

# YOUNG LONDONERS' PRIORITIES FOR A SUSTAINABLE CITY

## SUMMARY REPORT

Report on the Key Issues and Priorities for  
Young Londoners Undertaken for the London  
Sustainable Development Commission

SEPTEMBER 2019

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Enquiries 020 7983 4100  
Minicom 020 7983 4458

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London Sustainable Development  
Commission

City Hall  
4th Floor  
The Queen's Walk  
London SE1 2AA  
[www.londonsdc.org.uk](http://www.londonsdc.org.uk)

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following individuals for their help in  
compiling this report.

**Authors:** Dr James Sloam and Dr Rakib Ehsan  
(Royal Holloway, University of London) in  
collaboration with Bite the Ballot, the Greater  
London Authority and the London Sustainable  
Development Commission.

**Steering Group:** Paul Toyne, Ashok Sinha,  
David Elliott, Julie Hirigoyen, Malini Mehra,  
Claudia Webbe, Charlotte Wood, Marius  
Greave, LSDC Secretariat, and GLA Officers.

**Royal Holloway, University of London:**  
Dr James Sloam and Dr Rakib Ehsan.

**Bite the Ballot:** Michael Sani, Ben Pook,  
Tom McManus, Theo Otoo-Quayson, Korinna  
Veropoulou, Elena Prieto and Jonathon Thiar.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

LONDON SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

The London Sustainable Development  
Commission (LSDC) was established in 2002  
to provide independent advice to the Mayor of  
London on ways to make London a sustainable,  
world-class city. The Commission is an  
independent body, challenging policymakers to  
promote a better quality of life for all Londoners,  
both now and in the future, whilst also  
considering London's wider global impacts. The  
Commission is made up of individual experts  
from the economic, social, environmental and  
London governance sectors. Commissioners  
give their time voluntarily, promoting sustainable  
development, embedding sustainability into  
London-wide strategies, and helping make  
sustainability a meaningful and understandable  
concept for all Londoners.

ROYAL HOLLOWAY, UNIVERSITY  
OF LONDON

**Dr James Sloam** is reader in politics at Royal  
Holloway, University of London, where he was  
co-director of the Centre for European Politics  
from 2007 to 2017. He is a founding convenor  
of the UK Political Studies Association (PSA)  
specialist group on young people's politics.  
James has published widely in the area of  
youth, citizenship and politics in Europe and  
the United States, including his most recent  
book "Youthquake 2017: the Rise of Young  
Cosmopolitans in Britain since the Financial  
Crisis" published (open access) with Palgrave.  
James has engaged with many organisations  
that seek to increase youth participation  
in democracy. He is a fellow of the UK All-  
Party Parliamentary Group on Democratic  
Participation and a member of its Political  
Literacy Organizing Group. In 2016, he authored  
a chapter on 'electoral participation' for the  
United Nations World Youth Report.

**Dr Rakib Ehsan** worked at Royal Holloway,  
University of London as a postdoctoral  
researcher for this project. His research  
interests include British ethnic minority public  
attitudes and Brexit-related voting behaviour.  
He has had research published by a number  
of UK think-tanks, including Runnymede  
Trust, Policy Exchange and Intergenerational  
Foundation, as well as the Mackenzie Institute,  
an independent security think-tank based in  
Toronto, Canada. Rakib currently works as a  
research fellow at Henry Jackson Society's  
Centre on Radicalisation & Terrorism.

BITE THE BALLOT

Bite the Ballot (BTB) is an international  
social enterprise that specialises in civic  
and community engagement. Our charity  
has grown from an idea in a classroom  
to coordinating world-record breaking  
campaigns, changing laws and rebranding  
politics among young and socially-excluded  
communities. Since establishing in 2010 BTB  
has always been strictly party neutral - we  
do not champion any individual politicians  
or parties. We simply want to invite citizens  
to join a national conversation, debating the  
issues that matter most to them and play  
an active role in the solutions. As more and  
more people become socially conscious, our  
methodology acts as a catalyst for them to  
become positive changemakers. We only  
believe in one type of engagement - purpose  
driven and meaningful.

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# FOREWORD

The London Sustainable Development Commission (LSDC) has been assessing London's progress in becoming a more sustainable city since 2005 through its periodic publication of '[Quality of Life](#)' indicator reports. These reports have revealed the need to improve the capital's economic, social and environmental performance for Londoners and visitors to London. At the same time the LSDC has been aware of the need to better understand the issues affecting different parts of London's society. We were particularly keen to look at the inter-generational impact of decisions made previously and now on the younger generation (16-24 year olds). The following quote provided by a female participant in this research project sums up our rationale:

"We're getting the hit because this country has an ageing population, and it seems that the older generation are the ones that are making most of the policies, even though they are going to be the ones that are least affected for the least time".

