

# Edible High Town: Assessing the value of urban community gardens.



[www.ediblehightown.com](http://www.ediblehightown.com)

This evaluation report covers the following period: 1 March 2022 to 1 March 2023  
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## Introduction

This report is the joint product of evaluation by a London South Bank University academic (Dr Barbara Czarnecka) and Edible High Town coordinator (Konni Deppe). This report presents an evaluation of an urban community gardening initiative, Edible High Town. Community gardens, including urban community gardens such as Edible High Town, involve:

*“the communal cultivation of plants, varying in form according to local contexts and the needs and desires of gardening spaces and local residents. It includes collective gardening undertaken for community development, food production, health promotion, horticultural therapy, collective action, and environmental and permaculture education.”<sup>1</sup>*

In the past, urban community gardens have been identified as providing a model for promoting sustainable urban living.<sup>2</sup> At present, community gardens, especially those located in deprived urban areas such as High Town in Luton, have been used as a public health tool to foster particular health outcomes related to healthy eating, mental health and physical exercise.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, such gardens are also seen as initiatives that contribute to community cohesion by cultivating connections between neighbours and contributing to the regeneration of deprived areas and hence improving the well-being of residents.<sup>4</sup> Hence, this evaluation focuses on assessing the social, health, economic, and environmental benefits of Edible High Town initiative. The report is divided into the following sections: 1) What is Edible High Town? 2) How did we evaluate Edible High Town? Evaluation framework and evaluation methodology; 3) Evaluation results; and 4) Recommendations and conclusion.

### 1. What is Edible High Town?

When was the last time you spoke to your neighbours? Do you feel like you can enact change in your community? Most people living in poor, densely populated, and culturally diverse communities such as High Town in Luton do not have positive responses to such questions. The economic, social, and cultural characteristics of such communities pose particular

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<sup>1</sup> McGuire, L., Morris, S. L., & Pollard, T. M. (2022). Community gardening and wellbeing: The understandings of organisers and their implications for gardening for health. *Health & Place, 75*, 102773.

<sup>2</sup> Turner, B. (2011). Embodied connections: sustainability, food systems, and community gardens. *Local Environment, 16*(6), 509-522.

<sup>3</sup> McGuire, L., Morris, S. L., & Pollard, T. M. (2022).

<sup>4</sup> Delshad, A. B. (2022). Community gardens: An investment in social cohesion, public health, economic sustainability, and the urban environment. *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening, 70*, 127549.

challenges for community cohesion. The responses to challenges faced by such communities are various, including implementing schemes such as Edible High Town.<sup>5</sup>

Edible High Town (EHT) is a community not-for-profit organisation whose aim is to use publicly owned green spaces to grow food in the community, create a nature-friendly environment, help people make community connections, and to beautify High Town. Although urban agriculture is the primary objective of schemes such as Edible High Town, their impact usually goes beyond teaching people about food systems, and food growing. Urban community gardens are also deployed in communities as important interventions in community transformation, civic engagement, and building community cohesion. High Town is a neighbourhood in Luton. Luton is a town with a population of nearly 230,000. The diversity of the population in High Town (ethnic, religious, and nationality) means this is a very transient community, lacks social cohesion, lacks social capital, and experiences public health issues such as overweight and obesity rates higher than elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> The public spaces are neglected and uncared for, and this includes green spaces and parks.

EHT currently manages eight patches of land owned by Luton Borough Council. These patches/green spaces are situated in High Town ward of Luton:

- Cobden Corner
- Corner of Edward Street/Kingston Rd
- Dudley Triangle
- Wenlock Street
- Burr Street Square (in front of Café Lagoa)
- Albion Court (at the bottom of Cross Street)
- Orchard in People's Park
- Peace Garden behind the High Town Methodist Church

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<sup>5</sup> Czarnecka, B. (2022). Communicating with culturally diverse and economically deprived communities to encourage the adoption of environmentally friendly behaviors-the effectiveness of local versus global message framing and shocking images. In The International Congress on Public and Nonprofit Marketing. Available from: <https://openresearch.lsbu.ac.uk/item/9145x>

<sup>6</sup> Czarnecka, B. (2019). Perceptions of healthy eating and meanings of food amongst Polish immigrants in Luton—a qualitative study. Accessed from: <https://openresearch.lsbu.ac.uk/item/88qx3>

The gardens are tended to by a group of volunteers recruited by the EHT coordinators from the community. There are two EHT coordinators who lead EHT, and are responsible for organising events, communication, marketing, and the actual gardening. In addition to cultivating the public gardens, Edible High Town team organises a range of educational and social events to raise awareness about EHT and its aims and to teach residents about gardening.

