

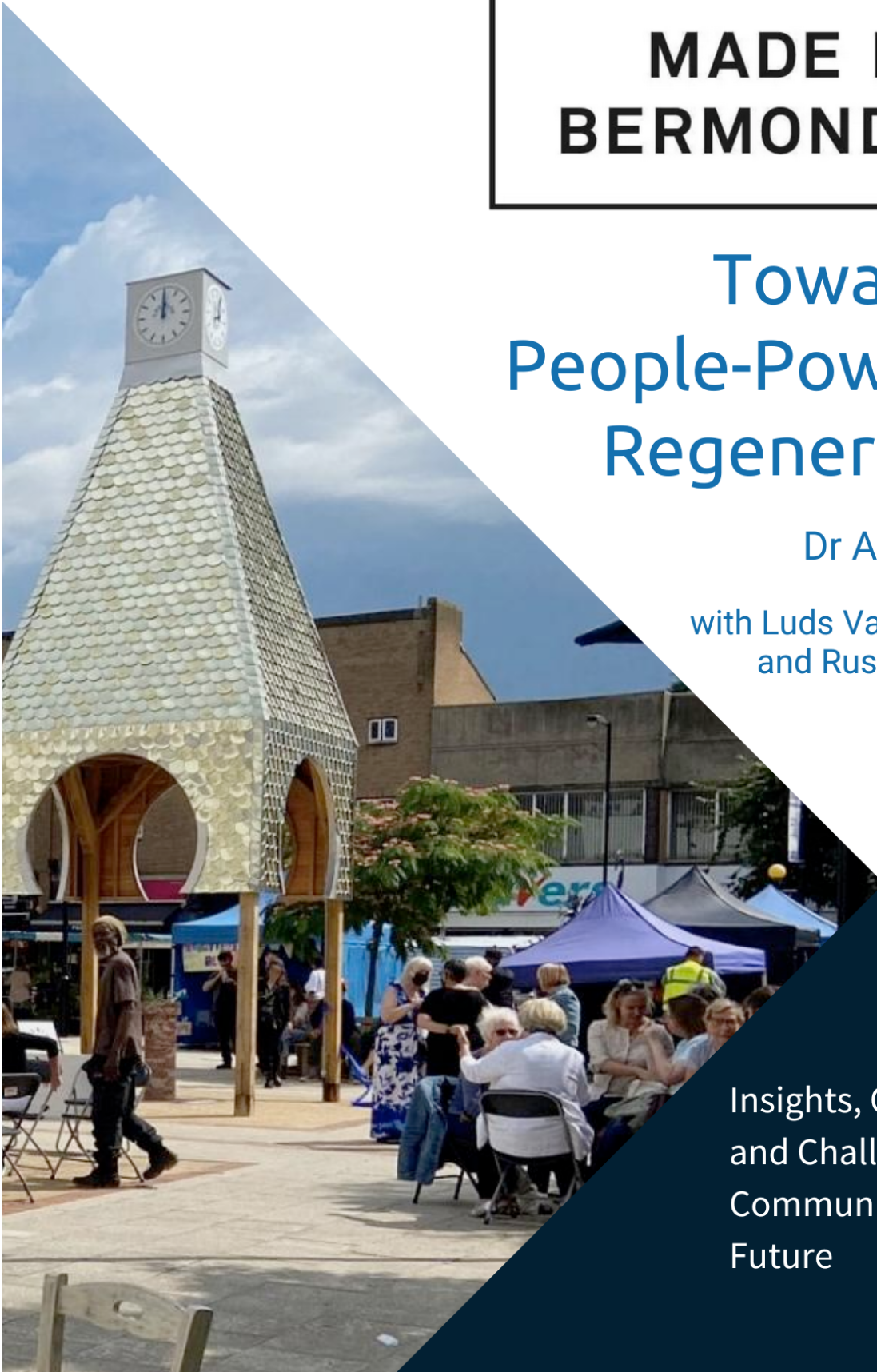
# MADE IN BERMONDSEY

## Towards a People-Powered Regeneration

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Insights, Opportunities,  
and Challenges for a  
Community-Driven  
Future





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## Towards A People-Powered Regeneration

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## Introduction

This work was commissioned by the Blue Bermondsey Business Improvement District, working alongside local financial inclusion charity, Big Local Works. It combines a range of different types of research and analysis of the local area, with a view to informing a ‘People-Powered Regeneration’. With many new projects happening across South Bermondsey, and especially around the Blue Market, we believe there is a need and an opportunity to take a more strategic approach to regenerating the area economically, and to ensure that regeneration benefits existing as well as incoming residents, from all ages, social backgrounds, and cultures. We recognise the central role that developers and local authorities play in regeneration, especially at the level of capital developments, but we also want to ensure that a more grassroots, community-led regeneration sits alongside this. We also want to consider regeneration as a more holistic process. Rather than focusing solely on economics and infrastructure, we want to also consider and improve the social fabric and day to day experience of community life for local people, during a time of great change.

## The New Blue Market

This work has grown alongside the redevelopment of the Blue Market, undertaken after securing a £2m grant from the GLA Good Growth Fund. It is the first time Southwark council have ever licenced an independent organisation to run a council market, and shows the positive relationship and trust BLW has built within the local community and at Council level. The new market was designed by Hayatsu architects. The revival of the market has been featured in the press as an exemplary urban design project for community regeneration.<sup>1</sup> The market space is not the only built-environment opportunity – the Railway Arches also could form spaces to focus for investment (in the viaducts, arches and adjacent sites).

As well as a thriving trading hub, we also see the market square as a space for multiple generations, multiple cultures, and the crossing of boundaries, in an area that has in the past tended towards insularity and exclusion of minorities. We see it as a key part of our aim to change the ‘story’ of South Bermondsey, and the way our community conceives of itself. This research and strategy informs the next stage of our development – the market is just the start of our plans.

