

Designing Capability Indicators for Community-led Tourism

Good Organisation and The Policy Co-op

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Cover Image: **Castlegate Museum** 'Postcards From The Edge'

A York based photography project supporting rough sleepers to capture images of heritage attractions beyond the city centre.

Introduction

There are now indicators for many aspects of sustainable tourism.¹ But, too many of these indicators do not measure what matters for communities (Islam, Lovelock and Coetzee, 2023; Miller and Torres-Delgado, 2023). This briefing document presents an innovative framework to evaluate sustainable tourism, one which advances a commitment to community-led tourism (CLT) and community wealth development. It does so through the application of the capabilities approach to a series of CLT activities in the city of York.

This briefing is result of a pilot research project carried out by Good Organisation and The Policy Co-op between October 2025 and March 2026. It aims to promote the value of CLT within the broader tourism strategy in the city of York. It can also be of use to other cities and towns experiencing the pressures of high levels of tourism and with an interest on local residents' well-being. The evidence presented here suggests 28 CLT indicators that emphasise the principles of people centredness, community wealth building and economic sustainability.

First a capability approach is briefly introduced to underline the need of bringing local people together to create opportunities for them to do and be what they most value. Next, we explain how the capability approach is aligned with the principles of sustainable tourism and community wealth building to create what we call here a 'community-led tourism framework'. Based on three case studies illustrative of CLT initiatives in York, a set of indicators is presented. Finally, suggestions on the implementation of these indicators are offered.

Why are we suggesting the capability approach?

Traditional approaches to evaluation tend to focus on measuring outcomes such as income, training and skills, distribution of goods, or legal rights (What Works Scotland, 2015:3). The capability approach, which was originally developed by the economist Amartya Sen (2000:87), takes a different orientation. It seeks to understand how policies and programmes impact on what people are actually able to do and be. It assesses how policies and programmes enable individuals 'to do or be those things that they value doing or being' (Binet et al., 2025:352; Jenssen, 2024).

Against this background, the capability approach is founded on two key concepts: capabilities and functionings:

- Capabilities are a person's real freedoms/opportunities to achieve those things that they value doing.
- Functionings are the various things a person values doing or being.

For example, ‘a computer is a resource that provides the opportunity and freedom to calculate, draw, read and write (capability), and by using it, one can be educated (functioning)’ (Bartolomei et al., 2024:370).

Through this approach, the evaluation of any programme or policy should aim to understand how individuals bring together different combinations of capabilities to produce the different functionings that they value doing or being. Not everyone will convert capabilities into functionings in the same way. How they use capabilities and what for will depend on three types of conversion factors:

- Personal: age, gender, disability, etc.
- Social: relations with others, access to (public) service provision or spaces
- Environmental: structural inequalities, urban/rural, clean/polluted nature

Returning to the example of the computer and conversion factors: its use may be limited by technical illiteracy (social factor) or living in an area with poor digital networks (social and environmental factors) (Bartolomei et al., 2024).

