

ADVOCACY  
ACADEMY

SENSATIONNEL

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# What's Brixton saying?

A LISTENING CAMPAIGN  
APRIL 2023

## What's Brixton saying?

What's Brixton Saying? A Listening Campaign by The Advocacy Academy

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We are deeply thankful to all the traders, organisations, and Brixtonians who shared their time and insights with us. Thank you for trusting us with your stories.

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 [www.theadvocacyacademy.com](http://www.theadvocacyacademy.com)

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# SUMMARY:

## Our report in a nutshell

Between November 2022 and February 2023, The Advocacy Academy conducted a series of conversations with Brixton-based traders, institutions, and people to help capture a snapshot of the hopes, dreams, fears, frustrations, and opportunities in the neighbourhood.

The 83 conversations we held highlighted the following themes:

### TRADERS

**Changes in the neighbourhood:** Traders in central Brixton feel a lot of love and appreciation for the neighbourhood and its communities. But, as the area grows busier and more popular, the local customers who traditionally relied on the markets for their groceries and errands are being displaced by a mostly white, middle-class community. These new customers seem to primarily support restaurants and bars, neglecting the market businesses that were once the backbone of the area, leaving traders worrying for the future of their livelihood.

**Feeling the squeeze:** The cost of living crisis, Brexit, and a multitude of further crises have meant that traders are feeling the squeeze. Their rents are increasing whilst they are unable to hold on to a changing demographic of clients and people are less likely to spend on their stock.

**Authority and control in Brixton:** Traders worry that their interests are not being reflected in decisions made by the local council, who they view as championing the cause of big corporations. They have a fractured relationship with local authorities in general, whom they only see when they are in trouble - for example when paying fines. They would like to organise collectively, but gentrification and the cost of living crisis, together with a culture distrust which has grown out of perceptions of scarcity of space and power in the market, has meant they feel they feel unable to speak or act collectively.

### EVERYDAY BRIXTONIANS

**Going through the changes:** Brixtonians expressed they feel left behind in >

> decision-making in the neighbourhood. Many are alienated by the politics taking place in the community, and feel a lack of agency in engaging with decision-makers. They love the area and appreciate its unique identity, but fear that it is not being protected enough in favour of quick money fixes by developers, and that their voices and perspectives are not heard enough.

**Cost of living crisis and safety:** The cost of living crisis is exacerbating existing inequalities in the neighbourhood. These inequalities are linked with feelings of insecurity on the street as incidents of petty theft and violence were increasingly on the rise. Many also reported perceived rises in the number of unhoused community members and anecdotal sightings of people experiencing mental health episodes publicly in Brixton.

## **INSTITUTIONS**

**Two steps forward, one step back:** many felt great improvements have taken place in improving communities' relationships with local authorities, but gaps in funding, follow-through, and institutional issues of discrimination, particularly in the case of the Met Police, have made the work hard to keep up.

**Funding cycles and broken promises:** short funding cycles, unclear decision-making processes in the funding sector, pitting institutions against each other, and a lack of investment in the follow up of projects means organisations are unable to holistically organise or cooperate, with communities, and young people in particular, feeling let down as projects start and end with no follow through.

**Intergenerational gaps in organising:** many organisations expressed a worry about how young people are not stepping into leadership positions in the community, or taking ownership in the projects taking place.

**Voluntary sector plugging public sector gaps:** A lot of organisations feel that public sector cuts have resulted in them having to fill gaps in schools and other public services. This, paired with lack of funding opportunities, has meant they are encouraged to keep signposting people to specific bits of service provision without efficient follow up or support for them.

**Gentrification and planning:** Many institutions raised concerns about the condition of council homes in the borough, and cited a worry that the council privileges the needs of developers above that of vulnerable residents. Some also highlighted a lack of care of public spaces, and pointed to the tendency of pushing for commercial needs in decision-making above those of community wellbeing.

# What is

# THE ADVOCACY ACADEMY?

**The Advocacy Academy** (TAA) is a Brixton-based social justice organisation. Founded in 2014, TAA supports young people in South London to fight the injustices they face in their daily lives. We are not shy about wanting to see change in the world, and we deliberately set out to win campaigns for our collective betterment, and create spaces which are joyful and centred in and around community while doing so.

