

# **Growing Well – Mental Health Recovery through Farming**

## **An Evaluation of Performance and Impact**



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## 1. Executive Summary

Growing Well is a mental health support organisation based at Low Sizergh Farm, near Kendal in Cumbria. Established in 2004 as an Industrial and Provident Society (IPS), the organisation operates as a non-profit-distributing social enterprise. Growing Well manages a 6 acre farm as a horticultural business, delivering a range of products including local salad and vegetable produce for sale, as well as supporting therapeutic vocational activities for adults experiencing mental health challenges.

The social objectives of Growing Well are to:

1. Develop the emotional resilience of people experiencing mental ill health
2. Develop people's life skills, through training and vocational activity, increasing hopefulness for the future.
3. Support people to be healthier and more active, reducing social isolation and increasing life expectancy.

In 2015 Growing Well secured BIG Lottery funding through the Reaching Communities programme to deliver a Mental Health Recovery through Farming project aimed at supporting the mental health recovery of up to 120 adults. Each day, up to 20 volunteers collaborate with other team members to engage in a wide variety of tasks including ground preparation, plant preparation, packing, administration alongside other activities and formal training.

Symbiont Consulting Ltd, a North West-based research and development consultancy, was appointed in December 2015 to conduct the external evaluation. The evaluation considered Growing Well's performance against the achievement of project outcomes and delivered primary research identifying the sustained impact of Growing Well in delivering recovery support for participants.

The results of achievement against Reaching Communities project targets and outputs were impressive, suggesting that the project delivered a high level of positive results in Year 1, achieving most targets and exceeding many. The project engaged considerable numbers of beneficiaries, exceeding the target figure. The level of activity too was impressive, with the project exceeding the target figure for the number of training days delivered, although the total number of delivery days fell slightly short of the target. A high level of impact was felt by beneficiaries and the scope of positive impacts was impressive. Beneficiaries reported positive impacts in their mental health including reduced levels of anxiety, increased levels of confidence about their mental health recovery and decreased usage of NHS Mental

Health services. A range of social impacts were reported including beneficiaries considering themselves to be leading healthier lifestyles, reporting improved physical wellbeing and increased social interaction. Impacts relating to employment readiness were also achieved, with beneficiaries achieving qualifications, moving into education, training or employment, and having greater confidence in their own skills, ability and knowledge.

Factors influencing Growing Well's high levels of achievement included the flexibility of delivery, with each individual attending Growing Well's service being treated in a manner appropriate to their own circumstance, with bespoke tasks selected each day. The nature of wrap-around support delivered was considered key, with volunteers not only involved in the planning of activities, but also engaged during breaks and lunch time periods, where volunteers are encouraged to sit together, share refreshments and interact socially. A spirit of peer support appears to contribute to achievement, with volunteers at Growing Well being encouraged by staff throughout the project to support their peers in formal and informal capacities. Other key success factors appear to be the excellent use of the Natural Environment, with Growing Well exploiting their natural surroundings to maximise feelings of wellbeing in volunteers, thereby engendering a biophilia effect. The approach adopted by staff to working with, and being around, volunteers with a range of mental health conditions and social backgrounds, appears to be a contributing factor to supporting volunteers' mental health recovery, with current and ex-volunteers heavily praising the approach of staff. Other contributory factors in the success of delivery include the diverse range of activities offered, the small-scale nature of delivery and having staff (and the organisation) keeping in touch after volunteers exit the project.

Recommendations for the improvement of delivery included developing a wider offer of winter and adverse weather activities for volunteers, whilst remaining true to enterprising and vocational focus of activities. Improvements to systems and processes included a review of the success of the Annual Participant Survey, additional questions to be added to the exit interview process, and exit interviews being delivered via a range of different media. Recommendations for the delivery of improved sustained impact included the establishment of a Growing Well alumni with regular communication targeted at alumni, a regular programme of alumni activities/events and an alumni mentoring programme.

## 2. Introduction to Growing Well

Growing Well is a mental health support organisation based at Low Sizergh Farm, near Kendal in Cumbria. Established in 2004 as an Industrial and Provident Society (IPS), the organisation operates as a non-profit-distributing social enterprise (BenCom) and has grown to become an established support agency in the area, receiving referrals from the local Community Mental Health Team and local GP surgeries.

Growing Well manages a 6 acre farm at Low Sizergh Farm as a horticultural business, delivering a range of products including local salad and vegetable produce for sale to the local community via farmers markets, local retailers in the community and via a community crop share scheme. The farm business supports therapeutic vocational activities for adults experiencing mental health challenges, many of whom are experiencing profound distress and chaotic lives.

The social objectives of Growing Well are to:

- Develop the emotional resilience of people experiencing mental ill health
- Develop people's life skills, through training and vocational activity, increasing hopefulness for the future.
- Support people to be healthier and more active, reducing social isolation and increasing life expectancy.

The organisation engages its service users, called volunteers, in the day to day vocational activities involved in the operation of the farm, along with engaging both current and ex-volunteers in the governance of the organisation as Trustees. Volunteers may engage in a range of horticultural activities including seed propagation, land preparation, planting and sowing through to the harvesting of produce. The organisation employs a Horticultural Therapist, a Social Worker and a Psychotherapist, in order to appropriately support people who are experiencing mental trauma. A Training Co-ordinator is also employed to deliver Level 1,2 and 3 work based horticultural qualifications along with practical training in work-based activities such as Tractor Driving.

Operating as a trading social enterprise, Growing Well generates approximately 28% of its income through commercial activities. The nature of the mental health support offered by the organisation results in significantly higher operating costs than those which would be incurred by a purely commercial horticultural enterprise, and the operating costs are supported through a mixture of contract, sales, donation and grant income.

### 3. Mental Health Recovery through Farming

In 2015 Growing Well secured BIG Lottery funding through the Reaching Communities programme to deliver a 'Mental Health Recovery through Farming' project aimed at supporting the mental health recovery of up to 120 adults.

The project beneficiaries include individuals across South Cumbria; those in deprived urban areas, particularly Barrow in Furness, and those in isolated rural areas who experience a range of mental illness, from depression and anxiety disorders, schizophrenia and bi-polar disorder to conditions such as eating disorders and personality disorders. The project has aims to target individuals with mental health issues who experience poor physical fitness, drug or alcohol dependency or are vulnerably housed, individuals who receive benefits from Jobcentre Plus, and experience significant financial hardship, who feel unable to return to work, due to poor mental resilience and work readiness.

Each day, up to 20 volunteers, actively supported by staff, collaborate with other team members to engage in a wide variety of tasks and responsibilities. The teams work between Monday and Thursday with volunteers choosing from a range of activities on offer. Each activity includes informal training tailored to meet the recovery needs of each individual.

