



# Exploring London's Public Realm

Final report

February 2020



# Introduction

# Background and context

- The public realm is a crucial component of any city. It is the space in-between buildings and the ‘glue’ that holds them together. It is where people carry out a broad range of daily activities in the city: meeting, relaxing, eating, playing, working. The spaces that make up the public realm are also broad. As defined in the draft new London Plan, the public realm includes:

***“...all the publicly-accessible space between buildings, whether public or privately owned, from alleyways and streets to squares and open spaces, including the Thames and London’s waterways. Some internal or elevated spaces can also be considered as part of the public realm, such as markets, shopping malls, sky gardens, viewing platforms, museums or station concourses.”***

- London’s public realm is constantly changing, as areas and public spaces throughout the city are being developed. The draft new London Plan states that the public realm should be:

***“well-designed, safe, accessible, inclusive, attractive, well-connected, related to the local and historic context, and easy to understand, service and maintain.”***

- The Mayor is committed to ensuring London’s public realm achieves all of the above, and that its spaces (whether publicly or privately owned) are open and accessible for all Londoners.



# Research objectives

- The Mayor of London is developing a Public London Charter, the first of its kind in London, setting out rights and responsibilities for users and owners of public spaces. The Centre for London were commissioned by the Greater London Authority (GLA) to review and explore the management and usage of public and privately-owned spaces, to inform this Public London Charter.
- Alongside this research, the GLA wanted to understand in more depth how Londoners are currently using public spaces, and what they think of them. The Opinion Research team were commissioned by the GLA's Regeneration team to explore in-depth Londoners' perspectives of the public realm. Specifically, this research explored the following:
  - How is the public realm currently being used?
  - What are Londoners' experiences of the public realm?
  - How important is the public realm to Londoners?
  - What do Londoners think of private-public spaces?
  - What is the link between the public realm and social integration?
  - What should the public realm look like in the future?

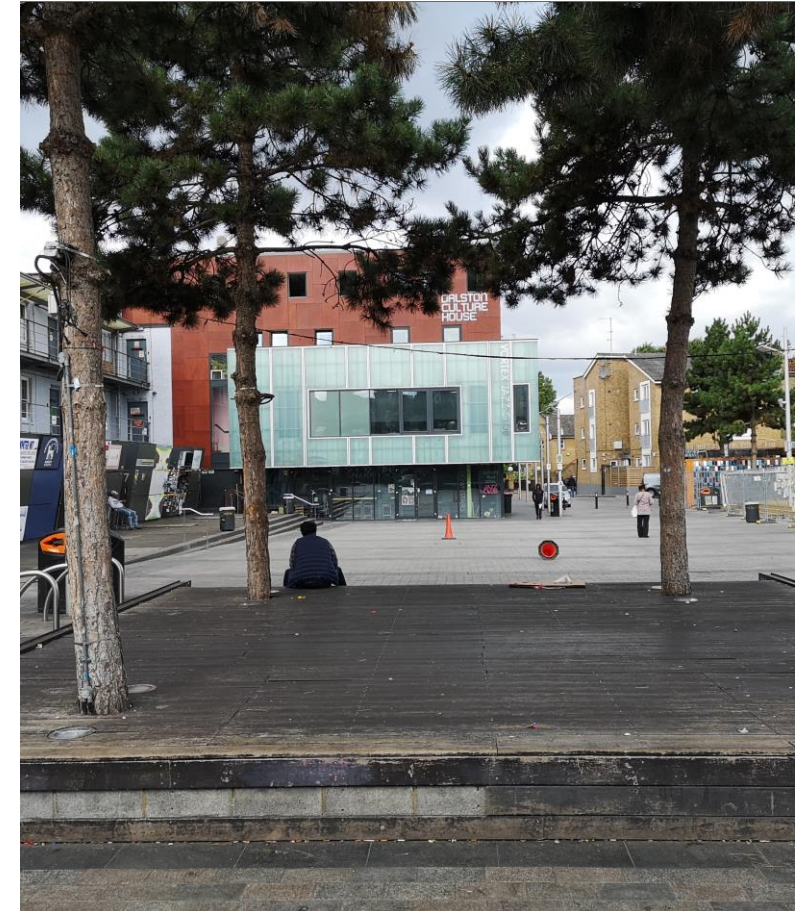


# Methodology

- To explore the research questions on the previous page, we designed and delivered a mixed-method project which included in-depth qualitative interviews, mobile ethnography, non-participant observation and a representative survey of Londoners.
- The qualitative research and non-participant observation took place at 10 public spaces across London. These sites were identified with support from the Regeneration team and focused on local 'every day' public spaces that Londoners come across – these included public spaces in a mix of Inner and Outer London boroughs with proximity to high density residential areas. We purposely chose to exclude the larger and more touristy or corporate public or privately-owned spaces such as Granary Square, Trafalgar Square, Crossrail Place Roof Garden, More London etc. For this research we also excluded parks in our definition of 'public spaces' and have referred to parks separately throughout this report.
- Participants for the qualitative research and mobile ethnography were recruited from Roots Research. The sample included a mix of ages (all 18+), ethnicities, and socio-economic status.
- An overview of the methodologies used are provided on subsequent slides.

# Methodology: in-depth interviews

- We conducted in-depth interviews with 18 participants across the 10 case study sites. Interviews took place in a local café close to the site, and also involved visiting the site itself. Interviews were conducted in three stages:
  - **Initial interview** – this explored their general views and experiences of the public realm, as well as discussing the sites visited during the mobile ethnography pre-task.
  - **Immersive interview** – this involved a short walking interview to explore participants' use, experiences, and views of the case study site. Visiting the site allowed the participant to narrate and talk about it (including their experiences and usage) with the help of visual prompts.
  - **Debrief interview** – this reflected on the immersive interview. It also explored in more depth some of the other research questions such as the link between public spaces and social integration and, lastly, thoughts and aspirations for the future of the public realm.



# Methodology: mobile ethnography

- Prior to the in-depth interviews, participants were asked to use a mobile platform called Tandem over a two-week period. Through this, they:
  - Recorded and talked about different public spaces that they had come across.
  - Completed a series of one-off activities including talking about their top 3 favourite public spaces, and their ideal public space.
- This mobile ethnography part of the study allowed the researchers to capture 'in-the-moment' insight from participants on public spaces in London. The participants were also asked to upload photos and videos, allowing the researcher to see public spaces 'through the eyes' of the participant. Lastly, it also helped to 'warm up' and prepare both researcher and participant for the subsequent in-depth interviews.

Where are you? (Please tag the public space you are in)

Broadgate Circle, 2 Broadgate Circle, London

Tell us about this public space...

