



Roots and Shoots: Evaluating a pilot of social therapeutic horticulture at SJOG

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Overview

Roots and Shoots was a horticultural project that embedded horticultural activities into the daily living of people we support at SJOG. The project was carried out across thirteen services, covering disability, complex needs, older communities, and homelessness.

The project aimed to encourage the use of outdoor space and the development of gardening activities to improve the well-being of people through being shaped by SJOG's Life Worthwhile model and Social Therapeutic Horticulture (STH).

This report detailed the evaluation of the project through the experiences of colleagues who were involved in the project between December 2022 and November 2023. The aim was to better understand the structure of training and material provided, the impact on people we support, and ways the project could be improved in the future.

Background

SJOG has been on a journey to improve outdoor spaces for people we support. In 2021 Green Team was established as a youth employment programme. Green team supports young people not in education, employment or training through providing garden maintenance training whilst also enhancing the gardens and outdoor space of SJOG services in the Northeast.

Roots and Shoots developed from Green Team but with the intent of embedding horticultural activities into the daily support plans of people in services and contributing to their physical and mental health. There is growing evidence and research that shows time spent productively outside can¹:

- increase feelings of happiness and well-being
- allow time and space to recharge our minds
- develop new knowledge, skills and interests
- reduce stress levels and negative or challenging behaviours

¹ Mackrill, Dexter, 2022

- develop mindfulness skills and improve memory
- increased feelings of satisfaction and achievement

These benefits were somewhat depicted in SJOG commissions research, a Life Worthwhile². This research showed the importance of relationships, meaningful activities (purpose) and health and wellbeing in the lives of people we support (see figure 1).

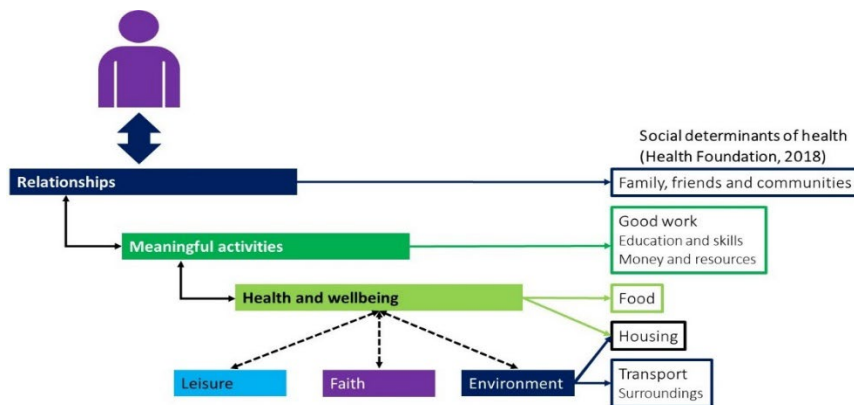
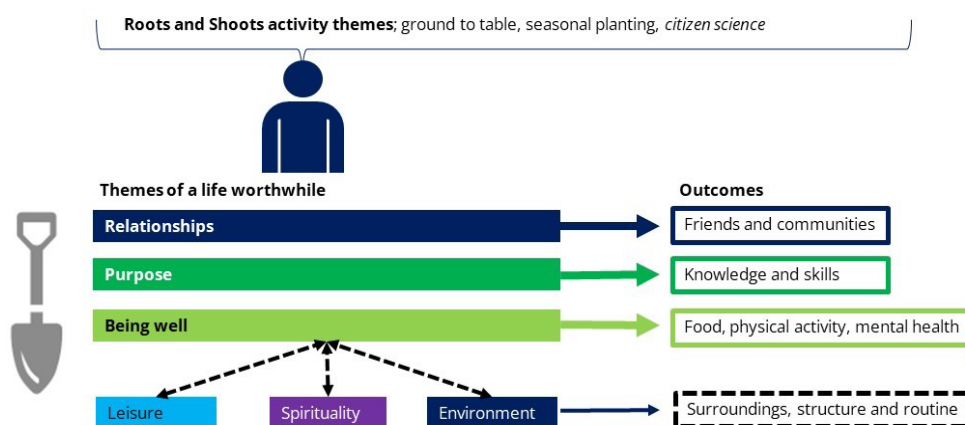


Figure 1 – Themes of a life worthwhile taken from Mackrill (2019)

The Life Worthwhile model was used to map the social determinants of health to inform new services design and delivery. The activities, processes, and outcomes of gardening tie closely to this through elements of social inclusion, purpose (through meaningful activities) and elements of health and wellbeing that stem from participating in outdoor activities and allowing colleagues to support people by relying less on restrictive techniques³ (see figure 2).



