

An evaluation of the Community Garden Project run by organicARTS



Alan McGeorge
July 2013

Ecominds



For better
mental health



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organicARTS

Learning with the land

A note from the Author

When I accepted the opportunity to carry out the research and compile this report it was with mixed feelings. The mixture was mainly pride, joy and terror. I have not written something on this scale for a number of years.

I was already vaguely aware of what the Community Garden project is and what the organicARTS organisation does at West Town Farm. I had visited a few times which was how I came to be offered the job in the first place. I had no idea how strong my connection with the place would become and what an impact it would have on my life. I have my own story about mental health issues. I was diagnosed with depression and anxiety in 2008 and fought a four-year battle with my symptoms, a battle that I have now mainly won.

My personal experience has perhaps allowed me a deeper insight into the value of the Community Garden project. Some of the first and strongest impressions I got were of peacefulness, gentleness, and serenity and perhaps, most importantly, trust. This has happily been proven to be an accurate assessment as my research has shown.

There are many types of folk currently volunteering on the Community Garden project. Some are there just for a short while, some are there to "heal" and some are likely to be there for as long as the system allows. What they have in common is a sense of place, purpose, stability and camaraderie that helps them individually and also allows them to be a part of something good, real and useful. From my own experience I know these are things that are of primary importance to someone who has mental health issues.

I have met so many new friends and kindred spirits.

Alan McGeorge

July 2013

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone who contributed to this report. I have spoken to many people with different levels of involvement in the Community Garden project and related and connected organisations.

Special thanks must go to Christine Duff and Andrew Sanders. They make it possible. They make it work.

I will not name names for a number of reasons but I will directly thank the volunteers for their co-operation, time, effort and enthusiasm, not just with me but also and especially for their work on the Community Garden project.

I would like to thank the enablers that I spoke to and the people who are occasional visitors who bring their own more specialized skills to the project. Their contribution is all the more valuable because they add extra dimensions to enhance a project that already has so many good things to offer.

Thank you to Clare Henry for letting me use some of her photographs and also to Sarah Copley for doing a great editing job and making it look professional.

Thanks must go to all the organisations and people who provide funding for the various projects at organicARTS, without whom it would not be possible to do such great works.

I would finally like to thank my family for enduring my increased state of absent-mindedness, my lack of participation and my weird time keeping over the last few weeks! Well, you know what I'm like...

Researcher: "do you enjoy coming out here?"

Volunteer: "I would say so! It's brought some joy into my life, it really has!"

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Executive Summary

The organicARTS project started in 2004. It is “an educational charity that promotes the arts and rural issues through educational visits and walks, classes, workshops, community projects, exhibitions and performances.” The organicARTS organisation is run by a group of experienced educators and artists, working in partnership with the farmer at West Town Farm, Andrew Bragg. A network of volunteers and a group of trustees supports them.

The Community Garden was started in 2007 as part of the organicARTS organisation and is designed to offer people the opportunity to take part in meaningful physical activity in a calm, peaceful rural setting. The Community Garden is available for anyone to use but is particularly aimed at people with physical and

mental health issues along with people who are socially excluded for a number of reasons.

Research has demonstrated that a supervised programme of exercise can be equally as effective as antidepressants in treating mild to moderate depression. Ecotherapy should be recognized as a clinically valid treatment for mental distress.

The primary purpose of this report is to assess how the Community Garden project is performing in terms of meeting its aims and objectives. However it is also about gaining an impression of how all the participants: the volunteers, the enablers, the project coordinators and managers and those who work on specialized parts of the project perceive it and how they and the wider community benefit from it.

The objectives for the Community Garden project were laid out in the

“Changing Space Ecominds Application Form” as “Key Project Features.”

These are:

- Involve people with direct experience of mental distress at all project levels.
- Deliver sustainable projects that enhance rural and urban environments.
- Encourage diversity and include marginalized and under-represented groups.
- Deliver a well-planned and well-managed project offering good value for money and a genuine need within the designated time frame.
- Help reduce stigma and social exclusion of people affected by mental distress.

Involve people with direct experience of mental stress at all levels

The project is coordinated by a person who has worked for many years alongside people with direct experience of mental distress. The coordinator of organicARTS has personal experience of mental distress. The author of this report has direct experience of mental distress. Many of the volunteers have personal experience of mental distress. The volunteers take a large amount of responsibility for various areas of the project. They work together as a team and many of them have become close friends and colleagues as a result of working on the project. This has been partly facilitated by the communal lunch taken during project days and by encouraging the volunteers to work on other activities available to them. This gives clear evidence of the volunteers' willingness to mentor at least within their peer group. As a group they have a collective empathy and a culture of sharing.

"It helped me learn about horticulture, to communicate with other persons. It has helped with my personal development if you like." – a volunteer

"It's given me self-confidence, it's built my fitness up, [I'm] communicating with people outside my comfort zone." – a volunteer

Deliver sustainable projects that enhance rural and urban environments

The project is located in a rural environment. This has been enhanced by the work the volunteers do. They work both in the garden and on the farm, developing wildlife habitat and maintaining access routes around the farm for educational or casual visits. As a community garden the project also provides an opportunity for people living in urban areas to visit and spend time there. West Town farm is only three miles from the centre of Exeter making it accessible to a large number of people who do not have other opportunities to spend time in a "green space".

"It's a volunteering opportunity; it's a nice atmosphere for people with a history of mental health difficulties. It's very understanding." – a volunteer

The project is sustainable for the volunteers because of its flexible nature. The volunteers have the opportunity to learn about growing food and the importance of a healthy diet. They are learning transferrable skills for their lives outside of the project. Many of them have developed lasting friendships as a result of spending time on the project and several say they feel more confident and have higher self esteem as a result of volunteering.

"They are growing food here and I believe it's only to feed us for our daily feed. We don't get a massive meal but what's there is good nutrients and stuff." – a volunteer

Alongside their vegetables the volunteers are growing things like willow which they will use as supports for beans, peas etc thus reducing the number of external inputs into the project. They also actively compost everything they can for future use.

Encourage diversity and include marginalized and under-represented groups

One of the major factors in the success of the Community Garden project is that all the participants are treated equally. They are required to work but are encouraged to carry out tasks they want to do. This is always done gently and sensitively and an atmosphere of mutual encouragement has been created that seems to work for all the volunteers regardless of how well they mix in with the group. There are areas for people to be alone and there are opportunities to be part of the larger group. The coordinators are always available for volunteers to speak to if required and have been very good at building a rapport with the volunteers.

"The staff are compassionate." – a volunteer

Deliver a well planned and well managed project offering good value for money and a genuine need within the designated time frame

The project is led by a qualified horticulturalist who also has many years of experience of working with and training mental health service users. The activities are planned with the volunteers which gives them a greater degree of involvement and responsibility. They are encouraged to make the best use of the resources to be found in situ. Activities are mainly planned around existing facilities and expertise. The project is managed by the organicARTS coordinator who has administration, finance and project management experience. The recruitment process for volunteers mainly, but not exclusively, takes place through a series of organisations with whom organicARTS has an ongoing relationship. The volunteers grow their own food for lunches etc.

Help reduce stigma and social exclusion of people affected by mental distress

One of the major aspects of the project is the gathering for lunch. Soup and bread is provided for anyone who wants it and there are no formal seating arrangements. This gives the volunteers a chance to integrate with the other people there, and with each other. There is a real

sense of comradeship, of camaraderie about the volunteer group and a number of friendships have been forged through participation on the project. The West Town Farm staff unanimously say that they enjoy the lunch they share with the volunteers and that it has helped them to understand more about mental distress. They see the volunteers as a valuable part of the workforce on the farm.

Some of the most confident volunteers take part in West Town Farm open days. They act as general helpers, moving tables, picking up litter and selling draw tickets. They also show visitors round the Community Garden with a considerable amount of pride. There is a strong sense of responsibility and ownership on the part of the volunteers.

"A lot of them live in isolation, a lot of them are judged, a lot of them seem to be judged in any other area where they go to. Here they can be who they want to be and they can try to be who they think people want them to be and nobody's going to judge them, nobody's going to care. It doesn't matter who they are when they come out here, they're just here. They're contributing." Community Garden project coordinator

The Community Garden project is not only meeting but also surpassing its objectives. There have been a number of unexpected outcomes that supersede the original aims of

the project. These are allowing the project to evolve in a positive way.

The flexible nature of the project allows people more freedom to perform tasks and participate in activities at a pace they are comfortable with. This gives them the confidence to return if they take some time out from the project. That confidence is also developing a sense of ownership among the volunteers. All of them wish to carry on working on the project, some of them indefinitely, some of them with the ultimate objective of gaining full time employment.

