

Supporting ethnic minority traders and businesses in local high streets and centres:

Report of Social Life's work with the
"Super-diverse streets" ESRC research project

14 November 2016



About the report

This short report discusses what has been learnt from Social Life's contribution to the ESRC research project "Super-diverse streets: Economies and spaces of urban migration in UK Cities". The project explores the economies and spaces on streets across four cities: Birmingham, Bristol, Leicester and Manchester. One street was selected in each city in an area categorised as deprived and with high levels of ethnic diversity.

This second phase of the project, involving Social Life, has investigated how traders and local businesses impact on the changing city, both through their own collective actions and their interactions with other local organisations and institutions. It explores how people organise themselves economically and collectively, beyond their own personal lives, and how they negotiate with the city around them. The aim is to understand how the on-going experiences of migration, and ethnic minority entrepreneurship, shape our streets and broader urban landscape.

Two of the Super Diverse Streets case study cities were chosen to carry out further research. Birmingham, because of the focus that Birmingham City Council has placed on the local economies of their 73 town centres¹. The street that was the focus of the first phase of the Super Diverse Streets project, Rookery Road, is one of the most economically precarious in the study. The second city, Leicester, was selected because the case study street, Narborough Road, has a dynamic economy, shaped by a wide range of migrant businesses and traders. As a city however Leicester has the lowest household incomes in the UK².

The two cities and two streets are therefore contrasting case studies.

Key messages

1. Councils need to recognise the value of street-based retail and its contribution to local economies in their policies, strategies and statements, and specifically acknowledge the role of diverse ethnic minority retail.
2. Councils should recognise not only the economic but the social value of migrant and ethnic minority retailers and their contribution to local neighbourhoods.
3. Street-based retailers' critical issues - including parking and safety - are core to their businesses. Traders often have practical suggestions to offer to tackle these problems.
4. It is important that engagement and consultation activities recognise the practical difficulties traders face attending meetings. Traders are more likely to engage through informal meetings one to one or with small groups, or through their own networks.
5. Supporting traders to strengthen their informal networks, through social media or other means, is effective and inexpensive. This can use new and emerging social media platforms that are already being actively used by traders.
6. Bureaucratic and administrative barriers - like ward boundaries or inflexible contracts - cause frustration. Flexibility about contract boundaries and break clauses can enable migrant traders' representative bodies to play a bigger part in managing local areas.
7. In the context of austerity and reduced local authority services, new forms of partnership between local authorities and local trading groups need to be brokered, exploring a range of options suitable to each context, avoiding 'one-size fits all' approach.

What we did

The aim of Social Life’s research was to convene local discussions to explore how these streets, and the traders and small businesses that operate in them, can thrive as a result of traders’ mutual aid and efforts to promote their own interests, and through the contribution of local agencies. Following initial scoping in both cities we agreed our approach.

In Birmingham we involved local institutions, particularly the council and BIDs (Business Improvement Districts) in the discussions, so we could explore the existing relationships between traders and these agencies. In Leicester, where organisation appeared to be more community led, our intention was to stay at the local level and engage with businesses and community organisations.

Initial conversations with traders and institutions in Birmingham revealed that the formalised social networks between traders in Rookery Road are generally weak. There is no formalised traders association or collective organisation, a previous traders association ceased to exist several years ago and it was not possible to speak to any of the individuals who were involved in it. There appeared to be little appetite among the traders of Rookery Road to meet together to discuss their shared interests, as this happened more informally. The team decided instead to bring together community representatives from local centres and high streets with substantial ethnic minority populations, with city council officers and representatives of BIDs. Birmingham University’s Centre for Research in Ethnic Minority Enterprise (CREME) agreed to co-host the workshop. CREME have been working with Citizens UK in Birmingham on a series of listening campaigns aimed at ethnic minority business, aiming to bring the plight of marginalised inner city business owners to attention of the City’s business support providers”.³

The Birmingham workshop was held on 20th July at the St Mary’s Centre in Handsworth, with 17 participants (see appendix).



The Birmingham workshop at St Mary’s Centre, Handsworth

In Leicester, we engaged with an established traders’ network covering Narborough Road. Further conversations revealed that this is run by a small number of committed traders, and faces challenges engaging more recently arrived traders and businesses. Improving communication between traders has become a priority for the association. The workshop aimed to bring together traders to discuss how they could communicate with and support each other.

The Leicester workshop was held on 11th July at the East West Community Centre, close to Narborough Road, with eight participants.



