

Downham community health research

A pilot study

September 2022



This report describes the findings of a community research project carried out by Social Life, Downham Dividend Society CLT and Downham residents between March and June 2022.

More about this research is on our website, http://www.social-life.co/project/downham_community_research/

We would like to thank the residents who shared their knowledge, hopes and concerns with us. We are grateful for their expertise and the time they put into this work and hope the report will help bring about the changes they would like to see in their local areas. The report was written by Olimpia Mosteanu with contributions from Nicola Bacon, Izzy Gibbin and the residents who shared their views about Downham with us.

Research team: Nicola Bacon, Tony Fairclough, Izzy Gibbin, Olimpia Mosteanu, Tim Oshodi, Janine Zapple.

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<https://www.facebook.com/downhamhealththroughsport/>
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Sevenfields Primary Care Network (PCN) is a group of six local General Practices working together to improve health and wellbeing for our patients. As well as providing the best medical care we can we aim to encourage health promotion and work with our community, the council and voluntary sector to establish and promote activities that themselves improve health hence commissioning this important report and installing four outdoor gyms in our local parks and greens.

<https://www.sevenfieldspcn.nhs.uk>

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1 Research approach

This report summarises the findings of the community research pilot carried out by Social Life and Downham Dividend Society Community Land Trust between March and June 2022. We worked with Downham residents to identify local strengths and needs. The research was commissioned by Sevenfields Primary Care Network.

1.1 About this community research project pilot

Downham is an area of Lewisham that is recognised as facing challenges, particularly long-term underfunding. Downham has a diverse population, but community relations have been complicated over the years. There is awareness among local activists that Downham has received less investment than parts of the borough to the north. Deprivation, measured by the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, is high in Downham, and the number of children living in poverty is high as well. Parts of Downham fall into the Bromley council area, deprivation here is less pressing than on the Lewisham side.

The community research had two main goals: to train and support residents to carry out research, and to understand what is supporting and undermining health and wellbeing in Downham. The lived experience of the residents who were trained as researchers made it easier to connect with communities and helped the team identify local issues that matter to people living in and around the area. Community researchers were involved in all the stages of the research. This helped researchers feel ownership over the research process, which helped their confidence and trust in their abilities as well as developing skills and wider social networks.

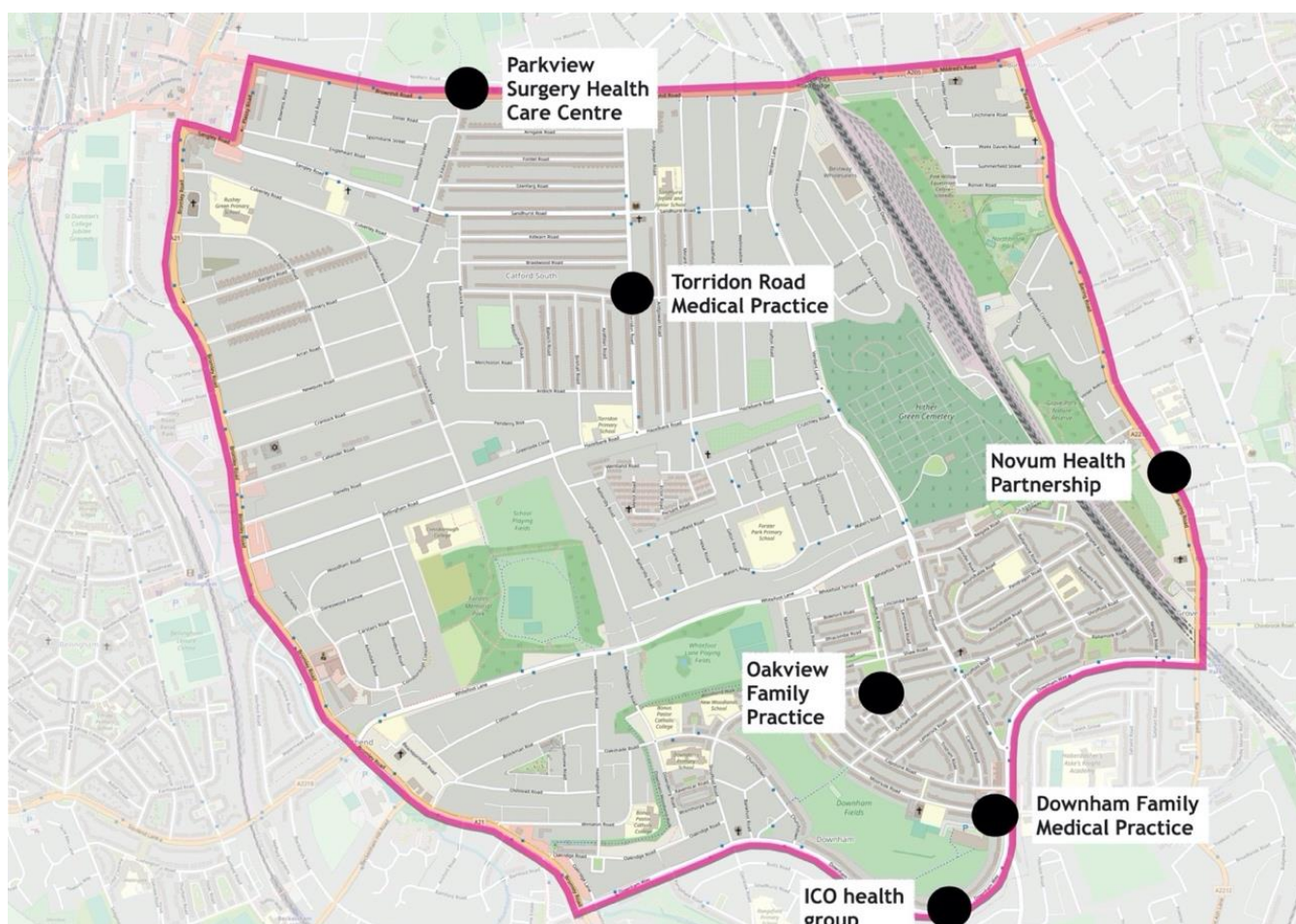
The community research pilot showed that