Below we describe the evaluation framework and present data analysis. This is followed by discussion and recommendations.

## 2. How did we evaluate Edible High Town? Evaluation framework and evaluation methodology

Evaluating the benefits of urban community gardens is a relatively complex exercise as measures need to incorporate tangible and intangible outputs and outcomes including economic, social, health, and environmental benefits.

To evaluate Edible High Town, we have collected the following data as summarised in Table 1. The indicators include tangible measures such as the number of residents who attended events or the volume of produce harvested, and intangible measures such as perceptions and perceived benefits of EHT community gardens.

**Table 1:** Data collected to evaluate EHT.

<b>Indicator/Data/Measure</b>	<b>Details</b>
Number of EHT volunteers	51 volunteers
Number of gardening sessions	47 sessions
Number of volunteers per session	1-4
Number of volunteer hours	393.5 hrs
Value of physical activity	393.5 hrs of physical activity
Number of bags of rubbish collected	139 bags of rubbish
Social media communication	3 social media profiles with a total of 1573 followers

EHT events	7 events (including 2 workshops for primary school children in 2 local schools)
Number of attendees at EHT events	161 (including 40 schoolchildren)
Volume of produce harvested from EHT gardens	16 kg
Community perceptions of and familiarity with EHT	In-person street survey with 27 High Town residents on three occasions and at three locations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• St Matthews School (October 23, 2023)</li> <li>• High Town Christmas Market (November 27, 2022)</li> <li>• Street intercept (January 11, 2023, In front of Lagoa Café on High Town Road)</li> </ul>
Survey with EHT volunteers	Online survey for EHT volunteers (April 2023) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 17 fully completed responses</li> </ul>

We have also calculated, where possible, the monetary value of the outputs of EHT as presented in Table 2 and table 3.

**Table 2:** Return on Investment: Total Monetary value.

Item	Monetary Value at TOMS Values
Rubbish picking	£793.01
Volunteer contributions (393.5 volunteer hours)	£6653.49
2 educational sessions (estimated at £50 each)	£100
Produce (16 kg harvested)	£40
Events	£100
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>£6986.50</b>

### Produce by weight/volume\*

\*This is weight and/or value harvested by volunteers. These do not include the produce harvested by High Town residents at other times and are not reported here.

**Table 3:** Monetary value of EHT produce.

Produce	Weight or Volume	Monetary value <sup>1</sup>
Potatoes	12kg (at .50p per kg)	£6
Beans	1kg (at £6.94 per kg)	£6.94
Rhubarb	1kg (at £9.25 per kg)	£9.25
Strawberries	1kg (at £7.93 per kg)	£7.93
Herbs (various)	1kg (at £10.25 per kg)	£10.25
<b>Total</b>	<b>14kg</b>	<b>£40.00</b>

<sup>1</sup>This value is estimated using [www.tesco.com](http://www.tesco.com) website as of March 15, 2023.

### 3. Evaluation Results

#### Number of EHT volunteers

There are 51 individuals registered with EHT as volunteers. Volunteers contribute to the various tasks carried out by EHT and support the two coordinators in achieving the aims of EHT. The main activity is looking after the gardening spaces (this includes gardening, litter picking), assisting with events, and assisting with promoting EHT. Volunteers are registered on a WhatsApp group.

#### Number of gardening sessions, number of volunteers per session, the value of the physical activity

There were 47 gardening sessions run in 2022-2023. On average, there were 1 – 4 volunteers per gardening session contributing a total of 393.5 volunteer hours. These gardening sessions provided social interactions and moderate physical activity opportunity.

