

THE STORY OF  
**WALWORTH  
COMMUNITY  
GARDENING  
NETWORK**<sup>2017-  
2025</sup>

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MAY '25

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# INTRODUCTION

Good stories usually have a beginning, middle, and end. When the idea of telling the story of the WCGN first arose in early 2024, it felt like an end. There hadn't been any formal meetings in over a year. A decision had been made to close the company, and Pembroke House had been appointed to 'support the wind down of the formal organisational structure, and a transition to an informal network.'

But what did that really mean? There was a lot of uncertainty. What does an informal network do? Without a central administration, how would anyone know what's happening? If there was just a whatsapp group and a plant swap once a year – is that still a network? Would WCGN exist?!

Around this time we heard about 'The Decelerator'. The Decelerator is a free service for civil society organisations that offers tools and hotline support for better organisational endings. Its tag line is "Endings Are Inevitable. Bad Endings Don't Have To Be". They aim to equip people with the "knowledge and confidence to approach endings with purpose and care".

This helped us to realise that whatever the future for WCGN it felt important to recognise the contributions that people had made, and celebrate the value of what had been created. Ideas, like seeds, can sometimes take many years to germinate and take root. WCGN itself grew from earlier attempts by resident groups to unite around a resident-led neighbourhood plan for Elephant & Walworth. We began to ask – what could WCGN most usefully leave available, ready to be picked up and used by those who came next?

The story of the WCGN will be different for everyone who has played a role in the network. Whether you joined a garden visit, attended a training session, swapped a plant, or shared knowledge via the Whatsapp group. It's not one, but multiple interconnected stories. We hope you find both something you recognise, and something surprising in the stories that have been brought together here, and forgive the inevitable gaps and subjectivities.

Is this a story that is ending? Or just beginning? You decide.

**By Richard Galpin  
Alberta Fruit Commons  
Pembroke House**



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## 2009

### AN ALTERNATIVE NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

In response to Southwark Council's plans to regenerate the Elephant and Castle, a coalition formed in 2009 under the banner of the 'Elephant Amenity Network' that included local residents, shopkeepers, market traders, TRAs, and friends of parks groups. In 2012 the coalition achieved designation for the Elephant and Walworth Neighbourhood Forum (under the Localism Act 2011) and began work to develop a neighbourhood plan for the Elephant & Walworth area that would offer an alternative resident-led vision to Southwark Council's plans for regeneration.

The neighbourhood plan was never adopted by the council, but many of the ideas and relationships took root across Walworth. One of these was a network of community growing spaces.

## 2016 - 2017

### SETTING UP WALWORTH COMMUNITY GARDENING NETWORK

In 2016 the Community Action Network (CAN) run by Community Southwark brought together a 30-strong group of Southwark growers at the Pullens Centre to discuss the possibility of forming a Southwark-wide growers' network. Adopting an 'Incredible Edible' model was proposed, but there was no consensus on the best way forward. Mindful of the neighbourhood plan, Jeremy Leach from the Walworth Society suggested that a starting point for developing a Southwark-wide network could be to build-out from existing groups in the Walworth area. In time, a Southwark-wide network could be established, linked to more localised clusters.

Walworth became the 'ideal' place to start because it already had many active tenants and residents associations (TRAs) on both sides of the Walworth Road.

TRAs offer a way for anyone living in a defined area (council tenants, leaseholders and private renters) to make collective decisions, and have a voice with Southwark Council to try to address localised issues such as housing conditions, rubbish collection and antisocial behaviour. Some TRAs have community

gardens and garden groups. They found themselves facing similar problems, such as a lack of horticultural knowledge, and a lack of volunteers.

Vincent Brown, member of Pullens Estate TRA and the Walworth Society, had experience of tenant's groups through his work with SGTO (Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations) and began conversations with neighbouring groups on the Newington, Alberta, Draper, and Brandon Estates. The idea for a Walworth-wide growers' network gathered momentum.

Local charity United St Saviour's offered funding to establish the network and to run training events. The Walworth Society agreed to hold the funds until the Walworth Community Gardening Network (WCGN) was ready to operate independently. Vincent became the first paid part-time coordinator.

In autumn 2017, the Walworth Community Gardening Network (WCGN) was set up.

In November 2017, an initial term of reference was agreed upon, and 32 growing spaces committed to becoming involved.



**The initial WCGN map**

# 2018

## THE FIRST WCGN CONFERENCE



On 21st April 2018, WCGN held its first annual conference at Walworth Garden. Jeremy Leach from the Walworth Society chaired the conference, and Cllr Barrie Hargrove, Southwark's Cabinet Member for Communities, Safety and Leisure at the time, attended. Through the conference WCGN identified three common challenges for groups, and outlined three key asks of Southwark Council:

1. Strategic support for access to watering points.
2. Free green waste collection for community gardens.
3. A single point of contact at Southwark Council.

Southwark Council expressed its commitment to all three demands. After the conference, the WCGN members started to meet regularly and started a WhatsApp group. In May, the first WCGN Steering Group formed and met at Walworth Garden. Meeting minutes have been diligently taken since then by Olivia Carlton.

# 2019

## INDEPENDENCE, FUNDING SUCCESS AND MANAGEMENT CHANGE

In early 2019, discussion about the long-term future of WCGN gained momentum. Members debated whether the network should remain under the Walworth Society or establish itself as an independent entity.

Throughout 2019, WCGN strengthened its presence in local events: two garden shows were hosted, one at Pasley Park in June and another at Nursery Row Park in September. A new website was established to centralise community garden information, supported by the London College of Communication (LCC).

One of 2019's major achievements was securing £11,500 from the Southwark Cleaner Greener Safer fund (CGS) for a two-year watering research project with Imperial College London. It was collaborative research into water needs and problems across community gardens to explore innovative irrigation solutions. In August, a further £10,000 was secured for staff costs and development from the London Community Foundation, which urged WCGN to set up its own bank account following the decision to be an independent organisation.



## 2020 ADAPTATION AND RESILIENCE

By September 2019, WCGN formally constituted itself as an Unincorporated Voluntary Organisation, setting up a smaller management committee with key roles: Chair, Treasurer, Secretary, and Coordinator. Vincent Brown stepped down as the paid coordinator, handing over to Debbie Michener in September.

By late 2019, WCGN had moved from an informal network to a structured, funded organisation with a draft vision for the future. The AGM in early 2020 was set to be the next major milestone to officially launch the organisation (however, it got postponed to June and went online due to COVID).