- 1. Parks and green spaces are key local assets.** They are valued for their positive impact on physical health and wellbeing. Parks are seen as good and affordable spaces for families and children.
- 2. Residents would like to see better amenities in parks** such as toilets, outdoor gym equipment and water fountains, and more community events.
- 3. Local amenities and events need to be low-cost and, ideally, free for those who cannot afford the cost.** Amenities and events need to be accessible to people with different needs, and accommodate people with reduced mobility, those who need work-friendly hours or on-site childcare provision.
- 4. Many residents appreciated their relationships with neighbours, felt at home in their communities, and valued their ties and connections across the local area.**
- 5. More community activities and venues are needed.** Locals noted that some groups are particularly underserved at the moment, including children, young people, older people, and vulnerable groups (especially those experiencing mental issues).
- 6. The lack of information about what is available in the area is a key challenge for Downham residents.**

Recently, the Lewisham African Caribbean Health Inequalities Review has set out a number of research and evidence gaps. It shows the need for more research “to help to address knowledge gaps across the themes and...help identify the most effective culturally sensitive interventions to address health inequalities affecting Black African and Black Caribbean populations”. The review identifies 39 opportunities for place-based action - from early years services to education, youth provision, and wellbeing. Successful implementation of these actions depends on a detailed understanding of local neighbourhoods, support ecosystems and relationships between various local groups.

Like the approach championed by the Lewisham African Caribbean Health Inequalities Review, this community research pilot recognised the importance of existing relationships and local partnerships, and it took a place-based approach. The trust built over time between Sevenfields Primary Care Network and Downham Dividend Society Community Land Trust ensured the success of this pilot. Working in partnership with residents to co-produce research tools and approaches to data collection that reflect place-based needs takes time and substantial effort¹. Existing working relationships, however, played a key role in making sure that the research could remain flexible and responsive to the challenges raised by the context in which our work took place. Even with these relationships in place, it took partners 18 months to put the project together. Place-based community research projects need time and commitment to build the partnerships needed to sustain them. Dr. Helen Tattersfield’s long-term commitment to Downham was key to this approach.

The community research took place close to local community centres and Sevenfields GPs



¹ This has been flagged by a range of community research projects, and it was well-documented by many of the peer / community researchers who participated in the [peer research conference](#) organised by the Young Foundation in March 2022.

