

Social transformation in urban neighbourhoods

Supporting smart urban intermediation



Policy & Practice Briefing | November 2019



Smart Urban Intermediaries

Connecting people.
Changing communities.

Social transformation in urban neighbourhoods: Supporting smart urban intermediation

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This report is based on the Smart Urban Intermediaries research project:

www.smart-urban-intermediaries.com

Conducted by:

University of Birmingham
University of Edinburgh
Roskilde University
Tilburg University
The Danish Town Planning Institute (DPTI)

The research was funded by:

Economic and Social Research Council
(UK; ES/R002991/1)
Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO)
Innovation Fund Denmark
united in the Joint Programme Initiative Urban Europe
jpi-urbaneurope.eu

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This briefing will be of relevance to anyone interested in:

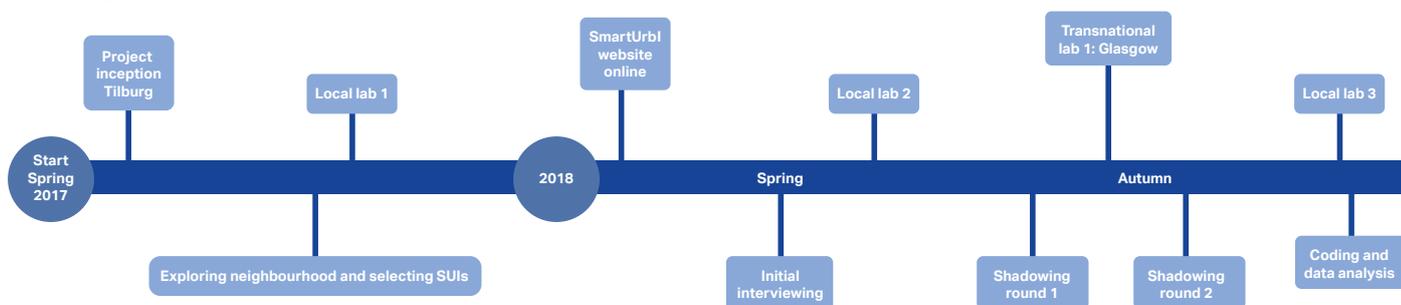
- how people make a difference in neighbourhoods
- what enables or hinders this kind of local action in a range of European cities
- what can be done in terms of capacity building, governance and resources
- the role of policy-makers, politicians, non-governmental organisations and funders in supporting smart urban intermediation

Smart urban intermediaries (SUIs) may be:

- unpaid community leaders, activists, active citizens or residents
- employees working for a public authority, non-governmental organisation (NGO), community group or social enterprise
- elected politicians or campaigners
- social entrepreneurs, traders or business developers.

Often they live locally and usually have strong connections with the neighbourhood. They are recognised as making a difference by being actively involved in addressing cross-cutting, challenging or shared problems, using their local knowledge and contacts to bring people and resources together in creative, interesting or socially innovative ways. Our research highlights their contribution to urban transformation through bringing people, resources and ideas together to achieve positive change for communities.

Project Timeline



Overview of the research

“Neighbourhoods matter and key people who can bring neighbourhoods, community groups, voluntary groups together matter... So if you can build partnerships everybody wins” (SUI).

This briefing sets out the policy implications of the Smart Urban Intermediaries research project, notably why and how these individuals might be better valued and supported.

