



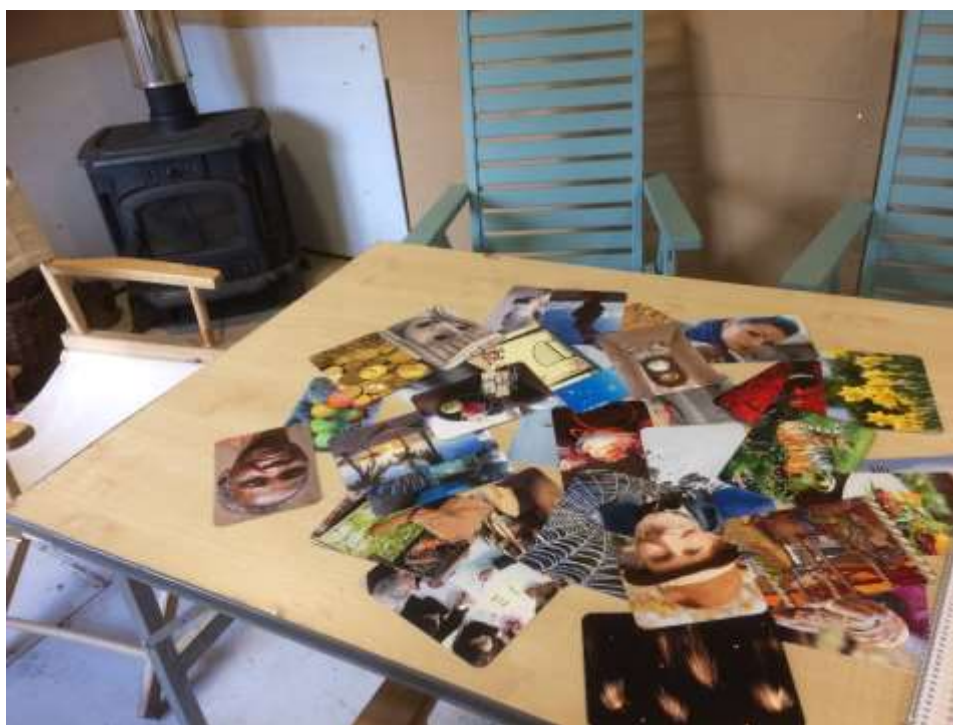
# St Mary's Secret Garden

Registered Charity 1152027 Company Ltd by guarantee 5987612

## Team London Older People's Project

2017 – 2018

### Evaluation report





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# St Mary's Secret Garden, Team London Older People's Project, 2017 – 2018

## Evaluation report

### 1 Introduction

Team London aims to encourage older people to take part in opportunities that can utilise their skills to benefit their community and also support older and vulnerable people to access supported volunteering opportunities.

Organisations were invited to bid to develop projects to help deliver this aim at a local level for the financial year of 2017-2018. St Mary's Secret Garden (SMSG) were successful with their bid to provide weekly community gardening sessions for older adults in Hackney to support and develop the local environmental activities we undertake; the majority of these 'budding' gardening volunteers will have learning disabilities.

There is a growing evidence base that suggests gardening is good for physical health and the mental health benefits of gardening are broad and diverse. Studies have shown significant reductions in depression and anxiety, improved social functioning and wider effects, including opportunities for vocational development.<sup>i</sup> In addition, as we age, our relationship with gardens and gardening changes. Surveys suggest they become much more important to us as a source of physical activity, but also in terms of our identity and independence, and in ameliorating loneliness. There is emerging evidence that gardening may also be important in falls prevention (helping to maintain good gait and balance) and also in dementia prevention and cognitive decline. Not all is 'rosy in the garden' as we age, though; for example, lower back pain among gardeners is common, and gardens can become a psychological burden.<sup>ii</sup>

SMSG is committed to evaluation of their work to help identify best practice and lessons learned from this Team London funded project; and to add to the monitoring undertaken by Team London. Hence, evaluation was commissioned from an external Health and Wellbeing Consultant. This report presents the findings, conclusion and lessons learned.

