

ANNUAL OUTCOME REPORT 2023



CULTIVATING COMMUNITY

*supporting loneliness and
isolation through nature based
connection*

NOT FOR PROFIT COMPANY
NUMBER: 12114130



CONTENT

This report showcases our work in 2023 and some of our outcomes over the last 4 years as we have grown as a social enterprise.

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MESSAGE FROM THE FOUNDER DIRECTOR

2023 was a important year for us with the opening of a new site, an out- door seasonal cafe in Victoria Park, Frome. Our new community café, quickly became a beloved gathering spot, exceeding all our expectations.

It was a truly collaborative effort with significant support from Frome Town Council and the National Lottery that enabled us to increase both our outreach and accessibility. The venture did stretch our team and presented a steep learning curve. However, it has significantly contributed to our growth and financial stability, setting a solid foundation for future expansion of our programming and community engagement.



The importance of connecting with and connecting in nature has never been more relevant as we navigate through an increasingly digital and urbanised world. Its the cornerstone of the work that we do in alleviating loneliness and isolation. The Centre for Mental Health modelling predicts that up to 10 million people across England (almost 20% of the population) will need either new or additional mental health support as a direct consequence of the crises we are currently living.

By engaging with the natural world, whether through hiking in the forests, gardening in our backyards, or simply pausing for a coffee in a beautiful park, it is well evidence that we can enhance our physical well-being, and mental health. Sixty percent of the carbon footprint of NHS primary care is due to prescribed medicine, if nature based connection and green social prescribing can be part of the solution in reducing some prescriptions for people it could have a profound environmental impact.

We are excited to share some of our outcomes over the last few years with you

Dr Sam Evans, Managing Director

ABOUT US

We are a social enterprise providing nature-based activities and therapeutic horticulture programs to alleviate the health and well-being effects of loneliness, whether as a result of social, economic, geographic, or generational isolation.

1. Supporting vocational & experiential learning by young adults, especially those with disabilities to improve their employability and participation in society
2. Providing welcoming outdoor hubs that encourage people to connect and socialise
3. Improving the physical and mental wellbeing through nature connection

We have two sites: the Walled Garden at Mells which is a community plant nursery, and a seasonal outdoor community cafe in Victoria Park, Frome. Although we are a not for profit organisation we strongly believe in being financially self sufficient and reducing our need to apply for grants so we have both trading and program activities

TRADING

WALLED GARDEN NURSERY

With the help of our participant gardeners and volunteers we grow, care for, and sell approx 5500 cottage garden perennial plants and herbs each year. Many of the plants we grow feature in the garden beds and it gives people the opportunities to learn how to seed, split, and propagate cuttings from the garden. We also work with small local microgrowers who may not have a traditional pathway to market to stock their plants. Our Shed Shop sells and supports locally made garden/ craft products to give local producers an avenue to market to improve local rural economic resilience.

VICTORIA PARK CAFE

Our outdoor cafe in Victoria Park offers a welcoming space where everyone is welcome. The cafe opens everyday from 8-5pm from the beginning of April until the end of October. We sell cakes, coffee, icecreams and some hot snacks to go. With a covered area to sit in when it rains and a loose play pod on site for children it has become a meeting place of different people and groups to convene in open spaces and maximise the use of the park for health and wellbeing. The cafe is staffed by volunteers, pupils and young adults that need supportive work environments to develop employment skills.

WALLED GARDEN PROGRAMS

WORKSKILLS LEARNING

Work Skills Development: Our weekly sessions run by our therapeutic horticulturist currently work with two local schools providing gardening based sessions for young people with learning challenges. Supported by volunteer gardeners these sessions promote intergenerational learning.

OUTDOOR LEARNING

Workshops: We run a number of low or no cost workshops on a range of nature-based activities and gardening skills. Working in partnership with Somerset Skills and Learning we run 5 week courses in Art and Wellbeing, Nature photography and weaving.

SOCIAL CONNECTION

Talking Cafe: We support monthly signposting drop-in sessions with Frome Health Connectors.

WHY Grow: For several years we have run a monthly bereavement gardening session in collaboration with We Hear You that uses the life and death cycle of the seasons to help participants reflect on their grief journey.

Connect and Grow: Our core therapeutic programs are three weekly sessions for those with mental and physical health challenges. We use adaptive gardening techniques working with participants that are referred by Village Agents, Mental Health Support workers, local community groups and Health Connectors. In addition people will self refer.

Wild Memories: This weekly drop-in session ran by FrogLife and supports people experiencing memory loss or dementia to participate in nature based activities.



VICTORIA PARK PROGRAMS

WORKSKILLS LEARNING

Work Skills Development: Weekly sessions supporting young adults with autism to gain work and team skills experience in catering placements.

OUTDOOR LEARNING

Grow Your Own seed workshops supported 24 children to learn to plant and grow seeds.

Weekly Art Sessions: Free craft sessions for people of all ages, utilising donated resources from the Pod. This has brought in an unexpected intergenerational element.

SOCIAL CONNECTION

Chatty Café: Every Thursday, there is a designated table where anyone can come and have a friendly chat over a cup of tea with volunteers.

