

Back to the Future

A return to traditional 'village' communities could transform the High Street over the next two decades.

William Higham, Next Big Thing, October 2021

1. Putting the 'local' in tomorrow's local high streets

The importance of 'community' is growing. It's been years since the 'me decade' of the 1990s. More and more people are seeking the support, not of institutions, but of their fellow citizens: family, friends, neighbours and shared interest groups. Horizontal trust - trust in fellow citizens, consumer reviews and 'people like me' - is rising exponentially. For instance, 97 percent of consumers claim to use customer reviews whenever they purchase any new product.¹ This is in contrast to trust in institutions, or vertical trust, which is declining. 58percent of citizens globally say they distrust governments, business and the media.²

It's not just about trusting others. Increasing physical closeness to family and friends is helping drive the trend. Statistics show that young people are living at home longer before they 'fly the nest'. There are now six times more UK 25-34s living with their parents than living on their own.³ And there are signs their grandparents might come too. Already one in eight UK adults expect their parents will move in with them.⁴ In the UK, the number of granny flats and 'graddy flats' - self-contained spaces for grown-up children returning home after university - has risen by a third since 2014. Meanwhile, young people are showing a lot of interest in co-living spaces: dormitory-style blocks with shared kitchens and living rooms.

Love thy neighbour

One of the consequences of this is a growing closeness between neighbours - and neighbourhoods. Local communities are becoming a much bigger part of people's lives. Residents are seeking and enjoying local businesses and amenities much more. For many, it's almost like a return to traditional 'village values'. The pandemic has helped, but two years before the pandemic,

¹ Power Reviews, Mar 2018

² Edelman, Trust Barometer, Jan 2021

³ Office of National Statistics, Sep 2012

⁴ Mintel British lifestyles, May 2017

30 percent of Britons said they were getting on better with neighbours than five years before; over half (54 percent) were now on first name terms with the people next door; and 29 percent would trust their neighbours with a key.⁵ The value of our communities is growing. For instance, though many Britons (19 percent) consider a brand more 'ethical' if it supports a charity, a bigger proportion (23 percent) say they do so if it supports the local community.⁶

While the trend began before Covid, lockdown supercharged it. Firstly, the appreciation of help given out by neighbours during the crisis: like doing the shopping for those that were quarantining. Secondly, lockdown forced people to rely on local services for much of their requirements. And thirdly, working from home has meant people are spending more time in their neighbourhoods, creating a new found love for it among many.

The statistics bear this out. Two thirds of Britons (64percent) say community ties have strengthened in lockdown.⁷ 78 percent say people were doing more to help others locally during the pandemic. 50 percent feel they could rely on community support. 55 percent felt a sense of belonging to their community.⁸ Over half of Britons (56percent) say that since lockdown they've got to know their neighbours a lot better or are now better friends than ever.⁹ 64 percent believe the lockdown is bringing their neighbourhood closer together.¹⁰ 50 percent expect community spirit to be stronger still after the crisis ends.¹¹

Local shops for local people

The impact of the trend will be far reaching and have a huge impact on Britain's high streets. Not just in the short term but the long term too. Over the next two decades, we'll see more shops selling local produce and products, owned by local entrepreneurs, and run by local communities. And local shops and banks becoming an increasingly active part of the community.

⁵ Co-op Insurance & Neighbourhood Watch, 'A Neighbourly Nation, Oct 2018

⁶ Mintel, Nov 2015

⁷ Centre for Economics & Business Research, May 2020

⁸ ONS, Apr 2020

⁹ Share To Buy, Sep 2020

¹⁰ Channel Mum, Mar 2020

¹¹ RSA, Apr 2020

In future, no chain store will set up without the name of the neighbourhood on its shopfront, as the likes of the Co-Op have started to do now. Every branch of Costa Coffee, Greggs or Primark is likely to be run by a completely local team, with hand-written reviews by nearby customers, and in store workshops hosted by neighbourhood experts. And for those chains that can't afford to have an outlet on every high street, there'll be dedicated buildings offering click & collect for multiple chains.

