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Urban image change over two decades: Comparing the images of six British urban areas 20 years apart

Andrew Bradley^a, Tim Hall^{b,*}

^a Department of Business, Computing and Social Sciences, University of Gloucestershire, UK

^b Department of Policing, Criminology and Forensics, University of Winchester, UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses a significant lacuna in the literature of urban image by examining urban image change for multiple towns and cities over a period of two decades. It revisits and repeats a survey of UK conference and events organisers from 2000 that explored the images they hold of six British towns and cities that had all positioned themselves as key venues for business and leisure tourism meetings, events and conferences. It found both continuities and changes in the images of the towns and cities examined across this time period. Whilst the images of some towns and cities had changed significantly, others had changed very little. Further, the ways in which this audience collectively talked about these urban areas had changed little over this time. The results show that, across an extended time period, significant change in the images of urban areas can occur but that it is not inevitable. The results point to the significance of individual circumstances rather than general processes of urban image change. Our results also reveal the significance of ongoing personal experiences of cities to the processes of urban image formation and change amongst this audience.

1. Introduction

The strategic promotion of desirable images has emerged as a key area of urban policy in recent decades and one that has generated extensive, multidisciplinary academic and policy literatures. Much of the early academic literature on place promotion (Ashworth & Voogd, 1994; Kearns & Philo, 1993; Ward, 1998) sought to analyse the images that were created, but there has been a significant shift in the literature from examining urban image towards understanding the effectiveness of these campaigns and this has fragmented the literature along a number of different lines. For example, research has sought to highlight the creative processes that lead to how city images are produced (Cleave et al., 2017; Hanna & Rowley, 2013), how they are consumed (Fincher et al., 2016; Heere et al., 2019), how the promotion of urban image has shifted with the prevailing economic and social milieu (Kortelainen & Albrecht, 2021; Warnaby, 2018) and how issues related to place distinctiveness as a key feature of urban development policy making has increasingly been driven by neoliberal policies and consequent institutional realignments (Boisen et al., 2018).

Understanding the effectiveness of the creation and dissemination of urban image as a key feature of urban policy has implications for a

number of stakeholders (Florek et al., 2021). These include the connection that local residents have with an urban area (Gilboa & Jaffe, 2021; Styliadis, 2018), tourists who may be tempted to visit the area (Vanolo, 2017) and businesses who may be attracted to an area (Green et al., 2016). Recent literature has, however, sought to challenge the separation of these individual groups of stakeholders and has argued that the interactions between stakeholders keeps city images active and in constant development (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2021; O'Malley et al., 2024) and allow for meanings and interpretations of our understanding of place and place images to be something that changes over time (Malone et al., 2024).

However, despite this shift in emphasis, little is known about how urban images might change over time. This paper addresses this significant lacuna by exploring urban image change for multiple towns and cities over an extended period of two decades. It revisits and repeats a survey of conference and events organisers that explored the images they hold of six British towns and cities (Birmingham, Belfast, Cardiff, Doncaster, Glasgow and Manchester) that had all positioned themselves as key venues for the hosting of business and leisure tourism meetings, events and conferences through the development of major events facilities. It considers the images that this key audience hold of these towns

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: tim.hall@winchester.ac.uk (T. Hall).

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and cities and the ways in which these images have changed over time. It does this through comparisons of a survey conducted amongst this audience in 2000 and a repeat survey conducted between 2020 and 2023. It makes a number of original contributions to understanding the nature of city images, the ways in which they change over an extended time period, the process of urban image formation and the significance of urban image to the decision making processes of key actors.

2. Literature review

The promotion of urban images has become an integral part of urban governance and policy making in the worldwide competition for tourists, inhabitants and investments with cities vying against each other in order to develop an attractive image and positive reputation (Aydoghmiş & Rafieian, 2022; Lucarelli, 2018; Zenker, 2009). Cities, however, have not always adopted the same approach to the promotion of image and this has been widely documented by the considerable academic interest in this area (Boisen et al., 2018; Van Assche et al., 2020; Vanolo, 2018). Most of the preliminary research in this area from the 1970s to the 1990s centred around the nature of cities as “marketable commodities” (Hankinson, 2010: 28) as cities struggled to adjust to a post-industrial landscape which reflected a considerable shift in the global economy which now prioritized “hypermobility, global communications and the neutralization of place and distance” (Sassen, 2000: 84). At this time, the promotion of urban image was seen as a cost-effective response as cities the world over attempted to promote themselves as attractive places to live, to visit and to do business, whilst at the same time aiming to distance themselves from their industrial legacy (Albrecht & Kortelainen, 2021). Many commentators have linked these initial attempts at the promotion of urban image to a shift towards the language of business becoming entwined with local policy development and the emergence of ‘entrepreneurship’ in urban management (Boland, 2013; Kavaratzis, 2018; Skinner, 2008). The result of this was that cities were increasingly conceptualised as businesses and urban policy makers were cast as creative and risky profit motivators who developed urban images that were designed to reflect the unique and distinctive nature of the cities that they represented (Hall & Hubbard, 1998; Huang et al., 2021). This language, however, is somewhat contradictory to some of the analysis that has been conducted of the images that were subsequently produced with commentators noting that they were typically centred around very few themes and that cities that were essentially quite different became remarkably similar as urban planners created images from a very narrow palette of marketable attributes that highlighted what the city could offer (Bonakdar & Audirac, 2021; Holcomb, 1994; Kock et al., 2016; Murray, 2001; Short, 1996).

In the early 21st century there was an increased emphasis related to urban image that took a wider perspective and engaged with a variety of stakeholders. Again, commentators have sought to link these developments to broader shifts in urban governance with a revised focus on urban planning that placed a greater emphasis on stakeholders and a much more collaborative planning approach (Johansson, 2012; Tasci et al., 2007). These approaches drew on some of the criticisms of the first phase of the incorporation of urban image in relation to city politics in that they typically emphasised the promotion of urban image as a co-operational approach amongst stakeholders (Aitken & Campelo, 2011; Bonakdar & Audirac, 2020; Warnaby & Medway, 2013) with the images that were produced aiming to have more of a ‘personal’ connection to the area that was being promoted that resonated as much with local residents and businesses as they did with external audiences (Kavaratzis, 2009).

