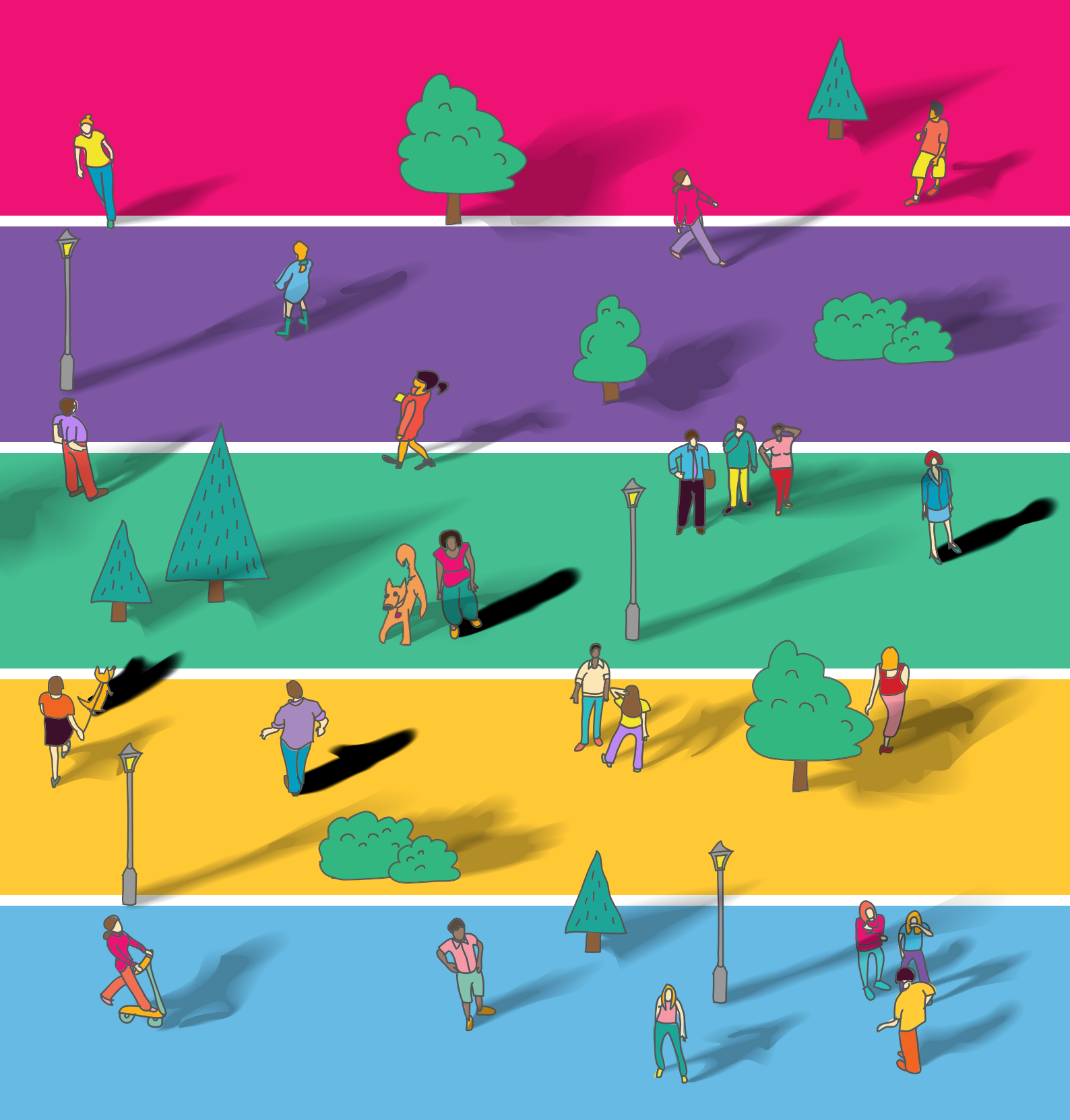


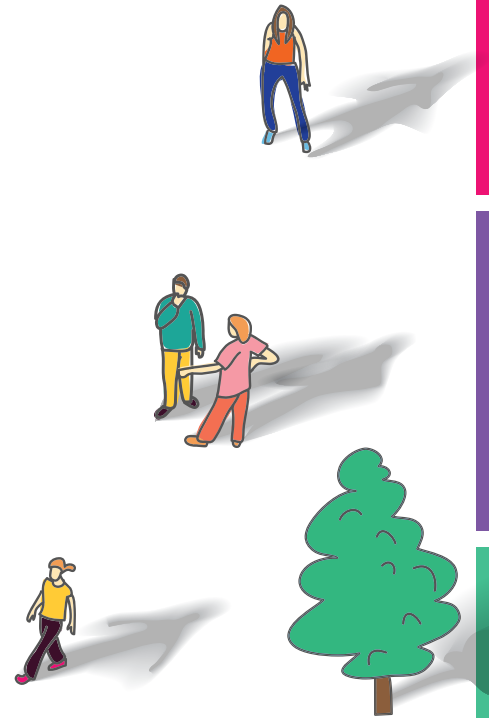


Young, Green, and Well



Parks for
London

SUPPORTED BY
MAYOR OF LONDON



A research study on young Londoners' green space use and mental wellbeing

Citation:

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1 Executive Summary

This research was conducted by Parks for London, Centre for Excellence for London's parks and green spaces, with support from the Greater London Authority (GLA). It follows other initiatives in London that relate to the importance of green spaces to Londoners' health such as the Parks for Health project and research into green social prescribing.

This study seeks to better understand how young Londoners (16–25) perceive, access, and use green spaces for their mental health and wellbeing—as well as the barriers for their doing so. Exploring health inequalities was identified with the GLA as a major programme of work, and health was a priority area in Parks for London's annual supporter survey. Championing the economic, social, health, and environmental value of high-quality green and accessible space was also identified by the London Green Spaces Commission as one of the areas which could add most value.

This research builds on the increasing evidence base around the mental health and wellbeing impacts that derive from access to green space. It also contributes to research focusing on the mental health and wellbeing of young people— in particular, young people in the transition phase from adolescence to adulthood—or 16–25-year-olds—whom research shows have been experiencing increasingly worse mental health. Yet, at the same time, research also tells us that this age group accesses parks and natural areas

less than other age groups and, thus, may not be maximising or accessing the mental health benefits from these spaces. Moreover, research on this specific age group, including how green space use supports their mental health, is scant and inconsistent.

This research also sought to bring young people's voices to the fore and throughout engaged with a range of young Londoners through a survey and small-group interviews and provides some valuable insights. This research, however, is not fully representative of young people across London as, for example, there was an underrepresentation of men amongst interview participants.

Additionally, no white British young people participated in the interviews and further research that incorporates a broader range of young Londoners would help contribute to a fuller picture of how the capital's young residents perceive, access and use green space.

The top recommendations overleaf are based on the feedback from participating young Londoners and are particularly relevant to policy makers and project initiators in the sectors listed. The full list of recommendations can be read on page 44 of the report, framed in three broad themes arising from the conversations with the research respondents: uses and preferences; mental health and wellbeing; accessibility, community, and safety.



Top recommendations by and for young Londoners

For the environment/green space sector

- ▶ Identify where there is poor access to, or exclusion of young people from, green space design, maintenance, management, and decision making so that positive changes can be identified and implemented.
- ▶ Make existing green spaces more permissive and welcoming to young people and, in some cases, provide 24-hour access.
- ▶ Create more green spaces close to where young people live, prioritising areas with greatest deficiencies in access to public green space.
- ▶ Provide shelters or all-weather spaces and tree canopy cover for protection during wet, windy, or sunny weather and provide places to sit and socialise. Include exclusive places and facilities for young people such as swings.
- ▶ Train staff and volunteers to support safer green spaces, provide information and offer outreach to young people.
- ▶ Encourage and support community organisations to engage with young people to act as green space stewards or rangers.
- ▶ Communicate facilities and activities tailored to young people through multiple mediums, such as social media, newsletters, and notice boards.

For the health sector

- ▶ Link workers should help young people to prioritise spending time in green spaces and signpost them to local green social prescribing providers or activities.

For the education sector and all employers

- ▶ Education providers (16–18 and post 18) and employers should help young people to prioritise spending time in green spaces as part of their daily routine for mental health benefit, e.g., lunchtime walks in green spaces close to their place of study or work.



2 Introduction

Addressing young Londoners' mental health and wellbeing, and improving the environment and access to nature are key priorities for the current Mayor of London. Understanding how young Londoners perceive, access, and use green spaces for their mental wellbeing—as well as the barriers for their doing so—is essential to achieving this.

The timing could not be more urgent, as young people have emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic as one of the most negatively affected groups in terms of economic and social impacts. They have experienced significant changes in every aspect of their lives, including at home, at school and at work. These changes caused disruptions to education and economic opportunities as well as to social development.

These changes have also accelerated mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety, among young people. For example, 40% of young people say they feel anxious about socialising, while 35% say they are experiencing an unprecedented sense of loneliness¹.

Apart from the pandemic, other contemporary issues—such as the cost-of-living crisis, climate anxiety, international conflicts, and racial trauma and injustice—have exacerbated mental health and wellbeing pressures felt by young people^{2,3,4}.

In addition to dealing with an increase in mental health and wellbeing challenges, young people aged 16–25 are experiencing greater social and economic pressures as they transition from adolescence to adulthood. Living in an urban environment has also been found to be a risk factor for mental ill health for young people. Nearly 83% of England's population lives in urban areas and cities hold a much larger share of 16–24-year-olds than other areas (in England and Wales)^{5,6}.

The pandemic also shone a light on how important nature is for mental health and wellbeing. The evidence-base for the positive impact of nature, including parks and green spaces, has on young people's mental health and wellbeing continues to develop.





Yet, despite visits to urban green spaces increasing across the British population, 16–25-year-olds make proportionately fewer visits to urban parks and green spaces than other age groups. This means young Londoners are not realising the mental health and wellbeing benefits that London's vast array of green spaces can provide them.

Through surveys and in-depth interviews with young people, this research aims to identify the social, cultural, and personal issues they face in accessing green spaces. The results of this research can inform policy makers and be used to initiate projects that engage more young people with green spaces and lead to improved mental wellbeing outcomes.

Definition of terms used in this report

The following definitions apply to terms used in the report only. These terms were not formally defined for respondents, thus enabling them to discuss green space access and use for mental health and wellbeing through their own interpretations.

Green space: any green spaces that are publicly accessible, including local parks, cemeteries, churchyards, commons, greens, public gardens, outdoor sports facilities/playing fields, nature conservation areas, gardens, sitting out areas, children's play spaces, corridors, or networks of open spaces and towpaths alongside rivers, canals and other waterways, paths, and disused railways.

Nature: the phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals, the landscape, and other features and products of the earth, as opposed to humans or human creations.

Mental health: defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community”⁷.

Green social prescribing: the practice of supporting people in engaging in nature-based interventions and activities to improve their mental health⁸.

3 Literature review

Health benefits of green space use

A growing body of empirical research has connected exposure to green spaces with benefits to human health⁹. Green spaces can provide physical and mental health benefits in several ways, such as presenting opportunities for exercise and other physical activity¹⁰; reducing stress¹¹; and mitigating environmental harms, including air, water and noise pollution, flooding risks, and urban heating¹². Research indicates green spaces contribute to the prevention, reduction, and treatment of chronic conditions^{13,14}, such as type 2 diabetes¹⁵, cardiovascular disease¹⁶, and obesity¹⁷. People who visit nature at least once a week are 1.9 times more likely to also report good general health¹⁸.

Research also explores the impact being in green space has on mental health and wellbeing^{19,20}. An expanding evidence base demonstrates how nature has positive benefits for conditions such as depression²¹, anxiety, and mood disorder²². Access to green spaces can also promote relaxation²³, improve sleep patterns²⁴, facilitate positive social interactions²⁵, promote improvements in an overall sense of happiness and self-worth^{26,27}, and contribute to the wellbeing of patients with diseases such as cancer²⁸.

Mental health disorders are increasing globally and are recognised as a leading cause of global disease burden²⁹. In particular, mental health disorders are increasing globally among young people³⁰. The US Preventive Services Task Force, for example, recently recommended screening all children aged 8–18 for anxiety³¹. In the UK, the National Health Service (NHS) has stated that funding for children and young people's mental health services will grow faster than overall NHS funding and total mental health spending, and includes a new approach to supporting young people's transition to adulthood³².

