



# BRIXTON YOUTH DESIGN ADVOCATES FINDINGS REPORT

NOV 2021



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## ABOUT BUILDING YOUNG BRIXTON

Building Young Brixton (BYB) is a place-based partnership of 9 Lambeth-based youth and community organisations. Founded in 2016, we are working together to improve outcomes for young people and strengthen the youth sector in Lambeth. With over 100 years collective experience supporting Brixton communities, our partnership consists of: Advocacy Academy, The Baytree Centre, Ebony Horse Club, High Trees Community Development Trust, Indo-American Refugee and Migrant Organisation (IRMO), Marcus Lipton Community Enterprise, Spiral Skills, Grove Adventure Playground and Juvenis.

Each year, our multifaceted youth service supports 1000 young people to thrive through personal and professional development programmes, education & employment support, coaching & mentoring, and therapeutic recreational activities.

Strengthening young people's voice is at the heart of what we do. Our work is firmly based on the input of the BYB Youth Steering Group who are driving BYB's vision and strategic planning. We have facilitated youth-led decision-making in the form of Lambeth-based youth boards and panels and are experts in peer-led research. We believe that youth engagement is crucial for the effective design of organisational and public services, and we provide expertise and support in finding creative ways to do so.

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

Between August and November 2021, the Brixton-based partnership consortium Building Young Brixton delivered a youth engagement project commissioned by Lambeth Council designed to build capacity/knowledge in regeneration and development projects through workshop activities and events. In close collaboration with Lambeth's Neighbourhood Regeneration team, our overarching aim was to amplify young people's voices and gather insights on their perspectives on regeneration in Brixton, focusing on four key specific areas:

- Architecture & Land Use
- Diversity & Inclusion
- Employment & Skills
- Engagement

A paid work opportunity was shared with young people via an intensive engagement process to ensure that the opportunity could reach broad demographics. This included targeted social media postings

as well as reaching out to Brixton-based youth networks with a specific focus on organisations attached to Building Young Brixton and those supporting women, young people at risk of entering the criminal justice system and young people with disabilities. Our team then conducted a competitive recruitment process, which was based on young people's application and interview and a set of key criteria, including them living in Brixton or being attached to a Brixton-based organisation. Nine young people were finally onboarded and formed the group Brixton Youth Design Advocates, tasked with independent research into their peers' views and opinions on regeneration.

This report offers a discussion and summary of their findings with the aim of centring the voices of the 150 young people that were engaged throughout this project.

## METHODOLOGY

The research conducted was not of an academic nature, but much rather based itself on the lived experience of the Brixton Youth Design Advocates, their relationships in the area and the perceived sense of belonging of their peers. The methodology was youth-centered, led by the young people themselves so it could play to their individual strengths, talents and passions.

In September, the Youth Advocates engaged in a full-day workshop, facilitated by a team of consultants and supported by the Neighbourhood Regeneration team, which allowed them to understand basic regeneration principles and background information regarding the Growing Brixton Rec Quarter project.

Based on this, each of the Youth Advocates was then tasked with interviewing at least 15 young people in and around their own Brixton-based networks and engaging them in conversations around regeneration and the Growing Brixton Rec Quarter in particular.

Young people chose a range of methods to centre the voices of their peers. These included four audio-recorded street interviews and one podcast, three surveys, one short film and two focus groups. Their individual research projects were shaped by young people's creativity and to some extent their own perceptions of the neighbourhood that is their home, making this a rich, shared collection of community knowledge on the lived experience of young people in Brixton.

# YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES ON GBRQ

## ARCHITECTURE AND LAND USE PERCEPTIONS AND OBSERVATIONS ON BRIXTON'S EXISTING BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Young people agreed on Brixton being a lively and interesting place. 'You can never get bored of Brixton', one of the participants stated. They were observant to this liveliness being reflected in Brixton's architecture, seeing a 'mix of run-down buildings and random expensive-looking buildings' next to each other and noting that 'the streets were colourful.'

