



Case study

Benefits of community growing: Refugees and asylum seekers

Over the last few years there has been a growing body of evidence supporting the benefits of community growing for physical and mental wellbeing. Horticultural and other tasks involved in community gardening (such as regular exercise) alongside healthier eating patterns (usually the result of eating fresh produce grown in the garden) are often cited in such research.

The Growing Well project was set up by FCFCG in 2014 to provide support, record and share good practice in this field, and to help other groups who want to maximise the health and wellbeing benefits of their work.

Mental stress and social isolation is a big factor for asylum seekers. They are forbidden to seek work, have very little money, and very little control over their situation. Many have been through very traumatic experiences in their home country.

This case study from a project that participated in the Growing Well programme highlights how therapeutic gardening is a very effective way of tackling these factors, combining meaningful activity with exposure to nature in a communal setting. It includes testimonials from participants and useful advice from the project on implementing and evaluating work.



Bradford Community Environment Project, Yorkshire

Bradford Community Environment Project (BCEP) works to improve environmental education, local food growing, green spaces and environmental play in the Bradford community. BCEP has been running an allotment group for refugees and asylum seekers in Bradford since March 2010, as part of BCEP's 'Gardening for Health' (G4H) work strand, and has seen the project help people form friendships and increase their mental wellbeing.

It is common for staff to receive comments such as: "If I wasn't here at the allotment, I would just be sitting at home crying" or "I wish the allotment sessions were held every day – I would be here every day".

One person, who had lost his family in tragic circumstances and was diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder, just wanted to dig - and ferociously. He was often seen crying silently as he worked. The G4H worker recorded this observation last year: "He started crying and explained in broken English that his young children, wife, mother and sister were "all gone". He continued working on the allotment, but silently cried for the rest of the session. The following week, he said this: "I live in city centre. No green, no place to grow. No like home, not good. I like come here. No problem. Happy come. Work. I take fruit, food, eat. Like to dig. ... I come every day if I could.""

"I learn how to plant, how to do digging, how to make the veg. And we make here all the friendships, different people, different languages. Makes me happy, them happy."

Asylum seeker volunteer at Bradford Community Environment Project



The allotment sessions provide a widening of horizons, a change from the confines of staying at home. G4H is about removing barriers to participation, so group members' bus fares to the allotment are paid. The G4H worker even managed to negotiate a reduced rate for this with the transport authority.

People gain skills, knowledge and a pride in what they have done and the group functions well on a social footing, too, with many people commenting that they have made new friends at the sessions.

"I have now little bit experience [at growing veg], and I take another allotment plot [one of G4H's starter plots] for myself. I am growing there potatoes, strawberries, sprouts, all things. Later peppers, coriander. I feel very good, very healthy, good exercise and good to meet other people. These things make me feel more healthy.

"The veg we take from here - very fresh, very good. Some

things we cannot get in shop – carrot leaf, broccoli leaf. Some things we never tasted before – sprouts, courgette – very good, very tasty. The strawberries – nicer than in shop!"

The refugees and asylum seekers allotment group started on an abandoned plot on the Scotchman Road allotment site in Manningham, Bradford. The Council had recently cleared the site using heavy machinery; the only food plants which had survived were some old currant bushes, a stand of rhubarb, and some imperishable horseradish, sitting in a sea of compacted mud, with rubble, glass and twisted metal buried underneath. There was much digging to be done!

About a dozen people went regularly to the group from the start. By mid-April, enough ground was cleared to put potatoes in. As the months went by, raised beds were installed, plus a shelter at one end of the plot and a picnic bench at the other. Planting continued apace, even on bad weather days when the group worked indoors, sowing seeds in modules etc.

By summer, there were radishes, rocket, runner beans and strawberries to harvest,

and autumn brought courgettes and cabbage, sweetcorn and pumpkins, beetroot and cucumber.

The group's produce was first entered into the West Yorkshire Organic Group Show in September 2010. This long-standing show judges on taste rather than looks, and the group won first prizes for sweetcorn and for potatoes. The plot has produced prize-winning vegetables, fruit and/or flowers every year since. In 2011, the plot won the prize for the best allotment in the local 'In Bloom' competition.

The allotment continues to produce fruit and vegetables all year round. Those who have done the work decide how to share the produce fairly between themselves. As well as the allotment sessions, in winter there are "cook what you've grown" sessions. These usually take the form of two recipe demonstrations, one by a refugee or asylum seeker showcasing a speciality from their own country, and one by the BCEP staff member showing how to cook a cheap but nutritious and healthy meal. Usually these recipes

feature fresh organic vegetables from the allotment. At a recent session there was minestrone soup using freshly harvested onions, leeks, chard, shredded cabbage and baby carrots, and falafel. Everyone helps prepare the vegetables, learning the recipe in the process.

Membership of the allotment group is fluid and fluctuating. Although a few members have managed to keep coming for some time, many people have had to leave the group for various reasons.

Asylum seekers can be suddenly moved out of the district by the Home Office, or deported if their application for refugee status has been turned down. This has happened a number of times to regular members, and is distressing both for those who leave, and for the others who are left behind - a reminder of the lack of control, the impermanence of their situation, and missing the 'family' who are suddenly gone.

At the same time, there is a constant influx of new families. The group is welcoming to new members and new arrivals often bring children with them to the allotment until school places are found for them.

In the school summer holidays parents bring their children to the allotment. Family-friendly activities are provided such as butterfly hunts, mini-beast spotting and outdoor cooking in these sessions. The group covers a wide age range, many ethnic origins, differing abilities in English language, and varying gardening skills.

The sessions include many activities to enable maximum participation, and to encourage inter-personal skills and communication. Photographs are taken at each session, so that people can look back through the photobook and recognise what



they have achieved, remember what plants they have grown and eaten, and who they have met at the allotment.

The group is also supported by a dedicated long-term 'super-volunteer', who does huge amounts to support Bradford's most deprived communities including refugees/asylum seekers.

Other secrets of success include BCEP's strong commitment to partnerships - the refugee allotment would not have worked without the commitment of Bradford Action for Refugees (BAFR).

G4H is currently commissioned by Public Health (part of Bradford Metropolitan District Council) and funded through NHS/tPCT. It aims to reduce local inequalities in health and wellbeing by encouraging food growing and healthy eating, particularly among residents from high risk or 'hard to reach' groups.

www.bcep.org.uk



Please turn over

Demonstrating impact

Currently, evaluation is carried out through collecting participants' oral contributions and observations of their involvement. Regular attendees are intermittently asked for their own perceptions as to whether they benefit in terms of their physical health, mental wellbeing and awareness of healthy eating.

In the latest survey, 99% of participants reported improvements in mental health and 95% reported improved physical health (this is from all clients, not only the refugees and asylum seekers group).

These 'surveys' are recorded in the quarterly reports for each group and collated annually. In addition, written questionnaires are used occasionally but only



where appropriate. Partner agencies are asked to complete an annual B CEP satisfaction survey.

Each year, four anonymous case studies are collected. These are what B CEP values most, as people's stories say much more than numbers!

Resources

Other case studies in this series:

- Benefits of community growing, green spaces and outdoor education - summary of research and evidence
- Health and wellbeing
- Mental health
- Older people and dementia

www.farmgarden.org.uk/resources/health-wellbeing-case-studies-ellerman-project

Which tool to use?

A new guide to evaluating health and wellbeing outcomes for community growing programmes.

www.farmgarden.org.uk/resources/whichtool