The impact of urbanisation

The environment in which people live affects their health. Urban living has been connected to a rise in several chronic health conditions^{33,34}, including mental health disorders, such as depression³⁵. In England, 82.9% of the population resides in urban areas, with cities continuing to grow faster than rural areas³⁶.

The built environment can negatively affect mental health and wellbeing through exposure to urban stressors, including noise, fear of crime and crowding³⁷. Anthropogenic environmental hazards, such as pollution and loss of biodiversity, also feature more prominently in cities³⁸. Indeed, research has shown mental health problems “accumulate in urban areas”³⁹. For example, urban residents have a 20% higher risk of developing depression than their rural counterparts⁴⁰.

As such, the relationship between green spaces in an urban context and the health of urban residents is increasingly studied⁴¹. Integrating green space and other natural elements throughout cities is a prevalent metropolitan policy, including in London, where the Mayor's 2018 London Environment Strategy sets out a target for more than 50% of the city to be green by 2050⁴².

Yet, urbanisation can decrease access to and engagement with green space^{43,44}, and opportunities to increase the quantity and equitable distribution of green space are reduced within an increasingly built-up environment^{45,46}. Thus, as cities like London grow more densely populated and densely developed, the ability to provide access to natural areas for health and wellbeing grows more challenging.



Inequalities to access

Health inequalities exist across socioeconomic levels, including in London⁴⁷, and this has been connected to lower levels of greening and lower levels of use of green spaces in more deprived neighbourhoods⁴⁸. In England, for example, residents in the most deprived areas are less likely to live near green spaces, thus they have fewer opportunities to realise the health benefits of green space compared to residents in less deprived areas⁴⁹. Similarly, black and minority ethnic groups in the UK experience health and environmental inequalities, including poorer quality of green spaces⁵⁰.

The connection between spending time in nature and disparities in access was accentuated during the COVID-19 pandemic. By limiting

residents' visits to only green spaces near their homes, regional lockdowns highlighted issues of insufficient and inequitable quantity, quality, and access of green spaces. Emerging research shows the pandemic was not experienced evenly, with environmental factors and accessing nature being a key indicator in health-related disparities⁵¹.

This was further exacerbated by the lack of access to private or domestic gardens, with London having the highest percentage (21%) of all regions across Great Britain⁵². Ethnic minorities are less likely to have access to a private garden or other private outdoor space. For example, in England, black people are nearly four times as likely to have no access to outdoor space at home as white people⁵³.

Young people as a vulnerable group

Young people were experiencing increasing worse mental health before COVID-19 emerged^{54,55}. However, they experienced a further significant decline in mental wellbeing during the pandemic, with exposure to some of the known risk factors for mental illness through disruption to school, extended social isolation, health anxiety, and economic instability⁵⁶. Research indicates that the mental wellbeing of 16–25-year-olds was the most negatively affected during the pandemic, with a higher prevalence of depressive symptoms among 16–24-year-olds than all other age groups⁵⁷.

The pandemic also exacerbated inequalities in mental health. For example, increases in psychological distress were 3.4 times greater in 16-24-year-olds who live in the most deprived areas compared with those in the least deprived areas⁵⁸. Among 16-24-year-olds, young women also were more likely to report greater psychological distress than young men⁵⁹. Also, during the pandemic, girls reported poorer wellbeing and higher anxiety⁶⁰.

Mental health related prescriptions and mental health events involving a GP increased threefold for people aged 25 and under between 2015 and 2021⁶¹. Monthly referrals to children and young people's mental health services have also surged in England, up 72% in September 2021 from September 2019⁶². Of 17–23-year-olds, 52.5% say they have experienced deterioration in mental health since 2017⁶³.

Rates of probable mental disorders have increased as well, to one in six among 17–19-year-olds in 2021, up from one in 10 among this age group in 2017⁶⁴. In this age range, young women were more likely to have experienced deterioration (61.5%) than young men (43.7%)⁶⁵. One in five (19.1%) young people

aged 20 to 22 years had a probable mental disorder in 2021⁶⁶.

Yet, young people had difficulty accessing mental health services during the pandemic. A survey of 13–25-year-olds with a history of mental health needs found that only 54% of those who expressed a need for mental health support had received it⁶⁷, indicating significant levels of unmet need.

A distinct phase in life and development

Understanding the needs of 16–25-year-olds is important, as this period presents a distinct phase in a person's development as they transition from adolescence to adulthood.

During this time, young people experience shifting responsibilities and pressures at home, school, and work. Peer relationships are becoming more important for wellbeing relative to family and spaces to develop these growing relationships are needed. Urban living can affect the risk of depression-related symptoms in young people, while noise, such as from traffic, can cause sleeping problems for this age group⁶⁸. Research also has found high levels of climate anxiety among 16-25-year-olds⁶⁹.

Interventions in and support for young people's mental health and wellbeing are critical. Adolescence and young adult years are considered a peak age for the first onset of adult mental illness, with 75% of diagnosable mental health problems established by the age of 24^{70,71}.

However, gaps between child, adolescent, and adult mental health services can leave young people lacking support⁷². Research typically focuses on children and younger adolescents⁷³, primarily up to age 15. Thus, limited data can hamper studies of this group, as well as affect targeted interventions and services.

Missed opportunities for green space benefits

Green spaces can have a positive impact on young people's health and wellbeing⁷⁴, including through stress reduction, improved academic performance, enhanced cognitive development, increased concentration, and socialisation^{75,76,77}.

During the pandemic, adolescents who continued spending time participating in outdoor activities showed a smaller decline in subjective wellbeing than those who did not have high outdoor participation rates before or during the pandemic⁷⁸.

Yet, research exploring the role of exposure to nature in preventing anxiety and depression

in young urban residents is lacking⁷⁹. Further, 16–25-year-olds use parks and natural areas less than other age groups⁸⁰, thus limiting their opportunities to reap the benefits that nature can afford their health.

Nature connectedness, which measures a person's relationship with the natural world through a six-item scale, is high among children, but drops to its lowest level by adolescence⁸¹. Nature connectedness is relevant for wellbeing, as people with high nature connectedness are 1.7 times more likely to feel that their lives are worthwhile than those with low nature connectedness⁸². As this age group transitions from adolescence to adulthood, shifting responsibilities and pressures can affect their relationship with and use of green spaces.



Credit: Chris J. Mitchell

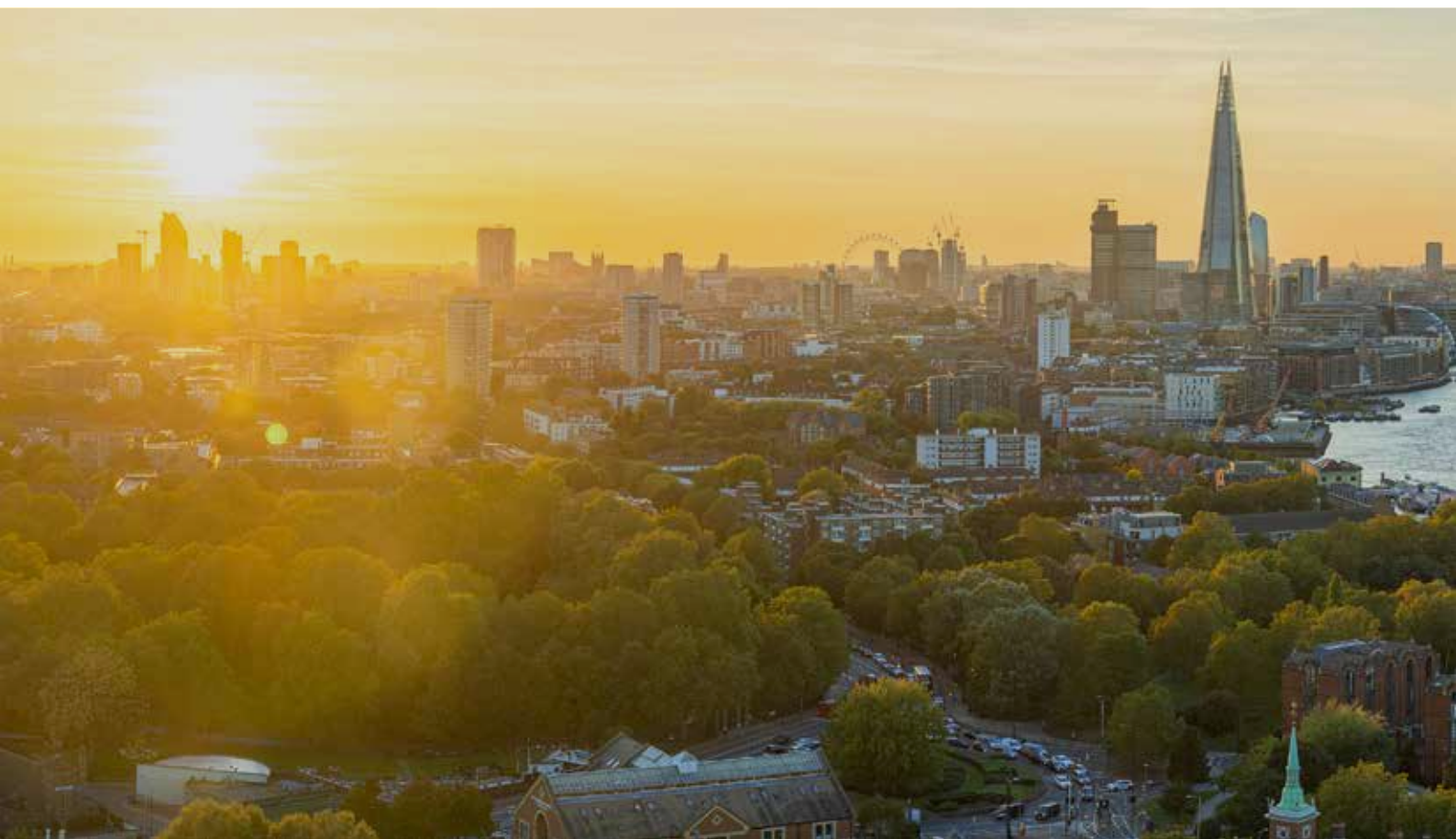
4 London context

While definitions of green space vary, London long has been recognised as a green city⁸³. Designated as the world's first National Park City, London is about 47% green, and 18% of London is made up of publicly accessible green open spaces, such as parks, commons, gardens, and cemeteries⁸⁴.

More than 3,000 parks and green spaces exist across London; the majority either owned and managed by London's 32 boroughs or managed for public access by other organisations, such as The Royal Parks⁸⁵. Approximately 900 friends of park groups contribute to green space management and maintenance across London's green spaces, such as by litter picking, maintaining equipment and facilities, planting and gardening, fundraising, and organising events.

From 2001–2019, London had the fastest population growth rate in England—Inner London had the most significant growth rate of 27%, followed by Outer London with a growth rate of 19%⁸⁶. Londoners aged 16–25 years old comprise 11.9% of the overall population of more than nine million⁸⁷. Spatial planning policies call for compact development to limit Greater London's footprint and improve sustainability.

Increasing population and development densities create challenges for delivering conventional green spaces across London's 32 local authorities and the City of London. As such, many have adopted policies designed to green the urban environment through a broader range of green infrastructure, including street trees, rain gardens, and vegetated roofs and walls. These reflect policies in the London Plan that address green infrastructure, urban greening, biodiversity and access to nature, and trees and woodlands⁸⁸.



Still, London, like other cities, faces challenges in providing access to nature for its burgeoning population. This is also a concern because Londoners do not have equitable access to green space. The London Green Spaces Commission noted that more inclusive use of the capital's green spaces remains an issue, adding that more needs to be done to ensure all Londoners can realise the benefits of green spaces near where they live and work⁸⁹.

Despite the city's green credentials, areas of deprivation in access to open space and access to nature exist throughout the city and other green infrastructure is unevenly provided^{90,91}. For example, although 21% of London lies under tree canopy, this ranges across wards from 3% to 50%⁹². Further, green spaces in more deprived areas tend to be of lower quality⁹³.

This has implications for young Londoners' ability to realise the wellbeing benefits of the city's green spaces with 16–25-year-old Londoners already visiting green spaces less frequently than other age groups.

Half of 16–25-year-old Londoners reported that their mental health worsened during the pandemic⁹⁴. Young people aged 16–24 were more likely to report having difficulty with their mental health than children and younger adolescents⁹⁵. In a survey by Partnership for Young London, one-third (34.4%) of 16–25-year-olds reported wellbeing scores that indicated depression and three-quarters (75.5%) indicated poor wellbeing⁹⁶.



