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Nicky Marsh, Daniel Ashton & Joseph Owen

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Towards a qualitative data observatory: generation, connection, use

Nicky Marsh, Daniel Ashton and Joseph Owen

Southampton Institute for Arts and Humanities, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship of qualitative data to place-based decision-making and the role of data observatories in these emerging debates and practices. Qualitative data enables the understanding and evaluation of the lived and felt experience of place. This article identifies where qualitative data approaches intersect with place-based policy and existing data observatory initiatives. While data observatory initiatives and projects address how data is stored and shared, the specificities and nuances of doing this work for qualitative data remain unexamined. This article analyses findings from a project that scoped the potential of a qualitative data observatory. It draws together empirical data from a review of different types of data observatories, a series of interviews and focus groups with qualitative data users, and two workshops with creative practitioners and stakeholders. This mixed-methods approach seeks to outline the possibilities of combining qualitative data and data observatory methods. The findings suggest three themes that guide a framework for designing, building and sustaining a qualitative data observatory: generation, connection, use.

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Qualitative data; lived experience; data observatory; framework; local decision making

1. Introduction

This article examines the relationship of qualitative data to UK place-based decision-making and the role of data observatories in these emerging debates and practices. Following Tee Guidotti's definition, we understand data observatories as models that "convert episodic research opportunities into clusters of observed events" (2022, 835). The work is situated in two contexts. The first is the increased attention from policy-makers to the role of lived and felt experience, and the demands this places on local authorities and community groups. The second is the volume and heterogeneity of qualitative data that might allow organizations to meet these demands. This *big bang* of informal information – gathered from social media, open surveys, emails, consultations – offers local authorities and community groups new ways of accessing the lived experience of the communities that they serve. Yet these organizations lack clear guidelines for

CONTACT Nicky Marsh nm8@soton.ac.uk Avenue Campus, Highfield Road, Southampton, SO17 1BF, UK

navigating and presenting this information as rigorous, credible data. This article seeks to understand how qualitative data is generated, connected and used, and how this data can be deployed for evidence-informed, place-based decision-making.

First, we provide research context for the relationship between qualitative data, place, and the focus on lived and felt experience in UK policymaking. We examine the distinctive possibilities and challenges of qualitative data and seek to understand the extent to which policymakers engage with this data in their work. The methods section specifies our qualitative content analysis of observatories and our interviews, focus groups and workshops. This work informed our practical and theoretical overview of data observatories, and from this analysis we developed an empirical account of user insights. Our final section suggests the parameters of an observatory framework, outlining the three critical categories for good practice on how qualitative data can be generated, connected, used.

The central research question, connecting all of this work, was: what needs might a qualitative data observatory serve and how might they best be met?

2. Qualitative data and place

The need to understand place through lived and felt experience is becoming more important for producing evidence-informed policy, evaluating community engagement activities, and bolstering democratic accountability (Higgins and Lenette 2024; Policy Lab 2024). Qualitative research is valued as it makes "visible the lived experiences of policy implementers, members of underrepresented groups, and people who benefit from policy interventions" (Natow 2022, 109). To understand the relationship between qualitative data and policymaking, we review multidisciplinary approaches to qualitative data and the lived experience of place, highlighting the challenges of these perspectives for observatories.

The qualitative analysis of lived experience has a strong, recent tradition in education and health research (Frechette et al. 2020; Priestley and Mazzoli-Smith 2023; van Manen 2016). Phenomenological, narrative and self-study approaches have been used to elicit lived experience, and the data generated from these approaches is often "specific in time and place, embodied, visceral and unique" (Ajjawi et al. 2024, 1054). The qualitative analysis of lived experience in place-based studies is more nascent, and it is often found at the intersection of health, wellbeing and place (Sunderland et al. 2012). Participant observation and wider visual-sensory ethnographic approaches generate data that is defined by "the researcher's active engagement with participants in their daily activities", which are recorded in "detailed field notes, which become part of the data" (McGovern 2017, 669).

Because the study of lived experience is bound to its methodological assumptions, there are few specific accounts in place-based research of lived experience data as a discrete, defined phenomenon. Studies that have identified the importance of lived experience in place have used a mixture of interview and spatial data to constitute *lived experience* (e.g. Flynn and Mathias 2020). Qualitative data has also been used to augment and challenge existing quantitative data on place. Researchers draw on existing data to provide insights about lived experience, using survey responses to map local characteristics (e.g. Leguina and Miles 2017; Delrieu and Gibson 2017). This work

feeds into the wider trend towards "big qual", which draws on big data and mixed methods to conduct research of large qualitative datasets that allow for breadth and depth of analysis (Brower et al. 2019; Davidson et al. 2019; Weller et al. 2023).

There is a long-acknowledged mismatch between the demands of qualitative research and the preferences of policymakers for quantitative data. Rebecca Natow identifies that policymakers search for "prompt, simplified answers to questions about the impacts of programmes and practices", which are integral to the "neoliberal, positivist tendencies" that serve as a "barrier to the consideration of qualitative studies" (2022, 121). Yet this mismatch – as Natow's own research on Higher Education in the United States suggests – is slowly being challenged. Natow's account of policymaker responses to narratives of lived experience can be traced across a wide range of policy domains including housing, urban regeneration, cultural evaluation, and health and wellbeing (Clapham 2005; Sharp 2018; Meyrick et al. 2019; Blanchette and Brooks 2021). Nonetheless, the perceived difficulties in rigorously providing and using qualitative data often renders it a lesser voice in policy debates.

Yet there is an emerging emphasis on qualitative data as a form of evidence that exceeds its role in supporting policy-focused narratives. Nigel Fielding gives several examples of how health and crime evidence-based policy includes an "opening" for qualitative data, which represents "a thaw in contemporary officialdom's view of qualitative research" (2019: 147). The centrality of lived experience to recent place-shaping initiatives has provided other openings. The recent UK Conservative Government (2019–2024) highlighted the role of feelings, particularly pride, across iterations of the Levelling Up agenda. The 2019 Towns Fund prospectus exhorted towns to "engage with communities" to understand "what they love about their place" (HM Government 2019: 18). This imperative was advanced across sectors. The AHRC Place Programme report, for example, foregrounds using lived experience for understanding place-shaping (Madgin and Robson 2023). A Creates Streets Foundation report cites cross-sector initiatives that recognize how qualitative data about lived experience can enhance the "economics of attraction" by understanding that "place is emotional as well as practical" (Grayston and Lloyd 2023, 9).

