

ST MUNGO'S PUTTING DOWN ROOTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Interim evaluation report: Year four
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Main Findings

Putting Down Roots for Young People is a St Mungo's gardening and horticultural project, which works specifically with young people aged 11 to 24 years old, who are homeless or at risk of homelessness.

- During year four Putting Down Roots for Young People engaged 56 young participants. On average young people engaged with the project for 7 months.

Young participants

- Young people attending the project experience many vulnerabilities, like poor mental health and disengagement from education and work. This suggests that the project has succeeded in engaging its target group of young people who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness.
- Benefits of attending the project include giving young people something to do and look forward to; improved well-being through physical activity; increased confidence and self-worth; and a space to develop positive relationships with attentive adults.
- While these outcomes are encouraging, the number of young people who have engaged with the project longer-term is still relatively limited. Consequently, the evaluation is unable to evidence the wider impact of the project's work with young people.

Challenges of providing a horticultural training project

- Recruiting young people has been a challenge from the outset of the project – and continues to be so.
- Over the past four years the project has trailed different ways of engaging young people. Its current model of work focuses on delivering sessions from its green hubs, which has enabled the project to facilitate longer-term engagement and hence longer-term outcomes.
- The project has experienced some disconnect from St Mungo's as an organisation, and while horticultural training plays a growing role within St Mungo's a separate strand specifically targeting young people is unlikely to continue beyond the current funding period.

Executive Summary

Putting Down Roots for Young People is a St Mungo's gardening and horticultural project, which works specifically with young people aged 11 to 24 years old, who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Funded since January 2016 by Our Bright Future, a National Lottery Community Fund programme, Putting Down Roots for Young People works in three geographical areas: London, Bristol and Oxfordshire.

The evaluation was commissioned in September 2018 to evaluate the project's outcomes until the end of the funding period in December 2020. This interim report focuses on the project's activities, challenges and achievements in year four (2019).

Progress in year four

Working with two groups of young people – young adults (aged 18-24 years) and school students (ages 13-16) – the project engaged 56 young participants during year four. On average young adults engaged with the project for 7 months, but this varied between participants attending green hubs in London (average 12 months) and Oxfordshire (average 5 months).

Following a decision in year three to rewrite the projects' training material, the new Open College Network course was accredited in summer 2019. Young people engaging with the project are now able to gain a qualification in horticulture (OCNLR Entry Level in Horticulture Skills – Entry 3) or to complete units towards the qualification.

Young people and their outcomes

The two different groups of young people who attend Putting Down Roots for Young People share many of the same vulnerabilities that make them at risk of homelessness, such as poor mental health, disabilities, being care leavers, disengagement from education, being NEET (not in education, employment or training) or experiencing difficult family backgrounds. These common characteristics suggest that the project has succeeded in engaging its target group of vulnerable young people who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Interviews with young adults and project staff highlight several common benefits of attending Putting Down Roots for Young People, such as:

- Giving young people a routine, something to do and look forward to;
- Improving young people's well-being through physical activities and being outdoors;
- Developing positive relationships with attentive adults and other young people;
- Increasing young people's confidence and self-worth through learning new skills and project staff's positive reinforcement.

While these findings should be viewed with some caution due to the low number of young people engaged, the benefits mentioned correlate with outcomes commonly highlighted in the research literature about the benefits of therapeutic gardening¹.

Challenges and lessons learnt

Engaging young people

Recruiting young people has been a challenge from the outset of the project – and continues to be so. This lack of engagement has been difficult for the project and often very frustrating for the staff team who has worked tirelessly to explore different approaches to increase engagement. However, a combination of factors, like gardening being less attractive to some young people, an aim to engage 'hard to reach' young people with multiple difficulties and the lack of clear referral pathways into the project, have often worked against the project.

Relationship with St Mungo's

Over the last few years of project activities, it has become evident that Putting Down Roots for Young People as a project working specifically with young people, does not fit particularly well within St Mungo's. Since securing the National Lottery Community Funding, and partly in response to the national growth in rough sleeping, St Mungo's has refocused its resources and moved away from developing expertise in young people's services.

This, together with certain structural barriers (like being unable to log clients under 16 years old on St Mungo's monitoring system), has made the project team feel somewhat disconnected from St Mungo's as an organisation.

¹ Soga et al. (2017) Gardening is beneficial for health: a meta- analysis, *Prev Med Rep*, Vol. 5 (92-99).

Acknowledging that the project has struggled without an overall strategic plan, St Mungo's recently created a new manager role that will have strategic oversight of the organisation's expanding horticultural services. However, senior staff within St Mungo's have also expressed that while there is a growing role for horticultural training within St Mungo's, this is unlikely to include a separate strand specifically targeting young people.

The project model

Over the past four years the project has trialed different ways of engaging with young people. At the end of year four, the project has reduced its outreach work, as outreach sessions in hostels tend to be less well attended. Consequently, the project now works primarily from its four green hubs, where the majority of school students and young adults attend sessions regularly over a longer period. This is a positive development as it has enabled the project to facilitate longer-term outcomes, like increased confidence and self-esteem, and improved wellbeing.

However, close relationships with young people have also highlighted their high support needs – needs that generally fall outside the scope of a horticultural training project. Gardener Trainers have often felt compelled to step in and offer support, with for example claiming benefits or attending appointments. This has on occasion caused some conflicts, as staff are pulled in different directions, and may not feel comfortable or qualified to provide keyworker support.

This highlights the importance of working in close partnerships with other organisations, like Back on Track in Oxfordshire, who may be better placed to provide one-to-one guidance and mentoring to young people.

