HEALTH AND SPORT COMMITTEE

SOCIAL PRESCRIBING OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND SPORT

SUBMISSION FROM Judy Wilkinson

1. To what extent does social prescribing for physical activity and sport increase sustained participation in physical activity and sport for health and wellbeing?

The long term sustained participation in the physical activity of community growing comes from recognition of the benefits of the growing opportunities. Allotment plots and community gardens offer

- sanctuary allowing escape from personal stress and problems
- engagement with natural world is shown to have positive effects on mental health and promotes wellbeing
- mental stimulation with a variety of physical tasks and decisions about options for cultivating your own space
- companionship in shared tasks both in growing and in management of a site
- opportunity to discuss experiences informally when the need to talk arises
- actually contributing to the wellbeing of your own family and friends by growing food and to the wider society through climate change mitigation

2. Who should decide whether a social prescription for physical activity is the most appropriate intervention, based on what criteria? (e.g. GP, other health professional, direct referral from Community Link Worker or self-referral)

There should not be one channel to access a growing space. Individuals for self referral, GPs, health promoters, education, community centres, housing associations should be aware of benefits of growing places and supported at the level they require and enables them to make their key contributions to preventative self-care for health and wellbeing

3. What are the barriers to effective social prescribing to sport and physical activity and how are they being overcome?

- lack of awareness of benefits among decision makers and those who would benefit (most of us)
- land - local authorities have a duty to identify land for allotments and other forms of community growing but the lack of awareness across departments (planning, health, education etc) in many authorities is limiting the assessment and availability of land for growing
- rules and regulations on allotment sites - often people with mental illness have a fear of judgement and failure so cannot cope with the enforcement of strong rules and invasive plot inspection procedure by allotment association committees or by allotment officers in local authorities.

4. How should social prescribing for physical activity and sport initiatives be monitored and evaluated?
There will be a great diversity of needs and outcomes and these can only be appreciated by listening to the stories of those involved -the individual, their families and friends, the GPs, the health people etc. A formal evaluation should not be necessary because the local organisations and services involved should have quality standard they operate to and are monitored and evaluated as part of their funding. The way forwarding the short term would be to work with health improvement people to include all growing places in the community directories and these are available in every possible local location; make sure visits to growing places where the visitors can talk to the cultivators are widely available and supported by the decision makers; produce leaflets, posters, podcasts about the benefits that can be disseminated in GP surgeries, community centres, housings associations, schools and on social media. In the medium term ensure support and funding is in place that is relevant for the intervention offered. In the long term there should be a variety of opportunities available, easily accessible that cover the multiple health and wellbeing interventions that community growing offers.

Background information on why community growing should be part of social prescribing and recommendations for the way forward.

1. Benefits:
   (i) Story - loss of sight
   In 2018, becoming partially sighted was an immense challenge for a man who had been very practical and independent. He joined a walking group but could not see well and found it frustrating. However the opportunity to join a community plot on his local allotment site enabled him to get out of the house, enjoy working in the open air, find companionship and support. Above all it offered mental stimulation 'gardening is a challenge, you have to concentrate on what you are doing, you find peace from the worries reverberating round your head. When you get home you think about what you have done and the people you have talked to.' He felt that the organiser of the plot took a risk with him as a partially sighted person on an allotment site. However although he can’t weed well, he can harvest, clear a bed and support others in multiple ways. He says other members have become friends not just acquaintances and this has changed his life. He only found out about the allotment from the manager at his sheltered housing. She said “it has changed his life and feels his life is sorted now” and he reckons without it his Doctor would just be prescribing Valium. The site is close to his home which is very important because he can get there easily without the stress of buses or other forms of transport.

