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A Thriving Hub of Independent Commerce

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On a crisp Thursday morning, Totnes hums with life. The south Devon market town is alive with live music spilling onto the streets and locals and visitors alike enjoying al fresco dining outside independent eateries. The high street is a vibrant tapestry of over 125 independent businesses serving a community of just 8,000, a stark contrast to the struggling high streets across the UK, where approximately 10,500 shops closed in 2024, representing a 27% increase from the previous year.

Unlike the national trend, Totnes boasts a retail vacancy rate of just 2%, compared to the UK average of 13.9%, according to data from the British Retail Consortium. Around 80% of its

traders are independents, a testament to the town's fierce commitment to local commerce. Emily Price, former mayor, explains in an interview, "People come to Totnes to shop for the experience, browsing for something unique, not just necessities. It's fun, interesting, and you'll find treasures you won't get elsewhere." This ethos has preserved Totnes as a beacon of independent trade, even as chain stores dominate elsewhere.

The town's resistance to corporate giants is well documented. In 2012, locals successfully rallied with a petition to block a Costa Coffee outlet, despite the company receiving approved planning permission. "The more we hold onto our independent spirit, the more Totnes becomes a destination," Price says, highlighting a community-driven ethos rooted in sustainability and local economics. This philosophy aligns with aspects of doughnut economics, a model that encourages balancing human and social needs with environmental sustainability while supporting local wealth circulation over corporate profit extraction.

Totnes's commitment to sustainability traces back to the 1930s, when philanthropists Dorothy and Leonard Elmhirst transformed the 14th-century Dartington Hall into a hub for arts, rural regeneration, and social justice, with environmental initiatives becoming a key focus in later decades. The estate's Schumacher College, a globally renowned centre for ecological learning and research, has attracted thinkers and activists for decades, many of whom settle in Totnes, enriching its progressive culture. "For a century, people have come here for sustainability, arts, and resilience, shaping the town's identity," Price notes.

At Oliver's Butchers and Pie Makers, a shop trading as a butcher since 1912, owner Oliver Horrocks embodies this passion. "Two butchers on one street, that's rare," he says proudly in an interview. "We're a brotherhood, not competitors. Each of us specialises differently, and the community supports us." Sourcing from farmers within a 15-mile radius, Oliver's offers organic-quality meat without the premium price, with all pastries made on-site. Remarkably, three of his eight employees are under 25, a rarity in a trade where the average age exceeds 50. "I work alongside them, sweating as hard as they do," he grins, explaining his success in attracting young talent.

Further along the bunting-draped high street, Totnes Brewing Company thrives as a microbrewery and cultural hub. General manager Sarah Massey, in an interview, shares, "Totnes attracts diverse, independent-minded people who value local businesses. The community's support keeps our high street vibrant." Beyond its beers, the brewery champions other UK craft breweries and will soon host the Totnes Fringe festival in its quirky upstairs ballroom, complete with a disco ball.

The town's independent spirit extends to The Mansion, a former school turned not-for-profit community space. It's Canteen cafe, co-owned by Tara Vaughan-Hughes, serves local dishes like Devon cheddar-laden steak sandwiches. "We're casual but serious about food," Tara says in an interview. "Most ingredients come from local farmers and butchers, with global flavours." The Mansion also hosts pottery, yoga, and a library, acting as an incubator for local ventures.

Even the late-night takeaway, Joe Joes, embraces Totnes's ethos, shunning neon signs for muted tones and local ingredients. At Fretworks, a music shop run by newcomer Tobias Fernside, the town's nickname "Totters" is used fondly. "It's part of Totnes's identity," he says, summing up the town's unique charm.

Totnes stands as a defiant counterpoint to the homogenisation of British high streets, proving that community, sustainability, and independence can triumph over corporate creep. Its success is a clarion call for towns nationwide: local pride and activism can keep high streets alive.

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