



Grow Elephant

Social impact survey

September 2017

Key findings

- Grow Elephant is a unique community asset, comprising both a space for engaging with nature and a cultural hub.
- The diverse range of activities and events on offer at the garden and café bring in a wide cross-section of people together from the local community, it's also a destination for people from across the capital.
- Located on a busy road and in an area with relatively little usable green space, it offers locals and passers-by a place of respite.
- Grow Elephant offers a flexible way for users to cultivate their own produce and accommodates many more growers than traditional allotments.
- For Grow Elephant's regulars it is an important space for social interaction, which has helped reduce isolation and foster community.
- The flexible, dynamic and informal ethos of the organisation offers a space which is friendly to families and open to interpretation and experimentation.
- Grow Elephant forms part of a wider eco-system of community activity, providing support to other gardening schemes and community groups in the area.
- The Tropics Café is used by a wide range of community and arts groups who value its non-commercial, inclusive and creative approach.

"It's a great way to feel part of my local community. It's also really nice to have somewhere peaceful to spend a Saturday afternoon. Being in London there aren't enough open and accessible green spaces." (Volunteer, 18-29)

1. Introduction

Social Life was commissioned to undertake a social impact study of Grow Elephant, a community garden in Elephant & Castle. This report outlines the role the organisation plays within the community and explores the difference it makes to the lives of its users.

Grow Elephant was London's first mobile garden, a moveable growing project that temporarily inhabits the under-used spaces of the city. Though itinerant, the project is grounded in the participation and energy of the local community and has remained within a small area to the south of Elephant & Castle. The project emerged at a time of great upheaval in area, as the lengthy re-development of the Heygate Estate got underway. The current New Kent Road site, Grow Elephant's third plot, was created in a portion of land on the construction site.

Since its move to the New Kent Road in 2015, Grow Elephant has continued to develop its physical assets and approach, adapting to the potential of the site. As well as allotment spaces and a community garden, it hosts its own café and venue - the Tropics Café. Hence beyond gardening activities, the project also hosts a range of cultural events, extending its impact and reach beyond its core community of users. This report offers a snapshot of the diverse groups and individuals who engage with the space, as well as some of the events and activities which have taken place over its three years on the New Kent Road.

The research also seeks to understand what the space means to the different groups who engage with it. We highlight the key themes of respite, community, and culture & creativity that emerged when users spoke about Grow Elephant and the impact it has on their lives.

Finally, the report outlines the role Grow Elephant plays within the wider community, as it engages in growing projects beyond its bounds and plays a part in a wider eco-system of community activity.



Halloween 2016

2. Methodology

Over the course of July & August 2017 we conducted research at the garden, capturing the views and experiences of volunteer gardeners, plot-holders, event organisers, collaborators, and people who simply come to enjoy the space.

The research used a range of qualitative tools to capture the impact of Grow Elephant's work. We conducted semi-structured interviews with regular garden users, volunteers and those closely involved with events at the Tropics Café. The interviews ranged in length, from 15 minutes to two hours. They aimed to capture the histories of individual engagement with the space, as well as tease out the significance of Grow Elephant within their lives.

We also conducted interviews with a range of stakeholders from organisations who interact closely with Grow Elephant and other community groups within the area. These conversations aimed to better understand the organisation's wider role within the community and how it interacts with other organisations in the area.

In order to gather qualitative information from a wider range of users, we also created and distributed survey forms online and in paper to capture a range perspectives, including from those who might use the space less frequently. The online survey captured a primarily younger audience.

Finally, we conducted ethnographic observation of the space, spending time at the garden, including at events and a school workshop. Our objective was to understand the dynamics of the space, how users engage with the environment and with one another.