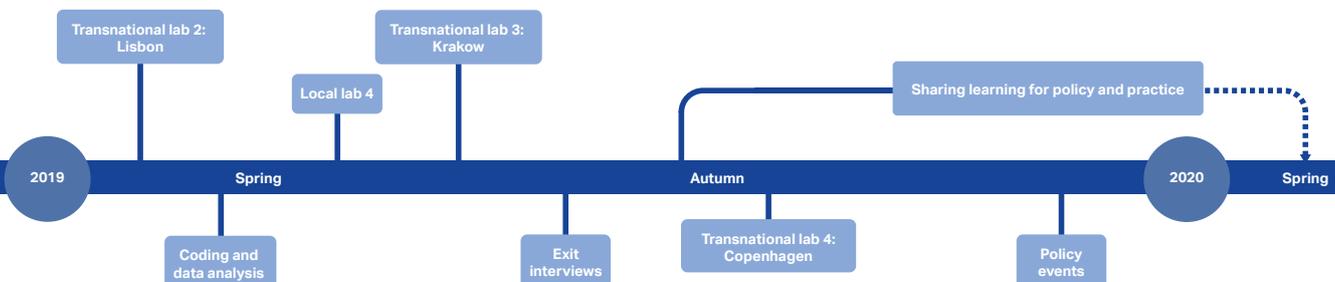
SUIs are aware of the challenges facing communities and often have a good understanding of how they can use their strengths to develop practical, cost-effective solutions that fit local needs and circumstances. Society must understand, indeed celebrate, the SUI role in order to sustain and expand this cohort of dedicated activists and leaders. See Durose et al (2019¹) for more detail and examples of their work and impact.

The motivations and practices of SUIs demonstrate how these people contribute to urgent policy agendas relating to health, housing, education, social cohesion and community safety.

“Intervention, prevention, investing in this piece of work will actually add value, not only add value but may save money” (SUI).

The research complements the prevailing emphasis on technology and information within the current ‘smart cities’ model. As a project partner commented: “it is people, not technology, that fundamentally make cities work”. We explored how smart urban intermediation promotes the kinds of innovation and transformation that improve people’s lives and keeps good things going at local level.

The recommendations are based on interviews, shadowing observations, peer dialogue and facilitated reflection across four areas in different northern European cities – Amsterdam, Birmingham, Copenhagen and Glasgow. Our findings also benefitted from workshops with SUIs in Lisbon and Krakow.



1. Socially Smart Cities: Making a difference in urban neighbourhoods.

Authors: Catherine Durose, Oliver Escobar, Alison Gilchrist, Annika Agger, James Henderson, Merlijn van Hulst and Mark van Ostaijen. November 2019.

Smart urban intermediation: challenges and enablers

Our partners and SUIs recognise that urban communities experience multiple issues: some arising from **ingrained poverty and inequalities**, while others are exacerbated by **austerity-driven financial cuts**. There has been a gradual **'rolling-back' of state responsibilities** and reduced funding for community-led programmes. This has placed added pressure and expectations on communities, SUIs and local agencies to deal with **rising hardship and social fragmentation**. Urban populations are increasingly diverse and transient, but nonetheless usually have a place-based sense of identity. Therefore **neighbourhood-level action remains essential** for collective organising and the delivery of policy outcomes.

Smart urban intermediation can have only a limited impact in these circumstances, and this is often localised and temporary. However, by resourcing measures that enable community-led interventions, long-term strategies for transformation are possible, which have the potential for greater and more sustainable effect. A shift is needed to **balance community engagement with practical action and experimentation** so that new solutions are found for the enduring and entrenched social, economic and physical problems endemic to our cities.

Building capacity and establishing the right conditions

SUIs are **'experts by experience'**. Their knowledge and skills should be better valued. Understanding what they do – their different roles and positions – should make it easier to **support their practice** and **enable new SUIs to come forward** from the next generation and under-represented communities. Doing so is not just about mapping competences or providing training and toolkits, but also ensuring that SUIs have access to advice, encouragement and, crucially, influence.

The ability of SUIs to bring together people and resources to effect transformational change involves a range of skills and knowledge, including persuasive social strategies for building consensus and coalitions. SUIs are often socially-skilled and committed individuals, acting with charm and courage to convince others and get things done. Usually they work 'behind the scenes', combining several roles so their competence might go unacknowledged and they become over-burdened with expectations, risking 'burn out'. They adopt a range of leadership styles: mainly collective, inclusive and generative, using their role to build the capacity and confidence of others, including community volunteers, colleagues and family members. So, in order to cultivate the next generation of SUIs, **policies for 'smart cities' must reach out beyond the 'usual actors' and ensure that current SUIs are able to sustain their own practice and nurture their successors.**

"We don't need to map it, we need to support it" (SUI).

