

Research Report

Innovation in Rural and Agricultural Shows

Authors: Liz Price, Barry Ardley, University of Lincoln, and Gary Bosworth, Northumbria University

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Contact: lprice@lincoln.ac.uk

Non-technical abstract

Rural and Agricultural Shows are rich in tradition but their function in the rural economy is evolving. The cancellation of Shows during the Covid-19 pandemic led us to examine how rural Shows would re-emerge and what opportunities and challenges they now face. The research draws on interviews with organisers and exhibitors, attendance at live events and evaluations of online events that were staged during the pandemic. This has revealed that Shows have accelerated their digitalisation but also that the physical meeting space is critical to their social function. The research identified new expectations from exhibitors which have discovered alternative routes to market, including online. There is an imperative for Show organisers to identify methods to tap into online markets and offer value to their exhibitors. Shows re-opening in 2022 are having to adapt quickly to the post-pandemic economy including the cost-of-living crisis, a loss of volunteers and a more competitive event environment.

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Non-technical executive summary

About this study

Agricultural and Country shows were traditionally the preserve of farmers and related businesses, but they are increasingly sites of wider leisure and consumption that draw on their rural identity. As with many other festivals, they face challenges to create contemporary experiences that appeal to both repeat and first-time visitors. This challenge was brought into sharp focus by the Covid-19 pandemic which saw larger events cancelled, or severely limited in capacity, for over 12 months. This study was designed to investigate the immediate responses to the pandemic during the Spring/Summer of 2020, and particularly the emergence of "virtual" and "online" Shows. As opportunities and challenges for Shows evolved, the project also had to adapt and a greater emphasis was placed on understanding the continuing use of digital technologies, the changing expectations of Show exhibitors and audiences, and the strategies that Shows were developing for their future sustainability.

Research approach

The study was conducted using a mixed methods approach, and included a number of data collection methods:

- (i) A web-based evaluation of a sample of 10 online Shows that took place during 2020. The evaluation used a new "e-eventscape" model (Bosworth et al., 2021) developed specifically to evaluate online events.
- (ii) Qualitative interviews with 10 Show organisers, representing a mix of large and small agricultural and rural shows, to explore experiences of running online shows and any digital innovations that were introduced or retained.
- (iii) Visits to four Shows to undertake observation and conduct short interviews with a range of exhibitors.

Findings

Little appetite for continuation of online shows: While online Shows were identified as useful to keep Shows fresh in people's minds, there was broad acknowledgement that they were no substitute for physical events. There is therefore little appetite for online events to continue. However, the learning among Shows that developed online platforms during the pandemic has enhanced organisers' confidence in the use of websites, social media and online ticketing.

A more competitive rural event environment: Many exhibitors and traders have expanded their online sales during the pandemic or found new locations to trade from making them more selective about which Shows to attend. Exhibitors are more likely to ask organisers about pre-sales of tickets, to weigh up the mix of other traders, as well as the online exposure that Shows can provide them. While many Shows offer social media promotion there is more that could be done, including facilitating online retailing, providing discount codes to spend with exhibitors, and offering demonstration platforms for traders to engage with audiences online.

The E-eventscape model: This study has validated the e-eventscape model as a strategic tool that can help Show organisers to analyse their online audience engagement. It

provides the basis for initial web design, and for improvements to be made to digital spaces inhabited by Shows, including social media posts and associated web forums. Show organisers will increasingly need to ensure that digital and physical Shows becomes a seamless experience for visitors.

Digital innovation mediated by rural (and generational) digital divide: Show organisers are starting to digitalise some of their processes, such as ticket sales, class entries and exhibitor bookings. However, the movement to online systems is mediated by a lack of digital skills and confidence among volunteers, employees and attendees, particularly those in older age groups. Similarly, many Shows operate in poorly connected rural locations and would benefit from support to boost their signal during Show days, such as through hire of mobile WiFi solutions.

Succession and loss of knowledge a key challenge for Shows: Shows face challenges around succession, with fewer younger people coming forward to replace older committee members. The need for skills support for new and returning Show organisers is clear. Resources such as 'Rural Event' training offered by LANTRA are valued, as well as the opportunity for learn from other Shows.

Increased networking between Shows facilitates knowledge exchange and innovation: Being able to learn from other Shows is identified as beneficial for learning about new digital solutions. Networking between Shows, facilitated by the Association of Show and Agricultural Organisations (ASAO) and local level networks, was felt to have increased during and following the pandemic, facilitated by conferencing technology. Given the challenges faced by many Shows, there is an opportunity for Government to support these networks to help them to share good practice, cut costs and develop local programmes of events that continue to fulfil a variety of roles and attract a mixed audience.

Lack of clear alignment to, and support from, Government departments: Responsibility for Shows appear to fall between Government departments, with some activities such as animal movements aligning with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). As events, they align more with the remit of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), but many were too small to qualify for Culture Recovery Funds during the pandemic. A clear link to Government that reflects the wider rural development activities, and potential, of Shows would help to strengthen their future.

Support for farming communities remains a core focus: A strong message from the study is the key role that Shows play in the social wellbeing of the farming community. From health-checks and vaccination centres to providing opportunities for social interaction, they are important inter-generational events for the sector. Through activities that promote local foods, animal breeds and nature conservation, Shows raise the profile of the contribution of farmers and land managers at a time when they are often accused of environmental harm.

A continuing and evolving role for Shows in connecting audiences with today's diverse rural economy: The study identifies that necessity innovation has occurred in the Shows sector, driven not by profit but by a desire to keep connected with audiences. As agriculture is increasingly at the margins of society, so the Show sector has also seen "big

agriculture" having separate trade events, allowing Shows to become more family-oriented and representative of today's more diverse rural economy. The rural consumer economy creates a major opportunity for Shows to prosper and makes the educational/communication role even more important for the agricultural sector. Therefore, the working relationship between Show organisers, the agricultural sector and a wider range of exhibitors must continue to evolve in order to present a coherent offer to today's Show audiences and participants.

Introduction and background

Agricultural and Country shows (hereafter "Shows") were traditionally the preserve of farmers and related businesses but they are increasingly sites of wider leisure and consumption that draw on their rural identity. This recognises the growing importance of events as part of the fabric of a diverse rural economy where agricultural traditions blend with new leisure and retail activity (Holloway, 2004; Westwood et al., 2018). Animal shows are no longer just for the benefit of superior breeding and agricultural machinery, exhibitions appeal to children just as much as they do to farmers. The continuing popularity of Shows is sustained by a loyal visitor-base, a familiar place in the calendar and renewed interest in food, farming and the environment. As with many other festivals though, they face challenges to create contemporary experiences that appeal to both repeat and first-time visitors. This challenge was brought into sharp focus by the Covid-19 pandemic which saw larger events cancelled, or severely limited in capacity, for over 12 months.

At the start of the Covid-19 outbreak in the UK, a group of rural policy organisations wrote to the national Government outlining their concerns relating to the rural economy, one of which was: "The cancellation of festivals and events, such as agricultural shows, food festivals, will impact on business more widely through loss of footfall etc." (ACRE, 2020). This study was designed to investigate the immediate responses to the pandemic during the Spring/Summer of 2020, and particularly the emergence of "virtual" and "online" Shows. As opportunities and challenges for Shows evolved, the project also had to adapt and a greater emphasis was placed on understanding the continuing use of digital technologies, the changing expectations of Show exhibitors and audiences, and the strategies that Shows were developing for their future sustainability.