Summary

The young participants, project staff and external partners who fed into this evaluation show that many of the soft outcomes generally associated with therapeutic gardening, like improved self-esteem, confidence and social interaction, are being achieved. However, while these outcomes are encouraging, the number of young people who have engaged with the project longer-term is still relatively limited. Consequently, the evaluation is currently unable to evidence the wider impact of the project's work with young people.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Putting Down Roots for Young People is a St Mungo's gardening and horticultural project which works specifically with young people aged 11 to 24 years old, who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Funded since January 2016 by Our Bright Future, a National Lottery Community Fund programme, Putting Down Roots for Young People works with young people in three geographical areas: London, Bristol and Oxfordshire.

The project offers gardening activities through its green hubs, where young people can attend regular and ongoing sessions to gain vocational skills, a qualification in horticulture and benefit from therapeutic gardening. The project also delivers outreach sessions by taking horticultural activities to young people's services.

1.2 Project aims and objectives

By creating an environment that supports learning, fosters well-being and enables young people to learn new skills, Putting Down Roots for Young People works to help young people realise their potential and look forward to a future with a home and a place in their community.

The project aims to:

- Develop green spaces with young people, where they feel safe and have a sense of ownership.
- Create safe environments that enable 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 feel a sense of belonging.

In addition, Putting Down Roots for Young People works to achieve the following outcomes for young people who are 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.

1.3 About the evaluation

St Mungo's commissioned Ludvigsen McMahon in September 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 young people.

The evaluation will follow the project until the end of the National Lottery Community funding in December 2020. This interim report focuses on project activities and achievements in year four (2019). It builds on the evaluation start-up report (December 2018) that provided a summary of the first three years of project delivery, as well as a more detailed description of the project, its structure and timeline.

In year four, the evaluation has carried out the following work:

- Interviews with four young people (London)
- Interviews with six external partners (London, Bristol, Oxfordshire)
- Interviews with four project staff (London, Bristol, Oxfordshire)
- Interviews with two senior St Mungo's staff
- Participant observation of four delivery sessions (London, Bristol, Oxfordshire)
- Analysis of the project's evaluation tools (Youth Star, Outcome Flower, feedback postcard for young people, feedback questionnaire for partner staff)
- Analysis of monitoring data (provided by the project)
- Review of quarterly funding reports (provided by the project)

This interim report provides an overview of project findings from year four with some illustrative case studies.

2. Project progress in year four

In year four the project engaged with two different age groups of young people:

- The first cohort consists of young adults, aged between 18 and 24 (London and Oxfordshire). These young participants attend the project independently following an introduction and risk assessment from a referral partner.
- The second group of participants is younger – approximately 13 to 16 years old – and they attend horticultural sessions with their school (London and Bristol). Partner schools are responsible for accompanying students to green hubs, and hence school staff are present during sessions.

Working from four green hubs (Higham Hill Hub, the Vicarage Garden, Hartcliffe Allotment and Hobby Horse Nursery), the Gardener Trainers have worked with a total of 56 vulnerable young people this year.

Table 1. Young people engaged during 2019 (year four)²

	London	Bristol	Oxfordshire	Total
Young adults (18 – 24 years)	8	1	21	30
Young school students (13 – 16 years)	12	14	None	26
Total	20	15	21	56

The young adults who engaged with the project in 2019 have on average done so for 7 months (median 6½ months), but this varies noticeably between young people who attend green hubs in London (average 12 months) and Oxfordshire (average 5 months).

Young students generally attended the project for one or two school terms, although some students have been coming on site for longer.

2.1 Horticultural training

The training qualification offered to young people was originally transposed from St Mungo’s horticultural work with adults through the original Putting Down Roots project. However, over the course of delivering the training the Gardener Trainers found the course too long and the content too advanced for young participants. In year three, the project team therefore began to rewrite the course as an entry-level course. While the accreditation process have taken longer than anticipated the new Open College Network course material and qualification was signed off in summer 2019. When completed

² 1st January – 31st December 2019.

young people will gain an OCNLR Entry Level in Horticulture Skills (Entry 3) qualification.

The Gardener Trainers plan to offer the full training course to young people who engage with the project regularly over a longer period. Other young people, like school students in Bristol, will be encouraged to do a few selected units, such as planting a container.

One of the perceived benefits of the new entry-level course is that it includes units like photography, upcycling and sustainability that can be completed during the winter months, when fewer horticultural activities take place.

The following sections provide an overview of what the project has delivered in year four, as well as changes to delivery in its three geographical settings:

2.2 London

The biggest change to provision in London this year was the decision to move away from Spring Gardens in South East London. The garden, based within a St Mungo's hostel, was established in year one, but major building work, which triggered the relocation of the garden to the back of the property, and a somewhat chaotic environment within the adults' hostel made the project decide to discontinue delivering at the Spring Gardens site. Consequently, since April 2019 the Gardener Trainer has been based solely at Higham Hill Hub in North East London, a green hub site established in year three.

Working in partnership with Pinpoint, a local community and youth focused organisation, the Gardener Trainer now offers sessions to young adults two days a week at Higham Hill Hub. These sessions tend to be one-to-one or in small groups due to the higher support needs of young adults. Meanwhile, the partner school Belmont Park continues to bring students into the green hub two days a week. The Gardener Trainer also helps maintain the school's allotment one afternoon a week together with a small group of students.

The project coordinator, who was based at St Mungo's Southwark office, relocated to Higham Hill Hub in the summer 2019. This has increased capacity, as the Gardener Trainer, for example, can pick up participants who struggle with travel anxiety, knowing there will be someone on site to welcome other young people.

2.3 Bristol

The Gardener Trainer in Bristol works in partnership with two alternative school providers at two different sites – the Vicarage Garden in Barton Hill and an allotment in Hartcliffe, on the southern outskirts of Bristol. Since the autumn the Gardener Trainer has also helped students develop raised beds within their school environment.

