

## **"Third places" and social interaction in deprived neighbourhoods in Great Britain**

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# **'Third Places' and Social Interaction in Deprived Neighbourhoods in Great Britain**

## 1. Introduction

Over the last twenty years, the “neighbourhood infrastructure” of many deprived areas in Great Britain, especially those that have not been subject to neighbourhood renewal programmes, has been eroded as many of its key elements, such as shops, cafés, community centres, libraries, and recreational areas have reduced in numbers and/or or deteriorated in quality (Speak and Graham, 2000). It appears that this trend is being exacerbated by the recent economic downturn (Hastings *et al*, 2012, Flint, 2012; Tunstall, 2009).

However, the infrastructure of a deprived neighbourhood is important because it fulfils two key “roles”. First, it performs a vital *functional* role, by providing residents with key recreational facilities, services, amenities, and “goods”. Second, it may also be argued that it performs a key *social* function by providing “public” social space within which residents can interact. This paper is concerned with examining this role. It explores social interaction within key local neighbourhood infrastructure “places”, such as shops, pubs, cafés, and community centres, and the extent to which these spaces, which have been described as being “third places” of social interaction after the home (first) and workplace (second), are important and valued mediums for interaction. It does so specifically within the context of deprived neighbourhoods.

There are three reasons for this. First, a strong case can be made for arguing that third places in deprived neighbourhoods are likely to be more well used than their counterparts in better off areas, and play a greater role in the lives of their residents.

This is because residents of disadvantaged areas are less likely to socially interact in the

workplace, because they are more likely to be economically inactive, and lack the opportunity, through a range of factors including ill-health and low income, to interact to outside the local neighbourhood.

Second, as noted earlier, the neighbourhood infrastructure of deprived neighbourhoods has been eroded in the recent years, a trend which is likely to continue in the future with the decline in public spending in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Third, data collected as part of a number of neighbourhood studies that the author had been involved in, including the New Deal for Communities National Evaluation, suggested that third places fulfilled important role in deprived neighbourhoods.

The paper draws on data gleaned from in-depth interviews with 180 residents in six deprived neighbourhoods across the UK, conducted as part of a study of the links between poverty and place, *Living Through Change in Challenging Neighbourhoods*, which was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF).

The paper is divided into five sections, including this one. Section two seeks to locate the research within the broader policy and academic context while section three highlights the approach taken to it. Section four begins by examining the importance attached to local social interaction by residents in the case study neighbourhoods. It then moves on to highlight: the role of third places as mediums for social interaction; which population groups are more likely to frequent them; and the barriers to social interaction within them. The last section is concerned with highlighting some of the key implications for policy to emerge from the research.

## 2. Context

Research suggests that the neighbourhood infrastructure of an area has a major impact on residents' quality of life (Carley *et al*, 2001; Buonfino and Hilder, 2006; Goodchild, 2008). While there are a number of ways that this happens, one of the most important is the impact it has on social interaction. This issue has been a long standing concern of planners and architects in both the policy and academic communities with their being a particular concern about how the physical attributes of a neighbourhood can affect the social "behaviour" of its residents (Sennett, 1992; Goodchild, 2008). In the 1980s, this concern centred on the relationship between the urban design and anti-social-behaviour, with some authors, such as Alice Coleman ("famously") arguing that an inevitable corollary of poor design was, what she described, as "*social malaise*" (Coleman, 1985).

In recent times, the concern with the relationship between an area's physical characteristics and social interaction has taken on a more positive hue as practitioners and academics have sought ways to make neighbourhoods better places to live in by creating social spaces that maximise social interaction between residents. Underpinning this approach is the belief that social interaction at the neighbourhood level enhances residents' quality of life (Carmona *et al*, 2003).