We’re inviting traders to get together to discuss:

- What are the issues that traders are facing?
- How do traders work together?
- How can things be made better?

We would like to talk to traders about what can be done to support the trader community on Narborough Road. This conversation will follow up on research* which found that Narborough Road was the most diverse street in the UK.

When: Monday 11th July from 6:30pm - 8:00pm
Where: the East West Community Centre
 10 Wilberforce Rd, Leicester LE3 0GT
There will be food and refreshments.

*For more information about LSE Cities research see <https://lsecities.net/objects/research-projects/super-diverse-streets>

Get in touch:

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LSE Cities
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*Flyer for the
 Narborough Road
 workshop*

Scoping conversations

In Leicester we spoke to 38 traders of which 13 were in-depth conversations. Three faith organisations, two community centres, two representatives of the local authority and one NGO were also interviewed.

In Birmingham we had meetings with four council officers, one local councillor, three current or former BIDs managers, and four representatives of civil society organisations. We also spent time observing everyday life several of Birmingham’s local centres, particularly Soho Road and Stratford Road.

What we found

Relationships between traders and businesses and the local council

The Super Diverse project revealed the value that migrant retailers contribute to local and city-wide economies. This was widely recognised by traders and business owners themselves. However, there was a broad perception among those interviewed, which was also voiced in workshops, that this contribution is often poorly acknowledged by formal institutions and policy makers.

Traders and businesses in both cities expressed different degrees of alienation from council structures. In Birmingham, the city council and Local Economic Partnership (LEP) was described as being “blind to the benefits” of the local centres, and that local centres feel like “poor relations”.

Both councils reported a shift in their emphasis towards recognition of the value of local centres, although also voiced a lack of confidence about how to best support local centres and how to communicate with traders, given their lack of resources. The two councils articulated a wish that traders would set up formalised structures, and in Birmingham particularly, to grow the number of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) to support more local centres. These structures however are not necessarily adept at meeting the needs of emerging businesses or recently arrived retailers - see below for more discussion of this.

In both cities, the formal structures that connected traders and businesses with the local authority before 2010 have ended or been scaled down. The complex networks of local partnerships and formal committees associated with neighbourhood management and town centre management in Birmingham (through which 11 town centre managers were employed) now no longer exist, along with the associated community development support and grant funding. In Leicester’s West End, which includes Narborough Rd, the City Challenge programme in the 1990s was mentioned as having been effective in boosting the local economy. Leicester City Challenge created ward structures, including quarterly “community ward meetings”, and grants programmes. The community meetings and the small grants programme, known as “ward community funding”, are still operating.

In Birmingham and Leicester, these formal structures invited migrant traders to participate in meetings and committees, and through these to directly influence plans for development and investment, and bid for resources for the area and for individual businesses. One trader who had been active in the Westend Traders Association for many years commented: “the city council never recognised the city challenge, but the outcome of it was phenomenal”. Now these structures and associated resources are reduced or ended, there is less incentive for traders to meet with the council through formal structures.

Today, traders and businesses appear to make very pragmatic decisions about when to spend time coming together in collective action. For traders, attending meetings means not being able to run their business for those hours, and this makes participation difficult. Traders therefore will prioritise

activities that they think are most likely to make a difference. At the Birmingham workshop it was also noted that institutions tend to set up structures and processes that mirror the way they work, which can be at odds with the flexible way that traders want to operate.

Some Narborough Road traders who had been active within the local community campaigning for change described how they “get things done” by personal contacts, getting publicity through the local media and by being persistent. However they also reported that they were “exhausted” after many years of local activism.

In both cities, the complaint was made that the issues that are critical to traders, including parking and security, are often not addressed or prioritised by councils. One Narborough Road business owner who had opened a hairdresser in the last two years described how his clients often need to stay in his salon for a number of hours, but have to leave midway through a hair treatment to move their cars. The frustration that this causes can taint traders’ wider attitudes towards local councils. Both officers and members were reported as failing to adequately represent traders’ interests.

Individual council officers interviewed spoke of the value of migrant traders and businesses to local economies and communities, but voiced frustrations about the lack of resources and uncertainty about the best way to support traders. Some recognised that their consultation efforts had been less successful than they hoped because they had been unrealistic about traders’ capacity (in terms of time in particular) to take part in formal consultation processes. One officer in Leicester spoke of his difficulties engaging traders in discussions about how to spend money allocated for a shop front scheme on Narborough Road, and his hope that there could be a single point of contact, through a traders association, in the future.