Host a Space: Community groups including Home Schooling families have begun to use the cafe space for regular activities and meetups.

Sunday Story Time: Volunteers share stories with an intergenerational audience. Young children, as well as seniors with dementia, have been regular attendees.

Christmas Day: We opened for a free community event Christmas morning for anyone on their own or wanting company. Approximately 350 people came out with their dogs in Christmas jumpers to connect and socialise.

SOCIAL CONNECTION

Daily Play Pod: A large box of specially chosen scrap items are made available for all ages. These resources have been transformed by the users into an array of playful items - from hammocks to space rockets, trains to fitness weights. In collaboration with The POD.

Sports Fun: A summer programme run in collaboration with SSAP saw 123 young people participate in school holiday activities in the Park bringing a real vibrancy to the space.

At risk outreach: With a funding grant Avon and Somerset Police fund we have been doing youth engagement in the park to reduce antisocial behaviour. Local police have noted that crime incidents in the park are lower in 2023. While its difficult to determine if there is any causal link with us opening the cafe and other measures such as increased CCTV coverage, our working relationships with the police and befriending the younger users of the park appears to be creating a safer and more welcoming space.

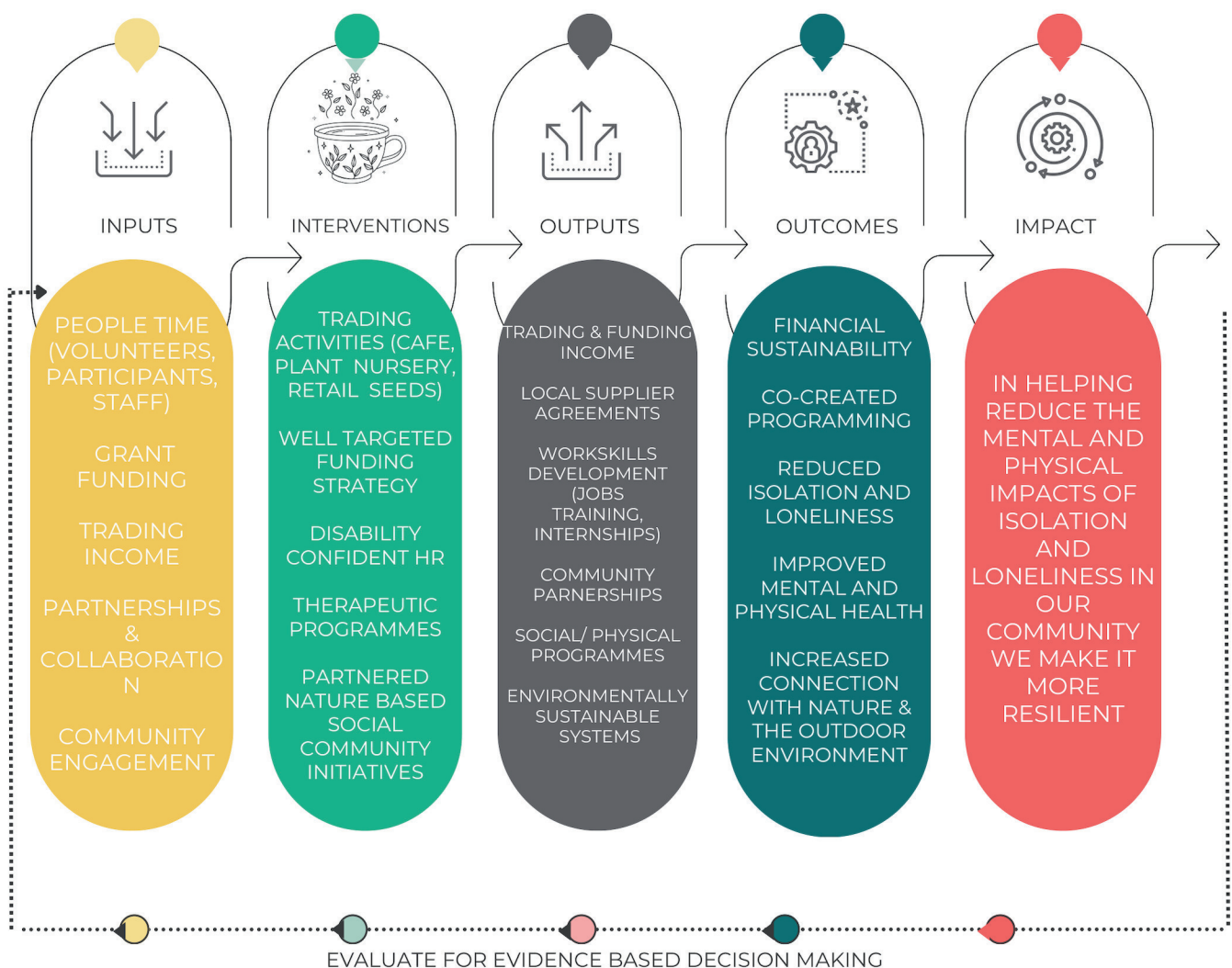
Supporting Park Gatherings: We supported a number of community events in the Park including Vegan Day, Refugee Picnic, Green Weekend, Neighbourhood Networks Summer Gathering and a STEM event called Luna Moth.

