Focus: Will leisure take lead from retail in 'changing of the guard' on UK High Streets?

E
ven before they endured the Covid-19 pandemic and multiple lockdowns, high street brands were grappling with multiple headwinds, from soaring business rates to stiff (and less encumbered) online competition. They have also since seen property values decline.

Over the past year retailers have won over millions of new online customers, many seemingly planning to stick with digital orders, putting further pressure on some physical stores. Debenhams collapsed, retailers including John Lewis have closed sites and pivoted focus online, and just this month US fashion giant Gap confirmed it plans to close all its 81 stores in the UK and Ireland and go online-only.

Experiential leisure was also hit hard in the pandemic. Sites were shuttered for much of last year, and in 2021 lockdown forced indoor experiences to stay closed until May 17. Many smaller operators folded.

But proponents argue that going forward, facilitated, in-person group experiences are one thing that cannot be fully recreated online.

They say that these "competitive socialising" and immersive leisure experiences – think everything from bowling to crazy golf, e-gaming rooms or London's latest offering of indoor cricket nets – are what will draw younger generations to High Streets along with hospitality, not bricks and mortar retail.

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There are also now many newly-vacated spaces in town centres around the country for leisure firms to pursue, owned by landlords who are keen for tenants. Many are offering discounted rents or rent-free periods.

Listed bowling giant, Hollywood Bowl, and budget fitness firm PureGym are among leisure firms already planning expansion in vacated retail sites on High Streets or in retail parks.

Lifelong leisure sector fan Michael Harrison is the co-founder of Gravity Active Entertainment.

The company, which is backed by Guinness Asset Management and has 22 sites across the UK, Germany and Saudi Arabia, is about to open a 100,000 square foot entertainment hub inside the former Wandsworth Debenhams store.