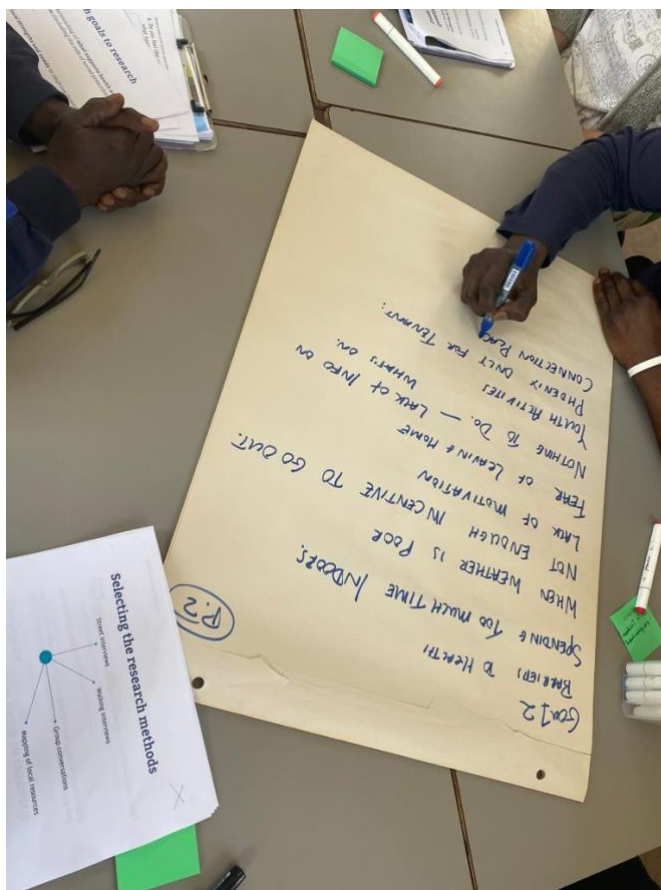
Downham Dividend Society Community Land Trust played a key role in bridging between different groups locally and provided insight into existing networks of support. This way of working made sure that the community research pilot connected with people who were already working to improve their local communities. The approach has also tried to establish new partnerships between local mutual aid networks, researchers, and commissioners who are interested in supporting health and wellbeing.

The community research took place near community centres and GPs part of Sevenfields Primary Care Network. These included Parkview Surgery Health Care Centre, Torridon Road Medical Practice, Novum Health Partnership, Oakview Family Practice, Downham Family Medical Practice, and ICO Health Group.

Social Life and Downham Dividend Society Community Land Trust invited over 25 local people to take part in the research training sessions, which took place in March 2022. The goal was to work with people who were already active in their local communities as volunteers and activists, who were interested in learning more about social research. In February and March, we also worked with local social prescribing partners to recruit some of their users to become part of the research team. Because of outreach barriers such as lack of time and resources no social prescribing users were able to join the research training.

The Downham research team included three people, who were employed as researchers. They came from different backgrounds and brought their own lived experiences to the work. Sustained engagement was needed to build up their confidence and the skills needed to carry out research. This engagement work was integral to the project, and to meeting the goals set up for this community research pilot, including that of supporting people to become more aware of the value of their participation in local initiatives. Several other people were keen to be involved in the project but, in the end, could not join. For some this was because of lack of confidence, anxiety, lack of childcare, and the fast-paced project timescale. Poverty and lack of time were both key barriers to participation.

The training sessions allowed us to learn from each other and co-produce the research approach



1.2 Methods

The research used a combination of methods to make sure that people from a wide range of backgrounds took part. This allowed the researchers to gain a detailed understanding of what supports the health and wellbeing of Downham residents, and the challenges they are facing.

The mix of methods also allowed the team to build on the skills and interests of the residents who were trained to carry out the research. This pilot did not aim to gather data that would be representative of the Downham population. Instead, it tried to provide a detailed initial account of the factors that impact on health and wellbeing locally. This was done by identifying the themes that cut across individual experiences and the in-depth accounts we heard.

We hope future work will develop this pilot to capture an even wider range of local voices and further evidence the place-based health-related experiences of Downham residents.