#### Rubbish bags collected between March 1, 2022 – March 1, 2023

There were 139 bags of rubbish collected during this period across 47 gardening sessions. If we assume that each rubbish picking session lasts 1hr, and the 1 hr is valued at £9.50 (NLW for individuals aged 25 and over since April 1, 2022)<sup>7</sup>. The value of rubbish picking is therefore £446.5. However, if we use the measures provided in the National TOMS framework<sup>8</sup>, a volunteer hour is valued at £16.93, and the value of those 47 volunteer hrs is £793.01. This is money that the council would need to spend to keep the gardens tidy.

### Social Media Presence

Edible High Town is actively present on three social media platforms (Table X) to create electronic Word-of-Mouth. In addition, to social media presence, EHT has a website <https://www.ediblehightown.org/>.

**Table 4:** Social media presence of EHT.

Social Media Profile	Number of followers
<a href="https://www.instagram.com/ediblehightown/">https://www.instagram.com/ediblehightown/</a>	486
<a href="https://www.facebook.com/ediblehightown">https://www.facebook.com/ediblehightown</a>	729
<a href="https://twitter.com/EdibleHighTown">https://twitter.com/EdibleHighTown</a>	358

### EHT Events

During 2022-2023, there were seven events organised

- Foraging walk in People's Park - 14 attendees
- Easter Trail: 50 attendees
- Storytime: 28 attendees
- Cuppa at Edward Street: 43 attendees
- Two workshops for school children at St Matthews Primary School and Richmond Primary School – 40 attendees

### Engaging with local schools

<sup>7</sup>

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1065743/The\\_National\\_Minimum\\_Wage\\_in\\_2022.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1065743/The_National_Minimum_Wage_in_2022.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <https://socialvalueportal.com/solutions/national-toms/>

EHT has organised two workshops for primary school children. The aim of these workshops was educational.

- St Matthews Primary School in High Town
- Richmond Hill Primary School

The educational value of those events is complex to estimate, however, 40 children were exposed to content about the benefits of gardening, and children also were engaged in potato picking.

### Surveys with passers-by

In order to assess awareness of the EHT initiative and the gardens, as well as to explore perceptions of the EHT initiatives and gardens, we conducted a street-intercept survey with passers-by in High Town. We designed a short survey which was printed and administered by an interviewer. Data was collected in person on 3 occasions:

- St Matthews School
- High Town Christmas Market (November 27, 2022)
- Street intercept (January 11, 2023, In front of Lagoa Café)

In total, 27 completed questionnaires were collected from a range of respondents representing different nationalities (Table 5). The analysis is presented below.

**Table 5:** Survey respondents' characteristics.

Characteristic	Frequency (Sample = 27)	%
<b>Nationality</b>		
British	11	40.7
English	4	14.8
British/Kenyan	3	11.1
Polish	2	7.4
British/Chinese	2	7.4
Black British	2	7.4
Mexican	2	7.4

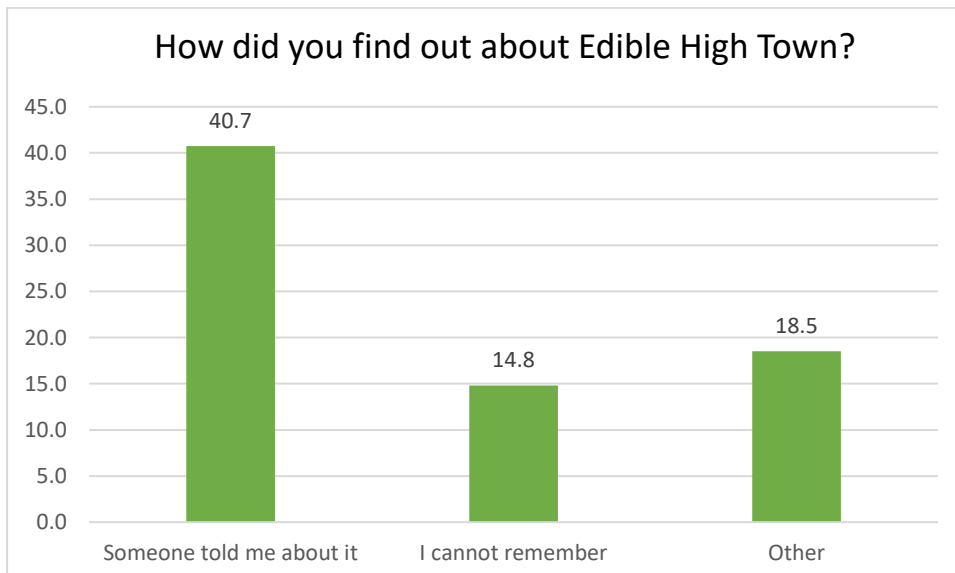


Ukraine	1	3.7
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	22	81.5
Male	4	14.8
Other	1	3.7
<b>Age</b>		
Mean = 43.5 years		
Age range: 17 – 79		

