

# Sydenham Garden

## The Nineveh Charitable Trust Report Questionnaire

### **Overview – our charity and the grant award**

Sydenham Garden – our organisation aims to help people recover from mental and physical ill-health. Sydenham Garden provides therapeutic activity in a safe and secure inclusive environment, following a well-tested model; We have developed an integrative approach where those with different degrees of mental and physical ill-health come together with volunteers from the local community to reduce social exclusion and prejudice, encouraging mutual peer support in a group environment.

Grant size: £5,000

Date received: May 2022

Funding supported the Growing Lives project, which encourages active participation in the agriculture and sustainability sector by utilising the 'Ecotherapy' disciplines of horticulture, the environment and agriculture as a therapy for those in need.

### **Grant funds**

The funded work has completed. Growing Lives staff supported groups of beneficiaries (referred to as co-workers) over the 12-month grant period. The funds were adequate and have been spent in full across the budgeted items.

The project will continue to offer 12-month placements from May 2023 – May 2026 with multi-year funding from the City Bridge Trust, and several other trust and foundation grant funders.

### **The project**

We met the key aims of the Growing Lives project by providing therapeutic gardening activities. A priority over the last year to resume in-person service delivery in full was achieved, with project activities delivered on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. The site itself is buzzing with activity, hosting separate groups for local school groups on Mondays and Fridays, young people from culturally diverse communities on Wednesdays, and delivering Practical Organic Gardening OCN qualification training on Thursdays – deepening people's knowledge and understanding of plants, soil, and organic gardening techniques.

A diverse range of people took up Growing Lives placements experiencing anything from low mood to schizophrenia, personality disorder, bipolar, depression, or anxiety.

### **Activities**

The Growing Lives team of staff, volunteers, and co-workers worked hard during Spring 2022 to plant the season's crops on time. They included a combination of flowers for our flower farm and vegetables for our co-workers.

We welcomed a lot of new starters over the Spring months. Our more established co-workers were great at helping them settle into the programme. This kind of peer support helps alleviate the anxiety people often feel when starting new groups and ease into building a new habit of attending a social group. Each Growing Lives weekly group has its unique feel and dynamic, but all function as a safe space.

The project includes focussing on supporting groups of co-workers to reflect on their experiences of mental health difficulties and communicate about these, empowering and giving a platform to lesser-heard voices. The cohesion is strengthened by what our wonderful volunteers can bring to the groups to work towards common goals in horticultural activity with co-workers.

The on-site 'therapy' chickens are a big part of the enjoyment. People find them soothing; they calm people down and reduce anxiety. The chickens get people engaged in projects and distract people from their troubles. People find it easy to bond with them. The hens also have an educational value; they teach people where their food comes from and about animal welfare.

We are a user-centred service where co-workers and volunteers are involved in decision-making and service delivery. Last summer, co-workers had the opportunity to get involved with all the aspects of the sites social enterprise. People enjoyed learning to prepare orders of cut flowers for local florists, looking after our bee hives and harvesting honey for sale at community engagement events. Groups helped prepare digital content for our website and social media. Together we also produced other products for sale, including chutneys, crafts and ornate homewares. These activities help our co-workers develop new skills and interests and also help boost self-esteem, confidence, and self-agency.

The photos below show Growing Lives horticultural therapy activities taking place in 2022.



*Left: Co-workers learning woodworking, making together, and building confidence each week  
Right: The Growing Lives group help manage the site beekeeping – the honey is sold locally*

We hosted our De Frene Festival for the first time in three years in August 2022. The event was a resounding success, attended by over three hundred local people. Our Co-workers reported having a great time helping out on the various stalls and having the opportunity to showcase the De Frene site.



*The De Frene Festival entrance | Land art & natural weaving*

Towards the end of the year, staff, co-workers, and volunteers enjoyed planning and planting our hardy annuals and bi-annuals, which overwintered for an early display of flowers from mid-spring 2023 to early summer, filling a traditionally sparse gap in the cut flower calendar. These have produced an incredible display of tulips and daffodils. We've been supplying local florists as well as reaching out to new florists in the area. We've also just started plans to partner with a local garden centre to sell our stunning ethical bouquets directly to their customers. This will help maximise the income we can generate, all of which helps to fund our therapeutic work. Co-workers and volunteers are really enjoying seeing the brilliant results of all their efforts in planting bulbs. You can follow the Flower Farm on Instagram @sydenhamgardenflowers and find out more about our flowers at [www.sydenhamgardenflowers.com](http://www.sydenhamgardenflowers.com).



And finally, we started a new programme of "micro-projects" where we work with our Co-workers individually to find a project in which they can take an independent lead whilst receiving all necessary support from the team. The programme design promotes self-esteem and self-agency, increases practical and planning skills and encourages an increased level of self-belief and the ability to self-start.

Co-workers were supported to:

- Maintain or improve their health and wellbeing, including anxiety and depression symptoms, ability to concentrate, level of activity and feelings of hope.

- Learn new skills and improve their confidence, enabling graduating co-workers to feel well prepared to take a positive next step at the end of their placement e.g. into a volunteering role, or training.

Staff and volunteers establish trusting and responsive relationships with co-workers, inviting informal feedback. The majority of Co-workers report a significant improvement in their mental health and well-being. The sessions enable people to learn new skills and build self-esteem. By growing food to eat, they improve their diet, and by enjoying social experiences and connecting with nature, they feel more positive and have a happier outlook.



*Pond dipping | Freshly picked De Frene tomatoes*

At any one time, there have been between 43 and 60 co-workers enrolled on the project. Over the project period, twenty co-workers completed their 6–12-month placements in full and graduated onto their next steps, with only a handful ending placement early or 'dropping off' for a variety of reasons.

We are satisfied with the outcome and feedback from project co-workers. The main challenge was to assist people to reintegrate into the community after experiencing poor mental health exacerbated by the pandemic. Group sizes resumed to pre-pandemic levels to meet demand and reduce waiting lists. We found managing attendance and closing placements promptly if too low was an important part of the consolidation and maximisation of service delivery.

Funding was secured for the project from other sources including The D'Oyly Carte Charitable Trust, The National Lottery, The Worshipful Company of Basketmakers, and Richer Sounds Foundation.

### **Feedback**

We found your process of selection and payment clear and thorough. We appreciate that an outcome notification is provided to successful and unsuccessful applicants, as this is not the case with all funders.

We would welcome a visit by Trustees. The site can be enjoyed whatever the weather!