

LIVING IN BATLEY AND HECKMONDWIKE

Research Report: Executive Summary

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Emma Victoria Shiel, Dr. Alex Bridger (Leeds Beckett University), Dr Andy Mycock (University of Leeds), and Professor Paul Thomas.

University of Huddersfield

The Jo Cox Foundation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND AND SCOPE OF THE PROJECT

'Living in Batley and Heckmondwike' was an exploratory research project carried out between March and June 2023 by a University of Huddersfield-coordinated Academic Team and The Jo Cox Foundation (JCF) colleagues, with funding support and Practitioner involvement from Kirklees Council. The need for local ground-level research was first identified by The Jo Cox Foundation, who proposed a pilot study to the University of Huddersfield to deepen understanding of community members' experiences of 'place', cohesion, togetherness, belonging, and loneliness.

Kirklees Council agreed to support the research process, as qualitative insights would provide additional depth and complexity to their pre-existing 'Currently Living in Kirklees' (CLiK) online survey data. Thus, the key objective was to obtain opinions and experiences from community members in Batley and Heckmondwike on:



- **Community:** How community members identified/felt about their community and how they described it.
- **Living in Batley and Heckmondwike:** How individuals feel about their town and 'place', exploring both positive and negative aspects.
- **Community Mixing and Cohesion:** How much mixing community members felt there was between different sections of the community and how they view this.
- **Participation:** Groups, places, and activities community members participate in and what their experience is of this, alongside concerns around loneliness in the community.



Participants at a 'Community Lunch' event contribute to the research by adding their thoughts on the local area.

METHODS

The Academic Team worked with The Jo Cox Foundation colleagues and a group of community-based professional Practitioners¹ to gather views and experiences of community members.

After sessions to devise and test possible methods of carrying out research, practitioners then gathered research data within their normal working situations through various qualitative research methods: Focus Groups, Interviews, Psychogeography Walks, and Word Association/Sentence Completion (presented through Word Cloud Analysis).

While certain setbacks had disrupted the research, this new approach offered the opportunity to capitalise on the working relationships practitioners have with community members and to develop new interesting and novel ways of gathering experiences and views from community members.



KEY THEMES

The Academic Team devised an analysis approach that appropriately interpreted the broad range of data: semi-structured interviews conducted by the Practitioners, psychogeographical walking interviews led by the Academic Team (EVS & AB), word association/sentence completion, and other external forms of data, i.e., CLiK.

When analysing the data, the Academic Team took four main topic areas into consideration:

1. Perceptions of Community and Local Areas in Kirklees,
2. Community Cohesion and Mixing,
3. 'Place' and Boundaries, and
4. Participation/Loneliness.

The Academic Team first conducted an initial pilot analysis of small sets of data, before embarking on analysis where five super-ordinate themes were developed:

1. Town Centres
2. Antisocial Behaviour and Lack of Safety

¹The community-based professional Practitioners (referred to throughout this report as 'Practitioners') worked in a variety of community-based roles within different parts of the area, some working for third sector organisations, and some working for statutory organisations such as Kirklees Council.

3. Activities, Belonging and Loneliness
4. Nostalgia
5. Community Cohesion and Togetherness

These five main themes map onto the four key topics of this report as they focus on how people feel about and perceive their local communities and town centres which they frequent on a regular basis, how connected, lonely, and/or engaged people feel in their local areas, and the extent of community mixing in various pockets of Batley and Heckmondwike.

ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

This innovative pilot study obtained nuanced data on people's experiences of living in Batley and Heckmondwike. There are a number of issues for consideration of government and non-government stakeholders interested in community engagement, place-based working, and policymaking:



- **Existing community groups and activities are valued and appreciated**, highlighting the importance of social infrastructure in shaping a connected place-based sense of community identity and belonging. It was noted that there had been a marked decline in community-based social infrastructure and that greater funding and support was essential to enable more opportunities to engage and participate in local community organisations and activities.
- **Improved access to existing community-based social infrastructure was seen as important**, as was a greater awareness of what groups, clubs, and activities are available, and their details such as where and when they meet is required. There is general interest in increasing the frequency, access, and types of events and activities. Heckmondwike in particular lacks places and opportunities for people to come together. Events around food would be particularly valued and can empower local businesses to participate. Increasing and diversifying opportunities and approaches to community cohesion are encouraged.
- **Cohesion between different faiths and ethnicities was apparent and generally seen as positive**. However, there is still existing demand to bring different communities together through shared community celebrations and activities. It was noted that there was less community engagement among residents from Heckmondwike, particularly those of Black and Asian heritage.

- **There are distinct disparities in how Batley and Heckmondwike were viewed.** Batley town centre is generally viewed as rejuvenated with new food establishments and tends to be favoured over nearby towns like Heckmondwike, or Dewsbury. Whereas Heckmondwike town centre, is perceived negatively, referred to as 'unsafe' and 'lonely'. In both cases, major supermarkets are both popular but also viewed as negatively impacting other local shops and thus referred to as the 'death of the town'.
- **There is considerable nostalgia among older community members across Batley and Heckmondwike.** This is accentuated by the many fine old industrial buildings in the area, which tend to be empty and unused. The importance of the built environment in enhancing a sense of place-based belonging and pride in place was evident in our research. Renovating and rejuvenating these buildings was seen as important in bolstering the community's perception of their towns and civic morale and pride.
- **Across respondents there was serious concern about safety** (particularly within isolated greenspaces). Many young people have a strong sense of safe and unsafe 'territory'. Many adults are wary of their safety in certain public spaces and avoid known crime 'hotspots', such as tunnels or town centres later in the evening. Allied was concern about anti-social behaviour, particularly speeding and racing cars that endanger pedestrians of all ages. There was substantial worry relating to traffic accidents, and blocked walkways, thus further pedestrianism would be valued.
- **The potential for research opportunities stemming from this pilot project are significant.** The innovative mixed methods approach could be translated and used as a template across different areas of the UK, and beyond to understand the experiences and needs of communities and places, and how they form and express place-based identities, pride in place, and belonging.



Participants at a 'Community Lunch' event discuss their thoughts and feelings about the local area, to contribute to the research.