

THAMESMEAD NATURE FORUM OF LONDON



Addressed SDG:



Image: CLEVER Cities, London

> OBJECTIVES

The Thamesmead Nature Forum, as part of the CLEVER Cities project in London, was established in 2018 to create an “Urban Innovation Partnership” that would help shape and guide the CLEVER Cities work in Thamesmead, London. The idea is to provide an open forum for all people in Thamesmead to discuss nature and environmental issues that can lead to collaboration amongst multiple partners from diverse backgrounds. The forum also challenges involved parties to think out of the box and curate interesting content that could appeal to a variety of audiences with a wide range of interests. The aim of the forum is thus to act as a first step towards creating a more bottom-up governance and decision making model.

> DESCRIPTION

Thamesmead district, in South East London, is managed by Peabody Trust and has a current population of about 45,000 people. Quite a diverse place in London, Thamesmead is typically 50% Black and Minority Ethnic, and 50% White. Large parts of Thamesmead are currently the subject of a billion-pound estate regeneration and renewal project that forecasts to double the district’s population by 2050. The project involves complete revitalization and redevelopment of parts of the estates to create new homes suitable for the future, keeping in mind the health and wellbeing of residents as well as the nature around. The remainder will undergo a series of interventions to improve and enhance social connectivity within and throughout the estates, ensuring more social cohesion and community building.

CLEVER Cities is involved with retrofitting NBS into a 1960s housing estate in South Thamesmead. The solutions to be installed will mostly focus on the use of green and blue infrastructure to create more resilient neighbourhoods. Chosen solutions will aim to:

- Promote healthier living by providing spaces for physical activity and relaxation.
- Cool the city and absorb stormwater to lessen the impacts of climate change.
- Filter pollutants to improve air and water quality.
- Make streets clean, comfortable and more attractive to encourage walking and cycling.
- Create better quality and better-connected habitats to improve biodiversity and ecological resilience.

Similar to other areas undergoing regeneration projects, the issue of gentrification looms large, resulting in a lot of mistrust in the authorities by many people in Thamesmead. To encourage trust building and to enable co-creation and socially inclusive decision-making with local communities, the CLEVER Cities project partnership of Peabody, Groundwork and Mayor of London, created a new governance instrument: the Thamesmead Nature Forum.

Forum attendees are a mix of people working in local authorities, residents of Thamesmead, and members of local interest groups, all united by a shared interest in nature and community governance. The forum is co-chaired by the social housing association responsible for the delivery of the public realm works (Peabody) and a local environmental regeneration NGO leading on community engagement and communications (Groundwork) (Wilk et al., 2020b). Peabody will continue to administer the forum after CLEVER concludes. The aspiration is that this may eventually be a self-governed group.

The forum is currently established with the aim of making a wide range of stakeholders heard. Open to all interested residents, it sponsors events and informal chats to create connections between existing community groups, initiatives and actions underway in Thamesmead. A new, non-traditional position of community Gardener in Residence has been created to undertake outreach work within the local community and make on-the-ground connections with residents. Apart from traditional “green-keeping”, the gardener provides hands-on experiences on gardening through workshops, drop-in gardening sessions for residents of all ages, and other events that are advertised by social media, posters, and their website (Wilk et al., 2020b).

The Nature Forum is also acting as a springboard for a new Community Design Collective that will act as a co-client for the CLEVER nature-based solutions in South Thamesmead Estate.

> CHALLENGES

Other forums focusing on culture and business have been successfully established in Thamesmead, but a forum focusing on blue and green spaces is new. The ambition from the outset was to create a group that could help guide decision-making in CLEVER

Cities and give direction to the implementation in Thamesmead. Striking the balance between an informal network and a strategic group proved challenging at first. It was important to understand what would work in the forum in terms of curated content or more strategic discussions. The administrators have found a good balance by using a *learning by doing* approach. Attempts to co-create areas of focus and encourage a self-led approach felt clunky and didn't resonate with attendees, so instead we moved towards a more traditional set up, with a pre-agreed agenda and sharing updates, with shorter time at the end for members to feed in or give announcements.

Another severely limiting factor in such engagement activities is the time that people in the neighbourhood can invest. This leads to difficulty in building a core group and thus enough momentum to keep the forum running smoothly. Interestingly, the move to online meetings, due to Covid-19 restrictions, resulted in better and more consistent attendance.

Balancing the varied interests of all participants is an ongoing challenge. Providing opportunities for all to contribute as much or as little to the agenda as they wish, helps. In terms of engagement, it has been easier to recruit new arrivals to Thamesmead, such as an emerging artist community, than some of the older, more established residents. Efforts continue to reach more broadly to ensure a good balance of new and established residents of Thamesmead.

> OPPORTUNITIES

Prior to the CLEVER Cities project, there was already an ambition to create a 'blue green' group in Thamesmead. However, the CLEVER Cities project helped to motivate all the partners and provide additional resources to get such a community engagement platform up and running and also maintain momentum.

> INSPIRATION FOR OTHERS

A few key tips to create, run and maintain a similar format for a community forum for discussions on NBS and their implementation are:

- Find a few key members of the community who are really passionate about the subject area. Work with them to test ideas for the group and then refine the approach as you proceed.
- Be honest and upfront if this is the first time you are convening a group – don't act like you have all the answers.
- Know when you need to adapt an approach or style – ask for feedback early.
- Work towards empowering the group – some will want to participate only a little, some will want to be more heavily involved – find a way to devolve decisions to those who are keen.
- Consider paying people who want to be more involved, to formally include them. "We get paid for our work, why shouldn't they?"
- Feedback on the impact the conversations have. Show people that their attendance is valuable.
- Be mindful of people's time – it is limited, and generosity runs out.

> NEXT STEPS

Building on the learning and experience of the Nature Forum, CLEVER Cities team are now establishing a Community Design Collective, to support the co-design process for the NBS. This group of residents will be recruited and paid for their time, approximately 15 hours per month. There is a need to recognise that people are

time-poor and have challenging lives, hence paying for them to invest their time is a way to enable a wide range of people to be part of the Collective. They will participate in a number of training and design sessions to ensure that emerging designs truly reflect local need.

In terms of the Nature Forum: there is ongoing promotion to try to involve every willing resident. The move to online has been a success, but it is important to be mindful of the digital divide. Many people can have limited internet access, so a 100% online presence is not desirable in the long run.

By reaching out to a diverse group of community members there is a possibility of finding people who could be future community leaders and champions. Nicola, the CLEVER Cities project manager from GLA says "We have had to adapt our ways of engaging with people, especially in response to Covid-19, as just stopping wasn't an option. Through the Nature Forum and the Community Design Collective we are testing different approaches to creating strong networks. If at the end of CLEVER, we get one local group formally established, we would consider it a win."

Most importantly, from an upscaling perspective, it has been vital to gather learning to help share the results, such that successful elements may be replicated elsewhere in London and Europe.

FURTHER INFORMATION

All fact sheets were produced from questionnaires and interviews conducted by the ICLEI team. Contact ICLEI Europe for more information or access Oppla: <https://oppla.eu/casestudy/21469>

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