Our work has resulted in some amazing campaigns both locally and nationally, including campaign groups The Halo Collective, CLT (Christchurch Road), LatinXcluded, and ChokedUp.

Our headquarters, **The Community Hub**, is on Vining Street and has had its doors open for community bookings and activities in the last few years. Ran and operated by our small Community Team, it hosts a myriad of groups organising around issues including police brutality, anti-racism, gentrification, community care, migrant justice, housing justice, and uplifting and celebrating the many diaspora communities in South London.



# What is a

# LISTENING CAMPAIGN?

**The foundation of any kind of community work is listening. Listening builds trust, connects people, and makes individuals feel seen and heard. Listening is also important as it allows organisers to build an understanding of the needs and networks in different communities, and to start pulling together the different threads to facilitate the change that needs to happen on the ground.**

The Listening Campaign captures the opinions and experiences of those who participated. This exercise is not representative of the entire population of Brixton. People who are more interested or invested in the issues being discussed were more likely to participate, which influenced our findings. We carried out three rounds of intensive listening from November 2022-February 2023. A more in-depth look at our timetable can be found in [Annex 1](#).

## **Our goals for the Listening Campaign were:**

- To better understand the struggles in the communities in Brixton and wider Lambeth.
- To reach out to our neighbours and build relationships based on trust and understanding.
- To centre our conversations around space-based organising. Brixton has a deep history of organising but where is it heading to? Who is involved in decision making, who feels excluded, and who gets to shape the future of Brixton?
- To understand the appetite for organising in our neighbourhood, and look at existing networks and the fantastic work already happening on the ground.
- To embed TAA into the communities of Brixton in order to build sustainable and meaningful connections for change.

## **The limitations of the work included:**

**Limited geographical scope:** we focused our efforts on central Brixton as a site which is both commercial and residential, and that has been at the heart of discussions on gentrification, city planning, and regeneration for many years.

**Language barriers:** English is not the only language spoken in the neighbourhood, but we relied on it for conducting most of the conversations. This meant some folks were undoubtedly expressing themselves less comfortably than they could have been, and some were excluded due to our inability to meet their language needs.

**Time and resources:** We ran this project as a snapshot of the current situation, which meant we had to be disciplined in our use of time and resources. We also ran this project along with multiple other responsibilities - meaning it was not the sole focus of our work. >

> This meant we were unable to tap into as many spaces as we could have liked, or reach as many stakeholders as we would have preferred.

### **Vulnerable groups not specifically targeted:**

Unhoused community members, community members in care homes or health institutions, or those stranded at home and unable to leave their premises, and other groups who require more outreach and trust-building work, were excluded from this exercise due to constraints of time and resource as we could not properly receive their input.

## **We grouped our conversations into three categories**

**Conversations with traders:** these are folks who work in Brixton. They often belong to diasporic communities. All run independent shops and operate out of the markets or its adjacent streets. We specifically targeted street vendors and independent shops as they are particularly vulnerable to displacement based on the history of the neighbourhood.

**Conversations with everyday Brixtonians:** we set out to visit the market on weekdays during working hours, to maximise the likelihood of us talking to people who lived and worked in the area. We utilised **Vox Pops** - voice of the people - stalls to start these conversations, and captured people's thoughts and opinions on site.

**Conversations with Brixton institutions:** We sought to have conversations with people doing the groundwork of organising in Brixton communities. Our selection process was deliberate, with the aim of including a diverse range of organisations that varied in mission, purpose, and tactics: from well-established institutions to collectives focused on specific issues such as renters rights. Additionally, we ensured that the organisations were representative of our community,

including those working with young people, marginalised groups, unhoused individuals, people experiencing mental health issues, diaspora communities, arts and culture, businesses in the area, and community organising groups..

