

ANNUAL IMPACT REPORT

2023–2024




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WELCOME

It's been a busy year for Sydenham Garden. We're very pleased to have supported over 300 co-workers to participate in creative, horticultural and nature-based activities, improving wellbeing and feelings of belonging. We've also supported 146 school children to experience outdoor education in our gardens and welcomed our local community to our Spring and Winter Fairs, De Frene Summer Festival and opening for the Sydenham Artist's Trail.

We've run lots of additional and themed activities this year, including project activities to celebrate Biodiversity Month in July and Black History Month in October. We ran dance for wellbeing workshops in partnership with Trinity Laban throughout the year, and in February, our  project (for young people aged 18-25) led a month-long intergenerational LGBTQIA+ History Month revolving around medicinal herbs. All these activities explored different aspects of wellbeing and helped to further strengthen our community, our connections with each other and our connections with nature.

I hope you enjoy reading about all our activities over the last year. Our many friends and supporters are always welcome at Sydenham Garden – we hope to see you soon!

Beth Jaichand, Director

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**336 co-workers
attending at least one
session**

**97 co-workers graduated
from a
12-month placement**

**146 school children
participated in outdoor
education**

**Six community lunches
and four public events**

OUR IMPACT **Katie's Story**

Leaving hospital is hard. Really hard. It can feel like you're leaving with nothing more than a bag of medication and barely able to look after yourself. The world seems enormous, empty and scary. How do you even begin to rebuild your life?

When I got home I felt as though there was nothing for me, I really did. Empty day after empty day stretched out ahead of me. Luckily for me I had an amazing Occupational Therapist who ferried me around the various groups, art sessions, walking groups, fitness memberships and, most importantly, to Sydenham Garden!

My first impression was the space, such a little green paradise you'd never know was randomly slap bang in Sydenham. I met Rachael who was so friendly and welcoming. I was feeling really vulnerable, still trying settle into being at home, but I felt very quickly that Sydenham Garden was a place to feel safe in. I was so pleasantly surprised with the group! Jo and the volunteers – Clare, Hannah and Barbara were so friendly and welcoming. I liked the idea of name badges every week. Removing the pressure of remembering names actually took a huge weight off that I hadn't even realised was there!

We did such a variety of crafts and making, things I've never tried before were such good fun. I loved being taught new processes and everything was always explained and demonstrated really well. It was also great seeing other people's pieces, so inspiring to see all the creativity in the room.

For quite a lot of my time at Sydenham Garden I was rather unwell. Sometimes I was barely holding on. Through all of this Sydenham Garden was a lifesaver. I mean that completely literally. It was a rare glimpse of purpose, fun and sparks of enjoyment that were few and far between — one of very few spaces I felt some respite and safety. No matter how horrible things were, how scary and overwhelming the illness could be, Sydenham Garden was simply amazing.



ADULT MENTAL HEALTH African Caribbean Group

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We welcomed a new staff team member in January, previously a volunteer who was supporting the group, they were well placed to lead this project.

Food is so important in our community, and cooking together provides a real opportunity for joy and bonding. We have enjoyed making dishes such as ackee and saltfish with dumplings, chickpea and butternut squash curry, and garlic and cheese scones using wild garlic from the garden. Earlier in the spring, we planted coriander and rocket which we will use in future cooking sessions.

We've been exploring different ways to use herbs. After learning about their properties, we made our own bespoke mixtures of tea using rose, lavender, lemon balm, sage, rosemary and sorrel. We also shared this knowledge in a tea making workshop with visitors to the Spring Fair.

More recently, we made some beautiful pinch pots using air-dried clay which we painted and decorated with pressed flowers. For a little self-esteem boost, we

explored the idea of using positive self-talk by creating an affirmations jar to hold our own uplifting statements.



"I was referred to the African and Caribbean group at Sydenham Garden because of my mental illness and I was feeling lonely. I wanted to have more interaction with people within my community.

