

# White Paper

## Impact of the pandemic on interactions between older shoppers and rural retailers: Resilience? Retreat? And what can retailers do?

**Authors:** Dr Rob Angell, Associate Professor of Marketing Research, University of Southampton & Mr Janusz Swierczynski, Research Assistant, University of Southampton

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**Contact:** [r.angell@soton.ac.uk](mailto:r.angell@soton.ac.uk), [j.swierczynski@soton.ac.uk](mailto:j.swierczynski@soton.ac.uk)

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## 2. Introduction and background

This white paper explores how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted the shopping habits and attitudes of older consumers (aged 65+) living and shopping in rural locations. Socioeconomic data clearly reveals that the over 65's will continue to be a key market segment in both size, growth and financial resources (Office for National Statistics, 2021; The Guardian, 2020) making it a key cog to the revival of the UK economy. It is also true that older people are likely to hold divergent feelings and beliefs when it concerns shopping in the post-pandemic environment. Retailers will know all too well that the older demographic often uses shopping as an activity beyond utility, and thus as a vehicle for socialising and meeting other people (Angell et al. 2012). Shopping therefore has both economic and wellbeing value to business, consumers, policy makers, and society-at-large. This research focuses on how older shoppers really feel about shopping at rural retail stores during this time, highlighting causes of worry and concern. As such, a series of nudge-like interventions are proposed that can encourage older shoppers (i) back into local retail stores, and (ii) provide a more comfortable and enjoyable experience.

### 2.1.1. The growth of local shopping

Local shopping has grown in importance for UK consumers in the era of Covid-19 restrictions. A recent survey by Barclaycard indicated that 90% of consumers who shopped locally during the pandemic will now continue to do so into the future (The Guardian, 2021). Typically, local retailers are independently owned businesses, which are generally also viewed as more desirable when compared to those owned by larger corporations (Pioch and Byrom, 2004). An explanation for this being that for every £1 spent in local independent stores, a higher level of capital remains in the local community amongst stakeholders such as employees, suppliers and the wider community; this is known as the 'local multiplier effect' (Pioch and Byrom, 2004). In particular, older shoppers value being able to help businesses who operate locally to where they live (Angell et al. 2014), and the reverse is also true in the sense that older shoppers are a very important segment to retailers, and particularly the rural high street, when considered from a financial perspective (Phillips et al., 2021), given the size and spending ability of this group (Office for National Statistics, 2021; The Guardian, 2020).

### 2.1.2. The needs and habits of older shoppers

Despite the importance of the older segment to retailers, it has to some extent been overlooked by decision makers - which is evidenced in the dearth of research about this group. Regarding this latter point, there has been signs of a slight landscape shift in the recent past, with more research focused around seeking an understanding of the shopping needs and habits of the 65+ segment (see Pettigrew, Mizerski and Donovan, 2005; Myers and Lumbers, 2008; Angell et al., 2012; Angell et al., 2014; Tomazelli et al., 2017; Phillips et al., 2021).

As a consumer segment, older shoppers tend to exhibit fairly unique behaviours when compared to other age groups. General trends suggest they spend more time in retail stores, visit more frequently on average, purchase fewer items per visit, vocalise and have more demanding requests to staff, and have a higher awareness of their rights as shoppers (Tomazelli et al., 2017). Nonetheless, for many older people, the act of shopping is not merely transactional, but also a social occasion (Angell *et al.*, 2014). In recognition of this, in the Netherlands, specialist 'Chat Checkouts' have been created

especially for customers wishing to engage in social conversation and dialogue with cashiers (Vice, 2021). However, the pandemic has changed how people currently feel about shopping in person.

Against this backdrop, there remains significant uncertainty about how older consumers are currently engaging with local retail stores and whether their shopping behaviour has changed significantly from the pre-pandemic era. As the UK Government revisits and weakens restrictions in the retail context, it is important to:

- Understand how older shoppers feel about the pandemic and shopping in their local rural stores,
- explore if, and how, their shopping behaviours may have changed, and
- suggest low-cost initiatives that will encourage and provide more confidence for apprehensive customers to return to pre-pandemic in-store behaviour.