With delivery from 2014 to 2017, the project aims to deliver the following activities (taken from the successful Reaching Communities application):

- *'Ground preparation - weeding, digging vegetable beds, tractor use including harrowing and rotavating, land clearance*
- *Plant Preparation - seed germination, seedling propagation, potting on and watering*
- *Growing - planting, weeding, tending crops, harvesting produce*
- *Packing – grading and packing produce, distributing produce for customers*
- *Administration – answering and making phone calls, responding to email correspondence, preparing invoices, managing financial transactions, preparing and distributing marketing materials, using accounting software.*
- *Site maintenance – Maintaining and repairing site buildings, pruning trees.*
- *Non-growing activities - Beneficiaries will be supported and trained at a pace to suit individual recovery needs in a range of roles including greeting and helping visitors, explaining growing techniques, mentoring new beneficiaries, taking full part in daily and monthly team meetings, representing beneficiaries interests at board meetings and in board sub-groups.*
- *Training and progression - These activities will support the achievement of work-based qualifications for beneficiaries. Additionally, whilst working on site,*

*beneficiaries will be formally trained and assessed in the Level One Certificate in Horticulture. Beneficiaries will be informally supported to develop their communication skills; team working skills; group participation and workload/activity management and planning.*

- *As their health improves they will be supported to move on from our activities to new work and life opportunities. Beneficiaries will be given information and support to access further participation, volunteering, training, employment, leisure and health/wellbeing opportunities’.*

The project has the following Outcome targets (taken from the successful Reaching Communities application):

- 1. Improved mental and physical wellbeing for 120 people (in total), experiencing mental distress, giving them IMPROVED LIFE CHANCES.*
- 2. Delivering BETTER ACCESS TO TRAINING, with 60 of beneficiaries attaining qualifications; moving on to volunteering, training or employment.*
- 3. At least 90 beneficiaries feeling less socially isolated and more hopeful and will therefore become HEALTHIER AND MORE ACTIVE PEOPLE.*

A total of £232,867 was awarded by Reaching Communities to deliver the project, to include an external evaluation of the performance of the project against project outcomes covering the three year delivery period.

#### 4. Aims of the Evaluation

In November 2015 Growing Well issued an Evaluation Tender Specification detailing the requirements of an evaluation of the project. Symbiont Consulting Ltd, a North West-based research and development consultancy, was appointed in December 2015 to conduct the external evaluation.

Consultation with staff at Growing Well identified the following key aims to the evaluation:

- A) An assessment of Growing Well's performance in achieving Mental Health Recovery through Farming project Outcomes, collating all information collected through Growing Well's internal assessment processes and reporting on this data with reference to the stated outcomes and indicators of achievement including:

##### Outcome 1:

- 20 People reporting reduced usage of NHS mental health services through the Client Services Receipt Inventory Questionnaire each year
- 30 People reporting improved mood and reduced anxiety through GAD7/PHQ 9 Questionnaire each year
- 120 People reporting increased optimism about their mental health recovery through monthly interview by the end of the project

##### Outcome 2:

- 10 People attaining recognised qualifications in Horticulture each year
- 10 people moving to further volunteering, training or employment as reported at time of leaving (exit interview) each year
- 60 People reporting greater confidence in their ability, skills and knowledge through monthly interview and use of CORS based questionnaire by the end of the project

##### Outcome 3:

- 20 People adopting a healthier lifestyle reported reporting monthly on agreed activity and food indicators each year
- 30 People reporting improved physical wellbeing through monthly interview (each year)



- 90 People regularly attending Growing Well demonstrating proactive social interaction with others by the end of the project

B) The delivery of primary research to identify the sustained impact of Growing Well in delivering recovery support for participants.

Evaluation methodology to include interviewing and surveying previous volunteers to identify any impact on their long term recovery, and in what way.

Outcomes are to be evaluated annually, over a 36 month period, with evaluations delivering recommendations on how Growing Well may improve their delivery to deliver increased and sustained impact. This report represents an external evaluation of Year 1 of project delivery from 1<sup>st</sup> February 2015 to 31<sup>st</sup> January 2016.

## 5. Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation methodology was conducted in a participatory manner, with negotiations between Growing Well as commissioning body and Symbiont Consulting as external evaluator, taking place shortly after Symbiont were commissioned to conduct the evaluation. The aims, anticipated outcomes, methodology and parameters of the evaluation were agreed, and evaluation methodology was set against an Evaluation Framework.

It was agreed by both parties that the evaluation should have three key deliverables:

- To provide a robust analysis of the performance of Growing Well in the delivery of the Mental Health Recovery through Farming project, set against the achievement of agreed project outcomes and indicators aligned to the Reaching Communities grant agreement
- To identify any sustained impact of Growing Well's activities and identify any methods of further sustaining positive impacts on volunteers who have completed their participation in Growing Well activities
- To deliver an insightful analysis of the reasons behind the level of success of Growing Well in delivering their current level of outcome achievement, and to offer recommendations on how the delivery may be improved and how positive impacts may be sustained

The evaluation methodology employed a number of different research exercises aiming to draw upon the extant results of research conducted through Growing Well's internal monitoring processes, along with primary research conducted with current and ex-volunteers. Alongside this, the evaluator attempted to engage with the culture of the organisation during visits to the site, taking part in informal activities and chatting with volunteers and staff.

The following research processes were conducted:

### 5.1 Analysis of Existing Secondary Data:

**Client Outcomes Review System** - Review and analysis of data taken from Growing Well's CORS (Client Outcomes Review System) database, which monitors impact through both quantitative and qualitative information. Data was reviewed resulting from regular semi-structured interviews with volunteers, where Primary Care Evaluation of Mental Disorders Patient Health Questionnaires PHQ 9 Depression and GAD 7 Anxiety were completed for the programme delivery period in Year 1. Elements of the CORE 10 questionnaire (a global assessment of wellbeing) and the Client Services Receipt Inventory, which assesses use of Health Services, were also included to deliver data for the same period.

**Volunteer Questionnaires** - Review and analysis of results of Volunteer Questionnaires conducted with current volunteers during the project delivery period in Year 1. The questionnaires encouraged volunteers to self-assess their level of mental health recovery on a sliding scale against a range of indicators such as 'general mood', 'levels of confidence in ability, skills and knowledge' along with lifestyle indicators. The questionnaire also inspected volunteers' feelings on entering the project, whether they had set goals, had they achieved those goals, and asked for comments on which activities volunteers felt they particularly benefitted from, which they enjoyed/didn't enjoy etc. Importantly, the questionnaire asked volunteers whether they felt that there have been changes to their mental health, what these changes were and whether and in which way they can attribute all or some of these changes to their time at Growing Well.

### **Collection and Analysis of Primary Data:**

**Interviews with Management and Staff** – the external evaluator conducted an interview with staff and management at Growing Well to inspect the results reported via BIG Lottery progress reports. The aims of this exercise were threefold; to interrogate the validity of the data, to gain an insight into the Management and Staff's own interpretation of results, and to understand why and how Growing Well had achieved the reported results.

**Interviews with Current and Ex-Volunteers** – a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted by the external evaluator with a selection of current and ex-volunteers. Ex-volunteers were informed of the evaluation, given details of the nature of the interviews, and given date and time slots for interviews. Ex-volunteers then chose whether or not they wished to participate in the evaluation, and selected their own date and time slot.

The structure of the interviews was based on the content of the existing Volunteer Questionnaire in order that loose comparisons may be drawn between the results of current and ex-volunteers. Survey questions were augmented by requesting ex-volunteers to identify their feelings against a series of mental health indicators at the time of joining Growing Well, at the time they left Growing Well, and at the time of interview (utilising principles of Outcome Star methodology – Dickens, Geoff et al 2012).

With the advance permission of participants, interview notes were taken and audio recordings of interviews were taken to ensure accuracy of quotes included in the evaluation report. All interviews were conducted in person or over the telephone.

**Electronic Survey of Ex-Volunteers** – ex-volunteers that did not participate in interviews were asked to provide email contact details if they wished to participate in the evaluation electronically. Individuals completed an abridged questionnaire online, containing an identical series of mental health indicators to the interview proforma for current and ex-volunteers.

**Engagement with Staff and Volunteers** – during the research period, the evaluator engaged with staff and volunteers in an informal manner. The evaluator participated in a daily team meeting, and also joined staff and volunteers for lunch and breaks. Informal observation and conversations with staff and volunteers provided an insight into the day to day working and culture of the organisation.

