



From Seeds to Shows: Growing People, Growing Community

Grow Your Own Evaluation 2025

Dr Andy Harrod



This evaluation of Grow Your Own, a therapeutic garden at Guild Lodge, was commissioned by the Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust. The evaluation took place between June and September 2025. The evaluation explored participants' experiences of Grow Your Own in order to understand the short- and long-term benefits of taking part in gardening activities at Grow Your Own. It also explored any challenges faced in accessing or participating at Grow Your Own, the factors involved in creating a therapeutic space, and the factors involved in replicating Grow Your Own at other sites. The project was supported by a British Academy Early Career Researcher Network Seed Fund grant. This report assesses the findings from the evaluation and provides a range of best practice recommendations for Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust for the replication of therapeutic gardens at other Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust sites.

The report has been produced by Dr Andy Harrod. Andy is a researcher in health and wellbeing geography with a particular interest in how people's engagement with nature influences their long-term wellbeing and connection with nature. Andy is based in the Lancaster Environment Centre at Lancaster University.



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Image Credits

Andy Harrod – Pages 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 13, 16, 19, 20, 22, 28, 29, 31, 33, 36

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Foreword

Grow Your Own is a therapeutic gardening project connected to Guild Lodge and located in the grounds of Guild Park, Preston. Guild Lodge is Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust's secure mental health inpatient hospital. Grow Your Own began in 2013, with the mission to provide opportunities for service users to develop horticultural skills, have meaningful social interactions, increase their physical activity, and develop a productive and beautiful gardening space. Grow Your Own is anecdotally a successful therapeutic gardening project, which provides service users with practical experiences that support improvements in their self-confidence and self-worth, provide a sense of achievement, and the opportunity to learn horticultural skills. However, there has been no formal evaluation regarding the efficiency of Grow Your Own at Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust, and the factors involved in facilitating beneficial changes to service users' mental health within the trust. The aim of this qualitative evaluation was to address this gap through understanding the standard of care Grow Your Own provides service users.

Good mental wellbeing is recognised as being an essential human right, however, mental health difficulties are common worldwide, with one in eight people living with a mental health difficulty, which impacts the person's quality of life. Within forensic services there is a focus on balancing service users' care with the monitoring, management and mitigation of potential risks to public safety. This approach can impact on service users' mental health, many of whom may already have complex mental health difficulties. As such, the offering of activities which can maintain and enhance service users' mental health are vital in supporting the recovery of service users.

Taking part in gardening and nature-based activities, as well as connecting with nature has been reported to enhance people's mental wellbeing, improving mood, increasing happiness, and reducing worries and stress. As such, engaging with nature for wellbeing offers a potential approach to maintaining and enhancing mental wellbeing of service users.

The evaluation adopted a research approach that aimed to be accessible, inclusive, and flexible to encourage as many as people as possible at Guild Lodge to participate and add their voice. The participants' voices highlighted five key aspects, nature, social interactions, meaningful activities, service users' choice and motivation, and Grow Your Own staff's non-judgemental, empathic, caring and understanding attitude. Together these co-create a therapeutic environment which is relaxed, peaceful, non-judgemental and caring, which provides a safe place for participants to engage and interact at their pace and in their ways. This facilitates improvements in participants' self-confidence and self-worth, supporting a re-evaluation of their identity, leading to improved actions, which support their short- and long-term mental wellbeing.

Based on the evidence, firstly, best practice recommendations are provided for the replication of therapeutic gardens at other Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust sites. Secondly, this report is provided as an evidence base for supporting future funding applications by Grow Your Own regarding engaging with gardening for wellbeing.

Introduction

Grow Your Own began in 2013 and is a therapeutic gardening project connected to Guild Lodge and located in the grounds of Guild Park, Preston. Grow Your Own seeks to provide opportunities for service users to develop horticultural skills, have meaningful social interactions, increase their physical activity, and develop a productive and beautiful gardening space^{1, 2}. Over the last eleven years Grow Your Own has expanded to include polytunnels, raised beds, a covered training area, aquaponic growing system for salad growing, a chicken coop, aviary, and pond. Activities involve flower and vegetable growing, craft activities, construction and woodwork, chicken care, as well as plant and craft sales. Service users also have the opportunity to attend various shows and markets, as well as complete formal qualifications in horticulture. These additional activities are made possible due to relevant qualifications and memberships held by the staff at Grow Your Own.

Guild Lodge is Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust's secure mental health inpatient hospital. Guild Lodge has Medium, Low, and Step Down wards for men and women with complex mental health care, or an Acquired Brain Injury. Service users are involved in their own treatment and care to ensure it is appropriate and effective for them. This care includes access to a range of pathways for occupational and vocational skills development (e.g., construction, education, horticulture, and metal working), as well as psychological therapies. The care is delivered by a multi-disciplinary team including doctors, nurses, occupational therapists, psychologists and a Primary Care Team.

Grow Your Own is part of the horticulture pathway, which begins at the Tarnbrook Recovery Centre based within Guild Lodge. As service users progress with their recovery and rehabilitation they can attend Grow Your Own, which is a 15–20 minute walk from Guild Lodge. Service users typically begin by attending one session (up to 3 hours) per week and are escorted by a member of staff from Guild Lodge, building up to 2–3 unescorted sessions per week. Service users are also given the opportunity to attend shows (agricultural and flower) and markets (Christmas) as part of their participation of Grow Your Own.



Anecdotal evidence suggests Grow Your Own provides service users with experiential experiences that support improvements in their self-confidence and self-worth, provides a sense of achievement, and the opportunity to learn horticultural skills^{2, 3}. It is proposed that this assists service users with their recovery process, as well as supporting their transition to independent living. However, a formal evaluation of Grow Your Own has not been carried out to ascertain: firstly, the factors at Grow Your Own in supporting beneficial change to service users' mental health; secondly, the effects of this beneficial change on service users' mental health; thirdly, the longevity of mental health improvements to services users' quality of life; and finally, good practice guidelines for NHS horticultural projects, which would also support scaling up of Grow Your Own across Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust.

As such, the aim of this evaluation is to understand the standard of care Grow Your Own provides service users. In support of these aims the following evaluation questions were developed:

- 1. What are the factors involved in co-creating a beneficial space at Grow Your Own?*
- 2. What are the effects of service users' participation at Grow your Own on their mental health?*
- 3. What is the longevity of beneficial changes to service users' mental health as a result of the Grow Your Own initiative at Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust?*

Throughout the project and in the report, therapeutic horticulture, nature and mental wellbeing are defined as:

- **Therapeutic Horticulture:** Facilitated activities which involve the use of plants and gardening, to develop participants' health and social wellbeing
- **Nature:** The environmental landscape including green spaces (fields, plants), blue spaces (sea, rivers), and other species (birds, fish, marine sea- and wildlife).
- **Mental Wellbeing:** A person's sense of living a good quality of life (fulfilling, joyful) and how a person responds (emotions, thoughts, actions) to everyday and life events.

Following this brief overview of Grow Your Own and the aims of the evaluation, a background to the evaluation is provided, exploring the role of nature-based interventions, which includes therapeutic gardening, in maintaining and enhancing participants' mental wellbeing. Next, an overview of the approaches taken throughout this evaluation to engage with the service users, staff and volunteers at Grow Your Own and Guild Lodge is provided. Then, the results of this engagement are presented, alongside discussion of the key points from this engagement. Finally, a series of best practice recommendations for Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust to support Grow Your Own and its development at other NHS sites are presented.

