



**Manchester
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Roberts, Gareth and Millington, Steven ORCID logo ORCID:
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**Area Based Collaborative Entrepreneurship
in Cities**

Withington District Centre

Case Study
December 2019

Withington district centre (Manchester)

This case study provides an overview of Withington district centre, with specific reference given to the collectives present in the centre, whose coordinated effort has contributed to Withington becoming one of the more desired centres in the Manchester city region.

The figures below show the location of Withington district centre (Figure 1), as well as a map of the district centre itself (Figure 2).

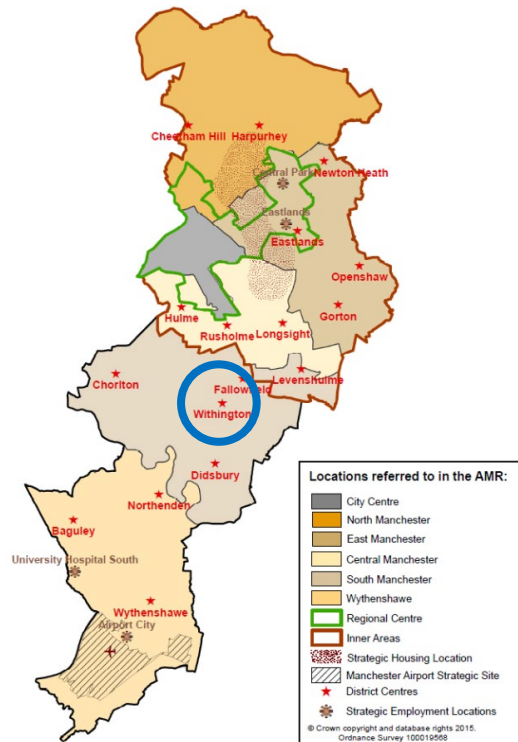


Figure 1: Location of Withington district centre

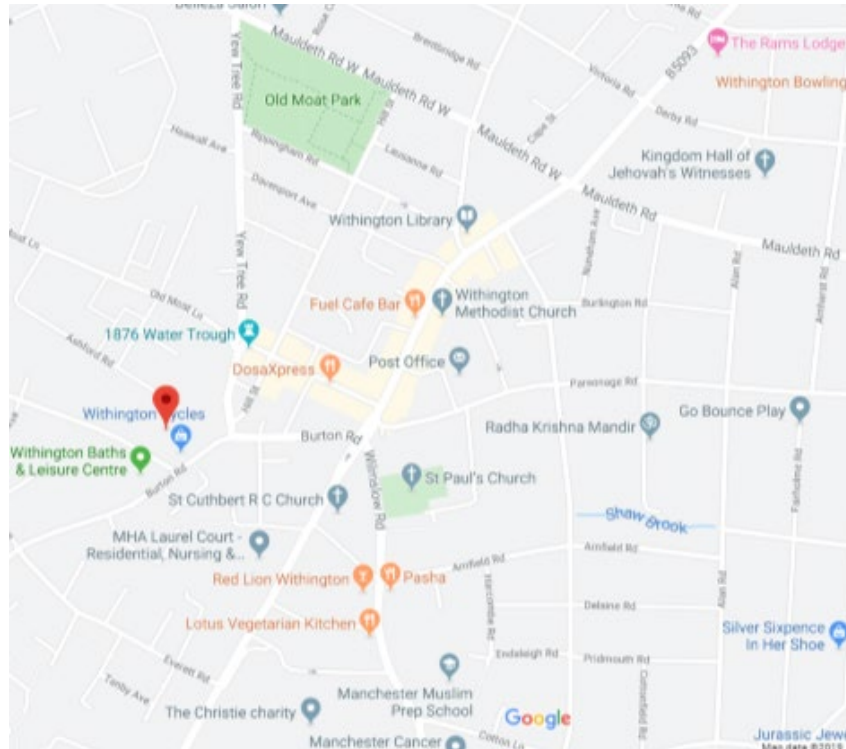


Figure 2: Withington district centre map

Characteristics of the collective

As with many smaller district centres located on the peripheries of larger city centres, Withington possesses a dishevelled quality. Whilst a product of the life of the centre – being as it is one which is home to a transient student population, and existing around a major commuter thoroughfare – there is much improvement that could be made to increase its appearance. Some of the issues include graffiti around the centre on both walls and shutters (although there are notably plans in place for a crowd-funded Shutter Art scheme to address this). There are also a higher than average number of vacant units (14% in March 2019) which contributes to the somewhat down at heel feel of the centre. Pedestrian access from the Old Moat area is particularly unappealing, especially the parking and service area behind the shops on the west side of Wilmslow Road. The centre currently lacks any significant quality civic space. Furthermore, whereas there are plans in place to enhance the appearance of the road leading from The Christie hospital (a major Cancer hospital/research centre located just outside the district centre boundary) to the centre via planters/trees; pedestrian links to other neighbouring districts need to be considered in terms of improving the overall appearance of the centre. However, on the positive side, there are a number of traditional buildings which give the centre an authentic feel, efforts have also been made to improve appearance through use of planters

around the centre (e.g. around the library), there are also several more modern-looking units (e.g. Toast, Shakedown, and Mockingbirds) which again help to promote a better appearance.