### 2 SMSG

SMSG has been able to provide a wide range of opportunities for people with support needs, particularly people with People With Learning Disabilities (PWLD) and older people in Hackney and neighbouring boroughs for over 20 years. These opportunities include:

- Training and learning in horticulture and skills for working life
- Day service provision for those with social care budgets or personal independence payments
- Supported volunteering opportunities.

The opportunities offered to PWLD aim to provide:

- Improvement in wellbeing
- Reduction in loneliness and isolation
- Increased confidence and self-esteem

SMSG participants and beneficiaries do not fit neatly into categories, tick boxes or target groups – PWLD will almost certainly have other health issues too e.g. epilepsy, mental ill health, diabetes, physical disabilities, sensory impairments and early on-set dementia. Consequently, SMSG works with the individual adapting our nature based interventions on how the individual engages and reacts to them – an organic process that requires a confident and experienced staff team.

### 3 Older people’s project methodology

The Team London SMSG project was established and fieldwork delivered between April 2017 and March 2018. Two experienced members of staff worked on the project.

SMSG recruited a total of 33 older people. However, some of those didn't really engage with the garden, had to leave through ill health or caring responsibilities. A total of 23 came in at least once a week so could be termed volunteers. They were older people who wanted to build on their enthusiasm, experience and skills to enhance the green spaces in their community. The intention being to improve their wellbeing by being actively engaged in their community; and improving their community by developing and enhancing local green spaces for the enjoyment of all.

Of those 23 older volunteers 11 were people with learning disabilities aged 40+. This is a difficult age for people with learning disabilities to find and retain long-term placements as, in general, placements for younger people and the older generation are more readily available whilst the middle age group appear to be forgotten.

The volunteers with identified needs such as PWLD or Mental Health conditions worked mainly in the garden on a range of activities ranging from seed sowing, pricking out seedlings, potting on plants through to making herb oils, bath bombs, lavender bags. A full list of activities offered are listed in appendix 1.

Others became involved and used their skills and knowledge to support SMSG’s work by other means such as: providing practical support to those with identified needs by working alongside them, helping with fundraising, raising public awareness of SMSG work or becoming a trustee.

### 4 Evaluation Framework

Table One below presents the Team London targets and outcomes for the project with methods for collecting data and analysis.

**Table One: Impact and measurement**

Target	Measure
<i>90% of volunteers will report improved wellbeing</i>	<p>A questionnaire based on the Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale completed by all volunteers at the start, mid and end point of the project.  <a href="https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/med/research/platform/wemwbs/">https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/med/research/platform/wemwbs/</a></p> <p>This is an evidence based and internationally recognised tool for measuring impact on wellbeing.</p>

<p><i>At least 12 older people will report that they feel more positive about their life, they will report feeling less lonely, they will report a greater connection with their community, they will feel fitter, healthier and happier.</i></p>	<p>Partly assessed using the WEMWBS questionnaire.</p> <p>In order to gather qualitative data from 16 participants and 2 staff semi-structured interviews were held (templates in Appendix 1) by the external evaluator. In order to facilitate discussions with participants, particularly those with learning disabilities, a set of picture cards <a href="http://www.barefootcoachingcards.co.uk/">http://www.barefootcoachingcards.co.uk/</a> were used to trigger thoughts and examples of experiences. Pictures most evocative for participants are used to illustrate this evaluation report.</p>
<p><i>A minimum of 60% of volunteers will continue to volunteer and support SMSG or other local voluntary organisation following the projects end.</i></p>	<p>Explored in the semi-structured interviews.</p> <p>Evidence of plans to offer volunteering opportunities to participants.</p>
<p><i>A minimum of 5 improved community green spaces and 3 new community greening initiatives created.</i></p>	<p>Evidence from SMSG of degree of achievement.</p>

