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Manuscript title: Are local landlords a solution to declining small-town high streets? – A study of Trowbridge, UK

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Abstract

High streets are a vital part of national identity and infrastructure. Responses to high street decline need to encourage stakeholder engagement. The prominence of local retail landlords as a key potential stakeholder group in smaller towns has been overlooked. Through a case study of Trowbridge, a small town in the UK, this research investigates local landlords' contributions towards countering high street decline and their attitudes towards the challenges of maintaining healthy small-town centres. The primary qualitative data is gathered through local inspection and semi-structured interviews with local landlords. Secondary quantitative data includes ownership, vacancy, and occupier type. Local landlords are of particular importance, despite engaging insufficiently with wider regeneration schemes. Local landlords demonstrate a strong awareness of the causes of high street decline and local issues. They also desire improvements to the current conditions of the high street, for both philanthropic and business reasons. We conclude that local landlords are a significant group with the credible potential to implement changes. It informs analyses of other towns struggling to reinvigorate their centres. While the case study provides a rich picture and the results are largely generalisable, further research is needed to understand more about the role of local landlords across similar towns with respective idiosyncrasies.

Introduction

High streets are the backbone of towns and cities which define the national identity. In the UK they form a pivotal part of the town centres' infrastructure by providing space, services, and opportunities for organisations and people to create a marketplace for the exchange of goods and services, a place where they converge to form a vibrant community rather than as individual agents. In 2020 retail sales generated 5.2% of UK's GDP despite the COVID-19 pandemic (Retail Economics, 2022). As much as 9.3% of all UK employees work in the sector (ONS, 2021). However, during the last decade, e-commerce advances have provided new consumption spaces (Grewal *et al.*, 2018). In the UK online retail sales have more than trebled, while 2021 saw growth to some 26% of retail sales made online (Retail Economics, 2022). This has reinforced the tenants' changing business models favouring greater flexibility (MSCI, 2019; Nanda *et al.*, 2021). On the 3rd December 2018, Mike Ashley (the most prominent UK retail billionaire) addressed the UK Government (House of Commons, 2019) asserting that "*mainstream high streets are already dead*". Although quantifying the scale of '*dead high street*' seems to be impossible, widespread incidents of spatial repositioning are undeniable (Dobson, 2015).

Town centres historically contained the hub for the community. Accordingly, objectives vary among stakeholders, which can inhibit coordination efforts to transition (Le Feuvre *et al.*, 2016). In this context, landlords have attracted scrutiny, focused on adversarial relationships between landlords and tenants (Carson and Fortune, 2012) and detached perceptions of landlords from the community. Sparks (2021) contests that decisions should be made locally

and not by distant corporations. However, the role and perception of local landlords in retail repositioning and regeneration have largely been ignored.

The aim of this study is to explore the retail decline and critically consider local landlords' ability to meaningfully deliver solutions to high street decline, whilst balancing the challenges of maintaining healthy small-town centres. We do this by means of a generic case study of Trowbridge, Wiltshire - a typical small town in England.

The following section reviews the literature on high street challenges. Section 3 describes our methodology and key inspection observations, while section 4 analyses and discusses the retail landscape in Trowbridge and the local landlords' observations and opinions. Finally, section 5 provides conclusions and makes recommendations towards informing stakeholders' role in high street transformation.

Related literature

Town centres traditionally encompassed the main retail cores within urban areas in the UK (Dolega and Celińska-Janowicz, 2015) and are often used interchangeably with the term 'High Street' (Carmona, 2015). Viewing town centres exclusively via their retail potential is problematic through perpetuating narrow views on town centres (Vaughan *et al.*, 2010). Hubbard (2017) argues that the high street remains one of the few places where a local community produces a shared sense of identity. However, Simms (2004) notes that past high street developments led to extensive uniformisation of town centres with many losing their distinctive character and alternative high street functions are not sufficient to compensate for the contraction of physical retail.

The pandemic only accelerated the high street decline, lower consumer demand and cash flow problems (Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020). Previously, Portas (2011) recommended urgent action, but not as an attempt to save every high street. Grimsey *et al.* (2013) saw old shopping patterns as broken, with decline as a mass restructuring opportunity, while Parker *et al.* (2014b) indicated a number of challenges affecting their survival. Astbury and Thurstain-Goodwin (2014) pointed out the competition from out-of-town large-scale retail schemes. All highlighting the importance of stakeholder engagement, with Wrigley and Lambiri (2015) advocating a partnership approach.

