

Sustain: Growing Connections

Age-friendly and
inclusive volunteering
grant programme
evaluation

January 2021



In partnership with:

About us

Centre for Ageing Better

The UK's population is undergoing a massive age shift. In less than 20 years, one in four people will be over 65.

The fact that many of us are living longer is a great achievement. But unless radical action is taken by government, business and others in society, millions of us risk missing out on enjoying those extra years.

At the Centre for Ageing Better we want everyone to enjoy later life. We create change in policy and practice informed by evidence and work with partners across England to improve employment, housing, health and communities.

We are a charitable foundation, funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, and part of the government's What Works Network.

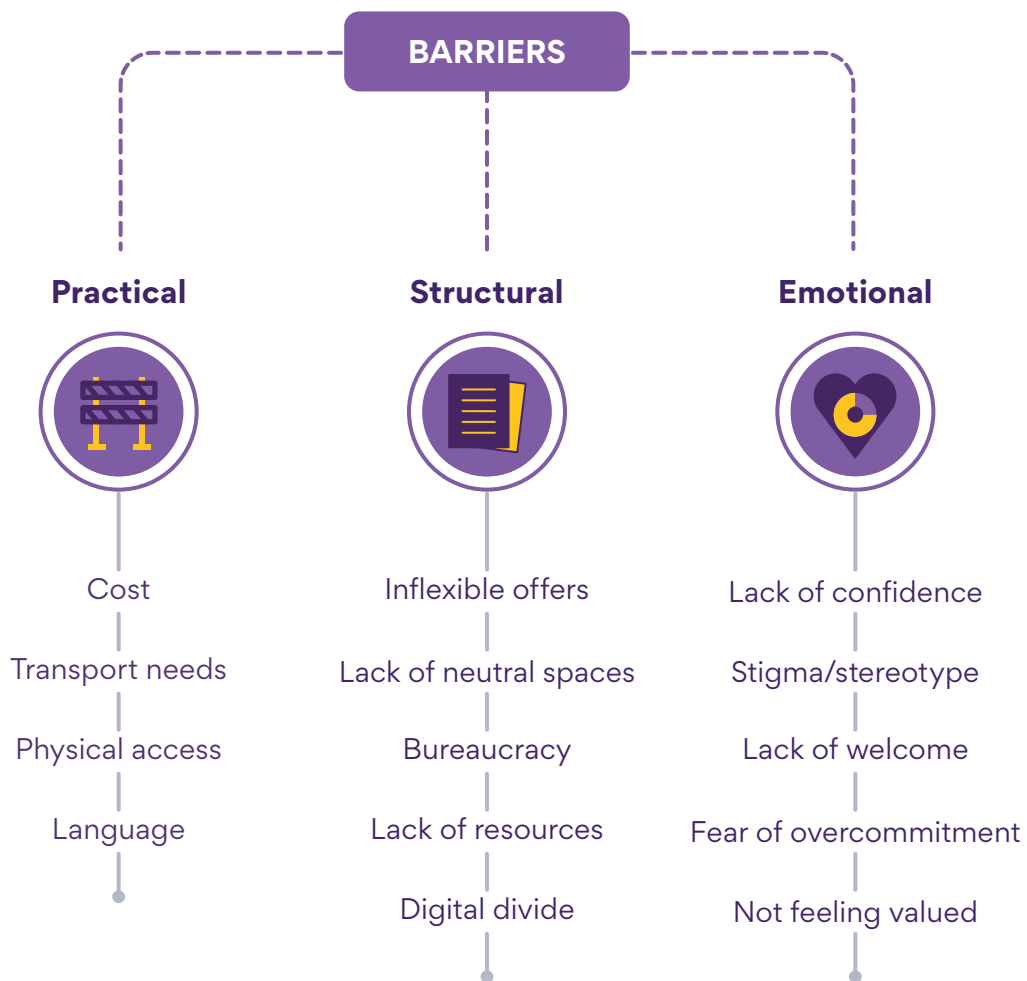
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Introduction

The Centre for Ageing Better, in partnership with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) undertook a review into community contributions in later life in October 2018. The review found that many older people, who would benefit most from contributing to their communities, encounter practical, structural and emotional barriers that prevent them from taking part, or from remaining involved as life changes. It called on voluntary organisations to do more to tackle these barriers and set out six key principles for achieving this.

Barriers to participation



Age-friendly, inclusive volunteering is:



Flexible and responsive



Valued and appreciated



Enabled and supported



Meaningful and purposeful



Sociable and connected



Makes good use of my strengths

Age-friendly and inclusive volunteering grant programme

Following the review, the age-friendly and inclusive volunteering fund was set up to put these principles into practice. The programme grant-funded five projects to develop and document models of good practice in supporting older people's voluntary and community activity. The focus was on those most at risk of missing out on the benefits of contributing to their communities.

The fund has three priorities:

- Sustaining lifelong contributions and helping people remain involved throughout major life changes such as bereavement, caring or developing a health condition.
- Helping people connect to and take part in voluntary activities and opportunities that suit their life circumstances, including informal and self-organised contributions.
- Providing practical support to include older people who currently face barriers to volunteering (for example due to health, language, and cultural or social factors).

The project initially intended to only address the priority ‘Helping people connect to opportunities to suit their life circumstances’. However, in practice, it had some impact on all priorities.