5 Methodology

This research was designed to engage directly with young people. The project consisted of two phases: a broad-reaching online survey and targeted in-depth, small-group interviews.

Online survey

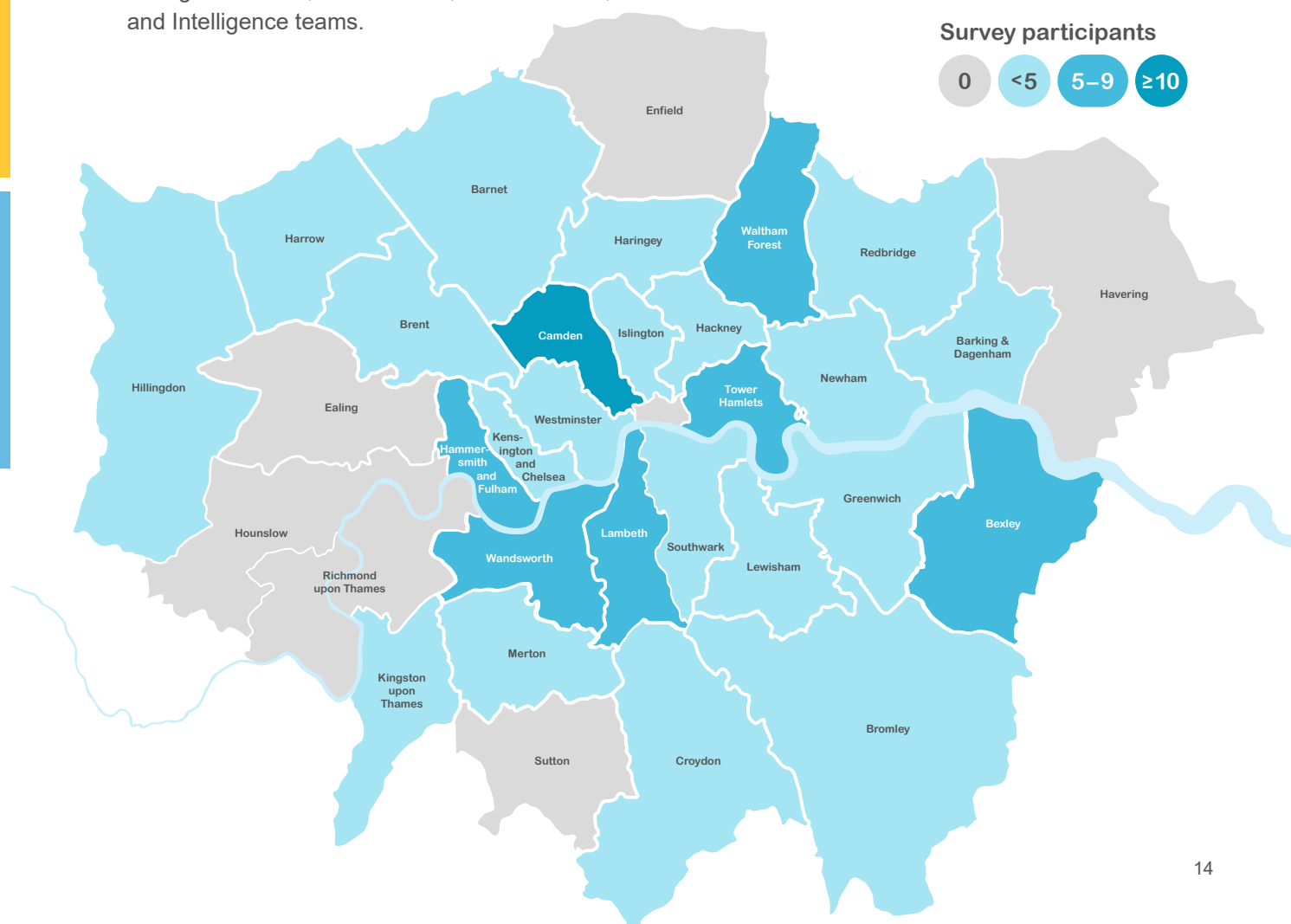
The first phase used an online survey platform, SurveyMonkey, to engage a wide audience of young Londoners. The aim of this phase was to establish a general understanding of young people's use of and experience with green spaces. Questions were designed around three themes: use and preference, mental health and wellbeing, and accessibility, community, and safety (see Appendix A).

Survey questions were developed in collaboration with the GLA Health, Children & Young Londoners, Environment, Mental Health, and Intelligence teams.

A link to the survey was distributed through social media, including Parks for London's Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn accounts, and the Mayor of London's Health and Environment Twitter accounts.

The survey was also distributed through youth organisations that work directly with young people or are connected to the GLA, i.e., Midaye, Voyage, Children & Young Londoners Team, and London Youth Assembly; and by posting the survey link in newsletters sent to young people, such as the Thrive LDN newsletter (see Appendix B for a full list).

The survey ran for six weeks in February to March 2022. A total of 169 usable responses were received and analysed.



ETHNICITY

GENDER

169

young
Londoners
responded
to the [survey](#)

AGE



16-17 (19)

18-25 (82)

Did not
answer(68)

	Woman	65
	Man	25
	Prefer not to say	6
	Non-binary / intersex / genderqueer / agender / gender fluid	4
	Transman	1
	Transwoman	0
	Did not answer	68

White British	49
White Other	11
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	9
Indian	3
Pakistani	0
Bangladeshi	5
Chinese	1
Any other Asian or Asian British background	7
Black / Black British African	5
Black / Black British Caribbean	3
Any other Black / Black British / Caribbean / African background	1
Prefer not to say	6
Other ethnic group	1
Did not answer	68



Small-group online interviews

Based on the themes and issues that emerged from analysis of the online survey, the second phase of this research project consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews held with small groups of young Londoners. The same two representatives from Parks for London facilitated all eight group interviews.

Whereas the survey aimed to develop a broad understanding of young people's use of green spaces, the interviews provided an opportunity to explore issues about how young people engage more deeply with green space for mental health and wellbeing purpose.

While semi-structured interviews are versatile, they do use a question guide that outlines the main subjects to address in the interview. A question guide also facilitates consistency across multiple interviews (see Appendix C).

The questions addressed the design, features, and maintenance of green spaces, and the perceived impact on mental health and wellbeing, safety, and feeling welcome. The questions facilitated participants providing examples from their personal experiences, as well as offering solutions for reducing barriers to young people's use of green space and other suggestions addressing the issues they raised. As exploring the respondents' perspectives was central to the research, the researchers did not provide formal definitions of terms, including green space.

-  **Boroughs represented in online interviews**
-  **Boroughs not represented in online interviews**



ETHNICITY

GENDER

23

small group
interview
participants

AGE



16–17 (9)

18–25 (14)

	Woman	16
	Non-binary / intersex / genderqueer / agender / gender fluid	4
	Man	3
	Transman	0
	Transwoman	0
	Prefer not to say	0

White British	0
White Other	1
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	3
Indian	2
Pakistani	0
Bangladeshi	2
Chinese	2
Any other Asian or Asian British background	2
Black / Black British African	6
Black / Black British Caribbean	1
Any other Black / Black British / Caribbean / African background	1
Prefer not to say	3
Other ethnic group	0





Interview participants were recruited from survey respondents who had indicated in the survey that they would be interested in participating in an interview. Additionally, participants also were recruited through the GLA's networks, particularly the Mayor's Peer Outreach Workers (POW). The POWs are a group of young people from across London that helps influence the Mayor's policies.

The participants expressed a preference for being interviewed online, although an in-person

option was offered. Eight interviews took place via Microsoft Teams between May and June 2022. Participants were paid for their time in £25 gift vouchers after they completed a session.

To maintain the anonymity of interview participants, they are identified by P and a number when quoted in this report. These identifications were assigned randomly and do not reflect any specific characteristics of the participants.



Data analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams. Interview data was analysed through thematic coding using the Dedoose software.

A coding framework was developed, beginning with initial themes of preference and use, mental health and wellbeing, and accessibility, community, and safety. Subthemes emerged under each of these; additionally, new themes emerged, as well (see Appendix D).

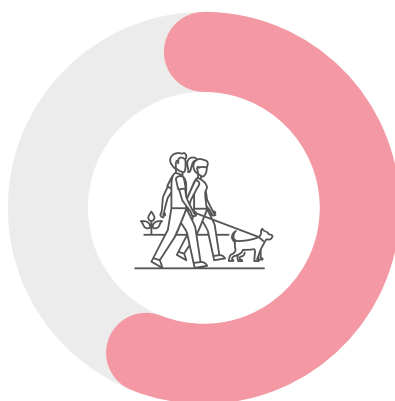
6 Findings

Survey findings



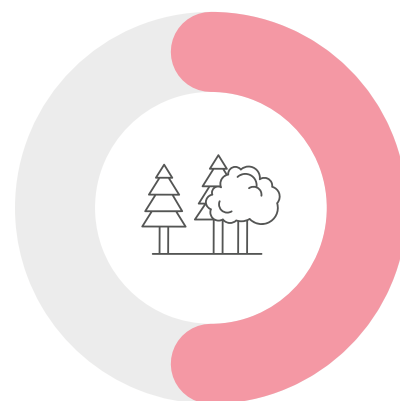
74%

visit parks and green spaces alone



56%

increased time spent in green spaces over past year



51%

visit green spaces because they find them beautiful



64%

believe that spending time in green spaces is important



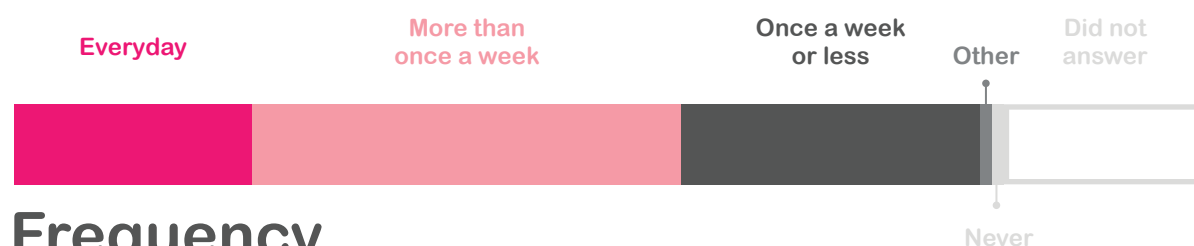
66%

spend time in green spaces to "escape life's day-to-day stresses"



56%

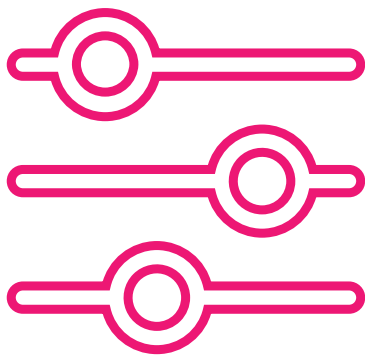
were deterred from visiting green spaces before due to bad maintenance



Frequency
in visiting parks
and green spaces

Survey and interview respondents revealed awareness of the benefits to their mental health and wellbeing that spending time in green spaces can provide. Yet, despite acknowledging the importance of looking after their mental health and wellbeing, respondents also discussed challenges and barriers to their use of these spaces.

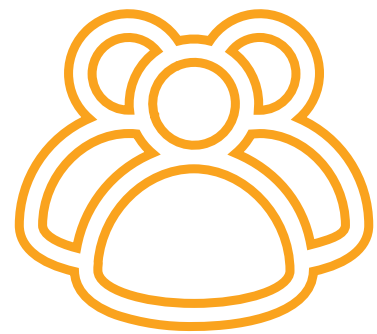
This section presents results from the survey and interviews organised around three broad themes:



**Use and
preferences**



**Mental health
and wellbeing**



**Accessibility,
community,
and safety**

Some overlap exists across the themes, which is expected given the interconnectedness of many of the topics young people raised.

Conversations on...

Use and preferences



Conceptualising green space

When asked to report what initially comes to mind when thinking about London's green spaces, respondents typically described flagship or destination parks, such as the Royal Parks or other large open spaces comprising fields with trees, and children and dogs playing.

In contrast, the green spaces they reported spending the most time in, now and in the past, were their local parks and green spaces, which often were smaller neighbourhood spaces near where they lived or went to school.

Similarly, they initially described green spaces that offered an extensive range of features and activities, yet recounted spending time in spaces that had only some of these.