### 3. Methodology

25 participants over the age of 65 were recruited for the project. Since the research concerned rural retail, volunteers were self-selected on the basis that they lived in a 'rural' location, defined as "areas that fall outside of settlements with a more than 10,000 resident population" (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2017). In practice, the sample was drawn from a handful of rural communities in the South of England; key locations were Bishops Waltham and Swanmore near Fareham, and Hamble near Southampton. A range of methods were used for reaching the appropriate demographic including leaflet drop-offs, street-level intercepts, and respondent snowballing, which refers to encouraging participants to recommend other eligible people to the research. Care was taken to ensure that participants recommended other people who differed in terms of their shopping behaviour since the pandemic (i.e., not all participants should avoid / do not avoid rural shops).

The sample (n=25) had the following characteristics (see Table 1).

*Table 1 Sample Characteristics*

Average Age (years)	74
Females (n)	19
Males (n)	6
Can drive and have access to a car (n)	22
Cannot drive/no access to a car (n)	3
Live alone (n)	10
Live with others (n)	15

Semi-structured telephone interviews were used to collect the data. An interview schedule guided the interviews (see appendix 1). However, flexibility in the questions ensured a more exploratory and less prescriptive set of results. All interviews were recorded with permission, and then transcribed and securely stored in line with University of Southampton protocol for maintaining data.

Transcriptions of each interview were analysed using thematic analysis software.

## 4. Findings and practical recommendations

### 4.1.1. Finding 1: Pandemic fear persists

The interviews naturally captured attitudes towards shopping and the pandemic at the time of data collection (July and August 2021). Since the UK Government had recently announced the relaxing of in-store restrictions there was a sense of hope, but a clear consensus that the pandemic itself, including its repercussions, were far from over. For example, one older participant said:

*"...well, it's changed my husband and I forever, because the virus isn't going to go away."* (P23, Female, 74).

Many older shoppers were bullish about the importance of exhibiting cautious behaviour when it comes to previous restrictions and, in particular, continuing to wear masks and take other precautions. Even though several participants were vocally relieved to no longer *have* to wear a mask at all times, there was also a sense from older people that they still would through a matter of choice, regardless of the policy guidance:

*"You know, you wear a mask in there, because I always wear the mask in the shop. Because I think that's just good manners."* (P9, Female, 85).

Indeed, there was a willingness not to take unnecessary risks when the stakes are so high. Despite feeling great relief as a result of the United Kingdom's vaccination programme, there was a wider realisation that by itself Covid-19 cannot be entirely curbed and so an element of fear for safety continues:

*"Although I'm double vaccinated, it doesn't protect you entirely. And there's always a risk that you could be carrying it and giving it to somebody else"*. (P19, Female, 77)

### 4.1.2. Practical recommendation 1: Simply recognise that pandemic fear persists

An intuitive but essential first step for rural retailers is the simple recognition that *some* older shoppers will remain very worried about the pandemic, both for themselves and for their peers. Where possible, providing subtle signals that these concerns are legitimate will provide a source of comfort in empathy. For example, actively encouraging customers to adhere to previous restrictions by, for example, signage around the store perhaps focusing on the continued wearing of masks for the safety of "the community" will put many people in this group at ease.

Moreover, recognising that this alone will not go far enough for some older customers and continuing to provide additional convenience services (e.g., home delivery, phone ordering, etc.) that were introduced during lockdown periods will build equity and goodwill amongst this group until they are happier to return on a more regular basis. Making sure that in-store staff are also conscious and sensitive to these attitudes and opinions will also help to put minds at rest.

### 4.1.3. Finding 2: Older shoppers are very conscious of physical space

Since many rural stores are tight on physical space, a finding with overwhelming support pertained to the concerns participants had about their proximity to other shoppers, especially when the volume of people in-store is not managed or controlled. One benefit of rural stores is that this kind of situation is rare. For example, one participant said: *“we don't have huge shops, so you don't get masses and masses of people there. So, it never seems overwhelming.”* (P8, Female, 71). However, there remained concern about store space and social distancing more generally, even in lieu of a high volume of other shoppers, especially when aisles were seen as not wide enough:

*“Because the store is small, they have a lot of big lorries parked right outside the shop, which sends the shop into darkness. The shop is very dark, and they wheel all these huge cages of food piled up into the store and leave them just inside the door. And it's a bit of a bunfight, when you get there in the morning to try and walk around the delivery cages, and the staff are busy serving customers and trying to get them in and out.”* (P23, Female, 74)

