Socially smart cities

Making a difference in urban neighbourhoods

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**Smart Urban
Intermediaries**

Connecting people.
Changing communities.

Socially smart cities: Making a difference in urban neighbourhoods

Contents

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What is this report?

This report[1] draws on a trans-European research, learning and action project conducted between 2017 and 2019 called **Smart Urban Intermediaries** (SUIs). We wanted to better understand how positive change can happen in our cities and generate dialogue on the role of intermediaries in such change.

> **Smart Urban Intermediaries = SUIs = people who make a difference in urban neighbourhoods**

In a single neighbourhood in four European cities, we identified a diverse group of people from different walks of life and in different roles, who were perceived by others to be making a difference. We worked with them for two years to discover what they do and from that, understand more about how to make change.

In this report, we share what we did, who was involved, what we learned and what this means. We identify six inter-related ways to think about the practice of smart urban intermediation.

Transforming · Fundamentals · Tensions · Motivations · Activities · Resources

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The report has been developed and edited with our co-operation partners and the smart urban intermediaries involved in the project. The report is accompanied by a separate policy briefing that addresses questions of context, barriers and enablers to smart urban intermediation, and sets out the implications of our research for policy and practice.

Who was involved?

Smart Urban Intermediaries was a research project funded by Urban Europe, involving the Universities of Birmingham, Edinburgh, Roskilde and Tilburg, and the Danish Town Planning Institute.

Smart Urban Intermediaries also worked with 19 co-operation partners and 47 local organisations.

The project worked closely with a cohort of 41 individuals who are active in one of four neighbourhoods: Osdorp and Slotermeer-Slotervaart in Amsterdam, Sparkbrook and Balsall Heath in Birmingham; Northwest in Copenhagen, and Govan in Glasgow.
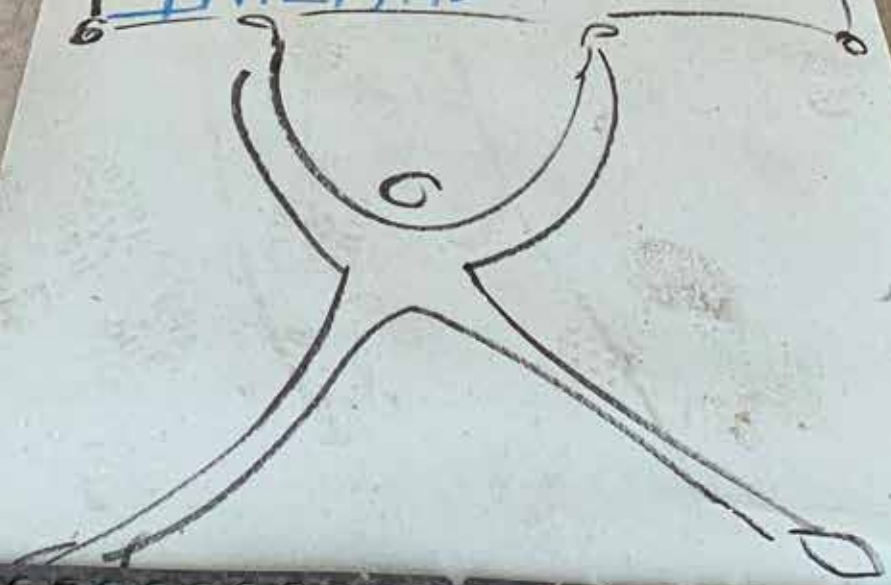
Part 1: Introduction

The liveability and resilience of many European cities is under pressure from growing inequalities, persistent poverty, political polarisation, fiscal uncertainty and environmental threats, such as the climate crisis. At the same time, cities offer multiple opportunities for people to address these concerns, but we need to be 'smarter' in our analysis and problem-solving strategies.

The nature of the challenges facing our cities defies traditional solutions and we believe it requires us to act differently, and in a more 'social' way, by which we mean, collaborating across boundaries and working more holistically by integrating knowledge and ideas from various sources. Being 'socially smart' entails:

- Bringing together what we know and acknowledging the value of different kinds of expertise and knowledge, including local and experiential knowledge as well as relational skills

- Involving those who are often under-represented in decision-making and urban governance

- Working across traditional organisational or sectoral boundaries

- Understanding the important role of place in people's sense of identity and belonging

- Making human connections to overcome personal isolation and urban fragmentation

The complex nature of current challenges and of cities themselves, means that these inclusive goals are unlikely to be achieved simply and solely through a structural or technological 'fix'. Instead, in this research, we are interested in how diverse actors and resources can be drawn together in constructive and imaginative ways in order to create positive social change and sustain existing community resilience.

This project puts 'intermediaries' – those individuals who connect people, ideas and resources – at the centre of how we can drive change in our cities.

What do we mean by 'smart urban intermediaries'?

Smart is a reference to 'smart cities', a concept born as a response to the complex and critical issues we are interested in addressing. 'Smart' is often used to refer to technology-mediated solutions to challenges. In contrast, in our research we emphasise the social and relational aspects of 'smart' and argue that social action and social innovation must be core components of the smart city vision.

Urban refers to the neighbourhoods where people live and work, where urban challenges are most keenly felt; and, on the practices of individuals within those neighbourhoods who are actively seeking to make a positive difference for those living in the area, as well as for society as a whole.

Intermediaries refers to individuals working between and across different sectors or activities who use their connections and social skills to bring people and resources together in creative and productive ways.

A 'smart urban intermediary' could be:

- An unpaid community leader, activist, active citizen or resident

- An employee working for a local authority, public body, non-governmental organisation (NGO), community group or social enterprise

- An elected politician or campaigner

- A social entrepreneur, trader or business developer

- An artist, designer or architect

These individuals may:

- live or work in the neighbourhood, with a local identity or emotional connection to the place;

- and/or be situated or embedded in a professional sense in those neighbourhoods;

- and/or be focused on forging connections within and beyond the neighbourhood.

Social smartness

Our research offers an alternative view of the future of 'smart cities', not driven solely by technology, but fundamentally relying on, and growing 'social smartness'.

The future of our cities cannot be understood or resolved simply as a technological or structural fix, but as requiring a inherently social form of action or innovation. Social innovation is more than, and different to technological innovation. Social innovation has become widely recognised as an important way to nurture and develop different solutions to address unmet social needs and local concerns with radical potential for transforming relationships in our society.

Such an understanding emphasises both a sense of individual agency (ability to act) and collective empowerment (belief in the value of acting together). Supporting this action involves respecting and harnessing the competencies to make things happen, including underplayed or hidden resources, such as local knowledge, relational skills and experiential expertise.

Our term 'socially smart' seeks to shift the smart cities discourse in a democratic and participative direction. Smart city visions tend to focus on flows of data across technological infrastructure, whereas the socially smart city pays attention to flows of communication, learning and support through inter-personal networks. This shift places people-led action and interaction at the heart of smart urban development, and technological innovation as serving rather than steering this agenda.

Ever changing.... moving cities
Breaking walls of knowledge
Keepers–seekers, seekers, keepers
Of
The spaces in–between
Capture unspoken thoughts
Taste the unknown
Dare to jump
Break through the sour
How it looks like–is not how it is!
It's the taste of prejudice
We became researchers and researchers became SUIs
Are we all one?

A poem written by Sebo Bakker, a SUI from Amsterdam, at our Copenhagen transnational lab, reflecting on his experience of being involved in the Smart Urban Intermediaries project.

Part 2:
What did we do?

Pilot research:
Five ways to make a difference

We asked 147 people who work in urban neighbourhoods in Denmark, the Netherlands and the UK to describe someone who they felt made a positive difference in their neighbourhood. Using an innovative survey method, Q-methodology, we were able to systematically compare these descriptions and identify five distinct practices for making a difference:

Enduring	building community networks over time to improve life locally for family and neighbours
Struggling	bringing together like-minded people to campaign on local issues
Facilitating	designing opportunities to encourage participation
Organising	mobilising people to take collective action
Trailblazing	forging wide-ranging alliances to find creative responses to local concerns

The research argues that different people make a difference in different ways, often by combining and adapting these approaches to different or changing circumstances.

To watch a short animation of this research, see **www.smart-urban-intermediaries.com/films/**

Durose, C, van Hulst, M., Jeffares, S., Escobar, O., Agger, A., de Graaf, L. (2016) 'Five ways to make a difference: perceptions of practitioners working in urban neighborhoods', Public Administration Review, 76(4), 576-586. **onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/puar.12502**

You need to be the one with a forward–looking perspective and be the one who dares to take the first step. I think that is what making a difference is about
— A SUI in Amsterdam

How did we select the neighbourhoods and identify SUIs?

Across the four cities, we used the same criteria to guide our selection of a specific neighbourhood and in identifying a diverse cohort of smart urban intermediaries.

In each city, our research was anchored in but not limited by a single neighbourhood. We selected neighbourhoods that were recognised as diverse, challenging and vibrant.

We drew on the local knowledge and networks of our co-operation partners to help us to choose the neighbourhoods. We also used existing datasets to establish the comparison across the different areas.

