

Practical Evidence Gaps #7

How can I improve the night-time economy in my town centre?

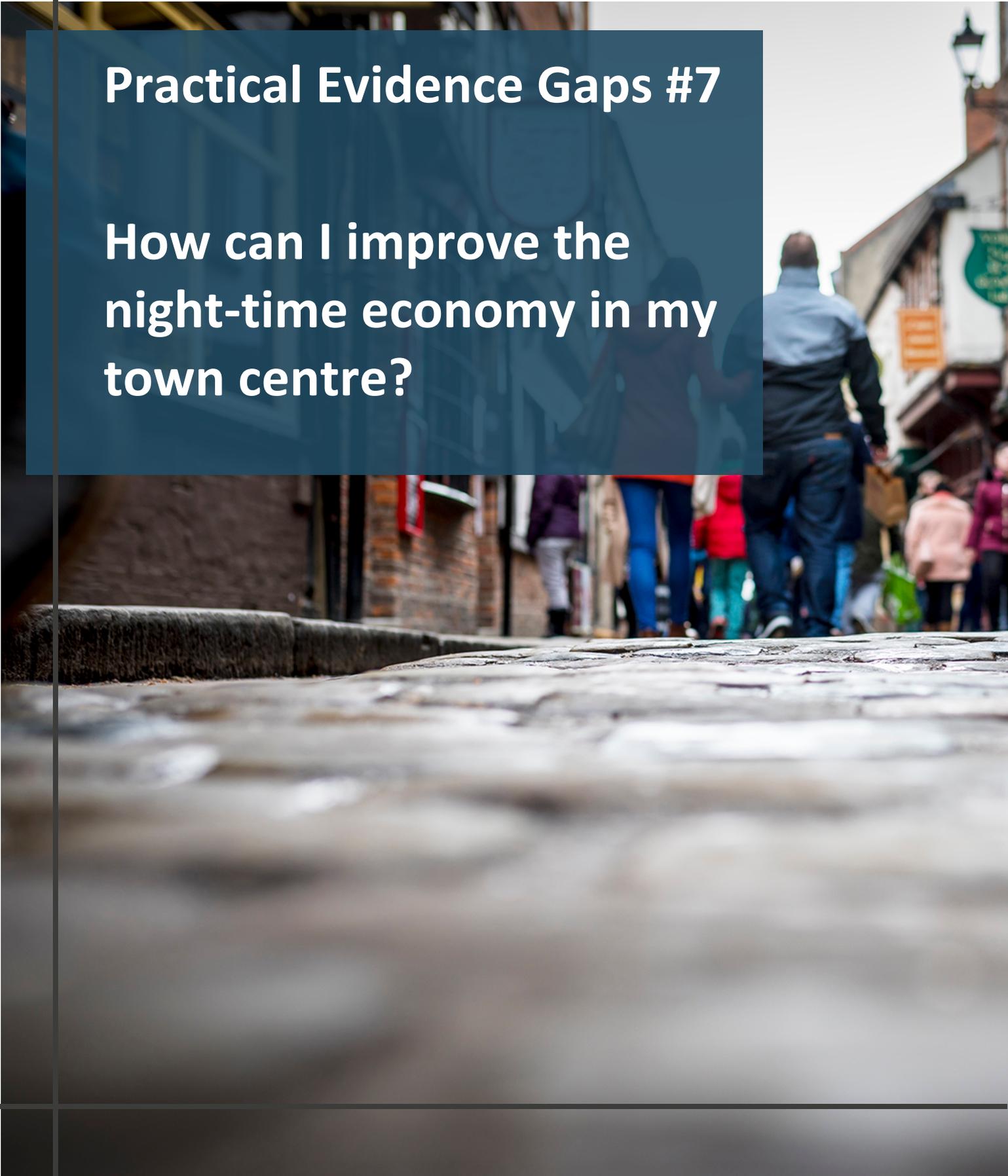


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Practical Evidence Gaps are current issues affecting high streets and town centres that would benefit from more knowledge and examples. These gaps have been identified by conducting content analysis in two large sources of data:

- 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 can I improve the night-time economy in my town centre?

An introduction to the night-time economy

The Covid-19 pandemic has had devastating consequences for the night-time economy (NTE). The pandemic has brought the need for more proactive and holistic planning for the NTE, as the leisure, entertainment, and cultural industries have suffered greatly. As a result, their future is uncertain in many cases, but they play a key role in the economic and social life of our communities.

Centres that have an attractive NTE become places that are interesting to spend time and live in and this will result in economic prosperity¹. A strong and diverse NTE, providing multiple opportunities for different publics, is integral to ensuring the vitality and viability of town centres², and lack of it can lead to visitor and resident dissatisfaction.

