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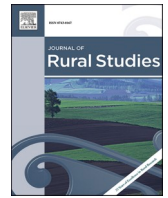
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# Examining the need for organisational learning and entrepreneurialism to meet the changing roles and expectations of rural and agricultural shows in the UK

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## ABSTRACT

Rural and Agricultural Shows are rich in tradition but their role in the rural economy is evolving. The effective closure of the sector in the UK in 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic led us to examine how rural Shows would re-emerge, as well as how subsequent economic challenges are influencing the future of Shows. The research draws on interviews with Show organisers and conversations with exhibitors while attending live events. Collectively, this has revealed the 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 who have discovered alternative routes to market, including online, that are competing with the traditional Show space. Forward-thinking Show organisers are identifying methods to tap into these new online markets and offer complementary value to their exhibitors but those who closed for the duration of the pandemic are finding that they are now having to adapt more quickly to the changes that have occurred.

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## 1. Introduction

Rural and Agricultural Shows (hereafter 'Shows') in the UK are rich in tradition but their function in the rural economy is evolving from serving agricultural businesses to providing family entertainment and raising the profile of a wide range of rural businesses and charities. They are particularly British institutions, but comparisons can be drawn with a mix of food and cultural festivals across other parts of Europe. While festivals attract substantial research interest, Shows have been rather neglected. From a Rural Studies perspective, they offer a valuable insight into changing rural economies because they attract multiple audiences drawn to both historical tradition and countryside heritage as well as contemporary agricultural, food and craft businesses (Westwood et al., 2019). Fulfilling a combination of social, educational and

economic functions, Shows are an important "convergence of agricultural and non-agricultural functions, entities and people at a particular place and time" (Holloway, 2004, p320).

Agricultural shows date back more than 200 years, with the first Shows taking place as far back as 1760s (Royal Lancashire Show, 2023; Wolsingham Show, 2017). These multifaceted events were initially developed to showcase 'best in breed'; with many shows existing to deliver clear charitable objectives to support, champion and promote agriculture throughout their own region, focusing on educating and informing the public (ASAO, 2023, Sutherland and Coe, 2022). The vast majority of Shows were established as charitable trusts, with these structures still in place today. However, in recent decades they have had to become more commercialised to fund their activities, with the majority of societies hiring their indoor and outdoor facilities to companies for a variety of uses when not in use for the main agricultural society events.

Agricultural shows exist in many formats and geographies from the traditional one-day events in the more remote 'hinterland' of Yorkshire where sheep dog trials (in particular) and livestock in general are very engrained in their existence (Holloway, 2004). In contrast with much

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more contemporary displays of ‘rural life’ in general, organisations such as The Three Counties Agricultural society delivers a myriad of annual events focusing on not only agriculture but also horticulture, arboriculture, forestry, rural crafts and skills and conservation (Three Counties Agricultural Society, 2023). Equally, whilst The Royal Welsh Show (the largest of its kind in Europe) is geographically remote, it attracts in excess of 200,000 visitors across the four-day event (Royal Welsh Show, 2023) revealing the disparate nature of these events in size, duration and location.

The research for this paper began by investigating the innovation of online and virtual Shows in response to the Covid-19 pandemic (Bosworth et al., 2021) which forced the closure of the sector in 2020 and revealed their wider importance for the rural economy (ACRE, 2020). However, as the demand for in-person activities returned, the study followed suit and examined the emerging challenges and opportunities influencing the return of live Shows. Our overarching aim here is to explore the ways in which Shows are adapting to changing customer interactions and expectations in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, we examine three related questions framed around their learning experiences and priorities: Firstly, how has entrepreneurial learning, particularly linked to digital innovation, led to changes in the way that Shows are organised and promoted? Secondly, how have the expectations of exhibitors changed? And thirdly, how do Show Associations see their future roles and priorities within the rural economy?

The paper continues by reviewing the literature on Shows and related rural business sectors to identify emerging trends that might shape the post-Covid rural economy. We also draw from related events literature to investigate how digital tools are influencing other sectors. The mixed methods approach is then described before findings from a combination of interviews and event visits are presented. Finally, we conclude and offer some recommendations for the sector alongside suggestions about how Shows can provide rural economy researchers with microcosms of rural social and economic change that provoke wider questions about contemporary rural identities.

## 2. Shows at a turning point?

Before focusing in on Shows, it is important to set their fortunes in the wider context of rural economic change and the so called ‘neoliberal’ countryside that has emerged since the 1980s. Neo-liberal policies advocate market-based solutions for rural development, on the assumption that rational, profit-maximising behaviour of economic actors will generate optimal outcomes (Ward, 2023). As a result, decades of reduced state support across the economy that sought to stimulate competitiveness and entrepreneurialism, have arguably overlooked the need for socio-spatial equity when considering rural areas with a weaker resource base (Tonts and Horsley, 2019). In the agricultural sector, this fuelled innovation in regions with high profitability potential but left other regions pursuing so called ‘multifunctional agriculture’ encapsulating a range of diversified activities and environmental subsidies (Shucksmith and Rønningen, 2011). The knock-on effect for rural labour markets saw a combination of technology-led growth or unfavourable market forces reducing agricultural employment and creating a variety of often low-paid local jobs in its place.