I really like the atmosphere of this place and the fact that its circular as it gives it a nice, communal feeling. As it's pedestrianised, you don't have to worry about vehicles. This is mainly a place to stop by for food and drinks but there are benches and some more "open access" seating areas in the vicinity where you can just catch up with friends over a coffee. There's also a big screen up broadcasting cricket matches so it's nice to sit back and watch some sport, especially when the sun is out. There's nothing in particular that I would do to improve the space.

Tell us about the people using this space...

There are lots of young working professionals at this space, mainly mingling with each other over a drink. It is very crowded this evening but I do feel comfortable and safe being here.

How do you feel about this space?


😊 😊 😊 😐 😞 😡

📊

Tell us about your new public space here...

somewhere where accessibility is central to all peoples of London, especially those who are physically challenged and well served with trabsport links  
preferably to cater for the needs of able and disabled people, young and old, local as well as tourist who would admire Londonness  
children enjoying with fun and games, younger generation using from WiFi connectivity, older folks relax and participate, drinking water fountain and restroom facilities and be very well lit, eco-friendly and sustainable  
A sense of shared ownership for all peoples who would benefit from a common perspective, free of fear, knife crime and knowledge that area is secure and monitored by close circuit TV and having facility to call the police should crime prevail  
Free and open to all members of the public and made available 24 hours (or best part of the daylight)

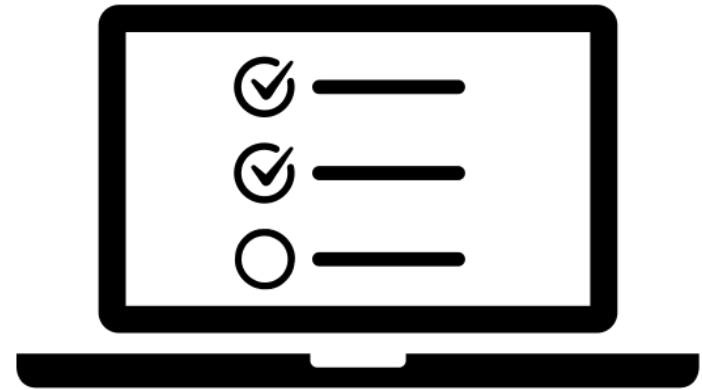
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# Methodology: quantitative survey

- Following the mobile ethnography and in-depth interviews, we commissioned an online survey through YouGov to:
  - Explore use of public spaces
  - Explore views on the management of public spaces
  - Identify priorities when designing public spaces
- The sample size of this survey was 1,134 and was weighted to be representative of the London adult (18+) population, conducted between 27th August – 2nd September 2019.
- Responses to the survey were analysed by demographic and socio-economic variables to explore similarities and differences between different groups of Londoners.






# Case study sites



10 public spaces were selected as case study sites for the in-depth interviews:

- Barking Town Square
- Barkingside Town Square
- Deal Porter Square (Canada Water)
- Ealing Broadway Town Square
- Gillett Square (Dalston)
- Kingston Ancient Market
- Narrow Way (Hackney Central)
- Perkyn Square (Tottenham Hale)
- Swiss Cottage Open Space
- Windrush Square (Brixton)



# Experiences and uses of public spaces

# What do Londoners think of public spaces?

- One of the key findings from the qualitative research is that **public spaces are to an extent under-appreciated**. Londoners may consciously or unconsciously use them on a regular basis, but many do not pay much notice to them or appreciate that these are purposely-built spaces for the public – they are just part of everyday London. This was reflected by the study itself: throughout the mobile study and in-depth interviews, participants ‘warmed up’ to public spaces – at first they tended to not have many views on public spaces, but by the end of the study they became much more aware of the different types of public spaces (beyond just parks) that there are in London. And they understood public spaces as being a vital part of public life.
- Many participants are also **‘accidental users’ of public spaces**, in that they don’t actively seek them out or make an effort to visit them. Instead they’re the types of places that people come across or end up at without planning: that public spaces are not understood as a ‘destination location’ contributes to why people tend to initially under-value them. This a key difference between everyday public spaces and parks – parks are generally viewed as an amenity and thus people understand them as somewhere to use and spend time (and many people do make the effort to do this). Public spaces, however, are not *automatically* understood as an amenity.
- Perhaps because of the ‘accidental’ use of public spaces, they are **used by all and are seen to be ‘open to all’** – indeed, for the majority of the respondents, a key tenet of public space was as being ‘for everyone’. When participants were at a public space, they saw these spaces as attracting a mix of Londoners and demographic groups (however, these spaces can be dominated by certain groups, depending on time of the day or location). Even privately-owned public spaces (POPS) were generally seen to be open to all.

*“When I was doing the daily task and talking about all the public spaces I was in, that made it more in the front of my mind, that yes I was out in a public space.”*

*“Most people choose to go to parks, so you’ll make a plan to go to a park, whereas a public space is something you must stumble upon, or you’ll walk through and realise you just need to stop for a second, you have the time to do that without it being a forced plan. Yeah, I think it’s a thing that you need, but some people don’t really notice they need it. They find it, and it’s a thing of, ‘Oh actually, it’s really nice to have it around me’.”*

# The changing face of the public realm

- When discussing public spaces, it became clear that Londoners have seen changes in the public realm over the last 10 or so years – mostly for the better. Foremost, the perceived **number of public spaces** has increased, and participants think there are now more outside of central London. Ultimately, the public realm is seen to be **more accessible and diverse** than it used to be. These changes in the public realm go hand-in-hand with local level regeneration throughout London, with some participants referencing the likes of Stratford or King's Cross and how those developments have produced new public spaces.
- The general **look and design of spaces appears to have improved**, with more greenery and pedestrianised areas, and better upkeep and cleanliness. And finally, participants believe that these spaces are being **better utilised** than they used to be, with more pops-ups and events (notably more sports screenings, for example Wimbledon) being held. However, as discussed later in this report, there is still further room for improvement.
- Although participants think public spaces have improved across London, there is still very much a **divide between central London and the rest of the city**. Firstly, central London is where the majority of the bigger, newer, and more interesting public spaces can be found (e.g. Granary Square, Sky Garden, More London) - these types of public spaces are few and far between outside of central London. Though there is the flip-side that these new developments may dilute the character of the central London. Regardless, participants talked about how public spaces in central London tend to be better kept, larger and there are more of them, feel safer than those in other parts of the city, in part due to more office workers and tourists, and are historically significant (e.g. Trafalgar Square), which adds extra importance and value to them.

