

# the comfrey project

A review of the first eight years



**Comfrey** (*Symphytum officinale*) also known as *Knitbone* or *Bruisewort*: a herb that grows wild across the United Kingdom used for healing

January 2010

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## About The Comfrey Project:

The Comfrey Project is a charity based in Newcastle upon Tyne in the North East of England. The project first started in 2002 and since then it has been delivering well being, mental health and other support services to asylum seekers and refugees. The Comfrey Project runs group based horticultural and cooking activities in allotment sites and community venues in Gateshead and Newcastle. The emphasis of the project's sessions is to provide a safe, friendly and relaxed environment where service users are respected, listened to, understood and valued.

More information: [www.thecomfreyproject.org.uk](http://www.thecomfreyproject.org.uk)

## About the authors:

Barefoot Research and Evaluation is based in Newcastle upon Tyne. It has extensive experience of evaluating projects aimed at supporting vulnerable groups, particularly asylum seekers and refugees. Barefoot Research and Evaluation has carried out work for Northumberland Strategic Partnership, Northern Rock Foundation, Voluntary Organisations Network North East and local authorities in the region on initiatives to reduce inequalities and deprivation. Christopher Hartworth, the main author of the report, has almost 20 years' experience of research and evaluation, beginning in developing countries in poverty alleviation programmes and continuing in the North East of England in work with disadvantaged communities.

More information: [www.barefootresearch.org.uk](http://www.barefootresearch.org.uk)



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## Foreword

When we were awarded funding in 2009 by The Henry Smith Charity, it was with the condition that we carried out an independent evaluation. This was not only an important step in securing funding for The Comfrey Project to continue, it also made it possible for us to dedicate time and resources to carrying out this review. A valuable exercise that many small organisations are unable to undertake.

We, like many small charitable organisations, have a history that is peppered with periods of funding insecurity and uncertainty. We are incredibly grateful and often overwhelmed by the support that has been shown to us, by funders, partners, organisations and individuals that has seen us come through these time and time again.

The findings of this review have been overwhelmingly positive. For us, it is a fantastic testament to the hard work of all those involved in The Comfrey Project since it began. A reassurance to all those involved that their time and investment has been well used and appreciated. Hopefully, it will be an encouragement for those who will invest in us in the future.

We were recently named as one of the Guardian Charity of the Year winners for 2009. Holding that, alongside the results of this evaluation, it would be easy to sit here and imagine that the future is bright and easy for The Comfrey Project, but it would also be foolish.

We must not forget the context in which The Comfrey Project operates. Our project users have fled situations of unimaginable fear, many making terrifying journeys. And at the end of that journey they face harsh government policy towards asylum seekers and negative, often aggressive public opinion. What we try to provide is a sanctuary and a safe place that is not found easily in wider society.

The Comfrey Project itself is not immune to the general climate in which refugees and asylum seekers in the UK live. We exist both because of and despite these conditions.

We continue to work towards improving conditions of life for refugees and asylum seekers in the area. We do not expect that the funding situation for this kind of work will become any easier.

Yet we hope that this review will contribute to helping us to negotiate both of these paths and enable our continued delivery of a high quality service for our project users.

The Comfrey Project, January 2010

## Introduction

This is a review of The Comfrey Project and its first eight years of operation. The purpose of the review is firstly to fulfil a requirement of funding from one of the project's charitable trust donors, but it also serves other purposes, such as:

- Informing future project development and direction
- Demonstrating a commitment to excellence through inviting scrutiny from an external expert agency
- Contributing to attempts at securing future funding.

The project provides support to people who have or are currently seeking, asylum in the UK. This group is vulnerable to the effects of poor housing, lack of resources, hate crime and poor health, both physical and mental. What the project does is to provide a space and an activity where project users can forget these vulnerabilities, for a few hours a week. It gives people strength and self-esteem and allows them to heal.

It does this in the context of funding insecurity, which forced the trustees and management to consider closure both in 2008 and early in 2009. The context is also one of harsh government policy and negative and often aggressive public opinion.

The Comfrey Project is a small project that began as an experiment in 2002. It was focussed on gardening activities at an allotment where people could grow their own vegetables, be in the company of people who shared similar experiences and do as much or a little as they wanted. From having a few project users at one allotment in Newcastle, it has grown to have three allotments and over 80 project users a year.

What this evaluation has found is an organisation that is highly valued and respected by service users and other agencies who work with similar groups in Newcastle and Gateshead. It is also an organisation that under independent scrutiny, has been demonstrated to be extremely effective in providing a therapeutic environment for people to recover and heal. It is an environment which could well benefit other traumatised groups.



## The context

In 2009, there were around 1500 asylum seekers in Newcastle and Gateshead and around 2000 refugees<sup>[1]</sup>.

These asylum seekers will all be at various stages in their application for refugee status. Some will be applying for the first time; some will have been refused in their first application and are appealing; some have submitted new evidence for a fresh claim (these are known as Section 4 asylum seekers and qualify for local authority accommodation and food vouchers); some will be temporarily allowed leave to stay because of physical or mental disabilities and are known as Section 21 asylum seekers and are also provided with accommodation and food vouchers; and others are refused or destitute asylum seekers who have no recourse to funds.

Refugees are asylum seekers who have been successful in their application and have all the rights of other residents of the United Kingdom.

Asylum seekers and refugees often experience severe mental distress. This is usually a result of: previous traumas related to their experience of persecution in their country of origin; the asylum journey where they may have been exposed to deprivation, violence and rape; and to the uncertain future and discrimination they face in the UK<sup>[2]</sup>. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is common as well as varying levels of other mental health disorders. The application process is itself a highly stressful and fraught time, full of uncertainty and insecurity. There is the constant fear of a refusal and the prospect of being returned to the country they fled.

Currently, everyone awaiting a decision on their asylum claim is able to access primary and secondary health care free of charge. Anyone who has been refused

leave to remain can continue to receive primary care but will be refused most secondary care (hospital) services. Treatment in accident and emergency departments and treatment for serious infectious diseases is also currently free to all. However, despite the need and the existing provision, many asylum seekers and refugees do not access traditional mental health care services<sup>[3]</sup>. Mind (2009) reported:

*There is evidence that in some political regimes healthcare professionals have been involved in torture which further deters refugees and asylum seekers from engaging with services. Linked to this is a fear of disclosure of information to officials, for example about mental health conditions, and concerns about how this information may be used or may impact on their asylum claim. Consequently, as the specialist providers told Mind, it can take a long time to build enough trust to develop an effective therapeutic relationship<sup>[4]</sup>.*

Asylum seekers and refugees also have needs which are not related to mental health, such as the need for adequate housing, community safety, constructive activities and a social network. These are also commonly poorly provided for, which compounds their vulnerabilities.