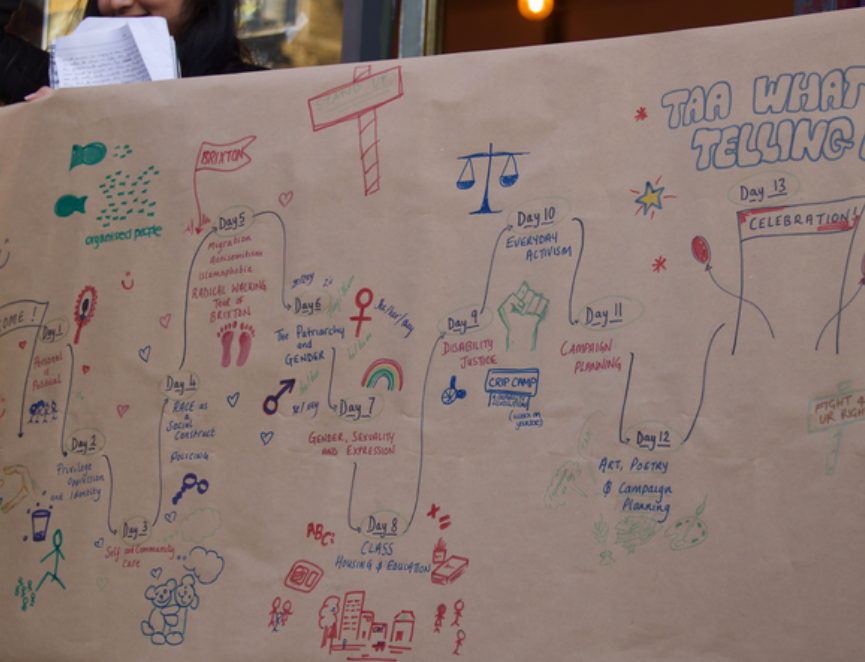
We named this cohort 'institutions' as their work (offering advice, referring people to services, working with communities on issues of violence etc) often ends up supplementing a lot of the work which the traditional state institutions (e.g. police, schools, council) do.

## **Data integrity and anonymity**

We made a decision not to collect data on our participants' identity markers, such as their gender, religion, age, and ethnicity, as this would have reduced the exercise to a survey activity. Instead, we sought to connect relationally with these individuals at a point in time. The vast majority of the people interviewed are our neighbours and peers, and we centred our conversations around their lived experiences of Brixton - how long they have been in the neighbourhood; their hopes, dreams, fears, and concerns for the area. They consented to sharing these experiences with us. If they shared their backgrounds with us as part of the conversation, as most did, we made no note of it as this factor was secondary to the purpose of this exercise.

Secondly, we made a commitment to ensure the absolute anonymity of the people who engaged in this exercise with us. We wanted to create a space for honest discussions without fear of any potential backlash or negative consequences, which might arise from sharing their experiences, especially in situations where they may be in a precarious relationship, for example when speaking about their landlords or particular funders or statutory institutions in the community.





# Listening to:

## MARKET TRADERS

**Brixton's markets have been at the heart of the community since the 1870s. To better understand the experiences of traders here, we had conversations with 40 independent traders from Electric Avenue, The Arcade, Brixton Village, and Market Row. During these conversations, we asked about their favourite aspects of Brixton, the changes they are experiencing, and the improvements they would like to see in the future. Here is what they shared.**

### Changes in the neighbourhood

Many traders in Brixton appreciate the area's multiculturalism. The diverse diasporas that call Brixton home create a vibrant and welcoming atmosphere that supports local businesses. The abundance of community members in the area also provided a sense of security and motivation for traders. However, most traders have noticed a shift in the community's demographics.

Brixton is becoming busier, but the customers are changing. The local customers who traditionally relied on markets for their groceries and errands are being displaced by a white, middle-class community. These new customers seem to primarily support restaurants and bars, neglecting the market businesses that were once the backbone of the area. This trend is concerning to some traders who worry about the future of Brixton's unique identity and the livelihoods of small businesses. They also have concerns about the lack of spaces for young people in the area, leaving many on the streets which they feel has fueled disruptive behaviours such as throwing fireworks through Electric Avenue.

