


"It's one of the few things that ... pulls us together when the outside world is really tough." Exploring the outcomes and challenges of a charity-led community garden in a disadvantaged English city

LOCAL ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

This article explores a charity-led community gardening project working in a disadvantaged community in northern England and provides a detailed analysis of the outcomes for vulnerable people. This article contributes to the research on community gardens by emphasising the need to plan for long-term sustainability. The project received external funding for 3 years and implemented urban agriculture activities based around a community garden and a team of volunteers. The project successfully engaged marginalised people, who strongly voiced outcomes including increased skills and confidence, reduced isolation, improved health and wellbeing, and the opportunity to give back to their local community. Support from staff, volunteering in a team, enjoying gardening and accessing nature provided a strong platform for engagement and impacts. However, there were also significant challenges which required ongoing professional management such as ensuring a safe and comfortable environment. In addition, after the funding finished, the future of the community garden was fragile and marginalised participants were vulnerable to outcomes not being sustained in the long term.

KEYWORDS

- Community gardening
- marginalised people
- charity
- volunteering
- long-term sustainability

1. Introduction

This article critically analyses the potential for community gardens to bring long-term benefits to marginalised people. The article first describes the benefits and challenges of community gardens from the literature before then presenting the detailed case study of a charity-led, externally funded community garden in a disadvantaged urban area in the north of England. The research explores outcomes for marginalised people through focusing on the stories of participants, in line with Creamer's (2015, 987) approach to understanding local interpretations of sustainability by allowing "themes to emerge unrestricted by preconceptions, frameworks and theories." The participants describe how they volunteered with the project because they enjoyed gardening, wanted to work in a team and took the opportunity to be involved in a positive project which brought them out of their homes. Involvement in the garden brought a wide range of benefits including enjoyment, developing skills and confidence, reduced isolation, improved health and wellbeing, and the opportunity to give back to their local community. However, the participants also voiced a range of critical feedback on the project and were particularly concerned about the future of the community garden when the funding was due to finish. The article, therefore, provides an essential and sometimes overlooked perspective on the need to plan for long-term sustainability (Seghezzi 2009). Critically exploring the outcomes and challenges of a charity-led community gardening project provides important lessons for the growing number of other similar projects (Tomaghi 2014).

2. Exploring the benefits and challenges of community gardening

Community gardening is a growing movement and there are many different types including: school gardens; entrepreneurial gardens; crime diversion gardens; therapeutic gardens; neighbourhood pocket parks; community plots on allotments and some guerrilla gardens (Ferris, Norman, and Sempik 2001; Miller 2015; Adams, Hardman, and Larkham 2015). There can be a diverse range of aims including food growing for food security, supporting biodiversity, creating visual beauty or helping vulnerable people such as people with mental health challenges (Ferris, Norman, and Sempik 2001; Miller 2015; Pitt 2015). Many community gardens have a community focus in terms of ownership, access and decision-making, and are built by volunteers, however, there are also an increasing number of local authority and charity-managed community gardens (Purcell and Tyman 2015; St Clair et al. 2017; Lindemann 2019). However, ideally the local community are able to care for and nurture the garden over a long period of time (Ferris, Norman, and Sempik 2001; Crane, Viswanathan, and Whitelaw 2013; Purcell and Tyman 2015).

Ferris, Norman, and Sempik (2001), Pitt (2014) and Miller (2015) identify a wide range of health and wellbeing benefits from community gardening including improving nutrition and food security, exercise, access to the outdoors, reducing isolation, and helping to deal with mental health challenges. Both Pitt (2014) and St Clair et al. (2017) argue that there can be significant therapeutic benefits of community gardening for people with health and wellbeing challenges. For instance, St Clair et al. (2017) research a community garden in northern England which has been established to help people undergoing cancer treatment. In Bhatti et al.'s (2009) research, participants voice the power of gardening and access to nature in helping them work through stress and different forms of depression. There is also some evidence that participants in community gardens have improved access to healthy and nutritious food which helps improve food security for those with limited incomes or living in disadvantaged areas (Kirwan et al. 2013; Furness and Gallaher 2018). Miller (2015, 1206) identifies that "participants in community gardens are more likely to attain recommended levels of portions of fresh fruit and vegetables and supply of quality food was a key motivation for food gardening". Buckingham (2005, 171) focuses on gender and identifies that food growing "is giving women in low income families the opportunity to provide fresh, and culturally relevant, food for their families". Improving food security for those with limited incomes, including the availability of fresh and healthy food, is increasingly relevant in the U.K. where there is growing food poverty and people relying on food parcels (Perry et al. 2014).

