

# Health and biodiversity in small inner city green spaces

Islington Council, Friends of St John's Garden and Central District Alliance BID are collaborating to enhance St John's Garden, to deliver on Islington and Camden Council's Parks for Health Strategy, and Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) criteria.

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## Collaboration



## Objectives

Camden and Islington Council launched their joint Parks for Health Strategy in July 2022. This strategy highlights four key priorities to guide future investment into green spaces, to maximise the health and wellbeing benefits that park can offer communities. These include increasing physical activity and mental health and wellbeing, through access to green spaces with richer planting, wildlife and amenities. These also include reducing social isolation and health inequalities, through support for green space amenities or programming, prioritised in areas in need.

Islington Council Head of Parks and Leisure Andrew Bedford highlighted St John's Garden as an opportunity to test how the Parks for Health Strategy can be delivered in small parks serving dense urban areas. In addition to supporting improvements that can support positive health and wellbeing outcomes, this project aims to help the Garden become a more welcoming place to relax and socialise, and enhance biodiversity to help achieve Site of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) designation.

## Context

This project emerged from deep collaboration between the Central District Alliance (CDA) Business Improvement District, residents' group the Friends of St John's Gardens and Islington Council Parks department. This public sector, private sector and community partnership extends from project initiation and objective setting to co-funding and specification of works.

The project will be delivered via an agile phased approach, with first steps leading up to summer 2023 showing visible improvement prior to the Garden's peak use period, and further steps to follow from autumn 2023. This agile approach proposes building enhancements gradually, therefore emphasising evolution and not revolution, rooted in the Garden's unique history and character.

Enhancements proposed include diversifying planting complementing existing woodland character, and supporting wildlife with fruiting hedges, bird/bug boxes and water. To capture social benefits, proposals include improving or adjusting the Gardens' seating provision, improving ecological and historical interpretation, growing participation in the Garden's maintenance and providing wellbeing activities.

## Community Programming

Under the Parks for Health strategy, Central District Alliance has concurrently sponsored a series of wellbeing activities in St John's Garden, while exploring the scheme's broader enhancements. These sessions have sought to foster place attachment, reduce social isolation, increase physical activity, improve mental health and wellbeing and reduce health inequality in the surrounding neighbourhood. The first of these wellness sessions began in April 2023, when the Holborn Community Association were commissioned to deliver a series of Qi Gong classes.

The success of the gentle movement series demonstrates how public space investment can foster collaboration between diverse stakeholders while promoting urban environmental health.



## Responsiveness to history

St John's Garden was originally used as a burial ground from the early 1700s until 1853, when it was closed under the Burials Act. The gardens then became a neglected space, encroached on by nearby industrial workshops, including the Booth's Gin Distillery. In 1885 it was laid out as an ornamental public garden, with trees, flower-beds and a dovecote, designed by J. Forsyth Johnson, an honorary landscape gardener to the Metropolitan Public Gardens Association.

By the late 1800s, such green space became increasingly important, as public transport began to evolve and intensify the character of Central London as a place to work. It was crucial "...to allure persons of 'sedentary occupations' from their dark courts and alleys, to take air and exercise..." (Holborn District Medical Officer, 1860s).

These themes continue to ring true today. Consequently, responsiveness to history has been a key driver of the project, facilitated by desk-based research alongside engagement with local stakeholders such as the Order of St John. Exploring how the project delivery team might be able to storytell through planting has been an outcome of the work. For example, juniper can provide a nod to Booth's Gin. Similarly, St John's Wort has a history of being used as an herbal medicine for mental health problems like depression.

While fostering biodiversity, the project can build on the garden's tradition of anchoring local residents and workers in a much-needed green oasis, amid a bustling urban environment.

## Findings

This project demonstrates deep collaboration between the public sector, residential community and business community. This collaboration has leveraged investment into biodiversity, health and wellbeing in an area of green space deficiency.

Concurrent wellness activities have demonstrated how thoughtful programming can engage the local community under the broader Parks for Health strategy. Simultaneously, responsiveness to local history illustrates how climate resilience efforts can forge links between an area's past and future.