

# Barbican public realm improvements Resident Survey



A report by Living Streets on behalf of The City of London Authority



**Living Streets** is the national charity that stands up for pedestrians. With our supporters we work to create safe, attractive and enjoyable streets, where people want to walk.



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## Background and Aims

Living Streets is the national charity that stands up for pedestrians. With our supporters we work to create safe, attractive and enjoyable streets, where people want to walk. Living Streets has a Service Level Agreement with the City of London to support their walking and public realm service delivery. As part of this agreement, Living Streets were asked to analyse the results of a survey sent to residents of the Barbican Estate.

The purpose of the resident survey was to understand how those who live at the Barbican feel about the changes made to the public spaces at Ben Johnson Walk and St Giles Terrace. Both areas have undergone an improvement project including new seating and planting for the public. Living Streets carried out a separate on-site survey to find out the opinions of people who work in the area or visit for recreation or tourism, the findings from which are available in a separate report. Together, these two reports provide City of London with an understanding of the broad range of opinions about the work.

## Methodology

City of London selected St Giles Terrace and Ben Johnson Walk as they are areas where improvements to the public realm have taken place.

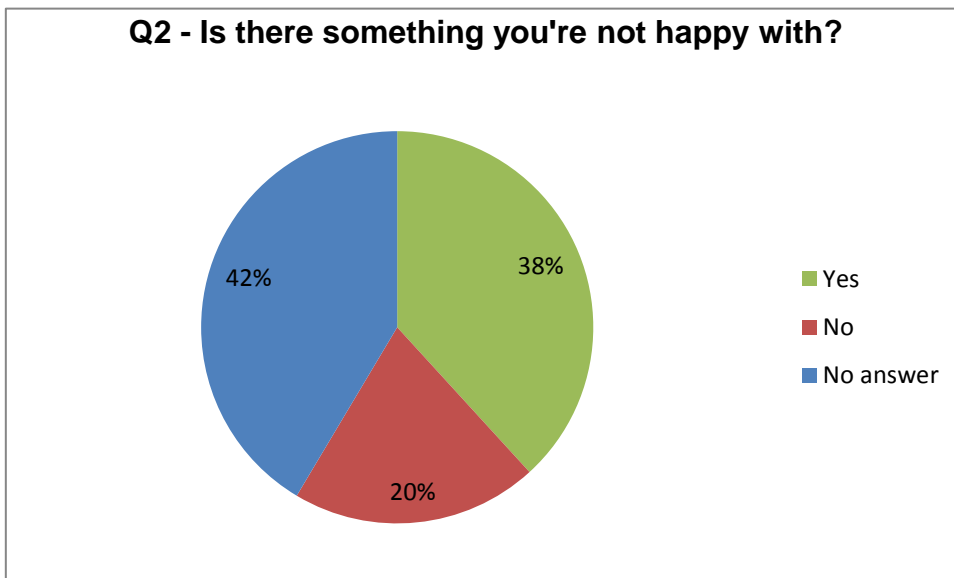
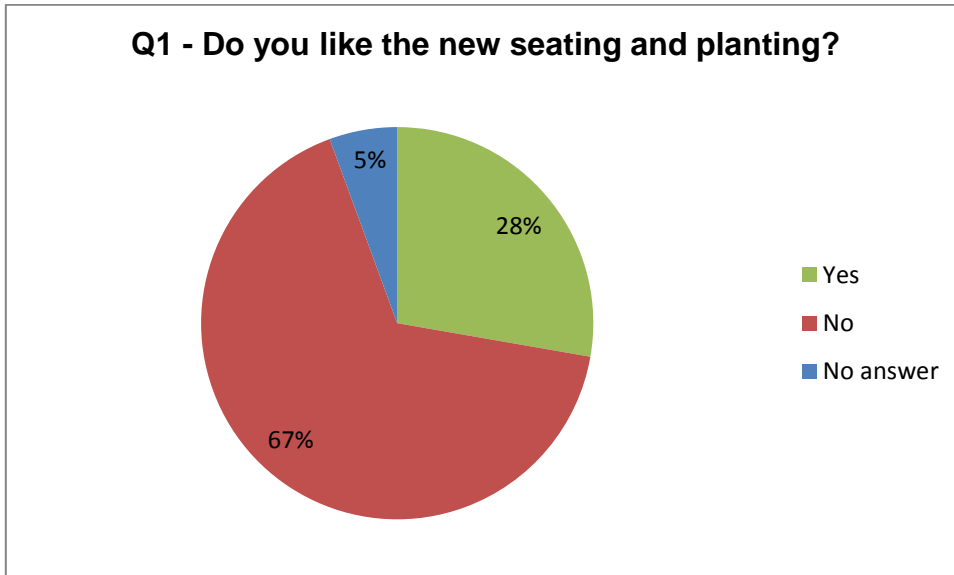
The questionnaire was sent to residents in the post and contained eight questions with a mixture of open and closed to provide a range of data. Sent with the questionnaire, each resident also received a letter explaining the scheme and reason for the questionnaire. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in the appendix.

In total, 1,700 questionnaires were sent out, and 411 questionnaires were received, a response rate of around 24%. The responses were written up and analysed by Living Streets.