Research also identifies how community gardening can provide opportunities to increase self-esteem and skills development, whether this is for people trying to access jobs in horticulture, increasing general skills and employability, or as a way of contributing to the local community and building social skills and social capital (Ferris, Norman, and Sempik 2001; Kirwan et al. 2013; Tomaghi 2014). Buckingham (2005) identifies how women are becoming increasingly involved in gardening and how this is helping reduce isolation and increase independence and empowerment, including for women on low incomes. Ferris, Norman, and Sempik (2001) explore how UA and community gardens in the U.S.A. can help meet the community and educational needs of refugee communities, provide learning opportunities for young people from low-income homes, develop alternatives for young people at risk of taking drugs or committing crime, and lowers reoffending rates for ex-prisoners. A key issue is that marginalised people may struggle to get out of the house and become involved in the local community without involvement in a positive project (Kirwan et al. 2013; Crisp 2015).

It is argued that there is a strong connection between the long-term nature of planting and cultivating a garden, and building a caring, sustainable and cohesive community (Ferris, Norman, and Sempik 2001; Holland 2004; Bhatti et al. 2009). Certomà and Tomaghi (2015, 1137) argue that "the social coordination and physical labour required to establish and maintain sites of cultivation is immense. Preparing an urban site for planting intimately involves the participants in urban metabolism". White and Stirling (2013) identify that while there is a focus on growing food "much else is grown in the process – including, community, confidence, welfare and skills ... since the space is collectively worked and the produce is shared". Holland (2004) also identifies how community gardens can lead to the development and shaping of community-

level organisations and institutions as part of a community asset base. A key platform for engagement and benefits is the enjoyment people get from gardening (Bhatti et al. 2009; Miller 2015; St Clair et al. 2017).

However, it is important not to over-exaggerate the benefits of community gardens, which can be inconsistent, and to explore negative issues (Ferris, Norman, and Sempik 2001; Tornaghi 2014; Miller 2015). A theme within the literature is that participation in community gardens can be limited to a small number of gardeners (Holland 2004; Franklin, Newton, and McEntee 2011a; Furness and Gallaher 2018). For example, Furness and Gallaher (2018) describe how in their research into community gardens in a U.S. city, the main participants tend to be older, white, experienced gardeners and do not reflect the demographic and ethnic diversity in the local area, and this disconnect reduces the impact of the garden in the community. Although, in contrast, Lindemann (2009) describes thriving gardens driven by the local population in ethnic minority neighbourhoods in another US city, indicating that "real" participation of local communities in developing community gardens is essential.

Lindemann's (2009) research describes a project which received external funding with an aim to engage the local community and increase participation. However, the long-term sustainability of externally funded community gardens can be fragile (Holland 2004; White and Stirling 2013; St Clair et al. 2017). For instance, St Clair et al. (2017) examine a therapeutic community garden established by a charity in northern England which helped cancer patients and other members of the local community as part of a 5-year externally funded project. However, the land was then returned to the site owners after the end of the project, severely affecting the participants in the community garden. A further criticism is that community gardens can support the rollback of the state, particularly in the U.K. which has seen public spending cuts and an increasingly punitive state benefits regime, within the government's austerity agenda (Perry et al. 2014). For instance, community gardens are criticised for substituting professional care for community care for people with mental health issues (Ferris, Norman, and Sempik 2001; Milbourne 2012; Tornaghi 2014) and this implies there could be harmful impacts on participants with mental health challenges if the garden only lasts a short time due to funding issues. However, despite the criticisms and challenges, the number of community gardens continues to grow and research is required to guide support (Holland 2004; Franklin and Marsden 2015).

3. Research context and methods

3.1. Research context: Hull and the case study project

This article focuses on the case study of a Big Lottery Fund (BLF) project in Hull led by a local charity and supported by two other local partner organisations. The Green Prosperity (GP) project obtained funding of approximately £800,000 from 2013 to 2015 and focused on urban agriculture, volunteering outreach, community energy, supporting eco-enterprises, and a "Green-Care" activity to support local carers and localise care. BLF funded GP as part of the Communities Living Sustainably (CLS) funding stream which supported 12 projects in deprived areas across the country to explore connections between climate change, sustainable living and poverty reduction and achieve outcomes for vulnerable people (St Clair et al. 2017; Big Lottery Fund 2018). CLS projects were established as "test and learn" projects to explore what worked at a community-level and to provide flexibility for projects. Individual CLS projects received up to £1 m in funding to run projects for between 3 and 5 years in length from 2014 to 2018 inclusive. Urban agriculture activities, including community gardens, became a strong focus of many CLS projects (St Clair et al. 2017; Big Lottery Fund 2018).