More recently, Timpson's report (MHCLG, 2018) has called for grassroot-led high street rejuvenation. However, it is challenging. Retail redevelopments typically require a larger plot than that occupied by one unit, therefore, either buying out or cooperating with neighbours is needed to overcome fragmented ownership (Jones, 2009; Alakeson and Brett, 2020).

Moreover, the property owners often perceive themselves as lacking the resources to influence developments and if they do cooperate, it is typically with neighbouring owners (Håkansson and Lagin, 2015).

Understanding influential stakeholders is crucial to addressing high street decline (Savage *et al.*, 1991). According to Child (2019), over half of the space measured based on the retail area is owned by institutional investors and only 7.5% by private landlords. However, the institutional ownership based on the number of units is less than 1% and is worth 27% of the estimated capital value of the sector. At the same time the private local ownership is more prevalent in secondary high streets (Byrne and Lee, 2009). Focus on capital investments masks

the complex and fragmented ownership structure of town centre real estate and over-prioritises institutional investors (Lee and Swann, 2020). Further, more recent shifts among the major institutional investors leaving the highstreets and debt-funding restrictions put on smaller investors impose further pressures on local landlords, who then are faced with ownership fragmentation issues (Orr *et al.*, 2021). Government responses include the intended rollout of a public ownership register of all property (Shalchi and Mor, 2021). However, it is not clear when this will happen. Identification of high street stakeholder groups includes retailers, landlords, investors, shoppers, community groups, police and councillors (Pal and Sanders, 1997; De Nisco *et al.*, 2008; Bagwell, 2011). Their relationships are critical to understanding differing aims. Yet, when it comes to managing town centres, Forsberg *et al.* (1999) observe limited cooperative behaviours among landlords. De Nisco *et al.* (2008) found lower levels of cooperation from landlords compared to other stakeholders. Parker *et al.* (2014a) indicate high streets with more local engagement are expected to outperform those without. Håkansson *et al.* (2017) find limited evidence of landlords and local authorities working strategically and proactively together, even in organisations such as business improvement districts. In addition, understanding local stakeholders, including retail unit owners, ensures their involvement in fashioning solutions (Carley *et al.*, 2001). Van den Berg and Braun (1999) suggest that strategic networks integrating private and public actors are pivotal in town centre strategy development. Despite that, Medway *et al.* (2000) observe lower engagement in the private sector compared to public, attributed partially to a limited knowledge of scheme benefits. Whyatt (2004) notes that the gathering and sharing of market information would enable

stakeholder collaboration and the facilitation of communication, while Dempsey and Burton (2012) recognise that knowledge transfers can improve the profile of long-term ‘place-keeping’. Increased participation can be encouraged by propagating a sense of belonging amongst communities and their stakeholders in decision-making processes (Coca-Stefaniak *et al.*, 2009; Millington and Ntounis, 2017). However, Carley *et al.* (2001) suggested inefficiencies in existing partnerships, observing ‘partnership fatigue’ within regeneration areas with partnerships in place. Pre-existing patterns of detachedness mean tenants, rather than landlords, are more likely to engage (Sayce *et al.*, 2009). Thus, the identification of ownership composition and understanding of the individual motivations of landlords could assist in transformation (Orr *et al.*, 2021). That is because the local landlords with their first-hand experience have the potential to act as cocreators of local spaces.

Research design and methodology

Underpinned by a pragmatic research design (Creswell and Pooth, 2018), we employ the generic case study approach. This approach was selected as it allows an in-depth study involving local landlords in a typical small town (Fiss, 2009). The Trowbridge town centre was chosen purposively as a generic case, as it (1) closely reflects retail land use and vacancy national averages (ONS, 2020; Local Data Company, 2020); (2) has a traditional British town centre; (3) its demographic structure is similar to the UK’s average; (4) faces pressures from competitor towns such as Bath; and (5) was a major beneficiary in the in South-West of the Future High Streets Fund (MHCLG, 2020) evidencing that support is needed; to deal with the challenges it faces.

