MAYOR OF LONDONLONDONASSEMBLY

Protecting and sustaining spaces for London's diverse communities through planning and licensing

A policy brief for local authorities and central government

Key information

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Contents

1. London's cultural and community spaces are at risk??

The people and organisations that run community-led and cultural spaces play a fundamental role in creating cultural, social and economic value for Londoners and serve London's diverse communities.

Community-led and cultural spaces are often described as 'cultural infrastructure' or 'social infrastructure'. These categories exist to help policymakers understand the role that specific spaces play for different communities. In daily life spaces may blur the boundaries between these definitions and are hard to categorise in this way.

These spaces could be:

- a music venue, theatre, or artists' studio offering training and skills-development opportunities, as well as opportunities to meet, create, and socialise
- a local restaurant as a place where people go to find out about support services available in their native language
- in some neighbourhoods, a café, a barber, or a tailor's shop that might hold significant cultural heritage value.

These spaces contribute positively to community cohesion and wellbeing; and provide opportunities for Londoners to represent their unique identities, and celebrate shared experiences. The ability of all Londoners to access spaces representing their communities is key to their agency in telling London's history, and shaping its future.

Worryingly, over the past decade and a half, London's community-led and cultural spaces have faced increasing risks. High land values, business rates, redevelopment pressures, funding reductions, the COVID-19 pandemic, and most recently, the cost-of-living crisis have challenged even the best-established spaces.??

2. Taking action to stop the loss of spaces Londoners love and value

Since 2016, the Mayor's Culture and Community Spaces at Risk programme has been providing information, advice, guidance, advocacy and policy work to help protect against threats to London's community-led and cultural spaces. Evidence from direct engagement with organisations operating spaces indicates that spaces run by and serving Londoners who are more likely to face inequalities are at particular risk. This is because these spaces face additional challenges when interacting with the planning and licensing system. While the Mayor's Culture and Community Spaces at Risk programme can support spaces at immediate risk, system change is needed to address the root causes.

We commissioned research to understand the disparities that organisations led by underrepresented groups face in their ability to secure and sustain spaces for cultural and community uses. The research process combined desk research with the lived experience and expertise of community-led and cultural organisations as active research participants. The full research report is available on our website.

3. Our research findings

Five key conditions putting spaces at risk

The research identified five key conditions impacting the level of risk that community-led and cultural organisations face. This policy brief focuses on two of these conditions: the national planning system and licensing restrictions. It makes relevant recommendations to local authorities and central government.

The five key conditions are:

- **Land value and increases in business rates** pose one of the biggest challenges facing all community-led and cultural spaces in London. They create a property market with high barriers to entry for renting and owning property, and put existing spaces at risk due to unsustainable rents.

- **The national planning system** shapes planning and development conditions for community-led and cultural spaces. Permitted development rights within the National Planning Policy Framework put their assets at risk and the framework lacks specific protections for cultural and social infrastructure.

- **Licensing restrictions** threaten the sustainability of late-night venues. Development has brought more residents near licensed premises. Spaces have come under increased scrutiny for drawing late-night crowds and generating noise in mixed-use areas of London and can face stricter licensing controls.

- **Funding reductions and funding design** threaten community-led and cultural spaces. Austerity measures have limited funding and resources available through local authorities and other public-sector organisations and increased the financial precarity of organisations who are already struggling with cost and rent increases. They now struggle to secure crucial long-term funding agreements and core funding.

- **Networks and relationships** with key stakeholders such as local authorities, property owners and funders benefit community-led and cultural spaces by helping them gain traction in lease negotiations, secure future funding and more. Underdeveloped or tense relationships can create problems and put them at risk.

Spaces led by or serving underrepresented Londoners face additional challenges

London has high levels of inequality, impacting Londoners' social and economic circumstances. Race and ethnicity, sex, income level and class, disability, religion or belief, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other identity factors, impact how Londoners experience inequality.??
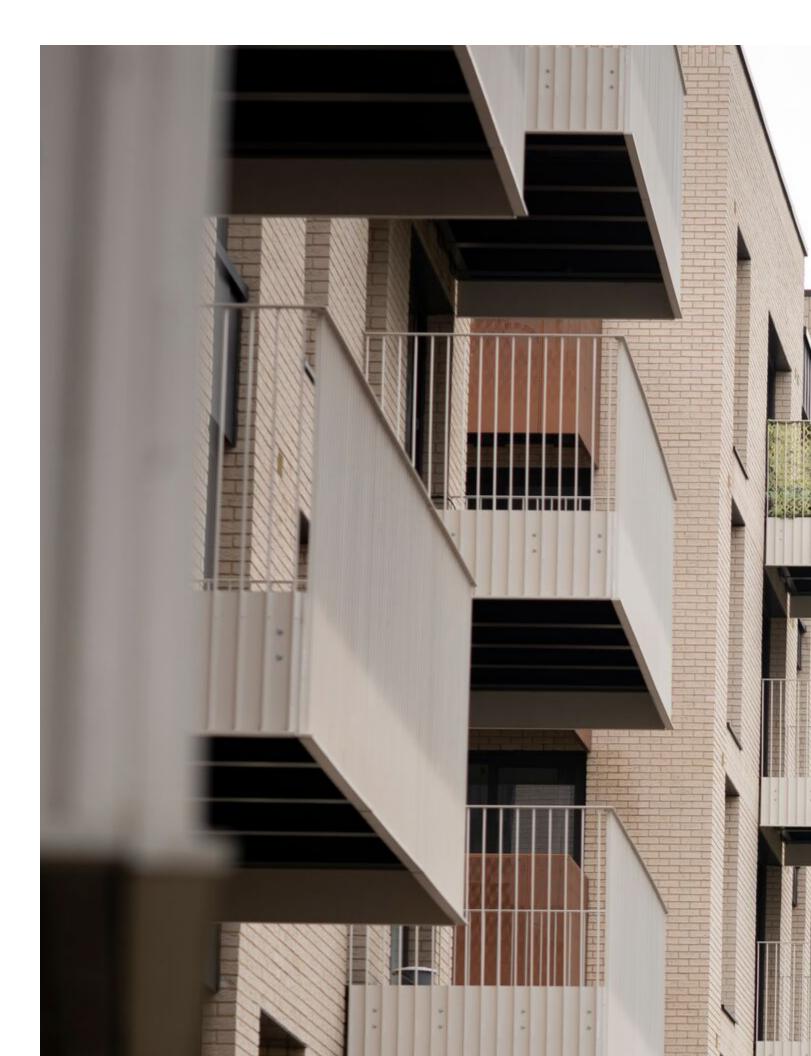
London's inequalities are structural. This means they arise from historical situations and are deeply rooted in institutional systems that govern key factors in securing and sustaining cultural and community spaces – such as property ownership and finance. Historic factors increase the challenges in accessing, securing and sustaining space. Groups that, historically, have had less access to wealth creation and financial resources are less able to secure property in London, where land values are high. They are also more likely to lose access to property.??