## 5 Evaluation Findings

### 5.1 90% of volunteers will report improved wellbeing

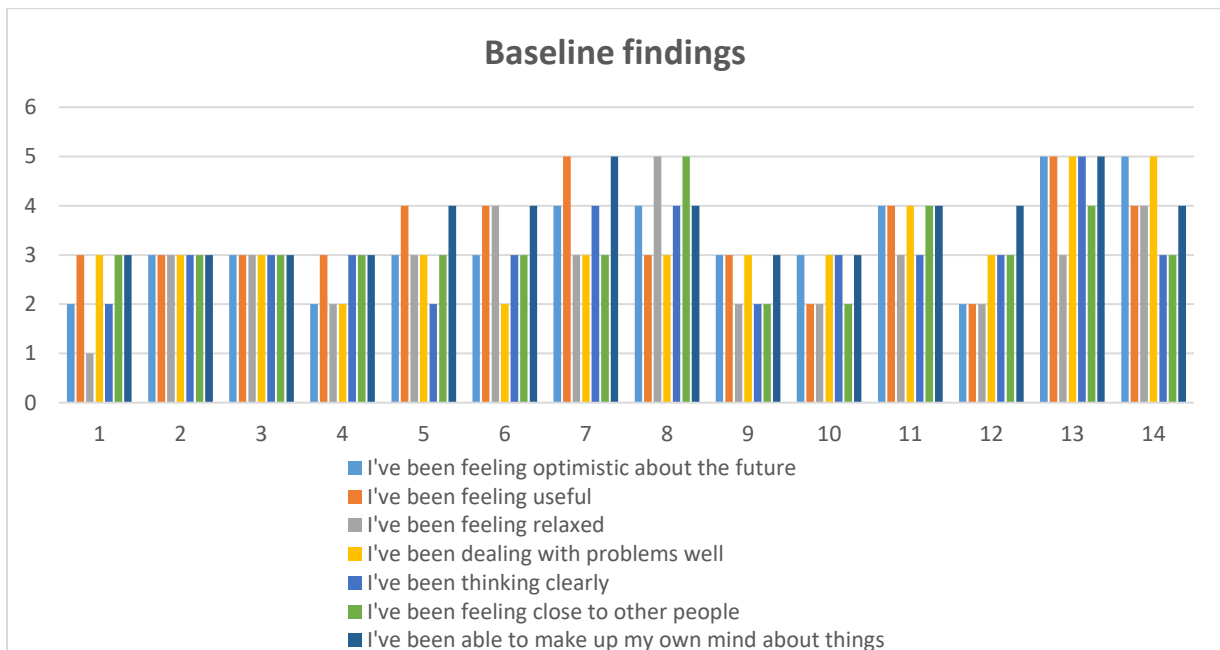
In order to identify a numerically measurable change in the mental wellbeing of volunteers a questionnaire was devised based on the Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS). WEMWBS is a scale which has been validated for the measurement of mental wellbeing among people aged 13 to 74 in the UK [1-5]. The Short WEMWBS comprises 7 positively worded statements with five response categories from ‘none of the time’ to ‘all of the time’ (see Appendix Two). Volunteers were asked to complete this at the start and end of the project in order to draw comparisons.

In order to analyse the findings, the results were scored using the guidance from WEMWBS. The Scale was devised for using at a group level. However, whilst the Scale has not been validated for use at an individual level it is suggested that if an individual score is increased by three to eight points it is deemed reasonable to conclude that mental wellbeing has been improved. Conversely if the score decreased by the same numbers this would suggest a negative impact.

#### 5.1.1 Group results

A total of 14 volunteers completed both the baseline and final questionnaire. Only these have been included in the analysis to be able to make a comparison.

The baseline findings would suggest that the majority of volunteers have a moderate level of mental wellbeing (an average score of 3 out of 5 per question). However, there were lower scores for some of feeling less relaxed or useful.



