

Community-led green space toolkit

Information for communities and individuals on how to plan and design green, sustainable and vibrant spaces for all to enjoy.

January 2024



Aim of this toolkit

This toolkit provides guidance on the steps needed to get a community green space planned, designed and growing. It aims to empower individuals and local communities with the information they need to transform urban areas into green, sustainable and vibrant spaces for all to enjoy.

This toolkit has been produced in consultation with London based community groups, planners and designers and although intended for use by all communities in urban areas in England, there maybe some guidance which is specific to a London context. The toolkit is not intended to be exhaustive but to provide a starting point and resources to help with commonly asked questions.

Planning Aid for London and Ramboll hope that this toolkit will help communities to create healthier and greener environments in which to live, work, play and age.



Contents of this toolkit

The guidance in this toolkit is divided into two sections:

Planning and governance (p.3)

Provides guidance in relation to planning applications and legal requirements.

Designing and engaging (p.11)

Outlines physical opportunities and constraints to consider when designing a community-led green space.

At the end of the toolkit we have provided a **Checklist (p.17)** of key actions.

At the back of the document are some **Case Studies (p.19)** and **Further Resources (p.21)** providing links to relevant information.



Community-led green space toolkit

Planning and governance



To ensure that your community green space can have longevity it is important to ensure that you follow the correct planning and governance procedures.

1.1 Key considerations before you begin

Set up your group - Organise your core team into a working group. Coordinate the practicalities of your group, including roles and responsibilities for taking the project forward, considering:

- How you will communicate as a group (e.g. WhatsApp, Facebook, email, website posts etc.), as well as where and when to meet.
- Who the potential supporters of your project are, including existing local community groups, schools and businesses, and how to reach out to them.
- What the overarching aim(s) of the garden are; what types of audiences/users it will serve; what kind of design elements you will need to meet these aims/suit these audiences.
- How you will go about recruiting members and keeping records of membership. This is particularly important if you are applying for funding.
- How you will get basics covered, including access to water, power, tools and toilets; how you will secure the site and ensure it is accessible.
- How you will develop and maintain the site in the future.
- What insurance cover you will need.
- How you will fund the project.

In legal terms, when you start out, your organisation will simply be a group of people with a shared aim. As you expand, in addition to opening a bank account (see further below), it can be useful to formalise your group into an “unincorporated association”. This will require that you produce a governance document, also sometimes called a Constitution, or Articles/Memorandum of Association. This is a legal document that sets out the purpose of your organisation, how it will be run and how it will cease operating, if needs be. Templates for these can be found online and an example is [here](#).

As your project further develops, you might want to consider evolving your organisation into another type of community group, to better suit your needs.

Get insurance cover

You are legally responsible for the safety on site from the day you take it over. To protect your group from any mishaps on site, it is strongly recommended that you take out public liability insurance before any site work is undertaken, even if it's only temporary clearance work prior to signing an agreement.

Public liability insurance cover will indemnify you against being held responsible for the injury, disability or death of people visiting or taking part in your activities. Cover should be obtained for a minimum of £2 million, however most groups are now insured for £5 million.

Health and safety

As the responsible party for the site you will also be responsible for health and safety, there are legal responsibilities dependant on whether you are undertaking construction work on the site known as CDM regulations, details can be found [here](#). There are other obligations if you are running activities for the general public and best practice to keep people on site safe, Guidance and more details can be found [here](#).

Financial sustainability and fundraising

There are strategies for reducing the need for funding (see suggestions below). However, even the smallest garden needs some funding to cover essentials like insurance, rent and some tools. It's good practice to develop a budget, to plan and prioritise your expenditures, and progressively learn to better forecast your needs. It is also useful to have a fundraising strategy, providing a roadmap for how you plan to financially support the delivery of your vision for the site both now and in the future.

Being well-organised, having a large network of volunteers and solid negotiation skills can go a long way in reducing costs associated with a garden. Consider:

- Practicing the five R's: reduce, re-use, repair, recycle and review.
- Getting pro-bono work: either by identifying who in your network has skills they can contribute to your project (including fundraising, grant writing, account keeping, landscape design, horticulture, graphic design, carpentry and other DIY, etc.) or by taking part in a local time bank.

- Limiting expenditures on plant materials: Focus on hardy plants that are well suited for the growing conditions offered by your site; grow as much as you can from seeds – relying on seed collection or using a community seed bank; when not growing from seeds, prefer bare-rooted plants or plug plants over potted plants, whenever possible.
- Asking for preferential discount to suppliers.

Will you need a bank account?

Probably not to start with. But if you think you will apply for grants, having a dedicated bank account will provide a useful central area for funds and will legitimise your group to funding foundations and organisations. High street banks offer specialist not-for-profit bank accounts as well as other ethical accounts.

Where to get funding

Tap into your local community as a first point of call. Consider having a modest membership fee. A community garden can also offer an attractive venue to host social events e.g. community barbecue, solstice celebration, etc. Consider using such events to fund raise by inviting donations at the door, or through other perks available on site (games, food, plants to take home...).

Another avenue to consider is crowd-funding. Your local council may be able to fund some aspects of your project. Each ward typically has a budget set aside to support community initiatives. Additionally, planning receipts gathered from local developments through the community infrastructure levy (CIL) or Section 106 agreements may be available to spend on community greening initiatives. Your local ward councillors are the best person to speak to on this. Their support for your idea will be critical in unlocking access to Council funding.

There are also many grant options available for community garden projects. Bidding for grant funding is a competitive process, so be sure to select the grant profile that best fits the expenditure you are seeking to fund and to check that your organisation meets the eligibility criteria. For such funding bids, you might be required to have charity or community interest company (CIC) status. Whilst this may come later in the day, in your project's infancy, consider approaching local charities/CICs who have the legal infrastructure (published accounts, charitable/company status, insurances etc.) to collaborate. For example, if you offer the site to a youth centre to explore green skills, your site fee might include a contribution towards development costs so you can build a fence, shed etc. or purchase new tools.

If you can't manage to cover the cost of your dream garden right away, try scaling back to a smaller project that can be expanded over time.

1.2 Establish a sound relationship with the landowner

It is illegal to use land without obtaining the owner's permission. As a first point of call, contact your local Council to ascertain land ownership. If the land is not Council-owned, you may then have to do your search via the Land Registry.

