

Wellington's inspirational community projects

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People have an affinity with the natural world, and many studies have shown that when we get in touch with nature, we are happier and healthier for it. But many of us living in cities, surrounded by concrete and steel, have become so disconnected, our heads too full of our jobs or relationships to allow space for anything else.

The miracles of nature never cease to amaze me. I was taught to treat the body as a whole by my homeopath from an early age, which led me to pursue a career in holistic massage and skincare. Permaculture seemed to perfectly suit my holistic approach to life, and I have been involved with the transition town movement for about 10 years. Being part of TTW's Sustainable Food Group has brought me a lot of joy, so I hope readers will be inspired to join their own local group to take positive steps towards a greener, kinder, and healthier future.

The transition town movement

Rob Hopkins, the permaculturalist and addiction counsellor who founded the first transition town group in Totnes in 2005, pointed out that our society is addicted to fossil fuels – and will do almost anything to avoid facing the fact that we need to change. Some deny that there is a problem; others adopt survivalist strategies and build a bunker, or pin their hopes on outlandish technical solutions – perhaps we can move to another planet? The real answer is much closer to home: to work together as a community to transition away from fossil fuels – and fast. For if we carry on consuming the earth's resources at the current rate, as well as warming the climate and damaging the environment, shortages and price rises are likely to cause war and conflict. But if we use the remaining resources wisely to build infrastructure such as solar farms, hydro dams and wind farms, we could have a future that's not just viable but actually more desirable, within closer-knit and mutually supportive communities.

The transition strapline is: 'If we wait for the governments, it'll be too little, too late; if we act as individuals it'll be too little; but if we act as communities, it might be just enough, just in time.'

If we were to show, as I believe we are now starting to, that the 'electorate'

really care about the environment, climate change, and the destruction of habitat, politicians will have to respond.

Hearing about too many of the world's problems, on our ever increasingly depressing and negative news, can leave us feeling powerless. This feeling can lead to a sense of hopelessness. The problems are so vast and complex, it feels like nothing we can do will make the slightest difference. But this is what the transition movement is all about. Whatever local community group you choose to join, or create, you can be part of the solution. We all have the ability to influence and change the small patch of earth we call home.

The transition movement aims to reskill people with the arts we are losing – learning from our elders how to sew, bottle food, mend our bikes – the kind of life we led before our throwaway and consumerist society started to wreak havoc on our climate and environment. This could build connections in our community and help us become a more cohesive society. If we can take the best from modern life – the technology that makes life easy – and combine that with some of the skills and values from the past, the Earth and us humans would be happier for it. Repair cafés – closely allied to the transition movement – are a wonderful way forward, as we saw in practice when we started our own in Wellington earlier this year.

Growing our own

One of the first regular events we set up in Transition Town Wellington were talks on how to grow organic vegetables. This was a chance for both experienced and novice gardeners to get together and share knowledge. Unlike the town's regular gardening club, which invited 'experts' to give talks on their special area with the audience sitting and listening, we decided to run the meetings more as a knowledge-sharing platform, where novices and more experienced gardeners could learn from each other. The notes are available from our website ttw.org.uk. They have been revised and added to over the years, to provide a valuable resource for us in the future – and for others too.

Growing plants to eat is a complete joy. I would like to encourage anyone reading this who doesn't already grow to give it a go. It will help you discover a fundamental connection to the earth, and this connection will grow stronger over time, even if you live in a city, and will have a positive impact on your mental health. Until relatively recently, in evolutionary terms we, like all other animals on our planet, spent our lives in pursuit of food. Becoming more self-reliant and reconnecting with this primal drive will give you more confidence and satisfaction.

As well as encouraging people to grow their own fruit and vegetables, TTW also wanted to encourage home cooking. The emergence of convenience food, fridges and freezers in the 1960s, drew many people away from cooking from scratch. Then, as the busyness of our lives increased and more women started to work full-time in the 1970s, cooking skills took a back seat. Chef-led programmes may encourage a few to have complicated food and cooking as a hobby, but as a group, we want to reskill normal people with basic cooking skills. We organised chutney-, soup- and bread-making afternoons, where we would get together in a church kitchen and make a variety of recipes from mainly home grown produce.

Low carbon farming

Looking at the bigger world picture, 26% of the world's carbon emissions come from food production (www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-46459714) so growing food locally is a good place to start when it comes to reducing our carbon footprint. At the start of the Dig for Victory campaign in the Second World War, Britain only produced around a third of its food. There was a massive government drive to increase yield, until in the early 1980s we had the ridiculous situation of phenomena like 'grain mountains', although we did produce 82% of our food. But now we have slipped back to 61% self-sufficiency (www.countryfile.com/news/can-the-uk-feed-itself-after-brexite/). But if we are going to rely less on fossil fuels and minimise the destruction of our natural environment, we need to move away from a highly mechanised and artificially fertilised agriculture. We can influence how agriculture works by campaigning for government policy

change, and as individuals aim to increase the amount of organically produced food we buy, and reduce our intake of meat products. In time, more farmers will change their practices to meet consumer demand.

Meanwhile, as a community, we can help our urban landscape provide food, and wildlife to thrive there. We can choose what we grow in our own gardens, but we can influence what gets planted in our communal spaces. Wellington local council has been co-operating with transition town efforts for planting and maintaining unused public spaces for the overall good of the town. TTW has been planting fruit trees, bushes, and herbs, around the town for five years now. We are working towards a vision that there could be food to forage near everyone's home, to provide an opportunity for everyone, through gardening, to connect to the earth, and to their neighbours, even if they have no garden nor time to commit to their own allotment.

