Southampton Cultural Data Observatory

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This report outlines and reflects on the University of Southampton's collaboration with diverse sectors across Southampton to create a cultural data observatory. It stemmed from conversations begun during the city's bid to be UK City of Culture (UKCoC2025) around what data sets the cultural sector needed to support their activities, and how material collected for the City of Culture bid could be more broadly disseminated.

The city council already had an excellent data observatory which presented information on diverse topics and a route to seeing data from surveys.   The Southampton Cultural Data Observatory (SCDO) project aimed to provide space where perceived gaps in this service and potential solutions could be trialed. The process of identifying what was seen to be missing and what could be provided was carried out through collaboration with cultural sector, community and local government interested parties.

Between March 2023 and September 2024, a series of series of conversations and consultations were conducted with interested parties to gather input and feedback. The design and development emphasized a participatory approach to understand and meet the current and anticipated needs and priorities.

The SCDO project resulted in the creation and evaluation of a beta (test) site: https://southampton-cultural-data-observatory-soton-uni.hub.arcgis.com

As a central repository for cultural data, the SCDO brings together people, research and data sources enabling cultural engagement, strategic planning, and data-driven decision making within the cultural sector.

The SCDO project is led by Professor Fraser Sturt (Professor of Archaeology) and Professor Daniel Ashton (Professor of Cultural and Creative Industries) in partnership with Southampton Forward and Southampton City Council. The project team included cultural sector consultant Samantha Cairns (Transition Programme Manager at Southampton Cultural Education Partnership) and research and innovation associates Pujitha Kanakam and Joey Jones.

The SCDO project was funded by University of Southampton Arts & Culture Strategic Priorities Funding 2023-24 (supported by Higher Education Innovation Funding and Policy Funding) and aligns with the University of Southampton Civic University Agreement 2022-2027.

CONTEXT

The SCDO project emerges from local circumstances and opportunities relating to Southampton's bid for UK City of Culture (UKCoC) in 2025 and connects with and contributes to larger national discussions and initiatives around data, evidence and observatories.

1. Local: Southampton Bid for UK City of Culture 2025

Describing UKCoC as 'a flagship DCMS project that provides a largescale, culture-led investment in place shaping', the **The UK Cities of Culture Project: Towards a Research-Informed Approach** report summarizes that since its inception in 2009:

71 expressions of interest in the competition from across the UK submitted	**44** places submitted full bids
17 places have been shortlisted	**4** places have been awarded titles

Southampton was shortlisted alongside Bradford, County Durham and Wrexham County Borough with Bradford announced as the 2025 holder on 31 May 2022. Reflecting on the Southampton experience, Satvir Kaur (at the time Councillor and Leader Southampton City Council) stated:

> *For us the bidding process has unlocked a scale of ambition, vison and financial commitment that is unprecedented, with 150 businesses, cultural and community organisations and 11 neighbouring local authorities committed to transforming the city and wider region through culture*

> (Cited in **The UK Cities of Culture Project: Towards a Research-Informed Approach**)

These comments of aspiration and reflection emphasize community and that a **distinctive focus of the Southampton bid was consultation.**

As the **Southampton UK City of Culture full bid application** states that 'the consultation begun in 2020 was one of the largest undertaken by the city and carefully listened to the seldom-heard, community leaders, and the city's voluntary, cultural, and statutory organisations'. The application outlines how the consultation process involved:

→ 149 hours of consultation with over 1,000 people in virtual workshops.

→ 16 cross-sector working groups.

→ Residents and councillors in each of 16 electoral wards.

→ Young people and under-represented minority communities.

→ Culture and Health task group including NHS Hampshire, Southampton and Isle of Wight CCG and Southampton City Council Public Health.

→ 8,019 responses to city-wide surveys and online engagement.

→ A desktop Cultural Needs Assessment.

→ "SO let's talk about Music" conference, November 2021 led by Southampton Festivals with SoCo Music and Solent University Southampton with 120 attendees.

The **Southampton UK City of Culture full bid application** summarizes how the consultation has built 'new relationships and collaborations with communities who are uniting in a shared mission to create a stronger city' and 'has shaped everything from choice of partners, our four themes, the fifteen strands of the programme, our step changes, and plans for legacy.'