While the permanent Gardener Trainer in Bristol is on maternity leave, the Putting Down Roots Trainer who delivers sessions to adult clients in Bristol has taken over the work with young people as well – initially for two days a week, reducing to one day a week since the summer. Having one Gardener Trainer working on both of St Mungo’s horticultural projects in Bristol (Putting Down Roots and Putting Down Roots for Young People) has demonstrated how the two projects can work together and share sites. Adult clients have, for example, helped clear vegetation and improved the Vicarage Garden for the benefit of young students who don’t spend enough time in the garden to develop the green hub. The Gardener Trainer has also been able to recruit a young volunteer among her adult clients – who will begin to volunteer with young people once their DBS is cleared.

During year four the work of recruiting and engaging young adults have been put on hold until the permanent Gardener Trainer returns in January 2020 (year five).

2.4 Oxfordshire

During year four the Gardener Trainer in Oxfordshire has established a new partnership with Activate Learning who runs four colleges in Oxfordshire. Specifically targeting young people at risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training), Activate Learning runs a National Lottery Community funded project – Back on Track. Working in partnership the two projects have regenerated a green hub in Banbury – the Hobby Horse Nursery – where young people will engage in gardening and horticultural sessions with the Gardener Trainer, while the Back on Track staff provide one-to-one mentoring and short courses in maths and English. As an established organisation in the area, Back on Track received 19 new referrals in September 2019 for young people not currently engaged in education. Of these 7 young people have already started attending sessions at the green hub. This is a very positive development for the Oxfordshire branch of

Putting Down Roots for Young People, as the project has struggled to engage young people in this area.

Work with West Oxfordshire Single Homeless Pathway, a St Mungo's young people's accommodation service in Witney and Caterton, came to an end in year four. Since year one, successive Gardener Trainers have struggled to engage young residents within their temporary accommodation and with a new site secured in Banbury, the project decided to focus its resources on work with young people there.

An existing partnership with Banbury Young Homelessness Project (BYHP), where the Gardener Trainer has carried out outreach sessions since year three, will continue, but their young clients will now attend the nearby Hobby Horse Nursery green hub, rather than the BYHP site.

3. Young people

This section of the report focuses on young participants; who they are; their demographic profile and their needs; what they told the evaluation about the project; and any outcomes gained as a result of their involvement with Putting Down Roots for Young People.

3.1 Characteristics of young people and their needs

In year four, the project's monitoring records show that Putting Down Roots for Young People engaged 30 young people who were 18 years or older³.

Half of these 30 young participants were male (15 clients) and one-quarter female (9 clients). Another 6 clients preferred not to say.

Table 2. Gender

	Frequency	Percentage
Male	15	50%
Female	9	30%
Prefer not to say	6	20%
Total	30	100%

³ St Mungo's monitoring system OPAL does not allow the project to input participants under the age of 16 years. Consequently, students attending the project via their schools are not included in this analysis.

In terms of disability, a quarter of young people (27% or 8 clients) said they had a disability, while a similar proportion (27%) said they did not. However, the disability status is unknown for 37% of the young people (11 clients) and another 3 young people preferred not to say. Hence, this figure may be higher.

Table 3. Disability

	Frequency	Percentage
Disability	8	27%
No disability	8	27%
Unknown	11	37%
Prefer not to say	3	10%
Total	30	101%

Approximately a quarter of participants were care leavers (27% or 8 clients). However, again this figure may be higher as the information is unknown for almost half of the sample (43% or 13 clients).

Table 4. Care leavers

	Frequency	Percentage
Care leaver	8	27%
Non-care leaver	9	30%
Unknown	13	43%
Total	30	101%

As mentioned earlier, the average length of engagement for young people (18+ years) who attended the project in 2019 was 7 months (median 6½ months), but their engagement ranged between 2 months and 1½ years. At the end of year four, ten young adults continue to be engaged with the project (five in London and five in Oxfordshire).

While the 56 young participants who engaged with the project during 2019 differ in terms of their age and relationship with the project (e.g. whether they are school students or not), they share many of the same vulnerabilities that make them at risk of homelessness. The histories of participants are characterised by the following factors:

- Poor mental health and well-being. Young participants experience a range of mental health issues, such as eating disorders, anxiety or depression.
- Disabilities, poor physical health and learning disabilities.

- Disengagement or risk of disengagement from education. Young people often struggle to engage with mainstream education, have poor educational experiences, have left or been excluded from school with few or no qualifications.
- Not in Education, Employment or Training. Young adults are often NEET, due to ill health, mental health issues or homelessness.
- Family background. Family difficulties include relationship breakdown, parental death, low income, family mental health issues and growing up in care.

The project's experience of working with young people shows that they often have multiple needs, increasing their emotional and social vulnerabilities. Their young age also puts them in a challenging transitional stage moving from child to adult; dependent living to living alone; and education to work.

'The reason they come to us is because of all the stuff you can't have in [mainstream] schools. Not just one thing, but multiple issues, like anger issues, trauma, defiance ... behaviour that can't be maintained in mainstream schools, they are too volatile, too disruptive, too violent... The families of children have mental health issues, often there're problems like overcrowding in their house, alcohol and drug addiction, unemployment, depression – all those things are the backdrop to the kids' lives'. (External school partner)

'Most of our youth have some forms of disabilities, including ADD, ADHD, Aspergers and other behavioural issues'. (External school partner)

Overall, these characteristics show that Putting Down Roots for Young People as a project has managed to engage its target group of vulnerable young people who are either homeless or at risk of homelessness.

