The impact of TCV's Green Gym on mental health

GREEN GYM™



The Conservation Volunteers' Green Gym™ is a group-based outdoor activity with a purpose, which improves physical, mental and social health as well as the local environment.

Participants are guided in practical activities such as planting trees, growing food and digging wildlife ponds. The Department of Health, link workers and GPs recognise the invaluable impact that Green Gyms can have on those who take part.

TCV works closely with local social prescribers to encourage people to join to improve their health and wellbeing. By taking part, participants start making positive changes to their lifestyle, such as walking and cycling more.

Green Gyms also enhance mental wellbeing through increased contact with nature, the social benefits of group activity and helping people contribute something positive to their community. TCV works closely with partners to continually innovate Green Gyms to ensure that they maximise the benefits for participants.

Throughout this booklet, you'll find a number of research and case studies to demonstrate this.



TCV's Green Gym supports the 5 ways to wellbeing model developed by the New Economics Foundation.

TCV The Conservation Volunteers

Increased wellbeing following engagement in Green Gym

The Conservation Volunteers completed a three-year long review of the impact of our Green Gym programme.

TCV often engages people with lower mental wellbeing scores than the average population and our Green Gym data shows an increase in those scores, with lasting benefits for over a year. These results are highly relevant for all TCV's projects.

Dr. Nina Smyth and Dr. Lisa Thorn, University of Westminster and Dr. Carly Wood, Essex University reviewed the data from 892 different volunteers who'd taken part in the Green Gym programme between June 2017 and March 2020.

Full results can be found at **www.tcv.org.uk/health** with key highlights below.

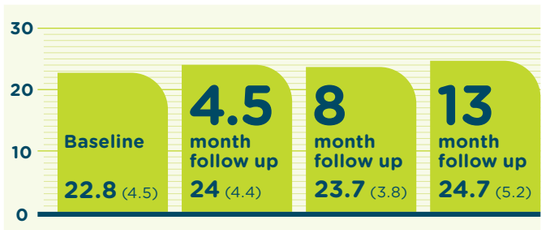
41% had a **self-reported health condition**

33% **lived in an area classed as most deprived,** according to the indices of multiple deprivation (IMD)

TCV's volunteers had significantly lower mental wellbeing than the UK average before starting the Green Gym programme. This was measured by Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS), which is a tool designed to measure the general population's perception of their own mental wellbeing across seven domains such as '*I'm feeling useful*' and '*I'm feeling relaxed*'.

By the first follow up point, on average four and a half months later, these SWEMWBS scores had increased to be in line with the UK average.

The evidence also suggested that the increases in wellbeing were sustained for over a year.



Mental wellbeing for the UK population is 23.6. Figures presented are the Mean with standard deviation in brackets.

There was a particularly strong effect for those who had very low levels of wellbeing (more pronounced SWEMWBS scores) upon joining the programme.

	Baseline	4.5 month follow up
Whole sample	23	24
Low wellbeing	17.9	20.5
Av/high wellbeing	24.9	25.2

The Green Gym participants completed an evaluation form when joining the programme (baseline) and at subsequent points; on average 4.5 months (follow-up 1), 8 months (follow-up 2) and 13 months (follow up 3) later.

In total, the volunteers completed 1,264 surveys. 883 volunteers completed a SWEMWBS questionnaire prior to participating in Green Gym to create a baseline, with 251 volunteers continuing to do the survey 4.5 months later, and of these 90 completed the survey 8 months later and 40 volunteers completed the survey 13 months later.

"We have a lovely group of volunteers of mixed ages and backgrounds. We always have a variety of tasks and make it as inclusive as possible. Some volunteers like hard, physical work such as chopping back vegetation or sawing. Others prefer gentler exercise like planting tree whips. Whatever people do they are getting fresh air in a green environment, which is conductive to stress relief and relaxation."

Maria Schlatter, TCV Camden Senior Project Officer



"A project like this has to be a supportive place. You have to accept that sometimes people are having a bad day, and make sure they feel they can come to the garden.

