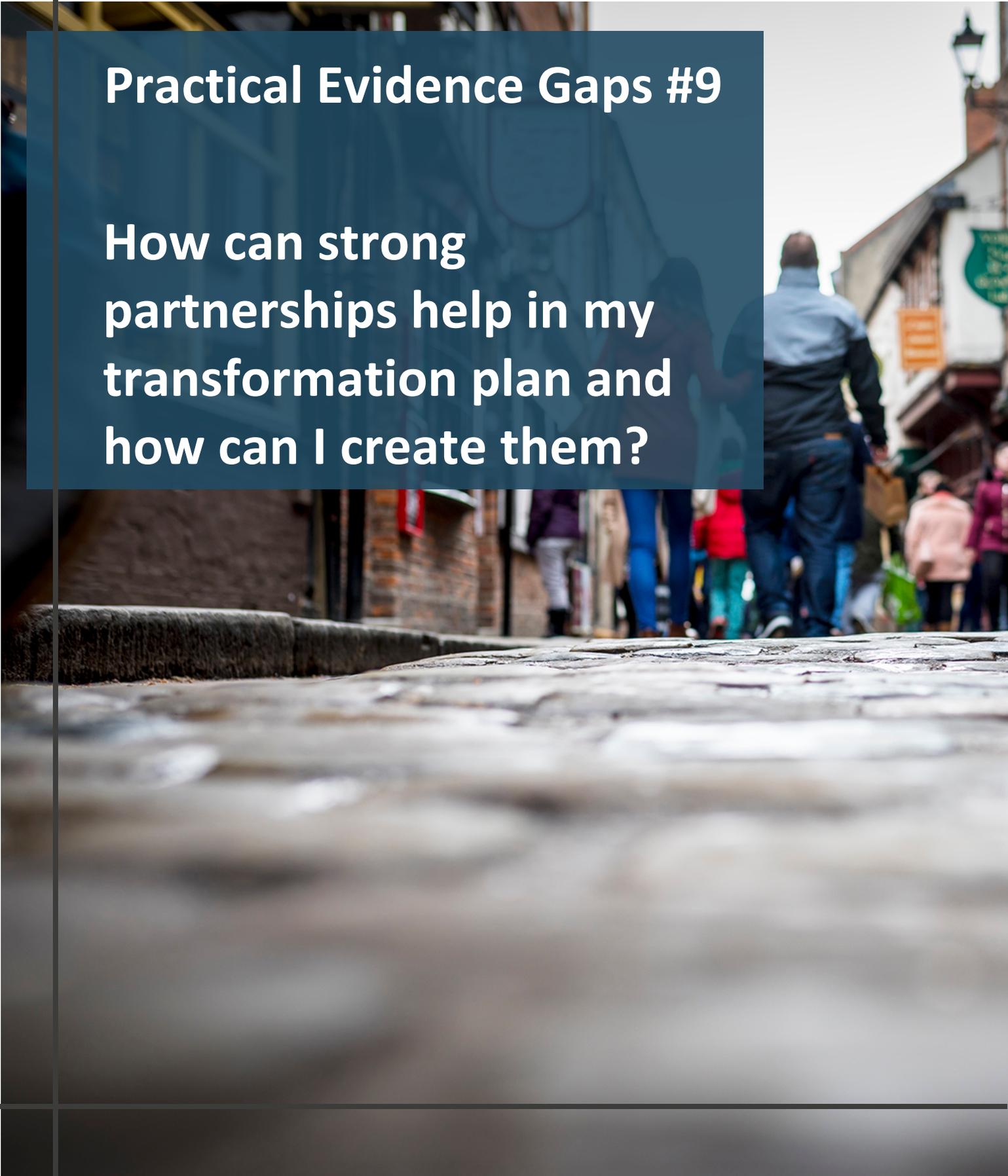


## Practical Evidence Gaps #9

How can strong partnerships help in my transformation plan and how can I create them?



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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 strong partnerships help in my transformation plan and how can I create them?

### An introduction to the importance of partnerships

The presence of formal and informal partnerships, where there is effective communication and collaboration, can positively influence the vitality and viability of high streets. Networked governance approaches were different expert views, as well as ‘expert’ and ‘vernacular’ knowledge are combined, can give raise to improved place management, planning, and policy processes<sup>1</sup>.

Collaborations between local institutions and communities can be translated into a more effective formulation of a place vision that will guide all actions and strategies for high street regeneration, renewal and transformation.

Strong networks and partnership are about fostering organising capacity, that is “the ability to enlist all actors involved and, with their help, to generate new ideas and to develop and implement a policy designed to respond to fundamental developments and create conditions for sustainable development”<sup>2</sup>.

Experts in place management highlight that in building back better in the aftermath of Covid-19, local people must be involved in redesigning their town centres and have a say on the services and amenities that occupy it (i.e. bike lanes or pedestrianised areas)<sup>3</sup>. Citizen participation is a key

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<sup>1</sup> Henderson H (2016) Toward an ethnographic sensibility in urban research. *Australian Planner* 53(1): 28–36.

