In independent retailers play a vital role nurturing new brands, setting the standard for service and serving their communities. But as high streets up and down the country are left with voids from the torrent of retail collapses, a punitive business rates regime, and political and economic uncertainty brought about by Brexit, the odds seem stacked against the UK’s smaller fashion businesses.

Against this backdrop of instability, Drapers conducted a survey of the independent sector to uncover the challenges businesses are facing, and to find out what local and national support they need. The survey was open to fashion-based independents, and received 133 responses from across the UK and Ireland.

Worryingly, more than a quarter of respondents revealed that their businesses are not currently profitable, while only 35% have felt confident enough to expand by opening another store in the past three years. When asked to rank the main reasons why they need help, the survey reveals that over two-thirds of respondents were sceptical that the fund will help independent retailers.

One said: “[Prime minister] Boris Johnson is not to be trusted. Any local help and development spending promised by the Tories pre-election will simply be flung out post-election.”

Independents expressed exasperation at “retail giants [creating] a discounting culture that is hugely dangerous to retail”, and called for more government support to guard against increased overheads, and competition from retail parks and online shopping.

High streets minister Jake Berry would not comment because of the pre-election purdah. While the country remains in political and economic turmoil, the retail sector will struggle to get the attention of government. However, without its support, the future for independents is uncertain.

Draper’s survey of independent fashion retailers shows how this pioneering sector is battling competition and economic uncertainty.

Words by ISABELLA FISH and GRACE WHELAN

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**The State of Independents**

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**Drapers Investigates**

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**Online vs Bricks-and-Mortar Operations**

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**The State of Independents**

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**About the Survey**

- Carried out online between 12 September and 18 October
- 133 respondents across the UK and Ireland: 33% in the south-east of England (including London), 15% in the east, 13% in the south-west, 9% in the north-west, 9% in Scotland, 8% in the north-east, 8% in the West Midlands, 6% in the East Midlands, 6% in Yorkshire/ Humberside, 4% in Wales, 2% in Ireland, 2% in the north-east and 7% in Northern Ireland
- 42% run or work for a women’swear independent, 8% menswear, 5% childrenswear, 8% footwear. Others sold a mix of categories
- 66% of respondents have one store, 16% have two stores, 9% have three, 5% have four, 2% have five and 5% have more than five
- The oldest independent retail business to take part opened in 1888, while the most recent opened in 2019

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**Online vs Bricks-and-Mortar Operations**

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**About the Survey**

- Average percentage of total sales made online
- 35% of respondents had opened a store in the past three years
- 70% of respondents trade online via their own website
- 30% online via another site

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**The State of Independents**

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**About the Survey**

- Average percentage of total sales made online
- 35% of respondents had opened a store in the past three years
Independent retailers across the UK said they face many political and economic challenges. The main issues they cited included: Brexit uncertainty, high rents, high business rates, high parking charges and limited parking spaces, a decline in footfall; homeless people or begging on the streets; “constant” discounting from high street stores; online retail competition; “constant” requests for discounts; multiple launching CVAs/administrations; leading to closed shops on the high street; having to compete against the likes of JD Sports/Sports Direct (as people go to the larger retailers where they can access more exclusive product) and a lack of good-quality and nice-looking shops – “just gambling and pound shops left.”

A main focus of the survey was to investigate the level of local and wider government support available for independent businesses. Respondents were pessimistic about help for independents from the EEF Future High Streets Fund – a government initiative to reinvent town and city centres. Responses heavily indicated a lack of support from both local councils and national government.

One independent warned: “If government doesn’t act soon, there will be a lot of business failures in spring 2020.”