### How do respondents find out about Edible High Town?

The most effective communication channel is Word-of-Mouth (Figure 1), with 40.7% of respondents indicating that they learnt about EHT because ‘someone had told them about it’ suggesting that Word of mouth is the most effective means of promoting EHT to the public. Survey respondents took part in the EHT events (Table 6) indicating that they are aware of and engaged with EHT.

**Figure 1:** How do residents learn about EHT?



**Table 6:** Have you taken part in the following events?

Event	Yes	%
Easter Egg Trail	6	22.2%
Foraging Walk	9	33.3%
Storytime in Peace Garden	2	7.4%

**Can you describe what Edible High Town is?**

Respondents were asked to describe, in their own words, what EHT is. Respondents who indicated that they were familiar with/heard about EHT, were then asked to describe what EHT is. 74.1% (20) of respondents heard about EHT and provided short descriptions of EHT. The descriptions are presented below:

**Community gardens/community gardening project/community initiative** was the most frequently provided description.

Quotes: *“growing edible plants/vegs as a community and encouraging others to come along”*; *“Community gardening and making use of local spaces to grow veg, plus looking after the orchard”*, *“Volunteers who grow food for the community on pocket plots throughout the ward. The area is also maintained with litter picks etc. People are able to learn skills and develop a sense of community”*; *“EHT work to promote gardening, working sometimes with St Matthews School.”*

**What do you think about EHT gardens? This was an open-ended question with a text box to complete.**

Twenty-one (21) respondents completed this question. The responses ranged from one-word responses such as *“encouraging”* or *“happy”*, to longer sentences such as: *“great idea, I am very happy to see it and I pick mint from the plots, there should be more of this so High Town looks like it belongs in the 1st world”*. Such quotes suggest that EHT is recognised not only as a gardening initiative but also as a community project contributing to regeneration of the area. EHT provides individual benefits to volunteers and residents but also community-level benefits such as neighbourhood regeneration.

Additional quotes:

*“They make HT look a bit more 'maintained' amongst the dilapidated, neglected streets/buildings. It's like there is hope that HT can be better”* (neighbourhood regeneration)

*“they look organised (within a disorganised space); calm space”* – recognition that the maintained gardening spaces contribute to the more maintained look of High Town.

*“I think it gives a community vibe and a feeling of togetherness for those who walk past. It makes you feel like Luton, as a community, are taking vital steps to a greener future”*

Some respondents offered suggestions for alternatives: *“prefer flowers, would make the area look nicer than vegetables and herbs”* suggesting that Edible High Town is also perceived as a platform to beautify the neighbourhood.

### **Online survey with Edible High Town volunteers**

The next stage of the EHT project evaluation was implementing an online survey (hosted on Qualtrics online survey platform) to assess the value and benefits of EHT to volunteers. A short online questionnaire was designed and the link to it was distributed via the EHT WhatsApp group. Eighteen (18) volunteers completed the questionnaire.

### **Who are EHT volunteers: age, gender, nationality (country of birth), and length of residence in High Town.**

Table 7 presents the demographic characteristics of EHT volunteers who completed the survey.