These changes inevitably impact Shows in many ways. Some larger Shows in dynamic agricultural regions retain a strong industry connection and provide opportunities for innovation networks to coalesce, although increasingly this takes place at “industry events” that are organised separately from public Shows (Farmers Guardian, 2022). Meanwhile, the majority of traditional Shows have become part of the rural leisure market, mirroring the diversification of many farmers and placing different demands on the traditional pool of volunteers who serve of Show committees and help to arrange the annual events.

The increasing mobility and wealth accumulation of rural professional classes may provide a lucrative audience for Shows, but they also

drive up rural house prices and bring new expectations of contemporary rural lifestyles (Sheppard and Pemberton, 2023). This ‘consumption’ of rural living is another representation of the neoliberal economy (Hu and Gill, 2023) which has an additional effect on Shows; New residents may be consumers of rural events, but they are not professionally or socially attached to the events in the same way as previous rural workers and their families. Perhaps new concerns for environmentally sensitive, sustainable and responsible methods of food production offer alternative means for Shows to raise the profile of local agriculture in the face of widespread criticism of the dominant food systems (for a useful summary, see Marsden, 2016), but this is a further example of the influence of market forces rather than social solidarity guiding the evolution of Shows in this neo-liberal era.

A survey of Shows conducted on behalf of the Association of Show and Agricultural Organisations (ASAO, 2020) estimated that their members employed some 2100 full-time staff, 10,800 temporary staff and 63,000 volunteers. Their events generate an estimated annual income of £128.6m to the sector and a further £14.5m expenditure on charitable activities. As a result of the pandemic, the survey identified that 36 % of surveyed shows had already made redundancies and the uncertainty across the sector led to a lack of confidence in the future resilience of many Shows.

Shows have long been viewed as highlights of the rural calendar, offering a unique and multifaceted family day out for farmers and the non-farming public. They satisfy a range of visitor expectations that have been categorised as “livestock and machinery”, with a traditional farming focus; “exhibitors and amenities” with broad visitor appeal and “equestrian and main ring events” which combine a number of participant groups with broader visitor appeal (Westwood et al., 2019). Motivations for attending Shows was also categorised as a combination of “socialisation and relaxation”, “new knowledge and experiences” and “prestige and tradition”. In this work, certain factors we found to be particularly important in driving repeat visits to Shows, notably in the categories of “livestock and machinery” and “socialisation and relaxation” where the ability to reconnect with personal networks is an essential motivation for attending.

Going beyond these initial motivations, shows provide a place and space for individuals to connect and reconnect with all aspects of rural life, creating a platform for formal more ‘planned’ interconnections for example between farmers and machinery suppliers, equally less formal, more organic interactions for example between food producers and general attendees (Langridge-Thomas et al., 2021). For non-farming public especially, shows provide a connection to the food chain; whereby children in particular can “learn more about farming, food and the countryside” (Great Yorkshire Show, 2023). The combined functions of promoting excellence and innovation within the local agricultural industry and educating current and future generations of consumers about the links between farming and food have always been central to the work of the agricultural associations that run Shows (Royal Cornwall Show, 2023).

Sometimes a forgotten function of shows is to provide an opportunity for farmers to ‘escape from everyday life’ and non-farming public to seek out novel and new experiences (Crompton and McKay, 1997). Farming can often be a lonely and isolating way of life (Annibal et al., 2019); rural events and in particular Shows provide the chance to leave the farm for a day or two, providing opportunities to foster familial relationships with likeminded individuals which may only meet at these particular events. Moreover, Shows provide an environment for co-created experiences which last long beyond the temporary nature of the event, creating both temporary knowledge and long term economic and social impacts on the community and show stakeholders (Thomas, 2016; Langridge-Thomas et al., 2021; Westwood and Gibbeson, 2022). Looking ahead, the perceived importance of social and business networking at Shows alongside different aspects of the broader visitor experience will be key to understanding how they can innovate to stay competitive in an increasingly saturated events sector.

### 3. Shows, networks and identity

Shows are important, albeit temporary, network nodes in the rural economy. The “rural buzz” of a large Show provides a forum for leisure, learning, community building and discussion among a variety of stakeholders, including individuals, public and private organisations, and policymakers (Langridge-Thomas et al., 2021). Shows also support other creative and knowledge networks to reconnect and to reach out to new audiences. From a business perspective, the chance to entertain clients, showcase new products and demonstrate one’s attachment to the local area all provide valuable motivations for attending and sponsoring Shows.

Traditionally Shows and their associations have facilitated much more transactional relationships amongst some of their stakeholders such as exhibitors; increasingly shows must acknowledge the vital role exhibitors play in creating the ‘show experience’. Key stakeholders such as trade stands or livestock exhibitors provide the rich mix of education and entertainment that attract a wide range of visitors seeking a new form of ‘Agritainment’ (Mitchell and Turner, 2010). Resilience demands gradual changes to meet customer expectations and ensure that Shows continue to appeal to existing attendees and attract new audiences. Gradual evolution is important to maintain continuity of identity but innovation is essential (Kwiatkowski and Hjalager, 2018).

