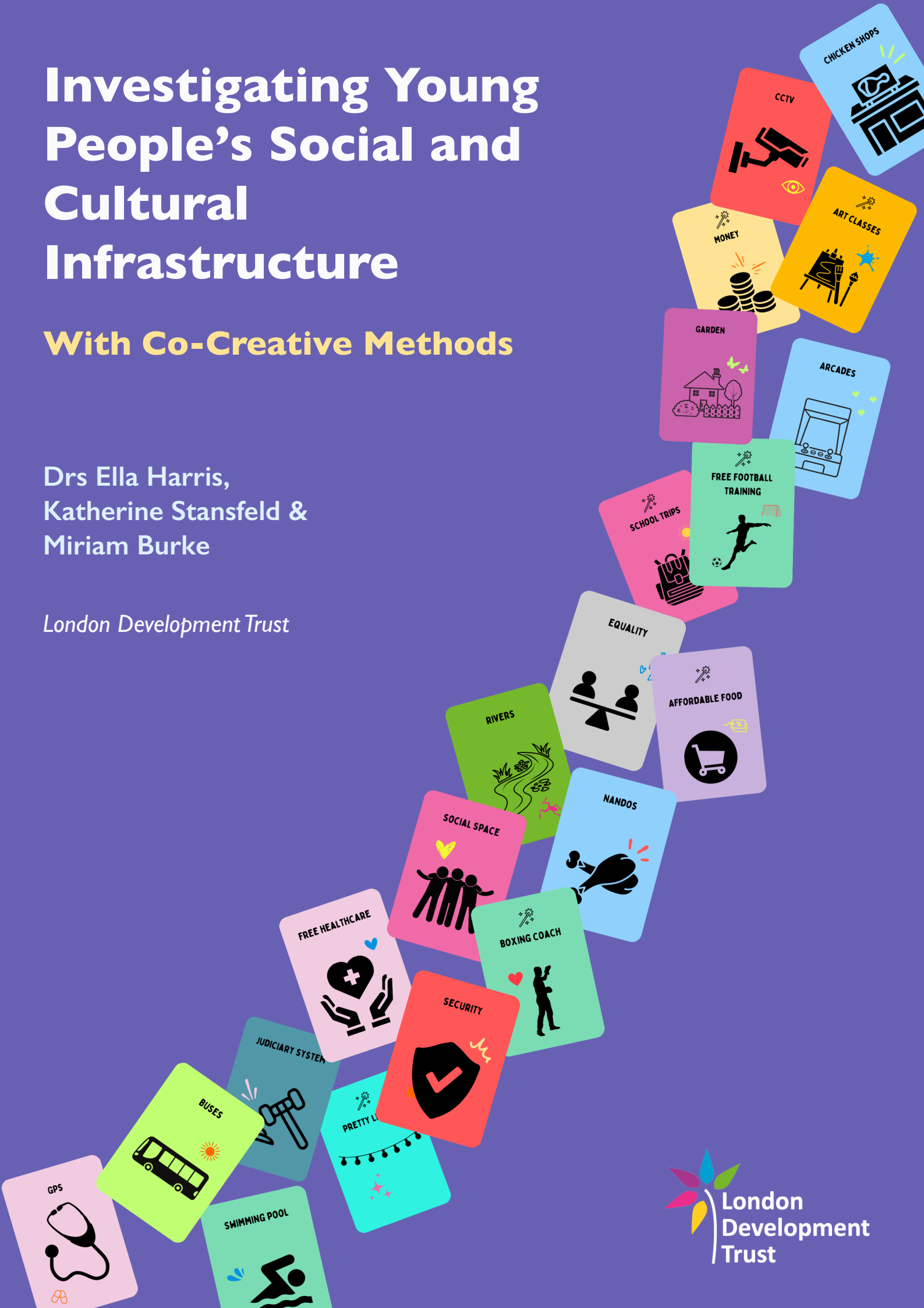


# Investigating Young People's Social and Cultural Infrastructure

With Co-Creative Methods

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*London Development Trust*



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## About London Development Trust

London Development Trust (LDT) is a social sustainability organisation with an embedded research consultancy team. The research team brings a cultural geographical approach to explorations of social and environmental issues as well as to impact evaluations. They specialise in creative ways of doing and communicating research. The work of London Development Trust more broadly includes managing community and creative venues, facilitating community stewardship of green spaces and running large-scale environmental engagement projects.

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## Executive Summary

**Rationale:** The British Academy's [social and cultural infrastructure](#) work theme explores the importance of this infrastructure for policymaking and how social and cultural infrastructure interventions can address policy aims and challenges. A first phase of work focused on the use of social infrastructure to support the social fabric of places, treating social infrastructure as an infrastructure, and defining the purpose of social infrastructure. A second phase of work in this area, Valuing People, Places and Spaces, is underway, and a core focus of this phase is how social and cultural infrastructure can best be measured and valued.

It is incredibly important to factor in young people's experiences as measurement tools and metrics are defined and created so that, when used in policy settings, these methods accurately identify the adequacy of social and cultural infrastructure for young people. The British Academy has therefore commissioned London Development Trust to undertake this research project investigating young people's views and needs in relation to social and cultural infrastructure.

**Aims:** Therefore, the aims of this study are to:

- Examine what young people understand by social and cultural infrastructure
- Co-create, with young people, a reporting tool for identifying and articulating the resources they need to thrive socially and culturally
- Explore how policy makers can better accommodate youth voices
- Work with the British Academy to integrate our findings into their broader work on Social and Cultural Infrastructure

**Overview:** This study develops a co-creative measurement tool that can be used with young people, enabling them to self-report their needs in relation to social and cultural infrastructure. We worked with 58 young people (12-20 year olds) from four diverse London communities to trial and develop an innovative card deck method while simultaneously gathering findings about the needs and experiences of young Londoners.

**Methods:** Our co-creative card deck method involved:

- Conducting a literature review and extracting 'things' that other researchers have identified as social and cultural infrastructure
- Creating a card for each 'thing' and adding thinking prompts to the back of each card
- Colour coding cards to reflect categories of 'things'
- Running four focus groups with young people where, through a gamified activity, we asked them to:
  - ◆ Review which cards they thought were important for progressing their social and cultural goals
  - ◆ Create their own cards to reflect other things they might need, as well as creating items with arts and crafts materials
  - ◆ Create 'activation' cards to reflect what is needed to make core items useful, accessible and enjoyable (e.g., street lights to make a park safe, plug sockets to make Wi-Fi more useful)
- Using the cards young people created to produce additions to the card deck

- Deriving new categories, based on their additions

The card deck method made the nebulous concept of social and cultural infrastructure more tangible to young people so they could identify and articulate the component features that constitute and 'activate' social and cultural infrastructure for them. The gamified and creative approach ensured deep engagement and encouraged young people to think exploratively, while also supporting equitable participation.

The literature review card deck is available to view [here](#) and the working version of the young people's additions are available to view [here](#).

**Findings:** Headline findings from this research include:

- Ontological security is crucial for young people's access to social and cultural infrastructure. The young people in this research in London feel pervasively and acutely unsafe and this is a huge barrier to them accessing social and cultural infrastructure. Measures to ensure young people's safety and mitigate their concerns must be central to policies looking to improve youth access to social and cultural infrastructure
- Young people's scales of access can be much smaller than that of adults. Many young people seldom leave their local areas meaning that the closure of social and cultural spaces and resources in local areas impact them more intensely
- 'Hard' elements of social and cultural infrastructure are only valuable to young people with the right 'soft' elements to 'activate' them (e.g., security and surveillance are deemed essential by young people to create an environment in which they can access and enjoy social and cultural institutions)
- The 'how' is as important as the 'what' of social and cultural infrastructure. The term 'activation' can also capture this idea, showing, for example, how street lights are needed to 'activate' a park, or female-only sessions are needed to 'activate' a gym. This concept also illuminates how what 'activates' social and cultural infrastructure varies from person to person
- Accessibility and awareness are key. Young people are often unable to access social and cultural places, activities and events because of safety or affordability. Furthermore, young people have poor awareness of the social and cultural infrastructure that is available to them.
- People are an important dimension of social and cultural infrastructure. From teachers to sports coaches to corner shop staff, people are important to young people for making them feel comfortable in an area and supporting them to develop social and cultural capital
- It is hard to differentiate 'good' and 'bad' social and cultural infrastructure. Some 'bad' social experiences can be formative for young people, especially with regards to developing independence, making it hard to create a clear binary between good and bad social and cultural infrastructure
- Businesses are important social and cultural spaces for young people. While the role of business is normally seen as funding and supporting social and cultural infrastructure, young people identified local businesses as important social and cultural spaces in their own right
- 'Aspirational Infrastructure' is important to young people. Young people value the existence of spaces that support their social and cultural dreams, even if they don't access these spaces day to day

**Recommendations:** We have drawn recommendations both for how to value and measure social and cultural infrastructure and for how to produce and maintain young people's social and cultural infrastructure. Our recommendations for valuing and measuring social and cultural infrastructure are:

- To build on the success of the card deck as a co-creative thinking tool in this project by developing and refining it through national research
- To test a range of other 'games' and uses for the card deck that support different avenues of investigation into social and cultural infrastructure (see Recommendations on Valuing and Measuring for details.)

Our recommendations for producing and maintaining youth social and cultural infrastructure are:

- Considering Safety. Safety must be considered when planning infrastructure for young people. This includes how to mitigate actual, everyday threats but also how to mitigate subjective experiences of ontological insecurity. Policy makers need to focus on adaptations that can make young people feel safer such as:
  - ◆ Organising visits to cultural and social institutions via schools, youth clubs or other spaces with trusted adults (this could involve group trips or could mean establishing links between schools or youth clubs and cultural institutions, so that young people can be introduced to institution workers in advance, etc.)
  - ◆ Hiring and training people at social and cultural institutions to do thorough outreach work. This includes not just advertising events in 'hard to reach' communities but going as far as establishing, with young people, safe ways for them to travel to institutions as well as listening and responding to their other concerns
  - ◆ Considering safety and inclusivity when programming events and activities
  - ◆ Providing extensive and accessible information so that young people know what to expect in a space/from an event
- Ensuring that social and cultural events are free or affordable
- Ensuring that there is low cost, or ideally free (as well as safe) travel to get to key social and cultural spaces (this could involve, for example, putting on free shuttle buses for cultural events, with designated safe meeting spots)
- Taking advantage of 'pivotal people' by training sports coaches, teachers, community leaders, etc. to help signpost young people to social and cultural sites and activities
- Planning spaces to be religiously and culturally inclusive, including prayer spaces, appropriate food and signs in multiple languages
- Training for workers in social and cultural spaces to ensure they are supportive and welcoming to young people and knowledgeable and compassionate about young people's safety concerns
- Advocating for the importance of affordable housing, reliable healthcare and adequate financial support as inextricable from and indeed dimensions of social and cultural infrastructures, as these provisions increase young people's sense of ontological security and safeguard their social support networks

**Conclusions:** We have found that young people's perception of social and cultural infrastructure and their needs in relation to it differ significantly from understandings in literature based on adult experiences. It is crucial that youth-specific angles on social and cultural infrastructure (e.g. the importance of safety and security, the desire for 'aspirational infrastructure' etc.) are factored into measurement tools so that policy makers and stakeholders can know whether social and cultural

infrastructure provisions are adequate for and valuable to young people. We believe that the co-creative card deck method this research has trialled can be an inventive and successful way of valuing and measuring social and cultural infrastructure with young people.

[You can watch a short video about this research here.](#)

## Introduction

“We made our own perfect city, making sure to consider the most important factors for a safe environment, where people of our generation can thrive.” (Young Research Participant).

From dreams of taking a girl on a date to Nandos, to ambitions to travel the world; from hopes of exhibiting work in a major London gallery, to fantasies of streets safe enough to walk down at night - young people's social and cultural needs are diverse and complex.

This research contributes to the British Academy's Social and Cultural Infrastructure (Social and Cultural Infrastructure) policy work theme. A core aim of this work is to explore how social and cultural infrastructure can best be measured and valued, including how different groups within society conceptualise and value social and cultural infrastructure. This research engages with this question by exploring how children and young people conceptualise and value social and cultural infrastructure.

This report shares findings of an initial study conducted in London which ran creative focus groups with 58 young people (12-20 year olds) in four locations across the capital. By working with these young people to co-create a card deck we were able to illuminate what they identify and articulate as infrastructure that helps them to thrive socially and culturally, and what barriers and supports prevent and enable them to access this infrastructure. The resulting card deck is a measurement tool that can help other young people to value and measure the social and cultural infrastructure available to them, as well as self-report their needs in this area. The research was conducted with a view to extending fieldwork at a national scale, further trialling and refining the card-deck in varied contexts and geographies.

After briefly charting the conceptual context, this report describes and explains the rationale for our innovative card deck methodology, presents findings from our focus groups and then analyses these findings to suggest implications for understanding, measuring and valuing social and cultural infrastructure for young people.