Soho Road in Birmingham

Some council officers interviewed suggested that increased diversity amongst migrants was increasing the complexity of engaging with traders and businesses. One interviewee described the gap in Birmingham between settled communities and “seasonal” communities, said to include Romanians and Kurds, who were believed to intend to return to their home countries.

Reflecting on structures used in the past, officers in both cities felt that the greatest loss from the ending of town centre and neighbourhood management was in coordination, the named person who had contact with all the traders and council, police, and highways. However there was recognition that past structures could have been more successful if they could have worked more effectively with businesses that had a “social value perspective”, for example involving local businesses in apprenticeship schemes, in the jobs and skills agenda.

Birmingham City Council state that they wish to take an enabling approach to their high streets and local centres, taking flexible action when needed rather than offering rigid programmes.

For both councils, there are difficult issues to manage about how to engage less formally with traders; how to value the local centres and their different values and ways of operating, alongside boosting the city’s economy; how to maintain the wider diversity and resilience of local areas alongside a flourishing city centre; how to stop bigger players dominating smaller but valuable businesses.



Narborough Road in Leicester

The value of informal networks and support

The Super Diverse Streets project has illustrated the importance of social networks and relationships between local traders and businesses in responding to the impact of public sector austerity.

Cuts in welfare provision for vulnerable groups have affected many of the traders and their wider networks. The Birmingham workshop discussed how traders have adapted to providing services in the absence of state support. Activities like help filing in forms, or providing community meeting space in the back of a shop were described as supporting to the local community, however the perception was that these are often invisible to formal institutions and officials.

On Narborough Road, there is a light-touch neighbourliness amongst traders, many are not aware of, or involved in, the existing Westend Traders Association, but speak to each other when something happens. Some have very little, or no, contact with other traders. One trader described it as “glimmers of organisation”. When invited to the workshop, some commented that they did not think traders would get together and that people “only turn up when there is something pressing” or “when they think something is wrong”. One commented about a formalised traders’ association, “it doesn’t work in an area like here. If having that kind of organisation would work, we would have recognised it by now”. One workshop participants said: “what is needed is to get into all the different networks on the street. There isn’t just one network, are many, find out who the influencers are in this.”

In Birmingham, Citizens UK has launched listening campaigns with “marginalised business” and report that traders are taking active roles. They believe that traders will become involved in local initiatives when they see this is worth the effort.

At the Narborough Road workshop many of the attendees expressed an interest in creating a more effective network between traders. Their key practical issue was parking restrictions, however many were not sure if they could change anything, in spite of being told how the Westend Traders Association had succeeded in modifying the parking scheme when it was first introduced. Several traders described effective informal networks: “We talk to each other. Last year the business rate scheme was changed so everybody ran to each other to ask what they had gotten or if it had been changed”.

Traders who attended the workshop agreed to set up a WhatsApp network at the meeting. This sort of informal information flow and loose networking fits with traders’ time constraints and difficulties engaging in formal meetings, whilst allowing the possibility of building on the strengths of existing networks. At the meeting we also agreed to set up a link between traders and the De Montford University.

NARBOROUGH ROAD UPDATE

NOTES FROM MEETING 11TH JULY 2016



Join the new
Narborough Rd Network
WhatsApp group!

On Monday 11th July, Social Life and LSE Cities met with traders and businesses to talk about what can be done to support Narborough road. The meeting was held at the East West Community Centre and was attended by eight Narborough Road traders and businesses, and a representative from the council.

What participants decided

Traders at the meeting decided to set up a WhatsApp group called the **Narborough Road Network**. The group will share information about what is going on and be a forum for issues that are affecting traders and businesses on the road. This new network will work alongside the existing West End Traders Association's Facebook group: www.facebook.com/WestendTradersAssociation/

Please contact Social Life on 0797 573 8097, or Ufuk Gundogdu on 0780 708 9233, to join the group.

We have compiled a list of useful information, including information about the West End Traders Association and upcoming meetings. *Please see the back of this leaflet.*

Issues raised by traders

Traders identified parking restrictions as a key issue, alongside crime and street cleaning.

There was an interest in finding out whether traders could have parking permits, remove parking limits on match days and offer extended parking hours for businesses with customers who stay for longer periods of time.

There was also a wish for better safety and a more visible police presence.

At the meeting we discussed how difficult it can be to share information between traders and how many are unaware of existing structures. We spoke about how a traders network can give traders a stronger voice in dealing with the council, applying for funding and helping with shared problems.

