

Practical Evidence Gaps #1

How do I improve the public space in my town centre?

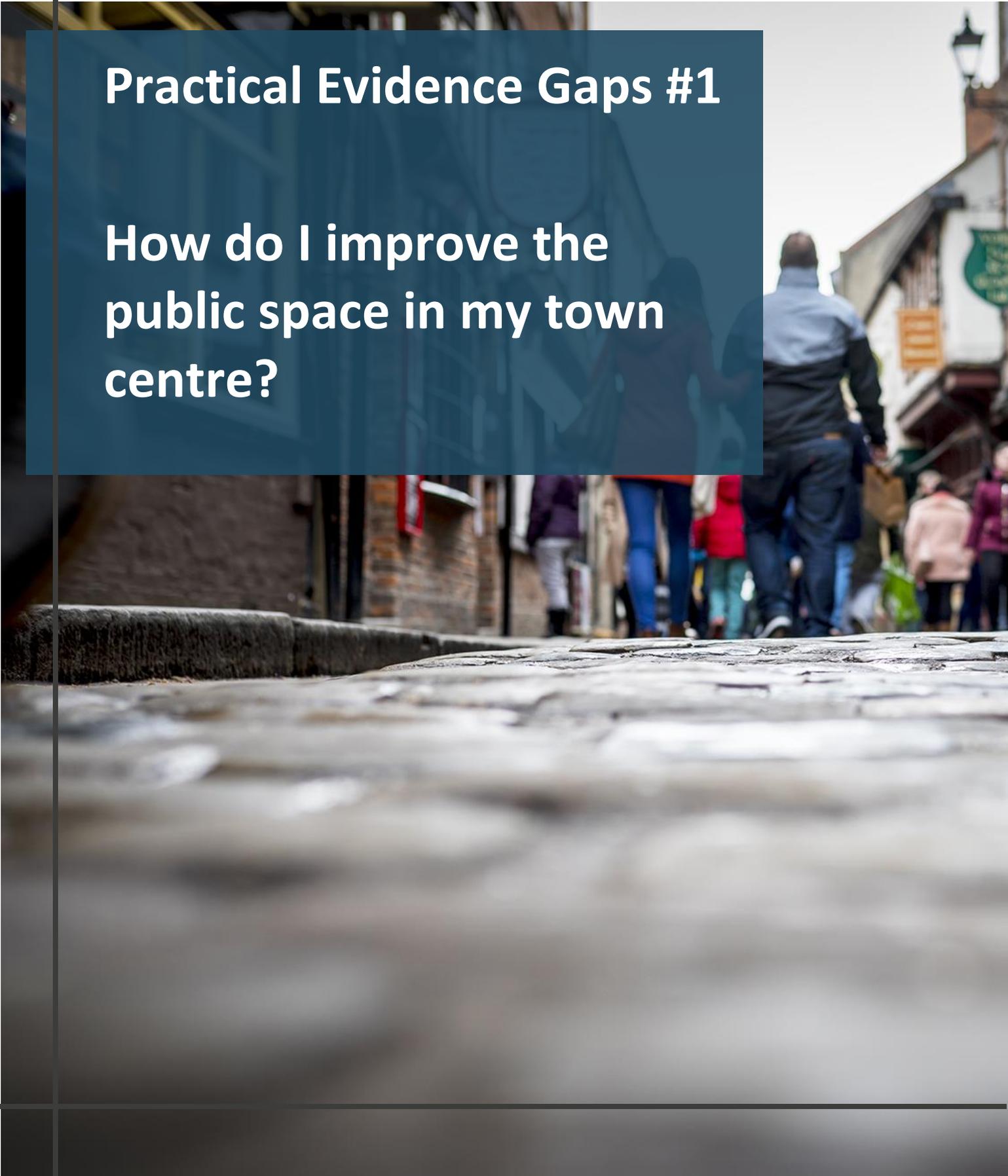


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Practical Evidence Gaps are current issues affecting high streets and town centres that would benefit from more knowledge and examples. These gaps have been identified by conducting content analysis in two large sources of data:

- 1) the online network set up by Association of Town and City Management (ATCM) (on Basecamp), involving town and city management practitioners across the UK; and
- 2) the Expressions of Interest (EOI) submitted by local authorities to the Future High Streets Fund.