Capability approach, sustainable community tourism and wealth building

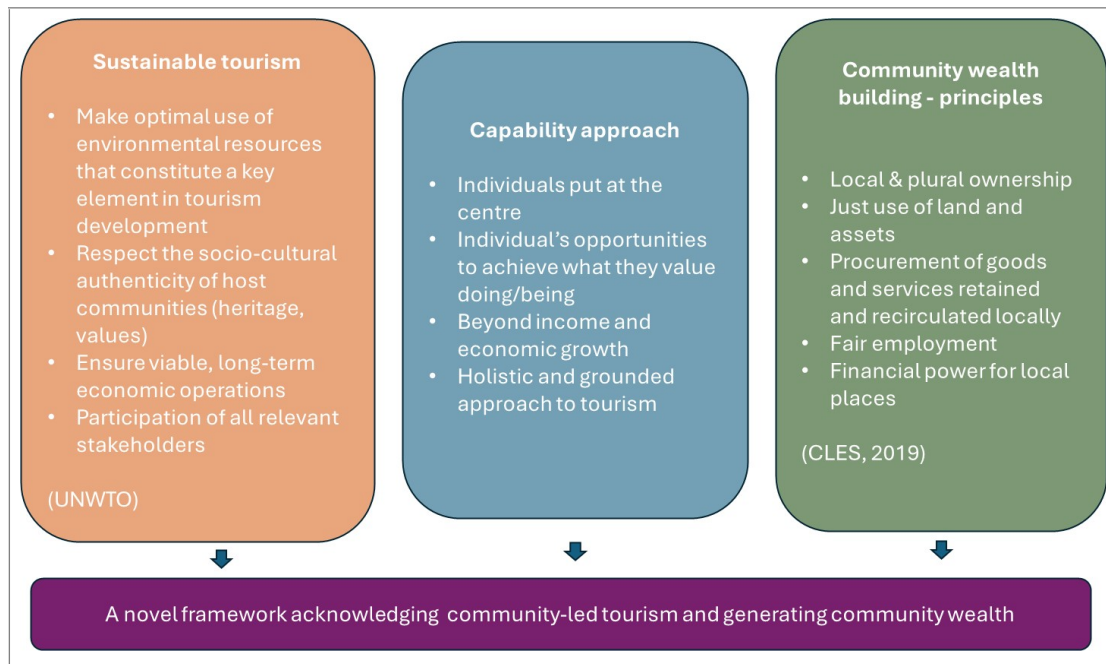
By adopting the capability approach, individuals are put at the centre of any evaluation of tourism policies and programmes. It encourages us to think beyond narrow measures of income and economic growth, by focusing on how tourism advances well-being (functionings) and increases the opportunities (capabilities) to pursue well-being. The approach invites us to be more holistic by considering the personal, social and environmental factors that impact people’s lives.

Alternatively put, the capability approach questions what tourism delivers and does for communities. In contrast to standard approaches to sustainable tourism, spearheaded by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (www.untourism.int), it focuses attention on the actual everyday impacts of tourism on communities in the ‘now’ rather than displacing attention towards a set of normative environmental, economic and socio-cultural dimensions of yet-to-come sustainable futures.

Also, we recognise the value brought by discourses on community wealth building. They have been important to CLT in their laudable work at emphasising economic inclusivity to mainstream models of economic growth (CLES, 2019; Crisp et al., 2024). However, we believe that in its application to tourism, this community wealth orientation risks generating an overly narrow focus on income and local market economies and assets, overlooking people-centredness and changes to well-being. The capability approach helps us to rescue the latter, while including social and cultural elements relevant to tourism.

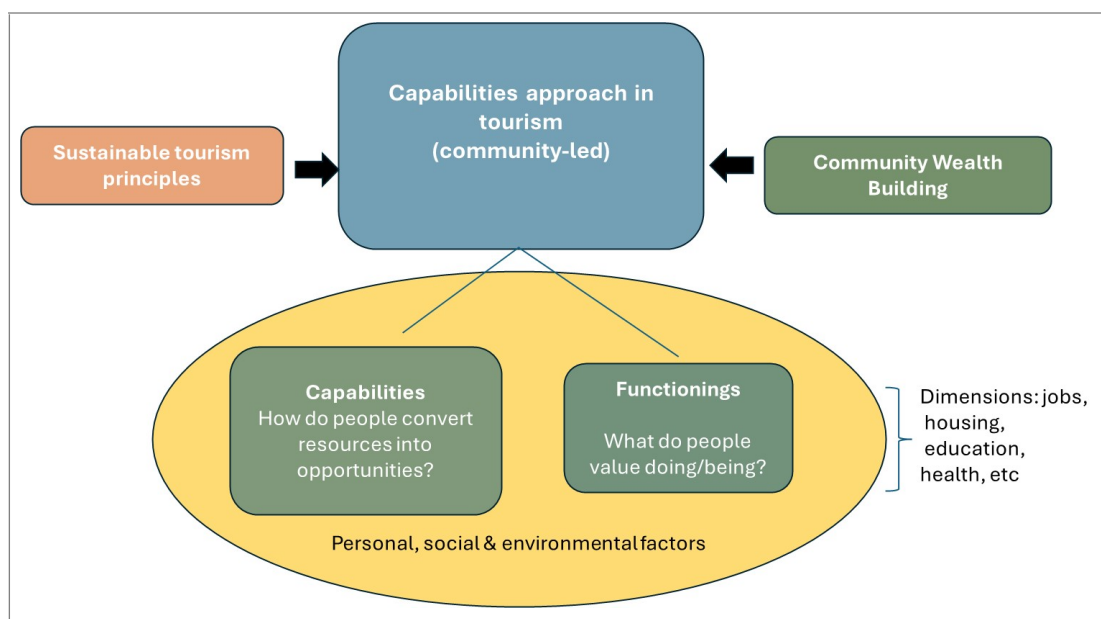
Figure 1 summarises the principles set by the capability approach, sustainable tourism and community wealth. It illustrates their differences but also their complementarities.

