



North Edinburgh Arts Centre and Garden – June 2021



Organisation name: North Edinburgh Arts

Project name: North Edinburgh Arts garden project

Location: Lothian, Scotland.

Grant amount: £149,350

Grant date and duration: November 2016, 3 years

Project context: The community centre has a theatre, gallery, café and garden. They host a range of practical workshops and sessions, centring on the environment, horticulture, creativity and play, for people living in and around the Pilton and Muirhouse areas of North Edinburgh.

Project aims: The grant was aimed at improving the garden space, to create somewhere that the community could use freely as an area for rest and respite, recognising the lack of green spaces in the local area. There is a lot of regeneration and housing development going on, and many local residents have no access to a garden of their own.

Project aims

The arts centre and its garden is in one of the most deprived wards in the city, and country. Few residents have access to their own garden, and while green spaces do exist in the local area, they are often under-used due to lack of confidence about

"This part of Edinburgh is generally pretty austere in terms of outside space" **Kate, Director**

caring for the land. The quality of communal green space in the local area can also be low, due to the amount of regeneration and housing development work taking place, as well as high rates of fly-tipping and graffiti. The grant was

aimed at improving the garden space, to create somewhere that the community could use freely as an area for rest and respite.

With the garden, they want to:

- Give people a pleasant green space they could spend time in, to provide relief from the urban surroundings
- Provide a range of activities for people of all ages from the community to take part in
- Educate the community about growing and caring for plants and vegetables

"We know it's got to have that wow factor. To give people that sense of escapism. That's what we aim to do" **David, Staff member**

About the grant

The funding from The National Lottery Community Fund builds on the work of an earlier grant. Prior to receiving any grants, the garden space was very scrubby and bare, with few activities being offered outside.

"It was ghastly before really, needles lying around... not somewhere you'd want to bring your children. It's gone from that to somewhere really beautiful". **Sheila, Beneficiary**

The grant **funded four staff positions**: Victoria, David, Sal and Rory's. Victoria holds a Community Development postgraduate qualification. David is a part time Community Gardener, whose job it is to look after the garden, alongside Rory, whose role is Garden Maintenance. They keep the garden litter free, and David runs the adult volunteer group twice a week. There is also Sal, their sessional youth play worker, who coordinates activities for young people, including building bug hotels, growing potatoes, cooking food and making pizza in the pizza oven. Kate, the centre

Director, explained that they had noticed that young people were coming to the garden anyway so they decided to run activities for them.

With the funding, they have **maintained the community shed**. The shed is a safe place where people can come together to make things, mend things, learn new skills or use old ones, meet people, and have a laugh while being productive.

The grant also paid for **materials such as seeds and plants**.

Project set up and delivery

The garden specifically wants to be open to anyone: the gates are open all the time and people are encouraged to drop by whenever they want and spend as much time as they'd like in the space. This is deliberate as Kate wants to make sure that, in contrast to other available local support, everyone in the local area can access their space.

“There are a lot of support agencies in the local area, but many operate by referral only. We want to be open to everyone”. **Kate, Director**

There is no recruitment as such, because they want everyone to feel able to come by, but they have a very lively Facebook page. They have also started engaging with younger people in the community via Instagram Stories. Some of the volunteers and beneficiaries proactively got in touch as they had worked there before, like Ian, while others just stumbled across it.

They also work with specific groups. For example, one person will come from Community Jobs Scotland, to work for them on a six-month placement: these are people who have barriers to accessing training and work, often because of ill health.

They have also worked with a local school, with teenagers who are following an alternative curriculum, some of whom may be at risk of exclusion from mainstream education. This came about because the school approached the garden, looking for extracurricular activities. Some of the young people were already known to the garden because they had been involved in vandalising it in the past, so Kate was pleased that they had an opportunity to engage with these young people. Their youth worker accompanied them for weekly sessions; at these sessions, the young people were shown how to care for the garden. After taking part, the young people had a better relationship with the garden and no longer vandalised it. Some appeared more motivated generally.

Project impact

Key highlights

Numbers supported

- 45 beneficiaries supported through activities run in the garden
- Around 2000 people have used the garden in the last year (some of whom do so regularly). It is open 24/7 and people can come and go as they like so it is difficult to ascertain exactly.

Key impacts

- It has helped the community stay connected and reduced social isolation during the pandemic.
- It has improved people’s wellbeing, mental and physical health.
- It has helped those with ill health or at risk of exclusion from mainstream education to gain skills and work experience

Website

<https://northedinburgharts.co.uk/>

People had more social contact

Both volunteers and beneficiaries like that they know everyone there. The project staff know it has become an important part of some families’ lives. This tends to be families who embrace everything that the centre does: they’ll come in and use the space, parents will have a coffee while the kids play in the sandpit, then they might start taking some of the creative classes, then possibly start volunteering themselves.

