



Adopt a Garden Scheme - Review & Report - March 2009 **A Footprint Trust project based on the Isle of Wight**

Background

The Isle of Wight has a larger than average number of elderly people. The 2001 Census revealed that people aged 65 and over formed 22% of the population, while the average for England & Wales is 16%. The elderly population on the Isle of Wight is traditionally high, but nationally it is the first time that there are now more people aged 60 and over than there are children aged under 16. Widows and widowers make up 11% of the population on the Island, over 2% higher than the national figure.

On the Island it is estimated that there are over 3000 unused or overgrown gardens, which are often a great cause of concern to their owners. There has always been an acute shortage of volunteers to look after disabled and elderly people's gardens and no reliable scheme exists at present. It is unlikely that any organisation could run a 'free gardening scheme' due to cost and this shortage of volunteers.

There are also many people on the Island with a small garden, or no garden at all, who would like a growing space. Some of these form the 300+ names on the IW Council's waiting list for an allotment. Many more have not bothered to put themselves on the list knowing that it can take three years to get one.

The scheme was started on 1st February 2008, as a pilot project.

How the Scheme Works

The scheme tries to match up would-be gardeners with people who own too much garden, preferably living close to each other. The garden owner allows the gardener to use a part of their garden to grow food or flowers, and in return, that part of their garden is cared for.

The gardener may wish to share some of their produce with the owner, or help to keep another part of the garden looking nice, but this is not a condition of the scheme.

The garden owner also has the social benefit of regular visits from the gardener and the knowledge that when they are away there is an extra pair of friendly eyes to check on their property.

Additionally, it is anticipated that friendships will develop, often across generations, between predominantly younger gardeners and older owners.

Rules are kept to a minimum. There must be access to the garden without going through the house; no money changes hands; there should be a minimum of 6 weeks notice to end the agreement; and all of the people involved should undergo a Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) check or hold a current one (we accept portability in line with CRB guidelines). There is no charge for this from the CRB as all those involved are volunteers. See www.crb.gov.uk.

Both parties are given guidelines for safe and good practice, and advised that they should seek legal advice if they feel the need to draw up a more formal agreement. Householders are advised to inform their insurers that they are taking part in the scheme and it is suggested that both gardener and householder check that their insurance covers them for any incidents.

Funding and Promotion

Finding suitable funding was difficult, as it is hard, for example, to justify 'community benefit' when the work is occurring in private gardens. Clearly there are environmental and social benefits but this scheme does not 'fit' many funding streams. This innovative proposal was seen as being too radical by some traditional funders, who could only think of the problems, and not the benefits. The same was also true of one Parish Council, which declined to promote it as they oppose CRB checks.

Funding was received from the Isle of Wight Charitable Trust and Anchor Staying Put, along with money from the Footprint Trust's own reserves. A total of £4,000 was raised to run the pilot scheme for 14 months. Help in kind has been forthcoming from community organisations, the library service, parish councils, care workers and many individuals who have promoted it. Southern Water donated a number of waterbutts, which are given to gardeners who adopt a garden.

The initial push to join was to the 300 people on the Isle of Wight Council's Allotment waiting list. The Council kindly agreed to allow us to mail shot them.

The local media have supported the initiative giving it much free publicity – Isle of Wight Radio, BBC Radio Solent, BBC TV South Today, the County Press, the IW Beacon, the IW Gazette, Island Life magazine and various community magazines. It has featured in Parish and Housing Association newsletters and the Gardening News national magazine, as well as being promoted on the Footprint Trust's own web-site and other internet sites.

It has been promoted at various shows and events which the Footprint Trust has attended, including some specific talks to groups and societies. Promotional postcards have been displayed in libraries and health centres, and posters have been put in public places. Word of mouth has worked well too. Social workers and community workers have promoted the scheme, along with Age Concern, Anchor Staying-Put, Parish and Town councils and the Isle of Wight Council.

