



Right to Thrive | Keeping Londoners Well
Research report



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Executive Summary

About this study

This study was commissioned to explore the lives of a group of diverse Londoners, all of whom represent different forms of intersectionality and with lived experience of mental health conditions.

The project was designed to answer the question ‘what keeps Londoners well’ and highlight the role that stigma and discrimination may have in contributing to negative life experiences.

The case studies that are included in this research are recruited from all over London. They illustrate many different forms of intersectionality – including black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) people and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) people, and people who experience physical and learning disabilities.

What keeps people well?

Those who took part in this research were necessarily diverse and represented a wide range of experiences. Some were happier than others, but all experienced problems on a day-to-day basis that held them back from achieving their personal life goals. Some, it seemed, had given up entirely on trying to make positive progress in their lives – and were accepting of their current situation, no matter how bad it was.

In mapping out their life journeys, similar themes often appeared:

- The negative, and often unaddressed, trauma experienced as children and young people which had impacted their confidence and perception of the world into adulthood
- The importance of places and communities where they felt psychologically and physically safe (although often these spaces were very limited both in terms of number and size, which illustrated just how ‘unsafe’ and unwelcoming many felt wider London to be)
- How positive and enduring relationships could make a lot of difference to their ability to cope (but also how fragile, and occasionally damaging, interpersonal relationships could be)
- How essential it is that hopefulness, positive progress and opportunity are built into any state or charity funded services or community provision (to ensure that people don’t give up on a better future for themselves and others)
- Confidence that, as a Londoner, you can live without fear of stigma or judgement from others (and will be protected and supported if you do experience problems)

Insights derived from the research have been used to devise **4 key guiding principles for commissioners of community support.**

Community initiatives should:

- Offer people ‘safe spaces’, **but not narrow their social worlds**
- Support and sustain people when they are most in need, **but then help them to move forward**
- **Engage people from a young age**, establishing their wider community as something they can always turn to as a source of resources and support
- Support the wider community to be **more proactively accommodating**, breaking down boundaries that exist along identity lines

The remainder of the report will elaborate how these principles were informed by the key findings and themes across the data, and why each is so important to the achievement of Thrive LDN’s goals.

Background

Understanding inequality and Mental Health

Social inequalities impact people's mental health and wellbeing, with significant implications for their life outcomes. It is also the case that disadvantage - material, social or political – can be cumulative across a lifetime, sometimes irreversibly skewing people's chances of happiness and success.

A growing body of research reveals how inequalities can have different kinds of psychological consequences (for example significant bodies of work on social determinants of health¹, the Marmot Review³). While evidence of this has applied due pressure to policy-makers to address these issues at an institutional level, relatively little investment has been made in developing programs of understanding, inclusion and equality of opportunity **at the level of local communities**.

Right to Thrive is an initiative led by Thrive LDN to understand how inequality and discrimination has impacted Londoners' mental health and wellbeing.

This year, **Revealing Reality** has partnered with Thrive LDN to assist with the Right to Thrive project. Through ethnographic interviews with people across London, Revealing Reality has worked to unlock the pivotal insights needed to guide those involved with community engagement and support them in their missions of outreach and inclusivity.

About this research

London, in all its diversity, encompasses the broadest possible spectrum of cultural practices, beliefs, ethnicities, languages, disabilities etc. Two million Londoners experience some form of poor mental health every year and Londoners' life satisfaction and feelings of self-worth are lower than the national average⁴. The challenge of supporting such a diverse and complex population's mental health needs is significant.

This research aimed to identify needs that transcend the boundaries of specific social 'groups', aiming instead to explore the experiences of a broad range of Londoners whose backgrounds and experiences sit on the intersections. The work took a human-centric understanding of the issues, enabling people to tell their own stories in their own words.

Research Objectives

The research was guided by the following core questions:

- What factors contribute most to people's sense of mental wellbeing and life satisfaction?
- What factors are at play when people feel more/less resilient or able to cope with adversity?
- In what ways can experiences of prejudice and discrimination impact people's sense of mental wellbeing and resilience?

