TALKING OF BEXHILL:

MEASURING VALUES AND PERCEPTIONS OF A HOME TOWN

CONTENTS

TALKING OF BEXHILL: MEASURING VALUES AND PERCEPTIONS OF A HOME TOWN

AUTHORSHIP

This book brings together five areas of research with a focus on Bexhill-on-Sea and with reference to Bexhill After Dark. This light festival was produced by 18 Hours Ltd in partnership with Arts Council England, Rother District Council, East Sussex Arts Partnership, De La Warr Pavilion and supported by a wide range of local community organisations. This is the only festival of its kind in Bexhill and features light installations, illuminated performances and community parades, presenting an inclusive programme of excellent quality art in the off season.

The book contents remain within the ownership of 18 Hours Ltd, and no part should be reproduced without prior consent.

18 Hours Ltd, September 2024

office@18hours.org.uk

www.18hours.org.uk

INTRODUCTION

18 Hours has worked with partners the University of Brighton, the University of East London and more recently the Bexhill Town Board to capture residents' and visitors' perceptions of Bexhill.

Bexhill-on-Sea is nestled on England's south coast approximately an hour east of Brighton with its nearest neighbour Hastings a further five miles along the seafront. Recently described as "an unassuming seaside town…brimming with eccentricities" (Machan, 2024:1), Bexhill has a population of 34,750 (2021), with 34.5% aged over 65 years, 13.9% under the age of 16, and 6% from an ethnically diverse background.

The town has a calendar of events, with two delivered annually by local events company 18 Hours: Journeys Festival of Dance and the light festival Bexhill After Dark.

Bexhill After Dark takes place in January and brings 12,000 visitors into the town centre. It is these audiences and participants who form some of the research within Part 2 of this book, which investigates the festival's economic impacts, wider societal impacts and attitudinal change. In Part 1 of the text, young people and residents of diverse heritage have responded to questions of their perceptions of Bexhill. The entire book of five sections presents innovative participatory research methodologies to capture feedback including diamond ranking exercises and photo elicitation.

The purpose of the book is to collate these five pieces of research undertaken across a two-year period and to introduce the methodologies developed to understand place identity and participants' sense of belonging. The book aims to contribute to a broader evidence base to inform future policy by others outside the organisation.

For further information please contact: office@18hours.org.uk

PERCEPTIONS OF BEXHILL

As an ice breaker, participants were asked to describe Bexhill in three words. The size of the circle reflects the number of answers for the same word.

YOUNG PEOPLE IN BEXHILL

YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERCEPTIONS OF BEXHILL:
RESEARCH REPORT TO BEXHILL TOWN BOARD, JULY 2024

Objective:
To provide Bexhill Town Board with an authentic overview of young people's perceptions of Bexhill and their priorities for change, thereby informing the Board's Long-Term Plan.

Commissioning body: Bexhill Town Board

Research partner: University of Brighton

Participants in figures:

42 Respondents from 10 to 18 years across 4 focus groups

25 x Female / 17 x Male

37 x White British / 5 x from diverse heritage backgrounds

Population profile:
Bexhill residents between the ages of 10 and 19 account for 9% of the town's population (Source: 2021 Census).

FOCUS GROUP CHARACTERISTICS

- **Sidley Girls Zone:**
  a girls' youth group in Sidley aged 10–15 years

- **Beulah Youth Club:**
  Mixed gender youth group aged 11–18 years meeting at Beulah Centre in Bexhill town centre

- **DV8:**
  Students at DV8 creative education provider in Bexhill town centre, mixed gender, 16–18 years

- **Bexhill College:**
  mixed gender 6th form students, 17–18 years.

Methodology

Using a "Postcards from Bexhill" approach across all focus groups, researchers elicited the ways young people currently interact with Bexhill's amenities, their attitudes to the town and how they would use Bexhill in a world of ideal facilities. Groups then developed and ranked a wish list of suggestions.

The detailed method was as follows:

- "Postcard from Now": a picture postcard depicting familiar Bexhill settings was distributed to each individual, on which they were encouraged to write or draw how they regularly spend leisure time.

- A verbal discussion followed where the group was invited to describe the town in three words.

- "Postcard from the Future": a second postcard was distributed to each participant, this time inviting them to imagine their ideal leisure time in a Bexhill with more abundant facilities. Ideas were broadly put forward from the perspective of participants' existing budgets.
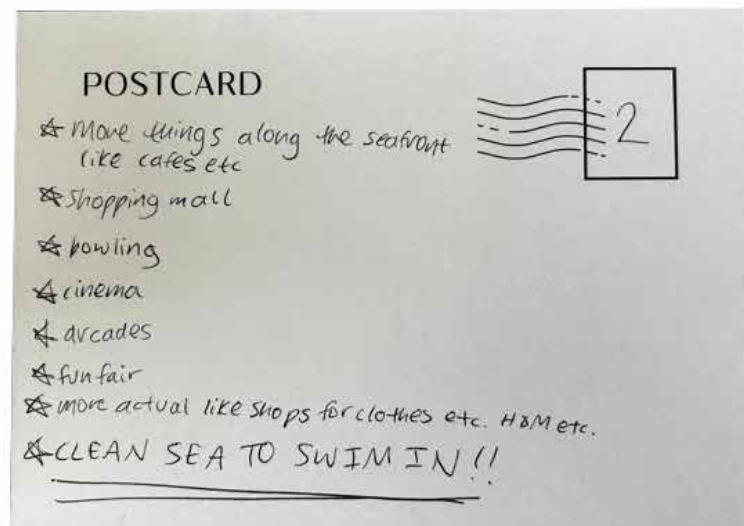
- In group discussion, suggestions from the second set of postcards were reduced to nine key statements and ranked, using a diamond-shaped array to focus priorities.

- Postcard writing and group discussions were filmed. Each participant was also given the opportunity to expand their thoughts in a short, filmed interview.

OUTCOMES

Present perceptions

When invited to define their leisure time in Bexhill, answers across the board communicated young people's need to socialise.

The majority felt blessed by their home town's seaside location and incorporated this into their social lives – seaside walks with friends and trips to the beach. But they felt hampered by the lack of commercial options along the seafront (kiosks or amusements) and horrified by sewage. A third of the Beulah focus group cited "train station" as a key leisure destination, to head to Eastbourne or Hastings, and the Bexhill College group agreed they tend to visit Hastings, Eastbourne or Brighton for socialising amenities such as arcades and cafés – an expensive and less safe option than if some of those towns' broader amenities were available in Bexhill.

The limitations of Bexhill's hospitality sector in catering to teens was expressed by all focus groups, with a lack of affordable cafés branding to their age group. Some cited McDonalds or KFC at Ravenside Retail Park as a destination, but not a convenient one. These limitations impact nightlife possibilities for older teenagers too: in Bexhill town centre, no café-style destinations are open after 5 pm. Pool can be played in a couple of pubs, but only in the company of an adult. Wetherspoons is the only affordable evening hospitality venue in town, and only until 9 pm for under-18s. There is nowhere to go dancing.

Hospitality frustrations were echoed for the retail sector. There was a consensus that the town centre caters to its large senior population with its vast array of

charity shops. While a quarter of young people interviewed do visit these, there was a vocal desire for young people's fashions to be represented in the town, especially among female respondents.

In essence, in terms of seafront and town centre use, focus groups painted a picture of young people "wandering", staying at home or spending their funds to head out of town.

Away from the town centre, outdoor activities do offer opportunities for socialising. A third of young people mentioned Egerton Park for hanging out or kickabout. Others did not go there because they perceived its amenities as being for either children or adults but not for teenagers. Over half of the Sidley girls use the Sidley Recreation Ground, but safety concerns clouded this: they described a lack of locations where they could hang out safely, indicating a need for more "safe green spaces" or "a place which only young people can go in".

Younger teens interviewed at organised youth clubs (Beulah and Girls Zone) valued these clubs' opportunities for socialising and fun.

Three Words to describe Bexhill

Groups differed in their preferences here. The only word to crop up twice was "boring". Adjectives were largely positive or neutral: "quiet", "basic", "safe", "clean town" but with the unsettling outlier "scary" coming from the Sidley girls' group.

Opinions and suggestions

Given the near-vacuum of teen-friendly amenities in Bexhill town centre or along its seafront, the second postcard activity elicited a host of ways in which young leisure time could be improved.

Many participants envisioned a more vibrant seafront with kiosks offering globally diverse foods as well as the kind of arcade experience – amusements, a funfair – which they currently seek elsewhere. One Beulah postcard simply said, "The whole of Eastbourne just come to Bexhill".

This sentiment was echoed by two-thirds of respondents urging improved town centre retail destinations for this age group. Younger fashions were especially craved (Primark, Claire's, Nike, H&M were named) and also stores catering for pastimes (Hobbycraft, video games). A common vision among all focus groups was for shops to be located in a shopping mall which would incorporate places to hang out and teen-friendly cafés (Bubble Tea, Starbucks, pet cafés...).

Three-quarters of participants proposed facilities offering some kind of physical activity. The most widely prized of these was a bowling alley (41%), followed by a town centre-based, larger swimming pool (26%), a teen gym (21%) and more outdoor activity space given to, for example, trampolines, a bigger skate park and nature trails. Two groups suggested an indoor activity centre such as Urban Jump or Ninja Arena.

There was a yearning for establishments to socialise in, from day into evening. Cafés with longer opening hours cropped up often in discussion – either "teen-friendly" ones or catering exclusively for the younger age group. Many (41%) suggested a cinema – indeed this was equal in popularity to a bowling alley and scored even more highly in the later diamond-ranking task. The Bexhill College group proposed an indoor hangout which might cater for different age groups (under 18s, 18+) on different days/evenings, with opportunities including board games and a silent disco.

A desire to overcome the paucity of Bexhill's amenities for young people was demonstrated in one of the Sidley Girls Zone postcards: "I would like to do a parade with all the schools around Bexhill to raise money for Bexhill".