Experiential learning and reflection is vital to maintain local capacity for effective and sustained smart urban intermediation, alongside the provision of **peer guidance and mentoring**. Neighbourhood forums and higher-level **cross-sectoral networking** enable SUIs to share knowledge and recognise their own practice. Their role in working with communities to mobilise assets and forge boundary-spanning connections is crucial but often overlooked by policy-makers and those working in formal institutions. SUIs are generally solution-oriented, preferring action and empowerment by discovering ways to challenge procedures and overcome bureaucratic barriers that can block social progress.

Effective experimentation means embracing diverse perspectives and priorities. So **testing new ways of working** tackles inertia and delivers innovative models of service or leadership. SUIs are different – they operate in different ways, with their own identities and narratives so, as another SUI commented: *“power has got to listen to lots of different truths if they really want change.”* Statutory institutions, such as local councils and health authorities, must **embrace a solutions-focused approach**, accepting risk and **allowing for uncertainty rather than imposing rigid targets and procedures**. All parties can **learn from apparent ‘failures’**.

Organisations should evolve a culture that is **enabling rather than controlling**, so as to be **more responsive** to community or external initiatives. Open, face-to-face interactions are important so opportunities to meet in person, build relationships and exchange views are essential. Community members may need **signposting to expert professional advice** to help them adapt and realise their plans, and if these can be linked to official policies, so much the better.

Neighbourhood-level **social infrastructure**, offering places and occasions to gather and interact, is crucial for enabling SUIs and other ‘players’ to make connections and learn about local issues and aspirations, either first hand or through conversations with residents and community workers. **Area-based forums** provide platforms for different voices to be heard and solutions hammered out. Non-commercial venues, such as community hubs and clubs, alongside accessible public spaces (parks, libraries, etc.) are places where people can tell their stories, express local pride and follow cultural traditions. Here they develop useful relationships and, sometimes serendipitously, **find potential allies who can work together to develop shared visions, assemble assets and bring about change**.

Flexible and open governance

Opportunities for active citizens **to link with professionals with the right skills and attitudes** provide them with welcome **encouragement and advice**. More **dialogue** is needed, more **genuine engagement** and a degree of **power sharing**. SUIs act as **legitimate ‘boundary-spanners’** and **advocates for interests that tend to be under-represented**. Local experiences matter, informing strategic efforts to tackle problems at city-level, by mobilising people-power *and* technologies. SUIs offer new channels for **asserting accountability** and **reinvigorating participative democracy**.

“Sometimes it’s easier to ask for forgiveness than permission” (SUI).

Smart urban intermediation flourishes **when bureaucracy is kept to a minimum** so as to encourage initiative and enthusiasm.

SUIs need **freedom to manoeuvre** and value the chance to collaborate through ad hoc and temporary alliances, as well as being involved in longer term multi-level, cross-sectoral partnerships, for example to deliver commissioned services through formal contracts.

SUIs working within institutions have also have important roles to play in **facilitating cross-cutting exchanges** and **opening up communication channels**. These create **opportunities for collaboration** between formal politics and community action. Problems can arise at the interface between institutions, organisations and communities, creating friction through the misalignment of government aims and neighbourhood priorities.

Co-operation is easily jeopardised without trust and mutual understanding, so **mechanisms and relationships** are needed that improve communication, deepen connections and promote **transparent and participative democratic processes** –this is often a key component missing in the ‘smart city’ model. Suitable forms of participation evolve over time and reflect local circumstances and cultures. **Diversity should be respected** as enriching but sometimes difficult, rather than a tick-box exercise that neglects significant aspects of people’s lives, such as commitments to faith and family.

Smart urban intermediation is a crucial ingredient of **inclusive and empowering community-engagement** strategies. **Creative co-production** involves partnership working across sectors in ways that are transparent and experimental. It is not just about short-term projects that appear novel or that fit a particular ‘niche’. The work of SUI needs a long-term perspective that is sustainable because it **nurtures growth** and **allows adaptation** to changing conditions.

Resources for innovation and sustainability

“Let groups pilot ideas, see if they work and grow them ... If you’ve got a problem then ask the community to help you solve it because they know what the issues are, they know what the problems are” (SUI).

Both ‘seed corn’ and core funding are important for stability and for trialling new ways of working.