¹ Jessica Allen, Reuben Balfour, Ruth Bell & Michael Marmot (2014) Social determinants of mental health, *International Review of Psychiatry*, 26:4, 392-407, DOI: 10.3109/09540261.2014.928270

² Murali, V., & Oyeboode, F. (2004). Poverty, social inequality and mental health. *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment*, 10(3), 216-224. doi:10.1192/apt.10.3.216

³ Fair Society, Healthy Lives, The Marmot Review, Institute of Health Equity, 2010

⁴ [Thrive LDN 2017 report](#)

Research Method

This research project involved a range of engagement activities, with the aim of hearing a wide range of stories and voices from across the capital. Different approaches were used to make the research as accessible as possible, with different options for people to contribute their perspective. In total the research engaged with over 150 individuals across 15 London boroughs (Camden, Ealing, Enfield, Hackney, Hammersmith, Harrow, Islington, Lambeth, Merton, Newham, Redbridge, Southwark, Tower Hamlets, Waltham Forest and Wandsworth).

Open call for online contributions

An invitation to contribute answers to a set of questions (see appendix). People from across London contributed written, videos or audio recorded responses telling us about their feelings and personal experiences in relation to maintaining positive wellbeing in London.

Community organisation engagement

Researchers spent time in a range of community-based support services and venues across London (including those supporting people with mental health issues, BAME, LGBTQ+, mental and physical disability) hearing the perspectives of service users and capturing their stories in written, video or audio format.

We would like to thank the following organisations for supporting the research:

- Camden LGBT forum
- Mosaic Clubhouse
- Sutton Mental Health Foundation
- London Gypsy and Traveller Forum
- Core Arts
- Sound Minds
- Imagine Independence
- Islington Mind
- Islington Borough Users Group (iBUG)

In-depth ethnographic interviews

Researchers spent extended time with 19x Londoners from across the capital, interviewing them about their stories of living in the city, discrimination and stigma they may have experienced, mental health and resilience, and their coping strategies and support networks. Individuals were recruited via a range of channels – through community and support organisations and networks, free-find recruitment organisations, and people who signed up to support Thrive LDN via their website.

Representing London's diversity

This research engaged with Londoners from all corners of the capital.

Participants were engaged with the research via a range of channels – through community and support organisations and networks, free-find recruitment organisations, and people who signed up to support Thrive LDN via their website. See figure 1 for an illustration of the reach of the project.

The project aimed to hear the stories of people who represented a wide range of experiences and identities, including intersectional perspectives that sit across multiple groups. Specific experiences or identities were represented across the research included:

- Experiences with mental health issues (both diagnosed and undiagnosed)
- Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME)
- Physical and cognitive disabilities
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+)
- Gypsy and travellers

The people who ultimately took part in the research had an extremely broad range of life experiences, demographics and perspectives on the issue of mental health and wellbeing in London.

The majority of people who took part were living on a low income (either working on low paid jobs or unemployed and receiving benefits). Most were in private rented accommodation or social housing.