During this phase of the academic interest in urban image there was also a shift towards taking a more detailed approach to how these urban images were received by a variety of audiences (Echtner & Ritchie, 2003; Bradley & Hall, 2006). This may seem a little strange as whilst it had been a key feature of more traditional areas of marketing and promotion to consider issues related to the role of image formation and the

communication process (Skinner, 2011), this was only widely adopted within approaches to understanding urban image at a relatively late stage with a range of studies that sought to examine how external audiences engaged with the images that were produced and what impact this had on a urban development (Bradley, 2011a). In these approaches, the purpose was no longer solely to understand what had been produced by a variety of cities, but also to examine this from the perspectives of a variety of stakeholders, including city residents for the first time, to ascertain how city images were subsequently consumed by recipients (Dragin-Jensen & Lenholdt, 2021; Potter, 2020).

A combination of these earlier approaches has led to a much more developed literature on the nature of urban image and the development of city brands that has stressed how they are embedded within complex geographical, relational, and institutional systems, involving the interaction of different sectors and intertwined with the political environment (Oliveira, 2015) and almost all major cities now apply these strategies to improve their image (Zenker, 2018).

With specific reference to professional event organisers, a potential stakeholder who is looking for the best city in which to host their next event, there is plentiful evidence from both the academic literature and from the industry to suggest that the image of urban areas is one of the key attributes that conference, meetings and events organisers take account of within their locational decision-making processes (Baloglu & Love, 2005; Glasgow City Marketing Bureau, 2004; Hayat et al., 2014; Houdement et al., 2017; Jo et al., 2019). As Houdement et al. (2017: 141) argue in their study of events organisers and suppliers in two Spanish cities: “Destination image is crucial in the decision-making procedure... Respondents added that the place communicates about the event, giving it a specific picture”. From an industry perspective, Scott Taylor, Chief Executive of Glasgow City Marketing Bureau (2004: np), in their brand marketing document published in association with the launch of the ‘Glasgow: Scotland with Style’ campaign, discussed below, claimed “A positive and unique image is the primary reason why visitors choose a city for a short break, *the overriding reason why a convention organiser selects one destination over another* and the impetus behind an investor believing in the lifestyle values that Glasgow offer” (our emphasis).

An analysis of surveys related to the decision making process of professional event organisers as well as those who make decisions as to which events to attend highlights three key areas related to destination image that are of particular influence: The images of the city that are promoted (Happ, 2014; Hayat et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2016; Pavluković & Cimbaljević, 2020), the perception of event related infrastructure that supports the delivery of the event and the creation of a quality event experience (Bernini, 2009; Kumar & Hussain, 2014; Welthagen et al., 2023) and broader circumstantial change within the destination (Haven-Tang et al., 2007; Moon et al., 2013; Skinner, 2017; Cassar et al., 2020; Schabbing, 2022).

Whilst a great deal is understood about the nature of urban image, how it is produced, consumed and the impacts it can have on a location, far less is known about how a destination's image may change over time and much of the work that has been produced to date can only reflect a specific moment in time. This is particularly surprising as much of the literature related to image and urban planning is connected to the broader literature on competitive advantage with city images being repackaged in order to maintain place distinctiveness as urban development policy has increasingly been driven by neoliberal policies and consequent institutional realignments (Boisen et al., 2018).

This is particularly problematic for locations that have invested in a range of destination marketing campaigns in order to improve or maintain their image. However, as Pike (2017: 126) noted, “the issue of destination position temporality has largely been ignored by academic researchers”. This is an omission that this paper aims to directly address.

There is some evidence that studies have begun to heed Pike's call, but this literature is rather fragmented and the extent to which issues of change of destination image over time is lacking in the key area of

temporality. There have been published studies that have looked at the change in a single destination (Almeida-García et al., 2020), studies that have examined change in destination image following a visit and how it impacts intention to return (Oyunchimeg et al., 2022), how destinations are described over time in online reviews (Guo et al., 2022) and a study of a single country's image before, during and after a visit (Kim et al., 2019). Whilst these studies help to shed important light on the changes that can occur with a destination's image and the factors which can influence this change, they are limited in terms of time scale over which the image is being looked at or are limited to a single location. An understanding of destination image change has relevance to a number of audiences including urban managers who will be interested to know if the policies related to urban image have been successful and are sustainable as well as academics who are interested in urban image and how it is perceived by those who make decisions based upon the images that they receive. It is this latter audience to whom this paper is largely addressed as issues around change within urban image have been lacking within the extant academic literature.

3. Method

The method employed in this research, an extensive questionnaire survey, exactly mirrored that of the original research (Bradley et al., 2002). The 2000 survey asked respondents about their images of six UK towns and cities. We selected these towns and cities on the basis of three criteria:

- They [the towns and cities] have had a prominent industrial/manufacturing economy that has subsequently contracted;
- They have developed/redeveloped facilities in or near their centres, which demonstrates a commitment to the promotion of meetings tourism;
- They have developed meetings tourism facilities as part of a wider policy of economic regeneration" (Bradley et al., 2002: 64).

The primary aim of this paper is to track changes in the images of these urban areas over two decades. For this reason, the survey again asked specifically and only about the six urban areas included in the original 2000 survey. We were drawn to meetings, events and conference organisers as our research population, over other potential sets of respondents, as they constituted key decision makers and a key client market that the regeneration strategies, and their associated promotional campaigns, undertaken in the six UK urban areas were designed to appeal to.

Although, copies of the original questionnaire no longer existed, victims of shifts in digital storage technology, it was reconstructed from our publication with minimal changes. The original survey, circulated in summer 2000 was a postal survey, the survey for this research was distributed to respondents by email, with a link to the online questionnaire included.

During late 2019 and early 2020, 393 events and conference organising companies were identified, constituting the research population. Invitations were distributed to all identified companies in early March 2020. Almost immediately the conference and events industry were shut down as the UK entered its first Covid-19 'lockdown' on 23rd March 2020. Responses to the survey, 13 had been received at this point, stopped immediately as the industry entered what seemed at the time to be an existential crisis.

The effects of the pandemic on the conference and events industry necessitated a multi-stage strategy to gather further responses. This included contacting companies who had not responded to the initial invitation when the industry began to emerge out of lockdown in 2021, distributing the survey using appropriate hashtags on the business social media site LinkedIn, through personal contacts that the researchers knew were working in conference and events companies and distributing a shortened version of the survey at a large conference and events

industry event in 2023. In total we received 57 responses to these various invitations. This compared to 62 responses received in the original 2000 survey from 295 postal invitations that were distributed then (Bradley et al., 2002: 65).

