

# Participatory Placemaking and Sustainable Development

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The climate crisis means that we face ever increasing challenges when it comes to thinking about planning and sustainable development (development that balances environmental protection, economic development, and social inclusion). In addressing these challenges, it is crucial that local people are at the heart of decision-making. Placemaking, an approach to help develop and improve a neighbourhood, city, or region, uses community participation to understand the spaces that matter to people, as well as the aspirations and potential of an area.

Drawing on data from the people of Leeds, this briefing outlines some of the key factors that can help us develop our city so that it not only reflects

community needs, values, and practices, but also contributes meaningfully to people's future health, happiness, and wellbeing in a changing climate.

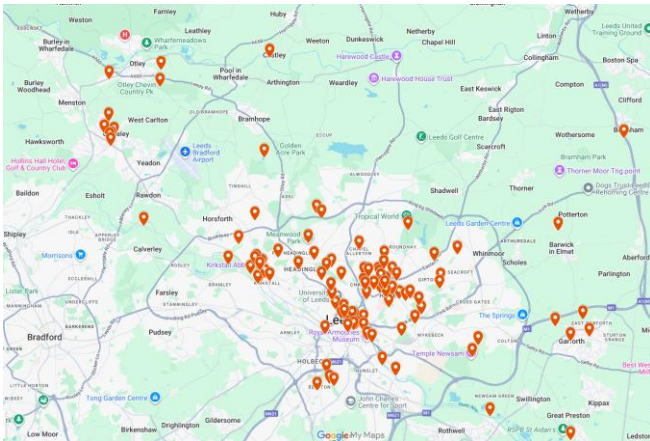
Despite revealing a wealth of important spaces across Leeds, the data suggests that to develop a meaningful placemaking approach a number of barriers need to be addressed. First, these relate to the impact that controls on the use of spaces can have e.g. ranging from challenges associated with the privatization of public spaces such as shopping centres, to the barriers to repurposing unused spaces. Second, these relate to issues of public trust and perceived power imbalances when it comes to local decision making.

## Summary of Findings

- Key spaces that matter to communities and key factors that make these spaces meaningful 'places': Nature and outdoor/green spaces are key to communities across Leeds and inherently connected to people's sense of wellbeing. Other reasons for feeling a strong connection to spaces includes community history, personal memories, and the scope for connecting with others
- Key challenges relating to controls on city spaces across Leeds: The privatisation of public spaces presents some notable challenges, as does the perceived undervaluing of existing resources/wasted spaces across the city
- Key challenges in developing a placemaking approach in Leeds: There are a number of obstacles which relate to a lack of public trust and a perceived lack of community power in local decision making processes

## Background

We asked people across Leeds to tell us about the spaces that matter to them (this could be anything e.g. ranging from a favourite bench, to a local coffee shop). To do this, they either dropped a pin on a specific location on an interactive map, or took part in a walking interview around their local area.<sup>i</sup>



## Which spaces matter to communities and how are connections to these spaces formed?

Outdoor/green spaces play a vital role for people across Leeds. People connect with a range of green spaces (e.g. from cemeteries *'this is the first place I feel like I can breathe a different kind of air'*,<sup>ii</sup> to the *'lifeline canal'*,<sup>iii</sup> to parks and woodland, to roadside greenery *'that's the beauty... just walking and enjoying the green bits in between the concrete and the tarmac'*.<sup>iv</sup> The common theme being the importance of these spaces for wellbeing.<sup>v</sup>

Connected to this is a strong sense that such spaces offer much needed opportunities to connect with nature. The value of 'wildness' was a common theme e.g. even within more managed parks, with one person telling us *'well, it's another little wild bit I like to go to...there's hardly anyone there...and there are lots of birds'*.<sup>vi</sup> This 'wildness' was valued both in terms of nature and associated opportunities such as foraging for *'wild garlic, sorrel, elderflowers'*,<sup>vii</sup> but also for the sense of escapism that people feel in such spaces. Associated with this was the

value of proximity and *'being able to get out into nature from my doorstep without having to drive anywhere'*.<sup>viii</sup> This is something that people across Leeds recognise as being an asset of the city.

When people talk about the spaces that matter to them, i.e. what makes these spaces meaningful 'places', history, memories, and stories also play a key role. These positive associations, and the connection to others experienced in relevant spaces often underpins why they matter.

Crucially, people across Leeds were enthusiastic about sharing their important spaces with us, reflecting the pride and connection that such spaces create between people and their locality, a sense of place.<sup>ix</sup> This wealth of knowledge and insight is illustrative of the immense value in using placemaking to ensure that neighbourhoods, cities, and regions contribute meaningfully to people's health, happiness, and wellbeing.

## How do the current controls on city spaces shape how they are used and understood?

Controls on city spaces can range from limits on access e.g. park entry at certain times, to permitted use/activities e.g. no cycling. Public spaces are not necessarily publicly owned i.e. by the local council, but can include any privately owned area that has been made open and accessible to the public e.g. shopping centres or mixed use development areas with both leisure/retail and residential/office buildings.<sup>x</sup>

This privatization of public spaces presents some challenges with one person telling us they felt excluded e.g. from certain areas along the canal, *'I didn't know I had permission to go into this space because it is so corporate'*.<sup>xi</sup> One person explained the importance of considering these privatised public spaces by telling us about their local shopping centre, *'it's not that special but it's still a gathering place, it's still a place where you see each other and you say hello. When the new management moved in about four years ago, they took away all the benches, so*

*you couldn't sit down outside*'.<sup>xii</sup> Such changes have the potential to significantly alter the way that communities can interact with public spaces (this public/private mix is something that poses a challenge when thinking about a placemaking approach and the opportunities local communities have to shape their local area given the role that private actors, as opposed to the state/local council, play).

