



RHS Wellbeing Garden Blueprint Youth-led gardens

Evidence and Policy Companion



RHS Wellbeing Garden Blueprint

Youth-led gardens - Evidence and Policy Companion

The case for youth-led wellbeing gardens in local authority and youth centre settings

How to use this document

This companion sets out the case for the model described in *RHS Wellbeing Garden Blueprint Youth-led Gardens*, the theory of change, the evidence, the economics and the policy fit.

It is written for commissioners, local authority and youth centre leads. The *RHS Wellbeing Garden Blueprint Youth-led Gardens* holds the model itself: the vision and design principles (Part 1), who decides (Part 2), how it gets built (Part 3), and the detail (Annexes 1 and 2). Each document carries its own reference list.

Like the blueprint it accompanies, this companion has not yet been reviewed by young people: a paid youth panel (ages 11–25) reviews and amends the blueprint in Autumn 2026, and a full version co-created with young people follows in 2027.

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The case in brief

A youth centre is neither school nor home, and that's exactly its value. There's no curriculum, no hierarchy of teacher and pupil, none of the responsibilities or family dynamics that come with home. Attendance is chosen, not compulsory, and that's what lets trust build on a young person's own terms rather than an adult's.

For many, especially those for whom school is pressure and home isn't always settled, the youth centre is the one space that asks nothing of them beyond showing up. That makes it a genuine haven: somewhere to just be, not somewhere to perform or be managed. This companion is written for that space, and for the staff who hold it open. A garden doesn't change what the space is: it gives it one more way to deliver on it.

Local authorities and youth centres aim to improve wellbeing, opportunity, safety and environmental outcomes for young people in the communities they serve. A youth-led wellbeing garden supports these outcomes together.

Wellbeing: green space exposure is linked to better mental health across the life course, and gardening reduces stress, anxiety and depression, with the strongest effects in the most deprived communities. Indoor planting also improves mood and supports workplace wellbeing year-round.^{1,2}

Opportunity: growing builds skills, qualifications, volunteering and pathways into green careers, or transferable confidence young people carry into other paths.

Safety: shared activity builds trusted-adult relationships, belonging, and turns space into place.

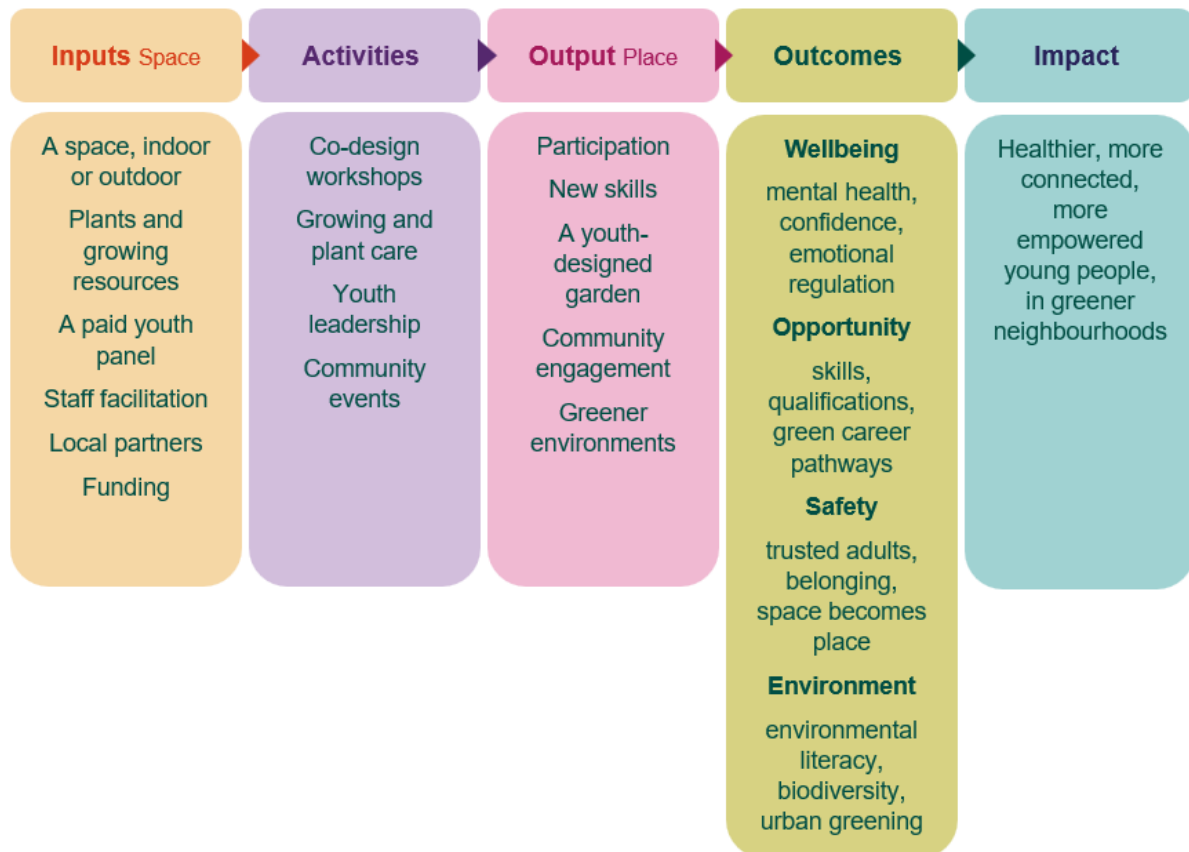
Environment: growing builds environmental literacy and pro-environmental behaviour and contributes to biodiversity and urban greening, in the generation most invested in the outcome.