HOW WE ENACT CHANGE

We enact change through the social and therapeutic programs we run and in the way we operate organisationally as a social enterprise.

Our logic model below shows the stepped ways in which we hope to make this change happen and helps us develop a framework that guides us in collecting the right data with which we measure this change. Although it's shown as a linear process, in reality it's iterative, messy, and ever evolving.

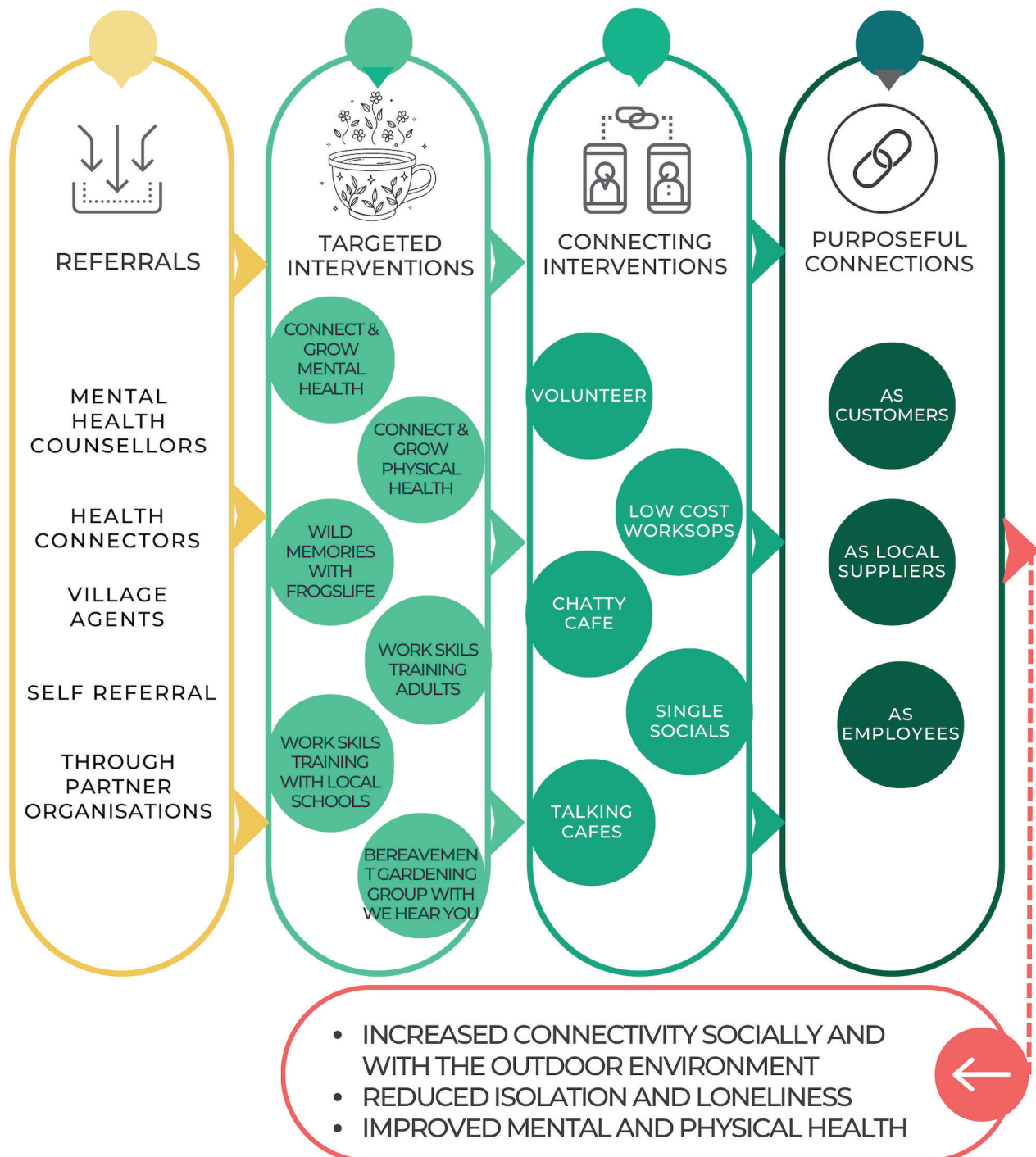
We only collect data that is meaningful in helping us improve how we work and how we support people through our programs.



Our logic model is based on the assumption that nature-based interventions lead to improved mental and physical health. There is a large body of research that supports this assumption.

INTERVENTION PATHWAY

Over the last four years we have been developing targeted programs in collaboration with partner organisations to best meet the needs of their participants. We try to offer a transitional pathway so that people can continue to be engaged with us as an organisation after a targeted intervention, by providing a pipeline through to more social or connected ways of engaging with our outdoor spaces.