This report proceeds with two short literature sections. The first sets out key trajectories in the rural leisure, food and agricultural sectors that have influenced the changing fortunes and functions of Shows, as well as the networks that support innovation in the sector. The second focuses on the conceptual development of the e-eventscape which was subsequently used to evaluate digital innovation across 10 virtual shows that took place in 2020. There follows a section outlining the research design and methodology before the detailed findings are presented. We conclude with a number of key findings which outline the ways that Shows have innovated during pandemic, the challenges they face as they re-open this year, and opportunities for policymakers to further support the Shows sector.

Literature review

Key trajectories influencing the role of Shows in the rural economy

As rural economies have seen the dominance of productivist agriculture replaced by a constellation of small firms, many tapping into a growth of consumer-led opportunities, the role of Shows has also had to evolve.

In 2020/21 'Agriculture, forestry & fishing' accounted for 14% of registered businesses in rural areas, rising to 30% for rural areas in a sparse setting (DEFRA, 2022). When we consider the wider food economy, the role of agriculture in the rural tourism offer and the range of businesses that support primary sector industries, they remain of great economic as well as cultural significance to rural areas. However, numerically, other sectors are equally prominent, including 'Professional, scientific & technical services' (14% of businesses), 'Wholesale & retail trade; repair of motor vehicles' (13%) and 'Construction' (13%) (DEFRA, 2022). Furthermore, the growth of rural tourism, with over 66,000 tourist related businesses registered in rural areas (11% of all registered rural businesses), sees it now generating an estimated £11.5bn Gross Value Added (GVA) in predominantly rural areas (DEFRA, 2022).

In parallel to shifts in the composition of rural economies, there has been a substantial increase in mobility and income levels among rural populations. Linked to continuing trends of counter-urbanisation, there have also been increases in both the frequency and distance of commuting out of rural areas (Brown et al., 2015). The social changes arising from counter-urbanisation and gentrification, and the additional effects of second homes in touristic areas, have weakened traditionally embedded networks of workers within their local communities, for whom Shows were often significant dates in the calendar. Instead, Shows are catering to new audiences as part of the wider visitor economy of rural areas, including urban audiences keen to (re)connect with rural places, environments and food production, reflecting contemporary values attributed to the countryside and rural products (Horlings and Marsden, 2014).

Reaching beyond traditional audience enables Shows to play a role in strengthening place identity and a sense of community (Jarman, 2018; Hjalager and Kwiatkowski, 2018). The 'experiencescape' created at a Show is representative of the local heritage and natural amenities that comprise a contemporary multi-functional rural landscape (Marcouiller and Western, 2019). By expanding their identity and reflecting wider changes in the rural economy, Shows are able to offer networking and promotional opportunities to a range of businesses beyond the agriculture and food sectors. This reflects similar findings from other small-scale cultural festivals where the time and space for a mix of visitors to intermingle and build connections within a place can create valuable social capital and place attachments (Black, 2016).

Unlike arts and music festivals, it is argued that Shows provide a more authentic connection to rural traditions, including farming communities, their heritage and values. From a consumer perspective, this has been broken down into three motivational components (Socialisation and relaxation; New knowledge and experiences; Prestige and tradition) and three experiential dimensions (Machinery and livestock; Exhibitors and amenities; Equestrian and main ring events) that influence consumer behaviours and

choices (Westwood et al., 2018). These elements help to assess the rural traditions that continue to resonate with different audiences and present important angles for investigating the approach to virtual shows and subsequent rebuilding of physical Shows throughout this project.

Alongside socio-economic changes, rural areas have been influenced by the rapid spread of digital technologies allowing shopping, banking, home entertainment, health services and homeworking to be accessed through our computers and mobile phones. Digital infrastructure and skills have not been equally accessible across rural areas (Salemink et al., 2017) and this has impacted the ability of Shows to introduce online ticket sales, competition entries, marketing and social media activity. However, with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, many Shows were quick to explore how they could better use the technology to maintain connections with their trade and public audiences (Bosworth et al., 2021).

The state of the Show sector in early 2020 was highlighted by research commissioned by The Association of Show and Agricultural Organisations (ASAO, 2020) to estimate the impact of Covid-19 for the 2020 Show season. Their report identified:

- Jobs affected/at risk across 2,100 FTE staff, 10,800 temporary staff, almost 63,000 volunteers, and over 400,000 performers/exhibitors/stall holders.
- Losses of income generation of £37.5m.
- Losses of £38.5m for charitable activities.
- Wider impact on the economy – a loss of £810m.

This scale of activity spread across every region of the UK gives a clear indication of the continuing importance of Shows, and the need to ensure their full recovery to fulfil traditional and new roles in our future rural economy. With the acceleration in use of digital technology during the pandemic, Shows will have to embrace new online communications as part of their future strategies. Innovations in online event-spaces are therefore explored in the next section.

Conceptualising the e-eventscape

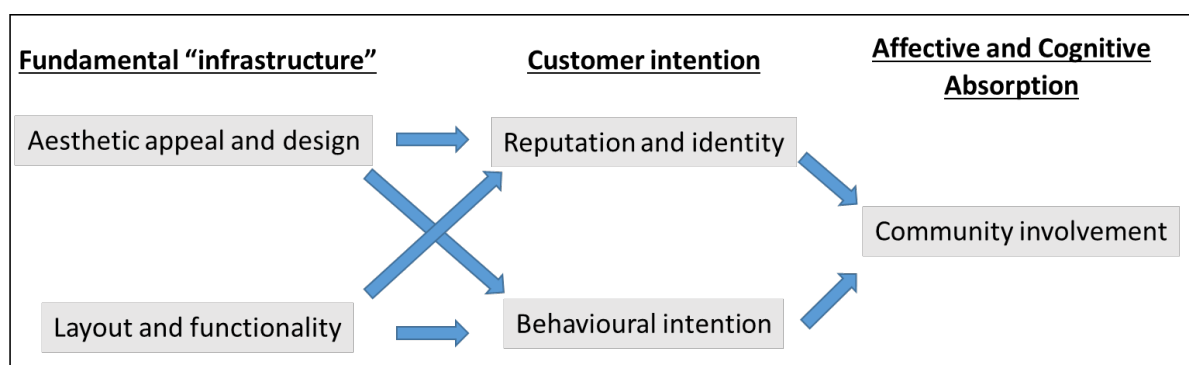
Marketing theory has evolved to explain the characteristics of different spaces of consumption, from a generic "servicescape" (Bitner, 1992) through to more specialised interpretations of eventscapes (Carneiro et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2015), experiencescapes (Marcouiller and Western, 2019), winescapes (Bruwer and Lesschaeve, 2012), storyscapes, for heritage attractions (Chronis, 2005; Leighton, 2007) and festivalscape, for the physical surroundings and atmosphere of festivals (Mason and Paggiaro, 2012).

The traditional servicescape has been used to analyse and enhance consumer experiences in physical environments such as shopping malls, leisure and hospitality venues (Yalinay et al 2018; Leighton 2007). The model examines consumers' interaction with various aspects of their surroundings, including the buildings, natural elements, temperature, fixtures and fittings, colours and signs. These are grouped into three dimensions: 'ambient conditions', 'spatial layout' and 'signs, symbols and artefacts' (Bitner, 1992). Subsequently, both social and natural dimensions have been added to capture the importance of customer interactions and natural features such as access to green space

and the wider landscape setting, all of which can enhance the visitor experiences (Rosenbaum and Massiah, 2011).

