



RHS Wellbeing Garden Blueprint Youth-led Gardens



RHS Wellbeing Garden blueprint

Youth-led Gardens

Wherever things grow is a garden. Whoever makes it, it's theirs. Indoors counts. Outdoors counts.



Figure 1. The Beginner Buddies Cube at the RHS Urban Show 2024: Salford Youth groups "buddy plants" in jewelled pots, and painted clay creatures hidden through the planting.

Written by adults, waiting for the expert authors. We want young people to cast their expert eye over this and, if they want to, we'll support them to redesign it their way, as national guidance for their peers in autumn 2026.

How to use this document

This blueprint describes gardens that don't exist yet or need updating: the ones young people will make. It's a first draft for them to take apart, and a head start for the adults alongside them.

Planning the next phase of your youth centre? Parts 1 to 3 hold the model: the vision, who decides, how it gets built. The annexes hold the design detail; *RHS Wellbeing Garden Blueprint Youth-led gardens Evidence and Policy Companion* holds the evidence and policy case for local authority commissioners.

Young person picking this up? Young person picking this up? The visuals, the eight steps and every prompt in italics are yours. If something reads like it was written by adults, it was. Change it for your garden. Then tell us what you changed. That's *Quick say*, and it means the next edition sounds more like you.

A note on language. "Youth centre" is shorthand for any organisation working with young people, with or without its own building: community and voluntary groups, charities, faith and cultural groups, uniformed and detached youth work, and local authority services. An indoor garden can start in a room you own, share, or borrow.

Start where every garden starts: with what it's for.

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Part 1: Start with the vision and design principles

The three core elements

Every youth centre, community organisation, or service working with young people can benefit from a co-produced approach to creating and improving its spaces. This document is a starting point for one aspect of that work: an indoor and/or outdoor garden designed and cared for by young people, not designed for them. It draws on the RHS Wellbeing Garden Blueprint, built from twelve years of RHS research and practice and a global evidence review in collaboration with the University of Surrey¹ and the University of Sheffield.

A garden of belonging

We have a place here

A lasting sense of place, ownership and connection for all who use it

This space belongs to us. Our choices, names and stories are visible within it. It is a space we look after together, where we can feel safe and connected.

A garden of emotional wellbeing

We have space to feel

A hopeful, restorative environment where people can rest and experience a healthy range of emotions

Whatever we feel, there is room for it here. A place to slow down, connect and simply be. Both good days and hard days are equally welcome.

A garden of ecological resilience

We have a hand in what's next

A diverse, robust planting environment supporting long-term health for people and nature.

Together, we grow and care for plants that support nature, adapt to changing conditions and thrive with fewer resources. In doing so, we contribute to a healthier future while building skills, confidence and opportunities.

Figure 2. The three core elements: belonging, emotional wellbeing, ecological resilience.

Every wellbeing garden, whether it's a few pots on a windowsill or a large outdoor space, aims for the same three things: **belonging**, **emotional wellbeing**, and **ecological resilience**. These aren't chosen at random; they reflect what many people say they need from the places where they spend time.

Think of the elements as the destination. The ideas in this document are simply different routes for getting there.

From vision to design: seven principles

The seven design principles that reflect the strongest evidence for supporting wellbeing, adapted from the RHS Wellbeing Garden Blueprint¹ and informed by youth evidence and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child²

Youth panel: This is your vision to define. Challenge, adapt or redesign it support is available every step of the way