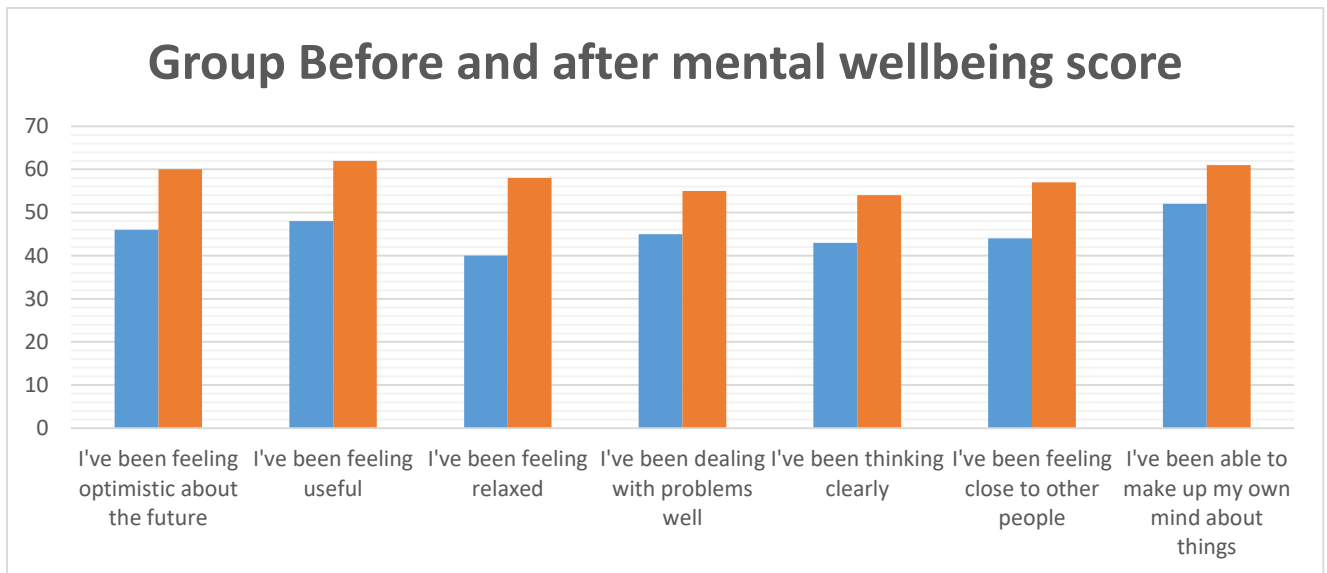
### 5.1.2 Completion findings

On completion of participation in the project it can be seen that every individual has improved their self-reported sense of mental wellbeing. Some have reported considerable improvements in feeling optimistic about the future, feeling useful and relaxed. Many felt they were closer to people.



### 5.1.3 Conclusion for the core group

The chart below shows the overall core group scores in the 7 key areas. The overall group score at the start was 300, with a final total score of 407. Hence, the average individual improvement in score is 7.5. It is reasonable to conclude that mental wellbeing has been significantly improved as it is at the high point of the scale suggested (3-8 points). This would suggest that regular participation in the SMSG Team London gardening project has a significant positive impact on mental wellbeing, and would also suggest that being part of a group has benefits particularly in reducing loneliness and helping people feel useful.



Blue = Before score    Orange = After score

### 5.2 At least 12 older people will report that they feel more positive about their life, they will report feeling less lonely, they will report a greater connection with their community, they will feel fitter, healthier and happier.

The volunteers were from two distinct groups – those who undertake the activities; and those who help with the delivery of the project including supporting the other volunteers as well as some gardening activity.

**5.2.1 Twelve volunteers working on the gardening, food preparation or other classroom based activities were interviewed.** All had learning disabilities (PWLD) or diagnosed mental health conditions such as depression or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, with one being a Carer speaking on behalf of their spouse as well as themselves.

Photo / picture cards originally designed for Coaching were chosen by volunteers to help talk about how participating in the project made them feel. They then talked about those feelings and what had helped them with their wellbeing.





