

# COMPOSTING IN THE SOUTH HAMS

A HOME AND COMMUNITY  
GUIDE



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# INTRODUCTION



I wrote the first introduction for an information booklet for the Devon Community Composting Network in 2000. In those days, the Network was funded by all the local authorities in Devon. This Information pack is largely updated from that document. This time we have the support from South Hams District Council, who are working with Sustainable South Hams, Sustainable South Brent, and the Devon Community Composting Network, DCCN.

DCCN was founded in 1996, predating the launch of the National Network. When the funding ceased we carried on giving support through the website – [www.dccn.org.uk](http://www.dccn.org.uk) and thanks to this recent support we are able to overhaul the site and update it. Nicky continues to work and liaise with Devon County and CAG Devon ([cagdevon.org.uk](http://cagdevon.org.uk)), who support grassroots community activities all over Devon.

It's our view that community composting is a vitally important socially, environmentally, and economically and has a unique part to play in building community cohesion and resilience. It can be a stand-alone project or be linked into a range of other activities, such as community gardens and local food growing. In projects like Proper Job in Chagford and Sustainable South Brent, composting is only one of a suite of services that supports their communities and attracts visitors from further afield.

Through recycling and the reduction of buying, we have become used to diverting from final disposal. We still have so much in the form of compostable materials from our kitchens and gardens that could either be composted or fermented at home or by a local or neighbourhood group. Picking up these materials is not good for our carbon footprint and, besides, the resulting 'black gold' helps build our beleaguered soils sequestering carbon instead.

I've been helping projects since the early 1990's and am delighted to see the positivity and support given by South Hams District Council. Hopefully this will be a new start inspiring other councils to follow suit!

Nicky Scott April 2024





# STARTING A COMMUNITY COMPOSTING PROJECT



In order to get help from South Hams District Council, you will need to fulfil certain requirements:

**1. Your project should be open to the public.**

People should either be able to bring materials to you, or you should be collecting materials from them. A regular system is vital. Groups can operate once a week or once a month, some are open daily.

**2. You must have a suitable site, which complies with all the relevant legislation.**

This will have to be carefully thought out, we are here to help you. Later the Environment Agency and the planning department will need to be involved. There must be enough space to stock-pile materials, process them and compost. If you are going to be shredding, think of the noise and the neighbours. There must be good access and room to turn vehicles, whether the ground is dry or wet.

### **3. You must have a bona fide group.**

An individual cannot apply for funding etc. If you are not a member of a group, join one! Check out your local allotment, gardening or environmental groups. It's important to get people on your side. You will need plenty of help to get going and to keep running. Alternatively, you could set up your own constitution, but this can take time and money.

### **4. Your group will need dedicated volunteers or paid staff.**

Making compost is very rewarding, though not everyone's cup of tea and its hard work at times.

### **5. You must register and keep track of the tonnage for the recycling credits claimed**

'Recycling Credits' translates as money that the council give you for materials diverted from landfill - but it must be audited.

### **6. New and prospective groups should visit an existing scheme.**

Preferably a community compost demonstration site. South Brent is ideal.

### **7. The Golden Rule is - small is beautiful!**

Community composting can be an ideal project, indeed we think every community should have one.

### **8. Community Composting projects are characterised by their diversity.**

Many of them are a part of a larger scheme, often addressing and involving marginalised social groups in a wider range of activities.

# PLANNING THE PROJECT, SELLING THE IDEA

The activities of a community composting group activities can be pretty diverse. As a group, you may well have a whole range of aspirations and fears. Although initially you will not want to take on too much, it is good to imagine where the project could be in a few years time. It may well transpire that you just want to be, and remain, a small composting group run by volunteers. Or you may well have members of the group who would like to take things further. It is important to allow all potential ideas to be considered.

A good approach is to have a 'brainstorming' session. At this all ideas are considered, however farfetched and impractical they seem - no holds barred at this stage. Think of what the compost is going to be used for. Who is going to do the work - is there any 'free' labour available? Are there existing local organisations that you could work with? These could include people with learning difficulties, mental health projects, young offenders, long-term unemployed, and so on. You may well want to do some research at this stage. The Sustainable South Hams team working with Devon Community Composting Network are available either to help directly or to suggest other experts to assist you.

