

**Headlines from Energy Plus Academy Think Tank**  
**Greening Community Spaces:**  
**The value of growing things in combating climate change**  
**Monday 18th-Tuesday 19th October, Trafford Hall**

On the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> October, the Energy Plus Academy organised a 24-hour Think Tank at Trafford Hall to explore how green spaces and community growing can help combat climate change, the wider benefits they bring to communities, and how they can be organised. The event was attended by 35 representatives from local councils, housing associations and community groups. Participants shared their knowledge and experience and left with practical ideas on how to set up or improve their own community growing projects. This headline report presents the main findings and key points from the event.

***How green spaces in urban areas helps mitigate climate change:***

1. **The Natural History Museum recently produced a report which found that the UK only has 53% of its natural species left, and rates in the bottom 10% of all countries in the world for biodiversity intactness<sup>1</sup>. Community gardens and green spaces play an important role in tackling climate change** by protecting green space and encouraging biodiversity. They also provide an important platform to encourage wider discussions about climate change and the changes we can make within our own lives.
2. **Tree planting** can be a useful way to increase biodiversity in the local area and help mitigate against climate change. It is important to select the right trees to plant, so they do not cause problems further down the line and ones that stand a good chance of surviving in built-up areas.
3. **The risk of flooding** is increasing in many communities. Green spaces can help manage flooding by replacing concrete areas with soil that can absorb water. Certain plants can also help control water flow and increase community flood resilience, such as goats' beard and giant rhubarb<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/press-office/press-releases/natural-history-museum-reveals-the-world-has-crashed-through-the.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.countryliving.com/uk/homes-interiors/gardens/a30976386/rain-gardens-help-flooding/>

4. **It is important to use green spaces to increase biodiversity, which can be done by planting wildflowers as opposed to a plain lawn.** In one example, Chidwall EMB converted an empty flat into an estate office, and replaced the front lawn with wildflowers to enhance biodiversity, they are supporting tenants to do the same if they would like to. Orbit has produced a handbook in partnership with the Wildlife Trust teaching people about changes they can make in their own gardens and community spaces to support nature<sup>3</sup>. Bootle, Liverpool, runs a Bootle in Bloom competition every year to encourage people to use their front gardens to grow flowers and other plants. Another suggestion is to replace some fences and walls with hedges. Utilising green space creatively, rather than sticking to a ‘neat and tidy’ approach, can uncover greater options for wildlife and the environment.
  
5. **Using small spaces:** When thinking about increasing green spaces in urban areas, we have to be innovative. Some groups are using buckets and bags which can be placed in small courtyards and balconies, or in areas that are concreted; whilst one group is using lampposts to support hanging baskets. Green walls and vertical gardens can also be a good way to increase greenery in modest spaces. Small bits of underused scrubland can also be used to grow wildflowers, as a group in Liverpool has found after identifying 72 public sites across the city which would be suitable for growing. In Leicester they are adding “living roofs” to all their bus shelters to encourage biodiversity and help absorb pollutants<sup>4</sup>. And there are many more.
  
6. **Active travel:** How we travel around our towns and cities has a big impact on the environment and local habitats. Leicester have recently introduced a “Choose How You Move”<sup>5</sup> scheme, with an app which rewards you with points for walking or cycling rather than driving. These points can then be used as high street vouchers or donated to a local charity.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.orbitcustomerhub.org.uk/media/xjkpgze4/the-wildlife-trust-wildlife-outside-your-window.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.clearchannel.co.uk/latest/bee-bus-stops-springing-up-in-leicester?creative=500875743762&keyword=&matchtype=b&network=g&device=m&utm\\_term=&utm\\_campaign=&utm\\_source=adwords&utm\\_medium=ppc&hsa\\_acc=8578032136&hsa\\_cam=12417376541&hsa\\_grp=122159989590&hsa\\_ad=500875743762&hsa\\_src=g&hsa\\_tgt=dsa-19959388920&hsa\\_kw=&hsa\\_mt=b&hsa\\_net=adwords&hsa\\_ver=3&gclid=EA1aIQobChMlnLr0\\_sro8wIVhpftCh3l8gbGEAAAYASAAEgJvEvD\\_BwE](https://www.clearchannel.co.uk/latest/bee-bus-stops-springing-up-in-leicester?creative=500875743762&keyword=&matchtype=b&network=g&device=m&utm_term=&utm_campaign=&utm_source=adwords&utm_medium=ppc&hsa_acc=8578032136&hsa_cam=12417376541&hsa_grp=122159989590&hsa_ad=500875743762&hsa_src=g&hsa_tgt=dsa-19959388920&hsa_kw=&hsa_mt=b&hsa_net=adwords&hsa_ver=3&gclid=EA1aIQobChMlnLr0_sro8wIVhpftCh3l8gbGEAAAYASAAEgJvEvD_BwE)