The COVID-19 pandemic forced WCGN to move all meetings and events online. By April, a business Zoom account was set up, and regular steering group, management group, and full group meetings were held virtually. Despite restrictions, WCGN members continued growing projects in lockdown, supporting each other through WhatsApp groups, new social media channels on Instagram and Twitter, and a new YouTube channel for community gardening tutorials.



**2021 February Zoom all member meeting**

In June, Sam Jones (Chair), Vincent Brown (Treasurer), Peter Balazs (Vice Treasurer) and Olivia Carlton (Secretary) were re-elected. However, Sam noted that she needed to step down in September. By then, the network had struggled

# 2021

## RECOVERY AND RECONNECTION

to find a successor. Richard Galpin later stepped in with transitional leadership support but the Chair role remained unfilled.

From mid-2020, funding became the central topic for WCGN. The idea of transitioning to an incorporated body was discussed to unlock larger funding streams.

By November, WCGN had adapted to a new operational model and navigated leadership changes. Members voted for prioritising deeper engagement rather than expansion, reducing the frequency of full-group meetings from monthly to quarterly, simplifying the coordinator role from hands-on project delivery to supporting garden leaders, and transitioning to incorporation to gain funding eligibility.

The year started cautiously due to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, but activities resumed with the Plant Swap at St Peter's Church Garden in May and ramped up after July when lockdowns were lifted. Garden visits resumed. New gardens joined the network. The WhatsApp group grew significantly, reflecting renewed interest in community gardening. Additionally, a short documentary on community gardens was filmed.



**Aug 2021 Gibbings House, Children's Fun Day**

To support the growth, Ali Yellop was hired in May as WCGN's Project Officer to support engagement, social media, and outreach to underrepresented communities, while Debbie Michener continued

# 2022

## FINDING CLARITY AND PURPOSE

as Project Manager, overseeing fundraising, website updates, event coordination and reporting.

In 2021, WCGN successfully secured multiple small fundings, including Southwark Neighbourhoods Fund, National Lottery Community Fund, and Wakefield and Tetley Fund, which was carried over from 2020. However, securing future funding remained a priority, with bids submitted for Eden Tree Funding (3-year core grant), United St Saviours, and Southwark Council funding. In preparation for a potential funding gap, Debbie planned to step back, with a decision not to renew Ali's role if no funding was secured.

The November AGM proposed a new annual activity cycle to follow the gardening year, reducing activities during the summer and winter to allow members to focus on gardening from June to August and from December to January.

In March 2022, a visioning group was held to reconsider WCGN's purpose, values and vision.



### March 2022, visioning workshop snapshot

Discussion showed the group remained ambitious for what WCGN could achieve, with a focus on strengthening the network and peer-to-peer support and learning. Meanwhile, WCGN secured core funding from Eden Tree for £10,000/y for three years, which required a legal structure, leading to the decision to formalise WCGN as a registered non-profit company.

On 31st May 2022, WCGN was officially registered as a Company Ltd by Guarantee with an 'asset lock' in the governing documents. This was seen as the simplest legal structure to set up and administer, while still ensuring

# 2023

## A TURNING POINT

some guarantees of charitable purposes as required by the funder. Company directors were required and Winston Miller, Olivia Carlton, Tom Lloyd and Alex Gough were appointed. Alex (17 years old) brought the first youth involvement in WCGN.

As WCGN set up a new legal structure, leadership changes remained. Ali, the Project Officer, confirmed she would leave in November. Debbie, the Project Manager, also decided to leave by March 2023. Peter Balazs, the Treasurer, also stepped away.

Despite formal committee roles remaining unfilled, WCGN maintained an active presence, spending-out remaining grant funding to run workshops on polytunnel management, composting, and herbal medicine. The Walworth Plant Swap was held in May and WCGN attended the Autumn Fair at Nursery Row Park in September.

By the end of 2022, WCGN faced key strategic decisions about long-term financial sustainability. Leadership vacancies asked the question how WCGN would operate in 2023.

At the start of 2023, WCGN faced a pivotal moment to decide how or whether to continue. A SWOT analysis highlighted that WCGN had been largely driven by funding requirements rather than organic member leadership. On 21st March, a network-wide meeting was called to discuss options. Four scenarios were presented to members:

1. Stay as we are and grow the organisation – requires fundraising and new recruitment.
2. Transition to a decentralised network – to stop formal funding and admin but maintain the WhatsApp group and occasional self-organised events.
3. Call it a day – shut down the organisation but keep informal community relationships.
4. Transfer WCGN to an existing larger charity – this was the least supported idea.

Option 2 was favoured as members agreed that WCGN should continue but with a reduced structure. This marked a fundamental shift for WCGN – to scale back, focusing on organic member connections rather than expansion. By mid-year, WCGN no longer seeks large grants or hires staff, instead prioritising community-driven activities, resource sharing, and informal collaboration.

# 2024

## BACK TO INFORMAL STRUCTURE

With no administrative support in place, Pembroke House are appointed to complete the reporting, conclude the wrap up of the company, and support a positive transition to an informal network. Plans are made to ensure the learning from WCGN is shared with members, and informs the work of Southwark's Community Gardening Coordinators.

The company is dissolved but WCGN remains active through organic activities. The popular plant swap is held in May, hosted at Sutherland Square, and the WhatsApp group continues to facilitate groups in exchanging knowledge and resources, sharing tools, and solving practical challenges together.

# 2025

The year begins with the now-familiar pattern of another plant swap, regular wood chip deliveries, and knowledge-sharing and problem-solving via the Whatsapp group. New members continue to join.



# FOCUS: WCGN ACTIVITIES

## GARDEN VISITS

Garden visits were a core part of WCGN's activities, encouraging cross-learning between different groups. Many meetings were deliberately chosen in different community gardens to allow members to visit each other's sites.

## GROUP TRAINING

WCGN provided hands-on training sessions to improve members' gardening knowledge and skills. Training focuses on technical areas like composting, seed-sowing, tree pruning, biodiversity support, and sustainable gardening practices. Apart from skills development, these trainings also allowed many residents who are neighbours but never met each other, to start talking and sharing.

## COLLECTIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

WCGN facilitates a platform where members and community gardeners can address shared challenges. The network WhatsApp group has proven to be an efficient communication tool for them to discuss technical gardening questions, ask for tool sharing, resource sharing and recycling, and keep in touch with one another.



