

## Forest Farm Peace Garden

City Bridge Trust Stepping Stones Case Study  
*First Interview – October 2015*

For some, time spent gardening would mean burdensome labour and exhaustion; for Amiya, time spent gardening lifted her burdens and set her free.

After losing her job and her physical health, Amiya began to suffer with depression, anxiety and self-harming behaviours. After a referral from her GP to the Forest Farm Peace Garden, Amiya's recovery began instantly. "As soon as I began to spend time working in the garden a weight lifted from my back" she said.

Beginning her time alongside a volunteer buddy in the garden, Amiya soon grew in confidence, becoming a big part of the garden community, and regained her physical and mental health. Before long she was leading other volunteers in their work, and presenting the garden to visiting members of the public. As a result of her work she was able to gain strong references and recommendations, earning her further volunteering opportunities and an opportunity back into employment.

Natalie Szarek, Project Manager at Forest Farm Peace Garden tells this story to bring to life the mission and success of the project. Set up in 2003 by Joanna Burch-Brown on a two-acre site on the outskirts of North-East London, the project set out to provide a community for refugees and asylum seekers who found themselves in a new country without a support network to help them find friends, and community. Since then it has grown to include all kinds of people looking for support and health recovery, including many mental health referrals from GPs and charities.

Their work falls now into two categories, eco-therapy, where they pair clients with volunteer buddies to work in the garden and gain new skills and confidence, and environment-education, where they bring in groups of local people to teach them organic gardening skills and environmental conservation.

Forest Farm Peace Garden finds itself having both an increasing demand for its services – a result of loss of statutory support networks, and increased mental health diagnoses – and a period of stable funding. This has allowed Natalie to spend time thinking and researching how the project can gain new income streams in the future and grow its core purpose. It is through this thinking that social investment sprung to her attention.

"In the last eighteen months social investment has come up a lot in visiting other food projects. Social enterprise lends itself well to the work we're doing here. I like that social investment is renewable. You gain it and then pay it back, hopefully to receive it again", Natalie says. In particular she had been putting together plans for their own social enterprise called 'Audacious Veg'. "We have an idea to work with NEET and vulnerable young people to train them in

gardening skills, develop their confidence, teamwork and aspirations, and enable them to grow high-end vegetables to sell to London restaurants. The City Bridge Trust Stepping Stones came along at the perfect time to let us make this idea a reality.”

Using a grant in the capacity building stream, Natalie will continue her research and exploration of the social investment market and what form their social enterprise should take. “We’ve already attended training about transitioning to social enterprise models, working with a consultant one-on-one, and mapping out all the options available and which is the best fit for us here. The great thing about the grant is that it’s given us the staff time to do this work, develop business plans, and begin to build partnerships.”

Their aim is to run a pilot of the Audacious Veg project by the end of 2015 to test the concept from the young people’s point of view, with a mind to making decisions about social investment models by the end of the grant period in 2016.

Natalie is already aware of the variety of forms in which social investment can take and is keen to ensure they choose the right one: “a lot of charities wonder how best to raise investment. For example, can they do shares? What about equity? Any form of repayable finance is a risk. Shares moves the risk to shareholders in repayment, but then you also hand over control. For us at the moment it’s about risk management, and at the moment that means ensuring that our big picture vision can still come about with the decisions we make.”

Asked about advice for other Stepping Stones applicants, Natalie continues in a similar vein: “Go for the grant and look into your options. Social investment has a big range of options. Do some research, get some expert advice, and let the concept sink in. Let it sit for a while, and come back to it. Give yourself the time to understand it and what it would mean for your charity.”

Perhaps coming from their gardening background, Forest Farm Peace Garden are taking a very particular approach to exploring social investment: good things come to those who wait.

#### *Second Interview – February 2016*

Talk to Natalie Szarek about Forest Farm Peace Garden’s Stepping Stones project and the theme of patience comes through strongly: “For us the grant has given us the time and space to learn about social enterprise, change our mindset, and develop our ‘Audacious Veg’ social enterprise.”

Four months into the funding and they’ve got to a stage where they are ready to pilot their social enterprise with a first set of young people.

“We’ve recruited six young people, not currently working or in education, aged 18-24, and from the local area. They’re going to complete 100 hours of paid

placement on the Audacious Veg project, growing produce that will be sold to local cafes and restaurants.”

Demonstrating their enterprising approach, Natalie has built a partnership with the Redbridge Institute of Adult Education and the local adult education college. Using government traineeship funding, the young people will also study for three days a week in English, Maths, Health & Safety and Customer Service, adding an accredited educational component to the Audacious Veg scheme.

“After three months with us, these young people will have earned some money, gained new skills, and secured new qualifications. All on top of the experience of having worked hard to grow high quality produce that was sold for a financial profit. It’ll be their own stepping stone to a better future.”

The development of Audacious Veg was a clear process of meeting with consultants to discuss social investment options, legal structures for the social enterprise, and adapting to a new mind-set: “One of the biggest changes for us was that with grant funding you plan the project and only run it if you get the funding. With a social enterprise, you plan the project, run it and only then do you find out much you’ve generated.”

This change involved significant market research. “We needed to be confident that we could make products that would be in demand, and to identify what competitive edge we could create. We knew that we had an abundance of nasturtium flowers on the farm that are in demand, and have the ability to grow purslane, which is one of the current ‘superfoods’. We also knew that we’d be able to provide these fresh and locally produced, something few other providers could offer.”

Despite this progress, they’ve actually delayed their search for social investment. Having initially thought to fund the project through social investment, they realised they needed more confidence first from a successful pilot. “We realised that we couldn’t go from no social enterprise activity to a successful enterprise in less than a year. We needed to test it out first.”

However Forest Farm Peace Garden have found the process of change exciting: “One of the principles of permaculture is knowing how to turn a problem into a solution. With the Stepping Stones grant, we’ve been able to turn that same idea into a way to look at income generation. As long as we don’t let that detract from our core purpose of eco-therapy, it’s a great way to think!”

Time will tell if the Audacious Veg pilot succeeds, if they raise a good income from the produce, and if the young trainees have a positive experience. At that point they’ll be in a position to take the next step and seek social investment to make the enterprise larger and more sustainable.

