



Everyday life in Catford:

How local spaces, facilities and groups build relationships, encourage participation and help tackle inequalities.

September 2020

About this report

This report is based on research carried out in Catford looking at how local social infrastructure is supporting social integration.

Between December 2019 and June 2020, Social Life and Hawkins\Brown spoke to local residents and agencies working in the area to find out how local spaces, services and groups support the local community. We hope the findings are useful to everyone working in the area.

The report was written by Christina Bayram and Lucia Caistor, with additional research by Jessica Gatta and Jonah Rudlin.

As part of his Good Growth by Design programme The Mayor of London has commissioned research on social infrastructure, building on the recognition that London's built environment plays an important role in enabling social integration. This included indepth research in three contrasting areas: Catford, Homerton and Surbiton.

The full report of the Inquiry will be available in early 2021 from www.london.gov.uk

The Mayor's Good Growth by Design programme seeks to enhance the design of the built environment to create a city that works for all Londoners. This means that as London increases, development and growth should benefit everyone who lives here. For more about the programme go to: <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/regeneration/advice-and-guidance/about-good-growth-design>

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.

www.social-life.co

Hawkins\Brown is an internationally renowned practice of architects, urban designers, interior designers and researchers. People are at the heart of everything we do, from our design approach to the way our studio runs. We bring a wealth of experience designing and delivering innovative and socially sustainable places and spaces, with research underpinning our creative process and all our outputs.

www.hawkinsbrown.com

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all those who generously gave their time to speak with us, who took part in our workshop and shared their experiences and insights.

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1. Introduction

Social infrastructure - which includes many different facilities, spaces and places - is London's social glue. When we meet our friends in a cafe, go to a class at a community centre, take part in a tenants' and residents' association or a park friends' group, go to the library for information or get help and advice from people within our community, we are using the city's social infrastructure to support and enrich our lives.

Alongside places and spaces, like GP surgeries, gyms, cafes and schools, social infrastructure is also made up of local groups and networks. Londoners support each other through friendships, families and wider networks. People in local neighbourhoods come together to respond to needs, to help each other and to get help, to share interests and have fun. They also organise into formal groups like school parents' groups, local campaigns, or action groups to improve their areas. This energy and the dynamism of communities' efforts is vital to Londoners' lives and has played out vividly in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have been looking at the role of social infrastructure in its many different forms and functions in enabling social integration. By social integration we mean the ways that public spaces, local amenities, groups or networks support relationships; how they encourage participation, allowing people to become actively engaged in their communities; and how they help tackle inequality and break down barriers.

“Social integration is the extent to which people positively interact and connect with others who are different to themselves. It is determined by the level of equality between people, the nature of their relationships, and their degree of participation in the communities in which they live.”

(All of us: the Mayor's strategy for social integration, 2018)

To understand how social infrastructure supports social integration that works at the local level, we have been looking into the role of social infrastructure in Catford as well as in Homerton and Surbiton. We chose these three areas to give a range of neighbourhoods, with different social profiles, diversity, housing types and regeneration.

In this report, we describe what we found in the area - how residents use different types of places and spaces and how these support local relationships, equality and participation. We highlight the lessons that can be learnt from this part of Lewisham

as well as from our wider research. This help us understand how local groups and agencies can support social infrastructure to fulfil its potential in the future.

How we define social infrastructure

We use the term to include a range of local spaces and facilities: **formal spaces** such as libraries, GP surgeries, schools and community centres; and **informal spaces** which range from high street businesses that provide meeting places for local people, shops and cafes, cinemas and art centres. We also include local networks and groups, online and offline.

The Mayor of London's definition of social infrastructure is:

“Social infrastructure covers a range of services and facilities that meet local and strategic needs and contribute towards a good quality of life. It includes health provision, education, community, play, youth, recreation, sports, faith, and emergency facilities.”

“Alongside more formal provision of services, there are informal networks and community support that play an important role in the lives of Londoners... Green infrastructure in all its forms is also a key component of social infrastructure.”

(GLA, Draft London Plan, 2019)

2. Key findings

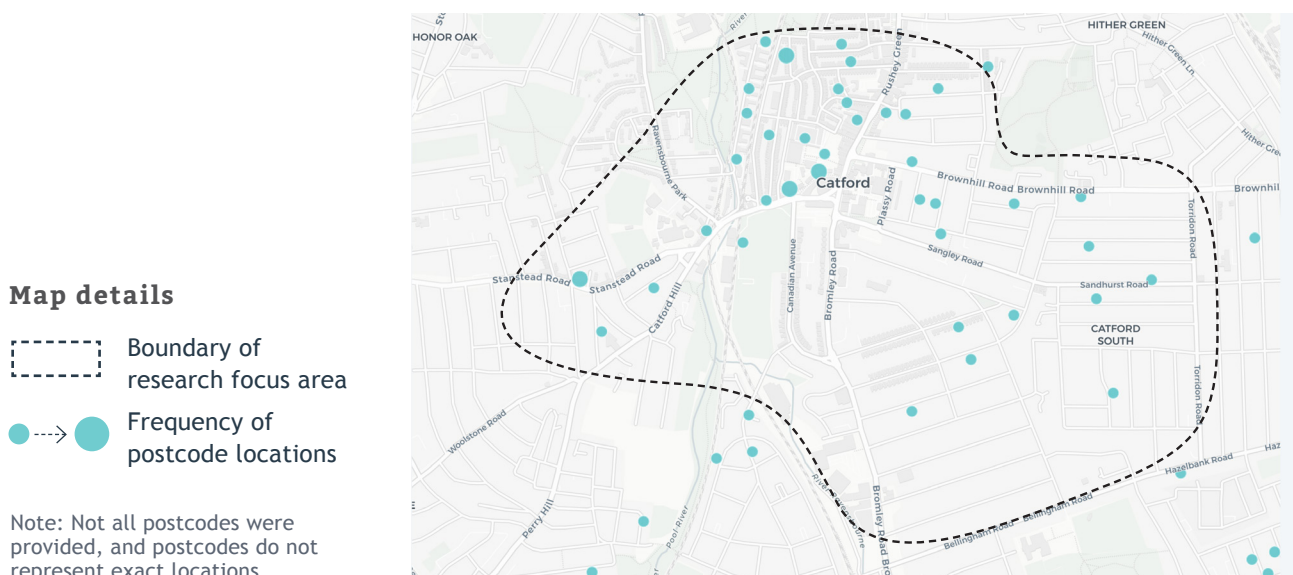
- There is a **rich ecosystem** of social infrastructure in and around Catford that supports the local community, from parks and community centres, to shops, cafes, barbers and the Broadway Theatre.
- In Catford, **formal social infrastructure** that offers free and accessible activities, such as community centres and libraries, are most successful in building relationships between people from different backgrounds. Informal spaces, like pubs and cafes in the town centre, are most important for supporting existing relationships.
- In this ecosystem, it is important to have both **inclusive and exclusive spaces** - more neutral spaces like Ladywell Fields and local GPs are open to all, while places like the Calabash Day Centre support particular groups, creating trusting relationships and networks of support.
- **Programming** is vital to social integration - activities with broad appeal like fitness classes or film screenings at Catford Mews encourage people from different backgrounds to mix; tailored activities like ESOL at The Point community centre and dementia-friendly groups at Corbett Community Library and Centre build confidence and social supports.
- **Change and regeneration** has brought new local businesses to the area - shops, bars and cafes. This can help make people new to the area feel at home but can undermine longer-standing residents' sense of belonging and generate perceptions of inequality.
- In Catford, **formal social infrastructure** counterbalances change, providing stability and a sense of community ownership. A number of council-owned community spaces are now in community management, like the Abbotshall Healthy Lifestyle Centre.
- The **COVID-19 pandemic** put unprecedented pressure on local social infrastructure and has exacerbated exclusion and inequality. Some community spaces rapidly adapted to closure, others stopped their activity.
- **Food solidarity** has been the driving force of new networks and the numbers of volunteers have increased, engaging people from a variety of backgrounds.
- However, many people have been **economically and socially vulnerable** through lockdown and there are concerns about the impact of the crisis on BAME communities. Businesses, agencies and community groups are worried that in the future they will face challenges on multiple fronts.

