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Understanding how Green and Cultural Assets can be used to improve mental health for refugees and asylum seekers – Lessons from the Abundance Project

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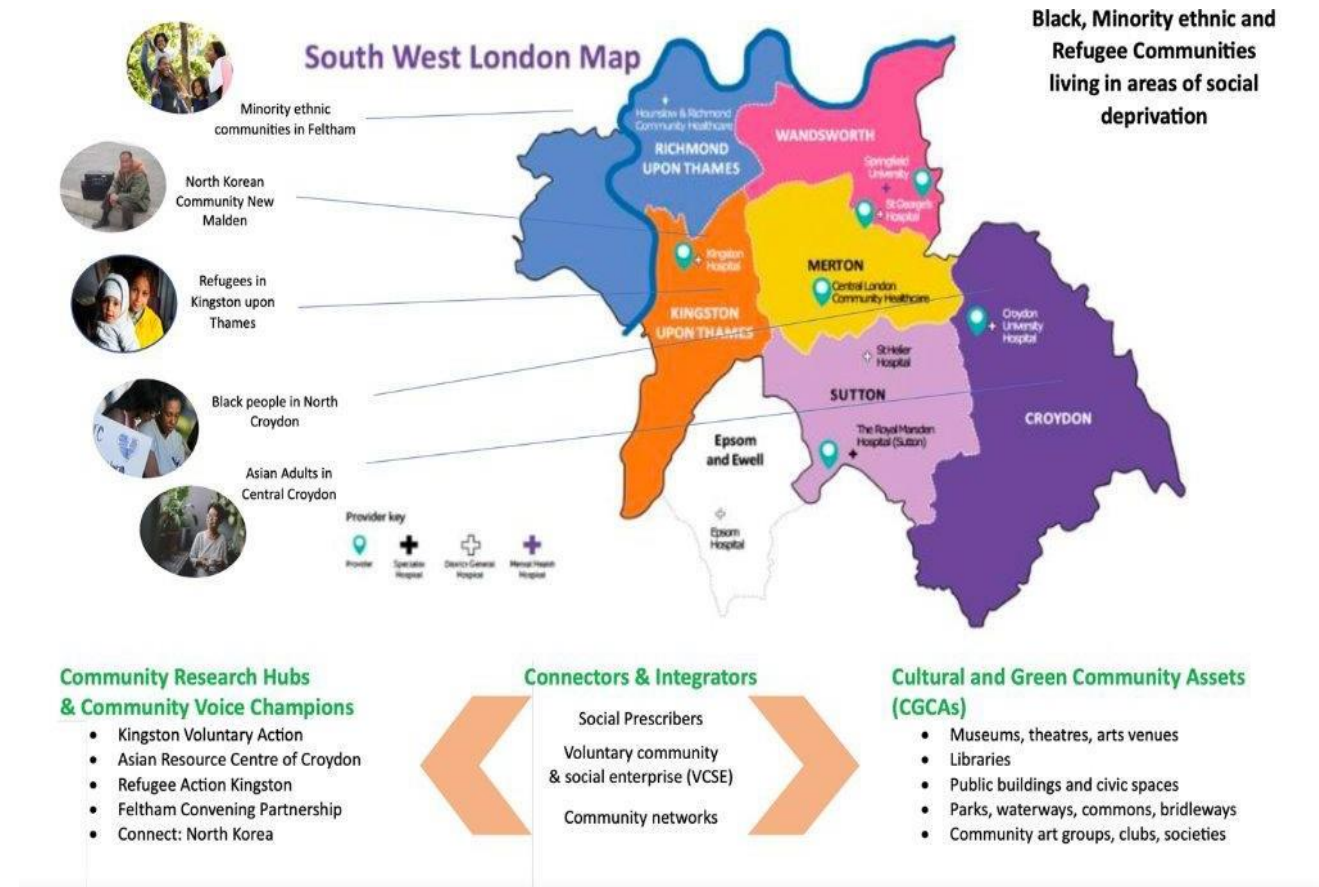
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Background