As online consumption has grown, a new e-servicescape model has been developed to understand consumers' experiences of online consumption spaces. Some of the core dimensions of a physical servicescape are represented in the aesthetic appeal, layout and functionality of websites (Hopkins et al., 2009). However, new dimensions such as financial security/trust (Harris and Goode 2010) and different modes of customer interaction (Lai et al., 2014) have also been identified as distinct requirements for online consumption spaces. As the relevant dimensions for any (e-)servicescape are highly contextual (Tran and Strutton, 2020), we drew from both the eventscape and experiencescape literatures to develop an adapted model for rural events. This new "e-eventscape" (Bosworth et al., 2021) illustrated in Figure 1, comprises five domains where the aesthetic appeal and layout of websites influence customer intentions and behaviours and subsequent engagement and involvement. The fundamental components mirror traditional servicescape and e-servicescape models but for events, this needs to develop more than a momentary purchase action and encourage continuing consumption of online entertainment and, ideally, interaction with other consumers, exhibitors and participants too.

Figure 1: The e-servicescape Model (Bosworth et al., 2021)



The above model was developed when Shows were not permitted due to the Covid-19-imposed lockdowns that occurred during 2020. Moving into 2021 when larger events were once again permitted, a sixth component of the e-eventscape became apparent – the complementarity of the virtual space to the physical event. Arguably this sits as an overarching feature of the e-eventscape that should be considered across each of the steps above because a coherent online presence should support the fundamental infrastructure of the physical Show (for example selling tickets and providing up to date information to visitors), reflect the reputation and identity of the event and engage customers and the wider community. The online space should offer the potential for visitors to enjoy participation in parallel to attending the physical event as well as offering a substitute for those choosing to interact remotely.

From this model, a framework for assessing the design of online shows was derived to include this sixth component. This is shown in Figure 2 and provides a basis for assessing Shows' online activities in terms of the customer interface, wider value propositions and their complementarity to physical activities and communications.

Figure 2: A framework for assessing the e-servicescape of online Shows

<p><u>Aesthetic appeal and design</u></p> <p>Do you like the way this website looks? Is the general design of this website appropriate, appealing and pleasing? Do you think that this website is entertaining? Is the website sufficiently interactive? Would you describe it as a high-quality experience?</p>	<p><u>Layout and functionality</u></p> <p>Is the website easily navigated with clear information? Are there convenient ways to move between related pages and different sections of the Show and its parts? Do you have any suggestions how the site can be personalised or tailored to you? How would you assess site usability?</p>
<p><u>Reputation and identity</u></p> <p>Does this website enhance or detract from your view of the Lincolnshire physical Show? Do you feel the website represents the County of Lincolnshire?</p>	<p><u>Community and involvement</u></p> <p>Does the site facilitate interaction and belonging among visitors to the Show? Does the online Show experience help you to feel part of the Lincolnshire Show event? Do you feel totally absorbed and involved in the processes of this Show website?</p>
<p><u>Behavioural intention</u></p> <p>Is there anything about the current website show that might put you off from participating? Would you participate in an online show through this website in the future? Would you engage with the website in parallel to attending a physical Show in the future?</p>	<p><u>Complementarity to the physical event</u></p> <p>Which elements of the online event would strengthen a physical event? Which parts of the online event would you engage with before/during/after a physical event? Does the online event communication reach out to audiences beyond the local target areas?</p>

Research design and methodology

The research embraces mixed methods, which are particularly valuable in rural areas where data is often relatively scarce and the need for deeper contextual information is particularly important (Strijker et al., 2020). This included web-based evaluation of a sample of online shows using the e-servicescape framework, a series of semi-structured video-interviews with Show organisers and short, informal in-person interviews with traders at Shows attended by members of the research team.

1. The e-eventscape

As a research team, we identified a range of different approaches to staging online or virtual Shows over the 2020 and 2021 Show seasons and used a common set of questions to assess the delivery of these events from the content that remained online. We are conscious that this evaluation was carried out after the event and may miss some of the “live” components that help to strengthen consumer interaction with the events, however, every effort was made to identify how this was facilitated at the time to allow a fair assessment to take place. Looking back at events that had taken place also gave us access to social media comments to inform our reviews. In some cases we were also able to interview members of the Show organising committees to assess their motivations for staging online events as well as their views of how successful the events had been.

The sample included a mix of larger and smaller Shows, as well as a mix of platforms that ranged from purpose build websites through to social media activities. These are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: The sample of online and virtual Shows

Show	Platform used	Usual Type of Show	Virtual Show details
Brecon County Show	Own website	1-day agricultural show	Animal handling and arts and crafts competitions. Educational videos.
Collingham Show, Nottinghamshire	Own website & Facebook	1-day village show & ploughing match	Photo-based crafts and produce competitions
Penrith Show, Cumbria	Facebook	1-day agricultural show	Photo-based animal, craft, cookery competitions and archive footage
Lincolnshire Show	Own website	2-day county show	1-day online show with live-stream videos, networking event and recordings
Royal Highland Show, Ingliston, Edinburgh	Own website	4-day countryside and agricultural show	7 days of live streamed content

Easton Agriculture & Countryside Show	Facebook & own website	n/a. This was a one-off event run by an agricultural college	Animal, flowers and produce judging online
The Virtual Heckington Show, Lincolnshire	Own website	1-day village show	Online entries for house decoration, children's and craft sections plus memories of past shows
Shrewsbury Flower Show	Own website + social media	2-day flower festival	2-day online event with flower/vegetable and children's competitions, demonstrations, exhibitors listed online with links to e-shops
Kids Country (East of England Agricultural Society)	Own website	Practical and video content to support rural education	Online educational content
South of England Show, Ardingley, Sussex	Own website	3-day agricultural show	NFU conference, nothing else went virtual
Ripley Show, Yorkshire	Facebook	1-day countryside and agricultural show	Online photo competition for crafts and produce

2. Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 10 show organisers, eight via video-call and transcribed using digital software and two over the telephone with notes written up immediately afterwards. A semi-structured questionnaire was used and interviewees were asked to give their consent to participate using a standardised form. Both of these are included in the annexes to this report and the list of interviewees is shown below.

Table 2. Interviewees

Show	Interviewee
Ripley Show, Yorkshire	Tammy Smith
Hope Show, Derbyshire	Andrew Critchlow
Ryedale Show, Yorkshire	Christine Thompson
Collingham Show, Nottinghamshire	Diane Rowland
Three Counties Show	Dene Hazelwood
Lincolnshire Show	Jayne Southall
Mid Somerset Show	Christine Barham
Bath and West Country Show/ASAO	Paul Hooper
Royal Pembrokeshire Show	Delme Harries
Blanchland and Hunstanworth, County Durham	Margaret Bowers

3. Visiting Shows

Two Shows were attended in late summer of 2021 and two more in May 2022. In 2021, two researchers attended LincsFest, a one-day family event organised by the Lincolnshire Agricultural Society staged on 15th August, and one attended the Wolsingham Show on 4th September. In May 2022, researchers also visited the Woodhall Spa Show in Lincolnshire and the Northumberland County Show in Bywell in the Tyne Valley. At each event, observations were noted about the crowd and mix of exhibitors and interviews were conducted with a range of exhibitors including food and drink vendors, artisan and craft retailers, local charities and community organisations. So as not to obstruct their business on the day, these were largely unstructured and varied in length from just a few minutes up to around 20 minutes in one or two cases. The aim was to pinpoint key changes in their business approaches throughout the Covid-19 period and to explore their views about the continuing role of Shows for their businesses. These were not recorded but notes were taken and where possible flyers or business cards were collected to allow additional details of the exhibitors to be gathered from their websites.