A landowner may be willing to let your group use all or part of the site you are interested in. However, simply putting forward to them the benefits of turning their land over into a community garden is unlikely to be enough to convince them. You must also be able to demonstrate that you understand and are able to address their key concerns. Not all landowners have the same needs, so the first step is to find out from the landowner what their needs and concerns are. Some common concerns of landowners are:

- **Care of the land:** most landowners will want to be confident that you will take care of the land and anything on it, for example maintaining fences and keeping weeds under control.
- **A nice view:** not everyone appreciates compost bins, polytunnels or carpet mulch. Be prepared to agree to limit the materials used, the number of structures, and their sighting.
- **Happy neighbours:** anticipate any concerns the neighbours might have about noise, visitors, parking etc. and show you can address these. If possible, seek letters of support from neighbours. This will also be useful if you need planning consent for your project.
- **Meet their policies, aims and/or objectives:** some landlords, such as councils, have policies that you will deliver on better than other tenants, e.g. on social inclusion, on access to green space, etc. Find out if your landlord has plans or aims that you can help with.
- **Getting their land back when needed:** some landlords need to be confident that you will leave at the point you have agreed to do so.
- **Support for their future development on the site:** some landlords will not want your use of their land to decrease the chances of them obtaining planning permission in the future e.g. by generating a lot of public support for keeping the space green. You can agree not to oppose future planning applications.

- **Community Involvement:** Show that the project has strong community support and involvement. This can be achieved through petition signatures, case studies letters of support, and regular community meetings. The more the landowner sees that the project is valued by the community, the more likely they are to support its long-term presence.
- **Financial Sustainability:** Develop a financial sustainability plan that demonstrates how the community garden or green space will be funded over the long term. This may involve membership fees, grants, fundraising, or other sources of income to cover ongoing maintenance costs. Local Authorities will appreciate seeing plans for project sustainability.
- **Maintenance Plan:** Present a well-structured maintenance plan that clearly outlines how the community group will take care of the land and ensure its long-term viability. Include details on volunteer schedules, maintenance tasks, and a budget for ongoing upkeep. Design and plan with community maintenance in mind. For example, you might plant drought-proof plants that require minimal watering, or your garden furniture might be made out of low-maintenance hardwood, like hickory. You could also state that you will up-skill residents to look after the space themselves. Including plans to move towards a community asset transfer can demonstrate that you have seriously considered project sustainability.
- **Education and Outreach:** Offer educational programmes and outreach events that engage the landowner and their family, as well as the broader community. Demonstrating the positive impact of the project can foster a sense of pride and commitment. Furthermore, studies also show that getting community buy-in results in fewer instances of damage/ASB due to fostering a greater connection to place.
- **Regular Communication:** Maintain open and regular communication with the landowner. Provide updates on project progress, share success stories, and involve them in decision-making.
- **Flexibility and Adaptability:** Be open to discussions about adjustments or modifications to the project as circumstances change. Flexibility can go a long way in maintaining a positive relationship with the landowner.
- **Regular Review and Feedback:** Periodically review the project's progress with the landowner, gather their feedback, and make any necessary improvements to address their concerns and maintain their support.
- **Paying the rent:** the rental income might be small but you should still show that you have a solid plan to pay and set up a standing order/direct debit.
- **An easy life:** show you are organised, reliable and easy to deal with. Bring references from someone the landowner will trust. Find one person from the group to be the contact point, who is personable and able to communicate with the landowner in the method they prefer.
- **Professionalism:** the landowner needs confidence that you will comply with regulations and agreements without any fuss.
- **Prepare and negotiate a lease agreement and terms for use for the site.** You should attempt to negotiate a lease agreement for at least three years. A lease of seven years or more will require registering at the Land Registry. It is standard for a tenant to be responsible for registering the lease. If you are using a legal professional, this can be included in their services. Otherwise, it is possible to follow instructions on the Land Registry website to register the lease directly.

In essence, it's about building a strong, mutually beneficial partnership with the landowner and the community based on trust, shared goals, and clear agreements. Engaging the landowner as a partner in the long-term stewardship of the community garden or green space can significantly increase the chances of permission being granted. **Realistic plans and commitment:** show the landowners a sensible plan about how you will develop and maintain the garden, even in the face of setbacks and/or as the initial enthusiasm fades.

1.2 When to apply for planning permission?

What is ‘development’?

Whether or not you will need planning permission for your project depends on several factors, including:

- The nature and scale of the changes you anticipate making,
- The current use of the land where you intend to develop your garden, and
- Where your project is located.

Planning permission is required for works or a change of land use amounting to ‘development’. The definition of ‘development’ used by planners is wide-ranging and includes construction, demolition, engineering works, as well as change of use for a building or a piece of land.

Some minor works as well as some changes of use are granted planning permission automatically if they meet certain criteria. Such rights to avoid the need to make a formal planning application are called ‘permitted development’ rights.

Permitted development rights do not apply uniformly across the country. These rights are restricted in conservation areas, and other areas of land designated for their man-made or natural beauty. Permitted development rights can also be restricted or removed by the local planning authority (LPA), hence the relevance of the location of your project.

Currently, there are no permitted development rights in England for community gardens.

Common scenarios

To help you ascertain whether planning permission might be required for your project, below are some scenarios that are likely to arise when creating and managing a community garden. Please note that this guidance is not exhaustive, nor is it an authoritative interpretation of the law. You should get advice from your LPA or a planning professional if there is any doubt whether your proposal would be permitted development.

- **Growing amenity plants and food on land:** Land and buildings are divided into various categories called ‘Planning Use Classes’ which determine the purpose for which they can be used. Most community garden projects will be considered to amount to either a

recreational/leisure use, or for gardens with a food growing focus, to an agricultural land use (like urban allotments). Agriculture is not included within the definition of development, so it may be acceptable to grow fruits and vegetables on a piece of land without seeking prior planning permission. However, leisure uses, for example, the laying out and keeping of a lawn, is considered differently. If the focus of the garden is not food growing, then it is important to consider the current Use Class of the land on which the garden is to be sited. Planning permission is not usually needed when existing and proposed uses fall within the same Use Class. Some changes of uses falling under different classes are covered by permitted development rights. These are regularly updated and listed here. Sites that have been abandoned for a long time, or host uses that are not captured under any of the main Use Classes are called ‘Sui generis’, a Latin term that means ‘in a class of its own’. Changing the use of a site from ‘Sui generis’ to a different land use requires planning permission.