- Refugees and asylum seekers are disproportionately impacted by mental health problems (Lloyd et al., 2024, Marmot et al., 2020)
- Unique challenges and trauma they face prior to migration, the migration journey but also in trying to assimilate in their host countries
- Least likely to engage with cultural and green community assets that support mental health (Collins et al., 2020)
- Or social prescribing that could improve mental health and reduce health inequalities



Aims

Developing and evaluating community-led ways to encourage engagement with cultural and green assets

1. understand the mental health challenges of refugees and asylum seekers and their perceptions and lived experiences of using green and cultural assets
2. co-designing community-led interventions to encourage beneficial engagement with green and cultural assets.



Work Package 1: Lived experience storytelling

Methods:

- 5 ethnic minority and refugee community- based organisations in Southwest London UK recruited 27 volunteer community voice champions (CVCs)
- Cycle of 12 collaborative, community focused, creative writing, lived experience story telling workshops
- 141 individual lived experience stories collected from community members
- Thematically analysed using inductive and deductive coding (Braun & Clark, 2023)
- Emergent themes sense-checked with CVCs



Work Package 1: Lived experience storytelling

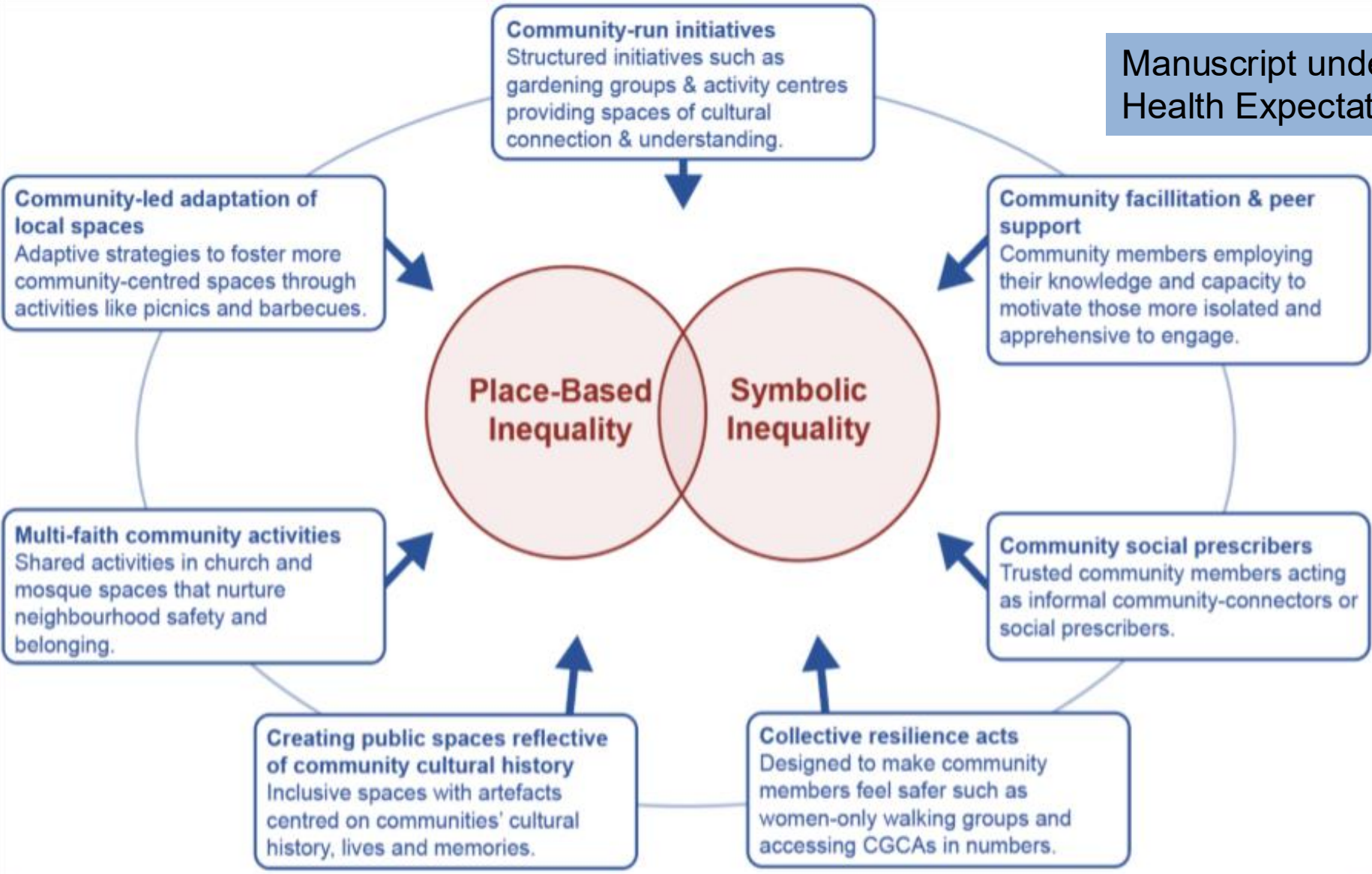
Findings

1. Cultural Influence on Mental Health
2. Unknown spaces and Unfriendly Environments
3. Creating Spaces of Safety and Belonging

It's normal live with fears, struggling, tense. You know you don't have a choice. As refugees (we) have to grapple with loss of identity, loss of place so there is a huge importance for creating a feeling of belonging and home here
(CVC - Workshop 1)

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
(CVC 18 - Workshop 3)

Imagine if we had more spaces where everyone felt welcome, more events that brought us together, more ways to celebrate who we are and where we're from
(CVC 19 - Letter)



Meso-Level Cultural Processes

Identification (e.g. racialisation, stigmatisation)
Rationalisation (e.g. standardisation, evaluation)

Work Package 3: Co-design workshops

Methods:

- Co-design: inclusive, participatory approach where diverse stakeholders collaboratively develop ideas, systems, or experiences emphasising mutual learning, and collective decision-making throughout the design process (Sanders & Stappers, 2008)