In this repositioning, qualitative data does more than simply illustrate quantitative data. Its analysis, findings and insights become the *evidence*. While there are legitimate concerns about the validity of some qualitative data, the meaningful understanding of lived and felt experience requires policymakers to exceed positivist tendencies and engage with the possibilities of this data. We support Natow's suggestion that "enhancing the role of qualitative research in policymaking begins with qualitative researchers themselves, by promoting and advocating for their own work" (2022, 122) Priorities for data infrastructure are integral to our focus on both place-based decision-making and the role of qualitative data in policymaking. To this end, we ask: which data infrastructure requirements enable qualitative data on lived and felt experience to inform place-based decision-making?

3. Understanding qualitative data in the observatory

Our mixed-methods approach sought to understand the infrastructure requirements for qualitative data and place. Our methodology included analysis of the practice and

literature of data observatories alongside an account of the experiences of data users and practitioners.

We structured our analysis of qualitative data using a device perspective, which studies "both the affordances of platforms as well as how they are interpreted and deployed by users and other parties" (Weltevrede and Borra 2016, 1). Weltevrede and Borra (2016, 2) develop the device perspective through a case study of Wikipedia, focusing on the "negotiations and interactions between Wikipedians and the affordances of the Wikipedia platform." Weltevrede and Borra's approach has been engaged with several other studies that examine how platforms are not neutral and that design and structure have implications for what is possible and probable (see Egbert and Ulbricht 2024). For this study, the device perspective enables understanding as data observatories entities that evolve with different uses and users and investigating and comparing observatory designs in separate contexts. The project had three phases which engaged with the device perspective, with phase one focusing on the data observatories as objects and phase two focusing on the user experiences.

Phase one explored the practices of data observatories by reviewing existing literature and deploying a theoretical analysis. Phase two included interviews with observatory experts who had experiences of designing and operating data observatories. Phase three focused on professional data uses and users, including focus groups with users and workshops with creative practitioners and stakeholders. Research ethics approval was secured by the University of Southampton (ID: 81700), ensuring robust research integrity and data management. As a research team, the authors prompted critical reflections on researcher self-presentation across the project phases to explore different relational positionalities with participants.

3.1. Data observatory content analysis

We identified twenty data observatories by surveying existing academic projects. We conducted nine keyword searches across 900 articles on Google Scholar, using targeted and broader keyword strands (e.g. "Data Repository", "Web Observatory", "Qualitative Data Observatory") to account for variations in terminology across projects. These searches were cross-referenced with examples shared during the interviews (see below).

We explored the connection between existing insights in academic literature and the wider variety of data observatories through a qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2023). This enabled a structured analysis that addressed the affordances of the observatories and considered their aims, uses and users. We augmented the findings from this analysis with a theoretical review of the possibilities and limitations of the data observatory.

3.2. Design and development interviews

To examine experiences of designing and operating data observatories, we conducted five interviews. We recruited participants by conducting a historical overview of recent (2000 – present) UK observatories, identifying key stakeholders in the design, development and maintenance of observatories. The group included representatives from cultural policy, the creative and digital industries, and local authority data insight teams. The interviews

covered the rise of regional cultural observatories in the early 2000s and present data challenges. The interview questions were informed by five themes: audience, use, visualization, narration, and maintenance. These themes emerged from the systematic literature review and analysis of data observatories. The background of the interviewees and the labelling for this article are included in Table 1.

3.3. User focus groups

We held four focus groups to examine data needs and challenges in more detail. We recruited stakeholders from organizations that we had previously worked with on a range of placed-based research projects, and that we knew had interest and expertise in qualitative data and place. These stakeholders included representatives from local authorities, community groups and Business Improvement Districts (BIDs). Brought together, this work enabled insights from government, communities, and commercial organizations with diverse relationships with data. The constitution of focus groups, the background of participants, and the labelling for this article are included in Table 2.

The interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed and a full account of these findings is available in the report, Opening the Observatory (Owen, Marsh, and Ashton 2023).

3.4. Practitioner and stakeholder workshops

To explore the potential data observatory platforms and different types of user engagement, we conducted two knowledge exchange workshops: Working with Creative Practitioners (WS1, October 2023) and Consulting Data Users (WS2, December 2023).

There are obvious challenges of power dynamics in co-research. While enabling practitioners to engage with the materials through their distinctive practices, as well as emphasizing participatory dialogue, we recognize how dynamics of power informed the construction of the resource pack and analysis of the experiments.

WS1 was held with five creative practitioners who were familiar with a range of qualitative data. WS2 was held with stakeholders from local authorities, community groups and cultural institutions. The background of the participants and the labelling of the workshops for this article are included in Table 3.

The selection of practitioners for WS1 was informed by a desire to include a range of divergent practices and included practitioners with expertise on virtual environments, sound design, hypertexts, creative writing, and data theory. Each was provided with a resource pack comprising qualitative data – short narratives, images, poems, videos and maps – from existing projects led by the research team. Practitioners were asked

Table 1. Interviewee background and identifying label.

Interviewee background	Identifying label
Cultural strategist	I1
Academic	I2
Digital strategist	I3
Data insight officer	I4
Data insight officer	I5

Table 2. Focus group participant background and identifying label.

Focus group	Number of participants	Identifying label
Local authority officers	3	FG1
Community workers	2	FG2
Business Improvement District (BID) representatives	5	FG3
Local authority officers	2	FG4

to investigate eight data examples across five projects: six were artefacts produced by participants, two were representations generated by artists based on participant responses. The workshop was structured to explore the potential for exploring, connecting, visualizing, The project was interested in how these practices could interpret data at different scales and what the possibilities for a cross-practice conversation might be. Drawing on qualitative methods literature (Cuomo 2021; Decuypere 2020; Liu et al. 2014; Willaert et al. 2020), WS2 was held with twenty-five professional data users from a range of civic organizations, including local authorities, national bodies, and community groups. It sought to understand how these stakeholders were using qualitative data and what they considered to be the opportunities, risks, and needs of this process. The workshop was organized through two workshops designed to understand the issues, capacities and potential of using qualitative data to inform place-based decision-making. Each workshop was organized using a set of semi-structured questions, which organizations addressed in pairs and as groups.

The findings from both workshops were recorded as co-produced field notes: these included presentations and outcomes of specific activities. A full account of the findings from each is available in the report, *Transforming the Observatory: From Archive to Engine* (Ashton et al. 2025).