Respondents typically used the terms park, green space, and nature interchangeably when discussing the natural, vegetated areas they accessed.

"I associate [green spaces with] a field or meadowy area or just a forested area because that's what I've been around. I do enjoy green spaces that have water... like Chiswick Park and Hyde Park. I like the fact that there's water available ... because that makes it more calming and scenic to me. A lot of different types of trees or plants. Somewhere quiet because especially in London everything is very loud and distracting ... the fact you could hear the birds chatter and a breeze."—P3

"I definitely would much prefer my local green spaces over like the really big generic parks everyone uses. I mean they're great and all, but, yeah, I definitely love the ones closer to home."—P14



Changing experiences

Younger respondents (16–17-year-olds) were more likely to experience green spaces on their way to and from school or as a destination with their family. They also more frequently referred to participating in planned activities in green spaces, such as family parties and picnics.

“For me it’s every day, after dinner, my family and me just go for a walk in a park ... because at home you’re just on your, like, social media and phones and all that. But in a park, you can actually talk and just relax.”—P3

Meanwhile, 18–25-year-olds were more likely to visit parks and green spaces alone or with friends and to participate in more spontaneous activities, such as playing on basketball courts or photographing wildlife. This fits with 18–25-year-olds’ comments that they use green spaces as a place to retreat from the increasing structure and commitments in their life.

“When I was in primary school, usually I would be going with my parents, but then through to like secondary, more with my friends. So, it sort of changed as I got older. And [I was] going to the playground in primary school, secondary school more just like sitting on the bench and having a chat with friends.”—P12

“Whenever I wanna go to a park or green spaces, [it’s] very much to like be active and like have fun. So, like if I’m going to Marcus Garvey Park, I’m there to, like, play on the swings or play basketball, play football.”—P4

Conversations on...

Use and preferences



Changing experiences (continued)

Recalling childhood experiences

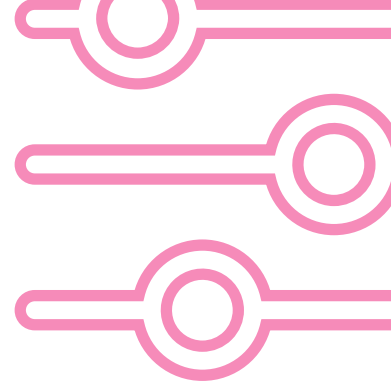
Many respondents recalled positive memories of visiting green spaces as children with their family or primary school. Those who did reported that they continued to spend time in green spaces as adolescents, although the amount of time they do so varies, as discussed in the next finding.

This implies that by fostering an early relationship with green spaces, young people may appreciate and use them more in their adolescence. For example, P4 described “a nostalgic, positive feeling” when visiting green spaces today and connected this to specific memories from childhood visits to parks and green spaces.

“Every social activity ever would always take place in a park. It was mostly Marcus Garvey and Holland Park. So, like all of our birthday parties would always be like scavenger hunts or something at Holland Park, which was like, so fun. And we literally had like weekly picnics.”—P4

“When I went to primary school, there [were] multiple parks right next to us and they would have designated days where they would take us to the park and it was kind of like something like the parents signed off on.”—P3

“Sometimes I get really overwhelmed, especially like if I'm in a house with my triggers, so I like to go out. It's always helpful to go to somewhere like relatively quiet, so it could be a park ... When I feel overwhelmed, I'm going to somewhere that's like, familiar and, I guess, places that could be like happy places from childhood can sometimes help.”—P17



Shifting priorities

Interview respondents said they now visit green spaces with family much less than they previously did. While this is not unexpected as young people age and grow more independent, respondents did not report replacing this with a subsequent increase in green space visits alone or with people other than their families. They attributed this to other responsibilities, such as academic, work, or caring tasks, becoming more prominent in their lives, leaving them with less time to spend in green spaces.

Describing increasingly structured lives, respondents said none of that time is allocated for going to green spaces or otherwise engaging with nature. Several noted that as older teenagers and young adults, spending time in nature is not part of their academic curriculum and, thus, gets pushed aside by other commitments and responsibilities.

“If you're in school, your main focus has to be school. You're sort of taught that you can't really have fun time. So, like, if I didn't go with friends to a park, then I just wouldn't go. Or if there weren't events in a park, then I wouldn't go. But it's nice if you have free time, but like at the time being, it's not really realistic for me to go to parks frequently.”—P11

“I think initially it has to start from primary school because once you're in like midway through secondary school, you've already, you know, been taught the idea that your work is the most important thing.”—P2

“All of us are working too much to be able to go for leisure sometimes. So, like an ideal green space is somewhere that's on a route home or on the way to something.”—P17

The exception, several said, is for sports, although they said participating in sports through school could cause additional stress and anxiety, such as from the competitive aspect, thus making that time spent outdoors unenjoyable and not positive for their mental health and wellbeing.

“In secondary school, where we used to go to parks for physical exercise activities, like dodgeball or rounders etc., that created quite a lot of pressure to be like a team player and to be good at participating in physical activities in a park setting, which, yeah, that was very overwhelming.”—P5

Respondents who had jobs and were no longer in school described similar situations, with little, if any, time during the day to go outdoors.

“The reason I go less now to the park than I did during the pandemic is because work has picked up.”—P15

Conversations on...

Use and preferences



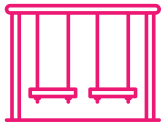
Changing, heterogenous landscapes

The availability of quality green space was reported as a key facilitator of use. Fifty percent of survey respondents said they visit green spaces because they find them beautiful. Respondents described wanting a “wow” factor in green spaces, namely a diversity of plants and year-round colours that make a space inviting.

Several stressed that they do not find homogenous landscapes stimulating or inspiring. Instead, they cited the restorative benefits of being in ecologically diverse green spaces and the psychological benefits that they bring, such as feeling peaceful, quiet, and connected to nature.

“Flat parks kind of, I think, have a different vibe to ones which are hilly or have different terrain as well. So, it could be really cool because like sensory wise, I think it's good to have like a range of different stuff.”—P20

“The park I go to just has incredibly stunning things all year round ... and like every single season, there's like something else, which is like really, really striking.”—P15



Feeling too old for green spaces

Respondents described feeling like they have aged out of green spaces—they noted that at a certain age (e.g., 14 or 15), young people are suddenly no longer allowed to access some structures or equipment, such as swings.

They said playgrounds and other facilities are designated for younger children only, while nothing is specified for 16–25-year-olds. Thus, they graduate from children’s play areas, yet nothing awaits them. Several discussed feeling left out or sad about this, with a desire to access swings in particular mentioned by many respondents.

Amenities such as boats, bikes, and sports areas were well used, particularly in warmer seasons and in well-maintained green spaces.

“I’m turning 18 soon ... and I’d love for there to be swings because if I go to the kids’ part when there’s no kids, obviously my mom’s, ‘come on, you’re grown up now, stop.’”—P16

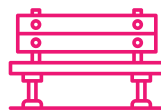
“I think there’s been twice me, as an adult, have been on the swings and someone has like kicked me off because like I’m not a child. ... being approached again like these ‘Karens’ in Streatham Common, like they love to tell and there [were] no children waiting to go on the swings, like there was no one there. But I’ve been told that I’m too big for it.”—P17



Credit: Meredith Whitten

Conversations on...

Use and preferences



Missing features

Young people reported a lack of suitable provisions like tables and benches in green spaces. Several interview respondents said a dearth of structures for sheltering from the weather discouraged them from going to green spaces more frequently. Many mentioned they would like more structures that provide cover from the rain, while others wanted places to shelter from sun and wind, including trees, as well.

“I love bandstands because when it rains you've got somewhere to just run under. ... I think coverage is always handy thing, and bike stands where you can safely park your bike. ... and make it more accessible for students, you know, add some more tables so people could do group work outside and put a sun umbrella you know, so you've got some protection when you're on your laptop.”—P21



Programming green spaces

The types of events and programmes respondents participated in while in green spaces ranged from highly structured and planned to spontaneous, in-the-moment activities. For example, interview respondents recalled organised activities with schools or local providers, such as trips, sports days, and youth zones. They contrasted this with unstructured activities, such as sitting on a bench listening to music or podcasts.

“I think it's better to go to a park if it's not for an event kind of thing. I think it makes it, I don't know, more fun because I think you can take in more. If you if you go for like a music festival or something, the only thing you're going to be concentrating on is that.”—P2

Both survey and interview respondents indicated they preferred a mix of structured and unstructured activities, thus providing a range of opportunities that could fit changing reasons and contexts for going to a green space. Younger respondents and those with younger siblings said they participated in seasonal and half-term activities, as well as those led by the community. However, respondents emphasised that green spaces should not be over-programmed, with several saying the lack of structured activities attracts them to green spaces.

“I don't really have a preference, but I think that a non-organised event would fit more like a park because people pass through it like all the time. And, even if you didn't know that activity was taking place, if you're passing through and if it was open, more people might join it.”—P10



Communicating about features and activities in green spaces

Information about facilities and activities should be well advertised through multiple mediums, such as social media, newsletters, and word of mouth, interview respondents said. They noted that they often saw an event or activity taking place in a green space but had seen no information or publicity about it and, thus, had not signed up or planned to participate. Several contrasted this with the information blitz that often occurs with funfairs held in green spaces.

In addition to promoting events and activities being held in a green space, respondents discussed a need to better communicate other information related to the space, such as the species of trees and other plants, growing there.

“I do know that they do have select activities like cycling or and some sort of stretching—it wasn't yoga, so I'm not sure what they were doing, but it's a scheduled thing in the park. It's hard because it's not like on like a bulletin board or something that you can read and see, so I'm not exactly sure who's organising it.”—P3

“You know when the funfair is because there's loads of different colourful little flyers around the local area, which is good. I think, yeah, schools and colleges, like you can put it up on their notice board. I live in the YMCA. You could put it up in housing associations. There's various different places where you can display it.”—P21



Conversations on...

Mental health and wellbeing



Influencing mental health and wellbeing

More than half (54%) of survey respondents said spending time in green spaces was “extremely important” to their mental health and wellbeing, with 55% saying this has increased since the pandemic.

The primary reasons respondents cited for spending time in green spaces included escaping life’s day-to-day stresses (66%) and to relax (56%). Most, but not all, of interview respondents also said green spaces were important for their mental health and wellbeing, although the impact green spaces have could vary with certain conditions or situations.

“Personally, parks are really good for mental health because they can be quiet, peaceful, and harmonious to be in. A setting that is a natural environment and habitat without any disturbances or city life hustling and bustling can be good for your mental health. It allows your mind to escape from the worries and stresses that you’re going through in your day to day, sitting at home, at work, or with school, college, whatever it maybe. And I feel like, yeah, just the ... scenery and the beauty of it. It can be quite inspiring—it can really put people’s worries at rest and just make them feel at ease with anything that’s disturbing them and give them peace of mind.”—P5



"I have kind of frequent anxiety attacks, so I think this is why it's better for when the parks are peaceful and no one is really around because then I can just walk and there's a path that I can follow. Just walking. Nothing's going on—there's not a bunch of children screaming and stuff and like, having fun. Like it's just quiet. I can just think, so then I can kind of clear my head from like irrational thoughts. And I think a bit more clearly and then kind of approach whatever is going on with more like rational thoughts."—P2

"I'd just say that [green spaces affect my mental wellbeing negatively] when it's really busy and chaotic and it can kind of feel really overwhelming and it's just like people everywhere."—P12

"For me, I don't think parks and green spaces have an effect on my mental health just because I'm not the kind of person if I'm not feeling good mentally to go outside."—P1

"I just feel more positive when I'm there. Maybe just being away from looking at my to-do list and my work and stuff, it kind of allows me to break things down in my head even if I'm not consciously thinking about it."—P15



Conversations on...

Mental health and wellbeing



Expressing mental health awareness

Respondents also were highly attuned to mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, and they pointedly discussed how they are increasingly aware of the importance of taking care of their mental health and wellbeing, including the benefits from spending time in green spaces.

However, many respondents reported feeling overwhelmed because of increasing responsibilities, expectations, and workloads that leave them with little time to focus on themselves.

“We need to push young people into understanding that going to a park can benefit their mental health. When they see the benefit that it has on them, when they’re in that space, they can now try and incorporate that into their weekly or daily life. ... Stuff like that comes down to like the parents pushing them to understand, ‘OK, you need to go outside now and go and play with nature. Pick a tree. Blow on leaves and ground yourself, you know, and just relax and come back to a level mind’, because everyone is on a run. Everyone is on a day-to-day run, going to school, making sure homework is done, GCSEs, and as adults we are working a 9-to-5 job weekly and we rarely take annual leave.”

