



How do local authorities deal with super-diversity?

How do local authorities and other service providers deliver welfare and other services to populations that are rapidly changing and increasingly diverse in their needs and backgrounds, especially in a context of central government cuts to local authorities? How can local authorities and their partners in the voluntary and charitable sector make sure that super-diversity does not lead to new or entrenched inequalities in service provision?

What is super-diversity?

Super-diversity is a term increasingly used in both academic and policy literature to indicate not only ethnic diversity, but diversity across a range of interacting indices, including country of origin, language, religion, migration channel and immigration status, gender, age, and generation.ⁱ These factors also interact with high population density, churn and stark contrasts between poverty and affluence in inner-city neighbourhoods. This briefing analyses how service providers respond to the challenges of super-diversity, focusing specifically on schooling and housing. It is based on research in the Elephant and Castle area of Southwark in south London and focused on how to build resilience among residents.ⁱⁱ

The local profile

Our census analysis of the area revealed a densely populated quarter with a rapidly changing population, diverse in terms of ethnicity and migration but also in socio-economic terms. Minority ethnic populations and more deprived populations are not evenly distributed across the area, however, but concentrated into particular local clusters. Some populations are hidden in an analysis that focuses on too narrow a range of indicators – for example, Latin Americans are not visible in ethnicity and country of origin data, but Spanish is the second most common language spoken after English.

Super-diversity in schools

Schools are among the frontline services directly affected by super-diversity. Mapping the area showed high levels of ethnic diversity within and between schools, high rates of entitlement to free school meals, high churn among pupils, and a high incidence of pupils for whom English is an additional language. Teachers are skilled in dealing with multi-lingual classrooms and see it as a positive asset for their schools.

Families in the area have complex needs, including deprivation and destitution. Changes in the welfare system and the different legal statuses of migrant families add to this complexity. Schools have developed ways of working with their families, including providing spaces where children can do their homework, and supporting parents finding employment and navigating bureaucracy. Schools work with an ethos of inclusion summed up by a primary school head teacher who said: 'they're our children regardless of where they're born'.

Super-diversity in housing

The Elephant and Castle area is within walking distance of the City, and centres of financial, political and cultural power. This proximity, in combination with wider economic and social changes, including regeneration, means that the socio-economic profile of residents is changing with more professional,



managerial and relatively affluent people moving in. Right-to-buy legislation means that there is growing diversity in housing tenure on estates as well as a growing ethnic and other diversity among residents. As a result of these trends, the area is increasingly marked by close juxtapositions of wealth and deprivation among its residents.

Barriers to resilience

Many residents work anti-social hours on flexible contracts; many do not have the resources and experience to deal with bureaucracies and formal structures so find it difficult to access support and funding for projects and activities. Demanding working conditions and low pay make it hard to engage, especially for migrants who do not speak English. Additionally, there is a high incidence of anxiety and social isolation among residents, and issues of fear and mistrust, both of other residents and of authorities.

Promising practices

In schools, promising practice include an ethos of inclusion (see above); seeing languages and diversity as a positive resource; celebrating diversity as well as emphasizing shared values across faiths and cultures; and recognising the work of home-school support workers as essential for schools.

In housing, promising practices include: Tenant Management Organisations (TMOs), enabling tenants and leaseholders in social housing to take collective responsibility for managing the homes they live in. Community gardens can bring people of different ages, backgrounds and nationalities together around the shared interest of growing food. Sports projects provide opportunities for children and young people to exercise regularly, and can be used as a vehicle to get residents involved then link it with wider skills and employment training. Involvement in sports or community gardens is not always successfully translated into broader engagement, but when used strategically can lead to positive change and inclusion.

Overall, partnerships between local authorities and the charitable and voluntary sector to develop areas through bottom-up, long-term approaches have the potential to build inclusion and resilience.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

1. Inequality, deprivation and poverty constitute more of a challenge to service delivery than 'diversity' understood as 'ethnic diversity'; this is exacerbated by central government cuts to local authority funding. There is a risk of service delivery becoming patchy and fragmented, deepening the risk of people falling into vulnerability.
2. Diversity is differently patterned across age groups, which means there are different implications for different areas of service delivery, which will change slowly over time. Schools already have substantial expertise and experience in dealing with super-diversity, elder care less so.
3. It is important to understand the profiles and needs of 'hidden communities' and micro-populations, which can easily be overlooked in broad census categories.
4. Developing a reflective style of working is vital in a context of rapid change. Frontline staff and middle managers can accumulate rich, grounded understandings of their areas over time, which are important in service delivery in dynamic, super-diverse contexts. Institutional restructuring and staff turnover can be detrimental to this. There are good examples in Southwark of staff who have worked in the area for many years and have broad-based, nuanced, grounded understandings of changes over time.
5. Different areas of policy are linked and changes in one area can have un-anticipated impacts in others. What happens in a domain such as housing impacts on what is possible in an institution such as e.g. a school.

The speakers:

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¹M. L. Berg, B. Gidley, and N. Sigona (2015) *Ethnography, Diversity and Urban Space*, Routledge; S. Vertovec (2007) Super-diversity and its implications. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30(6):1024-1054.
²Welfare, neighbourhood and new geographies of diversity <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/research/urbanchange/welfare-neighbourhood-and-new-geographies-of-diversity/>
Servicing Super-Diversity ESRC Knowledge Exchange Fellowship http://www2.socsci.ox.ac.uk/knowledge_exchange/projects#Berg