

# Imagining and Co-creating a More Livable City: Insights from Lived Experience Storytelling Workshops and Walks with Migrant, Refugee, and Minoritised Ethnic Communities in London

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# Background

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- UKRI AHRC-funded 'Abundance Project' (3 years) aimed at developing community-led ways to facilitate more equitable beneficial engagement with cultural and green community assets
- 'Abundance mindset': recognising skills, abilities and resources in communities (no deficit-view)
- Solutions catalysing local action on mental health and wellbeing to co-create healthier and more equitable, inclusive, and livable urban futures

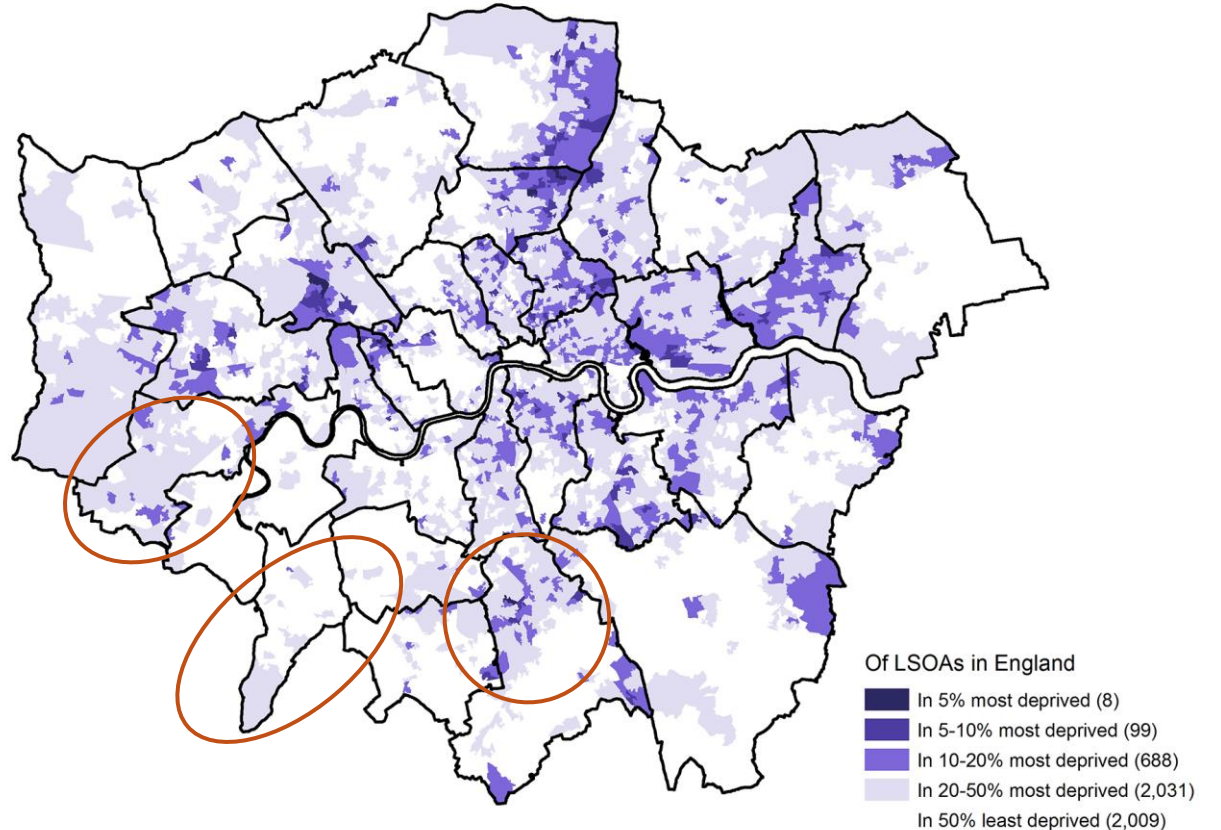


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# Background

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- Place-based approach centering lived experience of community members
- 5 community hubs in South-West London
  - Asian Resource Centre Croydon
  - Connect North Korea
  - Refugee Action Kingston
  - Kingston Voluntary Action
  - Reach Foundation Feltham
- 27 Community Voice Champions (CVCs) bringing their lived experience into every part of the project





## Context

- The communities we are researching with have been on the forefront of facing
  - historical and institutional injustices and racisms
  - intersecting inequalities and social exclusions
  - effects of austerity measures
- Often find themselves
  - in marginalised positions
  - living in more unhealthy and deprived urban environments
  - hampered in engaging with green and cultural community assets

# Methodological approach

- Mixed methods project incorporating creative and participatory methods with the CVCs
  - **Creative writing and lived experience storytelling workshops**  
(Cycle of 12 collaborative workshops, mix of in-person at community hubs and online bringing everyone together)
  - **Community walks**  
(One per community hub)



# Aims and focus

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- To explore different lived experiences of navigating intersecting and place-based inequalities and their effects on one's sense of wellbeing and urban livability.
- Focus on green and cultural community assets, places, and spaces; how they are perceived, accessed, and used by different communities.
  - How do these experiences sit within (creative health) policymaking and urban planning?
  - How can green and cultural community assets be leveraged to encourage opportunities for better wellbeing and to co-create a more livable city?