Ryan (19 years)

Ryan has been coming to the project in Higham Hill Hub for a few weeks and he describes his time on the project as 'sick'. He has especially liked using the strimmer and other power tools, as well as learning how to put petrol in the lawnmower. Ryan is on the autistic spectrum and staff suspect he struggles with reading and writing. *'I never went to school or college... I did go to school, but didn't focus on it. I just sat mucking about. When I finished school I just went to work in construction'.*

Ryan used to live with his older brother, but is now homeless and staying in a St Mungo's supported housing project nearby. It was his key worker there who told him about Putting Down Roots for Young People and encouraged him to visit and see what it was all about. *'I wasn't really doing nothing, just staying in bed all day'*. Coming to the hub and seeing the garden space, he liked it and just asked *'what do you want me to do?'*

Ryan often finds it hard being around other people, but he has settled in quickly, likes working outside and wants to do the horticultural qualification. Project staff has helped Ryan fix his bike so that he can come to the project independently, and they have also supported him in setting up his first bank account. When Ryan was interviewed for the evaluation he had only been coming for a few weeks, but five months later he is still attending sessions regularly and continues to like it.

3.2 What young participants say about the project

3.2.1 Feedback from young adults

The five young adults in London⁴, interviewed for the evaluation, were all introduced to the project via a keyworker or support worker who they knew through CAMHS or charities like St Mungo's and Centrepont. The information they had received about Putting Down Roots for Young People had often been limited, merely saying that it was a gardening project and that they should go along and speak to the project staff to find out what it was about. Despite some initial reservations, they had all liked the site and the Gardener Trainer, and had been keen to get started.

A few of the young people had previous experiences of gardening or growing vegetables, but for other young people the project was the first time they had got involved in something like horticulture or woodwork. However, regardless of their previous experience, none of the young people had any expectations about what they wanted to gain from attending sessions, but they all stressed that they enjoyed being involved.

Although the project was known as a horticultural and gardening project, young people appreciated being able to do other activities too, like using power tools, woodwork, fixing bikes, doing art and crafts, or building bigger structures like the polytunnel. When asked what they particularly liked about

⁴ One young adult was interviewed in year three, but for confidentiality reasons feedback was not included in the start-up report.

the project, some mentioned the flexibility of what they were doing and opportunities to choose their own activities like photography or art. They especially liked that the Gardener Trainer responded to their interests, rather than sticking to a pre-set plan.

Young people said that they wanted to learn new skills, but that they generally did not respond well to a traditional school structure. For them the training and the qualification was an added bonus, not the main reason for attending the project.

3.2.2 Feedback from school students

One of the evaluation tools introduced in year four was a feedback postcard given to young people who have attended the project for 5–10 sessions or longer (defined as medium-length engagement)⁵. At the time of writing eight postcards have been completed by mainly school participants in London, but also by a few young people who took part in the summer scheme in Banbury.

Young people's feedback on their time with the project was positive. They all agreed (light & dark green smiley faces) with the statements 'I enjoyed the sessions' and 'I have tried or learned new things'. In similar terms, young people also agreed with 'staff listened and respected my opinions', 'staff included me' and 'I got to know other people better'. One disagreed (red sad face) with the statement 'we have worked well as a team', while the others agreed.

The eight young people who completed the postcard would all recommend Putting Down Roots for Young People to other young people.

When asked what they liked about the sessions, young people wrote 'we got to do fun stuff', 'they were all different sessions' and 'everything'. When asked what they didn't like four wrote 'n/a', but one said 'getting wet'. In terms of improvements, one mentioned 'BBQ's every week', while another said 'get more bikes'.

3.2.3 Feedback from school staff

Two senior school leaders were interviewed for the evaluation, while another four members of school staff (London and Bristol) completed a feedback

⁵ Another feedback postcard was also produced for one-off young participants who took part in tester sessions / events. However, due to the limited number of outreach sessions carried out this year, this postcard has yet to be introduced.

questionnaire at the end of the summer term, when sessions were coming to an end.

The questionnaire feedback from schools was positive, with staff either strongly agreeing or agreeing with statements such as 'the sessions were well planned and organised', 'the content of sessions was appropriate for the young people's age and abilities' and 'the sessions were relevant to all the young people involved'. Three 'strongly agreed' and one 'agreed' with the statements 'the young people were engaged in sessions' and 'the project workers interacted well with students'.

'[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'. (External school partner)

In terms of feedback school staff have received from students about the green hub sessions, all four members of staff noted that students had told them they enjoyed the sessions and coming to the green hub, giving examples such as: 'I want to go back', 'Are we going to the hub?' and 'That was fun!'

In terms of improvements, one suggested inviting professionals from the construction industry to come and work with the children, while another wrote: '*Nothing to improve at the [green hub]. Students are happy with how it is run and find it enjoyable to visit and work here'* (school staff).

Jess (24 years)

Jess was referred by her mental health keyworker who knew about Putting Down Roots for Young People through Pinpoint. Jess was encouraged 'to give it a go as it might be good for you', and she has now been attending the project for a few months and likes it. With a background in film making and a degree in Journalism Jess is not planning to work in horticulture, but enjoys the therapeutic aspect of gardening because it makes her feel calmer. She also likes being able to eat what they grow, such as strawberries and courgettes.

Before fracturing her arm, Jess was showing another young person how to take pictures with her equipment for the photography unit, and since the summer she has also been involved in making a short promotional film about Putting Down Roots for Young People.

Because of her mental health problems, Jess' attendance can fluctuate. While she is not keen on having new people on site, the social aspect of the project is something that Jess values about the project:

'We all moan about our lives, it's nice because everyone has their own issues, but it's an environment where everyone feels comfortable talking about their stuff. Sweet, in its weird way. A lot of us got similar problems, so it's easy to relate to one another and bond while we are working'.

3.3 What young participants say about the benefits of the project

3.3.1 Outcomes for young adults

Interviews with young adults and project staff highlighted several recurring themes about the benefits of attending Putting Down Roots for Young People sessions. While these findings should be viewed with some caution because of the low number of young people involved, the benefits they mention correlate with outcomes commonly highlighted in the research literature about the benefits of therapeutic gardening⁶.

