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Our town and city centres are important for many reasons. They are where the important businesses and services we rely on are concentrated; they give places and people a sense of identity, and they are major employers and drivers of growth. However, the past decade has been a challenging one; our traditional high streets have been battered by a storm of disruption with many major retailers going out of business. To understand and support high streets, the Economic and Social Research Council invested £1.5m to investigate the changing nature of retail and town centres, with the expectation that new technologies, original research and knowledge exchange between academics, practitioners and policymakers could also help the renewal process. The High Street UK 2020 project, led by the Institute of Place Management at Manchester Metropolitan University, was one of nine projects to receive funding from this scheme and this Special Issue of the *Journal of Place Management and Development* contains the findings of the work.

Through bringing together the UK’s leading experts in retail, economic geography, place management, place branding and planning and governance as well as working in partnership with the Association of Town and City Management, 10 UK town centres and a variety of other partners, the High Street UK 2020 project has identified, through scientific means, not only the 25 priorities that will improve the vitality and viability of the High Street but also a helpful framework for town centre renewal. This Special Issue, which is freely accessible to any business, local government official, politician or concerned citizen provides the evidence and guidance for those wanting to change the prognosis of their town centre – from decline back to health.

I would like to personally thank all those academics, retailers, trade associations, property owners, Councillors, MPs, local authority officers and local people that have worked together on this project to develop such a useful and accessible body of knowledge. The findings contained in this Special Issue and the impact the project has already had demonstrate how our town centres can be regenerated through partnership working.

**Jim McMahon, MP**

*Member of Parliament for Oldham West and Royton | Shadow Minister for Local Government and Devolution | Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Town Centres*
High Street UK 2020

So much commentary surrounding the economic fortunes of town and city centres in the UK in recent years alludes to a “before” and “after”, sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly. The “before”? Well, that usually refers to a pre-2008 financial crisis golden age, where town centre retail was in plentiful supply, upward-only rental reviews were commonplace, and the high street was the destination of choice for shoppers. Fast forward to the post-recession era, we entered the age of the “after”, where squeezed household budgets, reduced credit, fuelled a rise in charity shops, cheaper online alternatives, budget retailers and bargain hunting.

The past decade has been a turbulent one for our towns and cities culminating in a vote to leave the EU on the 23 June 2016. Will this vote to redraw the boundaries of a major trading bloc and political union, significantly altering the geopolitical landscape, have such a profound legacy that high streets will be understood in the dichotomy of “pre-Brexit” and “post-Brexit”?

So fundamental have the political and economic shifts been, at a global scale, it is hardly surprising there is such collective concern about the future of our high streets. However, this not a new phenomenon. The Association of Town and City Management (ATCM) was founded in 1991 in recognition of the challenges faced by the decentralisation of retail – from in-town to out-of-town. Now, 26 years later, Ojay McDonald, Acting Chief Executive of the ATCM and one of your Guest Editors of this Special Issue, is still heavily involved in developing and influencing policy to support the continued adaptation of town and city centres because the rise of out-of-town and on-line shopping, changing consumer demands, the financial collapse are really all part of the same story, along with the invention of the motor car, the refrigerator and the widespread adoption of the credit card. Every social, technological, cultural and economic shift impacts on how we live and how we shop. The question is how do the people who have a stake in these places respond?

This relationship between the changing nature of retail and the responses of local stakeholders was the focus of the High Street UK 2020 project. The project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of its flagship £1.5m Retail Sector Initiative, co-ordinated by Professor Kim Cassidy at Nottingham Trent University, your other Guest Editor of this Special Issue.

The aim of the High Street UK 2020 project was to not only research the changes facing the high street but also bring this knowledge, as well as a package of solutions, direct to people that wanted to make a difference to the prognosis for their centre. What follows in this special issue is a fundamental rethink of how we make, manage, maintain and market places. The knowledge developed in the High Street UK 2020 project and exchanged through these articles has been developed by academics, policymakers and practitioners. Whilst it will not answer every problem on every high street, we do think it is a major step forward as it gives clear guidance as to what can be done at a local level that can lead to measurable improvements in success.

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In their paper *Improving the vitality and viability of the UK High Street by 2020: identifying priorities and a framework for action*, Cathy Parker, Nikos Ntounis, Steve Millington, Simon Quin, and Fernando Castillo-Villar discuss the key findings stemming from the High Street UK 2020 project. Based upon a systematic literature review, and using an engaged scholarship approach, the authors identify 201 factors that influence the vitality and viability of town centres. Through the use of the Delphi technique involving a panel of 20 retail experts, this longer list of factors is further distilled into the top 25 priorities for action. The authors further create and present a strategic framework for town centre regeneration, which comprises repositioning, reinventing, rebranding and restructuring strategies, and is termed the “4Rs of regeneration”. The aspects of this framework are discussed in further depth in several other papers within this issue. The paper concludes by demonstrating the impact of these priority factors and the framework on partner towns so far, and it thus has vital implications for bridging the gap between academic literature and practice for the revitalisation of UK high streets.

Turning to the next paper, which is focused on methodology, Nikos Ntounis and Cathy Parker discuss *Engaged scholarship on the High Street: the case of HSUK2020*. Here, they argue that engaged scholarship provides an effective means through which to tackle the “wicked problem” of High Street change. They explain that engaged scholarship is a participatory form of research which involves the co-production of knowledge between academics, practitioners, citizens and other place stakeholders. Drawing upon Van de Ven’s diamond model of engaged scholarship, the authors explore the case of the High Street UK 2020 project. They illustrate how, through using engaged scholarship, a greater understanding of the factors impacting the vitality and viability of high streets was attained. The authors, in turn, contribute insights into how engaged scholarship can offer an alternative method of conducting research in place management which can generate enhanced stakeholder collaboration.

In *Repositioning the High Street: evidence and reflection from the UK*, Steve Millington and Nikos Ntounis seek to illustrate how local stakeholders involved in place management can respond to High Street decline through a strategy of repositioning. The paper begins by outlining perspectives on repositioning from the extant literature. The authors then draw on evidence from ten UK towns who participated in the High Street UK 2020 project, to reveal how repositioning involves more than just taking a snapshot profile of a place, since a dynamic approach is needed. Furthermore, the complexities involved in analysing and understanding repositioning and developing coherent strategies is demonstrated in the paper. The authors thus argue for the importance of collaboration and knowledge-sharing between stakeholders in devising repositioning strategies and improving places. Consequently, the paper contributes understandings of how town centre stakeholders collect, interpret and analyse data, and the challenges, opportunities and practicalities involved in developing and implementing repositioning strategies.

In their paper *How to reinvent the High-Street: evidence from the HS2020*, Costas Theodoridis, Nikos Ntounis and John Pal draw upon findings from the High Street UK 2020 project to critically discuss the extensive retail-led changes facing British high streets and town centres, and how this has led to examples of reinvention. With reference to various retail change theories discussing both institutional- and consumer-led change, the authors demonstrate how reinvention is a natural learning process, which can result in the emergence of places that are more inclusive and meaningful to stakeholders. The paper argues that, to positively impact the High Street, stakeholders involved in place management should embrace and attempt to learn from town centre change, rather than resisting such changes. The authors contribute to the theories of retail change literature, in
addition to providing useful suggestions to practitioners interested in learning how to deal with high street change.

Next, Nikos Ntounis and Mihalis Kavaratzis seek to develop a broader understanding of place branding in their paper *Re-branding the High Street: the place branding process and reflections from three UK towns*. The authors present a holistic place branding process including the interrelated stages of research, deliberation, consultation, action and communication. They further relate these place branding stages to the rebranding process of three UK towns participating in the High Street UK 2020 project (Alsager, Altrincham and Holmfirth). The paper demonstrates the significance of the initial research stage of the place branding process, and how the place branding process discussed in the paper can help places to mitigate identity issues. The authors also illustrate the effectiveness of participatory place branding involving a range of engaged stakeholders sharing knowledge and expertise. The paper thus offers a novel practical grounding on participatory place branding concepts and theories.

Finally, in *Restructuring: Planning and governance dimensions of high street and town centre regeneration*, Deborah Peel and Cathy Parker examine the role of restructuring in addressing the contemporary challenges impacting UK high streets. The paper first reviews the literature surrounding restructuring from a planning and governance perspective, and draws upon the theoretical concepts of “resilience” and “wicked issues” to better understand high street change. Drawing upon action research involving interventions in selected locations, and workshops with engaged practitioners and community actors, the authors argue for a restructuring approach to addressing the issues currently facing the high street. The paper further contends that such an approach should involve planning and governance arrangements which are sensitive and multi-faceted to respond to the complex changes happening within town centres and high streets. The authors, therefore, contribute fresh insights into the people and partnership aspects of place management.

We hope you find the contents of this special High Street UK 2020 project useful. There are additional resources for town centre stakeholders available at www.placemanagement.org. Thanks to Professor Cathy Parker, the Principal Investigator for the project and her team at the Institute of Place Management at Manchester Metropolitan University, for undertaking such a worthwhile piece of work.

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Improving the vitality and viability of the UK High Street by 2020
Identifying priorities and a framework for action

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to document the results and the impact of the ESRC-funded High Street UK 2020 (HSUK2020), a project designed to take the existing academic knowledge relating to retail and high street change directly to UK High Streets, to improve local decision-making and, ultimately, their vitality and viability.

Design/methodology/approach – Through a systematic literature review, and by following the tenets of engaged scholarship, the authors identified 201 factors that influence the vitality and viability of town centres. Through the consensus-building Delphi technique, a panel of 20 retail experts identified the top 25 priorities for action.

Findings – Taking a place management approach led to the development of a more strategic framework for regeneration, which consisted of repositioning, reinventing, rebranding and restructuring strategies (4R’s of regeneration). Collaboration with the project towns resulted in identification of the strategy area that would
add the most value, and the impact of the 4Rs and the top 25 priorities is demonstrated via numerous town examples.

**Originality/value** – Knowledge exchange projects, such as High Street UK2020, have an important contribution to make, not by developing even more theory that is unlikely to get utilised, instead their contribution is to bring existing theory into practical use.

**Keywords** Retailing, High street, Knowledge exchange, Place management

**Paper type** Research paper

**Introduction**

UK High Streets are facing a period of turbulent change. The global economic crisis of 2007-2009 along with the development of out-of-town and online retailing have directly affected the vitality and viability of high streets, leading to store closures and unemployment (Hart *et al.*, 2013). The enormity and complexity of the problem has made it difficult for high street stakeholders to respond effectively. Therefore, this paper argues that it is necessary for academic scholarship not only to develop theory but also to demonstrate how theoretical concepts can be used to better inform practice. The goal of this paper is thus to make an academic contribution that is useful to practitioners and policymakers trying to effect positive change. To meet this need, the ESRC-funded High Street 2020 UK project set out to take existing academic knowledge relating to retail centre change directly to UK High Streets, to improve local decision-making and, ultimately, their vitality and viability.

Ten partner locations[1] were selected to work with a team of academics from five universities[2]. Full details of the methodology used can be found in another paper in this special issue *HSUK2020: A model of engaged scholarship* (Ntounis and Parker, 2017), but in summary, the project was carried out in three stages. First, through a systematic review of the literature and a more engaged model of scholarship, the project identified 201 factors that influence the performance of the UK High Street. Second, from this longlist of 201 factors, a combination of experts and the consensus-building Delphi technique distilled the top 25 priorities for action that local stakeholders should focus on. Finally, given the disparate nature of the evidence base, a framework for high street regeneration (repositioning, reinventing, rebranding and restructuring) was built by the research team and applied in the partner towns to give a more coherent and strategic steer for action in the medium to longer term. The paper ends with a brief summary of some of the impact the project has had so far and our overall reflections on the experience.

**A brief history of retail centre research**

Despite the claims that high streets and towns centres have undergone dramatic changes recently (Wrigley and Lambiri, 2014), dramatic changes have been a constantly recurruring theme in research into retail centres. In the 1920s and 1930s, early research relevant to retail centres came from economists studying agglomeration (Hotelling, 1929; Reilly, 1931) in response to increased urbanisation or geographers studying consumers and travel (Christaller, 1933), as a result of rising car ownership. The principle here being that there are benefits to both the consumer and retailer of co-location. For the consumer, collections of shops are associated with a reduction of effort (Hotelling, 1929) as people can just visit one location rather than have to travel to many. Co-location of similar stores also allows the consumer to comparison shop (Harris and Shonkwiler, 1997) and reduce uncertainties (McLafferty and Ghosh, 1986). For the retailer, agglomerations offer supply-side-type benefits, through, for example, decreasing labour and other input costs (Marshall, 1890) or by the sharing of facilities and infrastructure such as car-parking (Teller and Reutterer,
2008) or transport modes (Brockman, 2008). As The Law of Retail Gravitation (Reilly, 1931) states, the bigger the centre, the more attractive it is and the more successful it will be in attracting customers from a specific catchment area (Carruthers, 1967; Dennis et al., 2002; Reilly, 1931; Teller and Schnedlitz, 2012). The study of retail centre attractiveness has since been extended to include non-traditional centres, such as out-of-town retail parks. For example, Eppli and Shilling (1996) found that in keeping with findings from traditional retail agglomerations, larger shopping centres attract more consumers than smaller shopping centres.

The spatial/economic models of the 1920s and 1930s that dominated retail centre research gradually began to be augmented by more information about groups of consumers. As the 1930s unfolded, initial attempts to understand footfall in a more sophisticated fashion began. Meserole (1935) took into account qualitative variability in pedestrian traffic (such as level of affluence, time of day and proportion of children). The relationships between geographical and catchment areas were further investigated to assist retail managers in the selection of appropriate retailing mixes and strategies based on the geography, demand and heterogeneity of these trade areas (Rosenbloom, 1976). Segmentation and targeting are still seen as crucial when developing marketing and communications activities for retail centres wanting to improve their performance (Teller et al., 2008; Warnaby et al., 2005; Westbrook and Black, 1985).

During the 1940s, the need to identify trade drivers for store location and developments became increasingly important, and quantitative methods of city classifications, based on the activity of greatest importance for each city/town (manufacturing cities, retail centres, diversified cities, wholesale centres, university towns, etc.) and relating it to the kind of business, were proposed (Harris, 1943). These classifications progressed into hierarchical classifications of shopping centres and retail outlets based on number of stores and net attraction of the centres’ locations (Carruthers, 1957, 1967), physical characteristics of retail locations (Brown, 1992), number of multiple, comparison goods retailers (Reynolds and Schiller, 1992) and on types of goods sold and types of shopping trips (Guy, 1998b). These classifications can benefit centre development by understanding consumer demand, forecasting future trends and developing appropriate retail mixes, store designs and local marketing strategies (Wood and Reynolds, 2012).

Also during the 1940s, the rise of chain stores continued rapidly at the expense of independents. Better merchandising, marketing, lower pricing and ability to operate on a lower profit margin, as well as advanced location selection, training, productivity, distribution and public relations with consumers (Beattie, 1943; Beckley, 1949; Jones, 1948; Phillips, 1941), are some of the factors that still drive chain store expansion into the current century (Karamychev and van Reeven, 2009). In contrast, the negative impact that large-scale retailing can pose to a local economy began to be identified (Phillips, 1941). Restrictions and the first signs of local resistance started to emerge in favour of local merchants with the creation of anti-chain store movements and the rise of the “localist” ideology (Schragger, 2005). Local resistance is still in evidence in some town centres (Hallsworth and Worthington, 2000) in an attempt to support local businesses as well as long-term town prosperity (Pryor and Grossbart, 2005). However, the overall impact of chain stores on local businesses is not clear as town centres can react differently (both positively or negatively) to these forces of change (Henderson, 2011; Wrigley et al., 2009).

The 1950s saw the introduction of the enclosed, climate-controlled mall (Jackson, 1996) and the scientific study of this new channel began to emerge in the literature, firstly with investigating locational processes used in selecting shopping centres’ sites (Kelley, 1956). Subsequently, with the spread of the mall during the 1960s, researchers investigated factors
such as mall strategies and shopping goods (Dommermuth and Cundiff, 1967), shoppers’
movements outside their local retail areas (Herrmann and Beik, 1968), the influence of drive
time in shopping centre preference (Brunner and Mason, 1968) and retail centre patronage
(Moore and Mason, 1969).

In the 1970s, retail decentralisation was also starting to occur in the UK and Europe; part
of the retail revolution changed retail geographies of cities mainly due to technological,
organisational and marketing changes, as well as a loosening of planning constraints
(Bromley and Thomas, 1993; Collis et al., 2000) and other forms of retail deregulation, such
as the outlawing of retail price maintenance. In an increasingly competitive retail
environment, with a growing array of stores and channels, retail researchers responded by
investigating non-retail-related consumer motivations to shop at these centres, including
physical facilities and clientele (Hansen and Deutscher, 1977), cleanliness, presence/quality
of bars, restaurants, leisure/sport facilities (Gentry and Burns, 1977; Moore and Lochhead,
1997) and availability of child-minding centres/baby parks (MacLaurin, 1974). While non-
retail related factors were increasingly hypothesised to influence store/centre choice,
according to Teller and Reutterer (2008, p. 134), retail remained a key driver of centre
success, as “(f)ood and entertainment doesn’t drive shoppers’ evaluations of satisfaction
with retail centres/streets. Shops do”. Nevertheless, parking availability and quality,
convenience and functionality are still important attributes for car-borne shoppers and
partially justify their preference for out-of-town shopping centres rather than town centres
(Reimers, 2013).

With more out-of-town development, UK researchers (such as Clarke et al., 2006; Guy,
1998a; Whysall, 1995) assessed its impact on traditional centres, mirroring previous
research in the USA where the “move-to-the-suburbs” trend had hit major downtowns hard
(Pratt and Pratt, 1960). However, it is not just out-of-town developments that have impacted
upon the UK High Street. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, UK urban centres were
developed to incorporate covered malls and multi-level shopping (Jones and Orr, 1999). The
widespread adoption of a US out of-town format in many UK towns has been heavily
criticised. For example, as Hobday (1982, p. 14) asserts, “Large scale retail experience has
been mistakenly applied to smaller town centres, which have totally different problems and
needs”.

During the 1980s, important changes such as the rise of female employment, increasing
car ownership and suburbanisation of population led to an increasing length of major
grocery shopping trips (Guy, 1985). Researchers also started to more thoroughly examine
the experiential and behavioural perspectives of consumer behaviour (Gabbott and Hogg,
1994), such as unplanned impulse/compulsive buying (Weinberg and Gottwald, 1982;
O’Guinn and Faber, 1989) or browsing behaviour in retail establishments (Bloch and
Richins, 1983). These studies highlighted the importance of shopping centre/mall design and
the role of the built environment in streets/malls in facilitating consumption (Gottdiener,
1986). Marketing innovations such as instant credit, credit cards, cash machines and 24-h
retailing (Rook, 1987) also contributed to the rise of impulse buying and further increased
consumers’ demand for convenience, which in turn fuelled the development of more out-of-
town malls, supermarkets and retail parks. This eventually triggered government action
against edge- and out-of-town retail development (Reynolds and Schiller, 1992).

Planning policy interventions to encourage development in the “town centre first”, the
town centre management movement was instigated (Jones, 1990). Originally financed by
major retailers who saw themselves as long-term high street channel members (such as
Boots and Sainsbury’s), the “philosophy” of managing and marketing the high street came
directly from innovations in shopping centre management (Martin, 1982; Morris, 1988) and
the improvement of tenant/manager relations (Prendergast et al., 1987). The premise being cleaner and safer centres, with retailers working in partnership (Williams, 1995), would attract more visitors (Jones, 1990). Retail-led regeneration continued to be the major driver of town and city centre development in the 1990s (Findlay and Sparks, 2008). Researchers, in turn, began to investigate stakeholder power (Pal and Sanders, 1997) and motivations.

In the new millennium, the growth of the internet as a shopping channel has prompted an increasing focus on the “USP” of the high street, with researchers identifying reputation (Hart et al., 2013), place marketing (Kavaratzis, 2007), heritage (Whitehead et al., 2006) and urban design (De Nisco and Warnaby, 2014) as important components. Other authors have looked at the opportunities for local shopping that may come from, for example, an ageing population (De Kervenoael et al., 2006) or an increasing interest from retail into local corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities (Oppewal et al., 2006). Alongside this has been more interest in the models of partnership that are adopted to facilitate collaboration (Coca-Stefaniak et al., 2009) and improve the centre experience, such as the adoption of business improvement districts (De Magalhães, 2012). However, this is against a back-drop of a technical turn and is focussing upon the potential for, and integration of, digital technologies (Fletcher et al., 2016) as well as the use of big data (Kitchin, 2014) and application of “smart” solutions (Graham and Peleg, 2017).

The research problem
Our brief review of retail centre research demonstrates that high streets and town centres are subject to a staggering number of forces of change. The difficulties localities face in tackling decline is, in part, due to the complexity and diversity of the problem (Peel, 2010). The people who need to manage the resultant changes in spatial requirement must also understand the complexity of forces that influence change (Clarke et al., 1997; Hernandez et al., 1998; Pioch and Byrom, 2004); the multi-disciplinary nature of the evidence base (Palmer et al., 2006); and the multitude of stakeholders (Pal and Sanders, 1997) that make up the high street if they are to play a proactive role in shaping its future. The problem is that academic and professional knowledge is fragmented, and the study of retail change in particular geographic locations is limited (Wang, 2011).

As urban change is not consistently underpinned by reliable information (Wrigley and Lambiri, 2014), the main aim of the High Street UK 2020 project was to channel existing academic knowledge relating to retail centre change directly to decision makers in individual locations. In particular, the project partners wanted to know what factors/trends were having the most impact upon their high streets and what they could do about these. The approach was informed by the work of Webber, who, in his seminal paper “The Myth of rationality: development planning reconsidered”, questions the model of development planning and concludes that comprehensive development planning is blocked on all sides by insufficient knowledge (Webber, 1983). He observed that there is usually a lack of factual data on extant conditions and little explanatory (causal) theory resulting in limited instrumental knowledge (Webber, 1983; also see Slater et al., 2012). Previous research has also identified that many initiatives to support the high street are not nuanced enough to meet the needs of the locality (Byrom et al., 2000; Hudson-Davies et al., 2002; Parker et al., 2003). Therefore, the project worked directly with ten locations, facilitating the exchange of knowledge through the range of methods outlined below.
Method
To improve high street decision-making through exchanging knowledge of relevance and rigour between high street stakeholders and researchers, we applied a model of engaged scholarship. Engaged scholarship is a participative form of research for obtaining the views of key stakeholders to understand a complex problem in its particular context (Van de Ven, 2007). This informed our research methods, as we engaged, communicated and exchanged knowledge and ideas with academics, practitioners and local people. This engaged scholarship provides a useful model of high street performance that not only resonated with the “on the ground” reality (Rescher, 2003) but also could be easily interpreted by all high street stakeholders and inform towns’ development plans.

The aim of the research had already been agreed across the project to understand what factors/trends impacted upon high streets and what could be done in response to these. Due to the complexity of forces that shape the high street, no one study had ever attempted to examine all these concurrently. Therefore, to identify the factors, a systematic literature review was undertaken. All the methodological details of the project are contained within a separate paper in this special issue: “HSUK2020: A model of engaged scholarship” (Ntounis and Parker, 2017). However, in brief, the parameters for the review included any peer-reviewed study, published in English, that investigated a factor and related this to retail centre performance, which, for the purposes of the project, we interpreted as “vitality and viability” – a common interpretation of retail centre performance (Barata-Salgueiro and Erkip, 2014).

The findings from the systematic literature review were then reviewed by the partner towns during a full day workshop, with the people present contributing 50 additional factors that they felt, from their practical experience, were missing from our literature review (Parker et al., 2014). This then resulted in a final list of 201 factors that influence the vitality and viability of retail centres. Although this list was of interest to the town stakeholders, it could not help them prioritise their actions. What the stakeholders really wanted to know was:

RQ1. How much impact does each factor have on vitality and viability?

RQ2. How much influence could the high street (local stakeholders) have over the factor?

A rank order of factors, in terms of:
- their impact on vitality and viability; and
- the influence the location has over the factor was established through the use of the Delphi Technique and a panel of 22 leading retail experts (academics and practitioners).

As stated previously, the full methodology is written up as a separate paper in this special issue (Ntounis and Parker, 2017), as the focus of this paper is the project’s findings and application. This ranking was used to develop a model of high street action (High Street UK 2020) for the ten locations. The first stage of the project culminated in a series of local workshops in the ten locations, bringing together retailers and local actors and agencies to use the model to understand the nature of the retail challenge faced by that location and to agree some short-term priorities for action.

The second stage of the project focused upon building a framework for managing medium to longer-term change (interpreted as regeneration or development) from the range of literatures that contain empirical findings relating to interventions. Leading academic experts, who acted as visiting researchers in the project, informed the development of this framework. The research team reviewed and distilled the evidence relating to development interventions and
Results

After two rounds of the Delphi process, consensus over both the impact upon and influence over rankings was reached for 191 of 201 of the factors. This 95 per cent consensus level was deemed acceptable by the project team when compared to similar Delphi studies, and the consensus scores were transferred to the model (a full list of factors with their Delphi scores are contained in Appendix 1). Where consensus had not been reached, the mean scores for these factors were calculated using respondents’ scores from both rounds. Plotting each factor on the two axis (impact and influence) generates the scattergram in Figure 1 with four quadrants that the project team along with partners labelled “Get on with it!”, “Live with it!”, “Ignore it!” and “Forget it!”.

Identifying priorities for action

The “Get on with it!” quadrant represents all the factors that the Delphi respondents identified as ones that could be influenced by local stakeholders. The factors in this quadrant are also the ones that have greater influence on high street vitality and viability.
The very crowded nature of the quadrant means many of the factors identified through the systematic literature review and by our HSUK2020 partners are located here. On the one hand, this is heartening, as one hopes that academics will study those factors of most relevance to High Street change. On the other hand, there are still 99 factors in this area. A number of our high street partners (the people that had to put these findings into practice) found this number overwhelming and off-putting.