There has been a lot of national interest including from the BBC's One Show, the River Cottage Series on Channel 4, several local councils including Hampshire County Council and Wokingham Borough Council, and the Welsh Assembly.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. Why do I have to have a Criminal Records Bureau check?

A. The only way we can be reasonably sure that we are protecting everyone involved is to do a CRB check on the householder and the gardener. We are prepared to use a recent CRB in line with their guidelines.

Q. Will I have to pay?

A. No money changes hands, but produce can be shared if that is agreed. The CRB's are free as everyone involved is a volunteer.

Q. Why are gardeners only given 6 weeks notice to quit the garden?

A. We would hope that gardeners would be given a season's notice, but the householder or their family may wish to sell their home, in which case they may want the arrangement to end quickly.

Q. Can gardening chemicals be used?

A. We suggest that any chemicals used are applied in accordance with manufactures instructions. Ideally we would suggest that organic methods are used. If you want chemicals to be avoided then this should be made clear on the questionnaire.

Q. Can my children help me out?

A. Of course your children can help you, but state that you wish this to happen on your questionnaire. You are responsible for your children, and gardens can be dangerous places, so they must be supervised properly. All those over 13 who are taking part would need to be CRB checked.

Statistics (as at 28 Feb 2009)

A household is sometimes a couple, or even a family, so the actual number of people involved in the scheme is larger than the numbers below indicate.

Just over 100 households have joined the scheme, of which 86 remain on the database. Of those, 29 are gardeners and 57 are garden owners, a ratio of 2:1 in favour of garden owners.

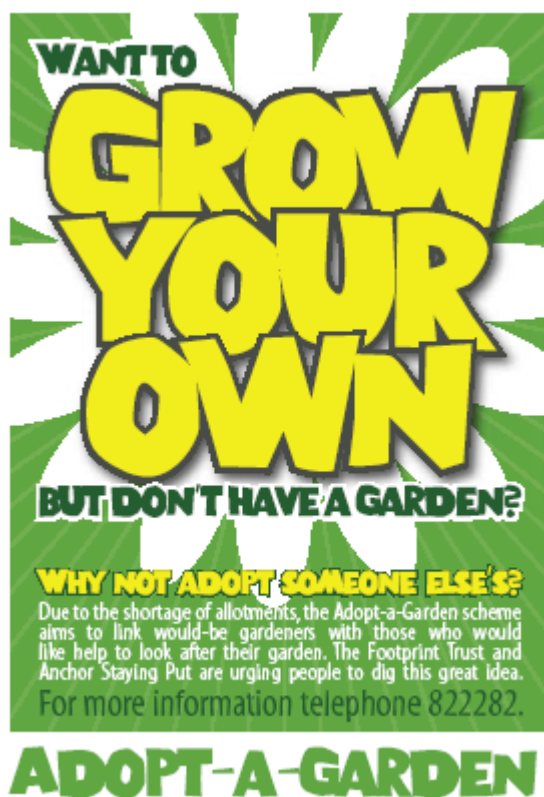
Over half of the would-be gardeners expressed an interest in receiving training.

22 matches have been made, of which 11 “failed” relatively early (see lessons learned for reasons).

Only 2 of the matches so far have been in a rural area.

Of the 11 in action, 5 are working well, while the other 6 have only just been set up and are taking time to get going.

Of the matches so far, just over a half of the owners are elderly.



Lessons learned

The scheme is more time-consuming than originally anticipated. Keeping a database of interested parties, and introducing those who live close to each other, sounds simple, but talking to people on a personal basis necessarily takes time. We have been contacted by many lonely people who want to chat about their garden and medical problems etc. Some we have managed to refer to other bodies or to our Warmahome scheme.

There was an initial heavy workload before any positive results were achieved. The work involved promotion and marketing; answering phone calls and emails; sending out information and forms; setting up an Access database and adding details; and talking to press, radio, TV and to councils and individuals in other parts of the UK.

It takes several months to build up a usable database, which has enough people who live reasonably close to each other to make CRB checks and matching worthwhile.