## Conceptual Context

Social and cultural infrastructure is 'conceptually unruly' (Bingham Hall & Kaasa, 2017, 10). It can be loosely understood as the 'things' needed to thrive socially and culturally but it is hard to precisely define or even pinpoint the different elements of it. It includes both 'hard' and 'soft' aspects, both deliberate and 'accidental' components (Kerlaff & Käkälä, 2024) and is as much about the 'how' things are delivered, as 'what' those things are (Alexandrova et al, 2024). As Bingham Hall and Kaasa have argued, social and cultural infrastructure is also relative. 'Different things become infrastructures depending on the object of study, and any object of study may be an infrastructure for something else' (Bingham Hall & Kaasa, 2017, 10.)

A premise of this research is that social and cultural infrastructure is also relative to who is using that infrastructure. For example, a barber shop might be a key social space for a black Caribbean man, but largely irrelevant to a white European woman. When it comes to young people, we believe that their views and experiences on what counts and what is valuable as social and cultural infrastructure must be considered separately, given that they have very different needs, concerns, pressures and opportunities to adults. What's more, young people are in a crucial, formative period of developing their social and cultural capital and their social and cultural experiences while teenagers are likely to shape their trajectories as adults (Holland et al. 2007, Lupton et al, 2007).

Also important when exploring young people's social and cultural infrastructure is the idea that infrastructure is as much about constraining as supporting action (Bingham Hall & Kaasa, 2017, 10). As we will see in this report, fear for their safety and security is a huge barrier to young people's social and cultural activities, so infrastructure that constrains threats and mitigates perceptions of threats is key to them being able to access social and cultural infrastructure. This means that items and processes that may seem to have little to do with social and cultural life become crucial infrastructures for young people's social and cultural development.

Our research explores social and cultural infrastructure as both an emergent and relative phenomenon. We see it as something that emerges from component parts that it cannot be reduced to; parts which shift depending on who that infrastructure is supporting. This study offers an insight into what those component parts are for particular cohorts of young people in London and develops a method that can be used to identify and measure those component parts for other groups of young people too.

## Methodology and Rationale

Creative methods have been identified as a way to conduct research with young people that is collaborative, non-exploitative (Robinson & Gillies, 2012) and can empower young people's expertise in their own lives (Bowman, 2020). Creative practice can be an accessible way for young people to express complex experiences and ideas. Creativity can also make theoretical ideas more tangible, enabling young people to take part in discussing and exploring nebulous or high-level concepts.

The card-deck method we designed for this research was informed by these principles. It enabled us to firstly communicate social and cultural infrastructure to young people in a clear and accessible way and secondly to engage young people in co-creating an ecosystem of 'things' they deemed essential for social and cultural infrastructure.

## Card Deck Creation

To create our card deck we conducted a literature review of recent work on social and cultural infrastructure, including working papers written for the British Academy's current phase of investigation into measuring and valuing social and cultural infrastructure. From this literature we extracted 'things' that other researchers identified as being part of social and cultural infrastructure, including 'hard' elements (e.g. buildings, roads etc..) and 'soft' elements (e.g. activities, services, processes). It was important to us that the list of things was limited to what we had found in the literature to ensure it was grounded in research rather than based on our own speculations and assumptions.

Once we had derived our list of 'things' we created a card to represent each thing visually and added thinking prompts to the back of each card that would give young people ways of imagining why these things might be important for their social and/or cultural lives. We colour coded the cards to create categories of 'things.' We did this so that we would be able to easily see, from our findings, what types of social and cultural infrastructure are most valuable to young people. We used the graphic design software Canva and chose images and colours that presented the information clearly while being visually engaging.



Image One: The Literature Review Card Deck

The table below shows the categories we derived and the 'things' each category encompassed and [the deck can be viewed here.](#)

<b>Category</b>	<b>Things</b>
Arts & Culture (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Theatres</li> <li>- Recording Studios</li> <li>- Cinemas</li> <li>- Art Galleries</li> <li>- Music Venues</li> <li>- Museums</li> </ul>
Institutions (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Libraries</li> <li>- Community Centres</li> <li>- Universities</li> <li>- Places of Worship</li> </ul>
Local Businesses (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Barber</li> <li>- Cafes</li> <li>- Hairdresser</li> <li>- Bookshops</li> <li>- Local Businesses</li> </ul>
Accidental Infrastructure (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Local Streets</li> <li>- Supermarkets</li> <li>- Stairwells</li> </ul>
Nature (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Shared Gardens</li> <li>- Parks</li> <li>- Woods</li> <li>- Blue Spaces</li> </ul>
Sports (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Football Pitches</li> <li>- Boxing Gyms</li> <li>- Gyms</li> <li>- Tennis Courts</li> </ul>
Digital (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social Media</li> <li>- Wifi</li> </ul>
Home/Housing (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Home</li> </ul>
Activities/Intangible (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Volunteering</li> <li>- Fashion</li> <li>- Nightlife</li> </ul>

## Recruitment

We recruited 58 young people aged 12-20 years from across London. We focused on London for the study to explore relations to social and cultural infrastructure in urban settings, and as the research



team including Dr Ella Harris and London Development Trust are based in London and have existing networks of young people via community centres and work with schools, colleges and boxing gyms.

Based on these networks, we identified focus group sites that encompassed North, West, South and East London. These were Manor House / Woodberry Down, Acton, Alperton, and Peckham.

To recruit, we created flyers to circulate in local areas as well as on social media and contacted the leads of youth groups and programmes at the focus group sites as well as local youth clubs and schools. Our focus was on recruiting 13-18 year olds, as an age group who are not yet fully independent but who have some degree of autonomous decision making and urban mobility. 13-18 is also in line with the age range that attend LDT's My Place programme. In practice, we worked with a small number of young people outside of this age range (two 12 year olds, one 19 year old and one 20 year old) who were keen to attend and not far enough outside the range for us to consider their views irrelevant.

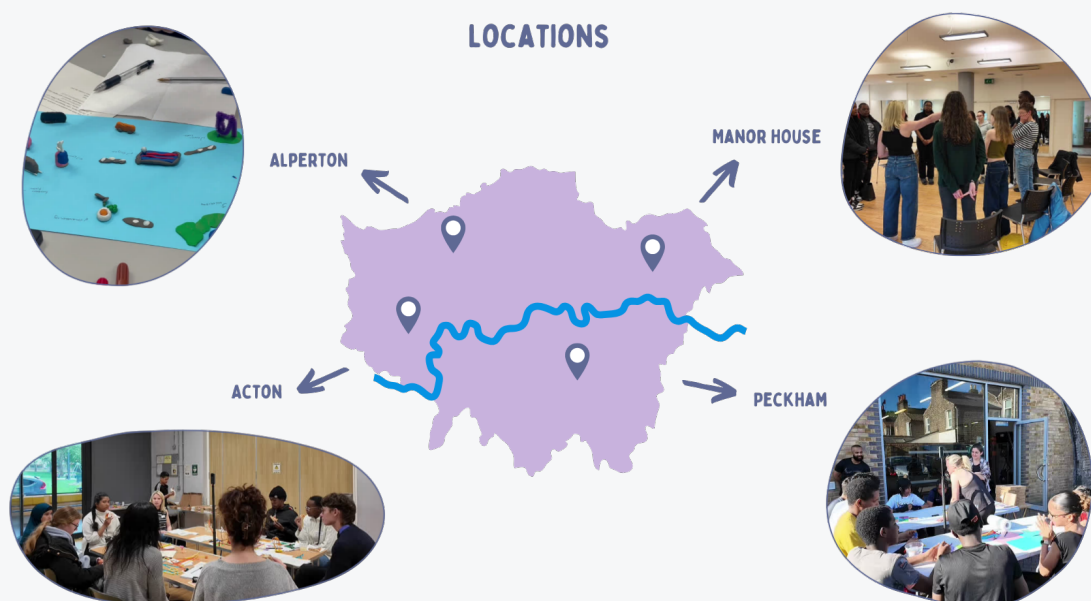


Image Two: Focus Group Locations

The four areas we chose are all historically deprived but are either experiencing processes of urban gentrification (in particular, Peckham) or undergoing programmes of urban regeneration (in particular, Woodberry Down and South Acton). All areas are ethnically diverse and two of the areas remain in the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country (South Acton and Woodberry Down). We chose not to collect demographic data from the young participants beyond gender and age for ethical reasons of wanting to ensure our requests for personal information were sensitive, non-extractivist and proportionate to their contributions. For longer research participation, we would build trust with young people before requesting potentially sensitive personal information such as ethnicity, religion, sexuality, socio-economic status and disability.

However, observationally across all focus groups the ethnic backgrounds of young people were very diverse and we believe that the young people we worked with were roughly representative of the



areas we held the focus groups in, encompassing a majority of black, mixed-race, asian and 'other' young people, as well as a minority of white young people (labelled against the five high level categories used in national statistics). As a proxy for this data, we have collected ward demographic data from each focus group area:

**Alperton:** According to Brent Borough Council Ward Profile<sup>1</sup> in 2014, 81.7% of the population of Alperton were from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds compared to 63.7% in Brent as a whole. By contrast, 14% of people in England and Wales and 40% of people in London were BAME.<sup>2</sup>

The median household income in Alperton is one of the lowest in Brent at £26,312. In 2019, Alperton LSOA ranked 10,632 out of 32,844, where 1 is the most deprived. It falls within the 40% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country.

**South Acton:** South Acton is also an ethnically diverse area, although residents identifying as White British make up the largest proportion (28%) of the Acton population, followed by White Other (24.6%). Acton has the highest proportion of residents identifying as Other White in Ealing. This is followed by the second highest proportion of residents identifying as Mixed ethnicity and third highest proportion of residents identifying as Black/Black British. The largest religious identity in Acton is Christianity (39.9% of the population).

14.5% of the Acton population live in income-deprived households. In 2019, South Acton LSOA ranked 2,888 out of 32,844, where 1 is the most deprived. It falls within the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country.

**Woodberry Down:** Hackney has an ethnically diverse population compared to the rest of the country. Woodberry Down Ward reflects this pattern. 37% of the population of Woodberry Down Ward are White British, 22% are 'White Other', and under a fifth identify as Black.

Woodberry Down Ward has a similar level of income deprivation affecting children to the borough average, which is higher than the average for London and England. In 2019, Woodberry Down LSOA ranked 2,578 out of 32,844, where 1 is the most deprived. It falls within the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country.

**Peckham:** Just over half (54%) of Southwark's population is of White ethnicity, 25% Black, 11% Asian and 10% from other ethnic backgrounds. The diversity of East Central Southwark is substantially higher than England, London, and Southwark. More than half of residents in Nunhead & Queen's Road, Old Kent Road, Peckham, and Rye Lane are non-White.

Children living in households claiming out of work benefits can be used as a measure of child poverty in a community. Across Southwark, this applied to 10,900 children at the end of May 2017, equating to 18.5%. This was significantly higher than the national average of 13.5%.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on data from the 2011 Census.

<sup>2</sup> The term BAME is used here because taken from government reports, but we acknowledge that the government no longer uses the term as it can be exclusive and problematic.

In 2019, Rye Lane LSOA ranked 9,345 out of 32,844, where 1 is the most deprived. It falls within the 30% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country.

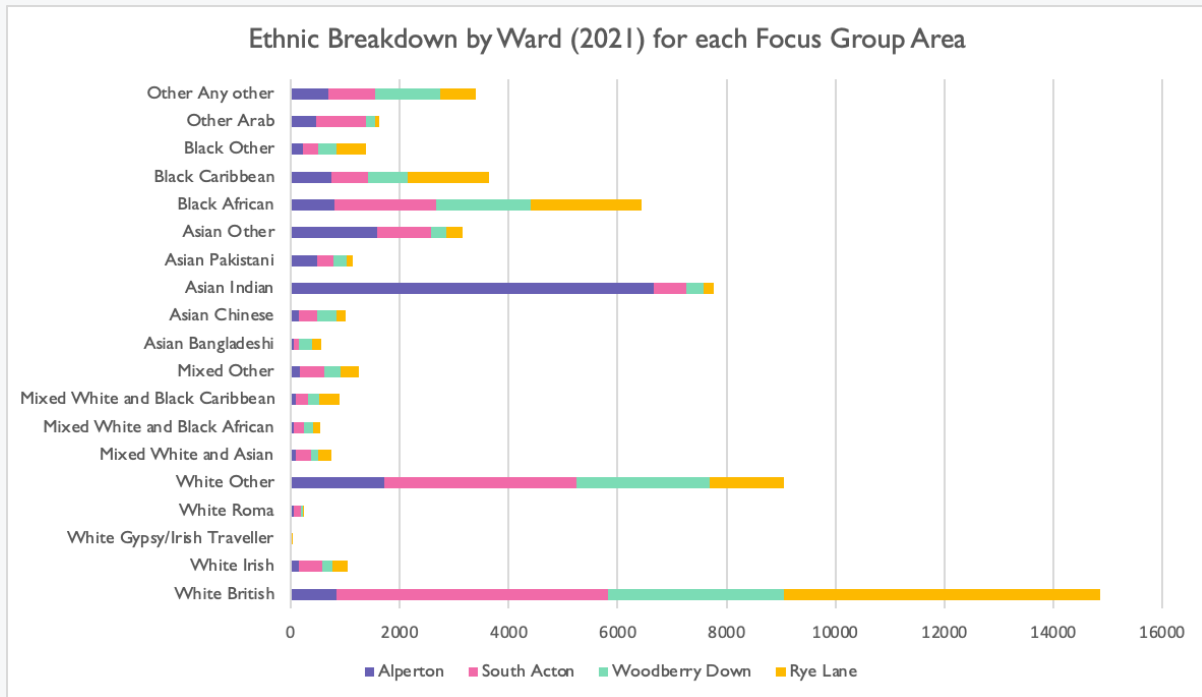


Figure One: Ethnic Breakdown by Ward for Each Focus Group Area

### Focus Group Demographic Differences

Focus Group Location	Recruitment Method	Ages	Gender breakdown	Reflections
Alperton	Via Sixth Form at Alperton Community School	16-17	12 males 10 females 2 non-binary	The group were more academic, having chosen to continue their studies in the school's sixth form. The school also has a large population of students from religious minority backgrounds including Muslim and Hindu.
Peckham Rye Lane	Via youth boxing squad at London Community Boxing Club	13-15	9 males 3 females	Many of the young people are not in mainstream education (either homeschooled or attending pupil referral units).