   (ii). Story - recovering from depression ¹:
   Recovering from anxiety and depression is very difficult. One man who found support and help was advised to volunteer with a community organisation at their site behind a house for the homeless. He did not know anything about gardening, had no interest and didn’t even like mowing his lawn. He was given the task of potting plants and thought he would perhaps manage half an hour. Two hours later he realised that ‘My mind had been at peace for these two hours. In effect I had peace from my mind racing with negativity for the first time in who knows how long’.
   He had spent around 25 years hiding his condition. He was ashamed because he had been brought up with the ‘pull your socks up and get on with it’ approach and felt a failure. He suffered a series of regressions because he was abandoned after recovery and was under

¹ Different spaces, different needs by Judy Wilkinson and David Lamont www.postcardsfromscotland.co.uk
pressure to prove he was fit for work without any further support. However in the gardening group he found it easier to open up to someone who had been through a similar experience and managed to bring it under control. He could talk about his depression because he was not there to ‘talk about depression’ but to do some gardening and the therapeutic environment then enabled him to open up.’

(iii). Story - raspberry jam
A plotholder at an allotment site in Dundee also found that his plot, his ‘bit of Scotland’ was a personal therapeutic garden which helped him fight depression:
‘Jam made from my raspberries gives a meaning to life. Living in a tower block is like living in a hencoop and on my plot I have my own space where I can get away from it all and switch off or, if I feel like company there are people from different countries and different backgrounds to talk to.’

(iv) Story - diversity of activities:
Wellhouse allotments are an amazing group of local people who work together and care for one another. Many who joined the allotments have had health problems such as drug and alcohol addiction, agoraphobia and depression but these problems have been overcome through working and talking together. They understand each other’s needs and skills, encouraging those with various disabilities to enjoy the site The allotment site has plots for growing vegetables, a community hut and workshop together with chickens, rabbits, and other animals enabling those involved to develop a range of skills from painting and wood work to caring for animals as well as growing vegetables and fruit. There is a wonderful, caring atmosphere on the site.

2. Who decides?
In 2018 the Department of Rural Affairs and the Environment has published Guidance For Local Authorities Section 119 Duty to Prepare Food-Growing Strategy. Annex A covers the Impacts and benefits of community growing in great detail with references to source data. Health includes:
• Gardening activities can provide low-impact exercise and improve physical health and can be a more sustainable form of exercise than when the exercise itself is the primary driver
• Community growing can lower stress levels, offer mental health benefits and a supportive social environment, where growers view the growing space as a “safe” space where they can relax and unwind from the stresses of other parts of their lives;
• Creating green space in built up areas improves air quality and provides recreational opportunities that encourage socialising, decrease isolation and lead to improved confidence and self-esteem
• GPs and healthcare professionals can consider social prescribing to connect people to non-medical sources of support and resources in the community, for example a GP or healthcare professional might consider it appropriate to prescribe gardening-related activity to improve the health and wellbeing of the individual;
• Community growing spaces in hospital spaces, for example, can prove useful spaces for occupational therapists and other medical specialists when working with their patients.

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2 Raising Spirits - allotments, wellbeing and community’ Jenny Mollison at al.
wwww.postcardsfromscotland.co.uk
3 https://www.facebook.com/wellhouseallotments/
• Horticultural therapy through community growing can provide wide-ranging health-related benefits to ease suffering and promote recovery from illness. Such therapy can, for example, help to reduce physical pain, assist with rehabilitation and recovery, and alleviate the symptoms of dementia.

However this awareness must be recognised and community growing supported and promoted by the Planning, Local Government and Health Departments together with the NHS Scotland and at all levels in the local authorities. There needs to be a big campaign to ensure growing places are found within walking distance of every dwelling and are accepted as an integral part of our culture, Walking groups have deservedly received great support in recent years and the same level of promotion and engagement should be found for growing spaces, Then the decision about who decides on social prescribing will be part of the culture of the community and place with those in need welcomed into the growing spaces.

3. Barriers:
Lack of Awareness:
There are many very good initiatives some of which are described above but there is not a general understanding among all sections of society including professionals and decision makers that access to a growing space and reconnection with the land is essential to the cultural change we need to deal with the health and environmental crises. There is far more support for sports, including cycling and walking than for community growing although there is an increasing body of research into the benefits of gardening both physically and mentally.

