

Proposed Change of Use to part of Willis & Co - 17A High Street, Cuckfield RH17 5JU

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1. Does the size of retail shop unit affect business viability in Sussex village high street?

The size of a retail shop unit - or its layout and flexibility can significantly influence business viability, especially on a Sussex village high street, where footfall patterns, rent levels, and community character differ from urban centres.

Here's a breakdown of key factors and how size plays into them:

1. Flexibility & Adaptability

According to the High Streets Task Force, retail unit size and flexibility are critical to a high street's adaptability

highstreetstaskforce.org.uk

- Smaller units allow independent or local businesses to enter with lower upfront costs and risk, enabling a more dynamic and mixed-use offering

Reddit

2. Cost Pressures & Lease Terms

- Smaller units typically command lower rents and business rates - which is essential for independents in villages where margins can be tight

ourhighstreets.co.uk Savills

However, UK retail window leases are often inflexible, with long terms (commonly 5+ years), posing a barrier for small operators

Reddit

3. Experience-Driven Retail & Community Fit

- Modern high streets are evolving to be more about experience, community connection, and curated offerings rather than just transactional retail

Vogue Business

- Smaller, well-designed units suit boutiques, artisan services, pop-ups, or experiential retail formats that drive engagement and repeat visits.

4. Anchor Tenants vs. Mixed Use

- Larger units have sometimes become liabilities; they're hard to fill and adapt unless reimagined creatively, such as with shop-in-shop or multi-operator models

Experian

- In contrast, subdivided smaller units can support a diverse tenant mix, enhancing footfall through a variety of offerings.

- Village high streets, however, thrive on **compact**, accessible, locally rooted businesses that cater to community needs and capture foot traffic within walking distance.

Specific Considerations for Sussex Village High Streets

- Footfall & Community Habits

Villages may not generate the same volume of random foot traffic as big towns--but their shoppers often favour local, personal, service-oriented businesses.

- Rent Affordability

Smaller units reduce fixed overhead, making it more realistic for niche or seasonal retailers to operate profitably.

- Versatility Over Size

A well-presented small shop can outperform a larger underutilised unit by being curated, welcoming, and tailored to local demand.

- Shared & Flexible Use Models

Encouraging pop-ups, rotating vendors, or shared space models in underused units could invigorate village high streets.

Summary: Does Size Matter?

Unit Size	Advantages for Village High Streets	Challenges
Smaller Units	Lower cost, flexible use, suitable for single or local operators, encourages vibrant mix	Lease rigidity; fit-out costs; limited display space
Larger Units	Room for multiple functions (e.g., café + retail), potential anchor	High rent, harder to fill, underutilisation

For Sussex village high streets, smaller and adaptable units are generally more viable, supporting local enterprise, enhancing variety, and fostering community identity. A high street successful today is less about big-box presence and more about diverse, experience-led, and well-aligned businesses.

Retail Unit Sizes in Cuckfield:

What the Data Shows

1. Heathfield House - 11 High Street

- A Grade II listed, mixed-use property for sale with retail space on the ground floor and residential above.
- The retail area measures 754 sqft (~70 m²).

LoopNet Zoopla

- This size is typical of many traditional village shop units-compact but visible, with high frontage appeal. Underscoring that Cuckfield favours smaller-format units rather than large footprints.

2. Letting Opportunity.

Modernised Shop

- A unit on the High Street (Let via Rightmove) lists detailed internal dimensions:

- Front retail: ~17ft x 10'10" (~185 sq ft)
- Rear shop area: ~12ft x 11'10" (~142 sqft)
- Additional stock/sales area: ~12'10" x 9'5" (~121 sqft)
- Total: around 450 sqft of usable space.
- Rent is around £625/month, and qualifies for small business rate relief.

Rightmove

What This Means for Business Viability Accessibility & Affordability

- Small units (<500 sq ft) are more affordable in terms of rent and rates, crucial for independent businesses in a village context like Cuckfield.
- The Rightmove listing even notes potential for small business rate relief.

Suitability for Local, Experiential Retail

- Cuckfield's High Street is full of independent boutiques, galleries, cafes, and specialist services businesses that don't require expansive footprints.

Smaller units support shops like Artologie, Willis & Co, Blossom & Roar, and PJ and the Hare- highlighting a curated, community-focused retail environment.

Visit Cuckfield +1

High Visibility & Heritage Appeal

- Even compact units benefit from high street presence; Grade II listings (like Heathfield House, nos.17 & 18) add character and prestige.

Crickmay Chartered Surveyors Zoopla

- Architecture and display matter more than square footage in attracting footfall and establishing local identity.

Flexibility & Mixed-Use

- Some buildings include flats or storage above, supporting mixed-use models that help owners offset costs.

Zoopla OnTheMarket

Smaller format units lend themselves well to pop-ups, shared marketplaces, or flexible lease arrangements.

Summary Overview

- Yes, unit size does significantly affect business viability in Cuckfield. The most successful setups tend to be smaller, well-located, and cost-effective.
- Compact retail units support lower overhead, high visibility and flexibility - aligning well with the village's independent, character-driven economy.
- Larger spaces exist but are less typical; they may require mixed-use strategies or subdividing to remain commercially viable.

2. How does the size of compact retail shop units compare and what are potential uses?

1. Business Rates & Fixed Costs

- Units under ~30–35 m² typically fall below the £12,000 RV threshold, so you'd almost certainly qualify for 100% Small Business Rates Relief.
- That means your main fixed cost is rent + utilities, making these sizes more affordable to independents/start-ups.

2. Suitable Uses

Because they're too small for traditional cafés/restaurants (insufficient covers), the most viable uses are:

- Specialist retail – e.g. gifts, deli counter, floristry, premium confectionery, refill shops.
- Services – hair salon (1–2 chairs), beauty/treatment room, nail bar, micro-clinic (e.g. physio, osteo).
- Food-to-go – coffee hatch, juice/smoothie bar, small bakery, takeaway only.
- Office/agency – estate agent, design studio, consultancy, with street-facing presence.
- Pop-up/co-retail – shared use with local makers, aligning with Cuckfield's action plan for flexible trading.

3. Practical Fit

- 25 m²: usually works for single-function operators (espresso bar, boutique, treatment room). Storage will be minimal, so it needs high turnover/low stock.
- 34 m²: more versatile – you can fit a small counter + 2–4 covers (coffee shop), or two treatment rooms with a reception.
- Both are viable if frontage is good (≥ 3.5 m wide) – long/narrow shapes can kill trading efficiency.

4. Market Evidence

- Independent shops in villages like Cuckfield often trade from 30–70 m² units.
- London research suggests ≤ 80 m² is the benchmark for “small viable shop”; your sizes are below average, but still workable for specialist/service-led uses.
- Because of their smallness, these units are low-risk entry points for independents, which is exactly what sustains village high streets.

Summary:

Both 25 m² and 34 m² are viable in a Sussex village high street, but not for all sectors. They're best suited to services, grab-and-go, and specialist/curated retail, less so for restaurants or general convenience. The 34 m² unit gives you more flexibility, while the 25 m² is highly niche but attractive for very low-overhead concepts.