

# Research summary

Helping community groups  
to improve public spaces



## About this briefing

This paper is based on research commissioned by CABA Space and conducted by the Glass-House Community Led Design in 2008. The aim was to find out more about community groups that were involved in improving public spaces, what resources and support they had, what more they needed, and what obstacles prevent projects from progressing. The research was based on three regional focus groups, attended by representatives of 14 community groups, and participants of a Glass-House training course, Spaces by Design. A questionnaire was completed by 68 people actively involved in community-led open space regeneration projects.

## About CABA Space

CABA Space is a specialist unit within the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. It aims to bring excellence to the design, management and maintenance of parks, streets and squares in our towns and cities. We provide support and advice to built environment professionals and, through them, best practice guidance for community groups working with professionals to improve their local spaces.



**‘Recent duty to involve legislation means local authorities have to involve local people’**

© Craig Strong

## Why support community public space projects?

Most local authorities and housing associations are responsible for hundreds of gardens, squares, allotments and other public spaces. Many of these spaces are small and scattered throughout a wide area, so are relatively difficult to maintain – yet it is often these small local spaces that are particularly highly valued by the people who live nearby.

Research for CABI Space has shown that 91 per cent of the public believe that public parks and open spaces improve people's quality of life and 74 per cent believe that parks and open spaces are important to people's health and mental and physical wellbeing<sup>1</sup>. More than 70 per cent of people say they visit urban green spaces frequently<sup>2</sup>.

Research published by Natural England as part of its 'Natural Health Service' manifesto found that people who said they had easy access to safe green spaces are more likely to visit their green space and live more active lives<sup>3</sup>. Those that live more than a mile and a quarter from a park are less likely to be physically active and 27 per cent more likely to be overweight or obese.

Increasingly, local community groups want to become actively involved in restoring or maintaining neighbourhood spaces. In many cases, these groups can bring together a wide range of volunteers, with many useful practical and professional skills, and a willingness to give hundreds of hours of their time free. In the survey, 75 per cent of groups listed volunteers as the most commonly used resource. CABI's local authority skills survey suggests volunteers contribute the equivalent of two extra members of staff directly to the management and maintenance of spaces<sup>4</sup>. Beyond direct help groups offer other assistance such as marketing and running events to improve spaces and involve the community with a value of £35 million a year to the sector<sup>5</sup>.

Local people bring a knowledge of how existing spaces work and what the needs of the community are, which leads to better-designed places that are more sustainable. With the right help and support, community groups can raise significant amounts of money and work with professionals to deliver considerable improvements to the quality and appearance of neighbourhoods.

Central government recognises this: the recent duty to involve legislation means local authorities now have to involve local people. This means they should inform them, consult them, and involve them in other practical ways, both in routine functions and significant one-off projects. Public space projects already attract interest and engagement from local people so can be used to demonstrate good practice to other services looking to involve local people. Community green space activities, such as allotments and community gardens work, encourage people to talk to each other, building community cohesion and pride. Engagement will also build trust between the authority and local people.

To maximise the benefits from community groups, public authorities that are responsible for these spaces need explicitly to recognise and support these groups.



**'91% of the public believe parks and open spaces improve peoples quality of life'**

1. MORI research for CABI Space (2004) *Public attitudes to architecture and public space: Transforming neighbourhoods*
2. National Audit Office (2006) *Enhancing urban green space*
3. University of Bristol / University of East Anglia for Natural England
4. CABI Space (2009) *Local authority skills survey*
5. GreenSpace (2003) *The community network final report*

## Harnessing local enthusiasm to transform public space

Parks, gardens and children's play areas have all benefited from the enthusiasm and vision of dedicated local volunteers. Many community groups have raised money, employed professional designers and other contractors, and created strong partnerships with their local council, housing associations and other organisations. Often, community groups are clients in the design process: finding out what people need from the space, writing briefs for landscape architects and other professionals, co-ordinating partnerships with the local authority and others, and managing projects.

## Knowing more and wanting better

As an increasing number of public space improvement projects are managed by community groups, people's expectations are rising and they are becoming more demanding clients. Many groups have volunteers who are skilled professionals able to offer valuable skills in organising, influencing and marketing. While time and money are often in short supply, community groups also recognise the value to their community of better public spaces and this is what motivates them to get involved.

