# Understanding Southwark

Young people's perspectives

December 2021

Southwark Council
southwark.gov.uk

SOCIAL LIFE

Social Life was created by the Young Foundation in 2012, to become a specialist centre of research and innovation about the social life of communities. All our work is about the relationship between people and the places they live and understanding how change, through regeneration, new development or small improvements to public spaces, affects the social fabric, opportunities and wellbeing of local areas. We work in the UK and internationally.

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# Introduction

This report brings together the emerging themes and findings from qualitative research carried out in six areas with 10 young people from the Southwark Young Advisors.

The research focused on Camberwell, Dulwich, Elephant and Castle, Old Kent Road, Peckham and Walworth. This is part of a larger project that explores daily life in these areas, how people feel about their local area and recent changes, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on residents' daily lives.

This research gives insight into the everyday lives of young people living, studying and working in Southwark. At the beginning of this period in November, London entered a second national lockdown. As we moved into December, the lockdown restrictions were relaxed for a short period. A third national lockdown started in early January 2021, demanding that people in England stay at home, except for limited reasons, and, unlike in November, largely closing schools and colleges.

## Approach

This report brings together findings from 10 in-depth interviews and two focus groups carried between November 2020 and January 2021 with Southwark Young Advisors from Camberwell, Dulwich, Elephant & Castle, Old Kent Road, Peckham and Walworth. The interviews were carried out on Zoom or by phone and were on average an hour long, with some lasting up to one and a half hours. The focus groups took place on Zoom and each brought together five Young Advisors (four participants and one co-facilitator) and lasted about an hour.

The data collected is particularly rich not only in the narratives it reveals but also visually. Before the interviews took place, we asked participants to send us four or five photos of spaces in their local area that they used to go to before the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures were introduced; four or five photos of spaces in their local area that they have been able to use during the lockdown; and one photograph of a hand-drawn map of places and spaces in their local area that are important to them, that describe how they feel and experience their daily life at the moment. Participants submitted around 80 photographs and 10 maps of local areas.

The photographs captured a mix of spaces used by the young people we interviewed, showing how they feel about their areas and the local change that is taking place across the borough. The cognitive maps gave us additional insight not only into places of significance in these local areas but also into the way that young people's routines have been changing for the past months. When analysed together with the in-depth interviews, they piece together a varied social landscape and illustrate how young people use and feel about their local areas. The visual component of the research (also called "photo elicitation") allowed participants to capture their knowledge of local areas, while grounding the interviews in specific places, routes and local experiences. As one of the participants told us,

> *"When I was drawing the map, I was thinking what are my favourite places there, and what places I usually go to. Started from the top, and slowly walked through like I was walking down the road, and asked where I would stop at. Everything in order. McDonald's / Asda / my church / my barber shop / Burgess Park. It's just like when I am usually on that road."*

The quotes used in this report have been edited for clarity.

Through this combination of qualitative methods, we can better understand what spaces are significant to the everyday lives of young people, as well as a range of challenges they are facing. Together, the narrative and visual components of the research with the Southwark Young Advisors revealed six main themes:

- the impact of COVID-19 on everyday life
- local assets and challenges
- a place to belong
- local change and control
- safety
- support and opportunities for young people.

# The findings

## 1 The impact of COVID-19 on everyday life

During the in-depth individual interviews and focus groups, participants talked at length about the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on young people. Mental wellbeing was a central concern in our discussions. Some of them mentioned that it has become more common to discuss depression openly among friends. Participants also spoke about the impact of the pandemic on their relationships with friends, family and their neighbourhoods, describing the severe impact COVID has had on the social and economic lives of local areas across the borough.

*"I feel disconnected from everybody … this sense of disconnection ties into the social distancing, and being so focused on social media, and … your mental health also. We're not used to doing nothing on a Saturday, or for that long, or not seeing your friends. You feel like you're losing all of your childhood, the time you could be doing stuff, like even right now. It did get quite depressing, definitely, some of your friends if they are not online, you feel like you are alone. And you just wait for them to be available again, lonely, and depressing."*

*"Young people are flooded with work to keep them busy. Their lives are put on pause. Even if they speak to an older person about their struggle, they are not sure they'll understand."*

Coping with social distancing measures, missing school events and the routines created by school activities have made the young people we spoke to feel isolated, anxious and claustrophobic. Not being able to meet friends at home or go someplace locally together affected many of them.

*"The pandemic has affected me a lot. I used to go to friends' house to play video games but I can't go now because of the pandemic restrictions."*

*"… the days are claustrophobic now and they are repeating themselves."*

*"Young people missing out on lots of school events … I didn't have an end of year prom. Young people who have started university during the pandemic feel like they are wasting their time being there, with only online lessons. They don't feel like they are getting their money's worth. I feel this experience of missing out on school rituals will affect young people in the future."*

*"Majority of the day is spent in one room, there's just repetition and you feel like there's no break. Even with interactions in the home, with family are affected … everyone is occupied with online work. 'What do I do next? when do I have to log on next?' is on everyone's mind. Family interactions are affected by online working and learning."*

For many of the young people who took part in the research, the use of digital platforms and social media for most forms of social interaction, including school, has resulted in fatigue and a sense of continuous anxiety.

