

Transforming derelict or underused land through community-led models

A guide inspired by the experience of Our Place projects



Our Place Programme

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Introduction

Land and the quality of the local environment is at the heart of the way that people experience where they live. Derelict or underused land can have a really negative impact on neighbourhoods; attracting anti-social behaviour or fly tipping, becoming overgrown, or simply being an eyesore.

This guide starts with an introduction to the benefits and challenges of reclaiming land, and then goes on to discuss the different models and approaches that communities could consider further when undertaking similar projects. The guide closes with a precis of two Our Place projects that demonstrate the opportunities associated with reclaiming land. Further resources and links to other relevant examples are provided as an Appendix.

This guide should be of interest to both new and established community based organisations. It serves as an introduction to the subject and demonstrates how to bring communities together to take action to bring land back into productive use. The Our Place examples referred to also show how additional community benefits have been achieved as well as creating a better local environment for everyone.

This guide has been produced as part of the Our Place programme funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), by [Shared Assets](#) - 'a think and do tank that makes land work for everyone'. The information contained in this guide has been drawn from the experience of Shared Assets as a result of supporting community-led land projects in Our Place.

What do we mean by 'land' in this guide?

This guide focuses on outdoor spaces that are not formally used and managed as defined public spaces, such as parks. It includes 'brownfield' land - that is land that has been used for something else in the past and is now derelict or unused.

Not all outdoor spaces with potential will be large scale sites. Everywhere has some kind of 'in between' spaces such as verges, land in between buildings, and spaces that might be developed in the future but are, for now, not being formally used. This guidance aims to provide advice on the options available to improve the use of land at the heart of your community.

Benefits of reclaiming derelict or underused land

There are a range of potential benefits that are connected to taking on greater responsibility for, and control of, the land in your local area. The experiences from relevant Our Place areas and from elsewhere demonstrate the following opportunities:

- **People care about land and outdoor spaces:** This is where people can come together and take positive action. Land can be the most tangible thing that people in a local area have in common. It is highly visible, and as a result everyone will have a view on it.
- **It can be beneficial for the people involved:** These sites can be places to build skills, capacity and confidence - for individuals and collectively as a community. It can be satisfying to see the difference that you can make to a shared space, particularly one that has been unloved for some time.
- **It can be a catalyst for new partnership outlooks:** People coming together to reclaim a piece of land can demonstrate a new sense of responsibility and care for an area which may be perceived in a negative light by other agencies and services. As a result of demonstrable community engagement, new relationships and benefits can emerge.
- **Productive land can host new services:** These sites can be places to develop new services from, and add value to the delivery of current services. It might be that the new space helps to create new ways of tackling difficult problems locally, or that the space itself is where services can be delivered from.
- **It can be a resource in itself:** Eventually, these sites can become common resources, whether they are providing space for food, housing, training, or simply a lovely place to be.

Overall, initiatives that get people involved in reclaiming and using local land more productively can create a real sense of belonging and citizenship. By working together and inputting into decisions about the land's future, people can feel more empowered and connected to their local area more broadly.

Challenges for reclaiming derelict or underused land

The Our Place project examples and practice from elsewhere, indicate that there are some common challenges that communities face when looking to use, or improve, a piece of derelict, or underused land in their neighbourhood. Strategies for addressing these challenges are also included below:

