

Practical Evidence Gaps #4

How do I manage the future of culture in my town centre?

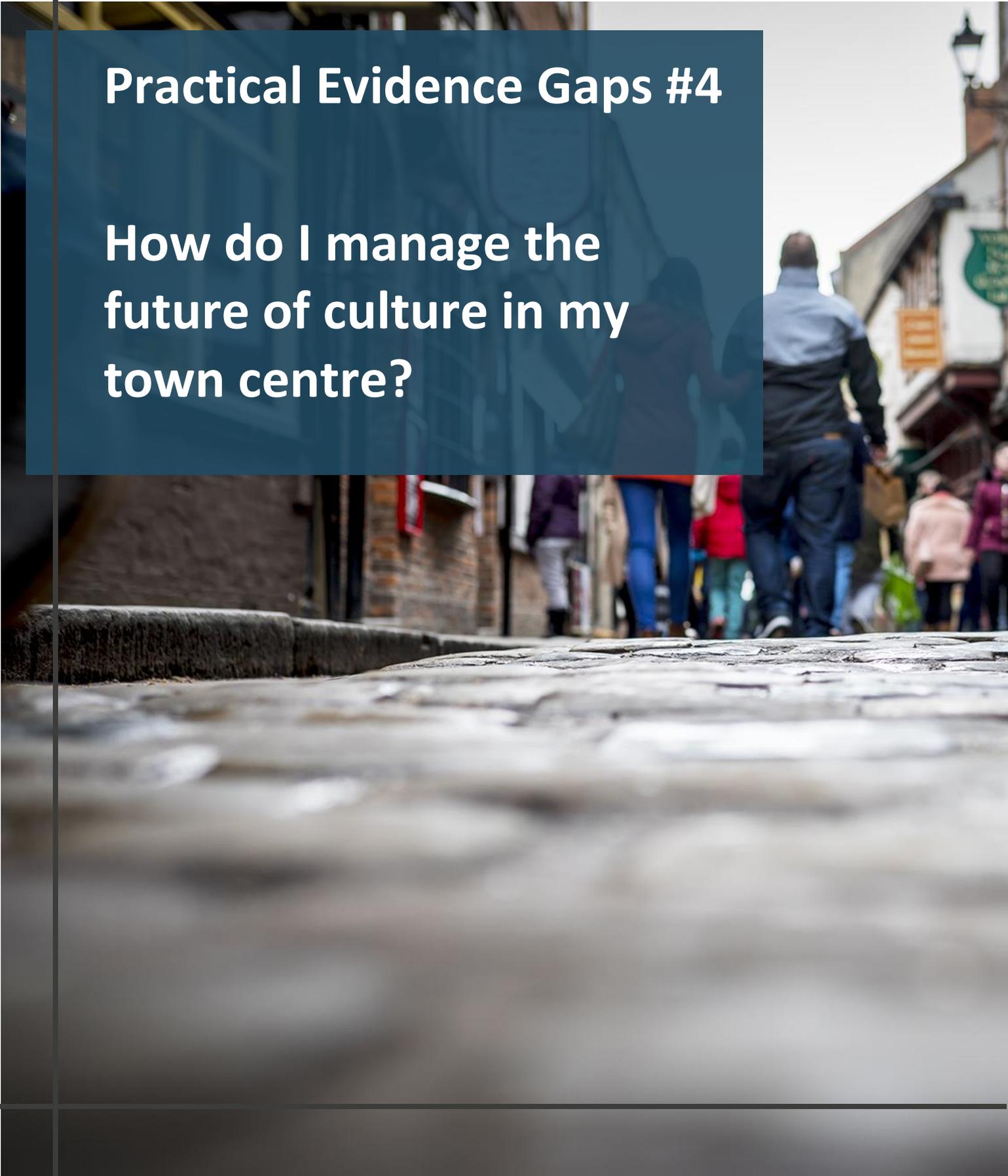


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Practical Evidence Gaps are current issues affecting high streets and town centres that would benefit from more knowledge and examples. These gaps have been identified by conducting content analysis in two large sources of data:

- 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 manage the future of culture in my town centre?

An introduction to culture in town centres and high streets

Investment in cultural activities, arts organisations, museums, and libraries can support local economies through a variety of different ways, including the generation of employment, the attraction of new visitors, the improvement of liveability, and the building of place identity. All of these are central to the success and prosperity of the high street.

