

# MEASURING PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL OUTPUT OF COMMUNITY GARDENS: A PILOT CASE STUDY

Victoria Schoen<sup>a</sup>, Silvio Caputo<sup>a</sup> and Chris Blythe<sup>b</sup>  
<sup>a</sup>University of Kent; <sup>b</sup>Social Farms & Gardens

## Introduction

As a contribution to the debate on the monetised benefits of community gardens, this research uses a social cost benefit methodology to value the social benefits emanating from one garden in central London and combines this with the monetary value of fruit and vegetables produced. It calculates the public value return on investment achieved by the garden and assesses the policy implications of the resultant cost : benefit ratio.

## Method

The research uses an 'off-the-shelf' tool for calculating a public value return on investment ratio of costs to benefits (1). Cost data were collected during interviews with staff at the case study garden. Value of garden produce was calculated by the application of Soil Association price data to harvest data gathered by the garden over the course of the 2019 growing season (2). This value was deducted from total costs before a comparison was made with the benefits.

Benefits were assessed under the outcome, 'Improved well-being', selected, with agreement of garden staff, from the menu of options on the pre-set tool. Specific benefits on which savings were measured included, 'Increased



confidence and self-esteem', 'Reduced isolation' and 'Improved emotional well-being'. Numbers in the population to be included were calculated using survey data for the FEW-meter project (3). An additional benefit of 'Reduced Hospital Admissions' was then added to the model to see the impact of this fiscal saving.

## Results

The model shows a social cost benefit ratio of 1:3 rising to 1:5 when the improvements in the benefit indicators as a result of attending the garden increase from 30% to 50%. Volunteer labour is valued at £10.55 per hour (London Living Wage(4)) and when this is halved, to reflect the productivity of elderly gardeners, the return on investment increases to 1:3.75. The model also shows that the increase in staff costs as a result of increasing the number of community groups on offer is balanced by the increase in social value produced. Including Reduced Hospital Admissions for a small number of garden attendees improves the cost benefit ratio slightly to 1:3.08.

Interestingly, the low value of garden produce compared with the value of social benefits results in a reduction in cost benefit ratio to 1:2.75 if the head gardener spends more time on fruit and vegetable production and less time on facilitating community groups.

## Conclusions

The analysis values the physical and social output from the case study community garden and its value is in highlighting the important contribution that community gardens make to society and in its use for comparison, for the same garden over time and between gardens with similar objectives and activities. It also offers potential as a tool to aid activity and infrastructure planning within urban farms and gardens, as well as policy and urban planning in a wider sense. The analysis shows:



- Community gardens can provide social support services at a time when the UK government – as well as in many other European governments – are curtailing state intervention. The analysis shows the value of the benefits such gardens offer, which would be significant if scaled up across London.
- Community gardens have huge potential to play a role in the three main policy areas receiving focus from the UK government: health, climate change and environment and community cohesion/development. The analysis shows the value of social outputs as well as the fiscal savings possible from reduced hospital admissions.
- Social CBA can be used by gardens to assist with internal planning of regular groups and less frequent events and can provide the hard evidence needed for future funding applications.

## References

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