Case Study
Royal Edinburgh Community Gardens

Context
The recent public interest in growing your own food has been stimulated by a number of sources. Cost saving is a key motivation; the economic downturn has been characterised by rising unemployment and falling levels of disposable income, whilst the cost of fruit and vegetables in the supermarket is increasing. The media, particularly gardening and cookery programmes on television, promote growing your own food for both enjoyment and improved flavours. Concerns over climate change are also a motivating factor for some people who wish to reduce their carbon footprint as regards ‘food miles’ and packaging. Lastly, health professionals are increasingly citing the positive role of gardening in reducing stress levels and increasing physical health.

At a more strategic level, there is increasing concern within local and national governments regarding food security – that is – ensuring that people have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Britain imports 40% of the total food consumed and this figure is rising.

Crucially, it appears that this collective escalation of interest has not yet been complemented by an increase in the amount of land and number of sites available for people to use in order to grow produce. This is one of the reasons why the Royal Edinburgh Community Gardens (RECG) is so interesting and important.

Royal Edinburgh Community Gardens is a pilot project that is run by Edinburgh Cyrenians to use up to fifteen acres of NHS Lothian owned land in south Edinburgh for a vibrant community garden. The initiative adopts a holistic approach to health promotion which recognises the long term beneficial impacts of community gardening which includes opportunities for improving physical and mental health, healthier eating, contact with nature and social inclusion.

“I am delighted with the use of NHS Lothian land for community gardens as an important part of health promotion.”

Dr Charles Winstanley, Chair, NHS Lothian
**Project Background**

The project was established in January 2010 by NHS Lothian to explore opportunities for temporary community gardening on NHS land. It is designed and set-up with a view to replication, creating more multi-use green space facilities welcoming a mix of different user groups, across the NHS estate.

The project’s goals are to:

- Tackle health inequalities through encouraging healthy eating and providing a place for physical activity
- Promote community building and social inclusion
- Provide a green space facility to support the recovery of patients
- Promote environmental sustainability through environmental education and opportunities for environmental volunteering

The Gardens are led by a Steering Group which includes representatives of NHS Lothian and third party stakeholders. The day to day management of the Gardens is undertaken by the Edinburgh Cyrenians who work in partnership with local community and health organisations.

Edinburgh Cyrenians is a Scottish charity with a track record in pioneering creative solutions to the contemporary problems faced by people on the margins of society, such as homelessness, poverty, deep unemployment, recovery from addiction and recidivism. A Development Partnership Group has been created to encourage community groups, hospital patients and staff, and RECG volunteers to take part in the design and development of the site.

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**Key Points**

- Interest in community growing is increasing whilst provision of land for this purpose has not
- RECG uses an innovative approach to provide land for community growing within the NHS estate
- The model used facilitates high levels of on-going community participation
- The day to day development at the gardens is largely community-led, resulting in a truly community created urban green space
- Engaging groups with a focus on tackling health inequalities, nearly a quarter of volunteering hours are contributed by these groups
- Running costs are around £26K per year but the ambition is to be self-sustaining through social enterprise initiatives. Corporate challenges have been very helpful to the project through their contributions of materials and labour power
- The CSGN Development Fund has been instrumental in helping to replicate the RECG model, funding a feasibility study to identify new sites and also funding the capital investment in the new site at the Midlothian Community Hospital

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Highly Commended, Best Community Woodlands Category, Scotland’s Finest Woods Awards 2011

Royal Edinburgh Community Gardens
What it does

In just 8 months in 2010 the site was transformed from an overgrown wasteland into several acres of growing space, woodland walks and recovered orchard. This involved high intensity collaboration and voluntary effort from 12 local community groups, with help from local businesses. The achievement was featured on The Beechgrove Garden in August.

The physical structure of the gardens is made up of distinct areas including an orchard, a fruit tree nursery, a woodland walk, vegetable growing in small raised beds and larger scale field planting. Organic and permaculture methodologies are followed as much as is practically possible, and the development of the land has been undertaken with the existing fauna and flora in mind.