All ideas need to be recorded, then sifted through and prioritised. You don't want to be overwhelmed by the possibilities, its' important to work within the capabilities, and the time constraints of the group. Create a time scale - start small within the capacity of the group, but start a dynamic rolling programme that you keep revisiting. Put the bigger developmental ideas further along the timescale and focus on the immediate job in hand.

## **Group Dynamics**

When your group gets together, take some time to allow everybody to speak. It can be useful to go around the group first to introduce themselves and how they are feeling. Everybody should be able to see each other, circular seating is ideal.

## **Funding**

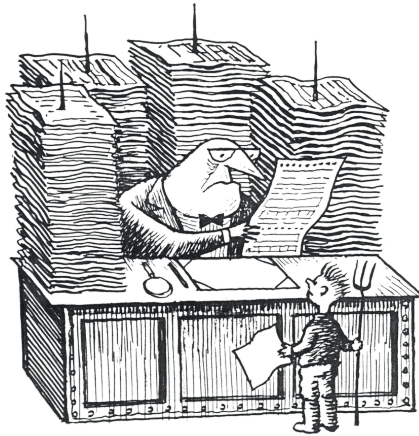
Luckily funding is available from South Hams to help start new and existing projects.

## **Checklist**

- Site, suitability, risk assessment, legality etc.
- Labour force, own group, social services etc.
- Administration of group
- Constitution, secretary, chair, treasurer
- Insurance
- Visit(s) to other project site(s)
- Funding

Budget for tools, equipment, rotary sieve, machinery, materials for site construction, plant hire, consultation costs, planning costs, publicity materials, art work & design costs, printing, initial labour costs, insurance costs, office equipment/materials, signs, first aid kit, vehicle, hiring of meeting space - and don't forget to factor in a percentage for admin costs etc.

# COMPOSTING AND THE LAW



Before you go too far, make sure that you have read all the fact sheets, and have a chat with us! If you are still trying to get a group together and stimulate more interest, then we can give a presentation to your community.

A suitable site is obviously a vital first step. Even if you have not yet got a group together, you could find out about suitable sites. The Local Authority may own a piece of land, or you could ask your Parish Council for ideas. If you are only contemplating a small village scheme, then there may be space on the local allotments. Talk to the allotment holders.

Don't forget that farms can make ideal composting sites and if you can get a farmer's support you could have the use of some useful machinery too. Once you think you have found a suitable site talk to us first. Then you must check it out with the Environment Agency. They will want to know, firstly, that you are operating within the legislation.

The main concerns of the E.A. are that you are not going to pollute or cause a nuisance. Areas of concern include:

- *Proximity to residential areas or inhabited buildings*
- *Geology (likelihood of leachate to reach groundwater)*
- *Proximity to watercourses*
- *Surface and groundwater abstractions*
- *Other protection designations (e.g. Nitrate vulnerable zones, source protection areas).*
- *Designated physical features and areas (e.g. SSSI, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, ancient monument, etc.)*
- *Transport network*
- *Other considerations, (e.g. political, known objectors, etc.)*

They will also want to know the precise location of the project. This all sounds rather daunting but it is just to check that you proposed site is really suitable, that you are not going to be polluting the environment, or disturbing neighbours and that you have thought about the scale of operations and the involvement of the community. It sounds more complicated and difficult than it usually is and we are on hand to help.



# COMPOSTING FOOD WASTE

There is additional legislation that covers the composting of food. It's called Animal By-Products legislation (ABPR).

If you are collecting food waste for composting you must make sure you are not contravening the law. If you are composting food waste and using the resulting compost in the same place, e.g. a school garden, then ABPR does not apply to you.

Food waste coming from a kitchen or canteen, unless is completely vegan, falls under ABPR. If you are collecting from say a fruit and vegetable market place, then it does not apply.