There is a strong historical narrative in Withington, which is the original home of Factory Records, the Manchester record label famous for producing bands including Joy Division/New Order and the Happy Mondays. The centre has largely retained its traditional high street form, although there are challenges here – traffic, appearance, and a lack of quality public realm. The centre possesses a relatively narrow range of basic retailers and services for the local catchment, providing basic groceries, food/beverages, household items, and healthcare services. The centre generally feels quiet on weekday mornings and afternoons (outside of typical commuter ‘rush hours’) and lacks a sense of vibrancy. The appearance issues in the centre also negatively affect the experience. However, to counter this there have been a range of recent pop-up festivals in Withington which have driven footfall into the centre and created a sense of experience (e.g. Factory Records event, craft ale festival, Withington by Night evening event, and a pop-up market).

Given the large number of students and younger people who reside in the centre, there is a lively evening economy, provided for by the handful of bars and pubs located in the centre. A proposed market feature will likely help to further enhance the experience in Withington, coupled with the potential to draw inspiration from the Teenage Market model to attract the young catchment and contribute further to the existing sense of community. However, there is a concern that the centre over-serves younger people, and does not adequately serve older residents.

Withington baths provides an important community hub, hosting a variety of events, both fitness-related and community-focused, as well as providing a co-working space. Although officially outside of the district centre boundary, this facility – and the circumstances which led to it becoming the hub it now is, which are detailed below – was a catalyst for much of the change that the collectives in Withington are now enacting.

The community and the collective

At the last official count, the population of Withington District Centre was 16,038. In terms of ethnicity, 77% of the population were white, 12.8% Asian, with the remainder a mix of other ethnicities. Approximately 40% of the population do not own a car, with 40% owning one vehicle, and the remainder owning two or more. In terms of deprivation, the centre performs well relative to other Manchester district centres. A key differentiator for Withington in relation to many centres is its high proportion of younger residents, as illustrated by the graph below.

