

Withington Road - Looking in the right place for a compassionate, viable economy



Where are we most likely to find models for a viable economy? We recently discovered there are more answers than we realised without looking very far.

There is a strong economic case for vibrant local shops. It is based on how money flows around a local economy. *How many times* money circulates in an area is just as important as the *amount* of money flowing into it. The key to successful high streets is interdependent, inter-trading local businesses.¹

Withington Road First Steps is a consultation project about the shopping area on Withington Road which is in Whalley Range, Manchester. The exercise grew out of local dissatisfaction about the area. We talked to traders, including managers of local health services. There are undoubtedly many things which can be improved; and we also found that the area has many strengths on which to build.

We started the exercise with preconceived ideas about what the shops and services had to offer Withington Road and what they wished for in return. Our expectations were based largely on the look of their shop front, the shop name or personal past experiences, often from a long time ago.

We started by looking at the strengths and moved on to what traders would like in the future and how that might be achieved.

Our preconceptions of what some shops and services had to offer were challenged once we stepped inside. Whilst the shop signs or front give potential customers a clue as to what is sold or provided inside, it is not until you speak to the people behind the counter that you see all that is on offer.

¹ (<http://www.neweconomics.org/blog/entry/long-live-the-queen-of-shops> 2011)

As traders shared their stories with us it became clear that the compassion, humour, diversity, time, conversation and humanity they bring to Withington Road, are a huge part of the offer and often the reason why many customers return again and again.

We left each shop door with a growing curiosity about who we'd find behind the next door and what they had to give.

We were amazed and excited to discover a more diverse range of shops than we expected (see box)

We felt incredibly privileged to talk with traders and humbled by learning more about the challenges traders were living with day in and day out, a stone's throw from our homes.

Services and goods available on Withington Road include:

plumbing materials, kitchen/ bathroom design, lawyer, accountant, primary care, dentist, pharmacy, records, post office, buy a car, get one repaired or washed, hairdressers, service wash, laundrette, clothes alterations

Food & take aways including Polish, Halal meat, gluten free, organic, fish and chips, Mediterranean, Jamaican, Vietnamese pizza, Subways!

'gluten free... I could meet more customers' needs like that; it is just a question of knowing what people need.'

Often their success was despite limited financial resources and based on vision and hard work

We wanted people to notice us. Decking was expensive, so we put flowers instead.

Lots of people noticed us. They asked us how long we have been here. Young people started coming. Some people had thought we are just a take away; now they know we are a cafe and they come.'

Traders want to stay in the area if they can develop their businesses where they are. They are appreciative of their staff most of whom live in the area – so they are also likely to spend their wages in the area - the reason why local shops are so good for the local economy.

'The staff live locally and work with pride. One member of staff knows everyone – what we want in the business. she has in abundance!'

'Many of the staff are local; they have a passion for the community. They come to work because they want to work in this environment, therefore we have low staff turnover. We feel our staff are very compassionate and empathetic which develops their relationship with the patients'

We realised that most traders saw compassion as the route to their success and recognised the **enormous amount of wellbeing and social care work they and their often low paid staff do, which is unrecognised, invisible, unvalued and unpaid.**

'It is really important to give time and many of our customers don't get it anywhere else. It brings back customers and strengthens relationships.'

'We take customers home and go the extra mile. One woman moved to Rusholme and got a taxi back to shop here.'

'Most of the time, I don't feel that it is work, it is meeting people. There is real community – people talk together; we all know each other.'

'A woman came in; she had locked the car with the key and baby inside. The baby was crying.....I managed to get into the car and I did it carefully without breaking the glass. She became my customer and has been a customer for a long time now and recommended others who are also still customers. '

Traders believe that by having satisfied customers, positive links with the community and other traders and caring about the area **makes it safer for everyone**

We look after them and they look after us, we are part of their family. A point of note is that we have never had any graffiti on the building; we feel protected, part of the community. Colleagues from other areas are surprised when they come here, to feel so comfortable. I would suggest they have come to expect differently of Moss Side and Whalley Range. They often say they would like to work in an environment like this.

At one time it was really unsafe..... I loved the flower containers the council put here. They really civilized the place. I think they will stop vandalism

'We prevent conflict or racism. We have the minimum of incidents by working to ensure that customers are happy – they come in with a smile; go out with a smile'

We fed back our findings to traders and believe that if these findings are shared widely it can contribute to a more up to date image of the shopping area. There are things that traders as well as the community are keen to improve and there are differences between individual traders and traders and people who live in the area about their aspirations for the area.

There are also broader questions being asked by local community groups about who decides what shops are developed in the area. This may concern how the interests of people making a living and others interests can be accommodated. There are big questions here. Is it possible to have a successful shopping centre which provides for the common good? In other words which does not encourage consumerism beyond the scope of planetary resources and provides decent affordable products and services for local residents and decent standards of living for traders and staff?

The time is right for more dialogue, greater shared understanding to increase everyone influencing and supporting one another. We have great hopes for our local shopping area, will use it more and have learnt loads from these golden gems in our community about growing the shoots of a viable economy in Manchester.

Eve Holt, Dave Saunders and Judith Emanuel discovered this light on the viable economy as part of the Withington Road First Steps consultation. Judith is also part of Steady State Manchester

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