The report, commissioned by us, and independently researched and written by Royal Holloway University of London and Bite the Ballot, is targeted at London decision-makers such as the Mayor and London's borough councils, but is also highly relevant for national government, public sector organisations and business. We sought to understand the issues and views of young Londoners, and through this unique research we are calling upon London's policy makers to consider how best to address the findings of this report so that the situation can be improved.

Furthermore, we explore how young Londoners' concerns align with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and invite policy makers to consider what this means for London's commitment to sustainable development that meets the needs of future generations as well as those of the present.

This report does not assess the performance of the GLA's or others' work on youth engagement or sustainability. Instead, it is a contribution to ongoing discussions at a time when a wide range of actors have a crucial role to play in shaping policy debates on a range of social, economic and environmental challenges.

Over the coming months, the LSDC will be assessing the implications of the findings and initial high-level recommendations. We will then collaborate with others to identify any further recommendations to ensure inter-generational fairness and seek to make London a better place in doing so.

**Paul Toyne**

*LSDC Commissioner*

*Chair of the SDGs and Quality of Life Subgroup of the London*

**September 2019**

**WE BELIEVE  
YOUTH  
ENGAGEMENT  
IS ESSENTIAL  
TO THE HEALTH  
OF OUR  
DEMOCRACY**

## 1. LISTENING TO YOUNG VOICES: OUR AIMS

This report aims to better understand what issues are important to young people in London and how these might be better heard in policy-making processes. It is targeted at policy-makers in London and beyond, and focuses on opportunities to enhance the quality of life of young Londoners but clearly has great significance for national government and business too.

This report also aims to understand how young Londoners' concerns align with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>1</sup> This contributes to a wider piece of work to map London's 'Quality of Life' indicators to the SDGs, situating London's sustainability performance in a global framework, whilst identifying opportunities to further enhance the lives of Londoners.

According to the report authors, no study of such a large, representative group of young people's views on sustainability-related issues has previously been undertaken in such depth and breadth in any single city.

We believe youth engagement is essential to the health of our democracy, and the participants in our interviews and focus groups confirmed they feel it is vital to better incorporate their views into decision making. Plan International<sup>2</sup> state young people (16-24 year olds) are:

- Critical thinkers, able to question contradictions and biases in the status quo
- Change-makers, mobilising others to act
- Innovators, bringing fresh perspectives and solutions
- Communicators, spreading key messages to their peers and beyond
- Leaders, driving change in their communities

This report does not assess the performance of the GLA's or others' work on youth engagement or sustainability. Instead, it is a contribution to ongoing discussions at a crucial time of change when a range of non-state actors (including businesses, civil society groups and others) have a key role to play in influencing the policy debates on the climate and ecological emergencies, Brexit, and other issues.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

We engaged with a large group of 16-24 year-old Londoners through:

- Interviews with 30 participants - a diverse group selected by the GLA Peer Outreach team. (Sample size too small to be considered a representative group.)
- Round-table focus groups, debating issues raised during the interviews and creatively visualising their ideas, at an evening event with 100 attendees selected by the GLA Peer Outreach team. (Sample size too small to be considered representative.)
- An online survey with 2,002 participants (a representative cross-section of Londoners, conducted by polling company Survation).

The unparalleled size of this relatively narrow age group in one geographical location – and the fielding of nuanced questions relevant to young people's everyday lives – allowed the project team to explore the views of young Londoners as defined by age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status.

We analysed what this data tells us about:

- What young Londoners' priorities are.
- How these issues map to the SDGs.
- How their concerns fit into the wider social context

We developed recommendations for policy-makers in London and beyond based on this evidence, as well as plans for further work.

The flow chart on the next page highlights our process.