Value: a garden is low-cost and preventative, contributing to several local outcomes at once, alongside wider public health, skills and community priorities.

Deliverability: Many young people have no garden or easy access to green space at home, with inequalities greatest in urban and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities,^{3,4} so an indoor garden is often the most equitable starting point. Indoor gardens can start small, often need no planning permission,⁵ and can be running within weeks, whether or not outdoor space becomes available later. They also build the skills, ownership and evidence for future outdoor investment. The independently evaluated RHS Plants for Wellbeing pilot confirmed this in practice: plants in every room proved the easiest element to take up, and indoor growing and propagation kept young people engaged through winter.⁶

Theory of change

When young people create and care for a garden in their youth centre, they become placemakers: building skills, confidence and relationships while turning the space into somewhere that's theirs.



1. Theory of change: from space, to place, to wellbeing, opportunity and safety

What the evidence shows

Green space in childhood can help protect mental health into adulthood. A study of nearly one million people found higher childhood green space exposure associated with significantly lower risk of psychiatric disorders from adolescence into adulthood,⁷ at a time when one in five young people in England has a probable mental health disorder.⁸

Gardening measurably reduces anxiety, depression and stress. Meta-analyses covering nearly 100 studies show reductions in depression, anxiety, stress and BMI, with improved cortisol and heart-rate variability.^{9,10} Of 273 studies reviewed, 70% reported a positive green space–mental health link,¹¹ and a randomised controlled trial of community gardening found reduced stress and anxiety alongside more physical activity and healthier diets.¹²

Physical health and immunity. Gardening is moderate exercise comparable to brisk walking,¹³ and contact with soil and vegetation enhances immune regulation and healthy microbiota in children.¹⁴

Nature indoors supports both wellbeing and learning. A systematic review of 42 peer-reviewed studies found indoor plants consistently improved emotional wellbeing, increasing positive feelings while reducing negative emotions and physical discomfort,^{1,15} and RHS-led research shows even the appearance of indoor plants shapes perceived air quality and subjective wellbeing.¹⁵ In a Taiwanese secondary school, classroom plants increased students' feelings of comfort, friendliness and connection to their environment, while also reducing absenteeism and behavioural incidents.¹⁶

Somewhere to self-regulate. Students actively seek out gardens to calm themselves, with particular benefits in motor skills, teamwork and confidence for young people with SEND,¹⁷ the group the National Youth Strategy identifies as most affected by current pressures.¹⁸

An offline counterweight where trusted-adult relationships form. With 76% of young people spending most free time on screens, gardening offers embodied, in-person activity. Shoulder-to-shoulder work is where mentoring and disclosure happen for young people less likely to sit opposite and share feelings, directly serving the Strategy's trusted-adult ambition.¹⁸

Direct RHS evidence with young people. In the independently evaluated RHS Plants for Wellbeing pilot, wellbeing and connection to nature rose most among young people facing the greatest pressures, including those in alternative provision. In SEND settings, where regulation was often an explicit aim, connection to nature rose by 16%, the second largest gain of any setting, and staff reported significantly greater confidence in using plants to support pupil wellbeing. Growing also felt calmer and more enjoyable than young people had anticipated.⁶