Overview of the methods used



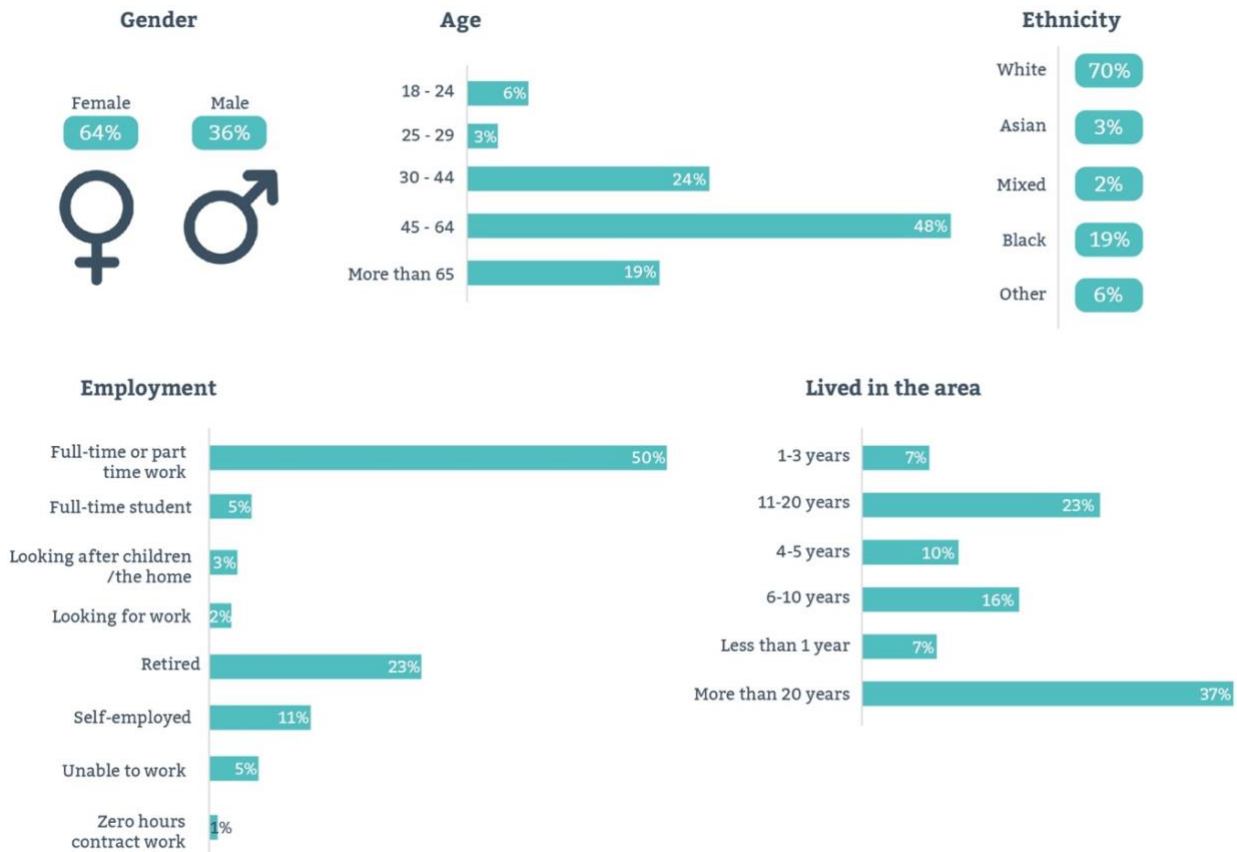
The research team carried out **137 street interviews** with residents. The street interviews captured snapshots of residents' experiences and their perceptions of daily life in Downham. Street interviews were carried out in busy places including in front of local shops, parks, train stations, community centres, and a COVID vaccination hub.

Six group discussions were also conducted, two with members of a local boxing club and some of the parents of younger users of the club. Two other group discussions took place with members of a local church, which was identified as an important community asset. The other two discussions involved a walking group and a group of social prescribing users.

We carried out **10 walking interviews**. We asked Downham residents about their connections to local places, and their thoughts on how these places support or undermine health and wellbeing locally. The majority of the walking interviews took place in or around local parks and green spaces.

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

Profiles of participants in street interviews (N=137)



Downham researchers carried out street interviews in April and May 2022



2 Main findings

2.1 Local assets

The research showed that parks and green spaces are important local assets. Downham residents see them as valuable resources that support their physical health and wellbeing. Locals said that green spaces and parks are affordable spaces for families and children, unlike other local amenities.

I like to go up to 'The green' sometimes. I've got a lovely space near the church on Downham Way there. 'The green' is a stop on the 181 route, a small patch of green that's above Shroffold. I also like Downham Fields, which is another place I'll head out to just for some thinking time. Organise my thoughts if I need some space from things.

Walking interview, June 2022

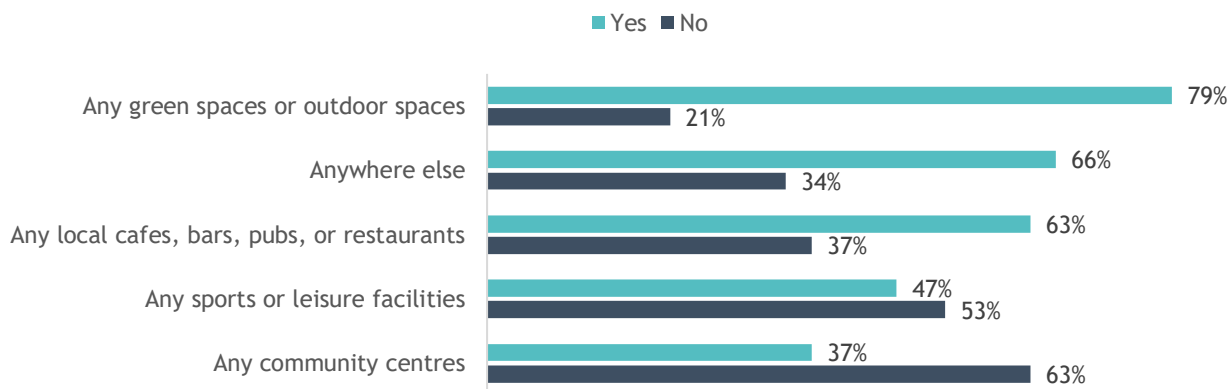
In the street interviews, 23 different green spaces were mentioned by people interviewed as places that they had visited over the last month. Forster Park, Beckenham Place Park and Mountsfield Park in Lewisham were the most popular. The spaciousness of Downham's parks is highly valued. Some people also mentioned the variety of wildlife, with opportunities to see animals and forage for food.