² Mackrill, 2019

³ Mackrill J., Dexter N., September 2022

Figure 2 – Roots and Shoots horticulture project model linked to a life worthwhile and broader outcomes.

Project objectives

Initially designed to provide learning opportunities for those in disability and older community services, Roots and Shoots was broadened to include our homeless service, Olallo House, and Woodhall Community Centre (day service for people with disabilities) to utilise their garden courtyard and community space.

The project aimed to create opportunities for colleagues and people we support to access gardening and horticulture activities and skills, in particular:

- To upskill and train colleagues, diversifying the support provided to each person living in services;
- To create and broaden the scope for shared learning experiences between and within communities– both people supported and colleagues;
- Make better use of outside spaces by identifying needs and maximizing participation and learning opportunities for people we support;
- To create a suite of bespoke learning resources.

Evaluation methodology

Starting in 2023, data was collected based on the shared experience of colleagues who were involved in the project. The aim was to better understand the structure of the training, the impact on people we support, and ways the project could be improved in the future.

An in-depth interview was conducted in July 2023 with the Roots and Shoots Coordinator, exploring how delivery of gardening activities took place and challenges that occurred during implementation.

A survey was carried out with colleagues involved in the project, to better understand their experience.

The survey was distributed to the 13 participating services between August – September 2023.

A survey gathering the views of the people we support was translated into an accessible format with Widget Rebus Symbols (PECS). This was disseminated in all disability services, aiming to capture the experience of people we support. N=2 disability services provided information including direct observation and case studies with a further n=4 people supported at our homeless service contributing their feedback.

Engaging SJOG Services

Roots and Shoots reached 13 services. Geographically, services were in the Northeast of England, Midlands, Hertfordshire, and London. A total of n=26 colleagues were engaged in the delivery of the project from service managers (n=13) and Roots and Shoots champions (n=13).

The breadth of services meant that a total of n=184 people who are supported across the services were given opportunities to take part in Roots and Shoots.

The project engaged the wider community through involving local school pupils (in Birmingham) in a seed planting activity. Our homeless service, Olallo House, was involved in the distribution of community garden allotments, through the “Story Garden” project based in Camden, where people took part in Roots and Shoots activities, in addition to planting and taking care of their own vegetables and plants.

Implementation of Roots and Shoots

Upskilling and training of colleagues

Colleagues were upskilled through trainings offered by the project coordinator. Knowledge learned was used to create bespoke learning plans for each service, supporting the needs of people by making best use of the outside spaces. Our project coordinator was responsible of writing and delivering face-to-face learning sessions, and of creating and delivering activity packs and providing online support during the process.

Activities were co-created with managers, to deliver personalised engagement plans. Through the process, they oversaw the schedule of the learning and the assignment of tasks, with the help of an assigned “champion”.

Creation of shared learning experiences between and within services

A dedicated page on SJOG's social media, Workplace, was created to allow colleagues to share their updates via a Roots and Shoots Diary. This was used as monthly feedback, where pictures and comments were captured to highlight progress and delivery of activities.

The use of internal social media created a community which allowed all services to engage both directly and indirectly. It also created an immediate legacy of the project for people to refer to (see figure 3). Using a similar platform in the future is a useful tool to document evidence and increase engagement.

