





Ten Top Tips for Co-designing Community Spaces that Nurture





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The Better Place project is a Better Start Bradford project that is being delivered in collaboration with Bradford Council, voluntary sector, community groups and local people. Over the past 10 years (2015-2025) Better Place has identified and overseen improvements to local parks and outdoor spaces with the aim of providing a healthier and happier environment for babies, young children and families. We have put together these Top 10 Tips in the hope that they may help you deliver your own community project.

Better Place's goal from the outset was to create accessible and stimulating outdoor spaces that specifically met the local communities' needs and encouraged families to spend time in the outdoors. Each project was designed with input and insight from the users, the local community and families, ensuring that the design perfectly complemented the individual needs and unique characteristics of each community that we worked with. By blending our expertise with the specific requirements of the community, we have achieved wonderful results that bring people together, enriching lives, especially for the little ones who use them.

1. Harness the expertise of the community

The community brings an historical perspective and valuable insights into how a space functions, an understanding of critical, local issues, a place's individual character and what excites or concerns people. Everyone's input informs how the project develops, working together to find solutions through co-design to preserve, enhance and build wonderful, tailored places. It is vital to allow your community a voice and to hear it.

Collaboration is key in bringing people together to feel a part of something. Harnessing talents, insights and assets from the local community ensures people work together to share ideas and skills, boosting confidence in themselves and the project. Encouraging many voices helps a project succeed in the long term as they feel an integral part of it. Communities can be transient, with key people moving on but, by involving as many people as possible in decision making from the start, people involved stay involved, the community develops pride and takes ownership in a project collectively.

Don't bring a professional ego to the table - as a visitor, stay humble, and ask for feedback regularly. To keep a community connected remember members of the community are the experts, not you. It is their space.

Spaces that are co-designed, perceived as safe and inclusive, accessed easily and promote well-being will stand the test of time. Co-designing focuses on creating environments that enable positive interactions between communities, support diverse needs, and improve the overall quality of life for the people who inhabit and use these spaces.

The common goal of developing a local space can galvanise a community based on local appreciation and interests.



2. Take the time to observe

Establishing how people are using, or not using, a particular space informs the project design by highlighting popular activities and what features could be incorporated to enhance experience and increase usage. Once the spaces are built, continuing to observe people as they use them gives an insight into how to manage them and support how they may evolve over time.



3. Partners are invaluable



Partners can include: the local council, community hubs, community representatives, libraries, schools and many others. They can provide hospitable and trusted links into a community to initiate dialogue, represent expectations and hopes, and influence project success. Getting them involved helps in building trust, providing support, overcoming obstacles, nurturing and galvanising the community and getting a project off the ground.

Link to local agendas and good working practice such as Play and Physical Activity strategies through the participatory design processes. Provide environments, such as workshops or drop-ins, for exploring users' ideas and discussing different points of view that are compatible with users' needs and provide vibrant and diverse social interactions.

4. Be an inclusive community, but retain a unique sense of place

Co-designing and building spaces in strong neighbourhoods that are walkable, socially connected, fun, safe to linger, with as few barriers to access as possible supports a thriving, convivial space.

Taking a broad range of needs and thoughts into account -intergenerational and intercultural- you can create a place that will be human-centred, vibrant and inclusive that inspires connection, understanding and, ultimately, community cohesion. When inclusive and diverse perceptions on what is important to people is shared and acknowledged in terms of abilities, beliefs and views it helps a community to trust you are working with them towards a common goal. Including children in the co-design team helps them build diverse relationships and understand their connections to a broader world, promoting socialisation, decision-making and active citizenship.

Communicate in a way that works for the community. Discuss concepts at a relatable level, in varying formats (social media, virtual meetings, door-knocking, group discussions, storytelling, map construction to understand the local context) that engender active inclusion and ensure people understand the proposals and can contribute. Meet in the communities, space such as community venue and at community events.

Creating a welcoming, comfortable, and vital place may mean introducing new elements such as sculptures, seating, play equipment. If these match community need but have an element of being bespoke and special to that community, the sense of place can be immense. People love having something unique and special to only them and it demonstrates how much a project uniquely represents just that community and place. In a public space, the choice and arrangement of different elements in relation to each other can encourage interaction, bringing people together and even a minor design solution can achieve a powerful improvement in a place.

The approach to a site is almost as important as the actual site itself. Put energy into keeping access points clean and tidy and ensure visitor experience is positive as they approach the space. The frame is as important as the picture with The areas around a site are also important, such as access routes and pathways. Put energy into keeping all access points clean and tidy and ensure visitor experience is positive as they approach the space. The frame is as important as the picture.



SPECIAL TO EACH COMMUNITY

NO BARRIERS



WALKABLE

CO-DESIGNED WITH CHILDREN





5. Have a Vision

An over-reaching vision for a space and other local spaces needs to come out of each community to set down expectations and possibilities and to introduce a sense of pride and identity for the community involved. Avoid replicating similar projects within the vicinity by thinking about connectivity, accessibility and mobility to elicit exploratory, social, and enjoyable behaviours. Don't forget to include environmental comfort - seating, shade, shelter, multi-sensory elements that all help to promote greater accessibility and usage.

6. Quick wins

Short term engagement activities or responses at the start of a project, such as a pop-up play space or temporary art installation, act as nodes for conversation and engagement. Ideas can be tested and refined, building the communities confidence in being able to contribute towards and achieve the project. It helps build trust, interest and exploration and might bring more people on board.





7. Value for money matters

Improving public space requires significant investment and we need to be able to assess demand and benefits of such spaces to ensure landowners, clients, funders and the communities perceive the schemes as value for money. Once the basic infrastructure of a public space is set, the elements that will make it work need to be built for longevity using strong materials resilient to exuberant use and malicious damage that have been tried and tested and satisfy regulatory standards. It helps to view the cost in a broad sense, balancing value for money against community benefit - both short and long term.

8. Build in evaluation from the outset

The impact of interventions and how they are valued may take some time to manifest. Establishing the base line, and transition over time, of a site requires detailed evaluation planning from the start of the project to determine social value both in the design process and in the actual physical use of the space. Capture and demonstrate the impact that a space brings in terms of its value in bringing people together, fostering relationships, improving health and wellbeing etc via pop-ups, questionnaires and attending local events. Interviewing users to develop case studies is a powerful way to highlight the impact and gain insights into how spaces are used. There may be some impact you may never have predicted. With good planning and community connection, outcomes should be enduring.



9. Celebrate and remain playful

How the community and wider team have worked together to bring a project to fruition deserves recognition, especially the value that everyone's contribution has brought. An opening celebratory event should be planned in from the very beginning and will help promote the project to a much wider audience beyond the project team, the community involved in co-design, internal and external contributors and contractors. Celebrate milestones along the way. An end-of-installation celebration is not celebrating the project is over...it is recognising the achievement and that this is only the start - the fun is just beginning!



10. The project is never finished

Socially sustainable projects consider the social, cultural, economic, and health aspects of a community to address societal challenges and provide long-term benefits to residents. Future-proof the design and consider each elements' environmental impact. Flexibility in the use of a space to suit changing needs is essential. Co-designing with the local community is crucial for a space to maintain continuous engagement and a long-term sustainable impact.

Equipment wears out, may need repair and can be damaged through wear and tear from frequent use. Check you site regularly and involve larger organisations that may be able to help with resources. Having a long-term maintenance plan is essential, including provision for making future adaptations if necessary. This ensures the project remains relevant with a longer-term legacy. It's a good idea to have some project funding specifically for site establishment and longer-term maintenance to ensure the longevity of the project/installation.

