



Scottish Affairs Committee

Public survey into 'The future of Scotland's high streets' – summary of results

Background

Between 25 November 2025 and 4 January 2026, the Committee ran a public survey as part of its inquiry into 'The future of Scotland's high streets'. This note provides a summary of responses and findings from the survey. Key findings are summarised here, with a detailed breakdown of the results provided in the appendix below.

Key results and findings

Respondent attributes

- The survey received **310 responses**, from people living in 27 different Scottish local authority areas. Ayrshire (and in particular South Ayrshire) was disproportionately strongly represented, accounting for 47.5% of all responses (and South Ayrshire alone represented 38%). Most respondents (80%) were aged between 35-74.

Respondents' feelings towards their high street

- **77% of respondents said they were unhappy with their local high street and town centre**, compared to 14% who said they were happy. Respondents living in **urban areas were more likely to be unhappy**, relative to those in suburban or rural/island areas. Factors associated with respondents being unhappy included empty buildings, antisocial behaviour, a sense that available shops were lacking in variety and quality, and street cleanliness/upkeep. Factors associated with respondents being happy included the presence of independent shops.
- **62% of respondents said they were less happy with their local high street compared to 2020**, while only 5% reported being happier. Factors associated with respondents being less happy included shop closures, perceived physical decline, and reductions in ease of travel/access. Factors associated with respondents being happier included new shops opening.
- When asked to identify (from a pre-defined list) their **biggest concerns with their local high street and town centre**, the most commonly chosen options were: too many empty buildings; not enough good quality shops; streets being unattractive and/or not well maintained; too many unwanted shops; and not having enough reasons to spend time there.
- **78% of respondents agreed the high street remained an important part of their local community**, compared to 13% who disagreed. Respondents who agreed with this statement tended to highlight the contribution of high streets to community feel and cohesion, as well as their practical importance in more remote areas. Others who disagreed with the statement tended to argue that high streets were no longer as inviting or important as they used to be. There was limited geographic variation in responses to this question between rural/island and urban/suburban areas.



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How respondents use their high street

- **50% of respondents reported that they visited their local high street or town centre at least once or twice a week**, compared to 18% who said that they never or almost never visited it. However, 60% of respondents also said that they visited their local high street or town centre less as a result of the shift to online retail, banking and other services.
- **Just 25% of respondents said that they were able to purchase the goods and access the services they wanted to** on their local high street, compared to 62% who felt that they were able to do so 'not very much' or 'not at all'. **73% of respondents reported a decline in their ability to access goods and services where they live** as a result of changes in their high street since 2020.
- **31% of respondents said that they relied on their local high street to purchase goods and access services**, compared to 58% who said they relied on the high street 'not very much' or 'not at all'. There was limited geographic variation in responses to this question between rural/island and urban/suburban areas.

What respondents want from their high street

- When respondents were asked to identify (from a pre-defined list) the **shops and services they considered it a priority to have access to on their local high street**, the most commonly chosen options were: specialist food retailers, cafes/restaurants, independent shops, clothes shops, and banking.
- When respondents were asked to identify (again, from a pre-defined list) the **factors and/or amenities that would encourage them to make more use of their local high street**, the most popular choices were: fewer empty buildings; more independent shops; better provision of essential shops; and better physical upkeep of the high street.

Ease of access and accessibility

- **67% of respondents said that they found it easy to travel to their local high street**, compared to 16% who said that it was difficult. Positive responses tended to highlight the ability to walk or drive into town, whereas more negative responses tended to focus on difficulties with car parking and public transport.
- Of those respondents who identified themselves as having accessibility needs, **71% said that their local high street met those needs at least somewhat**, while 29% said that it did not.



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Appendix – detailed summary of findings

Respondents' attributes

- In total, the survey received 310 responses.
- Most respondents were aged between 35-74 (1 respondent did not answer).

Age range	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
Respondents (number)	11	35	55	67	67	62	12
Respondents (%)	4	11	18	22	22	20	4

- The survey received responses from people living in 27 of Scotland's 32 local authorities.¹ Ayrshire (and in particular South Ayrshire) was disproportionately strongly represented in the responses. 3 respondents did not answer.