## 6. Limitations of the Evaluation

In engaging ex-volunteers to participate in interviews, staff at Growing Well contacted all ex-volunteers whose contact details they had. Ex-volunteers were informed of the evaluation, given details of the nature of the interviews, and given date and time slots for interviews. Ex-volunteers then chose whether or not they wished to participate in the evaluation, and selected their own date and time slot. To this extent, the ex-volunteers who participated in the interviews were self-selected. Whilst this may appear at first sight to be a random sample of ex-volunteers, in practice the ex-volunteers that responded are more likely to be those that are still in touch with Growing Well, who have achieved considerable levels of recovery in their mental health, and are therefore willing to provide feedback on their experiences and results. This selection method has potential to skew the results towards a positive bias, in terms of the impact of Growing Well.

During the interviews with ex-volunteers, participants were asked to identify their feelings against a series of mental health indicators at the time of joining Growing Well, at the time they left Growing Well, and at the time of interview. There is potential for the results of the first two series of responses to be skewed by how each participant is feeling in the present day e.g. do they look back on joining Growing Well as being a negative time in their life, or do they look back on it as a positive time in their life.

## 7. Quality Assurance

The evaluation was set against an agreed Evaluation Framework detailing methodology and deliverables.

Regular communication between the external evaluator and Chief Executive ensured timely delivery of agreed deliverables.

The monitoring databases at Growing Well were inspected by the external evaluator. The data held on a randomly selected volunteer, that had been used to feed into the BIG Lottery monitoring reports, was requested, produced and data were confirmed.

Sample sizes of volunteer data were not considered sufficiently large to deliver statistically valid results to confirm correlation with an appropriate degree of certainty. The analysis contained within the Evaluation Report does not, therefore, rely heavily on statistical analysis, rather it used simple percentages to present data.

Care was taken by the evaluator to question output figures reported against indicators to ensure accuracy. An example of this relates to Outcome Indicator 2.1 which relates to the number of people attaining recognised qualifications in Horticulture. Where any individual attains a Level 1 qualification, then progresses to complete a Level 2 qualification, the Output is reported twice; this could lead to double-counting of outcomes. In this instance however, an explanation is provided to the BIG Lottery by Growing Well to accompany the monitoring report, stating that the outcomes both relate to the same individual; this appears appropriate.

## 8. Results and Analysis

Results of research are presented in two distinct areas within this section, with associated narrative analysis by the evaluator. Quotes and data resulting from primary research including interviews with staff, current and ex volunteers is used to illustrate and validate the narrative. The first two parts of the results section consider Reaching Communities project targets, outcomes and indicators specifically; the second part considers the sustained impact of Growing Well.

### 8.1 Reaching Communities Project Targets

This section considers basic Project Targets including the number of delivery days and training days delivered, along with the number of regular attendees.

Reaching Communities target description	Target	Achieved
Number of volunteers regularly attending Growing Well	30	52
Number of beneficiary activity days delivered	2040	1895
Number of training days delivered	600	690

The organisation largely achieved Reaching Communities targets for participation and delivery levels in Year 1, with some short fall in areas. The first 12 months of project delivery saw a total of 102 volunteers access project activities, with a total of 52 volunteers attending on a regular basis (regular attendance is classed as volunteers attending for a minimum period of 3 months); this figure exceeds the project target of 30 regularly attending volunteers. A total of 1895 beneficiary days were delivered for volunteers, which falls short of the project target of 2040. The target number of training days delivered reached 690 for the year, this exceeds the project target of 600.

In consideration, the organisation has delivered positive results in terms of participation and delivery levels, closely adhering to project targets. The high level of regular attendance has exceeded the target level by over 70% and should be viewed as a major success for the project. When interviewed and asked to identify factors about the project that 'make you keep coming back', volunteers identified the approach of the staff team, the flexibility of delivery and the variety of activities available, as key factors.

Comments included:

*'I like the structure, the weekly routine, and the different days I can come. If I've got something on on a Wednesday, I know that I can change it one week and come another day. I like the different things we do each time I come. I know that each week I will be coming here (Growing Well), and that gives me something important to look forward to each week'.*

The number of delivery days achieved for the year falls slightly short of target, however, it is within a 10% variance, which would appear reasonable in the first year of delivery of a project. To address this shortfall and increase the total number of delivery days over the year, an additional day of activities (Mondays) was integrated each week into the project in April 2015. The additional delivery day had an overall attendance rate of 65%. This should be recognised as a success in the first year of delivery, given that it is an addition to the recognised programme, thereby representing an offer outside of the recognised routine for existing volunteers. Many volunteers experience chaotic lifestyles and the regular routine of activity days at Growing Well is an important factor in their level of attendance; attendance at a time that 'breaks the routine' may be viewed as a success in itself.

The increased number of delivery days has been supported in part by the addition of range of catering activities including vegetable preparation, vegetable pickling, soup making, bread making and cake making. The catering activities both broadened the range of activities available for volunteers with different interests, whilst also broadening the offer of winter and poor weather activities for volunteers. Given the exposed location of the delivery site and that many of the project activities necessarily need to be delivered outdoors, the addition of interesting indoor activities appears to be a valuable addition to the project. One volunteer commented:

*'I don't really like the outdoor stuff in winter or rainy days, it can be pretty cold and wet. Since we've started making soups it's given us more things to do indoors; I like it. It's fun and it's warm'.*

To ensure a high level of participant intake, Growing Well has taken positive steps to engage with local GP surgeries via the delivery of an Annual Participant Survey. It is hoped that the survey will engage GPs, will ensure that the profile of the project remains high amongst GPs, and will ultimately lead to an increase in referral numbers. This proactive approach may deliver positive outcomes in terms of increased referrals, however, a true picture of the success of this tactic cannot be assessed until an appropriate period of time has passed, whereupon the relative success of the tactic should be reviewed as part of the organisation's forward planning processes.



The number of training days delivered exceeded the project target by 15%, delivering training in a range of horticultural activities at Level 1 and 2, along with more specific training such as Tractor Driving. The level of achievement of qualifications is discussed in detail later in this report.

## 8.2 Reaching Communities Project Outcomes

In this section, Project Outcomes are considered, each having three separate Indicators against which results are assessed to identify levels of Outcome achievement.

<b>Reaching Communities Outcome 1: Improved mental and physical wellbeing for people experiencing mental distress, giving them <u>improved life chances</u>.</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Achieved</b>
Indicator 1.1: Number of people reporting reduced usage of NHS mental health services through the Client Services Receipt Inventory Questionnaire.	20	14
Indicator 1.2: Number of people reporting improved mood and reduced anxiety through GAD7/PHQ9 Questionnaire.	30	29
Indicator 1.3: Number of people reporting increased optimism about their mental health recovery through monthly interview.	120 over a 3 year period	39

### **Indicator 1.1: Number of people reporting reduced usage of NHS mental health services through the Client Services Receipt Inventory Questionnaire.**

The number of people reporting reduced usage of NHS Mental Health services through the Client Services Receipt Inventory (CSRI) questionnaire reached a total of 14, falling 30% short of the target of 20 for the year.

Interviews with staff and management identified a number of reasons why the achievement figure against this indicator may well be under-reported. First it should be noted that the Client Services Receipt Inventory questionnaire is completed every three months by current volunteers. Whilst this interval is appropriate, it does offer the potential for volunteers to leave the service without reporting results, as this indicator is not covered during the volunteer exit interview process. This offers potential for this figure to be under-reported.

Of potentially greater significance to the level of achievement reported against this indicator is that Growing Well currently only conducts CSRI questionnaires for volunteers accessing secondary NHS mental health services. This offers the potential for a significant under-reporting of achievement levels, as data relating to volunteers accessing primary services e.g. GP services, would not be captured through existing reporting mechanisms.

