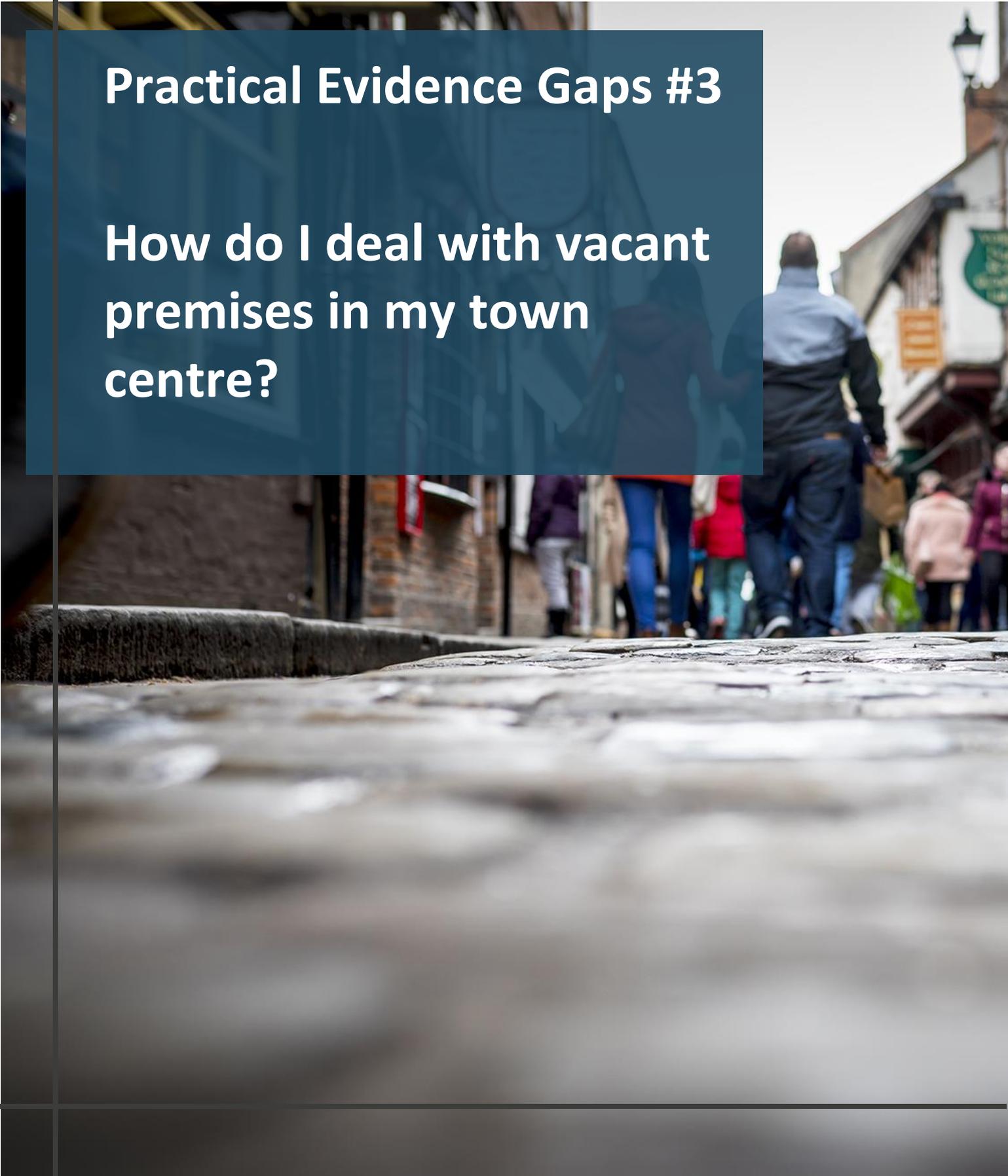


## Practical Evidence Gaps #3

How do I deal with vacant premises 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 deal with vacant premises in my town centre?