Manor House / Woodberry Down	Via My Place and Redmond Community Centre	14-18	6 males 10 females	The My Place programme is a collaborative initiative to help local young people shape decisions about what happens and gets built in their community and neighbourhoods. This meant that over half of the young people who came were already engaged in thinking about urban change.
South Acton	Via Acton Gardens Community Centre, Bollo Bridge Youth Centre and Rolladome	12-20	2 males 4 females	The young people who attended this focus group in Acton were very mixed in terms of their ages and backgrounds.

Across all focus groups the gender split was 29 male, 27 female and 2 non-binary:

### Gender Breakdown

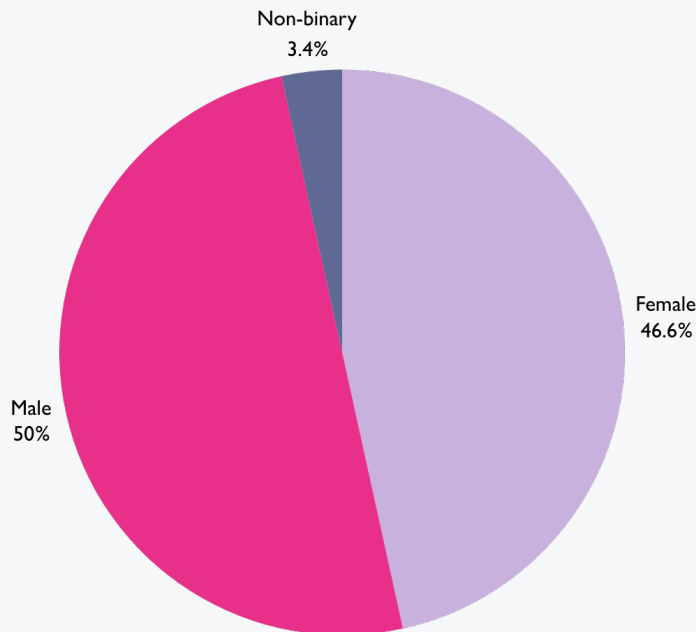


Figure Two: Chart showing Gender Breakdown for Focus Group Participants

To thank young people for their time in the focus groups and acknowledge their contribution to knowledge we gave each young person a £20 voucher and provided snacks, drinks and pizza for them to consume during the activities. We also included some short training on creative and participatory methods at the start of each focus group and gave each young person a handout they could use to

further explore these ideas as well as a certificate to evidence the training and their participation in the workshop.

At each focus group we used dictaphones to record young people's conversations as well as two digital cameras to record video footage, securing consent verbally and via consent forms for young people and opt out forms for their parents/carers. Informed consent was gained through explaining the research and providing information sheets for the young people and for parents. We ensured the young people had various opportunities to ask questions and different avenues to withdraw and opt out of photography/videos.

## Focus Group Set Up

We began each focus group with an ice breaker. We asked yes/no questions and labelled one wall of the room 'yes' and the other 'no'. We asked young people to move around the room in accordance with if their answer to the question was yes, no or somewhere in between. The questions we asked were:

- 1) Do you think London is a good place to live?
- 2) Would you move somewhere else if you could?
- 3) Do you think London is a good place to live for young people?

After each question we selected several young people and asked them why they were standing in that particular spot. We asked follow-up questions and encouraged discussion between young people about where they were standing and why.

This ice breaker allowed us to introduce the theme in a light-touch way, while setting a dynamic and engaging tone for the session. It also encouraged young people to start speaking to us and each other in a low pressure context.

## Card Deck Game

It was important to us that the card deck method was fun and engaging for young people. Partly, this was because we wanted them to have an enjoyable and enriching experience in the session. It was also because of the benefits of gamified activities for collective, imaginative thinking. As various researchers have noted, games can be great research tools as they encourage an attitude of 'serious play', enabling deep and explorative thinking (Thurley et al. 2024).

Game-based methods can encourage more equal engagement between research participants as inhabiting a fictional or hypothetical scenario helps to overcome 'hierarchies and hegemonies' and encourage all views to be given 'equal consideration and legitimacy' (McCusker, 2020, 2). To activate this potential, we came up with a loosely gamified way of engaging young people in assessing the existing cards and adding their own. The process looked like this:

- Split the young people into small groups on different tables
- Ask them to imagine and list their social and cultural goals (this was to encourage them to think concretely and personally about what they need and value, rather than approach the exercise from an abstract or generic perspective)

- Tell them that each group is going to be building their ideal city; a place that will support their social and cultural ambitions
- Deal 8-10 cards to each table (we limited the number of cards each table got because a) 32 would have been too many to look through and b) it introduced a competitive element as each table had different cards)
- Ask them to keep/discard cards from 'their city' depending on what they think is valuable for progressing their goals
- Ask them to add their own cards to make their city better, as well as to create items using arts and crafts materials (plasticine, pipe cleaners, card). The arts and crafts element enabled a different way of thinking to supplement the item-based approach of the cards, focusing attention on how elements of their cities were placed and connected in relation to each other
- Encourage them to 'spy' on other tables to see what cards they were missing and get ideas (this element was also to encourage a competitive spirit, as well as to make sure young people could take into account the full 32 cards from the literature review deck)
- Ask them, as a final step, to make 'activation cards' - cards that will improve/make useful/make accessible the item cards they've already made. (This stage of the method was inspired by the Bennett Institute's inception report which explores the importance of not just what exists, in relation to social and cultural infrastructure, but how those places are run, how they are connected to other services, who works there, who they are inclusive to, etc. Based on this principle, we explained to young people that their activation cards might, for example, include street lighting to make streets safer, a plug socket to make Wi-Fi more useful in a cafe, or a young leader to work in an art gallery to ensure relevant programming)

After working through these stages we called the groups around each table in sequence so the young people could explain what they had added and discarded from their city. We then ended with a summative discussion about what they had learned by playing with the cards and if they had any feedback or ideas on the design of the cards and how they are used, to take forward into future versions of the focus groups.





Image Three: Young People work with the Cards and Arts and Crafts Materials in Manor House

## After the Focus Groups

After the focus groups we collected in the cards the young people had made and photographed everything they had created with the arts and crafts materials. We made digitally illustrated cards to represent the paper cards they had added. Where multiple groups had created the same card (e.g., multiple groups added 'school' and 'chicken shop') we only made one card but counted the number of times the card had been added. Some groups made their own versions of cards that were already in the literature review pack (because we only dealt 8-10 per table, they made some cards before seeing the full pack.) Where groups had made cards that were already in the original literature review card deck, we didn't add a duplicate but noted down these instances.

We colour coded the young people's cards to show which of our categories each one belonged to. We also derived new categories for collections of cards that we felt didn't fit into the original categories derived from the literature review deck. The original cards had thinking prompts on the back. For the new cards designed by the young people we extracted quotes from the audio recordings of the focus group to use as thinking prompts - giving context and explanation to why young people had added those particular cards.

[The digital versions of the cards the young people created can be viewed here.](#)

## Findings

We found that the card deck method was very successful in enabling young people to identify and articulate what they see and value as social and cultural infrastructure, both by assessing the relevance of things others have seen as parts of that infrastructure and by adding their own things. By deriving new categories from their additions we were also able to see key trends in what the 58 young people had added. Visual analysis of their arts and crafts creations and coding the transcripts from audio recorders also helped us to better understand the cards they had selected and made. This enabled us to see where there had been consensus and disagreement, understand how the young people saw different elements connecting and explore what was discussed but didn't make it onto cards.

### Cards Kept and Discarded

The cards that young people kept and discarded from the literature review deck gave us an important insight into how their views correlate with what scholars have identified as key elements of social and cultural infrastructure.

Cards that were frequently discarded by young people included shared gardens, tennis courts, stairwells and recording studios. Shared gardens were often discarded because young people imagined them as spaces that would generate conflict between neighbours and/or be unpleasant to occupy because of the behaviour of others:

“From personal experience, I can see how shared gardens can be a negative experience... some people have dogs and stuff.” (Young Person, Manor House)

“I think sometimes people want to be in nature for their own personal wellbeing, so sharing it with someone else....” (Young Person, Acton)

Young people preferred parks or private gardens, which they saw as more peaceful than areas shared with neighbours. (“you should be able to have a garden without extra money cause I’ve been wanting a garden my whole life”). Stairwells were also seen as places that can generate anti-social behaviour and were often discarded on that basis.

We were surprised that young people often discarded recording studios. This wasn’t about a disregard for music. Young people identified music as something ‘a society can’t survive without’ and that they personally ‘can’t live without.’ Instead, it seemed to reflect the ease of making music at home now, as well as potentially a resistance to young Londoners, especially from working class backgrounds, being typecast as likely to want to make music as their primary form of creativity. It may also have reflected young people’s worry about which young voices are being amplified via the music industry:

“We decided to remove recording studios because we believe some people should be taken away from the mic” (Young Person, Alperton).

Cards that were normally kept with no or little debate included gyms, boxing gyms, football pitches, places of worship, homes, Wi-Fi and social media. Young people were especially emphatic about the importance of gyms:

“Obviously we need it [the gym] for our physical health, our mental health, our confidence as well” (Young Person, Alperton)

Young people spoke about the gym as important for physical and mental health but also as a social space they often go to after school and college with their friends.

Some cards sparked intense debates between young people on their tables and/or were met with conflicting opinions by different groups. This included bookshops, nightlife, blue spaces and museums.

In Peckham there was a heated debate about bookshops as one young person insisted that books could be read on your phone and another steadfastly defended the importance of physical books. In Alperton there was a debate about whether nightlife was a site of deviance or an arena that helps to mitigate stress, while in Acton a Muslim<sup>3</sup> young person was adamant that alcohol should be banned entirely. Museums were often seen as irrelevant to young people, or something that would only be relevant under particular conditions. The following exchange took place in a group at Manor House:

YP 1: “Guys, do you think art galleries or museums are important?”

YP 2: “Yeah, I’m a write museums”

YP 1 and 4: “Nah, no”

YP 2: “Why?”

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<sup>3</sup> Where we have mentioned a young person’s religion or ethnicity this has been self reported to us by the young person



YP 1: "Because they're just not that important, like for young people. Have you guys ever went to a museum like out of your own?"

YP 2: "Yeah!"

YP 5: "I have!"

YP 4: "I have not"

YP 1: "Wait actually, if they're some modern museums maybe"

YP 2: "Modern, modern"

YP 1: "Cos art galleries are just (sucks teeth as signal of disapproval)"

When asked what they meant by modern museums young people said it would be 'futurist init' with 'floating cars' and 'interactive stuff'. This highlights the importance of not just what exists, socially and culturally, but how it is curated and positioned to engage young audiences.