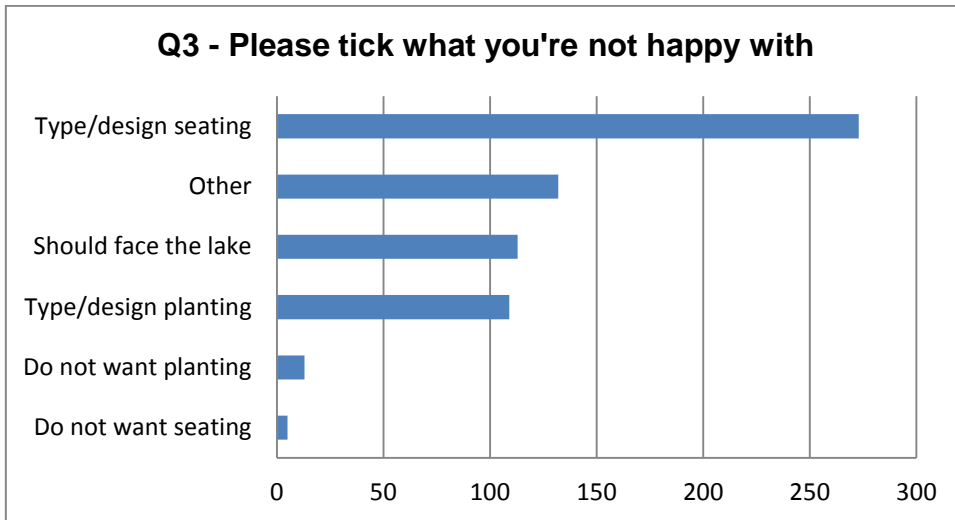
## Summary of Findings

The results of all 411 surveys are summarised below.

### St Giles Terrace

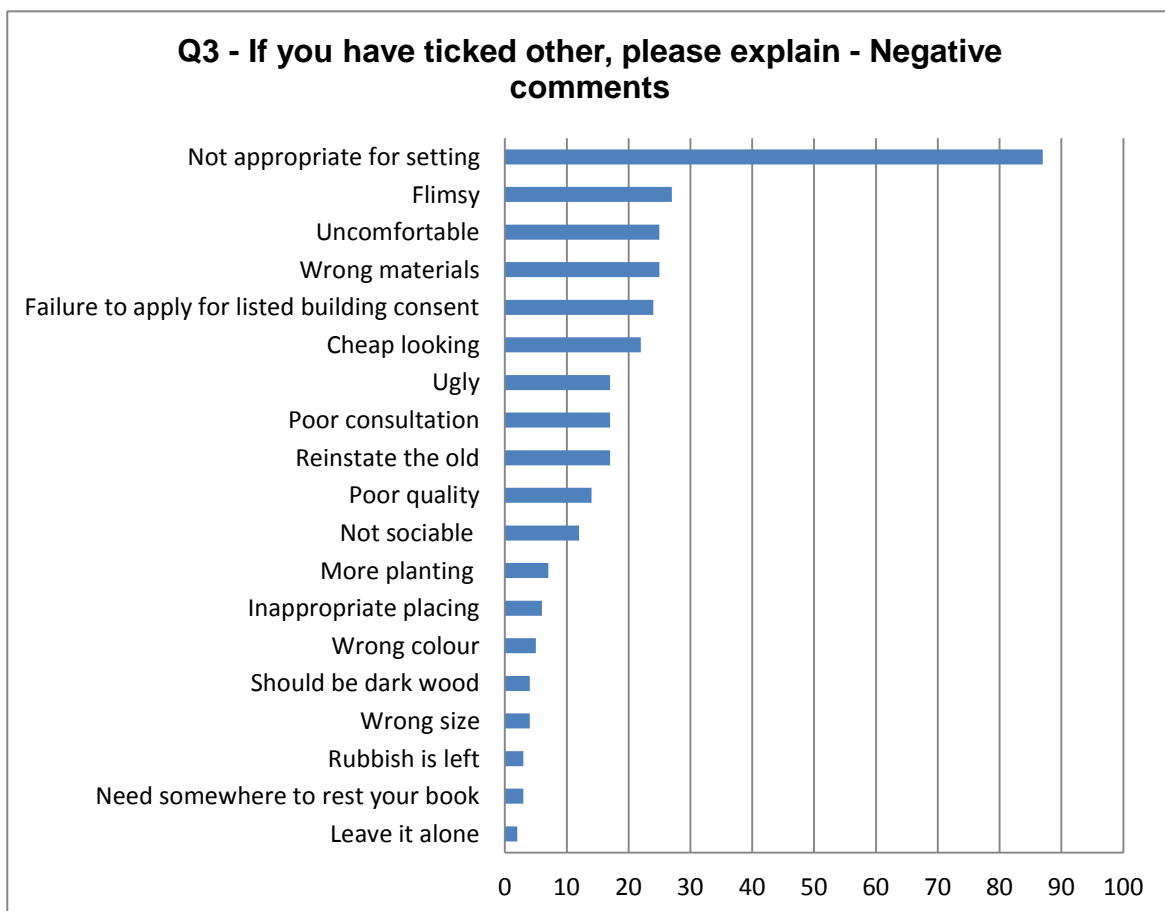


The graphs above demonstrate that the majority – two thirds – of residents who responded do not like the seating and planting improvements at St Giles Terrace. 38% of people said there was something in particular they were not happy with. Residents were then asked to further explain their dislike for the scheme by ticking as many of the options as they agreed with.