There was a high degree of synergy for the cards that were picked. For example, this picture of spring daffodils was the most commonly chosen to illustrate the value placed on participation in the project :

- ✓ Nature and being outdoors
- ✓ Feeling hopeful and looking forward
- ✓ Fresh new life

***Feel more positive about their life, report feeling less lonely, report a greater connection with their community*** Many of the volunteers interviewed reported they had benefitted from a sense of fun and freedom experienced through the flexibility of how they could engage with activities and each other. Many of the **PWLD** have had years of being 'institutionalised' with limited freedom of choice and movement. They reported that they were allowed to go *'at their own pace'* with gentle encouragement from SMSG staff and other volunteers to try out new options. This has resulted in new friendships, trying out new skills and contributed to a sense of learning and growing confidence – leading to a sense of achievement for many: *'I get a sense of purpose doing something productive and worthwhile, gives me something to smile about,' 'Helping to make tea for people makes me feel good, like to be helpful – helps me feel part of the family'.*

For those older people who have a **mental health condition** they reported that working in the garden with other people has helped to reduce their sense of loneliness and they have made friends. *'Staff are really good and they make you feel like you are part of a family'. 'I had mental health problems and was recommended to come to SMSG. I find it difficult to interact with people but coming here I now say Hi and Goodbye to people. I can do a bit of mixing with people now which gives me a boost.'*

For some being able to be a volunteer in the project is a lifeline. *'Coming here is the best hours of the week, couldn't imagine the week without it, I can be different person for awhile', 'I can't imagine not being able to come here, I wouldn't know what to do,' 'If took away being able to come here people would be lost as mixing around people is very good.'* One volunteer noted that she had *'noticed one of the clients seems to be more smiley as he didn't smile at all when he started.'*

Another volunteer was reported as having changed from being very withdrawn to now being a key member of the group, to be smiling much more and to have begun to recover from the loss of a loved one. *'I had depression and growing things here with other people has really helped me with that.'*

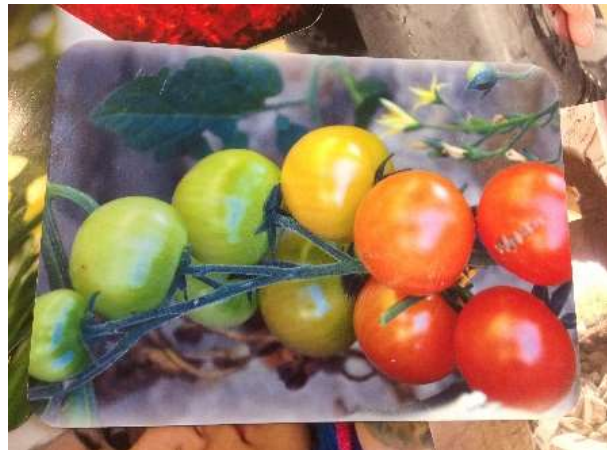


The benefits that people experienced to feeling more positive, less lonely and connected spreads beyond the older people volunteers participating directly in the project. Those who are **carers of volunteers** who have mental health conditions such as Alzheimer's (and managing this is becoming increasingly stressful) were able to report they experienced benefits. These included:

- *'The best thing that happened was being referred by a Social Worker and having peace of mind that my wife is in good hands and she is doing something she used to enjoy again – such as gardening and this brings a little of her back to her as well as me...it's a lifeline.'*
- *'When she has come here to work she is less anxious when she comes home, and she has made some friends. This takes the pressure off me.'*
- *'Gives me a chance to go to the Dementia Café and get some support, to go shopping and do other tasks without having to manage her needs. It allows me to keep on top of things and then be able to care for her when she comes home.'... 'Smaller things like a weekly session at SMSG is better for me than having a two week respite in a home.'*

**They will feel fitter, healthier and happier** Some volunteers talked about enjoying learning cookery skills including more healthy food, as well as feeling a sense of family through helping to cook and share food together at lunchtimes.

Common choices of pictures were of vegetables and food to show the value they placed on being able to learn to plant vegetables from seed, growing them through to learning how to cook them, then sharing meals together. Benefits derived from this included *'helps me to learn how to grow things at home', 'learn how to make pumpkin soup which is good for us', 'feel good being outdoors and in nature', 'getting used to baking so can help wife at home'*.