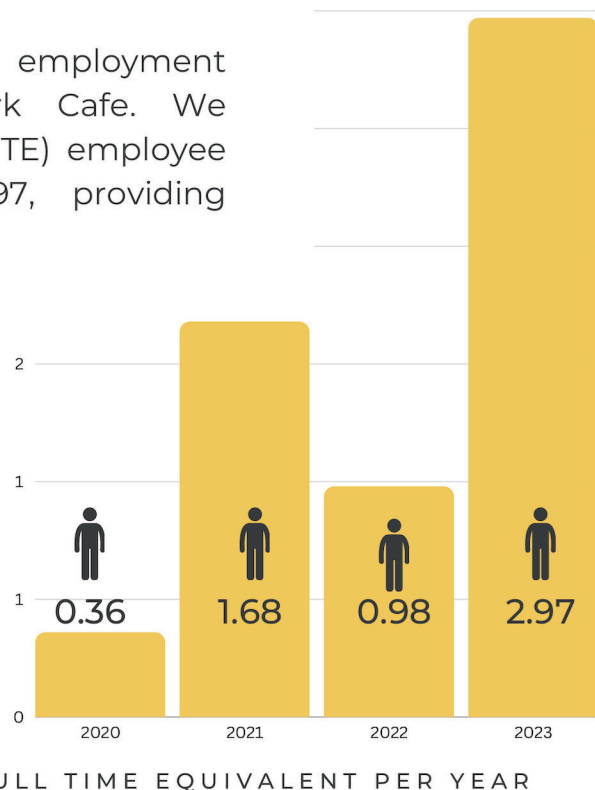
SUPPORTING PEOPLE

Supporting employees through adaptive work practices can positively impact the wider community by setting a standard for inclusivity and support for people with disabilities. Developing meaningful livelihoods is an important element of our work. We are a disability confident employer and 75% of our staff have a physical, mental or learning disability.



In 2023 we were able to offer more employment opportunities through Victoria Park Cafe. We increased our Full Time Equivalent (FTE) employee levels from 0.98 in 2022 to 2.97, providing employment to 12 people.

We support our staff through adaptive work practices tailored to meet individual needs. This includes providing one-on-one supervision when necessary, facilitating acclimatisation sessions, and offering unpaid leave to accommodate personal and home life situations. Our approach ensures a supportive work environment that respects and values the unique contributions of all employees.

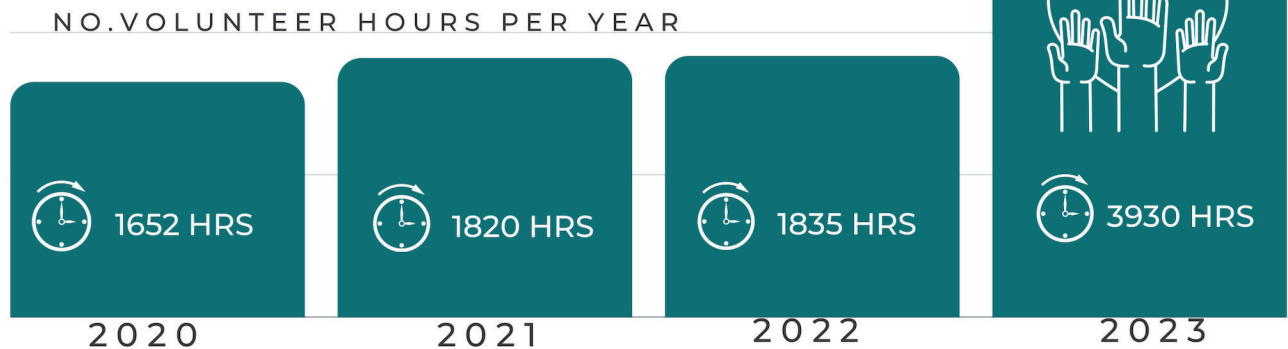


CASE STUDY

We had an employee grappling with mental health challenges, which affected their reliability and ability to maintain a regular work schedule. We set up a flexible arrangement which allowed them to work when they felt able and up to it, without the pressure of a fixed schedule. This approach had several positive outcomes. Firstly, we got to keep a valued team member, and it provided them with a sense of purposefulness. Being able to contribute when they were able offered them a valuable sense of achievement and self-worth. Secondly, it led to increased confidence. Each successful day at work built up their self-esteem, showing them that they could make meaningful contributions despite their challenges. Moreover, being part of a team created opportunities for social connection. They felt like an integral part of something larger than themselves. Within a few months they were back on their feet.

SUPPORTING PEOPLE

Volunteers support our work in a whole range of ways from working alongside people in our groups, to working in our community cafe at Victoria Park or maintaining the garden and looking after the plants we grow at the Walled Garden. We have a volunteer Board of Directors and most operational functions, like fundraising, programme development and event planning, would not happen without voluntary support. In 2023, 37 people gave 3930 hours of their voluntary time to our initiatives. Over the last four years of operation, this equates to an underestimated monetary value of £108.5k (calculated at minimum wage)



Each day, I'm surrounded by a community that values kindness, support, and collaboration. It's more than just serving coffee and food; it's about creating a warm, welcoming space where everyone feels valued and connected.

Victoria Park Cafe Volunteer

I've learned so much about the importance of small acts of kindness. Seeing the smiles on our customers' faces, knowing I've played a part in brightening their day, gives me a sense of purpose and joy.