Around two thirds of respondents (273 out of 411) specifically were not happy with the type and design of seating, and close to a quarter of people (109) dislike the type and design of planting. A further quarter (113) feel that the seating should be reoriented to face the lake. Only five people would rather there was no seating or planting all together.

The 132 people who ticked 'other' were then asked to further explain their answer. To make this information easier to digest, we categorised the written answers.



The vast majority of people who had ticked 'Other' felt that the seating was not appropriate for the context of the Barbican Estate. The perceived inappropriateness of

the design of seating prompted some particularly strong responses as demonstrated by the quotations below:

“The seating design is ugly and not consistent with the barbican and the other seating within the barbican creating a mismatch of equally ugly and unsuitable designs”

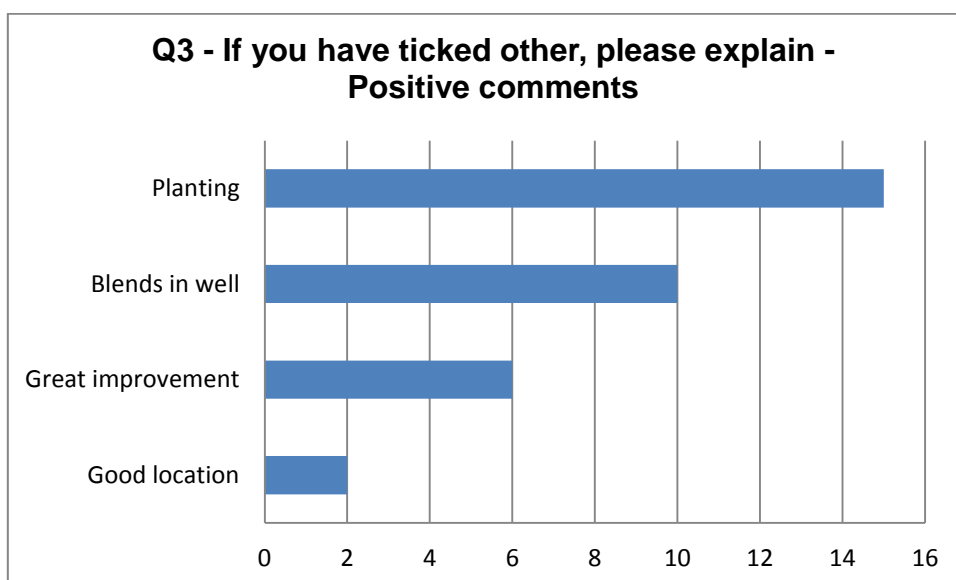
“I much preferred the old seating which seemed in keeping with the Barbican environment. The current seating is an eye sore”

“The new structures are badly designed, shoddily executed and show no appreciation or understanding of the design of the Barbican Estate by the original architects. St Giles is a Grade 1 listed building and its environs were planned with great care, it is the jewel in the crown of the Barbican and should be treated as such. Instead it has been surrounded by junk which would be rejected by McDonalds for lowering the tone of the brand”

Clearly, the respondents felt there were a number of particular issues within the design or style of the seating, including the choice of materials, colour and perceived quality. The responses demonstrate a good understanding and awareness amongst resident of the design context with people referencing the listed building status, Brutalist Architectural style and the names of the architects.

A smaller number of people were unhappy with the process and had concerns with either the lack of listed building consent for the seating or the consultation process, either with residents or with bodies such as English Heritage and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Society.