The value of interpersonal networking for rural businesses is well documented in terms of sharing knowledge (Lowe et al., 2019), generating new connections (Atterton et al., 2011; Muñoz and Kimmitt, 2019) and reinforcing trust and loyalty (Moyes et al., 2015; McKeever et al., 2015). Like other community festivals, Shows can improve social and civic well-being by affirming local people’s identities and attachment to a place and/or its local agricultural and industrial traditions (Mair and Duffy, 2018; Eversole and Martin, 2005). When this is reflected in the business networking connected to Shows, arguably, the social capital created through shared experiences and memories is deepened by the shared sense of place attachment, re-affirming a rural identity and shared goodwill towards the local economy (Westwood and Gibbeson, 2022).

In other types of festivals, individual and collective identities are strengthened by narratives of places, people and customs that can be experienced by local residents and visitors, and can be especially strong for returnees seeking to retain a connection with their place of origin (Jaeger and Mykletun, 2013). As well as reinforcing farming identities within the agricultural community, these narratives contribute to the educational and promotional roles of Shows in communicating local, regional and even global aspects of rurality to wider audiences. It could be argued that these representations of agriculture and rurality are performative efforts seeking to portray a positive image of farming to the non-farming public (Larsen, 2017).

The regional brand that can be created through Shows, and their associated networks, can be communicated by a range of local products as well as the heritage breeds that form part of their traditional agricultural focus. For example, food festivals increasingly appeal to the novelty-seeking visitor as well as to indigenous people reconnecting with their local heritage, thus strengthening both the place-brand and local identity of a rural region (Demir and Dalgıç, 2022; Lin and Bestor, 2020). To stay fresh, while also satisfying the tradition and continuity that Show audiences enjoy, Shows require effective leadership and collaboration from local partners drive innovation (Kwiatkowski and Hjalager, 2018; Schofield et al., 2017; Black, 2016).

As the sector faced up to the challenges of Covid-19 and the accompanying lockdowns, digital innovations were a key factor. The spread of digital technologies has been slower in rural areas due to a combination of lagging infrastructure and skills (Salemink et al., 2017; Ashmore et al., 2017), but social media and online marketing provide new opportunities for Shows to connect with their audiences. Social media is already used effectively in the planning and pre-experience phases of festivals (MacKay et al., 2017) and digital innovations have

enhanced visitor experiences and information at other attractions (Hjalager, 2010; Kraak et al., 2018) but we have only recently started to explore opportunities for wholly online or “virtual” festivals and events. Their emergence can spark further new product innovations (Ryan et al., 2020), notably a blend of interactive and participative elements that might connect live and virtual events to reach distinct audiences.

A number of factors including effective communication, change agents and trust-building are important for supporting the diffusion of digital innovations in rural micro-enterprises (Räsänen and Tuovinen, 2020). The experiences of a crisis like the pandemic highlights that necessity innovation also sees organisations drawing on a range of networks to assist them to make rapid responses (Bosworth et al., 2021). Resilience is strengthened by greater access to resources and superior managerial and technological capabilities (Laskovaia et al., 2019) alongside the ability to pivot business models in response to external conditions (McCann, 2004; Morgan et al., 2020). To be resilient in the face of a crisis, firms must deploy resources as efficiently as possible, firstly to survive and then to accelerate their recovery (Dormady et al., 2019). Continuing resilience also demands a willingness to learn, optimism, persistence and the confidence to take actions (Korber and McNaughton, 2018; Branicki et al., 2018). As such, it is important that government policy and support within the Show sector combines both practical skills and financial support with responses aimed to boost individuals’ strategic awareness and confidence to act (Branicki et al., 2018; Doern, 2021).

As many Shows turned to digital and online opportunities to survive throughout the pandemic, theory suggests that the skills and networks developed over that period will strengthen their subsequent resilience. Many Shows enhanced their use of social media, with some staging “virtual shows” on Facebook, some developed new websites and many implemented cashless events when they first reopened (Price et al., 2022). By contrast, Shows who shut down all operations during the period of the pandemic could be disadvantaged, both in terms of digital skills and learning as well as weakened network connections if they are out of touch with the online world. Show organisers must recognise that both exhibitors and paying customers are part of the digital transformation so innovation needs to satisfy the demands of both audiences. As others have argued, the digital transformation has not created equal opportunities for all rural areas with uneven provision of infrastructure compounded by slower development of digital skills and confidence among rural populations (Cowie et al., 2020; Rijswijk et al., 2021).

The range of digital tools and skills that are being introduced to Shows, and the agricultural sector more widely, can be daunting to farmers and Show organisers so appropriately targeted support is essential to support digital transformation (Ayre et al., 2019). Potentially, with their new-found digital skills, Shows can be trend-setters for others in the rural economy and provide hubs for digital training. This could further enhance their wider mission to serve the agricultural needs of their rural region alongside driving their own digital innovation to enhance events and audience engagement, but, in a neo-liberal rural economy, this also depends on the ability of Show organisers themselves to develop a more enterprising mindset and embrace entrepreneurial learning.

### 4. Entrepreneurial learning: cognition and practical experience

To examine the digital learning question, we propose a model drawn from the entrepreneurial learning literature. Entrepreneurial learning has been defined as ‘recognising and acting on opportunities as a natural process which can be applied within both everyday practice and formal education’ (Rae, 2015; p5, *emphasis added*). While our focus here is not education, but Show organisers as entrepreneurs, we need to understand how and when learning takes place as part of an innovation or opportunity-driven process.

