

PLACE-MAKING AND THE RIVERS OF LEWISHAM

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END OF PROJECT REPORT

DR EMMA JACKSON AND DR LOUISE RONDEL

Introduction

This short report presents the headline findings from 'Place-making and the Rivers of Lewisham', a research project funded by the Strategic Research Fund at Goldsmiths, University of London. It explores how rivers are implicated in different registers of place-making in a borough of South-East London with three highly engineered rivers – the Ravensbourne, the Quaggy and the Pool.

While the riverfront development of large rivers – and the Thames specifically – have been extensively researched, these smaller bodies of water are also rich sites for examining questions of urban development and how we live with rivers in cities.

Many of London's rivers are submerged. They have been covered over and some have been incorporated into the sewage system. And while mythology abounds about London's 'lost rivers', Lewisham's rivers are unusual in that long stretches are uncovered. **Our research finds that these three rivers feed into the shaping of the city in multiple ways.**

In a context where approaches to living with rivers – including the need to manage flood risk in a time of climate crisis – are in the spotlight, **Lewisham's rivers present opportunities for learning about how to live with rivers in the present and in the cities of the future, for policy-makers and citizens.**

The project was driven by three research questions:

- How are Lewisham's rivers constructed, drawn upon, included or excluded in plans for regeneration and development in the borough?
- How are the rivers practised and imagined by those who live by them, care for them, and spend time alongside and in them?
- And what are the synergies, conflicts and potential opportunities that arise from these different kinds of place-making on the rivers?

Methods

The research design combines two strands:

1. Policy document analysis was undertaken to understand the place of the rivers in official forms of discourse (including planning documents and council documents) mapping how this has changed over time across all three rivers. This involved archival research in the London Metropolitan Archives, Lewisham Local History Archives, Transport for London Corporate Archives, Centre for Urban and Community Research archive (the Ben Gidley papers), focusing on materials from 1969 onwards.
2. In order to understand the various ways that people engage with the rivers, we focused on two contrasting stretches of the rivers. One was the section of the River Pool Linear Park, from Lower Sydenham to Catford Bridge. This is an almost uninterrupted stretch of open river that is part of the well-established Waterlink Way. The second stretch was from Lewisham Gateway to Deptford Creek. Starting from Confluence Park, a recently-formed 'pocket park' in the centre of a newly-constructed privatised high-rise development, this stretch runs alongside the DLR to the former wharves of Deptford. These two stretches of river give us a transect through a fast-changing part of the borough and reveal different approaches to planning for and living with rivers.



Interviewing staff at Creekside Discovery Centre



Collaging Workshop at the River Pool Linear Park

We used a range of creative methods:

- i. Conducting 19 walking/on-site interviews with stakeholders along the river including members of river groups, artists, council representatives and local residents, plus 18 short interviews with people at river events.
- ii. Taking part in 11 river activities – including clean-up events, amphibian counts and bird counts – alongside river groups .
- iii. Conducting creative workshops along the rivers: we conducted three collaging workshops in which we asked participants to craft a response to their relationship with the rivers; a photography workshop with young people from the 9th Sydenham Scout Group; and a soundwalk as part of the Deptford X Festival.
- iv. Collaborating with sound recordist Konstantinos Damianikis who made soundscape recordings along the rivers.

Findings

How are Lewisham's rivers constructed, drawn upon, included or excluded in plans for regeneration and development in the borough?