Each project received approximately £50,000 to run over a one-year period between April 2019 and March 2020.¹ The grant programme adopted a grant-plus model, supporting projects to maximise their learning and outcomes through project development, action-learning and evaluation support. The focus was as much on development, learning, sharing good practice and sustainability as on immediate outcomes and impact (the grant-plus model was funded through additional funding from the Centre for Ageing Better above the £50,000 for each project).

The scale and activities of the projects are different, each working with older people in different circumstances and settings and using different approaches. This provided opportunities to learn about, and measure the impact of, different models of tackling barriers to community contributions in later life and supporting older people’s voluntary and community activity.

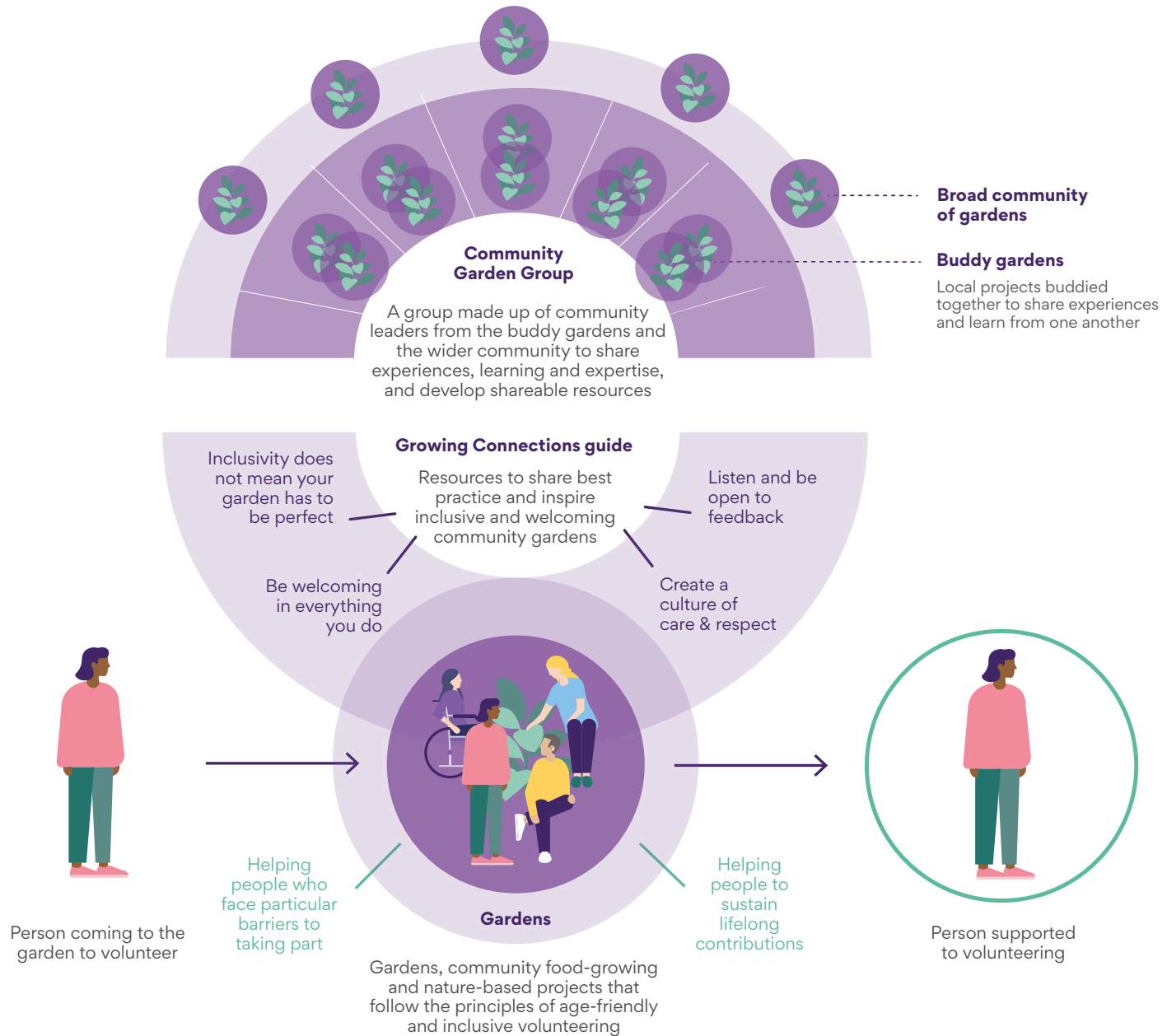
Sustain: Growing Connections

Growing Connections is a project of Sustain, the alliance for better food and farming. The project was delivered through Sustain’s Capital Growth network of 2,700+ community gardens in London, using volunteers as part of the delivery model. It is estimated by Sustain that about 90,000 people volunteer in member gardens.

The project was designed to facilitate, collate and share best practice across the network and beyond. Sustain connected gardens, buddied local projects together to share experiences and learn from one another and recruited a team of community leaders to form a community garden group (essentially a Community of Practice to share experiences, learning and expertise). The group met throughout 2019 to explore positive and negative volunteering experiences, the barriers to people getting involved and the principles of inclusive volunteering.