<sup>1</sup> The UN Sustainable Development Goals are a universal agenda for "transforming our world". They commit to tackling 17 key environmental, economic and social issues. <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html>

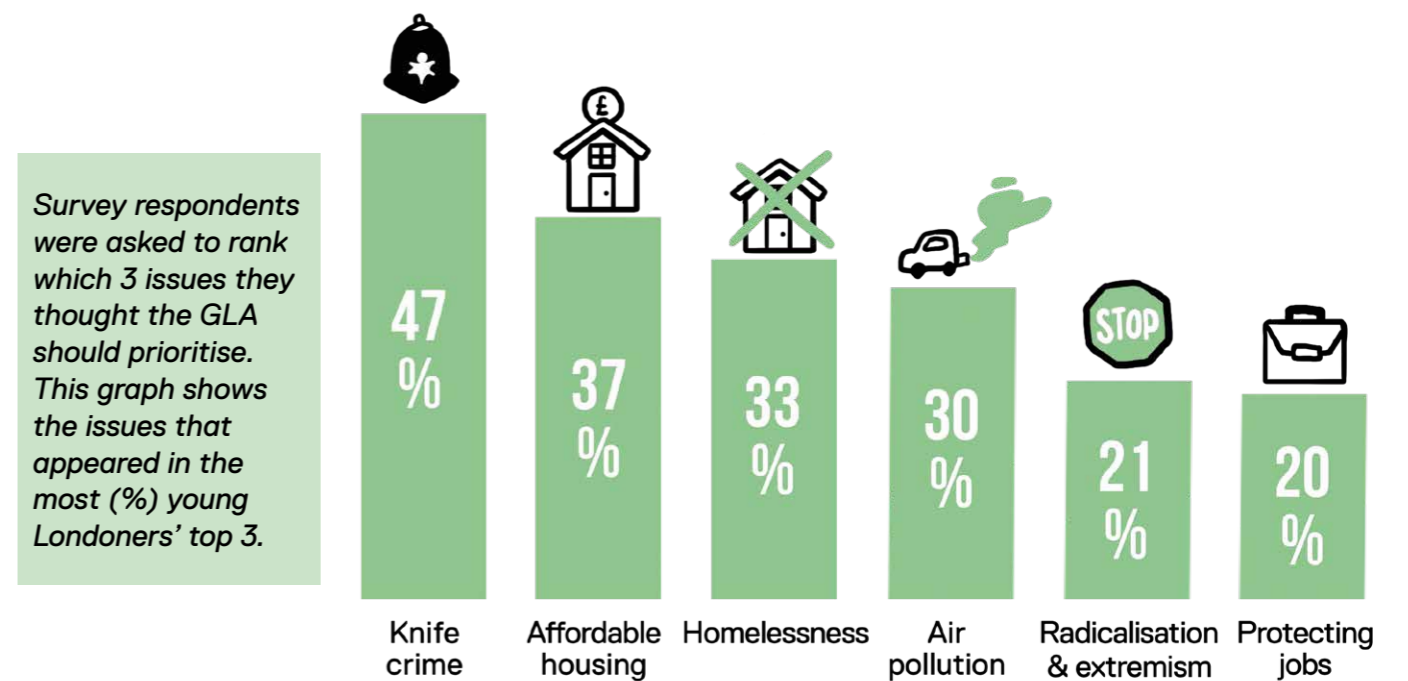
<sup>2</sup> Plan International, 2015. The Success of The SDGs Depends On Youth Engagement: <https://plan-international.org/blog/2015/08/five-reasons-success-sdgs-depends-youth-engagement#>



### 3. RESEARCH FINDINGS: WHAT YOUNG LONDONERS TOLD US

The charts below and on the following page show survey participants' priorities for key decision makers to take action on, as well as more detailed feedback on key social, economic and environmental issues that young people feel are of concern to them in London.