"Need more help for mental health – therapy and stuff like that."

DV8 participant

"Every time I want to hang out with my friends, I have to take a train and that already costs £5...."

Bexhill College participant

Priorities

Each of the four focus groups had its own demographic character and group dynamic. This influenced their priorities for Bexhill and how the group positioned priorities in the diamond-ranking exercise. For example, older teens at Bexhill College and DV8 took the opportunity to express a political voice, giving top priority to suggestions – "Clean Seas" and "Help for Mental Health" respectively – which were unique only to their group.

Nevertheless, recurrent suggestions emerged for amenities which, it was agreed, would make life in Bexhill better for its young people. To hone a single set of priorities spanning all focus groups, the following methodology was used:

- Suggestions ranked N° 1 in each group were given a score of 9, down to a score of 1 for the lowest ranked suggestion
- Scores for the same or similar suggestions were then added across all groups. Using this method, the highest possible score would be 36 (if all four groups had ranked the same suggestion highest) and the lowest, 1.

The highest priorities for the full dataset of young people were:

- Typical seafront activities, such as diverse food kiosks, arcades, funfair, trampolines, crazy golf (Score 28)
- Town centre shopping more conducive to young people: younger fashions, ideally in a mall setting (Score: 26)
- Cinema (Score: 24)
- Café & evening culture: food outlets and socialising venues suitable for under-18s open into the evening (Score 22)
- Bowling alley (Score 16)
- Youth clubs (Score 15)
- Events aimed at teens in terms of budget and programming (Score 12)
- Swimming pool & gym (Score 10)
- Clean seas and Help for Mental Health both scored 9 respectively.

"A cafe for teens would be good – a place to meet up after school if we're feeling stressed."

Sidley Girls Zone participant

SUMMARY

Underpinning all young residents' responses was a desire to socialise with each other in settings appropriate to their age group – not childish, but also not adult settings revolving around alcohol consumption. The fact that many respondents are enticed out of town by the amenities of other coastal towns on the rail network indicates that Bexhill's young people do have a budget which they could be spending in their home town. Market forces will dictate whether their desired mix of younger retail outlets can establish itself in the town centre. But the current lack of amenities to draw young people to the centre of town and seafront could give a skewed image to investors that this age group does not exist in Bexhill or has no interest in using its centre.

Grumbles such as the lack of teen-friendly hospitality options, especially after 5 pm, were specific to the age group. However, key suggestions would probably chime across a much broader age spectrum. One of these was that a cinema hub – including a hospitality area – would be a welcome return to the town. Another popular theme was that a more vibrant seafront could bring fun and a boost commercially.

Table 1.1:
Young people's priorities for Bexhill

Priorities for Bexhill: combined dataset from all focus groups aged 10-18, July 2024

Number of Responses

Category	
Seafront activities	
Town centre shopping	
Cinema	
Evening cafe culture	
Bowling alley	
Youth clubs	
Events for teens	
Swimming pool and gym	
Clean seas	
Help for mental health	
Pet rescue centre	
Soft play centre	
Hotels	
Basketball courts	
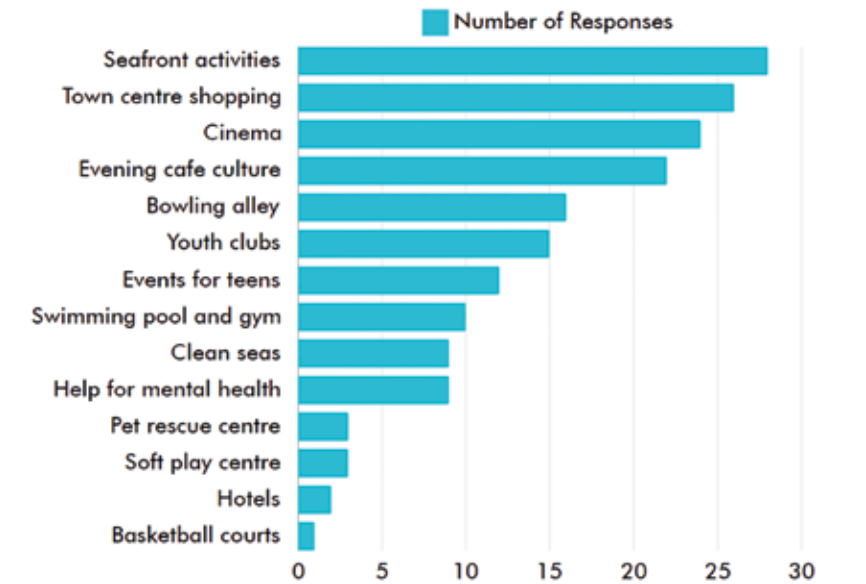
**RESIDENTS OF
DIVERSE HERITAGE**

DIVERSE COMMUNITIES
REPORT TO BEXHILL TOWN BOARD, JULY 2024

Objective
To provide Bexhill Town Board with a refreshed understanding of the communities of diverse heritage living in Bexhill, to inform the Board's Long-Term Plan for the town

Commissioning body: Bexhill Town Board

Research partners:
Rother Race Action Forum, University of Brighton

Participants in figures:

15 respondents:

1 focus group (6 respondents)

9 One-to-one interviews

10 x Female / 5 x Male

8 x African & African Caribbean

3 x Arabic

3 x Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi)

1 x Dual Heritage

2 x 19 – 34 years old

7 x 35 – 64 years old

6 x 65+ years old

Population profile: In Bexhill, the population of people from an ethnically diverse background is 6%, compared to roughly 4% of the population in the wider Rother District. (Source: 2021 Census).

PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

Participants in this study are Bexhill residents of diverse heritage assembled through Rother Race Action Forum (RRAF). RRAF is a community organisation which has supported the district's ethnically diverse communities for 20 years.

This is the first known research to engage specifically with Bexhill's diverse heritage populations, identify their perceptions of Bexhill and determine their priorities for change.

Methodology

Researchers employed the "Postcards from Bexhill" approach (see also Young People's research) to tease out the town's perceived benefits for respondents, its shortcomings, and desired improvements.

Postcard 1: On a Bexhill picture postcard, each individual was invited to write or draw the town's current offer and places where they socialise.

Postcard 2: A new set of postcards was distributed to gather ideas for changes which would improve participants' experiences of Bexhill.

Diamond ranking activity: Thematic analysis of the second set of postcards identified nine top suggestions. These were itemised on nine cards and placed randomly in a diamond array as a visual prompt for discussion and re-ordering. The postcard re-ordered to the top of the diamond was the most important desired change, followed by the next two preferences, until suggestions were ranked 1 to 9 (for further information about this methodology see Curtis and Jones, 2024). Discussion throughout all activities was noted.

OUTCOMES

Present perceptions

Many respondents had moved to Bexhill in the last 10–15 years for more affordable housing for their families, coming from other Sussex towns such as Hastings, Eastbourne or Brighton. For some, Bexhill offered more sustainable employment; others still commute outside the town for work. Most were content with their move to Bexhill and said it met their expectations and needs. A few added Bexhill has provided them with a sense of security they had not experienced for some time. For many, Bexhill is generally "better" than the places they moved from.

When defining their leisure time in Bexhill, participants highlighted family- and friend-focused activities in private settings, public spaces (including parks, picnics and coastline walks) and cafés and restaurants. Many spoke of the pleasure of being at home with family and friends and expressed appreciation for living in peaceful areas where they can relax, undisturbed and comfortable.

Some added they enjoy visits from family who live outside Bexhill. These visits allow them to explore areas and social amenities of Bexhill they typically might not. Despite limitations, most appreciated the amenities the town has to offer.

Bexhill's retail outlets were mentioned as a source of leisure. The eclectic nature of Bexhill's shops was noted, including its many charity shops, its independent creative shops, core high-street stores and the nearby retail park.

Some respondents struggled to provide details of social amenities they enjoy in the town. There was some awareness of festivals and outdoor events but the ability to name or distinguish these was minimal. It was unclear whether respondents or their families had attended any.

One group of respondents cherished a female-only gathering which they attend weekly. The chance to meet regularly with their peers helps address isolation and provides conversation, regular social connection, opportunities to participate in creative activities, and a culturally safe space.

The notion of safety was raised by more than one female respondent, referring to the ability to visit places in the evening as a female from a diverse background, where they would not be subject to unwelcome observation, hostility or indifference due to their background. It is worth noting that no respondents spoke of experiencing racism in Bexhill. However, the fact racism was not mentioned should not be interpreted as them not having experienced racism in Bexhill.

Many could not pinpoint what might prompt them to use the town's leisure amenities more. However, there was a sense that as Bexhill's number of residents of diverse heritage grows, so will their sense of belonging and knowledge of a broader range of social opportunities. Overall, most expressed satisfaction with the amenities they do access, believing they may venture beyond their comfort zone as they and their family become more embedded in the town.

Opinions and suggestions

Some were shy about suggesting improvements, un-used to questions they considered were for people with greater planning knowledge. Nevertheless, when further prompted, all gave examples of things that mattered personally or might improve the town's amenities.

Family-friendly amenities claimed the spotlight. Broader amenities would strengthen families and foster greater community and pride in Bexhill. Family amenities were needed both by respondents with families in Bexhill, as well as those hosting family and friends from out of town. Some were quick to stress they meant facilities free from admission fees. They imagined the town's parks and coastal areas providing more elaborate play spaces and comfortable picnic areas. Also, eateries serving a broader range of street foods would add a modern and diverse aspect.

A number of participants living in Bexhill for many years spoke of the fountain near the De La Warr Pavilion: it was a well-liked local site that the authorities had inexplicably left to fall into disrepair.

Many were frustrated with the lack of facilities for young people. Some parents of older children complained there was nothing for them in the town beyond "hanging out with their friends". They felt providing more for young people to do in Bexhill would reduce their travel frequency to Eastbourne or Hastings. These parents felt uneasy about their children leaving Bexhill, not knowing where their children were or what they were doing. One suggestion was a local youth club, offering young people a location to spark interest in creativity and sports.