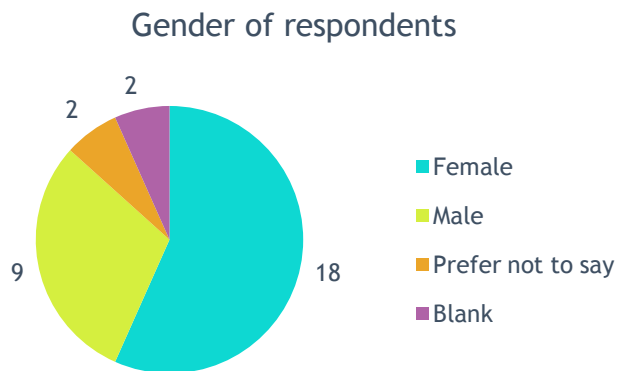
Who did we speak to?

- Nine users
- Six stakeholders
 - Pullens Residents Association (x2)
 - Lendlease
 - Southwark Council
 - St John's School
 - Walworth Society

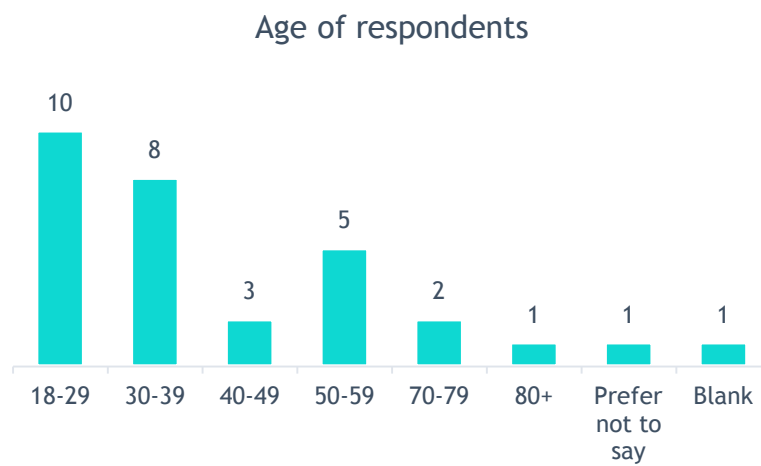
Who did we hear from?

- 15 online surveys
- Seven paper surveys

2.1 Who participated in the research?

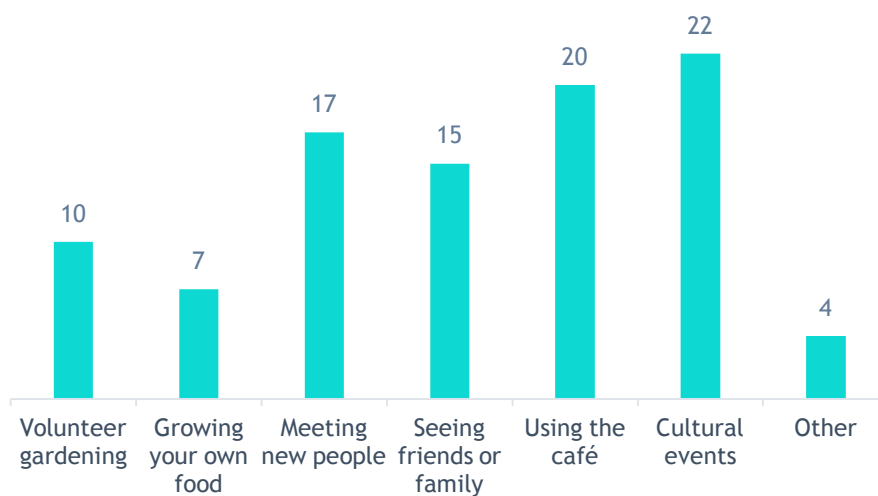


(N: 31 respondents from surveys & user interviews)



(N: 31 respondents from surveys & user interviews)

2.2 What did they do at Grow Elephant?



(N: 31 respondents from surveys & user interviews, multiple responses permitted)

3. The garden

Grow Elephant was created in 2012 as London's first mobile garden. From its original site on Wansey Street via a disused petrol station forecourt on the Walworth Road, to its location on the New Kent Road today, it has offered local people a community garden and the space to grow their own fruit and vegetables in small moveable containers.

Its New Kent Road site sits on the Elephant Park redevelopment, a busy construction site. In an inner-city area which is currently largely fenced off, Grow Elephant has been an important asset in an area with relatively little green space.

