

Gardens for Life – using community based food growing in Tower Hamlets to deliver public health outcomes



Maria Devereaux (Growing Health, Sustain), Susie Crome (Public Health Tower Hamlets), Connie Hunter (Women's Environmental Network), Kate Metcalf, (Women's Environmental Network), Paul Wilson (EastendHomes)

Introduction There is an increasing body of evidence supporting the health and wellbeing benefits of community gardening¹. Gardening and food growing benefit not only the individual's mental and physical health but they can help build communities that can help themselves. The Women's Environmental Network (WEN) was commissioned by London Borough of Tower Hamlets public health department to set up community food growing sites across the borough. Building on previous work in this area, the Gardens for Life pilot further supports the case for using community based projects to deliver against public health outcomes framework.

Summary of evidence

Regular involvement in gardening can

- Improve psychological health, by reducing stress, the severity of stress and associated depression
- Increase physical activity, burn calories and contribute to maintaining a healthy weight and reduce the risk of obesity
- Contribute to improved social interactions and community cohesion
- Provide access to locally grown, fresh produce and help increase the consumption of fruit and vegetables, as well as improving attitudes to healthy eating
- Introduce people to a way of life that can help them to improve their wellbeing in the longer term.

Project Background

The London Borough of Tower Hamlets in East London is the third most deprived local authority district in England². There is a high prevalence of long term conditions in the borough, many of which can be prevented through being able to adopt a healthier lifestyle. The Gardens for Life project brief was developed through a recognition of the role that community gardens can play and the service specification competitively tendered. WEN as a charity had a track record of supporting community food gardens plus existing relationships with the Registered Providers of Social Housing (RP's).

Project Summary

Working primarily with RPs (EastendHomes, Poplar HARCA and Tower Hamlets Community Housing), 15 community gardens were successfully set up during a 15 month project (April 2014 - July 2015), with WEN's community garden coordinators. The project engaged almost 4.5K Tower Hamlets residents with 178 actively participating. WEN delivered a mixture of on-site support and joint training courses on food growing, healthy eating and cooking. As part of the project a conference 'Growing Health in Housing' was organised to share learnings from the project.

Food Growing and the Wider Determinants of Health

As the wider determinants of health model³ demonstrates there are many social, economic and environmental factors that impact on health.

Community food growing projects can have positive benefits on these:

Individual lifestyle: supports a healthy lifestyle with regular outdoor activity and contact with nature which helps improve physical and mental health. Provides access to healthy, affordable, locally grown food

Social and community: engages the community and enhances mechanisms for getting people involved in things that matter to them

Activities: promotes health and wellbeing as well as an opportunity for learning new skills

Built environment: physical exercise is designed into the local area

Natural environmental factors: enhances the natural environment and engages people with nature.

Key Findings

The key findings using a recognised tool, case studies and individual feedback showed

- A meaningful improvement in wellbeing for over half of participants for whom data was available using the Shorter Warwick & Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale
- Improvements in the wellness of residents as shown by feedback from residents and individual case studies, which were evaluated against the Five Ways to Wellbeing
- Increased access to local food as most of the sites grew vegetables and fruit which were eaten
- Some self-reported positive changes to eating and consuming behaviours plus general awareness of healthy eating
- A wide range of community benefits including increased local opportunities for volunteering, increased community cohesion plus better consideration and pride in their neighbourhood.

Opportunities

- Projects are strengthened by ensuring time is factored in to develop partnerships
- Recognising that altering the usage of communal space is best done with an consultation process
- Novice growers need support and training
- RPs are best placed to support a programme like this because they have the infrastructure for this type of initiative and they are able to sustain their support to the residents involved
- To develop 'action-based' research to show the cost-effectiveness of food growing programmes compared with other interventions
- In addition to health outcomes, food growing provides significant added value, including an increase in biodiversity and ecosystem value and development of skills and learning.

Challenges

- Collecting evidence of health outcomes for food growing projects can be difficult for a variety of reasons including language, timing and turnover of participants
- Difficulty of comparing gardening and food growing to other programmes
- The internal set up of different RPs varies which requires a flexible approach. Senior leadership support in the RP is also crucial
- Outreach work is essential to ensure active participation from a good number of residents.

Conclusion

The scope of this project is a good example of collaboration between different local partners to improve residents' wellbeing and help community cohesion.

The full report is available from

wen.org.uk/all-resources/



Growing Health Growing Health is a joint project between Garden Organic and Sustain funded by the Tudor Trust. Gardens for Life is one of the case studies documented by Growing Health which demonstrate how community food growing is currently being used to deliver health improvements, either within the context of Public Health or for Clinical Commissioning Groups. www.growinghealth.info

References

1. Schmutz U., et al (2014). *The benefits of gardening and food growing for health and wellbeing*. Garden Organic and Sustain. [online] www.growinghealth.info
2. London Borough of Tower Hamlets, June 2011, 'Indices of Deprivation 2010: Research Briefing 2011-03'
3. Barton, H. and Grant, M. (2006) A health map for the local human habitat. *The Journal for the Royal Society for the Promotion of Health*, 126 (6). pp. 252-253. ISSN 1466-4240