

Tuesday, 6 August 2019

Growing project to boost mental health

A pilot scheme has been launched to give islanders with learning disabilities the opportunity to grow fruit and vegetables on a community allotment.

The Growing Group aims to help boost the mental health of islanders, who may be socially isolated, as well as giving them an opportunity to be an active part of their community. Each week for an hour-and-a-half, the group, who are supported by the Health and Community Services Learning Disability team, tends the land at the Salvation Army base in Gorey.

Currently, six islanders aged between their twenties and sixties are taking part in the project supported by clinical psychologist Sinead Peacock-Brennan, occupational therapist Julie Vibert-Jones, occupational therapy assistant Aimee Howard, nurse Liz Lewry and nursing assistant Jane Nicolle. Whilst some of the produce grown is used to make the free soup that the Salvation Army gives out at its St Helier café, the group also gets to take a lot of fruit and veg home.

Nicky Pallot (55), from St Saviour said: "I've enjoyed it, there is a lot of gardening to be done – the people help us and we help them."

Theirry Gales (49), from St Saviour said: "It's been very exciting and interesting. What we do with the flowers and herbs is very informative."

Ethan Allen (21), from Trinity said: "I enjoy helping out with the environment and gardening. I like being out in nature and it's been good getting to know new people."

Kelly Blanco (40), from St Saviour added: "I like wetting the staff with the hose and I like the company of some of the people I have met."

The scheme has received support from B&Q and the JFTU which gave discounts to buy gardening tools as well as from Acorn and Overdale which provided plants and seeds. LibertyBus also provides a minibus to transport service users to the allotment. And it is hoped that in the future, if funding can be sought, raised beds will be able to be created at the site enabling islanders with mobility issues to take part in the project.

Dr Peacock-Brennan said: "Everybody's mental health benefits from being outside but it is particularly important for people with learning disabilities who might have less access to these community, public spaces.

“This scheme provides community integration through a meaningful activity – it’s important that the vegetables go back into the community via the café. Being active is great for mental health and the project enables us to have conversations with service users which can sometimes be difficult within a clinical setting.”

Salvation Army Lieutenant Richard Nunn added: “It has been a real privilege to share with this group as they enjoy our community garden. Supporting and sharing with each member of the group as they experience gardening has been great. For people who are cared for on a day-to-day basis, there is something special in seeing them caring for the plants as they grow and produce vegetables and fruit that they can take home, and that also helps us provide the free soup in our cafe in town every day.”

Islanders who have an interest in allotments who would like to volunteer with the group are asked to contact Richard on Richard.Nunn@salvationarmy.org.uk.