Victoria Park Cafe Volunteer

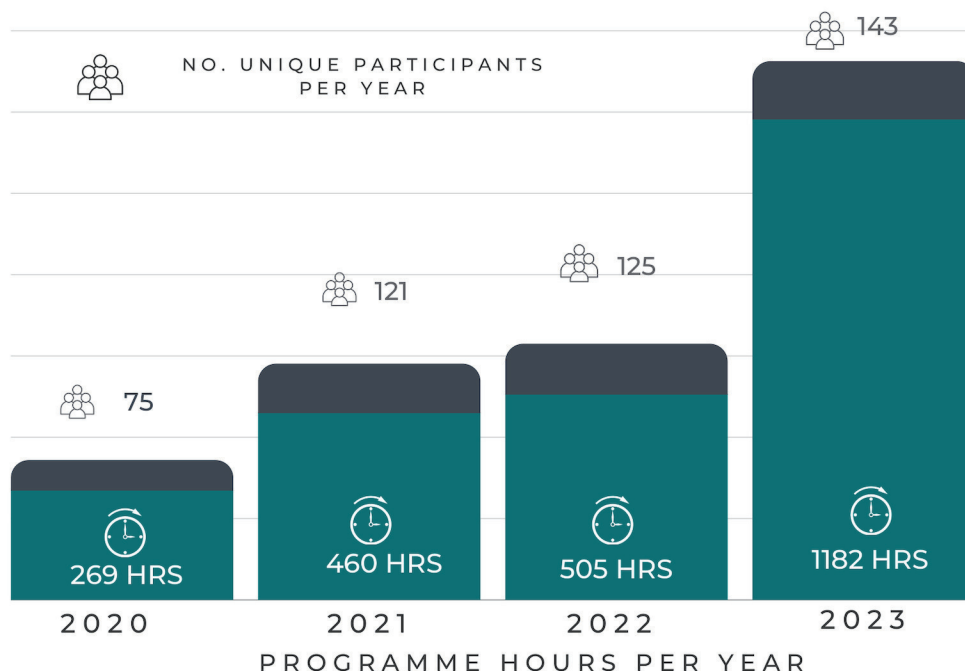
MONETARY
VALUE OF
VOLUNTEERS
HOURS 2020-
2023
£108.5K

CASE STUDY

One of our volunteer in their 20s, joined the cafe team in April 2023. Despite the challenges presented by his autism, his astute mind and love for routine became his strength. His interactions with customers and his willingness to share his life as an autistic person has been enlightening for many. He is now geared to lead a programme under our "Host a space" initiative being developed for 2024.

SUPPORTING PEOPLE

In 2023 we ran 1182 hours of targeted interventions with 143 unique people participating across our two sites. While the Walled Garden programs are more structured, the Victoria Park programs were allowed to grow and emerge in a much more organic way to understand and meet the needs within the park. We counted an additional 846 unique people participating in our open-to all connecting initiatives in the park. In addition, there were a number of initiatives for which we were unable to capture participant data. For example, we had a loose play pod out every day which we did not capture engagement data on. Victoria park staff and volunteers had 9876 meaningful interactions with a whole range of visitors in the Park since they opened.



CASE STUDY

One of the unintended outcomes we experienced involved the introduction of a loose play trolley and our new outdoor shelter at Victoria Park. We first noticed a stay-at-home dad started visiting the café regularly for coffee while his children played. The following week, he was joined by another dad, and within a few weeks, there was a group of them meeting up regularly. A Pew Research Center study, noted that the proportion of stay-at-home fathers has increased from 11% in 1989 to 18% in 2021. Had we attempted to engineer such a programme from the start, it's unlikely we would have achieved the same level of success. The organic, natural formation of this group underscores the power of simply providing space and opportunities for connections to flourish on their own. It's a testament to how small changes can have a profound impact on community building and social interaction, supporting a shift in societal norms and roles.

WHAT OUR COMMUNITY SAYS

For the participant gardeners, volunteers, and engaged customers that work with us there are a number of identified benefits they regularly note including:

LEARNING NEW SKILLS

Those who visit either the garden or the park value the opportunity to learn new skills, noting how it boosts their wellbeing by offering a sense of achievement and sparking a new or reignited interest to concentrate on.

“Spending a few hours each week engaging in regular social activities has greatly benefited me, making me feel like I'm part of something bigger as you watch the park change with the seasons. I will miss it when it closes for winter”
Volunteer

NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

The impact of being outdoors, in nature, helping things grow, and watching the seasonal changes with its life and death cycles, is something really valued by people. For some it's helped with improving their physical fitness and wellbeing, for others it's more about the therapeutic impact derived from the sense of connection to nature.

“Without Victoria Park Cafe, I'd really be struggling. Living with bipolar means I have good days and bad days. On the tough ones, it's a real challenge to even get out of the house and walk my dog. But knowing that I'll be greeted by the team with a smile and a coffee at the park makes it worth the effort. This year, the cafe and the park have been a godsend for me.”
Victoria Park Cafe Regular

“Visiting the garden and learning new skills there has been a game-changer for me. It's not just about the gardening; it's about the sense of accomplishment I feel and the new passions it has ignited within me. It's feel very nurturing for both my wellbeing and interests.”

