

Practical Evidence Gaps #6

How do I improve the image and perceptions of my town centre?

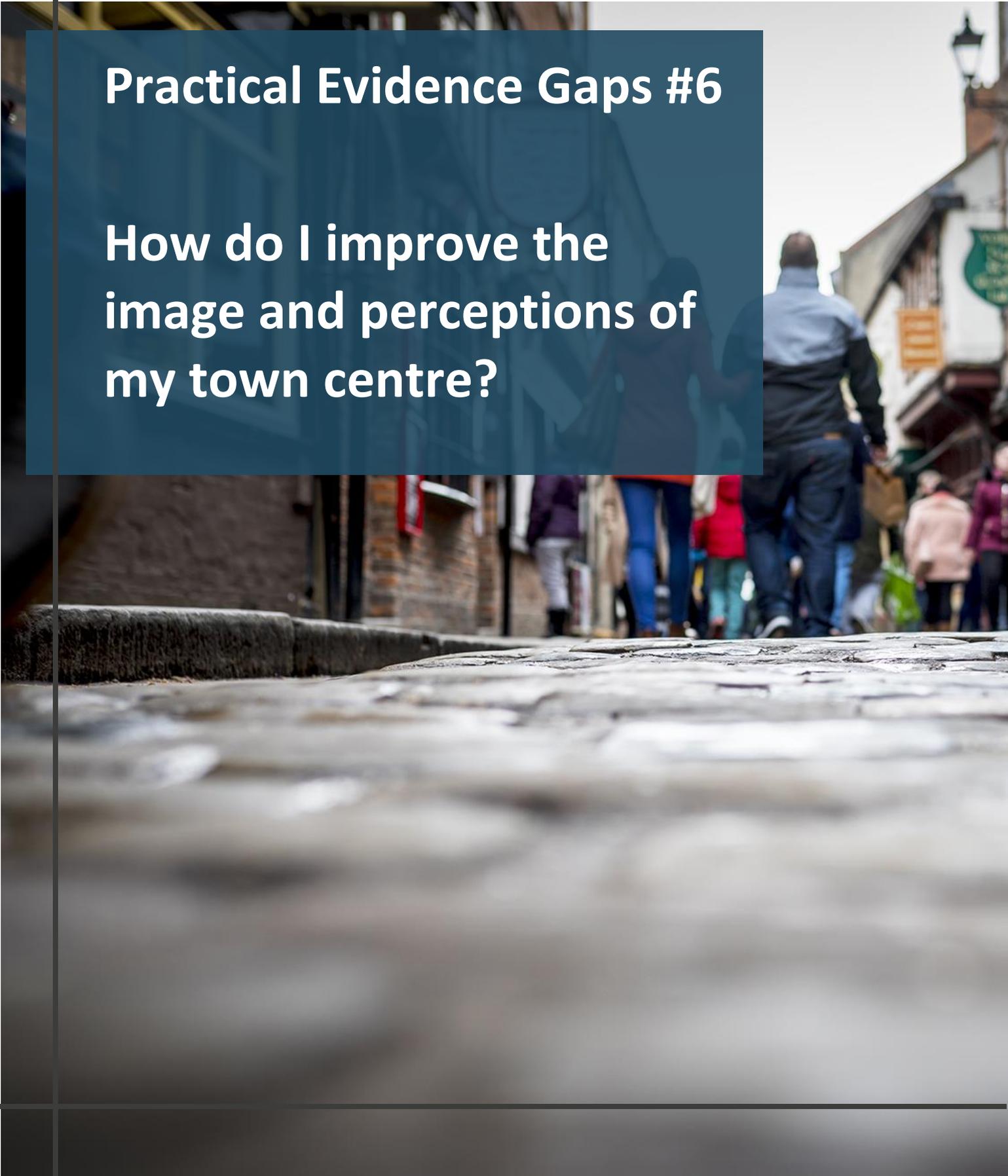


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Practical Evidence Gaps are current issues affecting high streets and town centres that would benefit from more knowledge and examples. These gaps have been identified by conducting content analysis in two large sources of data:

- 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 image and perceptions of my town centre?

An introduction to town image and perceptions

The image of a town centre is created based on functional, experiential, social and symbolic elements that shape the behaviour and decision-making of visitors¹. Analysing and responding to town centre image and visitor perceptions is central to delivering effective marketing and management strategies. Town image and perceptions are subject to change, as they are constantly being shaped by external factors and trends. It is important to monitor these trends and anticipate any changes, so that a town centre can respond to ensure that it remains in a competitive position and delivers a positive visitor experience².