Something to do. In addition to learning new skills and gaining new experiences, young people also said that the project gave them something to do. As NEET young people their week is rarely structured by work or educational obligations, and opportunities to try new things can be limited. All mentioned that sessions were instrumental in getting them out of bed or out of the house, and keeping them busy physically as well as mentally. At its most basic level, the project gave them something to do and also something to look forward to during the week.

'I was excited to actually be doing something. [The project] keeps you busy, there is always something to do...'

'Today I got dressed quickly and got out. I would still be in bed [if I wasn't here]'.

'It's all quite helpful to be here. Get's me out of the house. If I spend too much time at home I go a bit nutty'.

⁶ Soga et al. (2017) Gardening is beneficial for health: a meta- analysis, *Prev Med Rep*, Vol. 5 (92-99).

Improved well-being. The benefits of working and being outside was talked about by all the young people interviewed. The physical work involved in gardening, being outside and around other people was mentioned by several of the young people as a reason why they liked the project. Working in the garden made them feel calmer, less anxious and more relaxed, and helped them forget their problems. Such distractions did not solve their mental health issues, but allowed them to focus on more positive feelings and gave them more energy to be physical active.

'Just being in nature gives you freedom, it uplifts you and gives you a boost of energy and that is what I love. At the flat I am so tired, have no energy, where here I have so much energy'.

'Being here takes a lot of the stress away. [My mental health problems] are still there, but they are not as powerful – It just takes the stress away and when I am doing something that I love... my whole body feels better, I am happy. But when I am stuck in front of the PC I just feel down and that is why I snap...[My mental health problems] have slowed down, especially on a Wednesday and a Friday, they are coming down, when I am outdoors. Every other day they are the same, but on Wednesdays and Fridays they are coming down. It has helped me when I am here. For them 2 days – finally I can come down and do stuff. Instead of [my head] telling me to do stuff, I can get on with things that I love doing'.

'I think it's because it is quiet here, I don't get a lot of that... with the noises in my own head, so being somewhere it's quiet, it is surprisingly enjoyable... [It makes me feel] calmer – at least while I am here'.

'It gives me things to do, keeps my mind active because if I stray away... my mind wants to stray to a darker territory. The things I have seen and experienced are always going to be imprinted on my mind ... but I try to keep myself busy'.

Relationship with an attentive adult. The knowledge and skills of project staff were appreciated, but it was mainly their personal attributes that young people talked about – their willingness to listen, the good connection they had with young people and the respect they showed.

'If you suffer from mental health issues, you are not alone here, you always got someone to speak to. You don't have that at school. [There it's like] make an appointment with the school counselor... I have had a couple of days where my mood has been rubbish, and [the Gardener Trainer] has taken the

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 there who wants to [listen]’.

‘Being around people who really show that they care, really means a lot... It’s just a good vibe. Everyone here I get a good vibe from... it’s nice being around people who care, because I haven’t grown up with that’.

Many of the young adults clearly struggled with social interactions and being around people, but at the same time they valued the opportunity to socialise and talk with project staff, and to a lesser degree with other young people. The site offered ample opportunities for young people to get on with their own work, while still feel connected to other participants. The lack of pressure to talk seems to have encouraged young people to develop a relaxed way of interacting with each other.

Increased confidence and self-worth. Young people talked about occasions where project staff had praised them or their work had been recognised. The sessions clearly provided plenty of opportunities for staff to reinforce positive messages about the young people’s skills and abilities, and consequently for young people to feel pleased about their achievements.

‘I try to do everything. [The Gardener Trainer] challenges me. I have never used power tools in my life. Tells me what not to do. He was just dead impressed how easy I took to machinery. I just took to it naturally’.

‘The first day I came here, it was like ‘do we have to do all of that?’, because the grass was really long and the polytunnels hadn’t even been moved. At the time it was just [the Gardener Trainer] and me. ‘Okay!!!’ But once I got into it, it was really good, cutting the grass. The weather was really good and we could have a laugh... It’s good here’.

‘[Talking about a project in progress] It was my idea, but [the Gardener Trainer] helped me. He gave me a quick run through what I would need to do. I just got on with it. It’s coming on quite well – I am actually quite proud of myself’.

3.3.2 Outcomes for schools students

Eight young students who participated in the project in London, Oxfordshire and Bristol through their school completed the Our Bright Future’s ‘outcome flower’ before and after their engagement with the project. All had attended sessions for one or two terms, and in a few cases longer.

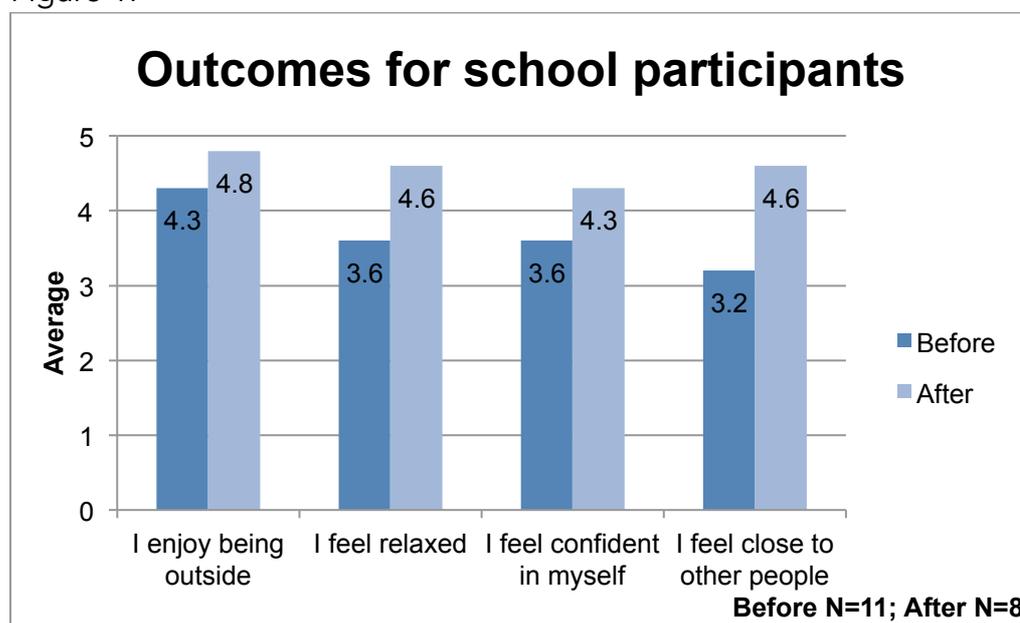
Young people were asked on a scale from 1 to 5 how much they agreed with different statements (1 being strongly disagree and 5 strongly agree).

