# Brentwood high street faces decline amid fading influence of The Only Way Is Essex



It was once the television phenomenon that defined a generation's relationship with reality TV, drawing millions into the glittering world of Essex glam and social drama. "The Only Way Is Essex," affectionately known as Towie, became not just a hit series but a cultural touchstone, influencing fashion trends and lifestyle choices across the UK. Women clamoured for Gemma Collins-style ‘vajazzles’, while men sought the right hue of bronzer to emulate Joey Essex's iconic tan. However, as the show commemorates its 15th anniversary, the once-bustling heart of this phenomenon—Brentwood High Street—stands as a haunting reminder of its erstwhile allure.

In recent visits, the vibrant street that once radiated the excitement of fame appears ghostly quiet. The social media-driven tourism that once brought throngs of fans for Towie Tours and high-street shopping has dwindled dramatically, epitomised by a staggering decline in viewership. At the show's peak, episodes attracted over 1.7 million viewers, yet last year's finale limped to below 50,000 live audiences, portraying a deep disconnect between the show and its fans. This shift signals not just the ebbing popularity of Towie but also reflects a broader malaise affecting British high streets nationwide.

The dereliction of Brentwood is especially poignant for key figures associated with the show. James 'Arg' Argent, once a beloved character, has found himself embroiled in controversy, recently pleading guilty to a domestic violence charge. Such personal declines echo a more widespread disillusionment, as the glamour fades and the remnants of Towie's influence wither. The show’s original cast, which included popular names like Mark Wright and Sam Faiers, transformed Brentwood into a trendsetting hub through entrepreneurial ventures and star power. Their businesses, such as the iconic Minnies Boutique, which began as a collaborative effort between Sam and her sister Billie, basked in the show's initial glow, bringing flocks of shoppers seeking a glimpse of reality fame.

However, as time passed, the initial buzz surrounding these ventures faded. The town's commercial landscape has since shifted, replaced by barbershops and vape shops—an emblematic illustration of broader retail decline. Figures indicate that over 750 barber shops opened across the UK last year, with some drawing suspicion for acting as fronts for illicit activities. The transition from trendy boutiques to generic establishments reflects a stark shift in consumer behaviour and local economics. Libby Wells, aunt to the Faiers sisters, shared her dismay, stating, “We lasted the longest, but everything’s shutting down... Brentwood has lost its soul; it has died a death.”

The nostalgic recollections of Brentwood's past resonate with long-time residents. Sarah Barton, a local for 15 years, lamented the loss of vibrancy, recalling a time when the streets were alive with glam and youth heading to the Sugar Hut, a hotspot featured prominently in Towie. Her observations underline an ongoing struggle: how to align the economic influx generated by reality stardom with the dissatisfaction of longtime locals disenchanted by the invasive presence of touristic crowds, as noted by councillor Chris Hossack, who remarked on the discomfort felt by residents as stag and hen parties descended upon their hometown.

Notably, the Sugar Hut, once a brand marked by its iconic status in Towie, has been reported up for sale at £3.85 million, a further indication of changing fortunes. The legacy of its former owner, Mick Norcross, who faced his own tragic end a few years later, adds another layer of melancholy to the narrative. The nightclub’s current fate—a closed establishment with potential conversion into flats—mirrors the broader narrative of decay surrounding Brentwood.

The story of Towie's influence is not merely local but part of a national conversation about the future of high streets across Britain. The desire for a rejuvenated image has led to an ambitious £300,000 marketing campaign initiated by Essex County Council, consciously distancing itself from the antics of Towie stars. The campaign aims to shine a spotlight on the region's scientific, culinary, and historical contributions—a move that has drawn mixed reactions from the public, illustrating the multifaceted legacy Towie has left behind.

Ultimately, Brentwood’s trajectory offers a microcosm of contemporary challenges facing many towns across the UK. The fading glow of Towie might signal the end of an era, yet it also prompts a reflection on what comes next. As some residents bemoan the vestiges of Towie's presence, the future remains uncertain for a town caught in the competing narratives of celebrity culture and economic survival.

**Reference Map**1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6  
2. Paragraph 8  
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4. Paragraph 7  
5. Paragraph 7  
6. Paragraph 8  
7. Paragraph 5

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-14720671/reality-tv-brentwood-high-street-essex-closed-barbers-vape-salons.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.chelmsfordweeklynews.co.uk/news/15262771.brentwood-nightclub-bosses-announce-closure-after-tv-show-blamed-for-business-decline/> - Eclipse nightclub in Brentwood announced its closure, citing a decline in business attributed to the reality TV show 'The Only Way Is Essex'. The club's managing director, Kevin Springham, stated that local residents were avoiding Brentwood on weekends due to the show's national exposure. A closing party was scheduled for May 13, 2017, to commemorate the club's years of operation in the area.
3. <https://www.echo-news.co.uk/news/24693400.towies-famed-sugar-hut-building-brentwood-listed-3-85m/> - The Sugar Hut nightclub, a venue featured in 'The Only Way Is Essex', was listed for sale at £3.85 million. The historic building, spanning over 13,000 square feet across four floors, was being sold with vacant possession, allowing potential buyers to repurpose it into a hotel, restaurant, or other hospitality venue. The property retained its existing licensing, which could be advantageous for continued use as a nightlife destination.
4. <https://www.essexlive.news/whats-on/shopping/towie-still-bring-people-brentwood-1451775> - The impact of 'The Only Way Is Essex' on Brentwood's High Street was mixed. Some businesses, like Virgo boutique, continued to benefit from the show's popularity, attracting fans. However, other shop owners reported a decline in customer visits, particularly on weekends, attributing the influx of fans and associated disruptions to the show's influence. The presence of TOWIE tours and filming activities led to concerns among local residents about the town's atmosphere.
5. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-essex-33760895> - Brentwood borough councillor Chris Hossack expressed concerns that 'The Only Way Is Essex' tours, stag parties, and hen nights were deterring local residents from visiting the town. He noted that the influx of visitors from across the UK, equipped with selfie sticks and engaging in nightlife activities, was making some locals uncomfortable. While acknowledging the economic benefits brought by tourists, Hossack emphasized the need to balance these with the preferences of Brentwood's residents.
6. <https://www.itv.com/news/london/2022-01-27/essex-to-airbrush-towie-out-of-countys-image-in-300k-ad-campaign> - Essex County Council approved a £300,000 advertising campaign aimed at rebranding the county's image, notably excluding 'The Only Way Is Essex' from its promotional materials. The campaign focused on showcasing Essex's scientists, chefs, and historic attractions, seeking to present a more diverse and sophisticated image of the county. This decision sparked debate, with some locals expressing pride in the show's cultural impact and questioning the exclusion of TOWIE from the campaign.
7. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-essex-39471837> - A hit-and-run incident occurred outside the Sugar Hut nightclub in Brentwood, a venue featured in 'The Only Way Is Essex'. Three people were struck by a vehicle during a brawl that escalated to involve 50 or 60 individuals. The incident led to serious injuries, with one person being seriously hurt. Police launched an appeal for witnesses and footage to assist in their investigation, emphasizing the need for community cooperation to address such disturbances.