GREEN WAYS TO HEALTH

Case Study – people make the Gartnavel community garden come alive
The GREEN EXERCISE PARTNERSHIP (GEP) is a joint venture between Forestry Commission Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage and Health Scotland (the health improvement board of the National Health Service in Scotland). The Partnership aims to build links between the health and environment sectors, following growing evidence that public health can be improved by getting people engaged with the natural environment.

Since 2013, the partnership has been active at Gartnavel in the west of Glasgow, a large campus that includes several major hospitals and smaller specialist units, including psychiatric wards. The partnership has developed a much improved network of paths, greenspaces and growing spaces around the site. Work included a garden area based on a restored 19th century walled garden and a modern summerhouse, surrounded by raised beds.

The garden provides a base for a range of environment-based therapy and community-linked activities. This study looks at what makes them come alive: the people involved, and what the space means to them.

While I was an in-patient at Gartnavel Royal, a Patient Activity Coordinator brought a group of us to the garden. I’d never seen it before and thought it was a magical place. I got in touch about volunteering after I was discharged. For the first couple of months there were times when I didn’t feel like getting out of bed, but this feels like a safe place to come even when I’m not feeling good. That’s because people respect your privacy and there’s no judgement.

The problem with depression is losing a sense of purpose and hope – the garden really helps with that. I enjoy the learning too: finding out how plants grow reinforces my sense of being able to learn.

Katie, volunteer
I started volunteering after I got physically unwell and mentally not in a good place after leaving a stressful job. I enjoyed the company and the gardening: I get such pleasure from planting a seed and watching it grow. The garden slows you down and brings you into the moment: you can’t hurry it along. Things will grow when they’re ready, and you’re working with the rhythm of the seasons.

When you’re suffering from depression it’s hard to think about the future. But gardening means you’re planning for the future, and seeing the results. I think it’s very therapeutic, very healing.

Margaret, volunteer

ONE GARDEN, MANY USERS

As part of the GEP’s NHS Greenspace for Health demonstration programme, The Conservation Volunteers charity (TCV) employs a full time Green Activity Project Officer. Their role includes running sessions with the garden volunteers, delivering taster and engagement sessions and acting as a contact point and facilitator for other groups who use the space: these include volunteers with Macmillan Cancer Support, and clinical staff and patients from a number of wards at the hospital.

Volunteers may be referred to the scheme by health care professionals, or they may find out about it for themselves. Many come every week, to plant seeds, weed the beds, harvest vegetables and flowers or make plans for next year. What keeps them coming back?

For many, sessions in the garden offer a time without the pressures of work or everyday social settings, but where they feel their time is useful. A former mental health patient at Gartnavel, who has been volunteering since their formal treatment ended three years ago, values the sense of having no deadlines or expectations, combined with a sense of achievement and pride at seeing things grow.

The project has restored the walled garden outside the 19th century Superintendent’s house.
A few years ago I came to day release sessions at Gartnavel Royal: I was having a bad time with alcohol and anxiety. Towards the end my occupational therapist put me in touch with the garden and I’ve been coming two days a week ever since.

I walk here, which helps keep me fit. In the garden I find jobs like hoeing therapeutic and relaxing. If I ever feel a bit down I know I can put my boots on and come up to the garden for a couple of hours. I haven’t had one anxiety attack since I’ve been here.

Brian, volunteer

Social contact with other volunteers is important too. “After a major breakdown I’d got so I wouldn’t answer the phone or leave the house. This place has brought me out of myself and given me a way to talk to people.” Many volunteers mention the atmosphere of the sessions as a key part of the benefits they get. It’s a supportive, friendly environment where people can chat while they work, or be quiet and self-contained if that’s how they’re feeling.

Increased confidence is another recurring theme. A volunteer who had become scared of people through the pressures of their job said that after a few months of contact with the project, “I can read people’s expressions again without feeling worried about their demands.”