Once we had selected our anchor neighbourhoods, we sought out people who were:

- Associated with the neighbourhood, for example, making an impact working or living there

- Recognised as making a difference in the neighbourhood;

- Actively involved in addressing local issues or challenges by bringing people and resources together in socially innovative ways; and

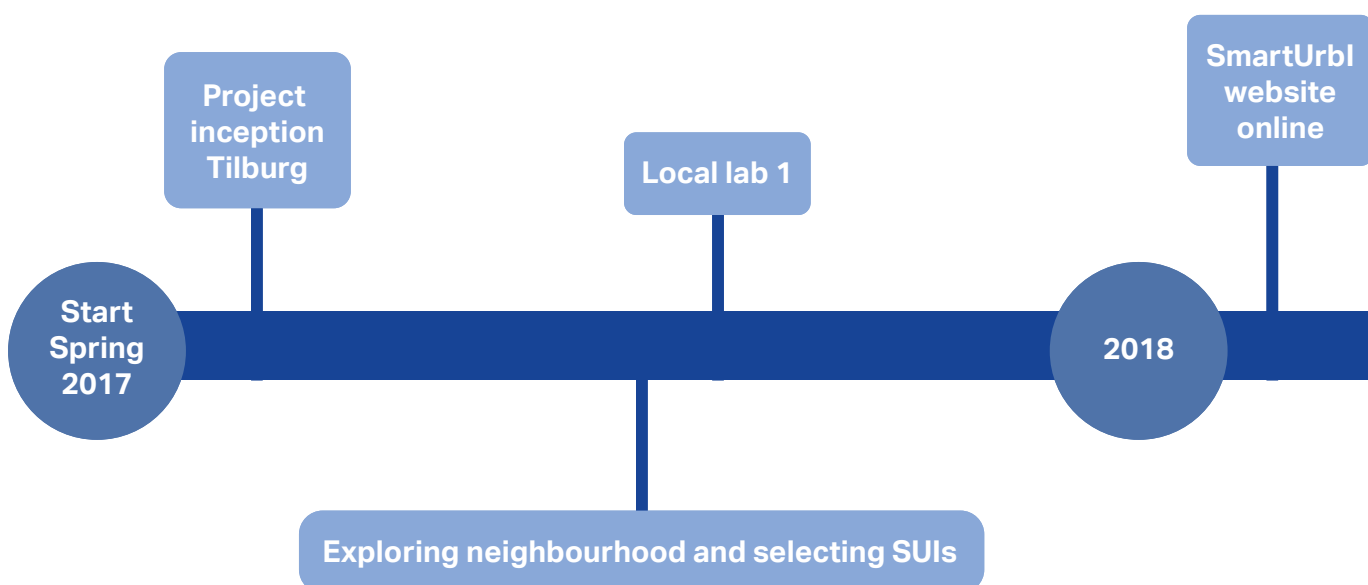- Willing and able to take part in this research.

We wanted to ensure a cohort of SUIs who were diverse in their role and practice, as well as working towards reflecting the demographic composition of the neighbourhood we worked in.

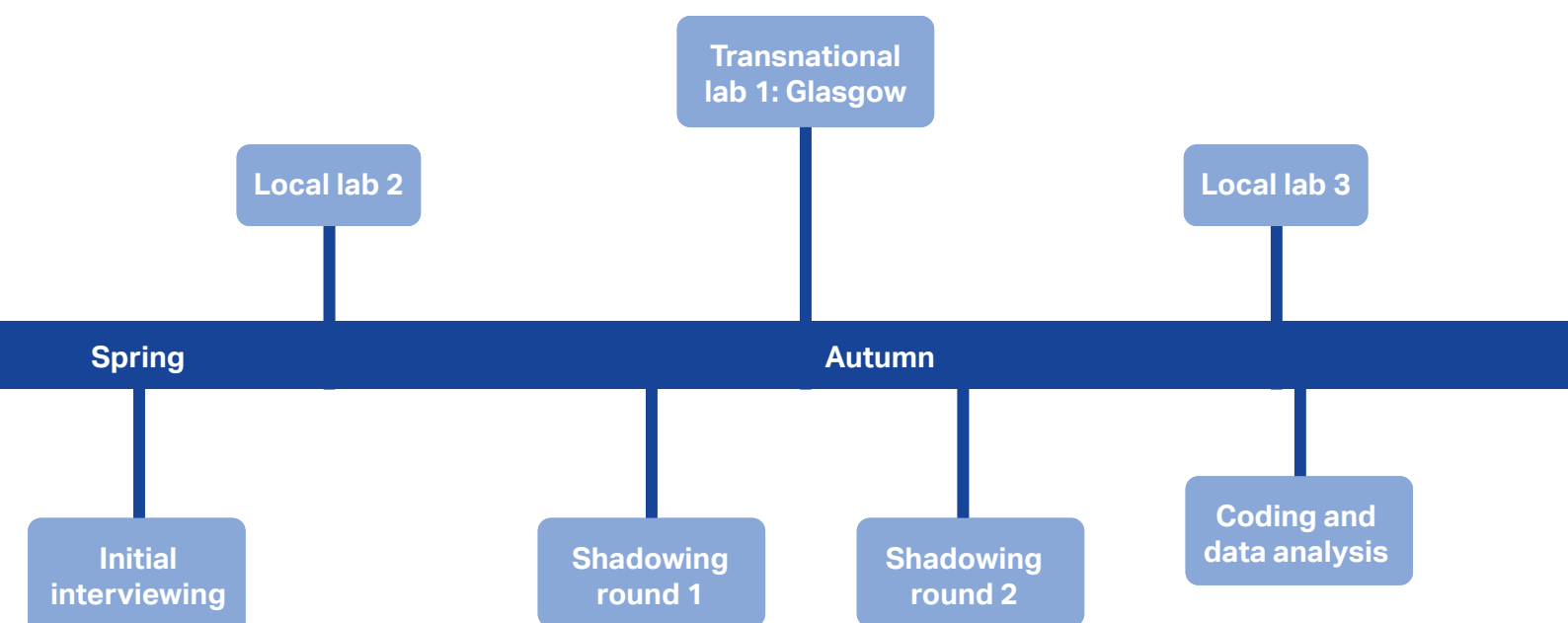# Introducing the SUIs

Sparkbrook and Balsall Heath, Birmingham

☺ Young female activist organising street parties

☺ Male community worker who ran a neighbourhood forum and is now working on a regional hate crime prevention programme

☺ Male leader in neighbourhood mosque and active in welfare initiatives

☺ Female social entrepreneur running events to promote community cohesion in public places

☺ Female arts practitioner, entrepreneur and activist

☺ Senior male youth work manager running a local youth centre

☺ Male chief executive of a local community development organisation

☺ Female community development worker involved in inter-faith and cohesion projects

☺ Female youth worker and trustee of a local community project

☺ Male director of substance misuse project, also tackling crime, safeguarding and sexual health issues

☺ Male political activist, who was a local councillor representing this area for many years

☺ Female health development worker running fitness and well-being projects for women

Project timeline

Project inception Tilburg

SmartUrbI website online

Local lab 1

Start Spring 2017

2018

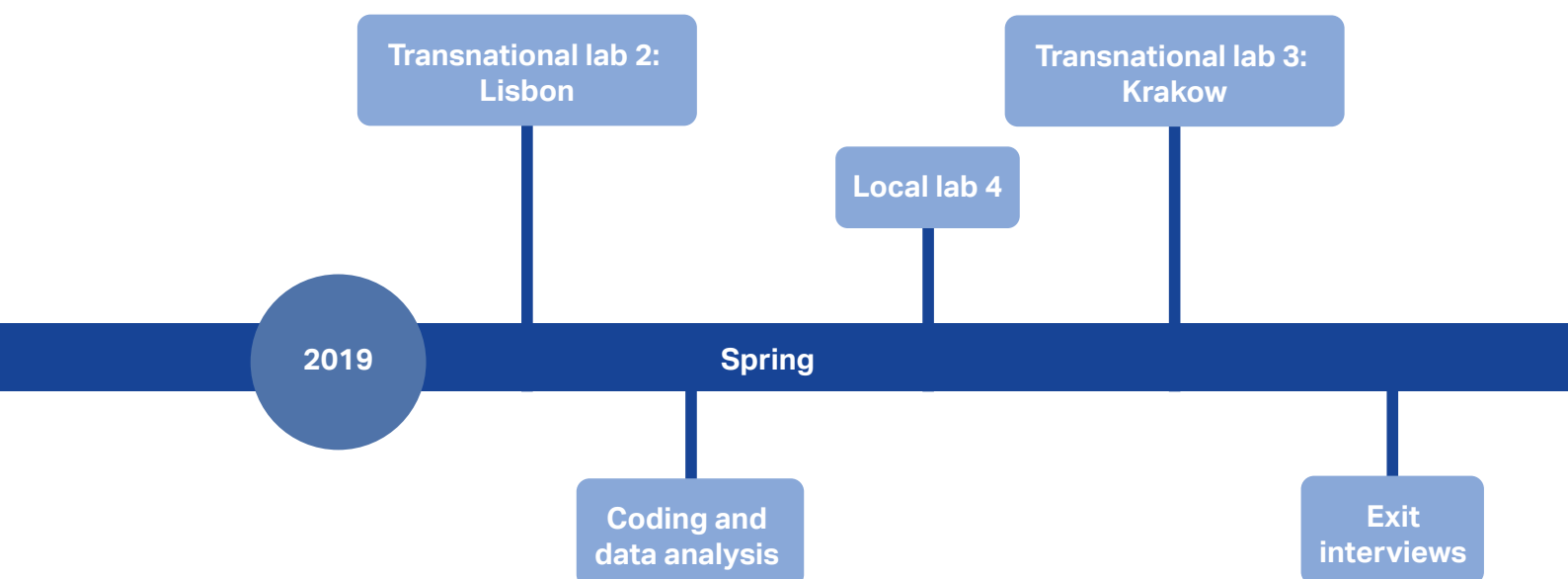**Exploring neighbourhood and selecting SUIs**

Northwest, Copenhagen

☺ Female outreach council worker working to improve environmental activities

☺ Female entrepreneur running a local food business

☺ Male social entrepreneur running events to promote community cohesion in public places

