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# ENVISIONING COMMUNITY WELLBEING THROUGH PARTICIPATORY ARTS-BASED METHODS

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

This project was developed as a collaboration between researchers from the University of Oxford and Ark-T, a local charity in East Oxford, with the aim of exploring community wellbeing through creative, participatory methods. The focus was on engaging children, young people, and underrepresented groups to understand their views on what wellbeing means in their community. Through a series of workshops using arts-based methods, participants were invited to share their experiences and ideas. These activities were designed not only to foster creative expression but also to offer insights into how community wellbeing can be supported and improved in the future.

## Experiences of Community Wellbeing through Participatory Arts-Based Methods

Throughout the project, three workshops were held with participants from different age groups. These workshops encouraged the use of visual art, such as painting and creating 3D models, to express ideas about living well in the community. Participants shared a range of perspectives on wellbeing, including the importance of green spaces, social connections, and mental health support. For example, children and young people emphasized the calming effects of nature and animals, while adults highlighted the need for accessible public spaces where community members can connect.

The creative process revealed unique insights into how different age groups perceive their surroundings and envision the future. Younger participants, for instance, focused on imaginative futures, while older adults were more concerned with intergenerational justice and preserving nature for future generations. These workshops demonstrated that participatory arts-based methods are an effective way of engaging individuals who might not typically contribute to discussions about community wellbeing, offering them a platform to voice their thoughts in a creative and inclusive environment.



## Reflections and Key Learnings

One of the key learnings from this project was the importance of tailoring workshop formats to different groups. For example, while younger children engaged enthusiastically with painting, older teenagers needed more varied materials and stimulation to maintain their interest. Additionally, some participants brought up deeply personal issues, such as family bereavement, which could not be fully addressed within the workshop context. This highlights the need for support structures, such as access to mental health professionals, when conducting community engagement work on sensitive topics.

The recruitment process also presented challenges, particularly in securing reliable commitments from participants. Some individuals attended the workshops without completing the necessary paperwork, and others expressed interest but were difficult to reach. Future projects will need to streamline this process to ensure better communication and engagement.

Moreover, the project underscored the need for more inclusive and equitable recruitment strategies to ensure diverse representation. This could be achieved by offering tailored sessions for specific groups, such as young people with special educational needs (SEN). In terms of impact, participants expressed pride in their artwork and enjoyed the opportunity to share their thoughts through creative means, indicating that arts-based methods foster a sense of ownership and connection to the community.

## Summary

This project successfully explored community wellbeing through the use of participatory arts-based methods, engaging a diverse range of participants. The creative workshops provided valuable insights into how different age groups understand wellbeing and what they consider important for a healthy community. Key themes such as the role of nature, social cohesion, and access to mental health support emerged, offering a foundation for future policy and community development work.

While challenges were encountered in recruitment and managing sensitive issues during the workshops, the project demonstrated the value of creative expression in fostering discussions about community wellbeing. Moving forward, the lessons learned will help refine future engagement strategies, ensuring that diverse voices continue to be included in shaping the wellbeing of the community.



# 1 INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

## 1.1 Background

A key challenge facing communities worldwide today is that health and wellbeing are strongly influenced by interventions outside the healthcare sector. While public policy is largely focused on managing the existing sick care system, there is increasing emphasis on creating health and wellbeing in addition to treating ill-health. Social and wider determinants of health highlight the importance of improving the circumstances in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age (WHO 2024). This includes the individual characteristics of people, their lifestyles, the connection to community, local economy and macro-economic, political and cultural factors, and the conditions framed through the global ecosystem (Fig. 1). These non-medical factors are interlinked and have the power to impact health and wellbeing. For example, someone who is unemployed may be more likely to live in poorer quality housing with less access to green space and less access to fresh, healthy food. This means some groups and communities are more likely to experience poorer health and wellbeing than the general population. These groups are also more likely to experience challenges in accessing care.

However, before we think about policies and actions, we need to imagine the future and what wellbeing in our communities would look like. In order to ensure that actions connect to the reality and goals of different places, cultures and the people in them, it is important to have a shared understanding of the future which policymaking would help to create. This project thus focuses on areas of deprivation to understand what communities in their local areas understand as important things that make and keep their communities well and how to support the delivery of these factors more effectively.

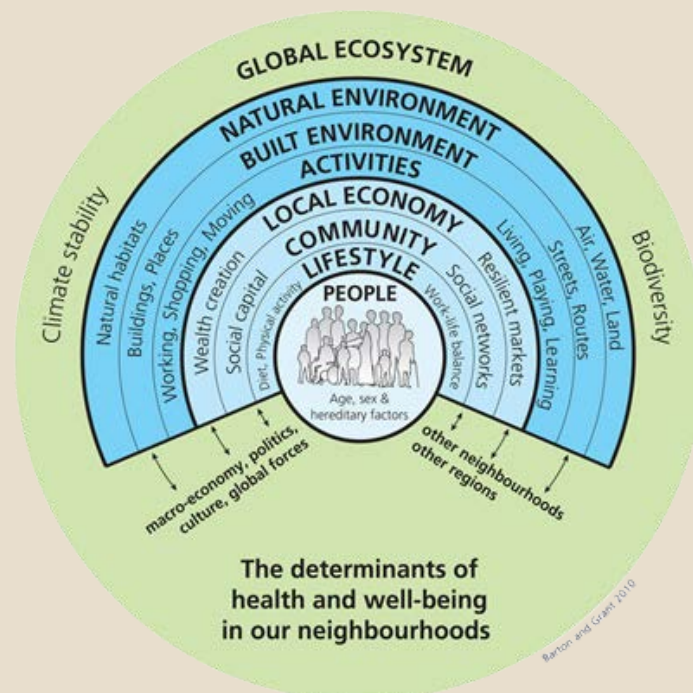


Fig. 1: Wider determinants of health and wellbeing (Barton and Grant 2009)



### 1.2 Relation between wider determinants of health, sustainable wellbeing and sustainability transformations

To achieve community wellbeing requires fundamental transformations in our economy, society and environment to ensure sustainable wellbeing for current and future generations (Hirvilammi et al. 2023). Understanding wellbeing at the local level is essential as it allows for tailored interventions that address the specific needs of communities, which can vary significantly in factors such as housing, employment, and social connections. Local wellbeing data equips decision-makers with the tools to create targeted policies that reflect the unique challenges and opportunities within their areas, while also empowering communities to actively participate in defining and improving their own wellbeing. Additionally, local data provides a framework for monitoring progress and assessing the impact of policies over time, helping to identify and address hidden inequalities and ensure that wellbeing, not economic growth, is prioritised in decision-making (Brown et al. 2017).

Children and young people offer unique perspectives and creativity, which are often overlooked but essential for envisioning a future in which wellbeing is achieved for all. Their participation ensures that future policies and actions resonate with those who will be most affected by them. There is a need to actively support and include children, especially from underrepresented groups, in visioning processes. This inclusion helps create a more comprehensive and diverse understanding of what wellbeing means across different contexts. Engaging children in meaningful ways through creative activities fosters a deeper connection to their community, helping them express their values, hopes, and priorities, which can then inform local decision-making and policy development (WEAll 2022). Vervoort et al. (2024) argue that art and creativity are essential for sustainability transformations as they engage with deeper leverage points, such as the fundamental myths, paradigms, and systems of meaning that shape societies. Art and creative practices have a unique potential to stimulate shifts in how people imagine and understand the world, encouraging new collective horizons for action. Through creative practices, individuals and groups can reframe relationships, expand their capacities for empathy and care, and challenge existing power structures, making art a powerful tool for envisioning and enacting sustainable futures.





### 1.3 Approaches to assess the impact on health and wellbeing in communities

To assess the impact of interventions on health and wellbeing of communities, Health Impact Assessments (HIA) have been set up by many countries and regions to ensure that probable impacts are considered within their wider context and negative and positive aspects are identified. The resulting information from HIAs can help inform and assist in decision-making (Aboagye et al. 2019). HIA is a practical approach used to judge the potential effects of a policy, programme or project on a population, particularly on vulnerable or disadvantaged groups (Buse et al. 2019). The approach can be applied in diverse economic sectors and uses quantitative, qualitative and participatory techniques. HIA provides a way to engage with members of the public affected by a particular intervention. It also helps decision-makers make choices about alternatives and improvements to prevent disease or injury and to actively promote health. It is based on four interlinked values: democracy (promoting stakeholder participation), equity (considering the impact on the whole population), sustainability (considering the wellbeing of current and future generations and the planet) and the ethical use of evidence (Edmonds and Green 2023). HIA is a methodological approach by which the best information is presented to decision-makers in a clear and transparent way. However, HIAs are often generic and rapid desk-based approaches using already existing and easily available data and scientific and grey literature to analyse potential health impacts with inadequately integrating the community's and people's perspective on their health and wellbeing (Coady 2014).