# Emerging stories of livability in the city

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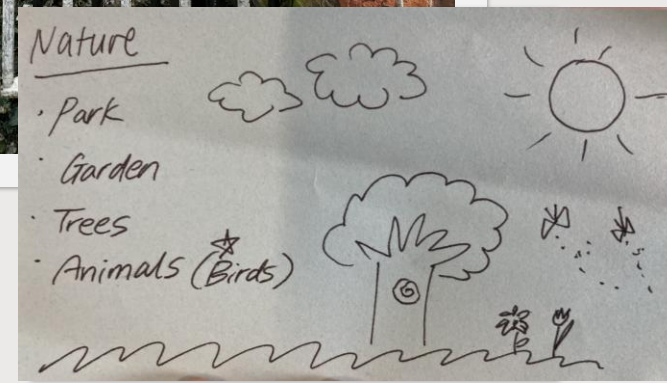
- Highlighting places and spaces that provide respite and refuge from the struggles of navigating and making one's life in the city
- Connecting to places that detach from the city evoking memories of the past and associations of home, heritage, rootedness, warmth beyond the immediate urban environment
- Varying connotations of un/belonging and dis/connectedness
- Criss-crossed with anxieties around safety and experiences of discrimination and racisms



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# Respite and refuge

"Every day, I walk through my local park, where a peaceful river flows through. Birds nest in the trees, ducks swim along the water and sometimes, I see fish jumping. I stand on a little bridge, listening to the gentle sound of the water as it flows over rocks and under the bridge. It's so calming, like the water is washing my worries away. Here, I can breathe and feel at peace. I found this comfort in nature after a very hard time in my life. [...] I felt lost and empty, unsure of what to do. Slowly, I started to feel better by spending time in nature. Walking through the parks, caring for my garden and working in my allotment gave me something positive to focus on. [...] These green spaces make me feel connected, calm and strong again. Nature has become my refuge. [...] These places have given me hope and a chance to start again."



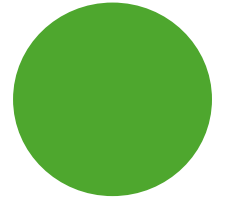
A photograph of a red train with yellow and blue accents on a track. The train is partially obscured by trees and a grassy field in the foreground. The sky is overcast and grey. The text "South Western Railway" is visible on the side of the train.

# Roots and memories

“Visiting the park makes me nostalgic. It takes me back to my family-owned farms in Pakistan when I was a child. There’s something about the smell of the grass and the earth, and the sight of bare open fields that brings up memories of my childhood. I especially feel this nostalgia when I see the early morning dew or watch families gathering. It reminds me of quiet, peaceful mornings and the closeness of family with aunts, uncles, cousins and my grandparents all on one tractor travelling around our farm. It feels like reconnecting with my roots, giving me a comforting sense of familiarity and bringing up beautiful distant memories, miles from home. A visit to my park offers me a slice of my past, giving me a sense of calmness and a way to feel happy, a way to relax and destress. This nostalgia has given me a priceless source of peace and joy, making me proud of my heritage.”

# Un/belonging and dis/connectedness

“After my knee operation, life felt lonely and difficult. Everyday tasks were hard, and I missed feeling connected. Then I heard about Roots and Shoots, a community gardening group [...] from the moment I arrived, everyone was warm and welcoming [...] it turned out to be about much more than gardening. It was a place where I could reconnect with nature, others and myself. From the first day, I felt a warmth I hadn't felt in ages. Many of the people there spoke my language, understood my background. The scents of the herbs and the sight of green leaves brought me a sense of home and comfort, a calm and joy I hadn't realised I needed. [...] Each week, I looked forward to gathering with people who understood me and welcomed me fully. The green space and caring community became my refuge. In the middle of busy Croydon, it was my special place, giving me peace, joy and a sense of community when I needed it most. This garden gave me hope, friendship and a new place to belong.”



# Safety, discrimination and racisms

"I have been fortunate that we have nice green areas, where we can go for walks, the problems I have encountered have been dogs not on a leash, and owners thinking everyone loves dogs, which I've been traumatised in the past by having dogs set on us due to racism."

"I think why those of ethnic minority communities they go with numbers is because of that discrimination. Because if you're by yourself you could be an easy target. "

"So, for us [South Asian community, Muslims, women with headscarves] it would be things like where they think there won't be any racism or Islamophobia, especially, you know, with the riots, the Southport riots that started. Do you know there were so many women who used to go to the park together, moms, after dropping children off to school, the moms would get together and go to parks. They completely stopped that. So, there was a big impact in that."



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## A more livable and just city?

“The planning system has the transformative power to reduce inequalities in wealth and quality of life between groups and to create the conditions for an environment in which all communities can thrive and realise shared and individual aspirations. But planning processes, either through action or inaction, can also do real harm, by reinforcing entrenched inequalities and forms of exclusion.”

Sources:

Image 1: Unsplash

Image 2: The UKCATPeople

TCPA (2019) London - Planning for a Just City?, p. 7

# Concluding thoughts

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- Situated, embodied, multi-sensory and relational ways of knowing that were produced unearthing personal, community, and place-based sensitivities
- Lived experience stories reveal the intricate relationships between the past and present and offer great potential for imagining future alternative ways of being, living, and thriving together in the city
- Speak to the urgency of making urban planning more community-led and to pursue more empathetic decision-making processes through embedding and valuing lived experience
- Real possibilities of bridging questions of social and environmental justice and sustainability, building infrastructures of care, and co-creating a more livable urban environment



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# Thank you!

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Project website:

[The Abundance Project | Chelsea](https://abundanceproject.chelsea.ac.uk)

Project blog:

<https://abundanceproject.myblog.arts.ac.uk>

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