“It really gives me a space, an oasis, to relax and enjoy myself, forget about the stresses of the city for a moment, and feel closer to nature and the community” (Yoga class attendee, 30-39)

As well as providing container allotments for individuals, Grow Elephant has communal growing spaces. A wildflower meadow takes up the middle section of the garden, providing a feasting ground for pollinators during the Summer season. Other containers with small plants, shrubs and trees surround the space, they have grown in number as materials and plants have been found and donated.

These communal parts of the garden are tended to by volunteers during the regular Saturday afternoon work sessions held in the garden and through the spontaneous efforts of regular users of the space.

“I bring my son to show him how plants can provide food and not just come from a shop. It is a safe space near our home for him to explore and develop his confidence.”

(Garden regular, 40-49)



Volunteer Work Day, February 2017

3.1 Mini allotments

The garden has several hundred containers available as mini allotment spaces. Local residents can sign up at the beginning of the year for up to eight containers to grow their own produce.

In 2016 around 60 individuals and families signed up. In contrast to local allotment plots with lengthy waiting lists, all who applied were able to access some growing space. When this research was conducted in Summer 2017, some of the allotment gardeners had not continued tending their containers because of uncertainty around the future of the garden.

The containers permit a less intensive engagement than traditional allotment plots which are sized to feed a family. Gardeners can pick how many they want to occupy in a year and adjust the number according to their needs and capacity. Containers are easier to manage than a ground plot, they require less digging and are less susceptible to pests. Raised off the ground, they are also more accessible to gardeners with restricted mobility.

Several gardeners commented on the mutual support available at Grow Elephant. For those with less experience, Paul - Grow Elephant's Founder & Manager - and other regular volunteers are on site to lend expertise. As well as advice, plot-holders help one another with watering and maintenance. This points to the communal ethos of the space, distinct from some more traditional allotments.

“a place to garden, see what other people are growing, a place to experience other people and projects and create our own” (Volunteer & events organiser, 18-29)



Container allotments with red spinach grown by local Bengali women, August 2017



Case Study: Sally 52, Lara 9 & Remi 8

Sally and her family were involved with Grow Elephant from the very beginning, helping clear the site for its first location on Wansey Street. They've followed the garden ever since.

Sally always wanted an allotment, however with the busy lives the family leads it would be difficult to keep up with it. Grow Elephant fits in with their lives and offer the flexibility to come when they're able. The family have several containers in the garden - this year the children chose to plant flowers rather than edibles.

For the family, going out is not always easy. Lara has Asperger's syndrome and experiences difficulties leaving the house. The garden is a space she can come and feel safe, as she said, "I like plants, they grow just like people and animals, they're quiet and can be around you." Meanwhile,

for Sally, the enclosed space is safe for the children to play in and there aren't too many rules constraining them.

In all its incarnations, the garden has also offered a point of connection for the family with the community: "it gave an opening for us to meet neighbours we would never have had otherwise." Knowing the adults who regularly use the space means Sally can also leave the kids to do their own thing, hence the garden offers a place she can relax.

"I'm often worried about going out, coming here I know it's a space that if anything happens it'll be ok."



Case Study: Marie-France

Resident in Elephant & Castle for 32 years, Marie France has been involved with Grow Elephant since 2015. An experienced gardener, she lost her allotment plot and moved her plants over to Grow Elephant's containers. Yet at Grow Elephant she's found much more than growing space.

"Here I like everybody - all are welcoming, they love to talk, to draw, to do craft, we exchange food. It's a diverse community, all ages, colours. Everyone is friendly, we get on."

A keen gardener, she also tends to a communal space outside her building. However, when she's tried to grow vegetables there they've been stolen. While in other allotments, Marie-France explained, there are too many rules and politics. "Here people are nice, they share, there's no stealing."

When Marie-France was unwell during a long period, the people at Grow Elephant offered her support: "without them I would've sunk." When she feels down, she comes to the space to read, talk and relax. She likes the diversity of the people who use the space "I don't want to be with a bunch of grannies, I don't fit with the stereotype and they wouldn't accept me anyway."