Further along the age spectrum, some felt access to public amenities could be better for older people and those with mobility considerations. This included access routes to the beach, wheelchair accessible toilet facilities and improved parking for disabled drivers in spots where they could enjoy the coastline without disturbance.

Another popular comment involved "safe spaces for women". This was interpreted as places where women could socialise safely, day and evening. Safely typically meant away from threat of violence (directed at them or others) or hostility or prejudice they might face because of their race or ethnicity.

There was a belief among participants that many people live lonely lives and more should be done by the local authority to tackle isolation, particularly – but not exclusively – among older people. Suggestions included ensuring public spaces facilitate connection through specific clubs or common areas.

Race and ethnicity

Some wanted to see more clubs encouraging inclusivity and diversity of race and ethnicity. Creative, fitness and yoga clubs were mentioned, as well as community spaces where people can meet regularly for coffee and socialise. When prompted about existing clubs, many said they would be willing to participate in these if they knew they would be treated equally and face no hostility.

Most respondents did not immediately refer to race or ethnicity when considering what would improve their lives in Bexhill. A key exception was female respondents who felt they would welcome greater awareness and understanding of cultural sensitivities related to their faith.

A few hoped that, whilst they had not experienced overt racism living in Bexhill, over time they would feel more integrated and have a sense of belonging in the town. For many, this starts with a sense that when pursuing their interests they feel comfortable and safe, in other words not facing hostility or barriers when engaging with people not from their background.

Priorities

Highest priorities centred around opportunities to do more and, with this, to socialise, indicating respondents have free time and a desire to connect with others and the town:

1   More leisure amenities and attractions (things for people and families to do)

2   Broader range of cafés and coffee shops (to socialise with family & friends, and break cycles of isolation)

3   More community spaces offering opportunities to meet and share an interest.

4   Better access routes for older people and those with mobility considerations

5   Lower parking charges, making it easier for car owners to visit the town centre or coastline

6   Young people's amenities, including indoor & outdoor facilities offering sports and creative activities that reflect their interests

7   Revived and expanded retail facilities, with a broader range of shops in a mall-type setting

8   Repairs to the Fountain and other environmental refurbishments to enhance the town's aesthetics and appearance.

9   Safe places for women to socialise, irrespective of their background.

SUMMARY

This research represents an authentic record of how respondents from Bexhill's ethnically diverse communities feel about their home town.

Respondents with limited or no research experience were reluctant to speak critically, acknowledging much to be thankful for in coming to Bexhill. However, when prompted, there was a sense the town could offer more locations to socialise and connect.

Some issues raised will resonate across the town's majority population; there are also areas of significance for this respondent type that relate uniquely to ethnicity. Consideration should be given to conducting further research with Bexhill's ethnically diverse populations. Their involvement ensures representation of all citizens and can identify where perceptions and experiences converge and differ.

ECONOMIC IMPACT STUDY

ECONOMIC VALUE OF BEXHILL AFTER DARK FESTIVAL 2024

Objective: To determine the effects of a free public festival on businesses in Bexhill

Event: Bexhill After Dark, 27 January 2024, 5–8 pm

Event sponsors:	**With in kind support from:**
Arts Council England	De La Warr Pavilion
Rother District Council	Bexhill College
Trattoria Italian Restaurant	Bexhill Museum
Bexhill Chamber of Commerce	DV8 Creative Education Provider
Bexhill Wheelers	Bexhill Heritage
University of East London	Section 5 Drummers
	Speedy Hire

Research funded by: University of Brighton

Participants in figures:

Live festival audience: 12,000

Event attendees participating in research:
117 (approx. 2/3 from outside Bexhill)

Businesses interviewed: 11 (9 x hospitality; 2 x retail)

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

- 117 Festival attendees responding to questionnaires
- 11 Local businesses were interviewed:
  9 x hospitality
  2 x retail

Types of businesses interviewed:

Larger restaurant	2
Larger restaurant / Bar	1
Medium sized restaurant	2
Fish and chip shop	2
Café	2
Retail shop	2

Table 3.1:
Business research participants

Economic impact studies evaluate how public assets such as festivals contribute to a community's economic health. They are a useful tool informing event sponsors of the value added through their investment. For event organisers, they can also flag unforeseen negative impacts to mitigate in future. Sharing evaluations between local stakeholders raises opportunities for cooperative ventures and business development.

Bexhill After Dark is an annual festival illuminating Bexhill's seafront and other public spaces with projections, street theatre and a parade on the last Saturday evening in January, held between 5-8pm. It is completely free and was held for its third year on Saturday 27 January 2024. Research was conducted before, during and after the event to determine the festival's impact on local businesses and their operation.

Methodology

- Footfall was measured for 30 minutes between 5 pm and 5:30 pm at seven locations, including Bexhill Station, on the previous Saturday and at the same time on the Saturday of the event.
- Attendees provided demographic and spend data via:
  - face-to-face questionnaires gathered by the organisers among festival crowds
  - self-completed Google forms, accessed via Near Field Communication (NFC) cards distributed by hospitality businesses on the evening and afterwards via a link on the organisers' Facebook page. The last of these was completed on 3 March 2024.
- Structured interviews with businesses were conducted after the event.
- A thematic analysis of business interviews and attendees' responses highlighted key themes and assessed similarities and differences between responses.

OUTCOMES

Bexhill After Dark brought visitors to the town

Bexhill After Dark 2024 attracted a much larger crowd than expected, with Sussex Police estimating up to 12,000 people attended.

In interviews businesses attributed the strong turnout to a stormy January, with better weather forecast for the festival weekend. Three businesses had also noticed more event advertising on social media this year, contributing to increased awareness.

Every business reported a busy evening with new faces among regulars. Conversations with customers had identified families from Eastbourne, Hastings and St. Leonards; some even from as far as London (two hours away).

The 106 respondents who supplied their postcode confirmed this:

35% were local to Bexhill (TN39 and TN40) and

65% from out of town.

Footfall data from Bexhill Station also supported this, showing an increase of 321% on festival night compared to the previous Saturday.

"At one point it was so busy you couldn't see the floor."

Local restaurant

"There was a time when every table was full."

Local restaurant

"Staff love busy shifts – it's more enjoyable."

Local restaurant

Audience spending

Bexhill After Dark is a free event. This makes it intentionally accessible for everyone and also maximises event-related spend in the direction of local businesses.

104 audience members responded to the question: Would you mind sharing how much you plan to spend in Bexhill? Whilst this represents a small proportion of total audiences, it provides useful insights into the spend patterns of local and out-of-town participants.

To estimate total event-related expenditure, spend patterns were superimposed on the estimated number of spending adults. The latter was estimated as 9,000 adults, based on an assumption that one-quarter of audiences were non-spending children.

Calculations suggested the event brought an extra £288,000 to £297,000 into town on 27th January 2024.

"We ran out of chips" – high demand for the town's eateries

Analysis of data provided by businesses and attendees indicated the festival's most significant economic impact was on businesses serving food, particularly given the evening-meal timing of the event. Questionnaires confirmed Restaurants and Takeaways were the most used services:

Table 3.2:
Audience spending

Impact on local businesses

Detailed analysis of revenue impacts was restricted by limited data-sharing from businesses due to confidentiality concerns or a lack of accurate information. However, for the majority it was clear that turnover increased with Bexhill After Dark.

Three restaurants recorded a 21-27% increase in business. One fish and chip shop estimated taking double what they would on a normal Saturday in January, with a second reporting it was "like summer" with queues stretching down the street.

Both fish and chip shops and one restaurant ran out of chips. The restaurant had to close its kitchen at 7pm as stock was running out, staying open just for drinks and ice cream. Larger businesses coped better with the influx of visitors with one larger establishment stating: "We never run out of food".

A retail business also reported increased revenue by staying open later:

"We were pleasantly surprised at the number of visitors and buyers. It introduced our shop to new customers… People were happy to buy as well as browse" Retailer
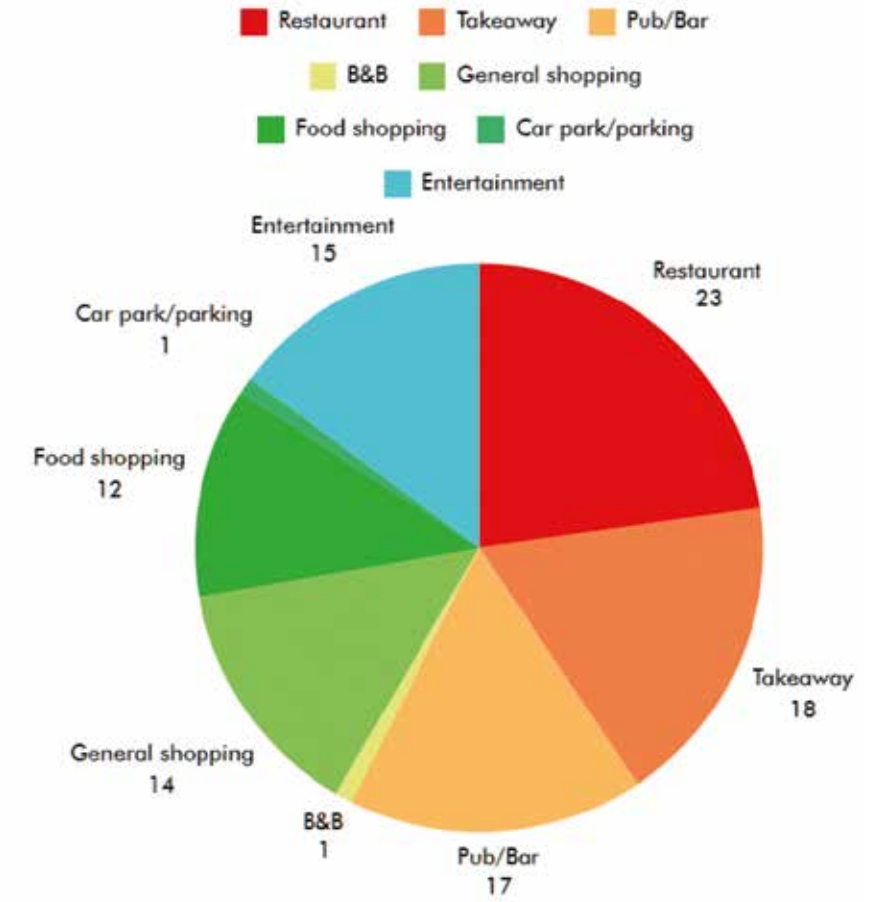
Table 3.3:
Most used services according to questionnaires

Support for businesses in the winter months

The opportunity for increased revenue came at a hard time for businesses in Bexhill. Three businesses expressed the difficulties of an economic downturn in a seaside town reliant on summer visitor trade, welcoming the boost brought by winter events. The benefits of Bexhill After Dark were signalled by one business reporting "It can help us keep going when things get tough" and another commented: "With the closure of businesses on the seafront and people losing jobs, it's good to support local businesses."