Benefits of a strong NTE, that go beyond economic benefits, are rarely discussed, or talked about. However, research shows that nightlife can bring social wellbeing, stronger communities, and foster multicultural understanding, as well as psychological mutual support after the lockdowns and isolations triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, it can bring people of different ethnic or religious backgrounds, ages, and genders together, forming social capital between different groups and individuals in the community that make neighbourhoods more resilient and stronger³.

Town centres are experiencing a growth in the evening and night economies, as after the multiple lockdowns people have the desire and disposable income to go out and spend. Also, flexible working has also been translated into activity in town centres across the day, including later in the day. A strong NTE is one that responds to the needs of the target catchment, and that it is open when the

¹ 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>

² Teller, C., & Schnedlitz, P. (2012). Drivers of agglomeration effects in retailing: The shopping mall tenant's perspective. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 28(9-10), 1043-1061. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2011.617708>

³ Nofre, J. (2021). Nightlife as a source of social wellbeing, community-building and psychological mutual support after the Covid-19 pandemic. *Annals of Leisure Research*, 1-9.

target catchment requires it to be. If your centre's activity hours do not meet the needs of the population it should be serving, they will go elsewhere.

Safety is central to a strong NTE. It is important that all groups in society feel safe when they visit town centres at night (e.g., including older generations, women, LGBT+, etc.). High crime rates or perceptions of insecurity and unsafety will stop people from wanting to stay late or venture into the centre at all. This idea of safety acquires a new light in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic, as centres need to offer the certainty that are safe in terms of health and pandemic response too.

Strengthening the night-time economy

In improving the NTE, planners and policymakers should look at the main attractions a centre has to offer, and the strength of each of these should be assessed as part of the repositioning and reinventing processes. Looking at the NTE in neighbouring towns and cities, as well as that of places with similar characteristics, will help identify whether the offer is right and what developments are required. Similarly, footfall analysis provides a means to understand dynamic patterns of behaviour and levels of activity within town centres, and whether this corresponds with activity hours. Analysing this data will lead to better and more accurate place-based decision-making.

Putting new activities in place can strengthen the NTE and attract new users, but it requires a collaborative approach, working in partnership with the property industry, the local authority, end users, transport providers, civic groups, and others. Although short-term initiatives are a good way of experimenting and trying new things out, improving the NTE should be done as part of a joined-up strategy, working together as part of the town centre vision. A good approach to improving evening and nightlife after Covid-19 is to establish a network of evening economy businesses to ensure that there is a collaborative and consistent approach.

The Global Night-time Recovery Plan⁴ and the Developing a night-time strategy document⁵ offer a series of recommendations to improving the NTE. These are presented below.

Safety perceptions can be improved through urban design features such as lighting and signage, or the removal of litter and street clutter. Communication strategies such as drink-aware can also help people feel safer. It is also recommended that place leaders support structures to protect vulnerable social groups. In considering the impact of Covid-19, safety can be achieved by encouraging social distancing, reminding people with symptoms not to enter areas, as well as offering hand washing and sanitising stations. Plans for enhanced cleaning in busy areas are also important.

The outdoor is a key space for outdoor dining or events in the evening and night-time. These spaces can safely increase capacity from indoor spaces, whilst also activating unused spaces and increasing cultural vibrancy and liveability, problems such as littering or sound control need regulating and to include the community in their design and implementation.

Whilst regulation is important, relaxed rules can also be central in improving the NTE. For example, permitting and encouraging longer opening hours to kick start activity in the evening. Similarly, illumination becomes even more critical for outdoor events, and relocating road space to events and walking can also be a huge support for new night-time activities.

⁴ <https://www.nighttime.org/recoveryplan/>

⁵ https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/210317_gla_1_night-time_strategies_part_1.pdf

The preservation of night-time can only take place if policymakers recognise this as a legitimate cultural activity with immense benefits for the economy and society, and not as a stigmatic activity solely linked to alcohol and drug consumption, or crime. Work towards protecting and supporting the NTE workers, is central, especially during a crisis. Communication, education and awareness for how to deliver a safe and sustainable night life is also important, encouraging respect, civilised behaviours, and participation of all.

Examples of initiatives to improve the night-time economy

Stockport, Foodie Friday

In 2011, Stockport was named the town with the highest number of empty shops in the country⁶. A nationwide survey of retail vacancy rates by The Local Data Company found that Stockport was the town with the highest percentage of empty units (27.7%), whilst overall, the North West suffered from higher vacancy rates than any other region – at 16%. To respond to this, the town bid for Portas Pilot status from the government and, upon receiving funding to invest in its development, set-up a Town Team to focus on regenerating the Old Town. This part of the town had suffered the most from the impact of the '08 recession, with close to one in every two shops being vacant.

To help breathe new life into the Old Town's Market Place, a monthly street food event was set-up as part of the Love Your Local Market campaign which aimed to attract residents into the town centre after 5pm. The event, named Foodie Friday, was sparsely attended at first but, upon receiving help with promotional and operational support from the Town Team, the event quickly grew in popularity. In 2015, the responsibility for running the event was passed to a local community interest company, Seven Miles Out, who also ran a community arts centre on the Market Place.