Green spaces are an important asset in Downham



When asked about the places in the local area they went to in the last months, far fewer Downham residents said they went to a community centre than to parks.

Places in Downham where people interviewed went to in the last month



(N=137, street interviews data, multiple choice question)²

Some of Downham’s leisure and support facilities were also seen as local resources, though they were mentioned less often than parks and green spaces. The ones that were spoken about most often were Downham Leisure Centre, Abbotshall Healthy Lifestyle Centre, and Goldsmiths Community Centre.

"I think the local authority needs to invest more money. Not just in community centres but in Sure Start Centres that are closed down. I think that's short sighted because children need that early years support, mothers need that support. Closing those centres down just widen the gap."

Walking interview, June 2022

Thinking about what would make them use support and leisure spaces more, residents spoke about increasing accessibility, especially in terms of timings, price, or disabled access. Residents also reported that there needs to be more information about what is going on locally. We will discuss these issues in more detail in the next sections focused on local challenges and barriers.

2.2 Social capital and networks of support

Many Downham locals said they had good relationships with their neighbours, felt at home in their communities, and valued their ties and connections across the local area.

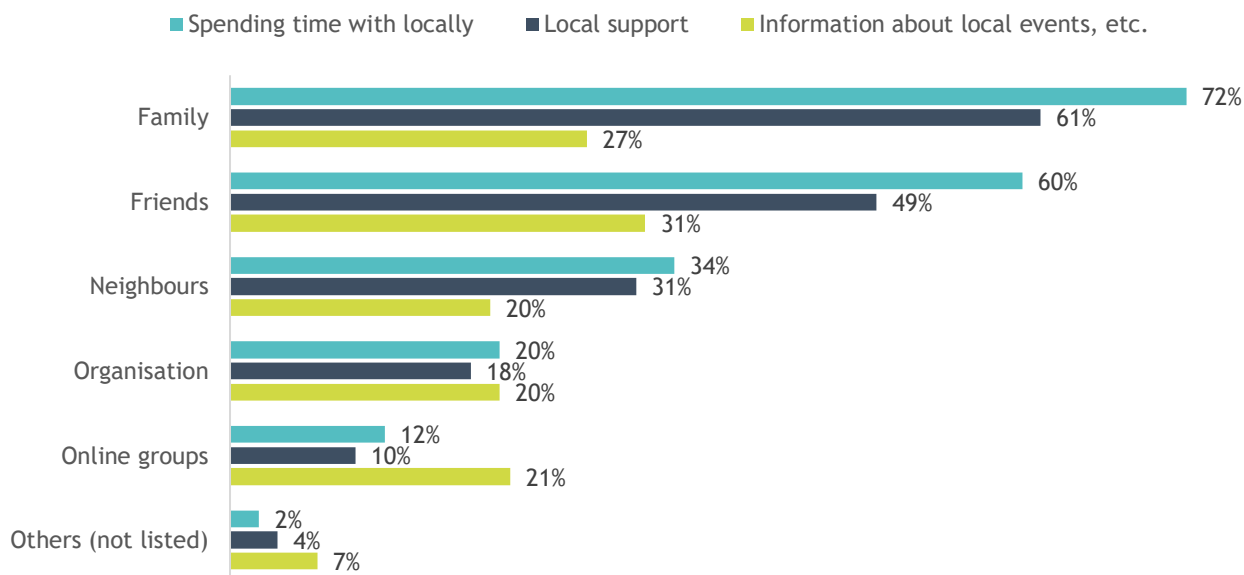
"I feel very at home here, that everybody knows me and I know everybody, I've got good support and made friends, so have the children. [...] Everything feels warm and welcoming living here. The people that live here, the shopkeepers, the small businesses, everyone knows everyone around here. Like a small Irish village, you can't leave your house without waving to people."

Walking interview, June 2022

² "What places in your local area have you been to in the last month?"

The street interviews revealed that family and friends are the most important local ties. Family and friends, and to a lesser extent neighbours and organisations, make up a complex ecosystem of local support for socialising, help or finding out information. The research shows that the weakness in this is that there are not enough people around who know what is going on in Downham. We will come back to this issue later in the report when we discuss local challenges and the changes that residents would like to see.

Social networks in Downham (N=137, street interviews data, multiple choice question)³



The walking interviews and group discussions helped us gain a better understanding of the places where locals gather to hang out with friends, family or meet their neighbours. These include parks and leisure centres, but also gyms, churches, cafes and the local libraries.