[1] These figures are derived from data provided by Your Home Newcastle and Gateshead Council's asylum seeker services.

[2] A recent report goes into detail about mental health issues and asylum seekers: Mind, 2009, Improving mental health support for refugee communities – an advocacy approach, Mind.

[3] Mind, 2009, A civilised society: Mental health provision for refugees and asylum seekers in England and Wales, Mind.

[4] Op. cit. pg 16.

### **A brief history of The Comfrey Project**

The Comfrey Project was founded by Mandy Jetter in February 2001 as a pilot project, under the auspices of The Rights Project (a welfare rights charity based in the West End of Newcastle), with small grants from the Health Action Zone, Activities for Health, Esmée Fairbairn Charitable Trust and the Allen Lane Charitable Trust. It offered one session a week on an allotment in the West End of Newcastle, with the first referrals arriving in April 2001. Referrals came from GPs, Stonham Housing Association and the West End Refugee Service. During that first summer there were six project users participating regularly, with one member of staff employed ten hours a week and one volunteer.

In February 2002, the project became an unincorporated association and later that year was granted charitable status. Five trustees with a wide range of skills began meeting every two months to steer the development of the project. The guiding principal in the constitution is:

*To provide facilities for the recreation or other leisure-time occupation of refugees and asylum seekers with the objective of improving their conditions of life and general well being, primarily though not exclusively through the provision of horticultural activities.*

The organisation gradually expanded and in 2002, they acquired another allotment at a site in the East End of Newcastle and then a site in Felling, Gateshead in 2005. They now have a number of sheds and greenhouses and many spades and wheelbarrows. In 2005, they also began indoor cooking activities in the winter months, using community venues, like the Scotswood Natural Community Garden and the Bensham Grove Community Centre. They now have over 80 project users.

In 2008, Jayne Butler was appointed as Manager to consolidate and grow the organisation in order to develop services and access more project users. In December 2009, The Comfrey Project was named as Guardian Charity of the Year.

# The project

The project states its broad objectives as improving the lives and well being of asylum seekers and refugees, with specific objectives to:

- Increase self esteem, confidence and motivation
- Improve mental health by reducing isolation, anxiety and depression
- Improve spoken language skills
- Increase opportunities for integration
- Improve physical health and nutrition through exercise and healthy eating
- Contribute to the household economy through the supply of fresh vegetables.

The project has one manager, two project workers and a financial administrator. Both project workers have community development backgrounds and one has horticultural experience. In January 2010, the project employed a part time garden support worker who concentrates on horticultural activities. The project has a small committed board of trustees that meet once every two months (see Appendix).

The project also uses volunteers who help at the allotments and the cooking sessions and with specialist IT duties; there are currently three volunteers.

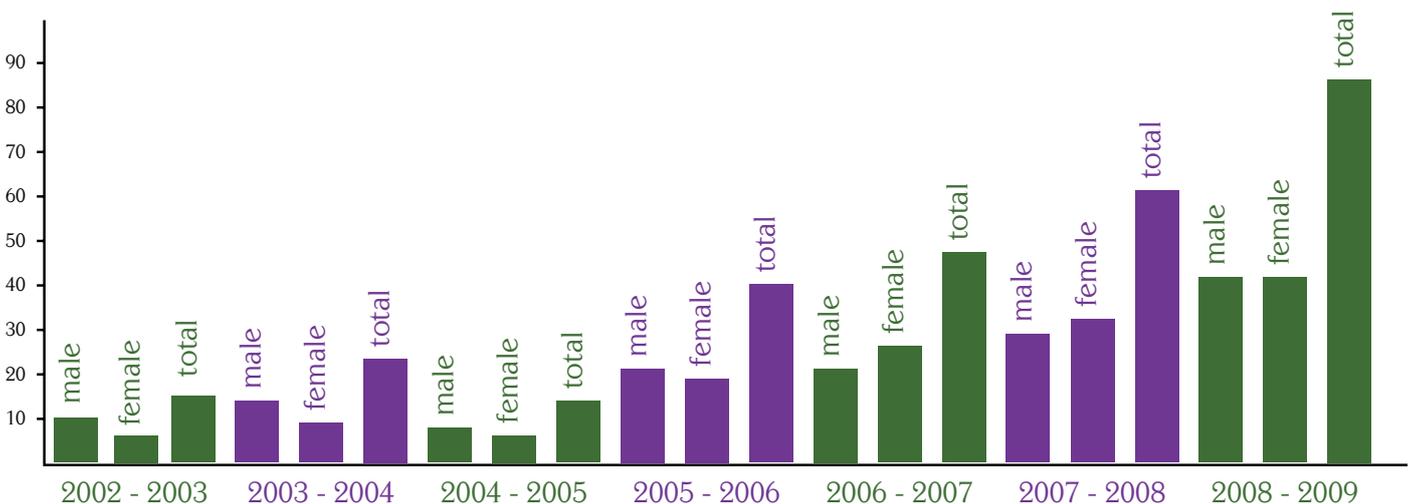
## Project users, 2002 to 2008

Project staff act as session facilitators and ‘animateurs’<sup>[1]</sup>, who work alongside the project users. Their role is to support people in the context of engaging in a physical activity using a person-centred approach. Some of their comments provide good illustrations about what they do: “if I make two people laugh today then I’ve achieved what I want”; “the job is to have an enjoyable lunch, to let them switch off from reality ...”; and “it’s about having a space, to sit on a bench ...”. Although the project workers are not mental health professionals, they can tell if somebody is in distress. One project worker said “clearly the person wasn’t feeling well ... I said ‘let’s go dig’ ... but other people won’t want to do anything and just sit ... and that’s fine, we are led by them”.

When the project first started, it had a total of six project users; that has now grown to 86. Since it started eight years ago, the project has had over 300 project users referred to them, 187 of whom have gone on to become regular project users.

The following graph shows the number of project users from 2002 to 2008. As can be seen, there has been a significant and steady increase.