—P18



Twenty-two percent of survey respondents answered they “don’t have the energy” to visit parks and green spaces. Meanwhile, interview respondents talked about conflicting messages they receive to prioritise their mental wellbeing without being given the time or resources to do so. They suggested incorporating free time spent in green spaces into academic curricula for all ages to support young people's mental health.

“There needs to be like more like emphasis put on taking time for yourself rather than schoolwork. You’re made to think that your work is more important than anything else, so then you put more time in your work and then that makes mental health worse.”—P2

“I feel like schools have to understand that there has to be a work-life balance.”—P1

“With exams like always around the corner, you always have to keep up at school. It just like blocks you from going to parks. You need to get the work done. So, you go straight home, you finish the work and you have more work. There's just like a cycle you know.”—P6



Conversations on...

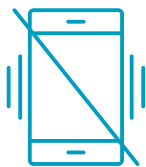
Mental health and wellbeing



Green social prescribing

Only one respondent referred to social prescribing and this was within the context of the respondent's medical education. While no interview respondents said they took part in green social prescribing, several mentioned participating in projects for young people based in green spaces that lead to improved mental wellbeing (see Appendix E). This shows a clear lack of awareness of green social prescribing even when actively taking part in such initiatives.

"In medicine we do something called social prescribing. You prescribe people to go to a park to feel better. But, if you have a quick look at the map of London, not everyone has accessible green spaces."—P22



Disconnecting to connect

Respondents said they purposely avoid using their devices and other technology while in green spaces. Both survey and interview respondents emphasised that they go to green spaces to get away from technology and to unplug from otherwise highly connected lives.

Ensuring stable Wi-Fi and phone signals and providing charging points in green space is important for safety reasons, but otherwise green spaces should not become technology hubs, they said.

When they do use technology, most respondents said it is to enhance the experience of relaxing, such as through listening to music or podcasts, reading, or taking pictures. This contrasts with the idea that young people will spend more time in green spaces if more technology is available in these spaces. Instead, these findings suggest focusing on technology in green spaces is not a priority for young people.

“There are apps now where you can take a photo of a plant and it tells you what species and genre it is ... so that's how I use my phone.”—P22

“I think I purposely go to a park to not use technology at all because I think I use it too much. So, me and my friends will be like “look guys, let's go to a park.” There's a lot to do when you're together, so you just don't really need your phone.”—P2

“I don't really use technology whilst in the park because I feel like if you go to the park, you're looking to do something else. So, I've never really experienced a situation where I like wanted to use my phone or needed to use it like in a green space.”—P10

“As my phone gets older and planned obsolescence kicks in, my battery doesn't last as long, so I have to go home sooner than I would like to and it's like, come on man. That's a very direct link between devices and affecting time outdoors because it's like I've run out of podcast. I can't listen to my phone and also like it's kind of like a safety thing not having my phone battery be dead and being out of the house, you know?”—P15

Conversations on...

Accessibility, community, and safety



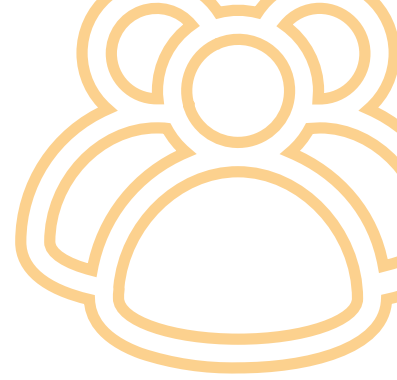
Barriers to access

Survey respondents expressed concern about external barriers, such as distance (45%) and weather (70%), consistent with previous research. Further, the fiscal cost and time investment in transport inhibited some respondents from visiting green spaces, especially young people dependent on public transport.

“The only deterrent is stuff like tube fare and stuff like that. Because back when I used to go like exploring everywhere ... [it] was always when the situation was a bit better than it is now. Cost of living crisis, right?”—P15

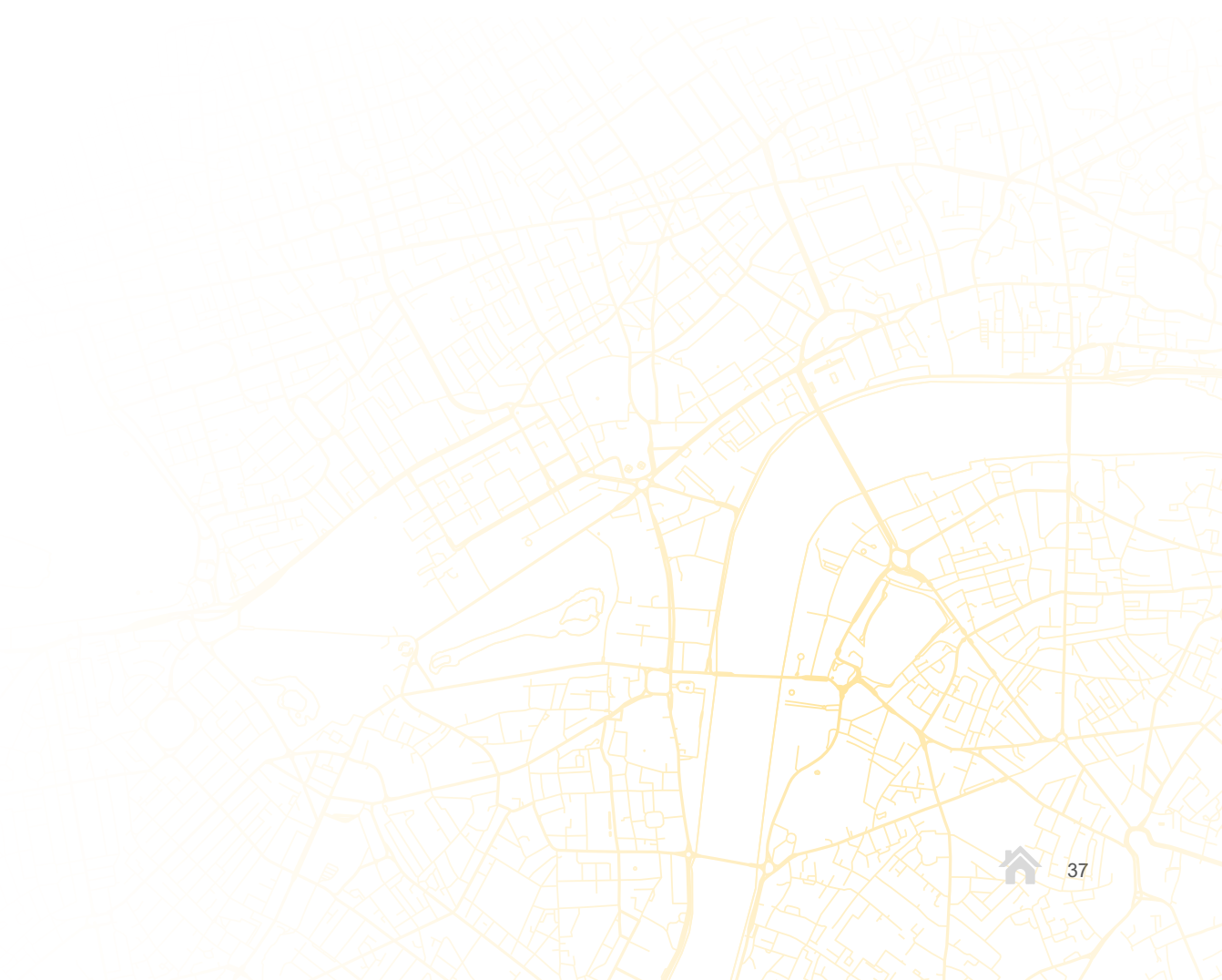
“Whenever it rains or the weather isn’t very great, I try to avoid parks because it gets very muddy and wet.”—P10





Respondents also said the condition of the surrounding area affected their access of green spaces. They noted that a regenerated green space does not improve mental wellbeing if the surrounding area and routes to and through it are not safe, implying a need for a broader place keeping approach to providing access to green spaces to facilitate mental health and wellbeing.

“I think a lot of it tends to be where the parks are specifically because I think there are some parks at night, it wouldn't be too bad ... well I think it's more to do with if a park is in [a] more like deprived area ... I kind of feel like that's the sort of link.”—P9



Conversations on...

Accessibility, community, and safety



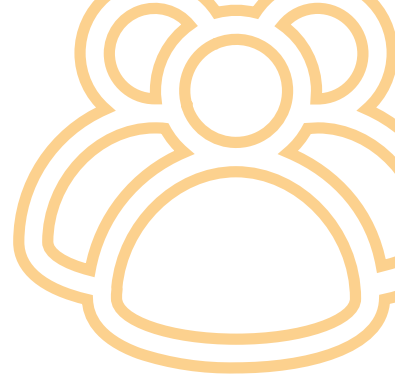
Maintenance of green spaces

Respondents mentioned the impact maintenance has on their use of green spaces, as well as the effect it can have on their mental health and wellbeing. More than half of survey respondents reported that poor maintenance like litter, graffiti, vandalism, dog waste, and broken equipment discouraged them from visiting green spaces.

Similarly, interview respondents also mentioned litter and dog waste. They also talked about broken or poorly maintained facilities and equipment, such as dried up ponds and broken swings. In some cases, respondents said, facilities remained visibly poorly maintained for considerable periods of time, while in other cases, broken equipment was removed and never replaced. Several respondents connected poor maintenance with negative impacts on their mental health and wellbeing.

“The other day I found a microwave there—someone just left a microwave so that that was interesting ... but all that grass is overgrown, it’s not really looked after—it gets cut like once a year. So, it’s kind of very low maintenance.”—P23

“Because one of the like swings is broken, I’ve seen parents tell their kids don’t go into the park, just stay around this area. So, it kind of like decreases the amount of people that go to the park.”—P13



“There are ones with like terrible public toilets. ... So, then you're caught like peeing outside. And then it's like, 'woah, you're not meant to do this.' And it's like, 'Well, I'll probably catch more from, like, going to use those toilets than going outside.' Yeah, they're just gross and I don't know if it's just they're not cleaned enough or just people are just really dirty.”—P17

Funding for green spaces

The idea that green spaces were community assets was a consistent theme across the interview. Respondents also consistently stated that the public sector should be the primary provider and maintainer of green spaces and that other organisations can provide programming. This was because green spaces were seen as a community asset from which everyone benefits.

There was a varied understanding of who managed their local green spaces and familiarity with whether it was run by the local authority or by an external contractor.

“There's so much to be said about councils and their stewardship of parks and what are they prioritising exactly if our Council taxes keep going up and up. What are they even investing it in? What are they even doing? They're not like improving like waste collection or parks or anything that makes living better. So, yeah, this is just me going on a good old rant—let councils do more. That would improve the park, give more, give more funding to that, not more funding for like the Metropolitan Police to do whatever it's not doing. ... When we're paying taxes, when we're putting our trust for whatever reason in public representatives, should we be depending on charities and like the out-of-pockets efforts of like ordinary people when we have a supposed infrastructure for all these things in place that we are actively paying for?”—P15

“In [my borough] they are forever doing road works. I'm thinking, 'why can't you just like actually invest in a park or something or their people?' But they don't want to do that. Then invest in road works.”—P21

Conversations on...

Accessibility, community, and safety



Positive effects of park staff

Respondents said more staff in green spaces would make them feel safer, although most indicated they did not like the presence of Metropolitan Police, with several saying their presence contributed to feeling unsafe.

Instead, respondents said they prefer Park Police, along with park rangers, groundskeepers, and gardeners, as green space staff they would feel comfortable approaching if they had a safety concern. Park staff also offered information and knowledge about the green spaces, including names of plant and wildlife species, and how to appropriately use the spaces, which added to the feelings of welcome.

“I’d only ever seen a gardener there after probably five, six years. Then I met a local gardener who I think was also like a resident of the area. And that was really weird, but it held a lot of meaning. I think just knowing someone locally and someone who took care of the park, like, I really enjoyed having that conversation with him. ... I guess it just made so much sense and all those years I’ve been there and I continue to use it, I sort of think of him and I think him being a probably a local resident, someone who really cares for the space, only made it that much more special, which was nice.”—P14

“I like to see that it’s like cared for it. It feels like safer somehow.”—P15



Community

Interview respondents reported that seeing other people using their local green space created a sense of community. A few noted that holding local events, such as markets, in green spaces contributed to building community.

