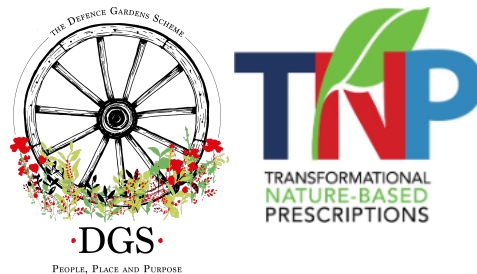


A Qualitative Evaluation of the Well-being, Health and Social Benefits of the Defence Gardens Scheme Nature Based Therapy (NBT) for the Armed Forces Community



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Executive Summary

“DGS-is providing fresh air, friendship and gardening, an invisible medication.”

Cole, a male veteran attending a DGS 10-week Programme, 2025

Over the last two years, Neighbourly Lab has carried out an in-depth qualitative evaluation of the Defence Gardens Scheme’s nature-based therapy programme. Our research team, led by Neighbourly Lab Director and Co-founder, has conducted ethnographic visits to gardens in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and gathered data from 97 participants, focused on Weeks 2 and 9 and over 6 months post-participation (longitudinal). Neighbourly Lab has interviewed not only beneficiaries of the DGS programme but also 20 garden managers and referral partners.

This evaluation found that DGS delivers significant and lasting positive impacts for Veterans and Service Leavers and additionally their families. Participants often described the programme as being a lifeline for them when struggling with their mental health; that it reduced their anxiety, improved their mood and sparked a renewed sense of purpose. These benefits also have ripple effects positively impacting families and friendships.

Our evaluation highlights that the programme’s efficacy depends on the combination of 4 elements.

- **People** – A Veteran-only environment builds instant trust, shared understanding, and peer support.
- **Place** – The gardens provide safe, non-clinical outdoor spaces that foster calm, belonging, and reflection.
- **Purpose** – Meaningful, hands-on horticultural activities build skills, confidence, and horticulture provides metaphors and scaffolds for talking and mentalising about personal renewal and growth.
- **Practitioners** – Skilled facilitators adapt delivery with empathy and inclusivity, ensuring that all participants can engage meaningfully.

When we asked veterans to reflect on the “magic ingredients” of the programme that made it work well for them, they identified 5 elements (Veteran-only, Outdoors, Light-touch, Social connection, Holistic) that we’ve named as “VOLSH”. Working in concert, these factors create conditions for transformation, from rebuilding confidence to reconnecting with communities and careers. The longitudinal quantitative findings (Franklin, 2026) show that these benefits endure, with many participants continuing to volunteer, pursue qualifications, or provide peer support after completing the programme.

This combination of these “key success factors” has been well tested and codified by DGS. The fact that different gardens are able to deliver the programme successfully whilst adding their local context and individual character confirms our view that the programme can be replicated and therefore scaled. However, as with much of the wider Green Social Prescribing (GSP) Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University, 2023), the long-term impact of DGS will depend on sustained, multi-year funding to protect the referral and progression pathways that underpin its success.

From this evaluation, Neighbourly Lab recommends:

1. Specific

Secure long-term funding to expand the Defence Gardens Scheme (DGS) across the UK and strengthen referral pathways with NHS, Armed Forces, and community partners. This should include clear referral criteria to ensure that those most likely to benefit from the programme are appropriately identified and supported.

2. Measurable

Track participant wellbeing and engagement through standardised evaluation tools, including the Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) and the Office for National Statistics (ONS4) life satisfaction measures. Attendance, progression, and follow-up outcomes should be recorded at consistent intervals to demonstrate measurable improvements in wellbeing and social connection.

3. Attainable

Build on the proven Hub-and-Spoke model to scale delivery efficiently while maintaining quality and consistency across all participating gardens. Leverage existing academic and evaluation partnerships, such as those with Edinburgh Napier University and Pro Bono Economics, to ensure that data collection, analysis, and reporting remain robust and evidence-based.

4. Relevant

Strengthen onward progression routes for participants, connecting them with volunteering, training, or employment opportunities, while ensuring alignment with UK Green Social Prescribing priorities and Armed Forces wellbeing strategies. This will reinforce the relevance of DGS as a practical, holistic intervention that supports both individual recovery and wider system goals.

5. Time-bound

Run and review each 10-week programme cycle biannually, with structured participant follow-up at 6–12 months to assess the sustainability of outcomes. Insights from these reviews should be used to refine delivery, strengthen referral guidance, and inform future expansion of the scheme.

The 10-week programme provides a proven, nature-based model of support for Veterans, Service Leavers, and their families. This evaluation shows that DGS not only improves individual wellbeing and resilience but also fosters connection, purpose, and confidence in ways that participants describe as life-changing. By combining practical outdoor activities with safe, supportive spaces, the programme has demonstrated a powerful impact on mental health and social connectedness.

1. Introduction

Transformational Nature Based Prescriptions (TNP) is a three-year project funded by the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust (AFCFT), with the goal of delivering a compelling “weight of evidence” to convey the value of the Defence Gardens Scheme (DGS) nature based therapy programme for the wellbeing and health of its participants and the impact that this programme (and GSP more broadly) can contribute to the Health and Social Care system. As national evaluations of GSP) have demonstrated, the effectiveness of nature-based interventions depends not only on programme design but on stable commissioning frameworks that enable continuity across referral and progression pathways.

Since TNP’s launch in March 2023, the project has provided the necessary funding and platform to carry out a rigorous mixed methods evaluation of the 10-week DGS programme. The evaluation aimed to understand the impact of the DGS programme on Service Leavers, Veterans and their families, particularly looking at its effects on their mental health and wellbeing, feelings of loneliness or isolation and their sense of purpose as well as to conduct a rigorous cost benefit analysis.

Neighbourly Lab (NL) has been privileged to lead this qualitative evaluation of the DGS engaging with Armed Forces Service Leavers, Veterans and their families. This research has involved ethnographic visits to gardens across the UK, carrying out in-depth interviews with those participating in the programme, collection of quantitative survey data and group discussions with the programme delivery teams. The research team has collected data from almost 100 beneficiaries from four DGS Hub Gardens across the UK (see figure 1). NL has evaluated the long-term impacts of the programme by gathering life satisfaction data and conducting ethnographic interviews with beneficiaries not only during the programme but also at 6, 9 and 12 months on from attending DGS.

This qualitative evaluation has been anchored in the DGS Concept Manual (Defence Gardens Scheme, 2020) and its originating research, the Churchill Fellowship report by Col (ret’d) Sally Coulthard MBE (2020) which explored best practices in nature-based therapy for military Veterans in Denmark and the USA, identifying key principles that now underpin the DGS model, including structured and group-based horticultural therapy, safe green spaces for psychological recovery and cultural alignment with the Armed Forces community.

The aim of the TNP qualitative evaluation is to measure and quantify the impact of participation upon beneficiaries, and to offer informed support for the scalability and replicability to support extensions of nature-based social prescribing programmes across the UK.

NL have worked with the TNP evaluation partners:

- Edinburgh Napier University (ENU) Military Research Hub who undertook the TNP literature review
- Pro-Bono Economics (PBE)

to ensure that this evaluation meets the gaps identified in the TNP literature review and gathers the quantitative data required for PBE to undertake a Social Cost Benefit Analysis of the DGS programme.