The process sought to help the gardens involved in the project adopt age-friendly and inclusive volunteering by developing resources, such as a guide/toolkit, webpages, films and animation, to share best practice and encourage other community gardens, community-food and nature-based projects.

¹ The end of the project and the evaluation took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which impacted on completion of the project. Consequently, this delayed some evaluation activity and access to information, although most of the evaluation activity was conducted prior to the lockdown.



Learning and evaluation

A ‘light-touch’, independent, evaluation of the project has been conducted to capture learning and identify emerging impact. This is a one-year developmental programme and therefore the focus is more on evidence of good-practice models that can overcome practical barriers and embed the age-friendly and inclusive volunteering principles, with only an expectation of emerging individual and organisational impact. The light touch evaluation and the length of time that the project ran makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions about whether the project has led to working with volunteers from more diverse backgrounds than would have otherwise happened and/or whether the volunteering experience (despite being good) was better than it would have been otherwise. However, the findings do illustrate how practice has been adapted in line with the principles of age friendly and inclusive volunteering and began to explore a new approach that hopefully with more time would lead to a greater diversity of volunteers and a better volunteering experience.

Specifically, the evaluation sought to capture evidence about how the model has:

- Helped meet the fund’s priorities (this project focused on helping people who face particular barriers to taking part and helping people to sustain lifelong contributions).
- Overcome practical, structural and emotional barriers to community contributions and volunteering (i.e. formal and informal ways to give time and help others).
- Tested, validated and embedded the age-friendly and inclusive volunteering principles.
- Impacted on individuals and organisations involved in the project.

Monitoring and evaluation has been embedded in the programme and project from the outset. This includes the following activity, which has informed this report:

- Quarterly monitoring reports and other documentary evidence provided by the projects to the Centre for Ageing Better.
- Co-creation of a Theory of Change working document to help shape the delivery of the project, establish expected outputs, outcomes and impacts, and provide a guide to evaluating the model (see appendix) (the Theory of Change was co-produced with the project at the development stage of the programme, and subsequently some elements may have evolved over time).
- Learning logs maintained by the project to capture learning, ongoing feedback, progress and impact.

- Development of evaluation materials including an experience and outcomes questionnaire and discussion guides to capture quantitative and qualitative insight from individuals and organisations involved in the project.² This included interviews with 12 community garden representatives (who are volunteers at Flagship, buddy gardens and gardens involved in the Community of Practice), stakeholders involved in delivering the project and other stakeholders.

² These materials were co-produced by the project and Centre for Ageing Better. They are available for use in the continued monitoring and evaluation of the project and model. They were used by the evaluators towards the end of the project to independently capture learning and impacts through face-to-face, telephone and digital methods with individuals and key stakeholders involved in the project and programme.

Learning and impact

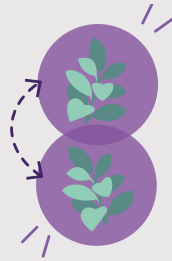
What activities have taken place? Process and learning

As part of the grant-funding plus model, the project received significant development and learning support. This included support to plan, develop, prototype and refine the project delivery model, participation in workshops and action-learning sets to support project development and delivery, and communications and graphic design support. This all took place within the context of a programme that encouraged projects to experiment, test and not be afraid of failure. The project found this support and approach highly beneficial and believes it led to better outcomes, despite it being time and resource intensive:

“ We found the wider support really positive and a really good experience. It was one of the things that attracted us to applying for the funding in the first place. It was time consuming and very involved, but we knew it was an important part of the programme and it was expected. We had to squeeze delivery into a smaller time period to accommodate the development phase, but the project was better for it. We really valued the flexible, supportive approach of the Centre for Ageing Better and their encouragement to experiment and fail. It is pretty unique to have that. It meant we could change the project when faced with challenges and issues as they emerged and not go down the wrong road just because we said so in our original proposal. The project and outcomes are stronger as a result, although more time would have allowed us to promote the guide, reach more people and gardens and implement the age-friendly and inclusive principles.” Stakeholder

4 Flagship and buddy gardens

matched, with each visiting one another, to exchange learning



376
volunteers

162
aged 50+

2 Events

to 'promote' age-friendly and inclusive volunteering



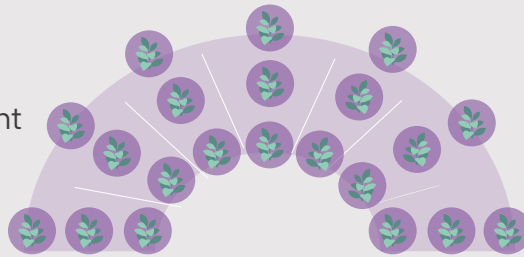
2,200
people across 30+
participating gardens

1,067
new to
volunteers

437
aged 50+

3 Community Garden Group sessions

to inform the development of the age-friendly and inclusive volunteering guide/toolkit



21
Community
garden
representatives

89 People representing community gardens

gained exposure to age-friendly and inclusive volunteering principles through three events/training sessions



Development and publication of resources

to share best practice and encourage other community gardens, community-food and nature-based projects to support age-friendly and inclusive volunteering