☺ Male social entrepreneur running events to promote community cohesion in public places

☺ Young female working in a community organisation and volunteering at food waste initiatives and community dinners

☺ Female founder of a community organisation working for public safety and volunteering in several community initiatives

☺ Male activist and fundraiser who initiated a fabrication lab in the neighbourhood

☺ Young male local activist who organises street-parties and political debates, and is a member of a local council

☺ Male local activist, member of local council and volunteer in a community organisation

Transnational lab 1: Glasgow

Local lab 2

Local lab 3

Spring

Autumn

Initial interviewing

Shadowing round 1

Shadowing round 2
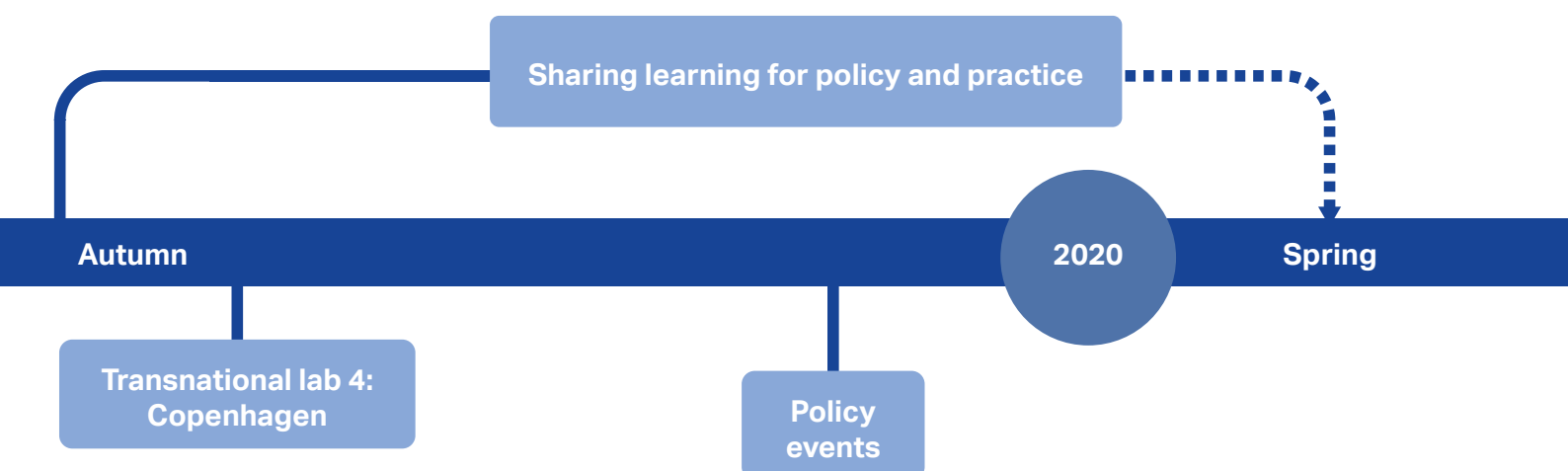
Coding and data analysis

Introducing the SUIs

Govan, Glasgow

☺ Female public sector worker focused on building partnerships and participation

☺ Male social entrepreneur and director of a community-owned neighbourhood centre

☺ Male third sector director of project working with asylum-seekers and refugees

☺ Female community development worker leading neighbourhood community food hub

☺ Female public sector worker in regeneration planning and implementation

☺ Male community development worker managing a community radio and learning centre

☺ Male social entrepreneur leading community-owned and regeneration-focused business

☺ Male social inclusion hub coordinator for community-based housing association

☺ Female director of creative participation, multi-media and arts social enterprise

Transnational lab 2: Lisbon

Transnational lab 3: Krakow

Local lab 4

2019

Spring

Coding and data analysis

Exit interviews

Osdorp and Slotermeer–Slotervaart, Amsterdam

☺ Male professional theatre director and actor running a community theatre with local actors

☺ Female self-employed communication professional organising a community disco

☺ Female director of an organisation for women's emancipation

☺ Female senior citizen organising courses, field trips and meals to connect local seniors

☺ Male welfare worker focusing on active citizens

☺ Young co-founder of a network organising sports events, workshops, awards and political debates for young people from ethnic minorities

☺ Female director of a centre for women's emancipation, focusing on ethnic minority women

☺ Male founder of a social enterprise supporting NGOs and director of an organisation bringing people together to act collectively

☺ Male director of a community initiative taking over an old school building, developing local services by citizens for citizens

☺ Male artist and social designer, manager of a local meeting place, collaborating with municipal welfare services and supporting community initiatives

☺ Male former municipality worker now self-employed and focusing on local welfare

Sharing learning for policy and practice

| Autumn | 2020 | Spring |

Transnational lab 4: Copenhagen

Policy events

How we did the research

Data was collected in several ways through the course of the research, for example, interviews, observational notes, photographs and participatory workshops. Drawing on existing research, including our pilot study, we analysed the data to look at similarities and differences between the SUIs across the four sites.

Here we set out key aspects of how we did the research:

Co-enquiry

Our aim has been to make visible the work of SUIs so that it can be valued and supported. We have done so through providing opportunities for reflection and peer-learning using a model of co-enquiry where researchers, practitioners and co-operation partners collaborate to develop and make sense of the research findings.

We organised four participatory workshops or 'local labs' in each of the four neighbourhoods. These labs created a forum for SUIs, partner organisations and researchers to investigate smart urban intermediation. The labs combined dialogue and deliberation to explore the challenges and opportunities of working in neighbourhoods. The first labs established common ground between the aims of the academic research and the interests of those involved in the project. In later labs, we discussed emerging findings from across the four sites. The labs were highly interactive, making use of a range of participatory formats and facilitation techniques.

Our transnational labs offered the opportunity for SUIs to meet peers across cities and share perceptions about their work and projects. These gatherings took place in Glasgow, Lisbon, Krakow and Copenhagen and provided space to compare different contexts and practices. Transnational labs included study visits to local projects, capturing responses via photovoice and group dialogue, and providing opportunities to network, exchange challenges, compare practices, and set the agenda for successive phases of the project. The Lisbon and Krakow labs also provided the opportunity to assess how our research in northern European cities compared with experiences in other European contexts. All these transnational encounters served as a step towards building a trans-European network and dialogue. The local and transnational labs provided the opportunity to share our emerging findings with our SUIs and partners, and to benefit from their insights and reflections.

Local Lab in Amsterdam, June 2018

Local Lab in Copenhagen, March 2018

Interviews and shadowing

Transnational Lab in Glasgow, September 2018

Local Lab in Copenhagen, September 2019

SUIs were interviewed twice, using a semi-structured format: once at the start and again towards the end of the project. In the first interview, SUIs were asked to introduce who they are and what they do to the researchers, including their background, networks and current priorities.

We used 'shadowing', an observation method that allowed researchers to follow each SUI for two days over the course of the project. Shadowing allowed the researchers to accompany and observe the SUIs in the course of a typical day in order to gain some understanding of the context they are working in and see them in action.

The final interviews were a chance to follow-up on questions that had emerged during the research andfor SUIs to reflect on their involvement in the SmartUrbI project.

Local Lab in Birmingham, May 2019

Transnational Lab in Glasgow, September 2018

Transnational Lab in Krakow, June 2019

Transnational Lab in Lisbon, January 2019

Photovoice

Photovoice is a participatory research method, aiming to give VOICE through PHOTOgraphy. It is often used in community-based research to document, to empower and to start a conversation. Photographs are taken and shared in order to stimulate dialogue and to identify issues that otherwise might be hidden from view.

We asked SUIs to take photos to document and illustrate their work as part of our local labs and shadowing days. We also used photovoice in our transnational meetings for SUIs to find connections between the visits to local projects, their own practice and our emerging findings. There has been a strongly positive reaction to using photovoice in the project, as a way of showing links and overlaps between people across place, position and practice.
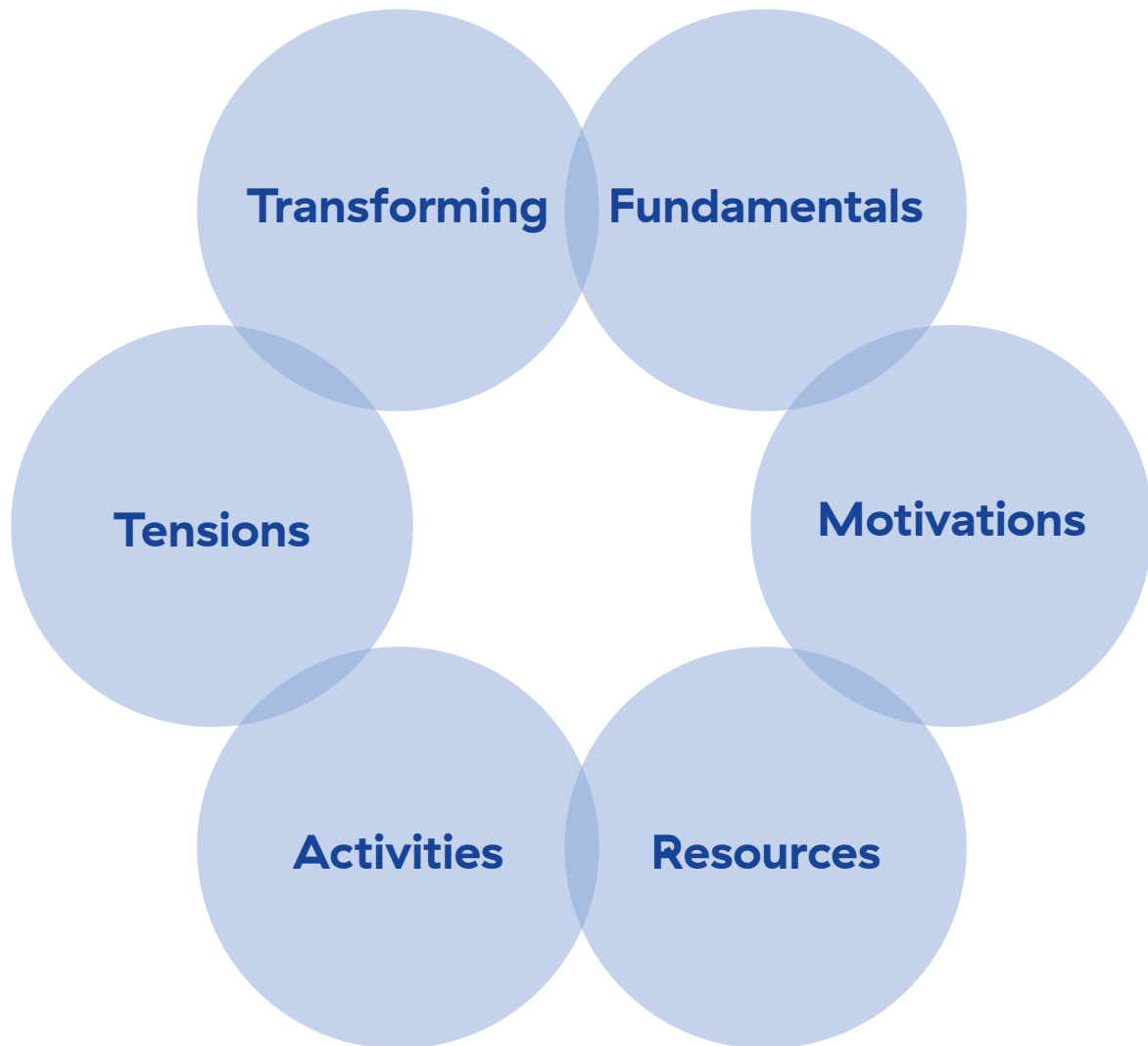