Local authority	Number of respondents
Aberdeen (City)	4
Aberdeenshire	3
Angus	3
Clackmannanshire	1
Dumfries and Galloway	2
Dundee	4
East Ayrshire	31
East Dunbartonshire	16
East Lothian	3
Edinburgh	9
Falkirk	2
Fife	5
Glasgow (City)	11
Highlands	13
Midlothian	2
Moray	4
North Ayrshire	6
North Lanarkshire	9
Orkney Islands	1
Perth and Kinross	14
Renfrewshire	16
Scottish Borders	7
South Ayrshire	116
South Lanarkshire	3
Stirling	8
West Dunbartonshire	4
West Lothian	10

¹ Zero responses were recorded in the following local authority areas: Argyll and Bute; East Renfrewshire; Inverclyde; Na h-Eileanan an Iar / Western Isles; and Shetland Islands.



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- Respondents who described themselves as living in a suburban area were most common (38%), followed by respondents in rural and island communities (aggregated) and those in urban areas (both 31%).

Location type	Respondents (number)	Respondents (%)
Island	7	2
Rural: Hamlets and Isolated Dwellings	13	4
Rural: Village	77	25
Suburban	118	38
Urban	95	31

Respondents' feelings about their high street

- Respondents were asked how happy they were with their local high street and town centre.
 - 77% of respondents said they were either 'somewhat' (24.5%) or 'very' (52.5%) unhappy with their local high street and town centre.
 - 14% of respondents reported being 'somewhat' (12%) or 'very' (2%) happy.
 - Respondents living in urban areas were more likely to be unhappy, relative to those in suburban or rural/island areas (84% vs. 74%).
- Respondents were invited to briefly explain their response if they wished to do so. Negative comments tended to highlight concerns such as empty units, the perceived low variety and quality of shops, antisocial behaviour, and street cleanliness/upkeep. More positive comments tended to focus on the presence of independent shops.
 - Selected headline responses included:
 - "To put it politely, it [is] a ghost town. Every third shop is empty and boarded up [...] Vape shops, takeaways and the odd independent store are all that are left. Even pubs are closing down. There's also little to no green space and the overall feel just looks bleak."
 - "It looks run down with many empty shops. Transport links into the town centre have been in decline. There's no shops there I really want to use, I only go to the town centre for the library and the cinema."
 - "It is better than other places, but local business that are actually useful for locals not just selling trinkets to tourists struggle. It is losing its soul. Luckily there are a few independent shops still, but will it last?"
 - "Good progress has been made to improve Paisley high street, with new/modern cafes and restaurants [...] the new library is very valuable. There are still [a] significant amount of vacant shops, antisocial behaviour, etc."
 - "I haven't been down the high street in probably a year. There's nothing there anymore."



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- Thematic analysis of responses with selected supporting quotes:

Response theme	Supporting quotes
Concerns about the prevalence of empty and derelict buildings	➤ "It looks depressing with about 50 percent of premises boarded up." ➤ "Far too many empty and often derelict buildings around the town [...]" ➤ "[...] It's sad to see the town centre decline from a busy, vibrant place to a stretch of empty, run-down shops."
Dissatisfaction with available retail and dominance of 'low quality' shops	➤ "It's all vape shops and fast food outlets, it doesn't serve the needs of the community." ➤ "Very few actual retailers or anything to attract people to spend time/money there; mostly offices and beauty places/hairdressers. Boring." ➤ "The high street is appalling and only seems to get worse. We are continually losing quality shops in favour of low quality like vape shops and charity shops."
Safety concerns and concerns about antisocial behaviour	➤ "[...] Visible drug misuse and suspected dealing make the area feel unsafe, and frequent antisocial behaviour – such as public intoxication, shouting, and intimidation – discourages visitors [...]" ➤ "I don't feel safe shopping there or going to the bank [...]" ➤ "The high street has become a no go area."
Dissatisfaction with cleanliness and upkeep	➤ "All towns are struggling but there is no excuse for the main high street to be in such a dirty state." ➤ "High street is dirty and grubby [...] not a very welcoming place to be, [I] only go if I really have to access services." ➤ "[...] Filthy shop fronts with broken windows, littered streets, overflowing bins [...]"
Dissatisfaction with access and accessibility	➤ "[...] The high street is narrow, medieval, very awkward parking and no bus can get along it to drop off shoppers." ➤ "Closed to traffic, very limited and expensive parking [...]" ➤ "Some good shops and cafés, but [...] poor pedestrian infrastructure." ➤ "Absolutely appalling wheelchair access. It's full of cobbling which isn't maintained [...]"
Support for independent businesses, but concern about costs they face	➤ "Portree has a fantastic selection of small shops [...] these shops are the heart of the community [...]" ➤ "I don't really use the high street as it's just pound shops or big chains. I [...] would like to see more independently owned shops and cafes [...]" ➤ "Dunbar High Street is a gorgeous, historic high street with independent shops [...] However, many businesses are struggling to stay open [...]" ➤ "Majority high end retail / chains, very little independent. Units that have been empty for years that could be used by small businesses but are presumably too expensive".