Although the sample that informs this survey is less than we originally hoped, it does represent 14.5 % of the original 393 companies contacted. Given the impacts of Covid-19 on the conference and events industry (Ziakas et al., 2021), this likely represents a higher proportion of the UK's remaining, post-Covid conference and events industry. Further, given that this survey targets a specialist, professional population, a form of elite interviewing, the sample obtained is deemed representative of its population.

The questionnaire contained a mix of closed and open questions. Closed questions produced numerical data that were analysed using standard descriptive statistics (totals and percentages). Text generated through open questions was analysed using inductive thematic analysis. This aimed to identify common themes across the responses. This analysis was initially undertaken independently by both researchers. The themes identified were then reviewed and an agreed set of themes arrived at. This analysis of open text data from the 2020–2023 survey was undertaken independent of the themes identified in the analysis of open text data from the original 2000 survey.

In addition to this survey research, a review of promotional campaigns and activity within the six urban areas in the 20 years between the two phases of this research was conducted, along with a review of major urban development or refurbishment projects and a review of major events that have generated extensive media coverage of the six urban areas during this period. This analysis provides an overview of the key developments that are likely to impact on the externally perceived images of our study urban areas. This analysis is discussed in the following section.

4. Major developments in study areas since 2002

In the period since 2002 there have been some political changes that have influenced who has been responsible for creating and promoting promotional imagery for the six case study locations. For example, Manchester elected its first Mayor in 2017 who has responsibility for the strategic governance of the region and the shift in legislative and management powers in Cardiff that took place following a referendum in 2011 and the passing of the Wales Acts of 2014 and 2017 which saw control and responsibility shift to local areas and away from central Government in England, which reflects a broader shift in politics that has taken place in the last 2 decades (Yi & Qiu, 2024).

In conjunction with this political shift to place a greater emphasis and responsibility on local areas, there has also been a significant technological shift that has seen an increased growth in the creation of 'peer-to-peer' marketing through the growth in social media (Hysa et al., 2021; Pop et al., 2021) and how it has been used to connect people to images of place that are beyond those that are communicated by official agencies that are tasked with promoting images of place. This fragmentation within destination marketing has presented significant challenges for those tasked with promoting destinations (Palazzo et al., 2020), but also offers significant benefits as it allows a connection to be made between people and places that may have been ignored or overlooked by traditional place marketing activities (Cooper et al., 2021; Gato et al., 2022).

All six urban areas in our study have seen extensive promotional and urban development activity in the two decades since the original study. They have all, for example, launched multiple promotional campaigns over this period. Collectively, these campaigns all align broadly within the promotion of the narrow palette of urban attributes that some commentators have argued represents the formulaic and repetitive approach that cities internationally have taken to place promotion in recent decades (Holcomb, 1994: 121; Murray, 2001: 6; Short, 1996). Short (1996), for example, has argued that the promotion of cities tends

to suggest that they are either multicultural, environmentally friendly, cultural and/or a perfect location for business and investment.

If there has been a prevailing approach to city marketing in our study urban areas since 2002 it has been the promotion of an abundance of the post-industrial urban attributes recognised by Short (1996) above, under slogans that emphasise positivity whilst avoiding specificity. Glasgow, for example, launched its 'Glasgow: Scotland with Style' campaign in 2004. Although visually this branding emphasised style, fashion and a European sense of sophistication, it sought to enroll a wide range of the city's perceived physical and cultural attributes under this brand umbrella. Glasgow's brand management document at the time argued:

"The brand works on both the rational and emotional level, conveying a unique sense of place. On a rational level, the brand encapsulates the many physical attributes of the city, including the legacy of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Glasgow Style; its strength in its cultural credentials; the history and heritage of the River Clyde, and the visual wealth of the best preserved Victorian city in the UK. This is combined with the creative vibe that has produced a world-renowned capital of contemporary music, a city with an unbridled passion for sport, and an intense drive for urban regeneration. To this, add the emotional characteristics of its citizens with their own distinctive self-deprecating humour, genuine friendliness, a cosmopolitan attitude and a firm belief in fair play" (Glasgow City Marketing Bureau, 2004: np).

An equivalent campaign 'See More. Feel More.' was launched by Birmingham in 2013. This was centred on a visual collage that emphasised a townscape combining historical and modern architecture, the city's prestigious high cultural assets, such as the Birmingham Royal Ballet company, along with a diverse and lively street culture. The city returned to the positive, yet unspecific, in their 2022 campaign, launched in association with the city hosting that year's Commonwealth Games, 'Be Bold, Be Birmingham'. Birmingham City Council describe 'Be Bold, Be Birmingham' (2022: np) as:

"A celebration.
An attitude.
An aspiration.
A state of mind.
A sense of direction.
A purpose for the city.
A promotion of civic pride".

Examples of comparable promotional campaigns from other urban areas in our study include: 'This is legendary. This is Cardiff' (2017); 'Escape the Everyday in Manchester' (2022) and 'Belfast Makes Sense' (2019). In sum, rather than the promotion of singular, stable urban images, much of the promotional activity that we have seen in our study urban areas since 2002 has involved the periodic repromotion of various combinations of that narrow set of post-industrial attributes that first emerged in these urban areas in the 1980s and early 1990s and which were often promoted then in association with major cultural events such as Glasgow's role as European City of Culture in 1990 (Mooney, 2007) or urban developments such as the opening of the International Convention Centre Birmingham in 1991 (Hall, 1994). In addition to campaigns of this nature, we have also seen campaigns within these urban areas that have been targeted towards more specific markets with more singular foci such as 'Business Birmingham – Best to Invest' (2015); 'Discover the UK's best value capital city break' (Cardiff, 2024) and 'Belfast believes in Christmas' (2021). These campaigns though have also remained within the template defined by Short (1996) outlined above.

