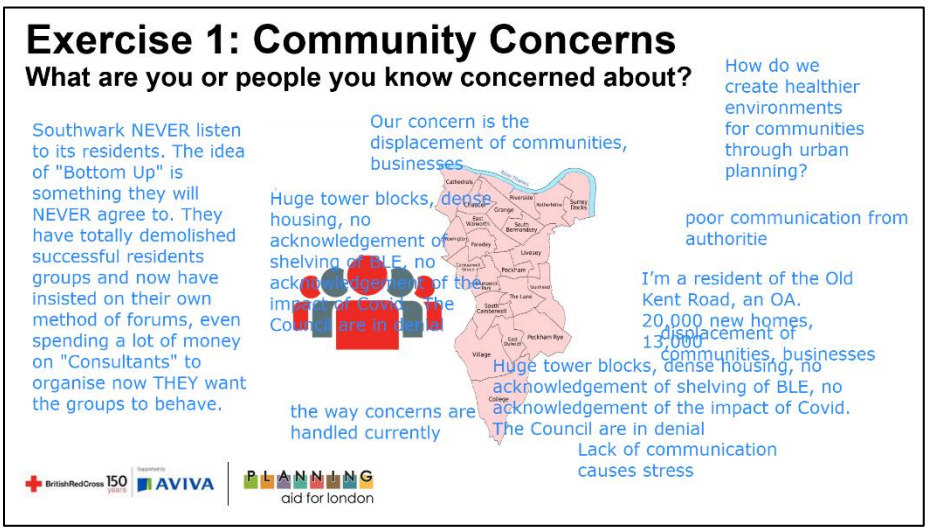
Southwark
Community Resilience and Urban Planning
Workshop Report

26th May 2021



Annotations from Community Concerns Exercise

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Workshop Outline

This introductory workshop, brought together by Planning Aid for London and Southwark Community Resilience Advocates from the British Red Cross, explored the links between emergencies, community resilience and how our neighbourhoods are planned.

The workshop aimed to give members of the Southwark community the opportunity to:

1. Learn about the planning system and how they can engage with it.
2. Express their concerns about urban planning and emergencies in their community.
3. Discuss potential actions and solutions.

The agenda was as follows:

- Overview of BRC and PAL's Work
- What is Community Resilience? What is Urban Planning?
- Exercise 1: Community Concerns
- Exercise 2: PAL Presentation
- Exercise 3: Problem Tree
- Q&A Session

The views presented in this report are those of participants in our workshops and do not necessarily represent the views of Planning Aid for London and/or the British Red Cross.

Section 1: Emergency Concerns

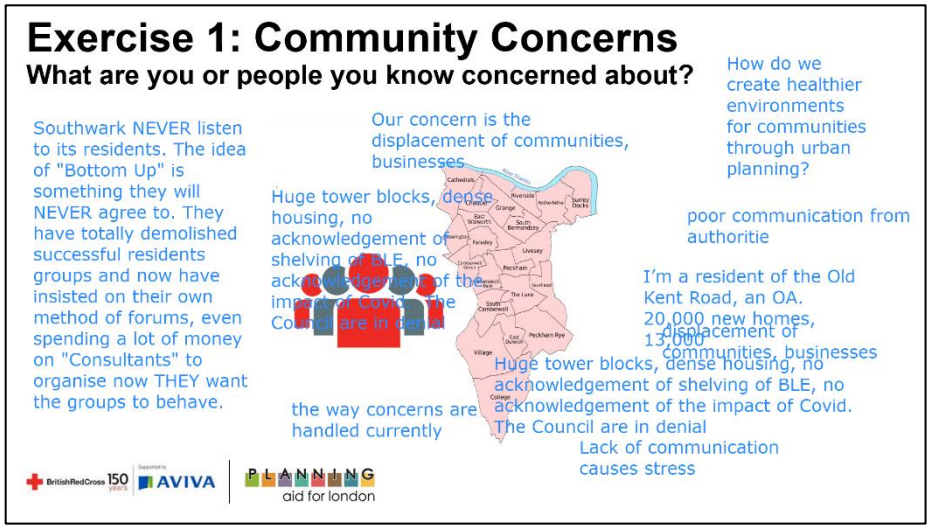
For this exercise we asked, “what emergencies are you or people you know concerned about?”