Background

Therapeutic Gardening

Historically, hospitals and asylums have provided gardening and/or agricultural activities to patients, which provided patients with meaningful work, routine, and reflective spaces to support their mental health recovery⁴. Since the 1970s, community care initiatives have been employed to care for people with mental ill health, which included occupational therapists' use of established gardening and farming practices to provide opportunities for patients to engage with nature for their wellbeing⁵. This led to the development of social and therapeutic horticulture⁶. Social and therapeutic horticulture involves horticultural therapists working with individuals, via the use of plants and gardening, to develop their health and social wellbeing⁷. Gardens are also widely used in therapeutic programmes, which are facilitated by a range of professionals and referred to as healing gardens, rehabilitation gardens, as well as gardening⁸⁻¹⁰. Therapeutic gardening is one of the interventions grouped together under the umbrella of nature-based interventions. Nature-based interventions aim to improve participants' wellbeing by incorporating nature through regular, structured, and facilitated activities^{4, 11, 12}. More recently, nature-based interventions are becoming part of Green Social Prescribing¹³, which involves linking patients with non-clinical and nature-based sources of psychosocial support and activities within the local community, based on personal interests¹⁴.

There is a growing evidence-base that participants' short-term mental wellbeing is beneficially impacted through their participation in therapeutic and community gardening. These benefits include improvements to participants' emotional processing and regulation¹⁵, social skills and connections¹⁶, and the development of gardening skills¹⁷. At rehabilitation gardens participants have reported improvements to their mental health due to feeling calmer and safer at the garden, which enables them to reflect on their emotions leading to improvements in their self-awareness and self-confidence^{15, 18}.



Meanwhile, participants report that the social interactions that occur at gardens provide peer support where they can share knowledge, skills, and help each other with gardening tasks, which in-turn supports them to feel valued and included¹⁹. These social interactions can also develop into longer-term friendships, which extend beyond the garden, supporting a sense of community belonging¹⁶. Finally, the development of gardening and cooking skills can help participants integrate, feel valued and useful within the community²⁰. For example, Parr²¹ describes how gardening practices as part of social-welfare schemes enhanced participants' sense of community belonging and social status. This occurred through the participants' development of skills and creation of aesthetically pleasing urban green spaces, supporting their sense of being valued and useful, as well as reducing their sense of stigma regarding their 'difference'.

One-year follow-up studies of participants attending rehabilitation gardens report that the beneficial changes to participants mental health were being maintained a year later. For example, overall improved psychological wellbeing, and decreased burnout^{22, 23}; reductions in stress, improved social interactions, increased contact with nature and creative activities²⁴; and reductions in GP visits and long-term sick leave²⁵. Meanwhile Harrod's²⁶ research suggests that participating in nature-based interventions can co-create beneficial long-term shifts in participants' self-worth, identity, study and/or career choices, as well as wellbeing practices to maintain and enhance their mental wellbeing over the lifecourse.

Nature-based interventions

Three affective characteristics of nature-based interventions have been described, with improvements to participants' mental health being attributed to these factors. These affective characteristics are nature, meaningful activity, and social interaction²⁷. Nature has been considered as providing an alternative to everyday environments and as being involved in fostering safe and supportive environments, which can support participants to take a break from their everyday concerns and attune to their emotions^{18, 20}. The multi-sensory aspects of gardens, including natural sounds, smells and textures can help soothe participants and evoke positive memories, which provide joyful moments^{28, 29}. Meanwhile the meaningful activities (e.g., planting, weeding, developing new areas) provide a regular structure, which Pitt³⁰ proposes create a sense of flow and helps participants to relax. The completion of these activities provides participants with a sense of achievement and affirmation through contributing to the garden and/or community^{19, 31}. The activities also provide participants with opportunities to learn new skills and with positive experiences of being trusted to practise this new learning in a working environment, which beneficially impacts participants' mental wellbeing^{17, 26}. Finally, the social interactions also contribute to the development of a safe and supportive environment where participants are able to engage in offering and receiving support, knowledge, understanding and share skills, providing a sense of belonging^{16, 32, 33}.

Alongside recognising these affective characteristics of nature-based interventions researchers have proposed that a supportive psychosocial environment may be involved in transformative experiences for participants. For example, Sahlin et al.²³ propose supporting participants to learn about and experience activities to manage their mental health, as well



as develop their connection with nature helps participants to maintain their mental wellbeing post participation. Fernee et al.³⁴ also suggest that alongside participants spending time with nature, the provision of a psychosocial environment supports participants to develop their self-awareness and self-acceptance regarding their emotions and situations. This empowers the participants, promoting their agency and exploration of their self beyond the intervention, which supports increased social interactions and their emotional regulation through adaptation of nature-based practices to manage their stress.

Meanwhile Harrod et al.³⁵ propose the importance of recognising the role of people in co-creating affective psychosocial environments, particularly through the relational qualities of empathy, genuineness, non-judgemental acceptance and trust. These characteristics are deemed important in developing affective therapeutic environments as they do not place conditions on people's behaviour and support people to develop trust in their own feelings and thoughts to guide their actions and choices. These affective relational dynamics support participants to explore the impact of their participation on their sense of self, facilitating their movement towards a more authentic self, leading to improved self-care and towards a more meaningful existence – where their psychological distress can decrease as their experience of the world more closely aligns with their actions within it^{26, 35}.

Studies have also highlighted that the facilitators' experience, motivation, values and skills influence whether enabling or disabling spaces are formed at nature-based interventions through their interactions with participants. For example, Moriggi et al.'s³⁶ research proposes facilitators' care for people and nature as a common factor that influences their practices and approach. The facilitator's care is informed by their own passion for being and working outdoors, as well as concern with social inclusion, and disconnections between people and nature and between urban and rural areas. These concerns underpinned an inclusive approach that supports vulnerable and marginalised people to engage in meaningful nature-based activities that also provide social opportunities, education about, and a connection to, nature. The facilitators are also flexible in adapting activities to ensure participants find something suitable for them that enables their capabilities.

Facilitators also influence the fostering of safe and inclusive environments through non-judgemental, encouraging, and supportive social interactions, where participants are supported to engage at their pace to try new experiences³⁷⁻³⁹. Finally, McGuire et al.⁴⁰ report a range of motivations amongst the facilitators of community gardens: a desire to engage participants with nature to help the participants develop a relationship with nature that supported their wellbeing and care for nature; to foster the participants' wellbeing through providing hands on and meaningful activities that also enabled community ownership through the development of greenspaces; and by being in a space in which they could enact social justice through care and environmentalism in order to combat social exclusion through creating inclusive and accepting spaces.

Mental Wellbeing

Good mental wellbeing is recognised as being an essential human right, which supports people's general wellbeing, connection to others, responding constructively to difficulties, and flourishing⁴¹. However, mental health difficulties are common worldwide, with one in eight people living with a mental health difficulty, which impacts the person's quality of life. Meanwhile, people with severe mental health difficulties may die up to 10-20 years prematurely due to preventable physical conditions⁴². According to NHS England⁴³, mental health difficulties now represent the leading single cause of disability across the UK. As such, the NHS is transforming mental health care as part of the NHS Long Term Plan⁴⁴. This includes within forensic and community-based mental health care with a focus on improving service users' experience, outcomes and reducing their length of stay.