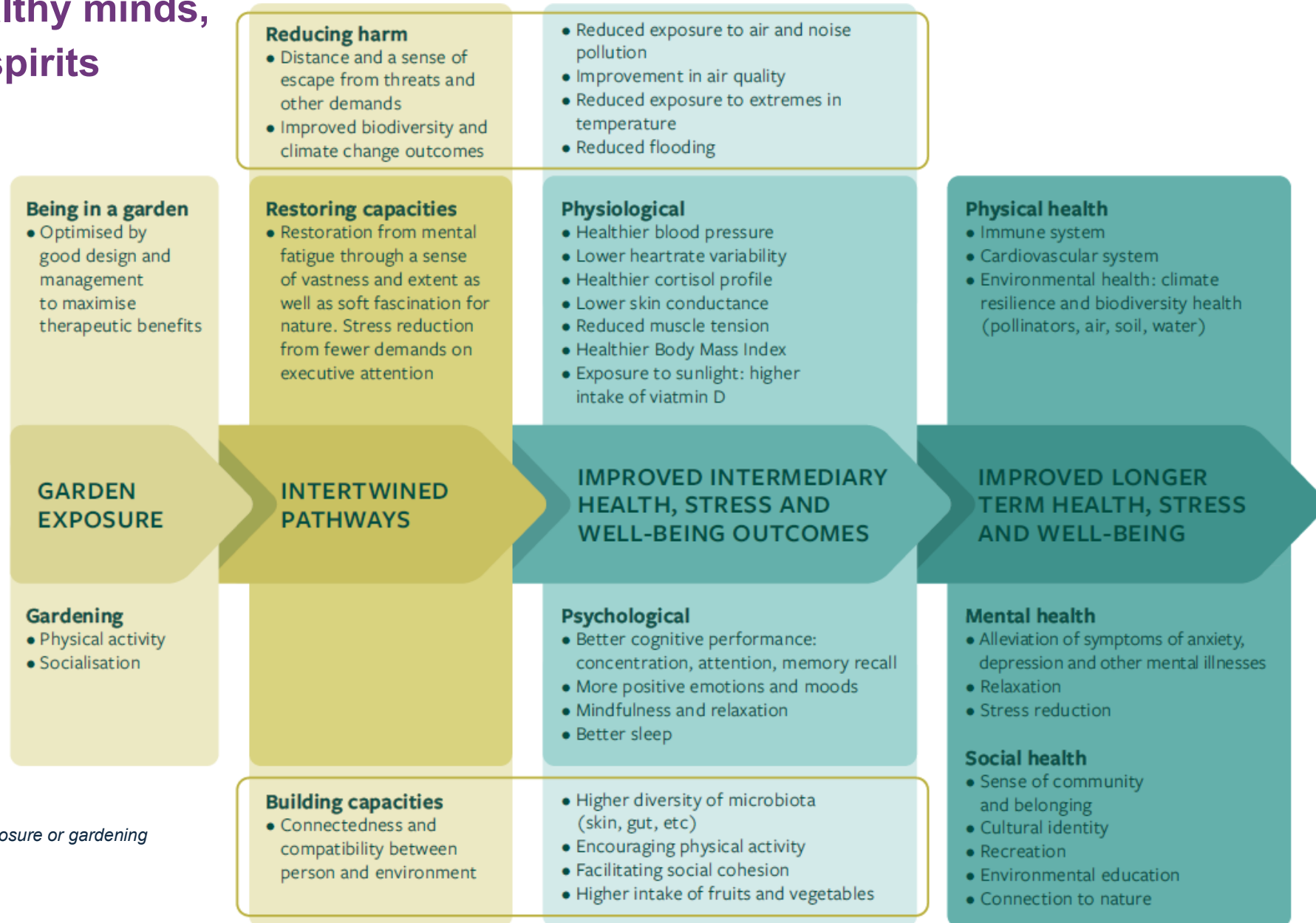
Why it works: nature connection. Nature connectedness, not knowledge or time outdoors alone, predicts both wellbeing and pro-nature behaviour, built through five pathways: senses, beauty, emotion, meaning and compassion.¹⁹ The seven design principles deliver all five, from multisensory planting (senses, beauty) and the quiet corner (emotion) to Looks like us (meaning) and youth-led seasonal care (compassion). A garden built to this blueprint is an evidenced nature connection intervention.

