

INVOLVING YOUNG PEOPLE AT RISK OF HOMELESSNESS IN HORTICULTURE

A report of the learning from St Mungo's five-year project 'Putting Down Roots for Young People'

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1. Introduction

This report summarises the learning from establishing, delivering and evaluating a gardening and horticultural training project for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Putting Down Roots for Young people is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund as part of the Our Bright Future programme. Between 2016 and 2020, St Mungo's delivered the 5-year project in three geographical areas. Ludvigsen McMahon was commissioned in 2018 to evaluate the project until its completion in December 2020 (the evaluation methodology is described in appendix 1).

This report considers seven areas that were identified during the evaluation as key to organisational learning. Key findings highlight the transferable lessons to establishing and developing a horticultural project for young people. These areas are:

- Horticultural training
- Green space
- Partnership working
- A team in multiple settings
- Working with young people
- Supporting vulnerable young people
- Relationship with St Mungo's

This report also brings findings from the evaluation together with evidence from the wider field of homeless young people and social and therapeutic horticulture. It summarises what has been learnt from the Putting Down Roots for Young People project and draws out some of the key points for future initiatives in this field.

2. Background to Putting Down Roots for Young People

2.1 St Mungo's

St Mungo's is a housing association and homeless charity established in 1969 by a group of people who decided to help out in response to seeing people sleeping rough on the streets of London. Having developed and expanded over the past fifty years, St Mungo's worked with over 32,800 people in 2019-20, across its 174 services in London and the South of England (St Mungo's annual review 2019-20). As a charity, St Mungo's is primarily known for its street outreach with homeless adults and accommodation services. In 2019-20 the organisation provided over 3,000 people with housing and support on any given night (Ibid).

2.2 Putting Down Roots for Young People

Putting Down Roots for Young People was a St Mungo's gardening and horticultural project that worked specifically with young people aged 11 – 25 years old, who were homeless or at risk of homelessness. Funded between January 2016 and December 2020 by the National Lottery Community Fund as part of the Our Bright Future programme, Putting Down Roots for Young People engaged young people in three geographical areas: London, Bristol and Oxfordshire.

Within St Mungo's, Putting Down Roots for Young People was situated in the Train and Trade department, which offered courses to St Mungo's clients in different trades, such as bricklaying, decorating and horticulture. Modelled on St Mungo's long running adult project 'Putting Down Roots', the youth project offered horticultural training and gardening activities through its green hubs, where young people could attend regular and ongoing sessions to gain vocational skills, an entry level qualification in horticulture and benefit from therapeutic gardening.

2.2.1 Project aims and objectives

By creating an environment that supported learning, fostered well-being and enabled young people to learn new skills, Putting Down Roots for Young People worked to support young people realise their potential and look forward to a future with a home and a place in their community.

The project aimed to:

- Develop green spaces with young people, where they felt safe and had a sense of ownership.
- Create safe environments that enabled young people to build their confidence and self-esteem, while improving their mental health and well-being.
- Teach young people gardening and horticulture skills to open up new opportunities.
- Build relationships with local communities to improve community cohesion so that young people felt a sense of belonging.

In addition, Putting Down Roots for Young People worked to achieve the following outcomes for young people who were homeless or at risk of homelessness:

- Improve young people's confidence and self-esteem.
- Improve young people's health and well-being.
- Reduce young people's feeling of social isolation.

- Increase education, training, employment and volunteering opportunities for young people.
- Improve young people's engagement with the wider community.

2.2.2 Three geographical settings

Putting Down Roots for Young People was initially developed to cover four geographical areas in Southern England: London, Milton Keynes, Bristol and Oxfordshire. These were selected based on areas where St Mungo's already had a high number of services (London and Bristol) and on areas where St Mungo's wished to strengthen its presence (Milton Keynes and Oxfordshire). However, shortly after securing the funding in late 2015, St Mungo's lost its contract with the local council to provide accommodation services to young people in Milton Keynes. Consequently, Putting Down Roots for Young People only worked in London, Bristol and Oxfordshire. The overall project team consisted of a project coordinator and three Gardener Trainers.