3.2 Workshops

Since 2015 Grow Elephant has run a regular programme of workshops and educational events. In total, over 50 sessions a year have taken place. The educational and community engagement programme has provided the opportunity for participants to develop their horticultural knowledge and other skills, such as carpentry. This programme of events and engagement has involved hundreds of local people, young and old, many of whom do not have their own gardens. They have also provided points of contact for community members to meet and develop relationships with one another.

In 2017 Grow Elephant ran a series of free educational workshops focused on food-growing skills for children and adults. The Edible Elephant workshops were supported by the Southwark Council Neighbourhoods Fund. Participants were taught the techniques for growing different types of vegetables, from courgettes to carrots, and gained hands-on experience.



Edible Elephant workshops were also run for schools. From March till July, three classes from two local schools participated in a weekly programme. Through these workshops, around 90 children were able to get hands-on experience in the garden, growing their own vegetables from seed through to harvest.

Case Study: St John's School

From March 2017 until the end of the Summer term, a Year 2 class from St John's School spent 12 weekly sessions in the garden. As the school premises has limited outdoor space, Grow Elephant provided an opportunity for all the

children to be directly involved in the full growing process. The children learned to grow vegetables from seed and how to care and nurture the plants till harvest. The giant courgettes they grew were cooked for the class at school. For some of the children, it was the first time they tried the vegetable.

According to their teacher, the children - many of whom live locally in flats without outdoor space - really looked forward to their sessions at Grow Elephant: "they love it."

"For some of these children, it was the first time they'd ever handled soil."

The children themselves were enthusiastic about gardening, competing with each other to weed the containers. As local children, several wanted to bring their families to the garden during the holidays.

4. Tropics Café

The Tropics Café was built in Autumn 2015. Constructed in part from reclaimed materials and a shipping container, the space has been built, altered and extended with the help of volunteers, in an ongoing process of adjustment and improvement.



The café offers affordable and fresh food and drinks, with a menu that varies day-to-day. The revenue from the café also provides an important income stream for Grow Elephant.

However, more than a café, the space creates a focal point for the garden as well as a community hub. As one stakeholder noted, the café distinguishes Grow Elephant from many other gardening schemes, whose appeal and use often remains limited to a core group of participants.

“There’s an amazing range of people who come here, it’s so rare for a venue to have such a diverse crowd. And it seems to do it so effortlessly because of what it is.” (Event organiser, 18-29)

The café offers a meeting space and venue for a diverse range of events and activities. Regular users include:

- Paxton Green Time Bank
- Creative Roots Art Group
- Yoga in the City
- Kings Cross Hot Club
- Ingrid Film Club



Creative Roots Art Group

The café also hosts many one-off events, from seasonal get-togethers such as pumpkin-carving, to fundraisers.

Grow Elephant does not charge event organisers to use the space, provided entry is free. As one event organiser highlighted, this is particularly important for young artists who can't afford to pay upfront for venue hire. It also encourages a diverse range of programming which is kept deliberately open and flexible.

The array of events and activities in Tropics Café make it an affordable and accessible cultural resource in the heart of Elephant & Castle which draws in both local and people from further afield.

“It is a big part of my life, I go there several times a week, to the café, film screenings, live music events, parties, and my child loves it too, being surrounded by plants of all sorts, it's a safe and beautiful spot for exploring and learning, and it's much more relaxing than being in any commercial hectic and expensive chains around the area.” (Volunteer)

Case study: King's Cross Hot Club

On Monday nights, King's Cross Hot Club have a residency at the Tropics Café. The band plays jazz, swing, tango, cumbia and other styles from the early twentieth century.

The Monday-night sessions started a year ago, with the band initially using Grow Elephant as a rehearsal space. These practices slowly evolved into performances. Entry is free and open to all and a crowd of regulars from the near and far has gradually built up.

The Tropics Café offers a flexibility and informality which suit the band, something which they've found to be increasingly rare in London. For Bruce, one of the band members, Grow Elephant is one of the few of such spaces left in London: self-managed and intimate in its nature. During the band's time playing there, the café itself has developed in an ad hoc way, with the help of Bruce himself, who lent a hand to extend and improve the Tropics Café.

