

Transforming back-alleyways into community spaces

Guidance



Introduction

This paper focuses on positive examples of small-scale community interventions to transform back alleys / lanes into attractive and cared for spaces. It looks at cases where interventions have made alleys more environmentally attractive and also typically brought wider benefits to community well-being.

Context

Back alleyways are a feature of many residential and commercial areas, particularly in terraced housing built in the 19th and early 20th centuries. These locations can cause problems for residents and councils alike for a variety of reasons including crime, anti-social behaviour, neglect, and fly-tipping, littering and graffiti. In Keeps Wales Tidy's own national programme of litter surveys it has also been noted that the local environmental quality of alleyways tends to be poorer than the average standard of streets surveyed.

The nature of the problems and potential solutions will vary widely. Relevant issues include:

- the nature of neighbourhood (is there a high turnover of residents? eg. students and houses in multiple occupation)
- extent to which access is needed for vehicles
- whether or not the alleyway concerned is adopted by the council
- locations and types of refuse and recycling bins

Gating alleyways has become more common and promoted by some local authorities. This typically means the installation of a self-locking gate being installed with residents provided with keys. The effectiveness of this is a separate topic which is not considered hereⁱ.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to highlight initiatives which have succeeded in turning neglected alleyways in residential areas into places that are a source of pride and no longer seen as a dumping ground.

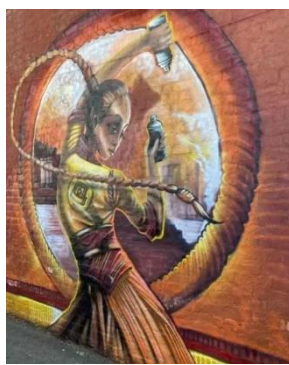
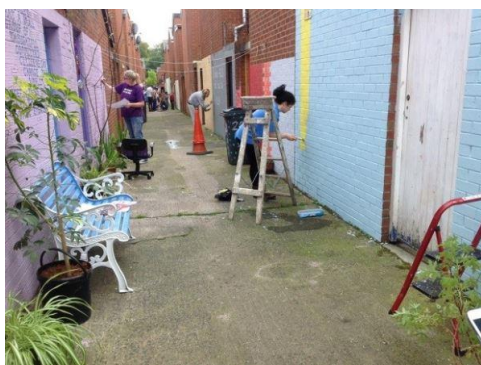
Photo of alleyway transformation, Wavertree – before and after.ⁱⁱ



The examples that have been found were predominantly reported in newspapers and press, rather than objective reports and evaluation. This means there is not sufficient detail to fully and objectively appraise their longer-term success, but it is possible to identify some common themes which will be valuable for any organisation looking to encourage similar projects. The conclusion includes a list of activities which would be needed as the project progresses to achieve the type of results shown in the cases studies highlighted.

Physical interventions

Typically, the first physical intervention needed was a clear up. In many cases the rather dark space was then brightened up with painting the walls bright or light colours^{iii iv} or even allowing local artists to use the walls as a canvas^v.



Photos of painted back alleys in 1) Miracle Way - Lower Ormeau Belfast^{vi} 2) Street art in Camden Street, Middlesborough^{vii}

Most schemes also introduced nature into alley in the form of planters, tubs, trellises or hanging baskets^{viii}.

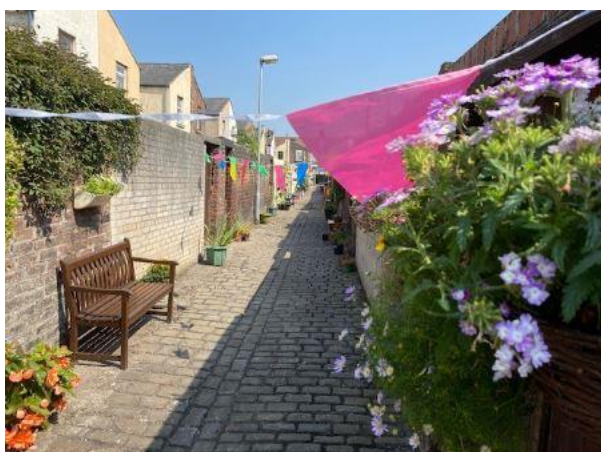


Photo of community gardening contributing to alley makeover in Rufford Road^{ix}

Other items installed to create seating and socialising areas ranged from seats, play areas to street bars and a mini cinema! ^x



Photo of mini-bar installed as part of alleyway transformation in Claughton^{xi}

Community involvement

Most projects started from local residents seeing an opportunity to make better use of the alley space and unhappiness with an area that was a hotspot for dumping. There were a number of cases where the restrictions of the Covid lockdown were the spark which enabled some local residents to see the promise of the alley as an openair space for the local community to meet up. Often the residents let others know about their idea either via a note through the door or via social media which developed into a group of residents who were enthusiastic and willing to put in some physical work to get the project off the ground. In many cases, the involvement of just a few people was the catalyst for greater engagement.