In many respects, this is the view of the American academic, Ramon Oldenburg, who argues that the "social malaise" that he felt existed in America in 1980s was a result of the increasing reluctance of American residents to interact outside the work place and home, in social arenas that he called *third places*, which he defined (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982 p271) as followed:

*“A third place is a public setting accessible to its inhabitants and appropriated by them as their own. The dominant activity is not "special" in the eyes of its inhabitants, it is a taken-for-granted part of their social existence. It is not a place outsiders find necessarily interesting or notable. It is a forum of association which is beneficial only to the degree that it is well-integrated into daily life.”*

In his book, *The Great Good Place*, Oldenburg (1989) highlighted the characteristics and function of these places. Their defining feature, which is highlighted in the quote above, was there 'ordariness' - they were not special, but simply (unassuming) places where people could hangout. Oldenburg highlighted other functions of third places. They were places where people could have fun socially. They were also 'ports of entry' for in-movers to an area; 'sorting areas' where residents found' people identified people they liked and disliked; and, importantly in the eyes of Oldenburg, somewhere that united the neighbourhood. He noted that third places would be of particular importance to elderly residents.

While Oldenburg did not seek to identify all the types of the third places that may exist within neighbourhoods, he did highlight a number including: drug stores; shops; post officers; hair salons; bookstores; beer gardens; the main street; pubs; cafes; taverns; with chapters devoted to the last six in *The Great Good Place* (Oldenburg, 1989).

Oldenburg's work may be criticised at a number of levels, not least because it is not empirically informed. However, his hypothesis that third places perform an important function as a venue for social interaction is potentially very persuasive and exploring their role within the context of deprived neighbourhoods is the focus of this paper.

It is timely in two principal ways. First, although there is an ever growing literature which addresses, whether directly or indirectly, the issue of social interaction, particularly at the neighbourhood level, we know very little about the phenomenon within the context of third places, and this a relatively under-researched area. Social interaction has been explored in a range of different (and sometimes overlapping) contexts including: social networks within the neighbourhood (Bridge, 2002; Riger and Lavrakas, 1981; Ross and Jang, 2000; Guest and Wierzbicki, 1999); social network analysis (Mitchell, 1969; Burt, 1987); family and kinship (Young and Wilmott, 1957); 'neighbouring' (Buonfino and Hilder, 2006; Crisp, forthcoming); mixed communities (Tunstall and Fenton, 2006; Jupp, 2000; Allen *et al*, 2005); contact theory (Emmerson *et al*, 2002; Miller, 2003; Pettigrew, 1998); relations between and within ethnic groups (Hopkins, 2010; Amin, 2002); social cohesion (Van Kempen and Bolt, 2009; Dekker, 2006; Dekker and Filipovic, 2004); social capital (Blokland and Savage, 2008; Power and Wilmot, 2007, Forrest and Kearns, 2001, and Putnam, 2000); and the (social) role of neighbourhood institutions (Small *et al*, 2008; Sanchez-Jankowski, 2008).

It is also important to note that the literature on social interaction has also addressed two issues that are of particular concern to this study: barriers to social engagement (Blokland and van Eijk, 2010; Blokland and Noordhoff, 2008); and how the extent and nature of interaction differs by population group (Blokland and van Eijk, 2010, Nassar and Julian, 1995; Skjaeveland *et al*, 1996).

A number of the studies that have addressed the issue of social interaction, whether directly or indirectly, have been funded by the JRF. It has commissioned studies on: neighbouring in contemporary Britain (Buonfino and Hilder, 2006); social interactions in urban public spaces (Holland *et al*, 2007); and mixed tenure communities, as part of a

specific research programme on this issue (Silverman *et al*, 2005; Allen *et al*, 2005; Bailey *et al*, 2003; Martin and Watkinson, 2003; Tunstall and Fenton, 2006).

Interest in social interaction has not been confined to academics: it is also an issue that has increasingly concerned central governments. One that has paid particular attention to the issue is the 'English' central government. Its interest in the issue is clearly evident in policy initiatives such as community cohesion and mixed tenure, which are underpinned by a belief that social interaction at the neighbourhood is desirable and beneficial for residents, and the plethora of publications it has produced on the subject, such as CLG (2008) and TLGRC (2002).

