

# Creating Nature Neighbourhoods, Towns and Cities: agenda

23 October 2025, 9.15am – 4.45pm

A free conference for hyper-local community organisations leading for change for people, nature and climate.



**Nature Towns  
and Cities**

# Agenda: Creating Nature Neighbourhoods, Towns and Cities

## Morning

9.15am – Registration and networking

10.15am – Welcome from Nature Towns and Cities

10.25am – Opening talks

- **David Luckin** (Head of Community Funding and Partnerships, The Co-operative Group)
- **Tayshan Hayden-Smith** (Founder, Grow to Know)
- **Rachel Rowney** (Chief Executive, Local Trust).

11.05am – Panel conversation: **closing the gap between the community and environmental sectors**

- Hear from representatives of community organisations who are driving change for people, nature and climate.

## Afternoon – part 1

12.00pm – How to sessions: sharing solutions, tools and practical guidance to sector-wide challenges. Choice of five sessions

1. How to **grow more trees** in urban neighbourhoods
2. How to get started with **community growing** projects
3. How to set up a **green social prescribing** offer
4. How to kickstart impactful **youth work** in your community
5. How to help **local authorities** build successful VCSE networks.

1.00pm – Lunch with networking from 1.30pm (lunch is provided)



## Afternoon – part 2

2.20pm - Spotlight on: **rooted in community**

- Recommendations and learnings from Nature Neighbourhoods; a collaboration between large nature NGOs and community organisations. Presented by evaluation specialists **tialt**.

2.35pm – Practical workshop: **creating greener communities together**

- Co-designing future support for the VCSE sector. Plan together and explore the support available through Nature Towns and Cities.

3.50pm - Spotlight on: **enhancing community-led greening**

- A conversation with funders, NGOs and local authorities on how they see their organisations evolving to better support community-led action for people and climate.

4.30pm – Plenary session, close at 4.45pm



## 10.15am: Opening talks

**Victoria Bradford-Keegan**, director of the Nature Towns and Cities programme, will kick off the conference and introduce our three guest speakers.

Hear from **David Luckin** (Co-op), as he shares his insights on Co-op's commitment to communities, **Tayshan Hayden-Smith** (Grow to Know), for the grassroots perspective on why change is needed, and **Rachel Rowney** (Local Trust), on the impact Big Local has delivered for 150 communities across England.

### **Victoria Bradford-Keegan**

Programme Director, Nature Towns and Cities



### **David Luckin**

Head of Community Funding and Partnerships, The Co-operative Group



### **Tayshan Hayden-Smith**

Founder, Grow to Know



### **Rachel Rowney**

Chief Executive, Local Trust





# 11.05am: Panel conversation: closing the gap between the community and environmental sectors

An 'in conversation' panel session with VCSE organisations, bringing different lenses on how they're closing the gap between the community sector and the environmental sector.

**Bei Gao, Mafwa Theatre** – doing 'green' work when it's not your main thing: the intersection of arts, nature and social cohesion.

**Debbie Freeman, Zebra Collective** – the benefits and challenges of working as part of a partnership with a Local Authority.

**Tayshan Hayden-Smith, Grow to Know** – 'closing the green gap' - the challenge and opportunity of melding social and environmental justice.

**Debbie Freeman**

Community Projects Lead, Zebra Collective



**Bei Gao**

Project Manager, Mafwa Theatre



**Tayshan Hayden-Smith**

Founder, Grow to Know



**Rachel Rowney (chair)**

Chief Executive, Local Trust



# 12pm: Choice of 5 sessions



1

## How to get started with community growing projects

Learn how to get started with community growing in your neighbourhood from a tried and tested model in Edinburgh.

Hear from Granton Community Gardeners' Tom Kirby on how they got started, what's worked well and how they have overcome challenges since they dug up and transformed the first street corner in 2010.

2

## How to grow more trees in urban neighbourhoods

Explore how community organisations can lead for more tree planting in urban places.

Charlotte O'Connor and Marie-Claire Denyer will share Street Trees for Living's model in Lewisham, followed by a group discussion on how this model could work in other neighbourhoods across the UK.

3

## How to set up a green social prescribing offer

Hear how connecting with nature has proven benefits for health and wellbeing.

Sara Laking, creator of YourPark Bristol and Bath's Roots to Wellbeing programme, will share insights and learnings from this successful social prescribing model. Be inspired and take away top tips to help you get started.



**Tom Kirby**

Co-founder and Development Manager, Granton Community Gardeners



**Charlotte O'Connor**

Executive Director

**Marie-Claire Denyer**

Partnerships and Development Consultant, STfL



**Sara Laking**

Freelance Consultant and Mental Health Practitioner



# 12pm: Choice of 5 sessions

4

## How to kickstart impactful youth work in your community

Keen to engage better with youth but not sure where to start?