<sup>2</sup> van den Berg L and Braun E (1999) Urban competitiveness, marketing and the need for organising capacity. *Urban Studies* 36(5–6): 987–999.

<sup>3</sup> Grimsey review: Covid-19 supplement for town centres: <http://www.vanishinghighstreet.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Grimsey-Covid-19-Supplement-June-2020.pdf>

instrument to achieve this and to make governments and councils respond to the needs of citizens<sup>4</sup>, a practice that can be defined as “a democratic right and a process through which citizens engage in the public sphere to shape policy”<sup>5</sup>. Successful partnerships and collaborations rarely take place just following a top-down approach and are often informally created from the bottom-up where citizens and civic voice organizations take the lead.

BID’s also play a key role in partnership working, as they are very effective in business representation within town centres and being able to put forward the interest of smaller businesses in the high street. Often BID’s extend their area of action beyond levy payers and this are better placed for the future, “BIDs that are inclusive of all business types, and can reach out to other important groups, such as residents, will be the ones that are better able to navigate successfully through this changing environment”<sup>6</sup>.

Some of the benefits of strong partnerships giving rise to multiple voices are: a better vision with buy in of all stakeholders; business and visitor satisfaction; more relevant initiatives and strategies that are suitable for that specific centre; strong overall image and brand of the centre; and social capital. All of these will in turn have positive economic (e.g., visitor numbers and expenditure) and social outcomes (e.g., integration and well-being). Being able to demonstrate capacity for transformation through a strong presence of active partnerships and networks has also become a key factor when applying and acquiring funding (e.g., central government).

Strong partnerships are not only important at the broad high street level, but also within specific retail environments in the high street, such as in markets or shopping centres. High level of engagement and collaboration between retailers, traders and managers will improve the overall health of these smaller environments.

## Creating strong partnerships

It is important for the local council (or other leading place management bodies, such as the BID, LEP, or town team) to identify all key stakeholders and ensure that all organisations or groups with a responsibility for place management are brought together and included in a networked system.

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, it is important to provide a unified response to tackle the crisis as well as an inclusive recovery strategy. Partnerships which include a broad range of representatives (residents, faith groups, businesses, delivery bodies and charities) are better placed for this task ensuring the involvement of a diverse set of stakeholders. Engaging these partnerships early will enable greater collaborative planning capability in the recovery phases.

The URBED report on partnerships highlights five key aspects to consider<sup>7</sup>:

Think about membership in your partnership: ensure that there is high-level participation from all bodies involved with the authority to take decisions and to carry out change.

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<sup>4</sup> Cortés-Cediel, M. E., Cantador, I., & Bolívar, M. P. R. (2021). Analyzing citizen participation and engagement in european smart cities. *Social Science Computer Review*, 39(4), 592-626.

<sup>5</sup> Kalandides, A. (2018). Citizen participation: Towards a framework for policy assessment. *Journal of Place Management and Development*.

<sup>6</sup> Grail J, Mitton C, Ntounis N, et al. (2020) Business improvement districts in the UK: a review and synthesis. *Journal of Place Management and Development* 13(1): 73–88. DOI: 10.1108/JPMD-11-2019-0097.

<sup>7</sup> <http://urbed.coop/sites/default/files/Town%20Centre%20partnerships.pdf>

Think about the mission of your partnership: it is important to set out clear goals addressing issues that go to the core of economic, social, and environmental environments.

Think about money in your partnership: partnerships require sufficient investment or putting mechanism in place to secure funding to develop initiatives.

Think about management of your partnership: partnerships require highly competent staff that are trusted by everybody in the partnership. Setting out the structure of the partnerships is important for its effective operation.

Think about measuring results of your partnership: it is important to produce tangible results for the confidence and involvement of members but also as a way of securing funding in the future, this can take place by establishing KPIs, objectives, and producing annual reports. It is also important to measure less tangible aspects, such as whether members are having positive experiences, to assure the continuity of the partnership.

Furthermore, there are some key ingredients for partnerships that work effectively: trust between members, negotiating skills, joint investment for resources, accountability, collaboration.

The success of a partnership can be measured by whether or not the objectives were met, but especially reflecting on whether the achieved goals are a sum of joint efforts and couldn't have been achieved by one body alone.

Disillusionment with partnerships can stem from different reasons: unrealistic expectations that can't be achieved, lack of communication between members, lack of respect, or an incapacity to break knowledge structures and encourage everybody to participate and contribute expertise equally (i.e., members of the public feeling left out).

It is recommended to create a business plan for the partnership to work effectively. This will be the means through which a full partnership is forged, where responsibilities are shared, objectives set, etc. An initial audit is a good starting point to create a scan of the situation of the town centre, who are important stockholders, what the challenges are, etc.

The ideal partnership is where responsibility is shared amongst all main actors, each giving up a bit of power and resources in exchange of results achieved by collaboration.

