YOUTH
RESEARCH
PROJECT

A project carried out by young people in Islington, supported by Community Plan for Holloway (CP4H), following the closure of HMP Holloway.

COMMUNITY PLAN
FOR HOLLOWAY

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND FILM

Community Plan for Holloway (CP4H) was formed by local people, campaign groups, and organisations after Holloway women's prison was closed in 2016. The core aim of CP4H is to make sure that local people's views shape plans for the 10-acre site development, the biggest development in Islington for more than 30 years.

Everyone has the right to be heard regarding decisions that concern us, but frequently young people don't have that opportunity. CP4H launched a peer-led youth research project in 2024. A group of young people living and studying in Islington were trained and supported to design and carry out research activities to find out what their peers' views are on the local area and what should be taken into account by developers and planners, especially those working on the Holloway Prison development (now known as Holloway Park).

This report brings together the youth researchers' findings and recommendations for engaging young people in the design, planning and management of Holloway Park and other future developments, as well as for creating a community that young people feel part of.

Key takeaways of the research findings are:

- Young people want a range of physical infrastructure on the Holloway Park site and beyond, such as green spaces, sports areas, youth hubs, and measures that make indoor and outdoor spaces feel safe and foster belonging. But this is not enough in itself: they also want regular activities that give people opportunities to come together and also allow them to have an active role in shaping this and other developments now and into the future.

- Safety is an important theme for young people. Participants feel that safety is both physical (CCTV, streetlights, good management) and social (familiarity, knowing people, trust) and that the latter is at least, if not more important than the former.

- There is a strong desire by young people, whose voices are so often not heard, to be meaningfully consulted by power holders about matters that affect their daily lives. It is one of their fundamental rights. Consultation should not be one-off and tick box but an ongoing conversation with robust feedback loops.

"

I feel like, especially with the new development, people might be coming from different areas so it's important to have places where they can connect.

A girl that I interviewed mentioned familiarity within your community, so I think its important to have a lot of people, a community that's close [together].
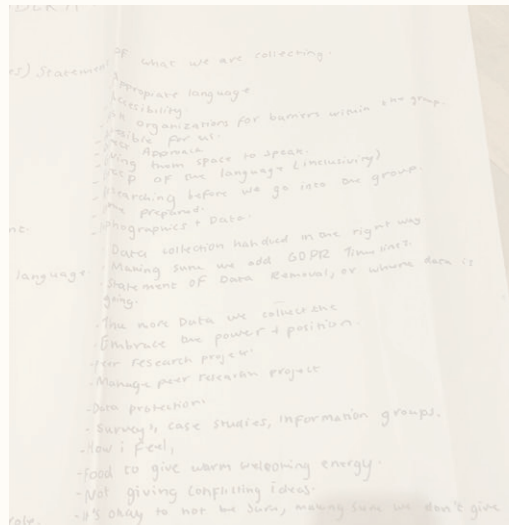
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The youth researchers worked with filmmakers to make a short film about our project. You can watch the film by going to www.plan4holloway.org or by scanning this QR code:

INTRO DUCTION

HMP Holloway, the largest women's prison in Europe, was at the heart of our area for over 150 years. When the Ministry of Justice closed the prison in 2016, and sold the land for redevelopment, a number of groups and local residents were determined that this historic site should be used to deliver a proper legacy for the community.

Community Plan for Holloway (CP4H) was set up as an informal, independent umbrella group for everyone who cared about the future of the site, from campaigners for a women's building to provide services and support — especially for those at risk of involvement in the criminal justice system — to housing activists mindful of the dire need for secure homes that local people could afford, to those who wanted a new sustainable community with services and amenities that would bring people together and feel safe and welcoming, where everyone has the right to live in dignity and safety.

All of us have the right to be heard in decisions that affect our lives, but too often we are shut out from the conversations that affect us most, or our inputs are not taken seriously — even more so if we come from marginalised backgrounds. CP4H launched the peer-led youth research project at the end of 2024 as part of the organisation's role to amplify local views around the redevelopment of the Holloway Prison site (now known as Holloway Park), especially the views of less-heard groups. The project aimed to find out more about young people's views, with a focus on the Holloway
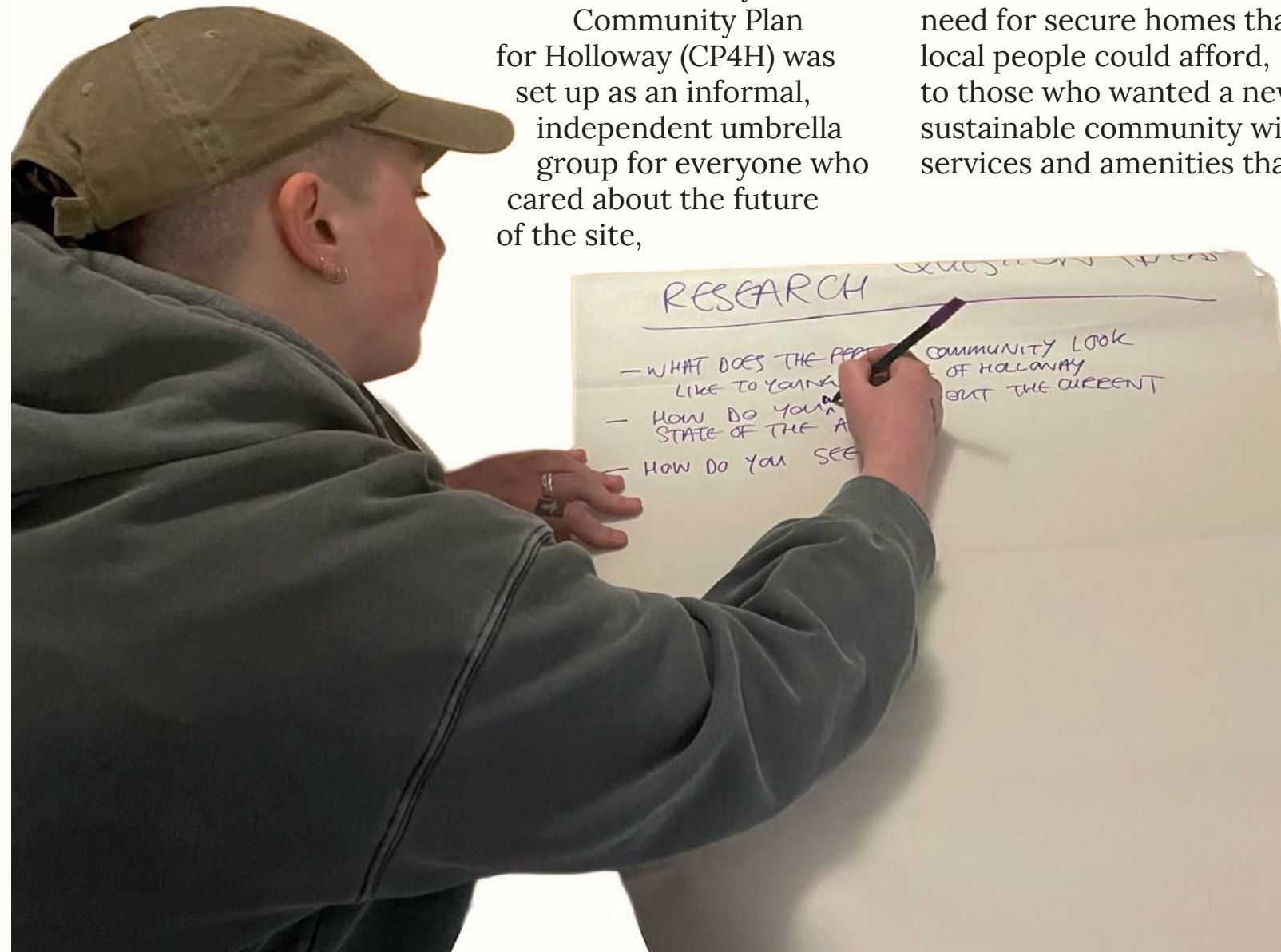
development, but with the broader aim that their voices and lived experiences shape decisions made about public spaces, housing, and community resources in Islington.

We also have the right to live in homes that are safe, affordable and secure, but too many young people are growing up in inadequate homes. According to the 2021 census, [1] the rate of overcrowding in Islington is significantly higher than the national average, with over 12% of households being overcrowded, and approximately 4,860 households containing dependent children lacking enough space.

Isolation stemming from different causes, including the lack of spaces for young people to meet and interact with their community and the widespread reduction of youth services, has been highlighted by many organisations working directly with young people. In 2023, Partnership for Young London,[2] found that "almost four out of five (78.1%) young Londoners said that they felt lonely at least sometimes, with one in ten (10.5%) feeling lonely all of the time." The majority of young Londoners they spoke to also said that they did not feel their views are listened to.

Almost a fifth of Islington residents (30%) are aged between 10-24: what ideas do young people have about how these problems and their ongoing impact can be solved? The right to be heard, to access adequate housing,

to live free from discrimination, and to participate meaningfully in decisions that affect our lives are fundamental human rights protected under UK and international law. The redevelopment of sites like Holloway Park is not just a planning issue; it's a human rights issue. If we are serious about building fairer, safer and more inclusive communities, then we must treat young people not just as future renters and homeowners, but as current rights-holders with the capacity to guide how the world works. Their voices, ideas and needs must shape the decisions made today.

CP4H proposed a youth research project to bring these voices into the discussion about today's decisions. Our funding made this possible. A group of young people from Islington was trained in research methods to find out what their peers value; what they would like to change about their community; and what they believe should be included at Holloway Park. We also wanted to know how young people's views could be included in the conversation that is about them but so often does not include them.

Their findings are gathered together in this report. Everyone who participated in the research shared invaluable insights about what sort of communities young people want and also how best to reach their peers and engage them in consultation. It will be shared with local and London-wide stakeholders with the objective that

everyone interested in fostering communities that better meet the needs of young people will find it valuable.

We hope it includes both inspiration and practical ideas that can be implemented at Holloway Park and beyond in planning rights-respecting housing and amenities for all. We hope that it will provide some of the tools to encourage organisations to meet their legal obligations to respect the rights of young people to be actively listened to; it is itself an example of just one way to take these rights seriously.

We are extremely grateful to everyone who took part, including the youth researchers, the young people who completed the survey or agreed to be interviewed, and the youth workers who support them.

CP4H Board of Trustees
October 2025

1   Office for National Statistics, "Overcrowding and Under-Occupancy by Household Characteristics, England and Wales: Census 2021" (dataset), released August 25, 2023, accessed [18/10/2025], https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/housing/datasets/overcrowdingandunderoccupancybyhouseholdcharacteristicsenglandandwalescensus2021
2   Partnership for Young London, Levelling Up London (London: Partnership for Young London / Trust for London, March 2023), page 3 https://trustforlondon.org.uk/research/partnership-for-young-london-levelling-up-london/

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH APPROACH

This is a collaborative project by adult staff at CP4H and a key group of young people living or studying in Islington, aged between 16 -19 (up to 24 years with additional needs). They were recruited as youth researchers through local youth organisations with the assistance of youth work professionals. We worked with them at the heart of the design and delivery of the project to make it accessible and relevant. The peer-led approach created trust between participants and researchers and ensured the use of accessible themes and language that encouraged honest responses, meeting the aim that the findings were a real-life reflection on concerns and aspirations of the young people in the community.

A trend considered by various practitioners and academics is the general prioritisation of young people in the later stages of youth-led research, over design and analysis stages. Collecting ideas about the consequences of this trend, a Poverty Alliance report warns against the opportunity for the youth voice to be exploited to dress-up research,[3] rather than genuinely allowing it to drive and shape research.

Bearing in mind these concerns, we involved youth researchers from the beginning and at every stage of project design. In particular, we took on board the observation that involving young people earlier in the research process not only allows them to shape the research but to witness and feel that they have had "profound impact on the research outcomes."[4] Although due to employment or education priorities, not all of the youth researchers were able to commit to the whole process, their contributions were valued at each stage, and they were invited to give their views and participate in different project activities throughout.

The youth researchers were paid an hourly rate in line with the London Living Wage, reflecting current best practice[5] as well as a strategy to retain researchers throughout the project and to add value to their contributions.

