

Supporting and valuing ethnic minority businesses in Birmingham's local high streets and centres

Notes from discussion, 20th July 2016 at St Mary's Centre, Handsworth

On 20th July 2016, Social Life, LSE Cities and the University of Birmingham's Centre for Research in Ethnic Minority Enterprise (CREME) hosted a discussion about how businesses and micro-economies in Birmingham's ethnically diverse high streets can best be supported, by both local institutions and by the traders' own collective efforts. This is part of an ongoing ESRC research project at LSE Cities on 'Super-diverse Streets: Economies and spaces of urban migration in UK Cities'. The research has involved research on streets in four cities: Birmingham, Leicester, Bristol and Manchester.

The workshop brought together representatives of the Birmingham City Council, academics, business and community representatives. A list of participants is at the end of this note.

There were three key questions for discussion:

- How do we acknowledge the value of Birmingham's small traders and enterprises to our local centres and to the city?
- How can minority ethnic and migrant traders and small business be best supported?
- Will the most effective support come from city-wide structures, from local initiatives, or from the traders themselves?

1. How do we acknowledge the value of Birmingham's small traders and enterprises to our local centres and to the city?

- **Terminology:** Participants discussed the complexities and nuances behind terms such as 'ethnic minority' or 'BME'. It was noted that different groups have different experiences of arrival, of life in the city, and of trading.
- **Differentiating between different migrant groups:** The perception is that more established traders (such as those from India and Pakistan) are faring better than more recently arrived groups who might need more support starting their businesses (including traders from Poland, Kurdistan and Somalia). However, it was also noted that enduring structures of inequality also play a role and that requirements for support therefore vary. The importance of leaders within different groups that businesses can turn to was discussed, as well as local networks of support around advice and financial support.
- **Recognising success and contribution:** The group emphasised that the wider roles that traders and small businesses play in the community needs to be recognised and acknowledged, both in terms of the contributions to local centres and neighbourhoods, and the broader identity of the City. There is a need to highlight the positive stories, not only the people who are doing well, but

how traders are self-organising and doing things successfully. There needs to be more acknowledgement of how many traders are operating globally, extending beyond city boundaries and building on cross national networks.

2. How can minority ethnic and migrant traders and small business be best supported?

- **Consultation and dialogue:** The perception was that consultation between local authorities and neighbourhoods had been poor. Traders' interests are often ignored; the issues that would bring them together are often dismissed. Parking was raised as a primary issue for street-based retail, as was security and safety. Although local groups and organisations make substantial investments in the area, they report that they not invited to be involved in discussions by the council. The sentiment was that there needs to be more devolution of power and decision-making to local areas, in ways that recognise local skills and expertise.
- **Visibility and recognition:** Participants felt that the contributions of ethnic minority retail to the vitality of local economic centres are not being acknowledged by the city. There is little recognition of the economic and social value of these hubs, or understanding of the diverse roles they play. The perception was that city officials don't know 'who' or 'what' these places are made up of, and therefore do not offer them the support they need.
- **Support adaptability and resilience:** Ethnic minority retailers have become very adaptive and resilient in providing wider community services (such as small loans, advice and information, help filling in forms) in the increasing absence of state support. This range of activities could be supported better by local agencies.
- **Measuring success:** The council should adopt better ways of recording the economic and social vitality of local centres, in ways that highlight the importance of wider social and cultural benefits beyond traditional economic ways of measuring success.

3. Will the most effective support come from city-wide structures, from local initiatives, or from the traders themselves?

- **Interface with formal structures:** Birmingham's administrative areas do not always map onto the shopping areas and local centres that people identify with; there are examples of ward boundaries running down the middle of high streets. This can be experienced as indicating low respect for how people live their lives. However it was also pointed out that economic development and planning policies in Birmingham do acknowledge local economic centres and their importance.
- **There is also is a perception that the council can be inflexible:** For example, participants mentioned that there are derelict shop properties yet new traders face problems getting leases to these. Some participants noted a problem with political representation, stating their belief that councillors do not view local businesses as voters so do not necessarily put the effort into connecting with them.
- **Engaging in the right way:** Participants noted the dangers of official interventions trying to professionalise community and civic activism. The council tends to set up formal forums that reflect the way that local agencies work (such as the BID model), however this can take away energy from local activism and the diverse ways local networks are organised. Citizens UK noted their experience is that entrepreneurs do and will participate in community based groups, but largely when they see that they will achieve something or when they think they can effect a practical difference.

- **Marketing:** Participants raised the question of how local economic centres could be better marketed. Suggestions included representation of different kinds of groups and communities within local structures, including BIDs and LEPS.
- **Sharing lessons and learning:** It is important to recognise that some migrant communities are more established than others, participants suggested creating prototype plans for newer migrants based on lessons learned by earlier arrivals. There was also an interest in actively celebrating success stories.
- **City-wide structures and local centres:** Participants noted the need to acknowledge the value of migrant and ethnic retail within regional support structures, economic plans, BIDs and LEPS. Several participants voiced a view that LEPS and city-wide structures work for the city centre but not for local centres. Examples were given of council targets for rent and sales running counter to the interests of local centres; and that the language of growth does not fit many sectors in small businesses trade (such as the food sector) which do not tend to grow once established. Some reported that they believed that the authority is more likely to sell empty properties to international investors than to local businesses.
- **Work with community leaders:** Every community has community leaders, ways of representing interests, and ways of communicating between groups and authorities. There is a need to identify these leaders and these practices, to work with them, and involve them. This will help with accountability as well as the recognition of the particular economic and social roles of local centres.
- **The new Mayor will be critical:** It is hoped that the Mayor will be more of an intermediary for local concerns and diverse groups, who can find ways to address the constraints of bureaucracy and weak communication between the council and local centers, and actively support local economies.

Workshop participants

Ajmal Hussain	Aston University
Abdirahman Iman	Ashley Community Housing
Amrik Singh Ubhi	Nishcam Centre, Centre Director
Andeep Mangal	Soho Road BID
Faraz Hassan	Social Life
Ifor Jones	Better Neighbourhoods Work, Director
Nicola Bacon	Social Life
Professor Monder Ram	University of Birmingham, CREME
Musurut Dar	Legacy WM
Mosese Dakunivosa	Citizens UK
Rachel Okello	Sutton Coldfield Town Council, Deputy Leader

Russell Poulton	Birmingham City Council, Regeneration Manager City Centre and North West
Saidal Haque Saeed	Citizens UK, Senior Organiser
Dr Sarindar Singh Sahota	Director, Nishkam School Trust
Dr Suzanne Hall	LSE Cities
Uyen-Phan Han	Birmingham City Council, Strategic Planning Manager
Wayne Pell	Birmingham City Council, Senior Regeneration Officer