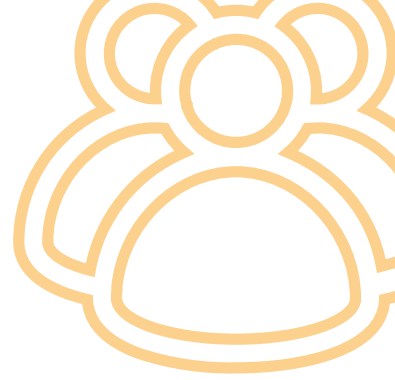
“Community events, I think, should be held more like in green spaces. So, the more that you see people like having fun or like making things or having classes, even like yoga classes and stuff to have them in green spaces instead of like buildings.”
—P20

Yet, some community organisations could make them feel unwelcome. For example, several respondents described being told by community volunteers to use the green space in a way different than how they were, exacerbating negative connotations of groups of young people being described as loitering by other park users.

“They be taking pictures of, they say ‘gangs of youths.’ Yeah. What you can clearly see is, a picnic of like ten young people.”—P17

Some interview respondents said parks friends’ groups could contribute to excluding young people by scheduling their meetings during school hours when most 16–25-year-olds cannot attend or by not consulting young people when changes are happening in their local parks. Several respondents expressed a desire to be more involved in the management of their local green spaces.

“... community parks teams are like, made up of certain demographics or volunteers from certain demographics that make the place, like really exclusive and like, yeah, it’s exclusive and excluding like kind of that young folk or black folk or like, you know, the historical communities that kind of lived in this area.”—P17



Conversations on...

Accessibility, community, and safety



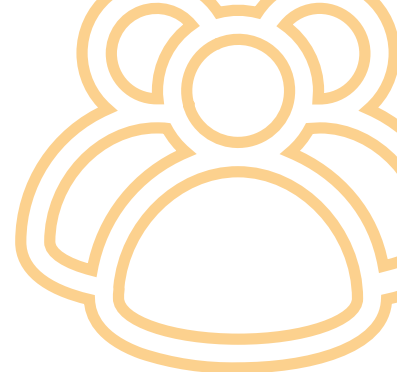
Feelings and perceptions of safety

Fear of antisocial behaviour and concerns about their safety featured prominently in the surveys and interviews. These concerns covered issues ranging from other green space users to facilities to policing.

Of survey respondents, 60% reported that lack of lighting had prevented them from visiting green spaces. Interview respondents also discussed lack of lighting, saying this could make them feel unsafe in a space or avoid it altogether. They also talked about installing CCTV or ensuring existing cameras were operable as contributing to a sense of safety.

“Some parks don’t have lights, so they’re all pitch dark at night, especially in winter. So, I would like to have, you know, lights on the trees. How should I explain it? Like on Christmas trees, they have lights on the tree, so it will make the park look nice, as well. Plus, you don’t have to put up the big street lights.”—P7

“I think generally like more cameras, more security cameras that are known to work—because there’s a lot that [are] just plotted about that don’t actually work and a lot of people know that. And I think more street lights, there’s so many parks ... [where] it’s pitch black, and I’ve been locked in the park once it’s flipping scary so it would be really nice to have a bit of light in the parks.”—P21



Retaining memories of negative incidences

Previous crimes in and around a green space can have an impact on safety perceptions years later, with several respondents discussing how green spaces hold on to memories of crimes. Such lingering memories can contribute to a general feeling that a space is not safe and, thus, put them off visiting a green space.

Stories of crimes can be perpetuated through word-of-mouth from trusted sources, such as friends, family, teachers, or police or through personal experience with news stories amplifying local knowledge.

Specifically, many respondents mentioned that lack of follow-up information after a crime has occurred, such as about the outcome of any police investigations, causes perceptions of lack of safety to linger and prevents them from using green spaces again.

Previous experiences or concerns of negative interactions with other park users was a concern that prevented 32% of survey respondents from visiting green spaces. Many interview respondents stated that groups of other young people have prevented them from using green spaces due to fear and concern for their safety.

“Personally, I don’t like seeing big, dodgy groups of teenage boys like between 13 and 18, and they’re all dressed in like these track suits and the drill music. They congregate around one area of the park and then they move around just to intimidate you. Sometimes they can even come up to you and ask for things like to rob you. I absolutely hate seeing them. I tend to just avoid going inside the park.”
—P8

“There was [a stabbing] in a local park and there is a mural now outside of the young person that did pass away sadly in that space. I think it does bring back like really, yeah, not the most pleasant memories. Also, I think back over the last few years, I know that there was quite a lot of violent crime and violence against women that happened in Finsbury Park and every single time I sort of walk through that park I can point to you and show you exactly where that story happened. ... I think memories like that linger in the space and they are always carried and channelled through word of mouth or like you hear it the newspapers weeks or years later.”
—P14

7 Recommendations

In many ways, the preferences and uses that young people discussed mirror those of other age groups—they want safe, accessible, and well-maintained green spaces with diverse landscapes.

The young people who participated in this research access green spaces to relax and to escape from school, work, and home stress, with some pointing out that they like green spaces that are quiet. This contradicts the negative stereotype of young people being disruptive or noisy in public spaces.

Young people recognise the wellbeing benefits of spending time in green spaces, but they feel they are not given the time and space needed in their academic curriculum or work situation to have unstructured time in green spaces for wellbeing purposes. They believe that their academic achievements and work responsibilities must take priority.

This applies to young people in higher education, as well as those who have graduated and have professional jobs. Interactions with green space as a child remained influential many years later, indicating the importance of not only early exposure to nature, but also the need for a continuum of experiences with green, natural settings as children transition to young adults.

Simply being in nature was not sufficient for wellbeing—green spaces needed to be varied and well-managed to provide the most benefit. Furthermore, green spaces are part of their surrounding neighbourhood. For example, a regenerated park does not improve their mental wellbeing if the surrounding area and routes to get to the green space are not well maintained and safe.



Parks and green spaces are seen as a community asset that can make young people feel more grounded in and connected to the community. They asserted that the public sector should have primary responsibility for designing, building, and maintaining green spaces to a good standard.

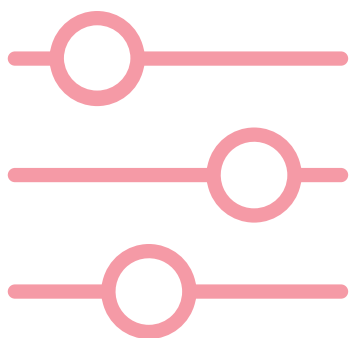
The gaps of interaction with green space are probably exacerbated by segmentation/ segregation of children, young people, and adults into separate cohorts, because of educational, social care, health, and other systems. The current provision and management of some green spaces potentially reinforces these groups, for example, through design and management (even signage) of spaces exclusively for young children, teenagers, and adults.

Designing and managing spaces to improve provision for all age groups as they transition through life could provide better wellbeing outcomes. Ironically, participants also wanted their own dedicated spaces, too, exemplifying the challenge for green spaces to be all things to all people all the time.

Based on the feedback from participating young Londoners, the following recommendations are framed in the same three broad themes of uses and preferences; mental health and wellbeing; accessibility, community, and safety. The suggested actions are relevant to policy makers and project initiators from the green space sector, public realm planners and designers, health professionals, youth workers and educators in the statutory and voluntary sectors to make green spaces better for young people's mental health and wellbeing.

It is worth noting that while the Executive Summary assigned key recommendations to specific sectors, collaboration across a range of different professions and sectors, together with meaningful engagement with young people, is vital to maximise the positive mental health and wellbeing benefits for young people through access to green spaces.

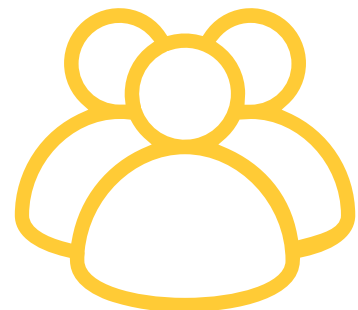
The suggested actions marked in **bold** apply to things that young people particularly wanted, but these and other recommendations could apply equally to other age groups.



**Use and
preferences**



**Mental health
and wellbeing**



**Accessibility,
community,
and safety**

Suggested actions on...

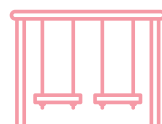
Use and preferences



Changing, heterogeneous landscapes

Young people reported that the beauty and variety of nature was important for them, and that they enjoyed spaces for both individual quiet time as well as socialising with others.

- Design and provide varied landscapes within green spaces that includes both quiet zones and social areas, for example, sensory gardens, community food growing/gardening areas, orchards, water features, biodiversity, and community centred artwork.



Feeling too old for green spaces

Young people felt they were no longer allowed to access some structures or equipment, such as swings. Conversely young people also expressed the need for some places that are exclusive to them and not used by younger children.

- Provide inclusive areas such as natural play that provide for a wider age range.
- **Provide exclusive places and facilities for young people such as dedicated swings.**



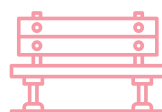
Credit: Meredith Whitten



Programming green spaces

Young people indicated they preferred a mix of structured and unstructured activities, thus providing a range of opportunities that could fit changing seasons and contexts for going to a green space.

- ▶ **Provide structured activities for young people that change according to seasons and during academic holidays but provide space for unstructured activities as well.**



Missing features

Young people reported a lack of suitable provisions like toilets, tables and benches and protection from extreme weather discouraged them from going to green spaces more frequently.

- ▶ **Provide shelters, all-weather spaces, and tree canopy cover for protection during wet, windy, or sunny weather and provide places to sit and socialise.**
- ▶ Provide clean toilets, bike stands, lockers and phone charging points.
- ▶ Promote the use of green spaces for other uses such as meeting places for council/ community/school/workshops.



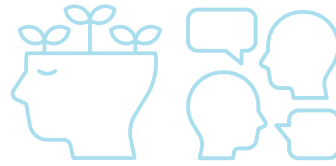
Communicating information and activities

Young people reported seeing events, activities or specific things in a green space and want to find out more but did not know where to go to find out more.

- ▶ **Communicate facilities and activities tailored to young people through multiple mediums, such as social media, newsletters, and notice boards so that they can get involved. For instance, on the GoParksLondon [website](#).**

Suggested actions on...

Mental health and wellbeing



Expressing mental health awareness

Young people found it difficult to prioritise their mental health as some felt that they lacked the skills to be able to implement it into their daily life. Young people found it difficult to find time to be in green spaces because of study/work commitments.

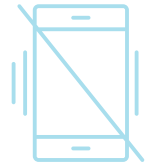
- ▶ **Education providers (16–18 and post 18) and employers should help young people to prioritise spending time in green spaces as part of their daily routine for mental health benefit, e.g., lunchtime walks in green spaces close to their place of study.**



Green social prescribing

Young people showed a lack of awareness of green social prescribing, even when referring to activities or projects that helped improve their mental health.

- ▶ **Link workers should help young people to prioritise spending time in green spaces and signpost them to local green social prescribing providers or activities.**



Disconnecting to connect

Most young people use green spaces to get away from devices and other technology. Nevertheless, technology was used by some to enhance their experience of green spaces and in some cases make them feel safer.

- ▶ Provide phone charging stations, a good phone signal (where possible) and Wi-Fi specifically for safety reasons.
- ▶ In some cases, technology can be used to enhance experiences in green spaces e.g., using QR codes to access audio recordings/ podcasts related to plants in green spaces, the history of the place or music specially selected to fit the environment.



Suggested actions on...

Accessibility, community, and safety



Barriers to access

Bad or extreme weather, distance and cost of travel were identified by young people as barriers to access.

- ▶ Create more green spaces close to where young people live, prioritising areas with greatest deficiencies in access to public green space.
- ▶ Make existing green spaces more permissive and welcoming to young people and, in some cases, provides 24-hour access. See [Camden and Islington Parks for Health Strategy](#).
- ▶ Improve routes to and through existing green spaces that are more attractive and safer, by walking and cycling.
- ▶ Promote access to green spaces by public transport, walking and cycling.





Maintenance of green spaces

Young people consistently stated that the public sector should be the primary provider and maintainer of green spaces and that other organisations can provide programming. They mentioned that broken or poorly maintained facilities and equipment, litter, graffiti, vandalism, dog waste, and broken fences discouraged them from visiting green spaces, as well as affecting their mental health and wellbeing. Young people avoid neglected green spaces because of the connected fear of antisocial behaviour.

