

Practical Evidence Gaps #8

How can I document and understand challenges in my town centre better?

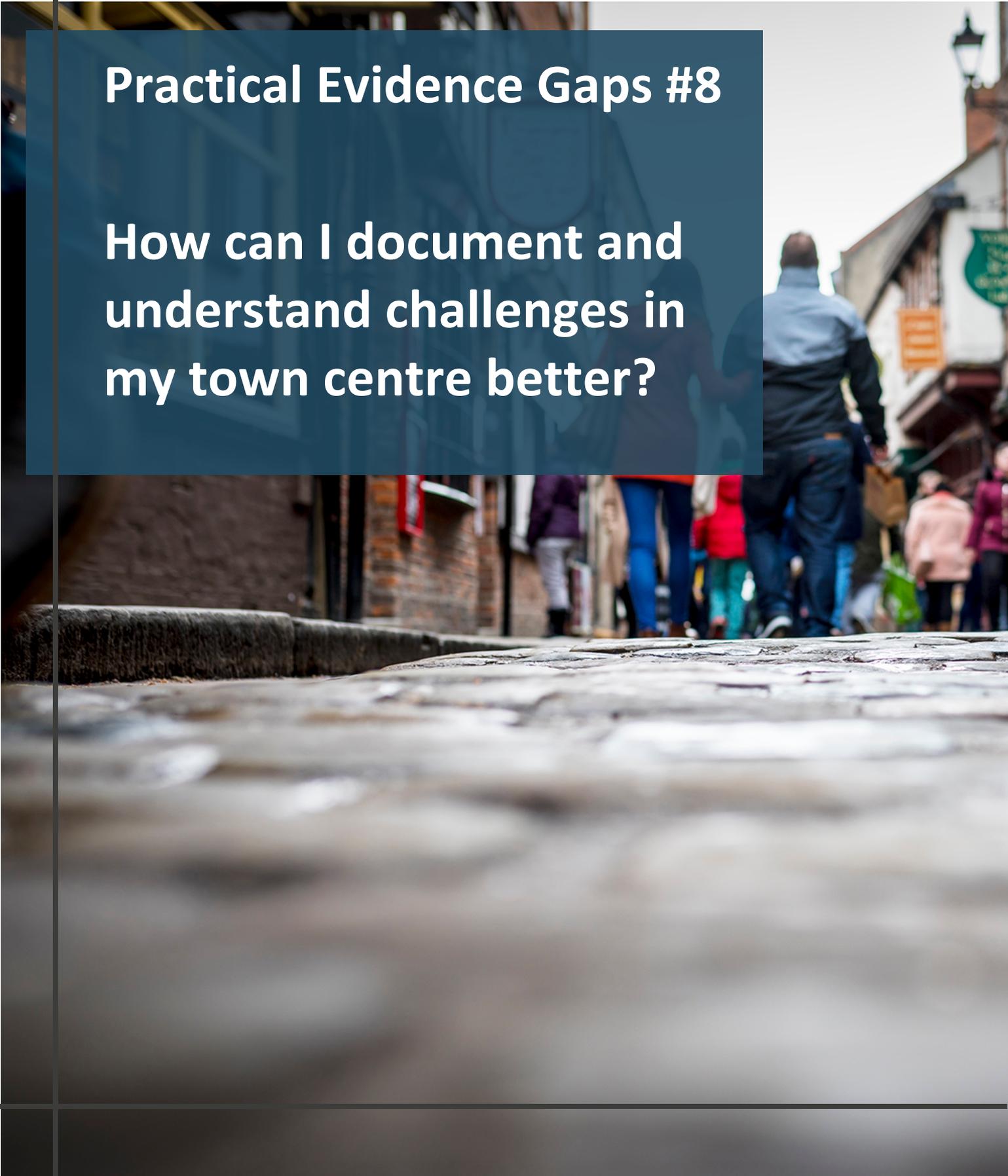


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Practical Evidence Gaps are current issues affecting high streets and town centres that would benefit from more knowledge and examples. These gaps have been identified by conducting content analysis in two large sources of data:

- 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 document and understand challenges in my town centre better?

An introduction to the importance of data and intelligence

Effective high street and town centre transformation requires accurately identifying the problems(s) that need to be solved or the challenges that need to be addressed. Development decisions that are not based on accurate data and intelligence are usually ineffective¹.

Local leaders are tasked with the responsibility to develop the right plans for their town centres and high streets. To do this, they need access to data, information, and evidence. There is a wealth of this already in existence that can be integrated in a way that provides reliable 'point-of-need' support. An important question to ask is: is there data to support each challenge?

Relevant data and indicators can help in identifying the challenges facing high streets/town centres and the capacity they have to manage change. Baseline indicators are a standard way to understand challenges for all town centres/high streets, both over time and in relation to national trends.

Articulation and evidencing the challenges your town or high street faces, is not only necessary to plan appropriate action, but also to be able to share clear and reliable data and arguments with important stakeholders: the public (i.e., for more effective consultations); businesses (i.e., for a joint strategy); funders (i.e., to make a compelling case for securing funding); etc.