*“There's too many aisles too close together and you can't space out in them, so I just don't go in there.”* (P15, Female, 75)

Furthermore, for several participants, their experience of rural stores did not facilitate a safe and pleasant queuing experience, both inside and outside of the store, and particularly when they were asked to queue for checkouts or outside for admittance:

*“Sometimes you were in a queue, like the main supermarkets were doing but you could be stood in the queue, and I felt more threatened in both the smaller shops to a degree because there wasn't the space due to the design of the shop for keeping your distance. So sometimes I would just say, I'll actually walk a bit further and go to a bigger supermarket.”* (P18, Female, 66).

### 4.1.4. Practical recommendation 2: Maintain a physical distance

Local store owners can mitigate concerns over shopper proximity by increasing space in the aisles of their store by changing, where practically feasible to do so, the layout to allow for more open space. In addition, when customers are queueing, using floor spacing markers similar to those used at the height of the pandemic should nudge shoppers into standing a little further apart - especially as people are notoriously bad at judging distances (Viguiet, et al., 2001).

In situations where the retail floor starts to become busy, asking customers to queue (outside) is seen as reasonable, especially where there are awnings to protect from extreme weather conditions.

Finding ways to inform shoppers of the store's busiest hours will allow more conscious shoppers to choose times where the likelihood of coming into contact with a high volume of customers will be low.

### 4.1.5. Finding 3: Contactless payments can create feelings of exclusion

One of the implications of the pandemic has been the accelerated transition to electronic forms of monetary exchange - e.g., card payments. Whilst some older shoppers had a positive attitude towards

for example, contactless card payments, older and more openly less tech-savvy participants exhibited a general reluctance to use retailers where they were unable or discouraged from paying in cash:

*"I mean, the butcher, there is a butcher there, I don't use it, you can only use a card, and I'm limited in how much I can carry so that's the way it is. I can only [...] go in there providing I will use a card. [...] It's too much bother and that's all there is to it."* (P14, Female, 88).

#### **4.1.6. Practical recommendation 3: Offer multiple modes of payment to reduce anxiety**

Whilst some older shoppers may have adapted to using contactless payments, many still prefer cash payments and therefore can be excluded from shopping when this is not available. Whilst it is understandable for many retailers to have introduced card-only payment in-store as a safety measure, this comes at a price, and so cash should not be completely disregarded if at all possible. Taking additional sanitary measures, such as regular hand sanitisation and separation of cash taken will help to limit the spread of the virus.

#### **4.1.7. Finding 4: Recognisable staff elicits feelings of safety**

An interesting finding from the interviews was that older shoppers are particularly drawn to known and recognisable members of staff. More than this, a recognisable face elicited more feelings of safety and comfort. When respondents knew the member of staff serving them, they commented on how this made them feel safer in the store, as illustrated in these two interview extracts:

*"I think it gives you a bit of confidence in the overall sort of attitude of them, with regards to safety. If you know somebody or you feel that you know somebody fairly well, you feel that they do take care, not just going through the motions sort of thing."* (P24, Male, 74).

*"It makes me feel much more comfortable because even though I'm doing my shopping, I'm still interacting with people, I usually do interact with them, and it makes me much more comfortable shopping at the local store."* (P6, Male, 65).

#### **4.1.8. Practical recommendation 4: Encourage and facilitate [even more] personalised service interactions**

Store owners should foster the relationships between staff and shoppers, and encourage staff to form relationships and bonds as par for the course. For example, if not used already, name badges should be introduced to help "put names to faces". Staff should be encouraged to interact, in particular, with older shoppers rather than just going through the motions. If the store layout allows, exploring the possibility for 'chat checkouts', like those used in continental Europe, will help to encourage dialogue over service speed (see Vice, 2021).

#### **4.1.9. Finding 5: Older shoppers are particularly concerned about merchandise contamination**

Elderly shoppers were especially concerned about how merchandise might have been contaminated by other shoppers picking it up and touching it prior to their arrival. This was particularly the case for products that are not securely wrapped in a wipeable or plastic package. Loose products - like those found in bakeries, greengrocers and delicatessens - were of particular concern:

*"I got a bit worried because there was a lot of people there, I felt this all, you know, all picking up the potatoes or carrots or something, it was probably all busy touching everything. [...] Well, obviously an awful lot's in plastic now. And, you know, if you don't feel you're touching things in the same way, packets of lettuce were wrapped up, and cucumbers are covered in film. It's all pretty hygienic in that respect."* (P10, Female, 85).