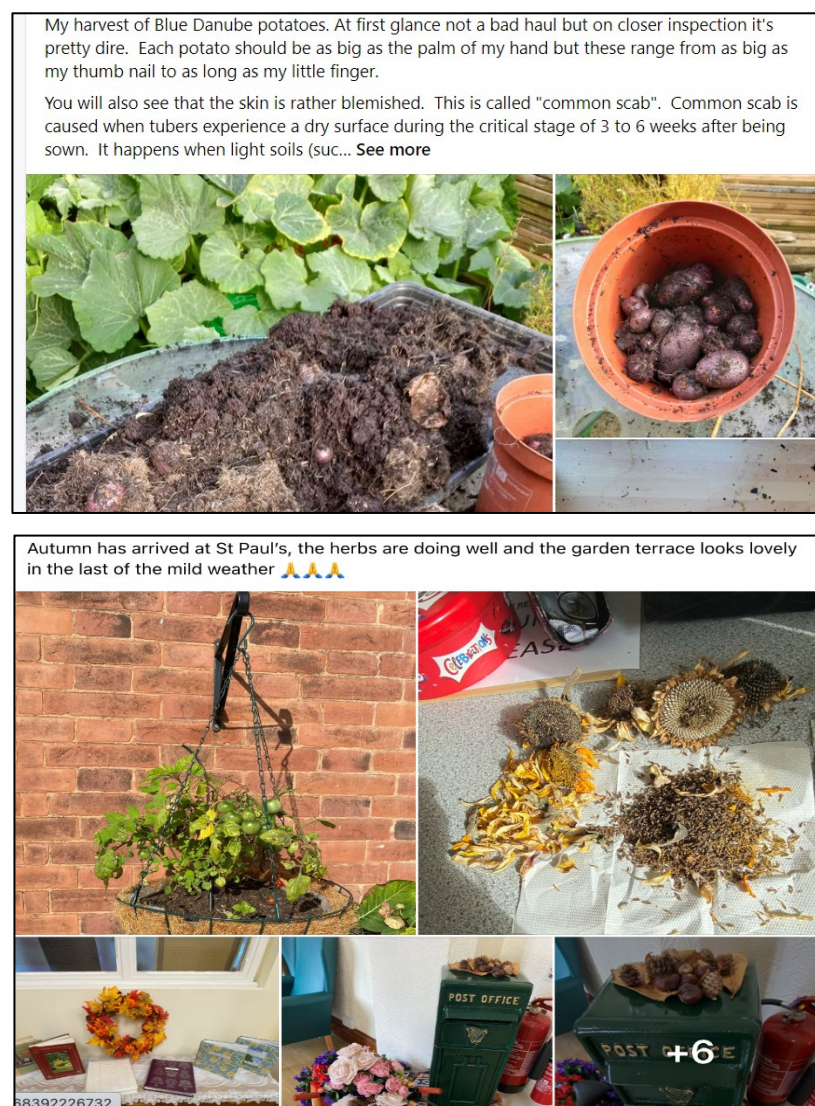


Figure 3 – Example of Roots and Shoots social media pages

Outdoor activities, participation and learning opportunities for people we supported

Through co-production sessions, colleagues developed knowledge, participation and local knowledge of the needs of the people supported that contribute to the creation of a suite of bespoke learning resources and activities. Over the 12-month delivery of Roots and Shoots, a series of seasonal opportunities were explored, incorporated and experienced first-hand in each service. After the initial training sessions, colleagues took the lead on sustaining periodical gardening activities, embedded within support plans.

Creation of learning resources

The skills learned by colleagues and people we support during Roots and Shoots, transferrable covering themes such as horticulture, wildlife, weather and the environment. Additionally, learning was packaged and made available across SJOG (figure 4).



Figure 4: Seeds distribution in services with instructions

Notable findings from the evaluation

Development of outdoor spaces and meaningful activities

The project was born with the idea of upskilling colleagues to better integrate the use of nature and gardens in day-to-day practices. This would encourage the use of outdoor space and would engage people we support in meaningful activities, such as growing their own edibles. The advantages were:

- Fresh food, less waste (including plastic)
- Learning opportunities
- Skills development
- Seasonal and timely activities
- Choice if what and how much to grow
- Garden space will be a productive, well used, maintained, and engaging.

Additionally, planting, cultivating and other gardening work are seen as both meaningful and productive with evidence growing that this mix of activity contributes to health, wellbeing and social inclusion⁴. The “green care” method introduced by Social Therapeutical Horticulture approach has been evidenced to reduce stress levels and negative or challenging behaviours, by increasing feelings of satisfaction and achievement and raising the heart rate or work different muscle groups in the body⁵ (figure 4).