Town centre image and perceptions are shaped by multiple factors, such as; retail assortments (e.g., range and/or quality of goods and shops); atmosphere (e.g. how busy, friendly, or safe a centre feels); accessibility (e.g. the location of a high street, how easy it is to access via public transport, or how easy it is to park there); layout and scale (e.g. how large it is and how it has been designed); appearance (e.g. how clean the centre is and feels); non-retail activities (e.g. how diverse and lively it feels in terms of culture and leisure offer); place attachment (e.g. whether visitors and residents feel familiar); and global impressions (e.g. general likes and dislikes).

Responding to town image and perceptions

Some of the factors that influence town centre image and perceptions are permanent and cannot be changed (such as the location of a town centre), but fortunately, most of them are within the control or influence of place managers (such as how clean and safe a centre feels)³.

¹ Hart, C., Stachow, G., & Cadogan, J. W. (2013). Conceptualising town centre image and the customer experience. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 29(15-16), 1753-1781.

² Dennis, C., Murphy, J., Marsland, D., Cockett, T., & Patel, T. (2002). Measuring image: shopping centre case studies. *The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research*, 12(4), 355-373.

³ Hart, C., Stachow, G., & Cadogan, J. W. (2013). Conceptualising town centre image and the customer experience. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 29(15-16), 1753-1781.

There are different steps that can guide the improvement of a town centre image and perceptions and contribute to a better branding of a town: research, planning, consultation, action, and communication⁴.

It is important for place managers to understand which factors affect town centre image and perceptions and conduct an analysis of each of these. Many of these factors are subjective and will be perceived differently by different sociodemographic groups in society. Although it is important for place leaders to conduct an audit and gather quantitative data, such as number of benches, number of public toilets, cleanliness score, public transport connections, parking spaces, number of non-retail venues and activities, etc. this is better combined with interviews or questionnaires that can gather local knowledge and experiences of daily users about their formed perceptions, about, for example how functional, clean, or safe a town centre feels.

For example, safety and perceptions of security can greatly contribute to a town's image. Although safety can be measured by the number and frequency of reported crimes (quantitative data, that can be collected through desk-research), this should be complemented with on-the-ground experiences about perceptions of safety: dark streets, vacant units, and run-down appearance, etc. can all contribute to a feeling of insecurity, which can be detrimental for a town centre image (qualitative data, that can be collected through questionnaires and interviews with users). Furthermore, safety will be perceived differently by different groups in society, and women, for example, might feel less comfortable walking around in the dark hours. That is, qualitative data should be gathered across a representative sample of town centre users⁵.

Although research is important, there are other key steps to forming a place image and brand. Once factors that need rethinking are identified, a plan or strategy needs to be devised in keeping and strengthening town centre vision, so that all actions work towards one unified and agreed goal. Here too, participation and asking the community is necessary, so that potential plans can be agreed upon with businesses, citizens, and other stakeholders. That is, plans and strategies should be subject to consultation.

Once plans for town centre vision have been agreed upon, these can be implemented. This, however, is not the last step in the process of improving town centre image. Once actions are in place, there needs to be effective communication. This means actively engaging in promoting the place's benefits and improvement efforts.

Research and analysis are also important at the end of the process, to measure how image and perceptions have changed after your efforts. Using the qualitative and quantitative data collection methods again, can be a good way of assessing progress.

Examples of initiatives to improve town image and perceptions

Altrincham

Not that long ago, the affluent Northern market town of Altrincham was labelled a 'ghost town'. A combination of factors had pushed customers away from the once bustling high streets to the nearby Trafford Centre. This had led to the disappearance of many of the independent businesses

⁴ Ntounis, N., & Kavaratzis, M. (2017). Re-branding the High Street: the place branding process and reflections from three UK towns. *Journal of place management and development*.

⁵ Whitzman, C., Legacy, C., & Andrew, C. (Eds.). (2013). *Building inclusive cities: Women's safety and the right to the city*. Routledge.

that once helped the town to thrive and resulted in the town possessing the highest shop vacancy rates in the UK, with almost a third of the shops lying empty.