Hear from Emily Cutts, founder of G20 Youth Project, an organisation focused on supporting disadvantaged and underserved young people aged 11-25 in the G20 postcode of Glasgow.



**Emily Cutts**

Founder and Director, G20 Youth Project

5

## How to help local authorities build successful VCSE networks

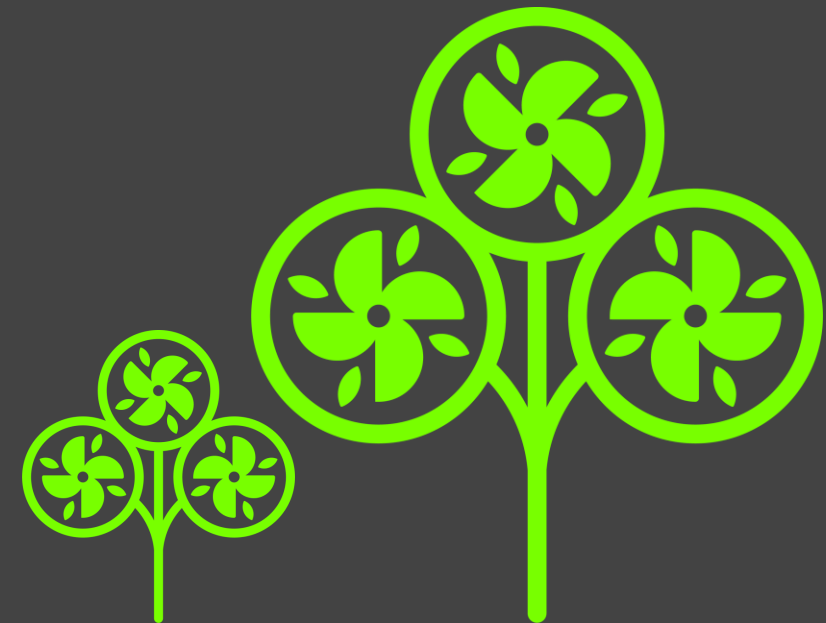
Keen to know what local authorities are doing to support community-led greening?

Hayley Swift from Bristol City Council will share their Asset Based Community Development approach, their work with climate action groups and their plans for a Greening Permit.



**Hayley Swift**

Community Development Practitioner at Bristol City Council



# 1pm: Lunch and networking



Spend time networking and getting to know your peers over lunch, which will be served in the annex opposite the auditorium from 1pm.

There is plenty of seating in the auditorium, or you might like to get some fresh air and eat outside.

At 1.35pm, there will be an optional guided walk to see some interesting local green spaces (more detail coming soon).

If you would prefer a self-led walk, there are trail sheets on the registration desk.

Please return to the auditorium and be seated by 2.20pm ready to start the second half of the day.

There'll be some networking cards available, with some suggestions for topics to cover or questions to get you started.



## 2.20pm: Spotlight on: rooted in community

Climate and nature action is happening in neighbourhoods across the UK.

Tialt have been the evaluation partners for Nature Neighbourhoods, a pilot project bringing together 18 community organisations from across the UK to build their capacity and expand their impact.

Claire Sivier and Hannah Arnett will present tialt's headline recommendations from their work across the 2-year duration of the project, spotlighting phenomenal successes and where big sectoral changes are still required to lift barriers and make great things easier to do.



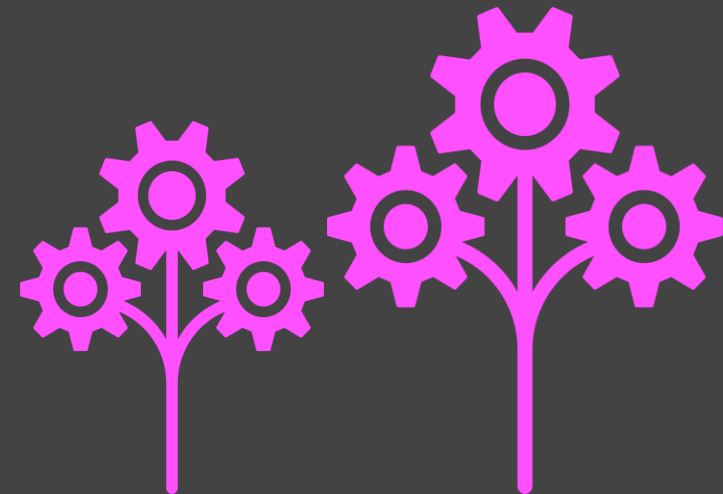
### **Claire Sivier**

Co-Director, tialt – there is an alternative



### **Hannah Arnett**

Senior Researcher, tialt – there is an alternative





## 2.35pm: Workshop: **creating greener communities together**

We'd like to hear from you about what's needed to make more community-led greening happen.