Partnership

A whole variety of partner organisations were important in contributing to different stages of the alley transformations. In some cases, the area was managed by a housing association, and they played a key part in supporting residents ideas^{xii}. Council involvement frequently included support from the local councillor and support for removing pre-existing rubbish and fly-tipping. Other local environmental or support groups also often had a prominent part eg. Wirral Environmental Network; Streets Ahead for Information (Middlesborough). In one case a Garden Centre chain had donated plants through the “Here we Grow” community scheme.

Middlesborough Council are an example of a council which has played a key part in encouraging alley schemes with over 20 schemes going ahead with varying levels of support from the council^{xiii}.

Groundwork in, Greater Manchester, have also led on an Eco-street initiative helping communities find nature-based solutions and make a plan to look after a community space in the long term^{xiv}. Their webpage www.groundwork.org.uk/hubs/greatermanchester/eco-streets/ includes advice on many aspects of this type of project.

Outcomes

Photos from the cases cited in the articles alluded to here show beautiful and cared for spaces. The residents and other stakeholders interviewed mention a whole range of benefits beyond the physical improvement of the ally environment. Residents mention getting to know neighbours they'd never spoken to before and an increased sense of community. Skills were learnt in upcycling and gardening. Additional outdoor space was created for activities and relaxation.

Conclusion

From looking at these stories of transformations there is inspiration to see problem alleyways in a different light. Enthusiasm from a core group of residents is essential to get the venture off the ground. The council and housing associations and appropriate community / third sector organisations also offer vital support and practical assistance to allow residents to achieve their ambitions and deal with the practical issues involved.

Here are some key points to think about at different stages:

Beginning

- Decide how to engage with residents to establish levels of interest and find out what is important to them (eg coffee morning for informal discussion)
- Who owns the land? Whose permission is needed?
- Share stories of how other communities have stopped fly-tipping and transformed their alleyways to provide inspiration
- Consider starting small with a trial - eg. installing a few planters to gauge reaction

Moving forward

- One or two keen residents can make all the difference but make sure they have the right contacts, support, capability and skills
- Local councillors and other local voluntary groups can potentially give important help and remove barriers
- Think about communication as the project goes forward so volunteers stay interested (a WhatsApp group or newsletter)
- Make sure the focus is on the outcomes wanted by residents and their priorities
- Help with costs - will the Council do an initial clear up? Could local businesses make a donation of plants or containers? Any suitable funding schemes (eg regeneration, climate change, sustainability funds)
- Consider if there are things that can be recycled or up-cycled to provide containers, seating areas etc. for little cost

Longer term

- Celebrate what's been achieved, for example, a BBQ, coffee morning etc. which use the space and involves as many local residents as possible
- Agree who will do what to make sure the alley is maintained. Keep the momentum going

-
- ⁱ [Alley-gates: preventing crime or isolating communities?](#)
 - ⁱⁱ [Rundown alleyway transformed into urban oasis with its own cinema \(Image credit Berringtoncommunitygarden\)](#)
 - ⁱⁱⁱ [Community alley growing | Social Farms & Gardens \(farmgarden.org.uk\)](#)
 - ^{iv} [Residents work together to transform alleyway into community space in Longsight - Manchester Evening News](#)
 - ^v [Middlesborough Community transform rundown back alley](#)
 - ^{vi} [Community alley growing | Social Farms & Gardens \(farmgarden.org.uk\)](#)
 - ^{vii} [Middlesborough Community transform rundown back alley](#)
 - ^{viii} [Neighbours from Litherland transform their overgrown alleyway into an amazing community garden - My Sefton News Channel](#)
 - ^{ix} [Neighbours from Litherland transform their overgrown alleyway into an amazing community garden - My Sefton News Channel \(Image credit ruffordcommunitygarden\)](#)
 - ^x [Merseyside alleyways transformed into amazing community spaces](#)
 - ^{xi} [Merseyside alleyways transformed into amazing community spaces \(Image credit Andrew Teebay/Liverpool Echo\)](#)
 - ^{xii} [Residents and Volunteers get green-fingered to improve community space](#)
 - ^{xiii} [National spotlight for amazing alley makeovers](#)
 - ^{xiv} [Eco-Streets, Groundwork \(Greater Manchester\)](#)