The general consensus of staff and management when questioned about the level of achievement reported was that the figure was underestimated. Results of the interviews with both current and ex-volunteers would appear to support this assumption, with 75% of respondents who were using NHS mental health services on accessing Growing Well services reporting a reduction in usage since joining the project.

Comments from volunteers included:

*'I used to go to the doctors' nearly every week with this or that problem, then I'd be referred to this and that programme, and none of them did me much good. When I came to Growing Well I stopped going to the doctors' and to other services 'cos I found that I had all the support I needed here (at Growing Well), and I simply felt much better about myself'.*

*'I used to be at Unity because of my alcohol use. I don't need them anymore because my alcohol is under control'.*

*'Before I joined (Growing Well), I was on lots of tablets and since coming here I don't need them anymore and I don't even go to the doctors' anymore either'.*

### **Indicator 1.2: Number of people reporting improved mood and reduced anxiety through GAD7/PHQ9 Questionnaire.**

Number of people reporting improved mood and reduced anxiety through GAD7/PHQ9 Questionnaire was 29 in total, which is only slightly below the target of 30 individuals.

As with Indicator 1.1, interviews staff and management identified a number of reasons why the achievement figure against this indicator may well be under-reported. Data relating to this indicator includes data collected through the GAD questionnaire process. Certain volunteers prefer not to complete GAD questionnaires for various reasons including feelings that the questionnaire raises negative issues that volunteers do not wish to dwell on. Previously, Growing Well staff used the WEMWBS scale which uses positively-worded questions however they have found that this approach was unsuccessful and that the original, negatively-worded questions 'spoke to volunteers' experience better'. Furthermore, the figure reported may be skewed by the fact that some volunteers complete the questionnaire at alternative services they may be accessing and they do not wish to complete the questionnaire again, at Growing Well. When questioned as to whether

the completion of the GAD questionnaire should be enforced for all volunteers, in an attempt to increase accuracy in reporting, staff felt that this was totally inappropriate.

It appears evident that certain data are being omitted during the existing project monitoring processes, therefore it would seem reasonable for these data to be adjusted to achieve a more accurate figure. As there are a number of different reasons why volunteers choose not to complete the GAD questionnaire, it would be difficult for Growing Well, or indeed for the external evaluator, to adjust the figure reported on anything more accurate or representative than a straight-line proportional extrapolation of figures to represent the project impacts for the full number of volunteers receiving support during any period.

The general consensus of staff and management when questioned about the level of achievement reported was that the figure was underestimated. Results of the interviews with both current and ex-volunteers would appear to support this assumption, with 90% of respondents stating that their 'general mood' has improved since accessing Growing Well's services. Similarly, 80% of respondents stated that their levels of anxiety had reduced since accessing Growing Well's services (one respondent stated that his general anxiety had reduced however, he was currently experiencing a 'dip').

*'My mood picks up as soon as I start walking down the path here (Growing Well) 'cos I know that I'll be greeted with a smile and a hug from the student (Occupational Health student) or the staff if she wasn't there. Knowing that I'm not going to be judged or put under any pressure by anybody else. Who wouldn't feel better here, everybody helps, everybody is supportive and its in an amazing place to spend your day'.*

*'I used to be very anxious, I mean, I wouldn't leave the house for days at a time, maybe even weeks, because of my anxiety. Now I'm happy to get out and about. I'm still anxious when I meet new people, but it's nowhere near as bad as it used to be'.*

A number of volunteers reported improvements in their mood which they attributed to working outdoors and engaging with nature and the environment. Growing Well appears to capitalise on this biophilia effect to maximise the impact on volunteers. Comments included:

*I feel better being in the outdoors, hearing the birds singing, instead of being stuck in the house all day’.*

*‘I think my favourite thing is seeing plants grow from seeds all the way to fully grown plants when we harvest them, it gives me a sense of satisfaction seeing things that I planted ages ago grow into adult plants’.*

### **Indicator 1.3: Number of people reporting increased optimism about their mental health recovery through monthly interview.**

The project indicator for the number of people reporting increased optimism about their mental health recovery through monthly interview is 120 over the three year project delivery, if averaged across all years this would equate to 40 people per year. Taken on this basis, the project fell slightly short in its achievement, reaching a total of 39 individuals. It is reasonable to expect a build-up period in outputs during the start-up phase for the project. Taken on this basis, the project would appear to have at least achieved its indicator target.

Interviews with current and ex-volunteers identified that there was an overwhelmingly positive response to the feelings of optimism about participants’ mental health recovery; comments included:

*‘I know I’m not right yet, but I feel a million times better than I did this time last year’.*

*‘My lifestyle has changed completely, I’m much more positive now, and Growing Well is at the centre of it’.*

<b>Reaching Communities Outcome 2: Improved life skills and personal development for people facing discrimination, through <u>better access to training</u>, volunteering and employment.</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Achieved</b>
Indicator 2.1: Number of people attaining recognised qualifications in Horticulture.	10	14
Indicator 2.2: Number of people moving to further volunteering, training or employment as reported at time of leaving (exit interview)	10	31
Indicator 2.3: Number of people reporting greater confidence in their ability, skills and knowledge through monthly interview and use of CORS based questionnaire reporting increased optimism about their mental health recovery through monthly interview.	60 over a 3 year period	35

### **Indicator 2.1: Number of people attaining recognised qualifications in Horticulture.**

The number of people attaining recognised qualifications in Horticulture for the year was 14 in total, which exceeds the indicator target of 10. Three volunteers attained a Level 2 qualification and eleven volunteers attained a Level 1 qualification, with a further three volunteers registered to complete a Level 2 qualification.

The figures reported represent a considerable over-achievement in the year, exceeding the indicator target by 40%. Staff members encourage volunteers to pursue training where appropriate and where the volunteer shows an interest. The training programme has returned positive impacts for volunteers with one ex-volunteer reporting to staff that their qualification in Horticulture was critical to them succeeding in getting a new job.

The inclusion of training adds value to the project in terms of building confidence and self-esteem amongst volunteers, with one volunteer commenting:

*'I was no good at school, I hated it really! So when I was asked if I wanted to do some training towards a qualification, I wasn't sure. It's been great though, it hasn't been too much and I know that I can do it. It's given me confidence to do other things'.*

## **Indicator 2.2: Number of people moving to further volunteering, training or employment as reported at time of leaving (exit interview)**

The number of people moving on to further volunteering, training or employment as reported at time of leaving was ascertained during volunteers' exit interviews. The target for this indicator was 10 individuals in the first year; this figure was exceeded by over 200%.

The project includes a 'Co-worker' (Buddy) programme, where volunteers who feel ready to take on additional responsibility, are encouraged to become Co-workers. The role of a Co-worker includes taking on the responsibility for leading on certain tasks as well as supporting other volunteers. The role appears to support volunteers in their journey towards becoming employment ready, with one volunteer commenting:

*'My goal when I joined Growing Well was to get well and get a job. I'm feeling loads better in myself and I'm a Co-worker now.....I support other volunteers, but don't boss them around 'cos I know what it feels like when you're new here.....the other day I was in charge of the seed sowing; I know it isn't a massive job but I was in charge and that's important 'cos the staff had trust in me that I could do it'.*

When questioned as to why the level of achievement in this particular indicator was so high, staff and management were not able to narrow down to one specific reason. Volunteers and ex-volunteers were asked, during one-to-one interviews with the evaluator, to give their opinion on why so many volunteers successfully moved on to volunteering, training or employment after their time at Growing Well, comments included:

*'Probably because we're given trust here and the staff have faith in us to work on our own'.*

*'I think the nature of the activities helps. We're working every day; we have set break times, so it's like being in a real job really'.*

*'Staff gave me the confidence to go out there and find a job; before coming here I didn't think I would ever work again'.*

**Indicator 2.3: Number of people reporting greater confidence in their ability, skills and knowledge through monthly interview and use of CORS based questionnaire reporting increased optimism about their mental health recovery through monthly interview.**

The number of people reporting greater confidence in their ability, skills and knowledge through monthly interview and use of CORS based questionnaire reporting increased optimism about their mental health recovery through monthly interview indicator had an overall project target of 60 individuals over the three year project lifetime. In year 1 the project achieved a total of 35 individuals reporting increased optimism about their mental health recovery. Taking a mean average over the project lifetime, the annual target would be 20 individuals; the project has exceeded this target by 75%.