- ▶ Protect adequate funding for councils to maintain their green spaces better.
- ▶ Ensure that green space assets are managed well and appropriately funded.
- ▶ **Encourage young people to be more involved in the stewardship of green spaces through volunteering and other initiatives.**



Positive effects of green space staff and volunteers

Fear of antisocial behaviour and concerns about their safety worry young people. Things that worry them include other green space users, dogs, lack of lighting, and policing. Young people would like to see more staff presence in green spaces to make them feel safer.

- ▶ Improve perceptions of safety through better lighting, CCTV, dog-free areas, and better surveillance.
- ▶ Provide recognisable and approachable staff presence such as Park Police, rangers and groundskeepers.
- ▶ **Train staff and volunteers to improve the sense of safety in green spaces and provide information, and offer outreach to young people.**
- ▶ **Encourage and support community organisations to engage with young people to act as green space stewards or rangers, e.g., [London National Park City Rangers](#).**

Suggested actions on...

Accessibility, community, and safety

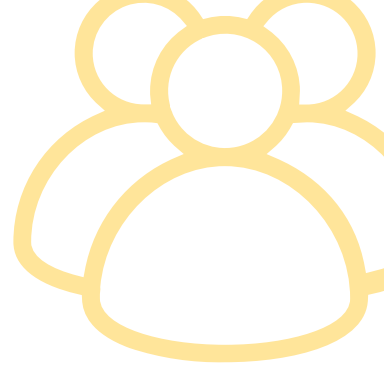


Community

Young people like to see other people like them using their local green space in ways that contribute to building community. Yet, they can sometimes be made to feel unwelcome.

- ▶ **Identify where there is inaccessibility to, or exclusion of young people from, green space design, maintenance, and management so that positive changes can be identified and implemented.**
- ▶ **Involve young people in the decision-making processes of their local green spaces, such as through Youth Forums, e.g., [London Youth](#).**
- ▶ **Consult with young people about things happening in their local green spaces at times that they can attend.**
- ▶ **Encourage and support community organisations, such as friends' groups, to engage with young people.**





Credit: Bruno Martins

Feelings and perceptions of safety

Previous crimes in and around a green space can have an impact on safety perceptions years later. Young people mentioned that lack of follow-up information after a crime has occurred, causes perceptions of lack of safety to linger and prevents them from using green spaces again.

- ▶ Plan a recovery strategy with the local community to ensure that crime is reduced in and around green spaces.

Opportunities for further research and engagement

This research provides a critical look into how young people perceive, access, and use urban green spaces for their mental health and wellbeing. Yet, opportunities exist to develop a fuller, more robust understanding of this often-overlooked age group.

Further research is needed that focuses on 16–25-year-olds. As this report notes, the transition from adolescence to adulthood is a distinct phase in a person's development, with increasing pressures and responsibilities. Yet, research on this specific cohort is often lacking or is inconsistent.

For example, further research might aim to understand how the value of green space for young people's mental health might vary by characteristics such as their gender, ethnicity, or social class. Additionally, further studies could provide a more refined exploration of prevention, intervention, and design strategies in urban green spaces that contribute to improving young people's mental wellbeing and reducing their mental health issues.

A more detailed examination of this age group would be insightful, as well, as those in the younger part of the group are more likely to still be engaging with an educational system, including at higher education level, and to be



living at home. Meanwhile, those at the older end of the cohort are more likely to have moved into full-time work and be living independently. “Young person” can often be interpreted as “school-age,” yet much of this age group have finished their studies. Thus, further research should ensure those in the older end of this age bracket are not overlooked or readily consolidated with their younger peers.

Additionally, a representative sample, reflecting the characteristics of young Londoners, should be studied. This includes engaging young men, who are an important group for mental health and wellbeing, yet under-represented in this study. Care is needed to find the best ways to engage with young people including those less heard through this research.

As Wong and Powell⁹⁷ observe, more experimental research design would extend existing research, which has largely been exploratory and based on qualitative methods examining perceived and self-reported benefits of access to green space and other natural areas on mental health and wellbeing.

Future studies should also examine the longevity of effects that accessing green spaces may have on young people’s mental health and wellbeing. This should include both the positive impacts, e.g., improved mood and reduction in stress, as well as the negative impacts, such as those raised by young people in this research, e.g., litter, unwelcoming community organisations, and safety concerns.

Finally, further research should integrate green spaces into a broader continuum of green infrastructure, thus providing more evidence regarding how natural elements woven throughout an urban area collectively affect young people’s mental health and wellbeing. For example, many respondents in this research expressed a desire for more trees, thus exploring whether tree canopy, including tree-lined roads, has an impact would provide additional insight.

This is relevant for London and other cities that are becoming more densely developed and populated, particularly in light of research that shows urban living can have a negative impact on young people’s mental health and wellbeing. Also, given that urban greening policies, such as those seeking to “green the grey” feature increasingly prominently in London and other cities across the world, such research could fit with the way young people—and other urban residents—interact with green space and experience the city in which live.

8 Action plan

We believe in the importance and transformational effects of quality green space on the health and wellbeing of young Londoners and are committed to sustaining the momentum needed to drive through these recommendations.

But we cannot do it alone.

We call on all organisations, groups, and movements who share our belief to get involved. We have created a shared Google document to help us capture, engage, and drive forward this important body of work. Please contribute [here](#) and talk to us directly to get involved.

	Action	Who	When
1	Call for case studies for Resources Hub and others to use	Parks for London London Plus: London Social Prescribing Network Natural England	November 2022 Ongoing Ongoing
2	Promote the 'Young, Green, and Well' report	Parks for London GLA	Ongoing
3	Identify further actions post report	GLA Mental Health Foundation Partnership for Young London	TBA
4	Green social prescribing webinar	Parks for London London Plus: London Social Prescribing Network	February 2023
5	Promote green space and green social prescribing to young people	GoParksLondon London Plus: London Social Prescribing Network	TBA

	Action	Who	When
6	Involve young people in the Clean Parks for London campaign	Parks for London London Friends of Green Spaces Network GoParksLondon	2023
7	Work with friends' groups network to involve young people	London Friends of Green Spaces Network GoParksLondon	TBA
8	Recruit young people to become green space rangers	Parks for London London National Park City	TBA
9	Engage young people to work in the green space sector	London Green Space Skills Hub Future Gardeners Groundwork London London Wildlife Trust RSPB	TBA
10	Promote more safe routes to and through green spaces	Parks for London	TBA

9 Limitations

Research methods to engage young people

Care is needed to find the best ways to engage with young people in the most appropriate way. For example, using a conventional survey was not that well received. The preferred methods subsequently suggested by young people included youth forums and long-form interviews where young people would be part of the decision-making process from the beginning.

One key finding was working in partnership with organisations that work directly with young people and paying for young people's time helps establish trust and an equal exchange. However, the process of engagement is a challenge that goes beyond the scope of this project and is a field of research in its own right.

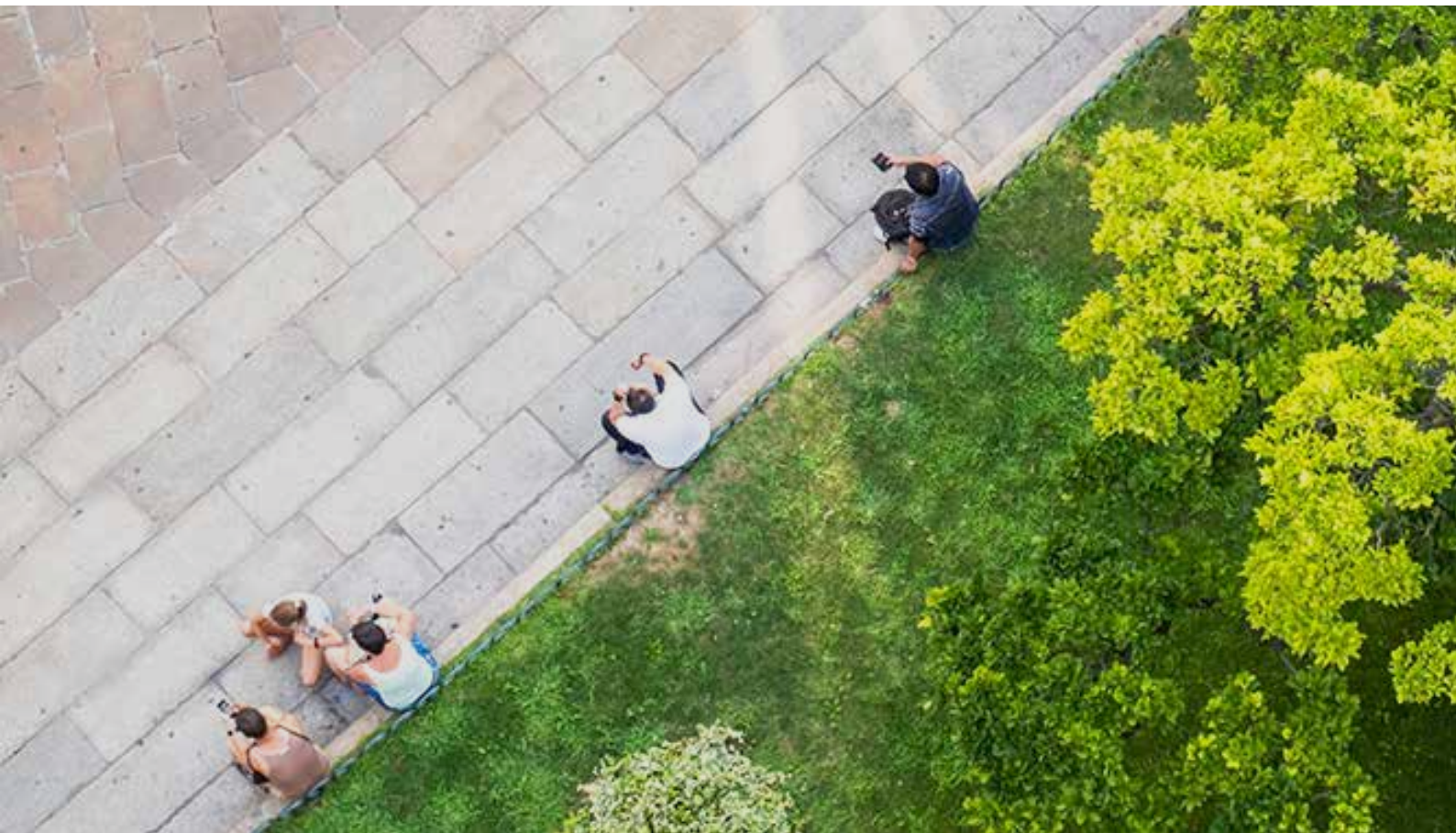
Young people expressed consultation fatigue and scepticism that this piece of research would lead to meaningful change in policy

and practice. They stated that they want to be involved in the research process and not simply just as passive participants. Research aiming to inform policy and practice should include young people throughout as key stakeholders so they can shape what questions are asked and what solutions they need.

Young Londoners' representation in the study

Almost all the participants shared an interest in and liking towards green spaces and were aware to some extent of the benefits of green spaces for mental wellbeing. Reaching non-park users would have provided a deeper analysis on what those not already interested in green space and mental health research would benefit from when considering needed improvements.

Respondents did not come from a random or representative sample. Many of the respondents were recruited through networks such as the



Peer Outreach Workers and, thus, were highly engaged in issues affecting young Londoners, including mental health and wellbeing.