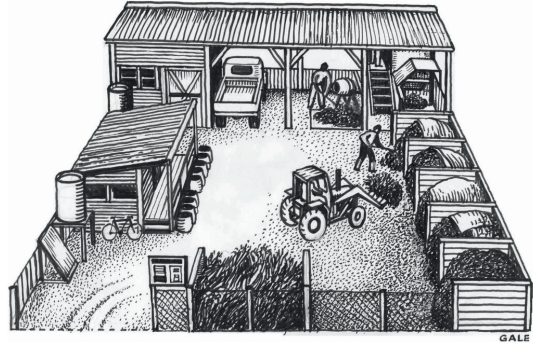
There are many projects around the country and the world looking at food waste in all its forms. Louiza Hamidi wrote a book called *Landfull—a snapshot of the UK food waste movement in 2017*. Hamidi emphasises the importance of putting composting right at the end, after all other solutions are put in place. That we also need to be creative in transforming what would otherwise have been wasted, from free food cafes, gleaning, mushroom growing on coffee grounds and cardboard and so much more.



Albion Community Garden (Brighton) composting area  
The Mycelium Network have been developing local composting stations like this starting from Brighton now there are projects nationwide

# TYPES OF PROJECT

Composting schemes are incredibly diverse; no two are the same. This means that you cannot just take a model off the shelf and copy it. The main governing factors are the size of the community you will be serving and the size and capability of your organisation. For instance starting from scratch is more challenging than adding composting onto existing activities.



## **Unstaffed ‘Bring Sites’**

Unstaffed sites where people are trusted to bring materials and put them in the appropriate place can pose challenges. There is a lot of potential for dumping of unwanted rubbish, so it is usually preferable to have a collection round. However, ‘bring sites’ can work within a well organised, co-operative community with excellent communication from the community group. It can even work with larger schemes, although these tend to have people working on them for much of the time and so are in effect being staffed.

Examples in the South Hams include; Ashsprington, Dartington. These projects have worked hard with their communities to ensure the right materials are brought and put in the right place.

## Advantages

- You don't need a vehicle
- You're not tied to a collection round week in and week out

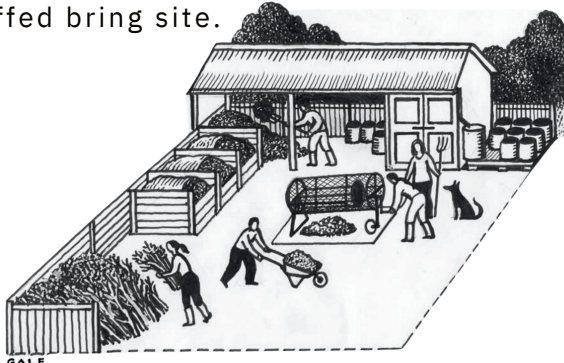
## Disadvantages

- Best to staff the site as people will often put things in the wrong place
- They will bring things you can't deal with, like tree stumps - and plastic. This is where your communications are vital!
- You will need good access. Probably planning permission too.

## Staffed Bring Sites

Many community composting projects are operating from sites with a variety of activities taking place and will be staffed during opening hours. This is much more preferable to an unstaffed bring site as staff can help explain the system and what is appropriate to put where etc. It also helps to involve the community more with the wider activities of the project. A bring site has to have very good clear access approved by planning and highway departments.

The South Brent site is a demonstration site and is also a staffed bring site.



## Collection Round

The easiest way to have full control on your system is to operate a collection round. Probably the best way to do this is to make a charge for the service at the outset, either by an annual fee, which will guarantee a number of sacks collected, or by a tag system, whereby only material with the appropriate tags attached will be collected. Councils are not obliged to collect garden materials, if they do they can charge for it.

Some do collect and charge some collect and don't charge and some don't collect. If a community group is going to collect this material they really should charge for the service in order to make it sustainable. Concessions can always be made for special circumstances. Having a collection round involves far fewer vehicle movements, which is obviously preferable to lots of vehicles trundling around creating pollution. Also the site doesn't have to be so rigorously checked, if at all, with planning and highway departments.

### Advantages

- Only one vehicle coming onto the site
- The access does not have to be perfect
- Planning can be a lot easier to obtain
- Your site can be more remote
- It doesn't have to have fixed opening times
- You can control where you are collecting materials from so you can start small
- You can easily monitor the quality of the materials left out for collection and reject anything unsuitable.

