Advancing Equitable Access to Greenspaces: From Community Engagement to Meaningful Change



Dr Nasreen Ali
Professor of Public Health Equality
Co-Director, Institute for Health and Wellbeing Research (IHWR)
Talk, Listen Change Health Inequalities Programme Lead
University of Bedfordshire

Introducing Luton and the Research Context





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The problem: access is not equitable

Greenspaces are good for health – but who benefits?

- Physical activity
- Wellbeing
- Social connection
- Connection to nature

But access and use are not equitable.

'The opportunities to access and benefit from greenspaces and the countryside are not equally shared."

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The complexity:
access is about more than having a green space nearby

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Talk, Listen, Change: moving beyond participation to co-creating and change

Talk

- Start with communities
- Understand experiences and inequalities
- Include diverse voices

Listen

- Identify what matters
- Explore barriers, assets and priorities
- Learn from lived experience

Change

- Develop solutions together
- Translate evidence into action
- Influence policy and practice

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The question:

> So, how do we move from knowing that an inequality exists to creating sustainable change with communities?

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The evolution of TLC: from community engagement to co-created change

COVID-19

TLC emerges

- Community survey
- Qualitative research
- COVID-19 health behaviours scoping review
- Reaching and engaging communities during lockdown

CHALKSCAPES

TLC develops

- Qualitative research
- Community survey
- Built environment scoping review
- Understanding inequalities in greenspace access and use

CTOP-GREEN

TLC moves to action

- Collaboration Cafés
- Co-design
- Co-delivery with communities and partners
- Translating evidence into action

TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE CHANGE

TLC creates impact

- Community capacity
- Practice
- Policy
- Learning & sustainability



talk



listen



change

Cook et al. (2022), Vaccines, 10(1), 106
Nduka et al. (2023), BMC Public Health, 23, 1206

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Chalkscapes

co-creating spaces for supporting diverse communities to use greenspaces and the countryside





Aims & Objectives

***Chalkscapes* is a landscape partnership project developed by the Chilterns Conservation Board (CCB) to inspire people to understand and care for the North Chilterns' countryside.**

Diversity and inclusion are a high priority for the CCB, and the aim of the research was to co-create solutions for supporting people from minority background and/or deprived areas to use greenspace and the countryside, and to inform the next stage of the *Chalkscapes* Project.

The objectives for the research were to:

- Ascertain the **current level of engagement** with green spaces and the countryside;
- Understand the **barriers and enablers for accessing greenspaces and the countryside**;
- **Co-create sustainable, scalable activities** which overcome the identified issues/barriers.

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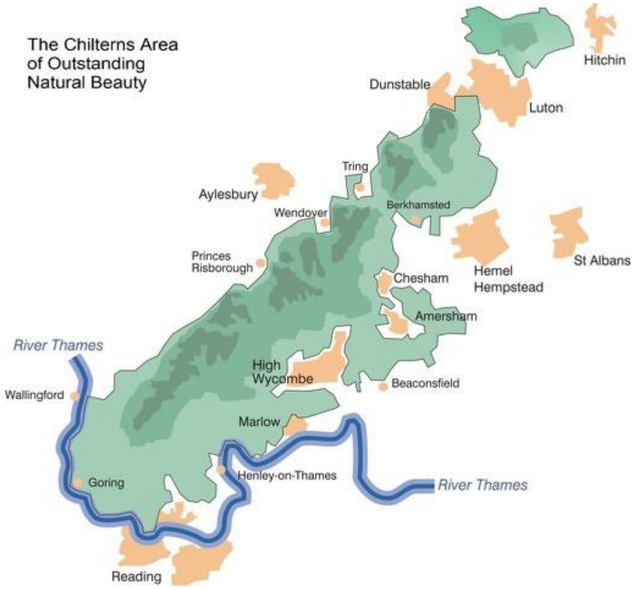
Selecting Luton and Dunstable as the research sites