The responses show a positive trend for all young people, across all the statements (see figure 1), as they were more likely to say they 'felt relaxed', 'felt confident in themselves' and 'enjoyed being outside' after their engagement with the project compared to before. The biggest change between before and after was for the statement 'I feel close to other people' which young people were more likely to agree with after working with the project.

When asked what they have done differently as a result of the project, young people mentioned being outdoors more and doing more gardening at home. A few also mentioned other benefits, like feeling 'calmer' and being 'more social around other people'.

'The work has built my confidence up'. (School participant)

Figure 1.



When school staff were asked what students got out of the sessions, they highlighted other types of benefits, like gaining new and more hands-on experiences, and learning new skills. Some also mentioned that sessions had encouraged young people to be more active outdoors and had developed their teamwork and communication skills.

One external partner provided a specific example of the benefits to one young student:

'She is the only girl we bring [to the green hub]. Her behaviour can be unbelievably difficult... The amount of times she had to be sent home or picked up, or put in a one-to-one room or in a room of her own. She literally spent weeks in my office, refusing to go to class and if she did, she would destroy any chance of anyone learning anything. She turned my office into her own, to avoid being around other people, but since we have been taking her down it has died a death. She has been doing arts and craft based stuff, painting things, building small things ... and she has been an angel, some of the stuff she has made has been awesome, she has just flourished in the hub setting. She is much better at school too, but in the hub setting she is completely different'. (External school partner).

Zach (22 years) and Courtney (20 years)

Zach and Courtney have been a couple for two years and have been coming to the project together for nine months. Zach was referred to Putting Down Roots for Young People in Spring Gardens, because he was homeless and living in a hostel in South London. As Zach suffers from severe travel anxiety he never goes anywhere without his girlfriend, and she helps him attend the sessions. When they visited the first time, project staff assessed them both and were able to offer them both a place on the project.

At the time Courtney had just been fired from her part-time job, and although she lived with her mum and younger brother, they had a strained relationship. Courtney has suffered from poor mental health since she was 13 years old and is still on anti-depressants. Growing up Courtney didn't like school much and left before sitting her GCSE exams.

Zach was an outgoing and sporty young man doing A-levels when he was diagnosed with leukemia aged 17 years. He spent the next year in hospital going through a range of experimental chemo treatments, and while he is now in cancer remission the treatments have affected both his physical and mental health, and he suffers from chronic back pain and excess weight gained while in hospital. The cancer also affected his social life, self-worth and family relations, and this is how Zach found himself living in a hostel for young homeless people: *'I chose to move out of my mum's because of family issues, but I never knew it was going to be that bad... I saw someone get stabbed'*. A hostel worker told Zach about the gardening project, but while

he used to like physical work and being outdoors he didn't initially want to go:

'I really didn't want to do it. I didn't want to leave my house. I hadn't left for months. I had blackout blinds. Seeing that stabbing shocked me into hibernation. I had food delivered – the delivery guy was one of the few people I saw. But I came here, saw [the Gardener Trainer], had quite a good connection, much better than I thought it was going to be'.

Attending the project, first in Spring Gardens and now in Higham Hill Hub, Zach and Courtney like the relaxed atmosphere, the freedom of the place and being around people who care. During sessions, Zach gets involved with the gardening and woodwork, while Courtney prefers doing arts project, like decorating bird boxes and making miniature garden pots.

Zach and Courtney now share a flat, but struggle with the obligations that come with independent living, like budgeting and paying bills. They are both gamers, and spend the majority of their time inside playing video games. This has made them socially very isolated, but they both think the project has made them physically more active and given them an opportunity to socialise with other people. While they often miss sessions, because of ill health and anxiety, they always communicate with project staff about how they are doing. As Courtney highlights *'these two days a week is what we really look forward to ... just to get us out of the house, it gets so boring ... these two days are like – freedom to us – getting away from the internet'.*

When asked whether their partner has benefitted from the project, Zach believes that Courtney is more active, while Courtney says Zach has become more confident around others:

'She is more active. Before we were just surviving, we didn't have anything that we like, didn't get out much, we just had each other... but we have tried to broaden our horizon. She has made progress, she wouldn't be doing [art] if she weren't here, she would just be at home playing games and snacking. We are both on a diet now, we have definitely changed'. (Zach about Courtney)

'He is a lot more confident. He used not to be able to talk to everyone. Coming here has definitely helped him with his confidence. [It's] also keeping him busy, with his back, stretching it out'. (Courtney about Zach)

4. Challenges and lessons learnt

4.1 Engaging young people

From the very beginning of the project, the low number of young people attending the project has been a challenge – and this continues to be the case.