Their ownership also gives the volunteers a sense that they are doing a job. They take responsibility for themselves. They take a pride in their work and what is happening in the garden and on the farm.

They also take responsibility for each other. There is a very strong team spirit and a sense of community. Many of the volunteers have become friends. They feel that they can communicate with each other on equal terms, they relate to each other and this helps to build their confidence and self-esteem. They become more socially adept by spending time together and also because of the lunchtime routine where everybody on the farm eats together on equal terms.

Conclusion

The Community Garden project is surpassing its objectives. There have been a number of unexpected outcomes that supersede the original aims of the project. These are allowing the project to evolve in a positive way.

The volunteers attend for a number of reasons. Some of them are there as a first step to volunteering in a more formal setting or even toward seeking paid employment. Some see it as an opportunity to spend time in a healthy environment. Some simply

enjoy being there. All of them have acquired a sense of ownership of the project that they may not have experienced in other aspects of their lives.

Many of the volunteers have said they feel stronger physically and mentally because of their time in the garden. Many of the enablers and referrers note considerable positive change to their clients who are volunteering. They notice a development of self-confidence and personal wellbeing that they directly attribute to the Community Garden project at West Town Farm.

Introduction

The organicARTS project has been running since 2004. It has developed a number of activities and initiatives offering people an opportunity to interact with art, nature and rural areas. One of these initiatives is the Community Garden, located at West Town Farm, Ide, near Exeter.

The Community Garden was started in 2007 and is designed to offer people the opportunity to take part in meaningful physical activity in a calm, peaceful rural setting. The Community Garden is available for anyone to use but is particularly aimed at people with physical and mental health issues along with people who are socially excluded for a number of reasons. There are approximately 30 volunteers “in the system” at any one time although this figure is fluid as people are permitted to come into and go from the project according to their circumstances.

The primary purpose of this report is to assess how the Community Garden project is performing in terms of meeting its aims and objectives, with particular reference to meeting the requirements of the Ecominds funding that the project successfully attracted. It is also about gaining an impression of how all the participants: the volunteers, the enablers, the project coordinators and managers and those who work on specialized parts of the project perceive it and how they and the wider community benefit from it.

Background: the Need for the Project

Research has demonstrated that a supervised programme of exercise can be equally as effective as antidepressants in treating mild to moderate depression. Ecotherapy should be recognized as a clinically valid treatment for mental distress [1].

Ecominds was set up by Mind, a national mental health charity, in order to develop this idea in the form of 130 environmental projects around England. The activities carried out on these projects range from “horticultural and agricultural schemes, through to walking groups and regeneration projects in local parks.” [1]

Mind commissioned a report based on two studies carried out by the University of Essex. The studies compared various types of activities and the mental health outcomes of each of these activities. The studies compared activities taking place indoors versus outdoors and in rural versus urban environments. It was found that 90% of people involved in the studies said that the combination of nature and exercise was the most important factor in the way they felt. 94% of the people in the studies said that green exercise activities had benefitted their mental health. Other benefits cited in the report included improved self-esteem, a sense of achievement, reduced feelings of

depression and anger and an improvement of physical fitness levels [3].

Devon's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment of 2012 reveals some surprising facts; around 71,733 of people aged 18-64 are likely to have a common mental disorder; 2,006 of people aged 18-64 to have a borderline personality disorder and 1,550 of people aged 18-64 to have an antisocial personality. [2]

The community needs for this project are complex. Exeter is a city with pockets of deprivation among more wealthy demographic areas. This makes some groups of people difficult to identify statistically. It is however possible to find five districts in Exeter that are in the lowest 5% in England in terms of access to training, skills and education. There are 14 districts in Exeter that score in the

10% most deprived districts in England [6]. This provides a strong case for the Community Garden project offering opportunities to meet some of these needs and improve life quality for some of the "invisible" people.

organicARTS

The organicARTS project is "an educational charity that promotes the arts and rural issues through educational visits and walks, classes, workshops, community projects, exhibitions and performances"[4].

The organicARTS organisation is run by a group of experienced educators and artists, working in partnership with the farmer at West Town Farm, Andrew Bragg. A network of volunteers and a group of trustees supports them.

organicARTS has been involved in helping a large number of people:

- 150 education visits and more than 3000 visitors.
- 90 volunteers, many who suffer some form of social isolation, have worked in the community garden.
- Over 60 participants have attended starter creative workshops.
- 10 artists have exhibited as part of Devon Open studios.



The Community Garden project

It is well documented that active participation in physical activity conducted in an outdoor environment has considerable physical and mental health benefit potentials.

The Community Garden project was started by organicARTS at West Town Farm, Ide, Exeter in 2007. Since then it has attracted funding from various sources allowing it to develop and grow. One of the major funders for the Community Garden project has been Ecominds.

Volunteer Days at the Community Garden project are currently held on Wednesdays and Fridays. These offer an open access day where volunteers can engage in a variety of farmed

based practical activities. These include working in the community garden, helping to prepare the lunch that is made from vegetables grown in the community garden, general maintenance tasks, wildlife and nature walks. There is also an opportunity to join a photography group that has exhibited as part of the Devon Open Studios event, which is held annually.

The Community Garden project is extremely well integrated into the rest of the organicARTS organisation's activities and those of West Town Farm. This seamless interface allows the volunteers to try different activities.

The Community Garden project was recently awarded "highly commended" status in the South West Projects Awards category at the Adult Learning Awards.

The objectives for the Community Garden project were laid out in the "Changing Space Ecominds Application Form" as "Key Project Features." These are:

- Involve people with direct experience of mental distress at all project levels.
- Deliver sustainable projects that enhance rural and urban environments.
- Encourage diversity and include marginalized and under-represented groups.
- Deliver a well-planned and well-managed project offering good value for money and a genuine need within the designated time frame.
- Help reduce stigma and social exclusion of people affected by mental distress.

From meeting these objectives the volunteers will gain:

- Self-confidence through gradually being given more responsibility for the tasks they undertake.
- Self-esteem by knowing that the activities they do contribute to the success of organicARTS and the farm.
- Social skills by mixing with other people, importantly the other people working at the farm and at organicARTS, on an equal footing leading to reduced isolation, exclusion, stigma and discrimination.
- Transferable skills through participating in a number of different activities.
- A routine in their life.
- Improved physical mobility by using and strengthening muscles whilst working outside.
- The opportunity to be in clean air (Exeter has poor quality of air due to excessive traffic fumes).

The volunteers have opportunities to learn about:

- Where food comes from.
- How to grow their own food.
- How to eat healthily.
- How an organic farm produces food and works with the environment rather than against it.
- The problems facing farming.
- How to identify plants and wildlife.
- The value of volunteering.
- The importance of record keeping.
- How trees can be used whilst still growing – e.g. coppiced wood for carving and the remainder for animal habitats.

This list shows that there is a diverse range of activities that the volunteers can participate in. The list is not exhaustive because the nature of the organicARTS organisation is to be fluid and flexible. More activities are added and some become unavailable according to who is working for them at any given time and what resources are available. Also, the volunteers are encouraged to choose activities that they want to take part in, making it hard to forecast an uptake of any particular opportunity.

More than 90 volunteers have worked in the garden since its inception. It has been difficult to keep track of where individuals have gone after their time in the garden but some people have kept organicARTS informed as to their progress. Of these:

- 2 are now in full time employment, one of whom runs his own gardening business.
- 10 are now in part time employment.
- 10 are in formal education.
- 13 are now taking part in more structured volunteering.
- 5 have moved on to living independently.
- 3 have continued to stop drinking alcohol.
- 1 has given up smoking and drinking.
- 1 has established an art practice of his own.

This success has been partly attributed to the flexible nature of the project and the diversity of experiences and opportunities that the volunteers encounter. The informal and friendly environment at West Town Farm also contributes to the volunteers' success. One of the great advantages of the Community Garden project is that volunteers can have time away from it and then return. This gives them the opportunity to try other activities while offering them the chance to return if the new venture doesn't work out. They can also use this facility as a "time-out".



organicARTS is an inclusive organisation that does not advertise the Community Garden as a mental health project. The volunteers are partly diverted from their difficulties by this policy. It allows them to focus on being part of a team of volunteers helping organicARTS maintain and develop an educational facility. One of many positive outcomes of participating in the project for the volunteers was an opportunity to share experiences with other people in similar circumstances and with similar issues.

The variety of activities for a volunteer to participate in is extensive:

- Vegetable and fruit growing.
- Identifying and supporting wildlife.
- The sustainable use of garden waste;
- The development of educational facilities.
- Woodland management.
- The care of trees and hedges.
- Developing a pond and wetland area.
- Helping with farming activities.
- Walks.
- Cooking.
- Talking to visitors including school groups about what they do and why.
- Helping to organise and host garden parties.
- Open days at West Town Farm.
- Photography.
- Cob building.
- Pottery.
- Wall building.
- Fence building.
- Felting.
- Producing and using charcoal.