Mental wellbeing is an emergent process affected by the spatial context of a person's situation and their affective responses to the place and the actants involved in co-creating that place proposes wellbeing as a dynamic and relational process⁴⁵. Hence, wellbeing is not just an individual endeavour, rather a co-created process, which is an entanglement of human and other-than-human relationships, more-than-human spaces and places, a person's values and meanings, societal expectations, cultural meanings, and governmental policies. The interplay of all these factors can influence a person's wellbeing through affecting their capabilities, choices, and actions. The relationships people are part of can also be a source of wellbeing, where wellbeing emerges through the quality of the interactions of the relating human and other-than-human actants and shifts over time as a result of the relationships an individual is part of⁴⁶. As such, a person's wellbeing can flux depending on a person's context and the shifting values and meanings attributed within that context and so their wellbeing does not necessarily stay stable overtime⁴⁶⁻⁴⁸. Consequently, recognising wellbeing as being formed through complex and dynamic assemblages shifts responsibility away from individual acquisition of resources to focusing on how the social, material, and spatial aspects effect people's wellbeing⁴⁵.



Meanwhile, within forensic services there is also a focus on balancing service users' care with the monitoring, management and mitigation of potential risks to public safety⁴⁹. This balance can impact on service users' autonomy, choices, recovery and rehabilitation through the control and limits placed on their care and movements whilst in secure and forensic services. The service users' identity and self-worth can also be impacted by their offending history, including coming to terms with the impact they have had on others, and on their future opportunities⁵⁰. Subsequently, there are multiple ways in which service users' (who may already have complex mental health difficulties) mental health is impacted whilst in secure mental health services. Furthermore, studies have shown that the outcomes for service users leaving secure mental health services are poor, including employment, mortality, readmission and reoffending⁵¹⁻⁵³. Consequently the development of activities which can support service users' mental health, including improved self-worth, sense of meaning and purpose, vocational and employment opportunities, beneficial relationships and belonging, are vital in improving the health, societal, and employment outcomes of service users.



Approach

This evaluation of Grow Your Own adopted a research approach that aimed to be accessible, inclusive, and flexible to encourage as many as people as possible at Grow Your Own and Guild Lodge to participate and add their voice. Throughout the evaluation participants were engaged with care, compassion and respect. The participants are co-producers of the data and their expertise regarding their lived experiences is especially valued. To ensure their participation and the evaluation was conducted ethically, the study was approved by Lancaster University, specifically the Faculty of Science and Technology Research Ethics Committee and by the NHS as a Service User Evaluation.

The evaluation involved interviews and the opportunity to submit written feedback. The interviews took place at Grow Your Own or online by Teams between June and September 2025. Interviews have been effectively employed to explore the intricacies of people's experiences of nature-based interventions, including therapeutic gardening^{30, 54} and the continuing impact of participation on their lives^{34, 55}, as well as to understand the influential factors involved^{35, 40}.

The data produced with the participants was thematically analysed. Thematic analysis involves identifying, interpreting and analysing similarities and differences in patterns of shared meaning within the dataset. The analysis was informed by Braun and Clarke's^{56, 57} systematic six phases of thematic analysis, which involves an inductive and interpretive approach to develop codes that reflect the participants' descriptions and meanings and codes that identify implicit meanings. Followed by collating relevant codes into themes, which provides narratives to support answering the evaluation questions.



Participants

The interviews involved 46 participants and comprised of a range of service users, staff and volunteers (see table 1) to explore their views of Grow Your Own and understand the level of care Grow Your Own provides service users. The interviews explored with the participants their experiences of Grow Your Own, the factors they consider to be helpful, beneficial changes to service users wellbeing, and where applicable the longevity of benefits to service users wellbeing. Meanwhile, four volunteers submitted written feedback regarding their volunteering experience and the benefits of this to them. All participants have been given pseudonyms.

Participant Group	Number
Grow Your Own Staff	9
Service User	15
Volunteer	6
Ward/Estates Staff	16
Total	46

Table 1: Groupings and Numbers of Interview Participants

The participants' demographics highlighted a range of ages (figure 1), but a limited range of ethnic backgrounds (figure 2) and a binary gender (figure 3). The demographics from the volunteers who submitted written feedback are unknown.