The council said they welcome traders associations and networks as it makes it easier for them to speak to local businesses. They talked about how they had worked with some traders to decide how to allocate money for the shopfront scheme - the council said that there may be more funding for the street later in the autumn and that it was important that traders give them their views about how this should be spent.



The meeting was organised to follow up on research carried out by the London School of Economics (LSE), which explores how local high streets are faring, and how they can be supported. The research project is led by Dr Suzanne Hall from LSE Cities.

More information about the research project can be found here:
<https://lsecities.net/objects/research-projects/super-diverse-streets>

If you have any feedback or questions about the meeting please email hello@social-life.co

Feedback leaflet for Narborough Road traders and businesses after the workshop

Social Life supported a group of Narborough Road traders to set up a WhatsApp network in July to August 2016

This began with the involvement of four traders, people who had either come to the workshop or who had expressed interest in being involved in the workshop. A Social Life researcher took the role of group administrator initially, but early on one of the traders said they would be happy to take this role. In the first weeks, activity was slow, and the Social Life researcher was the only person posting updates. However, after two weeks, traders began posting and two months after starting the group, 14 traders were involved.

The original plan was that the group should be for Narborough Road traders and businesses only, however at a meeting on July 28th it was decided to make the group co-terminus with longer standing Westend Traders Association, which already runs a Facebook group, which covers the Westecotes ward (the council ward covering Narborough Road).

The staff time needed to support the setting up of the group to a point where members were posting updates spontaneously was around three days.

The experience of more formal structured support

Councils in Birmingham and Leicester want to encourage traders to set up formal traders associations and BIDs (Business Improvement Districts). Officers from both councils articulated that having one body to speak to makes it easier for them to plan how to spend resources, and to make consultation effective. They also highlighted how formal bodies can apply for small grants, like the Big Lottery’s “Awards for All” programme which gives grants between £300 and £10,000 for “grassroots and community activity that aims to improve life for local people and neighbourhoods”⁴, and through this leverage resources to support traders’ priorities.

In Birmingham, the City Council has supported for the BID model since 2005 when the first BID, in the west of the city centre (the Westside BID), was set up. The first local centre BID in Erdington was set up in 2007. The council has actively supported their expansion in the city centre and in the local centres and there are now 11 BIDs in total, four in the city centre and seven in local centres. In Leicester a ballot in 2014 to set up city centre BID failed, the Leicester BID steering group is planning another ballot in 2017.

In Birmingham, the council’s wish to develop more BIDs sits alongside recognition that the relationships between BIDs and the Council, and city centre and local centre BIDs, can be strained. In our discussions with various BIDS it became clear that this is an adaptable, rather than a ‘one size fits all’, model.

Birmingham BIDs reported that lack of flexibility in council contracts, on issues as varied as street cleaning and buying festive lighting, hampers their ability to expand their activities to benefit traders. The mismatch between local government administrative boundaries, and the “natural

neighbourhoods” of streets and centres frustrate traders and BIDs in the city. In the past when funding and resources were channelled through council structures, traders and the council navigated around these issues. Now the council can no longer provide the same level of support, and structures have been disbanded or scaled down, these boundaries can become a larger barrier.

A BID can only be set up after businesses in the area demonstrate their support through a ballot. BIDs set their own priorities, for example it was reported that the Kings Heath BID in Birmingham places more focus on promotion and marketing, whereas the Soho Road BID concentrates on managing the street. Interviewees emphasised that the BID model only works where there are enough businesses to generate enough income, and where there is a logic to the remit and geography of the BID. Several described the difficulties starting the Sparkbrook and Springfield BID in Birmingham, in spite of strong council support, citing the problems caused by its sheer length and the low levels of business rates.

Birmingham BIDs are now thinking about how they support smaller centres. Financial support from the council for BIDs is shrinking. For example BIDs are now being required to bear the costs of running a ballot. The Birmingham BIDs Association, which includes the Soho Road BID and others in the north west of the city, is contemplating a “mini BID” model where smaller streets set up a BID that buys in administration and business support from larger BIDs. Some queried whether BIDs could manage the tensions between the different issues facing the larger streets and the more vulnerable economies of smaller shopping streets.

In both cities independent traders associations were mentioned, but these were not the norm. In Birmingham examples were given in Harbourne, Mosely and Digbeth. In Leicester, Belgrave Business Association on the Golden Mile, and the Braunstone Gate Traders Association.