The high level of achievement may be expected to a certain degree in Year 1, where positive impacts in confidence, ability and knowledge would be engendered through increased participation in a range of activities, and with volunteers encouraged to capitalise on their own skills and what they may contribute to the project. It can be reasonably expected that number of volunteers will remain on the project in years 2 and 3; these volunteers will not be counted again against this indicator. The result of this is that achievement levels may be lower than this year's figure in years 2 and 3.

An interview with one ex-volunteer who had previously worked in a highly skilled and high pressure commercial environment, at a senior level, before experiencing ill mental health commented:

*'Working as a buddy for new volunteers has really helped me to use my existing skills; I thought I had lost them, I didn't have any confidence in my own ability to lead anymore'.*



<b>Reaching Communities Outcome 3: People with mental health problems being <u>healthier and more active</u>, reducing social isolation and increasing hopefulness.</b>	<b>Target</b>	<b>Achieved</b>
Indicator 3.1: Number of people adopting a healthier lifestyle reporting monthly on agreed activity and food indicators	20	27
Indicator 3.2: Number of people reporting improved physical wellbeing through monthly interview.	30	28
Indicator 3.3: Number of people regularly attending Growing Well demonstrating pro-active social interaction with others.	90 over a 3 year period	52

### **Indicator 3.1: Number of people adopting a healthier lifestyle reporting monthly on agreed activity and food indicators**

The number of people adopting a healthier lifestyle reporting monthly on agreed activity and food indicators totalled 27 volunteers, exceeding the project target of 20 for the year. The data to report on this indicator is gathered through monthly supervisions and covers healthy and lifestyle indicators such as smoking cessation, reduction in alcohol consumption, weight management. Data is also collected from staff observations of volunteer behaviour, such as cooking healthy meals, bringing healthy snack for break etc.

The level of over-achievement for this indicator may be anticipated, as all volunteers on the project will at some point during their participation, take part in healthy lifestyle activities, be that cooking healthy meals, physical activities or stress relieving activities.

Interviews with current and ex-volunteers highlighted the positive level of impact that their time spent at Growing Well was having on their lifestyle, with the majority of individuals reporting improvements.

Comments included:

*'I used to use alcohol regularly, a lot more than I should have, until it became a problem. Being here gave me a different focus, to not necessarily need to always use alcohol.....to focus my efforts on activities that would be positive for me, rather than negative activities e.g. drinking'.*

*'I lost over 3 stone during my time with Growing Well and in the period after I left. I've had a bit of a dip now and put a bit back on, but I know I can lose it again, because I've done it once before'.*

*'I don't think it's healthy to stay in the house every day and not see other people, so just getting out of the house and mingling with others is making me healthier, I think'.*

### **Indicator 3.2: Number of people reporting improved physical wellbeing through monthly interview.**

The number of people reporting improved physical wellbeing through monthly interview totalled 28 individuals, falling slightly short of the indicator target of 30. This is a subjective indicator which is reported on by participants themselves during monthly supervisions, and it is therefore difficult to deliver accurate results.

The project aims to support people with mental health problems to be 'healthier and more active'. The subjective nature of this indicator means that standardisation of responses is difficult, for instance, during volunteer interviews, one volunteer said that he felt much fitter, but his limbs ached; he did not know whether to answer this question positively or negatively, did he feel that his physical wellbeing was better or worse. The level of achievement reported, although slightly short of the target figure, represents a positive impact on the majority of regular participants and should be considered as a success.

Commonly, responses from volunteers when asked during interview and informally during break times, as to how they felt about their physical wellbeing, positive responses were given. Comments during interview included:

*'I love the physical work; digging and getting out in the field. It's not so good in the cold but I don't mind, I volunteer for any physical work because it makes me feel better'.*

*'The work at Growing Well can be physically challenging at times, but there are plenty of breaks and they don't push us too hard. It's made me pick up my gardening again; I'd missed it and I hadn't realised'.*

### **Indicator 3.3: Number of people regularly attending Growing Well demonstrating pro-active social interaction with others.**

The target for the number of people regularly attending Growing Well demonstrating pro-active social interaction with others was 90 for the three year project lifetime. In year 1 the figure achieved was 52, which would exceed a mean average target over three separate years (equating to a target of 30 individuals per year).

The nature of the activities at Growing Well incorporates and facilitates group work, in this way; volunteers are encouraged to work together in small groups. This alone would contribute strongly to the reported achievement level. The structure of the day at Growing Well includes lunchtimes, breaks and a daily meeting, at all of which, volunteers are encouraged to mingle, to share experiences, to tell jokes and to interact socially. This social interaction does not appear to be forced by staff; rather it is facilitated and encouraged. Staff appear to ensure that volunteers are afforded appropriate space should they wish to take their break time alone; the planning of informal lunch, breaks and daily meetings supports both interaction and solitary reflection. One ex-volunteer commented:

*'There were times when I just wanted to be on my own for a bit, usually when it all got a bit much for me. But it wasn't a problem for anyone, nobody judged me and they all left me to have a bit of peace until I was ready to join in again'.*

Interviews with current and ex-volunteers highlighted the level of importance they gave to the social interaction at Growing Well. Comments included:

*'The staff make sure that we're all included in activities, they come and get us if we're on our own, ask us if we want to join in or be left to do something on our own'.*

*'Growing Well made me realise that I really want to be around people again. Lunchtimes in the yurt could be absolutely fantastic; people are free, warm and accepting'.*

*'I love the daily meetings, because it brings us all together, even if we're working on different parts of the farm all day. The lunch times are great too, especially if we've made a big soup and we're all eating fresh soup together on a cold day; it's great!'*

### 8.3 Sustained Impact

A key element of the evaluation research was to attempt to identify the sustained impact of Growing Well for individuals who were experiencing mental health issues when they joined, and have now moved on from using Growing Well services. The organisation attempts to track ex-volunteers and keep in touch, however, there are currently no formal systems in place to measure the sustained impact of their services.

A series of face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted with ex-volunteers, with the interview structure being based around the format of the volunteer questionnaire employed by Growing Well with their existing volunteers, augmented by additional impact questions. Some volunteers did not wish to participate in one-to-one interviews, but completed online questionnaires based on the volunteer survey.

Ex-volunteers interviewed had engaged with Growing Well mostly on a one day per week basis, for a period of one to four years. Reasons for engaging included a range of mental health challenges including shyness and insecurity, severe clinical depression and post-breakdown recovery.