Figure 1. Contrasting sustainable tourism, capabilities and community wealth



We believe that in bringing together these three models we can create a framework that is feasible to implement and assess CLT, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The CLT framework



The case of York and its tourist economy

York is one of the leading tourist destination cities in the UK. It has global attractions like York Minster, the Shambles and the National Railway Museum. In 2024, the city attracted 9.4 million visitors. Its tourist economy generated an estimated £2.01 billion and supported approximately 16,800 jobs across the city (Global Tourism Solutions, 2024; Make It York, 2025). However, like other destinations across the globe, the popularity of York with tourists can impact negatively on local communities. Across different cities, local residents have voiced concerns over how the tourist economy has contributed to rising housing prices and commercial rents, added to congestion and anti-social behaviour in city centres, and increased pressures on local infrastructures and the environment (Beddington, 2024; Edwards, 2025; Jones et al., 2025; Postma and Schmuecker, 2017)

The City of York's Tourism Strategy seeks to protect the city's historical legacy while benefitting from future opportunities. It establishes an 8-year transformative vision to position the city as a leader in regenerative tourism which is committed to protecting the environment and advancing the city's culture and heritage (City of York Council, 2024:10). Its vision recognises that the attractiveness of York for visitors comes from both its global attractions and its neighbourhood and communities, what it calls York's 'local hood, its atmosphere and non-touristic in-between spaces' (2024: 24).

At the same time, it acknowledges that local residents and visitors both benefit from improvements to green infrastructure and parks, better transport connections, and the development of vibrant cultural sector with theatre, events, festivals and increased access to heritage. Its five strategic priorities thus commit the Council and its local partners across York to:

- building a regenerative visitor economy;
- ensuring that tourism contributes to a green York;
- enriching the culture offer, creative sector and heritage of the city;
- aligning tourism to efforts to improve the quality of life of residents and local neighbourhoods;
- building skills and career development opportunities in the tourist economy (City of York Council, 2024:11).

Piloting the framework through a case-study selection

To elaborate a set of indicators that responds to the CLT framework, shown in Figures 1 and 2, and that also align with the priorities of York's tourism strategy, we piloted three case studies: Aesthetica fringe festival, York Unlocked CIO open weekends and the Bluebird Bakery (see boxes below).

We concluded, these cases are illustrative of tourism activities in York, not only for their contribution to the local economy and cultural offer, but also for their close attachment with local residents and the development of community well-being. They are linked to attractions for visitors to York, while originating and giving back to York's residents and local communities. Although most of the case studies' activities are centred in York's city centre, they also reach areas outside the city walls. This geographical dispersion is an important aspect in our analysis-previously underlined by residents (Jones et al., 2025)- as it helps to capture broader patterns of inclusion in the local tourism economy.

