



INVESTIGATING YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF

SOCIAL & CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE



THE RESEARCH

Who carried out the Research?



This research project was carried out by a charity called London Development Trust (LDT). We are a community organisation based in London that carries out research projects and runs community projects and centres to make a difference to everyday people's lives. We aim to support sustainable communities and create places where people live happily.

The Research Team



Dr Ella Harris is an independent researcher who works closely with London Development Trust. She is an expert in creative methods and 'crisis cultures'.



Dr Kat Stansfeld is a research specialist at LDT and a Lecturer in Human Geography at University College London. Her research specialises in diverse urban places and cultures.



Dr Miriam Burke is Chief Operating Officer at London Development Trust as well as a researcher and artist. Her work explores participatory art, community practice and climate change.



OUR YOUNG RESEARCHERS

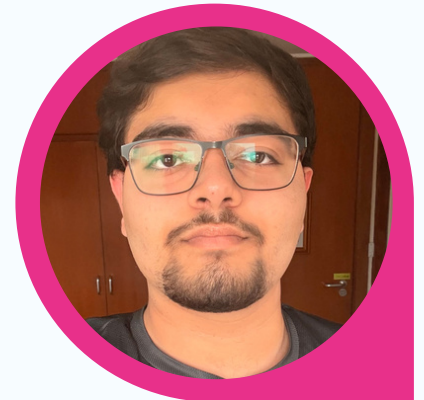
The research team included three young researchers from London who helped us shape and co-create the research.



Alexis

“ Alexis is 18 and currently studying Psychology, Business, and Politics. She’s hoping to go into clinical psychology in the future as she’s interested in how people think and behave. Outside of studying, she loves going out with her friends, going to concerts and reading. ”

“ Bhavya is a 19-year-old undergraduate at the University of Cambridge reading Physical Natural Sciences. He is also an avid reader and loves playing table tennis and badminton. He once had the privilege of representing Ealing in cricket. ”



Bhavya



Elisha

“ Elisha is a 15-year-old boxer with a passion for networking and making connections. He enjoys the hard work of training and competing in boxing and is deeply engaged in studying Business too. ”

THE RESEARCH

BUILD YOUR PLACE

About the Research

This project was part of the British Academy's work on social and cultural infrastructure.

That sounds complicated, but it basically means the places, services, and relationships that help you to thrive in your social and cultural life.

Think of sports clubs, libraries, youth centres, transport links, parks, and even things like local cafés or music venues.



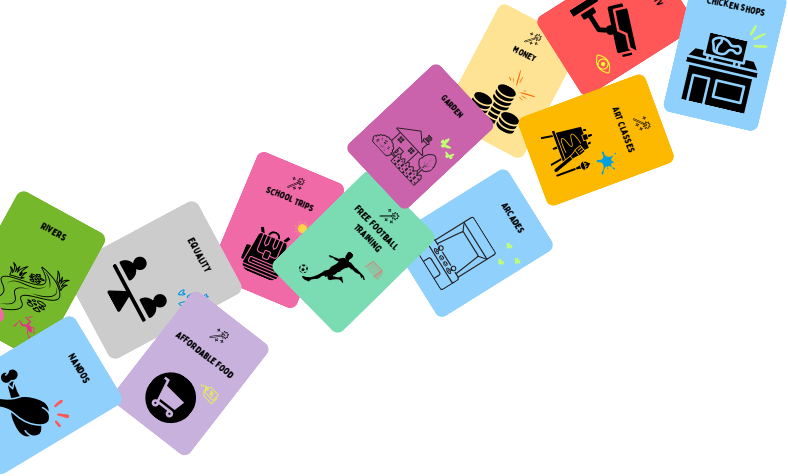
The Question(s)

Our research asked:

What do young people across the UK really think about the cultural and social spaces and services around them?

- What do they want and need in their local areas?
- Are they able to use these spaces and services? What gets in the way?
- What kind of benefits do they get when they do access them?





