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# Reframing high street viability: A review and synthesis in the English context

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## ABSTRACT

Changing consumer trends, waves of retail decentralisation, and various socio-economic and environmental shocks have exacerbated the well-recognised challenges of retail-dominant English high streets in recent years. The decline and ‘death’ of the high street has been the subject of many policy responses aiming at transforming high streets as viable multifunctional hubs and local community anchors. However, this vision implies a narrative change of high street viability beyond established economic and property-oriented interpretations, which is presently unclear in conceptual and operational terms. This paper identifies the conceptual ambiguities and tensions evident in English policy and reframes high street viability at the confluence of other ‘loose concepts’ (sustainability, resilience, adaptability, liveability). Through a scoping review, this paper synthesises studies discussing these interrelated concepts, and presents their development since the influential URBED *Vital and Viable Town Centres* report. We argue that the factors contributing to the interrelated concepts form a joint effort towards achieving high street viability, but can also be distinguished by temporal variations and areas of concentration.

## 1. Introduction and context

For over 30 years, much research and policy debate about English high streets<sup>1</sup> has focused on addressing issues that jeopardise their long-term *vitality* and *viability*. These two terms were promulgated in this context in an influential report *Vital and Viable Town Centres: Meeting the Challenge*, which defined vitality as “*reflected in how busy a centre is at different times and in different parts*”, whereas viability refers to “*the ability of the centre to attract continuing investment, not only to maintain the fabric, but also to allow for improvement and adaptation to changing needs*” (URBED, 1994, p. 55).

Concerns about high street vitality and viability were motivated by changing patterns of consumption, and concomitant structural changes in retail provision occurring from the late-1960s onwards, manifested spatially in the movement of retail activity to edge-of-town and out-of-town locations, conceptualised in terms of successive ‘waves’ of

decentralisation (Schiller, 1986). High streets have often been perceived as a “wicked problem” (Rittel & Webber, 1973) due to the multi-faceted nature of the issues they face and the complexities of implementing necessary remedial structural and policy interventions (see Cassidy & Resnick, 2022; Peel & Parker, 2017), which may of course, be contested. Such interventions have involved initiatives manifest at the local scale, such as town centre management (TCM) schemes (see Warnaby et al., 1998), Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) (see Grail et al., 2020), and national-scale policy initiatives to put ‘town centres first’ (see Hallsworth & Coca-Stefaniak, 2018 for a summary).

The result of retail decentralisation processes has been a perceived town/city centre ‘crisis’ that has been discussed at great length over the years. Numerous reports (see for example, Beyond Retail Taskforce, 2013; BIS, 2011; Grimsey et al., 2013, 2018, 2020; Millington et al., 2015; Portas, 2011; URBED, 1994; Wrigley & Lambiri, 2014, 2015) have proposed potential frameworks for high street revival/reinvention that

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<sup>1</sup> High street is a term often used interchangeably with ‘town centre’ – (see High Streets Task Force (HSTF), 2020; DLUHC, 2021a). It has traditionally been understood to be the main strip of shops in a town/city centre, and consequently, to be primarily focused on shopping activity (Carmona, 2022).

incorporate a move away from retail-oriented economic activity and towards a rediscovery of the high street as the natural centre for people and local communities (Carmona, 2015; Hubbard, 2017), thereby facilitating increased social cohesion and place attractiveness. Such sentiments have been echoed in recent recommendations (see Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, 2019; Timpson et al., 2018), highlighting the need to reinstate the high street as the nucleus of everyday life and as a multifunctional place (High Streets Task Force (HSTF), 2020) that facilitates and improves the nature of commercial activity, culture and leisure opportunities, tourism, or residential activity therein (Maliene et al., 2022).

In this regard, there is an ensuing need to mitigate the multiple stresses (social, environmental, economic, technological, institutional, etc) that many high streets (and their communities) face, (Dobson et al., 2021) - and in doing so, ensure their continued viability. The *Build Back Better* high streets strategy (DLUHC, 2021b) sets out long-term plans to support the recovery and transformation of high streets so that they become places where people not only want to shop, but also live, work, and visit. It articulates five key areas of action: 1) breathing new life into empty buildings; 2) supporting high street businesses; 3) improving the public realm; 4) creating safe and clean spaces; and 5) celebrating pride in local communities. This guidance for revitalising high streets goes beyond retail and narrow economic imperatives, to include aspects such as protecting green space and investing in green infrastructure, improving the public realm, including communities in place-making, making sure that commercial and residential uses complement each other, and fostering social experiences. Recently, various government funding streams have become available for 'saving' the English high street. For example, the Levelling Up Fund aims to improve local infrastructure, including investment priorities, local transport schemes, urban regeneration projects and cultural assets through monies distributed to English local authorities. Linked to levelling up in England, the Community Renewal Fund aims to empower local communities to take ownership of community assets and improve social wellbeing. Together, these funding streams form part of the shift towards more resilient and revitalised high streets for longer-term viability. As Maliphant (2021) observes, where funding is available, a strong impetus for bringing together both residents and businesses under local regeneration partnerships is evident, highlighting the importance to ensure that future projects are tailored towards local needs.