#### 16-24 YEAR OLD LONDONERS' TOP 6 PRIORITIES FOR THE GLA

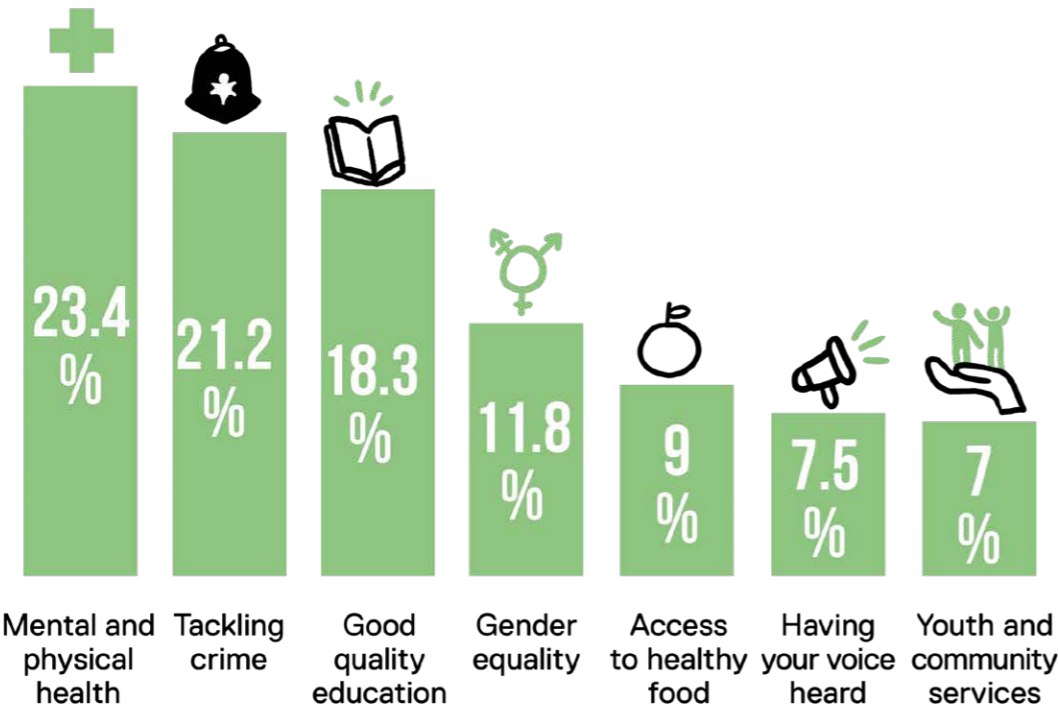


//Source: survey of 2,002 respondents aged 16-24. Commissioned by LSDC and conducted by Survation.

#### 3.1 SOCIAL ISSUES

Issues relating to health and personal safety were at the very top of young Londoners' list of concerns, particularly mental health provision and the threat or experience of knife crime.

## MOST IMPORTANT SOCIAL ISSUE



“It’s hard to get a [mental health] appointment. A few of my friends suffer bad...”  
“I know that the youth offending team tackles mental health, but if you’re not offending you can’t go there.”

Quote from focus group participant

//Source: survey of 2,002 respondents aged 16-24. Commissioned by LSDC and conducted by Survation.  
//Note: Percentages do not add up to 100% as “don’t know” responses are not included.

### Mental health

Most of the interviewees and focus group participants had friends who had suffered from mental health problems or experienced problems themselves. But the general feeling was that provision was patchy at best, and that schools did little to prepare them for dealing with mental health problems. Interviewees spoke of how economic pressures and cuts to youth support services were exacerbating young people’s mental health problems in London. There was also a feeling that mental health treatment was reactive rather than preventative.

### Crime

Young Londoners in the focus groups did not always feel they were safe, but this depended upon “where you live”, your class, gender and ethnicity. Many reasons were given for the rise in knife crime – one young woman explained that it was “a multifaceted problem” that needed “to be looked at from all angles”, including the issue of paternal role models, child poverty, education and “male pride”. Policing was also an issue – focus group participants cited cuts to frontline officers, as well as a lack of trust-building and community policing. From the research many young men saw “the police as more of a threat than a force to help”.

“Political education is something that is just ridiculously lacking... As someone who’s currently working in the political system, you can see how much people from 18 to 24 are basically left out of the entire policy process.”

Quote from focus group participant

### Education

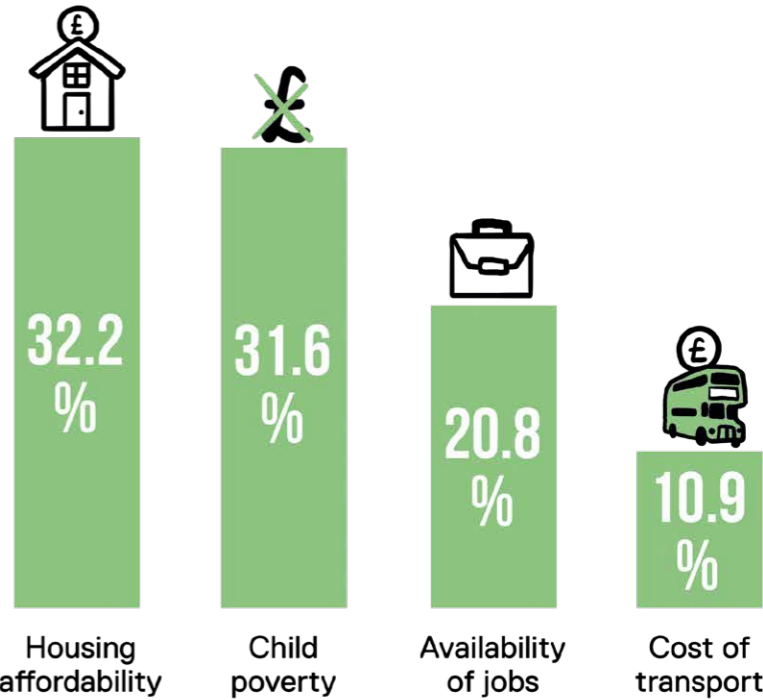
Education was viewed as an important issue by almost all interview and focus group participants, and was, for many of them, a central part of their everyday lives. However, they felt that the curriculum did not prepare them for life (especially the management of finances), teach them enough about the environment, how democracy works, or explore what it means to be a good and active citizen. Research by the National Union of Students also found that 70% of students would like to learn more about the Sustainable Development Goals.