Research also shows that a strong cultural offer in high streets and town centres can provide additional benefits. People coming together as spectators or volunteers for these activities can reduce isolation and anti-social behaviour and contribute to creating solidarity and strong communities. Similarly, research shows that culture can contribute to improving the physical and mental well-being of people, preventing ill-health, and encouraging active lifestyles¹.

Traditionally, however, the high street has mainly been retail-oriented, and often lacking the ‘experience economy’ (offering consumers more than just the delivery of products and services). The emergence out-of-town shopping centres, the 2008 financial crisis, internet shopping, and finally

¹ Arts Council. (2020). Arts and Place Shaping: Evidence Review.

Daykin, N., Mansfield, L., Meads, C., Gray, K., Golding, A., Tomlinson, A., & Victor, C. (2021). The role of social capital in participatory arts for wellbeing: findings from a qualitative systematic review. *Arts & Health*, 13(2), 134-157.

Evans, G. (2017). The role of culture, sport and heritage in place shaping.

Covid-19, have all contributed to the decline of retail oriented high streets². However, these shocks present an opportunity for high streets to be reinvented around the development of an experiential economy with a strong cultural offer at their heart.

During the pandemic, ‘multifunctional centres’ – defined as centres that have a diverse offer other than shopping (e.g., culture and leisure), have suffered the effects of COVID-19 to a lesser extent and could arguably be the ones to recover faster. In recent years, there has been an increase in towns that class as multifunctional. Today, 44% of towns are multifunctional, having a footfall pattern that suggests they are no longer retail-dominant and are providing several other functions for their community, including cultural events³.

Responding to the future of culture

Deciding the strategy for the future of culture should be done locally considering the characteristic of each place and of the people who live in it. High streets in the UK have seen new innovative and creative cultural examples: pop-up art galleries, pop-up cinemas, street art, gastronomic events, literary festivals, etc. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for the future of culture, and all of these initiatives can be effective as long as they are part of a strategy that follows some principles⁴:

- **Local knowledge and expertise.** A strong cultural offer is one that responds to the needs and curiosities of the residents and catchment area. Therefore, the cultural strategy should integrate on-the-ground knowledge or be developed from the bottom-up through citizen participation or citizen-centred governance.
- **Diversity and integration.** Culture in the high street should be created considering the needs of *all* citizens, giving voice to those with different backgrounds and experiences. Culture should be inclusive to older generations, different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, all genders, and sexual identities, etc. The night-time economy for instance, should be planned in a way that is (and feels) safe for women and LGBT+ people to participate in. Similarly, integration not only refers to the integration of people, but that of places. That is, cultural

² Coca-Stefaniak, J. A. and S. Bagaean. 2013. “Strategic management for sustainable high street recovery.” *Town and Country Planning* 82 (12): 532 - 537.
https://cris.brighton.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/305804/ACS_SB-5.pdf

Jones, C., and N. Livingstone. 2018. “The ‘online high street’ or the high street online? The implications for the urban retail hierarchy.” *The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research* 28 (1): 47 - 63. doi:10.1080/09593969.2017.1393441

³ HSTF. 2020. “Review of High Street Footfall: July 2019 - June 2020.” High Streets Task Force. Accessed on 28th June 2021. <https://hstfprodwebsite.blob.core.windows.net/media/b5dnkp4z/hstf-footfall-report-2020-for-publication.pdf>

⁴ Millington, S., & Ntounis, N. (2017). Repositioning the high street: evidence and reflection from the UK. *Journal of Place Management and Development*.

Learmonth, A., & Curtis, S. (2013). Place shaping to create health and wellbeing using health impact assessment: Health geography applied to develop evidence-based practice. *Health & place*, 24, 20-22.

activities should also be planned in places that are abandoned, unmaintained, and that attract anti-social behaviour, such as abandoned factories, mills, or unused open spaces.

- **Collaboration between stakeholders.** Often Cultural initiatives will require collaboration from multiple stakeholders. This can be a clear case when, for example, unutilised or vacant premises are being used for temporary cultural solutions. In such cases, local councils, community groups, and landlords will have to come together to make this happen.
- **Utilising data and intelligence.** Data and intelligence is always key in place management, and it is also central when it comes to a strong cultural offer. Footfall data, for example, can tell us about what areas of the high street might need investment, or can give us information about when people visit the centre and when activities should be organised. A lack of an evening economy, identified through footfall analysis, can be a good first-step for action. Data and intelligence will give us answers to questions such as: what offer is needed? who are the different demographics? etc.
- **Monitoring success.** Cultural initiatives can be experimental and short-term, which can allow to innovate and be creative, trying out different options and exploring what works. This, however, can only be a learning process if the impact of such initiatives is monitored. This can help in finding funding and other resources needed for future initiatives and events.