*"[It] feels like I'm 'Zoomed Out' … I use my phone a lot more than before, all interactions being done though text messages and social media. Everyone talks about the pandemic all the time … it's exhausting. This constant talk about the pandemic has a negative impact on people, especially because so many people know people who have died due to COVID. Anxiety is definitely a constant problem and this is a new experience for this generation … life has taken a dramatic turn, and I think it has also made my son develop an anxiety of being around people."*

*"I haven't been out at all … only been to school, then home and homework. I have been using Zoom for online schoolwork and other activities. I've had enough of Zoom … It's a lot. I wish it could be in-person."*

The lack of daily routines has played an important role in making young people feel disconnected from their local areas. Social distancing measures and the closure of particular places have put pressure on many young people: supermarkets, chicken shops and chip shops, McDonald's, barbers, and churches are all important places for young people, serving important social functions.
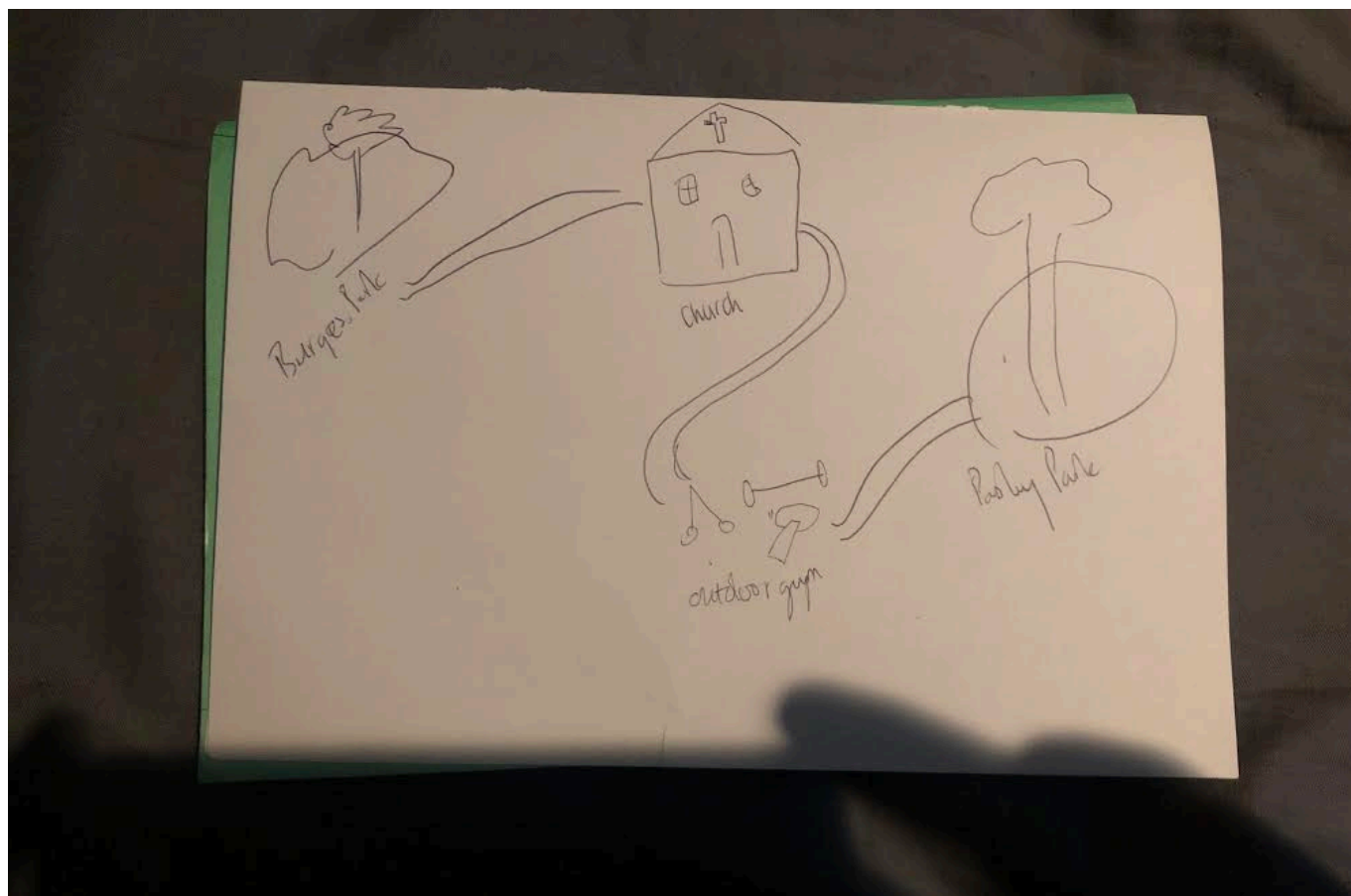
*Churches play an important role in some of the young people's daily routines in their local areas*

With COVID restrictions, relationships between local churches and some of the young people interviewed changed as well. Social distancing and, at times, the closure of faith organisations had an impact on a range of activities that church life afforded, including attending weekly services with family, taking part in the church choir, spending time with friends, and having access to a safe and welcoming space. A few young people noted that going to church was a major weekly routine, and not being able to made it all the more difficult to fill the week with activities and keep one's sense of time and motivation intact.

