



**RSPH**  
ROYAL SOCIETY FOR PUBLIC HEALTH  
VISION, VOICE AND PRACTICE

# STREETS AHEAD

Building health on the high street

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# FOREWORD

The high street is a British institution. Visited by millions of people every day, it has played a role in our lives for centuries and is the heartbeat of our cities and towns. It is a place where people work, shop and socialise, making the high street the perfect place to promote healthier behaviours.



This can be done not only by the services it offers but also by the environment it creates. The way we use high streets has shifted. Retail was the main attraction on high streets in the past, but over recent decades, this has changed. Social activities and experiences we share with family and friends are now what we look for when visiting high streets and town centres.

This change creates an opportunity for us to refresh our high streets, ensuring they respond to a dynamic economy and society's needs. To fully embrace this opportunity, we must work together with communities, town planners, businesses and local authorities to transform our high streets into such environments that encourage healthy behaviours.

Over the decade since the RSPH published *Health on the High Street* there has been no shortage of initiatives and schemes to revive our high streets, but we still aren't seeing them become the drivers of health and wellbeing that they should be. Footfall is down, and people are less satisfied than ever with the options they are being given.

This is the result of a system where incentives, powers, and outcomes all reside with different bodies – or even just different teams within the same body. It is clear that we need a more cohesive approach, where both responsibility and the power to act reside in the same place.

This report is our contribution to rebuilding our high streets – harnessing the expertise of the wider public health sector to develop a clear roadmap for every high street to follow in order to become a driver of good health. If they do this, then we will also see them thrive in their own right – as people want to make healthy choices, they will seek out the places that enable them to do this.

Turning our high streets into healthy places into reality is a long-term process for which many of us are responsible. But it is doable if we all work together and use the building blocks to transform this British institution into a place that fosters health and wellbeing. We are proud to be part of this change, ensuring that our high streets are a place for health.

**William Roberts**

RSPH CEO

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## The Problem with High Streets

High streets are the lifeblood of communities – they are at the heart of neighbourhoods, and can have a huge impact on our wellbeing. At their best, they drive not just our commercial and social habits, but also economic growth through the dynamism of the private sector. But, over recent years, they have changed – and not necessarily for the better.

Footfall on high streets has consistently declined, and 60% of the public say that they are concerned about the number of shops closing. In the face of this, there is a clear need to regenerate high streets so that they meet the needs of today's society.

At the same time, the burden of ill health on society is greater than ever. Preventable health conditions – both physical and mental – are on the rise, holding people back from living the lives they want. Solving this is a national priority and, in attempting to do so, we should harness every part of the public realm in pursuit of better health outcomes.

High streets are a vital part of this. They remain – despite changes – places where people spend a lot of time. The services on offer and physical environment people spend time in have a direct impact on the health of the public. If a high street is healthy, then everyone stands to benefit – but the current situation all too often means that they are not simply neutral, but actively harmful to public health.

When the public are asked, an overwhelming majority think that their local high street does not have enough of the things which make it healthier. Changing this means shaping high streets in a way which actively encourages healthy behaviours.



## Building Healthy High Streets

High streets are not spaces which just happen. Instead, they are the product of work by local authorities, businesses, and communities. Creating high streets which work on multiple levels means taking the expertise of the public health sector to identify the practical steps which they can take to make their high streets healthier.

A decade ago, the RSPH launched 'Health on the High Street', looking at the health impact of the shops on our high streets. Since then, town centres and high streets have changed, but often not improved. Therefore, a new approach is needed. High streets are no longer just retail destinations, but places where people go for experiences and to spend leisure time.

Reflecting this change in usage, a model for healthy high streets in the post-Covid economy must look beyond just the shops present – although these remain a major factor. We have taken a holistic approach to healthy place making, considering every element of the physical and social fabric of a high street to consider how we can best use them to drive health outcomes. This approach should be built on community empowerment, with anchor institutions, local businesses, and developers supported to play a full role in realising the positive change which is possible.

Our model brings together the expertise of the public health, planning, and business communities to set out a roadmap for every local authority to put in places the facilities and services which are needed to ensure that their high streets not only thrive, but support the local population to do the same. It also provides businesses with ideas that can help them influence the wellbeing of the customers and staff, ultimately shaping the health of the high street.



## STAY THERE

### HEALTHY FOOD



People need and want to be able to make healthy choices - ensuring high streets offer these both encourages the use of high streets, and healthy behaviours

### GREEN SPACES



Adequate provision of green spaces - even small ones - encourages exercise, and has improves people's mental wellbeing

### SUPPORTIVE WORK



Those working on high streets spend the most time there - the jobs available should encourage them to be healthy and support others to do the same

## BE THERE

### RETAIL



High quality retail, selling the products that people want, remains a key driver of footfall and ensures people are accessing other services

### SOCIAL SPACES



Whether this is pubs, cafes, or community centres - third spaces play a vital role in facilitating social connections and improving people's wellbeing

### HEALTH SERVICES



Providing access to health services - whether that is a GP, pharmacist, or dentists - ensures that people can get support with their health, and draws them to the high street

## GET THERE

### TRANSPORT LINKS



Strong public transport links help bring people into town centres and boost their connectedness

### INCLUSIVE DESIGN



Making it easy for everyone to get around through the design of the streets means that nobody is prevented from accessing the high street

### SAFETY



People do not just want their high streets to be free of crime, but perceive clean high streets as being safer and more accessible

## SHAPE THE HIGH STREET

### COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT



A local community - including the public, businesses, and local authorities - empowered to shape their high streets, supported by the powers to enact changes, is vital to securing positive outcomes

## The Change We Need to See

Over the last decade, despite the best efforts of those involved, the changes our high streets need have not been realised. The building blocks of healthy high streets remain the responsibility of different actors – from landlords deciding which shops to rent their units to, through to police forces deciding where lighting and foot patrols are focussed.

Changing this means ensuring that there is a single point of both co-ordination and accountability. With 4 in 5 people saying that local authorities should lead on improving high streets, there should be a single named person in each local authority responsible for each of their high streets to bring together the different services and authorities which are needed to build a healthy high street.

This should be the bedrock of the regeneration of high streets and town centres, with new devolved authorities explicitly tasked with creating healthy high streets across the areas they represent, and a statutory duty on others involved to collaborate with them. The Government has set out a clear commitment to both devolving power to local communities, and neighbourhoods as drivers of the economy. Creating healthy high streets would help meet both aims.

This is not a process we can do all at once – each stage of the model must be considered. A high street with poor transport links will always struggle, no matter how strong the retail offer. At the same time, a high street which is imposed on a community without their input will always struggle to meet their needs and thrive.

At the same time, those involved in regenerating our high streets need practical support to put this change into practice. The model we have set out is not intended to be theoretical, but provide a starting point for local authorities, developers, landlords, and communities to consider what their area does well and what it needs to do better. It is through this – empowering people to shape their high streets – that we can truly rethink what it is to be a healthy high street.



# WHY WE NEED CHANGE

## High Streets – An Institution

The high street is a British institution. Its origins can be traced back to the 18th century, but it became central to communities around mid-19th century,<sup>1</sup> when they offered an alternative to noisy and often unclean markets.<sup>2</sup> The ways communities have used the high street have also changed with time. In the 1960s, the shops and facilities on the high streets were needed for everyday life – like buying new clothes or paying a bill at the bank. Now, with online shopping and banking apps, going to the high street has become a choice.<sup>3</sup> People no longer visit them out of necessity, but because they seek experiences or social activities.