Literature Review – The ENU Military Research Hub literature review, led by Professor Gerri Matthews-Smith (2026), explored existing scholarship and practices around horticulture as an intervention for those with mental health concerns. It found three significant gaps in the literature: on nature based and therapeutic gardening research. To date there had been no;

- evaluations done consistently at scale - i.e. beyond isolated programmes of 6, 8 or sometimes 20 participants at a single location
- longitudinal studies conducted
- comprehensive cost-benefit analysis

TNP data collection and analysis conducted by NL and PBE has been designed to meet these gaps. It has collected data from 97 beneficiaries who have all participated on the same programmes - based on the DGS Concept Manual - at different gardens. Using the Short Warwick and Edinburgh Wellbeing Scales (SWEMWBS) (Stuart-Brown et al., 2009) and Office for National Statistics (2025) Life Satisfaction (ONS 4) to gather quantitative evidence, the research team has engaged with beneficiaries not only while they are participating, but also between 9 and 18 months following their participation on the programme. PBE has analysed the economic value using HM Treasury guidelines (2022).

This Neighbourly Lab qualitative evaluation, the ENU literature review and the PBE cost benefit analysis independently and collectively fill the identified gaps. Together, these reports contribute a necessary and valuable contribution to the understanding of Nature Based Therapy (NBT) to help those experiencing difficulties with their mental health and/or severe loneliness.

This report, which sits alongside the findings of our evaluation partners, presents key qualitative findings and insights into:

- **The Structure and Formula of the Programme:** The structure of the programme, the key components of the programme and who is involved.
- **The Impact for Beneficiaries:** Findings from our evaluation, including first-hand accounts from beneficiaries about their experience of the programme
- **Mechanisms and Key Success Factors:** The factors that make the programme successful in supporting Service Leavers, Veterans and their families.
- **Opportunities and Recommendations:** Based on the findings of this evaluation, we outline below a series of opportunities and recommendations to enhance, sustain, scale and replicate the impact of the programme.

The Four TNP DGS Gardens

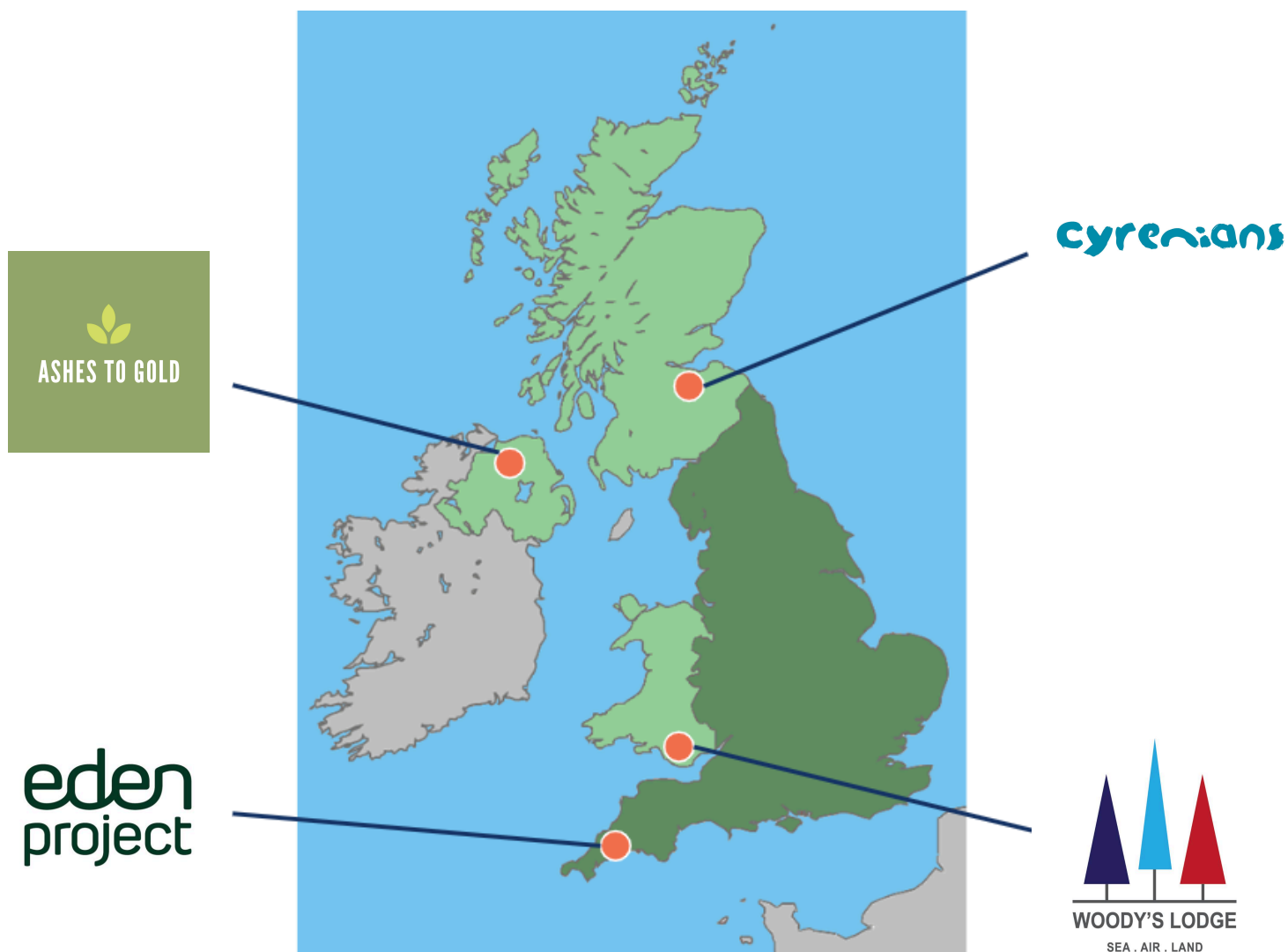


Figure 1: Location of the four TNP DGS gardens

Four gardens across the four nations were included in this evaluation:

- The Eden Project, Cornwall, ENGLAND
- Linburn Walled Garden, Midlothian, SCOTLAND
- Woody's Lodge, Barry, WALES
- Ashes to Gold, Ct Antrim, NORTHERN IRELAND



Eden Project, Cornwall, England

EDEN PROJECT is home to the dedicated Vounder Therapy Garden; set to one side of the Eden complex, it has its own access, creating a dedicated entry point to those joining the DGS Programme.



Linburn Walled Garden, Midlothian, Scotland

LINBURN is a historic and fully enclosed walled garden with a military history, found just on the outskirts of Edinburgh; here, DGS delivery is in partnership with Cyrenians and Sight Scotland.



Woody's Lodge, Barry, Wales

WOODY'S LODGE is a tri-service veterans' hub with daily activities and its own dedicated DGS garden; a secluded space at the edge of the beautiful community allotments with uninterrupted hill views.



Ashes to Gold, CT Antrim, Northern Ireland

ASHES TO GOLD sits in a beautiful 10-acre site, including woodland for walks and large productive polytunnels; ensuring the weather does not distract from DGS delivery.

2. Evaluation Methodology: Objectives and Methods of this Evaluation

Process

Neighbourly Lab deployed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews, ethnographic site visits and quantitative wellbeing surveys across four DGS gardens in the UK. This has produced a robust evidence base that conveys the value of the DGS programme and nature-based therapy in general.