But despite growing academic and policy interest in social interaction, our understanding of it within the context of the third places is relatively limited. Specifically, the third places literature sheds relatively little light on three main issues that are at the heart of this paper: the extent, nature and value (to residents) of social interaction in local third places in deprived neighbourhoods, the characteristics of residents who interact in these places; and the barriers to engagement.

However, it is important to acknowledge that a number of valuable contributions have been made in the field. These include: Cheang's (2002) examination of the nature and form of social interaction in a fast-food restaurant; Matthews *et al*'s (2000) study of the street as third place; Rosenbaum's (2006) exploration of the importance of social interaction to patrons of diners, coffee shops and taverns; Rosenbaum *et al*'s (2007) examination of social support relationships in "commercial" third places; and Lawson's (2002) study of libraries as third places.



Moreover, it is also worth noting that the literature on third places has grown rapidly in recent years. However, this reflects a growing interest in the emergence of a 'new' third place – the internet – and most recent studies in the area have been concerned with this (Soukup, 2006; Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006; Ducheneaut *et al*, 2004; and Lawson, 2004).

Second, as noted earlier, the study is timely because it appears that the number and quality of third places in deprived neighbourhoods across the country is reducing as the impact of the credit crunch and recession is felt by small businesses and public agencies (Hastings *et al*, 2012, Flint, 2012; Tunstall, 2009). For example, it appears that there has been a reduction in the numbers of shops and pubs in these areas, although neighbourhood specific data to corroborate this does not exist. However, if national trends are replicated within poor neighbourhoods, which appears a very reasonable assumption given that there is some evidence to suggest that the impact of recession has been more marked within them (IPPR, 2009), then recent “research” at the national level supports this assertion. Research by CAMRA has revealed that on average 12 pubs closed in Britain every week between September 2011 and March 2012 (Hall, 2012), while data collected by the Local Data Company has revealed a large reduction in the numbers of shops in the UK (Wallop, 2012). Furthermore, it is likely, that these trends will continue in the foreseeable future.

Before moving on, it is worth reflecting further on the scope of the paper and what it does (and does not) seek to achieve. First, it is important to note that its focus is on *local* social interaction - ie interaction by residents in the neighbourhoods they live in - and it does not explore social interaction in third places that occurs outside the local area. However, given the prevalence of the view that the local neighbourhood has become

increasingly less important in shaping the (daily) lives of its residents (Friedrichs *et al*, 2003; Cheshire, 2007), and recent research that shows that the lives of residents in deprived neighbourhoods are not spatially bounded and not confined to the 'local' (Robinson, 2011), this apparent limitation may be a virtue of the paper.

Notwithstanding this point, this issue highlights another important feature of this paper: it does not seek to identify the *relative* importance of social interaction in local third places in deprived neighbourhoods by comparing it with interaction that occurs in the first and second places, virtual places such as Facebook and Twitter, or social spaces outside the local neighbourhood. Furthermore, it does not seek to compare how the social interaction of (predominantly) lower income residents in third places compares with that of residents living in better-off neighbourhoods. Thus, while the paper does attempt to make some (tentative) assessment of whether local third places are valued by residents living in deprived neighbourhoods, it is not concerned with establishing the relative importance of social interaction in local third places but primarily with exploring residents' engagement with, and in, them.

### **3. Research Approach**

As noted earlier, this paper draws on data derived from a JRF funded study of the links between poverty and place, which was concerned with exploring the experiences, attitudes and perceptions of residents living in six deprived neighbourhoods across England, Scotland and Wales over a three year period. More specifically, it draws on data derived from in-depth interviews conducted with 180 residents across the six areas as part of the first of three waves of resident interviews in 2008.

The interview sample, which was representative of the local population, and therefore was comprised principally of residents with low incomes, was derived from a household survey undertaken by a market research company. The interviews, which were conducted with an adult member of the household, identified in the initial contact survey, and sometimes accompanied by their partner or children for all or part of the time, covered a wide range of issues including the residents' views about their neighbourhoods, the nature and extent of social networks, the salience of the neighbourhood as a focus for activity.