The process of creating the guide and toolkit through **the flagship/buddy garden approach, that provided a space for gardens to share experiences and learn from one another**³, **combined with a community of practice, provides a useful template for similar projects.** It allowed the project to **co-create, prototype and test resources, using the experience and expertise of community gardens and volunteers** that may encourage and support community gardens and other organisations to adopt age-friendly and inclusive volunteering and principles:

“The guide and toolkit are incredibly well informed through an extensive process of iteration and development, working closely with community gardens to share their experience and expertise. Consequently, we have a lot of faith that it will be effective in promoting good practice and encouraging community gardens, and anyone that picks it up, to become more age-friendly and inclusive.” Stakeholder

“This is one of the most positive projects we’ve been involved with. I really liked the participatory nature of it all. The way you can learn from others, share ideas, experiences and network. I got a lot out of it and it’s had a positive impact on our garden and will do in the future because of some of the relationships we’ve formed. I enjoyed helping develop the guide, and I also commented on a draft. It feels like a really useful resource and one that is based on real-life experiences and examples of community gardens like ours.” Community garden representative

Similarly, the approach allowed those taking part directly in the project to **reflect on their approach and make changes to improve their age-friendly and inclusive volunteering practice**, based on sharing their ideas, experiences and expertise. A number of participating gardens obtained a small grant by Sustain to help put ideas into practice and implement changes:

“The whole approach really helped us. We learned a lot from the other garden by visiting them, and them visiting us with Sustain and giving us the benefit of their expertise. And I really valued the community garden group, sharing our ideas and experience, real-life examples relevant to community gardens and how to make them inclusive and accessible. We learnt a lot from the whole process and it inspired us to review what we do and make changes to create a better experience and better outcomes for our volunteers.”
Community garden representative

³ Originally, through the flagship/buddy garden model, it was intended for buddy gardens to learn from flagship gardens through a process of visits and discussions. In practice, this became more reciprocal, with both flagship and buddy gardens sharing their experiences and approaches and learning from one another.

“It was a privilege to be part of the project. The visits, the sharing of ideas, learning from others and their experience and just the time to reflect and think and plan. We came up with lots of ideas about what to do differently. And one of the best things is that we had money to make changes. This wasn't just one of those things that is abstract and you never really do anything with it. We never get funding, so this made a huge difference to make some practical changes, like improving the layout of our garden. That will be long-lasting and help us be more age-friendly.” Community garden representative

How have barriers to age-friendly and inclusive volunteering been overcome?

Participation in the project helped **validate the age-friendly and inclusive volunteering barriers, and provided examples of how these barriers can be overcome** through the flagship/buddy garden and community of practice model, and application of the relevant volunteering principles. All of the flagship and buddy gardens agreed, through a short end-of-project survey, that their ‘garden helps people overcome barriers to taking part in volunteering’.

Practical barriers have been overcome, for example mainly through **physical changes** to community gardens to make them more accessible and make it easier for people to participate:

“We used the grant to create raised beds. We got the idea from speaking with other gardens. We're really happy with the raised beds. They make it a lot easier for older volunteers or volunteers with physical difficulties to garden and participate.” Community garden representative

“The project and engaging with other gardens inspired us to look at our garden holistically and with an eye to inclusivity. It led us to getting someone to do an accessibility report. We're making changes to the paths. They're just not accessible at the moment. We're making them wider, more stable and with more suitable surfaces. We're also looking at indoor space, the importance of shelters, so people can stay warm and have a cuppa and chat, and benches. We're also thinking about a toilet. We recently put in raised beds. We think all this will make it easier and more comfortable for people to take part.” Community garden representative

Structural barriers have been overcome by making volunteering and involvement in some of the gardens **less formal, more flexible and more sociable**, which helps increase volunteer involvement and commitment:

“One of the things I learnt from some of the other gardens was how they make things fun, sociable and informal, and manage to make participation flexible, while also getting volunteers to take a lead, be proactive and committed. We’d always struggled with that balance and tended to be less flexible and demand more of our volunteers and if they couldn’t commit, then we’d get frustrated. We now offer tea and cake and people can come and go as they like and do as much or as little as they like. We’ve found they enjoy taking part more, and therefore get more involved and are probably now more committed than before.” Community garden representative

“I learnt you’ve got to have a different mindset about it all and take a different approach. We now let people come and go as they want and as often as they like. We don’t turn anyone away now, even if they come rarely, they are always welcome. We have a flexible mindset, with no exclusions, people come and act in a way to suit them. It’s about ‘empowering people, not just telling them what to do.’ And that means they end up willingly giving you more than you hoped.” Community garden representative

Emotional barriers such as lack of confidence and fear of overcommitment have been overcome, **partly through the aforementioned emphasis on fun, being sociable and flexible, and also by recognising emotional barriers and seeking to directly overcome them.** For example, one community garden introduced a buddying system, while another uses their community garden to help improve their volunteers’ emotional well-being:

“I learnt about some of the barriers and how we can overcome them. I hadn’t really considered that confidence would be an issue for some, but of course it is. We’re trying to hand-hold our volunteers at the start now by buddying them up with more experienced volunteers, so they can get to know people, improve their skills and their confidence.” Community garden representative

“We’re creating a space for our gardeners to relax and appreciate the garden and nature, to be mindful and meditate. We think this will help our gardeners’ well-being, which is a positive end in itself but it will also help us support our gardeners to get more involved.” Community garden representative

Reducing barriers and increasing access to volunteering opportunities

The project has the potential to attract new and diverse volunteers and widen access to volunteering in community gardens by reducing the practical, structural and emotional barriers and adopting age-friendly and inclusive volunteering principles:

“One of the reasons we decided to take part in the project was because we wanted to attract and hold on to new volunteers. We’d just lost a few of our more committed volunteers, who have moved away, and we were struggling to attract and engage new people. Participating in the project gives us confidence that we will be able to attract new volunteers through outreach activity [the project funded such activity that was delayed due to COVID-19], making it easier for people to take part by reducing barriers and supporting people once they’re here volunteering so they and we get the most out of the experience.” Community garden representative

How have age-friendly and inclusive volunteering principles been promoted and embedded?