Urban agriculture (UA) was a strong focus of the Green Prosperity project with the project employing three skilled and experienced staff members who were becoming increasingly connected to the wider food growing network in Hull. The main focus of the UA activities was establishing a community garden at a local community farm. The volunteer outreach activity also became combined with the urban agriculture activities – the volunteers met weekly at the community garden and then provided support to additional activities including supporting local families to grow their own food (the Family Growing Project), supporting a city-wide cooking event (the Festival), and tree-planting in local schools.

The Green Prosperity project worked with communities in east Hull, a disadvantaged area in one of the most disadvantaged cities in the U.K. Hull has a population of approximately 260,000 and has experienced post-industrial decline with high levels of unemployment after the reduction in North Sea fishing and dock labour (Atkinson 2008; Jonas et al. 2017). At the time of the research in 2015, Hull was identified as the third most disadvantaged local authority area in England, with some of Hull's most disadvantaged areas in council housing estates on the outskirts of the city including in east Hull (ONS 2015), and there is also increasing evidence of food poverty across the city (FareShare 2015). However, the story of decline and deprivation masks the positive agency in Hull. Hull is an important historical city and "was pivotal to the abolition of slavery in the British empire in 1833, to prompting the English Civil War in 1642, and to resisting the blitz on British cities" during World War Two (Starkey et al. 2017, 1). Hull was the British City of Culture in 2017. Hull City Council also has a history of being proactive in anti-poverty and food security projects, such as through the pioneering "Eat Well Do Well" initiative in 2004 which improved nutrition in schools (Colquhoun et al. 2008). Hull also has a growing number of urban agriculture activities, including a number of active community gardens, and is a member of the "Sustainable Food Places" network (Hull Food Partnership 2020).

3.2. How the research was conducted

The research contributed to monitoring and evaluation for the project, and the main focus was exploring outcomes for participants. However, it is important to note that the research did not include any financial or cost benefit analysis. The research started in February 2014, approximately 1 year after the GP project began, and continued until the end of 2016, which was 1-year after the project was completed. There was a focus on qualitative research and semi-structured interviews, with a flexible approach to explore themes from stories and perspectives of participants and staff (Creamer 2015). I regularly attended the Wednesday sessions at the community garden, and other outreach and training activities. Through regularly attending activities, I built trusting relationships with staff and volunteers which proved essential in people opening up to share their stories. Continuing research for 1 year after project completion also enabled me to track what happened next with the volunteers and the community garden. Table 1 identifies the number of interviews conducted during for this research. Some UA participants and volunteers were interviewed more than once to follow-up themes or outcomes.

Table 1. Interviews conducted with participants and staff.

	Interviews	Participants
Operational Staff	7	5
UA – Volunteers	50	31
UA – Participants	19	11

Due to the need for continuous feedback of findings to the project, interview recordings were transcribed on a continuous basis. Transcriptions and field notes were then coded and analysed to identify broad themes and more detailed sub-themes, which were revised as the research progressed. For instance, some community gardening participants described how participating in activities helped them address health and wellbeing issues, or described challenges relating to obtaining state benefits, and these themes were followed up in more detail through further interviews. In addition, at the end of the funding period, participants increasingly wanted to discuss the future of the community garden.

There were challenges and ethical dilemmas in the field especially in trying to be constructive and avoid emotional attachment, while providing support (Tornaghi and Van Dyck 2015). For instance, concerns about the future of the project affected my research in that I felt under pressure to produce research findings relatively quickly for the project to use as evidence of its impacts, to enable the project to obtain further funding. Although it is important to note I was never asked to exaggerate benefits. But this period also showed the reality of working with a charity-led project that was about to have its funding stopped.

