

Towards A Place-Based Qualitative Data Observatory

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TOWARDS A PLACE-BASED QUALITATIVE DATA OBSERVATORY

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Executive summary

This research briefing responds to Local Policy Innovation Partnership (LPIP) Hub work on data devolution, transparency, and place productivity. Building on this existing research, it argues that current UK data infrastructures do not yet accommodate the heterogeneous forms of qualitative data on which local, regional and national policymakers increasingly rely. To meet the demands of evidence-informed, place-based decision-making, especially in the context of the Pride in Place and New Towns agenda, organisations require frameworks that address how qualitative data is generated, connected, and used. The brief draws on empirical research into the practices of data observatories and the experiences of data users to outline these needs, proposing a model for a qualitative data observatory that can support the democratic, strategic, and evidence-led requirements of policymakers.

From data devolution to qualitative observatories

Recent LPIP analysis underlines the changing conditions in which local authorities operate. [Rebecca Riley's](#) work on [Powering Up Local Leaders](#) highlights the need for devolved analytical capacity, investment in local data skills and long-term data stewardship. Drawing on this thinking, Riley provides recommendations for [Data and Transparency for Combined Authorities](#) that emphasise the importance of consistent, transparent and accessible data governance to support accountability and public trust. [Maryna Ramcharan](#), meanwhile, identifies in her work on [Data in Place](#) the need to understand place fundamentals, agglomeration and sorting to adequately measure local productivity. In this context, my approach recognises that identity,

attachment and lived and felt experience often exceed quantitative metrics and that novel ways of understanding places—grounded in qualitative data—are needed.

These concerns are amplified by wider national policy priorities. The Levelling Up agenda, beginning in the [Towns Fund Prospectus](#), foregrounded “what [people] love about their place,” insisting that pride and felt experiences are key sources of evidence for shaping interventions in places (HM Government, 2019: 18). Similarly, the [New Towns](#) programme, which seeks to deliver on the Government’s priority to build more affordable housing, depends on understanding how communities experience their places, how they identify with them, and how built environments cultivate belonging and wellbeing. Such ambitions cannot be met with quantitative data alone. They require robust, rigorous, and credible mechanisms for generating and interpreting qualitative data, particularly data that captures the lived and felt experience of place.

The qualitative data observatory, which we understand as a model that “convert[s] episodic research opportunities into clusters of observed events,” responds to these wider systemic demands (Guidotti, 2022: 835). Its scope provides a way of seeing how qualitative data is produced, conceived, and deployed across different organisational settings. Consequently, it also addresses the LPIP focus on devolved capability, transparent governance, and multi-scale evidence for local decision-making. At the University of Southampton, we have undertaken interviews, focus groups, and workshops to interrogate these ideas, specifically through the AHRC-funded [Neighbouring Data](#) project in 2023.

Our mixed-methods approach sought to understand the infrastructure requirements for qualitative data and place (Marsh, Ashton, and Owen, 2025). This methodology included analysis of the practice and literature of data observatories alongside an account of the experiences of data users and practitioners. The volume and heterogeneity of information generated by national and local organisations poses a key challenge. This data is often garnered through miscellaneous survey comments, detailed narrative interviews, evaluation forms, doorstep conversations, and participant observations. The following project findings demonstrate how these various organisations navigate the surfeit of qualitative data that they encounter in their work.



Generation: creating, collecting, and reporting qualitative data

The generation of qualitative data is a central concern for organisations, particularly local authorities and community groups, working in place-based contexts. Generation refers to the creation, collection, and wider reporting of data for different purposes and audiences. Local councillors frequently functioned as a “qualitative interface” between councils and residents, reflecting the extent to which qualitative responses circulate through local government. One participant described the “never-ending big bang of data” that characterises their day-to-day practice.

Data insight council officers attributed this proliferation partly to the lack of alternative, formal routes through which communities could engage with them. In the absence of structured channels for dialogue, business owners, residents, and local stakeholders provided qualitative feedback in *ad hoc* ways. Organisations highlighted the need for platforms that enable communities to voice their insights, identifying observatories as potential mechanisms for transparent, community-owned data that “provide access to work that is ostensibly being paid for by public money.”

