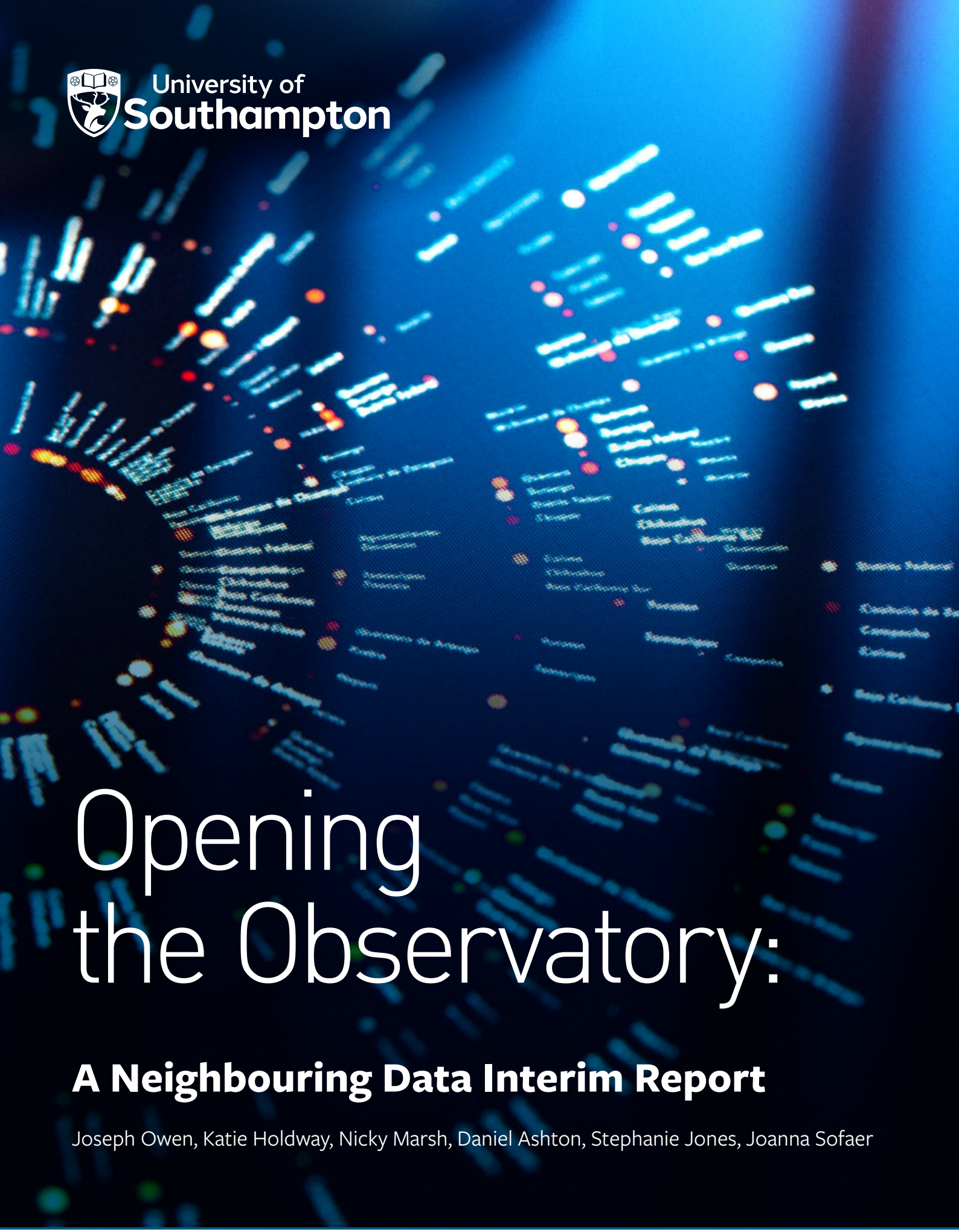

University of Southampton

Opening the Observatory:

A Neighbouring Data Interim Report

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UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council

SIAH Southampton Institute for Arts and Humanities

AND TOWNS

Contents

Executive Summary

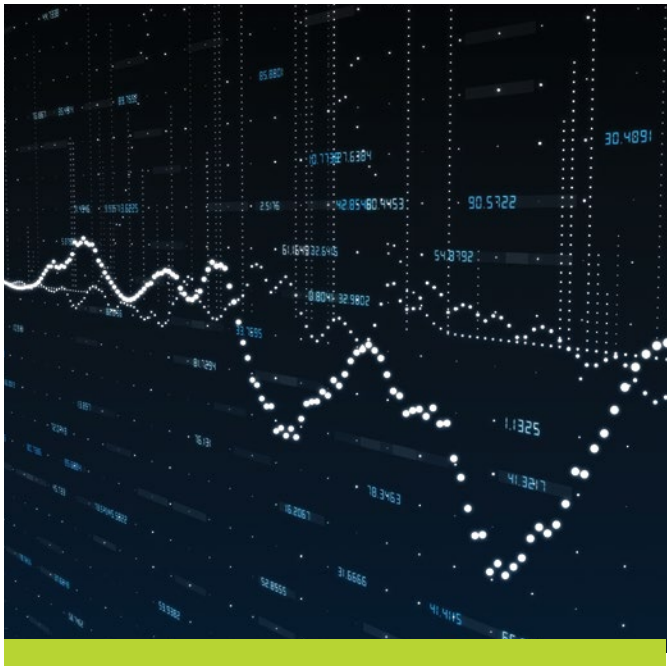
This report outlines the interim findings of the AHRC-funded project, **Neighbouring Data**, which explores **the creation, use and representation of hyper-local qualitative data in place-based decision making.** The project has built on several research projects that were concerned with using qualitative data in place-based decision making. We have completed three work packages.

In the first work package, we worked with **local authorities** to develop **a range of creative methodologies** for using qualitative data to engage with place-based decision making. This work allowed local authorities to engage with the needs and lived experiences of specific hyper-local communities as a part of their planning on cultural services.

In the second work package, we focused on the challenge of storing and analysing qualitative data, specifically through **existing models of data observatories**. We produced an annotated bibliography of data observatory literature; mapped a sample of observatories; and interviewed key experts on data observatories, place-based policy and qualitative data.