All six cities have continued to make investments in their event infrastructure that was pivotal to them being chosen for the 2002 paper. In an attempt to keep up with the changing demands of professional event organisers Alananzeh et al., (2019) for the latest technology and flexible facilities Birmingham spent £26 million on a redevelopment of the National Indoor Arena in 2014 for its reopening as the Barclaycard Arena (2014). Similarly, Doncaster invested £32 m in a renovation of Doncaster Racecourse and conference centre which was completed in

2008 and included a brand new hotel for delegates. There have also been investments in venues within the host cities that can host events as part of their broader remit as professional event organisers seek new and unusual locations to host their events in order to add an important point of difference. For example, Kelvin Hall in Glasgow reopened in 2016 after a £35million refurbishment as an art and cultural centre, Belfast opened the Titanic Museum in 2012 and Cardiff opened the Wales Millennium Centre in 2014 and the Cardiff International Sports Stadium in 2009.

Each of the case study cities have also been active in attempting to secure the rights to host a range of prestigious events which can promoted and managed as a form of public spectacle and also have the potential to become attractive to external audiences as it reflects the 'vibrancy' of an area as well as reflecting the ambition, differentiation and histories of its residents (Jago et al., 2003). These events can be a cost-effective way of securing both short term financial gain as well as offering potential to meet long term strategic goals as they have an ability to offer spectacle, and atmosphere and allow a direct connection to the experience economy which is increasingly aligned with societal demand in an era of conspicuous consumption connected to the use of social media and the portrayal of the 'ideal self' (Gratton et al., 2011) as well as providing vibrancy to broader urban imagery.

For example, three of the six cities have been host locations for the Commonwealth Games (Manchester, 2002; Glasgow, 2014 and Birmingham, 2023) and other major sporting events have taken place in Doncaster (one of the host cities for the Rugby League World Cup in 2022) and Cardiff (Host city for the UEFA Champions League Final, 2017). The case study cities have also held events across the political and cultural sphere with Glasgow hosting COP26 in 2021 and Cardiff hosting a NATO summit in 2021.

The case study cities have also looked to develop their own events and festivals, which as Bladen et al. (2022) note, are attractive to government bodies pursuing place branding initiatives as these temporary events are more flexible than fixed physical infrastructure and do not require a long-term commitment. Therefore, newly developed events can be a cost-effective way of securing both short term financial gain as well as offering potential to meet long term strategic goals to differentiate physical environments which are threatened by serial reproduction (Kubeš & Kovács, 2020) For example, Belfast developed The Imagine! Belfast Festival of Ideas & Politics which strives to provide high-quality showcases for the discussion of contemporary political and societal issues including new ideas on politics, culture and activism, Manchester developed the Manchester International Festival (first held in 2007) and Glasgow launched the Glasgow International Comedy Festival in 2002.

Whilst destinations attempt to control the images of cities that they disseminate via place marketing campaigns, numerous studies have also highlighted that circumstantial change in the form of news stories of events from within a location can also have a significant impact upon the destination images that are subsequently formed (Beerli & Martin, 2004; Campo & Alvarez, 2014; Avraham, 2015; Gabbioneta & De Carlo, 2019). The six case studies have been covered extensively in the media during the two decades between the initial paper and this follow up and have had several circumstantial narratives that could, potentially, have a positive impact upon their image. For example, Doncaster achieving city status in 2022, travel publications that name the locations as one of their top places to visit (Glasgow named by Time Out in 2022 and Manchester named by Lonely Planet in 2016 or Belfast winning the Best Conference Destination award at the Conference and Incentive Travel Awards in 2021 and 2022. Some of the news coverage was far more mixed, with Birmingham's redevelopment of Centenary Square gaining attention, but also much criticism as it was only designed in 1990. Similarly, the launch of Grand Central in Birmingham in 2015 was widely covered, as was the closure of its anchor store in 2020. A similar mixed picture has emerged from Belfast with the on-off nature of its devolved Government at Stormont and the opening of Doncaster Sheffield Airport in 2005 and its subsequent closure in 2023. This positive and mixed picture is

Table 1

Image as an encouragement or deterrent to potential event organisers (2020–2023) and ‘Encouragement’ change from 2000.

	Encouragement	Change from 2000	Deterrent	Neither	Don't know
Belfast	34 [59.6 %]	+48.7 %	3 [5.3 %]	13 [22.8 %]	7 [12.3 %]
Birmingham	32 [56.1 %]	–18.9 %	7 [12.3 %]	17 [29.8 %]	1 [1.8 %]
Cardiff	40 [70.2 %]	+53.0 %	5 [8.8 %]	9 [15.8 %]	3 [5.3 %]
Doncaster	4 [7.0 %]	+3.2 %	21 [36.8 %]	17 [29.8 %]	15 [26.3 %]
Glasgow	42 [73.1 %]	–4.3 %	6 [10.5 %]	7 [12.3 %]	2 [3.5 %]
Manchester	45 [78.9 %]	+2.9 %	3 [5.3 %]	8 [14.0 %]	1 [1.8 %]

counterbalanced by a range of circumstances that could have reflected negatively on the case study cities. For example, there were terrorist attacks in Glasgow (2007) and Manchester (2017), the well-publicised financial troubles of the city of Birmingham that resulted in it declaring bankruptcy in 2024 and some unrest in Belfast following the murder of journalist and author Lyra McKee.

To reflect on this as a whole, it is clear that destinations have continued to vigorously pursue strategies aligned with the promotion of urban image in the 20 years that have divided the two surveys reported in this paper, but the practice of destination marketing has evolved. It has moved from something that had a singular goal of demonstrating that cities had moved away from their industrial heritage to something that has become far more nuanced and focused upon individual groups of stakeholders with differing wants and needs. There has also been a recognition that the formation of destination image by these stakeholders is not totally in the control of those crafting and transmitting city images and broader circumstances that are beyond the immediate control of destinations also play a key role. This, however, only paints a two-dimensional approach to the understanding of destination image as it only looks at what is produced and how it is consumed and it neglects to consider the key element of time and we know very little about how city images change over time and what might be influencing this change.

5. Findings

The images of the six urban areas held by our 2020–2023 respondents varied significantly (Table 1). The images of three cities (Cardiff, Glasgow and Manchester) were viewed positively (as an encouragement to holding an event there) by over 70 % of our respondents. This positivity was reflected in open text comments about these cities. For example, “Gateway city, big venues, well priced”, “Cultural, good transport links, lots of options, good activities and venues undervalued” and “has some very attractive buildings and a picturesque setting on Cardiff Bay” (Cardiff), “vibrant, fun, accessible, easy to navigate around”, “Edgy, urban, new investment, new large venues, quirky” and “Transforming the city into a vibrant and prosperous destination” (Glasgow) and “Buzzing”, “London of the North, very accessible and lots of options”, and “A modern city with a proud heritage, and some excellent facilities too” (Manchester).