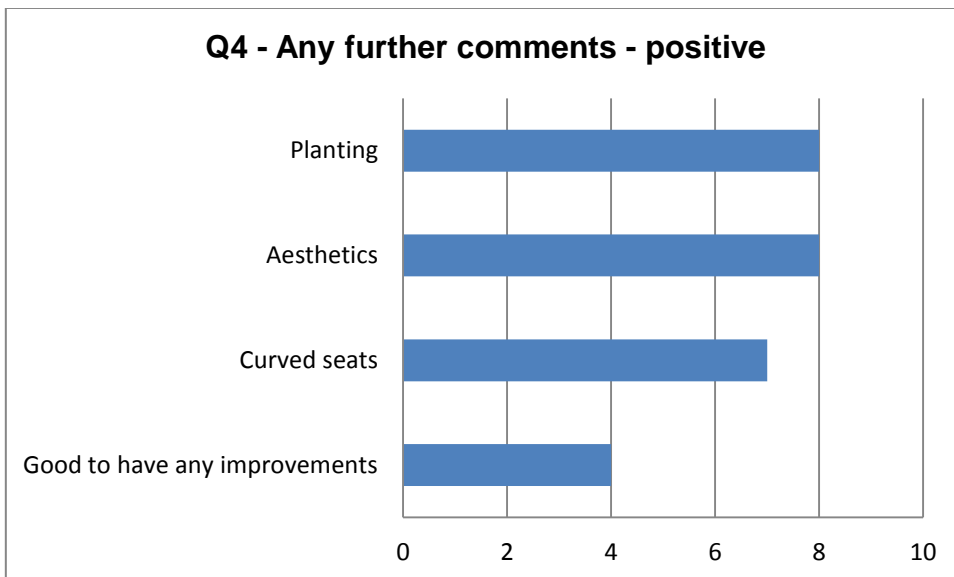
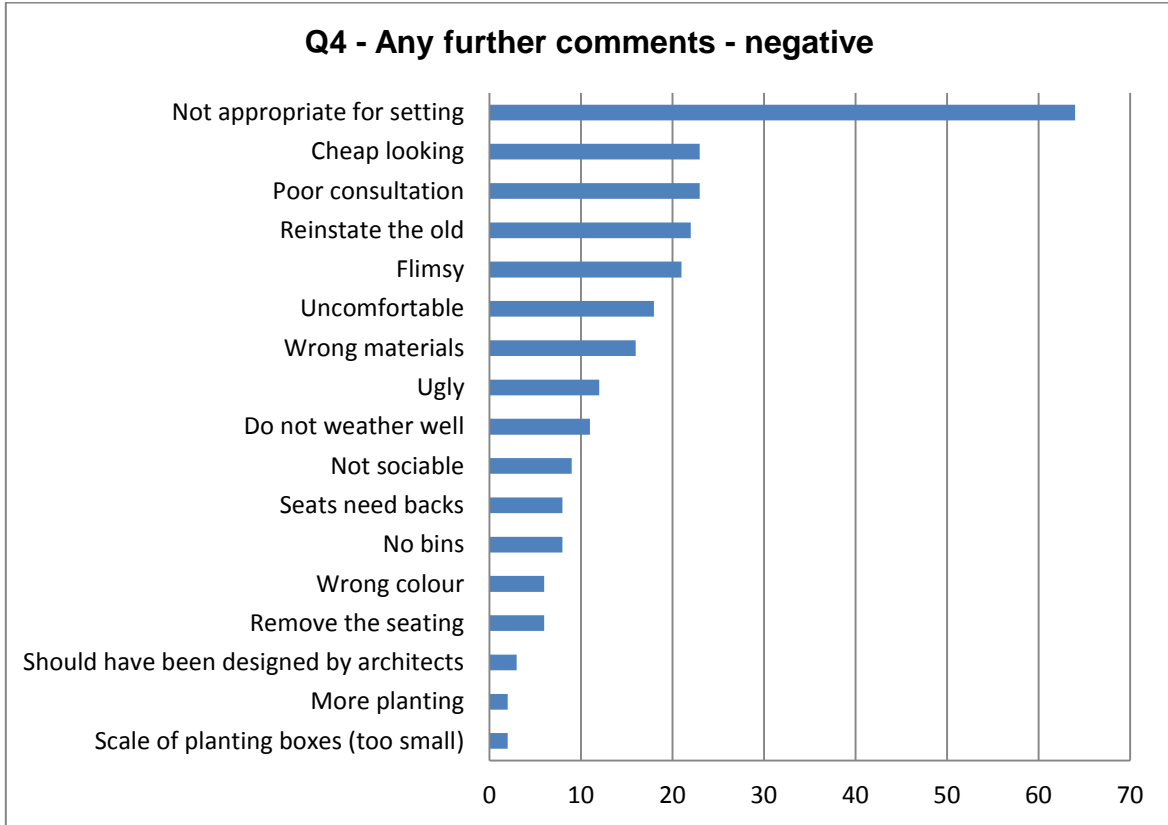
A small number of people used this question to express positive opinions about the seating, as demonstrated by the following graph:



The views of these people were in contrast to the negative comments above, with one resident commenting:

“I think that the seating is excellent improvement. It blends in well into the environment. I understand that the original plan (1960s) was for the area to be a 'village green' with a pub and church and lake. It should still be that way”.

Finally, residents were asked for any further comments on the St Giles Seating and Planting scheme. Of the 281 comments received, 254 (90%) were deemed negative and 27 (10%) positive. Once again, the comments were categorised.



We found there was a large amount of overlap in the responses to this question with those to the previous question, with similar issues such as the seating looking out of context again mentioned by a high proportion of people. Within this point, people cite

the colours being different to others on the estate but also the shape of the seating failing to reflect the shapes and structure of the nearby church.

A small number of people said that the designs should have been carried out by professional architects, although in fact they were –by Studio Weave, as explained to residents at the beginning of the survey.

Again, some very strong opinions were given, such as:

“The arrangement is nice with the planting, but the seats are awful. They look cheap and out of character with the estate. They will look tatty in time”

One issue which was raised in both Questions 3 and 4 was that of the lack of bins and subsequent rubbish left by members of the public. We recommend that City of London consider the installation of some rubbish bins to the area in order to alleviate this issue.