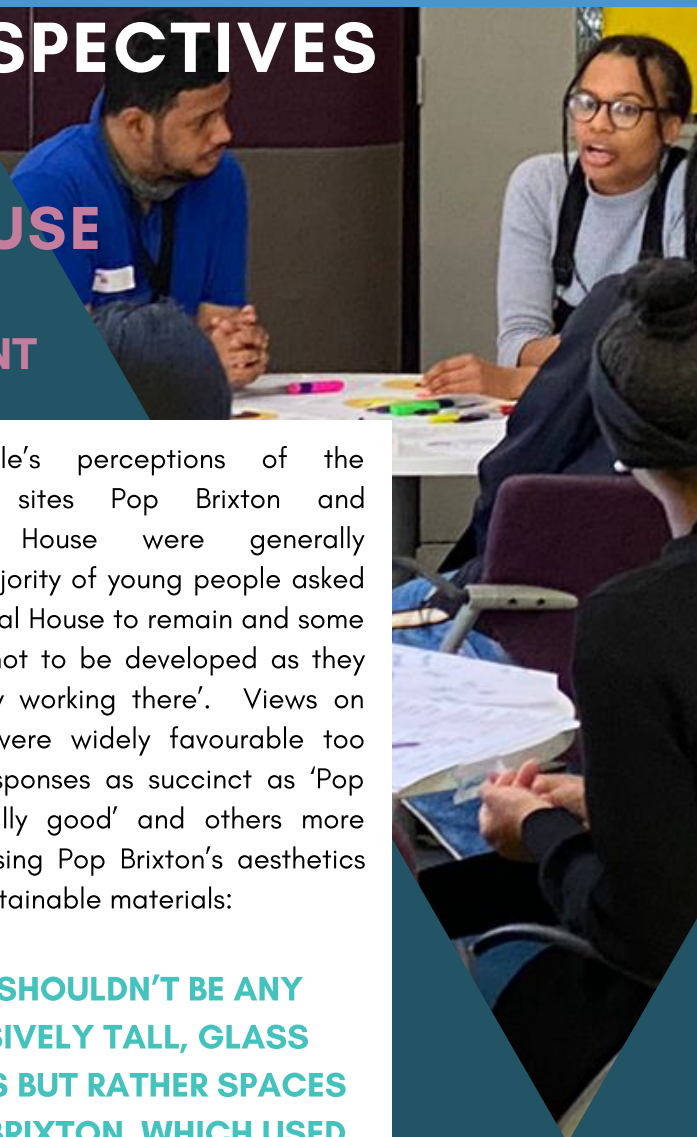
When speaking about their sense of Brixton's built environment, many young people described a noticeable change: 'Brixton is a small town made up of a lot of different small businesses but it's slowly beginning to change.' Some young people observed a modernisation of the area but wondered which elements of the community new development projects were catering to: 'Brixton has plenty of old features and places that need work or help from the government such as some estates. But it is clear that it is trying to be modernised for an agenda rather than to help the community'. Another young person suggested that:

**'I THINK THAT HAVING THE NEW BUILDINGS RIGHT NEXT TO THE OLD ONES LIKE IN MYATTS FIELD MAKES IT VERY APPARENT THAT THERE ARE PEOPLE WITH DIFFERENT FINANCIAL INCOME LEVELS LIVING IN THE AREA.'**

Young people's perceptions of the development sites Pop Brixton and International House were generally positive. A majority of young people asked for International House to remain and some asked for it 'not to be developed as they were currently working there'. Views on Pop Brixton were widely favourable too with some responses as succinct as 'Pop Brixton is really good' and others more detailed, praising Pop Brixton's aesthetics and use of sustainable materials:

**'THERE SHOULDN'T BE ANY EXCESSIVELY TALL, GLASS BUILDINGS BUT RATHER SPACES LIKE POP BRIXTON, WHICH USED CONTAINERS AND ALSO BROUGHT A NEW LOOK TO THE AREA BUT WITHOUT DAMAGING THE REST OF BRIXTON.'**

Three of the Youth Advocates extended their research project by also including conversations with residents over the age of 24. Their thoughts of Pop Brixton were much more negative, and they saw the space as part of a wider gentrification process. Those under the age of 20 however, praised its 'colourful look and feel' and acknowledged it as a 'part of Brixton's architecture'.