To bring the number down to one perceived as more manageable, we proceeded to identify the 25 priority actions within this quadrant. These were identified through combining factors that were grouped into meaningful categories, both statistically and in terms of face validity (Ntounis and Parker, 2017). The Top 25 priorities for high street action are presented in Table I. Priorities presented in capitals represent two or more of the original 201 factors. Priorities identified in lower case represent just one factor. The High Street UK 2020 towns used this list to audit their performance and identify areas that they could start to work on straight away. Average feedback from the 180 delegates that attended the workshops to the question “it is helpful to know what factors we can influence locally” was 4.5/5. The overall score for “how worthwhile was the workshop” was 4.49/5. The score for how much the workshop would help future town centre decision-making was 4.24/5.

Identifying a framework for regeneration

Utilising the Delphi Technique, and engaging experts from a range of disciplines (retail, geography, planning, urban regeneration, public administration, management, marketing, etc.), fostered cross-disciplinary knowledge exchange, helping to broaden the “real-world” understanding of a research problem in context (the changing nature of the high street). A range of other stakeholders were also involved in the identification of the 25 priorities for action (Table I), for example, retailers, retail property owners, consultants, town centre managers, economic development professionals, Councillors and MPs. The 25 priorities were practically orientated and, given their ability to be controlled or influenced at a town level, were fairly internally focussed. This posed a barrier to a more strategic attempt to guide regeneration in the towns. One of the fundamental premises that drives regeneration in town centres is the competitive tension between towns and cities (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990; van den Berg and Braun, 1999), which is obviously externally focussed. Likewise, retailing is one of the many factors identified as necessary to a place’s attempt to attract capital from elsewhere (Niedomysl and Jonasson, 2012). The next stage of the project entailed taking more of a discipline-led approach to the development of a more strategic framework for regeneration that took account of the more meso and macro factors and trends that were not the focus of the 25 priorities for action.

In addition to the core project team, four leading academics representing discipline or sub-discipline areas were engaged as visiting researchers to help develop more of a strategic approach to managing change, which still complemented the 25 priorities for action. Professor Deborah Peel summarised literatures on planning and governance; Dr Jonathan Reynolds provided insight on economic geography and retailing; Dr Mihalis Kavaratzis undertook a literature review on place marketing and branding; and John Pal summarised relevant developments in retailing and services marketing. Subsequent discussion between all the academics on the project led to the development of a new framework: “The 4 R’s of Regeneration” (Figure 2). These R’s consist of repositioning, reinventing, rebranding and restructuring strategies, and each was the focus of an expert workshop, the content of which is summarised below. Each of the 4Rs is important as town centres adapt to change and seek to improve their prognosis. Through reviewing all the notes from the town workshops, strategic documents, and in partnership with the local project stakeholders, the research
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>Considerations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <em>Activity hours</em></td>
<td>Ensuring the centre is open when the catchment needs it. What are the shopping hours? Is there an evening economy? Do the activity hours of the centre match the needs of the catchment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <em>Appearance</em></td>
<td>Improving the quality of the visual appearance and aesthetics. How clean is the centre? What is the quality of the public realm?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <em>Retailers</em></td>
<td>Offering the right type and quantity of retailers. What retailers are represented (this includes retailers of products and services)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <em>Vision and strategy</em></td>
<td>Having a common vision and some leadership. Do the High Street stakeholders collaborate? Is the vision incorporated in local plans? Is the vision adopted in stakeholders plans?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. <em>Experience</em></td>
<td>Considering the quality of the experience. Measuring levels of service quality and visitor satisfaction. What is the overall image or offer of the centre?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. <em>Management</em></td>
<td>Building capacity to get things done. Is there effective management of the shopping centre(s) and town centre?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. <em>Merchandise</em></td>
<td>Meeting the needs of the catchment. What is the range and quality of goods on offer?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. <em>Necessities</em></td>
<td>Ensuring basic facilities are present and maintained. Is there appropriate car-parking; amenities; general facilities, like places to sit down and toilets?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. <em>Anchors</em></td>
<td>The presence of an anchor which drives footfall. This could be retail (like a department store) or could be a busy transport interchange or large employer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. <em>Networks and partnerships with council</em></td>
<td>Presence of strong networks and effective formal or informal partnerships. Do stakeholders communicate and trust each other? Can the council facilitate action (not just lead it)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. <em>Diversity</em></td>
<td>A multi-functional centre. What attractions are there, apart from retail? What is the tenant mix and tenant variety?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. <em>Walking</em></td>
<td>The “walkability” of the centre. Are linked trips between areas possible – or are the distances too great? Are there other obstacles that stop people walking?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. <em>Entertainment and leisure</em></td>
<td>An entertainment and leisure offer. What is it? Is it attractive to various segments of the catchment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. <em>Attractiveness</em></td>
<td>The “pulling power” of a centre. Can it attract people from a distance?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. <em>Place assurance</em></td>
<td>Getting the basics right. Does the centre offer a basic level of customer service; is this consistent? Or do some operators, or parts of the offer, let this down?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. <em>Accessible</em></td>
<td>Ease of reach. How convenient is the centre to access? Is it accessible by a number of different means, e.g. car, public transport, cycling?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. <em>Place marketing</em></td>
<td>Communicating the offer. How does the centre market and promote itself? Do enough stakeholders communicate in a way that builds a coherent message? How well does the centre orientate visitors and encourage flow – with signage and guides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. <em>Comparison/convenience</em></td>
<td>The amount of comparison shopping opportunities compared to convenience (usually in percentage terms). Is this sustainable?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. <em>Recreational space</em></td>
<td>The amount and quality of recreational areas and public space/open space. Are there places that are uncommodified? Where people can enjoy spending time without spending money?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. <em>Barriers to entry</em></td>
<td>Refers to obstacles that make it difficult for interested retailers to enter the local market. What is the location doing to make it easier for new businesses to come onto the High Street?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. <em>Chain vs Independent</em></td>
<td>Number of multiples stores and independent stores in the retail mix of a centre/High Street. Is this suitably balanced?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. Top 25 priorities for high street action (continued)
team identified the strategy area (or R) that could add most value to the existing place management activity, in each of the ten towns. In Market Rasen and Morley this was repositioning. For Ballymena and Barnsley it was reinventing. For Alsager, Altrincham and Holmfirth it was rebranding. Finally, In Congleton, St George Bristol and Wrexham it was restructuring. The 4R’s are explored in much more detail within this special issue, as each one has an article dedicated to it.

Repositioning is a strategy focused on identifying a purpose or vision through the effective gathering and analysis of relevant data. Rapid economic, political and social changes are most likely to lead places to repositioning strategies that will allow them to identify potential competitive advantages (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008) or counteract decline (Smith, 2004). Therefore, the focus of the expert workshop was on understanding the
forces of change and the value of unique responses that reposition individual high streets and to build on distinct capabilities (such as local identity), whilst remaining accommodative of future trends (such as an ageing population or the growth of m-commerce). Repositioning could thus lead to town centres that are more resilient (Wrigley and Dolega, 2011). The expert workshop drew heavily from theory found in economic geography and principles of market research. An effective analysis of customer needs and the local economy can help high streets to recognise the failures of previous strategies, identify new ways of expanding their economic activities and help them to find opportunities for improving existing retail stores (Kures and Ryan, 2012).

A sustainable or resilient high street is one that adapts to the changing needs and expectations of customers and can identify useful metrics related to the local catchment and demographic change (Wood and Reynolds, 2012). Obtaining up-to-date and relevant data enables towns to position themselves relevant to their catchment, to other towns and to trends, such as the increase in internet shopping and the concentration of comparison retail in the major centres. However, the problem for the HSUK2020 project towns focussing upon repositioning was that the current information or data they had or, more often than not, the information or data that were collected on their behalf, was not useful for strategic repositioning. There was very little focus upon the type of information that would enable them to anticipate and adapt to change, like footfall data, for example. These metrics are important to explain the preference of the users for specific shopping streets (Ercoskun and Ozuduru, 2014) and to support the development of initiatives aimed at changing the nature of, or reinventing, the high street (Carmona, 2015).

Reinventing is a strategy that refers to taking action. It is the ability of retail locations to adapt and innovate in unfavourable and uncertain contexts, e.g. the declining high street. The expert workshop drew heavily from retailing and marketing literature – as any new developments should be guided by the marketing principle of meeting the needs/wants of identified target audiences (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990). Likewise, retailing is an important element of the urban place product and “reinventing” this sector along with improvements to complimentary elements of place can contribute to a better understanding of the formation of the “holistic” place product (Warnaby et al., 2005). Retail stores have used different reinventing strategies such as extending opening hours, segmenting store offers to new market niches or reducing the size of the establishment to adapt to the physical conditions of the high street (Pal and Byrom, 2003). These strategies are just as applicable to retail locations, as they are to retail stores. The “reinventing” process of urban places should be built on activities that aim to revitalise a place’s identity and image; identity and image can be seen as both static (for communicative purposes in a fixed time) and dynamic, which recognises the uniqueness of each place and the difference in each stakeholder’s view about a place (Kalandides, 2011; Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). It is the latter view of identities and images that can be used as a driver for reinventing places such as high streets and city centres; a framework built on these premises can unarguably assist the development of rejuvenated, competitive retailing spaces, which will merge innovation and local place identity and will be meaningful for all stakeholders (Coca-Stefaniak et al., 2009).

After the economic collapse of 2008, most of the ten towns in the project were suffering from a lack of innovation because there was little investment, thus making reinventing difficult. However, by focussing upon more temporary or pop-up change, the reinventing process could begin, even with limited budgets. One of the most important discoveries of the project was the role of flexible and adaptable space in town centres, such as market places, that could be “reinvented” on different days of the week or at different times of the day, to provide a more relevant offer and to meet the needs and expectations of the catchment
Undoubtedly, reinventing relied upon changes on the ground, but on their own, these changes were not enough. People need to know about and experience them.

Rebranding focused upon on the communication of image and identity, as previous studies demonstrate that place consumers may find that the place experience meets or exceeds expectations, whilst the image of the place is “problematic” (Blichfeldt, 2005; Selby, 2004; Stachow and Hart, 2010). For the purpose of this project, rebranding tended to focus upon the application of branding, marketing communications and public relations techniques to deliver an improved place image; a sum of beliefs, ideas and impressions in the minds of potential consumers of a place (Kotler and Gertner, 2002). Overall, rebranding was considered as a communicative strategy aimed at managing the reputation of high streets and drew most inspiration from the place marketing literature.

Even though it is impossible to control all the communication media (e.g. word of mouth and direct experience of the consumer with the high street), high street stakeholders developed promotional activities such as advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, public relations, sponsorships, direct marketing and internet to deliver an attractive image (Warnaby and Yip, 2005). Place branding was also considered as the “organising principle” for integrating measures (e.g. events, media relations, residents’ participation). Place branding can evoke favourable place images that transfer emotional and self-expression values, as well as utilitarian attributes to individuals (Caldwell and Freire, 2004). Successful place brand management can lead to positive word-of-mouth and also assist in the transformation of negative images (Hanna and Rowley, 2011; Skinner, 2011). The need to identify how potential stakeholders can co-create the place brand has been the focus of recent developments in place branding (Hatch and Schultz, 2010; Warnaby, 2009), and this aspect was particularly popular amongst the partner towns. High streets, and particularly the retail sector, with the multitude of stakeholders involved in it (e.g. users, brokers and fixers) (Pal and Sanders, 1997), can highlight the desires, needs and views of those stakeholders, which can lead to a better understanding of how place brands are created and evolve (Hanna and Rowley, 2011; Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). In particular, the expert workshop explored stakeholder involvement in the creation, development and ownership of place brands (Kavaratzis, 2012).

The towns that embarked upon a strategy of rebranding, in the short-term anyway, made the most progress. Unlike repositioning, which requires a certain amount of evidence and technical expertise in analysis and reinventing, which needs considerable investment (of money and/or time and effort), rebranding was seen as “quick fix” – a strategy that could unite stakeholders in some focussed effort fairly quickly. Unlike planning, governance or retailing, branding was seen as “free space” that did not need huge amounts of expert skills, knowledge or capital. Nevertheless, despite the initial success of a place branding campaign in one of the towns, it did little to solve the problems of division and the entrenched views amongst stakeholder groups. In fact, the brand became associated with the people using it; a tactic used by the rival group who wanted to undermine the success of the campaign. This highlights the importance of people and power in places and the need to, sometimes, restructure governance arrangements.

Restructuring, focused upon these people/power issues through examining different forms of management and governance, including formal and informal (Coca-Stefaniak et al., 2009; Peel, 2003); regulatory, functional and contractual (Lloyd and Peel, 2008; Peel et al., 2009); and structures for communication/knowledge exchange (Peel and Lloyd, 2008). Consequently, the major point of interest was how the organisations or partnerships that manage high streets can be restructured to facilitate all the changes mentioned so far. Restructuring can be interpreted as a management, governance or collaborative strategy.
focused on understanding the specific role that many parts of the society (i.e. market, government and society) play in the configuration of the high street. The complex nature of the high street requires an effective form of management and leadership capable of creating strategic networks and encouraging the involvement of stakeholders and local community in decision-making processes (De Magalhães, 2012; Peel et al., 2009). Practices that entail both commercial and locational benefits are seen as the best way forward (Bennison et al., 2010). Therefore, restructuring was interpreted to mean the cooperation of place stakeholders and creation of strategic networks and public–private relationships that will nurture conditions for the sustainable development of a place (van den Berg and Braun, 1999; Rainisto, 2003).

Restructuring also involves large urban transformation projects, such as the physical improvements of the town centre. In the case of retailing, the best spaces created from restructuring can enliven the high street and also shape a better image for the place which can enhance retail operations (Pal and Byrom, 2003). However, the drivers of these regeneration projects can often represent quite narrow interests (De Nisco et al., 2008). Therefore, the active involvement of local stakeholders in earlier stages can contribute to their definition, acceptance and, consequently, the success of a regeneration project (Coca-Stefaniak and Bagaeen, 2013). Not surprisingly, restructuring drew primarily from planning and public administration literatures.

Perhaps perceived as the most challenging strategy, the governance structure in one of the towns started to change remarkably quickly. The existing partnership was perceived as not action-orientated enough for some of the retail stakeholders. Therefore, the retailers looked at the 25 priorities for action and identified those they could “get on with”. Speaking at a Town Centre Forum Meeting, the Chairman Nigel Lewis said:

This arose as a result of the work that Manchester (Metropolitan) University had done. They found there are 25 priorities and how we would tackle those. We had a meeting where the university attended, meeting in the council chambers. We broke up into small groups and started actioning things, such as street clean ups, street festivals and we influenced parking charges. We are recognising that the council have officers and members dealing with issues in the town centre, and we have many volunteers. We don’t want to duplicate things and together we want to tackle things that need it and make sure that they are prioritized (Wrexham.com, 2016).

This action changed the dynamic of the partnership considerably, and the town has now gone on to develop a new governance structure to manage town centre activity and development (see below).

As a result of applying the framework in the ten locations it became apparent that there was some relationship between the number of stakeholders that needed to be engaged, the amount of resource that was needed to be invested and the likely success of the approach adopted. Repositioning and reinventing appeared to need less stakeholder involvement than rebranding and restructuring. On the other hand, reinventing and restructuring needed significantly more resources (money for reinventing and time for restructuring) than repositioning and rebranding. This finding has been introduced into the 4R’s framework in Figure 3.

Impact
Both the 25 priorities, in the short-term, and the 4R’s, in the medium term, have enabled a multitude of stakeholders in towns to get involved in making their high streets more vital and viable. Over 180 people attended workshops in their local town centre to contribute to the High Street UK 2020 projects. From now on, any other high street or town centre can use the list of 25 priority actions as a health-check or to focus activity and resources on interventions
that will have the most impact on vitality and viability. The findings from the High Street UK 2020 project have been very popular, and the team have been invited to more than 25 conferences and events worldwide to speak to a collective audience of over 5,000 people.

The “good news” that has been generated from this project is also worth mentioning. Many local papers and radio stations tend to focus on “doom and gloom” stories about the High Street. However, the combination of the range of stakeholders involved, the kudos of quality research and the workshops held in towns made for interesting local news stories. The local media in each of the ten towns covered the High Street UK 2020 project at least once. In total, the project resulted in 80 news articles, in local papers, on local radio and on websites, such as BBC Wales. Whilst getting favorable media coverage was a welcome outcome, the main purpose of the project was to improve the vitality and viability of specific high streets, through the process of knowledge exchange. Whilst the other articles in the special issue cover this process in more detail, we include a brief summary of some of the impact the project has had “on the ground”, using the framework of the 4Rs (repositioning, reinventing, rebranding and restructuring).

Morley approached repositioning in several ways. They worked closely with a wide range of stakeholders to share and analyse information and data, including the nearby out of town shopping centre. The group also looked into how to gather missing data, which resulted in a footfall counter being installed in the main street (positioned on the local MPs office as she saw how this would benefit the centre). A better understanding of the town and how it was performing has enabled many new initiatives to be taken. Clear evidence of demand led to the introduction of some additional car parking (Morley Observer, 2016a), whereas trader concerns about quieter shopping areas, in addition to the finding that “89 per cent of all Morley businesses are independently run, allowing the town to offer a bespoke shopping experience” (Morley Observer, 2016b), led to the development of a new monthly outdoor food market.
Ballymena concentrated on reinventing through strengthening its retail offer. The 25 priorities for action were used extensively to focus effort and resources on interventions that would bring more shoppers to the centre. Reinventing Ballymena as a shopping destination has been very successful, as:

Ballymena celebrated New Year with news that the town centre’s overall customer footfall was up 8.1 per cent for December 2016 compared to the same period for 2015. The comprehensive Christmas marketing campaign by Ballymena BID was to encourage shoppers, the local community and visitors to make Ballymena their destination of choice (BallymenaMeans, 2017).

Altrincham focused upon rebranding, and the ambition, contained in Altrincham Town Centre Public Realm Strategy, was to make Altrincham:

“[...] the Modern Market Town" an integral part of people’s everyday lives and a place people can be proud of again. Our aim is to change people’s perceptions of the town from one which is negative to overriding positive.

Unlike other locations where branding straplines remain unattainable pipe-dreams, Altrincham is delivering on the promise of a “modern market town” as it has, according to the local paper, Altrincham Today (2016), developed a retailer and service mix firmly anchored around a hugely successful food market, offering the catchment something special, as well as benefiting from better access and connectivity, with improved transport links and a £19m overhaul of the Altrincham Interchange.

Finally, relevant to restructuring, a Wrexham Town Centre action plan has since been developed by the Wrexham Town Centre Partnership Steering Group in response to the High Street UK 2020 study. This plan has been agreed by the Town Centre Forum, and although it includes actions that are delivered by the Council, its intention is as a partnership plan rather than one specifically articulating the Council’s Vision for Wrexham Town Centre. It was agreed that a single strategy was required that brings together all the Council’s strategies and action plans relating to Wrexham Town Centre, clearly setting out the Council’s priorities for making it a vibrant, safe, accessible and prosperous place for people to live, work and visit.

**Conclusions and reflections**

Our project was timely, as it clearly supported the aim of “ensuring the vitality of town centres” contained within the National Planning Policy Framework 2012; the renewed focus upon town centres found in the regeneration strategies of Scotland and Wales; Northern Ireland’s proposed PPS5; a variety of government initiatives designed to promote innovative and multi-stakeholder approaches to town centre change, namely, the High Street Innovation Fund; the Business Improvement District fund; the Portas Pilots; and the Town Team Partners. By working directly with ten different locations, the project helped the local agents of change (e.g. high street stakeholders in the private, public and third sectors), identify and understand their information requirements and get access to accurate and relevant academic knowledge to improve the quality of decision-making and provide solid academic underpinning to their plans for action.

Identifying 25 generic priorities for action was a very popular approach with the stakeholders. The plethora of existing development plans, public realm strategies, action plans, visions and strategies can confuse people and even alienate them. At best, each document appears to stand alone, and at worst, the documents contradict each other. Given the diversity of people that need to collaborate in the collective goal of high street success, much more thought needs to be given to how actions and strategies are communicated. The
In a similar fashion, our 4Rs framework brought a thorough but complicated evidence base to towns in a more coherent fashion, using our academic experts. Of course, given the complex nature of high street change all these strategies overlap. The underpinning theory and principles we used in the project came from a wide range of literatures. However, our high street stakeholders were not interested in engaging in epistemological debates. They looked to us, as academics, to make some sense of this on their behalf, so they could concentrate on putting theory into action. Having a simple framework, where town stakeholders could enter at any point, meant they could approach regeneration in a way that accommodated the path they had already started to take, be sensitive to how they had started to conceptualise the problem or reflect the amount of people and resources they had to hand. Did they feel they needed more information (repositioning); did they want to get on with something (reinventing); did they need to communicate more effectively (rebranding); or did they need to work out who was responsible for what (restructuring)? Given how disciplines and sub-disciplines “spread”, the theory and principles to answer all these questions are not contained neatly in any one literature stream. Therefore, the chances of practitioners finding comprehensive answers in academic literature are slim. Where do they start looking? Knowledge exchange projects, such as High Street UK2020, have an important contribution to make. The process of engaging more meaningfully with research users not only led to the development of new theory (the 4 R’s framework) but also brought existing theory into practical use, through the 25 priorities. By engaging the stakeholders in the whole project, from design all the way through to dissemination, there is no doubt that the quality of the research questions improved, our data collection and analysis methods benefited, and our ability to transfer this knowledge was significantly amplified. We look forward to measuring the impact this project has had on the vitality and viability of the partner locations in 2020.

Notes

1. The partner towns in the project were Alsager, Altrincham, Ballymena, Barnsley, Bristol (St George), Congleton, Holmfirth, Market Rasen, Morley and Wrexham.

2. The universities that took part were Manchester Metropolitan University, University of Manchester, Oxford University, University of Dundee and University of Leicester.

References


Improving the vitality and viability


Millington, S., Ntounis, N., Parker, C. and Quin, S. (2015), Multifunctional Centres: A Sustainable Role for Town and City Centres, Institute of Place Management, Manchester.


Further reading


CRR (2013), Retail Futures 2018, Centre for Retail Research, Newark, Nottinghamshire.


## Appendix 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence factor</th>
<th>Definition/interpretation used in study</th>
<th>Example study/studies</th>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Footfall</td>
<td>Number of pedestrians counted over a specific time period in a specific location</td>
<td>Warnaby and Yip (2005)</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Accessibility</td>
<td>Centre accessible by a variety of transport modes (walking, bike, car, bus, etc.)</td>
<td>Brockman (2008); Clark (2006)</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>2.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Retailer representation</td>
<td>Types of retailers in centre (goods/services, independents/multiples, etc.)</td>
<td>Wrigley and Dolega (2011)</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>3.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Construction of OOT centre</td>
<td>The construction of out-of-town retail parks or malls</td>
<td>Guy (1998a)</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Convenience</td>
<td>The ability to reach, browse and shop in a centre easily and without much effort</td>
<td>Léo and Philippe (2002)</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>3.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Opening hours</td>
<td>What hours does the town centre, high street, shopping centre, retail park, etc., open?</td>
<td>Hart et al. (2013)</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>3.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Shopping hours</td>
<td>What hours do the shops in the centre open?</td>
<td>Hart et al. (2013)</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>3.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Place attractiveness</td>
<td>Links to the overall attractiveness of an urban place and its incentives for visiting it, e.g. shopping</td>
<td>Teller and Elms (2012)</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>3.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Retailer offer</td>
<td>Retailer representation, large/small, specialist/generalist, high service/no-frills</td>
<td>Brown (1987)</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>3.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Supermarket impact</td>
<td>The impact of supermarket development on small retailers and the High Street</td>
<td>Chulow and Reimers (2009)</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Economy</td>
<td>Refers to the general state of production and supply and supply of money in the country</td>
<td>De Magalhaes (2012)</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>2.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Centre size</td>
<td>Size of centre as a measure of overall drawing power</td>
<td>Yuo et al. (2004)</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>1.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Area development strategies</td>
<td>Ways of redeveloping existing retail centres - e.g. pedestrianisation, new shopping centre, etc.</td>
<td>Kärrholm et al. (2014)</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>3.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. E-retail</td>
<td>The sale of goods and services through the internet</td>
<td>Weltevreden (2007)</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>2.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Range/quality of goods</td>
<td>Range (wide vs narrow) of retail goods on the High Street and the overall or perceived quality of them</td>
<td>Hart et al. (2013)</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>3.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Collaboration</td>
<td>Various stakeholders from different sectors working together for physical, commercial and general improvement of the High Street/Centre</td>
<td>Wood and Reynolds (2012)</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>3.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table AI.