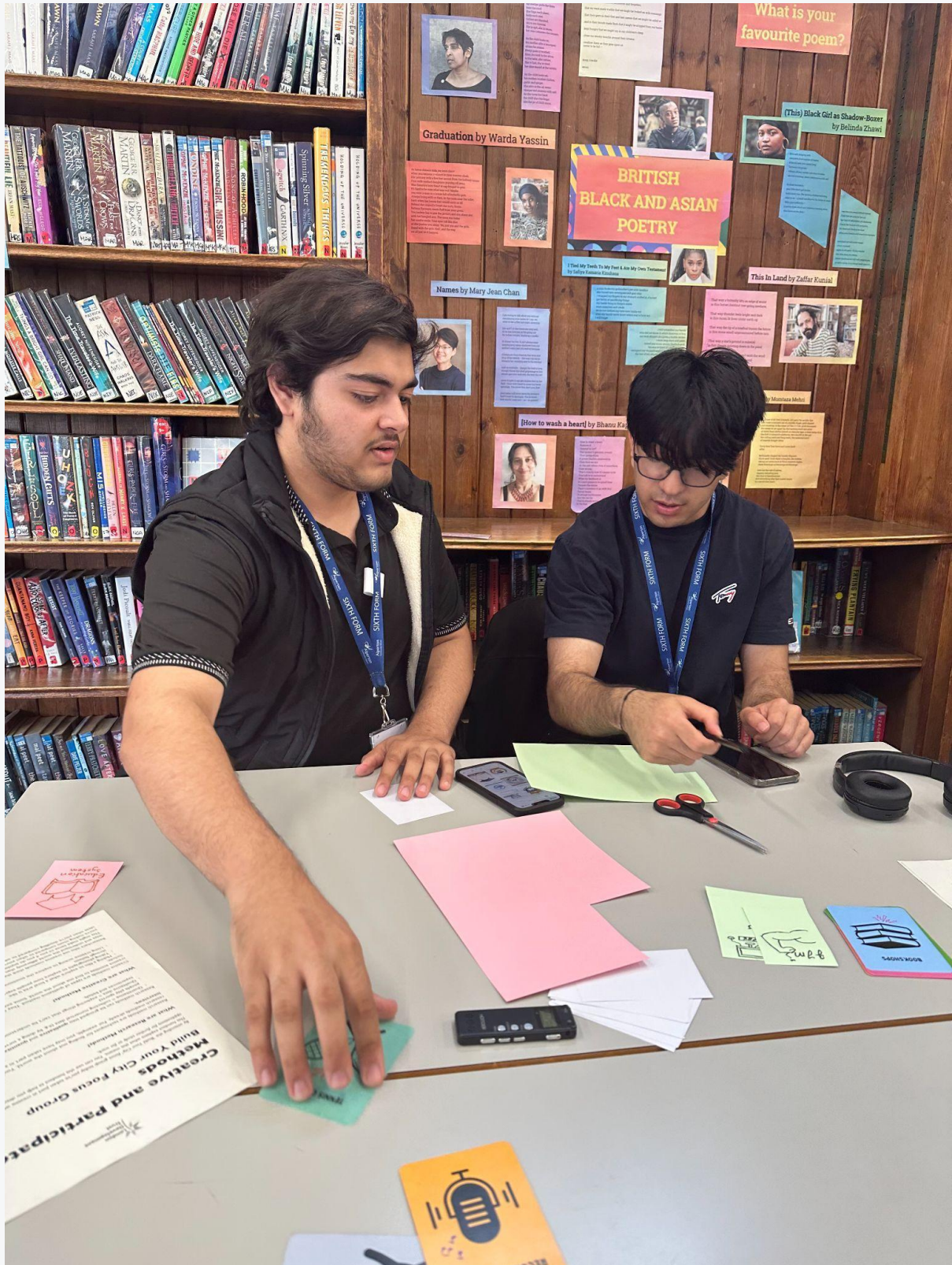


Image Four: Young people discuss and debate cards in Alperton

## Cards Young People added that Fitted our Existing Categories

Debating the cards we'd dealt them was a good precursor to young people making their own cards, giving them strong opinions on what was missing. The cards they added that fitted into our existing categories are as shown in the table below. Cards that were added as 'activation' cards are noted in brackets, as are instances where the same card was added by more than one group.

<b>Additions to Existing Categories</b>	
Arts & Culture (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Modern Museum</li> <li>- Art Classes (activation)</li> </ul>
Institutions (8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Education</li> <li>- Schools (added 5 times)</li> <li>- School Trips (activation)</li> <li>- Qualified Teachers (activation)</li> <li>- Multi Use Space</li> <li>- Mosque (added 2 times)</li> <li>- Social Space</li> <li>- Youth Centre</li> </ul>
Local Businesses (13)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Kebab Shop</li> <li>- Nandos</li> <li>- Chicken Shops (added 5 times)</li> <li>- Restaurants (added 4 times)</li> <li>- Theme Parks (put in this category as best fit for now)</li> <li>- Shopping Centre</li> <li>- Pet Shop</li> <li>- Shops (added 2 times)</li> <li>- Clothes Shops</li> <li>- Chef (activation card)</li> <li>- Games Shops</li> <li>- Arcades</li> <li>- Takeaways</li> </ul>
Accidental Infrastructure (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Affordable Foods (activation card)</li> <li>- Safe Streets (activation card)</li> <li>- Street Lights (activation card) (added 3 times)</li> </ul>
Nature (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rivers</li> </ul>
Sports (10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Swimming Pool (added 2 times)</li> <li>- Judo Studio</li> <li>- Free Football Training</li> <li>- MMA Gyms</li> <li>- Stables</li> <li>- Snowboarding Slope</li> <li>- Basketball Courts</li> <li>- Water Parks</li> <li>- Sports Centre (added 2 times)</li> <li>- Boxing Coach (activation card)</li> </ul>

Digital (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Devices (added 2 times)</li> <li>- Plug Sockets (added 2 times)</li> </ul>
Home/Housing (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Housing for the homeless</li> <li>- Garden</li> <li>- Apartments</li> <li>- Affordable Housing</li> </ul>
Activities/Intangible (7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Equality</li> <li>- Music</li> <li>- Citizens (activation)</li> <li>- 24 Hour (activation)</li> <li>- Proximity and Availability (activation)</li> <li>- Less Monitored Youth Spaces</li> <li>- Regular Cleaning &amp; Efficient Equipment (activation)</li> </ul>

The following cards were also made by young people but have not been added to the table above because they are duplicates of cards already in the literature review pack (which young people may not have seen when they added these):

- Wifi
- Gyms
- Parks/Green Spaces/Park + Leisure /Nature Parks /Public Parks /Parks
- Library
- Places of Worship (one group created this card and illustrated it by making a church)
- Cinema
- Cafes
- Community Centres
- Home/houses
- Football Pitches

Although the cards in the table above fitted fairly well into our existing categories there were some additions that were hard to categorise or made us consider revising our original categories. For example, we placed theme parks with 'local businesses' even though they are clearly very different to everyday forms of Social and Cultural Infrastructure such as corner shops, barbers, etc. We could consider making an additional category to house this card which reflects more exceptional forms of entertainment-based Social and Cultural Infrastructure. The additions to the 'activities/intangible' category made us consider if we should break this down into smaller groupings, potentially including, for example, a 'values' category or a 'maintenance' category. We also considered whether a 'people' category should be added to include 'citizens', 'boxing coaches' and 'teachers' as well as potentially 'bossman' who was mentioned extensively but not represented on a card.



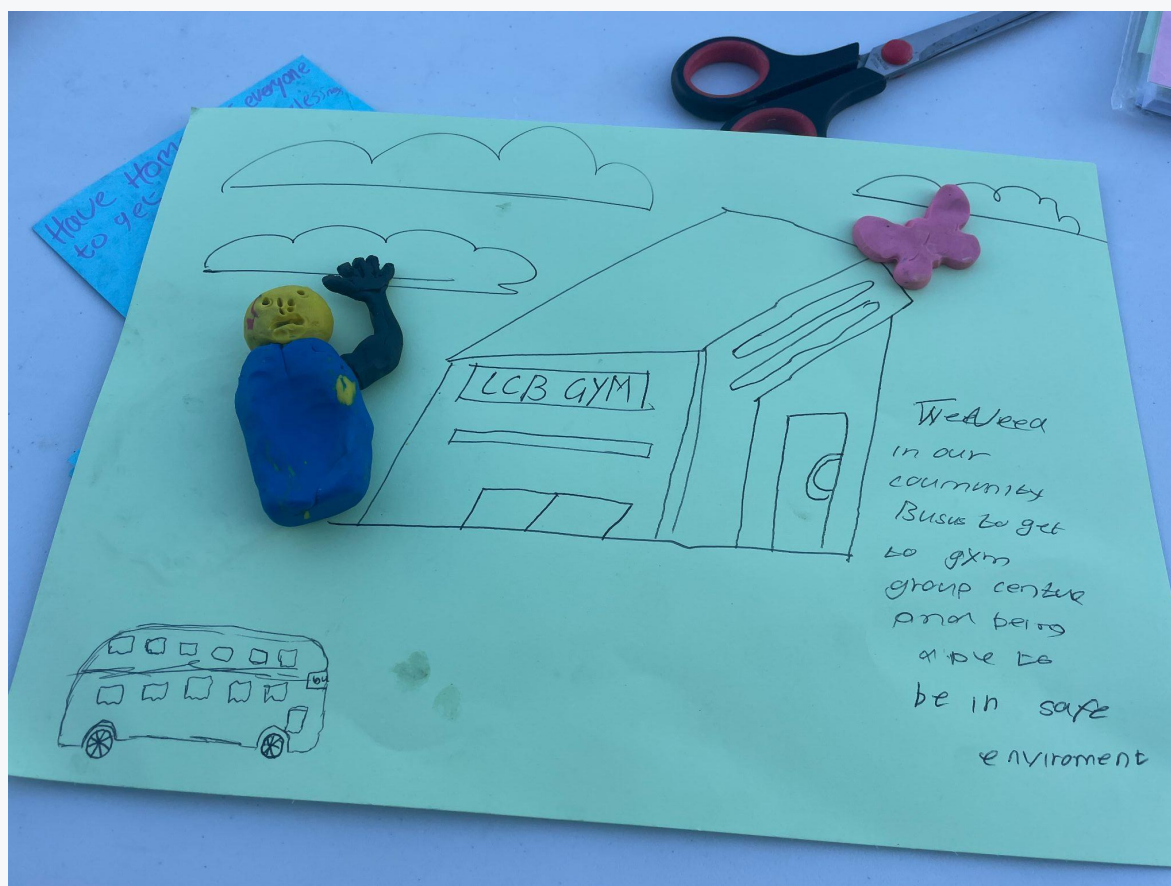


Image Five: Young Peoples' drawing of the boxing gym and figure of a boxing coach, from focus group in Peckham

It was interesting to see which categories young people had added a lot of cards to and which got few contributions. There were ten contributions to the sports category, reflecting the importance of sports as social and cultural capital building activities for young people. Institutions were also important, including schools and youth centres, which can be explained by how much time young people spend in these places. Interestingly young people also added heavily to the local business category, which we will discuss in depth later in this report. Home and housing was another category young people frequently added to which again may reflect the fact that they spend a lot of time at home and the importance of bedroom culture for young people (McRobbie and Garber, 1976; Lincoln, 2015). This also may relate to desires for secure housing and broader feelings of housing precarity during the ongoing housing crisis in London and in the long aftermath of the disaster at Grenfell. Consequently, housing as Social and Cultural Infrastructure is not always available for young people due to lack of space and overcrowding, yet it remains a crucial social space. As one young person in Acton said when reflecting about social spaces, "you can just go round to their house to be honest".

The categories that young people didn't add many cards to are also revealing. Only two were added to arts and culture, which didn't seem to be a sector young people felt engaged or welcomed in. It was also interesting that there wasn't more discussion of digital connectivity, given the prominence of social media in young people's lives. Although one young person did add a 'devices' card to ensure people could 'communicate with each other and keep in touch with your friends and family' this didn't come up as often as expected. This could be because we didn't foreground the digital as an

aspect of social and cultural infrastructure in our introduction to the focus groups, or it could be because this dimension is so naturalised to young people as to not warrant attention. One young person discussed how you can “do everything on social media” including learn new things, find a job, and even market and develop a business. Consequently, it’s unlikely to be because young people don’t value the digital world, as they all kept the Wi-Fi and social media cards from the literature review pack without much debate.

Only one card was added to the ‘nature’ category. Young people often saw natural environments as places that were normally unsafe or polluted:

“The woods aren’t a safe space” (Young Person, Acton)

“In London our blue spaces are not really blue...they’re brown” (Young Person, Manor House)

“We have one near us [a blue space] and we barely go there”

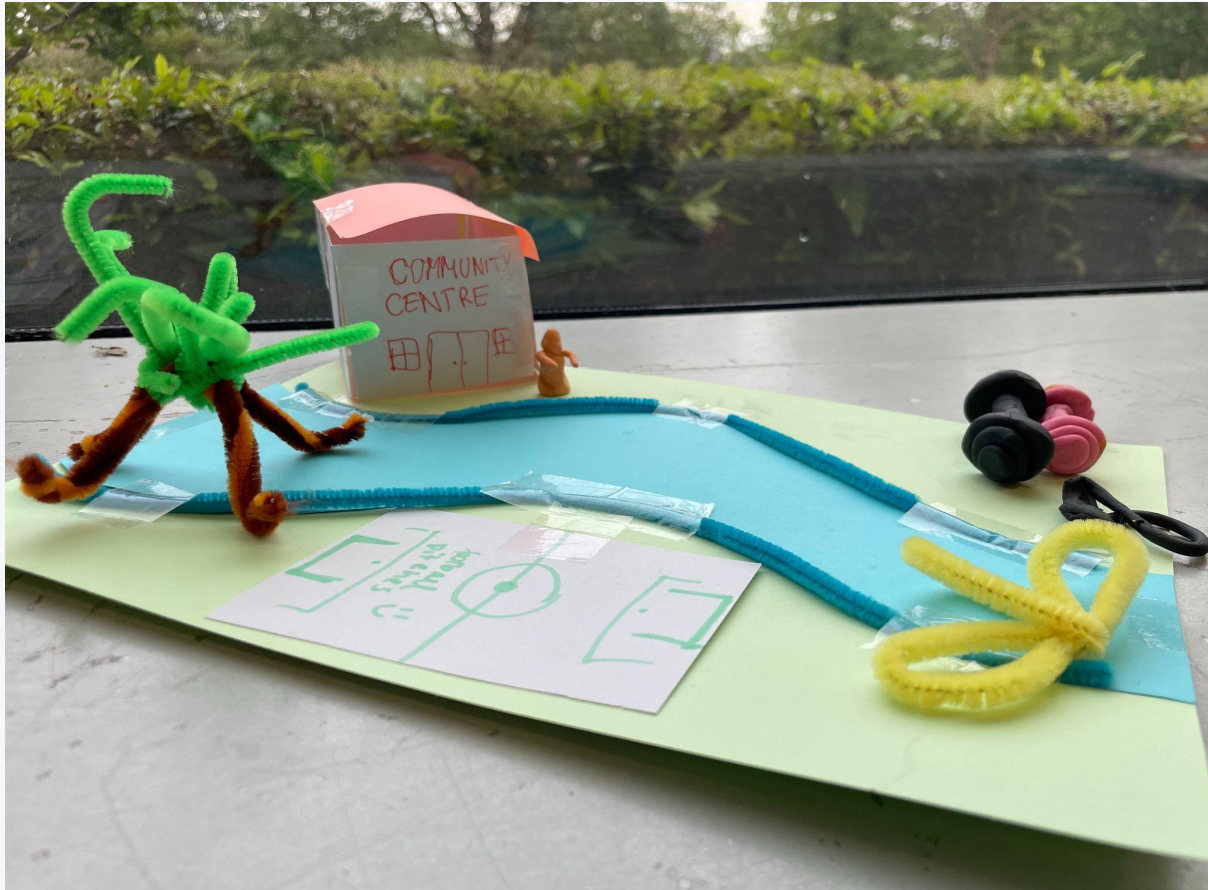
These views might reflect the locations of our focus groups in built-up areas of London where urban nature can be seen as unsafe or marginal. Interestingly, a couple of young people in Acton agreed that nature should be “outside the city” rather than in it and removed green spaces from their city.