> *"Would go every Sunday, sometimes Fridays. It was a place I'd go to a lot. It had its own youth floor, had people my age, all of the youth. Also, during summer because it was a youth church. It ran like a summer spot, a hang-out spot, you could turn up any time, and stay there till late. Had a TV there, a kitchen, a lot of space, a back-garden...You'd bring food, play PS4. It wasn't only a church, and so young people in the area would use it as a space. It ran throughout the summer for six weeks. It was a hangout space as well as a church. Lockdown just took that away. This definitely impacted some young people more than others. In my friendship group, it's not everyone who can go out without telling their parents where they are going. Some people's parents need to know a spot is a safe space, and know where it is. They know how it is, they know the space. But now, 'Oh, mum, I'm going out', and it raises more questions."*

> *"The church was a place he would frequently go to pray and meet his close friends, since the initial lockdown he hasn't gone to church. He was worried about social distancing measures. Even after his local church reopened, as a precautionary measure decided to not attend services. He would attend online service that the church started providing during and after the lockdown period."*

> *"Church closures impact on young people. They are hanging out with nothing to do."*

*Parks, outdoor spaces and churches appear as key elements in the life of young people across the borough, playing an essential role in making them feel connected to others and allowing them to feel part of their local neighbourhood*

A range of places, including libraries, barbers, nail salons, clothes shops, restaurants and supermarkets were shut or opened with restrictions, or opened intermittently, leaving many young people feeling disconnected from their local areas. Change in everyday routines made many young people see their local areas differently, as they became more aware of the role played by local places in organising their lives.

> *"I didn't realise that having a routine made me happy … that I like having something I could wake up to in the morning or knowing I had somewhere to go to. For example, school, when we had it before lockdown, there was no such thing as liking school. A lot of the boys who used to complain about it are now the people who complain that they can't go to school due to lockdown. Schools are that place where you can do everything, get direction, meet people, socialise. So, having that routine is what makes me happy. Now, there isn't much to do in your life."*

The places used by young people before the pandemic illustrate the range of local businesses that anchor everyday life, serving multiple functions at the same time. For many young people from different parts of the borough, places such as barber shops, chicken shops or McDonald's are important local social infrastructure.

> *"I like Morley's because I can meet a group of friends for a catch up. I also go to McDonald's but it's more crowded so it's more to see friends on a 1-2-1 basis. I go to Nando's for celebrations with friends, such as a birthday. It's for evening birthday celebrations."*

*Many of the young people's daily routines before the pandemic included beauty shops and restaurants*

*"This is the barber I go to, have been going there for a long time. It's my main one. Going to the barbershop you'd speak to your friends about, go on the same day, wait for each other after, then after go chicken and chip shop, or go Tesco and get a drink. Something that as boys you all did together, and left together, and everything just changed. Everyone was looking rough, started cutting my own hair. We all had the barber's number, he recognised you were a regular customer – already knows who you are, how you want your haircut – and you had his number so could call him beforehand. You expect it every 4 weeks. So, it was a place you would go a lot."*
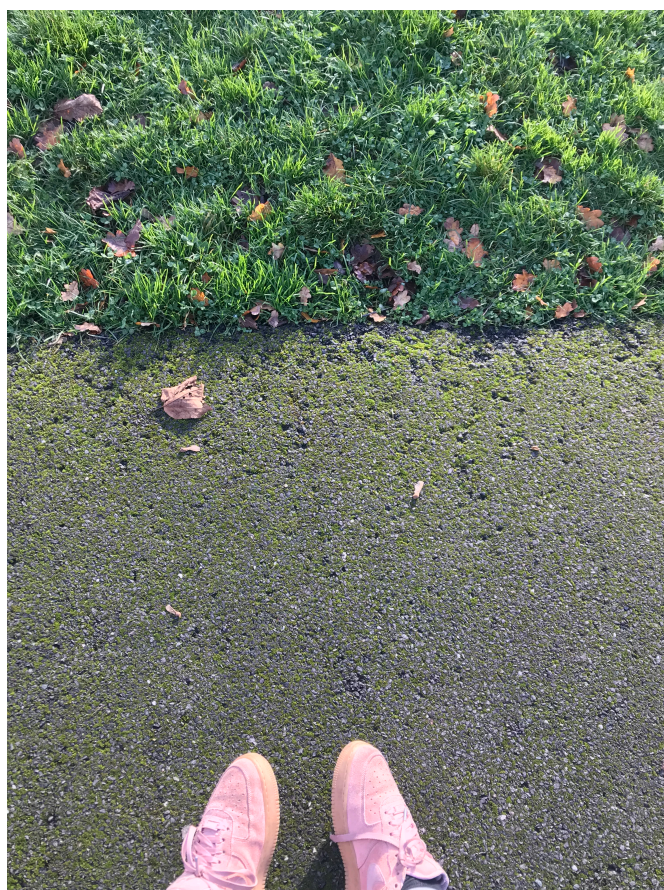




*Libraries and barbershops were also mentioned among the local amenities that play a role in allowing young people to develop a strong connection to place*

# 2 Local assets and challenges

A few of the young people we spoke to said that taking up new routines helped them during the lockdown. Having access to green spaces and other outdoor spaces in the local area made it easier to exercise, socialise with friends outdoors or just go outside to get away from other family members. The importance of being able to step away from the home cannot be overstated. During lockdown, some young people started to take more walks in local parks, others hung out with their friends on park benches (when this was allowed), and others sat in their parents' car outside their homes.