#### **4.1.10. Practical recommendation 5: Mitigate against merchandise contamination**

How products are packaged is more important than it was in the past. The priority and provision of packaged or plastic / paper coverings is much more essential; albeit it must be noted that this is in conflict with environmental guidelines. Nonetheless, as a further safety precaution, supplying hand sanitiser in locations where merchandise contamination is most likely (e.g., vegetable aisle) would be a subtle signal of the store's efforts to reduce virus spread through product contamination.

#### **4.1.11. Finding 6: Older customers appreciate being asked for their opinion**

A definite inclination and warmth towards being asked for feedback was expressed by the sample. It was clear that very few people had been asked by the stores they used for "their" thoughts and feedback but the act of asking was particularly appreciated, as illustrated in this comment:

*"Thank you for doing this project, it's so nice to know that someone is out there speaking to older people like me about this sort of thing."* (P14, Female, 88)

Owing to the pandemic, older shoppers also mentioned a growing desire to thank store staff for their service, especially those who were 'Key Workers'. They wanted to express their gratitude, either in store, or via online channels such as local community Facebook groups:

*"I would maybe like to say how much and how grateful I am... more than I would normally I thank them for their help and their service more than I would have thought to before because they've been you know ... in retail they're very vulnerable, aren't they?"* (P13, Female, 75)

#### **4.1.12. Practical recommendation 6: Ask for feedback (and listen)**

Store owners and their workers should even more actively collect (informal) feedback from their (older) customers. The advantage of this is not just from gaining actionable insight. There is a certain "feel good factor" attached to being asked for feedback and opinions, especially amongst more

(perceptually) marginalised groups. Informal conversations in-store, using local community Facebook (or similar) groups, distributing paper surveys at checkouts, or organising more formal market research through interviews (as this research has done), are all ways to achieve this. Whilst a proprietor may feel as if they know what is best for their store and customers, they may (i) learn something new, whilst (ii) at the same time demonstrate that they care.

#### **4.1.13. Finding 7: Deliveries are very desirable**

At a time where many older shoppers have become more avoidant of shopping, alternatives to attending the physical store, such as deliveries or collection services, have become more popular. However, this comes with its own issues and concerns for older people - as the interviews elucidated: e.g., timings of the delivery, being able to unpack the shopping oneself, being rushed by the delivery driver, etc. Nonetheless, many older participants in the research who hadn't returned to using physical stores said that they would favour retailers that also offered home delivery and collections into the future.

*"The village shop they were offering if you phoned up or emailed an order, they would actually put it all together and deliver it to you. Well, we didn't actually take them up on that because Tony said he'd pick it up at the door. So we used to email an order through to them for various things and then they'd have it all together in a big box and Tony would pay over the phone with his card and then nip up when they said it was ready pick it up at the door which was great and it was better than bothering anybody else to deliver it to us because we're you know we're able bodied, it's not as if we're old and decrepit. So, we are a bit old but we're not decrepit. So that's what we did. So, we had a nice slot from them"* (P12, Female, 76).

#### **4.1.14. Practical recommendation 7: Go the extra (delivery) mile**

Delivery services offer another logistical aspect for retailers to consider, and for many may be a 'step too far'. Nonetheless, where it is feasible and realistic to do so, it may maintain older shopper's patronage in the short-to-medium term until they do feel more comfortable, safe, and willing to return to stores.

## 5. Conclusion

This research identified seven factors that characterised how older shoppers feel about shopping in their local rural stores since the pandemic began, and how the nature of shopping has changed for them. It is clear that many older shoppers are already returning to use rural retail stores, but the majority also have similar concerns and apprehensions that prevent it being a “normal” experience. For others, physical shopping remains a ‘step too far’ in the immediate term, often for one or more of the reasons that are also inhibiting those who have already returned to store. In all cases, a series of practical, inexpensive, and realistic recommendations are provided that can help welcome more older shoppers back into store, make those who already have feel more comfortable, and encourage an experience for customers that will feel more ‘normal’. See Appendix 2 for a summary of our findings in infographic form.