According to the Grimsey Review COVID-19 Supplement (Grimsey et al., 2020), for high streets to thrive, there needs to be a move towards localism, taking power away from central government and emphasising the importance of involving the local community so that they can participate in important decisions about high streets and town centres. There also needs to be effective leadership, collaborative skills, imagination, and speed in decision making for an improved planning system. Climate change and the environment also play a key part, and work is needed on expanding green space and pedestrianised areas and granting space for people over cars. There is also an emphasis on a digital revolution and using technology for better management and usage of high streets. To achieve such ambitious plans, however, there is a need to address the long-standing ambiguity relating to high street reinvention and repositioning (Millington et al., 2018) and move towards a fundamental re-evaluation and repurposing of what a viable future high street should be (Grimsey et al., 2020). This brief outline illustrates that there is urgency and resources to regenerate our high streets; however, there remains "little steer of what that might mean locally" (Carmona, 2022, p. 19), highlighting a lack of conceptual and operational clarity in place-based issues that result in policy ambiguity and confusion (McCann et al., 2021).

In this paper, our aim is to address such ambiguity by synthesising previous literature to reframe high street viability in this context. We argue that viability should not merely be regarded in terms of a high street's economic potential (i.e., as a retail hub), but should bring forth

the ability of high streets to facilitate a "combination of complex and sometimes conflicting economic, environmental and social factors that are influential to the high street evolution" (Maliene et al., 2022, p. 2). In this regard, we look beyond established notions of viability (see Hall, 2011; Lowe, 2000; Ravenscroft, 2000; URBED, 1994), situating it at the confluence of other 'loose concepts' (sustainability, resilience, adaptability, liveability) that have influenced English high street policy and planning for almost 30 years. We provide a scoping review of the high street literature after 1994, focusing predominantly in the English context. Through a synthesis of the identified studies, we assess the contributory and interconnected elements of viability, and showcase how they correspond to economic, social, technological, environmental, and regulatory factors that challenge high streets. Finally, we present future research avenues for examining high street viability, driven by the range of factors and indicators identified in our scoping review.

## 2. The evolution of high street viability: interrelated concepts in English policy

Our starting point for unpacking the term "high street viability" comes from its original formulation as an urban centre that has a capacity for living, influenced "through a series of processes, initiatives and actions with economic, environmental, and cultural aspects" (URBED, 1994, p. 55) that make it feel lively or not (i.e., vitality). On initial inspection, the terms vitality and viability, while distinct to some extent, appear so closely linked that they are almost synonyms for each other. The main objective of the PPG6 report (DoE, 1996, p.72) was to "sustain and enhance the vitality and viability of town centres" through a series of actions focusing on development and retention of key attractions and amenities, measures to increase attractiveness and accessibility, as well as investing in development or refurbishment of the built environment. While these policy precepts were purposely broad to help local authorities to strategically plan developments suited to particular high streets, they emphasise the importance of suitable and available sites for regeneration, with the hope to encourage further retail, commercial, residential, and other developments, as well as ensuring long-term profitability for investors (DoE, 1996, p. 31–32). In this regard, further nuances of the concept of viability are unpacked, particularly in terms of high streets being fit for development and being structurally and commercially viable.

From a planning perspective, the meaning of viability shifted towards exhausting all available options in central locations in order to permit development. Assessing the need for high streets to change and grow became a key criterion in subsequent policies, particularly articulated in elements of the PPS4 supplement (Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), 2009, p. 12) whereby guidance was tailored to "redirect growth to smaller centres (where they have the capacity/demand) to achieve a more sustainable network of centres to serve local needs". The notion of sustainability comes to the fore here, as a responsibility of planning and policy makers was to facilitate and promote "sustainable and inclusive patterns of development, including the creation of vital and viable town centres" (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), 2005a, p. 5). Such guidance further encapsulates the economic aspects of viability and sustainability, even though sustainability is used in a much broader sense in the 2005 "Sustainable Communities: People, Places and Prosperity" report, bringing forth elements of inclusivity, environmental sensibility, accessibility, diversity, and equity in developing thriving high streets (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), 2005b). Additionally, the promotion of the 'liveability' agenda in the early 2000s aimed at creating cleaner, safer and greener communities that would in turn create a pleasant and socially inclusive high street, particularly in smaller, local areas (Jones et al., 2007). An added focus on repopulating urban centres, influenced by European cities' ideals of peoples' participation in urban living and evening activities, also became a major policy concern. The notion of 'urban renaissance' (Urban Task Force (UTF), 1999, 2005) aimed to

sustain the life of high streets beyond normal working hours and balance residential amenity with mixed uses and diverse activities for all people (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), 2003). Rooted in a sustainability framework that promoted quality of life, accessibility, and business production (Peel, 2003), the new, ideal high street appeared in English policy as a compact, well-designed area that accommodates a variety of uses, and can be adapted in order to sustain a pleasant urban environment.

The criteria set by multiple policies paved the way for the development of place-based partnerships and the promotion of place management initiatives - from TCM schemes and BIDs to smaller local town teams - with the aim to develop, improve and safeguard high streets while working collaboratively and mindful of the local situation (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), 2005c; Findlay & Sparks, 2009). In this respect, high street viability is influenced not only by effective community engagement at the planning level (MHCLG, 2012), but also from the buy-in of people and partnerships and active involvement of the local community. This is highlighted by Coca-Stefaniak et al.'s (2009, p. 78) assessment of TCM initiatives, whereby high street vitality and viability is also interpreted as a set of actions towards "improved quality of life, community empowerment, the robustness of decision-making, place attachment, place identity and community pride". What is noticeable in this interpretation is the added emphasis on liveability not only in terms of developing cleaner and safer high street where people "live, work and play" (Ward, 2007, p. 665), but also as developing a flourishing and stimulating environment where local people interact on a daily basis for the betterment of their high street.