This short, facilitated, insight gathering session will be held in smaller groups that will encourage thinking about the challenges, but also the routes through these. What would better support for the community sector look like?

This session is the start of co-designing the community support and resources that Nature Towns and Cities will offer over the next decade.

**Emily Cooke**

Senior Project Co-ordinator,  
Nature Towns and Cities



## 3.50pm: Spotlight on: enhancing community-led greening

This panel session will wrap things up by looking at how large and influential organisations can play a role in better enabling the work of the community sector.

We'll hear from **Dr Saira Ali** on what local authorities have done well and could do more of and **Lucy Stowell-Smith** from Groundwork on how relationships between national charities and hyper-local organisations can make meaningful change. We'll also look at how funders can support community organisations in an increasingly challenging funding landscape.

### **Dr Saira Ali FLI**

Team Leader for Landscape Design and Conservation, Bradford City Council



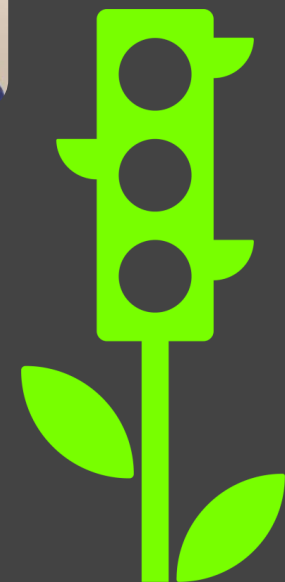
### **Lucy Stowell-Smith**

Strategic Lead – Urban Nature, Groundwork



### **Claire Sivier (chair)**

Co-Director tialt - there is an alternative



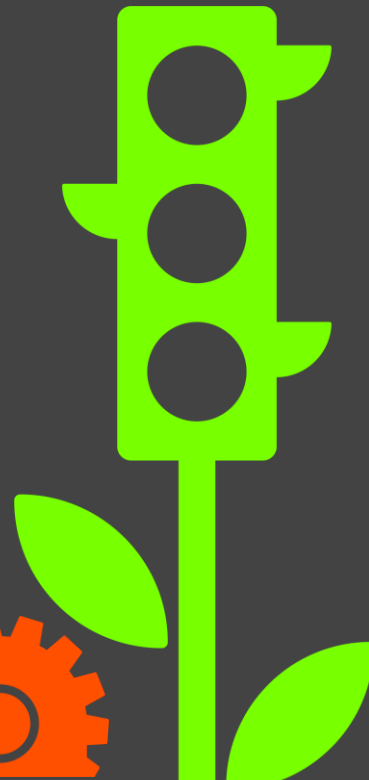
## 4.30am: Plenary

Victoria Bradford-Keegan (Nature Towns and Cities), will close the day with reflections on key themes and insights from the conference, and outline ways you can keep involved with the programme and access the support on offer.