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## 7. Appendix 1

### Draft Interview Schedule

[phone interview]

#### Introduction

Thank you for providing your time. It really is appreciated. I would like to tell you a little about the project, and also make you feel comfortable with how we will use and look after your data [refer to the interview consent form and participant information sheet]. We would also like to offer you a small incentive for your time.

#### Indicative Questions:

##### Background (warm up)

- Can you tell me a bit about the type of area you live in and perhaps a bit about how long you have lived there? Is there anything you particularly like about the area you live in?

##### Shopping Behaviour (local)

- Can you tell me a little bit about how you typically organise your shopping (prior to the pandemic)?
- How about since the start of the pandemic? Do you feel your shopping habits have changed at all?
- Did you shop in any of the local village stores? If so, which ones? If not, why so?
- Do you have a favourite village store? What do you like about it?

##### Retailer Response to the Pandemic (local)

- How did your local (rural) shops respond to the pandemic?
- Did the way you shop in these stores change between now and before the pandemic? In what ways?
- What has been the implication on the relationships you had and social aspects of how you shopped before?
- Are there any examples of local stores who have done a good job, in your opinion, of managing the pandemic? If so, how?
- What do you think local stores could do better to encourage a more enjoyable shopping experience and more opportunities to meet people and have relationships in store?
- Is there anything that larger retailers have done that you wish smaller stores had also done in response to the pandemic? Or is there anything you think that smaller retailers have done better?
- Many retailers introduced digital technology to cope with the pandemic, how did this affect you?
- How do you feel when there are other customers shopping at the same time as you?

### Relationships and Socialisation (local)

- Have you found that you have formed any relationships through shopping in local stores? If so, can you tell me about one or two?
- What do you like most about shopping locally rather than going to a more urban location?
- What sort of (other) activities do you get up to when you go shopping locally?
- How do you feel that Covid restrictions and specifically social distancing have impacted your local shopping activities? And your ability to socialise in those spaces?
- How about your interactions with members of store staff, how do you think the pandemic has affected those?

N.B. Collect demographic data at the end of the interview

### Others

Interviews are only semi-structured, so any interesting threads can be investigated and pulled.

## 8. Appendix 2

### Infographic illustrating key findings

# ENCOURAGING OLDER CUSTOMERS BACK IN STORE

## What can you do?\*

#### Recognise that pandemic fear persists

- Continue adhering to and encouraging the wearing of masks in your store
- Continue to provide additional services e.g. phone ordering, deliveries and collections
- Ensure that all staff are aware that some older shoppers may have concerns about being in store

#### Maintain physical distance

- Adjust aisle layouts to configure more parallel space
- Use floor markers to encourage spaced out queuing
- When the store is busy, have a protocol in place for controlling admittance
- Make customers aware of less busy periods (through clear signs) so they can select appropriate periods to visit

#### Facilitate more personalised service to drive perceptions of safety

- Provide name badges for staff
- Encourage staff to socialise and get to know your (older) customers whilst they're shopping
- Open 'chat checkouts' to create space for social interaction

#### Mitigate against merchandise contamination

- Provide sanitary packaging for any loosely sold products (e.g. fruit, vegetables)
- Ensure that hand sanitiser is available in places where customers routinely "touch" products.

#### Ask for feedback (and listen)

- Actively collect feedback from customers to demonstrate that you care
- Train staff to ask customers for feedback, and when they receive it, to pass it on further so you can continue to improve

#### Go the extra (delivery) mile

- Identify locations where older people may live and promote delivery services for these customers.

Over 65's retail spending increased 75% between 2001 and 2018  
*International Longevity Centre UK*

By 2040, the Over 65's will be responsible for 63p of every pound spent in the UK  
*International Longevity Centre UK / The Guardian*

\*Based on interview with 25 people aged 65+  
[www.ncl.ac.uk/nicre/research](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/nicre/research)

Other Research Reports are available on the NICRE website [www.ncl.ac.uk/nicre/research/publications](http://www.ncl.ac.uk/nicre/research/publications) The views expressed in this review represent those of the author and are not necessarily those of NICRE or its funders.

For further information about NICRE:

Email: [nicre@newcastle.ac.uk](mailto:nicre@newcastle.ac.uk)

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