Audience questionnaires also shared positive experiences of exploring the town's services:

"We visited The Lounge restaurant that we'd not been to before and had amazing food and cocktails beforehand. Plus, an ice cream and hot chocolate for the journey home. Loved it."

Unexpected impacts of the festival

For three businesses, the increase in business was less clear. Some attributed this to regular customers changing their behaviour to attend the festival: One café found that those who may have visited during the day waited until evening because of the event. A second café reported fewer take-away deliveries for a Saturday night. A larger restaurant stated it is always fully booked on Saturday nights in January so could not increase business on event night.

One fish and chip shop reported the increase in demand for portions of chips meant they did not sell as much fish as they might on a Saturday night.

An increase in family groups meant one eatery sold more children's meals than usual, and less alcohol.

Overdemand

Demand for refreshments had positive and negative impacts as the increased revenue opportunity was curbed by businesses' capacity. Two larger restaurants each turned away over 100 people. One larger restaurant reported trying to "squeeze as many people in as we could"; other businesses regretted disappointing customers because tables were full, or supplies had run out.

The larger bar restaurant coped best with demand, increasing its staff for the evening so "no-one needed to queue too long for the bar and food was still served within ten minutes".

Questionnaires confirmed some local spend was lost as overdemand pushed visitors out of town for food: "We didn't know where to look and everywhere was booked up … we ended up driving to a nearby Tesco for a sandwich on the ride home."

One business also reported an unsuccessful effort to find visitors somewhere to eat later in the evening; the visitors departed to eat in St Leonards.

Mitigating overdemand

- Businesses and audiences alike were keen for solutions to the overdemand on eateries.
- Event visitors were eager to see food outlets alongside event interactions, suggesting:
  – "More access to food stalls"
  – "Maybe some pop-up refreshments - possibly linked to current café owners (not suggesting they lose business)"

- All businesses preferred to see themselves supported in responding to increased demand rather than have external food and drink providers brought in. At an operational level, businesses' solutions for the following year included:
  - One restaurant increasing capacity with outdoor tables and chairs
  - A second restaurant opening its connected café into the evening
  - Two retail shops running food stalls outside their shops
  - One café running a hot drink and snack stall closer to event shows
  - Two cafés which had been too short-staffed to stay open resolving this with better advance notice of the event
  - Fish and chip shops increasing supplies with better advance notice of the event

- Besides increased notice, other suggestions aimed at organisers included:
  - Seeing if the De La Warr Pavilion café and bar could open
  - Locating shows in different parts of the town to spread people closer to other businesses
  - Detailing businesses on the event map so visitors could find services easily

Longer term benefits

Businesses will be invited to join a new After Dark Business Network to support planning and share good practice to maximise success possibilities from the event.

All businesses interviewed within this research thought the free event had generated a joyful mood across town and welcomed the longer-term impact of this: Bexhill After Dark had "put Bexhill on the map", challenging the town's quiet perceptions, and new customers would visit again.

SUMMARY

Overall, Bexhill After Dark 2024 had a positive economic impact on Bexhill. It brought an estimated 12,000 people (7,800 external visitors) to the seafront and town centre, who filled the town's restaurants, cafés, and bars, spending an estimated £288,000 to £297,000 on the night.

All businesses interviewed expressed pleasure with the event and felt it had benefited them, whether through increased revenue on the evening or by attracting visitors to Bexhill who would visit again. They appreciated the positive atmosphere the event brought to the town and were keen to see more town-wide events.

Interviews with businesses generated useful ideas for optimising the festival's economic potential. In particular, operational tweaks were proposed to mitigate overdemand on the town's eateries. It is recommended these be considered through collaboration between local businesses, the local authority, and event organisers for a successful Bexhill After Dark 2025.

SOCIAL IMPACT EVALUATION
OF BEXHILL AFTER DARK

SOCIAL IMPACT EVALUATION: LOCAL COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS

Objective: To assess the social impacts of a free cultural light festival on various groups within the Bexhill community

Event: Bexhill After Dark, 27 January 2024, 5-8pm

Research funded by: University of Brighton

Participants in figures:

16 respondents across four focus groups

"There were lots of different generations, which was great. Lots of families, obviously lots of different ages, lots of older people on their own, lots of teenagers around as well as families."

Women's group member
of diverse heritage

"What it's good for is sort of showcasing Bexhill in the dark winter months to make people think 'Oh, actually maybe we'll come and see what it's like in the summer'."

Local performance artist

SOCIAL IMPACT RESEARCH AND THE BENEFITS FOR THE COMMUNITY

Existing studies which evaluate the impacts of arts festivals on local communities tend to focus on economic benefits rather than social impacts. Yet free public arts festivals are a fantastic opportunity for communities to enjoy themselves, participate and feel good about where they live.

Research has demonstrated the positive social impacts festivals can bring, building happier communities with better social cohesion, civic pride and opportunities to connect with others, learn new skills and build trust (Edensor & Sumartojo, 2018; Hell & McPherson, 2022).

The present research explores the social impact of Bexhill After Dark, a free evening light festival in January 2024, on the Bexhill community. Research focuses on the following four themes:

Social cohesion: Higher levels of social cohesion occur where people feel a sense of belonging and opportunities for community participation (Duffy and Mair, 2017);

Civic pride: Pride in place may arise from increased favourable attention from visitors and media (Mourao et al; 2022), which in turn can create a more harmonious community (Crompton, 2004);

Increased social capital: This implies a stronger sense of community, cooperation and empowerment (Gibson et al., 2014) featuring networks and broad levels of trust;

Health and well-being: The concepts of social cohesion, civic pride and increased social capital are interconnected, enhancing quality of life in a thriving community (Knott et al., 2015).

Bexhill After Dark festival

Bexhill After Dark festival is a free, vibrant cultural event held each January to invigorate tourism during the winter and support Bexhill-on-Sea's evening economy. Organised by 18 Hours Ltd, the festival features light installations, illuminated performances and a community parade, bringing together local, national and international artists across key locations in town and along the seafront. The festival aims to appeal to audiences of all ages and backgrounds.

Participant Profiles

Four focus groups participated in the social impact study, all local residents from a mixture of backgrounds aged 35 to 90+. Their roles in the event were:

- x 2 Professional artists (hula-hooper and roller-skater) who performed and interacted with audiences. Female, one of diverse heritage;
- x 2 Mobility scooter users who participated in the parade in decorated scooters, male White British, aged 70+ and 90+;
- x 5 Audience members from a local women's group aged 60+ of diverse heritage;
- x 7 Volunteer stewards from Bexhill Heritage Group.

Methodology

Face-to-face focus group interviews gathered opinions on the social impacts of the festival. Interviews were semi-structured, covering the four social impact themes but allowing space for broader experiences to be shared.

Participants were also invited to score whether the festival had, in their own experience, generated a sense of belonging and pride in Bexhill, using scales from 1 (weakest sense) to 6 (strongest). These scores invite some analysis of whether social impacts are influenced by participants' roles in the festival.

FINDINGS

Social Cohesion

The event created a lively atmosphere, captivating thousands of community members, including those from minority backgrounds, to come together, feeling included and represented.

All groups appreciated the January timing for luring people from their homes and the women's group relished spectating with friends and family. They saw Bexhill brought to life with all generations in one space. The performance artists noted a more diverse crowd than normal and this was echoed by the Bexhill Heritage Group volunteers, who were thrilled with the busy seafront.

Key to social cohesion is a sense of inclusion, and this was keenly expressed by those participating or interacting with strangers. The two mobility scooter users loved being part of the parade: "I've lived all over the world working. The places you remember are the ones where the community gets together…you all pile in and do something, you get to meet people…. The next thing you know is everybody knows everybody else." Both were keen to participate in future.

The two performance artists valued interacting with the diverse crowds which the free festival attracted. One offered hula-hooping activities, connecting in particular with children, young people and a neurodiverse onlooker who expressed their own sense of inclusion afterwards. As a woman of colour, this artist valued being seen as a role model in a predominantly white area, which encouraged other people of colour to participate in her workshop: "I felt very included. Considering that actually there's not many people of colour that live here. So, to be standing out like a sore thumb as an instructor and teaching is huge…. here being in this space has made me feel safe massively."

Overall, participants from all groups awarded Bexhill After Dark high marks for 'sense of belonging', with group scores ranging from 5.2 to 5.5 out of 6. A nuance to note is that the highest score (5.5) came from the mobility scooter users – somewhat socially excluded individuals who were celebrated at the event

as active participants – followed by the Heritage Group volunteers (5.3) and performing artists (5.25). The lowest score (but still high) came from the women's group of spectators. Whilst exercising caution given the focus groups' small numbers, one might conclude that active participation, especially where this is not the norm, delivers a particularly positive social impact.