The ways in which Lewisham's rivers feature in plans for regeneration and development have shifted significantly over the past 55 years. The importance and potential of the rivers were noted in town centre plans and proposals from 1969 onwards. This includes their potential to put Lewisham 'on the map' once opened up as part of the development at Lewisham Gateway as proposed in the early 2000s. However, in more recent documents, **there has been a notable quantitative and qualitative increase in when and how the rivers are mentioned.**

Contemporary planning documents such as the current Lewisham Local Plan (2023) set out a wide range of actions that could (or should) be done regarding rivers. They also set out a number of different functions that the rivers are expected to perform. These range from focusing on access, ecology, recreation, active travel, education, aesthetics, biodiversity, renaturalising, deculverting, flood management and prevention and the rivers as cultural and heritage sites. Here we consider shifting approaches to rivers and shifting approaches to urban development:

Shifting approaches to rivers

- In planning documents from 1969 to the mid-2000s the rivers feature as having the potential to play a central role in the social and economic life of Lewisham. **But largely the rivers are discussed as a pleasing backdrop.**
- From 2015 onwards including in the current Local Plan for the Borough, **the ecology and biodiversity of the rivers are considered as important in their own right**, with several objectives outlined to improve or enhance these.
- This contemporary focus on rivers as 'active' - including in alleviating flood risk - **reflects the work of local river groups, the Lewisham Biodiversity Partnership and Thames21** as well as a widespread zeitgeist around environmental concerns and national policy in a time of climate crisis.
- Work taking place within the Ravensbourne Catchment Group serves as an example of good practice. This partnership working between



DIY rope swings on the River Pool

agencies, specialist organisations and boroughs **has fed into the planning process** through the River Corridor Improvement Plan Supplementary Planning Document (2015). This partnership brings together the locally embedded knowledge of the local river groups, the expertise of Thames 21, the Environmental Agency and the London Wildlife Trust together with four local authorities (Lewisham, Bromley, Greenwich and Croydon).

- A common thread through both the archival and current plans is that the rivers are expected to **perform economically** in the case of marketing new developments or as part of improving the image of Lewisham to shoppers and employers. This can lead to tensions and differences in expectations (see pg. 12).

Shifting approaches to urban development

- There has been a change in how private investment is framed, regarding development in Lewisham. Planning proposals from the 1960s-1980s emphasise improving Lewisham's image, in which the rivers are seen as having potential. However these documents note that their proposals are unlikely to happen without private investment. By contrast, in contemporary policy it is taken-for-granted that developments will be **carried out by private entities** with the local authority providing documents as guidance. **This shift prompts questions about:**
 - How the guidance in relation to river restoration or enhancement will be interpreted by developers. This underlines the importance of **clarity around the terminology used**, and ensuring that the actions are applied appropriately to **each site allocation**.
 - How the developers' implementation of the guidance is being **monitored to ensure best practice and best outcomes faced with competing priorities**. Also, with private investment comes **the imperative of profit**, which may be in tension or even conflict with the ecological and socio-cultural dynamics of rivers.
 - **Access to green and blue spaces** in the Borough. It is acknowledged by The Lewisham Local Plan, there are already **discrepancies in access**. These spaces will be put under **increased pressure** by the potential new residents that housing developments will bring.

How are the rivers practised and imagined by those who live by them, care for them, and spend time alongside and in them?

The rivers are lived and experienced in a multitude of ways by the people who encounter them. From the rivers' role in fuelling childhood imaginations, to the network of council officers, organisations, contractors and volunteers who steward the rivers. From those who walk alongside the rivers for some headspace, to the artists who use them and their banks as inspiration, or even as a canvas. There are also traces of people building makeshift homes along the banks.

This diversity of use speaks to the complexities of the rivers as social spaces and the multiple possibilities that the rivers offer to Lewisham's residents. We have divided these themes into *Authorship*, *Stewardship* and *Ownership*:

Authorship

Here we focus on how people feed into **shaping the spaces of and around the rivers through everyday contact and imaginings.**