The audio recordings from discussions in focus groups, however, show more debate around and enthusiasm for natural environments than the cards added reflect. For example, one young person suggested that “when you’re stressing out and you just need to get out of your house [you can] go and sit by that blue water and it’s calming.” There was also one group in Manor House who used plasticine to construct a river that ran through the heart of their city. They discussed how the river and a tree would be the foundation of the city and houses would be built to the side:

“I made a tree because I think that’s the most important [thing] for a good community to thrive” (Young person, Manor House)

“[We kept] rivers, because I think they’re beautiful” (Young person, Acton)

Another young person described why they kept the ‘Woods’ card in their city: “I think they have a role - having some quiet spaces for people which plays into the scenery as well”.



*Image Six: One group in Manor House built their city around a river and a tree, highlighting the importance of blue/green spaces for some young people*

Additionally, parks were discussed as key spaces for health and wellbeing and for socialising. This was discussed by various groups in the Alperton focus group:

“You need to [have a] park also [because] running on a treadmill is not the same as running outside”

“We have a park so it's good for your mental health to spend time in nature plus you get more reason to go outside rather than spending time at home”

“We also have a park plus a leisure place because although we need to focus on our mental health and physical health, we also need a lot of like free time doing stuff that makes us happy”

“Parks are just fun. I mean, dude, who doesn't like it? Parks are important for your social life - for meeting people - for picnics!”

## Added Cards that Required New Categories

The table below shows cards added by young people that required us to derive new categories.

<b>New Categories Derived from their Additions</b>	
Transport (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Buses (added 2 times)</li> <li>- Public Transport (added 7 times)</li> <li>- Trains</li> <li>- Petrol (activation) (added 3 times)</li> <li>- Airport (added 3 times)</li> <li>- Car Parks</li> </ul>
Substances (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Legal Weed</li> <li>- Ban Alcohol</li> <li>- Bars/Pubs</li> </ul>
Money (7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Money (activation)</li> <li>- Funding (activation)</li> <li>- Discounts for Young People (added 2 times)</li> <li>- Places to Work</li> <li>- Free</li> <li>- Tax the Rich</li> <li>- Pawn Shop</li> </ul>
Aesthetic (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Nice Views</li> <li>- Waterfalls (activation)</li> <li>- Pretty Lights (activation)</li> <li>- Aesthetic Flowers (activation)</li> </ul>
Security (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Security</li> <li>- Navy</li> <li>- CCTV</li> <li>- Police (added 2 times)</li> </ul>
Government and Justice (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Government</li> <li>- Not Corrupt (activation)</li> <li>- Judiciary System</li> </ul>
Healthcare (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rehab Centres</li> <li>- Free Healthcare</li> <li>- Hospitals (added 4 times)</li> <li>- GPs</li> </ul>

The new categories we derived, as listed above, were: Money, Transport, Security, Healthcare, Aesthetics, Substances, Government and Justice. These categories are not perfect containers for the young people's cards and we considered alternative categories including, for example, adding a 'people' category. For future research phases, we would be interested to consider different categorisations/categorisation strategies. We think it would be valuable to work with young researchers on the category deriving process or to build in a second stage to the focus groups where all participants feed into the category creation process.



The new categories we derived are revealing about the concerns of young people. They show how important good public transport is for young people's mobility and access to social and cultural infrastructure and also indicate widespread concerns among young people about cost of living and safety. It was interesting, given how many of our participants were black and mixed-race boys, that security and police services were frequently added. At least for this particular cohort, concerns for their own safety were more prominent than concerns about being criminalised.

Young people's concerns about safety also spilled over into other categories beyond the 'security' category, manifesting in debates over whether there should or shouldn't be unsupervised youth spaces, the addition of a governance card and an idea to add rehabilitation for offenders (discussed but not added as a card.)

The four additions to the "health" category may indicate concern for physical wellbeing among young people at a time when the NHS is increasingly inaccessible. Additionally, it may reflect particular health inequalities and challenges in these areas of high deprivation. One young person added a 'rehab' card to support people with alcohol and drug addiction or abuse which may reflect local social challenges in these areas.

## Frequently Added Cards

Some of the cards included in the young people's deck were added by more than one table. This includes; Public Transport (7) Schools (5) Chicken Shops (5) Restaurants (4) Hospitals (4) Petrol (3) Street Lights (3) Airport (3) Swimming Pool (2) Devices (2) Buses (2) Shops (2) Discounts (2) Plug Sockets (2) Mosques (2) Police (2) Sports Centres (2). Although this list doesn't include instances when young people discussed potentially adding an item but didn't actually produce a physical card, it gives a good indicator of what was at the forefront of young people's minds when thinking about social and cultural infrastructure.



Image Seven: Some of the cards created by young people at the focus group in Manor House

## Debated Additions

As well as having rigorous debates over keeping and discarding cards in the original literature review pack, many of the cards young people added were added following, or despite, long debates.

The most debated addition was the 'Less Monitored Youth Spaces' card which followed a long debate about whether unsupervised space was valuable for independence and would give safer environments for experimentation with drugs, or whether it would encourage more young people to try out drugs and engage in problematic behaviours. The debate ended with the group agreeing to disagree and the card was added to reflect a partial consensus. This will be discussed further in the section on 'Good and Bad Social and Cultural Infrastructure', along with debates about alcohol and nightlife.

## Potential Cards

As mentioned previously, listening back to audio from the focus groups and analysing their arts and craft creations shows that some things were important to young people but didn't end up being written down on cards.

For example, many young people spoke about how important 'bossman' is (the person who works behind a counter in a corner shop, chicken shop or similar) but nobody made a standalone bossman card. There were also discussions about adding churches and about needing religious sensitivity that were not made into cards. We did not add cards to reflect these items but we did add cards to reflect other much talked about items that were illustrated with arts and crafts materials and written down as labels or lists (but not on cards). These included pubs/bars and boxing coaches.

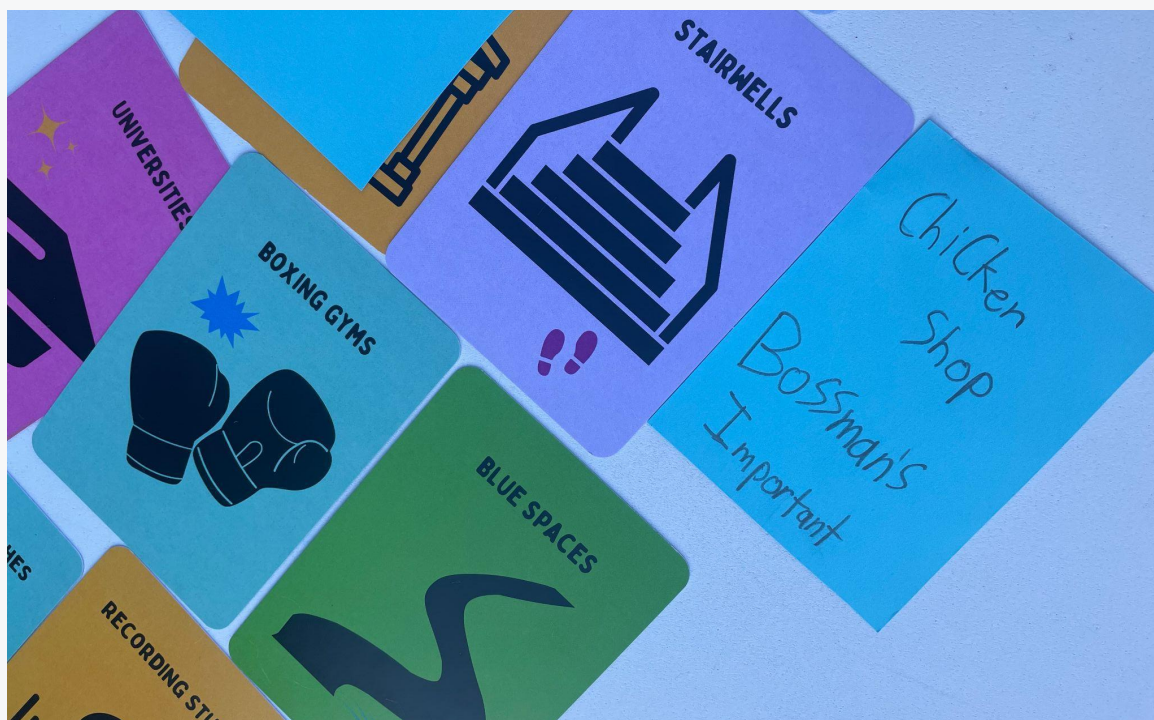


Image Eight: Chicken Shop card stating that Bossman is an important aspect of the space

## Activation Cards

The 'activation cards' element of the focus groups was very successful in getting young people to think about the contextual elements that make something accessible or useful. Young people added 19 activation cards (out of 82, so almost 25% of the total cards added) which reiterates the importance of the 'how' in addition to the 'what' of social and cultural infrastructure for young people. Many of the main item cards they added could also be categorised as activation cards, even though they didn't label them as such (this is something we could address in future focus groups by adding a second stage where young people review and refine categories and classifications of cards).

Most of the activation cards young people added made things either safer, more affordable or more accessible. For example, they added 'money' and 'funding' cards as well as free football sessions and discounts for young people at art galleries. Young people also discussed wanting social spaces where you can 'just hang out' (Young Person, Acton), without buying anything. In Peckham, a young person who added a 'school trips' activation to the school card specified that these trips should be available 'for cheap.'

Young people were obviously very concerned with the cost of living, as well as with their safety. While safety concerns are likely to be from their direct experiences, cost of living concerns may be something impacting them via their parents and families. This is indicated by discussions they had about the price of petrol, which (given most of them aren't old enough to drive) is likely to be a worry inherited from adults in their lives.

## Analysis

The next section of this report analyses our findings to explore their implications for how we define, value and measure social and cultural infrastructure. It's important to keep in mind that our findings reflect the demographics we're working with - young people in London from mostly deprived communities - and are not representative of all young people in the UK. Even within our sample, some findings are clearly rooted in the concerns of particular demographics. For example, at Alperton Community School where the students are mostly from Muslim backgrounds, female young people were interested in female only spaces (e.g. a women's gym). Alperton was also the only setting where Barber shops were not deemed valuable, while the other groups, where there were a majority of Black Caribbean and Black African young people, saw this as a key social and cultural space. More geographically extensive research is needed to trace similarities and differences across different areas of the UK including in towns, villages and rural areas and explore how findings vary for groups of young people from different ethnic, religious and class backgrounds, as well as to identify the needs and interests of other minoritised groups of young people including LGBTQ+ and disabled young people.

Equally, further research is needed to hone in on differences between younger and older 'young people.' This study encompassed a wide age range, aiming to work with 13-18 year olds but ending up encompassing 12-20 year olds. There are clearly huge differences between the life worlds of 12 year olds and 20 year olds which are reflected in our findings. As our participants worked in mixed groups to create cards, we can't easily differentiate concerns and interests by age for the data as a whole. However, we did observe differences at the focus groups. For example, we noted that younger participants were more likely to advocate for things that accommodated their special interests and fantasies. In Acton, a 12 year old girl added a 'stables' card, reflecting her dream of going horse riding, while a 13 year old boy added a 'Navy' card, reflecting his concern for the country's security but also quite probably a special interest in ships (he spent a significant amount of time doing a detailed drawing of a ship while making this card). Older participants, on the other hand, were more likely to think in economic and governmental terms. In Alperton, where all participants were sixth form students (16-18), cards added included Judiciary System, Government, and Tax the Rich. Analysis of transcripts from the focus groups also shows clear differences in the sophistication and coherence/self-consistency of participants' analysis of social and cultural issues according to age, especially between Alperton where all participants were over 16 and in Peckham where the age range was 13-15. That said, young people from across our age spectrum showed pervasive and preoccupying concern with health, wellbeing, financial security and safety and differences in the sophistication of their analysis could just as easily be attributed to education levels as to age. For further research, it would be advantageous to conduct focus groups with 13-15 and 16-18 year olds separately, and



potentially collect data on academic attainment, to be able to identify distinctions more easily and reliably.