Representing intersectional experiences

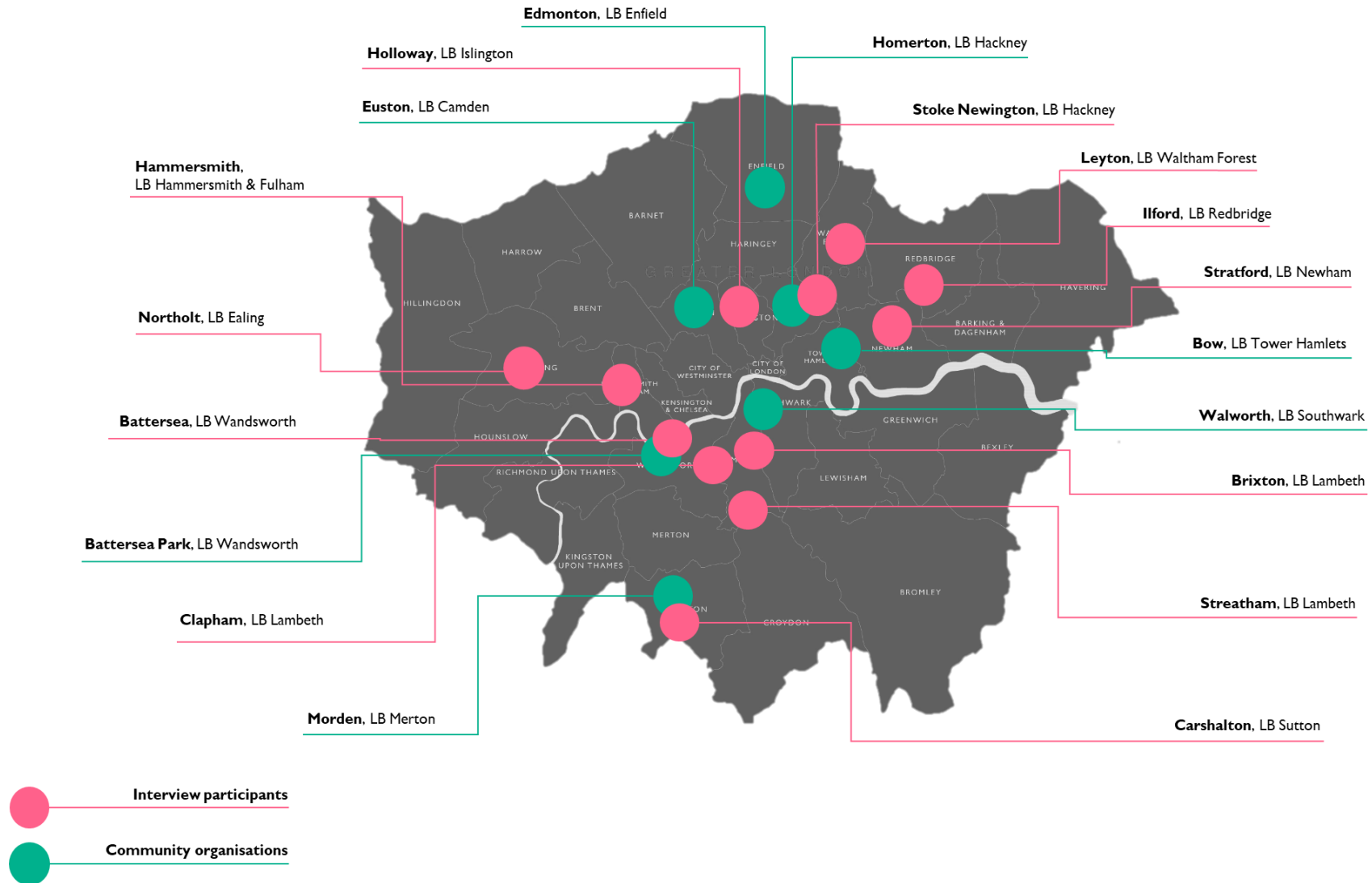
During the research, issues of intersectional experiences and identity were explored with participants, including any stigma or discrimination people had experienced as a result.

There were many examples and stories of difficulties or adversity that Londoners had faced, often linked to their specific experiences or identities – for example mental health issues they faced, sexual identity, ethnicity or disability.

However, the challenges people in this research faced were typically more similar across groups than within specific groups or intersections. Most of the people in the sample did not outrightly identify as “intersectional” – and neither did they usually attribute the challenges in their lives to these specific intersections. Identity manifested as a much more complicated set of values and experiences for people – including but also transcending “protected characteristics” such as ethnicity, sexuality or religion.

As such, this report describes a set of themes and commonalities that appeared across the sample – issues that were experienced by people with a wide range of characteristics, demographics and identities, rather than attempting to infer recommendations from within specific intersections.

Figure 1: Locations of research participants and community organisations engaged during the research



To keep people well, we need to better deal with the difficulties people face when they are young

Often experiences at a young age had contributed to a person's feelings of discrimination and isolation.

A proportion of the people we spoke to traced the origin of their struggle with mental health to events in their childhood.

It was often the case that these people had been born into difficult domestic contexts, with parents who were unable to support them, financially, emotionally or both.

The respondents who had struggled with the most persistent mental health difficulties were often those who had suffered adversity or trauma as children.

For most, a lack of steady support had made it difficult to process and overcome difficult events at the time that they had happened.

Some had reached what they described as “**crisis points**” by late adolescence, whereby cumulative negative experiences had caused the deterioration in their wellbeing.

Several respondents described how negative experiences as children had made them **mistrusting** of other people, in some cases leading to the desire to withdraw from relationships.