The images of Belfast and Birmingham were viewed as an encouragement to holding an event there by a smaller majority of respondents (34 respondents, 59.6 % and 32 respondents, 56.1 % respectively). Although all six urban areas received some negative comments within the qualitative responses, the comments for Belfast and Birmingham were more mixed overall than those for Cardiff, Glasgow and Manchester. We find comments for these cities such as “compact, young, wanting to prove itself. Great facilities in a walkable space”, “Maybe modern but wary of political unrest, unfriendly image/feeling” and “A little mixed with its recent history of terrorist atrocities, but the setting on Belfast Lough is attractive and there has been some good investment in modern facilities for business events” (Belfast) and “concrete and canals with an unattractive central area”, “Traditional industrial” and “Middle of country, accessible, diverse, airport, good activities and venues” (Birmingham).

The image of Doncaster was viewed as an encouragement by only 7

% of respondents. Doncaster's image was viewed variously as a deterrent to holding an event there by 21 respondents (36.8 %), neither (17 respondents, 29.8 %) and don't know (15 respondents, 26.3 %). In each of these cases these were the largest number of responses in these categories for our six urban areas. Doncaster was, as it was also in 2000, an urban area little known by our respondents.

We see both continuities and changes from our 2000 survey (Tables 1 and 2). The images of three cities (Doncaster, Glasgow and Manchester) have not fundamentally changed in the ways in which they are regarded by respondents between the two surveys. The images of both Glasgow and Manchester were viewed positively by a large majority (over 75 %) of 2000 respondents and remain similarly positively regarded in 2020–2023. Doncaster was largely seen negatively, ambivalently or was little known in 2000 and little has changed in the intervening 20 years. For example, 36 respondents (63.2 %) indicated that they had an unclear, or very unclear image of Doncaster in 2020–2023, the largest proportion for any of the six urban areas. Further, 35 respondents (83.3 %) said that their image of Doncaster had not changed in the last 20 years, again the largest proportion who answered in this way for the six urban areas.

By contrast the ways in which the images of Belfast and Cardiff and, to an extent and in a different direction, Birmingham, are regarded, has shown noticeable change in the period between the two surveys. The images of Belfast and Cardiff are now regarded much more positively than they were in 2000. The proportions of respondents who regarded Belfast and Cardiff's images as an encouragement has increased by 48.7 and 53 % respectively (Table 1), despite having the additional answer option of ‘neither’ on the 2020–2023 survey, which was not available in 2000. Similarly, the proportion of respondents who regarded Belfast's image as a deterrent has fallen significantly from 62.7 % in 2000 to only 5.3 % in 2020–2023. When asked separately, 35 respondents (81.4 % of those who answered the question) indicated that their image of Belfast had improved in the last 20 years, the largest for any of the six urban areas. In 2000 the image of Belfast was tainted by Northern Ireland's history of sectarian violence that had only ended a few years previously with the Good Friday agreement in 1998.¹ This significant image change was reflected in 2020–2023 qualitative comments for Belfast. For example, one respondent indicated “when I first visited on conference

Table 2

Image as an encouragement or deterrent to potential event organisers (2000 (Bradley et al., 2002: 66)).

	Encouragement	Deterrent	Don't know
Belfast	6 [11.8 %]	32 [62.7 %]	13 [25.5 %]
Birmingham	39 [75.0 %]	10 [19.2 %]	3 [5.8 %]
Cardiff	5 [17.2 %]	7 [24.1 %]	17 [58.6 %]
Doncaster	2 [3.8 %]	21 [40.0 %]	29 [55.8 %]
Glasgow	41 [77.4 %]	5 [9.4 %]	7 [13.2 %]
Manchester	38 [76.0 %]	4 [8.0 %]	8 [16.0 %]

¹ In addition to this, there had been some prominent media coverage of ongoing unrest in the months leading up to the distribution of the 2000 survey (Bradley et al., 2002: 67).

business in the early 1990s, police security checks on the streets were still in evidence - now most of the ‘troubles’ seem to be behind it and there has been significant investment in conference infrastructure”. Similarly, although to a slightly lesser extent, Cardiff’s image has become much better known in a positive way since 2000. Over half (58.6 %) of our 2000 respondents indicated that they had no clear image of Cardiff by responding ‘don’t know’. By 2020–2023, by contrast, 39 respondents (68.4 %) indicated that they had a clear or very clear image of Cardiff and only six respondents (10.5 %) that they had an unclear or very unclear image of Cardiff.

Birmingham’s image has shown a drop of 18.9 % in the proportion of respondents who regarded it as an encouragement to holding an event

there, in the period between the two surveys, although it is still seen in positive terms by over half (56.1 %) of the 2020–2023 respondents. When asked how their images of the six urban areas had changed over the previous 20 years, 27 respondents (62.8 %, $n = 43$) indicated that their image of Birmingham had improved. Whilst this might initially seem incongruous in the light of drop in the proportion of respondents who felt Birmingham’s image was an encouragement, this was the smallest proportion of respondents who expressed that their image had improved for the six urban areas. The way in which respondents regard Birmingham has not fundamentally changed between the two surveys, but its image is seen in less positive terms amongst the event organisers surveyed.

Table 3

Selected respondents’ quotes Birmingham, Doncaster, Glasgow, Manchester (2000 and 2020–2023).

Belfast 2000 (Bradley et al., 2002: 68)

- Beautiful city with a friendly atmosphere.
- Dangerous image.
- Unstable politically, difficult to get to.
- Too much violence in the news.
- I think that Belfast should try and promote the positive side of its culture, the negative side is always seen in the media.
- Still has image of city affected by sectarian unrest.

Belfast 2020–2023

- Came a long way to offer a positive view of the city.
- Rising Star in conference and events, accessible, small city with great heart and soul.
- Up and coming, reinvented itself since the troubles.
- Modern, up and coming.
- Historical issues abound but have heard a lot of good things.
- Innovative and young exciting.
- Up and coming, accessible, cultural, airport, good activities and venues

Birmingham 2000 (Bradley et al., 2002: 67)

- Established conference/exhibition/event city, excellent hotels, bars, restaurants, venues – easily accessible.
- Area around International Convention Centre is vibrant and up and coming.
- Poor image, high rises, dirty, crime, traffic problems.