Trowbridge is a county town of Wiltshire in South-West England between London and Bristol 45km south of M4 motorway (see map in **Figure 1**). Trowbridge, similar to other smaller towns in the South West of England is a typical commuter town. It is well connected via rail to its closest larger town of Bath (20min) and to the other main cities in the region (Bristol - 40min, Swindon - 40min) and London (1h45min). The town has a population of 37,000 reflecting England's age profile (ONS, 2023). While Wiltshire is in the top quartile of all English unitary authorities, Trowbridge is somewhat polarised. In terms of the index of multiple deprivation, most of the central areas fall in the 2nd to 5th decile, while the surrounding areas are mostly in the 6th to 10th decile suggesting strongly mixed local population and higher welfare levels outside of the town centre (CDRC, 2019).

We then conducted the research in two phases. The first phase encompassed site inspection and collection of secondary data on retail in Trowbridge. This allowed us to understand the physical structure of the town centre and its main urban characteristics, and to establish the level of retail oversupply and the ownership structure. The understanding of the ownership structure confirmed the observations by Byrne and Lee (2009) and Child (2019) which reinforced our motivation to explore the local landlords as a potentially influential stakeholder group.

To conduct the second stage of the research, we used the local ownership data to identify local landlords with substantial experience in the local market capable of providing a rich picture of the local situation and able to reflect on their own actions and make observations on actions of other landlords and other stakeholders relevant for the survival of high streets. We

extracted their observations and opinions by means of semi-structured interviews. The interviews were structured in nine parts: Firstly, questions were asked about the participants' profiles, backgrounds and their properties (e.g. place of residence, identification with Trowbridge, engagement in actively managing properties and the relevance of these properties as investment); and secondly, questions were asked about their understanding of the current situation, their relationships and their experience with competitors and other stakeholders. Finally, they were also asked to elaborate on their responses to changes in the environment and express their sentiments on the future of Trowbridge's high street. The themes of the interview questions are listed in **Table 1**.

A purposive sampling (a non-probability sampling technique) was adopted, using explicit inclusion criteria, namely: participants must have a minimum of five years of experience acting as a local retail landlord in Trowbridge and reside within a 30 minutes-drive of Trowbridge. The experience criterion was critical to identify only those who would have been exposed to changes in the high street, exposes to local, regional and central government policies affecting their operations and understood the issues pertaining to the survival of the local high street. The residence criterion was used in reference to the 20-minute city concept (Capasso Da Silva *et al.*, 2020). Absentee ownership was omitted on the assumption that absent owners would provide greater representation to disengaged participants (Bennet, 2017). This process allowed a specific targeted group of participants to be invited for an interview. All participants were identified via the Trowbridge Chamber of Commerce. Once invitations were accepted, participants were offered the opportunity to have in-person or online face-to-face interviews.

All interviews were digitally recorded (each taking 30-60 minutes) and later transcribed verbatim. To preserve the anonymity of the participants and to guarantee their confidentiality, no names were stored in the transcribed text. Property data was then triangulated using CoStar and wider Internet searches. Interviews were subject to thematic analysis (Guest *et al.*, 2012) following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-step process (familiarisation with the data; coding; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; writing up).

Ethical approval

Prior to the interviews being conducted ethical approval was gained. Also, before any interviews were arranged all participants were informed of the nature of the study via a participant information cover letter detailing that their consent and involvement were anonymous and entirely voluntary. At the start of the interview, the interviewer explained this again and reminded the participants that the interviews were being recorded and how the data would be kept and used. After the interview, the participants were given a two-week window to allow them (if they desired) to withdraw their responses. This approach is compliant with the expectations of UK university research ethics regulations.

Results and discussion

The findings of the study are presented under two main section headings: (i) Site inspection and secondary data; and (ii) Local landlord interviews.

Site inspection and secondary data

To gain a clear understanding of town centre vacancy rates, occupier type and unit ownership,

an inspection of the study area was conducted on 20th July 2021. This data was triangulated using CoStar and interviews. Bearing in mind the complexity of town centres (Genecon, 2011), the area of study was narrowed down to 190 units located (see **Figure 2**) within the ‘Primary shopping area’ (Wiltshire Council, 2013) delineated to only areas with unbroken retail frontages to exclude areas with a proliferation of non-retail units. This included 64 units (34%) in two shopping centres – The Shires and Castle Place – and 126 high street-type units (66%). Other notable retail spaces outside the area of study include superstores (ASDA, Tesco Extra and Sainsbury’s) and the Gateway shopping centre and the leisure civic centre area around the Odeon cinema.

