

Free community guide to creating green space

A new 'toolkit' for communities looking to create and manage green space has been launched by Planning Aid for London and consultants Ramboll, writes Lee Mallett

All images are of Wild Green Community Garden, Plaistow, London E13



Lee Mallett is director of Urbik and joint publishing editor of Planning in London

Every square inch of London's green space is precious, as anyone who has made a planning application that impinges upon it can tell you. But it is really daunting for local community groups to transform themselves into semi-professionals to even get to the point where they can project manage getting planning permission for something everyone would like to see created - never mind getting it built and managing it for a long time afterwards. Consent can be just the start of a whole new set of issues. It can be a mountain and not a molehill to climb for the uninitiated.

Which is why engineering, design and sustainability consultant Ramboll teamed up with Planning Aid for London to produce a new 'toolkit' for community groups setting out 'steps needed to get a community green space planned, designed and growing'.

It has been produced in consultation with London community groups, planners and designers, and can be used anywhere in England, and includes guidance that is specific to London.

'It fills a gap that Planning Aid for London had spotted,' says Ramboll's principal urban planner Rebecca Dillon-Robinson who lives in east London and has been involved with establishing community green space projects there.

'There is currently a big push for community gardens and green spaces to be created that is often community-led. But it can be very difficult to know where to start if you aren't familiar with the planning system,' she observes.

'You have to find out how to speak to the police about security, for example. Discover and understand what all the material considerations are, what the planners need to know, how to present it all. This toolkit tries to bring all the issues into one plane for community members. It's a capacity-building exercise.'

So why have Ramboll and Planning Aid for London teamed up? 'Local authorities are so challenged in delivering things they really do welcome community initiatives, but it's dependent on community groups' capacity. But in the current climate of austerity it is unclear how a garden get delivered unless the local community did it themselves,' says Dillon-Robinson.

'We've tried to create a toolkit that alerts them to all the things they need to consider. Long term sustainability is the key. Understanding the context, what water source is there, what sort of planting will work best, orientation of things and furniture, security and sightlines, safety for women and children, lighting, accessibility. We are capacity- building and sharing knowledge with the toolkit.'

'You have to use some forethought about where you place things, for example, and how that features in the planning

application. In one space a community created, I was involved with, there was a long shipping container installed and it became desirable to move it to improve sightlines and people's sense of security. But we couldn't just move it because its location was a material planning condition. There is complexity to establishing green spaces that communities may not be aware of,' she points out.

'I've been working with the local community on Wild Green in Plaistow, E13, which was designated as community space,' she says. 'It's a corner of a local park owned by the council and the community group manage it.'

'A lot of these types of spaces are coming up. Sometimes they are abandoned parking lots or leftover or neglected spaces, and there may be some sort of CIL-funded mechanism to provide some money with the community voting which space they wish to adopt.'

'The local authorities are challenged so they usually welcome the chance to facilitate the community taking it over. For the community, however, if you're dependent on the local council to manage some of these spaces, you might not get the outcome you want.'



'The problem is there are a lot of "roadblocks" to work your way through. For example, you will need to talk to the police about tackling anti-social behaviour and for some groups that might pose some difficulties.'

'I think there's also some potential here for private developers to use the toolkit and help community groups tackle taking on their own bit of green space, or growing space. Especially now more of them are getting interested in delivering some social value impact.'

To remind PiL readers, Planning Aid for London, Ramboll's partner in the venture, is a registered charity, founded in 1973 by the Town and Country Planning Association and members of the Royal Town Planning Institute.

With help from volunteer planners, architects, urban designers and other built environment professionals, it provides free advice and training to Londoners from underserved communities to help them to participate in and navigate the planning process and make a difference in their neighbourhoods.

Denean Rowe, Project Manager at Planning Aid for London, said at the toolkit's launch: 'It was great to collaborate with Ramboll on this. We know access to green space is important for good health and wellbeing. But many underserved communities in London don't have adequate access to them. We hope the toolkit will serve as an important tool for groups to create and maintain green spaces in their neighbourhoods.'

Rebecca Dillon-Robinson again: "Being part of creating and maintaining a local green space can support communities to be

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.

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more resilient and create a sense of local stewardship. Yet the planning system can be difficult to navigate, especially for our most disadvantaged communities, who are often time poor and for whom English is not a first language. If we want to create an equitable city, we need to ensure everyone can take part in the planning system and we hope this toolkit goes some way to achieving that.'

What's in the toolkit

The kit, free online (see link below) divides into four sections: Planning and Governance, Designing and Engaging; a Checklist of key actions; and a section on Case Studies and Further Resources. It runs in total to around 26 pages – not too long, but covering all the bases.

Planning and Governance

The initial planning and governance section includes information on setting up your group, arranging insurance cover, health and safety regulations to consider, financial sustainability and fundraising, establishing a relationship with the landowner, and securing long-term protection for your green space. Or where it is due for redevelopment, community groups will need to reassure the landlord that they can be confident the community will hand back the land at the point they've agreed to. >>>

>>> Strong plans that demonstrate community involvement, financial sustainability, and how maintenance will be managed into the future will be needed. And it is a good idea to plan in some education and outreach events that engage the landowner and the broader community. Buy in from the community results in fewer instances of damage or anti-social behaviour and helps strengthen community and a sense of place.

Whether or not the community's plans will be regarded as 'development' and require permission is explained, and that there are currently no permitted development rights for community gardens. There is a sub-section devoted to achieving long term stewardship, by designing a plan with community maintenance in mind and arranging for an asset transfer of the space to the community, if that's desired.

Design

On design, it covers who to engage, visioning, understanding your site – water, wind, daylighting, topography, soil, past uses, invasive species, users, and zoning your site into different areas before moving onto materials, accessibility, drainage and water, lighting and planting.

There is some useful advice on not getting fixated on one layout, but to explore as many different iterations quickly, then



filtering the options to a few designs that will work, and then how to phase the garden so that it can evolve over time as funding and resources allow.

Material choices that deliver long term sustainability or use reclaimed materials and components (a link to recycling organisation ReLondon is included), accessibility issues, water and drainage, lighting and planting, biodiversity are all considered.

There's also a checklist of the headline things you'll need to think about to keep everything on track and a section on further resources to look up. The toolkit also includes a list of six case studies with links to their individual websites, including schemes in Brussels, Mexico and the US, if you need ideas from further afield,

Wild Green, Plaistow – the scheme Rebecca Dillon Robinson has been involved with, which cost £20,000, is also included ([link here](#)), alongside schemes for Walworth Garden, Lambeth, a growing space ([link here](#)) and London's pocket parks programme which ran from 2013-15, providing £2m to create more than 100 parks across 26 boroughs, ranging from community orchards to edible bus stops. Further information on the pocket park projects can be found [here](#).

Here's the link to the Community-led Green Space Toolkit – Are you planning a community-led green space? – Download the guide from Planning Aid for London here: <https://tinyurl.com/dxwd7a22>