With limited awareness of where and how to seek support, many had also become isolated as they entered adulthood.

For some, there was a sense of having been “**let down**” or overlooked, both by those around them and by public services, at the times when they were most in need.

“My parents really couldn't look after us... it was actually a relief when we got taken to the children's home”

Amari, 56, Islington

“I live on my own because I don't really trust other people... I'd prefer to be wrapped up in bubble wrap”

Agatha, 24, Clapham

“My mental health spiralled in my 20's...I think there were too many things that I just hadn't addressed at the time”

Michelle, 38, Carshalton

Wesley (42)



“White people have always defined what being black is. I hate it”

Wesley, 42, Lambeth

Wesley was born and raised in Lambeth.

He has been homeless since September last year.

Although he trained as a chef when he was younger, he has never been able to hold down a job. He currently makes money by selling drugs.

Wesley grew up in a house with his mum, his two sisters and two of their cousins. He had a very difficult childhood, as his Dad was in prison, having physically abused his Mum. He described finding it difficult not to have had any close relationships with men growing up. His only contact was with his younger sister's father, who physically abused him.

Wesley was also bullied at school. Because Wesley is mixed race – his mother is from the Caribbean and his father is Chinese - he felt like he didn't fit in anywhere. Throughout his life, Wesley has hated the pressure he feels to fit in, and “to be one thing or the other”.

Summary

The compounding nature of negative experiences in early life speaks to the importance of the early engagement of community initiatives. This is particularly the case given that it is a recognised problem in public health services that there is less mental health provision for those over 18 compared with under 18's, and many people experience this as a sudden drop-off in care once they reach adulthood.

It is therefore imperative for community initiatives to engage people from a young age, establishing their wider community as something they can turn to as a source of resources and support.

To keep people well, we need to grow social networks

It was vital to many respondents' sense of wellbeing and support to have contact with people who were "like them".

Most respondents felt strongly that they needed the support of those who had experiences similar to their own. It was important to them to be able to relate meaningfully to the people around them.

Many respondents who perceived 'majority groups' to pose a threat to them sought out "**safe spaces**" – communities of people who were "like them".

Experiences of prejudice and discrimination had made some feel the need to withdraw into smaller communities where they felt safer.

Although the availability of 'safe spaces' was undoubtedly important, and enabled people to establish close circles of people they trusted, sometimes this had resulted in people becoming entirely insulated from their wider communities.

So, whilst providing a safe and protective environment in the short-term, these socially narrow communities could leave individuals feeling apprehensive about interactions with 'others'.

Many also acknowledged that their need for a 'safe space' did not deny their ultimate aspiration to be fully accepted by, and integrated into, the wider community.

Those who had recovered from their negative past experiences to the greatest degree and had the most robust coping strategies were those who had built wide networks of supportive and varied relationships.

"I'm either at the centre or I'm in my flat. I don't know really do anything else anymore, and all my friends are from there"

Amari, 56, Islington

"I really try not to identify things that separate me from other people. I want to be an approachable person... I don't want to think about my ethnicity"

Lee, 39, Balham

"I feel like minorities are forced underground. You have to 'be with your kind' as other people won't accept you"

Nathaniel, 56, Brixton

Nathaniel (56)



“I have a lot of frustrated ambitions. Being trans has been my full time job.”

Nathaniel, 56, Brixton

Nathaniel, 56, lives alone in social housing in Brixton.

Nathaniel is transgender – as an assigned female at birth, he took the decision to ‘transition’ in his early thirties.

Nathaniel has had many experiences of overtly anti-transgender sentiments and feels constantly threatened by it. He has always relied on trans support groups, and feels strongly that people who experience discrimination should be surrounded by those who “reflect their reality back at them”.

He takes great comfort in the stories of those who share a similar gender identity journey to his, and also finds that they are better able to accept him and the decisions that he has made.

At the same time he also acknowledges that he has some fear of building any close relationships outside of this network despite his deep desire to repair old friendships from earlier in life.

Summary

As a result of both real and perceived negative experiences, many of those we spoke to described having a limited social network which was often made up of ‘people like them’.

Within this network fear of others could be compounded and over time people described losing confidence that they would be able to fit within other social scenes.