- **Play** is an important feature of the rivers and river spaces. On the River Pool, spilling out from the nearby play park or stopping on a cycle ride, younger children paddle in the river or play Poohsticks on the bridge. On sunny days, teenagers get in the water, waist or sometimes chest-deep. There is a seemingly never-ending supply of rope swings, when one is frayed and falls out of use, it is mysteriously replaced by a new one. Playfulness in the rivers also extends to adults, and there is a cohort of artists, urban explorers and film-makers who also make use of and enjoy the spaces in creative ways.
Play on the river is concentrated in those places where the rivers can be physically accessed.
- **The rivers spark imaginations in different ways.** In the Linear Park and Brookmill Park where the rivers are accessible, children and their caregivers tell us about coming across mermaids, pirates, treasure and crocodiles. A group of children accompanied by their childminder put on their wellies, take sticks and go 'fishing', learning about nature and enjoying being in the river. Further downstream in Deptford Creek, we hear cautionary tales of the Deptford Necker, a mermaid or serpent who lives in a dark corner of the Creek. These recurring stories of the river point to how **the presence of water in a green space is a resource for imagination, creativity and learning.**

- The combination of an accessible tarmac path and the option to walk by the river on more natural paths in the River Pool Linear Park enriches the uses of the space. Caregivers recall teaching children to ride bikes or pushing buggies along the smooth path, which is also a well-used cycle route. The paths walked along the edge of the river offer opportunities to paddle and watch wildlife. Overall, where accessible, **the paths and open green spaces along the rivers are very well-used** by people for recreation, picnicking and walking their dogs. **The river paths enable a range of everyday activities which in turn shape the spaces.**
- People also shape river spaces in more negative ways, for example through **fly-tipping, littering and acts of vandalism**. This is a key concern and source of frustration for the river groups who care for these spaces.

Stewardship

Here we focus on how people feed into shaping the spaces of and around the rivers through active involvement with caring for and maintaining the rivers.

- There is an **extensive network of organisations and groups who maintain and care for the rivers** and river spaces. This includes the Lewisham Council nature conservation team, Glendale (the private contractors for Lewisham's parks and green spaces), Thames21 (a London-wide organisation), the Environment Agency and various Friends and other volunteer groups. There are regular weekly and monthly volunteer events where litter picking, berm-building and other river-related activities take place along different stretches of the rivers. These are facilitated by the Lewisham Council nature conservation team, Glendale and Thames21 and attract a high number of regular, semi-regular and one-off volunteers. In addition, the Three Rivers Clean-Up is a three-week volunteer event held in June and July, focusing on litter-picking and removing invasive Himalayan Balsam from the river banks. There are also corporate sessions facilitated by Thames21 where corporations pay for their staff members to spend a day volunteering on the rivers.
- **Volunteers make a significant contribution to the maintenance of the rivers.** They work closely with paid river experts who identify the tasks to be done during the session and facilitate the work through briefing the volunteers, providing equipment, guidance and monitoring the session.



A river clean-up session on the Ravensbourne organised by the Friends of Brookmill Park.

- The volunteers who attend the sessions are largely people who live locally. The week-day sessions attract mostly retired people whereas the sessions held at the weekends attract mixed age groups. There is a mix in terms of gender and social class across the various groups. The majority of the volunteers are white.
- **Volunteers report a range of reasons for becoming involved.** These include wanting to make a positive contribution to their local environment and care for habitats, looking for an active and physical activity to do post-retirement, taking part in something that is active and social when faced with a life crisis, and being referred through social prescribing. Volunteers see the sessions advertised through a variety of forums including posters in the parks and via social media, or by seeing the volunteer groups in the river when passing by and asking how they can become involved.
- **The social benefits for volunteers come to be as important to them as the river-related work they carry out,** especially during the sessions which are held weekly. There is clear evidence of teamwork and camaraderie as well as social support amongst the regular volunteers. This is visible both when they are working in the river and during breaks.
- **Volunteers noted the positive impact of taking part in river activities for their mental health and wellbeing.**

Ownership

Here we focus on how through spending time next to or in the rivers, people become more connected to them, **fostering a sense of attachment or ownership.**