Civic Pride

Many respondents mentioned free admission and the uniqueness of the event, particularly given its winter timing, as elements which had encouraged friends and family to attend from Bexhill and beyond. The festival's quality and unexpected use of the town's spaces had given attendees a warm glow about their home town, distinguishing it from other areas. One women's group member described feeling "proud of Bexhill. I had a friend from Hastings with her daughter, who've had a brilliant time. I mean the performance in front of the Library – the guys who were on stage spinning things around, that was really good".

All groups expressed pride in the way the festival showcased Bexhill. The artists loved the projections on the clock tower and how the parade and performances celebrated the promenade. Volunteers from Bexhill Heritage Group were thrilled to see the town so lively, its changed dynamic and floodlit architecture giving Bexhill "a chance to show off".

Participation in the festival, now in its third year, had produced positive knock-on effects: the mobility scooter users had invited more friends and family each year, drawing favourable word-of-mouth attention to Bexhill. However, this group also remarked on a need to increase awareness among local families.

Overall, the festival instilled a strong 'sense of pride in Bexhill', with average group scores ranging from 4.6 to 5.8 out of 6. The Heritage Group volunteers awarded the highest score (5.8). This could be interpreted as satisfaction in seeing their passion for Bexhill's landmarks publicly celebrated. The result again suggests that active participation delivers the most positive social impacts. Artists and mobility scooter users each gave a score of 5.25 and the women's group 4.6.

Increasing Social Capital

Higher social capital is characterised by a safe and inclusive environment with effective networks for connecting, cooperation and skill-sharing.

All festival audiences appreciated the chance to socialise with friends and family and felt safe attending after dark. Volunteers from Bexhill Heritage Group were also delighted to connect with strangers on their information stall, engaging with people from far and wide.

Performance artists valued networking backstage and would gladly see mingling extended before and after the event. One illustrated the value of networking: "Those artists that were backstage, one of them works for the National Art School, and there's lots of things that I'm very interested in. They were able to signpost me to lots of different things that I didn't know about because we live here in such a small town."

Some groups noted that opportunities for making new connections were hampered by the layout and the event's busy nature. The women's group and mobility scooter users craved more covered or heated interaction space, especially for older attendees: the De La Warr Pavilion was mooted as a venue for this.

Some suggested the event could have offered more skill-sharing: The women's group had cherished lantern-making workshops in past years and were sorry these had failed to sustain ongoing connections. The mobility scooter users would also have welcomed contributing to parade preparations. Both had practical experience, one as an engineer and one as a joiner, and they could have proposed ideas for scooter decoration even if they were no longer physically able to execute them. Neither felt that participation had garnered new skills, but they agreed it provided purpose and a chance to reconnect with friends.

"But yeah, the whole process from when we met up in the afternoon and then came into town, and we both enjoyed it apart from being frozen! Did I enjoy it? I could definitely use the word. Enjoy. Yes. Would I do it again? Yes. Yes."

Mobility scooter user participating in the parade

Interactive performances opened the door for skill-sharing. The roller-skater chatted with teenage girls interested in skating and pointed them to local skate groups: "They didn't know about these things, now they'd really like to try." The hula-hooper's workshops were popular and she received outreach via social media after the event. Both felt the event could have bolstered them by announcing their names during performances or "have the programme projected on the back of the De La Warr [Pavilion] where everybody is looking."

A special note should be made about families: when a family takes part in a festival, it shows its commitment to being an engaged community member and a responsible citizen (Rao, 2001), thus increasing social capital. Many families did attend the event, however, one mobility scooter user was surprised not to see more children. More advertising or schools outreach could rebalance this.

General wellbeing

Almost all attendees and performers reported a temporary boost in happiness and an enjoyable time shared with friends or fellow performers. Feelings of excitement and joy were common, with the women's group also commenting on feeling safe during the event.

Most residents appreciated the event's timing in January, breaking the monotony of Bexhill's dark winter months and helping some cope with winter depression. Parade participants expressed a desire to participate again and noted the event's role in forming friendships and preventing social isolation. Performance artists were also positive, with one noting a boost in confidence and the physical health benefits of participating.

One volunteer explained how, post-pandemic, it was great to see so many people and lots of visually pleasing elements: "It's uplifting because it's beautiful, magical."

General conclusions and recommendations

Bexhill After Dark festival supports social cohesion by bringing community members together in an uplifting shared experience, particularly in the context of winter isolation. Representative programming made marginalised groups welcome, and local performers built social capital through new connections with national and international artists.

Three out of the four focus groups had an active role in the event. Scoring and discussion suggested active participation optimises social impact for individuals, especially where this includes learning or respect for creative or intellectual input. A broadly interactive programme is also favourable, permitting spectators to participate.

Free entry, uniqueness, quality and landmark-showcasing were features of festival design which played a role in developing civic pride.

Going forward, recommendations centred around making a good thing better, in order to create more sustainable social impacts:

- Broaden opportunities for participation before and during the event. Commit to supporting ongoing workshop connections;

- Increase marketing and outreach, particularly to children and teenagers;

- Extend opportunities for artists and audiences to socialise either side of the formal programme;

- Design event elements which raise local artists' profiles;

- Offer more warm seating spaces where the less mobile can socialise to enjoy the spectacle.

EVENT PARTICIPATION AND CHANGES IN ATTITUDE

MEASURING ATTITUDINAL CHANGE IN COMMUNITY LIGHT FESTIVALS

Authors: Mandy Curtis & Adam Jones

Objectives:

- Evaluate attitudinal change as a result of participation in a community cultural event
- Strengthen analysis of the social impacts of community cultural events
- Inform event design and cultural regeneration strategy

Note: This chapter is an abridged version of the original academic paper, which presented research undertaken by the University of Brighton with 18 Hours.

The original full-length chapter can be accessed here:

Curtis, M., & Jones, A. 2024: Measuring Attitudinal Change in Community Light Festivals, in **Jepson, A., Stadler, R., & Walters, T.** (eds): *Reimagining Community Festivals and Events: Critical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Abingdon: Routledge.

This chapter presents the findings of an innovative methodology to research, from participants' perspectives, attitudinal change as a result of their participation in two entirely new community light festivals: Bexhill After Dark (East Sussex) and University of East London (UEL) After Dark.

For as long as can be remembered, events such as theatre, drama, spectacle, performance, carnival and festivals have played a significant and integral role in shaping the social fabric of human existence (Hauptfleisch, 2016). Their diversity, popularity and flexibility, particularly in the context of community festivals, have led to them being viewed as excellent opportunities within cultural policy strategy to achieve specific political, economic and cultural development objectives (Getz & Page, 2019; Luonila et al., 2021). Through its findings this chapter contributes to the growing demand for research to determine whether and how such festivals fulfil these expectations (Karttunen & Luonila, 2017).

This research involves participants of the festival and considers changes in their attitudes measured before and after participation in the event. Research exists in measuring event experience (see Biaett & Richards, 2020; de Geus et al., 2016; Richards, 2020) and event encounters or belonging (see Quinn, 2019; Smith, 2016). This chapter examines the impact of events on participants' attitudes and emerging themes in the changes of those attitudes. The purpose is to better understand the benefits of community events from participants' perspectives and how participation in the event changed attitudes or did not.

The following three areas constitute the focus of the research:

1 The place of community light festivals from participants' perspectives

2 The value placed by participants on community light festivals

3 The elements community festival organisers and sponsors need to focus on to ensure support from the community to deliver successful and impactful community events

The role of community light festivals in attitudinal change

By their nature, community festivals take place in community spaces, generally outdoor shared places. These are an intersectionality of place and people, developing shared capital through a process that transforms the familiar in an unfamiliar way. Community festivals are often said to create a sense of pride in a place (see Edensor & Sumartojo, 2018; Hell & McPherson, 2022; Richards & Palmer, 2010; Smith, 2016) and are used to leverage interest (Finkel & Platt, 2020) in communities, towns and cities.

Local authorities consider community festivals in public spaces as 'quick wins' to improve neighbourhoods without the need for expensive capital infrastructure, as events can animate 'dead' places (towns and squares) and invite the reclamation of streets by community participants (Smith, 2016). Additionally, the importance of events and festivals is their social impact on communities and how they can be considered as agents of planned change affecting people's lives (Wallstam et al., 2018).

Originating in France in the 1950s, evocatively described by Lovell and Griffin (2019), light festivals are examples of events that transform public space as illuminated installations and performances interact with the backdrops of place. Smith et al. (2022) reference Giordano and Ong's (2017) account of the abundance of light festivals globally as a method used by destinations to address the issues of out-of-season tourism economies.

The very essence of light festivals is to excite and amaze audiences in after dark spaces, eliciting emotional connection with performances as audiences' responses alternate between calmness and excitement according to the spatial qualities and intensities (Edensor, 2015).

Young people's engagement with public space has also been extensively documented (see Devine & Quinn, 2019; Hopkins, 2010; Hörschelmann & van Blerk, 2012; Skelton & Valentine, 1997), with Hopkins (2010) suggesting that

spaces each have an identity centred around age. While Hörschelmann and van Blerk (2012) consider young people to be marginalised residents due to social difference, Devine and Quinn (2019) in relation to this research propose the potential for events to bridge such social capital divisions.

New community light festivals:
Bexhill After Dark and University of East London (UEL) After Dark

Bexhill After Dark (East Sussex) and the University of East London After Dark festivals were orchestrated as a mixed programme of community engagement, performance, projection and street theatre to be performed during the quieter winter months. They were set against the architectural canvas of the town and university and were curated to animate space (Smith, 2016), transform place and invite audiences to engage with familiar spaces in new ways (Edensor & Sumartojo, 2018). Thus, facilitating identity as 'shared' through the bringing together of communities to witness light festivals (Skelly & Edensor, 2020).

The first Bexhill After Dark concept was conceived and developed by a local events company, 18 Hours, in partnership with Rother District Council. Additionally, the formation of an advisory committee played a crucial role in the event's success as it identified gaps in local provision and reflected the communities it aimed to engage.