This evaluation was informed by the operating model outlined in the DGS Concept Manual (2020), which serves as the foundational guide for programme delivery and evaluation across all participating gardens. The methodology followed the HM Treasury Green Book (2022) and Magenta Book (HM Treasury, 2020) standards to ensure rigor and transparency, emphasising informed consent, participant confidentiality and respect for lived experiences in all research phases. Together, these informed a methodology that enables individuals to share their lived experiences of the DGS programme, while supporting these narratives with measurable data from quantitative surveys.

This research evaluated the impact of the DGS programme on Veterans, Service Leavers and their families across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The sample included anonymised, ethically collected (by Neighbourly Lab) data from 97 beneficiaries, including both men and women and with ages ranging from 18 to 74 years old. Beneficiaries completed surveys (ONS 4 and SWEMWBS) in Week 2 and Week 9 which asked them to rate their satisfaction with life at that moment. Subsequent longitudinal ONS 4 data was collected between 8 and 18 months post-participation on the programme. Neighbourly Lab cleaned this data which was then analysed by our partners at PBE.

Together, this research has found the positive impacts, both emotionally and economically, of the programme.

This report synthesises the qualitative evaluation that was conducted as phased research, with semi-structured, in-depth interviews with practitioners and beneficiaries (carried out in person, online and via phone call) and site visits in Autumn 2023, Spring 2024, Autumn 2024 and Spring 2025. This approach allowed Neighbourly Lab to iterate the approach and delve deeper into the findings at each phase.

- Interviews with beneficiaries were not focused on their background and history but instead on their lives at the current moment and their experiences on the DGS programme. Questions centered around why they decided to take part in DGS, what they enjoy most about the programme, what impact they think it is having for them and how they see their future.
- Conversations with delivery teams and facilitators from each of the gardens encouraged staff to reflect on the successes and challenges of DGS. Insights about what could be changed or improved, the impact of DGS on the beneficiaries and the key components that drive these impacts emerged from these interviews.

3. Findings from the Qualitative Evaluation

As part of this evaluation, Neighbourly Lab has reviewed the DGS operating model and its application in a regional setting, the overall structure of the 10-week programme and the constituent components of individual sessions.

The DGS Operating Model

The DGS regional operating model is based upon an evidence-based conceptual model created from research during a MSc in Social and Therapeutic Horticulture and a Churchill Fellowship (2019) to the US and Scandinavia. It is a Hub-and-Spoke (H&S) model involving a central hub garden coordinating the activities of several community-based services that are linked to it like spokes on a wheel. DGS uses the H&S model to deliver community-based services across different sites. They deliver a structured, 10-week intervention for military personnel at ‘Hub’ gardens in programmed sessions twice a year and veteran only whilst also providing all-round support in community gardens supported by the Hub Garden that are not veteran-only.

This approach is aligned with guidance articulated in the 21st US Surgeon General’s Parting Prescription:

“Community is a powerful source of life satisfaction and life expectancy. These core pillars of community-relationships, service and purpose - are powerful drivers of fulfillment. They can also significantly influence health outcomes, including premature mortality, heart disease, depression and anxiety.”

(Hallegere Murthy, 2025)

A key component of the DGS model is its partnership with referral partners, ensuring safeguarding, case management and post-intervention support are in place. This model draws from international best practice from the Veterans’ Program at the Chicago Botanic Garden (Coulthard, 2020), which partners with Thresholds, Illinois’ largest provider of mental health services. The success of that partnership highlights the importance of integrating nature-based interventions with established clinical pathways to achieve sustainable outcomes.

“The open day is great for the garden to show referral partners what DGS is. After I went along, I understood that it wasn’t just gardening but instead is a valuable opportunity for the Veterans we work with. They have to show the right message so they target the people most at risk and who can benefit the most from the programme.”

Referral Partner

Programme Structure – The DGS programme is a 10-week, one four-hour session a week, balanced blend of practical horticultural skills and therapeutic outcomes, physical, cognitive, emotional and social. Programmes are led by a trained Social and Therapeutic Horticulturist supported by the head gardener at each Hub garden and delivered to small groups of eight. The ‘Spoke’ gardens are existing community gardens, within an hour’s radius of the Hub Garden which provides year-round,

informal community-based support for military personnel, either prior to attending the formal programme or after, as one of several progression opportunities.

“It’s great to have this as a model that anyone can use, wherever they are based. We know what’s been working, with how the programme and individual weeks are structured. It’s a great way to support Vet, especially when they’re recommended or referred through word of mouth - otherwise reaching out to Veterans can be difficult.”

Garden Manager

Overall, Neighbourly Lab observed two essential components of the programme structure:

Legacy Project

The opportunity for the group to design and build a legacy project is an integral part of the programme structure. This is significant because it enables individuals to contribute to something lasting, gaining a sense of ownership and pride over the garden. This sense of leaving a meaningful mark that will benefit others brings satisfaction, especially for individuals who have endured life-changing trauma and may feel disconnected from past sources of success. Along with gardening being a core element of the programme, it is also the social routine, getting out and about and feeling like you have a purpose, that has a beneficial impact on participants. This creates a strong connection to the garden afterwards because of what it has done for them, gardening plays a facilitatory tool.

Inclusivity

The research team were struck by how delivery teams promote inclusivity by adapting tasks and environments to ensure that all participants regardless of physical ability or injury can take part in the programme meaningfully. Rather than making Veterans feel limited or less than, practitioners work to create inclusive and enjoyable activities for all. For many Veterans, particularly those living with chronic pain, limited mobility, or disability, being unable to engage physically in traditional ways can be frustrating and demoralising. However, by designing environments and tasks that accommodate diverse needs, DGS practitioners foster a sense of purpose and belonging.

“I’ve been struggling with the fact I can’t do all the activities that they do. It frustrated me because I can’t bend down. But they adapt in an equitable way, which is handy. I fill in jobs others won’t do... stuff that I don’t need to kneel for. They’ve got high planters, 15ft long and I can weed away. Someone’s got to do it..”

Veteran, Linburn Walled Garden, Autumn 2024

The ten weeks are broken down into three phases:

→ Phase 1 – Weeks 1-3: Bedding In

Beneficiaries are getting to know one another and the practitioners. In this phase consistent attendance is important to ensure positive group dynamics are established. A session can include: a check-in about good, hard and hopeful experiences that the beneficiaries have had in the past week; some discussions about the effects of stress, anxiety and low mood on their minds and bodies; and teaching about wildflower planting. Practitioners often finish the sessions with mindfulness practice,

offering the space for beneficiaries to reflect on what they have experienced that day and establishing a calm environment for when they leave.

→ Phase 2 – Weeks 4-7 Becoming Grounded

Beneficiaries and practitioners have grown accustomed to the structure of the sessions and the group dynamics. It is during these few weeks that most of the ‘work’ is done. For example, at the beginning of the session, the practitioners guide the group in noticing features of their surrounding environment and the changes that are happening around them and inviting others to share their thoughts and reflections about what they have observed. Once the group has settled into each other and the environment, the practitioners invite the beneficiaries to take part in upkeep tasks like repotting plants; while doing these tasks, beneficiaries find the space to chat to each other and build connections. To finish, the practitioners offer a walk down to the river for them to share reflections on the session and what they are looking forward to in the coming week.

