

## Transition Town Tooting

Tooting, South London



## Gardens of Sanctuary Case Study

Community growing spaces welcoming, supporting and working alongside refugees and asylum seekers

## Transition Town Tooting at a glance

<b>Established in:</b>	2011
<b>Location:</b>	Tooting, South London
<b>Website:</b>	<a href="http://www.transitiontowntooting.blogspot.com">www.transitiontowntooting.blogspot.com</a>
<b>Structure:</b>	Constituted Community Organisation
<b>Staff:</b>	Sessional workers
<b>Volunteers:</b>	50+

### Project History

Transition Town Tooting agreed as part of their strategic direction in 2010 that they would like to work with young people and to carry out projects that were concerned with social sustainability alongside their other 'green' activities.

In 2011 one of the early partners of TTT offered the use of a large garden behind their building to the transition group at no cost. They begin to run regular volunteer days on a Sunday which attracted local people to help in the garden.

In January 2015, TTT they met with Community Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers (CARAS) which led to some of the young people from CARAS coming to the garden on a Sunday to join the regular volunteering day.

This proved successful and a member of CARAS suggested they would like to use the skills they were learning to benefit the small courtyard in front of the CARAS offices. 5 volunteers ran 7 sessions on consecutive Saturdays within the CARAS Youth Club to create and implement a design for the space.

CARAS and TTT held a follow-up session where they received fantastic feedback from the young people who had been involved in the gardening sessions. They commented that they valued meeting people from the local community and feeling trusted.

Following this pilot period, TTT were able to secure £2k in funding, which enabled them to fund sessional workers and set up a project called 'Rooting in Tooting' to run until the end of 2016. This focused on building skills, growing and working with plants, and creativity. Rooting in Tooting was very popular with young people at CARAS and brought a lot of new volunteers to TTT.

This learning all led to a larger funding bid through the Aviva Community fund which was successful and enabled the project to expand into field trips, pay for sessional workers and develop an initiative called Gardens of Refuge.

### Current Services

In January 2018, Transition Town Tooting were awarded funding from the Team London and Thrive LDNs 'Young London Inspired' fund for a project called Welcoming Signs. This is a development of Rooting in Tooting and Gardens of Refuge which focuses on engaging young people from CARAS with others in the local community and identifying volunteering opportunities.

As more people in the local area hear about TTT and CARAS, they are 'reaching in' and asking if the young asylum-seekers can become involved in their own community projects.



## Outcomes

Transition Town Tooting and CARAS agreed early on that the focus of the projects needed to be on mental health. The responsibility for referring people at the right time and for ensuring the right therapeutic support is given lies with CARAS. CARAS have also more recently requested that some key TTT volunteers have a DBS check and anyone volunteering on the project attends two evenings of training – one on the asylum process and one on safeguarding. In this way

there has been a huge amount of learning for local volunteers.

Participants from CARAS have become much more aware of what is available in their local community. Several parents have said that they did not previously realise that there were safe and free places that they could go with their children.

The project has helped a lot of people to connect with their own personal histories of growing, to think about what they used to grow and how they can build those skills into their lives now. Tied to this is an awareness

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### Case Study: I.

I. was 15 years old when he first started to attend activities at CARAS. He had fled Eritrea and arrived in London alone, seeking asylum as a separated child. He was very withdrawn and angry, feeling very lost and alone. Concern about him was high - he was hard to connect with, and didn't speak very much. When the first phase of the partnership with Transition Town Tooting began, he came alive. He loved to be outdoors and to grow things. He helped design and build some of the first planters, making the CARAS site greener and more inviting. He spoke about the crops he used to help grow in Eritrea- avocados, mangos, and beans- and began to share some stories about his family. He gradually began to find his place amongst friends, and to be able to imagine a future in London.

He is now 18 and has started an apprenticeship at college. He is learning to be a plumber because it will give him stability and a good income, and because 'I like using my hands'. Recently he said that what he'd really love is to farm. He thinks that is impossible in London, but he has been looking up local projects in community gardens and allotments. He says that being outside is where his heart is. Having activities that helped him be outside and to nurture something into life was what helped him to be where he is now.



shared by many parents of how unconfident they feel because they don't have a community around them that helps them look after their children. Being able to share skills from their home communities helps them grow in confidence as parents.

The young people have learned important practical skills including gardening, woodwork, painting, use of tools and many more. For some it has helped them to think about their career and educational goals. It has opened up conversations about what is possible and encouraged young people to think about careers they would really like to have and how to pursue them. Those who come regularly

are now able to share their skills with newcomers to the project.

Perhaps most profoundly it has enabled people who have relied on charity for so long to think about the skills and knowledge that they have and how they can pass this on to others in difficult situations.

As the project has developed and changed, it has become increasingly shaped by the young people from CARAS who have thrived in taking ownership.

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### **Case Study: M.**

M. has four children who are aged 10, 8, 6 and 2. They live in a small flat with no outdoor space. She likes London because 'it is safe, we are safe; people are good'. But opportunities to play are very limited – M. doesn't feel safe in the park. She would like to take the children but she worries about who might be there and how she can watch all four children. Where she fled from, IEDs were often disguised as children's toys and she can't shake that fear. However, they have all been to several CARAS family activity days hosted in the Tooting Community Garden. It is a walled space, tucked away from the road and although it is open to all, it's also very private and protected. Family activity days have involved cooking outside, treasure hunts, giant art projects, and sharing stories of home that are rooted in the plants and scents of the garden.

M. loves coming to the community garden. 'This is a beautiful place for us. I can lie down and close my eyes and my children can be free. They are safe here.'



## Problems and Barriers

The project has not faced significant problems or barriers, largely because it has been developed in such a close partnership with CARAS and potential issues have been tackled before they have arisen.

It is noticeable that members of CARAS, whilst very enthusiastic about the dedicated opportunities available to them, have not taken up the invitation to join in with regular volunteer days. The young people who join the Youth Club do not live locally (they come from all over London). Families do live nearby, and while joining regular garden days has never been an objective, TTT and CARAS would like to explore barriers to this kind of participation.

The key challenges have been for members of TTT. The project has developed every year

with a new name and a new focus – largely due to the funding that has been available and the desires of the young people from CARAS. TTT's experience in this partnership with CARAS has been that the activities and expectations of participants need to be very flexible within a broad set of objectives. It can be demanding to always be responsive and available to facilitate - TTT has learned to expect emergent change rather than a rigid project path.

## Future Plans

Transition Town Tooting and CARAS continue to have regular review meetings at which they discuss how the project has been and make plans for the future. As plans will be shaped by members of CARAS at the next review meeting it is not possible to say what they plans will be at this time!

## Compiled by Sophie Antonelli and Ben Margolis

For more information about Gardens of Sanctuary go to <https://gardens.cityofsanctuary.org/>

Gardens of Sanctuary is a partnership between [Social Farms & Gardens](#), [City of Sanctuary](#) and the [Permaculture Association](#). We have a shared vision of a network of green spaces with a culture of welcome, in which asylum seekers and refugees feel safe and appreciated as valued contributors and co-creators of community gardens and environmental projects across the UK.

For those who arrive to seek asylum in the UK, community gardens, city farms and other community growing spaces can offer vital and unique opportunities to find community, improve mental and physical health and to learn and share skills.

Our case studies and report are intended as useful resources for any community growing space who is working with refugees and asylum seekers, or who would like to welcome them in the future. Find all our resources on our website [here](#).