## The Impact of High Streets on Health

Many factors can influence our health. Our workplace, our houses, the environment around us, or places we spend a significant amount of time can influence how we feel in many different ways. These are the social determinants of health. For example, research suggests that living near green spaces can increase levels of physical activity, improve mental health, and lower blood pressure.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, living near pedestrianised areas can improve diabetes outcomes, and having good access to recreation and shopping facilities can support weight management.<sup>5</sup> Other factors such as air pollution, and noise levels play their role too.<sup>6</sup>

There are over 6,500 high streets in Great Britain, and over half of the units on these streets are residential.<sup>7</sup> Before the pandemic, 16% of Great Britain's population lived on or around a high street.<sup>8</sup> With many of the people who moved to the countryside coming back to cities as office workers return,<sup>9</sup> it is likely the proportions have not changed significantly. This means that around 11 million people live on or around a high street, and are directly affected by them. Therefore, for many people, high streets are still meaningful places in their lives.

On top of this, many people do not live on or around the high street, but live close enough. Around 90% of people in London live 10 minutes away from a high street.<sup>10</sup> Across the country, people visit their high streets on average 81 times a year.<sup>11</sup> Millions of people visit our high streets every month, and are influenced by them and their design and functionality.

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1 English Heritage (nd). [From stalls to malls](#).

2 London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine Blog (2024). [The Victorian meat market, tainted meat, and public health crisis](#)

3 Local Government Association (2022). [Creating resilient and revitalised high streets in the 'new normal'](#).

4 Carmona M. (2019). Place value: place quality and its impact on health, social, economic and environmental outcomes. *Journal of Urban Design*. 24 (1), 1-48.

5 Idem.

6 Public Health England (2018). Healthy High Streets: Good place-making in an urban setting.

7 Ordnance Survey (2019). [OS and ONS release report on the geography of Britain's high streets](#).

8 ONS (2020). [High Streets In Great Britain](#).

9 Hamiduddin I, Gallent N (2024). The rural housing market after the COVID-19 pandemic. *Town Planning Review*. 95:4, 343 – 354.

10 Mayor of London (2024). [High Streets for All](#).

11 Legal & General (2023). [Home is where the high street is](#).

Creating an environment that encourages people to make healthier choices on the high street can positively impact the lives of millions of people – from tackling health inequalities, to offering health services in places that are convenient to people.<sup>12</sup>

## The last decade – action but no progress

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the UK, large-scale movement restrictions helped control the speed at which the virus spread. The consequence of this, though, was that high streets were under further stress.<sup>13</sup> However, the pandemic did not impact all high street shops in the same way.

During the lockdowns, essential facilities such as food shops, supermarkets, petrol stations, banks, and medical facilities were allowed to remain open. High streets with the lowest proportion of essential shops and services were the least resilient to the consequences of the pandemic and, consequently, faced more closures.<sup>14</sup> However, shops that understood their communities' needs and independent shops that were often better able to adapt their ways of working<sup>15</sup> were less likely to face closure.

High streets were already seeing visitor numbers steadily decline before 2020, but lockdowns saw numbers fall even further. The High Streets Task Force, commissioned in 2019 by the now Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities, compared the footfall before and after the pandemic. Its analysis has shown that we still have not returned to pre-pandemic levels.



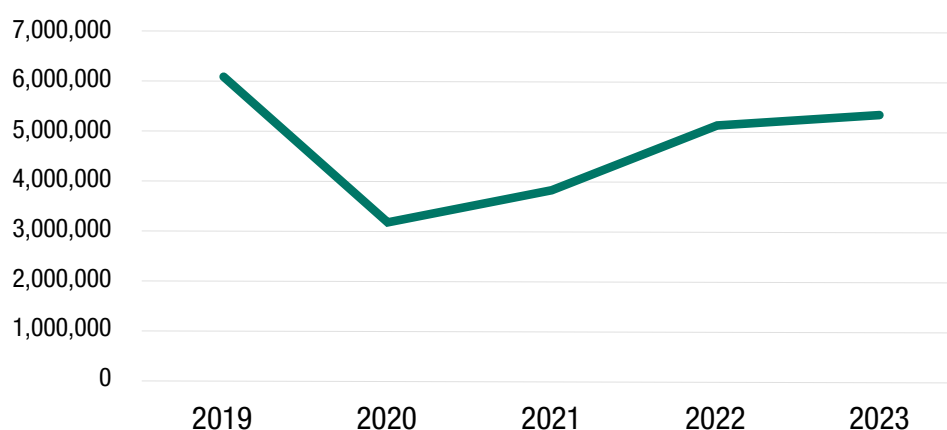
12 NHS Confederation (2020). [Health on the High Street](#).

13 Cassidy K, Sheilagh Resnick (2022). Adopting a value co-creation perspective to understand High Street regeneration. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*. 30 (1): 69 – 92.

14 Hill A, Cheshire J (2023). An Investigation of the Impact and Resilience of British High Streets Following the COVID-19 Lockdown Restrictions. *Appl Spat Anal Policy*.16(2):537-559.

15 NHS Confederation (2020). [Health on the High Street](#).

**Table 01: Average annual footfall in 93 English towns and cities<sup>16</sup>**



High streets have also struggled more with shop closures than shopping centres and retail parks, and half of those who shut their doors were chemists, chain pubs and banks.<sup>17</sup> However, data shows that the situation is stabilising.<sup>18</sup> This may create a window of opportunity for high streets to understand what customers and visitors want, and offer them these experiences.

These challenges have not gone unnoticed – over recent years, there have been multiple attempts to turn the tide on the state of our high streets. However, because of the lack a strategy for what should be done, how it should be done and when, our high streets struggled with a piecemeal approach to their problems – meaning that they are stagnating at best.

In 2018, the government launched the “Future High Street Fund”,<sup>19</sup> with £675 million in total available for local authorities. In total, 72 were successful and the amount rewarded was higher than originally announced (around £830 million).<sup>20</sup> Around 23% of local authorities in England received the fund, but its impact is still unclear; so far, the evaluation has analysed the fund roll-out, not its impact.<sup>21</sup>

In 2021, the government also published “Build Back Better High Streets”, a plan to support high streets that focused on five priorities: using empty buildings, supporting existing high street businesses, improving the public realm (by for example investing in green spaces and accessibility), creating safe and clean spaces, and celebrating local communities.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>16</sup> High Streets Task Force(2023). 2023: [Review of the High Street Footfall in England](#). Adapted from Table 1.

<sup>17</sup> PwC (2024). [High-streets suffer as 38 stores close across Great Britain each day in 2024 - but there's hope with convenience stores, coffee shops and value retailers showing net growth](#).

<sup>18</sup> PwC (2024). [Store Openings and Closures H1 2024](#).

<sup>19</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2018 to 2021) and HM Treasury (2018). [Policy paper: Future High Streets Fund: overview](#).

<sup>20</sup> Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2021). [Future High Streets Fund: successful and unsuccessful applications](#).

<sup>21</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2024). [Town's Fund evaluation: interim findings. Early process evaluation insights](#).