The Community Garden project is unique in that it offers opportunities and circumstances so that the volunteers in are involved in and belong to the project, while at the same they are given a reciprocal sense of ownership, which is explained below:

- They are part of, and are aware of being part of a greater project which reaches about 6000 people a year, which would not be so robust without their assistance. The farmer and the educational staff regularly visit the participants to talk to them about what they are doing, and are genuinely impressed with their achievements.
- Lunchtime is a social event where everybody mingles on equal terms. This means the volunteers are involved in conversations about a number of things including discussions about activities in the garden and on the farm.
- They are included in helping with farm work, for which they are given thorough training, when there is a need for extra bodies for example at harvest time.
- Those who have built up the confidence to do so will talk to visitors about their work, in particular to people on educational visits.

These activities ensure that the volunteers have an active and real role in the work with organicARTS, giving them a sense of belonging, which many of them do not have, or will have lost, in their lives outside the project.

Some unforeseen developments have taken place during the development of the project:

- Volunteers are taking responsibility for parts of the project, which they like to return to and see through to completion, though they are also happy for others to be involved too.
- Volunteers are keen to be involved in decision making about their project.
- Volunteers are taking responsibility for each other outside the project.
- Through being involved in cooking lunch, several volunteers have taken vegetables home to share with their families or fellow residents.
- The volunteers acquire an increased awareness of the effect of food on their health and pass this on to others.
- Several of the volunteers have become involved in the Ecominds project at Exeter CVS 'Personal Development Through Horticulture'.

The informal nature of the running of the Community Garden project has allowed for open and ongoing discussion with the volunteers. The general feedback from the volunteers, organisers and other participants in the project, along with referring organisations is that the project is a success, is valuable to the volunteers and the wider community and should continue and develop.

Educational Impacts of the Community Garden Project (Kevin Cotter)

The development of the garden has seen the creation of a vital educational resource for all visitors to the farm. School groups, adult groups, family groups can learn first hand about the growing process, bee keeping, pond wildlife, how to cook over a fire and many other activities. The learning experiences are real, practical and often mirror what the volunteers have been doing in the garden. Visitors, especially those who have been visiting over a period of time, see and appreciate the impact that the volunteers have had. This can lead to groups taking ideas and projects back to their centres and schools.

The garden is a defined space within which a whole range of activities can take place. Unlike those that take place out on the farm the garden based activities benefit from the close care of the garden volunteers. The garden provides the raw materials, a tree trunk, the task splitting and constructing and a context the creation of benches around the fire pit. At all points there is purpose and learning for all those involved. The support of the main garden project encourages and supports other projects such as growing flax for

fibres which in turn enhances the experience of the garden volunteers. Increasingly the garden is extending its role from growing food to growing the raw materials for art.

All visitors to the farm appreciate the impact that the environment and atmosphere has on them. This fact in itself influences perceptions as it establishes a strong, shared experience. This is great leveller! Group leaders are informed about other groups who are using the farm. However when encountering each other the act of identifying who is who becomes rather irrelevant. It is often commented that working out who is a leader, who is visitor, who is an enabler, who has mental health issues or indeed who is the farmer can be rather hard. This fact makes it far more a perception of individual people in a shared space than a perception of people with mental health issues. There is also great value in the times when a volunteer becomes a teacher or a guide. This really reinforces that fact that the garden volunteers, whatever their background, are givers in this environment and not takers.

We recognise the importance of underpinning our work with a clear framework of policy and practice, which can support a safe and inclusive environment for everyone who is at the farm.

Interviews

A series of interviews were conducted with as many participants in the Community Garden project as possible. The people interviewed included referrers, enablers, facilitators and the other people who work at West Town Farm. Most importantly, the volunteers were interviewed in some depth about working in the Community Garden.

The volunteer interviews

There is a series of data tables in the Appendix. These list the volunteers' response frequencies in detail. This section contains quotes from what they said.

All of the responses are in the words of the volunteers.

Question 1 – why do you volunteer on the Community Garden project?

"it's a nice relaxing environment."

"it's easier to communicate with people here."

"I have more self confidence."

"it gives me some structure to my week."

"I like gardening."

"it's nice to be in the countryside."

"I feel more open minded here."

Question 2 - Has the reason changed since you started coming?

Some of the volunteers said that their reason for coming to the garden had changed over time. These are some of their changed reasons:

"I'm stronger physically."

"I'm stronger mentally."

"they are nice people here."

"I feel like I am achieving something."

"I feel I am connecting more."

Question 3 – How long have you been volunteering on the project?

The volunteers have been coming to the project for different times ranging from a few months to 6 years.

Question 4 – what are your most favourite aspects of the Community Garden project?

"I like gardening."

"I like being with other people."

"I like the physical work."

"I get a sense of achievement."

Question 5 – what are your least favourite aspects of the project?

A number of the volunteers could not pinpoint a 'least favourite' aspect. Those who could said:

"gardening."
"It can be a bit boring."
"it can be tiring."
"I don't like the responsibility of cooking."
"sometimes I feel I could have done a bit better."

Question 6 – is there anything you would like to change about the project?

Most of the volunteers didn't want to change anything about the project. Those who did made comments about tool use:

"I would like for the tools to be washed properly after they are used so they don't rust."
"I would like to use more tools, like strimmers and lawn mowers."

Question 7 – would you like to keep volunteering at the Community Garden project?

All of the volunteers want to keep coming to the project.

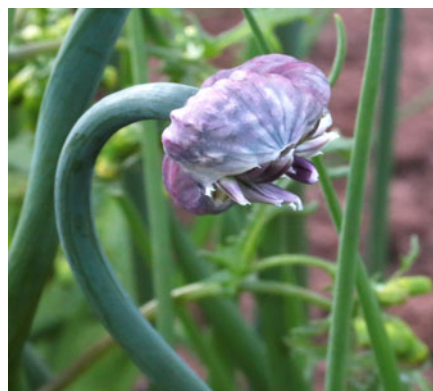
"I'd be lost without it."
"I like it here."
"it gives me something to do on a Friday."

Question 8 – how do you feel that volunteering at the project helps you?

"It gives me a chance to talk to other people."
"It's a chance to share experiences."
"It's helping me to get somewhere."
"I like the peace and quiet."
"It's opened me up as a person."
"It makes me feel I am doing something useful."
"It's helping my confidence."
"It's helping my fitness."

Question 9 – How do you feel when you are volunteering at the Community Garden project?

"I feel a sense of achievement."
"I feel useful."
"I feel more relaxed."
"it's good to be active."
"I like being in the garden."
"I am immersed in what I do."
"I feel a bit pushed sometimes."
"Sometimes the time drags."



Q10 – how do you feel when you are not at the Community Garden project?

"I feel ok."

"I feel lost."

"it's good to have a rest."

"not bad exactly, but there is a difference."

"At first I feel uplifted but it wears off."

"I have to work hard at feeling upbeat."

"A bit lonely sometimes."

"Down."

"I look forward to my next visit."

Question 11 – has volunteering on the Community Garden project improved your quality of life?

Three quarters of the volunteers feel that working on the project has improved their lives.

"I am more satisfied with life."

"I feel more useful."

"It is something to do."

"I feel more mentally fit."

"I feel more physically fit."

"I am more confident."

"I am more confident."

"It's nice to be in some kind of employment."

Question 12 – what would you say to a prospective volunteer at the Community Garden project?

"I would encourage them to come along."

"The people here are good."

"Give it a try."

"It's a positive experience."

"Come and have a look round."

"work with some of the people here."

"You don't know until you've tried."

"There's something about this environment that helps you."

"There's a good community spirit."

"I was nervous to begin with."

"It will help with your confidence."



The Community Garden project is seen very positively by the volunteers. They all had positive things to say about it and all of them want to continue volunteering. Most of them saw personal developments in themselves as a result of volunteering. Many of the volunteers welcomed the social aspect of volunteering, some saying they liked having the company, some saying that they felt less lonely or isolated as a result of being at the garden. There was a very strong sense of teamwork, comradeship and even friendship between the volunteers as a group. They look out for each other, they listen to each other and they feel they can talk to each other at a common level.

The Facilitators

The facilitators were asked some questions about their perceptions of the Community Garden project, what it does, how it is done and the impact working on the project has on the volunteers and themselves.

Christine Duff, **organicARTS project coordinator:**

The project co-coordinator has been with organicARTS since its beginning. She feels the project is developing well but there is still a lot more that can be done.