The local community is at the very heart of the project and has been involved in designing and creating many features around the Gardens, including seating areas, a herb spiral, and a living willow arch. In total, there are 19 community and health groups, more than 50 regular volunteers, and nearly 10,000 volunteering hours have been undertaken (from January 2010 to June 2011).

Community events held at the site included a celebration after The Beechgrove Garden filming, Apple and Potato day, Wassailing day and Halloween. Education workshops have also taken place at the site including tree and plant identification, fruit tree planting, soil enrichment training, green woodworking, bird identification walks, introduction to permaculture and a wild food identification walk.

Four local schools have become involved in the site. Patients at The Royal Edinburgh Hospital also regularly participate, and the RECG has supported the Young People’s Unit gardening group in developing their own gardens.

CSGN Support and Learning

The 2011 CSGN Development Fund financed a 6 month strategic development project that resulted in a detailed proposal going to the NHS Lothian Board with seven sites on their estate identified, surveyed and studied. The feasibility report (created as a result of this exercise) rated the potential of these sites to deliver green spaces for community growing, volunteering, public access events, education and land based skills development and growth.
Outcomes

**Inclusion:** More people will have an opportunity to take part in and learn about growing and enjoying food, nature and community action, with a special focus, on but not exclusively, people normally excluded from this sort of thing or facing particular barriers to being involved – such as mental health issues, disability, isolation and poverty.

**Better health:** Health and well-being will be improved, not just by the ‘green gym’ exercise and improved diets but also by the convivial, inclusive community spirit that pervades the Gardens in how they are run.

**Skills and lifestyle for the future:** everyone involved is given the opportunity to learn about and develop more sustainable and economic lifestyles: growing and cooking their own food, recycling and appreciating community and the natural world.

**A model of excellence:** The Royal Edinburgh Community Gardens will develop as a professionally managed project that offers a safe, well-run and great environment that is financially self-sufficient and continuously improving and which acts as a beacon to inform and inspire activity to utilise unused green space in Scotland.

The RECG is a multi-use facility, providing a range of different benefits to meet different needs. People come to the gardens to spend some time with their families, to make connections with their local community, to learn how to garden and about the local environment. They gain new skills, volunteer outside, become part of a community, get some light exercise, and relax in a safe and beautiful environment. The many benefits of community greenspace highlight how important social inclusion and a connection to the land are for our health and for our overall sense of well-being. The RECG is the vibrant and active space it is because it has been able to support the involvement of a wide variety of people with different interests, and because the decision to share all the land communally has made the gardens a much more social place than they would have otherwise been.

Establishing facilities (portacabin, toilets, and electricity) was more expensive and time consuming than expected, and until there were adequate facilities it was difficult for volunteers to spend the day working on the project.

“We are glad to support this project. Volunteering is a well known way of contributing to the local community but perhaps less well-known is the benefit people themselves get out of doing it. Improving your own health, both physical and mental, meeting new friends, enjoying nature and being outdoors are just some of the benefits of joining a project like this.”

John O’Keefe
Scottish Natural Heritage

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vocational training. This directly led to the decision to develop a new NHS Community Garden at the Midlothian Community Hospital. A third site is also currently being considered for development.
Location
The grounds are bounded by the back of the Royal Edinburgh Hospital to the east, Myreside Road in the west, George Watson’s College to the north, and the Edinburgh Suburban Railway line to the south.

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Project Partners
Central Scotland Green Network
Edinburgh Cyrenians
Scottish Natural Heritage
NHS Lothian
Forestry Commission Scotland

What is the CSGN?
The CSGN is a national development within the National Planning Framework which aims to make ‘a significant contribution to Scotland’s sustainable economic development’. It involves public agencies and stakeholders (those with an interest in our work) working together to align their policies, programmes and actions to achieve a common aim. That aim is to change the face of Central Scotland by restoring and improving the rural and urban landscape of the area.

Getting in touch
For further information on this case study please visit www.centralscotlandgreennetwork.org

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