WHAT IS PEER RESEARCH?

Following the Poverty Alliance's wide-reaching review of peer research we used the following definitions and approaches:[6]

Peer research is led by people with experience of the issues being studied, in this case young people living in Islington - "People who have something in common do research about the thing they have in common." "People-powered research."

3   Cath Larkins (and others), Peer Research by Children and Young People and Their Allies: Rapid Evidence Review of Best Practices in Health and Social Science Literature (Centre for Children and Young People's Participation, October 2021), pages 24-25 https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Peer-Research-by-Children-and-Young-People-and-their-Allies-Rapid-Evidence-Review.pdf.
4   O. Wilson (and others), A Rapid Evidence Review of Young People's Involvement in Health, Research (London: Wellcome, 2020), page 18

5   Larkins (and others), Peer Research by Children and Young People and Their Allies, page 50
6   Larkins (and others), Peer Research by Children and Young People and Their Allies, page 6

Peer research places young people in the lead with adults playing a support role, where children and young people are advisers, co-researchers, co-analysers, co-presenters and "where they contribute to shaping what is done, how it's done and what is done with what is gathered."

Peer research is not an extractive process, but rather offers skills and value as a result of participation. Young people are the experts on their own lives; the lived experiences of the youth researchers were vital to building the project, and how they asked questions to their peers. Having things in common with their peers allowed for fewer misunderstandings with questions and a better understanding of the data. The project also provided work experience and practical skills for the youth researchers.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The youth researchers used a mixed-methods approach to gather both quantitative and qualitative data, employing surveys and interviews. A range of questions was discussed around the themes the youth researchers felt were most appropriate, and they thought of several questions for each theme. These were then reduced through discussion and our final survey included 18 questions. We used a range of data capture methods such as tick boxes, open-ended questions, asking participants to choose three words, and number scales to keep the survey interactive and engaging.

The youth researchers felt this was the best approach to ensure a range of high-quality data to better understand the young people's experiences. The design focused on themes such as perceptions of the local area, aspirations for a perfect community, safety and priorities for the Holloway Park development.

As an incentive for young people and a thank you for completing the survey, participants were able to opt in to be included in a prize competition to win a £20 shopping voucher.

THE ROLE OF PEER RESEARCHERS

A group of young peer researchers were trained to:

- Define the scope of the research through discussion with peers and local architects, Peabody Housing Association, Just Fair and the British Institute for Human Rights.
- Design survey questions to ensure they were clear and youth-friendly.
- Encourage participation among their peers in youth hubs, community settings and carrying out interviews.
- Contribute to the analysis of the findings by highlighting themes that resonated most strongly with young people.
- Participate in the design of the final report, including a zine and a human rights leaflet aimed at young people and the production of a short film.

Their involvement aimed to ensure that the research remained youth-centred, inclusive, relevant and authentic.
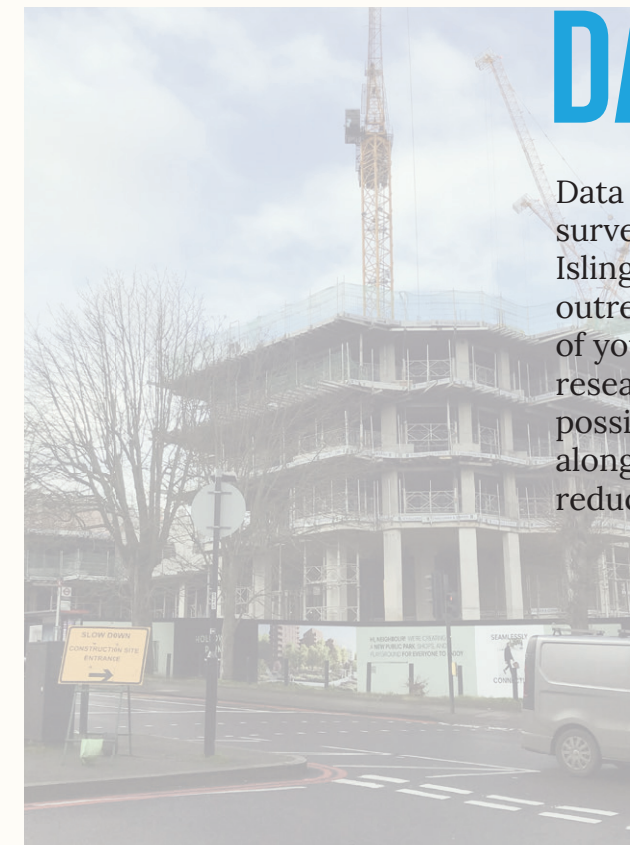
DATA COLLECTION

Data was gathered with a total of 89 responses (total completed surveys and interviews) from young people aged 11–24 across Islington. Participants were recruited through youth hubs and outreach activities within the borough. A self-selected group of young people completed interviews carried out by the youth researchers to give further insight into some of the questions. Where possible, young people were encouraged to complete the surveys alongside youth researchers to create a supportive environment and reduce barriers to participation.

All the young people who responded were reached via the youth services they attend in Islington. This is called convenience sampling. We used convenience sampling for this study as young people from youth organisations were available, within our proximity and it is a good way to reach young people who are engaged in their local area. However, this sample may not be representative of the broader population of young people in the borough.

ETHICS & SAFEGUARDING

Strong ethical protocols were followed:

- Questions were designed to be clear for different ages and not to lead the participants.
- Responses were anonymised to protect confidentiality.
- Youth researchers received safeguarding training and were supported by staff at all times.

The process was designed to be empowering rather than extractive,[7] giving young people ownership of their contributions. In line with findings from reviews of other youth-led research, the project aimed to support and empower young people, including peer researchers, with the ongoing presence of a familiar and consistent youth worker.[8]
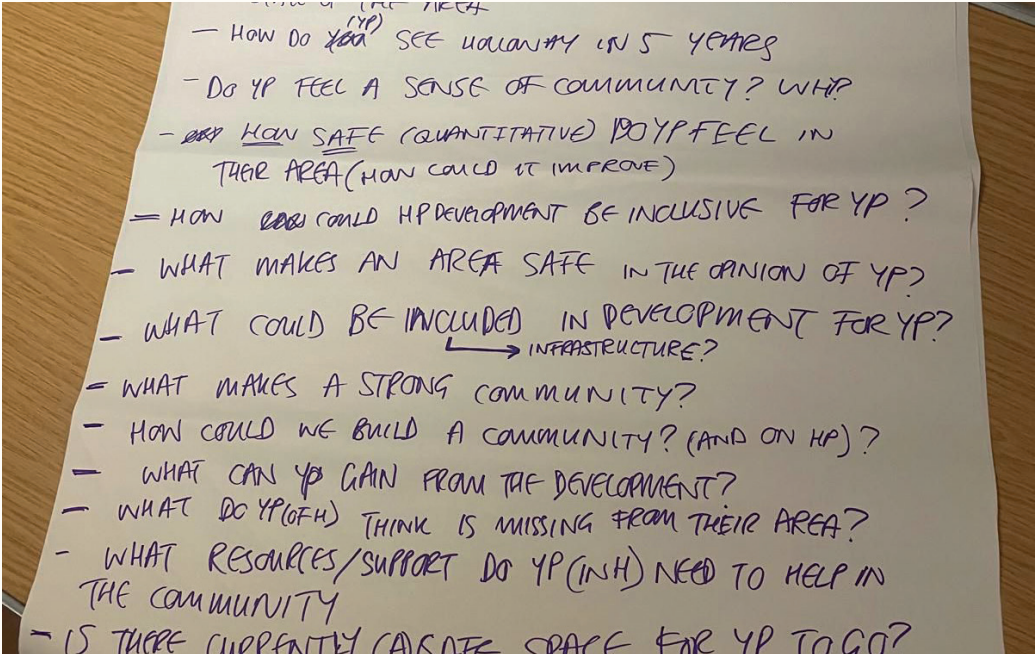
DATA ANALYSIS

Survey responses were collated and analysed using thematic coding to identify data or words which have a common theme or idea for open-ended questions. AI was also used as a tool to help us with content analysis, and then verified. Youth researchers worked with staff to identify recurring themes that appeared in the surveys and the interviews. Quantitative data such as age, gender, and closed-question responses were used to explore differences between groups, highlighting key insights into gender and age-based priorities.

7   Larkins (and others), Peer Research by Children and Young People and Their Allies, page 4
8   Larkins (and others), Peer Research by Children and Young People and Their Allies, page 40

LIMITATIONS

As with any research, there are limitations. The sample size, while robust for initial insights, may not capture the full diversity of young people in the borough. Some groups have been underrepresented due to limited outreach capacity. However, the peer-led approach provided a strong foundation of authentic voices and experiences, which informed research and programme design and led to strong findings.

As found across youth-led research "children and young people often have busy lives with multiple commitments and obligations. Peer research may be something they can only drop in to…appreciation of the trust, time and effort that all children and young people contribute is key."[9]