3. About the research

How we went about it

- We carried out **street interviews with 77 residents**, asking them about which local spaces they use, what they value locally, whether they participate in any groups or networks in the area, any barriers they face to accessing spaces, and how they perceive change locally. Respondents were over 18 and representative of the local population in terms of tenure, gender, ethnicity and age; however residents of black backgrounds were slightly under-represented and residents aged 30 to 64 slightly over-represented.
- We spoke with **nine local stakeholders**, including local residents, councillors, charities, businesses, Lewisham Council, and consultants developing the town centre masterplan, to build a better understanding of how social infrastructure is supporting residents, some of the challenges it faces and plans for regeneration.
- In late May and early June, we spoke with eight community representatives and local agencies about **the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown on their communities** and on the support they offer.
- **We spent time and spoke with people at three local spaces** - Ladywell Fields, Catford Mews, and Corbett Community Library and Centre - and observed the role of the Corbett Residents Association Facebook group, to gain a sense of how these social infrastructure sites and online social networks contribute towards social integration locally.
- We **held a workshop** bringing together 12 participants, including residents, representatives of local groups, charities and facilities, arts and cultural organisations, masterplan consultants, and local government to explore the role of social infrastructure and how it can better be supported in the future.

Research focus area and the postcodes of street interview respondents



4. About the area

Catford is the civic centre of the London Borough of Lewisham, with the Town Hall and council offices at its core. Catford's shopping centre is known for its concrete, Brutalist architecture and the Catford Cat sculpture. The Broadway Theatre, housed in a Grade II listed art deco building, proudly marks the intersection where the pedestrianised Catford Broadway - with its shops and traders - evolves into the busy high street. This central area offers residents a cluster of shops, cafes, restaurants, a library, cinema, theatre and other amenities.

Road and rail infrastructure both connect and dissect the area, creating easy routes into central London but making walking more difficult. The area has two train stations, Catford and Catford Bridge, and the south circular (A205) runs through the town centre.

“Within 15 minutes you can be in central London but in Catford it's a quiet space with lots of green and there's a community feel. It's peaceful.”

(Catford resident)

A wide range of residential property types are available in the surrounding areas, from low-rise Victorian terraces nestled away from the busy high streets to taller, modernist storey



Catford Broadway



New development, Catford Green

towers adjacent to the town centre and train stations. Two large green spaces - Ladywell Fields and Mountsfield Park - define the boundaries of the neighbourhood to the west and to the east.

Catford is a culturally diverse area, with over half its population from BAME backgrounds. It is home to one of the largest black Caribbean populations in London. From 2001 to 2011 there was a fall in the number of residents from white British backgrounds and an increase in people from mixed, other white, Asian and black ethnic backgrounds.¹ Residents describe distinct communities within Catford, few tensions are reported along ethnic or racial lines, and residents say that local diversity is one of the area's important attributes.

There are stark disparities in income among residents. Rushey Green ward, in the north of Catford, is among the 10 percent most deprived neighbourhoods in England and Wales.² This part of Catford has more social housing and private renting and higher levels of transience, compared to neighbouring areas to the south. While many residents in Catford are struggling on low incomes, rising housing costs highlight the attractiveness of the area for increasingly affluent residents. Many moving into the area are families with young children, often with professional jobs. Divisions of social class are slowly becoming more visible as local businesses change and respond to the shifting demographics.

“The crowd that come [to Ladywell Fields Park] hasn’t changed too much – it’s always been very diverse, but there are younger, more affluent families arriving. They don’t really interact with anyone they don’t know much besides smiles ...”

(Catford resident)

In spite of change, to date Catford has resisted wide-scale gentrification, and residents express pride in living in a preserved piece of London. However growth and change are planned. Lewisham Council is developing a masterplan framework to guide the regeneration of the town centre; the former greyhound stadium was recently developed into hundreds of new homes; and the proposed Bakerloo Line Extension will improve connections to the rest of London. These proposals have been met with both optimism and concern. There is excitement at the promise of new shops, restaurants and investment in the area but an awareness, and desire, to avoid negative consequences that would disproportionately affect or exclude longstanding and more vulnerable residents.

1. Census, 2011.

2. Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2019.

5. What we found

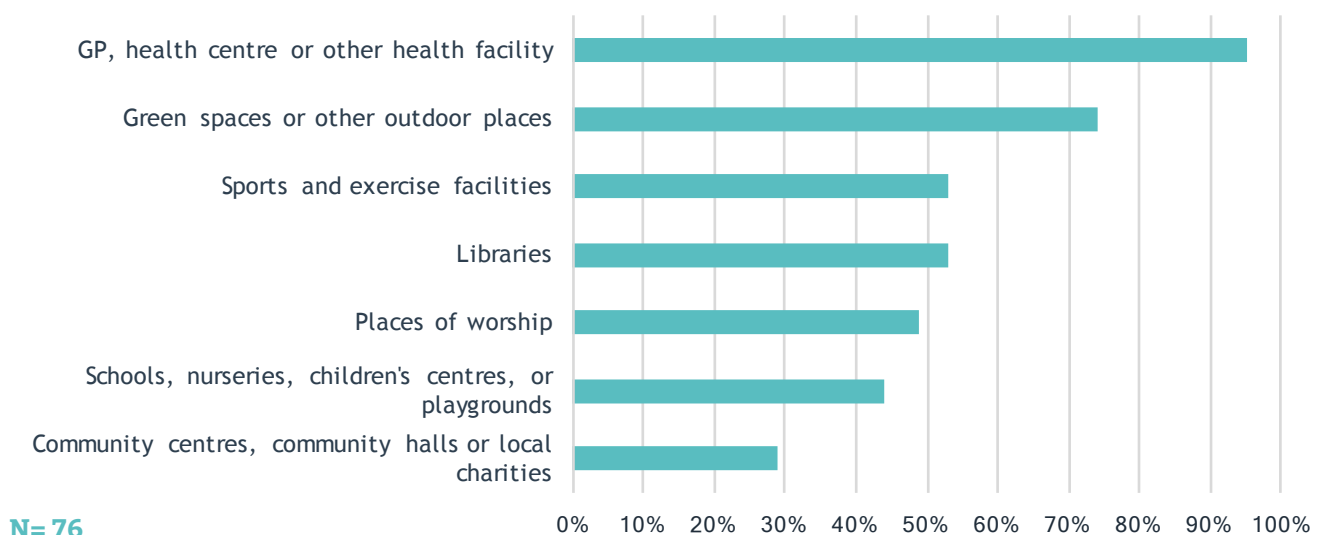
How people use and value spaces locally

GPs, health centres and other health facilities were the formal social infrastructure that was most widely used by the people who took part in street interviews, followed by green spaces. Similar to Surbiton and Homerton, Catford residents highlighted parks for their wellbeing benefits and the opportunities they offer for recreation, leisure and to connect with nature.