All participating community gardens agreed, through a short end-of-project survey, that they were now more aware of the age-friendly and inclusive volunteering principles and adopted more of them or applied them better in practice.

Community gardens **embraced the principles, stressing their importance, relevance and usefulness:**

“We’re always thinking about inclusivity and accessibility, so the age-friendly and inclusive volunteering principles resonate with us. They are valuable, relevant and work in a real-world context. Having it set out as principles makes it all manageable, understandable and coherent. They break it all down and make it easy to follow and apply. We’re now thinking about these principles at an organisational level, so that we’re all brought into them and embed them into our work and the garden. The guide we’ve produced is really useful and can be adapted and used flexibly in different gardens and contexts, partly because it is organised around the principles. It is something you can just dip into, to get ideas, be inspired and sense check what you’re doing.” Community garden representative

The project encouraged and supported participating community gardens to **consider and adopt age-friendly and inclusive volunteering principles and practice. Participants put the subsequent guide and toolkit into practice and showcased how it can deliver tangible positive change**, improving the volunteering experience and helping attract and retain volunteers.

Flexible and responsive:

Community gardens provided examples of being more flexible and responsive. This included being non-prescriptive about levels of commitment, allowing volunteers to get involved and come and go on their own terms and when they like, and providing them with choices, all in the interest of improving the volunteer experience and levels of volunteer engagement:

“ We learnt from the project and other gardens that you’ve got to be flexible. In the past with our volunteers we used to tell people what tasks to do. Now we give them more of a choice by writing the tasks on a blackboard and allowing people to choose, trying subtly to encourage them to lead and take responsibility, but on their own terms. It is sometimes a bit of a Hobson’s choice and we politely make it clear that they do need to do something to contribute to the garden and the community. But it is an example of us trying to be more flexible and trying to always think about the volunteer experience and those principles.” Community garden representative

On average, on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is not at all and 10 is completely, community gardens having participated in the project rated their gardens as 7 out of 10 for being flexible and responsive.

Enabled and supported:

Community gardens put in mechanisms to help volunteers participate and feel comfortable, such as buddying arrangements or helpful information and guidance:

“ We learnt from the other gardens that it can be helpful to provide volunteers with an induction and a handbook. Not something too bureaucratic, but something that helps people get to know the garden and our project, gives them some useful information, sign-posts them to other support, and just makes them feel like they’re part of something and supported.” Community garden representative

On average, on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is not at all and 10 is completely, community gardens having participated in the project rated their gardens as 8 out of 10 for enabling and supporting volunteers.

Sociable and connected:

The participating community gardens said they learnt through the project that the social element of volunteering had to be stimulated and supported, through planning, activities and events to help build relationships and a sense of community:

“Visiting the other garden we learnt the importance of being sociable and fun, and working hard to build relationships, so that your helpers feel part of something. This can happen naturally, but we also learnt that you can encourage it to happen through good planning, thinking about your activities and how you engage people, actively trying to build relationships and support people. So now we try to run some workshops and activities, alongside our gardening activities, so that it’s more than people just turning up to garden, where they may or may not engage with other people. We’ve also planned in a tea and cake break to give space for people to get to know each other and it not all be about gardening and work. We’d like to think that will make people enjoy helping more and then want to come back and get more involved in the future.” Community garden representative

On average, on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is not at all and 10 is completely, community gardens having participated in the project rated their gardens as 9 out of 10 for being sociable and connected.

Valued and appreciated:

Some community gardens said they proactively now show appreciation to their volunteers (both informally and individually, but also formally through intentional activities such as naming people, holding events and giving certificates and rewards). This is so they feel valued and in return leads to a better volunteering experience, and subsequently greater involvement and commitment:

“We’ve realised the importance of celebrating success through taking part in the project. We did this before, but it was ad hoc, but now we plan it in and seek it out. We deliberately shine a light on our volunteers and helpers to thank them for their involvement and commitment and to highlight the impact they’re having. We do it at the start of sessions by naming people and asking them to come to the front and we’ve been known to give the odd prize or reward. Nothing too serious or formal, but enough to make a point. We’re already seeing that this makes people feel good and want to get even more involved.” Community garden representative

On average, on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is not at all and 10 is completely, community gardens having participated in the project rated their gardens as 8 out of 10 for valuing and appreciating volunteers.

