

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

Briefing paper two: Staffing

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 second paper looks at the skills and experiences needed within a project staff team, in order to facilitate young people's involvement in a horticultural project.

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.

Staff experiences and skills

For organisations that have not worked with young people before, it is important to acknowledge that working with young people is different to working with adults, and that project staff therefore need prior experience of the young people's sector.

In addition, young people at risk of homelessness often have multiple and complex needs which are likely to increase their emotional and social vulnerabilities, and consequently the support needed to participate in a gardening project. Hence, employing experienced staff who are able to engage and support vulnerable young people is key to the success of a project.

Over the course of the evaluation, project staff, young people and other stakeholders identified a broad range of personal characteristics, skills and experiences that staff need when working within a horticultural youth project:

Working with young people

- Familiarity with the young people's sector and local services
- A commitment to young people and an understanding of the factors that affect their lives
- Good interpersonal and listening skills, with the ability to establish and maintain good relationships with young people
- Ability to provide, or signpost to, reliable support when needed
- Flexibility and willingness to try new things
- Patience and inclusivity with all young people
- Capacity to manage young people's concerns with respect and sensitivity, while working within the limits of confidentiality and boundaries
- Resilience

'[Project staff] have this incredible way of working with the kids. It's very gentle, very thoughtful, they build the children's self-confidence and self-belief, making it a safe space'. (School partner)

'If you suffer from mental health issues, you are not alone here, you always got someone to speak to... I have had a couple of days where my mood has been rubbish, and the [project staff] has taken time out to just let me let it all out. I have never had that, so it feels good to know that there is someone here who wants to [listen]'. (Young participant)

Working in a horticultural project

- Knowledge of horticulture, including food cultivation
- Understanding of social and therapeutic horticulture
- Ability to deliver an accredited vocational training programme
- Have initiative, be self-motivated and able to work independently
- Experience of networking and building partnerships with other organisations or practitioners in the local area
- Ability to carry out physical gardening tasks (e.g. digging and moving compost)
- Driving license

Combined these are a very specific, and somewhat niche, range of skills for one person to have. Consequently, projects may want to consider employing an interdisciplinary staff team that includes, for example, a youth worker, support worker and a horticulturalist or horticultural therapist.

Staff to client ratio

Compared to adults, young people often need more guidance and one-to-one encouragement to stay on task when involved in garden activities. This is especially the case for vulnerable young people, or young people with learning difficulties. New projects therefore need to agree a safe staff to client ratio, and to decide how many young people they can safely have on site at any one time.

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