## Examples of good practice in partnership working

### **Withington Village**

Prompted by the proposed closure of Withington Baths, one of Manchester's oldest working swimming pools, a group of residents came together to form an organisation which aimed to put a stop to these plans and instead run the space as a community asset. Shortly after this, the Love Withington Baths group was formed and their business plan to run the space was approved by Manchester City Council in 2013.

Following the success of this approach, the group then started to think more broadly about the future of Withington and a new organisation, the Withington Village Partnership, was formed alongside We Are Withington, a traders association comprised of local businesses.

The formation of both these groups has been instrumental in delivering a number of small-scale, low-cost place-based interventions to improve the appearance of the local centre. Together with adaptations to trading times and linking vacant properties to potential users, the partnership has helped change the image and reputation of Withington as a place.

One such project was Withington By Night, which sought to promote the village as a destination to visit in the evening. Through a process of collaborative working, the village was able to market itself as being open to visitors past 5pm, providing late-night shopping, live music, DJs, street art and food and drink. Discounts and deals were available throughout the night, along with interactive workshops to design cards for Halloween. The initiative was a great success, increasing footfall and spend throughout the village, which led some businesses to open beyond what they had initially agreed (such as the event's popularity).

Another popular intervention that has emerged following this improved partnership working is Withington Walls, a community street art project that aims to reinvigorate the area by commissioning and delivering quality street art to the shutters and walls in the village. The project is run by volunteers and was part-funded through an online crowdfunder which raised £11,090 from 138 supporters in 84 days. The full list of street art, including the now world-renowned Marcus Rashford mural, can be [found here](#).

The local networks that have been developed in Withington are now well placed to deliver wider strategic regeneration and tackle complex issues in the Village. This has already started, with public consultation now taking place on the [Withington Village Framework](#), which aims to establish a vision for Withington Village which is supported by local people to guide development decisions and provide a basis for future funding bids.

The framework has also been based around the High Street Task Force's 4Rs principle: repositioning, reinventing, rebranding and restructuring; and outlines a series of projects:

- Improve the public space outside the Library (Rutherford Place)
- Develop a more pedestrian friendly environment on Copson Street
- Enhance the public realm along Wilmslow Road
- Enhance the gateways into the Village
- Improve walking and cycling routes to and around the area
- Restore the heritage features in the Village, including shop fronts
- Support and encouraging appropriate development in the Village.

Other places can learn a lot from the approach taken by local people and traders in Withington. Effective partnerships in the centre have organised and aligned stakeholders and, working together, they have brought about positive change to their local high street.

### **Upper Dales Community Partnership**

When confronted with the issue of retaining local services that were being stripped away from rural locations, a small group of parish councillors decided to launch a partnership group in collaboration with the District Council and police. The Upper Dales Community Partnership has since developed to provide library and post office services in the heart of the Yorkshire Dales, as well as a community bus service and a local petrol station which, in 2017, was the only community-run garage in England.

The group's latest venture has been a partnership with Newcastle Building Society, opening a new branch on the high street when most banks have pulled away. As well having great partnership working between the UDCP and Newcastle Building Society, North Yorkshire County Council, as owners of the building, were instrumental in making this project happen and provided invaluable support through their legal, library and premises teams throughout.

The short-term outcomes of this project include the benefits of being able to provide sound financial advice to locals, as well as their day-to-day banking needs without having to take an entire day out and a 70-mile round trip to deal with money matters. By recruiting staff locally, the new team also

know their customer base and it has been a seamless transition from a traditional high street bank to the new way of life in a Community Hub. The work of the UDCP is a great example of effective partnership working, having grown the group from a handful of volunteers to a workforce of 25 staff with a turnover of £3M+.

## 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. Fostering strong partnerships links to some of these 25 priorities and reading about them can therefore be helpful in this task. Creating strong partnerships can link to the following priorities: vision and strategy, place management, attractiveness, redevelopment plans, innovation, 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.

Establishing strong partnerships is included in different stages of this recovery framework. You can read more about it and download an editable version [here](#).

## Action points for creating strong partnerships

1. **Identify all place management stakeholders in your town centre:** who has an interest in and responsibility for place management in your centre? Who of these are already engaged? Are all sectors (businesses, citizens, planners, etc.) represented in your list?
2. **Establish communication channels:** how can you get in touch with all stakeholders? Do you need to find representatives for each group (i.e., the public)? How can you create an ongoing and effective communication system with all?
3. **Map out types of knowledge and expertise:** who has expert knowledge? Who has lay or vernacular knowledge? What different professional backgrounds are there? What are each group of stakeholders good at?
4. **Set out a business plan for your partnership:** who is involved and what are different stakeholders' responsibilities or contribution? What is the structure of the partnership? What are the goals? How is the partnership going to be funded?
5. **Measure progress:** what are the KPIs? what has the partnership achieved? How has the collaboration been? Have all members had positive experiences? Have all members contributed and fulfilled their responsibilities?
6. **Document the journey:** How are you going to tell your story to the community, funding bodies, etc.? Can you produce resources about the work of the partnerships? Are there any media appearances that you can include in a dossier? Have you conducted any workshops that you can document with video and photographs? Can you produce a report about the success of the partnership?

## Acknowledgements

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