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More than convenient: how local shops create good neighbourhoods

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When it comes to making communities more inclusive, local businesses play an integral role



Locally owned businesses make areas more vibrant, and keep money in the local economy. Photograph: Maskot/Getty Images

If Tols Anouture's WhatsApp flashes with a message from her local business group she knows she needs to read it. There will be a strong chance that someone in a nearby shop or business along a stretch of London shops known as the King's Road Curve needs some urgent help.

As the owner of The Baby Cot Shop, a children's furniture retailer in Chelsea, looking out for her fellow shopkeepers is just one of the ways Anouture helps to support her local business community via a neighbourhood networking group.

"The WhatsApp business group is for any messages, but we use it mostly to raise alarms or share urgent info. We say, for example: 'Need help 408' and whoever is around will help," she says. This can involve something as simple as one of the group wandering into a shop if a solo sales staff member feels unsafe around a customer. "It's been very effective," adds Anouture, 49, who traded online before opening her children's furniture shop nearly six years ago.

This initiative, and others like it across the country, show that local shops can be useful for much more than just the ingredients for dinner, or a last-minute birthday present. Local business owners rely on each other to thrive and create an inclusive environment.

The local community also benefits. "Locally owned businesses are more likely to trade for the benefit of their local community," says Christian Jaccarini, a senior consultant at NEF Consulting, which is part of the New Economic Foundation thinktank, which aims to promote social, economic and environmental justice.



The Baby Cot Shop's owner, Tols Anouture, is part of a WhatsApp group for local businesses.

Anouture likes to support her customers by holding a range of special events, from breastfeeding clinics to first aid workshops, before the pandemic she had a "Galentine's Day" evening for anyone at a loose end on 14 February. And she is part of a group of shops on King's Road that supported this year's Chelsea in Bloom, a free annual festival that runs alongside the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, and which encourages local businesses to transform the area with eye-catching flower displays – the best of them winning an award.

"We invite our clients in Kensington and Chelsea and beyond to come in for a glass of prosecco or juice to see the flowers and also our latest collection," adds Anouture.

Such community spirit is not unusual among small business owners, says Martin McTague, national chair of the Federation of Small Businesses. He points out that despite the mounting pressures they face, many small business owners still find the time to volunteer or contribute to a local community organisation or charitable cause.

He adds that, according to FSB research, 95% of small businesses have taken on at least one worker from a disadvantaged Labour group, which includes people with disabilities, those with low levels of educational attainment and older workers.

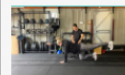


Alanna Atkinson's business, A Few Scoops, supports her local community and enjoys the community's support in return

In Manchester, small business owner Alanna Atkinson, 35, likes to support community fundraisers. Buy a ticket for a local school raffle and you might win a voucher for one of the ice-creams she makes at A Few Scoops, a business she launched in May 2021. The local community supports her in return, she says, buying her products retail and wholesale, and also keeping an eye on the customised tuk-tuk that's her fresh take on an ice-cream van.

"It's parked in my driveway and is part of the little community where I live. Everyone looks out for it because I'm a local businesswoman and I'm known for having this bright pink tuk-tuk," says Atkinson. Like many local business owners, Atkinson tries to recruit from within the community, posting job ads on her local Facebook group; all her eight staff members live nearby in south Manchester.

This all helps to create a virtuous circle. "If you go to a local business to buy your groceries, that money goes to the business owner. That business owner is more likely to live nearby, so that is money that will also be spent in the local region," says Carlos Fatas, senior economist, at the Centre for Economics and Business Research (Cebr). "If the business employs people in the shop, it's more likely that those people will be local residents. If they go out for lunch and go out for groceries before going home, that's also money that stays in the region."



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Local businesses also often use local suppliers, as Fatas says. "In the cases of local businesses it's easier to localise their business supply chains to minimise costs." And there are further layers, such as taxes that go to the council to be spent locally. In fact, research by Visa and Cebr in 2020 found that of every £10 spent with independently owned local businesses surveyed, £3.80 was retained in the local area.

Not that upsides of shopping locally are limited to economics. "Consumers value the inclusivity and community benefits provided by having businesses located nearby, making their neighbourhood a nice place to live and keeping their local area vibrant and buzzing. This improved neighbourhood feeling may encourage other local entrepreneurs to start ventures of their own," says Fatas.

As McTague says: "The impact of small business success surpasses the economic – they are embedded in their communities, trusted by local people and are there for the long term."

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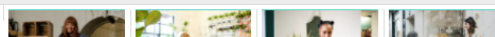
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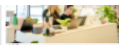
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