### 1.4 Relevance of communities to positively impact health and wellbeing

Community-led HIA (C-HIA) prioritises people's perceptions and needs, promoting participation by incorporating community voices to shape policy, programmes, and practice. It enriches traditional HIAs with lived experiences, equity, and real-world perspectives on health and wellbeing by adding a lay community perspective to HIAs (Bourcier et al. 2016). Strengthening community-driven HIA can ultimately contribute to achieving the health-related targets of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Leuenberger et al. 2022). Communities are encouraged to collaborate with health system decision-makers and stakeholders to co-create policies and services that improve health and wellbeing. Effective approaches foster active citizen engagement in determining their health priorities and directing the course of health and wellbeing interventions to improve the conditions that affect their overall health and wellbeing (Coady 2014). A 'reflexive action framework', where participants collectively reflect on actions and outcomes, supports transformative processes through co-creation (Monstadt et al. 2022). By assessing local interventions, C-HIAs inform policymaking about what makes and keeps communities healthy and well. As a highly inclusive and participatory community health development process, it can lead to sustainable and transformative change at local level (Centric Lab, n.d.).



## 2 OUR APPROACH

This project was delivered in partnership between researchers from the University of Oxford and the community group and local charity Ark-T based in East Oxford. The project started in October 2023 through the University of Oxford's Science Together programme. This programme brings together community groups and researchers to explore community interests by involving both parties equally in designing and conducting research that is closely connected to the interests of both local communities and academic research. The project team then applied for additional funding through the University of Oxford's Participatory Research Fund to expand the research and experiment with participatory arts-based methods. The study started in March 2024 and employed a mixed-methods research design. Researchers from the University were responsible for the quantitative aspects of this study and providing the framework and analysis of the qualitative part of the project, while Ark-T were responsible for designing and conducting the workshops and recruiting participants. The research design was developed collaboratively between the project partners, with Ark-T informing and shaping the project building on their expertise in creative arts and community engagement while researchers from the University of Oxford guided the research and conducted the analysis.

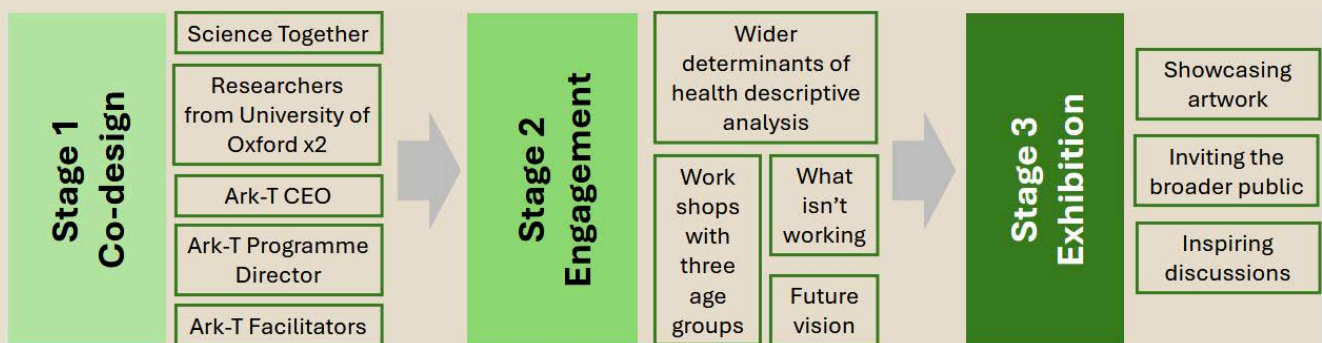


Fig. 2: Mixed-method research design, Source: authors illustration

To learn more about community wellbeing and the link to wider determinants of health, the project consisted of three phases (Fig. 2):

1. The first phase focused on designing the research approach to capture wellbeing in place, the issues at play in the community, and the overall context in which wellbeing can be attained. The project team defined the area for quantitative data analysis to describe the context that Ark-T and the communities it serves are embedded in, the scope of the qualitative part of the study to follow, and the management of the project throughout its runtime. In this phase the group fed into the quantitative analysis and the qualitative themes for exploration.





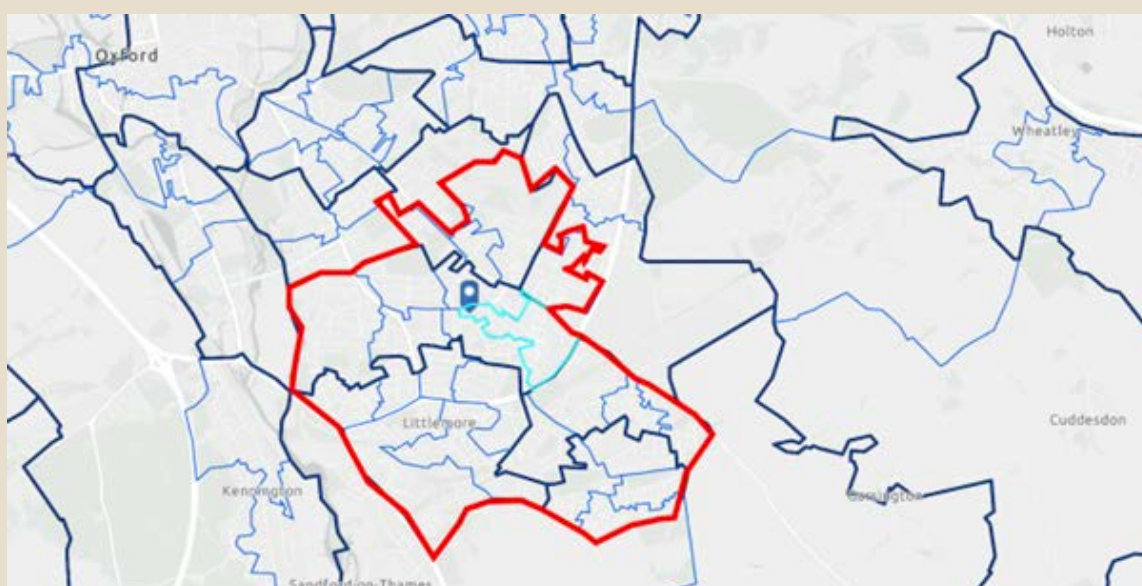
## 2. Our approach

**2.** The second phase focused on two themes: things that currently are not supporting wellbeing in the local area, and future visions of how community wellbeing could be attained. These themes were chosen after exploring various steps within the C-HIA, based on the experiences of both researchers and community group. The research project piloted participatory arts-based methods through three workshops with residents from different age groups to better understand what adults and young people in OX4 consider crucial to live well and explore lived experiences around the chosen themes. We focused on creativity to see whether it's a helpful way to better understand what people living in areas of deprivation consider wellbeing to look and feel like and what they need to live well now and in the future. The study focused on giving voice to underrepresented groups in society through visual art to better understand the meanings and vocabularies of community wellbeing.

**3.** The third phase focused on showcasing the artwork created in the workshops through an exhibition providing visitors an opportunity to respond to the artwork, generating further discussions about community wellbeing. The exhibition provided space for learning and communication between researchers, community groups, and residents. Through understanding lived realities of communities experiencing multiple deprivation, the exhibition showcased work to increase community confidence and develop a stronger sense of place and wellbeing.

### 2.1 Data collection and analysis

Quantitative data for the analysis was collected by selecting specific Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) and Middle Layer Super Output Areas (MSOAs) surrounding the Ark-T Centre, using ArcGIS. These areas, referred to as the "Ark-T neighbourhood," were chosen based on the locations of Ark-T participants gathered through a short questionnaire they were asked to fill out prior to attending the workshops (Fig. 3).



**Fig. 3:** Ark-T neighbourhood highlighted in red, LSOA of Ark-T centre is highlighted in green. Areas chosen for the Ark-T neighbourhood included MSOA Oxford 015, 016, 017, 018, and LSOA Oxford 019 B, C, D and 20C. Source: authors adaptation from Office for National Statistics (n.d.)



## 2. Our approach

Data from the 2021 Census, obtained from the Office for National Statistics, was used to extract information on total residents, gender, age groups, ethnic backgrounds, employment status, and health and disability status for the selected MSOAs and LSOAs. The data for each category was aggregated, and new percentages or ratios calculated. This processed data was then compared to the broader datasets for Oxford City and England (Office for National Statistics, n.d.). Visualisation of the data was performed using Python. The processed data and source code are available upon request.