Local research had identified that Bexhill-on-Sea had a higher percentage of the population aged over 65 than anywhere else in the country, fuelling a local myth that the town closes at 4pm. With this perception in mind and to support evening economy opportunities, the event concept was directed toward an illuminated festival: After Dark. Bexhill After Dark provided an opportunity for a new high-profile annual event to champion the rebranding of Bexhill-on-Sea.

Following the success of the first Bexhill After Dark festival in 2022, which attracted an audience of 12,000, the organisers were approached by the University of East London (UEL) to develop a concept that would raise the profile of their Docklands Campus. The programme for the first University of East London After Dark festival

in 2023 was designed to fulfil specific community participation objectives and transform university spaces. A student committee was formed with the purpose of involving students in various roles as performers, participants and producers. The UEL student committee had the opportunity to be involved in both festivals to facilitate knowledge and understanding of the concept.

In line with Edensor and Sumartojo's (2018) philosophy, which criticises broad approaches to developing interest from higher socio-economic groups and evening economy stakeholders, both After Dark festivals were firmly grounded in community participation and audience development. Adapting three of Richards and Palmer's (2010, p. 85) key questions for programme vision, the organisers were sensitive to identifying their core stakeholders (immediate communities); their "special competencies" (delivery of a fabulous experience to those who could otherwise not see or afford it); and understanding their "unique position" (working with community participants to develop and commission engaging work, while learning from experienced others through initiating a new network: 'Light Up the South East').

Both festivals created commissioning opportunities for visual and outdoor artists and ran education programmes that reached out to local communities through training and involvement opportunities. These initiatives increased interest in the event and created local advocates and supporters. Fulfilling several of Richards and Palmer's (2010) programming influences, both festivals offered a convergence of programme styles, extending the impact of the programme.

The purpose of the free cultural community festivals was to offer something new and magical to Bexhill-on-Sea and the UEL Docklands Campus, with a priority for engaging local communities. Aims included increasing the social capital of attendees (local stakeholders, residents, visitors and students) through access to national and international quality arts programming, which was carefully selected to reflect the audience's heritage and interests. This approach had a dual purpose: allowing the audience to see themselves in the event to create a sense of belonging and, applying Simonson's (1971) approach, creating positive attitudes through the audience's identification with the performers.

Community light festival evaluation

As community events and festivals often take over critical public spaces and impact the communities that use them, a key consideration for organisers is to develop a greater understanding of the attitudes of stakeholders towards community events and how these may change. The perspective of public value, as addressed by Hell and McPherson (2022), extends beyond economic benefits into an understanding of wider cultural and social benefits.

Due to events' impact on the personal, social, cultural and political as well as economic aspects of people's lives, there is a desire to develop methods that evaluate the totality of the contribution they make (MacKenzie & Porter, 2016). The most common method to gauge the social impacts of events and festivals is that of resident perceptions (see Ap, 1990; Kim et al., 2015; Liu, 2016), using quantitative-based approaches to evaluate social impact (Wallstam et al., 2018). The problem with such social impact studies of events is that they can lack the theoretical clarity of economic impact studies, resulting in a more limited influence on decision-making. This matters because with competing demands for funding, there is a desire for sector standards to support decision-making (Pernecky 2016). The development of methods to quantify attitudinal change will help support a more standardised means of measuring the social impacts of different cultural events (Wallstam et al., 2018).

Quality is essential to the sustainability of all scales of festival (Richards & Palmer 2010). For sustainable community event design, it is essential to include distinctive 'wow' factors for audiences, media, professionals (Smit & Melissen, 2018) and participants. The most used measure of quality is through satisfaction feedback surveys, often used to report to funders on their quality criteria. Sustainable community events however rely on a broader range of criteria with the above principles of quality being relative. This research measures festival participants' attitudes through the events' journeys, with a sense of purpose and role providing additional quality measurements.

Methodology to research attitudinal change from participants' perspective

Whilst measuring attitudinal change is an underdeveloped area in events, the methodology used was borrowed and adapted from a successful measuring system in global citizenship (Allum et al, 2015). Participants who were local community members were active stakeholders in the research. The specific stakeholder groups involved are often marginalised due to economic circumstances or mobility issues but are important constituents to help shape event-led regeneration policy for their town or campus.

Participatory research allows for converging the scientific with the lived experience and is gaining recognition as an appropriate and effective method of qualitative social research (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). Community events, specifically with their community engagement and participation impact, lend themselves to participatory research as a method for developing meaningful research accounts based on lived experiences (Finkel & Sang, 2016). Key elements of participatory research include the recognition that community members and/or community-based organisations are equitable partners in planning and conducting the research and are key contributors to the knowledge production process (Bergold, 2007). The appropriateness of choosing a participatory research approach for this study was supported by its aim to ascertain perceptions resulting from participation in a community festival, utilising different types of participants as a reference group.

Participatory Research of After Dark – Bexhill and University of East London

Through discussions between the festival organisers and those responsible for commissioning, four groups of participants were identified. Each group would offer different participatory perspectives due to varying ages, accessibility and roles undertaken in the festivals:

The first Bexhill group, mobility scooter users, participated in the parade with their scooters dressed as illuminated flamingos. They were selected as a group who generally feel excluded from community events due to accessibility barriers. The second group consisted of active local skateboarders aged 23-30, who attached lights to their skateboards for the procession. The third group was made up of neuro-divergent young people, aged 16-19, from a local alternative provision college. They filmed the festival build and interviewed artists who had developed newly commissioned work for the festival. The fourth group was a group of thirteen university students from a mix of courses and levels including PhD who took active roles in the delivery of the festival including marketing, staging and production. To avoid attitude contamination, participant groups were kept separate from each other throughout.

Data collection required a method to elicit attitudinal change pre- and post-festival. To achieve a baseline of attitudes, participant groups undertook the first attitudinal research activities prior to any knowledge of the light festival. Groups then met with researchers again after their involvement in the festival and the activities were repeated to identify attitudinal changes that had occurred. A list of the four research activities and the attached statements and questions are shown in Table 5.1.

Attitudinal research activity	Attached statement/question
1: Write or draw	Write or draw what you would expect to see at a light festival
2: Sorting photographs	Sort these photos into arts/non arts events
3: Diamond ranking	What do you feel are the greatest benefits of light festivals?
4: 'Beans in pots'	Which of these are the most important in a light festival?

Table 5.1:
Identification of the activities and attached question

The first activity, also serving as an icebreaker, began as an individual task. Participants were asked individually or in pairs to write or draw what they expected to see at a light festival (Figure 5.1). Participants were then asked to discuss their responses to create a shared understanding.
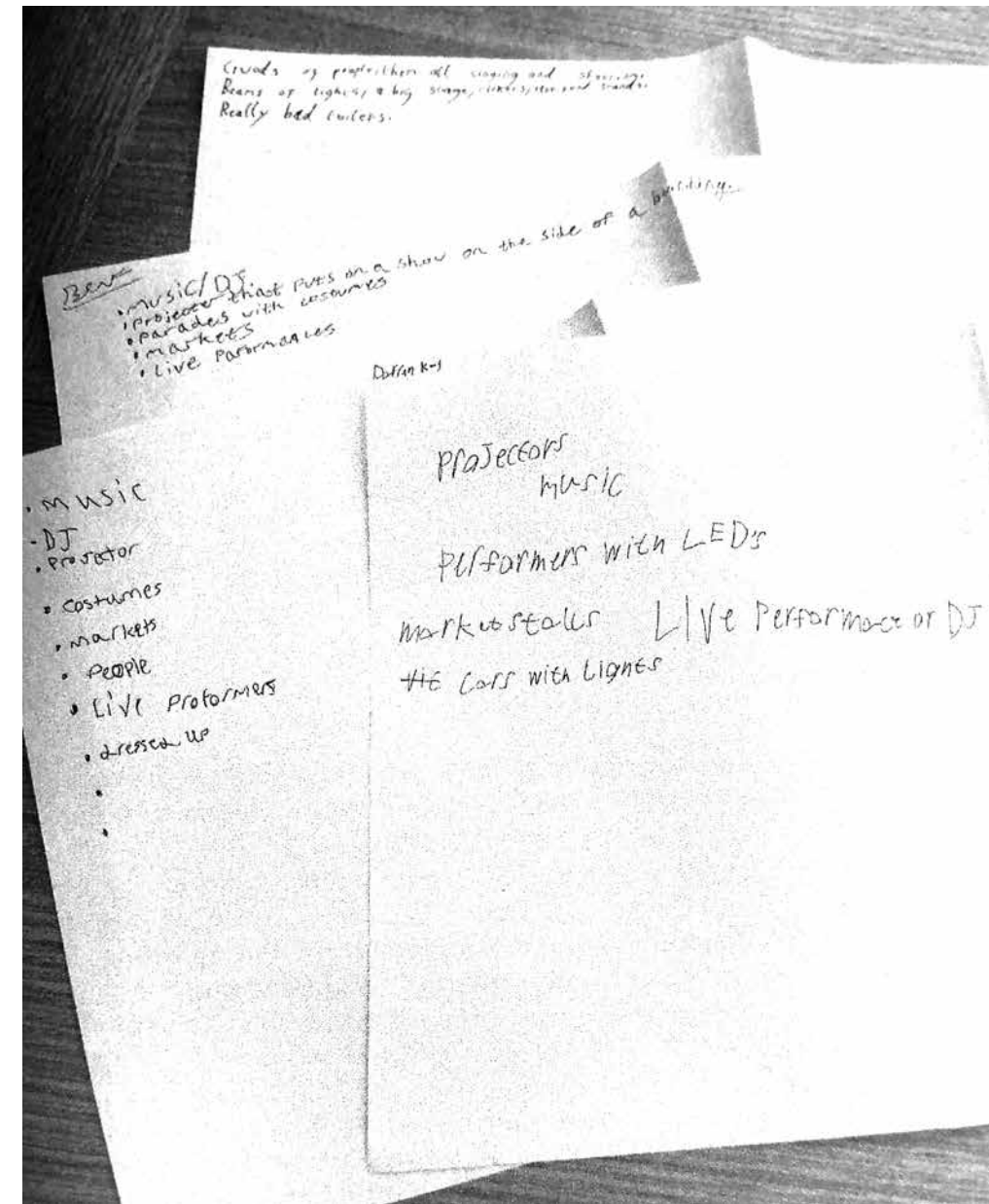
Figure 5.1:
Activity 1: Write or draw what you would see at a light festival
Source: Mandy Curtis, 2022.