We both anticipated and experienced this common aspect of peer research. Some youth researchers could not sustain commitment for the whole process, but we committed fully to those who did want to engage to the end and placed equal value on the contributions of those who could only drop in and out.
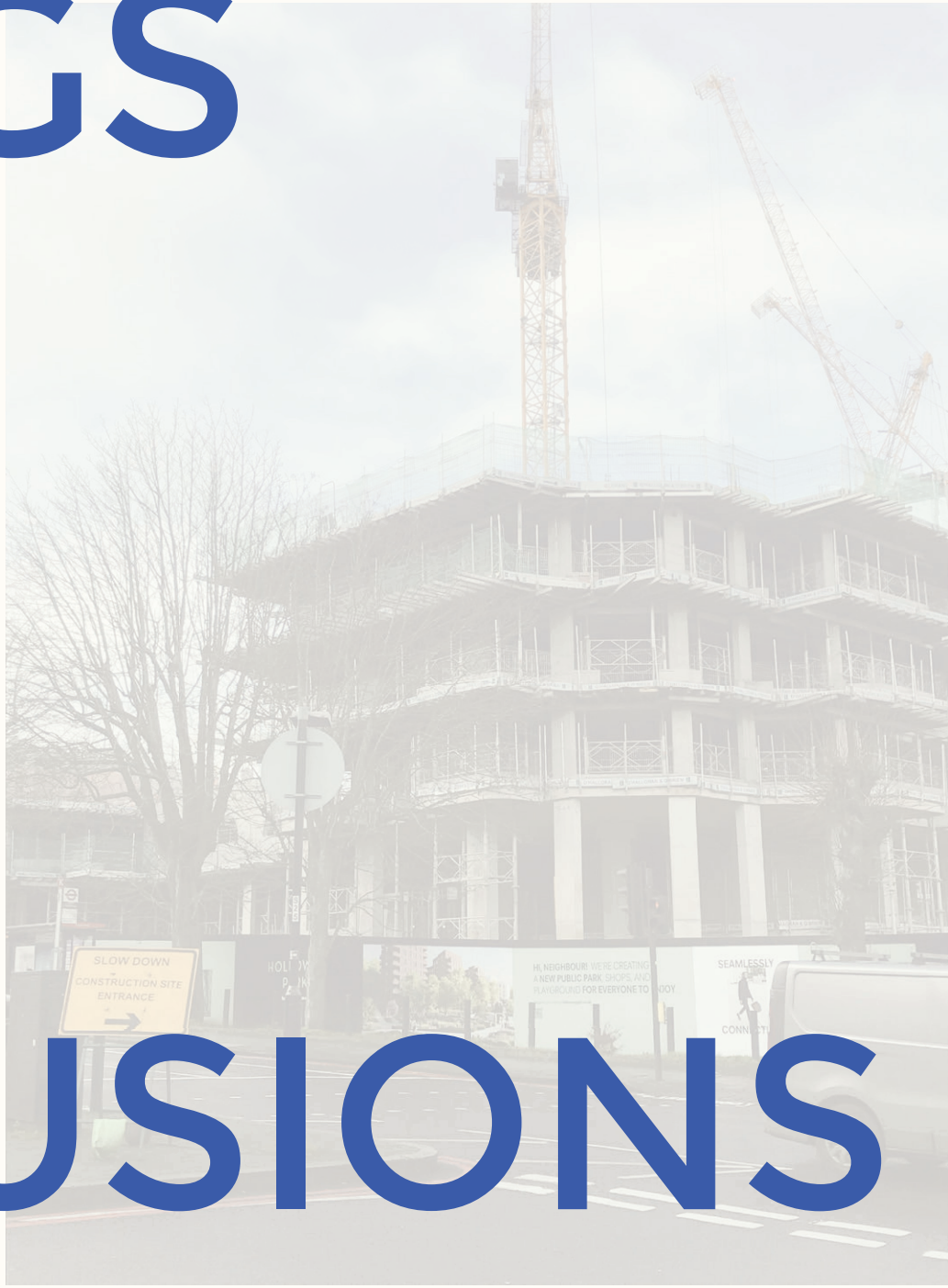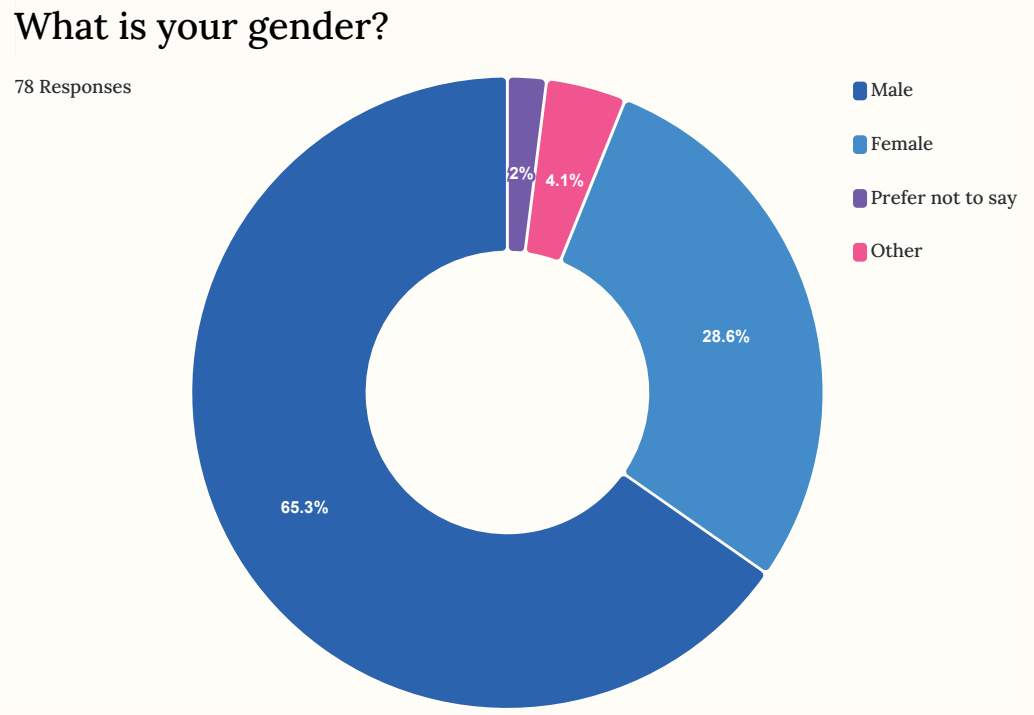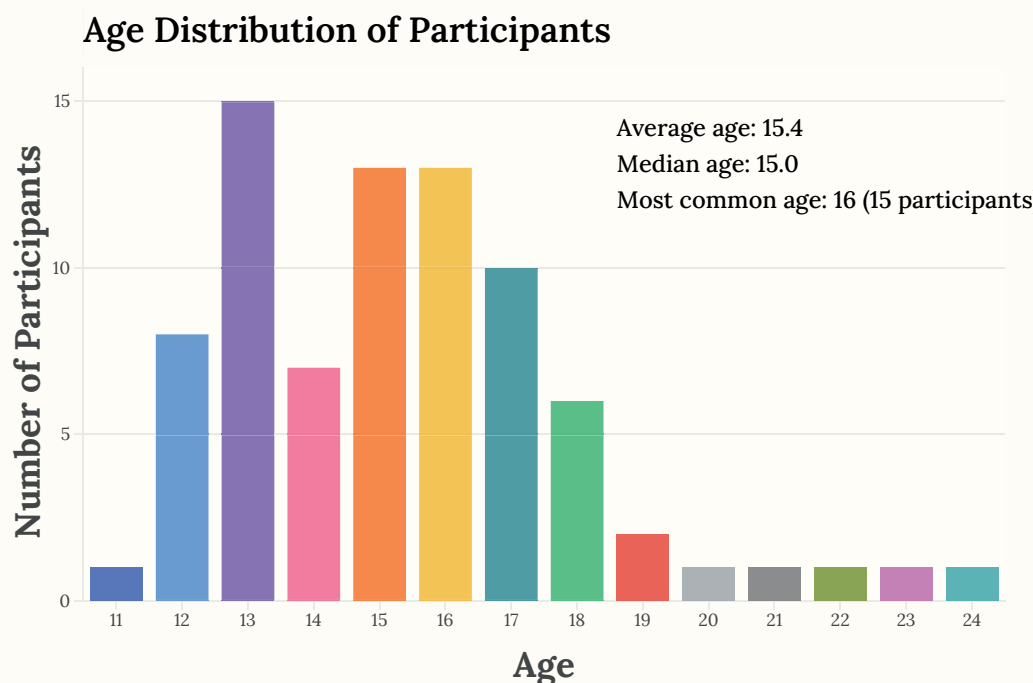

9   Larkins (and others), Peer Research by Children and Young People and Their Allies, page 85

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

INFORMATION ABOUT THE YOUNG PEOPLE WE TALKED TO

HOLLOWAY PARK

Age Distribution of Participants

Average age: 15.4
Median age: 15.0
Most common age: 16 (15 participants)

Number of Participants (y-axis: 0, 5, 10, 15)

Age (x-axis: 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24)

What is your gender?

78 Responses

- Male — 65.3%
- Female — 28.6%
- Prefer not to say — 2%
- Other — 4.1%

We engaged 80 young people aged 11+ through surveys and interviews, with most respondents aged between 12 and 16. The median age of participants was 15 years.

Our youth researchers were additional members of the sample group (with ages ranging from 16-24), as their answers to interviews were also included in the findings.

There was a significant gender imbalance; more than twice the number of participants identified as male (66.7%) than female (29.5%). Almost 4% of respondents did not want to disclose their gender identity or did not identify as male or female. It is possible the imbalance is because more males than females attended the youth hubs during the sessions we visited. There are good networks of girls-only sessions in the borough, but we were unable to visit any during the data collection phase.

Islington Wards
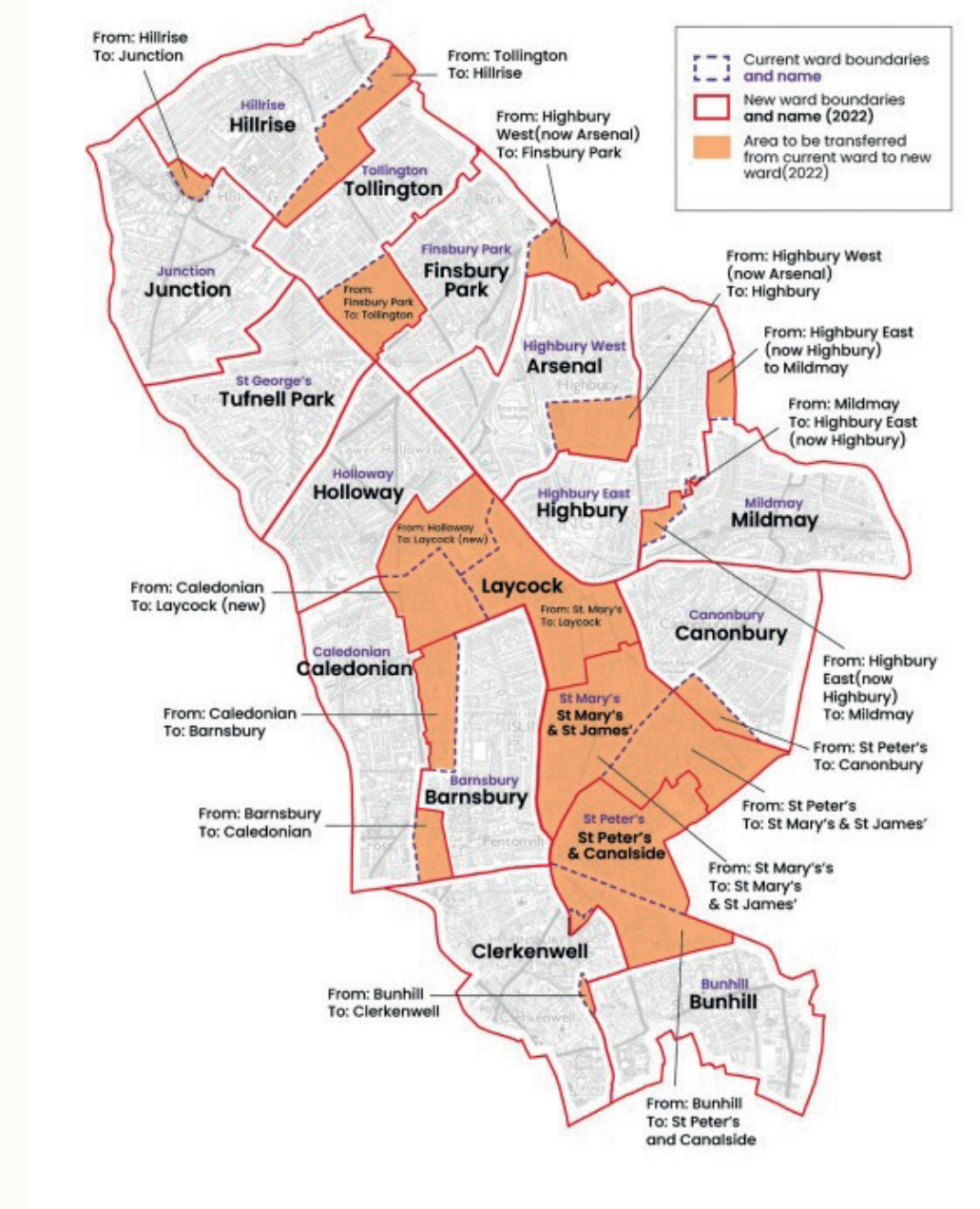
The insights presented in this report are drawn from interactions with groups of young people who are currently engaging in youth services across Islington. As such, their views may not represent the experiences or priorities of all young people across the borough. While these perspectives provide valuable insight into the views and priorities of young people, we encourage organisations to carry out further engagement with a broader and more representative group of young residents to explore the views of the wider youth population in Islington.

We did not ask participants about their ethnic identity. The youth researchers, of whom only one was White British and otherwise were constituted of young people with varying racial and ethnic identities, felt it was not relevant to ask.

The postcodes given by respondents covered a wide area of Islington but were concentrated in the central and the north of the borough, with N1, N7 and N19 being the most common. This shows most of the data came from young people who were local to the youth organisations we visited. There were a few postcodes which fell outside of the borough, specifically

from neighbouring Hackney and Haringey, indicating youth services can draw young people in from wider areas. This suggests any further research on large developments may need to work across multiple boroughs to reach all of the young people who may be affected by large developments such as Holloway Park.

YOUNG PEOPLE AS RESEARCHERS

The impact of having young people themselves as the researchers is evident in the data collected:

- Youth researchers helped young participants to share their views openly. Data suggests that having youth researchers leading the data collection meant that insights were gained that wouldn't have been shared with non-peer researchers - in other words, adults and/ or people in authority.
- Youth researchers were able to help participants access imagination and hypothetical beliefs and desires about community development.

Having young people act as researchers gave some interesting insights not just into local issues, but into how they navigated their role as peer-facilitators. One interview stands out, where a youth researcher encouraged their peer to speak openly:

> " You can say whatever you want to say… You never know who's listening. Someone really might like your idea, and then that might be in the community, and then that might make things better for everyone.[10] "

10 Cath Larkins (and others), Peer Research by Children and Young People and Their Allies: Rapid Evidence Review of Best Practices in Health and Social Science Literature (Centre for Children and Young People's Participation, October 2021), page 80, https://www.povertyalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Peer-Research-by-Children-and-Young-People-and-their-Allies-Rapid-Evidence-Review.pdf.