The inspection identified a vacancy level of 21.2% (see **Table 2**), suggesting a strong oversupply of retail units significantly above the national level of 14.5% (BRC, 2021) and in line with Dolega and Lord’s (2020) study of Liverpool which identified vacancies at 20-30% in deprived areas of the city. As depicted in **Figure 3**, there is a clear divide in the mix of ‘national’ vs ‘non-national’ (independent) retailers with a higher ‘national’ concentration within the prime retail area, which reflects the suggestions of Grimmer *et al.* (2015) that where footfall is too low for larger operators, small retailers are vital to maintaining a vibrant local economy.

Analysis of ownership of 146 units, for which the status was known, reveals that 28% of Trowbridge shops were locally owned (**Table 3** and **Figure 4**) as opposed to 7.5% of units in major UK high streets (Child, 2019). Overall, 35.1% of vacant units are locally owned and excluding shopping centre units, the ‘local’ ownership of vacant units is at 59.1%. This notable

presence of local vacant unit owners provides opportunities for local partnerships (Tselios *et al.*, 2018).

To collect visual illustration, additional landscape survey of the area was undertaken on 26th June 2022, which validated previous inspection observations strongly suggesting low footfall, persistent vacancies and except for building renovations, no visible signs of material improvements to the high street retail (**Figure 5**).

Local landlords' interviews

Based on the participants meeting the criteria-based selection process, between 16 August and 2 September of 2021 seven interviews were conducted using an online platform with local landlords (L1-L7) conducted. L7 is also an operator of one town-centre shop. Participants' profiles are described in **Table 4**.

Interviews revealed participants' views on current challenges in the retail sector and Trowbridge town centre, their perceptions of government interventions, engagement with competitors and other stakeholders and perspectives on what the future may bring. Further, they demonstrated what role they play in the town centres now and how they could contribute to the betterment of their positions and ultimately to the survival of the high street.

Retail sector challenges

All participants demonstrated a broad awareness of the challenges faced by the retail sector and online sales. L7 operates a footwear retailer; their last remaining branch in Trowbridge acts as the “*shopfront*” to the more profitable online business. L2 highlighted limited parking,

anti-social behaviour, and a lack of investment. L3 felt that the diversification of supermarkets into non-food goods has negatively impacted local retailers. The respondents noted the resilience of “*the social side of shopping*” (L1) and the strong performance of retailers such as coffee shops and hairdressers, post-lockdown (L5, L7). All of these observations are reflective of research into the health of high street (Portas, 2011; Grimsey *et al.*, 2013; MHCLG, 2018; and Orr *et al.*, 2022).

Views on Trowbridge

Key strengths of the town centre include a wide retail selection, pedestrianisation of Fore Street, historic streetscape, industrial heritage, free parking, and a growing population (L1, L2, L3, L7). L1 also cited initiatives such as craft markets as catalysts for revival. L4 highlighted that a democratic town centre “*gives a chance for the small man doing pretty much anything to earn himself a living*” through the prevalence of secondary and tertiary units. Therefore, caution is needed to ensure new retail developments do not damage secondary retail locations (Bagwell, 2011). Key strengths are place-specific to Trowbridge and need to be considered in the context of retail transformation. Weaknesses of Trowbridge include obsolete larger premises, high vacancy rates and extensive, conveniently located out-of-town developments such as Bradley Road retail park (L1, L5, L7).

Consistent with Astbury and Thurstain-Goodwin (2014), a common theme of fragmentation through out-of-town development attracted negative observations including no strategic plan (L6), lack of functionality (L7) and chaotic developments (L3) and non-sustainable places (L4). The consistency of responses suggests limited central planning

and stakeholder engagement. However, participants were also aware that high street adaptation is equally needed (L1 and L2). L3 and L6 attributed the decline to the closure of major local manufacturers and losses of secure jobs. Other negative observations included anti-social behaviour, a lack of cleanliness and homelessness issues (L1 and L2). L3 noted that the pedestrianisation of a major street reduced parking and market stalls obscured shop fronts.