<sup>5</sup> <https://choosehowyoumove.betterpoints.uk/page/choose-how-you-move#:~:text=The%20Choose%20How%20You%20Move,them%20to%20your%20favourite%20charity.>

***The wider benefits of green spaces:***

7. Being involved in community growing projects and having access to green space helps people's physical and mental health. It helps keep people active and lets them connect with other people, bringing people together who may not otherwise get the chance to meet. In a recent survey of 900 customers carried out by Orbit, 92% said it was important to have access to green space<sup>6</sup>. The Bleasdale Street Garden, set up by Community Gateway, was established to help bring people together who had been isolated over COVID. One participant told the story of a member of their group who found that being part of the garden helped bring a new focus to his life and created a support system around him, which was instrumental in his recovery from addiction. Hull City Council reported a significant increase in people wanting to be involved in community gardens since the pandemic. The "Chester 10 Times Greener"<sup>7</sup> project aims to bring green spaces to people who may not otherwise have access and gives people the skills and resources to grow things in their own neighbourhoods and near their homes.
  
8. **Lots of the participants organise food growing gardens.** This helps provide healthy sustainable food for the local community, provides a platform to teach people about the benefits of home food growing and helps stop food waste. Many of the groups donate surplus food to local food banks. In Liverpool, there is a "Eco Foraging" club where local people come together and collect food from local the local areas which they then cook together.
  
9. **As well as protecting the environment, greening projects can help housing associations and councils save money.** For example, a community garden can stop fly-tipping and anti-social behaviour; whilst a wildflower meadow needs less upkeep and mowing than a lawn.
  
10. Having well-maintained community green spaces help people take **pride in their local area**, making it a more attractive place to live.

***Organising your community growing project:***

11. To set up a community growing project, groups need to ensure they have the **basic equipment to get started and have access and permission to use the land**. Groups need a

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<sup>6</sup> <https://orbitgroup.org.uk/media/2344/climate-change-report.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://10xgreenerch1.wordpress.com/>

clear growing plan and an understanding of the type of space they have so that they can identify appropriate plants for example shade or sunshine.

12. It is important the project has a **known person in charge** who can lead on the project. If there is enough budget or the project is supported by a larger organisation, a paid member of staff can help ensure the project stays on track and has continuous management.
13. It is important to use lots of **different methods to get people involved in the garden**, including online advertising and physical leaflet drops and posters. Cooking events and fun days can help engage people who might not otherwise be interested in gardening. It is important to open the garden at different times in the week to let as many people as possible become involved, for example, a retired person may prefer to come in the week, but a family may only be available at the weekend.
14. If a community growing project is being organised by a larger organisation such as a housing association or council, it is important that they take proper care to **find out what the community would like as part of their green space**. Childwall EMB, who are in the process of re-establishing a community garden is planning on running an open day where local people can come and share what they would like to see in the garden and how they would like to use the space.
15. For a project to be sustainable, **it needs to have engaged volunteers** who are committed to the project, and who will maintain the momentum of the project. Volunteers need to be patient in order to see change happen in the garden and be resilient to any setbacks such as a bad growing season.
16. Involving local children is important as it helps spread the knowledge and skills to the next generation and get new groups involved in the garden. Involvement in green spaces teaches children to respect nature and their local environments. Children can be given small projects that will have quick results to get them interested in growing, such as growing cress 'people' in recycled drinks bottles or eggshells.
17. It is important that community gardens are accessible to elderly and disabled people, for example having wide paths and ramps. Raised beds can be a good way to allow people who