I enjoy the environment and meeting other co-workers. I've made new friends. The staff and volunteers are welcoming and helpful. I've improved my confidence by speaking to other people in the group. I'm not as quiet anymore. Staff and volunteers encouraged me to pursue other activities like adult learning.

I started studying English Language at college. I meet a friend and go on regular walks. I've been to community lunches and dance classes. I'm very busy."



ADULT MENTAL HEALTH Art & Craft

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This year has been jam-packed with a huge number of activities offered to co-workers in sessions. Highlights include learning batik techniques on paper and fabric, creating bowls from papier-mâché, drawing outside and experimenting with watercolour painting.

Many co-workers volunteered at our events – Spring Fair, De Frene Fest, Artist's Trail and Winter Fair - for the first time. This included looking after the Art & Craft stall, supporting tea/coffee sales and assisting with creative workshops. Each role involved talking with visitors. Although some were nervous before, all reported feeling proud of being a co-worker and the art-work that was sold.

We've celebrated many co-workers graduating full 12 month placements and several have gone on to art courses, something they report they wouldn't have done without the skills and confidence gained at Sydenham Garden.

This year we're happy to have welcomed some new volunteers and one volunteer moved on to study an Art Therapy masters degree, prepared with lots of relevant experience from her time in the Art & Craft

project. Increasingly, volunteers have been leading sessions and sharing their creative skills and passions with co-workers such as decorating shells, leading drawing workshops, weaving bracelets and teaching paper craft.



"I've seen lots of changes in myself during my time here, the biggest change is that my confidence has increased. I've definitely achieved the goals I set out. Each week I learned an activity in the Art & Craft group and I would then teach it to my niece!

My future plans include moving onto the Gardening group at Sydenham Garden. I'm also going to volunteer at my local school at the after school activities club. I plan on doing an art course Lewisham College."

"It's nice not to have to talk about mental health stuff, but sometimes it's been helpful to talk to people in the group who have similar experiences, like being on a mental health ward."



(m.u.d) has grown exponentially this past year. As a group of 43 young people (aged 18-25), we have been learning how and what the group can be. Naturally, we have practiced acceptance and slowness, particularly when it comes to artmaking, gardening, and socialising.

With a shared love for plants as natural dyes, we've schemed ways to explore this further. One of our intrepid members devised a foraging project that prompted us to explore Lewisham's green spaces for dye plants, mapping out where we collected the dyestuff and what we dyed with it. It will become a small publication and treasure map that allows young people to ease into botany, and find a love for plants, naturally.

(m.u.d) will continue to become a fruitful entanglement. We'll keep bringing our eccentric ideas, recycled materials, and changing moods to this community that we have built. Joy is radical, and we appreciate the highs and lows of making, and growing, together.



"Everyone is so welcoming and I really appreciate that. There is no sense of 'hierarchy' – everyone is treated with such respect to explore/express in their own ways. Helping with facilitating group sessions was new to me before and something I'd like to explore more going forwards. [I've] felt really welcomed to bring my existing skills, felt really valued; excited to get more involved in the future as my confidence has definitely increased since beginning to help out"



ADULT MENTAL HEALTH Practical Organic Gardening

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Over the course of two years, we enrolled 30 students. 17 students are on track to complete the full diploma and 25 students have completed at least one of more of the five units:

1. Soil Care & Composting
2. Plant Health
3. Crop Production & Maintenance
4. Propagation
5. Gardening for Wildlife

Students have demonstrated improved development in their own learning skills and increased awareness in sustainable practices,

biodiversity, wildlife garden design/re-wilding, recycling & reusing materials, organic gardening methods & techniques and adapting our gardens to climate change.

Many students stated improved confidence in applying new skills learnt on the course outside of Sydenham Garden and have moved on to further studying, work placements and volunteering opportunities in horticulture.