4. Research findings: exploring the outcomes of community gardens marginalised people

This section explores the outcomes of the community garden activities. The community garden was the "place" used for developing volunteering activities and building a team of volunteers. Wednesdays were allocated as the volunteer day at the garden, and the sessions were open to anyone who wanted to attend, and people could come and go at any time. There was an informal approach but there were usually at least two Green Prosperity staff who guided the activities. As a team of volunteers developed, project staff identified the potential of using the volunteers to support the outreach of other UA activities (Milligan and Fyfe 2005) with these activities also recruiting more volunteers to the community garden. These activities included annual Seed Swaps, EHCF open days, a beekeeping project, the Family Growing Project (FGP), a model garden at the eco-house, the Hull Harvest Festival, and tree-planting in local schools. For example, the Seed Swap and EHCF open day in 2015 both attracted a large number of participants and helped the project to connect to local residents interested in growing food. Mandy became a regular volunteer after attending the Seed Swap with her Grand-Daughter:

So we... enjoyed the Seed Swap and got some information off some of the people there and got lots of seeds, so we could move - quite excited and we're really geared up to get going on it straight away which we did do together in the garden.

The project developed an inclusive approach to developing the volunteer group at the community garden, which was open to anyone who wanted to attend, including people from any area of Hull. Therefore, the project did not exclusively target particular marginalised groups by location or by population type (Staheli 2008). Enjoyment of gardening and working in a team of volunteers provided a strong platform for people to join the project. The project was particularly successful at engaging with people with learning disabilities, mental health issues, the long-term unemployed and people with caring responsibilities, and a number of volunteers were caring for relatives with health and wellbeing issues. Some volunteers felt isolated and wanted to get out of their home. Overall, approximately 120 volunteers committed nearly 5000 h across the different activities, and there were approximately 50 regular volunteers during the 3 years, although some left during the project for a range of reasons which are explored below. At the community garden on a Wednesday there would normally be between 10 and 20 volunteers depending on the weather and the planned activities.

Describing outcomes, volunteers strongly voiced a wide range of connected benefits including enjoying gardening, connecting with past memories, developing gardening skills, growing fresh fruit and vegetables, educating children, reducing social isolation, developing skills and confidence, improving mental health and helping them give back to communities through volunteering in social projects. Many of these benefits resonate with a wide range of studies into gardening and UA including by Bhatti et al. (2009), Pitt (2014) and Miller (2015). These outcomes are explored in more detail below using quotes from participants. Pseudonyms have been used to protect anonymity.

4.1. Enjoyment of gardening and participating in a positive project

Many volunteers described how they enjoyed volunteering and gardening, being outdoors and close to nature, the sense of peace and developing relationships with other volunteers (Bhatti et al. 2009; Milbourne 2012; Tornaghi 2014). There was also a strong focus on appreciating how the project was implemented including the friendliness and flexibility of the staff, the reliability of ongoing activities and different types of tasks from digging to garden design (Bhatti et al. 2009). Some volunteers did not have access to or were not able to manage their own garden (Milbourne 2012) and many volunteers also reminisced about happy memories of gardening as children (Bhatti et al. 2009):

Yes, the only time I ever did this was when I was a child and we had gardening tasks to do as children so we could earn pocket money. Mum and Dad's garden was always full of gooseberries, raspberries, you name it they would grow it.

One local volunteer described how she came to the garden when she could because it offered: "Tranquillity in the middle of a bloody housing estate", describing the importance of being able to spend time in a natural space in a disadvantaged area (Milbourne 2012). This tranquillity and being in a safe supportive environment were essential to the volunteers with day-to-day challenges, including isolation, mental health issues, or caring for relatives. The staff focused on helping ensure the farm is a safe environment and making sure the volunteers feel supported, including a focus on health and safety such as conducting Disclosure Barring Service (DBS) checks which indicate a past criminal record. Appreciation for the work of the staff in making the farm a safe and welcoming environment is expressed in the following quote from Helen who was a regular volunteer:

Coming here, it is flexible, nobody criticises, or says anything negative about where were you last week or whatever, and that's one of the things that I enjoy about it, you've got the freedom to come and go. When I'm here I can more or less pick and choose what kinds of jobs I do.

The safe and secure environment meant that a number of volunteers wanted to bring their children and grand-children to the community garden and farm for enjoyment and education (Miller 2015). For instance, one grand-parent, Bel described the benefits of bringing her grand-daughter regularly as part of providing day-care:

I'll tell you something that is really important to me because I've got a grandchild, is that I'm teaching her, since she was 6 months-old she's been coming here, and she knows where vegetables come from - it's incredibly valuable.

