



Scottish Natural Heritage
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Health And Natural Heritage Case Studies

Bridgend Allotment Community Health Inclusion Project



Location

Craigmillar, Edinburgh

Summary

Community organic gardening project which engages individuals and local communities in growing their own fruit and vegetables to tackle chronic health problems arising from poverty and social isolation.

Health benefits

- Good mental health and well being promoted by building people's confidence and skill levels and through working together to create a garden
- Physical health improvements from the introduction of healthy food that people have grown themselves, cooking workshops, eating together and discussing food choices informally
- Physical health improvements from the physical activity inherent in gardening
- In a recent survey, all respondents said that being involved in the project helped them to keep active, made them feel happier, helped them feel more part of things, let them make a contribution to something worthwhile and made them feel better overall

Keys to success and learning points

- Focus on growing and eating healthy food together, rather than the negative aspects or problems in people's lives which might have brought them to the project initially, is essential to the project's success.
- Many people don't like accessing mental health services in the area in which they live so funding or other restrictions which limit involvement to a defined geographic area immediately around a particular location can represent a barrier to inclusion
- People of all ages and abilities flourish in the non-threatening environment associated with gardening and growing, and newcomers are absorbed into the group at their own pace.
- Informal drop-in sessions remove pressure for commitment which can deter some people from coming along.
- Organising events and other events at weekends enables a wider group of people to be involved, including families.
- Being at and working the allotment provides a degree of focus, structure and purpose to many of the participants lives, and becomes an important part of many of the participants' weekly routine, with some depending on it for social contact. Maintaining formal and informal sessions year-round is therefore important although a break may be necessary for the organisers to consolidate project development.
- Making social inclusion work on the ground means disregarding peoples' case histories or handicaps and focusing on their interests and needs.
- One of the great strengths of the project is that it allows each individual to make what they want of their involvement. Monitoring and demonstrating tangible benefits is often critical to securing and maintaining funding but bureaucracy and trying to predict specific outputs can conflict with social inclusion and maximising health benefits for individuals.
- A non-judgemental ethos, absence of pressure and warm welcoming atmosphere are essential to encouraging participation and maximising mental health benefits.
- Learning together and from one another, working together, harvesting, cooking and eating together all contribute to wellbeing.
- Commitment to investing in project participants as key stakeholders is a major contributory factor in the success of BACHIPs

About the project

Bridgend Allotment Community Health Inclusion Project (BACHIPs) was established in April 2006 on a new council allotment site developed in one of the fields of the former Bridgend Farm in the historic Craigmillar Castle Park on the Old Dalkeith Road near Cameron Toll, on the south side of Edinburgh. The aim is to promote an holistic approach to health by encouraging people to engage in physical outdoor activity, healthy eating, and mixing with others through the practical and companionable work involved in creating a garden. The whole focus is on pro-active health promotion, rather than reactive treatment of illness.

In total there are 58 plots on the allotment site, four of which are used by the health project. Each plot measures 18m by 9m, and has a shed with a rain water butt. There are also eight small plots in a paved area for use by charities and other local groups which can be converted to raised beds for wheelchair users as required. The Royal Caledonian Horticultural Society also has a large demonstration plot. The land belongs to Edinburgh City Council.

Although intended primarily as a referral scheme for social and therapeutic horticulture, BACHIPs welcomes everyone, whatever their age, background, knowledge or ability. The youngest participant so far was aged two, the oldest in his 70s. Some people self-refer, others are referred to the project through a number of support agencies and health professionals, including Link In, Bethany, The Thistle, Keep Well, Health Inequalities Team, GPs, the volunteer Centre, Community Service Volunteers and REH. The project offers older people the opportunity to escape the loneliness of social isolation. Young people and children find role models and surrogate grandparents. Those who have lost their self confidence through illness or other reasons regain their esteem and a sense of well-being through involvement in the project.

Initial phone enquiries in response to local media coverage, events and open days are followed up by completion of a simple registration form providing contact details and previous experience. During the first year 50 individuals registered, and the project enabled a great mix of people to discover or rekindle the delights of growing fruit and vegetables, working together and harvesting their food. Tuesdays and Thursdays are run as drop-in sessions which allows people to decide on the frequency and hours they attend, varying between individuals and from week to week. On average 10-15 people attend each of the two days. Cooking sessions have become a regular event and the atmosphere is happy and relaxed. Stimulating new relationships among people who have become isolated for a variety of reasons is as important as the physical health benefits from digging or healthier eating.

From June 2006, BACHIS started working with groups at the allotment, including high school children, a group of Sikh women and young homeless women with children. Programmes of workshops offer more structured learning opportunities and are easier to plan, with scope to develop other environmental links, for example a walk through Craigmillar Park focusing on biodiversity.

As well as the plots, the project does outreach work with schools and communities, health flats and groups who want to set up their own food-growing projects. Community events including weekend

gardening workshops, community lunches using produce grown on the allotments, open days and potato days help raise awareness of the project and extend the benefits beyond those directly involved. The aim is to encourage people to move through the project onto other things, ideally integrating what they have learnt into their daily lives, whilst allowing individuals to stay as long as they need according to their own circumstances. Some of those who have been involved are already growing vegetables on their own at home, while others are now working with their childrens' school to set up growing projects.

The project is managed by the Community Health Project (NHS Lothian), with City of Edinburgh Council as an active partner, and is part of the Scottish network for social and therapeutic horticulture (Trellis) and members of the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens. It employs two full-time gardeners/project staff plus sessional staff, initially funded through Lothian NHS Trust, followed by a successful bid to Big Lottery "Investing in Communities" through which funding has now secured for a further two years.

The wide-ranging mental and physical health benefits of BACHIS are widely recognised by all involved, but while it is relatively straightforward to record the number of participants, media interest and referral routes, measuring and monitoring health benefits is far more of a challenge. Inclusion of questions on registration forms intended to track progress have proved impractical, not least because they depend on subjective personal assessment by participants of how they rate their own physical and mental health before and after involvement with the project. Participant's experiences of the project have been documented through focus groups and individual interviews, and surveys undertaken to log participants' views and responses to the project. Inevitably longer term funding is likely to depend on proving to funders and policymakers that the project makes a genuine difference to people's lives. To this end, more appropriate means of more subtly monitoring project outputs are currently being developed. Opportunities for the local community to become more involved in the running of the project are also being developed.

"The connection with the earth has given me a sense of belonging. It has brought meaning and purpose back into my life."

"Bridgend has been a really positive experience. My doctor says I'm much stronger ... thought I'm ready to come off the anti-depressants."

Further information

www.bridgendallotment.co.uk

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