Case study: Growing Well
Building links with GPs and social prescribing

One of 130 projects funded by Mind through Ecominds; a £7.5m Big Lottery Fund grants scheme that used nature and green activities to improve physical and mental health.
Summary
Growing Well in Cumbria is a care farm based within a social enterprise growing organic produce. People recovering from mental health problems are supported to take part in farming activities from planting and tending seeds to harvesting crops and running the business. A 2012 independent evaluation\(^1\) found that 76 per cent of participants showed an increase in wellbeing at some point during their involvement with Growing Well.

\(^1\) Maynard, L (2012) Understanding the impact of Growing Well Cumbria: Brathay Trust Research Hub

What is it about?
Growing Well is sited on six acres of a 341 acre dairy farm. It supplies fresh organic produce to local people through a crop share scheme. People experiencing mental health problems work on the farm in all areas of production, from fields to packing, and running the business side. They are referred by their GP, community mental health team or can refer themselves. At their first visit they meet staff and other participants, and get familiar with the site. GPs or community mental health teams are asked to support applications, this makes them aware of Growing Well and they can advise on any risks for people.

Participants choose a regular day to attend, which starts at 9.30am. There is a choice of tasks each day and people can change these depending on how they feel. Lunch is an important part of the day and helps people to connect and share experiences.

All participants have a monthly supervision session with a staff member to review progress and set new goals such as moving on to new tasks, greater responsibility or a training course. Vocational training is available and people can complete Level 1 and 2 diplomas in work based horticulture. Everyone is invited to attend monthly team meetings to gain a wider understanding of the business and meet others.

The beneficiaries
The project received many referrals from social care services, but following health and social services re-organisation referrals declined. In response to changes in local health commissioning, a social prescribing pilot has been set up with local GPs. They now refer 50 per cent of people to the project and strong relationships have been formed with local surgeries. Growing Well has been particularly successful in working with men aged over 40 who can be hard to engage in mental health services.

### About the participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>130 people have been referred to the project</td>
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<td>97 men and 33 women joined</td>
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<td>70 people recovering from mental health problems participated for three months or more</td>
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<td>60 people took part for less than 3 months - reasons for this include physical health problems, family problems and lack of transport.</td>
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<td>60% of participants are aged 40 or over</td>
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<td>47 people have moved on to education, employment or training</td>
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The difference it makes

An independent evaluation identified six factors that had a positive impact on participants:

- **Opportunities for social interaction** – people were more sociable and enjoyed being around others.
- **A routine and structure** – having something regular to do each week – this was particularly valued by people who had become isolated and withdrawn.
- **People felt better about themselves** and became more confident about their skills and contribution and were able to transfer this to other areas of their lives such as employment.
- **The flexibility of the project** supported people to stay involved. They came when they felt well enough or changed tasks if they wished so they felt in control and that they weren’t letting others down.
- **Training was available** for those who were interested and provided a stepping stone to further training and employment as well as teaching new skills.
- **Contact with nature** was significant because people said they found it relaxing and interesting while at the same time made them more physically active. A participant’s blog reflects this throughout the year: growingwell.co.uk/blog/volunteer-blog.aspx

To measure wellbeing improvements, participants completed a Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well Being Scale questionnaire each month. The project evaluation showed that 76 per cent of people showed improvement in wellbeing at some time. Wellbeing varied according to what was happening in people’s lives and their health, while reflecting that recovery takes time and progress is not always even. Overall people reported feeling better mentally and physically as a result of their involvement in Growing Well.

The project is in a rural location so it has been important to fund people’s travel costs. The independent evaluation found that transport difficulties were a reason why some people could not continue their involvement in the project.

The staff team have expertise and training in mental health which means they are attuned to people’s mental health even though the focus of the project is not medical in any way. The Organisational Coordinator is a clinical psychotherapist and the Volunteer Coordinator is a social worker; and the staff team have monthly clinical supervision. Staff can recognise if a person is becoming unwell and may suggest making a GP appointment or – with the person’s permission – arrange appointments for them. The result is that people get help early and crises can be avoided.

Project successes

The social prescribing pilot has led to good relationships with GPs who understand the project and can refer people they think will benefit. Dr. Allan of Stoneleigh Surgery who is involved in the pilot said:

“The project is another referral pathway for my patients... I have found the service particularly helpful for people (both men and women seem equally keen) for whom counselling has failed or is simply ‘not their thing’... This is a way for my patients to re-integrate with life and the real world in a way that counselling, multiple visits to the doctor and pills probably won’t achieve.”

Local schools visit the farm to learn about organic farming and healthy eating. Work with schools now focuses more on how to promote mental and physical wellbeing and has been well-received by schools. This work and family open days challenge stigma about mental health and increases social inclusion for people with mental health problems.

Growing Well has reached out to other organisations across Cumbria, raising awareness about how to promote good mental health and wellbeing. The Volunteer Coordinator was involved in setting up Cumbria Third Sector Mental Health Forum.

The project has received the Royal College of Psychiatrists Enabling Environments quality standard, which is awarded to organisations with an outstanding level of best practice in creating and sustaining a positive and effective social environment.

Growing Well has developed a successful business model that meets a community need and supports people with mental health problems. It reduces social isolation, helps people to re-enter education and employment and challenges stigma about mental health.
# Five ways to wellbeing according to participants:

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<tr>
<th>Five ways to wellbeing</th>
<th>What participants say happens for them</th>
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<tr>
<td>Connect with others</td>
<td>• Meet new people and make friends&lt;br&gt;• Feel less social isolation&lt;br&gt;• Have more understanding of other people</td>
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<tr>
<td>Be more active</td>
<td>• Become more physically active&lt;br&gt;• Look after themselves better&lt;br&gt;• Increased energy</td>
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<td>Take notice of the world</td>
<td>• Develop a routine – a reason to get up and go out&lt;br&gt;• Something to look forward to&lt;br&gt;• More aware of the natural world</td>
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<tr>
<td>Keep learning</td>
<td>• Learn new skills and take responsibility for tasks&lt;br&gt;• Some people gain qualifications&lt;br&gt;• Gain a sense of achievement; feel valued and useful</td>
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<tr>
<td>Give to others</td>
<td>• Take responsibility for the quality of the crop boxes&lt;br&gt;• Support other participants&lt;br&gt;• Work as part of a team</td>
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**Top tip**

Develop good working relationships with a broad range of partners within health and social care as this builds knowledge about the benefits and quality of the project, widens choices of support for people and encourages referrals.

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**Project details**

Started 2010 and ongoing with funding being sought.

Staffed by an Organisational Coordinator, Volunteer Coordinator and four team leaders

web: growingwell.co.uk / email: info@growingwell.co.uk

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**You start to notice things again like the changing of the seasons**

Participant

**I’ve done a little bit of activity today and I actually feel a bit better about myself and then you do a bit more activity...**

Participant