**Plant swap hosted at Sutherland Square May 2024**

# CELEBRATION EVENTS

WCGN organises events that bring the community together to celebrate achievements and milestones, such as garden shows at Pasley Park and Nursery Row Park and plant swaps at St Peter's Church Garden. These events create community touchpoints, enhance morale, and foster community pride.

Even during the pandemic, WCGN launched its first online garden show in September 2020, featuring five competition categories, a virtual gardeners' question time, and live-streamed judging and prize announcements.

During funded years, many events were held, such as Heritage and Horticulture Walks, the Great Big Green Week at Collinson St Garden, and a Winter Wellness Workshop at Rockingham Allotments.

## STORY 1: WOOD CHIP RECYCLING

The by-product of pruning work in London – wood chips – can weigh about 1.8 tons per truckload and, once composted, is highly fertile, like 'rocket fuel' for plants. Large companies pay for its disposal and dominate the market, while smaller firms struggle to compete on volume or disposal cost. JJ, a local independent tree surgeon, would drive out of London several times a day to empty his truck for woodchip processing.

WCGN set up a remarkably simple and clear system with JJ to allow him to drop the wood chips directly to gardening groups. A spreadsheet was set up detailing contact numbers of each community garden, address, and way of entrance. JJ simply posts in the WCGN WhatsApp group that he has wood chips available. Groups respond and get a drop the very same day.

From Jan 2024 – Jan 2025, JJ delivered 21 tonnes of wood chips to WCGN gardeners. Instead of being sold, exported, or processed, these wood chips stayed within a 5 to 10-minute drive of their source. It kept nutrient-rich organic matter within London's ecosystem, reduced transport emissions, and improved soil health by retaining moisture, suppressing weeds, and supporting biodiversity – making it a circular, zero-cost solution that benefited urban greenery, small businesses, and the environment – proving the power of grassroots networks.

## STORY 2: CHILDREN'S FUN DAY

A fun afternoon for the children, starting with planting seedlings and moving on to crafting, using different techniques to make leaf and flower prints. WCGN led the activities and provided refreshments.

The children clearly enjoyed the event and also enjoyed the opportunity to meet neighbouring children for the first time.

Particularly, two children from two estranged families bonded through the event and allowed the parents to move beyond their previous conflict.

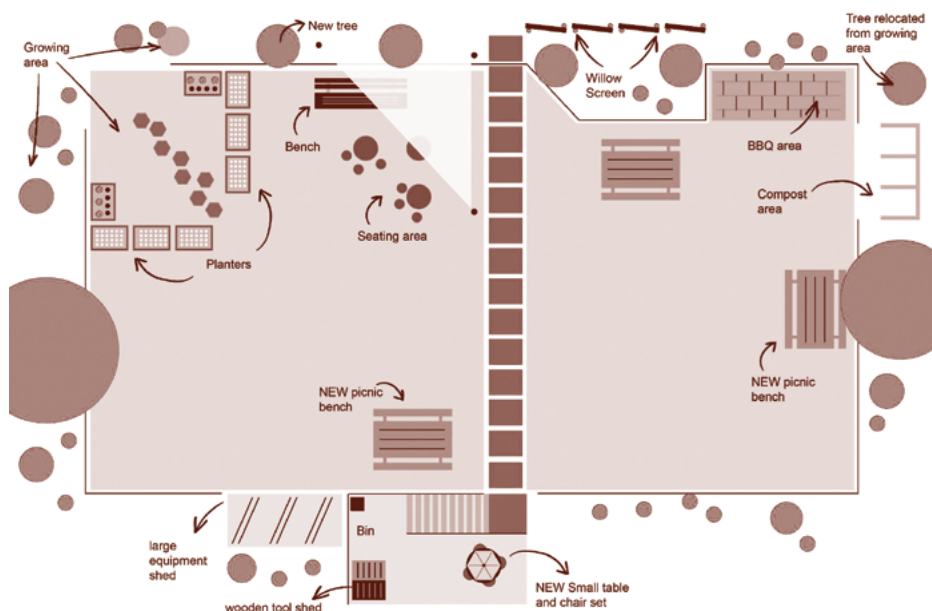
## STORY 3: WEST WALWORTH WASSAIL

Wassailing is an ancient winter tradition intended to wake fruit trees from their slumber and wish for good health and a good harvest. In this Walworth version, it became a joyful community gathering, bringing neighbours together to celebrate local gardens. From 2018 to 2020, five gardening groups joined a noisy parade, banging pots and pans and chanting to the trees. In 2025, Alberta Fruit Commons hosted a low-key revival after a pandemic pause, with ivy head-dresses, spiced apple juice and beer from local hops.



# GARDEN CASE STUDIES

## CASE STUDY 1: KENNINGTON PARK ROAD TRA



**Map of a new back garden design by Chev, Kennington Park Road TRA community garden, Mar 2025**

### WHY UNIQUE

Kennington Park Road TRA community garden is a fully private garden made up of 2 front gardens behind bus stops and a larger back garden accessible through a series of locked doors, located in a council-owned block of 11 flats. The garden is led by its TRA secretary, collaborating with external groups like Good Gym for physical help and the WCGN for knowledge and resource sharing.

## INVOLVEMENT

2 main garden leaders + active neighbour participants + Good Gym.

## WHAT'S GROWING

Apple tree; flowers; food growing, the garden previously has been used to grow food and the residents plan to grow food again. Past crops include potatoes, pumpkins, and rhubarb.



**Plaque on a bench in Kennington Park Road TRA community garden**

## KEY COLLECTIVE ACTIVITIES

Gardening and food growing; garden maintenance (a monthly clean-up); composting; tool sharing; social events such as barbecues, picnics, and annual New Year dinners; and training when they have the opportunity.



**Compost area at Kennington Park Road TRA**



# CASE STUDY 2: ROCKINGHAM ALLOTMENTS

## WHY UNIQUE

Rock-a-llot is one of the more established garden projects in the network. It is made of 2 private allotment areas, a car park garden, and a few nearby semi-public sites. The main site was established in 2011, transforming a grassy area above an old air raid shelter. It has a focus on biodiversity with efforts made to try to establish it as an official nature conservation area. It features beehives, a pond, raised beds, and wildflower meadows, supporting wildlife like birds, frogs, and bats. Serving as a model for similar projects.

## INVOLVEMENT

Driven by 2 garden leaders + less active neighbours.