A few felt healthier from the physical work in the garden as well as being outdoors rather than being *'stuck at home in front of the TV'*.

One volunteer has since gone on to recognise his OCD behaviour is not helpful to him and is now accessing specialist intervention. He points out that he would not have done this without having gained confidence and support from the project.

The value and skill of **SMSG staff** and volunteers was mentioned by many people. *'Staff are really good and they make you feel like you are part of a family', 'if you feel a bit down you can chat to them even if they are busy.'* *'They don't judge you. A few months ago I felt like my head was exploding and wanted to get away. They sussed me out and helped me calm down and found me a job to do which helped.'*

A number of people remarked about the *'we can do this'* attitude of staff no matter how limited the abilities of the volunteers are. Staff always manage to find jobs that are realistic and yet have some kind of challenge for volunteers.

*A minimum of 60% of volunteers will continue to volunteer and support SMSG or other local voluntary organisation following the projects end.*

All the volunteers in this group were keen for the project and opportunities to participate through volunteering to continue. For example one volunteer claimed *'This is a lifeline for me,'* with another saying *'I don't want to go back and stay indoors. I want to continue.'*

### **5.2.2 Four volunteers who support the delivery of the Older People's Team London project were interviewed.**

These volunteers are older women who have recently retired and were looking for *'something to do'* and who have an interest in gardening and their local community. Some had already joined SMSG prior to this project, some referred to SMSG having been involved with other Hackney based organisations or courses for Older People. They undertook a variety of activities – supporting PWLD clients to have maximum gain from their participation in the project, supporting the staff with the delivery of the activities, supporting the management with running of the Charity, or undertaking whatever was needed of them.

*Feel more positive about their life, report feeling less lonely, report a greater connection with their community*

These volunteers reported they had learned more about plants and gardening which they felt positive about. They looked forward to their time at SMSG as it helped to reinforce that they still had relevant experience and skills such as working with PWLD, gardening and administration. This helped to make them feel more positive about their lives in retirement, for some they felt less lonely and had made new friends. For those who had experienced bereavement they felt that joining the project had given them *'something to love'* and feel positive about.

The experience of being able to be out in nature, being active, contributing to preserving *'a little bit of green surrounded by buildings'* and to be doing some gardening with other people, making friends, helped the volunteers feel included and positive. *'Gardening draws good people and that draws you in.'*

The social aspect of the Team London project, such as cooking and eating together, was valued. This increased the sense of inclusion and being part of *'something worthwhile.'*



The volunteers felt connected to SMSG and the local community *'It's helped me to relate to my neighbourhood,' 'It's a valuable asset for the community especially given the proximity of the location to the City of London. It's good to feel part of this.'*

As before, the value and skill of **SMSG staff** was much commented upon by this group of volunteers. *'The way SMSG staff behave makes me and others feel included, they are friendly, able and broad minded, good humoured and they show you how to do things.'* Asked what the staff did that made this difference comments included *'accept you at face value with no judgements, very informal and flexible according to your needs and make you feel you are part of the team....very well informed...skilled at working with PWLD'* This feeling of inclusion was seen as being an important aspect of the volunteer's wellbeing.

### *They will feel fitter, healthier and happier*

None of this group of volunteers felt that they were necessarily more fit as a result of this project – two of them are regular cyclists and still active. However, all reported that they felt happier and had fun, were valued by SMSG, less lonely and this, in turn, helps them to feel their general wellbeing and health is improving.