The study's six case studies, all of which are in the lower two deciles of the relevant national deprivation index, and were selected to represent broad differences in the extent of diversity, connectivity and residential mobility according to relevant social indicators, were: Amlwch, a small town on the northern tip of Anglesey/ Ynys Mons, which has suffered rapid economic decline in recent years; West Kensington, an ethnically mixed area comprising two social housing estates in inner west London; Oxfords, a social housing estate located next to one of the most affluent suburbs in Edinburgh; West Marsh, an area with relatively little social housing located close to the centre of Grimsby; Wensley Fold, an ethnically and tenure mixed area in Blackburn; and finally, Hillside and Primalt, a social housing area in Knowsley. The location of the case studies is highlighted in Figure 1.

## Figure 1. Location of the case study areas

**INSERT FIGURE 1**

Source: OS Opendata

The nature and quality of the neighbourhood infrastructure in these areas varies markedly. In three – Oxgangs, Wensley Fold and Amlwch – it is relatively well developed. The Oxgangs estate has a range of neighbourhood amenities, all with the potential to act as third places, including: a main shopping street; three takeaways; two grocery shops; a library; a post office; a hairdressers; a pub; a park; a childrens' play area; and two community centres. In a similar vein, Wensley Fold also has numerous neighbourhood amenities that can serve as third places. These include: several convenience shops; pubs; a community centre; mosques; churches; and play areas. Befitting its status as a small town, Amlwch has a well developed neighbourhood architecture which includes: a main shopping street; numerous shops and takeaways; a leisure centre; a community centre; a library; and numerous pubs.

The local neighbourhood infrastructure of two areas is relatively poor: West Marsh and (especially) Hillside and Primalt, which has seen its neighbourhood amenities eroded in recent times: its (few) shops have closed as has its Post Office which closed shortly after the study began, and the area is bereft of places for residents to socialise – for example, like West Marsh, it does not have a pub.

The neighbourhood infrastructure of West Kensington, which like Hillside and Primalt was the site of a major regeneration programme in the form of New Deal for Communities programmes, is more difficult to characterise. This is because, while the neighbourhood infrastructure of the two estates that comprised the West Kensington study area is relatively poor, the area surrounding it is awash with neighbourhood amenities and potential third places, including a vibrant market.

## 4. Research Findings

### 4.1. The value of local social interaction

It is important first to establish whether residents in our case studies valued the social interaction that occurred within the social places that existed within their neighbourhoods, whether in third places or other social spaces. This appeared to be the case for most we interviewed including one resident in Amlwch who, in addition to valuing having friends and family living nearby to him, also valued the social interaction that meeting “acquaintances” on local streets brought her:

I        *“So is that what makes it (living in Amlwch) sort of special for you?”*

R        *Yeah*

I        *That network of...*

R        *Yeah, the network of people you know; acquaintances and going down the street there’s always somebody to say “hello” to.”*

(Ruth, 45-64, Amlwch)

In a similar vein, an elderly resident in the town bemoaned the fact that most local residents no longer stopped to talk to each other as they passed each other in the street, something which he missed:

*“You see the difference I find; I used to walk up; everybody; even little children (said): ‘how are you Mr Bloggs?’ Now they just pass you. You see people coming and they just pass you now. Unless they’re from here, they would say “hello.” But anybody that’s new here, they just pass. It’s just like a city now.” (Arthur, 65+, Amlwch)*

The importance of social interaction at the local level was also highlighted by residents in Hillside and Primalt. Two residents there attributed their dissatisfaction with the neighbourhood to a decline in sociability caused by large scale demolition. In particular, they felt it was socially “empty” and devoid of people.