- **Time:** These projects typically take longer than people think they will. What might look like a simple clear-up task on the surface, can turn out to be more complicated. This should not put you off from starting; but don't feel disheartened if your project is taking longer than you thought it would to progress.
- **Finding the owner:** It can sometimes be particularly hard to find out who owns the site in the first place, particularly if it has been unused for a long time, or if current ownership is not obvious. The [Land Registry](#) is a good place to start as it holds ownership details on registered land, but not all land is registered. Speak to your [local authority](#) and talk to people who have lived in the area for a while to find out more about the ownership history of the land.
- **Contamination:** Sites that have been derelict for some time might be contaminated with heavy metals, oil or gas. This may mean that you cannot grow food for consumption. Finding out what the site was previously used for will help, and your local authority should have records. The [Environment Agency](#) is also responsible for some contaminated sites.
- **Waste disposal:** Often the first job will be clearing a site, whether of overgrown vegetation, fly-tipped waste, or both. There will likely be costs associated with this and you will need to consider insurance, and any other risks that the removal of this type of waste might pose. The risks posed will vary by site so we recommend talking to your local authority before getting started.
- **Money to get started:** A lot can be done by volunteers and with donated materials. But you are likely to need some money, whether "capital" money to pay for equipment, materials, or acquiring the land, or "revenue" money to pay for legal fees, design fees and people's time.

- **Money to keep it going:** If this is a long-term project you need to think about how you will keep it going. Again, volunteers can do a lot, but you may need to find regular, albeit small amounts of money year after year. Are there ways that the site can earn money? Or will you need to ask for donations and obtain [grants](#)?

Models of community involvement for reclaiming derelict or underused land

The table below presents some of the key activities and considerations that are associated with the different levels of involvement or responsibility that can be taken when reclaiming land. The levels of involvement range from a light-touch ‘Oversight’ role working alongside local services and agencies, up to formal ‘Management and Development’ of the land by taking on the responsibility for it through a long term legal agreement, such as by lease or freehold ownership. You should consider the level of involvement that is right for you when looking at your options.

Level of involvement	Activities	Considerations
Oversight		
Working alongside other agencies to help them to carry out their responsibilities, e.g. where local authorities have a responsibility to deal with derelict sites in its area, and to facilitate the better use of underused land as a result.	Being the ‘eyes and ears’ of these agencies on the ground, e.g. reporting anti-social behaviour, responding to consultations and inputting into the development of minimum public service standards.	Creates good relationships and partnership working but the community may have to ‘organise’ the statutory agencies. Potential for community disenchantment if agreed actions by responsible parties do not happen.
Animation		
Beginning to take matters into your own hands. This works best on sites that are publicly accessible but not well used. You might think of this as ‘reclaiming’ them.	Increasing public use and driving out undesirable behaviour by organising events, parties, tidy-ups, camp-outs, wildlife/history walks, etc.	The main resources you will need for this are determination, ideas and good connections. You might get a local business to sponsor an event - but the important thing will be getting local people to participate! You will also need to

consider the ownership of the land and whether what you are proposing is legal.

Taking Care

Making physical changes to a space, whether currently publicly accessible or not, according to a defined plan. This might include clearing waste, grass cutting, creating new landscaping or planting. You are likely to need the permission of the landowner to do this, but some movements like [Guerrilla Gardening](#) and [Incredible Edible](#) have achieved lots of positive benefits without formal permissions.

Management & Development

Negotiating with the landowner to get formal permission to permanently occupy the space. Opens up many more possibilities. This might involve creating allotments, sports pitches, community gardens, opening up new footpaths, or even developing part of the site for affordable housing. This requires more formal structures, planning and resourcing. You will need to be an incorporated organisation to enter into contracts, employ people and sign leases, or acquire the freehold. You may need planning permission to make changes. Substantial funds may be required.