### Feeling the squeeze

*"Business is tough too as people are not spending in shops" - trader who disclosed that he is planning on using his break clause in the next 12 months and sees no future in the neighbourhood.*

The pandemic has brought about changes in consumer behaviour, affecting the way people shop and interact with local businesses. Traders have had to adapt to these changes, including the shift from cash-only to card payments, which bring additional business costs. Brexit has also had a significant impact on the importation of goods, affecting the availability and cost of goods sold in the area, as well as adding complexities of trade regulation. Additionally, the cost of living crisis has decreased consumers' disposable income to spend in local businesses. They have also expressed a need for more parking spaces for business owners, as road closures have made working in the area increasingly difficult. Traders are feeling the squeeze due to rising costs - with rent, utilities, and supplies continuing to eat into their profits.

## **Authority and control in Brixton**

*"Council takes on a punitive role, communicating through fines rather than building relationships."*

*"There is more government control - they are making a lot of changes we are unaware about, and have no control over."*

Traders in Brixton are facing challenging times and feel isolated in their struggles. Many have expressed a desire for a stronger trader association to communicate more efficiently, be more resourceful and support each other during tough times, but they simply do not have the means or time to invest in such a network. They have turned to the council, and while the traders have suggestions on how to improve the area for businesses, they feel deeply let down by the lack of support from the council when facing landlord mismanagement of the markets. Dynamics of the landlord/tenant relationship in this space have also meant that tenants are often played against each other, making it hard for them to organise collectively. However, possibilities for organising are not impossible.

Traders are also concerned that the council's plans do not reflect the needs of the community and are focused on attracting developers. They referred to examples such as the closure of Brixton Arches in 2015, the regeneration of Station Road and Pop Brixton, and the proposed Hondo Tower on Pope's Road, expressing fears about future plans. This has left traders feeling vulnerable and unsupported, leading to a sense of distrust in decision-making processes which impact their businesses and livelihoods. Traders believe that by working together, they can create a stronger, more cohesive community that can effectively lobby for their needs and the community. They see an opportunity to develop a shared vision for the markets which reflects the diversity and vibrancy of the area. But as things stand, scarcity and distrust has made it difficult for them to organise cohesively.

From our conversations with traders in Brixton, it became clear that they desire a more organised and connected market culture. They need more avenues to communicate and influence the council, so they can ensure that Brixton's markets continue to evolve and remain a vital part of its communities.

# Listening to:

## EVERYDAY BRIXTONIANS

As part of our work in listening to our neighbours in Brixton, we set up a stall to have conversations with people on the streets. Here is what they shared.

### Going through the changes

"The majority of the people we encountered spoke with a passion about the many beautiful aspects of living in the neighbourhood: the sense of community they felt, the culture and sense of belonging found here, the flavour and the beauty of this corner of London. Despite the changes that are taking place, there were significant concerns regarding the direction of these changes. Older residents, in particular, expressed a sense of helplessness in regards to the directions that these changes were taking.

Decisions around city planning and resourcing came up in the majority of the conversations we had. Concerns were raised about the council's decision-making with regards to investments in the area, in particular around keeping Brixton's unique identity and heritage alive. Concerns were also raised about their ability to make decisions for the people who were here already, and conversations reflected a sense of disempowerment, as many expressed that their communities were being pushed out, and that their concerns were brushed aside or ignored in rooms of power.

*The people making decisions are the ones with the money and power, we can't really do anything really. We gotta adapt and deal with it, as best as we can"*

*"[Brixton has] good transport links, [it is] well connected and everything you need is here - except good clothes shops!"*

### Cost of living crisis & safety

*[I am] worried about lack of respect for working communities in the neighbourhood, and lack of viable work opportunities for local young people."*

*"it's [Brixton] not welcoming to working class people's struggles and voice"*

The feelings of being squeezed out also bled into conversations on inequalities in general in the community. One person talked about the crisis of land ownership and how it was affecting communities being displaced across the country. Another spoke about difficulties with housing and rent, and many spoke of the inequalities faced in a neighbourhood which is experiencing a lot of growth, but also has a large community of unhoused people.