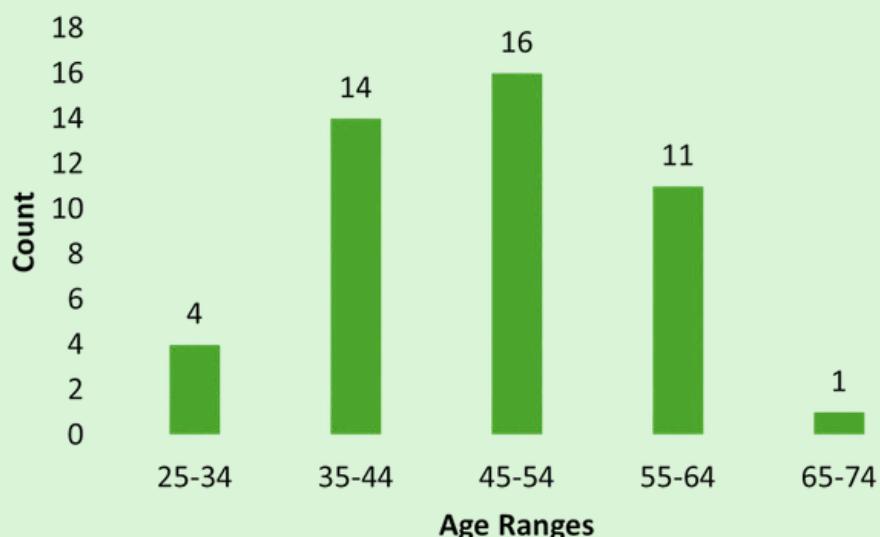


Figure 1: Bar Chart representing the range of participants' ages

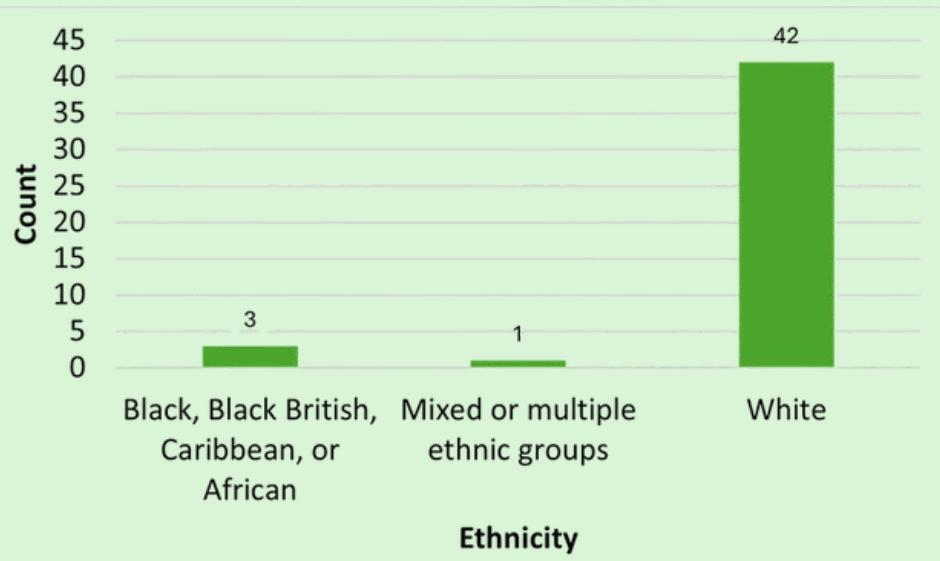


Figure 2: Bar Chart representing the Participants' ethnicity

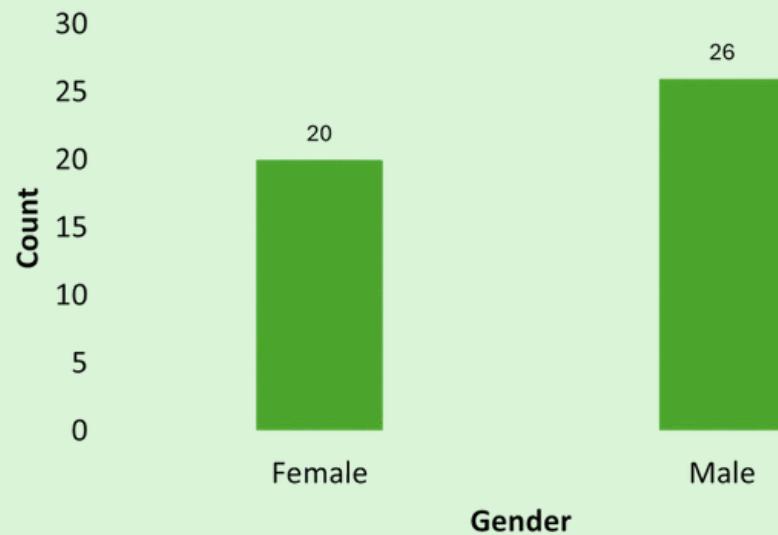


Figure 3: Bar Chart representing the Participants' gender

Limitations

The evaluation involved a mix of participants; however it was not possible to include all participants of Grow Your Own and/or service users and staff from Guild Lodge. For example, it was not possible to contact former participants of Grow Your Own who have been discharged and now live within the community and have not stayed in contact with Grow Your Own, as their contact details are unknown. Meanwhile, the views of the residents who do not participate in the horticulture pathway are unknown. As such, the evaluation may not capture the range of longer-term benefits participants may experience, as well as understand why some service users decide to not engage with the horticulture pathway, including Grow Your Own.

Findings and Discussion

This evaluation of Grow Your Own set out to find out what are the short- and long-term health benefits to service users' from participating at Grow Your Own and the factors involved in co-creating a beneficial space. Analysis of the interviews highlighted several key findings regarding the therapeutic environment at Grow Your Own, which provides respite, restorative and meaningful experiences, and purposeful occupation and learning opportunities. These influence the development of service users' sense of self, wellbeing practices and overall mental health, aiding their recovery and transition to community living. As such, the focus of this discussion explores the factors involved in co-creating the therapeutic environment at Grow Your Own, specifically the role of nature, activities, social interaction, and the personal qualities of the service users and Grow Your Own staff. The discussion will also consider challenges to service users' participation, service users' experiences on the wards, and ward staff engagement with Grow Your Own for their wellbeing. Finally, the factors involved in the replication of Grow Your Own at other Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust sites will be explored.

In order to centre the participants' experience of Grow Your Own quotes from the interviews are used liberally within the discussion to highlight the multiple stories shared and ensure the participants' voices are heard.

Therapeutic Environment

Grow Your Own is firstly a non-clinical space, with participants discussing the importance of there being no walls, doors, corridors and very few uniforms. This supports a sense of normality as Grow Your Own does not feel like part of Guild Lodge, especially as participants mentioned the significance of the sense of no one watching, listening or observing them.

"People are able to be themselves without feeling like they're being watched by staff or their peers on the ward." (Ayana, Consultant Nurse)



This supports participants to feel free and provides breathing space for their thoughts and reflections. Subsequently, participants referred to Grow Your Own as "a refuge", "a sanctuary", "a retreat" and "a hideaway", with plenty of spaces to go and be on your own when required, as well as communal spaces for social interaction.

"It was a refuge from being on the ward all day. It got me out, got me some fresh air. So it got me off the ward for a bit. So a bit of me time, I can just drift off and be a bit normal. So it's like separate from the hospital, it's peaceful." (Roy, Grow Your Own Staff (Former Service User))

"It's just the calmness of down here. For me personally that's how I find it. It's a bit of a breathing space. You can have a laugh with people, make coffees or go for a walk." (Tim, Service User)

The sense of escaping the hospital and having a break from it is supported by Grow Your Own being experienced as "welcoming" and "friendly", where there is no pressure to participate in certain ways, as well as being supported and encouraged during the activities. This added to participants' sense of freedom, as they are free to choose how they participate at each session depending on how they are feeling.

"Relax. It's easy on, but you can work hard. But you can say I'm just gonna have five minutes. You know, there's no pressure here. It's just come as you are." (Jacob, Service User)

"She [manager] wants you to feel comfortable. She wants you to have a choice in what you're doing as well." (Kae, Service User)

The size of and space provided at Grow Your Own is also significant to the participants, with the garden referred to as "vast", "big", and "massive", especially in contrast to the small, locked and bounded environments of the wards. This sense of openness was aided by it being an outdoor environment, with the mix of plants, trees, birds, wildlife, sunshine, skies and fresh air all contributing to a "relaxing", "calm" and "peaceful" atmosphere. This natural environment further supported a sense of normality and getting away from the wards, providing a beneficial and fascinating change of scene.

"The fresh air. The feeling of the different seasons as well, the different weather patterns. Sometimes I might sound silly with this, but when you're working in a polytunnel, it's raining, it's actually quite satisfying and soothing." (Liam, Service User)

"So, it's all the bugs, the bees, the flowers. So, it's seeing those aspects of nature. It's a very peaceful setting. And they've got so many little different environments as well, which is good." (Ivan, Service User)

Overall, these factors, contribute to a safe space for the participants, which provide meaningful experiences that provide short- and long-term therapeutic benefits to the participants' mental health and for service users aid their recovery and transition to community living.

participants' mental health and for service users aid their recovery and transition to community living.

"I can't thank it enough for what it's done for me. It's just priceless."
(Laura, Volunteer (Former Service User))

"Oh, it's special, isn't it? I'll be disappointed if I can't come anymore. ... it's like a warm hug, isn't it? ... I'm just glad I started, made that decision to come at the beginning." (Felicity, Volunteer)

"I'm grateful for this place because it has changed me. Given me the right direction in life." (William, Service User)

Beneficial Components

Three of the above factors: nature, meaningful activities and social interaction are considered as core components of nature-based interventions which support improving participants' mental and physical wellbeing^{11, 27}. Participants discussed how all three of these components are actively engaged with at Grow Your Own to co-create therapeutic experiences.

Nature

Firstly, nature, which provides a low stimulus sensory environment, through the presence of sights, sounds, smells, textures and tastes. Participants discussed being surprised by deer running through the garden or a passing flock of birds, as well as the joy of feeding the resident chickens and geese. Meanwhile, participants also enjoyed the different smells from the plants, as well as tasting the fruit and vegetables they have grown, which includes the joy of getting their hands in the soil when planting. Finally, bird song, the rustling of trees and the sound of rain, all contribute to a tranquil and calming environment. These sensory experiences support participants to get away from the wards and their difficulties, providing respite, joy, and a reflective environment^{28, 29, 58}.

