



Gardens of Sanctuary

The Comfrey Project

Gateshead



Gardens of Sanctuary Case Study

Community growing spaces welcoming, supporting and working alongside refugees and asylum seekers

The Comfrey Project at a Glance

Established in:	2001
Location:	Gateshead, Tyne and Wear
Website:	http://thecomfreyproject.org.uk/
Structure:	Charity
Staff:	1 full time, 1 part time
Volunteers:	50+

Project History

The Comfrey Project was founded in 2001 with one part time member of staff and one volunteer, offering 1 session per week on an allotment site in the West End of Newcastle and working exclusively with refugees and asylum seekers. Initial referrals were taken through GP surgeries, housing associations and the West End Refugee Service.

Over the years the project expanded, taking on different sites and leaving others, and working with partners including British Red Cross, Freedom from Torture, the RHS and Baltic, a centre for contemporary art.

As of June 2018 they had 7 trustees, one full-time member of staff, a part-time therapeutic horticulturist, more than 50 volunteers and an advisory group of participants. They are now based at the Windmill Hills Centre in Gateshead, and also manage two allotment plots.

Current Services

Comfrey offer specialist drop-in sessions for local refugees and asylum seekers from across Tyneside on Wednesdays and Thursdays, plus a Syrian group on Tuesdays. All their sessions have a focus on growing, cooking and eating food together.

Participants are referred from a range of organisations, sometimes as a next step or as a continuation at the end of a course of therapy. There is not currently any funding associated with these referrals, and the project funds its activities through third party grants and donations. In order to be referred

the participant needs to be able to work independently and be aged over 18, although many cases participants attend with their children. In some instances participants will attend on the condition that additional staff support is received from the referring organisation.

The sessions are run on a drop-in basis and don't need to be booked in advance, although attendance is monitored so that any unexplained absences can be followed up to make sure the person is ok, and text message reminders are sent out on the morning of each session.

Sessions are supported by volunteers from the local area, who go through a process of recruitment, vetting and training to ensure they have the skills required to work with refugees and asylum seekers. There are very few barriers between participants and other volunteers, and they all do the same jobs, such as gardening, cooking and serving.

The Comfrey Project also signpost participants to other organisations, including during points of crisis or when additional professional support is required that Comfrey is not able to provide.

Outcomes

The project has observed participants increasing in confidence, socialisation and integration, with participants actively taking on roles and responsibility. Participants find the sessions enjoyable and the project has very good retention rates.

Comfrey find that it is very difficult to evaluate the type work they do without creating barriers between the participants and project staff, and this can sometimes make reporting on grant funding challenging. As a result their outcomes tend to be qualitative and observational rather than as a result of data collection or surveys.

Community Impact

During the early stages of the project there were a few minor complaints locally, but largely the interactions with local people have always been very positive.

They encountered issues at some of the allotment sites they worked on from other

plot holders, with comments which could sometimes be both negative and racist, particularly if there wasn't a project worker present. However, these incidents were in the minority, and were always challenged by volunteers and other plot holders, who recognise that participants often encounter very serious racism in their daily lives.

Overall, the project has seen a definite improvement in socialisation and integration, along with the breaking down of negative stereotypes of refugees and asylum seekers. The project has helped members of the community to recognise similarities rather than highlighting differences.

Case Study: S.

S. came to the UK as a refugee in 2010, and has been at the Comfrey Project for seven years. She comes from a family of restaurateurs and chefs in Sri Lanka, and immediately took to organising the daily lunches of the gardeners, working from the small sheds at the allotments or the kitchen at Windmill Hills. Cooking with donated foods or produce grown in the garden, often with no prior knowledge of what is available until she arrives on site, S. organises a kitchen and a number of volunteer cooks to produce fresh, home cooked, vegetarian food for up to forty participants.

Over the past seven years, S. has prepared over fourteen thousand lunches, always with a smile, and with utmost professionalism. Having received her right to remain in 2014 she has now set up her own Sri Lankan catering business, supplying snacks and catering for community events.



Problems and Barriers

Some problems encountered are:

- Occasional “dumping” of vulnerable individuals on them by other organisations
- Monitoring and evaluation – to evaluate on a more regular basis would take a huge amount of staff resources!
- The Participant Advisory Group struggles to meet sometimes because of personal issues/instability in participants lives
- Participants can be moved on to other areas with little or no notice
- The Home Office allow asylum seekers to volunteer but not to undertake unpaid work, so the project needs to be careful with terminology
- There is a high prevalence of mental health issues, stress and a lack of stability generally for participants
- lack of funding – especially a difficulty in getting funders to understand the complexity of what they’re doing
- Risk of exclusions when people speak different languages. They have a policy where everyone tries to speak English when they are at the project to avoid this

Future Plans

The project intends to finalise the Community Asset Transfer of the Windmill Hills Centre that is currently in progress. They continue to seek funding to maintain and expand their services, and eventually they would like the centre to be open 7 days a week.

They would also like to be able to offer training, particularly on gardening and transferable skills. Being able to offer some form of accreditation would also benefit the employability of participants who successfully receive refugee status.

Compiled by Sophie Antonelli and Ben Margolis

For more information about Gardens of Sanctuary go to <https://gardens.cityofsanctuary.org/>

Gardens of Sanctuary is a partnership between *Social Farms & Gardens*, *City of Sanctuary* and the *Permaculture Association*. We have a shared vision of a network of green spaces with a culture of welcome, in which asylum seekers and refugees feel safe and appreciated as valued contributors and co-creators of community gardens and environmental projects across the UK.

For those who arrive to seek asylum in the UK, community gardens, city farms and other community growing spaces can offer vital and unique opportunities to find community, improve mental and physical health and to learn and share skills.

Our case studies and report are intended as useful resources for any community growing space who is working with refugees and asylum seekers, or who would like to welcome them in the future. Find all our resources on our website [here](#).