## THOUGHTS ON IMPROVING BRIXTON'S BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Young people raised the importance of cleaner streets and improving road works. They saw Brixton as 'quite dirty' and a need for it 'to be cleaned up regularly, especially around the market and alley ways.' This was brought up in relation to how safe they felt, acknowledging that cleaner streets would add to a sense of security. Interview participants also raised the importance of green spaces and how it felt important to them to see more trees in Central Brixton.

When asked about what kind of buildings they would like to see in Brixton, a majority mentioned that they wanted buildings to 'blend in with their surroundings'. They shared that they did not want new structures to 'stick out from a mile', but that they should be built 'at the general height of the area' and that buildings 'should not be taller than the overhead railway tracks'. Some young people were keen to see more 'colourful and playful' design in Brixton, including graffiti walls and other wall art.

Many young people raised that they did not care about the look of buildings as long as houses were affordable. They were actually cautious to wish for 'interesting houses as that may cause the price to become expensive, gentrifying the area'.

Overall, young people were vocal about the 'culture and essence of Brixton to remain in place' and for that to be reflected in the design of Brixton's built environment. Some of them felt that 'the cultural feel of Brixton' was already changing a lot and that it was important to preserve what makes Brixton unique.

**'BRIXTON ISN'T CENTRAL LONDON AND THERE IS NO NEED FOR IT TO LOOK LIKE IT. WE ALREADY HAVE SEVERAL PLACES THAT LOOK IDENTICAL ACROSS LONDON.'**

## SUGGESTIONS ON LAND USE

Young people's suggestions on land use varied greatly. Gyms and fitness areas were mentioned several times and one young person suggested another space similar to the existing Rec Centre. Interviewees were keen to practice a range of sports, including gymnastics, boxing and skating. One young person was passionate about introducing an ice-skating rink to Brixton. Many of the young people interviewed were keen on safer cycle lanes in Central Brixton.

Common themes also included extending existing food markets and building more local restaurants, clothes shops, hairdressers and shops selling foreign food at affordable prices. Art and fabrication spaces were also mentioned, alongside storage spaces that could rent out equipment. Young people further noted a lack of accessible public toilets. Mentioned by a majority of young people across the spectrum was a need for more youth clubs.



## DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Conversations and interview questions on diversity and inclusion tended to be quite heated and often culminated into the topic of gentrification more widely. Many young people felt that the culture of Brixton as they knew it was disappearing. Statements included: 'Everything that used to be here when I grew up has closed down.'; and 'The culture is going away. The atmosphere is changing. It is becoming a business hot spot rather than a cultural one.' Other young people used the phrase of Brixton becoming 'hipster-like'.

**'SOME SHARED THAT THEY HAD LOST ANY CONNECTION THEY PREVIOUSLY HAD WITH THE PLACE AND THAT IT WAS SLOWLY BECOMING SHOREDITCH 2.0. BUT NOT IN A POSITIVE WAY.'**

There was a consensus amongst many that development in general was needed everywhere and in Brixton in particular, but young people were wondering 'who it is attracting and who it is built for'.

Many of the young people stated that they did not feel that new developments were catered towards them, referring to both their age group and their ethnic backgrounds. There was a sense that 'minorities are being pushed out' of the area, particularly in relation to black-owned businesses. One person observed that 'Brixton is now an eatery, it's lost a lot of the Caribbean influence it once had'.