→ Phase 3 – Weeks 7-10 Looking Ahead/Progression

The final few weeks are focused on reflecting and then looking ahead. The emphasis here is on exploring possibilities for community- re- integration. The DGS team, most importantly the referral partner who is the case manager for the veteran, explores options for next steps, whether that is training, volunteering or employment. The goal is finding the right place for the individual on a case-by-case basis and is summed up as follows.

By Week 9, a strong sense of trust and camaraderie has developed between the beneficiaries and between the beneficiaries and the practitioners. This allows the practitioners to lead beneficiaries through a series of guided reflections, providing space for beneficiaries to have meaningful conversations about their experiences on the programme and more generally and for them to share as a group. Key to this phase is the transformation of what they have learnt and experienced on the programme into something they want to take into the future, including questions around what they would like to do after the programme. The practitioners also connect individuals to DGS Spoke gardens and other sources of support.

“The learning and skills that Veterans gain from the programme are really useful to help them think about what they want to do next. They realise they can do something with what they’ve already got and it’s important we work with them in this follow-on period.”

Referral Partner

A session structure of DGS individual weekly sessions of four hours is a balanced blend of 70% practical horticultural activities and 30% ensuring one or more therapeutic outcomes are achieved whether this is cognitive, physical, emotional, or social. Outcomes are delivered by supporting individuals in how to self- manage their own mental health whether that is reflection, journaling, mindfulness and breathing exercises.

Our research team noted two essential aspects of the sessions:

Lunch – Growing your own food, eating together and the social aspects of every DGS session are integral and fundamental to the impacts it imparts.

Certificate Session – The final session of any DGS programme always includes a visitor, chosen and agreed by the group to present individual certificates to each participant. Recognizing the achievements of everyone both within the group but also amongst family and friends is an important milestone for the delivery team and beneficiaries alike.

Certificate of Achievement

This certificate acknowledges that

Full Name

has been successful in completing the
DGS horticultural program at *garden,*
delivery partner

Sally Coulthard

Colonel Sally Coulthard MBE
Founder and Managing Director
Defence Gardens Scheme



Name
Position
Company

LOGO



**THE ARMED FORCES
COVENANT FUND TRUST**

4. The Impacts of the Programme

The key impacts of the DGS programme for beneficiaries from both a Neighbourly Lab and importantly a veteran participant perspective.

The Neighbourly Lab research team has seen the transformative power of DGS. Over the course of just 10 weeks, previously isolated and withdrawn individuals begin to trust, open and socially connect. With each cohort, remarkable growth occurs as veterans gain confidence, enhance their self-worth and feel empowered to take positive actions; whether by reconnecting with their communities, revitalising their gardens, volunteering locally, or even taking on a management role in one of the Spoke Gardens. For many, these benefits ripple far beyond the individual, positively affecting spouses, children, families and friends, who feel closer and more connected to their loved ones as a result. In this way DGS truly fulfils its mission of delivering Nature Based Therapy for the Armed Forces Community.

During the 10-week programme, we heard directly how DGS impacts individuals emotionally, socially and practically. Participants overwhelmingly described the programme as transformational, with many citing it as a lifeline for their mental health. The combination of practical gardening and knowledge, immersion in nature and peer support created an environment where participants could feel safe, valued and reconnected.



Figure 2. Three key impacts of the DGS programme

Individual Impact

Veterans, service leavers and their families experienced noticeable improvements in their mental health and emotional wellbeing because of the DGS programme. As a group that faces higher barriers to accessing traditional services and support, the impacts on beneficiaries across this evaluation is important to understanding the value of the DGS programme and taking learnings for further implementation and scalability.

We saw around a 1 point increase (on a 0-10 scale) in the ONS Life Satisfaction points for beneficiaries from Week 2 (5.4) to Week 9 (6.4) of the DGS programme. From this analysis, we can understand that in comparison to a similar group of people (please see the PBE report for full details of the data

comparison), the wellbeing of beneficiaries improved in the duration of the DGS programme. Although we cannot determine that the DGS programme is the sole cause for these changes, from our qualitative research we can see how beneficiaries attribute much of their improved wellbeing and mental health to the programme. They shared how the calm, structured but open environment and low intensity interventions from the delivery team positively affected their ability to connect to and open up with others, having impacts upon their lives outside of the programme. The combination of quantitative and qualitative data here is valuable as it suggests that beneficiaries of the DGS programme experienced improved mental health and quality of life, which connects to wider research showing the positive effects of natural, and wildlife-rich environments on mental health, loneliness and physical health (The Wildlife Trusts, 2023).

“They have permission again to ask questions and learn something, it’s an open forum to learn. Prior to becoming a Veteran, some perhaps were not given permission to ask questions/make mistakes - so this has helped them.”

DGS Delivery Team

These findings were further supported by the SWEMWBS data (a scale of 7-35), from which we also saw improvements in the mental wellbeing of beneficiaries of the DGS programme. Average scores in this measure increased by 1.1 points from 21.8 to 22.9 in the duration of the programme. Whilst there were improvements across the sub-items of the SWEMWBS measure, the most significant were for feeling relaxed and feeling closer to other people. The impact for beneficiaries was focused around their mental health, with minimal change in the proportion of those who marked their general health as ‘poor’. The proportion of beneficiaries stating that their mental health was impacting their day-to-day lives ‘all’ or ‘most’ of the time decreased from 35% to 23% between Week 2 and Week 9. This improvement in the mental wellbeing of beneficiaries of the DGS programme was reflected in our qualitative research. Many described how they gained a more positive headspace, feeling better equipped to manage the everyday stresses and emotional ups and downs of their lives. The programme provided a safe space where they could ground themselves, reflect and learn practical tools to manage anxiety and practice self-care. There was also an impact on how participants viewed their mental health - those who had previously been hesitant or dismissive of the idea of wellbeing support - and how they learned to build connections with others, impacting their relationships with friends and family beyond the programme.

Beneficiaries of the DGS programme shared how they witnessed their efforts take root, giving them a tangible sense of purpose and accomplishment, rekindling a sense of self-worth and boosting their confidence to explore and pursue their own interests and passions again. We also observed how the garden acts as a liminal space for these participants - disconnected from the rest of their lives, it is a consistent, safe space, to escape, open up and reconnect with themselves and others.

“The program significantly broadened my perspective. I started out with modest expectations, but by the end, I realised I was actively working toward my future goals. The experience reinforced my desire to work in the land-based sector and set me on a path to gain valuable qualifications that will support my career in fields like greenkeeping, wildlife consulting or organic farming.”

Veteran, Woody’s Lodge, Spring 2024

Neighbourly Lab have summarized over 30 interviews with veterans and found five key benefits of the programme from the perspective of the beneficiaries. This is **VOLSH**:

- **Veteran-only**
- **Outdoors**
- **Light touch**
- **Social connection**
- **Holistic**

Overall, these elements form a powerful intervention for the Veterans. No single element stands alone, but it is the interplay between them that creates such meaningful outcomes for Veterans, Service Leavers and their families at different points in their recovery. For many on the programme, this is the first time they have felt safe and seen in many years. Being on the DGS programme has allowed them to build up an informal peer support network - helping them to rebuild their identity, break the cycle of social withdrawal and establish healthier routines and habits.