Birmingham 2020–2023

- Big, brash Birmingham.
- The retail provision is good at the mailbox and at some specialist local retailers and that can be a big draw for people.
- Centrally located but facilities starting to show their age

Cardiff 2000 (Bradley et al., 2002: 67)

- Perception of city has improved.
- Has more of a provincial image but is improving rapidly.
- Good new venues, a fast improved city.
- Difficult to reach by all forms of transport, smaller facilities.
- I have no image of Cardiff.
- Even with improvements to waterside area, it’s still a dump.

Cardiff 2020–2023

- Demonstrates investment.
- Packs a lot in for a city that is relatively small.
- Vibrant city.
- Great for smaller events, lively city, great for history and sport.
- Proud capital of Wales, rugby, but I’ve never been.
- Was surprised by the docks area and the symphony Hall, there is more here than I expected, shame you don’t hear much about it.

Doncaster 2000 (Bradley et al., 2002: 67)

- Lack of knowledge, perceived as a Northern town.
- Where?
- I have no image of Doncaster.

Doncaster 2020–2023

- I don’t know the first thing about it.
- It has never even come up in conversation as a possibility.
- I couldn’t tell you where it is or anything about it.

Glasgow 2000 (Bradley et al., 2002: 67)

- Is now a vibrant city, good conference facilities, hotels, good shopping.
- Trendy, lively, great people, good PR.
- Glasgow has a much improved image since the 1980s, there’s so much going on.

Glasgow 2020–2023

- Continues to develop the city to attract visitors.
- The nice bits of Glasgow are great, but south of the river is bandit country.
- Key Scottish conference and exhibition destination, culture, history, accessibility, large spaces and good bedroom options.

Manchester 2000 (Bradley et al., 2002: 67)

- Vibrant city, good image, good facilities.
- Trendy, cosmopolitan, lively.
- Working hard to shake off past industrial revolution feel, vibrant, lively.

Manchester 2020–2023

- Really young feel, great for post meeting activities.
- Becoming the second city of the UK - especially since the creation of media city
- Gets great reviews from clients for the facilities and the quality of the nightlife.

Birmingham has, in the period since our second survey closed, been subject to a number of both positive and negative news stories. The city's hosting of the 2022 Commonwealth Games was generally seen as a success, both as an event in itself and in terms of promoting the city externally. In contrast though Birmingham has been the subject of a string of more negative media narratives that have followed its City Council issuing a Section 114 (bankruptcy) notice in September 2023. Both of these events and their subsequent media coverage have the potential of impacting internal and external stakeholders' views of the city. Whilst Birmingham, and indeed all of the six urban areas surveyed, will have been the subjects of both positive and negative media coverage in the period between the two surveys, it is telling that, with the exception of Belfast in 2000, the impacts of such media narratives are little apparent in the comments of the respondents to our two surveys (see Table 3). This may, however, reflect the nature of our sample. Less specifically industry focused surveys might reveal the potential impacts of external events and media narratives on the images of urban areas.

Drawing now upon the themes that appeared in qualitative responses in both surveys, we see broadly similar discourses articulated by respondents about the six urban areas in 2000 and in 2020–2023. Following the 2000 survey we identified eight themes that emerged in respondents' qualitative comments about the urban areas. These were: cultural; social; environmental; political; regeneration/economic development; related to individual venues; related to facilities (hotels, shops etc.) in the venue's location; and accessibility (Bradley et al., 2002: 66). All but one of these themes (political) were present in the ways that respondents spoke about the six urban areas in the 2020–2023 survey. The ways in which the urban areas were collectively talked about by our respondents, then, has changed little between the two surveys.

The urban areas that were perceived positively by the respondents to the 2020–2023 survey were seen as possessing combinations of some or all of five specific attributes. These attributes were cultural (vibrant), environmental (historic or attractive), dynamic (in regeneration and development terms), having good facilities (events venues and supporting facilities such as shops and bars), and accessible. Where the urban areas were spoken about in more negative or equivocal terms in the 2020–2023 survey they were seen as having poor facilities, being too remote or feeling rundown (which encompassed references to crime, industry and poverty). The themes that came out through the open text comments in the 2020–2023 survey strongly echo the eight themes identified in the 2000 survey. The only significant change is that we do not see the political factors that we identified in 2000, which were largely a reflection of the extent to which Belfast was viewed through the lens of media coverage of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland in 2000. This had either entirely disappeared from the responses to the 2020–2023 survey or was present as a marker of how far Belfast has moved away from this aspect of its past in the minds of our respondents.

Reflecting the continuities and changes in the general perceptions of the urban areas noted above, we see both continuities and changes in the ways that the specific urban areas were discussed by respondents across the two surveys. Fundamentally, the ways in which Doncaster, Glasgow and Manchester's images are regarded has not changed across the two surveys and we see this reflected in the ways in which respondents talk about these areas in their open text responses. Similarly, Birmingham is little changed in the way it is talked about across the two surveys (Table 3). Whilst there are more negative comments than we found in 2000 amongst 2020–2023 responses, they are of a similar nature to the 2000 comments. Respondents, for example, talked about Birmingham being built up, which was interpreted as congested, or overly busy, some talked about Birmingham having peaked some years ago and now declining as a venue and of facilities having not been upgraded or of showing their age. In some other cases, respondents mentioned the city was not that well connected or accessible. Other specific negatives that were mentioned were that it was dull and was affected by problems of crime and poverty. A small number of respondents mentioned it having a generally poor image, without outlining specifics.

The specific themes attached to Belfast and Cardiff by respondents have changed somewhat between the two surveys, reflective of the significant improvements of the images of these cities amongst the event organisers surveyed. In 2000, Belfast's image was rooted firmly within its recent history of sectarian violence whilst Cardiff was seen as a provincial, remote city that lacked a clear image. However, both cities were seen in more positive terms by 2020–2023 and were talked about by respondents in ways reflective of the positive attributes attached to other cities in our survey. Specifically, Belfast was frequently talked about positively in terms of its dynamism and Cardiff its vibrancy and good facilities (Table 3).