### An introduction to vacant premises

The number of vacant premises is a traditional key performance indicator of town centre vitality and viability<sup>1</sup>. There is concern that retail locations may be becoming obsolete, as 46.6% of retailers in the UK are classified as being in serious risk of failure<sup>2</sup>. At the end of June 2021, the vacancy rate for England, Wales and Scotland was 14.5%, an increase of 2.1% on the same period in 2020. Therefore, it is imperative for local authorities and other key stakeholders in town centres (e.g. investors) to identify obsolete retail locations, or those in danger of becoming obsolete, in order to begin the process of breathing new life into empty units.

There have been a series of trends and events that have had a massive impact on vacant premises:

- Online shopping
- Out of town retail centres
- Global economic crisis of 2008
- Covid-19 pandemic

These will serve as learning opportunities, but going forward identifying trends and businesses that might be in danger can help in the resilience of town centres.

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<sup>1</sup> Millington, S. and Ntounis, N. (2017), "Repositioning the high street: evidence and reflection from the UK", *Journal of Place Management and Development*, Vol. 10 No. 4, pp. 364-379. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPMD-08-2017-0077>

<sup>2</sup> Grimsey, B., Perrior, K., Trevalyan, R., Hood, N., Sadek, J., Schneider, N., Baker, M., Shellard, C., Cassidy, K., 2020. Grimsey Review: Build Back Better. Covid-19 Supplement for town centres.

## Driving factors

Vacant premises can be the consequence of a range of factors including; changes in customer demands and behaviours, changes in planning, change of economic activity in the area, neighbourhood deterioration, changes in transport systems, connectivity, and accessibility, changes in other nearby high streets and town centres, etc.

Vacant premises can derive from economic, environmental, and functional factors<sup>3</sup>:

- Economic: lack of demand for goods and services from consumers and the intrinsically linked lack of demand for property by retailers, this could be because of change in the economic profile of the catchment area, a global crisis (e.g. '08 Financial Crash, Covid-19), etc.
- Environmental: relates to the surrounding area that might be impacting the performance of businesses. For example, if the environment becomes devalued, run-down, higher crime rates, unpleasant, etc.
- Functional: refers to intrinsic characteristics or form of the businesses that are unable to respond to changing trends and needs: for example, accommodating vehicular access for delivery purposes that traditional locations can struggle to meet. This becomes very relevant in terms of Covid-19, whether businesses have the functionality to operate following social distancing rules.

## Responding to vacant premises

Research suggests that there are three key steps to deal with the problem of high street decline and vacancy rates:

Causation: finding global, national, or local trends that can have an impact on the performance of high street businesses

Manifestation: finding how these trends are taking place and monitoring changes.

Intervention: taking action to prevent or respond to vacant premises.

Without the assessment of causation and manifestation, it may be that attempts at intervention are misplaced.

Interventions can include<sup>4</sup>:

- Changing the use of retail sites in areas where there is concern that retail is no longer a viable use.
- Pedestrianization and environmental improvements (urban design measures that improve appearance) enhancing customer physical shopping experience.
- Securing the required private-sector property investment and improvements.
- Forming alliances with neighbouring landlords and/or retailers: town centre management (TCM) schemes and Business Improvement Districts (BIDs).

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<sup>3</sup> Hughes C., and Jackson C., (2015), Death of the high street: identification, prevention, reinvention, *Regional Studies, Regional Science*, 2:1, 237-256

<sup>4</sup> Dolega, L., & Lord, A. (2020). Exploring the geography of retail success and decline: A case study of the Liverpool City Region. *Cities*, 96, 102456.

- Devolution of business rates.
- National accreditations, such as Purple Flag status for safe and well-managed areas that specialise in the night time economy.
- Facilitating stronger presence of anchor retailers, leisure facilities and consumer services.
- Improving convenience and accessibility.
- Integrating the digital experience such as ‘click and collect’ facilities, free Wi-Fi, or store-finding apps, to embrace the expanding role of digital technologies.
- Promoting markets to attract trade to town centres.
- Allowing temporary uses such as pop-up shops, creating ‘meanwhile spaces’.
- Creation of spaces to encourage social interaction and community uses such as zumba, yoga, painting, exhibitions, etc.
- Considering alternative uses, a change of use from retail to residential use in redundant retail space.