Concurrently with the promotion of sustainability and liveability agendas, emphasis on minimising the vulnerability of high streets from economic, environmental and lifestyle changes (Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), 2009) became a growing concern. The adaptation of urban areas through the effective reuse and conversion of buildings (MHCLG, 2012) is an ongoing resilience-improvement strategy, showcasing the need of sustainable development to safeguard community resilience. In the economic context, the effects of the 2008 financial crisis and the ongoing downward spiral of the retail sector meant that many high streets became vulnerable due to their overreliance on key retailers (GVA, 2011). A socio-economic understanding of resilience has become a staple with the state of the high street since then; adaptive resilience (Wrigley & Dolega, 2011) appears as an overarching goal that focuses on future proofing the performance of the high street (Coca-Stefaniak & Carroll, 2015) via "anticipatory and/or reactive reorganisation to cope with changing competitive dynamic following macroeconomic shock(s)" (Wrigley & Lambiri, 2014, p. 10). The focus on adaptive resilience corresponds to Griffiths' (2015, p. 41) call for dealing with contemporary high street problems through a temporal framing that adds "increased sensitivity to the way built environments evolve in relation to the communities they support" that enables place stakeholders to focus on the "generative qualities of the high street as a source of social life".

Thus, it is unsurprising that high street resilience and viability are interlinked not only in socio-economic terms (via financially viable investments) but also in addressing social and experiential demands that are informed by community engagement and evidence-based solutions (Local Government Association (LGA), 2022). The ability to sustain a long-term vision for high streets, developing inspirational leadership and encouraging local capacity and community involvement were deemed as essential criteria in securing funding for high streets (Timpson et al., 2018). These parameters highlight the cultural transformation needed to support renewal and regeneration in high streets, "in a way that improves experience, drives growth and ensures future sustainability" (MHCLG, 2018, p. 9).

### 3. Reframing high street viability

As briefly outlined above, high street policy debates/

recommendations over the past 30 years seek to provide a holistic understanding of - and response to - the economic, political, technological, social, environmental, and cultural challenges that threaten the English high street. As highlighted in many assessment frameworks (see Maliene et al., 2022; Parker et al., 2017), high street stakeholders need to prioritise actions that will have the biggest influence on creating and maintaining viability based on the amount of time, people, and resources available. This is a complex task however, as lack of consistent terminology is evident in both guidance and policy. Additionally, as recent crises have firmly highlighted, high street viability can be regarded as:

- an active and dynamic endeavour, rooted in spatial and temporal processes, with the aim to enhance and improve the high street environment through effective coordination and collaboration
- an unbounded target that contains both long-term goals and immediate, continuous actions
- the outcome of a combination of governmental and policy arrangements and place-based interventions that warranty adaptability to changing conditions
- an ongoing process characterised by its ability to be resilient - that is to resist, absorb, adapt and transform when exposed to multiple shocks and remain viable (Béné & Doyen, 2018; Bornemann & Strassheim, 2019; Meerow et al., 2016; Shirazi & Keivani, 2019)

The various perspectives outlined above showcases the confluence between viability and interrelated concepts in spatial and temporal terms; from a technological viewpoint, de Haan et al. (2014, p.123) argue that as sustainability is shifting away from a human-centric focus to a broader socio-technological one, the intersections with liveability should still be on meeting the needs of citizens, as liveability emphasises the "here and now and the direct delivery of benefits while retaining an expectation that these will continue in perpetuity". Similarly, notions of urban resilience accentuate adaptability, flexibility, integration, inclusivity and resourcefulness as founding pillars that determine a high street's capacity to respond to multiple challenges (Borsekova et al., 2018). Clearly, viability is strongly embedded in the broader concepts of sustainability, resilience, adaptability and liveability; taking into account the policy and practice conditions above, as well as the confluences of all these 'loose concepts', we propose a working definition of high street viability (Fig. 1), which will guide the empirical element of the paper. This is:

the culmination of successful place-specific initiatives and practices that correspond to the long-term, changing challenges and needs of communities and place stakeholders and lead to a sustainable, resilient, adaptable and liveable high street.

The proposed definition situates viability as the functional core of the four concepts, and suggests that a set of continuous actions and practices is needed to achieve a desired outcome for our high streets, given their spatial, temporal, policy, and practice thresholds. Additionally, various processes of vitality need to occur, related to place characteristics, place activation, busyness, and everyday practices and activities by different groups of people. Processes of vitality in this sense are synchronic to viability and its interrelated concepts, they are routinised and incorporated to a high street, and are, consequently, not quickly or easily undone (Kärholm, 2017). Thus, vitality can inform specific strategies that can lead to the achievement of long-term benefits and sustained viability. By adopting this perspective, we seek to broaden the focus of high street viability from merely economic terms such as urban form and urban density, land use values and patterns, endogenous growth, the changing urban fabric, and consumption trends (Chiaradia et al., 2012; Glaeser et al., 2001; Jenks & Jones, 2010; Jones, 2017; Lowe, 2000; Talen, 2011; Törmä et al., 2017). To further highlight the nuances, confluences and tensions of high street viability, we conduct a scoping