List of factors that influence vitality and viability

(continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence factor</th>
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<td>18. Public transport</td>
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<td>4.30</td>
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<td>19. Attractiveness</td>
<td>The ability of a centre to attract customers from a catchment area</td>
<td>Dennis et al. (2002)</td>
<td>4.29</td>
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<td>20. Centre management</td>
<td>Control, coordination, guidance of a centre’s activities and of its tenants/retailers</td>
<td>Teller and Reutterer (2008)</td>
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<td>21. Sales/turnover</td>
<td>Total amount of retail sales made in a certain period (specific store or all High Street stores, shopping centre revenue, etc.)</td>
<td>Tomalin and Pal (1994)</td>
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<td>22. Connectivity</td>
<td>Refers to the number and quality of connection points between the built-up fabric in the High Street/Centre</td>
<td>Nase et al. (2013)</td>
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<td>23. Location</td>
<td>Spatial positioning of the centre</td>
<td>Coelho and Wilson (1976)</td>
<td>4.26</td>
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<td>25. Service quality</td>
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<td>26. Retail rents</td>
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<td>28. Vacancy rates</td>
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<td>29. Transport route</td>
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<td>30. Barriers to entry</td>
<td>Refers to obstacles that make it difficult for interested retailers to enter the centre</td>
<td>Clarke et al. (1994)</td>
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<td>31. Landlords</td>
<td>Owners of retail, commercial and other types of property</td>
<td>Roberts et al. (2010)</td>
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<td>32. Retail planning policy</td>
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<td>35. Internet/Online shopping</td>
<td>The ability to browse, compare and shop goods and services via the internet rather than going to the actual store</td>
<td>Weltevreden (2007)</td>
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<td>36. Non-retail offer</td>
<td>Total amount of units that are not considered as part of a shopping trip and usually augment it (hair salon, banking, amusements, recreational spaces, etc.)</td>
<td>Teller and Schnedlitz (2012)</td>
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<td>37. Prosperity of town</td>
<td>Links to the financial flourishing of a town’s citizens or the town overall</td>
<td>Wrigley et al. (2009)</td>
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<td>38. Range/quality of shops</td>
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<td>Hart et al. (2013)</td>
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<td>How the physical space is managed to attract retail traffic to shopping centre tenants</td>
<td>Roberts et al. (2010)</td>
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<td>40. Retail flexibility</td>
<td>Degree of adaptation to change type or style of retailing activities</td>
<td>Findlay and Sparks (2008)</td>
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<td>41. Distance to centre</td>
<td>Amount of linear space between the consumer and the city centre</td>
<td>Nase et al. (2013)</td>
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<td>42. Finance</td>
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<td>Peel (2003)</td>
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<td>43. Car-parking</td>
<td>The number or availability of parking spaces</td>
<td>van der Waerden et al. (1998)</td>
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<td>44. Catchment size</td>
<td>Whether a catchment area of a centre is large or small</td>
<td>Wood and Reynolds (2012)</td>
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<td>45. Comparison/convenience</td>
<td>The amount of comparison shopping opportunities compared to convenience (usually in percentage terms)</td>
<td>Reimers and Clulow (2004)</td>
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<td>46. Consumer trends</td>
<td>Habits or behaviours currently prevalent among consumers of goods or services</td>
<td>Allport (2005)</td>
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<td>47. Retail choice</td>
<td>Links to everyday consumer patterns and how they alternate and influence retail offer</td>
<td>Clarke et al. (2004)</td>
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<td>48. Retail diversity</td>
<td>A mix of multiples and independents, range of goods, a strong anchor</td>
<td>Findlay and Sparks (2008)</td>
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<td>49. Linked trips</td>
<td>Consumers’ propensity to visit other stores after fulfilling their main shopping need (e.g. grocery shopping)</td>
<td>Thomas and Bromley (2002)</td>
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<td>50. Anchor stores</td>
<td>Presence of anchor stores – which give locations their basic character and signify importance</td>
<td>Thorpe (1968)</td>
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<td>51. Attractions</td>
<td>Anything that brings people into the centre and is not a part of its fixed retail offer (e.g. Christmas markets, events, museums)</td>
<td>Peel (2003)</td>
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<td>52. Availability of alternative formats</td>
<td>Department stores, speciality stores, discount stores. Linked to cross-shopping and retail offer</td>
<td>Morganosky (1997)</td>
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<td>54. Catchment view/behaviour</td>
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<td>55. Centre image</td>
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<td>56. Employment</td>
<td>The amount of people in the catchment area that have got jobs</td>
<td>Biddulph (2011)</td>
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<td>57. Evening economy</td>
<td>All economic activity taking place in the evening after many people finish daytime employment, such as eating and drinking, entertainment and nightlife</td>
<td>Biddulph (2011)</td>
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<td>58. Monofunctional vs multifunctional</td>
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<td>Irazábal and Chakravarty (2007)</td>
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<td>The provision and type of pedestrian space (streets, open malls, “skywalks”, etc.)</td>
<td>Cui et al. (2013)</td>
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<td>60. Place management</td>
<td>A philosophy of how to improve towns and cities through more flexible and inclusive management</td>
<td>Coca-Stefaniak et al. (2009)</td>
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<td>61. Planning</td>
<td>The strategic management of land and buildings for economic and social benefits</td>
<td>Guy (1998)</td>
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<td>62. Planning blight</td>
<td>Reduction of economic activity or property values in a particular area resulting from expected development or restriction of development</td>
<td>Imrie and Thomas (1997)</td>
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<td>63. Retail innovation</td>
<td>Representation of new forms of retailing (e.g. click and collect)</td>
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<td>64. Retail spend</td>
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<td>65. Tenant mix</td>
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<td>66. Town centre management</td>
<td>Decision of town to use town centre management to coordinate resources and activity</td>
<td>Pal and Sanders (1997)</td>
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<td>67. Visitor satisfaction</td>
<td>Global attitude gained by visiting the high street, a mental process</td>
<td>Léo and Philippe (2002)</td>
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<td>68. Visual appearance</td>
<td>Includes building appearance, lightning, cleanliness, is the centre appealing to people?</td>
<td>Hart et al. (2013)</td>
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<td>69. Location of employment</td>
<td>Refers to whether employers operate in, nearby, or out of the High Street/City Centre</td>
<td>Powe and Hart (2008)</td>
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<td>70. Cross-shopping</td>
<td>Visiting more than one store when visiting a retail centre</td>
<td>Bodkin and Lord (1997)</td>
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<td>71. Population</td>
<td>All the inhabitants at a particular place</td>
<td>Hall (2011)</td>
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<td>72. Partnerships</td>
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<td>Williams (1999), Peel (2003)</td>
<td>4.02</td>
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<td>73. Property ownership</td>
<td>Type of ownership of retail properties in the high street (sole owner, tenant, landlord, etc.)</td>
<td>De Magalhaes (2012)</td>
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<td>74. Recession</td>
<td>The overall impact of the economic downturn on the high street</td>
<td>De Magalhaes (2012)</td>
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<td>75. Safety/crime</td>
<td>A centre KPI measuring perceptions or actual crime including shoplifting</td>
<td>Jones (1990), Hogg et al. (2004)</td>
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<td>77. Household expenditures</td>
<td>The sum of household consumption expenditure and non-consumption expenditures</td>
<td>Thorpe (1968)</td>
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<td>78. Regeneration</td>
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<td>Smith (2004)</td>
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<td>79. Cleanliness</td>
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<td>80. Consumer choice</td>
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<td>81. Familiarity</td>
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<td>Léo and Philippe (2002)</td>
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<td>82. Leisure offer</td>
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<td>Howard (2007)</td>
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<td>Links to the degree of influence on decision-making by various High Street stakeholder groups</td>
<td>Pal and Sanders (1997)</td>
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<td>Links to the volatility of the covenant strength risk ratings of the top 25 retailers</td>
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<td>The degree of change and adaptability of a centre’s built environment and services to meet local conditions, trends and consumer needs</td>
<td>Roberts et al. (2010)</td>
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<td>87. Population density</td>
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<td>Hall (2011)</td>
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<td>Sit et al. (2003)</td>
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<td>90. Liveability</td>
<td>Centres are accessible without a car and consumers can fulfil needs without travelling to another centre</td>
<td>Rotem-Mindali (2012)</td>
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<td>How freely and easily can people move to, from and in the high street/shopping centre</td>
<td>Rotem-Mindali (2012)</td>
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<td>Timmermans et al. (1992)</td>
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<td>93. Structure</td>
<td>Physical layout of centre, store location, external appearance (fascias, etc.)</td>
<td>Dawson (1988)</td>
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<td>94. Community leadership</td>
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<td>Timmermans et al. (1992)</td>
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<td>97. Economic base</td>
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<td>Shields and Deller (1998)</td>
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<td>Facilities that contribute to a retail centre’s/High Street’s convenience</td>
<td>Teller and Reutterer (2008)</td>
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<td>99. Lease lengths</td>
<td>Average time of lease agreements between retailers and landlords for use of retail property</td>
<td>Nase et al. (2013)</td>
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<td>100. Mixed-Use</td>
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<td>Balsas (2008)</td>
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<td>101. Recreational areas/facilities/activities</td>
<td>Areas to relax or simply spend time in and, therefore, satisfy social needs</td>
<td>Teller and Reutterer (2008)</td>
<td>3.76</td>
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<td>102. Retail centre preference</td>
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<td>Clulow and Reimers (2009)</td>
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<td>103. Tourist/visitor attractions</td>
<td>All place attractions that are associated with spending free time, sightseeing, relaxation, leisure, etc.</td>
<td>De Nisco and Napolitano (2006)</td>
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<td>104. Entertainment</td>
<td>All activities that can provide enjoyment and amusement to consumers</td>
<td>Teller et al. (2008)</td>
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<td>105. Networking</td>
<td>Interaction between High Street stakeholders for assistance and support</td>
<td>De Magalhaes (2012)</td>
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<td>106. Retail change</td>
<td>Any change in regulations, infrastructure, technology, consumer behaviour, etc., that influences and alternates the retail offer on the High Street and beyond</td>
<td>Clarke et al. (1994), Pioch and Byrom (2004)</td>
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<td>107. Competition</td>
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<td>Clarke et al. (1994)</td>
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<td>108. Rents turnover</td>
<td>Financial incentive given to tenants in which the rent is calculated by reference to the turnover generated by the tenant</td>
<td>Kirkup and Rafiq (1994)</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>109. Atmosphere</td>
<td>A global assessment of a retail centre, made up of a number of factors such as manoeuvrability, orientation and sales personnel</td>
<td>Teller and Elms (2012)</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>3.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>110. Secondary shopping/edge-of-centre shopping</td>
<td>Any type of shopping/retail activity in secondary locations out of High Street, e.g. Edge of City Centre locations</td>
<td>NRPF (2004), Bennison et al. (2010)</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>2.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>111. Spatial structure</td>
<td>Links to city centre/high street structures, nodal, bi-nodal, multi-nodal and polycentric regions and how they influence hierarchy of centres within metropolitan areas</td>
<td>Bennison and Davies (1980), Williams (1999)</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>1.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>112. Fragmentation</td>
<td>The degree of detachment in the High Street (political, retail, ownership, etc.)</td>
<td>Williams (1999)</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>113. Commercial yields</td>
<td>Level of return on commercial property investment</td>
<td>Hutchison et al. (2008)</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>2.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>114. Consumer culture</td>
<td>The current state that encourages consumption of goods/services</td>
<td>Clarke et al. (2004)</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>2.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>115. Floorspace</td>
<td>Total amount of floor area that is used for retail, leisure and other town centre uses</td>
<td>Gibbs (1987)</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>3.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>117. Store characteristics</td>
<td>Perceptions on characteristics such as store location, environment, staff, etc</td>
<td>Pantano et al. (2010)</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>3.52</td>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>118. Street characteristics</td>
<td>Physical characteristics of the street/route that leads to or contains shopping/retail areas</td>
<td>Borgers and Timmermans (1986)</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>3.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>119. Technology</td>
<td>As an environmental factor that affects retailers, e.g. RFID</td>
<td>Coca-Stefaniak et al. (2005)</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>2.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>120. Travel time</td>
<td>Links to length of trip to the shopping centre, high street, etc.</td>
<td>Rotem-Mindali (2012)</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>121. Type of centre (mall vs street)</td>
<td>Retail parks, shopping centres, malls, out-of-town, etc. Establishment of a business improvement district enabling local businesses, services and council to collaborate</td>
<td>Hart et al. (2013)</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>122. BID's</td>
<td></td>
<td>De Magalhaes (2012)</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>3.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>123. Drive time</td>
<td>Total number of minutes travelling by car to a desired location</td>
<td>Lowe (2000)</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>1.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>124. Number of landlords</td>
<td>Refers to the number of property owners that are renting out High Street premises</td>
<td>Whysall (2011)</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>2.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>125. Place hierarchy</td>
<td>Hierarchy of places based on their centrality and size (national, metropolitan, major regional, minor regional, major district, minor district, etc.)</td>
<td>Reynolds and Schiller (1992), Guy (1998)</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>1.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>126. Real estate ownership</td>
<td>Links to type real estate ownership (single or multiple ownership, commercial company)</td>
<td>Teller and Reutterer (2008)</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>2.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>127. Store development</td>
<td>The process of building, upgrading, remodelling or renovating retail stores</td>
<td>Clarke (2000)</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>128. Engagement</td>
<td>Formal arrangement between High Street stakeholders (e.g. BIDs and council, community)</td>
<td>De Magalhaes (2012)</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>3.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>129. Retail fragmentation</td>
<td>Dividing up areas of high retail activity with areas of low activity</td>
<td>Hart et al. (2013)</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>3.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>130. Catchment commuting</td>
<td>Amount of catchment that works in another centre</td>
<td>Shields and Deller (1998)</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>131. Environmental quality</td>
<td>Varied characteristics that refer to the natural fabric and built environment of the High Street/centre</td>
<td>Thomas and Bromley (2002)</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>2.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>132. Inertia (behavioural)</td>
<td>Tendency of consumers to repeat the same shopping trip in a centre as part of daily routines</td>
<td>Clarke et al. (2004)</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>133. Local economic integration</td>
<td>Coordination of economic activities and reduction of barriers with an aim to reduce costs to both local consumers and retailers</td>
<td>Findlay and Sparks (2008)</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>134. Supply of retail units</td>
<td>Number of units/properties that are available for retail use only</td>
<td>Jones and Orr (1999)</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>3.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>135. Functionality</td>
<td>The degree to which a centre fulfils a role – e.g. service centre, employment centre, residential centre, tourist centre</td>
<td>Powe and Hart (2008)</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>136. Heritage</td>
<td>All parts of city centre/High Street “offer” that are part of a place’s history (landmarks, old buildings, etc.)</td>
<td>Whitehead et al. (2006)</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>3.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>137. Merchandise value</td>
<td>Links to the overall value of retail goods and the amount of pricing, discounts, samples and other retail-related factors that customers can benefit from</td>
<td>Teller and Reutterer (2008)</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>2.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>138. Multiple land ownership</td>
<td>Pieces of land/buildings/stores on the High Street/Town Centre that are owned by more than one owner</td>
<td>Robertson (1997), Henderson (2011)</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>139. Open space</td>
<td>Amount of space that is not in private ownership that citizens can freely use</td>
<td>Cohen (1996)</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>3.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>140. Planning application</td>
<td>Permission to be allowed to build on land, or change the use of existing land or buildings</td>
<td>Dabinett et al. (1999)</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>2.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>141. Public space</td>
<td>Amount of space that is not in private ownership, that citizens can freely use</td>
<td>Cohen (1996)</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>3.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>142. Retail-led Regeneration</td>
<td>The impact that retail has had on the regeneration (in its widest sense – social, economic and physical) of town centres and local high streets</td>
<td>Findlay and Sparks (2008)</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>143. Urban design</td>
<td>Process of designing and shaping cities, towns and villages</td>
<td>De Nisco and Warnaby (2014)</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>3.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>144. Use of technology</td>
<td>Use of technology by retailers, to control costs, develop new markets and new strategies</td>
<td>Kures and Ryan (2012)</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>2.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>145. Governance</td>
<td>Refers to the manner of governing the area affiliated with a centre (local, regional, metropolitan, community)</td>
<td>Henderson (2011)</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>146. Retail/Tenant trust</td>
<td>Links to the relationships between retail tenants and shopping centre managers or town centre managers, see tenant/managers relationship</td>
<td>Roberts et al. (2010)</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>3.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>147. Reputation</td>
<td>Links to the town’s/city’s “presence” as a heuristic for visiting a retail centre/High Street</td>
<td>Hart et al. (2013)</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>3.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>148. Store/centre design</td>
<td>Process of designing shopping centres, stores, malls, etc.</td>
<td>Reimers and Chulow (2004)</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>3.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>149. Catchment psychographics</td>
<td>Classification of people in the catchment area according to their attitudes, aspirations and other psychological criteria</td>
<td>Sullivan and Savitt (1997)</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>2.24</td>
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<tr>
<td>150. Orientation/flow (inc. signage)</td>
<td>A system of signs that provides information about the High Street’s offering and helps customers to orientate when on shopping trips, visits, etc.</td>
<td>Léo and Philippe (2002)</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>3.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>152. Unfair competition</td>
<td>Competitive advantages of multiples vs independents and conventional shops that create disparities</td>
<td>Bookman (2008)</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>2.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>153. Ageing population</td>
<td>People are living longer</td>
<td>Bookman (2008)</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>2.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>154. Business ownership</td>
<td>Refers to the type of ownership (sole trader, limited company, partnership, etc.)</td>
<td>Henderson (2011)</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>2.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>155. Media coverage</td>
<td>A means of communicating about High Street – usually about events and festivities</td>
<td>Warnaby and Yip (2005)</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>3.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>156. Tenant/manager relationships</td>
<td>Links to the relationships between tenants and shopping centre managers (trust, warmth, friendliness)</td>
<td>Prendergast et al. (1987)</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>3.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>157. Centre empowerment</td>
<td>The degree to which centre managers provide support and treat tenants as an important element of centre</td>
<td>Roberts et al. (2010)</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>3.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>158. Crowds</td>
<td>Total number of people gathered in the centre/High Street</td>
<td>Gautschi (1981)</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>3.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>159. Branding</td>
<td>Collective centre identity communicated about centre</td>
<td>Roberts et al. (2010)</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>3.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>160. Centre marketing</td>
<td>The centre’s promotional strategies and activities to attract visitors/shoppers</td>
<td>Teller and Reutterer (2008)</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>3.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>161. Protection from weather</td>
<td>Store or High Street developments that can provide weather protection</td>
<td>Bennison and Davies (1980)</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>3.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>162. Tourism</td>
<td>All tourism attractions, number of tourists visiting, tourism expenditure, etc.</td>
<td>Hernandez and Jones (2005)</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>2.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>163. Regional rental level</td>
<td>The total rent per annum or rent per square foot/metre of a region</td>
<td>Yuo et al. (2004)</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>2.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>164. Car ownership</td>
<td>Households with cars</td>
<td>Kervenaoel et al. (2006)</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>2.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>165. Social identity</td>
<td>A consumer’s self-concept derived from perceived membership in a relevant social group, in our case from local shopping and a sense of attachment to the community</td>
<td>Miller (2001)</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>2.81</td>
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<tr>
<td>166. Street trading</td>
<td>The retail or wholesale trading of goods and services in streets and other related public areas such as alleyways, avenues and boulevards</td>
<td>Jones et al. (2003)</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>3.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>167. Low prices</td>
<td>Refers to the ability of some retailers (usually multiples, outlets, pound-shops) to offer permanently low prices</td>
<td>Alport. (2005)</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>168. Integration</td>
<td>Unification of spaces in the city centre for the benefit of the public</td>
<td>Kärrholm et al. (2014)</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>3.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>169. Merchandising</td>
<td>The activity of promoting the sale of goods at retail centres/shopping centres/High Street</td>
<td>De Nisco and Napolitano (2006)</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>3.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>170. Open/closed centre</td>
<td>Links to whether the centre is enclosed or open-air (exit one store before entering another or internal access to all shops)</td>
<td>Bennison and Davies (1980)</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>3.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>171. Opportunities to experiment</td>
<td>Links to opportunities for innovativeness and new ideas that can improve the High Street offer</td>
<td>Neal (2013)</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>3.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>172. Organic development</td>
<td>Any store/high street/town centre development that stems from existing operations on the High Street/Town Centre</td>
<td>Bennison and Davies (1980)</td>
<td>3.19</td>
<td>3.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>173. Entry points</td>
<td>The number of routes that people choose to access the city centre</td>
<td>Borgers and Timmermans (1986)</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>2.71</td>
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<tr>
<td>174. Information (availability)</td>
<td>The type of information towns access and how this information is used</td>
<td>Larkham and Poper (1989)</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>3.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>175. Land ownership</td>
<td>Retail or other property or land that is owned by an individual</td>
<td>Henderson (2011)</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>176. Culture</td>
<td>The ideas, customs and social behaviour of a particular people or society</td>
<td>Robertson (1997)</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>2.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>177. Personal services</td>
<td>Commercial services such as catering and cleaning that supply the personal needs of customers</td>
<td>Kures and Ryan (2012)</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>3.81</td>
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<td>178. Community benefits</td>
<td>Gestures from commercial developers to the community in exchange for planning permissions and agreements</td>
<td>Howard (2007)</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>3.29</td>
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<tr>
<td>179. Community engagement</td>
<td>The process whereby public bodies reach out to communities to create empowerment opportunities</td>
<td>Depriest-Hricko and Prytherch (2013)</td>
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<td>3.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>180. Community power</td>
<td>Refers to how much power the community has in decision-making for High Street change</td>
<td>Findlay and Sparks (2009)</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>3.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>181. CPOs</td>
<td>Compulsory purchase order: Obtaining Land for retail and other purposes without owner’s consent</td>
<td>Imrie and Thomas (1997)</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>2.90</td>
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<tr>
<td>182. Social cohesion</td>
<td>Tendency for a group to be in unity towards a common goal</td>
<td>Williams (1999)</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>2.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>183. Special offers</td>
<td>Degree of availability of special offers/discounts on the High Street, shopping centre, retail park, etc.</td>
<td>Marjanen (2000)</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>3.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>184. Centre support for the local community and environment</td>
<td>Retailers’ CSR actions that benefit the centre’s environment and the community overall</td>
<td>Oppewal et al. (2006)</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>185. Information seeking</td>
<td>Recollection of product/service-related information, or general information for a centre, either internal or external</td>
<td>Brown (1987)</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>3.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>186. Social enterprise</td>
<td>Organisations (or even BIDs) that apply commercial strategies to maximize improvements in human and environmental well-being</td>
<td>De Magalhaes (2012)</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>3.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>187. Communication practices (development)</td>
<td>Refers to the number of channels and information that is provided to an area’s stakeholders for future land/building developments</td>
<td>Henderson (2011)</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>188. Credit</td>
<td>Ability to purchase goods/services by credit cards, etc.</td>
<td>Sullivan and Savitt (1997)</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>2.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>189. Local resistance</td>
<td>Degree of support to a local market when “threatened” by large retailers</td>
<td>Hallsworth and Worthington (2000)</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>3.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>190. Methods of classification</td>
<td>Classification of High Streets/Town Centres/Shopping Centres by type of goods, shopping trip purpose, size, ownership</td>
<td>Guy (1998)</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>1.81</td>
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<tr>
<td>191. Political climate</td>
<td>Current mood and opinions of political issues that affect decision-making</td>
<td>Brown (1987)</td>
<td>2.81</td>
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<td>192. Property age</td>
<td>Age of commercial/retail properties on the High Street</td>
<td>Hardin and Carr (2006)</td>
<td>2.81</td>
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<td>193. Performance indicators (KPIs)</td>
<td>Type of performance measurements that are related to the High Street</td>
<td>Hogg et al. (2004)</td>
<td>2.76</td>
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<tr>
<td>194. Ethnic retailers</td>
<td>The act of retailing by members of minority ethnic groups/immigrants on the High Street</td>
<td>Coca-Stefaniak et al. (2010)</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>3.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>195. Upper floor usage</td>
<td>What upper-floor developments are needed and how they can assist in the viability of the High Street</td>
<td>Findlay and Sparks (2009)</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>3.62</td>
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<tr>
<td>196. Baby-change facilities/Toilets</td>
<td>Hygiene factors of a centre including public toilets, baby rooms, diaper changing rooms</td>
<td>Reimers and Clulow (2000)</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>197. Deliveries</td>
<td>The process of delivering goods to shops/centres</td>
<td>Pickering (1981)</td>
<td>2.52</td>
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<tr>
<td>198. Cycling</td>
<td>Refers to all infrastructure and routes available for cyclists</td>
<td>Biddulph (2011)</td>
<td>2.43</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>199. Land contamination</td>
<td>Pollution caused by past uses of a site, such as former factories, mines, steelworks, refineries and landfills</td>
<td>Dabinett et al. (1999)</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>2.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200. Child-minding centre</td>
<td>A daycare centre for children which is part of the shopping area</td>
<td>Johnston and Rimmer (1967)</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>201. Health care</td>
<td>Organised provision of medical care to individuals or a community</td>
<td>Duff (2011)</td>
<td>2.2381</td>
<td>2.5238</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table AI.

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Engaged scholarship on the High Street: the case of HSUK2020

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to introduce engaged scholarship as a method for addressing the “wicked problem” of High Street change through successful collaboration and co-production of knowledge between academics, practitioners, citizens and other place stakeholders.

Design/methodology/approach – The first part of this paper introduces engaged scholarship as a participatory form of research and situates it within the context of the High Street. The second part presents the case of High Street UK 2020 (HSUK2020) via Van de Ven’s diamond model of engaged scholarship as a guide.

Findings – Engaged scholarship’s focus on knowledge production and on collaboration between the research team and the community enabled us to improve the understanding of factors affecting High Streets amongst a diverse group of stakeholders and focus on what works for the towns. The ongoing impact of HSUK2020 on the project towns’ action plans and on this current research is testament to how engaged scholarship research can drive the agendas for both academics and communities.

Originality/value – The paper presents engaged scholarship as an alternative collaborative method of conducting research on the High Street, one that is more in line with the current trends in retailing and works as a motivating factor for community engagement.

Keywords High Street, Co-production, Knowledge exchange, Collaborative research, Engaged scholarship

Paper type Research paper

The High Street is widely established as a dynamic construct with a multitude of stakeholders and a plethora of factors that contribute to an “endless litany of change” (Morganosky, 1997, p. 269). The complexities of dealing with the High Street have been well documented in the literature (Clarke et al., 1997; Hernandez et al., 1998; Peel, 2010; Pioch and Byrom, 2004; Wrigley and Dolega, 2011; Wrigley and Lambiri, 2014), and these complexities can constrain the attempts of local authorities, retailers, citizens and other key stakeholders to plan and adapt effectively. This is an enduring situation in most places, and the abundance of academic research, market reports, High Street data, as well as the extensive interest from the media and the public, seem to have had little effect on the ground (Parker © Nikos Ntounis and Cathy Parker. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this article (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors. The full terms of this licence may be seen at http://creativecommons.org/licences/by/4.0/legalcode
et al., 2016, p. 3). The ongoing decline in the importance of the High Street, which impacts upon both retailers and communities, has thereby not yet been alleviated.