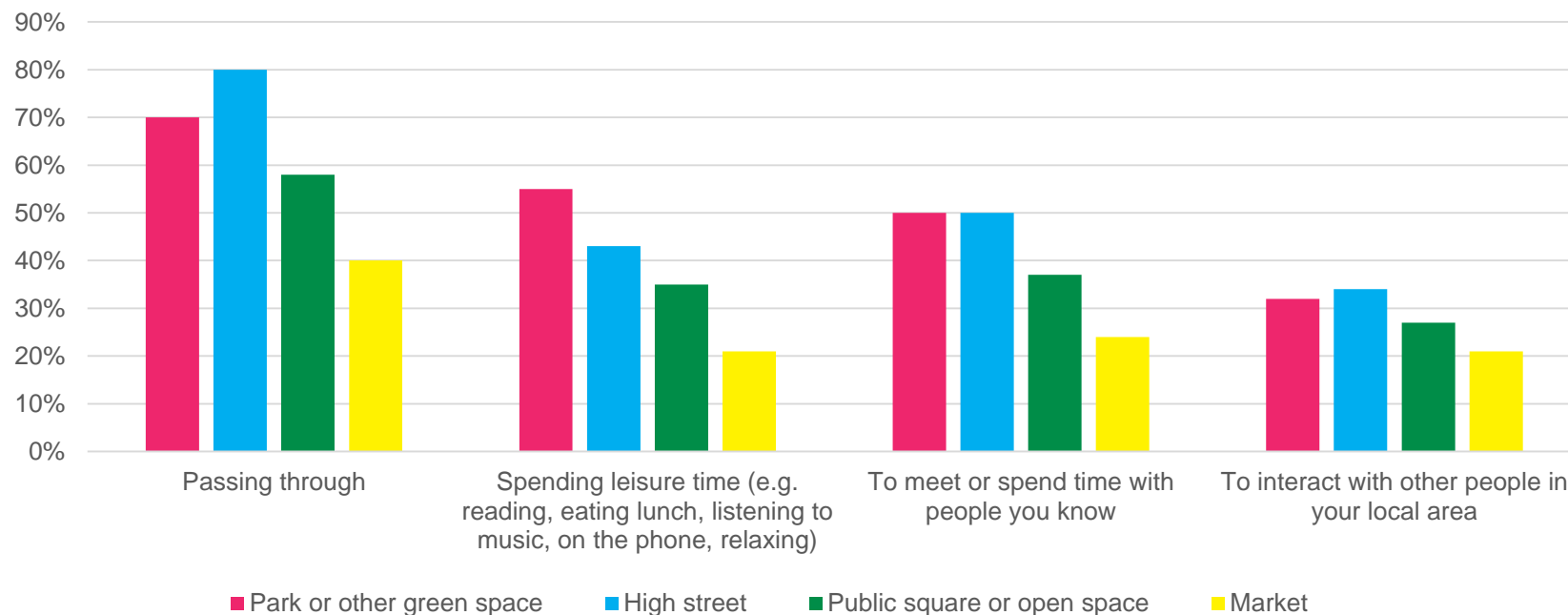
*"I think there seems to be more focus on them...there seems to be more time given to incorporating public spaces into a new development. So, for example, years ago I lived near King's Cross, and this was prior to the whole regeneration project. Since then, they've got Granary Square, which is very outdoors, and they've got those steps overlooking the canal, again where sometimes they have screens up and things like that."*

*"I wouldn't have used public spaces before... I wouldn't sit on a street bench. I just never would do it and now I don't feel two ways about walking along and sitting there and just taking in the day, having a coffee."*

# How and when do Londoners use public spaces?

- Despite many participants being 'accidental' users of public spaces, public spaces are still used often and **for a number of different reasons**. The graph below shows that Londoners use public spaces on a regular basis. For example, 35% of Londoners spend leisure time at a public square or open space at least once a month. Even if Londoners do not use or spend time at them, they still often come across public spaces. For example, 58% of Londoners pass through a public square or open space at least once a month.
- When comparing the types of public spaces Londoners spend time at, parks or green spaces and high streets are the most frequented, followed by public squares or open spaces. But, as discussed on p.11, *actual* usage of public squares and open spaces may be higher.

How regularly, if at all, do you visit the following public spaces for the following reasons? (% at least once a month)

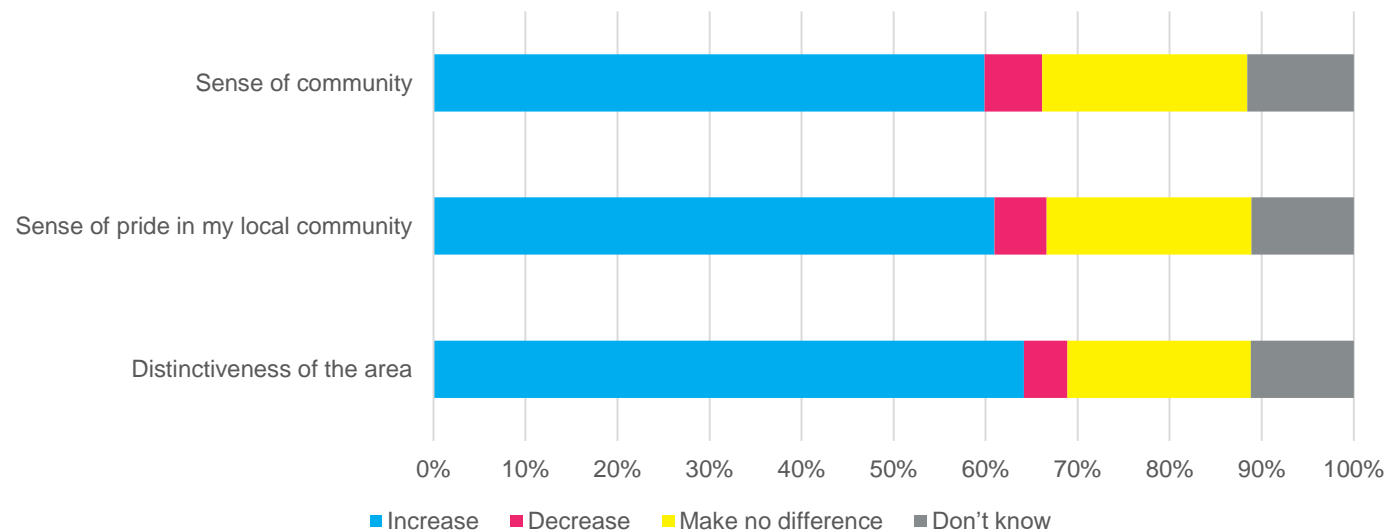


*“You take everything like this for granted, don’t you? Until you sit and think about it, like do something like this, you don’t think about how lucky we are actually to have this on our doorstep, because if we didn’t have it on our doorstep, yes, it would be quite sad for me. Even though I have a garden and I have an outside space, I prefer to sit here. I’m nosy, so I people watch, and I like to see what’s going on.”*

# How important are public spaces to Londoners?

- This research revealed that public spaces may be initially underappreciated, but, after thinking about them, Londoners acknowledge the value and important role these spaces have. Firstly, they **add to the aesthetics and distinctiveness of local areas** – they are simply nice to look at or walk past, even if not using them. They offer **open, pedestrianised and often green spaces in otherwise busy and built up areas**. They provide value in terms of increased **sense of community and sense of pride** in a local community. But public spaces also provide numerous other benefits, for communities and individual Londoners – they are places for people to **relax, meet people or just ‘watch the world go by’**. These benefits of public spaces are expanded on in subsequent pages.