Over half of respondents had visited a local library in the past few months, including the Catford Library and Corbett Community Library. Over half of respondents had used sports and exercise facilities. Nearly half of respondents had attended faith spaces, which attract a higher proportion of BAME residents and are highly valued for both their social and spiritual dimensions. Nearly half the people interviewed had used children's facilities. Around 30 percent of respondents had also been to local community centres, which have the lowest numbers of users but widest reach across age, ethnicity and social class.

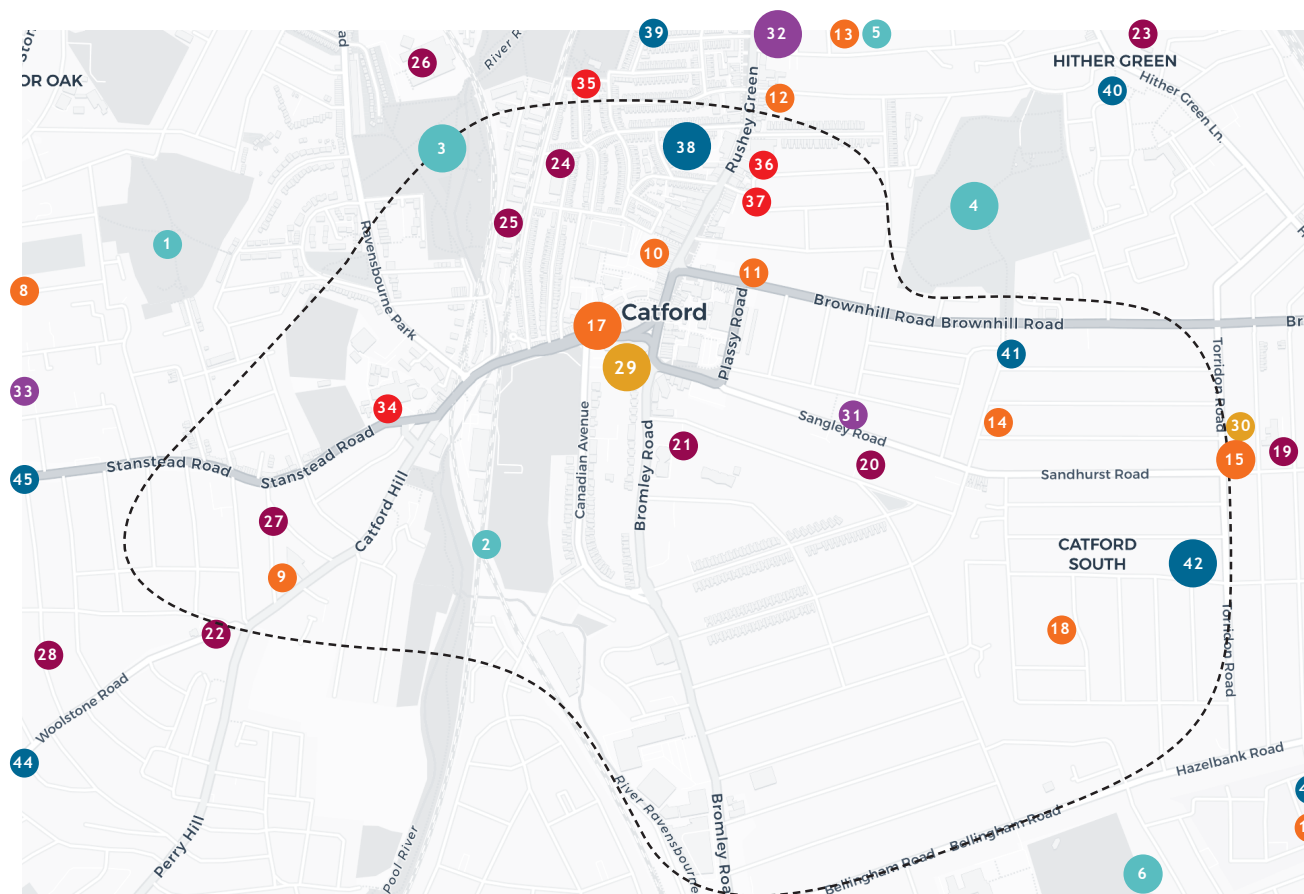
Across all types of social infrastructure, local businesses were the most valued by residents. Over a third of the people interviewed said that they were the most important place, for their “buzz” and spaces for socialising. Local facilities like community centres and hairdressers were most important for a quarter of people, followed by places of worship and green spaces. Frequency of use did not necessarily correspond to the value people place on local assets.

Which places have you gone to in your local area in the last few months?



Use of local spaces in and around Catford

This map shows the formal local spaces and facilities which street interview participants reported using in the past few months. The spaces used were spread across the town centre, high street and residential areas. Many children's facilities, community centres and parks were visited in neighbouring areas, including Forest Hill, Lewisham, and Hither Green.



Green and outdoor spaces

- 1 Blythe Hill Park
- 2 Riverview walk / river
- 3 Ladywell Fields
- 4 Mountsfield Park
- 5 Lewisham Park
- 6 Forster Memorial Park
- 7 Manor House Gardens

Community and charity spaces

- 8 Ackroyd Children & Families
- 9 Big Red Box
- 10 British Heart Foundation
- 11 Salvation Army
- 12 Lewisham Irish Centre
- 13 Salvation Army Older People Service
- 14 Catford Pentecostal Church
- 15 Corbett Community Library & Centre
- 16 Goldsmiths Community Centre
- 17 Broadway Theatre

Children's facilities

- 19 Sandhurst Primary School
- 20 Holy Cross Primary School
- 21 Rushey Green Primary School
- 22 Montessori Catford
- 23 Hither Green Primary School
- 24 Holbeach Primary School
- 25 Little Elms Daycare
- 26 Prendergast Ladywell School
- 27 Rathfern Primary School
- 28 Kilmore Primary School

Libraries

- 29 Catford Library
- 30 Corbett Community Library

Places of worship

- 31 Holy Cross RC Church
- 32 Lewisham Islamic Centre
- 33 Church of Saint William of York

Sports and exercise facilities

- 34 St Dunstons Leisure Centre
- 35 Ladywell Arena
- 36 Fitness 4 Less
- 37 Energie Fitness

Health facilities

- 38 Rushey Green Group Practice
- 39 University Hospital Lewisham
- 40 Woodlands Health Centre
- 41 Parkview Surgery Healthcare
- 42 Torridon Road Medical Practice
- 43 Boundfield Road Medical Centre
- 44 Woolstone Medical Centre
- 45 Jenner Practice