Qualitative data on community wellbeing was collected through three workshops with community members from Ark-T's after school groups and Hub Days. Workshops were held with 10 participants each, in the age groups of 7-11, 12-18 and adults over 18. Data collection followed participatory observations by two researchers taking hand-written notes, 3-4 facilitators guiding the workshops and debriefing the researchers on their observations after the workshops, and one filmmaker documenting the process. The design of the workshops built on the framework developed by zoe – institute for future fit economies and the Wellbeing Economy Alliance on "Developing a Wellbeing Vision with Children and Young People" (WEAll 2022). Workshops were held at the Ark-T shop at Templar Square. They were all structured in the same format and facilitated by guiding questions to start participants thinking about what community wellbeing means for them. A topic guide can be found in the Appendix.

The first part of the workshop employed photo elicitation (Kyololo et al. 2023) with photos taken by volunteers from Ark-T from their daily lives, reflecting common features of their day-to-day activities and local areas, complemented by words written on paper. Photos and written words were put on a wall in the workshop space for participants to choose from, with the option to add their own words to create a personalised mood board reflecting what living well locally means for them. Participants were then guided to move to the second part of the workshop, where they could choose between painting on a canvas or building a "little world" as a 3-D creation representing their understanding of community wellbeing. The workshops ended with all participants sharing their thoughts and explaining their artwork to the workshop group.

The qualitative data analysis followed Baart and Roos's (2022) framework for visual data, gathering basic information about the visual representation (e.g., about the produced and context), analysing the image's elements, form, and composition, assessing internal logic and cohesion, and interpreting its meaning in context. This was complemented by thematic analysis (Nowell et al. 2017) of participants' written statements, observation notes, and workshop transcripts. Thematic analysis, known for its flexibility and accessibility, focuses on identifying patterns without the theoretical or methodological constraints of theory-bound methods like grounded theory, ethnography, or phenomenology. Its steps include familiarisation, coding, theme identification, review, definition of themes, and report production (Naem et al. 2023, Nowell et al. 2017). Credibility was ensured through peer debriefings with the project team, and NVivo software was used for systematically analysing the data.



### 2.2 Recruitment of participants

Participants were selected using a combination of existing contacts through Ark-T, snowball sampling, personal invitations during the monthly Hub-Day at Ark-T and their after-school groups in April and May 2024, as well as posters in the Ark-T shop. Additionally, email invitations were sent through Ark-T's after-school mailing lists. The recruitment strategy was designed to be inclusive, avoiding bias in the selection process. Workshops were advertised broadly to all individuals within the target age ranges who had attended previous groups or were on mailing lists. Information was shared through posters, emails, and direct engagement with interested families. To ensure participants were fully informed, tailored Participant Information Sheets and consent forms were provided, with the option for further explanation via phone or meetings. For young people from the after-school groups, participation required opt-in consent from parents or legal guardians, facilitated by Ark-T. Ark-T's experience navigating the ethics application process provided valuable insights, but required significant time to ensure the forms were clear and accessible to the participants. Personal assistance was offered in completing forms together with participants, though this process proved more time-consuming than anticipated.

The invitation emphasised that the workshops aimed to explore the concept of living well through creative art, focusing on sharing ideas rather than artistic aesthetics. Participants were compensated for their time with shopping vouchers as recognition of their contribution to the project. To maximise participation, workshops for young people were scheduled during regular term-time groups, increasing the likelihood of attendance. These sessions were held during Ark-T's female-only (trans-inclusive) groups, which contributed to a higher turnout of female participants. However, Ark-T engages young people of all genders throughout the year.

Challenges arose during the workshops. One participant's parent expressed concerns due to their child's special educational needs (SEN), as the unfamiliar adults and altered session structure caused discomfort. In hindsight, smaller group sessions specifically designed for young people with SEN might have mitigated these issues. Additionally, some teenagers attended the workshops independently but without completed paperwork, requiring staff to leave the session to obtain permissions. While these young people were old enough to attend independently, they were not legally able to sign their own documents, presenting a logistical challenge.



## 2. Our approach

The recruitment process faced several challenges, particularly in securing reliable commitments from potential participants. While some individuals expressed interest, maintaining communication and obtaining responses proved difficult. Additionally, some participants attended the workshops without having completed the necessary registration forms, which created logistical issues and required extra time from staff to address. These challenges highlight the need for a more streamlined approach and more time in advance of the workshops to complete the forms. When working with more vulnerable groups, it is beneficial to have more flexibility and possibly additional staff at the start of the workshops to help complete any outstanding paperwork, without having to have the paperwork already completed as this may deter some participants from attending.

To ensure the process is both inclusive and equitable, recruitment strategies could include offering tailored sessions for specific needs, such as smaller groups for participants with SEN. Clearer communication and more consistent follow-up will also be crucial in securing commitments from participants. Expanding outreach efforts to reach underrepresented groups will help ensure diverse representation, strengthening the overall inclusivity of the programmes.



# 3 COMMUNITY WELLBEING IN OX4

## 3.1 The overall picture

This project focused on Oxford as a city characterised by an unequal distribution of income, housing affordability and life expectancy. With a population of 160,000, Oxford is one of the most culturally diverse cities in the UK, with a vibrant and multicultural community and the third highest ethnic minority population in the Southeast of England. The 2021 Census showed that 35% of residents were born outside the UK and 29% were from a black or minority ethnic group, compared to 19% in England (Oxford City Council, n.d.).

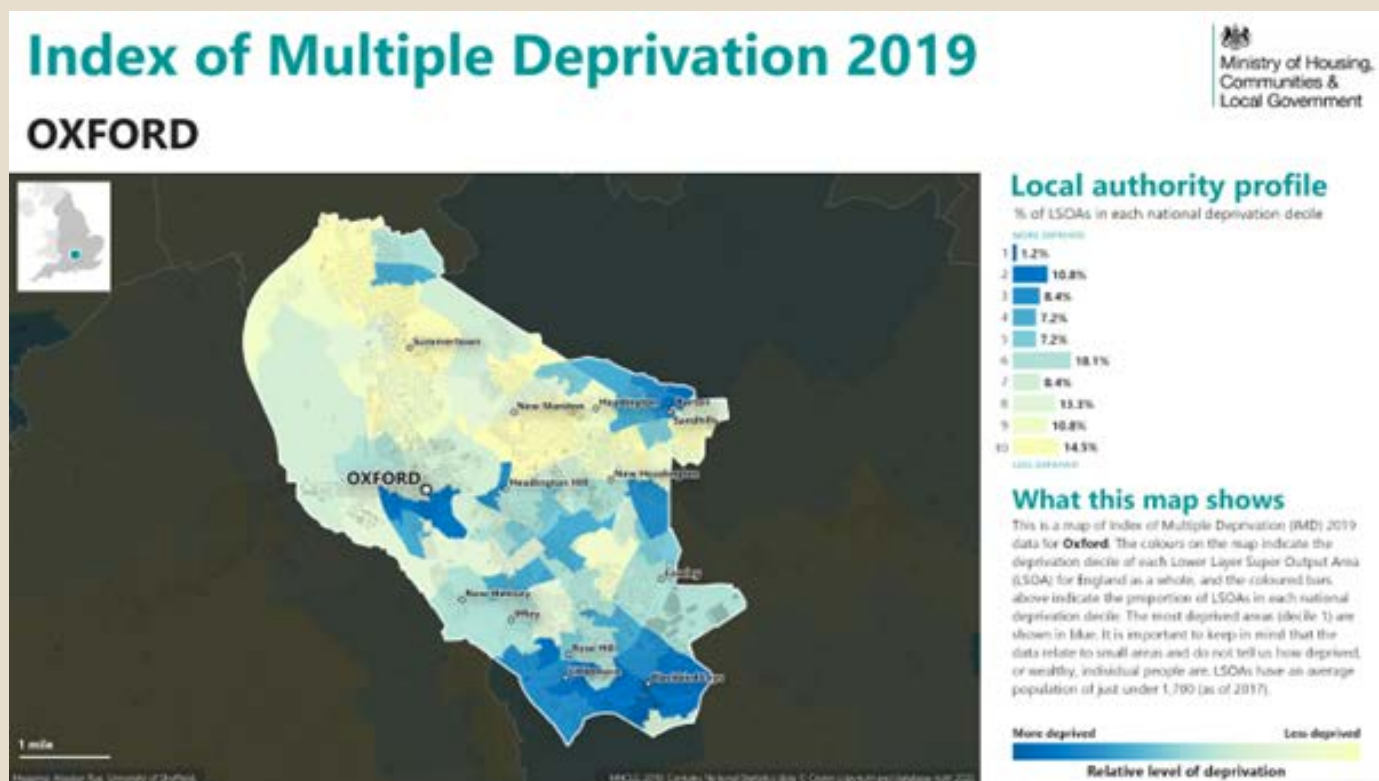
Oxford has a strong economic base with around 6,000 businesses, many of which are in the knowledge, science and technology sectors. Around 60% of the working age population is highly educated with a degree or diploma. The city has the highest employment rate in the country and contributes around £6.8 billion to the national economy each year. The city's economy is supported by internationally, nationally and regionally important anchor institutions, including the University of Oxford, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford Science Park, Oxford Business Park, the John Radcliffe Hospital and the MINI factory. Despite Oxford's economic success and cultural prestige, it is the UK's second most unequal urban area in terms of income, housing costs, and life expectancy. These deep-rooted inequalities stem from colonialism and institutional racism. Oxford faces significant challenges related to income inequality, housing affordability, and environmental factors, with 20% of its children living in low-income families. Oxford is the least affordable UK city, where house prices are 16.7 times the average salary, contributing to rising homelessness and declining social housing affordability. Also, educational disparities persist, with children on free school meals underperforming compared to national standards (Owned by Oxford, 2023).