### Disadvantages

- Once you start you must keep it up!
- You must have a suitable vehicle and keep it maintained
- You must have a dedicated labour force



# PROJECTS IN SOUTH HAMS



## The Marsh site at South Brent

This is the flagship project by Sustainable South Brent in the South Hams and includes a demonstration area.

The site, at the old Highways depot on Exeter Road (otherwise known as the Marsh), will accept bulky garden waste and produce compost for local collection and use.

Can accept:

- Soft green waste material you can cut with mower or clippers
- Twiggy brushwood material that can be cut with loppers, saw or power tools
- Large branches material that came from a plant larger than you!

Can't accept:

- Stumps
- Vines
- Bamboo
- Japanese knotweed
- Any other materials whatsoever





## Ashprington

Method of operation: unstaffed bring site. No collection round. Launched in 2000, a small but enthusiastic group that has also created a wildlife area and planted an orchard.

It is very well used by the villagers and produces leaf mould, compost and wood chippings. The facility is sited in a three acre site which has been planted with 500 items of native shrubs and trees together with over sixty ancient Devon species of apples. All the apple trees are mulched annually with well rotted wood chippings.

## Brixton

A community site for residents. Contact them at [Brixtoncomposters@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:Brixtoncomposters@hotmail.co.uk)

They also have their commercial operation South West Composting.







## Stoke Fleming (Loam Rangers)

Since its establishment in 2005, Stoke Fleming Loam Rangers community composting has gone from strength to strength. Open to all residents of the Stoke Fleming Parish for a minimal fee of £10 per year – including free access to 3 bags of compost per visit. Membership now exceeds 100 and producing over 50 tons of recycled quality compost per year. The organisation is run by an army of volunteers and sited next to the primary school in Stoke Fleming.

Open Sundays March – November 10:00 – 11:30 and selected dates December – February. Interested in joining -just pop up to the site on a Sunday morning – or look out for membership details in the Stoke Fleming magazine. - they don't have their own facebook or website but Sustainable Stoke Fleming does.



## Marldon

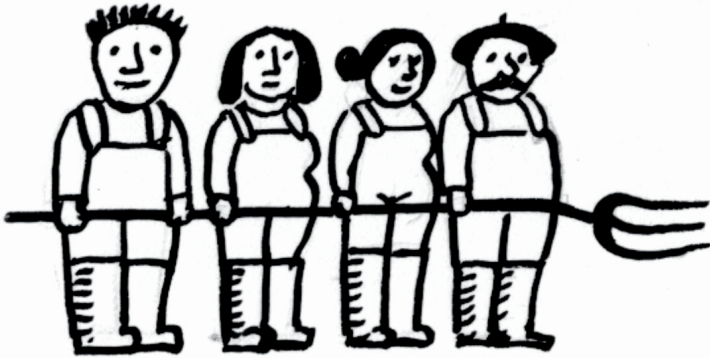
Marldon is the first of the new wave of emerging composting sites, funded by South Hams District Council in 2023. There is a small bring site at Stone Cutters Barn, next to the Village pub (Church House Inn). Permission to use the site was granted by a local farmer who leases the land from National Trust, also very supportive to the cause. The site has a beautiful Devon Linhay Barn and is adjacent to village allotments.

No membership but open to any residents of Marldon or Compton Parishes.

Small and beautiful project with no vehicular access inside the gate, compostable material received by volunteers at site entrance. No hard standing, so most of the work done manually, apart from hire of portable shredder for hot heaps. 4 large wooden compost bays, New Zealand box style, which can be subdivided into 8 smaller bays with wooden slats.



# VOLUNTEERS



They all want to do something positive, every positive single individual action helps. . Volunteers want some social activity and connection with people who share the same ideals and vision. Many community composters are organic gardeners who want large amounts of compost and mulch.

Volunteers may be unemployed or retired or just interested in extending their knowledge of composting, gardening and soil health. Often, people want lots of good quality compost for veg growing using no dig or minimum dig methods.