- **London**

Based in London, the full-time coordinator managed Putting Down Roots for Young People's from St Mungo's offices in central London. The first coordinator was in post for just under one year, before moving on in year 2. Following a dormant period and an internal project review at the end of year 2, a new project coordinator was recruited and was in post between years 3 – 5.

The full-time London-based Gardener Trainer, who was in post for the duration of the five-year project, was primarily based in two green settings, a St Mungo's adult hostel in South London (years 1 – 4) and a grassroots-led community centre in North London (years 3 – 5). Across the five years, the Gardener Trainer provided twice-weekly horticultural sessions to young people (aged 16 – 24 years) who attended the green hubs. In years 1 – 4 the Gardener Trainer also ran occasional outreach and taster sessions with a range of other organisations, such as Centrepont and YMCA, as well as hosting volunteering groups from other organisations, like National Citizen Service (NCS) and corporate business, such as Google. In years 3 – 5, the Gardener Trainer also held two weekly sessions for school groups (aged 13 – 16 years) from two alternative education providers local to the green hub in North London. Following the national COVID-19 lockdown in year 5, during which time all sessions were cancelled, the Gardener Trainer relocated project activities to an allotment in North London, where engagement focused on developing 'moving on' plans for the young people.

- **Bristol**

The full-time Gardener Trainer, who initially covered both Bristol and Oxfordshire was in post for one year until mid-year 2. During this time, the Gardener Trainer engaged a small number of young people (aged 16 – 24 years) in an allotment in North Bristol. This was followed by a dormant period in Bristol, until year 3 where a newly recruited part-time Gardener Trainer identified two new green hubs, a vicarage garden in walking distance from Central Bristol and an allotment on the southern outskirts of Bristol. These two green hubs were used to host school groups from two local alternative school providers. During year 3, the Gardener Trainer also ran a small number of 6-8 week outreach projects, working with local partners to take gardening to young people in their hostels or supported housing. In year 4, with the permanent Gardener Trainer on maternity leave, the work with school groups was covered by the Putting Down Roots Gardener Trainer who also worked with adult clients in Bristol. However, with the loss of the vicarage garden at the end of year 4, the Gardener Trainer role was made redundant and Bristol work with young people finished in March 2020.

- **Oxfordshire**

Oxfordshire was the only area where Putting Down Roots for Young People specifically targeted St Mungo's clients, as St Mungo's provides a young people's accommodation service in Witney and Caterton. The original Bristol-based Gardener Trainer, who was also responsible for work in Oxfordshire, carried out outreach and tester sessions during year 1 with young people and their keyworkers in St Mungo's accommodation, but struggled to engage any of the young clients. Work in Oxfordshire therefore stopped in year 2 and was not resumed until year 3 with a new part-time Gardener Trainer in place. However, the initial engagement issues with St Mungo's clients continued and work was stopped at the end of year 3, to focus on other longer-term outreach work in Banbury. In year 4, a new partnership was established with a local college in Banbury that via a National Lottery funded project 'Back on Track' offered support to young people at risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training). Working from the partner's green hub in Banbury, the Gardener Trainer collaborated with Back on Track staff to provide three weekly sessions to young people referred via the partners, until the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown forced sessions to be halted in year 5. The Oxfordshire Gardener Trainer left his position during lockdown in year 5, but young clients were able to resume gardening session with partner staff following lockdown.

3. What we know about homeless young people and their involvement with horticulture

3.1 Homeless young people

Young people experiencing homelessness are one of the most vulnerable groups in society, and with homelessness rising and resources to tackle homelessness declining, there is a growing concern about vulnerable young people. According to Centrepoin't's Youth Homelessness database, over 110,000 young people in the UK approached their local authority in 2018-19 because they were homeless or at risk of homelessness. Almost half of these young people were homeless because their family or friends were no longer able to accommodate them, while for another one-in-five their tenancy had come to an end.

Although most young people were assessed by their local authority and many received assistance with their situation, 57% of the young people in England who presented to a local authority in 2018-19, were not successfully prevented or dealt with leaving them at risk of homelessness, or leading them to become 'hidden' homeless (Centrepoin't databank, fact sheet 2018-19).