She thinks that "sharing the farm with other people, welcoming other people and showing them because

it's an amazing place" is her favourite aspect of working on the project.

She believes that volunteering on the project is a chance to get involved in something. The project is flexible enough to allow volunteers to participate at different levels allowing different benefits for different people. She places considerable importance on the fact that the volunteers who come to the Community Garden project have a chance to "get involved and meet with people". There is an opportunity for volunteers to do something with a positive impact. It is important for the volunteers to give something back as many of them have had things done for them during their lives. They can learn new skills, gain confidence in themselves and their ability and have a chance to move on a bit in life.

Her own motivation and benefit for being involved in the project is based on a philanthropic instinct. She sees herself as coming from a privileged background and it is an opportunity for her to give something that is a benefit to other people and the community. "Personally it gives me a reason to live I suppose really."

She wants the project to continue and sees her role as evolving away from the bureaucratic side of the organisation so she can help more with the developmental aspects and get more involved with the creative parts of organicARTS.

Andy Sanders: Community **Garden**
Project facilitator

The Community Garden project facilitator has been working in mental health care for most of his life. He has seen many strategic changes to the way mental health care is practiced and he feels that in some ways the way it is approached now is better than it was thirty years ago. He has been involved in similar projects in the past but he sees this one as being the best so far. This is mainly due to the flexible approach to volunteering that the project allows and also because of the fact that the people who volunteer are not stigmatized.

He says:

"A lot of them live in isolation, a lot of them are judged,.. a lot of them seem to be judged in any other area where they go. Here they can be who they want to be and they can try to be who they think people want them to be and nobody's going to judge them, nobody's going to care. It doesn't matter who they are when they come out here, they're just here. They're contributing."

He places a lot of emphasis on the fact that the volunteers have the opportunity to give something back, to contribute instead of just waiting to be given something.

"They are always in receipt, they've always got to be thankful. So we've turned it around a little bit. We're thankful to them for coming in because they are helping to keep the farm open."

It's only a tiny little mind shift but then again it gives them something to be proud of, something to contribute to. And that's where it all stems from. And they are proud of the place, they are proud of themselves initially, they are proud of the space and then that sort of filters out. They do end up feeling like they belong here. They do own a bit of it and whether they stay or whether they go, how ever long they stay, they will always own a bit of it, there will always be something."

After much thought he couldn't identify what it is about being outdoors that is so beneficial. His own experience tells him that he prefers being outdoors. He put it down to it simply being nicer outdoors!

He has been working with the Community Garden project for five years after running a similar kind of project in Exeter that had run its course. He was able to take some of the volunteers from his former project and place them in the Community Garden. He wants to see more permanence and continuity in this project, not just for the volunteers but for himself and the garden too. A more permanent outlook would give him the opportunity to develop the project in a different way on the ground. He would be able to plant more perennial trees and bushes, giving the place a less transient feel and offering more long term opportunities for the volunteers to take up their own projects and tasks.

He thinks that if the project were to wind up at the end of its current funding phase it would be detrimental to the land and to the volunteers too. It would remove a lot of motivation for them and in many cases force them backwards in terms of personal and professional development. He feels that at the moment the project is evolving as more new volunteers come onboard and as new ideas are put forward.

At a more personal level he gets deep satisfaction from working on the project. He is delighted to watch people emerge from whatever shadows they have been living in and becoming more social, more integrated and more confident. He gives examples of this:

"They've got to the stage where actually they are thinking for themselves. They are not getting paid for it but they still want to come out and they know they are going to lose out. But its not conformity, its fundamentally good manners. Seeing them interact as they want to not as they should."

He is keen but cautious about the idea of taking individual volunteers to the next level. He makes it clear to all the volunteers that it is very difficult to get paid employment in the rural industry. However he thinks it is important for people to have aspirations and is very encouraging to all the volunteers at whatever level of development. He is comfortable with the fact the many of them will not have a paid job in the foreseeable

future and some of them will never be able to work in conventional employment. He sees the garden as being an opportunity for people to be engaged in something real and meaningful that can offer a legitimate alternative to mainstream employment. This has a twofold effect: the volunteers are given a chance to really contribute while at the same time the community and society is being served. He illustrates this point by pointing out, once again, that many of the volunteers see and indeed treat their time at the Community Garden project as a job.

Photography Project Leader

This facilitator has run a specific project in the Community Garden with some of the volunteers. Although that project has now officially finished she still regularly visits and helps out with various activities.

One of her favourite aspects of being at the project is its relaxed atmosphere. Alongside that she feels:

"There's space for anyone who comes here to find something to do that they can feel that they've made a contribution."

She reinforces the statement that volunteering on the Community Garden project is work and it is real and meaningful. She has noticed volunteers becoming more confident and gaining skills in horticulture.

She perceives that for many of the volunteers working on the project provides them with a secure base. She attributes this to the flexible nature in which the project is run.

She also sees that friendships are being made among the volunteers. They are developing or re-acquiring social skills because they are in a well balanced peer-group. She sees them supporting each other and caring for each other and feels that is as important as the work itself.

She was very pleased with the outcome of the project she ran and continues to offer her expertise on a more casual basis. It was successful with the volunteers to the extent that some of them have acquired a new hobby, based on the skills she taught them.

"Its just very enjoyable being with them and its been fantastic to watch people actually learn and stick at something. OrganicARTS are very good because they allow that to happen, they allow someone like me to come and give that extra dimension to the experience."

Her only concern about the project was the perceived imbalance between male and female volunteers. There are far more males than females currently participating and she could not understand why that would be the case. It is however worth noting that during Men's Health Week in May 2013 it was highlighted that 72% of people treated for depression are male and

75% of people who take their own lives are male [7]. It may simply be that there are more males in need of the opportunity to volunteer than females.

Nature Walk Leader

This facilitator visits the Community Garden project monthly and leads on another set of activities. These activities give the volunteers a further insight into living with nature and are enthusiastically received. His association with the project has developed over about a year so that he is now a regular leader.

His perception of the Community Garden is:

"I can see that the volunteers benefit from getting involved with the vegetables and the fruit and from having allotments myself I know that there isn't too much difference between gardening and being out there in the great outdoors and being out in the countryside looking at the natural history. It's the outdoor effect, it's the getting your hands 'hands-on' with the plants and wildlife around you and it's the physical benefits that come from that. The quiet time as well, being away from people, when you are out there solitary either gardening or out in the countryside or with a group."

He enjoys the opportunity to lead groups in the countryside, not only for what can be seen but also for the silence, the peace and quiet. He feels

that all of these things have a good therapeutic effect and are very important aspects of life.

He placed a lot of emphasis on the group experience, implying that it is better than being in constant social isolation.

He talked about how he felt that the Community Garden project could serve as a pilot project. His final comment struck a chord:

"Is this sort of setting the benchmark of how things are done, to do with people with mental health difficulties and helping them with access to the countryside?"

Art worker and educator

This facilitator has been working with organicARTS for seven months. She is a less regular visitor to West Town Farm but has utilized the garden and the help of the volunteers. She has also helped supervise the volunteers when required. She has made herself approachable so the volunteers have another "go to" if needed.

She has been involved with a project about growing willow in the community garden as a resource for making art and also for use in the garden. There are a number of willow varieties now growing in the garden. The volunteers helped with ground preparation, weeding, mulching and harvesting the willow.

She sees the help the volunteers gave her as invaluable. She says:

"the community garden wouldn't exist without the volunteers. They are the workforce for it and the reason for it being there."

"I find it hard to imagine the farm without the community garden attached. It makes it a community."

She develops this aspect of community further by saying that the volunteers help to form a bond between organicARTS and the staff at West Town Farm.

At a more personal level the facilitator says that working with the volunteers has developed her own confidence at a professional level but also as a person through the community aspect of how the project runs.

She believes that anyone who comes into contact with the volunteers or works with them will develop a more positive attitude towards mental health and people who have experienced mental health distress.

"just because somebody's got mental health issues doesn't mean to say they're not useful."

She says that the community garden is a fantastic resource and would like to see it develop and grow bigger. It is a community resource and an educational resource. The volunteers' activity provides an extra attraction to school groups in that the community garden and its peripherals offer another aspect to a farm visit.

The Enablers

Several of the volunteers need enablers to help them during their time working at the Community Garden project. It seemed worthwhile to ask them for their views on the project, how it works and what impact it has on their clients and themselves.

Enabler 1

The first enabler had been coming for several years, some of them before he took up his present employment. He helps a team of several volunteers. He felt that it helped his clients "massively" in that it got them outside and gave them the chance to learn some new skills. He saw it as an opportunity for them to be useful and play a fulfilling role too:

"Obviously they've got to do the work but they also see the rewarding side after its all done. It's like a project to them that they get to see beforehand, and after it makes them feel good about themselves and about what they've achieved."