High street - decline or transition

Similarly to the past literature (Orr *et al.*, 2022), all participants acknowledged Trowbridge's decline and recognised a need for transition. – “*it cannot get any worse, so the only way is up*” (L6). L5 argued population growth has not translated to footfall increases and Trowbridge will continue to lack appeal. L3 remained optimistic, despite fewer choices in the town and higher costs compared to online. L7 viewed contraction as a necessity, which could consolidate the centre around its industrial heritage. L4 predicted future community-focused government investments in town centre public services. L2 speculated that entertainment, food, and drink will trigger growth. L1 felt that with the right people and changes, “*the town centre does have a bright future*” and expressed their desire to instigate social-led retail changes.

Local landlords' perceptions of policies and engagement with local government

All participants noted a persistent lack of government support. L2 stated that the government's attitudes towards landlords have always been very negative. L5 could not recall any support offered and was highly critical of the local authority's efforts. L1 and L6 only recalled the COVID-19 tenant grants. However, L7 felt that the government “*acted quite quickly and*

efficiently” with assistance. The participants universally felt unrepresented and thus, collectively, considered themselves as an untapped resource for placemaking.

When asked about the utilisation of Trowbridge’s £16 million Future High Streets Fund (MHCLG, 2020), L1 recommended start-up grants for small businesses or rent reductions, L4 and L3 suggested aesthetic and cleanliness improvements, while in agreement with Coca-Stefaniak *et al.* (2009), L2 focused on business-like management to improve shoppers’ experience.

Overall, L4 and L5 were sceptical of the funding. While L7 welcomed the funding, they cautioned that the market should “*decide what’s going to live or die rather than subsidising, prolonging the agony*”. Other recommendations centred on realistic surface-level proposals. L3 asserted that “*you’ve got to be very big to make a difference*” highlighting a need for collaborative engagement.

Rather than engaging with other stakeholders, the participants viewed previous local authority-led schemes as unproductive, suggesting partnership distrust or fatigue. L4 and L3 cited a lack of trust, consultation and inflexibility once decisions are made. L6 critiqued the planning department, claiming they “*dither and protract*”. These observations highlight the potential for local authorities to communicate the tangible benefits of involvement to capture landlords’ engagement, including increased asset value via improved control over the public realm (Morçöl *et al.*, 2008).

Local retail landlords’ peer engagement

In line with De Nisco *et al.* (2008), most respondents knew their immediate neighbours and

kept limited maintenance-related communication (L3, L4, L6, L7). L2 stressed negative perceptions of previous interactions. L3 was aware that institutional ownership is high. Due to negative experiences, participants did not see benefits to establishing inter-landlord relationships. Only L1 and L7 highlighted the benefits of sharing comparative values. L6 saw competition between landlords as a challenge, for which L4 suggested council facilitation. Only L1 aimed to increase involvement with other landlords through networking and development schemes. However, bearing in mind that major retail improvements require larger plots and collaboration between property owners (Jones, 2009) and resources to support efficient collaboration (Håkansson and Lagin, 2015) they also noted potential risks around barriers to sharing commercial information.

Local retail landlords' engagement with tenants

All respondents had symbiotic relationships with their tenants; however, they differed in approaches. When selecting tenants, L1 balanced entrepreneurial spirit and ease to deal with. L2 “jumps” at prospective tenants due to low demand. L6 and L7 preferred face-to-face interactions, relying on instincts and a 3-month deposit. L3 and L5 checked the trading history, preferring established businesses. Lastly, L4 looked for adaptability and willingness to collaborate. All respondents deal directly with tenants and suggested that only: if they overstretched themselves, they would consider taking on a third-party service (L1) or if tenants were uncooperative (L4). L3 and L5 did not see the benefits of costly agency fees. Nevertheless, relations with tenants were predominantly positive, with direct communication and good rapport being the catalyst for this (L2, L3, L7).

In line with MSC (2019), L1 requested smaller deposits, refurbishing units, and setting “fair” rents. When tenant’s improvements benefit the building, L7 often contributed, generating goodwill. L1 assisted tenants in obtaining pandemic grants and establishing payment plans, highlighting a “human” approach, and balancing short-term profits vs guaranteed cashflows (Nanda *et al.*, 2021).