There can be a misunderstanding by some garden owners that the scheme is about finding volunteers to look after their garden – the purpose of the scheme has to be made clear to them.

Carrying out CRB checks is essential, but it also takes time. The checks have taken from 10 days to 3 months to be returned, with an average of about 6 weeks. Also, thought needs to be given to what happens when a CRB check highlights a conviction or an accepted police warning or caution.

There is no perfect time of year to start the scheme. Many people will not start to think about gardening until the spring, but it takes at least 2 months from getting someone's initial contact through to them being CRB checked and ready to be paired off. Probably the autumn would be the best time to start.

Keeping in touch with people who are in the system, but have not been matched up, is important but time consuming to do on a regular basis.

People's circumstances change, which means that they are no longer able to take part in the scheme. You often only find out when contacting them with a possible match, as they forget to let you know.

There is no pattern to the reasons for matches not working out.

The reasons were: garden too overgrown; garden too dark & shaded; garden too small; garden too far away; 2 gardeners were able to get an allotment; 2 gardeners got jobs, resulting in no time for gardening; 1 moved house; 1 gardener withdrew due to a change of circumstances; and 1 gardener didn't go very much, leaving the owners to do most of the work.

Some garden owners wished to have restrictions placed on would-be gardeners, such as that they only came once a week, only grew flowers or did not garden on a Sunday. In most cases those with such requests did not join as they were advised that the chances of finding a gardener were small.

A local neighbourhood or village scheme would be easier to manage. We believe it would recruit more people. We found that in the very rural areas of the Island matching was difficult due to a shortage of people taking part. Most matchings have been in towns, whose populations range from about 13,000 to 26,000. The use of local people to promote the scheme and to chat to their neighbours and friends would bring better results. We would not recommend a scheme that covers a wide geographical area, unless it had 'local ambassadors'.

The issue of on-going funding needs to be addressed. Whilst those matched could continue without the scheme being funded, those who are yet to be matched would lose out. Those involved in the scheme would be unlikely or unable to pay for its running costs.

Many of those showing an interest in the scheme expressed a need for some training in gardening. We are aware of some individuals not getting involved due to them feeling that they did not have sufficient skills. Offering a basic free training course might increase take-up.

We have twice as many garden owners as gardeners, which confirms that our targeting of publicity mainly at gardeners is the right approach.

The scheme is not designed as an alternative to allotments and is not suitable for everyone. However, it can help to find a growing space for some people wishing to 'grow their own' and it can help to solve the problem of an unmanageable garden for a vulnerable person. There clearly is a need for more allotment space and for not-for-profit gardening maintenance schemes. Adopt-A-Garden is there to complement, not replace, these.

Adopt–A-Garden in your community

This repeats the information in the letter or e-mail which came with the report:

This is a copy of the analysis of our pilot scheme. We hope you found it useful.

If you have, and you want to make a donation, then that would be great.

We are not trying to make money out of the scheme, but we do want to keep the scheme going on the IW and as a small organisation we are always looking for funding.

If you are interested in setting up a scheme in your area then we can offer a range of help and support. We can make an initial visit to talk to interested people, put on a training event, provide system notes and forms to run the scheme, and give advice by phone or e-mail. You can choose what help you want. There would be a charge, depending on the level of support, but our rates are very reasonable.

If you just want to get the scheme going in your area, and feel that you can handle it by yourselves, then that's great as well. We would really appreciate it if you sent us an occasional e-mail letting us know how you are getting on, and details of any new issues you have come across. We are always keen to learn and to improve the scheme.

The Adopt a Garden “name” has been trademarked, because we want to make sure that it's reputation is protected. If anyone is going to run a scheme with that name, then we want to be certain that some basic principles are followed.

These are that CRB checks are carried out on all people involved, no money passes between gardener & garden owner, there is access to the garden without going through the home, and at least 6 weeks notice is given by either party to end the agreement.

Please get back to us for more information.

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