Map details

Boundary of research focus area

Frequency of mentions

Number of respondents = 77

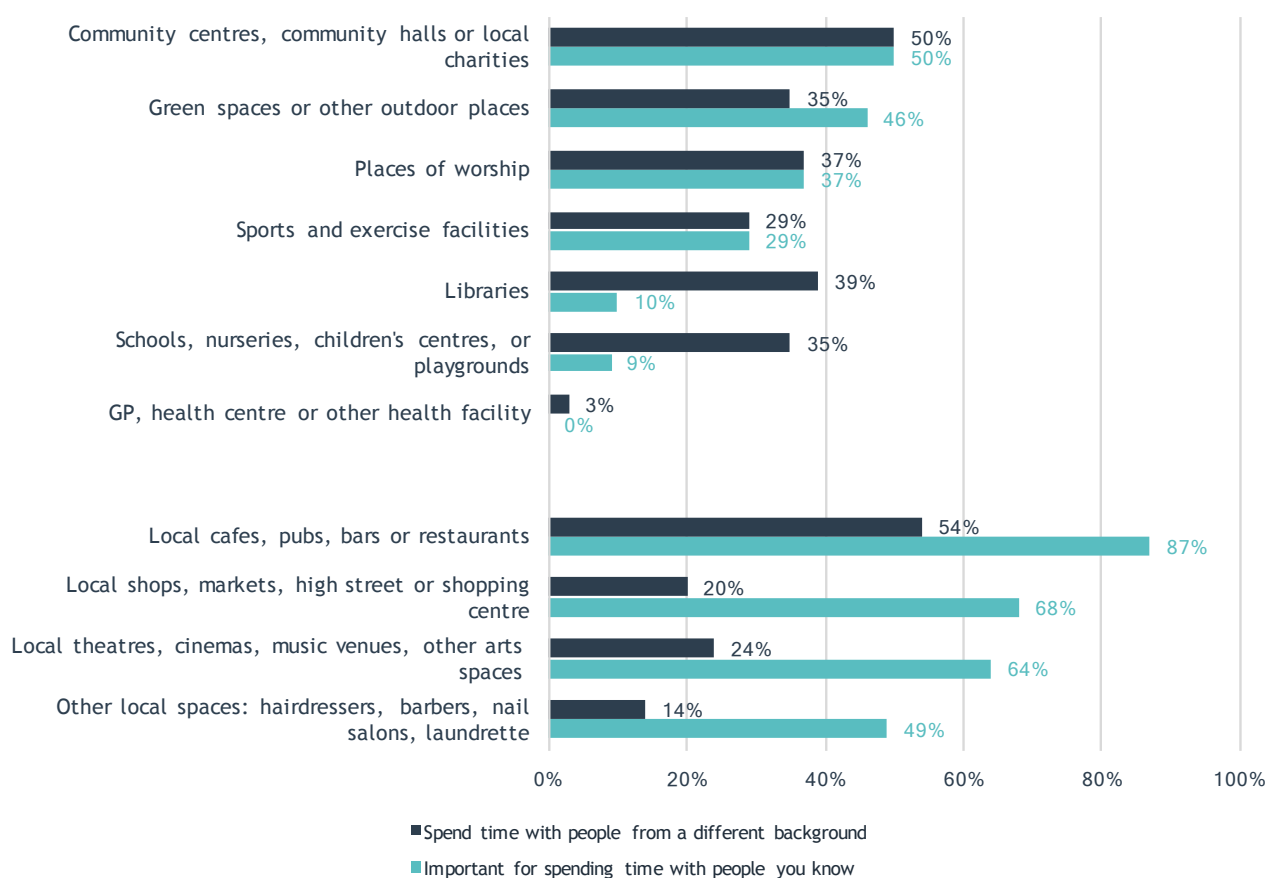
Relationships

Different types of high street businesses play a strong role in supporting relationships locally. 87 percent of the people interviewed said that food and drink establishments are important for spending time with people they know. They were also described as important for spending time with people from different backgrounds.

Catford is a very diverse area and some people described local businesses as spaces for social mixing through “co-presence”, people spending time in each others’ company without direct contact, rather than planned, more meaningful connections.

Some also reported that when mixing occurs in cafes and restaurants, it tends to be between people from different ethnic but not socio-economic backgrounds, and that many places and businesses are associated with a particular social class. High street brands tended to attract the widest cross-section of customers compared to independent stores, which were seen as serving particular groups.

The importance of local places for relationships



For question ‘spending time with people from a different background’, N=77 for formal, and N=59 for informal. For question ‘spending time with people you know’, N=77 for formal, and n=77 for informal.

“[This cafe] feels like a place for my demographic...
gathering place for my tribe: young and educated.”

(Catford resident)

For two thirds of the people interviewed, local shops, markets, theatres, cinemas and arts spaces were also important places to spend time with people they know, but less important for spending time with people from different backgrounds.

More formal types of social infrastructure, like community centres, places of worship, and sports facilities were used by fewer people than local businesses, but tended to play a stronger role in social mixing. Libraries and children’s facilities were considered more important for spending time with people from a different background than spending time with friends or family. The most mixing across social groups appears to take place between children, who are heavy users of formal social infrastructure - from playgrounds to playgroups. Children are recognised in wider literature as “equalisers” who interact across difference. Educational and play activities designed for children often double as social supports for parents and carers, and are particularly important in combating social isolation.

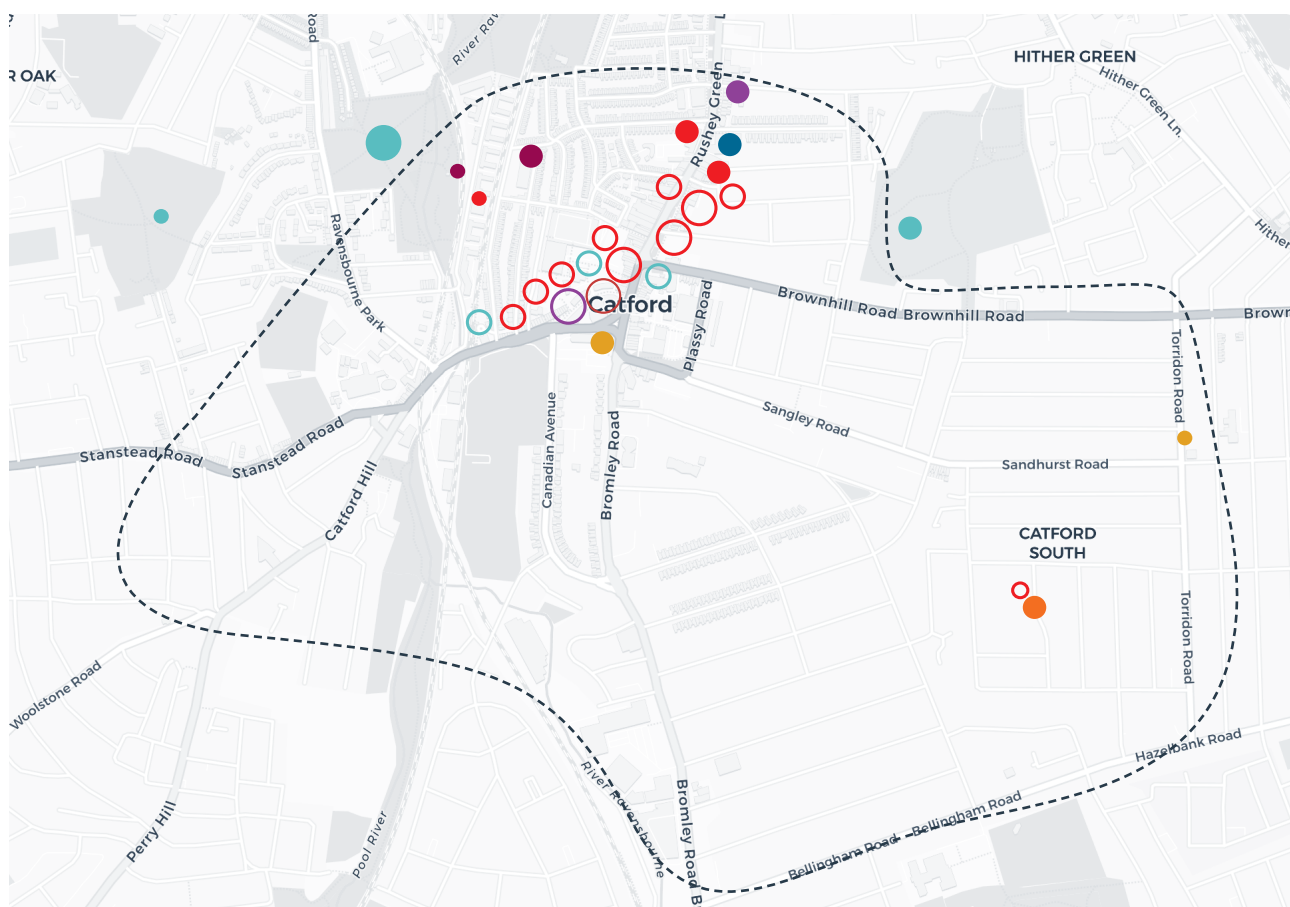
These findings highlight the importance of statutory services, free spaces and formal provision in bridging divides. However, the role of different facilities in supporting relationships varies. Community centres tended to have the strongest role in this, while health facilities play the weakest role.