These challenges have led to our understanding of the High Street as a “wicked problem”, which requires successful collaboration between place stakeholders, researchers and practitioners to tackle the misalignments between academic and practitioner knowledge. “Wicked problems” call for participatory approaches to research that can “enable the mutually beneficial reciprocal-exchange of resources and knowledge” between the relevant parties (Phillips et al., 2013, p. 235). In this article, we present such an approach, which was influenced by the tenets of engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007) and guided the ESRC-funded High Street UK 2020 project. By situating engaged scholarship in the context of retailing and the High Street, we argue that such an approach can address the issues of the limited application of existing academic knowledge to the problem, as well as develop and exchange new knowledge of relevance and rigour for High Street stakeholders, researchers and practitioners (Pettigrew, 2001). Furthermore, we present how our collaborative relationship with place stakeholders helped us to provide useful models of High Street performance that represent a more commonly held “reality” (Rescher, 2003), can be easily interpreted and therefore be put into practice more easily (through, for example, towns’ development or action plans). Based on our High Street UK 2020 project, we demonstrate how engaged scholarship, as a form of research that requires “researchers and practitioners (to) coproduce knowledge that can advance theory and practice in a given domain” (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006, p. 803), can provide an alternative to dominant methodological approaches in the fields of retailing, town centre management and place management.

What is engaged scholarship?

In academia, and particularly in business schools, finding ways to address the theory-practice gap and harmonise the scholarly pursuits of researchers with society’s pressing concerns is a recurring issue (Phillips et al., 2013). As King and Learmonth (2015) illustrate, the relevance, usefulness, applicability and impact of original academic research has been questioned repeatedly (Boyer, 1996; Learmonth et al., 2012; Shapiro et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2011; Starkey and Madan, 2001). This has led to the “growing realization that so-called ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ cannot be bifurcated as separate domains” (King and Learmonth, 2015, p. 354). What is required, therefore, is a shift in how researchers approach the knowledge production problem by moving from an “unengaged process of inquiry in social research” (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 5) to a research style that is participatory, reflexive, transdisciplinary, collaborative and directed towards accomplishing societal advancements while maintaining research quality (Cuthill, 2010; Gibbons et al., 1994).

Engaged scholarship is a participatory style of research for obtaining the understanding of a complex problem in its particular context (Van de Ven, 2007) and typically from those key stakeholders affected by the issue being studied. Its origins can be traced to the work of Boyer (1990), who argued that scholarly activities need to move beyond the conduct of original research (scholarship of discovery) to form a dynamic definition of scholarship that helps to build bridges between theory and practice (scholarship of integration); incorporates scientific discovery with problem-solving that assists individuals and communities (scholarship of application); and promotes educational progress (scholarship of teaching) (also see Paynter, 2014). The scholarship of engagement entails the deployment of the above activities from outside the campus to people and places, and the work of the engaged scholar can, in turn, be directed towards larger, more humane ends (Boyer, 1990). As Van de Ven (2007, p. 9) observes,
such collaboration in knowledge production can result in “knowledge that is more penetrating and insightful than when scholars or practitioners work on the problems alone”.

Subsequently, engaged scholarship advocates a fundamental shift in the relationship between researchers and other stakeholders (Van de Ven, 2011). This begins with a recognition that the problem under study cannot be answered with one person’s limited resources and capabilities. This thus leads researchers to adopt a participant frame of reference and engage in a reflexive, collective learning process that respects all other kinds of knowledge production (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000; Hendrickx, 1999). Furthermore, engaged scholarship requires researchers to adopt a pluralist view of science and practice and participate in conversation and discourse with different people, with the goal to produce new but complementary knowledge outputs that can help answer complex problems (Van de Ven, 2007). Engaged scholarship can thus be understood as a collaborative research method that advances scientific knowledge, helps to understand complex real-life problems and has emancipatory potential (Huzzard and Johansson, 2014; Strumińska-Kutra, 2016). Therefore, engaged scholarship has strong bonds with critical management studies, collaborative inquiry and participatory action research. This is because it also advocates that academics be actively involved in practice and in the creation of practice-based knowing to achieve transformative goals in society (King and Learmonth, 2015; Willmott, 2008; Wolfram Cox et al., 2009).

This deviation from traditional, self-referential scholarship which fits the researcher’s view and values is also reflected in the philosophical underpinnings of engaged scholarship, which favours a “more inclusive research philosophy that is open to and integrates some of the differences of alternative philosophies of science” (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 63). Hence, engaged scholarship adopts a realist position that includes elements from different philosophical approaches (e.g. critical realism, pragmatism, constructivism and critical theory) and allows researchers to better coordinate the multiple models, theories and perspectives that are constructed and identified during the research process (Azevedo, 1997). Engaged scholarship thus favours the use of multidimensional methods and theories and obtains findings by triangulation through engagement. As Van de Ven (2007, p. 285) asserts, such an approach:

[...] increases the richness (and complexity) of problem representation, and decreases the likelihood of myopic representations that other stakeholders may perceive as being biased and misdiagnosed views of the “real world” situation.

Although engaged scholarship attempts to connect different research approaches, which can lead to theoretical and methodological contradictions and inconsistencies (Strumińska-Kutra, 2016), it enables an evolutionary growth of knowledge via the development of models that “better fit the problems they are intended to solve” (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 70). Thus, as Wells (2016, p. 43) describes, engaged scholarship does not attempt to seek generalisability but rather aims for relevant theorisation and explanation in a specific situation through an immersive, interactive and emergent collaborative learning process.

**Engaged scholarship in the context of the High Street**

When comparing the underlying assumptions of engaged scholarship with the High Street and its academic disciplines or areas (e.g. retailing, marketing, geography, planning and public administration), a degree of similarity is evident. High Street performance and development, which, in the UK, is often investigated under the labels of “town centre management” and “place management” has long been associated with different types of engagement which are integral in place decision-making, such as business engagement
Engagement between established town partnerships (e.g. business improvement districts, local development companies, community interest companies, town teams and the local government) can “create more efficient, inclusive and pluralist local governance, bringing together key organizations and actors [...] to identify communities” top priorities and needs and work with local people to provide them (Geddes, 2006, p. 87).

Moreover, working in partnerships has long been recognised as an important objective in local community agendas as a way for addressing complex and interrelated issues, such as the future of the High Street, through trust-building and knowledge-sharing exercises (Balloch and Taylor, 2001; Raco, 2000; Taylor, 2006). In this sense, researchers’ engagement within these partnerships is not only aligned with the tenets of engaged scholarship but also consistent with current policies regarding local governance in the UK (DCLG, 2009). Therefore, merging engaged scholarship into the already well-established processes of town centre and place management can be a step towards the strengthening of stakeholder participation in the management of the High Street and can also stimulate opportunities for learning, dialogue, and knowledge production for everyone involved (Peel, 2003).

Furthermore, when examining the literature concerning collaborative planning and strategic spatial planning, valuable outcomes that fit with engaged scholarship can be drawn regarding stakeholder/community interaction, conflict resolution and consensus building in a pluralistic environment (Brand and Gaffikin, 2007; Depriest-Hricko and Prytherch, 2013; Healey, 1998, 2006; Innes, 1996). Indeed, engaged scholarship can mesh well in participatory projects and town partnerships, where the multitude of understandings and the constant conflict of values and interests that are entailed in all stakeholder interactions need to be recognised and eventually legitimised (Albrechts, 2015; Hillier, 2003; Mouffe, 2005). Engaged scholarship’s theoretical and methodological pluralism can be utilised to support what Brand and Gaffikin (2007) label as the “smart pluralism” approach, which shifts away from coercive dominance and aims to maximise the chance of positive outcomes via compromise and knowledge exchange (Le Feuvre et al., 2016). Strategising in pluralistic contexts raises various challenges (e.g. inflationary consensus, collective paralysis, inertia and the dilution of town initiatives) (Denis et al., 2007), reflecting criticisms regarding the ability of engaged scholarship to produce valuable results in the long term (McKelvey, 2006). However, the “splicing” of methodological, theoretical and “on the ground” pluralisms can be a vehicle towards the production of more insightful knowledge for academics and both emergent and intended strategies for town partnerships (Arkesteijn and Volker, 2013). In the next section, we demonstrate how our approach to engaged scholarship corresponded to the participatory processes that took place during the life of the High Street UK 2020 project.

High Street UK 2020: a model of engaged scholarship
To explain our approach to the High Street UK 2020 project, we will use Van de Ven’s (2007) diamond model of engaged scholarship (Figure 1) as a guide for the milestones and outcomes that stemmed from our engagement with stakeholders. Van de Ven’s model is appropriate for this purpose, as it is a knowledge production model that advises collaboration with stakeholders and the researchers at every stage of a research project, including problem formulation, theory building, research design and problem-solving (Hunt, 2008). It is also an iterative model, which allows us to illustrate how our method enabled “simultaneous problem solving of lower level issues within the greater research question at
hand" (Phillips et al., 2013, p. 236). Our model of engaged scholarship differs slightly from Van de Ven’s, as it takes numerous case studies and a plethora of stakeholders into the knowledge transfer/exchange loop (also see Wells, 2016). However, Van de Ven’s model follows a step-by-step approach that enables us to frame the research in a simple and effective way. We will now present each stage of our research project more thoroughly, and an outline of the milestones and outcomes at every stage can be found in Table I.

### Problem formulation

In the initial stage of the project, and prior to the production of the bid, we started to engage with key stakeholders (e.g. retailers, town centre partnerships, local authorities, property owners/developers and residents) to attain their views of the High Street knowledge problem. At this stage, the researchers adopted an approach akin to a journalist, by being open to the interpretations of others, able to answer the basic questions of why, when, what, where, who and how the problem exists and learning to appreciate the problem’s multiple dimensions and manifestations (Van de Ven, 2007, pp. 77-79). What was clear from our discussions with stakeholders was the uncertainty of how to manage or develop a High Street that could meet the needs of its community, perhaps not immediately, but in the fairly near future (i.e. 2020 and beyond). From our initial collaboration, it was apparent that academic and professional knowledge was fragmented and that the study of retail change in particular geographic locations was limited (Wang, 2011), thus making it difficult to those experiencing the problem to secure the future of their town centres. With this in mind, we started developing a project bid that would help the local agents of change to identify and understand their information requirements, get access to accurate and relevant academic knowledge, to improve the quality of decision-making and provide a solid academic underpinning to their plans for action. The bid was developed as an ESRC knowledge exchange project for a large-scale retail sector initiative and addressed the following key project questions:

**Q1. Why have High Street stakeholders not acted on the research and data that has been available to manage change in a more effective way?**

**Q2. How can research and data be delivered more effectively to High Street stakeholders so that it is used to inform decision-making?**
Theory building

Once we had agreed a common knowledge exchange problem, we started further discussions with retail experts, academics and place stakeholders to enhance theory building. At this stage, we wanted to help our project towns to understand their information requirements and get access to accurate and relevant academic knowledge, which could improve the quality of decision-making and provide solid academic underpinning to future plans of action. According to Van de Ven (2007), the knowledge exchange “anomaly” can be resolved by creating a theory/model through processes of abduction, deduction, induction, which can provide a coherent resolution that can also be applicable in subsequent situations. During the stage of problem formulation, we came to the realisation that the fragmentation of the retail literature, and the complexity of factors that impact upon the High Street, leave little room for existing theories to influence change. Therefore, our goal was to develop a model of retail centre change that would stem from a review of the literature and existing theories, as well as from conversations with retail experts that have previously addressed the High Street problem (Van de Ven, 2011). After discussions between the research team...
and our retail experts regarding the future of the High Street, we identified that High Street performance is mainly a reflection of retail performance, with footfall and vacancy rates as key indicators. This “strongly-held assumption” (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 110) served as our initial theory, and given it stemmed from the knowledge and experiences of diverse stakeholders, it appeared to be plausible and worthy of further investigation.

To investigate the factors that would support our theory, we conducted a systematic literature review (see Appendix for search process and review parameters for this study) to form a reliable knowledge base from a range of studies that can be relevant to academics, practitioners and other stakeholders (Tranfield et al., 2003). We initially identified 156 factors that may influence the performance of the High Street. During our first project meeting, and in line with the engaged scholarship model, we presented these initial factors to academic and retail experts, in addition to our town team partners. Participants were asked to comment on the factors and to identify additional performance factors that were not initially ascertained. Partner towns identified 50 additional factors (Parker et al., 2014) that influence the High Street, which led to the review of 33 additional studies. For 12 of those factors that we could find no evidence of their effect on High Street performance, we outlined a research agenda to engage academics on furthering the research on retail change (ibid). Such a scholastic process outlines the foundation of theory building in engaged scholarship, which is based on deductive, literature-based, literature gap formulation and application, and is modified inductively through co-production with practitioners. Moreover, the combination of literature-based and practitioner-based engaged scholarship helped us develop an initial theory and identify 201 factors that can interest researchers and also help practitioners and place stakeholders in their everyday work (Nielsen, 2010). The findings of each stage of the research are presented in the second article in this special issue.

Research design
At this stage of the research process, we needed to develop the appropriate methods and obtain empirical evidence from our retail experts for evaluating the factors that influence High Street performance (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006). Given the multitude of interpretations, research philosophies and methods used to measure these factors, a meta-analysis would not be possible. In addition, the extant literature has not conceptualised “performance” (or any other dependent variable) in any comparable manner. Indeed, it is only fairly recently that researchers have been interested in the collaborative activities of stakeholders on the High Street, and we thus knew little about the type of factors these initiatives seek to influence. This subsequently led to two research questions:

RQ1. How much influence does each factor have over High Street performance?

RQ2. How much influence could the High Street have over the factor?

Addressing these questions requires an understanding of the dynamic concept of the High Street as a social phenomenon. Therefore, model development needed to take into account not only how much these factors influence High Street performance (RQ1) but also how people respond and adapt to High Street change over time because of these factors (RQ2) and under which circumstances or contingencies High Street transformation occurs (Bruner, 1990; Tsoukas, 1989; Van de Ven, 2007). To explore RQ1 and RQ2, we used the Delphi Technique for scoring all factors that may influence the performance of the High Street, as identified from our aforementioned systematic literature review. The Delphi Technique is unique in its method of eliciting and refining group judgement, as it is based on the notion that a group of experts is better than one expert when exact knowledge is not available
(Paliwoda, 1983). To establish the amount of influence the High Street may have over each identified factor, we first asked 22 retail experts to classify each of the 201 factors as either spatial, macro, meso or micro (Figure 2). Second, we asked respondents to rate how influential each factor was on the vitality and viability of the High Street. A five-point Likert scale was used for rating the influence of each factor on the High Street, with 1 being “not at all influential” and 5 “extremely influential”. Participants were also free to write additional comments about each factor. The results of the Delphi exercise, after each factor was plotted, can be seen in Figure 3.

Despite the purpose of a Delphi study being to establish sufficient expert consensus to make a forecast or assignment of values believable or useful (Shields et al., 1987), this did not limit us from treating it as a collective learning process that would enhance our perspectives on the issues of the High Street (Peluchette and Gerhardt, 2015). Discussions during the Delphi exercise and the experts’ comments unveiled that from the long list of 201 factors, many had either the same meaning/definition or were conceptually related. We thus adopted a novel exploratory approach, including statistical tests, to combine those factors which encapsulated the same meaning or were highly related (e.g. “visual appearance” and “cleanliness”) (Parker et al., 2016). This resulted in a more coherent representation of factors and scales, based on the advice from retail experts. Moreover, we realised that to bring further clarity, we needed to identify the Top 25 priorities for change based on the results from the “Get on with it!” quadrant (Figure 4). This is because these micro factors can be influenced by High Street stakeholders and can also have the greatest influence on the vitality and viability of High Streets. This decision was mainly informed by the interests and perspectives of the town partnerships involved in the project, which, given their lack of time and resources, were looking for a model that could help them to focus activity and resources on action that will have the most impact on vitality and viability (Parker et al., 2016).

Figure 2.
Level of influence High Streets have over High Street performance factors.
Problem-solving
After the completion of the model and the formulation of the top 25 priorities, we embarked on a variety of activities to communicate and apply the HSUK2020 model to our ten towns (Alsager, Altrincham, Ballymena, Barnsley, Bristol (Church Road, St George), Congleton, Holmfirth, Market Rasen, Morley and Wrexham). At the problem-solving stage, which entails the dissemination, interpretation and application of empirical findings (Phillips et al., 2013), the impact of the study is the criterion that outlines the usefulness of research findings (Hunt, 2008). Consequently, we sought to ensure that HSUK2020 will leave a suite of legacy products (e.g. the HSUK2020 modelling tool; podcasts from academic experts;
intervention place templates; reports; and the special issue of this journal), which can eventually facilitate change in behaviour, conditions and in the way communities interpret co-produced knowledge in their own High Streets (Franz, 2009).

Subsequently, amplifying HSUK2020’s impact and legacy involved continued interactions and discussions between the research team, our retail experts and practitioners and our ten towns. Half-day workshops have been run in all ten locations, in which local partners were introduced to the 201 factors and top 25 priorities for change, and offered their own perspectives on how these can inform town centre decision-making. In addition, action planning seminars offered an update on the reflection of our findings, including a new forecasting tool that enabled each centre to consider different scenarios, based on footfall data provided by one of our project partners. Appropriate place interventions, under the broad categories of “repositioning”, “reinventing”, “rebranding” and “restructuring”, were also contextualised in partnership with our ten user communities. These help individual High Streets to identify an alternative, sustainable future for their High Street in 2020, in addition to developing an action plan for achieving that aim.

At this stage, a greater sharing of power and activities (Van de Ven, 2007) between the research team and our town partners allowed us to take advantage of their skills in engaging with the best possible audiences and even in designing some of the research activities. Taking a back seat during workshops and presentations made all activities a collective learning experience and in turn enabled us to concentrate on “problem solving and action, looking for ‘what works’ not just on participation and communication of new voices and categories” (Strumińska-Kutra, 2016, p. 879). However, during these activities and workshops, we did not hesitate from sometimes challenging the established conventions of town centre management and highlighting the necessity for developing applicable action plans to our project towns, based on the novel contributions and knowledge that our continuing engagement with them produced.

Consequently, a more positive story about town centre change cascaded throughout the project, which in turn encouraged more collaboration across stakeholders, namely, a story of “hope” rather than “doom and gloom”. This engaged a number of media (i.e. local press, national radio and local radio), and such coverage of the local workshops and subsequent interviews helped to disseminate the priority actions that had been agreed by the towns, through the HSUK2020 project. Furthermore, the project was acknowledged in Wrigley and Lambiri’s (2015) report, “British High Streets: from Crisis to Recovery?”, and research findings have been presented to numerous conferences, symposiums and meetings in the UK, Europe, Latin and North America, thus furthering HSUK2020’s impact internationally.

**Conclusion**

In an era of transformative retail change (Millington et al., 2015), forces such as internet retailing, multichannel/omnichannel retailing, the rise of different convenience cultures and car ownership and its relationship out-of-town developments have already permeated and altered the fabric of our High Streets and town centres. The complex nature of the High Street requires all stakeholders (insiders and outsiders) to work together effectively, to develop the basic knowledge and resources that can explain how we can create sustainable town centres in the near future (Louis and Bartunek, 1992). In this respect, collaborative forms of engaged scholarship, such as the one described in this paper, can “generate knowledge on big questions and issues by testing alternative ideas and different views of a common problem” (Peluchette and Gerhardt, 2015, p. 416). As we demonstrated throughout this paper, the joint knowledge production between the research team and the community enabled us to improve our understanding of the factors affecting High Streets amongst a
diverse group of stakeholders rather than remotely drawing our own conclusions regarding the factors influencing High Streets (Lewis, 2012).

As successful as our approach was, we are not arguing that engaged scholarship model is the new “golden standard” on how to conduct research in retailing and town centre change (Van de Ven, 2007). Like any approach, engaged scholarship can suffer from the biases and the disparities between the goals and problem-solution cycles of academics, field experts, practitioners and local communities (McKelvey, 2006). However, engaged scholarship can pave the way for beneficial collaboration that can “produce research findings that make more significant advancements to theory and practice than the traditional approach of going it alone” (Van de Ven, 2007, p. 296). The ongoing impact of HSUK2020 on our project towns’ action plans, and its success in securing further funding for extending our research on High Street change, are testaments to how engaged scholarship research can drive the agendas for both academics and communities. As scholars, we have benefitted enormously from creating relevant knowledge for our High Streets with the people who work, shop, live and use them every day, who in turn carried the torch of knowledge to their local councils and other networks. This illustrates how engaged scholarship not only can become a valuable tool for researchers but also has the potential to motivate communities to become more involved in the revamping of their centres. Hopefully, as demonstrated in our paper, such a development can make a difference to the vitality and viability of our High Streets.

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Engaged scholarship on the High Street


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Appendix

Review parameters
(1) Type of study (empirical, exploratory, conceptual)
(2) Methodological evidence
(3) Data source (primary, secondary, tertiary)
(4) Dependent variable (retail area performance measure)
(5) Independent variables (factors affecting performance)
(6) Significance (major findings and statistical significance)
(7) Limitations of study
(8) Author, date, publisher
(9) Geographical location of study (e.g. UK, US, Europe)
(10) Size of retail/shopping centre (different geographical scales of place, e.g. city centre; town centre; High Street; neighbourhood centre; district centre; suburban centre)

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Repositioning the high street: evidence and reflection from the UK

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Abstract

Purpose – Drawing on evidence from ten towns (across England, Wales and Northern Ireland) participating in the High Street UK 2020 (HSUK2020) project, the purpose of this paper is to reveal how local stakeholders involved in place management respond to high street decline through a strategy of repositioning.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper identifies the challenges faced by the towns considering repositioning, and highlights examples of good practice of relevance to the practitioners. First, it outlines the perspectives on repositioning from the academic research and theory, before drawing on evidence from across ten UK towns that participated in the HSUK2020 project, to reveal how repositioning involves more than just taking a snapshot profile of a place.

Findings – The research revealed major challenges faced by local stakeholders in clearly identifying and communicating their market position, in particular, the maintenance of up-to-date information on catchments was lacking at all the locations. Despite having local knowledge and some data, stakeholders still did not possess a clear (or shared) understanding of the identity or function of their towns. This evidence reflects the complexity of analysing and understanding repositioning and developing coherent strategies.

Practical implications – Knowledge exchange between stakeholders involved in place management can help inform the identification of new strategic objectives, appropriate interventions and project planning and delivery. Where resources are limited, particularly in smaller towns and settlements, the research demonstrates the significance of collecting and sharing data and analysis with other stakeholders, because this can generate positive outcomes for all.

Originality value – By offering empirical evidence based on the experience of local practitioners, this paper provides valuable insight into how town centre stakeholders collect, interpret and analyse data, revealing the challenges, opportunities and practicalities involved in developing and implementing repositioning strategies.

Keywords Stakeholders, Decision-making, High street, Place management, Repositioning

Paper type Research paper
Introduction

Place positioning refers to the identification of unique or special attributes possessed by a place (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008; Paddison, 1999; Yanchula, 2008), which contribute to a clear understanding of a place’s identity, or simply, what a place is known for (Baker, 2012; Martinez, 2016). Although places are multiple and complex entities, predominant images eventually surface where towns or cities are associated — perhaps with heritage, tourism or local industry and so on. Labelling places as a historic city, seaside resort or market town is useful in attempts to define and clearly articulate messages to both residents and external audiences. It can underpin a place’s identity and belonging, in addition to establishing a comparative or differential advantage in relation to other places (Dennis et al., 2002).

Although a place might possess a strong market position (e.g. in the retail hierarchy) and image, we should resist the assumption that this is necessarily the outcome of carefully devised place marketing and branding strategies. In many cases, such unique advantages possessed will have accumulated over decades, if not centuries, and will reflect long-standing expectations and deeply rooted perceptions of that place. Where this has produced strong and positive place image, civic leaders might well adopt a complacent attitude to place marketing, but the reputation of even the most attractive places can fade as user preferences shift, requiring places to refresh their appeal. The loss of key industries for instance, or trends in mobility and tourism, can profoundly undermine the reputation of a place. In contrast, processes such as globalisation may also strengthen a place’s reputation (Bell, 2016), as a city or region becomes more outward-looking (Kuss, 2009).

Nevertheless, to counteract the long-term structural decline, rebranding will not be sufficient (Neill, 1995; Vanolo, 2008). To satisfy the expectations of the place users, the development of multiple place products is required before a cohesive and plausible place-branding strategy can be implemented (Ntounis and Kavaratzis, 2017). Whereas the literature on repositioning places largely discusses citywide or regional strategies, the focus of this paper is on understanding the forces of change and the value of unique responses that reposition the high streets. The plight of town centres, in particular, reflects the specific localised impacts of wider change (Parker et al., 2017). Resorts have lost custom because more people holiday abroad, whereas former industrial centres have lost key employment anchors. In addition, the town centres face growing competition from out-of-town retailing (Thomas et al., 2004) and more recently the disruption caused by internet shopping (Weltevreden and Atzema, 2006). Consequently, the place managers need to engage in repositioning strategies to enable them to identify potential competitive advantages (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008; Smith, 2004). This may involve not only strategies for building on distinct capabilities (Martinez, 2016), reconfiguring the retailer and service mix (Teller et al., 2016), but also the anticipation of, and the adaptation to, more prosaic future trends (such as local demographic change). Understanding the current and future needs and behaviours of the catchment population is essential if high streets are to recover their vitality and viability. A difficulty arises in convincing the local stakeholders to accept that change is necessary. Their status in an imagined retail hierarchy might no longer be what it once was following the restructuring of the retail sector. Likewise, there may be poor understanding of the degree of competition and complementarity with adjacent centres (Teller et al., 2016). Re-evaluating the role and function of the places might require a fundamental shift from retailing to consider the other functions that might thrive in the town centres (Downs and Haynes, 1984). The stresses, volatility and fluidity of the high street change remain difficult to predict. This project has made a first attempt to list all the factors that influence retail centre vitality and viability – identifying 201 such factors.
Before this, the lack of a solid and thorough evidence base concerning high street performance and the factors affecting change have remained obscure, patchy or simply absent.

Wrigley and Dolega (2011) suggest that places that develop a strong evidence base about their current position, as well as an understanding of how future changes will affect them, are likely to be more resilient, although this raises important questions regarding the capacity and skills of the stakeholders responsible for managing the high street. In this research, therefore, we first outlined the perspectives on repositioning from the academic research and theory, before drawing on the evidence from across the ten UK towns that participated in the HSUK2020 project, to reveal how repositioning involves more than just taking a snapshot profile of a place. Rather, places need to consider repositioning as a tool through which to not only gather data and build an understanding of their identity but also manage future change.