4.2. Reducing isolation

Some volunteers strongly voiced how the chance to garden with others reduced isolation (Milbourne 2012; Crane, Viswanathan, and Whitelaw 2013; Purcell and Tyman 2015). For example, as well as helping educate children, bringing children to a community garden helped volunteers who sometimes found caring for children to be an isolating experience. In the quote below, Bel featured above describes how she also uses the community garden to help deal with stresses of being a foster parent, appreciating the support from the project:

it's one of the few things that we've both got an instinct for and that's nature and gardening. And that pulls us together when sometimes the outside world is really tough, for my foster daughter, because it's all rules and regulations and control, whereas here, its environment that she fits into that she feels she is in control of, she's been independent and helping and producing, so yes it's been good for her. And it's good for me because everyone else is aware of the relationship, and the situation, so I feel supported as well.

Helen enjoyed the respite provided by the activities from helping her daughter through her medical needs:

I really like coming to the farm, it gives me a dose of feel-good, when I come here. Especially in the summer months when it's nice like this, it's not a problem today... last week it was a problem because she [daughter] had a major anxiety attack.

4.3. Developing skills and confidence

Developing skills and confidence was important to a large number of volunteers (Ferris, Norman, and Sempik 2001; Kirwan et al. 2013; Tomaghi 2014). A number of volunteers were interested in developing gardening skills to improve knowledge for gardening at home, in allotments or to use in the project. Gloria describes how she used advice from the project to improve her own gardening skills, where she is adapting to gardening conditions after moving to the U.K. from Zimbabwe:

I'm learning the seasons here in the UK, because I was just planting in my house, dying, and I didn't know that you first put it on the window, at home we put it in the ground because the soil is always hot, but here the soil is always cold, so I didn't know it needs a little bit of warmth, then it germinates.

Some volunteers were also interested in obtaining gardening qualifications. The project supported six volunteers to study Horticulture Courses at Hull College as a reward for contributing hours as volunteers. Bel described how she was able to apply the learning from the course to help shape the community garden.

Interviewer: What did you enjoy most about the course?

Bel: Probably, procedures of and understanding how plants survive, the actual design side of it was very much a project I did on my own but I actually implemented it a design through an apothecary garden here [at the community garden].

Arthur is another regular volunteer who attended the Horticulture Course to improve his gardening skills but also with an aim to pick up employment in gardening if possible. Other unemployed volunteers used the project to keep active and pick up more general skills during periods of unemployment. Two volunteers began with the GP project but then volunteered on a local wood recycling project to increase woodworking skills, after being linked by the GP project. In addition, four of the regular long-term unemployed volunteers stopped being involved in the community garden after finding paid work. Another regular local volunteer, Nancy, who has suffered from bipolar disorder described how the project helped her to get ready to go back to work and was working with a friend to start her own business: "It has been fantastic for me health wise, mental health wise. This project has helped me get ready to go back to work, I want to go back to work".

The quote below is from Chris who was one of the regular local volunteers in 2015 but who left the project to join an employment training course. Chris describes the difficulties of finding a job in the local area, and also how volunteering helped him in the period the training course.

but it's just getting back on our feet...in the mean-time I'm just looking for a bit of casual work to keep me going, but this helps, filling in a day in. Giving back, through what we're doing here.

Chris did find a new job. However, many volunteers including Arthur, Don, Bill and David did not find work. In the quote below David identifies identified how he used the volunteering to keep active and get a good reference. However, the quote from David above also illustrates the psychological effects of not being able to find work.

I was just stuck in my flat, just watching TV, so it was nice just to come, also I can get a reference... The benefits office last year, telling me to go and look for work, I know for a fact there's no work...it just makes you depressed.

4.4. Improvements in health and wellbeing

Volunteers, including Nancy above, regularly voiced how involvement in the project helped them work through stress, depression and more serious mental health issues (Ferris, Norman, and Sempik 2001; Bhatti et al. 2009; Pitt 2014). Getting out of the flat and reducing isolation was a key theme running through many interviews (Buckingham 2005; Kingsley, Townsend, and Henderson-Wilson 2009). Tim described why he got involved in the project including his family connection to gardening: "my family is, my granddad used to have an allotment...and then over the years, my dad used to... I've learned mainly off him over the years, it's part of getting on with things". At the time I didn't pick up on the mix of present and the past tense in the quote, but Tim later talked about how he came to the community garden to help deal with the recent bereavement of his father.