Evidence on the predictors of homelessness among young people highlights the combined role of both structural and individual factors. Structural and wider societal factors can include macroeconomic causes, such as growing youth unemployment, the housing market and changing welfare policies (Williams-Fletcher & Wairumbi, 2020). Individual risk factors associated with homelessness, can include adverse childhood experiences, school exclusion and learning difficulties (Watts et al, 2015). Specific groups of young people, such as those from BAME backgrounds, refugees, LGBTQ+ and care leavers have also been identified as more vulnerable to homelessness. Combined, these factors impact on young people's experiences of systems and services, and their pathways into independence, potentially placing them at greater risk of homelessness (Homeless Link, 2019).

Recent accounts also highlight the growing proportion of young people accessing homeless services who have complex and multiple needs, such as mental health and behavioural issues, substance misuse, learning difficulties (often undiagnosed) and involvement with the criminal justice system (Watts et al, 2015). Young people with complex needs are also more likely to be turned away from service providers, and their multiple needs severely impact their prospects of finding work and maintaining a secure income and stable accommodation (Watts et al, 2015).

3.2 Social and therapeutic horticulture

It is increasingly recognised, by individuals and health professionals alike, that horticulture, gardening and food growing is good for health and wellbeing. Research shows that gardening can provide substantial physical and mental health benefits, as well as increase life satisfaction and create a sense of community (Soga et al, 2017, Schmutz et al. 2014). Nature-based interventions operate under a variety of names, but social and therapeutic horticulture (STH) can be defined as the 'use of plants and gardening in a structured and formalised way to promote health and wellbeing' (Sempik et al, 2014:313).

While there are relatively few randomised controlled trials (RCTs) that evidence the direct cause and effect of therapeutic horticulture, a large body of qualitative research studies have consistently demonstrated a wide range of mental health and social benefits (Buck 2016), including:

- Improved mental health and general wellbeing;
- Reduction in depression and anxiety;
- Improved self-esteem, confidence and mood;
- Improved happiness and quality of life;
- A sense of peace and calm;
- Increased social interaction and sense of belonging;
- Development of work skills, meaningful activity and personal achievement (Bragg and Atkins, 2016; Sempik et al, 2002; Schmutz et al. 2014).

Exploring what it is about social and therapeutic horticulture that enables such positive outcomes, Sempik et al (2002) highlighted the interconnectedness between participants' 'passive' appreciation of nature and their 'active' participation in horticulture. This model emphasises how the two distinct processes facilitate the improved health and well-being among participants.

Based on a review of the available research literature, Bragg and Atkins (2016) concluded that the benefits of nature-based interventions appear to derive from a combination of three key attributes, namely:

- The natural environment
- The meaningful activities
- The social context

The social element of gardening projects is often described as a key facilitator to engagement, while focused and activity-based sessions allowed participants to feel empowered to work in green settings that evoked a sense of calm (Harris, 2017).

Drawing on these three elements, the research literature tends to focus on projects that offer social and therapeutic horticulture to people with specific physical health concerns (e.g. stroke, cancer or dementia patients), mental health issues (e.g. post-traumatic stress, depression) or specific groups of people (e.g. older people, offenders, veterans or people with a history of substance misuse). However, while a limited number of studies have focused specifically on homeless adults (e.g. Grabbe et al, 2013; St Mungo's 2013; Durbin, 2018), none were identified that specifically looked at homeless young people's engagement with social and therapeutic horticulture.

4. Key learning

This section looks at key organisational learning by focusing on what Putting Down Roots for Young People did and what was learnt.

4.1 Horticultural training

When St Mungo's won the Our Bright Future funding in late 2015, the intention was to replicate the existing Putting Down Roots model and tailor it to meet the needs of disadvantaged young people. It is unclear whether the intentions were always to set up the young people's project as a separate entity working independently from the existing adults' project, or whether this happened early in the project development. Nevertheless, despite being based within the same St Mungo's department and having the same line manager, the two projects had very little connection and (except for in Bristol) never cooperated or shared sites, resources and learning, or staff and volunteers. Consequently, the youth project developed from scratch, rather than benefiting from St Mungo's existing knowledge and experience.

Despite working independently, Putting Down Roots for Young People as a project 'inherited' many of the structural features of the adult project. The most obvious feature was the focus on training, education and qualifications, which may also derive from being based within the Train and Trade department where the emphasis is on improving clients' employment opportunities through training. From the outset, project activities therefore focused on young people gaining vocational skills and qualifications in horticulture, an emphasis underlined by the recruitment of Gardener Trainers to deliver the project activities, rather than, for example horticultural therapists or youth workers.