Project users, 2002 to 2008



## Funders

The project relies on external funding from a range of sources. For 2009/10, these included:

Allen Lane Foundation

Christ's Hospital in Sherburn

Eaga Community Foundation

Emerton Christie Charity

Esmée Fairbairn Foundation

Gateshead Council

Hadrian Trust

Northern Rock Foundation

Sir James Knott Trust

The Big Lottery Fund

The Henry Smith Charity

The Joicey Trust

Tudor Trust

Your Homes Newcastle

1989 Willan Charitable Trust

The amount of grant varies, with some funders paying for small equipment or beneficiary travel costs and others paying core costs and salaries. The project has been through several crises of funding and, in 2009, the trustees handed out redundancy notices to staff. Fortunately, funds were found to take them through until 2011.



Funding insecurity undoubtedly affects project performance in a number of ways, from affecting numbers of referrals (i.e. organisations will not refer if they think that the project is ending), negatively impacting on current service users and creating difficulty in attracting and retaining quality staff.

[1] This is a French community development term which is very useful in describing a worker's role in animating groups and bringing their activities to life and fruition.

# Project activities

## Horticulture

Between February and November, the project carries out group-based work at allotments. The project has three allotments: two in Newcastle, in Fenham and Walker; and one in Gateshead, in Felling. In each allotment there are growing plots, a greenhouse used for seedlings and growing delicate species (sometimes of overseas origins), a shed used for storing tools, materials and a shelter for bad weather.

The allotment sessions allow project users to:

- Socialise and make friends
- Take part in physical activity
- Mutually support each other
- Access a therapeutic environment where they can recover, heal and de-stress
- Teach and learn new horticultural skills
- Grow and eat food that has been produced by themselves and fellow project users



working in the greenhouse

At the allotments, project users can have their own plot where they can grow vegetables of their choice. There is also a communal plot where project users grow flowers and vegetables that are used by everyone. This echoes common agricultural arrangements in most Third World countries, with familial and communal fields. Examples of food crops grown are shown below:

Overseas varieties	British vegetables
Amaranth (an African green leaf)	Broad beans
Middle Eastern mint varieties	Broccoli
Ngai Ngai (a green leaf from Congo)	Cabbages
Rahan (a type of basil from Iran)	Carrots
Shahi (similar to Dill from Iran)	Chilli
Small courgette variety from Palestine	Chives
Small leek variety from Afghanistan	Courgette
	Okra
	Onions
	Potato
	Salad
	Tomatoes

The project users share their vegetables and take home and eat them.

## Cooking

In the winter months, project users meet in community venues where they cook. These venues include: in Gateshead, Bensham Grove Community Centre; and in Newcastle, the Medical Foundation for Care of Victims of Torture near the city centre

and Scotswood Natural Community Garden in the West End.

Similar to the objectives of the horticultural activities, the aims of the cooking sessions are:

- To provide an opportunity for project users to socialise and make friends
- An opportunity to mutually support each other
- An opportunity to teach and learn new cooking skills
- A therapeutic environment where people can recover, heal and de-stress.

Project users take turns to be responsible for planning a session and they are given a small budget with which to buy ingredients.

## Visits, trips and events

Since 2007, the project has taken project users on different visits, trips and events. These trips were initially funded through the Big Lottery and their objectives included providing a respite and enjoyment for families and children. The funding allowed the project to carry out a series of trips between 2007 and 2009.

Although the particular funding stream has ended, the project continues the trips and visits. The emphasis has slightly changed to focus on local and low cost trips, particularly in the school holidays. This serves the objective of providing people with access to places that they can easily go to again, and perhaps did not know about before, or how to get to, for example Jesmond Dene Park.

## Referrals

Referrals into the project come from a range of sources, including:

- Common Ground (EAASSG) and West End Refugee Service (WERS); both are asylum seeker and refugee support services in Newcastle
- ESOL services in Gateshead and Newcastle
- Gateshead Asylum Team and Social Services
- GPs, health visitors and Community Psychiatric Nurses
- Medical Foundation for Care of Victims of Torture North East
- NHS North of Tyne Community Mental Health Service; this is part of primary care, whose clients come from resident and non-resident BME communities
- North of England Refugee Service
- Action Foundation (formerly Open Door), an asylum seeker and refugee accommodation and ESOL service
- Your Homes Newcastle Asylum Seekers Unit.

The project has a standard referral form, which the referral agency completes and returns. On receipt of the form, the project makes contact with the referral by phone and letter and an appointment is made either at the project office or at the allotment/community venue. The first meeting is for introductory purposes and an outline is given about what the project does and what the referral can expect. It is explained that travel expenses will be reimbursed. Interpreters can be arranged at this juncture if required. Having attended once, most continue to become regular project users and participate in the horticulture or cooking activities. A small proportion of referrals decide upon receiving more information that it is not an activity in which they are interested and do not come again.

## Service users

Service users are either asylum seekers or refugees. Asylum seekers may be:

- Those who are applying for asylum
- Those who are appealing their decisions
- Refused asylum seekers (i.e. their application for asylum has been turned down by the Home Office)
- 'Section 4' asylum seekers
- 'Section 21' asylum seekers

Many project users have experienced more than one of these stages of the asylum process.

They have had project users from many nationalities, including:

Afghanistan	20	Kosovo	1
Albania	2	Lebanon	1
Angola	2	Libya	2
Azerbaijan	3	Malawi	1
Bolivia	1	Montenegro	1
Bosnia	1	Nigeria	2
Burundi	4	Not known	3
Cameroon	2	Pakistan	1
China	1	Palestine	5
Congo	4	Somalia	4
DR Congo	15	South Africa	1
Eritrea	14	Sri Lanka	13
Ethiopia	7	Sudan	4
Georgia	1	Syria	5
Guinea	1	Tibet	1
India	1	Togo	1
Iran	31	Turkey	16
Iraq	10	Zimbabwe	5
		Total	187

The specific characteristics of the service users vary and fluctuate: at times there is an equal number of women and men; sometimes groups are dominated by men or women; the mix of nationalities also varies. The only apparent pattern to groups is that the winter cooking sessions tend to be dominated by women. One project worker said :

“they’re all cultures,  
all abilities, all ages,  
from 18 to 62 ... it’s  
a good mix”.