“Monday night can be difficult but here it doesn't matter if there's one person or twenty, there's always a great atmosphere.”



Source: The Proud Archivist

5. What does Grow Elephant mean to its users?

The research set out to understand the impact Grow Elephant had on those who engaged with the space. From the conversations and surveys several key themes emerged on the meaning of the Grow Elephant for its users.

5.1 Respite

For many of its users, Grow Elephant offers a place of calm amid the frenetic pace of the city. Many described it as an oasis, an environment where people could relax amid greenery. Surrounded by busy roads, a construction site and the increasingly towering cityscape of Elephant & Castle, users described the space as an antidote to the urban.

“An oasis of calm in the manic city - somewhere to rest and reflect” (Garden user, 30-39)

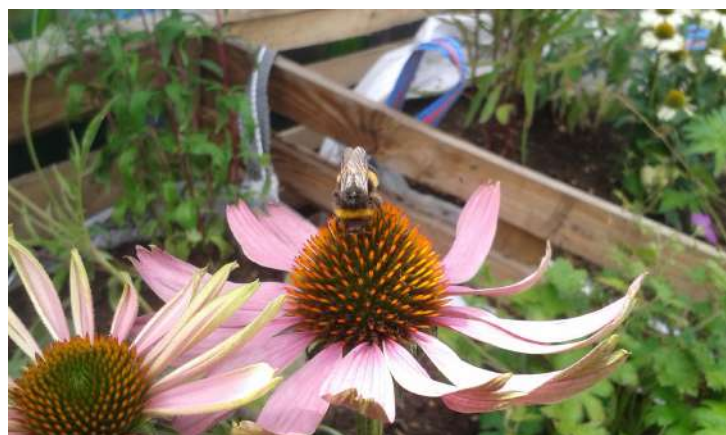
Some respondents understood the value of the natural environment provided by Grow Elephant in relation to the paucity of green spaces in the immediate area.

“As there are no parks nearby, it provides a spot for these hundreds of people to hesitate. I have seen people treating Grow like a park...walking their dogs, taking their children and taking their lunch break there.” (Volunteer, 18-29)

For some users, the non-commercial nature of the space is vital to creating a sense of relaxation. While the café sells food and drink, they feel both the garden and Tropics Café are a place you can go without needing to spend money.

“everyone feels included no matter what they are there for. that includes people who aren't there to spend money - few other places exist that you can relax indoors or outdoors without feeling like you need to buy something.”

(Volunteer, 18-29)



5.2 Community

Many value Grow Elephant as a social space. Among regular users, it is a key site for meeting others in the local community, without which several reported they would feel more isolated.

“I think it’s a meeting place for people who don’t know where they are, don’t know how to get a toe hold in the area. It’s really a hub for getting to know people.” (Patricia, Volunteer)

For some, Grow Elephant provides a space to find and meet like-minded people with whom to talk, share ideas and collaborate. Many commented on new connections they had made through Grow Elephant.

“It’s great hub to meet interesting/culturally active people for socialising and potential collaborations, links, exchanges of ideas, fun too.” (Garden User, 30-39)

Others highlight the diversity of people they encounter at Grow Elephant as central to its appeal, with individuals from all different backgrounds and walks of life using the space. Underlying this diversity, users highlighted an ethos inclusivity which makes everyone feel welcome.

The sense of community at Grow Elephant is also enabled by a perceived friendliness and conviviality of the space. One regular user described how people’s inhibitions drop when they enter the garden and they seem to engage more readily with one another.

The wide-range of activities and programming, from gardening and children’s workshops, to film and book clubs, is another element bringing these diverse users together.

“It is a community hub... various different groups manage to find a place to congregate over such a vast range subjects and causes... people from all parts of the world and from all different stages in life, it is a beautiful setting for so many different communities, it has such a broad range and openness that no space can match” (Volunteer)



5.3 Culture & creativity



For many respondents, Grow Elephant is a space to encounter culture and pursue creative projects, with the diverse programming of the garden and café.