This quote shows how youth researchers were able to negotiate the tricky balance between encouraging honesty and guiding the conversation. The idea of "someone listening" provides a particular insight, highlighting that young people may imagine powerful, unseen adults as the ones who could make change happen. Here, peer researchers attempted to make participants feel comfortable and empowered about sharing their real thoughts, even if they don't have direct access to decision makers themselves.

The peer-to-peer set up opened the door to trust. In some interviews, participants shared experiences of prejudice at school and how they've had to hold back emotions; things they might not have shared with adult researchers. The interviews also displayed how participants can be inspired to think about the needs of others, not just themselves, when guided by someone they trust.

Overall, involving young people as researchers doesn't just give richer, more honest data, it also helps participants imagine what a safer, more supportive community could look like. It's clear that when young people are given the tools and trust to guide research, they can unlock insights that adults might never hear otherwise.

Speaking with young people about housing developments and the consultation process, it's clear many are open to sharing their opinions if they feel they would be listened to and their feedback and ideas would be considered. They understand it may be tough for developers to make contact with young people but many youth organisations we spoke to would happily host focus groups, which young people said they would participate in. The Poverty Alliance found that young people are more likely to engage in research when working in familiar environments.[11]

11 Larkins (and others), Peer Research by Children and Young People and Their Allies page 80.

WHAT SERVICES DO YOUNG PEOPLE USE IN ISLINGTON?

We asked participants about services or places in Islington that they attend regularly to gain a framing understanding of their relationship to the area, the kinds of spaces and services available to them, and the spaces that matter to them at the moment. Almost all respondents were involved with a youth service at the time of the survey, which may have shaped the types of facilities they mentioned or caused some uncertainty about how to interpret the question.
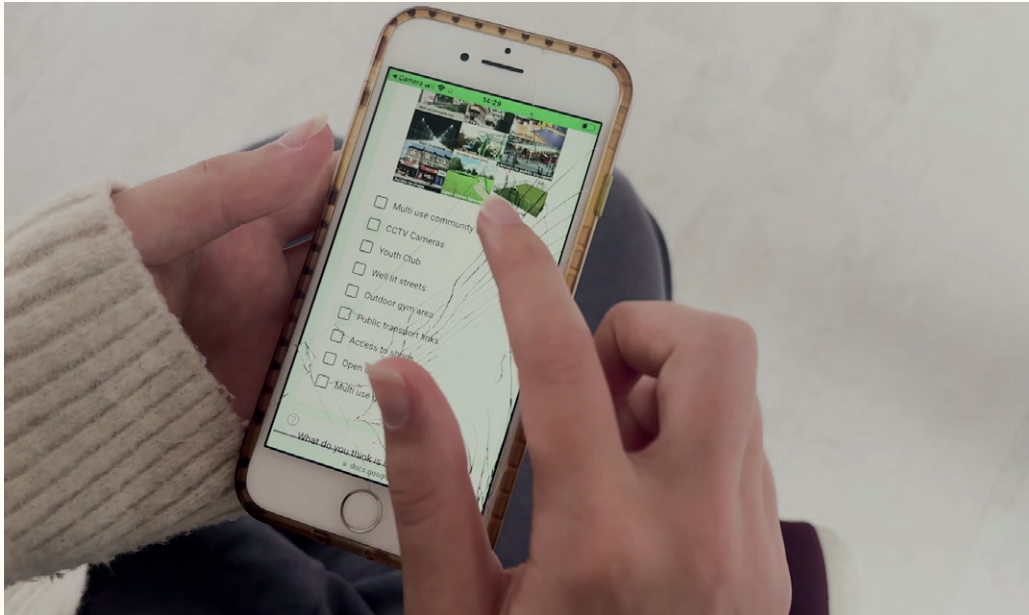
- Youth clubs were the most frequently mentioned service with over 30 responses.
- Sports-related activities were also common, including football clubs, community sports sessions and informal sports sessions with friends, and gyms, which collectively accounted for approximately 15 mentions.
- Parks - including Whittington, Finsbury, Paradise, Arundel, Highbury Fields, and skate parks (of which there is relatively low provision in Islington compared to the other London boroughs, with only one small skate park) were cited in around 12 responses.

A smaller number of participants mentioned other activities, including youth organisations and uniformed groups such as Scouts or Girl Guides.

Data shows that most young people in the sample are engaging in local services, organisations and activities. Some listed shops and restaurants, which suggests these amenities are important to them in their daily lives.

LOCAL AREA PERCEPTIONS, PRIORITIES AND IMAGINATIONS

- Young people shared a vision for a perfect community which is safe, fun, peaceful and equitable.

- They expressed different feelings about their area, with some describing the area in opposing ways (safe vs dangerous), but when describing what was most important to them, many placed a shared strong value on accessible indoor spaces that support daily needs, socialising and engagement in relationships.

- Participants' sense of their local area is shaped socially rather than just in physical terms. While physical features are important, the strongest connection across the sample was to relationships and the social fabric of the area.

- Within our sample, the gender of the participant is related to what they feel is missing from their local area.
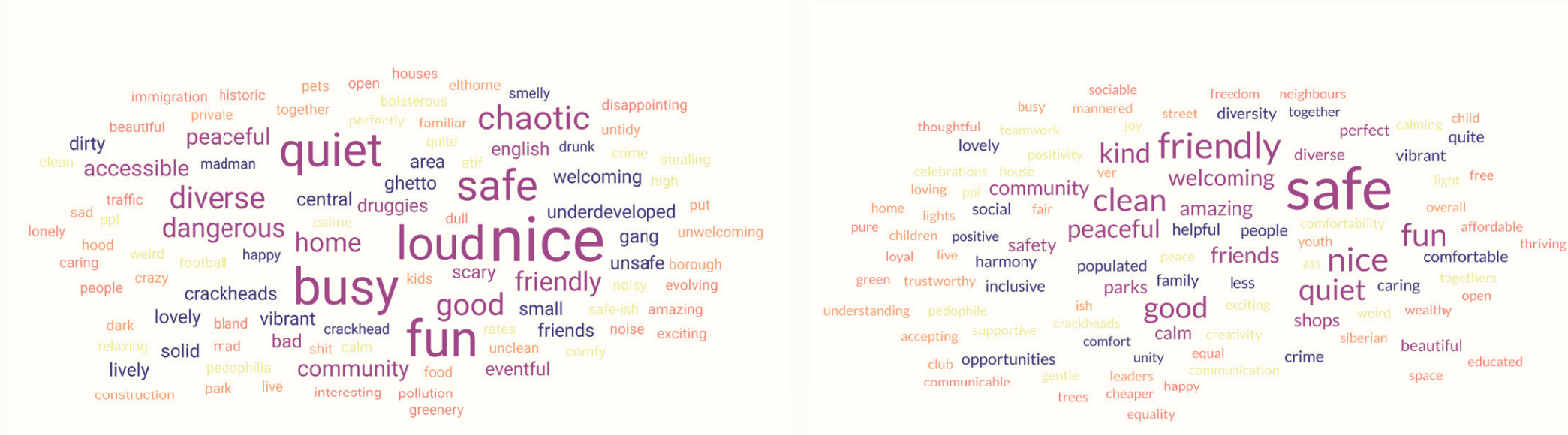

We asked young people "Write three words to describe your local area" and "Write three words to describe your perfect community" to understand how young people feel about their area and to allow us to present the words they used in common visually (see the word clouds below). Most common descriptors were: "nice" (14), "busy" (10), "fun" (9), "safe" (9), "loud" (9), "quiet" (8). Some contradictory words were popular (e.g. "safe" and "dangerous") used as young people expressed differing opinions about different areas they go to.

When collecting ideas around the perfect community, the word "safe" was mentioned most often by participants: "safe" (21), "nice" (10), "friendly" (10), "fun" (9), "clean" (9), "good" (8).

The aim of pairing these questions was both to activate the participants' imagination about what their perfect community would look like, as framing for the rest of the survey, and also to see what gaps there may be between their dreams and the reality in their local area.

The word clouds below show trends in their answers. While participants had differing experiences of their local areas, they united around what they saw as a perfect community.

It is important to tailor consultation and engagement methods for different age groups. If younger groups respond best to experiential questions, while older groups may provide more thoughtful feedback on issues, methods that use both open text fields and that invite 3-word descriptions can facilitate diverse types of responses.

While these observations of age difference are based on age differences within this sample and cannot be seen as representative of young people in Islington generally, we can learn from this about what sort of questions might work well with different age groups.

Write three words to describe your local area

Write three words to describe your perfect community

There was a statistically significant relationship between age and responses when young people were asked to describe their local area. The younger participants, around 11-14, used playful and reactive words such as "boring" or "fun", showing that an immediate experience of enjoyment or frustration was significant. The older participants were more reflective with words such as "busy," "unsafe," or "underdeveloped," highlighting structural or community issues.

When the young people were asked to imagine a "perfect community" by choosing three descriptive words, safety, friendliness, and enjoyment were the most important themes. When compared to the mixed and sometimes negative words used to describe their current local area, this question revealed a more consistent and aspirational vision. The answers were broadly consistent across gender and age groups, suggesting that, despite differences in how younger and older participants describe their current environment, their aspirations for a perfect community align. The interviews provided rich detail on this question.


> " A perfect community for me would be somewhere I'm safe, and I don't have to know the people, but I know I can trust them, and that I wouldn't be hurt or robbed or anything in the community. And that there are places where you can enjoy yourself, like youth clubs. "

Have a look at the following image, please click the top three things which are most important for you in your local area
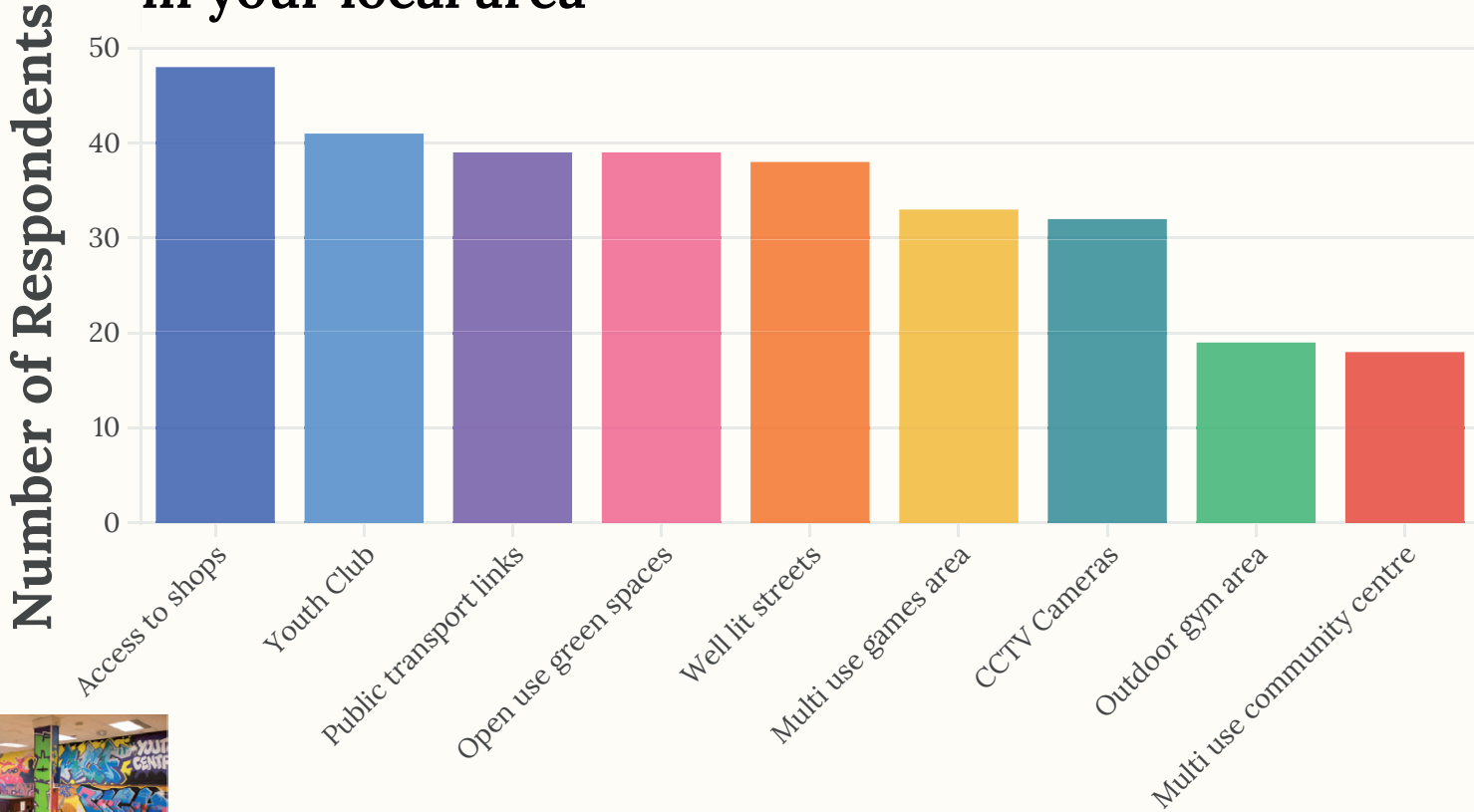
When young people were asked to choose which three things they felt were currently important for them in their local area from a selected range of images, respondents showed clear priorities, with similarities across age and gender. These responses suggest that

> ❝ **I like the youth clubs, because like I said before, you can enjoy yourself there. You can feel free. You don't have to suppress your emotions.** ❞

young people place strong value on easy access to indoor spaces within reach of transport links, that support their daily needs, socialising, and engagement with others. Also popular were answers which indicated that young people value being active, safety, and outdoor spaces.