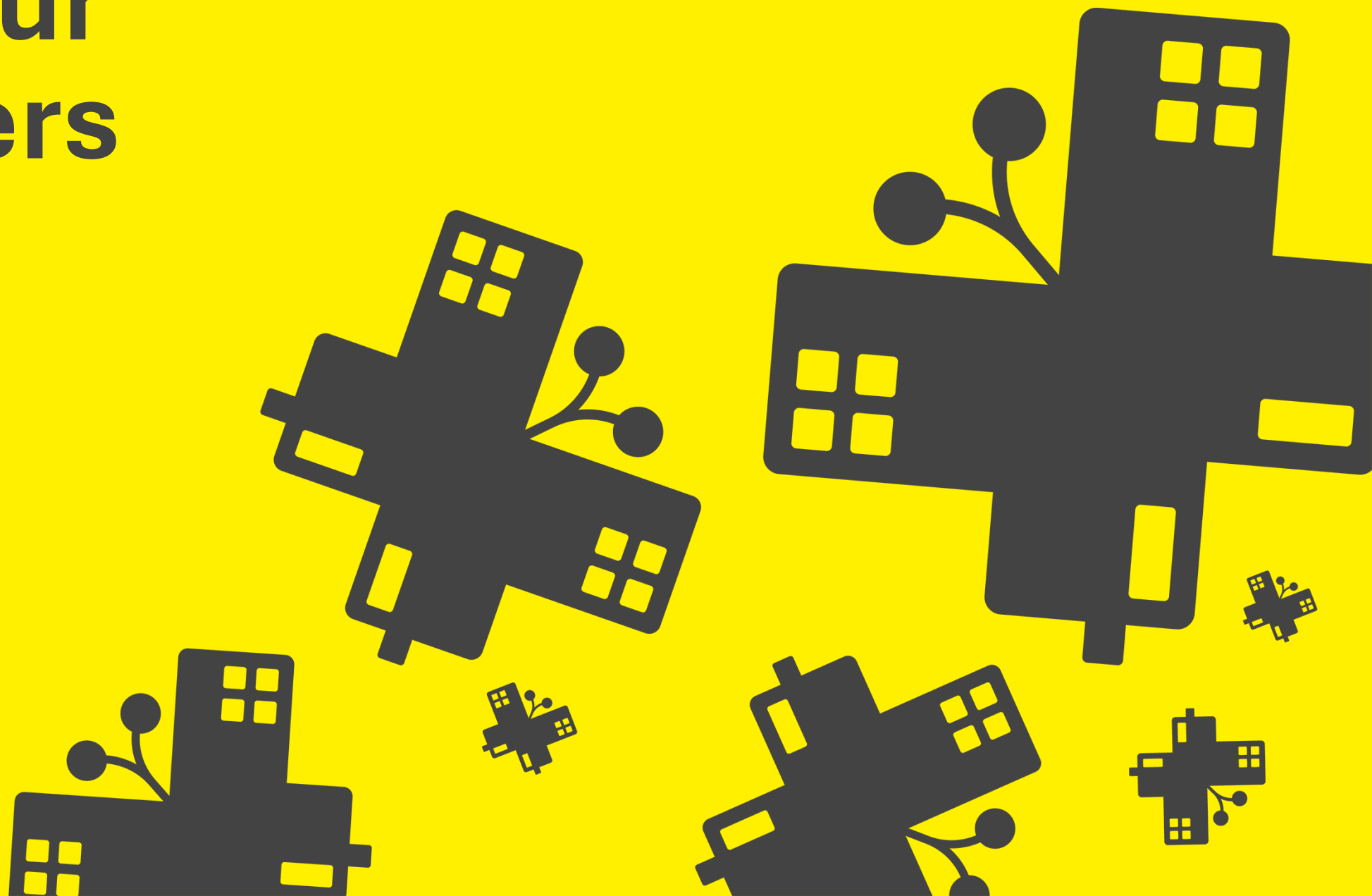
The conference finishes at 4.45pm, with the optional to continue networking at The Saddler's Cat nearby.

**Victoria Bradford-Keegan**

Programme Director, Nature  
Towns and Cities



# Meet our speakers



# Morning speakers and panellists



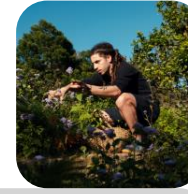
**Dave Luckin** leads a wide range of community investment and engagement at the Co-op, one of the world's largest consumer co-operatives, with more than 6 million members. His career spans the private sector, community sector and academic research, and has focused on communities, sustainability and responsible business for more than 25 years.

He was awarded a PhD in sustainable development and environmental taxation from Nottingham Trent University. Dave is a trustee of the People's History Museum, chair of Making a Difference Locally, and Chair of the Community Council at Co-op Academy Brierley, a special school in Leeds.



**Rachel Rowney** is the CEO of Local Trust and has been part of the team responsible for delivering the Big Local programme since 2012. Big Local has enabled 150 areas across England to create lasting change in their neighbourhoods over 10 to 15 years, through grants of just over £1m each. Designed from the outset to be radically different from other funding programmes, at the heart of Big Local is a vision of community development that champions resilient, dynamic, asset-rich neighbourhoods, making their own decisions on what is best for their area.

Prior to Local Trust Rachel worked on the delivery and evaluation of a range of neighbourhood renewal programmes, including New Deal for Communities, Neighbourhood Management pathfinders, Single Regeneration Budget and Total Place.



**Tayshan Hayden-Smith** is a community leader, a creator of spaces, a champion for justice, and an advocate for the power of nature, art, and activism to transform lives. Born and raised in Ladbroke Grove, London, Tayshan's identity was shaped by resilience, pride, and community. After spending his teenage years pursuing a career in academy and professional football, his path shifted in 2017 following the Grenfell Tower fire - a tragedy that struck the heart of his community. At just 21, Tayshan joined others in taking action, helping to spark a youth-led guerrilla gardening movement rooted in justice, hope, and the urgent call for change.

A not-for-profit subsequently flowered: through Grow to Know, founded by Tayshan in the wake of the Grenfell Tower fire, he has continued to experiment - trying and testing different approaches that blend changemaking with placemaking to rebuild hope, reclaim identity, and inspire joy and justice. Uniquely positioned through deep community trust, cultural fluency, and youth-led momentum, Grow to Know is rooted in lived experience of inequality and resilience.



