

Case Study

Petworth Community Garden

Background

The project started when Kate Brickell attended Garden Organics 'Organic Food for All' training course in 2005. Kate was expecting to be put in touch with a local group needing a gardening mentor but it quickly became clear that the course was actually designed to encourage people to start their own groups in their local communities.

So, furnished with a resource pack and a few seeds and tools from the course, the search for suitable garden space in Petworth began. Two plots eventually were kindly offered at the allotments and, with the help of two local youngsters, the overgrown plots were cleared and prepared.

Petworth has deprived sectors of the community which struggle with issues such as social cohesion, poverty and physical, learning and mental difficulties. The beneficial impact of the garden was already being demonstrated with members of the community joining the group and contributing their ideas as to how the garden could develop.

Kate's personal experience of social isolation and disability coupled with her training in organic gardening and Social and Therapeutic Horticulture meant she quickly found her role to be identifying skills and abilities and coordinating activities around the garden to suit the varied participants.



Accessible to the whole community: there is no minimum age for participation

The project

The activities and attendance continued to grow steadily to the point where the onsite facilities needed to develop further. Week by week the group and local community pitched in to raise money for and build wheelchair accessible paths, raised beds, childrens' and wildlife gardens, an accessible shed and an accessible composting toilet so that the site could continue to provide for its growing audience. A third plot was also adopted by the group and a polytunnel put up to act as a 'Living Larder' to provide enough food to share with all participants.

But attendance continued to grow with participants benefitting from the "accessible to the whole community" ethos, social interaction, outdoor exercise, training and confidence building activities. The site was beginning to strain again under the Men's Shed, Plot to Plate, Learn and Grow, sensory and therapeutic activities, childrens' activities and open days.

The "off-grid" nature of the site meant that charging batteries for tools and heating water for tea had to be done at Kate's home but lack of light and heating also meant that activity in the winter months was difficult and very limited.

Connecting the site to the power grid was not feasible so the group identified solar power as an option and approached the Sustainable Communities Fund with the Sustainable Sunlight Project. South Downs National Park Authority was very impressed with all that had been achieved on the site and offered a grant of £2,874 towards the cost of purchasing and installing a solar power system.

“With someone like my son who doesn’t have friends, your project is just a lifeline.”

Mrs Tobbit October 2014

The outcome

Since installation the solar powered system has been over-achieving and provides energy all through the winter, therefore the community garden now operates all year round with indoor space for activity, respite, and refreshment when the weather becomes inclement. Previously, attendance dwindled heavily during winter, now with the improved facilities more people participate at the time of the year when this type of activity is often most required.

The power has enabled a projector to be installed so that more formalised learning can take place – this in turn has led to the Petworth Gardeners club booking the shed for the Royal Horticultural Society to hold a presentation and training session for allotment holders, all powered by sunlight!

The Garden is living by its motto “Grown by the community, for the community” with up to 37 people now being able to take part at a time and all members taking home fresh produce at the end of the day.

One of the project’s greatest successes is its social impact - all ages are able to relate to people with disabilities and other issues which helps break down barriers and gives people confidence in social situations. There are several cases of attendees returning to training and work with the support of the sessions. John Tobbit is a young man with learning difficulties who was very shy and monosyllabic when he first joined. Over time he developed confidence and friendships to the point where he was called one of the “chuckle brothers” as he laughed so much during the sessions with his new friends. He found paid work in January 2017 and has now moved on from the project and is loving his new job.



Accessible to whole community: all abilities are catered for

The future

Importantly, more time can now be spent on the core activities rather than transporting batteries, tools, urns and kettles.

This has given Kate and the team time to develop and look at ways to build capacity and improve delivery.

The organisational resource is now being developed in volunteers for things like bookkeeping, administration and fundraising with the understanding that the growth has to be properly managed in order to continue and expand operations.

Other site infrastructure requirements are now being considered like a larger shed, renovation of accessible paths and providing running water and cooking facilities in the shed.

The new cooking facilities could enable the “Plot to plate” cooking sessions to take place at the very site, within the very community where the food is grown.

Visit <http://growingforall.org.uk/> for more information on the garden and www.southdowns.gov.uk/scf for information on the Sustainable communities Fund.

April 2017