Innovation sometimes requires **financial assistance for small or experimental projects**, which is easy to access and not subject to competitive bidding.

Commissioning procedures could be more flexible, encouraging collaboration by enabling community groups to work together to devise and deliver services. Current procurement systems tend to foster rivalry rather than co-operation, generating a pseudo-novelty while allowing existing, well-functioning, projects to falter or fail.

Smart cities have yet to tap into the power of smart urban intermediaries and would do well to make the funds currently allocated to technological advances more available to neighbourhood-level communities and social entrepreneurs.

In addition to a range of funding streams, **support-in-kind** is also needed. Larger and better resourced organisations can use their position and assets to support smart urban intermediation by ‘opening doors’ for people to approach decision-makers or potential funders, lending spaces for meetings, sharing equipment, servicing networking initiatives and convening forums that bring together SUIs and partners for networking and learning at local and city-wide levels.

Key messages

Although some of the following recommendations will seem familiar to many involved in community-oriented work over the years, our findings illuminate a multi-themed policy-space where SUIs can be more effective.

For policy-makers and politicians — recognise and respect SUIs

- Get out and about more – listen and talk to community members; build relationships with SUIs.
- Develop balanced engagement with residents by opening up opportunities for community members to influence your views and decision-making.
- Create greater transparency and accessibility for conversations and funding.
- Cultivate the ethos and methods of cross-sectoral collaboration.
- Adapt policies and procedures to remove blockages and encourage experimentation.
- Allow for risk and uncertainty.
- Recognise the willingness of local community groups and non-governmental agencies to organise themselves and help them do this more effectively.
- Use different empowerment mechanisms such as citizens’ assemblies or digital crowdsourcing to work towards forms of public deliberation that are tailored to diverse communities.
- Work with local networks that help you reach beyond those who are already confident and easy to engage in consultation exercises.
- Involve community members and residents in actual decision-making, for example on resource allocation or spatial planning.

“They really need to look at the culture, who they are and how they engage with communities, so they really need to look at themselves.” (Co-operation partner).

“Really put trust in local organisations and local people to deliver things ... you’ve got to put some faith in local capacity [and] capabilities.” (Co-operation partner).

“I certainly see a lot of people doing consultations everywhere, but are they really involving the community or are they just the people that talk the loudest.” (SUI).

For funders — smart cities need ‘smart investment’

- Provide a spectrum of funding possibilities – for core costs, projects and pilots.
- Explore mechanisms for providing stable income streams through endowments and one-off investments to enable community ownership of assets.
- Use longer timeframes and simplify reporting so that activities are guided by outcomes rather than targets.
- Make it easier to apply with fewer conditions.
- Invest in initiatives that build capacity and support the next generation of SUIs.
- Make time to learn about the work of communities – why it matters and how it happens, possibly through study visits and shadowing schemes.
- Be fair and flexible about setting budgets; encourage transparency in decisions and allocation criteria.
- Value the time and efforts of SUIs as ‘matched funding’.
- Acknowledge that social investments have a ‘return’ that can be evaluated but be realistic about expectations and setting achievable measures of success.

“The funding applications seem to be getting more and more complex ..., with a really tight window of time and deadlines to meet.”
(Co-operation partner).

“Change the perception that funders are doing us a favour, we are delivering their remit” (SUI).

For third sector and intermediary bodies

- Present your work as skilled and effective; challenge the idea that it is amateur and can be done cheaply and through volunteering alone.
- Keep faith in basic goals and values.
- Deal constructively with tensions and conflicts to make them productive.

“Our sector’s strength lies in early intervention and prevention as we are able to respond quickly to identified issues and deliver a person-led solution” (SUI).

For smart urban intermediaries

- Look after yourself and each other by actively seeking allies and find support for your work through SUI-led networks.
- Maintain some role boundaries and make time for family and friends.
- Carry on reflecting and learning.
- Develop your own interests, skills and knowledge through training or pursuing career options; this will maintain your motivation and energy levels.
- Stand up for your beliefs and explain why they matter to the communities you work with.
- Plan your ‘exit’ and succession’ strategy by passing on skills and enthusiasm to support the development of the next generation of SUIs.