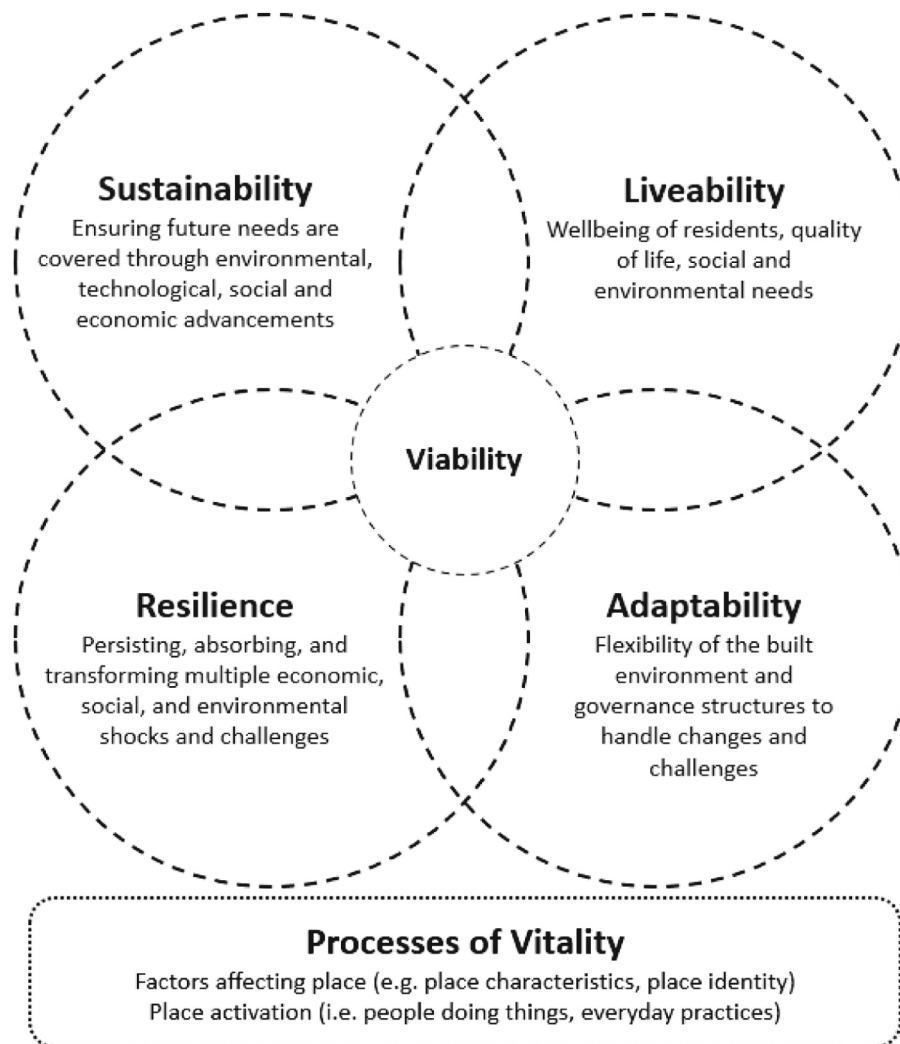


Fig. 1. Interrelated concepts of viability within the high street context.

review of the existing high street-oriented literature predominantly in the English context, where a renewed focus on giving high streets the freedom to change and adjust to the challenges of 21st century is pertinent (DLUHC, 2021a).

#### 4. Methodology

We now turn our attention on further exploring the concept of high street viability in the context of the English high street. We apply a scoping review methodology, as our main aim is to reframe high street viability through an examination of the range, depth, and breadth of research activity and clarification of its conceptual boundaries, as these stem from the study of the term viability and its interrelated concepts (sustainability, adaptability, resilience, liveability) (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). A scoping review methodology was deemed appropriate as high street viability is a topic of interest that warrants assessment within a wider context in order to address “issues around a town, urban area or place” (Sparks, 2021).

Our initial scoping question was: Which factors have been used to define high street viability in the past 30 years in England that have implications for - and contribute towards - resilience, liveability, adaptability and sustainability? Our initial focus on factors stemmed from an understanding of viability as a set of key indicators (alongside vitality indicators) to assess the health of high streets in different areas (Guimarães, 2017; Ravenscroft, 2000; Schiller, 1994; URBED, 1994).

The time span between 1994 to the present was covered to reflect developments from the first comprehensive study and conceptualisation of high street viability (URBED, 1994). The electronic databases used to identify relevant studies were Scopus and Web of Science, and the last search took place in September 2022. Consistent with other scoping studies concerned with urban challenges (Malekpour et al., 2015; Rozhenkova et al., 2019), we applied loose search terms and kept the review as broad as possible, in order to ensure that no key concepts were excluded. The searches included keywords to reflect the ambiguity of viability as a term (“vital and viable”, “vitality and viability”, “liveab\*”, “sustainab\*”, “adaptab\*”, “resilien\*”) and the interchangeability of the term high street (“high street”, “town centre”, “city centre”, “urban centre”, “district centre”, “neighbourhood centre”). The search approach was reflexive in nature, after it became evident that a focus on indicators of viability was too narrow to justify a scoping study, or when assessing all indicators against all interrelated concepts made our project too broad. The systematic review software Covidence was used to import and screen the identified studies.

After removal of duplicates and initial reading of titles, about 1100 studies were assessed for eligibility. A series of exclusion criteria was then developed to exclude irrelevant outputs. Studies that were included in the final extraction addressed at least one of the following criteria:

- Actively reflecting on the viability, sustainability, adaptability, resilience, and/or liveability of high streets in the English context



- Focusing on the long-term implications of high street challenges (e.g., retail decline) and how these are reflecting on the future of towns/cities
- Discussing strategies, areas of actions, and recommendations to ensure longevity and survival of a town/city
- Providing methodological approaches to assess high street viability, in the form of indicators and/or dimensions
- Discussing policy implications for ensuring high street viability

After criteria application, 125 studies were included and their findings were extracted through charting and collecting standard information related to high street viability and its interrelated concepts, such as factors associated with viability, practical solutions, policy frameworks and agendas, and future orientations. Our understanding of high street viability (Fig. 1) acted as a thematic framework to present the evidence collected, placing more emphasis on the already identified concepts and “certain aspects of the literature” (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005: p. 28) rather than on the quality of the studies. The next section presents the findings of the scoping review.