Ten Practical Evidence Gaps have been identified. All of them have been framed as ‘how to’ questions, with the aim of helping local authorities and place managers in the transformation of their high streets and town centres.

How do I improve the public space in my town centre?

An introduction to public space

For the purposes of this paper, public space is defined as any outside space which is freely accessible to the public. Therefore, we exclude consideration of publicly accessible internal space, such as libraries and airports, but include space that is privately owned but publicly accessible.

Street corners, parks, squares, alleyways, and riverbanks are all forms of public space. They allow for socializing, resting, playing, and can also host activities and events of different nature. Since the 1980s, public spaces have become central to regeneration and development plans, and those that are designed effectively are proven to have social, economic, and environmental benefits¹. Planners play a key role in the design of public space, either because they are in charge of the design, or because they are granting permission to initiatives put forward by the private sector or grassroots groups.

Public spaces do not need to be owned by public bodies and there are both inclusive and exclusive examples of privately owned public space (POPS). These examples and others demonstrate that ongoing management regimes as well as the design of spaces are central to its success. In any case, being aware of the importance of public space, and being able to identify creative and innovative solutions that contribute to liveability is key.

What makes the design of public space so interesting, yet challenging, is that there isn't a one-size-fit all strategy or formula, and that the characteristics of a town or city, as well as its residents should shape these spaces so that they become relevant and loved. It is important that public space is meaningful², in that it is a response to specific needs in the community. It also might incorporate a signifier of authenticity, such as a historic building (e.g. old market hall) or a landscape feature (e.g., trees or canals). Public space allows for temporary as well as permanent activation, for example, from temporarily closing down a road to traffic to allow for pop-up markets or performances, to redesigning an underused square to include trees, sheltered areas and benches. When designing public space, it is important to consider the desired social outcomes. For example, designing public

¹ Carmona, M. (2019) 'Principles for public space design, planning to do better.' *URBAN DESIGN International*, 24(1) pp. 47–59.

² Mehta, V. (2014) 'Evaluating Public Space.' *Journal of Urban Design*, 19(1) pp. 53–88.

space will involve deciding whether the aim is to create a quiet place to relax and read, or a place for interaction, music, and crowds. Attempts to create a peaceful nook on a high street, or a performance space in a residential area might not only be challenging, but also unwanted by the community.

In addition, there are a range of legal constraints that effect the design and use of public space, with a range of aims. Examples include:

- Reducing the threat of a terrorist attack in crowded places
- Ensuring people are safe at night
- Protecting people with visual or other impairments from harm
- Ensuring various modes of transport / town centre uses can exist in parallel
- Requirement to think sustainably in terms of drainage, urban greening and energy use

Creating inclusive public space

There isn't a one-size-fits-all method for creating public space across cities. Age, gender, class, ethnicity are only some of the factors that influence what type of public space people desire and feel comfortable in.

For example, at a very basic design level, the architectural features of a public space can prevent the elderly, disabled people, pregnant women, etc. from being able to use it. Unsuitable architectural features for different groups include stairs, lack of benches, narrow entry points, uneven surfaces, lack of handrails³, etc.

Similarly, the type and cost of activities designed in a public space can cause certain demographic groups to feel excluded. For example, spaces that promote only alcohol consumption risk excluding certain faith backgrounds; and events that require an entry fee can exclude low-income groups.

Older people should be able to continue to participate in social activities, by including suitable activities and programmes⁴. Young people should also be included in public spaces, including in consultation on public space design to provide infrastructure which engages them in the life of the centre without having to spend money. Skate parks, parkour ramps and performance areas can be used to good effect in these instances.

Research also suggest that safety and appropriate lighting are defining factors of whether or not women participate in given public spaces. Similarly, 60% of unpaid work (e.g., childcare) in the UK is performed by women (Census, 2011), which means that spaces and activities that are not child-friendly might also be excluding this group.