It's also important that we don't focus on the problems people have: a volunteer who came here after HIV treatment said he liked how 'we don't talk about HIV – we talk about lettuces and radishes'."

Bryony TCV Project Officer



"The Green Gym is not just about gardening; it can make a difference to a community. It can open doors which you thought were shut or too far to reach. You can make a difference not just as an individual but also to the wider community. The Green Gym is like a family – a green hub for the community."

Julie Richards, Project Officer at TCV Leicester

Case study
Gartnavel Hospital

A wide range of TCV activities provide opportunities to improve physical and mental health and wellbeing through physical activity and social interaction. TCV's work at Gartnavel Hospital is a wonderful example of volunteers doing just that.

The garden at Gartnavel Hospital provides a base for a range of environment-based therapy and community activities for a wide-range of people in the local area. TCV runs the sessions with garden volunteers who are either referred by a health care professional or find out about the activities on offer for themselves.

Those who come regularly take on a variety of activities around the garden such as planting seeds, weeding the beds, harvesting vegetables and flowers or planning for the seasonal changes ahead. Volunteers find that time spent in the garden without work or social pressures is beneficial to their mental health, especially when they feel they can make a useful contribution.

The garden provides the chance to develop a different kind of therapeutic relationship between clinical staff at Gartnavel Hospital and their patients. Clinicians can take their healing and recovery programmes outside, offering patients a more holistic and person-centred approach. For psychiatric care, mindfulness techniques are used, with benefits including better attention, improved mood and heightened self-esteem. Occupational Therapists bring elderly patients to the garden for a relaxing environment to practice their mobility.

"The problem with depression is losing a sense of purpose and hope – the garden really helps with that. I enjoy the learning too: finding out how plants grow reinforces my sense of being able to learn."

Katie – Volunteer



"I started volunteering after I got physically unwell and mentally not in a good place after leaving a stressful job. I enjoyed the company and the gardening. I get such pleasure from planting a seed and watching it grow."

Margaret – Volunteer



Case study
David – TCV Leicester

“My son is the constant and most important thing in my life. He is what gives my life meaning and Green Gym is what gives my life joy.”

Using a resident-focused approach, TCV Leicester’s Green Gym was set up to improve social connectedness, address loneliness and develop opportunities for the community.

After losing his partner and becoming a single dad with a young son to care for, David’s life became increasingly isolated and lonely. Finding his community at Green Gym helped him on the right track to transform his life.

It wasn’t until he saw a poster for Green Gym at his son’s school that invited him to meet new people in the community whilst exercising and gardening that he decided to make a change.

“I was just getting up, taking my son to school, coming home and doing nothing. I was lonely and miserable, but I could not and did not want to do anything about it.”

David had always wanted to try gardening but didn’t feel sure enough in himself to do it on his own. He thought he might enjoy it more with other people in a group. Feeling anxious about not knowing anybody, David attended his first Green Gym session and met TCV Project Officer Julie and Green Gym volunteer Zoe.

“When I first went, I didn’t feel comfortable being the centre of attention, so I would just stick to the side. I would get on with my work and listen to everyone around me but not actually contribute to the conversation. Now, we bounce off each other, we banter with each other and there isn’t a topic we cannot discuss. Before I didn’t feel like I could talk to anybody but Julie has made me feel so welcome.”

The impact that attending the Green Gym and engaging with his local community not only had a positive effect on David, but on his son too.

“I went on my own on Thursdays and took my son with me on a Saturday. This really made a difference because Thursdays I could really get into the group and on Saturday, it got us out of the house. It just became part of our routine and we really enjoy it.”

David said that getting out of the house for a few hours and volunteering has helped him to manage his depression and anxiety.

“I could easily drop my son off at school and go home, but I don’t. I make an active decision to go to Green Gym, even when I’m feeling down. I can talk to everyone about why I am feeling it.”

By building his own community at Green Gym, David has found something that he not only enjoys, but adds value to his life.



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