"Smelling the different types of flowery plants and I'm not sure what it does, but it feels good." (Sam, Grow Your Own Staff (Former Service User))

"When I first came, when I found out that they had chickens and geese, that made me so much happier because I knew that there was animals there. I just love animals." (Frank, Service User)

"I absolutely love it. This is where I practise my mindfulness techniques. While I'm down here, I can feel the wind, I can hear the trees, I can feel the sun, I can feel the sky." (Richard, Grow Your Own Staff (Former Service User))



Connecting with nature also supported participants' sense of being part of something bigger than themselves and the hospital. This occurred through the growing of individual plants, as well as through the creation of habitats for insects, birds and wildlife. These acts of care support people's wellbeing through improving their sense of purpose and belonging^{26, 59}. This can aid long-term wellbeing through an ongoing beneficial two-way relationship, where nature provides restorative experiences for people and people take part in restorative actions for nature^{33, 60}.

"Because I'm working with them [plants], I've got that connection, if that makes sense. You've got that bond with a plant, don't you? They say you've meant to talk to plants and nature and look after them. I just enjoy doing that." (Seb, Service User)

"It's nice that we've given back something to nature, really, which before there wasn't really a lot down here." (Gordon, Grow Your Own Staff (Former Service User))

Social

In this relaxed environment participants highlighted social interactions were easy-going, full of jokes and laughter, and focused on everyday topics, but could also involve peer support around personal experiences of medications, of progress and recovery. Peer support is empowering for the people involved as it raises their self-confidence, self-worth and self-efficacy through the sharing and receiving of lived experience, which facilitates their processing of experiences and assists social inclusion^{61, 62}. These social interactions are significant in supporting participants sense of belonging at Grow Your Own, with participants noting they feel part of a "team" and "family".

"I think one of the things that surprised me was the community, I am quite a loner and I live on my own, how much I've enjoyed being part of this community." (Holly, Volunteer)

"It's a place where everybody comes together. They're a great team. They all get on with each other. There's never any arguments, there's never any disagreements. We're all just one big team." (Richard, Grow Your Own Staff (Former Service User))

Participants discussed how their words and conversations were not "jumped on", that the staff at Grow Your Own did not "overreact" if they mentioned having a bad day or personal difficulties. Participants raised that both the ease of talking and non-reaction was in contrast to being on the ward, where service users feel guarded and constrained by the cramped and intense spaces, and the sense of being observed twenty-four-seven.

"You've got the space to chat about any issues that they may be encountering on the wards. You know, a lot of people do open up about things, pressures they are having on the wards and they're able to do that because they feel relaxed and there's nobody listening, there's no one around." (John, Grow Your Own Staff (Former Service User))

"Because it's a non-clinical environment. It's a common ground. It's a place that if they want to express their feelings, whether negative or positive, they can do that to an extent without it being taken that their mental health is taking an adverse effect, because at the end of the day, we're human beings." (Jennifer, Grow Your Own Staff)

Meanwhile, participants discussed that conversations between service users and staff (Grow Your Own and ward) opened up at Grow Your Own, creating therapeutic relationships, where service users felt safe to discuss their difficulties, as well as progress. The use of non-clinical settings, especially natural ones, have been shown to enhance therapeutic relationships between healthcare staff and service users by disrupting hierarchical dynamics and enabling a collaborative approach⁶³. These conversations often took part during activities, were being side by side rather than face to face facilitated discussions. These provided invaluable insights for staff regarding connecting to service users and assessing their progress.

"Whilst we're there to help and make it as enjoyable and relaxed as possible, when we're down here we're getting involved. You build therapeutic relationships." (John, Grow Your Own Staff (Former Service User))

"They do express their thoughts and feelings and they're more open here as well. When you're on the ward they seem to be more caged." (Patrick, Healthcare Professional)



Activities

"Gardening is good for a lot of people with mental health. I'm on medication for my mental health, but I think there's other things that do help as much, if not more sometimes. I think gardening, especially with myself and a lot of people, it does help a great deal." (Gordon, Grow Your Own Staff (Former Service User))

As Gordon highlights, gardening activities are recognised as providing multiple benefits to participants' wellbeing³³. The activities include planting seedlings, creating crafts, landscaping, woodwork, and contributing to show gardens. Through participating in these activities, participants are able to support their emotional regulation, develop a sense of achievement, improve their physical health, be trusted with restricted items and develop responsibility.

"Because you've vented your frustrations out digging the plants out. Well, for me, put your aggression into your work and then when you go back, you just chill out." (Roy, Grow Your Own Staff (Former Service User))

"I really like planting plants and seeing them grow because it's like Oh my god, I've achieved that, that plant was that little and it's up here [points up]. I have really achieved that." (Daisy, Service User)

Participants' active engagement with the activities opens up opportunities for them to learn about themselves, develop new skills and knowledge, which is empowering for the participants^{17, 26}. Some of the participants transfer these skills and knowledge to the ward gardens, creating green spaces and further developing their interest in gardening. Through the activities, participants become included at Grow Your Own, which is enhanced through participation at the Southport Flower Show, Longridge Show, and various festive markets. These shows and markets are the accumulation of common goals, where the public interaction and appreciation supports participants' confidence, self-worth and belonging⁵⁴.

"When they get to those events and they see people looking at what they've produced, they really do enjoy it. So that being part of the community, I think, is a big, big thing. And having those goals to work towards." (Aisling, Forensic Community Practitioner)

"It's the pride, isn't it? When they win prizes and they've actually achieved something that their work has paid off and ... being part of society and doing things that they enjoy and that are meaningful to them." (Ayana, Consultant Nurse)



Learning and Occupation

Through the combination of nature, social interaction, and meaningful activities learning opportunities are provided, including personal development, social skills, and horticultural skills and knowledge, which can be formalised through completing Level 1 and Level 2 City and Guilds qualifications in Horticulture. Participants highlighted the importance of learning about themselves through the activities and interactions at Grow Your Own and beyond at community events. This included understanding their capabilities, ways of learning, self-respect, social skills, and emotional awareness and regulation.

"To respect people that work. To respect people doing things instead of like... because I mean growing up, I'd probably just robbed from them or stole from them or stuff like that. But coming more self-respecting yourself and to respect other people as well." (William, Service User)

"It can be hard work, but it is rewarding. I started with nothing down here and I had nothing. And then I've been allowed scissors and then I've been allowed hand trowels and then I've worked my way up to the lawn mower. I had to do my course to use the lawn mower, and then we got a ride on one. So now I can use a ride on." (Thomas, Grow Your Own Staff (Former Service User))

Through the opportunity to participate in structured, regular and meaningful activities, participants highlighted how they developed short- and long-term occupation, which provides purpose and meaning to them^{26, 30}. Firstly, the development of a regular focus during the week to keep their mind occupied, rather than getting bored on the wards, which is detrimental to their mental health. Secondly, the development of this focus into a structure and identity, with service users referring to their time at Grow Your Own as work and as gardeners. Finally, as a long-term protective factor, that aids participants' recovery and supports them in the community.

"I know my schedule and what I do on a day-to-day basis. I've got a meaningful life and I've never had that. Never thought I could have the life that I have now. So I'm doing well, right?" (Rosie, Grow Your Own Staff (Former Service User))

"So I think primarily structure and routine is so important in terms of helping people with their mood, distraction from any symptoms that they might have, ability to self-regulate, helps them with loneliness." (Megan, Forensic Psychiatrist)

Personal and Relational Qualities

Alongside the core components of nature-based interventions, the role of the people involved has been identified as a significant factor in co-creating beneficial experiences and successful outcomes^{35, 36, 40}.