**Table 7:** Volunteer survey – sample characteristics.

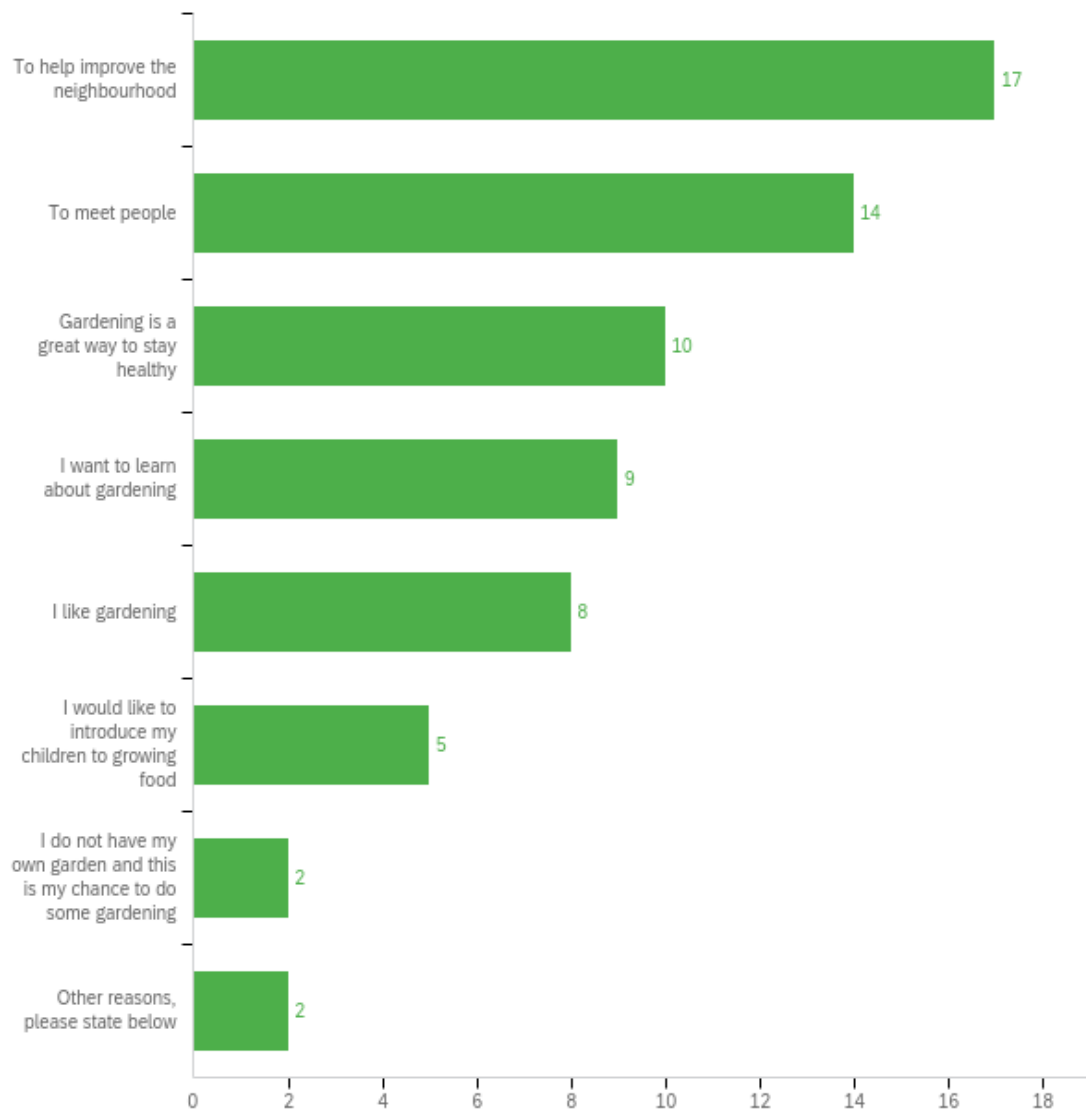
<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Count</b>
<b>Nationality</b>	
United Kingdom	13
Argentina	1
Poland	1
Norway	1
United States of America	1
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
White	15
Mixed two or more ethnic groups	1
Prefer not to say	1

Black/African/Caribbean	0
Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, any other Asian background)	0
Other (Arab or any others)	0
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	8
Female	7
Non-binary / third gender	1
Prefer not to say	0
<b>Age</b>	
Mean = 53	
Maximum = 71	
Minimum = 33	

First, we wanted to know why volunteers joined EHT. Figure 2 presents a summary of responses. The most important motivation is to help improve the community, followed by the opportunity to meet people. These responses suggest that EHT is more than just a gardening initiative to grow vegetables – it is seen (again) as an initiative to help improve the neighbourhood (regeneration aspect of community gardens) and to meet people (community building). Other reasons mentioned were to strengthen community bond and to help with mental health.