In the third work package, we focused on **data experiences**. We held focus groups with data users from local authorities, community groups and Business Improvement Districts (BIDs); collated artefacts and approaches from a range of University of Southampton research projects; and commissioned creative practitioners to investigate **the possibilities of visualising, representing and connecting qualitative data** from these projects.

Interim Findings



Work Package ONE:

Creative methods, qualitative data, decision making

- Creative methodologies are valuable tools for eliciting qualitative data, enabling local authorities to better understand the needs and aspirations that are attached to **the lived experiences of hyper-local communities**. This qualitative data can augment and challenge quantitative data by adding richness and complexity to place-based decision making.
- Qualitative data allows organisations to consider a wide and **diverse range of community responses to place**. Based on this data, decision makers can propose new investment strategies, frame further community consultation, make strategic bids for funding, and develop arts, culture and heritage strategies aimed at visitors and residents.
- Gathering, analysing, storing, aggregating and sustaining such forms of data present clear methodological, resource and ethical challenges for decision makers. We seek to address these challenges through **a critical exploration of qualitative data observatories**.

Work Package TWO:

Narrative, participation, scale

- Data observatories need to draw together different datasets in productive ways. The key to facilitating this work lies in understanding how **narratives** can act as a form of metadata to help forge these connections by labelling, explaining and giving meaning to other data. Qualitative data can be deployed to support different forms of **data storytelling**.
- Uneven levels of **digital literacy** across different groups are a barrier to **user participation** in data observatories. Researchers acknowledge this problem but find it difficult to identify a sustainable solution. We suggest that modelling forms of data visualisation so that they are accessible to a range of audiences is a potential solution.
- Qualitative, place-based data provides opportunities to think about scale. Where quantitative data is insufficient, qualitative data about hyper-local neighbourhoods can address local, regional and national policy challenges. Narratives about place can **forge links between different geographical scales**, as well as between different types of data.

Work Package THREE:

Perception, engagement, decision-making

- **Perception, engagement and decision-making** are vital considerations for data users. Data observatories should provide an accessible network and interface to address challenges regarding the consistency, quantity and complexity of qualitative data. Modes of presentation should preserve the richness of qualitative data, articulating its purpose and offering comparisons with other data units.
- Curators of data shape how it is presented, and the relationship between data, news media, policy and public opinion requires more interrogation. To address problems of data literacy, observatories should present **clear and lucid narratives** that do not cherry-pick and decontextualise information. For narratives about place, observatory authors should be attentive to a range of needs, perspectives and audiences.
- Models such as The Neighbourhood Insight Engine offer platforms that identify key information and use metadata to label, explain and forge connections between data units, artefacts and representations. By bringing together a range of datasets, these engines can develop accurate and insightful stories about place for decision makers. The hypertextual approach enables users to find relevant data for decision making and **explore the possibilities of qualitative data-driven storytelling**.

Neighbouring Data seeks to use these findings as it **develops its principles for a qualitative data observatory framework**. The project will consult with data users on these principles, using their insights to revise, model and trial a qualitative data observatory that can assist with place-based decision making

Research Context

And Towns draws on three projects funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and led by researchers at the University of Southampton. These projects are based within the **Southampton Institute of Arts and Humanities** (SIAH). Supported by SIAH, And Towns seeks to develop new understandings of pride, place, regeneration and decision making in the UK.

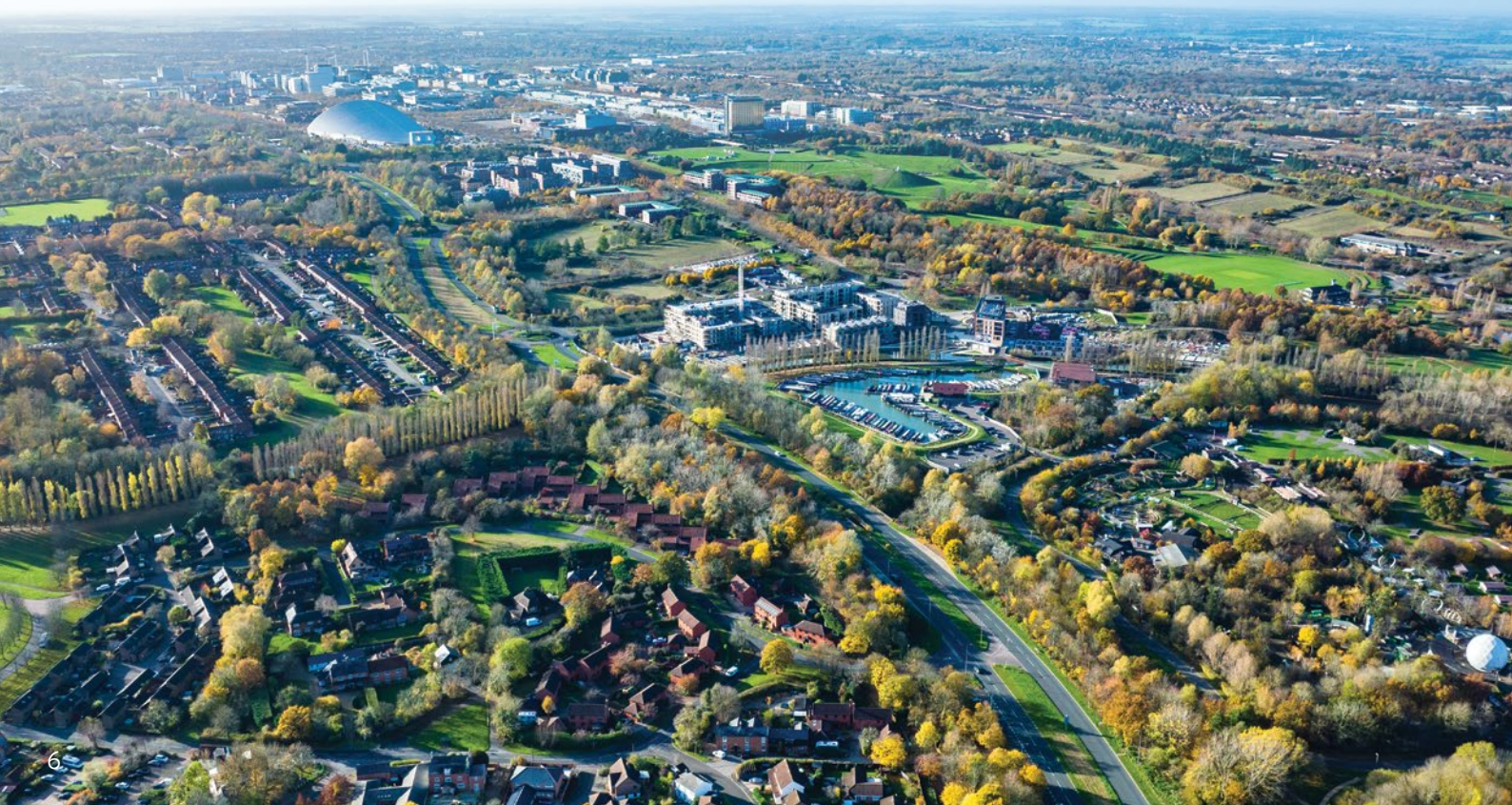
The first scoping project, **Towns and the Cultural Economies of Recovery** (TCER), ran throughout 2021 and focused on the role of culture in Levelling Up funding, specifically the Towns Fund. It explored the economic infrastructures of the creative, cultural and heritage industries, and it examined the role this sector plays in developing the broader, changing economies of towns.

