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Innovation Network

SOCIAL OUTCOMES



London Borough of Lewisham

The High Street Headcount and Survey

This represents the first time a council has conducted a survey to better understand the demographic make-up of businesses in its town centres (for example ethnicity, gender etc of business owners, plus the split between independent and larger firms) and to champion and support the diversity of the high street retailer offer. The headcount and survey have recently been repeated with the results due shortly. An analysis of the results will allow the council to establish how Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic businesses have fared in the wake of the pandemic.

The inaugural survey saw the Council win at the Federation of Small Businesses Local Government Awards 2022 for its support for the small business community. The authority won the COVID-19 Support and Recovery category, aimed at highlighting those that had made the biggest impact on local SMEs during the Covid crisis and beyond.

The disproportionate deaths due to COVID-19 among Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities shone a spotlight on the systemic inequalities they experience in all areas of their lives. That includes businesses. The ground-breaking census of Lewisham’s high streets reflects the council’s commitment to tackle inequalities; rebuild the local, post-COVID economy; and to ensure everybody has the opportunity to succeed.

Post-pandemic recovery in the retail sector is considered fragile, given the huge impact that the pandemic had on customer footfall, sales and business liquidity. The Council commissioned this first-of-its-kind study to understand and address the unique challenges local retailers face as they

emerge from the pandemic – with an emphasis on identifying any disparities for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic business owners.



Lewisham Mayor Damien Egan and Business Owner

The initial independent survey was conducted by London South Bank University Business School in April 2021 across 10 of the busiest high streets in the borough, including Catford, Deptford and New Cross. The study offered students, many of whom have local connections, a valuable opportunity to apply their learning in a critical business setting. In addition, it is a chance for the University to engage with the local community and contribute to the Council's Covid-19 recovery plan for independent high street businesses.

The insight gathered from the survey helped the council shape its services and future approach to the needs of ethnic minority owned and run businesses, who serve Lewisham's communities and play such a vital role in the local economy. The second survey was conducted in early 2023.

Key findings from the first survey:

70% of businesses on Lewisham's high streets are independent. These businesses want to be more self-sufficient, so they are in a better position to weather any future crisis. In response, the council is offering a range of practical support to empower them to strengthen their businesses, from free courses in book-keeping to building local networks to share knowledge and experiences.

Two thirds of the independent shops and services on the borough's high streets are owned by Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic entrepreneurs. Mistrust of authorities is a common issue and has led to poor uptake of council-led business support. Lewisham is addressing this through increased face-to-face engagement, developing local peer-led initiatives and partnering with trusted business networks. The Council is also offering discounts on Federation of Small Businesses memberships for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic retailers.

Local retailers need an increase in footfall. High street business owners rely on in-person sales to bolster revenues, but footfall levels are still perceived to be lower than they were pre-pandemic. The Council is implementing a series of environmental improvements to make town centres more

appealing places to visit, alongside running initiatives such as the ongoing Shop Safe Shop Local campaign to actively encourage residents to support their local businesses.



Cllr Kim Powell (Cabinet Member) and Business Owners

Lewisham's intention, subject to funding, is to conduct a business headcount study every year and to re-evaluate its strategies in light of the findings to ensure they are having the desired impact on the high streets. Although the Council already offers a robust programme of support for local businesses, the findings from the surveys mean it can be even more targeted in the types of support offered. This is about ensuring Lewisham is giving all entrepreneurs the tools to succeed, regardless of their ethnicity or background.

For the full findings of the first report or to read the executive summary, please visit www.lewisham.gov.uk/highstreetstudy/

Cllr Kim Powell, Cabinet Member for Business and Community Wealth Building, introduces the report via a short film - www.youtube.com/watch?v=buNcLm7Ee3s

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