Do you think that public spaces in your local area increase, decrease, or make no difference to the...?



*“To be honest, we bump into people all the time when we come down here, we do see people and it is one of those things, whether it’s families from school, or quite often we’ll come down here and our kids will see their friends and that will be a way that we’re introduced to their friends’ parents and we’re able to meet people, and adults, essentially, that we otherwise wouldn’t be able to.”*

*I feel like [this public space] is a great source of community cohesion where you’re not just, okay, inside my front door, off to the grocery door in my car, and nothing in between. The fact that it is accessible by walking distance as well makes it that much nicer as well.”*



# Case study: Narrow Way

Clockwise from the top left photo:

1. Several small seating areas are scattered along the north end of Narrow way
2. In addition to the high street shops, there are also a few market stalls (such as a florist) operating in the more open south end of Narrow Way
3. There are plenty of bicycle stands, but a key point made by participants is that there is no separated cycle path along Narrow Way
4. Just off Narrow Way, on the east side, is the Walled Garden Walk and Churchyard Gardens, providing greenery, open space, and additional seating





# The value of public spaces...for individuals

- The value of public spaces for individuals is extensive, even if not immediately realised. The value can broadly be seen as three-fold, although there is overlap between categories:
  1. Enabling a **sense of togetherness** and **meeting people** (including new people) – this is especially true when events are taking place
  2. Providing an **easily accessible, and free, outdoor space**, to be used how you want
  3. Contributing to an increased sense of **well-being**
- Participants also readily recognize the **value of public spaces for others** (such as young families, those without gardens, and older people who might be lonely). Sometimes the perceived value for others may exceed the value for that individual – but they still understand public spaces as important for society and as having a positive impact on wider well-being

*“I think public spaces actually do a lot for people’s wellbeing. Just having the option of getting out of your flat, or your house, or out of work, and just spending some time in a communal area with other people without any sort of judgement, you can just kind of enjoy it. I think getting rid of that, I don’t think it would do much for people, really. Yes.”*

*“I think getting outside just in general is good for people’s health. I think another thing is if you’re with other people, you sit down, you relax and get some fresh air in you. You have conversations, you socialise, you laugh, all aspects of wellbeing. It takes your mind off other things, you see kids playing around, you see other things, it kind of distracts you from your everyday life.”*

*“There are a lot of young mums in this area, it’s quite a young borough, so having somewhere that you can go that isn’t expensive, that is kind of... There’s not loads of steps, you can get a buggy in it easily... And that’s true of the older community as well, somewhere that’s easy to walk and navigate to, where there are places for you to sit down and get a cup of tea, or take a picnic with you, I think are important.”*

# The value of public spaces...for individuals

## 1. Meeting people

- The seating that public spaces offer, the often compact size of these spaces, and their proximity to nearby amenities means they are convenient **spaces to spend time with people** – whether sitting and eating lunch with colleagues during the week, ‘chilling out’ with friends after a day out, or grabbing a coffee with other mums. When talking to participants, these came out as key benefits and reasons for using these spaces. They’re also great places to wait and meet-up with others, even if just to move on elsewhere.
- Many participants also highlighted the fact that, unlike meeting up in cafes, they are **free to sit and relax in for as long as they like**, whilst still being a relatively safe and pleasant environment.
- Events, especially screenings of sports matches, were mentioned as **fostering positive interaction between strangers**. This in turn helps people to feel part of a community – something which is valued in London, where the city can sometimes feel large and lonely

*“I know sometimes people eat lunch on their own and utilise the space for that, but a lot of the time you’ll go to a public space and go with your friends and stuff, so it’s just kind of another place to socialise, but without having to spend money to get to sit down somewhere.”*

*“My son, who’s 14, who we let off the leash, he’ll just come down here and hang out with his friends, and might go and grab a coffee or a sandwich or whatever; it’s just a place for them to meet their friends as well. For us, as parents, we actually feel relatively comfortable letting him come to this area and feel like it’s a safe enough location that we don’t have any qualms about him coming to meet his friends at a set location and making his own way here.”*

*“Another thing is if it’s during a weekend when the World Cup is on or Wimbledon is on, you get together and watch it in an open place with other strangers who are into the same thing, so it doesn’t feel like they’re strangers. It feels like a whole big group of friends is watching an event... You’re bringing people that may not necessarily interact with each other together to create that community aspect of it.”*

# The value of public spaces...for individuals

## 2. Easily accessible outdoor space

- Public spaces provide multi-purpose outdoor space. They are usually located next to other amenities, meaning they are **convenient to access**. These spaces are particularly valuable for those without gardens or without parks nearby, but who just want to **spend time outside**. Public spaces differ from gardens – even those who have gardens say they also enjoy public spaces as a place to sit and ‘watch the world go by’. They provide a space in which people can ‘do their own thing’, whilst still feeling connected to the rest of society. They tend to be quieter and more restful, compared to commercial spaces, allowing people to take time for themselves.
- Public spaces are used to meet people, be part of community events, and get some much-needed outdoor time. But they are also used for everyday, mundane activities – taking phone calls, eating lunch alone, people watching. This ease of use is intrinsic to their value: people don’t need to think about *how* they might use a public space, but instead are free to **use such spaces as and when they wish**.

*“Say you’re passing through and you want to make a phone call, I always usually stop to make a phone call, or stop to read or something. I think just a place to stop and relax, stop and soak in everything.”*

*“Sometimes if I just want to chill by myself and have a bit of alone time, and don’t want to be cooped up inside, then I’ll just sit down on a bench, read a book.”*

*“That is how I would categorise public spaces, that place where you need to do something, need to make a phone call or wait for someone. You need to do something and it’s just somewhere nice to sit and do it.”*

*“I just sit down somewhere and just have a bite and a drink... I think a lot of the time we get so caught up and wrapped up in our own lives, we don’t stop and see what’s happening outside of our little bubble. I quite like people watching. I think sometimes just stopping and seeing what’s going on can be really insightful, and you can learn a lot just by seeing how people are engaging with other people, and what the dynamic of a place is like.”*

# The value of public spaces...for individuals

## 3. Well-being

- Public spaces provide a place to just 'be' and 'chill' – somewhere to relax and clear the mind – the value of which cannot be overstated. Respondents highlighted the importance of public spaces for well-being, as they are places where people can go to **be around greenery** and **be outside** (of the house). This can be particularly valuable for those who don't have their own outside space, live in high-density housing, or live or work in busy and crowded areas.
- Public spaces are often recognised as a place where people can **feel part of a community** (see following slides) and less alone. They are spaces for people to be out in the community and around others, even if they don't necessarily interact with others. As mentioned previously, public spaces are understood as being for everyone which means people feel comfortable going to them alone and using them **without fear of judgment**.