## 5. Overview of viability literature in the English high street context

Fig. 2 presents how papers were distributed based on the concepts explored. Whereas most papers are categorised in more than one concept, it can be argued that sustainability ( $n = 67$ ) and vitality and viability ( $n = 68$ ) are the most prevalent themes in the English high street context. The majority of resilience ( $n = 22$ ) and adaptability ( $n = 29$ ) studies are dated in the 2010s, possibly highlighting a shift in line with calls to reshape and transform the high street. Finally, the concept of liveability ( $n = 14$ ) is often discussed in conjunction with sustainability and vitality and viability, but rarely as a central concept.

### 5.1. Vitality and viability

The majority of papers discussing explicitly vitality and viability of the English high street used both terms in conjunction and in relation with the aforementioned policies over the years. Both terms are relevant to assess high streets' vulnerability, and highlight the locational challenges of different centres and the necessity to be flexible and embrace redevelopment to attract users (Schiller, 1994). Unsurprisingly, early studies were mostly concerned with effective use of indicators of vitality

and viability, such as:

- Retail floorspace
- Commercial yields and rents
- Pedestrian flows
- Retail turnover
- Vacancy rates
- Environmental quality
- Incidence of crime (Ravenscroft, 2000; Tomalin, 1997)

Critique of the predictive capability and relevance of these indicators was evidenced (Guimarães, 2017; Ravenscroft, 2000), while studies also focused on the difficulties of data collection, monitoring, and performance measurement to assess the health of high streets (Couch, 1997; Hogg et al., 2004, 2007; Tomalin & Pal, 1994). Vitality and viability were also the main focus of studies related to the repopulation and reurbanisation of high streets (Bromley et al., 2007; Cameron, 2003; Couch et al., 2009; Heath, 2001; Tallon & Bromley, 2004), on studies exploring the revitalisation of the evening economy (Bromley et al., 2000, 2003; Oc & Tiesdell, 1998; Ravenscroft et al., 2000; Thomas & Bromley, 2000), and on studies examining the impact of large retail and foodstore development in the vicinity of the high street (Adams et al., 2002; Banai & Antipova, 2016; Guy, 1998; Lambiri et al., 2017; Lowe, 2005; Powe, 2012). The stark contrast of repopulating and reanimating the English high street at the same time was evident in most studies. The temporal fragmentation and division of users between daytime and evening economy (Bromley et al., 2000), as well as fears of safety and crime, created tensions between different users of the high street. Additionally, new housing tailored for specific target groups (Bromley et al., 2007; Couch et al., 2009) further contributed to high street alienation and social exclusion, while re-densifying high streets was proven not as significant to retail viability as factors of walkability and accessibility (Banai & Antipova, 2016).

Regardless of such inherent tensions, studies focusing on partnership-working and particularly TCM schemes and strategies were evident (Coca-Stefaniak et al., 2009; Hehir et al., 2022; Hogg et al., 2007; Otsuka & Reeve, 2007; Warnaby et al., 1998; Whyatt, 2004). These studies placed emphasis on the importance of place managers and the need for a strategic reorientation in order to safeguard partnerships from a disparate network of high street stakeholders. A general consensus of these approaches is the need to ensure that a clear vision and focus on “staying together” and “working together” (Hehir et al., 2022: p. 14) is maintained towards high street viability. On a smaller scale, studies also identified the importance of maintaining a unique array of shops and services in smaller locations (Baldock et al., 2015; Bennison et al., 2010; Clarke & Banga, 2010; Powe & Hart, 2009). The inherent difficulties of regeneration due to lack of resources and location are mentioned, but emphasis is given in continuing to serve the local community and enhancing the identity of the small high street. From this synthesis, vitality and viability is understood as a socio-economic endeavour to protect high streets via:

- Monitoring and examination of retail-oriented indicators
- Reinstalling urban living and housing within the high street
- Ensuring the safety of users in both daytime and night-time
- Examining the impact of retail and foodstore developments on the high street
- Providing instructions and strategies for successful partnership-working
- Ensuring availability of local shops and services
- Ensuring accessibility to local facilities
- Safeguarding high street functionality and environmental standards

### 5.2. Sustainability

The papers discussing sustainability encompass the traditional

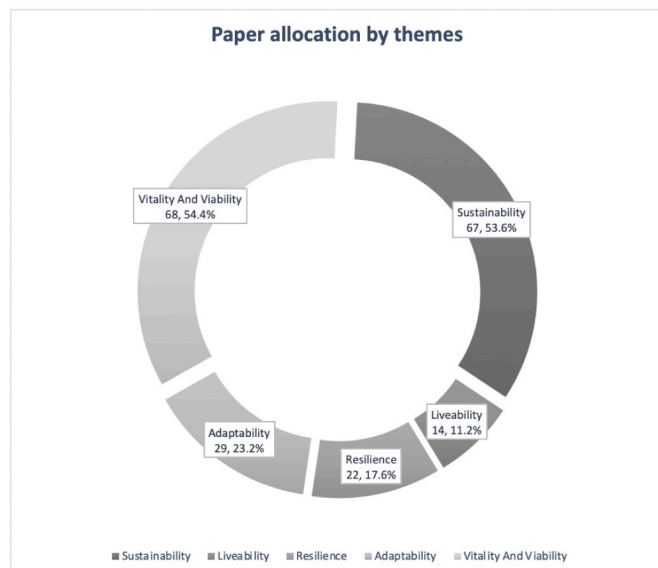


Fig. 2. Paper allocation by themes.