Belonging
We have a place here

Emotional wellbeing
We have space to feel

Ecological resilience
We have a hand in what's next

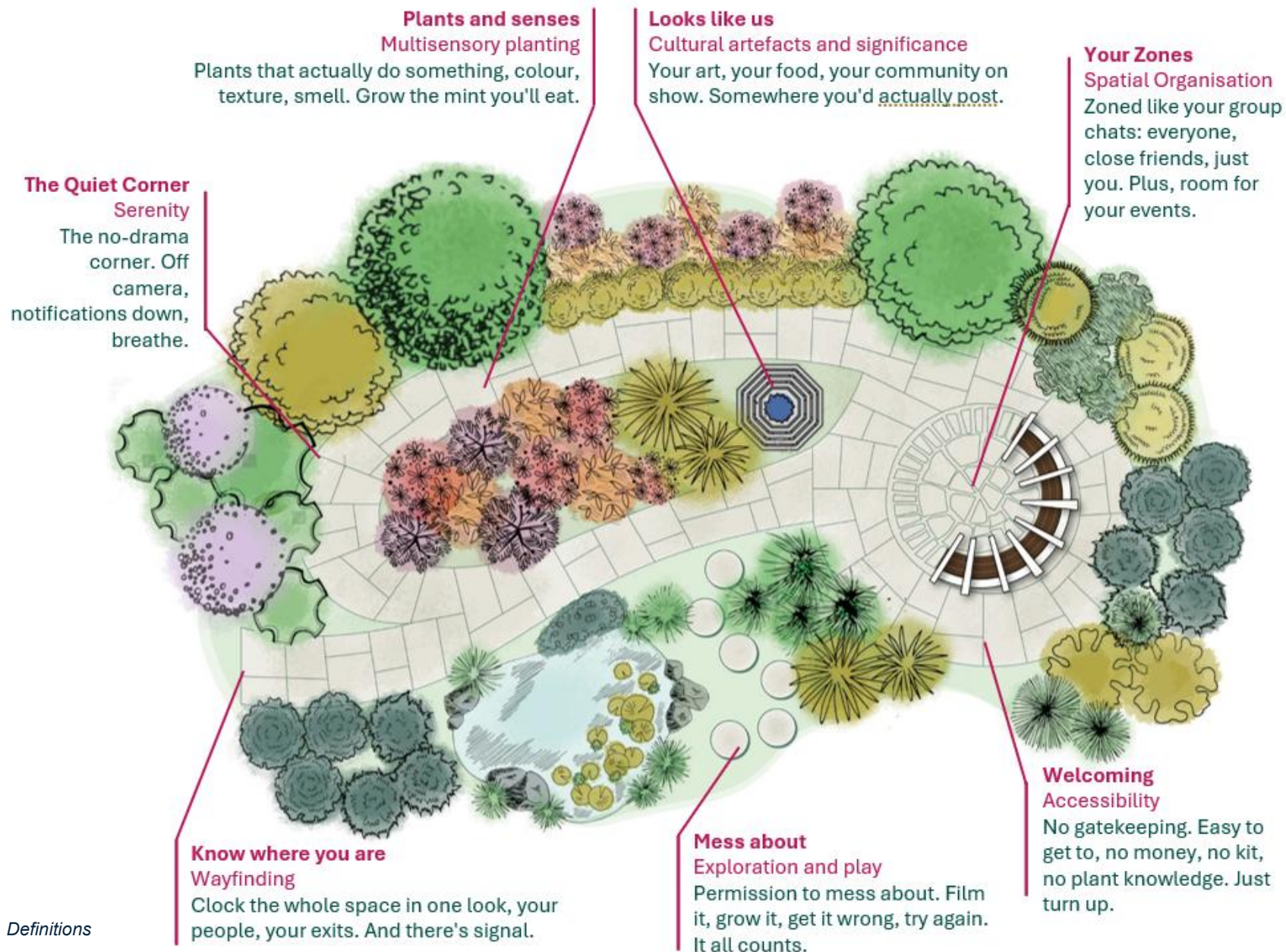


Figure 3. The seven design principles. Definitions and evidence in Annex 1.

Indoor first: growing starts on day one

Not every youth centre has outdoor space, and some never will. An indoor garden removes that barrier. It's low-cost, easy to start, and can be enjoyed all year round.

Many young people do not have a garden, or easy access to green space at home, by growing plants and taking home something they're growing, young people can extend the youth centre's garden and create their own connection with nature at home, whatever their living situation.

More than the plants themselves, it's the act of caring for them that matters. Active involvement brings greater wellbeing benefits than simply being around plants, which is why young people, not staff, should lead decisions about what is grown and how the space is cared for.



Figure 4. Style it, stage it, shoot it. A phone going back to green, a pufferfish with attitude: an indoor garden is a photoshoot waiting to happen. Have fun with plants.

