

Do you live in an urban, suburban or rural environment?

How would you describe where you live?

How would say it has changed over the last ten to twenty years, and why do you think it has changed?

- 1 Work with a partner.
Check the meaning of the adjectives in the box.
Which words do you think are positive, which are negative and which are neutral?
Which words could be either positive or negative depending on your perspective?
Which words would you use to describe the place where you live or work?

vibrant	sprawling	congested
creepy	bustling	cosmopolitan
desolate	abandoned	gentrified
tatty	dilapidated	neglected
dull	buzzing	sedate
sleepy	affluent	thriving

2

Work with a partner. Look at the images below and describe what you can see, comparing and contrasting the places in the photographs. Try to use the vocabulary from the previous exercise.



PHOTO: Jonny Gios on unsplash



PHOTO: Gabriella Clare Marino on unsplash



PHOTO: Chris Anderson on unsplash

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Match the words and phrases on the left with the definitions on the right.

A

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. struggling (v.) | a. happening a lot, becoming much worse |
| 2. undesirable (adj.) | b. made to appear larger in size |
| 3. magnified (v.) | c. coping, continuing to function after a difficult period |
| 4. footfall (n.) | d. trying very hard to cope in a difficult situation |
| 5. disrepair (adj.) | e. the number of people entering a shopping area at a given time |
| 6. rampant (adj.) | f. a place full of energy and bustling with interactions and business |
| 7. a thriving hub of activity (phrase) | g. not wanted or unpleasant |
| 8. holding up (ph. v.) | h. in poor condition due to neglect or being old or broken |

B

**Watch the clip and listen to Jack describe his experience and impression of town centres in the UK.
As you listen mark the words and phrases from part A in the order that they are used.**

C

Watch the clip one more time. Then read the statements below and mark them as true (T) or false (F).

1. Jack hardly ever goes back to the UK.
2. Jack's impression is based on what he overhears other people say.
3. The centre of town gets worse at night.
4. The indoor market is still very busy.
5. There are many empty shops in the streets near the indoor market?
6. Independent retailers were able to adapt to changing circumstances quite easily.

In the clip Jack mentions that town centres up and down the country are becoming like ghost towns.

Do you think this is true?

What is the situation in your country?

How does the situation in smaller towns compare with the largest, most important cities?

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Discuss the following questions with a partner or in groups.

1. Are there any areas or neighbourhoods in your town that are considered **undesirable**? What are the factors that cause an area to become **undesirable**?
2. What problems do you think were **magnified** by the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown? Has anything been done to alleviate these problems?
3. What buildings where you live are in a state of **disrepair**? What do you think should be done with these buildings?
4. How should governments and the police deal with **rampant** crime? Would severe punishment help to reduce the problem? Why / why not?
5. Are there any areas of your town which used to be **thriving hubs of activity** but are now abandoned and dilapidated? Or, are there any areas that were in a state of disrepair and became **thriving hubs of activity** after being gentrified? What caused the change?
6. How is your home town or city **holding up** following COVID and the cost of living crisis? Has it managed to bounce back or not?

With a partner, make a list of causes of the problems faced by high streets and town centres.

Now skim read the article on the below and make a note of what factors are mentioned.

How does this compare with your list?

Not so long ago, UK high streets were thriving hubs of activity. Bustling streets fed by phalanxes of office workers providing the footfall that is the lifeblood of the retail and hospitality sectors. These days the picture of the typical town centre is stark in comparison. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a surge in remote working and online shopping. Key retailers have disappeared from the high street without replacement, commercial leases have shortened in length, office vacancy rates have soared and town centre high streets look increasingly tatty and fly-blown.

At 1.2 miles long, Oxford Street is the largest and most valuable shopping street in Britain. Stuart Machin, the CEO of Marks & Spencer, has described it as 'a national embarrassment, with a proliferation of tacky candy stores, antisocial behaviour and footfall remaining in the doldrums, 11% down on pre-pandemic levels'. As Westminster Council have adopted a policy for Oxford Street of 'retail only', any attempts to reintroduce residential accommodation back into the street are prevented and retailers that think they have too much space in Oxford Street are limited in what they can do to alleviate the situation.

During the pandemic online retailing soared, hitting a market share of 32.6% in November 2020. The following July this had fallen back to 25.5%, a pattern that was repeated for each lockdown. There was a ratchet effect: internet sales did not return to the levels of 2019, but to an average around 25%-27%. An internet share of one-quarter or more of retailing means that there are too many stores.

A recent report stating that empty workspace across London's West End, City and Canary Wharf business hubs has hit a 30-year high paints a bleak picture for those hoping footfall will return to pre-pandemic levels. Since the end of the third lockdown in the UK it has proved difficult to get employees back in the office full-time, with many now working from home two or three days a week. However appealing this is for the individuals concerned, the impact on the retail and hospitality sectors has been significant with many business unable to survive. The increase in energy prices in 2022 delivered the coup de grace for many smaller independent businesses. High streets in smaller, economically-challenged towns and cities are particularly badly affected.

It goes without saying that high streets and city centres go through changes, with premises that were once retailers becoming coffee shops or restaurants just as their predecessors changed from being family grocers or bakers. In the post-war period there have been many economic ups and downs impacting town centres. Today however, local governments and urban residents need to ask themselves whether the current situation is simply the trough in a typical boom and bust cycle, or is it indicative of a more fundamental shift taking place. The subsequent consideration is, what do we want post-pandemic town centres to look like?

Sources – retail research.org, reuters.com, ft.com, theconversation.com

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Read the text one more time and mark whether the following statements are true (T) or false (F):

1. The amount of office space available to lease has fallen.
2. Fewer people are visiting shops on Oxford Street than before the COVID-19
3. There is a lack of available commercial space for high-street retailers.
4. There is optimism that all office based workers will once again commute to the city centre five days a week.
5. Almost all smaller family shops and restaurants were able to absorb an increase in the cost of electricity.
6. Changes in the high street are part of a natural cycle.

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Find the words or phrases in the text that match the following definitions:

1. Groups (para 1)
2. Extremely dirty and unclean (para 1)
3. Of poor taste and quality (para 2)
4. A period of depression (para 2)
5. An escalation that tends to self-perpetuate, moving easily in one direction (para 3)
6. Depressing, without hope (para 4)
7. Poor, lacking money or wealth (para 4)
8. someone who held a position before the current holder of that position (para 5)
9. the lowest point in an economic cycle (opposite of peak) (para 5)

Discussion

Read the final paragraph of the text on one more time and then discuss the following questions in pairs or groups.

In your opinion is the situation described in the text and in the video that you watched part of a natural boom and bust cycle, or is it a more fundamental shift? Why do you think so?

If retailers and other business such as bank branches are leaving the high street, what do you think city and town centres should look like in future?

What should local governments do to repurpose and rejuvenate abandoned commercial properties in town centres? What purpose should town centres serve?