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The Blue Market is not designed to be purely a space for trade and traders. It’s our community space, much like an outdoor community centre. Traders are just one important part of the activities there contributing to the everyday life of that vibrant community space, and the ‘glue’ of our community.

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## About this report

This is a summary report drawn from several other reports on particular areas of this substantial research project undertaken over several months. It is designed to present top-line ‘highlights’ of the project’s findings, while the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/nov/07/blue-market-bermondsey-review-revive-local-market-for-2m-assemble-hayatsu-architects>

more in-depth work can be used by the Bermondsey BID and partners to inform future development. The work was led by Dr Alex Evans, in partnership with Big Local Works and Blue Bermondsey BID.

The following work is drawn from:

- In-depth interviews with 10 local people (largely ‘active citizens’), selected to represent a strong cross-section of the area.
- Conversations with 311 local people, and 100 completed questionnaires with both open and closed response questions, completed in December and January 2021-2022.
- Workshops including asset-mapping and project outlining with the Blue BID and Big Local Works team

The project has been part market research, and part social research. We originally planned to focus on the very commercial specifics of place, but it was clear, especially in one-to-one in-depth interviews, that interviewees had bigger questions they wanted to discuss, particularly around culture, history, place, and identity. The report combines both. Part One discusses issues around community, culture and identity, before moving on to the specific of economics, infrastructure, planning, and shops and enterprise needs in Part Two. In Part Three, we propose priority areas of focus for a ‘People-Powered Regeneration.’

Semi-structured interviews were complemented with a range of more market research-based methodologies, both qualitative and quantitative, which gave us both in-depth detail and a wider spread of opinions. All of this work is preliminary – not only is there more work to do to finalise the current project, but much of the work, and the understanding of place, will continue to change, grow and flex as time goes on.

PART ONE:

Community, culture, and identity

## Community cohesion

Sense of community within South Bermondsey is complex and nuanced. On the one hand, interviews revealed a perception of lost community, or one greatly diminished: *“There used to be a big sense of community in Bermondsey – and that’s been eroded over the last seven or eight years.”* And yet, other interviews, and our asset-mapping, unveiled numerous thriving micro-communities such as Tenants and Residents' Associations, active citizens, faith groups, and a strong voluntary sector. Most of the people we spoke to had a wide range of local contacts and networks – although they were aware of people who they felt did not. Overall, we felt these observations showed a discrepancy between the perception of community activity and its existence.

When we pursued this with interviewees, they felt that individual communities are vibrant, but are often insular, with some people feeling left out as individuals, and each community feeling much separate from others:

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*“There is a community, but it’s just your neighbour next door...People are secluded and isolated into their separate places.”*

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It was also noted that post-war urban planning, with estates concentrated in smaller units, may cause people to remain unaware of other thriving communities around them. Interviewees also spoke of a lack of widely recognised communications channels locally – how or where could they find out what was going on around them?

Overall, there was consensus on a need for more community engagement and unity, particularly in the face of regeneration efforts. For example, as one active local community builder suggested: *“The TRAs are strong, but they never do anything together. They could do so much more if they did.”* There was a perceived gap in coordination and continuity, and some felt that, despite the existence of many active local citizens, there remained a need for a few dedicated individuals to help bridge isolated communities and individual projects. This could help strengthen the overall sense of unity and community identity in Bermondsey.

## Assets and Awareness

Our asset mapping showed an impressive array of resources within the area, with a particularly vibrant clutch of charities and socially-focused organisations – and in particular, youth-focused organisations. The increasingly bustling market square at the physical centre, various active citizens involved in initiatives ranging from housing advocacy to elderly care, and civic bodies such as proactive Tenants and Residents Associations, all contribute to an area with much activity, even if there is low awareness. After some years of decline, local businesses are thriving, from small to medium enterprises – including the thriving 'beer



mile,' the creative hub of the Biscuit Factory, small cafes and food venues, and the resilient traders around the Blue Market – as well as some local branches of major national chains.

Many local civil society assets are long-standing pillars of the community, such as Bede House and Salmon Youth Centre, as are some of the businesses and pubs around the Blue Market. These can offer a sense of continuity amid change. Furthermore, there is an exciting growth of new assets, such as the redeveloped Blue Market with changing stalls and themes for different traders, an array of newer small businesses, and leisure facilities like the forthcoming local cinema. Again, however, our interviews revealed a significant lack of awareness of these resources, with a feeling for some that there is “*nothing*”. When we reminded participants of the assets that existed, they knew of some of them, but had found they did not spring quickly to mind. This disconnection may stem from the existence of hyper-localised communities, potential barriers to access, or simply a lack of effective information sources.<sup>2</sup>

## Continuity and Change

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“Power is an issue – even if people are different, and different people are using the space, it’s important that there isn’t a disparity of power between the new and the old.”

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Another common theme was of the balance between change and continuity. Interviewees felt they recognised many local people felt a strong need to hold on to what was there already – to what is comfortable and familiar, and valued. For some, there was a strong sense of loss as a result of the regeneration that had already taken place. Some had a general feeling that “*things have changed*”. One recurring theme was that that people “*have nothing in common anymore*.” A contributing factor mentioned repeatedly was the level of transience of the population:

*“One of the reasons that community spirit and connection is being lost is the selling-off of council properties. A lot of people have left/moved out. They move on to somewhere else. There’s a lot of movement. People don’t have homes for life anymore. There’s also a lot of ‘us and them’ about people who have been there long term, and newer people who have come in. And wondering whether people will stay or not.”*

*“One of the problems is an increasingly transient population – and there’s a lot of development going on.”*

Others had a strong feeling that change was unavoidable, but that the right change could be welcomed:

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<sup>2</sup> The existence of some channels such as twitter feeds was noted – but people noted the toxicity and highly politicised nature of those.