What is repositioning? Can we apply repositioning from marketing theory to places?

Theories of marketing management define positioning as a strategy for adding value to a product or service through the identification of specific target markets, which enables an organisation to differentiate or adjust what it has to offer relative to other competing products or services. As Tadajewski and Jones (2014) pinpoint, success or failure of the marketing strategy lies in marketers’ ability in allocating their scarce resources on the S-T-P process (segmentation, targeting and positioning), which positioning is part of. As such, positioning becomes an integral part of the marketing strategy, and it often represents the “sharp end” for marketers (Ries and Trout, 1981) in terms of translating the customers’ needs and wants into products or services that will be perceived as superior from the competition (Dibb and Simkin, 1991). By communicating a clear and unique set of advantages, a business might anticipate that the consumers will be attracted to their offer ahead of their competitors (Doyle and Stern, 2006). A company, therefore, will aim to change the perceptions of a brand through the rebranding of an existing product to emphasize or reveal the new attributes that will appeal to a different target market, or it may introduce a new brand. Of course, market conditions are highly dynamic, implying that even well-established products and brands might lose their appeal to the consumers. Anticipating and adapting to change, therefore, and repositioning products and services to target markets are key to successful branding and rebranding. By extending this concept, it can be argued that places also need to adapt and change in response to external forces (Warnaby et al., 2005), and their image needs to be constantly maintained and repositioned. As such, the S-T-P process is seen as an important aspect of successful place marketing strategies. Govers and Go (2009), for example, see place marketing as “the traditional segmentation, targeting and positioning approach to the promotion of place […]” (p. 19), whereas Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2008) indicate how the place marketing strategies can be viewed as responsive mechanisms to improve a place’s competitive position via discovering and creating uniqueness.

The transferability of marketing theory to place development, however, is neither simple nor straightforward, and we should avoid lapsing into a reductive view that treats places as just “extended products” or a simple list of easily recognisable or branded values (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005; Medway et al., 2015; Turok, 2009). Places are complex assemblages of assets, resources and attractions, subject to multiple interpretations and understandings. Attempting to distil the “essential” qualities of a place will always involve simplifying what that place is about, which will unavoidably exclude alternative or
competing narratives. In addition, the communication of place images is not the sole preserve of the place marketers. Through multiple mainstream and social media channels, people will draw on both direct and vicarious experiences of the place. In the same way, the values attached to a corporate brand promiscuously circulate within a wider culture; the same is true of place, only more so. Nevertheless, questions raised through marketing theory, such as understanding a place’s identity and what differentiates one place from another, are important considerations for place managers, together with a need to anticipate change and an understanding of how to adapt (Kotler et al., 1999).

Towns and cities continually experience phases of growth, stagnation and decline. Although place promotion is a long-established practice (Ward, 1998), the structural economic problems arising in the early 1970s through deindustrialisation, sectoral shift and globalisation provoked an outbreak of the reflexive and instrumental local interventions designed to reposition the places in terms of their economic competitiveness, identity or function, (e.g. the case of Town Centre Management in Ireland documented by McAteer and Stephens, 2011). Often, the desired outcome of these strategies is to correct the negative stereotypes and change the image of a place into one attractive to managerial elites, corporate investors, property speculators and international tourists. Collectively, this produced local economic development initiatives designed to re-orientate the struggling places to the external audiences and the decision-makers through incremental product replacement and diversification. Typically, this involved large-scale “flagship” regeneration projects, new attractions, improvements to civic realm and infrastructure (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990), with the desired outcome being to produce “substantial change to the features, benefits and experiences, relative to competitors, or targeting new audiences, or both” (Baker, 2012, p. 56). Faced with the dilemma of compete-or-die, the local decision-makers were perhaps left with little option than to pursue these interventions, resulting in the embedding of repositioning in regeneration strategies (Peel and Lloyd, 2008; Gilmore, 2002). Consequently, place marketing and branding have become normalised through the establishment of marketing bureaus and inward investment agencies, together with a burgeoning sector of place-branding professionals. Place branding has also become an academic sub-discipline in its own right, although much of this research focuses on the city, regional and national scale, whereas relatively little is understood about the branding and repositioning of town centres or high streets (Yanchula, 2008). Moreover, the reality is that many smaller towns and centres, unless they possess special historical attractions, are unlikely to appeal to international audiences. As such, we go on to critically evaluate if any insight can be garnered from the repositioning research that might inform the place management practice.

Critical perspective on place repositioning
Initially involving aggressive marketing of places to attract direct investment, or capture international flows of capital or tourism, many towns and cities became embroiled in an unsustainable “spiral of place competition” (Hall and Hubbard, 1996; Harvey, 1989; Lui, 2008; Metaxas, 2009; Sassen, 2002; Turok, 2009). In attempts to understand or analyse these conditions, academics have deployed various terms such as civic boosterism, urban growth machines, urban entrepreneurialism and place marketing and branding (Molotch, 1976; Harvey, 1989; Gibson, 2005). Such accounts reveal a number of critical concerns about place repositioning. Harvey (1989) argues that such strategies have resulted in urban monotony, through replication of the same policy solutions across multiple locations, such as ubiquitous and generic waterfront regeneration schemes, and mega-projects, such as stadiums or airports, together with the construction of a similar mix of new attractions.
conference centres, indoor arenas, covered shopping malls). The involvement of certain “starchitects” and urban planning gurus has resulted in the replication of similar aesthetics and built forms (Ponzini and Nastasi, 2011). For Eisenschitz (2010), this is a zero-sum game, which undermines a place’s distinctiveness or unique selling proposition, and it is conducive to the production of corporatised non-places (Auge, 1995). Town centres are not immune to such homogenising trends, with the accusation that many places are becoming clone towns (New Economics Foundation, 2004), where one high street provides the same range of retailer offers and brands as the next one. Such outcomes are not surprising, given the propensity of localities to follow the same repositioning “scripts” (Hubbard, 1996), which present simplified commodified messages about places to potential external users; typically decision-makers responsible for inward investment decisions, or mobile consumers and tourists, or latterly the ubiquitous but ephemeral creative classes (Florida, 2017). Unfortunately, the pervasive compete-or-die mantra simply fuels a destructive spiral of place competition (Harvey, 1989), exposing the places to the vagaries of globalisation, through intrusions of corporate capital and value-extracting functions, which not only contributes to an undermining of local distinctiveness but also weakens the power of civic institutions to affect local change as they become subject to remote decision-making.

The reconstruction of the built environment and civic realm, again to appeal to a corporate class or reliable consumer, is increasingly entangled with the commodification and regulation of public space, as centres become subject to surveillance and regulatory controls which serve to identify and exclude undesirable others (Minton, 2012). Recent debate concerning the emergence of privately owned public space underlines a growing concern about rights to the city (Mitchell, 2016). By exposing the high street to the logic of neoliberal regeneration, the town centres are now subject to similar critical concerns regarding gentrification and social exclusion (Hubbard, 2017), together with anxiety about new forms of local governance involved in managing the town and city centres. Critical responses to the growth of town centre partnerships and business improvement districts suggest that these actors are extensions of the neoliberal restructuring of the local state, which serves the interests of big business and property interests, rather than representing local people (Ward, 2006). Consequently, rebranding places typically involves upscaling through transforming downtrodden places into “quality” or “world” destinations (Gibson and Davidson, 2004; Allport, 2005; Skinner, 2011) through services and facilities that will attract lucrative external markets. But as many towns, typically smaller towns or peripheral places, are perhaps now beginning to realise the failure to consolidate local independent business capacity and adjust to meet local needs has resulted in the loss of a vibrant public and street culture on the high street. The mobile classes simply shop elsewhere, often where parking is free, whereas even Richard Florida (2017) brings into question the power of the creative class to drive economic recovery. As Hubbard (2017) argues, high street decline goes beyond retailing and economic development. The footfall that drives shopping also drives local employment, public services and transport. Symbolically, the high street is a meeting place, providing opportunities for socialising and leisure, and remains one of the few places where a local community might come together and produce a shared sense of identity, in ways which are conspicuously absent within the regulated environments of the shopping mall or retail park. In this context, attempts to reposition the high street intersect with social and political concerns and require a “whole place” approach to address multi-functional uses.
Repositioning the high street: from place branding to placemaking

Repositioning the high street involves more than rebranding. The place product has to meet the expectations and desires established through development or reinvention (Theodoridis et al., 2017). For towns experiencing a decline in footfall and high vacancy rates, solutions extend into the realm of place shaping or placemaking (Daramola-Martin, 2009; Warnaby and Medway, 2013). At one level, this may involve improvements to public realm through urban design, but placemaking as an approach calls for holistic, collective and participatory solutions to what might be considered as traditional planning problems, which go beyond physical redesign to consider how people actually use places in contradistinction to the top-down strategic approaches (Project for Public Places, 2009). Placemaking has its roots in Jacobs’ (1961) ideas about the value of street life and well-used public realm, which she argued were qualities of urban living under threat as places give up more space for traffic, together with the de-densifying effects of suburbanisation and the planned decentralisation of cities in the post-war period. Instead, Jacobs saw value in dense, compact and walkable neighbourhoods in producing informal and spontaneous social interaction necessary to build community cohesion. These ideas continue to resonate within architectural movements such as the New Urbanism (Katz et al., 1994) in the 1990s, and more recently, in the rise of subversive and community responses to local problems experienced by residents in their everyday life, broadly falling under the umbrella term “tactical urbanism” (Lydon and Garcia, 2015). Although often unsanctioned, and sometimes semi-legal, Lyons and Garcia suggest that the growth of tactical placemaking reflects the increasing frustration with formal planning processes and place management, where institutions of local governance appear unresponsive and inflexible. Through the re-iteration of flexible, temporary interventions and events, Lydon and Garcia suggest that communities can produce liveable and attractive places through grassroots action. Lydon and Garcia, however, acknowledge that, in practice, placemaking involves a middle ground between formal and informal action. This means developing an understanding of multiple local needs, together with recognising the value of participatory approaches and engagement with the wide range of interested parties who share a stake in town centres and high streets, to “create a better fit between the town’s competences and the needs and benefits the customer seeks” (Wrayatt, 2004, p. 348).

Understanding how people engage with the centres, therefore, is essential to the centre’s success (Teller et al., 2016) and, therefore, attempts to reposition the high street are needed. For the vast majority of smaller towns, however, including many regional centres, there is a need to question their investment and marketing plans when the focus is on attracting new external audiences to their centres. Successful repositioning in many cases does not necessarily mean replacing existing markets or existing users of a place, but adapting local services to match their needs. This may involve down-scaling or creating better value/experience for existing local users.

Broadly, a strategy for repositioning will involve shifting from external to internal objectives to focus on:

- liveability (repositioning centres as places to live);
- town centre activity (repositioning offer, services and activities, anchors, e.g. markets, multi-functional);
- connectivity (repositioning links, transport accessibility, integration of transport into place, infrastructure); and
- demographic change (repositioning to meet needs of changing catchment – younger families, older generations).
Repositioning, however, is a long-term strategy. The bricks and mortar infrastructure that constitutes the high street environment presents a major challenge to short-term adaptation. Store formats are constantly shifting combined with the changing consumer preferences, which might render major investments quickly obsolete, leaving the town centres with empty shops and failing malls. Placemaking might provide a pathway to overcome this rigid short-termism. Consequently, this paper begins to address these challenges and asks how towns can reposition themselves to be better enabled to identify distinct capabilities and develop competitive advantages and accommodate future trends.

Repositioning in practice
The changing nature of the retail environment and its impact on town centres indicate that all towns need to think about a repositioning approach. Throughout the lifetime of the HSUK2020 project, it became clear that identifying distinct capabilities and developing competitive advantages are two critical components of repositioning. However, the main challenge that all towns were facing was one of effectively understanding and addressing their current situation. Usually, identification of local variations and the problems and challenges associated with the town centre was based on anecdotal evidence. During the early stages of the project, this seemed to be enough for the stakeholders to reach some primary agreement that repositioning was necessary. Such anecdotal data, though not robust enough to inform a strategy, provided rich descriptions and seemed to enable local partnerships to get some initial momentum for a repositioning strategy, which could lead to more purposeful market research (Mintzberg, 1979). A full methodology for the project can be found in Ntounis and Parker’s (2017) study.

During workshops, and relying on these soft data, we encouraged the local stakeholders to start determining the town’s current situation, based on their views about their town. This exercise can be seen as the start of a place audit, an accurate description of where a town and its community are, and the first step towards strategic decision-making (Kotler et al., 1999). Unavoidably, such a process tends to reflect the complex and multiple identities that people construct for their town. From a strategic management point of view, unstructured processes (Mintzberg et al., 1976) can lead to diverging interpretations of the town and the town centre, and subsequently to diverging opinions regarding which repositioning strategy needs to be implemented. Consequently, stakeholders with different interests, objectives, knowledge and motivationally distinct values (Horlings, 2015; Peel, 2003) need to build a common ground of where the town is and where it needs to go. Especially in towns where little information about their present situation is available, such an approach ensured that the majority of stakeholders have a partial understanding of the town partnership’s objectives (Le Feuvre et al., 2016; Mowery and Novak, 2016), are aware of the challenges that their town centres encountered and are willing to work together to alleviate the conflicts that stem from the plurality of understandings and demands from the town centre and the town in general (Brand and Gaffikin, 2007; Hillier, 2003). However, in most cases, these understandings were backed up by some basic data information (e.g. retail sales from a limited number of shops, or unrepresentative surveys that portrayed a snapshot of the situation) that may, or may not, reflect actual performance. Traditional metrics that are based on historical data, such as vacancy rates and footfall, are perceived to be most useful and easiest to collect, but these were not available to all the towns in the project. Henceforth, the towns were encouraged to start working towards collecting these data (Table I) and bring evidence to the table regarding the future planning of their towns.
Addressing place management issues
A direct outcome of our engagement with participants was the assessment of factors that
influence a town centre’s current position. Here, emphasis was given to the top 25 priorities
for changes that were identified during the HSUK2020 project (Parker et al., 2017). These
were presented to the participants prior to the dialogue regarding the challenges the town
centres face and, as Table II illustrates, these guided people’s discussions regarding the
areas of improvement in their respective towns. This exercise highlighted that prior to
considering repositioning as a potential strategy, improvements in the tangible and material
elements of the place product (Warnaby and Medway, 2013) need to be addressed. Yanchula
(2008) suggests a relative hierarchy of activities, which first focuses on the operational side
of place management that underpins the safety and overall appearance of the place. Getting
the basic rights has to be the initial step of all place management interventions (Parker et al.,
2015), which then will allow places to build upon and develop other activities, ranging from
temporal events and festivals to long-term solutions (beautification and business retention).
This level of commitment obviously requires a range of stakeholders working mutually to
achieve the holistic change within the centre, a point that was raised by a participant in
Ballymena:

“We need to work together towards becoming a destination of choice and tackle the negative
attitude from retailers and citizens regarding the town centre […] Improving customer service,
evening economy, and bringing the next generation of entrepreneurs can help towards that goal”.

Partnerships can address all these points from the bottom-up, meaning that the actions need
to be gradually developed and involve the community. Such was the case in Market Rasen
with Market Rasen Business Improvement Group (MR BIG), a now-dissolved community
interest company that spearheaded repositioning attempts by focusing their actions on
improving the main shopping areas of the town. Among these, the major facelift and tidying
up of the high street, and the reinstatement of markets in the heart of the town, aimed to
change the perception of both locals and visitors. The goal of MR BIG was to put Market
Rasen back on the map, by re-establishing its identity as a market town with participation
from local traders and businesses. Their repositioning attempts were reduced to not only the
local catchment but also the potential visitors. The geographical position of the town (near
the coast) means that there is an opportunity to “make Market Rasen a gateway from which
visitors will explore the whole region” (MR BIG, 2013, p. 17), with the market as the main
anchor:

“A lot of people drive by Market Rasen, but do not stop, and some of the activities that we are
putting into place are giving people a reason to stop, shop, enjoy themselves, have a bite to eat
and really experience all the things our town has to offer”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vital and viable town centres (URBED, PPG6, etc.)</th>
<th>Table I. Traditional metrics of town centre performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pedestrian footfall</td>
<td>Vacancy rates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity of uses and change</td>
<td>Cultural and social events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of built environment</td>
<td>Leisure and cultural facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recent and proposed investment</td>
<td>Town centre residential population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
<td>Employment in the town centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes and perceptions</td>
<td>Street safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retailer representation and demand</td>
<td>Sense of place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial yields and retail rents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Anticipating and managing change: towards multi-functional town centres

A combination or permutation of the 201 factors identified in this project (Parker et al., 2017) alters micro-scale conditions and causes local structural changes in towns and city centres (De Kervenoael et al., 2006). This means that adaptive alignments need to be made to the existing urban form and the structure of the towns, with an emphasis on more permanent and temporary uses other than retail, making many of them multi-functional (Millington et al., 2015), but in contradistinction to forces that propagate their comprehensive redevelopment and masterplanning (Bishop and Williams, 2012).

Subsequently, repositioning attempts were needed to address all the changes that any of our project towns were dealing with. For example, Morley is in the middle of an important demographic change, as young families and a growing young professional population are emerging because of an increase in urban housing developments within the area (ATCM, 2014). This warrants potential change in Morley’s town centre performance, and it poses a big challenge for the Morley Town Centre Management Board on how to capture the needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Town</th>
<th>Areas of improvement</th>
<th>Link to top 25 priorities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alsager</td>
<td>Improve connectivity and walkability, better customer experience and retailer representation, create vision for town</td>
<td>Retailers, vision and strategy, experience, walkable, accessible, liveable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altrincham</td>
<td>Changing opening hours, ensuring the basics are right (such as car parking), make use of redundant retail space, attract key retail names</td>
<td>Activity hours, necessities, attractiveness, anchor stores, adaptability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballymena</td>
<td>Developing an evening economy, ensuring the basics are right (such as car parking), better marketing and promotion, building a more modern and positive identity for the town</td>
<td>Activity hours, necessities, networks and partnerships, place marketing, recreational space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barnsley</td>
<td>Reviewing opening hours, attracting new retailers and development, merchandise and retail/tenant mix, customer experience, building more positive perceptions of the town</td>
<td>Activity hours, merchandise, retailers, diversity, experience, vision and strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bristol (St. George)</td>
<td>Changing opening hours, strengthen the evening economy, improving the connectivity and walkability of the street, attracting more fresh food retail and restaurants</td>
<td>Activity hours, liveable, walkable, diversity, adaptability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congleton</td>
<td>Signage and car-parking need improvement, reducing barriers to entry to encourage new businesses into the town centre, lack of merchandise and little retail offer</td>
<td>Necessities, barriers to entry, retailers, merchandise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holmfirth</td>
<td>Signage, lack of office space, lack of engagement with young people, lack of support for the business community</td>
<td>Activity hours, necessities, experience, networks and partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market Rasen</td>
<td>Changing opening hours, attracting a number of shops in town, more collective action and networking across all stakeholders</td>
<td>Activity hours, networks and partnerships, retailers, merchandise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morley</td>
<td>Changing opening hours, improving walkability, accessibility and street activity, lack of night-time economy, better marketing and promotion</td>
<td>Activity hours, walkable, place marketing, accessible, liveable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrexham</td>
<td>Improving evening economy, more restaurants and cultural events, improving the “walkability” and connectivity of retail in the town, better marketing and promotion, more collective action and collaboration across all stakeholders</td>
<td>Activity hours, walkable, accessible, place marketing, networks and partnerships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of the changing catchment population. Major issues for the Morley town centre are centred around a weak retail mix, lethargic street activity and the lack of night-time economy. The board’s current approach focuses on strengthening Morley’s image as an independent town with a growing number of independent retailers, service providers, cafes and restaurants (ATCM, 2014).

In terms of retailing and leisure, partnering with the White Rose Shopping Centre has proven to be successful for the promotion of both locations, as the White Rose creates a positive link to Morley according to the town representatives. This collaboration aims to establish a new town profile for Morley as a key destination for shopping, leisure and culture, with a focus on independents, because 89 per cent of all Morley’s businesses are independently run (Morley Observer, 2016a). Understandably, White Rose’s close proximity to the Morley town centre can prompt people to visit both locations, albeit for different reasons. In this case, complementarity of the retail offer (Teller et al., 2016) is crucial (unique independent shops on the one hand and national multiples coupled with leisure on the other), and the high level of synergy between White Rose and Morley reflects a certain degree of cohesion in their respective action plans, with a common aim to enhance visitation and shopping linkages (Hart et al., 2014; Lambiri et al., 2017). In this case, knowledge exchange and data sharing on catchment profile have been proven essential for both centres’ cooperation. This also highlights how effective market research processes can reveal ways in which competitive places can complement than substitute each other (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008).

Moreover, new planned developments in town, such as increased parking provision, park and ride schemes, new train services and improvements to Morley railway station (Morley Observer, 2016b; Morley Observer, 2017a), are aiming at eliminating previous connectivity constraints within the town. These can create more routes within and into the centre, meaning greater levels of porosity, particularly in disconnected zones and squares that are underperforming compared to others. Boosting trade and increasing uses in quieter areas are also in Morley’s repositioning plans. Also, a new outdoor food market (Morley Observer, 2016a) that offers Yorkshire produce is already bringing vibrancy and improving the less-visible town centre image attributes of busyness and crowding (Hart et al., 2014) in the quieter part of the town centre. Finally, the future production of a neighbourhood plan (Yorkshire Evening Post, 2016) and thoughts about achieving Fairtrade town status (Morley Observer, 2017b) further showcase Morley’s town council to have some sort of control towards future development while also differentiating their offer because of new trends at the same time. Such strategic actions highlight the intention of the town council to become an effective advocate for sustained transformational change (Yanchula, 2008, p. 95), which, with collaboration with other partnerships, can reposition the town.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

Although places might begin to consider repositioning triggered by high street decline, it needs to be thought of as a broader and proactive approach underpinning place adaptation and management. This can enable the local stakeholders to understand what is special about their place and what is happening elsewhere and also help them to plan for future changes that are likely to have great impact on centres. Planning for the future also highlights the importance of building evidence to underpin both strategic and operational decision-making, as well as sharing data that will bring benefits to all the stakeholders on the high street. Our work with the ten local centres who participated in the HSUK2020 project reveals the challenges faced by the local stakeholders in clearly identifying and communicating their market position. Poor understanding of a place’s identity or how a
place functions, and mismatches between functionality and visions and action plans, is the key challenge to effective repositioning and developing coherent strategies. Such challenges further demonstrate the practicability of the market research approach and the need for thorough market research at the beginning of every place management process (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2008; Zenker et al., 2013).

Based on our interactions with the project towns throughout the lifetime of HSUK2020, three recommendations can be made in relation to the design of a repositioning strategy. First, it is essential to complement local knowledge, basic metrics and “soft” data with more comprehensive data collection and data analysis approaches, as well as data sharing between partners. These approaches can include analysis of traditional key performance indicators, such as footfall, retailers’ representation and performance, car parking provision, vacancy rates, property rents, retail and housing investments (Hogg et al., 2007), and these can also transcend towards more sophisticated approaches aiming to evaluate consumers’ perceptions and shopping behaviour (De Nisco and Warnaby, 2013). These approaches will generate metrics for performance and also lay the foundation for mutual understanding that everyone will benefit from the interventions that are effective in increasing footfall in town centres. Second, there is a need for towns to bring together relevant stakeholders with the necessary skills and capacity to effectively self-organise as a decision-making forum. This requires towns to develop organising capacity (van den Berg and Braun, 1999) and fluid local governance networks that will generate new ideas and also reduce barriers to participation, but nevertheless, retain the qualities of leadership and the vision to implement the action plans (Peel and Parker, 2017). Third, and finally, the repositioning strategy needs to deviate from prescriptive models and become more dynamic, evidence-based and aligned with the structural changes in the town centres and retailing. It is evident from the research that shifting consumer shopping behaviours, enhanced mobility, advent of e-commerce and demographic changes are challenging assumptions about how places are functioning. A dynamic repositioning approach can reveal how and when places are actually used, which could lead to their effective repositioning to the right audiences and to the realignment of the town centre action plans.

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**Further reading**


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How to reinvent the High Street: evidence from the HS2020

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of the paper is to present and critically discuss the findings of the ESRC-funded HS2020 project. The aim is to discuss the retail-led change that has happened to the High Streets that participated to the project that, in some cases, is revolutionary and is leading to the reinvention of the place. To do so reference is made to various retail change theories discussing both institutional and consumer-led change.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a discussion paper on the findings of the HS2020 project.

Findings – The major finding reported in this paper is that the reinvention is a natural learning process that involves the comprehension of change and the development of knowledge that will lead to the reinvention of the High Street.

Research limitations/implications – The findings of the research are based on data that were collected from a total of ten towns across the UK.

Practical implications – The paper suggests that to reinvent the High Street the stakeholders that are involved in the place decision-making processes they should embrace the change as a natural development and try to understand and learn from it rather than resisting to it. The HS2020 project provides a comprehensive guide of the areas that change can be managed and if it happens it can facilitate the reinvention.

Originality/value – The paper is relevant to the academic community, as it offers insight to the theories of retail change, and to the practitioners, as it provides evidence as to how to deal with the change that happens to the High Streets.

Keywords High Street, Retail, Reinvention, HS2020

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
In this paper, we argue that the extensive changes facing British High Streets and town centres has led to examples of reinvention, and the emergence of places that are more inclusive and
meaningful to stakeholders. High Streets have long been the focus of scholarly research and policy-making (Dawson, 1988). The recession of 2008 caused numerous issues for High Streets and town centres, particularly the ones in smaller towns. In 2010, the future of the High Street re-emerged as a political priority for the British Government, when Mary Portas (2011, p. 2) “was asked by the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister to conduct an independent review into the state of our High Streets”. As a consequence of the political prioritisation of the future of the High Street, the Institute of Place Management at Manchester Metropolitan University was awarded a research grant by the Economic and Social Research Council to examine the impact changes to retailing in the UK were having on town and city centres. The High Street UK 2020 project included ten British retail centres, namely, Alsager, Altrincham, Ballymena, Barnsley, Bristol (Church Road, St George), Congleton, Holmfirth, Market Rasen, Morley and Wrexham (for further details visit: www.placemanagement.org/special-interest-groups/managing-places/town-and-city-centresdowntowns/town-centre-policy-and-research/hsuk2020).