Alongside the acquisition of life skills and some pride in what they are doing he saw the visits to the garden as forming something of a routine for his clients. He saw this as important to their overall quality of life.

"It's like their job, it helps with their independence, it gets them active and keeps them healthy as well because

they are doing all the exercise here. It helps them out."

He felt he was getting something of a reward too. He derived considerable satisfaction from helping and watching his clients getting motivated and carrying out their tasks.

He saw the project as contributing to the community by highlighting the production of local food. He felt that was the most important aspect of the project in terms of community development. He felt that it was helping people realize that locally produced food is available and that people can grow their own food.

Enabler 2

The second enabler also came to help several volunteers. She has been involved in mental health care for over 20 years but has only been doing what she does now for a comparatively short time.

He felt that volunteering on the project helps here clients a great deal. She saw the benefits of being in the fresh air, being active and also that they were learning skills that they could take home and use in their own garden, which she claimed was happening.

She felt that volunteering had a motivating effect on her clients and that it was much better that they were being active than being at home playing games or watching TV.

She also said that they commented on a sense of achievement after a spell in the garden.

She said:

"It's refreshing to know there are such services out here for people. I get a real sense of achievement out of it for myself as well and for the lads we are with."

She also felt that it was good for her clients to get into society and experience the camaraderie of volunteering on the Community Garden project and helping to improve the environment.

Enabler 3

The third enabler works on a one-to-one basis with his client. He has only been with the client for a few months and so is still building their relationship.

He feels that the Community Garden project is very therapeutic for all the volunteers. It offers a different experience, a different work environment and a chance to meet new people. He felt that the relaxed environment accommodated a lot of different people.

"It always suits a lot of people and accommodates all sorts of people with all sorts of abilities, different backgrounds so it's a good project."

He felt it was good for building his client's confidence. It gave him

motivation, something to do and that his client looked forward to Wednesdays. His client had learned new skills and was interacting more with people.

"He's coming out of himself. He is definitely a changed man from coming here. He is learning a lot about himself."

He felt that he had got to know his client a lot better from their time volunteering on the project. He felt that they were bonding.

"I can see what he is capable of, how I can best support him. We've got a rapport, we trust each other so it's helpful on those levels."

He feels that volunteering helps people in different ways according to their individual levels and abilities. He could see that some were there to acquire or hone skills with a view to getting into regular employment. He liked the level of support that is available.

He saw the value in getting work experience, having a routine and a reason for getting up in the morning.

"All that's going to have a knock on effect to all different parts of their lives and support different people in different ways so it's a bit of everything really."

He believes that if people weren't getting anything from it they wouldn't be volunteering.

People Referring Volunteers to the project

Steve Mariner from the NHS

One of the referring organisations said they refer volunteers to the Community Garden project because it offers an opportunity for their service users “to grow, to forget what life has thrown at them, to be in an environment where they can be themselves in the company of people whose only interest is in advancing their potential.”

This referrer went on to discuss how for many people a formal diagnosis can feel like “the end.” He said that volunteering with organicARTS helps to create the feeling that “it’s only the beginning.”

The atmosphere created at the Community Garden at West Town Farm brings people together who might otherwise be socially isolated. It is an open air environment all year round and in all types of weather which encourages a spirit of camaraderie among the volunteers that also extends to other people on the farm. The volunteers grow food that they eat having first “been cooked by their like minded buddies.”

Most of this organisation’s referrals have remained at the Community Garden project in the long term. Some have left but later have asked to return. “Its a way of getting

better, of contributing and giving something back that will then reward them in the form of food, spiritual warmth and self esteem.”

John Stammers from Exeter CVS

John has been referring people to the project since it started in 2007. He claims to have referred hundreds of people. He knows of two people who have been volunteering through his referral at the project for the entire time the project has been running.

Although he sees each person as an individual case there are two main strands to the types of people who volunteer through him. Basically these are people who want to be outdoors and people who want to volunteer at something that will lead them to further development. Within those strands there are people who already have clear objectives. Some people are aware of the therapeutic value of taking exercise outdoors and uses a man who worked at a computer screen full time and volunteered in the garden as a means of respite from that.

John sees the project as being flexible enough to offer opportunities to people at several levels. It caters for people who are consciously looking to develop in terms of either getting qualifications, or work, or both and also people who want to volunteer but who are not ready for mainstream volunteer work with, for example,

organizations like Oxfam. He calls it "early stage volunteering".

one of the best aspects of the project is that it doesn't wave banners. People can volunteer from all walks of life and there is no stigma attached to it. His own organisation reflects that and he welcomes the opportunity to see that follow through into a project.

John has a favourite quote from one of the volunteers he referred to the project: "Volunteering literally saved my life." He went on to say that another major advantage was that he can speak to a potential volunteer on Tuesday and on Wednesday that person can get on the bus, go to the farm and start volunteering. He has found that with other organizations the complex system of enrolment: filling in forms, having interviews and getting references can be too daunting for some potential volunteers.

When asked why he recommends the community garden project to so many volunteers he says:

"For two reasons – well let me try and answer this in lots of different ways – from a referral point of view you get people for whom the activities are exactly what they are looking for or they are close enough so this is really going to move them forward in their own aims and objectives. Other people might not know what they want to do and this is a way for them to start something, again because they can start it tomorrow and its safe

and supported up there. It's got the flexibility and lack of pressure that some people need. From another point of view it's the good it does people because I know it does good and I can meet somebody and very quickly think that it would be brilliant for them. It's going to bring them out of themselves, its going to give them something to do, they're going to have enough interaction to lead them back into interaction without putting them in a crowd situation. I think that's very important. You meet people who may have spent the last two years watching daytime television and they are very much aware that they've been isolated but then if you were to stick them in a busy place full of noisy people it would be too much for them whereas this is a kind of gentle lead in to be sociable. And because it works for people and I see the change in them."

Michael from Seabrook House

For the staff at Seabrook House, the opportunity to send volunteers to work at the Community Garden project run by organicARTS is a great benefit. It is a major part of their policy to encourage their service users to participate in activities outside the home.

The Community Garden project is seen as being particularly beneficial because a lot of the service users at Seabrook are physically able but have mental health issues. The

organisation promotes development in daily living routines with a view to encourage people to enter the mainstream of society. They have a house where service users stay initially and after a time they can have the option to move into their cottages, living a more independent regime. Sometimes people develop sufficiently to move out of the cottages and into the community. Spending as a volunteer at the Community Garden project is seen by Seabrook as an effective way to facilitate some of that development process. "Coming here gives them the opportunity to learn some social skill." There are four or five volunteers from Seabrook who work independently as a group. They learn new skills and how to work as part of a team.

Apart from the practical skills and the teamwork aspects of their time at the Community Garden the volunteers are learning life skills in that they develop a routine of getting up in the morning and "once we get them engaged they have a much more productive day." The Wednesday morning they spend at the Community Garden is seen as a great start to acquiring these life skills.

There is also an economic benefit to Seabrook. Attendance at the Community Garden project is free for volunteers. There are other similar activities but they cost money to attend, either for the individual or the organization referring them. This means that Seabrook can bring up to

6 volunteers which they could not afford to do otherwise. This feeds upstream in that when they have new service users they are given the opportunity to try out different activities organized by Seabrook. Some might be choosing between different care opportunities. Being able to offer them free activities such as volunteering at the Community Garden project encourages new service users to the organisation. "The fact that we can bring them somewhere like this does sell the home really well for us." It also offers a degree of continuity for the volunteers who become a team during their time at the Community Garden tend to remain part of the team when they get home. They develop bonds of friendship because of mutual participation in the activities in the garden.

Attendance at the Community Garden also has a positive on the enablers and facilitators who come with the volunteers from Seabrook House. They appreciate the opportunity to be working outside and learning new practical skills alongside the volunteers. On a professional basis they see their service users in a different environment to usual. It was noted, that "when the service users are at home they tend to be completely different. You get them out on something like this, their personalities change 99% of the time for the better, they engage better with different people and they get to meet

different staff from other areas that they wouldn't know so it really works for them as well." Clearly, working at the Community Garden alongside the volunteers allows the enablers an opportunity to develop their relationship with their service users and get to know them as people and to understand more of their potential.

The respondent sees the Community Garden project as a good opportunity to change people's perceptions about mental health issues. Some of the volunteers from Seabrook House are physically able, helping them to become eligible for paid employment. Unfortunately there is still a lot of stigma attached to mental health, which makes this difficult if not impossible for most of them. Volunteering at the Community Garden gives some of the volunteers a sense of purpose and provides them with the opportunity to "give something back". This can also help some of the volunteers with their C.V.s. some of the volunteers from Seabrook House have now left and are working part-time. Credit for this has been partly attributed to time spent as a volunteer in the Community Garden.