National planning system

National planning policy shapes planning and development conditions for community-led and cultural spaces. The National Planning Policy Framework lacks specific protections for cultural and social infrastructure. Landowners and developers can convert many types of commercial property to housing without planning permission. Community-led and cultural spaces are vulnerable to conversion and losing their space.??

The National Planning Policy Framework requires local authorities to achieve significant housing delivery. The use of council funding is restricted, so local authorities rely on private housing development to meet these targets. There is a risk that planning authorities will approve development schemes that displace valued local assets if they determine that new housing delivery outweighs the importance of protecting the assets. This is a particular risk if there are gaps in policies protecting community-led and cultural spaces.?

Spaces valued by underrepresented groups are often unknown to local authorities, and so may not be represented in the Local Plan. There are insufficient protections for community spaces supporting groups with protected characteristics within Local Plans in most areas. They may also lack institutional recognition for the specific value they provide to certain communities. Organisations led by speakers of English as a second language find it harder to engage effectively with the planning system.

Case study: Assessing the equalities impacts of development to protect cultural and community spaces

The London Borough of Tower Hamlets has strengthened the way it considers the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) in the planning process.

The PSED requires public authorities to have due regard to the objectives set out in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010. This means they must consider the needs set in the objectives when making decisions or delivering services. The objectives are to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations. The PSED applies when local authorities assess planning applications and make decisions about them.

The way local planning authorities do this varies greatly. The strengthened approach in Tower Hamlets makes it easier to consider how the potential loss of community and cultural spaces may impact different groups of people.

Read case study: Assessing the equalities impacts of development to protect cultural and community spaces

Licensing restrictions

Licensed venues have come under increased pressure in the past decade due to new residential development in mixed-use areas of London. Because more residents now live near licensed premises, spaces such as music venues, nightclubs and other entertainment premises have come under scrutiny for drawing late-night crowds and noise.?Licensing controls over these activities have become stricter. Restrictive licensing conditions can have a negative impact on the sustainability of late-night venues.

Licensed premises led by underrepresented groups can also face greater scrutiny from licensing authorities. Overall, licensing authorities and policing tend to approach live entertainment and licensed premises from a risk assessment perspective, instead of an economic or cultural development perspective. This approach negatively impacts groups that authorities perceive to create more risk.

Case study: Helping night-time economy businesses navigate licensing and other regulations

Significant opportunity exists in London to become part of the night-time economy. Certain barriers can prevent entrepreneurs and businesses from creating a night-time offer, such as security concerns, information overload, unknown logistics, and a lack of existing local evening hubs or attractions.

Entrepreneurs and businesses come in all shapes and sizes, from private companies and limited partnerships to community organisations, sole traders and charities.

The [Night Time Enterprise Zone Toolkit](#) (NTEZT) brings together licensing, environmental health, trading standards and planning regulation guidance in one place. And explores key considerations and regulations for those looking to offer evening or night-time activities.

[Read case study: Helping night-time economy businesses navigate licensing and other regulations](#)

4. Recommendations

Our research has identified barriers to achieving equity in access to space. Imbalance of power is a common theme in these barriers. Overcoming the barriers requires all stakeholders to consider how they can shift power to the operators and users of space. This shift should mean involving communities as partners when shaping plans and making decisions that affect the assets they use and value.

Local planning authorities can:

- include, in their Local Plans, specific protections for community-led and cultural spaces led by or serving underrepresented groups
- ensure that infrastructure mapping and delivery planning includes community-led and cultural spaces led by and serving underrepresented groups
- employ co-designed and participatory research methods, working with underrepresented groups to identify community-led and cultural spaces that serve these groups?
- develop specific targets and actions for actively involving underrepresented groups when developing planning policy??
- consider Article 4 Directions to remove permitted development rights that place community-led and cultural spaces at risk, recognising that community-led and cultural spaces may occupy properties with different use classes.??

Local licensing authorities can:

- share best practice on supporting community-led and cultural organisations through licensing processes
- ensure that licensing officers understand the potential impacts of systemic historic inequality, the low level of trust towards public authorities in some communities, and unconscious bias by decision-makers on licensing decisions
- monitor and report on the impact of licensing policies and decisions on community-led and cultural spaces, especially those led by or serving underrepresented groups.??

Central Government can:

- consider developing guidance on cultural and community infrastructure mapping and planning.