Catford Broadway

Local places where people from different backgrounds meet in Catford

This map highlights the formal and informal local spaces which street interview participants reported spending time with people from a different background to them. It highlights the important role of parks and local businesses in the town centre and along the high street.



Map details

- Boundary of research focus area
- Frequency of mentions

Number of respondents:

Formal social infrastructure = 77
Informal social infrastructure = 59

Formal social infrastructure

- Green and outdoor spaces
- Community and charity spaces
- Children's facilities
- Libraries
- Places of worship
- Sports and exercise facilities
- Health facilities

Informal social infrastructure

- Bars, restaurants and cafes
- Shops, markets, high-street uses
- Art and cultural venues
- Other

Participation

Many local spaces offer opportunities for volunteering and active participation, from church events, to tenants' and residents' associations (TRAs), to helping out at a park run. Among street interview respondents, 31 percent reported helping out, helping run or volunteering in spaces locally, mainly through community centres, charities and faith spaces. Some neighbourhoods within Catford are particularly well organised with high levels of participation in local initiatives. For example, residents of the

Corbett Estate help run two facilities, the Abbotshall Healthy Lifestyle Centre and the Corbett Community Library and Centre.

21 percent of respondents were involved in other local groups or clubs like TRAs, parent support groups and groups focused around hobbies. Participation in these groups was often enabled by community networks, with around a third getting involved through their friends and family, a quarter through neighbours.

Lack of time was reported to be the key barrier to participation and use of local spaces, particularly among families with younger children and people working long hours. Cost is also a barrier, with some people noting that even free activities are unaffordable because of the cost of public transport.

“There are too few places to support people on lower incomes. Austerity is hurting people. Wasn’t like this before. Can’t afford to even buy food or pay bills.”

(Catford resident)

In Catford, as a result of austerity, many facilities which were once council-owned are now managed and run by volunteers. Some of these community spaces face a difficult balancing act between ensuring spaces are inclusive and being financially sustainable. Volunteering can be dominated by people with strong social networks, social capital and personal resources (including time and housing security). This can reduce participation by people from less affluent communities and means that there are more volunteers available to agencies in the more affluent parts of the area.

Despite these concerns, participation was shown to be an effective bridge between different groups. 87 percent of people interviewed who took part in local groups or networks had got to know people from different backgrounds as a result of their involvement. Participation was seen as an opportunity for people to build local social networks and confidence to engage in more formal commitments. Capacity-building and supporting and training volunteers was seen as a critical part of this. Community groups highlighted the need for a better understanding of crossovers between local groups, better coordination of resources, and efforts to more evenly distribute the local volunteering community across Catford.

Participation in governance, and in engagement and consultation, was also noted to be skewed. Groups with less resources tend to be under-represented; this includes some BAME groups. Some stakeholders highlighted that strategies for engagement must be long-term to build trust and relationships with all the different communities living in Catford.

Equality

Formal social infrastructure provides the direct services or referrals people need to access support, including crisis services. In Catford, this role is often filled by faith spaces who support some of the most vulnerable community members, through food banks and safe spaces for worship. Children's facilities and community centres play an important role in identifying families, children and young people who may be vulnerable and linking them into wider networks of support, not just in Catford but across Lewisham.

Some social infrastructure is there for the community to turn to for help and advice if they have a problem. In Catford, GPs surgeries and places of worship are important sources of help. Community centres, local charities and children's facilities play a smaller role, as do local businesses and informal spaces. Although libraries are often considered important in accessing information, only a few people reported they would use them for help or advice. However, visits to some of these venues confirmed the role they can play in giving advice and support.

Beyond formal provision and referral routes, the networks created through social infrastructure also bolster the informal acts of support upon which many residents depend. For example, members of the Corbett Residents Association Facebook group use the online forum as a constant source of information sharing, help and advice. Volunteers at the Corbett Community Library and Centre check up on their vulnerable neighbours if they fail to attend their regularly scheduled activities.

Local businesses can play a role both in addressing or reinforcing a sense of inequality. Some cafes and shops donate food, drink and time to support local causes and events. Other businesses



Catford Mews

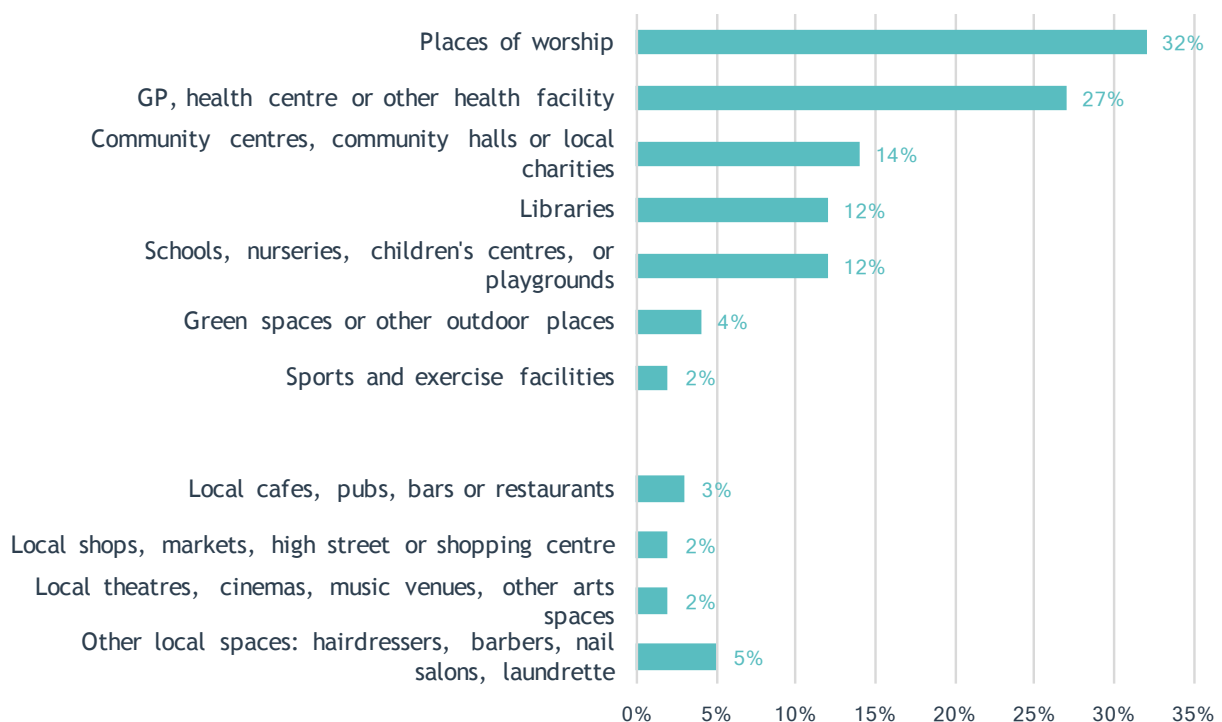
offer discounts to hard-up regulars - high degrees of trust and familiarity between customers and staff form the basis for many of these acts of support. This is possible because many business owners are local, employing staff from the local area. Their role in the community can extend beyond the business premises.