Alongside building new relationships and collaborations and shaping the development of the bid, the **consultation generated a significant amount of data.**

In considering what next for this data, the Southampton position and experience closely echoes with Interim Proposal 1 from in **The UK Cities of Culture Project: Towards a Research-Informed Approach** to 'ensure that data and methodological innovations continue to be collated, investigated, and shared as a resource for researchers and other stakeholders.'

Consultation data is part of a larger and multifaceted data picture. The bidding guidance for UKCoC2025 gives much more attention to data through a dedicated section on data sharing and transparency, and the provision of funding (£40,000) for the six longlisted applicants to undertake data gathering relating to social, cultural and economic impacts (**DCMS, 2021**).

The types of data that should be considered have become more formalised, with Arts Council England encouraging the adoption of a **Joint Cultural Needs Assessment (JCNA)**.

In elaborating on Interim Proposal 1 and addressing this need for collating, investigating and sharing data, the **The UK Cities of Culture Project: Towards a Research-Informed Approach** proposes a 'UK Cities of Culture Data Observatory building on the extensive open-source data warehouse created for Coventry UK City of Culture 2021'.

An observatory would also be essential contribution to Interim Proposal 6: 'A common and stable evaluation framework and baseline methodology for UK Cities of Culture, developed by DCMS' that 'would build on the detail and breadth of the Coventry UK City of Culture Monitoring and Evaluation strategy, recognising the distinctiveness of place and the identified ambitions of title holders, while also supporting comparative and longitudinal analysis of the programme' (in **The UK Cities of Culture Project: Towards a Research-Informed Approach**).

Whilst these proposals focus on and reference the Coventry UKCoC2021 'data warehouse' and monitoring and evaluation strategy, the bidding process ensured that each bidding place also had their own 'warehouse' and ways of working with data.

For Southampton, the **full bid application** (2022: 15) outlines the process undertaken: 'an expert group of local researchers and evaluators is building on the work of Coventry and previous title-holders to establish robust baseline metrics to measure the impact of the year' and that 'at the core of this group are our two universities and the City Council's Data Observatory.' These comments recognise the existing expertise and capacity in place with the Southampton City Council (SCC) Data Observatory.

Southampton City Council outline how:

> *The Southampton Data Observatory brings together data from key stakeholders across Southampton and Hampshire and, combined with nationally published data, makes it accessible to professionals, businesses, the voluntary sector, citizens and communities. Its aim is to make data more accessible and deliver intelligence to help inform evidenced based decision making, service planning and commissioning for professionals, as well as providing insight into the ways in which we can all make the city a better, more fulfilling place to live.*

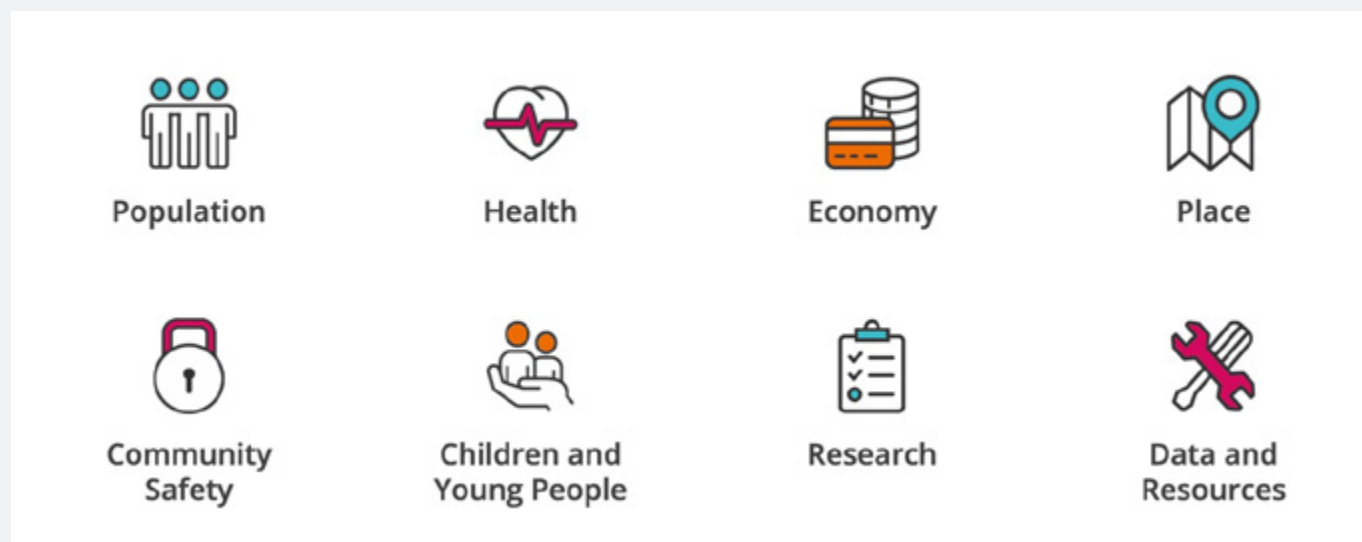## The SCC Data Observatory is organised around 8 menu items:

Image 1: Screenshot of **Southampton Data Observatory Homepage.**

Alongside the **The UK Cities of Culture Project: Towards a Research-Informed Approach** proposal for a specific UKCoC Data Observatory, the idea of the observatory is gaining wider traction.

2. National: Data, evidence and observatories

Three ongoing initiatives form part of 'culture and data' landscape within which the SCDO has developed:

National Cultural Data Observatory

Following the *Making data work* scoping study in 2023, a partnership between the Centre for Cultural Value, The Audience Agency and MyCake is developing a blueprint for a UK-wide national cultural data observatory. This Economic and Social Research Council project running from July 2024 to June 2025 'will investigate the practicalities of establishing an observatory that can gather and analyse smarter data and provide a trusted evidence base for the arts, cultural and heritage sectors.'

Find out more:
https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/our-work/making-data-work/

Arts Council England (ACE Culture and Place Data Explorer

Launched in 2024, the Culture and Place Data Explorer is an interactive tool designed to support ACE and its partners understand the impact of their investment and development work in communities across the country.'

It provides access to over 200 data indicators including:

→ Arts Council England investment, mapped across England at a local level

→ levels of engagement with culture with headline data from the 2023/24 Participation Survey

→ economic and demographic information

→ health and wellbeing, education and employment information

→ the ability to map and plot local cultural infrastructure

The Culture and Place Data Explorer is supported by the Joint Cultural Needs Assessment guidelines. Appendix 3 of these guidelines specifically addresses key sources of data and where to access data.

Find out more:
https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/your-area/culture-and-place-data-explorer

Neighbouring Data

Opening the Observatory outlines the interim findings of the University of Southampton Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project Neighbouring Data, which 'explores the creation, use and representation of hyper-local qualitative data in place-based decision making.'

Focusing on the challenges of storing and analysing qualitative data, this project produced an annotated bibliography of data observatory literature; mapped a sample of observatories; and interviewed key experts on data observatories, place-based policy and qualitative data.

The report highlighted the following features of a successful data observatory:

→ Gathers evidence, forms clusters, and generates hypotheses

→ Systematically engages with national and local communities

→ Provides up-to-date information and connects data at different scales

→ Addresses key issues relating to narrative, scale and participation

→ Focuses on maintaining data at a hyper-local, neighbourhood scale

→ Influences governance, policy and decision making

Find out more:
https://andtowns.co.uk/project/neighbouring-data/

The SCDO runs alongside these initiatives and this report set outs out processes and reflections and makes recommendations that speak to local circumstances and contribute to national conversations.

DESIGN

A range of channels were used to promote visibility with the project and enable engagement. This enabled participation from a range of sectors (i.e., culture; education; health; local government; voluntary sector) and from a range of roles and experiences (community; policy; creative practice; consultation, strategy and advocacy).

In prioritizing accessibility, a variety of engagement opportunities and methods were used:

– Online and in-person meetings

– Online questionnaires

– Post-it note feedback at existing events

– World Café conversations

– Asset Mapping

The project was attentive to the value and importance of co-creation approaches. Participants in the initial meetings leant towards receiving options and giving feedback rather than active co-creation. Whilst the project team committed to funding co-creation efforts if required, the project unfolded with the project team facilitating an ongoing series of conversations and opportunities for consultation.

The following provides a summary of the suggestions, interventions and directions generated during the design stage conversations:

The initial conversations highlighted several anticipated advantages of the SCDO:

– Improved strategic planning

– Collaboration opportunities

– Data-driven decision-making

– Equitable resource distribution

These were elaborated on with an indication of data needs, including:

– Information on relevant contacts for projects.