**Figure 2:** Reasons for which volunteers joined EHT.

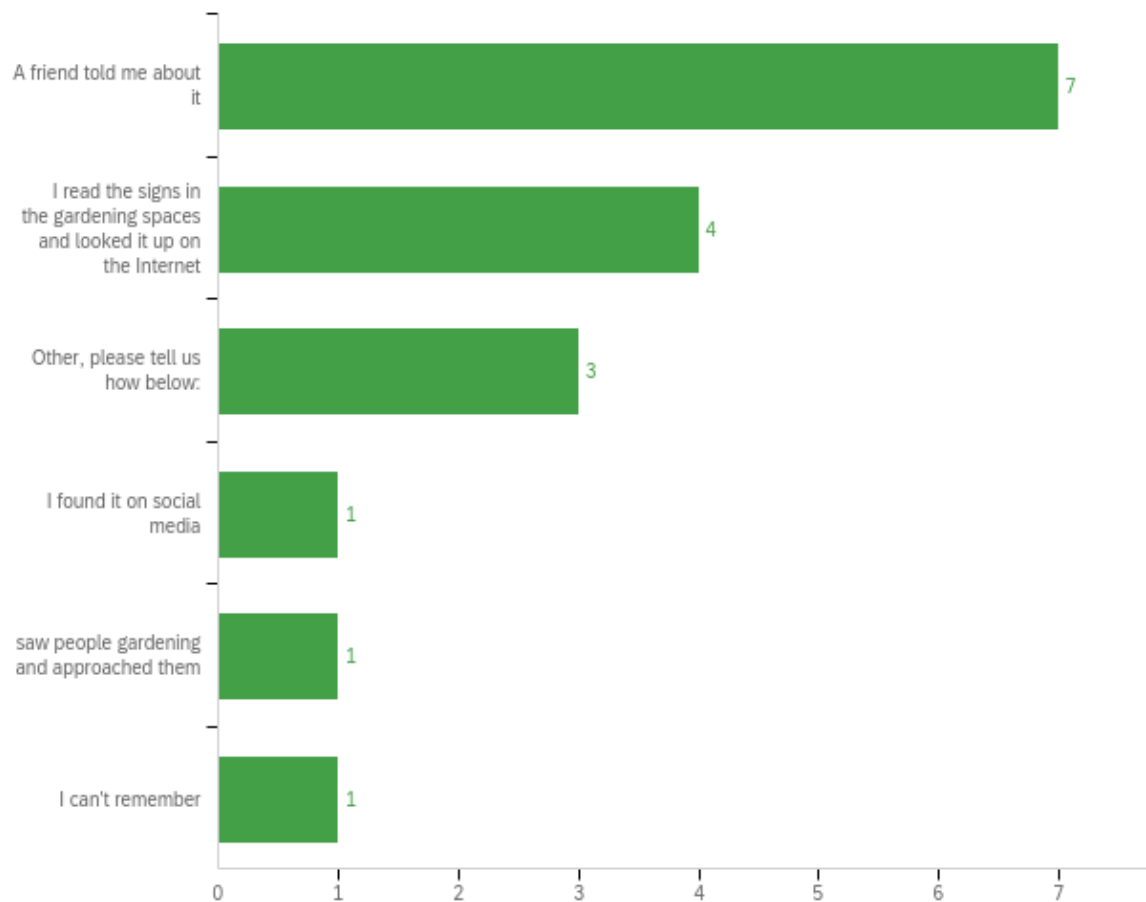
### Why did you join EHT?



Next, we asked how volunteers learnt about EHT (Figure 3). Word of mouth was the most frequently chosen option, followed by reading the signs in the gardening spaces.

**Figure 3:** How did volunteers first learn about EHT?

## How did you find out about EHT?



## Volunteer engagement with gardening sessions and EHT events

Volunteers engaged with EHT as volunteers (Table 8) but also as participants in events organised by EHT (Table 9).