3.5. Data analysis

We used thematic analysis to identify and explore patterns across the data (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). Specifically, a coding category "is a method that enables you to organize and group similarly coded data into categories or "families" because they share some characteristic" (Saldaña 2013, 9). The construction of the coding categories was iterative: the authors used inter-coder reliability assessments to promote dialogue and transparency (O'Connor and Joffe 2020).

We identified three stages of data engagement during the analysis: generation, connection, use. Generation refers to creation, gathering, collection, marking and reporting of data from different audiences and for different purposes. Connection refers to visualization, narration and the broader representation of data on an observatory platform. Use

Table 3. Workshop participant background and identifying label.

Workshop	Number of participants	Identifying label
Creative practitioners, data scientists	5	WS1
Local authority officers, community workers, Business Improvement District (BID) representatives, ALB representatives, cultural strategists, digital strategists, academics, data insight officers	25	WS2

refers to the inclusion, implementation, instrumentalisation, monitoring, evaluation and maintenance of data for decision-making. These themes structure the presentation of findings in Section 4. Participants have an identifying code that references the interview (I), focus group (FG), or workshop (WS) in which they were present.

3.6. Limitations of the study

This was necessarily an exploratory examination of the issues involved in constructing a qualitative data observatory and there were several limitations to this study. Firstly, we were only able to work closely with organizations that we had existing relationships with and, although these included representatives from national organizations, it often entailed a geographical narrowing. Our sampling of data observatories, found in the report Understanding the Observatory (Owen, Marsh, and Ashton 2025) was intended to be purposive rather than comprehensive because this is a dynamic and diffuse field.

4. An observatory for qualitative data and place

4.1. Models of data observatories

Observatories exist in many incarnations, and there is little consensus on their scope, purpose and capacity. Several recent reports have sought to highlight the potential of observatories, particularly in understanding place and its cultural and social infrastructures. The *Better Data on the Cultural Economy* report recommends "build[ing] a cultural sector data platform [because] data about the cultural sector is fragmented, often inaccessible and incomplete, making it difficult to assess its value" (MyCake 2021, 9). To address a lack of robust information about social infrastructure in places, the Bennett Institute's *Townscapes* report advocates for a "digital data repository, bringing together key datasets relating to community facilities and their levels of use" (Kelsey and Kenny 2021, 7). To establish more compelling narratives about the social impact of cultural activity, the *Making Data Work* report proposes a "Cultural Sector Data Observatory to bring together, research and analyse mixed-methods data sources" (Walmsley, Boyes, and Garcia 2022, 5).

These reports indicate the fragmented context in which the debate on data observatories has taken place. The idea of a place-based observatory is not new. Its history in the UK can be traced to the early 2000s when New Labour increased the emphasis on regional government, giving rise to the Regional Cultural Consortia (Jayne 2005). These advisory bodies championed efficient regional cultural investment, and each consortium was responsible for making sure "that culture plays a full part in contributing to the quality of life and the increasing prosperity of the region, and that key cultural priorities would lead to the improved delivery of services" (Dhupa 2002). Part of this process included bringing coherence and consistency to large quantities of regional cultural data and prompted a wave of place-specific data observatories, including the East Midlands Cultural Observatory and the Northwest Cultural Observatory.

Although these projects were largely disbanded in 2009, the idea of a place-based data observatory persisted. Many subsequent initiatives sought to galvanize regional identity,

sharing information and curating a sense of place by developing business opportunities and investment. At the city level, these observatories share a range of data sources to which local authorities have access. The aim is to empower local communities rather than obtain external investment. Birmingham City Observatory and Southampton City Observatory share themed data on heath, economy, population and safety to encourage informed, collaborative action (data.southampton.gov.uk; cityobservatory.birmingham.gov.uk).

Other observatories have remits both narrower and wider than these place-based observatories. The supranational agency Eurofound, for example, hosts reports and survey data across three thematic observatories that focus on living and working conditions in the European Union (EU). The platform hosts resources for EU institutions and policymakers, including data explorers and downloadable datasets that cover issues on managing and anticipating cultural change, as well as activities promoting social cohesion and convergence (eurofound.europa.eu/observatories). Other models are similarly rich in aspiration but focus on narrower forms of collectively sourced data. The UK Archaeology Data Service supports open access archaeological and heritage data and functions as its own capacious, searchable database, containing 1.4 million metadata records, 70,000 reports, and 50,000 articles that are generated by its user community (archaeologydataservice.ac.uk). In a different context, Newcastle University's Urban Observatory provides real-time data gathered through sensors. It contains more than 50 different types of data that includes information on solar radiation, wind direction, sound and humidity, providing a digital view of cities and the potential impacts of climate change (newcastle.urbanobservatory.ac.uk).

Yet, as this variety suggests, rigorous protocols for data use across these different contexts, especially for qualitative data, have yet to be reached. Data observatories are culturally specific: gathering, representing and narrating data at scale is a political act, both practically and symbolically. These observatories are also precarious and fragile: the political-technical infrastructures and assumptions, on which they are reliant, are constantly adapting, often to different demands and temporalities. The register of what counts as data and why data counts is often culturally and politically specific: the purpose of the observatory dictates its structure, access and visual properties. It may prioritize any one of data transparency, user inclusion, self-evaluation, academic critique, public spending accountability, and regional advocacy.

The following literature review on data observatories addresses three main subject areas – environment, technology, place – and indicates how these protocols and needs have been theoretically developed. First, environmental approaches to observatory infrastructures foreground citizen science, geographical scalability, and reusable data. These observatories draw on citizen science-led initiatives and participatory sensing to monitor issues such as traffic, flooding, drought and environmental governance (Cieslik et al., 2018; Liu et al. 2014; Helgeson, Glynn, and Chabay 2022). The literature highlights the role of the observatory in managing scientific data and connecting it at different geographical scales. (Ajates et al. 2020, 13). "Second generation" data observatories collect granular data because "local knowledge is often absent" in earlier iterations of the observatory (Karpouzoglou et al. 2016, 43). Allowing provision for reusable data is critical because it begins to address how qualitative data observatories might respond to pressures on time, resources and capacity.

Second, the technology literature on observatories identifies the practices of updatable architecture, digital methodologies, and combined analysis that underpin these data platforms. Several key architectural features distinguish data observatories from archives and repositories (Ribé and Laniado 2020; Tiropanis 2022). Observatories host data that is *live* in some capacity: using replicable methodological frameworks to collect data and providing links to data that is externally sourced and consistently updated. Social media web scraping has begun to reshape this architecture and while its low fidelity presents problems, it provides opportunities to include different forms of evolving qualitative datasets.