To guide the group further, we gave the following specification: “For our first exercise, we would like for you to discuss the key needs and concerns with regards to urban planning that you and your community groups face. This is an opportunity for you to discuss developments in your area, topics such as sustainability. Or how you see your environment changing, particularly with regards to increased risk of emergencies or difficulty responding to emergencies.”

Responses covered several broad areas:

- Frustration over lack of action taken by the Local Authority in response to community concerns, complaints and campaigns about new development.
- Lack of communication from the Local Authority, including on emergency changes to traffic due to Covid-19, leading to residents being unable to comment on planning applications at an early stage and feelings of stress.
- Concerns about specific developments, including housing developments on Old Kent Road and loss of green community space and a school playground in Rotherhithe.
- Concerns about the quality of developments, including housing density and the need to create healthier living environments.

We used Zoom’s ‘annotate’ tool to record the responses, as seen below*, alongside chat and speaking out loud:



*Verbatim responses below for ease of reading:

- *Southwark NEVER listen to its residents. The idea of “Bottom Up” is something they will NEVER agree to. They have totally demolished successful residents groups and now have insisted on their own method of forums, even spending a lot of money on “Consultants” to organise now THEY want the groups to behave.*
- *Our concern is the displacement of communities, businesses*

- *Huge tower blocks, dense housing, no acknowledgement of shelving of BLE, no acknowledgement of impact of Covid. The Council are in denial.*
- *The way concerns are handled currently*
- *How do we create healthier environments for communities through urban planning?*
- *Poor communication from authoritie*
- *I'm a resident of the Old Kent Road, an OA. 20000 new homes.*
- *Lack of communication causes stress*

We then asked participants which 3 main issues they were most concerned about in a Zoom Poll, which were discussed in greater depth in breakout rooms in section 3.

The participants voted for:

1. Loss of green/community spaces
2. Lack of communication from the local authority
3. Displacement of communities and businesses

Section 2: Planning Aid for London's Introduction to the Planning System

After Planning Aid for London's presentation, participants asked some questions to the team. These included:

What are the ways that people can get informed about the new developments; and how can they get involved?

The best way is usually through the local authority's own web pages or signing up for the local authority's newsletter. Additionally, if you are interested in the applications, you can search online for "Southwark planning application" and it will come up with the subject planning page and show a list of all the applications that have been commented on, or you're able to comment on that week.

In terms of planning applications responses, are a certain number of responses needed for the application to go to planning committee? When does an application go to planning committee?

There's a different threshold for each local authority. Some local authorities might have 3 objections or more and then it will go to committee. But the planning decision must always consider every objection that's been made in the report itself. So, there is an agreement to each authority and it's not one officer's decision only.