*“We need to find a way to get people to accept change, but also not to be pushed out. We need to make sure that people don’t allow change to isolate them even further. If people come together, you can make the most of the change. Don’t go it alone. What are people used to? What is familiar? People there are concerned about change. They want to know what is familiar. But would some change also be okay? Can they be encouraged to embrace the good parts of change?”*

One person drew comparisons with another area of Southwark and the gap between reality and nostalgia related to change:

*“Like there was anger about the demolishing of [large post-war housing estates] Aylesbury and Heygate – but they were actually not that great places for a lot of people.”*

### Young people in the area

We asked interviewees about their perception of local opportunities and activities for young people.<sup>3</sup> Again, this highlighted a significant disconnect between perception and reality. Despite the existence of numerous youth centres, local parents seemed unaware or under-informed about these resources (and thought their children were not aware of them either). This disconnection sparked concern among participants, with one parent and teacher commenting, “If there are all these things for young people in the area, how do they link up, and how do they target the most challenging children?” For others, the focus on young people, particularly on cultivating their entrepreneurial minds, was seen as pivotal for the community's long-term progress, with one interviewee suggesting that

*“You need to focus on young people... We need to think about how young people in the future can participate – what can we put in here now to make it possible for them to participate later.”*

On the other hand, there was a keen sense that more could be done to make the existing community resources and spaces more welcoming to the younger generation. This concern was captured in a participant's anecdote about their teenage son's unwelcoming experience at a local gym, leading them to query, “If young people are criticised for hanging around on the streets, and made unwelcome in venues and services, where are they supposed to go?” There was a clear recognition of the need to stop 'demonizing' young people and to cultivate more inclusivity and visibility for them in the community. Encouragingly, ideas like encouraging young people to use the new market square, especially in partnership with youth organisations, were positively received, hinting at the potential to create a sense of ownership and belonging for young people within public spaces.

### Race and diversity

Bermondsey, an area known historically for racial tension, has seen progress but was felt to still struggle with inclusivity. Participants from ethnic minority backgrounds still perceive it as a place where racism persists, leading sometimes to an atmosphere of discomfort and concern for safety. One participant stressed *“Past*

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<sup>3</sup> The lack of participation in this research by young people is a limitation, especially in this part of the discussion, and one we hope future research can rectify.

*folklore – that Bermondsey was a place that you can't come to, if you're black – that is changing – although not 100%, because that's probably not possible."*

However, while some were clear that intolerance was not a significant a problem as it once was, there was overall agreement that racial difference continues to be a concern in Bermondsey, potentially impacting the area's diversity and inclusivity. As one interviewee put it,

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*"Some [people from ethnic minorities] don't feel welcome – and may not even feel safe."*

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One of our interviewers experienced racist remarks even while undertaking the research on the market. New market traders from BAME backgrounds have expressed anxiety about their safety, not least because of the area's reputation. Despite this, some white voices in Bermondsey strongly deny that racism remains a problem and can react indignantly to the suggestion. That unwillingness to hear the views of people who have a different experience is perhaps a key part of the problem.

Despite this, it's essential to acknowledge the thriving businesses run by people from ethnic minority groups in the area, some of which have been established for many years. The question of addressing racial issues openly was met with mixed responses, with some (both white and people from ethnic minorities) fearing it could stir further tension. One participant suggested that *"One reason white people worry about anything to do with race here is because they don't want animosity in the area."* (This was also the case for older generations of people from ethnic minorities.) Some remember the racist activism by the BNP and National Front (and anti-fascist resistance) on the Blue Market as recently as the 1990s.<sup>4</sup>

We also noticed differing perceptions of progress generationally, with older individuals noting improvement, while younger participants highlighted the ongoing issue. The baseline for comparison is no doubt very different for those who have had different experiences throughout their lives. At the same time, while discussions around racism may be uncomfortable for some, especially those who have personally experienced racial tension in the past, others, particularly younger community members, view this silence as an avoidance of the problem. *"There's a lot of local frustration in ethnic minority communities. This is because of systemic racism. It comes from people not knowing the history."*

Ultimately, the persistence of experiences of racial tension by some reveals the need for ongoing dialogue and active measures towards inclusivity in Bermondsey. But these must be taken sensitively, and perhaps most importantly, led by the people most affected by the issues.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example: <https://pasttense.co.uk/2019/08/24/some-reflections-on-local-anti-fascist-struggles-in-south-london-in-1991/comment-page-1/>

## ‘Gentrification’ or just ‘nicer’?

Most interviewees were from, or hailed originally from, working-class backgrounds. Several took pride in their social mobility. Some spoke about an aspirational outlook, while maintaining their connection to working class roots, and, despite the move by some to professional, more traditionally middle-class roles, they described a strong desire to live in a working-class area. People from all backgrounds we spoke to showed enthusiasm for what might be considered more ‘gentrified’ developments such as the new coffee shop, the takeaway food market, and Maltby Street market. Interestingly, these changes were perceived not as ‘gentrification’ but as positive development and change. As one respondent put it,

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*“There are those gaps [in class and consumer options] that you tend to get...One of the things in Bermondsey is when you get the new things coming in, it splits completely... So what can the in-between places be? How can the market and businesses do that?”*

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People's personal narratives often underscore the significant cultural shifts and changes the area has experienced, and want their area to evolve in a way that mirrors their own trajectory. But most simply want it to become in some way ‘nicer’ - without losing its core character or becoming exclusive. Some concerns were raised about potential backlash from those not comfortable with the changes, and especially about the impact of the loss of social housing on the area's character. Ultimately, however, we suspected there was greater overlap in needs and desires between a longstanding working class and a newer, incoming middle class/ professional than is often claimed, even while, at the edges, there will be strong feelings to the contrary. As we will see later, despite what we perceive to be predominantly working class current users of the Blue Market, there was a strong appetite for ‘nicer’ restaurants, shops, and even sometimes for higher end food produce. We suspect class and consumption/ lifestyle are on much more of a continuum in the surrounding area than is given credit by some common local narratives – but this means that the need to retain a place that is inclusive of people from all backgrounds is just as important as ever.