"I can really be myself. I love learning and it is made so interesting. I love having assessment objectives and relating them to what we learn"

"I've found it quite easy to follow. You've been very patient and support me with my learning disability"

"Excellent trainer knowledge and support, in-depth knowledge and careful individual interventions. Pace is fantastic – trainers know each one of us, our progress and challenges whilst supporting us to get the best out of it"



ADULT MENTAL HEALTH Garden

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We've had a busy year in the garden, growing lots of delicious, organic vegetables and maintaining the nature reserve for the benefit of wildlife. Our star performers in the vegetable garden were Stowell's Evergreen sweetcorn, a heritage variety which produced plump, sweet, creamy-white kernels, and the perennial kale which has proved to be a generous plant that keeps on giving.



Over winter we did lots of work on the scrubby area of the nature reserve, cutting down brambles and dogwood to allow optimal sunlight to the woodland floor. We have had an explosion of wild strawberries

along the pathway edge in response. When clearing the scrub, we found a beautifully-preserved greenfinch nest from last year, tucked away on a low branch just metres from where we sit and have tea.

"I was really depressed when I was referred to Sydenham Garden, really low. I hadn't moved for two years. I'd been sectioned. I was feeling isolated. I hadn't spoken to anyone for years. I wanted to join so I could socialise and talk to people again. I wanted to do some physical activity and learn about gardening. I have enjoyed the people, nature, and the peace and quiet. There's something about coming through the gate at the front that levels my head, it's like a peace pipe.

I'm doing a lot more group work since starting. I do dance and movement on Fridays and wildlife club on Mondays. I've gained confidence to leave the house, to get out and actually speak to people. I've gained knowledge of nature and gardening skills. I've gained some strength in my physical being.

I've got activities every day now. I'm starting at Growing Lives on Wednesday, and I also volunteer at the church garden and Forest Hill library garden."



ADULT MENTAL HEALTH Growing Lives

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We continued to offer a wide range of activities each week for our co-workers, ensuring there is always something for everyone and it is an inclusive space. We continued the Flower Farm growing fabulous cut flowers to supply local florists and businesses. We encouraged co-worker led projects to foster an environment of trust and empowerment. These included renovating the larger compost loo into a "super loo" to help reduce possible barriers and make De Frene a more inclusive space.

We ran sessions focused on specific themes and skills including screen printing, dying with natural pigment, macrame as well as growing edible mushrooms on waste materials.

Cooking and eating together was still a central part of our sessions. We have continued to refine our recipes to make them as inclusive as possible whilst simplifying them to demystify and breakdown barriers to plant based healthy eating on a budget. Many of our co-workers have taken the recipes away with them and report that they have included them in their own repertoire.



What do you find most helpful about Growing Lives?

"It's wonderful. I'm free and feel comfortable here. It is a beautiful environment and the people are so supportive"

"I don't want to come because I feel so low, but when I'm there I feel so happy. It's such a wonderful place and people"

"Sometimes just being able to take time to go and do different things – take time out, freedom – flexible structure. And I learned a lot. Calming. Sometimes I could talk to people when having stressful times without being judged"

"Community, connection with others, activity-based socialising, physical exercise, gardening practice and learning, feeling useful/productive, seeing the seasons change and having a sense that things grow, meeting others with similar interest and life experiences"



Sow & Grow

For people living with dementia

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Our Sow & Grow project enables people living with early-stage dementia to live well. Co-workers join a weekly group and participate in gardening, cooking, creative activities and singing. Our sessions use cognitive stimulation therapy (CST) techniques, helping co-workers to improve their cognitive skills, become more socially included and have a better quality of life.

During the year 39 co-workers benefited from the Sow & Grow groups, with 13 co-workers and carers participating in our families group.

Sow & Grow has come through a time of transition to now work closely together with the Lewisham Dementia Service run by Alzheimer's Society. Through this year we have grown amazing pumpkins which along with many other delicious homegrown vegetables and herbs have found their way into mouthwatering dishes cooked and shared together. Co-workers have created stunningly beautiful batiks, cyanotype photos and Japanese printed bunting all exhibited at the Sydenham Artists Trail. Time and again co-workers and their families have spoken of how much they love and value coming to the



garden and how important the friendships are that they have made here. We are delighted to have received 3 more years of funding from the Mercers Company and this has enabled a new sessional worker to join the team.