Veteran-only

Having an environment that is just for Veterans, supported participants to feel safe and granted reassurance that they didn't have to explain themselves or their behaviour. Being in a Veteran-only environment creates a sense of camaraderie, understanding and acceptance. Participants found comfort in being with others who had similar experiences and were able to bond and offer each other mutual support.

What makes this work:

Veterans appreciated not having to constantly explain their experiences, which helps ease them into the programme and build up trust towards each other. Being surrounded by like-minded people reinforces the sense of a safe space and the exchanging military sense of humour creates connection and trust. This camaraderie allows Veterans to open and feel understood. Participants described the deep comfort of being around people who 'just get it'. This sense of shared experience created immediate rapport and reduced social anxieties. There was a huge emphasis on the benefits of veterans being together, being around like-minded people which validated their experiences. Seeing people who are in a similar situation to them is comforting.

"I had become isolated, and I found a lot of comfort in the garden...I was interested in the well-being aspect but I also wanted to go and meet other individuals who have suffered PTSD. I find it therapeutic to sit in a garden and speak to people, you are surrounded by people who are all equal."

Veteran, Ashes to Gold, Autumn 2024

Over the course of the programme, many Veterans began to function as a team again, opening up, supporting each other and re-learning how to trust others. Being with like-minded Veterans creates an unspoken code of conduct; there is no need to explain yourself or relive painful stories unless you want to. The banter and casual interactions mean participants don't have to be overly polite or 'walk on eggshells,' which creates a relaxed and genuine atmosphere.

“Over the course of the programme, they get stronger in every way - a massive part of this is that Vets start to become a team and have conversations.”

Garden Manager

Outdoors

Being able to spend time outdoors allows participants to connect with nature again. It offers them an opportunity to slow down in a safe and peaceful space to truly appreciate the natural beauty that surrounds them. The programme provides a unique opportunity to give Veterans the time and permission to connect with the outside world and nature.

What makes this work:

Being outdoors offers a chance to disconnect from daily stress and reconnect with their surroundings in a gentle, grounding way.

“Being in nature you enjoy what the earth has got to offer you, it's more emphasised on the programme, you see the veg growing...flowers...I see the relaxing side, laying under trees and listening to birds. We used to do that in the army and it slowed me down. You remember how happy you were being outside and this programme reminds you how important it is to be outside.”

Veteran, Ashes to Gold, Spring 2024

Growing food and watching seeds be planted in the early weeks transform into fruit and vegetables over the 10 weeks provides a powerful metaphor for growth. This physical, visible progress reinforces a sense of and hope as well as achievement.

Light touch

The programme is built to be flexible and light touch, the way it is delivered was highlighted as being a step away from a militaristic and regimented environment, enabling the beneficiaries to switch from 'doing' to 'being'.

What makes this work:

The programme has been praised for its flexible delivery approach, there are options around which activities to engage - in a complete juxtaposition to the militaristic environment, the semi-structured environment is welcomed.

“You can sit in a quiet area, and you're not forced to do anything. It's excellent. For a lot of people with mental health problems, having no pressure makes all the difference.”

DGS Delivery Team

The programme offers a sense of rhythm and consistency without being too rigid. This semi-structured routine provides a consistency for them each week, giving participants something to look forward to without overwhelming them. It gently reintroduces structure into their lives, which many have lost due to extreme isolation and loneliness. As a result of the DGS programme, activities feel manageable for them.

“I think the programme has caught my anxiety down already, to a 7, if the same things happen again by the end of [the programme], I will be a 3..it will be a miracle. The invisible medication. It's a distraction...it distracts me from my thoughts and makes me feel at one with nature and meeting lovely people.”

Veteran, Linburn Walled Garden, Spring 2024

Social connection

The programme offers participants the opportunity to connect with others socially again where they foster meaningful relationships with one another and share their experiences without judgement. The programme offers an oblique opportunity for participants to form social connections whether they be small and short-lasting or in-depth and enduring. Many participants are experiencing isolation or loneliness, and they have seen this be massively improved throughout the course of the programme. Connection is not always vocal/chatting but even just being in the presence of others has decreased perceptions of isolation.

What makes this work:

The programme is delivered in a gentle and relaxed pace which helps ease beneficiaries' anxiety. The low-pressure approach and calm environment helps the Veterans engage comfortably with the programme at their own pace; conversations can unfold naturally and relationships can grow over time. Many participants highlighted that a sense of security and psychological safety was a key reason that the programme helped them. They often felt a sense of relief that no one asks them too many questions or expects them to retell and relive their story. The informality of conversations and the ability to 'banter' with each other without needing to 'walk on eggshells', creates a safe space for Veterans. For many of the participants, this alleviated some of the anxiety they experienced going into the programme.

“The best part is the people, I am mixing with people and everyone here is the same. We're all in the same place so we don't have to explain ourselves to anyone, we can make the same jokes and no one bats an eye. I was very isolated before the programme but have experienced a complete transformation. I've made friends here so I can now expand on this socially and feel confident to meet new people.”

Veteran, Woody's Lodge, Autumn 2023

Holistic

The programme offers a holistic approach, through incorporating an array of activities like mindfulness and grounding exercises, participants build up their confidence in gardening/horticulture but also reconnect with nature through being intentional in the space. The programme also integrates both the physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual aspects of an individual's life allowing all of these elements to interact with one another to positively impact a Veterans overall health and wellbeing.

What makes this work:

The DGS programme offers a holistic experience that nurtures both practical skills and personal wellbeing. Through hands-on learning such as food production, cooking and woodwork, participants

gain a sense of achievement and create tangible outcomes that build confidence and self-reliance. At the same time, the programme provides a safe and supportive space where individuals - many for the first time - can open up and connect with others without judgment. Complementing these elements are gentle, restorative practices such as grounding, breathwork, mindfulness and tension release, which encourage relaxation and balance as a counterpoint to regimented or high-pressure lifestyles. Together, these aspects make the DGS programme a uniquely supportive environment for growth, healing and self-discovery.

“The therapist pointed us to look out for sticks and using the four sticks to create a square, we had to find as many things as possible in that square. It was nature itself and seeing all sorts of things helped with mindfulness and made me feel at one.”

Veteran, Woody’s Lodge, Autumn 2023

“They’ve done quite a lot of physical activities, but they’re also given options – some spend time cooking, others chatting and then there are the physical tasks. For example, today they were making pergolas to support the sweet peas, while three of them went off to do woodworking.”

DGS Delivery Team

Social Impact

As VOLSH showed, not only did our research team observe, but veterans themselves rated the social aspect of the DGS programme very highly. The programme helps participants to reconnect with peers, family and their wider Veteran communities. After long periods of isolation, mistrust and social anxiety, the programme has created a safe space for Veterans to create genuine connections especially for those who were initially hesitant to engage. For many Veterans:

“Meeting and mixing with people is scary, when I go to the sessions, I don't really want to go...it’s like going to the dentist.”

Veteran, Linburn Walled Garden, Spring 2024

Despite this reluctance, many found themselves easing into the programme as the weeks went on. Being around others with similar experiences helped them feel understood. Informal moments such as sharing lunch around the fire pit and a cup of tea proved powerful in breaking down barriers and creating a space to form genuine connections. Some participants were also coming out of spells of extreme social isolation and struggling with low trust have undergone a full transformation where they are learning to network and meet with others again. DGS has allowed people to talk again and open up, the barriers that had built up over time are slowly coming down as the weeks progress.