**Personal goals on joining Growing Well:** Volunteers are encouraged to develop personal goals when they attend Growing Well, and although many ex-volunteers were able to identify definite goals, others said that they had less well-defined goals. Ex-volunteers were asked if they had specific goals on joining Growing Well, responses included:

*'I just wanted to get out of the house; I had no confidence at all'.*

*'I wanted to get out of the house more. I wanted simply to do things, to have something to talk about with other people. If you're in the house all day, then you have nothing to say to anyone, and the isolation grows and grows'.*

*'I just needed to change my life, change where I was living, due to not having a stable home situation'.*

*'I didn't really go into Growing Well with any goals in mind, however, after about two weeks with Growing Well I realised that I did not want my full-time, pressured career back; I didn't want full time work anymore, not at my age'.*

**Goals and Achievement:** When asked whether ex-volunteers felt that they had achieved their goals on leaving Growing Well, 80% stated that they had achieved their goals. 100% of these individuals also stated that their time with Growing Well was influential in achieving their goals. When asked what exactly it was about their time with Growing Well that had helped them achieve their goals, comments included:

*'Growing Well helped me replace negative behaviour with positive behaviour; this enabled me to leave the house and engage positively with people'.*

*'I was able to talk about my issues and fears at Growing Well. They gave me the courage to speak about things with other people.....I had previously been hiding my troubles away, and this was making them worse'.*

*'It (Growing Well) was a lifeline when I was in a critical situation. It gave me a chillout; a place to think and recover; this helped me to move forward'.*

*'It was really, really helpful having (staff member) to talk to and know that everything was confidential. I could talk to her, tell her my problems and just have a chat, this helped me to work through things and get stuff done'.*

*I was working 90 hours per week and never switching off. Growing Well helped me to focus on having some direction in life, not just work'.*

**Identifying Sustained Impact:** Ex-volunteers were asked to describe how they feel about certain issues, before joining Growing Well, at the time they left Growing Well and in the present day.

**General Mood** – 100% of ex-volunteers consulted with said that their general mood had improved since joining Growing Well, with 80% stating that improvements to their general mood had been sustained.

Two ex-volunteers stated that their general mood had improved since leaving Growing Well. When asked why this was, responses included:

*'I'm moving forward with my life now and things are improving all the time'*

*'I don't need any help anymore, that makes each day an improvement, doesn't it?'*

**Optimism about mental health recovery** – 100% of ex-volunteers consulted with said that their level of optimism about their mental health recovery had improved since joining Growing Well, with 80% stating that these improvements had been sustained. One ex-volunteer commented:

*'I don't worry too much if I have a set-back, 'cos I know I can deal with it'.*

**Confidence in Ability, Skills and Knowledge** – this question gave the most impressive responses in terms of sustained impact, with 100% of ex-volunteers saying that the positive impacts had not only been sustained at the levels they were at when they left Growing Well, but that they had actually improved. When asked whether ex-volunteers could specify why this was, responses included:

*'I know that I can use the skills I developed over the years'.*

*'Growing Well gave me the confidence to go and get a job.....I know that I could do it but I never had the confidence before'.*

**A Healthy Lifestyle** – ex-volunteers were asked to comment on their lifestyle; whether they ate healthily and whether they participated in regular physical activity. 100% of ex-volunteers stated that they ate healthier since their time spent with Growing Well. All ex-volunteers also stated that their level of physical activity had either been sustained or increased since their time with Growing Well, with all ex-volunteers taking part in regular physical activity at least once per week. 80% of all ex-volunteers interviewed stated that they felt their overall level of physical wellbeing had been sustained at the level it was when leaving Growing Well. Comments included:

*'I'm happy to give it a go nowadays, try to cook something for myself from scratch, even if it doesn't turn out brilliant'.*

*'I eat more salads and veg' now. I try different healthy things. Growing Well was a springboard'.*

*'I walk everywhere! I enjoy walking the dogs again'.*

*'It's great to get out into the countryside, I'd forgotten how good it was. I don't rush to get to a trig' point anymore; if I'm tired then I simply sit down and enjoy my environment, then do a little bit more when I'm ready'.*

**Social Interaction** – 100% of ex-volunteers consulted with stated that their level of social interaction with others since leaving Growing Well had been sustained at the level it was at when they left the project, with 40% stating that their level of social interaction had increased. When asked to comment on their current social interaction, responses included:

*'I'm in contact with people every day through work, it's a job where I interact with people all day long. I love it!'*

*'I used to shy away from speaking to people because I thought they would judge me, now I just get on with it, speak to people and don't worry about what they think.'*

**Anxiety** – 80% of ex-volunteers consulted with stated that their level of anxiety had been sustained at the level it was at when they left Growing Well, with 40% saying that it had decreased further since leaving the programme. Comments included:

*'I don't stress over the little things anymore, I put them in their place. I used to be anxious about almost everything; I'm not like that anymore.'*

*'I was so anxious about what people would think of me that I just stayed in the house every day. This stopped me working, stopped me seeing friends and family, it was totally destructive. Now I don't worry about other people, I'm not anxious when I leave the house.'*

**Other sustained impacts** - In an attempt to identify the nature of any sustained impact on their lives, ex-volunteers were asked to describe the lasting effects on their lives of their time at Growing Well, comments included:

*'The faith that the staff at Growing Well showed in me, giving me tasks to do on my own, telling me that I was capable of doing things; it all helped to boost my confidence at a time when I didn't have any. I've kept this confidence and use it every day to get on with things. The qualifications have helped too 'cos I had no faith in myself 'cos I left school early. Now I know that I can achieve things, like the qualifications; I have confidence in myself now.'*

*'The impact is my work and home life settling down as my anxiety settled. It made me realise that even in a high anxiety state, I can still achieve something each day.'*

*'The biggest impact was definitely changing my lifestyle to a better lifestyle. Just little things, but they are very important. I know now when to stop and take the dogs out. I drive differently, I don't speed anymore. I know how to enjoy things'.*

*'I wouldn't have got work without Growing Well 'cos I was engaging in negative behaviour. Growing Well crowbarred me out of these bad habits therefore enabling me to work again. I learned how to behave around people i.e. with respect and understanding and I have taken this into the workplace'.*

*'Even though I'm going through a bit of a dip right now, I know that I can handle it. This is a massive improvement in my life, it's like night and day the difference between how I handle things now to before I joined'.*

**Achieving Sustained Impact:** Ex-volunteers were asked to describe what specifically about their time at Growing Well that they found most valuable in achieving a sustained impact, responses included:

*'The informal feel to the place helped me so much; it made me realise that I could relax a little, think about real life. It helped me to realise that I needed to change my entire lifestyle, which I have done'.*

*'I think it was the low key nature of the place; I enjoyed going there. It gave me a space to think and rationalise things, this enabled me to put things straight in my life. I still go and get a little space when I need to make decisions in my life. I think Growing Well gave me this'.*

*'It was definitely the confidence boost; I've carried this with me to this day.....it was the Buddying work that gave me back my confidence'.*

*'The staff....the staff, the staff, the staff! They were wonderful, they were always available, always helpful and never judged me'.*



**The future role of Growing Well in sustaining impact:** Ex-volunteers were asked if there was anything that Growing Well could do to support them once they had left the project, to help them to sustain the impact on their lives. Suggestions included:

*'I would love to work 4 days and come here for 1 day, I think this would help me to keep stable.'*

*'I'd really like to be able to come here at weekends. After a few years away I realised that I'd like to be able to pop in to the service again'.*

*'I loved being at Growing Well, but I'm glad I've moved on now. That's a positive reflection on my personal growth. I think the best thing that Growing Well could do for me now it just to be there, it's important to know that there's somewhere I can go if I need it'.*

*'I would like to keep in touch more, although I have visited a couple of times and I also read the website'.*

*'I needed mental health support back then, but I don't need it now. I'm managing my own mental health'.*

*'Personally I don't want anything else; I'm getting on with things. But some people struggle to cope when they have knock-back; they might need on-going help'.*

## **9. Conclusions:**

### **9.1 Delivering positive impacts**

The results of achievement against Reaching Communities project targets and outputs are impressive, suggesting that the project delivered a high level of positive results in Year 1, achieving most targets and exceeding many. The project engaged considerable numbers of beneficiaries, exceeding the target figure. The level of activity too was impressive, with the project exceeding the target figure for the number of training days delivered, although the total number of delivery days fell slightly short of the target. A high level of impact was felt by beneficiaries and the scope of positive impacts was impressive. Beneficiaries reported positive impacts in their mental health including reduced levels of anxiety, increased levels of confidence about their mental health recovery and decreased usage of NHS Mental Health services. A range of social impacts were reported including beneficiaries considering themselves to be leading healthier lifestyles, improved physical wellbeing and increased social interaction. Impacts relating to employment readiness were also delivered with beneficiaries achieving qualifications, moving into education, training or employment, and having greater confidence in their own skills, ability and knowledge.