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- Respondents were asked what their biggest concerns with their local high street were. They were able to select up to 3 options from the following list of specified alternatives. Echoing responses to the previous question, concerns about vacant buildings and a lack of good quality shops were most commonly identified.

Concern	Number of respondents
Too many empty buildings	188
Not enough good quality shops	180
Unattractive/not well maintained	139
Too many unwanted shops	114
Not enough reasons to spend time there	101
Criminal/anti-social behaviour	60
Not enough access to essential services	42
Lack of accessibility	26
Other	23
I have no concerns with my local high street	4

- Respondents were also asked what one word or phrase they would use to describe their local high street. Responses were, for the most part, overwhelmingly negative. The most common responses were:
 - 'Depressing' (20 responses)
 - 'Rundown' (14 responses)
 - 'Dead' or 'dying' (13 responses)
 - 'Sad' (10 responses)
 - However, there were also some more positive responses; for example, 6 responses identified their high street as having 'potential', with another describing it as a 'sleeping giant'.

How respondents' feelings about their high street have changed over time

- Respondents were asked how their feelings towards their local high street had changed since 2020.
 - 62% of respondents said they were either 'somewhat' (21%) or 'much' (42%) less happy with their local high street compared to 2020.
 - Only 5% reported being 'somewhat' (4%) or 'much' (1%) happier.
 - 29% of respondents reported no change in their feelings.
- Respondents were again invited to explain their response if they wished to do so. Common negative changes identified by respondents included shop closures, physical deterioration, a reduced sense of safety, and reductions in ease of access. Where respondents identified more positive changes, these tended to be in terms of new outlets opening, including independent stores.



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- Selected headline responses included:
 - "More retail units have closed. State of dilapidation has got worse – and no one seems ready to address it."
 - "Shops have closed down, bus services to get there have been cut, there are more attractive destinations to go to further afield."
 - "Before Covid the high street was more full and the town less run down."
 - "I feel there is some life coming back to the centre with small businesses trying to start up and there is definitely some local government support. But people just don't see enough value to come into town yet."
- Thematic analysis of responses with selected supporting quotes:

Response theme	Supporting quotes
Shop closures / fewer reasons to visit the high street	➤ "There are less shops on the high street and less variety. You have to look online to get products as they are not available on the high street." ➤ "Debenhams gave a reason to visit. When they closed there was nothing to go into town for." ➤ "We have lost lots of good retailers and they have not been replaced, also there are no longer any banks."
Visible decline in physical condition of the high street	➤ "The town is getting worse each day. The smell of decay from the buildings, the neglect with weeds [...]" ➤ "It feels abandoned and grotty [...]" ➤ "General upkeep of town [is] a disgrace [...]"
Perception of reduced safety and/or increased antisocial behaviour	➤ "More shops have closed, the streets are a mess, and it's rarer not to see antisocial behaviour now." ➤ "Even more antisocial behaviour and not enough access to enticing retail or leisure offerings [...]"
Increased difficulty in accessing the high street	➤ "Fewer choices, difficulty in accessing because of limited parking and no alternative transport." ➤ "More and more people shop elsewhere because of parking charges and less spaces [...]"
New outlets and independent shops opening	➤ "Some investment has gone a long way recently. A lot of nice restaurants and bars – but there's still more vacant spaces than not." ➤ "The increase in independent cafes, restaurants and shops has improved over the past 2 years."