Box 1. The Aesthetica Fringe Festival

Good Organisation has shown research (Jones et al., 2025) on residents' desire for greater involvement in York's festivals. Festivals are seen as fostering pride, opportunity for cultural development and skills, and a sense of belonging, which in turn contribute to improved health and well-being of residents. In November 2025, with the aim of evidencing festival potentiality, Good Organisation supported the organisation of a creative festival, fringe to York's international Aesthetica Film Festival (AFF). AFF alone attracts ca. 28,000 visitors across multiple venues, with a noticeable impact on hotel bookings and the hospitality sector.

Alongside the CEO of AFF and with funding from the Joseph Rountree Foundation, the fringe followed the Edinburgh-Fringe model, in which participating creatives organise and promote their own events. AFF developed promotional materials, organised the application process, and established a presence on the festival's website. Ten spark grants were given to participants to contribute to their performance and printing costs. AFF was responsible for selecting the performers and determining who would receive the grants. A total of 24 performers were chosen, mostly residing in York and surrounding areas. AFF also gave performers a pass to attend the film festival.

Results from interviews and a survey designed by Good Organisation show the importance of community building and networking, accessing new local venues and reaching new local audiences.

Box 2. York Unlocked

York Unlocked CIO (YU) is a charity founded in 2022 to open York's architecture and urban landscape to the public. It is considered an initiative that promotes CLT because it is all organised and operated by York residents on a voluntary basis and with external funding. Through its mission, and in line with community wealth building, each year YU contributes over one weekend to a more just use of York's architecture and heritage assets (which tend to be underused) and new urban spaces. It also allows residents to share the city's socio-cultural values with visitors.

It has a close attachment with York because it does not only depend on the city's heritage and urban landscape, it also involves and includes its residents. According to the YU report (2025), 60% of people visiting the open weekend were from York and the weekend contributed to the city's local economy by £200,000. Although YU is targeting local residents, it also depends on external visitors' interest and consumption of local goods and services. Hence, the participation of both local residents and visitors is important to maintain and develop the success of YU.

The success of YU in connecting residents with buildings of architectural and historical heritage has also reached commercial purposes promoting change in the urban landscape. For example the development-restoration of the retreat in Heslington suburb, for which YU was invited to host the developer's ([P J Livesey](#)) community open-day.

Results from the interviews show that the importance of community building and networking, peer-to-peer learning, access to new buildings or public spaces and attachment to place.

Box 3. Bluebird Bakery

Bluebird Bakery is a limited company, founded in 2015. It is rooted in the community of York's city centre. Place and product are terms that signify a lot about the bakery, their purpose and their values. The quality of their bread and the founders' passion for the integrity of their products resulted in business growth by word-of-mouth advertising. The business grew organically and a decision to open in Acomb suburb, served to deepen their commitment to community-oriented actions. The bakery now sells its bread at six locations across Yorkshire, tapping into both local and tourist markets.

Knowing their customers, treating their employees fairly, and endeavouring to deliver products in an ethical and sustainable way are some of the principles by which the bakery seeks to operate. These principles align to CLT and community wealth insofar as local procurement of goods and services that the bakery offers target the local economy while being committed to the green environment. For example, by sourcing ingredients from local suppliers and selling their products to and through local restaurants and delicatessens; avoiding the use of plastic packaging; donating surplus product to local foodbanks and using food residue for local farming.

In seeking to promote York socio-cultural environment, the Acomb branch serves in the evening as a community hub to host events and social gatherings, many of which build a sense of community and inclusion while building the bakery's brand.

Interview data underline the importance of community building and networking, employee-peer learning, attachment to place and provision of a multiple-use venue.

