PUTTING PLACE FIRST

Community Barometer 2026

A report from the Association of Convenience Stores

ACS the voice of local shops

Putting Place First

A change of leadership in Westminster has created an opportunity to deliver a genuine "high street renaissance", after a decade in which too many local parades, high streets and town centres have been allowed to drift. Andy Burnham has put the principle of place at the heart of his agenda. On winning Makerfield, he called for a "Makerfield test" at the centre of British politics, judging every decision by its impact on the many communities that Westminster has too often overlooked.

It is a deceptively simple idea, and one that speaks directly to the purpose of this report that we have run for over a decade. The places that feel left behind are not abstractions. They are experienced day to day on local high streets and parades: in the shops that close, the units that stand empty, and the services that quietly disappear.

If the Makerfield test is to mean anything, it must be applied where people encounter the condition of their community. Putting place first means recognising that a thriving local shop, a clean and safe parade, and easy access to everyday essential services are not nice-to-haves. They are the infrastructure of community life, and the clearest measure of whether a place is working for the people who live there.

The Association of Convenience Stores' Community Barometer 2026 explores what it means to put place first through the lens of local high streets and community services. Drawing on the views of people across Britain, it examines:

- Which businesses and services people value most in their local communities and why they remain essential to local life.
- What factors, in the public's own view, make a high street thrive or decline.
- The barriers that prevent people from accessing and using their local high streets.
- The policy interventions needed to support vibrant, accessible and economically sustainable local communities.

Together, these findings provide a blueprint for the new Prime Minister to deliver a robust high street strategy and a starting point for how to deliver good growth on every high street, in every part of the country.

High streets have been **left behind** by Westminster

Westminster has spent years debating how to save Britain's high streets. Commission after commission, review after review, the diagnosis is revisited, and yet the structural change needed to deliver real improvement is consistently sidestepped.

Common policy recommendations made across 11 different reports on revitalising high streets published over the last 15 years

Recommendation	Number of reports
Diversifying/ mix of uses	11
Cleanliness	8
Planning reforms/ change of use	8
Reducing vacant properties	8
Accessibility and parking	6
Business rates	4
Crime and safety	3

See methodology on page 7 for full list of high street reports analysed

Our analysis of the policy recommendations across 11 reports on high streets published in the last 15 years tells a remarkably consistent story. Time and again, the same priorities emerge: Diversification of businesses/services, action to tackle the rise in empty properties, reform of planning policy, and cleanliness. These are not fringe concerns or competing theories, they are the settled, repeated conclusions of government departments, parliamentary committees, think tanks and industry alike.

Yet for all the consensus on what needs to change, action on these fundamentals has been piecemeal at best. Business rates reform remains unfinished. Planning policy continues to work against, rather than for, vibrant town centres, and retailers still face levels of crime and anti-social behaviour that drive footfall away and units into vacancy.

In his first major speech, Andy Burnham made devolving power to local communities central to his vision, recognising that decisions about places are best made closer to those places. The public agrees, as our polling shows below.

Who is best placed to make decisions about your local area?

Local Council	Community Group / Residents Association	Local Business Owners	Your Local MP	Central Government
31%	20%	14%	10%	4%

How people **feel** about their high streets

Local high streets are often totemic in how they make people feel about the success of their local communities. The overall picture across the UK is one of decline: more people believe their high street has gotten worse over the past year than believe it has improved.

Over the last 12 months, has your local high street gotten better or worse?

Worse	No change	Better
35%	42%	23%

This sense of decline is not felt evenly across the UK. When we look at the nine regions of England along with Wales and Scotland, it is clear that there is a divide between London and everywhere else. Greater London was the only region surveyed that reported a net positive change in their high streets over the last year, with areas like the South West, Scotland and the East of England feeling worst affected by negative high street change.

The regional High Streets Index enforces the idea that London is treated more favourably both commercially and by those looking to invest than the rest of the country.

The High Streets Index, UK Regions

- GREATER LONDON (+16)
- EAST MIDLANDS (-7)
- WEST MIDLANDS (-9)
- YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER (-9)
- NORTH WEST (-11)
- WALES (-18)
- NORTH EAST (-19)
- SOUTH EAST (-21)
- SCOTLAND (-24)
- EASTERN (-24)
- SOUTH WEST (-28)

What makes your high street better or worse?