## Stories and History

Some interviewees talked about a strong connection to local history in Bermondsey. Stories of the docks, factories, and past racial tensions are passed down through generations here, and some noted that it is not unusual to hear people too young to remember this period talk as if they experienced it. The power of these local stories and histories, and their role in shaping a sense of identity and continuity amidst change was raised repeatedly. A few do remember working on the docks, and many more local older people do remember working in the local factories, or knew others who did. Alongside this is an acknowledgement by some of its long history as a manufacturing centre for food – once known as the ‘Larder of London.’ Alongside pride in this past, interviewees said that, for some, there is a powerful sense of loss (indeed, one academic study of the area described South Bermondsey as having a ‘culture of lament’).<sup>5</sup> Others know the history of local political radicalism and social justice

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<sup>5</sup> Ole Jensen, Hiranthi Jayaweera, Ben Gidley (2013) ‘Diversity, Cohesion and Change in Two South London Neighbourhoods’ ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS), University of Oxford

(e.g. Ada Salter), and again, both of neo-Nazi activism and resistance against it. There are many powerful local stories of history – some of which have the power to bring together, and some to divide. The question, perhaps, is what stories the area wants to take forward into the future, and which it wants to leave behind. And what new stories does it want to create and tell?

One interviewee noted that “*there are so many untold stories.*” They felt this underlined the need for a broader and more inclusive understanding of local history. They also felt that explicitly confronting some of the area’s negative past may need to be part of a healing process, to bring local people together, but also, to make people from ethnic minorities feel seen, heard, and welcomed. Overall, the stories and histories of Bermondsey, both positive and negative, provide opportunities to unearth untold narratives and perspectives. Rethinking those stories could help creating a more inclusive place that values its history, and embraces positive change, whilst ensuring continuity.

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<https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2013/nostalgia-and-diversity-understanding-integration-and-the-local-level/>

PART TWO:

Planning, Enterprise, and Economy

## Regeneration and Infrastructure

One of our key areas of inquiry was around residents' aspirations for future economic development. There was a strong desire for economic regeneration to be inclusive, providing equal opportunities for both new and long-standing community members. Some residents were sceptical of the term 'regeneration', viewing it as a cover for gentrification. One of the biggest local developments is the Biscuit Factory build-to-rent scheme, which will feature 1,548 homes, and extensive play and public spaces, including a large public roof terrace and pedestrian walkways. It is intended to help to create new job opportunities through 150,000 sq ft of flexible employment space, and drive additional footfall for local businesses.

The necessity for basic infrastructure like shops, services, and other essentials was often discussed by interviewees. The emphasis was on how such infrastructure can help to create a coherent place that can actively respond to the needs of residents. All acknowledged the value of social and capital, the work of active citizens, and community organising, but also stressed the importance of the physical infrastructure, especially in a commercial context. For example, will there be sufficient commercial space for new (or local) businesses?

*"How will all this new infrastructure appear? Given that there's all this new development, and they're bringing in so many more people, but then they're also knocking down the shops and superstores and replacing them with flats. The result is a loss of industrial land, so what will they do? They'll have nothing useful there – no shops, nowhere to eat, nothing of any use."*

## Employment, skills and enterprise

There were questions about whether new developments would bring employment opportunities for locals, or just lead to the import of new workers. At the same time, some residents questioned the capacity of local businesses to offer significant employment opportunities. The shift towards national advertising by larger employers was seen as a challenge for local job markets. Jobs in larger organisations in the local area are often not advertised locally – and those who apply to national organisations may not be appointed to their local branches. Two local SME employers acknowledged difficulties in finding skilled local employees, and said that they tended not to bother any more. Some noted, however, that many local people who had little recent work experience – for example, women with caring responsibilities – have a great deal to offer, and that this was a group they hoped their recruitment could target better. Some interviewees spoke of a strong aspiration to build opportunities for young people through training and skill development. Some proposed a local skills audit to identify potential gaps and opportunities in the workforce, suggesting that training could then be provided to fill these gaps.

Residents expressed enthusiasm for encouraging local enterprise and creating more spaces for people to *"try things [business and enterprise ideas] out."* They highlighted the value of shared creative spaces for fostering connections among diverse groups of people. Some felt that the existing 'Biscuit Factory' workspace, though intended to serve this purpose, was an expensive and external resource rather than a truly local space.

## Key stakeholders

Several interviewees expressed frustration with the perceived lack of accessibility and visibility of the Council and local Councillors. Many felt the Council was more in alignment with developers than local residents and businesses, failing to actively involve them in the decision-making process. They highlighted the importance of community-led regeneration, as opposed to top-down development. As one resident suggested, *"The Council is dragging its feet – it's stopped involving people."* On the other hand, in interviews, it was difficult to persuade interviewees to think beyond the Council as the main, or sole driver behind local regeneration, or even the main decider of wider development in the area. Since the Council has long been the main landlord in the area, there may be a strong sense that it alone decides the area's fate. And while there was a belief that the Council had driven the major redevelopments in their current form, residents were less often aware of the fact that the Local Authority themselves resisted the developer's plans to the point of judicial review (unsuccessfully) in one case. There was a general sense that developers did not listen and were not interested in the needs of local people. We asked research participants to consider a broader approach to 'regeneration' which would go beyond physical infrastructure to include cultural and community revitalization, suggesting that this approach should be led by the local community. This was met with enthusiasm from many. At the same time, there was a feeling that the local authority, and developers, should not be 'let off the hook'.