"Mum glows every time she talks about 'her club'. She has felt loved and valued during her time there. You have woven care, support, nurture and friendship into your group. Combining the nurturing of plants with the nurturing of people is such a strength.

She has enjoyed all the activities, including being first up to take a cycle on the adapted bikes when 'Wheels for Wellbeing' visited and dancing with the Lion mask on during a visit from the Horniman Museum. She has shared her interests in fungi, birds, weaving, carpentry, and gardening with other group members. Always her joy was arriving at the garden to a series of hugs with fellow participants and singing "What a wonderful world" before heading home.

As mum's dementia progressed, she and I have felt able to discuss this with the team and receive support and signposting to other services."



Outdoor Education

For children with special educational needs

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We continued to run outdoor education sessions at De Frene Market Garden for students from Brent Knoll and Greenvale schools.

From Brent Knoll, thirteen different classes with ten students each participated in sessions in the garden three times each term, with 130 individual students benefiting.

From Greenvale, two different classes with eight students each participated on a weekly basis, with sixteen students benefiting.

Throughout the year, the students have been devoted **carers of the chickens**, ensuring that they have had fresh water and feed. A wish held by many of the group was to hug a chicken – Big Dorris, a tame gentle old girl was very willing to assist. Staff and students were quite overwhelmed by their chicken experience – there were tears of joy as Dorris settled into laps and had a head scratch.



"Visiting Sydenham gardens is brilliant as it allows children the opportunity to engage with an environment they may not normally visit"
– Larch class, Brent Knoll



New Mural at Resource Centre

In February 2024 artist Amy Bairstow painted a mural at our Wynell Road entrance. The image was designed collaboratively with co-workers from the Arts & Craft, Garden and Sow & Grow projects. The ideas process included group discussions and making collaged designs on paper. Amy then put forward two designs to the Sydenham Garden community to vote on and this landscape won! Part of the final piece shows **two cups of tea, an integral part of things at Sydenham Garden.**



Warm Welcomes

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Our drop-in clubs, open to co-workers and volunteers past and present, continued to grow throughout the year. It has been great to have options for people who had finished their main placements, or who were looking for an additional activity but weren't quite ready to join groups outside of Sydenham Garden.

The year started with Wildlife Club, Textiles Club and Wild Walks and we were excited to become part of Lewisham Local's 'Warm Welcomes' initiative for the first time, which saw our clubs transform into welcoming spaces for new visitors to the gardens.

Warm Welcomes were set up to support individuals affected by increased living costs in Winter. We secured a grant of £5,500 to deliver Warm Welcomes sessions from December to the end of March 2024 and had 472 visits to the groups over this time.

Textiles Club became Activity Group, with board games, puzzles crafts and best of all, delicious freshly cooked soup. Our wonderful nature-filled Wildlife Club sessions were opened up to people in the community and we launched our long-awaited Gardening Club.

Warm Welcomes brought new people to the garden and brought people together, usually over a nice hot cuppa. Although the funding came to an end, the spirit of warm welcomes lives on in our clubs, which continue to thrive, led by a dedicated team of volunteers.



"I've really enjoyed the warmth, togetherness and chats with people from all kinds of backgrounds, learning skills from each other. I felt a sense of relief and a peace from the welcome I received. And I loved the good feeling of being cooked for"
– Co-worker in Activities Club



Flower Farm

Co-workers at De Frene Market Garden were involved in growing, caring for, and picking and preparing the flowers for sale as part of our Flower Farm social enterprise. Co-workers also contributed to our approaches to increase sales and brand awareness.

We supplied wholesale flowers to three local florists and hand-tied bouquets to Alexandra Nurseries, generating £2,884 in income during the year.

Many co-workers reported how enjoyable and enriching they found contributing to the Flower Farm. Testament to the quality of our flowers, the florist we supplied used them for a wedding which was featured in British Vogue as well as the British premier for a block buster movie.