- Improved range of shops or services (44%)
- Improved quality of shops available (42%)
- More people visiting (40%)
- Cleanliness (39%)
- Shop units are occupied (30%)
- Too many empty shop units (63%)
- Poor range of shops and services (53%)
- Fewer shoppers due to the cost of living (38%)
- Stronger competition from online shopping 32%)
- Dodgy shops (31%)

To deliver meaningful changes we have to listen closely to what people want from their high streets and be clear about what can be delivered.

Decline on high streets is not inevitable. The factors that contribute to a high street's deterioration are, for the most part, the same factors that can support its recovery, and the public identifies them with notable consistency.

The evidence points to a clear and consistent set of priorities: addressing crime and anti-social behaviour, returning empty units to use by reducing the cost of trading, maintaining clean environments, and ensuring accessibility.

These are the determinants of a high street's success or failure, and, as the following sections set out, they are precisely where action is required.

The businesses that **matter most** to local communities

When people consider what they most want close to home, the answer is consistent: access to essential, everyday services. In terms of close vicinity to where people live, people continue to want access to essential services like pharmacies, Post Offices and convenience stores.

Most essential services in the community

These services consistently poll as a clear top three among the public in terms of being the most essential in their local area, and the services that have the most positive impact on a local area.

Convenience stores and **social benefit**

Convenience stores function as a single point of access to a range of not just products, but essential services, many of which have closed as standalone businesses before being picked up by the local shop to continue providing that service to the community.

The value of local shops also extends well beyond the transactional. 51% of people agree that their local shop acts as a community hub, and 54% agree that it helps to reduce loneliness in their community.

Local shops also help people during this enduring cost of living crisis; saving people money on fuel by being local enough to walk to, helping people manage their money by providing access to cash, and avoiding delivery charges that people would experience online.

Convenience stores are part of the essential economic and social fabric of communities: a source of everyday provision, a support to household finances, a point of human contact, and a stabilising presence when communities are under strain.

Any strategy that seeks to put place first must recognise, and protect, the businesses that people themselves identify as integral to local life.

What do people want more or less of locally?

More than half of the services that we polled local people on are ones that they want more of in their community, highlighting in particular the need to address empty properties - businesses that were serving a community but haven't been replaced. This comes with caution however, as the services in red are those that people believe there are too many of, acting as subtle indicators of a declining high street.

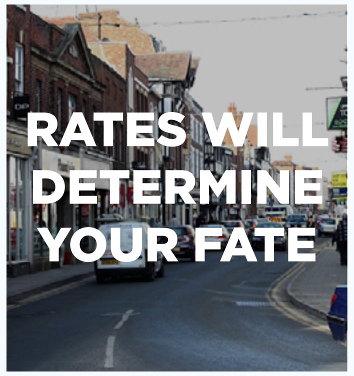
- 1 | BANKS
- 2 | SPECIALIST FOOD SHOPS
- 3 | PHARMACIES
- 4 | POST OFFICES
- 5 | NON FOOD SHOPS
- 6 | RESTAURANTS
- 7 | CONVENIENCE STORES
- 8 | PETROL STATIONS
- 9 | COFFEE SHOPS
- 10 | GYMS / SPORTS FACILITIES
- 11 | PUBS / BARS
- 12 | HAIRDRESSERS / BARBERS
- 13 | CHARITY SHOPS
- 14 | FAST FOOD / TAKEAWAYS
- 15 | PAWNBROKERS
- 16 | VAPE SHOPS

The policy action needed to deliver **good growth** on our high streets

The public's verdict points to a clear and deliverable agenda. The factors people identify as driving their high streets backwards – empty units, a lack of variety, dodgy shops trading locally – reflect the factors they credit with recovery when things are getting better. That symmetry is the foundation of an effective high street strategy, and it should shape how the Government directs its attention and resources. Three priorities follow directly from the evidence.