Another interviewee suggested:

**'IF I HAD CONTROL OF DEVELOPMENT, I'D MAKE MORE BLACK-OWNED BUSINESSES. YOU CAN ALREADY GO TO H&M IN CENTRAL BRIXTON BUT THESE BLACK BUSINESSES HERE, THIS IS KIND OF LIKE THEIR ONLY SHOT.'**

However, a sense of exclusion was also noted in relation to housing. Young people shared that 'rising prices were forcing a lot of original Brixtonians out of their homes' and another young person added that it was 'upsetting seeing Brixton change more for the good of those outside of Brixton than for the locals. People are being pushed out when Brixton should be improved for its existing community.'

The young people interviewed, and to some extent the Youth Advocates as well, did not seem to feel part of the change that is undergoing in Brixton. Many of them noted an increase in 'white people in the area' and stated that it was becoming 'more diverse in the sense that it is changing demographically'. Some young people expressed hope that certain changes might make the area safer, and another young person added that newer buildings might be more wheelchair accessible than older ones, 'which was important as their father uses a wheelchair'.

Whilst a majority of interviewees generally expressed an openness to change, young people seemed to wonder 'where they (we) might be left at in the new developments' or they stated that 'this new Brixton is just not for people like them (me).'



## ECONOMIC STUDY: EMPLOYMENT & SKILLS

### OPPORTUNITIES AND SKILLS

Young people highlighted a need for more youth-led opportunities. Youth centres were mentioned by nearly ninety percent of all participants across the research project. They observed that Brixton 'had more youth facilities in the past' and that these are a key contribution to 'our safety, for example in relation to gang violence'. They expressed a need for:

**'SPACES WHERE PEOPLE FROM ALL BACKGROUNDS CAN MERGE AND EDUCATE THEMSELVES CULTURALLY ABOUT OTHER COUNTRIES AND THEIR TRADITIONS BY USING IT AS A CULTURE HUB. THERE COULD BE WEEKLY OR MONTHLY EVENTS THAT PROMOTE DIFFERENCE THROUGH ENTERTAINMENT, FOOD, MUSIC OR BOOKS'.**

Some young people added that any such events would need to be promoted widely as 'right now events in Pop Brixton often get attended by one particular demographic' so organisers might need to engage more strategically. Young people listed existing youth clubs such as Baytree Centre, Marcus Lipton and spaces like the Brixton Rec but agreed that these were not enough to cater to the increasing need for young people 'to have a place that is ours'.

**'THEY WERE SPENDING A LOT OF TIME JUST CHILLING ON THE BLOCK AND THERE WASN'T MUCH TO DO FOR THEM'.**

Interviewees further raised the importance of life skills 'as this wasn't something currently taught in schools'. Discussing mental health, especially after Lockdown, formed part of this and it was highlighted that 'those new opportunities needed to include support to break down barriers and stigma around it'. Concrete suggestions included self-care and wellbeing workshops, sessions on managing emotions and encouragement to take part in sports activities and exercise.

Others shared it would be helpful to have access to financial workshops that cover money management, tax and earning income from multiple sources. Sessions on confidence building, networking and communication skills also formed part of the list of suggestions, so did media editing and 3D printing classes, language classes, safety/first and self-defence classes and parenting courses. In order to practice vital skills, young people would like to have better access to machinery or specialised equipment. Other project participants listed study spaces or 'semi-quiet spaces with tables and chairs for individuals who are studying now that Covid-19 has led to many young people studying or working from home'. A common theme across these ideas was accessibility and ways to ensure that new spaces were open to young people for free or via discounted rents.

With regards to opportunities provided at Pop Brixton, the consensus was for these to stay active. Young people praised the idea of pop-up stores that could be rented out to different brands or for new workshops, entertainment or local artists.