Suggested indicators for community-led tourism

As indicated in Boxes 1-3, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted between December 2025 and January 2026 -with artists participating in the fringe festival, volunteers working in the York Unlocked open weekends and founders of the Bluebird Bakery. The interviews included questions framed under the CLT framework depicted in Figures 1 and 2. The data collected led to the design of 28 CLT indicators. They emphasise well-being through the city's physical conditions and relational opportunities that local residents convert to achieve such well-being or that local businesses offer to contribute to community wealth building.

These indicators can be used to set a baseline of CLT in the city and to subsequently monitor change over time. Because of the pilot nature of this research project, outcome or performance indicators were not included. This is something that fell outside the scope of the project, but which is highly recommended to be developed for future plans.

Table 1 summarises the nine capability dimensions in which the 28 indicators are distributed. These dimensions stem from the CLT framework depicted in Figure 1.

Table 1. Capability dimensions and indicators

Capability dimension	No. of indicators	Target audience
Accessing spaces or venues	3	- Businesses /VCSE organisations
Generating and expressing place attachment	8	- Residents
Creating community networks	3	- Businesses /VCSE organisations - Residents
Enhancing physical and mental well-being	2	- Residents
Learning from others	2	- Residents - Businesses /VCSE organisations
Accessing fair employment	3	- Businesses /VCSE organisations
Building reputational capital	2	- Businesses /VCSE organisations
Cross-subsidising local activities	1	- Businesses /VCSE organisations
Contributing to the circular economy	4	- Businesses /VCSE organisations

The full list of indicators, alongside a brief explanation of their capability dimension, is presented in Annex 1. There are three target audiences that the indicators engage:

local residents, VCSE organisations and business associations, primordial in the hospitality, cultural and creative industries. The latter two groups have been put together in the indicator design, because both sectors contribute to the city's skills, venue offer and local economy. We suggest collecting data and reaching each of these audiences can be best achieved through the distribution of an annual CLT city-wide survey.

Reflections and recommendations

As described in Boxes 1-3, the case studies selected do not fully capture or map all the characteristics that a CLT approach might very well generate. Most notably, aspects related to inclusion, accessibility and environmental sustainability were less prominent or did not feature in the stories that data interviews provided.

In the fringe festival, accessibility to venues by performers was caught in tension with the film festival. Also not all shows were inclusive to all types of audiences. For example, people with hearing disabilities were perceived as excluded from oral performances. Similarly, some venues of YU open weekends were exclusive to people with physical disabilities and by default was attracting more adult and White groups of the population. In both cases although people cycled or walked to move around and attend shows and buildings, it was perceived that this was a default given the city's layout rather than purposeful design to incentivise environmentally friendly travel. The bakery presented sustainable initiatives through food waste and plastic reduction, but they also seemed to be part of a strategy to distinguish the bakery's brand in the local market.

The silences or omissions that the case studies highlight do not aim to undermine the ethos and laudable work behind these local initiatives. Instead, they show the value of the capability approach, in that it reminds us about the aspects that CLT should continuously question to ensure people-centredness is factored within the aspirations that community wealth pursues. In other words, tourism in itself will not automatically ameliorate the negative impacts of market economies. But through the persistent application of a CLT framework, local stakeholders can contribute to putting communities and capabilities -which help people produce the functionings that communities value- at the centre of the tourism initiatives and dialogues across the city. Thus, CLT acts as a vehicle to ameliorate the negative impacts of tourism by prompting the sector to give something back to local communities.

In keeping with our data-driven and pilot-based approach, we have limited our set of indicators presented in Annex 1 to the lessons and evidence generated in our case studies. If the implementation of these CLT indicators is to be pursued, we recommend that environmental sustainability and accessibility indicators are also included in future work. As mentioned above, these monitoring indicators will only provide a baseline for the aspects regarding people-centredness, wealth building, and economic sustainability.

Moving forward, if ambitions exist to pursue outcome indicators, more thought must be given to the design of change measures to assess performance. This cannot be obtained until the monitoring indicators are implemented. Based on the latter, interested stakeholders shall be in a better position to assess what to measure against a set of aspirations that drive the development of CLT. For example, an outcome indicator could be the percentage of the resident population that enjoys the benefits of tourism through CLT initiatives versus the percentage of visitors enjoying the benefits of all types of tourism.