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

- **Brexit uncertainty**
  - Strongly agree: 46%
  - Somewhat agree: 36%
  - Somewhat disagree: 7%
  - Strongly disagree: 7%

- **High street maintenance**
  - Strongly agree: 52%
  - Somewhat agree: 23%
  - Somewhat disagree: 17%
  - Strongly disagree: 7%

- **Business rates reform**
  - Strongly agree: 92%
  - Somewhat agree: 52%
  - Somewhat disagree: 39%
  - Strongly disagree: 9%

- **Consumer confidence**
  - Strongly agree: 97%
  - Somewhat agree: 52%
  - Somewhat disagree: 39%
  - Strongly disagree: 9%

- **Parking**
  - Strongly agree: 4%
  - Somewhat agree: 36%
  - Somewhat disagree: 36%
  - Strongly disagree: 4%

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

- **Footfall in my town has decreased over the past three years**
  - Strongly agree: 49%
  - Somewhat agree: 36%
  - Somewhat disagree: 7%
  - Strongly disagree: 7%

The High Streets Fund will help independent retailers

- Strongly disagree: 27%
- Somewhat disagree: 35%
- Somewhat agree: 34%
- Strongly agree: 4%

What type of business rates reform would you like to see?

- Abolish business rates altogether: 92%
- Reduction of the business rates multiplier: 40%
- Annual revaluations: 27%
- Introduce an online sales tax: 17%
- Reform of the Check Challenge Appraisal system: 16%
- Lower rents for new businesses to help them find their feet: 16%
- Performance-based business rates: 13%
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The current business rates system is fair

- Strongly disagree: 82%
- Somewhat disagree: 31%
- Somewhat agree: 8%
- Strongly agree: 9%

The current business rates appeals system is fit for purpose

- Strongly disagree: 45%
- Somewhat disagree: 40%
- Somewhat agree: 12%
- Strongly agree: 3%

To what extent do you agree with the following statement?

- **Some retailers reported no increase in their business rates at the last revaluation, while others have risen by 50%**
  - Strongly agree: 61%
  - Somewhat agree: 39%
  - Somewhat disagree: 4%
  - Strongly disagree: 0%

Prime minister Boris Johnson will support local independent retailers

- Agree: 40%
- Somewhat agree: 23%
- Somewhat disagree: 34%
- Strongly disagree: 4%

We asked independents to rank these factors from most concerning to least concerning in respect of the health of their business.

- High street maintenance
- Chain retailer company voluntary arrangements
- High street company voluntary arrangements
- Vacancy rates
- High street vacancy rates
- Consumer confidence
- Parking
- Uses rent in the high street
- Consumer confidence

What do you think is fit for purpose

- Retail business rates: 47%
- Rent agreements: 46%
- Consumer confidence: 45%
- Parking: 44%
- Uses rent in the high street: 43%
- Chain retailer company voluntary arrangements: 42%
- Consumer confidence: 41%
- Consumer confidence: 40%
- Consumer confidence: 39%
- Consumer confidence: 38%
- Consumer confidence: 37%
- Consumer confidence: 36%
- Consumer confidence: 35%
- Consumer confidence: 34%
- Consumer confidence: 33%
- Consumer confidence: 32%
- Consumer confidence: 31%
- Consumer confidence: 30%
- Consumer confidence: 29%
- Consumer confidence: 28%
- Consumer confidence: 27%
- Consumer confidence: 26%
- Consumer confidence: 25%
- Consumer confidence: 24%
- Consumer confidence: 23%
- Consumer confidence: 22%
- Consumer confidence: 21%
- Consumer confidence: 20%
- Consumer confidence: 19%
- Consumer confidence: 18%
- Consumer confidence: 17%
- Consumer confidence: 16%
- Consumer confidence: 15%
- Consumer confidence: 14%
- Consumer confidence: 13%
- Consumer confidence: 12%
- Consumer confidence: 11%
- Consumer confidence: 10%
- Consumer confidence: 9%
- Consumer confidence: 8%
- Consumer confidence: 7%
- Consumer confidence: 6%
- Consumer confidence: 5%
- Consumer confidence: 4%
- Consumer confidence: 3%
- Consumer confidence: 2%
- Consumer confidence: 1%
- Consumer confidence: 0%