

Practical Evidence Gaps #10

How can my town centre respond to any potential Covid-19 related changes to working practices?

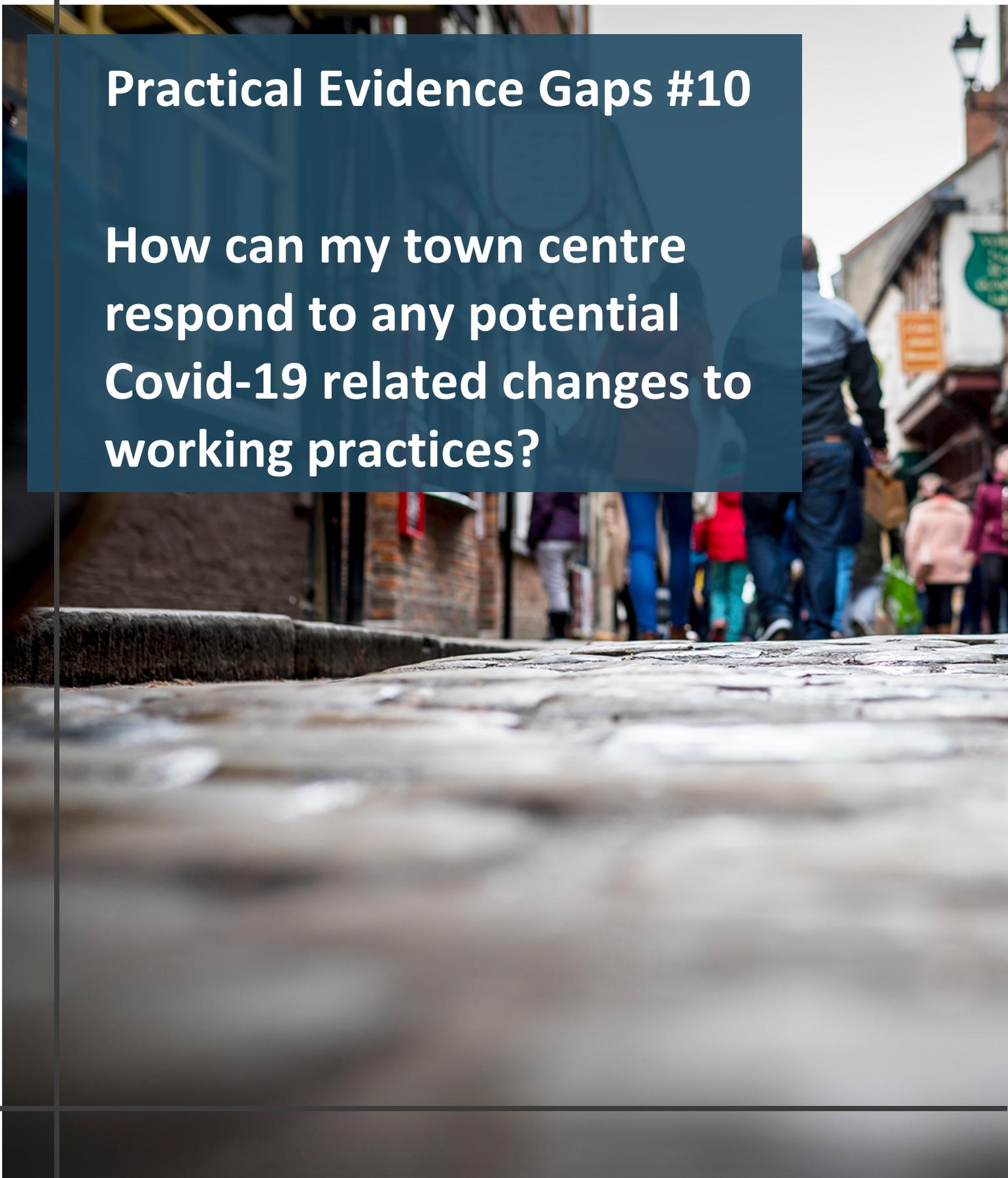


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Practical Evidence Gaps are current issues affecting high streets and town centres that would benefit from more knowledge and examples. These gaps have been identified by conducting content analysis in two large sources of data:

- 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 can my town centre respond to any potential Covid-19 related changes to working practices?

An introduction to Covid-19 related changes to working practices

Since the imposition of the first lockdown on 23rd March 2020, town centres in England have experienced many changes. Non-essential services were forced to close and people were asked to work from home (WFH), which led to reduced footfall levels.

Although in June, July, August, we saw restrictions lifting and some people returning to the office; on 22nd September 2020 there was a return to working from home. On 5th November 2020 we experienced a second lockdown and a third on 6th January 2021, with multiple restrictions including homeworking in place. It wasn't until 17th May 2021 that we experienced a relaxation of measures, and since then homeworking has become a continued reality (if only partially) for many businesses across England.