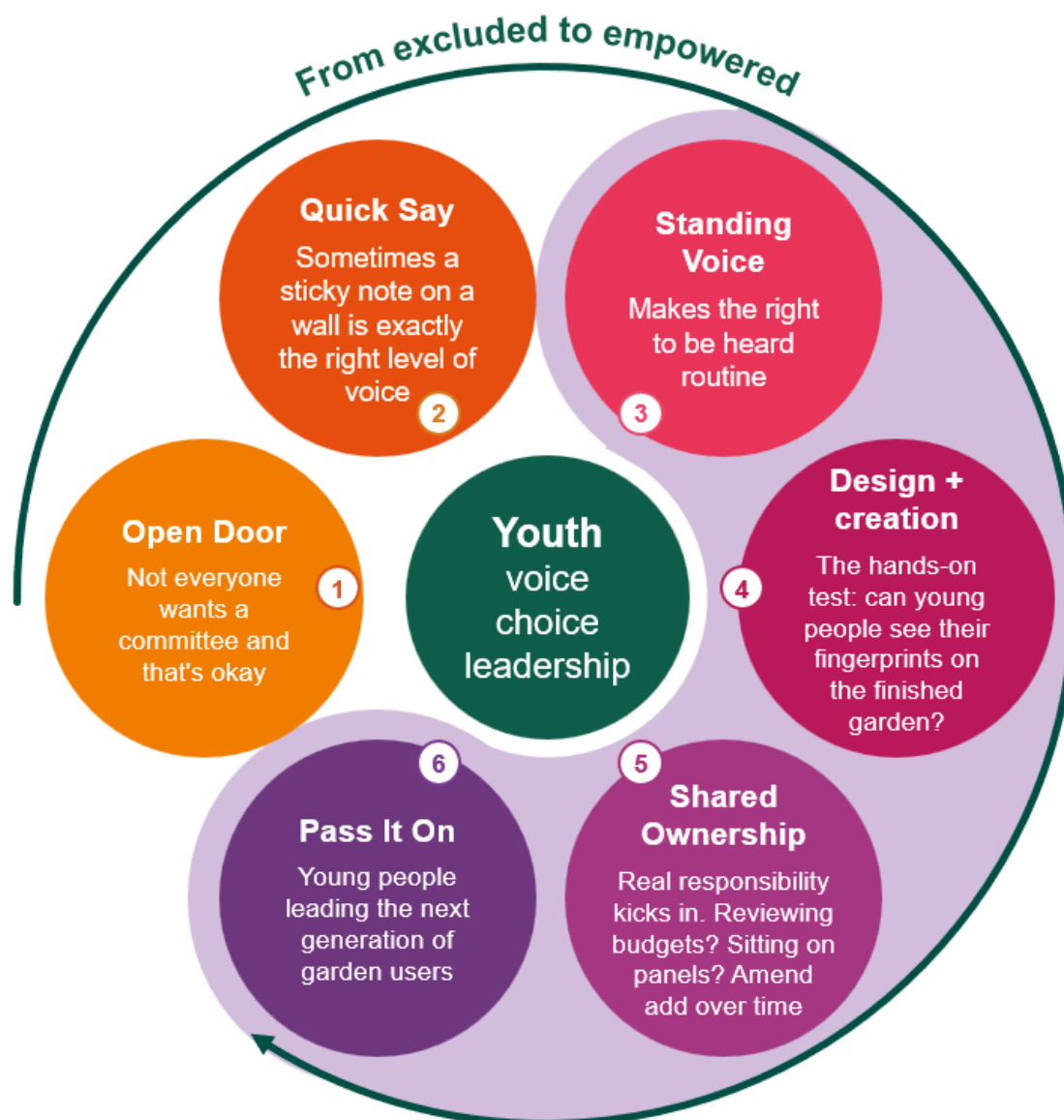
Everyone benefits from a greener environment. In the RHS Plants for Wellbeing pilot, young people found caring for plants calmer and more enjoyable than they expected, while indoor growing and propagation kept them engaged through the growing seasons.³ Whether actively involved or simply spending time nearby, people described greener spaces as feeling calmer, more welcoming, and more cared for.