Questions to the exhibitors were framed around the issues set out in Table 3. This was easy to carry around on the day and acted as an aide memoire for questioning and note-taking. In 2022, when it became clear that "virtual shows" were unlikely to return, questions 4 and 5 was amended to simply ask: "can you think of other ways in which Shows could use online spaces more effectively?"

Table 3: Aide memoire of key research issues explored during visits to Shows

Potential questions for the exhibitors
1) What features makes for a successful live agricultural show?
1a) And specifically, what brings in the most revenue for you at an event like this?
2) How did you maintain contact with your clients and potential clients during lockdown?
2a) Are these methods still being used and do you plan to incorporate them permanently into business activity?
3) What is your view of the online site for today's show? https://lincolnshireshowground.co.uk/lincsfest Would you be willing to pay more to link your online shop directly to the Show website? Is there any other way that you would like your organisation to be featured online?
4) How do you view the prospect of a future where agricultural shows always have a virtual element alongside a physical event?
5) If a permanent integrated approach was to go ahead, what particular features do you see as central in executing a successful show in a live and online context?
<i>'Participant Observers' to view live show its entirety to see where other virtual feature (s) could be potentially incorporated and to consider existing virtual live\compatibility</i>
<i>Although this is not about "networking" we should try to observe business connections being made</i>

4. Additional materials

During the period of the project, we also collated a number of news articles about virtual Shows, including local and national press as well as an ASAO-produced report on the impacts of Covid-19 for the Show sector. We also drew on the earlier research of Caroline Westwood to provide a pre-Covid baseline of consumer attitudes towards Shows.

Findings

The most salient finding from the research was that after the early innovations during 2020, the appeal of online Shows waned quite quickly. One such innovation, the launch of "The Greatest Online Agricultural Show", a company that sought to fill a gap by providing services to many other Shows, now has a Facebook page used by members solely to promote live Shows.

Respondent 4 perhaps captured the mood best by saying: *"in 2021, unfortunately the interest [in virtual Shows] wasn't the same by any means. You know, people wanted to get back out there, you know, and the social interaction you know, it was important and so, although we did more classes for the online competition last year, we didn't get as much interest. To be quite honest, we did get entries but there wasn't the enthusiasm there somehow. In fact I think some of our committee have still got to look at the results."*

As a consequence, the focus of the research shifted towards the re-awakening of live Shows in 2021 and 2022. However, we begin the findings section with an overview of the strengths and weaknesses among our sample of online Shows in order to identify opportunities to capitalise on online spaces in the future.

i. Applying the e-eventscape model to evaluate virtual and online Shows

Among the 11 Shows that were evaluated by the team, there was a range of approaches, from relying wholly on social media (principally Facebook) through to commissioning purpose-built web-platforms. Some Shows prioritised competitions for flowers, vegetables, crafts or animals while others focused more on the educational and entertainment aspects of Shows. None that we analysed had any spaces for retailing so the traditional craft and food tents that support small business across the rural economy were missing. There were opportunities for businesses to sponsor different parts of virtual shows, but this was primarily a good-will gesture as there were few mechanisms to translate that sponsorship into networking, advertising or sales opportunities as would be the case at a live Show.

Using the six components of the e-eventscape model, some of the main points emerging from our individual reviews of the online Shows are set out in Table 4.

Table 4: Key learning points from the online Shows

<p><u>Aesthetic</u></p> <p>Imagery largely reproduced features of the local area, which was important for connecting with key audiences.</p> <p>Bright colours were commonplace, especially where content was aimed at children.</p> <p>Where a lot of information needed to be conveyed (e.g. lists of prize winners), it was more challenging to make this engaging.</p> <p>Some were put together quickly without the input of designers resulting in more amateurish colour schemes and layouts.</p> <p>Consistency of colour schemes and general aesthetic was considered important.</p>	<p><u>Layout and Functionality</u></p> <p>Facebook limits the layout to a stream of posts.</p> <p>Too many videos on one page could be overwhelming, content needs dividing into sections with a mix of formats and activities. In some cases, videos did not sit well in the same "zone" (e.g. tractor rides and archaeology).</p> <p>The best layouts were those that thought about the flow between elements with helpful imagery to indicate where different sections of activities, videos etc could be found.</p> <p>Minimising clicks for participants to find their competition or exhibit was important but to encourage people to engage with more of the site, easy links to complimentary elements were important.</p>
<p><u>Reputation and Identity</u></p> <p>There was a need to manage the scale of online Show vs physical Show.</p> <p>Involving keynote speakers to give live, as well as recorded, presentations proved an effective means of engaging people. The speaker could then enhance the reputation of the Show.</p> <p>The degree of engagement on social media was an indicator of the reputation of a Show so any online strategy must be sure to have regularly updating content.</p> <p>Poor design of a website could detract from the reputation of a Show.</p>	<p><u>Community and Involvement</u></p> <p>Very few Shows included space for community engagement beyond social media comments or comments on youtube videos.</p> <p>One online networking event highlighted the potential for deeper participation.</p> <p>Physical activities in the community were another effective way to generate new forms of involvement – e.g. decorating houses in the village when the virtual show was on.</p> <p>No virtual shows that we found integrated online marketplaces but that would be a further opportunity for deeper engagement.</p> <p>Themed competitions that encouraged schools or other groups to enter could support interaction prior to the event thus building a greater shared sense of involvement.</p>

<u>Behavioural Intentions</u>	<u>Complementarity to Physical Events</u>
<p>Where activities occur on social media, the Show organisers have less control of the overall aesthetic which may compromise levels of attachment.</p> <p>Generally, the number of entries in online Shows were very low, in part this could be attributed to the novelty of the concept and short lead-in times for publicising them.</p> <p>Social media is important for influencing behaviour as it allows people to "Like", state that they are "attending" and "share" content. All of this can influence future behaviour in ways that a static webpage cannot.</p>	<p>The video archives that have been generated provide valuable educational and marketing content for future Shows.</p> <p>Using images from past Shows was a good way to showcase what the real Show was like for new audiences.</p> <p>Virtual conference type activities could definitely be complementary to Shows, perhaps run at different times of the year to maintain connection with key audiences.</p>

These summary points indicate some of the risks and some of the opportunities that we identified in relation to expanding the use of online interactions and activities by Shows. The purpose of this section is not to advise shows on how to deal with a future pandemic, but to identify elements that could be adopted to enhance their overall offer to their key audiences and, consequently to improve their business performance. Whatever approach was taken, any Show that designed a virtual or online offer will have enhanced their online presence and developed new skills. In interviews with Show organisers, the extent to which digital skills and online spaces were continuing to be used to support their businesses became a key question.

ii. Interview findings

The interview analysis was carried out using a two-layer coding approach. Lower order codes included a range of issues from the changing roles of Shows, the adoption of new technologies and marketing approaches, costs, volunteers, legislation and different forms of community and stakeholder engagement. These in turn were categorised into higher order codes which are used to structure the sections that follow. Within each, a number of key quotations are presented prior to a more general discussion of the changing landscape. Throughout this section, additional insights are drawn from the informal interviews carried out at Shows to support the discussion.

New technology and online innovations

For this first section, we draw on codes related to technology; online Shows, innovation and marketing, which was almost entirely about social media and online form of marketing.

