The so-called ‘death of the High Street’ receives an enormous amount of attention. Research by Professor Jonathan Reynolds at the Oxford Institute of Retail Management shows that this may be a myth and aims to help both businesses and governments to respond to pressures and be resourceful.

How we shop – and where we shop – has changed radically over the past 30 years, and is still changing. It is the apparent continuing decline of our central urban shopping centres that usually grabs the headlines. Initially this was blamed on pressure from retail parks, and more recently it has been linked to global recession and the rise of online shopping. Commentators tend to focus on negative changes, like the collapse of BHS and other big stores, and to view all High Streets as essentially the same. But how far is ‘the death of the High Street’ a reality?

Research by Professor Jonathan Reynolds reveals a much more complex and dynamic picture of our...
High Streets. Professor Reynolds is co-director of the Oxford Institute of Retail Management, which has 30 years’ experience of retail sector research and specialises in using ‘big data’ to build up a picture of what is actually happening in the UK’s retail sector.

Professor Reynolds analysed data from over 150,000 retail outlets across 1,300 city and town centres in Britain to show how the retail role of High Streets changed between 2011 and 2013. Rather than simply tracking vacancies and shop closures, he devised other measures of comparison that could capture a subtler picture, such as calculating a diversity index that distinguished between independent stores and multiple (chain) stores.

Some of the evidence confirms anecdotal accounts of a ‘decline’. Fashion retailing has taken a big hit, with the loss of over 500 outlets between 2011 and 2013 in the centres that Professor Reynolds analysed. Outlets where the product itself has been digitised (such as music, books and films) have suffered even more: over 1000 fewer in 2013 than in 2011. 2011-13 saw a 12.4% increase in charity and discount shops, which have taken advantage of empty premises and lower rents and now comprise 9% of all retail stores in town and city centres. But other findings are more surprising – and there are some good news stories amongst the negative ones.

Overall, the number of independent retailers in High Streets actually grew by nearly 2% from 2011-13. Professor Reynolds’ diversity index also recognises that many High Streets have become more than just places for buying goods. Between 2011 and 2013 there was a net increase of over 800 independent food retailers, reflecting the transformation of ‘shopping’ into a leisure activity that incorporates eating, drinking and entertainment.

Another area that has seen rapid change is personal consumer services which offer something that cannot be replicated online. Professor Reynolds looked specifically at health and beauty related businesses and found an increase of over 10% between 2011 and 2013 – meaning, amongst other things, that there are now more nail bars on British High Streets than Chinese restaurants.

Research of this kind has important implications for future planning and policy. It suggests that, while big retail centres may continue to be resilient, smaller town centres will need to be diverse and versatile, perhaps developing specialist roles in order to survive and succeed. This aim – to ‘revive, adapt and diversify the nation’s High Streets’ – is at the heart of the Department for Communities and Local Government’s agenda, which is looking ‘beyond retail’ for some solutions. The research also shows that, despite enormous pressures, our High Streets are continuing to evolve. Their evolution may not always be in line with the expectations of commentators or politicians – but they are adapting nevertheless to meet the changing needs of the residents, workers and visitors who use them.

Professor Reynolds is grateful to the Local Data Company (LDC) for access to its data. (LDC is a UK leader in retail location data and insight, combining field researchers and bespoke software. LDC surveys every retail premise in Great Britain every 26 weeks).