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Respondents' views of the high street's importance to their community

- Respondents were asked to what extent they felt that their local high street is an important part of their local community.
 - 78% of respondents either 'somewhat' or 'strongly' agreed their local high street remained an important part of their local community.
 - Only 13% 'somewhat' or 'strongly' disagreed.
- Respondents were again invited to explain their response if they wished to do so.
 - Those who agreed with the statement focused on themes including the contribution of high streets to community feel and cohesion, as well as their practical importance in more remote areas.
 - Those who disagreed with the statement focused on the sense that high streets were no longer as important or inviting as they used to be (although many also indicated support for the idea that high streets should in principle play a major role in their local community, and could do so again with the right support).
 - Selected responses included:

Response	Supporting quotes
Agree that the high street is an important part of the local community	➤ "A vibrant healthy high street is the backbone of any town or city, and a reflection of its prosperity and should be something the residents are proud of." ➤ "The high street is still an important part of the community, even in its current state. It should be a shared space where people meet, access services, enjoy culture and feel pride in where they live. At the moment it's not fulfilling that role, but with the right support [...] it could once again become a meaningful hub for local life." ➤ "I love having a chat with small business owners and workers when I go to the High Street. It makes shopping/eating/drinking out feel more personal, and definitely makes me feel like I'm part of the community." ➤ "[...] It is also a place where people can meet and socialise – for many people it may be the only opportunity to do so in a weekly basis." ➤ "[...] Public transport is infrequent and expensive which means a reliance on local shops." ➤ "We live remotely and the high street is important (particularly) for an ageing population to be able to buy necessities, bank, be part of the community and meet people."
Disagree that the high street is an important part of the local community	➤ "A lot of locals wouldn't really go down it except to get from A to B." ➤ "It should be an important part of the community but there's nothing to draw the community there." ➤ "It used to be, but not anymore. There's nothing left. I used to love going in on a Saturday with my friends for a nosy around the shops but it's not worth it now [...]"



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How respondents use their local high street

- Respondents were asked how often they visit their local high street or town centre.
 - Half of respondents (50%) reported that they visited their local high street or town centre at least once or twice a week.
 - Only 18% of respondents said that they never or almost never visited.

Frequency of visit	Respondents (number)	Respondents (%)
Every day/most days	33	11
Three or four times a week	44	14
Once or twice a week	78	25
Once or twice a month	97	31
Never/almost never	57	18

- Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the following statements about their local high street. The answers suggested respondents were most likely to see their high street as somewhere to access essential services such as banking, and least likely to see it as somewhere to access essential goods such as food.

Statement	Strongly agree (%)	Somewhat agree (%)	Neither agree nor disagree (%)	Somewhat disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)	Not sure (%)
It is my main source of access to essential goods (e.g. food)	8	14	10	19	49	0
It offers local/independent products not available elsewhere	6	23	12	18	40	1
It is the main source of access to essential services (e.g. banking)	16	24	10	16	34	0
It is a place where people go for leisure/entertainment	9	20	9	18	43	1
It provides a space for community and cultural activities	7	25	12	18	36	2
It brings local people together in a way that wouldn't happen otherwise	12	17	12	14	43	2



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- Respondents were also asked how the shift to online retail, banking and other services had changed how they use their local high street.
 - 60% of respondents reported that they visited their local high street or town centre less as a result of this shift.
 - 19% of respondents said they now visited the high street the same amount but for different reasons, while 18% said this shift had not changed how they use their local high street.