Transnational Lab in Krakow, June 2019

Part 3:
What did we learn?

Six dimensions of smart urban intermediation

Transforming

Fundamentals

Tensions

Motivations

Activities

Resources

A key aim of our research was to acknowledge, value and make visible the important contribution that smart urban intermediation makes to social change, and to influence how these practices can be sustained and developed. We have chosen to express the different inter–related aspects of smart urban intermediation as a series of models to stimulate further thinking and discussion.

These models are informed by the data collected and the reflections of SUIs and partners, and are intended to offer an accessible representation of our findings.

These models are also intended to emphasise the varied and dynamic nature of smart urban intermediation, acknowledging that different SUIs make a difference in different ways.

1. Fundamentals for smart urban intermediaries

This figure sets out six interrelated fundamentals that underpin and inform smart urban intermediation:
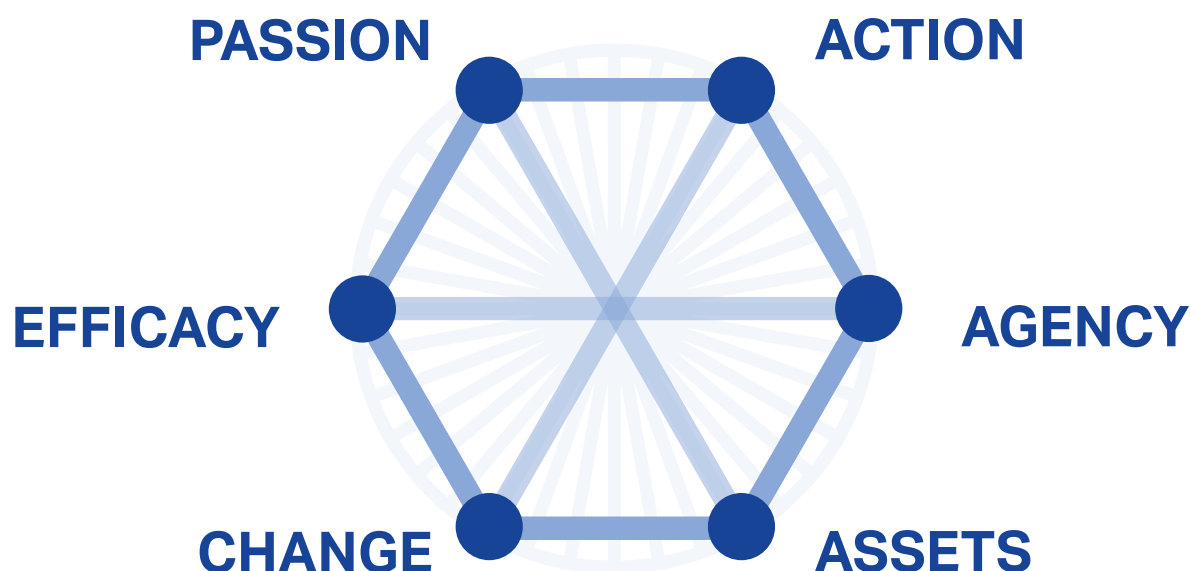
Change: a rejection of the status quo, combined with a readiness to pursue positive change in their neighbourhood, city and beyond.

Most SUIs acknowledged that they seek to effect change as the primary reason for doing what they do.

A SUI in Glasgow reflecting on supporting residents and community organisations to have 'a louder voice', noted 'it's about change … for better outcomes for local residents, jobs, better housing, better links, better networks … and the process to get there is … bringing people together.'

Agency: a sense of their own capacity to take local action, as well as to create opportunities for voice and influence as part of broader efforts for change.

SUIs often have a strong belief in collective power and take a role in mobilising others.

As one SUI in Amsterdam commented: 'I activated the anger of the residents, now [we are] keeping track of whether the agencies are putting their money where their mouth was.' Another SUI from Copenhagen commented, 'I know many people in the public administration. I have learned not to accept "No" for an answer.'

Efficacy: a belief in their own ability or the ability of individuals and communities to effect change through the collective action of ordinary people.

For example, SUIs in Glasgow talked about their personal commitment to being part of exploring and creating a better future that endures.

Action: Being action-oriented, and a sense of persistency in accomplishing local goals, was common amongst SUIs. As one put it: 'The important thing is that you try to do something.'

Assets: an asset-based approach focuses on the strengths and resources of an individual, community or place rather than the deficits.

Many SUIs emphasised the importance of being appreciative towards others.

For example, a Birmingham SUI organises an annual community awards evening to acknowledge the contributions made by others. As another SUI commented, 'all people are valuable – and can contribute with something'.

Passion: a strong personal commitment to their practice was another fundamental of smart urban intermediation. SUIs also placed importance on inspiring others to pursue their passions. As one SUI put it, 'If you are not passionate then you get nowhere!'

2. Motivations

This figure addresses the question of motivation: what catalyses and sustains smart urban intermediation.

ALTRUISM

POLITICAL CAUSE

PERSONAL INTEREST
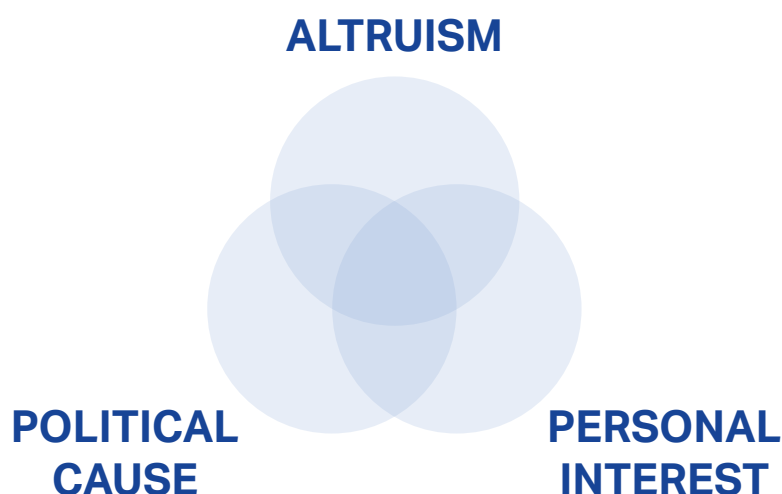
Altruism: this term reflects that many smart urban intermediaries are motivated by a concern for the welfare and interests of others, as demonstrated in a desire to provide service or practical help to those in need or to bring benefits to the wider community.

In Copenhagen, several SUIs expressed their personal satisfaction in contributing to 'the common good' by providing physical and social spaces where people could interact and develop projects.

A number of SUIs in Birmingham talked about how their practice was strongly informed or influenced by their faith. One SUI was involved in setting up a food bank at their mosque to provide poor or homeless people with food, toiletries and other necessities.

In another example, a SUI in Glasgow spoke about growing up in a working-class family surrounded by inequality, poverty, unemployment and seeing people struggling. This experience and their training since have developed their capacity for empathy and compassion: 'people are people: people don't choose to be in a certain circumstance'.

Personal interest: this term reflects that many SUIs acknowledge the personal benefit that their work offers. Such benefits may include fun, friendship or satisfaction; the opportunity to pursue a personal passion; or to learn new skills, and build their own confidence or self-esteem; as well as providing an income, either as paid work in an organisation or as social entrepreneurs.

A SUI in Amsterdam explained that whatever she does also needs to contribute to her own learning and development.

A SUI in Glasgow spoke of how a film-based research project with local asylum seekers aiming to dispel myths through developing an educational resource gave them the opportunity to get back to creative participatory work with local people, study for a masters, as well as generating 'a very beautiful piece of work'.