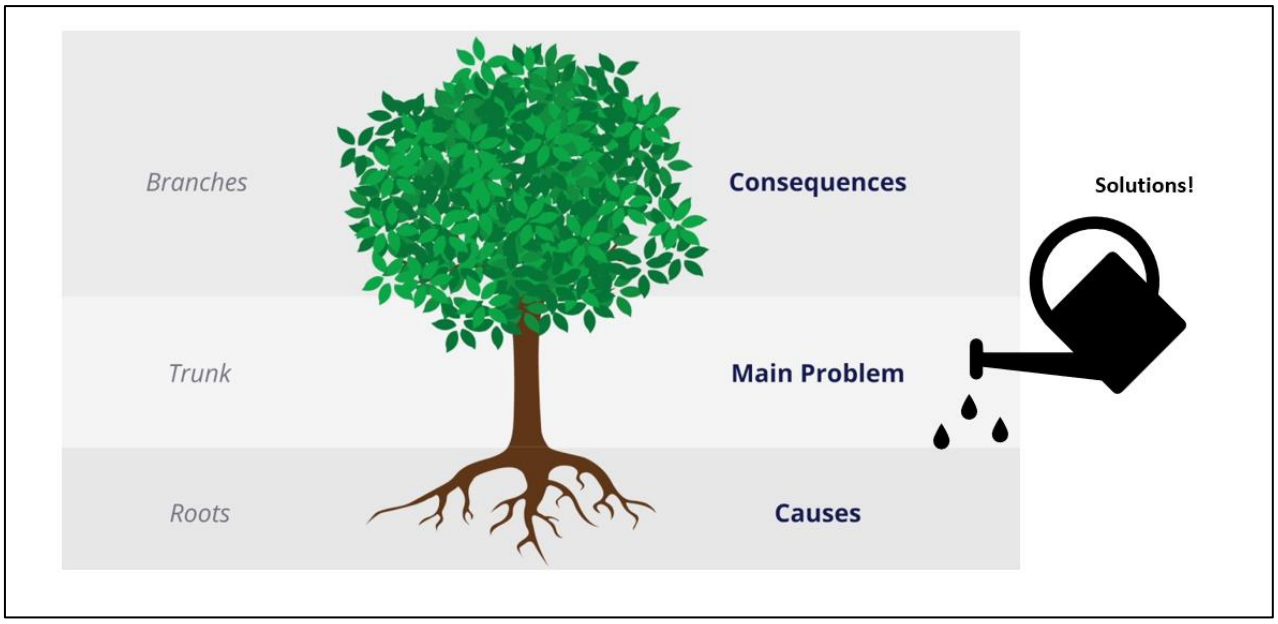
What weight is given to responses to planning applications from community groups?

It's more about the substance of the comments received from the public. So, if there is a single objection or single comment made about something that alerts or makes a planning officer decide that this development doesn't comply with policies, then it will be considered as such. Once the final decision has been made on an application, whether it's to approve it or to refuse, you can go on to the local authority's website and look up the planning officers report.

Section 3: Problem and Solution Trees

For this exercise, we split into 3 breakout rooms and used **Miro** to create problem and solution trees. This facilitated the creation of 3 'top solutions' (or immediate actions) from each of the breakout rooms.

The problem and solution trees consisted of the following sections:

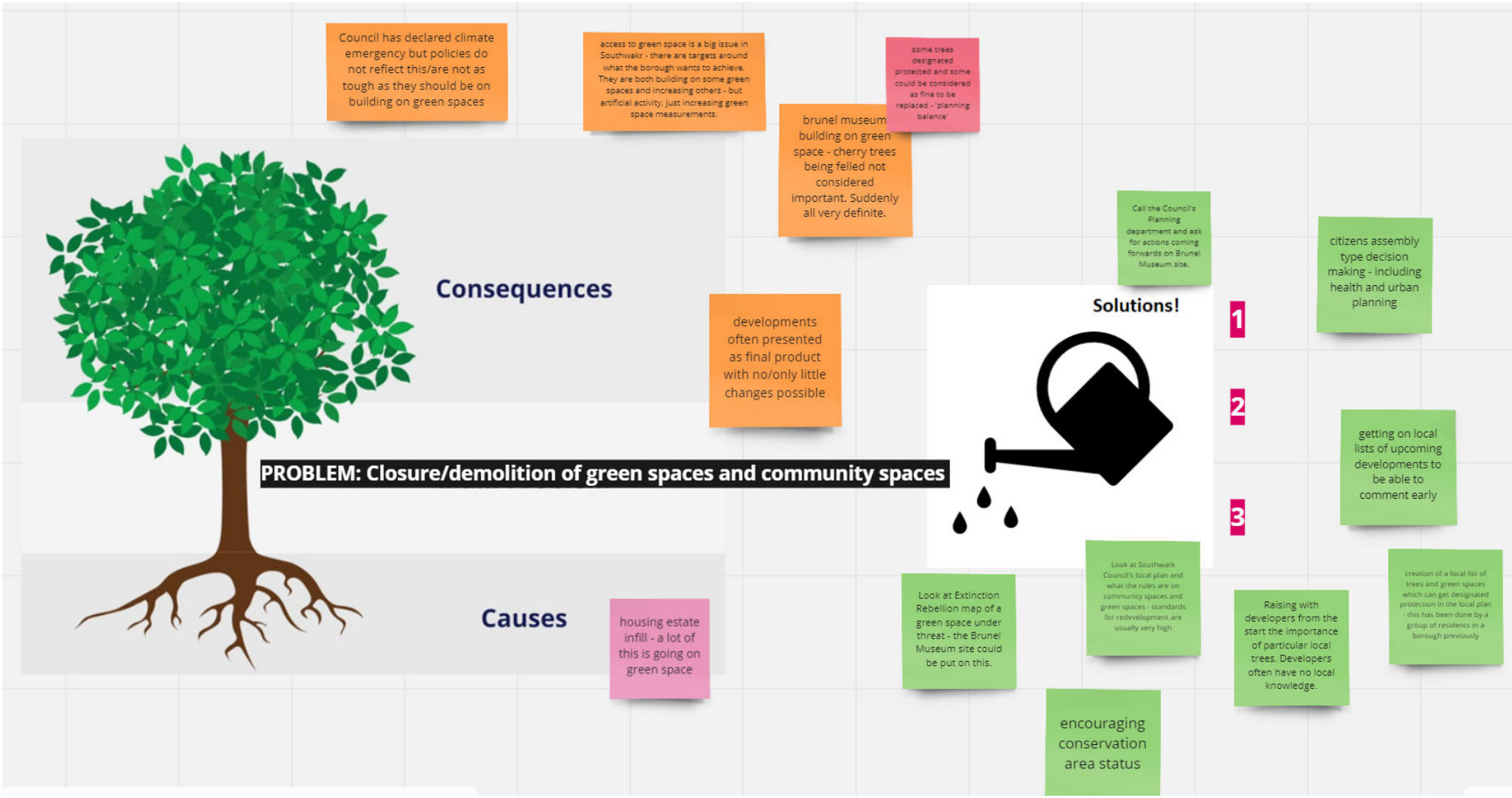


The 'Main Problem' section of each tree was taken from the poll in Exercise 1, and participants were able to self-select which breakout room to enter to discuss which of the 3 issues.