Art and Wellness Course
Participant SSL

SOCIAL INTERACTION

The social connections that people make are cited as one of the most important impacts for participants. For some, those connections are easily gained, for others it's more hard won as they overcome the challenges they experience from feeling cut off by their mental or physical challenges.

“The tranquility found in taking the workshop in the walled garden became a soothing balm, a tonic for my soul. This experience, set against the serene backdrop of nature, is an enduring memory that continues to inspire and comfort me.”

Somerset Skills and Learning
Weaving workshops

ROUTINES

Regaining routine, structure, and purpose through attending regular weekly or monthly sessions or just coming for a cup of tea is important to people who come to the Walled Garden or Victoria Park.

VICTORIA PARK

The cafe in Victoria Park quickly developed into a much loved community hub in 2023. This was achieved because the park space is accessible in terms of physical, attitudinal, financial, transport and location barriers. Community members had the opportunity to be involved in the running and shaping of the cafe as it became established through volunteering, consultation and a user advisory board.

There is a large amount of literature concerning the impact that interventions like community hubs have on loneliness and social isolation. They have been evidenced to (i) promote social cohesion through the mixing of different social or age groups, (ii) increase social capital and build trust between people in communities, (iii) increase wider social networks and interaction between community members, and (iv) increase the knowledge and skills of individuals*.

CASE STUDY

An elderly gentleman with mild dementia lives in one of the assisted living homes that edge the Park. He had been housebound for 2 years through lockdowns and hadn't resumed an independent life outside of his apartment until someone coaxed him to go for a coffee in the Park when the café first opened. He now walks on his own to the café three to four times a week to have a coffee and a cake knowing that there will always be someone to talk to him. His daughter can not speak highly enough of how this has transformed both his mental and physical health.

We undertook some survey work in Victoria Park this autumn to understand our impact and while our survey sample sizes were not very big we did note very positive feedback from volunteers and customers.

72% of volunteers/participants in organised activities felt they learnt new skills.



81% of cafe users reported an improved sense of wellbeing though having a reason to stop and stay in the Park.



86% of volunteers noted an increased sense of purpose through being part of a team and having a routine. This was also anecdotally noted by many customers



82% of customers improved physical/mental health through spending time outdoors.



84% of volunteers/ Staff/ Customers noted an increased sense of connection with their local community through activities at Victoria Park.



* <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/resources/places-spaces-people-and-wellbeing/>

FISCAL SUSTAINABILITY

Social enterprises are uniquely placed to deliver important community programs without over relying on traditional grant funding by building trading income streams that can increase their financial self sustainability. Our approach involves selling plants cultivated by our participant gardeners, as well as locally crafted artisan products within the Walled Garden. In the Victoria Park community, we offer an appealing selection of food and beverages.

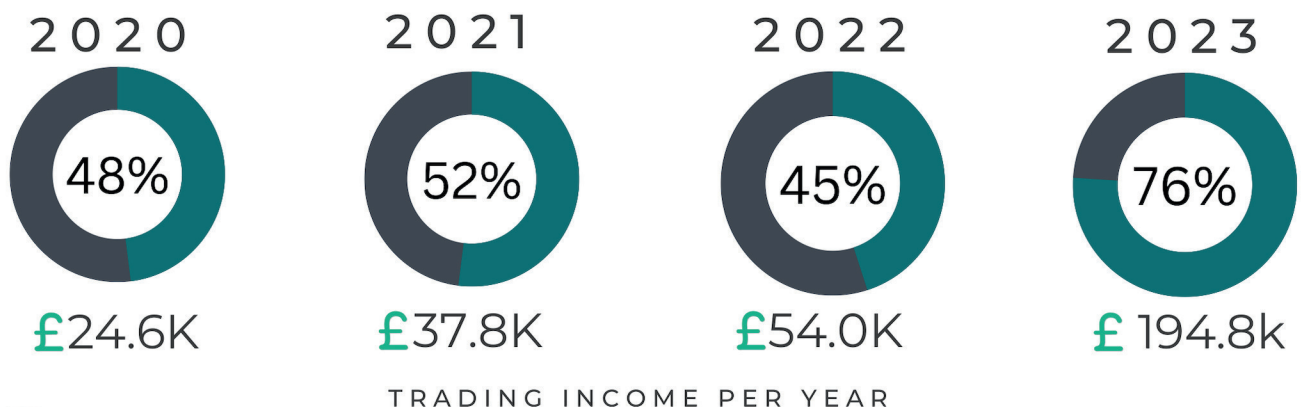


Income from trading allows us:

- Independence on what programs we develop so that we are not trying to make our work fit the latest funding priorities.
- More flexibility to cover operating costs which are often a challenge to fundraise for.
- More innovation in how we work and the ability to pivot more quickly in tough times.

We track the proportion of our revenue generated from trading activities versus grant funding. In 2023, we successfully improved our trading income ratio from 45% in 2022 to 76%, with the remaining 24% coming from grants. This exceeded our target of 75% trading income. It's noteworthy that 67%* of social enterprises generate between 75% and 100% of their income through trading so it good to know we are on track.