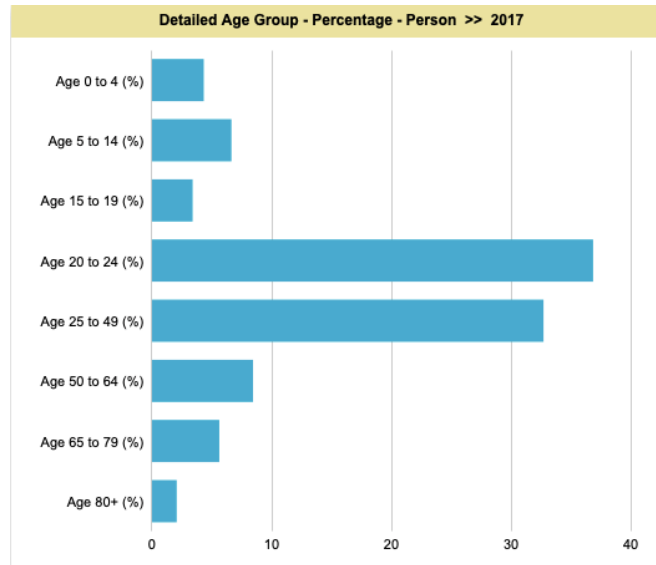


Figure 3: Withington population age breakdown

There are numerous reasons for this, including the centre being affordable – at least relative to more affluent adjacent centres including Didsbury and Chorlton – and the fact that the centre has long been home to a large number of student residences. Interestingly, in recent years there has been a boom in city centre student living, with many developments emerging to cater specifically for this market and thus contributing to a reduction in Withington’s student population. This, coupled with the centre’s proximity to aspirational yet more unaffordable centres, has led to an increase in young professionals residing in the centre (specifically those in the 25-49 age bracket). As such, the centre is evolving to meet the needs of this profile of resident, and the work of the collectives in the centre is catering to this market.

Governance structure of shared resource

The Withington Village Regeneration Partnership (WVRP) is a unique public/private/community collaboration set up in 2017, with a vision to progress the regeneration and environmental improvement of Withington Village. It consists of key stakeholders who have an interest in Withington Village including representatives of Manchester City Council, Southway Housing Association, The Christie, Withington Baths, Withington Civic Society and importantly local traders and property owners. The Partnership has had a number of successes in the short time since they were founded. Not least the major success that subsequently led to the group’s formation, when in 2015 the local Withington baths were saved from closure. After a community campaign to take control of the building and the baths within, the Council seceded control and scrapped plans to close the building, which was handed over and is now managed by and for the community. As well as the swimming baths/gymnasium and space for other

leisure activities and classes, the group have recently added a co-working space on the upper floor – and have set in train ambitious plans to transform the site into a community hub.

The successes of WVRP has set in motion wider collaborative activity. Adjacent to this group now sits We Are Withington (WAW), a collection of traders and services in the Village including Wilderness Records, A Curious Collection, The Lock Inn, Solomons, Burton Road Brewery, Withington Baths and The Christie. WAWs remit is to promote the centre, capitalising on the strategic work of WVRP and building on this to engage the local community and increase vitality in the centre.

The two groups sit together as follows:

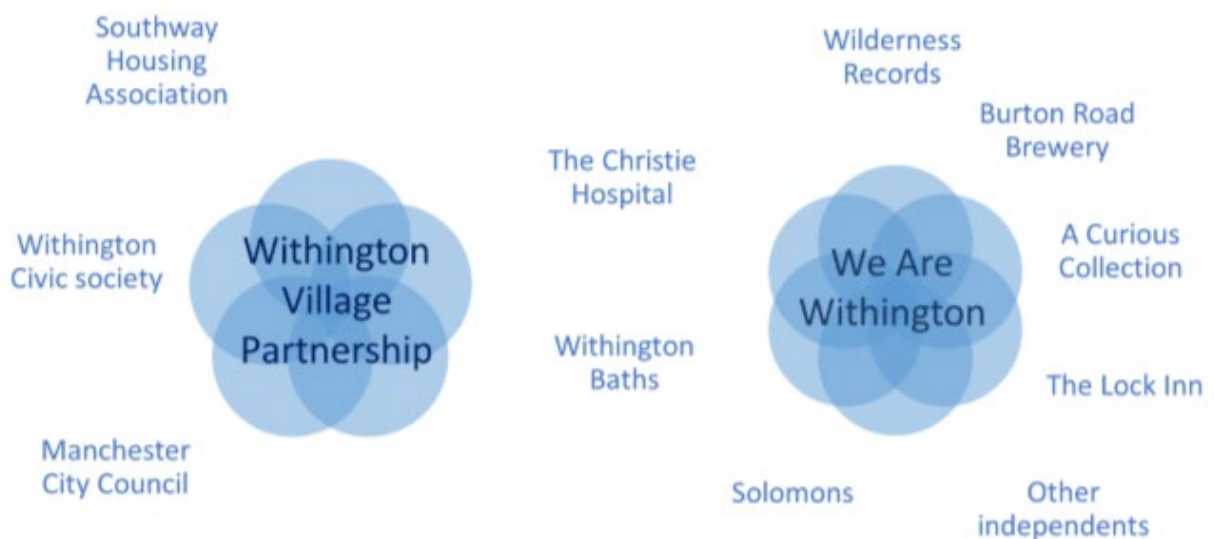


Figure 4: Relationship between WVRP, partners, and WAW.