Central to entrepreneurship are the twin pillars of opportunity exploration and opportunity exploitation (Corbett 2005), carried out by

alert and enterprising individuals (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). Show organisers need to act entrepreneurially in searching for innovative ideas and practices to enhance their events and through this process we argue that they also need to engage in entrepreneurial learning. In a complex field, diverse approaches seek to explain how entrepreneurial learning occurs in practice (Wang and Chugh, 2014), with the majority describing it as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, encompassing varied emotional, social, cognitive and behavioural aspects of human activity (Rae 2005; Cope 2005). At its heart, entrepreneurial learning is primarily experiential, occurring in practical circumstances rather than in any isolated cognitive knowledge transfer process (Nogueira 2019; Rae, 2015; Tseng 2013).

It is useful here to make a distinction between the two main approaches that attempt to explain how organisations and individuals learn: Firstly, the social theory view suggests that learning is acquired through experiences and interactions with others, emphasising the learning process; Secondly, the technical view is more concerned with measuring outcomes and it promotes the value of formally processed and stored information (Easterby-Smith and Araujo, 1999). A technical view of learning is not only about the effective accumulation and consequent processing of information, but the interpretation and response to that data. These two stages align to the single and double loop learning models used to explain different cognitive drivers of incremental and radical change (Argyris, 1977). In an entrepreneurial context, this cognitive approach is reflected in the work of Young and Sexton (1997), who suggest that entrepreneurial learning is about a problem-solving process involving individuals acquiring, storing and then using relevant knowledge. Subsequent studies have argued that this fails to recognise that entrepreneurship is an energetic form of social and economic action in which people respond to experience and emergent environmental factors (Rae 2015), often drawing on tacit knowledge too (Agbim, et al., 2013).

When turning to the social view of a situated learning process, it is key to understand how individuals makes sense of their experiences in the context of their wider social interactions and circumstances (Brown and Duguid, 2001). This experiential theory of learning sees learning as a social, relational, and practice-based activity which therefore can be shaped by the community in which actors are embedded (Rae, 2017). In this context, knowledge is the result of negotiation and shared understanding, where talk, networks and relationships form a central unifying process (Ardley 2006). This can be seen in the emergence of collaboration networks, where entrepreneurs learn and exchange knowledge through business transactions that assist them in establishing supply chains of firms in geographic proximity (Cannavacciuolo et al., 2017). These situated experiences of learning comprise a three-part structure

where both communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation sustain cycles of reproduction and transformation (Hamilton 2011).

Two key domains that influence entrepreneurial learning, as shown in Fig. 1, are individuals' "personal and place-based identities" and their "social and professional networks". When these are drawn together, situated experiences are generated that provide the stimuli for experiential learning. This provides a useful lens through which to explore the learning processes among Show organisers with reference to our research questions on digital change and changing expectations among their key audiences. We also argue that learning cannot occur in this context unless an individual has a willingness to learn aligned to a disposition towards entrepreneurial activity – in other words, without a desire to drive change, there is no impetus to seek out new business ideas, opportunities or skills. Furthermore, once these domains combine to enable situated learning, there must be a *modus operandi* and a willingness to take action. This final stage of *Opportunity Enactment* therefore concerns the implementation phase and, in the analysis, we reflect back on the underlying conditions to help make sense of key decision-making.

The model above also indicates that while learning can be an individual, as well as a collective process (Wang and Chugh, 2014), the outcomes rely on a collective unit to provide the route to action – in this case this is the Show Committee or the Agricultural Society running the Show, often working with partners through their networks. In this sense, opportunity enactment is constrained by the constitution and goals of the organisation and learning too is driven in part by team members' aspirations for the organisation to develop in relation to its wider operating context (Haneberg, 2019). As the external environment evolves, and major challenges such as Covid-19 hit the sector, this approach to understanding entrepreneurial learning shapes the subsequent analysis of how Shows responded, and continue to strive for more resilient futures.

## 5. Methodology

A mixed method, qualitative approach was used to provide deep understanding while also recognising that single methods can be limiting for rural research where data is often relatively scarce and deeper contextual is particularly important (Strijker et al., 2020). This included semi-structured interviews with Show organisers, informal discussions with traders at Shows and observations of the ways that Shows were run during the first year of re-opening after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Interviews were conducted with 10 Show organisers, one who was also a board member of ASAO. These were conducted via video-call or

