

Cowley Road, Oxford Retail Vacancies 2018 to 2023



A CoHSAT Report
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Introduction

No-one likes a high street with empty stores. The ‘vacancy rate’, the percentage of shops that are empty, or not open for business, is a standard indicator of retail health. The Local Data Company, a regular provider of data services to retailers and local authorities describes it as “a key barometer of the relative health of the retail and leisure market”¹

The recent environment for retail businesses has been difficult and in this report we examine the change in the vacancy rate for Cowley Road, Oxford, from 2018 to 2023, compare this to the national trend, and consider factors that might influence this.

Executive Summary

In November 2018, Cowley Road had 12 retail vacancies. In September 2023 it had 11. If it had followed the national trend, it would have had 4 more vacancies rather than one fewer. Possible explanations for this above average performance are: (1) regional variation with the south of England possibly performing better than the north; (2) the dynamic nature of Cowley Road; (3) the local population density with 40,000 people within a mile; and (4) the recent improvement in walking and cycling access, as most shoppers arrive by foot or bicycle (a 2017 survey shows about 75%). The first three are quite widespread effects, but the fourth is relatively unique to Cowley Road.

Method

For the first time point we chose November 2018 because there is a survey of Cowley Road conducted by Oxford City Council for the Local Plan to 2036². This survey was made on 173 sites on 13th November 2018.

For the second time point we chose September 2023 to be after implementation of the East Oxford Low Traffic Neighbourhoods on an experimental basis, but before a decision on making them permanent. We surveyed Cowley Road covering the same sites on the same basis as the 2018 survey on 14th September 2023, plus making checks of Google Streetview/Maps.

Comparison to trends was based on the national vacancy trends from British Retail Consortium-Local Data Company Vacancy Monitor – a standard benchmark for the sector, from which the top-level results can be freely checked³.

We refer to other sources and studies in the discussion.

¹ Local Data Company, FY 2022 Retail and Leisure Trends Analysis

² RTL.7 - Retail Surveys Oxford Local Plan 2016-2036 Shopping Frontages

https://www.oxford.gov.uk/downloads/download/1056/016_rtl_-_retail_leisure_and_vibrancy_of_centres

³ <https://www.localdatacompany.com/insights-hub/press-resources/press-release-fewer-vacant-stores-by-end-of-2022>

Results

On 13th November 2018, there were 12 retail vacancies in Cowley Road.

North Side	Survey from 1 (Vacant) to 267 (Scott Fraser)	64 units
Vacancies	1, 7, 17, 47/49, 131, 169, 189/191	7 vacancies
South Side	Survey from Cape of Good Hope and 34 (Thy Spa) to 300 (Christian Life Centre)	109 units
Vacancies	72, 114 (6), 132, 134, 134A	5 vacancies
Total 12 vacancies, 173 units, 6.9% vacancy rate		

In September 2023, there were 11 retail vacancies in Cowley Road.

North Side	Survey from 1 (Vacant) to 267 (Scott Fraser)	64 units
Vacancies	1 (long-term vacancy), 105 (ex-The Gameskeeper), 151 (ex-Honest Stationery)	3 vacancies
South Side	Survey from Cape of Good Hope and 34 (Thy Spa) to 300 (Christian Life Centre)	109 units
Vacancies	56/60 (ex- Café Tarifa), 62 (ex-Indigo), 92 (ex-Atomic Burger), 114 (ex-Aarons Lounge), 114 (ex-French Crepe), 134 (ex-Oxford Super Choice), 134A (ex-Reign), 186 (ex-Istanbul Grill)	8 vacancies
Total 11 vacancies, 173 units, 6.4% vacancy rate		

Between November 2018 and September 2023, Retail Vacancies in Cowley Road reduced by one.

The national trend from 2018 Q4 to 2022 Q4 is an increase from 11.5% vacancies to 13.8% vacancies, based on the Local Data Company's Vacancy Rate data⁴ (Fig 1). A more recent article shows the vacancy rate rising slightly to 13.9% in 2023 H1⁵.

All types of retail across the UK have seen increasing vacancy rates since at least 2018, with a significant escalation during Covid, and a small partial recovery since. On a national basis, High Street retail has been more resilient than Shopping Centres or Retail Parks, but has also recovered less.