Where project targets and outputs had not been achieved in Year 1, the level of shortfall was minimal. There appear to be either logical reasons for these shortfalls which may be due to a slow start up period of the project or under-estimation in the reporting of results against indicators. Simple adjustments to data collection and reporting processes may be put in place to rectify any under-reporting and thereby deliver a more accurately representative set of results in Years 2 and 3.

Positive impacts are clearly sustained in ex-volunteers, with nearly all ex-volunteers experiencing positive impacts at the same level, sometimes higher, than they were at the time they exited Growing Well's services.

### **9.2 Factors contributing to the impact Growing Well delivers**

The multi-faceted nature of delivery at Growing Well, coupled with the range of challenges experienced by beneficiaries, renders it somewhat difficult to identify exactly what elements of delivery are key to the success of the project to date. This ecology of recovery may be described thus; 'Recovery is a product of dynamic interaction among characteristics of the individual (the self/ the whole person, hope/ sense of meaning/ purpose), characteristics of the environment (basic material resources, social relationships, meaningful activities, peer support, formal services, formal service staff), and the characteristics of the exchange (hope, choice/ empowerment, independence/ interdependence)' (Onken, Dumont, Ridgway,

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Dornan, and Ralph 2002). There are, however, a number of commonalities that may be identified that clearly contribute to the success of Growing Well in delivering positive impacts:

**9.2.1 Flexibility in Delivery** – The spectrum of conditions experienced by volunteers dictates that what works for one person may not work for another; an activity that may bring comfort to one individual may raise anxiety in another; there is no single panacea, no cure all that fits for every volunteer. Perhaps it is the recognition of this fact that is behind one of the major contributors to the success of Growing Well; its flexibility in delivery.

The programme of activities at Growing Well may appear to be relatively rigid at first glance in that there are a set number of days, tasks are set on a daily basis, and lunch and break times are fairly regimented. This gives a false picture of delivery on the ground!

In practice, each individual attending Growing Well's services is treated in a manner appropriate to their own circumstance, with bespoke tasks selected each day depending on how each individual is feeling, their level of confidence in working with others, their level of confidence in completing tasks, their level of supervision requirement and a number of other relevant factors. Moreover, each individual has input into the choice of tasks they deliver each day, within a choice of essential farm management and horticultural tasks.

The level of participation for volunteers is also flexible, with volunteers able to switch days if necessary in any particular time, and able to pop in and out of group activities depending on how they are feeling at any particular time.

**9.2.2 Wrap-around Support** – The programme of support at Growing Well is extremely well-devised and serves to effectively support volunteers at different times during the day. Volunteers are greeted with a warm welcome on entering the site at Growing Well; this is not only by the staff and students on placement, but also by other volunteers. The environment is warm and friendly, and volunteers are encouraged to sit and have a cup of tea together.

Volunteers are fully involved in the planning of activities for each day and for the coming week. Whilst there are certain essential activities involved in managing a working farm, volunteers are guided through activity choices and through the choice of which activity to undertake and by whom.

During breaks and lunch time periods, volunteers are encouraged to sit together, share refreshments and interact socially. Staff join volunteers during these periods and provide informal support, sometimes this may appear as simple as chatting to

volunteers on a one-to-one basis, or helping them to make a cup of tea, at other times it may be recognising that a volunteer feels left out and encouraging interaction by drawing volunteers into conversations with a group of their peers.

The attention shown to each volunteer continues throughout the entire day, including breaks and 'down times'. This is an extremely important element of delivery and takes considerable planning and effort from staff, however, it appears to result in an environment where volunteers feel supported throughout the entire day, and able to continue their recovery.

**9.2.3 Peer Support** – Previous studies have evidenced the benefits to mental health recovery of peer support mechanisms (Druss 2010). Volunteers at Growing Well are encouraged by staff throughout the project to support their peers in formal and informal capacities. This applies to formal activity times and to break periods.

Volunteers who are competent in completing specific tasks and are comfortable in taking on a little more responsibility, are offered the opportunity to work as a Co-Worker and lead a group of their peer volunteers in certain activities. This system has a dual effect, in that it empowers the Co-worker, boosts confidence in their own ability, whilst also inspiring the group of peer volunteers to see the progression in one of their peers. Empowerment has been recognised as one of the '13 characteristics of the recovery journey' (Leamy, Bird, Le Boutillier, Williams, Slade 2001).

Volunteers are encouraged to work in teams, to support each other in completing tasks when they are undertaking formal activities. Furthermore, volunteers are also encouraged to interact during break periods, if they feel confident enough to do so. They are informally encouraged to work together in simple tasks such as making tea, to listen to each other and to share thoughts.

The formal and informal blend of peer support appears to offer volunteers an additional and valuable support structure, over and above that which may be offered by staff alone. This social interaction forms part of a valuable support network which has been shown to contribute to mental health recovery (Corrigan and Phelan 2004).

**9.2.4 Use of the Natural Environment** – The psychological benefits of engagement with the natural environment have been shown to deliver powerful results for individuals with mental health challenges (Gullone, E. 2000). Management and staff appear to exploit the location of the Growing Well site to deliver maximum benefits for volunteers. The site is located on a gentle hillside in a relatively isolated area of a working farm, with views over the surrounding countryside. It is no accident that activities take place outdoors where the nature of activity and weather permit, and several volunteers commented on the positive feelings they get from working

outdoors and engaging with nature. Staff actively maximise the use of their natural surroundings to maximise these feelings of wellbeing in volunteers, engendering a biophilia effect (Wilson 1984).

**9.2.5 Diversity of Activities** – The range of activities on offer for volunteers is influential in retaining volunteers and driving up participation levels. Volunteers clearly enjoy the diversification into catering activities and appear to be gaining positive benefits from these activities on multiple levels. Research has shown that there is ‘a strong relationship between physical activity and mental health (Richardson 2005) and this is certainly evident from the feedback from volunteers. The offer of a range of indoor activities during adverse weather conditions and in winter is clearly popular with volunteers, and clearly helps to maintain a positive morale amongst groups.

The diversity of delivery of activity is also an important factor in the success of Growing Well, with volunteers able to participate in solo or group activities depending on their own feelings on any particular day. This is an essential element of delivery in addressing the specific needs of volunteers on an individual basis, and ensuring that all needs are catered for.

The expansion into training activities including farm machinery use and catering was not welcomed by all volunteers, with a small number expressing their fears that in time the main focus of the organisation may drift away from horticulture. Whilst this is a genuine concern, and one that the Board and management at Growing Well should consider, the balance of benefit may well swing towards increasing the diversity of activities on offer.

**9.2.6 Small-scale Delivery** - The intimate nature of Growing Well affords an extremely personal touch in the support provided to volunteers. Through observation by the evaluator, it appears that each staff member knows every volunteer, and communicates effectively with them. Staff converse naturally with volunteers, sharing day to day experiences and encouraging volunteers to share opinions and thoughts. This personal touch is truly impressive to the observer, and clearly serves to relax volunteers, also empowering them to engage socially.

