

Dr Jenny Mercer
Dr Debbie Clayton
Nicole Burchett

Cardiff School
of Health Sciences

GreengAge Project



Cardiff Metropolitan University | Prifysgol Metropolitan Caerdydd



Befriending older people through gardening

Gofal are a Welsh mental health charity providing a wide range of services to people with mental ill health. The GreengAge project was set up by Gofal in 2011 and combined their mental health expertise with horticulture to produce an innovative way of delivering befriending services. The evaluation of the project was conducted by the Centre for Outdoor Activities and Leisure research (COAL) located in the Department of Applied Psychology at Cardiff Metropolitan University. The aim of the research group is to evaluate and understand the role that the outdoors, volunteering and purposeful leisure may play in enhancing health and well-being.

Overview of the findings

The evaluation provided evidence that the GreengAge project was successful in recruiting beneficiaries onto the project and of delivering a high quality service. Overall the project was well received by beneficiaries, volunteers and care homes and day centres who gave positive feedback about their involvement. The interviews demonstrated that individuals involved were highly committed to the project and the novel method of befriending, using gardening as a tool to engage both volunteers and beneficiaries was highly effective. This may be particularly important for older men, who are less likely to engage in traditional befriending support services.

Quantitative findings

The VFI revealed the three most important factors for volunteers were values; understanding; health and physical activity. See table below for definition and scores.

Table: Motives and benefits from volunteering for GreengAge as rated by an adapted version of the Volunteering Functions Inventory. Possible scores for functions and outcomes range from 1- 7 (where 1 = not important at all to me and 7 = important to me).

Factor	Definition	Motive Mean (S.D.)	Benefit Mean (S.D.)
Values	the person is volunteering in order to express or act on important values, such as humanitarianism and helping the less fortunate	5.83 (.94)	5.35 (1.47)
Understanding	the individual is seeking to learn more about the world and/or exercise skills that are often unused	4.82 (.82)	4.95 (1.57)
Health and physical activity	the individual is volunteering to increase physical activity and improve physical health	4.74 (1.20)	4.60 (2.01)
Connection to nature	the individual is volunteering to enable a greater opportunity to connect with the natural environment	4.02 (1.48)	4.60 (1.52)
Enhance	the individual is seeking to grow and develop psychologically through involvement in volunteering	3.84 (1.71)	4.10 (1.54)
Protect	the individual uses volunteering to reduce negative feelings, such as guilt, or to address personal problems	3.54 (1.62)	3.65 (1.10)
Career	the volunteer has the goal of gaining career-related experience through volunteering	2.83 (1.71)	3.25 (1.93)
Social	volunteering allows the person to strengthen one's social relationships	2.60 (1.07)	2.75 (1.73)

COAL research design

The evaluation incorporated two phases:

- **Phase One** exploratory in nature to inform phase two
 - Shadowing staff
 - Scoping workshop (with staff and volunteers)
 - Literature search
- **Phase Two**
 - **Quantitative:** Volunteering Functions Inventory (VFI) was adapted to incorporate the two subscales, 'connection to nature' and 'health and physical activity'
 - **Qualitative:** Semi-structured interviews with beneficiaries, volunteers & care home staff

Qualitative findings: Beneficiaries

Company and friendship
Positive impact on mood
Gardening and physical activity
Building self-efficacy and optimism

Qualitative findings: Volunteers

Affords positive view of self
Helping others
Knowledge and skills
Positive impact on mood
Social Benefits
Gardening and physical activity

Because once you're all doing something communally, it just generates discussion and something to talk about, isn't it? You know how everyone's language is, you know. It's that easy you know.
(Female, care home staff)

And they actually started growing veg. And the chef started to use the veg in their food.
(Male volunteer, aged 35)

They changed my life completely. I can sit out in the garden in the summer when the flowers are out and really enjoy myself. I couldn't do that for years.
(Male beneficiary, aged 89)

And when you've been unemployed for that long, you kind of say, "Oh, I can't do anything," you know...and then, slowly for this, it sort of opened up support work which is something I've never considered...basically it got me my job, where I am now. And it's totally sorted my life out, you know.
(Male volunteer, aged 35)



It's lovely and (.) somebody to talk about different things. [Later] As I told you, you know I look forward to her coming because nobody comes around (.) to have a chat even if it's just (.) chatting about for different things. But I think this project has been very good. I'm sure other people would say the same thing especially if when you're living on your own. I don't want to go in to a home.
(Participant 8, female beneficiary, aged 94)

Oh, it's fantastic, yeah. And it was so much variety and it was very person-centred with a lot of the stuff we did, a lot of the activities that they brought...And the team's approach, you know, really. Everyone who came to us was, was brilliant.
(Female care home staff)

[I] certainly found it rewarding you know (.) you know rewarding to myself...and it's definitely a good, good experience
(Male volunteer, aged 54)

They've done a huge amount, a huge amount for me. Uhm, and also, with bringing me...you know, bringing me plants because that's like a cheerfulness.
(Female beneficiary, aged 71)

Future directions

The GreengAge project can be mapped onto the 'Five Ways to Well-Being' categorised by the National Economic Foundation (2011). Based on a systematic review of the evidence the following five activities were identified as simple things we should engage in to improve our well-being: Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning and Give. The evaluation provides evidence GreengAge has enabled beneficiaries to engage in four of these activities and volunteers to engage in all five. Overall the project was a success and well valued, there is also strong evidence provided in this research that the GreengAge model can be successfully adapted within organisations offering care services to older people.

References

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For further information contact:
coal@cardiffmet.ac.uk
www.cardiffmet.ac.uk/coal