## JOBS AND CAREERS

In order to get a chance to explore different pathways outside of school, interviewees suggested business, job fairs and open-days. Young people were keen to see information centres where they might get advice on employability and careers, attend CV workshops, or be linked up with work experience that provides accredited qualifications as well as mentors who can support them with specific career choices. Young people generally highlighted that they would enjoy

**'MORE MEANINGFUL EMPLOYMENT, AND OPPORTUNITIES SUCH AS THE BRIXTON YOUTH DESIGN ADVOCATE PROJECT THAT ALLOWS THEM TO ENGAGE WITH THEIR COMMUNITIES'**

They also highlighted the importance of tackling educational barriers by offering tailored career support and the need to understand the different learning styles of the young people. More specific ideas included 'life changing opportunities such as offering internships abroad or providing scholarships into universities, like Stormzy's uni scholarship'.

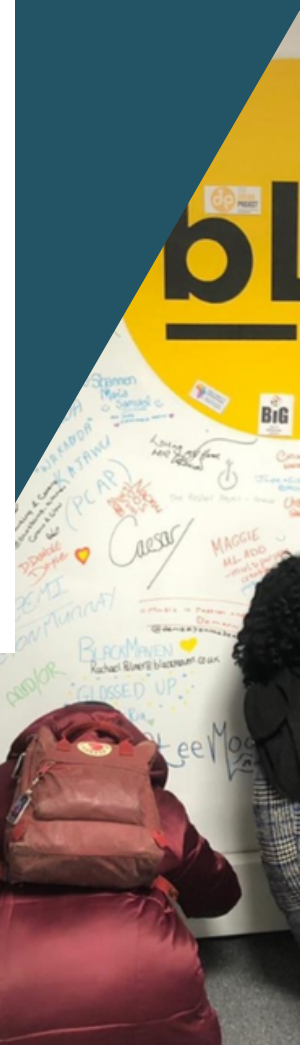
Another particular emphasis was set on creative industries and workshops and events that could provide a pathway into the sector.

One young person stated that it would be important to

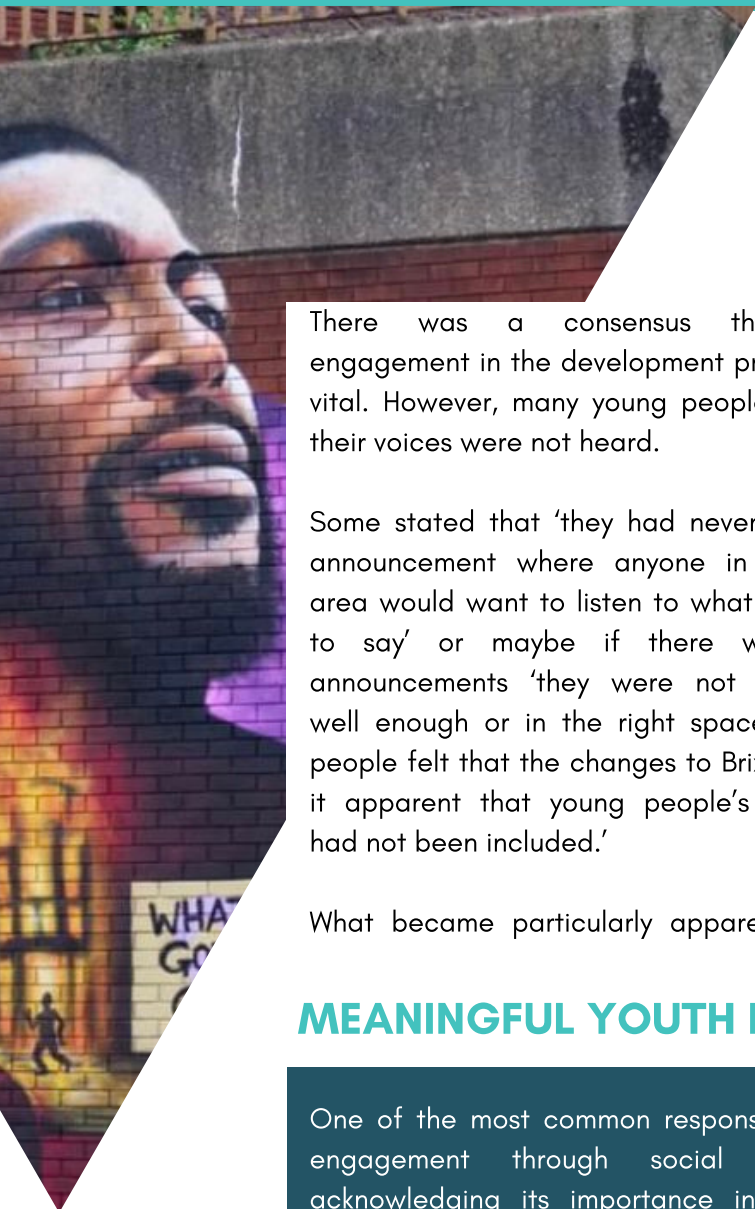
**'HAVE MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE TO EXPRESS THEIR CREATIVITY IN THE ARTS WORLD OUTSIDE OF THE GENERIC PAINTING AND DRAWING BUT INSTEAD AROUND FILMING ON SETS AND DESIGN TECHNOLOGY.'**