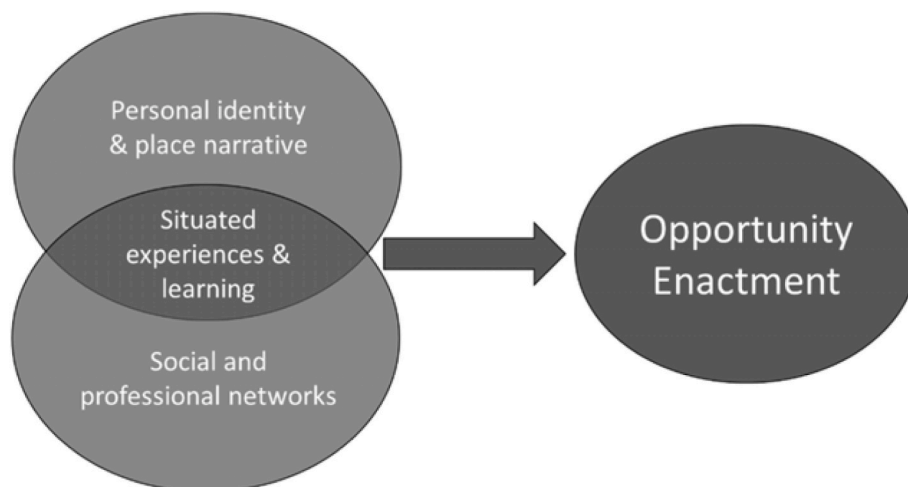


Fig. 1. Contextualised learning model (Authors' own design).



telephone and lasted between 30 and 60 min. Conversations were audio recorded and later transcribed or, where recording was not possible, notes were taken which were typed up shortly afterwards. and transcribed using digital software and two over the telephone with notes written up immediately afterwards. Interviewees were asked to give their consent, prior to the interviews, using a standardised consent form. A semi-structured questionnaire approach was used chosen to facilitate the collection of rich data using a schedule of common questions but allowing flexibility to move the discussion onto other areas considered important by the interviewee (Saunders et al., 2016). Interviewees were asked whether they had run events in 2020 and 2021, any changes they made to the delivery of Shows in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, including adoption of digital approaches such as online events and use of social media, and other business model changes. They were asked about the success of any innovative practices that were introduced (or barriers to adopting innovative practices if not) and their views on the future development of Shows.

The transcripts were analysed using a ‘theoretical’ thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This involved manual coding by the researchers in an iterative process that started with familiarisation with the overall set of transcripts to provide a preliminary understanding of possible patterns emerging from the data (Nowell et al., 2017) and the identification of initial codes. During this initial stage, 121 codes were assigned to quotations identified as relevant to the overall research question. In the next stage, the researchers considered whether any of these codes could be linked or combined together. The initial codes were therefore combined to create 23 higher order codes which, following further review, were then categorised into overarching themes. Using this inductive approach, five themes emerged: (i) Innovation, knowledge & skills; (ii) Financial and political uncertainty, independence and continuity; (iii) Technological change & modernisation; (iv) Marketing and communication; and (v) Social and community roles (including education and wellbeing). Within each area, we then explored issues of learning and adaptation with reference to the drivers of experiential learning and opportunity enactment set out in Fig. 1.

Due to the qualitative nature of the study, with a focus on understanding the entrepreneurial learning and the reflections of show organisers, a non-probability sampling approach was used with the intention of gathering rich data from a limited number of in-depth interviews. Starting with the ASAO and a small number of contacts, the sample was expanded using a process of referral to contacts in other Shows. Using this snowball sampling approach, the eventual sample size was determined by the point of saturation, that is the stage when limited new information was emerging from the interviews (Guest et al., 2020). Although the sample was not intended to be geographically representative, it included Shows from five regions of England and one from Wales (see Table 1). All were annual events varying between one and three days in length. Some were smaller events with a local focus while others had a much wider regional status.

As the re-opening of Shows began in late 2021, researchers attended two events that Summer and three further events in Spring (2022). These were LincsFest, a one-day family event organised by the

Lincolnshire Agricultural Society on Sunday August 15, 2021; Wolsingham Show, which took place on Saturday 4th and Sunday 5th September; the Woodhall Spa Show in Lincolnshire on Sunday May 22, 2022, the Northumberland County Show on Friday 3rd June 2022 and the Blanchland & Hunstanworth Show, August 2022. 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 min 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 2. 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?”

## 6. Findings

The research focused on three inter-related questions concerning the organisation and promotion of Shows; the changing expectations of exhibitors and the future roles and priorities of Shows – all with a particular emphasis on the entrepreneurial and digital learning that has taken place during the turbulence of the Covid-19 pandemic.

### 6.1. Entrepreneurial learning and situated experiences

The model of learning (Fig. 1) provides the framework for analysis to facilitate an understanding of learning in Shows as a phenomenon that emerges from social practice. Show organisers answered questions regarding how entrepreneurial learning is enabled through social interactions within their own communities of practice as well as through more extensive and peripheral networks allowing both continuity and innovation to take place. Within the communities of practice around Shows, we saw a range of volunteers and supporters drawn from local communities, families and other Show organisations:

“She’s a volunteer. You know, somebody who’s part of the community, and she’s come on board to help us with future sponsorship as well and running the Instagram account for us.” (Yorkshire Moors Show)

“The [County] Federation of Shows have a meeting once a year ... Quite a few shows go to that, I would have said at least 20 to 30, and

**Table 1**  
Case study shows.

Show	County/Region	Length
Yorkshire Village Show	North	1 day
Upland Village Show	Midlands	1 day
Yorkshire Moors Show	North	1 day
Midland Village Show	Midlands	1 day
Big Show	South	3 days
County Show	Midlands	2 days
District Show	South	1 day
Regional Show	South	3 days
Welsh County Show	Wales	2 days
Pennine Village Show	North	1 day

**Table 2**  
Aide memoire of key research issues explored during visits to Shows.

Question “aide-memoire” for speaking to 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?
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?

we have a bit of a presentation and break into syndicates and sort of discuss topics like, environment or online entries or what we're doing for recycling. So that's useful." (Yorkshire Village Show)

"My daughter fortunately, is very social media savvy, that's what she does. She's a PR person ... I mean I'm not. And she helped me an awful lot with it ..." (District Show)

The third quotation above highlights the role of family members providing intergenerational learning in the community of practice. It is often assumed that beneficial knowledge resides exclusively in long established members of an organisation, but, particularly in the case of modern technologies like social media here, valuable knowledge also dwells in peripheral actors (Rae, 2017).

