

The bigger picture

Conference report from papers presented at 'New Horizons in Mental Health and Horticulture' and 'Horticulture and Learning Disabilities' by Peter Bates, National Development Team, Manchester

Around the UK, some 60,000 people are involved in social and therapeutic gardening projects. This paper highlights the role of gardening projects as places that can bring hope, inspiration and a bigger purpose into people's lives.

Getting really joined up

Over the past decade the funding environment for gardening projects has become ever more complicated, with the formation of Primary Care Trusts, health and social services confederations and partnerships, Health Action Zones, New Deals, Training and Skills Councils, and mergers of NHS Trusts and health authorities. And the variety of outcomes produced by horticultural projects makes their work relevant to all these new bodies.

Outcomes from gardening projects can be broadly categorised thus:

- Improving people's mental health. Forty percent of GPs today prescribe complementary and alternative therapy; and gardening projects help with the National Service Framework for Mental Health by providing meaningful daytime activity and friendship as a support to other therapies
- Causing improvements in the environment and help with Local Agenda 21. They green the cities, protect the environment, provide wildlife habitats and run recycling and composting schemes for the local neighbourhood
- Teaching people skills, from building a rubble wall to the sophisticated programmes of organic farming. This fits with the policies of the Training and Skills Council, Employment Service, Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and regeneration agendas
- Improving general health, as people get exercise and reduce their risk of coronary heart disease. Spare aggression and anger is diverted into productive digging, and projects respond to food poverty by achieving affordable improvements in diet, furthering *Our Healthier Nation* targets

- Renewing derelict brownfield sites, involving neighbours and so increasing active citizenship and social capital, as they become a focus of pride for the local community.

New relationships

Gardening projects must therefore draw on a diverse range of policy resources in order to inform practice and construct applications for funding; with those projects that do not neatly fit into one category or another (after all, who does?) being more likely to be eligible for a service. This requires new types of relationship both with external partners and within the project, relationships that will be characterised by equality and sharing. For example, in a gardening scheme in north London, each person trains two newcomers and the learning then cascades through the organisation. As a result, there is a higher degree of ownership, and the local Casualty Department is expecting fewer gardening accidents.

Other projects disrupt traditional power lines by using project income to buy tools for members to use at home, or by just giving away their produce. They could use project income to buy annual subscriptions for the National Trust or Greenpeace on behalf of members. Neighbours and friends have clubbed together to buy their fresh fruit and vegetables, to buy seeds or tools or to jointly run a sales outlet.

It is a curious fact that we are advised to farm for 1,000 years but funded for 1,000 days or less. As a result, many gardening projects spend far too long fund finding. They employ staff on short-term contracts and too many of them spend time and energy campaigning for survival. This degree of insecurity is a waste of energy and is bad for everyone concerned. So far, there isn't much evidence that the new flexibilities and pooled budgets of the Health Act 1999 have improved financial security for horticultural projects. Busy

bureaucrats in the Health Authority or the Social Services Department will always be tempted to evaluate by pay-offs within their own field. It is the job of horticultural projects to get them to look up and see a bigger picture – to recognise the value for money achieved by projects that meet a wide range of objectives.

Managing risk assessment

Over the past two years, there has been a new emphasis on risk assessment in health and Social Services departments. In contrast, the staff of gardening projects have been making risk assessments for years. Every day, the staff look out for restlessness, irritability or lack of concentration and quietly give a bit of extra time, make a cup of tea, or suggest an appointment with the community nurse. *The Thrive Guidelines for Good Practice* (GrowthPoint 80; 2000) underline the importance of risk assessment, but the trend to develop explicit and comprehensive risk assessment protocols is like medicine which can be accidentally overdosed:

- Over-protection can restrict personal growth. In the horticultural project, it is by carefully trusting people with tools, with responsibility and with independence that people develop and grow as human beings
- The risk agenda can restrict opportunities. Jane wanted to go swimming, but staff stopped her going until they had completed the risk assessment form. Three months later it still hadn't been done, and Jane still hadn't been allowed to go swimming
- The risk assessment exercise can be based on a negative view of the person. Horticultural projects tend to ask what people like to do, what they feel confident about, what they are good at. But the over-zealous risk assessor reminds everyone of old incidents, perpetuating the person's bad reputation.
- Over-enthusiastic risk assessment can lead to a loss of hope and belief in the potential to change. By emphasising times when things went wrong for the person, we forget that the future does not have to be a repeat of the past.

Hope assessment

Some projects work on personal development through drama, video, self-advocacy or self-help meetings as well as through gardening. Many horticultural

projects are relaxed, egalitarian places where the members are not fussed about formal empowerment programmes because they already have a genuine stake in the place and a voice in the decision-making. Projects can use this strong foundation to develop hope assessment, in part as a counterbalance to the potential negativity of risk assessment.