### *A minimum of 60% of volunteers will continue to volunteer and support SMSG or other local voluntary organisation following the projects end.*

Most of the Older People volunteers who were retirees had either already been volunteering for SMSG. All stated they intended to continue to volunteer both with SMSG and, for some, with other local outdoor charities such as City Farm. *'It's such good fun and I have a good time I want to continue.'*

*'This is the best charity I've ever come across for people with Dementia mental health conditions. I want to continue and I'd recommend it to others.'*

### **5.2.3 Staff**

The two SMSG staff who delivery this Team London Older Peoples were interviewed. They began by choosing picture cards that reflect how they viewed their contribution to the project. One chose the daffodil card as earlier saying it made her *'feel good about herself and reminded her of the enjoyment she gets from the work. I come away from here thinking this is an amazing place to work.'* The other chose the card below:

*'This reminds me of the creativity we get here. It helps have a sense of self and an outlet to be creative which makes me feel good about myself.'*



*Feel more positive about their life, report feeling less lonely, report a greater connection with their community, feel fitter, healthier and happier*

Both staff noted they had a sense of 'happiness' seeing how being involved through volunteering affected people and made visible changes to their lives. For example seeing the positive differences on the older people who had mental health concerns (described earlier) made staff feel a real sense of job satisfaction. This was placed in the context that working with older vulnerable people can be frustrating and hard work, and it can take a long time before change is seen.

*A minimum of 60% of volunteers will continue to volunteer and support SMSG or other local voluntary organisation following the projects end.*

The staff noted that although they knew that most of the volunteers who have learning disabilities or mental health problems wanted to continue the project it is due to end shortly. *'It's unsettling for the staff and also for the clients. It's getting harder to feed people into other projects. We need more core funding.'*

#### 5.2.4 Organisational and learning points

**Tension between organising people and gardening supervision** Two staff, with a small amount of support from volunteers, does not allow sufficient time for staff to give individual time those volunteers who have special needs. Staff felt tension between managing the project, the group and being there to teach their knowledge of gardening/horticulture *'It's hard to both supervise and teach our knowledge of gardening – it's a big group for us to manage.'* There were also a potential health and safety concerns due to small numbers of trained staff working with a large group.

This appears to have led to tensions between trying to keep everyone occupied and not having enough time to give gardening supervision to those who are more active and independent who appear to have been over zealous with cutting back hedges that should be trimmed e.g. Wisteria.

**Mix of people** Conversely, the staff felt that is helped to have a mix of older people with some able to help and support others. *'It's encouraging self-sufficiency all round.'* Having a mixed ability group also meant less physically disabled people and thus a greater range of tasks could be undertaken which the staff appreciated.

**Flexibility** The staff valued having some flexibility on the activities they could offer including more social aspects, such as preparing, cooking and eating lunch, for volunteers than they would normally have. This had helped the group to mix more and to feel part of the team.

**Drop-out** There was a small amount of drop-out by the volunteers attributed to the needs of older people. They either had poor health and not able to come in at times; some also had other carer responsibilities. For some there were also transport difficulties including lack of affordability.

**Publicity** A number of volunteers and staff noted that publicity and marketing of the project could have been more outreaching to the wider community. There was a delay in sending it out which meant that there was a more limited pool on which to draw. Hence, they felt the project had had a limited impact on the wider community.

**Short term funding and challenges with sustainability** Whilst SMSG value having been able to receive funding to demonstrate the need and value of this type of project for Older People they are concerned about the short term nature of funding. This poses a number of challenges.

The first being how they will bring the project to a close (particularly for those who say it is a lifeline) and feed people into others when there are only a limited number of other funded places.

In order to make a real tangible and sustainable difference longer term funding is needed in order to provide stability, time for the project to become more established, time for behaviour to really be impacted upon and to develop sustainable relationships between people and with their community. It is recognised that the current public sector budget is under unprecedented restrictions and constraints. This, coupled with reductions in provision for support for PWLD or mental health concerns, puts small charities such as SMSG under even greater physical and moral strain to provide services which evaluation suggests are needed and that make a positive difference to the health and wellbeing of people.