<p><i>Opportunities:</i></p>	<p>"We have a new website launched. We're going to be putting our membership on there and tickets will be sold digitally this year as well." (2)</p> <p>"... this year they've got the chainsaw world tour competition going on. they're part will be streamed all around the world." (3)</p> <p>"I would say there's been a switch to a greater push to pre-sell tickets since, since Covid." (3)</p> <p>"Going forward it is all going to be done online now so they will log on to our new system and make their entries and pay for them online. So it's hopefully, fingers crossed, much easier." (4)</p> <p>"I can definitely say that video editing skills for both him and me did improve last year. We were sort of obviously stabbing in the dark with a lot of the time, but we got there in the end." (4)</p> <p>"It really highlighted that online is good, but it's no substitution for the real thing." (4)</p> <p>"We do want to start introducing things that we've never done. E-ticketing on our car parking and things like that." (5)</p> <p>"My daughter fortunately is very social media savvy... I mean I'm not. And she helped me an awful lot with it, so we just chose a few things. Kept it very, very simple." (5)</p> <p>"The most lucrative thing, which was no skill of ours was film company hired it for three weeks last year and made far more than we ever made holding the show." (6)</p>
<p><i>Challenges:</i></p>	<p>"We're trying to digitalise as much as we can. However, one of our office staff members is in her seventies... she'd rather have a piece of paper." (2)</p> <p>"I don't think the staff ever wants to do it again, because it was something that never done before. So it was a big steep learning curve ... After the first hour it went live, it all crashed because there wasn't enough bandwidth." (3)</p> <p>"We encourage people to go contactless on site, but my WiFi couldn't cope with it in the end an iPhone signal couldn't cope with it, so again on our new site we found out the hard way, but that's something else we need to look at boosting [the signal] and all that sort of thing for Show day." (5)</p> <p>"The worry at the moment is we don't want the older people to be missing out because I am getting quite a few phone calls from people</p>

	<p>saying 'is the Show on... How do I get ticket?'... The younger people, they're fine, they'll just use their phone but I think 60+ people still expect to see a physical piece of paper inviting them to the Show, landing on their doorstep." (10)</p>
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In elaborating on the perceived value of online or virtual Shows, interviewees commented that it was important to "mark the day" (1), and "keep it in people's minds" (3) but while "online is good ... it's no substitution for the real thing" (4). Another commented: "it's the social aspect of it for everybody... they're just so pleased to be exhibiting their animals and so pleased to be meeting up with people they haven't seen for two years. So that is such a strong element of what we do, and you don't get that online" (5). Rather than focusing on the online Shows themselves, we therefore move forward by examining the new opportunities and challenges emerging from digitalisation.

Throughout the interviews there was a clear recognition of the new digital skills that were required, and in many cases that had been learned, as a result of the pandemic. The skills to develop new websites, create video content, enable online ticketing and enhance social media usage were all evident to differing degrees. Where Shows were more reliant on older volunteers, this was sometimes more challenging but even here, alternative solutions were found, either through new connections with local firms or drawing on family support. The example of the film company making a successful Netflix series, and basing their operations on a rural Show site, further illustrates the potential diversification enabled by digital technology.

While the advanced use of online technology was largely beneficial for marketing and communication, it also had practical benefits with increased emphasis on pre-selling tickets helping with cashflow and event planning. Moving towards cashless sites was also considered to enhance security by some respondents. As with many digital developments in rural areas, however, the infrastructure can be challenging. Shows take place outside of the major settlement and the sites are not used frequently enough to justify high expenditure on fixed broadband. As a result, the high demand on mobile internet on Show day continues to create challenges for contactless sales and other digital activities in some areas. Support for Shows to boost their signal during major events would benefit both exhibitors as well as the Shows themselves.

While many respondents noted that their older clientele had adapted to greater use of digital tools during the pandemic, others noted that some still liked to have hard-copy tickets and flyers. The digital skills divide among older audiences who particularly value the social interaction of Shows, cannot be forgotten in the name of technological progress.

Despite the successes of creating online shows very quickly in response to the pandemic, the focus on returning to live shows has seen that learning side-lined at present. The sentiment that "staff never want to do that again" because of the pressure and uncertainty that they felt remains fresh in their memories but over time, the new skills can be applied to complementary activities, such as the live-streaming of feature attractions of the type mentioned by respondent 3.

With many Shows run by agricultural societies which have remits to advocate for agriculture through their educational and community activities, digital platforms offer an important resource. The pandemic saw the Lincolnshire Show enhancing its provision of rural education materials to local schools and examples of digital education run by attractions like Beamish are illustrative of the potential for this area of activity to grow. Showcasing the best of local farming and food through video content is also important for raising awareness of sustainability and healthy food options too.

Supply-side challenges

In this section, we capture higher-order codes relating to changing exhibitor expectations; legislation and supply-side squeeze.

<p><i>Exhibitors</i></p>	<p>"What we're struggling with is some of our agricultural machinery people because one big one has pulled out and they used to have a huge area of our show, but they said they haven't missed it, it hasn't affected their sales by not being at the show and it costs them so much money to put the put the show on, so they pulled out." (2)</p> <p>"Some traders that were perhaps at that time in life, anyway, they decided, well, now's the time we're going to retire... And there's probably some that have gone out of the market ... some that switched to online and realised we don't need to go to shows we can do all this from our home. So, you know, they're out of the market as well because they found a new sort of platform and window for themselves. I'm sure there's some that are just still a bit nervous about what's going on, but hopefully they'll see the potential and will come back." (3)</p> <p>"The trade side of things ... they've got to take a fair bit of money just and cover what it's cost and to be there before for anything else. So I think traders are probably going to be one of the bigger challenges this year." (3)</p> <p>"Some of the feedback from the traders was "So we've got fluffy cows or the motorbike display, you don't push perhaps enough of all the trade stands. You know, the amount of trade that you've got there", which you know is a valid point, but I'm trying to get the marketing people on board to understand that that actually the trade stands are a huge chunk of our income and we do need to do more about that." (3)</p>
<p><i>Suppliers & volunteers</i></p>	<p>"We've used one big marquee company for many years, and obviously in 2020 everything shut down, so that was it. 2021 we were unable to go ahead, so when I've contacted them now to see about availability for our normal slot next year, unfortunately they've turned around and said No." (4)</p> <p>"Mobile loos and cabins are already starting to get difficult for the Show season next year and there are some of the big tent</p>

	<p>contractors that are talking to some of the bigger shows saying, no, sorry we are not taking your order for tentage. We will tell you what tentage is available for you to hire if you want it." (7)</p> <p>"A lot of [smaller Shows] are struggling to get people back in people to help because they've not missed it for two years." (2)</p> <p>"We're already seeing probably a shortage of stewards this time because after two years we've got a lot of... I think it's the same all over the country and in the volunteering sector. You tend to find there's a lot of volunteers [who] are older... so unfortunately we have lost a couple of stewards, but you know, we're suspecting as well that some of them will think, well, this year we're going to just go to the show and have an enjoyable day out rather than steward it. So we're already preparing some sort of recruitment for volunteers in the spring to try and replace some of those." (4)</p> <p>"One that's just packed up was kind of two day show that was kind of more run by a village really. They've just decided to close for now... they hadn't run out of money, right, they just run out of volunteers." (6)</p> <p>"Some people that have been on furlough have taken on other jobs as well, which they could legitimately do on furlough and they have decided now furlough is over, we don't want to carry on with the Show." (7)</p> <p>"It's a problem getting people to help... people come with agendas... designers want paying for their time... people don't do things for nothing." (8)</p> <p>"Entertainment costs have gone up and we've had no income for 5 years, marquee costs have gone up too." (8)</p> <p>"I think there's a worry that because everybody's a volunteer, there's a worry as to how much you will have forgotten." (10)</p>
<p><i>Legislation:</i></p>	<p>"If there is one thing you could ask DEFRA to improve: "anything to do with animal movements and making that easier for bringing 1,200 sheep onto the showground and away again in a day, and anything to do with that would be much appreciated." (7)</p> <p>"From April next year, red diesel can't be used on anything other than food production, but that affects us in a big way. If we can't use red diesel for things like the Gaters that we run around on site and some of the tractors we use, that's going to put our fuel bill through the roof and it's just little things... We exist, we don't fit the model for everything, but we do exist." (5)</p>

	"Because we are being cast as non-cultural and so none of the Cultural Relief Fund has come to any of the shows." (7)
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While Covid-19 initially removed demand from the Show sector, the continuing challenges are more focused on the supply side. The desire to get back out and meet people combined with continuing restrictions and uncertainty on international travel saw a very successful 2021 season for those able to operate and there was general optimism for 2022 in a similar vein.