Males tended to select sports-related or activity-based options, such as multi-use games areas and youth clubs, while females slightly preferred measures to improve safety, including well-lit streets and CCTV.

Age differences were minimal, but it is worth noting that older participants showed a preference for public transport links, perhaps reflecting that travel needs are more important as their independence grows with age.

However, these associations failed a test for statistical significance, meaning the overall finding from this question is broad agreement across age and gender about what is most important to them in their area.

To understand what young people feel is missing from their area, respondents were asked an open-text question. The use of this type of question allowed participants to express ideas without constraints, encouraging them to draw on their imagination after reflecting on their current and ideal community.

In this case, four key themes emerged across what the participants feel the local areas does not have enough of:
Community-focused and/or **open space** - such as "community facilities" "open green spaces"

Safety or security - such as "CCTV" "cameras" "well-lit areas"
Sports facilities - such as "football pitches" "gym"

Opportunities for socialising and self-expression - such as "an area for young children to express their emotion" "places to meet people with shared interests and hobbies"

These results indicate that young people feel there are not enough inclusive and secure community spaces designed with them in mind, and that they would like more opportunities for social interaction and connecting with their peers.

Survey responses and interviews told us that young people recognise that not all community spaces are the same. Spaces need to offer regular activities and have secure funding to operate as a facility that people will want to use. One interviewee observed that community spaces that can't offer what community members need and enjoy, because of a lack of funding or skilful management or other reasons, risk being underused or even closed down. This is a useful reminder that Islington Council's perspective when the Holloway Park plans were developed that the local area has sufficient Community Centre provision could be misguided: the existing centres may not offer what the community requires.

It was conspicuous that young people frequently mentioned that football pitches are missing from the area. There is currently only one full-size grass football pitch in the borough. There are a number of artificial pitches, but most are not publicly available and need to be booked at a cost, often inaccessible for young people who want a casual kickabout. It was perhaps unsurprising that young people said that green space was missing. Islington is one of the most densely populated local authority areas in England and Wales, with high numbers of young people living in overcrowded homes. However, it has the smallest amount of green space per person in the country.[12]

There was a statistically significant relationship between gender and the answer to this question. Males were more likely to mention there are not enough sports facilities as well as concerns about safety, while females were more likely to highlight social and community aspects and there not being enough spaces of different kinds.

We found a clear pattern between gender and what young people feel is missing from their area. People with different gender identities living on large developments such as Holloway Park may have different needs and priorities and this should be considered by planners and developers through consulting with a broad range of young people and engaging them in ongoing decision-making, for example through resident panels and user groups.[13]

12 "Why Islington?," Islington Giving, accessed October 13, 2025, https://islingtongiving.org.uk/about-us/why-islington/.

13 Partnership for Young London, Shaping Housing Futures: Young Residents Using Peer Research in Housing to Make the Invisible Visible (London: Partnership for Young London, 2023) page 7.

What respondents like most about their local area

Percentage of respondents (%)

Categories (x-axis): Friends / community, Football / sports facilities, Accessibility / transport, Parks / green spaces, Youth clubs / services, Other, Positive environment, Shops / restaurants, Negative / none, Events / culture
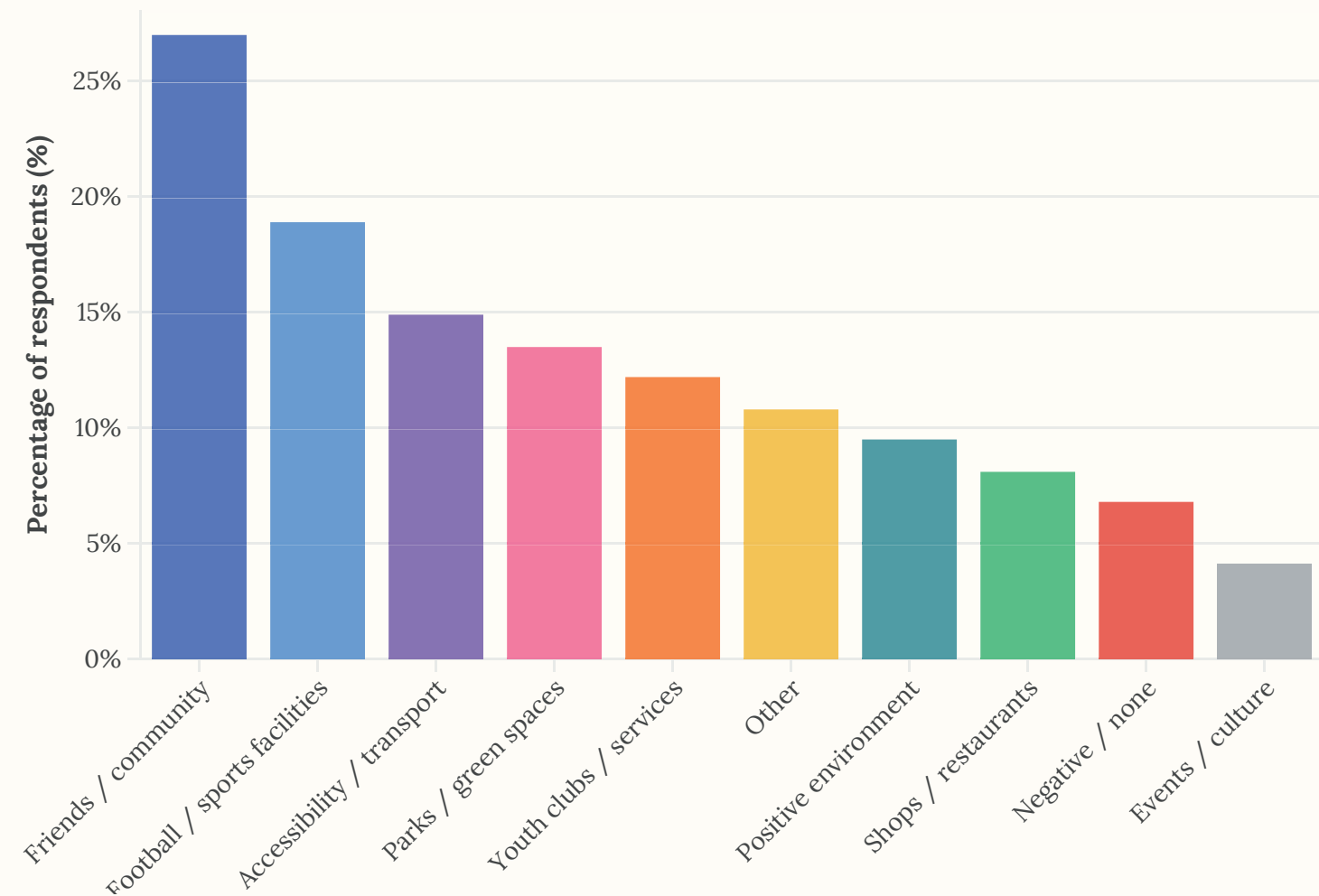
To gain more understanding about what participants like or value most about their local area, an open-text question was also used, allowing respondents to freely express what they appreciated without being led by pre-defined options. Respondents were able to mention more than one aspect in their answers. We then identified shared priorities and values.

The predominance of answers relating to friends or community (with 27% of respondents answering this question with something in this theme) indicates that young people's sense of their local area is shaped socially rather than just physically. While physical features such as sports facilities, parks and youth services are important, the strongest connection is to relationships and the social fabric of the area.

"What do you like most about your area and why?" *"The community and the people that are around me."*

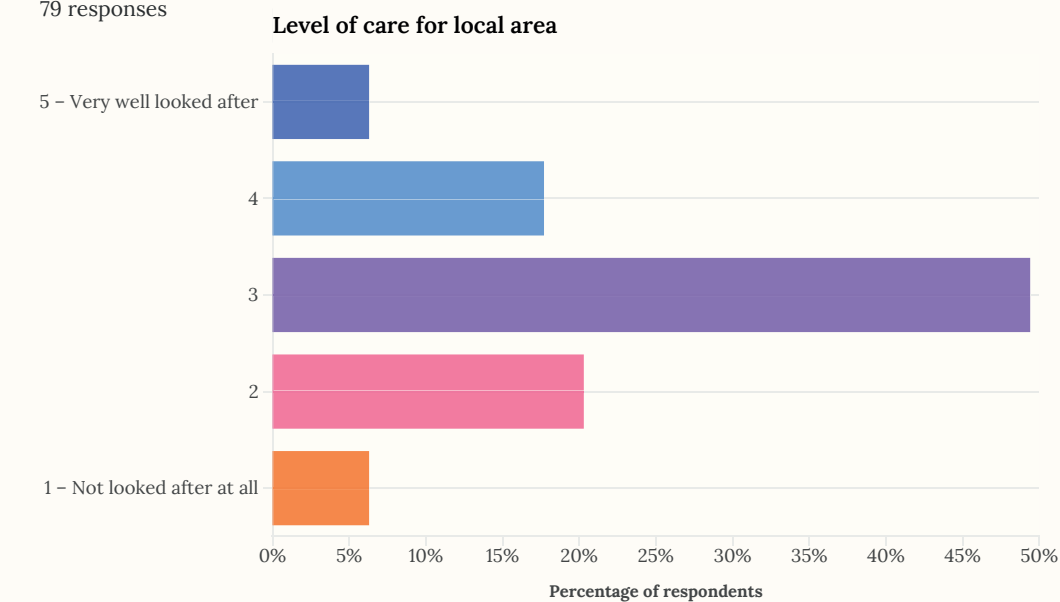### Do you feel the local authority looks after your area well?