For initiatives to be effective and relevant they need to reflect the interests of the local community, through participation and co-creation, especially in the design phase, not just in the implementation phase.

Initiatives that have a cultural focus will contribute to improving the non-retail offer, and thus towards multifunctionality. Multifunctional towns provide a diverse offer, ranging from leisure and recreation, employment, tourism, heritage, culture, housing, employment, education, health and wellbeing, as well as retail. Our research has found that in England around 44% of towns are multifunctional (2020). These multifunctional towns experienced lower drops of footfall during Covid-19, and are expected to recover faster.

## Examples of initiatives for vacant premises

### **Canterbury – Repurposing Debenhams**

Recent announcements of closures by major retail names in the UK, such as Debenhams have negatively impacted towns and cities across the country. Canterbury is re-purposing the entire Debenhams site into a mixed-use development with predominately retail at ground floor and residential apartments above. The idea of mixed use originated because the old Debenham’s store is impractical for occupation by a single retailer and was significantly under-used when it was active, with around 40% of floor space left empty.

The Guildhall Quarter will deliver a number of smaller retail units to strengthen and broaden the commercial appeal of the city centre and provide contemporary urban living through the creation of apartments. You can read more about the project in the design and access statements, found in three parts: [part 1](#), [part 2](#), and [part 3](#).

### **Oxford - Transforming Boswells Department Store**

After trading for 232 years, the Boswells department store in Oxford city centre closed its doors for good in 2019 due to the “adverse retail conditions” experienced during the first lockdown. Boswell & Co had been trading since 1738 and was the city's largest independent department store, fondly known for its array of toys, haberdashery and home accessories. However, new plans put forward by Savills Oxford and Reading planning teams will see the vacant store refurbished to create a new 101 bedroom 4\* boutique hotel featuring a

basement gym, a restaurant and bar open to walk-in customers, and a new rooftop terrace. The new venture will also include a hot desk office space, which is expected to see a rise in demand post-Covid due to an increase in the number of people home working. Development commenced in May 2021, and the hotel is due to open in the Spring of 2022.

### **Nottingham – Science Pop-Up Shop**

In Nottingham, students from local universities were recruited to work in 3-2-1-Ignition, one of the world's first pop-up science shops. The project, which was funded by Nottingham City Council, took over a vacant unit in Broadmarsh Shopping Centre to create an alternative learning space for school children. As part of the offer, as well as provide a place where science questions could be asked by the public and answered in a collaborative way with help from students and experts. Other activities in the pop-up science shop included a curiosity trail of weird and wonderful items with related questions and answers, a reading area with arts and science books and a cinema space screening lunchtime lectures and fun science videos. You can read more about what pop-up science is, examples and tips, as well as 10 reasons why to do this [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. Managing vacant spaces in your town centre links to some of these 25 priorities, and reading about them can therefore be helpful in this task.

Managing vacant premises can link to the following priorities: Activity, Retail Offer, Vision and Strategy, Experience, Appearance, Place Management, Necessities, Anchors, Non-Retail Offer, Merchandise, Adaptability, Networks and Partnerships with Council. 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 huge 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.

Helping businesses that are struggling through Covid-19 and finding alternative uses for vacant premises and are all included in different stages of this recovery framework. You can read more about it and download an editable version [here](#).

## Action points for dealing with vacant premises

1. **Conduct a place audit:** how many vacant premises are there? What type of businesses have closed down? What type of businesses can you find in your town centre?
2. **Conduct a study of businesses in your town centre:** how are they performing? Are there any businesses at the verge of closing?
3. **Conduct a customer and visitor study:** why do people visit your town centre? Is there anything they miss? What contributes to positive and negative experiences?
4. **Develop a SWOT analysis:** What are the strengths, weaknesses of your businesses and town centre? What opportunities and threats can you identify that might have an impact? Reflect on causation and manifestation.
5. **Develop a management plan:** how are you going to tackle the weaknesses and respond to the threats?
6. **Think about interventions:** what solutions are you going to put in place to fill in vacant premises in the short and long term? And to help businesses that are struggling?

## Acknowledgements

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