**Victoria Bradford-Keegan** is the Programme Director of *Nature Towns and Cities*, a coalition united by a shared mission to put nature at the heart of urban life and create greener, healthier, more prosperous places.

An experienced systems change leader working at the intersection of community participation, urban resilience and nature recovery, Victoria is known for championing bold collaboration and innovation to solve complex challenges, promote equity and achieve and long-term impact. She is passionate about the power of nature to bring communities together and improve lives, and about the critical role of communities in urban nature recovery.

Prior to Nature Towns and Cities Victoria led the *Future Parks Accelerator*, supporting cities from across the UK to unlock new models for park and green space management.

Originally from the South, where she grew up with the Lee Valley Regional Park on her doorstep, Victoria has spent most of her adult life in the North of England and now calls Bolton, Greater Manchester, home.





# Morning speakers and panellists



**Rory Crawford** has worked in the nature conservation sector for 18 years, and is an urban nature and community enthusiast, campaigner and lapsed marine biologist.

He worked on one of the world's first citizen's assemblies on nature - the People's Assembly for Nature – and loves participation. He now works for the National Trust on the Nature Neighbourhoods project, a follow-on partnership between big nature NGOs and 18 community sector organisations that seeks to support and build the capacity of local initiatives to create happier, healthier and greener communities.



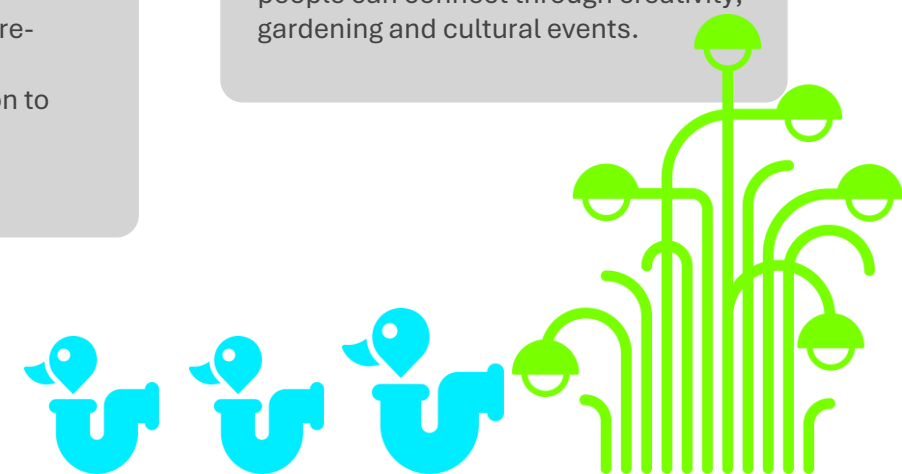
**Debbie Freeman** is Community Projects Lead and a Director of Zebra Collective, a small community organisation who run a community centre in Devonport, a low-income area of Plymouth. Zebra Collective weave nature-based work into all strands of activity at the community centre - youth club, toddler groups and across their work with adults.

With a long history in working with people, and managing and commissioning services, Debbie believes in the strength and resourcefulness of individuals and communities, and the power of embedded community work to re-connect people with their own strengths, and agency in relation to their local area.



**Bei Gao** is a community leader with over a decade of senior leadership experience at a local charity and more than ten years supporting new arrivals and settled communities in Leeds. As Project Manager at Mafwa Theatre, she leads programmes that bring together refugees, asylum seekers and local residents.

Bei also leads the organisation's Nature Neighbourhoods project, which connects arts, culture and green space to build stronger, more inclusive communities. She is passionate about creating welcoming spaces where people can connect through creativity, gardening and cultural events.



# How-to workshop leads



**Tom Kirby** is one of the founders of Granton Community Gardeners, a community led charity in North Edinburgh. Beginning in 2010 when an informal group of neighbours on the street where he lives, started a community garden on a corner of disused land. The organisation now support gardens and particularly food growing across their community. They also host lots of popular free community meals, including every Wednesday lunchtime; and run a Community Bakery (among other projects).

Tom is very interested in what can happen when a local community that is often overlooked, starts to organise together around food (growing, cooking and eating), and when good relationships start to form and grow between people from a wide range of backgrounds/cultures, land, and nature. Tom has previously worked in youthwork, funding and horticulture.



**Charlotte O'Connor** joined the Street Trees for Living team earlier this year in a newly appointed role as Executive Director. She leads a dedicated team of staff and volunteers and is responsible for the strategic planning and organisational development of the charity.