Volunteering at Sydenham Garden

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"Volunteering here has become an essential part of my week. It gives me a great sense of worth and allows me to learn about the living experience of the co-workers and how the world often looks different to each of us. It's pretty humbling."

"Volunteering has helped me to meet people, very necessary as I had moved hundreds of miles to a new community."

"Being a volunteer at Sydenham Garden has been so rewarding, being welcomed into such a lovely space full of lovely people has been so amazing. Being a part of and building a community that is focused on being so accepting and understanding is so important and I'm so grateful to be a part of it."

**71 volunteers
providing over
10,000 hours
of support**

**100% of our
volunteers
reported
increased
contentment
with life**



Partnerships

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We've partnered with several organisations this year, strengthening our relationships with different communities and improving the quality and diversity of our services.

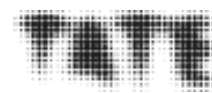
We've worked closely with the **Lewisham Wellbeing Hub**, run by **Together for Mental Wellbeing**, and **Lewisham Dementia Service**, run by **Alzheimer's Society** to receive referrals, and with **Community Connections Lewisham** to provide local signposting support for our co-workers.

©.u.d has partnered with **Tate Late Collective**, **Garden Museum**, **Southbank Centre** and **London Wildlife Trust**, enabling the group to try different activities, meet other young people and facilitate workshops for them, develop new global-majority perspectives on nature and find out about trainee opportunities.

We partnered with **Trinity Laban**, to provide dance for wellbeing sessions for our co-workers on Friday afternoons throughout the year. "When I do movement or dance to music it gives my mind a break and I feel like me again. And that makes me able to cope with things."

We planted 100 whips donated by **The Conservation Volunteers' I Dig Trees** national campaign which has provided habitat and forage for a range of native species. We also won a **Kenneth White Legacy Award** this year, enabling us to provide two interpretative signs to highlight pond wildlife.

We also partnered with the **Horniman Museum** and **Sydenham Arts**, broadening our co-worker experiences and reaching new people. Many thanks to all our partners.



GARDEN MUSEUM



Community Lunches, Events and Open Days

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Our six **Community Lunches** provided an opportunity for co-workers across Sydenham Garden to come together to share food and friendship. These were well attended and enjoyable for all!

We welcomed members of our wider community to the Wynell Road garden and nature reserve in May for **Spring Fair**, September for **Sydenham Artists' Trail** and December for **Winter Fair**. This enabled hundreds of local residents to spend time in the garden, enjoy food, art, creative activities, plant shopping, and a wonderful array of home made cakes! We also welcomed local residents to **De Frene Summer Festival** in August, with music from Heart of Steel and Pengenista Drummers (pictured right) amongst others.

We welcomed lots of new visitors to the gardens at our various open days this year. People came to find out about volunteering, referring to our projects, and some just came along to meet the chickens!

Spending time in the gardens and seeing first-hand the work we do in our groups has been valuable in forging new relationships with local organisations, supporters and volunteers.



"Thank you for showing me round the gardens. Seeing and hearing about what goes on there was inspiring."

"It was a valuable experience and enjoyable morning. It is an insightful tour of your service."



Special Projects

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In July, all our groups decided to focus on **Biodiversity** in their sessions. This involved activities such as pond dipping, butterfly spotting and wildlife surveys both at our gardens and in Mayow Park.

Sydenham Garden volunteer Alona regularly conducts a biodiversity survey on the green roof of our Resource Centre and during the month, we invited co-workers, volunteers and staff to climb the ladder to have a look at the environment on the roof and gain a different perspective of the Wynell Road garden and nature reserve.



In October, we celebrated **Black History Month** with an array of activities. Our groups cooked food, made art and read poems with African and Caribbean roots. We partnered with Horniman museum to look at and discuss African and Caribbean artefacts from their collection. And we held a celebration event with delicious food and a presentation by @citygirlinnature (pictured below) about how nature has inspired her as a young black woman.