<sup>22</sup> Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2021). [Policy paper: Build back better high streets](#).

Additional funds, such as the UK Community Renewal Fund, the Levelling Up Fund, the Community Ownership Fund, and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, all aimed to support communities and their high streets.<sup>23</sup> However, the number of funds, without coordination, created a confused landscape.

In December 2021, the House of Commons Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee found that the central government's approach to funding was too complex, short-term, and fragmented, with disparate grants and relatively small amounts of money for which local authorities had to compete. There was no long-term funding, no empowerment of local authorities, and no opportunities for them to develop holistic plans for their high streets or city centres.<sup>24</sup>

To make this even more complicated, there were funds available to tackle specific problems. In 2023, the government published the "Anti-Social Behaviour Action Plan", making £2 million available so that communities and local businesses could take control of empty buildings on high streets and pay for refurbishments, auctions and council fees.<sup>25</sup> This later led to the High Street Accelerator fund<sup>26</sup> and the High Street Rental Auctions, a project that would help locals rent spaces in high streets.<sup>27</sup>



23 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2018 to 2021) and Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2024). [New levelling up and community investments](#).

24 House of Commons Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee (2021). [Supporting our high streets after COVID-19 Sixth Report of Session 2021–22](#).

25 Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2023). [Anti-social behaviour action plan to help communities take back control of high streets](#)

26 Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2023). [High streets levelled up with £7 million funding boost](#)

27 Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2024). [New levelling up powers to fill empty shops across England](#)

# BUILDING HEALTHIER HIGH STREETS

There are steps that can be taken to transform this landscape and make high streets healthier places. RSPH conducted in-depth research with specialists in community engagement, place, public health, and town planning across the country to understand the essential components of a healthy high street. Common components were highlighted by most people; these elements are the basics of a healthy high street.

To build our model, we used the most common elements that people deemed to be fundamental for a high street to be classified as healthy. From this, we defined ten building blocks that a high street should have to become healthy.

Our model is built around the anchor institutions of local high streets – whether that is a private shopping centre, public services such as GP surgeries, or services provided by the VCSE. In particular, a vibrant local VCSE sector – one that both provides support and empowers local residents – is critical to the success of high streets.

A healthy high street is a busy high street. It is a lively place where people can go, want to go and enjoy going. Our model is based on what people said high streets need to have – if they have these things, people will use them more.

## SHAPE THE HIGH STREET

### **Community Empowerment**

There is an element that is essential to healthy high streets, a building block that holds all other elements together and is central to this conversation: the community. It is the people who will use the spaces and whose health will be affected by the high street that need to be listened to, involved in decision-making processes, welcomed into feedback exercises, and trusted.

This doesn't just mean engaging with the public – a local community is a complex system, which includes everyone from the public and local business owners to the staff who work for the local authority. Meaningful community engagement brings together all of these groups to reach mutually agreeable solutions, rather than attempting to impose the will of any one group on others.

Community engagement is everyone's responsibility. Communities themselves should be willing to participate in co-production, but local governments and businesses have to facilitate such participation.

Without their involvement in all stages of developing our high streets, from planning and commissioning, to shaping how services are delivered and executing plans, we risk not addressing their needs or creating a space offering the experiences and services they want. Communities are also more likely to feel ownership and pride of spaces they helped create.

When they have a place in which they feel they belong, they are more likely to support its improvement.<sup>28</sup>

Co-production and public involvement are strategies that should be widely used, so we can create places that improve people's health and wellbeing but are also meaningful to them. If people can shape their high streets meaningfully, then the other impacts will follow.

## One Kilburn

In 2021, Brent and Camden councils began collaborating to revitalise Kilburn High Road.<sup>29</sup> To ensure the success of the project, they created a partnership called “One Kilburn”, bringing together local people, the councils, charities, and businesses. The idea was that knowledge and insights were shared, but also that local people participated in the development of the neighbourhood and projects delivered positive change.<sup>30</sup>

The Greater London Authority and Power to Change sponsored this project, which utilised what they referred to as “community activators” to engage with other local residents and stakeholders.<sup>31</sup> By encouraging networking, community leadership, and providing a local voice, the project aims to turn Kilburn into a thriving hub for businesses, retail, leisure, and communities, all while delivering improvements that make the high street more welcoming.

## GET THERE

The first step to building a healthy high street is ensuring that people can access the services they provide. A high street which is cut off from its local community will never survive. In the modern world, where they compete not only with out-of-town shopping centres but also with online deliveries and streaming services, high streets need to be more accessible than ever.

We can't assume that people will go to their high street because they have no alternative. When we make it hard for someone to get to their high street, for some people, that means they will go somewhere else.

Therefore, the first building blocks of a regenerated high street must focus on ensuring that people can access them and do so in a way that supports healthy behaviours. Transportation links, inclusive design, and safety are three ways that can achieve this.

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28 Royal Society for Public Health – RSPH (2021). [The Community Spirit Level](#).

29 Brent Council (2024). [Kilburn Town Centre](#).

30 One Kilburn (2025). [One Kilburn](#).

31 Greater London Authority (2025). [High Streets for All Challenge Learnings](#).

## Transport Links

Historically, high streets have always been well-connected to the rest of the city or town, and this connectivity has impacted their economic performance.<sup>32</sup> Thriving high streets are busy ones, where people can travel to and through easily.

Public transportation also affects our health. Motorised transport is detrimental to clean air, and can make high streets unsafe as it increases the risk of road casualties.<sup>33</sup>

There is evidence that many towns and small cities struggle with a lack of public transportation infrastructure.<sup>34</sup> Even though central and local governments design elements of transport policy, the service is often delivered by a range of private companies. For example, local authorities provide bus stops and lanes, but bus services are normally run by private bus companies that have the autonomy to determine routes, timetables and fares.<sup>35</sup>



Bus mileage is used to measure the number of bus routes, and this indicator has decreased by 29% between 2005 and 2024, while the British population increased by 15% during the same period. Commercial operators focus on more profitable routes to remain in business, and local authorities struggle to fill the gaps in the network with a shrinking budget.<sup>36</sup> The Bus Services Act 2017 empowered local authorities to have more control on this matter, but by 2021 almost no LA had used this power due to lack of funding.<sup>37</sup>

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32 House of Lords - Built Environment Committee (2024). High Streets: Life Beyond Retail?

33 Public Health England (2018). Healthy High Streets Good place-making in an urban setting.

34 House of Lords - Built Environment Committee (2024). High Streets: Life Beyond Retail?

35 House of Commons Library (2024). [Bus policy in England](#).

36 Local Government Association – LGA (2023). [A Smoother Ride: Reviewing the Bus Services Act 2017 to empower local areas](#).

37 House of Commons Library (2024). [Bus policy in England](#).

Change is possible. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) has created the “Bee Network”, integrating tram, trains and buses networks. Decisions regarding bus services are made locally, and the number of passenger journeys is showing an increase of 4% year-over-year, with a 20% increase in revenues in a two-year time period.<sup>38</sup>

Public transportation also helps reach otherwise isolated communities. Older people value reaching other locations via the high street, which increases their sense of connectedness and social interaction.<sup>39</sup> It also can be helpful for those with an underlying health condition, as a high street with a well-designed transport network supports active travel and the creation of community spaces, contributing to physical activity and becoming a good place for everyone.<sup>40</sup>

### East Bristol Liveable Neighbourhood Bus Gates Trial<sup>41</sup>

Bristol City Council aims to make neighbourhoods more accessible, regardless of how people move around the city. To achieve this, the council is designing ‘Liveable Neighbourhoods’ in collaboration with the community, rethinking the way roads are used, and providing more green spaces and social areas to the population.

