

A new report is warning that village shops in the South East are in danger of becoming a thing of the past. Oxfordshire Rural Communities Council says communities will have to support actively their local shops if they want them to survive. Shireen Wheeler reports.

Balancing the books has proved a weighty problem for Tony Summerfield. As a former bank manager he has cultivated a prudent approach to money, but last month alone there were 775 retail price increases to deal with. Under the new rating system, he is paying twice as much as last year. Was this what he expected when he left his old job ?

Tony SUMMERFIELD, village shop owner

- No, much harder than we both expected when we first took the business on. Don't get me wrong, we're still thoroughly enjoying it, but the work is very very hard, long hours, and of course the present economic climate hasn't helped the situation at all. The early part of this year, we, my wife and I, Jill and I, were very concerned about how things were actually going, by how tight the situation was coming and we did sit down and talk and think hard about the current situation and how we could over – overcome it.

- Did you think you might have to close ?

- Yes, it was a possibility, and we did talk about it and we had a few sleepless nights.

But the villagers of Kirtlington in Oxfordshire are unanimous in their appreciation. For many of them, Tony and Jill Summerfield are a life-line, the shop a haven, in a sometimes bewildering world.

- Well, I can't get out shopping you see, and I mean, what should I do ? I'm eight – I'm eighty-four and I live alone, and er – people are kind, and they do when they go out somewhere, they might buy me something, but otherwise I get most of my stuff here.

- It's so convenient. Because otherwise you would have to go to Bicester which costs £2 fare and then you've got to carry it all back and if you've got arthritis it's no joke.

Roger DAVIS, Oxford Rural Communities Council

- A village shop is just not a place where you go and buy your groceries or your sweets or news – news items – new s p a p e r s, it's a place where the village

actually has a heart. In the survey we undertook last year, some 60% of shops are actually fluctuating between being viable businesses when new owners come in, and perhaps fading and receding when the owners' enthusiasm wanes with the support of the villager.

Susan Brown, former village shop owner

- We tried green groceries and fruit, we tried fresh meats, we tried doing a wider range of frozen foods, and they all went quite well, but none of them went well enough to make it financially viable, this was the trouble.

But with the appeal of the convenient supermarkets and the temptations offered to villagers by the big companies village shops will have to draw on all their resources to survive.