*“It’s just unbearable (living here). It’s like the black hole of Calcutta of a night when the winter comes. It’s horrible. There’s no-one living ‘round me and it’s just an awful depressing thing to go home to. I hate even being in there now and I loved my home when my children were growing up. I never ever thought I’d ever say that.” (Tracey, 45-64)*

*“It’s just you come out your door and it’s like: ‘ugh, what’s going in ‘ere?’ There’s nothing there no more. You haven’t your nice neighbours that lived over the road who you’d say ‘good morning’ to and whatever. They’re not there now. So that’s the only like maybe bit of emotional side of it.” (Andrea, 30-34)*

Oldenburg envisaged that the positive impact of social interaction could only occur if it took place between participants in the form of a verbalised conversation. However, this definition of social interaction is perhaps too restrictive and many residents in our case study areas engaged in social 'interaction' that did not involve verbalised conversations. In these 'interactions' residents simply valued seeing familiar faces or, in the case of more socially isolated residents, simply other people. In these important interactions no words were exchanged and on occasions it was an 'interaction' where, paradoxically, only one participant appeared to be involved: in this instance, the "other participant", whether the friendly face at the shop or the child playing in the park, might be totally unaware of his/ her involvement in it.

This form of non verbal interaction is exemplified in the quote below, which highlights the case of an Amlwch resident who appeared to value watching children playing outside her window and having something to 'see':

*"I was offered a bungalow but I don't want to move. It wouldn't be the same kind of life for me in a bungalow. Here there are little children playing outside all the time and there's always something going on. If I was in a bungalow I wouldn't see anyone, no one would pass the window.." (Ramona, 65+)*

The social value of having non verbal interactions with people we may not know in our neighbourhood has been recognised by Young and Willmot (1957) and Hunter and Suttles (1972), who developed the concept of the "face block" community. This is a community whose members are aware of each other but who do not necessarily know each others' identity, and who do not formally communicate or interact with each other.

Reflecting the importance of this type of interaction, for the remainder of the paper the term 'social interaction' will be used in the broadest sense and will include non verbal interactions and those between “*face block*” members.

#### **4.2. Third places as valued local social places**

Much of the local social interaction that residents appeared to value occurred in third places. A number of third places emerged including: libraries; cafés; pubs; libraries; local parks; play areas; churches; and mosques. However, in line with the findings of other studies (Carley *et al*, 2001; Flint, 2006; Matthews *et al*, 2000), one emerged as being of particular importance to residents: local shops. Across all six case study areas they appeared to fulfil an important role as a vehicle for promoting social interaction between residents. For example, this was certainly was the case for a resident in West Marsh who particularly valued being “known” by other residents in the local shops he visited.

*“Well, I was well known because every shop I’ve been in I knew a lot of people. When I used to come here of a weekend I couldn’t walk down say Freeman Street without being stopped you know. I knew a lot of people but I don’t know whether they were two faced then but I’ve said all along that this place has been spoilt.” (Bruce, 65+)*

A resident in Amlwch valued the social interaction that shops brought in a different way: she noted how the local supermarket was an important and valued location for meeting her friends.

*“I go and do the shopping every morning whether I need anything or not. Go*



*'round Somerfield: meet more friends there than I do in the street.'* (Lilly, 45-64)

The importance of third places as social places, and local shops in particular, was recognised by a number of residents we interviewed. For example, a resident in Amlwch was unhappy about the reduction in the number and quality of social places in the town:

*"We used to have a cinema, and now it's just flats and flats and flats getting built everywhere... There are very few shops in Amlwch so I have to leave to buy clothes and things like that. There used to be five butchers and a lot of other little shops for different things, bakers; a veg shop. But they've been shut down and replaced by Chinese restaurants, Indian restaurants. I don't know how they survive in such a small place. **It's sad that there are no more little shops and cafés because there aren't enough places to socialise now...** in the 1970s the Chapel on this street closed and was turned into a warehouse. Now the Welsh Chapel on Salem Street is closing. The streets are the heart of Amlwch and they're being ruined by big flat developments. The old Chapel on this road is now being turned into a block of flats and it's just not attractive for people living here. **It's not going to be a community space anymore and that's a shame.**"*

(Susan, 35-44)

In a similar vein, a Hillside and Primalt resident highlighted the negative impact of the closure of many of the area's shops on its social environment and social interaction within it.