Prior to the pandemic, L3 has reduced rents and provided rental holidays. During the pandemic, L2 and L7 granted their tenants rent-free or other incentives. In contrast, L5 and L6 did not have to offer pandemic relief as grants covered tenant shortfalls. Some of the incentives were inadequate and led L2 to sell the property illustrating the limits of flexibility and engagement with tenants; therefore, adaptability remains critical.

Local retail landlords’ engagement with other stakeholders

With respect to other stakeholder engagement, L3, L6 and L7 felt disillusioned with previous groups which had an immaterial effect on council policy. L2’s only interaction with other groups has been through pop-up shop organisers and they felt that they were subsidising this initiative. L1 recently got involved in a WhatsApp group, but perceived the group as riddled with self-advertisements. Despite a lack of current membership, L6 and L4 acknowledged the strengths of the TCC’s current president in opening new lines of communication. However, consistent with De Magalhães (2012), L7 opposed Business Improvement Districts, due to similar schemes providing little return and no structural changes. The results indicate that Trowbridge’s networks are hampered by ‘*inertia in mindsets*’ (Parker *et al.*, 2014a).

Local retail landlords' response to change

Participants mostly described themselves as open to engaging with changing opportunities for varied uses in the town centre such as entertainment (L2) and the independent retail scene (L1). These comments expose support for a shift from a “*clone town*” with “*a monochrome strip of [...] chains*” to be supplanted by a “*hometown*” that “*is instantly recognisable and distinctive*” (Simms, 2004: p. 3).

The proliferation of internet retailing and out-of-town shopping destinations (Wrigley and Lambiri, 2015), has contributed to L1's preference for town centres offering “*a unique product or personal service*”. Converting parts of commercial units was a key method cited, including converting upper retail and office floors to residential (L1, L3, L5, L6).

Despite mixed uses resulting in high-density developments with a greater density of potential customers (Parker *et al.*, 2014b), for L7 conversion was the last resort as they did not feel that residential and commercial tenants mix well. While L3 and L2 emphasised the need for local councils to support changes, wider planning system modernisation with the introduction of Class E and extended permitted development rights, further support flexible uses (MHCLG, 2021). The disproportionate vacancy rates in Trowbridge indicate partial obsolescence of retail space as an economic and social issue (Remøy and Wilkinson, 2012), for which L2 recommended mixed-uses as inhibiting anti-social behaviours reducing urban sprawl and increasing walkability and addressing housing shortages. Participants with underutilised space are keen to support a mix of uses in return for income growth.

Participants perceived technology, including online shopping, as “*the end of the town*

centres as we [...] know them” (L1). The changes it has introduced, which even sophisticated retailers have found disruptive, were acknowledged in interviews due to convenience and lower prices. However, local landlords expected technology not to play a major role in town-centre regeneration. L1 and L3 asserted that the face-to-face experiences retail offers, set it apart from online channels, which correlates with Portas’ (2011) recommendations. Although participants mentioned technologically related solutions such as omnichannel retailing (L1, L5), anti-social offenders database (L2), a virtual retail platform for Trowbridge (L4) and technology-led construction (L7), they did not cover potential smart technologies. Technology for participants is a distant concept lacking plausibility; instead, the high street’s physical nature is seen as a distinguishing strength. As L3 puts it unit cleaning and repainting are more needed than the technology.

Outlook

With low engagement levels, participant opinions on methods to increase engagement are of critical importance. L5 stated *“my time is worth more than being in a town centre group”*, and L2 could not suggest any improvements. For L4, high-street stakeholder groups were considered too fractious with mixed priorities. L7 noted conflicting interests – *“tenants want cheaper rents, landlords want rent increases and councils have no money”*. L4 and L7 agreed that future cooperation would be unlikely.

L6 believed that the TCC could facilitate information exchanges. L3 hoped the TCC could encourage authorities to listen to those at the frontline and use them to implement changes. L1 perceived problems arising from buildings with absent owners and a need to

encourage sales or redevelopment. This conforms with Alakeson and Brett (2020) recommending stakeholder group purchases of neglected properties.

In line with Lee and Swann (2020), a further observed barrier to landlord coordination was the lack of transparency on the ownership of the retail units and where financial benefits were opaque, landlords felt less motivated to support changes. Finally, it was suggested that transparency could promote improved engagement through expressions of interest, negotiating purchases and directing queries.