The arts centre acted as a hub for families, in particular, who could attend the evening event safely with their children, a factor that played a big part in the event's success. In providing a good mix of street food, live music and drinks from surrounding venues Foodie Friday became one of the most popular street food events in the whole of the North West. A key part of the event's success was the licensing arrangement which allows for drinks to be purchased in any of the surrounding bars and pubs, providing they are in disposable cups, and consumed in the Market Place. This gives visitors the opportunity to buy from any one of the surrounding establishments and meet back in the square with friends and family to enjoy their food and drink.

In 2016, Foodie Friday was awarded the coveted "Best Event" award at the Manchester Food and Drink Festival, and regularly attracts thousands of visitors into the town centre on the last Friday of every month. Thanks to the economic impact the event has contributed to Stockport, the Old Town has seen a wave of private investment and the vacancy rate is now virtually nil. Whilst the impact of coronavirus resulted in the event having to be cancelled for over a year, upon resuming delivery the event was just as, if not more, busy than before. Foodie Friday in Stockport is a great example of how a grassroots community street food event can bring activity into a town centre in the evening and revitalise a struggling local economy.

⁶ <https://www.thebusinessdesk.com/northwest/news/216986-stockport-and-blackpool-have-most-void-shop-units>

Chester

Following the formation of Cheshire West and Chester Council in 2010, an assessment was made as to what the strategic priorities of this new body should be. As there were evidenced high levels of alcohol related harm, it was decided that the council would look to improve the night-time economy and a target of securing Purple Flag status, the accreditation awarded by the ATCM to towns which can demonstrate safe and thriving night-time economies, was prioritised.

Since this target was set, Chester has been successful in securing Purple Flag status for two years in a row. The Chester Business Improvement District played a key part in helped to achieve this, as they partnered with the council to set-up a Purple Flag steering committee. This steering committee was comprised of a number of other partners, including Chester Pubwatch, Chester Against Business Crime and the police, and the group had a clear work plan where the standards, key achievements and future improvements would be reviewed on a monthly basis.

Another night-time economy outcome which emerged as a result of this strategic partnership working included Safe Space, a mobile city-centre based unit which operates on Saturday nights with paramedics, volunteers and security staff to provide immediate first aid and pastoral support for vulnerable people. Since its launch in October 2018, the Safe Space has helped 196 people and diverted 67 individuals away from emergency services. It has also prevented low-level crime and provided valuable intelligence on substance use and drink-spiking.

To build on the work of these initiatives and the Purple Flag steering group, the council set up a specific Night-time Economy Task Group to work towards ensuring that the night-time economy offers a safe and enjoyable experience for all. This group met four times and took two tours of Chester city centre in the evening to gain an in-person perspective on the state of the evening economy. This was then complemented with the results of a questionnaire, which helped generate eight recommendations including membership of best practice accreditation schemes, such as Best Bar None. The questionnaire was also circulated to all Cheshire and Merseyside authorities, in order to help Chester benchmark themselves across other nearby local authorities.

Based on the above, Chester is a great example of demonstrating excellent partnership working to improve the night-time economy. According to a Chester BID survey, nearly 70% of people now feel safe in Chester in night, which is a significant improvement. Very few licence reviews have also been instigated because of the partnership approach that has been taken.

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 the night-time economy links to some of these 25 priorities and reading about them can therefore be helpful in this task.

Improving the night-time economy can link to the following priorities: activity, experience, non-retail offer, appearance, place management, safety/crime, recreational space, 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.

Improving the night-time economy is included in different stages of this recovery framework. You can read more about it and download an editable version [here](#).

Action points for improving the night-time economy

1. **Collect data:** what are the opening times of non-retail businesses in your town centre? How is your footfall activity? What NTE is there in your town centre? Can you identify any gaps? What are other similar, or close by, centres doing?
2. **Reinvent the business model:** what can you do to overcome existing challenges? How are you going to ensure creative solutions?
3. **Make a plan:** what actions can be put in place to improve the NTE? How do these actions contribute to the overall town vision? Can you pilot some activities and collect data on their effectiveness and community satisfaction? how are you going to execute your plans? What assets do you need? Who do you need to involve?
4. **Be flexible and supportive:** how are you going to support NTE workers and businesses? Can you relax opening hour bans? Can you provide grants? Can you help with granting road space? Can you help with noise and litter control? Do you need to work in diversifying the NTE and destigmatizing it?
5. **Work on safety:** how are you going to make sure that all demographic groups feel safe and included? Can you improve the lighting? How are you going to make sure that there is social distancing (and other Covid-19 specific measures) in place?
6. **Communicate:** how are you going to raise awareness for a sustainable NTE?

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