

Growing Together Levenshulme

Manchester



Gardens of Sanctuary Case Study

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

Growing Together Levenshulme at a Glance

Established in:	2006
Location:	Levenshulme, Manchester
Website:	https://www.facebook.com/GrowingTogetherLevenshulme/
Structure:	Charitable Incorporated Organisation
Staff:	None
Volunteers:	10+

Project History

Growing Together Levenshulme began when a group of friends, with a shared interest in gardening and using land as a shared community resource, took on 5 plots of an allotment site in 2006. Working as volunteers, they initially worked with a number of different community groups and organisations to bring people to the allotment site, including Refugee Action and a local permaculture group. One of the allotment group members also volunteered with Revive, a Manchester based group who support refugees and asylum seekers, and through this connection a group of refugees and asylum seekers began to attend the site regularly.

Over time the group became more formalised, finding that regular hours meant people knew when they could come and allowing more people to plan their visit. In 2014 they agreed a constitution for the group and they are now a charitable incorporated organisation (CIO). They now work mainly with refugees and asylum seekers, although their charitable aims are broad and encompass any discriminated against communities.

Current Services

GT Levenshulme provide a weekly gardening group on their allotment plot, run on vegan organic principles and supported by a core group of volunteers. They do not have any paid members of staff, although they have sometimes been able to pay workshop leaders using grant funding. They have had other

small grants which have helped to pay for things like gardening tools, travel expenses for participants and a small site building. Their running costs are approximately £10k per year.

The group doesn't currently have an established referral system (although they do have very good links with local refugee and asylum support organisations) and participants can just turn up. The group finds that participants will typically attend for a couple of years, and that group numbers remain fairly stable, although at times they have had to cap participant numbers to prevent volunteers feeling overwhelmed. More volunteers, improved infrastructure and the development of more structured sessions has meant that the project is now able to accommodate more participants, with participants also encouraged to work independently and lead their own activities when appropriate.

Outcomes

The group has had lots of feedback from participants that describes the positive impact that the group activities have had on their mental health, including giving people a reason to leave the house, overcoming isolation, anxiety and depression and finding supportive people who can relate to and share their problems.

The group has seen participants become more confident and "lighter in their being", sometimes over the course of a session but also over a period of years. They feel that

having a break from “being an asylum seeker” and just being able to be a person and a gardener for a while is a really positive and therapeutic break.

The participants themselves have brought a very strong work ethic to the group, and are very keen that people work hard when they are at the garden rather than just using it as a place to socialise.

Problems and Barriers

The most important factor that the group constantly struggle with is the stress and difficult lives that the participants experience as a result of being refugees and asylum

seekers. The hardship and trauma that participants may have experienced, either in their home country or in the UK (or both), can have a profound effect on individuals and group dynamics in both obvious and subtle ways, as can the constant strain and uncertainty that being part of the UK asylum system entails.

When the group began, the volunteers who set it up it very much wanted the participants who were refugees and asylum seekers to become fully integrated and help run the group as well as taking part. In the beginning this was the case, it could be quite chaotic but everyone mucked in. However, a desire from the participants that all participants be equal

Case Study: Howard

Howard (not his real name) started gardening with Growing Together Levenshulme (GTL) in 2011. He had grown up in rural Liberia and brought a huge amount of gardening experience to the garden. Having arrived in the UK several years before and been stuck in the asylum process, unable to work or contribute to society, he was visibly excited by the opportunity to get involved in the project. Despite dealing with significant past trauma and also the stress of the inevitable repeated cycles of refusal and re-application in the asylum process, Howard always brought an incredible level of enthusiasm and positivity to the garden.

In 2014, while still attending GTL, Howard used his experiences to start an allotment group in the garden at Revive’s Manchester office. He applied for funding and galvanised a group of people to renovate the garden space and turn it into a productive growing space. The garden has gone from strength to strength in the years since then. In 2018 a group of participants from GTL spent a day helping out at the Revive garden, and it was truly inspiring to see how established it has become. In 2016, Howard got his status and is now building a life in the UK. He has left a huge legacy at both GTL and at the Revive garden.



and for the volunteers to be “in charge” now means that the volunteers are more of a separate management group, with less take-up from participants to get involved in decision making or running the group than they would ideally like. To combat this the project has established a steering group, which meets four times a year. This group is very well attended by participants and plays a crucial role in making decisions about overall strategy and direction, as well as setting ground rules and agreements to ensure that community, respect and solidarity are maintained within the organisation.

Equality is also important to participants with regard to how hard people work, perceived privileges for any particular member and the sharing of food. The volunteers have had to put very clear measures in place to avoid conflict in these areas, such as ensuring everyone gets given an equal sized plate of food.

Conflict between participants can also be an issue due to the very difficult, stressful and

sometimes chaotic lives that the participants lead due to their asylum status, and on occasion conflict between communities has spilled over into the garden. On these rare occasions the volunteers have found that they have to mediate and arbitrate between parties to keep the peace. This has been difficult as the volunteers would prefer to stay impartial, whilst maintaining a safe space. On only one occasion have they had to temporarily suspend people, but this ultimately reached a positive resolution with participants returning and the conflict being resolved.

Other barriers to attendance include the group being full, people’s fitness and physical ability to work in the garden; working within people’s capabilities whilst treating everyone fairly; a large group could overwhelm a person who is feeling very isolated and this may put them off; and lastly the site itself can be difficult to find if you haven’t been there before.

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](#).