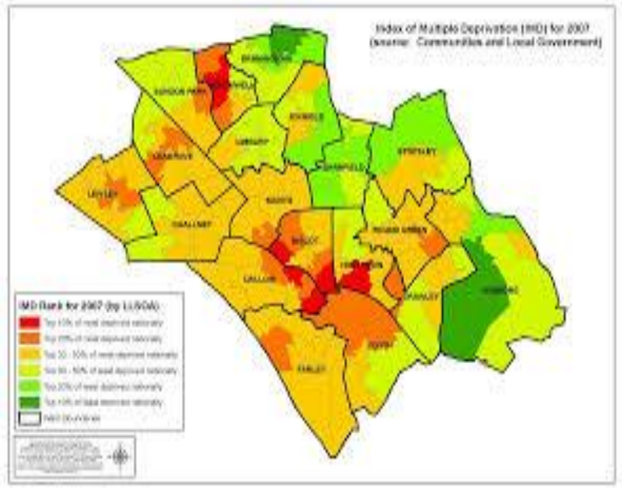




35 miles from London







19 wards of Luton

What did we do?

We used a mixed methods approach to carry out the research. The project included:



112 Participants

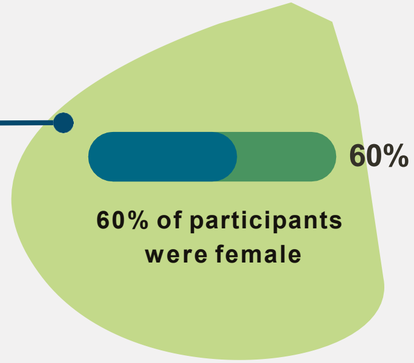
14 focus groups, totalling 112 particpants from our communities of interest.

9 Interviews

9 interviews with community organisation representatives who could represent our focussed community views.

906 Questionnaires

906 people completed our community survey. 60% were female and participants were aged between 16 and 94 (avg. of 38 years.)



Our communities

Our communities of interest were people who self-identify as Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian, Black African, Black Caribbean, Polish, Romanian, Roma Gypsy Travellers, white Irish and white British communities and reflected, self-ascribed identities, generational, gender, linguistic, national and social class differences.

Where and when

Data collection was carried out between March and September 2022 and focus group discussions and interviews were conducted face-to-face or using Zoom.

Supporting details

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Bedfordshire (UoB) Ethics Committee.

Our Inclusive Research Approach

- Access to lesser heard voices
- Empowering participants
- The lived experience
- Gathering better data
- Activating communities





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Qualitative Study Findings

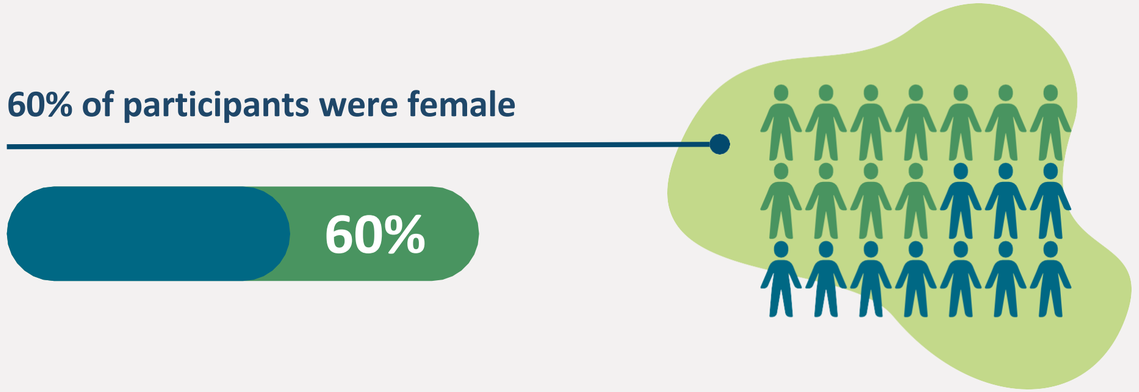
The Chalkscapes Survey

Type of greenspace (e.g., national parks, recreation greenspaces, outdoor playgrounds) and

Frequency of use
(1) ‘never’ to (9) ‘several times per day’ (Wang et al., 2019).

Types of activities they do when they visit greenspaces
(e.g., walking, running, dog walking, etc.)