The need for clear data provenance was deemed essential. Locating the origins of data is crucial to understanding where, how, and why it was generated. Local authorities require clearly articulated protocols for marking and recording provenance across diverse and informal forms of qualitative data. Participants described collecting qualitative data that was “based on vibes and not [gathered] through a formal reporting mechanism,” yet this information offered valuable insights into the lived and felt experience of place. These insights included patterns of hyperlocal

concern, such as recurrent anxieties about graffiti, for example, which were not formally recorded but nonetheless shaped community narratives.

Local authority officers emphasised that qualitative data, even when incomplete or imperfect, can “tell a strategic story.” They argued that decision-making should not be paralysed by a desire for perfect evidence: “Don’t make perfect the enemy of the good.” Yet the absence of highly granular, neighbourhood-level data made it difficult to target interventions or allocate resources effectively. Granular qualitative data was seen as essential to avoid “putting the watering can over the whole local authority area in the hope you’ll hit the right bits.”

Participation was repeatedly identified as essential to achieve data completeness, granularity and rigour. Organisations emphasised the need to engage seldom heard communities and younger people, whose perspectives were underrepresented in local consultations. Creative practitioners described data generation as a longitudinal, co-produced process in which the experience, rather than the “object” produced, is foregrounded. They prioritised sustained collaboration with communities to understand the context and meaning of the data that was being produced.

Connection: visualising, narrating, and representing qualitative data

The connection of qualitative data refers to the visualisation, narration, and broader representation of data within an observatory. Users consistently reported that existing observatories focus predominantly on quantitative datasets. Observatories focusing on quantitative trends can be beneficial, particularly when the data is collectively sourced, and when they deploy themes and labels to marshal narratives from the datasets. Yet while these observatories were described as “brilliant to get a number,” they were limited in articulating why people use or do not use specific services, assets, or spaces. Users emphasised the difficulty of finding qualitative insights within platforms designed for numerical reporting and thematic dashboards. As one participant noted, qualitative data often requires users to “go down the rabbit hole to find the right document.”

The accessibility of observatories was a recurrent concern. Complex platforms, limited data literacy and varied levels of digital confidence hinder user engagement. Participants valued interactive and visual elements such as maps, noting that “segmentation makes the documents and toolkits accessible,” and emphasising that “people don’t want to trawl through all that [data].” Users sought opportunities for exploration, experimentation, and “playtime” with data, but acknowledged the challenges of designing such features that demand sustained maintenance and support within resource-sensitive organisations.

Connection was also understood as a mechanism for addressing mismatches between public perception and statistical evidence. Participants described communities who felt ignored, misunderstood, or disempowered, and they argued that qualitative insights on an observatory could support transparency and accountability. Narratives were integral to this process. Qualitative data was frequently equated with storytelling, and users emphasised that residents respond more readily to stories about how local problems have been resolved and how places have improved. Narrative forms were seen as essential for connecting qualitative and quantitative data, especially in contexts where numerical breakdowns did not resonate.

Concerns about bias and cherry-picking highlighted the need for transparent and rigorous protocols that connect qualitative data and building trust in the decision-making process. Negative information, such as complaints, is often collected systematically, but “neutral and positive stuff” is rarely captured with the same attention. Organisations expressed interest in systems that could reflect a diversity of perspectives, including ambivalence and conflicting views, and cautioned against approaches that reduce qualitative complexity to thematic counting.

Use: implementing, evaluating, and maintaining qualitative data

The use of qualitative data refers to how it is implemented, evaluated, and maintained over time. Local authorities expressed uncertainty about whether decisions can or should be made on qualitative data alone. Officers noted limitations in skills, capacity, and methodological familiarity, yet also emphasised that “local opinion is expressed qualitatively.” The challenge is not a lack of value but a lack of infrastructure.