For many people interviewed, however, changes in businesses - including the arrival of new shops, cafes, pubs or restaurants and the departure of older establishments - are the most noted symptom of neighbourhood change. Many residents and stakeholders discussed how more change was coming to the area with future regeneration. Some saw this as an opportunity to make improvements, explaining how the current retail sector did not currently reflect the resources and aspirations of the local community. Regeneration of informal social infrastructure, particularly commercial spaces, was seen as a way to address this mismatch. Others felt change would price them out of the area.

“The idea [for Catford Mews] was to bring the heart back into the high street. We don’t think the high street is dead. It’s just that people are approaching it the wrong way. We think that if you engage with the community and understand what people want, and offer a space which is tailored and flexible to meet changing needs, then it can work.”

(Local stakeholder)

Where residents go for help and advice



N=77 for formal, and N=59 for informal.

Resilience

In Catford, the COVID-19 pandemic put unprecedented pressure on local social infrastructure and exacerbated different forms of exclusion and inequality.

The voluntary sector and council coordinated their efforts. Lewisham Council were clear at the start of lockdown that they wanted to support a community-led response to the pandemic, building on the strong relationship that already existed between the council and the voluntary sector through their grants programme. Lewisham Local, a partnership of local organisations hosted by Rushey Green Timebank, had been set up to encourage community-led development. This became a key platform for coordinating the response.

Some community spaces rapidly adapted to closure, finding new ways to connect with their users in spite of physical distance. Other spaces could not keep their activities going and stopped all activity. This included vital social spaces like sports facilities and meeting places like barber shops that were important for specific communities. The owner of Progress Barbers had no income and received no support to help pay the rent, but in spite of this set up an informal food bank in his space, working with Fair Share, distributors of wasted food.

With many facilities closed, outreach and outdoor public spaces became effective places to organise hyper-local support. The Corbett Community Library and Centre started speaking to their library users on the street and on doorsteps as these chats could no longer happen inside the library.

There was increased pooling of resources between residents through borrowing and bartering, and between local businesses and community spaces.

“It’s been wonderful to see how local projects are learning from one another and sharing resources.”

(Local stakeholder)

The immediate vulnerabilities of local residents and local key workers were addressed through food solidarity. This was the driving force of most new networks that emerged to source, pack and deliver food to those in need.

From mid-March onwards, the focus of Rushey Green Timebank and Foodcycle Catford became the Lewisham Local Hub - centred around getting people involved in distributing food, and supporting local businesses. This was based in the Lewisham Irish Community Centre. They worked seven days a week to deliver emergency food parcels.

Online platforms became a key space for rapidly organising responses, sharing information about the crisis and signposting. They were valuable in maintaining connections between residents, services and supports.

Volunteering created new relationships between people who did not previously know each other and also between people from different backgrounds.

“I’ve seen him around but I don’t really know him, and now I do!”

(Local stakeholder)

Some residents were affected much more than others, particularly those isolating alone, older people and people in precarious living situations. This included many migrants. For some people, the shift to online spaces to access support has become an additional barrier.

“If you’re living alone with a disability in council housing, your mental health is going to go through the mill.”

(Local stakeholder)

There is a strong feeling among stakeholders that the crisis brought different communities together and that new interactions supported social integration. However, tensions also increased as inequalities have been exacerbated. In Catford, BAME communities living in the area are economically vulnerable, and became increasingly concerned as knowledge emerged about the particular impact of COVID-19 on the health of BAME communities.

Many spaces were already struggling financially before the crisis and this hindered their ability to respond. It also made them concerned about the future. Many community organisations and hospitality businesses in Catford report feeling anxious and concerned about the future, worrying that there will be challenges to face on multiple fronts.



The Catford Cat

6. Profiles of local spaces

We visited three places in the area, and observed the Facebook group to find out how they contribute to social integration and the lessons that can be learnt from them.