However, the outcomes that Putting Down Roots for Young People aimed to achieve, were not simply about young people's qualifications and future employment. Instead they also considered 'softer' outcomes for young people, such as reducing social isolation, improving well-being, creating opportunities to learn new skills, and building confidence and self-esteem. These outcomes correlate more closely with the benefits of social and therapeutic horticulture, over and above educational outcomes. This potential inconsistency between project activities and project outcomes, impacted, and to an extent blurred the direction of the project. Across the five years, staff tried to deliver horticultural training to young people, within a context where young people's complex needs often meant they were not in a position – emotionally and practically – to access structured horticultural learning. Evaluation interviews with young participants highlighted that they valued a more flexible approach to learning, and while they wanted to learn new skills, gaining qualifications was not a priority compared to the more holistic well-being benefits gained from therapeutic gardening.

This dilemma of working to deliver training to vulnerable young people who often were either unable or unwilling to engage with learning in a structured way, created a great deal of ambiguity about the aim and direction of the project. Especially as project success, in part, was measured against how many qualifications or units the young people achieved.

The actual training course offered to young people, an ONC Level 1 in Horticulture, was also transposed from the adult project and hence not designed with young people in mind. Over the course of delivering the training, the Gardener Trainers found the course too long and the content too advanced for young participants, who often had learning difficulties or poor educational experiences. The written component of the qualification was especially challenging, because of the time it took to write up and label course booklets.

In light of this experience the project team rewrote the course in year 3, as an entry-level course (OCNLR entry Level in Horticulture Skills), which was accredited by the Open College Network in year 4. Although the new course material was described as a project strength, as it made horticulture more accessible to young people, in many ways it was developed too late to be useful. Over the five years, one young person completed the Level 1 course and one young person completed the Entry Level course, although many more completed individual course units.

Key points

A well-evidenced Theory of Change. New projects should clarify the issues or problems they seeking to address, together with the outcomes they hope to achieve by developing a Theory of Change. This will help articulate and evidence

the rational between project activities and the desired outcomes that a project works to achieve.

A learning culture. Being able to cooperate, share knowledge and learning within an organisation can help foster a supportive environment, improve reflective practice and facilitate staff development, and ultimate benefit clients.

4.2 Green spaces

Identifying suitable green spaces, from which the project could deliver horticultural sessions to young people was a crucial factor of running Putting Down Roots for Young People. Over the five years, the project worked from numerous sites, including hostel gardens, allotments, a vicarage garden, a community centre with an outdoor bowling green and a school playing field.

One central consideration for the project team, which was never fully resolved, addressed whether it was most beneficial to take gardening activities to young people in their settings or to work with young people from a dedicated green hub. Both approaches had advantages and disadvantages, and throughout the life of the project the team was pulled in different directions doing one or the other, or trying to do both.

Outreach work, for example in young people's hostels or supported housing, was seen as a good way to introduce horticulture to young people and to engage those young people who would not be able or willing to travel to participate in sessions. Putting Down Roots for Young people did run some successful outreach projects, where the gardening activities were low-key, flexible and adapted along the way to meet the young people's needs (e.g. cooking, rather than growing). However, these generated one-off or short-term engagements and did not enable the Gardener Trainers to work with young people over a longer period or to deliver the training course. The project team also learnt the hard way that homeless young people rarely wanted to improve and maintain their hostel gardens, as their time there was perceived as transient. To do so would be to invest in temporary spaces, and young homeless people were understandably unlike to participate.

Working in the community, on the other hand, from dedicated green hubs required young people to travel for sessions, which prevented the most vulnerable young people from attending. Nevertheless, having a core site enabled Gardener Trainers to introduce a broader range of horticultural activities, use power tools and work with young people to design and shape the green space – and most importantly to work with young people over a longer period of time.