Figure 4 – Activities, processes and outcomes of STH adapted from Sempik, J., Aldridge, J., & Becker, S. (2005)

⁴ Diamant and Waterhouse, 2010

⁵ Mackrill J, Dexter N, September 2022

This positive impact was successfully reflected by colleagues. When asked why colleagues would get involved, they mentioned:

"To support residents to do more and to improve colleague's skills"

"To engage people, we support within gardening activity"

"To improve outside spaces".

Moreover, 80% of colleagues said most people they support have been involved in the programme and they benefited from it, including:

"Taking more pride in their gardens - increased engagement around growing plants from seed and watching them grow";

"Gardening activities improved socialisation, emotional and physical wellbeing. It provided a sense of ownership for the property and enhanced a sense of achievement";

"Learning new skills"

"Colleagues saw an increased involvement, engagement and motivation to do things"

Outcomes for the people we support enjoying outdoor spaces and occasional gardening

At Dalby View, a disabilities service, residents appreciated the outdoor spaces and the opportunity to get involved whenever possible. Choice was important – people engage when they wanted without committing to regular gardening work:

"At times the residents will ask the green team if they are doing more hands-on work for example, one resident wanted to help paint the fencing around the courtyard and Doug helped make this happen. This is about as much involvement as they wish to have. I like to lead by their wants and wishes, then that way I know they are happy in their home."

Feedback from The Old Vicarage complex care service provided is another example. One resident mentioned he enjoyed spending time outdoors but preferred to get involved in activities such as planting and harvesting potatoes on a sporadic basis:

"F has autism and complex needs. He works best completing short activities which have a concrete purpose. He has had, through gardening tasks, the opportunity to engage in things"

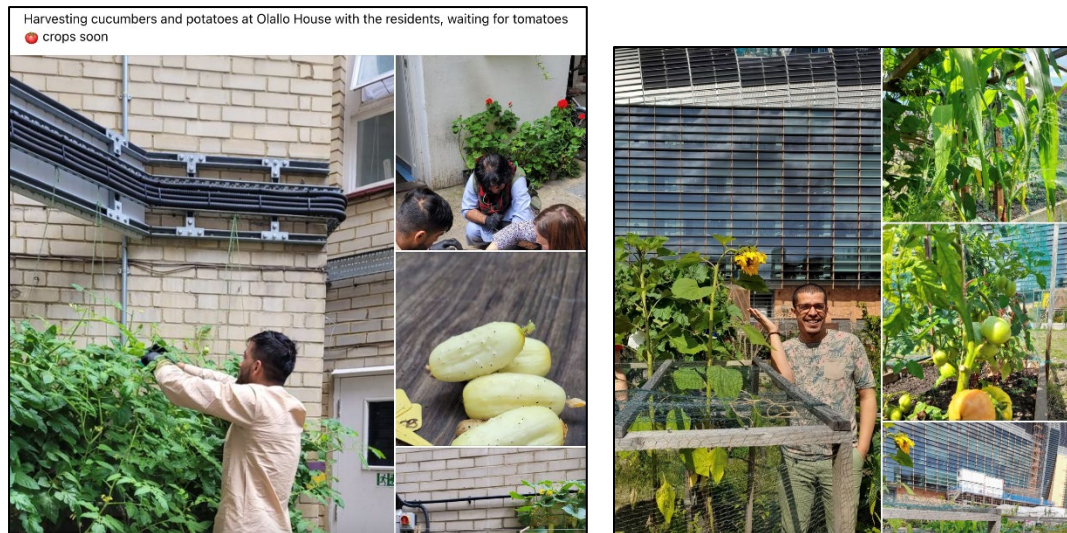
which give him a range of sensory feedback and get him outdoors. He loves being outdoors in most weather but finds activities/ places with lots of other people around over stimulating so being able to do things in his own garden works well for him. Completing tasks such as digging helped support F's wellbeing by offering him a different type of exercise to walking, which is how he primarily gets exercise."

The Old Vicarage, which provides 24 hours support to people with autism and complex needs were the first service to deliver the model. Core themes such as Ground to Table and Seasonal Planting were embedded into the operational delivery. Further learning included seasonal planting and understanding the impact of elements such as weather, light, nature, plant pests and diseases on flora.