> *"Most of the time when I am outside, I would stand looking at the surroundings, just looking for something to do … Sometimes when I am bored of being indoors, I would sit in my mum's car listening to music. It's way to relax outside of the house."*

> *"I see my neighbours in the park but I feel we don't use the park as much as we should. The park needs refurbishment, that would encourage the neighbours to use it more. During the initial lockdown the park was used extensively, it felt like we went back in time, when we I was younger and saw more kids using the park."*



*Pathways and backstreets became key assets during lockdowns as they were used for new routines*

Parks were seen as important local assets by young people from across the borough. The young people we interviewed mentioned a range of smaller and larger parks and green spaces, including Dulwich Park, Belair Park, Brockwell Park, Pasley Park, Burgess Park, Kennington Park, and Brunswick Park. A few young people added that what they lack in their local areas is a larger park, one with several well-maintained outdoor amenities like Burgess Park.

*Larger parks were preferred by young people as they offer more outdoors facilities*

Some also said that there should be more playground facilities for young children, adventure playgrounds and various football pitches and basketball cages available locally.

*"Having outdoor sports facilities can help young people's mental health, it can be an outlet when being stuck indoors for a prolonged period."*

*"Elephant & Castle is a quiet place, there's not a lot to do … There's more for adults, some parks and markets … There's only a Sainsbury's and a Nando's … I used to go to the arcade and bowling alley in the Shopping Centre with my mates but those closed down. Now, we just hang out outside because we don't have anywhere to go."*

Some participants noted that local basketball and football cages shut during the lockdowns, which left them with even fewer options for outdoor activities. Some of the photographs submitted featured these gated spaces, highlighting both the attachment to them and the impact their closure is having on young people's daily lives.

*Many football and basketball cages remained closed during lockdowns*

When no other socialising spaces were available or when they were not close to their home, young people said that they would just hang out on park benches or next to outdoor gym equipment. Participants talked about the importance of benches as spaces for socialising. A few of them added that hanging out outdoors in these spaces was not ideal, as not everyone in the neighbourhood was happy about that, including some neighbours and the local police.

> *"The area is policed more than it used to be before COVID, they're stricter with rules and regulations now [during the third national lockdown]. There's a lot of pressure from the police on young people right now. Things have been shutting down because of COVID-19 … people are more panicked now, and it's affecting people. They are all stuck inside their homes. There's not much available in this area, we don't move around a lot, which is why the lack of local spaces and amenities is an important issue."*

> *"I would pass time sitting on park benches, just make sure I was not stuck indoors for a long time. Even though I'm outside it isn't the experience I want … I want to be around more people, to be outside with friends."*

> *"There is an outdoor gym on the Aylesbury near my block. This was important during the pandemic because it was an easy place to meet friends, we could chat from opposite sides of [gym] equipment."*

*While the facilities themselves were shut, some outdoor gyms and play areas were used for socialising*



*Many young people commented that local park benches increased in importance during lockdowns*

When asked about what facilities are missing in the local area, the young people highlighted that there are not enough youth clubs. They said that this was the case before COVID-19 crisis started, the pandemic only made this absence more apparent. The lack of indoor and outdoor gyms, and sports clubs was also noted. Some young

people believed that making such facilities more widely available across the borough would also increase local vibrancy, safety and make local areas more inviting.

*"The area needs places where young people could just chill. That would also bring more light to the area, and more vibrancy, and kinda solve the problem of everything looking darker."*

*"There are no spaces for young people where they can engage and interact, where young people feel free, where they feel they can do what they want."*