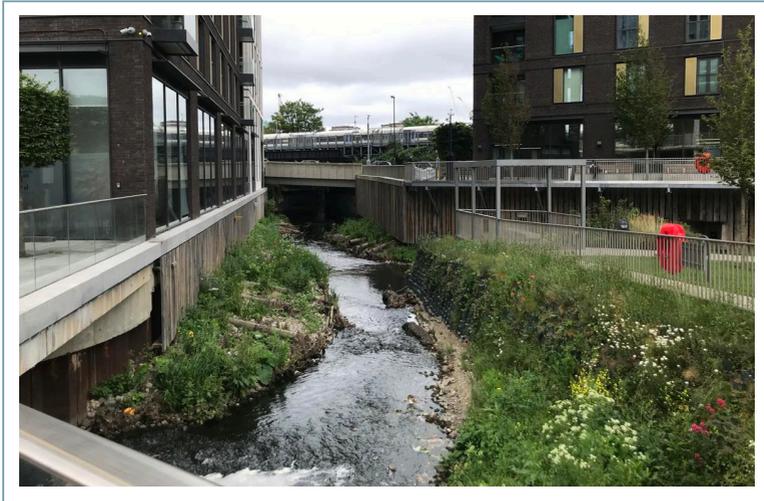
- The rivers both connect people to other places, while grounding them in Lewisham. A common refrain amongst participants was that 'you could be anywhere'. This particularly applied to the stretches with trees and greenery on the banks, away from the roads. Yet participants always stated with a sense of affection, when reminded by the railway or by coming across a discarded shopping trolley, that they are still in Lewisham and that the river is part of their locality. **The rivers offer both a physical and imaginative connection to elsewhere whilst they are also considered to be significant components of the Lewisham landscape.**
- Participants often described 'my river' or 'my kingfisher'. **This demonstrates how the river also acts back on those who care for or spend time by it, embedding them further in place and contributing to a sense of belonging to the local area.**
- On the other hand, a lack of familiarity with the river, and a lack of knowledge about its depth or cleanliness **can lead to reservations about interacting with it**, or lead to heightened risks.
- **Infrastructure – including benches, bins and lighting – enhance people's sense of safety in river spaces** and attract them to spend more time there instilling a sense that this space is for them. However, these riverside paths are often relatively isolated and participants – particularly women – describe feeling unsafe there at certain times of the day, when fewer people are using them.

What are the synergies, conflicts and potential opportunities that arise from these different kinds of place-making on the rivers?

There are both intersections and tensions in how Lewisham's rivers are lived and planned for. This is unsurprising given the multitude of ways in which the rivers are imagined, experienced and practised. Here we explore the connections and barriers to river spaces and the tensions in uses, practices and imaginings:

Connections and barriers

- **The rivers physically connect the places through which they flow.** This is evident in the materials that get carried from upstream to downstream such as pollution, invasive species and litter. **This makes partnership work across organisations and local authorities crucial.**
- Our findings highlight the different **means of and barriers to physically accessing the rivers:** are there steps, a bank which is easy to walk down, or a fence? Approaches to access vary significantly across public realms in Lewisham. From the steps leading to the river in Cornmill Gardens and Ladywell Fields, to fencing off the rivers at Lewisham Gateway.



Railings at Confluence Park

- **Barriers to access can also be conceptual.** For example, participants from the river groups emphasised the need for **more knowledge and understanding** of rivers' depths, currents and flows to reduce fear of increasing public access to water. Barriers can also include knowing whether a place is public space, or questions about the water's cleanliness.

- **There are culturally-specific engagements with the rivers.** For example, the rivers are important places for people to connect through spiritual practices, through offerings and engaging in other forms of ritual. **Yet some minoritised groups do not see their cultural practices reflected in the ways that green and blue spaces are promoted and celebrated in the borough.**