GP's often don't know about the local projects and services, or if they do they don't know who can participate, what referral routes are, if they are open and any quality standards. All health professionals need to understand what is on offer and what could be on offer in their area. Gardening enables every one to contribute to the health of society as well as addressing some of their personal issues. However politicians must not believe that just mentioning gardening as a health benefit is sufficient, support and relevant funding is essential, for example community plots on allotments have been abandoned when the funding for the group fails. As a start visiting, talking and listening in local neighbourhoods would enable everyone including ordinary citizens, politicians and professionals to realise what is needed and what can be done.

Land:
It is difficult to find the land needed for community growing because this is not usually a priority for the planning departments. The document ‘Plan to Grow Food - A Spatial Planning Advice Guide for Allotments and other Food Growing Spaces’[^4] is a comprehensive analysis of the planning system with case studies and recommendations for planning authorities in encouraging opportunities for community growing spaces.

If a local group is empowered it can set up an allotment and become a support for the neighbourhood. In the story about the loss of sight, the allotment site was part of the housing association but plots were abandoned and not cultivated, until the community activist saw the site and, with a great deal of volunteer help, was able to turn it round.

[^4]: [www.sags.org.uk](http://www.sags.org.uk)
Braehead (a case study in Plan to Grow) also shows how the barriers can be overcome. However if the community plot is developed ‘top down ’ by local authority officers, housing associations or other professionals without the engagement and empowerment of the local community, it can take a long time for those who may benefit to actively participate and take control.

**Rules and Regs**

(v). Story - pressure on a vulnerable person from an allotment association committee: This story is about an allotment holder who is supporting a husband who has MS and is in a home. She has a very stressful job and the plot has become a sanctuary where she can relax in the fresh air for a little while. She has five children and they have all benefitted from the space, whether from finding a time to work quietly with their mother, to have the responsibility of taking the vegetable waste to the plot and managing the compost, or picking the raspberries and strawberries. However rigorously imposed rules about 'weed free' plot and 'fully cultivated' have disturbed the enjoyment and benefits. The plot may become weedy and overgrown in times of family pressure and illness. The allotment association committee attempts to reduce the threat of losing their plot by suggesting they should 'inform the Committee of any difficulties." However they do not know members of the committee and do not wish to write about their problems. Kindness and understanding should be paramount in an allotment site.

(vi) Story- pressure on a vulnerable person from a local authority officer: The allotment he tends ion a site near his home is a life saver for an allotment holder who has a son with severe complex needs. The plot is enjoyed by all his family. However last year they received a letter warning them their plot was not up to standard. He replied that they had harvested kale, broccoli, leeks and chard through-out the winter and would like to discuss this letter with the auditor who has sole responsibility for the compliance with the rules of his local authorities allotments. He took time off work to meet her. She disparaged their plot saying that it was not 70% cultivated (untrue), was untidy (agreed it is not neat), weedy (some weeds) and that the kale had been left to flower (what about the bees?). He was obviously not making full use of the plot and there was a large waiting list of people who would benefit. She had seen plots that were immaculate all the year round and they were her benchmark. When he explained about his son and that the plot was his sanctuary she replied that if he did not have time to garden because of caring for his son he should get help with the cultivation. This time she would withdraw threat but he felt he was on a final warning. She left him in tears.

He is also not allowed to put aside a space for his disabled son’s wheelchair because disability access only applies to those who are plot-holders not to their families.

Health and wellbeing is a big part of the growth of demand for allotments and allotment officers should understand and respect this. All local authority officers with responsibility for allotments should be trained in an awareness of mental health and stress and on the effects of judgement and cynicism on vulnerable people. They should be cognisant of the ‘power for wellbeing’ in the Local Government Act 2003 and the Equality legislation’

4. Monitoring and evaluation

It is very difficult to monitor and evaluate the success of community growing on health because of the diversity of projects and opportunities and the multiple benefits. The interventions depend on the individuals and organisations involved from the local allotment associations to local organisations such as the Leamy Foundation and the formal networks
of Trellis and Social Farms & Gardens with a whole diversity of local growing in between. If preventative health measures money is channelled in their direction, organisations will monitor and evaluate their projects as part of their funding. Ensuring voluntary bodies such as allotment associations welcome and support those with mental and physical health is beginning to happen and with increasing awareness will be part of our cultural change.

August 2019 by Judy Wilkinson - allotment campaigner