An indoor garden can be the starting point, building skills, confidence and ownership before expanding outdoors. The next step might be a nearby allotment, park corner, school, faith or housing association site, or meanwhile-use plot. It also connects naturally with activities such as cooking, healthy eating, art, climate action and enterprise. Where young people want to go further, local outdoor providers can open up wider opportunities. Walking distance matters more than size, and the garden at the centre remains the weekly base.

A vision only becomes real when someone has the power to act on it. Part 2 is about making sure making sure that's you.

Part 2: The RHS Youth-led Garden Design Model

Shaped by young people, not just for them. A garden in a Youth Centre affects the young people who use it, so they should help shape its design, development and use. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child protects young people's right to be heard and participate in decisions that affect them.² The *RHS Youth-led Garden Design Model* turns that right into practice, drawing on recognised participation models,⁴⁻⁷ providing young people with the space, voice, audience and influence needed for meaningful involvement. The model offers six approaches, from simply enjoying the garden to leading and mentoring others.



One rule: you choose your part, always. It's not a ladder; they are choices
Youth panel: rename anything that doesn't sound like you

Figure 5. The Youth-led Garden Design Model: six approaches, not a ladder. Most time is spent in approaches 3 to 6.

The RHS Feel Good by Growing pilot reinforces this: when young people led launches and named the plants, projects took root, and co-creating with young people was the clearest route to deeper engagement.³

Not every young person wants a decision-making role, and that's fine. Youth-led wellbeing gardens create opportunities for those who do, while also ensuring that those who prefer to contribute ideas, skills, creativity or feedback can still have their voice heard and shape the garden in meaningful ways. This is why the model focuses on the final four approaches, where opportunities for influence, responsibility and ownership increase, while recognising that participation can look different for different people. The full framework, with what each approach looks like in practice, is in [Annex 2](#).

Choosing your part is the start; Part 3 sets out the eight steps that turn those choices into an actual garden.

Part 3: Making it happen

There's a useful process behind this: the same one the RHS uses to build real gardens, and the same shape architects and landscape designers work to (the [RIBA design stages](#)). It scales both ways, so a shelf of plants in a back room and a whole new youth centre use the same eight steps, just heavier or lighter.

From day one there's a youth panel with real budget and real say, deciding from the start, not consulted at the end. You bring the ideas, the lived experience and the ambition. Staff, gardeners and designers bring skills, evidence and know-how. Your wishes aren't replaced by the science behind the why, they're strengthened by it. The best gardens need both. The steps in won't always run in order. Pause, loop back, edit: that's growing a place.