“The best thing about it is it reconnects people to their Veteran community and builds their confidence to connect more with the outside world.”

Veteran, Woody’s Lodge, Autumn 2023

The impact of the programme extended beyond the Veterans, also influencing their home life and relationships. Veterans' renewed confidence and emotional openness often led to improved relationships with family members. One participant's wife reflected:

“My husband going on the programme changed my life. I wanted my husband to get his confidence back and it helped me in the way that I am living through what he is living through, and it was also beneficial to our other family members.”

Veteran, Ashes to Gold, Autumn 2023

In many cases, partners and families have experienced the emotional effects of this too and the programme in a sense helped rebuild family bonds and promote healing at home and within their personal relationships. See the more detailed stories of Wayne and Lyndsay (Case Study C and E respectively).

Practical Impact

A key element of the DGS programme is the impact of the natural environment on participants' wellbeing. For Veterans, Service Leavers and their families, the programme fostered a new sense of appreciation for nature, allowing them the space to notice the small details that often go unseen. The activities on the programme provided them with new interests and allowed them to immerse themselves into the outdoors and connect with nature. Many experienced how nature can become a space for mindfulness and can foster a connection between individuals and the environment they're in, helping them to learn tools to manage their emotions.

“One participant had an incident in his life whilst he was on the programme and there's no way he would've coped without the tools he'd learned. Using those techniques, he learned how to manage his mental health, he's slowly finding his way back.”

Horticultural Therapist, Autumn 2024

Participants felt that they benefited significantly from the practical elements of the programme, including woodworking, germinating seeds and looking after plants - skills which they have later been able to take into their daily lives. Case studies of Cole and Brent illustrate this benefit. Many found the knowledge about conservation and about healthy eating particularly beneficial, encouraging them to re-engage with parts of their lives they felt far away from. Overall, the programme's ability to upskill Veterans is especially important, DGS provides participants with knowledge and skills that they can see have practical benefits for themselves. For example, some have taken their experiences gardening and learning from a horticultural specialist and developed their skills further, turning them into future career opportunities.

“A highlight was the practical work - using fallen wood to build benches and a table. Seeing the finished product was deeply satisfying.”

Veteran, Eden Project, Spring 2024

5. Analysis of the Findings

As the Neighbourly Lab team visited and, in some cases, revisited gardens and interviewed beneficiaries as part of this ethnographic and immersive qualitative evaluation, research team members started to reflect and analyse on how and why DGS consistently receives such powerful and inspiring feedback from beneficiaries as well as deliver the clear benefits as shown by the positive changes to the wellbeing scores. The team have concluded that it is the underpinning ethos of DGS that is People, Place and Purpose and its application to all DGS operations from the outset which is key to the transformative impact the programme has on its beneficiaries. It really is as the Case Study (D) from Cole says: ‘invisible medication’ perhaps a true Transformational Nature-Based Prescription

People, Place and Purpose was recommended to the DGS founder by the Green Care lead at the Royal College of Psychiatrists and which defines an enabling environment for the purposes of supporting the restoration of mental health as:

“A place where people can develop, grow and flourish. They are places where people live, work or come together for a specific purpose.”

(Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2019)

The application to the DGS model is as follows:

People: Having an environment that is just for Veterans enables them to feel safe and supported. The shared experiences, sense of humour and common vocabulary removes the fear of not being understood or judged - validating their experiences and enabling them to open up to the benefits the therapeutic component of the programme provides.

Throughout the research team’s visits, they observed an unspoken code of conduct. Many participants highlighted that a sense of security and psychological safety was a key reason that the programme helped them. They often felt a sense of relief that no one asks them too many questions or expects them to retell and relive their story. The informality of conversations and the ability to ‘banter’ with each other without needing to ‘walk on eggshells’ creates a safe space for Veterans and alleviates some of their anxiety around participating.

Place: From being immersed into the programme, Neighbourly Lab saw first hand the transformative power of the outdoors and how nature can become a space for mindfulness and improving mental wellbeing. We can appreciate how spending time outdoors fosters a connection between individuals and the environment they are in. We also observed how the garden acts as a liminal space for these participants - disconnected from the rest of their lives, it is a consistent, safe space, to escape, open up and reconnect with themselves and others. In this way, the connection is not just with nature, but can be developed with others in the space, creating a sense of community and belonging.

The way the gardens are set up plays a key role in creating a dynamic and engaging environment. With varied features like digging spots, a fireplace and multiple activities spread throughout the space, participants can move freely and choose tasks that suit their mood or ability. This thoughtful

setup fosters a sense of exploration and comfort, making the garden not just a workspace but a welcoming place that supports connection, relaxation and purposeful activity.

“The garden is a beautiful place to be, it’s quiet and secluded. Most importantly, the Veterans don’t feel like they’re in a clinical environment and so feel more comfortable being there.”

Referral Partner

Purpose: Side-by-side horticulture acts as a unifying purpose, bridging differences and acting as a conduit for meaningful connection among participants. Beyond creating connections, gardening also imparts valuable knowledge and skills. Over the 10-week programme, participants witness their efforts take root, giving them a tangible sense of purpose and accomplishment, rekindling a sense of self-worth for many and opening doors for future opportunities. The legacy project holds deep significance. By contributing to something lasting, participants gain a sense of ownership and pride over the garden. This sense of leaving a meaningful mark that will benefit others brings satisfaction, especially for individuals who have endured life-changing trauma and may feel disconnected from past sources of success.

The programme is designed by balancing individual and joint activities, as well as blending structure with freedom, Veterans are given the space to choose how they engage. Many tasks carry powerful symbolism of change and renewal, for example the idea of growth through planting, which closely align with therapeutic metaphors, reminding participants that what may seem dormant or broken can come back to life. These activities are more than just “work”; they hold emotional meaning and provide a non-verbal way for Veterans to process their recovery journey. An example is seen in the variety of tasks offered at the Eden Project during Week 2.

“They’ve done quite a lot of physical activities, but they’re also given options — some spend time cooking, others chatting and then there are the physical tasks. For example, today they were making pergolas to support the sweet peas, while three of them went off to do woodworking.”

DGS Delivery Team

Overall, NL found that some participants arrive with a passion for horticulture, although not that many, some participants do not have an interest in gardening itself, and it is not the main factor that keeps them coming back. What matters more for some is the social routine, the structure and the sense of being part of something again. Gardening becomes a facilitatory tool rather than the core outcome; it provides a shared activity that supports teamwork and social connection.

Beyond these 3 P’s, Neighbourly Lab has found that the role of the practitioners in delivery is key. While the physical environment and programme design are vital, it is the practitioners who breathe life into the programme and enhance its therapeutic power. This evaluation found:

The Role of the Practitioner: At the heart of each session is the role of the trained horticultural therapist who can gauge the tone and emotional vulnerabilities and capacities of each participant, often very early on in the programme. They can also sense emotional undercurrents even when nothing is said directly, steering the topics of conversation when needed. Participants noted that the practitioners can often notice withdrawal in some participants and gently re-engage individuals.