Perceived capability, opportunity, and motivation (COM) brief measure (Keyworth et al., 2020)



Age group	16 to 30 years	347 (41.2%)
	31 to 40 years	166 (19.7%)
	41 to 50 years	151 (18.0%)
	51 to 65 years	98 (11.7%)
	66 to 100 years	80 (9.5%)
Ethnicity	Bangladeshi 879	118 (13.4%)
	black African	120 (13.7%)
	black Caribbean	43 (4.9%)
	Indian	73 (8.3%)
	Mixed ethnic background	10 (1.1%)
	Pakistani	155 (17.7%)
	white British	102 (11.6%)
	white Other	195 (22.2%)
	Any other ethnic background	53 (6.0%)
IMD Quintile	1 / 2 – Most deprived	418 (57%)

Chalkscapes: What the quantitative evidence revealed...

Community Survey · 906 respondents

1 in 3

visited greenspaces at least once a week

The implication

Interventions must address different barriers and be co-created with communities.

1 Who used greenspaces less?

Respondents aged 50+, Bangladeshi and Black Caribbean/African respondents, and people reporting a disability.

2 What shaped participation?

Physical capability, social and physical opportunity, and motivation differed across groups.

3 What predicted use?

Capability, opportunity and motivation together explained 30% of variation in reported greenspace use.

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CAREER POWERED EDUCATION

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Recommendations

- Increase awareness about greenspaces and the Chilterns countryside
- Improve information on the availability of essential facilities in greenspaces and the Chilterns countryside
- Provide organised subsidised trips to increase access to greenspaces and the Chilterns countryside
- Reduce concerns about racism and discrimination and health, and safety in greenspaces and the Chilterns countryside
- Have clearly signposted areas for dog walking



ctop™ COLLABORATIVE TARGETED OUTREACH PROGRAMME | for access to greenspaces and the countryside



The Collaborative Targeted Outreach Programme (CTOP) for improving access to greenspaces and the countryside for Muslim communities in Luton

Nothing for you, without you; *shaping greener, healthier communities together.*

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CTOP For Access to Greenspaces

Aim:

To **design**, **develop** and **deliver** CTOP to improve access to greenspaces and the Chilterns countryside through a series of interventions





Objectives

- Assess accessibility and cultural relevance of current greenspace initiatives
- Co-design interventions with communities to improve engagement
- Deliver and evaluate supported visits to build access and confidence
- Improve representation in greenspace communications
- Evaluate impact to inform future policy and practice

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Who is working together to deliver change?

- CTOP is part of the Roots to Healthy Places project, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, which aims to improve equitable access to nature for diverse communities

The Partners

- Luton Borough Council
- University of Bedfordshire (CTOP)
- Luton Health and Nature Partnership
- Chilterns National Landscape
- Wilder Luton (Wildlife Trust Bedfordshire)
- Edible High Town
- University of Sheffield
- Be Active of Active Luton

Strategic Supporting Partners

- Natural England
- Environment Agency

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The CTOP-Green journey so far: co-creating inclusive greenspace experiences

LISTEN & CO-DESIGN

1

Collaboration Café & Interviews

June – July 2026

- Understand community priorities
- Co-design the intervention



REFLECT & AGREE

2

Feedback Events

August 2026

- Create a steering group
- Share findings
- Agree priorities
- Plan intervention delivery



PUT INTO ACTION

3

Co-designed guided visits

September 2026

- Organise guided countryside visits
- Community-led activities
- Shared learning



LEARN & INFLUENCE

4

Evaluation

September 2026 – March 2027

- Participant experiences
- Implementation learning
- Recommendations for future delivery