This paper elaborates on some of the evidences that were collected and reported during the High Street UK 2020 project, and it has a twofold aim:

1. to critically examine the retail change literature and propose a framework of reinvention suitable for smaller towns; and

2. to explore the reinvention of the High Streets and town centres of small towns amidst the changes that have occurred within their competitive environment since the start of the 2007 recession.

The paper will first provide a review of the literature regarding the concept of retail change. Second, the literature on the evolution of High Streets and town centres, alongside the forces that impact upon them, will be reviewed. These literature reviews will be followed by a brief section outlining the methodology used within this research project. The paper will then report findings from the project, in particular those findings relevant to the theme of High Street reinvention. Finally, the implications of this paper for practitioners and policymakers will be explored.

Retail change

The theorisation of retail change is a rather generous term for what has been described as little more than inductively derived generalisation (Brown, 1987a, 1987b). However, there have been a number of different attempts to retrospectively explain the changes that happen in the retail landscape. Pioch and Schmidt (2000) suggest that the debate on the retail change has concentrated variably on retail institutional development; the patterns of expansion of particular retail formats and companies; or on historical studies of selected regions, often including culture and changing forms of demand as variables influencing retail structures. They further argue that most share a positivist preoccupation with reductionist representations of complex change processes which aim to predict future developments and provide explanations of outcomes in all situations, regardless of broader or different context. Retail change theories have thus been subjected to criticism. Early studies have been characterised as “descriptive reasonings” that fail to meet the criteria for formal theory, suffer from poorly defined concepts and causal linkages, lack validity, are tautological in their reasoning and, consequently, cannot hope to serve as the foundations for retail theory (Brown, 1987a, 1987b, p. 27). In a similar fashion, Hollander (1980) argued that these models are mostly descriptive rather than exploratory, lack predictive power, suffer from the subjectivity of the selected examples and are full of “ill-defined” concepts, such as “newness” or “merchandise mix” or “vulnerability”. In
contrast, studies that were published from the 1950s, the so-called “cyclical theories”, were characterised by realism, quantification and managerial relevance (Brown, 1987a, 1987b). However, the validity of these same theories was later questioned, and a post-modern approach was proposed. Brown (1995) concluded that cyclical theories should not be rejected and they are not a panacea either. Moreover, he adds that researching retail change from a post-modern epistemological stance can bring into focus the fragmented and inconsistent sequence of phenomena that motivate or characterise change.

Recently, more sophisticated methods of scrutiny have been called for that reflect the economic and social context of retail change. This complements a call for multidisciplinarity in place management research (Coca-Stefaniak et al., 2010; Wrigley and Dolega, 2011). Indeed, retail change cannot be understood in isolation from economic and social contexts. Likewise, town and city centre change cannot be understood without an appreciation of the power and influence of retailing (Milner and Wheatcroft, 1980). In other words, the current challenges facing UK High Streets are closely associated with the performance of the retail, and other, institutions that inhabit them, and vice versa. To this end, the use of adaptive resilience has emerged as an explanatory framework to study the evolution of places. The adaptive resilience “focuses on anticipatory or reactive reorganisation of the form and function of a system so as to minimize the impact of a destabilising shock” (Wrigley and Dolega, 2011, p. 2346). The destabilisation and reorganisation of systems are common to some retail change theories as well and, namely, conflict theory (Fernie et al., 2015). The difference is, of course, that retail conflict theory examines change from the organisational point of view; however, some geographers have attempted to link retail spatial evolution to the various types of the environmental crises (Dawson, 2014). The application of complexity theory principles, and particularly the concept of adaptive resilience, was introduced by Martin and Sunley (2007) as an effort to explain how places self-organise themselves in response to changes in their surrounding conditions. Robinson (2010, p. 14) defines adaptive resilience as:

... the capacity to remain productive and true to core purpose and identity whilst absorbing disturbance and adapting with integrity in response to changing circumstances.

Adaptive resilience can explain how different High Streets and town centres respond to the challenges that face them. Martin (2012) presented historical findings from the performance of UK High Streets after various periods of recession and demonstrated that different regions recovered at a different pace than others. Similar studies have been conducted in Portugal (Cachinho, 2014), the USA (Cowell, 2014), Austria, Slovakia and Slovenia (Teller et al., 2016), amongst other places in various stages of their economic cycles. All these studies conclude that different places adapt to their environment at a pace that depends on their social, economic and physical characteristics (Dolega and Celińska-Janowicz, 2015).

**Retail change driven by the consumers**

Fernie (1997) argued that retail change is a consumer-driven process. His approach focused upon demographic changes in the British society since the mid-1970’s, which brought respective changes in consumer behaviour that in turn led to change in the retail sector. The impact of consumers’ behaviour to the changes of the High Streets is prevalent in the research of Hart and her colleagues (Hart et al., 2013; Stocchi et al., 2016). They suggest that consumers, or the catchment of the High Streets and town centres, search for a holistic experience that includes a mix of the tangible and intangible, for example, the store and the product mix, and the social events that
create excitement and novelty, in addition to functional features, such as ease of movement and parking (Stocchi et al., 2016). These findings are consistent with the results of the High Street UK 2020 project, in particular the 25 priorities for vitality and viability summarised in Parker et al. (this issue). The impact of consumers on High Street change is also reported by Wrigley et al. (2015), who identified consumer groups among the stakeholders that influence the evolving High Street configuration. The importance of understanding the changing perceptions of the catchment on the image of the High Street is also stressed by Hart et al. (2013) who maintain that understanding the perceptions and expectations of the catchment will ultimately drive the delivery of an attractive place. Hart et al. (2013) also suggest that the understanding of what is delivered on the High Street is the result of a mental process that reduces the complex offering to anchors that can be recalled and easily classified in a person’s memory.

Of course, catchments are also impacted by change that happens outside the High Street or town centre. Hampson and McGoldrick (2013, p. 835) identified four emerging retail consumer clusters during the recession, which includes the *maximum adaptors*, *minimum changers*, *caring thrifties* and, finally, the *eco-crunchers*. The minimum changers, or those consumers that do not present signs of significantly changing consumer behaviour, were the smallest of the four clusters, representing about 13 per cent of the consumer base. This leaves 87 per cent of consumers within clusters that displayed significantly transformed consumer behaviours. A point that is raised in the literature is the long-lasting impact of recessionary consumer behaviour even after the recession period has ended. Slaughter and Grigore (2015) maintain that the post-recession lives and lifestyles are different to pre-recession ones. For example, an emerging trend during the recession period was the increase of the de-ownership and collaborative consumption (Lindblom and Lindblom, 2017). This could explain the documented net increase of retail businesses on the High Street that provide space for experiences and co-consumption, for example, coffee and tea shops and restaurants and bars (LDC, 2017).

The changing nature of the expected functions of High Streets and town centres from the catchment has resulted in a need for their reorientation. Martin (2012) suggests that the reorientation, or realignment, is a proportionate response relevant to the amount of crisis pressure imposed upon High Streets and town centres. Hughes and Jackson (2015) went as far as to say some High Streets became obsolete because of a combination of economic, environmental and functional factors. They suggested that economic obsolescence was a result of the declining demand for retail products and services that subsequently led to the rationalisation of retail businesses and a decline on the demand for retail property. They also raised the problem of “unfit” physical environments, suggesting that the change or deterioration of the physical environment, in addition to changes to the infrastructure, make retail agglomerations less attractive for their catchments. Martin (2012) pointed out the British regions that lagged in their recovery from recessions showed signs of slow adaptation to emerging catchment trends. As a result of these issues, places lose their functionality, and therefore, they become less attractive for consumers. In the past, challenges like this were met by the relocation of retail activity, which was metaphorically described as the “waves of retail” (Fernie, 1995, 1998; Schiller, 1986, 1994); however, nowadays the challenge is more complex and influenced by the opportunities and threats that are created by the rapid development of technology and omni-channel retailing (Grimsey et al., 2013).
Therefore, there is a call to reflect on how High Streets and town centres can adapt and be changed and revitalised to reinvent themselves and provide whatever their catchment needs in a way that will make them vital and viable. Indeed, later in this paper (after the methodology), qualitative data will be discussed that sheds light on the reinvention process of the High Street.

Methodology

The purpose of the paper is to report a part of the results of the High Street UK 2020 project. The methodology adopted by the research team is discussed in more detail within another paper in this Special Issue, entitled “Engaged scholarship on the High Street” (Ntounis and Parker, this issue). Nevertheless, to put the findings of this paper into context, a brief summary of the methodology will now be outlined.

The purpose of the project was to address real problems experienced by ten partner towns, namely, Alsager, Altrincham, Ballymena, Barnsley, Bristol (Church Road, St George), Congleton, Holmfirth, Market Rasen, Morley and Wrexham. Thus, the first methodological challenge was to engage the towns in the definition and development of the research aim. To achieve this, the researchers used a framework of engaged scholarship, which can be defined as:

[…] a collaborative form of inquiry in which academics and practitioners leverage their different perspectives and competencies to coproduce knowledge about a complex problem or phenomenon that exists under conditions of uncertainty found in the world (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006, p. 803).

A set of aims and objectives were collaboratively devised that were related to the short- and mid-term change of the respective High Streets and town centres. The first step to achieve these aims and objectives involved the project team conducting a systematic literature review to examine what factors have previously been identified that influence the vitality and viability of High Streets and town centres. This process resulted in 201 factors (Parker et al., this issue). To reduce this selection of factors to a more manageable and comprehensive proportion, a Delphi Technique, which included 22 retail experts, was used. The Delphi Technique refers to “a group process involving an interaction between the researcher and a group of identified experts on a specified topic, usually through a series of questionnaires” (Yousuf, 2007, p. 1). After two iterations of engagement of the experts, the 201 factors were reduced to 25[1] in order of how much impact the factors have on the performance of the High Streets and town centres and how much influence local stakeholders had over the factors.

The final stage of the project focused on the development of a framework for managing change on the High Street and identifying interventions that can facilitate change. Four major intervention themes were identified, namely, “repositioning”, “reinventing”, “rebranding” and “restructuring”. This paper focuses on the reinvention of High Streets or the process of re-orientation/realignment (Martin, 2012).

How can the High Street be reinvented?

Understanding the need for reinvention

It was apparent from all the focus groups that took place that there was a strong appreciation for the diverse range of challenges that call for the reinvention of High Streets and town centres. In some cases, the requirement emerged because of the changing nature of the needs of the catchment. In Wrexham, for example, it was reported that teenagers were underserved by the town centres, as there were no free
activities to attend during the summer. Similarly, in the case of Barnsley, the challenge was to make the town centre more attractive for younger college students as it was currently mainly attracting older people. In other towns, the challenges were seen as being the deficit of certain services in the centre. In the case of Market Rasen, for example, the challenge was the lack of a functioning market in a market town called “Market Rasen”. For Congleton, there was a need to improve the “well-being” offer through the refurbishment of the leisure centre.

The real challenge throughout the project was to develop a shared understanding that reinvention is not a bespoken project or a one-off solution. Instead, it is a culture that needs to be embedded into the minds of the place managers and retailers and considered as an on-going process, like gardening. As one Bristol workshop participant noted: “I like the fact that there is a noticeable improvement and new shops are coming in, like delicatessens for example”. This quotation implies that stakeholders notice change, without the need, necessarily, for hard data to support it. What may be more problematic for High Street stakeholders is understanding the drivers of change. When it comes to retailing, it is more commonly understood that change is an outcome of diversification, which is a strategic choice that comes as a result of the constant monitoring of the internal and the external environment. In the case of High Streets and town centres, even though performance indicators are used to measure their success or decline, the project identified that the knowledge of the decision-makers is usually limited or incomplete (see Millington and Ntounis, this issue). This resulted in reinvention, tending to come as a reactive response, often too late (in other words the internal and external environment had already shifted). This highlights the need for a better system of incoming information that will inform the decision-makers about emerging challenges. For example, in the High Street UK 2020 project, the project partners and the local stakeholders found the workshops the research team delivered in the town exploring the factors that caused change extremely useful (a mean score of 4.6 out of 5). Having a more sophisticated understanding of retail and High Street change enabled the participants to develop a shared understanding of the need for reinvention – i.e. what was likely to be driving this need in their particular town.

Learning the art and the science of reinvention
The reinvention of High Streets and town centres is, put simply, the process of ensuring the offer matches the needs of the catchment. Some High Streets and town centres that took part in the HSUK2020 project had a much clearer idea of what their offer endeavoured to be, whereas others were in the process of figuring that out. Altrinham, for example, had a clear view that they aspired to be a modern market town, attractive not only for the catchment but also for new entrepreneurial activity mainly focussing on local products. Barnsley, on the other hand, had to deal with the collapse of a major regeneration partnership; therefore, the local council stepped in to push for the reinvention. In Altrinham, reinvention was more organic. Anchored by the redevelopment of the indoor market-hall, new businesses have been attracted. These entrepreneurs have been encouraged by the town centre partnership, Altrinham Forward, but not “selected” in the same way a shopping centre may approach tenants. In Barnsley, the reinvention involved extensive changes to the public realm, which is far more controllable from the perspective of the local authority, but carries more risk as large-scale interventions are not so easily adaptable. These cases signal a process of learning to reinvent High Streets and town centres, either building on the capabilities of the local community
Learning the art and science of reinvention involves the engagement and cooperation of stakeholders. This may emerge in the form of a flawless interaction or in the form of conflict that leads to a resolution that will inevitably involve some change. High Streets and town centres can learn from retailers in terms of how to reinvent themselves. Retailers are changing the way they do business, becoming increasingly more reliant on their online sales, whereas other retailers engage in partnerships that enable them to extend their offering and attract a wider and more diverse catchment (for example Argos tie-up with eBay). Creating a town-centre click and collect facility was proposed by a number of pilot towns, for example, Holmfirth. Mixed uses of space were also proposed for the introduction of events, the utilisation of public spaces, such as parks, for monthly markets or even the short-term lease of unused retail space for local artists to display their art. These are all examples of how town centres were reinventing. The process of learning how to reinvent in this more flexible or incremental way depended on sharing information and experiences with other towns that had attempted something similar. In contrast, the larger regeneration projects relied on advice and recommendations from professionals – such as developers, planners or urban designers. Any source of learning external to the location needs to be evaluated in relation to the peculiarities of the particular location. It is one thing to see successful reinvention somewhere else – the question to subsequently ask is “will it work here?” No matter if the learning originates in the microenvironment or macroenvironment, or even both, it has to generate local knowledge and subsequent value for a particular High Street or town centre.

Intervening in High Streets and town centres
The High Street or town centre intervention is, obviously, the most substantial part of reinvention. The intervention can be subtle (e.g. the creation of outside space to encourage a stronger hospitality offer in Ballymena), or it can involve the complete revamp of the town centre, as happened in Barnsley. The intervention involves the investment of either public money or funds invested by retailers or others with the expectation that the investment will improve vitality and viability. Given the promises and expectations associated with reinvention, decision-makers can be expected to be held accountable.

In Market Rasen, for example, the attempt to create an attractive offering for the catchment did not leave all the stakeholders happy. There was a fundamental disagreement on what reinvention was necessary, and this was strongly communicated in the workshops that took place there. Whilst there was no doubt the town team had made significant improvements to the town – supported by visitor surveys and other statistics – this reinvention without a subsequent restructuring of the governance arrangements of the town (relationships with the town council) meant the change was short-lived.

In Ballymena, on the other hand, project participants advocated a strong partnership between the public and the private stakeholders. One of the achievements of this partnership was developing a free WiFi offer in the town, which not only was of benefit to traders but also improved the multichannel experience for the catchment. Offering connectivity is a tool that can also compete against out-of-town shopping centres that usually offer this facility to their visitors. Another advantage is that having such a platform available means the catchment will have the opportunity to access other innovations. For example, accessing a
mobile app that will use and feed real-time data on available car park spaces would address one of the challenges facing many town centres.

What is the reinvention of the High Streets after all?
For the purposes of the High Street UK 2020 project, we are defining reinvention as a process of recognising a need for change, learning from the micro and macroenvironment and intervening to deliver a High Street or town centre that that attracts and meets the needs and expectations of visitors and users (Figure 1).

Most models of retail change refer to a cycle of transformation that, in a Darwinian manner, selects the fittest to survive within an evolving environment. The reinvention of the High Street is not dissimilar to this premise. Portas (2011), in the foreword of her review, maintained that we cannot and we shall not attempt to save every High Street. Meanwhile, Justin King (2012, p.8), the ex-CEO of Sainsbury’s, in a public speech suggested that: “[…] We all need to adapt or die, be foxes not hedgehogs. Something that successful grocers have been adept at”. Hughes and Jackson (2015) theorised that the death of the High Street or town centre is the outcome of the combination of numerous intrinsic or extrinsic factors. The findings of the High Street UK 2020 project indicate that the High Streets and town centres that survive pay attention and address a variety of factors that are within their ability to influence (Parker et al, this issue). The catchment will choose to custom the High Streets and town centres that provide the offers that are closer to their needs.

Practitioner implications
The reinvention of the High Street is an art and a science. It requires a vision and a visionary team to lead the change process (Peel et al, this issue), but it also requires information on the trend changes (Millington et al., this issue), routines that will produce sufficient knowledge and people to apply the knowledge and capitalise on that. Retail change theories refer to the bras de fer between the old and the new, the established and innovative and the importance of “letting the fight happen” because through these processes change occurs. The reinvention of High Streets and town centres can be conceptualised in a similar way. It is a fight between the traditional brick and mortar retail and the modern omnichanneling. It is a fight to interest the catchment and keep them patronising the High Street, rather than letting it escape to out-of-town or online choices. Reinvention is about developing a retail and service mix anchored around a focal place of interest, with easy access and a plethora of activities to keep the catchment purposefully engaged. Of course, in addition to that, it is an exercise of strong leadership that will involve the stakeholders (Peel et al, this issue) and make them agents of change.

It shall be acknowledged that the reinvention of the High Street and town centres can only happen within the remit of the authority of the local decision-makers. It is a positive sign that various government initiatives have been introduced to support the aim of “the vitality of town centres”, which is enshrined within the National Planning Policy Framework 2012. This project also aimed to improve the vitality of town centres by providing a forum for stakeholder engagement and knowledge exchange, through the methodology used (Ntounis and Parker,
With respect to the three stages of reinvention (Figure 1), the findings of this research reveal a number of practical implications worthy of future study. With regards to the understanding of the need for a change, the evidence from the research indicates that the decision-makers need to develop their management and decision-making skills (Millington et al., this issue). Previous research has also pointed out that the decision-makers come from diverse backgrounds, and they do not necessarily have the information, knowledge, skills or experience to scan and respond to the changes that happen in High Streets and town centres (Hogg et al., 2003, 2004; Morgan, 2008; Yanchula, 2008). It would be beneficial for all the stakeholders to actively engage with their peers and share knowledge and information for the common good. It would also be useful if decision-makers were provided with the necessary development support (Theodoridis and Kayas, 2017) so that they possess the skills to collect and analyse data, produce information and knowledge that will underpin decisions and create value from the various sources of data that are in their possession.

Addressing the emerging challenges also entails a process of learning and collaboration. The evidence from the project suggests that High Streets and town centres that engage retailers in the process of understanding evolution achieve better results because the decision-makers benefit from the knowledge and understanding of the retailers, even when the knowledge is moderated and partial. This finding relates to the work of Medway et al. (1999, 2000) who maintained that the retailers’ involvement with High Streets and town centres is not only vital but also necessary prerequisite for their financial support, which is needed to improve the vitality and viability of the place. The findings of this project are also in agreement with the findings of Thomas and Bromley (2003), who highlighted the impact of retail linkages for the revitalisation of retail agglomerations. Therefore, addressing the emerging challenges requires the engagement of the retailers because they can provide tacit and tangible resources for the sustainable development of the place.

Finally, the intervention process per se requires an excellent understanding of the emerging challenges and the boundaries of intervention set by the policies. Furthermore, it also requires understanding of the marketing issues that particularly relate to the consumer behaviour and lifestyles that at some point became non-compatible with High Streets or town centres, and rendered them unattractive or obsolete. This was highlighted in the work of Page and Hardyman (1996) and Stubbs et al. (2002) but was particularly focussed on the beneficial synergies between town centre schemes and retailers in the work of Warnaby et al. (2005). Marketing the High Street and town centre is a function that moves beyond operational activities, such as litter management or the procurement and display of Christmas lights. In fact, it is a complex strategic function that involves the understanding of the catchment and the delivery of a place that within its capabilities will provide value to all the engaged stakeholders and users.

Note
1. See Ntounis and Parker (this issue) “Engaged Scholarship and the High Street: The case of HSUK2020” for details on the elicitation process.

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**Further reading**


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Re-branding the High Street: the place branding process and reflections from three UK towns

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Abstract

Purpose – The main aim of this paper is to develop a holistic understanding of place branding and reflect on its practical value and implications, by drawing evidence from the rebranding process of three UK towns (Alsager, Altrincham and Holmfirth) that participated in the HSUK2020 project.

Design/methodology/approach – A comprehensive place branding process that includes the interrelated stages of research, deliberation, consultation, action and communication is presented. The practical value of this theoretical proposition is linked to the experiences of three UK towns that participated in the HSUK2020 project.

Findings – The importance of research, the challenges of participation and the role of communications in place branding processes were identified as primary issues in all towns. The results of the project demonstrate the significance of the initial research stage of the place branding process and show that the process as a whole is valuable in helping places deal effectively with identity issues.

Research limitations/implications – Participatory place branding processes can flourish when place stakeholders are engaged in the right context and are encouraged to work together. In addition, place brands are important cues and empower stakeholders’ participation in all stages of place brand processes.

Practical implications – Knowledge exchange projects that have the potential to engage a plethora of place stakeholders should be considered by practitioners for future place branding strategies.

Originality/value – The paper offers a refreshing practical grounding on participatory place branding concepts and theories. The value of knowledge exchange strategies for examining the field of place branding is also highlighted and can become a useful research approach for future research.

Keywords High Street, Rebranding, Place branding process, Place brands

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

One of the tasks that has captured the imagination of local authorities around the world is that of developing and maintaining a successful brand of the town or city (Lucarelli and
Often it is considered that the city’s branding process centres around “a cacophony of logos, slogans, events and other types of interventions all aimed at promoting, selling and marketing places” (Giovanardi et al., 2013; p. 366). What this treatment of place branding implies is that the crucial elements in the formation of place brands are advertisements and visual identity tactics that can be designed and created by consultants or city officials behind closed doors. However, as repeatedly discussed in the literature (Govers, 2013; Oliveira, 2015), such a misunderstanding significantly limits the application and effectiveness of place branding. The brand of a place is not created in the design of a logo but rather in people’s encounters with the place and all its diverse aspects. In this sense, place brands have numerous co-creators who engage in a process of co-constructing them as they form and exchange ideas, experiences, feelings and opinions about the place (Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013). The role of designers, consultants and local authorities is a role of participation in these processes and of facilitation of a dialogue that constantly recreates the place brand. While the need for advertising and other promotional activities should not be disregarded, they are only a small part of the wider place branding process (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2009). All places are complex entities that have multiple identities (Boisen et al., 2011), which do not allow an easy depiction in a single identity claim or a single logo, as beautiful and appealing as this might be.

In this article, we argue for a broader understanding of the place branding process. We highlight the importance of research as a foundation of the process, the crucial role of stakeholder participation in grounding the place brand in the place’s identity and the need for integration of actions to fully capitalize on the potential of the place brand to assist in place development. We link this theoretical discussion to illuminating examples from three towns in the UK. We start by describing the pillars of place branding and the interrelated steps of the place branding process. This is a process that makes the place brand more effective and links it to the local needs and specificities, thus making it also more sustainable. This provides a theoretical basis and conceptual grounding for the description of the re-branding process, as this was understood and implemented in three small UK towns that participated in the High Street UK 2020 project.

The place branding process
For place branding to contribute to the development of towns and cities, several preconditions need to be met. The foundations of the place branding process can be accurately described by the three areas of analysis, strategy and participation (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015). Analysis is an essential part of any place branding project. Internal and external market research is vital in achieving the necessary understanding of the place, its audiences, its potential and its aims – all of which become the cornerstones of place brand development (Kotler et al., 1993). A solid grasp of the constituents of the place’s image (how it is perceived by people) and what the place means for people is crucial for the development of a sustainable place brand (Govers and Go, 2009), as is the evaluation of the place’s potential for the future in relation to the external environment. The understanding developed by the analytical stages of place branding leads to the development of a vision for the place and the strategy that will be followed. Place branding actions implemented in isolation and not adhering to a wider place reputation strategic framework (Bell, 2016) are not likely to achieve long term effects for the place. Even the most appealing and creative promotional campaign or a well-organised event can only bring temporary results if they are not aligned with a strategic vision of what the place’s stakeholders aim for the future.

Consequently, this highlights the significance of stakeholder participation for effective place brand development. Several groups of place stakeholders (Stubbs and Warnaby, 2015)
are important participants in the branding process. The need to involve them in this process stems from the nature of places and place brands themselves which are complex, multifaceted, dynamic and participatory (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015). It is often the case that place brands are developed without the participation of stakeholders (Bennett and Savani, 2003; Merrilees et al., 2009). As Zenker et al. (2017, p. 17) critically note, “because branding is often understood as a process of reduction and concentration on core associations [. . .] practitioners and researchers alike tend to react negatively to complexity”, and they avoid involving many stakeholders in the process. This, however, is unlikely to lead to sustainable place brands because it minimizes the sense of ownership over the brand that is necessary for the brand to be endorsed and advocated by people (Aitken and Campelo, 2011). Current implementation of place branding seems to emphasise the development of a place brand that is chosen by the local authorities or consultants, which is unfortunate, as it ignores the meanings of the brand for the people who live in the place and have invested interests in its development. In contemporary political environments, it is this aspect of participation that is most fragile, as it goes against the desire for fast and easy solutions, thus hampering the potential of place branding to represent in-depth local development policies (Bennett and Savani, 2003; Braun et al., 2013; Cleave et al., 2017).

