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LESS THAN HALF OF BRITS ARE PROUD OF THEIR LOCAL TOWN CENTRE

Rates, rents and big retailers are killing our High Streets say consumers

Shabby, poor choice of shops and high prices – this is the damning consumer verdict on the state of Britain's High Streets today according to a new report from uSwitch.com:

- **Less than half of Brits are proud of their local town centre (49%)^[1]**
- **Declining pride: a quarter of people (25%) used to be proud of their local town centre, but aren't any more^[1]**
- **Two in ten shoppers (22%) have already turned their backs on their local High Street while just 6% of people remain loyal to theirs^[2]**
- **Poor choice of shops (41%), high prices (29%) and shabbiness (12%) are driving people away from their local High Street^[3] – while a quarter of people (25%) blame the recession for closing shops down^[3]**
- **Vacant shops are a turn-off – Brits blame high rents (66%), high rates (60%) and the fact that small businesses can't compete with the big retailers (64%)^[4]**
- **97% of Brits care about their local High Street - 61% think it is vital to the local community^[5].**

The Government review, spearheaded by retail guru Mary Portas and designed to breathe new life into Britain's ailing High Streets, cannot come soon enough according to a new report out today by uSwitch.com, the independent price comparison and switching service, in conjunction with research company, EasyInsites. It reveals that less than half of Brits (49%) are proud of their local town centre. More worryingly, a quarter of people (25%) used to be proud, but aren't any more^[1] – a sad indictment of how Britain's High Streets are going downhill.

Poor choice of shops (41%), high prices (29%) and shabbiness (12%) are driving people away from their local High Street. The high cost of parking a car is an issue for almost a quarter (22%) while 25% lament the fact that the recession has closed shops down^[3].

The picture being painted is of a place people want to get away from, rather than go to. In fact, two in ten shoppers have already turned their backs on their local High Street (22%) choosing to shop in shopping centres, retail parks or online instead. Just 6% of loyal shoppers use their local High Street religiously^[2].

Boarded up and vacant shops are the biggest culprit for making Britain's High Streets look shabby (69%)^[6]. People blame high rents (66%), high rates (60%) and the fact that small businesses can't compete with the big retailers (64%)^[4] for the rash of vacant shops scarring High Streets up and down the country.

Despite this, almost a quarter of people (24%) would like to see their local town centre get a new lease of life through the arrival of a big name department store, such as John Lewis or House of Fraser. At the same time, almost two in ten (19%) would like to see new independent retailers such as florists, greengrocers, bakers and butchers, livening up their main shopping street. Just over one in ten (14%) would like to see a farmers market set up in their town centre^[7].

The majority of Brits, 97%, care about their local High Street with 61% saying that it is vital to the community^[5]. They believe it is the lifeblood of their area because it provides local jobs (80%), is invaluable to those unable to travel, such as the elderly (77%), provides essential services and products (58%) and creates a feeling of local pride (47%)^[8].

With so much depending on Britain's High Streets unsurprisingly 67% of Brits support the idea of an independent Government Review headed by retail guru Mary Portas^[9]. As part of the rescue plan, they would like to see free car parking to encourage shoppers back into town (76%), more variety (41%), cleaner pavements and streets (54%) and fewer charity shops (42%)^[10]. Whatever the outcome of the review, what is clear is that Britain's High Streets are letting consumers and their communities down.

Ann Robinson, Director of Consumer Policy at uSwitch.com, says: "Britain's High Streets should be the lifeblood of the local community – instead they are dying on their feet. High rents, rates and the recession have forced many retailers off the High Street altogether, while preventing new independents or start-ups from taking their place. Consumers often blame the larger retailers for the lack of choice on our High Streets, but the reality is that very often it is only the draw of a larger store that is keeping some town centres alive.

“The good thing is that 97% of consumers care about their local town centre – they want to see it thrive and they would like to be able to spend their money there. We are living in financially difficult times so anything that can relieve this pressure, such as free car parking for shoppers, will go down well. Yes this would cost local councils money, but we would all see the reward in a boost to civic and community pride.”

	Proud of local town centre	Used to be proud but not any more	Poor choice of shops	Shabby	High street is vital to the community
East of England	50%	26%	39%	8%	65%
London	53%	23%	38%	6%	70%
Midlands	48%	32%	40%	10%	58%
North East	53%	25%	45%	15%	59%
North West	52%	23%	33%	11%	52%
South East	47%	22%	45%	11%	66%
South West	57%	18%	39%	13%	65%
Scotland	37%	24%	49%	18%	56%
Wales	46%	30%	41%	13%	63%
Northern Ireland	36%	27%	27%	9%	55%
British average	49%	25%	41%	12%	61%

For more information visit www.uSwitch.com or call 0800 093 06 07

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Notes to editors:

Research was conducted by EasyInsites on behalf of uSwitch.com in May 2011 amongst 1,002 British adults. Results are weighted.

1. In response to: ‘Are you proud of your local town centre?’
2. In response to: ‘How often do you shop on your High Street?’
3. In response to: ‘When you do not choose to shop on your local High Street, what are your reasons for not doing so?’
4. In response to: ‘On many High Streets across the UK there are a lot of vacant stores. Please select what you believe are the main contributing factors to this problem’.
5. In response to: ‘To what extent do you think the High Street matters to the community?’
6. In response to: ‘You indicated that the shabbiness or run down appearance of your local High Street is an issue for you, please indicate what changes you’d like to see’.
7. In response to: ‘What one service/store would you like to see arrive in your High Street/town?’
8. In response to: ‘In what way does the High Street contribute to the community?’
9. In response to: ‘Earlier this week the Government announced that it had launched an independent review to investigate how to stem the growing tide of vacant shops on Britain’s high streets. It will be headed by retail guru Mary Portas who will come up with a rescue plan. Do you agree with this?’

10. Respondents who voiced concerns about parking, choice of merchandise on offer and the shabbiness or rundown appearance of their local high street were asked what changes they would like to see in these areas.

About us

uSwitch.com is a free, impartial, online and telephone-based comparison and switching service, helping consumers compare prices on gas, electricity, water, heating cover, home telephone, broadband, digital television, mobile phones and personal finance products including mortgages, credit cards, current accounts and insurance. In 2010 uSwitch.com celebrated ten years of saving customers money.

uSwitch.com is the first comparison website to achieve the Plain English Campaign's Internet Crystal Mark, which is recognised as a standard that a website has clear language, is accessible and easy to use, and has been tested on a sample of its users.

uSwitch.com is dedicated to helping consumers save money whether they have internet access or not. It offers a dedicated call centre, manned by uSwitch customer service representatives, as well as a freepost 'Send us your bill' service, whereby customers can post their latest energy bills with their telephone number to FREEPOST USWITCH, to get a free call back from a dedicated customer services representative. The service is also available via fax, email and post. Consumers should fax 0203 214 8417, email CustomerServices@uswitch.com or write to Customer Services, uSwitch.com, Centro 3, 19 Mandela Street, London, NW1 0DU with their postcode and usage details.

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