Types of tenure involved in reclaiming land

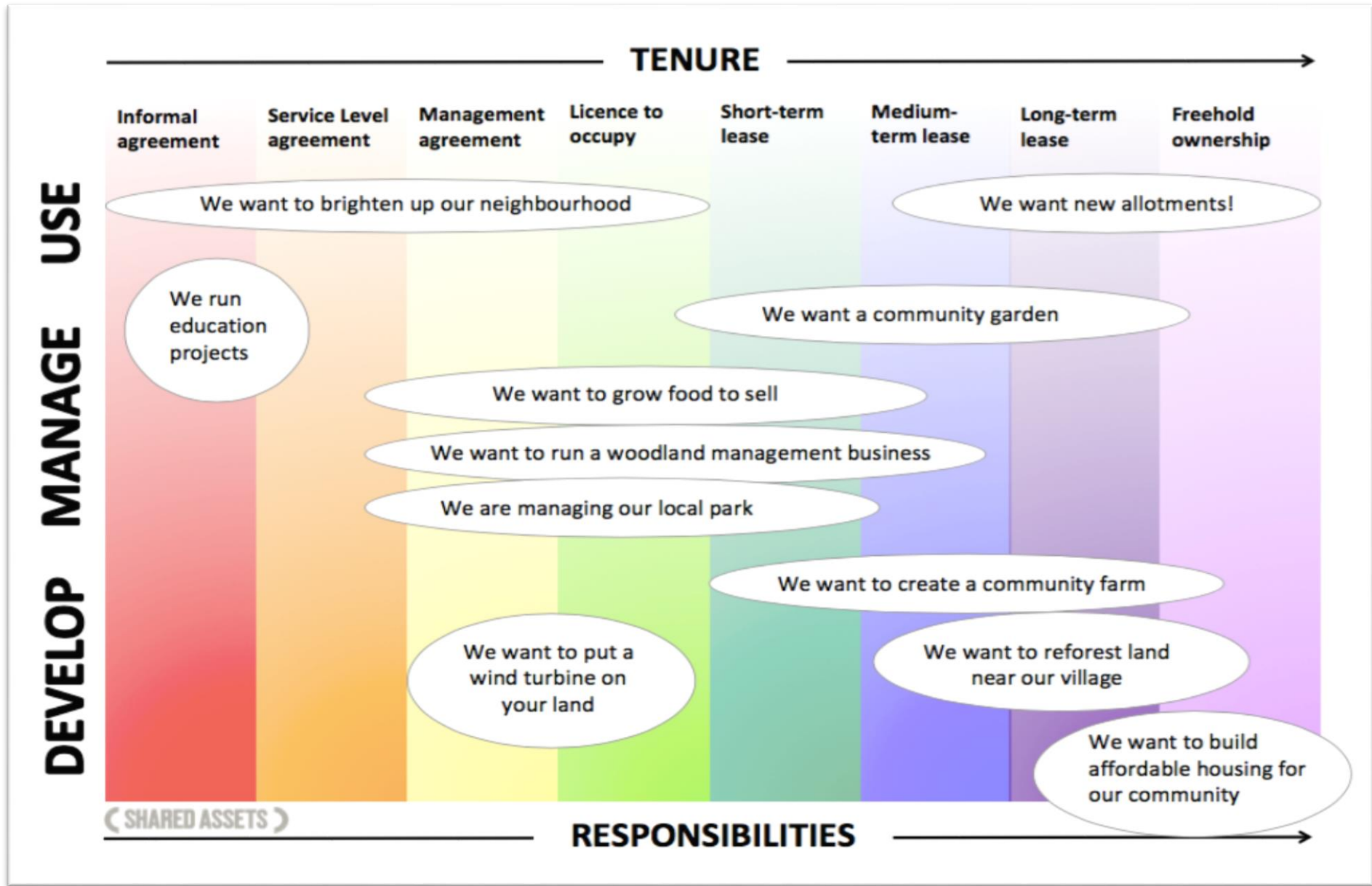
The relationship - whether formal or informal - that community organisations will have with the land is described as 'tenure'. Management agreements, leases, freehold ownership, etc are all escalating degrees of tenure that enable an increasing stake to be taken in the land by the organisation. The range of common forms for negotiation and agreement include:

- **Informal agreement:** An agreement between two parties that does not have any official recognition or legal standing. Agreements are made and altered through regular conversations and a shared sense of understanding is created between both parties for mutual benefit.
- **Service Level Agreement:** A written agreement between a service provider and the land owner that defines the services that are to be delivered, by when and to what standard, e.g. grass cutting once a month, railings painted every three years, etc.
- **Management Agreement:** Sets out longer term, more strategic objectives for the use or management of the land, e.g. creation of allotments, a tree planting programme or the creation of new wildlife habitats.
- **Licence to occupy:** A contract between the owner and the occupier giving the occupier the right to occupy and use the site for a defined period of time. It does not provide exclusive use or security of tenure, so the owner may still have access and use of the site and can usually eject the occupier with minimal notice.
- **Lease:** A contract that allows occupation and use of a site for a defined period of time. It will usually give the person or organisation taking on the lease exclusive use during that period. Leases can be for any length of time, from a few years to 999 years. It is generally better to have a lease that is as long as possible (particularly where external funding is dependent on a minimal lease term) but that may not be either desirable or practical in every situation and a more incremental approach may be the best option.
- **Freehold ownership:** Outright ownership of the land with absolute control, subject to other relevant law.

Formal legal tenure can be a complex area to negotiate and we recommend that you seek [appropriate legal advice](#) before entering into an agreement to take on the responsibility for

managing land. The type of agreement or tenure that you need will depend on the type of activity that you want to undertake on the site. Allotments, planting woodlands or developing housing will require long term and secure tenure agreement. However, a one-off event to carry out an education project, do some planting or tidying-up may only need an informal agreement or permission from the owner.

The diagram on the next page should help you to decide what kind of agreement you need to obtain with the landowner in order to achieve your aims and objectives for the site.



Case Study inspiration

The following two project summaries provide contrasting Our Place examples of community-led approaches to transform derelict and underused land. Both projects show what can be achieved when communities come together to create better local environments. They are meant to be primers for inspiration. Fuller accounts and insights can be obtained from the further reading section at the end of this guide.

Saffron Lane Estate and the Saffron Acres food project *Using food and land based projects to inform and solve long term problems*

What was the problem?

The Saffron Lane Estate is located two miles south of Leicester City centre. The estate is recognised as one of the most deprived in the East Midlands and consists of a large area of social housing. Aspects of deprivation include low incomes, unemployment, poor educational attainment and ill-health amongst the resident population.

There was a substantial amount (12 acres) of overgrown, derelict land on the estate which was causing problems. The Saffron Lane Neighbourhood Council (SNLC) had been consulting with the community about the possibilities for the land since 2000. Recently SNLC has developed a successful project that has included the transfer of the land from the local authority (the landowner) to SNLC to achieve a range of social benefits for the community.

What was the solution?

SNLC worked with the local authority and a housing association to bring the land into productive use. SNLC's proposal to acquire the land at a discount from the local authority hinged on the benefits of housing local families and the development of a community food production project on a portion of the site - called the Saffron Acres Food Project.

The housing has been made possible by sub-letting a piece of the land to a social landlord. SNLC helped them to get a grant subsidy for the construction of the homes. The Saffron Acres Food Project has involved local people to improve their physical and mental health, increase skills levels, and improve community cohesion. Outdoor projects such as ‘tea and digging’ have also enabled SNLC to get people’s input into the development of the housing project, as well as supporting healthy lifestyles locally.

What has been the impact?

The high quality housing will provide homes for 68 local families. The outdoor growing and cooking projects have successfully engaged lots of residents as a result of their informal social nature and links to food growing. As a result, participants and volunteers have felt more comfortable in sharing their ideas and discussing their needs.

Other partnerships have also flourished, such as with local schools and health agencies. A growing and cooking course for teachers and school staff has developed and the local NHS dietetic service is interested in a food labelling project and supporting the promotion of healthy ‘ready meals’ for residents. These various community growing initiatives build upon SNLC’s commercially viable jam product which is produced on site and has been sold across the region by retailers. Whilst the project is still in its early stages, longer term impacts are hoped to include an increase in the mental and physical health of local people, increased skills and knowledge about food, and increased community participation.

Who was involved?