Innovation in Shows tends to be situated within cycles of reproduction and transformation that ensure continuity as well as adaptation (Hamilton 2011). The following quote from an organiser demonstrates an awareness of the shows established character existing alongside a need for technological change.

"We'll basically stay what we are, because that's who we are, and we want to stay with our roots. But at the same time, we do want to start introducing things that we've never done. E-ticketing on our car parking and things like that." (District Show)

The Show's identity is clearly important here, and the quotation demonstrates that "Who we are" can encapsulate the identity of the organisation as well as the people involved. The organisers and organisation share an identity and this can influence the behaviour and entrepreneurial appetite of people working within the confines of a particular organisational identity (Weick, 1995). Elsewhere, paid employees referred to the Show committees being more "conservative" and fearful of change, but it is also important to recognise the role of external changes. As one interviewee noted:

"There's the biggest changes happening [in agriculture] for 60 years, so we will have to adapt ... and that in itself will probably change some of the aspects of the show anyway, and it will probably move a little bit. It will reflect whatever farming practices take place really ..." (Yorks Moors Show)

It is perhaps too easy to view small committees being resistant to change when, in some cases, they simply powerless to take ownership of strategic changes in the face of global economic trends. However, where they can make a difference, in smaller, practical changes, Shows are demonstrating the ability to innovate. For example,

"We've gotta get our head better around kind of e-ticketing ... So, the vast majority wants to pay by card. It is just getting your heads around that, otherwise you get a massive queue". (Upland Village Show)

Shows are also working together to try to improve their resilience in the face of continuing economic uncertainty, both in person and digitally:

"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 and just sort of lead them through the fact you can put on your show." (Welsh County Show)

"The [County] Federation of Shows have a Facebook page. So, in fact, I asked a question on that yesterday. So, anybody who's in the [County] Federation, we've got a Facebook page and we share ideas and things, ask questions, check in on people and see how they're doing, and we did a few zoom calls as well ...." (Yorkshire Village Show)

The research results indicate that opportunity enactment, the final part of the model, is largely facilitated through contextualised learning,

where digital is a key issue. Our respondents have been able to learn, for example, about innovating in social media using platforms like Instagram, and of implementing e-ticketing, where local community members and peripheral actors have shown the way to develop business digitally. Also illustrated is the key role of networks in facilitating extensive learning. This involves not only small and large show interactions, but also key professional bodies. Through these socially situated experiences, show organisers have been able to exploit various types of opportunities in an entrepreneurial fashion and it appears that the challenging environment strengthened learning networks. However, in the next section, we explore the changes that were also occurring among Show exhibitors during this time which led to new learning and adaptation requirements.

## 6.2. How have the expectations of exhibitors changed?

Faced with the challenges of rebuilding Shows after one or two years without events, the internal issues may have overshadowed the equally pressing need to respond to the changes that exhibitors were also forced to make. It appeared that one of the benefits of running online shows during the pandemic was keeping in touch with their networks of supporters and exhibitors (Bosworth et al., 2021), which may have helped them to adapt more quickly to their changing priorities. One Show operator commented, "There's some that switched to online and realised we don't need to go to shows we can do all this from our home" (Big Show). An exhibitor also commented: "we traded in new community spaces during lockdown, Instagram is really important with that ... [going forwards] ... we expect the business to be half street-trading and half shows" (Exhibitor at LincsFest).

As a result of these changes, Shows need to review their value propositions to exhibitors who are becoming increasingly selective and analytical in their decision-making. For example, some were asking for more information about the location of their stand, neighbouring and competing exhibitors, ticket sales and the social media promotion they could expect from the Show. One exhibitor said, "The choice of shows would depend on the personalities of the organisers and the pitch fees" (Exhibitor at LincsFest), while two others commented that they were more likely to focus on the bigger Shows in future having diversified their other sources of income during the pandemic. As well as being more commercially savvy in their decision-making processes, other exhibitors simply realised that they had been on a treadmill of going to Shows without really assessing the value of different types of events. One food and drink retailer at LincsFest put it bluntly, saying, "you don't want to spend £60 for a small event to freeze your \*\*\*\*s off in December". The growth of these alternative routes to market means that Shows need to understand the return on investment that they offer and explore strategies that maintaining the balance of 'showcasing agriculture' while still appealing to an increasingly diverse audience that can sustain the interest of an equally diverse mix of exhibitors.