1 = Not looked after at all, 5 = Very well looked after
79 Responses

Level of local authority care for area

Percentage of respondents
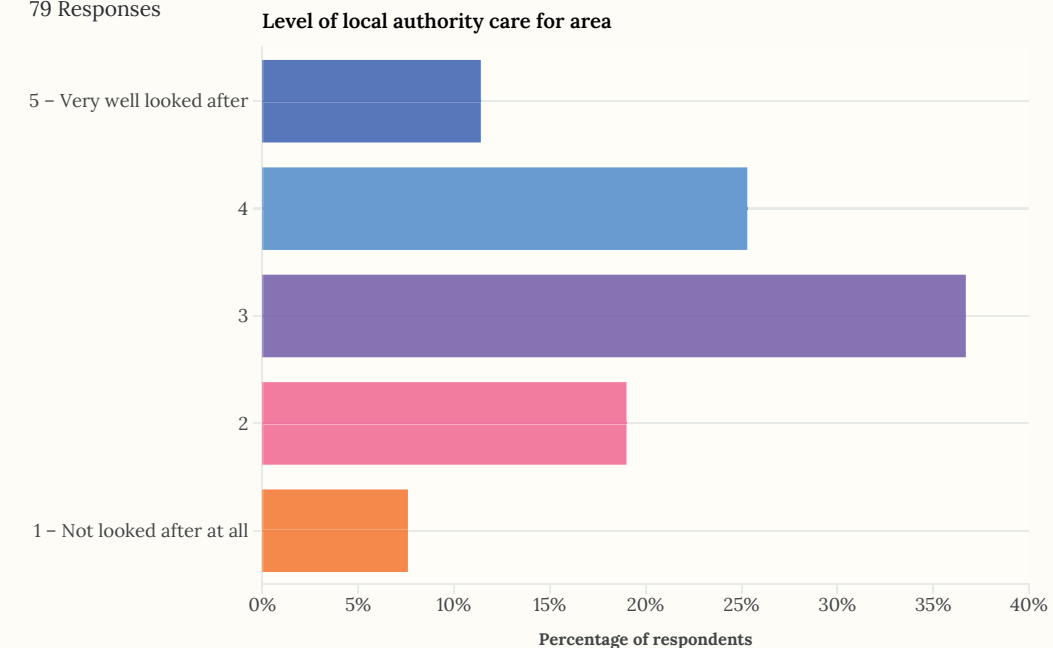
Do you think residents care for and look after your local area?

1 = Not looked after at all, 5 = Very well looked after
79 responses

Level of care for local area

Percentage of respondents

> ## "
> **If the local authority did care about the area then it wouldn't be as dangerous as it is.**
> "

For us to understand whether young people feel different community stakeholders care about their local area, participants were asked two paired questions: first, about how much residents care about the area, and second, how well the local authority looks after it. These questions were designed to encourage reflection on the roles people play in shaping and caring for their environment.

These findings underscore the mixed experiences of young people, who recognise effort but see significant room for improvement in both community and council maintenance. Some young people who were interviewed were unsure that the local authority cared enough about the area and felt the council could do better if it wanted to. Interview quotes around this question suggest that the perceived responsibility for upkeep by the local authority is repeatedly associated with crime-prevention/safety creation and not about physical upkeep.

That power-holders' care is evaluated in part in relation to a sense of safety and the presence of crime is important to bear in mind when analysing the findings of this research regarding the responsibilities of such a large development. Safety and the creation of safe space prevailed as important for youth researchers and participants.
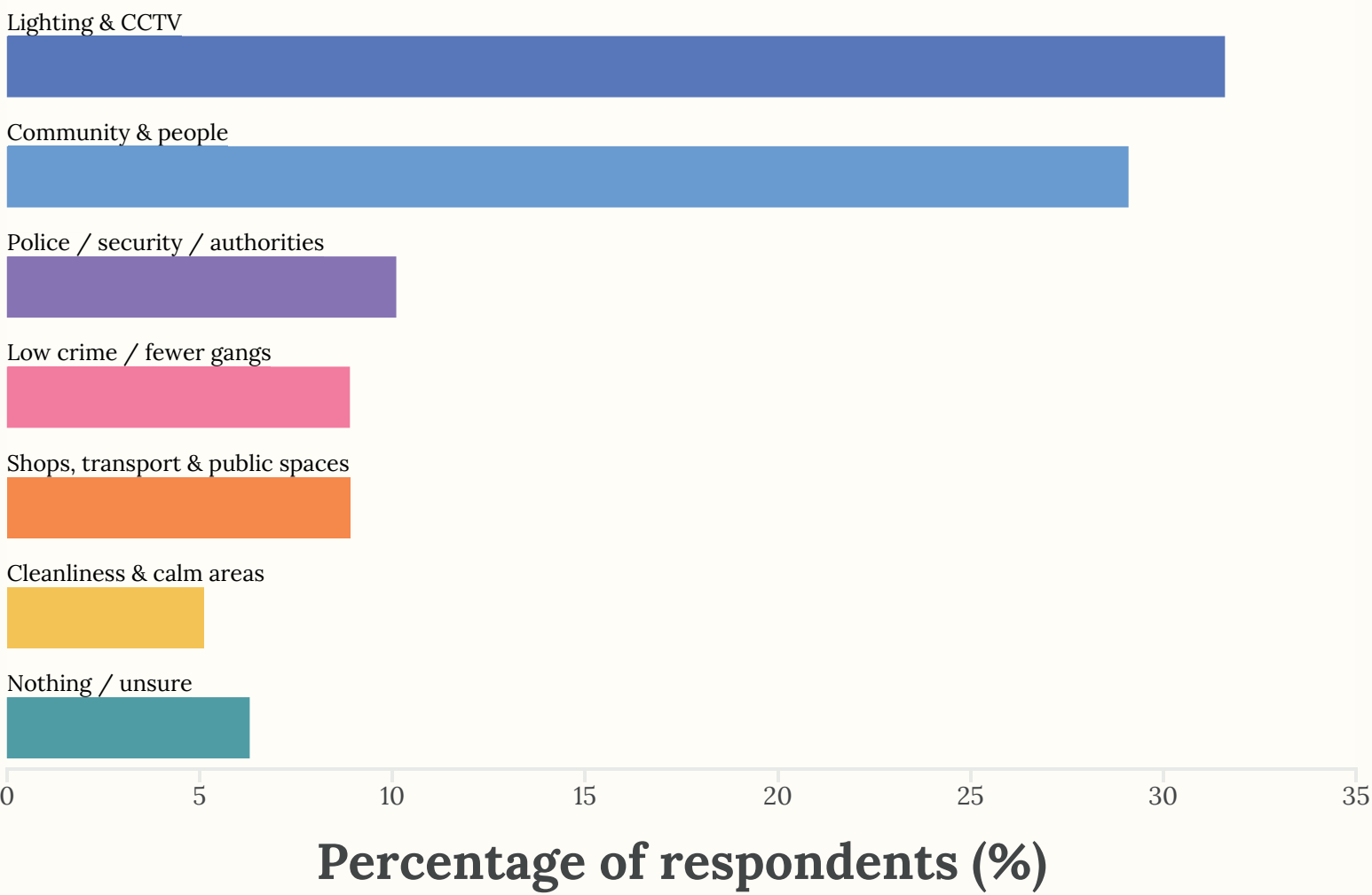
PERCEPTIONS OF SAFETY IN ISLINGTON

- Safety was a recurrent theme when thinking about their area, both for youth researchers and for participants.
- Despite young people reporting different levels of feelings of safety in their area, only a small proportion felt very safe. Interviews revealed that the type of safety reported by those who feel very safe may be a non-conventional safety.
- Safety for participants is created by both physical (CCTV, streetlights) and social aspects (familiarity, knowing people, trust).
- Young people showed mixed responses regarding the desirability of Islington as a place for them or their families to live. A quarter of respondents said if they could move somewhere else they would.

Safety was discussed at length by the youth researchers during the initial planning stages of the project. They shared concerns that new developments such as Holloway Park might not create environments that are safe for young people. They considered other estates in the area and were concerned about aspects such as the layout, how residents would feel at night and darker areas in the 'park' areas. This was explored through community mapping exercises and discussions around what made young people feel safe, and it was a clear priority to understand how their peers felt about this topic.

Young people were asked to rate their sense of safety on a scale from 1 ("not at all safe") to 5 ("very safe"), giving a picture of how safe they feel.

Most respondents reported feeling only "somewhat safe." The largest group (37%) gave a middle rating of 3, while around a third (33%) rated their safety as 1 or 2, suggesting that safety is a concern for them. A quarter (25%) rated it as 4, and only a small number (5%) said they felt "very safe." Overall, the results paint a mixed picture, showing that young people are frequently conscious of potential risks in their surroundings. A sense of safety was not related to gender in the sample.

What makes a local area feel safe? (n=79)

Percentage of respondents (%)

Bar chart categories (top to bottom):
- Lighting & CCTV
- Community & people
- Police / security / authorities
- Low crime / fewer gangs
- Shops, transport & public spaces
- Cleanliness & calm areas
- Nothing / unsure

"One young person that I spoke to, when it came up to what would make them feel safe in their area they didn't even have a clue of what to say, because like, they said, the area is that bad that they don't have any idea of what could make it better so it's quite upsetting to hear but hopefully with the information we're gathering and with this new estate that's getting built, we can do something about it."

To find out what creates a sense of safety, we also asked participants an open-text question about the characteristics of an area that make it feel safe to them. Responses were categorised by themes to highlight shared priorities and values across the group.

This told us that safety for these young people is shaped by both physical and social aspects. Physical infrastructure (such as street lighting and CCTV) and well-maintained and possibly supervised public spaces are seen as providing deterrence against unsafe behaviours, while social relationships, familiar faces and trust within the community are felt to build reassurance and give informal protection. This illustrates a safety that is created not only through formal measures or visible infrastructure but also through social networks, passive surveillance, and the perception of having local support systems. There was no statistically significant association between gender and what the participants say makes an area feel safe.

We were able to add really useful context to these findings by looking at some of the interview responses. Young people spoke about aspects such as gang protection, looking out for each other, and trusting people in their community, even those they don't know personally, as key. Participants shared that they feel safe when they are known and trusted by local people, when there are youth clubs and other social spaces that provide alternatives to unsafe streets, and when familiarity with their area mitigates perceived risks from gangs or crime.

One participant noted that a "perfect community" would be somewhere they feel safe even without knowing everyone personally, emphasising the importance of feeling you can trust in people around you that you don't know personally, as part of a sense of safety. Youth clubs were frequently highlighted as spaces where young people can enjoy themselves freely and escape the hypervigilance they feel is required from them in areas that are felt to be less safe. Another participant reflected on the importance of street-level knowledge, noting that some areas require constant vigilance, while other spaces are collectively understood by young people to be safe.
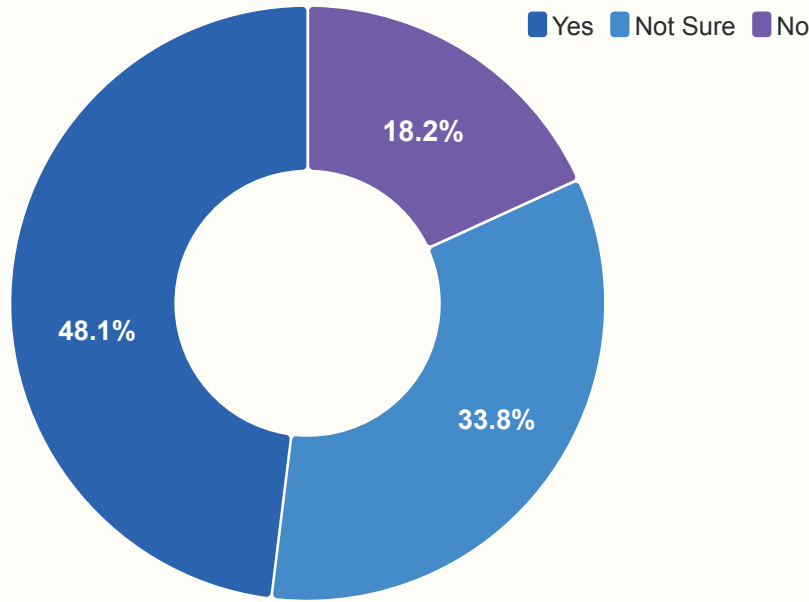
These insights suggest that safety, for our sample, goes beyond CCTV or street lights. It is also about being able to trust the people around you and knowing there is local support available when needed.

Passive surveillance, or "eyes on the street" is a term used in urban design to describe how a sense of safety and community can be built into and nurtured in an environment, by increasing ways for people to be naturally seen or observed by members of their community. Measures can include designing homes and amenities with windows and terraces or balconies that overlook streets and walkways and also encouraging everyday activities that bring people together in spaces. Jane Jacobs talked about this in The Death and Life of Great American Cities, where she argued that children and young people's use of outdoor spaces makes our neighbourhoods safer and creates a feeling of belonging and citizenship from an early age.[14]

14   Jane Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities (New York: Random House, 1961), page 35.

Would you recommend Islington as a place to live for your family?