Political cause: Another crucial motivation for many SUIs was their commitment to a broader political cause, for example, working towards social justice, challenging inequality and gentrification, discrimination or poverty, working for a cause or campaign, standing in solidarity with others, encouraging democratic participation, or tackling local issues by connecting them with a wider struggle.

For example, a SUI in Birmingham described how she has witnessed and experienced social injustice in her own life, often relating to her Muslim faith. This SUI uses community-based activities, especially inter-faith events, to raise issues around all forms of discrimination and to educate herself and others about the need to respect one another, promote rights and opportunities and to care for the environment. She demonstrates her commitment to these values through her behaviour and practice, but also through political work as a regional organiser for a national anti-racism organisation.

Political cause should not be interpreted as related to party politics here. Whilst some SUIs were engaged in electoral politics, for example sitting as a local elected representative or being a party activist, our understanding of political work is broader than formal politics. Indeed, many of the SUIs were explicit in their intentions of staying neutral or avoiding entanglement in local party politics. For example, one SUI who is an artist reflected on the importance of being 'neutral' and the advantage of being seen to have 'no obvious agenda'.

ALTRUISM

POLITICAL CAUSE

PERSONAL INTEREST
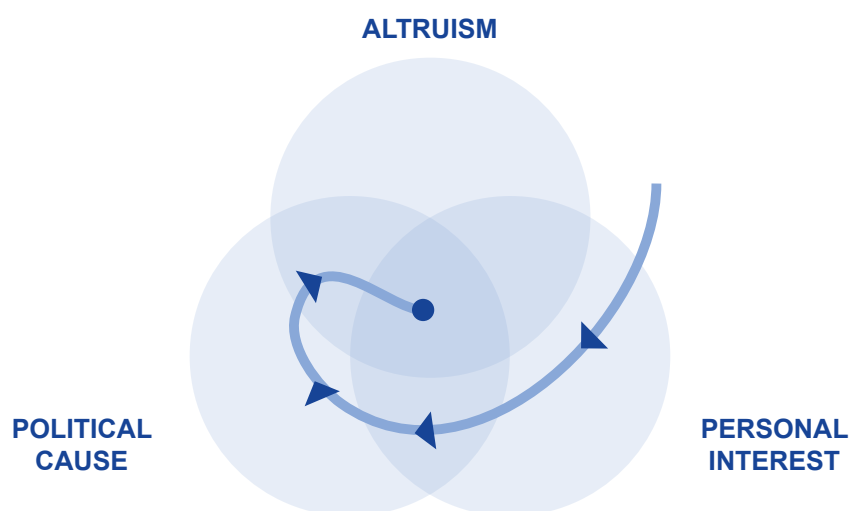
Many SUIs referenced a particular moment, 'spark' or catalysing experience that had deeply informed their work as a SUI or determination to make a difference. This may be an experience within their background, childhood or how they were socialised. Or perhaps an opportunity for action through an area-based initiative as illustrated by many SUIs in Copenhagen.

A SUI in Birmingham was raised within a large family of Jamaican heritage, with a tradition of family get-togethers and community involvement. Her mother has been heavily involved in community activities and our SUI has picked up the baton with her commitment to running local events that encourage people to get to know their neighbours and to enjoy 'quality time' together. This SUI is passing this sense of community down to her own children by delegating tasks and

responsibilities for certain aspects of the communal proceedings, such as selling raffle tickets or giving out leaflets as part of efforts to run local street parties, encouraging their social skills and community membership.

For many SUIs, these motivations may be internalised and tacit, and therefore only discernible through a study of their practices and reflection on them. As such their work provides examples of their values-in-action. For others it was the clear alignment between their personal beliefs and motivations and their role or practice that underpinned their effectiveness.
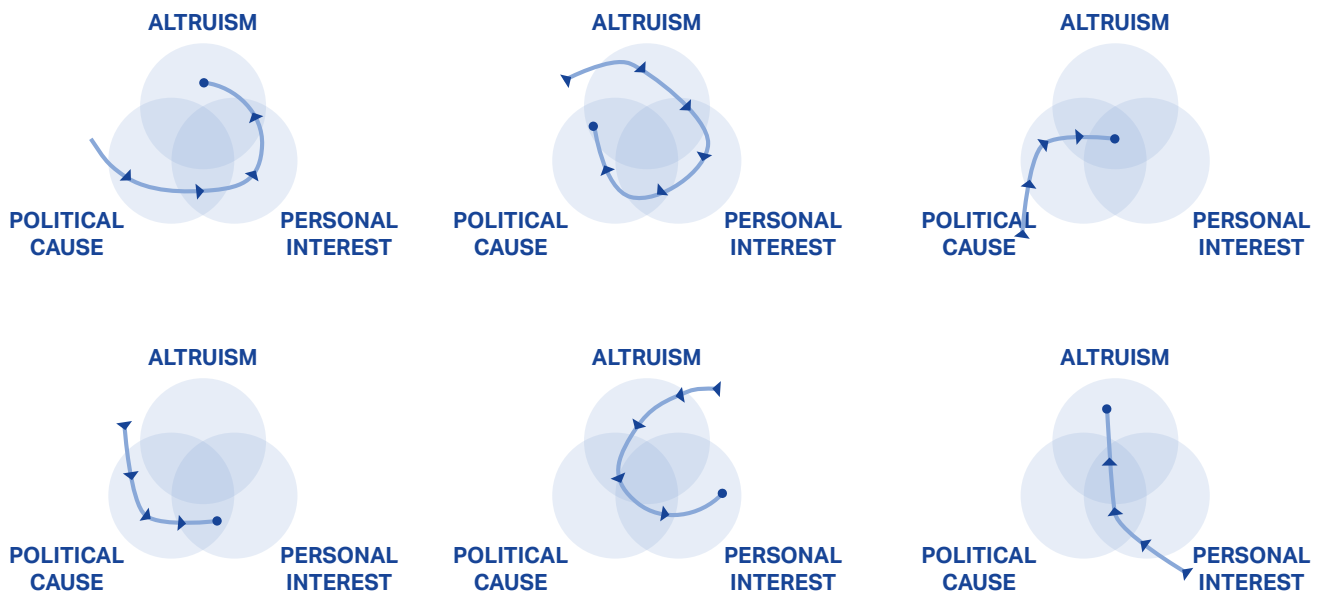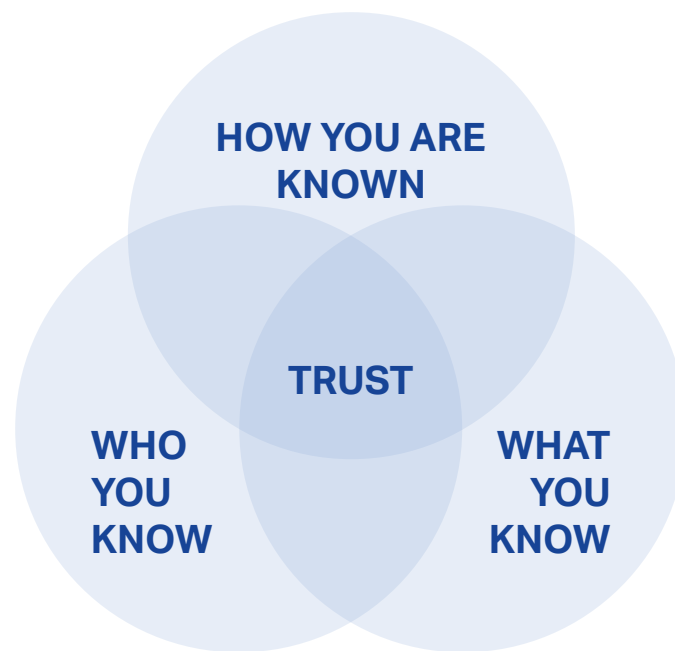

Smart urban intermediation may have different starting points and take different journeys. Such journeys are rarely linear and the direction of travel is not necessarily shared, but is specific to the individual.

For example, a SUI may initially be motivated by altruism and then start to see their work within a broader political struggle. Alternatively, they may also go the other way, starting off positioning their work as political, but then eventually settling into a more altruistic mind-set. Personal interest may not be a primary motivation, but may be an important part of what sustains a SUI's practice over time.

3. Resources

This figure sets out the resources or assets that are typically drawn upon or mobilised in smart urban intermediation.

Who you know: diverse networks of reciprocity and peer support

Smart urban intermediation involves engaging people from across different communities, organisations or environments. To facilitate this, intermediaries actively invest in connections locally, developing strong and often diverse networks.

As one SUI in Copenhagen commented: 'Many people contact us – because we know everybody.' Another SUI stated that it is about finding 'the people – not necessarily those at the top of an organisation – who share your aims'.

These relationships were consciously nurtured, with SUIs carefully choosing their approach on an individual basis. For example, moderating their pitch and considering the form of communication to use. Whilst social media and technology now offer an important way to build relationships and reputation, these were seen as a complementing rather than replacing face-to-face interactions.

SUIs were also strategic in their network building; seeking out people or organisations with different kinds of expertise and connections. They were also prudent in not spending limited personal resources on interactions that were unlikely to be useful or lead to change. As one Glasgow SUI put it: 'We're happy to work with partners, but if they're not bringing anything to the table, or there's no value to that joint working, then just don't do it'.

How you are known: reputation, credibility and integrity

Smart urban intermediaries try to maintain a good reputation, make credible promises and safeguard the integrity of their work and that of the projects they work on or organisations they work for.

For example, as one SUI in Glasgow explained: 'I worked on this for a good eighteen months just preparing the groundwork, getting to know people, talking to organisations and local residents … and just gaining trust. And I think that's a big part of it. And then the official approach started.'