The pressure to adapt was heightened in the immediate aftermath of Covid-related closures where several Shows were experiencing a slow uptake of trade stands, lower entries in animal classes and, as the Big Show organiser commented, "a lot of nervousness to actually commit earlier on" to taking stands. One Show organiser explained the impact of losing a major agricultural machinery exhibitor saying, "it hasn't affected their sales by not being at the show and it costs them so much money to put the show on so they pulled out" (Welsh County Show). This not only hit their income but also took away a public attraction and part of the visual identity of the agricultural Show. The growth of larger industry-focused events and exhibitions in the UK add to the competition faced by Shows, particular with respect to larger machinery dealers. As a result, larger exhibitors now realise that the Show needs them as much as they need Shows, shifting the power balance. Shows now draw more on their charitable goals of educating people about farming and supporting farmers' wellbeing as a mechanism to retain major agricultural businesses who then value Shows as opportunities to "engage with

customers and get their details and sell to them afterwards" (Big Show) and to enhance their company reputations rather than purely to sell products.

Whether it is larger businesses, craft producers or other not-for-profit organisations, the post-Covid environment has emphasised that traders' presence at Shows is increasingly part of a wider marketing strategy, and not purely about selling products. A honey retailer at the Northumberland County Show, who had increased his online retail and national trade in queen bees during the Covid pandemic, explained that they "didn't expect to make a profit but it was important for meeting people." A farm shop operator at the Wolsingham Show also saw the Show as a platform to promote events at their shop, not just an opportunity to trade. For some creative businesses, face-to-face interaction was important to build relationships with people who might sign up for courses or visit their online shops. While sales at the event are helpful, these were often just a way of covering the cost of hiring the stand. One such exhibitor explained that they had developed more online tutorials during the Covid-19 lockdowns, reinforcing the potential additional value that Shows can offer from online and social media businesses promotion.

A potter with three shops and an online store who attended a large Show in Autumn (2021) said that it was her first show back and "nothing much has changed – it's perhaps a missed opportunity". (Wolsingham Exhibitor). Perhaps Shows need to create fora for people like this, with knowledge of different physical and virtual retailing spaces, to share new ideas about how to increase the value of Shows going forwards. Consumers are seeking their own connections with the countryside and their motivation to attend is increasingly experiential, seeking escapism from everyday life and opportunities to learn something new. Shows should consider the value of engaging with an even wider array of exhibitors to avoid exhibitors feeling "there are too many competitors today selling the same thing". Connecting and meeting with the farmers turned producer, the blacksmith, the wood turner, the basket maker is a unique aspect of attending Shows, as one exhibitor highlighted "consumers want people that are genuinely making things themselves" (Pennine Village Show).

While a lot of learning has taken place as a result of the engagement with new networks and reflection on the core identity and values attached to Shows, it is unreasonable to expect small teams of people that run Shows, many of whom are volunteers, to have the commercial expertise to drive forward the level of adaptation that is needed for Shows to safeguard their position within an increasingly competitive leisure and events sector. As we look to the future, the next section therefore explores new ways to embed learning, networks and traditional values to inform their strategic priorities and evolving roles within the rural economy.

### 6.3. How do Show Associations see their future roles and priorities within the rural economy?

Following the Covid-19 pandemic, Shows emerge in a more challenging and competitive trading environment. Inflation and tight labour market conditions have contributed to rising costs and difficulties in retaining and attracting volunteers. The permanent closure of some Shows is cited as a cautionary tale by organisers, particularly those perceived to have "lost their way" or where organisers "didn't take the pruning knife out soon enough to cut the overheads" (Upland Village Show).

Despite this, there is a determination to carry on and maintain the (often very long) annual tradition of Shows: "We're still here and still alive and kicking, and we just want to keep continuing being here, basically" (District Show). Many organisers take a long-term perspective and identify the Covid-19 pandemic as just one of a series of events that have disrupted the Shows sector: "We've existed this long [100 years]. You know we've survived foot and mouth and that kind of thing. So yeah, we just have to be optimistic" (Upland Village Show). For some, the pandemic has provided an opportunity to pause, reflect and consider how Shows can become relevant and profitable once again: "Covid has probably given us an opportunity to redraw where we wanna go. If it wasn't for Covid, I don't

think we'd be having a show in ten years' time because we'd have gone bankrupt" (Welsh County Show). This suggests that, prior to and regardless of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Shows were facing a crisis of identity and the longstanding business model associated with Shows was not sustainable.

Looking ahead, Show organisers identify a number of ways in which they will need to adapt. One is the need to work alongside exhibitors as partners, stepping away from purely transactional relationship and offering a clearer route for collaboration. Shows have a large physical presence, which perhaps isn't always reflected in online 'likes, shares and follows' of their own posts on social media. They need to capitalise on the online presence of exhibitors which often have various social media platforms as they seek multiple 'shop windows'. In this way, social media can be seen as a joint venture. One exhibitor highlighted how important their social media platforms are, she planned to "use social media to drive traffic to her website and [...] create content during the show" (Wolsingham Show Exhibitor). If Shows can capitalise on this and offer a full package of values to exhibitors and the public, supporting e-commerce, tourism, creative courses and wider activities within the umbrella of the rural experience economy, they can perhaps provide a missing link in an increasingly diverse rural economy.

