

Case Study:

Mount Wise Neighbourhood Centre Collaboration

The Mount Wise Neighbourhood Centre collaboration has been a partnership project between Zebra Collective, The Open University, Plymouth City Council (Green Communities project, in partnership with the National Trust), and Plymouth and South Devon Community Forest.

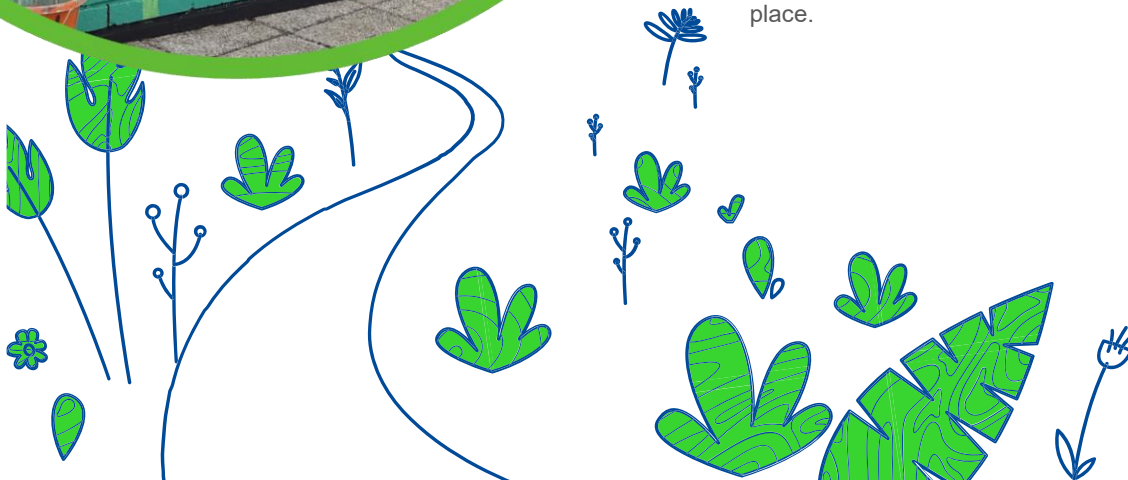
Mount Wise Neighbourhood Centre (MWNC) is in Devonport, a socioeconomically disadvantaged area of Plymouth. In April 2024, Zebra Collective took on the centre when it was set to close after a long period of underuse. Despite its importance as a local nursery, youth club, and community venue, the building was near derelict. Zebra Collective's aim was to bring the building and outside space back to life alongside local people and create a welcoming community space.

The Open University and Zebra Collective co-designed a research project based on shared values around asset-based community development (ABCD), community agency and participatory action research. The project used an embedded and relational approach in line with Zebra Collective's practice.

Since 2022, Zebra Collective has worked with Green Communities, a partnership between Plymouth City Council (PCC) and the National Trust, to improve access to nature in Devonport. Green Communities supports activities at MWNC, including the gardening group, youth clubs, and the Green Devonport Partnership, where local people and professionals come together to plan for nature in the neighbourhood.

In Summer 2025, Green Communities connected Zebra Collective with Plymouth and South Devon Community Forest (PSDCF), which is administered by PCC and funded through DEFRA's Tree Programme. PSDCF funded tree planting and wider improvements to support community access to the garden.

This project brought together Zebra Collective, The Open University, Green Communities and PSDCF to improve the outdoor space at MWNC for people, nature, and place.



Aims/what were we trying to do?

All partners agreed that the priority was to enhance the outdoor space with the local community, making it better for people and wildlife. Within this shared goal:

Zebra Collective aimed to ensure local people, including young people already involved with the Centre, led the design of the space. The garden needed to be good for nature and suitable for children and young people.

The Open University aimed to support a community-led co-design process that enabled local people to influence their place and explore how participation can affect their sense of agency.

Green Communities aimed to promote health and wellbeing through nature connection and support community-led local nature recovery through co-design and co-delivery.

PSDCF aimed to combat social isolation by creating a wildlife- and community-focused tree space, while increasing canopy cover to benefit people, nature, and place.

Together, the project aimed to create a space where people can connect with nature, meet as part of community life, and continue supporting positive change in Devonport. It also contributed towards the Green Devonport Plan and Plymouth's Plan for Nature & People.

Our approach

This collaboration was grounded in relationships and connections developed over many years.

Each partner brought complementary approaches:-

Zebra Collective has cultivated deep local connections in the neighbourhood for 23 years. It works through a hyper-local, strengths-based approach focused on agency, participation, and community ownership.

The Open University team uses ABCD, place-based co-design and participatory action research methods, creating spaces for learning and doing that support people to build on their existing strengths and assets.

Green Communities uses ABCD and nature-connectedness approaches to build long-term trust, promote green skills and wellbeing, while using permaculture principles in local nature recovery.

PSDCF uses evidence-based approaches to increase canopy cover, improve biodiversity, and create greener spaces through partnership working and community participation.

Collectively, partners worked openly and collaboratively, learning from both shared values and different perspectives. This enabled the project to grow and evolve through community participation.



"When I was younger I used to think, '[gardening]'s boring. How can anyone want to be a gardener? But since joining the gardening group and getting involved in all this with the garden, I think I've been a bit more green-fingered. Learning about different things. And I mean, who would have thought I'd do a permaculture design course?" - Local resident.

What did we do?

The project used a community-led collaborative design process to shape improvements to the outdoor space at MWNC. Activities included:-

- Workshops to understand how the space is used by people and nature.
- Activities with the regular youth group to gather ideas, which included incorporating a fire pit and wildlife pond.
- Visits to other community-led green spaces across Plymouth.
- Hands-on creative activities using imagery and maps to explore ideas and to design the space.