Meaningful and purposeful:

Community gardens appreciated the importance of ensuring that volunteering opportunities are meaningful and purposeful to volunteers, and that this needs to be actively planned and encouraged, so that volunteers have a positive experience:

“ We learnt that you’ve got to plan and work hard to create a volunteering experience that is worthwhile to volunteers, so they have a better experience and want to get more involved. We are now more focused on getting to know our volunteers better, their needs, expectations and skills. We’re thinking about workshops and activities and getting volunteers to become experts in certain things related to their skills and experience, and then share that with others. It should lead to a better garden and a better experience for volunteers.” Community garden representative

On average, on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is not at all and 10 is completely, community gardens having participated in the project rated their gardens as 8 out of 10 for providing meaningful and purposeful opportunities for volunteers.

Makes good use of my strengths:

Some participating community gardens made changes that sought to make the best use of the strengths of their volunteers, and consequently improved the volunteer experience. For example, allowing volunteers to choose the activities they got involved with and getting to know volunteers, their motivations, strengths and goals:

“ We used to think of volunteers as almost a single, morphed group. But we now work hard to observe, listen and understand each individual volunteer, why they’re volunteering, what they want to get out of it and what their strengths are. That way we can offer them tasks and support to suit them, which gets the best out of them, meaning they have a better experience and we get a better volunteer.” Community garden representative

On average, on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is not at all and 10 is completely, community gardens having participated in the project rated their gardens as 7 out of 10 for making good use of the strengths of their volunteers.

What have been the impacts on individuals and organisations?

Individuals

There is emerging evidence that volunteers in the participating community gardens enjoy an **improved volunteering experience, which in turn is contributing to greater involvement and commitment:**

“The changes we made in the garden seem to have had a positive effect on our volunteers. I think they find it easier and more enjoyable to take part. It’s a better experience for them. I think the changes in themselves have helped, but volunteers also feel like we care and we’re trying to make life better for them, which then means they appreciate the garden more and what we and it offers them. I’m now seeing more volunteers spending longer in the garden and getting more involved than before.” Community garden representative

There is also emerging evidence that participating in the project has **helped improve the physical and emotional well-being of volunteers** in the participating community gardens:

“Making it easier and more comfortable to work in the garden means that people get more involved and do more. We had one lady that couldn’t garden because of her back, but now she can with the raised beds. That means she’s a lot more active than she was previously, getting more fresh air and taking home fresh vegetables to eat.” Community garden representative

“Gardening is really good for the soul, the connection with the earth. Coming to the garden improves people’s social connections. They make new friends and improve their self-esteem and confidence. They enjoy it and turn out in all weather, which shows how much it matters. I’m always astonished by how small things can have a very significant impact on people’s lives and their mental health, and helping at the garden is one of those. Since taking part in the project we’ve talked with our volunteers about how to make it easier for people to volunteer and get more out of it and we’ve talked with local organisations about how their service users can get involved. We created a ‘mindfulness’ space and changed the layout to make it easier to get around and garden. All of this adds up to a better experience for volunteers and more people taking part, which then means more people are getting the benefits to their health of coming to the garden.” Community garden representative

Community gardens

Volunteers are important to community gardens and their successful operation and management. Stakeholders and the community garden representatives involved said the project **helped inspire, inform and implement new approaches to age-friendly and inclusive volunteering, and consequently increase the reach of community gardens and attract and retain volunteers:**

“Most community gardens rely on volunteers. Our main aim was to support our community gardens to attract and retain supporters, and in the process improve the volunteer experience, which helps create a more successful community garden. We’ve not supported community gardens around volunteers much in the past, so this project has really kick-started that. The gardens involved all benefited in different ways, becoming more inclusive and providing a better volunteering experience. And the guide and toolkit will help the wider network of community gardens to be more age-friendly and inclusive and support their volunteers.” Stakeholder

“Taking part in Growing Connections has acted as a catalyst for our new volunteer recruitment campaign with an age-inclusive focus. It has motivated our core volunteers to keep going. It enables us to contribute in a small way to meeting the needs of elderly people in Tower Hamlets who suffer high rates of pensioner poverty, isolation, loneliness and depression.” Community garden representative

Fundamentally, taking part in the project helped some participating gardens to **develop a ‘mindset’ shift and become more ‘people-centred’**. It gave them the space, support and encouragement to think about their garden in a holistic sense and how volunteers engage with it (with the hope that the guide/toolkit will inspire other community gardens in a similar way). **This in turn has the potential to attract more volunteers, improve volunteer experiences, and therefore improve the level of engagement and retention of volunteers:**

“We’ve always known volunteers are important, but we’ve struggled with attracting, managing and keeping volunteers in the past. Being involved in this project led us to think deeply about what we do and change our mindset. We’re now focused more on the individual and have adopted a more people-centred approach. We always used to think about what volunteers could do for us, but we now know we need to think about what we can do for them and how we can organise things so that it works for them. Why are they volunteering, what are their motivations, needs, expectations, what can we do to get the best out of each other and make it a good experience for

everyone involved? That way, perhaps not intuitively, you end up getting more out of volunteers because they're having a positive experience. So we've started looking at everything we do, the organisations we work with, our promotional materials, the layout of our garden, the activities we offer, everything. The aim is to get more people involved and improve their experience when they're here and hopefully it's a win-win for us all."