Third, the place literature on observatories demonstrates the wide-ranging functions that these systems can provide: real-time monitoring, agile responsiveness, and dataset consistency. In place-based research, observatories show their value for tracking urban mobility (Keseru, Wuytens, and Macharis 2019), measuring and comparing national health outcomes (Røttingen et al. 2013), and mapping economic and creative clusters (Crawley and Pickernell 2012). These observatories can adapt to include heterogeneous and unanticipated data needs: the Newcastle Urban Observatory, for example, acquired new functions and responsibilities during the COVID pandemic (James et al. 2020). The contingent nature of place-based decision-making highlights the role of observatories: these systems must have the flexibility to accommodate immediate need, unexpected policy shifts and local specificities as well as the rigour to provide consistent analysis.

Guidotti's research draws together many of the data observatory principles, practices and functions discussed in this section, subsuming them into this definition:

> The observatory model is a strategy to convert episodic research opportunities into clusters of observed events that can support hypothesis generation and policy studies (Guidotti 2022, 835).

Guidotti highlights the versatility but also the problem of defining the data observatory, which is alternately described as a model, a strategy, and a set of key attributes. This slippage shows how our understanding of observatories is necessarily determined by their context.

This analysis of the infrastructure requirements that might enable qualitative data to support place-based decision-making has identified nine key observatory features:

- citizen science
- geographical scalability
- reusable data
- updatable architecture
- digital methodologies
- combined analysis
- real-time monitoring
- agile responsiveness
- dataset consistency

These are instructive starting points for developing the qualitative data observatory. Yet positioning observatories as the infrastructure that will enable qualitative data to inform policymaking requires further scrutiny.

5. Generation, connection, use

The following section synthesizes our theoretical and empirical work into three stages of data engagement: generation, connection, use. Each section identifies a series of user insights into qualitative data.

5.1. Generation

The generation of qualitative data is the first key concern of users. Generation refers to creation, collection and wider reporting of data for different purposes and audiences.

One of the most striking aspects of our findings was the surfeit of qualitative data held by organizations (FG1, FG2, FG3, FG4, WS2). The volume and heterogeneity of qualitative information generated by these organizations posed a key challenge. This data was garnered through miscellaneous comments in surveys, detailed narrative interviews, evaluation forms, doorstep conversations and participant observations (WS2). Local councillors were regarded as a "qualitative interface" between the council and the public, such was the extent of responses they provided to local authorities (FG1). A BID representative referenced the influx of "so much data" (FG3), and a digital strategist described the "never-ending big bang of data" (I3). Not only did this data arrive in high quantities, but it appeared in diverse forms from multiple places via different mediations.

This volume was partly attributed to the lack of alternative, formal routes through which communities could engage with organizations (WS2). A BID representative solicited qualitative data in response to a perceived democratic deficit: "I asked for feedback from businesses, and they said that there wasn't enough space for comments" (FG3). The need for platforms that could be used to voice opinions appeared to increase in lieu of democratic avenues elsewhere. An academic participant noted that data observatories can host transparent, community-owned data to bolster this democratic mandate: "it provide[s] access to work that is ostensibly being paid for by public money" (I2).

One way of establishing accountability for organizations is through a system of data provenance. Locating the origins of data is crucial to understanding where, how and why it was generated. Local authorities require clearly articulated protocols for registering this provenance, which is essential for navigating the volume and heterogeneity of their data. The question of how this process was managed, specifically marking and recording provenance across different and informal types of qualitative data, was a recurring theme. The need for planning was understood as even more acute for addressing the diverse forms of qualitative data and producing clarity from them. A BID representative argued: "People generally really want certainty: clearcut survey responses that implement responses to problems" (FG3). While absolutely certainty in qualitative data is difficult to achieve, it does not have to preclude decision-making. Rigorous and credible data on lived and felt experience can still support the implementation of place-based policies.

As these examples suggest, qualitative data was often recognized as incomplete. The method for collecting this data was characterized by one community worker as being "based on vibes and not [gathered] through a formal reporting mechanism" (FG2). Yet this method was important for understanding the lived and felt experience of place, even as it exposed significant gaps in knowledge about communities. Some local groups identified patterns in "vibes": one community worker, who covered a hyperlocal

area, noted that anxieties about graffiti had become a recurrent concern among residents from doorstep conversations and social media posts (FG2). This information had not been formally recorded through local authority surveys, yet it provided insights into the concerns of communities that could be acted upon.

Local authorities were also alert to the challenges of this data but keen to establish findings from it. Insight officers, who have a specialist data remit within these organizations, indicated that it was important to be flexible when presenting "incomplete" and "imperfect" qualitative data: one officer who worked with infrastructure mapping noted that while it may not be "100% accurate", it still "tells a strategic story" (I4). Sometimes partial evidence could support a wider narrative for interventions in place. Using his mapping example, the officer posed it as a question: "Is it good enough for me to draw some conclusions? Yes, even if the odd venue is missing and one or two have closed" (I4). This practical, big-picture approach to data requires effective judgement from users to reach decisions: "Don't make perfect the enemy of the good" (I4). Users, in this instance, require data literacy and strategic knowhow to understand what constitutes rigorous and credible qualitative data, which amplifies the lived and felt experience of place.

Yet some data omissions are systematic, obstructive and need addressing. Incomplete data makes it difficult for local authorities to make ward-level decisions on place-specific issues. In the words of a data insight officer, "there is very limited local data that gives the granularity to make informed decisions at local authority level or below" (I4). Highly granular data – data that is subdivided into small units – is often missing. Without this data, it is hard to deliver cultural funding for hyper-local places, for instance, because such investment requires "data-informed and data-enabled decisions" (I4). Local authorities sometimes equate the granularity of data with geographical specificity, arguing that interventions should "not target limited resource by putting the watering can over the whole local authority area in the hope you'll hit the right bits" (I4). Fine-grain data can entail deeper and more precise analyses of place, but coarse data can sometimes provide helpful overviews and strategic stories about the lived and felt experience of place.

Increasing participation and engagement was seen as a crucial tool for making this data more complete, strategic and granular. There was an emphasis on generating qualitative data that could engage with seldom heard communities (WS2). An observatory was required, as one local authority officer argued, to allow local authorities "to understand who is participating, who needs a little nudge to participate, and who is furthest from participation" (I4). The ambition is that the observatory is used: that the resources are well-allocated, and participation is widened. Otherwise, a data insight officer warned, "you're just throwing your resources at those who would probably participate anyway" (I4). Identifying and engaging with relevant audiences, those for whom investment, services and assets are targeted, is essential.