**Table 8:** How often do you take part in the gardening sessions?

Answer	%	Count
Less than once per month	50.00%	8
Other: please tell us how often you take part in the gardening sessions below	25.00%	4
Three times per month	12.50%	2
Every week (4 times per month)	12.50%	2
Once per month	0.00%	0
Twice per month	0.00%	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>16</b>

**Table 9:** Participation in EHT events.

EHT Events	%	Count
Cuppa in the community garden	58.82%	10
Foraging Walk in People's Park	41.18%	7
No, none of the above	23.53%	4
Easter Egg Trail in High Town	17.65%	3
Storytime in Peace Garden	17.65%	3
Total	100%	17

### Why do people not engage with EHT?

When volunteers were asked about other people’s lack of engagement with EHT, the main reason was time (Figure 4 and Table 10) suggesting that lack of time is seen as the main barrier to participation in EHT community gardening. The language barrier and fear of the unknown was selected as the next most important barrier to participation in EHT. Lack of interest and lack of awareness about EHT were also mentioned as frequent barriers to participation.

**Figure 4:** Volunteers’ perceptions of lack of engagement with EHT.

Why do people not engage with EHT?



**Table 10:** Reasons why residents do not engage with EHT.

Answer	%	Count
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They do not have the time to get involved	53%	9
Other (language barrier, fear of the unknown, time)	41%	7
They are not interested in such initiatives	35%	6
They are not aware of this initiative	35%	6
Laziness	17.65%	3
Total	100%	17

Next, we explored volunteers’ motivations (Figure 5, Table 11). Volunteers participate in EHT for variety of reasons including connecting with the local community, meeting people, physical activity and contribution to High Town regeneration.

**Figure 5: Why do volunteers participate in EHT?**

Word cloud: why do you participate in EHT?



**Table 11: Volunteers’ views on EHT engagement.**

**In your own words, tell us why you are involved with EHT?**

Some of the people involved are my friends, I suffer from generalised anxiety disorder and was wanting an outdoor chance to meet other new people, learn more about gardening and to bring some joy to High Town’s surroundings.

I like the initiative of edible high town and also the litter picking that is essential to make High Town an attractive, safe and nice place to live.



I don't take part as much as I would like to. I like to take my little daughter and hope she enjoys it. I think small steps in improving the neighbourhood are important in themselves and can also lead to bigger changes. Gardening and environmental issues are particularly important given the climate context we're all in.

When I can, due to work & time constraints, I would like to improve my local community... Bring about a sense of community in the area... Encourage people to grow their own produce... Get out in the fresh air... Meet with the other like-minded people... And share information.

I participate to meet my neighbours and make the neighbourhood a better place. I love that anyone can harvest from the garden. Edible High Town makes the neighbourhood a place I want to live in.

I'm afraid I don't take part very often, but I do believe that this is a really important community initiative

I like to contribute when I can, although it ends up being rarely. I also like to mix with the sort of people who are interested in such community projects (eg environment/sustainability minded and seeking to benefit the community)

To: further a good cause; help me get out of the house; get some fresh air and exercise: be with the other friendly participants; meet friends and new people in High Town who pass by; keep the area clear of litter and flytipping; being involved helps others achieve their gardening aims.

I like to feel part of the community. I think it is a great idea just I am very busy so don't attend much at present

I love the idea of being part of a group working to make of our town a better place to live in.

To be outdoors enjoy gardening talk to the local community help with well being

I don't really any more sadly! I did because I loved meeting people, transforming spaces and seeing positive, community-driven neighbourhood-level change.

Community, Wellbeing, keep luton tidy, fresh produce, nature.....

It's a wonderful way to connect with the area, local people and nature. We can so easily be isolated and divided in modern society

I think it's very important for the community.

I want High Town to be cleaner, prettier and safer, and one way of achieving it is to transform the physical spaces in High Town

#### **4. Conclusion**

EHT is an urban community gardening initiative in High Town, Luton. The results of the evaluation show that the initiative is perceived as an important mechanism for revitalizing the neighbourhood, creating, and maintaining community cohesion, and in turn delivering important social and economic value. Specifically, EHT is perceived as a neighbourhood initiative providing more than gardening opportunities, it contributes to transforming the neighbourhood, and is an important initiative to bring together culturally diverse members of the High Town ward. In the long term, EHT may, as part of a wider community-building campaign, contribute to uplifting the area and improving the mental health of residents, and strengthening community cohesion.