Support to encourage young people to develop their own business ideas was mentioned multiple times as well. Young people also highlighted roles in advertising, marketing and hospitality, and acknowledging growing opportunities within tech, they also listed robotics, engineering and coding.

**YOUNG PEOPLE FELT THAT MANY OF THESE ROLES COULD BE DEVELOPED WITHIN THE NEW BRIXTON REDEVELOPMENT ITSELF, INCLUDING BUT NOT EXCLUSIVELY IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF NEW BUILDINGS.**







## ENGAGEMENT

### YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCE WITH ENGAGEMENT

There was a consensus that youth engagement in the development process was vital. However, many young people felt that their voices were not heard.

Some stated that 'they had never seen any announcement where anyone in the local area would want to listen to what they have to say' or maybe if there were such announcements 'they were not advertised well enough or in the right spaces.' Young people felt that the changes to Brixton 'make it apparent that young people's viewpoint had not been included.'

What became particularly apparent was a

lack of trust in the Council and developers. Many young people expressed that if asked their opinion,

**'THEY DOUBTED THAT THEY WOULD ACTUALLY BE LISTENED TO AND THAT THEIR VOICE WOULD BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT'**

Several of the interviewees used the phrase of 'becoming part of a tick box exercise' and that for meaningful engagement to take place 'trust would need to be recovered first.'

### MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN REGENERATION

One of the most common responses was engagement through social media, acknowledging its importance in young people's lives. Many of the Youth Advocates found the project opportunity on Instagram and one of the participants shared that they were once involved in an engagement project in Peckham which they had found out about online as well. Interviewees suggested setting up Instagram and Tik Tok profiles for any new development project which would allow the public to engage with it.

It was added however that those managing the accounts needed to make the accounts relevant to young people, for example by partnering with businesses and companies that could share the profile so it would catch young people's eye: 'Otherwise we will scroll right over.', one of the interviewees added.

Whilst raising the impact of social media, there was consensus that it should not be

the only form of engagement as it did not allow for in-depth conversations. There needs to be an interplay of many different activities to get our voices heard. It needs to be accessible.'

Other suggestions included placards on bus stops and phone booths, billboards and posters on spaces like the O2 arena or Brixton Rec. Many of the research participants included leaflets to people's homes, doing street surveys or knocking on people's doors. An idea shared by many was utilising schools or youth clubs.

**'THERE COULD BE TALKS AT COMMUNITY CENTRES OR HERE AT THE BAYTREE CENTRE WHERE WE CAN LEARN ABOUT THE DEVELOPMENTS AND SHARE WHAT WE THINK ABOUT THEM.'**

Other ideas included large social or cultural events at prominent spaces such as Windrush Square or the Brixton Library. There seemed to be a lot of support for structured debates that allow for young people's input. One of the interviewees shared:

**YOU NEED TO GO TO YOUTH CENTRES OR GENERALLY PLACES WHERE YOUNG PEOPLE ARE AT AND THEN GIVE THEM RAW, REAL INFORMATION. BE UPFRONT! DON'T SAY, HEY, THEY ARE THINKING ABOUT THIS AND THAT. BUT INSTEAD SAY, HEY, THIS IS WHAT IS HAPPENING, WHAT DO YOU THINK.'**

Once engaged to share their voice, young people all agreed that it felt important and exciting. Participants shared that 'This is the first time I am being asked about regeneration and it's amazing.'