The workshops were facilitated by The Open University with input from Zebra Collective and support from Green Communities and PSDCF. These workshops, weekly gardening group conversations, and a public consultation led to a final design, with the gardening group refining details on specific materials and items. Community members also led on mini-projects within the space, including a mural, plant selection, building bird boxes and bug hotels, as well as exploring local history and options for garden management.

Following several months of co-design, a Community Planting Day took place in March 2026, where the project teams and local residents helped to plant trees and wildflowers, build planters and wildlife homes, create a fire pit, paint signs and complete the mural.

The gardening group continues to care for and develop the space with ongoing support from the Zebra Collective, Green Communities, and PSDCF.

What were the outputs/results?

A collaborative process

Project partners worked together regularly to coordinate planning, delivery, and community engagement.

Co-design and research

- 46 individuals directly involved in research-related activities
- 25 local people involved, including 11 children
- 236 individual contributions
- 4 structured workshops
- 1 stakeholder collaboration workshop
- 4 informal community workshops
- 6 mini-projects taken forward by community members
- 3 Ripple Effects Mapping sessions
- 1 research findings review session
- 7 interviews/focus groups

Community Planting Day

- 15 local people along with Zebra Collective, Open University, and multiple teams from PCC delivered activities on the day
- 87 community participants attended
- 175 trees planted
- 1 community orchard created
- 1 wildlife pond installed
- 8 planters built, 6 lower and 2 accessible
- 1 fire pit created
- 2 benches installed
- 1 greenhouse/shed built
- 1 water butt installed
- 1 large round table with seating installed
- Dozens of hands-on contributions from local people, including bird box construction, plug planting, and pebble and sign painting
- 1 mural painted on the MWNC building

Mini case study 1: A few days after the Community Planting Day, a PCC grounds person was in the garden and when asked, shared information about plants that had been planted. This conversation led to two people from gardening group arranging their own visit to a garden centre. They shared plant knowledge and bought seeds and plants for the garden. They have since grown marigolds and other plants from seed in the greenhouse that now support the food growing space at the Centre. They also now consider each other to be friends.



What difference did it make?/What were the outcomes?

People

- People now enjoy spending time in the garden, growing food and flowers, and continuing to make plans for further improvements.
- The gardening group developed a stronger sense of ownership of the garden and a greater desire to contribute to its development, increasing the likelihood of long-term sustainability.
- Local people reported stronger feelings of individual and community agency, belonging, and active citizenship.
- People described benefits to their mental health, wellbeing and confidence, and developed new skills, interests and friendships through participation.
- Young people are spending more time outdoors during youth club activities and have become increasingly engaged with gardening, the pond, trees, and fire pit, supporting stronger connections to nature.
- A placement student from the University of Plymouth ran an evaluation project with the MWNC Gardening Group. This showed increased confidence in caring for nature, noticing everyday nature, and influencing nature-related decisions.

Nature

The project created:-

- A transformed and more biodiverse outdoor space
- Increased canopy cover
- Improved opportunities for food growing
- Enhanced nature connectedness
- Greater access to nature
- Improved habitat for wildlife

Place

- The garden has become a valued community space and the first project delivered since the co-creation of the Green Devonport Plan.
- Local people and wider community members have recognised and celebrated the improvements made to the space, including the visual impact of the mural on the front of the building.

Partnerships and research

- The project strengthened relationships between Zebra Collective, The Open University, Green Communities, and PSDCF, creating opportunities for future collaboration.
- The project provided a space for academic knowledge generation using a range of hands-on and creative methods. Insights from the Open University/Zebra Collective research form part of this case study. One method used was Ripple Effects Mapping, capturing causal links of impacts through collective conversations. This created a reflective space for all project partners and local people taking part to consider the impact of the project's collaboration, activities and events.
- While OU research outputs are still in development, the project has already been shared through a seminar at University of Exeter's Environment and Sustainability Research Group, and further sharing is expected through a sharing event for local people and stakeholders (June 2026), a workshop at the Royal Geographical Society Annual Conference (Sep 2026), and future research outputs.

Mini case study 2: Gardening group were interested to learn that a gardener had both white and red strawberries at home. This person decided to order some white strawberry plants to bring and donate to the Centre, where the group now cares for them in one of the new planters.

"I was slightly worried that we were going to be told what to do...And I love the fact that we weren't, that wasn't the case." - Local resident.



Key learnings

- Relationships, trust, and consistency are fundamental to successful community-led projects.
- Creating spaces that enable people to contribute takes time and requires consistency for relationships to develop.
- Offering a range of different activities, including creative ones, over a longer period of time enables more people to take part.
- Asset-based, strengths-based and relational approaches support participation, ownership and agency.
- People engage through relationships and connection to place rather than activities alone.
- Co-design and co-production strengthen active citizenship and long-term stewardship.
- Every individual brings valuable skills, knowledge and experience across communities and organisations.
- Values, principles and long-term relationships are more important than funding alone.
- Cross-working within and between organisations strengthens delivery and creates opportunities for future collaboration.
- Community ownership increases when people are involved in shaping decisions from the beginning.

Next steps

- Zebra Collective and the local community will continue to develop the garden and outdoor spaces at MWNC.
- Partnership working between Zebra Collective, Green Communities, PSDCF, and The Open University will continue and may lead to future collaborations.
- Youth engagement will be strengthened through ongoing activities.
- Plans to extend the garden will be progressed.
- Future funding opportunities will be explored to support long-term development and programming.



Plymouth and South Devon
Community Forest



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