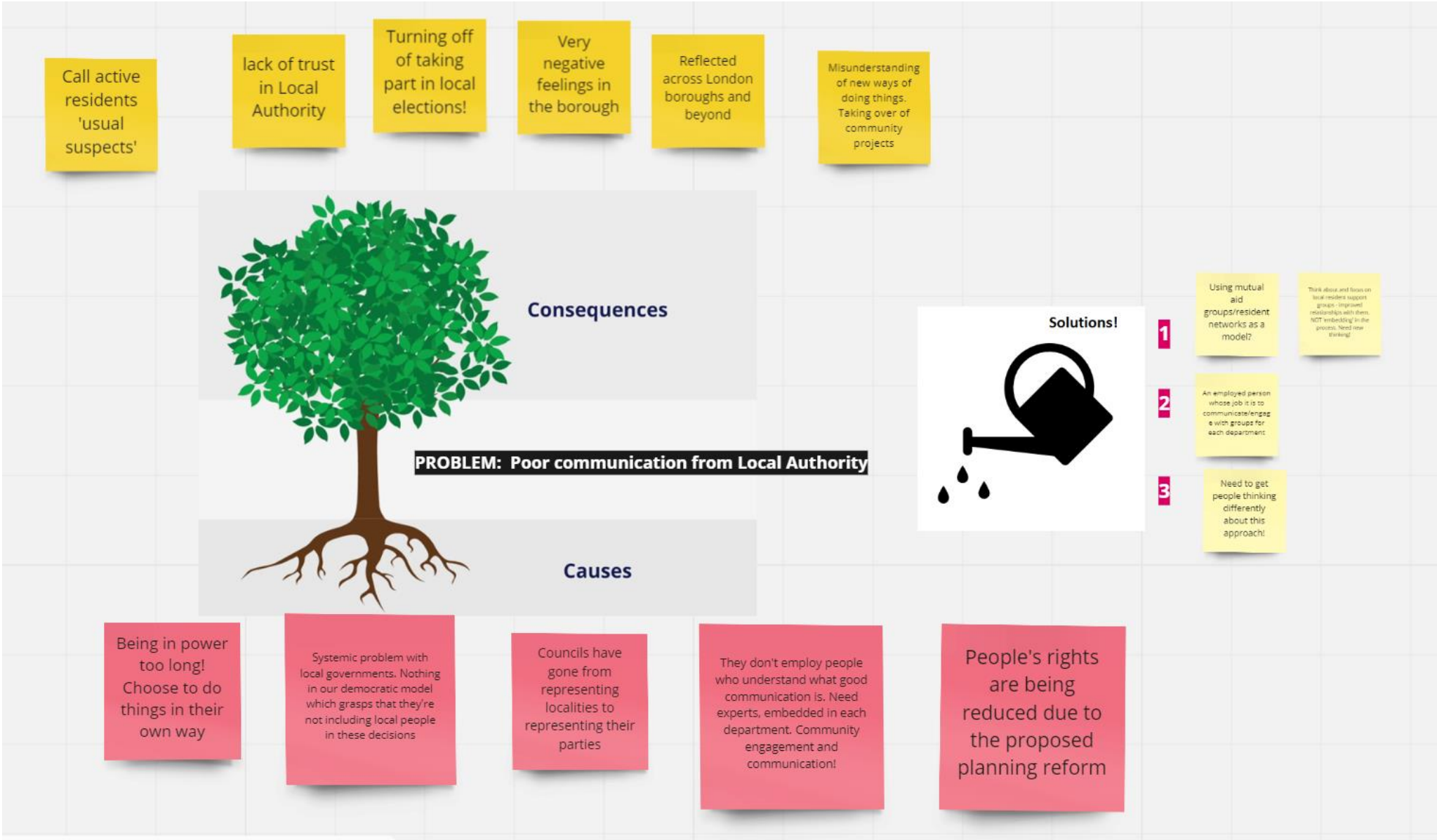
Participants were asked to contribute ideas via the Miro, by speaking out loud, or by adding their thoughts to the Zoom chat feature. The facilitator in each room ensured that all of these were recorded on the Miro, using the participants' own words as much as possible.

The Miro board with the full responses can be found here. Please see below for an image from each breakout room:

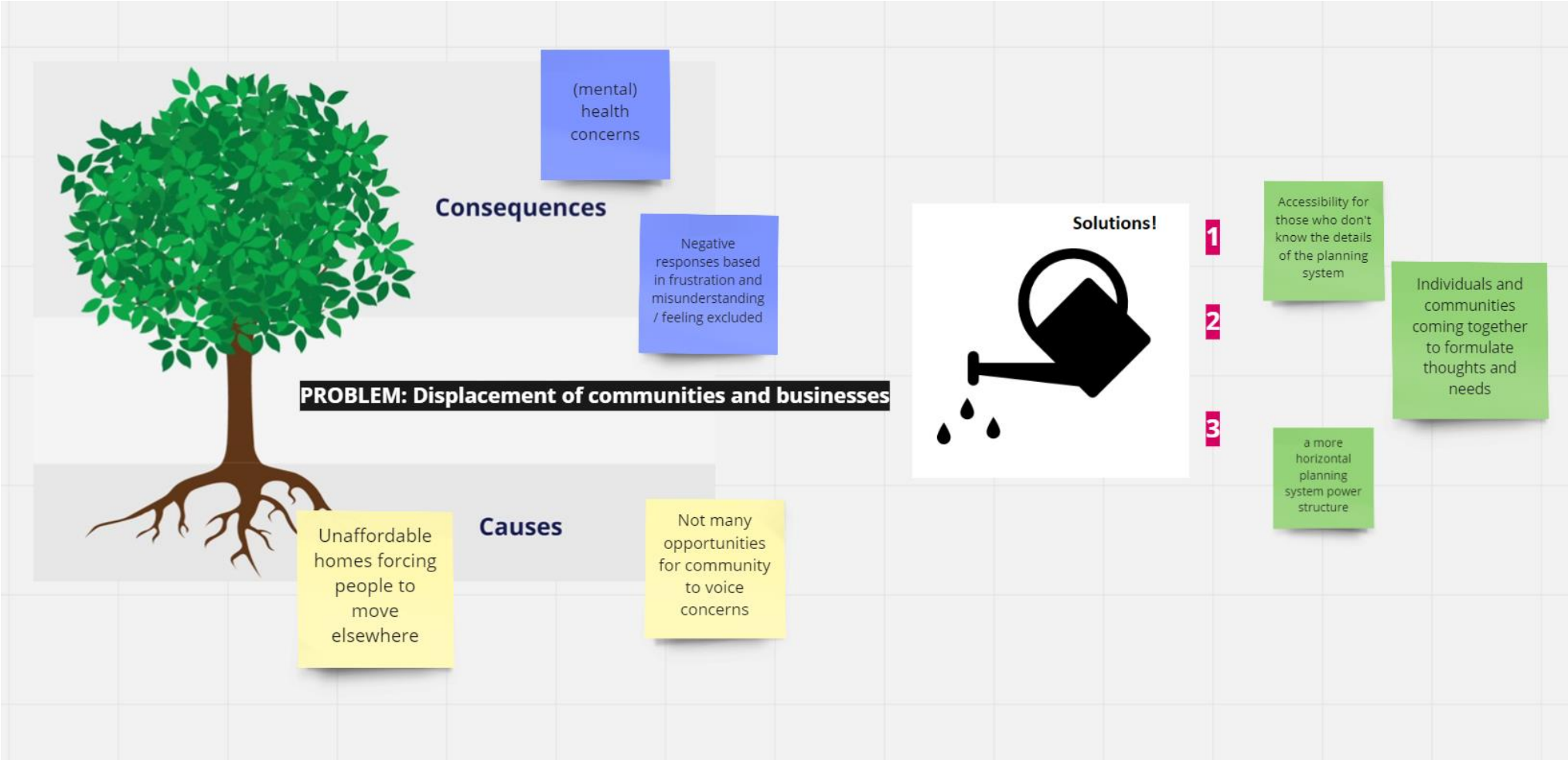
Room 1:


Council has declared climate emergency but policies do not reflect this/are not as tough as they should be on building on green spaces
access to green space is a big issue in Southwakr - there are targets around what the borough wants to achieve. They are both building on some green spaces and increasing others - but artificial activity, just increasing green space measurements.
some trees designated protected and some could be considered as fine to be replaced - 'planning balance'
brunel museum building on green space - cherry trees being felled not considered important. Suddenly all very definite.
Call the Council's Planning department and ask for actions coming forwards on Brunel Museum site.
citizens assembly type decision making - including health and urban planning
Consequences
developments often presented as final product with no/only little changes possible
Solutions!
1
2
3
getting on local lists of upcoming developments to be able to comment early
PROBLEM: Closure/demolition of green spaces and community spaces
Look at Extinction Rebellion map of a green space under threat - the Brunel Museum site could be put on this.
Look at Southwark Council's local plan and what the rules are on community spaces and green spaces - standards for redevelopment are usually very high
Raising with developers from the start the importance of particular local trees. Developers often have no local knowledge.
creation of a local list of trees and green spaces which can get designated protection in the local plan - this has been done by a group of residents in a borough previously
Causes
housing estate infill - a lot of this is going on green space
encouraging conservation area status