PERCENTAGE OF ANNUAL EXPENDITURE ACQUIRED FROM TRADING

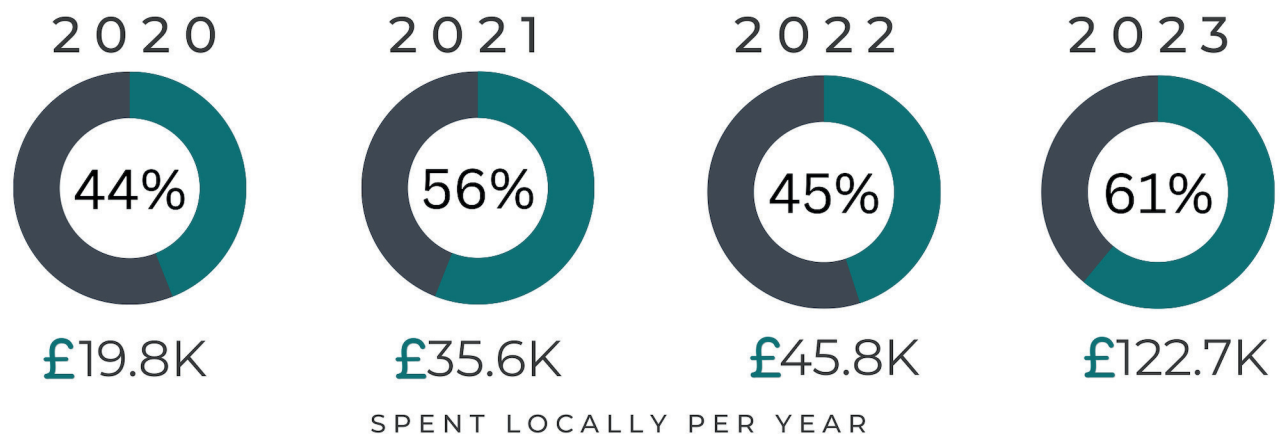


*Social Enterprise UK. 2021. No Going Back – State of Social Enterprise Survey 2021
file:///C:/Users/drsam/Downloads/https___www.socialenterprise.org.uk_app_uploads_2022_05_State-of-Social-Enterprise-Survey-2021-compressed.pdf

SUPPORTING LOCAL ECONOMIES

We prioritise buying and supporting local suppliers and service providers wherever possible. We look at how much of our annual expenditure we spend with local people, suppliers and service providers to support and build resilience in our local economy, which we define as within 15 miles of our sites.

PERCENTAGE OF ANNUAL EXPENDITURE SPENT LOCALLY



In 2023 we spent more in our local economy in terms of money and as a percentage of our total spend than in previous years as we grew the organisation and opened our second site at Victoria Park Cafe. From our inception we have spent £223.9k within 15 miles of our sites, managing to ensure an average of 51.5% of our expenditure is local.

The ratio of local to non local purchases increased from 45% in 2022 to 61% in 2023 which we are very proud of. Our target for sourcing locally is 65% of our expenditure.

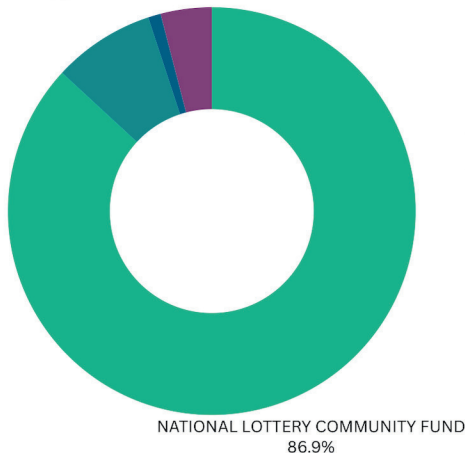
Some of the ways in which we buy local include:

- Developing a network of local microgrowers that we buy plants from. These are usually senior people who love growing at home but don't want to market their plants.
- Using local producers for items like cakes, honey, cards and coffee.
- Using local based wholesalers such as RD Jones
- Using local environmentally focused printers such as Unity Prints
- We sourced a local wood worker to make our new shelter in Victoria Park that uses sustainable UK sourced wood.

This supply chain program fosters a sense of connectedness to the work we do at our sites, increases our capacity to stock more bespoke items, and reduces transport miles.