## WHAT'S GROWING

Vegetables and herbs such as artichokes, asparagus, chard, garlic, rhubarb, sage, rosemary and bay (tree); fruit trees including apple, pear, and plum trees as well as some more exotic trees such as banana trees; a variety of flowers are grown to attract pollinators, and other pollinator-friendly plants to draw in evening time moths and bats; ferns including lady ferns and tree ferns; various types of fungi including turkey tail and oyster mushrooms grow organically on logs in the garden; wildflower meadows.

## KEY COLLECTIVE ACTIVITIES

The garden planting is often done by the two lead gardeners always keen to get better at getting people involved; the allotments are planted by individual residents; work parties focusing on pruning, tidying and general garden maintenance; tool sharing; composting; beekeeping, garden tours and inspirations.

# ALBERTA FRUIT COMMONS

CAN YOU HELP US?

MEET YOUR NEIGHBOURS

ALBERTA FRUIT COMMONS IS A COMMUNITY FOOD GROWING GROUP ON THE ALBERTA ESTATE. WE COME TOGETHER TO MEET OUR NEIGHBOURS, GROW + SHARE FRUIT, AND NURTURE BIODIVERSITY IN OUR COMMUNAL GARDEN AREAS.

- WE HAVE 3 GARDEN AREAS ON ALBERTA ST, AMBERGATE ST, BERRYFIELD RD, AND A FOOD COMPOSTING AREA.
- REGULAR TASKS INCLUDE PLANTING, WEEDING, PRUNING, MULCHING, FRUIT PICKING + TOOL CARE.
- COULD YOU SPARE A FEW HOURS A MONTH TO HELP OUT?

## UPCOMING SESSIONS:

MONTHLY SESSIONS <sup>USUALTY</sup> (2ND SUNDAY OF THE MONTH)

SUNDAY 13TH OCTOBER 10.30-12.30

SUNDAY 10TH NOVEMBER 10.30-12.30

SPECIAL SESSION: INTRO TO FRUIT TREE PRUNING 10.30-12.30, LUNCH, 13.30-15.30

WORKSHOP SIGN-UP REQUIRED

← more details via whatsapp

JOIN THE WHATSAPP GROUP

OR TEXT

07818078135

# CASE STUDY 3: ALBERTA FRUIT COMMONS

## WHY UNIQUE

Alberta Fruit Commons is a fruit growing project which is spread across Alberta Estate's many garden areas, including 5 areas that are open and located on a street, making it accessible to all. Children often pick berries on their way to the nearby school. The gardeners see other people taking the fruit as part of the garden's success, focusing on abundance over ownership.

## INVOLVEMENT

2 main garden leaders + active neighbour participants.

## WHAT'S GROWING

Fruit trees of various types including apple trees with different varieties that ripen at different times; fruit bushes of various types such as red currants, white currants, and black currants, also cane fruit like loganberries, boysenberries, and blackberries; raspberry hedge; native hedging plants like hawthorn and dogwood; lavender; wildflowers; rhubarb.

## KEY COLLECTIVE ACTIVITIES

Every second Sunday of the month from 10:30-12:30, garden leaders will organise a collective gardening gathering to do gardening, planting, and maintenance. This can include pruning trees and bushes, weeding, mulching, adding wood chips, and composting. Tool sharing. Brewing beer together using hops grown in the garden, and beer tasting around the tool shed. The group holds two larger annual events open to all – a midsummer picnic, with the sharing of family cultural dishes, and a winter 'Wassail'.



**Volunteers' task list on a gardening day**

# KEY LEARNINGS: COMMON CHALLENGES

Community gardens hold immense value, yet their existence is often precarious. The story of gardens in WCGN reveals not just moments of triumph but the persistent challenges that shape the realities of urban communal gardening.

These challenges—ranging from infrastructure to governance complexities, social dynamics, and the slow, sometimes invisible impact of gardening—offer key insights into what it takes to sustain a community-led green space.



# 1. GARDENING INFRASTRUCTURE

Setting up a community garden requires access to water, sustainable materials, and usually a small starting fund. Maintaining a community garden requires continuous energy and commitment – this could be replacing thin wood raised beds, relining ponds, managing vigorous plants, and soil regeneration.

Waste disposal remains a chronic issue. The Council, although providing a paid garden waste collection service for householders, has no solution for community gardens which often produce larger volumes, leaving many gardeners to compost as best they can or resort to ad hoc disposal. Creative, often unconventional

solutions emerge, such as lobbying for a cleaning tap instead of a watering tap to bypass bureaucratic reluctance to liabilities, or building composting sites using second-hand materials.

*"The problem of green waste collection never got solved. There were no council arrangements for community gardens, and some allotments don't even have a post code. In the end, everything just has to go to composting."*  
- Olivia, Fielding St Allotments

## 2. COUNCIL COMMUNICATION AND FUNDING POLICIES

While many community gardens in Walworth are resident-led, they often exist on council-owned land, leading to an inherent tension between the residents' sense of ownership and the council's ultimate control of the property. Seeking permission for basic improvements – whether installing a shed or adjusting pathways—can be an exhausting process.



**Compost area at Kennington Park Road TRA**



Council funding is territorial, and allocated by ward councillors, meaning that gardens need to maintain good relationships with councillors. The application and reporting requirements are a significant administrative burden. The network applied across multiple wards for financial support, dramatically increasing the administrative burden for individual gardeners. This fragmented system disadvantages gardens that don't fit neatly into funding categories, forcing them to piece together

small grants while navigating shifting council priorities.

An early success of WCGN was the collective voice it established to successfully lobby the council for a dedicated community gardening role. However it has taken time for WCGN's more established gardens to feel the benefits of the support available, as the initial two years of this role were focussed on creating new gardening areas under the council's own 'Great Estates' and 'Allotment Guarantee' programmes.

## 3. KNOWLEDGE AND LEADERSHIP

Gardening is more than enthusiasm—it requires technical expertise in soil health, biodiversity, and seasonal planting cycles. Many participants lack confidence or knowledge, and leadership often defaults to a small, overburdened group, creating a dependency that's difficult to break. Efforts to decentralise leadership struggled with formality, demonstrating that community leadership must be cultivated, not imposed.

"ATTEMPTS AT A DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP MODEL FAILED WHEN OVERLY FORMALISED. WE NEED A MORE ORGANIC WAY TO SHARE RESPONSIBILITY" - RICHARD ALBERTA FRUIT COMMONS

Burnout is a constant threat. Garden leaders juggle people management, council negotiations, funding applications, and physical upkeep. While some gardens have introduced more structured planning systems, others remain reliant on a handful of individuals.