Growing healthy minds, bodies and spirits

For young people, pathways from garden exposure to gardening can be particularly important because gardening can combine physical activity, connection to nature, social belonging, skill development and a sense of agency. Together, these experiences support healthy development and resilience during adolescence while establishing behaviours that can benefit wellbeing into adulthood.

2. Pathways from garden exposure or gardening to improved long-term health

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Why youth-led

A garden designed for young people may improve wellbeing. A garden designed with them delivers wellbeing, participation and safety together. The RHS Youth-led Garden Design Model, set out in Part 2 of the RHS Wellbeing Garden Blueprint: The Youth-led Garden Design Model, is how.

The process is itself the intervention. The wellbeing evidence points the same way: active involvement with plants delivers greater benefits than passive exposure alone,^{21,22} so a garden young people run will do more for them than one they merely visit.



3. *Reflect* under construction: Young Placemakers see themselves, literally, in the pavilion they're building and the panels they made by hand. [MATT + FIONA](#)

Co-design gives young people voice, agency and visible influence, answering the "feeling unheard" priority in the National Youth Strategy¹⁸ and your authority's obligations under UNCRC Article 12.²³ Recognised frameworks such as the Lundy model,²⁴ Hart's Ladder of Participation,²⁵ Hear by Right²⁶ and Think Local Act Personal's Making It Real²⁷ offer a benchmark for authentic participation and shared decision-making. Worth noting: the Blueprint's own model deliberately moves beyond a linear hierarchy, young people choose their level of involvement rather than climbing a ladder, but these frameworks remain a useful reference point for what genuine participation looks like in principle. They also open pathways into a UK environmental horticulture sector supporting over 700,000 jobs.²⁸

Co-creation builds stewardship. Young people are more likely to value, use and care for spaces they have helped shape.²⁹ Participatory design can foster belonging, responsibility and community ownership, helping gardens remain active and well-used over time.

The Plants for Wellbeing pilot bears this out: young people's voice strengthened delivery, but youth-led activity only flourished where it was deliberately supported, the role this blueprint gives the paid youth panel from day one.⁶

Policy alignment

Few interventions deliver across so many existing priorities at once. A youth-led garden supports wellbeing, safety, skills, climate action and youth voice through a single project. The result is a visible, lasting asset that young people can shape, use and take pride in.

Local authority and youth centre delivery: direct, measurable progress against wellbeing, opportunity and safety outcomes.

Land and asset use: underused council land, from allotments and park corners to verges and meanwhile sites, put to work as youth-led growing space, generating wellbeing, skills and community connection.

Public health and JSNA priorities: a preventative, universal mental health offer aligned with NHS green social prescribing, in the wards with least green space.

Community safety and ASB reduction: diversionary activity, guardianship of place, visible positive youth presence in neighbourhoods with the greatest need.

Skills, employment and NEET reduction: horticulture, enterprise and volunteering pathways into the green economy.

Climate, net zero and biodiversity duties: urban greening delivered by, and building the environmental agency of, the generation most invested in the outcome.

Youth participation duties: a flagship co-production demonstrator for Hear by Right²⁶ and UNCRC Article 12.²³

Beyond the building

Indoor first is a starting point, not a ceiling. The model extends outwards as far as local partners allow. Plants indoors, then the centre's own grounds, then borrowed ground nearby (an allotment plot, a corner of a park, a school, faith or housing association site, or a meanwhile-use plot), and then, where young people want it, urban or rural residential outdoor learning with established providers. Each step is optional and stands on its own.

Youth organisations already working in urban, rural or residential outdoor settings can run the model in reverse. The design principles and youth-led decision-making transfer unchanged, while indoor growing provides year-round continuity during the winter months.

Make land available. Councils hold allotments, parks, verges, housing land and meanwhile sites. In urban areas, allotment waiting lists often make that route impractical. A more realistic offer is a small area of land within walking distance of the centre, licensed or leased to a youth organisation with a named responsible lead.

Proximity matters more than size: land that young people cannot reach after school will not be used.

Connect with outdoor providers. [City farms](#), park teams, [community garden networks](#), [Wildlife Trusts](#), uniformed youth organisations and residential providers are often already active in a local area. Most councils already support several. The opportunity is to connect existing provision, not create new provision.

Learning, skills and career pathways

Young people involved in the design, creation and maintenance of a Wellbeing Garden will have opportunities, where appropriate, to work towards an RHS Entry Level or Level 1 qualification.