Service Users

Participants highlighted the role of choice and motivation in their participation at Grow Your Own, especially in relation to feeling they had no choice in being at Guild Lodge and how it was more difficult to make their own decisions regarding their treatment.

"You can be quite passive as a patient just receiving treatment and doing what's asked of you, without being so active and doing something yourself. So, it just feels a more active role." (Jessica, Forensic Psychiatrist)

Meanwhile, the inclusive, non-judgemental atmosphere at Grow Your Own enabled participants to be more active in their decision making regarding activities and regular participation^{35, 64}. This occurs because participants are free to try different activities and explore the garden spaces in their chosen way, which supports their autonomy. A supportive community and the development of a structure also creates a virtuous circle, with it increasing motivation⁶⁵.

"You know everybody who's here wants to be here." (Eric, Staff Nurse)

"Yes, he was able to be himself down here, because on the ward, a lot of them are frightened of ever saying no, because they'll get into trouble. At Grow Your Own, you can say no, you can say yes, you can say I might do, I might not do. You're not going to be judged." (Reece, Volunteer)

"The ones that attend Grow Your Own tend to be more motivated than some of the ones that don't. I think that having something that you're regularly doing does motivate you because it's when you don't have that structure, you don't get that motivation ... and they then maintain that." (Aisling, Forensic Community Practitioner)

The participants increased sense of agency supports them in developing confidence, in building up accomplishments, and led to shifts in their identity away from a 'mentally ill inpatient' to a 'normal human being'. This shift in their identity is supported by an increase in their sense of belonging as they are accepted as they are and valued by fellow participants and staff³⁷. Participants' re-evaluation of their identity can reduce their mental distress as their thoughts and actions become more aligned and supports them to flourish^{66, 67}.

"They seem to be more relaxed. Their thinking seems to be more coherent. Yes, because they're not under any pressure, they're not rushed. It's like taking all of the weight off and just presenting themselves as they really are." (Patrick, Healthcare Professional)

"You'll shape yourself, because you'll find yourself." (Rebecca, Grow Your Own Staff)



Grow Your Own Staff

The role of the manager of Grow Your Own was particularly highlighted by participants as being key to the success of Grow Your Own. Participants discussed her "caring", "considerate", "kind", "supportive", "encouraging", "non-judgemental" and "empathic" attitude, which supports participants to settle in and take part in the activities. These personal qualities were also highlighted as enabling participants to discuss difficulties and become their own advocate³⁵.

"[Manager] is just phenomenal. I think she can make anybody feel at ease and like they belong. And she's very organised and seems to be able to adapt tasks and roles to people's abilities so they feel good about what they're doing very quickly. And it's that recognition of when somebody's ready to take on a little bit of their own leadership as well and support newer members of the community." (Molly, Lead Practitioner)

"I think she sees people for who they are as individuals and what they're able to bring to this space because obviously everybody's different." (Ayana, Consultant Nurse)

"You've done really well and lots of praise and then we go away, with a smile on your face." (John, Grow Your Own Staff (Former Service User))

These personal and relational qualities have been shown to be essential in co-creating therapeutic environments, which facilitate participants to engage at their own pace and ways, which in turn supports participants to develop their identity and wellbeing practices^{26, 35}. This occurs because participants are not required to engage or behave in specific ways at Grow Your Own, but have the freedom to choose how they participate. This beneficially impacts their sense of worth and identity, as they are accepted as they are, which also improves their mental wellbeing. In support of this therapeutic environment, the manager chooses to have small numbers at Grow Your Own in order to be able to spend time with individuals one-to-one, as well as take time to teach participants how to undertake the activities.

"I don't overpopulate the area, and I do that on purpose so that they do get that time. If they need that time from a person, then they do get that time. Because when you've got a ward of 16 people and five staff, and they're knocking on the door and the staff are saying, hang on a minute, wait a minute, ... they're waiting. And it's not about pampering to the needs or anything like that. You know, that is not about that. It's about having that time for them, because that's what they need." (Jennifer, Grow Your Own Staff)

"She was like we'll just take it one step at a time. So then she was teaching me how to do all this stuff, and now I do it like that now [clicks fingers]." (Tim, Service User)

This therapeutic environment is supported by the other staff at Grow Your Own, many of whom are former service users, whose lived experience of being an inpatient at Guild Lodge can help them in their roles. These roles also provide personal satisfaction and helps them to maintain and enhance their own wellbeing²⁶.

"Yeah, it's unconditional listening, isn't it? You've got to listen to what people are telling you and don't judge it at the same time." (Richard, Grow Your Own Staff (Former Service User))

"I'm feeling satisfied, I'm doing my job right, being there for someone in need, who needs another chance in life just to get it right, then that gives me a lot of satisfaction and I'm very proud." (Rosie, Grow Your Own Staff (Former Service User))

This combination of personal and relational qualities, alongside the core components co-create a therapeutic environment that facilitates a range of beneficial experiences. In this environment, participants have the opportunity to participate at their own pace, find what interests them, learn new skills and develop their autonomy, which benefits their mental health and helps them to flourish^{26, 33}.

Mental Health Benefits and Recovery

Participants discussed a range of short- and long-term mental health benefits through participating at Grow Your Own. Through participation participants reported being able to have respite from the "noisy" and "crowded" wards, which supported them to feel relaxed and return in a more positive mood. Often participants would take small steps and slowly build up their participation in activities and interactions.

"I like it here, I don't want to go back to the ward when I'm here, because when I'm here I forget about the hospital." (Evie, Service User)

"When I first came down, it was quiet and I only stayed with [service user], but now I walk away and do my own thing and have a laugh with [volunteer]. I'm slowly getting better, and I do my own thing down here now." (Philip, Service User)

Through the social interactions and activities, participants highlighted how these helped to improve their confidence, mood, sleep, reduce their anxiety and to become aware of their emotions and improve their emotional regulation^{15, 18}.

"It's helping me grow. It's helping me understand my mental health as well as really helping with my mental health." (Liam, Service User)

"I certainly think it helps with my productivity because I feel happier coming down here. I feel like it gives me a fresh momentum and just... I do feel it helps. And you're not doing the same all the time." (Emma, Volunteer)

"Therapeutically, it's helped my mind. It's helped me understand myself better. Not to rush, just be calm, collected, and speak." (Rosie, Grow Your Own Staff (Former Service User))

Belonging is also an important aspect of good mental health, with participants recognising that becoming part of Grow Your Own and being valued as an individual and a team member is a significant aspect in improving their mental health^{16, 19}. The formation of meaningful and joyful social connections acts as a buffer against emotional distress, maintaining and enhancing participants' mental wellbeing.

"I feel normal down here instead of an outcast." (Peter, Service User)

"I think people's personal connection with them is a strong part of the driver to be honest with you, feeling part of that team feeling valued down here." (Graham, Occupational Therapist)

Participants' continual engagement with Grow Your Own supports them in developing their sense of worth and purpose, which supports their reconnection and/or reformation of their identity and sense of belonging^{26, 34}. Participants also highlighted the formation of improved wellbeing practices through having new experiences and becoming aware of harmful habits. This highlights the importance of participants being able to attend regularly and over a long period of time in order to have the time and space in which to explore their interests, habits and identity.