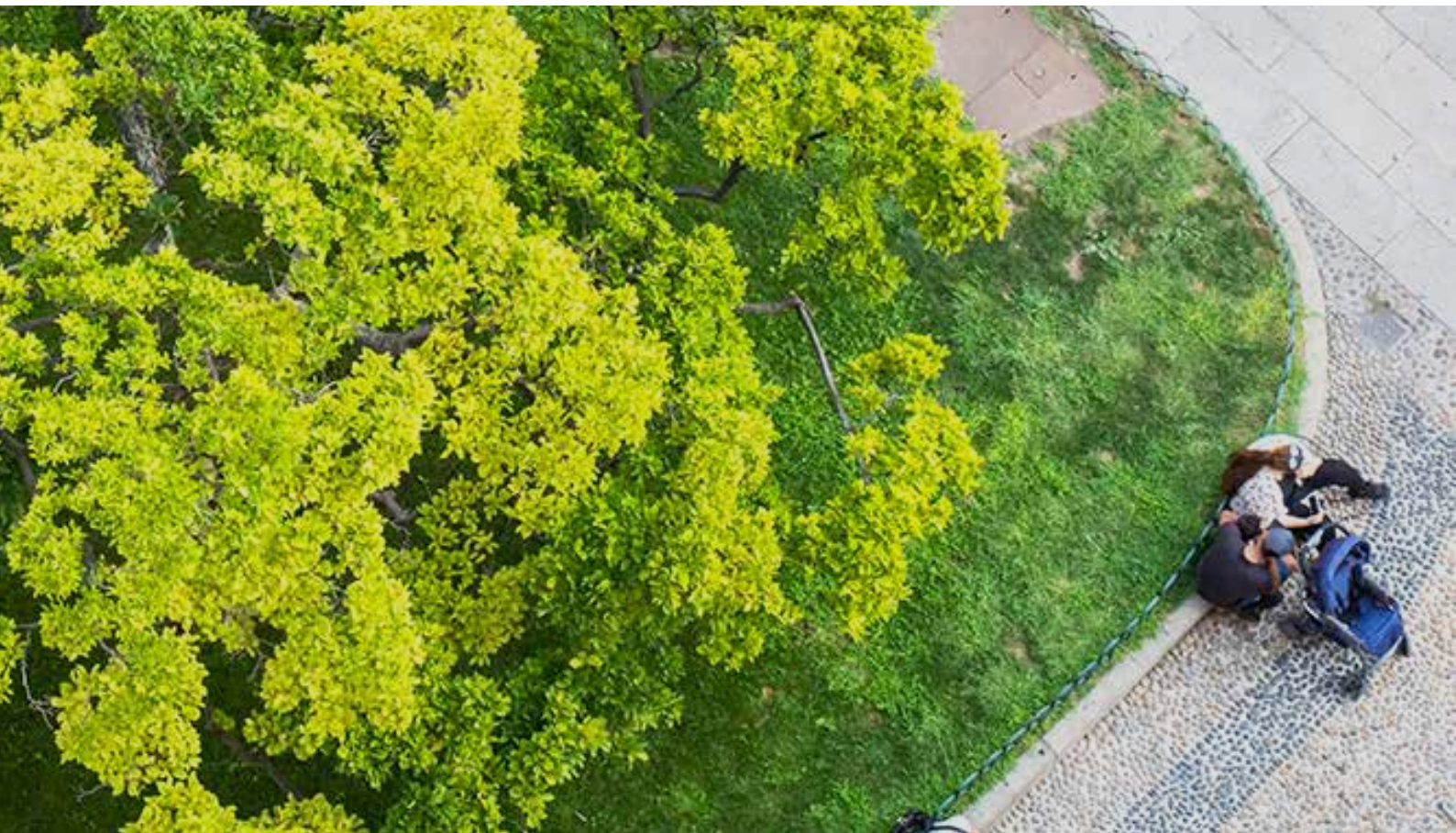
Given the number and makeup of participants, this research is not fully representative of young people across London. This was particularly pertinent when looking at the interview participants where there was an underrepresentation of young men which could have skewed the findings. Further research is needed on how to engage young men, their use of green spaces, and how it impacts their mental health. There were no white British young people interviewed.

Gaps in existing research

Data on 16–25-year-olds is lacking or inconsistent. Much of the data on young people and green space, such as that from Natural England's Monitoring Use and Enjoyment of the Natural Environment (MENE), focuses on

under-16s. Meanwhile, those 16 and older are often categorised as adults. The exact age range studied varies across research projects, including those focusing on young people's mental health. For example, some examine 16–24-year-olds, while others look at 17–19-year-olds. This presents difficulties in making comparisons, conducting analysis, and drawing conclusions when researching young people.

It also is important to note that context matters for wellbeing⁹⁸. As the Improving Wellbeing through Urban Nature project highlighted, the wellbeing benefits derived from green space depend on the specific characteristics of a green space, a person's life circumstances, and their past and potential experiences with urban green spaces and other urban nature⁹⁹. Young people, like other age groups, have different connections to green space. As such, no one-size-fits-all approach to urban green spaces exists.



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11 Appendices

Appendix A Online survey questions

1. How often, if at all, do you go to parks and green spaces?
 - Everyday
 - 2–3 times a week
 - Once a week
 - Once a fortnight
 - Once a month
 - Once every few months
 - Once a year
 - Never
 - Other (please specify)
2. How has the time you spend in parks and green spaces changed over the past year?
 - None of the above
 - It has increased
 - It has stayed the same
 - It has decreased
3. When you visit parks and green spaces, who do you go with? Tick all that apply.
 - Alone
 - Family
 - Friends
 - Classmates
 - Colleagues
 - Other (please specify)
4. How much do you agree with this statement: Spending time in parks and green spaces is important to me.
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree or disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
5. How important, if at all, would you say spending time in parks and green spaces is for your mental health and wellbeing?
 - Extremely important
 - Very important
 - Somewhat important
 - Not so important
 - Not at all important
 - I don't know
 - Other (please specify)
6. How does spending time in parks and green spaces make you feel? Tick all that apply.
 - Anxious
 - Bored
 - Calm
 - Connected to nature
 - Energised
 - Happy
 - Lonely
 - Relaxed
 - Sad
 - Scared
 - I don't know
 - Other (please specify)
7. What would you say are your main reasons for spending time in parks and green spaces? Please select up to three.
 - To spend time with family
 - To spend time with friends
 - To exercise
 - To relax
 - To take part in an organised activity
 - I find it attractive/pleasing/beautiful
 - To get away from my devices
 - To escape life's day-to-day stresses
 - Because it's nearby
 - To feel connected to my community
 - I don't have anywhere else to go
 - Does not apply—I do not spend time in parks and green spaces
 - Other (please specify)
8. What factors make you not interested in visiting a parks or green spaces? Tick all that apply.
 - Too far away
 - Weather
 - No activities
 - Activities are not tailored to my interests
 - Not interested in parks and green spaces
 - I prefer to spend time in other outdoor spaces (not in parks and green space)
 - I don't have the energy
 - Too busy at home
 - Too busy at work
 - Too busy with school/college
 - Does not apply to me
 - Others (please specify)
9. If you would like to spend time or more time in parks and green spaces, what keeps you from doing so? Tick all that apply.
 - Parks and green spaces are not for people like me
 - I don't like going on my own
 - I am not allowed to go out on my own or no one can go with me
 - I don't feel safe
 - I don't feel confident
 - I feel unwelcome or out of place
 - Groups of young people are not welcome
 - Lack of information on what to do/expect
 - Limited experience/fear of getting lost
 - Other (please specify)

10. Are there any experiences or concerns that make you visit parks/green spaces less often or not at all? Tick all that apply.
- Previous experiences/concerns of racism or other forms of discrimination
 - Previous experience/concerns of negative interactions with other people
 - Previous experience/concerns about physical safety
 - Presence of dogs/dog waste
 - My personal/religious beliefs were not accommodated
 - Reports of negative incidents from other people or the media
 - Other (please specify)
11. Have any of the following prevented you from going to parks and green spaces? Tick all that apply.
- No lighting
 - Badly maintained (e.g., litter/graffiti/vandalism/dog waste/broken fences)
 - Broken equipment
 - Too open/exposed
 - Fences, gates, or walls
 - Park staff (e.g., lack of staff or staff are an intimidating presence)
 - I don't understand the maps/signs
 - No facilities/badly maintained facilities (e.g., toilets/water fountains/café/dog litter bin)
 - No facilities for belongings (e.g., bike storage/lockers)
 - No activities or events
 - Inadequate shelter from bad weather
 - Only accommodates children
 - No internet connection/phone signal
 - Other: please specify
12. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about how parks and green spaces have helped your wellbeing in the last 12 months?
13. What is your postcode?
14. Which London Borough do you live in?
- Barking and Dagenham
 - Barnet
 - Bexley
 - Brent
 - Bromley
 - Camden
 - City of London
 - Croydon
 - Ealing
 - Enfield
 - Greenwich
 - Hackney
 - Hammersmith and Fulham
 - Haringey
 - Harrow
 - Havering
 - Hillingdon
 - Hounslow
 - Islington
 - Kensington and Chelsea
 - Kingston upon Thames
 - Lambeth
 - Lewisham
 - Merton
 - Newham
 - Redbridge
 - Richmond upon Thames
 - Southwark
 - Sutton
 - Tower Hamlets
 - Waltham Forest
 - Wandsworth
 - Westminster
 - I don't know
 - Other (please specify)
15. How old are you?
- 16–17
 - 18–25
16. How would you classify yourself?
- Man
 - Woman
 - Transman
 - Transwoman
 - Non-binary/Genderqueer/Agender/Gender fluid/Intersex
 - Prefer not to say
17. What is your ethnic group? Choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background.
- White British
 - White Other
 - Mixed or multiple ethnic groups
 - Indian
 - Pakistani
 - Bangladeshi
 - Chinese
 - Any other Asian or Asian British background
 - Black or Black British African
 - Black or Black British Caribbean
 - Any other Black/Black British/Caribbean/African background
 - Prefer not to say
 - Other ethnic group (please specify)
18. If you are interested in joining a small discussion group during April, please provide your email address here so that we can contact you.



Appendix B—Online survey distribution list

- Future Shapers Network
- Greater London Authority (GLA) Children & Young Londoners Network
- GLA Communities team network and contacts
- GLA Culture team
- GLA Young Londoners Participation Network
- Groundwork London
- London Wildlife Trust—Keeping it Wild contacts and newsletter
- Mayor of London Environment Twitter account
- Mayor of London Health Twitter account
- Mayor's Fund for London
- Mayor's Young Londoners Fund
- Midaye Youth Groups
- Natural History Museum youth organisations network
- Parks for London website and social media channels
- Partnership for Young London
- Sport and Serious Youth Violence Steering Group
- Thrive LDN newsletter
- Voyage Youth

Appendix C—Interview questions

Use and preferences

1. What comes to mind when you think of parks and green spaces in London?
2. How often do you visit parks and green spaces?
 - [Yes] What types of parks and green spaces do you visit? What draws you to these spaces? What do you like about London's parks and green spaces?
 - [No] skip to question 4
3. What do you do when you are in parks and green spaces? Or how do you typically spend your time when you are in parks? Does it change depending on who you are with?
4. What keeps you from visiting parks or visiting them infrequently?
5. Did/do you remember visiting parks and green spaces as a child, such as with your family or school?
6. Has technology affected or changed the way you use parks?
 - Do you find it easier to find to parks and green spaces?
 - How has devices like your phone changed how you use of parks and green spaces, if at all?
 - Are you more likely to read a book at the park, watch a movie/TV show, play games, go on social media?
7. What activities do you take part in at parks and green spaces?
 - Are they organised or informal activities?
 - How did you hear about them?

8. Young people have told us that one barrier to using parks and green spaces is home/school/work responsibilities—they don't have enough time.
 - Do you experience this?
 - How can this be overcome? What support can be provided?

Mental health and wellbeing

9. Can spending time in parks and green spaces affect your mental health and wellbeing?
 - [Yes] Elaborate on how parks affect your mental wellbeing. How do they make you feel? How long do these feelings last?
 - [No] Why do you think parks have no impact on your mental wellbeing?
10. Has your relationship with relationship with/access to/awareness of local parks and green spaces changed in the past two years/since COVID-19?

Accessibility/Feeling welcome/Safety

11. What makes you feel welcome and safe in parks and green spaces?
 - How does the presence of park staff affect how you feel about your safety?
12. What influences how you feel about your local green space park?
 - News stories, facilities, cleanliness etc. Give examples
13. How could parks and green spaces in your local area to be improved?
 - For your mental health and wellbeing
 - To make them more welcoming and safer
 - Specific features and activities

Appendix D—Themes identified from interview transcripts

- Safety
- Case studies
- Design
- Features
- Impact of non-police staff
- Information
- Mental health
- News stories
- Park management
- Barriers to access
- School
- Solutions
- Specific childhood memories
- Swings
- Technology
- Types and size of green spaces
- Uses
- Who

Appendix E—Green space projects mentioned by participants

- [Fitzrovia Youth in Action](#)
- [Cally Resource Centre](#)
- [Youth Zone](#)





Young, Green, and Well

October 2022

Charity number: 1156063
Designed by Jeanice Aw

Get in touch:

-  www.parksforlondon.org.uk
-  info@parksforlondon.org.uk
-  [@ParksforLondon](https://twitter.com/ParksforLondon)

Join in the conversation:

#YoungGreenandWell