The project involves constructing bus gates to prevent through-traffic or individual cars from accessing residential streets in the neighbourhood, while ensuring that accessibility and connectivity are maintained.

This project impacts high streets, including Lawrence Hill and Church Road, in the area, making sure they remain fully accessible and important to the community, while improving bus services for public transport users.

That this scheme has not been without its controversy serves to reinforce the importance of community engagement – ensuring not only that we are implementing positive interventions, but that the public both understand and want them.

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38 Bee Network Committee (2025). [Network performance](#).

39 Brunelli L, Smith H & Woolrych R (2024). High streets, ageing and well-being, *Journal of Urban Design*, 1-31.

40 Phillips J, Walford N, Hockey A & Leigh Sparks (2021). Older People, Town Centres and the Revival of the ‘High Street’, *Planning Theory & Practice*, 22:1, 11-26. Paragraph 1, pg 19.

41 Bristol City Council (2025). [East Bristol Liveable Neighbourhood](#).

## Safety

Safety and cleanliness create an inviting environment for users of our high streets. Footfall is not going to be high in an area full of waste and crime. Anti-social behaviour and litter are associated, with evidence showing that poorly managed areas show higher levels of stealing.<sup>42</sup>

Poor lighting is also a problem in some high streets, making people feel unsafe, particularly at night. Proper lighting can reduce reported crime by up to 30%.<sup>43</sup>

Responsibility for keeping high streets safe and clean is complex. Local authorities lead on street cleaning and managing the streetscape – including lighting. Police forces will deal with anti-social behaviour and create a visible presence, which is often central to improving perceived safety.

However, it is equally important that high streets are busy places. Having high footfall helps provide a sense of security.<sup>44</sup> This can be organic or driven by community groups who actively seek to create a sense of belonging and look after the street – developing the high street from the ground up, rather than only imposed from the top down.

### County Road, Liverpool

County Road is home to the Spellow Library in Liverpool. In 2023, it was refurbished to become a community hub. This was part of a larger project to revitalise the high street, with funds provided by the Mayor and the police getting involved in a safety scheme.<sup>45</sup>

Besides the library offering rooms for people to connect and advice on employment and the cost-of-living crisis, the police ran a pilot scheme called “Operation Abbeyvale,” in which designated officers dealt with crime but also engaged with the community and supported vulnerable people on the high street.<sup>46</sup>

When the library was forced to shut down after a fire,<sup>47</sup> the money needed for repairs was quickly raised, as the library is now more than a place where people can read, but also feel safe.<sup>48</sup>

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42 Public Health England (2018).

43 Idem.

44 House of Lords - Built Environment Committee (2024).

45 Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (2023). ‘Library of the future’ and community safety drive on key Liverpool high street, thanks to Mayor Steve Rotheram’s £6m Town Centre Fund

46 Idem.

47 Spellow Library was set alight following public unrest in the UK after the stabbings in Southport.

48 BBC News (2024). ‘Spellow Library changed my life’

## Inclusive Design

Inclusive design means infrastructure that makes it easy for pedestrians, cyclists, people with disabilities and older people to move around. The Sustainable Transportation Hierarchy or Sustainable Travel Hierarchy measures which modes of transportation are better for the environment, but it also helps us assess how modes of transport impact our health. More sustainable ways of travelling, such as bicycles, mean that people build more physical activity into their day. Addressing the needs of pedestrians can encourage people to walk to their destinations and see high streets as places to visit, not places to travel through.<sup>49</sup>

A more accessible place is better for everyone. Dropped kerbs and ramps are essential for people in wheelchairs to move around high streets, but they also help parents with prams and older people. Better-designed junctions, accessible pedestrian crossings and other accessible infrastructure are also better for young children.<sup>50</sup>

The streetscape is – in almost all cases – the responsibility of local authorities. Across the country, they are already working to make streets more welcoming and inclusive, whether that is through dropped kerbs, keeping pavements clear, or improving wayfinding. Rather than reinventing the wheel, a clear dialogue is needed between those responsible for physical infrastructure and those thinking about improving inclusion to ensure that every decision is made considering both what is possible, and how to maximise the number of people able to use high streets.



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49 Idem.

50 UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2016). [Good Practices of Accessible Urban Development](#).

## South City Way in Glasgow

The South City Way in Glasgow was a project to encourage more active travel from the south of the city to the town centre, where many of Glasgow's high streets are. Developed by the Glasgow City Council in partnership with Sustrans, a charity that works to make walking and cycling easier, the project aimed to support public transport and help cyclists and pedestrians by creating a travelling corridor.<sup>51</sup> This included developing a 3km protected cycleway and improving pavements, junctions, and green areas on the streets.

When completed, this project had a considerable impact: over 2.7 million journeys were recorded on the route, and retail favourability in the area increased by 12%. Air quality also improved, with a 53% decrease in carbon dioxide levels.<sup>52</sup> Other positive outcomes were the increase in active travel levels by 12%, and a 36% increase in the number of shoppers spending more than 30 minutes shopping in the area.<sup>53</sup>

## BE THERE

Once we know that people can get to a high street, we must consider what it is that will make them undertake that journey. At the same time, we know that people overwhelmingly want to make healthy choices and want settings to make these choices easier for them<sup>54</sup>.

There are two things which can drive people towards high streets: access to the goods and services they want, and the opportunity to spend time with other people. As well as driving people towards high streets, these building blocks help ensure that the choices they are encouraged to make are ones which are good for their health.

### High Quality Retail

While retail is no longer the sole reason people visit their high street, it still matters and is responsible for a certain percentage of footfall as people visit shops to buy what they want or need.

It is not only what the retailer sells that matters, but the experience they offer while selling it. For example, independent shops are known for giving places a sense of identity and community.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, smaller and independent retailers in certain sectors, such as

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51 Glasgow City Council (nd). [South City Way](#).

52 Sustrans (2024b). [£6.5m South City Way officially complete as route makes way through city centre](#).

53 Sustrans (2024c). [Glasgow South City Way Follow Up Monitoring Report](#).

54 Ref A Place for Health

55 London Assembly Planning Committee (nd). [The Future of London's Town Centres](#).

bookshops, have recently experienced growth, reflecting people's preferences for different types of retail.<sup>56</sup>

This is what we mean by high-quality retail. Shops that offer what people want or need to buy with the extra layer of character that provides people with the experience and social interactions that they look for when visiting a high street.

All those involved in ensuring that high streets thrive are responsible for the offer of high-quality retail. From councils and landlords, who can make sure businesses run in a sustainable and viable way, to communities and businesses, who can share what is locally needed and make the supply respond to the demand. Working collaboratively in this building block is crucial.

## The Frome Independent <sup>57,58</sup>

Frome is a small town in England, close to Bath. Since the 2010s, its council has worked to establish a good relationship with landlords, aiming to support local entrepreneurs in the area by offering flexible leases. This evolved to The Frome Independent, a street market on the high street populated with independent traders from the Southwest. This market attracts 80,000 people every year, and as a result of this vibrant economy, there are few vacant properties on its high street.