Notwithstanding the above, our findings from this study already have fascinating implications for how we think about social and cultural infrastructure. They both reiterate and contribute to emerging themes from the British Academy's wider work and introduce new avenues of exploration.

Our findings:

- Introduce the idea that improved ontological security is a crucial prerequisite for young people to access social and cultural infrastructure and must be factored into policy around social and cultural infrastructure, from an EDI perspective
- Introduce an emphasis on the importance of relative scales of access in assessing the value of social and cultural infrastructure
- Contribute to the idea that social and cultural infrastructure is both hard and soft (involves both the built environment and urban spaces, as well as services, programmes and activities)
- Contribute to the idea that the 'how' is as important as the 'what' of social and cultural infrastructure
- Contribute to the idea that people are a key element of social and cultural infrastructures
- Contribute to the idea that social and cultural infrastructure can support both 'good' and 'bad' social and cultural experiences - while also problematizing the idea that such a clear cut distinction can be made by suggesting that some 'bad' experiences can be important for young people's development
- Contribute to the idea that businesses and the private sector are key contributors to social and cultural infrastructure but suggest that, contrary to common assumptions that the role of the private sector is to fund other social and cultural spaces, commercial businesses can be important elements of social and cultural infrastructure in their own right
- Introduce the concept of 'Aspirational Infrastructure' to include places/things that, although they may not be accessed day to day, provide a sense of possibility, which is a key affective dimension of social and cultural infrastructure for young people

The following sections will explore these contributions.

## Ontological Security and Young People's Social and Cultural Infrastructure

As we've outlined, young people were very worried about their safety in London as well as about the affordability of food, transport and housing. This is reflected in the cards they added.

Young people have grown up in an era defined by crises (Harris, 2020). They've been children during the fall out from the 2008 financial crash and come of age amidst austerity politics, the build up to and impact of Brexit, the Covid-19 crisis, the cost-of-living crisis, as well as the ongoing 'slow' housing crisis. All of these crises have had direct impacts on the everyday lives of young people, particularly in their experiences of housing, food poverty, education and youth services and more. Additionally, the

war in Ukraine, the war in Gaza and the impending doom of the climate crisis has had tangible impacts on young people's 'ontological security' (Giddens, 1991), their baseline feeling of safety, security and predictability.

What is evident from our findings is that ontological insecurity is a huge barrier to young people accessing social and cultural infrastructure. Even from our icebreaker it was clear how concerned young people are for their safety. When asked if London was a good place to live almost all young people answered no and, when prompted to tell us why, cited prevalent knife crime and violence as well as a growing problem of affordability.

The 'Security' category of cards that young people added (including CCTV, Police Station and Security) speak to these concerns as do 'activation' elements added to other categories including 'Safe Streets', 'Street Lights' and cards added to the Home and Housing category including 'Housing for the Homeless' and 'Affordable Housing.' The fourth card in the Security category - 'Navy' - also speaks to a more existential concern about the safety of the country. The young person, in Acton, who added this card explained his rationale as 'no defence, no country, no country, no people.'

The one crisis we didn't have extensive mentions of was the climate crisis. Although some young people were concerned about pollution in London's blue spaces, we had no explicit mention of climate change or cards related to environmental concerns. This is in keeping with literature on climate change anxiety which suggests that people have a finite capacity to worry, meaning that for young people fearing for their immediate safety, climate change may not be top of their list of concerns (Whitemarsh, 2011).

It's important not to downplay the impact of safety concerns on young people's access to social and cultural infrastructure. For many young people, especially in cities like London, travelling even a mile to a local youth group or sports club can be literally life threatening if it involves going through the wrong area (Stansfeld, 2019). Journeys can also be impossible if they have no access to money for the bus or train.

Due to the prevalence of youth and gang violence, young people may feel unsafe attending events where they don't know in advance who else will be there, what will happen or if they will be adequately and compassionately supported by supervising adults. The amount of young people who (in 2024, long after the acute stages of the pandemic) attended our focus groups wearing face masks (which is common in schools and in youth activity groups too) indicates a pervasive worry about who might see you and what they might think.

Previous British Academy work on the Covid-19 crisis has shown that people fare better in crises when they have good engagement with well-developed forms of social infrastructure (The British Academy, 2021) suggesting that ontological security and social and cultural infrastructure are mutually reinforcing. This means that a lack of ontological security can produce a vicious circle, whereby those who feel unsafe don't access social and cultural infrastructure, leading them to have less resilience in the face of crises. If policymakers want to ensure that social and cultural infrastructure is effective in supporting young people they must, then, make sure that extra attention is given to how young people can be made to feel safe. This might mean organising trips to social and cultural spaces via trusted institutions and trusted adults (e.g. schools or youth clubs) or having well trained and effective outreach workers at cultural institutions who can help young people access safe

travel routes, answer their questions and concerns, and facilitate interactions between groups of young people safely as well as engagingly.

## Scales of Access

The vicious cycle of ontological insecurity and lack of social and cultural infrastructure relates to another theme from our research - the question of scale. Although we framed the focus group activities around young people building 'their city', we saw a range of interpretations of scale as they imagined the infrastructure they needed. Young people told us that social and cultural infrastructure would be more useful to them if it was local. This was especially true in Peckham where one young person explained that 'I'm being so real, if it's in central London, it doesn't matter to me.' On another table in Peckham one young person suggested the beach as a social space and another jokingly ridiculed him with 'you want a beach in Peckham, Bro?', demonstrating a lack of ability to imagine living elsewhere. In Acton, young people highlighted the importance of having social and cultural infrastructure locally and discussed how having something like a local theatre would enrich their area. They said that, with the right incentives and transport, they would go to other areas of London, but that they didn't see this as a regular occurrence.

Financial crisis and austerity has badly affected local areas, as youth clubs, libraries and sports facilities have shut down alongside closures of high street shops (Hastings et al, 2017). For young people who's scales of access are very local, this will have more impact than it will for those with more financial, social and cultural capital to travel to other areas to access social and cultural spaces.

One young person in Peckham did advocate for social and cultural resources being dispersed around the city but his reason was to ensure that no one area became too popular:

"We put them [things they want] everywhere innit, not to be biased...it just causes more problems cause then everyone wants to move there...we want things to be equal everywhere innit"

This comment is telling, coming from a young person in Peckham, an intensely gentrifying area. The boxing gym this focus group took place at is under the arches of the train line and next door to a mead brewery where 'hipsters' often come for cocktails in the evening. It's understandable that a young person at this gym would want to make sure that other areas of London were popular too, given that gentrification can mean that when new social and cultural spaces arrive in an area they are not serving people like him.

The importance of locality and the connection between spaces and services was also highlighted by some of the young people's arts and crafts creations (images five and six). These models reflected the importance of links, routes, transport and focal points in their imagined cities. The young people considered how different spaces and services were situated in relation to one another and how this might change their use, accessibility and interest for young people.

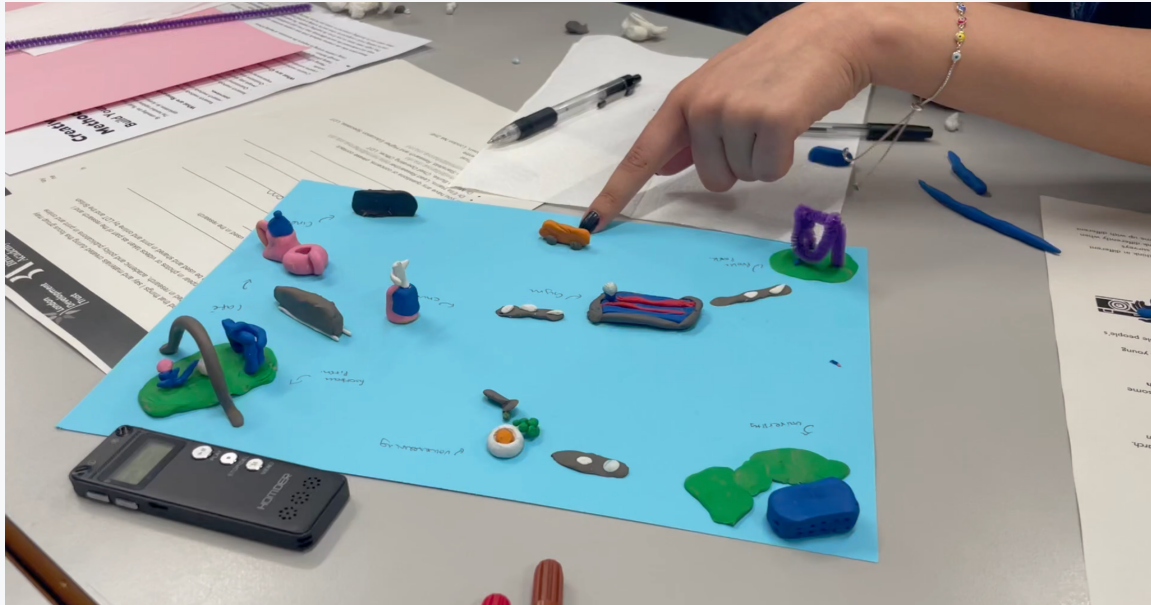


Image Nine: Young person presenting their city in the Alperton Focus Group, pointing out their model of a bus and train, as well as roads that connect their Social and Cultural Infrastructure



Image Ten: Another group in Alperton highlighted the importance of an airport in their city to connect to other global places



As well as considering the urban, regional and global connections of their cities through the inclusion of different forms of transport from buses and trains, to airports and planes, the young people explored hyper-local scales. Various young people highlighted how they wanted to have access to more multi-use spaces and connected services and activities within one space:

“I want to have a bookshop in a cafe in the woods that also has clothes donations” (Young person, Acton)

“It would be good to have an outdoor space attached to the community centre so that you're not just indoors all the time” (Young Person, Acton)

One young person highlighted that ‘if the boxing gym had a recording studio in it it'd be more interesting for young people. [Multi-use spaces] are brilliant. I feel like that would really help the community’. The focus on multi-use space seemed to reflect a desire for social and cultural infrastructure to cater for different needs and experiences simultaneously and be more inclusive to a range of people. It may also reflect young people's concerns about safety while travelling within local areas.

## Beyond Hard and Soft Infrastructure

The problematisation of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ infrastructure is an emerging theme in the British Academy's work on social and cultural infrastructure. Hard infrastructure has been defined as the built environment and utilities, while soft has been defined as services, skills and social systems (Dyer et al. 2019). However, this binary has been critiqued as an ineffective way of conceptualising infrastructure, including by the Bennett Institute's recent report (2024). Our findings contribute to this critique by highlighting how ‘hard’ elements can only become valuable infrastructure with the right ‘soft’ elements to activate them. In particular, we highlight the importance of safety and security features for activating the value of hard elements of social and cultural infrastructure for young people.

Our participants added enough cards related to security and safety to warrant us creating a ‘security’ category. As the previous section on Ontological Security explored, concerns for their safety were a significant barrier in young people being able to access social and cultural spaces.

Bingham Hall and Kaasa emphasise that infrastructure is as much about ‘constraining’ action as about ‘supporting’ it (2017, 10). Our findings suggest that things that ‘constrain’ can be important elements of social and cultural infrastructure for young people, who want to know that unsafe and violent behaviours will be constrained so that they can safely access spaces. We saw this concern in numerous statements from young people at our focus groups:

“There should be a safety guard at every corner” (Acton)

“We need more security cameras” (Acton)

“As a girl - walking down the street at night isn't good” (Acton)

“We need security to be able to walk at night” (Peckham)

“It's not really safe out here- we need Patrol - like they have in America” (Peckham)

“There should be no racism” (Acton)

“We added CCTV to ensure safety in the city” (Alperton)

“It would be better if we could get rid of violence” (RCC)

Our findings suggest that surveillance and security services are deemed essential by young people to create an environment in which they can access and enjoy social and cultural activities.

## The How of Young People's Social and Cultural Infrastructure

As mentioned earlier in this report, the ‘activation’ element of our card deck method was inspired by findings from the Bennett Institute's inception report that social and cultural infrastructure is not just about the things that exist but how those things connect and how welcoming, inspiring and safe they are (9). Other writing on social and cultural infrastructure has argued that, for young people in particular, what makes elements of social and cultural infrastructure valuable or not is how they are run, who they are aimed at and what's in them (Blamire, Rees & Elkington, 2024).

We found that the ‘how’ of social and cultural infrastructure is crucial for how young people value it. Even before we introduced the ‘activation’ element of the card deck method young people were interested in the details of how particular social and cultural places and assets are designed and delivered. For example, in Acton one young person showed the ‘parks’ card to the rest of the table and asked if they should keep parks. Another replied ‘what kind of park?’ This question emphasises that the what is not enough to assess the value of social and cultural infrastructure on its own.