social, economic and environmental aspects in urban planning that have been a mainstream element of public policy and notions of sustainable development since the 1980s (Couch & Dennewmann, 2000). Ennis-Reynolds (2002) showcased the importance of appropriate in-town leisure development in stimulating regeneration and supporting the evening economy, which seemed to prioritise the importance of economic sustainability compared to environmental management and community cohesion. This was in line with studies arguing that sustainability has shifted from a strong ecological focus towards a more socio-economic one that is not challenging the importance of economic growth (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005; While et al., 2004). Conversely, economic growth tends to be described as an outcome of overcoming social and environmental sustainability issues (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005). High streets designed to be socially and environmentally sustainable - where people work, live and play - can increase footfall and consequently, retail spend (Parker et al., 2017; Tubridy, 2021). The sustainability agenda in the context of the high street was also discussed in the context of both housing and retail development, with studies raising caution on the perils of large scale developments in small business sustainability and the reinforcement of top-down, imposed narratives of viability at the expense of inclusive place management and development models (Henderson, 2011; Unsworth, 2007). In these studies, sustainability was portrayed in a narrow scope that prioritised private sector profit, and seemingly sustainable policies of creating mixed and diverse communities in the long-term were critiqued for promoting divisiveness within high street (sorting out the 'good' and the 'bad') (Raco, 2007). However, Weingaertner and Barber (2010) posited that whether support to retain a balance between new development and established infrastructure was evidenced, sustainability projects had a better chance to strengthen local economies, enhance social networks, and potentially decrease the environmental impact on emissions.

Socio-ecological aspects of sustainability were evident in Dempsey et al.'s (2012) study on dense urban neighbourhoods. In this study, social and environmental sustainability factors around provision and quality of services and facilities, green spaces, community stability and social equity, social interaction, levels of car usage and ownership, and residential mobility were explored. Whereas densely populated high streets promoted walkability and usage of shops and services, issues around the quality of the public realm and the lack of neighbourhood cohesion and interaction highlighted the challenges of a compressed built environment. Additionally, studies highlighted the possible drawbacks of avoiding consideration of immediate needs and aspirations for a sustainable future. In this regard, actions that drive socio-economic activation were deemed important such as pop-up retail and temporary use of space, as well as the fusion of digital technologies in the physical fabric of shops and their operations in a co-creative and co-produced fashion to support high street retail (Fletcher, Greenhill, Griffiths, Holmes, & McLean, 2016; Fletcher, Greenhill, Griffiths, & McLean, 2016). Development of cultural quarters was also evidenced as a regeneration strategy, highlighting the importance of the cultural factors in the search for social sustainability of urban centres (McCarthy, 2005; Montgomery, 2004).

Sustainability in an urban context was also studied in terms of technological factors, such as green energy technologies and infrastructure to address environmental challenges (Bulkeley & Betsill, 2005; Rogerson & Giddings, 2021), and as a web of social organisation and soft knowledge procedures that allow high street stakeholders to develop relational skills and place-based solutions to community challenges (Marsden et al., 2010). In a recent study, Maliene et al. (2022) developed a sustainability assessment framework for high streets with indicators that consider social, environmental, economic, and governance aspects. Within the framework, retail was identified as the most important factor of high street sustainability, however factors related to environmental initiatives, place management, experience and economic viability (with emphasis on commercial rent, business rates and activity hours) were also present. Arguably, studies on high street sustainability highlight

similar elements compared to more traditional retail-oriented ones in the previous section. Looking at all contributing factors, the synthesis suggests that sustainability is an amalgam of economic, social, technological and environmental factors that focus on:

- Economic viability in terms of activity, business retention, commercial success, and temporary activation of vacant space
- Social equity and cohesion via housing and cultural regeneration
- Effective (re)use of available space and infrastructure via renewable/green/clean technologies
- A focus on high density and a compact high street
- Promotion of a healthy high street, with increased walkability, greenspace, and efficient transport networks

### 5.3. Liveability

The synthesis points to liveability contributing to overall place quality (Carmona & de Magalhães, 2009) and the majority of papers discuss the concept through social and environmental aspects. Earlier liveability studies focused on the potential of delivering an urban renaissance that would make the high street an attractive and liveable place (Couch et al., 2009; Thomas & Bromley, 2000), while also recognising the challenges of gentrification and displacement that are inherent in such projects (Cameron, 2003). Liveability is also understood as an important indicator of multifunctional high streets where retail plays a lesser role (Millington & Ntounis, 2017). By presenting a framework for measuring liveability, Cleland et al. (2021) stated that liveability consists of a set of core factors such as health, inclusivity, safety, wellbeing and walkability. The latter includes the built environment, but also indicators such as noise and pollution. Liveable places are also measured through residents' access to services such as banks, pharmacies, educational facilities and playgrounds (Cleland et al., 2021; Parker et al., 2017). Parker et al. (2017) highlighted that liveable centres should be accessible without a car and that residents do not need to travel to another centre to fulfil their needs. This brings technological aspects into the consideration of liveability as well as connectivity, in terms of transport, becomes important here. As such, based on the synthesis, liveability includes:

- Accessibility, both through access to the centre itself and services
- Health of residents
- Pollution levels (noise and air)
- Safety in the centre (perceived and actual)
- Social inclusivity
- Walkability into and around the centre
- Wellbeing of residents and in turn, their quality of life