As shops focus more on attracting local custom, every store owner, sales assistant and bank teller will make a point of getting to know almost every customer by sight, and taking time to interact with them on a more personal basis. This will take time so until it happens, chains will likely use advances in artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things to help them transition to the truly personal. As its usability increases and costs decline, AI will give retail and leisure chains the ability to personalise customer interaction at a local level. For example recognising customers as they approach and alerting reception staff of their name and history. Retail staff will utilise predictive analytics, artificial intelligence and machine learning via increasingly smart digital assistants, tablets and wearables, in a way that streamlines and enables much more personalised interactions.

2. Micro-neighbourhoods will encourage micro-high streets

Tomorrow's Britain will see the growth of small semi-autonomous communities. It's a future trend that harks back to the past: when 'cities' were actually just a collection of villages. One of its most high profile champions is Anne Hidalgo, the Mayor of Paris. She talks about trying to create a '15 Minute City'. One that is composed of multiple tiny, independent neighbourhoods. In each of these neighbourhoods, local shops and other facilities will never be more than a 15 minute walk away from people's homes.

The cause is proving particularly popular with planners and local councils, whose power will drive the trend forward in the UK. Covid will further encourage the trend. Not only has it encouraged greater neighbourliness, its long term health implications will encourage people to spend more time locally. The more people stay within a small physical community, the less their chance of the virus entering that community.

As the number of 15-minute micro-neighbourhoods grows, they will increasingly want their own micro-high streets. These might be a whole shopping street in the middle of a residential area, or a

row of shops added onto a residential street. With more shopkeepers being local, we'll see more of them choosing to live upstairs of their premises too. This will encourage the mixing of retail and housing: another trend Councils and planners are proving keen on.

Local transport

One thing these micro-high streets will have in common? They're all likely to be car-free. Not only will the majority of shoppers be local, thus able to walk to the shops. But as global warming impacts people's lives more and more, they'll seek alternatives to private car ownership, encouraging greater restrictions on residential car travel. The areas outside shops will be pedestrianised, with places to sit and relax or eat and large areas of grass. They will be safe spaces, for adults and children: high footfall areas, where neighbours look out for each other

In the near future, those visiting from outside the neighbourhood to shop will still use public transport to get there. Such transport networks will see expansion and greater funding as the Micro Neighbourhood trend grows. Other visitors will use bicycles, e-bikes and scooters. But in a few years we'll see the introduction of autonomous cars, which will pick visitors up from their homes and drop them off at the shops. Then they'll head off: to pick up others, or wait for their passengers in new people-free 'dark car parks' underground.

New technologies will enable many shops selling local products to adopt car-free deliveries. They will be serviced by electric cargo bikes and drones, bringing goods from the increasing number of local warehouses and mini-factories that will be built to accommodate these local supply chains.

Local amenities

High Streets won't just be composed of shops though. They'll prove much more multi-use than today. As citizens spend more time within the boundaries of their neighbourhoods, they'll want as many amenities as possible in easy reach. Residents will increasingly look to their local area to provide the means to satisfy all their lifestyle needs. A recent survey found that, when purchasing a home, over three quarters of buyers now consider it important to live within easy walking distance of amenities.¹² Millennials are particularly keen: 62 percent of them prefer walkable communities and short commutes.

As a result, we'll see the introduction of micro-facilities. The growth of powerful independent micro-neighbourhoods will encourage smaller versions of the sorts of places we might have seen. In the past we might have seen one hospital cover multiple neighbourhoods, but tomorrow's High Streets will include micro-hospitals: GP's offices that are expanded to include beds and even surgery space, alongside consulting rooms for local osteopaths and acupuncturists. There will be buildings on the new high streets that provide space to micro versions of today's retail banks.

