

## Markets as social spaces

**This study, by The Open University, examines the importance of markets as social spaces in towns and cities in England. Fieldwork and observation in eight markets across the country were used to: examine the key factors that make markets work well as social, vibrant public spaces for different groups in the community; identify the main users of markets as social spaces in different contexts; and examine the different kinds of social activity in markets. The team found that:**

- Markets were important sites of social interaction for all groups in the community, but most significantly for older people, especially women. Markets also represented important social spaces for mothers with young children, young people, and families with children, particularly at weekends.
- Markets had a significant social inclusion role, as places to linger, particularly for older people and young mothers. Some markets also appeared to be inclusive of disabled people, although in other places this was less evident.
- The social life of traders played a significant role in creating a vibrant atmosphere in markets, and in forging social bonds and links in the trading community as well as with shoppers.
- The researchers conclude that:
  - for markets to function well as social spaces, various factors are significant. Essential attributes include: a diverse range of products fitting well with local needs and tastes; cafés or food vans on site or nearby; good access to the site, especially by public transport; an active and engaged community of traders; and a sense of the unexpected;
  - where markets are managed by local authorities, good local management and a strategic vision by the council could help in their development. It was evident from the research, however, that some markets do not have a high profile or significant resourcing from councils;
  - there is limited national and local policy to encourage and support markets' role as a key social and economic space for the local community. Markets could play a more significant role in national policy agendas such as social inclusion, town-centre regeneration and healthy eating.



## Background

Many retail markets have been in decline over the last 20 years. Typically, local authorities manage markets, but they have suffered from lack of investment. Councils commonly choose instead to finance capital programmes in higher-priority services, such as education, housing and social services. Many markets therefore look run-down, with poor facilities. However, the last decade has seen a steady growth in niche markets: farmers' markets, craft markets, Christmas markets, French and German markets and, in London, Borough Market. These are often successful, leading to questions about what makes markets vibrant spaces within different settings.

Markets are often key sites of public space, offering opportunities for local economic development and employment, as well as opportunities for social interaction and connection, social inclusion, mingling of different cultures, and building a sense of local community. Interest is growing in using markets as a focal point for local regeneration and community initiatives, but to date little is known about why some markets succeed economically and socially and others do not. This project:

- investigated the extent to which markets operate as social spaces for different groups in the community, and how different groups use market spaces, as stall-holders and as consumers;
- explored levels of engagement and interaction in markets by different individuals and groups, and to what extent markets are inclusive or exclusive of different groups;
- explored markets' success as vibrant social, economic and cultural spaces in their locale;
- provides conclusions for local authorities on policy and practice for local markets.

## Case-study areas

The eight markets chosen for investigation reflected different types of market (covered, uncovered, street markets, town-centre markets, detached from and attached to shopping centres), different local socio-demographic profiles, and urban and rural locations. Two were in country towns: one partially covered and attached to a shopping centre (Lowestoft) and one open-air (Ludlow). Three were in northern cities: one covered and in a shopping centre (St Helens), and two comprising indoor and outdoor markets (Preston and Rotherham). One was an outdoor market adjacent to a shopping centre in the Midlands (Milton Keynes). Another was an outdoor street market in London (Ridley Road), and the eighth was a farmers' market, also in London (Islington).

## Markets as spaces of social interaction

The markets operated as social spaces in different ways, varying across the sites and between different social groups. The social life of traders played a significant role in creating a vibrant atmosphere, and in forging social ties in the trading community, especially in Ridley Road and Ludlow. Interactions between traders and shoppers were also a crucial component of social life, particularly for older people who regularly visited markets for the pleasure of these relationships. As a trader in Preston put it:

"I get on with my customers and make them feel special ... they say, 'Mick, sort me out, get me an outfit' ... they feel comfortable with me because I can say, there you go, bang, bang, bang, that's yours ... right, next! I'd say about ninety per cent of my customers know me by name. That's the kind of relationship I have with them."

The markets also had a social inclusion function. For many customers, particularly those more marginalised in cities, chatting with traders might be their only chance to talk to someone all day.

Markets were sites of social interaction for all groups – even younger people, despite a common perception that they have disappeared from markets. However, there were differences among various groups. Markets represented a crucial site for social interaction for older people, especially women, across all the sites. For this group, features such as access to transport and seating were very important; some markets (notably Rotherham) were better placed to serve this group than others. Markets were also important social spaces for families with children, particularly at weekends, when market shopping was a time to bump into friends, shop and chat at leisure. As one shopper in Ludlow reported:

"My kids hate going to the shops, but they like going to the market ... particularly the boys. I don't know whether it's claustrophobia or what, but the market they love ... They say they like the outside and it's just more of an exciting environment I think. There's lots of different stalls."

Young people enjoyed market visits in a different way, congregating around specific stalls and chatting to friends, for example by the make-up stall in Lowestoft or the Goth stall in Rotherham.

For markets to work socially, they needed to attract people but also encourage them to linger. The two most important physical attributes for markets to succeed as spaces for social interaction were a café (or food vans)

and somewhere for people to sit down (whether seating or a wall). In markets with cafés, overall time spent lingering was extended, providing greater opportunities for friends to gather or to bump into one another.

If markets' social inclusion function is seen as a more limited form of social interaction (simply 'co-presence'), places to linger a while take on greater significance. In the study, the three groups for whom markets were most significant in this respect were older people, disabled people and young mothers. Their presence varied across the markets. In Lowestoft and St Helens, large numbers of people using wheelchairs were observed, facilitated by the wide aisles, while in Preston and Rotherham, large numbers of older people congregated on benches and in the cafés throughout the day.