In April 2020, 46.6% of people in employment did some work at home¹. Following the impact of the pandemic, perceptions about WFH and productivity have changed, and this is now seen in a more positive light. There is a general willingness from both workers and employers for a partial return to the office, maintaining some degree of homeworking.

Footfall is a good indicator of when and how people are coming back to town centres, and footfall analysis conducted by the HSTF² shows restrictions and WFH have created some changes in how we use high streets. Perhaps the most significant changes are 1) differences across days of the week, and 2) reduction in the evening economy.

¹ ONS, 2020.

² <https://www.highstreettaskforce.org.uk/media/opcelyp1/footfall-report-2021-final-for-publication.pdf>

With WFH, people have been able to visit the high street more flexibly and Saturday no longer stands out as the busiest day of the week. It is important, however, to observe what happens with WFH and whether or not this pattern is here to stay.

Similarly, there has been a drop in evening/night-time footfall of nearly 6%, not only because these establishments have suffered the strongest restrictions, but also partly because many of the social post work events have disappeared as people don't come together face-to-face. Going forward, even if there are no restrictions in place and workers return to the office, many of the businesses haven't managed to stay open and there may not be the same evening/night-time offer in town centres.

Furthermore, footfall analysis conducted by the HSTF also shows that the impact of the pandemic and WFH is not even across places in England, and that the impact of homeworking (together with other restrictions) has been different depending on size and type of centres. For example, 100% of comparison and 50% of multifunctional towns have seen their footfall reduced. In the case of Holiday towns, 100% have seen a recovery or a summer boost; and around 67.3% of speciality towns have experienced a recovery in their footfall.

Smaller places have also fared better than large ones. 100% of district centres and 65% of town centres have seen a recovery in footfall; whereas 61% of regional centres and 70% of major cities have seen their footfall reduced. This means that, as people work from home, they are more likely to visit their local centres, instead of wondering down to bigger cities or centres of employment.

Responding to Covid-19 related changes to working practices

In responding to the impact of Covid-19 on working practices, it is best to start by analysing what town signature your town centre corresponds with and where your town centre is in the activity hierarchy, to see an approximation of how well your footfall is recovering while people find a balance between office and home working³. For a more accurate picture, you could use automatic footfall counting technology (e.g. Springboard) or engage in manual footfall counting at specific times of day (i.e. lunch hour, evening, etc.) to see how busy different days of the week are and plan initiatives accordingly.

Another important aspect is to understand the night-time economy and see if it has been influenced by people not visiting office centres, and perhaps, whether this has shifted to district centres instead. Nevertheless, a strong cultural and night-time offer can be a motive on its own for people to travel and visit a nearby centre or city. It is important to encourage the establishment of networks of evening economy businesses to ensure the offer is joined up and consistent, and coordinate businesses that can cross promote (e.g. hotel and attractions, theatres and restaurants)⁴.

Speciality towns that have all the necessary functions to serve catchment populations are recovering faster than other types of towns. Town managers should explore the offer in their town centre and identify what services need to be strengthened to be attractive to their demographic groups, whether this is to attract home workers back in or engage office workers who are still commuting in.

³ Mumford, C., Parker, C., Ntounis, N., & Dargan, E. (2020). Footfall signatures and volumes: Towards a classification of UK centres. *Environment and Planning B: Urban Analytics and City Science*.

⁴ Wrigley, N. & Lambiri, D. (2015). *British High Streets: from Crisis to Recovery? A Comprehensive Review of the Evidence*. Southampton; 2015. Available from: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/30341672.pdf>

It is important to conduct an analysis of what the anchors in your centre are, and whether this have shifted away from employment⁵. In office centres, place managers can help by engaging in employment brokerage activity and loyalty schemes which reconnect office workers with local hospitality businesses.

Home working has resulted in an increase of vacant premises, either because there are unused office spaces, or because lack of footfall in some centres (combined with other restrictions) have resulted in businesses having to close their doors. Place managers should explore how these vacant spaces can be turned into opportunities for innovation, supporting leisure offer, or other gaps in provision, as well as the night-time economy.

A successful place-management strategy that is responsive to Covid-19 related changes and working practices, will involve monitoring the shift through analysis of footfall, spend and vacancy data; as well as co-ordination and ongoing engagement of local capacity and continued collaboration and communication with place stakeholders via partnership-working. Furthermore, strong place marketing activities will not only have to remind people what their town has to offer, but also what the town can look like in the future via cooperation with multiple stakeholders⁶.

Examples of good practice in responding to Covid-19 related changes to working practices

Colmore BID

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, Colmore Business Improvement District (BID) commissioned a [research study](#) to better understand what the likely long-term impact of COVID-19 on city centre business districts would be, including ways of working, as well as discover ways to ensure that they remain successful places to attract businesses and people.

The nine-month research study was undertaken by City-REDI / WMREDI at the University of Birmingham, working in partnership with the Office of Data Analytics at the West Midlands Combined Authority and supported by UKRI. After an initial research phase, which involved an evidence and data review; workshops on ‘megatrends’; and a call for evidence, a number of key trends were identified.