Although the evaluation data presented in section 3 and the case studies, indicates that young people who *do* attend sessions benefit as intended, the pressing issue for the project continues to be that not enough young people are referred, and consequently not enough young people get involved with the project.

The start-up report highlighted a number of possible reasons for this, including:

- Difficulties in establishing referral pathways with both St Mungo's services and external organisations;
- The need to identify and establish new partnerships with external providers who are often over-stretched and face internal challenges and budget cuts;
- Offering a training course developed for adults that is less appropriate for young participants' abilities, length of engagement and age;
- The higher support needs of young people, compared to adults, requiring a higher staff – client ratio than anticipated;
- Difficulties in locating suitable and accessible green hubs, together with having to relocate multiple times to new sites;
- A staff team dispersed across three geographical locations, each with multiple green hubs, limiting the time and resources to carry out outreach and networking.

Some of these difficulties have been addressed in year three and four of the project:

- The London Gardener Trainer now only works from one site, together with Pinpoint – a partner organisation with many contacts in the local area, including keyworkers based within potential referral organisations.
- A new partnership with Activate Learning and Back on Track in Banbury, which has increased the number of referrals significantly (19

in September), but also allowed the Oxfordshire Gardener Trainer to focus on one green hub.

- Extending the age range to include younger people aged 11 – 15 years, which opened up the possibility of working in partnership with alternative schools and Pupil Referral Units in London and Bristol.
- Working in partnership with Pinpoint and Back on Track has increased staff resources and flexibility, enabled more young people to be on site, and also improved the support available to individual young people (e.g. one-to-one mentoring by Back on Track staff).
- The original horticultural qualification has been replaced by a new entry-level course, which allows young people to continue coursework outside of the growing season.

However, while these improvements may over time increase referrals and consequently the number of young people engaging with the project, the ongoing and persistent challenge of recruiting young people into the project raises the question whether this is merely a referral issue or whether young people are hard to engage in horticulture? And if this is the case, is this primarily a problem experienced by Putting Down Roots for Young People or a more general issue?

The programme Our Bright Future, under which Putting Down Roots for Young People was funded, aimed specifically to increase young peoples' engagement with the environment. But have other projects funded through this programme also struggled to engage young people? The Our Bright Future evaluation suggests not, as the programme's overall target of 60,000 young participants was exceeded mid-way having reached 85,000 young participants. However, the evaluation report also shows that the majority of young participants were younger (55% were 11-15 years), in fulltime education (91%) and engaged with projects on a one-off basis (82%)⁷.

This is a very different group of young people compared to the target group Putting Down Roots for Young People always intended to work with, namely older 'hard to reach' young people, who were homeless or at risk of homelessness. In addition, the project generally aims for longer-term engagement, rather than one-off participation. Combined, these factors were always going to make engagement much harder.

⁷ Hudson et al. (2019) Our Bright Future: mid-term evaluation, ERS Ltd and Collingwood Environmental Planning (accessed 20th November, <http://www.ourbrightfuture.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Mid-Term-Report-Executive-Summary.pdf>)

The project was also set up based on a number of assumptions, for example that it would be good for young people in hostels or temporary accommodation to take ownership and improve their immediate environment. However, in reality, and as the project has learnt primarily in Oxfordshire, but also through outreach work in Bristol and London, young people rarely want to work in their hostel gardens. To do so would be to invest (or put down roots) in temporary spaces, and young homeless people are understandably less inclined to do so⁸.

However, the project's experience also suggests that horticulture in itself is a 'hard sell' to young people, in part because growing is a long-term investment (either over months or years), and in part because gardening is neither perceived as a pathway into employment nor a socially desirable interest for young people to have. However, it is also the Gardener Trainers' experience that once young people have done it a few times, the majority enjoy it – being outdoors, being active and in the open environment with other people. The Gardener Trainers therefore often encourage young participants to engage in supplementary activities like bike mechanics, pizza making or woodwork, before introducing them to more traditional gardening pursuits. However, such 'tricks' rely on a steady stream of young people coming on site in the first place.

The continued lack of engagement has been challenging for the project and often very frustrating for the staff team who has worked tirelessly to explore different approaches to increase engagement. However, the combination of factors, like gardening being less attractive to young people, an aim to engage 'hard to reach' young people with multiple difficulties and the lack of clear referral pathways into the project, have clearly been working against the project.

4.2 Relationship with St Mungo's

Over the last few years of project activities, it has become clear that Putting Down Roots for Young People as a project working specifically with young people, does not sit particularly well within St Mungo's.

As a charity St Mungo's is primarily known for its street outreach with homeless adults and accommodation services, and although St Mungo's does work with young people (11% of its clients in 2017-18 were aged 18-25

⁸ This phenomenon is also found among renters, who tend to be less motivated to improve their rented garden, than those who own their garden.

<https://www.ft.com/content/ace0b5b2-1e86-11e6-a7bc-ee846770ec15>

years)⁹, it has few services specifically targeting young people. When the application for the National Lottery Community funding was originally submitted St Mungo's had three young peoples' accommodation services – respectively in Oxfordshire, Milton Keynes and Enfield. However, shortly before securing the funding, St Mungo's lost its contract with the local authority to provide accommodation services to young people in Milton Keynes. By year four, West Oxfordshire Single Homeless Pathway service is the only remaining St Mungo's youth service, besides Putting Down Roots for Young People itself.

Other factors have changed in the last five years. The biggest change being the national growth in rough sleeping, which has led to services such as outreach, shelters, 'no second night out' provision and other initiatives targeting rough sleeping being prioritised by St Mungo's. Consequently, St Mungo's has moved away from developing expertise in young people's services, making Putting Down Roots for Young People somewhat of an 'anomaly' within St Mungo's.