"Planning ahead was a big shift - before, we just reacted. Now we hold meetings. Write things down, and have structure." - Chev, Kennington Park Road TRA Community Garden

## 4. THE CHALLENGE OF PARTICIPANT COMMITMENT

Community gardens rely on volunteer recruitment, engagement, and retention. Leaders must navigate shifting interest levels, competing priorities, and the slow cultural shift needed for people to see themselves as devoted gardeners. Uptake is often slow, requiring consistent encouragement to draw in new participants.



**Guide to Winter Gardening event,  
Nov 2021**

*"When an allotment is first established, people don't immediately engage - it takes time to change mindsets." - Shereen, Camberwell Triangle Community Garden & Allotment*

Keeping momentum is another hurdle. Individuals may express interest but struggle to follow through. Pairing volunteers and working in groups fosters accountability and ensures work actually gets done.

*"When individuals commit to a task within a group, they are more likely to follow through, which fosters both accountability and moral."*  
- Sandy, Kennington Park Road TRA Garden

## 5. LITTERING, THEFT, AND SAFETY

Urban gardens are often located in public or semi-public spaces, making them vulnerable to littering, theft, and anti-social behaviour. Persistent issues include fly-tipping near bin areas, hazardous waste like needles and knives, and garden theft—ranging from stolen tools to entire plant beds being taken overnight. Gardeners must balance maintaining an inviting community space while minimising risks.

Accepting imperfection—rather than aiming for total control—often leads to better long-term sustainability.

*"WE DON'T HAVE A FENCE, SO WE'VE ACCEPTED THAT SOME PEOPLE WILL TAKE FOOD, AND CHOOSE TO SEE THAT AS A POSITIVE. ALTHOUGH WHEN SOMEONE TAKES THE ENTIRE CROP, IT DOES TAKE A BIT MORE EMOTIONAL ENERGY TO FEEL HAPPY ABOUT IT." - RICHARD ALBERTA FRUIT COMMONS.*

## 6. THE DIVERSITY AND FRAGILITY OF COMMUNITY

"Sometimes it's just about managing different personalities. Some people work, others socialise - both are valuable."  
-Shereen, Camberwell Triangle Community Garden and Allotment

Community gardening is not just about plants—it's about people, relationships, and the delicate balance of shared responsibility. Some individuals excel at manual labour, others build social

connections, and some play both roles. When expectations around contributions aren't clear, tensions arise. Conflicts can emerge over plot usage, rule enforcement, and cultural misunderstandings.

"THE INITIAL STRUGGLE WAS WITH INFRASTRUCTURE WE OVERCAME ALL THAT. THE CURRENT CHALLENGE IS JUST MANAGING PEOPLE."

"SOME PEOPLE WANT WRITTEN RULES AND PROFESSIONAL MEDIATION FOR CONFLICTS. BUT TOO MUCH FORMALITY KILLS THE SPIRIT OF A COMMUNITY."

## 7. GARDENING IS HARD WORK – AND RESULTS CAN BE SLOW

Unlike other community projects, gardening requires patience and long-term commitment. Crops take time to grow, soil needs ongoing care, and the benefits are often invisible at first.

Yet, when gardens are nurtured over time, they create something more enduring than just plants—a community with shared knowledge, collective resilience, and a sense of place within the city.

"Gardening is work. People want immediate results, but it takes seasons, sometimes years, to see real change!"  
-Ian, Rockingham Allotment.

# THE SOCIO- POLITICAL CONTEXT OF COMMUNITY GARDENS

"We are here, we care. AND we are  
trying to protect our community  
from future displacement."  
-Ian, Rockingham Allotment.

To cultivate a garden is to cultivate a claim – to land, to belonging, and to the right to shape the spaces in which one lives. In the shifting terrain of urban regeneration, where the logic of capital almost dictates the fate of neighbourhoods, community gardens emerge not only as sites of cultivation but as acts of quiet resistance.

# THE PRECARIOUSNESS OF GREEN SPACE

For many community gardens on Council estates, the Council is the landlord that, in the name of urban progress, has overseen the steady erosion of community-controlled green spaces. Gentrification looms over Elephant and Castle, where the erasure of the Heygate Estate serves as a warning to those who remain. Residents have watched as parcels of land, once integral to their neighbourhoods, have been marked for sale—some for as little as £1 to commercial developers—on the grounds that the council lacks the funds to maintain them.

Against this tide of redevelopment, gardening has become an act of spatial defence. Residents recognise that the presence of a well-tended green space is more than an aesthetic concern; it is a means of staking a claim, of inscribing community identity

into the very soil. In some cases, the pursuit of conservation status has become a strategy—not just to protect plants but to prevent the wholesale demolition of estates in favour of profit-driven redevelopment.



**Kipling Estate**

# THE FRUSTRATION OF ‘GROUND MAINTENANCE’

Yet, the battle for control is not always fought against faceless developers; often, it is waged at the level of everyday management. Ground maintenance services, provided by the council, operate on an ethos of containment rather than cultivation.

*“Groundskeepers, not gardeners.”*

This phrase echoes through residents’ frustrations. The reality of council maintenance is not the nurturing of a living landscape but a regime of brutal pruning—cutting back plants indiscriminately, stripping green areas bare. In other cases, neglect is the problem: Failing to replenish soil or support regrowth; despite rounds of funding

and replanting, new plants wither due to a lack of watering, forcing residents into cycles of investment, disappointment, and self-reliance.

"BRANDON RESIDENTS WENT THROUGH FOUR CYCLES OF PLANTING AND FAILURE BEFORE TAKING MATTERS INTO THEIR OWN HANDS."

The financial injustice compounds the frustration. Residents at Brandon Estate pay £1.70 per week per property for ground maintenance—totalling £1,100 per week—yet they see no meaningful return. The irony is palpable: residents are charged for services they neither control nor benefit from, reinforcing the perception

that true care for the land can only come from those who inhabit it.



**Slug trap made by gardeners at Rockingham Allotment**

## TENANT AND RESIDENT ASSOCIATIONS

Amidst challenges, the TRA model has proven to be a formidable structure for collective action, serving as a vehicle for negotiation, funding, and protection against bureaucratic inertia.

"the council may not always fully acknowledge individuals voices, but it's harder to overlook the collective representation of TRAs."  
—Sandy, Kemington Park Road TRA Garden.

WCGN itself was strategically built upon the foundation of existing TRAs, recognising that true resilience must be rooted in the social structures that already exist. What began as a network of

nearby gardens gradually evolved into an urban gardening network where knowledge, resources, and collective problem-solving flourished.

