

Case study for the Community Growing Scrutiny Panel

Clydach Community Garden

Submitted by Cllr Chris Evans

I have been a volunteer with the Clydach Community Garden since it was originally set up, and in that time have seen the area transformed from what was once a piece of waste ground covered in stones and thick brambles into the vibrant community social hub that it has now become.

The idea for the garden came about initially from the GP surgery in Clydach that had the idea of creating a garden as part of a social prescribing pilot scheme. It approached the community council about using the land between the surgery and the community centre as an area for the garden and then instructed a project manager to hold a series of open sessions with the people of Clydach to see what sort of thing they wanted there.

In the initial discussion, the idea of a shared community space where people work together was more popular than personal allotments, as it was felt that personal allotments didn't have the same community spirit and lacked the teamwork elements found in community gardening.

I remember the first session, which was the project manager Neil, 3 ladies and myself all cutting back brambles and digging out rocks. From then on it became much easier, and change seemed to happen rapidly as we all worked together to build the compost bins and raised beds from scratch. Since then we've seen volunteer numbers increase, cockle shell paths installed to protect crops from slug attack, later upgraded to be wheelchair friendly paths. Accessible level raised beds put in, a polytunnel, benches, tea shed, sitting area, tool shed and much more.

The group itself has thrived and there's regularly around 20 or so volunteers that all get together to grow, work with the soil, or just come down for a cup of tea and some cake and a chat. The bonds were strong enough to see us through Covid and out the other side, which has been a real success story. The produce is shared amongst volunteers, local residents and has also been given to local food banks.

There are huge health and wellbeing benefits for the volunteers. Just working with the soil has been shown in studies to have a huge positive

impact on mental health and wellbeing, and can help reduce stress and anxiety symptoms. The strong social element of CSAs and Community Gardens also builds a sense of pride in the local area, community cohesion, camaraderie, and togetherness, and is a much better way to deal with social isolation than prescribing medication.

As well as all this, the garden provides an excellent opportunity to learn new skills. Food growing, and food security is going to get more and more important as the climate crisis worsens, and having local groups working with local schools is a great way to teach new skills, not just to the volunteers, but also to children in our communities. Some of the feedback we received from the local food bank was that people didn't always know what to do with fresh veg when we supplied it, so teaching cooking skills as part of the growing lessons is also massively important.

The Garden Committee and I would like to thank Councillors Matthew Bailey and Gordon Walker for their continued support of the garden which has been invaluable and led to many of the improvements over the years.

There is also a strong growing community in Swansea between the numerous groups that have sprung up and are part of the Bwyd Abertawe network. This means that help and advice is available locally from similar groups.

I'd wholeheartedly recommend a community growing area or two in all wards, as it can provide huge benefits across a number of social measurements. Even the most unpromising piece of waste ground can be utterly transformed with the right mix of people and the determination to succeed, and there's nothing like the taste of freshly grown veg that you've planted and looked after yourself. The main issue I foresee though is the perennial problem of funding, but in terms of poverty reduction, medical benefit and social cohesion they are a good way to reduce costs in other areas.

I'm glad to say that we've recently planted a small community orchard in Mayals with the help of the local primary school and Residents Group which hopefully will provide some fresh fruit for years to come, as well as the many other benefits.