Participants feel very comfortable and at ease, which is largely because of the way in which the staff structure the session. We found an example of good practice of this at the Eden Project in Cornwall. At the very beginning of the session, the practitioners do a contracting/code of conduct with beneficiaries. This practice lays the foundation for the programme, ensuring that everyone remains respectful to each other and setting ground rules that allows everyone to feel safe and reassured to share what they wish to.

NL was impressed to find that all the practitioners meet monthly to share best practice and receive peer support as well as benefitting from clinical supervision throughout all DGS programmes. Practitioners are not only supported by each other but are managed and supported by the DGS National Operations Manager who routinely engages with practitioners and visits DGS delivery partner gardens and their managers. From our visits and throughout this evaluation NL have observed how the 4 P's are consistently embedded in the design and delivery of not only each session but also the overall programme, and as a result create the conditions for deep engagement and long-term transformation.

“The staff are brilliant, they could not do enough for you, they get to know you and speak to you individually... The therapist breaks things down into minute detail if you don't understand...he also says horticulture is not 100% things go wrong, not everything works straight away.”

Veteran, Eden Project, Spring 2025

Challenges within GSP

While this evaluation demonstrates the transformative impact of the DGS model, it is important to situate the programme within the wider GSP landscape, where sustainability remains a significant systemic challenge. The National Evaluation of the Preventing and Tackling Mental Ill Health through Green Social Prescribing programme (Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University, 2023) highlights both the promise of nature-based interventions and the structural fragility created by short-term funding cycles. Like many social prescribing initiatives, DGS operates within a complex ecosystem of referral partners, case managers and progression pathways. Considerable time and trust are required to establish effective referral routes into the programme and meaningful onward pathways into volunteering, training or employment.

However, without sustained three-year funding, there is a risk that this carefully constructed infrastructure can become destabilised. Where a programme such as DGS sits centrally within a local pathway, any interruption in funding does not only affect delivery; it risks weakening referral confidence, disrupting participant progression and eroding the wider partnership network that has been intentionally developed. This challenge is not unique to DGS but reflects a broader tension within social prescribing policy, where strategic ambitions for preventative, community-based mental health support must be matched by longer-term commissioning frameworks to ensure continuity, stability and system-wide impact.

The evidenced based and structured 10-week programme, the individual, social and practical elements of DGS service delivery, combined with the detailed benefits veterans described in VOLSH create a sense of safety and security, comradeship and peer support and encourage genuine interaction and self-growth. Neighbourly Lab found that the impact of the DGS programme can be directly attributed to the founding core principles of People, Place and Purpose, but it is the alchemy that is the Practitioner which transforms these ingredients into the consistently successful delivery model observed in this study. The following case studies highlight the positive impacts of DGS service delivery.

6. Case Studies

Case study A: Brent

From unsure to conservationist, Brent found new purpose through DGS

Brent is a Royal Marine (RM) who sustained life changing injuries in service. While he was in recovery at Haslar, the RM recovery centre, he discovered DGS at Eden. Intrigued but unsure of what to expect, he decided to join the 10-week programme, which became a transformative experience.

Initially, Brent viewed DGS as a simple wellbeing programme, a way to spend Wednesdays. However, as he progressed it became much more. Immersing himself in the hands-on activities, Brent found a new sense of purpose. He networked with like-minded individuals, gained practical skills, and developed insights into his interests and abilities. The structured sessions, coupled with the therapeutic benefits of working outdoors, reignited his passion for the environment and gave him a clear sense of direction for his career. Health and Safety had always been an area of interest, but he had been uncertain about which specific path to pursue. During the penultimate session, everything crystallised: being outdoors, collaborating with people, and engaging in activities like cooking, gardening, and woodwork brought him a profound sense of calm and fulfillment that he wanted to carry into his professional life. Reflecting on his time as a RM, Brent recognised how his military experiences had always intertwined with environmental protection, whether preserving greenery, minimising footprints during deployments, or planting memorial gardens to honor fallen soldiers. DGS harnessed and focused these experiences, helping him pinpoint a passion for environmental health and safety as the next chapter in his career. For Brent, this was one of the most profound impacts:



'I've got a place I can fit in, I've found a purpose... and the Defence Garden Scheme really helped me channel my interest. I'm really excited about it.'

Finally, the certificate ceremony was also a poignant moment for Brent. Having members of the DGS leadership team join them to present certificates and celebrate their achievements gave him a profound sense of wellbeing, pride and togetherness. Reflecting on the experience, he shared,

"It shows that people do care at the top and the leadership cascades down to the very people who are planting the bulbs in the ground."

Case study B: Kevin

Isolated and withdrawn, over time, Kevin became confident, engaged and optimistic.

After spending nearly two years largely housebound and socially withdrawn, Kevin described feeling like a 'hermit. He was introduced to DGS through his social prescriber, he thought:

“Yeah, this is where I'd like to be.”

Although initially nervous about meeting new people, the welcoming, non-pressurised atmosphere quickly helped him settle in. The programme was fully accessible, with many activities adaptable to seated participation which is something that made a real difference to his experience.



“I've done a lot of sitting down tasks such as weaving baskets, green woodworking. You're never forced into anything, and that means a lot for people with mental health problems.”

Over time, his confidence returned. He describes the experience as transformative:

“It gave me a new lease of life. I'd been indoors for nearly two years; it was a chance to meet new people and learn new things. It has been a lifesaver.”

Kevin stayed connected to the garden returning for every season, enrolling in an RHS Level 1 horticulture course, and becoming a regular volunteer. He now offers peer support to other Veterans, including those with mobility challenges.

“There's a guy in a wheelchair on the programme, I was happy to go sit with him, show him how to sow seeds. That sort of peer support makes people feel more comfortable. Especially with mental health and knowing someone else has come out the other side, it gives you confidence in yourself.”

Today he describes himself as more confident, engaged, and optimistic. He continues to pursue learning and volunteering opportunities with The Eden Project and credits DGS and then Eden with a deep shift in his mental health and outlook:

“I used to have black thoughts. Now I don't. It's opened me up again to normal society. I've stopped feeling sorry for myself. Life is worth living.”

Case study C: Wayne

Once sceptical, Wayne found quiet strength and reflection alongside fellow veterans- turning the soil and his own past.

Wayne is a retired veteran with over four decades of military service. After a difficult transition out of the military, he was initially sceptical about the programme, only joining after encouragement from his wife who framed it as a gardening course. He was unsure about the relevance of gardening or group work to his life. Some of the more reflective elements, such as mindfulness exercises, initially made him feel uncomfortable.

“I cannot hide that I didn’t want to do it...it goes against my thinking. Sitting with your back against the tree...standing and using thoughts... I am more of a realist.”



Whilst some of the mindfulness activities did not resonate with him. The gardening activities, peer conversations, and gentle structure gave him practical skills, a sense of purpose, and quietly transformative.

Since completing the programme, Wayne has experienced improved emotional regulation, a more positive outlook, and stronger family relationships.

“My family said I am calmer, they see a more relaxed person, I have been able to accept my circumstances and move on from that and build on what I have.”

He also describes it as a vital first step in beginning to process aspects of his past:

“It gave me strength in my mind to deal with the past.”

He now actively recommends the programme to others and believes initiatives like this should be offered during military resettlement. He has expressed interest in supporting future programmes, helping others take that first step as he once did.

