 

**Workplace Growing: Case Studies**

**The Book People**

Selling books and growing root vegetables may not seem like natural bedfellows, but staff at [The Book People](https://www.thebookpeople.co.uk/) have been growing their own produce for several years, courtesy of a popular workplace garden scheme set up in 2009 by company founders Ted Smart and Seni Glaister.

There are 31 garden plots available for use over three sites and all are free of charge for staff to use. The largest is at the head office in Godalming, a Victorian manor house with extensive grounds. An old kitchen garden has been converted into a series of 1 x 2 metre plots, small enough for staff to look after in their lunch breaks.

The other two are on industrial sites at Bangor and Haydock, next to book warehouses. These are particularly appreciated as there is little green space locally.

Book designer Ann Childs, who has been gardening at the Godalming site since the scheme launched, said it has been a great opportunity to learn about growing: "I had a small garden at home but it was stuffed full of flowers with no room for vegetables.

"I hadn't done any veg gardening before so it was a bit of a baptism of fire, but my husband was able to steer me in the right direction and I've learned by trial and error over the past four years. So really I started from scratch and now I’m seen as a bit of an authority!"

Unlike many allotment sites, staff have few restrictions on what they can plant and grow, so there is a mix of vegetable, flower and ornamental plots.

"If you want a gnome in your garden, you can have one!” said Ann.

There has been plenty of drive and enthusiasm behind the workplace allotments scheme. Volunteers and keen gardeners among the staff prepared the original site at Godalming and erected fences to keep out pests, and the company supplies tools, a shed and manure. At Bangor and Haydock, where there is no proper garden, the staff grow on small patches of earth or in large grow bags.

In its first year, the Godalming site went from bare ground to a productive group of plots rich in rainbow chard, beetroot, kale and a glut of yellow courgettes grown.

The benefits of workplace allotments or gardens go far beyond producing free food, according to Ann: "For me the nicest thing is having somewhere lovely to go at lunchtime that’s a complete break from work, away from the computer and with the birds singing in the sunshine.

"It's sociable and beautiful and you go back to work feeling refreshed. I like to grow flowers on my plot as well and I cut them and put them on my desk." She added: "We're very lucky at Godalming because we have eight acres of land. That is very unusual, but you don't actually need a garden as such. No matter how big or small the space at your workplace, you could find a way to set up an allotment."

**Ginsters Allotments**

Ginsters, a food manufacturing company famous for its pies and pasties, has set up workplace allotments where employees can grow their own vegetables. The site at the Ginsters factory in Callington, Cornwall was first allocated three years ago but an allotment committee has recently been formed, with the help of Ginsters Active Workplace co-ordinator Kate Barker, to help co-ordinate the plots and plot-holders, arrange events and oversee the site.

The 36-plot site is a two-minute walk from the Ginsters factory and the company provided the land and a water-tap.

The site is a good example of the challenges that workplace allotments can face and of the need for co-ordination to make the most of such sites. Andy Sayers, a driver for Ginsters, is one of three members of the inaugural committee and has held a plot since the beginning.

Andy said: “The people who initially helped set up the site have since left Ginsters and there hasn’t been anyone administering it so it’s been a bit of a free-for-all. At the beginning of 2013 there were 20 plots empty out of the 36 available, mainly from people having left the company. We’ve now filled 13 of these again. We’ve renumbered the plots and puts signs on them all and asked plotholders to contact us and let us know if they don’t want their plots any longer.”

The empty plots posed other problems for the committee as some had been left with compost bins and netting still up which had to be removed.  The committee allocated one plot where people could leave any rubbish, and two for compostable material, so that it can be dealt with jointly.

The allotments have also faced particular challenges due to the shift patterns at the Ginsters site. Andy, who works for the distribution arm of the company, said: “Pretty much everyone in distribution does 12-hour shifts and often they don’t get time to go out to tend the plots. I actually work in Callington so I can walk up the road and go to the plot on my days off.”

Despite the problems the committee has faced, Andy enjoys working on his plots and is keen to develop the site and make it a real success in the future.