As your project grows and considers diversification and even revenue generation, volunteers may be promoted to part-time work, earning small amount each week, which some schemes may be able to fund from their recycling credits. It is good to reward volunteers in any way you can, even if it's just free compost, good tea and cake, and perhaps also expenses.

With any group of people you are bound to get some who are committed to work than others, or maybe they just have more time available to do it. Conflicts and disagreements can easily arise. Its not really within the scope of this short piece to deal with that and anyway it goes beyond my expertise. I have however learnt a few things along the way which may be of use.

If one person has overall responsibility it can avoid a lot of potential for misunderstanding. Everyone should have had the same training and understand the working methods and aims of the project. Everyone should be rewarded equally for the work they put in.

Resources for supporting volunteers:

NVCO Thanking volunteers | NCVO

South Hams Community Action (SHCA) / CVS

DVA Devon Voluntary Action Devon Voluntary Action  
([devonva.org](http://devonva.org))

CAG Devon

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# BECOMING A COMMUNITY BUSINESS

Many community composting projects run entirely on volunteers. However many of these projects also run out of steam eventually and volunteers drop away leaving only a few stalwarts to carry on. When Proper Job broke away from its volunteering roots after a few years it was named Proper Job to acknowledge that people need payment for any long term commitment. We had a consultations with a community support organisation based at County Hall. We were urged to have some 'blue sky' thinking around compostable materials and how we could develop a business model around these ideas. Several mind maps ensued!

As I say in my talks, 'composting is the last thing you should do!' By this I mean see what else you can do first, can you extract more value first? Here's a list of ideas. Pull out any living plants, bulbs, plant material for cuttings etc. You may be surprised how much really good plant material is thrown away. Pot it up, use a propagator to bring on cuttings and hold regular sales of plants. You should be sieving your finished compost anyway so why not make potting substrates? Any plants you can save or propagate can be potted into this, see Nicky's book for more on this.

Fresh small diameter woody material can be chipped or shredded for 'Ramial' woodchip. Any large fairly straight poles can be set aside for sale as beanpoles of garden structures.

If you have space to neatly stack dry small diameter woody materials then you can make bio char which you can add to your composting bays or add the 'bio' to the char in other ways.

## **Becoming a legal entity**

Think carefully about how you legally structure your group. You may well want to start by ‘piggybacking’ on an already existing group such as your allotments just to get you started and able to accept funding, or you might want to become a community interest company (CIC) or a charitable incorporated organisation (CIO) or a cooperative, of which several models exist.

## **Funding**

Once you have legal status it’s much easier to apply for funding. Be creative in what you apply for and how. Many funders will be looking for how you can involve as many people from your community as possible. How you draw up your aims and objectives to enable you to undertake as broad a range of activities as possible will help you here. For instance the objectives of the Proper Job Resource Centre are ‘the protection and preservation of the environment by the promotion of waste reduction, re-use and recycling and advancing education of the general public about all aspects of waste generation, waste management and waste recycling.’

There are a bewildering amount of funders out there and you have to fit their criteria. It’s generally best practise to really think about what you would like to fund, rather than trying to fit your project into a fund that has just become available, however in practise it can be a combination of approaches. See section on working with South Hams DC as well, your local officers and councillors can often help with funding opportunities.



## Core Funding – Recycling Credits

You can and should apply to Devon County Council to take part in the recycling credits scheme. This applies to materials diverted from disposal including compostable materials. See [www.devon.gov.uk/wasteandrecycling](http://www.devon.gov.uk/wasteandrecycling). Although the recycling credits won't cover all your costs it's a very useful amount to build upon.

## Sales

Don't forget you are not providing a free service. Proper Job in Chagford ask for a donation for materials being dropped off. They claim Recycling credits and then sell the resulting compost. If you want to build a resilient project then you must make a profit. Not for profit organisations plough their profits back into the business and there are no shareholders to take it away.



# WORKING WITH SOUTH HAMS DISTRICT COUNCIL

South Hams DC are there to help you and your project, they want you to succeed and as well as the funding they have on offer they also can help sign-post you to other sources of funding. The councillors also can help directly through the locality fund.

They can also forward you the latest funding news keeping you in touch with any relevant funding opportunities.

Most importantly they are working with Sustainable South Hams and Devon Community Composting Network to support you and your project.