*"It's somewhere where, like I said, people can do sports events, community sports, community parties, community markets, places where you can go and feel like you're not just stuck in your house, or in somewhere where you have to pay to get in. Having somewhere where you can just go and – I'm using this word a lot – 'chill', is really important."*

*"I think that's the thing that stops London feeling claustrophobic, is feeling like you can have a nice outdoor space, because lots of people don't have gardens. Being somewhere that is restful like that is really nice."*

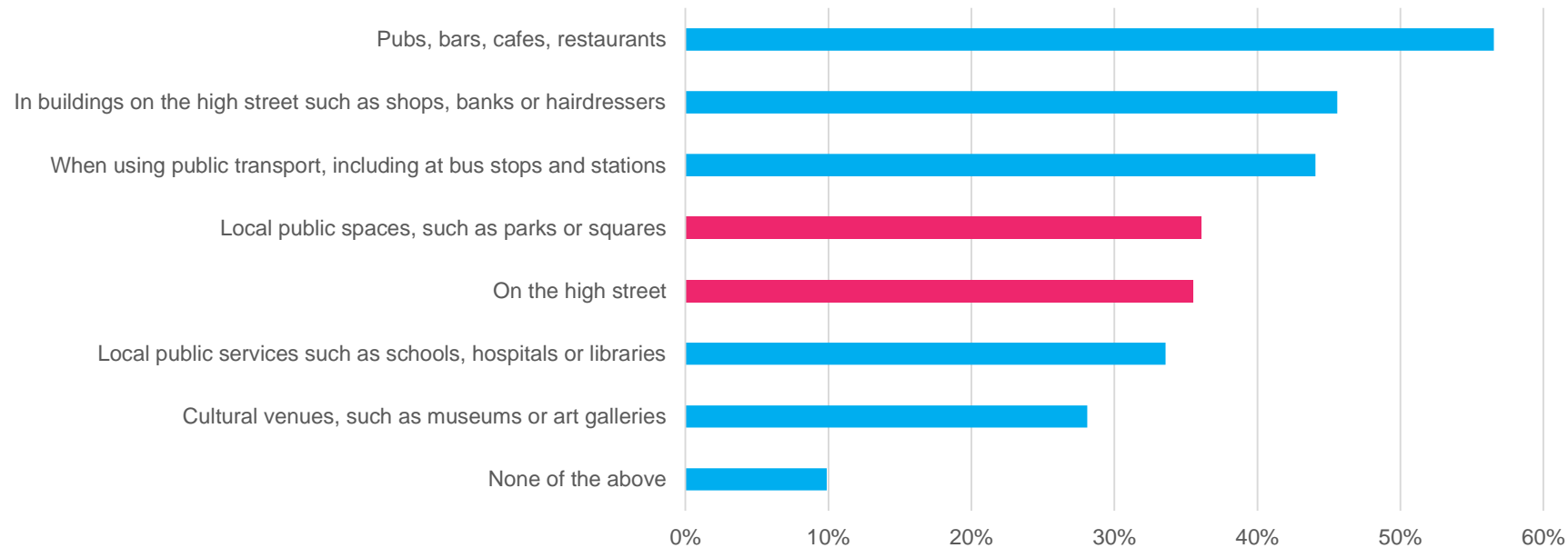
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# The value of public spaces...for communities

- On consideration, people do recognize public spaces as unique in being somewhere you can **socialise with strangers** – and that there is value in this, through establishing a **feeling of community**. This is especially true of places where events are being held, or TV screened – which facilitate conversation and a sense of togetherness.

Thinking about the last 6 months... In which of the following kinds of places, if any, have you had a positive interaction with other people?



*“Public spaces can make or break a city. Particularly now we’re in this era of rather than building an apartment building or a couple of houses, generally we’ve got these huge, large scale urban developments...they are planned in such a way to include fluid public space that ties everything together. I think it’s important because you don’t just want people to go to their neighbourhood and lock themselves in their house; you want to promote a bit of community. It promotes people mixing.”*

# The value of public spaces...for communities

- The usage of public spaces is more incidental (compared to parks, where people tend to go with a defined idea of what they might do there) – and thus the expectation of, and the willingness to engage in, social interaction seems to be more flexible. They are also smaller than parks, which makes interaction more likely. The **role that public spaces play in community cohesion – and individual well-being – is thus distinct from that of parks or gardens.**
- Public spaces provide **distinctiveness** to a specific area – and a striking public space, or one that hosts a particular offer or event (such as a market) is often a **source of civic pride** for those that live there, as well as providing something which **benefits the local community and/or boosts the local economy.** In Kingston, both respondents reference the market as being something ‘cool’ and unique to that area.
- Similarly, public spaces can also be used to **honour the local community and provide a sense of identity** – in Brixton, for example, Windrush Square is named for the large Afro-Caribbean population, serving to recognise the area’s unique cultural heritage.

*“The space feels much more shared. A lot of the time I go to Lincoln’s Inn Fields just over there to eat my lunch and obviously it’s lunch time, there are loads of people there at the same time, so inevitably you have to share seating, whereas in a park you might not do that because there is so much space, people can spread out. Actually, I think these sorts of squares, they feel much more like they are community spaces, whereas a park almost feels like somewhere you would go to get away from the community.”*

*“[The market] makes it a fun place to me, it’s kind of a source of pride, it’s something that other neighbourhoods in London will hear about and be like, “Oh yeah, the market in Kingston is so cool.”.”*

*“I think given there’s such a large migrant population from the Caribbean and the West Indies so many years ago, it is an important part of the heritage. I think with the gentrification there is always the risk of losing that, so I think it’s important to have a structure or an area, something that gives that recognition so that people who have been here for so long don’t feel like they’re losing their community and their sense of belonging.”*



# Comparing public spaces and parks

- Parks and large green spaces clearly come under the definition of a 'public space', but for this research we chose to exclude them and focus mostly on the smaller urban 'every day' public spaces that Londoners come across. Yet throughout the qualitative research participants still referred to parks, often comparing these with the types of public spaces that they captured through the mobile study.
- As mentioned previously, participants tended to under-appreciate public spaces at first and talked about how these are the types of places that people end up at without planning, whereas they are more likely to make the effort to go to and spend time at a park. In this sense, **parks are more commonly framed and understood** as an amenity and have a clearer offer and reason for using them. If one thinks of a park, they have a clear image of what that is whereas public spaces could conjure up a variety of images. Parks also have recognisable names, whereas public spaces often don't which may contribute to their under-appreciation.
- But many people have to go out of their way to get to a park, and although there are a lot of parks in London many people may be unlikely to come across one through their day to day lives. A key benefit of public spaces, on the other hand, is that they are **more conducive to everyday usage**. They are often **more embedded in local areas** and **closer to other amenities** (transport hubs, shops, offices, public buildings etc.) than parks are. The public spaces themselves may not have a lot on offer, but the immediate vicinity does.
- Lastly, participants reported **feeling safer in public spaces** compared to parks. Public spaces are 'for everyone', so can sometimes attract the 'wrong crowd' and anti-social behaviour. However, as they are smaller and often in areas with greater foot-traffic, there is a feeling of safety in numbers. They're also more likely to have CCTV and be better lit at night.