These included that digital transformation of the workplace and tech disruption will continue to impact on business models, which means that hybrid working is here to stay. For many (not all) – two-three days working in the office and three-two days working from home (or elsewhere) will become the norm. As such, future business districts will need to be even more focused around connections and culture – a place to connect, interact and collaborate and to enjoy urban experiences.

Therefore, the over-arching theme that emerged was the concept of the *The Space Between* – the hidden, unrecognised space utilised on an ongoing basis - including transport, public

⁵ Clopton, AW. & Finch, BL. (2011). Re-conceptualizing social anchors in community development: Utilizing social anchor theory to create social capital’s third dimension. *Community Development*, 42(1), pp. 70–83.

⁶ Millington S and Ntounis N (2017) Repositioning the high street: evidence and reflection from the UK. *Journal of Place Management and Development* 10(4): 364–379.

realm, green space, cultural/ entertainment space - which is essential to the growth, performance and activity of the 'space within' businesses. It provides opportunities for workers, residents and visitors to relax, connect and recharge and is dependent upon a high-quality public realm, plus hospitality and retail venues, together with green and open space, to make the city centre attractive to businesses and individuals, and support well-being.

The report concludes by stating that more collaboration and flexible meeting spaces will be needed to keep people returning to the city to connect and exchange, further support will need to be provided to business who are adapting to a hybrid working model and the experience portfolio of the city centre business district will need to be enhanced and refined, in order to attract former city centre workers back and engage a new diverse workforce with the enjoyment of interaction and experience of place and activities.

A companion report titled '[The Space Between](#)' was published following the release of this research study by Colmore BID, showing how it intends to adapt its vision and strategy based on the report's findings. Among its proposals include the creation of new lead role for the city centre, the 'Curator General', who would target and welcome new entrants; acting as creative director, commission events and festivals and help shape public realm and green spaces. Other proposals include the creation of a Cultural Enterprise Zone for artists and creative businesses to find affordable space and a proactive campaign to target and attract new independent retail, food and cultural offers that will shape identity and attract visitors.

Ireland

As part of its five-year rural development policy in response to the pandemic, the Irish government is proposing creating a national network of 400 remote working hubs, which includes plans to use rural pubs as community spaces and hubs for local services. Under the plan, a fifth of public servants would shift to remote or home working by the end of 2021.

As part of the new strategy, the government has proposed investing up to €2.7bn (£2.3bn) in the roll-out of the national broadband plan to improve speeds in rural areas from super-slow to super-fast. The government says it is an invitation to remote workers to live in rural Ireland and has described the scheme as "the most ambitious and transformational policy for rural Ireland in decades".

At the core of the policy is an ambition of this policy is to support the regeneration, re-population, and development of rural towns and villages to contribute to local and national economic recovery. To achieve this objective, there will be investment in communities to enhance their social, cultural, economic and environmental wellbeing and quality of life.

To learn more about the rural development strategy, [click 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. Responding to Covid-19 related changes to working practices links to some of these 25 priorities and reading about them can therefore be helpful in this task. Responding to these changes can link to the following priorities: vision and strategy, place management, place-marketing, functionality, non-retail offer, innovation, etc. You can find more information about the 25 priorities [here](#).

Covid-19 Recovery Framework

This framework has been designed to assist place leaders who are responsible with the gargantuan task of supporting their cities and towns through this pandemic. The Framework sets out a series of systematic preparedness, response and recovery measures, across four stages: Crisis, Pre-Recovery, Recovery, and Transformation.

Responding to Covid-19 related changes to working practices is included in different stages of this recovery framework. You can read more about it and download an editable version [here](#).

Action points for responding to Covid-19 related changes to working practices

1. **Identify your town type and size:** How does your town type and size been affected by homeworking? Are you a district experiencing more footfall from home workers, or are you a large employment centre that has seen a decrease in visitors?
2. **Identify home working practices in your centre:** which are the main employment centres in your town centre? What is their policy in regards to WFH?
3. **Collect footfall data:** what changes can you explore? When and how do people visit your town centre? Has this changed now that people are working from home?
4. **Collect offer and vacancy data:** how what businesses have been affected by a change in pattern (either with more visitors as they are staying local as they work from home; or fewer visitors as office centres are experiencing a decay in visitors)? What premises have become vacant? What offer is missing? Do you have a nigh-time economy and on which days and times is this stronger?
5. **Identify stakeholders:** which businesses and organizations do your need to involve to respond to this shift in working patterns?
6. **Create responsive initiatives:** how are you going to reconnect office workers with the offer in your town centre? How are you going to encourage people who no longer work in your town centre to visit anyway? How are you going to make sure that home workers are still satisfied with your town centre?

Acknowledgements

Thank you to ATCM for knowledge and resources.