Several volunteers, during interviews, cited the intimate nature of delivery as one of the ‘things that Growing Well does best’, with reasons being the close interaction with staff, knowing that they will definitely know many if not all of their peers attending on any given day, and the attentive support available when required.

There is a tendency for social enterprises to strive for expansion to achieve financial sustainability; this is often coupled with the notion of ‘Growing bigger to achieve greater impacts’. Whilst this may work for certain social enterprises, perhaps this is

not the case for Growing Well. Perhaps the very things that they do best are directly related to, or reliant upon the small-scale, intimate nature of delivery.

**9.2.7 Commitment and Approach of Staff** – The level of commitment and professionalism shown by staff is a large contributor to the level of achievement of the organisation. The staff team show a remarkable level of commitment towards volunteers; this was evident to the evaluator through observation of staff in action. Commitment was always strong, be that in demonstrating patience with volunteers who may not understand or have the confidence to complete a task, or in spending break periods listening to a volunteer who wanted to get something off their chest. The level of professionalism shown by staff is also truly impressive. Staff appear to handle all situations with an effective choice of appropriate tactics, they observe situations and instantly deliver appropriate solutions. In an environment where there are volunteers with a diverse range of conditions, at various stages of recovery, this is truly impressive and certainly adds to the creation of a harmonious environment and successful project.

The approach to working with, and being around, volunteers with a range of mental health conditions and social backgrounds is a contributing factor to supporting volunteers' mental health recovery. The presence of stigma in any situation can hinder mental health recovery; it has been shown that 'concerns about stigma predicted higher avoidance of social interactions with persons outside the family and psychological isolation' (Perlick 2001), similarly that 'experience of prejudice events, expectations of rejection' (Meyer 2003). Feedback from volunteers and ex-volunteers highlighted the accepting nature of staff and the lack of stigma in the everyday environment at Growing Well.

**9.2.8 Keeping in Touch & Simply Being There** – Staff at Growing Well request contact information from volunteers who are exiting the project. Exit interviews are conducted to both ascertain two-way feedback on volunteers' experiences at the project, but also to identify any on-going needs that volunteers leaving the project may have, and where they are moving on to. Staff forward Growing Well's electronic newsletters to volunteers and aim to stay in touch through e-shots. A number of ex-volunteers stated that they valued this continued support and that they wished to have more contact, even visits to the site. This was not the case for all ex-volunteers; some ex-volunteers clearly wanted to 'move on' from Growing Well.

When asked what Growing Well could do to sustain positive impacts with volunteers who had exited their services, ex-volunteers offered a number of suggestions including part-time attendance alongside full-time work, annual alumni-style get-togethers, and activity days delivered on weekends. A significant number of ex-volunteers stated that they felt supported in the knowledge that Growing Well and

their staff were 'simply there' should they need them. Ex-volunteers are clearly made to feel comfortable in contacting staff or popping back in to see everyone at Growing Well and this delivers long-standing, unseen support to ex-volunteers. It is clearly valued by ex-volunteers.

## **10. Recommendations**

This evaluation has considered the performance of Growing Well in delivering Year 1 of the Wellbeing and Recovery through Farming project, funded by Reaching Communities. The evaluation also looked at the level of sustained impact on volunteers who had exited of Growing Well's services. The evaluation necessarily inspected the systems and processes at Growing Well, including data management and performance monitoring systems. The following recommendations aim to offer options for Growing Well to improve their level of impact for volunteers, both in the short and long term, and to improve their impact reporting in future years.

### **10.1 Delivery:**

A broader range of winter and adverse weather activities should be explored to provide engaging and interesting activities for volunteers during poor weather conditions. Growing Well is soon to appoint a Catering Co-ordinator with a remit of expanding the catering activities and training at the site. This enhancement of activities could potentially be augmented with a programme of additional activities, however, caution should be exercised in ensuring that activities remain relevant to the horticultural and natural environment focus of Growing Well. Growing Well prioritises enterprise/vocationally focussed activities, however, there is potential to add value during winter months with activities such as willow weaving, bird and bat box making, charcoal making, as examples.

### **10.2 Systems and Processes:**

Review the level of referrals from GP surgeries in light of the delivery of the Annual Participant Survey. Growing Well should assess whether the engagement tactic worked to increase GP referral numbers? If not, why not? Should the tactic be re-employed and if so, what can be improved?

Include a question in the volunteer exit process to ensure that information is gathered relating to the Outcome Indicator 1.1. 'Number of people reporting reduced usage of NHS mental health services through the Client Services Receipt Inventory Questionnaire'.

Exit interviews are currently only delivered where appropriate notice of leaving is given by volunteers exiting the project. Some volunteers leave the project without giving sufficient notice to arrange and deliver exit interviews; data relating to these ex-volunteers is not collected and this has the potential to result in data being missed. Exit interviews could be completed over the telephone where volunteers leave the project without giving sufficient notice to enable a face to face exit interview



to be arranged. Alternatively, electronic surveys could be emailed to ex-volunteers to gather certain information; this could also be conducted via text surveys.

Growing Well should explore the benefits of conducting Client Services Receipt Inventory Questionnaires with volunteers who are accessing primary NHS services; this may deliver more accurate data and results relating to Output Indicator 1.1.

Growing Well does not currently have a comprehensive social impact measurement system in place. The public sector commissioning process, in which Growing Well wishes to engage to win public contracts, requires organisations to be able to evidence their social value. Growing Well should strive to embed a social impact measurement system into its project monitoring systems.

Staff at Growing Well collect a considerable range of performance information through a variety of different systems including CORS, GAD7/PHQ9, CSRI, Monthly Supervisions and Volunteer Questionnaires. The data resulting from monitoring activities are held on a central computer. An aspirational goal for Growing Well may include the integration and rationalisation of disparate recording systems to enable Growing Well to interrogate databases to retrieve information and meaningful reports more effectively.

### **10.3 Sustaining Impact:**

A range of options to maximise the sustained impact for ex-volunteers was identified during interviews, these included including part-time attendance alongside full-time work, returning to Growing Well to support other volunteers, annual alumni-style get-togethers, and activity days delivered on weekends. Some ex-volunteers wished to be kept 'in the loop' with information, but did not necessarily wish to visit the site in person. A significant number of ex-volunteers stated that they felt supported in the knowledge that Growing Well and their staff were 'simply there' should they need them.

There appears to be a balance to be achieved by Growing Well in any attempts they make to sustain positive impacts for volunteers who have left the service, with some ex-volunteers wishing to stay in touch, and others feeling that they have moved on from Growing Well and are 'getting on with their lives'.

Recommended options to be explored to increase the sustained impact for ex-volunteers include:

Establishment of a Growing Well alumni – this may be as simple as creating alumni groups on social media or via email groups. Dedicating an alumni title to the group and targeting communications directly at ex-volunteers may focus the nature of

communications to address the specific needs of individuals who have moved on from the service.

Regular communication targeted at alumni – a series of regular e-newsletters, outlining the progress or successes of ex-volunteers, highlighting Growing Well events and alumni activities. Communications may include details of alternative services and events available in the community. An alumni-focussed e-newsletter may engage ex-volunteers to a greater degree than the standard Growing Well e-newsletter. Alternatively, each standard e-newsletter could contain an alumni section.

Programme of alumni events – a series of celebration ‘get-togethers’ for ex-volunteers, to engage and inspire individuals to maintain their mental health recovery.

Alumni mentoring programme – Growing Well may build on the success of their existing Co-worker/Buddy programme to offer a similar programme to volunteers who have moved on from their services

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