*"[I use this space more than a park] I think because it's open and it's got everything here. I can go and get a cup of coffee in there or go into the library and use the library if I want to use the internet for anything. Everything is just here and it's on my doorstep."*

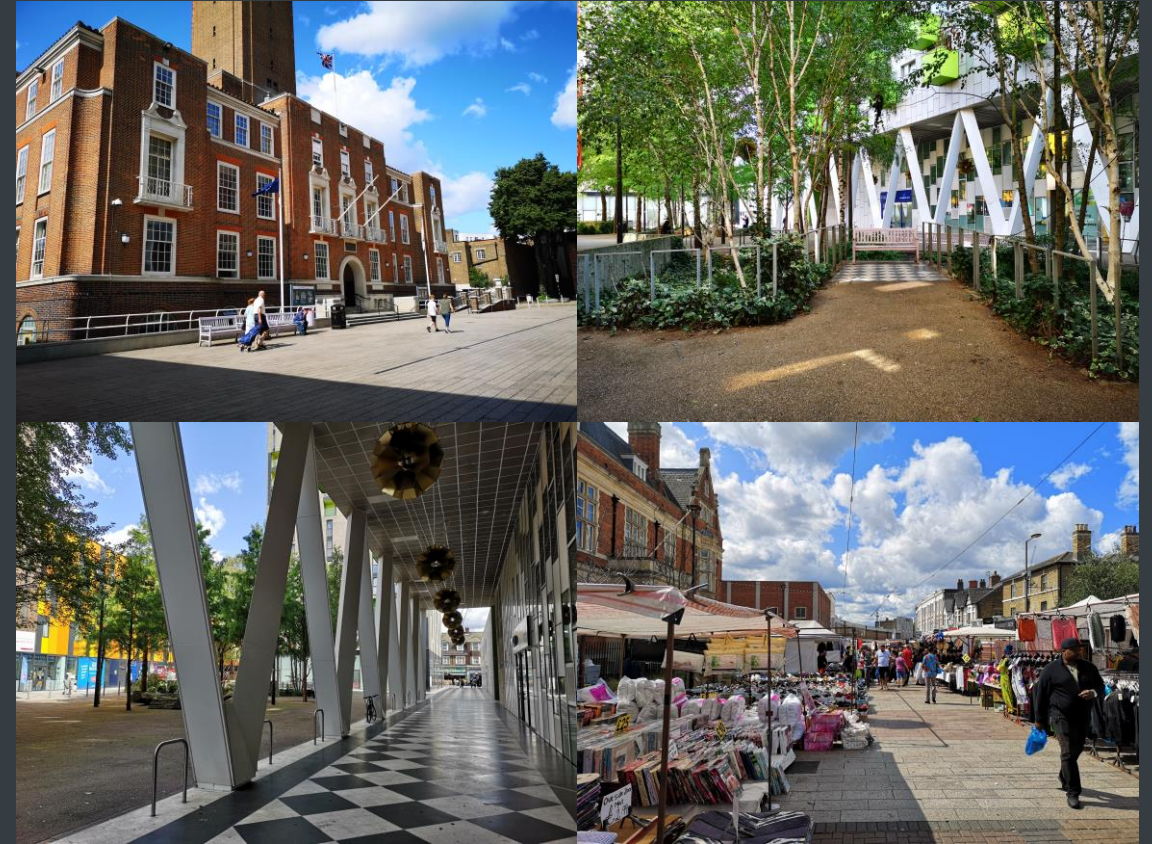
*"You're closer to shops. A lot of the time I've realised if you're in a park there's only the little café that's in there. There's one café. But when you're in an open space you've got loads of places around. You can go to the one shop and then come to sit down, go to another shop and come to sit down. You can access more things."*



# Case study: Barking Town Square

Clockwise from the top left photo:

1. The Town Square sits outside Barking Town Hall, and has a regular footfall of people making their way to the Town Hall, Barking Learning Centre, Barking Library, and other nearby residential, commercial and public buildings
2. There is plenty of seating scattered throughout the square and nearby areas, including this bench in the shady arboretum part of the development
3. The arcade, with it's golden chandeliers and checked tiles, connects the Town Square with shops on Ripple Road
4. Just outside of the quiet town square is the bustling Barking Market. There is also Barking Abbey Ground 1 minute away, offering greenery and open space





# Privately-owned public spaces

# Awareness of private spaces

- In the in-depth interviews we showed participants photos of some privately-owned public spaces (POPS) in London (e.g. Granary Square and More London), and explored participants' views on these. Overall, there was **very little awareness** at first that these were in fact privately-owned. But once told about this, some were **unsurprised that these are privately-owned** given the overall aesthetics and design of these spaces, as well as the level of upkeep and free events.
- Some POPS appear more 'private' than others, because of presence of security guards or signage, which have more obvious restrictions. But, on the whole, due to the free access and absence of physical barriers, there is an **assumption that these types of spaces are publicly-owned**.



*"I've never thought about it but now that you've said it, I do think it's a bit of an issue, because they are masquerading as public spaces but they're not. If that means that without that private funding these places wouldn't exist, obviously I would rather have them, but it's almost the fact that they're not really an open forum, it would be a shame if that set some sort of precedent for the decline of genuine public space for the sake of these spaces."*

*"With Granary Square I don't feel like it's a private space...but when I went to the Sky Garden, there are security guards all over the roof, and you do feel a bit like you're being watched, even though you're not doing anything. And I get it, it's literally in the City and they've got to be careful, but you do feel like you're on a school trip, and I'm waiting to get told off even though I'm not doing anything wrong. I think a public space should be somewhere where you can relax and feel free and have no stress, which is what I think Granary Square does really nicely."*