How traders and businesses relate to their wider neighbourhoods

In workshops and in interviews, demographic change was cited as having changed the way that migrant traders interact with residents of the neighbourhoods around town centres. Some suggested that increasing diversity among shop and businesses owners in local centres and streets was making it more difficult for traders to collaborate, comparing this to a past where they perceived that traders and businesses were more homogenous. A belief was also voiced that changing demographics have affected the relationships between traders and local populations, and that the two groups are now less similar than formerly. In Birmingham it was reported that the people most affected by this change living near Rookery Road are older isolated Asian and Caribbean residents whose families have left home, seeing the shops that they depend on close down and be replaced by shops serving different groups.

However, traders are constantly adapting to change. One interviewee described a “shift in faces and languages”, and how business owners have become property owners and are now letting their shops to others migrant entrepreneurs. Interviewees on Narborough Road cited the example of shops aimed at eastern European customers, run by Kurdish proprietors. One Narborough Road proprietor said: “it has changed slowly but it was always in a state of flux”, reflecting the ongoing changing nature of migration to the UK as reflected in the street.

In the Birmingham workshop, one group discussed how needs vary amongst different groups, how some longstanding migrants are now well established, whilst others (the example was given of the Bengali community) need more support. Some suggested that people from groups that are more newly arrived (Somalis and Kurds were identified as two such groups) need the same higher levels of support earlier migrants had benefitted from in the past (although as mentioned in the previous section, the affect of austerity and cuts to local authority services means that support for small business street trade is much reduced).

In Soho Road in Birmingham, there is a strong relationship between individual traders, the Soho Road BID, and local community organisations. A shared commitment between socially committed traders and long-established local community organisations was described. However in both cities, the ending or scaling down of local neighbourhood structures that linked traders to residents in the past - including neighbourhood management structures and ward forums - was cited as important in the decline of the sense of shared interest between traders and residents.

In Leicester, the neighbourhood civil society organisations near Narborough Road were described as now having weaker relationships with traders than in the past. For example, the Hindu temple described how many worshipers have now moved away from the area, and that the temple is now used by Hindus from across the city. In Narborough Road, some traders are involved in the ward community forum for Westecotes ward, however others in our workshop did not know of the existence of this forum, or that it distributes small grants to the local area.

Kings Heath in Birmingham offered a different picture, where it was reported that there are many community organisations in the area and BID prioritises good relationships with them. Their interest is in thinking about customers’ interests and the wider offer of the area, and how local assets can be pulled together to promote the area.

Conclusion: action points for agencies working with street-based retail on super-diverse streets

1. Councils should explicitly recognise the value of ethnically diverse street based retail and its contribution to local economies, both in formal policies and strategies, and in the actions and day to day statements of officers and elected members.
2. Street-based traders' critical issues - including parking and safety - are core to their businesses. The importance of these needs to be recognised in planning local schemes. Addressing problems will signal the council's goodwill and intention to support this group of businesses. Traders often have workable and practical suggestions about improving the things that cause frustration, and need avenues to communicate these.
3. It is important that engagement and consultation with traders recognises the practical difficulties they face attending meetings. Traders are more likely to engage through informal meetings, either one to one or in small groups, or through their own networks. They are less likely to take part in conventional consultation processes like public meetings.
4. Supporting traders to strengthen their informal networks, through social media or otherwise, is effective and inexpensive. This can use new and emerging social media platforms that are already being actively used by traders.
5. Councils need to acknowledge that traders reluctance to invest time in setting up traders associations is related to the low benefits that they see these structures generating, as well as the high time commitment needed to set them up.
6. Bureaucratic and administrative barriers - like ward boundaries or inflexible contracts - cause frustration. Flexibility about contract boundaries and break clauses can enable migrant traders' representative bodies to play a bigger part in managing local areas.
7. Councils should seeks out and collaborate with traders and businesses that share a social value perspective. They should not under estimate the extent of community-based support that is being provided through local initiatives, and could find ways of combining resources to meet shared goals.

Appendix

Birmingham 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 North West	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

This report was written by Nicola Bacon, Emma Nielsen and Faraz Hassan from Social Life.

Social Life was established in 2012 by The Young Foundation. All our work is about the relationship between people and places.

For more information visit www.social-life.co

¹Birmingham City Council (2015) Shopping and Local Centres Supplementary Planning Document, Monitoring Report 2015

²<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/regionalaccounts/grossdisposablehouseholdincome>

³ Citizens UK and CREME Birmingham University, Listening campaign Citizens UK- University of Birmingham: Engaging local ethnic minority businesses, Meeting report, 22nd September 2015 <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-social-sciences/business/research/creme/citizens-uk-report.pdf>

⁴<https://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/global-content/programmes/england/awards-for-all-england>