Organizations explicitly identified young people as the least engaged audience for their support and services (WS2). Participation in feedback and consultations tended to come from demographics that had sufficient social, economic and political capital. A BID representative argued: "The older voices are most audible, because they hold local council positions and are more likely to raise things with their local representative" (FG3). Observatories were sought to engage with the concerns of young people, represent their lived and felt experiences, and afford these experiences influence in decision-

making. Presenting qualitative data about place in novel, interesting ways could "encourage younger people to stay" and allow them to contribute to the community, workforce and economy (FG1).

Creative practitioners emphasized the importance of meaningful, long-term participation. They considered data generation to be a longitudinal, co-produced process, which comprised community engagement and creative collaboration. To understand the data generated from this work, they prioritized creative practice above all as the focus "is on the experience and not the object, the thing that is made" (WS1). Understanding and representing qualitative data without privileging the process renders the data "meaningless in some ways" as such work is "massively contextual" (WS1). Creative practitioners explicitly advocated for a methodological "model" in which they worked "over long periods of time with a group to get to know it really well" (WS1). This model could provide sustained engagement with seldom heard communities and young people by increasing participation, putting less emphasis on the practical application of the generated qualitative data.

5.2. Connection

The connection of qualitative data is the second key concern of users and refers to the visualization, narration and broader representation of data. Exploring these possibilities were widely recognized as important but difficult to realize within existing observatory models.

Existing data observatories, even those that are collectively sourced, mainly focus on quantitative data, using themes and labels to marshal narratives from a series of datasets. A data insight officer noted that current observatories preference quantitative data: they are "brilliant to get a number" (I5). Yet the insights derived are often limited: observatories can tell users how many people live in a place, for example, but not the reasons why people use or fail to use specific assets and services. For that kind of qualitative data, organizations must "go down the rabbit hole to find the right document" (I5). This process can be wayward, unresourceful and time-consuming. As one community worker put it: "You must know what you're looking for. The data observatory is reliant on you articulating the question that you want to find out" (FG2).

User appeal is imperative for an operational data observatory, but complex platforms, and limited data literacy among users, are barriers to access. There is a need to define the role of qualitative data in place-based decision making, considering factors such as accessible storytelling, literacy support, and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Interactive and visual elements such as maps were popular because, as a data insight officer argued, "people don't want to trawl through all that [data]: segmentation makes the documents and toolkits accessible" (I5). Giving users the capacity for interaction, exploration and playtime with data poses an ever-present challenge. Observatories can provide a basic level of user interface: "the very minimum is having maps where you click on certain areas, and it tells certain stories" (I5). The qualities of self-service, experimentation and accessibility are therefore considered prerequisites for users seeking to understand and connect the reasons that underpin policy issues and community concerns.

Self-service of this kind puts pressure on organizations that lack training, capacity and resources. A qualitative data observatory must reconcile competing needs, address

mismatches between data and perception, and widen participation in local decision-making. Users currently "comb through" resources that are organized by predetermined themes, topics and "headlines", which direct them to existing findings and recommendations (FG2). While this method can be informative, there was a perceived "role for data observatories" in discovering "alternative ways of gathering and looking at this data" (I3). Community groups wanted "to search further afield" for qualitative data on the lived and felt experience of place (FG2). Many interviewees were keen to understand how qualitative data could be connected to shape richer and more accurate perceptions of place.

Opportunities for decision-makers to access and understand this data was seen to offer a strategy for addressing citizens' misunderstandings about assets and services, as well as wider feelings of being ignored by local organizations. Building connections between different qualitative data in contested environments was seen as a strategy that could bridge the knowledge discrepancy between communities and local government. As one local authority officer put it, "the community lacks understanding of the [Council] mechanics" (FG1). It is important that communities understand the jurisdictions and responsibilities of local authorities that serve them. There was a shared feeling that qualitative insights about place could address misperceptions about the accountable body for certain policies, which lead to anger, apathy and frustration among citizens.

By including qualitative evidence in local plans, strategies and cabinet reports, citizens can identify their contributions to the decision-making process. An observatory was sought that could allow the council to understand what the community is "saying and enables them to understand the restrictions we're operating under" (FG1). Users saw this process as mitigating citizens' tendency to offer complaint over constructive feedback. A BID representative pointed out: "You could have a bingo card for the things people will complain about. […] When people change their minds, they forget what they thought in the first place" (FG3). Qualitative insights on an observatory provide points of shared transparency and accountability between users, service providers and political representatives.

Where numbers do not suffice – when the "numerical breakdown" fails to resonate with users (FG2) – storytelling emerges as an important tool. For users, qualitative data is often synonymous with narrative (WS2). Yet given varied literacy levels across and within communities, stories need to be carefully shaped for different audiences. Local authorities want to know "where the story is being told" and how case studies can connect "qualitative and quantitative data" (FG4). Users portrayed citizens as responding more to stories about place than to statistics on an area: residents want to know what has happened to improve where they live, or they want to know how a problem has been resolved. Narrative forms, which can combine representational and nonrepresentational experiences, provide a means of connecting different types of data.

Local authorities highlighted the lack of methodological expertise for rigorously parsing, evaluating and connecting qualitative data, especially when it depicted conflicting and complicated views (FG4). Not all qualitative data was viewed and treated equally and there were concerns to mitigate perceived biases in how data was presented (WS2). Local authorities noted that negative information – "complaints […] from very opinionated people" – were often gathered, but "the neutral and positive stuff" would be "really helpful to save" (FG1). While complaints are collected via formal processes, there is no equivalent system for other types of feedback. There is, though, an appetite for systems

that represent and navigate multivalent perspectives, supporting organizations to establish reporting mechanisms that reflect a diversity of data. These systems help to capture the fundamental ambivalence that often underpins the lived and felt experience of place.