- **Sheds and other structures:** The erection of a greenhouse, compost toilets, a polytunnel, a tool storage shed or a shelter may be considered as development. Is such project intended as a permanent structure (i.e., last more than a few weeks)? Will it need to be assembled on site? Will it be physically attached to the ground? If the answer to any of these questions is ‘yes’, then chances are it amounts to ‘development’ and planning permission is required. A good starting point is to assume that most buildings, however small, will require planning permission and to seek advice from the LPA. Some circumstances are covered by permitted development rights, detailed here. For example, if the structure is below certain dimensions and forms part of the curtilage of the garden of a house. Raised beds, on the other hand, are likely to be regarded as ‘de minimus’, meaning they are so small they do not warrant intervention by the LPA.
- **Areas of hard standing and ponds:** Planning permission will be needed if you want to lay a traditional, impermeable driveway, such as concrete or tarmac, that’s more than five square metres and does not provide for natural water drainage. By contrast, minor engineering works to create a small pond are likely to be regarded as ‘de minimus’ and would not typically require planning permission.

- **Fencing:** Any means of enclosure including a fence, wall or gate may be built without planning permission provided it is less than one metre high adjacent to a highway (road) or two metres high anywhere else, except within the boundaries of a listed building.
- **Demolitions:** If the structure you intend to demolish is not listed, not located in a conservation area, and its external volume is below 50 cubic metres, you may not need planning permission for its demolition. However, if such demolition works are likely to have a significant impact on the environment, then the LPA will need to issue a screening opinion as to whether a full Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) is required.
- **Easements and covenants:** These create rights and restrictions over the use land. They're legally binding and can have a fundamental impact on how the land is developed. These may include rights of way or restrictions on access to land. You should check if your land is subject to any of these as they could impact your plans.
- **Adjoining properties or boundaries:** If your project could affect neighbouring properties, there may be restrictions. For example, determining whether there is a party wall agreement in place with neighbouring residencies, which will need to be considered when applying for planning permission.

Remember in any case that there may be conditions on a previous planning permission applying to your site or other local restrictions imposed by the local planning authority which may limit or remove permitted development rights in some instances. If there is any doubt as to whether planning permission is required for your project, seek professional advice or clarification from the local planning authority before work starts.

If you ask your LPA if planning permission is required for a certain type of development, they may suggest you submit a 'Certificate of Lawful Use or Development'. This is an application to test whether an existing or proposed use or development is lawful. There are benefits to taking this route as it provides you with certainty and immunity from future enforcement action. If the structure or use has not already begun the fee for the application is half that of a normal planning application fee.

Our project requires planning permission, now what?

Gaining pre-application advice from the local planning authority on the likelihood of gaining planning permission is a good starting point. This will require the payment of a fee. Pre-application advice will also give you a better understanding of the key factors that will be considered in deciding your planning application. These factors are known as 'material planning considerations'.

Material planning considerations likely to be relevant to a community garden project include (this list is not exhaustive):

- Whether the proposed location is in the countryside or on green belt land, or within the built-up limits of a settlement. The design of the structure or engineering operation and how appropriate it is in its proposed location and surroundings.
- The impact the proposed development and its use will have on neighbouring properties and uses.
- Whether any car parking will be required for the use of the site or structure.
- How the site or structure will be accessed from the nearest street.
- Whether people walk, cycle or use sustainable modes of transport to get to the site.

Remember also that material planning considerations only relate to the development that you are applying for planning permission for. There may be other structures, such as a fence, that does not require planning permission. Do not include these works in the planning application. For example, if you are applying for a tool shed for your community garden, you only need to include the tool shed in the description and build a case for the tool shed in the application documents. You do not need to show a case for the community garden use.

Most planning applications are submitted online via the planning portal website. Submitting a planning application will also involve a fee (additional to the fee paid for pre-application advice). Check with your local planning authority or the Planning Portal webpages about the fee involved and the documents that need to be submitted.

If you need planning permission you should not start any work on site until the permission is granted.

Planning permission requirements can vary based on the size and location of your site, so it's essential to consult with your LPA to get the most accurate information.

- **Check the Local Authority:** Contact your LPA, which in London would be the local council, to inquire about the specific regulations for your area. They can provide information on whether planning permission is required. You can find your LPA [here](#).
- **Planning Use Classes:** Determine the current “use class” of the land. In some cases, community gardening and orchards may already fall under a “permitted development” category, which means you may not need planning permission. Contact your local authority to determine whether your plans fall under “permitted development”.
- **Community impact:** Before you begin the application process, it is important to prove the local need/want for your site. A needs analysis, focussing on what already/does not exist in the local area, how your site can meet local needs can be useful here. Consider collecting case studies from residents who have visited and/or frequently used the site, detailing what the site means to them. Quoting these case studies in your application can paint a picture to the planning committee, helping to bring your project to life.

To increase the chances of your proposal being successful and speed up the pre-application/consultation process, consider:

- Consulting with neighbours to address any concerns they might have regarding the project.
- Reaching out to local resident groups and schools to assess appetite for your project: Including quotes/testimonials from groups who will benefit from the site will help to prove community buy-in.
- **Environmental Considerations:** Consider the environmental impact of your project. If it involves significant tree removal, changes to the landscape, or will reduce percolation (increasing flood risk), it may require more scrutiny and planning permission.

- **Historic or Conservation Areas:** If your site is in or near a historic or conservation area, there may be additional restrictions or considerations. Ask your local authority if any local heritage surveys or ecology surveys have been conducted on/near to the site in recent years.
- **Access and Infrastructure:** Ensure that you have plans for access, infrastructure (like water supply), and waste management for your site. You should also evidence how you have pre-empted any physical barriers to access and will look to address these in your design. The Social Model of Disability is a conscientious and comprehensive model to follow.
- **Health and Safety:** Address health and safety concerns, particularly if your project will involve public access.
- **Local Policies and Guidelines:** Be aware of any local policies or guidelines related to community gardening or green spaces. These might influence the need for planning permission. Many local authorities have released ‘greening’ or “carbon reduction” strategies in recent years. Demonstrating how your initiative aligns with these strategies can benefit your proposal.