“It’s so nice to know you have the whole family there in that safe space”
Kate, Director

“It’s been a safe space for her [daughter] to grow up: she knows her way around by feel, it’s closed off from roads, there’s no dog poo or needles or whatever. People know her as well, so I know there’s always people looking out for her. I’ve seen the change in her too... her confidence has grown massively; she doesn’t need me as much anymore” **Jenny, Beneficiary**

Jenny, whose child is registered blind, is part of one such family. She has been going to the garden for 15 years and likes the fact that her child has grown up there. Recently, participating in the activities has given her a sense of purpose and something to do now her daughter does not need her so much.

People's mental health and wellbeing was better

One of the beneficiaries, Sheila, felt very emotionally connected to the garden as her husband went there a lot for the two years before he died when struggling with dementia. In tough times it was an easy space for him to be, with no pressure. It was an awful time for him and for her, but having the garden helped. It kept him active and doing things and for her it was a respite and somewhere she could go just to sit and relax with a cup of tea.

"There have been times when I've been quite down... it's important to meet with people, get outside. it raises your spirits" **Sheila, Beneficiary**

Callum tried out a couple of other mental health support projects, but they were too far away and he found that he didn't actually like the focus on his mental health and

"I just appreciate that they've been so flexible with me. If I'm able to, I get in for the two-hour session. But if I'm not, if I'm struggling at that time, they understand." **Callum, Volunteer**

the structure. He has found that it is easier for him to come to the garden as it is freer, with no timetabling, and lets him be himself more. The staff have been understanding of the fact

that he still struggles with his mental health sometimes and have catered to his ability: he does simple tasks that do not require too much concentration.

Mel enjoys spending time in the garden for her mental health: when she had depression, she felt it helped her to keep going. She has also valued getting to try new things and to learn skills. She has appreciated that, whenever she has suggested bringing a new activity to the garden, the staff have looked into it for her and have usually been able to make it happen. For example, she has got involved in running the messy play sessions with under-fives, as well as trying out new activities such as yoga.

People express more local pride and belonging

It is a high quality safe green space in an area of deprivation, that people can visit to escape from the noise and litter of the urban surroundings. Those who use the garden feel that people in the community are proud of the space.

The garden space inspires people in that it aims to show them what they can grow themselves, for example in their window boxes.

"The space is so beautiful and is really coming into its own now that we've planted it all. Just having an area that someone clearly cares about, somewhere that isn't shoddy at all, it's well looked after, sends a positive message to those living nearby." **Kate, Director**

It also protects local biodiversity, with benefits to wildlife, flowers and insects.

Overall reflections

Kate feels that flexibility is key when running projects like this; they started work on the garden with a relatively rigid idea of what they would offer and thought they would reach more people with less of an impact. Instead it has been the other way around: the impact has been really meaningful for a smaller number of people.

Kate also reflected that it has been really important to have some staff looking after the garden, while others welcome and coordinate volunteers. She feels the team's skillset (a mix of gardening and community development) has been key to the garden's success in engaging the community. The new youth worker role is particularly valuable as it has allowed them to engage effectively with young people.

There has been an occasional challenge around how people use the space, particularly given their ethos of openness. Vandalism generally is still a real challenge and is endemic in the area they are based. They have learnt positive ways to deal with it through engaging with schools and local social workers.

Partnership working has gone well. They now have other groups coming in to use the garden, such as social workers, or adults in recovery. They want to pick up their connections with local special needs children's groups, which have fallen by the wayside in the pandemic. Looking forward, they want to link up with other gardens in the area, to help build up the local network and improve access to green spaces, so that everyone knows what is near them.

While there are lots of other garden spaces in the area, none have inside space or toilets, so it is the combination of having the garden with the arts centre space which makes them unusual. Without the garden, the arts centre would be limited in the activities and education it could run, as the indoor space by itself is relatively small. During lockdown both staff and beneficiaries have appreciated having the outdoor space for activities. The centre was on the verge of selling the garden space to raise funds, but Kate was advised not to. She is really pleased they did not because, since redeveloping it, the garden has become the main attraction for the centre, with people often now engaging with the arts centre through the garden.

About the case study

As part of this case study, IFF Research spoke to Kate, Director of North Edinburgh Arts, along with staff members David*, Victoria* and Sal*, one volunteer Callum*, and three beneficiaries, Sheila*, Mel* and Jenny*. **Names have been changed.*