¹Millington, 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>

Documenting and understanding challenges better

Both qualitative and quantitative data can be important if it is well presented. A series of guidelines for how best to think about and present data are outlined below.

Benchmarking: It is important to place data into context. For example, the percentage of vacant units is an important datapoint to have to document high street decline, but this number alone is less significant than if this is presented in combination with a benchmark (e.g., national vacancy rates).

Finding a trend: A single datapoint in time can be less informative than showing whether, and how, this has changed in time. For example, presenting annual footfall can be interesting, but what makes a better case for footfall is looking at how it has been performing for a given amount of time (e.g., 5-year trend). Different strategies might be needed if footfall has been in a gradual or sharp decline.

Quantification: Qualitative data is often available for many high street challenges, such as footfall, vacant units, air pollution levels, crime rates, number of parking available, diversity of shops, etc. When this is the case, it is important to present quantified data. For example, instead of simply stating that there is a lack of diversity of businesses, better evidence would be to specify that 80% of the businesses are retail-focus, contributing to a narrow leisure offer.

Reliability: When offering qualitative data, it is important to explain how reliable this data is and present this in a transparent manner. This, for example, can be achieved by explaining the data collection method (e.g., interviews or focus groups), the sample size and characteristics (e.g., number of participants as well as their demographic traits), etc. Sometimes qualitative data can be quantified. For example, when presenting what percentage of participants perceive the town centre in a given way (e.g., 90% of participants agreed that the town centre is lacking diversity).

Referencing: Presenting evidence correctly, through benchmarking, quantification, etc. is important for making a compelling case, but data sources that are trustworthy also contribute to this end. Therefore, it is important to specify where the data comes from, whether it is a publicly available data source (e.g. Indices of Multiple Deprivation) or whether it has been collected in place (e.g. place audit)².

Transparency: Sometimes it won't be possible to present data from available sources, or to meticulously describe the data collection process. In those cases, as much detail as possible should be offered. If a town centre aims to describe their leadership capacity, they might need to describe their working partnerships. This can be done by providing as much data as possible to achieve transparency and credibility, for example, presenting data about when the partnership was created, who is involved, what the role is, and if there have been consultation efforts, trying to document this with newspaper articles, invitations to participants, report of the outcome, etc.

If you can't find data to evidence your challenges, or if the data you find suggests it is not really a challenge, then you may decide to focus on other, more pressing challenges, that you do have evidence for.

² Leung, L. (2015). Validity, reliability, and generalizability in qualitative research. *Journal of family medicine and primary care*, 4(3), 324.

Examples of data sources to evidence high street challenges

There are different datasets and toolkits to help you think about your data³. Some examples of what data can be useful have are included below:

Indices of Multiple Deprivation: presenting social, economic, and environmental challenges in relation to IMD data, can enable town centres identify challenges, a vision, and plans that are more diverse and transformational. The English Indices of Deprivation (IoD) are produced by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG). The latest statistical release is from 2019. The IoD measure relative levels of deprivation in 32,844 Lower-layer Super Output Areas (LSOA), i.e. small areas or neighbourhoods, in England. The IMD is composed of seven domains of deprivation: (1) income, (2) employment, (3) education, skills and training, (4) health and disability, (5) crime, (6) barriers to housing and services; and (7) living environment. The IMD 2019 can be accessed [here](#).

Footfall: the number of visitors to town centres contribute to economic prosperity and vitality. Understanding footfall can tell us about when and how a town centre is being used. Footfall data can be collected through automatic footfall counting technology (e.g. Springboard) or by manually collecting footfall data (you can read more about this option [here](#)).

Vacancy rates: level of vacant units contributing to decline and run-down appearance. Identifying these also provides an opportunity for diversity and innovation. Data about vacant units can be collected carrying out a place audit.

Community spirit: this refers to sense of belonging, place attachment, etc. leading to pride and place distinctiveness. Data about the community spirit can be collected through questionnaires, interviews, or focus groups with residents and visitors.

Visitor experience: this refers to visitor satisfaction with diversity, accessibility, perception of safety, etc. This can be collected through questionnaires, interviews, or focus groups with residents and visitors. Sentiment data can be useful here too. Sentiment data will allow local leaders to understand what key stakeholders are saying about the town and ascertain how different interventions impact on how people feel about their town. This can be collected by monitoring relevant social media in the town centre, or by hiring organizations who work with artificial intelligence and data mining (e.g., Maybe*).

Geographical catchment: this is about the characteristics of the people who live in and visit the centre, their interests, needs, and motivations. Census data can be a good tool for this.

Access: easiness of access to a town centre can be key in its prosperity. This includes modes of transport used to access the town centre, public transport options, parking spaces available, etc. This type of data can be collected through desk research or a place audit.

Evening night-time economy: this refers to the number of businesses open in the evening and at night and their offer contributing to liveability and a strong non-retail offer. Information about the night-time economy can be collected carrying out a place audit.

Diversity: this refers to the different type of businesses there are in your town centre, whether there is a strong non-retail offer; and whether the offer is composed of independents or chains. Information about diversity can be collected carrying out a place audit.