The need to gather and understand the wide variety of citizen's perceptions is pronounced for BIDs. These organizations often find mismatches between public perception and statistical evidence. As a BID representative put it: "There is often a thirst for data but also disbelief in what that data reveals" (FG3). It is often thought that community issues – such as vacancies, closures, anti-social behaviour, footfall – "must be worse than" what the data in fact suggests (FG3). There is an anxiety that this data is "narrow and difficult to report back in bigger contexts" (FG3). Yet this data, which illustrates the lived and felt experience of place, is acknowledged as crucial for operating these organizations. The clear sense that "economic data alone is not enough" to support local businesses is matched with the need to supplement this data with perceptions about the role of these businesses in communities (FG3). The value of perception data lies in its metonymic legitimacy, particularly its capacity to indicate a wider experience of place that is not revealed in quantitative datasets.

There were concerns, however, to avoid cherry-picking through qualitative data in potentially misleading ways, using approaches that lack rigour and amplifying positive stories of place contrary to widely-held perceptions. This selectiveness arises when organizations use qualitative data to illuminate quantitative reporting. As a community worker noted: "Partners ask very specific questions about the data. They don't comb through it themselves" (FG2). This point illuminates a key tension: the requirement to have specific data paired with the desire for data that can embellish reporting. Partners tend to ask for "specific questions or airy-fairy surveys that don't reveal much: there is never much in the middle" (FG2). The context for qualitative data should foreground its provenance, scope and complexity. A reflexive approach to data connection acknowledges the conditions in which qualitative data is generated and the researchers' role in that generation. This formal engagement with research could give decision-makers more confidence when engaging with qualitative data on an observatory.

5.3. Use

The use of qualitative data is the third key concern of users. Use refers to the implementation, evaluation and ongoing maintenance of data for decision-making.

In cultural policy, standardized protocols for including qualitative data in decision-making are seen as crucial but uncommon. Without them, local authorities are left asking limited questions such as: "Can and should decisions [about cultural and community assets] be made on qualitative data alone?" (FG4). The need to understand the reach and value of qualitative data on its own terms is pressing: "We want to try to change local attitudes […] and local opinion is expressed qualitatively" (FG3). Methodical assessment of qualitative insights was sought to instrumentalise the lived and felt experience of communities and develop place-based policies.

Yet local authorities were concerned that they had less expertise in qualitative approaches, that data takes time to gather and process, and that conclusions can be biased and lack rigour (FG4). The key problem is the skills gap and institutional limitations, which prevent users from addressing the ambiguity of qualitative data when

making decisions, especially for community groups that often work across and within ward boundaries, which can have vastly different levels of need and deprivation (FG2). Informal data gathering is challenging for decision-makers, and the transformation of this type of data into stories about place ignites concerns about its rigour and credibility. Even with skills and training, local authorities have strategic needs that limit their ability to use innovative approaches. A digital strategist argued: "You would expect university researchers to engage with regional observatories, but we need to help SMEs, community groups, and cultural-volunteer organizations" (I3). How to address the capacity of resource-sensitive groups is an underlying concern for a qualitative data observatory.

There is a further demand to build innovation in data strategies so that public and procedural needs can be met, training in qualitative research can be mandated, and organizations can be held accountable for their reporting. A BID representative illuminated this point: "If the perception doesn't meet reality [on a policy issue], is there a place strategy we can use to address that?" (FG3). Combined approaches to including qualitative data in local plans and strategies are being sought, specifically methods that demonstrate an analytical breadth and depth. As a local authority officer insisted: "[We are interested] in innovative ways of digging around in datasets and the opportunities to use rich qualitative research that lends itself to [quantitative] data" (FG4). Combining datasets to illuminate the lived and felt experience of place requires an open approach to what counts as data, but it also demands rigorous, credible protocols that give confidence to decision-makers.

The heterogenous quality of qualitative data has implications for its relative rigour, formality and completion. This challenge is made more complex by the external needs that this data is required to serve. Such data is important for understanding community needs and evaluating investments, specifically for funding applications and reporting requirements. A community worker was asked to supply information for these proposals: "We use [qualitative] data partly to guide what we do for the community, and partners use it for bids" (FG2). Here, qualitative data serves two functions: it provides crucial insights into the lived and felt experience of communities for local organizations, and it must be translated into cited, substantive evidence for funding bodies and accountable partners.

Yet mechanisms are rarely adequate to receive this data because partners emphasize quantitative metrics to measure outcomes. A local authority officer referenced a form that asked whether the number of people attending an event "were volunteers or in work", rather than qualitative insights into what constituted volunteering or meaningful work (WS2). This example highlights a requirement for many local organizations: the ability to record the impact of their activities. A community worker noted that "numbers are important for measuring impact, but how do you measure the impact of one conversation that makes two elderly people feel less isolated? It's not always about the number of people" (FG2). The metonymic legitimacy of lived and felt experience has value: it is not generalizable data in quantitative terms, but it indicates wider impacts that support local place interventions.

Evaluations of place interventions require a more open and longer-term approach that extends beyond the quantitative, positivist and econometric methods that currently dominate policy. There was an awareness that local councillors want findings in an "old-fashioned format", and that these expectations can inhibit informal, experimental reporting of lived and felt experience (FG1). There is a need for novel reporting structures that support the transparent and accountable input of qualitative data into decision-making.

Communities, local decision-makers and external funders were recognized as key users of qualitative data. For a digital strategist, an "approach to making things open" was connected to the long-term sustainability of observatories (I3). There is recognition that local authority officers and platform managers cannot "assume that there's always going to be someone looking at [the observatory] and that it is always going to be funded" (I3). The vagaries of political demands and funding priorities mean that observatories require longstanding engagement to survive. This scenario suggests that broad community participation should be encouraged: "If you make [the observatory] open, you allow it to have a life of its own. If the wider community have ownership and input, […] it will continue in some form" (I3). The open-access observatory has implications not just for the future but the present. A local authority officer noted: "[The observatory] needs to be self-service. We don't have any centralized capacity" (FG1). The limited resources of organizations make open-access functions on an observatory not only desirable but necessary.

The need to understand scale and comparison are likewise pressing concerns for local authorities, which must benchmark their data against comparative areas. The funding culture of competitive rather than collaborative placemaking leads organizations to measure success against geographical and statistical neighbours. This context raises difficult data-specific questions about comparative evaluation. A BID representative stated: "It's important to contextualize why there might be differences between different locations. We must be aware of the caveats of comparison and look at the regional and national picture" (FG3). Such processes cannot be captured by the current administrative foundations of many organizations and the one-size-fits-all approach to monitoring and evaluation. These challenges also exist for the comparison of quantitative data, where context is required to explain significant discrepancies in datasets. This contextualizing might require qualitative insights that communicate place specificities.