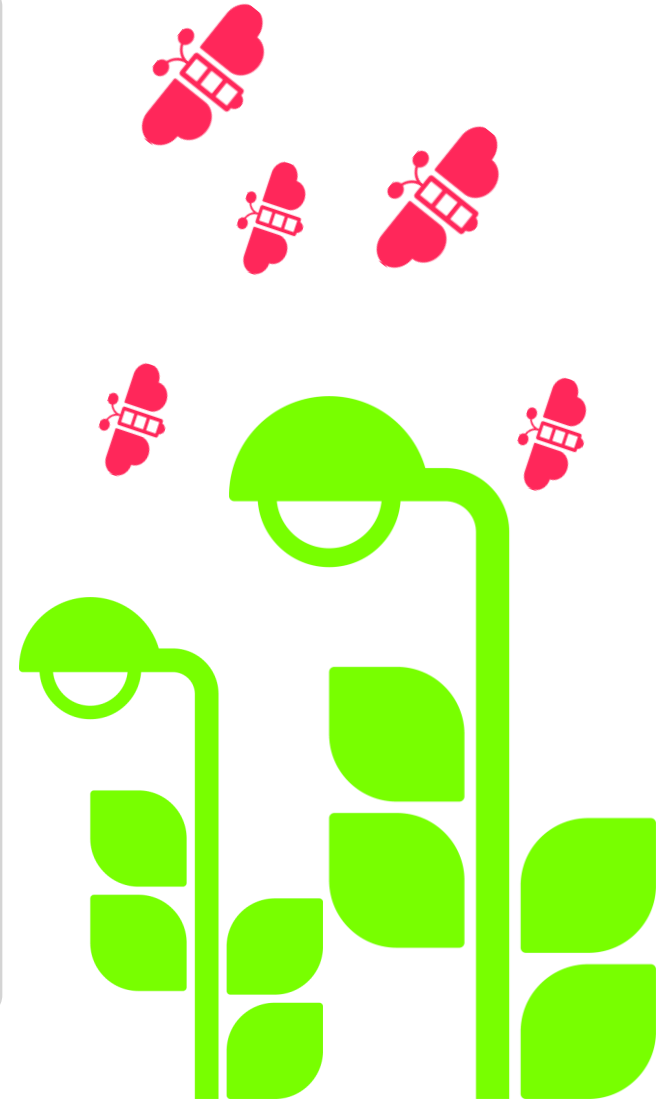
Her background is in community development, outreach and engagement and has worked for many years in the voluntary and community sector in areas including food, sustainability and environment. She is also the founder of a successful community business in South London.



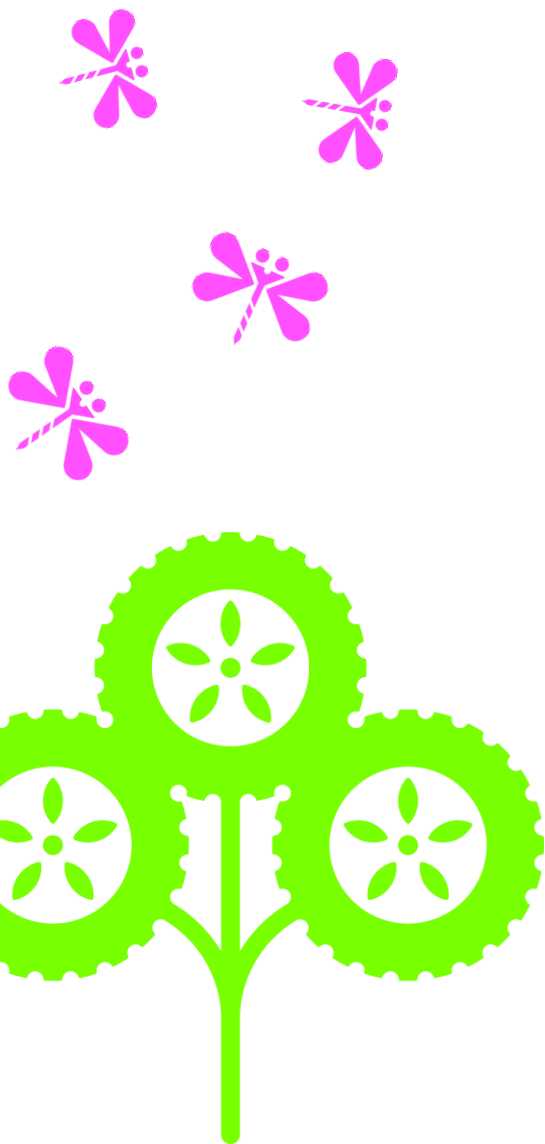
**Marie-Claire Denyer** is a Partnerships & Development Consultant specialising in community stewardship within urban forestry and is a co-founder of the community street tree planting charity, Street Trees for Living (STfL).

