



PERMACULTURE
ASSOCIATION

CASE STUDY

Creating Thriving Communities

A Permaculture Approach

Permaculture is an ethical framework used to design regenerative systems at all scales – from home and garden to community, farm and bioregions.

We live in a time of great uncertainty and unfolding crises with the social, environmental and economic failures of the current system being cruelly exposed by rising inequality, social division, increasingly precarious and insecure employment, loss of biodiversity, accelerating climate change and the inability of an increasing number of people to meet their basic needs for good food and housing.

In this project we are exploring how people across Britain are working to create thriving communities!

www.permaculture.org.uk



**NATIONAL
LOTTERY FUNDED**

Sydenham Garden

Sydenham, South London

Community: Adults with dementia; Adults with mental health illness; Asylum seekers

www.sydenhamgarden.org.uk



Overview

Sydenham Garden is a wellbeing centre in South London which uses its gardens, nature reserve and sustainable buildings to help people in their recovery from mental and physical ill-health.

It was set up by Jim Sikorski, a local GP, who wanted somewhere he could refer his patients to which offered more holistic, outdoor, therapeutic opportunities. As he put it, "There are so many needs that can be answered with an approach that does not focus on the illness."

Sydenham Garden now offer courses for up to one year through their core projects which include gardening, art and craft, cooking and achieving recognized qualifications. They also offer psychotherapy and Cognitive Stimulation Therapy for adults with dementia.

Permaculture

Sydenham Garden do not talk about permaculture with people involved in the project, but the ethics and principles have clearly influenced many of those involved including the current director. The focus of the project is on people care, but through that work they are creating a wildlife oasis in South London. In the future the garden is interested in exploring how they could share their abundance and learning more with others in the local area and further afield.

People care

People are at the heart of everything at Sydenham Garden. As the director Tom Gallagher said, "Our work is focused on therapy, so if people want to dig, even if there is nothing we want digging, we find something to dig."

The team at Sydenham Garden include horticulturists, community and mental health workers. They offer a carefully planned therapy programme structured to meet each individual's needs, but also have a focus on finding routes into employment for people graduating from the courses on offer.

Sydenham have a great relationship with the NHS Improving Access to Physical Therapies team which enables them to offer some one-to-one therapeutic support.

Earth care

Sydenham Garden operates on two sites in Lewisham. They have long-term leases on both sites and everyone involved in the project plays an active role in designing, implementing and maintaining the space to create a highly biodiverse and abundant landscape.

Growing spaces are designed to be accessible to people with limited mobility, and there is a variety of spaces which enable appropriate opportunities for many different people.

Across both sites, there are vegetables grown using organic techniques, beehives, ponds and a large nature reserve which is managed to encourage wildlife and biodiversity. It is a real haven in the heart of Sydenham.

Fair shares

Sydenham Garden is largely funded by the South London and Maudsley NHS Trust and takes referrals from NHS partners and primary care providers in the local area. Both sites are open to the public and local people are encouraged to get involved as volunteers and to attend open days and other events.

The team are actively involved in a variety of projects to share their model with others and regularly offer their learning through case studies, at conferences and so on.

Outcomes and monitoring

Being funded by the NHS means that Sydenham Garden has always had a strong focus on monitoring outcomes for people who access their services both as part of their funding, as well as to inform their ongoing work.

Outcomes are measured through goal setting with every individual who comes to the project which are monitored throughout their time there. The team also carry out focus groups to encourage participants to discuss the project, how they are finding it, and ways in which the service could be improved.

The key tool used to measure outcomes is the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Health Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) which is widely recognized and accepted by the NHS. The South London and Maudsley mental health trust recently carried out a patient study for report forms and found that WEMWBS scored highest.

Sydenham Garden have found that many people who access their services come to them in the lowest 5% of the population based on their WEMWBS score and leave at moderate levels with all participants showing some improvement. This represents an impressive outcome where people with often severe mental health illness are showing significant improvement within 6-9 months and are often ready to find work.

Asylum Seeker project

Sydenham Garden offer a specific therapeutic group for Tamil asylum seeking men from Sri Lanka, many of whom are housed in the local area. This project was started by an NHS psychotherapist who found that a lot of Sri Lankan men were being referred for mental health treatment. She found that Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), which are recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines, were not working for this group so she set up a peer to peer support ground at Sydenham Garden, using a combination of horticultural and group talking therapy.

The group – usually of between 3-6 men – meet once per week and do one hour in the garden with a horticulturalist before having a group session with an NHS psychotherapist for 2 hours. The NHS pay Sydenham Garden for the use of the premises and the horticulturalist's time. They are able to offer up to 20 sessions to

each individual and many then join other gardening groups at Sydenham Garden or continue to stay involved as volunteers.

This project uses Impact of Events Scale developed by Weiss and Marmar which is freely available and has been translated into Tamil. The scale is used at an individual's initial assessment, part way through their course and at the end. A vital aspect of the project is that the NHS funding is not based on participants necessarily showing improvement as it is understood that there are many other factors involved.

Case study

Mehmet

Mehmet attended the Art and Craft group at Sydenham Garden for one year after being referred by his support worker. In the months prior to joining, Mehmet had experienced a very difficult time with his mental health. He feels that taking part in the Art and Craft group has helped him to occupy himself, to concentrate, to feel inspired and to take his mind off other issues.

Mehmet has found that he loves learning new mediums and skills in the Art and Craft group and has produced a beautiful sphere structure woven with willow. He finds all the people involved in the group very helpful and kind.

Mehmet says that being part of the group has improved his quality of life by allowing his passion for art to flourish and by building his confidence to socialize and feel more relaxed around others. Mehmet has now started giving his time to the volunteer centre in Lewisham helping out with data entry each week. He is doing courses in pottery, drawing and painting and learning more about IT and is furthering his English skills.