For two regular volunteers with mental health issues, the regular volunteering forms a vital part of their involvement in the community. The use of community gardens in supporting the roll-back of government care for people with serious mental health issues is criticised by Ferris, Norman, and Sempik (2001), but both these volunteers voiced how they wanted to live independently and access the project, and there were very few well run alternatives. One local regular volunteer - Graham - was a resident at a mental health hospital but now lives in sheltered accommodation supported by the local council and a local mental health charity - MIND. MIND referred Graham to the project and Graham and his family described how the project helps him deal with combined health issues, including mental health challenges, recovery from a stroke, and also tackle the potential onset of diabetes through increasing regular exercise. Graham's mother [who came with Graham to our interview] also described how the project together with the support from MIND and CASE (another organisation providing life skills support) has improved his confidence, including now going to the community garden without a support worker.

you wouldn't know him from 2 years ago, because he wouldn't look at you, mind you having a stroke can change your personality - but he even asked me how I am which nearly bowled me over, because he never used to... But it is better now that it has ever been. [Graham's mother]

Interviewer: Would you put any of that to coming here?

Oh yes, and CASE as well, both these places have been an absolute god send. Without it, he wouldn't be like he is, because [he does] like to be out.

Another long-term volunteer, Paul, was discharged from community mental health care and uses the volunteering at the farm as part of a regular weekly routine to help him with every-day life after being referred to the project by his Community Psychiatric Nurse.

Interviewer: Does coming to the farm help you?

Paul: Oh definitely, definitely, I've got somewhere to go, I can see people... before I had the farm, I had no one, I didn't see my family, I didn't have friends...I was very lonely. But now I've got somewhere to go, even if it's only once a week, yes, I can look forward to it. So I think it's really helped yes.

Both Paul and Graham identify how they would not have anywhere to go on a Wednesday without the community garden. Both also value the therapeutic benefits of being outside in a nice environment and working

at the community garden at the farm (Pitt 2014):

When you're here, you're almost in the countryside, and the countryside is very therapeutic it's very serene, it calms you down, so it's very useful to get out into the community. [Paul]

Due to the number of volunteers who identified they benefitted from improved mental health in some way, this could be considered a community-level benefit as described by Ferris, Norman, and Sempik (2001). However, the project staff were concerned that they did not have sufficient training to support volunteers with more serious mental health issues. In addition, there was no additional funding from the health sector to support these activities.

Improving food security for marginalised people is also identified as a health and wellbeing benefit of some community gardens (Buckingham 2005; Kirwan et al. 2013; Miller 2015). There were limited outcomes in this area as food security was not the main focus of the project. Any food produced was harvested on an ongoing basis when it was ready and shared informally among volunteers, some of whom took produce and some of whom didn't. Graham took food home for his mother to cook for him. Arthur didn't take food home initially but was diagnosed with diabetes in 2015 and then used fruit and vegetables from the farm to help improve his diet. There was no formal arrangement for supporting food poverty alleviation projects, such as foodbanks, due to the irregular seasonal nature of produce and also because many foodbanks will not accept fresh food. However, the GP project and volunteers also supported a city-wide food event, the Feastival, through providing fruit and vegetables from the community garden. Stakeholders also identified how the production of food increased over the years as the garden became established and there was more scope to support diets and nutrition in the future.

4.5. Helping people in financial difficulties

Helping people in financial difficulties was a key aim of the GP project across its activities. At one level, the project aimed to reduce household expenditure through reducing energy and food costs. However, reducing food costs for marginalised people did not emerge as an outcome, due to the relatively small levels of fresh food produced. Although, the project did make an important contribution to helping some volunteers with financial difficulties. A large proportion of regular volunteers were receiving state benefits and concerns over punitive benefit changes were ever-present through interviews (Perry et al. 2014; Crisp 2015). In the initial stages of the project the main concern was over benefits sanctions and the increasing age of retirement meaning that older people had also become vulnerable to insecure state benefits. For instance, Arthur identified: "I said to be myself I would never go to a food bank, but when I got sanctioned a couple of years ago. I got no grub in ... because they stop your money straightaway". A staff member identified how it "stripped [Arthur] of his dignity" to have had a benefit sanction at 63. As well as providing respite from concerns, volunteering also improved the relationship between unemployed volunteers and the DWP benefits office. For instance, Arthur described how since his sanction, the local DWP benefits office now supported his volunteering and attending the Horticultural Course. Later in the project, Arthur described how he had not used a food bank since being involved in the project. Two other regular volunteers also described that they used foodbanks in the past but not since being involved in the project. Although they did not directly attribute this to the project, they described how being involved in the project had helped them get back on their feet, and out of more difficult periods.