Examples of initiatives for managing the future of culture

Stirling Storytelling

In Stirling a storytelling project has been brought to life, using vacant town centre properties as the canvass. This innovative project has been developed by the Go Forth Stirling Business Improvement District (BID).

The artworks are being brought to life using Augmented Reality and can be accessed through a smartphone app. The project has been an opportunity to showcase the work of different Scottish artists. The core of the project is that the art celebrates Stirling, building on what is unique about this place, contributing to place attachment, pride, and image. You can read more about this project [here](#) and [here](#).

NuArt Aberdeen

Nuart Aberdeen is the only street art festival in Scotland and one of the UK's leading festivals of its kind. Artists from around the globe transform the walls and buildings of Aberdeen city centre with works of art that are free for all to enjoy 365 days a year.

Launched in 2017 this multi-award winning festival provides a platform for local, national and international artists to showcase their work and produce both large and small scale murals, sculptures and interventions with the support of local artists that resonate with the city, its surroundings and its history. Since its launch, Nuart Aberdeen has brought tens of thousands of people into the city all year round to enjoy the works of art for free. It has been truly transformational for Aberdeen and the city centre is a perfect stage for this now annual festival which has genuinely revolutionised the city centre.

Winchester Hat Fair

Winchester Hat Fair has taken place every summer since 1974, making it the UK's longest-running festival of street theatre and outdoor arts. The festival takes place on the streets, green spaces and heritage sites of Winchester, bringing together international Outdoor Arts with local talent and community engagement projects to attract audiences of over 95,000 each year.

In 2015, Winchester's BID worked with Hat Fair to create a complementary winter event - the Woolly Hat Fair. This site-specific festival was designed to engage businesses in fresh ways and attract new visitors during the run-up to Christmas with free live performances in different spaces such as garden centres and restaurants. The festival attracted high-quality media coverage and the city was named the "Best Place to Live in Britain 2016" by The Sunday Times, with special mention for its festival programme.

Salisbury International Arts Festival

Salisbury International Arts Festival is part of Wiltshire Creative, an arts organisation that brings together the energy and ambition of Salisbury Arts Centre, Salisbury International Arts Festival and Salisbury Playhouse. It is an ambitious and innovative joint arts offer that secures a bright future for audiences, artists and participants.

Returning for the first time since the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and running for an extended period of 3 weeks, the 2022 Salisbury International Arts Festival will be inspired by the drama, opportunity and danger of islands, and the wide variety of emotions they evoke, delving into the mysterious allure of remote locations. The programme will feature a spectacular line-up of events spanning multiple genres, including circus arts, music, comedy, dance, and a variety of free family events across May half term.

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 culture in your town centre links to some of these 25 priorities and reading about them can therefore be helpful in this task.

Transforming the future of culture can link to the following priorities: activity, experience, vision and strategy, non-retail offer, safety, networks and partnership with council, markets, recreational space, functionality, innovation, liveability, 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.

Transforming the future of culture in town centres and providing an exciting and innovative non-retail offer are 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 the future of culture

1. **Conduct a culture offer analysis:** what is the culture offer in your centre like? Is it dominated by informal events or permanent institutions? Who is organising these events, is it top-down or bottom-up? What sort of cultural events are taking place (e.g., theatre, painting, music, etc.)?
2. **Identify all the different demographics and their interest:** who lives and visits your town centre? What do they want to see and participate in?
3. **Identify key stakeholders:** who in your town centre is, or can be, a key player when organising a new cultural initiative? Are there any formal or informal cultural organizations? Are there any volunteering groups?
4. **Identify opportunities:** are there any vacant spaces? Are there any large venues looking to diversify their offer? What about public spaces that can hold events?
5. **Develop a management plan:** what events can take place fast in a temporary and pop-up manner? What more permanent investments can you make?
6. **Find data and best case-examples:** what type of data can be useful in planning a cultural offer? What type of events are other town centres developing and how can they be adapted to your needs?
7. **Monitor interventions:** how are you going to measure the success (or failure) of a new activity? Can you use satisfaction questionnaires, footfall data, revenue, etc.?

Acknowledgements

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