Saffron Lane Neighbourhood Council (SLNC) was the lead Our Place organisation. SLNC is a local charity with multigenerational links, which was first established in 1976. SLNC manages Saffron Resource Centre (SRC), a community hub, Saffron Heath, and the Saffron Acres Food Project. The project was delivered in partnership with Leicester City Council.

What are the key learning points?

Saffron Lane estate is known as a 'hard to reach' community. But SNLC have found that by engaging individuals through informal land use projects, information has cascaded throughout the estate.

Partnerships have been key to the success of this project, particularly the partnership with the local authority. Considering the local authority as a business partner rather than as a service provider has been crucial to the success of this project.

It is also important to appreciate that officers and elected members have different attitudes and priorities, therefore, find out what they are so that your proposal for the land takes them into account. In this case SNLC were clear about the social return that would be created as a result of the local authority transferring the land to them.

Take a look at the Shared Assets video case study of the Saffron Acres project here:

<https://makinglandwork.wordpress.com/case-studies/saffron-resource-centre/>

Shotton Village

Reclaiming a pleasant local environment through better land use

What was the problem?

Shotton Colliery is in the constituency of Easington, in eastern County Durham. Closure of the mine in 1972 with a loss of 800 jobs impacted severely on local unemployment rates, health outcomes, income and educational attainment, which are still being felt today. The quality of the local environment, particularly fly tipping, dog fouling, litter and derelict buildings, has been a consistent theme in community consultations.

What was the solution?

A village partnership took leadership of the issue and a village maintenance plan was created to guide reactive and proactive community environmental action. A multi-agency approach was taken to improve a popular walking and cycling route, clearing litter and dumped rubbish, and cutting back trees. Through Our Place, the partnership's environment sub-group was able to influence some behaviours of service providers to ensure a more joined up appreciation of the issue, as demonstrated by the regular attendance of the local authorities, the parish council and the police (upon request) at stakeholder meetings.

What is the impact?

The Our Place environment group has become the first point of call for any environmental issues in the village. A greater pool of community volunteers has been developed, including school children, who have been involved in litter picking and bulb and tree planting. Ultimately these actions mean that the environment in the village is proactively managed and pride in the village has increased. The impact of volunteers has been considerable. In 2015 two volunteers were recognised for collecting 800 bags of rubbish and giving up hundreds of hours of their time. The reporting of numerous fly-tipping incidents by volunteers has resulted in more than two tonnes of dumped rubbish being removed by Durham County Council. The partnership has since won 'volunteer group of the year' in County Durham's Environment Awards 2015.

Who was involved?

The four key organisations were the Shotton Partnership 2000 Ltd, Shotton Parish Council, Shotton Community Association and Shotton Residents Association coming together to improve and enhance the overall appearance of the village. The joint objective *“To provide local Shotton residents with the opportunity to help create a happier, healthier and safer community and to influence service provision in the village”* was developed in response to considerable community engagement activity, including workshops, events and talks that involved 123 local residents and 218 survey responses.

What are the key lessons?

The Shotton partnership project has brought different stakeholders together, which is a key way of sparking discussion about land and local sites - both in terms of identifying opportunities and getting agreement to making positive changes.

The added value aspects of the project have been important. Rona Hardy from the Partnership said *“Throughout the project we learnt that the environment has many strands and is not just about doing litter picks and removing fly tipping. We learnt that the environment includes many elements - community safety and health and wellbeing. An example of this was the clean-up of the Church and Church hall where we had to fit CCTV and security lights so that the inside and out environment was improved.”*

Awarding volunteer contributions has also been valuable. It does not have to cost a lot of money, but feedback from people after the recognition of their efforts has been very positive, and has encouraged others to get involved too. Through taking ownership for developing solutions in the village, not just identifying the problems, the community has started to be empowered and has silenced any compulsive complainers by leading by example.