By the end of the project the majority of work took place in green hubs. But not all dedicated sites facilitated the desired calm atmosphere highlighted by the research literature as beneficial to participants' learning and wellbeing. During the evaluation, the project team, young participants and other stakeholders highlighted a number of desired requirements for green hubs¹:

- Easily accessible by foot or by public transport
- Access to outdoor space suitable for training purposes (e.g. not an established garden that just needs maintaining)
- A safe and calm environment, ideally with separate areas for young people to retreat when they need their own space.
- A space big enough for poly tunnels, composting and raised beds, but not too big as this makes the upkeep unmanageable
- Access to indoor space suitable for learning opportunities for cold or wet days
- Access to toilets, electricity and ideally kitchen facilities for cooking

Clearly it takes time to locate and secure such an ideal site, and Putting Down Roots for Young People spent considerable time and resources negotiating access and arranging agreements with relevant partners, as well as moving between sites when they were found to be less suitable for their needs. Such relocation also meant that some young participants were unable to move with the project and had to stop attending sessions.

Key points

A dedicated site. To reduce time and resources spent moving sites, a suitable site should be identified and secured as early as possible, ideally before the project starts. Any required infrastructure (poly tunnels, kitchen facilities etc) should also be in place in year 1, in order for the project to get the full use of any investments in the site.

4.3 Partnership working

The original project plan anticipated that Putting Down Roots for Young People would primarily work with young St Mungo's clients who, like the adult project, would be referred by their St Mungo's keyworker. However, in year 1 the project already recognised that it was unlikely that St Mungo's keyworkers would be able to refer a sufficient number of young people into the project. Hence, without a clear internal referral pathway, the project had to drum up referrals from other

¹ These features were identified with young people in mind, Swift (2017) highlights other important features of therapeutic gardens: <https://www.landscapeinstitute.org/blog/health-wellbeing-sweden-part-2/> (accessed 3rd November 2020).

organisations working with young people, a task that was left to the project team to do.

Across the five years, the project team spent considerable time and resources attempting to initiate and build relationships with external organisations in order to establish a referral pathway into the project. At the end of year 3, the evaluation estimated that the project team had approached or met with between 80 – 100 different organisational contacts across the three locations to promote the project. While most external organisations showed a genuine interest in making links and referring their clients, the project team struggled to translate their networking efforts into actual referrals. Multiple reasons for this were highlighted by the project team, and included horticulture being a ‘hard sell’ to young people; St Mungo’s low profile as a provider of youth provision; a high turnover of staff in potential partner organisations, and the same organisations being under tremendous pressure from budget and staff cuts. Consequently, while external organisations expressed their wish to work with St Mungo’s, when it came down to it they often struggled to identify the resources to do so (for example to free-up staff to accompany young people to gardening sessions).

Over the course of Putting Down Roots for Young People, project staff established two longer-term partnerships. While the two partner organisations differed markedly in terms of resources, size and capacity – Back on Track was a Lottery funded project run as part of a college in Banbury, while Pinpoint Inc was a small grassroots organisation involved in managing a community centre in North London – they shared one common characteristic: they both had a green site and were looking for a partner to help maintain that space. These partners highlighted their lack of experience with regard to running a gardening and horticulture project, but expressed their strong wish to engage young people in shaping their green site. The partnership in Banbury, established in year 4, was especially promising, as young people who were not currently engaged in education were referred directly to Back on Track staff, who worked together with the Gardener Trainer to deliver horticultural sessions, alongside mentoring and carers advice. Unfortunately, the project only had 6 – 7 months over the winter season to consolidate the partnership, before sessions were ceased due to the COVID-19 lockdown in year 5.

Key points

Working in partnerships: Ongoing difficulties in establishing partnerships emphasised the need for St Mungo’s to work more strategically with external organisations, ideally prior to submitting funding bids. Plans should acknowledge that it takes time to establish a working partnership. Agreements and SLA’s should

be in place at the beginning of the project, with senior managers able to understand and support the partnership.

Consultation with potential partners, clients and other stakeholders. Prior to setting up a project, organisations should consider engaging with potential partners, clients and other stakeholders. Together with other sources of data, consultations can help build a comprehensive understanding of the needs and issues facing clients, as well as highlighting any potential issues, complications and solutions at an early stage.

4.4 A team in multiple settings

From the outset, the organisational set up of Putting Down Roots for Young People, was that three Gardener Trainers were delivering activities in three different geographical areas, and even within these different areas, Gardener Trainers often worked from multiple green sites.