FUNDING

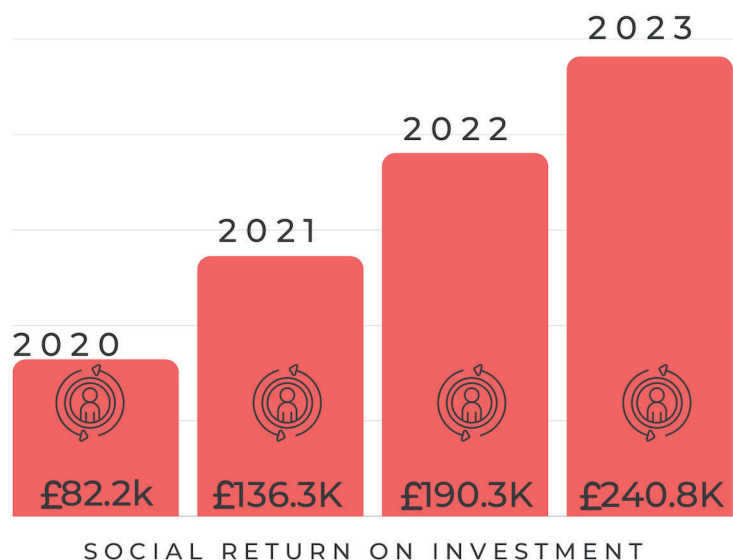
SOMERSET COMMUNITY FOUNDATION POLICE FUND
8.1%



We had £46,475 in grant funding in 2023. This was predominately used to improve our fiscal sustainability by increasing our trading income capacity through opening our community cafe in Victoria Park. We had a large grant of £40000 from the National Lottery Community Fund, along with a private donation (£2000) and a funding grant from the Frome Lottery (£675). This funding helped buy some equipment and refurbish the site in order to get open for April 2023

In kind and financial support was also given by Frome Town Council for a number of initiatives including repair to the fabric of Victoria Park Cafe, installing a beautiful wooden shelter in the Park and providing a loose play trolley.

From the Somerset Community Foundation we had £3650 to run initiatives focused on young people in Victoria Park to engage them and help reduce antisocial behaviour.



According to the Wildlife Trust *“Prescribing nature works – and saves money. A natural, community-based approach to health offers an important non-medical service that will deliver health prevention at scale and reduce the current burden on the NHS.”* They found for every £1 invested in specialised health or social needs projects that connect people to nature, there is a £6.88 social return. In the last four years we have generated a conservative estimate of £649.6k social return on investment.

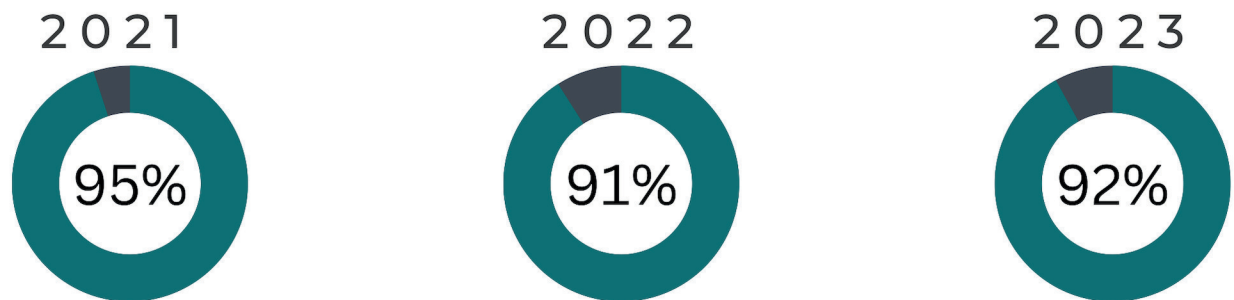
ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

As a nature-based green organisation, our environmental impact is also very important to us. The value of having a community plant nursery within a walled garden means that we can create a mini ecosystem that employs a number of sustainable practices allowing us to reuse, reduce, and recycle between all the elements of the business.

For example: we reuse our plastic plant pots, we moved to peat-free compost in 2020, we grow organically, we compost both café and garden waste, we mulch annually to reduce water evaporation from the beds, introduced more drought resistant planting, have three different ponds including a bog garden to attract a variety of wildlife., we purchase compostable and recyclable packaging and containers, and buy from local suppliers to reduce transport miles.

Since 2021 we have been able to track our non compostable waste by weight through metrics provided by our recycling collection company.

PERCENTAGE OF OUR WASTE THAT IS RECYCLED 



At Victoria Park Cafe we use compostable (commercial) takeaway food ware. We compost our food waste in collaboration with Loop Composting. We offer discounts to customers for bringing their own cups and we installed an outside tap for water refills for cups and dogs bowls. We work with the Pod to use recycled products in our loose play trolley.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are profoundly thankful to our collaborators, funders, donors, staff, volunteers, and customers for their steadfast support and commitment. Your invaluable contributions have been the foundation of our success, allowing us to effect meaningful change within our community.

To our funders and donors, your generous support powers our vision and has been crucial in propelling our projects forward with enthusiasm and expertise.

To our staff and volunteers, through your generous dedication of time and effort, you epitomise the essence of community spirit.

To our partners and the amazing community organisations we collaborate with together, we build a stronger, more vibrant community. Thank you for joining us on this journey.

And to our customers, your continued patronage and support motivates us to constantly offer you the best of service to entice you to come back and create opportunities for connection.



CULTIVATING COMMUNITY

Board of Directors

Dr Samantha EVANS: Managing Director
Emily BRADLEY: Plant Nursery
Andy JONES: Outreach and Networking
Caroline BLAKE: Victoria Park
Merryn PREECE: Program Development

Trading Names

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FB; @thewalledgardenatmells
Inst: @walledgardenatmells

Victoria Park Cafe

Email: contactcultivatingcommunity@gmail.com
Address: Weymouth Road, Frome, Somerset, BA11 1HJ
WS: <https://www.victoriaparkcafe.org>
FB: @Victoriaparkcafe