### Civic engagement

52% of survey respondents paid attention to politics, inclusive of 40% who paid a lot of attention. A large proportion had also participated in some form of non-electoral civic activity in the last 12 months, such as volunteering or signing a petition. However, many focus group participants expressed frustration that young people’s voices on issues affecting them are not heard by the older generation who set policy. When asked to name their top three sources of news, 50% said TV, 42% said social media and 34% cited friends and family.

## 3.2 ECONOMIC ISSUES

## MOST IMPORTANT ECONOMIC ISSUE



//Source: survey of 2,002 respondents aged 16-24. Commissioned by LSDC and conducted by Survation.  
//Note: Percentages do not add up to 100% as “don’t know” responses are not included.

Poverty and inequality

For young Londoners, poverty and inequality were overarching issues that drove many concerns regarding their futures, impacting all the other areas addressed – from mental health, to knife crime, to community cohesion. All young Londoners who participated in the interviews identified a lack of money as a “major problem”, citing factors including high living costs and a lack of access to well-paid work. A general view was established that the wealth gap between “rich and poor” needed to be reduced in British society – but particularly in London.

Many were of the view that government austerity had worsened inequalities in London, feeling that public spending cuts had disproportionately affected the capital’s more deprived neighbourhoods. The closure of youth centres was prominent in discussions.

Focus group participants emphasised the knock-on effects of poverty for issues such as crime: “who really robs houses for fun?... how many 14-year olds would be selling drugs if their family had money?”.

Housing

The majority revealed dreams of home ownership, but felt this was increasingly unattainable due to the chronic undersupply of genuinely affordable housing, along with the lack of access to well-paid, secure jobs.

The cost, quality and unreliability of the private renting sector was another key issue. Overcrowding was also raised, with one participant stating that he lived with three other adults in a one-bedroom council flat.

Most of the focus group participants either knew someone who had experienced housing problems or had experienced problems themselves, highlighting that young people and families were being made homeless and “left to rot” in hostels. One young woman reflected: “When I was in secondary school – I think about Year 10, Year 11 – me and my family did become homeless and it was crazy because I didn’t look like I was in such a situation... I did my GCSEs when I was homeless.”

Jobs

One interviewee stated that “[un]employment is at the root of all other problems...it’s really hard for young people to get jobs”. A number of interviewees spoke of their displeasure over the fact that young people under the age of 16 were not statutorily entitled to minimum pay.

“We have lots of homeless people and I think I’m seeing them younger and younger on the streets.”  
“If you’re a young person who hasn’t got any education and are just trying to get by and work a normal job, London has priced you out.”