Community garden representative

Sustain

Sustain became **more aware of age-friendly and inclusive volunteering within the organisation** by participating in the programme. The resulting insight provided **valuable resources to promote this desirable volunteering model amongst its Capital Growth network of over 2,700 community gardens:**

"Intuitively we did a lot of this already. We implicitly observed the age-friendly and inclusive principles. But now it's explicit and our knowledge and understanding about age-friendly and inclusive volunteering, indeed good volunteering in general, is much better. I think this will then feed into everything we do as an organisation. And likewise, the Capital Growth network will benefit from having access to the resources, guide, toolkit and support we can provide. So in short, I think organisationally we're much stronger in this area now." Stakeholder

Sustain's experience with the Age-friendly and Inclusive Volunteering Grant Programme was positive, albeit one that has required significant effort and time. The organisation has **improved its approaches and capacity to project development, learning, monitoring and evaluation, as well as supporting personal development**, by participating in the programme:

"We found the whole experience very positive, which was good for the organisation and also personally for our own professional development. It was extremely beneficial to engage with other projects and learn from each other, sharing experiences, and we valued the support around prototyping, project development and monitoring and evaluation. In general, it's felt very supportive and flexible, which allowed us to go ahead without fear of failure. It was very time-consuming to be involved in all this extra support, but we knew that would be required and the project was better for it. My only regret is that we haven't had a bit more time to support the dissemination of our guide across our network and to other organisations." Stakeholder

What is the sustainability for the future?

The Growing Connections project and **age-friendly and inclusive volunteering principles and practice have already been promoted amongst Sustain's network of community gardens** through the Spring Big Dig, Autumn Urban Harvest and training events. Initial promotion amongst Sustain's network of 10,000 people has been undertaken through newsletters, social media activity, a dedicated webpage, introductory animated film and other communications activity. The **'Growing Connections: Guide to an inclusive and welcoming community garden'** has the potential to promote age-friendly and inclusive volunteering principles and practice amongst community gardens, community-food and nature-based projects. **Sustain plans to continue promoting the guide, as well as embedding the principles and practice into its work and future funding bids and projects:**

“We've already began promoting the principles and the guide, the message is out there and we'll keep on doing this. We hope organisations will engage with the guide, adopt the principles and make changes in some ways, which will lead to positive outcomes. In that way the project and the guide will be self-sustaining. For our part, our improved awareness and knowledge of the principles means we're more likely to embed them into our work. We are bidding for some funding now that has links with all this and we hope to embed the principles and practice into new projects in the future.” Stakeholder

The small **grants** provided by Sustain to gardens participating in the project to implement age-friendly and inclusive volunteering changes has **led to permanent improvements that will have a lasting impact:**

“Some of the gardens made capital changes, like raised beds, which will last for years and have a sustained impact. While others made changes such as training to improve the skills of volunteers or outreach to reduce barriers to volunteering and reach more volunteers, which should have positive long-term impacts.” Stakeholder

“We will definitely carry on with trying to make the garden more inclusive and accessible. We've made a start and we'll implement more of our plans in the future. It is not something you get into lightly and then put to one side. It is a commitment to improving the garden and the volunteering experience, which benefits us all.” Community garden representative

The project, through the flagship/buddy garden model, has **developed new and potentially long-lasting relationships and networking** both between gardens and with Sustain:

“One of the exciting by-products of the project has been the new relationships formed, between gardens and with Sustain, and the opportunity for gardens based near to each other to network. This has had positive outcomes straightaway for sharing ideas and experiences, which then informed the guide and also helped the gardens improve their age-friendly behaviour. But it is also something that could lead to as yet unknown benefits in the future, partly around volunteering and also around lots of other aspects related to community gardens.” Stakeholder

“Visiting and getting to know other gardens, network and build relationships was one of my favourite parts of the project. We learnt a lot from each other, sharing our ideas and experiences. I’m still in touch with some people and plan to visit one of the gardens in a few months.” Stakeholder

Case study



The journey of a community garden reducing barriers, embedding principles and making their garden more age-friendly and inclusive

Community garden work relies on volunteer gardeners from a variety of backgrounds, including older people:

“The garden wouldn’t survive without the help of volunteers. We rely on them to maintain the garden, and the purpose of the garden is to provide benefit to local people by getting involved and supporting it. This is why we were interested in taking part in Growing Connections, we want to make our garden more inclusive and we want to get more people involved.”

The community garden enjoyed, and benefited from, sharing ideas, experience and expertise by visiting other gardens and participating in the community of practice group:

“I got a lot from the visits and the meetings, I learnt so much. I really liked learning from the other gardens, sharing our ideas and experience, networking. It gave me the chance to really reflect on how we organise everything and engage with our volunteers.”

The project helped create a guide that is based on real experience and examples, and allowed the community garden to make strategic and practical changes to improve the volunteer experience:

“The guide we produced feels like it will be really useful because we helped create it based on our experiences and ideas. It will be useful to us to dip into, to remind ourselves of the principles, and I hope it helps other community gardens. We used the experience to make changes to our garden, the layout and facilities to make it easier for volunteers, but also the way we go about engaging with volunteers. We wanted to become more focused on the volunteer, to make sure we get the best out of each other. All of this will

help make the garden and what we do more inclusive, and hopefully better for volunteers and other people that visit the garden.”

