

STATE OF THE SECTOR – CASE STUDY BULWELL FOREST GARDEN

This report focuses on the increased demand for our services and therapeutic volunteering opportunities, partnerships with statutory services and future funding.

Bulwell Forest Garden (BFG) is a community project mainly reaching people living in areas of Nottingham City with high levels of deprivation and health inequalities including Bulwell, Basford and Bestwood. Developed in 2012 by a group of local residents, its aim is to strengthen its community and social connections providing opportunities for people to learn more about growing food, protecting our environment and greater access to affordable healthy food. Together we grow fruit and veg, tend to our sensory and medicinal garden, wildflower meadow, wildlife pond, community woodland and outdoor kitchen, supporting a healthy bio-diversity and protecting wildlife.

BFG is primarily funded through Big Lottery for the next 2 years, with additional financial support via Nottingham City Council (NCC) and Nottingham City Homes. 5 part time paid staff and 47 volunteers (aged 12 to 82) support a weekly Lunch Club, outdoor yoga, Forest School, Men's Sheds, family activity days and adult educational workshops. Many of our older volunteer are with us to improve their social connections and feel valued, families come to learn about food growing and improve employability, and people seeking to improve their mental wellbeing.

Remaining operational for most of the pandemic lockdown, we became more familiar to statutory services receiving higher numbers of referrals, due to it being a relatively safe outdoor space and the therapeutic benefits of community gardens; referrals from the Social Prescribing (SP) and Adult Services also increased. We have a higher number of people access volunteering with us through Nottingham Community and Voluntary Service as a way to increase their mental health/social connections, engage with green spaces, giving something back to their community and/or filling time when furloughed.

With a high increase in fruit and veg/veg plants sales we have developed a new project, Lets Get Growing. Funded through COVID response grants we have connected with over 50 households providing fortnightly resources (to doorsteps in hard lockdowns) and online video tutorials helping people grow fruit/bee-friendly plants in their own outdoor spaces (no garden required!). With more people buying local, affordable fruit and veg (2097 veg parcels over the 2 years) we have created 8 new raised beds and planted 8 new fruit trees to meet demand. We have also developed a partnership with Bestwood and Bulwell Foodbanks, who now have 2 raised beds for growing produce to add to food parcels.

Our Lunch Club took a 2 month break during the pandemic. As it reopened, we allocated spaces to those most in need, reserving spaces for referrals from the SP team. Over Christmas 2020, we received DEFRA funding to deliver meals to our vulnerable Lunch Club members, this was extended for those most in need until Lunch Club reopened in April. We are proud to have worked closely with the SP team to support 3 local people with social anxiety into the project at this point and 2 of these are now volunteering with us.

The level of support we can offer our vols over the past 2 years has changed;:

1. With no close contact vols need to be able to take instruction and work independently, although in a social group ; this is difficult for people with high support needs.
2. due to a high number of referrals, we are now working to max capacity and have relied on the development of social groups forming as tasks can't be overseen in the usual way
3. we have received temporary funding through COVID support grants to fund a volunteer

support worker one half day a week; this is a very temporary solution though

Despite easy access to COVID recovery grants, the past 2 years has been an uncertain time regarding project and staff funding. Our 5 years Reaching Communities grant came to an end this year which funds staff salaries and running costs. During the process of reapplying to the Lottery through 2020-2021, demand and subsequent grant requirements changed, not only by the Big lottery but most large grant providers. Much higher emphasis is now placed on evidencing financial sustainability, and after several additional stages, we were recently awarded just 2 years extension, with feedback that we must evidence a transition away from full grant dependencies before any further applications are made.

A high rise in demand for therapeutic vol opps, local food and attendance at our Lunch Club creates more work i.e., supporting our vulnerable volunteers. Bulwell has the highest level of deprivation in Nottingham; rising energy, fuel and food costs, as well as job losses and the removal of the extra £20 universal credit has hit Bulwell hard. Our foodbank referrals have increased by 55% through the pandemic, with service users increasingly relying on our services e.g. free events with free lunch during school holidays. The national demand for financial grants has resulted in it being much harder to secure funding, and it is especially hard to raise funds ourselves considering the type of project we are.

To secure core funding we need to evidence further financial sustainability; this can only work with the financial support and recognition of our partners. We have worked with NCC and Bestwood and Bulwell foodbank to offer healthy food and access to physical activity. Local food growing is an important resource that can be expanded with financial support. Nottingham city CN28 plan includes Local Food as part of its strategy and, although a Food Insecurity Network (FIN) has been formed, more can be done. On behalf of Nottingham Growing Network we attend FIN meetings via Teams. We find that those with strategic roles in NCC, and specifically involved in CN28 plan, aren't always familiar with the purpose of local Community Gardens (CG). Our network of CG's are all unique but all share the same service of providing therapeutic vol opps, access to affordable fruit and veg and contributing the city wide goal to reduce our carbon footprint. In order for Community Gardens to be fully valued and supported as part of the CN28 plan, we must bridge the gap between those in strategic roles and grass root projects delivering work.

Another important partner is our SP team, along with Greenspace. Gardening and mental wellbeing go hand in hand and we, together with our SP team, not just provide vol opps, but also work to remove any barriers to initial access e.g. meeting people at the gate, contacting prior to initial visits and working initially on 1:1 basis if necessary. To do this, and to increase our SP referral numbers, Greenspace have agreed to fund a half day post for the next 12 months. Hopefully this will be extended to the remainder of their funding.

Holiday Activity Funds and Area Based Grants have enabled us to work with families to ensure they are supported both at the time of need, and also as a longer-term solution to food poverty by teaching skills in growing produce at home. Both HAF and ABG's are currently being reviewed, and we hope additional funding will become available.

Conclusion

- Re-introduce face to face meetings at different community gardens where NCC staff can see first-hand the importance of the sites. Providing refreshments could create revenue-
- More funding needs to be secured to meet service demand and to support our most vulnerable volunteers