The smallest detail can make a difference to the attractiveness of a public space to a particular user group and key spaces must be designed so as to ensure both inclusion and symbiosis. Feedback from

³ Rawski, K. (2017) 'Public space without architectural barriers as friendly and accessible for people with disabilities.' *Teka Komisji Architektury, Urbanistyki i Studiów Krajobrazowych*, 13(2) pp. 45–52.

⁴ Buffel, T., Phillipson, C. and scharf, T. (2012) 'Ageing in urban environments: Developing "age-friendly" cities.' *Critical Social Policy*, 32(4) pp. 597–617.

multiple user groups is the best way to design people friendly public spaces effectively, to identify problems as well as possible solutions.

Management of public space

The way public space is run and managed is an increasingly controversial subject, with particular focus on how private landowners and developers manage publicly accessible space that they own. For instance, there has been some criticism of allegedly 'heavy-handed' management of public space, including the prevention of photography and the harassment or removal of people who are begging or street drinking. The theory is that the motivations of some private landowners may be focused less on creating inclusive spaces and more on creating profitable spaces, or spaces that protect the value of property.

This is by no means universally demonstrable in all cases, and public authorities have faced similar criticisms. The introduction of Controlled Drinking Zones and ASBOs and latterly Criminal Behaviour Orders were seen by many to be an unacceptable use of control over the way people used public space, and debate continues on the motivations, rights and responsibilities of owners, managers and users.

The rights and responsibilities of both users and managers should be clear as early as possible in the creation of public space, as these issues can become difficult issues to manage at a later stage. These can vary from space to space but it is important to involve stakeholders for greater public buy-in. For example:

Responsibilities for owners and managers might include:

- Treating all users equally under the eyes of the law
- Clarifying terms of access, rights of way etc
- Keeping places clean and well maintained
- Providing rationale for allowing /disallowing certain behaviours in bylaws (e.g. barbecues, demonstrations, filming/photography, unleashed dogs)
- Providing clear and fair guidance on penalties for infringements, where these are in place, including removal, arrest, financial penalty, dispersal, warning etc.

Responsibilities for users might include:

- Respecting the rights of others
- Avoid littering
- Keeping the peace

Rights of users might include:

- Trading
- Busking and/or performing
- Taking photographs
- Protesting / holding demonstrations
- Collecting for charities

These serve as examples only and there is a large body of legislation and case law which sets out in particular the rights of individuals in public space.

Public space and Covid-19

Adaptable public spaces are important assets in a resilient city, as they can be transformed quickly for emergency purposes⁵. Covid-19 has brought about the need for social distancing and other modifications to our public realm. Cities worldwide are responding to Covid-19 by:

- Liberating space for pedestrians, allowing them to take up road space.
- Widening pavements.
- Redirecting traffic around neighbourhoods.
- Using 'tactical urbanism'⁶ to aid social distancing, using provisional street furniture and elements to mark queues, and boundaries.
- Greening public space (e.g., through planters, trees, etc.) for greater amenity in urban centres.
- Improving the appearance of public spaces and providing sanitation stations (e.g., hydroalcoholic gel and tissues) as well as signage.

As a result of the global pandemic, consequent lockdowns and home working, public space has seen a reduction in noise and air pollution, and in some instances, a more even usage across the hours of the day and days of the week. In other places, demands on public space have become more strained, with overuse of parks and a lack of facilities such as public toilets presenting a dilemma for local authorities that cannot be seen to encourage unlawful usage.

Improving public space in practice: case studies

Social distancing requires high streets to reimagine and change their physical spaces, allowing (and encouraging) people to respect the rules while being able to exercise or go shopping. **Royal Leamington Spa** placed large flower stickers in the high street to demonstrate the 2-metre social distancing requirement in public space, contributing to a nice appearance of the town and making social distancing as friendly as possible. You can watch more about this initiative [here](#).

As pubs and restaurants are allowed to reopen outdoors, tactical urbanism has become essential, and temporary street furniture is used to create terraces, block roads from traffic, and decorate with planters and green elements. You can find a wide range of tactical urbanism ideas to shape public spaces during and post Covid-19 [here](#).