Conclusion

Trowbridge town centre's composition provided place-specific context to the research, confirming that local landlords represent a significant influence group that can meaningfully contribute to the sustainable future of the high street. However, following previous literature (Forsberg *et al.*, 1999; De Nisco *et al.*, 2008; and Håkansson *et al.*, 2017), their existing approaches demonstrate low and reactive engagement, resulting in an increased risk of being outpaced by economic transition. This low engagement indicates the potential to improve local landlords' contribution to high street revival.

While perceptions of traditional high streets were predominantly negative, respondents recognised the need for place-specific transition. Like Håkansson *et al.* (2017), Trowbridge's local landlords agreed that the government was largely unsupportive of them. Reflecting De Nisco *et al.* (2008) and Håkansson and Lagin (2015), they agreed that engagement with other landlords was low, being confined to neighbouring units. Simultaneously, their relations with tenants were strong with participants selecting tenants based on willingness to engage and

ensuring long-term retail viability. Willingness to promote flexible uses was subject to personal circumstances with support for reactive adaptation. Despite a wide range of stakeholders (Pal and Sanders, 1997), local landlords indicated that previous interactions with other stakeholders were limited and ineffective. Consistent with De Magalhães (2012), openness to effective third-party facilitation that addressed the deficiencies of previous schemes was expressed. Finally, technology was not seen as a catalyst to revitalise the high street. Instead, its physical distinction was highlighted as a strength over online.

Within Trowbridge, local landlords are a prominent group and important to facilitating regeneration schemes. Capturing local landlord engagement presents a credible solution to the high street decline in Trowbridge. They are numerous enough, have mixed experiences and resources, and most express a desire to engage. The limited engagement between local landlords and the wider community was the most concerning observation, which could be addressed with greater transparency surrounding the ownership of high-street properties. If these patterns occur elsewhere, negative perceptions of wider engagement among local landlords are likely to inhibit retail transformation. Some participants interviewed expressed a desire to improve their town centre due to embedded links with the community. Others focused on input to schemes providing added value. Overcoming engagement barriers through action-orientated philanthropic and commercially oriented approaches (Peel and Parker, 2017) could potentially entice local landlords. Hence, it is hoped that this paper will inform local authorities on how to improve their engagement with retail smaller and individually less powerful landlords to address the challenges of evolving high streets through both small and

big-scale targeted investment.

Given the exploratory nature of this research, and the adopted methodology (case study and small sample semi-structured interviews) our results cannot be fully generalised beyond Trowbridge stakeholders. While the Trowbridge town centre is alike many small towns in England, other towns need to be investigated to check for the robustness of the findings reported in this research. Nevertheless, it is expected that our observations would inform analyses of other towns struggling to reinvigorate their high streets. Finally, future research should consider the roles of other stakeholders, including non-local landlords.

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Table 1. A list of the themes used to underpin the questions posed to the participants

#	Themes of the interview questions
1	Recent and current retail sector challenges
2	Views on Trowbridge's local economy
3	Views on the past and current situation of Trowbridge's high street
4	Perceptions of past government policies and experienced engagement with local government
5	Engagement with other local retail landlords
6	Engagement with tenants
7	Engagement with other stakeholders
8	Response to changes
9	Outlook on the future of Trowbridge's high street

Table 2. Vacancy level, July 2021

Retail units	Number of units	Number of vacant units	Vacancy level
Shopping centres	64	15	23%
Other retail units	126	25	20%
Total	190	40	21%

Source: Inspection, July 2021

Table 3. Ownership Structure, July 2021

Retail units	Number of units with identified owners	Local owners	Non-Local owners
Shopping centres	64	0%	100%
Other retail units	83	49%	51%
Total	147	28%	72%

Source: HM Land Registry

Table 4. Participants' profiles

#	Gender / Age	Owned portfolio	Building Location and Condition	Occupancy
L1	A married couple	Two retail, multiple residential units and a development plot in Trowbridge	Church Walk – Victorian, good condition Roundstone Street – modern, good condition	Local tenant Vacant
L2	Male	One retail unit in Trowbridge, other units in neighbouring towns	Fore Street – Victorian, fair condition	Vacant
L3	Male	Multiple retail and office units in Trowbridge, other units in neighbouring towns	Fore Street – Victorian parade of three units, good condition Church Street (two units) - Modern, good condition - Victorian, fair condition Castle Street (two units) - Modern, good condition - Modern, poor condition	Two national tenants, one vacant unit Local tenant Local tenant National tenant Local tenant
L4	Male	Multiple retail units in Trowbridge	Fore Street (two units) - Listed, fair condition - Listed, good condition	Local tenant Local tenant