Some markets were also sites of social mixing, particularly Ridley Road. As one trader commented:

**“You get a lot of Jamaicans, Africans, Nigerians. They all live in the area. It's the old famous Ridley Road. This is like a meeting point for a lot of them. There are people down here who haven't seen each other for twenty years, and they have met in Ridley Road ... no other market but Ridley [is like that]. It must say something, you know.”**

Conflicts and tensions were rarely reported, although some market managers (in St Helens for instance) mentioned problems with youths, and some Asian shoppers reported feeling unwelcome at several stalls in Rotherham market. Overall, observation suggested that market users tend to reflect the socio-demographics of their local communities. Where the population profile was very diverse, as in Ridley Road, the market appeared to act as a site of mixing and connection in highly positive ways. The other sites appeared to provide opportunities for some mixing across different age groups, particularly in cafés.

### Local potential

Markets could be enhanced through more strategic attention at local and national level. An important component of any local market strategy is responding to the area's socio-demographic profile and ensuring that markets meet local needs. At the economic level, this means encouraging traders who fulfil the local community's shopping needs and desires. At physical, infrastructural and locational levels, this means providing an accessible site – particularly for older people, people with disabilities, and those with children – with good design and layout (including protection from the weather), seating, wide aisles, and other attributes that attract customers to the market – particularly food sites, which often act as a focal point.

To enhance the success of markets at local level, partnership arrangements are one possible route for obtaining the investment needed to build the infrastructure for markets to compete successfully. Involving traders in running the market is another significant component. A strategy and vision at council level, recognising markets' potential role and not losing this within a wider profile of activities, could also help to ensure that markets play more of a part in communities. At site level, a well-trained, responsive manager can make a real difference to a market's effective running, and thus to its success as a social space.

In terms of markets' role as social spaces, the research revealed the importance of exploring how different markets operate in different communities, drawing out the different social roles they play. What works for one community may not work for another.

### National challenges

National policy agendas need to be sensitive to local needs and specificities. Currently, there is no clear coordinated policy or strategy for markets at national level. Several government departments play some part, but there is no overarching approach that considers markets holistically. Yet markets could play a crucial role in helping to deliver many government agendas, such as healthy eating, social cohesion and sustainable communities. Not connecting these political priorities into policy on local markets represents a lost opportunity.

In two current policy agendas in particular, opportunities for raising the profile of markets exist. First, core to the social inclusion agenda is the objective of creating sustainable, inclusive communities in towns, cities and rural areas. Markets can help by providing key public spaces for local people to meet, including different generations, and they offer potential for generating employment and testing new products and ideas in a local setting. Second, town-centre management initiatives and regeneration policies represent another under-exploited avenue. Markets could play a key role in regenerating and redeveloping town centres, which in the majority of cases is missed.

Though the new national planning guidance, *Planning Policy Statement 6: Planning for Town Centres*, endorses markets' valuable role in contributing to the vitality of town centres and to local choice and diversity in shopping, there is little emphasis on their role as social and public spaces. Given the potential for markets to act as significant sites of social interaction and inclusion, and their role in helping to create communities, their place in community development and local regeneration policies could be strengthened.

## Conclusion

The picture of what makes markets successful spaces for social interaction and inclusion is complex and textured. However, the research indicated that all markets operate as social spaces, even if simply as a public space for marginalised members of the community to shop or pass the time of day. The markets studied varied considerably in their level of social interaction and use by different groups, but in all cases some degree of social interaction took place, and respondents confirmed markets' significance as a social space. As such, markets play a crucial, mostly neglected, role in local communities.

A number of attributes contributed, in varying degrees, to a market's success as a social space. Essential attributes were:

- **features to attract visitors**, including a diverse range of products fitting well with local needs and tastes, and a sense of surprise or the unexpected to provide interest;
- **opportunities to linger**, notably cafés or food vans on site or nearby; informal seating areas were also important;
- **good access to the site** – public transport was key, but opportunities to come by car and access to parking were also important for some visitors;
- **an active and engaged community of traders**, to provide the retail offer and create part of the site's social life.

Important, but less essential, attributes were:

- **a well-designed site**, with well considered stall layout including linchpin stalls or features (notably cafés) and particular characteristics, such as wide aisles and protection from the weather;
- **connection with other retail outlets**, to ensure that the market is embedded in the local retail offer;

- **effective management of the site** and a leadership role by the council to provide a strategic direction for the market.

The study underlines markets' potential role as significant sites of social interaction and mixing, as well as in enabling the building and strengthening of social ties and social inclusion in communities. The lack of policy and strategy for markets at national level needs to be addressed, and their place in community development and local regeneration policies strengthened. Given the evident success of farmers' markets and other specialist markets in some areas, their provision needs to be encouraged. With good management and a strong vision as to their unique offer, combined with good accessibility, well-thought-through design and layout, and use of linchpin stalls and cafés on site, markets are well placed to succeed as economic and social spaces. Most importantly, local market provision needs to fit with, and respond to, the surrounding community needs, socio-economic and demographic profile and local conditions.

## About the project

The research was undertaken by Sophie Watson with the assistance of David Studdert, from The Open University's sociology department. The study took place between February 2005 and February 2006 and was conducted in seven English towns and cities, including London. It involved:

- in-depth observation of social interactions in eight markets;
- interviews with shoppers, market traders and local officials in these sites (and use of photographic records);
- in-depth interviews with key national informants on markets.

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## For further information

The full report, **Markets as sites for social interaction: Spaces of diversity** by Sophie Watson with David Studdert, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press as part of the Public Spaces series.

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

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