In February, to celebrate **LGBTQIA+ History Month**, m.u.d ran an intergenerational project called Supportive Herbs. m.u.d co-workers and elders from the Sydenham Garden community explored the nature reserve, spent considered time with wild herbs, and conducted research at Chelsea Physic Garden. Botanical art arose collaboratively as the group conversed, listened, painted, splattered, foraged, wove, and spectated.

Corporate Days & Venue Hire

In 2023-24 we were pleased to host four corporate team building days with over fifty people participating from Go Contaminated Land Solutions, London Stock Exchange Group, Deutsche Bank and We Worldwide raising almost £2,000 to support our work.

The groups undertook work on both of our sites including constructing a new wildlife pond, replacing two of our raised brick planter beds with new timber beds, building a new wood store and cleaning the greenhouse.

Such days provide groups a chance to spend time away from their day-to-day work and make a significant contribution to the upkeep and development of our sites.

In addition, we continued to hire out the Resource Centre enabling local residents, businesses and groups to access to our facilities including the gardens and nature reserve. We were able to increase the number of bookings to 93 and raise £10,000 towards our charitable work, an increase of almost 25% on the previous year.



Strategic Plan 2024–27

In September, our Trustee Board approved our **new Strategic Plan 2024-2027**. Over the summer we held sessions with co-workers, volunteers, staff and trustees to build our shared vision for how we want Sydenham Garden to develop over the next three years. The strategic plan is underpinned by four overall strategic objectives:

- To develop Sydenham Garden services to reach a larger cohort of co-workers.
- To continuously improve the effectiveness and impact of Sydenham Garden activities.
- To solidify and diversify Sydenham Garden's funding sources.
- To increase Sydenham Garden's diversity at all levels.

We have made a short video about the strategic plan which is available on our website.

At our AGM in November, alongside regular business, attendees heard presentations from four co-workers about the impact Sydenham Garden has had on their lives. Their testimonies were powerful and we'd like to say a big thank you to Carla, Stephanie, Katie and Julian for sharing their experiences. The group also enjoyed hearing from volunteer Clare, staff member David and trustee Laura about their work and experiences over the previous year.

Our new strategic plan reflects our ambitions to promote co-worker involvement and voice to influence services and decisions that affect them, both within and outside Sydenham Garden. Working towards this, we held several 'co-worker advisory' meetings to create space for co-workers to discuss their ideas. These meetings have evolved into a new Sydenham Garden group called 'Meanderings', which is now meeting monthly and enabling co-workers to think and talk about what Sydenham Garden means to them.



Funders and Supporters

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We would like to say a huge **THANK YOU** to all our funders and our many individual supporters. Our work would not be possible without your support.



Looking to the Future From our Chair of Trustees

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I hope you've enjoyed reading about all our activities over the last year. We're pleased to have our **3-year strategic plan** in place which will guide us as we seek to continue strengthening our services and impact for the benefit of our co-workers.

Since March 2024, we've started **new evening sessions** with Hyde Housing Association residents, and **Sunday drop-in gardening sessions** for all local residents at our De Frene Market Garden. We're really pleased to be able to open the gardens at the weekend to benefit more local residents.

We've also been able to start **a new Sow & Grow group**, enabling us to support more people living with dementia while maintaining our **Families group** to enable our Sow & Grow co-workers to enjoy the garden with their family members.

We were delighted to recently be awarded nearly **£300,000 funding** over three years from the **National Lottery Community Fund** - this will support our **Practical Organic Gardening** project and enable us to invest more in our volunteer-led **Community Activities** and **Volunteering programme**.

A key part of our new strategic plan is to **increase the voice and influence of our co-workers** and we supported **six co-workers** to share their experiences in accessing mental health services with **South London and Maudsley (SLaM) NHS Trust** in a powerful afternoon in April 2024. We look forward to building on this work over the coming year to ensure our support for our community is shaped by our co-workers.

I hope to see you at the gardens this year.

Julia Brandreth





ANNUAL IMPACT REPORT

2023–2024



Sydenham Garden Resource Centre
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