Answering the Question

To answer this, we worked directly with young people, using a creative card game that helped spark conversations and new ideas.

We first ran sessions in London, then expanded to seven other places across England, Scotland, and Wales.



We trained three of the young participants from London to be co-researchers, helping us design, analyse, and share the work.

THE LOCATIONS

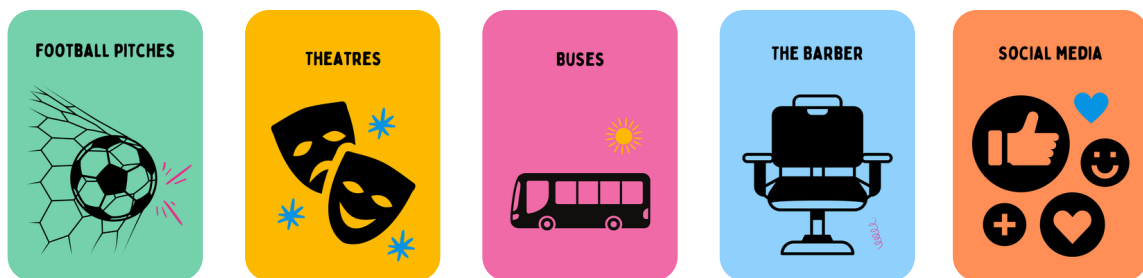
The map below shows the different locations where we worked with young people. From the pictures you can see how different each of these locations are!



THE CARD GAME

To help young people think about social and cultural infrastructure, we created a card deck that showed the kinds of items, services, places and activities that social and cultural infrastructure involves.

Each card shows a different one of these things.
For example....



We colour coded the cards to show different categories of things, like sports, nature, institutions, etc.

We also added 'activation' cards. These are cards that you can add to other cards to make them better or more useful to you.
For example...



On the back of the cards we wrote some questions. These questions were to help young people think more deeply about each item and it's value.

PARKS

How often do you use your local parks?

Does it make a difference how well maintained a park is?



GYMS

What does a gym add to your area?

Does the gym count as a social space?

What are the downsides of gyms?



BUSES

How important are buses for getting around where you live?

Do the buses come on time? Are they affordable?



SPACES FOR QUEER YOUTH

Are there places to go for queer young people in your area?

What would make these spaces welcoming and useful?



How the game works...

The card deck game works in three phases:



Plan your place.

In this phase we gave young people piles of cards and they sorted out what was and wasn't important to them, choosing what they wanted to have in their ideal place.



Build your place.

In this phase young people add their own cards, based on what they think is missing from the cards they'd chosen. They could also build things using plasticine and wire cleaners to demonstrate their ideal place!



Test your place.

Lastly, we gave young people a 'scenario card' that helped them to see if their place had everything they needed to achieve goals despite challenging situations. For example, the scenario might say 'get a job you love, in a cost of living crisis' or 'start a band, during a pandemic.' Young people then added cards to make sure their place had what they needed for these situations.



How the pack of cards grew...

At each focus group, young people added cards to the deck that were important to them.

We now have a huge pack of cards that represents what young people want for their social and cultural lives in all these different locations!



scan to see a video of one of our London workshops!

ACTIVITY



Scan to send us your cards

What cards would you add to the pack?

Get some paper, scissors and felt tips and create three cards that show things that are important for you to have in your local area.

You can send us your cards by using the QR code.

OUR FINDINGS

What we found in London

In London, we spoke to young people aged 12–20 in four different areas (Peckham, Manor House, Alperton and Acton). We found that...



Feeling unsafe was the biggest issue. Many didn't feel safe on the streets, in public spaces, or on transport. This often stopped them from doing things they wanted to do.



Money and awareness mattered. Even when opportunities existed, some young people couldn't afford them, or didn't even know they were there.



What we found across the UK

We then took the research to Scotland, Wales, and other parts of England, speaking with over 100 young people. The findings were similar but also highlighted differences depending on where young people lived.



