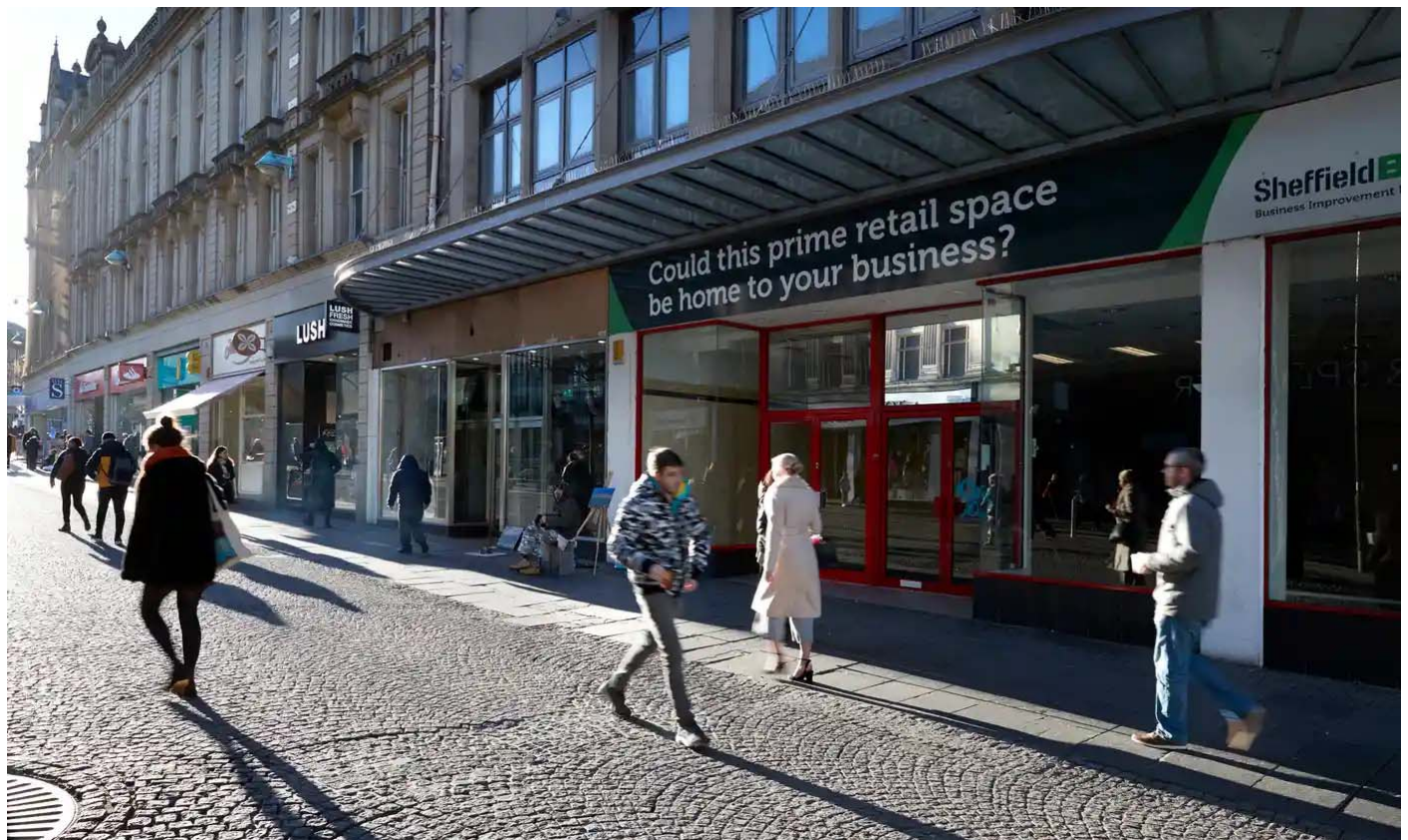


The Guardian

'Everything's leaving': Sheffield's high streets gutted by vacancies

The city centre has lost 18% of its shops in five years. What's really to blame?

Exclusive: Guardian Cities analysis reveals extent of high street crisis



Empty shops on Fargate, in Sheffield city centre. Photograph: Shaw&Shaw

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About this content

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“Look at it, everything’s leaving,” says Linda Shaw, nodding at a “to let” sign outside the branch of Next on Sheffield’s Fargate. It’s hard to argue with her. Once at the heart of the steel city, the shopping road is now pocked with vacant shops. Soon H&M will follow Next in relocating to the Moor, a recently redeveloped part of town.

For residents like Shaw, 70, the deserted feeling is enough to give up shopping here altogether. “The only reason I bother to come into Sheffield now is to go to the bank because they’ve closed so many outside of town,” she says.

According to a new Guardian analysis, over the last five years, while English and Welsh town centres have lost an average of 8% of their stores - itself a stark indicator of the crisis on British high streets - the city of Sheffield has lost 17.8%. The drop is nearly as bad in nearby Rotherham.

Worst affected were clothing stores, specialist shops and restaurants. Some stores are doing better - there has been an increase in cafes, tattoo shops and hair and beauty salons, for example - but in Sheffield you can see the net effect. Fargate has lost an electronics store, a plus-size clothing retailers, a video games store and countless eateries.