The respondent sees volunteering at the Community Garden as a great opportunity for many of his service users. The enablers often comment along similar lines. The enablers also have the opportunity to see the service users, who they work with in the home, in a different light that illuminates them in a more positive

way. He has watched the volunteers from Seabrook House work together as a team to build and maintain a feature in the garden. He sees that kind of work both as something for the volunteers to work towards and then look back on with ownership and pride. He added that they never have any problem motivating the volunteers to attend. They look forward to it each week.

New residents are encouraged to attend by being given a list of weekly activity opportunities to choose from. It is acknowledged that not all the activities are suitable for all residents but they are encouraged to try things to find out whether they like them. Some of the other volunteers encourage new-comers to take part in the project which shows their enthusiasm for being a volunteer.

Mark: a care worker

Mark does not refer people to the Community Garden project in an official capacity. He is a carer/enabler and as such is very pro-active in terms of looking for good, useful and interesting activities for his people. He first came across the project around 3 years ago while working with a man with Down's Syndrome and decided it would be a good activity for them to participate in together.

He has found that being a volunteer has helped his client to develop personally in that whereas before he

was a quiet person, since working on the project he has come out of his shell.

“We would come here, he’d get out of the car, he wouldn’t wait for me anymore, which was quite funny. Not the fact that he was being rude it was just the fact, “I know where I am. I am going up there. I know where the tools are in the shed. I know where we go and have a cup of tea. I know where we have lunch. I know where the toilets are. I can play little jokes and have fun and I’ve got no need to take a step back.”

He goes on to explain that because his client sees familiar faces he has become more relaxed and confident. He also stresses that that is possible because the Community Garden project offers a safe environment for people to develop in.

This personal development has extended into his client’s private life. He has grown in confidence. He prepares for his visits to West Town Farm and tells people he knows what is happening on the farm and in the garden. He has developed the ability to hold a conversation on his terms by offering information to people.

Mark organised this opportunity for his client himself, although with the approval of the organisation he was working for. He did this because he has seen other organizations become stagnant in terms of the opportunities they offer service users. He sees that as unrealistic in terms of

“every day life” and wanted to be more proactive.

Being a volunteer on the Community Garden project has had a positive economic impact on the service user’s life in that he had been attending a similar project but had been paying to use that facility. The Community Garden is free for him to attend.

The Community Garden project has had such a strong impact on Mark that he visits even when he is not working with a client. “I think of this place all the time and I talk about it to other people about this all the time.” He actively recommends it to people for whom he thinks it would be of benefit.

“There’s a great group of people up here and it’s always good to see them.”

He sees that the Community Garden project has a lot of potential to change people’s perceptions of mental health issues. He says that there are people there from lots of different kinds of backgrounds, which allows people to be included. He sees people treating each other as equals because of that and their common cause, which is volunteering in the Community Garden.

Mark commented on the flexibility of the project in that some people attend then take a break for what ever reason and return. He says that is possible because people are made to feel welcome in the garden.

He could not see an equal and valid alternative to the Community Garden project was horrified at the thought of it closing down. "I've never come across one yet. Not like this."

His final comments were that the Community Garden scored ten out of ten as a facility. "There's unlimited cafes out there that they can go sit in and there's various groups that are all valuable but I've not come across anything like this and for a good alternative, I genuinely can't think of one."

West Town Farm Staff

Andy Bragg, Farmer at West Town Farm

Andy sees the community garden as a useful and valuable part of the organicARTS resource on the farm. He says that the community garden offers educational opportunities for other visitors to the farm and also encourages environmental diversity. He likes having the volunteers on the farm as they present an extra social dimension to the community there, particularly the lunch when the volunteers, farm staff and visitors share food and conversation.

He did not think that the volunteers present a tangible economic benefit to the farm but said that their help with trail maintenance, odd jobs around the farm and the upkeep of the garden helped to improve the

quality of the site for visitors and for wildlife.

Other Staff Members

The other staff at West Town Farm are also very enthusiastic about the community garden project. They see the volunteers as useful people to have around the site, as a workforce, because of their expertise and especially because of the social interaction they offer.

One staff member said she had learned a lot from some of the volunteers about growing techniques. Another commented on how the volunteers are useful when the group are setting up an event, such as a wedding, on the farm. All of the staff commented on the social asset the lunchtime sessions have become.

All of the staff at West Town Farm agree that the community garden project is helping to improve people's perceptions of mental health issues. The volunteers having the opportunity to carry out meaningful work and especially the social interaction between the different people on the site is helping people to appreciate and understand mental health issues.

Case Studies

A number of case studies were carried out looking in more detail at some of the people who have been with the project for a long time, been away from the project and returned or left the project entirely. The objective was to establish the motivations for long term activity related to the individual's connection with participating on the community garden project.

Paul Deery

Paul no longer lives in the area and was contacted via email. He has an amazing story to tell and was very happy to share it directly:

First I will explain the circumstances that led me to become a volunteer at West Town Farm. On June the 6th 2009 I was attacked and stabbed 18 times, in various parts of my body, which I was lucky to have survived.

But as you can imagine this affected me as well as physically, mentally as well. And with the help of the police and my doctor, I moved to Exeter from Liverpool. When I got to Exeter I knew no one at all. No family or friends it was to be a fresh start for me and that's how I wanted it to be. I wanted to do some volunteer work, so I popped in to Exeter C.V.S.. Thanks to a lovely lady by the name of Samantha Kitto who got me an interview by John stammers and

Andrew sanders, who to me became my lifesavers, and good friends.

And through them that's how I became a volunteer at West Town Farm. And this was the start of my experience on the farm, which I am indebted to for all the work and help every one there gave me. I found during my time there that I had plenty of time to learn new skills, i.e. I learnt so much about myself: confidence, speaking, listening, helping and communicating with all types of different people.

As well as the gardening, planting and learning about different flowers, trees, plants, vegetables, and fruit, but the biggest thing it gave me was security, being with people that had similar mental health problems to myself and recognising that I did have a mental health issue. And from this I gained my confidence, and my self-esteem again.

What Christine, Andrew and Andrew the farmer have allowed to happen at the farm is outstanding, and more helpful than they probably think themselves. And through this it has made me determined to work with and help people with mental health issues, in the best way I can. And I am so hoping to be visiting the farm again in September, which I am really looking forward to. And it will also give me the chance to say thank you in person once again to every one at the farm.

The only reason I left the farm was because I had to leave Exeter altogether as my mum became ill back in Liverpool so I had to come and look after her. Unfortunately I didn't know how bad she was, and after me giving everything up in Devon I was only back home three months when my mum passed away.

And now I am hoping to get back to Devon and start over again. Well I will close there and if there is anything at all, that you would like me to do or say do not hesitate to email me back it will be a pleasure to answer anything you would like to ask.

Thanks again, I hope this is what you wanted. My regards to everyone at the farm x.

Volunteer A

This volunteer has been with the project for 6 years. Attendance has been constant but the volunteer has worked in other places at the same time. The volunteer would welcome the opportunity to do similar work elsewhere but has found it difficult to find another situation that is not repetitive and monotonous. The volunteer values the variety of jobs offered and the freedom to move from one task to another.

The volunteer likes the opportunity to develop at an acceptable pace while acknowledging the need for prompting and guidance from time to time. The volunteer has been on

work placements but they were seasonal and didn't offer a permanent place at the end.

The volunteer sees the project as a long term opportunity to establish a sense of self that has not been available elsewhere. The volunteer has done other jobs but has found the speed of work required and the physical effort distressing to the point of not being able to cope. The volunteer feels that working in the garden is more rewarding, personally and in terms of doing something worthwhile for the community.

The volunteer admits to having energy level problems and motivational issues but says that they do not manifest themselves at the community garden project. This is attributed to the relaxed nature of the way in which the project runs.

Working on the project is seen as a job and as an end in itself rather than a means to an end. The volunteer accepts that it will never be a paid job but feels that is justified by the fact that it is rewarding and meaningful.

The volunteer feel physically and mentally stimulated by spending time on the project. It provides purpose and meaning along with the physical benefits of working in an outdoors and gentle environment. The volunteer does not see an alternative to the project that would be as beneficial.

The volunteer has been at the project for a considerable amount of time

and has acquired a sufficient amount of knowledge to be seen, unofficially, as a leader on the project with other volunteers and visitors asking for help, guidance and advice. This has enhanced the volunteer's self esteem and status, which is helping with other aspects of life. However the volunteer does not have the confidence to develop in a more formal way such as acquiring formal qualifications. This process is seen as being too stressful with too much pressure being put on the volunteer to progress in a formal, possibly more academic environment. The need to be outside, working in a semi-natural environment is the most important factor.