*"I feel overall the area is quite peaceful, and there are some nice spaces to go which is good to clear you mind and have a walk. But I don't think there's enough places that include young people as such."*
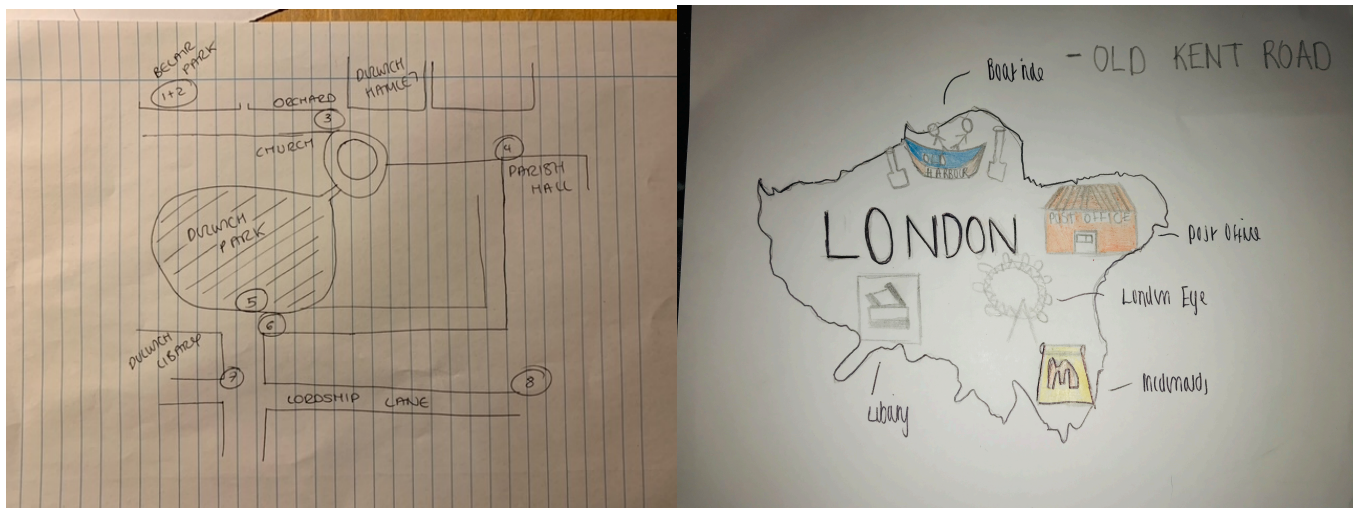
*"There is not much on for young people. We used to go to the Horniman Museum when I was younger but it's not cool for teenagers to go now."*
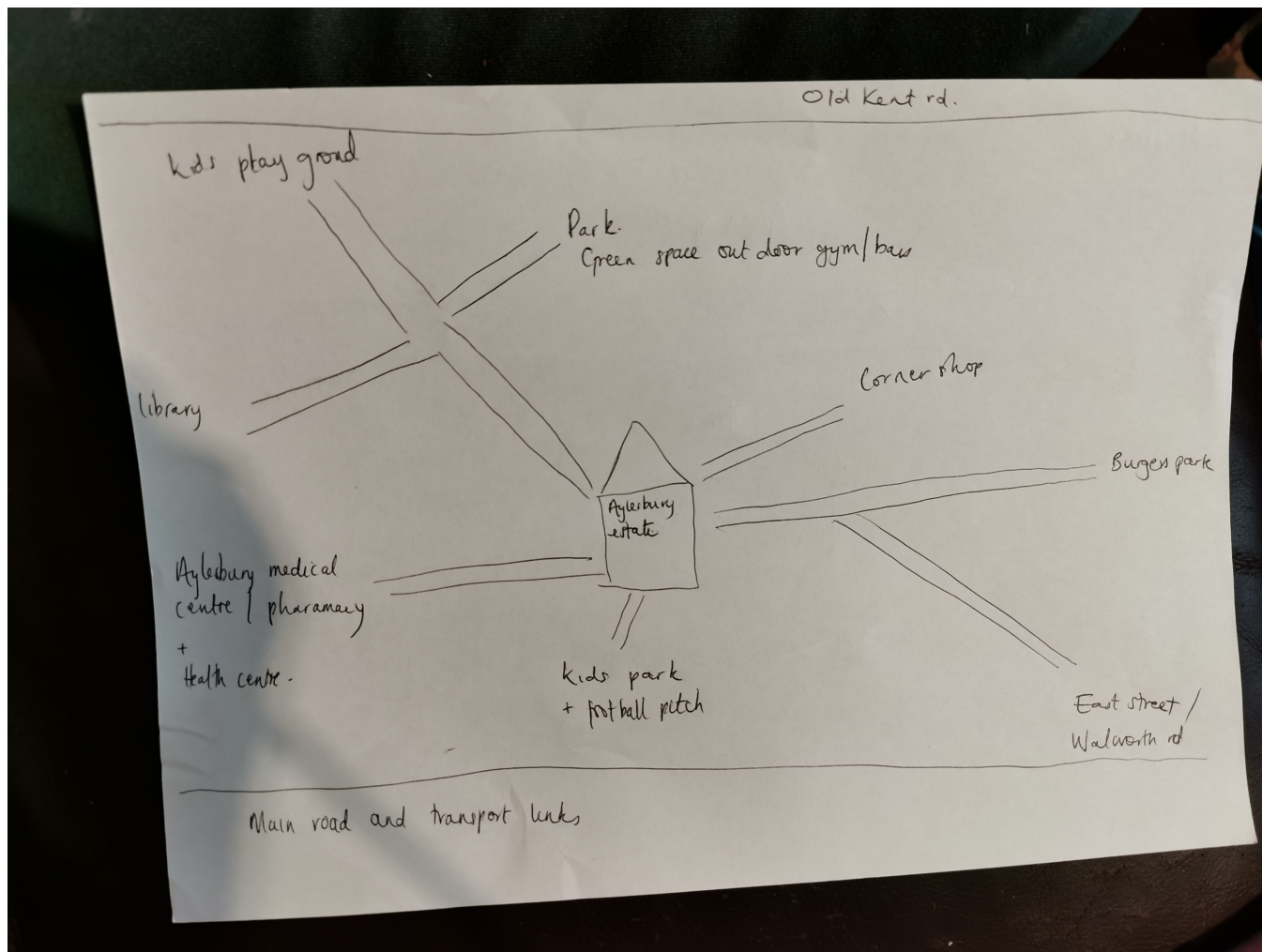
# 3 A place to belong

Young people reported a sense of belonging to their local areas, citing various reasons, including having friends locally, knowing their way around the neighbourhood and having strong connections to local institutions. However, as the pandemic has restricted many young people to smaller geographies, there has been additional pressure on local areas. With churches, community centres, cafes, shops or local clubs closed or with restricted access, young people have had a limited number of spaces where they could socialise or build their networks of support.