Some participants felt that businesses are no longer significantly involved with their community, focusing solely on running their businesses without making larger contributions to the area. They suggested that businesses could do more to offer their expertise to the local community, which would not only benefit their own operations but the broader community as well.

*"There are lots of chemists, and some of them are open 24/7 now for vaccinations and things. Pharmacists get to know people locally. And pharmacies can do a huge amount without people going to their GPs. That includes signposting, helping people with minor ailments. The fact is that pharmacists can change your life. Could they come to the market and help?"*

## Shops, services, and leisure

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*"With the Blue Market, the reality is that people stopped going there and started going to Tesco." "People want to go to Tesco, so you have to work out what you can get there [at the Blue] that you can't get at Tesco."*

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## Food and Drink

The interviewees agreed on the value of communal eating as a means of socialising and increasing local community capital.

*"Every September, Avondale have a picnic on the green. They bring the spread of finger foods, and everyone has a traditional dish. Everyone helps themselves. There's something about just being next to*



*each other that matters – it gets people talking. They start exchanging ingredients, etc. We need more of those things that bring people together. Can we bring in more cultures to share food?"*

Others noted that Bermondsey used to be known as the 'Larder of London.' That food heritage was quite evocative for some local people, and indeed, has formed the basis of several public art projects, but some also wondered if that could also be of interest to visitors, offering opportunities to bring further visitors and a boost to the economy: *"There are quite a lot of heritage things around the area in terms of food. Hartley's Jam, Peek Freans, Pearce Duff."*

A recurring request was for a restaurant that everybody could go to, especially for special occasions like a family party or birthday. Several were truly enthusiastic and animated about this – they liked the idea of something both local and which could also be 'special'. They were clear that this ought not to mean exclusive or expensive – just 'decent' and for everyone:

*"There's no decent, appropriately accessible, restaurant in the area. There used to be Castello's – they managed to balance it all out. They were a reasonably priced, modern Italian/European food place, which sort of worked across demographics. I think the Blue needs a restaurant. It could be Turkish, it could be Italian, it could be anything. But there need to be special occasion places. The good thing about restaurants is that they offer places to linger."*

### *Pubs and the Beer Mile*

Pubs, their potential role in revitalizing the area, and their connection to the popular 'Beer Mile' were frequently discussed. Several participants suggested ways of making pubs more appealing and inclusive, as well as ways to capitalize on their proximity to the Beer Mile to draw in more visitors and revenue.

*"Pubs could play a great part in trying to revitalise the area. Could they come together and do something?"*

*"People need a reason to stop at the Blue. We need to get people to follow the trail – to get people to go beyond the arches market and the food market, and bring them over to the Blue. We need to extend, to become the first or last bit of the Beer Mile. But how do you build that trail between them?"*

It was felt, however, that some pubs were more welcoming than others, and some were only for 'hard-core' locals.

*"People who go to the local pubs, it's the same faces. The pubs are very unwelcoming. They're not like, for example, a Wetherspoons where you get a range of different people."*

### *The Market Square*

Interviewees recognised the community value of the market as a public space. Participants highlighted its role in enabling people to be together and feel part of a community in a way not possible at corporate spaces like Tesco. The market's potential as a platform to reintegrate people into public life, particularly post-pandemic, was noted.

*“After the pandemic, people are a bit stuck in their houses. They can use the market as a stepping-stone to come back into public life.”*

*“People are secluded and isolated into their separate places. But you can use the market as a place to bring people together. For example, people with business ideas.”*

Participants felt the market needs to be a unique space offering products and experiences different from those available in supermarkets or other commercial spaces.

*“You come to the market, and then take something home from the market – something that isn’t from a supermarket. Because it’s nicer. It’s something different and special.”*

### *Local Traders and Encouraging New Traders*

The topic of local traders' involvement in the market and the need to encourage new traders was discussed. While there was a recognition of the need for new traders in the area, some were also concerned that it may become dominated by traders new to the area or those not living locally. The need for flexibility to accommodate newcomers and changing habits was also highlighted.

*“Could we get locals to manage the stalls?”*

*“You have to build some kind of critical mass, with both existing stall holders and also new ones. There needs to be a flexible enough model to receive newcomers.”*

### *Accessible and Appealing to All*

Discussions emphasized the need for the market to cater to a wide range of people and income levels. This conversation often revolved around the food offers in the market. There were views about the market not being too ‘high-end’ to exclude locals, but also suggestions that a changing roster of niche offerings like organic produce or health and wellness could work.

*“There’s a high ratio of unemployed people around here of all ages. The market can’t be too upper-crust or it won’t work. Because it will exclude all the people who live there.”*

*“Farmers markets are great, but they need to be with real food and real people, that people can afford.”*

One participant noted the forthcoming opportunity for the market due to the influx of workers for a new building project, emphasizing the need to make these newcomers aware of what the market can offer.

*“Next August, thousands of people will be landing in the area, all of whom will want lunch. This is the workmen for the new building project. We need to make sure that they know that there are things on the market that they can buy.”*

## *'My Kind of Blue' – what kind of place should the market be?*

At the centre of all this is the Blue Market and the wider district around the Blue. We wanted to ask local people what they want that area to be, as a destination. To find this out, we undertook our own market research, talking to over 300 users of the market and the surrounding area. Our open response and closed response (structured) surveys asked what the ideal Blue district should be, focusing on both the types of businesses present and the experience that visitors should have, with two questionnaires, "My Kind of Blue" and "What's in your shopping basket?" The first survey aimed to understand the vision and concept people had for the Blue district, allowing participants to freely express their thoughts on the type of place it should be. The second survey focused on gathering specific information about participants' preferences regarding the products, experiences and services they wanted in the Blue district.