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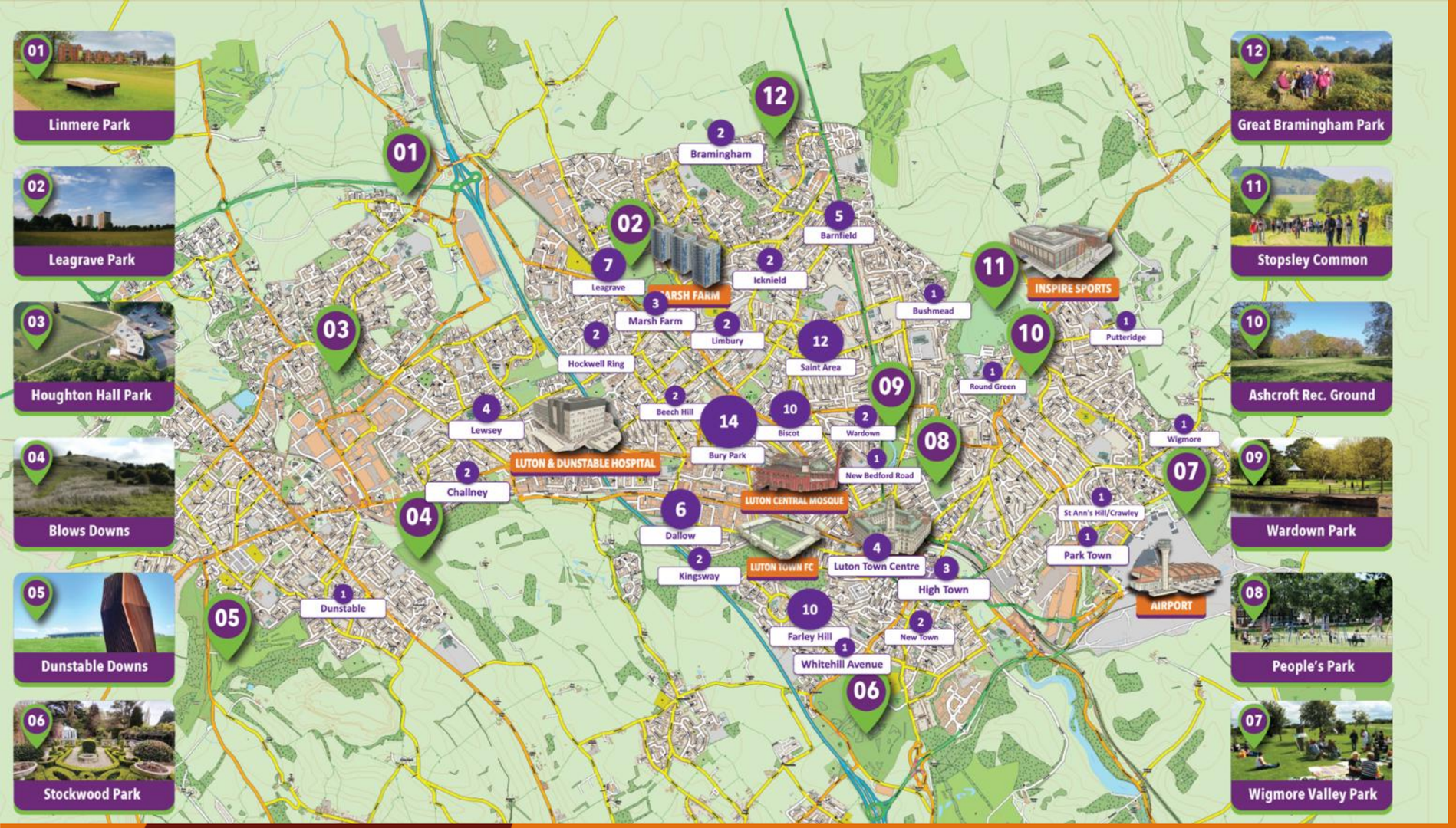
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- 5 collaboration café workshops
- 83 female and 41 male participants
- 25 self-identified ethnic groups
- 18 languages spoken
- Ages 18 – 90 years

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OUR JOURNEY

Co-creating inclusive greenspace experiences

What we heard through our Collaboration Café workshops

1

WHERE?

The places matter

PROMISING LOCATIONS

- Great Bramingham Park
- Houghton Hall Park
- Stopsley Common

REQUIRE IMPROVEMENTS

- Leagrave Park
- Ashcroft
- Recreation Ground

2

WHEN?

Good weather.
Daytime. Flexible.

10am – 3pm

- Weather
- Family commitments
- Faith commitments

3

WHO WITH?

People we know.
People we trust.

- Small, supportive groups
- Trusted facilitators
- Familiar community networks
- Flexible for age, gender, language & family needs

4

HOW DO WE GET THERE?

Support the whole journey.

- Clear information and communication
- Affordable, reliable transport
- Reduce financial and logistical barriers
- Support before, during and after

5

WHAT HAPPENS THERE?

Choice makes participation possible.

- Nature & exploration
- Relaxation & wellbeing
- Family activities
- Learning & creativity
- Prayer & reflection

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Top principles for CTOP for Access to Greenspaces

1 Access is about the journey – not just the destination

Interventions need to support the whole participation pathway, not just the activity itself.