– Data on who has done what and where.

– Data on Southampton's population, including pupil premium, deprivation, employment, schools' data.

– Knowledge about community groups.

– Guidance on collaborating with organizations to engage underrepresented groups effectively.

– Information on the locations where arts activities are being delivered.

– Employment-related data.

– Broad social metrics such as education, employment, cultural diversity, etc.

Aligned to the needs, the data accessed through the SCDO would have the following intended uses:

– For grant applications.

– For strengthening collaborations with potential beneficiaries from participation work.

– For establishing partnerships to facilitate shared working and joint applications.

– To display our impact effectively.

– To gain insights on how to best represent our community.

– For providing signposting for support and sharing relevant information.

– For sharing the acquired data with community members when they seek assistance.

There was specific exploration of a cultural activity mapper:

– Datasets identified for mapping: young people's cultural experiences, peak usage times for cultural assets; and time series data on childcare options.

– Network mapping methods were suggested: LinkedIn and Instagram scraping; community/organization engagement; data extractions from Arts Council England; gamifying network mapping with tags.

Having reflected on data needs and intended uses, participants were able to raise issues around data availability and absences:

– Issues with participation data's variability and quality.

– Challenges with audience segmentation data.

– Underrepresentation of young and old people in City of Culture data.

– Absence of information on freelancers and smaller groups' economic contributions.

– Lack of data on the value gained from community activity.

– Need for longitudinal data on events, actions, and outcomes.

– Improved links between datasets and domains.

– Preference for more qualitative data over/alongside quantitative data.

– Effective data collection as a crucial element for addressing cultural and health inequalities.

Moving forward with developing the SCDO, the following principles and values were set out:

– Anonymity and privacy: Protecting sensitive information and vulnerable individuals' identities. Utilizing large sample sizes to minimize accidental identification, and exploring options for anonymizing data, like shared identifiers across organizations.

– Transparency and shared understanding: Promoting open communication and mutual agreement on principles among all interested parties involved in data generation and sharing.

– Geographical clustering: Considering data clustering based on Local Super Output Areas (LSOAs) instead of individual-level data to enhance privacy protection.

– Inclusion and partnership: Ensuring inclusivity and collaborative efforts with various interested parties to foster equitable data generation and sharing practices. There was consensus to engage with existing platforms like the Southampton Data Observatory.

Aligned to the values and principles and alongside the specifics on data needs, uses and absences, there was a clear focus on how the SCDO would have a role in enabling engagement with data. There was a steer that the SCDO and ongoing initiatives should give consideration to the following:

– Effective communication, training, and data quality maintenance were deemed essential for platform usability and success.

– Enhancing users' data literacy and utilization skills for effective use of the SCDO.

– Providing website links and alternative formats for individuals without Internet access, along with the option of written information requests.

– Enhancing data querying and retrieval through integration with a Language Model (LLM) AI (Artificial Intelligence) system.

– Utilizing API (Application Programming Interface) extraction to facilitate data accessibility.
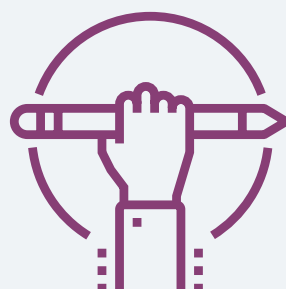
> **"Through the ongoing conversations, it became clear that any observatory needed to comply to FAIR principles, promote linking and be easily updatable."**

DEVELOPMENT

The Southampton Data Observatory (SDO) already included a large proportion of data that spoke directly to the needs engaged in the consultation conversations. This project enabled discussion as to why some users had not used it previously, and with this what they thought about its strengths and weaknesses. The results of these conversations helped establish the design and hosting principles for the SCDO:

    A. Easily adaptable and user-friendly interface

    B. Cope with a variety of data sets and their visualisations

    C. Link to rather than replicate datasets

Through the ongoing conversations, it became clear that any observatory needed to comply to **FAIR principles**, promote linking and be easily updatable.