Marie-Claire is driven by a belief in the power of community stewardship to deliver long-term, inclusive improvements to create and maintain urban green spaces. Over the past eight years, she has worked to build strategic partnerships and drive the development and expansion of STfL's community tree planting programmes in London, with a particular focus on schools and densely built-up areas.

She has been instrumental in developing the charity's work within Lewisham and in establishing relationships with key partners such as the Forestry Commission, the National Trust, and the Greater London Authority.



# How-to workshop leads

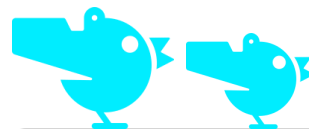


**Hayley Swift** is the Community Development Practitioner for Parks and Green Spaces at Bristol City Council. With 15 years' experience of working in Public Health, starting in Health Improvement, Hayley has worked across the cities most underrepresented areas utilising local green spaces as a tool for improving community cohesion and wellbeing.

Since 2021 she has worked alongside residents, Bristol parks service, highways and housing to create conditions for social action on green spaces.

Currently working on a city-wide Managing for Nature programme, Hayley is a passionate advocate for improving green spaces to benefit both people and nature and supporting citizen led action where possible.

Hayley is also a qualified Nature Based Practitioner and will find any excuse to be outdoors!



**Emily Cutts** is a Glasgow-based youth worker, campaigner, author, and community leader dedicated to transforming local green spaces and empowering young people through meaningful, grassroots initiatives.

Emily is a founding member of The Children's Wood, which started in 2011 with the aim of connecting more young people and families to nature.

In 2018, Emily founded G20 Youth Project in response to antisocial behaviour happening at The Children's Wood. Recognising trauma and poverty as root causes of antisocial behaviour, G20 Youth Project strive to create a safe and inclusive environment for 11–25-year-olds and provide opportunities to develop through outdoor experiences, coaching and employment.

Emily is a proud Ambassador of Glasgow National Park City, working with 10–25-year-olds.



**Sara Laking** is a mental health practitioner with expertise in green social prescribing, community engagement and programme development. In 2022, Sara created Roots to Wellbeing, the green social prescribing programme at YourPark Bristol and Bath, piloting a new model that then secured a further £250,000 in grant funding. The programme improved health outcomes for 200+ participants in areas with the highest levels of deprivation in Bristol and Bath and helped to increase biodiversity across inner-city parks in the region. The service has been used by NHS BNSSG Healthier With Nature Campaign to evidence the value of nature as a therapeutic tool and has helped to inform DEFRA's National green social prescribing delivery capacity assessment.

Sara graduated with First Class Honours in Psychology from the University of Edinburgh, later gaining qualifications in Psychotherapeutic Counselling and Nature & Health Facilitation. She now works as a freelance consultant, supporting communities and organisations to celebrate and harness nature's power.

# Afternoon speakers and panellists



**Dr Saira Ali FLI** is a nationally recognised leader in sustainable placemaking, regeneration, and green infrastructure. As Team Leader for Landscape Design and Conservation at Bradford Council, she leads award-winning, multidisciplinary projects that tackle climate resilience, public health, and social equity.

With over 28 years of experience across public and private sectors, Saira champions co-design, heritage-led regeneration, and access to nature in urban environments. She is a Fellow of the Landscape Institute, an advocate for inclusive design, and a regular contributor to national policy and practice on urban nature, wellbeing, and place-based transformation.



**Emily Cooke** is the Senior Project Coordinator for the Nature Towns and Cities network, with a passion for creating spaces where people can come together, exchange ideas and feel good.

She co-created and ran a community greengrocers and event space- 'A Small Good Thing' for 5 years and was a director at Smithills Collective CIC; a community organisation working on Woodland Trust land in Bolton.

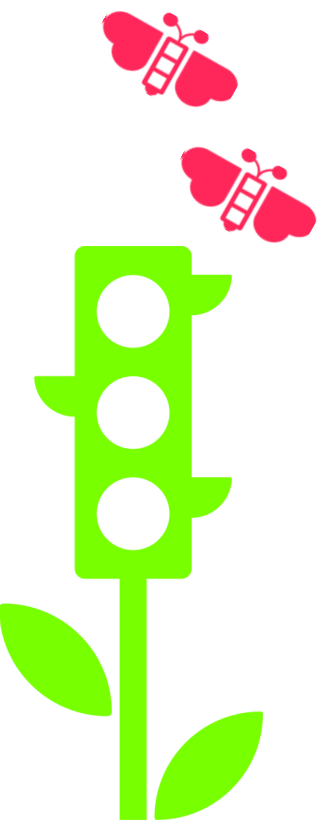
She believes that there is real power in stories, community and connection to rebuild and reimagine new ways forward.