Making safety on the high street a priority

Crime and anti-social behaviour are among the most frequently cited reasons people give for their high street declining, while improved crime prevention is among the leading reasons they give for it improving. Safety is therefore not a secondary concern but a precondition of recovery. The Government should make the use of closure orders and the accelerated application of Criminal Behaviour Orders a clear priority and, critically, communicate that priority plainly to retailers, enforcement agencies and the public. Powers that already exist must be made to work quickly and visibly if they are to deter the behaviour that drives customers and businesses away. **More detail on the action needed to address safety on high streets is** **outlined in our Stop Rogue Traders campaign here.**



Reducing the cost of operating to fill empty units

Empty units are among the most prominent drivers of high street decline in the public's eyes, just as occupied units are among the clearest signs of recovery. Long-term vacancy, and the "sea of sameness" it leaves behind, reinforce a cycle of decline. People want variety and vibrancy on their high streets, but that can only be delivered if it is viable for a wider range of businesses to trade there. The single most effective lever is the cost of operating, and business rates above all. Reducing that burden, alongside action on energy and other operating costs, is the route to bringing long-term empty properties back into productive use and restoring the mix of businesses that consumers value. **More detail on the principles of fair business rate reform are outlined as part of our Checkout the Cost of Trading campaign here.**

Planning high streets to meet future needs

A high street that is fit for the future needs a planning system that moves at the pace of the businesses it serves. Too often, slow and uncertain decisions hold back the investment and adaptation town centres need, so speeding up planning decisions and giving applicants greater certainty must be a priority. The best tool for driving economic growth in a town centre already exists: the "town centre first" approach set out in Chapter 7 of the National Planning Policy Framework. By directing retail, leisure and other main town centre uses into the heart of communities ahead of out-of-centre locations, it concentrates footfall, investment and activity where they deliver the most value. Government should uphold this principle rather than dilute it, and back it with faster, more predictable decisions, so that planning becomes an engine for growth on the high street.

Together, these three priorities – safety, the cost of trading, and planning – offer a practical route to good growth on every high street. They reflect not the preferences of policymakers but the settled judgement of the public about what makes a place thrive. Acting on them is how a government committed to putting place first can pass its own Makerfield test, and deliver better places for all.

Methodology

Community Barometer: Consumer Survey

The Community Barometer report is put together from the findings of an Omnibus poll of 1000 UK consumers about their local area*, conducted by More in Common in July 2026. The polling asks the following key questions of consumers which are featured in the report:

- Which of the following types of services, if any, do you think are the most essential for your local area? [Select up to 3 answers]
- Which of the following types of services, if any, do you believe have the most positive impact on your local area? [Select up to 3 answers]
- Which of the following local businesses are most important to supporting the local growth? By growth we mean job creation, local investment, bringing in customers etc. [Select up to 3 answers]
- For each of the following types of services, please indicate whether you think that it would be beneficial for your local area to have more or less of these types of services. [Options for each: More / the same / less / don't know]

For the above questions, we provided a list of 16 different services - all of which are detailed on page 5 (which of these services do people want more or less of.

- You indicated that you have a local shop in your area. Which of the following best describes your relationship with the people running and working in your local shop? [Single code]
- Generally speaking, do you feel like your local high street / shopping parade has become better or worse in the last 12 months, or has nothing changed? [Single code]
- When it comes to decisions that affect your local area and high street, which of the following would you say is best placed to make the right choices? [Single code]
- In what ways, if any, have local shops helped your community during the cost of living crisis? Please select all that apply.

Review of High Street Reports (page 3)

ACS reviewed 11 reports tasked with investigating ways of improving UK high streets, seeking commonality in the recommendations made in those reports. A full list of the reports analysed is included below:

- **Checking out: The varying performance of high streets across the country** (Centre for Cities, 2025)
- **High Streets: Life beyond retail?** (House of Lords Built Environment Committee, 2024)
- **The Pedestrian Pound 3rd Edition** (Living Streets, 2024)
- **Review of High Streets & Footfall in England** (High Streets Taskforce, 2023)
- **Community Powered high streets** (Power to Change, 2023)
- **Supporting our High Streets after Covid-19** (Levelling Up, Housing & Communities Committee, 2021)
- **Take Back the High Street** (Power to Change, 2019)
- **High Streets & Town Centres in 2030** (HCLG Select Committee, 2019)
- **The High Streets Report** (MHCLG & Sir John Timpson, 2018)
- **High Street 2030: Achieving Change** (Institute of Place Management for MHCLG), 2018)
- **The Portas Review** (Mary Portas, for Government, 2011)

About ACS

The Association of Convenience Stores is the voice of the UK's 50,000+ local shops, supporting its members through effective campaigning, comprehensive advice and innovative networking opportunities. ACS' core purpose is to engage with Government on the issues that make a difference to local shops.

For more information about the Community Barometer, please contact Rosie Wiggins at Rosie.Wiggins@acs.org.uk