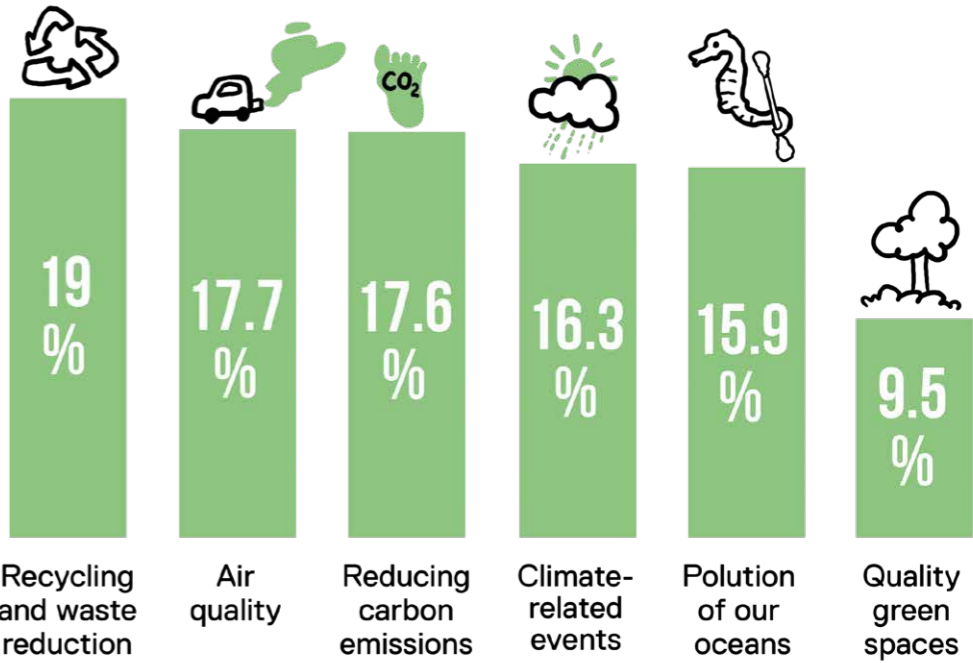
Quote from focus group participant

“[The environment] is a very ignored issue, because in London now there are more serious issues that we focus on which are life-dependent... like housing, or poverty, or crimes, but also the environment is a big part, because it is constantly adding and decreasing to either our emotional state or our health and the way we function as a society.”

Quote from focus group participant

3.3 ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

MOST IMPORTANT ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUE



//Source: survey of 2,002 respondents aged 16-24. Commissioned by LSDC and conducted by Survation.  
//Note: Percentages do not add up to 100% as “don’t know” responses are not included.

From the research, there is not a standout environmental issue which is prioritised by young Londoners as a whole. The only environmental issue which failed to reach a double-figure percentage was quality green spaces. This might reflect the fact that many young Londoners are very appreciative of the parks they do have (confirmed in the interviews and focus groups) and so do not view this as a key area for improvement.

Gender differences also emerged, with women placing more emphasis on global issues such as climate change, and men focusing on local issues like air quality and waste.

(It should be noted that the work was undertaken before the school climate strikes and major Extinction Rebellion events took place).

4. MAPPING YOUNG VOICES AGAINST THE UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS


This report took the LSDC's Quality of Life (QoL) indicators as its starting point – a set of measures used since 2005 to evaluate the sustainability of the city. The QoL indicators are grouped into social, economic and environmental factors, and the report's findings were structured using that tri-polar approach. However, in order to better understand the nuance of the views of young Londoners, they have been analysed and grouped into five clusters of themes. Those five clusters are shown below.

5 KEY CLUSTERS OF ISSUES:

**1 POVERTY & INEQUALITY**

- Affordable homes
- Better employment opportunities
- Affordable transport

1 NO POVERTY 5 GENDER EQUALITY 8 DECENT WORK & ECONOMIC GROWTH 10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES 11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES & COMMUNITIES




**2 HEALTH & PERSONAL SAFETY**

- Mental health provision
- Knife crime & safety on public transport

Poverty & lack of opportunity lead to crime

3 GOOD HEALTH & WELLBEING 16 PEACE, JUSTICE & STRONG INSTITUTIONS




**3 EDUCATION FOR LIFE**

- Education about life skills & how democracy works

We feel that the curriculum doesn't prepare us for life


4 QUALITY EDUCATION



**4 ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION**

- Improving air quality
- Increase use of renewable energy
- Improved recycling/less plastic


7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY 11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES & COMMUNITIES 12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION & PRODUCTION 13 CLIMATE ACTION



**5 CIVIC ENGAGEMENT & COMMUNITY COHESION**

- Lack of participation in decision making
- Lack of engagement with policy makers
- Radicalization & extremism

16 PEACE, JUSTICE & STRONG INSTITUTIONS



There is also a wider project to map the QoL indicators against the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. This aims to measure London's performance against a global framework and situate the city in an international vision for a better future. (See 'Further work for the LSDC' (below) for details.)

The UN's World Youth Report argues that "Critical to the success of the 2030 Agenda are the role of young people in engaging with local and national government in delivering on policies and programmes on the ground". The chart below shows which SDGs are represented in the five clusters of issues arising from the research undertaken; those which are not a primary focus of young Londoners' concerns are greyed out. However, the priority Goals presented in this chart do not tell the whole story, and only give a very high-level picture of the issues at play. The reality, as articulated in SDG 17 ('Partnerships for the Goals'), is that all the themes are highly nuanced, inextricably interconnected, and cut across a wide range of policy areas, levels of government and industrial sectors.



5. CONCLUSIONS



This research found young Londoners were passionate and articulate in their concerns about a range of sustainability issues. They highlighted the complex interconnections between these issues, particularly commenting that poverty, inequality and education underpin many of these challenges.