"Well, it gives a sense of purpose. When you're on a long trajectory of treatment it can be very tedious, the progression can be very slow. So this can be building self-esteem." (Sarah, Bank Support Worker)

"It helps your sense of identity. When you're in secure settings, you lose that. They're not very nice places. I'll be honest with you." (Richard, Grow Your Own Staff (Former Service User))

"I've found it helpful down here and it really has changed me. I suppose it's given me experiences to change my ways and do things in smarter ways. Like I've seen that with nature. It's not natural to take drugs because they're chemicals. Like let's say it's a flower, it's not gonna grow right, is it? But nature, without taking drugs, it grows, it's better. It's a lot better." (William, Service User)



Participants highlighted that through regular attendance, building a structure, taking on responsibilities, and having the manager and other staff and volunteers as role models has aided their recovery and supported their transition to community living. The significance of having paid roles, which former service users hold, was also recognised as a key aspect in supporting long-term mental health and stability in the community.

"When you are unwell and you can't go nowhere and you've been pumped full of medication and it can be scary, but you've got to crack on with it. And then when you get an opportunity like this, you take it. And then it helps with your wellness, it really does, just having more responsibilities and helps like a confidence boost, which helps your anxiety and stuff like that. It's been brilliant for me. This is what really got me out of the hospital ... But this has hasn't just helped me get out. It's helped me stay out in the community." (Thomas, Grow Your Own Staff (Former Service User))

"Just absolutely brilliant. It has been a key part of my recovery. It's been a slow recovery, but I don't think I would have recovered as quickly as I have done without Grow Your Own. I don't know what else would have been available to me that would have provided the atmosphere that Grow Your Own provides. And [volunteer] and [Manager] have been great mentors as well." (Laura, Volunteer (Former Service User))

"I mean the paid role is a particular draw and you can't underestimate the value of that to people and being paid for the work that you do." (Graham, Occupational Therapist)

"It's an achievement to be able to have a part-time job, especially the trust that goes into us being staff. It's a massive achievement." (Rosie, Grow Your Own Staff (Former Service User))

However, the manager of Grow Your Own highlighted that there is a limited number of paid positions. As such, other roles throughout Guild Lodge could be considered for former service users, where the transferrable skills, knowledge and experiences they have gained from their participation can be applied and developed. For example, former service users have taken up portering and admin roles at Guild Lodge.

Challenges

Participants discussed feeling nervous when starting at Grow Your Own, but these nerves soon passed due to the welcoming and understanding environment present. Within this environment, participants did not recall any arguments and that the only challenges were noted as being external to the service users. These challenges included obtaining the necessary leave to be able to attend Grow Your Own as it is not on hospital grounds, but situated within the community. As such, participation requires community leave, which can require Ministry of Justice approval. However, participants did not view this as a major issue, instead recognising the benefit of having Guild Lodge and Grow Your Own separate, as it provided exercise and supported participants' sense of getting away from the hospital.

"No, I've never heard of anything. None of mine have ever complained of any confrontations or anything like that. I'm not aware of anything."
(Ayana, Consultant Nurse)

"The only challenge is, like I said, if the ward are short-staffed." (Rebecca, Grow Your Own Staff)

"It feels very separate. It needs to be linked in enough that we have those close links. So that there's a sort of feedback loop. But is it helpful that it's not NHS? I mean, to me, it probably doesn't make any difference. I suspect it's quite important to the patients." (Jessica, Forensic Psychiatrist)

Another challenge participants recognised is financial constraints, as Grow Your Own is a charity and does not have an operational budget, instead running costs are met through plant and craft sales. This can make it difficult to ensure similar activities happen every year. However, as highlighted above, the major challenge recognised was staff shortages on the wards, which could lead to escorts for service users being cancelled. Participants recognised this could be stressful for service users, with service users highlighting it was particularly disappointing at weekends, when there are fewer activities available to compensate missing out on Grow Your Own.



"Yeah, it's probably the biggest barrier we have to all activities. ... I think from the service user's perspective their world is a lot smaller than ours. And it can feel, maybe we would be like, oh well, it's fine. But for them, that might be the only thing that is keeping them feeling steady that week." (Madeline, Occupational Therapist)

"A challenge for the patient is having a staff member available to come here for a few hours. But that's just the NHS, it's just it can be quite common. But I'll be quite honest we bend over backwards to try and facilitate." (Eric, Staff Nurse)

"Sometimes they don't have the staff to bring me down, but they always try their best to get someone to bring me." (Evie, Service User)

"You know, they don't have any activities or any sessions on the weekend. So when they're taken away the one thing that you've actually been looking forward to all week, it's more than disappointing." (Kae, Service User)

Ward Life

The focus of this evaluation was on Grow Your Own, but through participants discussing their experiences at Grow Your Own, they raised their experiences on the wards, as they were often in sharp contrast to the beneficial environment at Grow Your Own. Participants highlighted that life on the wards was difficult due to a sense of being on top of one another, bounded by the walls and doors, being regularly observed and being in a small, confined space, which was noted as being detrimental to their mental wellbeing. Whilst, it is beyond the scope of this evaluation to comment on the ward environment, it is recommended that further evaluation and research is conducted to understand service users experiences on the wards. This is especially in light of the reported characteristics which co-create the therapeutic environment at Grow Your Own. For example, incorporation of the characteristics which constitute Grow Your Own into the ward could further facilitate service user's recovery.

"He was apparently a completely different man down there from what he was up in the clinical environment. And does it always go back to if I talk too much or if I do different things, am I going to be perceived as being unwell again? I don't know." (Jennifer, Grow Your Own Staff)

"A sense of living [at Grow Your Own], sometimes you'll be on the ward and you're not really living, you're just existing." (Sam, Grow Your Own Staff (Former Service User))

Ward Staff Engagement

Whilst the main participants of Grow Your Own are the service users and volunteers, the garden is engaged with by the staff at Guild Lodge for formal and informal activities. Formally, regular supervision groups and one-to-one meetings are held there. Meanwhile, informal activities include taking breaks and having lunch in the garden. The ward staff recognised similar benefits to the service users and volunteers in terms of gaining respite from a busy working environment and a chance to reset and gain momentum for the remainder of the shift/week. However, similar challenges were also recognised in terms of staffing levels and time available to take part in the supervision group and informal breaks.

"We organise once a week, the professional nurse advocates facilitate supervision and it's a walking group. And then we come down here. So we meet up at the entrance and have a walk down, and obviously you've got that opportunity for everybody to have a chat with each other who comes and then we'll come down here and we can either go around the ground. Or [manager] has been organising some activities as well in one of the polytunnels so that their people have got that opportunity. So, it's restorative supervision that we're doing and people have an opportunity to kind of get that support from their colleagues." (Georgia, Mental Health Nurse)

"There are some challenges with that [supervision group]. Simply having surplus staff to leave the ward. To be able to come here, which can be quite frustrating." (Eric, Staff Nurse)

"That's why sometimes I'll go and do my one-to-ones there because it's a nicer environment and then they tend to show me around, what they're doing and things like that. And it's quite a nice place to kind of see people and see what they're working on and see what they're getting on with. So, it's always quite good to see them in that environment. They're always more relaxed actually than if you see them at a placement or an office." (Georgia, Mental Health Nurse)

"I guess that's another drawback of it being just that slight bit further away from the hospital as it does mean that when staff are pressured it doesn't get used so much by staff to come and sit and I'd love to come and sit and eat lunch or something, but quite often if I come for a lunchtime walk, I won't get as far as actually coming down to Grow Your Own I might get to sort of the top of the drive, but then I have to think about going back." (Lily, Forensic Psychiatrist)



One option to increase staff engagement with Grow Your Own is to support volunteering offerings to all staff, which can support staff giving back to the wider community, as well as support their own wellbeing. Feedback from volunteers suggest they gain benefits to their wellbeing, which help them to destress and recharge, as well as understanding of the role of Grow Your Own for service users and the wider community.