That confidence can extend to other areas of people’s lives. “Gardening has been the trigger for me to re-start my life,” said one volunteer. “Learning little things here has made me realise I can learn anything.”

A PRESCRIPTION FOR PLANTS

For clinical staff at the hospital, the garden offers a chance to develop a different sort of therapeutic relationship with patients. For psychiatric care, it can be a space to develop the sort of mindfulness techniques recommended in the “Five Ways to Wellbeing” approach developed by the New Economics Foundation. Occupational Therapists bring elderly patients who need a relaxed setting in which they can practise their mobility.

There are challenges in encouraging use of the garden for formal treatment. Some nursing staff may feel that if they don’t have any gardening knowledge, they wouldn’t know how to use the space. The Green Activity Project Officer has worked to overcome this barrier by taking plants from the garden into the wards, showing how simply getting patients to feel and smell them can be a rewarding activity. There are also difficulties in the way care is organised, with care for a patient sometimes split across different teams, and limited time available for one-to-one sessions.

When the gardens were first established, there was some concern among clinical staff about potential risks in working with patients outdoors. Experience has shown these concerns were unfounded, but the way the gardens are used depends very much on staff seeing the opportunities it offers. For patients, the garden is a valuable therapeutic resource, but their input isn’t enough to maintain the space. The volunteers’ work in planning what to sow, digging and weeding is essential – and for many, it’s an essential contribution to their long-term health.

Working as a team on mundane tasks like weeding helps build friendships and a common sense of purpose.
The garden prompts interactions with patients that aren’t possible in the environment of a hospital ward: you find stimuli for conversation in the flowers, or windfall fruit.

For people with low cognitive abilities, simple tasks like watering are good ways to get them active. It’s also a valuable place for people with mobility difficulties, but we sometimes need to drive to the garden, even though it’s only a few hundred yards away.

It’s difficult to evaluate the effect of the sessions in measurable ways, but I see real changes in a patient’s mood. They notice it too, and say things like, “I was having a terrible morning and feeling low – being here has made such a difference.”

Doreen, Specialist Occupational Therapist

Many organisations have contributed to the Gartnavel Growing Spaces programme and to the use of the garden by volunteers and patients. They include Art in the Gart, The Coach House Trust, and Macmillan Cancer Support.

I love working with volunteers. You can’t harangue people into doing things because they won’t come back! I hope I can make it fun and rewarding for them, but challenging too.

A project like this has to be a supportive place. You have to accept that sometimes people are having a bad day, and make sure they feel they can come to the garden anyway. It’s also important that we don’t focus on the problems people have: a volunteer who came here after HIV treatment said he liked how “we don’t talk about HIV – we talk about lettuces and radishes.”

Bryony, TCV Green Activity Project Officer
KEY LEARNING POINTS

• Contact with the natural environment enhances our ability to cope with and recover from stress, illness and injury. Spaces like the Gartnavel garden are ideal places to practice Mindfulness, with benefits that include better attention, improved mood and heightened self-esteem.

• Working in partnership and getting shared buy-in is crucial. Strategic partners like the Green Exercise Partnership, delivery organisations like The Conservation Volunteers, and a wealth of other partners from the third sector are needed to maximise use of the space.

• The Green Activity Project Officer is helping clinicians to take healing and recovery programmes outdoors, offering patients a more holistic and person centred approach. The Officer’s coordinating role is vital: they help to create a welcoming, therapeutic environment while ensuring that essential maintenance gets done.

• Commitment from clinical and other NHS staff is needed to make the space an effective resource for patients. This relies on personal enthusiasm, flexibility in delivery and management buy-in to make Growing Spaces a mainstream part of their approach.

• Contributions by volunteers are crucial in keeping on top of seasonal tasks.

• The effect of programmes like this can be hard to measure, but the experience of participants and patients demonstrates the huge impact of what is, in terms of health budgets, a very low cost intervention. Investing in the outdoor NHS estate is a highly cost-effective way to improve staff, patient and volunteer health and well-being.

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