Such groups are keen for a more informed and engaging relationship with their local authority. As one respondent put it: 'We want positive ideas about how to work with our local authority. We want them to share inspiring examples and support us by linking us up with the right officers'. Half of the respondents said that their project would benefit from the chance to visit inspiring projects and meeting other community groups which have completed similar successful projects.

## The role of local authorities

Public space improvement projects are rarely successful unless they involve people who have an interest in the space involved. Usually the local authority will be an important contributor. Local authority and housing association officers are seen by community groups as a vital source of help – more than 70 per cent worked with local

authority officers. Councillors, too, can be valuable – nearly half said that councillors had been a useful resource on their project.

However, the size, structures and working practices of local authorities can be a major barrier to success. One respondent voiced a common concern: 'There is no co-ordination. We have to deal with all the authority's departments separately.' Another said: 'Local authorities need to develop project teams for all sizes of project, not just the big infrastructure ones.' If local authorities are to make the most of their communities' willingness to help improve public spaces they need to address these concerns.

In addition, many community representatives said they were frustrated that local authority officers did not seem to appreciate how important public spaces are to people who live nearby. Linked to this is the perception that local authority parks officers have often not had a chance to develop the skills needed to work well with community groups. These 'softer' skills are often not recognised or taught as part of professional training. This gap in skills has been identified in *Skills to grow*, the green space skills strategy being implemented by CABE Space and others. For local authorities, public space improvement projects that actively involve local people represent an effective way of putting into practice the duty to involve. It is very much in the interests of local authorities that they ensure that their public space officers receive this training.

Councillors should use their own networks and contacts to support community groups. Council officers are also sometimes involved in local voluntary work. They should be encouraged to share their contacts.

**‘Almost 40% of respondents said they did not know where to find resources or help’**

© Alys Tomlinson



## The information gap

Although there is a wide range of practical information available to help communities that want to improve public spaces, local people are often unaware of it. Almost 40 per cent of respondents said that they did not know where to find resources or help. Local authorities should gather this information together on their websites and put it in hard copy in public libraries and council offices.

CABE Space has a growing collection of advice including: *It's our space: a guide for community groups working to improve public space* and Spaceshaper, a toolkit for measuring the quality of public space. All CABE Space publications are available to download free from CABE's website.

## Recommendations

- Councils should recognise the insight, passion and commitment that local groups bring to projects by removing barriers and develop better joint working with groups.
- Councillors should support community groups working on public space projects and ensure that they are viewed positively by council officers.
- Councils should recognise the skills needed for successful community engagement and ensure their officers receive training and ongoing support to develop these skills.
- Details of where to find resources and help should be made available in the form of a community portal on the council's website. It should also be in print in council offices and local libraries, and made available in alternative formats.
- Best practice examples of good projects should be shared locally.

# Case studies

## Edward Square, Islington, London

Edward Square is a newly designed public space occupying the site of a former Victorian town square. When the 0.5-hectare site was threatened by a nearby development, local residents got together to save and improve it. The Friends of Edward Square (FREDS) worked closely with the London Borough of Islington and, early in the process, appointed a landscape architect, J&L Gibbons. FREDS added planning help from a local barrister and specialist help from the Open Spaces Society to their own professional skills as part of the voluntary support. The renovated garden, which was completed in 2000, includes an inscribed poem by poet laureate Andrew Motion. The square has remained popular and respected, and the council and friends group still work together to maintain it. 'This was very much a grassroots project, because of the involvement of the community and the skill of the designers,' says Lucy Shomali, policy and projects manager, London Borough of Islington. 'What could have been a bland upgrade has instead produced a design that has stood the test of time and become a space that is much loved by the local community.'