What these responses suggest is that image change in a positive direction seems to be particularly related to tangible, recent urban change. Motifs such as 'up and coming' and 'demonstrating investment', for example, are prominent within discussions of Belfast and Cardiff. This suggests that evidence of recent visible development is perceived very positively by respondents. These comments contrast to those attached to Birmingham which suggest a city that might have experienced such change some time ago but is now somewhat lacking this quality of recent urban change. This is reflected in the generally more ambivalent view of its image expressed by respondents to the 2020–2023 survey.

A key feature of this tangible and recent change is perceived to be the vibrancy that is offered by the events that are hosted in these cities with respondents with both sporting and cultural events being commented upon as well as the particular facilities that are offered for business events. Therefore, it is possible to draw a tentative conclusion that locations that have used events in a strategic manner to give a frequently occurring vibrancy and energy to a location have been more successful in either maintaining or creating a positive image and this is something that may merit further investigation and be of interest to destination marketing professionals.

Turning to the importance of image within the event decision making process, we find very similar results in both surveys. A large majority of respondents (98 %) ranked the image of the town or city within which an event is taking place as either important or very important to the success of that event or attractiveness of that location, in the 2020–2023 survey, which compared to 83 % in 2000 (Table 4). However, when ranked against other relevant attributes of event locations, the image of the city it is located within, is ranked only seventh out of eight in 2020–2023, which mirrors exactly the rankings from 2000. Indeed, the rankings of all eight attributes from 2000 and 2020–2023 matched exactly (Table 5). The image of the city that an event is located within, then, emerges, as it did in 2000, as an important, but supporting attribute, within the event location decision making process.

6. Discussion

The findings of our 2020–2023 survey confirm those of our 2000 survey that the externally perceived image of an urban area is an important attribute, albeit a supporting one, within the location decision making process of events organisers and in the likely attractiveness of events. Urban image, then, remains a topic of some significance within the contexts of location decision making processes of a host of actors and in the realms of urban development and policy and in shaping the fortunes of individual towns and cities.

Table 4

Ranking of the importance of the town/city in which a meeting is taking place to the success of that event or attractiveness of that location (2000; 2020–2023).

	2000 (n = 46)	2020–2023 (n = 43)
Very important	17 %	65 %
Important	66 %	33 %
Neither	13 %	0 %
Not very important	4 %	2 %
Unimportant	0 %	0 %

Table 5
Ranking by respondents of attributes, in order of importance taken into account when selecting a venue for a meeting.

	2000	2020–2023
Accessibility	1	1
The quality and versatility of the venue	2	2
Catering and banqueting	3	3
The quality and range of services it offers	4	4
The physical location and associated facilities/services	5	5
Technology and technological facilities	6	6
The image of the city it is located within	7	7
Previous high-profile events/customers	8	8

Comparisons between the 2000 and 2020–2023 surveys tell us a number of things about continuity and change in urban image over a two-decade period. Firstly, the ways in which the six urban areas studied were collectively talked about by respondents has changed little over the 20 years under examination. The themes respondents articulated in 2000 remain, largely, relevant in 2020–2023. We see no encroachment of more recent discourses of urbanisation, such as green and smart urbanisation, for example, onto the ways in which our six urban areas were spoken about by respondents. We find no evidence, then, that the language used to describe cities by this audience has changed or expanded significantly in the 20-year period under investigation. The extent to which this is the case for other agents relevant to urban change, such as potential residents, tourists, companies seeking relocation, investors or developers, remains open to question and future investigation.

By contrast, when we look at the ways in which individual urban areas are described by respondents, our findings do demonstrate the potential for change in urban image over this period, but also that change is not inevitable. Two of the six urban areas that we examined (Belfast and Cardiff) showed significant positive change in the ways their images were viewed by respondents to the two surveys. One further city (Birmingham) showed some measurable modification, in a more modest and negative sense, to its externally perceived image. However, we also see that this change is not universal. Three of the cities (Doncaster, Glasgow and Manchester) were viewed in fundamentally similar ways by respondents in 2000 and 2020–2023. We can conclude from this that image change can occur for urban areas with both positively and negatively regarded images and those with clear images and weak images. Individual circumstances, rather than any general processes, determined the trajectories of urban image that we traced for our six urban areas across the two surveys. All three cities in our surveys that showed change in their images demonstrated distinct trajectories of image evolution.

By combining the various aspects of this study, however, it is possible to shed some light as to what this study has uncovered in relation to the changing images of destinations. Central to this argument is that the study was undertaken with event professionals who our data indicates, are forming their viewpoints primarily through personal experience of many of the case study cities as they visit the conference locations where they are working, with only Belfast being more reliant on external sources of information than personal experience (Table 6).

This, then, connects with the key idea that in order to understand the

Table 6
Main sources of destination image information from the case study cities.

	My image of these cities comes from media representations		My images of these cities comes from personal experience	
	(n=)	%	(n=)	%
Belfast	18	31.58	21	36.84
Birmingham	36	63.16	11	19.30
Cardiff	30	52.63	9	15.79
Doncaster	8	14.04	8	14.04
Glasgow	26	45.61	12	21.05
Manchester	35	61.40	18	31.58

image of a destination that there is a need to engage with a variety of stakeholders and to assess how the destination's image is formed, created and updated within the 'eye of key beholders', such as event professionals who will be mindful of the image of the locations that they are choosing for their events as this will be a key part of how well their event is perceived by all of those attending and may, in turn, influence the likelihood of attendance of some participants (Draper & Neal, 2018; Mair et al., 2018; Pavluković & Cimbaljević, 2020).

Images of place amongst event professions are not static, however and they have continued to develop and change. The nature and extent of this change is not consistent across all of the six cities and although each of cities does seem to have successfully shed their previous industrial images in line with what has been reported in other studies of cities that have attempted to use destination marketing to enhance their image (Milestone, 2008; Dembski, 2015; Ortiz-Moya, 2015; Beatty & Fothergill, 2020), the case study cities are not perceived in similar ways now that the core element of no longer being industrial has been achieved. For many of these professionals our initial study indicated the extent to which these images were an attractant, however, in the intervening decades many of the professionals who have responded to this survey have had first-hand experience of these cities and have continued to be exposed to external sources of information via various media outlets. What these unequal developments hint at is that once a location has moved beyond distancing itself from a perception of its past image, it is by no means certain that it will be able to create a clear impression of what the destination is like either via place marketing activities or first-hand experience.