The second activity, a group exercise, involved arranging a collection of photographs to determine which images represented an arts event or a non-arts event (Figure 5.2). To avoid bias, the images were of a similar size and format and presented in random order. Using images in participatory research can make it more accessible, stimulating discussion of participants' own experiences regardless of their literacy (Miles & Kaplan, 2005; Niemi et al., 2015). This activity aimed to assess participants' attitudes towards the arts and develop a collective understanding of the nuances of an arts portfolio. Additionally, it aimed to stimulate initial thoughts on the range of potential activities within a festival and measure how participants' attitudes change after their participation.
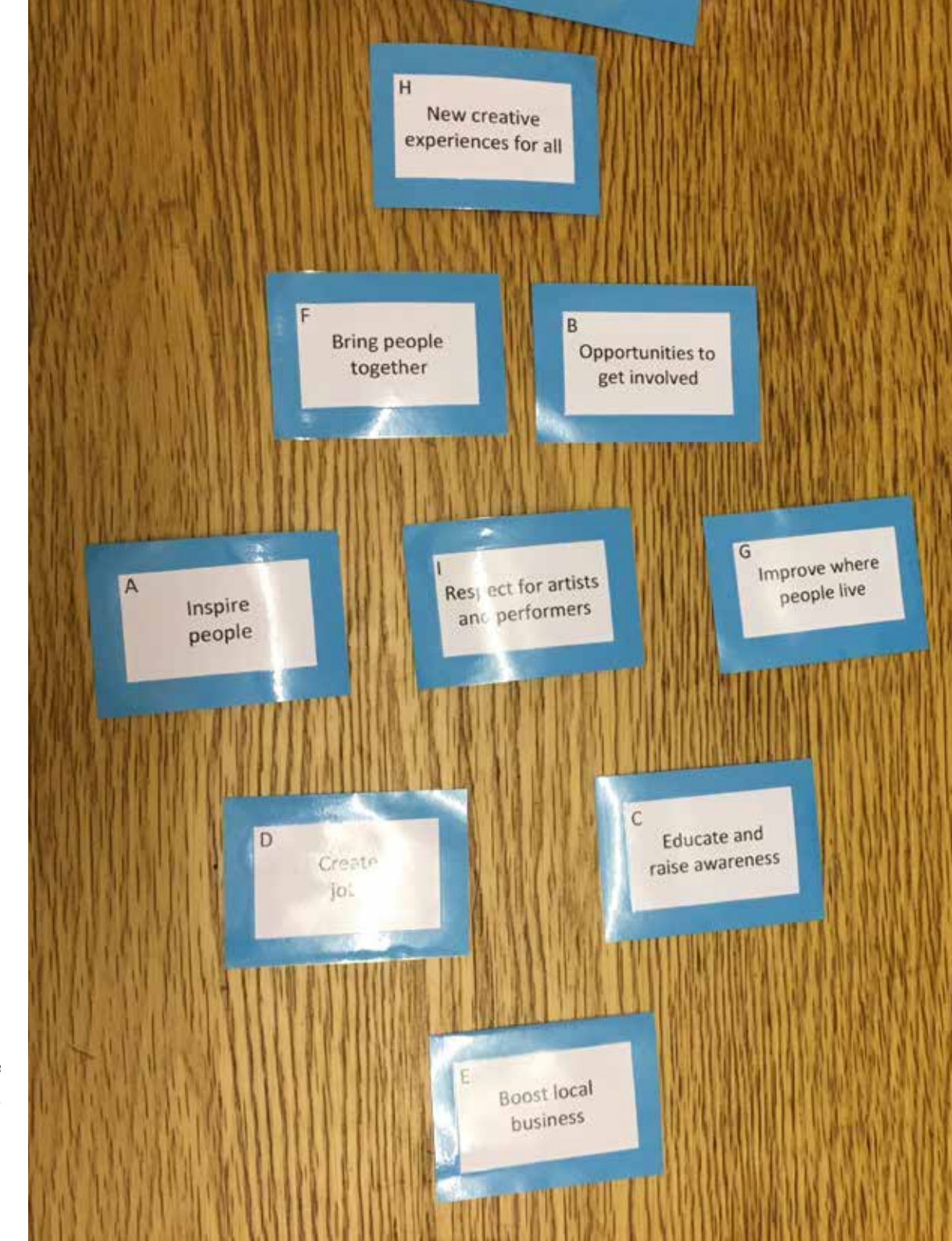

Figure 5.2:
Activity 2: Sort these photos into arts and non-arts events.
Source: Mandy Curtis, 2022.

The third activity (Figure 5.3) was a diamond ranking puzzle. In response to the question:

'What do you feel are the greatest benefits of light festivals?' participants collectively sorted and ranked a series of nine statements in a diamond formation. Participants were informed that there were no right or wrong answers. This method is useful for facilitating discussion, as it encourages explicit comparisons (Clark, 2012; Rockett & Percival, 2002).

Figure 5.3:
Activity 3: What do you feel are the greatest benefits of arts festivals?
Source: Mandy Curtis, 2022.

In the fourth and final activity (Figure 5.4), participants individually voted on a series of statements to answer the question: 'Which of these are the most important in a light festival?'. Each participant was given three voting beans. They had the option to place all three beans in the same pot, two beans in one pot and the third bean in another, or one bean in each of three different pots. To avoid influencing others, all pots were opaque. After voting, the beans for each statement were counted and participants discussed their responses.

The findings from the four groups (mobility scooter users, skateboarders, neuro-divergent college students and university students) were then analysed to identify attitudinal changes pre- and post-participation in the community light festival.

Figure 5.4:
Activity 4: Which of these is most important in a light festival?
Source: Mandy Curtis, 2022.

Findings

Interestingly, there appeared to be no significant difference in attitudinal responses between the groups, despite differences in their participation activity within the festival and variations in ethnicity, age, socio-economic backgrounds and interest in the arts.

Findings showed raised awareness, a sense of inclusion and a positive change in attitudes towards the value of events for community engagement. The research also highlighted no significant change in attitude towards the cultural regeneration and employment opportunities provided by community events.

[Detailed findings for Activities 1 and 2 may be found in the original research paper, Curtis & Jones (2024)]

Before participation the most commented-on statement from the diamond ranking activity and ranked highest by most groups was that the greatest benefit of light festivals is to 'bring people together'. Also highly ranked were 'inspire people' and 'respect for artists and performers'. This demonstrates the value placed by the groups on community-focused events. Furthermore, a respondent qualified the selection of creative experiences for all as "the whole point of arts festivals." However, the statement 'boost local business' was polarising as it was placed near both the top and bottom of the diamond. Groups assigned 'educate and raise awareness' and 'opportunities to get involved' a middle ranking diamond position. The statements more commonly considered less important included 'new creative experiences for all', 'improvement of where people live,' and significantly always placed at the bottom of the diamond, the statement 'create jobs'.

Diamond ranking following event participation demonstrated a greater appreciation of the contribution of arts festivals to local cohesion and community issues. There was also increased understanding of the effort involved in organising a festival and the importance of creativity in producing a professional event. Specifically, there was a positive shift in the ranking for respect for artists, implying the importance of quality. There was also a greater emphasis

on 'creative opportunities for all', reflecting participants' own opportunities for involvement in the festivals. The attitudes of these participants clearly represented their sense of inclusion.

Perhaps the most surprising disappointment from a critical event management perspective was the attitudinal discussions that took place around the value of light festivals in creating employment. 'Create jobs' was placed at the bottom of the diamond by all groups, both before and after their participation in the festival. Comments supporting this attitude included "you want a job that lasts," "arts festivals may happen only once a year," "summer jobs," and "jobs can be created in many other ways." All young people shared this value attitude towards employment (college students and skateboarders in Bexhill and university students in London). Despite engaging with paid organisers of the festival this response from university students in London was especially surprising as it may be assumed they had an interest in opportunities for employment.

The analysis from pre-event to post-participation identified the highest-scoring answer remained that 'high-quality production' was the most important in a light festival. This position is supported by comments such as "It has to be high quality or it's not worth it", "[it should] not [be] 'cruddy' ", "created with love," and "take time and people will go". Bexhill After Dark participants also took ownership and referenced it as 'their' new light festival, "Bexhill After Dark was high quality, spectacular and free," and "I've never seen so many people in Bexhill". Post-event, the participants became assertive concerning attitudes towards quality, saying, "It [high-quality production] encourages people to return" and "I'm not going to attend a light show unless it's a decent high-quality production". These statements become more interesting when reflecting on the earlier findings from the diamond ranking activity, where participants ranked the creation of jobs the lowest.

'Free to attend' moved from third place to joint first after the participants attended the festival, stating, "allows more people to attend" and "everyone's excited by free stuff". 'I can take part' gained significant importance, moving up six positions to third place while 'spectacular' moved up by three places.

These changes reflect the impact of participation in changing attitudes. There was a move down four places for 'a single big show' alongside 'a variety of small shows' also slipping down by five. These attitudinal shifts, similar to those identified through the sorting pictures activity, were likely influenced by the programme of smaller installations across the After Dark sites. This deliberate programming decision spread audiences across many sites, as neither location suits an open space for large numbers of people to gather. Using events as an opportunity to be 'thought-provoking' remained at the lower end, moving to the bottom place post-participation, with one participant expressing a desire "not to engage brain too much and have a good time".

Discussion

A thematic analysis of pre-and-post participation responses to the four activities highlighted that participation does provide opportunities to change attitudes, identifying a greater appreciation of the potential role of community events in creating community cohesion, value and respect. There was an increase in participants' understanding of the benefits of a community festival, evidenced through the energy of their contributions pre- and post-participation and the growing sophistication of language in their discussion.