What you know: repertoire of skills, expertise and knowledge

Smart urban intermediation can be understood as a 'craft', with a distinct repertoire developed over time and through experience.

Some SUIs reported that they had lived in the neighbourhood for decades, and over the years had gained detailed historical knowledge and a particular sense of place that they are able to bring to their work. Others who were newer to the neighbourhood were keen to bring their practice, honed through other activities or in other places, to bear in this setting. Many used arts-based practice in this regard.

One SUI, for example, spoke of their developing skills and work over a decade or more as growing from creative participatory work with local people to include organising community events and campaigns; developing a local organisation and managing a team; building and sustaining a business development strategy for the community enterprise; and, seeking to advocate with others on behalf of the community and its organisations and groups.

These resources also help to facilitate or create room to manoeuvre, space for discretion, experiment and to try things out, and support taking risks.

The resourcing of smart urban intermediation also had a material aspect to it: not only funding, but physical spaces and objects. SUIs make use of and often see the different potential in material resources.

For example, a SUI in Glasgow reflected on the importance of physical assets:

> 'everything at our work stems from having the building. So that means we've got a place for people to come, and a place to engage with people, and we've got a space to provide things that people need, and a reason for people to engage with us. And it generates the revenue that we need, and it allows us to access additional funding … what empowers our work is the building.'

However, our data indicated that crucial aspects of their work were not necessarily defined by material resources, but instead by social ones, like communication networks, interpersonal relationships, experiential knowledge and local partnerships.

4. Activities

This figure reflects the focus and aspirations of smart urban intermediaries:

Place-making

People-making

Community-making

We use 'making' here in several ways:
- **Making sense of different situations and wider world**
- **Creating something that was not there before**
- **Assembling different elements**
- **Pursuing change**

People-making: offering encouragement and mentoring, enabling and empowering others through opening up opportunities, sharing knowledge and skills, while fostering connections.

This aspect of smart urban intermediation reflects the one-to-one or group support that helps to build the confidence and self-esteem of individuals and to develop supportive relationships with others. These processes were seen to be particularly critical when supporting the most vulnerable and least heard in a community.

A SUI in Copenhagen works at a shelter for homeless people in the neighbourhood where they work to improve the quality of life for those who live in the shelter and create a sense of safety for the wider community through a range of activities. For example, an initiative selling Christmas trees provided temporary work for shelter residents and enabled new ways of meeting and interacting with others in the neighbourhood. The SUI later worked with residents to develop an urban garden in front of the shelter. The 'harvest festival' that followed was the first time they opened the doors of the shelter to invite neighbours in, which helped to improve relationships in the neighbourhood.

A Glasgow SUI spoke of their community radio station that also develops a range of learning opportunities and courses for local people: 'content goes out and then people get in contact with us saying "I listen[ed] to your programme about the Activate [community development] course and I'm trying to get involved. So that's what I'm saying about that cyclical nature of generate and create, tell the story of and then you get more people who want to be part of that story".

A SUI in Copenhagen, who established a 3-D printing and fabrication workshop in the neighbourhood, reflected on their work: 'it is also about the overall outcome: that it matters to people. That someone establishes themselves as an entrepreneur or develops a product, or has great pleasure in learning something new. So, it's great to see people make progress'.

However, the enrichment was acknowledged to have reciprocal effects; as one SUI put it: 'SUIs also grow from, and in their contacts with, the people they work with.' A Birmingham SUI recounted how much she enjoyed seeing how other women develop personal and social skills and come to enjoy outdoor activities. 'It's exciting times … you talk about it and talk about it and it finally happens … I just love what I do … You see someone's life changing and it's amazing.'

Community-making: supporting collective capacity-building and action; fostering cohesion and forging a sense of shared identity and belonging; creating and holding spaces for people to come together and co-operate or collaborate to tackle issues which matter to them.

A SUI in Amsterdam organises 'The Happiness Disco' a bi-monthly event open to everyone who loves to dance from all parts of the community. It is run entirely by volunteers, mainly local residents, including the DJ and security guard, and local businesses provide catering. The SUI who started it did so because she wanted to 'get the people walking along the streets, from the bike courier to the unemployed, here together.' Everyone is equal on the dance floor.

Another Amsterdam SUI organises a 'Freedom Breakfast' where they create a range of performances with neighbourhood actors who will sing a song, perform theatre piece or improvise with the crowd. After the performances, all participants share a free breakfast.

In Glasgow, SUIs running different local community hubs spoke of the value of the collective activities, such as growing food, cooking meals, digital learning, and community radio. By creating shared cultures of support and respect, other changes then emerged, such as, confidence to get back into work, gaining qualifications, addressing mental ill-health issues and, crucially, making 'real friendships' that could grow outside of the projects and be a foundation for collective action.

Place-making: turning spaces into places by recognising the existing and distinctive assets in a neighbourhood, encouraging a sense of local pride, connecting different issues and agendas with the resources available with an emphasis on the physical environment and making the most of its assets.

A SUI in Copenhagen commented about their work: 'What I try to emphasise in my work is that the neighbourhood continues to keep its identity. That it still has some 'edge' and is diverse. This approach must also be expressed in the physical spaces out here.'

Another SUI in Copenhagen who works to challenge and reduce gun-related gang activity in the neighbourhood explained: 'What I am really concerned about is to get our neighbourhood back to being a vibrant and safe area and that is at the core for almost all the things that we do. Then we aim to make people feel able to go out and use the facilities and resources that are present here in a manner where they feel safe.'

In Glasgow, a SUI spoke of using community ownership of local buildings to bring business and employment back to the area and sustain local historic identity. The resulting financial viability for the organisation has since enabled it to play a key role in supporting local campaigning work on controversial and important issues, for example on the location of a waste management site; local high street re-development; and, learning, training and employment.

In Birmingham, there have been a number of initiatives that have aimed to reclaim the streets as sites for local events. One SUI has organised several successful street parties for her family and neighbours, incorporating fun and food-related activities that deliberately encourage members of different communities to come together and get to know one another. Another SUI has worked in the same neighbourhood with local partners - businesses, faith organisations, voluntary arts organisations and community groups - to organise street iftars[1] and a temporary market on the main road through the area to boost the social economy and improve local pride and cohesion.

We recognise that these activities are necessarily inter-linked, but also that some SUIs may identify with some purposes more than others, and that this work is dynamic and tends to evolve over time, according to changing circumstances and priorities.

For example in Glasgow, one SUI is working to extend their community hub into another local venue **(place-making)** to offer more inclusive spaces **(community-making)** and create further options for learning **(people-making).**

SUIs may start by concentrating on a single issue – connecting and combining things to tackle or achieve something specific but then this later becomes one feature of a wider collective vision. For example, one Amsterdam SUI started by founding a women's centre to support women of all ages, but by using their expertise, network and infrastructure they are now active in developing services and activities to also support men.

Recognising the complexities and inter-connectedness of our neighbourhoods and cities, the range of activities undertaken by SUIs cuts across traditional organisational, sectoral boundaries, policy domains and professional roles. For example:

- people-making has aspects of social work and youth work
- community-making has aspects of community development and organising
- place-making has aspects of community planning and regeneration

It is this range of activity that makes smart urban intermediation both significant yet challenging for urban development.

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1 The evening meal with which Muslims end their daily Ramadan fast at sunset.

5. Tensions

Within the practices of smart urban intermediation there are tensions as expressed in this figure:
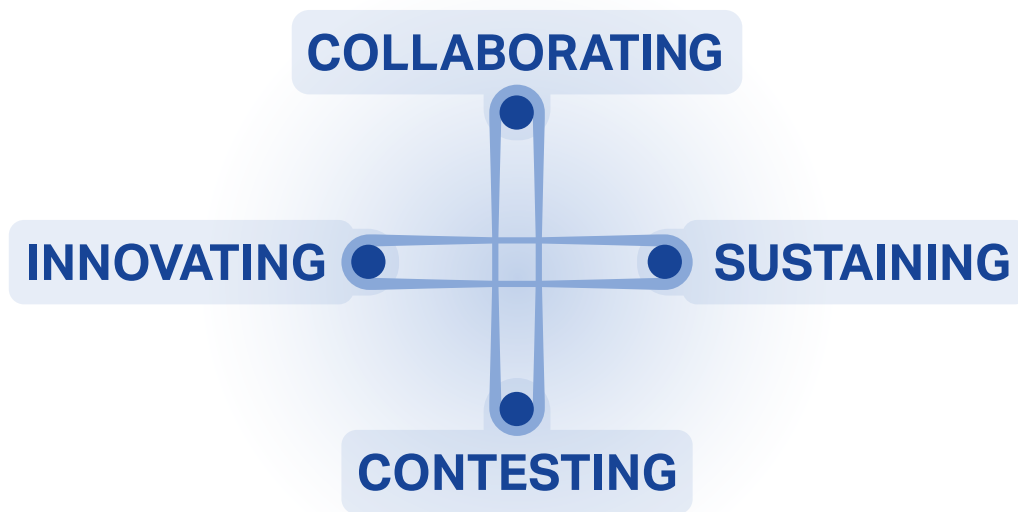
Innovating: being creative or creating new activity or provision

A SUI in Copenhagen developed a 'Fab Lab' in the neighbourhood; these are research and fabrication labs that aim to democratise access to the tools, education and resources for invention and manufacturing. He commented: 'My aim and motivation is to do something that hasn't been done before. So it's great to have made a place that wasn't here before. We are proud of that.'

Sustaining: ensuring an activity or provision is maintained, or being tenacious

Smart urban intermediation is characterised by an ability to work with these tensions creatively. This ability is characterised by a dogged persistence. Many SUIs talked about the importance of not 'giving up', about the need to 'keep on going', not taking 'a no for an answer' and 'the will to insist on making things work'. A SUI put it this way, 'it is about being stubborn – and the capability to get through hard times.'