> *"Before the pandemic, I really liked where I lived – it's comfortable to me because it's very welcoming, with many cultures and really diverse. During the pandemic it felt less open and there is not a lot of green spaces."*
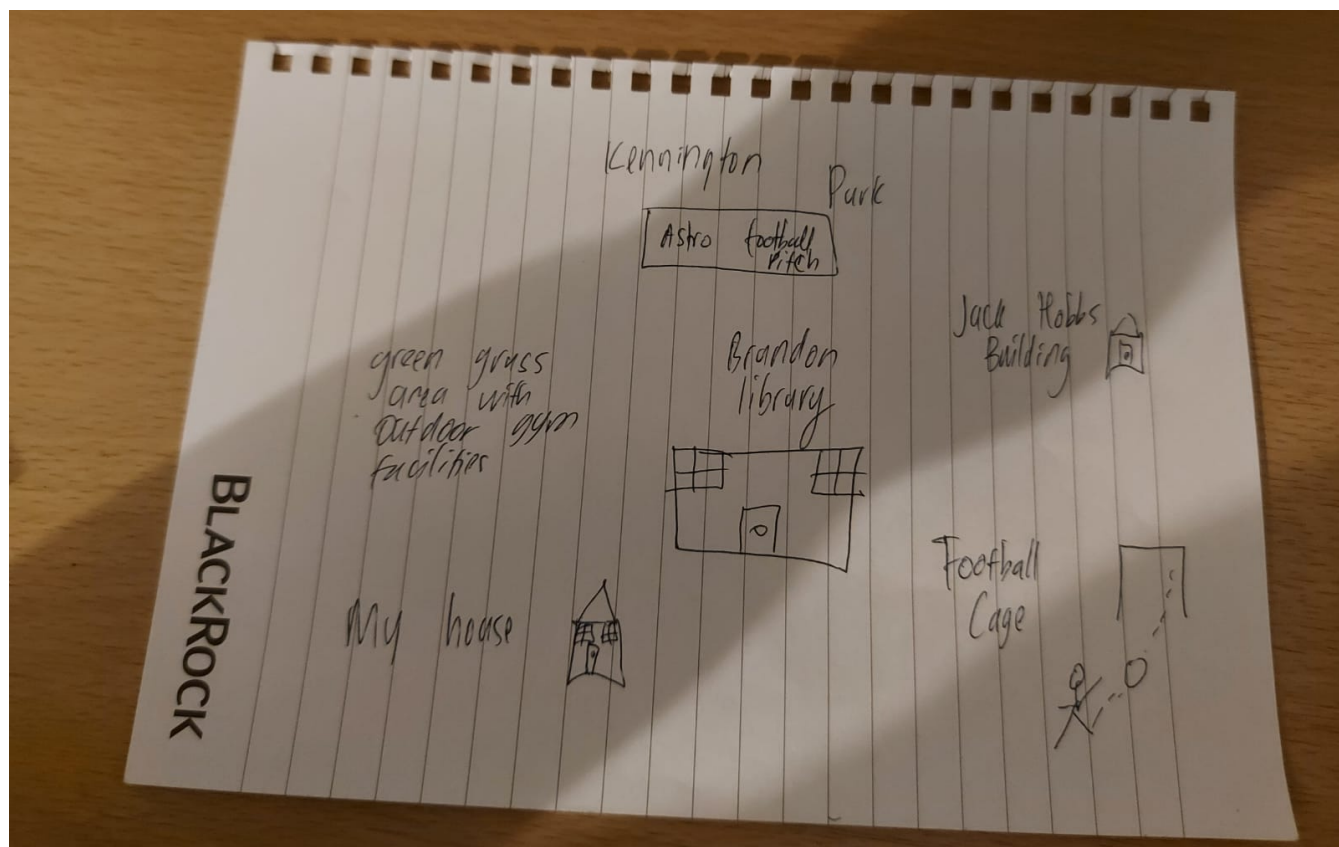
> *"I go to church – have been going since a child, most of my closest friends are there. I have a sense of second family, a safe haven to go to. It's not just about being religious, it's about seeing friends, being able to connect with other people. It's very important for me."*
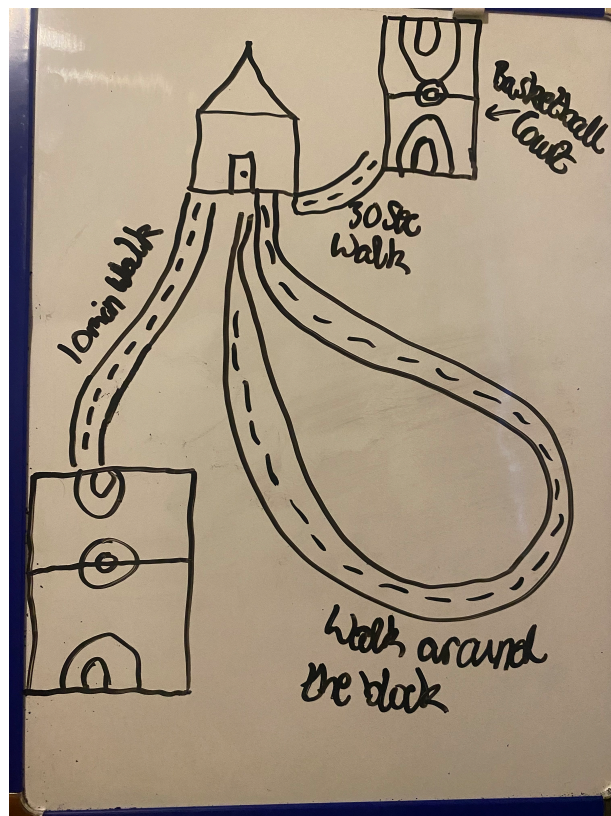