### *'My Kind of Blue'*

The "My Kind of Blue" results showed a strong preference for a community-focused area, supporting small local businesses, creativity, and start-ups, with less emphasis on big name stores and venues. People also expressed a desire for the district to be a place where they could spend time with friends, meet neighbours, and enjoy food and drink. This suggests that the market is perceived more as a social space than a functional one.

Interestingly, there was equal interest in connecting with old Bermondsey and experiencing new cultures. The desire for 'nicer' and 'special' items correlated with interview discussions. While for interviewees there was felt to be a need or desire to bring visitors into the area, this was not something that featured strongly in responses here – quite the opposite, there appears to be some resistance.

### *'My Shopping Basket'*

In terms of goods, food and drink alongside handmade, sustainable, and lifestyle products were popular – favourite local businesses included Bread à Manger and Bells & Sons.

People's food preferences leaned toward the speciality end of the spectrum, with less interest in everyday provisions, reflecting their perception of the convenience of supermarkets for regular shopping. Sustainable and organic products, typically more expensive, surprisingly drew interest in an area with high poverty levels. Again, the desire for something affordable but 'special' was strong. Regarding themed markets and attractions, seasonal and food-themed markets were again popular.

Overall, the community wants the Blue area as a social, family-friendly, leisure-focused space populated with small, local enterprises. The market is seen as a place to find unique and 'nicer' items, particularly food-related, which are not available in a supermarket – as long as these remain affordable and accessible. Seasonal festivals and music, and food-related activities were also popular potential attractions.

Finally, the majority of the community consulted in surveys did not see the Blue area as a destination for outsiders. That raises the question of how to financially support the desired services and shops without attracting outside customers. It may also chime with some of the concerns raised elsewhere about insularity, much as it also chimes with a desire not to lose the community continuity people find so valuable.

PART THREE:

Conclusions and Next Steps

## Needs and Priorities: A summary

We used our research to find out what mattered to people in the local area, and what barriers there are to a better, more connected community that meets the needs of its residents.

### Strengths

In summary, we found:

- There are many strong, close-knit communities in Bermondsey
- There is a wealth of assets, especially a thriving civil society
- There is a strong sense of local identity for many, and strong 'stories' people believe about the area – although these could be exclusive for some
- There is strong centre of gravity/ locus of community developing around the Blue
- People see positive activity happening on the market, and hope it will be a success
- There is a fairly strong consensus about the kind of place people want

### Areas for improvement

We also found the following areas for improvement:

- **Community Cohesion and Collaboration:** South Bermondsey is a mosaic of tightly-knit micro-communities. However, the stronger connections within these groups sometimes result in fewer inter-community interactions, creating an impression of fragmentation. This occasionally makes it challenging for people to come together as a whole when facing larger entities, such as developers or the council, or making decisions/ taking leadership on shared aspirations. It's a shared responsibility to foster a more cohesive community, bridging divides, and embracing our diverse identities.
- **Enhancing Community Awareness:** Bermondsey is rich with local resources and opportunities, but sometimes, community members may not fully recognise or utilise them. This could be due to a lack of awareness or the feeling that these resources aren't within their reach. It's crucial that we work to raise awareness and make those communal assets more accessible and inviting.
- **Fostering Inclusivity and Celebrating Diversity:** Despite Bermondsey's growing diversity, we heard about some reluctance in embracing change and a yearning for a more uniform cultural identity. There are instances where residents from diverse backgrounds feel less welcomed. Addressing this concern is key to building an inclusive Bermondsey where everyone feels safe and their stories are heard and valued, regardless of their ethnicity or race.

- **Addressing Narratives:** Bermondsey's history and folklore are rich and complex. However, some old narratives could benefit from a fresh perspective. Alongside preserving aspects of history, and harnessing the best stories of the past, it's time to rewrite, retire or create new stories that inspire unity, respect, and optimism for our future. This is an integral part of our journey towards regeneration, not just in terms of assets and enterprise, but also community spirit and local culture.
- **Reshaping Perceptions of Regeneration:** Many locals perceive regeneration as an external influence rather than a participatory process. This is far from an inaccurate perception in many ways, and this understandably breeds antipathy and scepticism about changes. To ensure successful transformation, the community's voice needs to be actively sought and heard. At the same time, giving residents a way to contribute in some way to a wider revival and regeneration of community – in which they take part directly – could be of significant value. Even if it is important not to let the biggest drivers of regeneration (the Council and big developers) 'off the hook'. 'Gentrification' in shops and services may be less of a concern than the reality of increasingly unaffordable housing.
- **'Making it nicer':** Despite appreciating recent improvements, some residents feel Bermondsey still lacks desirable recreational places, which could give [people a reason to spend time – and build a stronger sense of shared community through activity. They want more appealing, welcoming spaces where they can socialize and feel good about their neighbourhood. They would also happy to see a place where 'special' and 'nice' things can be bought, or occasions can be celebrated. There is less concern about the area being 'practical', given the high level of convenience from supermarkets and other service outlets.
- **Promoting Accessibility and Inclusivity:** Bermondsey is proud of its working-class history and culture. The concern is that future changes might disrupt this balance, making it less accessible for those from varied socio-economic backgrounds. As we move forward, it is paramount that we keep Bermondsey inclusive, with a diverse mix of shops and services that cater to all, regardless of their income or background.

