

u3a High Street Research Project



A major u3a research project is underway looking at local high streets before and after Covid-19.

U3a members were asked to record details of premises in their local high streets and shopping areas in September 2020, to gather information about businesses that were trading at the end of March.

Members were asked to walk down their local high street, take a note of what businesses there are, and take photos of the shop fronts. This information has been fed into a database.

u3a researchers will then revisit the same high streets during late 2021 and early 2022 to note any changes that have taken place. The findings, including anecdotes from u3a members who recall high streets of the past, will form a landmark u3a report for publication later in 2022, so helping to raise the profile of u3a in its 40th anniversary year.

The project was dreamt up before lockdown by Peter Cox of u3a North London and a member of the u3a Research Network. With a former career in retail, he was interested in comparing today's high streets with those of the past.

However, the pandemic has meant that the project has had to step up a gear. Peter emphasises that "We need to get the information as quickly as possible since people may not remember what shops were there before Covid-19 struck.

“If we can get just ten per cent of u3as to take part, that would be a significant amount of information.”

The rise of internet shopping and more office workers working permanently from home are just two of the reasons that high streets and towns could change in the future. Fewer office workers and commuters will have an effect on cafés and sandwich shops, while many people who have mastered online shopping may continue to do that into the future.

“Many people have had to learn how to buy their groceries and do other shopping online,” says Peter. “So, what happens to the businesses after lockdown? There will be some winners. For example, some people may prefer to shop in their local parade rather than go into town or to a shopping mall, where social distancing is more difficult. We may find new usages for our high streets.

“For example, as badly needed accommodation, or as shared work spaces where people can hire a desk to work at rather than go into an office. We want to be able to show these changes.

“We don't know precisely how our shopping areas will change in the long term, but we do know the effects in many places will be dramatic. By the end of the survey, we will be better able to answer the specific question: ‘how exactly has the Pandemic changed the places where we shop?’”.