**Cilybebyll Community Growers**

 **Pontardawe, Neath & Port Talbot March 2020**

Background information / describe the area/ when & how the group started

The group began in 2015 when the Community Council held a well-attended public meeting to gather interest in setting up an allotment site. Following this a committee was formed, the constitution and lease were sorted and fundraising began. This was successful, with grants received from the Community Council as well as Awards for All, Lush, Tesco Plastic Bag Fund, Admiral and Pontardawe Council.

In 2016 major site clearance was undertaken, with the volunteers and local community working hard to remove willow and brambles from the scrubland. Funds were used to erect secure exterior fencing around the site, create gravel paths and buy timber for edging of beds. By July 2016 interested members drew lots to allocate plots and started work individually preparing their beds.

However it soon emerged that under the soil was a layer of clinker and rubble. The group became concerned that the land might be contaminated and all work stopped. Later it was learnt that the site had been used for dumping from local industry. A costly contamination report was carried out, followed by a more detailed analysis. Some of the costs of this was funded by the Community Council. The results were devastating – cadmium, lead and arsenic were found in the soil.

The group were determined to find a way to use the site however, and by March 2017 a solution had been found. It was decided to use super-strong membrane with raised beds on top. No food was to be grown in the soil, only flowers. It was agreed to use some of the funds that had been raised to create one professionally made raised bed, including soil, for each of the 24 plots, so that everyone could get on and start growing.

Although the growing plots are individual, the group have erected a wonderful large community shed, made of timber, which is used for meetings, events and storage. This is kept unlocked so that anyone visiting the allotments can use it. Also there are communal areas around the site such as the woodland area and a fairly new wildlife pond.

There is a lovely public spirit and encouragement for all to join in and feel welcome.

Group aims and how many members

The group’s aims are:

* To promote for the benefit of the inhabitants of the ward of Cilybebyll and the surrounding area, the provision of facilities for recreation or other leisure time.
* Occupation of an allotment and community growing site for individuals who have need of such facilities by reason of their youth, age, infirmity or disablement, financial hardship or social and economic circumstances or for the public at large in the interests of social welfare and with the object of improving the condition of the life of said inhabitants.

Additional information: Cilybebyll Community Growers represents local people from Rhos, Alltwen, Pontardawe and surrounding area. Having formed in 2015 and becoming a charity in 2016 the aim is to provide allotments and associated activities for people in the local community. Inspiration for the charity was generated by the need to develop much needed gardening/recreational activities within the area but also to promote environmental awareness and sustainable practices.

Development of the allotments have allowed local individuals, groups and societies to utilise the designated area at Rhos Park to promote the benefits of growing your own produce and foster a value-added community feel for a project which is environmentally friendly and adopts sustainable principles.

Organic growing methods are encouraged and weedkiller is banned from the site. Recycling is carried out wherever possible – beds are made of pallets and recycled water butts are used etc. One allotment holder had an actual bed on her plot! Each allotment holder is encouraged to have their own water butt and also eight large IBC’s collect water from the communal shed roof as there is no water tap on site.

There are 8 people on the committee. In the beginning committee meetings were held weekly, but are now usually monthly although sometimes in the winter they are less often. If there is an event planned, then extra meetings are held. During the warmer seasons these are held in the communal building but over the winter the local pub is warmer! If there are issues which concern everyone then a members’ meeting is called to brief people or to make a decision. There is also the AGM and committee members are available to be contacted at any time. A Watts App group is used for communication and also a community noticeboard where people can post details of surplus plants etc.

Responsibilities are shared amongst the group using a really innovative structure. The members are divided into 4 smaller groups and on rotation, for 3 months of each year the groups take responsibility for certain tasks. These include tidying the communal shed and clearing the gutter; collecting leaf mould; general weeding; maintenance of the woodland area and setting up one event per group.

Main audience and volunteers

The growers are mainly people from the local area but also the group includes the wider area including Pontardawe. The site gates are kept open whenever someone is there and as it is near the recreation ground the public often come in to see the garden. The local school decided not to have a plot but to bring groups to the site and take part in activities. The local WI originally had a bed which has now been passed on. There is also a free plot for “Pantry” the local food bank. When other allotment growers have spare food they pass it on to the food bank. One of the plots has a disabled access path and members of the group offer support when needed to the allotment holder.

What the project is achieving

Once the initial hurdles were overcome, the growers were able to get on with establishing their plots. Most are a similar size with some a little larger. Everyone has raised beds in different conflagrations. Members say that growing their own food means they can reduce food miles and they like knowing where their food comes from.

They have established wildlife areas around the site which they feel is very important, as some habitat was reduced in order to create the plots. They are particularly proud of their pond area which is beginning to establish itself and now has frog spawn.

The growers were finally able to hold their Opening Event in 2017. This was an exciting point to have reached and Terry Walton from Radio 2 was the highlight of the event

Regular fundraising events take place where everyone is welcome, such as community events and fayres. These include bonfire night, barbeques, quiz nights and other events. At the Christmas fayre children receive a free gift and generally donations for raffles are given by local businesses. Local crafts people like to run stalls at events too.

How group got permission to be on the site/ was it difficult?

Apart from the huge initial setback, there have been few difficulties. There was one incident where all the sheds were broken into, but nothing of value was taken. Sometimes people from the recreation field try to tunnel under the fence to retrieve footballs!

There are good relationships with local businesses and resources such as manure and top soil are sourced locally wherever possible. Local farmers have brought in equipment to help clear the site, turn the soil and provide top soil.

A quote from the group about how they enjoy managing the site/ working with people on the site

The growers describe their project as “A community project with a friendly face. Everyone is welcome – children, dogs, and public visitors. There is a friendly atmosphere and it is very sociable. The project helps a lot of people as there is often someone there.” One member said her grandchildren say “When gran’s lost the plot, she’s gone to the plot!!”

Any support they have received, particularly if they have worked with the Community Land Advisory Service Cymru.

The group have previously had support from CLAS with their lease, and also from Social Farms and Gardens.

What they hope to achieve in the future/ aspirations for a Green Flag Community Award

Generally the site just needs ongoing maintenance of beds and paths. The group hadn’t considered a Green Flag Award but are open to the idea.

There is a plan to go off on some trips that are further afield such as to other allotments or a garden show. Christmas plans include a large tree this year perhaps with a “Turning on of the Lights”. Future plans for the site are in line with their commitment to wildlife and include installing homes for hedgehogs and bats, also nesting boxes for birds.