## **6 Summary and conclusion**

This time limited project working to provide weekly community gardening sessions for older adults in Hackney to support and develop the local environmental activities has been successful in achieving its targets and having a positive impact on mental wellbeing outcomes. It has been delivered in an appropriate, professional and compassionate manner. This is evidenced by:

- The high numbers of volunteers drawn from a range of backgrounds and needs and their consistent participation
- A statistically significant improvement in the Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale scoring – an individual average improvement of 7.5.
- The positive feedback from those older people interviewed about the way in which being involved has helped them feel included, less lonely, and part of their local community
- Being outdoors and in nature, working in a practical way and with others was valued by all and contributed to a sense of general wellbeing
- The social aspect of the project, such as preparing and sharing lunch, was particularly valued and demonstrates the need for these opportunities for older people
- For some, the tangible visible positive changes in their behaviour and mood which they and others have noticed
- The gain, for some, in knowledge of gardening and a wish to continue to learn
- For older people an increase in feeling valued and able to contribute earlier learned skills and experience to something they felt was worthwhile
- An additional benefit for those who have carers in the respite that the carers have whilst knowing their loved ones are happily occupied and being cared for
- Many expressing a wish to be able to continue to volunteer either for SMSG or other similar charities and projects

- There was limited evidence to suggest that people felt fitter and physically healthier other than, some, learning a little about growing, cooking and eating freshly prepared meals with others.

A small caveat, this project and evaluation is based on a small number of participants, some of who are in need of a level of support. Hence, the findings need to be taken in the context of people being appreciative of any intervention that helps to keep them occupied in a social setting. However, the limited evidence base would suggest that the findings are consistent with other studies that have found positive impacts for people from being involved with gardening and nature based projects. This evidence is likely to be transferable for older people and PWLD where there is even less published evidence.

There were a small number of **challenges and lessons learned arising** from this short evaluation:

- How to bring a project to a close (particularly for those who say it is a lifeline) and feed people into others when there are only a limited number of other funded places.
- In order to make a real tangible and sustainable difference longer term funding is needed in order to provide stability, time for the project to become more established, time for behaviour to really be impacted upon and to develop sustainable relationships between people and with their community.
- In addition, a short funding cycle does not allow sufficient time for a project to be fully bedded down and longevity of experience to demonstrate significant outcomes. However, due to the high level of skill and experience of SMSG staff they were able to deliver a highly valued project for older people despite the limited time frame. This would not necessarily be the case for other organisations trying to replicate this project.
- A project working with a mix of older people, including PWLD, needs to have sufficient skilled staff and volunteers to be able to fully support them through the process.
- The marketing and recruitment for this project was undertaken on a very short timescale (due to the shortness of time between the bidding process and work having to commence) with limited local opportunities to promote it to the wider local older people community.

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## References

<sup>i</sup> Buck.D, (2016) Gardens and health: Implications for policy and practice. Kings Fund, London

<sup>ii</sup> IBID

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1      SMSG Team London project activities

Our Team London volunteers have carried out many activities.

Seed sowing, pricking out seedlings, potting on plants. Taking responsibility for filling bird-feeders and bird-bath. Taking care of tools, cleaning, correct storage. Cutting the grass. Correct watering of the garden and in polytunnel and greenhouse. Sweeping up leaves and bagging them up for leaf mould. Harvesting apples and pears and placing them in storage. Pruning shrubs. Bottling honey from the garden hives. Making jams and chutneys from garden produce.	Weeding. Turning compost. Clearing growing beds. Painting sheds, stage area and trellises. Renovating compost bins. Insulating therapy shed and painting. Making herb oils, bath bombs, lavender bags. Cleaning boots. Packing seeds from garden. Repairing fencing. Litter-picking. Helping out at Open Squares and Gardens weekend Supporting other volunteers.
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And many more!

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*Appendix two*

Evaluation questionnaire

## The Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (SWEMWBS)

Below are some statements about feelings and thoughts.

Please tick the box that best describes your experience of each over the last 2 weeks

STATEMENTS	None of the time	Rarely	Some of the time	Often	All of the time
I've been feeling optimistic about the future	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling useful	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling relaxed	1	2	3	4	5
I've been dealing with problems well	1	2	3	4	5
I've been thinking clearly	1	2	3	4	5
I've been feeling close to other people	1	2	3	4	5
I've been able to make up my own mind about things	1	2	3	4	5

"Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (SWEMWBS)

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