1. Hosting the SCDO

Review of these design and hosting principles led to the selection of ArcGIS online, and specifically its hub site capability as the host platform of the SCDO. Much of the data held from the City of Culture bid had a temporal and geographical dimension, and thus lent itself to a mapping platform. ArcGIS hub's capabilities extend beyond this, to hosting different data and, critically, making these easily findable, linkable and downloadable.

2. Structuring the SCDO

From the design stage, nine headings of interest emerged through the consultation conversations (shown in table 1, below). As the table indicates, a number of the data sources for these headings were already available, through the SDO. In these instances, direct links were made to the sources with additional narrative explanation added if needed.

Heading	Indicative data sets	How available
Economic	Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (Department for Business and Trade) data.	SDO Dashboard
	Department of Culture, Media and Sport Economic Estimates	SCDO Links
	SCC (Southampton City Council) analysis	SDO Dashboard
	Sound Diplomacy	SCDO 'Unlock the Data'
Assets (formal and informal)	City of Culture (CoC) mapping **Pathways to Health** **Connecting Culture** Placebook	Cultural Mapper
Workforce	City of Culture analysis Department of Culture, Media and Sport Economic Estimates	SCDO 'Unlock the Data' SDO
Data & Resources	City of Culture surveys City of Culture Audience Agency report	SCDO
Participation	City of Culture Audience Agency report Department of Culture, Media and Sport Taking Part GCSE/A Level/Btec entries Artsmark Award Holiday and Food (HAF) Programme data	SCDO
Place	Southampton City Council survey City of Culture survey Deprivation and poverty	SDO
Evaluation	Previous evaluation reports	Held by external organisations
Funding	ACE (Arts Council England) Heritage Lottery Fund Trusts and Foundations Local Authority	Held by external organisations
Equity and inclusion	Governance and leadership data from ACE	Held by external organisations

Table 1: Proposed data sets mapped to SDO and SCDO

3. Developing the SCDO

One facility requested during consultation conversations, and a facility not included in the SDO, was a map of past, present and future cultural activities. As such a mapping element was added, this allows for anyone to add data on locations, activities or assets, past, present and future. It also allowed for visualization of data held within the SCDO that had a spatial element.

The team further explored various data sources for mapping, such as integrating the up-to-date cultural organizations list from the "Holiday Activities and Food (HAF)" Programme's online booking system, and incorporating events listed and advertised on "Visit Southampton," along with relevant archives and participation data.

The one area that we were not able to resolve, but was requested by participants, was provision of previous project evaluations. Here datasets are held either by the people carrying out the projects or by the funder. While we expressed an ability to host this information, it would need to be provided by the report's originators with clear permission for open sharing.

FEEDBACK

The SCDO is informed by ongoing discussions. The following draws together **user testing** insights from a range of perspectives: local government (P1); arts and cultural organizations (P2; P3); cultural consultant (P4).

Feedback resulted in three main insights:

1. Creating a data inventory that enables organizations to identify, understand and **connect different data** that are generated and that are accessible.

2. Data are used as **evidence to inform decision-making**, for example on cultural and creative sector development and on funding applications. Establishing what is needed and when can help ensure that data are maintained.

3. Wider and more **flexible geographical approaches** to regionally generating and connecting data.

1. Connections

Data generated can be specific to a sector and an organization. This kind of 'siloed' approach was highlighted to us: 'I think at the moment we are relying on the data that we have on our database' (P2).

Reflecting on the role of the SCDO in facilitating data connections, a suggestion emerged for an

> *'alliance of venues who would use the Observatory as their kind of Data Hub for that material and would give license to analyze it on their behalf' (P4).*

We know from existing projects (Making data better; Neighbouring Data) that there are considerable challenges in being able to connect data.

Noting practical challenges around data privacy, sharing agreements and 'interoperability', a starting point is creating a data inventory that enables organisations to identify and understand different data that are generated and are accessible.

Using the SCDO to share suggestions and practices could be a helpful prompt for other organisations to review and reflect on what they do and this could be complemented by skills sharing.

2. Evidence

A key driver was for data to inform decision-making. This came across in two ways: (1) creative ecosystems (2) funding.