A significant portion of Oxford areas, 17 out of 83, are situated in the most deprived 30% of England. The index of multiple deprivation is calculated using seven different domains, or facets, of deprivation (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2019) (Fig. 4):

- Income Deprivation
- Employment Deprivation
- Education, Skills and Training Deprivation
- Health Deprivation and Disability
- Crime
- Barriers to Housing and Services
- Living Environment Deprivation







**Fig. 4:** Oxford Index of Multiple Deprivation. Source: Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2019), mySociety (2019)

Oxford struggles with persistent air quality issues, with the entire city designated as an Air Quality Management Area due to high nitrogen dioxide levels from traffic emissions. Urban areas also face heightened risks of isolation and loneliness, which pose significant health concerns. On the positive side, Oxford has high cycling rates, benefiting physical health, and access to green spaces, which supports both mental and physical wellbeing. Nonetheless, the data highlights clear health inequalities and environmental challenges that need addressing to improve health outcomes (Oxfordshire County Council 2017).

To better understand the specific context of Ark-T’s neighbourhood, basic demographic and socio-economic data were analysed and compared to the wider geography of Oxford and England. Each indicator offers insights into different aspects of the community’s health, employment, and social composition.

There are around 40,000 people living in the Ark-T neighbourhood, compared to 160,000 residents in Oxford City and 56.5 million residents in England.



### 3. Community Wellbeing in OX4

Most people are between 35 and 49 years old in the Ark-T neighbourhood in 2021, followed by age group 25-34 (18%) and 50-64 (17%) (Fig. 5).

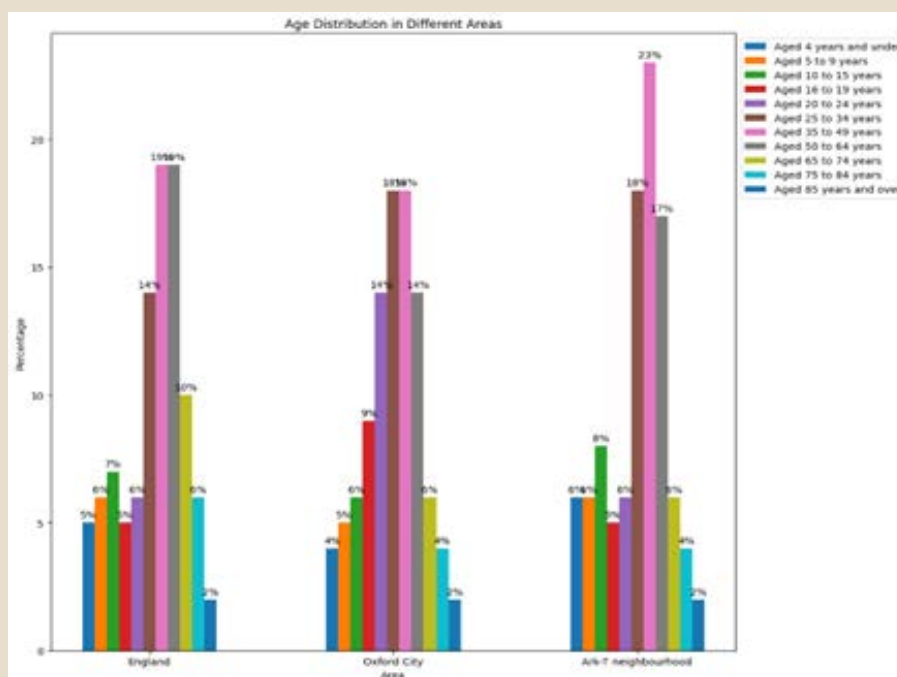


Fig. 5: Age distribution in the Ark-T neighbourhood, Oxford, and England

Most households in the Ark-T neighbourhood are family households (Fig. 7). Households are classified according to the relationships between members. One-family households are classified by the number of dependent children and family type (married, civil partnership or cohabiting couple family, or lone parent family). Other households are classified by the number of people living in the household, the number of dependent children, and whether the household consists only of students or only of people aged 66 and over.

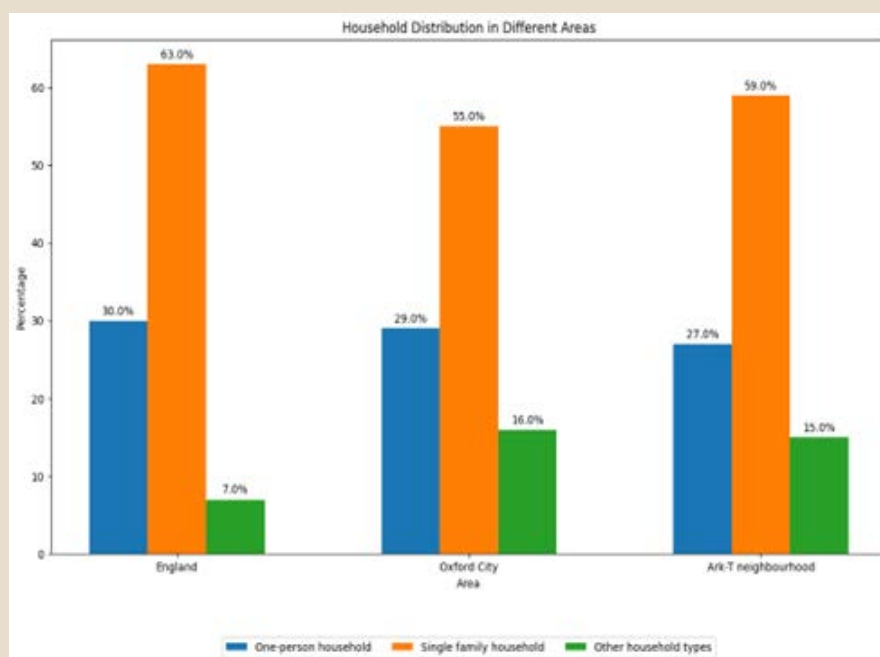
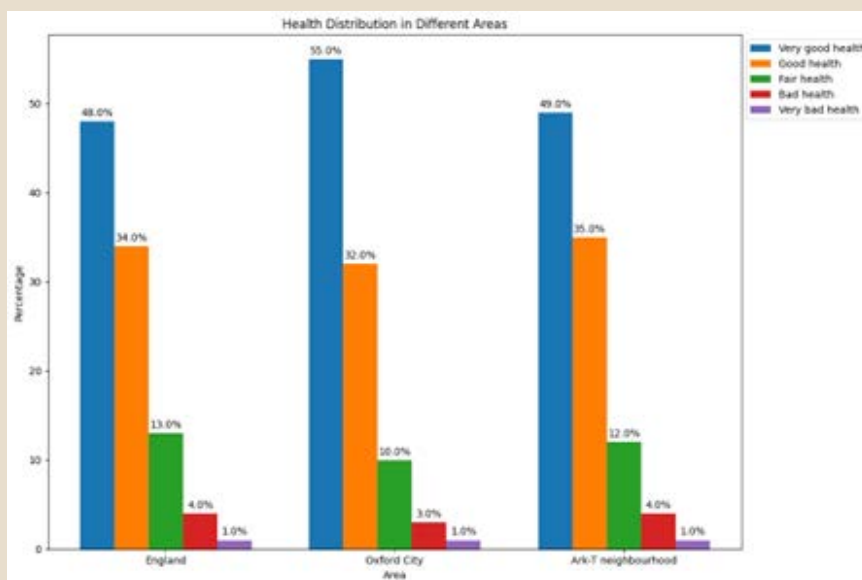