Positive feedback to this questions was pretty evenly split between four different topics: Planting, general aesthetics, the curved layout of seating and the fact that any improvements had taken place at all. For example:

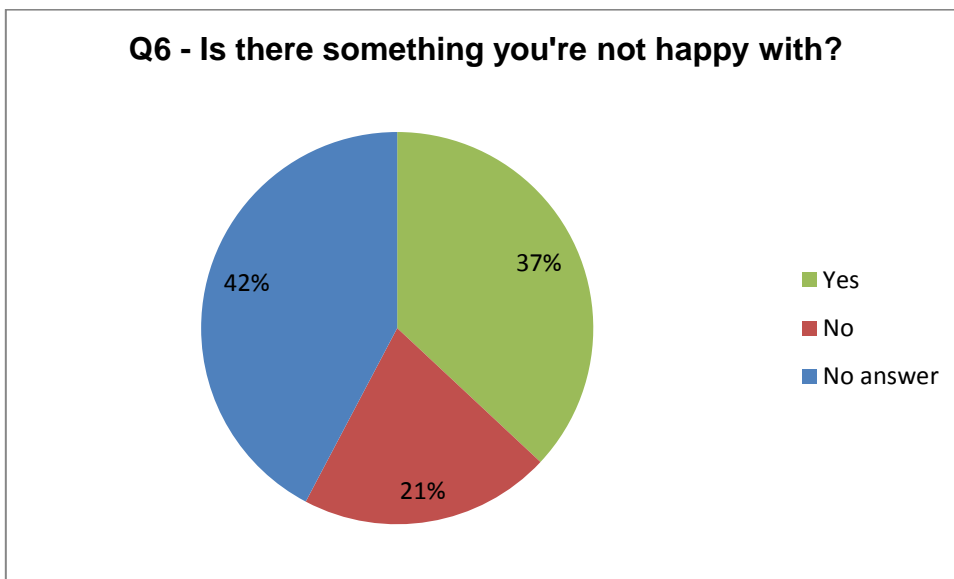
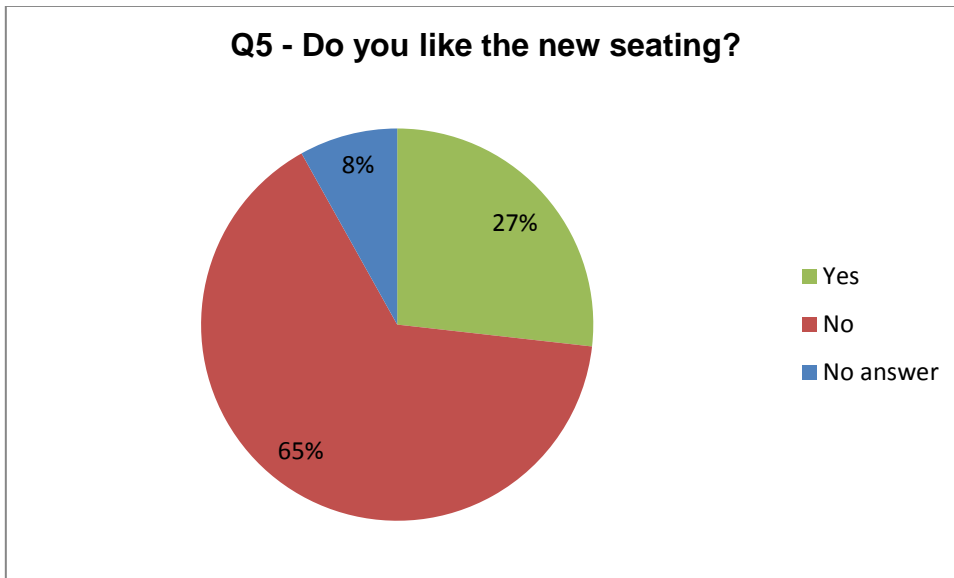
“I think it would be a shame if the present scheme were not adopted permanently. My own opinion is that what has been done is imaginative and pleasing on the eye. We are indeed fortunate in these straitened times that money has been found for such welcome environment improvements to the Barbican estate

Such comments are in the minority but demonstrate that there is some support for the St Giles seating and planting amongst the Barbican residents.

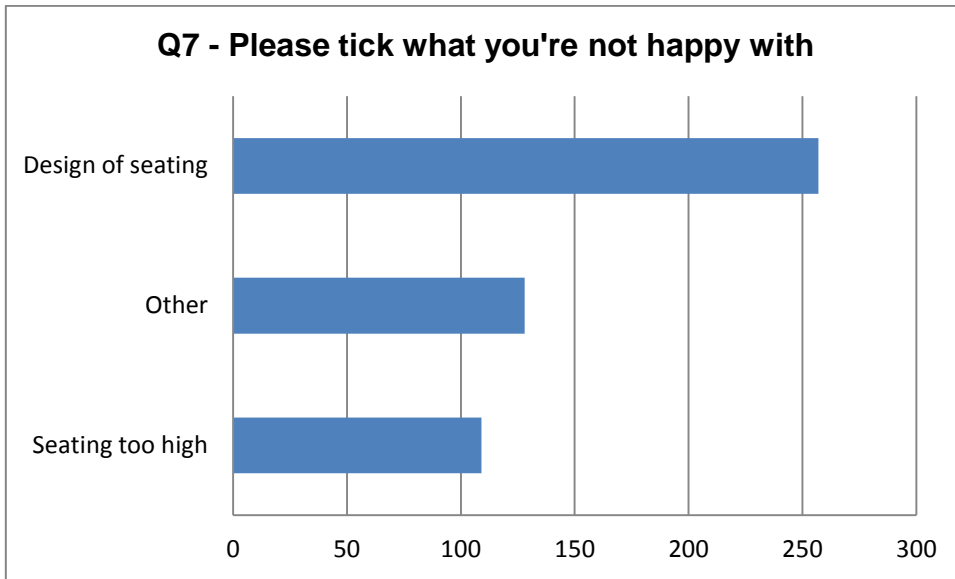


## Ben Johnson Walk

The questions relating to Ben Johnson Walk were almost exactly the same as those for St Giles Terrace with the one difference that it only asked about seating, as new planting has not been put in place here.