Yet comparing qualitative datasets appeared daunting for many organizations. As a BID representative put it: "Comparison is even harder with qualitative data: you often end up counting it anyway" (FG3). Counting qualitative data, by ascribing labels to different themes, risks diluting insights from the evidence. Responsive comparative tools to analyse cross-survey responses are required: "If it's a really specific question, it's easier to delve deeper" (FG3). This work demands reconceptualising how qualitative data comparison functions. A BID representative illustrated the point: "Often the same people complete [surveys] each quarter, but not always, so data is never directly comparable" (FG3). The challenges of comparison refocus the practical difficulties of aggregating and disaggregating data, and highlight the importance of forging connections between local, regional, national and international data scales, including a growing acknowledgement of neighbourhood data as a granular subdivision of local data.

6. Discussion

6.1. Implications for a qualitative data observatory

In the following section, we the explore the implications of our findings for the development of a qualitative data observatory.

First, provenance is necessary for user confidence in the rigour and credibility of qualitative data. To capture how data is generated, we opt for the term *data biography*. D'Ignazio argues that "the downside of discovering data through a quick Google search is that the data arrives at our doorstep completely decontextualized, without explanation of why it was collected, who collected it, in what way, and what its known limitations are" (2017, 10). Data biographies may provide a solution to this problem:

> Instead of following a typical data analysis process where you acquire a dataset and work forward to see what meaning there might be in the data, creating a data biography requires learners to go backwards in time before engaging in analysis, and describe how a dataset came to be in the world (2017: 10).

This process is crucial for analysing data in context, and we augment D'Ignazio's definition by suggesting that data biographies serve as more flexible forms of metadata in qualitative data analysis. Data biographies support story anthologies that outline not just how each qualitative dataset in an observatory came to be collected, but how those datasets might be *connected*. Stories do not replace or prohibit access to data but make it sustainable by imbuing observatories with clear methodological principles. Yet the use of narrative has implications for the privacy and confidentiality of citizens who contribute their data, and the need for processes that allow them to retain ownership of that data (Tiropanis 2022).

Second, these types of storytelling and narratives are central to the purpose of a qualitative data observatory and require transparent methodologies. Stories support top-layer analysis by eschewing comparison of raw, heterogeneous data. A qualitative data observatory should mediate between competing interpretations by narrating the relationship between unanalysed data and data biographies, preventing users from conflating analysed and unanalysed data. This format has been mooted in recent projects, where the observatory itself can act as a middle layer between complex "big data" and web data (Tiropanis et al. 2014a). Data is fed into an observatory on several levels: one, via observatory infrastructure; two, via signposting such as dashboards, websites, reports, queries, events, alerts; and three, via information systems used for decision-making (Caiaffa et al. 2014). Taking the layered approach to presenting qualitative data improves its accessibility and foregrounds the partiality of its analysis.

Third, the act of reimagining observatories through data biographies reveals the instrumental value of presenting complex qualitative data to different groups. Complexity does not indicate that the data lacks rigour; instead, it is embraced to tell richer stories about place. Complexity need not be barrier to participation. Limited access to observatories highlights the reliance on professional data analysts (Tiropanis et al. 2014a) and the importance of well-integrated participatory processes (Caiaffa et al. 2014). Some authors advocate for better solutions based on citizen consultation (Cieslik et al. 2018); some seek to redress absences in local knowledge (Karpouzoglou et al. 2016); and some integrate layers of collaborative and participatory data (Liu et al. 2014). All these solutions require specialized protocols for generating qualitative data, and the need to engage with different audiences is essential. To move beyond the experiences of self-selecting participants, the content and architecture of a qualitative data observatory should be adapted for different groups. The division of data into audience segments affects how audience data is used in reporting structures, so it is vital that different audiences have

consistent access. A sustainable observatory relies on data that is maintained to facilitate continued meaningful participation. Having the observatory serve complex, multiple needs means it can address diverse, multiple audiences.

Fourth, insights from qualitative data are not being properly understood, organized and accessed. A qualitative data observatory could enable users to explore connections between large and heterogenous datasets, and to search across different sources and make thematic connections between data. These connections could be supported by a coherent, consistent observatory architecture (Tiropanis et al. 2014b) with comparative typologies that group data by certain themes (Røttingen et al. 2013). Crucially, there has been a qualitative turn in data observatory studies (Decuypere 2020; Willaert et al. 2020). This turn reveals the impulse to overlay statistical and scientific data with narratives that act as metadata (Mackay et al. 2015). Metadata labels, explains and gives meaning to other data: it can bring together otherwise incompatible datasets, influence policy and behaviour change, and support conversations about sustainable futures (Helgeson, Glynn, and Chabay 2022).

Fifth, the density of qualitative data, and its ability to provide information about the wider experience of place through narrative and storytelling, encourages creative thinking about what metadata looks like and how it functions. Stories on an observatory can present, connect and transform metadata. Critical discussions about observatories have deployed various terminologies for connecting datasets but standardized structures for metadata are needed (Tiropanis et al. 2014b). More data requires consistent connections within and between observatories. These connections can be forged by metadata that includes URLs and dataset ID numbers (Tiropanis et al. 2014b). Metadata facilitates keyword search retrieval and comparison, and it offers structured themes that draw connections between formally distinct datasets. Because qualitative data is often heterogeneous, metadata is a crucial form of connection. Our exchanges show that users understand metadata in imaginative ways, and that identifying how qualitative data has been generated is key to making novel connections between data.

Sixth, a qualitative data observatory can respond to the critical turns towards neighbourhood data, granular data and perception data. By offering narratives on subjects at ward, community and hyper-local levels, observatories engage with the complexity of place-specific issues (Ajates et al. 2020; Karpouzoglou et al. 2016). The search functions of an observatory benefit from multiple perspectives: it is important to avoid the binary of perception data and statistical data, and to remain wary of comparative tools that encourage competitive placemaking and thematic counting. A qualitative data observatory can focus on enabling tools: one, it allows users to search by need and available resources, which returns a cross-section of data that fulfils reporting requirements but mitigates cherry-picking information; and two, it builds systems that focus on community perspectives, precise data units and local narratives, which can offer accurate portrayals of lived and felt experience in these places.