## Health Services

In 2024, Lord Darzi's Independent Investigation of the NHS in England was published. It emphasised the power of prevention and the need for the NHS to invest more in the community to help hospitals cope with demand.<sup>59</sup> As a result, the government committed to shift care from "hospital to community".<sup>60</sup> High streets are well-placed spaces that serve communities and bring people together, offering experiences and services all in one place, so must be a key part of this shift.

There are several opportunities for the NHS to become involved in the high street, for example, by offering health services from vacant properties, and by supporting the design of healthy places. The consequences of this would be positive, as health inequalities could be reduced due to the offer of services happening closer to communities.<sup>61</sup>

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56 House of Lords - Built Environment Committee (2024). High Streets: Life Beyond Retail?

57 Idem

58 The Frome Independent (2025). [About us](#).

59 Professor the Lord Darzi of Denham (2024). [Independent Investigation of the National Health Service in England](#)

60 Prime Minister's Office (2024). [Build an NHS Fit for the Future](#)

61 NHS Confederation (2020). [Health on the High Street](#).

The NHS, ICBs, and local authorities can do a lot to bring care from hospitals to communities. Working with locals is the first step to understanding which services they need.

## The Life Rooms – Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust <sup>62,63,64</sup>

The Life Rooms are part of a NHS service that provides safe spaces for communities. Those who seek its services can understand more about volunteering, employment and learning opportunities, as well as get advice from health and wellbeing coaches. These coaches support people living with anxiety, weight management issues or who have received a mental health diagnosis.

These Life Rooms are all located close to or on high streets, and their team of Pathway Advisors, working with social prescribing, can support the communities by referring people to a myriad of services, such as mental and physical wellbeing services and general housing support.

## Social Spaces

High streets have moved away from being retail-only places. They are now spaces where communities can meet and spend time together, where people share experiences and have fun. In 2019, the House of Commons Housing, Communities and Local Government committee concluded that high streets should be activity-based gathering places, and should offer more leisure, culture and health.<sup>65</sup> As long ago as 2015, the RSPH recognised that the social benefits of pubs, bars, and cafes made them net contributors to people's health.

However, many of these settings face serious challenges. The number of pubs in the UK has hit its lowest level since figures began<sup>66</sup>. Between 2010 and 2023, more than two thirds of council-run youth centres in England and Wales closed their doors<sup>67</sup>. The effect of these changes has been a massive reduction in third spaces – places where people can spend time and socialise.

While some of these spaces are publicly run, much of the responsibility for ensuring their viability currently rests with commercial landlords.<sup>68</sup> More community ownership of high streets could help address the issue of empty shops,<sup>69</sup> as the community knows what a priority for them is. Going even further and encouraging the establishment of community

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62 Idem

63 Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust (nd). [The Life Rooms](#).

64 The Life Rooms (nd). [Support](#).

65 Power to Change (2020). [Saving the High Street: the community take over](#).

66 Altus Group (2024) [Number of pubs in England and Wales falls below 39,000 for first time](#)

67 Unison (2024) [Closure of more than a thousand youth centres could have lasting impact on society](#)

68 House of Lords - Built Environment Committee (2024). [High Streets: Life Beyond Retail?](#)

69 Power to Change (2020). [Saving the High Street: the community take over](#).

businesses on the high streets could contribute to their regeneration and footfall, as they create clusters of activities.<sup>70</sup> With up to 172,000 commercial properties empty across the UK,<sup>71</sup> using these shops as social spaces could offer a solution to this problem.

The list of places communities can use on the high streets is vast. In addition to libraries, sports centres, and green spaces, market halls, coffee shops, pubs, and restaurants can also serve communities and create a sense of social cohesion,<sup>72</sup> offering the experiences and sense of belonging people so much want.

## Morden Meanwhile Public Realm Strategy

The London Borough of Merton wanted to improve the street experience in Morden Town Centre. The idea was to work with a multidisciplinary design team to co-design with the community parklets, seating areas and public art.<sup>73</sup>

The community was engaged from the beginning of the project, sharing their thoughts on what the Town Centre meant for them and suggesting interventions to encourage social interaction and healthier living. For example, people asked for more outdoor seating and benches. Local businesses were also involved, and the idea of painting their shutters with colours that reflected the identity of Morden. These actions create an enhanced sense of ownership by locals, which leads to better stewardship and maintenance of these areas, while also offering the community a place to engage.<sup>74</sup>

## STAY THERE

If we want to harness the health potential of high streets, they need to be more than just places where people pass through. Interventions which encourage people to linger or engage in physical activity lead to clear benefits – not just to physical health, but to mental health through reduced anxiety and stress.

These building blocks accomplish that – taking a high street where people can go and make healthy choices in the immediate sense, and turning them into places where people live their lives in a healthier way.

70 Sheffield Hallam University - Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (2022). [Community ownership key to levelling up Britain's high streets, according to new research](#).

71 Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2023). [Anti-social behaviour action plan to help communities take back control of high streets](#).

72 UK Hospitality (2024). [Serving Britain: creating places where people want to live, work and invest](#).

73 Committee Report (2024). [Morden Town Centre Regeneration: Placemaking and Public Realm](#)

74 Sustrans (2024a). Morden Meanwhile Public Realm Strategy. Information is available upon request.

## Healthy Food

When it comes to diet, the vast majority of people want to eat healthily, and have a strong sense of what this means in abstract. The problem is that, too often, making these healthy choices is made harder by the food environment they are spending time in.

Diet-related health issues are a public health problem in the UK, with England having the highest rates of obesity among high-income nations and with over 20% of children starting primary school with overweight or obesity.<sup>75</sup>

Access, affordability and availability of healthier food options shape what we eat.<sup>76</sup> Living in an environment where healthy alternatives are easily available and people are encouraged to choose healthy options involves a societal effort from all parts involved: individuals, schools, local authorities, communities, businesses and national government. Relying only on the individual to make healthy choices in an environment that actively discourages this behaviour simply will not work.<sup>77,78</sup>

There are two actions which can make these healthy choices easier. The first is to change the types of shop which open, with a focus on those offering healthy options.<sup>79</sup> The second is to work with existing businesses to ensure that they are promoting healthy behaviours, rather than pushing people towards the least healthy options.

Currently, councils face an economic conundrum. The number of empty shops in Great Britain was going up even before the Covid-19 pandemic, and in London alone, it is estimated that vacant places on the high street would cost £350 million in lost business rates and economic activity.<sup>80</sup> Fast food shops are more likely to be able to afford tenancies in high streets,<sup>81</sup> but if such shops dominate the high streets, they become places that encourage people to make unhealthy choices. So even though the responsibility falls on local authorities, without the support of businesses and the central government, change will be hard to achieve.

There is an extra layer of complexity because for many people, going out to eat is occasion-based. However, as UK Hospitality highlights, many establishments, including pubs, currently offer healthier menus and food options. Sales of low and non-alcoholic beers doubled in the 2019 – 2023 period, and 85% of pubs in the UK now offer low or no-alcohol beers.<sup>82</sup> Parents chose a pub chain as the second healthiest food option for their children, as they assessed it by the quality of ingredients used, the fact that kids' meals offered two portions of vegetables, and that it was freshly prepared.<sup>83</sup> This offers a way forward – where businesses do not simply conform to unhealthy expectations.