One significant outcome from the Old Vicarage, was the development of "active support" techniques through horticulture - the aim of enabling colleagues to create suitable learning activities for people with complex needs to develop new skills, learning, and access a wider range of activities. This had an impact on each person supported through allowing them to engage in positive activities to manage behaviour aiming to result in a reduction in behaviours that challenge, support colleagues rely less on restrictive techniques⁶.

The feedback received from people we support at Olallo House in London was also positive. Working on a common project with fellow residents and SJOG colleagues, members enabled each person to create better connections, improve socialisation, and to learn new skills, while committing to carry out scheduled tasks during the week (see figures 5).

⁶ Mackrill, Dexter, 2022



Figures 5: Enjoying the outcomes of gardening work at Olallo House

Sisters from SJOG's older community service at St Paul's in Birmingham enjoyed growing and tasting their own fruit and vegetables (figure 6). They worked with the project coordinator, while learning and planting flowers:

"Sisters supported enjoyed the grown fruit and veg and liked tasting them. The hanging baskets looked very nice on the garden terrace for all to enjoy while sat outside."

"I enjoyed working on this project, going to the garden show and introducing different plants and flowers for sisters to enjoy, and I have more ideas for projects to work on in spring to make St Paul's garden more aesthetically pleasing with different colours, textures, smells and heights of flowers, plants and garden decor."

"It was a lovely project to be part of, thank you for making it possible."

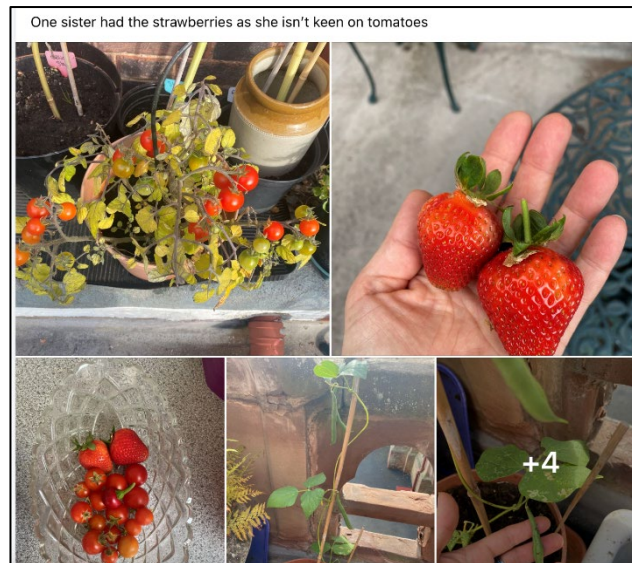


Figure 6: Images with grown veggies and fruits at St Pauls Covent

Strengths

As emerged from the evaluation and outcomes, the strengths of Roots and Shoots were:

- One-to-one support with dedicated staffing resources means that it is easier to deliver 'added' value activities in services.
- Outdoor space was used more effectively.
- Colleagues and the people we support engaged in activities (figure 7)
- Roots and Shoots was adaptable and enabled activities to accommodate the needs of the people each services support, and the location of those services. For example, potato growing at our complex needs service, along with redesigning the raised beds at our community centre, Woodhall, in Hertfordshire.