Fig. 6: Household composition in the Ark-T neighbourhood, Oxford, and England



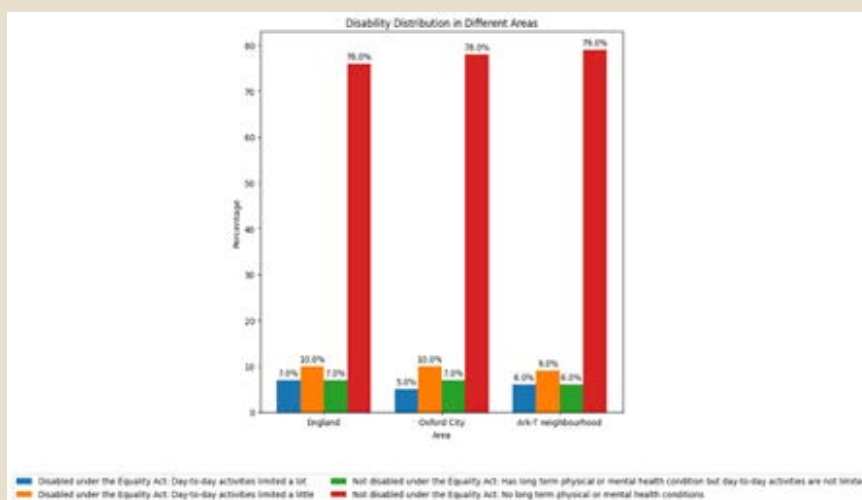
### 3. Community Wellbeing in OX4

In the Ark-T neighbourhood, fewer people reported being in "very good" health compared to Oxford City, with more reporting "good" or "fair" health (Fig. 7). Self-reported health measures an individual's subjective assessment of their overall health, typically classified into categories such as "very good," "good," "fair," "bad," and "very bad." It reflects how people perceive their own health status without an objective medical evaluation. This can be useful in understanding general health trends and identifying areas where health interventions may be needed.



**Fig. 7:** Self-reported health in the Ark-T neighbourhood, Oxford, and England

In the Ark-T neighbourhood, a slightly higher percentage of individuals reported having no known disability or health condition compared to Oxford City and England (Fig. 9). Disability captures the percentage of individuals who report having a long-term physical or mental health condition that limits their daily activities. This definition of a disabled person meets the harmonised standard for measuring disability and is in line with the Equality Act (2010). This indicator helps in planning for accessibility and support services for those with disabilities.



**Fig. 8:** Disability in the Ark-T neighbourhood, Oxford, and England



### 3. Community Wellbeing in OX4

The Ark-T neighbourhood showed a higher rate of full-time employment compared to both Oxford City and England, with comparable unemployment rates (Fig. 9). Employment status refers to whether individuals are employed full-time, part-time, unemployed, or economically inactive (e.g., students, retired individuals, or caregivers). People aged 16 years and over are economically active if, between 15 March and 21 March 2021, they were in employment (an employee or self-employed), unemployed but looking for work and could start within two weeks, or unemployed but waiting to start a job that had been offered and accepted. Employment is a measure of whether a person was an active participant in the labour market during this period. Economically inactive are those aged 16 years and over who did not have a job between 15 March to 21 March 2021 and had not looked for work between 22 February to 21 March 2021 or could not start work within two weeks. This provides insight into the economic vitality of the neighbourhood and potential areas for job creation or training programs.

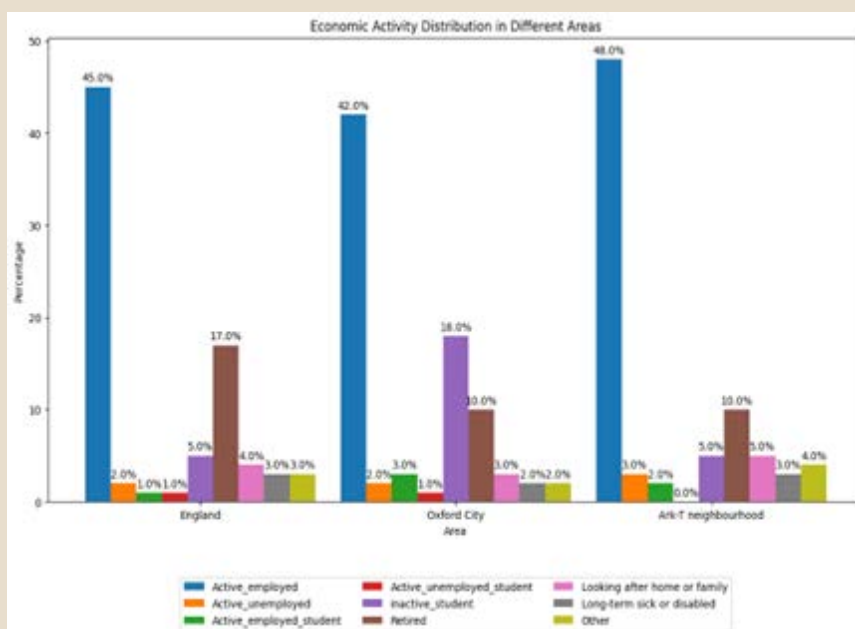
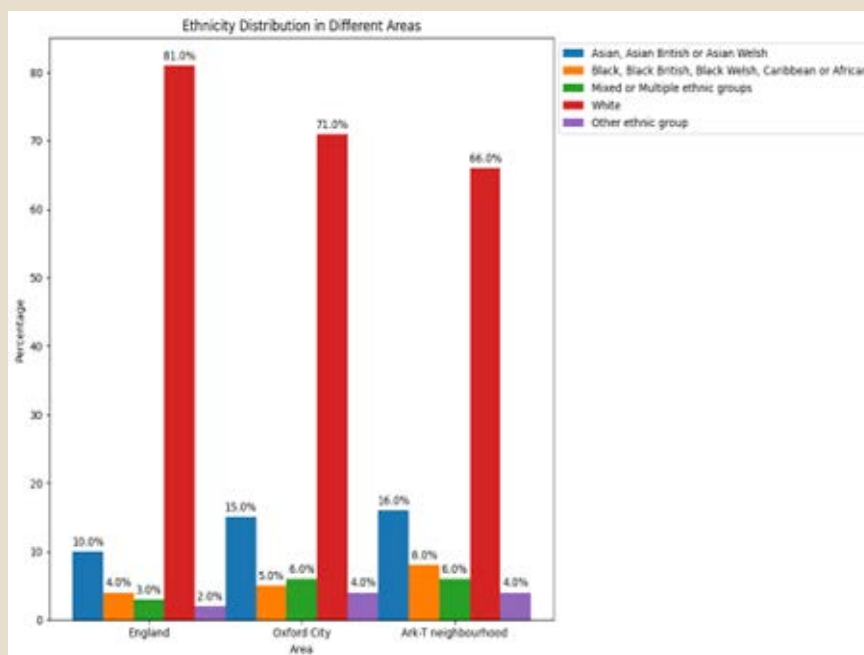


Fig. 9: Economic activity in the Ark-T neighbourhood, Oxford, and England

The Ark-T neighbourhood was noted to have a more diverse population compared to Oxford City and England, with a slightly higher percentage of Asian, Black, or African residents (Fig. 10). Ethnicity distribution reflects the racial and ethnic diversity within the neighbourhood and the ethnic group that the person completing the census feels they belong to. This could be based on their culture, family background, identity or physical appearance. Understanding this diversity is essential for inclusive community programming and services.





**Fig. 10:** Ethnicity in the Ark-T neighbourhood, Oxford, and England

These indicators, when analysed collectively, help to form a clearer picture of the Ark-T neighbourhood, offering a basis for policymaking tailored to the specific needs of the population to promote community wellbeing.

### 3.2 The participants

Following the quantitative analysis, the project team completed a total of three workshops with 10 participants each to learn about lived experiences of community wellbeing in OX4. The first workshop group involved young people from Ark-T’s Junior After School Group (ages 7–11), the second workshop young people from Ark-T’s Senior After School Group (ages 12–18), and the third workshop adults from Ark-T’s Hub Days (ages 18 and above). Following ethics approval from the University (Research ethics reference: R93040/RE001), participants from the Senior Youth and Adult groups were asked to fill out a short questionnaire to capture basic demographic characteristics. The majority of participants self-identified as “White British” (9), followed by “Asian or Asian British” (4), “Black or African or Caribbean or Black British” (1), and “White Other” (1) (5 people did not fill out the questionnaire). Half of the adults’ workshop participants were aged 66 and over. Mostly, participants came from the postcode areas OX4 3 and OX4 4, including East Oxford, Temple Cowley, Littlemore, Rose Hill, Blackbird Leys. One person came from Thame, one from Witney.