Timetaken:

- **Minor Development Projects:** For smaller development projects, such as a small community garden, the timeframe may be around 8-16 weeks. This can vary depending on the land owner and whether there are any issues or objections.
- **Major Development Projects:** More significant projects, like large community developments, can take considerably longer. These applications can take several months to a year or more.
- **Complex or Controversial Projects:** If your project faces significant opposition or involves complex planning issues, the process can be prolonged. It may take more than a year to secure planning permission in such cases.

Key Takeaways:

Consult with your local authority at the earliest possible stage in your plans to identify considerations, such as root protection agreements on old trees, and sites of historical significance/natural significance/scientific interest.

1.3 Securing long term protection for your green space

Local Green Space designation

Your site has been running for a while and is proving a great asset for the local community. It may be on council-owned land, or belong to a large institutional landowner, and you are concerned that different departments may have different views on its future. Staff changes can also lead to shifts in support. In this context seeking protection for the site may be an appropriate route forward.

One of the best ways to protect a community garden site from development is to get it officially recognised as a special area for its natural, cultural or community importance. This is known as ‘designation’ or ‘protection’. The best option available is to get a designation as a ‘Local Green Space’.

To be eligible for Local Green Space designation, land must fulfil one or more of the following criteria:

- Beauty
- Historic significance
- Recreational value
- Tranquillity
- Richness of wildlife
- The land needs to be ‘local in character, not an extensive tract of land’ meaning that an open patch of grass would not qualify.

Local Green Space designation means that the site cannot be built on other than in special circumstances.

The best time to get your community garden site protected is when your council is reviewing their Local Plan or producing a Neighbourhood Plan for the area where your site is located. If neither document is currently in the works, you can still contact your council about gaining a designation and ask for a written commitment in advance. Contact your council planning department to check for guidelines or a process for applying for the Local Green Space designation or if one has been previously granted.

Asset of Community Value

Another option to consider to protect your site from development is getting it listed as an ‘Asset of Community Value’ (ACV) with the local authority. Land that is used for enhancing the social wellbeing of the local community can be nominated for ACV registration by parish councils, neighbourhood forums (as defined in Neighbourhood Planning regulations), community groups of at least 21 members, and charities. If land registered as an ACV goes up for sale, the local community would be informed, and they would be given a period of six months where they would be prioritised to purchase the site if they are able to raise the necessary funds.

Community Asset Transfer

When the land is council-owned, another route to consider is to seek transfer of ownership of your community garden site to your group, or to a land-owning entity that will hold it on your behalf. This could even be a long-term objective you put forward to the council from the inception of your project. Local authorities are increasingly open to alternative approaches to fund the provision and management of green spaces.

The law gives local authorities and some other public bodies the power to transfer land – where it promotes social, economic and environmental well-being – for less than its market value.

The asset transfer process differs from authority to authority, but many councils structure their process in three linked stages:

- Invite initial Expressions of Interest. If successful, this leads to...
- The opportunity to submit a more detailed business plan. If successful, this leads to...
- Legal negotiations and agreement to transfer, e.g. in the form of a long lease.

A typical timescale for completion is 18 months from beginning to end. This could be shorter or much longer depending on the complexity.

Community-led green space toolkit

Designing a space for your community



The first thing to remember when designing a green space is the community. At every step along the way, consider how the garden can bring people together, whether they tend plants or not.

2.1 Who to engage and consult?

Start by talking to the local community, identify the need for the space and gathering support. Spend time talking to neighbours, local groups, local councillors, businesses and possibly local schools about what is most needed locally. Engage as many people as you can in this process, being curious about what sort of green space people would like, how they would use it, what their motivations are, how they might get involved and what skills they could bring. Avoid having a fixed idea of what your garden might look like, so that several options can be considered. Gather feedback on what emerges as the most popular options. If you can, also visit other community gardens and talk to the volunteers involved to get tips and inspiration.

In addition to defining what needs the garden should attempt to meet, use this early engagement process to:

- Build-up a reliable core group of people who will support the garden coordinator in the planning and delivery of the project. Make sure you collect the names of the most enthusiastic people you encounter so as to be able to follow-up with them.
- Gather evidence of support for the emerging preferred option(s). This will benefit your project in different ways, including facilitating negotiations with the landowner, successfully navigating any planning permission if you need to get one and securing funding. Support should be sought from immediate neighbours, the wider community and the local councillors. Securing the support of your ward councillors is very important. In the early stages, they will be a useful source of support and networking to help develop the proposal and offer suggestions on who to consult with. Later on, ward councillors will also need to endorse and/or advocate for any funding allocation from the local Council to your project.
- Ensure that your engagement has the broadest outreach possible. Speak to different types of potential users of the space, older people, families and different religious or cultural groups. Consider going to existing community events to speak to different groups and how you can be inclusive to gain different views.

When a community group applies for planning permission the local authority will want to see evidence that they have spoken to the different people and groups who have an interest in the space. It is also essential to engage in consultations and discussions with various stakeholders to ensure that the project aligns with the local planning regulations and community interests. Consider consulting with:

- **Local Residents and Community:** Engage with the local community, especially if your project may affect them directly. Hold meetings or consultations to address concerns, gather feedback, and demonstrate community support for your project.
- **Local Planning Authority (LPA):** You should contact the planning department to discuss your project, understand the planning regulations, and seek advice on the application process. They will be the primary authority responsible for granting or denying planning permission. You can find your LPA [here](#).
- **Ward Councillors:** Contact the elected ward councillors who represent the area where your project is located. They can provide valuable insights into local politics and community dynamics, including any community groups who are likely to challenge your proposal; you can then speak to them and attempt to reach an agreement in pre-proposal stage. Ward councillors will also need to endorse/advocate for any community infrastructure levy (CIL) or Section 106 funding collected from ongoing/future developments. Making them aware of your site will provide both an influential voice in the present and in the future. You can find your local Ward Councillor [here](#).
- **Environmental Agencies:** If your project has environmental implications, consult with relevant environmental agencies to address potential concerns related to biodiversity, water, or air quality. Natural England charges £110/hour for environmental pre-submission consultation. To save money, it may be worth reaching out to your networks to see if anybody with a Chartered Environmentalist accreditation is willing to consult pro-bono.
- **Local Schools and Educational Institutions:** If your project is near schools or educational institutions, they may have concerns about safety, noise, or other factors that need to be addressed. Simultaneously, schools offer a great way for getting the community involved in the project and increasing its reach.