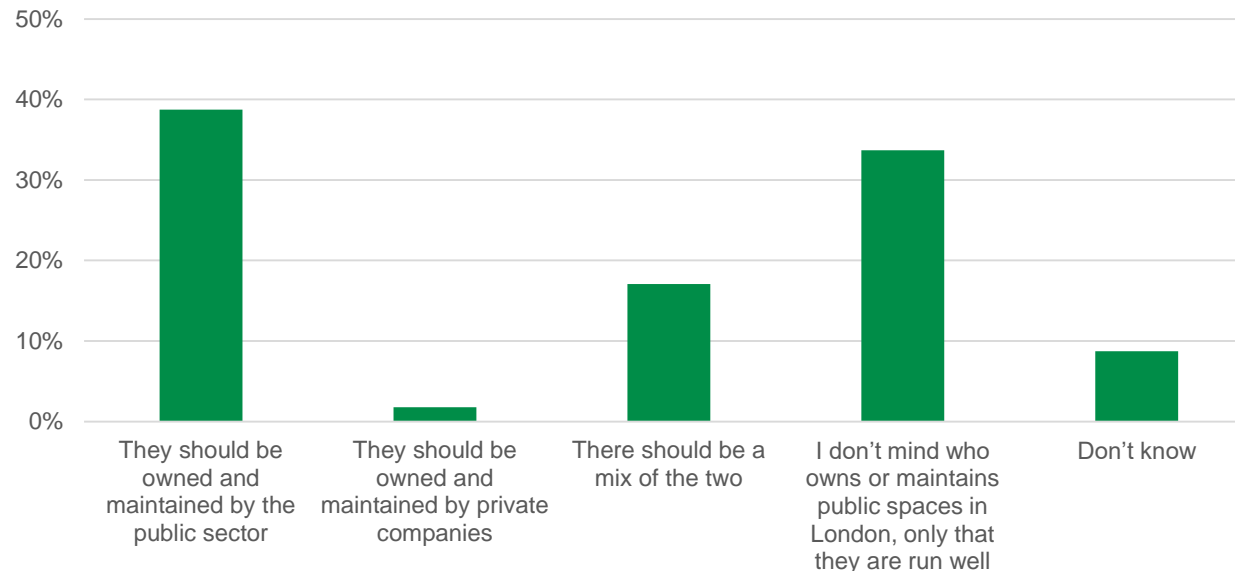




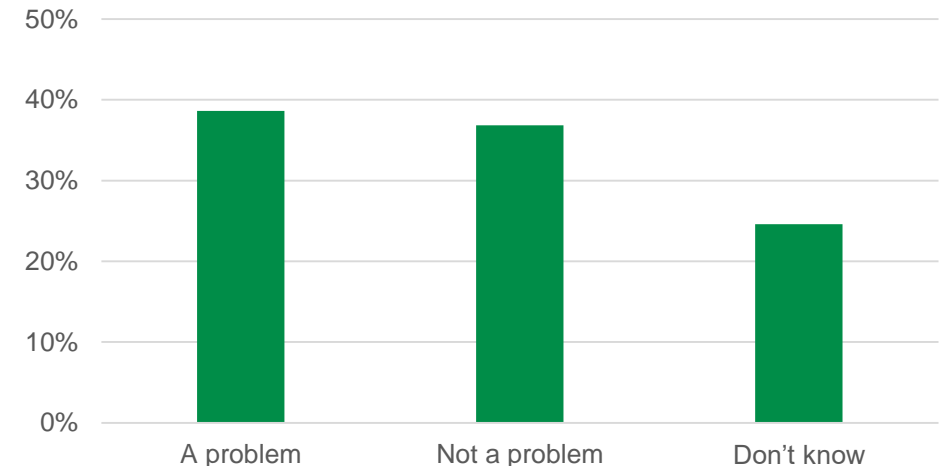
# Public vs. privately-owned public spaces

- The **extent to which private-ownership of public spaces is a problem is mixed**, with 39% of respondents to the survey thinking this is a problem and 37% not. The qualitative research revealed that the key concerns with private ownership mainly centre on sadness around losing public land and fears that privately-owned spaces might be taken out of public use at any time. There were also minor concerns of not feeling welcome in (that these were for business-people only) or about the restrictions placed on behaviour (such as protesting) and on homelessness in POPS. But on the flip-side, there are key benefits such as generally better design, maintenance, security, and provision of free events – these tend to outweigh fears related to POPS. Overall, roughly a third (34%) of Londoners **don't mind who owns or maintains public spaces, as long as they are run well**. This was higher among older Londoners, with 43% of those aged 65+ selecting this option versus 27% of 18-24 year olds.

When thinking about who owns and maintains public spaces in London, which of the following comes closest to your view?



Do you think it is or is not a problem for private organisations to own, run and maintain public spaces in London?



# Case study: Gillet Square

Clockwise from the top left photo:

1. The square offers a large open space. During the day it can feel empty and unused, but it can be transformed when events are held (see below)
2. The wooden decking and trees breaks up the space and provides some seating
3. Although empty during our visit, events are put on throughout the year including a pop-up playground and cultural events (image: [gillettsquare.org.uk](http://gillettsquare.org.uk))
4. A small public space outside nearby Dalston Eastern Curve Garden, showing how public art murals can enhance spaces like these