To put it simply, what this means in practice is that effective place branding implementation consists of the five interrelated and overlapping stages of the participatory place branding process (Figure 1). The first stage is research where the analytical aspects of place branding projects discussed above come to the fore. This involves a detailed account of the resources available in the place and an investigation of the external and internal environmental factors that affect it. Perception studies of the current and potential image are included as also several other studies and methods that help evaluate the current situation of the place and its potential for future development. The second stage is deliberation. In this stage, the core group of stakeholders discuss and propose a strategic vision for the place. These stakeholders might include local authorities, tourism offices, the local chamber of commerce and/or industry, directly involved sectors (e.g. retailers, leisure, transportation)
and any external consultants or experts. The aim of this stage of the process is not necessarily to create a final vision of the future but rather to formulate and articulate a meaningful proposition of such a vision. This proposition will be used in the next stage of consultation to initiate a dialogue around the proposed vision and about the future. Extensive discussions and consultations with local communities are required to refine the vision and strategy. Furthermore, this stage of consultation includes the seeking of synergies with organisations, institutions and other places that might be mutually beneficial. The fourth stage is the stage of action, in which measures are taken and tactics are implemented. These actions will inevitably include infrastructure development and improvement, regeneration initiatives and initiatives aiming at enriching the “opportunities” offered to the several place audiences (opportunities for residence, work, leisure, education, investment and general quality of life). In this sense, this stage of the branding process relies on “place making”. It is important to note that the previous stages are also action-based in the sense that the activities undertaken brand the place equally actively by sending powerful messages about the place and its brand. The next stage is the stage of communication. There is a clear need, particularly in our information overloaded times, to actively engage in communication of the place’s benefits and improvement efforts. This stage wraps up all the above efforts and aims at making all interventions known to the wider public. In this sense, the previous stages of the process provide this last stage with the content of communication.

It is very important to note that the stages of the above described process are not independent of each other but they are overlapping and happen simultaneously. For analytical and planning reasons, it is useful to consider the different aims of the stages and the different activities they include. However, in the actual implementation of place branding projects and strategies, the stages are interdependent and overlapping to a great extent in both content and timeframe. This notion helps clarify two important implications. First, all above-mentioned activities and measures are indeed branding measures. All activities described above in essence send messages about the place’s brand, which is what the process is about and are not meant to happen in parallel or after the branding process. Rather, they constitute the branding process. For instance, research does not happen “before” branding starts, but it is part of the branding process. The stage of consultation aims neither at clarifying the meaning of the brand before this is captured in other actions nor at getting people “on board” the established brand. It is in and of itself an integral part of the branding effort in that it sends important messages about the nature and content of the place’s brand. Place making is also a part of the branding process and not a separate activity. The second implication of the overlapping and simultaneous stages of the process is that the vision for the future of the place and the strategy to achieve this vision are not finalised at the second stage, but they are only propositions that need to be revisited at regular intervals. This is necessary to accommodate changes in the wider environment in which place branding takes place and also to account for the changes brought about by the branding process itself.

**High Street 2020 priorities and the re-branding factors**
The High Street UK 2020 project involved retail experts, academics, town centre managers and key High Street stakeholders (retailers, town centre partnerships, local authorities, property owners/developers and residents) from ten partner locations (Alsager, Altrincham, Ballymena, Barnsley, Bristol, Congleton, Holmfirth, Market Rasen, Morley and Wrexham) in a knowledge exchange process for building a framework for High Street intervention. The framework entails four main components (“repositioning”, “reinventing”, “rebranding” and
restructuring”) that were identified from the management and marketing literature. One of the main objectives of the project was the development of a series of sustainable centre plans on each one of these locations. After a series of workshops, discussions and consultations with the project team, retail experts and academics, each partner location had to develop a plan by focusing on one of the four components above.

Partner towns were encouraged to focus on improving these factors that can exert the most influence on the High Street and can also be mostly influenced by the High Street itself. A systematic literature review revealed more than 150 factors that can influence town performance. After that, via the utilisation of the Delphi technique, a panel of academics and experts participated in a two-round exercise to identify the most important factors. The above outlined process led to the identification within the HSUK2020 project of the top 25 priorities and factors for the future of the High Street, which are considered as the most important areas of action (Table I).

Several, if not all, of the factors presented in Table I are closely related to place branding as understood here and described above. The priorities of High Streets and town centres regarding their future can be considered in branding terms, and a place branding logic might help in achieving an integrated reaction to the challenging factors, as will be shown below with the brief discussion of the three cases. In general terms, branding is very clearly related to the “appearance” group of factors (cleanliness and design) and, of course,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activity hours</td>
<td>Opening hours; shopping hours; evening economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>Visual appearance; cleanliness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retailers</td>
<td>Retail offer; retailer representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision and strategy</td>
<td>Leadership; collaboration; area development strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>Service quality; visitor satisfaction; centre image; familiarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>Centre management; shopping centre management; TCM; place management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merchandise</td>
<td>Range/quality of goods; assortments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Necessities</td>
<td>Car-parking; amenities; general facilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anchor stores</td>
<td>Presence of anchor stores, which signify importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networks and partnerships</td>
<td>Networking; partnerships with council; community leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Attractions; range/quality of shops; non-retail offer; tenant mix; retail diversity; availability of alternative formats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking</td>
<td>Walkability; pedestrianisation/flow; cross-shopping; linked trips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment and leisure</td>
<td>Entertainment; leisure offer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractiveness</td>
<td>Place attractiveness; attractiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place assurance</td>
<td>Atmosphere; BIDs; retail/tenant trust; store characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility</td>
<td>Convenience; accessibility; public transport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place marketing</td>
<td>Centre marketing; marketing; tenant/manager relations; orientation/flow; merchandising; special offers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison/convenience</td>
<td>The amount of comparison shopping opportunities compared to convenience (usually in percentage terms)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreational space</td>
<td>Recreational areas; public space; open space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers to entry</td>
<td>Obstacles that make it difficult for retailers to enter the High Street’s market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chain vs independent</td>
<td>Number of multiples stores and independent stores in the retail mix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety/crime</td>
<td>A centre KPI measuring perceptions or actual crime including shoplifting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liveability</td>
<td>Multi/mono-functional; connectivity; liveability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptability</td>
<td>Retail flexibility; retail fragmentation; flexibility; mixed-use; engagement; functionality; store/centre design; retail unit size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Store development</td>
<td>The process of building, upgrading, remodelling or renovating retail stores</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table I. Top 25 priorities for change and factors
promotional needs, by assisting in disseminating information and persuading about the High Street’s features and benefits. Arguably, though, the “attractiveness” factor is to a great extent part of a holistic branding strategy, the “experience” factor is influenced by the place brand and all factors related to the facilities (e.g. “necessities” or “anchor stores”) and infrastructure (e.g. “walking”) and diversity of the offering also. The factors related to “networking” and stakeholder relationships are at the heart of a participatory branding focus as the brand can provide the common ground for these relationships to develop. Certainly, the “vision and strategy” factors can benefit greatly from the brand as, in a holistic understanding, the brand becomes itself the vision for a town’s future and the strategic guidance necessary for all other actions. Even factors that seem clearly unrelated to the brand such as the “accessibility” can be positively influenced by an effective place branding process as this might minimise the psychological distance from someone’s residence or might motivate people more to sustain access difficulties. This is just an example of the brand’s contribution to the reputation of the place, which in turn has an effect on many other development factors.

This briefly describes the way in which the place branding process covers a wide range of factors affecting the High Street, and it shows the potential of place branding to assist in city centre revitalisation and in securing a prosperous future for High Streets. It also makes clear why re-branding has been chosen as a main focus of the HSUK2020 project. This has been beneficial for the project as a whole, particularly for participating towns that chose to focus their efforts on re-branding, as the next section describes.

**Reflections from the High Street**

This section covers three case studies from HSUK2020 towns focusing on rebranding. The section does not report on a purposefully designed research process with set objectives and strict methodological guidelines. Rather, it is a description of how the three towns reacted to the need of re-branding and a reflection of how the re-branding theory has helped local stakeholders realise change in their towns. We draw evidence from the collaboration with our partners during the life of this project, as well as from workshops and meetings with town stakeholders. Each case includes a reflection on how the rebranding process relates to the theory and some commentary on what could have been done differently in each town. This serves the dual goal of placing specific practices and actions in a wider conceptual framework and of linking the place branding process to the specific context with its particular conditions.

**Alsager: reminiscing the “village” place brand**

Alsager is a classic “sleepy” town with a population of 12,500. Originating as a farming Hamlet, it expanded during the Victorian Period when the Railway made it a popular and attractive place for the wealthy to live away from the potteries. Alsager has been undergoing major changes recently, with the impending closure of Manchester Metropolitan University’s Alsager campus, the loss of manufacturing businesses, improvements in and around the town centre (including the opening of a new anchor store) and plans for future housing developments. It became evident during the lifetime of the project that these changes might have led to confusion between local stakeholders about what type of town Alsager is and what town they want it to be in the future. This was reflected during workshops and meetings, in which it became evident that the town is in need of proper market research that will eventually inform the place branding process and will assist stakeholders in decision-making regarding the future of the town centre. For example, people in Alsager tend to agree that the centre lacks definition and has no real identity,
which coupled with its linear structure poses a serious challenge for the centre’s resilience. It can be argued that these agreements mainly stem from town heuristics (“rules of thumb” regarding town perceptions based on minimum knowledge) and place schemata (Kotler and Gertner, 2004) that determine what town heuristics will be integrated (Brewer and Treyens, 1981) in the place branding process. Even though these heuristics are not entirely intuitive and probably correct, they are usually based on very little information about a problem, in an attempt to reduce efforts and speed up decision-making processes (Shah and Oppenheimer, 2008). However, a complex process such as place branding cannot be implemented without also weighting relevant information that might be unknown to place stakeholders and can corroborate public opinion. In Alsager, stakeholders agreed that future research and analysis regarding footfall, the catchment area, centre users’ behaviour and shopping preferences and residents’ perceptions of the town centre can reinforce the place branding process by elucidating town centre challenges and what type(s) of action is needed. This is something that highlights the necessity of research as the starting point of any branding initiative. Even if there is consensus between decision-makers as in the case of Alsager, extensive research can engage more stakeholders during the process (businesses, landlords, investors) and will mitigate against further conflicts between groups/individuals who have different associations about the place (Zenker and Beckmann, 2013).

Even in the absence of thorough research, people in Alsager seem to come to an agreement when it comes to place perceptions and what the town means to them. In their view, Alsager is a big village rather than a small town, with great community spirit, village feel and dynamic people who are proud of their town, and they agreed that a strategic vision for the town centre needs to put community spirit and friendliness in the forefront. These place associations can act as a guide towards dialogues and discussions between local stakeholders, an element of the place branding process that was identified as problematic in Alsager at the start of the project and was exemplified by a “tell us what to do” attitude that is directly opposed with the participatory view of place branding and co-creation (Aitken and Campelo, 2011; Kavaratzis and Hatch, 2013; Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015). This links directly to the participatory aspect of place branding projects as suggested earlier, and it was comforting to see that during the last months of the project people in Alsager were highly engaged with the rebranding process, as they felt that the place brand was embedded in their own personal values and that was something that they could communicate easier. Consequently, this process reminisced the Alsager brand in the minds of stakeholders, a brand that needs to be communicated effectively and to remind residents of the town’s assets and values. Almost half of the negative associations that people linked with the town centre were related to communication, place promotion and marketing of events. It was deemed important by the participating stakeholders that more effort should be made in encouraging more stakeholders to take an active role in promoting a positive image for the town. “It’s All about Alsager”, an on-going initiative to promote Alsager, its community, events and news, was praised for its social media presence and its role in engaging with stakeholders. However, it was felt that communicating the present place brand can only have a short-term impact on vitality and viability of the town centre, which links back to the absence of proper research in the town centre.

**Altrincham: from “Ghost town UK” to “modern market town”**

Back in 2010, Altrincham was labelled as the UK’s bleakest ghost town by the media with 37 per cent of its shops lying empty. The town’s close proximity to both a major city centre (Manchester) and a retail park (Trafford Centre), coupled with the economic downturn, contributed to the decline of Altrincham’s town centre, an image that did not reflect the
town’s history as one of the first market towns in the country and its affluent status. In 2011, the Altrincham Forward initiative brought together the town’s key stakeholders in a single partnership to drive forward change and help to turn around the fortunes of the town centre by implementing a collaborative approach towards the redevelopment of Altrincham. Good things are already happening in Altrincham, with the recent revamping of the Altrincham Market and the Historic Market Quarter, new developments such as a new transport interchange and a hospital and plans for improving the public realm and linkages in town. The biggest challenge though for the partnership is to reverse the negative perceptions that are still evident in the town. During workshops and meetings, local stakeholders not only acknowledged the positive energy and momentum from town developments but also admitted that more needs to be done in communicating positive messages for the town.

The current Altrincham brand is based on the concept of “Modern Market Town”, a vision that is shared amongst local stakeholders, emphasises the history and character of the town and places the market back at the heart of the brand. Markets, as key elements of the market town “brand”, can act as catalysts for change in towns (Hallsworth et al., 2015), as they can transform a place to a unique, multifunctional social centre that is relevant to the needs and interests of local people and visitors (Action for Market Towns, 2011). These aspirations need to be nested in all stakeholder groups and that can be achieved through coordinated leadership, an element of place branding that Altrincham Forward is constantly exercising, most recently by working and engaging with local businesses and developing a proposal for Altrincham Business Improvement District.

The central role of the market, in the case of Altrincham, is a good example of how certain place branding tools (in this case the market) cut across the different stages of the place branding process described above. The market is obviously linked to all parts of the “Action” stage of the process as “infrastructure” for necessary town functions, as a distinctive feature of the “cityscape” and as an “opportunity” for locals and visitors alike. However, it can be also used for parts such as “local communities” (with its clear community gathering function) or synergies (with its several links to suppliers and potential clients from outside the town). Furthermore, as the basis for the place brand, it has provided the core of the vision and strategy (“Deliberation” stage), and it also becomes a vehicle of communication of the brand (“Communication” stage). Co-ordination of all planning activities in town is of crucial importance to people in Altrincham, who try to make sure that all plans regarding the place brand, including the Business Neighbourhood Plan, the BID and the work of Altrincham Forward, are aligned to the vision. In addition, the majority of workshop participants saw collaborative leadership as a way to move things forward and tackle high vacancy rates by developing new actions for the town centre, such as transforming retail units to artistic and residential, as well as nurturing start-ups and supporting new businesses.

However, the transition from “Ghost Town UK” to “Modern Market Town” is not smooth sailing, as was pinpointed during the HSUK2020 project. Despite town regeneration and the revamping of the town centre and market, local people are not engaged and are not aware that Altrincham is changing. This is particularly interesting from a place branding theory perspective, as it is evident that the role of residents in the place brand as ambassadors and as citizens (Braun et al., 2013) is somewhat dysfunctional. Local support is low and the place brand is downplayed in tertiary communications, such as word-of-mouth between local people, retailers and potential investors in the case of Altrincham. Poor perceptions coupled with vacancy rates are still deterring anchor stores and young entrepreneurs from investing in the town centre. Therefore, the rebranding process in Altrincham needs to emphasize communications and promote town events and festivals in the town centre to bring local
communities closer and to support the town. This was identified by Altrincham Forward members who believe that communication is key and are working on social media activity and other approaches for engaging residents. Communications about successful stories can also attract new businesses and investors in the town centre, which have to be coupled with new data and evidence from the street to strengthen the appeal of the place brand.

Holmforth: reshaping the town’s identity

For most people, Holmforth, a small town in Holme Valley, is known as the setting of Last of The Summer Wine, a long-running TV sitcom that showcased the beautiful rural setting that surrounds the area. The show’s popularity drew in thousands of tourists every year, but since its cancellation in 2010, these numbers continue to shrink, emphasising the need not only for a diversified economic base but also for ample creativity in choosing the focus of the place brand. The show’s decline as the main attraction, coupled with poor retail diversity and lack of confidence from local people in their town, are major challenges for the place brand. Therefore, town stakeholders such as Keep Holmforth Special, a partnership with a mission to contribute to the wellbeing of the town, are firm believers of reshaping the town’s identity. It became evident during conversations with local people in Holmforth that it will take more than just marketing and communications to bring forward a new identity that is not heavily influenced by the distinctiveness of Last of The Summer Wine. On top of that though, the biggest challenge for Holmforth is how to bring more people in and engage different stakeholder groups.

Research in Holmforth prior to HSUK2020 revealed that people understand what is going on in the town, which needs to become more appealing to future businesses and young people by reinventing the town centre, as well as investing in events, sports and leisure facilities, and links to the national park. Despite these agreements and residents’ sense of belonging with the place, workshop participants were quite pessimistic on the chances of implementing a participatory place branding approach in Holmforth. This links back to the fragility of participation in the construction of the place brand, as frequently the majority of a place’s residents remain silent and uninterested in a place branding process that they feel they do not own. Several residents in Holmforth also recognised that they were not aware about the existence of a town partnership until they were invited to HSUK2020 workshops, further supporting communication and participation barriers in the town and lack of resources to raise awareness and interest for participation in the place branding process. This is something that reinforces the significance of the third stage of the place branding process as outlined above, where a culture of consultation and “listening” to stakeholders is suggested. While there is no clear vision for the Holmforth brand due to many scattered groups and individuals in town, there is a great need for the partnership to identify people’s trust points, be open and try to engage with local retailers, the council, residents and young people to refine the vision and the strategy for the brand. Workshop participants recognised that the need to inform, educate and map different stakeholder groups is essential for the development of networks that can reinforce the place branding process (Hankinson, 2004; Hanna and Rowley, 2011).

For all towns, the hands-on approach to knowledge exchange that HSUK2020 adopted helped participants to understand the complexities of places and, in the case of rebranding towns, how place brands can be influenced. In Holmforth, the project team encouraged participants during the last workshop to work together in groups and answer what makes Holmforth special. Once again, the level of agreement regarding the town’s assets was particularly high and the exercise worked as a preliminary place brand formation process, something that highlights the integrative effect achieved when the place branding process is
understood as a series of overlapping steps that collectively produce their common outcome. What was striking though was the high level of involvement and the connection between participants when thinking about their place and how it can become better. This example illustrates the important role of engaging stakeholders in the right context (the workshop event in this case) and being able to do it on a regular basis to engrain place brand values that stem from local people’s constructions during these communications.

Concluding remarks
The experience of the towns participating in the HSUK2020 project serves as evidence for the usefulness of the foundations of place branding (i.e. analysis, strategy and participation) and the place branding process as presented in this article. The results and experience of the project clearly demonstrate the link between place branding and town development. Approaching place branding in the way proposed here has proven helpful to the town authorities in their effort to deal with several of their imminent problems. Thinking about the place branding process in the above outlined manner has particularly helped tackle place identity issues that can be detrimental to any development effort. A general strategic guidance is also evidently provided by the place branding effort. The results of this project also show that the holistic view of place branding is helpful, much more so than a promotional view. Limiting place branding to the development of a new slogan for the towns or to the design of a new visual identity system for the town’s communications would not have been able to assist any of the towns examined here, as it would not offer a viable solution to the roots of their problems. However, this wider and more comprehensive view of what actually contributes to branding a place was able to offer a range of solutions and a wider set of tools that towns could use. Additionally, the reflections on the three towns demonstrate that the holistic place branding process provided an appropriate context and a useful opportunity to engage local stakeholders in the rebranding efforts. The HSUK2020 experience has also made clear the value of academics and practitioners working together. Both parties have agreed that there was a useful and rather surprisingly seamless transfer of knowledge and experiences that was beneficial for everyone involved, and this is something that we hope will be a major legacy of the project.

Clearly, there are several challenges, but with cooperation between stakeholders and their participation in the development of the place brand, it can be a valuable tool to understand the place’s identity and to guide strategic vision. As witnessed in the HSUK2020 project, place brands can “talk” to local people’s emotions and thus inspire them to engage in public discussions and consultations regarding the future of their town. This is a very encouraging first step towards the establishment of participatory place branding processes in towns as a vital part of town strategies.

References


Further reading

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Planning and governance issues in the restructuring of the high street

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to examine the role of “restructuring” in confronting the challenges facing contemporary high streets in the devolved UK. It complements three articles concerned with repositioning, reinventing and rebranding and illustrates the multi-faceted approaches involved in addressing retail change and town centre transformations. This paper emphasises the role of planning and governance in effecting change.

Design/methodology/approach – Informed by a literature review, action research involved inter-related interventions in selected locations, and associated workshops with engaged practitioners and community actors.

Findings – The findings highlight that the “resilience” of contemporary town centres demands resisting efforts to return to the status quo and necessitate forms of adaptive management. Understanding high street degeneration and the limitations of a retail-only led policy focus as a “wicked issue” further demands socially constructing town centres as an ecosystem requiring a holistic response. New forms of joint-working involve selecting appropriate models, attending to relational aspects and defined roles and responsibilities. Land use planning, including masterplanning and creating evidenced policy options, provides an important democratic space for legitimising action, offering leadership and extending participation to new change agents.

Practical implications – Restructuring of governance is an essential prerequisite in effecting change.

Originality/value – The originality of this study lies in the application of the restructuring element of the 4 Rs Framework which enables a focus on the governance dimensions of town centre and high street regeneration. The findings are enhanced through the experiential evidence which stresses both the importance of place-based diversification and value of prioritising holistic and joint actions developed through participatory visioning exercises.

Keywords Resilience, Governance, Joint working, Restructuring, Holistic, Wicked issue

Paper type Research paper

Recent evidence into the state of the UK’s high streets and retail-oriented centres details the extent to which the retail environment has evolved over time – and continues to be subject to changing conditions (WYG Planning, 2016). As this special issue reporting on the findings of
the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded study, High Street UK 2020, highlights, explanations of the underlying causes and triggers of retail transformation and wider high street environmental change vary quite considerably (Parker et al., 2017). For example, studies have pointed to a number of clarifications of these dynamics, which include local economic factors (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2014); social conditions, such as demographic and cultural diversification (Worpole and Knox, 2007); environmental and place qualities, including historical character (Historic England, 2013); technological developments (Scottish Government, 2013); shifting consumer expectations (Hart et al., 2014) and retailer responses (Findlay and Sparks, 2008); and differentiated political and ideological agendas to prioritise town centres (National Assembly for Wales, 2012). Conditions – and explanations, however – are not only contested but also context specific. Attention must be paid to the specificities of place and to the underlying power relations between the different interests involved. Networks of relationships intersect corporate, governmental, consumer and civil dynamics as the constituent sectors in high street dynamics go beyond mere retailing and shopping and involve the different motivations and behaviours of a diverse range of actors (de Nisco et al., 2008). In seeking to explain and understand the complex and evolving processes of change and place trajectories, it is important to acknowledge therefore that causes and effects are variously affected by geographical realities and spatial relations (Peel and Lloyd, 2016). As a consequence, retailing and high streets change in ways that vary across both time and space.

The fundamental nature of high street change in the UK may be characterised as comprising a place-based and systemic “economic restructuring” of locations, including the scalar realities of regional facilities, town and city centres and smaller neighbourhood centres (Doak, 2009). In terms of the land use planning system, for example, retail policy has tended to be concerned with identifying hierarchical provision of retail facilities (Peel, 2003). In practice, however, the well-being of the retail sector involves a screed of inter-related dynamics of an assortment of sectors, including banking, hospitality and distributional activities (Roderick MacLean Associates Ltd, 2013). These different sectors have themselves also transformed in terms of the nature of their location and delivery requirements. In short, new parameters are being created for high streets and retailing which require new behaviours, understandings and forms of action. As a consequence, academic and policy attention has turned to considering the appropriate ways in which the multi-dimensional characteristics of high streets and town centres may be assisted to respond to fundamental transformational shifts. In effect, a “planning and governance restructuring” strategy is required which can better address the complex nature of local high street and town centre change in response to these transforming external conditions.

This paper contends that this new restructuring approach must involve planning and governance arrangements which are relatively more sensitive, and multi-faceted, to respond to the complex and contested changes occurring at the level of high streets and town centres. Understood in this way, it will be argued that restructuring comprises, and, moreover, can serve to facilitate, elements of high street resilience (Centre for Local Economic Strategies, 2015). As this special issue illustrates, this can involve improved repositioning (Millington and Ntounis, 2017); the approach focussed upon understanding change and responsiveness to future changes. Moreover, a sensitivity to restructuring involves parallel efforts at reinventing (Theodiris et al., 2017) the high street through extending and varying the offer with new initiatives, such as pop-ups, alternative land uses and enhancing consumer convenience (Deloitte, 2013) as part of collaborative place-making efforts. A concerted focus on rebranding (Kavaratzis and Ntounis, 2017) to articulate a shared appreciation of the need to coordinate, communicate and promote a commitment to sustained change is also
necessary as part of a multi-pronged and mutually reinforcing approach to the revitalisation of a place’s identity and image. The role of a new restructuring strategy is to incorporate these elements as part of a revised planning and governance framework. Thus, the focus of this article is to critically reflect on the planning and governance issues involved in high street and town centre change, and to offer some recommendations with respect to restructuring.

The case for a new restructuring strategy based on planning and governance is driven, in part, by critiques of conventional land use planning not supporting and enabling town centres, and high streets in particular, to remain economically viable and socially vital (Jones, 2014). Over time, established land use planning practice has, for example, reversed a policy emphasis on allowing major out-of-town retail developments and promoted the idea of the “sequential test” approach in determining the physical location of retail provision and well-being of town and city centres. It has been argued that, in practice, however, the wider goals of this locational policy priority have not always materialised (Communities and Local Government Committee, 2014). Hence, conventional statutory planning has tended to be held culpable both for the decline of the traditional high street and the over-supply of out-of-town shopping facilities. Given the emergent parameters of external influence, such as internet shopping, this paper contends that town centres must be understood as complex and contested places, experiencing fundamental processes of change which require new mind-sets of understanding and new approaches, based on vision, partnership working and leadership (Hambleton, 2015). Importantly, then, planning and governance restructuring rests on understanding power, ownership, control, influence, responsibilities and joint-working in defined high streets and town centres.