Ladywell Fields



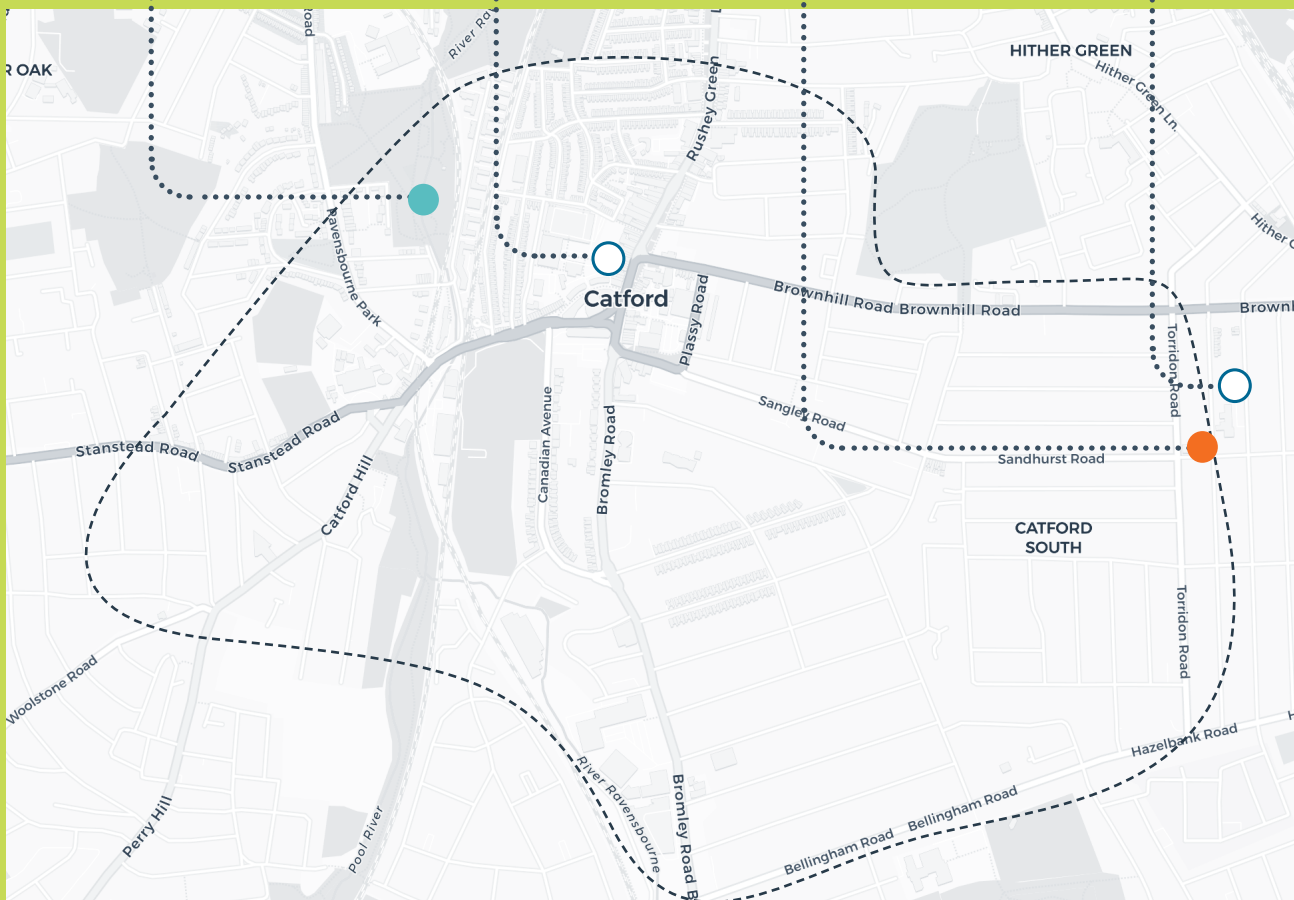
Catford Mews



Corbett Community Library and Centre



Corbett Residents Association Facebook group



Formal social infrastructure

- Community and charity spaces
- Green and outdoor spaces

Informal social infrastructure

- Bars, restaurants and cafes
- Other



Corbett Community Library and Centre

About

Two local groups - The Archibald Corbett Society and Corbett Residents Association - formed a charity in order to take over the management of a council-owned and managed library. They have expanded the programming of the library to transform the space into a community hub to benefit residents living in the surrounding area.

The centre offers a wide variety of drop-in activities, from music and movement sessions for families, to dementia support groups, education including ESOL (English as a Second Language) classes and online support. They work with outside organisations to provide health visitor check-ups, after school clubs and community events like concerts and food markets. The centre is almost entirely volunteer-run, apart from two part-time staff whose roles are supported through the National Lottery Community Fund.

How does it support social integration?

The Centre was founded to support residents' social welfare and health and wellbeing, and it has become important in building a strong local network. Activities are free and open access, and



Super Volunteer Awards



Photo Courtesy of Google Street View

while donations are encouraged, users are not obliged to give money. Staff continuously look for new partnerships and activities to reflect the interests of the local community. They also signpost to a range of organisations. Volunteers are given formal training, which helps individuals build skills and confidence and provides pathways to other roles in the community. Given most of the volunteers live nearby, they also act as sources of local knowledge and support.

**“It’s nice to give something back to the community...
I like to teach, in fact I love teaching.”**

(Volunteer instructor)

Lessons

This space exemplifies how strong, well organised communities have the power to save social infrastructure in the face of austerity, but also shows how these organisations can struggle to be financially sustainable, relying heavily on volunteers, grants, donations and the constant need to generate new streams of income.

A wide range of free services which are tailored to the interests of the local community ensure community spaces are inclusive, accessible and open to all.

Partnerships with other organisations are important for diversifying activities and support services, as well as expanding signposting and referrals.

Experimenting with events like markets, concerts and film screenings outside normal operating hours can help agencies find inventive ways to generate income to cross-subsidise their core activities. For example the Centre has run a profitable, licensed bar at evening events, with local businesses supplying refreshments at cost price.



Ladywell Fields

About

Ladywell Fields is a public park made up of three fields, next to the River Ravensbourne, which together create a linear park, nearly a mile long, from Catford Bridge station in the south to Ladywell station in the north. A cycle route (part of the Waterlink Way) and walking paths connect the fields.

There is a range of amenities, including a cafe, tennis courts, skate park, playing fields, playgrounds, community orchard and nature reserve, with an area of the river open for dipping and paddling.

The Friends of Ladywell Fields group represent the interests of park users in dealings with Lewisham Council, Glendale (the Council's parks contractor) and the police, as well as arranging volunteering in the park.

How does it support social integration?

Ladywell Fields borders neighbourhoods which fall into the 10 percent most deprived in the country, to the 30 percent least deprived. Entrance to the park is free and unmonitored, with a



wide variety of publicly accessible amenities open to everyone, irrespective of socio-economic status, ethnic background, age or personal circumstances. Open spaces give people the opportunity for relaxed interaction. Repeated visual connections and simple, positive interactions help build shared experiences and encourages mixing of people of all ages and backgrounds.

“Sorry he’s like a delinquent child!” – says one woman, as apology for her dog’s behaviour

Lessons

Open access green spaces play an important role in improving the quality of life and building more inclusive communities, providing therapeutic benefits of quiet time in nature as well as a neutral place to meet and bond over shared interests.

People on low incomes or in poor health often find it difficult to travel far from home so the availability of good quality green spaces in areas of high deprivation is important to ensure more equal access to nature.

Physical links with Lewisham Hospital provide opportunities to develop health and wellbeing activities.

Active citizens and volunteers play a key role in park maintenance and development, which in turn creates higher quality, community-owned spaces.

(Catford resident)



Catford Mews

About

Catford Mews is a cultural venue and community space that has been opened in the Catford shopping centre by the Really Local Group. The multi-functional space includes a three-screen cinema, live music venue, a bar, cafe, stalls for local food vendors, and rooms for community hire. The space was previously occupied by Poundland, and before that was a marketplace for local traders - the original “Catford Mews”. The name and the design pay tribute to its heritage.



How does it support social integration?

Catford Mews was born out of conversations with local residents and stakeholders. Really Local Group's founder carried out engagement with the local community before opening and worked with local groups to understand what residents wanted, what was missing and how to set up a tailored space and service, not a pre-prepared concept.

From the early planning stages, Really Local Group aimed to create an inclusive space through design and accessibility. The space now is large, open and multi-functional; it provides small businesses and aspiring artists with a platform to test ideas; and cinema tickets are cheaper than other local cinemas. Catford Mews works with local groups to encourage wider community use.

“We’ve been given a chance and it’s exposure too.”

(Catford food vendor)

Lessons

Community engagement can help commercial businesses tailor services to a local area.

Commercial viability can conflict with the ability to create a space which feels community-owned and accessible to all - these community-oriented principles must be built in at the onset.

Local community groups and leaders are important gatekeepers. Working with them on events and offering members discounted ticket prices or room hire can successfully engage a wider cross-section of people who may not otherwise participate.

Light-touch social interactions happen regularly in informal spaces, however events can build shared experiences and more meaningful interactions between people from different backgrounds.



Photo courtesy of Google Street View.

About

In Catford there are numerous online forums, groups and informal social networks that help residents to meet their neighbours, learn more about their communities, and participate in local civic life. The Corbett Residents Association Facebook group has enabled the Corbett Residents Association to broaden its membership, widen its functions and generate broad-based local participation.

The forum is reserved for residents (and local businesses), and there are over 3,000 Facebook group members. The online space facilitates interaction between neighbours and is a platform for people to organise community events and skills swaps, ask for and offer advice or support, and discuss local issues.

How does it support social integration?

The informal nature of the Facebook group makes people feel welcome, with high levels of participation. On some days there are up to 100 posts. Shared postcodes and geographical proximity create commonality, which encourages a sense of camaraderie, trust and openness within the group.