Due to the multiple components of the delivery model, project staff needed a broad range of skills and experiences in order to carry out the variety of tasks required of them. During the course of the evaluation, it was identified that, besides being self-motivated and able to work independently, each Gardener Trainer needed:

- Familiarity with the homelessness sector and local support services;
- Experience of engaging and supporting young people, including vulnerable young people;
- Ability to deliver an accredited vocational training programme;
- Practical knowledge of horticulture, including food growing;
- Experience of networking and building partnerships with other organisations or practitioners in the local area;
- Ability to motivate and supervise young people, as well as carry out physical gardening tasks (e.g. digging and moving compost);

These were high expectations of the Gardener Trainer role, especially as two positions were part-time. Evaluation interviews with project staff and other stakeholders highlighted how staff, due to the organisational set up of the project, each required these specific, and somewhat niche, range of skills and experiences.

With the benefit of hindsight, the project, and hence the young people, may have benefitted from two or more staff working together from the same site. This would have allowed Gardener Trainers to complement each other in terms of skills, experiences and personal characteristics, and to support each other. Working from the same site would also have increased the project's capacity to do more outreach

work with young people and potential partner organisations, while still running regular sessions with young people.

Key points

Delivering at a distance is often an organisational challenge as physical and social distance can influence the support available to staff based remotely, and the ability of senior managers to effectively steer a project they only know at arm's length (Harris, 2017). Over time staff can begin to feel isolated from the core organisation. While regular team meetings, learning opportunities and adequate line management support and supervision can minimise this, organisational disconnect is a continued risk for lone and remote working staff.

4.5 Working with young people

From the very beginning, the low number of young people attending Putting Down Roots for Young People was a challenge for the project. While the proposed engagement target of 400 homeless participants (80 per year) and 1,374 young people from the wider community was unrealistic for 2.2 FTE Gardener Trainers to meet, and despite this being recognised as unachievable both internally and externally within the first year, the project had to continue to report to the funders based on these targets. Furthermore, no internal re-evaluation was carried out to determine what *would* be a realistic target for the project to achieve, given the available resources across the three geographical areas, for example in terms of staff capacity. This put the project on the back foot, as it was perceived to be underachieving from the very beginning.

One example is the staff to client ratio or how many young people the Gardener Trainers could safely work with given their higher support needs. The original adult project reportedly worked with approximately 5-6 adult clients per member of staff. But as young people tend to be less independent and less self-motivated than adults when working in the garden, they often required more guidance and one-to-one support to stay on task. The experience of Putting Down Roots for Young People was therefore that 3 – 4 young clients per staff member was more appropriate. However, in Banbury, Back on Track staff worked with no more than 5 young people per 2 members of staff, a considerably lower staff to client ratio.

As mentioned earlier the set-up of Putting Down Roots for Young People meant that the Gardener Trainers all worked alone. Within a youth work setting this is unheard of, as sessions are never delivered by one youth worker only. This way of working is to safeguard both the young people and the workers. Although horticultural training may differ to youth work practices, there is no doubt that the

Gardener Trainers found lone working isolating, at times stressful and often made them feel vulnerable.

These perceptions impacted the operational running of the project significantly, as requests for sessional staff to support the Gardener Trainer during sessions were turned down due to the limited number of young people attending.

Key points

Safeguarding staff and clients. Staff to client ratio should be reviewed in order for staff to better support young people with higher support needs. The benefits of working in pairs should also be considered to reduce the risk of lone working to both clients and staff.

Funding proposals need genuine input from managers and staff with expertise in the area that funding is being sought to help ensure that targets, project plans and activities are evidenced-based, realistic, implementable and will benefit clients.

4.6 Supporting vulnerable young people

The Putting Down Roots for Young People team primarily worked with two different age groups of young people:

- Young adults (aged 16 – 24 years) who attended sessions independently
- School students (aged 13 – 16 years) who attended sessions together with school staff

Over the five years the project engaged approximately 433 young people and 332 other participants, such as adult volunteers. Among the young participants, 32 attended the project longer-term.² An analysis of young adults' attendance in year 4, showed that on average young adults attended the project for 7 months (median 6½ months), while school students came on site for two – three school terms.

