National Allotments Week 2020 – Growing Food for Health and Well-being

This magazine will reach our members around about National Allotments Week 10-16 August 2020. Sadly, the usual round of Open Days, Picnics, Allotment Tours, Flower Shows etc will not be happening due to the restrictions on gatherings caused by the coronavirus. However, those restrictions have led to an explosion in interest in growing your own food and a significant rise in allotment waiting lists.

Lesley Greene, Chestergate Allotment Warden for Bisley Parish Council has written an account for us about the “Growing on Prescription” scheme at Vale Community Hospital where the benefits of the allotment social prescription scheme have been evaluated.

Our Allotments and the Health and Wellbeing they give us

This piece began as a simple report on an evaluation of the impact of having an allotment with a group of medically prescribed GP patients. But then came Covid19 and allotments entered one of those periodic swings of fortune that the allotment movement has historically experienced. But how brilliant is the NAS – its 2020 theme could not have been more apposite as Health and Wellbeing arguably becomes top billing in the measurement of a bright new “GDP”!

In 2015/16 a creative GP serving Gloucestershire’s Vale Community Hospital identified surrounding unused hospital land for a “Growing on Prescription” project and four years on the hospital’s allotment project has 60 4’ x 16’ raised bed plots, managed by a local community group “Down to Earth” 21 tenants have been on prescription at some point and have kept their allotment (2 have gone on to take bigger Council allotments). There are 8 currently “on prescription” on the allotments. A quantitative evaluation undertaken in 2018 found high levels of satisfaction. A follow up qualitative evaluation in 2019 was organised to understand better the impact that the allotment was having on tenant’s health and wellbeing.

Local Horticultural Therapist/Researcher Amanda Pyne led the focus group questions and discussion with four participants who volunteered their time. It is evident that allotments deliver many outcomes in addition to food growing and confirms that the allotment has a positive impact on their health and wellbeing. The responses indicate powerful connections between the physical and the mental benefits of allotment gardening providing a holistic sense of improved wellbeing for people “growing on prescription”

Three key messages about improved health and wellbeing stand out:
- Increased independence, confidence and self-reliance,
- Being part of a helpful and welcoming community thus combating isolation
- Achieving better health

What was said?
Firstly, having an allotment gave greater independence to those reliant on carers. Being able to escape ‘the pressures around me’ and being given a freedom to assert personal responsibilities and own goals through tasks ‘physical within my capabilities’ was important. Personal independence was a key benefit, the allotments “delivering something I can do myself and don’t having someone else doing it for me is good”; “the allotment means I can sit down when I want so it can help me exercise at a rate I can control”. Being on the allotment proves to be “a therapy that is better than the (purely) medical (therapies) because you are doing it yourself. It allows you to self-heal

The hospital allotment provides a flexible and open opportunity for increased self-reliance and confidence, but with the added benefit for those on prescription to feel they had access to close medical facilities if something went wrong.

Secondly, the presence of a supportive and varied allotment community was very important for our focus group: - “It’s good to have an allotment here…. neighbours I know come here – it’s a community spirit”, - “… (the allotment) is an integral part of the (whole)community - patients come over and sit down and walk around and the staff come here to be in a nice area”. Only one of the focus group had had an allotment before, so the friendliness and help (that we know is typical of most allotment sites) was remarked on, that help is always on hand: “with my condition I can be good today but not … next week … it means my wife can come down and put a sticker on my plot for somebody to water and (they’ll) generally look after it and I don’t have to worry about it. I don’t have somebody saying because you didn’t come down last week you can’t have your plot again

Finally, all the focus group participants benefitted physically - using their plot to ‘get out’ to exercise, have fresh air and strengthen their muscles, and importantly their diets had improved. They all said they had an improved awareness of fresh food because they had grown it themselves: “Because of my diabetes instead of pre-prepared bought meals (I was dependent on these) by cooking our own food from what we have produced – potatoes beetroots, cabbages and cauliflowers are better and the runner beans - all picked at the right time - yes home gown makes a difference” and “We eat more vegetables because we are producing our own … and it gets us out every day” and “it’s rewarding when you see a plant growing and then you crop it, that does make a big difference to you. Satisfaction is the key word”.

The allotment had a profound effect on one allotment holder – “these demonstrations about climate change … having an allotment, growing your own food, saving transport miles and so rather than people demonstrating - all governments should be saying ‘grow your own’ and everyone should be growing your own food; in our teens we growed all our own vegetables and now we are a society that is easy to blame someone else …. us people on the allotments … help against climate change.

Pleasure is a key element of wellbeing and the pleasure and satisfaction of growing food was palpable amongst the focus group: “it’s a pleasure to make things with what you have

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1 This gentleman had previously had a council allotment but then as he became ill his experience was not positive
(in) the last few months grown - the pleasure after working (it) and enjoying the produce for me and my wife and my friends, and the produce is excellent, it feeds many people in (our street)!

I write this in the middle of Covid19. A YouGov poll has just been published, finding eight out of 10 people would prefer the government to prioritise health and wellbeing over economic growth during the coronavirus crisis, and six in 10 would still want the government to pursue health and wellbeing ahead of growth after the pandemic has subsided. As lockdown was forecast our rural Parish Council experienced an unprecedented number of requests for allotments. It is evident from a short survey amongst the Bisley Allotment holders that, whilst applying for an allotment may have been ‘triggered’ by Covid19, the allotment plot for tenants is for more than food growing2 Their feedback is telling:

“My allotment has been a lifeline during coronavirus lockdown, it gives me a focus …. It’s something I can achieve each day; it is so calming to my busy and overactive mind….”
“....my plot is part of my daily routine.... It adds to my sense of wellbeing especially in stressful times such as the Covid outbreak....”
“...Physical work outside, putting my hands in the soil and focussing on plants makes me feel better...less stressed because of being absorbed in something else emotionally more robust and lighter...”
“.... the allotment makes me feel happy and stops me from getting low...”
“...the allotment is the peacefulness... so satisfying tending it....”
“...I find it gives for the soul as its ‘me time’ ...and its nice for the children to have their small space...grow things...to know the cycle of plants...and satisfaction when is on your dinner plate....”
“.... the allotment is my sanctuary...”

Allotments have always been places where tending plants is also tending your own inner space and the wellbeing of your neighbours and in times of crisis they become a place to ‘buffer us when the going gets tough”.

Quietly allotments have always been and continue to be supported by local authorities, community organisations, and, increasingly supported as part of NHS provision. For every £1 spent on gardening projects, the NHS saves £5 in reduced health costs. Getting out onto the plot is good for all our sanity, health and wellbeing. Long may allotments continue to be supported as an integral part of a healthy community.

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2 All allotment holders in Bisley said primarily they wanted an allotment for “fresh veg…free of pesticides……zero food miles…..”