Micro cinemas - like the smallest screens in cineplexes - will show films chosen by local residents, or even filmed by locals. Tiny music venues will host acoustic concerts. We might even see micro-universities: especially as young people are now less and less inclined to travel far away for a university experience. Neighbourhoods too small to host their own church or mosque might see the introduction of multi-faith centres, which include church, mosque and non-denominational 'reflection spaces'. As 3D printing becomes smarter and cheaper, the high street will also host micro-factories that will enable better local production, providing quick access to more products for those outside of the main urban centres, and shortening haulage routes.

Local businesses

One reason for the growth of locally-owned shops will be a rise in small businesses. It's another trend that began before lockdown but is being supercharged by it. The Post-Covid Entrepreneurs will need premises for their start ups. Many will want physical venues like shops or workshops. Others will find desks in newly built shared offices and co-working space. Such spaces will become a common sight on the high street, catering not just to entrepreneurs but to the many people who'll choose to work outside of the corporate office. Local business service companies like accountants and law firms will thrive. This will also be a key area for local banking branches, who will become centres for business advice, for both SMEs and amateur entrepreneurs - or Tabletop Tycoons - alike. There will be demand too for more 3D printing and manufacturing workshops to service and supply local businesses. Meanwhile home working will encourage more daytime facilities such as gym classes, as home workers gain the freedom to work out when they want.

The number of Tabletop Tycoons is set to grow, as more people make and sell products outside of their normal day jobs: from honey to homemade hats. Some call the practice 'sunlighting': it's like

'moonlighting', but done with the permission of their boss. They too will seek out customer-facing premises. The most ambitious or wealthy might take over a whole shop, but many of them will just need a small unit or stall. As a result we'll see a massive growth in Makers Markets: like Farmers Markets but for a much wider range of products. There will be more high street stores built to house multiple different local 'amateur' brands: like a physical version of Etsy and eBay. And some established shops, banks and gyms will offer space within their store to local Makers.

Demand for local specialist small businesses, and hyper-local tradesmen, will grow too. There will be localized versions of services like Task Rabbit that make it easier to find neighbourhood tradespeople. We'll see a return to businesses offering local repair services too.

Certain micro-neighbourhoods will become hubs for specific industries, attracting relevant services to the area. For instance, one area might become a thriving hub for jewellery, another for bicycles and cycling gear. This is something that was common a few hundred years ago, as can be seen by surviving street names, from Threadneedle Street to Sadlers Yard.

Local businesses may accept local currencies in future too. It's trend that's starting to spread, from the Brixton Pound to the Bristol Pound. And while previously many young people left their hometown for better prospects, in future they may be more likely to begin their careers in apprenticeships just around the corner.

3. Locals will take greater communal responsibility

The more interest residents take in their local community, the more influence they'll seek over it. We believe this is more likely to take the form of a collective rather than individual power grab. The more united the community becomes, the more comfortably neighbours will work together to achieve shared goals. As a result the high street will house more neighbourhood co-op schemes: from creches to volunteer-run micro-tourism offices that sing the praises of the nearby streets. Some will be housed in stand-alone buildings: others in existing shops, cafes or banks.

Such a move chimes with a growing citizen desire to 'help out'. Just before the crisis, a major poll showed that 1 in 4 Britons was volunteering in some way.¹³ With the arrival of lockdown, much of

that focused inwards. Today the same number (1 in 4) are volunteering specifically within their local area. The majority clearly enjoyed the experience, as over three quarters of them (78percent) say they'll continue local volunteering once the crisis is over.¹⁴

Having your say

Meanwhile neighbourhood self-help groups will grow: based on established groups like residents' committees and PTAs, or organic new groups. They might start by suggesting the films a local cinema shows, or the shape of local traffic regulations. They might move on to gatekeeping issues: trying to influence which retailers, leisure brands, educational establishments and construction companies are 'allowed in' to the area. As their influence grows, they might be able to broker exclusive deals with, say, particular coffee shops, supermarket chains and broadband providers.