In order to capitalise on this momentum, Shows are faced with new challenges concerning their exhibitors, suppliers and regulations. A number of interviewees raised concerns that exhibitors may not return to Shows, either because they have gone out of business, found alternative routes to market or simply that they considered that a presence at a Show was no longer worth the investment. Previously, a lot of exhibitors would return year after year, almost out of habit or duty, knowing that their clients would expect to see them there or recognising the value of a guaranteed place in the calendar. As respondent 8 noted, *"We still have the same funfair every year, Jim's 60 this year, he came as a baby and his dad used to come and run it"*. The value of this to Shows was made clear by the quotation above where the loss of a major exhibitor can leave a large void to fill.

As reported in the NICRE Blog¹, a number of exhibitors reporting that they were becoming more selective in the Shows that they attend. More recent live events have reinforced that message with comments identifying that exhibitors have different purposes for attending. One commented: *"it's a chance to meet people, not just about selling"* while another said *"We'll only do the bigger shows now"*. A third added, *"you don't want to spend £60 for a small event to freeze your ****s off in December"*.

For Show organisers, this represents an opportunity to create a clearer marketing pitch with details of pre-sales, more information on the range of stands and the location on the Showground and greater cross-promotion of exhibitors online. Just as Shows have always represented the evolution of the rural economy, from ploughing matches to machinery exhibitions and from solely livestock to a range of domestic animal classes, so the local foods and rural craft movements can become a bedrock of 21st century Shows. Providing networking as well as exhibition opportunities, promoting e-shops and providing innovative customer interaction spaces can all generate a new purpose and set of values that attract exhibitors to Shows. This optimism is tempered by the current cost-of-living crisis but Shows must still plan ahead and develop packages that will appeal to those businesses innovative enough to survive the next phase of economic turbulence.

This aftermath of the pandemic has also had more direct implications on the supply side of Shows. Many reported shortages of essential infrastructure such as marquees (tentage), portaloos and trackway materials, many of which had been re-purposed to other markets given the national shut-down of all festivals and events. As Shows re-open, there is also a concern about a potential lack of volunteers and staff. With Shows lying dormant, anyone not engaging online would quickly feel disconnected and many turned

¹<https://nicre.co.uk/blog/2021/october/the-return-of-rural-shows-and-changing-expectations/>

their efforts to other jobs (e.g. if on furlough) or volunteering roles. With many older volunteers, it was expected that many would simply retire from the role too. As well as the manpower needed on Show days, some respondents expressed concerns that key knowledge could be lost too.

More positively, respondent 2 explained that “last year we used the young farmers a little bit to help us ... They want to have a presence and be part of the Show”, so potentially there are opportunities to engage new rural organisations to shape the future development of Shows but as with the digital innovations discussed previously, Shows seldom have the capacity to prioritise these issues in the face of more time-critical threats to the staging of events.

Finally on the supply side, a number of respondents pleaded for Shows to be exempt from certain legislations that were adding to their costs and/or restricting access for exhibitors. Regulations on livestock movements and tighter restrictions on the use of red diesel caused particular angst among respondents who felt victims of unintended consequences stemming from Government policy.

Communications, new audiences and renewal

Within this section we cover a range of themes including networks; community; education, wellbeing and the future of Shows.

Community engagement	<p>[the virtual show] focused on “community-focused event, not livestock or the usual societies and commercial exhibitors from further afield.” (1)</p> <p>“We have engaged with a local community and we’re renting them or leasing them two and a half acres of our land and they’re creating allotments on there ... they’ll have a special class for their vegetables ... and hopefully somebody from there will be able to come on the horticulture section and take it over long term ... we’ve got to try and bring fresh new blood up through it.” (2)</p> <p>“We took the tractor and some vintage cars and we went past the hospice for the residents and it raised £2,000 for the charity and it also highlights [our] Show. It’s trying to bring all the community together.” (9)</p>
Wellbeing	<p>“In 2021 we did our “show light” version then, which was face to face showing of animals and a couple of welfare trade stands. So we brought in a concept of having a welfare village where we brought in the charities which are looking after mental health and agricultural industry and the unions were invited as well, just so that the farmers present had somebody to go to and then round the corner from that if they wanted, they could have had their vaccine as well because we’d have vaccines centre set up at the event as well.” (2)</p>

	<p>"Within agriculture you know it's a big health and safety risk and there's the suicide rate is tremendously high, you know. And there's the agricultural charities. They are really gearing themselves up at the moment for a lot of work and they come to all the agricultural shows as well ... we've actually even had some nurses come out to do health checks at shows so like they're going to farm auction markets you know to do blood pressure and cholesterol and things like that because it's taking those services to farmers in their comfort zone and you've seen it at [our] show. The nurses will be there and all of a sudden there's a huge competition as to who's got the lowest cholesterol levels, you know. Well, there wouldn't have gone and had that checked out if they if you told him to go to the doctors, so it's that health side both physical and mental as well, that plays an important part in that... that's why shows really have to continue... It's bringing the farming communities together." (4)</p>
<p>Professional networking</p>	<p>"We've sort of put our arm around them [the other smaller shows in the area] a little bit now. So come on, you can do it. You can borrow stuff off us if it helps, but we're here to help and we come together now quarterly just to have a chat with them." (2)</p> <p>"I'm not sure whether they're the sort of organisations that like sharing that sort of information. So sometimes they can be a little bit... "They're our customers and clients, go away, you're not having them!" (3)</p> <p>"And if we were short of equipment to anything like that, other shows we all we all pitch in together. You know, to help each other out. And there is there is something called the Yorkshire Federation of Show Societies and that's run out of the Yorkshire Agricultural Society offices at Harrogate. And we have a closed Facebook group on there as well so if anybody runs into any difficulties, we just go onto there straight away and try and help each other out as far as we can." (4)</p> <p>"Because we have the ASAO we do meet quite regularly and we have a big annual conference and then we have regional conferences as well, ... you're always picking up ideas from that, so you do talk quite regularly to other Show people." (5)</p> <p>"We do talk to other shows and see how they do it... the other two shows have been vehemently cash. I don't think they've done it online yet. They're asking us because they realise they'll have to face it this year." (6)</p>

	<p>"That's one thing that's happened through Covid 19, businesses will share information where in the past you were perhaps a bit more guarded about what you said." (9)</p>
Renewal	<p>"I think we've got to move away from that now [having the same old men taking roles over from their fathers] and probably bring in a few business-y or commercial directors on board to fill that gap." (2)</p> <p>"A lot of the ones I think who did virtual shows, it was just something to keep people going and they had staff that probably needed something to do ... our show last year gave us an opportunity to put a line in the sand and restart the clock again. So this year's show will be a very different show to what people had previously." (2)</p> <p>"We're going to have a little bit of a country pursuits area and just sort of highlighting all the current issues and topics you know about rewilding and the environment and things like that... even though we're a traditional agricultural show, we are moving with the times and hopefully providing more information and education on current topics really." (4)</p>
Wider audiences & tourism	<p>"We do actually rely on holidaymakers coming to the show as well. And it is nice that some people come back year upon year. They book their holidays and make sure they've got the tickets for Ryedale show as well at the same time." (4)</p> <p>"We do get people traveling miles with the horses, especially because we've got some Horse of the Year Show qualifiers, and so they're always on Facebook... Social media does act as a fantastic platform for that." (4)</p>

Although this section picks up a variety of themes, the main messages about the future of Shows appear to revolve around the renewal of networks, re-asserting the value of Shows for different groups of people connected to the rural economy and society. The pandemic forced all types of enterprises to reflect on their value propositions, their routes to market and their key networks and Shows were no different. In the short term, the emphasis was often on local communities and charities. Even where virtual shows were recognised as a chance to connect to a wider audience, the supporting local organisations with charity events and competitions designed for local children remained a key motivation.