*"We've never had a chemist 'round here. The hairdressers have gone. I used to use that, now and then: used to have a colour done but that's gone. So you have*

*to travel now to do that so everything's transport now to go to these big supermarkets. I prefer the little shop. I used to love it where you knew everyone..... And the woman who owned it: her daughter was a teacher in the school and she knew my children, going to the school and all that. And her friend in Knowsley - she knew them by name - you know like a small world....we had a supermarket and everyone knew everyone. You know it was, it was nice 'round here years ago." (Dianna, 45-64)*

### **4.3. Who participates in third places?**

Although all socio-demographic groups in our case study areas made use of local third places, some were more likely to do so, a finding which is line with those of a number of other studies (Campbell and Lee, 1982, Nassar and Julian, 1995; Skjaeveland *et al*, 1996). For example, residents who spent most of their day at home because they were unemployed, in poor health, retired or had childcare responsibilities, made greater use of them. And therefore as a result, not surprisingly, more of their social interactions occurred in these places.

Perhaps not unexpectedly, residents with young children, including those who spent a significant amount of time away from the neighbourhood through work, were particularly likely to visit third places. Economically active residents were less likely to use third places. While there were a number of reasons for this, their lower usage could be attributed to two inextricably linked factors: the large amount of time they spent away from the neighbourhood; and their apparent lack of awareness of third places within it.

The lack of awareness of third places and community infrastructure more broadly was not confined to residents who spent most of their time outside the neighbourhood: some of those who spent most of the time within it also exhibited this characteristic. Furthermore, residents often held widely differing views about the prevalence and quality of third places and associated community infrastructure. This was most definitely the case in Amlwch where some noted that the town had many third places and developed community and neighbourhood infrastructure, while others thought it was moribund in these respects.

It is important here to offer two more reflections about the nature and characteristics of the residents frequenting third places. First, some chose to avoid them particularly when they were busy, precisely because they were places that they thought they would meet someone they knew, and therefore would have to engage in a social interaction. This was the case for one woman in West Kensington who was not keen on visiting the most important third place in the area: the market and shops on North End Road.

*“I try to avoid it because North End Road’s a place where you see everybody you know and that’s where you’ve got your Sainsbury’s,; your Iceland; (where I), do my shopping.” (Lizzie, 30-34)*

Second, as alluded to earlier, the types of third places frequented by residents in our case study areas, including those who more likely to use them, to some extent varied by population group. For example, perhaps not unexpectedly, residents with young children were more likely to visit parks and community centres, with older residents also being more likely to frequent the latter.

In terms of the most important of the third places in our case study areas – shops – in broad terms there was a less clear-cut dichotomy in terms of the population groups using them. However, it is important to note that in the two case studies with significant black and minority ethnic (BME) populations – West Kensington and Wensley Fold - ethnicity appeared to be an important factor affecting their use, with some specialist shops being frequented almost exclusively by members of the local BME population, who were less likely to visit ‘generic’ convenience stores. And across all our case study areas, BME residents appeared less likely to frequent local public houses.

#### **4.4. Barriers to social interaction in third places**

A number of barriers emerged to the use of third places in the neighbourhoods we studied. First, many residents were deterred from using them by the perceived unfriendliness of their long standing users or ‘regulars.’ This was particularly the case in relation to community centres. For example, a resident in West Marsh reported that she did not use the local community centre there because its ‘regulars’ had made her feel unwelcome when she visited it.

*“I went once (to the community centre) and I sat with some people and one of them said: ‘that’s my friend’s seat.’ So I sat at a table and I was on me own, so that put me off.” (Peggy, 65+)*

In a similar vein, another resident in the neighbourhood did not use the local community shop because of the perceived unfriendliness of its patrons:

*“I think everyone keeps themselves to themselves. When we first moved in we*

*used to work in a community shop at the corner and there everyone was very clicky and into their own business, and don't want to know anyone else. So we don't go there no more.” (Vicki, 25-29)*

Another factor which deterred some residents from using third places in their neighbourhood was their lack of social confidence and discomfort in social situations, particularly when they did not know many people locally and/ or were single. This was clearly the case for a middle aged in respondent in Oxfgangs who remarked that he and his partner were not “*sociable enough*” to visit the local community centre.