On issues of security, many linked feelings of insecurity on the streets with the rise of substance abuse in the community, and in the mental health struggles regularly experienced by the unhoused community members who frequent the high street. One person spoke at length about the Metropolitan Police stationed in Brixton, and how they were failing in policing the area. Whilst police presence has increased, it has not been welcomed by some members of the community, who see them as a threat to their safety. Others spoke of having witnessed acts of theft, violence, and people being in mental distress, and feeling unsupported in the aftermath of such incidents.

# Listening to:

## BRIXTON INSTITUTIONS

**Brixton is home to many different organisations, with similar hopes and fears about the future of the community and the people they work with. Here is what they shared.**

### **Two steps forward, one step back?**

The organisations we met spoke with passion and clarity about the many positive changes on the ground that organising has led to in the neighbourhood. We heard that there is more collaboration within statutory organisations, like the Local Planning Authority, in some parts of Brixton, particularly in Angell Town, with MPs and councillors putting in the time. One person remarked that there are still pockets of joy and community, such as the skatepark, but that the space has also “lost its vibe with the absence of sound systems and speakers”.

Institutional members truly appreciate the area’s rich history, and the diverse people that have built up its environment. Many spoke of the markets as being what makes Brixton what it is with its sense of character and vibrant atmosphere. Brixton was described as a “melting pot of culture, professions and experiences”. Some expressed worry about increased police presence in the neighbourhood, especially among racialised community members. Others worry about lack of agency in the communities, and fear tensions and mistrust will continue eroding community structures.

*"Our people have made Brixton what it is today"*

### **Funding cycles and broken promises**

Funding was another pressing theme for many institutions in Brixton. The lack of long-term funding from the council, for holistic support, community projects, and opportunities for young people in particular has created a sense of fatigue, distrust, and unwillingness to participate in projects in the community.

*"Funding cycles [are] not conducive to long-term work."*

Various conversations also highlighted a lack of sustainable funding patterns, with small grants cycles in particular making it challenging to work collaboratively and creatively across the neighbourhood. Additionally, the limitations of ‘restricted funding’ were raised, along with the lack of transparency from funders around their grant decision-making. One person shared that projects are only part-funded with limited flexibility. They gave an example of agreeing to a plan with multiple years of work, and when further funding is needed to deepen the work, for example to pay a commission for a part of the project or to deepen community engagement, it is dropped as it is seen as outside of scope.

### **Intergenerational gaps in community organising**

Many organisations mentioned difficulties in reaching out to and engaging with young

people in particular. One such issue was particularly in encouraging young people in taking ownership and leadership of local campaigns and projects. This gap has meant that many organisation feel they are missing out on valuable contributions from young people, and feel they are unable to bridge the gap on their own.

*“I would like to see more intergenerational experiences - it is happening but I'd like to see more of that really happen to open up these dialogues more and more”*

## **Gentrification and planning**

Institutions are worried that Brixtonians are being displaced due to gentrification and lack of affordability. Many raised issues of failing council homes, lack of funding, and lack of accessibility to housing as a real worry. They also fear that the council, which recently scrapped its Homes for Lambeth initiative, has focused on investors above the needs of its residents in its planning processes.

These worries also bleed into the planning of public spaces. Many expressed dismay over the maintenance of Windrush Square, which went from a vibrant, inviting, and green space to a “sad and concrete” middle section of central Brixton that “you happen to walk past on your daily commute”. Although Windrush Square remains an outside hub for community events, which have been described by institutions as excellent, more can be done to support organising and space usage, particularly with an investment in public toilets.

This lack of care was also reflected in what some saw as lack of investment in green spaces in favour of closed events and more spaces for commerce.