"AT FIRST, THE NETWORK SEEMED AMORPHOUS. BUT THEN, JUST INTRODUCING TWO GROUPS—ALMOST 5 SECONDS ACROSS THE WAY FROM EACH OTHER—MADE A DIFFERENCE. SUDDENLY THEY GOT TO KNOW EACH OTHER BETTER AS NEIGHBOURS AND GARDENERS."  
—VINCENT, PULENS GARDENS.

The simple act of meeting one's neighbour—through training sessions, shared workdays, or garden tours—became a quiet yet profound intervention, weaving new social threads through the fabric of Walworth's estates.



# SOCIAL FRICTION AND GARDENING AS A TOOL FOR TRANSFORMATION

Community gardening does not exist in utopian harmony; it is deeply enmeshed in the social tensions of urban life, especially in high-density cities like London. Gardens are not just shaped by soil and sunlight but by the personalities that inhabit them—sometimes in opposition.

*"every block has a lunatic."*  
—Peter, Beautiful Balin

Yet, in some cases, gardening itself has been used as a tool for social transformation. One resident deliberately invited an unpopular

neighbour to join a gardening session, observing over time how this participation shifted their relationships within the community. In another instance, children from a family known for anti-social behaviour were welcomed into a gardening workshop, where a moment of joyful play softened their presence in the space. These moments hint at a deeper reality: that gardens, when thoughtfully nurtured, do not just grow plants—they cultivate the possibility of repair, of softening tensions, of reweaving fragmented social ties.

## RECLAIMING NEGLECTED SPACES

In neighbourhoods where fly-tipping, drug activity, and littering persist, the presence of a well-maintained garden can shift the narrative of a space. Once-dismal corners, plagued by dumped rubbish, have been transformed through resident-led efforts. Collaborations with groups like GoodGym helped turn problem areas into thriving green spaces, demonstrating that urban neglect is not an inevitability but a condition that can be changed.



**Community garden in the car park created by gardeners of Rockingham allotment**



# KEY LEARNINGS: THE ROLE OF PARTICIPATION

## A LOUDER VOICE

To participate in a community garden is not simply to plant and tend to the land – it is to engage in a process of mutual support and shared responsibility with other social members. For WCGN, participation is not just about gardening together; it is about reshaping power dynamics, building relationships, and

exchanging knowledge in ways that extend individual efforts.

Individually, a gardener is a voice in the wind—a concern left unread in an inbox; a request stalled by bureaucracy. But collectively, WCGN became a force that the council could not ignore.

# A DIFFERENT WAY TO BE SEEN

Historically, councils tended to compartmentalise resident groups into TRAs, treating them as isolated entities rather than part of a wider movement. By bringing together dispersed garden groups under a structured but grassroots-led network, WCGN enabled residents to articulate their needs with greater consistency, clarity, and authority.

*"Before the council would talk to individual TRAs, putting everyone in boxes. WCGN allowed us to speak with a collective voice."*

The most tangible result of this advocacy was the creation of a dedicated community gardening coordinator role within Southwark Council in June 2020. This fundamentally challenged

the bureaucratic habit of siloed engagement, shifting the conversation from isolated projects to systemic change in urban gardening policy.

Originally conceived as a two-year fixed post under the Great Estates Project, this role later became permanent. Though its remit remains an ongoing negotiation, its very existence marked a rare moment of community-local authority alignment.



# COMPANIONSHIP AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Gardening, for all its beauty, can be a solitary and sometimes overwhelming endeavour. Volunteers burn out, resources run thin, and battles with bureaucracy drain motivation. WCGN became a place where garden leaders found companionship—not only in practical problem-solving but in shared emotional support.

*"We tried to combine a meeting with a garden visit. Some members loved the garden visits but were absolutely bored with meetings."*  
- Olivia, Fielding St Allotments

This sentiment captures something fundamental: people participate not because they need another meeting but because they need each other.

Garden visits didn't just offer moments of rest – they became catalysts for new ideas, inspiring gardeners to adopt fresh approaches, experiment with new techniques, and bring renewed energy back to their own spaces.



**Plant swap hosted at Sutherland Square TRA 2024**

## SHARING AS CREATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

In the most tangible sense, WCGN functions as a resource-sharing network, reducing waste and maximising efficiency.

Need wood chips? Post in the group chat, and within seconds, they'll be claimed. Looking for a contractor recommendation? Someone has a contact. Struggling with a pest problem? Another gardener has a solution. Need some blackcurrant cuttings to start new plants? Someone will offer some.

*"If someone asks in the Whatsapp group who wants some free wood chips, they will be gone in a nanosecond."*

A gardener facing mysterious soil depletion could be connected with a "compost doctor". An estate needing new planters could be linked to someone who's just trying to get rid of some. This organic, decentralised form of

knowledge-sharing reinforces one of WCGN's greatest strengths: that participation is not just about belonging but about contributing. Every member, regardless of experience, has something valuable to offer.

Beyond material resources, WCGN facilitates peer-to-peer learning, ensuring that expertise is continuously circulated. Many who join have enthusiasm but little technical expertise, unsure about what to plant, how to care for soil, or how to manage green waste effectively.

As WCGN grew, it filled these gaps by offering training sessions led by experts on composting, biodiversity, and seasonal planting, equipping participants with practical skills that empowered them to become more confident gardeners. In later years, it looked to the knowledge within the network to offer solutions.



**Demonstration of propagating red currants. Skills swap at the WCGN plant swap 2024**

# TESTING MODELS OF ORGANISATION TO FIND WHAT TRULY WORKED

If WCGN's story is one of participation, it is also a story of experimentation—of testing models of organisation to find what truly worked.

Initially, formalisation seemed like the logical next step. The hope was that this would provide stability, allowing WCGN to secure resources and sustain itself for the long term. Yet, in practice, formalisation placed new pressures on participation. The demands of administration—grant writing, governance meetings, compliance with funder expectations—began

to pull energy away from the very thing that made WCGN thrive: its grassroots, informal nature. By 2023, WCGN consciously chose to scale back, abandoning rigid structures in favour of a decentralised model.

The strength of WCGN was never in its structure alone, but in its culture of participation – a dynamic, evolving web of relationships where collective energy constantly flows – it's not linear, not scripted, but a living organism that remains adaptable, responsive, and deeply rooted in the community that forms it.