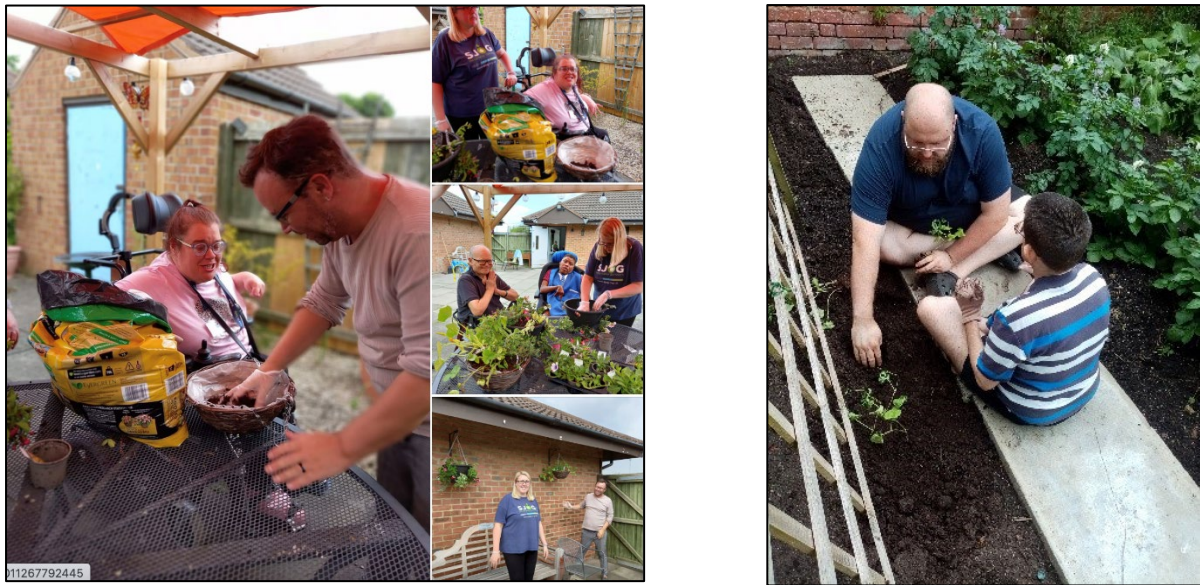


Figure 7 – Selection of images of people we support completing activities on the Roots and Shoots project.

Challenges

As with all projects, challenges emerged.

Time management

It was reported that finding the time and the resources to provide a strategy and framework that could be shared collectively represented a challenge for managers. Gardening was perceived as an extra activity to plan and implement, in addition to an already busy schedule related to care of people. The testimony of a colleague answering the survey, underlines this aspect:

“The biggest challenge? Time. The grounds are 250 square meters with a significant number of beds. Fitting the grounds maintenance into a day is almost impossible, and having the time to design and plan is difficult.”

Upskilling colleagues

One of the main objectives of the project was to create bespoke learning plans, support the needs of individuals by making best use of the outside spaces.

While the maintenance of gardens and cultivation of plants requires a certain expertise, the lack of this knowledge was an obstacle initially. However, this improved. The training provided by the project coordinator was “very useful” by all people involved in the survey, with 80% claiming they benefited from it. Improvements could have been made to share new knowledge through training to all colleagues and residents in services. As one colleague pointed out:

“Not all colleagues understand the importance of gardening activities and do not involve residents as much as they could. The time could be found during working hours, if it's well coordinated. Overall, it is great activity for both staff and residents”.

Gardening as a cyclical activity

Finally, the cultivation of plants is seen as a cyclical process. It is important to take into consideration the timescale necessary for embedding the necessary training and practice into services. This report is based on the experience of a 1-year implementation of the project. Should a second year have been possible, the seasonal variations in activities, and new growth of plants that had been grown may have added another layer of enjoyment for colleagues and the people we support.

Recommendations

The evaluation allowed the development of recommendations should other organisations wish to implement similar projects:

- More than 50% of colleagues agree that activities related to gardening, including training, should take place during working hours.
- Providing ongoing training, products, and tools, after the main project is completed is important for colleagues with little or moderate gardening experience.
- Ensuring that everyone has access to materials and methods is a basic requirement.
- Identifying champions among colleagues who are interested in upskilling and coordinating the gardening experience.
- Co-produce personalised workplans with services, as supporting the needs of people takes priority. This makes activities part of daily routines and complements existing support activities.

- Ensuring that initiatives are sustained with the help of a peripatetic activity coordinator to provide additional resources if needed, is desirable.
- Respecting individual choice. Horticulture is an option for people supported.
- For disability services, taking into consideration tasks which do not require long-term achievement, or overstimulating and crowded environments.

Conclusion

Although the project was initially developed for a 1-year pilot, our evaluation indicates that people we support improved their physical and mental wellbeing, sense of purpose and relationships while taking part in Roots and Shoots.

The possibility of joining seasonal activities, maintaining and improving the garden space, learning new skills and achieving new goals, such as growing edibles representing valuable outcomes for services.

Projects like this are best co-produced with the services and people we support to provide the best solutions, materials and approach. Continued support from a coordinator or similar post is needed to ensure activities are embedded.

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