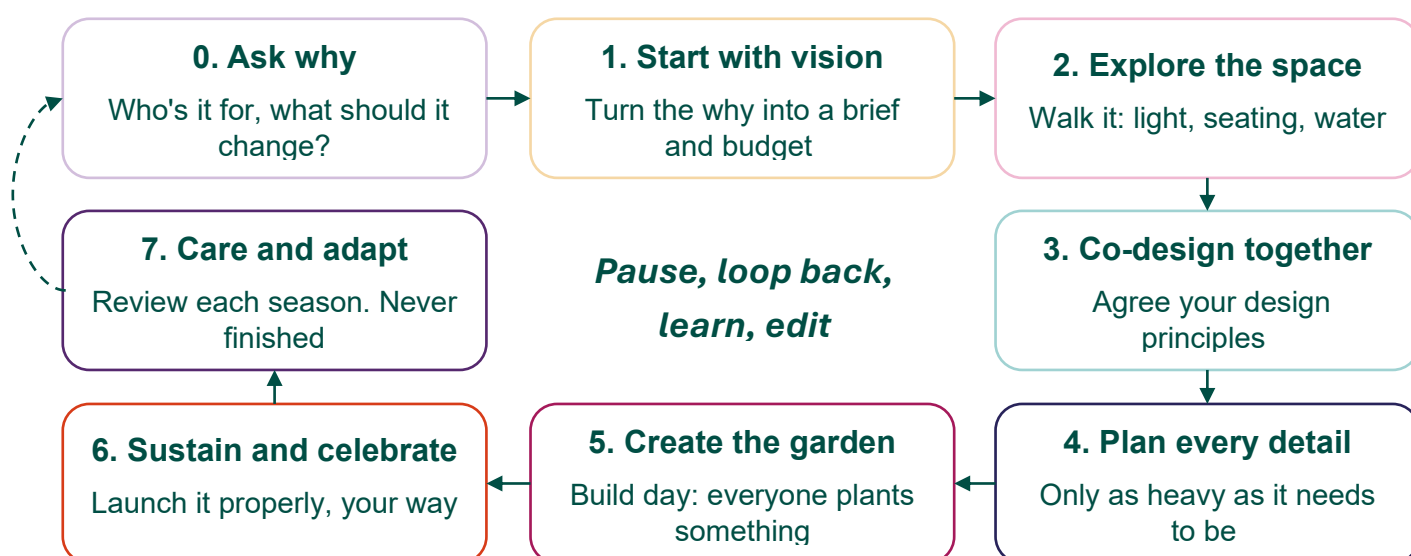


Figure 6. The steps. The dotted line back to the start isn't a mistake, it's the point: review, edit, go again.

Step 0: Ask why Dream big, then use evidence to shape ideas that work for people, wildlife and the climate. Explore what plants need to thrive and what works in your space. Choosing the right plant for the right place is a real skill. Pick plants you'd genuinely grow, eat or enjoy looking after. Fruit tends to win, and some tropical favourites won't survive a UK winter, but that's part of the challenge: finding great ideas that actually work.

Step 1: Start with vision Turn the why into a brief with staff: scope, budget, and who needs to be involved to access the space.

Step 2: Explore the space Walk it, indoors and out. Where's the light? Where would you actually sit? Where is the water source, and how will you reach it? You'll spot what a survey won't. If you're eyeing up a plot off site, time the walk there.

Did you know veg are thirsty! Growing pumpkins for Halloween is an often used hook, but a single 5 kg pumpkin accounts for around 1,700 litres of water across its growing life,⁸ and on a hot site most of the watering is down to you. Sort your water source before you plant. That's why Step 2 matters. Good gardeners don't just choose what they want to grow; they figure out how they'll keep it alive. Check out the [RHS sustainability advice](#)⁹ and the [Mains to Rains](#) guidance for ideas on saving water, helping wildlife and making your garden more climate-ready.

Step 3: Co-design together Agree your design principles from the RHS Wellbeing Garden Blueprint¹ and write them down. This is the power move: every decision after this gets tested against your list.

Step 4: Plan every detail Only as heavy as it needs to be. An indoor garden might just need a shopping list and a rota.

Step 5: Create the garden Before planting, prepare the ground, pots or containers properly. Good soil, drainage, water and plant choice help a garden survive and thrive. Then comes build day: everyone plants something, so everyone owns a piece of it.

Step 6: Sustain and celebrate Launch it properly: your music, your people, your photos. Then the real life of the space begins.

Step 7: Care and adapt. Review each season: move what's not working, grow what is. It's never finished, so your say never runs out. And count who's moved in new shoots, bees, a first butterfly, birds you've not seen before. Photograph it, log it, check next season. That's proof the garden's working, and its science.

The life of the space starts now. Every gardener, ranger, and designer began with one thriving plant. You're already there.

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.



Figure 7. 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.



Figure 8. 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.

THE BLUEPRINT IN PRACTICE

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.



Figure 9. The Young Placemakers at the pavilion they designed, named and part-built. © Nick Turpin. [MATT + FIONA](#)

The young people named the pavilion themselves and built its decorative panels by hand at the Euston Skills Centre. 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.



Figure 10. A play and performance space where hoardings used to be. © Grant Donaldson. [MATT + FIONA](#)

Annexes

The model ends here; what follows is the working detail to take into your first youth panel session.

Annex 1: The seven design principles in detail

This annex expands the seven principles introduced in Part 1 (*From vision to design*). For each: the youth adaptation and its definition, the evidence from the RHS Wellbeing Garden Blueprint,¹ and a youth-voice translation ready for adaptation. The right-hand column is a first draft only, written for the youth panel to challenge, adapt or redesign.