4.6. Volunteers giving back to their community

Against a narrative that people out of work and on benefits do not want to work there is very strong sense of the community garden providing a platform for volunteers to give back to their communities (Larner and Craig 2005; Milligan and Fyfe 2005). For some volunteers, supporting the community garden was a way of helping the local community. For example, Chris who explained earlier how he used the community garden during a period out of work, went on to explain how and why he got involved in more detail:

Yes, my sister, she got involved first - and she mentioned it to me - she knows I was at a loose end, I'm in between looking for work, and it sounds really interesting - I like helping people, I'll help anybody, along with gardening and growing things, it attracted me to it.

The volunteers also helped each other outside the project, with a group of volunteers helping Nancy, manage her garden when she had a broken leg. In addition, staff at the project described how they couldn't have run some of the wider activities in the local community without the support of the volunteers including the Family Growing Project which relied on volunteers to mentor the local families.

There is a potential question over whether the project exploited the volunteers to provide free labour. This did not come up as a concern from any of the volunteers during the research, who explained how they enjoyed being involved in the activities. The volunteers also appreciated that they were able to drop out of activities with no pressure from the lead charity. In addition, due to the complexities of the state benefits system, paying volunteers for casual work could have led to a loss in benefits for the volunteers. However, this issue would need to be reviewed if the project progressed.

5. Critical analysis: exploring the challenges faced by charities in running community gardens

In line with the need for critical analysis of charity-led community gardening projects there were also significant challenges (Tornaghi 2014; Franklin and Marsden 2015) and some of these were difficult to manage. In line with the literature, a criticism of the project was the relatively limited number of participants, including difficulties in engaging with young people (18–24) (White and Green 2009), and people from ethnic minority backgrounds (Furness and Gallaher 2018), which research indicates could need specific approaches. There were also a higher number of male volunteers (64) than women (52) with a more striking difference in the number of hours volunteered with male volunteers contributing over double the number of hours than women. This was due to a range of factors including the different types of activities, including some of the activities being manual labour intensive such as building planters and digging over land. However, some female volunteers also had more caring and work responsibilities restricting their input. Three of the regular female volunteers would drop out of the project for extended periods due to caring responsibilities for family members, with one dropping out of the project altogether. Some volunteers (both men and women) indicated that they didn't enjoy a "laddish culture" that developed at the farm for a short period, with some of the women volunteers suggesting that there should be a women's only session. A small number of volunteers also felt that the loose planning and flexibility meant there was a lack of clear supervision on tasks which didn't always work well for them. Three volunteers said they stopped being involved as they did not live in the target wards and the project staff did not clarify whether they could stay involved. Towards the end of the project there were also growing tensions with the hosting farm staff which project management did not address decisively. For example, one volunteer was shouted at by a farm staff member for picking up a pear which had fallen from a tree as the staff member felt that the pear tree was not part of the community garden.

However, the main focus of critical feedback from participants related to concerns about being able to continue attending the community garden after the funding finished, and the level of support from the existing staff. Long-term sustainability is particularly important to vulnerable people as they are most at risk of negative challenges. For instance, towards the end of the project, relating to the experience of Arthur and the impacts of his benefit sanction, a number of participants who received sickness and disability benefits were worried about the impacts of state benefits reassessments which were being rolled out by the DWP and without continuing connection to GP project stakeholders, could be facing these challenges alone. For example, in an interview in late 2016, Paul, who had previously been in day-care for mental health illness, expressed concern that he will be removed from sickness benefits in summer 2017 which could mean he would no longer be able to attend the community garden if he has to find work.

Towards the end of 2015, there were no assurances from the GP management that there would be continued work at the community garden and the uncertainty was affecting both staff and volunteers. It was during this period of research that volunteers gave many off-the-record comments about the lack of clarity and fear that the community garden would not continue. Volunteers were very concerned about whether they would be able to access the community garden and whether staff would continue to provide support. One regular volunteer argued that they had put so much effort into developing the community garden there was no way the volunteers would not find a way to continue working at the farm. Although Tim spoke for many when identifying that he would wait to see whether to stay involved depending on the involvement of staff, and did not see himself as being part of any management team:

Interviewer: Will you stay involved?

Tim: Depends on who's running it, because we've got close to Kate and Mark [the two main staff members at the Community Garden], they're two characters, without them it's going to be a shame.