*“We go to the library, use the library but we're not sociable enough yet to go to any of the community centres or anything like that, which we probably could if we wanted to or when we get a wee bit older we might. But we're not that way inclined to go. I don't know the people's name's next door or. In fact half of them upstairs either, to be honest.” (Robert, 45-64)*

In a similar vein, a resident in West Marsh noted that she had declined an offer to attend a Surestart initiative in the local community centre because she was “*quite shy*” and uncomfortable meeting new people:

*“I've been a couple of times (to the community centre) over the last few months to take me niece; well Bobby's nieces who live across the road to dance class there....I have been offered to go to SureStart but it's meeting people. I'm quite shy when it comes to talking to people like that what I don't know. And I know they're all in the same situation because that's what it is and it's to help single mums but it's not something I'm interested in really.” (Sarah-Lou, 16-24)*

A single retired woman in West Marsh reported that she was “ashamed” that she did not use the local community centre and attributed her failure to do so to the fact that she did not know anyone locally.

*“I’m ashamed of myself really. I really must go ‘round there (the community centre) and have a look..... I’ve never actually been to the community centre. I don’t know anybody you see. That’s the thing.... But I’ve not been to the actual place itself. I really ought to go.” (Vanessa, 65+)*

For some residents in our case study areas another factor lay behind their decision not to use third places: the physical difficulty of getting to them because of infirmity, ill-health and disability, which was compounded by the perceived failure of local agencies to provide them with assistance. For example, a disabled resident in Oxfords was keen to use the area’s community facilities but she felt that her severe disability made it very difficult for her to get to them.

I *“Do you regularly go to the community centre or the library, for instance?*

R *Well, not as often as I should. No. I know these facilities are available for me. The only problem with that is I am quite badly disabled and I know I should be trying to do more myself. But I don’t get out as much as I should.” (Mary, 45-64)*

In a similar vein, a resident in Wensley Fold was only able to overcome her disability – chronic arthritis – to visit a local church because a friend gave her a lift to it: without this help she would not be able to visit it. And an elderly female resident in West Marsh who

was reliant on her 94 year old friend to give her a lift to a local luncheon club, highlighted the difficulties that many elderly residents faced getting around their neighbourhoods.

A fourth barrier emerged to the use of third places: the reluctance of some residents to venture from their homes after dark. While this was an issue, to varying degrees, in all of the case study areas it was a particular issue in West Marsh. For example, one female resident there was very unhappy about leaving home after dark and was reluctant to visit one of the area's key local third places: the local convenience store.

*I        "Is there a reason why you don't go out 'round here or..."*

*R1      I won't go out at night, will I?*

*R2      No, she won't leave house on her own at night time because street lighting  
'round here..*

*R1      If I need to go to shop it's a nightmare. This passage way, alley way gangs and  
gangs about it.*

*R2      People waiting for drugs and things.*

*R1      And it's absolute pitch black."*

*(R1: Claire, 30-34; R2: Graham, 30-34)*

In a similar fashion, in Wensley Fold a resident reported that he would not visit local shops after nightfall.

*"I wouldn't go out at night on my own. Never. I wouldn't even go to the corner shop; to the take away shop... yeah, we don't go out at night anyway. (The) odd time we might go to something at church but it's always a neighbour that takes me with her." (Alfie, 45-64)*

## 5. Conclusion

The preceding analysis suggests that local third places fulfil an important *social* function in deprived neighbourhoods and are valued in this respect by many of their residents. The research also suggests that they are important in other ways. For example, their important *functional* role as providers of key services, amenities, leisure opportunities and “goods” clearly emerged from the interviews.