Seventh, the pull between public and strategic need must be factored into decision-making, especially for organizations who reach different conclusions about their data. This point reinforces the importance of search, filter and tagging functions that organize data by need and provide easy access to relevant data. Observatories offer citizens the chance to view data about their places: this transparency provides rigour for a qualitative data observatory, which needs to maintain public trust, mitigate challenges of combining

datasets, and develop robust ethical procedures. These ambitions can be achieved by representing both public perception and evidence-informed analysis of local issues. Although widening access can increase capacity, it compounds rather than transcends issues of data access, literacy and ethics. Yet the difficulties of employing permanent data analysts do not prohibit working with qualitative data. Although analysts are not realistic for many organizational budgets, a "two-way approach" that combines a top-down "expert or researcher led framework" with "bottom-up observations" can create a two-directional platform of engagement and participation (Keseru, Wuytens, and Macharis 2019, 487).

Eighth, sustaining a qualitative data observatory through a mediated open-source function poses important questions about the breadth of users who can be included. Specifically, it asks who can provide, order and access qualitative data. That an observatory should target content at groups with different levels of knowledge and understanding was axiomatic among users. In this context, deficits in data literacy should be read through recurring issues of transparency and ethics, which remain in tension with data integrity. While access is crucial, data sources from different places are difficult to validate, curate and verify, so they risk producing potentially meaningless datasets. Establishing the integrity of data, specifically its rigour and credibility, requires protocols that allow it to be used for funding, impact and reporting. Likewise, local authorities know the importance of data management and review plans while lacking capacity for full-scale ethics procedures, which are vital given the personal nature of much qualitative data.

Ninth, a qualitative data observatory must determine its data collection and analysis. A resilient observatory should meaningfully respond to fluctuations in policy, governance, public priorities and community engagement. Yet having data that possesses the longevity to meet these needs raises two problems. One, an observatory should retain its live function but acknowledge how changing contexts might make historical data newly relevant. Two, an observatory should preserve qualitative data while remaining sensitive to shifting ethical modes of accessibility and transparency. Maintaining consistent and comparable data over time is challenging, and sustainability carries significant costs. Sustaining datasets to enable historical comparisons is enticing, but producing longitudinal qualitative research is complex. It relies on mechanisms that make sure data collection is repeated, reiterated and comparable. This ask is expensive for local authorities, given that much qualitative data comes from informal sources. An observatory can use data biographies to facilitate comparisons with historical and geographical data, which activates historical data to address shifting contexts and unexpected crises. Using data biographies to extend datasets requires understood and trusted protocols, which the final section organizes into a framework for a qualitative data observatory.

This framework in Table 4 has four categories, organized into columns:

1. The three key stages in the data engagement process: generation, connection, use.
2. The nine key features of existing observatories, identified in the extant literature, organized by the corresponding stage in the data process.
3. The twenty-seven insights into how users engage with qualitative data.
4. The nine recommendations for how a qualitative data observatory can be developed in response to these stages, features and insights.

Table 4. A qualitative data observatory framework.

Stage in Data Process	Data Observatory Features	User Qualitative Insights	Qualitative Data Observatory
Generation	Citizen science	Volume and heterogeneity Perceived democratic deficit Provenance marking	Data biographies support story anthologies about data collection
	Real-time monitoring	Incomplete, informal data Strategic data literacy Highly granular data	Narrate the relationship between raw data and data biographies
	Geographical scalability	Seldom heard communities Young people engagement Longitudinal coproduction	Present complex qualitative data to different groups and audiences
Connection	Digital methodologies	Quantitative data preference Self-service, experiment, access Training, capacity, resources	Explore connections between large and heterogenous datasets
	Combined analysis	Knowledge discrepancy Transparency and accountability Storytelling as a tool	Creative narratives that present, connect and transform metadata
	Agile responsiveness	Multivalent perspectives Perception-statistics mismatch Cherry-picking concerns	Focus on community perspective, data units and local place narratives
Use	Updatable architecture	Standardized protocols Skills gap and institutional limits Innovative data strategies	Create a two-directional platform of engagement and participation
	Dataset consistency	Needs and investment evaluation Activity impact recording Novel reporting structures	Establish data integrity protocols for funding, impact and reporting
	Reusable data	Long-term sustainability Collaborative placemaking Responsive comparative tools	Activate historical data to address changing contexts and crises

7. Conclusion: A qualitative data observatory framework

Place will remain an influential lens for policymakers. We argue that qualitative data provides unique means of making accessible the lived and felt experiences of place for policymaking. Qualitative methods produce rich and detailed findings, but the types of data generated – creative, temporary, hyper-local – are complex to analyse, aggregate and meaningfully share, particularly within the limited capacity of local authorities and partner organizations.

In the UK, this complexity is made visible in calls for new data observatories. This article investigates the potential and principles of a qualitative data observatory. Our framework includes: first, the rigorous identification of how this data is generated,

establishing provenance through data biographies; second, the novel understanding of how this data is connected, signposting meaningful links between datasets; and third, the practical outline of how this data is used, suggesting multifunctional presentations of comparable data.

Observatories of all kinds must adapt to funding, policymaking and reporting structures that characterize evolving social, cultural and political environments. As the demands for data shift, so must the observatory that informs the generation, connection and use of this data. Observatories can support the democratic mandate of organizations. This self-consciously political and ethical emphasis is embedded in the practical concerns of users with whom we engaged in this research. The different participant groups demonstrated the complexities of engaging with qualitative data and revealed existing hierarchies that underpin relationships with communities, national funders, policymakers and other organizations.

Returning our focus to place-based decision-making, the qualitative data observatory framework enables lived and felt experience to be articulated as qualitative data, and gives these experiences status, voice and impact. This works applies to data users who advocate for their agendas and to policymakers who respond to these agendas. The content analysis shows that observatories appear in various settings: culture, health, technology, place and the environment. The qualitative data observatory framework developed in this article is therefore applicable to decision-makers who generate, connect and use data across a range of contexts, sectors and needs.

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Notes on contributors

Professor *Nicky Marsh* is a Co-Director of Southampton Institute for Arts and Humanities and works on culture, economics and place. Publications include Credit Culture (Cambridge University Press, 2020) and Invested (Chicago University Press, 2023).

Daniel Ashton is Professor of Cultural and Creative Industries at the University of Southampton. He is also Co-Director of the Work Futures Research Centre and Culture and Policy Lead with Southampton Institute for Arts and Humanities.

Joseph Owen is a Research Fellow in the Southampton Institute for Arts and Humanities. He is a Co-Director of the Centre for Modern and Contemporary Writing and coordinates the Culture and Creativity Policy Network.

ORCID

Nicky Marsh http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4107-1932
Daniel Ashton http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7572-3818
Joseph Owen http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2483-6502

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