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## Growth Point Spring 2016 - In Practice: Growing Together in Devon

By Pete Scott

It is a pleasure to be able to once again contribute to Growth Point. The last time was six years ago (*New Year, New Career*) when I was first embarking on the journey to becoming a Social & Therapeutic Horticulturalist.

Inevitably there have been hard lessons and setbacks for me personally and for my organisation - Growing Together Devon - along the way. But with the extraordinary level of support offered by Thrive and others, the vision we had back in 2011 has come to fruition.

Growing Together Devon works full time on STH and although I end up spending far too much time sitting in front of a screen I do get to practice STH on projects with our clients during our working season between February and November (we use the winter months for essential development work, such as writing funding bids).

Like many colleagues, I started out volunteering; in my case this was setting up and running gardening projects in a local primary school and for our local Memory Cafe (i.e. dementia support).

However, in 2012 we incorporated as Growing Together (Community Gardening) CIC. Being a Community Interest Company has been invaluable in that it has allowed us the freedom to adapt our business plans to meet unexpected challenges and to close in quickly on opportunities which present themselves.

Our client groups have included children with SEBD (social, emotional and behavioural difficulties) in mainstream settings, college age students with SEBD and learning difficulties and older people in care-home settings.

Since 2014 we have been working exclusively with older people in a range of settings. This social group has a very high prevalence of dementia and reflects the demography of the part of Devon we live and work in.



My training with Thrive was initially a series of one day STH courses. This led on to the Diploma Course in STH. Over a period of time I have collected my own mini library of resources and membership of Thrive allows me access to a wide range of online resources.

However one of the greatest benefits of training with Thrive for me has been meeting other people who share a similar interest in STH, and who brought such a wide variety of professional backgrounds with them in to our shared learning.

I was fortunate enough to do my diploma training with a notably kind and very positive group of colleagues - many of whom have gone on to become friends who I am still in touch with. I have found the professional training at diploma level particularly useful as it was always my intention from the outset to make STH a career.

It is worth pointing out however, that the training Thrive offers is a great way to find out more about STH and to meet like-minded people without committing to a career change.

I was still a teacher when I first went to the Geoffrey Udall Centre in 2010, and I then worked as a gardener for two years after I left teaching. Thrive helped me gain the knowledge and skills needed to

set up some small scale projects, and that led on to the eventual decision to work full time in STH. Growing Together Devon ran a single project during 2015. This was the delivery of supported gardening activities to older people in care homes. Between April and October we piloted this work in seven care homes across East Devon and worked with 107 clients. The age range spanned from 58 (a gentleman with acquired brain injury who needed constant care) to a lady of 99.

Physical and cognitive abilities varied widely and around 80% of clients had dementia. Almost uniformly our client group could broadly be classed as very frail, and needed a great deal of





support. For example, very few of our 'gardeners' (as we refer to clients on site) could stand unassisted for more than a brief period. Accordingly all our activities were adapted to table-top gardening. By far the greatest challenge for us was managing the garden area to ensure that our gardeners remained comfortable, and protected from the elements.

Of the seven care homes we worked at, only one had a garden which could reasonably be considered as a successful outdoor space for older people. None of the care homes had resolved the issues that prevent older people having free and available access to gardens. This had a significant impact on the uptake of our programme by residents initially - a great majority of them had simply got out of the habit of going outdoors at all.

Nevertheless, with perseverance and the able help of some of fantastic care workers and of course bribery cake!, our Gardening Clubs became one of the most popular activities in most of the homes.

All of the care homes asked for programmes to continue beyond the initial completion date (our planned programme was initially for 8 sessions at 2 week intervals). The key for us to having successful STH sessions was to have very detailed planning and a very clear understanding of the support clients needed in order to be successful but also to ensure that it was fun and that there were lots of opportunities to chat and to enjoy companionship.



My direct experience working in STH is that it matches and in fact mostly exceeds the job satisfaction I had in my previous work as a teacher. It is the only job I can think of which absolutely requires the practitioner to be explicitly and consistently 'kind'. Kindness is one of the qualities we list under 'essential' on our job spec for volunteers. That and baking cakes of course!

The group of people who make up what might be termed the STH community (and if you are reading this - that includes you!) are, I find, a unique group. Certainly everyone I met on the Diploma Course had at least one full-time professional career behind them. A number of colleagues had worked in the most challenging environments (a children's hospice, young offender units, prisons, working with homeless people etc.) and been very successful.

As a result, when we were discussing for example, the development of an STH programme for older people, that single issue was addressed by: nurses, occupational therapists, a forest ranger, an advertising/marketing executive, counsellors and by people already doing amazing things in a care home specialising in dementia (one lady did gardening... but also introduced farm animals as pets).

I can honestly say that it was a learning environment unlike any other I have experienced. I absolutely value what I learnt from the course and it informs my planning every day. I would say that in broad terms, running STH programmes has been pretty much as I expected it might be. And I would suggest most people with a background in the caring profession would find the same. I find it is a blend of my former profession, teaching, and the body of knowledge and skills which informs STH. Letting go of some old baggage from teaching was entirely liberating!

**STH makes people happier and it extends a helping hand to the most vulnerable people in our society in a unique and very special way. I am very proud to be part of that movement.**

I do think it is sad however, that STH remains at the periphery of social care rather than at its centre. Securing social and financial security for Growing Together Devon takes up far, far more of my time than I would ever have imagined. This of course is a characteristic of the Third Sector rather than an inherent difficulty with Social & Therapeutic Horticulture.

But I think it does emphasise the need to be prepared to run an organisation as well as just running an STH project if one is interested in securing paid employment as opposed to working in STH as a volunteer. This of course varies from place to place.



In urban areas there may be a wider range of employers than in rural settings. Growing Together has had excellent and wide ranging business development support from Unltd (<https://unltd.org.uk>) over a number of years - as with Thrive I regard them a friends - we would not be able to help the people we do with out the help of both organisations.

I hope this brief recount of my experience developing a new career in STH has been of some value to those of you who may be contemplating taking the same or a similar path.