Together, these groups are beginning to provide Withington with a strategic direction of travel. Progress has been made ranging from fundamental structural change (including property development and the introduction of affordable housing), to raising the profile and image of the centre through aesthetic interventions, experiential activity such as pop up events and festivals, and co-ordinated marketing and branding activity to amplify this activity.

The collective process and interaction

The WVRP brings together a range of passionate stakeholders on a monthly basis around a shared vision to regenerate the centre, with ambitions to create a cultural hub in the future. Efforts have been made to engage a wider range of stakeholders in centre plans, such as The Christie and a local housing association. There is also a Civic Society, as well as a recently formed Traders Association. The formation of the WAW group has contributed to compounding the WVRP's success, providing a public facing front and ensuring that the great work being done in the centre is communicated to the public.

Outside of the members of WVRP and WAW, stakeholders in general seem to operate relatively independently in their activities, rather than coordinating in terms of store renovations/updates. Indeed, there have been suggestions that some of the landlords in the centre are absent and disengaged with centre visions and strategies. There are discussions around whether a shop front design-guide is needed to create a more consistent image in the centre. Whatever the chosen mechanism, it is clear that greater collaboration between traders and communication with property owners is now required, which WAW may be able to facilitate.

Lessons learned

Withington benefits from an existing network of engaged local stakeholders who are in communication with one another and actively collaborating, sharing knowledge and generating ideas in order to enact interventions to improve the District Centre. The challenge now is to widen participation, extending collaboration outside of the immediate collective and engaging with a wider resource.

Longer term, it is important that the existing network of local stakeholders continues to focus on improving the connectivity and linkages between the district centre and the attractors lying just outside the district centre, together with further discussions concerning the improvement of connectivity between the district centre and adjacent residential areas within walking distance.

Efforts have been made locally to guide the re-use of empty units in alignment with the perceived needs of the existing local catchment. This has proven to be successful, and the continuation of pop-up shops, markets and events, which have so far proved to be an effective mechanism in terms of communicating the potential of extending the diversity of offer to property-owners and developers, must be continued.

Our engagement with local stakeholders has revealed a number of interventions which have sought to define and communicate what Withington Village has to offer to residents, for example, the production and dissemination of a History and Landmarks Map, events and activities connecting Withington to Manchester's recent popular cultural history, and a maker's market and temporary bars. Locally, therefore, there appears to be a strong sense of identity

shared between key local stakeholders, together with evidence of stakeholders willing to become engaged in improving and communicating a positive image of the district centre. WAW's strategic approach towards place communication through a consolidated social media presence for Withington Village should be applauded. Given the importance of collective collaboration, the local networks and local traders must continue to engage and collaborate to align the current offer with the potential needs of a wider catchment audience. This could, for example, include taking full advantage by giving more prominence to the centre's existing evening economy offer, through evening events and promotions.

The centre has demonstrated a strong and emerging narrative of effective local collaboration. Driven by the local community, the revitalisation of Withington Baths as a recreational centre and co-working space has proved to be a catalyst for bringing together a network of enthusiastic local stakeholders, including the City's Neighbourhood Team and elected members, who are committed to improving the district centre. We would suggest, therefore, Withington now possesses sufficient local capacity to engage with the local authority and other partners to achieve more strategic regeneration objectives. As such, Withington provides a model of district centre collaborative working in the city. We advise that the City continue to support this approach through local planning policy. The collectives/partnership(s) present in Withington have evolved to a position where they can instigate real structural change in their centre, liaising with the City Council to effect planning decisions, securing funding for physical regeneration, and organising to submit bids for significant funding from national Government. The progression has developed as follows:

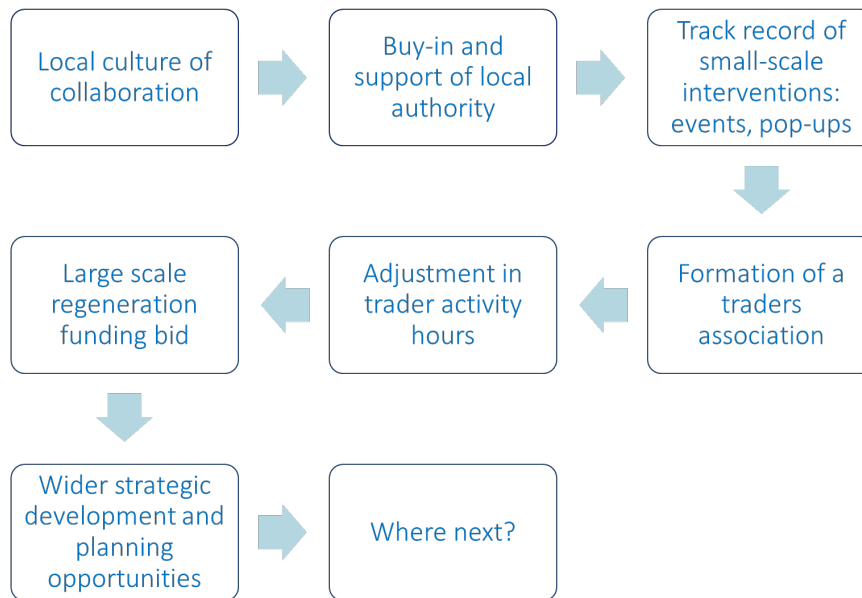


Figure 5: Progression of collective action in Withington

So the question for Withington is where do they go next? Nurturing and developing existing local networks to include local independent traders, and raising local capacity to address more strategic goals and ambitions, should be encouraged. Future decision making needs to consider the linkages and connectivity between the district centre and important attractors which currently sit outside of the local planning framework, such as The Christie Hospital and the restored Withington Baths, together with local connectivity to nearby residential catchment areas. Longer term, we would advise on a programme of physical regeneration to substantially improve the quality of public realm in Withington.

Understanding and sharing the analysis of footfall data may offer an opportunity to engage a wider group of stakeholders by developing a mutual understanding of centre functionality and performance, as such it is advisable that stakeholders begin to analyse the data themselves and share this information so that more informed and collaborative decisions can be made. Indeed, the centre has been tracking footfall to ensure that interventions can be coordinated, and subsequently their effect measured. This evidence-based approach to decision making can be very effective, as well as allowing the collectives to plan and measure, it also provides a way of conveying the success of interventions to the wider community in a tangible, quantified manner. Such tools can be very important in winning trust and ensuring buy-in, both from stakeholders with an active role to play, and the wider stakeholders of the centre to whom these interventions are designed to reach. A recent Withington by Night event, for example, achieved a 31% uplift in evening footfall for the centre based on the average of the previous 52 weeks. This kind of information encourages more businesses to become involved for future events, and provides those responsible with the evidence and recognition that they are making a real difference.

Compared to other district centres in Manchester, Withington possesses many advantages in terms of the diversity and strength of the local offer, a discernible evening economy, and ultimately an existing local network of stakeholders who have been making strong and effective interventions to improve the district centre. However, Withington is not without issues, and sustaining the viability of the centre is dependent on having the right place management structures in place. Our engagement has revealed a range of committed people with a vested interest in improving the district centre. Evidence from Withington also reveals a strong network of invested local stakeholders, who are already working collaboratively and effectively. Key to the further revitalisation of Withington will be the nurturing and development of this existing network, to develop local capacity further, and to enable invested local stakeholders to begin to tackle more strategic goals and ambitions. Careful management and monitoring of interventions and activities, which should align with broader ambitions to diversify the offer and will help prepare the centre for future change, is encouraged. To facilitate this, the excellent collective collaboration that we have seen in the centre should be continued. By working together, the WVRP and WAW, together with the wider collective, can develop the shared resource to the benefit of the wider community, allowing the centre to continue its upward trajectory.