Some lockdown specific measures are here to stay. For example, the Northern Quarter in **Manchester** was pedestrianised as a response to Covid-19 using temporary street furniture to block the road to traffic and allow for outdoor hospitality. After a great success, there are plans in place to make these temporary changes a reality. You can read the news story [here](#).

An excellent example of public space transformation can be found in **Poynton**. The aim of the intervention was to achieve a better and more dynamic space distribution for pedestrians and vehicles. This project consisted on eliminating a high traffic junction by implementing a combination

⁵ Honey-Roses, J., Anguelovski, I., Bohigas, J., Chireh, V., Daher, C., Konijnendijk, C., Litt, J., Mawani, V., McCall, M., Orellana, A., Oscilowicz, E., Sánchez, U., Senbel, M., Tan, X., Villagomez, E., Zapata, O. and Nieuwenhuijsen, M. (2020) The Impact of COVID-19 on Public Space: A Review of the Emerging Questions. Open Science Framework.

⁶ <https://www.highstreetstaskforce.org.uk/resources/details/?id=8e83cf1d-2c81-45c0-be9e-8c8d48aeb908>

of two fluid roundabouts that merge with the pavements, creating a space shared by people and cars. It has brought about more space and safety for pedestrians. The design itself forces speed control as well as traffic flow. You can watch a short documentary about the initiative [here](#).

In **York**, school children have been involved in the design of road safety and appearance, by using colourful furniture, painted road crosses, and allotments. You can read about it [here](#).

The **Teenage Market**, a national initiative which gives young people a free platform to showcase their creative talents could be a good resource to create activities that involve young people's interest and skills. To date, the initiative has delivered over 300 events in 40 locations across the UK. You can find more information [here](#).

The following guide can be of help to think about street design for all groups in society. Read it [here](#).

This is another public realm design guide based on the **London Borough of Croydon**. It explains how to create a vision for the public space, how to design and maintain it to high standards (i.e., using sustainable materials), as well as to how to make attractive, welcoming, and safe for all. Find it [here](#).

25 Vital and Viable Priorities

Research has identified 25 priorities for attractive high streets that create long-term success. This Framework can be used by place leaders to prioritise action. Transforming public space in your town centre links to some of these 25 priorities, and reading about them can therefore be helpful in this task.

Transforming public space can link to the following priorities: Safety, Recreational Space, Markets, Accessibility, Diversity, Walking, Appearance, Experience, and Networks and partnerships. You can find more information about the 25 priorities [here](#).

4Rs Regeneration Framework

Previous research and projects such as the Institute of Place Managements High Street 2020 project have demonstrated that the 4Rs framework provides a structure to the incredibly complex process of place transformation. It distinguishes between the processes of analysis and decision making (repositioning), effecting change (reinventing), communication (rebranding) and governance/spatial planning (restructuring). This framework can be of help along the different stages needed in improving public space in your town centre. You can read more [here](#).

Action points for transforming public space in your town centre

1. **Conduct research:** find examples and guides of how public space can be designed successfully. Remember however that schemes are not always equally effective everywhere.
2. **Think about the characteristics of your town centre:** is it a historic market town? Does it have any historic buildings? Does it have any nature elements that make it special?
3. **Think about your demographics:** who lives in your town centre? Create demographic groups and think about what design requirements they might have. E.g., cost, alcohol consumption, necessities, range of programmes, safety measures, etc.
4. **Think about social outcomes:** what are the social purposes of your initiatives for improving public space? Be explicit about your motivations.
5. **Think about people:** what elements are you going to include to make it people friendly? Are you going to introduce green elements, lighting, traffic calming measures, etc.?
6. **Think about timeframe:** are they long or short-term? Are you going to use tactical urbanism solutions or do they need a total reinvention through fixed and long-term changes? Factor in maintenance costs over the long term. Who will fund the long-term maintenance of the space? Will the materials you used still be available in years to come?
7. **Think about management:** what management measures will be needed to keep the space clean and safe?
8. **Think about rights and responsibilities:** what are these going to look like? Are you going to submit this to consultation? What legal constraints are there?
9. **Think about Covid-19:** how will public space comply with Covid-19 rules?

Acknowledgements

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