Yes ■ Not Sure ■ No

- 18.2%
- 48.1%
- 33.8%

If you had a choice, would you choose to continue to live in Islington?

Yes ■ Not Sure ■ No

- 25.3%
- 45.6%
- 29.1%

When we asked participants whether they would recommend Islington as a place to live for their family, and whether they would choose to continue living there themselves, responses were varied. Just under half said yes in each case (48% for family, 46% for themselves), showing that many do see positive aspects of life in Islington, especially when thinking about others rather than themselves.

However, around 30% of participants answered, "not sure" or "maybe," for each question. While this could reflect any of the concerns or contradicting

feelings expressed in previous questions or, indeed, not expressed by the participants, it is clear that there was uncertainty or ambivalence amongst the sample when considering these questions.

It's also notable that more young people said "No" when considering their own future in Islington (25%) than when thinking about recommending it for family (18%). This could tell us that, while they might see the area as desirable for others, many personally hope to move elsewhere.

ASPIRATIONS AND PRIORITIES FOR THE HOLLOWAY PARK DEVELOPMENT

The intentional design of the survey and facilitation by peer researchers helped participants to access aspirational ideas about the Holloway Park development.

- Participants were in favour of sports facilities, green spaces, community infrastructure (including safety-focused elements like CCTV, well-lit spaces) and youth clubs being built on the Holloway Park development.
- Youth engagement, physical activity, mental health support and social connection are priorities for the participants.
- The participants believe that a youth club, an outdoor gym, a multi-use sports pitch, age-specific spaces and water fountains are facilities most likely to be used by them or their peers, indicating a demand for inclusive and practical infrastructure.

We wanted to find out what young people would like to see being constructed alongside new homes at Holloway Park. Participants were asked an open-text question, complemented by a size reference (approximately seven full football pitches), to help them visualise the potential of the space. We used this open format to allow young people to tell us their ideas for this new community without being led by pre-set options. This provided insight into their priorities for physical spaces as part of the new development, enhancing the findings we've described above.

When we grouped the young people's responses into categories, they revealed several commonly mentioned areas of interest. The four most frequently cited were:
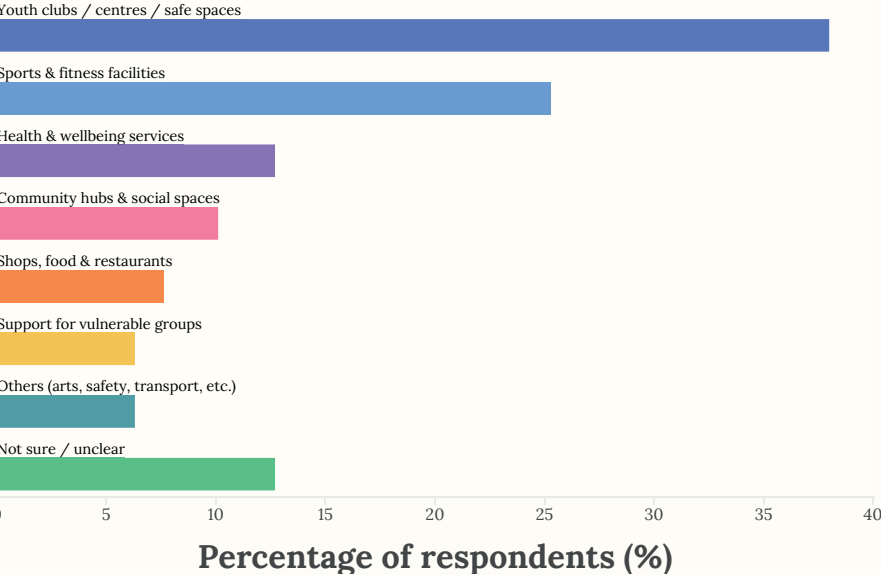
- Football and sports facilities, cited by 20.5% of respondents
- Parks and green spaces such as gardens, trees, and open areas (17.8%)
- Community infrastructure and wellbeing facilities, including safety-related elements like CCTV, well-lit spaces, and the provision of support or health services (17.8%)
- Youth clubs and services (15.1%)

Other suggestions included shops, housing, recreational activities and "things to do," and practical infrastructure, while around 16% of participants were unsure or did not specify anything.

While sports facilities were the most frequently mentioned single category, the margin is small compared to the other top categories. This suggests that young people's priorities are not dominated by sports, but are varied. Parks, wellbeing facilities, and youth services are valued almost equally, highlighting that our participants were thinking about both physical and social outcomes for the future Holloway Park community when they responded to this question. They may also have been considering the services that the local area is missing, with a lack of accessible, affordable football pitches in the borough, as well as a lack of skate parks, as previously noted.

The relatively low mention of youth clubs and services here (only 11 out of 60 respondents mentioned these) may reflect that most participants already attend youth services they value, and, therefore, if there were to be new youth clubs or services on the development, they may not imagine a new youth space being physically built as necessary. It is also possible that they see a youth club as a service

Community service priorities from survey (n=79)

Bar chart categories (top to bottom):
- Youth clubs / centres / safe spaces
- Sports & fitness facilities
- Health & wellbeing services
- Community hubs & social spaces
- Shops, food & restaurants
- Support for vulnerable groups
- Others (arts, safety, transport, etc.)
- Not sure / unclear

Percentage of respondents (%)

rather than a physical amenity, which the following data endorses. We also wanted to know what services participants thought should be provided for new residents, as opposed to just facilities built on the development. Here, an open-text format was used to stimulate imaginative and creative thinking. Youth researchers were eager to enable young people to propose ideas that go beyond immediate needs or familiar facilities and allow them to advocate for the community needs that they believe should be met by developers, rather than simply the building of physical infrastructure.

Here, the main priority of the group arose as youth clubs/centres and safe places with 38% of the sample mentioning something in this theme. Answers here also referenced some safety-related measures, including CCTV and lighting. This reflects influence from earlier questions in the survey, suggesting that participants' responses are likely shaped by both prior reflection and imaginative ideas. Participants were here able to consider the needs of future residents of different ages, not only young people, when responding.

> ## ..somewhere kids can enjoy themselves, but also somewhere that parents or adults can enjoy themselves.

The data shows our sample's priorities for service provision at Holloway Park are focused on youth engagement, physical activity, mental health support, and social connection. Here this appears to reflect not only their lived experience — with many already benefiting from youth services in the area — but also an understanding of the role such services play in providing safe, structured, and socially supportive spaces, in particular when thinking of others and potential future residents.

It also illustrates how participants value community spaces as being more than a simple physical amenity, but rather as created spaces where safety and trust are built and maintained. In interviews, young people's answers shed light on how this is both down to their peers and to the presence of "good" youth workers.

In interviews, young people consistently distinguish between "inside" spaces such as youth clubs or services that offer security and opportunities for self-expression, and the 'outside' environment of the streets, parks and open spaces, where safety can be more uncertain.

We wanted to understand what facilities young people felt would be most used by their peer group, if they were available at Holloway Park. Participants were asked to indicate which options they or people of a similar age would use. The youth researchers compiled a long list, and eliminated repetition through discussions around what their peers would react to and the type of things which have been noted on other developments. This approach captures both personal interest and perceived value for their social group, in order to access insight into potential engagement with the new provision.
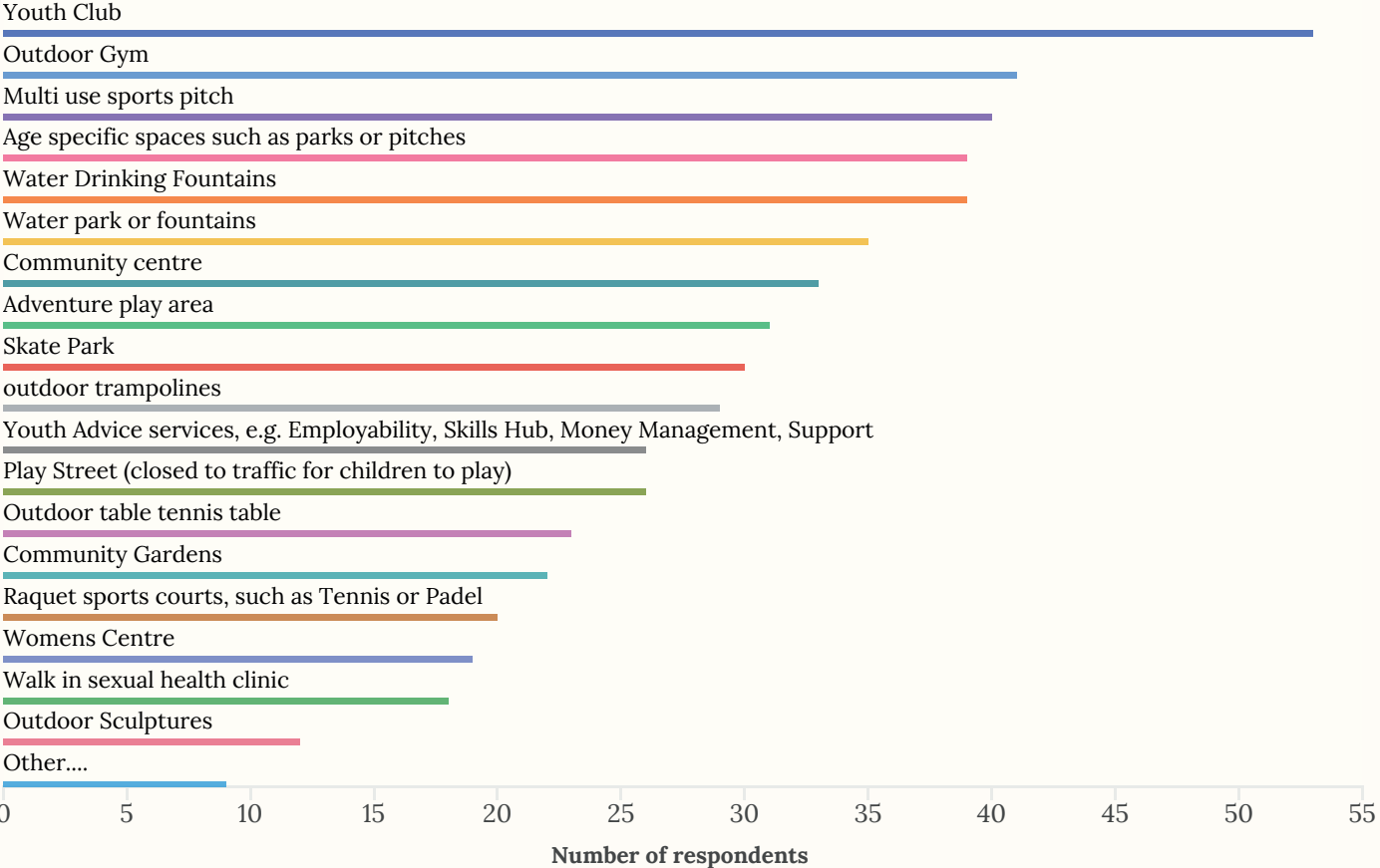
A clear preference for providing facilities aimed at young people emerged. This was the option with the most agreement amongst participants by a significant amount, with 67.1% of respondents indicating

If these things were provided on the Holloway Park development, do you think you or your peers (friends or family of a similar age) would use them (tick all that apply) 79 responses

Bar chart categories (top to bottom):
- Youth Club
- Outdoor Gym
- Multi use sports pitch
- Age specific spaces such as parks or pitches
- Water Drinking Fountains
- Water park or fountains
- Community centre
- Adventure play area
- Skate Park
- outdoor trampolines
- Youth Advice services, e.g. Employability, Skills Hub, Money Management, Support
- Play Street (closed to traffic for children to play)
- Outdoor table tennis table
- Community Gardens
- Raquet sports courts, such as Tennis or Padel
- Womens Centre
- Walk in sexual health clinic
- Outdoor Sculptures
- Other....

Number of respondents

they or their peers would use a youth club at Holloway Park. That young people who already attend youth services report a willingness to use new youth provision at Holloway Park themselves and/or that they believe their peers would benefit from such youth space on the development, is a notable, recurring finding of the research.