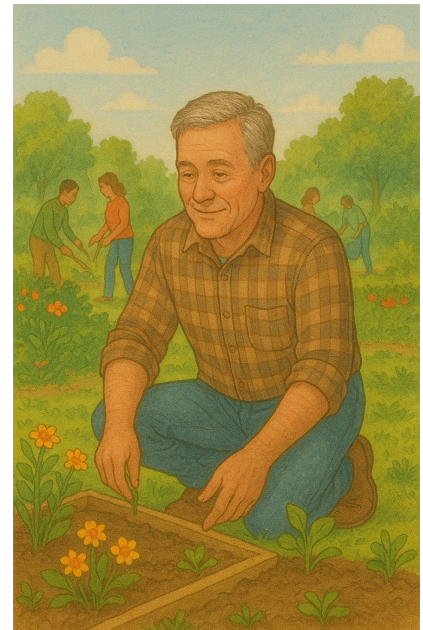
Case Study D: Cole

After years of loneliness, Cole discovered that fresh air, friendship and gardening could be an invisible medication.

Cole is a Veteran who has suffered with depression, anxiety and PTSD for many years. He shared how he feels that these conditions have led him to distance himself from his friends and family.

“I am not someone that has hobbies, that has friends, [I find] meeting and mixing with people scary.”

In the past, he often found that courses focused on therapeutic support were overwhelming, describing the feeling as *‘like going to the dentist’*. However, joining the DGS programme has been transformative for him.



Cole has experienced many benefits of being on the programme, for example being outdoors, where he can breathe fresh air, weed the flower beds and plant vegetables has given him a sense of purpose and brought him joy. *“I feel like I am creating something, sowing seeds for the future.”* For Cole the experience has also been enriched by being amongst others facing similar challenges.

“I am mixing with other people likewise, with problems much the same as what I have got and what I have been dealing with.”

Cole has said that since being on the programme, his anxiety has dropped and he looks forward to attending every week.

Looking forward, Cole plans to volunteer for the next cohort to help more people going through similar challenges. The programme empowered him to move past years of isolation, and he now feels a sense of purpose and connection. He expresses that, for the first time, he feels like he is on a *“straight road”* toward a fulfilling life and recovery. Which further highlights not only the connective power of the programme, to self and to nature, but the power of community and nature-based therapy.

“I wasted a lot of my life and this is the first time now I feel like I'm on the straight road... I wish I had come across this earlier.”

The final case study has been selected because it illustrates that although the TNP evaluation has focused on military veterans as the core community of DGS service delivery, the programme also positively benefits their families. Lyndsay's story is an example where direct support to a military spouse has equal benefit, again not just for her but for the wider family dynamic.

Case study E: Lyndsay

With support to care for herself, Lyndsay now sees her husband calmer and her daughter thriving. The whole family is growing stronger together.

Lyndsay's life has been deeply shaped by military culture, both through a past relationship and through her marriage to her husband, whose own life has been affected by intergenerational trauma and emotional repression.

At the time of the programme, Lyndsay's family was going through a really challenging time. Her daughter was struggling with self-harm, and her husband was emotionally shut down, and Lyndsay was absorbing it all. She describes feeling like she was in a war zone at home, emotionally and mentally exhausted, trying to control or fix everyone else's problems. The programme offered her a chance to slow down.



“There was a guy in a wheelchair, and I immediately went to make him tea. The therapist pulled me aside and said, ‘That’s not your job here. It’s not your job to fix him, we’re here to do that.’ That hit me. I had to step back and realise that helping others starts with helping yourself. That was the biggest step I’ve ever taken.”

In the first three months since completing the programme, Lyndsay says she regained her independence. She also learned how to establish emotional boundaries, how to stop taking responsibility for everyone else's pain.

“Now I feel like I can have a voice. Before I was a mother, a sister, not Lyndsay. It taught me to stop shielding everyone from the fire. That’s not strength, that’s self-destruction. I used to need to know why everything was happening. But now, I’ve let go of that. I can’t fix everything, and I don’t need to. Before, I would explode, but now I can talk and breathe through it.”

Since completing the programme, Lyndsay has learned to model emotional regulation for her family using practical tools she still relies on. A year later, she describes herself as thriving:

“I don’t feel like a mushroom anymore, sitting in the dark. I’ve got a voice again. I’m not just carrying guilt or pain, I’m living. We laugh in the house again. I’ve learned to listen, to give people time without trying to fix them. Just being there is enough.”

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

Neighbourly Lab has seen first-hand how the Defence Gardens Scheme provides a restorative and transformative model of nature-based therapy for Veterans and Service Leavers. The programme's ability to foster hope and connection through the combination of practical horticultural skills and therapeutic tools has positively impacted the lives of the beneficiaries. This evaluation found four elements that create a supportive space where participants feel safe to open up, build trust and experience personal growth:

- **Positive Impact** - The programme has a positive impact on the mental health of many Veterans, Service Leavers and their families.
- **Blended holistic programme** - The balanced blend of horticultural tasks and social, cognitive, physical and emotional therapeutic outcomes that make up the DGS programme combine to play a critical role in delivering impact to beneficiaries.
- **Veterans' perspective** - Veterans identified five key benefits of the programme (VOLSH).
- **Practitioner** - The role of the trained and experienced practitioner is key.

By combining safe and inclusive outdoor spaces with meaningful activities, peer connection and skilled facilitation, DGS has consistently delivered lasting improvements in wellbeing, confidence, and social connectedness. Participants described the programme as a “lifeline” that reduced anxiety, rebuilt purpose, and strengthened family and community bonds.

To build on this impact, we recommend:

1. **Specific:** Secure long-term funding to expand and strengthen referral pathways, ensuring clear referral criteria. This recommendation aligns with findings from the National Evaluation of the Preventing and Tackling Mental Ill Health through Green Social Prescribing programme (2023), which identified multi-year investment as essential to embedding referral infrastructure, partnership confidence and sustainable impact within local health systems.
2. **Measurable:** Track participant wellbeing and engagement through standardised tools (SWEMWBS and ONS4) and record attendance, progression, and follow-up outcomes at set intervals.
3. **Attainable:** Build on the proven Hub-and-Spoke model to scale delivery efficiently while using existing academic and evaluation partnerships to maintain evidence quality.
4. **Relevant:** Strengthen onward progression routes for programme participants while aligning with UK Green Social Prescribing and Armed Forces wellbeing priorities.
5. **Time-bound:** Run and review each 10-week programme cycle biannually, with participant follow-up at 6–12 months to evaluate sustained impact and inform future delivery.

In short, DGS has proven itself to be an effective, scalable, and life-changing intervention. With secure investment and strategic integration into mainstream provision, it has the potential to play a vital role in enabling Veterans and their families to thrive.

“DGS-is providing fresh air, friendship and gardening: an invisible medication.”

8. Acknowledgements

This evaluation represents the collective efforts of many people who have contributed their time, expertise and insight to the evaluation of the Defence Gardens Scheme (DGS) over the past two and a half years.

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Our sincere thanks also go to the Veterans, Service Leavers, and family members who shared their experiences with honesty and courage. Their stories and reflections have been central to understanding the impact of this programme and to shaping the insights presented in this report.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge our evaluation partners—Edinburgh Napier University Military Research Hub and Pro Bono Economics—for their collaboration, rigour, and commitment to building the evidence base for nature-based therapy within the Armed Forces community.

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