Collaborating: working with others for a shared purpose

A SUI in Copenhagen explained: 'What motivates me is to work with skilled collaborators. I can get almost high when I talk to an architect and you sense that she really knows her stuff and is able to communicate it in a clear way.'

Contesting: challenging existing ways of working or thinking

A SUI in Glasgow reflected on the importance of developing assets that give financial independence so that groups, or even individuals, can contest, advocate and campaign when necessary, following local priorities and agendas, rather than those of the state or funders. He explains : 'We took out mortgages on everything and have paid off a fortune over the years. But that was always the model, building community assets, and that's what community empowerment

is, when you've got a real asset. And any time I've been involved in advising other developments elsewhere I say… you need to own it, because that's your asset. That will allow you to do things in the future, and borrow money, and fight campaigns.'

Our data showed that within smart urban intermediation, there are tensions and compromises to be found within these different approaches.

For example, pressures to innovate competed with the imperative to try and maintain activities and services that are effective and which people relied upon. In order to maintain vital income, SUIs are typically asked to come up with a new product or service, while they have invested heavily in their current ones. There is also an implied issue here about timescales, with different amounts of time required for successful smart urban intermediation relative to funding milestones and grant periods.

This bias towards novelty is well-documented and found in current practice, as well as research on social innovation. Funders and policymakers must be aware of the problematic consequences of these tendencies to devalue what already works and reward 'gaming' in applications whereby existing projects are re-presented as innovative in order simply to survive..

Strategies of collaborating and contesting were usually held in tension or balanced. Again, some SUIs seemed to prefer one practice more than another. But most used a combination of tactics in their work or as part of a longer-term approach. This entails making the right judgement calls about when to collaborate and when to contest, and about what must be sustained and what requires innovation.

For example, a SUI in Birmingham has developed a fitness and well-being organisation, originally aimed to encourage women from black and minority ethnic backgrounds to participate in fun activities like cycling, running and kayaking. Not only do the women enjoy these events which challenge their own physical limitations, it improves their health and general well-being **(innovating)**. Just as importantly, the SUI makes sure to use every opportunity, including social media, to promote the project **(sustaining)** and confront assumptions about what 'Asian' women can and will do outside the home **(innovating and contesting)**. As her reputation and the group's profile have grown **(sustaining)**, the SUI is able to use her status and network of contacts **(collaborating)**, to raise awareness of the inequalities facing Muslim and other ethnic communities, and to tackle official policies and ill-informed assumptions that continue to discriminate against members of these populations **(contesting)**.

6. Transforming

We use the word 'transforming' in order to reveal and analyse the creation or development of something 'different' that was not there before through smart urban intermediation. Since smart urban intermediation is often 'hidden', a focus on transformations enables us to focus on how SUIs generate impact and meaning in their work.
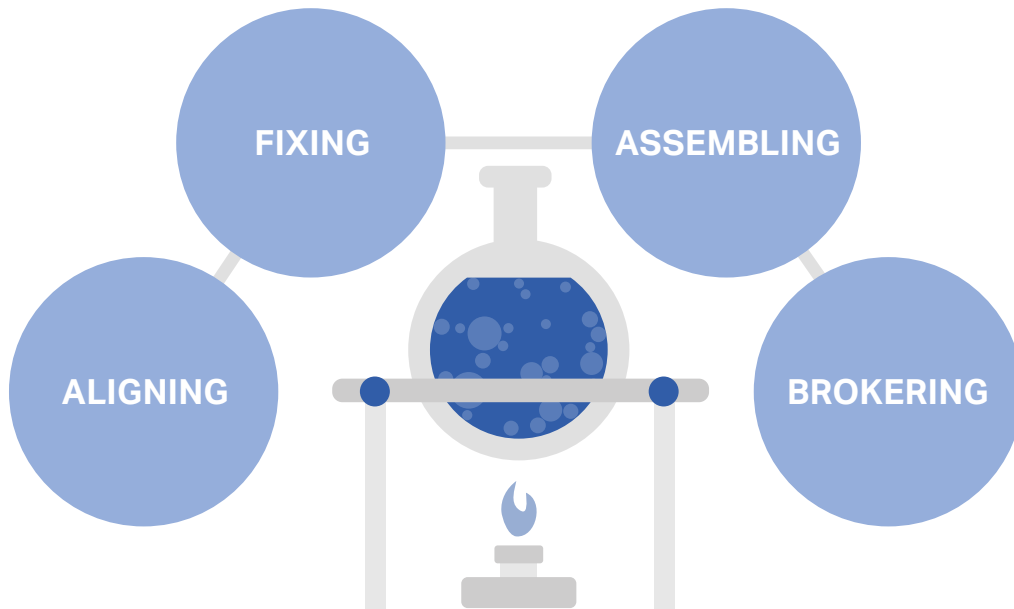
We use the metaphor of 'alchemy' – a 'seemingly magical, creative or innovative process of making a transformation, creation or combination possible'[1] – as a way of describing the change realised through smart urban intermediation. Two SUIs from Copenhagen, offered evocative metaphors to express the essence of smart urban intermediation:

'We are alchemists or gold diggers'
'It's like a bee-thing: we pollinate, flying from flower to flower'
'We are also queen bees ... we like that others also pollinate.'

Transforming takes places through a combination of different practices:

Fixing: immediate, improvised solutions to resolve problems and make something work

SUIs are often compelled to act by obstacles that require immediate attention. For example, a family may need food relief, an unemployed person may seek advice preparing for an imminent job interview, or someone may spot a physical barrier that impedes wheelchair users from moving around the neighbourhood. SUIs typically seek to address emerging difficulties either directly or by connecting to others who can act swiftly to remove or overcome them.

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1. Oxford English Dictionary, 2019

Aligning: identifying a shared direction or goal that allows differing agendas and values to fit together and create a common purpose

SUIs often work in contexts characterised by contrasting ideas about the needs and aspirations of the local neighbourhood, along with competing aims. In these situations, a commitment to making things happen requires a shared vision to underpin action. For example, by building a community bread-oven, a SUI in Amsterdam managed to get senior residents, ethnic minority residents and students to work together, despite initial misgivings by some participants. The process galvanised an ambition to overcome individual isolation and community fragmentation. The location eventually became a place where diverse local people gather to talk and bake together: 'The other day, there was an apple-pie next to a Turkish bread in the oven'.

Assembling: strategic efforts to marshal diverse elements in a coherent form so that something can happen

SUIs working on longer-term projects often facilitate processes that bring together ideas, people, organisations and resources. Sometimes this results in a formal partnership comprising strategic actors from different sectors, representing various organisations and interests. The partnership then becomes a space for developing ideas, negotiating priorities, agreeing shared goals and mobilising resources.

For example, a SUI in Birmingham, a former locally elected politician, used the opportunity posed by a consultation process by the city government on the question of democratic localism to invite key local players to an informal gathering. He used his considerable knowledge of the policy context, with its commitment towards neighbourhood devolution, along with extensive local knowledge and contacts built up over years of public service, to convene a discussion (involving other SUIs) based on both expertise and credibility. By using his initiative and connections to consult with likely allies, this strategy allowed the group to explore the prospects for something innovative that could potentially empower local residents. This agreement then fed-in to the formal process to establish a community-led localism proposition.

Brokering: connecting people, structures, resources, problems and opportunities

SUIs often find themselves as connecting points in complex networks. From that position in-between (systems/communities; local/national priorities; frontline/strategic work) they are able to broker contacts and negotiate exchanges to make things happen. For example, they may translate the needs of local communities into language that persuades public or third sector organisations to take action. Or they may connect people who are pursuing similar goals but from different positions or perspectives. Sometimes this entails fostering relationships that unlock investment and resources, or other forms of commitment which can enable local action.

These practices do not stand in isolation, but are necessarily integrated in order to deliver change over the longer term. For example:

The still ongoing strategy, started in 2006, of developing and implementing the Central Govan Action Plan illustrates how SUIs combine these four transformative practices over the short, medium and long term to support urban renewal. The process entailed **aligning** multiple

interests and priorities into a shared vision and programme to regenerate physical infrastructure for economic, social and cultural development. Doing so entailed **assembling** a collaborative partnership that over time enabled regular meetings between local organisations from public, third and community, and private sectors. Along the way, SUIs put considerable effort into **brokering** connections and relationships between residents, officials, politicians and activists. **Fixing** immediate issues and accomplishing 'quick wins' played an important role in building trust and momentum, thus helping to **align** interests and **assemble** long-term partnerships. For example, renewing derelict shops, improving landscapes, attracting new businesses, or creating youth and senior services, employment programmes and community safety initiatives. This focus on achievable short- and medium-term projects provided stepping stones for the ambitious multi-million investment that is now beginning to galvanise in Govan.

Part 4:
Why does this matter?

In a context of unprecedented social, political and environmental challenges, understanding how we can bring people together to act collectively in pursuit of positive social change is of clear importance.

In our research, we offer a crucial complement to the technology-driven vision of the smart city, demonstrating the **importance of the social and relational practices** of smart urban intermediation to urban development. Indeed, investing in such visions of the future city may be difficult without acknowledging, investing and working with those individuals who are able to make a difference in neighbourhoods.

Smart urban intermediaries come from different backgrounds. By connecting with them, the formal institutions of urban governance have much to gain from their diverse experiences and expertise, as well as benefiting from their reach into the city's under-represented populations. The reputations, networks and skills of SUIs **take time to develop** and the actions they initiate may take years to come to fruition. Indeed, our research has highlighted the **value of sustaining as well as innovating.** But in other ways, the simplicity of their practice: a commitment to place, bringing people together and engaging with people as people can yield immediate advances at the neighbourhood level.