Consequently, the community garden is hopeful that the changes will improve their garden, help it attract and retain more volunteers in the future and have a greater impact in the local community:

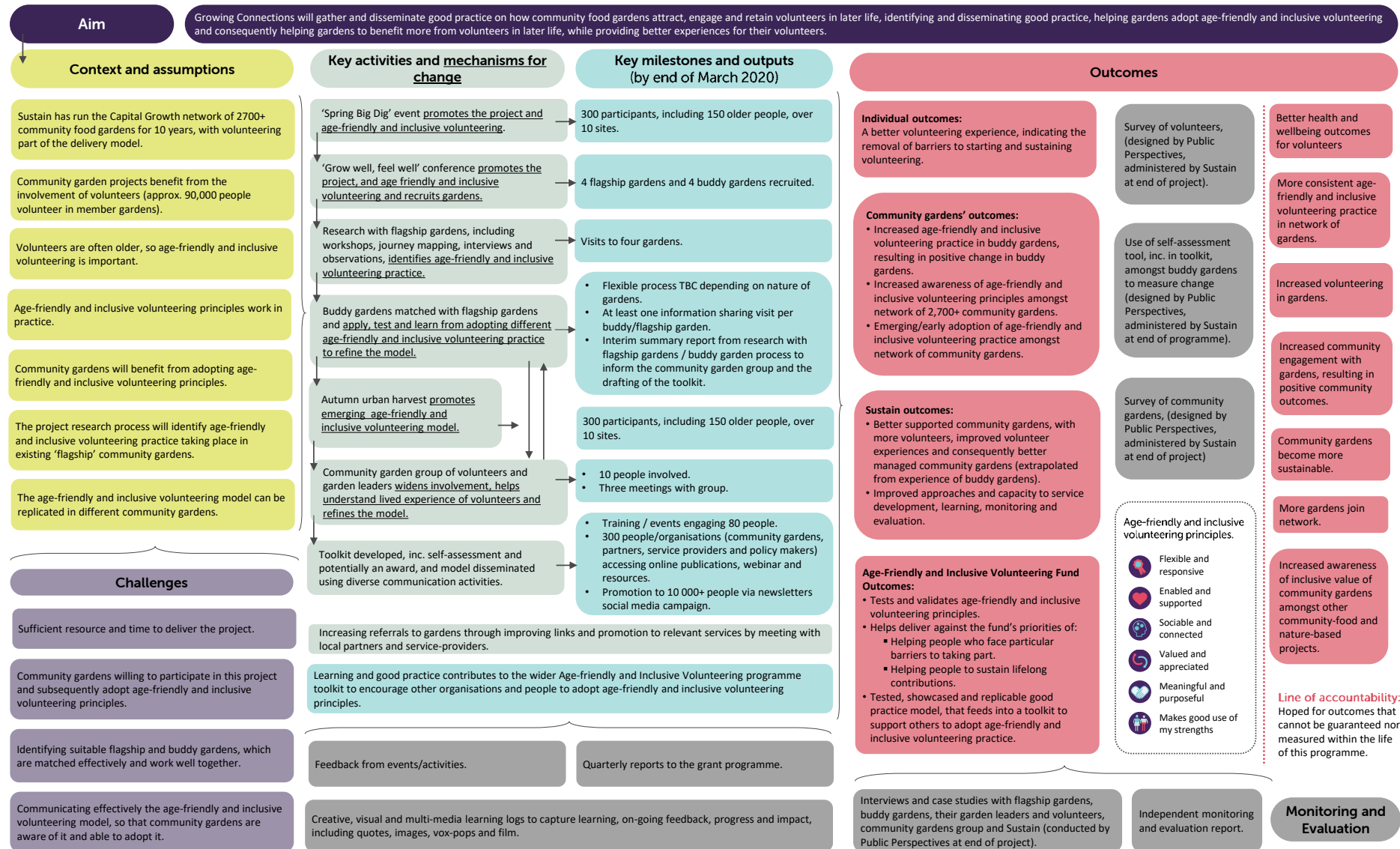
“Overall, it’s been a really positive experience. We’ve got a lot out of it. We’ve improved our garden, we’re now more inclusive and I feel that we’re in a better place to reach out to new volunteers and keep them interested and involved. All in all, I think our garden will be better off and those that come here will have a better experience and get more out of it.”

Conclusion

The Sustain Growing Connections project and its **model of sharing ideas, experience and expertise of volunteers and organisations through the flagship/buddy garden approach, combined with a community of practice, provided an effective platform to co-create, prototype and test resources relevant to age-friendly and inclusive volunteering.** Consequently, the ‘Growing Connections: Guide to an inclusive and welcoming community garden’ is based on real-world experience and examples. As such, it is more likely to resonate with community gardens and other community-food and nature-based projects and encourage the adoption of age-friendly and inclusive volunteering principles and practice.

The project has also **encouraged and supported the participating community gardens to put into practice and showcase approaches to age-friendly and inclusive volunteering.** They have been given the opportunity to reflect, learn from each other, and implement changes to **reduce age-friendly and inclusive volunteering barriers, embed the principles and make their gardens more age-friendly and inclusive.** This in turn appears to be improving the volunteer experience and consequently increasing the diversity and amount of volunteer involvement and commitment. This has the potential to help community gardens attract and retain more diverse volunteers in the future and become more sustainable.

Appendix: Sustain Theory of Change



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Let's make ageing better.



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