Membership is free but a yearly £5.00 voluntary donation for each household is encouraged, and vital in supporting the activities and administrative costs.

Lessons

Online forums can promote interactions and build local relationships, extending beyond the digital into the physical world.

Private groups, based on a shared interest, can encourage openness, increased use and more candid discussions among members. However they are by nature exclusive and not open to all.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the greater importance of digital technologies in reducing social isolation and building local community networks. It also however highlights the importance of digital inclusion.

Online social networks and groups are an important element of an area's informal social infrastructure.

7. Creating successful social infrastructure

In this section we draw together lessons learnt from Catford and our wider research, illustrating how social infrastructure can successfully support social integration.

1. Build an understanding of the local social infrastructure ecosystem and support connections within it.

At a neighbourhood level, social infrastructure should be understood as a dynamic and complex ecosystem, a mix of spaces, facilities, groups and networks. These systems will vary significantly from place to place, individual spaces and groups will take on different roles and host unique sets of relationships. There is evidence in Catford of strong links between informal spaces like pubs, cafes and shops and formal social infrastructure. For example, the Corbett Community Library and Centre is building partnerships with local businesses to put on events outside their regular operating hours, generating additional income to subsidise their core activities.

A dense web of connections is vital to the health and success of the system as a whole. While many organisations in Catford are well-connected, some voiced the need for greater coordination through more formalised partnerships like Lewisham Connections to help them work together, share expertise and learning, and build capacity among volunteers.

The Lewisham Connections partnership is made up of six organisations with different expertise but a shared vision to improve and expand services for vulnerable adults in Lewisham. Partners include Age UK Lewisham and Southwark, Carers Lewisham, Lewisham Speaking Up, Rushey Green Time Bank, Voluntary Action Lewisham and Voluntary Services Lewisham.

This highlights the importance of a properly resourced community connector, and individuals or organisations able to play this role, to identify and address gaps and opportunities over the long-term.

Action

Mapping local social infrastructure can identify informal provision and local networks. This can help understand what is supporting the community, help channel funding and investment to where it is most effective, and help protect existing assets, formal and informal, that may be put under threat in the future. Local agencies and the council are well positioned to take this forward.

2. Recognise, value and support the contribution of individuals.

Individuals are key connectors within the ecosystem. In Catford, many activists, dedicated volunteers and passionate individuals work within local groups to drive activities which animate local spaces. They push for improvements or greater community ownership of social infrastructure, share information and coordinate local action.

Individual workers and activists are central to the way that local spaces contribute to social integration. They create a welcoming atmosphere, facilitate interactions, build trusting relationships with users, and provide personalised signposting. In Catford, many volunteer-run spaces are supported by staff members and volunteers that have been in post, and involved locally, for a long time. Some local businesses prioritise employing people with strong local connections. This helps build social networks that connect them to wider neighbourhoods.

Catford traders and businesses serving minority ethnic communities often provide support beyond their primary business purpose. One Eastern European shop owner had been asked by the council to be an informal source of help and advice, helping customers fill in forms and navigate the bureaucracy required by EU citizens living in the UK after Brexit.

Action

Local community organisations and agencies should acknowledge and value volunteers, staff and activists who make particular contributions to social integration and community relationships. The effort made to support local relationships should be made visible to encourage others to work in this way.

3. Ensure change is carefully managed.

Change generates challenges and opportunities for social infrastructure. While regeneration can bring opportunity to residents and improve choice, community ownership and sense of belonging can be lost in the process. It is important to safeguard a balance of businesses and organisations that cater to different sections of the community and to make sure that everyone can access the products and services they need in the local area.

Physical improvements should be supported by strong and ongoing community engagement, involving long-standing and new residents. Team Catford performs a broad role locally, from organising consultation around the Catford town centre masterplan to meanwhile projects - from pop-up shops to free film screenings. These have helped promote Catford's identity and its residents' sense of pride in the area. Their free, community-wide events have been important for social mixing. However more meaningful relationships will be helped by recurring events over the long-term. It will be important for Lewisham Council to continue their detailed involvement after the masterplan is complete.

Commercial change is central to residents' perceptions of their local area, and affordability and perceptions of belonging are often closely entangled. The preservation of existing formal social infrastructure, and the focus on the local, can act as a counterbalance to change, providing a sense of stability and community ownership.

Involvement in the local community can be a platform for bridging across difference, bringing together community members who might not otherwise meet. This is important as new residents move into Catford. Rushey Green Time Bank reported that they are being contacted increasingly by people living in the new housing developments who are keen to build links with the area.

Action

Venues or facilities going through change, and agencies managing change, should audit social integration in the area, assess how this could be affected by change, and put mitigating measures in place to limit any negative impacts.

4. Balance inclusiveness against the ability of spaces, groups or activities to effectively support individuals.

Social integration suggests the need for inclusive spaces bringing together diverse groups, but this research also shows the important role of spaces and activities for particular groups. The Calabash Day Centre provides a dedicated adult day centre for the older members of the black community in Lewisham. It serves a small section of the community, acting as an important social support. The proposal to merge the centre with two other older people's centres in Lewisham has been contested, highlighting how it is valued by the community it serves.

The Corbett Community Library and Centre aims to balance inclusiveness and exclusiveness through its programming. The building is open access but its classes, like ESOL, and dementia support groups are very targeted. These classes are successful at building connections across backgrounds - highlighting the importance of shared experience as a basis for building relationships.

Many informal networks are also grounded in shared interests - from sports to residents groups - and are effective because of the mutual understanding this creates. Informal spaces - such as barbershops or cafes - can be an important resource to individuals, often catering to people from particular backgrounds.

Agencies and community groups must balance the need for programming and support that brings together people from different backgrounds, and support for particular groups. More targeted activities can become routes into other more inclusive activities or spaces.

Action

Spaces and places should assess how their activities support relationships between people from different backgrounds, and between people from the same background, and find an appropriate balance between these two outcomes (recognising that this will vary in different areas).

5. Animate and realise the potential of existing spaces.

The softer aspects of programming, facilitation and activities, and how they are used by local groups and networks, helps them realise their social integration potential. Without these relationships, spaces on their own are unable to build social integration.

In general, social infrastructure in Catford was seen as adequate, apart from supports for young people. The challenge is keeping existing spaces operating in the face of scarce funding. Community-managed spaces often run on precarious operating budgets, heavily dependent on volunteers, charitable donations and grants for survival.

Short-term projects, a lack of core funding, complex applications, and excessive monitoring requirements, are all felt to undermine the capacity of groups to fully achieve their ambitions, which can undermine social integration. It was noted during our workshop that it is not only the availability of funding but the accessibility and type of funding as well. Local funding can be useful because it validates small organisations in the eyes of external funders.

“Have enough facilities. What we need is FUNDING for the existing community spaces!”

(Catford resident)

Some community assets are underused, it was noted that Catford’s faith spaces and schools could play a bigger role by opening up their halls and sports facilities for wider community use.

Action

Community groups should develop a range of different activities for different groups in their programming. The council can support this through capacity-building and planning, bringing together local actors and creating forums for collaboration, information-sharing and accessing external funding.

Useful information

All of us: the Mayor's strategy for social integration, 2018

https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/final_social_integration_strategy.pdf

Good Growth by Design programme

<https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/regeneration/advice-and-guidance/about-good-growth-design>

New London Plan

<https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/planning/london-plan/new-london-plan/what-new-london-plan>

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