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While many mental health colleagues focus on problems and needs, progressive projects can work with people on their ambitions, achievements and lifestyle preferences. While commissioners ask for eligibility (or exclusion) criteria, progressive projects work with people who have had a bad time, and find their gifts; they work with people who have failed everywhere else and find that they too can change like the seasons of the year. In this way it is possible for progressive projects to move towards a 'zero rejection' policy – where people qualify and belong simply by being in need.

Community involvement

Being part of the community means different things to different people, so the following framework of four inter-linked components of community involvement is just one way of thinking about it.

- **Going Out** is simply trips into the community, such as a coach trip to the nearest Royal Horticultural Society garden. If the project aims to help people find employment, then visits to employers will be arranged. Some projects are 'gardening plus' schemes, spending time on literacy, numeracy and other skills, which may lead to trips to the cinema or museum
- **Community Amenities** are visited in order to shop, get a drink or look round. Social contacts tend to be brief and impersonal; people visit these places either alone or with a friend, and are unlikely to make new friends there. This is the kind of contact that takes place if members work in the project shop, show visitors round or staff the market stall

- **Social Networks** focus upon people rather than places. Networks may include relatives, friends who call and visit, or people at the horticultural project who have become friends. All of these contacts are very important. Some project staff say that the friendships that form between members are the most valuable part of what they do, and they run discussion groups or other activities to encourage social network formation
- **Integrated Pursuits** are the activities that bring people who have used mental health services together with other members of the public. They may be employed alongside a member of the public, be a neighbour, or belong to the same conservation group. These are long-term relationships, based on a shared activity.

Whirlpool services

In general, mental health services invest least effort in integrated pursuits; and so the remainder of this paper will focus upon this component. The Government talks about this as social inclusion – encouraging people to participate in the mainstream of society.

At present, most mental health services around the country are 'whirlpool services'; when somebody encounters them, they are gradually drawn into the middle, until mental health services, other service users and mental health staff surround their whole life. Gardening projects can reverse that process and offer people a path back into mainstream society. The National Development Team provides training for staff and service users on a range of approaches to fostering social inclusion, as well as convening a national *Inclusion Research Network*.

There are a variety of ways in which people can get to know all kinds of communities through an

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interest in horticulture and the countryside: think about how activities within the project mirror activities in the community. Unfortunately, some projects use a fairground Hall of Mirrors, where activities within a project are a distorted reflection of activities and opportunities in the community. For example, in one project the hedge was cut with a large electric clipper, and then members went home to trim their privet with a rusty pair of shears. Every activity in the gardening project can be subjected to the 'mirror test'.

Closer community links

Finally, here are a few ways in which closer links with the community have been achieved around the country.

- Does your project link members up and encourage them to help one another with their gardens at home? In Scotland, one project has encouraged users to become allotment holders, first checking out how many people normally shared a local allotment and keeping to that group size. An allotment site in Gloucestershire has an annual presentation evening and other social events, as well as growing flowers and vegetables. Service users are fully part of that community and its activities
- A day centre in Peterborough has run a gardening group at the centre, then arranged a course for service users only at the local agricultural college. Now one person has joined a mainstream NVQ course
- In north London, neighbours have formed a food co-operative to buy and share out fresh fruit and vegetables in bulk. There are 1,000 city farms and community gardens around the country, and some project members could become volunteers on a city farm
- In the Midlands one project invites the whole neighbourhood to their bonfire party. An allotment group in Dartford has been featured on TV, radio and in the newspaper on forty occasions in one year; local horticultural projects could invite them to visit and speak about their group
- There is a vast range of activities in the general community that may well be of interest to members of the gardening project: conservation work with the local conservation volunteers; the walking club; the bird-watching group; and offering some garden maintenance

work on the LETS scheme in exchange for a few hours decorating or baby-sitting, to name a few examples.

Project staff often suffer from role overload as they have to be the head gardener, health and safety officer, business manager, account keeper, trainer, NVQ assessor, stock controller, personal counsellor and fundraiser, and more besides. But despite such demands on time and resources, the challenge for garden projects remains. For two

hundred years, mental health services have been designed on a whirlpool model. Our job is to reverse that trend – to support people, not so much to get a service, but to get a life.

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Different government departments give money to different parts of garden projects. But projects improve many things at the same time: the community and environment, and the health and skills of users. We have to tell the government that money given to one part of the project will help another. We have to make sure that being careful doesn't stop us helping people. We have to look at what people can do, not what they can't do. People should have the chance to go on trips, to use shops, to have friends, and to have a life outside the project.