The project was particularly attentive to: the importance of the hyper-local for understanding place-based policy; the roles of **pride, self-perception, storytelling and narrative** in community decision making; the absence of longitudinal research and long-term planning on culture and place; the complex heterogeneity of towns; the need for inclusive and creative models of community engagement; and the effects of austerity on local authorities' ability to devise and implement cultural regeneration programmes.

The second knowledge exchange project, **Feeling Towns**, ran throughout 2022 and drew on the findings from the **TCER Mapping** report. It brought together a community of practice from a range of sectors and geographies to better evidence the relationship between pride, civic engagement and place attachment, which was understood as the emotional bonds that are developed between people and place.

The project used creative methods—including emoji mapping, timeline drawing, poetry collage and photo elicitation—with different communities in Southampton, Darlington and Herefordshire. This work drew out hyper-local insights, gathered qualitative data, and co-produced **multiple, descriptive and meaningful understandings of pride in place** for policymakers and local authorities. It developed a **Think-Kit** that consolidated these experimental approaches, which sought to capture the complex relationships between people and the places where they work, live and volunteer.

This third research project, **Neighbouring Data**, extends the methods developed in TCER and Feeling Towns to the Central South region, addressing questions about community engagement in place-based decision making and developing a better understanding of how qualitative data can be used in these types of decision making.



1. Work Package ONE: Place-Based Community Cultural Policy

The first work package developed creative methodologies for community engagement on place, hyper-local neighbourhoods, and arts, culture and heritage planning. We extended our previous work on qualitative metrics, pride and place attachment, and we collaborated with local authority officers from Dorchester and Isle of Wight councils to facilitate their understanding of the relationship between **place, community needs and existing cultural and environmental assets**.

This work included an analysis of a heritage strategy for Dorchester and a place-based regeneration strategy for Sandown on the Isle of Wight. We worked with a creative practitioner and hosted **six workshops** across both locations, where we engaged with specific communities identified by the local authority. These communities included young people, small-medium sized enterprises (SMEs), and volunteers.

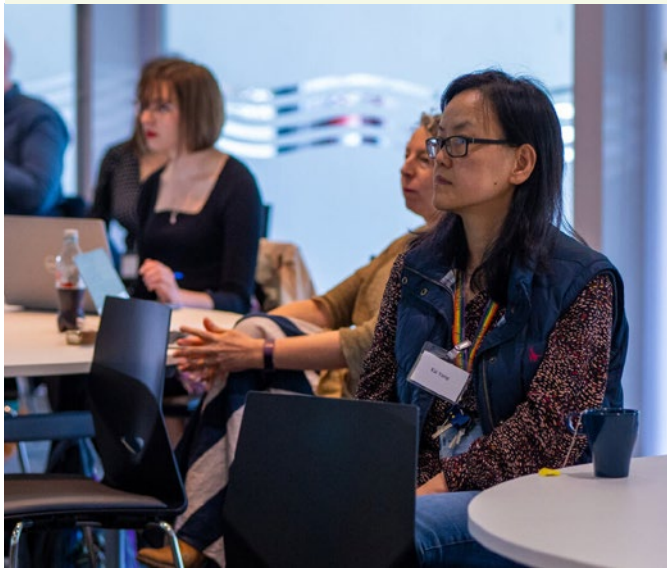
We used a mix of creative methodologies, including **emoji mapping, timeline drawing, poetry collage and photo elicitation**. The qualitative findings derived from this community-led work were shared with partners and complemented by desk-based research on small towns, community engagement and regeneration.

We delivered each local authority a report of our findings that contributed to their community-based arts, culture and heritage planning. This collaborative work demonstrated the value of qualitative data for understanding the lived experiences of hyperlocal neighbourhoods in ways that augmented the ward-level quantitative data of local decision making. It also enhanced our understanding of the clear challenges faced by the sector—particularly in towns and small cities—for **producing, analysing, storing and sustaining qualitative data** in policy and decision making.

1.1 Key findings

This stage of the project yielded **three key findings**:

1. Creative methodologies elicit qualitative data that allows local authorities to better understand **the feelings and lived experiences of hyper-local communities**, covering young people, SMEs and volunteers. This approach includes these groups in the development of arts, culture and heritage strategies that focus on resident communities as well as visitors.
2. Qualitative research allowed local authorities to consider their development and investment strategies, frame further community consultation, and **provide evidence for strategic bids for funding**. The findings from this research also bear upon regional and local plans for regeneration and housing developments.
3. Gathering, analysing, representing, storing and sustaining qualitative data can be time-consuming, resource-heavy and labour-intensive. This potential workload creates **serious practical and ethical challenges** for already low-capacity local authorities and community groups.



2. Work Package TWO: Case Studies for a Qualitative Data Observatory

The second work package focused on these challenges of storing and analysing qualitative data, specifically through data observatories. We produced an annotated bibliography of data observatory literature; mapped a sample of observatories, understood as an umbrella term covering repositories, research hubs and portals; and interviewed key experts on data observatories, place-based policy and qualitative data.

2.1 Highlights from the literature

Literature on data observatories mostly addresses three key themes: **environment, technology, and place**. The observatory is understood as a form of **observation** or data collection, and as a **place to store and visualise** these observations.

