Case study: PoLLeN
Building links with health professionals

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.

Ecominds
for better mental health
LOTTERY FUNDED
Case study: PoLLeN

Summary

PoLLeN (People, Life, Landscape and Nature) uses social and therapeutic horticulture to improve the mental and physical wellbeing of individuals through engagement in the natural environment. PoLLeN works in partnership with a GP practice and health centre, and is located with them at the Bromley by Bow Healthy Living Centre in Tower Hamlets. People experiencing mental health problems have benefited from the project according to an independent evaluation in 2012.1


What is it about?

At the heart of PoLLeN is a regular, weekly horticulture session that all new participants join. A project coordinator runs the project with support from a part-time gardening tutor. She says boundaries are important with clear start and finish times and a structured activity is always on offer.

The project provides a gentle introduction to gardening for people experiencing mental health problems who may be isolated and rarely leave home. Participants can go at their own pace, talk with others or not, work alone or with someone else, and for some people just coming to the session is a big step. “Sometimes I move a conversation on because it’s too painful for some people. I’m always aware that people are on the road to recovery, so I try to put people at their ease. Gradually people do feel part of something and it breaks down social isolation. In a garden you have to notice things like the weather and seasons, the temperature and how much things have grown.”

PoLLeN Project Coordinator

Participants can also join other groups such as floristry – making arrangements for the onsite cafe, allotment gardening, art therapy and the environment – facilitated by an arts therapist, a landscape related art workshops run by a local social enterprise and a healthy eating project.

Some people have worked towards City & Guilds National Vocational Qualifications in Horticulture and nine people have gained their Level 1 qualification and are moving on to Level 2.

The participants

People are referred by their GPs and health professionals because they are experiencing stress, anxiety, panic attacks, agitation, low mood, lack of self esteem or confidence, poor motivation or difficulty in coping with day-to-day life. Some people come after hearing about it from others. The project has been successful in attracting white British men and people from the Bengali community.

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<th>About the participants</th>
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<td>97 people were referred by GPs or health professionals</td>
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<td>64 people have attended more than one session</td>
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<td>46 people come weekly or every other week</td>
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<td>Most people are aged 26 to 55 years</td>
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<td>20 people are aged over 55 years</td>
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<td>25 people use statutory mental health services</td>
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<td>16 people are physically disabled</td>
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The difference it makes

Canterbury Christ Church University found that over time people’s rates of wellbeing increased. Some people who had enduring mental health problems described how PoLLeN had helped them to make friends and be less isolated, regain some structure and purpose in their lives, and learn new skills.

Dr Saul Marmot, GP Partner and Mental Health Lead at the Bromley by Bow Health Partnership noticed changes:

“I get fewer ‘crisis’ appointments for some patients once they get involved in PoLLeN and they seem to plan ahead and make better use of their regular appointments.”

The PoLLeN Project Coordinator noted other benefits:

- When participants are unwell or miss regular sessions someone notices, staff can liaise with GPs, with the person’s permission, and explain what’s happening; and several people have got help sooner rather than later.
- People come to PoLLeN because of mental health problems, but may have neglected their physical health: being part of the healthy living centre helps people find out about and access health services such as weight management and diabetes clinics.

Project successes

PoLLeN uses a ‘social prescribing’ model where health professionals refer patients with mental health problems to the project either as a treatment in itself or alongside other treatments such as drugs or talking therapies. Dr Saul Marmot, GP Partner and Mental Health Lead said:

“I see PoLLeN as a ‘group therapy’ but most importantly it does not look like group therapy and does not expect or demand verbal participation. It therefore allows true reflection through giving its clients the space and time (and company) to make this happen more naturally and safely.”

The GP practice and Healthy Living Centre see PoLLeN as one of a range of treatments that can be prescribed. All new GPs and those training to be GPs spend time at PoLLeN, and GPs and health staff will often just pop in. A universal referral form for all services at the Healthy Living Centre is being piloted. GPs will be told if a patient has joined a project so they can ask their patient how they are getting on when they see them next. The project was part of a social prescribing pilot across Tower Hamlets in 2013, which is being evaluated. The project coordinator also liaises with the Community Mental Health Team.

PoLLeN - People, Life, Landscape and Environment. An Evaluation (2012) Stephen Clift & Hilary Bungay, Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health, Canterbury Christ Church University: Canterbury
### Five ways to wellbeing according to participants:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Five ways to wellbeing</th>
<th>What participants say happens for them</th>
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| Connect with others    | • Meet regularly with others and make friends  
                          • Peer support from others with similar problems  
                          • Start to use other services at the Healthy Living Centre |
| Be more active         | • Get up and go out every week  
                          • Move around the garden and do something physical  
                          • Have more energy |
| Take notice of the world | • Notice the changing seasons and growing cycle in the garden  
                           • Do a regular, non threatening and relaxing outdoor activity  
                           • Look forward to something each week |
| Keep learning          | • Learn skills like gardening or pottery  
                          • Some gain horticulture qualifications |
| Give to others         | • Welcome new participants and support each other  
                          • Volunteer and participate on other local green projects  
                          • Some participants are volunteers at PoLLeN |

### Top tip

**Build in funding to pay for an independent and experienced person to develop and implement an evaluation; you will need this to show the benefits of the project to future funders.**

### Project details

Started 2010 and ongoing.

Staffed by a full-time project coordinator and part-time gardening tutor /NVQ assessor. Five participant volunteers support new people and help deliver the weekly ‘core’ horticulture session.

web: [bbbc.org.uk/pages/pollen.html](http://bbbc.org.uk/pages/pollen.html) / email: pollen@bbbc.org.uk

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**I think it’s meeting people with similar problems, and similar issues, you are not judged. We’ve all got some form of illness and you can talk openly about it and sort, no one takes the micky out of you or judges you.**

Participant