Focusing on economic data relating to the cultural and creative industries, data could be used to understand what is happening within the region as a **creative ecosystem**:

> *I would see one of the jobs of a cultural observatory to maintain longitudinal data on how the creative industry employment is changing within our area and what is happening to businesses - tracking GVA (Gross Value Added). Primarily creative industry economic data I think is one of the things which needs to be a priority and it needs to be done at a very granular local level (P4)*

These comments flag up what the role of the SCDO could be in setting priorities for and undertaking data collection (e.g. on creative industry employment). These comments are then further nuanced in terms of cultural and creative sector focus and regional advocacy:

> *I want data which is going to inform policy which is going to make the Solent a thriving hot bed for creative digital and tech businesses (P4)*

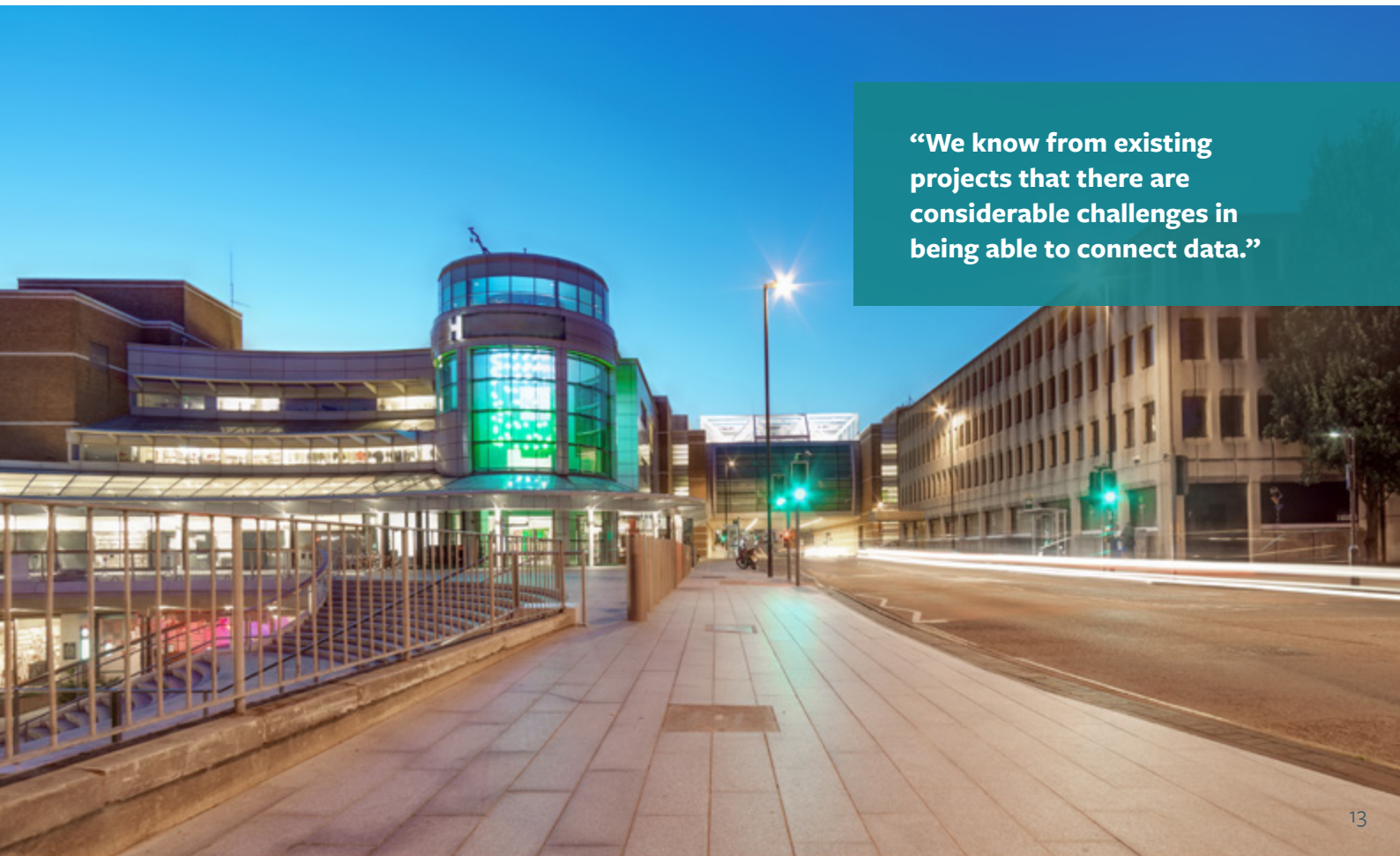Another priority that emerged from our discussions was for data to be part of the evidence-based for funding:

We obviously publish on our website, that's great, but as someone who spends my time looking at data and talking to people about data and writing about data and trying to prove all the wonderful things we do and how important it is, it's all very well me saying 'well, this is what we do" but actually having lots of other organisations do the same thing. Post it in a nice universal place, but it is actually that's the thing I want the most (P3)

There are points of alignment in these comments with the above section on connections and having organisations share what they are doing and making this accessible. These comments on sharing and bringing together have been a repeat point across the SCDO project and affirm the value of the SCDO in being a visible and accessible platform.

The other main point in these comments from P3 is on 'proving' and making visible the important work taking place. This is expanded in the following:

The most frustrating thing I get back from grants is "yes, we would love to give you the money and you're absolutely amazing, but either you're too spread out" or "whilst we can see the proof of what you do individually, there isn't data necessarily that backs up that it's needed in your area". So what I really want is everyone else to start collating all this information together so that when I go to a grant, I can say, "do you know what, you might think that there's no proof, but look at these 20 organizations who have exactly the same problems". (P3)

The insight here is that **data are used as evidence to inform decision-making, for example on cultural and creative sector development and on funding applications. The SCDO is a means to help establish what is needed and help ensure that data is maintained.**

"We know from existing projects that there are considerable challenges in being able to connect data."

3. Geographies

The SCDO so far has focused on the Southampton region. At the time of finalising this report (Spring 2025), conversations on regional devolution were gaining pace and geographical boundaries and place-based relationships are in flux.

For our discussion, the following point on **travel to work** areas highlights the need to question and explore geographical scope:

> *Obviously, the focus is Southampton but I would say going forward that geography might be more usefully wider than Southampton. The Southampton travel to work area goes all the way up to Winchester and well into the New Forest. Portsmouth travel to work area goes all the way up to Petersfield. Isle of Wight is fairly self-contained. And then you get into the Bournemouth travel to work areas. So, I think having data across that wide Central South area could be very valuable (P4)*

Another contribution focused on travel for understanding engagement with cultural venues/activities: '[I want to] access some of that data around audiences and see what you know what percentage of audiences or what sort of numbers really might be travelling […] for cultural activity.' (P3)

Through reference to 'travel to work', P3 and P4 connect with a more frequently made point across the project on how data can be used for understanding: (1) how different needs are addressed across defined geographical areas; (2) the trends, opportunities and barriers associated with movement within and between areas.

Our findings on data geographies and the significance of changing geographical boundaries and different perspectives on place connect with regional conversations (**Eden and Freeman, 2022**) and link ongoing discussions on cultural strategies (**Ashton, 2024**) and devolution (**Culture Commons, 2024**). All this prompts the need for the SCDO to explore **wider and more flexible geographical approaches to regionally generating and connecting data.**

SUMMARY

The SCDO projects engages with the energy and investment in generating and sharing data associated with the UKCoC2025 bid. It builds on these plans and conversations and recognizes a diverse range of needs and hopes for a cultural data observatory that enables organisations to work with and for their communities, collaborators, users and audiences.

The suggestions and reflections generated in the design, development and discussions around the SCDO are shared here to contribute to **ongoing initiatives across the UK.**

Connecting with existing conversations around a national cultural data observatory, the SCDO project raises the importance of **placed-based conversations, circumstances and needs.** The focus on devolution at the time of finalising this report (Spring 2025) further prompts the need for local/regional cultural data observatories that can inform emerging decision-making structures and processes.

As the **long-term sustainability** of the SCDO is reviewed, it is clear that **partnership** facilitators are essential. This can include **anchor institutions** as enablers and facilitators and the diversity **of place-based organisations, networks, and collectives**.

This project has demonstrated:

1. The demand for data (longitudinal) and platforms to help with access and analysis.

2. How the process of moving from data to knowledge is not easy, with capability unevenly spread across different sectors.

3. A strong desire from across the cultural sector for detailed records of who has done what and where, and to what effect.

4. Cultural data and critical evaluation is often 'un-FAIR' (Findable Accessible Interoperable and Re-usable), making it hard to build on past successes and failures.

"It is clear that partnership facilitators are essential."