The activation card creation activity was very successful in getting young people to think deeply about elements of design and delivery that make cultural and social infrastructure valuable to them. We introduced the idea of the activation cards half way through the activity, but even before this point many of the cards they made could be considered to be activation elements (for example, ‘music’ or ‘public transport’ could both be activation elements but were made as core cards).

The activation cards the young people added show the importance of who works in social and cultural spaces (e.g., qualified teachers, boxing coaches), what activities are delivered in them (e.g. school trips, art classes), how those activities are priced (e.g. free football sessions, cheap school trips) and who they are inclusive to (e.g. female only gyms, religiously inclusive spaces). Everything the young people added to our ‘Accidental Infrastructure’ category was an activation card (affordable food, safe streets, street lights) suggesting that the ‘how’ of accidental social spaces might be especially important to whether they are valuable or not to young people.

‘Activation’ is potentially a valuable term and concept for codifying this idea that it's how things are designed and delivered, not just what things are, that makes them valuable or not as social and cultural infrastructure. Importantly, different people will need different things to ‘activate’ elements of infrastructure. For example, for some of our young people having female-only slots was important to activate the gym, while for others it was important for gyms to be 24/7 spaces. ‘Activation’ as a concept can therefore help to articulate the variety of add ons that are needed to make infrastructure inclusive.

## Accessibility and Awareness Raising as Part of the 'How'

We were interested to observe that some young people made activation cards to represent things they wished existed, without knowing that those things actually do exist. For example, in Acton one young person added discounts for young people, unaware that most social and cultural spaces do offer such discounts. Another wanted art classes for young people in galleries, unaware of the wealth of opportunities that do exist for young people to take part in creative workshops in London. We also saw a generalised disbelief that there are enriching activities that are cost effective for young people. For example, in Manor House, one young person's story about going to a free cinema screening was met with disbelief:

YP 1: "Guys, I went to a free cinema, it was outdoor"

YP 2: "It defo wasn't free bro, someone probably took you..."

YP 3: "No, it was free, outdoor in Kings Cross"

YP 4: "Oh outdoor, like one where you park?"

This disbelief was despite the fact that free outdoor film screenings are offered in the local area of Manor House every summer. Young people's lack of knowledge about what is available for them in London might suggest that there are crucial activation elements that are currently in their 'unknown unknowns.' These unknown activation elements might include better outreach on behalf of social and cultural spaces, signposting work by schools, colleges, youth centres and other youth spaces to foreground opportunities, and training for young people to discover what's happening in their areas.

Our research indicates that awareness is a big barrier for young people accessing cultural spaces. For young people who don't have parents or other role models making them aware of cultural activities they may have no idea that activities and events they would love to access are happening locally to them. A certain amount of social and cultural capital is needed already for a young person to research a local cultural event and turn up to it confidently. This is especially true given that cultural spaces often have invisible behaviour codes (e.g. walking slowly in art galleries or sitting quietly in theatres) that can be off-putting or intimidating for young people not used to them. Awareness raising of what exists and inclusive approaches to behavioural norms in those spaces could therefore be a crucial 'activation' element, albeit one that young people didn't pin point explicitly.

## The Importance of People

Although there were no people represented in our card deck (the literature we based the cards on focused mainly on buildings, things and services) young people identified people (qualified teachers, boxing coaches, 'bossman') as important 'activators' of social and cultural infrastructure.

Teachers and boxing coaches are representative of a group of people that can be termed 'pivotal people' or 'boundary spanners',<sup>4</sup> people that serve as a bridge granting access to different worlds. For young people, a teacher or a boxing coach can be the person that offers pathways into unfamiliar arenas and supports them out of their comfort zone.

'Bossman,' however, relates to a different role that people can play in social and cultural infrastructure. Unlike a teacher or sports coach he doesn't (normally) support young people into unfamiliar territory. Instead, his role is about familiarity and a sense of belonging. In our focus groups young people spoke about bossman with obvious affection as well as clear enjoyment in the familiarity of this archetypal community figure.

"Obviously an essential to everyone is chicken shop and bossman" (Young Person, Peckham)

"Bossman is the chicken shop innit [Laughing], bossman will never reduce the price!" (Young Person, Manor House)

In work on shared spaces and cultural infrastructure, Sharon Jeanotte has discussed the importance of 'community identity' for wellbeing (2008). Local archetypes like 'bossman' may be an important element of community identity. Especially for young people, knowledge of archetypal people in their communities can help them to build social confidence and capital, developing heuristic knowledge of their local area. In our focus groups, the young people who mentioned bossman were all male which also suggests that these kinds of interactions are central to identity formation in relation to masculinity and urban mobility.

While there were only three 'people cards' added to our pack, qualified teachers, boxing coaches, citizens (as well as the discussion of bossman with no corresponding card), we suspect that if we create a 'people' category in future iterations of the card deck this is likely to prompt young people to reflect on other key figures and archetypes that are important for their social and cultural growth.

## Good and Bad Social and Cultural Infrastructure

Our research also speaks to discussions about 'good' and 'bad' social and cultural infrastructure<sup>5</sup>. Both positive and negative experiences can take place in social and cultural spaces, especially in accidental meeting spaces.

Our participants definitely identified social and cultural spaces as being potentially negative. Stairwells were seen as potentially anti-social spaces, nightlife was seen by some as being for 'deviants' and shared gardens were seen as spaces of potential stress and conflict.

Interestingly, it wasn't just accidental infrastructure that was seen as potentially 'bad.' In Alperton, one participant commented that they didn't want to keep the museum card because places like the British Museum 'just steal stuff from other countries and put it in their museums.' The same young

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<sup>4</sup> This idea was contributed by Nicola Berkley and Adam Wright from the British Academy in a conversation about this report

<sup>5</sup> This topic was discussed with Nicola Berkley and Adam Wright in a meeting about this report

person also wanted to discard the 'spaces of worship' card because 'religion divides society.' These contributions problematise the notion that infrastructure can be easily categorised as good or bad, emphasising the subjectivity of experience.

Another interesting implication of our findings is that some young people saw 'bad' experiences as a normal part of social development.

"Some people are still successful after misbehaving when they're younger" (Young Person, Manor House)

Some of the young people in Manor House felt that 'independence' was important for young people's social development, even if it might include negative experiences or involve illicit behaviours:

"We want independence, we've tried the youth club, they're on you....they're on your neck" (Young Person, Manor House)

This view is corroborated by Gallan's work on 'youth transitions' (2013) in which he argues for the importance of nightlife for young people's transitions to adulthood. Accordingly, in Alperton, some young people identified nightlife as an important 'stress reliever' and a space to 'numb it out' as well as a site of formative social interactions.

These findings complicate the idea that social and cultural infrastructure can be classified as either good or bad. Instead, social and cultural infrastructure might be better valued around how well it supports the development of social and cultural capital. While too many, or too extreme, 'bad' experiences are likely to be detrimental to social and cultural capital formation, some degree of experimentation is likely necessary for young people's development.

## Business and Social and Cultural Infrastructure

"Imagine if all the chicken shops were gone - riots!" (Young Person, Peckham)

Although business and the private sector are usually seen as funders of social and cultural infrastructure, young people in our research saw local businesses as important elements of social and cultural infrastructure in their own right. They added 13 cards to the 'local businesses' category (although the 'theme parks' card could warrant a new category.)

Young people partly valued businesses as places to get things they saw as important for their social and cultural lives (e.g. kebabs, clothes, video games, takeaway) but they also saw businesses as places to spend social time. For example, in Alperton one table added an 'arcades' card, saying it was 'good for quality time' and also specified that shopping centres were spaces for leisure as well as shopping. In Peckham, one table added a Nando's card and were deliberate in specifying that it was to enable 'dates wif gal.' In Manor House a young person commented that barber shops are not just for hair cuts but that 'a lot of people go there for their conversations.'

In their paper on 'Community business as a distinct form of social infrastructure', Hutcheon and Steiner (2024) define community businesses as generating social capital in three ways; 'bonding, bridging [and] linking.' While this paper is focused on community run businesses as a subsection of social enterprises, our findings suggest that local commercial businesses are also important for generating social capital, especially in relation to 'bonding' (connecting within groups or communities that have similar backgrounds and characteristics) (2024, 5).

In some instances, the values of businesses mattered to young people as well as the kinds of interactions they afford. In Alperton, one young person mentioned that KFC shouldn't be included in their 'takeaway' card because they were trying to boycott it, presumably in relation to the war in Gaza. In Manor House, a young person spoke about corner shops being preferable to Sainsbury's, in part because they are cheaper and in part because of the presence of 'bossman':

"Sainsbury's, they sell for high prices which is really bad - let's say corner shops, we like corner shops .....You need corner shops to chat to bossman" (Young Person, Manor House).

## Aspirational Infrastructure

A key contribution of this study is the importance of what could be called 'Aspirational Infrastructure'.<sup>6</sup> Our participants added many cards that reflected aspirational items; things they were unlikely to use day to day but that gave a sense of possibility with regards to what they might be able to do or achieve in the future. For example, across the four focus groups, three separate tables added an 'airports' card. While this could be because they have relatives who live abroad and see the airport as a social space where they pick people up, it seemed to speak more to their desire to be globally connected and to travel:

"It's [the airport] underrated in a way - cause a goal is to travel the world" (Young Person, Acton)

In Manor House, one table drew what they described as 'penthouse apartments' even though they weren't totally sure what this meant (when one of us joined their discussion, they asked us to clarify). They wrote, on their list of goals, that they wanted to achieve 'a nice house...retire your parents..get a good wife'. Penthouse apartments were part of this imagined geography of success.

Private gardens were also an aspirational item for the young people we worked with. Many young people rejected the 'shared gardens' card, saying they'd prefer a private space and in Acton one young person drew a 'garden' card of her own and commented that she'd been 'wanting a garden my whole life' (Young Person, Acton).

In some instances, everyday infrastructure was talked about by young people in relation to aspirational ambitions. For example, in Acton, one table chose to keep the Library card and the social media card because they said these items would enable them to learn new skills (in the library) then monetise them (on social media) in order to travel the world (via the Airport). In Peckham, a table

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<sup>6</sup> This concept was developed in conversation with Nicola Berkley and Adam Wright from The British Academy

kept the Art Gallery card not because they planned to go and see art but because one of them wanted to be a famous artist one day so needed a site for his exhibitions.

From these contributions, 'aspirational infrastructure' seems very important to young people. We can see how having things in an area like an airport, an art gallery or penthouse apartments can provide a background sense of social and cultural possibility, even if they're not accessed day to day. Edward Said's concept 'imagined geography' (1978) is useful here in illuminating a potential 'imagined' dimension to social and cultural infrastructure - infrastructures that allow you to imagine social and cultural possibilities for yourself.

## Recommendations: Policy Implications

The following policy implications can be drawn from this study with regards to a) how we measure and value social and cultural infrastructure with young people and b) how we produce and maintain social and cultural infrastructure for young people. All recommendations can be substantiated and developed in future research phases.

### Valuing and Measuring

The card deck worked incredibly well. Young people were resoundingly positive about their experience of using it and the way it looks, commenting that: "I wouldn't change anything about these cards...they're just perfect" (Acton); "It gave us the ideas and we went from there" (Peckham); and "It really catalysed our thinking" (Alperton).

The success of the card deck in this study indicates how valuable creative thinking tools like this can be for helping young people (and others) to understand and discuss nebulous concepts such as social and cultural infrastructure.

We recommend the use of this card deck method, and/or other creative thinking tools, as a way to engage young people in valuing and measuring the social and cultural infrastructure they have and need.

We believe that the cards can be used to 'measure' social and cultural infrastructure by helping young people to identify and articulate whether or not they have what they need for social and cultural success in their area(s), whether it is accessible to them, and why. This is a subjective measurement tool as it relies on young people self reporting and focuses on experiential aspects that make social and cultural infrastructure valuable (or not). However, the colour coded categories in the card deck and the core item/activation item distinction do provide a way to codify the measurements to some extent.

While we used the cards in the method described, alternative uses could offer different insights. For example:



- The cards could be ranked by young people, going systemically through the cards and categories. This would give a more comprehensive account of how far young people agree and disagree with what others have identified and valued as social and cultural infrastructure<sup>7</sup>
- The cards could be given different weightings, and their weightings could change when activation cards are added. This would give clear insights into what young people value most as well as into how activation elements change the value of 'core' items
- The cards could be used to identify what you currently do and don't have in your area, including activation elements. This would help young people to map existing social and cultural infrastructure
- The cards could be used in scenario based activities (e.g. what cards would you need to achieve X?), helping to measure social and cultural infrastructure as a phenomenon that is relative to what people are trying to accomplish
- The 'activation' card element could be used to foreground the different factors that make social and cultural infrastructure valuable to one person compared to another. For example, an activity could involve giving a group of young people one card and asking each of them what elements would 'activate' that thing for them personally. This activity would help to measure social and cultural infrastructure's relative and subjective dimensions
- The cards could be used as a Thinking Tool for other Metrics: While the cards are a measurement tool in their own right they could also be used to stimulate thinking among young people in order to generate findings that can be transferred into other measurement metrics. Different uses of the cards (from this list) can generate different kinds of data as appropriate for different metrics

## Producing and Maintaining

Our findings suggest that diverse forms of infrastructure are instrumental to young people's social and cultural lives in varied ways. The focus groups found that young people in London value different kinds of spaces and services to develop a sense of belonging and community and create balanced social lives; maintain their health and wellbeing; develop skills and access job and economic opportunities; broaden their worldviews and build a family life. However, in order to do so, there are several implications for policy makers and other stakeholders that need to be considered in how to produce and maintain social and cultural infrastructure for young people. These include:<sup>8</sup>

- Considering Safety. Safety must be considered when planning infrastructure for young people. This includes how to mitigate actual, everyday threats but also how to mitigate subjective experiences of ontological insecurity. Policy makers need to focus on adaptations that can make young people feel safer such as:
  - ◆ Organising visits to cultural and social institutions via schools, youth clubs or other spaces with trusted adults (this could involve group trips or could mean establishing

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<sup>7</sup>This method was inspired by a suggestion from a young person at the focus group in Manor House who wanted to be referred to as Molly for the purposes of this research

<sup>8</sup>These recommendations have been developed in consultation with Kheron Gilpin, Community leader and Engagement Specialist from South London

links between schools or youth clubs and cultural institutions, so that young people can be introduced to institution workers in advance, etc.)