The results here also suggest that there is a need to review and update some of the existing models of destination image and change as the existing material (Liu et al., 2021; Styliadis, 2022; Wang et al., 2021) is based upon change that has been noted at a single point in time after a visit. However, in this case, those reporting on destination image change are likely to have been having regular exposure to the case study locations as they book and host a variety of events in each city and many of the respondents from the study have been undertaking this type of activity for more than 10 years (Table 7).

This continuation of exposure and engagement is something that would have been hidden from previous studies that have examined destination image that were fixated on assessing a single moment in time. In this case, the results have come from the ongoing exposure that individuals have to destination images as well as continued first-hand experience and exposure to mediated sources of information.

Destination image, therefore, is in a constant state of flux and is impacted by a range of factors that are both within and outside the control of political bodies who have a vested interest in promoting the image of an area. The results of our study demonstrate that destination image does change, but whilst the number of factors that can impact destination image are large and varied, the extent of any change seems to be relatively slow and changes noted across a 20 year period are not dramatic or revolutionary. This raises particular issues when this time scale is viewed in relation to the destination marketing activities that will have taken place during this time as these initiatives can be both costly and time consuming, but seem to be making little difference to the images that are held by this set of stakeholders.

We would suggest that there is a pressing need to reframe the academic debates around destination marketing that places a greater emphasis on how destination images are received and how they evolve

Table 7
Level of experience of research respondents.

How long have you been doing this type of job?		
Less than on year	5	8.8
1–5 years	10	17.5
6–10 years	5	8.8
More than 10 years	37	64.9

over time in order to get a better understanding of the role of destination image enhancement as a core component of economic development policy and whether a more nuanced approach to this is required that separates out how destination image acts as an initial attractant and how this evolves over repeat visits by professional audiences that are key to the economic fortunes of these destinations, such as the event professionals that are focused upon in this study. These future debates may also need to consider whether the frequency of visit to a location impacts upon the nature or extent of destination image change, as whilst there is data in this study that acknowledges that many of the event professionals have first-hand experience of these destinations, no data was collected in relation to how frequent this exposure is and this might have some impact on how destination image changes and develops and this is something that would repay further research.

Similarly, there needs to be a reassessment of the role of destination image within economic development strategy that questions its efficacy as a long-term investment. This study indicates that destination image is relatively static across a 20 year period for this group of stakeholders and once a key objective had been completed in relation to the repositioning of the city as no longer being industrial, the creation of a clear identity for the contemporary city that resonates with this group of stakeholders has been far more problematic. There is, therefore, a need to look at destination marketing initiatives in a more nuanced way and, perhaps, to examine the success of campaigns that position cities as being the antithesis of something as opposed to those that have attempted to (re)create an image without a counterpoint.

This reassessment also needs to be far less focused on destination image-based objectives being a 'quick fix' to the economic issues that locations across the world are facing, both in terms of the use of these initiatives as a part of local politics, but also in the way in which academics attempt to understand the nature and content of destination image. This study has highlighted that destination image needs to be understood over a much longer time period than many of the publications that have sought to address this issue. Trying to understand destination image based on a single moment in time belies its complexity and that an understanding of this complexity is key to uncovering the role that destination image can play in both local politics and the decisions that key stakeholders make.

7. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to make a contribution to the debates surrounding urban image, the importance of urban image to key decision makers choosing locations for their events and how urban image develops and changes over time. The synergies between these issues, however, are not linear and the connections appear to be more complex than current theory would suggest. Whilst there has been significant investment in developing and promoting urban images by a range of local, regional and national government agencies with a view changing perceptions, these efforts have not met with universal success. One key feature of these image enhancement initiatives has been the integration of events as a mechanism of conveying urban spectacle and a sense of excitement both through the use of individual events and the construction of event infrastructure such as conference centres. Urban image remains a key factor for those making decisions as to where they wish to hold their business events and to choose between urban areas that have developed business event facilities, but the attractiveness of these locations has not remained static over time. Where locations have either managed to retain an attractive image or have made improvements in the last two decades, a lively a vibrant image where there appears to be a lot going on seems to be one of the keys to achieving an attractive image and events are a key part of this as they are effective at communicating attractive images of urban locations across a range of media platforms (Bradley, 2011b; Dragin-Jensen & Kwiatkowski, 2019; Zhang et al., 2022).

The findings from our study confirm the findings of our 2002 paper,

that cities are able to change their images, but by adding the dimension of tracking this change over time it is possible to suggest that the speed over which change occurs is relatively slow as the changes over the 20 year period that has been studied are neither dramatic or revolutionary. Whilst we do not wish to over-exaggerate the significance of this as the study has gathered data at two different points in time and has attempted to construct a narrative based upon this information that may over-look fluctuations in urban image in the intervening years, it is one of the first studies that has attempted to look at urban image as it develops over time and therefore we would like to suggest that other researchers may like to follow similar lines of enquiry to get a better understanding of the nature of urban image change and what might be driving these particular changes.

Nuanced understandings of how city images are produced and consumed and how they change over time is of more than just academic interest. Official and unofficial urban images of all kinds are integral to the production of space and are also key influences on investment decisions and policy interventions that affect material changes in the land use and design of cities and urban spaces and hence the experience of these spaces by different groups of people. Assessing how cities and their representations are consumed over time then is important to those involved in the management and development of cities and urban spaces. The findings of this analysis suggest that the uncontested embrace of the relentless reproduction, in material, experiential and representational forms, of the city as a site of spectacle and vibrancy cannot necessarily be assumed through time. This points to the potential of analysis of this type, complemented perhaps by interviews with a variety of stakeholders, to inform the development of more original, inclusive and sustainable plans and urban development trajectories. This does, however, run up against the obvious challenge of developing long term understandings of these processes within the constraints of relatively short term government electoral cycles.

The key element that combines all of these issues is time and that has been the main driving force of the revisiting of our older publication. So much published research seeks to understand the world by examining a single moment in time and by taking a single snapshot of data. We would like to argue that a deeper and more meaningful understanding can be achieved by examining change across time as that allows us an insight into what has happened, what might be influencing what we are observing and the long term effectiveness of policy. Many authors have heeded our call for a more nuanced approach to the understanding of urban image that situated it more effectively within urban development and the marketing of places, but we now feel that it is time to move this discussion forward by placing change over time at the heart of future discussions to get a better understanding of the key relationships that exist.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Andrew Bradley: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Tim Hall:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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