Applying the difference between 11.5% and 13.9%, **if Cowley Road had performed in line with the national average, we would have seen an additional +4 Vacancies.**

⁴ <https://www.localdatacompany.com/insights-hub/press-resources/press-release-fewer-vacant-stores-by-end-of-2022>

⁵ <https://www.localdatacompany.com/insights-hub/press-resources/press-release-retail-market-remains-active-in-2023>

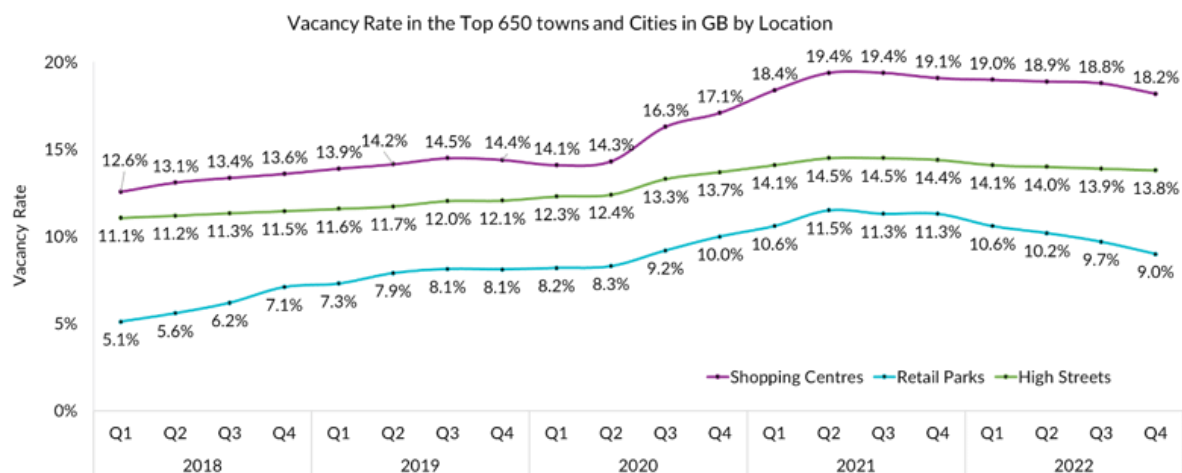


Fig 1: GB Vacancy Rate 2018-2022 (Source: Local Data Company)

Discussion

The period from late 2018 to 2023 has seen turbulent times, that have dramatically affected the retail sector. 2020 saw the highest level of retail business closures on record, affecting large chains and individual store owners. In recent months have seen another wave of closures including chains from Joules to Wilko.

Many of the factors that impact retailers are negative and national, so cannot explain the resilience of Cowley Road in an overall negative picture. These include: Brexit, Covid pandemic, Increasing rents, Energy price inflation, Supply chain inflation, Cost-of-living crisis. Cowley Road will have had no special protection against these. We must look for more local factors.

To date, we can identify three factors to explain the resilience of Cowley Road retail reducing vacancy rates against a background of increasing vacancies on High Streets nationwide.

1. Regional variation

Some retail commentators note that the retail in the south of England has generally performed better than the north, however the data on vacancy rates is not directly available. Local Data Company notes that retail “redevelopment is chiefly concentrated in the south”, but also that bank closures have particularly affected the South East⁶.

2. Cowley Road has always been thriving and dynamic

With 6.4-6.9% vacancies in the period, Cowley Road vacancies are far below the average

⁶ Local Data Company, FY 2022 Retail and Leisure Trends Analysis

GB High Street. Within this, every year, some shops close and others open with an average of 16 of each (9%, Fig 2)⁷. That represents one store closing and another opening every 23 days on average. This allows Cowley Road to adapt and evolve to changing conditions over the years.

Year	Businesses closed	Businesses opened
2010	23	10
2011	17	17
2012	11	17
2013	19	15
2014	12	17
2015	12	9
2016	21	14
2017	20	26
2018	15	24
2019	14	17
2020	13	15
2021	14	9
2022	14	15
2023	9	6
Total	205	205
Average	15.8	15.8

Fig 2: Business closures and openings, Cowley Road (2023 is part year to Aug 2023)
Source: Cowleyroad.org and Google Streetview

3. Cowley Road has a strong local community and customer base.

About 40,000 people live within 1 mile of Cowley Road⁸ - about a 20-minute walk or a 5-minute cycle. This is more than the population of Abingdon, but in a much smaller area.