As expected, when working with homeless young people and young people at risk of homelessness, the young participants had experienced many of the risk factors noted by the research literature. Monitoring data and interviews with Gardener Trainers showed that most young participants had two or more of the following vulnerabilities:

² According to OBF monitoring data the engagement with the 433 young people, breaks down into: 213 young people engaged on a one-off basis (once – up to a day); 188 young people engaged short-term (more than once, up to three months); 32 young people engaged long-term (more than three months in duration). Source: OBF monitoring report, Year 5, 3rd Quarterly report (2020).

- Disabilities, poor physical health and learning difficulties
- Poor mental health and well-being. Young participants experienced a range of mental health issues, such as eating disorders, anxiety, panic attacks, depression and bipolar disorder.
- Disengagement from education. Young people often struggled with mainstream education, had poor educational experiences, had left or been excluded from school with few or no qualifications.
- Not in education, employment or training. Young people were often NEET due to ill health, mental health issues or homelessness.
- Family background. Family difficulties included relationship breakdowns, parental death, low income, experiences of domestic abuse, family poor health and mental health issues.
- Growing up in care and care leavers

The project's experience of working directly with young people evidenced their often multiple and complex needs that increased their emotional and social vulnerabilities, and impacted their ability to commit to and participate in horticultural training.

Direct work with young people also brought to light their substantial support needs, around for example, claiming benefits, attending appointments, obtaining information, finding and sustaining accommodation, as well as more emotional support.

Providing such support was evidently not part of the Gardener Trainers job description and also fell outside the scope of a horticultural training project, but project staff often felt compelled to step in and offer additional support when realising young people had no other support network. This caused some tension about role and responsibilities, as staff were pulled in different directions or felt uncomfortable or unqualified to provide such support.

Key points

Interdisciplinary staff team. A team composed of staff with different qualifications, experiences and job descriptions, but working collaborative to support young people in order for them to learn and progress by providing wrap-around support may have benefitted young people's involvement in the project.

Staff supervision. Working with vulnerable young people with complex needs, especially over a longer period, can be stressful and emotionally challenging for staff. Hence, projects should consider offering regular clinical supervision or reflective practice to staff, as it provides opportunities for staff to explore their own personal and emotional reactions to their work, reflect on and challenge their own

practice within a safe space, as well as engage in professional development and identify best practice.

4.7 Relationship with St Mungo's

During year 4 – 5, it became clear that Putting Down Roots for Young People as a project working specifically with young people, no longer aligned with St Mungo's priorities. As a charity, St Mungo's primarily works with adults who are *already* homeless, and while the organisation does support homeless young people (11% of St Mungo's clients were aged 16 – 25 years in 2017/18)³, strategic priorities had changed over the past five years, in part due to the national increase of rough sleepers. A consequence of this was that St Mungo's moved away from developing expertise in young people services, in order to focus on services such as outreach, shelters, 'no second night out' provision and other initiatives specifically targeting rough sleeping.

Another noticeable difference between St Mungo's and Putting Down Roots for Young People, was the project's broader focus on young people at *risk* of homelessness. Targeting those at risk of homelessness enabled Putting Down Roots for Young People to work with a younger age-group, such as school groups attending alternative education and Pupil Referral Units, with the aim of reducing their risk of homelessness in the future.

These strategic differences were amplified by a number of practical barriers for the project. Gardener Trainers were, for example, unable to register clients under 16 years on St Mungo's monitoring system Opal. This made it harder for the project to account for the number of clients the project engaged, and consequently justify its worth to senior managers. Such barriers, and the perceived lack of support in solving them, made the project team feel disconnected and sidelined from St Mungo's as an organisation. In evaluation interviews, project staff described feeling undervalued and unsupported by St Mungo's, but also that the organisation lacked the broader structures to support a young people's project.

In year 4, acknowledging that the project had struggled without an overall strategic plan and senior managerial support, St Mungo's created a new manager role that had the strategic oversight of the organisations' expanding horticultural services. However, as the project entered its final year of funding this was possibly too little, too late to change the direction of the project, without also revising the project model.

³ St Mungo's (2018) Taking action: ending homelessness, rebuilding lives, Annual Review 2017-18.

Key points

Alignment between organisational strategy and project aims: A close fit between an organisation's strategic values and a specific project aims and objectives must be in place before a project is funded and resourced, as this can help prevent tension further down the line.

