

This article is about a project to create a community garden beside the St Mary's Centre and to tell you how it started.

Many of you may have heard about what we have come to call the ***Stokey Listening Circles project*** which was co-developed and run by people from St Mary's Church and Hackney Extinction Rebellion in the Spring of 2022. This was a community development project which aimed to find out about the concerns of local people at a time when we were emerging from the pandemic and facing several significant social issues such as poverty & the cost of living crisis; racial discrimination and the climate & biodiversity catastrophe. The aim was to develop some practical projects to address these concerns locally.

We created a plan to run a series of weekly listening circles to identify these concerns and work out what we as a community might do to address them. We ran a pilot session to test out the process and then organised 6 evenings of listening circles culminating in a community meal on the final evening. We created a flier that was used to promote the program and set up a Facebook page. Before each session we created a detailed plan including enquiry questions for the listening circles and allocated tasks such as welcoming and facilitation. After each session we held a review meeting to reflect on the process and work on a plan for the following week. Over the 6 weeks we worked through the stages set out below:

identifying people's concerns →

prioritising those concerns →

developing practical projects to address them

Four projects were initially created which were:

1. working to hold Hackney Council to account in relation to the climate crisis
2. running listening circles for young people
3. running a pop-up climate café
- 4. developing a community garden on church land**

The development of a community garden sought to address concerns about social isolation and mental health issues which were raised by many people during the listening circles. The Parochial Church Council has agreed that we can use some of the land at the east end of St Mary's Church (outside the back of the centre) where we will create a garden called Mary's Garden.

We are working to make the process of designing, creating and maintaining the garden a collaborative one - open to everyone. We are inviting people from St Mary's, from the projects that meet in the church and centre such as the Second Chance café and the Hackney Migrant Centre, and from the wider community to share in this process. By doing this we hope that people will connect with others & with nature and that this will help some of those who feel isolated or suffer with mental health issues.

We are not sure yet exactly what will be in the garden but we are going to create it using the techniques of Permaculture which is a sustainable design method which will help to ensure a positive environmental and social impact. It is likely that there will be a community orchard and that we will grow some herbs. So, as well as sharing the design and creation process, we will be able to share some of the fruit and other produce with the wider community.

And finally, once the garden is created, we hope it will become a space that can be used in different ways by the church and the groups that already meet in the centre plus others in the local community. In particular, we hope that it might be a space that people can relax and rest in.

At the moment, two of us from the church and two people from the local community who attended the listening circles are meeting regularly to plan the creation of the garden. This includes organising some days to do the initial clearing and planting in early 2023. We also plan to run a community engagement event in the New Year.