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75 House of Lords (2024). [Recipe for health: a plan to fix our broken food system](#).

76 Monsivais P et al (2020). Environmental approaches to promote healthy eating: Is ensuring affordability and availability enough? *BMJ*, 372.

77 Havard T. H. Chan School of Public Health (nd). [The Nutrition Source: Healthy Food Environment](#).

78 World Health Organisation (2025). [Promoting Healthy Diets](#).

79 In *Health on the High Street* (2015 & 2018) we suggest this should include pubs and bars, pharmacies, and health food shops.

80 Local Government Association – LGA (2020). [Dealing with empty shops – a good practice guide for councils](#).

81 House of Lords - Built Environment Committee (2024). [High Streets: Life Beyond Retail?](#)

82 Marsh S, Jones R (2023). [Alcohol-free beer: thirst for healthier options fuels jump in UK sales](#). *The Guardian*.

83 Soil Association (2024). [Out to lunch restaurant league table 2024](#).

## Brighton and Hove Healthy Choice Scheme

In 2008, Brighton and Hove City Council launched a voluntary healthy choice scheme so that cafes, restaurants, takeaways and local catering companies included healthier options in their menus. This included different practices, such as ensuring that food with reduced salt, fat and sugar, and drinks with reduced sugar were available to customers, as well as different portion sizes. This proved to be very popular with businesses, with around 140 opting in.<sup>84</sup> This scheme also awarded places that met its requirements. Winners, for example, prepared food in a healthier way (e.g. with less fat) and made fruits more accessible to customers.<sup>85</sup> This scheme also encouraged food health and safety practices to be followed, as only places with food hygiene rating score of 3 or above can take part.<sup>86</sup>

## Green Space

Access to green spaces in urban areas has clear benefits to our health. Besides the decreased risk of developing cardiovascular issues, respiratory diseases and lung cancer because of cleaner air,<sup>87</sup> there are benefits to mental health as well. People living in areas with more green spaces are happier.<sup>88</sup> Having access to green areas in urban settings encourages people to do more physical activities and take part in community engagement.<sup>89</sup> Urban green spaces support 2.1 million people meeting their physical activity needs.<sup>90</sup> They allow people to socialise and spend time together without having to spend money,<sup>91</sup> a key feature amid the cost-of-living crisis.

84 Local Government Association (2022). [Brighton & Hove: encouraging healthy food options in canteens, cafes and restaurants.](#)

85 Impact Initiatives (nd). [Award for healthy food @ The Larches.](#)

86 Brighton and Hove City Council (nd). [Find healthy choices in Brighton & Hove.](#)

87 Cruickshank S (2022). [Policy @ Manchester: Improving air quality in urban areas.](#) The University of Manchester.

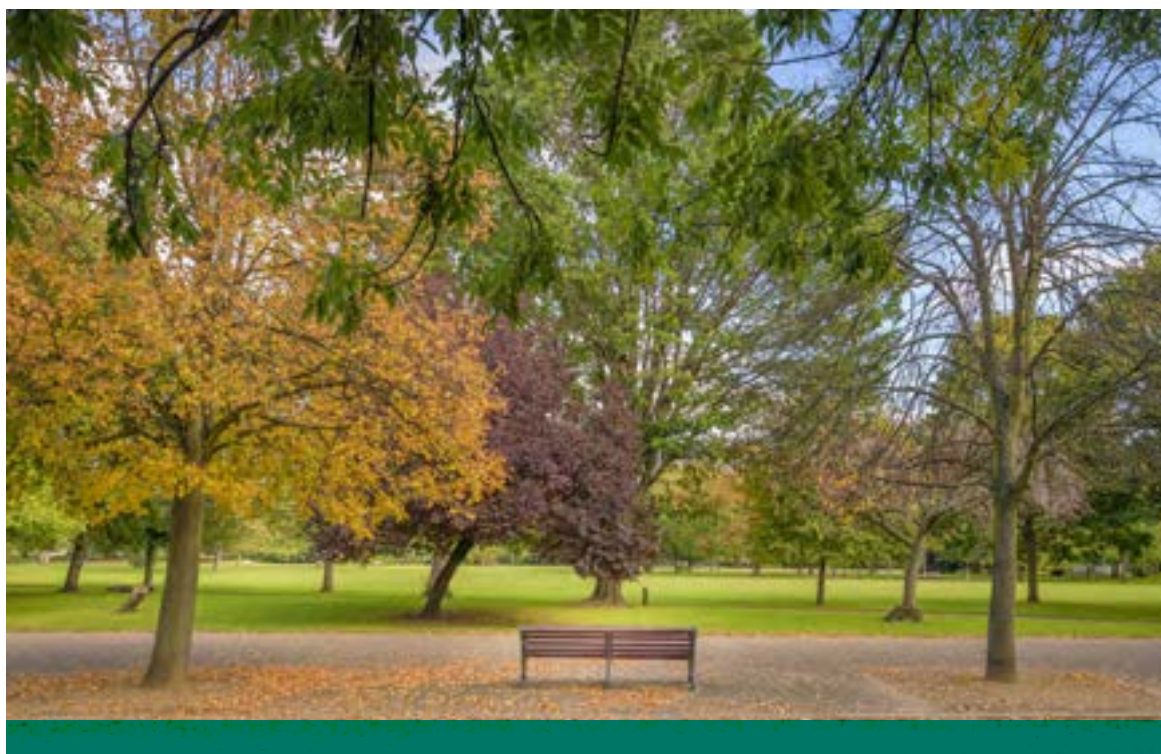
88 Houlden V, Weich S, Jarvis S (2017). A cross-sectional analysis of green space prevalence and mental wellbeing in England. *BMC Public Health*. 17, 460.

89 Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership - CISL (2021). [Positive impact on people's mental and physical health when accessing nature in the city.](#)

90 Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (2023). [Woodland Access Implementation Plan.](#)

91 House of Lords - Built Environment Committee (2024).

Multiple green areas, even small ones such as green roundabouts and roadside verges, can positively influence outcomes.<sup>92</sup> High streets would benefit from having these spaces, no matter how large they are. But over 15 years, urban green space in the UK declined from 63% in 2001 to 56% in 2016.<sup>93</sup> The numbers are even worse in areas that members of the public can access freely: in 2018, these corresponded to just 5% of the urban areas in the UK.<sup>94</sup> Therefore, this is a case in which every little will help.



Local planning authorities, which are often part of local authorities, are responsible for assessing the need for and opportunities to create green spaces.<sup>95</sup> And even though government guidance emphasises the importance of policy-making authorities cooperating when making plans, with local planning authorities having a statutory duty to do so,<sup>96</sup> businesses and private landowners can also get involved in this matter and ensure our high streets become more welcoming and greener spaces.

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92 Cruickshank S (2022).