*Cognitive maps bring attention to what local places are important to young people.*

Old Kent rd.

kids play ground

Park.
Green space out door gym/bars

library

Corner shop

Aylesbury
estate

Burgess park

Aylesbury medical
centre / pharamacy
+
Health centre.

kids park
+ football pitch

East street /
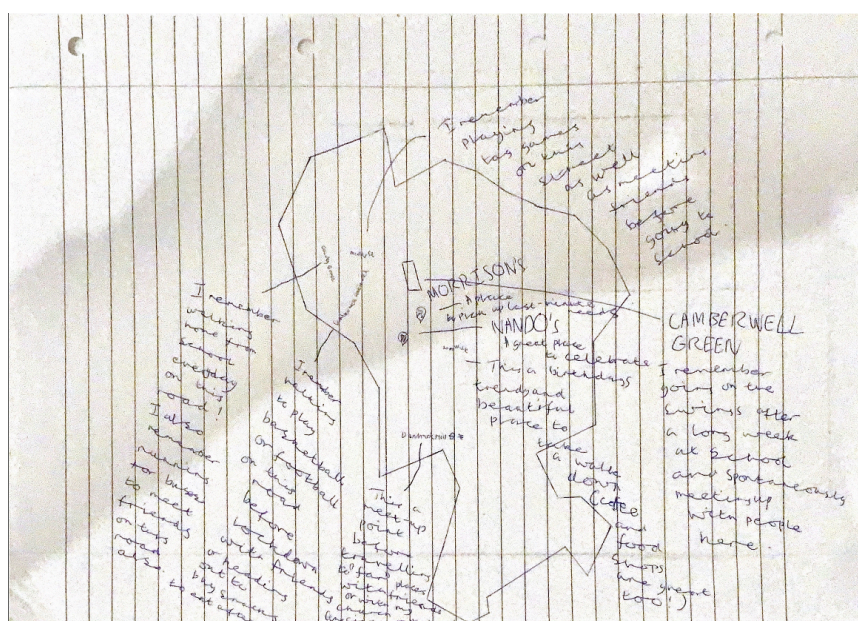Walworth rd

Main road and transport links

*Green spaces, basketball and football cages, and libraries featured prominently in young people's maps of local areas, revealing the importance of these spaces in their daily lives*



Kennington

Park

Astro | football
pitch

Jack Hobbs
Building

green grass
area with
outdoor gym
facilities

Brandon
library

Football
Cage

My house

BLACKROCK

*Maps overlay physical and social places, showing what parts of the local area are most familiar to young people and what places facilitate their connection to local communities*





*Young people reported that, generally, local people get on well with people from other backgrounds in their local area. But this was not always the case, and some of the participants talked about instances of discrimination and tensions between neighbours in their local areas.*

*"There are way better areas, and more safer areas ... in London, there are areas like Stratford or Canary Wharf where you don't hear about gangs and drugs. Here you hear about it all the time. If you have kids and you work all day, it will be easy for your kids to fall into that category. I would want to move to a different location and erase all the memories and start afresh!"*

*"Race and age determine who gets discriminated. Brown skin, black skin and young people. Race is important but also age … mainly age … Sometimes young people are outside just chilling out and people think they are up to no good."*

*"I feel a racial tension. The security guards always follow us. The police stop us. Drunk people are racist to me."*

Some participants also noted that feelings of belonging are not fixed, and if they feel they belong now it does not mean that it will still be the case in coming years. The main reason given for this was local change, young people highlighted that the transformation of their neighbourhoods has an impact on local relationships, attachments and the identity of local areas.