Those who were the most resilient described the importance of varied social networks that existed both within and outside more ‘organised’ community group settings. These relationships helped them to break down boundaries and enable individuals to feel both accepted and included in a vibrant London society.

To keep people well, we need to broaden opportunities

The large majority of people we spoke to had contact with their local peer-support group or mental health drop-in services. For some, these services had been absolutely vital, especially following particularly difficult periods in their mental health journeys.

For most, the services had been signposted to them when they were at a point of crisis, and some described frustration at not having known what was available before they had reached this extreme point. Many respondents had relied heavily on community support groups in their immediate and longer-term recovery. These familiar routines and ‘safe’ local community groups often brought great comfort and support.

Several of those who had relied heavily on community services themselves had, or had aspirations to, become mental health volunteers or peer support workers themselves. For some, this seemed like an obvious step given they had first-hand experience of the difficulties people could experience. For others, it could be an example of wanting to make progress and give back to others.

Many had found it rewarding to take part in political campaigning and lobbying for and on behalf of people like them. These outlets could help to provide a sense of solidarity and shared experience. However sometimes people recognised that focusing on these specific issues could leave them with a narrower rather than broader view of the world.

Growing comfort within a specific setting and building a strong community of like-minded people was often a central part of keeping well.

However, it was also a case that having found a specific and bounded environment in which they were comfortable and felt safe, other opportunities were sometimes limited. For example, some respondents talked of regrets about passions and hobbies that they no longer felt confident doing. Within a more closed social world, finding routes and avenues to achieve these things could feel very difficult.

“I do believe you have to do something with your life... but I struggle to make plans, I find it so disappointing”

Agatha, 24, Clapham

“I love gardening. I love to admire the transformation. It’s a good way to disconnect from your worries”

Wilbert, 41, Hammersmith

“I’ve used acting as a chance to turn my head away from issues. To be someone else. To be free”

Terrence, 54, Streatham

Mandy (59)



“I’ve got friends to rant with, friends to hang with, and friends to jam with. It depends what mood you are in”

Mandy, 59, Battersea

Mandy, 59, works for a mental health charity in Battersea. Here, Mandy coordinates a peer support service for members of the BAME community.

Mandy suffers from bipolar disorder. She has established management strategies for coping with her own mental health, many of which involve seeking the help of her many friends.

While she believes passionately that BAME-specific services should be available to those with shared lived experiences of mental health, she herself keeps a wide a diverse social network of support.

Partly her diverse range of friends are created and maintained through her many hobbies, including both playing and watching a number of different forms of live music.

Summary

Groups of like-minded people who are experiencing similar issues have an incredibly important role in helping people to thrive. People describe the value is sharing similar experiences and the empowerment that comes from the weight of combined voices.

However, many also felt that keeping a diverse range of social contacts and maintaining a wide array of interests and hobbies helped them to feel confident and in contact with different sorts of people.

Community initiatives therefore have a responsibility not only to support and sustain people when they are most in need, but to then help them to broaden their aspirations and move forwards in a balanced and open way.

To keep people well, we need to promote acceptance and inclusion

Many respondents felt that the deterioration of their mental health was related to experiences of prejudice and discrimination.

All respondents could recount experiences when they had been related to as “different” or as “an outsider” in one way or another. Some instances of discrimination were more overt or more malicious than in others, however all had the effect of making respondents feel that they were **excluded** from participating in community life in some way.

For some these experiences often extended into the workplace, where comments about difference and a feeling that they don’t fit in could lead to diminished confidence. People who had relied heavily on mental health support services often thought it would only be viable for them to work in mental health support settings in their recovery, as they were unable to perceive of other viable employment alternatives.

Some described that their perceived experiences of judgement could be equally strong. For example, having a strong sense of what others are thinking or believing that others will interpret their actions or behaviours in a specific way.

Some had come to terms with the wide range of opinions and beliefs held by others within society. These individuals described a feeling that you can’t change other people, but you can learn to accept and ignore their prejudices rather than taking them to heart.

For others, these comments and acts of discrimination actively shaped their self-perception and beliefs about societal hostility towards them. To this end, some chose to isolate themselves to avoid the threat that wider communities posed to them.