In recent years Altrincham has enjoyed something of a renaissance, however, with shop vacancies down by almost three quarters and footfall rising by more than 25% since 2010. The boost was aided in no small part by the investment that Trafford Council made into the physical infrastructure of the public realm, the improvement of community links through the town centre partnership vehicle Altrincham Forward, as well as the regeneration of Altrincham's Market House.

Nick Johnson, a former Deputy Chief Executive at urban regeneration company Urban Splash and ex-Chair of Marketing Manchester, had the vision of transforming the Market in Altrincham, the town in which he lives, from an underperforming traditional market into a 'total' experience of shopping, eating, drinking, and entertainment, with each component part delivered by independent businesses from across the North West of England.

Speaking to Manchester Confidential, he said: "Altrincham's charter dates back to 1290, the market hall itself is beautiful and listed and dates back to 1870 and it was Cheshire's pre-eminent market town. We propose to make it the best modern market town." Over the last eight years, Nick has delivered on this promise, combining market tradition with high quality independent traders and customer convenience to create a space which is a bustling hub of activity, for which it was awarded the coveted Observer Food Monthly "Best Market" award in 2015.

The success of the market has acted as a catalyst to further regenerate the town. New retailers and restaurants have opened up all over Altrincham, bringing more vibrancy to the town to transform it from 'ghost town' to 'boom town'. Speaking to Manchester Confidential, businesswoman Claire Howells stated that the town's 'foodie' reputation was one of the main reasons that she decided to open up her artisan bakery and eatery Blanchflower in Altrincham, demonstrating the potent effect that the improvement of a town's image can have on wider investment.

More information about Altrincham's transformation can be [read about here](#).

Blackburn

Blackburn, a former mill town in Lancashire which has struggled with the challenges associated with that of a post-industrial Northern town (deindustrialisation, economic deprivation, and housing issues), has seen a remarkable transformation over the last decade. Through active partnerships between Blackburn Business Improvement District (BID), Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council, the Healthy High Street Team and a range of organisations and businesses, the town has been able to reinvent itself as a real destination for visitors.

Investment across a range of initiatives, including huge town events (such as Blackburn Heritage Festival, Countryside Comes to Town and Blackburn Festival of Making), a new £5 million bus centre, a £66 million redevelopment of The Mall and the Cathedral Quarter's £33 million investment, helped the town secure the coveted "Best High Street" award at the 2016 Great British High Street awards.

When announcing that Blackburn had also been awarded the "Winner of Winners" at the Great British High Street Awards, Brigid Simmons OBE, chief executive of the British Beer & Pub Association, said: "The winner has blazed a trail, setting an example to other towns and cities.

"New shared space is creating facilities for the local community and new street scaping reflects the town's heritage. Crime and anti-social behaviour are being tackled with ground breaking partnerships. Perceptions are being challenged and changed through events, marketing and social media campaigns." She added: "The winner is a place that could easily fall victim to its old reputations but instead it is actively reshaping its own destiny."

Blackburn's success is a story that's been 15 years in the making, according to BID Manager Harriet Roberts. "We have to focus on bringing people back to Blackburn and change their perceptions. It's not just a mill town, Blackburn has transformed. People don't always believe things until they see it, and now 15 years of work is coming together, it's tangible. The amazing thing is that this is only just the beginning of what can be achieved."

More information on how Blackburn became an award-winning town [can be found 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. Improving town image and perceptions links to some of these 25 priorities and reading about them can therefore be helpful in this task. Improving town image and perceptions can link to the following priorities: experience, retail offer, attractiveness, appearance, necessities, rebranding, place marketing 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. Improving town image and perceptions is 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 town centre image and perceptions

1. **Collect data:** what factors are influencing town centre image? Which of this do you have control over? How are you going to collect qualitative and quantitative data about such factors? What sociodemographic groups do you need to consider?
2. **Make a plan:** what actions can be put in place to improve the selected factors? How do these actions contribute to the overall town vision?
3. **Conduct a consultation:** what do visitors, businesses, and other stakeholders think about your plans? What are their experiences and perspectives in improving town centre image?
4. **Take action:** how are you going to execute your plans? What assets do you need? Who do you need to involve?
5. **Communicate:** once you have implemented your plans, how are you going to let people know about them? What communications channels are you going to use? What is the message you want to send?
6. **Measure success:** how are you going to monitor interventions? Can you use your qualitative and quantitative data collection methods again to see how image and perceptions have changed?

Acknowledgements

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