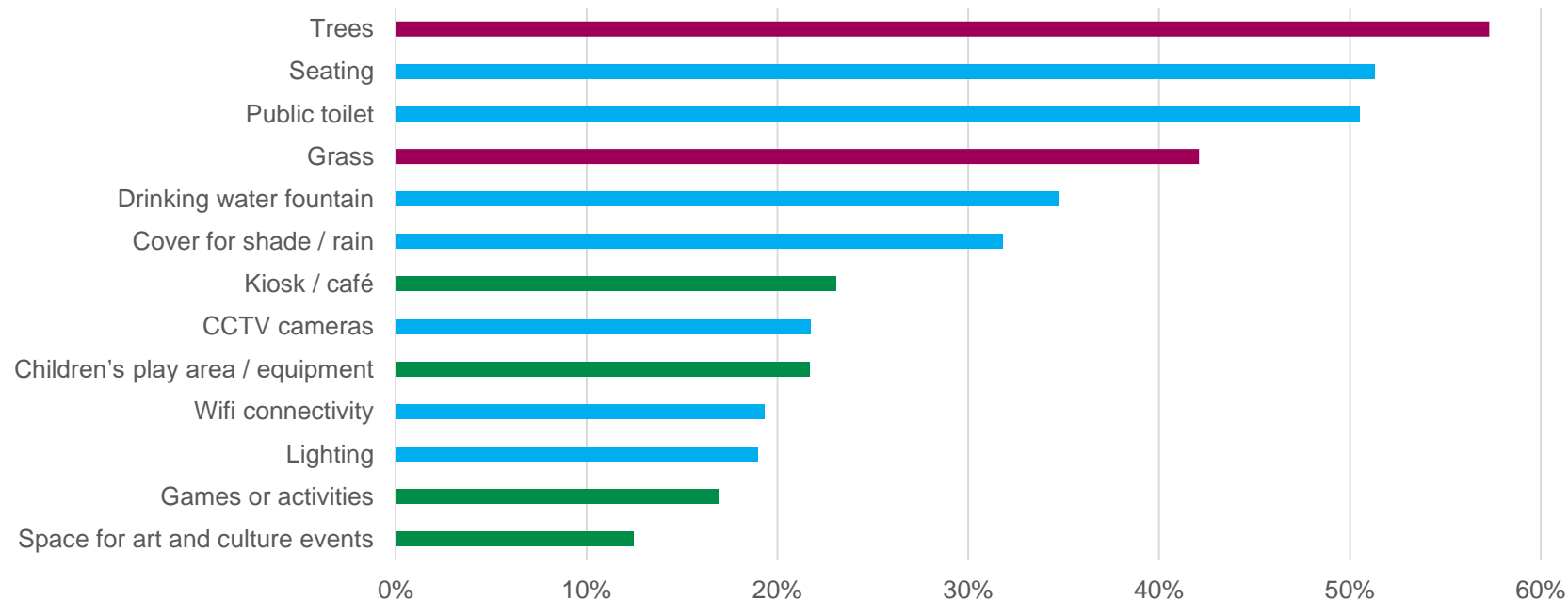
# The future of the public realm



# Designing public spaces

- Throughout the research we asked Londoners how public spaces could be improved and how they should be designed. Discussions around the design of public spaces touched on 3 different topics: how they should look, what they should contain, and how they should be used.

Which of the following would you most like to see in public spaces such as parks and squares in London?



**How they should look**  
i.e. general design/ layout

**What they should contain**  
i.e. basic facilities/ amenities

**How they should be used**  
i.e. making the most of them

# How should public spaces look?

- When it comes to the design of public spaces, **greenery and (comfortable) seating are must-haves**. This is what people like most and expect from public spaces – somewhere they can sit and relax. Seating is a particular need among older Londoners, with 80% of Londoners aged 65+ prioritising this.
- It may sound obvious, but it is also important that public spaces are **clean and well maintained**. You could have a well designed space, but if it appears neglected then people will be put off.
- It is also important to consider other nearby public spaces when designing a public space, and the area's overall public realm offering rather than looking at individual public spaces in isolation. People have different tastes and preferences, so there needs to be **variety in the types of spaces** in a particular area e.g. in Barking there is the town square but within a few minutes' walk there is also the market, high street and a park – these spaces are all different and together create a diverse public realm for all locals.

*“I think there could be more innovative ways of people sitting down to encourage people to sit down for longer, because there's only so long you're going to want to sit on a bench for, do you know what I mean? I saw some pictures online, just cool ways that people have done lounge beds and stuff, and I think that would encourage people, because a lot of people don't want to sit on the ground. Especially as you get older and it's a bit harder to get up after.”*

*“I think it always helps to have a bit of green. I don't know how easy that is to do. But it always helps if there are trees and a little bit of grass somewhere. Or even just things for people to sit on to make it somewhere that you don't have to pass through.”*

*“Spaces that incorporate lots of different things for entertainment, greenery and grass. I think things like that will be important in the future to use the space to its fullest, and then for different users as well, would be great.”*

# What should public spaces contain?

- Public spaces **need to contain public amenities**, such as toilets and drinking water fountains. These were ranked high in the survey and were mentioned in the qualitative research as key things that are **currently lacking from public spaces**. They are simple features that would improve many spaces. They are also features that people would remember and would encourage them to visit and use these spaces again, for example if they knew there was a public toilet or water fountain.
- It is also worth mentioning that CCTV cameras were ranked fairly high in the survey. This came out in the qualitative research, with participants saying that this would increase their feeling of safety in these spaces, though there are concerns over facial recognition. Some also want 'park rangers', but not necessarily security guards – just somebody to 'keep an eye out'.

*“I think with these spaces, having toilets and things is really helpful, particularly if it's a public space that you're encouraging people to use for a prolonged period of time. I think, again, likewise with [drinking water fountains], I think when you're out and about, particularly during summer, it's nice to have easy access to that”*

*“That's really open, so it would be nice if somebody had a little think about a shaded area that's good in the sun but also a covered area that's good when it's raining. Because you can have all the seasons in this country on any given day.”*

*“Spaces that have incorporated benches, or tech benches are quite nice as well now. So in other countries, I can't remember where it was, but benches that have USB ports are quite nice for people.”*

# How should public spaces be used?

- Public spaces provide value to individuals and communities, but without something to do or look at, participants reported that some spaces can feel too empty or boring. They like being in public spaces that **offer more than just seating** – whether a public ping-pong table, art, music, live sports screenings, community-led events etc. Having these on offer encourages greater use and also provide even greater value (for example putting on events and activities increases social interaction and cohesion).
- Although respondents to the online survey did not rank 'space for art and culture' or 'games or activities' as essential components of public spaces, especially when compared to other features, our qualitative research still highlighted the importance of these for improving the public realm.

*“I think like I said, just having activities that you can do, like a table tennis table, or a chess board. It just encourages people to come and use it, because otherwise people sit down and they might sit down for a bit and then get bored and move on, whereas if there’s an activity of some sort that incentivises it, I think it will just be used a lot more.”*

*“They brought in, in some of the squares, loads of deckchairs and they put on Wimbledon, and it’s just a really nice place to chill with people that you don’t know. And because you’re all doing one common thing, I think, a lot of the time, if you come and use a public space and you’re not doing anything in particular, no one is going to talk to each other, but if you’re all bonding over something, so if there was an event put on, like free yoga for instance, or if you’re watching something, people start to talk to each other more, and you actually meet some new people, which is what I think it’s lacking here, everyone keeps to themselves a bit.”*

*“Another thing that comes to mind, more art. We’ve got all these big public spaces and very little art and a lot of up and coming artists don’t really get exposure. It’s quite hard to get exposure. I know gallery space is quite expensive to maintain, but these public spaces just exist, so if you’ve got some outdoor sculpture or whatever. Actually, it reminds of near City Hall, outside there, they regularly have photography exhibitions...more things like that would be good. Just use the space a bit more.”*

# What do Londoners want from public spaces?

- A challenge in designing this research was that there is no such thing as a typical public space. The definition of 'public space' is broad. This came out in the research as well – what participants consider to be 'public spaces' vary from a small bit of seating outside a bus station to a big area of green space. But this research has revealed that, regardless of size and location, there are some key requirements of public spaces. Public spaces should be:

1

## **Accessible and practical**

Public spaces are seen to be open to all, but they also need to be practical and accessible for all Londoners with sufficient seating and key amenities (e.g. toilets, water, protection from rain or sun).

2

## **Spaces for communities**

Public spaces are where people can sit down and relax. But they have more to offer than just that. They should bring together people by providing activities, holding events, promoting culture etc.

3

## **Green**

Despite excluding parks in our definition of public spaces for the mobile study, many still referred to them as the 'classic' public space. Even in small spaces, having some form of greenery is a must.

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