



A Social and Therapeutic Gardening Scheme at Yarl's Wood IRC

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Introduction

I have a strong background in plant science, horticulture and project management within the charity sector and have been a Yarl's Wood befriender for three years. In December 2015, I approached Yarl's Wood Befrienders to see if they would help set up a Social and Therapeutic Horticulture (STH) scheme at the IRC. They agreed to approach Serco on my behalf and this resulted in a meeting, and a tour of the site and gardening facilities.

As a result a project proposal was submitted to the Senior Management Team at Serco. This proposal has been accepted (with a few amendments) but unfortunately no funding has yet been offered to support the scheme.

Introduction to Social and Therapeutic Horticulture (STH)

The knowledge that nature and contact with nature can be important for well-being has been passed down over the centuries with gardens being an important economic and cultural element of society. In terms of therapy, gardening became a popular activity for residents of Victorian asylums and has since gradually developed into what is now recognised as Social and Therapeutic Horticulture.

One important development within the UK was the launch of a charity called Thrive in 1978 (www.thrive.org.uk). Thrive is now arguably the lead organisation in this field. Another important initiative relevant to Yarl's Wood is the Natural Growth Project which has been run by The Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture since 1992.

SHT is now a growing and well evidence discipline. In terms of therapeutic value, it very much meets the 5 ways to well-being (connect, be active, take notice, keep learning and give) set out in a widely accepted research report by the New Economic Foundation (NEF). Most importantly there are a growing number of projects which lay testimony to its success and value. For a recent summary of the impact of gardens and gardening on health and wellbeing see:

http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/files/kf/field/field_publication_file/Gardens_and_health.pdf

Benefits of SHT Yarl's Wood IRC

No matter how well women and families are cared for, detention is always going to be a stressful experience. It follows that taking care of emotional wellbeing is a highly important but, at the same time, very difficult challenge. It is felt that SHT may be an ideal activity to complement existing initiatives designed to meet this challenge.

- Evidence suggests that, irrespective of background and culture, people have a strong psychological and physiological connection with nature. As a result contact with nature can reduce stress and improve both physical and mental wellbeing.
- Many of the women detained at Yarl's Wood will have their own personal and family experiences of horticulture and agriculture. Where tuition is needed, it is very visual and does not require the complex use of language.
- Gardening will provide an opportunity for women to experience many of the feelings that detention denies them; purpose and meaning; planning, decision making, problem solving and creativity; responsibility, ownership, self-expression and achievement.
- Taking part in gardening activities will provide moderate physical activity out of doors. It will require concentration and focus and therefore provide an opportunity for distraction and respite from other worries.
- For women experiencing health or mental health problems, there is the potential to work with existing health services at the centre to tailor sessions to meet more specific needs.
- Particularly for women being returned to their country of origin, there is potential to learn about the growth and care of plants and to explore ideas for employment and small scale enterprise activities.
- The scheme will take into account the growth cycle of different plants so that as much as possible there is always something to plant, pot on and admire/harvest. The idea of nurturing plants for the benefit of others is very much in keeping with the spirit of the women at the centre.
- Using the kitchen facilities, there will be the opportunity for women to cook with their home grown produce.
- The site already has well laid out gardens which are highly amenable to more diverse and imaginative planting. There is also an area with a poly tunnel and other gardening infrastructure which could quickly be brought into use at minimal cost.
- The current garden layout is readily amenable to adaptation to aid access for women with disabilities.

The benefits to women who take part in the scheme should stay with them beyond Yarl's Wood. Both for women who are removed to their country of origin and also those that are released and have to integrate/reintegrate into the UK. By supporting the wellbeing of women in detention they should be in a better position to pick up the threads of their lives, and they will have hopefully gained interests and skills that they may be able use for work, food production and leisure.

There will also many benefits to the centre as a whole, due to having an enhanced garden environment:

- All detainees will be able to access improved garden areas, where they can escape the confines of the building and its prison like design. The gardens should provide constantly changing and developing interest, fascination, and sense of connection with the outside world.
- This improved outdoor environment may provide a venue for other activities, such a location to deliver wellbeing activities or to hold the Music in Detention workshops. In time, it may be possible to involve a therapist in delivering some of the sessions.
- It is felt that staff as well as detainees will benefit and be motivated by the scheme. It provided a topic that all can engage in as equals.

Scope of project

A SHT project at Yarl's Wood will benefit from a captive audience of up to 350 women, plus a small number of men. While this may be considered strong criteria for success, it raises the problem of satisfying demand for spaces on the project. With this in mind, after an initial pilot phase, it is proposed to run 6 x 2 hour sessions a week, each catering for 8 women* initially (it may be possible to increase the general sessions to 10 women). In total this should make the scheme accessible to 50 women per week, approximately 200 women per year.

Weekly session	Focus
4-5 general gardening sessions	Based on SHT principles, women* will be engaged in a meaningful activity that has social and therapeutic value due the act of taking part, being physically active and being in contact with plants and the natural environment. There will be scope to tailor sessions to the needs of individual women (e.g. one session could cater for less physically able women) and the women can be involved with planning future activities.
1-2 weekly sessions with women who may be interested in developing entrepreneurial skills, ideally run with the help of a small business advisor	Particularly useful if women fear being returned to their home country without the means for survival. Can introduce principles of micro-credit alongside the growth and care of plants and ideas for storing and processing harvests. Will introduce an entrepreneurial approach which can be applied to other initiatives. Sales from plants raised in these sessions, in particular, may raise a small income for the project.
If interests, once women have attended their first few sessions it is hoped that they will be given a small areas of garden that they can take responsibility for and tend as they wish throughout the week.	

*Although activities have been described for women, consideration needs to be given to the small number of men detained at the centre. It may be possible to run one session for men or, with care, incorporate men into the sessions. It may be particularly beneficial for men to learn horticultural skills and/or to attend sessions on entrepreneurial skills – as both could enhance chances of a livelihood if returned to country of origin.