Environmental work focuses on citizen science initiatives and the use of participatory sensing (Cieslik et al., 2013; Karpouzoglou, 2016). In these projects, the data observatory is both **a repository and a mechanism** that facilitates knowledge exchange between scientists and communities.

Technology-led work explores the **architecture and methodologies** of data observatories, including social media data scraping (Cuomo, 2021), ethics (Tiropanis et al., 2014), and community-based IT interventions (Cieslik et al., 2013).

Place-based research, in which our project is most interested, uses data observatories to track urban issues (Keseru et al., 2019), measure health outcomes (James et al., 2020, Røttingen et al., 2013), and **map economic and creative clusters** (Crawley and Pickernell, 2012).

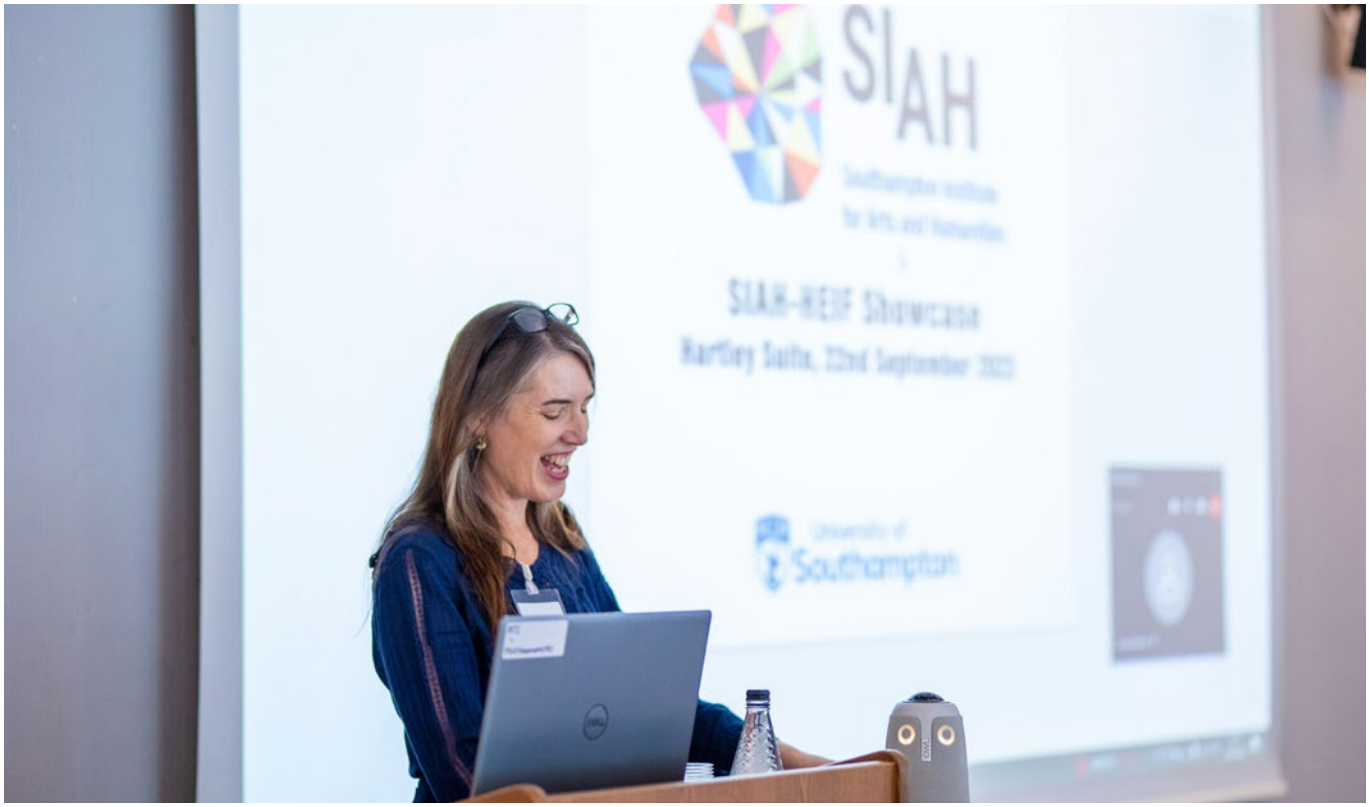
There has been a **qualitative turn** in data observatory studies (Cuomo, 2012; Depuypere, 2020; Willaert, 2020). This turn reveals the impulse to overlay statistical and scientific data with **narratives that can act as metadata** (Mackay, 2015; Kroll et al., 2021). Metadata labels, explains and gives meaning to other data. In this way, narratives can bring together otherwise incompatible datasets, influence policy and behaviour change, and support conversations about sustainable futures (Helgeson et al., 2022).

Scale is another key concern for data observatories. Research is focused on the practical difficulties of aggregating and disaggregating data (Dubois et al., 2016), and the importance of forging connections between local, regional, national and international data scales (Ajates et al., 2020; James et al., 2020). There is a growing acknowledgement of **neighbourhood data** as a granular subdivision of local data (Caiaffa et al., 2013; McKenzie et al., 2015).

Low levels of **participation** and **limited access** to data observatories highlight the reliance on professional data analysts (Tiropanis et al., 2014) and the importance of well-integrated participatory processes (Caiaffa et al., 2013). Some authors advocate for better solutions based on citizen consultation (Cieslik et al., 2018); some seek to redress absences in local knowledge (Karpouzoglou, 2016); and some try to integrate layers of collaborative and participatory data (Liu, 2014).