The importance of supporting Show Society members and the farming community has continued with Shows seeing themselves as important advocates for farming, communicating important messages about farmers' roles in environmental stewardship as well as food production. Shows have always played an important role in farmers' social wellbeing and this sort of activity can boost their wider sense of value in society. Further efforts to address health concerns has seen Shows follow the work of Marts (Nye et al.,

2021) by inviting health professionals to use the Showground as a space to connect with agricultural workers, whether to offer vaccines or simply to provide health checks.

While these community-focused networks are essential to the identity and local embeddedness of Shows, their growth is dependent on new networks and business renewal. Among Shows themselves, there were mixed comments about the degree to which they co-operate but overall, there appeared to be an increased spirit of collaboration, recognising the shared challenges that they face. Building on this, Shows may be able to work together to negotiate better deals with suppliers, offer a series of events to exhibitors and to support rural businesses and education in new ways. Currently, there is a lot of competition between Shows for a finite demand from exhibitors and a lot of Shows have very similar offerings to their audiences so working together can help them to differentiate their offer as well as sharing good practice. The work of ASAO and selective local networks is clearly valued here, but more informal collaboration could operate below this level to boost the sector, particularly in regions with high numbers of Shows.

Beyond the sector, networks with tourist organisations can be valuable, building Shows into touristic calendars and potentially using the online space to sell tickets as part of wider tourist packages. Linking into rural crafts networks as well as traditional agri-food networks will continue to be important for ensuring that Shows provide the best service to local businesses. With many Shows having to bring in new staff or volunteers, the challenge is to maintain tradition while introducing fresh ideas and a more commercial mindset to ensure their financial security. A further challenge will be to balance the need to cut costs with the ambition to modernise. In a highly competitive events sector, with a variety of festivals run by corporate businesses, the responsibility placed on small teams, often working on a voluntary or part-time basis, is a threat to the future.

If Shows are to continue to be operated by charitable organisations to support agriculture and the rural economy, there would appear to be a strong rationale for additional support. In particular this support could focus on enhancing the wellbeing and educational roles that they offer alongside support for Shows to provide network hubs for a range of rural businesses which are often quite isolated from professional networks. On this footing, the commercial aspect of Shows would be strengthened allowing their organisers to increase their capacity to deliver on more of their charitable missions.

Key conclusions and implications

i. Little appetite for continuation of online shows but valuable digital skills remain

In relation to the original research proposal, the findings concerning online and virtual Shows are clear – there is very little appetite for such events to continue now that physical events are permitted again. However, the learning among Shows that innovated their use of online platforms during the Covid-19 pandemic is now enhancing organisers' confidence and creativity in the use of websites, social media and online ticketing. In the future, it is possible that more online activity will take place around live Shows to widen the audience reach for exhibitors, enhance marketing and extend the educational and charitable content of Show Associations.

ii. Rural shows now operating in a more competitive rural event environment, with higher expectations from exhibitors

The research revealed insights about the competition that Shows now face when attracting exhibitors. Many craft producers expanded their online sales during the pandemic and food and drink outlets also found new, often free, locations to trade from making them more selective about which Shows to attend. Rather than simply attending the same Shows each year, exhibitors are now more likely to ask about pre-sales of tickets, to weigh up the mix of other traders and the location of their pitch on the Show field and assess the online exposure that a Show will provide them beyond the event itself. In response, some Shows were building social media promotion into their packages but there is potentially more that could be done to facilitate online retailing, providing discount codes to Show visitors to spend with exhibitors after the event and offering other demonstration platforms for craft producers to engage with a wider audience through the Show's online presence.

iii. The value of the e-eventscape model for assessing the digital offer of Shows

The research in this report has indicated that the e-eventscape model is a proven, robust strategic tool for Show organisers. When used, it can be deployed to systematically analyse online agricultural shows, in terms of the value offerings made to a diverse range of audiences. The five dimensions that were mapped out by the authors of this report, alongside the accompanying investigative questions, enabled a rigorous appraisal to take place. As a management tool for organisers, the e-eventscape model provides the basis for an initial web design, and for improvements to be made to the later digital space inhabited by shows. Whilst it appears unlikely that Shows will in the future be totally online, a digital element to all shows is a necessary requirement, given the nature of the evolving demands of audiences who attend in a live capacity. In this context, the e-eventscape model can be flexibly used to assess a range of digital offerings. In the future, this could include not only a website that links to a live Show, but also social media posts, and any complementary and associated web forums that are initiated. The case is that Show organisers will now need to ensure that the relationship between the digital and the physical Show becomes a seamless experience for the discerning visitor, one increasingly dependent on technology.

iv. *Opportunities for digital innovation mediated by rural (and generational) digital divide*

Use of online spaces has enabled Show organisers to digitalise some of their processes, such as ticket sales, class entries and exhibitor bookings, which have led to time and cost savings. However, it is important to consider the limitations of online platforms for rural events. The study identified that this can still alienate a minority of people, especially older people, with low digital skills and confidence – both among volunteers and employees as well as attendees. A further digital challenge arises for Shows operating in poorly connected locations where investment in better broadband or WiFi for just a few event days each year may prove uneconomical. Support for Shows to boost their signal during major events, such as through hire of mobile WiFi solutions, would benefit both exhibitors as well as the Shows themselves.

v. *Succession and loss of knowledge a key challenge for Shows*

Show organisers highlighted the recent loss of committee members and volunteers, due to retirement or because they had the opportunity to reflect on how they wished to spend their free time. This has sparked concern about a deficit of knowledge and skills in the Shows sector. Shows also face challenges around succession, with fewer younger people coming forward to replace older committee members. The need for skills support for new and returning Show organisers is clear. Resources such as the online 'Rural Event' training module offered by LANTRA are valued, as well as the opportunity for learn from other Shows, discussed below.

vi. *Increased networking between Shows has facilitated knowledge exchange and innovation*

The importance of being able to learn from other Shows was highlighted by organisers, particularly when implementing new digital solutions such as e-ticketing. Networking between Shows was felt to have increased during and following the pandemic, facilitated by conferencing technology such as MS Teams. The ASAO was seen as an important player in this context, as well as local level networks (such as the Yorkshire Federation of Show Societies) which were identified as a highly valued resource over the last two years. Given the challenges faced by many Shows, there is an opportunity for Government to support the ASAO and local level networks to help them to share good practice, cut costs and develop local programmes of events that continue to fulfil a variety of roles and attract a mixed audience.