However, it became clear from the interviews and focus groups that a lack of knowledge can create a major barrier to deeper engagement in these issues – especially for young people from less privileged backgrounds. Although young Londoners told us in the survey they participate in many diverse forms of civic and political action, the focus groups revealed that at least some young Londoners feel there is little engagement between young people and political officials, which is in line with wider social trends in the UK and Europe.<sup>3</sup>

The key challenge is therefore how best to channel this civic and political engagement into existing governance structures and policy making.

6. WORK ALREADY UNDERWAY



Participants in this research clearly stated they believe the issues raised should be top priorities for policy makers at all levels, including within boroughs, across London, and nationally.

Clearly, these are not problems that the GLA and boroughs can resolve on their own, and the Mayor does not have powers over many of the issues raised (education, mental health, etc). These challenges require a much greater commitment from central government and others (e.g. to reduce inequality), greater resources (e.g. for local services), as well as renewed commitment to collaborative and innovative approaches to incorporating youth voices into policy-making processes.

However, the GLA is already taking significant steps to address these issues, in terms of the overarching theme of better engaging young people in decision-making, and addressing the SDGs. The report does not provide a detailed list of all existing youth engagement activities across London as these are too numerous, but a few initiatives currently underway are highlighted below.

For example, the Mayor has created opportunities for young people to participate in debates on London’s issues through the London Youth Assembly, Partnership for London’s (PYL) Youth Board, and the GLA’s Young Londoners Participation Network of multi-agency frontline youth workers. The Team London Young Ambassadors programme helps young people take social action in their communities on issues they care about, such as the environment or knife crime. GLA teams conduct regular research on policy areas relevant to their particular areas (e.g. the research by the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) cited in this report, identifying demographic trends among victims of crime<sup>4</sup>). The GLA’s Education and Youth Team routinely engage young people on a range of policy issues, including the high-profile #LondonNeedsYouAlive social media campaign, the Young Londoners Participation Network, and events such as the annual Youth Summit.

In terms of employment, the Mayor has set up the Workforce Integration Network to improve pathways for underrepresented groups to access decent jobs, boosting not only individuals’ sense of community belonging, but overall social cohesion. This will initially focus on supporting young black men aged 16 to 24 into living wage employment in the construction and digital sectors, and will engage other sectors and groups over time.

On skills, the Mayor’s Digital Talent programme is a £7m scheme to make sure young Londoners have the digital skills employers want, and the Mayor’s Construction Academy aims to help more Londoners train in the skills they need to access vacancies on the capital’s housing construction sites. The devolved Adult Education Budget will support adults aged 19+, tackling inequalities and supporting groups excluded from job market. The Mayor’s London Curriculum also has numerous resources on social, economic and environmental issues - including one for secondary schools on citizenship (launching in autumn 2019), which was a key request from participants in this survey.

London’s boroughs also have their own extensive youth engagement programmes. Many boroughs across London also have youth mayors to better understand and highlight issues important to young people e.g. Croydon and Newham.

The SDGs have become a unifying global language for how nations, regions and organisations can take decisive action to improve our social, economic and environmental conditions by 2030. The LSDC are now taking steps to develop an SDG strategy for London – see ‘Further work for the LSDC’ below for details. The government also

<sup>3</sup> Sloam, J., 2013. *Voice and Equality: Young People and Political Participation in the European Union*. West European Politics.

<sup>4</sup> MOPAC, 2018: *Justice Matters* [https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/justice\\_matters\\_knife\\_crime\\_-\\_23\\_march\\_2018\\_-\\_presentation.pdf](https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/justice_matters_knife_crime_-_23_march_2018_-_presentation.pdf)

published the Voluntary National Review of the UK's performance on the SDGs in July 2019 – though it was criticised by the Parliamentary International Development Committee for lacking a coordinated strategy, not embedding SDGs throughout government, and failing to engage with stakeholders. The UN's 'Roadmap for localizing the SDGs' advocates the role of local government in implementing the Goals, and the UK government has been urged by the Local Government Association to support local authorities to create partnerships to deliver the SDGs.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

This report does not seek to make detailed recommendations on each individual policy area raised throughout this report (crime, health, etc.), as the wide range of issues addressed goes beyond the scope of the LSDC's role. Instead, the SDGs are used as a lens to frame the whole range of themes addressed, in the following set of recommendations for policy makers.