When the BLF's project funding finished at the end of 2015 the community garden continued but with very limited staff support. The project partners were able to attract some funding for the community garden but this was not at the scale of the BLF project funding and there was a time-lag. The lead charity that managed the GP project stepped aside from supporting the community garden, with one of the other partner organisations taking sole responsibility. In addition, the two main staff members, Kate and Mark, were no longer involved. The continued commitment of volunteers provided a strong platform for the immediate continuation of the community garden. However, the community garden and volunteer group were very fragile with reduced levels of support (Staheli 2008; White and Stirling 2013). Some volunteers stepped away due to the lack of direction which was a particular issue for some of the most vulnerable participants, and Paul indicates some of the issues that developed in 2016:

It's less organised I think, I mean last week I had nothing to do really, I was just stood about. I'd prefer it if there was someone in charge, handing out tasks.

Some regular volunteers became involved in other UA activities which were operated by the lead charity or developed by staff involved in the project, and where there was more guidance and support. Paul became involved in a new community garden in another part of Hull operated by a new small local grassroots organisation developed by former GP staff. Paul had taken on responsibility for being in charge of the site when the two senior officers are not there. Paul completed health and safety training and by the end of the research was planning to take mental health focused health and safety training. This was a major step forward for Paul who had previously stated he was not able to take training and qualifications due to a poor memory. Arthur continued to attend the community garden but then focused his volunteering on a new community allotment project. At this time, Bel, Mandy and Chris also dropped out after finding work, while Bill joined a volunteer wood-working project. However, although the number of regular attendees had become smaller, Helen, Nancy and Graham continued attending the community garden, with Helen becoming the chair.

By the end of the research the community garden was facing an uncertain future. The project could be criticised for not building the capacity of the volunteers to be able to effectively continue activities (Lindemann 2009; Franklin et al. 2011b). However, it was not realistic for many of the volunteers to take on leadership positions at the end of the 3 years. For example, many of the volunteers experienced challenges in their daily lives which meant that continued attendance could not be guaranteed. In addition, the project's main focus to secure a future for the community garden was to build successful activities to be in a position to attract further funding at the end of the project, rather than focus on capacity building activities that may not have been successful.

6. Conclusion

Volunteers and participants voiced how involvement in activities led to beneficial outcomes including improving mental health, reducing isolation, building friendships, building skills and confidence, and giving back to the local community. These benefits resonate with a wide range of research into community gardens (Milbourne 2012; Crane, Viswanathan, and Whitelaw 2013; Miller 2015). Many of the volunteers described

how volunteering in the project reduced their vulnerability to significant ongoing challenges, such as health challenges and changes to state benefits, which could be considered a form of resilience (Perry et al. 2014). Building skills and becoming involved in projects that give back to the community could also be considered evidence of social capital (Ferris, Norman, and Sempik 2001; Kirwan et al. 2013; Tomaghi 2014), although, the terms "resilience" and "social capital" were not used by respondents. The volunteers also described how they felt they were active participants in shaping the project rather than responding to pre-determined goals and plans (Holland 2004; Lindemann 2009; Furness and Gallaher 2018).

However, long-term sustainability is essential to provide security for improvements to vulnerable people's lives, as they are most at risk of negative changes. In this case study the volunteers were extremely concerned that they would not be able to volunteer at the community garden after the funding finished. Even though the garden continued, there was a sudden reduction in staff support which affected the continued attendance of participants who had enjoyed the stable and well-managed environment. It is difficult to assess whether this harmed vulnerable participants, particularly as a number of volunteers used the platform of the project to become involved in different activities, but the process could have been managed better to reduce the potential impacts of change on vulnerable people.

Long-term sustainability needs to be planned (Seghezzo 2009). Purcell and Tyman (2015) and van der Jagt et al. (2017) argue that a community garden needs resources (land, funding and expertise) in the short-term and municipal support including involving citizens in planning in the long term. In this case study, land and community support were in place, but there was no continuation funding to allow a more gradually reduction in staff support. Ideally, there should have been an open and transparent conversation between the project funders and the lead charity on what support would be required to build the capacity of volunteers to gradually take over the operation of the community garden (Holland 2004; Franklin et al. 2011b). This would also need to consider where additional support could be required, such as supporting participants with serious mental health challenges, or needing to target more involvement from young people and ethnic minorities. This long-term approach would require effective joint working between the funder, the lead charity and its partners, volunteers, wider support networks and the local council (Franklin and Marsden 2015; van der Jagt et al. 2017). This could be possible in Hull due to the continued community-level activities of the lead organisations, and the vibrant urban agriculture sector and networks of support.

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