From the literature, we have highlighted these **features** of a successful data observatory:

- → Gathers evidence, forms clusters, and generates hypotheses
- → Systematically engages with national and local communities
- → Provides up-to-date information and connects data at different scales
- → Addresses key issues relating to narrative, scale and participation
- → Focuses on maintaining data at a hyper-local, neighbourhood scale
- → Influences governance, policy and decision making



2.2 Surveying the observatories

We sampled twenty data observatories to better understand their purpose, architecture and presentation. We wanted to know what the observatories looked like, how they displayed their data, and which software was commonly used. We subsequently mapped these observatories against six criteria—**purpose, audience, use, visualisation, narration, and maintenance**—based on these questions:

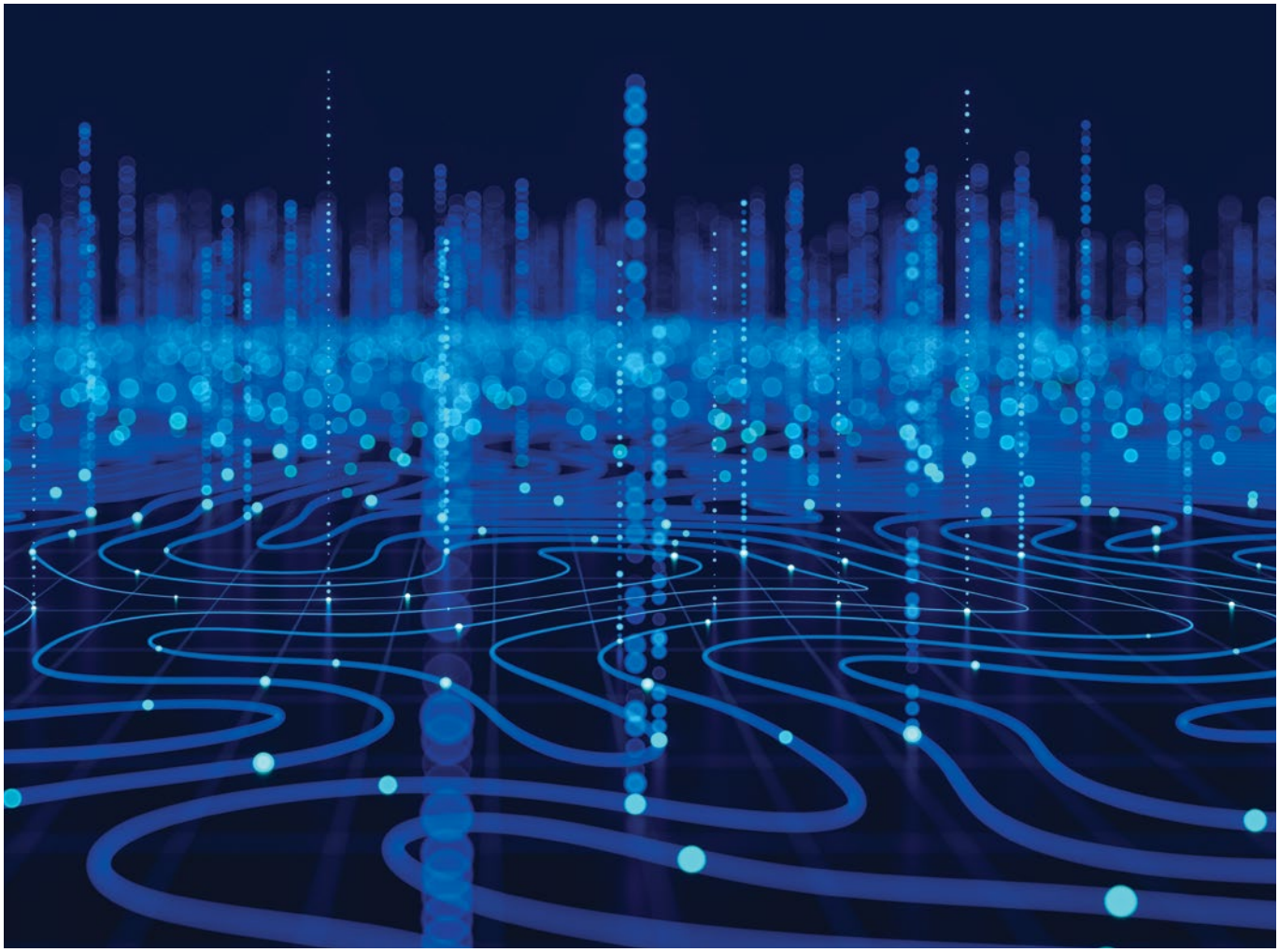
- **Purpose:** What needs does the observatory seek to meet?
- **Audience:** Who is qualitative data for? Who should be able to access this data?
- **Use:** How should users interact with this data? What is their experience of using it?
- **Visualisation:** How can qualitative data be represented and visualised?
- **Narration:** What should accompany this data? What story is the data telling?
- **Maintenance:** How can the representation of this data be updated and maintained?

The analysis revealed that a wide range of platforms, with varying purposes, understand themselves as data observatories. Each observatory in the sample had a different emphasis on data, visualisation and networks.

Some observatories functioned as **data repositories**, storing archival data for long periods. These platforms often limit user interaction to search tools and blog posts. Others style themselves as observatories but are structured as **research hubs** and are more concerned with bringing together outputs and resources than it is with displaying the raw data that underpins its research.

Some observatories provide **portals to both datasets and sample visualisations**. These observatories largely focus on quantitative data. Each type of observatory prompts concerns about agreed definitions, user access and authorial perspective.

The very register of what counts as data and why data counts is **culturally and politically specific**: the purpose of the observatory dictates the structure, access and visual properties of the observatory. These aims include data transparency, user inclusion, self-evaluation, academic critique, public spending accountability and regional advocacy.



2.3 Insights from experts

The Neighbouring Data interviews consulted five experts, covering the rise of regional cultural observatories in the early 2000s and data challenges in the present day. They included representatives from cultural policy, the creative industries and local authority data insight teams. The questions were informed by the criteria prompted by the survey exercise: **purpose, audience, use, visualisation, narration, and maintenance**.

Our interviewees emphasised the importance of approaching data with **context-specific questions and a clear sense of a storytelling**. A qualitative data observatory should ask:

> What is the story? What is the question you're trying to answer? The question you're trying to answer—and the problem you're trying to solve—tell you what the narrative is and how you should narrate the data (I4).

Only by addressing these challenges can the observatory provide 'the evidence base for cultural strategies' (I1), which in turn influence policy and decision-making. Gathering and uploading data without a stated purpose risks 'feeding the beast' (I5), adding pressure to limited local authority resources and capacity.

Clear, usable narration and effective visualisation tools are central to data observatories but raise complex questions about the observatory's authorial perspective. There are implications to approaching data with a predesigned brief, and data observatories should strike a balance between the presentation of resources and raw data. Raw data itself may be an oxymoron because any type of data observation suggests a level of mediation.

The interviews frequently turned to definitions of data, emphasising the importance of real-time data. While repository data is often static and requires 'gathering', observatory data is '**live**' and has '**agency**' (I2).