Further, people highlighted a number of spaces which they currently see as being wasted/not put to good public use across the city. Some of these examples offer potential for more creative ways to think about how we use our empty spaces, one example being a call for *'some sort of diverse wildflower plants'*<sup>xiii</sup> on unused parcels of land, and another example calling for more creative use of boundary lines e.g. park fences *'[referring to metal park railings/fence line] 'in a time of climate emergency, we need to be thinking much more creatively about the spaces and putting in things particularly plants that produce food in a whole range of areas. To me I see these railings. It's a complete waste...I think how nice it would be if they put some fruit trees along here'*<sup>xiv</sup> People also spoke about local actions to try and get unused spaces back into use, we heard about *'one street where they've [the residents] turned it [a square of land that used to have a row of garages on it] into a play area for kids, it's brilliant'*.<sup>xv</sup> Whilst others flagged the challenges and perceived 'red tape' that can prevent communities from repurposing empty spaces.

### How do people feel about the opportunities to shape their local area?

People talked to us about the way in which *'those in power... don't see the public as everyone'*,<sup>xvi</sup> resulting in exclusion and a lack of public power/voice. We heard that *'you have to remind them, this is for the people, allow the people to speak'*.<sup>xvii</sup> This is particularly problematic where local voice is needed to challenge negative narratives/perceptions associated with an area.

Issues of trust are key, with one person telling us that it is *'very much about the personalities leading the conversation. What agency do they have, what track record do they have, what trust do they have'*.<sup>xviii</sup> Acknowledging this is important given that people recognize the impact that a meaningful placemaking approach could have. One example given related to a local basketball court that could *'face Mecca, because there's a Muslim community, if they were wanting to do [for example] Eid worship, it would face the right way...it's the little subtleties....it's not a religious space, it's just consulting the communities who were the kind of communities that would want to use the park'*.<sup>xix</sup>

Given that public spaces, and their meaning/value are dynamic, with *'people use[ing] different spaces for different things'*,<sup>xx</sup> it is crucial that people are put at the centre of decisions on planning, development and public spaces.

### Summary

In summary, this project highlights some of the key factors that currently shape how people across Leeds connect to public spaces. Further it illustrates the potential that a placemaking approach can offer in moving forward as we reimagine our city in a way that delivers sustainable development that not only reflects community needs, values, and practices, but also contributes meaningfully to people's future health, happiness, and wellbeing in a changing climate.

### About the Author:

Joanne Hawkins is a Lecturer in Law at the University of Leeds. Her research focuses on the ways in which law shapes decision making. Her work draws on her interests in expertise, public participation and environmental democracy. Her projects draw together different strands that reflect her interest in the relationships, and power dynamics, between the environment, communities, and decision-makers.

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<sup>i</sup>The interactive map can be found here: [‘Tell us about the spaces across Leeds that matter to you’](https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1C-M9EFkq4KFxIMWG-fqB8C9kSEo4oAI&ll=53.82473595269967%2C-1.5342215500000034&z=11)<https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1C-M9EFkq4KFxIMWG-fqB8C9kSEo4oAI&ll=53.82473595269967%2C-1.5342215500000034&z=11>

<sup>ii</sup> Int. 19.

<sup>iii</sup> Int. 13.

<sup>iv</sup> Int. 31.

<sup>v</sup> See for example: C Rodgers, ‘Nourishing and Protecting our Urban ‘Green’ Space in a Post-Pandemic World’ (2020) 22(3) Environmental Law Review 165.

<sup>vi</sup> Int. 10.

<sup>vii</sup> Int. 21.

<sup>viii</sup> Int. 12.

<sup>ix</sup> For discussion of place see for example: R Bartel, J carter, *Handbook on Space, Place and Law* (Edward

Elgar 2021); D Delaney, *The Spatial, the Legal and the Pragmatics of Place-Making: Nomospheric Investigations* (Routledge 2010); N Blomley, *Law, Space, and the Geographies of Power* (Guilford Press 1994).

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Elgar 2021); D Delaney, *The Spatial, the Legal and the Pragmatics of Place-Making: Nomospheric Investigations* (Routledge 2010); N Blomley, *Law, Space, and the Geographies of Power* (Guilford Press 1994).

<sup>x</sup> See for example A Layard ‘Shopping in the Public Realm: A Law of Place’ (2010) 37(3) Journal of Law and Society 412.

<sup>xi</sup> Int. 14.

<sup>xii</sup> Int. 30.

<sup>xiii</sup> Int. 31.

<sup>xiv</sup> Int. 1.

<sup>xv</sup> Int. 21.

<sup>xvi</sup> Int. 26.

<sup>xvii</sup> Int. 25.

<sup>xviii</sup> Int. 27.

<sup>xix</sup> Int. 27.

<sup>xx</sup> Int. 32.