A key element facilitating these creative engagements is the informality and openness of the space - a tone set by Grow Elephant Founder, Paul, who is happy to accommodate new ideas.

The site is also in constant evolution. Individuals can contribute to changing and improving the space, while event

organisers can adjust the setting to suit their needs and vision. This DIY approach was praised by one young event organiser, who commented on the rarity of such a flexible and creative space in London.

Children too can interpret and engage with the space in an unstructured way, they are able to play with materials and make their own constructions, something one regular user commented made the space more enjoyable for children.

“It’s an outdoor space where people feel involved - rather than the more formal parks” (Garden user, 30-39)

Grow Elephant also offers users a cultural resource which is affordable and accessible. The diversity of programming on offer is key to the cultural value of the space. From weekly live music and film-showings, to other one-off cultural events. The ability to encounter the new and unknown was cited by some respondents as a key attraction.

“provides a space for socialising and for picking up a quick meal, also whilst doing so listening to interesting music or watching films and interacting with art that might not have been on my radar before. Since being aware of the garden i have also become more interested in the voluntary/mucking in side of such an enterprise.” (Volunteer)

The cultural offer extends the appeal of Grow Elephant beyond the local community. As one respondent described, the space has become a ‘destination’ for their friends. Grow Elephant was seen as something unique both in the Elephant & Castle area and a rarity in the capital.

“It’s a Utopian space that we unfortunately don’t see enough of in our city. A clean green space to enjoy, to learn and teach, a space that can give in so many different ways.”

(Garden user, 18-29)

Case Study: Jasper, 84

Jasper lives on the New Kent Road. A retired chemical engineer, he was passing by Grow Elephant one day and noticed the café was closed during lunch. With experience in the restaurant business, Jasper offered to help out. He soon realised that there was more that he could offer the space and since then has volunteered his time to various projects.

Along with supporting in the organisation of the café, he has offered technical advice on the building and aspects of the site. Grow Elephant has given him the opportunity to share his skills in a productive way and pass them onto others.

Jasper has his own garden and allotment, so he doesn't partake much in gardening activities. However, he appreciates that the garden creates a nice environment to spend time and offers an important resource for others in the area without access to their own outdoor space.

Above all, for Jasper the project is a valuable social space. While age can often be a barrier to meeting people, being community-run he feels Grow Elephant is a welcoming environment for all. Here he finds people of all ages and backgrounds are happy to socialize with one another and it offers a rare opportunity to interact with a wide range of people.



6. Role in the wider community

6.1 Involvement in local projects

Described by stakeholders as a ‘focus’ for gardening efforts in the area, Grow Elephant forms part of a wider eco-system of community groups and gardening projects in Elephant & Castle. Paul, Grow Elephant’s Founder is well-known by other organisations in the area and has collaborated on many local gardening projects.

Grow Elephant often lends its expertise and support to projects beyond its bounds. This map illustrates the local gardening projects in which Grow Elephant has participated, oftentimes working with other local community organisations to deliver them. The density of projects highlights the organisation’s close community relations within the Walworth area.



1. Grow Elephant Community Garden
2. Plant Station
3. Mobile Gardeners Park
4. Wansley Street Pocket Park
5. Crampton Street Planters
6. Hughes House Garden
7. Newington Estate
8. Draper Estate
9. London College of Communication
10. Rockingham Estate



1. Grow Elephant Community Garden



2. Plant Station



3. Mobile Gardeners Park



4. Wansey Street Pocket Park



5. Crampton Street Planters



6. Hughes House Garden



7. Newington Estate



8. Draper Estate



9. L.C.C Oswin Street Garden



10. Rockingham Estate

According to stakeholders from other community organisations, larger projects such as Grow Elephant are a vital support to smaller gardening initiatives - which often do not have their own facilities for meeting, propagation and storage. Grow Elephant, meanwhile, reaches a new and wider demographic than many other community schemes, bringing new people and ideas to the area. The organisation's informal, flexible and open ethos were also highlighted by members of other community organisations, marking it out as a unique asset and valued partner in the area.