“[We’re] just exhausted, and yes, always fighting [for survival].”
(Co-operation partner)

Conclusions: Now what?

SUIs are highly skilled and motivated, but they are under pressure and need both support and recognition. **Increasing the influence and capacity of SUIs will move communities into a better position to overcome problems and build a better, more just and sustainable future for themselves.** This determination to change how things are done will sometimes be exercised in partnership with others; sometimes through campaigning and self-organised collective action.

SUIs are change-makers. The research demonstrates that **'socially smart' working makes effective use of assets, opportunities and people by aligning shared aims and identifying potential synergies** for social good.

*"In a world of diminishing resources and services that are struggling to meet even statutory requirements... there needs to be a different response. There needs to be a different response; one that comes from communities themselves."
(Co-operation partner).*

Smart urban intermediation involves **innovation and enterprise**. It can therefore be contentious for policymakers and politicians, especially when confronting bureaucratic inertia and paternalism. Maintaining a balance between sustaining and innovating is crucial – a bias towards innovation may undermine the sustainability of what's already working well.

Smart urban intermediation acts as a **catalyst for transformative change**, challenging public institutions to be more flexible and accessible, embracing risk, experimentation and co-operation. A **strategic approach** should aim for long-term, systemic change, so must be proactive rather than a series of disjointed responses to particular issues.

SUIs are often pioneers. They certainly apply new thinking and discover new ways of combining assets and actors to solve intractable problems. While innovation is to be valued, funders and public authorities should continue to support and **consolidate 'what works' and 'what is wanted'** by residents and other stakeholders. The small, bottom-up contributions to larger transformations in neighbourhoods are **founded on lived experience and lead to the kinds of approaches** that allow successful projects to emerge.

"[It is not about] applying sticking plaster to a limb while the body as a whole is being devoured by disease" (SUI).

*"An important tension lies between pioneering versus consolidating, pursuing your private goal versus having collective leadership."
(Co-operation partner).*

The challenges facing communities are complicated and should not be underestimated. They give rise to **conflicts and tensions that need to be resolved**, especially in relation to the allocation of limited resources.

Ultimately it comes down to **trust and connections**: bringing people together to **challenge injustices, exclusion and inequalities through co-operation for positive social change and public good.**

“It’s very complex but SUIs are very good at actually bringing all these different dimensions together, making sense of them and turning it into something bigger.”
(Co-operation partner).

While smart urban intermediation undoubtedly relies on highly effective social skills that build relationships and facilitate interaction, nonetheless **information and communication technologies (ICT) have a part to play** in collating locally-generated evidence, mobilising ‘big data’ for social benefit, improving governance and sharing information through different creative and social media.

Smart cities will need to **harness and democratise ICT** for genuine community well-being. The collection and analysis of ‘big data’ at neighbourhood level could gather feedback on local services, inform public deliberation and generate ideas for change. **Bridging the efforts of tech entrepreneurs and social innovators** has the potential to create effective solutions to urban challenges. Until that connection is made, smart city strategies will have a people-shaped void at their centre.

Smart Urban Intermediaries are found within all levels and sectors – inside and outside the formal institutions. They play a useful **boundary-spanning role** and frequently broker across power differentials between authorities and communities.

The goal of the Smart Urban Intermediaries research project was to investigate the different ways in which certain individuals use their skills, energy and contacts to make a difference for neighbourhoods. We have revealed important aspects of their practice but now it is up to policy makers and funders to respond by building on these findings to create the conditions that enable intermediaries to become even more effective and resilient!

“It is about recognising that inequalities exist within certain communities ... so need a kind of different focus or way of working and ... to actually support [residents] in a way that they have a better, a louder voice to represent the community.”
(SUI).

The vision of a socially smart city creates the opportunity to develop, amplify and deepen their impact long into the future.

Further information: <http://www.smart-urban-intermediaries.com/>

Thanks to all the smart urban intermediaries and co-operation partners who worked with the project. A full list is provided in the companion report.

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For more information:

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Project no. 693443

 Innovation Fund Denmark

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Economic
and Social
Research Council

Project no. ES/R002991/1

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