Local citizen-led services might even one day rival external commercial entities. For instance, a residents group could create its own high street estate agent, connecting local sellers with external buyers. As local organisers move from volunteer status to community-funded, they'll get more involved in larger institutions such as micro-hospitals and schools. Perhaps not just overseeing the running of them but actually developing them: from consultation, through design and construction. We will also see local citizens working hand in hand with local councils, businesses and banks, to help sustain and improve their neighbourhoods.

Tomorrow's high street will see multiple help centres manned by volunteers: resident advice centres (like the old Citizens Advice Bureaus), health helpers, adult learning centres, apprenticeship spaces, and tutors offering everything from music to maths. These spaces will be run by a mix of amateur volunteers, who do it just to help the neighbourhood: and pro-volunteers who do it in exchange for local currency, or vouchers for local stores.

Meanwhile, local artists will help residents paint massive high street murals, and decorate the shops of those who can't afford - or don't want - to use outside professionals.

Exchange and barter

As neighbourhoods become closer and more trusting, sharing will become commonplace. Why buy a big-ticket item if you can borrow it from a neighbour? This could impact many products: cars to lawnmowers. Lockdown showed the way. Social sites became venues for sharing. Facebook groups sprang up dedicated to product barter. The Daily Mail reported sites like Facebook and Next Door “flooded” with posts from those wanting to exchange items with neighbours.¹⁵

Future high streets will cater to this trend. There’ll be product libraries where residents can borrow specialist and big ticket items. And citizen-run toy, book and magazine libraries where no-longer wanted items are donated, borrowed and swapped.

We’ll see more ‘time banks’: residents offering help for free to obtain others’ services. Pet sitting someone’s cat, say, in exchange for them putting up your flat pack furniture. And in true ‘village shop’ style, every shop will offer message and bulletin boards for locals to offer out their services.

The more neighbours interact with each other, the more comfortable they’ll be sharing not just products and services but data, ideas, skill sets and space too. Tomorrow’s high street will see cooperatively run amateur car clubs and locally-sourced energy sharing services.

Rival thy neighbour

As residents take more responsibility for their locality, they will get involved in competition between neighbourhoods. Residents might work together to help get a bigger share of local Council funding: impressing them by recycling more, keeping their streets cleaner or planting more flowers than nearby rivals. Others will seek out financial support from successful local business people.

They’ll also join together to help attract tourists and other ‘outsiders’ as another way of bringing money into the area. Each micro-neighbourhood will have its own unique qualities it promotes to encourage visitors. Perhaps they’ll focus on their produce, say honey or beer ~~wine~~. A micro-equivalent of Melton Mowbray championing its pork pies. Or they’ll encourage a best-selling author or TV presenter to host public workshops.

¹⁵ Daily Mail, May 2020

It'll all be about getting your area onto the list of must-see neighbourhoods to visit on a local 'high street crawl'. If competition gets fierce, communities might require 'proof-of-locality' cards giving the bearer special offers but only within a certain catchment area: mirroring what happens with local schools today. Alternatively, some micro-neighbourhoods want to twin with other areas to build co-operative support.

Britons look set to become increasingly interested in a range of local sports over the next 10 years. Pre-lockdown, local football clubs were seeing rising attendances. For instance, in 2016 non-league club attendances rose at higher rates than both the First and Premier leagues.¹⁶ They were also given a huge boost during lockdown, when they were the only football games Britons could attend: offering a first taste of non-league to many who will remain fans. If these trends continue, future neighbourhoods will each have their own micro-sports venues, hosting multiple sports. As part of the new local competitiveness, sporting rivalry between neighbourhoods will be played out in these venues or on micro-sports grounds. Once again this will mirror a previous era: a reminder of a time when local teams fielded local-only players.

¹⁶ LDN SportOnline, 2016