- **Accessibility and Disability Groups:** Ensure that your project complies with accessibility requirements, and consult with disability advocacy groups if necessary.
- **Property Owners:** If your project could affect neighbouring properties, it's a good practice to consult with the owners or occupants to address concerns.

2.2 Visioning

A great way to get the community on board and find out what they need is through a process of visioning what the space could be. You should build a consensus around this vision. Here are some ideas to inspire this process:

Fruit Orchard

Create a mini-orchard with fruit trees and berry bushes, providing fresh, locally grown fruit to the community. This theme is especially popular in areas with limited access to fresh fruit.

Sensory Garden

Design a garden that stimulates the senses, with fragrant flowers, textured foliage, and plants with interesting colours. It's a delightful space for relaxation and exploration.

Culinary Garden

Focus on growing ingredients commonly used in local cuisine. This theme can celebrate cultural diversity within the community and encourage culinary exploration.

Therapeutic Garden

Create a peaceful garden space that promotes relaxation and mental well-being. Incorporate calming plants and areas for meditation or mindfulness activities.

Companion Planting Garden

Explore the concept of companion planting, where certain plants are grown together to benefit each other. This can include plant combinations that deter pests or enhance growth.

Climate-Adapted Garden

Choose plants that are well-suited to the local climate, helping the garden thrive with minimal water and maintenance.

Artistic Garden

Incorporate sculptures, decorative structures, and creative plant arrangements to make the garden a visually appealing space that inspires art and creativity.

2.3 Understanding your site

Once you have agreed on a vision for your community green space you need to apply this to your site. It is important to understand the constraints of your site when designing it to ensure it is sustainable in the long term.

Topography

Understand the size, shape, and topography of your space – Google Earth Pro is a great tool to understand your site – analyse elevations and to measure areas. Download for free and access resources [here](#).

[Here](#) is the advice on how to measure distance and elevation so that you can understand the topography of your site.

Daylight

Understand how daylight will change throughout the day and year – online resources such as [SunEarthTools.com](#) allow you to understand how the path of the sun will affect your site during the year. All you need to do is put in you location and the site will give detail on sun paths throughout the year.

Prevailing wind

Ensure you understand how wind will affect your site, noting that prevailing winds can change through the year. In summer you want to take advantage of the breeze and in winter find ways of shielding your site from it.

The Met Office weather and climate data hub offers information on how long term trends can affect your site. [The Site](#) has a range of data sources for GIS and non-GIS users.

Water and drainage

Understanding how much average rainfall you are likely to receive, if your site is at risk of flooding – check flood maps [here](#). Understand the current permeability of your site (is it mainly hard or soft surfaces) and how water moves across and through it – where is the current drainage and in what condition is it in? Soil types will affect drainage e.g. clayey soils will drain very slowly and sandy soils quickly.

Soil and geology –

Magic Maps are a great resource for understanding your site – check out the geology and soil layers [here](#). This is also a good place to check for any designations or protections for certain habitats and species.

Past uses

Understand what was on your site before – is there any risk of pollution such as from previous building rubble (asbestos risk) or fly tipping? Considering soil testing if you are unsure – will help with understanding with soils and permeability too. Defra’s Construction Code of Practice for Sustainable Use of Soils on Construction Sites [here](#) provides useful information on testing and management of soils on a site.

Utilities

Do you have any service features crossing your site such as power or phone lines – also consider underground features – particularly if planning to do any excavation or planting trees – utility providers often require an easement where no trees are planted e.g. 2-3m either side of pipe of overhead line. Line Search Before You Dig is a free utilities search service available [here](#).

Invasive species

Check on the Defra website for invasive species – make sure your Site is free of any species that will take over the site. The GB Non-native Species Secretariat (NNSS) has responsibility for helping to coordinate the approach to invasive non-native species in Great Britain. The NNSS is responsible to a Programme Board which represents the relevant governments and agencies of England, Scotland and Wales. The website provides lots of useful resources and advice and is available [here](#).

Surrounding green infrastructure

Opportunities to link into to surrounding habitats/ green spaces. Check out Natural England’s resources that include a useful interactive mapping tool [here](#).

Users

- Identify surrounding uses e.g. offices / parks / residential
- Identify potential future uses, are there any new developments planned (check your local planning portal).
- Understand social demographics - engage local groups to understand their views on the local community and facilities available – the more you engage ,the more you will understand the local community and different points of view.
- Talk to local businesses – see if they would like to be involved in community activities / sponsor.

Information on socio-economic demographics of your area can be found [here](#).

2.4 Zoning areas

Now that you understand your site you can start the design process by zoning it into different uses or areas.

- Identify the different areas you need and areas you would like.
- Start sketching out areas of use and focus points.
- Think about movement and connections – consider how water, people and wildlife will move through the site.
- Develop rough, quick sketches that you can use to discuss with others and evolve ideas.
- Do not get fixated on one layout – come up with as many different iterations quickly - how many different ways could you use this site?
- Start filtering options until you end up with a few designs that you think will work.
- Consider how the development of the garden can be phased so that it can evolve over time as funding and resources allow.

2.5 Designing your space

Once you have zoned your site you can think about the detail of the materials and features you want to use in your garden. You should agree on these materials before applying for planning permission. Taking time to make considered choices about your design will support the site's long term sustainability.

Material choices

To embed long term sustainability through choosing the right materials:

- Check what materials are already available to reuse on your site or that can be sourced locally
- Understand different materials life span / maintenance requirements / environmental impact
- How will different materials work together
- Consider hierarchy of materials
- Consider how materials can support wayfinding or help to create a sense of place
- Consider the source of your materials and the carbon impact of transportation

If your project is in London you can have a look at ReLondon. They work with a range of partners to explore how to incorporate more reclaimed materials and components within new developments. Download their guide [here](#). You can access a range of accredited suppliers and other landscaping professionals on the British Association of Landscape Industries' website [here](#). It's always worth calling product suppliers for advice and information - many of them are happy to help and give advice without any obligations.