vii. *Lack of clear alignment to, and support from, Government departments*

Responsibility for Shows appear to fall between Government departments. The rules relating to animal movements and the use of red diesel align with DEFRA, which applies the legislation to Shows as if they are part of agriculture. As agricultural events, they are regarded as charitable and not licensable events and so outside the remit of DCMS. The majority of Shows are charities often organised primarily by volunteers and many were too small to qualify for Cultural Relief Funds during the pandemic. A clear link to Government that reflects the wider rural development activities, and potential, of Shows would help to strengthen their futures.

viii. *Support for farming communities remains a core focus*

A strong message that came from the interviews was that Shows play a key role in the social wellbeing of the farming community. From health-checks and vaccination centres to simply providing opportunities for social interaction, the Show circuit in a region provides important inter-generational social events for the sector. Through activities that promote local foods, animal breeds and nature conservation as part of their rural education brief, Shows are also raising the profile of the positive contribution of farmers and land managers at a time when they are often accused of environmental harm.

ix. *A continuing and evolving role for Shows in connecting audiences with today's diverse rural economy*

In terms of theory, the study has identified that small-scale innovations arise from multiple stimuli. In the case of Shows, a lot of necessity innovation occurred but the over-riding driver for this was the survival of Shows to fulfil their wider social and educational remits. The innovation that we identified was not profit-driven but driven by a desire to keep connection with audiences. As agriculture is increasingly at the margins of society, and even pushed to the margins of many rural communities, so the Show sector has also seen "big agriculture" having separate trade events, allowing Shows to become more family-oriented and representative of today's more diverse rural economy. The rural consumer economy creates a major opportunity for Shows to prosper with this model and makes the educational/communication role even more important for the agricultural sector. Therefore, the working relationship between Show organisers, the agricultural sector and a wider range of exhibitors must continue to evolve in order to present a coherent offer to today's Show audiences and participants.

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Project outputs

Bosworth, G., Westwood, C., Price, L. & Ardley, B. (2022) *Rural and agricultural shows: New strategies for supporting entrepreneurs*. Presented at the European Society for Rural Society satellite event, Newcastle, June 2022

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Bosworth, G., Westwood, C., Price, L. & Ardley, B. (in progress) *Rural Shows in the UK: Changing roles and expectations*. Target: Journal of Rural Studies

Annexes

Annex 1: Interview consent form



Innovation in rural and agricultural shows (IRAS)

Project Partners: *Liz Price, Barry Ardley, Katrena Peacock & Sabine Gerlach, University of Lincoln;* *Gary Bosworth & Lavinia Wilson-Youlden, Northumbria University;*

The project concerns the resilience of Rural and Agricultural Shows in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic and the learning from this period that will shape the future development of the sector. We are particularly interested in the use of online spaces and new ways of connecting with different audiences engaged in Shows.

We hope that our findings will help Shows to build and refine online platforms and identify opportunities to strengthen relationships with exhibitors and visitors in the future. These findings will be shared with participants and published through the NICRE website. The data will also inform a research article in an academic journal. Publications will not name individuals or Shows by name and all data will be securely stored within file-space accessible only by the research team.

The broad areas of interview questions will cover the following themes:

- General questions about the Show and your organisation
- Your experiences in 2020 and 2021
- Changes made in response to Covid and the increased use of digital tools across business and society at large
- Your main priorities for the future development of the Show
- The networks/collaborations that you draw on to help develop new initiatives
- The importance of the local region, community engagement and "sense of place" for your Show

To confirm your consent to participate, please sign the confirmation below and return by email to: lprice@lincoln.ac.uk

The purpose of the research and my participation has been clearly explained and I agree to participate in the research.

I also agree to the interview being recorded for the purposes of transcription.

Signed:

Print Name Date:

Annex 2: Interview question guide

Interview questions for show organisers

Introduce the project, mention that it is funded by NICRE which focuses on innovation in the rural economy. Explain that we are particularly interested in innovations that have arisen since the first impacts of Covid and new ideas that you are considering as a "new normal" returns.

General questions for all:

Can you tell us a bit about your organisation? (How many events do you run each year? Are you a business or just a group of volunteers? Do you have full time employees? How are you funded?)

Did you run any online events in 2020 or 2021?

Who is your main target audience for the major Shows?

Have you made other changes in response to the increased use of digital tools across business and society at large? (if needed, you might prompt with examples such as social media, business model development through website/ shops/ live streaming, new online collaborations etc)

If no...

Did you consider it?

What put you off the idea? What were the main obstacles?

Since more businesses are exploiting online space in new ways, do you have any plans to improve your web presence for future live shows?

What are your main priorities for the future development of the Show – do you think it will be back to "business as usual" or do you see changes that will continue to affect the way that Shows are run?

If yes... could you give us a brief summary of the online event that you organised? (this may then lead into, or even answer some of the other questions below without needing prompts.....)

What was the rationale for it? (was it more for customers, businesses, community groups...)

Was it solely triggered by the pandemic or were these changes that you were planning anyway?

And now a few questions about the design of the event?

- Did you design your own website for it? How important was social media?
- Did you already have the technical expertise to deliver it?
- Who did you call on to help pull it together? Were these existing, local networks?

How did you advertise the event – did you have to use new marketing channels? Did this help you to reach new audiences?

Did you collaborate with other Shows to put together an event?

What worked well, what didn't work so well?

- What feedback did you get from businesses/ exhibitors?
- What did the local community say?
- Did you have and interactions/comments on social media that you can share with us?
- Were you able to integrate online retailing, or other opportunities for local businesses to promote themselves?
- Were there any other ways that local businesses were involved? (e.g. developing your online content, supporting networking sessions, marketing the event etc)
- Whether through virtual events or other new ways of doing business, do you think the Show can help the rural economic recovery?

How did you manage to keep the "sense of place" in the online show?

Has the online experience given you ideas for the future – maybe integrating more online content alongside live shows?

What were the main benefits of your online event?

Are there examples of good practice/innovations that you would repeat?

What would you do differently next time?

If you run online events, or "blended" events, what additional value can the online space offer to you, and to your partners/sponsors?

Note: below is the e-eventscape from our paper – not the basis for other questions but something to refer to if they ask questions about what we think makes for a good online event. Also, consider these 6 categories if you are looking for prompts to follow up any answers.

<p><u>Aesthetic appeal and design</u> Do you like the way this website looks? Is the general design of this website appropriate, appealing and pleasing? Do you think that this website is entertaining? Is the website sufficiently interactive? Would you describe it as a high-quality experience?</p>	<p><u>Layout and functionality</u> Is the website easily navigated with clear information? Are there convenient ways to move between related pages and different sections of the Show and its parts? Do you have any suggestions how the site can be personalised or tailored to you? How would you assess site usability?</p>
<p><u>Reputation and identity</u> Does this website enhance or detract from your view of the Lincolnshire physical Show? Do you feel the website represents the County of Lincolnshire?</p>	<p><u>Community and involvement</u> Does the site facilitate interaction and belonging among visitors to the Show? Does the online Show experience help you to feel part of the Lincolnshire Show event? Do you feel totally absorbed and involved in the processes of this Show website?</p>
<p><u>Behavioural intention</u> Is there anything about the current website show that might put you off from participating? Would you participate in an online show through this website in the future? Would you engage with the website in parallel to attending a physical Show in the future?</p>	<p><u>Complementarity to the physical event</u> Which elements of the online event would strengthen a physical event? Which parts of the online event would you engage with before/during/after a physical event? Does the online event communication reach out to audiences beyond the local target areas?</p>

Other Research Reports are available on the NICRE website www.nicre.co.uk/publications The views expressed in this review represent those of the author and are not necessarily those of NICRE or its funders.

For further information about NICRE:

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