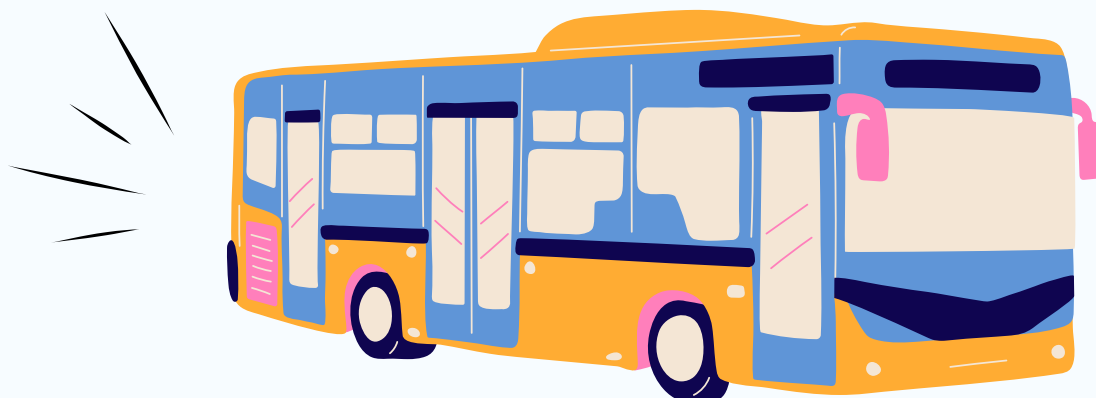
Safety first. In almost all places, feeling unsafe, on buses, trains, or just walking around, was the biggest concern.



Transport and money. Long, unreliable or expensive travel often made activities impossible, especially in rural areas or for families with less money.



Home and Community. Feeling safe, secure and connected at home and in the local area was important in giving young people confidence to access other opportunities and activities.





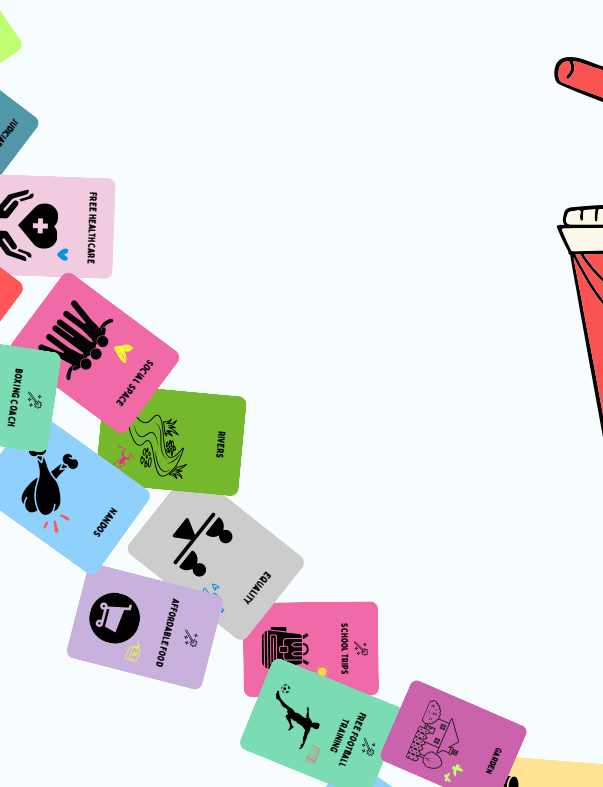
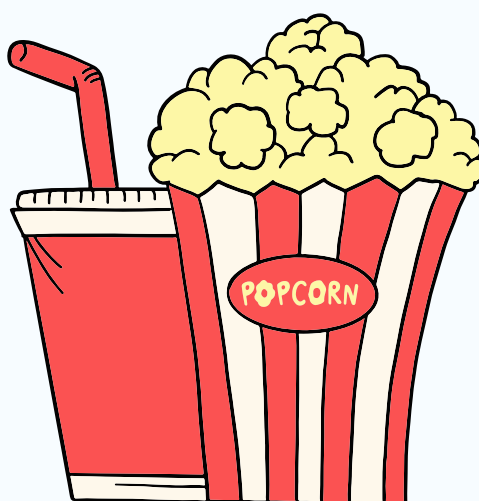
Cultural spaces are valued. Young people enjoyed going to music venues, gyms, cinemas, museums and other cultural spaces but felt that some are too expensive.