Furthermore, a number of residents, highlighted the *symbolic* importance of third places as they were seen as being a marker of the 'health' and 'vibrancy' of their neighbourhoods. Thus, their removal was perceived as being a very tangible marker and symbol of decline, with the closure of shops being particularly significant. This appears to have been particularly the case in two of our case study areas – Amlwch and Hillside and Primalt - when key local third places closed there, and the views of two residents - Susan from Amlwch and Dianna from Hillside and Primalt - which are presented in 4.2, were representative of many in these areas.

Thus, efforts should be made to ensure that recession does not result in their further denudation in deprived areas. Before exploring what form these efforts might take, it is important to make two important observations about third places as a focus for policy intervention in Great Britain. First, given the current economic climate, the decline in public sector spending in deprived neighbourhoods, the increasing economic hegemony of larger superstores, and the private ownership of many third places, the scope for



policy makers and practitioners to shape third place provision in deprived neighbourhoods may be relatively limited.

Second, although third places perform an important function in deprived neighbourhoods they are not (in isolation) a panacea for their social problems. There are two reasons for this: first, while it was clearly evident that many residents in the study valued interacting in third places it is important not to overstate the value and significance of these interactions. Second, for many residents third places will play no role in their lives. While there are a number of reasons for this, some of which have been highlighted earlier, it is important to note that the increasing tendency for social interaction to occur virtually through such electronic communications mediums as the internet, SMS messaging and telephone conversations may be an important contributory factor and may undermine the importance of the neighbourhood as a place for social interaction (Ascher and Godard, 1999). And furthermore, as noted earlier, some residents, like Sarah-Lou, the 'shy' Oxfords resident highlighted in section 4.3, may actively 'choose' to avoid third places and social interaction, thus limiting the potential impact of third places (creation and retention) as a policy tool. This behaviour should not be problematised and it is important that social interaction is seen as being a 'choice' and not something that should be expected of 'poor people living in poor neighbourhoods.'

Notwithstanding these important points, it does appear that third places can (and do) fulfil an important social function in deprived neighbourhoods and the creation of additional social places, allied to the retention of existing ones, may encourage further social interaction (Buonfino and Hilder, 2006).

Policy makers should therefore look to maintain and replenish third places and they do have a number of policy instruments that they can draw on to do so. For example, they could (and should): in line with one of the recommendations of Carley *et al* (2001), appoint a “*retail liaison officer*”; ensure that neighbourhoods are well lit so that residents can visit key third places after dark; provide support to local groups (in the form of subsidised rents and advice) to encourage them to occupy empty retail units; ensure that recreational areas are well maintained and managed; and support local community centres.

It is important that the strategies put in place by local agencies in relation to third places are tailored to the characteristics and needs of local residents and recognise that the appeal (and importance) of third place ‘types’ will vary by population group. For example, as noted earlier, the social benefits of community centres are more likely to be felt by those groups who are most likely to use them: residents with children and older inhabitants.

To conclude, this paper has explored the relationship between social places and social interaction in six case study areas and highlighted the importance of *third places*. While hopefully this has been a valuable exercise, it is perhaps worth briefly noting at this juncture that the paper does not address two issues of some pertinence to this study: the extent to which social interaction in third places results in changes in the attitudes and behaviour of residents; and the significance, meaning and depth of the social interaction that takes place in them.

These are both important issues and warrant further research. The first is particularly significant as it has ramifications for policy in relation to community cohesion: if racial

groups socially interact with each other in mixed neighbourhoods does this result in improved social relations as attitudes (positively) shift, as proponents of contact theory, such as Emerson *et al* (2002), would argue? And if this is the case, is the nature of social interaction important, as Amin (2002) argues? Furthermore, is the location of the interaction important? These important issues warrant further exploration.

So, too, do the following issues: whether the function of third place 'types', such as shops and community centres, differs; and assessing the relative importance of local third places in deprived neighbourhoods in relation to a number of other interaction domains including the home (first place), workplace (second place), virtual social spaces, and third places outside the neighbourhood, including those in better-off areas.

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