These changes have on occasions made the project team feel disconnected and sidelined from St Mungo's as an organisation, but it has also caused a number of structural barriers for the project. The most significant being that Putting Down Roots for Young People is unable to log half of its clients on St Mungo's monitoring system Opal, as young people under the age of 16 cannot be registered. This in itself makes it hard for the project to account for the number of clients the project has engaged over the past four years, and consequently justify its work.

Other examples include being unable to bring under 16's into its green hub in Spring Gardens, which ruled out engaging school students there. The project has also encountered issues with St Mungo's insurance policy, as again it did not cover younger clients attending green hub sessions – a complication that has taken considerable time for the project coordinator to resolve. The project has also found it difficult to recruit volunteers due to St Mungo's policy that volunteers must commit for six months and complete a comprehensive training programme before being able to begin volunteering.

However, the principal issue has been around the lack of cooperation between the original Putting Down Roots project and Putting Down Roots for Young People. The projects are both based within the same St Mungo's department, and have the same line manager. However, throughout the four

⁹ St Mungo's (2018) Taking action: Ending homelessness, rebuilding lives, Annual review 2017-18.

years there have been no structural or practical attempts for the two projects to cooperate by working together or sharing expertise, resources or sites. With the recent exception of the Bristol Putting Down Roots Trainer providing maternity cover for the project's Gardener Trainer, there has been no overlap between the two projects.

Acknowledging that the project has struggled without an overall strategic plan and senior managerial support, St Mungo's recently created a new manager role that will have strategic oversight of the organisation's expanding horticultural services. However, senior staff within St Mungo's have also expressed that while there is a growing role for horticultural training within St Mungo's, this is unlikely to include a separate strand specifically targeting young people.

4.3 The project model

Over the past four years the project has trialed different ways of engaging with young people, for example by taking gardening to young people (e.g. hostels) or to ask young people to come to the project's green hubs.

At the end of year four, the project has reduced its outreach work significantly, as outreach sessions in hostels are generally not well attended and often generate little or no engagement from the young people who are present. On the occasions where outreach work has been more successful, the Gardener Trainer has already built a trusting relationship with young participants – such as when school students, after attending regular sessions at the project's green hub, carried out horticultural work on their school allotment or build raised beds within their school premises.

Consequently, the project now works primarily from its four green hubs (Higham Hill Hub in London, the Vicarage Garden and Hartcliffe Allotment in Bristol, and Hobby Horse Nursery in Banbury).

In terms of length of engagement, the start-up report highlighted three levels of intensity for green hub participants – longer-term, medium-term and one-off engagement. It was anticipated that young adults would engage longer-term, while school students would come on site for 5–10 weeks during term time. However, as partnerships with schools have developed the majority of school students have now been coming for 1–2 school terms, and in many cases students have been attending regularly for over a year. Consequently, the majority of participants tend to be longer-term participants regardless of their age and means of arrival on site. This is a positive development as it has

enabled the project to engage with young participants for longer, and consequently facilitates longer-term outcomes, like increased confidence and self-esteem, and improved health and wellbeing.

The project describes itself as a horticultural training provider and its staff are employed as Gardener Trainers. But the project has also found that young people, especially from the older age group, have additional needs that are not strictly linked to the work of a horticultural training project. As Gardener Trainers build positive relationships with young people, many of their questions and conversations highlight difficulties with, for example claiming benefits, finding or sustaining permanent accommodation, attending appointments or accessing other support services. Support with such problems generally falls outside the scope of a training project, but when young people have few or no other sources of adult support and advice in their lives, the Gardener Trainers often feel compelled to step in and offer such keyworker support. This has on occasion caused some conflicts, as staff are pulled in different directions, and may not feel comfortable or qualified to provide keyworker support.

This is one of the reasons why working in close partnership with other organisations has proved important. The partnership with Back on Track in Banbury, whose staff provide one-to-one guidance and mentoring to young people, is a promising development for Putting Down Roots for Young People. This will enable the Gardener Trainer to focus on delivering the horticultural training course or working therapeutically in the garden, while young people access one-to-one support through Back on Track staff.

At the end of year four, Putting Down Roots for Young People mainly works with young participants longer-term within its green hubs. It offers horticultural training and an entry-level qualification, but the majority of work with young people revolves around therapeutic gardening.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Does the evidence support the project's aims and objectives?

A growing body of research literature shows that gardening and food growing can provide substantial physical and mental health benefits, such as reduction in depression, anxiety and body mass index, as well as increased

life satisfaction, quality of life and a sense of community¹⁰. Projects that provide therapeutic gardening to vulnerable people also report benefits such as increased self-esteem, confidence and social interaction¹¹.

The young participants, project staff and external partners who fed into the evaluation either through interviews or other evaluation tools show that many of these outcomes are being achieved. When working with vulnerable young people, small steps are often needed before participants are able to progress further, but the project's young participants appear to be achieving the range of soft outcomes that the project set out to address through horticultural training and therapeutic gardening.

However, while the outcomes are encouraging, the number of young people who have engaged with the project longer-term is still relatively limited. Consequently, the evaluation is currently unable to evidence the wider impact of the project's work with young people. However, as project staff continue to use the evaluation tools implemented in year four, regular feedback and outcomes data for a growing number of participants will help the project evidence this, as it enters its final year of operation.

¹⁰ Soga et al. (2017) Gardening is beneficial for health: a meta- analysis, *Prev Med Rep*, Vol. 5 (92-99); Schmutz et al. (2014) The benefits of gardening and food growing for health and wellbeing, Garden Organic and Sustain publication.

¹¹ Aldridge, J. & J. Sempik (2002) Social and therapeutic horticulture: evidence and messages from research, *Evidence Issue 6*, Centre for Child and Family Research; Schmutz et al. (2014) The benefits of gardening and food growing for health and wellbeing, Garden Organic and Sustain publication.