Nature is important for wellbeing. Natural areas like woods, lakes and parks were seen as important for physical and mental health, but need to be safe and well maintained.



It's not just what's there, but how it works. Young people wanted particular kinds of services and activities, but most important was that these spaces were welcoming, active, and useful.





Inclusion matters. Young people wanted more spaces for mental health support, LGBTQI+ communities, neurodivergent people, and safe spaces just for young people. But they also recognised the importance of spaces for older adults and younger children.



Place shapes expectations. In small towns like Brora (in the Scottish Highlands), travelling to a bigger city was expected. Whereas, in London, people wanted things close by.



Identity shapes access. Race, gender, sexuality, disability, and neurodivergence all affected whether young people felt included, or excluded, from social and cultural activities.





Trust and aspiration vary. Some groups felt hopeful because they had supportive teachers or youth networks. Others distrusted local institutions and felt ignored.



Ideal vs Practical Choices. In an ideal world, some young people would get rid of things like social media and fast food which they feel are unhealthy. But they also accept that these things can be practical and needed in today's world. For example, social media helps to stay connected and access the news, while fast food is affordable and provides safe places to hang out.



Scan here or click this [link](#) to watch some of our young participants talking about their views and experiences



Co-creation works. Having young people as co-researchers made the findings stronger and helped create real change.



WHAT SHOULD CHANGE?

The big takeaway is that young people need safe, affordable, welcoming and inclusive ways to access social and cultural infrastructure.

When they can access spaces and services, it boosts their wellbeing, confidence, and involvement in their communities.



Safety must be a priority. Better lighting, safer transport, and public spaces designed with young people in mind.



Make things affordable and accessible. Transport costs, entry fees, and hidden costs stop many from taking part. There also needs to be better information for young people on what opportunities are in their areas.



Involve young people in decisions. Not just asking their opinion, but actually showing them how their voices change things.



Long-term investment. Youth clubs, parks, and community spaces need reliable funding, not short-term projects.



Think about connections. Different spaces and services should work together as part of everyday life, not as isolated options.

HOW CAN YOU GET INVOLVED?

Get involved in local social and cultural activities...

Check out local youth clubs, museums, sports clubs and art galleries to see what's happening for young people in your area.

Your school or college might also have information on activities and groups happening locally.

Get involved in research...

Many universities and local councils have opportunities for youth and peer researchers and representatives. You might be able to find some of these in your area through a google search. You can also ask a teacher or other youth worker to help you find opportunities.

Contact us...

You can share your own experiences, thoughts or ideas based on this research by scanning the QR code or using the link and filling out a **short form**. We'd love to hear from you!



Click [here](#) for the link

A BIG THANKS!



Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to all the young people and youth workers who generously gave their time and expertise to this project, in Brora, Kirkcaldy, Hull, Leeds, Banbury, Brighton and Swansea, as well as in our London focus groups in Alperton, Manor House, Acton and Peckham.

We could not have done this research without the generosity and dedication of the youth, community and arts organisations and colleges across the UK who supported organising and facilitating young people's participation.

A big thank you to our young researchers who directed this research and in particular, three core young researchers, Alexis, Bhavya and Elisha, who were a hugely valuable part of the research team and brought so many insights, and so much enthusiasm, to the project.

Finally, huge thanks are due to the British Academy for facilitating, funding and supporting the research.



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London Development Trust

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