Accessibility

To design a community-led green space accessible for all:

- Mitigate barriers to wheeled access
- Ensure your space feels safe and deters crime and antisocial behaviour.
- Design with the safety of women and girls in mind
- Offer safe and plentiful different forms of seating
- Larger activity/play spaces should be divided into smaller sub-spaces to create diversity

Adhering to the most recent British standards is a legal requirement for any new developments.

You can access the British Standard for Design of an accessible and inclusive built environment (BS 8300 1:2018) [here](#).

The BS8300-1:2018 is a comprehensive overview of accessibility considerations and forms a code of practice. It advises on access strategies, navigation, wayfinding, public art, tree planting and temporary events.

If you are arranging any access to buildings, check the Approved Document M: Access to and use of buildings [here](#).

Water and Drainage

To design a climate-adapted garden that is flood and drought resilient.

- Consider planting mixes that can tolerate different weather extremes
- Minimise areas of hard surfacing and create planting areas where water can collect and slowly drain.
- Rain gardens are simple, small systems that can temporarily store water, slowing down flow and creating fun and attractive environments for people and wildlife.

Sustainable Urban Drainage (SUDS) principles are good to retain water on site and to minimise flood risk. The CIRIA susdrain website [here](#) and SUDS manual has a wealth of examples and advice to help you manage water on your site. The manual is available free [here](#).

Lighting

Consider how you are going to light your site. There are a range of suppliers that will be happy to provide advice and quotes on a project. Get in touch and explain your project at an early stage and they will often give a wealth of free design advice. Collingwood provide a useful guide [here](#). Also, [here](#) is a useful blog that gives you an overview of what to think about before you start.

Planting

Maximise the impact of planting on your site by selecting suitable plants for the conditions

- Consider how colours will work together
- Create interest throughout the year
- Consider how your planting can respond to your garden theme
- Consider structure and planting densities required
- For trees make sure to check the maximum height
- Understand maintenance requirements

Design for biodiversity

Small design features can have a big impact on biodiversity.

- Start by making sure you understand what you currently have on your site. Be aware of protected species which may need specialist surveyors if your plans will affect them.
- Think about which beneficial wildlife species you could encourage onto your site, such as birds, insects and hedgehogs. Which habitats might be suitable for them, which could be retained, enhanced or provided new?
- Consider all types of fauna and cater for different species at different times of year. Planting for pollinators can include native and non-native species. Open, simple flower structures provide access for insects to reach nectar. Spring and autumn flowering species feed insects during colder weather, which can be critical for their survival.
- Night flowering species such as jasmine provide nectar for moths.
- • Insect hotels, bat and bird boxes and hedgehog houses can be easily be made from scrap material, and can be fun projects for community involvement.
- All spaces can create valuable habitats for insects, birds and other wildlife. Could vertical spaces be used for climbing plants? Could nooks and crannies be formed into bat and bird boxes? Could the shed have a green roof?
- Ponds can be incredibly valuable for wildlife and can provide a refuge for humans to enjoy as well. Even the smallest of ponds (think old washing up bowls or buckets) can provide a space for dragonflies to feed and birds to drink.
- Keep an eye out for invasive plant species, and if present remove them responsibly.
- Minimise night timing lighting of wildlife features where possible.
- Most importantly, enjoy sharing your space with nature.

2.6 Encourage long term stewardship

For a community-led green space to be successful in the long term it is important to encourage community stewardship of the space. Long term maintainance is also often a key concern of the landowner when granting permission for use. Long term stewardship is therefore crucial for sustainability and success. Some of the things to consider to ensure long term stewardship:

- Design or plan with community maintenance in mind such as easy to maintain plants and furniture
- Upskill residents to gain skills during the project. For example, you could work with local charities who specialise in this
- Look at securing funding, create a fundraising strategy form the offset to account for unexpected costs during design and build process, and avenues for sustainable stewardship (e.g. funding to support local 'park champions')
- Get as many community members involved as possible – studies also show that getting community buy-in results in fewer instances of damage/ASB due to fostering a greater connection to place – reach out to local youth groups/schools etc.
- Move towards community asset transfer and make clear if this is an aim from the start. This can be beneficial to councils in the long term as it can save money.

Community-led green space toolkit

Checklist





Identify a location and site for a community-led green space.



Formalise a group of people in the community who want to create the green space.



Contact the local council, or search the UK Government website to find out who the landowner is and seek their permission for your project.



Engage as many people as you can, and find out what sort of garden people would like and how they'll use it.



Find out whether a planning application is required and involve any legal issues, also ensure the planning conditions are met.



Prepare and negotiate a lease agreement and terms for use for the site.



Create your own green space while ensuring sustainability is embedded.



Enjoy and maintain your green space continuing to ensure that it meets the needs of the local community.



If your project is located in London, Planning Aid for London may be able to offer further support through the planning process. To get in touch email:

info@planningaidforlondon.org.uk

Case studies

Some examples of community-led green spaces around the world.



Image: Walworth Garden
(<https://walworthgarden.org.uk/visit>)

Walworth Garden, Lambeth

Started as a community growing space and has evolved into charity that provides a range of services including garden therapy and back to work support. Please visit [here](#) for more information.



Image: Landezine
(<https://landezine.com/parckdesign-by-taktyk-and-alive-architecture/>)

Parackfarm, Brussels

A former railway valley wasteland turned into collective gardens, animal farms and public projects.

The project has created a new model of public space that combines the characteristics of a park and local micro farming that engaged the local community. Initially planned to run for five months, the Parackfarm project was so successful that it has since become permanent.



Image: Sandra Perezniето
(<https://archello.com/story/52268/attachments/photos-videos/1>)

Common-Unity, Mexico

Common-Unity is a public space rehabilitation project for San Pablo Xalpa Housing Unit in Azcapotzalco, Mexico City.

The unit used to be divided in sectors by walls, fences and barriers built by its inhabitants over time, which did not allow the community to benefit from available public spaces. The goal was to transform a “divided apartment unit” into a “neighbourhood COMMON-UNIT” by designing with the community and not just for the community through the implementation of several action.