*“Housing is not working at all, so many of our members and others in the community are having issues. Council housing is horrific and in disrepair and they fall apart, [there are] people living with mould, damp, cockroaches and when they go to the council for help to get issues fixed, nothing happens, and they are ignored.”*

## **Voluntary sector plugging public sector gaps**

*“Schools need engagement from parents.”*

*“The focus on the outcome within schools (grades in particular) has meant that they [young people] do not engage enough.”*

We heard from institutions that schools are heavily reliant on those in the voluntary sector to fill the gap of youth engagement. This has meant that things do not get completed effectively or with care due to inconsistency, unreliability, lack of funding, lack of access and general lack of holistic services provided in the communities. It was raised that there is barely any effective or holistic support offered to families covering multiple service areas like school, health, or housing. Instead, people are often signposted to different providers, many in the voluntary sector, and tend to then get lost in the system.

We have also learnt from conversations that recreation in Brixton is missing. Many pointed to a reliance on the voluntary sector and on youth centres to provide accessible and affordable spaces which offer communities the opportunity to engage in games, sports, crafts, and other forms of entertainment. Institutions pointed to how these activities enhance the physical and mental wellbeing of community members, as well as their socialisation and overall quality of life.

# What

# NEXT?

**Our conversations not only touched on themes of scarcity, worry and despair; many ended on hopeful and optimistic notes on how to make the neighbourhood better. People we spoke with across the three target groups recommended that we and others in the community invest in:**

## **Meeting spaces for the community**

Most people we spoke to saw Brixton's biggest asset in its wonderful and diverse community members. A majority pointed out that meeting spaces in the community are scarce, and meeting opportunities rare. One key recommendation is to create and maintain spaces for joy, organising, and community for all who call Brixton home.

## **Better communication, more trust-building, and more sharing amongst institutions & communities**

A lot of people spoke of the importance of sharing knowledge, sharing resources, and working together rather than in competition with each other. Some institutions suggested more interconnected community organising is needed. Others, such as traders, spoke of creating structures for trust-building, which combat feelings of scarcity and competition in different community groups. Institutions and Brixtonians spoke of the need to build more relationships on the ground, of the importance of visible investment in the community in the form of 'foot soldiers' - organisers who connect and encourage people to get more active in what is happening in their neighbourhood.

## **Spaces for joy and community**

Many spoke of the importance of investing in culture, art, and celebrations of history, joy, and nature. They also spoke of the importance of investing in alternatives to traditional education for young people, and the importance of building up their life skills and experiences. Many also expressed a desire for intergenerational spaces for such learning.

## **The Advocacy Academy will be following up on these recommendations by creating more spaces for meeting and action.**

This will be done by investing in broadening networks and connecting groups; by creating intergenerational spaces for learning and organising; and by continuously opening its doors to different stakeholders in Brixton and beyond. They will also create spaces to skill up different community partners and institutions in fundraising, work to connect people across different sectors and points of life, and use its fundraising know-how and network to connect other stakeholders in the community to these infrastructures.

But a better Brixton for all is not a marathon, it is a relay where we all have to chip in. Please reach out and share your ideas, your dreams, your hopes, and any community actions you might want to start or scale up

[hello@theadvocacyacademy.com](mailto:hello@theadvocacyacademy.com).

# ANNEX 1:

## OUR TIMELINE

### **ROUND 1: THE MARKET 14-18 NOVEMBER 2022**

We took to the streets and talked to traders in Brixton Market, Brixton Village, Reliance Arcade, Station Road, Atlantic Road, Acre Lane, Electric Avenue and the High Street.

Our conversations lasted between 5-40 minutes, depending on the capacity of the trader, and were conducted during the day on weekdays. The round also included two 'pop vox' stalls on Pope's Road and Electric Avenue.

### **ROUND 2: INSTITUTIONS 23 JANUARY- 3 FEBRUARY 2023**

We extended invitations to 30 Brixton-based organisations to participate in this listening exercise, and we were fortunate enough to conduct 45-minute long one-on-one sessions with half of them.

This outcome was expected given that many organisations are limited in their capacity to run their own services and prioritise key relationships, particularly during challenging times. We also carried out a third Pop vox stall in Electric Avenue.

### **ROUND 3: STREETS & INSTITUTIONS 6-10 FEBRUARY 2023**

In this third and final round of the Listening Campaign, we decided to carry out more Pop Voxs. We held an additional 2 of those, while wrapping up conversations with remaining institutional stakeholders we had reached out to.