Shows need to appeal to and reach new and, especially, younger audiences who will become the next generation of show attendees. A first step is recruitment of younger volunteers, which is needed for Shows' succession, but also to bring fresh insights from this demographic. Shows can become more accessible to younger people through use of social media, as described above, and through use of technology such as advance online ticketing which also helps to safeguard income in case of poor weather. As one organiser put it, "the cashless show is coming up" (Regional Show) which will put rural shows on par with music festivals which are increasingly cashless through use of bank card payments or pre-paid wristbands.

Recognising that adaptation is not just about the Show committee themselves, one commented: "I'm trying to get the marketing people on board to understand that actually the trade stands are a huge chunk of our income and we do need to do more about that" (Big Show). However, finding time to dedicate to this more strategic change has been a challenge in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent cost-of-living crisis. Instead, many Shows were focusing on the matters closest to hand, like e-ticketing and car-parking, or those that can cut costs, like replacing three-course dinners for members with a packed lunch. The learning required to address these issues was more instrumental and could be directly linked to outcomes for the event, and in turn for the wider charitable aims of Shows across the agricultural sector. Nevertheless, more strategic partnerships could introduce different opportunities for the commercial vitality of Shows as well as for the delivery of new educational and social activities. One of our case study Shows had provided health checks for farmers knowing that uptake of health advice is low across the sector, others were using these familiar spaces to promote more environmentally sustainable practices in a non-threatening, non-accusatory format.

Essentially, Shows have to combine their leisure offer with the needs of the farming sector. As one organiser commented, "that's why shows really have to continue ... it's bringing the farming communities together" (Yorkshire Moors Show). Those running Shows are motivated to support farmers and other parts of the rural economy, they are not there to make personal profits. However, it is increasingly clear that Show committees need to develop modes of learning that engage with their diverse stakeholders to ensure that the educational, networking, promotional and entertainment aspects of Shows continue to develop and meet contemporary needs and expectations.

## 7. Concluding remarks

Our findings identified only minor changes in relation to the first question about entrepreneurial learning, digital innovation and changes



in the way that Shows are organised and promoted. Several have adopted new practical and cost-saving ideas but these have largely been to help Shows to return to business as usual rather than to drive innovation. In a competitive rural leisure space, Shows need to find new ways to continue attracting new audiences in order to fulfil their aims of promoting agriculture and the countryside as well as raising income to support their social mission. This requires digital skills and entrepreneurial outlooks alongside the traditional understanding of the heritage and the contemporary needs of the agriculture sector – a combination that is hard to find, particular when many Shows are dependent on an ageing group of volunteers to remain viable.

The second question concerned the expectations of exhibitors, and here there has been a more substantive change with some having identified new routes to markets and many being more selective and strategic in the way that they assess the value of attending different Shows. Rather than simply places to trade, they are opportunities to engage with different audiences, to generate social media content and to promote their other sales channels, including e-shops, events and craft or cookery courses. If the innovative mentality of exhibitors could somehow be transferred into a new offer from Shows that also allowed more mutual learning through closer collaboration, the blend of agricultural tradition and contemporary rural consumption demand could be brought closer together.

Following on from these findings, the third question concerns the future of Shows. We argue that the necessary growth to continue to fulfil a substantial place in the rural economy will depend on both extensive networks and local place identities. Drawing on these attributes can not only help promote Shows but also enhance their entrepreneurial learning and their ability to enact new opportunities. While the Show organisers that participated in the study recognised that the local place was a key part of their identity and saw the need to work with more external people from different business sectors, regions and visitor groups, the routes to achieve this are complex. With small and often quite informal management teams, people draw from their own experiences and personal networks. As a result, resilience depends on the assets to hand and a form of entrepreneurial bricolage, sometimes acting with incomplete information and relying on combinations of personal hunches and trusted, often local, connections to get through (Korsgaard et al., 2021; Branicki et al., 2018).

Instead of just “learning to” work in the modern visitor economy, adopting new technology and marketing tools for example, Shows need to use their extensive networks beyond their own sector to “learn about” the new opportunities that are emerging. This requires a collective approach to re-positioning the Show in the local rural economy, not simply individual learning. As centres of networking and learning about how the rural economy is evolving, Shows can be centres of information and activity, potentially with more year-round activities and online connectivity to stay relevant and visible in a modern rural economy. Thinking in terms of “exhibitor relations” and not “selling pitches” could be a simple first step in repositioning Shows for the next stage in their evolution. Linking back to Fig. 1, this is about situated and relational learning, where both networks and place identity are key features in developing a stronger brand that supports the core purpose of Shows.

Reflecting back on a wider time scale of change, perhaps this is the rural economy in microcosm ... Shows have experienced a shift towards a consumer dominated economy which is impacting their dominant sources of income and their need for new strategies to attract new and wider audience. Despite this, the driving motivations for Shows are supporting the agricultural community and educating people about the countryside. Could we say the same thing about rural economic policy in the UK and other European nations? How realistic is it for a single “rural economic development” strategy to combine support for traditional land-based sectors, local food and the environment, when the dominant business activities are now firmly focused on the knowledge-based, creative and consumer-led sectors of the rural economy? These are all questions that future studies could explore.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Gary Bosworth:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft. **Liz Price:** Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. **Barry Ardley:** Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft. **Caroline Westwood:** Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

## Declaration of competing interest

None of the authors have any conflicts of interest in relation to the research presented in this paper.

## Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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