"[The gym I go to locally] is really cheap and it's got great classes and an amazing array of equipment. I like the vibe, it's super friendly and welcoming. I don't feel self-conscious there at all and there's many friendly faces I see every day. There's a nice social element linked to it and I believe all those people are local. [...] You're able to stop and have a chat, check in with how people are doing, it feels like every time you go there, you'll recognise the same faces, gives you a feeling of community, networking, the same people are coming together at the same time. And classes as well I see the same faces.

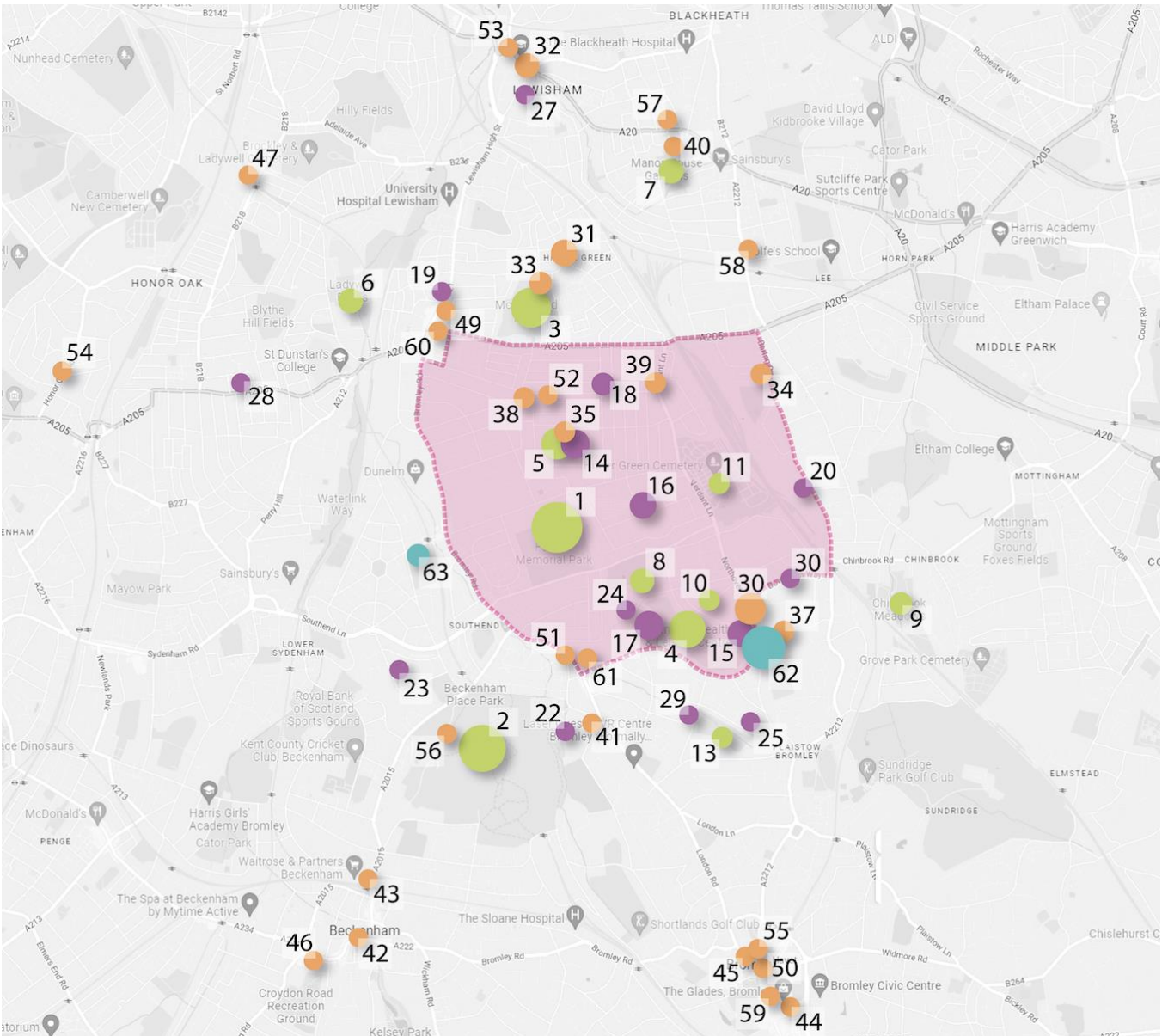
Walking interview, June 2022

³ The questions were asked in the street interviews to gain insight into social networks: "Who are the people you spend time with in your local area?", "Who do you turn to for support in your local area?", and "Do you know someone in your local area who is a useful source of information and who always knows what is going on locally?"