He said: “It’s probably one of my main hobbies. I do enjoy it – seeing the successes and saving money on veg. This year I’ve done particularly well with potatoes, courgettes, squash and iceberg lettuce. The three of us on the committee would like to get more going on up there because there is a brick barbecue and seating.  We’ve put up a noticeboard now that more people are taking up plots and we want to run some events to try and get people talking.”

The committee has also put together a set of allotment rules that people can sign up to, so that there is clarity over the way the site is used.

Andy said: “My tips for other groups wanting to set up workplace allotments would be to have a committee from the start. Then it’s clear where people can go to for advice or if they no longer want to use their plot. Also if it’s a service provided for free, as it is at Ginsters, you need to make sure people still value it and are willing to put the effort in to make the site work for everyone.”

**Stormont Estate Workplace Allotments**

The Stormont Estate Workplace Allotments were launched in May 2012 by Sammy Wilson MP MLA for Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) staff based within the Stormont Estate, the base for the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The project was developed as a pilot project, and the first of its kind in Northern Ireland, in order to provide:

* A facility for the participation in a healthy recreational activity which is easily accessible from the workplace and which contributes to the overall health and wellbeing of staff
* Staff working on the Stormont Estate with a facility to produce their own local, low cost, fresh food
* Opportunities for members of the Stormont Workplace Allotment scheme to learn new skills, develop existing skills and to share learning with others
* A shared space where people can mix and socialise.

The area in question was a nursery plot for plants to be used in the Estate so the infrastructure was in place. A small amount of work was required to divide the plots with money diverted from the estate maintenance budget to cover.

An expression of interest email went out to all civil service staff on the estate and more than 100 applications were received for 25 plots. Successful applicants were drawn from a hat.

### Activities

Employees on the estate tend their plots on their lunch breaks, after work and at weekends. They have a container for tools, but hope to get a shed at some stage in the future. To date there have been a number of community work days to build compost bins, improve fencing and a communal seed order was organised this spring.

The group of allotmenteers have begun to form as a group, and seem to be getting on with each other and developing relationships. People are keen to improve the site and co-operate on administration like seed orders.

The only ongoing problem is that a few plots have been neglected or underused. The plots are free and it is therefore particularly disappointing when they are being used to their full potential.

### Who benefits?

The allotmenteers benefit from having access to green space and an alternative activity close to the workplace. They also gain the experience of learning to grow vegetables, and of course will hopefully get fresh veg to take home.

There is evidence that contact with green spaces and allotments improve people’s experience in their working lives. Evidence also links green spaces with increased workplace productivity.

The Civil Service Occupational Health Service are carrying out six-monthly health and wellbeing surveys to monitor the perceived effect of the allotments on users. There will also be a survey of allotmenteers regarding the social side of the allotments.

### Lessons Learned

This project would differ from most others but the one thing it would have in common is people coming to allotments for the first time. Raising the awareness of the time and ‘hard work’ it takes to get an allotment into shape would be the best advice. Then people cannot say they didn’t realise.

### What will happen in the future?

There is a waiting list for plots, and there may be scope for expanding the project, and providing larger plots. At the minute interest and involvement seems healthy, and as running costs are relatively low, it seems that the project will continue. Some facilitative input from FCFCG, as well as the continued support of the estates team will be vital on an ongoing basis.

In its capacity as a pilot project the Stormont Allotments have certainly sparked interest from other employers and groups who would now like to explore the idea for their own allotments, but as yet no study visits have taken place.

### Who has been involved?

The initiative is a partnership between civil servants working on the estate, DFP Estates Management Unit and SF&G (formerly Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens.) There was also an advisory board comprising the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance, the Occupational Health Service and Corporate HR.

The project is currently managed by DFP Estate Management Unit as the landlords of the ground. While DFP will always have a role, it is hoped that the allotmenteers will take more control of day to day issues by means of an elected committee.

The project is currently overseen by the Stormont Estates team, who manage maintenance and plotholder lists. SF&G have contributed the facilitation of regular meetings and trainings, with an aim to having some level of self-management in the future.