**Claire Sivier** is a trauma-informed social researcher, facilitator, cultural producer and artist with nearly 20 years' experience working with a range of cultural organisations, artists, young people and marginalised communities in the UK and beyond. As Co-Director of tialt, she co-leads strategic direction and delivers research and evaluation that centre inclusion, accessibility and co-creation.

Claire has led national evaluations for Southbank Centre, Bethlem Gallery and Art360 Foundation, and co-developed decolonial archiving toolkits with the International Curators Forum. She has been a guest speaker in diversity policy in universities and cultural organisations across the UK and has recently developed a walking art methodology which explores the lived experiences of black female diasporic artists in Porto. She is also a member of the InterStruct Collective; an international network of researchers and artists working across socially engaged projects and decolonial practice.

Her work focuses on supporting critical reflection and organisational change through collaborative learning and care-led design.



# Afternoon speakers and panellists



**Lucy Stowell-Smith** leads the Urban Nature team at Groundwork Greater Manchester, a charity with a mission to create thriving nature rich urban environments, co-created with communities and cared for in the long term. With over 20 years' experience in landscape design, park management, and community engagement, including senior roles at the City of London Corporation, Lucy brings a deep passion for plants, people, and place-making. Her experience includes managing the award-winning Resilient River Valleys Project, which delivered nature-based solutions across 27 sites in Manchester, restored 37.5 hectares of land, created 30 green traineeships, and engaged more than 6,000 people in climate resilience and conservation. Lucy has recently led the launch of Groundwork's Community-Led Nature Stewardship Package which supports communities to take the lead in creating, restoring and caring for their local green and blue spaces.



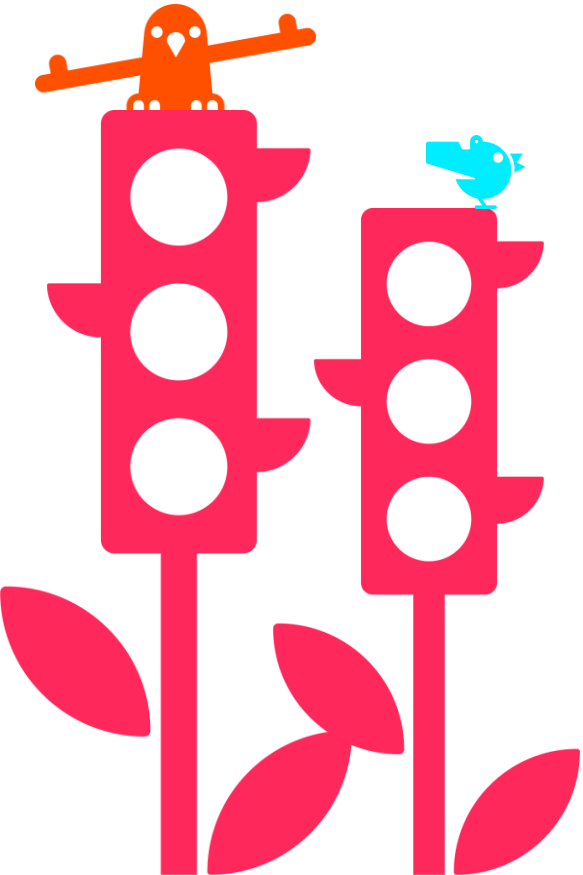
**Hannah Arnett** is a Senior Researcher at tialt. Hannah's role focuses on evaluative and reflective practice across arts, culture and environment sectors, integrating a psychological perspective. Hannah currently works with national conservation bodies and cultural organisations alongside community-driven work to elevate lived experience.

As an environmental psychologist, Hannah is interested in how humans relate to the environment and how the environment impacts us. Her thesis work developed participatory research design methods to explore lived experiences of urban places for social wellbeing. Over the past fifteen years, Hannah has held various strategic and innovation roles in health, developing evidence-based projects with transdisciplinary teams.

Hannah holds a History BA (University of Sheffield, 2008), an MSc in Outdoor Environments for Health and Wellbeing, specialisation in Environmental Psychology (Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, 2019), and a 200-hour Yoga Teacher Training certification (2022).



**Roger Winhall** is Head of England Portfolio Development, leading the environmental mission for grant funding at The National Lottery Community Fund. This aims to support community organisations that protect and improve the local environment, help people connect with nature, and enable communities to respond to the impact of climate change. Roger has several years' experience leading both policy and funding teams at Community Fund, tackling complex social policy issues including the development of strategic funding initiatives, piloting new ways of working and co-designing grant funding programmes - but with a passion for nature and the environment he is thrilled to be leading the development of this funding approach.







# Nature Towns and Cities



## Contact Us

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