93 Public Health England (2018).

94 Office for National Statistics – ONS (2018). [UK natural capital: ecosystem accounts for urban areas](#).

95 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2018 to 2021) and Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2014). [Open space, sports and recreation facilities, public rights of way and local green space](#)

96 Idem

## Hackney Parklets spaces

In 2018, Hackney launched the Community Parklet Scheme, in a way of offering more seating areas, bike parking and greenery to the borough.<sup>97</sup> Having realised that many residents of the borough did not have a car, Hackney decided to repurpose its kerbside so that it was used not by cars but by people,<sup>98</sup> thus offering residents a place where they could meet, play and socialise while creating a greener street at the same time.<sup>99</sup> Ten parklets had been installed by the end of 2021, and residents were invited to submit their suggestions for more community parklets directly to the council.<sup>100</sup> By 2024, 22 parklets had been installed,<sup>101</sup> summing up an area of almost 100 square meters with diverse vegetation and bike hoops.<sup>102</sup>

### Supportive jobs

The people who spend most time on the high street are the people who work there. From street cleaners and waiters, to shop staff and police officers, the high street can be somewhere people spend a significant portion of their waking hours.

The health outcomes of this group matter in their own right – having healthy, affordable food available, being able to access green spaces, and low levels of air pollution will all mean that staff on the high street are able to manage their own health better.

But they are also a group who are disproportionately likely to miss out on the support they need at work to remain healthy. RSPH research has found that 10 million people are not getting basic support, and they are overwhelmingly likely to be found working in Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), or in the service industries – in other words, on our high streets. This means that the people we are relying on to drive healthy behaviours in others are, all too often, not getting the support they need themselves.

Healthy work is not just about Employee Assistance Programmes or encouraging physical activity through the day. It rests on a foundation of empowering staff to know what they need, and ask for it in the knowledge that their employer will do what they can. These schemes can operate at the level of an individual business, but where we have clusters of SMEs – such as on a high street – there may be merit in delivering support at the neighbourhood level, with buy-in from every local employer.

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97 Meristem Design (2025). [Hackney parklets: transforming urban streets parklets for Hackney](#).

98 London Borough of Hackney (2024). [Parklets](#).

99 Friends of the Earth (nd). [How Hackney is connecting more people to local green space](#).

100 London Borough of Hackney (2024).

101 Idem

102 Meristem Design (2025).

If we get this right, then we will have a healthy, happy workforce, who are empowered not just to manage their own health, but also to support others to make healthy choices on a daily basis. For example, a salon where staff are given training in how to discuss mental health at work is likely to be one where staff can also talk about mental health with their clientele.

## **John Lewis & Partners<sup>103</sup>**

John Lewis & Partners is an employee-owned business with over 80,000 employees, 36 shops and 300 Waitrose units. Many of these facilities are on high streets across the country.

The company wants its employees to lead healthy lives, so it has developed a strategy to help them take care of themselves using a preventive approach. This includes encouraging them to become Wellbeing Champions, offering free mental health advice, and promoting managers to participate in mental health awareness workshops. In-house occupational health experts are also available.

The impact of this on business is considerable, as John Lewis & Partners predicts that £38.1 billion will be saved through improved productivity and reduced absenteeism. But the social impact of such a strategy is monumental. For example, 98% of employees return to work after treatment for mental health conditions, and 96% for musculoskeletal conditions.

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103 John Lewis & Partners (2019). [The John Lewis Partnership: Working well report](#).

# THE CHANGES WE NEED

These building blocks do not represent a major novelty – each of them can be found in previous work carried out by organisations ranging from Government to private developers.

This framework is presented as a starting guide. It represents the bricks that can be used to ensure people feel they are in control of their high streets, and to ensure they not only want to go to these places but want to stay and use high streets as a place that improves their health.

We know change is needed. We asked people if they thought their high streets had enough of the building blocks,<sup>104</sup> and 53% said they did not have enough shops selling healthy food. This is equivalent to 36 million people in the UK. It is not much better when access to parks or green areas is considered, as 49% of respondents reported not having access to green spaces where they can exercise or rest in their high streets. This equates to 33 million people in the UK being unable to relax or engage in outdoor activities around trees and grassland in their high streets. Others cannot even visit their high streets easily, as 42% told us they do not have good transport links. This means that 28 million people cannot easily get to their high streets.



Some people told us the situation is even worse in their areas: 11% of people do not have enough of any of the building blocks in their local high streets. This translates to 7.5 million people in the UK lacking sufficient transport links, social spaces, healthy food, safe environments, and other essential components that collectively create healthy high streets.

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<sup>104</sup> DeltaPoll carried out a nationally representative survey of 1,988 UK adults in March 2025.

This must change – and it can be changed. Efforts have been made in the past to transform this situation. The public clearly feel that this has not worked, and a new approach is needed.

## Why has not this worked – fragmentation

Despite the efforts of the last decade, clear problems remain. In no small part, this is because there is no one body responsible for bringing together all the elements which make a local high street.

It is a common frustration of local authorities that the only lever they have to influence the shops on their high street is the business licensing scheme. This makes no distinction between a takeaway selling burgers, and one selling genuinely healthy options. Similarly, different retail units – whether a grocery store or a vape store – are in the same use class, limiting the local authority's ability to prevent previously valuable shops from being replaced by those that actively harm the health of the local population.

Instead, the power here sits with landlords, who choose who to rent each given unit to. While some landlords work with local authorities to ensure their high streets thrive, there is no obligation to do so, and short-term commercial imperatives may not lead to decisions which build a sustainable, healthy high street. Particularly where retail units on a high street all belong to different landlords, this makes implementing a coherent strategy which promotes healthy behaviours near impossible.



Adding further detail into the planning regimes for high streets is unlikely to solve this problem. National legislation cannot be continually updated to account for new services and products, and it would be impractical for every change of occupier to require a new planning

application. Instead, what is needed is greater collaboration – where landlords understand that building healthy high streets will be good for their business as well. If this isn't achieved voluntarily, then local authorities should have the powers to step in and compel compliance.

This is not just an issue of inter-organisational cooperation. Even within one organisation, such as a local authority, the levers needed can sit in different teams, with little shared oversight. One example of this is the streetscape, which is often governed by technical experts in the highways division. While well intentioned, we cannot assume that these teams will be fully across both the commercial strategy for the high street, and the public health rationale for certain changes to be made. Again, there are examples of good practice, but we need to do more to ensure that these become the norm.



This fragmentation does not reflect how the public feel their high streets should be managed. 80% of people have told us that they feel local authorities are responsible for improving their local high streets. This does not mean that others do not have their share: 65% of people think national government is also responsible, and over half (56%) think large business are too. This should be taken as a clear signal – local authorities should be responsible for bringing together every element of a healthy high street, and we need to give them the powers they need to meet the expectations of their residents.

# THIS CAN BE DONE – NEW RIVER CASE STUDY

## Chatham Healthy Living Centre<sup>105</sup>

In Autumn 2025, in collaboration with Medway Council, NHS Kent will open the new “James Williams Healthy Living Centre” in the council-owned Pentagon Shopping Centre. Located in a previously unused first-floor space, the facility comprises 39,800 sq ft of doctors’ surgeries and additional community health provisions. Co-located with a 16,000 sq ft Innovation Hub, this £20m investment will transform the centre and the wider town, leading to up to 800,000 new visits each year and an additional spend of nearly £30m.



The council’s delivery partner, NewRiver REIT, which has undertaken the development management of the project and the ongoing asset management, has assessed this intervention using RSPH methodology (Health Richter Scale). The impact on ownership moves from -17 to +9, showing significant improvements in “Healthy Choices,” “Access to services,” and “Mental Wellbeing.” This represents a significant shift towards a healthier town centre, which meets the needs of local residents and delivers improved health outcomes.