# 4 KEY THEMES FOR COMMUNITY WELLBEING

## 4.1 Key theme 1 | **Natural & built environment**

Nature and the environment of our immediate community locality was a major theme throughout all workshop groups. For the junior youth group, nature was often associated with animals, giving non-human agents an important voice in their own wellbeing. They often were emotionally attached to animals in their lives. One participant for instance said:

*“Animals make me calm and happy.”*

Calming emotions were also attached to natural environments and green space, with one participant mentioning:

*“Nature is important because it clears my head.”*

In contrast, deteriorating green space and natural environments were often associated with negative emotions and effects for wellbeing. Polluted and contaminated spaces (e.g., the river full of sewage and litter) were brought up and represented in the creative artwork. “Swimming in the river would be great”, but rivers are not clean enough. This reflects the need for young people not only to have access to green space, but also the relevance of the quality of green space available.



**Fig. 11:** Examples of “Little World” and artwork created by participants in the Junior Youth group

The environment was also discussed in relation to transport, with cars often being addressed as something bad, noisy, and dangerous.

*“I don’t like the city centre because it’s too busy and noisy.  
I’d like it to be quieter and calm.”*

Someone mentioned that although they generally like to cycle, cycling into the city centre is not fun and they prefer “being at my grandmother’s because I can cycle to school.” Cars featuring in their future was debated with one participant saying:

*“I’m determined not to have a car. Cars are bad for the environment.”*

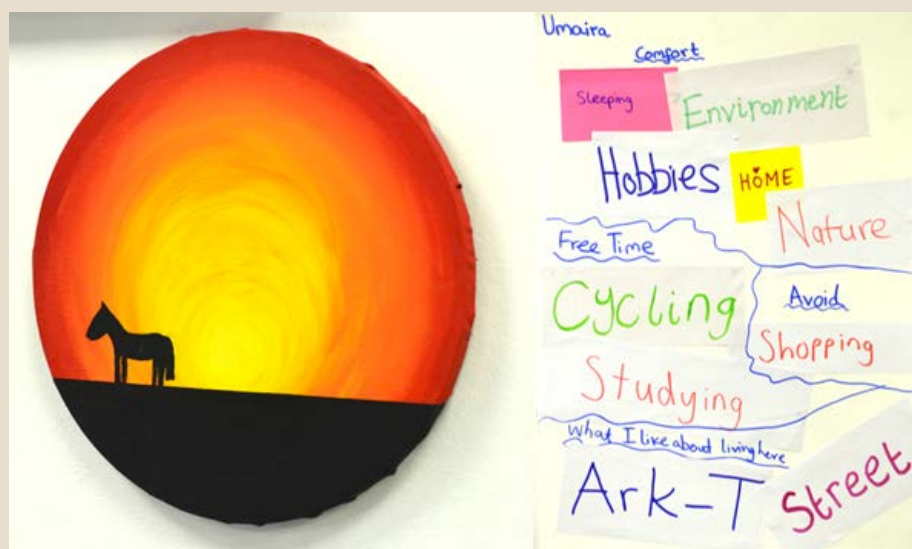


## 4. Key themes for community wellbeing

In the senior youth workshop, similar themes emerged, such as lack of safety in the city because of cars driving too fast, and excessive noise and traffic, which prompted them to envision their future living somewhere quiet.

*"I want to live in the country because it's quieter."*

Traffic was also associated with equity issues, with traffic calming measures being thought of unequally distributed across the city and not benefitting the more peripheral parts of town. Specific places were furthermore mentioned as feeling unsafe (e.g., Blackbird Leys), which were considered scary by some participants.



**Fig. 12:** Examples of mood board and artwork created by participants in the Senior Youth group

For the adult workshop group, nature was a prominent theme and something to preserve and protect for future generations. Intergenerational justice was often discussed, especially in relation to locally accessible green space that didn't require to travel for older and young people. Again, not only access but also quality of green space was mentioned, with older adults envisioning activities in nature to do with their grandkids during school holidays and weekends to ease their caring responsibilities, while younger adults were aware of the lack of publicly accessible green space in Oxford that offered activities relating to nature (e.g., a mini-golf course was mentioned as something young adults were missing since it closed in Florence Park, although it was replaced by a wildlife garden and pond, which is often used by younger children). Nature is seen as somewhat contradictory in relation to social connections. One participant mentioned that although recently moving outside of Oxford to a smaller village, which is more closely connected to the surrounding nature and quieter, this also comes with the loss of social connections and with increased barriers to get to know people. Walkability and local shops are part of this paradox. Although shops usually increase traffic and noise, at the same time they make a local area more accessible. Nature is seen as crucial for interactions with people, to include the wider community and go beyond the immediate family and even in some cases relate to nature around the globe.





## 4. Key themes for community wellbeing



Fig. 13: Examples of mood board and artwork created by participants in the Senior Youth group

### 4.2 Key theme 2 | Physical and mental health

Another key theme during the workshops for community wellbeing was physical and mental health. Whereas physical health was a more prominent theme for senior young people and adults, the junior youth group put emphasis on mental wellbeing. Often, things that they don't normally get to do and usually have little control over came up, which reflects their ambition for self-determination as an important factor of wellbeing (e.g., through fun things like rollercoasters, playing video games, trying new sweets, going to the beach etc.). Holidays as a way to exchange daily activities with something out of the ordinary and exciting was addressed, likely due to the workshop being held one week prior to school holidays. Participants often envisioned creativity to play a big part in their future as a means to express themselves (e.g., through becoming authors, illustrators, actors or artists). One participant mentioned their passion for fiction, arguing for the excitement of creating your own story:

*"Why would you write true stories? They are boring. Why would anyone want to write true stories?"*

This reflects their passion for creative outlets, for imagination and artistic ways of expressing themselves that doesn't necessarily relate to real world representations but can open the way for imagining a different future and inspire change both within the individual and the wider community. Another important topic for mental health was safety and security, with some participants feeling particularly safe at home and at school, which was often associated with close personal connections.

*"Home is my favourite place because it feels safe."*

*"Home feels safe because you have family and friends around."*



## 4. Key themes for community wellbeing



**Fig. 14:** Examples of painting and “Little World” created by participants in the Junior Youth group

In contrast, participants from the senior youth group connected safety and security more to financial security and decent housing. Current cost of living was discussed, with one participant mentioning:

*“How could you ever afford a decent home in Oxford?”*

Oxford as a city with a pronounced wealth gap was something worrying for this group of participants, connecting issues of poverty with the need to provide basic services, such as food in schools for free and questioning power structures and income inequalities between sectors weighing on their mental wellbeing. Instead of talking about luxury goods, such as fast cars or big houses, and having unfulfillable expectations about the future, participants were more concerned with satisfying basic needs for their wellbeing. One participant said:

*“Wealth is important to buy a decent house.”*

This reflects that money can't buy happiness, but if you are below the poverty line and are struggling to fulfil your basic needs, financial means make a significant difference in being able to live a good life. Another important topic discussed was that of having a voice and being heard when thinking and talking about what matters in life. Some participants felt that particularly young people and marginalised groups were often excluded from discussions about the future and often did not feel represented in political debates (which are often dominated by white middle-class males).

*“I want to be less judged for what I'm wearing and how I look.”*

*“People should be more accepting of races and diversity.”*

Lastly, mental health was explicitly addressed through issues of lacking mental health support, with participants feeling stuck and less in control of their lives.

*“There are many bureaucratic hurdles to get to a mental health diagnosis and even more for treatment.”*

For some, Ark-T plays an important role in this regard, providing space for social connections, offering activities that schools usually don't provide and filling a space in community wellbeing through easing the burden of mental distress.



## 4. Key themes for community wellbeing



**Fig. 15:** Examples of mood board and artwork created by participants in the Senior Youth group

For participants in the adult workshop, physical health was an important issue given that many participants in this group were 65 years and older. Practical things like being able to drive and get around to go to places you like was an important issue, with ill-health identified as a crucial barrier to wellbeing, both individually by feeling locked in, and on a community level by not interacting with others. Participants mentioned simple things, like meals with family, walking and sleeping as crucial things for wellbeing.

*“Green space, creativity, and community is what makes a good life.”*

*“Whatever can ground you, which is different things for different people, could be solitude, or community, is essential for wellbeing.”*

Focusing on the mundane things in life was discussed as being important for “finding joy and magic in the everyday, through interactions with people, having tea, putting the washing on the line, digging in the garden”, which also can be a challenge, especially when things don’t go as planned.