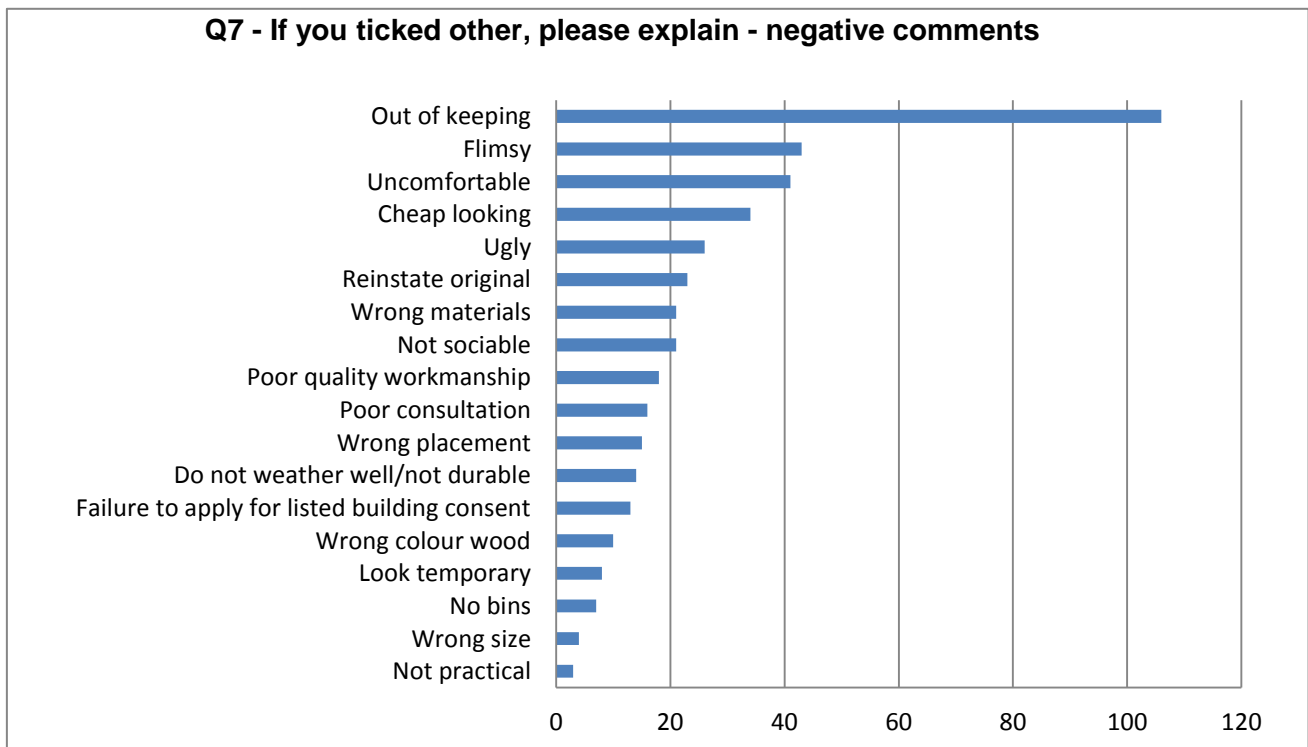


The two charts for this site are almost identical to that of St Giles Terrace and again, around two thirds of respondents did not like the seating improvements.



As with St Giles Terrace, the major objection to the seating at Ben Johnson Walk related to the design. Over a quarter felt the seating was too high and many attributed this to the seating being placed on top of ventilation grates.

Those who answered 'other' were asked to provide further explanation and once again this information was categorised for ease of analysis:



Slightly more people than for St Giles Terrace felt the seating at Ben Johnson Walk was inappropriate for its context, with over a quarter of respondents stating this as a concern. Again, a number of issues within the design were referenced including a flimsy and cheap-looking appearance of the seating. Although many of the comments are subjective with residents simply saying they feel the seats look ugly, many others

appear to be more objective and/or based on more constructive reasoning. For example:

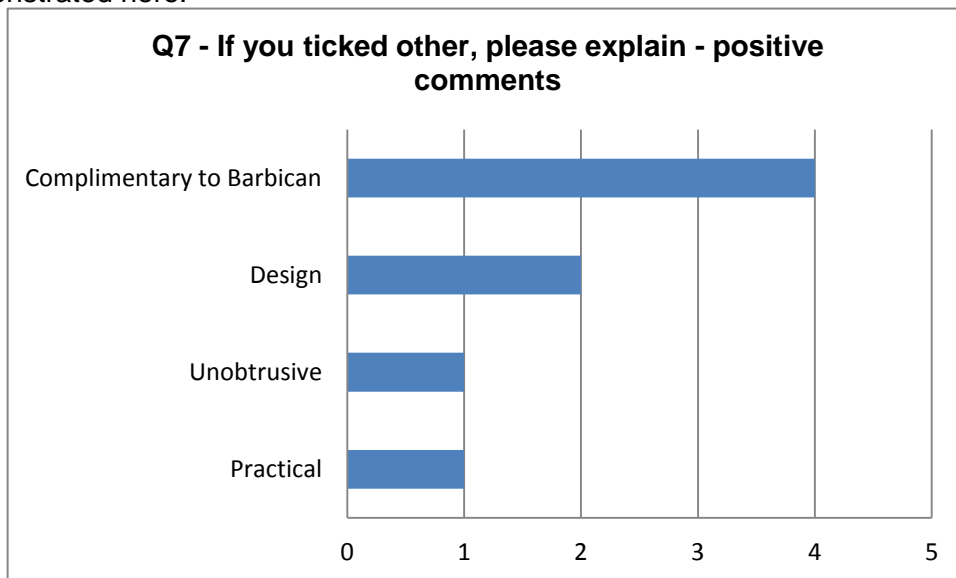
“When I first saw the new seating I assumed it was temporary, as it was so out of keeping with the aesthetics of the area”

“At Ben Johnson Walk, some people feel that the placement of the seats above the ventilation grates is impractical (especially for shorter people) and look ridiculous perched on top of the metal grids”.

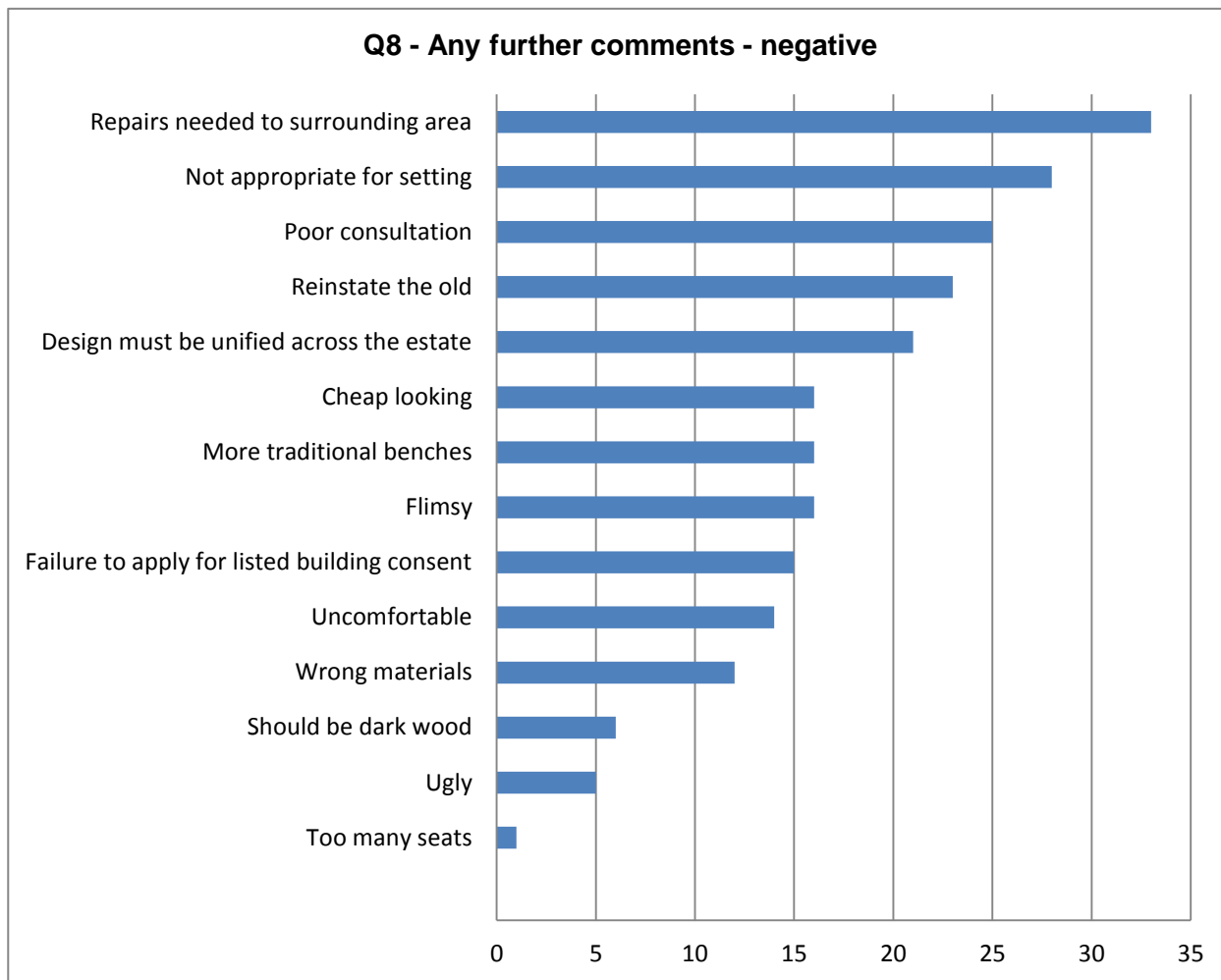
Some felt that the placement of the seating is anti-social and that the tables in between the seating prevent people from talking to each other or sitting together. This point is demonstrated by one resident who states

“My objection to the new seating is that it is designed for solitary individuals. As all seats are single, and kept quite separate from each other, they are not designed in any way for families, people with small children, couples or even in fact for anyone who might want to talk to one another.”