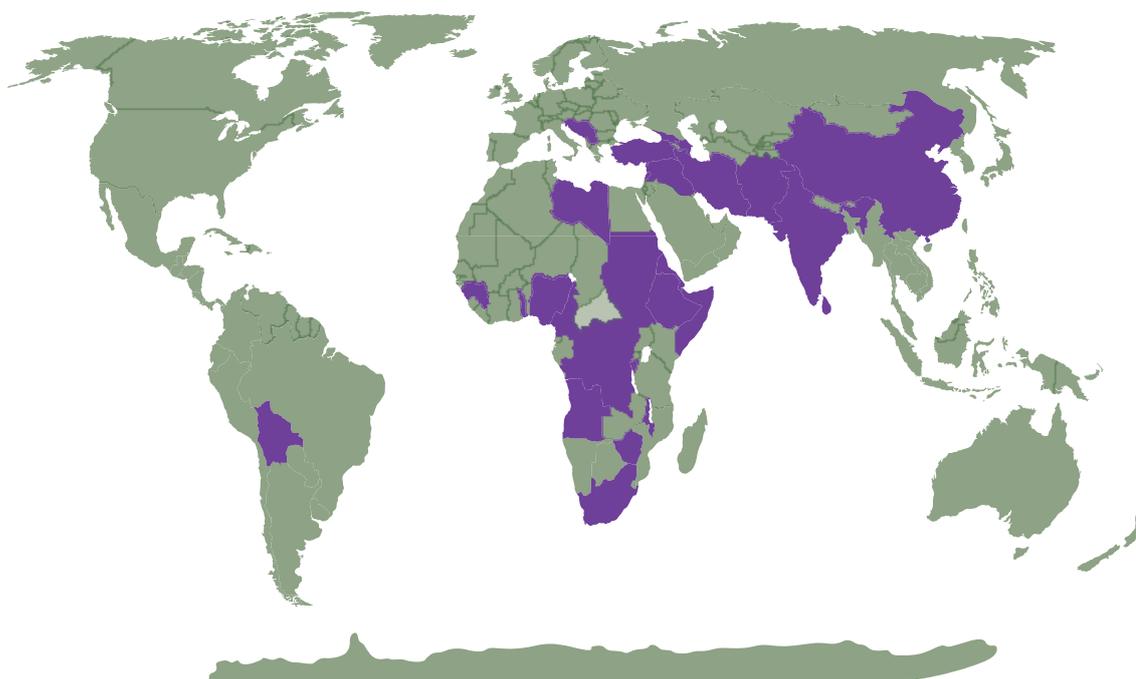
It was noted that the age differentials were a good thing and that the younger group members gave deference to the older members, regardless of nationality.

The groups are very welcoming to other, new members and great friendships have developed between group members, particularly between those who have been attending for a long time. A project worker said “you can tell this from the way they greet each other”.

However, despite the differences, one commonality is that every person who has claimed asylum has had challenges to their mental health to some extent. One project worker reported:

“their memories of fleeing ... you don’t know when they come back ... from their experiences in the country, the journey, from their high hopes of reaching paradise here, then the experience of racism ...”.

## Where project users come from



## Findings from service users

A number of project users were interviewed for this review in the West End of Newcastle and in Gateshead. Participants were both male and female, from a range of countries and both young and old.

Service users were unanimously positive and spoke highly about the project, the activities and staff. They spoke about the benefits of the project and there was a particular appreciation of the activities that were provided by the project; the gardening, cooking and trips.

One project user succinctly reported “if people didn’t like it, they would not come back ... and we are coming back”.

The testimonies of those that use the project strongly indicate that the project is fulfilling its objectives and reinforce the reports of the partner agencies. Their responses can broadly be categorised into the following areas:

### The benefits of gardening

Service users reported that the act of growing things was very important to them and had significant value. This appreciation also came from those who initially had reservations and did not feel enthused by the idea of gardening. Many service users however stated that they had a garden in their countries of origin so the gardening provides a level of continuity in their lives and continues an activity that they are proficient in and familiar with. Other project users said it brought back fond memories, with one reporting that the project brought back memories of working in her family garden with her mother when she was a child.

The benefits of gardening were felt on a number of levels including: carrying out a physical activity; growing and eating healthy food and being involved in a shared activity. There was also an expression of the nurturing aspect of growing where there was a connection between grower and ‘growing thing’.

Some comments included:

“it’s [gardening] very important for us”.

“I like growing things ... I like growing vegetables”.

“The first time to plant a potato was very nice to me ... I never done that before”.

“To see the vegetables that you have grown is to feel happy”.

“I feel better because I dig the ground ... I feel better than first [before I came to the project] just thinking about the garden ... this is good for everyone”.

## The development of the ‘social’

This was referred to in many different ways, from “social integration” which was expressed as becoming involved in a common social group, to simply “making friends”. There is clearly a strong common bond between all service users which is demonstrated through their greetings, conversation, physical contact whilst talking and level of communication (i.e. talking a lot). This social development aspect to the project was highly valued in the context of a truly international group. One project user stated “the mixing of all cultures is very good”.

There was much value placed by project users on being able to make friends at the project, talk and be listened to. The latter was more pronounced amongst certain project users, i.e. certain people felt that it was only at the project that they were properly listened to and valued as a human being.

One project user said “I like to talk to people ... I feel better”. Another said “it’s like family here”.

## Improving health

Project users explicitly recognised that there were strong links between participation in the project and an improvement in both their physical and mental health. Project users were very specific when reporting on the links between participation in project activities and improvements in their mental health. One project user stated, “it brings mental balance”. Project users also recognised the function of the project in raising their self esteem and confidence.

The therapy of the project was felt on a number of levels; from horticultural activities (“if you work with soil, you feel good”) to the social element (“they are my extended family”). It was also stated that the project stopped them being so isolated, both physically and mentally; “getting over the isolation of life”. Another said “it’s a nice place to help yourself. You stay at home and you think too much, you cry. You come here you relax”.

The beneficial impacts of the project were felt outside of project activities and were said to last for some time after leaving the weekly activity. Project users reported “it gives me energy and I feel good”, another said “I feel good when I leave”.

The benefits of improving their well being and self esteem inside the project were contrasted with the often negative experiences from people in their routine life. For example, one project user stated “people on the street say nasty words, make you feel bad”.

It was reported that the impact of the project on users’ health has been considerable. One project user said “for a lot of people they have shown a big improvement [in their health] since coming to the project”.

It was also felt that many people who come to the project may not realise the extent of their illness. It was reported “most people don’t know how sick they are but when you come here you start to feel better”.

## Improving spoken English

Service users highly appreciated the opportunity to practise their spoken English with one another. Indeed, they insisted that English was spoken even when certain group members shared a common language (“we won’t let them speak same language”). Whilst most service users had either participated in ESOL classes or were currently involved in courses, it was felt that it was necessary to have an opportunity outside the class to practice and develop their English levels. It was felt that the project gave them a unique opportunity to do this, for example, “it improves English and it’s important ... can’t do that at home”.