Parks and leisure spaces are important social infrastructure in Downham



Places in Downham where people interviewed went to in the last month (street interviews data)



● Green spaces or other outdoor places

- 1 Forster Memorial Park
- 2 Beckenham Place Park
- 3 Mountsfield Park
- 4 Downham Fields
- 5 Abbotshall Healthy Lifestyle Centre
- 6 Ladywell Fields
- 7 Manor House Gardens
- 8 Woodland Walk
- 9 Chinbrook Meadows
- 10 Durham Hill
- 11 Hither Green Cemetery
- 12 Blackheath
- 13 Shaftesbury park

● Community centres

- 14 Abbotshall
- 15 Downham Leisure Centre
- 16 Goldsmiths Community Centre
- 17 Corbett Library
- 18 Elim Pentecostal Church
- 19 Grove Park Community Group
- 20 Wavelength Lewisham
- 21 Ten Em Bee
- 22 Dumps Adventure Playground
- 23 Downderry Children's Centre
- 24 Burnt Ash Children and Family Centre
- 25 Greenwich Community Centre
- 26 Salvation Army
- 27 Scouts
- 28 Bromley and Downham Youth Club
- 29 King's Church

 Boundary of Research Area

 Frequency of mentions

● Local cafes, bars, pubs, or restaurants*

- 30 Kings Diner
- 31 Le Delice
- 32 Resta Coffee
- 33 Mountfield Park cafe
- 34 The Summerfield Pub
- 35 Abbotshall
- 36 George's Bromley
- 37 Downham Tavern
- 38 Caffè Tesoro
- 39 Wanderlust Eatery
- 40 Manor House Gardens Cafe
- 41 McDonald's
- 42 Kelsey House Bar and Kitchen
- 43 Bridge Bar
- 44 Debenhams (permanently closed)
- 45 Keikik Kitchen
- 46 Pizza Express
- 47 Arloe and Moe
- 48 Dolly Donuts
- 49 Costa
- 50 Havet
- 51 Caffè Cinos
- 52 Good Food
- 53 Sparrow
- 54 Lewisham Heights
- 55 The Greyhound
- 56 Homestead Cafe
- 57 Lagos Bar
- 58 Luciano's
- 59 Greggs
- 60 La Pizzeria Italiana
- 61 Cafe Treat Bromley

* Locations not mapped due to not having correct postcode:

Food Bank (2%)

Uncertain locations (9%)

● Sports and exercise facilities**

- 62 Downham Leisure Centre
- 63 Bellingham Leisure and Lifestyle Centre

** Locations not mapped due to not having correct postcode:

Uncertain locations (25%)

Some residents also spoke about the benefits of building a tighter community that brings residents, businesses and community organisations closer together. They described the positive impact this could have on health and wellbeing by strengthening social networks, increasing access to peer support, access to information, and sense of control.

"[Community groups and businesses and the residents themselves] are not working together here. I think there might be the lack of perhaps...time and skills? Or willingness to do it. And I think to be honest with you, the residents themselves might not have an interest or sensibility. I think people have really hard lives, it's a deprived area. Many people here. They might be working antisocial hours, have children, are single parents, or have health issues. Whatever it is. And they're just not able to participate because they have too much on their minds, especially now with the cost of living crisis, the last thing they're going to be worried about is a community project when they need to think about what to eat today.

Walking interview, June 2022

2.3 Local concerns and barriers

An important local concern is about affordability. People interviewed said that local amenities and events need to be low-cost and, ideally, free for those who cannot afford to pay. Amenities and events need to be accessible to people with different needs, including people with reduced mobility, people who have to work or who need on-site childcare provision.

Littering, fly-tipping, and maintenance of green spaces and parks were also mentioned. Residents also spoke about the negative impact of car use and the need for a better cycling routes that would increase connections within the community and help people be more active.

There's a lot of litter. Just the attitude I think of shoving litter into people's hedges on the way down the road. I've found multiple articles in my hedge, a random shoe [...]. We need to group together a lot more to know how it is affecting each other. If we all knew each other a bit more we'd feel a lot more ashamed about messing up those people's areas, even if it's far from your own house.

Walking interview, June 2022

Car dominance and poor cycling infrastructure are local challenges



A significant challenge experienced by local people is knowing what is available locally. Access to regular information was highlighted as a key barrier to people making use of local facilities more widely.

Downham residents wondered who should be responsible for making sure that people have access to this information, and some suggested that local GPs could take on a bigger role in providing it.

"[Knowing] what's available [is needed]. People come in and don't even know we're here. People don't know what their options are. How do we communicate that? Do we flyer, is it Facebook? [...] people don't go to noticeboards anymore. This Corbett Community library is incredible for letting people know what's going on."

Walking interview, June 2022

Maintenance of overgrown green spaces is a local concern



Perceptions of local safety were mixed. About half of those we spoke with described the area as feeling generally safe. Other people talked about avoiding certain areas; some said they did not go out in the evening (especially older people). We also spoke to people who described having been the victim of a crime or have seen antisocial behaviour.