Tensions

- The **different uses of the paths through river spaces lead to negotiations** between dog walkers, pedestrians, toddlers, cyclists who move at different speeds and rhythms. This usually works but there are moments of tension. Additionally, on the Ravensbourne in Brookmill Park there can be tensions around the presence of dogs who are not officially allowed in the park.
- While river groups share common goals of maintaining and cleaning up the river, there are also **differences in perspective about what belongs in the river, or not.** For example, when does a trolley become habitat? Should religious offerings be left in the river or removed? This speaks to the different aims and approaches across these groups.
- **The rivers and their surrounds also provide habitats for wildlife:** birds, fish, plants, trees, rodents and other mammals. Tensions occur between plans to open up areas on the rivers for people to access and enjoy, and the preservation of habitat for wildlife.
- The **different actions and anticipated functions** of rivers that we see in the policy documents at times interconnect, for example there is a synergy between overarching approaches to rivers on a London and Lewisham level. But there are also tensions and conflicts between the different functions, which will likely intensify given the dynamics of the climate crisis, uneven distribution of access to green space and the increasing population and spatial pressures that development will bring.
- There are tensions arising in the **definitions of some of the terms** employed in the Lewisham Local Plan and how these will be interpreted by developers. For example, what do 'river restoration', 'enhancing access' or 'improving biodiversity' mean in definitional terms and in practice? This is made more difficult as responsibilities are moved between developers/land management companies after completion.

- **The rivers and their futures are also imagined in ways which can be contradictory.** For example, the newly completed Confluence Park at Lewisham Gateway is portrayed in the planning documents as both a green oasis and a place of consumption. However, the river groups that mobilised around the project find it to be an improvement but a missed opportunity. Having advocated for a fully naturalised confluence, they point to the limitations of the way that the rivers were uncovered within the scheme.

Recommendations

The varied approaches to planning for and living with Lewisham's rivers found across the borough have led to **Lewisham becoming a vital example that can be used to inform approaches to living with rivers** in the present and in the cities of the future.

- The Ravensbourne Catchment Group serves as an example of **good practice that other local authorities can learn from** in terms of learning from local expertise alongside specialist agencies. **This successful partnership working between agencies, specialist organisations and boroughs has fed into the planning process** through the River Corridor Improvement Plan Supplementary Planning Document (2015).
- Further emphasis needs to be placed on the vital work of the Ravensbourne Catchment Group and the guidance they have developed. In particular, the requirement that **developers and landowners who are liable for particular stretches of bank should have a publicly accessible document of the work they will undertake to maintain river spaces in the future.** It should also set out who is responsible for this work to ensure accountability.
- There is a need to more **clearly and carefully delineate what key words including 'naturalisation' and 'river restoration' signify and how the practical application of these should be enacted in the different river sites across the Borough.** This should be done in conversation with the local river groups.
- Although rivers can offer opportunities for consumption and bring economic benefits it is important to recognise that there is a **social value in river spaces** that are accessible to a wide range of publics and that leave room for authorship.

- Our research demonstrates that having contact with the river has a **range of positive benefits**. However, residents also express uncertainty about the safety of the rivers. There is a need for specific funding for **education to increase knowledge locally about engaging safely with the rivers**, alongside the ongoing work of bringing children into contact with the rivers. **This will help to empower residents as they negotiate their interactions – and those of their children – with the rivers**. This can also increase the confidence of the local authority in navigating questions of risk and accessibility in the planning of the futures of river spaces.
- **The work of the volunteer, community and Friends groups and the Creekside Discovery Centre are crucial to the maintenance of the rivers**. In addition, participants who volunteer on the river overwhelmingly describe the **positive impact on their wellbeing**. It is essential that these groups continue to be funded.
- **Improved infrastructure in the river spaces** - for example, lighting, fox-proof bins and benches - can lead to more people using the spaces and increased dwell-time which in turn leads to more usage and an increased sense of ownership.
- More official recognition of the ways that rivers are meaningful to different groups, such as their religious uses or specific cultural resonances. This could include education for children and young people about the meaning of water in different cultures and religions and actively including sessions which **reflect Lewisham's multicultural heritage in river events in the borough**.
- This project has mapped the synergies, conflicts and potential opportunities that arise from these different kinds of place-making on the rivers in Lewisham. **Applying this research approach across the Ravensbourne Catchment could identify avenues for improving and enhancing the relationships between rivers and people, and establishing links between the communities that neighbour the river, across borough boundaries**.

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