A very small number of residents used this question to express positive comments as demonstrated here:



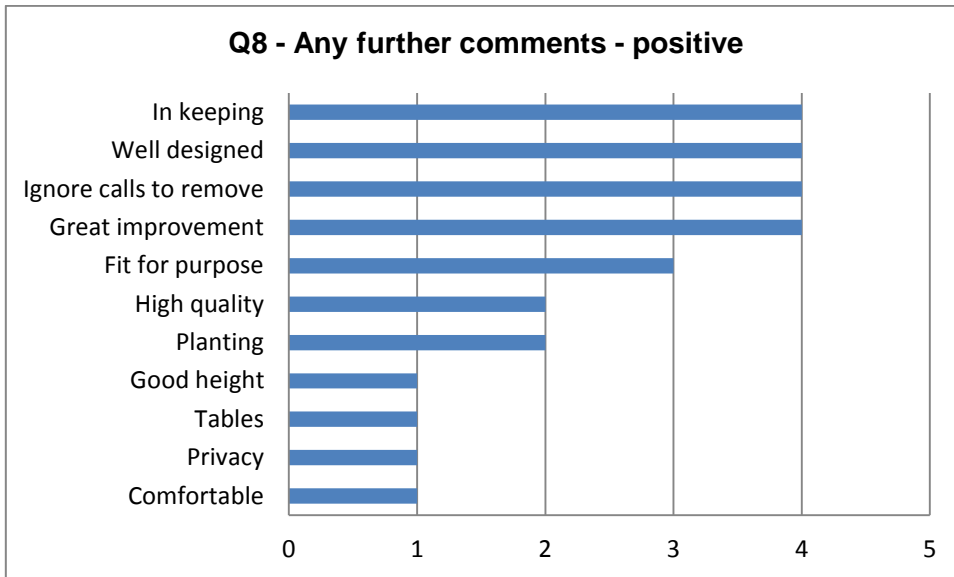
Finally, residents were asked for further comments. Of these responses, 224 (89%) could be deemed negative and 27 (11%) positive.



A key issue here is that residents felt the surrounding area is in need of repair and maintenance work and they felt this work should have been carried out as a priority over any new seating or planting. It may be that this issue has exacerbated negativity towards the seating and planting scheme, a view demonstrated by the following quote:

“With parts of the high walk visibly deteriorating (tiles falling off) the money would have been better spent on repairs and maintenance. What impression do visitors have when they see such an iconic estate poorly maintained - never mind us residents who have to live (and pay for) it”

Again, many people feel the seating and planting is out of keeping with the rest of the estate and some people expressed annoyance that yet another design of seating has been installed on the estate. A number of people called for the removal of the seating completely and/or reinstatement of the old benches.



Although positive comments were very much in the minority, the people who provided a positive comment tended to feel that the seating was in keeping with the estate and that it is an improvement, practical and well designed.

Some even made a plea to ignore the negative comments and ensure the seating is retained. For example:

“I like the new seating - unlike some of my more vocal neighbours. I do not want more money to be spent removing the seating. However the newness of the seating emphasises how dilapidated some of the tiling etc. has become - perhaps this could be spruced up”.

A number of the positive comments reference the opposition to the new seating and planting and there is an obvious awareness of a movement against the scheme.

## Conclusion

The strength of feeling for the seating and planting schemes is clear through the data and quotations in this report. It is quite apparent that Barbican residents value the public realm in the estate and want to ensure it is managed appropriately and effectively.

The results of the resident survey are largely negative, with two thirds of respondents disliking the improvements and most people having a number of concerns about the process of their installation on the resulting look of the area. There are however a small number of positive comments.

The open responses demonstrate some issues which divide opinion such as the orientation of the seating and whether it provides enough privacy or sociability. The issues where there appears to be less of a mixed opinion are around the lack of appropriateness for the context, issues with the consultation process and the need for more essential repairs in the area to take place.

Although the City of London could make some improvements or changes to placate residents (such as installing bins, changing the orientation of the seating at St Giles

Terrace and prioritising the maintenance of the surrounding area) there are still large numbers who will call for the removal of the seating.

## Limitations to the survey

A number of issues relating to the methodology and the way in which the surveys were carried out have been identified and should be considered when analysing the results.

- Respondents were self selecting to a certain extent and it may be that those with complaints were more likely to respond than those who feel indifferent or positive about the scheme. Indeed, the very few indifferent responses came from people who had visited one site but not the other and therefore did not feel equipped to comment.
- A letter from a number of Barbican House Groups was sent out to residents explaining their grievances with the seating schemes and recommending residents respond in opposition to the scheme. By encouraging more negative responses than might otherwise have been submitted, it seems likely that this letter created some negative bias, the magnitude of which is difficult to determine.

## Appendix

Copy of Survey