In conclusion, we have put in place a set of indicators of CLT that bring together the foundational pillars of our novel framing of capabilities and functionings. These indicators can inform policy debates and community dialogues across cities. They engage different stakeholders, from residents and community organisations, local venues and businesses, to anchor organisations and local authorities. Indeed, our focus on capabilities has led us to evidence and underline the multiple contributions of CLT, from tourism to well-being, learning, employment and place attachment. CLT has potential to cut across policy issues and empower communities as part of a broader strategy of place making.

Guided by the original objectives of our inquiry, we thus end with a series of recommendations for those engaged in tourism and the formulation of tourism policies and strategies across the city of York. Our evidence calls upon the Tourism Advisory Board and the anchor organisations represented on it to:

1. Recognise the social value of CLT across York, integrating it into mainstream policies seeking to advance the development of sustainable communities in the city.
2. Engage with community organisations to build a holistic and systematic set of CLT indicators across the city, completing or extending the capabilities framework piloted in this study.
3. Sponsor an annual survey of CLT and its impacts across the city of York, in collaboration with local universities and colleges, infrastructure organisations and the local and strategic authorities.
4. Appoint an organisational body or create a partnership in charge of managing the survey to ensure coordination in its design, distribution, collection of data and analysis.
5. Over time, discuss and set targets to guide the future of CLT in the city.

Acknowledgements

Good Organisation and The Policy Coop are very grateful to all research participants for their time and disposition to share with us their experiences. This research project followed ethics standards underlined by The Policy Coop's Research Ethics Policy and Good Organisation's Data Protection Policy.

For transparency, accuracy, and to ensure completeness of data, a draft version of this report was shared with research participants. Participants confirmed they were happy with the report, including their own business description in the vignette case study sections of the report.

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Annex 1. Community-Led Tourism Indicators and Their Capability Dimensions

Capabilities	CLT dimensions	Indicators
Accessing spaces or venues	Opening venues that are public or privately owned to the public expands the public realm, develops place attachment and helps to build communities and community connections. Venues can become community assets or spaces for multiple uses despite these not being part of their primary mission. In the process, local venues can gain the capabilities and capacities to host activities other than their main stream of income	1. The number of times, in the last 12 months, a venue in the city is offered (for free or fee charged) to community users or residents to organise a one-off specific activity other than the main purpose of the venue. 2. The number of times, in the last 12 months, a venue in the city is offered to community users or residents to organise a one-off specific activity other than the main purpose of the venue <i>despite not owning all the equipment and/or facilities needed for the activity to happen</i>. 3. The number of spaces or venues in the last 12 months opened for the first time to residents and communities by a business or organisation in the city.

Generating and expressing place attachment	Stronger bonds and attachment to place are associated with improved mental well-being, life satisfaction and environmental stewardship. By generating opportunities to build an attachment to place, CLT enables communities to experience better connections to others by showing others around the city or the local area; visiting familiar spaces and venues or discovering new venues that the city has to offer; and looking after public areas by picking up litter, caring for plants and wild animals in public spaces or looking after public or communal venues.	4. Average number of times a year a resident volunteers to show other people (family, friends or other) around the city or their local area. 5. Average number of times a week a resident visits either a favourite public or private space or venue in the city. 6. Average number of new spaces or venues in the city discovered or visited for the first time, either for business or leisure, by a resident in the last year. 7. Average number of hours a resident dedicates/volunteers a week in activities that look after a public or private but communal venue, such as green or blue spaces or community centres. 8. Number of city residents who attended activities (e.g. litter picks, gardening) in the past 12 months that contribute to looking after a public or private but communal venue. 9. Number of city residents who have set up cultural, environmental or heritage related activities that have attracted visitors in the last 12 months 10. Number of city residents who attended the city's cultural, environmental or heritage-related events in the last 12 months (e.g. ice trail, Vikings festival, theatre, York Open studios) 11. Number of city residents who have attended activities aimed at local place development that benefit residents as well as visitors (e.g. litter picks, gardening)
Creating community networks	The membership of different types of social organisations and groups enhances an individual's social capital. Bridging social capital enhances the links between communities, sharing information and access to assets.	12. Annual membership of local heritage clubs, cultural sites or tourism venues in the city. 13. Number of city-based memberships of local clubs, cultural sites or tourism venues obtained, renewed or maintained by local residents in the last 12 months. 14. Number of average times a week city residents access community-based forums, meetings, or networks, either in person or digitally.