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<sup>105</sup> <https://www.medway.gov.uk/chathamdesigncode>

This intervention, however, is a “first move” with Medway and NewRiver working up a Health First Asset management plan for the centre. This plan builds on Medway’s commitment to reducing health inequalities and supporting health and wellbeing as outlined in their draft local plan and Chatham’s Urban Design Code, which is rooted in community engagement and consultation, and promotes a healthy town centre through physical infrastructure and public realm improvements.



# THE SOLUTIONS - RECOMMENDATIONS

High streets are the lifeblood of our towns and cities, but the challenges they face mean that, often, they don't live up to our expectations. To change this, we need a concerted effort from local and national government, as well as the people and businesses who populate our high streets.

**Local authorities should publish high street action plans, setting out a named individual or role who will lead on combining existing schemes and funding mechanisms to implement the Healthy High Streets framework.**

Currently, local authorities have powers through the planning system to shape the broad shape of their high streets. However, high streets represent the intersection of a number of functions of local government, from environmental health to public transport. To ensure that all of these functions are pulling in the same direction, councils should publish High Street Action Plans (in the same way as they currently publish Local Plans for housing development) to give a clear sense of what each function of the council can do to improve their local high streets. These should reflect the specific changes needed on each high street, rather than seeking to apply blanket policies over large areas.

This is not a change which needs national action – local authorities can and should act autonomously to implement a new approach. However, the upcoming reorganisation of local government in England provides a key opportunity to change our approach, and MHCLG should make clear this is a key duty for the new authorities. This will not only improve the health and wellbeing of local residents, but also lead to clear economic benefits.

**National Government should legislate for a statutory duty on other bodies to cooperate with local authorities in creating healthy high streets, and this should be a condition of any approval for private development on or around high streets.**

If local authorities are going to be responsible for the regeneration of high streets, then they need to have the powers to enact meaningful change – anything else is simply setting them up to fail. Given the range of organisations which impact on a local high street, from police forces to transport companies and private landlords, a specific statutory duty to cooperate around high streets would ensure that all parts of the system are considered.

A new duty would require different authorities – from police and fire to local NHS bodies or bus providers – to work with the local authority to not only inform the design of high streets, but to act in good faith to put this into practice.

Such a duty could also be applied to private businesses such as large landlords, requiring them to engage with local authorities and take reasonable steps to help create thriving high streets. This should not require them to leave units empty, but help promote the building blocks of healthy high streets – whether that is social spaces, shops offering healthy options, or simply employers who look after their staff.

## **Developers should consider health outcomes as well as economic outcomes when putting together proposals for regeneration.**

Different types of businesses must consider economic outcomes to keep their doors open, but including community health outcomes in their success measurement can also support their financial health and success.

Places that are easily accessible, work as community hubs, and offer health services are places that people can get to, be at, and stay in. This will ultimately impact the economic outcomes of the development, as a financially healthy high street is a busy high street. By taking an approach which puts health at the heart of developments, developers can not only improve the financial sustainability of their project, but ensure they have community buy-in for their proposals – reducing the barriers to development.

In 2021, there was a conversation in government highlighting that new developments should have local communities at heart so that their designs addressed local needs.<sup>106</sup> We are asking this conversation to go one step further, so that the impact of these developments on our health is also considered and measured.

## **Businesses and the government should consider offering further training and support for staff working on the high street, so that they are skilled to assist colleagues and high street visitors with their health and wellbeing.**

The people who spend the most time on the high street are the people who work there. Upskilling these staff and offering them training and support so that they know how to ensure customers' wellbeing is looked after can significantly impact the health outcomes of local communities. For example, training staff to support customers with cognitive impairment to feel respected, less anxious and comfortable getting out and about positively impacts their experiences.<sup>107</sup> However, this would also help them support each other, as colleagues would be able to encourage each other to look after their own health.

Businesses and the government can support staff with employee training schemes and occupational health support, ensuring that those working in high streets can support themselves, colleagues and communities with their health and wellbeing.

As part of this, they should engage with local VCSE and informal groups to ensure that the specific conditions of their high street are being acknowledged, while also guaranteeing that financial constraints do not prevent these key parts of the high street from realising the benefits this training can bring.

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<sup>106</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2018 to 2021) (2021). [All new developments must meet local standards of beauty, quality and design under new rules](#)

<sup>107</sup> International Longevity Centre (2022). [Retail therapy: Helping people with dementia enjoy spending](#)



**Government should equalise the tax burden between in-person and remote retailers, using the dividends from this to fund improvements to our high streets.**

These changes cannot represent another unfunded mandate on local government, which has struggled with 15 years of rising demands and falling funding. For local action to be viable, we need national government to step in and ensure that local authorities have the financial support they need to implement these changes.

As long ago as 2018, the RSPH was calling on the Government to end the imbalance in tax between giant online retailers and the bricks and mortar shops which keep our high streets going<sup>108</sup>. This could be achieved through an online sales tax, or through reviewing the business rates paid by distribution warehouses which make online retail viable.

The funding raised through any such changes should be diverted in its entirety to supporting our high streets – giving local authorities the financial firepower they need to implement changes to the streetscape and public transport, as well as supporting socially vital anchor institutions.

HMT have previously estimated that an online sales tax could raise £1 billion a year a year. Even if a new system were to raise substantially less than this, it would match the investment which has been made by the Government through their recent 'Plan for Neighbourhoods', while supporting the growth of local economies and helping create good jobs.

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108 RSPH (2018) Health on the High Street

# PLAYING OUR PART

Turning our high streets into engines of good health will require action from every part of the system. As an education charity, the Royal Society for Public Health has a role to play here – we cannot simply make a call for action then expect others to do the work.

We will support front line staff to **reduce the violence they face**, whether this is police officers, retail staff, or those running public transport. Using a public health approach to violence reduction has been shown to produce strong results when used in other sectors such as healthcare, and we will work with those who occupy high streets to spread this learning.

We will work to **help developments have the best possible impact**, through developing toolkits which enable them to measure and improve the health impact of their work. Done well, private development can shape our high streets and promote positive outcomes. We will work with developers and local authorities to identify the tools they need to ensure that this is business as usual.

We will **support employers to support their staff**, through a comprehensive work and health offer. By working with individual businesses to identify their specific needs, we can build a model of support which means that staff are supported to stay healthy.

We will **provide tools to facilitate community engagement**, such as the Community Spirit Level. This framework not only helps to measure community spirit, but can be used by local authorities and others to identify the tangible actions which can and should be taken to ensure communities feel ownership of their high streets.

We will work with the hospitality industry to **ensure that social spaces have a positive mental health impact**, by training those who work in them to identify mental health problems and have supportive conversations when appropriate. The staff in social spaces – whether that is barbers or bartenders – can have a real impact on the mental wellbeing of their clients if they are given the support they need to do this.

We will **work with partners to make the case for healthier high streets** through our advocacy and campaigning work. This change cannot solely be imposed from the top down, so we will work with our members and others to build community support for healthier high streets at a local level.

If you want to be part of any of this work, please reach out to us at [policy@rsph.org.uk](mailto:policy@rsph.org.uk).