*“Keep hold of the magic of living is a challenge when things can go pear-shaped.”*

Perhaps relating to more reflexive attitudes given that participants from the adult workshops had more life experience to reflect on, discussions also revolved around difficult experiences and how to approach them.

*“We need boldness rather than avoiding things. Go into whatever you’re experiencing with courage.”*

Similar to the Senior Youth group, Ark-T was mentioned frequently in this regard as providing a space for social interactions, creativity and community, even for participants who usually would avoid social situations where they would be the centre of attention. Providing activities that tap into people’s creativity however is seen as fostering courage, communication also about difficult topics and exchange.

*“Ark-T helped me to share my experiences, open up and share my emotions. Focusing on health and wellbeing through Ark-T programmes and creativity helped.”*

*“Ark-T has improved my life.”*





## 4. Key themes for community wellbeing



Fig. 16: Examples of artwork and "Little World" created by participants in the adult group

### 4.3 Key theme 3 | **Social cohesion and opportunity in life**

The last key theme that emerged from the qualitative data analysis was social cohesion and opportunity in life. Although participants from the Junior Youth group as the youngest age group have had less life experience and thus less opportunity to reflect on their own lives and their relation to wider community structures, participants frequently mentioned having influence over decision-making, being able to relate to one's own and other's cultural heritage and fostering respectful communication between community members as important factors for wellbeing. As one participant envisions their future:

*"I want to talk to other world leaders, talk to big companies ... I would save the world and environment and stop fossil fuels."*



Fig. 17: Examples of mood board and "Little World" created by participants in the Junior Youth group

## 4. Key themes for community wellbeing

The theme of having influence and opportunities in life also span across the Senior Youth group with one person wanting to become prime minister to be able to do something different from people who are currently in power. Other participants questioned their opportunities in life while living in Oxford, given the high costs of living and lack of affordability. They also discussed their opportunities being constrained by racism, religious and ethnic backgrounds, with racism in school being a recurring issue. Others discussed their opportunities being constrained in family life, with parents having specific visions for their children's futures, which impedes young people from making their own choices. Interestingly, social media was a divisive issue, with some avoiding using it because it stops people interacting with each other ("all stare at their phones"), and some escaping the real world and conflictual situations through using social media.



Fig. 18: Examples of artwork created by participants in the Senior Youth group

In the adult workshop group, people talked more about ageing, which changed their perspectives compared to the younger workshop groups in relation to their outlook on life and future visions. They focused more on family life, nature, and community instead of basic necessities of daily life.

*"Death is like a controlled crash into the sunset of our life."*

Family was a recurring theme that was important not just for individual wellbeing, but also for social cohesion and wider community structures to foster social interactions. These would however need more places to visit that are open and accessible to meet and talk to people and be able to support the local community. Communal spaces were discussed as important factors to contribute to community wellbeing, enabling friendly and welcoming relationships that sustain healthy communities. Although social interactions that are based on support exist on individual level (e.g., one participant mentioned liking their neighbourhood because people help each other with little things like cutting the grass), social infrastructure and collective spaces are currently lacking. This was also discussed in relation to opportunities to learn, which could be promoted through collective initiatives in communal spaces, giving people a sense of belonging through meeting people and sharing experiences.



#### 4. Key themes for community wellbeing

For some participants this was directly related to two challenges in their lives: First, finding groups with diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds that support each other's learning path (e.g., language skills through conversation groups), and secondly, finding meaningful employment opportunities and the right support for settling into work life. One participant mentioned that work meant independence for them, feeling valued in society, even if their situation might require additional support to get there. For both challenges, community initiatives like Ark-T were discussed as important stepping stones, not only for offering different activities, but also signposting to other initiatives in the local community and providing volunteering opportunities that might ease access to workplaces later on.

*"Ark-T gives you purpose, something to do. Ark-T gives you a canvas and you can choose what to do with it. When I get up, I don't think 'urgh, I have to work'. I think 'yay, I'm going to Ark-T!'"*



**Fig. 19:** Examples of artwork created by participants in the adult group





## 5 ENVISIONING COMMUNITY WELLBEING

We base our reflections on community wellbeing, using participatory arts-based methods, on Vervoort et al.'s (2024) nine dimensions for evaluating how art and creative practice drive societal transformation. This framework guided our interpretation of the workshop activities and artwork outcomes, with slight adaptations to suit the pilot nature of the project, which did not encompass all nine dimensions.

### Changing meanings:

- **Embodying:** How does the creative practice help people experience and embody transformed realities and roles, individually and collectively?

All age groups responded positively to the creative practice, with the junior youth group being the most enthusiastic, while the senior youth and adults appeared more self-conscious about their creative abilities. Facilitators emphasised that it's not about the aesthetics and this prompted participants to try different things and find a way they were comfortable expressing themselves. The workshop's physically engaging design, such as warm-ups and photo elicitation, helped participants feel more involved and engage more easily. Overall, participants were hopeful about envisioning their future, though some found certain topics more challenging to process.

- **Imagining:** How does the creative practice contribute to the changing of societal imaginations in a way that has the potential to transform existing ways of doing and being?

While junior youth participants were enthusiastic and engaged, they found the guiding questions conceptually challenging and were grounded in their current realities, struggling to imagine a radically different future. Most envisioned themselves at the same age and still in school, and their future visions were not necessarily tied to local settings, unlike the adult group, for whom community wellbeing was closely linked to locality and things near to them. Senior youth focused on basic needs and everyday struggles, making it hard for them to imagine an ideal future, as they appeared constrained by their present circumstances. In contrast, adults were more concerned with intergenerational wellbeing and envisioning a wellbeing for the next generations.



### Changing connections:

- **Caring:** How does the creative practice engage with care as a way to create the support, safety, flourishing, relational security and empathy needed for societal change?

Throughout all workshop groups, care and social connection was a recurring theme, relating both to materials (e.g., caring for one's neighbours, communal spaces), but also interactions (e.g., friendly and welcoming community). These expressions of care were present both for beings (e.g., neighbours, family, friends, animals) and environments (e.g., nature, clean streets). Importantly, safety was often connected to these notions of care, generating trust between people and their environment. Some participants also came with a group of friends, making them feel safer to participate.

- **Organising:** How does the creative practice create change by fostering new relationships and creating new organisational structures based on transformative principles of relating and organising?

The workshops prompted people to visually represent their understanding of wellbeing, with many creating new symbols (e.g., wings representing a peaceful death). Younger participants were often influenced by those around them, sometimes diverting from their own interpretations. However, the diverse group dynamics fostered conversations around complex issues that might not have happened otherwise. The structured workshop design helped participants engage more effectively, relax, and use creativity to express often intangible concepts.

### Changing power:

- **Empowering:** How does this creative practice empower and platform individuals, communities and organisations to create change?

The workshops aimed to prompt participants to reflect on what wellbeing means in their local context, a topic most had not explored in detail before. Some younger participants envisioned future influence through politics (e.g., being a prime minister or addressing climate change), indicating a sense of empowerment and confidence in their future. For many, wellbeing was tied to meaningful aspects of their lives, such as employment and social connections. The workshops highlighted the need for political attention and resources to address basic needs tied to individual and community wellbeing. During the exhibition, participants felt pride in their creations, suggesting that both individual and collective agency had been fostered by identifying common wellbeing themes and priorities.