### 5.4. Resilience

The synthesis revealed that conceptually, resilience has several crossovers with adaptability, often referred to as 'adaptive resilience' (see Dobson, 2015; Dobson, 2017; Hughes & Jackson, 2015; Peel & Parker, 2017; Theodoridis et al., 2017; Wrigley & Dolega, 2011). These studies are concerned with persistence and adaptation primarily during changes in retailing, and stress the need for high streets to meet a changing demand and identify locations where retailing is or may become obsolete (Hughes & Jackson, 2015). As climate change became an inevitable concern too, mitigating and adapting to these environmental changes also has implications for resilience through various strategies and policies, such as land repurposing and acts of experimentation via local networks (Dobson, 2016, 2017). From a technological perspective, highlighting resilient high streets that can adapt to the trend of online shopping was a focus of Singleton et al.'s (2016) study on e-resilience. They concluded that clone-towns and suburban high streets were more vulnerable to the forces of online retailing. Theodoridis et al. (2017) noted that omni-channel retailing entails both

opportunities and threats and indeed, Fletcher, Greenhill, Griffiths, and McLean (2016) too note that technologies should not dominate the high street, rather, they should enhance the high street experience.

In the context of small businesses, Andres and Round (2015) highlighted how creative entrepreneurs create spatial clusters, adaptable forms of production, networks, and short-term planning as forms of micro-resilience. More traditionally though, resilience is used in connection with planning for unexpected or extreme events as well as shocks (Enoch et al., 2022; Wrigley & Dolega, 2011). This can include social, economic and environmental aspects. Wrigley and Dolega (2011: p. 2360) highlighted the difficulty of changing high street trajectories and navigating through the 2008 crisis in retailing, and the importance of “working with the grain of evolutionary trajectories” in order for high streets to bounce back rather than return to their previous state. In examining the effect of COVID-19 on six high streets, Enoch et al. (2022) argued that footfall is a strong indicator of resilience, as it can inform the immediate, context-specific changes that are needed in response to shocks. Together, the synthesis therefore shows that factors implicate on high street resilience include:

- Ability to mitigate extreme social, economic and environmental events and shocks
- Persisting through changes
- Adapting to changes, working ‘with the grain’
- Mitigating omni-channel retailing
- Building relationships through networks and developing strategies of micro-resilience

### 5.5. Adaptability

Adaptability of the high street refers mainly to “the flexibility of the space/property in a centre” (Parker et al., 2017, p. 319) to deal with challenges faced and the changing trends. Discussions unveiled from the synthesis highlight that adaptive reuse of space, retail adaption, flexibility of the built environment, and ability to adapt to societal, cultural and regulatory changes all contribute to a high street's adaptability (Carmona, 2022; Hall, 2011; Theodoridis et al., 2017; Törmä et al., 2017). From a socio-economic viewpoint, Carmona (2015) stressed how building frontages are a robust structural quality of the high street, which allows mixed use, continuity, and adaptability over time. Powe (2020) stated that centres are complex adaptive places, especially with the growing need for multifunctionality in mind. In this vein, Cassidy et al. (2020) purported that physical retailers need to embrace a new role as co-creators within the community ecosystem of a high street, adapt their strategies with other uses such as health, leisure, entertainment, education, arts, and become active place custodians.

Adaptability is also portrayed from a human lens, specifically in terms of designing spaces for usage from all groups. Phillips et al. (2021) highlighted how age-friendly design, housing, health and community services, and accessibility provision (i.e., the 20-minute neighbourhood) can re-establishing older people's position as empowered consumers, workers, entrepreneurs and residents that co-produce the high street via “a spatial ecosystem approach that goes beyond retailing to focus on living environments, cultural and social activities” (Phillips et al., 2021, p. 20). Adaptability in this context though relies on the deregulation of the planning system to accommodate building conversions from commercial to residential, and the problems that may arise in terms of design and housing quality, vibrancy of the public realm and unaffordability of living near a high street (Clifford & Madeddu, 2022; Ferm et al., 2021). As such, economic, social and environmental aspects engender adaptability of the high street. Adaptability is also viewed as a need for places to review and adapt local governance structures in order to build capacity (Peel & Parker, 2017), and transform into sustainable, liveable, resilient and ultimately, viable high streets. As Powe (2020) argues, complex adaptive places are not usually top-down planned as this limits high streets' flexibility and thus ability to adapt. Therefore, factors

considered for high street adaptability includes:

- Building flexibility, conversion, and capacity for inclusive design
- A concern about continuity and change in the context of mixed usage
- Regulatory flexibility within the context of local governance structures
- Effective use of people and space, co-creation and co-production

## 6. Discussion and implications for future research

From the findings of this scoping review, it is evident that the interplay between concepts related to viability (e.g., liveability, sustainability, adaptability, resilience and vitality) produces some synergies, as well as tensions. The analysis showed conceptual ambiguities, and also that the nomenclature relating to these concepts, both collectively and individually, is variable and interchangeable. Notwithstanding this, certain factors are evident, as all the concepts discussed above, to a greater or lesser extent, consider social, economic, environmental and technological aspects, with links drawn to governance, policy and planning (Fig. 3). Our intention here was not to juxtapose these concepts, but rather, disentangle them to develop a better understanding of factors contributing to each so that viability can be understood as an amalgam of these concepts.