## Developing a knowledge of the region

The trips that have been and continue to be provided by the project (although currently without funding) are felt to be important to the service users. They were mainly felt to be important as they gave project users an appreciation and knowledge of the local area, one that they would otherwise not have. It was also stated that it gave project users the opportunity to meet people from outside of their local area. Some comments included: “it’s good to see other places”; “it has helped me discover the country”. All project users said, had it not been for the project and these trips, they would not have seen those parts of the region, nor taken any trips.



## Findings from partner agencies

### Reasons to refer

The project plays an important role for a number of organisations across Newcastle and Gateshead who work with asylum seekers and refugees. This ranges from providing their service users with activities that they themselves cannot provide (like housing agencies or asylum seeker agencies that provide more critical services),<sup>[1]</sup> giving service users extended opportunities to continue their education (such as ESOL services), extending people's therapies or fulfilling sponsor's criteria for accessing and supporting vulnerable groups.

In relation to the first point above, one agency reported that The Comfrey Project was a place where they could refer people in order for them to engage in a meaningful and productive activity. This agency's core work is providing accommodation and English to asylum seekers and refugees. It is important to them that they are able to use other organisations to provide other services as it was recognised that "accommodation isn't everything in life ... you need other things". They continued "once we've provided stability, people need other meaningful things to do ... the Comfrey Project does that, it is a place where people can be active, be creative, they have an element of control and it's a place where they can make friends".

Another referring organisation works with service users who have severe mental health problems and suffer from various level of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, including some who have been discharged from the mental health unit in the Queen Alexandra Hospital in Gateshead. With these service users (including after discharge), they will try and find activities in the community for them to do and The Comfrey Project is one of them.

For another referring organisation, much of their work is around emotional support and improving service users' well being and it was felt that The Comfrey Project is an extension of that work. The manager of the organisation stated "we hope people will feel better from going there [The Comfrey Project] ... it's an additional arm of that support".

[1] E.g. The Medical Foundation that provides services for victims of torture.

For this organisation, when working with particularly vulnerable clients with severe mental health problems, they will take people to the allotment in person and go and pick them up from where they are staying; “otherwise people wouldn’t go”. One professional stated “it’s important to physically take them and once they are enjoying things they can go on their own, especially if they’ve been in hospital and are institutionalised. One woman had been in [hospital] for five months, then out, then in again for two months, then out again”.

Professionals from primary mental health care such as primary care counsellors, psychologists and doctors will also refer service users to the project. This is predominantly to provide therapy when other therapeutic options are restricted.

ESOL services recognise that opportunities for their students to both socialise and practise their English are extremely important for language development. It is for both these reasons, that tutors will refer using their one-to-one tutorials as an opportunity to do so.

There is a significant issue of trust in relation to agencies who refer people to the project. Agencies will not refer their clients if they are not absolutely convinced that those clients will be properly cared for. As an illustration, one organisation stated “We recognise our own limitations and so we signpost people. The Comfrey Project is a resource we can use and an organisation with whom we have a relationship and we trust. On a pragmatic level, this means that we have no hesitation in referring our clients”.

The Comfrey Project therefore is an organisation that has a high degree of trust throughout its partner organisations in Newcastle and Gateshead. Amongst other organisations who know about the project but who may not have a relationship, the project enjoys a very good reputation.

## Reflections and memories of a project worker

“ Some time back, as a result of funding shortages, we had to close one of the groups and this brought lots of concerns amongst our project users. One man said “this project is the only family I have ... so what will happen with me if it closes?”.

Recently I bumped into one of our project users who stopped coming to the group sessions a few months ago. He told me he has moved on in his life and thanks to the confidence and language practice he gained while coming to the project he is able to start a new ‘normal’ life and is in the process of starting his own business.

Another example is a man who after a couple of years of regular attendance (initially with his Social Worker) came to us and said “Thank you very much for all the good things you have done for me. Now I feel I’m ready to move on, I feel better and I am starting full time college course”.

A man who initially was very [mentally] unwell and has attended regular group sessions for some time came to me one day, with a garden key in his hand and said “I don’t need this any more” and handed his key back, “I feel good now. My heart was broken when I came to the garden, but you managed to put it back together again, so now I can move on with my life. Thank you very much”.

”

Source: Sanja Ratkusic, project worker from 2004 to 2009.

There was a good knowledge about the project and what it did amongst partner organisations in Newcastle and Gateshead. Indeed, its activities, approach and ethos were held in high regard by those organisations who worked with the project in various ways.

For example, it was known that the Project ran gardening groups in two areas (Newcastle and Gateshead). It was felt that the locations of the project (at the allotments) and its activities were “a nice place to be”. Furthermore, it was said that “it is a place where people can be and nothing is expected from them and it gets people into the fresh air and doing a physical exercise”. It was felt that the small numbers in their groups was a positive as many agencies felt that the service users who are referred (particularly those with more severe mental health issues) can be intimidated by large groups.

There was also a high level of awareness of the benefits of the project and many agencies had much praise. Below is a selection of comments from partner agencies.

“The Project is small and beautiful, something precious”.

“It offers a nice environment to people who are stressed, to do gardening”.

“It’s where people can develop confidence, can garden and practise their English ... that’s the progression”.

“It provides services that help people, improves their well being and gives them an activity to be involved in”.

“They work with asylum seekers and refugees. The work that they do demonstrates that they can enable people to develop a sense of self worth through a sharing of problems between each other. Their staff then can signpost people to other organisations that can help them”.

## An appreciation of project staff

Together with the good knowledge of the project and the high level of regard and trust with which it is held, was an appreciation of the staff at the project. The approach and empathy of the project workers were particularly appreciated.

“The staff are very welcoming and very sensitive with students who have lots of problems”.

“They are good at engaging people, stimulating people to do things that they are able to do, this makes people proud and gives them self worth”.

“It’s great the way they relate to people ... they empathise perfectly”.

Similarly there was an appreciation of The Comfrey Project manager and their role in growing the organisation, developing the profile and locating them on the ‘strategic map’.

“[the manager] has done really well in consolidating the organisation and bringing it to where it is. I also know [the manager] from strategy meetings and she is very good to work with and very professional”.

## Realisation of the benefits of the project

There were a number of benefits to the project felt by partner agencies. These varied in priority depending on the organisation. However, top of the list of benefits to most organisations was the therapeutic role of the project.