“An awareness of being different to other people has followed me throughout my adult life”

Tania, 56, Newham

“I am constantly aware that if I react to something I will be labelled an ‘angry black man’”

Wesley, 42, Lambeth

“Work is the place I can be what I want to be. I can be anyone’

Terrence, 54, Vauxhall

Agatha (24)



“I come here every day. I call the people here my ‘chosen family!’”

Agatha, 24, Clapham

Agatha, 24, lives alone in Clapham. Agatha has severe social anxiety and complex post-traumatic stress disorder.

She attends a mental health peer support service nearby. She first got involved with the centre in 2016, when some volunteers from there visited her in hospital following a very difficult episode.

Now she goes to the centre every day to see her social worker, and takes part in many of the day trips and activities they offer.

Agatha really wants to do more activities independently, and would love to have a job, but she doesn't see many opportunities for someone like her.

The last time she was employed was in 2015, and she said that the salon she was working for had dismissed her because they felt her anxiety was too severe. She's now worried that this might have been her last opportunity to do paid work.

Summary

Acts of prejudice and discrimination (both big and small) can often stay with people for a long time and significantly shape their beliefs about society.

Workplaces can be a source of both incredible freedoms, but also worry and fear.

Wider communities have a huge part to play in making **all spaces** safe for minority groups and helping them to realise that they have as much right to occupy it as anyone else.

Summary

London is one of the most diverse cities in the world. People come from all over the world to embrace the opportunity it offers.

Yet, the personal experience of many Londoners can sometimes be at odds with this image of flourishing and industrious individuals.

This research was commissioned to understand the role of stigma and discrimination in shaping the experience of a diverse range of Londoners.

The sample included people living all over the capital, from a wide range of different ethnic backgrounds and including people with protected characteristics and other factors that are often associated with discrimination.

The research found that people live very different lives and within a sample of this size, it's difficult to make claims about specific intersectional experiences.

However, what can be said from this research is that a number of factors seem to have a profound effect on an individual's ability to stay well, integrated and supported:

- Traumatic experiences during childhood were shaping people's ability to stay well long into adulthood.
- Experiences of discrimination could lead to a narrowing of people's social networks and growing isolation. People often had regrets about their struggle to maintain broader social relationships and those who had more diverse social networks felt happier.
- Places of safety were important and valuable to this group and these community groups were often vital in recovery from mental health issues. However, growing confidence within these settings could be accompanied by diminished confidence in other places.
- Acceptance and inclusion were a big theme of discussion – and most people had experienced discrimination in their day-to-day lives. Wider society has a clear role to play in ensuring that all spaces are safe for all Londoners.

These findings suggest that more can be done to support Londoners experiencing complex intersections between mental health difficulties and other life experiences. This report recommends **4 key guiding principles for commissioners or of community support**.

Community initiatives should:

1. **Engage people from a young age**, establishing their wider community as something they can always turn to as a source of resources and support
2. Offer people 'safe spaces', **but not narrow their social worlds**
3. Support and sustain people when they are most in need, **but then help them to move forward**
4. Support the wider community to be **more proactively accommodating**, breaking down boundaries that exist along identity lines

But this research also shows that community-based services are just one touchpoint where support can be given. The findings also suggest that more could be done by Londoners themselves to embrace and empower individuals who are struggling. This research has told the stories of people who feel unwelcomed or uncomfortable in many spaces and have retreated to more and more limited realms where they feel safe and secure – often in some cases isolated to just their own homes. All Londoners have a responsibility to reach out to people like this and help them get more out of life and out of the city they live in.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – research questions in open call for contributions

What does positive wellbeing mean to you?

- What things do you normally do to make you feel great, happy and healthy?
- What impact does this have on your mental health and well-being?
- What kinds of things can happen that make you unhappy and down?

Is London a fair place to live?

- Have you ever felt discriminated against or treated unfairly?
- How does unfairness make you feel? How can we change this?
- We'd really value you sharing your experiences of unfairness (especially relating to different kinds of identities) and the impact this may have had on your mental health and well-being.

Appendix 2 – Topics explored during in-depth interviews

- Introduction & background
- Social and personal identity
- Lifestyle and routines
- Health
- Relationships & social network
- Local environment & community
- Employment, careers and education
- Financial situation
- Wellbeing now and in the past
- Coping & strategies
- Influencing factors on wellbeing
- Identity and discrimination