Respondents' access to goods and services

- Respondents were asked to what extent they are able to purchase the goods and access the services they want to on their local high street.
 - Just 25% of respondents reported that they were able to do so 'completely' (2%) or somewhat (23%).
 - 62% answered either 'not very much' (47%) or 'not at all' (15%).
- Respondents were also asked whether their ability to purchase goods and access services had been affected by changes in their local high street since 2020.
 - 73% of respondents said that their ability to access goods and services where they live had changed for the worse as a result of changes in their high street over this period.
 - Only 3% said that their ability to access goods and services had improved as a result of changes in their high street over this period. 15% said that changes in their local high street over this period had had no impact.
- Respondents were asked to what extent they rely on their local high street in order to purchase goods and access services.
 - 31% of respondents said that they relied on their local high street either 'completely' (6%) or 'somewhat' (25%) to do so.
 - 58% said that they relied on their local high street either 'not very much' (34%) or 'not at all' (24%) in order to do so.
 - The survey found little to no evidence of variation in respondents' answers to this question based on whether they lived in a rural/island area, a suburban area, or an urban area.

What respondents want from their local high street

- Respondents were asked which of the following shops and services they considered it a priority to have access to on their local high street. They were able to choose up to 5 options from the following pre-defined list. The most popular choices were specialist food retailers, cafes/restaurants, independent shops, and clothes shops.



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Amenity	Number of respondents
Specialist food retailers (e.g. bakery, butchers, fishmongers)	188
Cafés/restaurants	161
Independent/boutique shops	149
Clothes shops	140
Banking	118
Post Office	92
Supermarket/grocery stores	91
Library/community centre	71
Pharmacy	71
Pubs/nightlife	69
Arts and cultural facilities	65
Cinema/entertainment	64
ATM/cash withdrawal	47
Leisure/sports centre	32
Hairdressing/barbers and beauty services	29
Newsagents/convenience stores	27
Charity/discount shops	17
Fast food/takeaway	6
Other	9

- Respondents were asked which of the following factors/amenities would encourage them to make more use of their local high street. They were able to choose up to 3 options from the following pre-defined list. The most popular choices were: fewer empty buildings; more independent shops; better provision of essential shops; and better cleaning and physical upkeep of the high street.

Amenity	Number of respondents
Fewer empty buildings	146
More independent/boutique shops	136
Better provision of essential shops	118
Cleaner/more well-maintained	117
Better provision of hospitality/entertainment facilities	82
Better access to essential services (e.g. banking, postal)	69
More/cheaper car parking	66
Better provision of arts/cultural facilities	50
Better provision of community facilities	42
Better public transport links	27
More green space	25
Other	13



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Respondents' access to (and accessibility of) their local high street

- Respondents were asked how easy they find it to travel to their local high street.
 - 67% of respondents said that it was 'very easy' (39%) or 'somewhat easy' (28%), compared to 16% who said that it was 'somewhat difficult' (9%) or 'very difficult' (7%).
 - Respondents were invited to briefly explain their response to the question. Many responses highlighted the ability to walk or drive into town as enabling access. However, other more negative responses highlighted issues with the cost and availability of car parking, and issues with public transport. Some respondents also highlighted accessibility issues. Selected responses included:
 - "Bus services aren't as good as they were back in 2015, they've decreased significantly and cost has increased [...]"
 - "Free parking is a huge bonus."
 - "I am disabled and parking is problematic. I use a walker but the pavements are a disgrace and often no dropped kerbs where needed."
 - "It would be easier if local active infrastructure were better. It is a close cycle away, but infrastructure is poor. It is a close walk, but not that pleasant beside roads."
 - "Parking restrictions prohibit easy and convenient access to the town centre, especially [on] a Saturday morning."
- Respondents were asked whether their local high street meets any accessibility needs they might have.
 - Of the 128 respondents who answered this question, 58 respondents (45%) said that it did, 33 respondents (26%) said that it did 'somewhat', and 37 respondents (29%) said that it did not.
 - Respondents were invited to explain their response to the question. Selected responses included:
 - "I am a carer for somebody in a wheelchair. There are nowhere near enough dropped pavements and people keep parking on the kerb."
 - "If you struggle with walking distances and carrying shopping but are but not sufficiently disabled to have a blue badge it is very hard to access."
 - "Reasonably wheelchair/pram friendly, but as a 200 [year] old former fishing village, there is a balance between making it totally accessible while retaining its historic character."
 - "The pavements are uneven so I trip on them a lot. There's no accessible toilets on the high street except in Burger King which are only accessible depending on the staff present [...]"