Young people want to have an impact and their voices heard and actually be part of the change. 'We do want to engage; you just need to be clear how it is guaranteed to change things.'

Another young person's recommendation included: 'Don't be scared to talk to us. We are not all rude and fighting you on the street.' Finally, one of the Youth Advocates summed up the relevance of youth engagement in his podcast: 'For pretty much my whole life I have seen Brixton changing, and having spoken to so many other young people, I think this change doesn't necessarily have to be a bad thing or as bad as I thought. Many of the people I spoke to last week had totally new arguments, and I think that's really important and that's something that developers should hone in on - young people and their voices. Because I am only one young person and others will have such different opinions and I think that's a great thing.'

**In 5 words,  
describe the  
ideal design of a  
building that  
would be catered  
towards  
young people**

Sustainable  
comfortable  
learning intergrated spacious  
community beneficial social  
Easy helpful workshops  
lively talking Football big uplifting  
comfy Modern available  
nice bold catching eye  
socialising fun informative  
everyone Refreshing  
Intriguing Open tech access Bright  
supportive safe  
free visible sports Exciting tall  
amazing friendly  
trendy centre Activities  
extensive Cultural Attractive  
Welcoming  
educational



## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are drawn from young people's findings and input with the aim of providing an actionable summary for the progression of Growing Brixton Rec Quarter.

- Young people are keen to see Brixton evolve whilst maintaining the character and culture of the area. New architecture and building design can be bold, exciting, modern and colourful but **need to still fit and blend into existing structures within Brixton.**
- Young people are proud of Brixton's rich Afro-Caribbean heritage. They see this aspect of Brixton's culture at risk of becoming erased in the regeneration process. Developers and the Council will need to find ways to cater directly to Brixton's multiple ethnic groups, specifically **celebrating the relevance of black-owned shops and businesses in the area.**
- **Young people generally have positive views on International House and Pop Brixton** and especially the first has been providing much-needed space and opportunities. New developments need to retain these achievements and build on their learning.
- Young people welcome a **focus on cleaner streets and green spaces.** There was a particular link drawn to an increased perception of safety in relation to a cleaner and greener urban landscape.
- There needs to be an increase in spaces catering to young people. Whilst acknowledging the impact of the Brixton Rec and surrounding youth centres, young people feel that demand is currently not being met. Particularly in Central Brixton, **young people want to see more spaces designed and constructed for them with a particular focus set on accessibility for low-income residents.**
- Young people want to be able to benefit from the new developments. This might be through **direct job opportunities, work experience, apprenticeship schemes and internships**, as well as through expert advice, events and workshops that can support them on their career journeys. Ranging from the arts, IT and tech, marketing and the hospitality sector, young people feel that many of the roles they are looking for could be developed within the new regeneration scheme itself.
- Lack of trust was identified as a leading concern that stops young people from engaging in the regeneration process. Both developers and the Council need to acknowledge this and **be frank and genuine about the parameters for young people to input into decision-making** and the opportunities that are available to them.
- **Targeted social media posts** as well as visible design and imagery in public spaces are effective ways to draw young people to specific engagement opportunities. It might be useful to tap into existing online relationships young people are having with local businesses or influencers.
- Young people are keen to have open conversations about what is happening in their neighbourhood. There is an appetite to be engaged as long as the process is transparent. This could be done via the use of street stalls, open shops and surveys. Working with **schools and youth organisations are particularly impactful ways to meet young people where they are at** and engage with them face to face about the changes that Brixton is undergoing and how they could become a part of it.