Design Principle	Definition and evidence	Blueprint Youth panel to challenge, keep or adapt
Welcoming Accessibility	Ages 11–25 (to 25 for SEND). No-cost entry, step-free access, works for evening and after-school hours. Applies indoors as much as outdoors; an indoor garden is often the more accessible starting point. Where part of the garden is off site, walking distance matters; travel time and fare cost are access barriers like any other. Evidence: Design for access regardless of age, disability or need¹⁰; gardens should feel welcoming across backgrounds, cultures and generations;¹¹ smooth surfaces, gentle gradients, raised beds and clear routes improve comfort and usability¹². A space becomes restorative when it supports what people want or need to do.	No gatekeeping. Easy to get to, you don't need money, kit or plant knowledge to belong here. Turn up after school, bring your mates, it works around your life.
Know where you are Wayfinding	Balance staff sightlines (safeguarding) with corners that give real privacy and autonomy; privacy is a right² not a safeguarding loophole; design for both. Reliable phone signal or Wi-Fi. Evidence: linked, meandering paths remove the pressure of choice at intersections and support orientation, with strongest evidence for cognitive accessibility¹³; avoid dead ends¹⁴; nooks, alcoves and layered planting create intimate spaces along the route, the same features that deliver the privacy/sightline balance.¹⁵	You can clock the whole space in one look: where your people are, where the exits are. And there's signal. Nobody sticks around somewhere their phone won't work.
The quiet corner Serenity	A real escape from exam stress, social media and, for some, an unsettled home life. Quiet corners set apart from the main activity area² with hammock zones and hanging-out spaces Evidence: mid-complexity fractal and Fibonacci patterns are the most relaxing to process¹⁶; people	The no-drama corner. Off camera, notifications down, somewhere to decompress when the day's been a lot.

Design Principle	Definition and evidence	Blueprint Youth panel to challenge, keep or adapt
	respond best to lush, rounded, dense foliage with flower colour influencing mood;^{17–19} natural soundscapes are calmer than traffic noise, which erodes the restorative effect of birdsong;^{20,21} simply perceiving biodiversity is calming;^{21,22} watching garden birds is especially restorative.²³	
Plants and senses Multisensory planting	Fast-growing, high-reward plants suit shorter attention spans; edible planting supports cooking sessions; scented planting (lavender, rosemary, mint) supports stress regulation around exams. Evidence: planting diversity gives year-round interest and wildlife value;²⁴ flower colour influences mood, with warmer colours such as yellow and orange linked to energy and uplift, and cooler blues, purples and whites to calm and relaxation;^{19,25,26} Scent links directly to emotion and memory²⁷ and is a key pathway from nature to wellbeing.²⁸ Evidence associates lavender with reduced anxiety and improved sleep; rosemary and sage with alertness and memory; peppermint with focus; citrus scents with mood and wellbeing; and pine, cedar and other conifers with wider health benefits.²⁹	Plants that actually do something: bold colours, weird shapes, leaves you want to touch, smells that hit different each season. Unreal on camera, better in person. PlantTok energy, but real. Grow the mint that ends up in your food.
Your zones Spatial organisation	Distinct zones for group hangout, solo reflection and youth-led events (pop-up markets, open mics), with flexible, movable furniture;² space to gather and associate on their own terms. Evidence: dividing the garden with plants, structures or changes in perspective supports a healthy range of moods, from calming to energising; zones should balance openness with privacy and safety;^{14 30 31} social features such as games tables, shelter and shared notice boards encourage interaction, learning and community building.³²	Zoned like your group chats: one space for everyone, one for close friends, one that's just you. Plus room for your events: open mics, pop-ups, watch parties.
Mess about Exploration and play	Framed as informal learning with a route to accreditation, not as “childish”, which matters for engaging older teens and young adults. Play is a right at 16 as much as at 6 ². This might include table tennis, giant games, creative activities or spaces designed for music, open-mic and performance space. Evidence: gardens with elements that invite easy exploration create play, joy and discovery; interactivity generates playfulness in adults as much as children and is uplifting and restful for the mind. ³³	Permission to mess about, and to use the space: film here, shoot photos here, run grow-offs with your mates, build the backdrop for your next event. Propagate a cutting, get it wrong, try again. It all counts.