³ <https://great-british-high-street.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/website-assets/pdf/Annexes-CDEF.pdf>

Management capacity: the number of existing partnerships, their characteristics, their composition, their role, etc. as well as public involvement and consultation efforts. This information can be gathered through desk research as well as through interviews with people involved.

Examples of initiatives to better evidence and understand high street challenges

Colwyn Bay

In 2019, Conwy County Council commissioned a report to record and present key evidence about the current performance of Colwyn Bay town centre and track changes over recent years. By comparing the data to other historical data collected since 2015, it was possible to track the impact of changes over the previous five years.

Surveys of businesses and town centre customers were undertaken to gauge their current perceptions about the town and point to potential future priorities. When asked about the positive aspects of Colwyn Bay town centre, its users were markedly more positive than businesses, with visitors rating the following aspects highly: cafes/restaurants (95%); ease of walking around the town centre (94%); access to services (87%); customer service (91%); convenience (90%); transport links (82%); and safety (78%).

In terms of negative perceptions, businesses were only significantly negative about the following aspects: car parking (53%), the prosperity of the town (38%) and competition from out-of-town shopping (36%). This is much more moderate than 2018, when a majority of businesses that responded considered car parking (77%), physical appearance (76%), empty properties (73%), footfall (55%) and competition from the internet (55%) to be key negative issues.

When customers of Colwyn Bay were asked what two things would improve the town centre, the most popular responses related to the appearance of the town including a desire to fill empty premises. Parking improvements and calls for more diverse shops were also prominent responses.

When businesses in Colwyn Bay were asked what two things that would improve the town centre the main issues related to parking, opportunities to improve the retail mix, marketing/events and the physical appearance of the town centre. There were proportionally fewer concerns about local, civic leadership and property cost compared to 2018.

The results of this survey will help Conwy County Council better understand their town and plan for future investment. The full report for Colwyn Bay by People & Places [can be found here](#).

Waveney District Council

Waveney District Council has supported the Southwold Coastal Community Team in developing an evidence-base to underpin its work revitalising the town centre. This involved gathering key performance data and surveying stakeholder perceptions about the town centre. The aim was to achieve this in a way that under-pinned long-term community engagement; took account of existing strategies; strengthened partnership working; informed objectives; shaped solutions; supported external funding bids; and provided measures to monitor impact.

The solution involved the Council and Coastal team conducting a desk-top review of existing strategies and data, assessing quantitative key performance indicators including footfall, vacancy rates, parking occupancy, rental levels, business mix, customer origins and purpose of visits, before commissioning a comprehensive town centre survey to collect qualitative stakeholder data including customers' perceptions, sentiments about place branding, business confidence and priorities.

This process revealed that:

- Southwold businesses are markedly more pessimistic than comparable towns, with nearly a third of them (32%) projecting a further decline in turnover compared to just 19% nationally.
- The presence of national chains was jointly ranked as the most negative perception by customers (58%) and stopping the decline of independent businesses was amongst their top priorities for the future.
- Customers were more positive than businesses about Southwold town centre and valued the quality of the environment, its shops and services. Ease of walking around, cleanliness, convenience (93%), physical appearance (91%), safety (90%) and customer service (92%) were particularly highly rated compared to national averages.
- 24% of customers thought the town centre had worsened in recent years; 35% considered it had changed in good and bad ways. Only 9% thought Southwold had improved.
- There are strong positive perceptions of the 'brand' Southwold linked to the culture, heritage, and quality of its environment. These need to be used in promoting its distinctiveness through new activities and innovative marketing that extends the visitor season.

The survey work strengthened the shared objectives and partnership working of the District and Town Councils, Chamber of Trade, community groups and other agencies to enable them to all play to their strengths and passions to collectively improve the town centre. Following this work, Southwold was selected as one of five communities to benefit from £10m Coastal Communities Fund investment to help improve the local economy.

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. Documenting and understanding challenges better links to some of these 25 priorities and reading about them can therefore be helpful in this task. Documenting and understanding challenges better can link to the following priorities: place management, innovation, liveability, experience, safety/crime, vision and strategy, functionality, 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.

Documenting and understanding challenges better is included in different stages of this recovery framework. You can read more about it and download an editable version [here](#).

Action points for documenting and understanding challenges better

1. **Select challenges facing your town centre:** what is your town centre struggling with? What can be improved in your town centre?
2. **Select data sources:** how can you evidence those challenges? What multiple data sources do you need? What challenges is worth concentrating on because of data availability?
3. **Identify data sources that are worth monitoring in the long-term:** what data can be useful for decision-making in the future? How can data support you long-term? What data are you going to monitor going forward?
4. **Present data correctly:** is the data quantified? Is it transparent? Is it reliable? Can you present your data against a benchmark or show a trend? Have you referenced your data?
5. **Work on the delivery:** who is going to read about the challenges in your town centre? Think about what data is relevant for them to understand? Are you presenting data and challenges for a funding body or the general public?

Acknowledgements

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