Enhancing physical and mental well-being	Participating voluntarily in community activities enables people to boost their physical or mental well-being. Benefits of participation, evidence suggests, include lower blood pressure, increased chances of longevity and faster recovery from disease.	15. Average number of times in the last 12 months a resident undertakes physical activity when volunteering in activities that promote tourism or culture in the city. 16. Average number of times in the last 12 months local residents in the city report a mental well-being boost after volunteering in activities that promote tourism or culture.
Learning from others	Community-led tourism offers the opportunities for peer-to-peer learning from others in a horizontal fashion, while being able to influence hierarchical forms of knowledge and power. People coming together for community events share diverse socio-cultural perspectives of place.	17. In visiting a city-based venue or event, average number of historical facts or popular legends learned verbally, written or digitally, in the last 12 months, about the city which helped residents to understand the city better. 18. Average number of times a city-based organisation or business change its strategy as a result of the comments or suggestions done by its workers or volunteers in the last 12 months.
Accessing fair employment	Community-led tourism opens up opportunities for local communities to access fair and stable employment. It can open up new non-traditional pathways into employment while contributing to community-wealth generation and the socio-economic development of a place.	19. Number of jobs in the last 12 months in community-led tourism events or venues. 20. Number of venues or events in the visiting-economy sector in the city over the last 12 months adopting real living wage for employees. 21. Number of jobs in the visiting-economy sector in the city transferring from volunteer to paid posts in the last 12 months.
Building reputational capital	Community-led tourism organises local events and festivals. These events provide opportunities for individual artists or creatives who rely on the reputation of public or private venues to build their own reputational capital in the city and the local community, while developing a sense of identity or place attachment.	22. Number of mentions in <i>major local media</i> outlets about a venue (or organisation) the week before and after a cultural or community event takes place in such venue. 23. The number of bookings that result from an event organised by community users or residents in a venue in the city vis-à-vis the daily average number of bookings (or footfall) for that same venue when servicing its main purpose.

Cross-subsidising local activities	Financial power to invest in local places or initiatives is considered a sign of economic health. The indicator recognises that external funding or investment contributes in developing community wealth building. But it avoids being extractive by giving something back to the local economy or the socio-cultural context.	24. The number of times a major or mainstream provider, funder or business based in the city subsidises local activities organised by local community groups or residents in the last 12 months.
Contributing to the circular economy	Community-led tourism opens up opportunities for residents to develop economic activities that favour the wider visiting economy of a place. It also contributes to the procurement of goods and services being retained and recirculated locally.	25. Number of new SMEs specialising in community-led tourism or engaged in the community-led tourism sector in the city over the last 12 months. 26. Number of community asset transfers in the city whose venues participated in a tourism or cultural activity in the city over the last 12 months. 27. Number of city-based SMEs participating in supply chains for other local companies in the tourism and hospitality sectors in the city over last 12 months. 28. Number of SMEs in the hospitality sector that report increased brand reputation/increased sells of their goods and services after participating in the city's cultural, environmental and heritage-related events over the last 12 months.

Main text notes

¹ See for example the measures of sustainable tourism developed by the United Nations World Tourism Organisation or by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.



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