Image: Frances Anderton
(<https://www.kcrw.com/news/shows/greater-la/earth-day-climate-change/rewilding-native-plants-landscape>)



Image: Greater London Authority
(<https://www.london.gov.uk/city-hall-blog/edible-bus-stop-pocket-park>)



Image: Wild Green E13 Mural
(<https://www.facebook.com/wildgreene13/photos>)

Test Plot, US

US, Los Angeles: Experiment in community-based ecological restoration in Elysian Park. After engaging the City and multiple community groups in the area and talking to anyone and everyone - horticulturalists, neighbours, politicians, architects, planners, dog walkers, experts on ecological restoration created Test Plot.

The project aims to explore what the minimal time, energy, capital, botanical, and material inputs are to re-establish a productive ecology in our public parks as well as a test of what different community care and stewardship models for these spaces can look like. Please visit [here](#) for more information.

London's pocket parks

Pocket Parks ran from 2013-15, providing £2m to create more than 100 parks across 26 London boroughs. These projects range from community orchards to edible bus stops.

Further information on the projects can be found [here](#).

Wild Green E13, London

Wild Green E13 is a community garden at the heart of the New City Estate in Plaistow in Newham. A voluntary community group led the transformation of a previously neglected space that was associated with anti-social behaviour into a community growing and activity space. This was funded through the Community Assemblies programme in Newham.

Further information on the project can be found [here](#).

Further resources

Planning and governance

Key planning policies to be aware of that support community-led green spaces.

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)
Community food growing/garden can contribute to 7 of the 16 core planning principles within NPPF.

National Planning Policy Guidance
It is also supported by NPPG, particularly, the section of 'healthy and safe communities' covering health and wellbeing.

Local Plans
Include community food growing within strategic objectives at a local plan allows planners to make the case for its inclusion within detailed development management policies.

Neighbourhood Plans
Neighbourhood plans can also provide a platform to build on both national and local policies.

The London Plan
Policy G8: In Development Plans, Boroughs should:

1. Protect existing allotments and encourage provision of space for agriculture, including community gardening, and food growing within new developments as a meanwhile use on vacant or under-utilised sites
2. Identify potential sites that could be used for food production.

The All London Green Grid (ALGG)
A policy framework to promote the design and delivery of multifunctional green infrastructure across London launched in 2011:

1. Green infrastructure-related planning policy contained in the London Plan
2. The ALGG Supplementary Planning Guidance
3. 11 ALGG Area Frameworks that provide a more detailed assessment of the opportunities for green infrastructure delivery at the sub-local level

Other Guidance Documents

The Mayor of London has produced a Community Projects Handbook, which is a great place to start, offering a clear roadmap and a set of useful questions to think through your project idea, develop it, and make it a reality. Visit www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/community_projects_handbook_web.pdf

The London City Farms and Community Gardens Association lists several London-based community gardens on its website that can provide a useful source of inspiration and contacts. Visit: <https://londonharvestfestival.org.uk/community-gardens-and-growing/>

The Lewisham Community Garden Guide provides good step-by-step advice to get started once you've pulled together a core group. Visit <https://lewisham.gov.uk/myservices/environment/allotments/community-gardens>

When you reach the stage of drafting a constitution as an unincorporated group, it's a good idea to get it checked by someone with experience. This is something the Environment Law Foundation can help with. Visit www.elflaw.org

The Avon Wildlife Trust offers a useful summary on other different group types to consider as your project evolves and matures. Visit <https://www.avonwildlifetrust.org.uk/team-wilder-resources-community-group-types>

Land Registry can be contacted to identify who owns the land you may be interested in. Visit www.landregistry.gov.uk. There is a fee for this service.

The Environmental Law Foundation specialises in environmental matters and gives free advice. Visit www.elflaw.org

The Federation of City Farms and Gardens (FCFCG) operates a preferential scheme with an insurance company that it is familiar with, and has prepared cover which is suitable for small community gardens. Visit www.farmgarden.org.uk/resources/insurance

If you're part of Britain in Bloom, It's Your Neighbourhood or an Affiliated Society, you are eligible for insurance through the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS). Visit www.rhs.org.uk/get-involved/community-gardening/resources/group-insurance

Funding

The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) offers good advice to identify your funding needs and signposts a wide range of resources to look for available sources of funding. Visit www.rhs.org.uk/get-involved/community-gardening/resources/fundraising

Social Farms & Gardens produces a monthly Resource Round-Up which lists current grant opportunities. Becoming a member is required to receive the newsletter, but membership is free. Visit www.farmgarden.org.uk/resource-roundup-subscribe

In London, Capital Growth will also be able to provide information on funding and may also have their own funding pot. Capital growth focuses on food growing projects. Visit www.capitalgrowth.org

The Greater London Authority has produced helpful resources on crowdfunding. Visit: www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/shaping-local-places/funding-opportunities/make-london-helpful-resources

Kew Gardens has over 425 scientists working on plants and they run a 'Grow Wild' outreach programme with the mission to bring people together to value and enjoy UK-native wildflowers, plants and fungi. You can apply for a grant, get seed kits and resources. Visit: <https://growwild.kew.org/>.

Planning and governance

Lawful Development Certificates. Visit: www.planningportal.co.uk/planning/planning-applications/consent-types/lawful-development-certificate

How to seek and prepare for pre-application advice. Visit: www.planningportal.co.uk/planning/planning-applications/how-to-apply/pre-application-advice

Guidance on trees protected by a TPO or located in a conservation area in England is available from the Government's website. Visit: www.gov.uk/guidance/tree-preservation-orders-and-trees-in-conservation-areas

Community Asset Transfer. Visit <https://mycommunity.org.uk/understanding-community-asset-transfer>

How to secure a Local Green Space designation via a Neighbourhood Plan. Visit <https://neighbourhoodplanning.org/toolkits-and-guidance/making-local-green-space-designations-neighbourhood-plan/>

Asset of Community Value and the associated Community Right to Bid. Visit <https://mycommunity.org.uk/what-are-assets-of-community-value-acv>

The specific issues related to green spaces being subject to community asset transfer. Visit <https://mycommunity.org.uk/files/downloads/Parks-and-Green-Spaces-Community-Asset-Transfer-B.pdf>