In consideration of the value placed by participants on community light festivals, there was a noticeable change in understanding of the complexity of a light festival and what is required to host such events, together with the importance of quality, surprise and something special (Richards & Palmer 2010; Smit & Melissen, 2018). However, despite participation in the festival, findings indicate limited attitudinal change with respect to the economic value of festivals for local community participants. There remains an attitude that community festivals are a volunteer-led activity that does not provide any significant skills, artistic and professional development, or employment opportunity.

The final research focus was to identify the elements community festival organisers and sponsors need to consider to ensure continued support from the

community in delivering successful and impactful community events. Highlighted as an important aspect of participant attitudes was that to gain community favour, organisers should plan to support all forms of accessibility, irrespective of economic constraints or physical ability. "After Dark was the first opportunity I've had to be in a parade." (Participant S, Bexhill After Dark, 2022). Additionally, the attitudinal changes identified by this research align with several positive cultural externalities that support a license for organisers to take over critical public spaces to curate community festivals that utilise them (Richards & Palmer, 2010; Smith et al., 2022). Importantly, analysis also highlights that attention is still required to change attitudes toward the perceived value of professionally delivered community events.

Final thoughts on participatory research for Critical Events Studies

Reflecting upon the approach taken for this study, participatory research provided an appropriate methodology to assist in understanding event and festival lived experiences (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Finkel & Sang, 2016). The selection of a diverse group of festival participants, the pre-and-post evaluation process and the use of a toolkit specifically designed to empower participants and measure attitudinal change were key considerations to ensure the research aims could be met. The inclusion of specific groups who are often marginalised in event research ensured that the knowledge generated did not come solely from higher socio-economic groups or evening economy stakeholders, but rather from those firmly grounded in the community (Edensor & Sumartojo, 2018).

The benefits of participatory research are the possibility of meaningful, empowered, co-created accounts that address critical community festival matters, find possible solutions and support better, more grounded, inclusive policy and decisions.

REFERENCES

Allum, L., Dral, P., Galanskà, N. (2015). How Do We Know It's Working? Book Two. RISC: Reading.

Bergold, J. and Thomas, S. (2012). Participatory research methods: A methodological approach in motion. Historical Social Research, 37(4), 191–222.

Biaett, V. and Richards, G. (2020). Event Experiences: measurement and meaning. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 12 (3) 277–292. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2020.1820146

Clark, J., (2012). Using diamond ranking as visual cues to engage young people in the research process. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 12(2), 222–237. http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/14439881211248365

Crompton, J., (2004). Beyond economic impact: An alternative rationale for the public subsidy of major league sports facilities. *Journal of sport management*, 18(1), pp.40–58.

Curtis, M., & Jones, A. (2024): Measuring Attitudinal Change in Community Light Festivals, in **Jepson, A., Stadler, R., & Walters, T.** (eds): *Reimagining Community Festivals and Events: Critical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives.* Abingdon: Routledge.

Devine and Quinn, B. (2019). Building Social Capital in a Divided City: The Potential of Events. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 27, (10), 1495–1512. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2019.1639721

Duffy, M. and Mair, J., (2017). *Festival encounters: Theoretical perspectives on festival events*. Routledge.

Edensor, T. (2015). Light Design and Atmosphere. *Visual Communication*, 14(3), 331–350. https://doi.org/10.1177/ 1470357215579975

Edensor, T. and Sumartojo, S. (2018). Reconfiguring Familiar Worlds with Light projection: The Gertrude Street Projection Festival, 2017. *GeoHumanities*, 4(1), 112–131. https://doi.org/10.1080/2373566x.2018.1446760

Finkel, R., and Sang, K. (2016). Participatory Research: Case Study of a Community Event. In R. Lamond & L. Platt (Eds.), *Critical Event Studies: Approaches to Research*, 195–213. London: Macmillan Publishers Ltd. http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-52386-0_10

Finkel, R. and Platt, L. (2020). Cultural Festivals and the City. In *Geography Compass* 14 (9), 1–12. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12498

Getz, D. and Page, S.J., (2019). Event studies: *Theory, research and policy for planned events*. Oxon: Routledge.

de Geus, S., Richards, G., and Toepoel, V. (2016). Conceptualisation and Operationalisation of Event and Festival Experiences: Creation of an Event Experience Scale. *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 16 (3), 274–296.

Gibson, H.J., Walker, M., Thapa, B., Kaplanidou, K., Geldenhuys, S. and Coetzee, W., 2014. Psychic income and social capital among host nation residents: A pre–post analysis of the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa. *Tourism Management*, 44, pp.113–122.

Giordano, E. and Ong, C.E. (2017). Light festivals, policy mobilities and urban tourism. *Tourism Geographies*, 19(5), pp.699–716.

Hauptfleish, T. (2016). Eventification: Framing the ordinary as extraordinary. In T. Pernecky (Ed.), Approaches and methods in event studies.36–52. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315770642-3

Hell, N. and McPherson, G. (2022). Public Value Outcomes of Festivals: Well-being and Economic Perspectives. In **Smith, A., Osborn, G., and Quinn, B.** (Eds.), (2022) *Festivals and the city: The contested geographies of urban events* 249–268. London: University of Westminster Press. http://dx.doi.org/10.16997/book64.n

Hopkins, P. (2010). *Young people, place and identity*. Abingdon: Routledge. http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203852323

Hörschelmann, K. and van Blerk, L. (2012). *Children, youth and the city*. Abingdon: Routledge. http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203967560

Karttunen, S., & Luonila, M. (2017). *Festivals in Finnish cultural policies: Cure-all or false hope?* Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference of Heritage, Tourism and Hospitality, University of Turku, Pori Unit, Turku School of Economics, Pori Unit Serie A.

Kim, W., Jun, H., Walker, M., & Drane, D. (2015). Evaluating the perceived social impacts of hosting large-scale sport tourism events: Scale development and validation. Tourism Management, 48, 21–32. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2014.10.015

Knott, B., Swart, K. and Visser, S., (2015). The impact of sport mega-events on the quality of life for host city residents: reflections on the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

Liu, D. (2016). Social impact of major sports events perceived by host community. *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*, 17(1), 78–91. http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/IJSMS-02-2016-005

Lovell, J. and Griffin, H. (2019). Fairy tale tourism: the architectural projection mapping of magically real and irreal festival landscapes. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*,11 (3), 469–483.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2018.1556674

Luonila, M., Kurlin, A. and Karttunen, S., (2021). Capturing societal impact: the case of state-funded festivals in Finland. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 13(3), pp.397-418.
https://doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2020.1839474

Machan, T., (2024). This East Sussex seaside town is brimming with eccentricities. *The Telegraph*, 22 August. Available at: www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/united-kingdom/bexhill-seaside-town-visit/ (Accessed 23 August 2024)

MacKenzie, I. and Porter R (2016). Evental approaches to the Study of Events. In: Pernecky T (ed.) *Approaches and methods in event studies*. London: Routledge, 25–35.
http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781315770642-2

Miles, S. and Kaplan, I. (2005). Using images to promote reflection: an action research study in Zambia and Tanzania. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 5(2), 77-83.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/J.1471-3802.2005.00045.x

Mourão, T., Ribeiro, T. and Cunha de Almeida, V.M., (2022). Psychic income benefits of the Rio 2016 Olympic Games: comparison of host community pre-and post-Games perceptions. *Journal of Sport & Tourism*, 26(1), pp.21–41.

Niemi, R., Kumpulainen, K., and Lipponen, L. (2015). Pupils as active participants: Diamond ranking as a tool to investigate pupils' experiences of classroom practices. *European Educational Research Journal*, 14 (2), pp.138–150.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1474904115571797

Pernecky, T. (2016). *Approaches and methods in event studies*. Oxon: Routledge.
http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781315770642

Quinn, B. (2019). A comment on: arts festivals, urban tourism and cultural policy. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 11(1) 8–12.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2018.1556855

Rao, V., (2001). Celebrations as social investments: Festival expenditures, unit price variation and social status in rural India. *Journal of Development Studies*, 38(1), pp.71–97.

Richards, G. (2020). Measuring the Dimensions of Event Experiences: applying the Event Experience Scale to cultural events. *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events* 12 (3), 422–436.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2019.1701800

Richards, G. and Palmer, R. (2010). *Eventful cities. Cultural management and urban revitalization* Routledge: Oxon.
http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780080940960

Rockett, M. and Percival, S. (2002). *Thinking for Learning*. Stafford: Network Educational Press.

Rojek, C., (2014). Global event management: A critique. *Leisure Studies*, 33(1), 32-47.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2012.716077

Simonson, M. (1979). Designing Instruction for Attitudinal Outcomes. *Journal of Instructional Development*, 2 (3), 15–19.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF02984375

Skelly, G. and Edensor, T. (2020). Routing out place identity through the vernacular production practices of a community light festival. In Courage, C., Borrup, T., Jackson, M.R., Legge, K., McKeown, A., Platt, L. and Schupbach, J. (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of placemaking*. 258–268, Oxon: Routledge.
https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429270482-31

Skelton, T. and Valentine, G. (1997). *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures.* London: Routledge.
http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203975596

Smit, B. and Melissen, F. (2018). *Sustainable customer experience design*. Oxon: Routledge.
http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781315620749

Smith, A. (2016). *Events in the City: Using public spaces as event venues*. Oxon: Routledge.
http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781315765129

Smith, A., Osborn, G., and Quinn, B. (Eds.), (2022) *Festivals and the City: The Contested Geographies of Urban Events*. London: University of Westminster Press.
http://dx.doi.org/10.16997/book64

Wallstam, M., Ioannides, D. and Pettersson, R. (2018) Evaluating the social impacts of events: in search of unified indicators for effective policymaking. In *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, 12(3), 1–20.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19407963.2018.1515214