I would not walk down the woodland walk of a late evening. [...] Just because I've witnessed some activity that I wasn't sure about...people standing and waiting and having covert conversations and parting ways quickly. Honestly, I am guessing that there was some kind of drug deal going on. And it's a real shame because that is a lovely little area to walk through. But that is the only time I've felt insecure.

Walking interview, June 2022

Locals seemed to agree that better maintenance and security measures, such as quick responses to fly-tipping or better street lighting, would improve safety in the area.

2.4 Supporting health and wellbeing in the future

Downham residents would like to see better amenities in parks such as toilets, outdoor gym equipment and water fountains, and more community events.

The majority of people interviewed pointed out that there was not enough investment in provision for children and young people. Toddler paddling pools, playgrounds and hanging bars were given as examples of what is needed.

Thinking about how accessible things are is important. [...] Yoga, tai chi, sitting pilates for older people who struggle with mobility and feel they can't exercise. What else...evenings are great. But you also need the childcare if you're a parent. There's a creche but you have to pay for it and it's only open until a certain time. I think practical classes, macrame, crafts. [...] It doesn't have to be every week, but doing a couple of classes so people get started on that journey. Building that community. [There's] a high percentage of mental health issues. Those people are mainly helped by getting outside, into the community. Those things are important to invest in.

Walking interview, June 2022

The need for more community activities and venues was also highlighted by the research. There was agreement that certain groups are particularly underserved at the moment, including children, young people, older people, and vulnerable groups, especially those experiencing mental health challenges.

Service delivery and community outreach was another important issue brought up by residents. The in-depth interviews highlighted that people living in Downham would like to see more local people in charge of delivering activities and running activities or events. Shared lived experience and trusting relationships between service providers and users were singled out as important things to consider when allocating funds to local providers.

The outreach isn't right. A lot of the things are run by professional people that...a lot of them don't have the experience that the rest of us have. Or if they do, they keep it quiet. So, people don't want to ask them because they think 'you have no idea what I'm going through'. Whereas when you see people in the community setting these things up, a lot of people have already been through it and they know what they're talking about. They're not going in blind, they've had depression, had anxiety. If you're going to do stuff like that it needs to be either community-led or community-led with the support of other people. It's the community that will connect with the community. Not outside people, especially here. I've lived here my whole life; you're not going to talk to someone from another area if you can get help on your doorstep. People here are like a big family. They can help you more than anyone from another area.

Walking interview, May 2022

3 Recommendations

The research provides nuanced insight into a range of factors that impact on health and wellbeing in and around Downham, highlighting local barriers and also the valuable assets that support individuals and communities. A set of recommendations emerged from the barriers identified by this community research. These recommendations are aimed at the council and other large agencies active within the community.

- 1. Invest in community research approaches** that build on the expertise of local people, help them develop skills, work with them to become more aware of and involved in local initiatives, and that help preserve the legacy of research in the local community⁴.
- 2. Recognise the value of existing local partnerships** and allocate the time and resources needed to involve them in place-based decision making related to research, planning or investment locally.
- 3. Fund community-based activities and events** that are tailored to different groups of people and needs.
- 4. Increase provision of amenities in parks and playgrounds** for young children and older people.
- 5. Subsidise community amenities and activities** to ensure that they are accessible to people on a low income.
- 6. Create and support a community-based role** to provide information about local activities and events. This should use a range of methods, including leafleting to bridge the digital and data divides.
- 7. Raise awareness of what social prescribing is** and how it could benefit people living in Downham.
- 8. Streamline social prescribing funding** to ensure that existing assets (clubs, community-based groups and organisations) can apply for it, as they are already embedded in the community.
- 9. Increase funding for street cleanliness and public space maintenance in the local area** to tackle fly-tipping, litter and general upkeep of parks. Help individuals who struggle to maintain their own green spaces, including older people and people with reduced mobility who cannot take care of their gardens.

⁴ This type of participatory work builds on the models of empowerment developed by Paolo Friere, Amilcar Cabral and Augusto Boal. Other useful resources are found in the work of sociologists and anthropologists on transformative research (Mertens, 2009), research justice (Jolivet, 2015), and engaged inquiry (Kuntz, 2015). Freire, P. (2020). Pedagogy of the oppressed. In *Toward a Sociology of Education* (pp. 374-386). Routledge; Jolivet, A. (Ed.). (2015). *Research justice: Methodologies for social change*. Bristol: Policy Press; Kuntz, A. M. (2015). *The responsible methodologist: Inquiry, truth-telling, and social justice*. New York: Routledge; Mertens, D. M. (2008). *Transformative research and evaluation*. London: Guilford Press.

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