5. Conclusion

This report has summarised some of the learning from establishing, delivering and evaluating a horticultural training project for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. By bringing research evidence from the wider field of youth homelessness and the therapeutic horticulture, together with the findings from the evaluation, the report has been able to draw out some of the key learning points for future initiatives in this field.

Throughout its five years of operation, Putting Down Roots for Young People experienced many changes and challenges, but also many achievements. Through trial and error, the project learnt valuable lessons and was able to adapt its way of working to better suit young people's needs.

However, the experience of developing a new project, within an existing framework, also emphasises the importance of clearly articulating and evidencing the link between client need, project activities and intended outcomes.

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Appendix 1: Evaluation methodology

St Mungo's commissioned Ludvigsen McMahon in 2018 to carry out an independent evaluation of the project's work in order to evidence the impact of the project and to identify key learning from providing a horticultural project to homeless young people. The evaluation followed the development of the project between September 2018 and December 2020, when the National Lottery Community funding for Putting Down Roots for Young People came to an end.

Evaluation questions

The evaluation had the following two primary objectives, each with a number of related key questions:

1. To assess the impact of the project on its beneficiaries:
 - What are the outcomes for the young participants involved in the project, in terms of their health, wellbeing, confidence and self-esteem?
 - How effective is the project in recruiting, engaging and sustaining young people's engagement in the project?
 - To what extent has the project increased the education, training, employment and volunteering opportunities of young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness?
 - What impact has the project had on young people's engagement with the wider community?

2. To identify and share the lessons learned from delivering the project:
 - What are the challenges and facilitators of delivering the project effectively in different contexts?
 - What are the challenges of delivering the project to young people and how are these being addressed?
 - What are the key success factors necessary to support young people involved in the project and the wider community?
 - What changes and adaptations, if any, have been made during the life of the project? How did such changes come about?

Evaluation methods

- **Repeat interviews**

Interviews with key stakeholders within St Mungo's, the Putting Down Roots for Young People staff team and partner organisations in each of the three geographical settings were carried out over three years (2018 – 20). Interviews

focused on the process of developing and delivering the project in different areas and the outcomes of project activities for young participants. The interviews also addressed project learning, organisational challenges and working in partnerships.

- **Young people’s interviews**

Interviews were carried out with individual young people (aged 16 – 24 years) who had attended project sessions over a longer period in London. Interviews explored young people’s experiences of being involved with the project, sought feedback on what could be improved, as well as their perceptions of any impact of horticultural sessions.

- **Observations**

The evaluator used participant observation during project delivery as a way to gain contextual information about the project and to make sense of data collected using other methods. Observations were carried out during project delivery with young people, as participants engaged in horticultural activities, such as mowing the lawn, digging up potatoes, making seed bombs, building wooden planters, painting bird boxes or cooking pizzas using home grown produce.

Summary of qualitative data gathered

Table 1. Number of people interviewed

	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
PDRfYP staff	4	4	2
St Mungo staff	2	2	2
Partners	0	6	3
Young people	1	4	2
Observations	1	4	1

Limitations of the evaluation

This evaluation was commissioned in late 2018, almost three years into a five-year project. With two of the original staff members having left their post in 2017, the majority of data gathered about the project’s early days came from quarterly funding reports, the project’s activity log and case studies produced by Gardener Trainers. This does, however, limit the understanding of decisions made in this early period.

This evaluation was planned as a mixed-method evaluation, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, in order to add both breadth and depth to the

evaluation. The evaluator worked with the project team to identify a range of assessment measures that could help evidence young people's progress pre and post their involvement with the project. The project team, for example, attended training in how to use the 'Youth Outcome Star' as an assessment tool. However, due to the limited number of young people who attended the project independently (not as school groups), the Youth Outcome Star was only repeated twice for one young person. A dozen 'feedback postcards' were also completed in year 4, together with a small number of repeated 'outcome flowers' developed by the evaluators of the Our Bright Future programme⁴. Consequently, evaluation findings derive primarily from qualitative methods, such as interviews and observation.

⁴ Findings from the 'feedback postcards' and 'outcome flowers' were discussed in the year four interim evaluation report (Ludvigsen, 2020)