Volunteer B

Volunteer B has been with the project for 6 years but has had a break during that time and returned. The project is seen as an ideal way to continue to volunteer and do something useful as the volunteer doesn't feel ready to go back into paid employment.

The volunteer has been on various training course and has achieved some formal qualifications. These were carried out and attained during the volunteer's time away from the project as the volunteer is unable to do both things concurrently. He also sees that despite the qualifications he has attained he does not have a strong enough skill set to offer an

employer or volunteering organisation.

The volunteer sees the project as a safe and friendly place to return and is highly motivated to continue spending time there. He is prepared to find an alternative if that becomes necessary and has resources to do so but would prefer to carry on working at the project for as long as possible.

The volunteer enjoys most aspects of the project and places particular value on his status as a volunteer in that he feels he is contributing in a positive way to something worthwhile that also falls within his sphere of interest.

Volunteer C

Volunteer C has been working on the project for about 2 years. He has spent some time away from the project in paid employment but has recently returned. He has been in paid employment before coming to the project but that was temporary and he needed something else to do.

Volunteer C uses a particular kind of meditation that makes him tire very easily, making it difficult for him to work for long periods of time. He had been working in a retail environment but a combination of his medication problem and a cut in the hours available for him to work made him decide to try and come back to the project. He felt he was able to come back as it is a welcoming and

rewarding place. He feels comfortable at the project because there are familiar faces and friends. He enjoys the work and also the variety of jobs that he can get involved with. He admits if he wasn't at the farm he would probably be sitting at home doing nothing all the time.

He acknowledges that being on the project has provided him with the opportunity to develop personally. He now lives in his own accommodation and looks after himself. It has motivated him to go out and try working in paid employment but it has also acted as a cushion when that wasn't successful.

The NHS

This is a brief assessment of two clients that volunteered at the project having been referred by Rob Davey, a vocational coach with the NHS.

Client A

A male in his early 40s with both physical and mental health issues, with a forensic history seeking support to gain skills and abilities to live back in the community and with a longer term goal of achieving paid employment.

Upon application to us he recognized that he needed to build his self confidence and self esteem, develop skills he felt he had lost by living in an "institution" and undertake tasks in a controlled way to see how his

physical capabilities would affect his ability to seek work in the future. He was particularly keen to work outside and do physical type work. Alongside this he also wanted to improve his literacy and numeracy and IT skills.

Initially he took a placement at New Leaf (a horticulture project, part of the NHS trust) but could not settle. Whilst he continued to work on the numeracy, literacy and IT by attending classes and groups with our service it was through organicARTS that the real progress was made to address the other matters.

Throughout his attendance at the farm, under the care and guidance of staff, I watched and supported him to regain his feeling of having a place in society. He was able to discover his physical capabilities working in an environment he enjoyed and felt part of, discover his own personality and develop it to become part of the "team". Such was his progress that he gained sufficient confidence and esteem to gain independent living status. This enabled him to move to another area to re-start his life. Whilst I do not know if he achieved employment the changed attained by attending organicARTS had a considerable impact on the quality of his life, something we as a service could not have achieved without that working partnership.

Client B

A male in his twenties, with a mental health and learning disability living in supported accommodation.

Upon application to our service it was identified that he was not “work ready” and as a priority needed to develop his social skills. He identified that he enjoyed doing physical things and liked to be outside. At this stage he also needed the one to one support of his support worker.

I accompanied him on several visits to the farm where he was introduced to staff. The initial meeting was not easy as the client’s levels of concentration were at best poor, and his desire to be outside was clearly demonstrated as he enjoyed the space and wanted to be with the animals rather than be part of the introductory tour. Despite this a place was offered (with the proviso that for a period of time he attended with one to one support of

his support worker. The skills, determination and ingenuity of the staff have over the months seen a vast improvement in his social and organizational skills and a big improvement in his concentration levels. He now responds well to instructions and requests to take part in the work regime of the farm and although still supported by his support worker, that person has been able to take a step backwards to allow him to take responsibility for his actions.

On my last visit the client was fully engaged as part of a team building a wall from tyres and earth. He is much calmer and approachable.

Although now closed to our service (not currently seeking paid work) the input by organicARTS has seen this individual’s quality of life improve, especially due to the achievements made by improving his social skills.

Discussion: Is the Community Garden Project run by organicARTS at West Town meeting its objectives?

The main objectives for the Community Garden project were set out as “project features” in the “Changing Spaces Ecominds Application Form”. They are:

Involve people with direct experience of mental stress at all levels.

The project is coordinated by a person who has worked for many years alongside people with direct experience of mental distress. The coordinator of organicARTS has personal experience of mental distress. The author of this report has direct experience of mental distress. Many of the volunteers have personal experience of mental distress. The volunteers take a large amount of responsibility for various areas of the project. They work together as a team and many of them have become close friends and colleagues as a result of working on the project. There is an atmosphere of camaraderie between the volunteers and the coordinators and other facilitators, and with other people working on the farm. This has been facilitated by the communal lunch

taken during project days and by encouraging the volunteers to work on other activities available to them. This gives clear evidence of the volunteers’ willingness to mentor at least within their peer group. As a group they have a collective empathy and a culture of sharing.

“It’s a volunteering opportunity; it’s a nice atmosphere for people with a history of mental health difficulties. It’s very understanding.” – a volunteer

“It helped me learn about horticulture, to communicate with other persons. It has helped with my personal development if you like.” – a volunteer

“It’s given me self-confidence, it’s built my fitness up, [I’m] communicating with people outside my comfort zone.” – a volunteer

Deliver sustainable projects that enhance rural and urban environments

Many of the volunteers have said that they are more confident, are better at meeting and being with other people and are more comfortable since being with the project. A large number of them feel they are learning new practical skills. A number of the volunteers say they feel stronger and fitter, both mentally and physically as a result of working on the project. Not many of the volunteers said much about improving their diet. They all

acknowledged the importance of gardening and growing vegetables.

"They are growing food here and I believe it's only to feed us for our daily feed. We don't get a massive meal but what's there is good nutrients and stuff." – a volunteer

Several of the volunteers are consciously working on the project with the goal of using their new skills to seek paid employment. A number of them have participated in other activities such as the photography group, wildlife walks, helping out on open days at West Town Farm and felt making.

The activities of the volunteers have made the site more appealing to visitors, many of whom remark on what a good place it is to be. They have been active in keeping pathways clear allowing for easier access, they keep the place neat and tidy and are always working to improve the garden, both visually and in terms of growing vegetables and other plants.

Alongside their vegetables the volunteers are growing things like willow which they will use as supports for beans, peas etc thus reducing the number of external inputs into the project. They also actively compost everything they can for future use.

Encourage diversity and include marginalized and under-represented groups

One of the major factors in the success of the Community Garden project is that all the participants are treated equally. They are required to work but are encouraged to carry out tasks they want to do. The project coordinator has a very experienced eye and can assign tasks to those willing and capable of doing them. This is always done gently and sensitively and an atmosphere of mutual encouragement has been created that seems to work for all the volunteers regardless of how well they mix in with the group. There are areas for people to be alone and there are opportunities to be part of the larger group, both during periods of work and especially at lunchtimes. The coordinators are always available for volunteers to speak to if required and have been very good at building a rapport with the volunteers.

"The staff are compassionate." – a volunteer

"A lot of them live in isolation, a lot of them are judged, a lot of them seem to be judged in any other area where they go to. Here they can be who they want to be and they can try to be who they think people want them to be and nobody's going to judge them, nobody's going to care. It doesn't matter who they are when they come out here, they're just here. They're contributing." – Community Garden project coordinator.

The bus collects most of the volunteers from Exeter. Some of the volunteers are brought to West Town Farm by their own enablers and at least one of the volunteers regularly cycles out to the farm. Some of the volunteers commented on the bus journey. It is clearly an integral and important part of their volunteering experience. One volunteer said he would encourage newcomers to attend *“as long as there is room on the bus.”*

Deliver a well planned and well managed project offering good value for money and a genuine need within the designated time frame

The project is led by a qualified horticulturalist who also has many years of experience of working with and training mental health service users. The activities are planned with the volunteers which gives them a greater degree of involvement and responsibility. They are encouraged to make the best use of the resources to be found in situ. Activities are mainly planned around existing facilities and expertise. The project is managed by the organicARTS coordinator who has administration experience, finance and project management. The recruitment process for volunteers mainly, but not exclusively, takes place through a series of organisations with whom organicARTS has an ongoing

relationship. The volunteers grow their own food for lunches etc.