2 Trust matters more than location

Trusted facilitators, community organisations and familiar faces helped create confidence and reduce uncertainty.

3 One size does not fit all

There are differences in preferences, needs and circumstances.

4 Practical barriers must be designed out

Transport, cost, communication, timings and booking processes.

5 Activities should be adaptable rather than prescribed

Interventions should respond to community needs rather than imposing a fixed programme.

6 Social connection is central

Opportunities to spend time together, meet new people, share food and build relationships wereconsidered important parts of participation.

7 Participation is shaped by identity, including faith, culture and belonging

These factors should be considered during co-design.

8 Communities want to shape – not simply attend

Community members wanted to be active contributors rather than passive recipients.

*Improving access to nature is not simply about providing opportunities to visit greenspaces. Successful interventions need to be built around **relationships, trust, identity and belonging**.*

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But successful interventions depend on more than good design...

They depend on how we engage communities.



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Community Engagement Principles: Applying TLC through CTOP

10 principles for successful community engagement with diverse communities

1. **Build relationships before recruitment**

   Trust begins before participation

2. **Prioritise representation over numbers**

   Ask: Whose voices are still missing?

3. **Reach people where they are**

   Engage through trusted community spaces, networks and relationships

4. **Build trust through authenticity**

   Be open about why people's voices, knowledge and involvement matter

5. **Create opportunities to talk**

   Provide safe and inclusive spaces where people can share experiences and priorities

6. **Listen beyond the immediate research question**

   Be responsive to what communities identify as important

7. **Reflect and adapt**

   Use what we hear to continually shape engagement and delivery

8. **Practise reciprocity**

   Ask: What are communities getting back from their involvement?

9. **Build community capacity**

   Create opportunities for people to develop confidence, skills and leadership

10. **Sustain relationships beyond the project**

    Maintain relationships and support continued community involvement and ownership

Moving communities from participants to knowledge holders, co-designers, partners and co-deliverers

talk **listen** **change**

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evidence talk & listen change

impact

Building evidence, relationships, opportunities and capacity



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What does… **CTOP mean to our communities?**

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Impact across the programme

Communities

Building opportunity and capacity

- Community members became participants, facilitators and community researchers
- New opportunities for meaningful involvement
- Stronger connections between communities and greenspace organisations
- Greater confidence and capacity to shape future activity

Practice & partnerships

Turning evidence into action

- Research recommendations taken forward by Luton Council
- Long-term collaboration between the University, Council and community partners
- CTOP-Green builds on earlier evidence through co-design and co-delivery
- Communities and greenspace organisations working together to shape delivery

Systems & legacy

Building for the future

- Recommendations informing local practice and policy
- Community engagement embedded within future greenspace work
- Continued investment in research and community capacity
- CTOP-Green contributing to a wider programme of work on equitable access to nature, receiving national recognition
- Further community opportunities arising from the programme
- Continued investment in research capacity, including a jointly funded PhD with Luton Council

> ***Impact has been cumulative;*** *and we have built evidence, relationships, opportunities and capacity across successive projects.*

University's Green Spaces research recognised in national climate action campaign

Thu 28 April, 2022



The Lumenators project was an event at Dunstable Downs in Bedfordshire where participants used Geolights to create shapes in the landscape – Green Space Dark Skies project, which is a national invitation to explore Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty



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From Evidence to Impact

Evidence base

COVID-19 Research + Scoping Review
Understanding the problem

Talk & listen

Chalkscapes Qualitative Study + Community Survey
Understanding experience, behaviour and what matters

Change

CTOP-Green
Co-design • Co-delivery • Evaluation

Impact

Communities • Practice • Policy



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Listening to Action: A question for you

Whose voices are missing from the decisions you make about access to greenspaces?

And what will you do differently to ensure they are heard?

Thank you



Professor Nasreen Ali
nasreen.ali@beds.ac.uk



Dr Erica Cook
Erica.cook@beds.ac.uk



Osasenaga Deborah Akenbor
Osasenaga.Akenbor@beds.ac.uk



Professor Gurch Randhawa
gurch.randhawa@beds.ac.uk



Olivia Hawes
olivia.hawes@beds.ac.uk



Rukia Saleem
rukia.saleem@beds.ac.uk