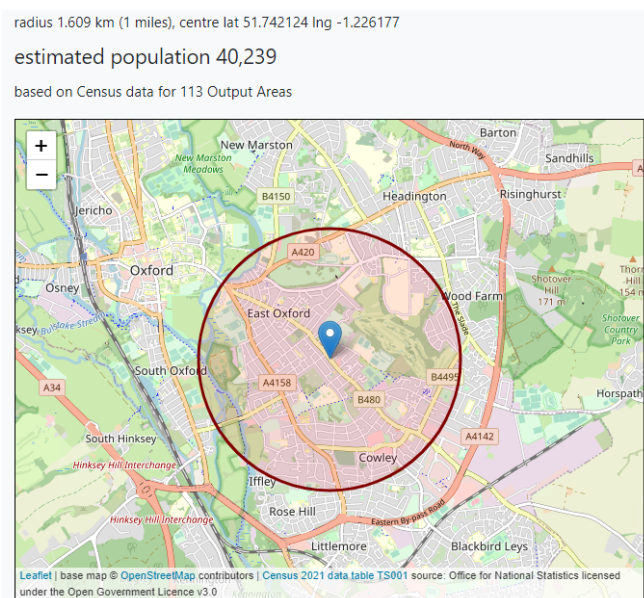


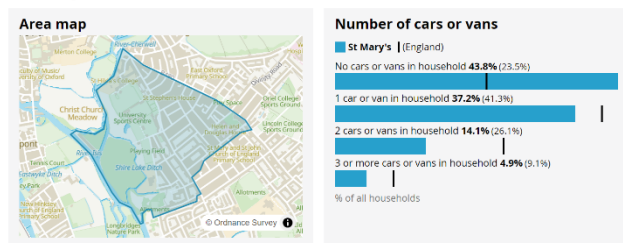
Fig 3: Population within 1 mile of Cowley Road / Howard Street (Source: Datadaptive)

⁷ Source: CoHSAT/Cowley Liveable Streets analysis based on cowleyroad.org and Google Streetview

⁸ Map source www.dataptive.com based on Census 2021

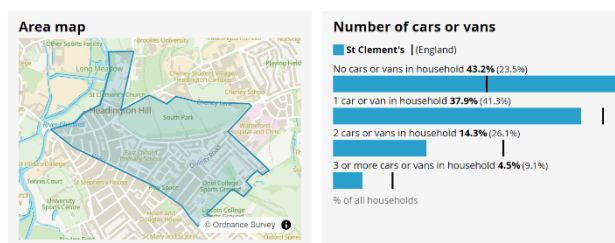
Further, about 44% of households in this area do not have a car or van, so they are highly likely to view Cowley Road as their main shopping location.

St Mary's



Source: Office for National Statistics - Census 2021

St Clement's



Source: Office for National Statistics - Census 2021

4. Most people access Cowley Road shopping by foot or cycle, and provision for this has improved recently

A survey conducted in 2017 for Oxford City Council by NEMS Market Research as part of the Oxford City Plan included an in-street survey in Cowley Road and other shopping centres. 52 people were asked how they got to Cowley Road (and other questions)⁹. 75% had arrived by foot or by bicycle. 21% arrived by bus and only 4% (2 people) had arrived by car.