## **Local Environment Agency offices**

Most Environment Agency offices are open 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday (except bank holidays). Please check before travelling as not all services are available in every location. The Environment Agency general enquiries team (contact details below) can help you make an appointment. They may be able to help by phone or email, such as finding contact details for more specialist advice, avoiding the need to travel. General enquiries:

National Customer Contact Centre  
PO Box 544  
Rotherham  
S60 1BY  
Email [enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk)  
Telephone 03708 506 506

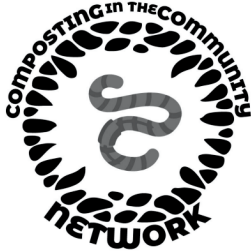


**Sustainable  
South Hams**



**South Hams  
District Council**

# RESOURCES



The old Community Composting Network CCN has been reborn as the Composting in the Community Network. It brings together projects all over the country. It runs regular online talks and has a Facebook group at the time of writing this (March 2024)

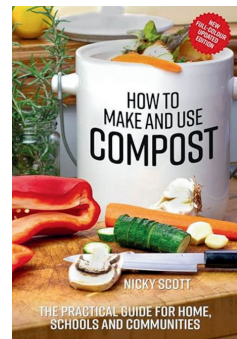
The Mycelium Network is a newer network with a fast building membership and amazing resource that is steadily building through its forum and Whatsapp group—to join and find out more see <https://www.OLDTREESOIL.org>



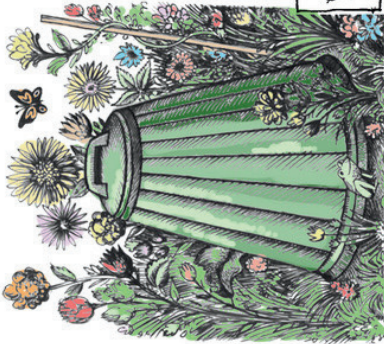
**Devon Community Composting Network**

Devon Community Composting Network website has a big resource of information to check out! See [www.dccn.org.uk](http://www.dccn.org.uk)

Nicky Scott has written extensively about composting, gardening, and working with community groups and schools. The book *'How to make and use compost'* is available through Bloomsbury and is being updated for a third edition.



# Some ways to Compost



## Cool Composting

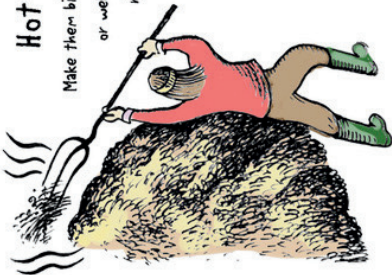
A small un-insulated compost heap does not heat up readily. Add plenty of absorbent carbon - e.g. scrunched up paper and cardboard. Let the worms and other creatures do the work. Try leaving the lid off or partly off to let beetles in!



Get the mix right and 'Compost Happens!' Mix wet with dry, green with brown & hard with soft.

Browns: mix with -

dry, hard & high in carbon



## Hot Composting

Make them big - left or well insulated right



If you want to cook weed seeds and roots, or to rapidly kill potential diseases or pathogens then hot composting is the way.

Beg borrow and collect together as much as you can! Fresh green matter like nettles will really help heat it up - but get the mix right.

## Kitchen Waste



Left overs - cooked food etc attracts flies and rats - so a sealed container is usually best. A wormery - see right - is one option but you can also ferment left overs with special micro-organisms (the EM Bokashi system) or hot compost in an enclosed container equipped with drainage and air-flow systems.

For more information on home composting why not buy 'Composting for All' by Nicky Scott - only £1.95 - published by Green Books 01803 863160

## Home-Made Wormery converted from a Wheelie-Bin



Lid perforated for ventilation  
 Add only small amounts of raw or cooked kitchen scraps  
 Worms in moist bedding of shredded paper/card, leaf-mould, etc.  
 Drainage grid  
 Liquid collects  
 Dilute contents approx. 1-10 to use as foliar feed.  
 Holes drilled for outlet pipe

Drawings by Bob Gale 01647 432160 Printed by Moor Print 01647 221229