© J&L Gibbons

## St Neot Doorstep Green, Cornwall

After a landowner bequeathed an area of 0.45 hectares to the village of St Neot, the local parish council suggested turning it into an informal garden. This idea was popular, so following a lot of consultation with local residents, and advice from a local architect, the council drew up plans and appointed a project manager. The garden was created by a partnership of a local contractor, who did the excavation and built the footpaths, and local volunteers. With advice from skilled craftspeople, such as stonemasons, the volunteers built an amphitheatre and planted around 1,500 trees and shrubs. The green was completed in 2005 and is maintained by the council, with seasonal pruning by the friends funded by income from events on the green. St Neot Parish Council said: 'Over 2,000 volunteer hours went into working on the project. The amphitheatre was built in just 10 working days, mostly at weekends, with some 40 workers lending a hand.'



Doorstep Greens © Natural England

## Mapesbury Dell, Brent, London

Mapesbury Dell is a 0.2-hectare public garden in the Mapesbury area of Brent, London, which was run down and under-used. The local residents' association wanted to renovate the Dell and formed a partnership with the London Borough of Brent council's parks service. Following public consultation, a local resident – an award-winning landscape architect – created a new design for the space and agreed to waive her fee. From the design, Brent's parks service wrote a tender specification for construction. The community group chose the contractor and the parks service then managed construction on site. The community group and the parks service collaborated closely throughout and the result was a revived public space that was better than either could have achieved alone. At least 20 per cent of the resources came from time and skills that were donated free. An agreement was drawn up specifying that the parks service provides basic maintenance for the site, while the community gardening group provides more detailed care. The restoration was completed in 2005.



Andy Hendry/New Century Pictures



Doorstep Greens © Natural England

### What help community groups want:

- face-to-face support
- inspiring visits to meet successful groups and share best practice
- training in planning, procurement and design
- access to professionals – fundraisers, project managers and landscape architects

## Resources for community groups improving public spaces:

BTCV – creating a more sustainable future by inspiring people and improving places  
[www.btcv.org.uk](http://www.btcv.org.uk)

CABE – resources for community groups: *It's our space*, a guide to improving public space and the Spaceshaper toolkit  
[www.cabe.org.uk/community-groups](http://www.cabe.org.uk/community-groups)

Community Matters – the national federation for community organisations providing support and guidance to increase capacity of local groups  
[www.communitymatters.org.uk](http://www.communitymatters.org.uk)

Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens – supports, represents and promotes community-managed farms and gardens across the United Kingdom  
[www.farmgarden.org.uk](http://www.farmgarden.org.uk)

Glass-House Community Led Design – offers design advice, training and project support to communities and professionals working together to improve the quality of a neighbourhood  
[www.theglasshouse.org.uk](http://www.theglasshouse.org.uk)

Green Pennant – the national award that recognises high quality green spaces in England that are managed by voluntary and community groups

GreenSpace – providing help, advice and networking for community groups working in parks and green spaces

Groundwork - supporting communities in need, by helping improve the places where they live, work and play  
[www.groundwork.org.uk](http://www.groundwork.org.uk)

Landscape Institute – creating a thriving society and environment through inspirational places - website includes a directory of all qualified landscape architects by region and specialism  
[www.landscapeinstitute.org](http://www.landscapeinstitute.org)

The Wildlife Trusts – provide volunteering opportunities and events for groups and individuals to help achieve a UK richer in wildlife.  
[www.wildlifetrusts.org](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org)



**‘Councils should recognise the insight, passion and commitment of local groups’**



Throughout the country, gardens, allotments, play areas and other public spaces are being transformed for the better by groups of local residents. These community groups often contribute hundreds of hours of volunteer time and considerable expertise, but sometimes they lack the practical support they need. This briefing is primarily for local authorities but will be of interest to other public space managers such as housing associations and offers ideas for supporting community groups that are working to improve neighbourhood spaces.

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Commission for Architecture  
and the Built Environment

The government's advisor  
on architecture, urban design  
and public space

CABE is the government's advisor on architecture, urban design and public space. As a public body, we encourage policymakers to create places that work for people. We help local planners apply national design policy and advise developers and architects, persuading them to put people's needs first. We show public sector clients how to commission projects that meet the needs of their users. And we seek to inspire the public to demand more from their buildings and spaces. Advising, influencing and inspiring, we work to create well-designed, welcoming places.

CABE Space is a specialist unit within CABE that aims to bring excellence to the design, management and maintenance of parks and public space in our towns and cities.

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