There should be a distinction between the use of **archive data** for preservation and the use of **live data** to creatively respond to policy challenges. There is enthusiasm for the latter:

> Observatories are often stuck in data collection, organisation and data hierarchies. [They are not] producing **useful tools that help people to engage** in interesting ways (I3).

Using different types of visualisation and narration to experiment with data appeared key for encouraging user engagement and for understanding the practical distinctions between archives, repositories and observatories.

User appeal is imperative for an operational data observatory, but **complex platforms, and limited data literacy among users, are both barriers to access**. There is a need to define the role of qualitative data in place-based decision making, considering factors such as accessible storytelling, literacy support, and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives (Mackay et al., 2015; Van Oostveen et al., 2019; Ribé and Laniado, 2022).

One interviewee noted the effect limited resources, skills and capacities had on the ability to make data-driven decisions:

> There is a data literacy challenge. When you think about the ability for cultural officers to [...] make informed decisions, they are relying on the overstretched data analytics resources within a local authority (I3).

These responses suggest that data observatories require a **layered architecture** and metanarratives to address different levels of data literacy, and that observatories need well-contextualised narratives and visualisations to make useful and accessible the data presented to decision makers.

2.4 Key findings

This stage of the project yielded **three key findings**:

4. Data observatories need to draw together very different datasets in productive ways. The key to facilitating this work lies in understanding how **narratives can act as a form of metadata** to help forge these connections, how metadata can label, explain and give meaning to other data, and how qualitative data can be rigorously deployed to support different forms of data storytelling.
5. **Uneven levels of digital literacy** across different groups are a barrier to user participation in data observatories. Researchers acknowledge this problem but find it difficult to identify a sustainable solution. Our work on data experiences (see section 3) has begun to address this challenge by modelling forms of data visualisation so that they are accessible to a range of audiences.
6. Qualitative, place-based data requires a sensitivity to scale. Where quantitative data is insufficient, qualitative data about hyper-local neighbourhoods can address local, regional and national policy challenges. Narratives about place can **forge links between different geographical scales**, as well as between different types of data.

3. Work Package THREE: Data Experiences and Data Possibilities

The third work package focused on data experiences. We held focus groups with data users from local authorities, community groups and Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) about their qualitative data needs; collated artefacts and approaches from a range of SIAH research projects; and commissioned creative practitioners to investigate the possibilities of visualising, representing and connecting qualitative data from these projects.

The work was structured to draw out a range of potential data observatory user groups that have different organisational structures and decision making priorities. This research supports the findings from the data observatories work package and provides information for qualitative data principles, including insights on the value of data sharing and decentralisation (see Tiropanis, 2022).

3.1 Understanding data needs

Neighbouring Data held focus groups with data users who included representatives from BIDs, local authorities and community organisations. Across these focus groups, we found that qualitative data was seen as useful for three key activities: **changing perceptions, community engagement, and decision making**.

Many of the participants highlighted the value of qualitative data for **telling a story, good or bad**. These must be narratives that communities could easily understand, and which could help change citizens' perceptions about a specific policy, service or asset.

Yet there were concerns about using creative methods for collecting and visualising qualitative data: these approaches might foster the **perception that the information presented was biased and unreliable**, and that the data gathered may have 'a shorter shelf-life' (FG1). Case studies were seen as an effective way to bring together quantitative and qualitative data, but other methods of storytelling, despite the stated concerns, were also sought.

Feeding back information to communities was not always straightforward. Local authorities often deployed "you said, we did" infographics in community engagement, and it was thought that local councillors should provide a 'qualitative interface' with residents (FG1). Observatories should be founded on the principle of '**empowerment and self-service**', but users should be able to 'trust [data] expertise' (FG4).

Community organisations were key to generating qualitative data because they identify 'what people on the ground are saying' (FG2). Yet these organisations faced problems when responding to community concerns because many of their users have limited opportunities to develop their data literacy and, in some cases, **general literacy**.

Pictures and minimal text were preferred methods of dissemination for these groups, and information was sometimes framed to residents as 'the top three things you said' (FG2). Community organisers also found it **difficult to use local authority data observatories** to understand the issues relevant to their area.

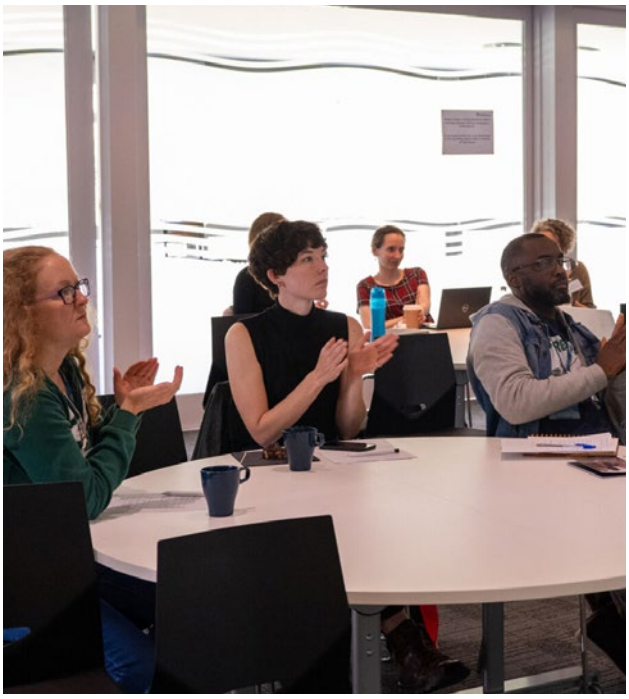
Organisations were concerned about the **longevity of data**, its transparency, and how it could be used to advocate for communities. The feedback that groups had to provide for funders was often inadequate, because the limited form of these reports encouraged superficial statements that obscured the complicated reality of people's lived experience.

The richness and rigour of qualitative data is sometimes diluted in order to **cherry-pick information that suits existing or inconvenient narratives**. Making data accessible was important to users, but it was thought that counter-narratives should not be excluded from decision making. The imperative for groups to supply individual statistics based on specific needs meant that data could be untethered from its original context.

Participants, particularly from the BIDs, focused on the **inconsistency, abundance and complexity** of qualitative data (FG3). This data needs to be comparable and rigorous to benchmark success against other organisations, and it is already resource-intensive to filter and understand the current plenitude of data. It is also difficult to reconcile dissonant, contradictory and minority-held views in decision making.