### A therapeutic environment

The project's position as a therapeutic intervention was felt on a number of levels, ranging from being described as "a good place to simply 'be'" to being an effective non-talking therapeutic intervention. The project's level of therapy was also reported to vary depending on the needs of the service user, from a place of respite for those suffering severe trauma, to relaxing and social opportunities to those who are isolated or depressed. However, it is generally accepted that all asylum seekers suffer from varying levels of mental health problems caused by experiences of fleeing or memories of their country of origin. Therefore, it would appear that all service users access some element of the project's therapeutic environment.

The project's aims all contribute to accepted ways of improving people's mental health, including being involved in physical activity, meeting people, making friends, relaxing, being in the open air and receiving mutual support.

The metaphors of 'growing and creation', 'the cycle of life' and 'nurture' were all frequently used by partner organisations as key to the therapeutic role of the project. One agency said "their whole ethos is around the ground, the earth and that is good". Another said, "They are creating something, something symbolic of hope, help, to nurture and produce. It is redemptive and healing".

Healing was also raised many times as a key outcome of the project. For example, one professional stated "It's great to have a therapeutic environment where you can grow and share and eat your own vegetables. It's healing for people with traumatic experiences". Another agency reported "talking, growing, healing, taking their achievements home, it teaches them how to cope".

The project's ability to create value in individuals and a self worth was also recognised. It was pointed out that asylum seekers and refugees are a very disempowered group and one lacking in control, voice or recognition. The project was reported to give a level of control and empowerment back to people. For example, one agency reported, "For asylum seekers, nobody asks them anything, people are always telling them what to do, giving them advice, The Comfrey Project is a place where they are the experts and they do what they want to do". Another said, "it gives asylum seekers control and that is something which has been taken away from them. It gives them purpose and their self esteem back".

The project's ability to listen to people was also recognised, "it makes people feel comfortable, it's a good place to be listened to ... it helps people with problems in a very relaxed way". Another agency stated, "It's a lovely little oasis, a safe haven, where people can talk about their problems, where it is safe and confidential".

The project's therapeutic role in addressing mental health problems was explicitly recognised by the primary care mental health service in Newcastle (NHS Newcastle and North Tyneside Community Health). It was reported that the project helps the service reach the objectives which are contained in the Department of Health's Delivering Race



Equality in Mental Health, 2005 to 2010. It was also reported that the project plays an important 'holding and containing' role for people with mental health problems, which essentially stops people "going over a critical threshold and becoming patients of the NHS".

It was felt by this service that the project provides a service that firstly is not available elsewhere (i.e. as a therapeutic intervention for asylum seekers and refugees with mental health problems) and secondly, provides a real alternative to existing NHS provision (which may include six week, one hour

a week counselling sessions run by the NHS, drug interventions or hospitalisation). It was also pointed out that many people from Third World countries may not access talking therapies, but instead would visit a traditional healer or spiritualist.

In relation to the capability of the project team to deliver a therapeutic intervention, it was reported that it was not necessary to be mental health trained. For example, "To work with people with mental health problems, you don't need qualifications, but you do need to know when you're out of your depth, so you can refer on and you need to know where you can get that help". Another said, "The Comfrey Project is a cheap way of providing clinical interventions. You don't need to be a psychologist or have a CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) qualification, you just need to be able to provide that space". It was felt that the current Mental Health First Aid course which is being delivered by the NHS can equip the project workers with sufficient knowledge to be able to deal with severe problems should they arise.

However, as one professional put it "the therapy is in the provision of the space and opportunity to be", and this is something that the project and its staff do in a very proficient and empathetic way.

One professional raised the issue of asylum and said:

"The thing we lack in the UK is something that truly provides asylum. Everything is about case management and care plans ... but you need a place to go which is good for your head, somewhere that truly provides asylum, like The Comfrey Project".

## Improving community cohesion

It was felt that the Project had a positive impact on community cohesion, particularly in relation to local people who share the allotments. One local authority professional in Gateshead who works with asylum seekers said:

“They’re brilliant ... it’s something [for the asylum seekers] to do, to meet people, to eat, grow ... and to integrate into the wider community, by meeting regular Gateshead folk, that’s something that they [people from Gateshead] wouldn’t normally do”.

The Comfrey Project plays a role in encouraging different communities to mix with resident communities. The chairperson of one of the allotment associations reported a number of positive things about the project, including the level of friendliness between project users and allotment members (“we get on very well ... they’re a good bunch”), the project’s contribution to broader community cohesion (“they’re classed as human beings ... you’ve got to educate them [residents], we don’t even look at their [project users’] colour”) and an educative role (“they’ve got different ideas [about gardening] and different ways of doing things, but that’s good”). It was noted that the integration took some time as it was reported “the first time [the project users met allotment members] they were a bit shy and people used to talk when they first came, you know, different colours, different nationalities, but not now ... there’s no bother, no issues and we’ve got good relations”. It

was also felt by the chairperson that it was important for both project users and other allotment members to mix, for example, it was stated “if you mix with people, people take you better, if you don’t then people get suspicious”.

## English language

It was felt that the project played an important role in developing and improving project users’ English language. For example, one organisation reported:

“it’s not just a gardening project ... [name] couldn’t speak a word of English when he arrived, now he can speak really well and The Comfrey Project had a lot to do with that because that’s where he spoke English”.

It was recognised that whilst colleges could teach English, it is the opportunity to speak the language which “brings people on” in English proficiency.

## Social interaction

The project’s role in allowing for social interaction, reducing isolation and providing people with an opportunity to make friends was also recognised.

It was noted that they help encourage people to mix and ‘come out of themselves’, particularly certain ethnic groups, who may have a tendency to mix only with members of their own community. One agency said, “It gives people an alternative to their own cultural groups”.

## Evidence of progression

There were a series from reports of referral agencies witnessing the benefits of their clients from accessing The Comfrey Project.

For one agency, there was a recognition of a general benefit to their clients. For example,

“They get out, become more confident. I notice that in my clients, they become more chatty. Before, they have no expression, nothing but after going it’s like, life doesn’t seem so bad ... it lifts their mood”.

For other agencies, the benefit is more specific and tangible. For example,

“One asylum seeker was having a dreadful time around their asylum application [which was ultimately successful] ... the Project kept them going. If the Home Office says it doesn’t believe you, then the Project provides a place to be where they say, we do believe you”.

Similarly, for another service, it was reported

“For one service user, the project saved his life. For another it stopped him going insane ... some people get incredibly depressed, especially if you are from a minority ethnic group, like someone from Burma”.

Then there are other agencies who witness a progression of Comfrey Project service users in a more measurable way. For example, “one Eritrean man who gained refugee status who went to the project went on to be accepted onto a Council run gardening scheme”.