This paper synthesises literature pertinent to “restructuring”, mainly from a planning and governance perspective. First, it maps the waves of economic restructuring which have altered the context for retail-oriented high streets. This section introduces the theoretical concepts of resilience and wicked issues as useful in understanding high street change. Second, the paper introduces social reconstruction as a way to understand and explain ongoing high street change and interprets these in relation to the 4 Rs Framework (Parker et al., 2017), which has evolved as part of this ESRC-funded study. Third, the paper considers the nature of the new planning and governance regime required to address the consequences of change. The discussion section is informed by the practical experiences and insights drawn from the towns that focused on restructuring as a way to improve vitality and viability. These experiences were obtained via the engaged scholarship approach implemented in this project (Ntounis and Parker, 2017), which saw project participants very much as producers as well as consumers of knowledge. Specific attention is paid to the role of the land use planning system and town centre policies in effecting change. Finally, the paper pulls out some recommendations in relation to the challenge of restructuring and reflects on likely future challenges and parameters to the planning and management of high streets and town centres.

**Economic restructuring: waves of change**

The literature review undertaken for the High Street UK 2020 project identified a number of complex changes affecting the nature of retail, retail performance and the wider dynamics of place (Parker et al., 2017). The changing nature of retail is a long-established characteristic, with Schiller (2001), for example, identifying the sector as subject to successive waves of change. It is sobering to note that his original observations pre-dated the impact of e-tailing, m-tailing and new home delivery distributional options. The subsequent effects of globalisation, international trading relationships and shifts in ownership and control of
Retailing activities have worked their way through to individual localities. These factors, combined with business cycles and differentiated economic recession and recovery, and deflated consumer spending, have contributed to structural change in retailing and associated physical effects on the high street.

Over and above these fundamental shifts in high street circumstances, changing ideologies have had an effect on economic rebalancing, the importance of the consumer (shopping) economy, and retailing as a specific sector. Differential performance in mobility, wealth and consumerism also contribute to powerful forces of change with respect to household spending (Wrigley and Lambiri, 2015) and the capacity of individual local authorities to influence the fortunes of their high streets and town centres. Attention must then be paid to the social divisions associated with a new moral economy based on market assertiveness. The role of debt, for example, is a characteristic of modern communities and will prove to have a longer-term effect on resilience (Milne and Rankine, 2013). Taken as a whole, change may be understood as both persistent, in the sense that change is continuous, and disruptive, in that unexpected shocks, such as the closure of a major anchor store, might occur, and which demand timely and coordinated responses. Here, the notion of resilience is helpful in exploring how a town centre or high street responds to such pressures. Generally, resilience is defined as “the degree to which a certain system is able to tolerate financial, ecological, social and/or cultural change before reorganising around a new set of structures and processes” (Kärrholm et al., 2014, p. 121). This concept is nuanced in practice as the term has expanded beyond an engineering interpretation of returning to the status quo – or bouncing back – to meanings which instead emphasise adaptation and anticipatory capacity to deal with changing contexts (Folke, 2006). Understanding of natural environments as dynamic and inter-dependent has focused attention on human systems of governance and led to the development of the concept of social-ecological resilience which then demands attention is paid to related systems of governance (Lloyd et al., 2013).

Translating these insights to town centres and high streets encourages an appreciation of high streets as inter-related systems possessing eco-systemic qualities. This demands appropriate forms of planning and governance, which can help high streets develop retail resilience and absorb the changes, crises and shocks of retailing that challenge the system’s equilibrium in a sustainable way (Fernandes and Chamusca, 2014; Rao and Summers, 2016).

This broader context is of significance for the restructuring of high streets, but not all change is retail-led, due to the inter-linkages of land and property markets in urban settings of all scales. What happens, for example, in the office sector with respect to decentralisation, expansion of home-working and the development of back-office and new technology has direct ramifications for footfall and expenditure by lunchtime office workers. Off-centre location of services and co-location of service functions directly reduces potential accessibility to retailing and other high street services. This outcome is further exacerbated by the relocation and privatisation of public services, including police, post offices, health facilities and banks, which, taken together, weaken what was perceived as the traditional fabric and synergy of the “down town”. Closure of community facilities, such as libraries, theatres and arts venues, is yet another layer of contraction and reconfiguration. While the focus of this ESRC-funded study emphasised retailing and high streets, it is evident that the global narratives cited above also affect other land use sectors, and, by extension, the overall economic viability and social vitality of town and city centres.

The complexity of the inter-relationships of economic and service activities and land uses, deteriorating environmental conditions and social change have contributed to the weakening of high street vitality and viability and result in high street change being conceived as a “wicked problem”. Following Rittel and Webber’s (1973) logic of “wicked
issues” demands a governance approach that is sensitive to the potential knock-on effects of policy interventions. In the context of town centre degeneration, taking a wicked issue approach means being mindful of the legacy effects of earlier interventions and alert to the potential unintended consequences of overly simple solutions that do not take account of the inter-related and dynamic nature of complex systems (Peel and Lloyd, 2016).

Social reconstruction: from down town to clone town
How contemporary problems of the high street and the state of retail are understood, talked about and addressed can be thought about using ideas of social construction. Understood as the way in which societies make, and convey, meaning, a benefit of adopting a social constructionist approach to understanding issues is that it emphasises that, in any given scenario, competing claims may be advanced and contested. For instance, Hannigan (2006) contends that, in terms of whether a particular environmental problem does or does not receive political or societal attention, and whether or not any action ensues, depends on a number of prerequisites being in place. Hannigan (2006) identifies scientific evidence as an essential requirement, but asserts that, on its own, evidence tends to be insufficient in mobilising change. He suggests that there are important roles to be played by popularisers and the media, and that dramatisation of an issue can serve to raise public consciousness and action in contexts where different issues are competing for public attention. Critically, Hannigan (2006) points to the need for economic incentives to bolster action and the identification of an appropriate institutional sponsor to legitimise intervention and action. For our purposes, we suggest reducing these different dimensions to populate the 4 Rs Framework presented in this special issue.

Four perspectives are appropriate in reconciling Hannigan’s (2006) thinking with the proposed 4 Rs framework for addressing high street change. First, in terms of repositioning, the nature and extent of the scientific evidence relating to high street and retail change is all important. Here, practical evidence relating to changing ownerships of chains, the position of independent stores, locational shifts and footfall is significant. Further, specific claims relating to the observed homogenisation of high streets – “clone towns” – as a consequence of wider processes of change has itself attracted critical attention from, among others, the New Economics Foundation (2010). Second, in terms of reinventing the high street, attention has been drawn to the need for new perspectives on traditional high streets which go beyond retailing to include services and affordable housing. The Portas Review (2011) is one example of these new debates, precipitating a formal central government response. Significantly, Portas (2011) has also simultaneously acted as a populariser of the need to take the high street more seriously by dramatising the shopping experience and providing an important advocacy role in terms of the need to actively reinvent the high street offer and experience through adopting new models and approaches. Here, it is suggested that the best spaces created from physical restructuring can enliven the high street and also shape a better image for the place which can further enhance retail operations (Pal and Byrom, 2003). Third, rebranding explicitly identifies a role for the media in changing mind-sets and attitudes, rebuilding reputations and offering new interpretations of a place. Finally, restructuring involves putting the necessary economic incentives and institutional arrangements in place to secure the appropriate planning and governance of the high street as a complex entity involving more than shopping. We can illustrate what this means in practice with reference to experience from Scotland.

Legitimacy for a reinvigorated approach to addressing high street change in Scotland was emphasised in a report by the External Advisory Group (2013). This report opened with a statement from the First Minister who claimed:
Town centres are the lifeblood of our communities, functioning as places of social interaction and enterprise. By diversifying our high streets we will make them even better places to live, work and socialise (External Advisory Group, 2013).

In promoting a diversified town centre first approach, the External Advisory Group (2013) emphasised a leadership role by public bodies who would be required to consider an inter-related range of issues with respect to how they can support town centres. These measures included not siting retail development outside the town centre, discouraging business relocation away from town centres and reviewing business rates to improve economic incentives. In terms of managing property and the social vitality of the high street, the External Advisory Group (2013) advocated expanding the appeal of town centres by expanding digital connectivity and strengthening the mix of leisure, public facilities and homes and working with housing providers to bring empty properties back into use and promoting affordable housing as part of a strategy for encouraging town centre living. Consequently, the major point of interest is how high streets can be restructured to facilitate all the changes mentioned above.

In short, a new social construction of both the high street, as one involving a diversified local economy and community, and new planning and governance arrangements necessitating multi-sectoral action, are important in driving and delivering resilient high streets and town centres. In contrast to conventional statutory retail planning, which tended to rest on regulation and the physical instrument of the sequential test in seeking to promote the town centre, this more sensitised thinking reflects a more nuanced appreciation of retail and high street change as collaborative governance. Hence, this holistic appreciation of the challenges to retailing and high street dynamics (Warnaby et al., 2005) becomes the motif for the new planning governance regime required, involving integrated service provision through a particular model of community planning, which is itself strongly aligned with a clear articulation of the land use planning arrangements (Pemberton and Peel, 2016). The case for a positive social reconstruction of the high street, and the operation of town centres as more than shopping, has to inform a new local restructuring strategy based on deliberate and appropriate planning and governance arrangements involving the development of a shared vision which brings previously parallel policy and service activities together with local communities and business. In Scotland, this process of rethinking local governance to extend beyond formal government, and to involve the third sector and community enterprises, for example, has emphasised the value added by defining shared outcomes as a way to align different interests (Peel, 2016). In short, across the devolved UK, restructuring will involve context-specific ways for socially constructing and mobilising action so as to better join-up the planning and governance of the high street.

**Planning and governance**

Notwithstanding a turn to multi-channel governance, as opposed to state-led, top-down government control, there is still an important role to be played by individual statutory functions in the management and regulation of shared spaces. In terms of providing the institutional legitimacy and democratic space for devising and building shared visions for the development of defined places, the particular legal arrangements for land use planning are critical in dealing with private property rights, mediating access to the public realm and negotiating the parameters for land use change (Sheppard et al., 2017). Critically, the land use planning system provides the legal framework within which decisions about the siting and design of new built form, as well as the protection of the historic environment and heritage, takes place. Locational decisions also involve coordination of access and mobility. Planning is concerned with managing the cumulative impact of development and sets
standards for the overall design quality. As such, planning plays a central role in the physical aspects of place and how the environment contributes to the well-being and liveability of individual places. However, market-led implementations of planning as a means to re-engineer spatial development for economic growth (Bafarasat and Baker, 2016), and the congested and complex landscape of planning arrangements means that technocratic and visionary planning “might mask some very real changes in strategic thinking about an area’s future development” (Allmendinger et al., 2016, p. 49).

An important rationale underpinning the operation of the land use planning system, its framework of policies and the associated body of case law, is that it provides certainty and consistency in decision-making in relation to individual development schemes and offers an overarching and forward-looking strategic framework within which to guard the public interest (Sheppard et al., 2017). Over time, there has been a concerted effort to strengthen public and stakeholder engagement in the preparation of local planning documents. Notably, this emphasis on collaborative approaches to forward planning activities has emphasised early engagement – or front-loading – of the planning process. As such, there is scope for civil and business communities to be actively engaged in, for example, the gathering and interpretation of evidence and devising of a shared vision. Important questions that arise in terms of how planning operates in any particular place at a given time are whether the particular governance structures in place are actively managing change and how well stakeholders are engaged in cross-service decision-making and action as envisaged by community planning (Pemberton and Peel, 2016).

The particular role of statutory land use planning in regulating high streets and town centres conventionally comprises allocation of land and property for specific uses and new development, granting of planning permissions for physical change, the use of planning conditions to control individual activities and regulating the change of use of premises. Retail policy has evolved over time with a long-standing emphasis on promoting the economic viability and social vitality of town centres through fostering an appropriate balance of activities and uses in what is held to be the public interest at any one time.

In terms of the overall management of town centre activities, however, since the early 1980s, there was a supplementary interest in town centre management as a way to deal with the perceived gap in coordination whereby infrastructural and management deficits were not “owned” by any one service provider or business interest (Worpole, 1992). In particular, the very public-ness of the town centre and the inherently symbiotic nature of high street functions, led to town centres experiencing what, elsewhere, has been identified as “the tragedy of the commons” (Hardin, 1968), whereby over use of the shared resource had overall detrimental effects. Related to this has been a concern, in some cases, with “free-riding” whereby certain interests have not contributed to the provision of communal resources (Warnaby, 2006). Initially devised as an informal approach to partnership working, over time alternative measures to high street and town centre management have then witnessed the development of more formal regimes, such as the business improvement district (BID) model. A move towards more contractualised relationships (Peel and Lloyd, 2008; Peel et al., 2009) with respect to financing and coordinating different activities has led to new ways of organising and funding collective management of individual places.

It can be argued that these new forms of governance reflect an awareness that the functioning of high streets and town centres requires a greater sensitivity to the inter-related operating environment of local government, business and communities. This new thinking must reflect a recognition that a relatively narrow – or sectoral – appreciation of retail performance, for example, is inadequate. Following thinking in relation to resilience suggests that new modes of joint-working require an ability to respond to economic shocks
in the immediate term, ways of dealing with inherited deficits and conflicts, and a capacity to anticipate future shocks, such as those driven by technological advances. Although in very early stages, the explicit alignment of the statutory duties of land use planning and community planning in Northern Ireland, for example, is a striking example of new attempts at strategic planning across functions and diverse providers (Pemberton and Peel, 2016).

It follows that new models of leadership and collaboration need to be sensitive to identifying the potential synergies of high street and town centre dynamics, and with an ability to tease out the particular distinctiveness and relative positioning in the wider socio-economic environment. In other words, the restructuring of governance needs to reflect the diversity of the place mix and identify the appropriate partners, knowledge, capacities and skills. For example, the External Advisory Group (2013) made the case for a more proactive planning approach based on an integrated policy framework that brings together national, regional and local planning agencies, and local civic and amenity groups. In practical terms, then, sustaining vibrant local economies depends upon devising a model of complementary leadership involving local authorities and businesses. Similarly, if town centres aim to enhance their digital provision, this requires local businesses, community groups, local authorities and digital providers to cooperate. Likewise, if there is a vision of the town centre as a living – rather than (solely) a shopping – environment, then planners, social landlords, empty homes agencies and funders, for example, need to work together, alongside retailers. The next section draws insights from the specific cases studied as part of the High Street UK2020 project, drawing attention to process and plan aspects of planning and governance restructuring. Quotations are anonymised to protect privacy. Particular reference is made to Wrexham with respect to the development of a town centre masterplan which deliberately identifies overlapping strategies and how proposed town centre initiatives meet the Council’s overarching plan for the area.

Insights and lessons from practice
As an applied project, High Street UK2020 sought to bring together relevant insights from theory to help address practical challenges on the ground. As such, care was taken not only to categorise areas where intervention was necessary but also, importantly, feasible. While three of the ten case study partner towns [Congleton, St George (Bristol) and Wrexham] focused in particular on restructuring, it is useful to note that participants involved in other approaches adopted under the project also highlighted aspects of planning and governance as key issues potentially inhibiting – or facilitating – effective action; therefore, we have also included reference to these in this paper. Particular insights relating to the challenges confronting town centre and high street change were articulated by participants during project workshops, and these are drawn upon here to illustrate the nature of some of the principal dilemmas identified. The findings are grouped under four broad themes (models of partnership working, nature of partnership working, roles and responsibility and planning and governance).

Models of partnership working
Different governance planning and governance models exist. In Altrincham, the pursuit of a BID model of governance had unintended consequences which involved a default reliance on the local retailers. On the one hand, this approach effectively divested collective responsibility across a sector. On the other, such a single sector approach weakened the breadth and diversity of the potential change agents. Eventually, a more inclusive partnership between the retailers and the civic sector evolved which went on to formulate a town centre neighbourhood business plan, using evidence from the High Street UK 2020
study (Altrincham Business Neighbourhood Forum, 2016). The referendum for this plan will be held in October 2017 and, if successful, the plan will be used to determine (legally) the future development of the town centre.

In Altrincham and in other towns, there was evident capacity to draw upon a civil society resource, that of an active volunteer force, amongst whom there was an evident enthusiasm to participate actively in effecting high street change: “We want to see change – and a vision is in the works. Some of these volunteers are looking to formalise action and create action plans”. Sometimes, new structures (such as the Altrincham Business Neighbourhood Forum) will be required to channel and support such energy.

In practice, governance forms may be a consequence of scale and strategic management. Hence, within a major city context, for example, there will be a number of high streets competing for limited resources. Degrees of engagement may (also) be relatively weak as a consequence. Moreover, and depending on the specific needs of the individual neighbourhoods within a city, it may prove difficult to generate a strategic approach to managing all the high streets which meet the particular needs of individual localities and communities.

One of these neighbourhoods that participated in the project was Bristol St George, which is one of 46 other retail centres across areas in the city. The key perception during the workshops was that there was a strong community feeling and willingness from the local people to be part of making changes. One of the recommendations from the academic team was to look at the development of an effective local partnership to establish a shared vision for Church Road. Partnerships such as St George Neighbourhood Partnership and Church Road Town Team were already establishing formal actions towards local business resilience and retail adaptation. These aimed not only to support local businesses but also towards building community via the encouragement of using local retail centres and businesses (St George Neighbourhood Partnership Plan, 2015a). The formulation of a Neighbourhood Partnership Plan also highlighted the local people’s aspirations to restructure St George and build links with other partnerships/initiatives around a new common vision for the area (St George Neighbourhood Partnership Plan, 2015b).

Recently, the formation of a new community-led organisation named St George Community Network aims to build upon the progress that has been made so far, and continue to act as a “community of community groups” that can speak up for the whole of St George and can improve the area’s identity. The new network will be run entirely by local residents and has already been able to self-organise to continue to pursue local priorities in the area despite reductions in central government funding (St George Neighbourhood Partnership Plan, 2017). It can be argued that local partnership working in St George has shown, and continues to show, great resilience and adaptation towards the challenges that can hamper effective local governance and planning of the area and its high street.

Nature of partnership working
Notwithstanding the case for new forms of collaborative governance, it is clear that developing appropriate models of joint-working brings with it certain challenges. It is also apparent that different models of partnership working have different implications. At the beginning of the project, one participant, for example, noted: “I feel that people are quite wary of the conflicts and arguments in X”, effectively pointing to potential relational difficulties. There was a sense that particular barriers existed which served to undermine partnership working in the town, including a lack of leadership, poor role definition, ill-defined partnership remit and unclear responsibilities. An implication of such a governance culture was then that there was a tendency towards inviting a top-down approach,
characterised as “Tell us what to do”. This governance culture had, it was felt, undermined the performance of the town, restricted communication channels and weakened the perceived legitimacy of the partnership. As a consequence, the potential input from wider stakeholders was effectively diluted, potentially weakening the available resource base. A common complaint among the partner towns was the feeling that decision-making and progress (and by default high street performance) are hampered by “inertia in mind-sets and people” (Parker et al., 2014); therefore, there is an expectation that the style of new forms of partnership working must be more action-orientated.

Roles and responsibilities
As models of high street and town centre governance evolve, there is clearly a need to consider how different roles and responsibilities are defined and inter-relate. One case study participant observed: “The ownership issue is conflicting and thus place visions are unclear. A vision is more like a meaningless model when it’s not focused”. Devising effective divisions of labour is not always easy; however, particularly when new forms of governance extend beyond formal – or statutory – functions. One participant commented: “[…] It is about creating that retail connectivity [between the towns within the region], but some believe that’s the paid bodies’ job and not a volunteering thing”. A lack of coordination across different roles and responsibilities, as well as a lack of common goals, have been associated with other regeneration or revitalisation projects in both the UK and the USA (Mowery and Novak, 2016).

Mediating roles within this new governance framework appear to be necessary, with strategic partners playing an important role in coordinating inputs: “Retailers recognise slowly that all these actions are for the good. I have lots of interaction and there are great opportunities for the retailers to give their opinion”. In practice, however, perceptions about the extent of one’s individual input are likely to be highly personal and may depend, for example, on personal energy and enthusiasm. One participant put it this way:

I have my strengths and other people know theirs so everyone needs to be involved, because everyone has plenty of ideas; it [a business meeting] just doesn’t have to be a waste of time.

Planning and governance
In concluding this section, attention is paid to the work of Wrexham County Borough Council in North Wales where the 25 priorities for local action, identified in the UK High Street 2020 project, were used to support the development of a masterplan as part of the statutory planning process leading to the new local development plan (Wrexham County Borough Council, 2016, pp. 75-76). Critically, this document was developed using wide stakeholder engagement. The masterplan began by declaring a “new normal” with respect to the role of retail within accepted models of town centre vitality and viability:

However, the previous model of retail continually driving town centre growth has broken, changes in modern retail, the way people shop and wider economic changes mean that town centre regeneration needs a different model, future growth will come from a greater diversity of town centre uses. (Wrexham County Borough Council, 2016, p. 1).

The masterplan also asserted the important role partnership working had made in developing the vision. Notably, then, Wrexham County Borough Council (2016) specified a range of partners necessary to progressing the vision, comprising national government, local planners, other council actors and the private sector. The vision developed by this network of diverse actors identifies alternative future scenarios around complementary
themes based not only on shopping but also on visiting, living, working, attractiveness, distinctiveness and accessibility. While these themes may be found in many town centre or high street visions, the checklist of 25 priorities was ranked (Wrexham County Borough Council, 2016, Appendix 10), offering not only a useful illustration of the thinking process involved in developing a future strategy but also validating the approach and identifying the related policy, practical, governance, implementation and delivery issues involved. A Wrexham Town Centre action plan has since been developed by the Wrexham Town Centre Partnership Steering Group in response to the HSUK2020 study. It was agreed that a single strategy was required that brings together all the Council’s strategies and action plans relating to Wrexham Town Centre, clearly setting out the Council’s priorities for making it a vibrant, safe, accessible and prosperous place for people to live, work and visit. Participants commented on the importance of the workshops in this process, and one of them highlighted that:

This [the Plan] arose as a result of a workshop where the university attended, meeting in the council chambers. They found there are 25 priorities and how we would tackle those. We broke up into small groups and started actioning things, such as street clean-ups, street festivals, and we influenced parking charges. We are recognising that the council have officers and members dealing with issues in the town centre, and we have many volunteers. We don’t want to duplicate things and together we want to tackle things that need it and make sure that they are prioritised (Wrexham.com, 2016).

Conclusions and recommendations
There is a substantial evidence base in the research, policy and practice literature that high streets and town centres are undergoing processes of transformation. Retail(ing) and high street change have been constant issues, of which governments (local and central) have been aware but have been seemingly unable to deal with in a timely manner (Kalandides et al., 2016). In parallel, state-market-civil relations are evolving. Models of governance then need to adapt (Pancholi et al., 2017) to reflect changes in resourcing and public–private responsibilities with respect to safeguarding the public realm and building in adaptive resilience to withstand future shocks. Restructuring then involves new relations beyond formal government, resulting in evolving new forms of collaborative governance that potentially extend joint-working to involve multi-dimensional sectors and voluntary forms of action. Faced with such fast-moving and transformative change, councils cannot rely on their statutory planning processes to keep pace – so by being willing to work in a more consultative and collaborative way they can be influenced by a richer and more contemporary source of information and insight brought by a wider set of stakeholders (including, in the case of this High Street UK 2020 project, leading academics from five UK universities).

In this paper, we argue that despite an abundance of academic knowledge on governance and partnerships, problems in practice are very common. Therefore, it is important to bring knowledge to bear to these problems – in the way we have attempted to do. The impact this knowledge transfer process has had, as evidenced across this special issue, suggests that our approach has been successful. The most important conclusion we draw from the focus taken in this paper upon restructuring is that many towns have inadequate structures to manage change or encourage any action. Structures that were appropriate once may need changing or refreshing, like in the case of Wrexham where a more open forum, appropriate for building trust and inclusivity, had become unwieldy and more of a “talking shop” than a mechanism for decision-making and action. By having a thematic focus (one of the 4 Rs) and by acquiring the relevant knowledge, towns felt they could tackle an important issue –
something that was holding them back. In terms of restructuring, four broad conclusions from this engaged scholarship project may then be discerned.

First, addressing high street change of necessity involves selecting an appropriate model of partnership – or joint-working arrangement. Different models exist and these invoke a range of relational aspects which may involve different ways of working, engagement with diverse players with different cultures and mind-sets and a need to determine cross-scalar, strategic-local relations.

Second, the nature and mode of working of the selected partnership will vary according to the model and partners involved. Attention must be paid to the practical, structural, operational and relational dimensions of governance if partnership-working is to be nurtured and approaches to joint action for the benefit of the high street are to be secured.

Third, given the diverse constituency and operational environment of the expanding governance regimes, it is important to define clearly the remit, roles and responsibilities of the individual partners, and appreciate that actions and interventions are mediated by both functional role definition, and what may be identified as an individual’s personal working ethos and emotional intelligence.

Fourth, the role of statutory land use planning in creating a resilient future for the high street remains a legitimate and democratic space for providing a leadership role, collating and prioritising the evidence base, and articulating options and joint strategies for change. Adopting participative methodologies such as engaged scholarship for the collation and prioritisation of the evidence base can serve to justify the work of new governance networks. Moreover, facilitating public debate around an alternative town centre vision can help build softer prerequisites such as trust and a sense of inclusion through soliciting local ideas and opinions, and enhance the resource base by identifying new change agents.

Finally, given the nature of the project, we end this paper with some practical recommendation for our town centre partners – as well as anyone else who is involved in regenerating the high street:

• Review partnership structures regularly – are they fit for purpose? Even functional partnerships can turn dysfunctional over time.

• Places are complex – no one structure is likely to manage all activity or make all decisions, so it makes sense to map out the partnership landscape. How do different partnerships, structures and organisations link to each other? How much duplication is there in terms of place management or regeneration activity? Where are the gaps?

• Often the ideology or working culture of the partnership will be influenced by who leads it (private, public or voluntary sector) – so a partnership working culture should be encouraged that suits everyone, rather than just adopting the procedures and processes of one partner.

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