

Croydon Saffron Central

Type of asset:	Brownfield land
Legal model:	Not legally incorporated
Type of community enterprise:	Community start up
Year of transfer:	Not yet confirmed – occupying temporarily
Type of transfer:	Not yet confirmed
Full-time staff:	0

Overview:

Croydon Saffron Central is a pop-up Saffron farm. The project began in summer of 2015, when a resident proposed the scheme for a brownfield site in the city centre, and received crowd-funding for it. Since, the project has attracted a lot of interest and support from the community. However, the site has always been designated for new residential development, to provide much needed affordable housing. Therefore, Croydon Saffron Central are now looking to become registered as a business and negotiate an asset transfer as part of the new development.

Overview

Croydon Saffron Central is an urban farm, growing Crocuses, Woad, Lavender and vegetables, also housing two bee hives. The project began in summer of 2015, when a Croydon resident who is also a part time local DJ of radio show 'Made in Croydon' and full time council employee in the children's services department, pitched the idea to the regeneration department. The proposal was to create a pop-up farm for 4 months, on a brownfield site which formally housed Croydon Council's offices. Since, a number of community groups have come to visit the site, demonstrating interest in the scheme. However, the site had always been designated for new residential development, to deliver regeneration and provide much needed affordable housing. The farm is currently still on the site, under an informal arrangement. However, the project's initiator is now seeking to negotiate a place in the redevelopment of Queens Gardens, one of the only green spaces in the town centre which is adjacent to the site. The project was crowd funded using Spacehive – a platform specifically for public investment in civic projects.

People

The guiding idea for this project was to create a community saffron farm which could give people access to nature in the centre of Croydon and create a place-

specific scheme to develop a new identity for the town, following the Croydon riots in 2011. Croydon Saffron Central is therefore a heritage and education project, with indirect implications for place regeneration. Once the first round of flowers had bloomed, the corms (seeds) were collected and offered to the 127 schools in the borough, and Friends of Parks and to Community Groups who were involved in the early stages of the project. While the project took significant upfront investment, it was planned to become self-sustaining through the sale of saffron gathered from the plants. This revenue would be reinvested in more corms for a second round of the project. However, as their occupation of the site was only ever promised to be short-lived, where this could take place was unknown.

One of the most significant assets to Croydon Saffron Central was the wide-reaching local social network of the projects instigator. This was particularly relevant in securing funding for the project, as a weekly radio show promoted the scheme. Connections with the wider local media were built upon and developed to secure positive coverage in the Croydon Citizen, Inside Croydon, and Croydon Guardian. The initiator, and other local celebrities used Twitter and Facebook to promote the project and opportunities to come and get involved. But most significantly was the involvement of local councillors, who bought into the scheme at an early stage and wanted to make it happen.

Enthusiasm about the scheme within the community awarded the project support – both goods and services – on the basis of good will. For instance, a local artist agreed to design an image for the Spacehive website. When the farm was first planted, on September 19th 2015, nearly 200 local people came to help. The local Women's Institute provided cake and refreshments, and a scout group put up a marquee so volunteers could shelter from the sun.

Rules

In comparison with other projects in which securing a leasehold or freehold agreement for the asset took a long time, the shift from concept to occupation was rapid in this project – because of the informality of the arrangement. The project's future is now under negotiation with the regeneration department and re-developer of the site, to find a way to incorporate the project into the scheme.

However, Croydon Parks Department is looking to extend the degree of community involvement in management of their 127 green spaces, creating a possible opportunity for Croydon Saffron Central to live on elsewhere. However, to formally receive an asset under loan or lease, Croydon Saffron Central would have to become a registered business. At present, the project's inventor holds responsibility for the scheme as a private individual, with the strong involvement and support of the wider community. To receive an asset transfer, he would also need to register the project as a formal charitable body.

Resources

Partnership

The success of this project has relied on a strong working relationship between the council and community members participating in its creation. A large part of this was based on trust. However, there are limits to a cooperative approach, and ultimately a community business must conform to rules. For instance, despite

positive reviews from youth groups who had visited the site privately, the council did not want the venture to be used to deliver council schemes for young people due to health and safety concerns.

The space presents a number of hazards with two basement stories filled with debris from the demolition, lift shafts still in place, and a number of trip hazards. Because the site remains in council ownership, the council are liable for any injuries. Croydon Saffron Central was able to secure insurance for volunteers on the site for free from The Conservation Volunteers (TCV) underpinned by Zurich. However, health and safety requirements meant some community innovations in design could not go ahead. For instance, chairs made out of pallets could not be delivered because they would not pass maximum weight resistance levels, and a bicycle which would spray water over the plants was not permitted because of the risk of legionnaires' disease.

Assets/money/funds

The project was funded through Spacehive, a platform for crowdfunding of civic projects. Working from a business plan, project costs were estimated to be £4,075. While Spacehive usually suggests that crowdfunding platforms are open for 12 weeks, to get the corms in the ground in time a 1 week turnaround was needed. Generating a huge amount of community buy in, they were able to raise over three quarters of this within five days. 107 people donated, with an average donation of £40 each. At this point David Wilson Homes, who were completing a new development nearby in Coulsdon, promised to make up whatever was left of the funding gap by the end of the week. The level of public buy-in was considered to be a response to the romance of the concept, and the knowledge that the scheme would go on to give something back to all of the communities across the borough, developing this new place identity.