Help reduce stigma and social exclusion of people affected by mental distress

One of the major aspects of the project is the gathering for lunch. A triangle is rung, just like in those old Western films, and everyone working or visiting the farm gathers. Soup and bread is provided for anyone who wants it and there are no formal seating arrangements. This gives the volunteers a chance to integrate with the other people there, and with each other. There is a real sense of comradeship, of camaraderie about the volunteer group and a number of friendships have been forged through participation on the project. The volunteers look out for each other and share experiences, good and bad.

The volunteers have become good at working together on tasks. They share responsibilities for various activities and work through problems together. Sometimes some of the less confident volunteers will seek the approval of the project coordinator but this is not always the case, nor is it always necessary.

One of the more popular activities is the monthly wildlife walk. It resonates at different levels for different volunteers. Some of them show the visitor parts of the path that they have maintained. Some identify

birdsong and flowers for anyone who is interested. All of them are clearly and enthusiastically engaged with what the walk facilitator is saying and doing.

Some of the most confident volunteers take part in West Town Farm open days. They act as general helpers, moving tables, picking up litter and even selling draw tickets. They also show visitors round the Community Garden with a considerable amount of pride. There is a strong sense of responsibility and ownership on the part of the volunteers.

Conclusion

The Community Garden project is not only meeting but also surpassing its objectives. There have been a number of unexpected outcomes that supersede the original aims of the project. These are allowing the project to evolve in a positive way.

The flexible nature of the project allows people more freedom to perform tasks and participate in activities at a pace they are comfortable with. People are allowed to come and go from the project so they can go off and try other things or just get some breathing space when they need it. This gives them the confidence to return. That confidence is also developing a sense of ownership among the volunteers. All of them wish to carry on working on the project, some of them indefinitely, some of them with the ultimate objective of gaining full time employment.

The sense of ownership also gives the volunteers a sense that they are doing a job. Many of them will contact the project if they can't attend for any reason, although they are not obliged to do so. They take responsibility for themselves. They take a pride in their work and what is happening in the garden and on the farm.

They also take responsibility for each other. There is a very strong team spirit and a sense of community. Many of the volunteers have become friends both on site and outside as well. They have a feeling that they can communicate with each other on equal terms, they relate to each other and again this helps to build their confidence and self-esteem. They become more socially adept by spending time together and also because of the lunchtime routine where everybody on the farm: the volunteers, the facilitators and other organicARTS staff, the farm workers and volunteers and the farmer all eat together on equal terms. There is no seating hierarchy and everybody can associate with the others or sit more quietly as they wish.

Many of the volunteers have said they feel stronger physically and mentally because of their time in the garden. The Community Garden project at West Town farm does much more than offer the chance to do some physical work in the fresh air. It has become a conscious lifestyle choice for many of the volunteers. For these reasons and probably many that haven't yet been noticed it is hugely important to the volunteers, to the organicARTS organisation and to the greater community that the project continues to run indefinitely.

References

[1] http://www.mind.org.uk/ecominds/what_is_ecominds

[2] <http://www.devonhealthandwellbeing.org.uk/>

[3] http://www.mind.org.uk/assets/0000/2138/ecotherapy_report.pdf

[4] <http://www.organicarts.org.uk/projects/mission/>

[5] <http://www.westtownfarm.co.uk/>

[6] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/english-indices-of-deprivation-2010>

[7] <http://www.menshealthforum.org.uk/22645-mens-health-week-2013-news>

More useful links:

<http://www.organicarts.org.uk/projects/aboutus/>

<http://www.organicarts.org.uk/projects/grow/>

Community Grants South West Grant Application Form

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyl5WPnmyHk>

Appendix: The Volunteer Interviews

Question 1 – why do you volunteer on the Community Garden project?

Nice, relaxing environment	9	64%
Easier to communicate with people here/more self-confidence	7	50%
Volunteer opportunity	6	43%
Some structure to my week	6	43%
I like gardening	5	36%
It's nice to be in the countryside	4	29%
Open minded	3	21%
I'm not a city person	3	21%
To learn more about horticulture	2	14%
For the organized activities	1	7%
Help other people	1	7%
Total responses:	47	% Respondents

Question 2 - Has the reason changed since you started coming?

Yes	4	29%
No	8	57%
No response	2	14%
Total:	14	% Respondents

I'm stronger physically	2	14%
I'm stronger mentally	2	14%
They are nice people here	1	7%
I went on a course and then came back	1	7%
I feel like I am achieving something	1	7%
I feel I am connecting more	1	7%
At first it was just for something to do	1	7%
Total:	9	% Respondents

Question 3 – How long have you been volunteering on the project?

0-6 months	4	29%
6 months – 1 year	2	14%
1 – 2 years	3	21%
2 – 3 years	1	7%
3 – 4 years	2	14%
4 – 5 years	0	0%
5 – 6 years	2	14%
Total:	14	% Respondents

Question 4 – what are your most favourite aspects of the Community Garden project?

Gardening	12	86%
Peripheral activities (cooking, photography, maintenance)	6	43%
Association with other people	4	29%
Physical work	1	7%
A sense of achievement	1	7%
Total	24	% Respondents

Question 5 – what are your least favourite aspects of the project?

No least favourite	4	29%
No response	2	14%
Garden related activity	3	21%
Gardening	2	14%
It can be a bit boring	2	14%
The responsibility of cooking	1	7%
It can be tiring	1	7%
Feeling I could have done better	1	7%
Being stuck indoors	1	7%
Total	17	% Respondents

Question 6 – is there anything you would like to change about the project?

Nothing	9	64%
No response	2	14%
Don't know	1	7%
Improve use of tools/use better tools	2	14%
Total	14	% Respondents

Question 7 – would you like to keep volunteering at the Community Garden project?

Yes	14	100%
No	0	0%
Total	14	% Respondents

Question 8 – how do you feel that volunteering at the project helps you?

It's a chance to talk to people	7	50%
It's a chance to share experiences	6	43%
Its helping me to get somewhere	3	21%
I am active all the time	3	21%
I feel alright	2	14%
Its not just about drinking tea	1	7%
Its better than staying at home	1	7%
It's a chance to help other people	1	7%

I like the peace and quiet	1	7%
Its opened me up as a person	1	7%
I feel I am doing something useful	1	7%
Its helping my confidence	1	7%
It's helping my fitness	1	7%
No response	1	7%
Total	29	% Respondents

Question 9 – How do you feel when you are volunteering at the Community Garden project?

I feel a sense of achievement	6	43%
I feel useful	4	29%
Relaxed	3	21%
Good to be active	2	14%
I like being in the garden	2	14%
I feel immersed in what I do	2	14%
I feel more clarity of mind	1	7%
I feel a bit pushed sometimes	1	7%
Sometimes the time drags	1	7%
Ok	1	7%
Total	23	% Respondents

Q10 – how do you feel when you are not at the Community Garden project?

Ok	4	29%
Lost	3	21%
I keep myself busy	3	21%
No response	2	14%
Its good to have a rest	1	7%
Not bad but there is a difference	1	7%
At first I feel uplifted but then it wears off	1	7%
I have to work hard at feeling upbeat	1	7%
Lonely	1	7%
Down	1	7%
I look forward to my next visit	1	7%
Total	19	% Respondents

Question 11 – has volunteering on the Community Garden project improved your quality of life?

Yes	11	79%
No	1	7%
No response	2	14%
Total	14	% Respondents

I am more satisfied with life	5	36%
I feel more useful	4	29%
It is something to do	3	21%
I feel more mentally fit	3	21%
I feel more physically fit	2	14%
I am more confident	2	14%
I am better at meeting people	2	14%
Its nice to be in some kind of employment	1	7%
It has given me a purpose on Fridays	1	7%
I have probably learned some bits	1	7%
I have more clarity of mind	1	7%
I am better at weeding	1	7%
Total	26	% Respondents

Question 12 – what would you say to a prospective volunteer at the Community Garden project?

I would encourage them to come	9	64%
The people here are good	6	43%
Give it a try	6	43%
It's a positive experience	5	36%
Come and have a look round	4	29%
Work with some of the people	3	21%
It is nice to be doing gardening	3	21%
You don't know until you've tried	2	14%
We go on walks	2	14%
There is something about this environment that helps you relax	2	14%
There is a good community spirit	2	14%
The management is good	2	14%
I was nervous to begin with	2	14%
We help to keep the trails open	1	7%
Try to relax	1	7%
They might take you on	1	7%
No response	1	7%
Its not for everyone	1	7%
It will help you with your confidence	1	7%
I don't talk to people about the project when I am not here	1	7%
Total	55	% Respondents