

Supporting *Life Changers* - a therapeutic gardening programme in Birmingham for people dealing with life changing injury or illness

Gardens offer the peace and tranquillity needed for rehabilitation and recovery; and the opportunity to develop an interest in gardening will give benefits that can last a lifetime.



Social and therapeutic horticulture (STH) the process of using gardening to improve physical and psychological health, thinking and communication skills, also develops an individual's ability to socialise, make connections and gain practical skills that aid independence and self-reliance.

For 40+ years Thrive has been using gardening to bring about positive changes to the lives of people with disabilities or ill health, or who are isolated, disadvantaged or vulnerable. We work with people with a wide variety of needs, such as learning difficulties, physical impairments, age-related diseases and behavioural difficulties.

We provide a range of services, including information and advice nationwide, and structured gardening programmes in three centres: Birmingham, London and Reading.

Life Changers programme

Life Changers enables those living with life-changing health conditions, recovering from a stroke, cancer or surgery, or living with long-term health conditions like diabetes, obesity, asthma, to benefit from the therapeutic power of gardening, build new friendships and their confidence to regain or maintain active, healthy and independent lives.

"Helped me socially and emotionally. It helped get me out of the house and meet people. It also helped me appreciate flowers and trees and made me want to learn more about gardening".MA

The aims of the *Life Changers* programme are to:

- improve energy and reduce depression and anxiety
- increase peer-to-peer support within the group
- increase confidence and reduce social isolation
- promote wellbeing and the health benefits of gardening
- give people the skills and knowledge to continue gardening after the programme has finished.
- provide the participants with the skills and enthusiasm to continue gardening once they have finished their programme.

How it works:

- A horticultural practitioner, supported by volunteers, works in the Thrive garden with a small group of up to eight participants one day per week for 16 weeks. Even more people benefit indirectly from the programme, such as family members and carers.
- Alongside each individual, the horticultural practitioner builds a set of gardening activities for each client gardener to improve their general health and wellbeing, and to work towards particular goals identified by the gardener, such as increasing stamina, mobility and balance, improving fine motor skills, increasing memory and information retention or strengthening muscles.
- A key element of all Thrive programmes is social inclusion; we design tasks and activities to encourage co-operation, interaction and socialisation. Each week has seasonally appropriate gardening focus with typical activities including seed sowing, planting bulbs, pruning, weeding, making hanging baskets, planting salads and herbs to encourage healthy eating, and some craft activities, such as making Christmas wreaths.
- We adapt the garden and tasks for ease of use, such as creating raised beds of multiple heights to ensure that gardening tasks can be done seated, in a wheelchair or standing. There are also specially adapted tools and equipment, glasshouses and a training room for tabletop gardening.



How we evaluate our programmes:

- Questionnaires - beginning, mid and post course; identifying personal goals and achievements
- A group reflective diary
- Horticultural practitioners' observational diaries
- Case studies.

How the *Life Changers* programme makes a difference:

Outcomes - based on previous programmes

- 75% of participants will report they have a sense of achievement at the end of a session
- 71% will report improved strength, stamina and mobility
- 60% will report an increased knowledge of how to garden with their condition
- 57% will report a reduction in depression and/or mood swings
- 50% will be able to carry out tasks for longer and with increased strength, dexterity or reduced fatigue

Covid-19/ Evidence of need

One of the results of the Covid-19 pandemic is that both the public and professionals are more aware of the large proportion of the population living with underlying health conditions, as well as the impact Covid-19 has had on so many people's lives. Even for people without a defined health condition, Covid-19 has been a life changing experience, and many more people are experiencing poor mental health due to loneliness and bereavement.

A more positive outcome of the period of lockdown under Covid-19 has been the increased recognition of the importance of time in nature and the value of our gardens and green spaces for our health and wellbeing. Not only do we feel better for being active outdoors and engaging with the natural world around us, the spread of the virus is reduced outdoors compared to indoor activities.

There is greater need than ever for organisations like Thrive, supporting the needs of large sections of the population by bringing them the health & wellbeing benefits of gardening. Enquiries for Thrive's programmes have increased - including for our *Life Changers* programme.

UPDATE - how we have engaged with local people

We have started our second 16 -week *Life Changers* programme in Birmingham, supported by the Sandra Charitable Trust and AMMCO. We started in Oct 2020 during particularly challenging times with 7 clients, referred from our local Headway charity and following another period of lockdown closures have restarted the programme in October 21 with 8 clients.

T's story

T first came to Thrive after being referred by Headway, due to a brain injury she experienced after a series of serious epileptic seizures. During lockdown she spent her time making embroidered doilies and taking part in 'Zoom sessions' to keep busy, but she still felt lonely, isolated and lost her confidence. She also started to forget things. Sessions at Thrive are tailored to suit individual needs, and T's time at Thrive helps to stimulate her brain, alongside providing that all important social interaction. Christmas to T means family time, and she is counting on her son to cook Christmas dinner as it is their tradition!

<https://www.thrive.org.uk/how-we-help/what-we-do/new-and-updates/gardening-works-wonders-for-teena>



We have monitored the progress and thoughts of the client gardeners throughout the Life Changers programme via questionnaires and feedback forms. We complete an end of programme questionnaire with the clients to capture outcomes and evaluation of the programme itself.

Rachel, our Life Changers Practitioner fed back "The feedback from the client gardeners has been incredible and within a few weeks of attending the enthusiasm, positivity and perhaps most importantly the motivation has been clear to see. Such an enthusiastic and hard working group, in just a few weeks we

have felt the benefits of sunshine and exercise whilst working hard in the garden. We have planted bulbs, taken Rosemary cuttings and sown herb & broad beans seeds in pots so there's a lot to look forward to. There's been lots of learning and laughter and we even have time for a nice chat over drinks and biscuits."

Before starting and we asked how the clients felt through the lockdown period and what they wanted to achieve from attending Life Changers:

T: "felt lonely and isolated, lost confidence and started to forget things"

R: "Depression! No social activities" "wants to learn new skills, break the week up, social skills"

A: "wants to improve plant knowledge and skills and get back to doing some exercise"

We also asked the gardeners 6 weeks into the program and the feedback was phenomenal, backing up the observations from the horticultural practitioner:

T: "I enjoy seeing all the greenery, using tools, and the social side of Thrive the banter with other is fun...feel brighter and happy" "
"improved mental health working together"

R: "fresh air, nice to get out, loving learning about gardening and how to do it when I'm at home....sleeping better at night, more stamina.....feels better in self"

A: "companionship and learning about different plants.....feel fitter being outsidegoing to use skills and knowledge on own garden"

Throughout we work to identify opportunities to continue a beneficiary's interest in gardening, e.g. on other Thrive programmes, such as general therapeutic sessions, and voluntary opportunities with other community organisations or gardens, such as Martineau Gardens in Edgbaston