“What’s special is how he opens up the space for people to use. He’s open to all ideas. It’s very unique, the fluidity and easiness of access. It’s not too precious yet” (Local stakeholder)

As a community-run space, the Tropics Café is also regularly used as a meeting venue for local gardening and community groups, including the Pullens TRA and the Paxton Green Time Bank.

“They think about what are the opportunities that the space offers. It’s not just about growing.” (Local stakeholder)

Case study: The ‘Big Bulb Plant’

In 2016 Grow Elephant collaborated with other community groups to organise the ‘Big Bulb Plant’ on the nearby Newington Estate. The daffodil planting was organised in the wake of a stabbing on the estate, and a desire to mobilise the local community to improve the outdoor space.

Grow Elephant’s support was instrumental in enabling the project: their links with different community groups helped broker collaboration & they also provided tools and materials for the planting. According to one local stakeholder, the event stimulated further planting initiatives in the community.



“I think it gave local people the confidence to start to talk about how they could have a bigger impact in their green space” (Local stakeholder)

6.2 Working with local stakeholders

Grow Elephant has partnered with local stakeholders since its inception. The site on the New Kent Road was made available to the organisation by Lendlease, the developers of Elephant Park which is scheduled for completion in 2025. The apportioning of a section of the construction site for the garden was one response to the community consultation process, which emphasised the desire for temporary use and access to the site during the redevelopment.

“We recognise the value of having this type of space available to local people during the period of construction and before much of the public realm is complete,” notes Fiona Parry of Lendlease. As well as a physical asset, she underlined how Grow Elephant has also provided a social function during this period of change.

For Fiona, despite being temporarily on site, Grow Elephant offers the potential for a lasting impact and continued community engagement with local green spaces. Indeed, gardeners from the new residents’ communal grow gardens created in Elephant Park have already attended workshops at Grow Elephant to develop their horticultural skills and meet other keen gardeners.

Grow Elephant has also worked together with Southwark Council’s Regeneration Team, who are supportive of the project’s role in bringing social and environmental development to the area. The garden forms part of the council’s wider plans to promote green spaces within the Borough through the Walk Elephant network.



7. Conclusion

Within an inner-city context of high density housing, air pollution, and relatively little green space, Grow Elephant provides a place to engage with nature and take respite in the outdoors.

While gardening is an important aspect of the space, for many of its users the social links it enables have been its greatest value. Grow Elephant's users range widely, spanning ages and interests: from those using the space for cultural events, to those who garden during the day. It has also extended its reach beyond the local community, providing a creative space for different groups and individuals from the rest of London.

Central to Grow Elephant's ability to create community and enable creativity, is its open, unstructured and informal ethos. It offers a rarity within the capital, a space open to interpretation and experimentation.

During its stay on the New Kent Road, Grow Elephant has continually evolved, adapting its approach to the possibilities of the space. New structures have been created, older ones modified, a café added and extended. Plants have been brought in, flower beds built and seeded. This continually evolving space has been constructed with and often by the voluntary efforts of the local community and other users.

As Grow Elephant seeks a new home, there is great concern from users about losing both the physical space and social ties that have been created. Some regulars who contributed to this research had limited mobility - they worried if it were to relocate at a distance they would not be able carry on using the space.

Indeed, while the garden is mobile, designed to evolve and adapt to new spaces, it is also grounded in the local community around Elephant & Castle. Finding a new home nearby will enable this valued community asset to carry on developing the social links and local relationships that have been forged over the past six years.

“It’s an oasis. It’s a way to meet like-minded people, a way of experimenting.” (Patricia, volunteer)

Grow Elephant Social Impact Survey

A report prepared by Social Life for Grow Elephant.

Social Life was set up by The Young Foundation in 2012, to work on innovation and placemaking. We are based near Elephant & Castle. All our work is about the relationship between people and the places they live. We work in the UK and internationally.

This report has been written by Claire Gordon with input from Nicola Bacon, and additional research support from Emily Jones.

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12a Peacock Yard, Iliffe Street
London SE17 3LH

www.social-life.co