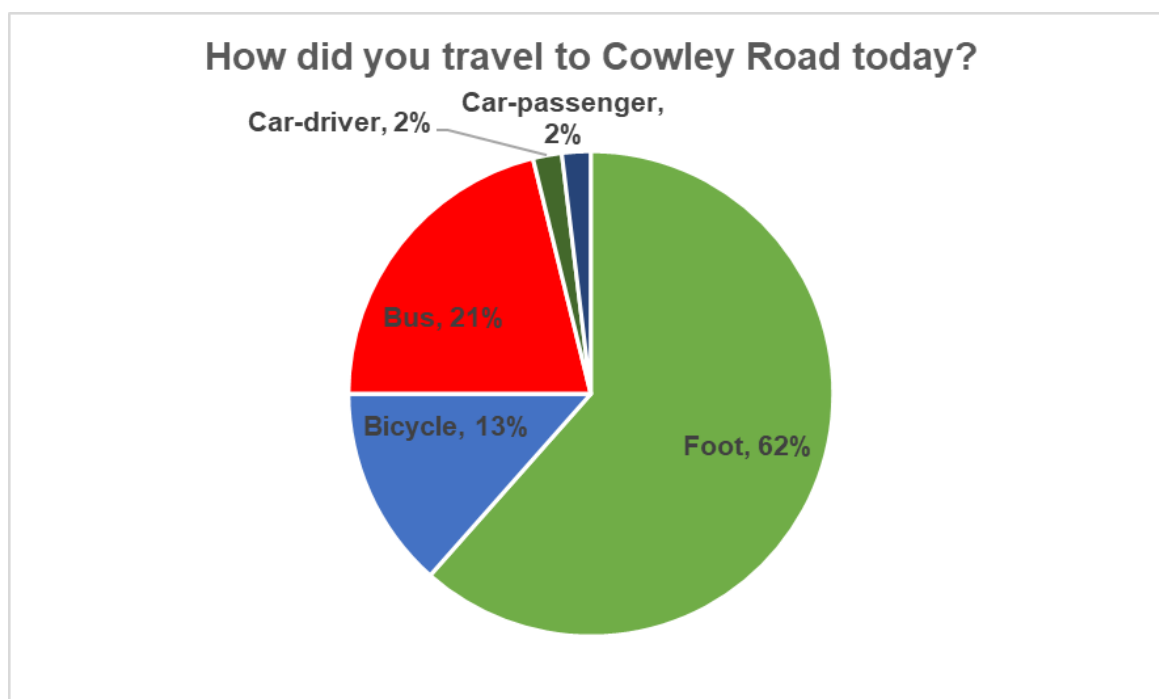


Fig 5: Mode of travel to Cowley Road (Source: Street Survey, NEMS 2017)

Over 80% of the people surveyed were on Cowley Road to shop or visit a café or restaurant. Others were there for leisure activities or meeting people.

⁹ [https://www.oxford.gov.uk/downloads/file/5783/rtl1 -
oxford city council retail and leisure study 2017 appendix 3](https://www.oxford.gov.uk/downloads/file/5783/rtl1-_oxford_city_council_retail_and_leisure_study_2017_appendix_3) (n=52) w

This was a small sample, but the surveys were conducted “across different locations on different days of the week and times”¹⁰ so should be a fair sample. Assuming a fair sample, we can apply statistical techniques (the Z-Test) to give the range of values that we can be 95% confident that the actual result lies within. For walking + cycling this range is 64% to 82%. For car travel this range is 1.2% to 11%.

The ability to reach Cowley Road by walking and cycling has improved since 2021 with the implementation of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods, initially in Cowley to the east of Cowley Road, and in early 2022 in St Mary’s and St Clement’s at the west end of Cowley Road, and by improved cycling routes. Anecdotally, at least one takeaway restaurant has reported “an increase in footfall since the end of lockdown”¹¹.

Of the three factors, 1 and 2 can be found in many other High Streets, and may explain their general resilience. But Cowley Road has outperformed the average High Street and the Low Traffic Neighbourhoods are the only relatively unique feature.

How can Cowley Road retail be improved?

The 2017 survey also asked people what they disliked about Cowley Road and how it could be improved. People disliked the road congestion, the unsafe feeling (including specifically for cyclists), and the dirt¹².

Table 10.7: Features respondents disliked about Cowley Road

Response	% of Respondents
(Nothing in particular)	36.5%
Road congestion	26.9%
Feels unsafe / presence of threatening individuals / groups	19.2%
Dirty shopping streets	17.3%
Dangerous for cyclists	5.7%
Rundown	3.9%
Overcrowded	3.9%
Noisy	3.9%
Pollution	3.9%
Too many homeless people	3.9%
General lack of independent / specialist shops	3.9%

Source: In-centre Survey, February 2017. Note: Some survey questions had multiple responses therefore percentages do not add up to 100%

Over half of people however had no ideas for improvements. Those that did focused on the quality of the shops.

¹⁰ https://www.oxford.gov.uk/downloads/file/5791/rtl1_-_oxford_city_council_retail_and_leisure_study_2017_final_report

¹¹ <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/23748148.oxford-takeaway-feeling-immensely-proud-rating/>

¹² https://www.oxford.gov.uk/downloads/download/1056/016_rtl_-_retail_leisure_and_vibrancy_of_centres (Final Report)

Table 10.8: Key Improvements for Cowley Road

Response	% of Respondents
No improvements needed	28.9%
(None mentioned)	23.1%
More independent shops in general	7.7%
More/ better food shopping offer	5.8%
Better quality shops in general	3.9%
More cafés/ coffee shops in general	3.9%
More/better restaurants in general	3.9%
More customer facilities	3.9%
More seating areas	3.9%
More/ better parking	3.9%
Bakery	3.9%

Source: In-centre Survey, February 2017

With such a high fraction of customers arriving by foot, it would seem valuable to make the street as attractive as possible for them to visit and shop in. The higher quality stores that are desired are only likely to be attracted by higher turnover. Several studies have shown the value of improving the street environment to footfall, retail turnover and vacancy rates. For example the UCL ‘Street Appeal’ report found that street improvements return substantial benefits to the users of the streets, including local businesses and people visiting the area¹³.

We conclude that a focus on improving the pedestrian environment of Cowley Road would be a valuable focus for the future, to ensure that the street’s demonstrated resilience continues.

¹³ <https://tfl.gov.uk/corporate/publications-and-reports/economic-benefits-of-walking-and-cycling>