Findings suggest that conceptual intersections exist mainly in the way that socio-economic challenges and opportunities facing the high street are addressed. Earlier studies confirmed a policy tendency to, above all, promulgate and pursue ‘top-down’ economic success as a primary route to high street viability. However, such an approach is often met with scepticism, mainly in terms of the consequent tendencies towards gentrification, displacement, alienation, social exclusion, and community cohesion as well as its environmental impact (e.g., Cameron, 2003). By way of contrast, studies also documented the importance of maintaining the social and physical fabric of the high street, thus advocating for sensible adaptations and sustainable solutions that merge new development with a high street's existing identity (e.g., Carmona, 2015). Other studies clearly attempt to find a ‘common ground’ between economic, social, environmental, and technological challenges, in order to assist in efficient funding allocation and resourcing of the high street (e.g., Maliene et al., 2022). Moreover, a range of studies stressed that collaboration between high street stakeholders and harnessing local knowledge is a major requisite for setting strategic goals and planning towards this ‘common ground’ of a viable, multifunctional high street (e.g., Parker et al., 2017; Powe, 2020).

Our review also revealed a temporal dimension, depending on whether efforts were implemented with a short-term, medium-term or long-term perspective. Studies focusing on liveability and vitality were more concerned with the immediate wellbeing of high street users and the betterment of the existing retail, commercial and living environment. Studies relating to adaptability advocate for maintaining flexibility within the built environment, with both temporary use (e.g., pop-up retailing) and longer term adaptations as part of wider visions and strategies for high streets. Studies focusing on sustainability and resilience studies generally have a longer term emphasis both planning for future events and needs, with resilience also persisting through immediate changes to future-proof the high street.

What is clear from these observations is the importance of reframing high street viability as a synchronic endeavour, consisting of short-term efforts and actions that can be influenced and controlled in the present, and then gradually evolving into strategic goals acting towards the achievement of a future vision for the place in question. The arrow in Fig. 3 demonstrates the necessity of creating appropriate timescales - and feasible targets - that correspond to the characteristics of a high street, ranging from addressing the immediate challenges that happen in the here-and-now (implied by the notion of *vitality*), to the setting of long-term goals (and the strategies to achieve them) that reflect high street *viability*.



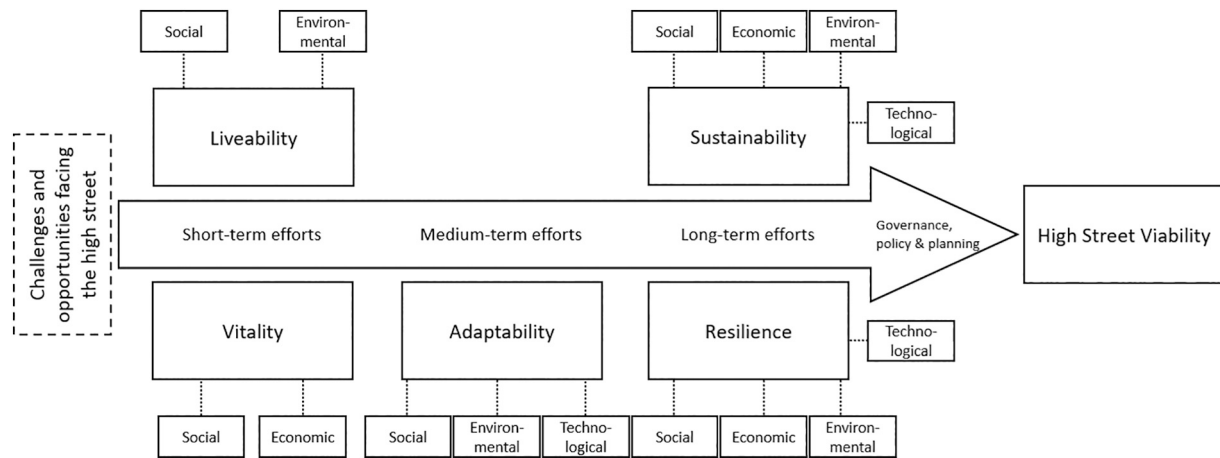


Fig. 3. Processes for high street viability.

What is evident from our findings is that the existing literature has paved the way towards reframing what is meant and understood as a ‘viable’ high street, in the English context. Our research provides insights into the nuanced aspects of high street viability and the implications for the conceptual understanding of the term, but we readily acknowledge that a more exhaustive analysis of the relevant indicators and factors is needed, in line with assessments regarding high street performance (e.g., Maliene et al., 2022). Additionally, the changing post-pandemic urban landscape has accelerated the need to draw on planning, design, and curation strategies to assist high streets to adapt to a ‘new normal’ (Carmona, 2022), whatever that might turn out to be. Consequently, further research examining how the narratives of these interrelated concepts underpinning high street viability have shifted during the pandemic would be beneficial to identify what the ‘new normal’ entails, and to rethink how high streets can be envisioned and used, focusing, as Sparks (2021) highlights, primarily on their social, environmental and cultural aspects, in addition to their economic viability. It is our hope that our reframing of high street viability indicates research avenues on long-term solutions for retailing, housing, employment, and other high street uses, and on synergistic attempts to reposition and reinvent high streets based on transparency and partnership-working (Nanda et al., 2021).

#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

Nikos Ntounis has supervised the project and particularly contributed to conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, data analysis, and manuscript writing, reviewing, and editing.

Regine Sønderland Saga has contributed to conceptualisation, investigation, data analysis, and manuscript writing, reviewing, and editing.

Gary Warnaby has contributed to conceptualisation, investigation, and manuscript writing, reviewing, and editing.

Maria Loroño-Leturiondo has contributed to conceptualisation, investigation, and manuscript writing, reviewing, and editing.

Cathy Parker has contributed to conceptualisation, initial project administration, and manuscript reviewing and editing.

#### Declaration of competing interest

There are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

#### Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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