On nearby Devonshire Street, home to a warren of independent shops and an increasing number of places to get a new trim, ink or a soy latte, the busiest haunt on a January weekday is the 200 Degrees cafe.



The 200 Degrees coffee shop is thriving, alongside tattoo shops and salons, but other stores have not been so lucky. Photograph: Shaw&Shaw

The blame for Sheffield's retail decline has long been placed on Meadowhall. Since it opened in 1990, the huge shopping complex three miles (5km) outside the city centre has offered more shopping options under one roof, with free parking. Adding to the competition, last July a new £35m retail park boasting high street behemoths such as Wilko, Next and TK Maxx arrived in the suburb of Meadowhead.

But that doesn't explain why the city centre has been so badly gutted in the last five years, leading others to point the finger at online shopping. In November 2018, for the first time in the UK, more than £1 of every £5 of shopping was spent online.

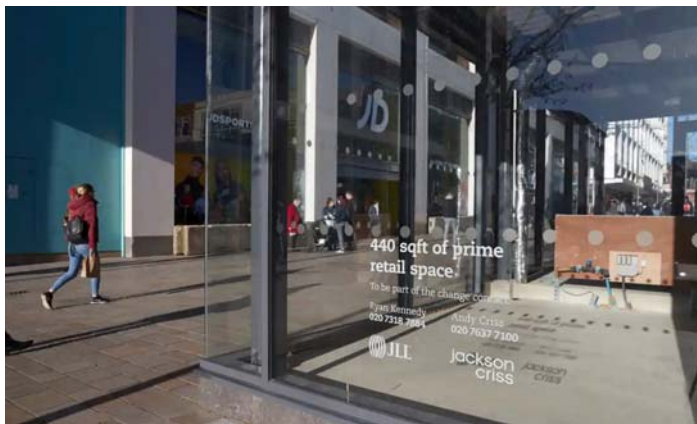
Sheffield shopkeepers, however, are unconvinced. "About half of our clients now come off the internet," said AJ Rundell, 20, manager of Follow Your Dreams tattoo studio on Devonshire Street. "It's a way to show people what we do."

Instead, many local shop owners blame high business rates.

"We're paying higher and higher business rates, but I can't really see how we're benefiting from it," said one business owner in the Devonshire Quarter, who points out that shop closures - like that of bookstore Rare and Racy, which shuttered to make way for yet another development - means fewer people visit their end of the street. The rates are calculated according to the value of a property on the open market - and the huge increase in property values has seen it skyrocket.

Earlier this week, business chiefs called for a dramatic overhaul of business rates to help bolster Britain's high streets. Bill Grimsey, the former Wickes and Iceland chief executive

who has conducted two reviews of the UK high street, urged a sales tax to replace business rates, in order to reflect the shifting way consumers buy products, but the government has shown no indication it will make changes any time soon.



Empty retail space in the redeveloped Moor area of central Sheffield. Photograph: Shaw&Shaw

Sheffield council, which has no authority over business rates, is trying to use the powers it does have: over the next five years it will plough millions into the city in a bid to compete with Leeds and Manchester as a shopping destination. A huge new 1.5m sq ft triangle of development, housing new shops, luxury hotels, offices, apartments and leisure venues, is planned for the centre.

The idea is not a new one - the 2008 financial crash scuppered the original plans - but most struggling shop owners don't think it will help them. For one thing, the construction sites on Pinstone Street are hurting smaller businesses.

“All the building works made it really hard to work as a business,” says Abi Golland, a branch of whose burrito joint The Street Food Chef, which was under a compulsory purchase order, closed last August.

Sheffield city council's cabinet member for business and investment, Mazher Iqbal, said he understands the struggles of high street shops, but emphasises that the council doesn't set business rates, and that although “most of the shops have closed down due to the redevelopment” on Pinstone Street, the council have been inundated with queries from investors into the new developments.

On Chapel Walk, once a hive of specialist locally owned stores, scaffolding at its narrow entrance just off Fargate hides it from those unfamiliar with the area. Lucille Cox, manager at Andaa Home kitchen supplies shop, says: “People who visited us before know us so they come to us, but others tend not to come down this side of the road any more.”



AJ Rundell of the Follow Your Dreams tattoo shop rejects the idea that online shopping has hurt the high street. Photograph: Shaw&Shaw

Nor is everyone in the city enthused by the prospect of attracting yet more retail conglomerates. Sheffield Hallam students Ellie Goodman, 18, and Tassie Drobinski, 20, scoffed at the idea of shopping at the huge new Primark or Gap.

“We mainly go to the vintage shops up the road, like Cow,” said Drobinski.

One independent retailer, who didn’t want to be named because he has been “too vocal” in his criticism of the council in the past and needs its support, believes the city authority’s focus is short-sighted. Characterful, varied stores are what boosts a city’s reputation, he argues.

“Other cities have always thought ahead. But to our council, big companies have always been more important,” he said.

“How do they expect to attract these high-end retailers to flock in if there’s nothing unique about the place?”

This article was amended on 1 February 2019 to clarify that H&M and Next were relocating to the Moor development.

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