Whilst the cities andneighbourhoods where we have undertaken research are inevitably different, we have discovered some **commonalities in terms of contextual factors** that enable or prevent social innovation. It is important to acknowledge and understand these in order to optimise the conditions that support the efforts of SUIs and enable them to overcome barriers and challenges.

Major obstacles are posed by the fragmentation and inequalities faced by communities living in many urban neighbourhoods, with some **experiencing poverty and severe lack of opportunities** to improve both their life chances and living conditions. These can limit people's aspirations and engender cynicism or apathy about the prospects for change or fairness. Consequently, many residents feel disenfranchised or "left behind" relative to the progress enjoyed by others in the wider society.

The **decline in public services and community-oriented infrastructure** notably in the UK, has left many neighbourhoods without the facilities, services and hubs that support social interaction and learning. As a consequence, people who want to make a difference and to campaign for change can find it difficult to meet, to obtain advice and to gain knowledge of what resources or funding might be available to develop innovative projects and support local initiatives. Open access places, such as community rooms or parks, offer important spaces for people to share ideas, to create local identity and to gather for shared activities or events that generate local pride and security.

Illustration by Dr. Sandra Geelhoed

Dr. Sandra Geelhoed is a sociologist, art educator and co-operation partner. Dr Geelhoed is conducting a research project on narrative accountability at the Research Centre for Social Innovation at HU University of Applied Sciences, Utrecht. Since January 2019, she produces visual accounts of conferences, meetings and gatherings, in narrative research schemes and participatory action research (PAR) settings. Through these experiments, she explores the notion of representation of people's voice.

Networks that enable dialogue and co-operation across different sectors and interest groups improve communication and mutual understanding between people with diverse roles and personal histories. Thus, **opportunities to meet and exchange** views can significantly increase the effectiveness of SUI strategies for assembling resources and aligning agendas, especially where there are good relationships and long-standing respect between potential collaborators. But SUI activities do not always have to involve partnerships or negotiated alliances. Creative or challenging solutions also require **resources and room for independent action**, especially to promote innovation and change. At neighbourhood level this might be small-scale encouragement, short-term (seed-corn) funds or support-in-kind from public or private sources. SUIs are entrepreneurial and determined. They are adept at levering in resources and achieving win-win solutions, but in order to get pilot projects going and to sustain successful initiatives, some form of practical assistance is necessary, sometimes provided from within community assets but more usually by external agencies or donors.

Relationships between people working in communities and those in formal institutions can therefore open up access to much needed resources and guidance that ensures that SUIs are successful in their efforts and are able to sustain momentum. However, the flow of expertise, assets and information is not just one-way. The **attitudes of community-facing professionals and politicians** can play a big part in developing mutual respect and learning. Organisational culture can ease or hinder this exchange; as can unhelpful community engagement strategies that fail to address power differentials or to acknowledge diverse traditions and needs. The separate policy briefing that accompanies this report considers these barriers and enablers in more detail. It explores how they relate to capacity, governance and resources; and includes recommendations for improving the conditions that can support and sustain the work of SUIs.

Our research has also helped to foster a trans-European learning community, offering the opportunity to learn from others and from elsewhere. As cities around the world start to organise differently in response to the challenges that face them, continuing to create opportunities to learn is ever more important. In this research, we have sought to **value and make visible the vital contribution** that smart urban intermediation makes to our neighbourhoods and cities. Whilst we want to acknowledge the individuality of SUIs and the differences between them, we have focused here on offering models for thinking in order to understand what they do, how they do it and why it matters. We hope that this report provides useful ideas for developing smart urban intermediation.

The Smart Urban Intermediaries project in numbers

1 project funded from 165+ competing applications

40 Smart Urban Intermediaries

3 funders in one consortium

16 local labs

€1.1m research investment

4 transnational labs

1 pilot study

108 interviews

5 research institutions

75 shadowing days

10 academic researchers

26 blog posts

19 partner organisations

250 subscriptions to newsletter

6 cities in five European Union countries

Appendix 1: Smart Urban Intermediaries

Glasgow

Anne Philbrow, Urban Roots

Jim McMillan, Sunny Govan Radio

Martin Avila, Kinning Park Complex

Moya Crowley, Plantation Productions

Owen Fenn, Govan Community Project (until March 2019)

Pat Cassidy, Govan Workspace

Ryan Davidson, Govan Housing Association

Susan Hanlin, Central Govan Action Plan, Glasgow City Council

Yvonne Reilly, Glasgow City Council

Birmingham

Adill Hadi, Concord Youth Centre

Abdullah Rehman, formerly of Balsall Heath Forum

Adrees Sharif, Paigham e-Islam mosque

Chantall Faure, Unity Streets

David Cusack, Chief Executive, St Paul's Community Development Trust

Mahmooda Qureshi, Hope not Hate and Birmingham Islamic Society

Marianne Salmon, Concord Youth Centre and Ashiana Community Project

Mohammed Ashfaq CEO of KIKIT Pathways to Recovery Drug & Alcohol treatment service / Chair of Sparkbrook neighbourhood forum.

Naseem Akhtar, Project Manager Saheli Hub

Noha Nasser, Mela Enterprise

Sandra Hall, Friction Arts

Tony Kennedy, Honorary Alderman, Birmingham City Council, former councillor for Sparkbrook Ward

Netherlands

Mostafa el Filali, Lucas Community

Peter de Lange, Lucas Community

Wasilis Phatas, Combiwel

Peik Suyling, Buurtwerkplaats

Youssef Yaghdi, Youssef Yaghdi Advice

Dorendel Overmars, Geluksdisco

Mourad el Otmani, Young Nieuw West

Mimoent el Fakih, Nisa4Nisa

Hans Krikke, SamenWonen/SamenLeven

Emel Can, SamenWonen/SamenLeven

Joke Kop, Vrouw en Vaart

Joke Veldkamp, ESAN

Sebo Bakker, ZID theater

Denmark

Dan Kreutzfeld, Local Council Bispebjerg (Board Member)

Rasmus Petrussen, Vibe & Tone

Mads Mazanti, Vibe & Tone

Finn Dyrby Hermansen, Local Council Bispebjerg (Board Member)

Rasmus Grusgaard, Fab Lab Nordvest

Lisann K. Gisesson, Mors madpakke

Signe Larsen, Kirkens Korshær

Jonna Daldorph, Taking back the streets - Nordvest

Tanja Møller, Local Council Bispebjerg (Secretariat)
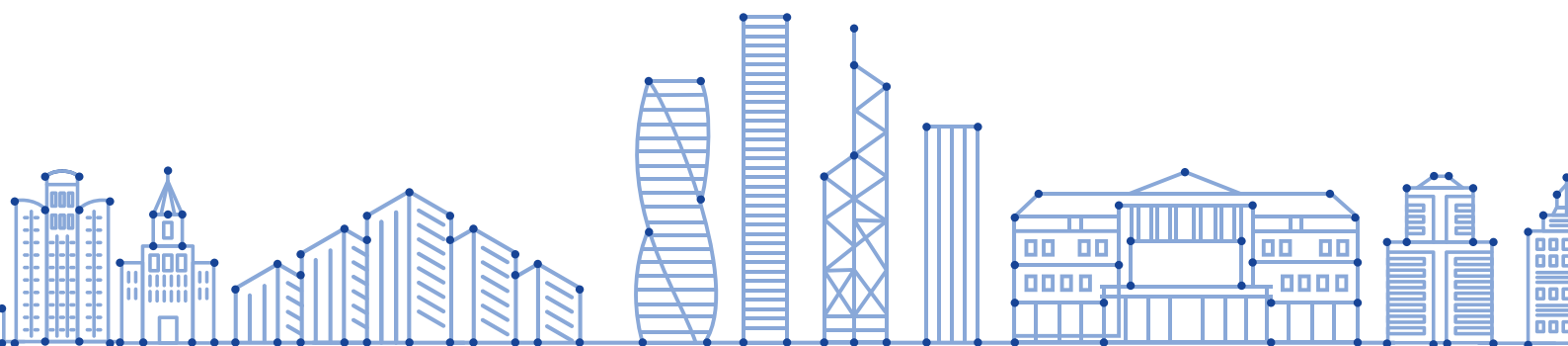
Appendix 2: Co-operation partners/organisations

Scotland

Andrew Magowan, Inspiring Scotland

David Allan, Scottish Community Development Centre

Derek Rankine, Scottish Urban Regeneration Forum

Elaine Cooper, Scottish Urban Regeneration Forum

Kaela Scott, Involve

England

Karen Cheney, Birmingham City Council Neighbourhood Support and Development Unit

Saidul Haque, Citizens UK (Birmingham)

Mosese Dakunivosa, Citizens UK (Birmingham)

Becca Kirkpatrick, former community organiser, Citizens UK (Birmingham)

Ben Lee, Director, National Association of Neighbourhood Management

Tim Hughes, INVOLVE

Netherlands

Thijs van Mierlo, Landelijk Samenwerkingsverband Actieve bewoners

Milja Kruijt from Landelijk Samenwerkingsverband Actieve bewoners

Sandra Geelhoed Research Centre for Social Innovation, HU University of Applied Sciences

Han van Geel, Landelijk Platform Buurtwerkers

Denmark

Områdefornyelsen, Københavns kommune

Simon Post og Anne Steen, Områdefornyelse Nord Vest

Anne Tortzen, Center for Borgerdialog

Lone Kelstrup, Gate 21

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Socially smart cities: Making a difference in urban neighbourhoods

November 2019