

Sow and Grow – Sydenham Garden

Mercers' Charitable Foundation
Older People & Housing Programme

A warm and vibrant space within nature for people living with dementia to thrive and connect.

Sow and Grow is a core project of **Sydenham Garden**, supporting people in the early stages of dementia to live well. By engaging participants in gardening, cooking, art, music, and Cognitive Stimulation Therapy, alongside opportunities for reminiscence, reflection, and discussion, the project helps people strengthen cognitive skills, feel more socially connected, and enjoy a better quality of life.

"People join with hopes of overcoming challenges like lost confidence and broken connections...they talk a lot about their isolation and their sadness before joining."

Project lead



Why the work is needed

Having a diagnosis of dementia can lead people to lose confidence and social connections. People often also lack opportunities to do things that they used to enjoy.

Approach

The project offers weekly creative sessions for individuals in the early stages of dementia. Led by a project worker and volunteers, sessions provide a safe, supportive, and welcoming space where dementia isn't the main focus.

Participants, regarded as "co-workers", are treated with respect and dignity, fostering participation and a sense of achievement. The project takes an empowering, person-centred approach, co-creating activities that play to participants' strengths and interests.

Staff and volunteers build trusting relationships with co-workers, while also supporting families through signposting and advice.

The calm, garden setting is also key to the success of the work and reducing anxiety for co-workers.

Participants and volunteers share ideas and skills to shape group activities. The result is an inclusive, safe, uplifting space where people can flourish despite dementia.

"It's a non-judgmental, welcoming and gentle but active environment...[where] you can only flower and flourish. They feel safe...and can open up and be themselves...they all describe it as such a rare thing to find." Volunteer

Impact



Meaningful Impact: The project has made a significant difference to participants' wellbeing, inclusion, and quality of life. Co-workers gain social interaction, stimulation, and a renewed sense of purpose.



Improving Independence: Making use of the safe garden space, helps improve physical activity levels and sense of independence.



Safe Space: Carers benefit too, valuing the approach and gaining respite and reassurance that loved ones are safe and stimulated. One carer described leaving his wife at the group as "heaven", as it allowed him to run errands.



"It's all tremendous fun... the exercise, the people, the varied activities - it's really positive." Co-worker

Challenges

Recruiting volunteers from diverse backgrounds has been a challenge and rising overhead costs and uncertainty over future funding present financial challenges. Changes among staff at the local dementia hub disrupted referral pathways, requiring time to rebuild relationships.

In practical terms, transport remains a barrier for some participants, as many rely on a volunteer driver scheme that has struggled to recruit drivers.

Finding suitable evaluation tools for people with dementia has also been a challenge.

Organisational Resilience

Sydenham Garden has strengthened its resilience by diversifying funding, securing unrestricted core income, and developing strong local partnerships. Support with governance, evaluation, and social return on investment has also helped. Staff development and supervision are prioritised, and confidence in the service model enables flexible, rapid responses to emerging needs.

However, resilience is tested by a lack of funding, pressure to meet demand and the emotional impact on staff, and wider societal pressures such as benefits reform and divisive public rhetoric.

The Future

Sydenham Garden plan to continue the Sow and Grow project and would like to expand it to meet the increased needs.

Having received funding from Mercers' has helped establish the project and makes it easier to approach other funders.

Learnings

- Taking a flexible, person-centred approach that adapts to participants' needs.
- Offering holistic support for families through signposting and connection.
- Building, managing, and sustaining groups with care and attention to individual wellbeing.

"We want to provide a space that's got the elements of what people need to flourish, even with an illness that's so hard." Project lead