Government guidance on planning decisions and wild birds. Visit: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/wild-birds-advice-for-making-planning-decisions>

Government guidance on planning decisions and reptiles. Visit: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/reptiles-advice-for-making-planning-decisions>

Government guidance on planning decisions related to protected species and development. Visit: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/protected-species-how-to-review-planning-applications#standing-advice-for-protected-species>

Parks Community advice on creating a management plan. Visit: <https://parkscommunity.org.uk/how-to-guide/working-together-do-we-need-a-management-plan/>

Ecology

The Building with Nature standards were set up to help guide placemaking in the UK and put nature at the heart of development. The Standards and Principles can be useful to help you start thinking about your space. The six standards are:

- Optimise Multifunctionality and Connectivity
- Positively respond to the Climate Emergency
- Maximise Environmental Net Gains
- Champions a Context Driven Approach
- Creates Distinctive Places
- Secures Effective Place-keeping
- The standards are supported by six principles: multifunctional, connected, sympathetically placed; resilient; responsibly managed; environmentally sensitive.

Visit: <https://www.buildingwithnature.org.uk/projects>

Chartered Institute for Ecology and Environmental Management. Visit <https://cieem.net/resource/a-householders-guide-to-engaging-an-ecologist/>

Bat Conservation Trust. Visit: <https://www.bats.org.uk/advice>

Bumble Bee Conservation information. Visit: <https://www.bumblebeeconservation.org/nature-recovery/>

Tree and Design Action Group (TDAG) has a wide range of resources to support design. A great resource is the Tree Species Selection for Green Infrastructure that provides a wealth of information on trees, their preferences and where they are best suited for use. Visit: <https://www.tdag.org.uk/>

Forest Research provides a range of resources on trees, forests, diversity and pests and diseases – a useful source of information on trees and the social and economic value they provide. Visit: <https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/>.

The Royal Entomological Society (RES) have a range of resources including online talks and a free digital booklet on how to create places for insects in your green space. Visit: <https://www.royensoc.co.uk/shop/publications/insects-in-green-spaces/>.

Data on wildlife

National and local biodiversity records. Visit: <https://nbn.org.uk/>

Biodiversity designated sites. Visit: <https://magic.defra.gov.uk/>

London wildlife records. Visit: <https://www.gigl.org.uk/>

Record centres for other areas. Visit: <https://www.alerc.org.uk/lerc-finder.html>

Creating wildlife habitats

British Trust for Ornithology advice on making a nest box. Visit: <https://www.bto.org/how-you-can-help/providing-birds/putting-nest-boxes-birds/make-nest-box>

The Wildlife Trusts advice on wildlife gardening. Visit: <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/gardening>

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) actions to support birds. Visit: <https://www.rspb.org.uk/helping-nature/what-you-can-do/activities>. Creating a wildlife friendly garden. Visit: <https://www.rspb.org.uk/helping-nature/>

[what-you-can-do/activities/get-yourself-a-great-garden](https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/seven-ways-to-create-a-wildlife-friendly-garden.html)

Natural History Museum advice on creating a wildlife friendly garden. Visit: <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/seven-ways-to-create-a-wildlife-friendly-garden.html>

People's trust for endangered species advice on how to build a log pile. Visit: <https://stagbeetles.ptes.org/how-to-build-a-log-pile/>

Parks Community advice on how to create habitats for wildlife through the year. Visit: https://parkscommunity.org.uk/how_to_guide/wildlife-monthly-jobs/

Other Supporting Organisations and Networks

The Eden Project has a wealth of learning resources and will connect with new organisations through online channels. Visit: <https://www.edenproject.com/learn>.

Trees for Cities is a a UK charity working with local communities to revitalise forgotten spaces. Visit: <https://www.treesforcities.org/about-us>

The London Freedom Seed Bank is useful network for those interested in the practice of seed saving and seed sharing. Visit www.londonfreedomseedbank.org/how-to-receive-seeds/

The Capital Growth network is London's food growing network, which continues to promote community food growing across the capital, as well as delivering food-growing skills and employment opportunities for Londoners. Their website provides a map of the existing community gardens in London. Visit: <https://www.capitalgrowth.org/spaces/>

The Wildlife Trusts well-being project provides research and information on how a thriving, wildlife rich environment supports physical and mental health. Visit: <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/nature-health-and-wild-wellbeing>.

There may also be local people willing to offer their professional services to your project through TimeBank. Visit www.timebank.org.uk.

Food growing

The Wildlife Trust advice on wildlife friendly food growing. Visit: <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/actions/how-grow-wildlife-friendly-vegetable-garden>

The Woodland Trust advice on growing orchards. Visit: <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/habitats/orchards/#:~:text=Wildlife%20in%20orchards&text=As%20fruit%20trees%20age%20quickly,well%20as%20plants%20like%20mistletoe.>

Green roof

The Green Roof organisation provides a range of resources for creating green roofs. Visit: <https://www.greenrooforganisation.org/>

Ponds

The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust advice on creating a wildlife friendly pond. Visit: <https://www.wwt.org.uk/discover-wetlands/gardening-for-wetlands/how-to-build-a-wildlife-pond/>

Digital Mapping

Building a GIS project for your site can help bring a range of data together making it easier to analyse and understand trends, opportunities and constraints. The QGIS site has help and advice for users. QGIS is a free software package that you can use and download. Visit: <https://www.qgis.org/en/site/forusers/download.html>.

The Community-led Green Spaces Toolkit has been developed through a partnership between Ramboll and Planning Aid for London.

Ramboll is a global multi-disciplinary engineering and consultancy company, delivering expertise and sustainable solutions. We create memorable and lasting places that embed long-term sustainability and generate value for future generations.

Planning Aid for London, is an independent charity that provides free support on town planning and development. By providing a helpline, written guides, and training sessions, we support disadvantaged communities in London to learn about and participate meaningfully in the planning process.



planningaidforlondon.org.uk

info@planningaidforlondon.org.uk

Planning Aid for London
c/o TCPA 17 Carlton House Terrace
London
SW1Y 5AS



ramboll.com

Ramboll, Regenerative Cities Team
regenerative.cities@ramboll.co.uk

Ramboll
240 Blackfriars Road
London
SE1 8NW