Steps for reclaiming derelict and underused land: A practical checklist to get you started

In conclusion, here are the key steps to take if you have a site in your community that you want to reclaim and transform:

Ownership: Who owns or leases the land?	The Land Registry is a good place to start, but you will have to pay a small fee for access to the information. Asking around locally may help - who remembers when the site was last used? Also try looking at the local authority's planning records; have any planning applications been made about the site? If not, try and find out what the long term plans for the land are. It is always worth trying to have a friendly discussion with the landowner before going too far with the project.
What do people want and what can they offer?	Getting people involved will be crucial. What do they want or need from the space? What skills or contacts do they offer? This might be as simple as asking around your neighbours, or holding an event on or near the space. Sometimes being there with other people can help you to see the land's potential differently.
Responsibilities: Who has responsibility for safety/fly tipping etc?	This may be the local authority and/or another statutory authority like the Environment Agency. The first point of call would be to contact the local authority and ask them.
What powers do you have as a community?	The Localism Act introduced a number of new "community rights". It is particularly worth looking at the Assets of Community Value provisions for land that is currently, or has recently, been in community use. The My Community site has further information on the opportunities associated with the rights.
Who else might have an interest?	Are there local housing associations, community trusts or groups, religious organisations, youth groups or schools who may want to get involved too?
What kind of control do you need?	The earlier advice and diagram on tenure options should help you to work out what management or ownership arrangements are appropriate.

Further reading and examples

There are many inspiring and varied examples of communities reclaiming derelict and underused land in their local areas.

Projects

- The Green Backyard is a community garden in Peterborough which has transformed a once-derelict former allotment site into a place for the community to come together: <http://www.thegreenbackyard.com>
- The Dalston Eastern Curve Garden in London was created along the tracks of a disused railway. It is now a community growing space as well as a social space, with a popular bar and pizza oven: <http://dalstongarden.org>
- The Friends of the Flyover are working to reclaim a disused flyover in Liverpool as a community and cultural space: <http://friendsoftheflyover.org.uk>
- Love Where You Live, hosted by Keep Britain Tidy: <http://www.keepbritaintidy.org/lovewhereyoulive/727>
- The Severn Project is an urban food growing project in Bristol which started on a piece of disused land by Temple Meads station, and now supplies around 80 partners in Bristol with food: <http://www.thesevernproject.org>
- Growing Communities have started a “Patchwork Farm” in London, using 12 different patches of disused urban land to grow salad, fruit and vegetables: <http://www.growingcommunities.org/food-growing/patchwork-farm/>
- MERCi, the sustainability charity in Manchester, ran a pilot project called “Sow Sew”, experimenting with growing flax on sites that were going to be built on in the near future, and then used the crop to make textiles: <http://www.merci.org.uk/drupal/sow-sew>
- The Eden Project in Cornwall is a large-scale example of reclaiming brownfield land! It is now one of the most popular visitor attractions in the UK: <https://www.edenproject.com>

Movements and Networks

- My Community Network and Just Act Forum exist to support people taking action in their communities: <http://www.justact.org.uk/forums/>
- Project Dirt is the social network for community and environmental projects: <http://projectdirt.com>
- Federation of City Farms and Community gardens is a source of support and advice on food growing: <https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/>
- Guerrilla Gardening is an informal movement reclaiming public spaces as places to grow things, “be they beautiful, tasty, or both!” The website has lots of useful information: <http://www.guerrillagardening.org>.
- Incredible Edible Network supports food activism and community resilience around the UK: <http://incredibleediblenetwork.org.uk>
- Growing Together is a new partnership of major community and environmental sector organisations that aims to unlock money, land and skills to support community growing: <https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/growing-together-initiative>
- Groundwork UK is a source of advice and funding: <https://www.groundwork.org.uk/>
- The National Federation of Parks and Green Spaces is the umbrella body for local forums of communities involved in greenspace management. Their networks can help to connect communities who are creating and managing local greenspaces: <http://www.natfedparks.org.uk/>
- Shared Assets created the Making Land Work micro site with inspiring stories of land use for the common good: www.makinglandwork.org.uk and www.sharedassets.org.uk.

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