

Rocky Park Community Gardens
Ellsworth Street, Bethnal Green, London
 Rocky Park Community Gardens

BIG Challenge 2015 submission category: Community engagement

Project overview

Rocky Park is a large scale community centre project to provide residents of the council flats of the Hollybush estate with a regeneration of disused and non-maintained land.

The scheme is entirely voluntary based with local residents working together to reclaim the land and turn it into a large scale mix of allotments, gardens, walkways and green space.

The work commenced five years ago when Margaret Cox decided to engage with local residents to understand if and what they would like to see happen with all the disused grounds surrounding the numerous blocks of community flats.

This inspired Margaret to make a start in one of the areas frequented by local drug users and sellers.

This first step demonstrated the potential to transform the area and rid it of the undesirable users of the area and bring about community and place for people.



Photo: Community garden

What were the biodiversity conditions on site, prior to the enhancement?

The public spaces were rundown and provided no place for people to socialise; no basis for community.

The squares between the numerous blocks of flats were virtually void of green and were allowed to degrade into near waste land. The outlook for residents was bleak; the biodiversity virtually non-existent.

Were there any specific conditions that led to you carrying out this work?

Unmaintained with drug users frequenting many of the public spaces in between the blocks of council flats, this created an uncomfortable and often unsafe feeling for residents.

The public land became disused and run down with no amenities for children and people largely stayed in their homes. The future of the estate looked grim.

There was a complex mix of cultures and ethnic minorities with a wide range of languages with many non-English speakers.

This exacerbated the lack of community and integration. People were not mixing and there were no amenities or features to encourage this status to change.

What were the biodiversity measures taken?

The context is very important! This project was started and achieved by a small group of residents purely voluntarily and with no financial support.

The equipment, planting, materials and features were all obtained through donations, rescuing items from local refuse centres and retrieving discarded items from the surrounding areas.

This core group decided to categorise each of the squares between the various blocks of flats into uses for community meeting places, visual improvement and many for a scheme of individual raised planting boxes about 6m² each dedicated to individual families to grow vegetables, fruits and flowers.

An area set aside for nurturing young trees and a gardening workshop area. All has been achieved, is functioning and the local residents are involved and making good use of the spaces; the drug addicts



Photo: Community centre

have virtually disappeared and crimes on the estate have fallen dramatically. Mrs Cox and her core group have managed the transformation on their own for over 4 years.

All the land between the blocks of flats has been reclaimed and put to one of the various uses mentioned above.

The innovation of this projects is the voluntary nature, the method of getting local community integration and the way it was achieved created an important tipping point where people behaviours radically changed.

The net gain in biodiversity is significant, with new trees, new planting areas, community spaces people are proud of, vegetable

growing and increase of trees and bushes. New habitat is created everywhere on the estate but a large central special zone was created for growing wild plants such as herbs where wild life thrives and residents can visit.

The local council allowed the use of the land to be reclaimed and the volunteers did the rest. All the work was by local residents as volunteers.

How would you best describe the project?

An enhancement.

Further information

The long term benefits are a new community spirit, social improvement, less crime, less drug abuse and a cleaner, safer and happier place for the 2500 residents.

All the objectives have been met; questions 9, 10 & 11 confirm this. However, the plan going forward is to maintain what's been achieved.

This includes making use of the old disused and small community building into a place for meeting and even cooking meals from the locally produced vegetables.

They hope to raise some funds to build a new centre which would feature sustainability such as solar panels, rain water recovery and involve the children on the estate to learn from this.

The area has now seen more wildlife return in this highly urbanised and traffic gridlocked area of East London.

With such a new richness of planting and maintenance it is clearly visible that insects and birds have made this reclaimed land their home as well.

The objectives are covered in questions 9, 10 & 11 and all are met. The most important objective being to create a place for community and integration with nature.

The lessons learnt by Mrs Cox and her core team is that people can make a real difference despite daunting



Photo: Residents growing area

odds and large scale issues. The core wish is that all council estates could learn to do this but with some financial and local government involvement it could be a model for the future of community integration.

There is a real story to be told with this large scheme and the best tip for that could be provided; capture the story and let others see it.

What was your personal motivation for carrying out the enhancement?

The biggest driver for Mrs Cox was the need to create a sustainable future for the 2500 community where day to day crime and miss use no longer a feature of community life.

Clearly achieved through all the areas with the richness and variety that has been achieved from nothing!