Room 2:


Call active residents 'usual suspects'
lack of trust in Local Authority
Turning off of taking part in local elections!
Very negative feelings in the borough
Reflected across London boroughs and beyond
Misunderstanding of new ways of doing things. Taking over of community projects
Consequences
PROBLEM: Poor communication from Local Authority
Causes
Being in power too long! Choose to do things in their own way
Systemic problem with local governments. Nothing in our democratic model which grasps that they're not including local people in these decisions
Councils have gone from representing localities to representing their parties
They don't employ people who understand what good communication is. Need experts, embedded in each department. Community engagement and communication!
People's rights are being reduced due to the proposed planning reform
Solutions!
1
Using mutual aid groups/resident networks as a model?
2
An employed person whose job it is to communicate/engage with groups for each department
3
Need to get people thinking differently about this approach!

Room 3:


(mental) health concerns
Consequences
Negative responses based in frustration and misunderstanding / feeling excluded
PROBLEM: Displacement of communities and businesses
Causes
Unaffordable homes forcing people to move elsewhere
Not many opportunities for community to voice concerns
Solutions!
1
2
3
Accessibility for those who don't know the details of the planning system
Individuals and communities coming together to formulate thoughts and needs
a more horizontal planning system power structure

Although the breakout rooms addressed different emergencies, a variety of **shared key ideas** emerged:

Causes	- **Systemic issues within the planning system** & communication by Local Authorities, including a lack of community engagement and valuing of community voices within planning. This also includes a lack of easily available and accessible information and fora for people affected by development to voice concerns and ideas. - **Unaffordable** and/or **low-quality** housing displacing individuals, families and communities.
Consequences	- **Lack of trust** in Local Authority, including feelings of exclusion and disenfranchisement, and disengaging from local elections. - Negative impacts on **mental health**. - Development projects negatively affecting communities through **destruction of green and/or community spaces** and assets, and co-option of community projects. - **Lack of green policies** in terms of preservation of green spaces. - A feeling amongst residents that developments are presented as final product with **no/only little changes possible**.
Solutions	The solutions proposed by each breakout room were grouped into three main points as follows: **Room 1:** 1. **Immediate actions** such as calling Southwark Council's Planning Department for information on the Brunel Museum site developments and signing up to the list of upcoming developments in order to be able to comment early on planning applications. 2. Taking action on **green spaces**, by: a. Examining Southwark Council's Local Plan rules on community and green spaces b. Creating a local list of trees and green spaces which are important to the community and raising these with the Council and developers from the start c. Adding local green spaces under threat to Extinction Rebellion's map. 3. Creation of a **citizens' assembly approach** to planning decision making.

	Room 2: 1. Modelling **community engagement** on the activities of mutual aid groups and residents' associations 2. Local authorities employing community engagement/communication officers for each department, including the planning department to ensure **better communication**. 3. Opening **spaces for new thinking and creative ideas** to overhaul the planning process to become more community-led **Room 3:** 1. Increase **accessibility** for those who do not know the details of the planning system 2. Bring individuals and communities **together** to discuss needs and ideas 3. Working towards a more **horizontal power structure** in the planning system

Many thanks to all those who participated in this workshop.

For any questions, please contact Koen (Planning Aid for London) on koen.rutten@planningaidforlondon.org.uk or Beth (British Red Cross) on ElizabethCraigGeen@redcross.org.uk.

If you would like to receive more information about the Community Resilience Programme or sign up to become a Community Advocate volunteer, you can find out more here.