Using qualitative data in decision making proved a challenge, though, especially when broad sets of interests had to be acknowledged, represented and delivered. There were also some **drawbacks to the one-size-fits-all approach** to data-driven decision making. It was thought that organisations should design services not for the entire range of people but for targeted groups based on need and other metrics (FG4).

There is a wider challenge regarding the efficiency of data sharing and decentralisation, and there was an enthusiasm to **improve networks of information gathering**, particularly across regions (FG3). Interviewees were broadly interested in finding 'innovative ways of digging into datasets' (FG4), and many thought that subjectivity and uncertainty could feature more prominently in decision making.



3.2 Selecting the data

Neighbouring Data created a resource pack of qualitative data comprising a sample of **short narratives, images, poems, videos and maps**.

We subdivided the dataset examples in our resource pack into three fluid categories: the **data unit**, where participants had contributed data; the **artefact**, where the researchers and participants had co-created an object; the **representation**, where data units or artefacts had been transformed by an artist. Some dataset examples fitted more than one category.

The resource pack consisted of:

- one poem representation from Darlington based on participant workshops
- one art representation from Southend based on public consultation responses
- two field notes from Darlington based on participant observation
- two timeline drawings from Hereford co-created with participants
- two emoji maps from Dorchester co-created with participants
- one collage poem from the Isle of Wight co-created with participants
- four craft sculptures from Southampton co-created with participants
- four participant photographs from Southampton co-created with participants

We invited practitioners, including artists, writers, academics and data scientists, to engage with the pack and find ways of interrogating, reimagining and transforming the qualitative data within it. We asked our practitioners to investigate, in total, **eight dataset examples across five projects spanning six places in the UK**. The resource pack featured data units across these eight examples, six of which were artefacts produced by participants, two of which were representations generated by artists based on participant responses.

3.3 Experimenting with the resource pack

Practitioners developed responses to the qualitative data according to their practice, which included expertise on **virtual environments, sound design, hypertexts, creative writing, and data theory**. The project was interested in how these practices could interpret data at different scales and what the possibilities for a cross-practice conversation might be.

Drawing on qualitative methods literature (Cuomo, 2021; Decuypere, 2020; Liu, 2014; Willaert et al., 2020), the workshop focused on how to **discover connections between different kinds of place-based data**. It sought to find ways to aggregate and render meaningful lived experience on place for community decision making, and to understand how communities could illuminate and expand on these forms of qualitative data.

Our practitioners presented a series of valuable demonstrations, including:

- an interactive 3D Minecraft map visualising data about a town and enabling users to intervene in their streetscape by adding or demolishing buildings
- an audio-visual piece illustrating different visions of a town's future that used coloured text and field recordings based on community responses
- an explorable website, the Neighbourhood Insight Engine, with a game-like interface designed to prompt user curiosity about place-based data
- five satirical online newspaper articles dramatizing a fictional government initiative for twinning together towns in the UK
- a roadmap for data observatories considering their infrastructure, stakeholders, ethics, sustainability and social impact

The research team gained insights from these presentations on the challenges of applying creative practice to qualitative data, and on the possibilities afforded by the data observatory model. **Multi-layered data observatories** can suit different levels of interest and literacy, but these platforms should bear in mind the tensions between the artistic process that generates qualitative data and the visual output that presents it.

Practitioners questioned whether the examples in the resource pack could be counted as qualitative data, and there were blurred lines between **the artistic process, the co-created artwork, and the elicited community views**.

Qualitative data was not always considered the right term for artists' visualisations of the data. This point raises questions about what observatories should do with **inherited data** that has been already selected or visualised. Is this data still useful? Is it still data?

There were ethical concerns about using creative methods: data considered valuable should be obtained by primary work with communities and **co-created over a long period of time**. Artists and researchers should not speak for communities, although there was value in transforming existing datasets and in the 'archives being woken up' (WS, 2023).

On **data sovereignty**, personal online datastores could enable users to have full control over what they did or did not share with public and private bodies. There was a mismatch between how practitioners foregrounded the process of community engagement and how decision makers emphasise the outcomes of this engagement.

Taking the time to understand qualitative data was considered important. The process encourages users to uncover information in ways that could illuminate complex community needs and significant policy challenges:

> You can discover more of what you didn't know you were looking for: you're not just checking for isolated, measurable points but attempting to look at the whole picture (WS, 2023).

One presentation, the **Neighbourhood Insight Engine**, took examples in the resource pack and connected them together through a website portal. Users could take time with each example, navigate connections between them, and record insights and reflections as they went. The practitioner described it as a **hypertextual approach**: creating a hypertext encourages the user to engage with all parts of a qualitative data collection to find a rich set of connections (WS, 2023).

The hypertextual approach is advocated for in data observatory literature (Yoshiura et al., 2018). The practitioner likened the approach to printing out sheets of paper, pasting them to a wall, and linking them together with string. Yet this method takes advantage of the qualities of the hypertext platform by enabling **non-linear and non-hierarchical reading experiences** (WS, 2023).

3.4 Key findings

This stage of the project yielded **three key findings**:

7. **Perception, engagement and decision-making** are vital considerations for data users. Data observatories should provide an accessible network and interface to address challenges regarding the consistency, quantity and complexity of qualitative data. Modes of presentation should preserve the richness of qualitative data, articulating its purpose and offering comparisons with other data units. Visualisations can make qualitative data understandable, compelling and sustainable.
8. Researchers will inevitably influence how qualitative data is presented, and the relationship between data, news media, policy and public opinion requires more interrogation. To address problems of data literacy, observatories should present **clear and lucid narratives** that do not cherry-pick and decontextualise information. For narratives about place, observatory authors should be attentive to a range of needs, perspectives and audiences.
9. The Neighbourhood Insight Engine offers an observatory platform that identifies key information and uses metadata to label, explain and forge connections between data units, artefacts and representations. By bringing together a range of datasets, this engine can develop accurate and insightful stories about place for decision makers. The hypertextual approach enables users to find relevant data for decision making and **explore the possibilities of qualitative data-driven storytelling**.

Data Futures

The Neighbouring Data project finally focuses on data futures. A knowledge exchange event will identify how community, cultural and local authority organisations engage with qualitative data. This stage seeks to **develop the principles for a data observatory framework** and outline the range of creative qualitative data collection methods we have deployed in our research.