"Volunteering within the GYO experience has had a positive impact on myself and all those that I have encountered within this environment. It has been an environment that shares knowledge and encompasses the wellbeing of nature, growing and the outdoors. ... I am a better person for the experience." (Anonymous, Volunteer)

Replication

"My experience is that I've really enjoyed being here so much to the point that I am going to ask if I can get additional days here because I do really like it and I do think that the Trust should expand this to other hospitals. I feel like it is something that's great for overall mental wellbeing. And for other service users to be able to have an opportunity to get out in the fresh air and to get involved with, doing similar things, that's a great thing. I believe it should be expanded nationwide." (Kae, Service User)

Kae captures the sentiment of the participants of this evaluation in terms of support for Grow Your Own and the expansion of it to other NHS sites. However, participants raised several challenges to Grow Your Own being replicated. These included finances and capital investment, land to create a garden of scale, length of stay regarding service users, access to leave, and the role of the facilitator (manager). This is, specifically regarding the importance of the personal and relational qualities highlighted in this evaluation, as well as the managerial commitment that has been present since the beginning of Grow Your Own.

In answer to these challenges, replicating the activities at Grow Your Own on the wards was raised as a possible in-between step, but questions were raised regarding risk assessments due to the use of tools for the activities. Meanwhile the manager of Grow Your Own suggested if a shorter time scale was only available due to service users' length of stay, then activities could be scaled down, as long as they still provide a beginning, middle and end, to facilitate participants experiencing the whole process of an activity in order to experience the different stages and processes. For example, planting seeds, then repotting seedlings, followed by nurturing the plants, and finishing by harvesting (and eating) the produce.

"At first glance it doesn't look very complicated, but it is. The model is quite complex, it is a complex model." (Jennifer, Grow Your Own Staff)

Overall, the evaluation has highlighted that Grow Your Own is successful due to a combination of beneficial components (nature, social interaction, and meaningful activities) and the personal and relational qualities (non-judgemental, understanding, care, empathy, and patience) of the service users, volunteers and Grow Your Own Staff. This highlights that Grow Your Own is indeed a complex model, where the beneficial components are related to through the personal and relational qualities in order to co-create therapeutic activities and interactions. This therapeutic environment provides a calm, relaxed, caring and non-judgemental environment, which participants experience as a safe and social place and one in which they can be their self and take time to find their interests. Through participating at Grow Your Own participants improve their self-confidence and self-worth, which supports a re-evaluation of their identity, leading to improved actions, which support their short- and long-term mental wellbeing.



Summary

This evaluation of Grow Your Own set out to explore and understand what are the short- and long-term health benefits to service users' from participating at Grow Your Own and the factors involved in co-creating a beneficial space. In order to ascertain the role and value of the experiential experiences offered at Grow Your Own on service users' mental health, recovery, and their transition to community living. The research approach aimed to encourage as many people as possible at Grow Your Own and Guild Lodge to participate and add their voice, in order to ensure their lived experiences were central to the evaluation. It is through this lived experience that a detailed understanding of the role and value of Grow Your Own to service users and Guild Lodge was reached.

The findings from the evaluation highlighted several key components at Grow Your Own in providing a therapeutic environment for participants. Firstly, the role of nature in providing a calm and tranquil setting, which provides respite and reflection; secondly, social interactions, which are light-hearted, but also meaningful and provide peer support; thirdly, meaningful activities that support participants to find their own interest and to develop skills and knowledge; fourthly, the service users' choice and motivation to participate at Grow Your Own, which enables their autonomy and agency; and fifthly, the non-judgemental, caring, understanding, and empathic attitude of the Grow Your Own staff, specifically, which accepts participants as they are and facilitates their engagement at their pace and in their own ways.

These five aspects co-create a therapeutic environment, which benefit participants' short- and long-term mental health. This includes reductions in anxiety, improvements in confidence, self-worth, self-efficacy, mood and sleep, as well as increased emotional awareness and regulation. Alongside these benefits, participants also experienced beneficial shifts in their identity, which supported the formation of healthy habits, improved wellbeing practices and supported them to gain employment. Finally, participants also developed a sense of belonging with fellow participants, as well as nature, which began at Grow Your Own. As their recovery progressed this extended out to the wider community. This social and natural community provides participants with a buffer and support for emotional distress, personal difficulties and a source of friendship and enjoyment.

The main challenge highlighted was staff shortages on the wards, which could lead to escorts for service users being cancelled. This caused disruptions to service users' routines, which could be particularly difficult at weekends, when there were fewer activities available than during the week. A further consideration is the low engagement of staff at Guild Lodge with Grow Your Own, in part due to the same issues faced by service users, in terms of being able to obtain time away from the wards due to staffing levels. Finally, it is recommended that further evaluation and research is conducted to understand service users' experiences on the wards. This is because participants highlighted that life on the wards was difficult and detrimental to their wellbeing, and their experiences were often in sharp contrast to the beneficial experiences at Grow Your Own.

Informed by the findings of this evaluation of Grow Your Own, best practice recommendations have been produced for the replication of therapeutic gardens at other Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust sites.

Best Practice Recommendations

Informed by the findings of this evaluation of Grow Your Own best practice recommendations are presented for the replication of therapeutic gardens at other Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust sites.

Personal

The staff require people skills, specifically care, genuineness, empathy, and a non-judgemental attitude. Alongside the relevant horticultural skills, qualifications and memberships. Together these will facilitate the co-creation of a therapeutic environment and the provision of a range of activities, events and learning opportunities for participants. To ensure resilience it is important that gardens have a manager, an assistant manager and horticultural assistants.

Choice

Choice regarding participation and activities is essential in order to facilitate the development of participants' motivation, autonomy and agency. As the provision of choice support participants to act, engage and interact in their chosen ways, supporting them to develop their own interest and overtime their identity and wellbeing practices.

Space

Ideally, a large outdoor space, which is set apart from the hospital, is required, with a mixture of environments, which provide the settings for the activities, social encounters, and personal reflection. A biodiverse environment enhances the range of activities, as well as facilitates a connection with nature that supports participants' wellbeing and pro-environmental actions. Facilities, such as a kitchen, toilets, and indoor workspaces are also essential in order to provide a comfortable environment.

Activities

A range of activities provides participants with variation and choice, enabling participants to experience various learning opportunities and engage in different learning styles, which supports a sense of achievement and development of self-confidence and self-worth. Additional, outside events, such as flower shows and festive markets provide further opportunities for personal development, as well as a sense of belonging.

Social

A mixture of outdoor and indoor social spaces are required which support group socialising as well as alone time. This can include different sit spots around the garden for reflection and one-to-one chats, as well as picnic areas for group engagement and sharing brews and biscuits together.

Structure

Regular and structured sessions are essential to support participation, which provide participants with meaningful occupation. This includes the provision of escorts for service users, who must be available to ensure service users can access the garden as per their timetabled sessions. A reliable and resilient escort service is vital in supporting beneficial outcomes for participants.

Financial

Capital investment is required to develop therapeutic gardens, in order for them to have the required environments, facilities and staffing levels. Ongoing funding is also required to support the costs of activities, events, staff, and participant reimbursements.



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