There is also evidence of progression within the project itself, including project users who have spent time as trustees, and the example of an Iranian man who now has his own “meticulous” allotment in the West End.

## A unique service

Finally, there was a recognition that no-one else provides a service such as the one The Comfrey Project provides. Reports include:

“They do something that nobody else does”.

“The Comfrey Project is different to other projects ... there’s nothing like it”.

“It is unique ... nothing does that”.

# Publicity

The project has received significant regional and national recognition from regional and national publications and online coverage. All of this coverage has been positive and has been the result of the project's uniqueness and of the benefits accruing to their project users.

In 2007, the founder, Mandy Jetter, and her work were recognised in Gordon Brown's book *'Britain's Everyday Heroes'*. More recently, the project has appeared on the BBC website, in FQ, the new regional food magazine, seeds of hope and in the Royal Horticultural Society's Gardening Magazine.

In December 2009, The Comfrey Project won The Guardian Charity of the Year Award 2009, selected

as one of five winners from around 500 entrants. The judges, who came from across the charity, public and journalism sectors, said: "This is a very powerful project that lifts the soul and is growing in an amazing way. The way it builds relationships and maintains these relationships is a really heart warming thing."

The award was presented to representatives of The Comfrey Project at a ceremony in London.

Ironically despite the high level of regional and national recognition, The Comfrey Project seems to be less well known and recognised locally. This may be a contributory factor to funding insecurities. One priority for the organisation is to improve publicity and recognition.



FQ Magazine Issue 2  
Summer 2009,  
pp80-2



The Garden Magazine  
August 2009  
pp527-9

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Page last updated at 12:37 GMT, Monday, 2 November 2009

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**Gardening can help end isolation**

**It's a typical British autumn day - wet and grey.**

The roads and pavements are covered in puddles and golden leaves droop under the weight of the rain.

It's not exactly ideal gardening weather, but one particular allotment in Gateshead is bustling with activity.

It belongs to The Comfrey Project - a Tyneside initiative that uses the very British pastime of gardening to help asylum seekers and refugees adapt to life in the UK.

Some of the refugees now living on Tyneside used to live in war zones like Afghanistan.

**Sense of belonging**

The project rents three allotments in total (the other two are in Newcastle) and runs weekly sessions on each.

Those who attend are encouraged to grow their own produce.



The project runs three groups on Tyneside

**Local BBC Sites**

- News
- Sport
- Weather
- Travel

**Neighbouring Sites**

- Cumbria
- South Scotland
- Tees
- Wear

**Related BBC Sites**

- England

**theguardian**

**Charity Awards 2009**

**Winners of Guardian Charity Awards announced**

Charities working with young people, stroke victims, asylum seekers and prisoners recognised for valuable contribution

Alison Benjamin  
guardian.co.uk



The winners at the Guardian Charity Awards 2009 in Kings Place, London. Photograph: Teri Pengilley

**The winners**

- Guardian Charity Awards 09: An introduction **Video** (56 sec)
- The Comfrey Project **Video** (1min 59sec)
- Aik Saath - Together As One **Video** (1min 56sec)
- InterAct Reading Service **Video** (2min 17sec)
- Faith and Football **Video** (1min 53sec)

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/tyne/hi/people\\_and\\_places/nature/newsid\\_8329000/8329407.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/local/tyne/hi/people_and_places/nature/newsid_8329000/8329407.stm); accessed 27/02/10

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2009/dec/03/guardian-charity-awards-winners>; accessed 27/02/10



A short film about The Comfrey Project, made for the Guardian Charity Awards, can be found at:  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/video/2009/dec/03/voluntarysector>

**theguardian**

**Charity Awards 2009**

**The Comfrey Project**

Allotment scheme for refugees and asylum seekers

Alison Benjamin  
The Guardian



More than 20 nationalities are represented on three allotment sites.

When the Comfrey Project faced tough financial problems, the refugees and asylum seekers who attend its weekly allotment sessions came to its rescue, writing a letter to funders that read: "You have stood with us all in

**More on this story**

- Winners 2009: Charities working with young people, stroke victims, asylum seekers and prisoners recognised for valuable contribution
- More on the Charity Awards 2009 winners
- More about Aik Saath
- Video:** Aik Saath
- Video:** The Comfrey

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2009/dec/03/comfrey-project-charity-award-winner>; accessed 27/02/10

## Conclusion

From the findings of this review, we can make a series of judgements. These are:

The project provides a therapeutic environment where people can start to recover from the experience of trauma.

The staff and the activities are effective at creating the environment and providing the support to allow that to happen.

The project plays a number of roles for its project users; developing new social networks, providing opportunities for developing their English, and improving their mental and physical health.

It extends and goes beyond the services that can be offered by many organisations.

It is a trusted organisation and well respected.

It is telling when reports that come from the project, associated organisations and project users all say the same thing. It is also unusual, as in most exercises like this, there is disagreement or contradiction. However, in the case of The Comfrey Project, this is not the case: one message is coming back. That message is about the benefits of the project, the healing that it allows, the strength gained from growing things, from their nurture and growth, and the friends made and the support that gives.

Indeed, the testimonies of the project users both past and present, demonstrate the project's impact; reports such as 'it saved my life', 'they got me through' and 'it stopped me from falling apart'. Such comments are compelling evidence of the project's value.

On many occasions, the project's partner agencies mentioned the value of transferring the project's approach to other groups who have suffered from trauma, particularly for people who either do not want to talk about their experiences or who are too traumatised to speak about them. It was pointed out that there were few alternatives to current therapeutic interventions on offer. One professional noted:

"There is not much in the way of therapeutic interventions which is not part of the Western psychotherapeutic model that is available. It [the project] is an alternative therapeutic intervention that doesn't require a massive amount of qualifications in order to be able to do it.