Academics, local authorities, government policymakers, national bodies, and community groups from across the UK will attend the knowledge exchange event, titled **Qualitative Data in Place-Based Decision Making**. This event presents the project's initial findings to open up a conversation on qualitative data needs, seeking to understand how different types of data can be used, visualised, narrated and maintained.

The event will consult on a set of principles for a qualitative data observatory to assist with place-based decision making. These principles will be **revised and trialled** using insights gained from this event. The research team will consolidate the data gathered and information shared across the project to outline recommendations for using qualitative data in place-based decision making, contributing to best practice in the field (Ajates et al., 2020; Caiaffa et al., 2013; Keseru et al., 2019; Liu, 2014; Røttingen, 2013).

Conclusion

Neighbouring Data is part of a national conversation seeking a more **joined-up approach to place-based data**, and it understands the qualitative data observatory as a mechanism for shaping these discussions. By combining analysis of existing data observatory models with a structured stakeholder consultation, this project has sought to kick-start crucial conversations about connecting, sharing and analysing qualitative and quantitative data.

This report has outlined several key findings about the role of qualitative data in place-based decision-making. We have identified **narrative, participation and scale** as key features of existing data observatories. Our research has shown that these features must be adapted to the specific needs of a qualitative data observatory. Qualitative data has an important role in changing perceptions of groups and services, facilitating creative community engagement, and influencing place-based decision making.

The principles for a **qualitative data observatory framework** will consolidate these aims and the findings from our research. Following this report, we will publish articles on data observatories and data possibilities, and we will test our principles with different users and groups from across the UK. To keep abreast of the Neighbouring Data research programme, and to read the range of outputs from the And Towns projects, please browse the **website**.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix: Participant Descriptors

'I' refers to an interview with a single participant. 'FG' refers to a focus group with multiple participants. 'WS' refers to the five-participant workshop. The number identifies the relevant interview or focus group. The descriptors provide the participants' occupations without compromising anonymity.

Work Package	Label	Descriptor
WP2	I1	Cultural Strategist
WP2	I2	Academic
WP2	I3	Digital Strategist
WP2	I4	Local Authority Officer
WP2	I5	Local Authority Officer
WP3	FG1	Local Authority Officers
WP3	FG2	Community Organisers
WP3	FG3	SME Representatives
WP3	FG4	Local Authority Officers
WP3	WS	Creative Practitioners

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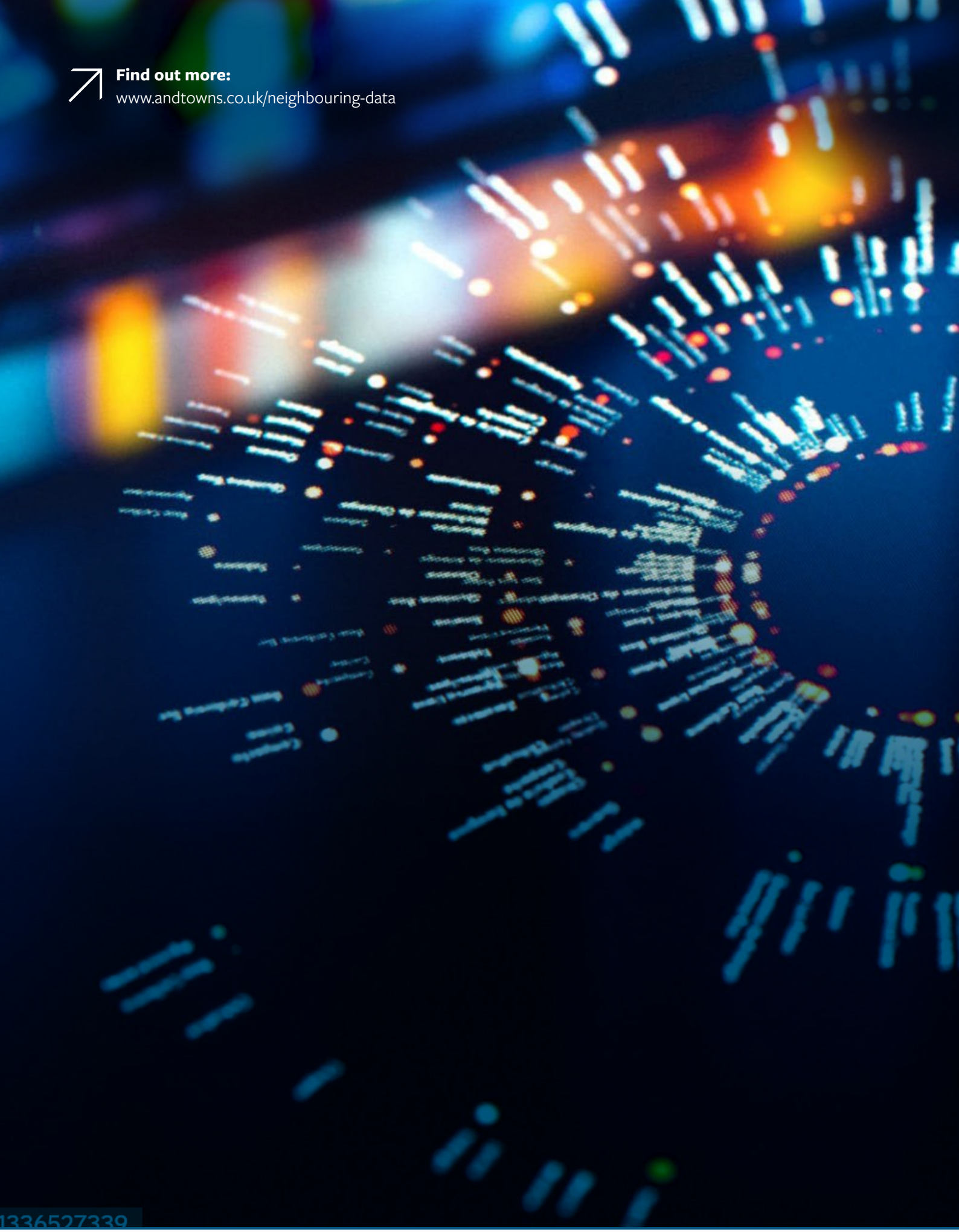

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