## What we want to achieve

Overall, South Bermondsey, with its residents, businesses, and civil society, is in the midst of a major regeneration, driven largely by property development. This brings significant challenges, but also opportunities. Perhaps one of the most promising ways to meet those challenges and grasp those opportunities, is to make this process more 'people-powered', and to ensure that *community* is regenerated alongside the economy and built environment. That involves local people having more of a say on those developments introduced by external forces, while at the same time offering them ways to contribute to the wider development of the assets of their community, both tangible and intangible. Nobody else is taking a big picture view or a long-term approach to the overall development of this historic area. We want to help people in Bermondsey take a lead – and have a voice – in making sure that regeneration is for the people who live and work here, present and future, and goes beyond buildings.

## A Thriving Economy

We want to foster a thriving sustainable local economy, to meet local needs, and to help provide easier access to new economic opportunities.

- *Supporting Local Businesses* - As new and existing residents bring fresh demands, we'll encourage and support local businesses to respond to these needs.
- *Curating and shaping a business place that meets local needs and desires* - We want to stimulate and support the kind of business that people want, and help resist inappropriate and uncoordinated decisions by planners and landlords. We want the area to have the kind of businesses and developments that benefit everyone.
- *Fostering Enterprise and Creativity* - We want to create opportunities for residents to participate meaningfully in the new economy. For example, offering ways to trade in the market or be creative in shared spaces.

## Connected Communities

We want to build a strong, integrated, tolerant, and diverse community everybody is welcome

- *Encouraging collaboration* – We want to foster collaboration between local communities, helping them work collectively to tackle common issues, and promoting shared activities that benefit the wider area.
- *Promoting community leadership* - We need to help support existing local leaders, and create new local leaders, especially from minority backgrounds, empowering them to make their own projects happen.
- *Confronting remaining intolerance* - We're want to support development of projects and initiatives tackling remaining racism and intolerance head-on, making Blue Bermondsey welcoming to all.

## Better Communication

We want to use communications to help people get the best out of Blue Bermondsey – and to help tell stories that reflect a complex past and a vibrant future.

- *Revising and re-telling Bermondsey's Narratives* - We'll focus on promoting previously untold stories from diverse backgrounds and broadening our understanding of local history, while remaining inclusive of existing positive narratives. Our aim is to honour Bermondsey's roots while fostering an inclusive, dynamic future.
- *Improving information and communications* - Keeping residents informed about local developments is crucial. Utilizing newsletters, local press, social media, and face-to-face conversations, we can keep everyone updated and involved.



## What's next?

Our "People-Powered Regeneration" wants to make sure change happens in a way that puts the community in charge. That way, we can ensure that our neighbourhood stays vibrant, inclusive, and prosperous.

Community organising and support for local initiatives are key. Our role is not to do everything ourselves, but to give power and resources to our residents, enabling them to have a say, and take an active part, in the changes that make the area.

Over the next 4-5 years, we're developing major projects with a community focus. We're seeking out much-needed local funding, but we also know that direct community action, and the work of local active citizens and entrepreneurs will be key to a transformation that reflects the needs, hopes and aspirations of the area. We will be providing support and servant leadership to as many of those as we can.

We've also started to bring together this network of people with 'skin in the game' - whether as strategic partners with resources to commit, as local residents with a big (or small) idea, or simply as active voices willing to be heard, we want everybody here to create a future for Bermondsey that is inclusive, creative, and truly collaborative.

## About the author and contributors

### *Author*

#### *Dr Alex Evans*

Alex is an independent researcher and consultant, with particular expertise in work with communities of place, identity, or interest. He has worked in the public, private, and voluntary sectors for over 20 years, including 13 years as a senior leader in London charities, businesses and social enterprises. His social research has included in-depth evaluations of a range of cross-sector community-based partnerships, funded by National Lottery Community Fund and NHS South West London, and in-depth research on digital community projects funded by Dunhill Medical Trust. Alongside social research projects, he also works on strategic development with a range of organisations, including local and national charities, social enterprises and major UK grant-makers. He spent some years as a professional academic and researcher with a special interest in community, culture and identity. He has worked in and around Southwark (as well as other London Boroughs) for 15 years, and in SE16 for nearly ten, as Chief Executive of Time & Talents, and later with United St Saviour's Charity on the development of their almshouse for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Appleby Blue. He has been working with Big Local Works and the Blue BID on this project for the last three years. He can be contacted at [dralexevans@gmail.com](mailto:dralexevans@gmail.com) or via [www.alexevansconsulting.org](http://www.alexevansconsulting.org)

### *Contributors*

#### *Luds Van Den Belt*

Over the past 20 years, Luds has successfully started and led several community-focused projects in both the UK and Europe. Since 2016, Luds worked as Project Director at Peckham Levels, where he transformed an abandoned multi-storey car park in central Peckham, in partnership with Southwark Council. This development became Peckham Levels, turning the seven empty car park levels into a space that celebrates Peckham's creative spirit, comprising 60 creative studios, a co-work space, and a food and drinks destination, providing affordable workspace for the cultural talent in Peckham.

In 2019, Luds joined Big Local Works as Charity Director. Big Local Works, a Bermondsey-based charity established in 2017, has goals focused on building local people's economic resilience, reducing poverty, and aiding financial independence. The charity offers services including welfare benefits support, skills training, job search assistance, and support for local entrepreneurs. Shortly after Luds joined, BLW, in partnership with the Blue Bermondsey BID, secured £2M funding from the Mayor of London for the 'Made in Bermondsey' community-led regeneration project. This initiative aimed at substantial improvements to the Blue Market place, updating infrastructure and amenities. A significant part of the project was ensuring that the market's evolution was community-led.