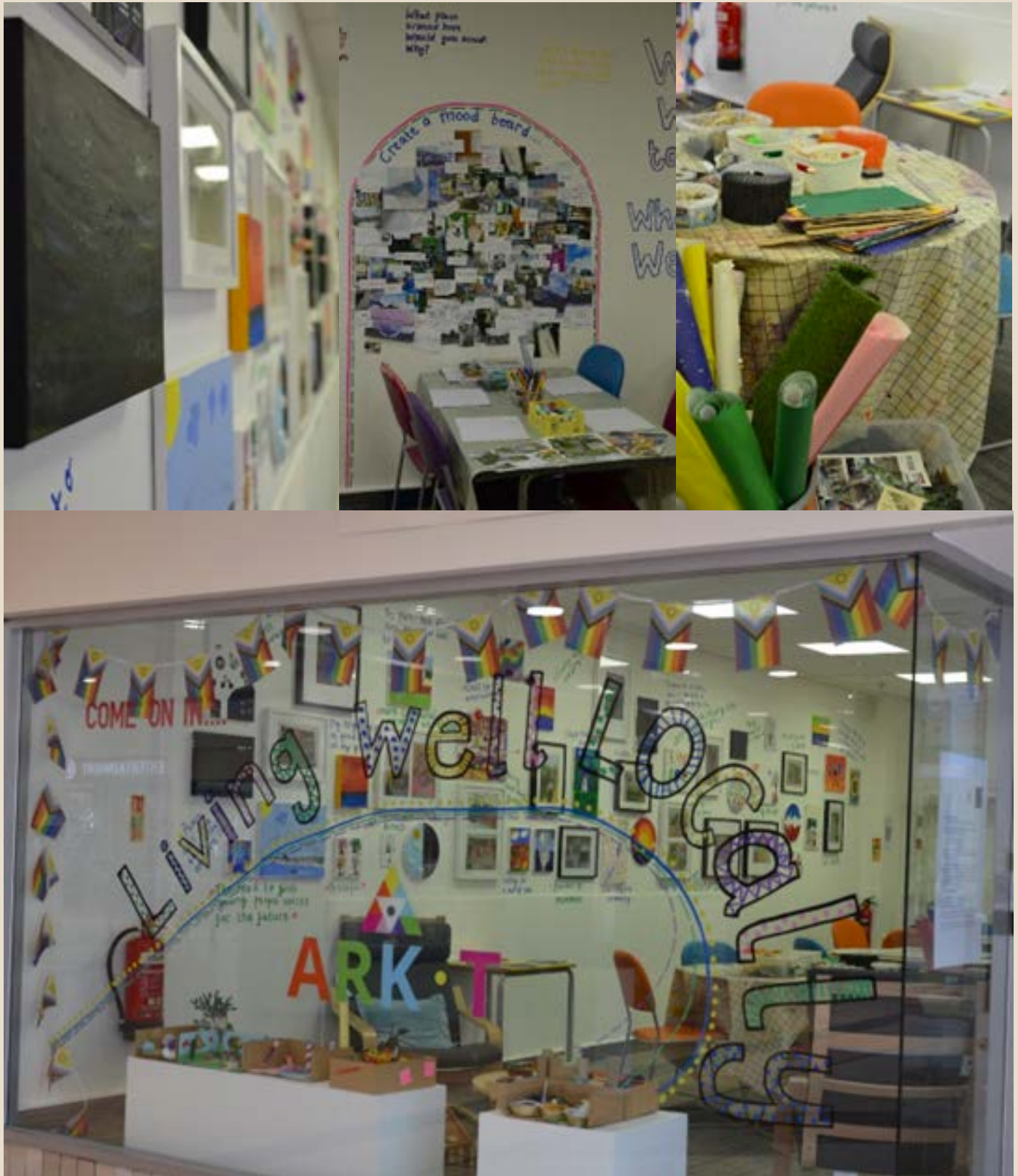


Fig. 20: Highlights from the exhibition showcasing the created artwork



## 6 KEY LEARNINGS

Conducting this research revealed key learnings around community wellbeing, participatory approaches, and the importance of engaging diverse voices in shaping local health and wellbeing policies. Health and wellbeing are influenced by various non-medical factors, including social, economic, and environmental determinants. In Oxford, significant disparities in income, housing affordability, and life expectancy highlight the need for tailored interventions, especially in underserved communities. Understanding local factors, such as the connection to community and the quality of the local environment, is crucial for shaping health outcomes, making place-based approaches essential for improving wellbeing.

**The Role of Health Impact Assessments (HIA):** The project highlights the role of Health Impact Assessments (HIA) and Community-led Health Impact Assessments (C-HIA) as vital tools in integrating community voices into health and wellbeing policies, programmes and interventions. C-HIAs focus on empowering local populations by involving them in decision-making processes, promoting equity and sustainability, and ensuring that future interventions address the real needs and aspirations of the communities they aim to serve. This approach is essential for achieving transformative outcomes in health and wellbeing, especially in areas experiencing multiple deprivations.

**Determinants of health and wellbeing:** The research showed that priorities for wellbeing vary based on age, geography, and financial circumstances. Younger participants often focused on nature and human-nature interactions, while older youths expressed concerns over fulfilling their basic needs. Adults reflected more on community connections, love, and end-of-life concerns. Geographically, safety perceptions shaped wellbeing; areas like Cowley Road and Blackbird Leys were seen as unsafe, whereas the city centre was perceived as crowded and noisy. Financial security and family support are critical in shaping life satisfaction, as participants' living standards heavily influence their sense of wellbeing.

**Insights from arts-based methods:** The research underscores the importance of using creative and participatory methods to engage underrepresented groups, particularly children and young people but also older people from deprived areas, in the process of envisioning a future where wellbeing for all can be achieved. By incorporating their perspectives, communities can develop a more inclusive understanding of what wellbeing means, fostering a sense of ownership and agency. Creative practices not only help in expressing local concerns and aspirations but also stimulate new ways of imagining societal transformation. Younger participants found creative art an easy and liberating way for self-expression, while older participants showed less engagement, suggesting the need for varied materials and methods for different age groups, such as using new materials or experiences unfamiliar to them (e.g., spray paint), to stimulate greater interest. Interestingly, adults struggled to imagine their own future, often focusing on their children's lives and being more concerned with intergenerational justice and equity issues. This suggests that age-appropriate methods could be a useful way to stimulate further discussions in future participatory workshops.





## 7 REFLECTIONS

The participatory arts-based workshops were structured around Vervoort et al.'s (2024) nine dimensions for assessing how art and creative practices drive societal transformation, though slightly adapted for this pilot project. By focusing on how creative practices changed meanings, connections, and power, the study shows the impact of creative interventions like Ark-T offers for understanding and changing perceptions of individual and community wellbeing.

The workshops helped participants embody transformed realities through creative expression. All age groups responded positively, with younger participants more enthusiastic, while older ones were more self-conscious. Facilitators emphasised the importance of self-expression over aesthetics, helping participants feel comfortable. The workshops' physical activities, like warm-ups and photo elicitation, encouraged engagement and helped participants envision their futures, though some found certain topics challenging to process.

Care and social connection were recurring themes throughout the workshops. Participants expressed care for both people and their environment, linking wellbeing to trust and safety in their communities. The workshops fostered conversations that would not have happened otherwise, bringing together diverse groups to explore complex issues. Younger participants were often influenced by those around them, but the structured design helped them relax and use creativity to express difficult or intangible concepts.

The workshops empowered individuals and communities to create change. Many participants, especially younger ones, envisioned having influence in the future, such as through politics, reflecting a sense of empowerment. Wellbeing was often tied to meaningful aspects like employment and social connections, and the workshops underscored the need for political focus on addressing basic needs. The exhibition of their work allowed participants to take pride in their creations, reinforcing both individual and collective agency around common wellbeing themes.

Reflecting on the workshop design and the use of participatory arts-based methods, several key learnings emerge from the process. The younger participants found painting easier than constructing 3D models, as painting allowed for more flexibility in expressing imagination without the constraints of physical building. The combination of creative activity and open-ended questions often led to therapeutic outcomes, with participants sharing personal reflections more freely. However, asking many questions sometimes felt like pushing participants in a particular direction, which could create discomfort. The exhibition of the artwork produced a sense of pride among participants, as it provided a platform to communicate their ideas to the broader community, showcasing the value of creative expression in fostering personal and collective narratives of wellbeing.



## 7. Reflections

Finally, a critical reflection from the workshops was the emergence of deep personal issues, such as the death of a family member, which could not be addressed within the workshop setting. This highlights the need for additional support structures, such as access to trained therapists, to handle sensitive topics that arise. Moreover, some participants chose not to engage due to scepticism about the impact of such initiatives, having been asked to participate many times before without seeing meaningful change. This illustrates the importance of building trust and managing expectations in community engagement activities, ensuring that participants feel their input can lead to tangible outcomes.

The project has been documented in a short film which can be viewed at [www.ark-t.org/living-well-locally](http://www.ark-t.org/living-well-locally).





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# APPENDIX

## Topic Guide

Question to get started with creating a vision:

- What do you want your future to look like?
- What does living well mean for you?

Prompts to help the thought process for creating an ideal vision locally:

- What would living well look like for you in your local area?
- What are the most important things for you to live well in this area?
- What parts of life are important for you for living well now and in the future?

Prompts to create a vision for your world here:

- What would you like to do in your free time in this area?
- Where is your favourite place to go? Why?
- What's a good day for you like?
- What is stopping you from doing these things?
- What place around here would you avoid? Why?
- What's a bad day for you like?
- What would it take for you to be able to do the things that you would like, or the way that you would like, in this area?
- What do you need to live well in this community?
- What do you currently like about living in this area - how could we have more of that?





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