The high interest in youth clubs, more than twice that for youth advice services, mirrors survey responses highlighting the importance of safe, semi-structured "inside" spaces where young people can co-create, express themselves, and socialise, rather than services focused on external advice or support.

The other services which around half of the participants agreed would be used were: an outdoor gym, a multi-use sports pitch, age-specific spaces and water fountains. The data shows that participants agree that more static or decorative features, such as outdoor sculptures would not be used by their peer group. Respondents believe their local peers need and value active, social, safe and health-focused spaces.

CONCLUSIONS

"
Knowing who you're surrounded by and also accessible and open for everyone to enjoy any activities and things like that. I would say that's a perfect community.
"

The young people in our sample conveyed through their experience and responses that for them, the role of housing developments and community spaces is less about providing physical amenities and more about providing the safe spaces in which young people can be free to co-create the support systems and understanding they want and need from their local community – not just their peers, but people of different ages. Young people told the youth researchers that what they value most about their local area is their friends and their community. This is an important reminder for everyone who is involved in planning and developing housing and communities. Physical spaces should not only serve a function but should also help people to connect, build trust, and develop a sense of belonging. However, you cannot have a sense of belonging if you do not feel you have anything to belong to. Places that allow young people to meet, play, and socialise safely can strengthen the social fabric of the area, enhancing what young people already value and enjoy.

High levels of overcrowding in Islington - significantly higher than the national average[15] - with thousands of children and young people lacking space at home, may mean that spaces where they can socialise outside the home, but not on the street, are even more precious to them. The impacts on young people who do not have enough space at home have been documented with the Institute of Health Equity finding that "overcrowded conditions are linked with increased stress, anxiety, and family tension due to lack of privacy, limited personal space, and conflict within households."[16]

When it comes to safety, the findings show that it isn't only about CCTV cameras, lighting, or clean and well-kept streets, although the young people who took part in our research appreciated these aspects. Safety is also deeply social. Young people's sense of security comes from the people around them, their networks, their relationships and the sense of trust they feel in a space. For new developments like Holloway Park, this means that safety has to be thought about in two ways: firstly, through physical measures such as lighting and design for passive surveillance, creating deterrents in busy areas, and access to physical spaces, but also through the social dynamics that make spaces feel welcoming, trusted, and having a community. These dynamics do not develop by accident - they must be actively created.

Across the survey responses, interviews and the project film, it's clear that young people already have an awareness of their local environment and what makes them feel they belong – or that they

don't. They highlighted places that are both safe and accessible, including well-lit outdoor areas, sports pitches, youth clubs and community spaces. These are the places where they feel free and comfortable to express themselves. The young people also expressed appreciation for the work that goes into creating and supporting welcoming spaces - they understand that these spaces have to be

fostered and do not exist without care and effort by trusted adults.

Young people want to be involved in making decisions about their daily lives, raising problems when they occur and being part of working out how to address what is not working. Their views must be taken into account, as part of the planning and design process and into the future as the homes and amenities are finished and the Holloway Park site is populated. Our research shows that many young people are keen to share their views as long as they feel they will be listened to, respected and have an impact. Moreover, when the time they take to share their views is honoured appropriately. This is supported by Islington Council's Youth Safety Strategy, which includes the following commitment to meaningful consultation with young people:

"Hearing and responding to the voices and views of our children and young people is essential. It is important that we provide the forums and platforms for this to be done and that we continually ensure the voices of our children directly contribute to and help shape the design and structure of services which exist for them and their families."[17]

What is not required is that private developers building within the borough adopt the same strategy.

The implications of the research findings for Holloway Park are clear. Physical design and space allocation will play a major role in shaping whether young people experience the development as inclusive and welcoming or whether it risks being inaccessible, representing unease or taking on negative associations. In youth understanding, spaces can quickly become labelled as either safe or unsafe, and may gain a reputation as such far beyond the immediate area. This means that the way that Holloway Park is designed and managed will have a ripple effect across the wider community, especially for young people – this is a big responsibility the developers must not ignore.

The research nurtured and conducted by these young people boasts another clear takeaway: the development must go beyond providing buildings or facilities. It should create genuinely neutral, accessible, and welcoming environments where young people (and people of all ages) can form connections, build trust, and feel part of a community. Spaces that are open to all, free of discrimination. That means combining physical infrastructure, such as green spaces, sports areas, youth hubs, safe and visible paths, with opportunities that not only bring people together but support them to have agency.

In 2019, Islington's Design Review Panel raised concerns around overdevelopment and high density on the site following the publication of Peabody's plans, and architects have indicated there should not be more than 800 units on a site of this size. Despite

15   Office for National Statistics, Overcrowding and Under-Occupancy by Household Characteristics, England and Wales: Census 2021.
16   Housing Learning and Improvement Network (Housing LIN) and Greater London Authority. Housing and Health Inequalities in London: Evidence Review. London: Housing Learning and Improvement Network, 2021, pages 13-15.

17   Islington Council, Youth Safety Strategy, 2020–25, "Our Approach" section, pages 25–32, https://www.islington.gov.uk/~/media/sharepoint-lists/public-records/communitysafetyandemergencies/

this, Peabody now plans to build up to around 1,200 units and we can therefore reasonably expect between 3,000-4,000 residents on the site. We note that there are no general use community facilities proposed. The overdevelopment of the site and underprovision of community facilities risks achieving the exact opposite of what the research suggests is needed, to the detriment of the future and existing local communities as a whole.

Young people have the right to have a say in how their communities are created and how they are maintained and developed. If this is done well, and in ongoing consultation with young people, Holloway Park can become a place where young people feel both secure and empowered: this will benefit not just our young people but the wider community as a whole.

Recommendations

In light of the findings described in this report, we ask that Peabody and Islington Council urgently review current plans as well as future proposals, especially to address the underprovision of community facilities and the overdevelopment of Holloway Park. Decision-makers must consider how the needs highlighted by these young people can be met.

Careful design and regular maintenance of accessible indoor spaces where young people feel safe and visible is essential, but is not enough on its own: the development of social ties and a sense of belonging should be actively fostered, and supported with funding.

Provide safe and welcoming, well-designed outdoor spaces where people of all ages can engage in structured and semi-structured activities such as sports and play, as well as having freedom to relax alone and with friends.

Actively develop and nurture physical spaces to provide a range of activities and opportunities to access support, learn skills and

socialise with a range of people. Acknowledge the importance of the role of trusted adults in facilitating the enjoyment and participation of young people in spaces.

Explore ways to consult with young people including peer-led methods and partnerships with experienced and trusted youth organisations to ensure the perspectives of young people inform development and town planning. Consider this by using methods that take into consideration how gender and age impact young people's views and what they want for their neighbourhoods.

Ensure that young participants are kept informed in the fullest possible ways about how their input has been taken into account as well as further opportunities to get involved. Feedback loops are vital to build trust and good community relations. Strongly consider ongoing mechanisms to involve young people in governance and decisionmaking, such as panels or steering groups rather than one-off consultations. Young people have a right to have a consistent voice about their homes and communities.

HUMAN RIGHTS STATEMENT

The priorities raised by young people in this research are reflections of the need for Islington Council, Peabody, and other authorities to respect, protect and fulfil basic human rights. The young people are, in this research, articulating what they need to help them realise these rights, and it is imperative that they are heard.

We have the right to participate in decision-making that affects our lives, and young people are no exception. Under international human rights agreements including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), every young person is entitled to the essentials needed to live a healthy, safe and fulfilling life - this includes a decent standard of living, health, rest, leisure, and participation in cultural life and the arts. As duty bearers and responsible actors under international law, Islington Council and Peabody hold responsibilities for the realisation of human rights in relation to this development, and so have a responsibility to direct their resources and decision-making power towards respecting, protecting and fulfilling them.

Throughout the report, we see a vision not only for improved physical spaces, but a community built on positive relationships, trust and safety. Safety is both structural and social to young people - only achievable when they are treated with respect and dignity, and their human rights are available to them.

In calling for safer, cleaner and better-maintained streets, housing areas and public spaces, young people claim their right to an adequate standard of living (Article 11 of ICESCR), and call for it to be realised. Similarly, youth demands for affordable sports facilities and green environments that reduce stress and fear can be understood as calls for the right to health (and the clean, healthy and sustainable environment that makes this possible) to be respected (Article 12 of ICESCR).

We would also point to indicators that young people in Islington's right to cultural life under ICESCR and to rest, leisure and play under Article 31 of UNCRC need attention - the research indicates that youth clubs, community hubs, and creative spaces are vital for young people's realisation of their rights, but provision is lacking.

As a human rights-based organisation, Community Plan for Holloway would advocate for the Council and Peabody to take the responses in this report seriously, and respond to them transparently. We would suggest taking a community-led and rights-based approach to the shaping of this development, to guarantee that duties to respect human rights and ensure equity are upheld as the Holloway Park community emerges.

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justfair.org.uk

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APPENDIX

Key insights: Islington

Work

Challenging labour market. Unemployment rates and the proportion of claimants in Islington remain above the averages for both London and England, particularly affecting women, ethnic minorities and disabled residents. The proportion of 16–17 year olds not in education, employment or training (NEET) is also higher than the London average. Accordingly, the development is situated in an area experiencing high levels of Employment deprivation.

Higher educational attainment. Although the borough shows comparatively higher levels of educational attainment overall, particularly at degree level, the development is located within one of several pockets of mild to high Education deprivation, with concentrations around Laycock and Holloway.

Economy

Entrepreneurship is on the rise. The number of micro enterprises in the borough grew by 2.9% between 2022 and 2024. Professional Services remains the largest employment sector, followed by Information & Communication.

Worsening wellbeing indicators. While self-reported wellbeing indicators have fluctuated over time, the most recent data shows that high anxiety in Islington exceeds exceeds both regional and national levels. The proportion of local residents with long term physical or mental health conditions in employment is also notably higher.

Need for more well-paid local jobs. Male workers earn a median weekly pay over £164 higher than their female counterparts. A slight gap between resident-based and workplace-based earnings may also suggest that local jobs are not consistently filled by local residents. Several clusters of high Income deprivation are observed across Islington, including the area surrounding the development.

Community

Significant barriers to housing and services. The number of households in temporary accommodation per 1,000 in the borough rose by 59% between 2020 and 2023. Similarly, a large cluster of high deprivation in the Barriers to Housing and Services domain extends from the north to the south of Islington, including the area of the development.

Mixed health outcomes. Islington records higher mortality rates from preventable causes and elevated admission episodes for alcohol-related conditions compared to both London and England. Hospital admissions for mental health conditions among under-18s are also above the London average.

Concerning crime rates. The borough reports significantly higher crime rates, nearly double the national average. Rates of violent crime are also persistently above those reported across London. Deprivation mapping suggests high to severe Crime deprivation throughout.

Planet

Low recycling rates. While total household waste in Islington fell by 4.4% between 2020 and 2024, the proportion sent for reuse, recycling or composting remains below both London and national levels.

Decreasing CO2 emissions. Between 2020 and 2023, CO_2 emissions from Islington's domestic and commercial sectors fell by 18.8% and 4.4%, respectively, while emissions from industrial sectors rose by 13.5%. Per capita CO_2 emissions fell by 7.1% and remain below both regional and national levels.

Scarce green space. Islington offers limited access to green and blue space compared to neighbouring boroughs, with most areas falling below the 10% threshold. Around the development, availability drops further, with coverage falling below 5%.

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Youth Venues
Prospex
Elthorne Youth Hub
Mary's Youth Club
Highbury Roundhouse
Arsenal in the Community

Film produced by
Melissa Herman

Film edited by
Sian Lattimer

Film sound edit by
Wid Cook

Research design, data analysis and reporting supported by
Asha Lyons Sumroy

Report editing by
Melissa Herman
Naomi Peck
Guilene Marco

Report lay out and design
Lukman Ipese

Report lay out and design support
Adriana Cornejo Capdevila

Use of AI statement
To increase accessibility to the process, anonymised data was initially worked through an OpenAI model to perform thematic groupings and, separately, to test for statistical significance. Data was handled and analysed throughout according to traditional research methods.

COMMUNITY PLAN FOR HOLLOWAY