Design Principle	Definition and evidence	Blueprint Youth panel to challenge, keep or adapt
Looks like us Cultural artefacts and significance	Murals, street art, planting reflecting the youth centre's actual community (including diaspora and heritage planting), space for young people's own creative signatures and, where relevant, tribute planting for peer loss. ² Evidence: cultural artefacts and symbolic plants matched to the community build fascination, belonging and familiarity, and carry strong positive memories. ³³ Familiar planting supports belonging after migration ³⁴ , visible creative input builds youth ownership. ³⁵	Your art, your music, your food, your community, visible in the space. It should look like somewhere you'd actually post, not a council leaflet.

Annex 2: The Youth-led Garden Design Model in full

This annex expands the model introduced in Part 2: the six participation approaches, the frameworks behind them, and what each looks like in practice.

The model draws on four recognised frameworks. Lundy's Model of Participation⁴ gives young people the space, voice, audience and influence needed for meaningful involvement. Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation⁵ established the distinction between token consultation and real power. Hear by Right, the National Youth Agency's participation framework⁷, is the benchmark most youth services and commissioners will recognise. Think Local Act Personal's Making It Real principles⁶ shape the co-production approach in "Shared ownership".

Unlike the ladders, this model does not rank the six approaches from worse to better: they are choices, and a young person can move between them at any time. A genuinely youth-led wellbeing garden will nonetheless spend most of its time in the final four, where influence, responsibility and ownership increase. Many youth centres are built on the principle of moving young people from excluded to empowered; the model is a practical route to doing that in the garden.

Approach	What this looks like	Typical activity
Open door (Provision)	Young people are welcome to use and enjoy the garden without any expectation that they take part in decision-making. An accessible starting point for everyone. Article 3 in practice ² .	Drop-in gardening sessions, open access during youth centre hours, produce used in cooking activities.
Quick say (Consultation)	Young people are asked for their views on specific questions or ideas. Participation is quick, informal and requires little commitment. A basic expression of Article 12.	Polls, sticky-note feedback walls, voting on furniture, planting or activities.

Standing voice (Engagement)	Young people regularly contribute to decisions through an established forum, council or steering group. Their views shape plans and priorities over time. Article 12 given ongoing influence, supported by Article 15.	Youth panels reviewing garden plans, discussing budgets or advising on programmes.
Hands-on design + creation (Co-design and co-creation)	Young people work directly with professionals to develop ideas, make design choices and physically create the space. Their input is visible in the final garden, both in the decisions made and in the work of their own hands. Article 12 with clear influence over outcomes.	Design workshops, site visits, model-making, plant selection and layout testing; painting walls and raised beds in chosen colours, building and planting up beds, and installing features.
Shared ownership (Co-production)	Young people and staff share decision-making responsibility. Decisions are made together and accountability is shared. A strong expression of participation and partnership. The space stays theirs to evolve, successive cohorts can amend and add their own elements over time, so it never becomes fixed or finished.	Joint budget decisions, co-chairing project groups, helping select designers or contractors.
Pass it on (Sharing)	Young people become leaders who train, mentor and support others. Knowledge and responsibility are passed on within the youth community. Article 15 in action.	Peer mentoring, accredited horticulture programmes (RHS Level 1 , New Shoots), youth-led workshops or volunteering opportunities.

Over to you

Every garden in this blueprint is still waiting to be made or updated. The first one might be yours: a shelf of cuttings in a borrowed room, a few pots by a door, a panel of young people deciding what grows. You don't need outdoor space, a budget line or plant knowledge to begin. You need a room, some light, and the people the space belongs to.

This is a first draft, written by adults, and it's waiting for its real authors. In autumn 2026 a paid youth panel will up us to write it their way, and the version their peers use across the country will carry their names.

If you know a group of young people who want a hand in that, or you're starting a garden and would like company on the way, tell us: Communities@rhs.org.uk.

Start small. Start indoors. Start anyway.

References

Numbered in order of first citation. The evidence base for the model sits in the companion document, RHS Wellbeing Garden Blueprint: Youth-led Gardens – Evidence and Policy Companion, which has its own reference list.

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