Community orchards and woodland

We started by helping to expand and develop a community orchard on a new housing estate, on a spare bit of green space that had to be preserved due to the presence of a pond with greater crested newts and 10 veteran apple trees. This sizeable orchard has the most productive community trees in town. We have added 29 more apple trees and four plums and pears to the original heritage orchard, plus a range of soft fruit bushes and hazels. In 2013, we planted a new orchard on an old church site. This is now known as Trinity Orchard, and contains 14 apple trees, a plum and a pear tree. In 2015, we planted some fruit bushes and rhubarb on council land by the Wellington Bowling Club. In 2016, we got a grant from the council to plant suitable fruit trees and bushes in a damp field dubbed a 'community woodland', and morello cherries along the shady edge of a rugby pitch. As the projects have grown, awareness of our activities has spread, and residents have started to ask if we can plant up small patches near their houses. By December 2018, we had planted plum, apple, cherry and pear trees near a local primary school, which in time will provide fruit for the children to pick on their way home from school.

These sites are shown on our foraging map drawn using the artistic skills of volunteers, and reproduced with sponsorship from local businesses; again using the resource of our community. Our foraging map got us noticed and together with our other projects led us to win a Green Heart Hero award in March 2019, as an 'inspirational community project'.

Gaining momentum

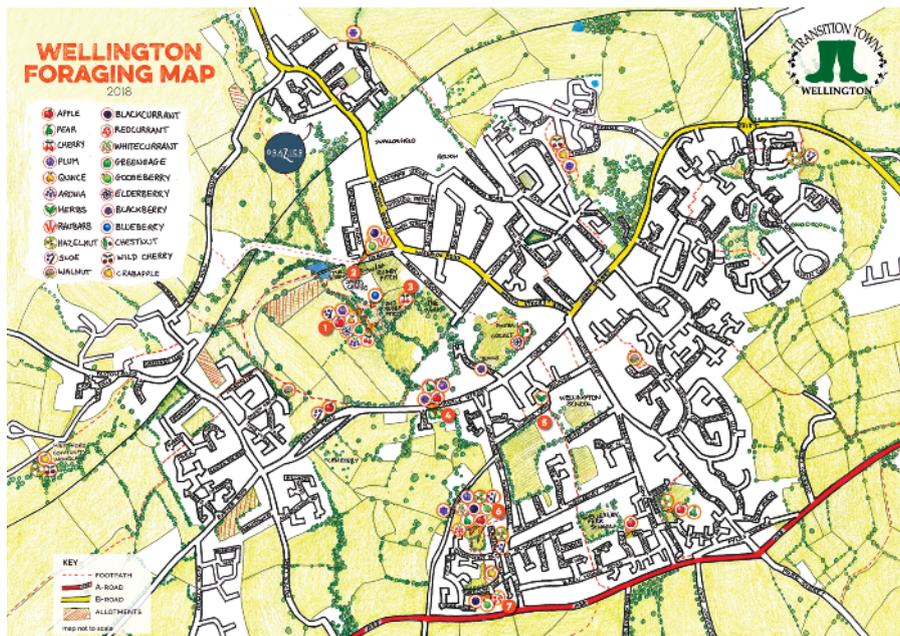
The Free Community Food Map (<https://ttw.org.uk/free-community-food-map>) has helped raise awareness of what we are doing as a group, as families are using the foraging sites more and more. It's lovely to see young children

discovering picking fresh food for the first time, as well as spending time with their families. New people are learning when different fruits become ripe, not from someone telling them, but from practical experience. As the most bountiful harvest so far in the town are the apples at the original community orchard, we have been running apple-juicing days for around five years now. As more people join the group, we may run an elderflower cordial event, or jam-making sessions, and share more recipes to use the foraged fruit by one of the many social media platforms.

This year we are embarking on our biggest project yet – a new community garden of around an acre next to a railway line. This site was brought to our attention at the same time as the community woodland, in 2016. The energy and enthusiasm of local volunteers has transformed the idea into something much greater than our original vision, with wildlife and nature now as its main focus.

The picture below shows the plan for the site. The council's ecologists are using our developing sites as case studies for the Pollinator Action Plan, adopted by Somerset County Council in 2018, to help provide insect-friendly habitats which are in desperately short supply. Hopefully in the future, this once bramble-covered field will be not just a bountiful resource for foraging, but also a haven for wildlife and a place for people to come together and enjoy picnics in a beautiful semi-wild garden.

The future is really bright for Transition Town Wellington. People seem to be waking up to the urgency of the situation – especially climate change and species loss – and realising more than ever that we all play a part in the global picture. Perhaps the success of our most recent projects is an indicator that more people are searching for something they can do to make a change. It feels like we are involved in the right movement at the right time.



Coming together for change

I would really encourage anyone reading this to join a project or start one. What is it that bugs you, that you'd like to change? If we can do it in Wellington, then you can. You don't need to be an expert, or have any particular qualifications. All it needs is the willingness to spare some time, some patience to deal with different people, and energy and enthusiasm to have a go. It doesn't need to be perfect, and you don't need to know everything – society just needs someone to volunteer, especially if no one else is doing it already. It might be a bit of hard work, but that is totally outweighed by the great feeling you get of being part of the solution. Member Andrea says: 'I was feeling a bit low one day with my job on the computer, wondering if my life was worth anything, but the following day, using a mattock to dig up bramble roots to create a footpath at Longacre, I felt my life had purpose and meaning, because I was helping the community'. Maybe you can join us in planting fruit trees and bushes in your town, or creating a community veg patch, or a wildflower meadow, joining many other similar projects in the country, until all of Britain's urban spaces are greener and more beautiful, providing hope for our future and our food security.