# PEER-TO-PEER LEARNING NETWORK

## WHAT WORKED WELL FOR WCGN:

### PEER SUPPORT AND SHARED LEARNING

The network provided a platform for garden leaders (not always all gardeners) to connect as peers to share experiences, find solutions to shared problems, and offer companionship. At its best, WCGN functioned as an organic learning environment, where knowledge flowed between peers, strengthening both individual gardens and the network as a whole. Rather than prescribing solutions from the top down, WCGN facilitated exchanges, allowing members to learn from each other's successes, failures, and innovations.

### LOW-EFFORT, SIMPLE, COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITIES

A plant swap required no grant applications and no strategic meetings—just a place, a time, and

a willingness to be there and share. Informal systems, such as borrowing tools or exchanging materials via WhatsApp, fostered participation without the pressure of formal commitments.

### INFORMAL COMMUNICATION

Networking channels like WhatsApp provide a cheap, quick, and low-maintenance way for people to feel loosely (and easily) part of a wider community and facilitate direct collective problem-solving and easy information sharing.

### TRAINING AND EVENTS

Made possible by funding that the network raised, the training on composting, pruning, and seed sowing were highly appreciated by members. These training sessions empowered participants with technical skills, increasing their confidence.



# WHAT DIDN'T WORK WELL FOR WCGN:

*"It's important not to see it as a failure. It's a success and evolution that gave birth to powerful friendships."*  
- Olivia, Fielding St Allotments

## THE DETOUR INTO FORMALISING THE ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE AND ETHOS CLASH

The decision to formalise as a non-profit company in 2022 was driven by a desire for growth—but instead of bringing stability, it placed new burdens on members. Funding requirements often demanded formal structures, titles, and policies, which clashed with the grassroots ethos and nature of the network. Gardeners resisted formal roles and titles like 'chair' or 'treasurer' as they created hierarchies and administrative workloads that detracted from gardening.

## FUNDRAISING EXHAUSTION AND ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN

The push for funding also shifted the network's priorities. Instead of supporting individual gardens, WCGN had to focus on sustaining itself—leading to fundraising

exhaustion and an administrative burden that drained energy rather than fuelling it. Success in grant funding also meant the need to deliver against funder's priorities, which some members felt overshadowed the network's original vision and purpose.

*"Money was driving the activities, but not members."*

*"It was clear that some members felt strongly that the drive should come from the gardeners, not from a paid person."*

*"I think some times people get fixated on funding, which is not the biggest barrier - it's volunteer time, being resourceful, having a big base of people with diverse skills, and some times, privileges."*

## FUNDERS' KPIS ARE NOT FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING

There were no KPIs for knowledge sharing, companionship, solidarity or sustainability in funders' KPIs.

# THE ROLE OF THE COUNCIL

Community gardens exist within larger systems of governance, and councils play a critical but complex role in their sustainability.

In Southwark, the council's approach was more community-led compared to other boroughs. The creation of a dedicated Community Gardening Coordinator role in 2020 was a major achievement. While the effectiveness of this role continues to depend on how well it responds to community needs, many residents already recognise the role's importance as key to fostering more collaborative and responsive council-community relationships.

"the council's role can signpost funding, provide useful contacts, and offer admin support - but how do we ensure they stay accountable?"

Through conversations with WCGN members, it's clear that working with the council over the past years requires persistence, time and strategy. Communities must organise, express their needs and form a collective voice. At the same time, councils must ensure public resources are fairly and responsibly distributed.

Like most large organisations, councils also operate through rigid departmental boundaries. While community gardening projects can support outcomes in health,

ecology, climate resilience, public realm and social change, the reality is that they don't always fit neatly within a single policy area.

The real value of council involvement lies in its ability to facilitate connections across neighbourhoods, ward boundaries, and funding streams, helping gardens see beyond their immediate surroundings and cross-pollinate ideas.

"Councils and governments have their own departmental boxes, but greening projects don't fit nearly into just one of them." - Ruth, Community Gardening Coordinator / Parks, trees & Ecology, Southwark Council.

The best outcomes emerged when councils worked with, rather than for, communities, providing a backbone of support while allowing grassroots energy and ideas to lead the way.

Like all relationships worth sustaining, it requires effort on both sides over time. When it works, it makes visible what collaborative public life can look like - living, rooted, and worth protecting.



# LEADERSHIP, COLLECTIVE DECISION-MAKING, AND THE BALANCE OF POWER

If WCGN's experience revealed anything, it was that leadership in a grassroots network is a delicate balancing act.

"TRYING TO DO EVERYTHING FOR EVERYONE CAN BE A PROBLEM SOMETIMES. THE PERSON WHO DOES IT FEELS OVERWHELMED. SOMETIMES IT'S NECESSARY TO STEP BACK, SO OTHERS CAN STEP FORWARD." -VINCENT PULLEN'S GARDENS

At one extreme, top-down leadership created division and undermined grassroots passion. At the other, fully distributed leadership often feel like an ideal – in theory, it removes hierarchy, encourages collective ownership, and no single individual bears the burden of leadership alone – but in practice, leadership is never truly leaderless. While a network may reject formal roles, hierarchies still emerge, often informally. Certain individuals naturally hold things together – organising meetings, making things feel easy, following up with commitments...A fully decentralised leadership would require every member to possess high skills, high enthusiasm, and the capacity to self-organise – conditions that rarely exist. Rather than thinking of leadership as something that can be fully decentralised, perhaps a more useful question is: how can a group

collectively create the conditions where everyone feels empowered to take initiative.

"We lost the person who made things feel easy when they are difficult  
- Who had a clear vision  
- Who was embedded in the community."

A sustainable network also requires room for change. The nature of informal groups is that people come and go, and leadership must be adaptable.

"It's never going to be static. It's always changing."



**WCGN visit the Alberta Fruit Commons in 2022**

# FINAL REFLECTIONS: WHAT MAKES A COMMUNITY GARDEN NETWORK SUSTAINABLE?

## LEAN ON PROXIMITY, SIMPLICITY, AND LOCALITY

A network that keeps things small, local, and simple is more likely to endure than one that tries to centralise or expand beyond its natural scale.

## ENCOURAGE SHARING, BUT RESPECT BOUNDARIES

Encourage sharing, and agree expectations for what each group or individual contributes to the network.

## RECOGNISE AND NEGOTIATE POWER

Whether within the group or in relation to external institutions, understanding how power flows (through knowledge, access, skills, and decision-making) is key to maintaining healthy group dynamics.

## CELEBRATE SMALL WINS

Big projects often exhaust rather than energise. The small moments of success—turning a neglected space green, hosting a low-effort gathering—are what truly sustain participation.

