

## **Involving vulnerable young people in horticulture: practical consideration for organisations setting up a horticultural project**

### **Briefing paper one: Green Sites**

**December 2020**

In this series of briefing papers, we highlight the learning from developing a gardening and horticultural project working with vulnerable young people, and the practice-based findings that other projects or organisations may find useful prior to setting up a new gardening project.

This first paper focuses on the importance of taking into account the growing season when planning a horticulture project. It also sets out the key requirements for green sites suitable for engaging young people.

**Putting Down Roots for Young People** was a gardening and horticultural project run by St Mungo's between 2016 – 20. Putting Down Roots for Young People was funded by the National Lottery Community Fund as part of the Our Bright Future programme. The project worked with young people aged 11 to 24 years, who were homeless or at risk of homelessness. The project offered gardening activities through its green sites in London, Bristol and Banbury, where young people and school groups attended regular sessions to gain vocational skills, horticulture qualifications and benefit from therapeutic gardening. The project also delivered outreach sessions by taking horticultural activities to young peoples' hostels and other services.

### **The growing season**

The seasons play an important role in the cycle of a horticultural project. Horticulture activities generally centre around the growing season, which runs from March / April until September / October in the UK. The nature of gardening, and especially food growing, is that if a project misses the beginning of the growing season the results in terms of crops are likely to be limited. To maximise the key months of engagement, new projects should therefore plan to have their site and staff team in place well in advance of the growing season.

When it's cold and wet outside most people, including young people, prefer to stay inside. Recruiting young people in spring or early summer, rather than during the autumn, gives young participants a better chance of settling in and building relationships with staff and other young people, before the common winter drop-off in numbers. Nevertheless, with careful planning, access to indoor space and a broad offer of activities, such as crafts or woodwork, sessions can continue all year around.

### **Identifying suitable green sites**

It takes time to locate and secure a suitable green space. Putting Down Roots for Young People spent considerable time and resources identifying green sites, negotiating access and securing service level arrangements (SLAs) with relevant partners.

Project staff, young participants and other stakeholders identified a number of crucial features of green sites that helped to engage vulnerable young people in horticulture:

- **Easy access**

New projects should consider choosing a central location or one that is easily accessible by foot or public transport, as if a site is remote, difficult or expensive to access (e.g. requires two or three buses) vulnerable young people are less likely to attend, or attend regularly.

- **Safe and calm**

An environment that feels safe and calm is paramount to working with vulnerable young people and to achieve the benefits of social and therapeutic gardening. Carrying out meaningful activities together with other young people in a green setting is well known to facilitate a sense of peace and calm, as well as other benefits.

Separate areas within a green site, or secluded spots where young people can retreat to if they need their own space, is especially beneficial for young people with learning difficulties.

*'It's just a chilled environment, and you don't really get that a lot in London... I do like it here, I just like it. I think it's because it's quiet here, I don't get a lot of that... being somewhere it's quiet, it's surprisingly enjoyable'. (Young participant)*

- **Outdoor space**

A green site needs to be large enough to allow project staff and young people to build poly tunnels, compost bins and raised beds, and perhaps a pizza oven or a BBQ. However, when a site is too large the regular upkeep and weeding can become unmanageable for staff and young people.

An important feature of involving young people in horticulture, is to plan, design and develop different spaces within a site, as well as planting and growing different types of plants. Hence, an established garden which merely requires maintaining is less suitable for horticultural training purposes.

- **Indoor space**

Access to indoor space greatly extends the activities and training opportunities that a project can offer. It allows young people to work on their training workbook, engage in craft activities or relax together when it is raining and cold outside.

Other infrastructure, such as toilets and electricity also prolong young people's time on site. Kitchen facilities, whether indoor or outdoor, can enhance young people's experiences as projects can offer cooking activities using home-grown produce and for young people to test new vegetables, fruits and herbs.

- **Garden wear**

Providing work clothes, such as overalls and rain coats, boots in different sizes and gardening gloves, enables young people to get involved in horticultural activities in all weather, regardless of what they are wearing when they attend. This removes a potential practical barrier to engagement.

### **The evaluation**

Dr Anna Ludvigsen worked with Putting Down Roots for Young People between 2018 – 2020, to evaluate their work with young people. The practice findings presented in this paper are based on evaluation interviews with project staff, young people, service partners and other stakeholders. For more detail about the evaluation see: [www.ludvigsenmcmahon.com](http://www.ludvigsenmcmahon.com)