*"The area has changed, there used to be a strong community but now new people are coming in. It's difficult to build relationships. Neighbours have changed quite a few times in the last few years."*

*"Yes, I still feel like I do, but don't feel will belong in the area in the future…It feels like we're being pushed out of the area … lots of people had the same struggles as my parents, migrating to the country, lots of people had the same experiences. Now, we don't feel like this … I need to push myself to relate to the people who move to the area. Shops, and buildings are changing. I think I might need to move."*

# 4 Local change and control

Young people were doubtful that the local change taking place in their local areas is benefitting them. Some argued that regeneration is more about financial gain than solving existing local problems. Others were more positive about the transformation but they had two concerns: that local people are not the target of much of the regeneration that is going on in their areas, and that long-standing neighbourhood businesses might get priced out of the neighbourhood.



*Some young people did not feel like local change is benefiting them, and highlighted that some of the places they used to like in their areas are getting demolished or are not well maintained*

*"What I dislike the most is the fact that the council keeps taking away privileges from local residents, making it harder for them to live because the council wants them to move out."*

*"In the near future, regeneration will benefit the young people in the area. The quality of the environment will be better … but young people will not be able to afford property as regeneration drives up prices."*



*Other young people were not opposed to regeneration but were worried about the longer-term impact on local communities and shops. This renovated library was given as a positive example of local change*

*"I've heard a bit about the Old Kent Road regeneration and thought it is an opportunity to jazz up the area a bit more, make it look more vibrant, a better place to hang out, especially like the youth club."*

*"The area has changed a lot. Before the demolition started there were more places to play for kids, which I used when I was younger. There was basketball court and football court close to area. Everyone used to go there, there were free activities, free basketball and football training. The play area I used to go to has gone because of the regeneration. I think the sense of community has gone too. I felt I used to know most of the people living in the area, if something went wrong, I could go to someone for help, like a shop keeper."*

A majority of participants reported that they did not feel they have control over what happens in their local areas, and noted that consultation processes need to be redesigned to appeal to young people as well.

*"[The council's] design and words make them look like any other communication, like it's made for corporate and not young people. Designs and wordings are important ways to reach out to young people."*

*"Young people are definitely not involved in regeneration processes. Recently, there was an indoor event at the local community hall, but younger people are never encouraged to attend such events or have their opinions heard."*

# 5 Safety

Safety is an important issue for young people. While many reported that they felt their areas are safe during the day, they also talked about gangs, the danger of violence, being "street savvy" and living with tensions or fear. Knowing people locally and knowing the surroundings increases perceptions of safety. In some cases, being a long-term resident and having a strong sense of community contributed to making young people feel safe in their local area. However, young people described how there are particular pockets in each area that they felt to be unsafe, despite the wider local area being felt to be safe.

*"The area doesn't look the greatest in certain parts. These are dangerous parts where people will come and take your stuff or are under the influence."*

*"When you do leave there [main road] and cutting into the little paths through estates, or when you walk a bit down near the barber shop, that can be a bit dangerous, and not safe. It can get really dark, and there's load of alleyways."*

*"I wouldn't say there's any divisions in terms of postcode or area, but in general, there's always that tension with someone you don't know – if I'm moving in a group and go past another – the way you look at each other and lean your head, and think if something is going to happen."*

*"My side of the Elephant & Castle is ok but could also be violent, especially gang violence. It can get chaotic. Around the train station fights break out at night."*

# 6 Support and opportunities for youth

Participants highlighted that more support is needed locally to help young people in the future. The lack of youth centres, and opportunities for mentoring, apprenticeship and internships were major concerns for young people from across the borough. Some of the young people interviewed said that a local hub that offers courses, and readily available information about local apprenticeships and employment opportunities is needed. A place where young people can learn about taxes, money, and other "things that are not taught in school".

*"One thing that could really just change everything, stopping young people hanging about and being silly and stuff, is if they had a job. But you can't really get a job when you're 15, and when your 16 there's a limited amount of hours you can do."*

*"My friends say 'oh, I wish I had a job or something to do', or even an apprenticeship or some programme. But there's a lack of those things around."*

*"Youth services are needed. I know it's a big ask but it broke my heart to see them go."*

*"A lot of mentoring stuff would be good. To give you advice on managing finances, for example, you don't learn that at uni. And, also, about future studies. I've never had a mentor but have friends who are a lot older who have been like mentors, role models. Mentors would be good, I would have been in a much better position than I am right now."*

The need for more widely available counselling and wellbeing services was also stressed by the young people who participated in the research. A few mentioned that, while some of these services might already be available, young people do not find out about them because of poor promotion or communication strategies.

*"It would be a good idea to have health services for young people where they can drop in."*

*"For young people, there could be better counselling, more advice on how to make their day-to-day lives better, as well as the opportunity to speak to professionals…Some of these things already do exist but they need to be better advertised. More than anything, the fact that nothing seems to be done WITH young people's input gives off the impression that the council does not really care."*

*"The school has a phoneline with a nurse from St. Thomas' Hospital, comes in every fortnight, and you can talk to a nurse if you feel you need support or help. I think that's quite helpful."*

Social Life is an independent research organisation created by the Young Foundation in 2012, to become a specialist centre of research and innovation about the social life of communities. Our work is about understanding how peoples' day-to-day experience of local places is shaped by the built environment - housing, public spaces, parks and local high streets - and how change, through regeneration, new devel- opment or small improvements to public spaces, affects the social fabric, opportunities and wellbeing of local areas.

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