- 18 co-design workshops to design 6 bespoke, scalable interventions (11 conducted)
- Partner meetings, desk-based research to consolidate and validate insights
- Participants: Community hubs, members of the community, local authority, NHS, social prescribers, owners of cultural and green spaces, arts and health organisations, industry



Interventions in progress

Develop Universal Access Scheme for Central London Museums

- Lead Community Hub: Refugee Action Kingston
- Problem: Safety concerns, fear of being alone and cultural relevance
- Framework or "ladder of standards" or developing different pathways into museum engagement.

When I'm alone safety concerns, feel targeted in Central London, more exposed. Can I ask someone for help or directions? Sometimes when I do, people think I'm a threat or a beggar.

Developing Access Scheme to Access and Navigate Large Green Spaces/Parks

- Lead Community Hub: Kingston Voluntary Action
- Problem: Safety concerns, language barriers and feeling unwelcome
- Access scheme including training for community leaders, multilingual signage, trail maps, guided visits, travel bursaries.

I think anyone who's been to [local park], it's not accessible to diverse communities, either due to local demographics or people not being welcome.

Interventions in progress

Modifying a Mobile App to Map Micro-assets

Lead Community Hub: Connect North Korea

- Problem: Culturally specific and attractive assets can be micro and invisible local authorities and asset platforms.
- Facilitating mapping of micro-assets, allowing people to connect and share activities and multi-language function



Big places like community centres are easy to find on a map. But the activities that people enjoy most, like sharing an allotment, a trip to Brighton to fish are invisible. Nobody writes them down. They live in conversations. We want to work on how to share these activities more widely, without losing what makes them special.

Conclusion

- Shift from individual treatment models to community-led, place-based, culturally attuned approaches
- Nature and culture offer sensory, social, and spiritual benefits but require safety and access
- Abundance mindset: recognise community strengths, knowledge, and creativity as resources
- Partnerships between institutions and communities are essential to dismantle barriers and build trust



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



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