cannot easily bend down or stand for long periods of time to get involved and help out in the garden. Gardens and green spaces can be made inclusive by growing different types of plants or herbs that have meaning to different groups within the community, and that are used in different types of cuisine.

18. A significant challenge in setting up a community growing project is **accessing the right funding**, which can often be very short term. Longer-term funding with larger amounts available can be difficult to access, which is off-putting for some volunteer groups. Becoming a constituted group and having a dedicated bank account can help groups access more funding opportunities. Groups may feel overwhelmed by the process of becoming constituted and securing funds but being able to turn to another group that has already been through the process can help. Peer learning and networking can help.
  
19. **Groups need to be resourceful to help funding stretch further**, for example using old tyres and bathtubs to grow things in. Local businesses may give away things that were being thrown away but could come in useful for green projects such as old timber and netting from local buildings, or coffee grounds and eggshells from cafes for compost. One community garden made planters out of material which could not be easily recycled, or for example, filling plastic bottles with used crisp packets to use as 'ecobricks' for raised beds; whilst another was letting the local housing association gardening service put a skip on their site in return for them removing the weeds in between their raised beds. Groups can also work with other local community growing projects to share gardening equipment.
  
20. Community gardening groups **can work with other local organisations** to provide support for local people. A group in Liverpool was working with a women's charity that had identified seven areas of the city where women felt unsafe at night. The two groups are working together to add lighting to these areas, as well as widening the paths and adding flowers to make them more appealing
  
21. **Community green spaces must utilise local knowledge**. There will be lots of local people that are knowledgeable about gardening and have a good understanding of the local environment. It is important that this knowledge is passed onto less experienced members and that skill-sharing is encouraged.

22. At the end of the Think Tank, participants left with practical plans of the next steps they could take in their own community growing projects. Actions included:

- connecting community green spaces to encourage green networks.
- installing community raised beds on high streets.
- organising a green spaces community mapping exercise; arranging garden open days to encourage participation.
- and setting up grow bags in meanwhile spaces.

### ***Conclusion***

Community gardens and green spaces can play a crucial role in helping to tackle climate change, not only do they help in their own right by increasing biodiversity and absorbing CO<sub>2</sub> and other pollutants, but they also help provide a platform for wider conversations around climate action. Community growing can take place in spaces of all size, large and small, by uncovering and implementing innovative ideas. Green spaces not only help the environment but also support both physical and mental wellbeing by bringing people together and keeping them active. They help to build skills, strengthen communities and make less affluent areas more attractive.

## Key messages to government

At the end of the Think Tank, we asked participants to come up with their key messages to the government about how they can provide greater support for community growing projects, increase biodiversity and help tackle climate change. The key ideas are summarised below:

- The government should provide sustained long-term funding to support community growing projects. This will help ensure the groups are sustainable and continue to operate.
- Incentives will encourage individuals, businesses and farmers to increase biodiversity on the land where they operate, for example replacing fences with hedgerows or adding bird boxes to encourage native species of birds.
- Planning requirements should be changed to ensure biodiversity and green areas are considered in every development, for example requiring grass instead of Astro turf.
- Government should provide training opportunities and educational material to help teach people about the importance of green spaces, and how they can make a difference in their own community. They should stress the importance of green spaces and growing things in combatting climate change in all teaching materials.
- There is great local knowledge about how green spaces should be run. The government needs to listen and use this knowledge to inform green policies.
- Climate change is an immediate threat, and the government needs to take action now. Using green spaces and people interest in growing things as a springboard will help the government to deliver.