By October 2022, BLW, supported by the Blue Bermondsey BID, had assumed management of the Blue Market from Southwark Council. Their mission is to leverage the momentum of the 'Made in Bermondsey'

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project, showcasing the Blue Market as not just a trading space but a community hub for various events and activities, bridging different generations and cultures.

For more on BLW, the Blue Market, and opportunities, reach out to Luds at [luds@biglocalworks.org.uk](mailto:luds@biglocalworks.org.uk).

*Russell Dryden*

Russell has lived in the SE16 area all his life and has tried his hand in a wide variety of business ventures until 1990, when he took over the Fish Stall on the Blue market. This led to awareness of the crucial role that street markets and the local High St play as places of great social importance and value. In 1993 Russell founded the Blue Bermondsey Traders Forum (BBTF), an informal network dedicated to championing local business issues and raising the profile of the Blue, which was becoming run down and neglected. In 2008 the BBTF became formally constituted as the Blue Bermondsey Business Association (BBBA) and as chair Russell led many initiatives to improve the retail environment, including The Bermondsey Lion statue, and regular community music and promotional events. Based on the positive results of research, the BBBA applied to hold a BID ballot and local businesses gave an overwhelming yes vote to the proposals and Blue Bermondsey BID began its first 5 year term in October 2014. Russell has managed the BID since then and through renewal ballot in 2019. Across two terms of operation the BID has become a major local stakeholder organisation which has been at the forefront of real tangible change and fostered constructive and beneficial relationships with the local community, so all can have a say in shaping a positive and prosperous future for the locality. To find out more, go to: <https://www.bluebermondsey.co.uk/>

*Silvia Bolonio*

Local resident Silvia undertook diligent and extensive consumer face to face research on the market, talking to local people and getting underneath the skin of what people want in the local area. She provided us with detailed analysis of survey results. We're very grateful for her excellent work.

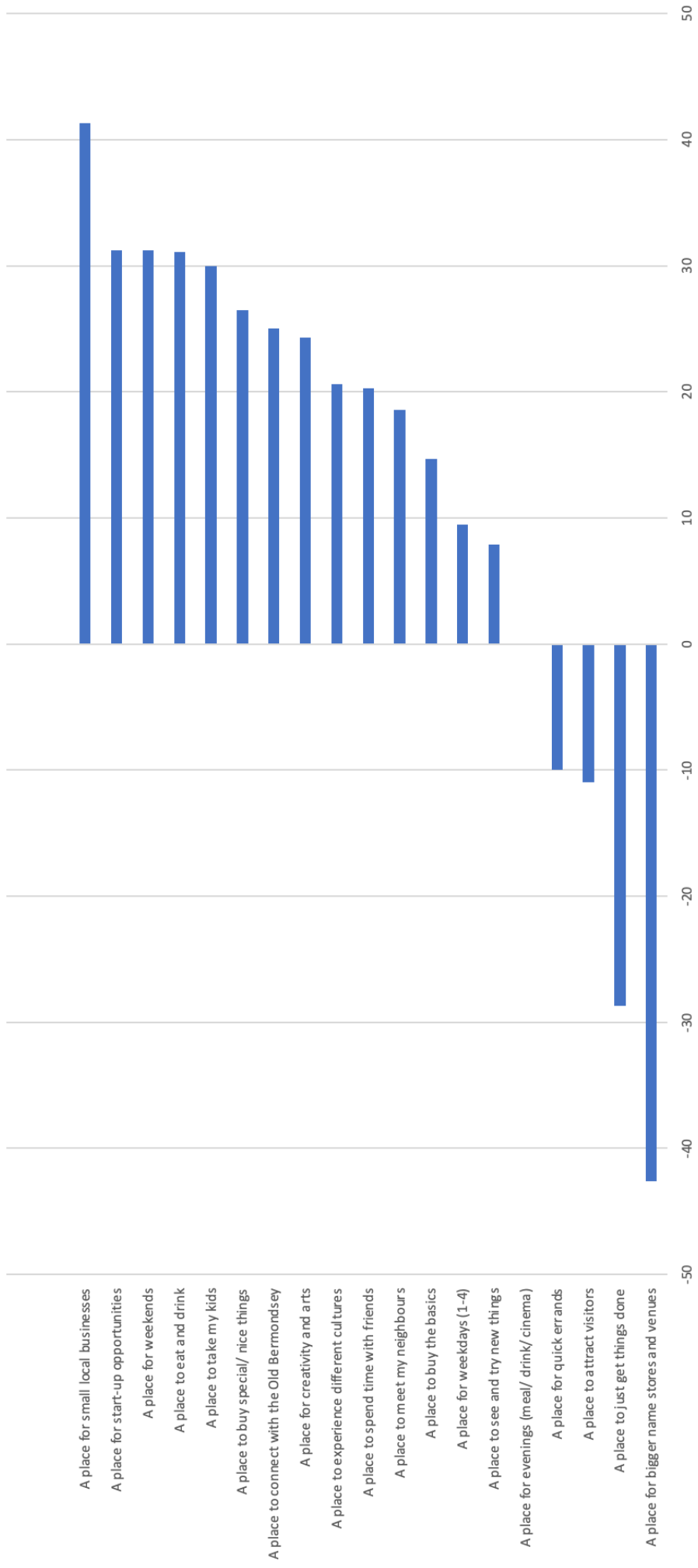
*Thanks*

The author and contributors would like to thank the anonymous participants in this research for taking part, and for offering their honest, heartfelt contributions as well as their valuable time. Finally, our gratitude to Bermondsey Blue Business Improvement District and its members for funding the work.

**'My Kind of Blue' – sentiment map**

(See overleaf)

### MY KIND OF BLUE Positive/ Negative



Figures expressed as percentages of all respondents. Threshold positive/ negative: 50%