## UNDERSTAND THAT COMMUNITY GARDENS ARE CONTESTED SPACES

From land ownership to funding priorities, community gardens exist in negotiation with larger forces. Being aware of this reality allows for more strategic, long-term sustainability.

**In the end, WCGN thrived not because of its funding, structure, or formalised roles but because of its relationships. It was built on people showing up, sharing what they knew, offering what they could, and making the act of gardening a collective experience.**

**The true measure of success was never in longevity or organisational growth. It was in the friendships it fostered, the knowledge it circulated, and the gardens that will continue to grow long after the network dissolves the company.**

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOUTHWARK COUNCIL

This research comes at a timely moment in which Southwark Council have renewed their commitment to food growing – becoming the first London borough to adopt the ‘Right to grow’ – and looks to bring the ambitions of the Southwark 2030 agenda and the Southwark Land Commission to life on the ground. In that context, the findings of this research offer three practical ways in which the council can deliver its own strategic objectives through low-cost, high-impact action.

The three areas, if unaddressed, risk undermining the council’s own efforts to support food growing and biodiversity. The good news is that all three recommendations lie fully within the council’s control, and provide opportunities for improved climate and biodiversity outcomes.

## 1. GROUND MAINTENANCE

Ground maintenance teams are a regular source of frustration and heart-break. Many community groups experience repeated setbacks caused by current ground maintenance routines. Teams – often overstretched – seek to compensate for infrequent visits by making a visible impact with work that is destructive to biodiversity and undermines months of community care. This service is based on outdated practices and maintenance schedules established 25 years ago and are no longer serving today’s environmental and community needs.

**Recommendation:** Urgently assess the impact of ground maintenance practices. Implement training, and pilot alternative maintenance tasks and schedules orientated around biodiversity gain, supporting community custodianship and green skills.

## 2. COMMUNITY GARDENING FUNDING STRATEGY

While valuable in many areas, Cleaner Greener Safer and Neighbourhoods Fund funding alone as funding sources are not well suited to the needs of community gardening, creating a wasteful administrative burden on both garden groups and the council.

**Recommendation:** Work with gardening groups to establish a dedicated small fund focussed on supporting ongoing custodianship of green spaces, with direct access to essential items such as replacement plants, tools, and training, with minimal administrative requirements.

## 3. GREEN WASTE MANAGEMENT

This has been a longstanding concern – originally raised by WCGN as early as 2018! Progress has been made with ‘compost doctor’ support and supporting onsite processing. However, many groups still struggle with the volume of green waste from

community gardening. Collection systems exist but remain hard to access and inconsistent in practice.

**Recommendation:** Set up a pilot working with a selection of gardens (ranging from raised bed food

production to larger spaces with trees, bushes and social spaces) to define shared responsibility in green waste solutions between gardens and the council. Use the trial results to develop an ongoing council-wide green waste strategy.

# ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

## RESEARCH BACKGROUND

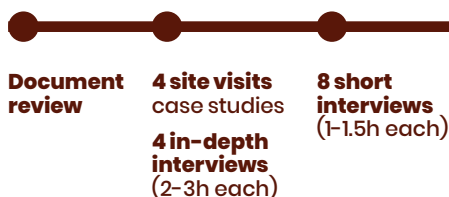
“The Story of Walworth Community Gardening Network (WCGN)” looks back at how the network has grown and changed since it began in 2017. It celebrates the many people who’ve contributed to WCGN over the years and captures what’s been learned along the way—what’s worked, what’s been tricky, and what could come next. We also hope it will offer something useful to others who may be thinking about setting up or running a similar network.

The research explores how WCGN came into being, the key moments in its development, and where things stand today. It also looks at how the spirit of the network continues even after the formal organisation wound down. In particular, we were curious about how knowledge and support continue to flow between people and places through informal, peer-to-peer connections—and what it takes to keep that kind of sharing going. We also wanted to understand the common struggles faced by gardens in the area, and whether being part of WCGN helped them to deal with those challenges. Finally, we asked what conditions—social, physical or practical—make it easier for

community gardens to get started and keep going over time.

## METHODOLOGY

To explore these questions, we used a mix of methods. We reviewed past documents to trace the network’s development, visited four gardens to learn from what’s happening on the ground, and carried out interviews—eight short ones and four more in-depth conversations. We also kept an eye on how people continue to share knowledge and stay connected online.



In choosing who to speak to, we made sure to include a wide range of perspectives, experiences and personal stories. We have spoken to garden leaders, gardening volunteers, network paid coordinators, ex-chair, ex-secretary, ex-directors, a gardening contractor, tree surgeon, and new member of WCGN.

# COMMUNITY GARDENING GROUPS

**The number of gardening groups actively involved in WCGN has varied over 8 years. This list represents groups that have registered their involvement at any point over the last 8 years. Some groups have evolved or changed their name over time.**

Alberta Fruit Commons / Alberta TRA	Friends of Pasley Park	Pullens Gardens, Amelia Street
Alvey TRA	Friends of Nursery Row Park	Pullens Estate Garden Club
Aylesbury Estate Allotments	Gibbins House Community Garden	Pullens Orchard
Berwick Court	Glengall Wharf Garden	Rodney Road TRA
Bricklayers Arms TRA Gardening Club	Goshen Community Garden and Food Project	Rockingham Allotments
Brandon 1 TRA and Children's Gardening Clubs	Grosvenor Estate Garden	Sceaux Community Garden
Brandon 2 TRA / Beautiful Brandon	InSpire Community Garden	Stompie Garden
Brookwood Community Garden	Kennington Park Road TRA Garden	Sturgeon Road Community Planters
Camberwell Subterranea	Kipling Estate Community Garden	Sutherland Square TRA
Camberwell Triangle Gardeners	Manor Place / Penton Place Allotments	Surrey Square Primary School – Edible Rotherhithe
Caspian Street Allotments	Newington Estate TRA	Tabard Growers / Tabard Community Allotments
Collinson Street Garden	Ok Grow (Aylesbury Estate)	Victory Park
Crampton Street Garden	Parent Action Community Allotment	Wells Way Triangle Greening Group
Crampton Primary School	Pembroke House Community Garden	Walworth Allotment Association (Fielding Street Allotments)
Draper Hall Garden	Pete's Community Orchard	Walworth Garden
Elmington Gardens		

THE STORY OF  
**WALWORTH  
COMMUNITY  
GARDENING  
NETWORK** 2017-  
2025

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