- ◆ Hiring and training people at social and cultural institutions to do thorough outreach work which includes not just advertising events in 'hard to reach' communities but going as far as working with young people to research safe routes, provide a pick up bus from a safe meeting spot, listening to young people and working with them to mitigate other concerns, etc.)
  - ◆ Considering safety and inclusivity when programming events and activities.
  - ◆ Providing extensive information so that young people know what to expect in a space/from an event
- Ensuring that social and cultural events are free or affordable
  - Ensuring that there is low cost, or ideally free (as well as safe) travel to get to key social and cultural spaces (this could involve, for example, putting on free shuttle buses for cultural events, with designated safe meeting spots)
  - Utilising 'pivotal people' by training sports coaches, teachers, community leaders, etc. to help signpost young people to social and cultural sites and activities
  - Planning spaces to be religiously and culturally inclusive, including prayer spaces, appropriate food and signs in multiple languages
  - Training for workers in social and cultural spaces to ensure they are supportive and welcoming to young people and knowledgeable and compassionate about young people's safety concerns
  - Advocating for the importance of affordable housing, reliable healthcare and adequate financial support as inextricable from and indeed dimensions of social and cultural infrastructures, as these provisions increase young people's sense of ontological security and safeguard their social support networks.

## Reflections and Take-Forwards for Future Research Directions

The last section of this report offers reflections on the project and explores what might be adapted and extended to progress the research, considering developing the research in different geographical locations across the UK.

### Interpreting Young People's Views

At the focus groups, we saw young people testing out political ideas. Sometimes this was via informed debates, other times via experimental, misguided or problematic statements. The range of ages and academic backgrounds also led to variations in how young people understood and engaged with the exercise.

For example, one young person (a 13 year old in Peckham) added a card saying 'make the prime minister British' (at the time of the research the prime minister of the UK was Rishi Sunak) and another saying 'women should go to war with men' [to earn equality]. We did not add these cards to

the deck because they are clearly offensive. However, it was interesting to think about how to interpret these additions. This young person was a Black boy who likely has had his own experiences of racism. He also added a card advocating for 'free healthcare for everyone no matter where they're from', the inclusive sentiment of which isn't coherent with his implication that Rishi Sunak isn't 'really' British. From the audio recording we saw that, before he added this card, he spoke about wishing the prime minister was a 'normal Geeza'. In this context, we could understand his racist remarks as indicating an underlying desire to have someone he can relate to in charge of the country.

Meanwhile at Alperton - where the young people were all 16-18 - we saw others trying out political ideas. For example, two boys added a 'government' card. When we came round to their table they asked us if we thought they should say that their government was capitalist or communist. After a short conversation about the different political systems, they ended up writing 'capitalist'.

These two exchanges above show the complexities behind each card. Young people are still forming their political and social views and, as such, the cards they produce are sometimes snapshots into ideas in progress rather than positions held with certainty.

Sometimes young people put very careful thought into their cards and sought consensus from the whole table before adding one. Other times they added cards quickly or flippantly and said things largely to amuse their peers. For example, one young person was explaining to his table how some things shown on the cards (religion and museums) are social constructs, using the term with varying degrees of accuracy but clearly enjoying trying out the concept.

This is to say that there is an analytical challenge in how to interpret policy implications from young people's contributions given that a) they are still growing as thinkers and b) they made cards with varying degrees of focus/flippancy. One way we have been able to mitigate this is to go back to the audio recordings to give context to their contributions.

For future research phases, we would look to work with young researchers who can help with this interpretive stage, using their expertise from lived experience to help represent young people's views effectively. We could also consider running an additional workshop following the focus groups (potentially a virtual workshop bringing together young people from across locations) at which young people can help to plan policy recommendations that address their needs and concerns.

## Refining the Card Deck Categories

Another challenge has been to refine the categories of the card deck in a way that is both true to young people's additions and which stimulates thinking effectively in future research. Our aim is for the card deck to be a tool that policy makers and other stakeholders can use with young people to help them self-report on the social and cultural infrastructure they have and need.

The success of the method at this research stage indicates that this tool will be very useful. A key consideration going forward is how we would refine the card deck and its categories. Do we take forward all of the cards the young people made or do some conflating, cutting and interpreting? Do we reassign 'core' cards that we think are 'activation elements', even though young people didn't identify them as such? Should the card deck we present at future groups show which cards were added from the literature review and which by young people, or should they be presented as one

deck? Do we choose categories that best reflect what was added at this research stage or that reflect themes we want to prompt thinking about in future focus groups? (e.g. by adding a 'people' category or even an 'aspirational infrastructure' or 'bad infrastructure' category.) These are questions we are addressing as we refine the card deck for any future research.

As above, it would be advantageous to work with young researchers recruited from this research phase to help with this refinement process.

## Factoring in the Focus Group Site

Another point of reflection is the impact that the different sites we held focus groups in might have had on our findings. We held two of these focus groups in community centres, one in a school and one in a boxing gym. These are obviously quite different environments, and we expect that young people might approach the exercise differently in a school than in a boxing gym, for example, considering different norms of behaviour and thinking.

It's also important to factor in the different peer groupings given that some tables were made up of young people who all knew each other whereas others were made up of strangers. While there was definitely a healthy amount of debate and disagreement at focus groups, 'group think' must also be considered as a factor that could drive false consensus among young people. We mitigated this through careful analysis of audio recordings and by ensuring a number of researchers were present to ask probing questions and encourage nuanced reflection and discussion.

For future research, it would be interesting to hold focus groups in a variety of cultural and social spaces. This would help to recruit young people with a range of social and cultural interests as well as help to analyse how the task is approached differently in different spaces.

## Interpreting Results against Demographic Data

We collected data pertaining to gender and age in these focus groups, which allows us to see how experiences vary according to these two categories. We also contextualised our findings in relation to ward data. However, given the scale of the project, we did not have scope to collect more extensive demographic data in an ethically sensitive manner.

Going forwards, we would be keen to collect data not just about age and gender but also about ethnicity, schooling, parental occupations or incomes and to undertake more fine-grained analysis against local data including the index of multiple deprivation.

Equally, we did not collect data on sexual orientation or on disabilities. It would be valuable to collect this data and possibly to run targeted focus groups with LGBTQ+ and disabled young people to ensure our findings incorporate the experiences and needs of minoritised groups.

This study mostly included young people from deprived areas and working class backgrounds, so it would be interesting to run the research with young people from more affluent areas and backgrounds to explore common and contrasting perceptions.

We hypothesise that more detailed demographic data and more emphasis on demographic characteristics could enable us to develop an understanding of infrastructure as 'intersectional' as well as to consider how identity formation (e.g. gender identity, racial identity) is embedded in social and cultural infrastructure.

## Exploring Differences by Geographical Area

Our focus groups were all in London and all in relatively deprived, gentrifying areas. For further research, it would be interesting to conduct the research in rural areas and smaller cities and towns where young people will have very different needs and experiences of social and cultural infrastructure. In particular, we expect to find very different perceptions on security and travel in different locations.

We look to run further focus groups in a range of areas across the UK and in cities, towns and villages of different sizes and demographic profiles.

## Exploring Differences by Age

Our focus groups encompassed a very broad age range, from 12-20. Because participants worked in mixed groups we've been unable to draw conclusions about differences in the needs and views of younger and older 'young people' within this bracket. For further research it would be advantageous to narrow the age range to our original intention of 13-18 and to hold focus groups with 13-15 and 16-18 year olds separately, enabling us to differentiate needs and perceptions by age. Relatedly, collecting data on educational enrolment and attainment would help to tease out how differences by age intersect with differences by education.

## Summary of Take-Forwards

In sum, our take-forwards for potential further research phases are:

- Generating comparisons with other areas of the UK including rural areas and smaller cities and towns, so that policy recommendations can be differentiated according to different contexts. This would allow us to generate a card deck that reflects young people's perspectives from across the country and create a more thorough measurement tool to be used by policy makers and stakeholders
- Getting a broader diversity of young people and measuring demographic data more extensively to enable comparisons across class, gender and ethnic background
- Holding focus groups with 13-15 and 16-18 year olds separately, to better differentiate needs and perceptions of social and cultural infrastructure by age
- Working with young people with disabilities and with LGBTQ+ young people to ensure that the views of these minoritised groups are included
- Testing out other uses of the card deck (as outlined in our Policy Recommendations on Valuing and Measuring) including to see how data can be translated into other measurement metrics
- Holding focus groups in different social and cultural spaces to engage young people with a range of interests and to investigate how different thinking is generated by different focus group sites

- Working with young researchers at all stages of further research including to develop a method and framework for how young people can be part of measuring and advocating for youth social and cultural infrastructure.

## Conclusions

Understanding what counts as valuable social and cultural infrastructure for different groups of people is vital to creating healthy, cohesive and fulfilling societies. This research contributes to The British Academy's broader investigation through an in-depth exploration of how young people understand and value social and cultural infrastructure.

We conducted this research across four sites in London, engaging with a diverse - and broadly representative - spectrum of young people from different demographic backgrounds. We developed a creative and engaging card game in which young people could edit and create elements of social and cultural infrastructure which were important to them.

A key finding is that safety is a huge barrier to young Londoners accessing social and cultural infrastructure, so measures to ensure young people's safety and mitigate their concerns must be considered in order to make events, places and support systems accessible. Young people feel an intense 'ontological insecurity' and cannot enjoy and benefit from social and cultural infrastructure without first feeling safe, supported, financially secure, and confident in their access to appropriate housing. This ontological insecurity is exacerbated by young people's small scales of access. Most of the young people we worked with live very local lives, meaning that, as cuts and closures impact local areas, they cannot mitigate the impact by travelling further to access alternatives.

We have found that 'hard' elements of social and cultural infrastructure are only valuable to young people with the right 'soft' elements in place, and that these soft, contextual elements are frequently related to security, as well as affordability. For young people, the 'how' of social and cultural infrastructure is as important as the 'what.' We have termed this as "activation". Activation is nuanced and relative; what 'activates' a resource for one group will differ from other groups and in other contexts. For example, gyms could be activated for some by having female only sessions but for others by having 24 hour access; this demonstrates the differing needs of different groups of young people to make the same infrastructure valuable.

Another important finding has been that people – and their integrity and intentions – are a central part of how young people are encouraged, supported and deterred from developing their social and cultural capital. People working in local businesses and institutions were seen as important points of navigation for young people's development of social and cultural capital.

Interestingly, we have also found that young people value infrastructures beyond what they access day to day. For example, airports, art galleries and penthouse apartments - although not frequented - give young people a sense of possibility regarding the cultural and social lives they could live. We have termed this 'aspirational infrastructure'; infrastructure that inspires young people to develop social



and cultural dreams. Yet, as much as they value aspirational infrastructure, we found that young people are often unaware of social and cultural opportunities available to them in the day to day that could also further their dreams. This suggests that work needs to be done to better signpost and raise awareness, especially for young people from disadvantaged areas.

Young people's perceptions of social and cultural infrastructure and their needs in relation to it differ significantly to adults. Young people have an expansive future-oriented outlook because of their age, and this is entangled in complex ways with their very real concerns around safety, as well as with other contextual factors (affordability, mobility, awareness, religious sensitivity, etc.) that activate or inhibit infrastructure for them.

As we have found, what defines and makes valuable social and cultural infrastructure is relative to who you are and what you are trying to achieve. This research was conducted in four areas of central London, and we found that even within one city, young people had very varied experiences and perceptions. This makes further research in other sites within the UK - rural areas, smaller towns, and more or less affluent areas - important to understand how geographical, social and cultural contexts affect the different ways young people engage with social and cultural infrastructure, especially with regards to the complexity of 'activation' elements. Our methods are replicable and scalable. The card deck co-created at this research stage can be used at different scales and in different contexts to gather findings with other young participants.

Our co-creative method has been highly successful in enabling young people to participate in valuing and measuring social and cultural infrastructure. We have worked with our 58 young participants to develop an expanded card deck that can be further refined and trialled to create a multifaceted, qualitative measurement tool. As well as offering important insights into how young people understand and value social and cultural infrastructure, we have contributed an innovative approach to measurement that helps to make a nebulous phenomenon more tangible and to engage and amplify young people's voices.

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