

Equality and Social Justice Committee visit to Railway Gardens, Cardiff

8 April 2025

As part of the Equality and Social Justice Committee's inquiry into social cohesion, Jenny Rathbone MS (Chair), Julie Morgan MS and Sioned Williams MS visited Railway Gardens in Cardiff on 8 April 2025. The visit was led by Hannah Garcia from Green Squirrel who lead and co-ordinate the project at Railway Gardens.

History and background

Railway Gardens was a derelict piece of land next to the railway line and the founders were looking for a community garden to grow food and plants. The project opened in 2022 and has developed to offer a range of services including a place to meet, outdoors and indoor, hosts a toy library, good sheds group, afterschool club, gardening club, wellbeing café and numerous community events.

Lottery funding was secured to develop the site and a programme of activities over a four-year period. Green Squirrel co-ordinates and leads the development with the intention of being increasingly led by the community. At present around 60% of the programme is community led.

Green Squirrel work to support individuals and groups who wish to develop an idea and establish a community group or network by providing informal mentoring and support. An example of this is the Good Sheds group, which is now self-contained, having developed their own constitution and rent their own space in a shipping container on the site.



A collection of shipping containers has been installed, owned by the Bone Yard who rent them out at very reasonable rates to small businesses or charities. Currently, one is a café, one is rented and used by the Good Sheds group, another is the base of the Safe Foundation. The containers have infra-red panels for heating.

The whole ethos is about being sustainable and “planet friendly”, re-using and sharing, growing food and plants, swapping, sharing and “promoting well-being.”

According to Hannah Garcia, Green Squirrel, the support from three local councillors was instrumental in helping to establish the project, although there is no regular involvement with Councillors.

Projects, activities, groups and events

- The **Stay and Play plus Toy Library** is held in Railway Gardens once a week, and also in the Grange Pavilion in another ward in Cardiff, is grant funded. Railway Gardens provides a cheap space and storage facilities for the toy library. The toy library loans toys for £1, which encourages families to see the value in the toys and return them. A small number of families regularly use the library and enjoy the free play offered too. A what's app group has been established for those who have expressed an interest to volunteer to help run the library. Some of the challenges noted were the difficulty in connecting with organisations which support families in the Splott, Adamstown and Tremorfa area to promote the use of the library, such as Flying Start. Whilst some health visitors are promoting the toy library particularly the one in Grangetown.
- **Benthyg**, a library of things is also run from Railway Gardens and is open once a week for people to borrow items.
- There are also regular **clothes swap** and **plant swaps**. Reusing and recycling is part of the ethos.
- An **Eco market** is held in the open outside space once a month, selling upcycled goods. It's an off shoot of an eco craft group – now constituted. This has grown naturally and fostered positive connections.
- The **Safe Foundation** is a charity established about 20 years ago in Barry which partners with overseas charities such as in Sierra Leone helping children access education. It boosts wellbeing through volunteer opportunities, linking in with global citizenship.
- The **Good shed** meets weekly and whilst affiliated to Mens Sheds Cymru, it has its own constitution and decided to open its membership to anyone who wants to join. They wanted a space for people to come together to

talk, share and make things, sharing their skills and knowledge. “It’s about valuing people’s skills, and the experience people bring”. As one member said, “the most important thing we do is drink tea and talk to each other”. They rent one of the shipping containers.

- A volunteer, who travels from Newport, runs the weekly **well-being café** says that she has seen it develop over time, attracting more people who bring new ideas. She said it was great to welcome some new people from Oasis more recently to the café. She said that “people feel safe in an environment where people have your back.”
- A **community garden** and a **community gardener**, with poly tunnels and glass houses for the community to grow their own food and herbs. There’s also a **monthly gardening club**.
- There is an **after-school club** for children and attendance is variable and an outdoor classroom Y Nyth, where they’ve held story telling nights.
- **Friendly Fridays – cook ups and share lunch**.
- **Working in partnership with Oasis** - to launch a garden of sanctuary and increase mutual understanding and respect across different communities.

Oasis will encourage people to volunteer. Funding through Building Communities Trust community anchor programme. Keen to work together and secure a budget which allows them to work together, whether it’s supporting paid staff, or starting a garden of sanctuary project to replant the planters together in an effort to make Railway Gardens more accessible to refugees. It was noted that they received excellent training re: refugees’ journey which has improved understanding of the difficulties asylum seekers and refugees face. Despite wanting opportunities to meet other people from the community, the representative of Oasis said there were few safe spaces for this to happen. He highlighted an incident where a ‘citizen’ journalist entered their carpark and started filming refugees and asylum seekers and asking inappropriate questions. There are many negative attitudes towards the communities they support.

Funding

Green Squirrel highlighted that grant funding is short term, and it takes time to build trust and engage people into key roles. They considered themselves to be “lucky to have a four-year grant”. But in general, short-term funding is not enough time to get started and develop trust with people and communities. There is a need to look at the longer-term strategy and approach. Green Squirrel also highlighted that when applying for grant funding there is an expectation for it to be something new. “It’s a fragmented funding system with an over reliance

on the lottery” Another organisation noted that “it’s often a very short window to apply for funding”.

Volunteers and staff views

We met and had conversations with staff and volunteers from a few of the organisations and groups who use Railway Gardens including Good Sheds, the Well-being café, Oasis and Green Squirrel.

Most travelled from outside of the community, from other areas of Cardiff or beyond to participate in groups or volunteer, and it was noted that the organisers of RG have struggled to engage with local people. One of the volunteers who originates from the area said that “coming here has been a great help since I lost my wife.” He regularly attends the wellbeing café on Wednesdays and enjoys the bingo games and crafts.

Another volunteer explained that his skills are not valued in the workplace because he is disabled, but he finds volunteering by updating and maintaining the contact database, auditing health and safety kit and welcoming visitors rewarding.

RG was described as a “safe and happy place” where there are a range of events to bring people together. As one individual said, “it’s all about people”.

Evaluation and ongoing challenges

Better Community trust provide support through the community anchor support development programme. It provides access to evaluators who help Green Squirrel obtain feedback.

Some of the ongoing challenges identified by Green Squirrel and others during our visit included:

- Connecting with the local community in Splott, Adamstown and Tremorfa. We heard that organisations found it difficult to connect and engage those who lived in the immediate locality. Most of the volunteers and workers we met were not local.
- Difficult conversations/ confrontations – an example of confrontation which took place at one of their larger events was shared, raising the issue of how to address hate language.
- Enabling people to feel confident in taking roles and responsibilities to promote ideas, projects, groups to be mainly community led. It was

highlighted that it takes time to build people's confidence to take on roles and responsibilities.

Thanks to Hannah, Zach, Martin, Ellen, Thomas and others who shared their experiences and involvement with Railway Gardens.