These qualifications can provide a valuable foundation for further learning and career development, supporting progression to Level 2 horticulture or other land-based studies, apprenticeships, and employment opportunities within the horticulture and environmental sectors. [RHS horticultural training and qualifications / RHS](#).

Potential career pathways may include roles in parks and grounds maintenance, garden centres, landscape management, and other related industries, helping young people develop practical skills, confidence and long-term employability.

Measuring and building the evidence

Align measures with your local authority's outcomes frameworks and the National Youth Strategy, so garden data feeds into existing reporting. Use the simplest validated tools your evaluation partner already works with and let the youth panel add what they think is worth recording.

If a centre takes up a plot, a partner site or an outdoor learning link, record what it took and what changed.

Help us build the case. The evidence base for wellbeing gardens is still developing; we're exploring a future impact study and would welcome interested authorities, so please get in touch with the RHS Wellbeing Garden Team Communities@rhs.org.uk.

Case study 1 The Beginner Buddies Cube

Four Salford youth groups, RHS Urban Show 2024

An indoor garden in a few square metres: easy starter plants that forgive a little neglect, no outdoor space, and no money, kit or plant knowledge needed.



5. New plant parents. The take-home plants whose successes, failures and names shaped the design brief.

Four LGBTQ+ youth groups from across Salford created the Beginner Buddies Cube for the RHS Urban Show 2024, with Andrew Simpson, RHS Community Outreach Officer for the Northwest, supporting rather than leading.

The project moved through the participation approaches at the young people's own pace.

It opened with small plants to take home and keep, no strings attached. Their notes on life as new plant parents, the successes, failures and names, then shaped the design brief. Finally came the making: "birth certificates" for their plants, ideas for the cube's look, and their own painted clay creatures hidden through the planting.

The finished cube wore Pride colours honouring Manchester's LGBTQ+ history, its three hard-to-kill "buddy plants" displayed in jewel-encrusted pots on gold pedestals. "It's fun, celebratory and joyous," as Andrew put it.

THE BLUEPRINT IN PRACTICE



4. The Beginner Buddies Cube at the RHS Urban Show 2024: Pride colours, "buddy plants" in jewelled pots, and painted clay creatures hidden through the planting.

Participation approaches: Open door (plants to take home), Quick say (feedback that shaped the brief) and Hands-on design + creation (making the cube). In a youth centre, Shared ownership and Pass it on carry the garden forward.

Design principles: Looks Like Us: Pride colours, the young people's own creatures and plant names, visibly theirs.

What lasts: The cube came down when the show closed, but the method keeps going. It shows a garden can start indoors, cost very little, and still be unmistakably the young people's own.

Case study 2 Reflect Pavilion

Young Placemakers, Regent's Park Estate, Hampstead Road, Camden

A play and performance space designed, named and part-built by young people on one of HS2's meanwhile sites.

Convened by local youth charity [Fitzrovia Youth in Action](#), a group of young people from the Regent's Park Estate, the Young Placemakers, worked with [MATT + FIONA](#), [LDA Design](#), [HS2](#) and Mace Dragados Joint Venture over twelve weeks to design their own play and performance space on Hampstead Road.



6. The Young Placemakers at the pavilion they designed, named and part-built. © Nick Turpin. [MATT + FIONA](#)

The result is a multifunctional structure that uses mirrors to playfully draw the surrounding garden into itself: a place for gathering performance and creativity that reflects the young designers' own identity rather than an adult's idea of what young people want.

The site was always temporary, but the pavilion's legacy remains. Following the closure of the Meanwhile Garden for HS2 works, Reflect was dismantled and its materials will be reused by Fitzrovia Youth in Action, supported by MATT + FIONA, to create new seating and sculpture for greening improvements on the neighbouring Regent's Park Estate, creating a lasting legacy for the community.

THE BLUEPRINT IN PRACTICE

Participation approaches: Hands-on design + creation throughout: twelve weeks of co-design, panels made by the young people's own hands, and a name they chose themselves.

Design principles: Looks Like Us (their identity, visible in the space) and Your Zones (room to gather, perform and create on their own terms).

What lasts: Twelve weeks of co-design produced an asset the estate keeps for good, moving with the community rather than disappearing with the site.



7. A play and performance space where hoardings used to be. © Grant Donaldson. [MATT + FIONA](#)

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