Organisations identified a clear need for innovation in data strategies, training in qualitative approaches, and systems that support the reporting of lived and felt experience. Qualitative data has dual significance: it guides community-facing work, and it serves as evidence for funding applications and reporting requirements. Yet partners often rely on quantitative metrics even when qualitative insights capture the most influential aspects of community work. Community organisations asked how to meaningfully convey the importance of interactions that improve wellbeing—for example, “one conversation that makes two elderly people feel less isolated”—when responding to reporting frameworks often demands numerical outputs.

Sustainability emerged as a significant concern. Participants noted that observatories cannot rely on permanent analytical staffing or continuous funding. They argued that open-access approaches encourage shared responsibility and enable observatories to “have a life of [their] own.” Organisations also stressed the importance of comparative tools that provide context without flattening the qualitative nuance. Importantly, counting qualitative data risks diluting its insights, while meaningful comparison requires attention to the complexities of neighbourhoods, populations, and changes in communities.



A place-based qualitative data observatory framework

Provenance is central to establishing rigour and credibility. Data biographies offer a means of capturing how qualitative data comes into being, identifying who collected it, under what conditions it was produced, and with what limitations. Biographies act as flexible metadata, supporting story anthologies that demonstrate how datasets might be connected without reducing them to basic comparison. This layered approach enables observatories to mediate between unanalysed material and analysed insights, preventing users from conflating the two types of data.

Narrative and storytelling are central to the purpose of a qualitative data observatory. Stories provide top-layer analysis that accommodates complexity rather than suppressing it. Participatory and collaborative modes of working help redress absences in local knowledge and facilitate sustained engagement with different audiences. Metadata plays a crucial role in connecting heterogeneous data, enabling searchability, comparison, and thematic grouping. These approaches resonate with wider methodological turns towards granular, neighbourhood-level data, and respond to the need for more nuanced portrayals of place.

A qualitative data observatory must reconcile public and strategic needs, provide ethical access to data, and accommodate fluctuations in policy, governance, and community participation. It must balance longevity with sensitivity to these shifting circumstances, preserving and activating qualitative datasets to make sure that they remain comparable over time. These requirements underline the need for coherent protocols, shared standards, and resilient infrastructures.

One further consideration is the distinction between data and evidence. Qualitative data does not cease to be data because it cannot be counted, nor does it become less evidence-based because it is generated through narrative, testimony, or lived experience. The more pertinent

question is how it is generated, connected, and used. Focusing on use foregrounds the social and institutional contexts in which data becomes meaningful: who gathers it, who analyses it, who determines its relevance, and for what purpose it is mobilised.

Seen in this way, data is never neutral or self-evident but always socially constructed and context-dependent. This perspective also highlights the relevance of community research, where the processes of generation, connection, and use are themselves politically significant. A qualitative data observatory must therefore attend to the collection of data, the conditions under which communities participate in its production, and the ways in which data is subsequently interpreted and deployed in decision-making.

Recommendations

1. Establish data biographies as standard metadata for qualitative datasets.
2. Develop layered observatory architectures that integrate narrative and contextual analysis.
3. Create open-access, self-service, interactive platforms that can capture the complexity of places.
4. Make thematic connections between large and heterogenous datasets that avoid reductive counting to support place-based interventions.
5. Use narrative and storytelling to present, connect, and transform metadata for seldom heard communities.
6. Prioritise granular, neighbourhood-level qualitative data to build systems that focus on community perspectives and local narratives.
7. Deploy a top-down and bottom-up approach to create a two-directional platform of engagement and participation.
8. Introduce reporting protocols that legitimise qualitative evidence for funding and evaluation.
9. Activate historical data to address national agendas such as Pride in Place and New Towns so that lived and felt experience inform strategic planning.
10. Only genuine, longstanding community participation in a qualitative data observatory will sustain it beyond the caprice of political and funding priorities.

For the full qualitative data observatory framework, please read our article “Towards a qualitative data observatory: generation, connection, use”, published in [Policy Studies](#).

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