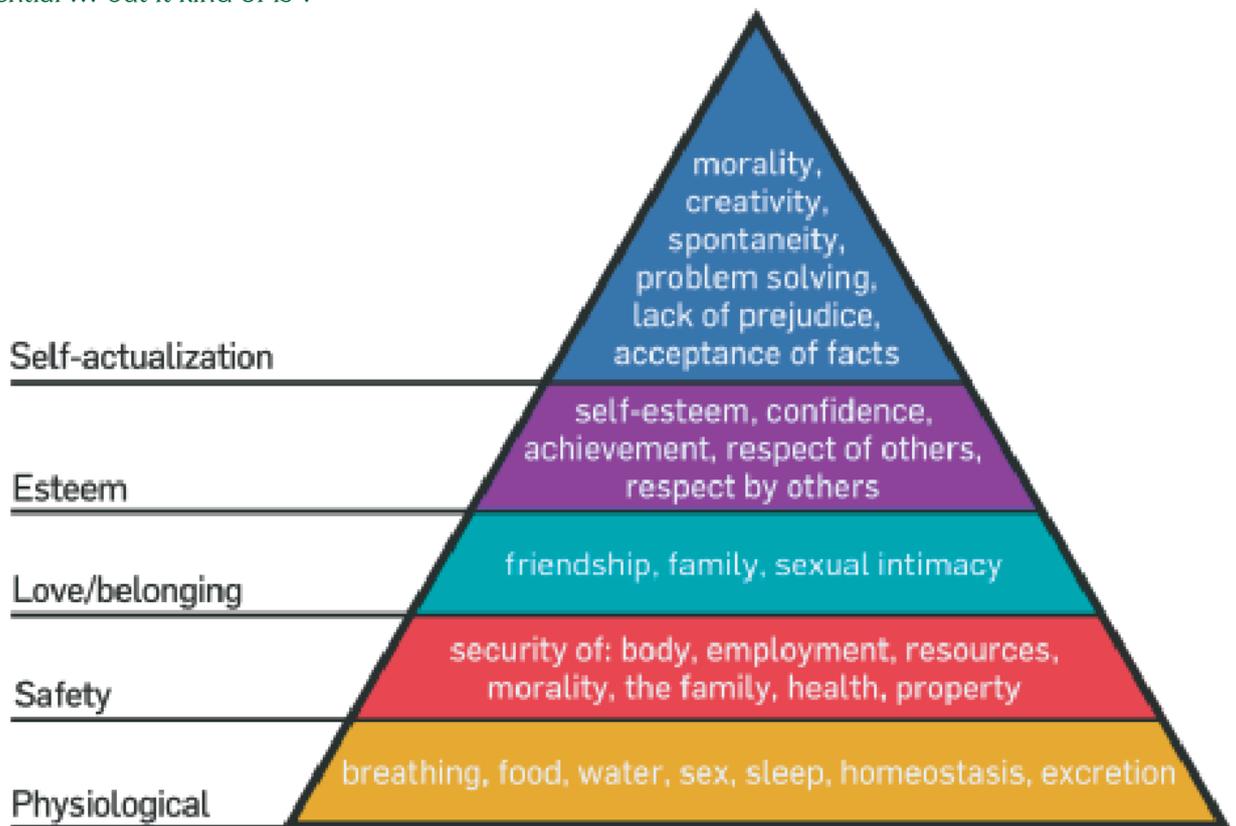
It's about letting people be and again see the cycle of life and it is an approach which has been shown to be very successful in modern psychology. You leave people to grow again, to re-establish themselves and recover from complex trauma. Interventions like The Comfrey Project are where you'd turn if someone had been so significantly hurt, that dealing with the problems direct wouldn't be possible. It has huge potential for other client groups because of this.

Sometimes you don't need a jointly agreed care pathway, you just need time".

Finally, we would like to turn to the issue of need. The question of 'is the project essential to project users' was raised during this review. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (below) was used as a way of illustrating the position of the project in catering for the needs of asylum seekers.

The project has been described as a 'luxury item' and to others it may appear to be a 'fluffy' project where people go to do a bit of gardening and have some lunch. However, from the evidence that we have gathered during this review, it would appear that the project, whilst working successfully at a number of levels, importantly fulfils the needs of its users much closer to the bottom of Maslow's triangle, than many people would expect. As one partner agency said:

"It's not essential ... but it kind of is".



Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow's\\_hierarchy\\_of\\_needs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow's_hierarchy_of_needs)

## Appendix - Governance

The Comfrey Project is governed by a board of six trustees, who meet around eight times a year to discuss and direct the organisation. They communicate regularly between meeting times, with the Manager and each other to keep abreast of new developments and to support and advise on issues including training, personnel, finances and business planning.

The current board is made up of the following individuals:

Ruth Hofbauer has been a trustee since 2005 and became Chair in July 2008. Ruth has previous experience working for Northumberland Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust and brings a wide experience of managing Mental Health Services across all age groups, knowledge of operational policies and financial management.

Clive Moon has been a trustee of The Comfrey Project since 2003 and is Secretary. He has been involved with managing gardening projects for the last 24 years and believes strongly in the use of gardening to bring people together and help people to feel good.

Pippa Kendall had been a long term supporter of The Comfrey Project before becoming a trustee in 2008. She became Treasurer in October 2009. Pippa is an Educational Psychologist and has worked closely with refugee families both in Newcastle and East London.

Richard Adams OBE has been involved in The Comfrey Project since 2004, previously serving as Chair. Richard has a strong background in issues of fair trade and social and environmental justice and as founder of several ethical businesses. Richard brings a wealth of business and strategic experience to the board.

Susan Donnelly has been a trustee of The Comfrey Project since it began. She has a background as a health visitor, with a huge amount of experience working with refugees and asylum seekers. She currently works with Newcastle Primary Care Trust as the Business Manager for Health Improvement Service for Ethnic Minorities.

Gail Young retired in 2008 from 28 years working as a GP, 11 of those in Newcastle (Benwell and Walker), and thus has extensive experience of the locality. She has always had a special interest in mental health and has been employed for 12 years part-time by the NHS as a counsellor; this post is ongoing. She is a keen gardener and keen to help promote the health and social benefits of gardening, and so joined the trustees of The Comfrey Project in late 2009.

The Comfrey Project trustees are currently seeking to increase the membership of the board and have identified several skill areas that would complement their existing skills base. These include, private sector business experience, members of the refugee community and those working day-to-day with refugees and asylum seekers.

They are currently exploring ways of working more effectively, for example each person taking a lead on a particular area, including finance, personnel, marketing, training, etc. The trustees have made a commitment that in every month, at least one of them will attend an allotment group so that they can better understand the day-to-day work. They are also exploring training and development opportunities to improve the skills and capacity of current trustees.



In 2009/10 The Comfrey Project was funded by:

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Christ's Hospital in Sherburn  
Eaga Community Foundation  
Emerton Christie Charity  
Esmée Fairbairn Foundation  
Gateshead Council  
Hadrian Trust  
Northern Rock Foundation  
Sir James Knott Trust  
The Big Lottery Fund  
The Henry Smith Charity  
The Joicey Trust  
Tudor Trust  
Your Homes Newcastle  
1989 Willan Charitable Trust

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