		Roundstone Street – parade of three listed units, good condition	Three local tenants
L5	Male	One retail and one residential unit in Trowbridge	Wicker Hill – Victorian, good condition Local tenant
L6	Male	Multiple retail and residential units in Trowbridge	Silver Street – two pre-war terraces, good condition Eight local tenants
L7	Male	Two retail units in Trowbridge and several more managed on behalf of family members	Castle Street – Listed, good condition Owner occupier Silver Street – Modern, good condition Local tenant

Source: Semi-structured interviews

Figure 1. Trowbridge Location Map. *Source: Ordnance Survey.*



Figure 2. Town Centre Structure, July 2021. *Source: Inspection observations*

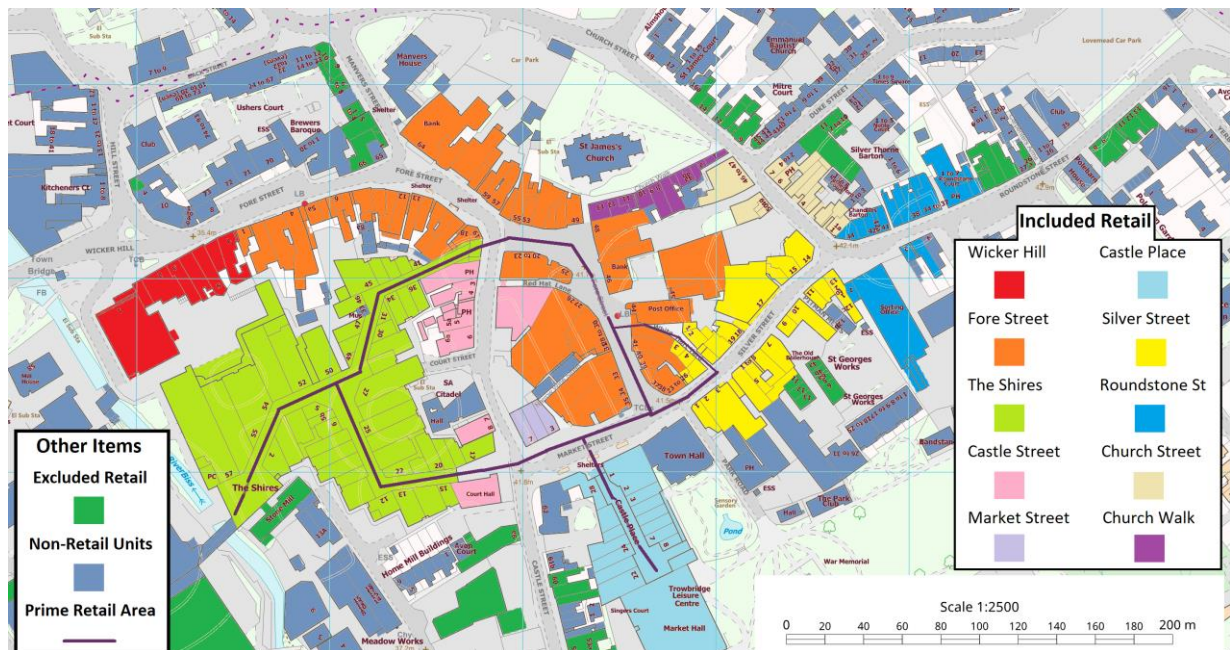


Figure 3. Occupancy Structure, July 2021. *Source: Inspection observations*



Figure 4. Ownership Structure, July 2021. *Source: HM Land Registry*



Figure 5. Landscape Survey, June 2022. *Source: Authors' own photos. Note: (1) Fore Street (view from Castle Street); (2) Silver Street (view from the corner of Market Street and Park Road); (3) Castle Place – entrance to the shopping centre (view from Market Street); (4) The Shires – entrance to the shopping centre (view from Castle Street); (5) The Shires – main atrium; (6) ASDA supermarket and The Shires – entrance from ASDA parking (view from Bythesea Street)*