### 1. Strengthen engagement with young people as a specific stakeholder group when consulting on strategy and policy.

- Although 52% of survey participants said they paid attention to politics, many young interviewees and focus groups participants in this research believed that there was not enough information about opportunities to engage in decision-making. In addition to the youth engagement work noted above, existing mayoral strategies have also consulted young people during their development. However, the LSDC recommend that the Mayor could go further, by requiring all key mayoral strategies to incorporate a specific youth engagement component. The Talk London online discussion platform could provide a forum to do so.
- Likewise, national government and local authorities could consider ways to formally include youth voices in decision-making, empowering them to participate in dialogue by making public consultations more visible and accessible. This could be through targeted campaigns or social media – there is a need to develop innovative communications strategies, and as shown in the report, 42% of young people get their news from social media.
- Further to the above, all levels of national and local government should explore effective ways to show young people that their voices are valued – hence inspiring further engagement – by promoting existing good practice that highlights to young people where policy-makers have listened to and acted on their concerns. For example, this could be done via the campaign techniques proposed above.

### 2. Embed the voice of youth in the development of the SDGs in London.

- SDG 17 ('Partnerships for the Goals') highlights that the Goals are interconnected and cut across a wide range of policy areas, levels of government and industrial sectors. The UN's World Youth Report argues that "Critical to the success of the 2030 Agenda are the role of young people in engaging with local and national government in delivering on policies and programmes on the ground". Therefore, when London organisations develop their approach to adopting the SDGs, this process should actively incorporate young people's voices. This includes not only the work of the LSDC, who will pay particular attention to young people's views when engaging stakeholders and the public on the SDGs. It also applies to the boroughs, businesses and other actors.
- The government has been advised to develop an integrated national SDG strategy by many organisations, including the Parliamentary International Development Committee. It has also been urged by the Local Government Association to support local authorities to create partnerships to implement the SDGs. When the government does develop its SDG strategy, it is recommended that this should include engaging with the views of young people, and incorporate their specific and pressing concerns into the UK's approach.

### 3. Education for sustainable development.

- Focus group and interview participants told us that they believed the national curriculum did not provide them with enough information on social, economic or environmental (i.e. sustainable development) issues – specifically they wanted to learn more about civic engagement and democratic participation; life skills, especially managing personal finances; and environmental issues. Research by the National Union of Students also found that 70% of students would like to learn more about the Sustainable Development Goals.
- It is therefore recommended that the sustainable development issues above are integrated more strongly into teaching at all levels of education, and that a range of actors – education institutions, educators, policy makers, local and national government, pupil and student groups, and education sector networks – collaborate to identify opportunities do so.

## 8. FURTHER WORK FOR THE LSDC

The GLA and other London organisations already deliver a wide range of policies and initiatives across the breadth of issues raised by the young Londoners. This research has now added a significant body of evidence on the concerns of young Londoners, and is unique in the sheer number of participants (2,002) engaged in a specific geographical area in a specific age-range. It has provided insights to help that work be delivered more effectively and support further integration between different policy areas.

In order for this work to have real impact, further work will now be done to continue the conversation with young Londoners, ensuring this research was not a one-off. To this end, the LSDC are delivering the following during 2019-20:

- An event was held during London Climate Action Week in July 2019, inviting young people to take part in a Question Time style debate with a panel of policy makers and young leaders. The issues raised were captured and will build on the existing engagement undertaken during this report.
- This research will feed into a wider project underway to map London's Quality of Life indicators against the SDGs, situating London's sustainability performance in a global framework and context whilst identifying opportunities to further enhance the lives of Londoners. This entails adapting the UN's Global Goals to create a locally relevant set of indicators for London (e.g. global targets on poverty thresholds are not suitable for London), and identifying what indicator data is available. The GLA and LSDC have already undertaken an extensive mapping exercise to understand where we have data and where we need to gather more.
- We will engage with stakeholders during autumn and winter 2019, to agree which are the most relevant SDGs to prioritise for London, and develop collaborative approaches to implementing them.
- Young people will be a key stakeholder group during that engagement exercise, which will also include roundtable discussions with the GLA and local authorities; small and large businesses; public bodies such as the police, Transport for London, the NHS; housing groups; and other groups with significant impacts, particular duties, or data.

- We hope this engagement will form the beginning of a new network of London SDG champions, convened by the LSDC.
- The SDG mapping project, incorporating the voices of young Londoners on sustainability, will report back in 2020.

In this way, this current research forms part of an ongoing programme to further develop practices that will help policy makers to better engage young people in our democracy and help to deliver a sustainable London fit for future generations.



*Debate hosted by the LSDC during London Climate Action Week  
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