

# Growing Recovery

For one village, gardening has brought the community together with far-reaching health and wellbeing benefits, as **Esther Beadle** reports



Sharon Stiles has watched the project bloom

the churchyard, parishioners, schoolchildren and Hopewood Park patients have been building bridges between the hospital and its neighbours, while helping to improve wellbeing and break down the stigma around mental health conditions.

And the resilience of these sunshine yellow blooms helps to spread the message of recovery and light in dark times.

'I think it's something about daffodils coming up at a time when they really herald the spring – especially here in the North East,' says Sharon Stiles, specialist occupational therapist at Hopewood Park.

'It doesn't matter what the weather is doing. There can be snow on the ground and they're still coming through. Daffodils are tough, they are beautiful and they represent new life.'

Quickly establishing links with the church and the village school, St Paul's Church of England Primary, staff at Hopewood Park, run by Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust, quickly found these connections benefitted everyone.

By holding Plant A Bulb For Recovery events, patients, parishioners and pupils were brought together to tend to the churchyard greenery, and share in the immense health benefits of being in the great outdoors. Without doubt, the scheme has helped villagers to connect with patients at their local mental health hospital, and to demystify what mental ill health is.

The patients at Hopewood Park involved in the project all live with severe mental illnesses, conditions that

can be heavily stigmatised. Sharon explains, 'I always start with anxiety because many people understand what that is. Anxiety to the point where it becomes a problem, depression to the point that you're in a dark place where it affects your life.'

'Psychosis gets a bit more difficult – seeing hallucinations or hearing voices. Not many people understand it and we need to tackle that.'

'We started Plant A Bulb For Recovery because there are lots of myths, fears and stigma

about mental health and through this we can show the local population that people with these conditions are not "scary".'

Vicar at St Paul's, Rev David Chadwick, agrees the project has really helped, adding, 'None of the parishioners ask or care about people's conditions. They see the person first, not the illness.'

'It has been wonderful to see people mingling at these events, enjoying cake and coffee together after getting their hands dirty.'

According to Sharon, gardening with villagers and celebrating the links they have cultivated

has proven therapeutic. 'Social isolation is one of the biggest risks for our patients,' she says. 'I think most people can understand how that can make you feel low.'

*'This has really improved the life of people here in Ryhope'*

'A lot of the service users who started have now moved on to the next stage of their recovery. Something like this shows you can be part of a community – and that's so important for all of us.'

And Rev David stresses it is not just the hospital patients' health that has benefitted from the project.

reduce the risk of falls. The National Garden Scheme, which helps fund nursing charities, has even called on doctors to start prescribing gardening to help reduce

depression, anxiety and stress. Alyson Chorley is from Thrive, a charity that uses gardening as therapy to help people with disabilities or ill health, or those who are isolated, disadvantaged or vulnerable.

She says, 'One in four people in the UK will experience a mental health problem each year and we know that the

therapeutic value and feeling of wellbeing people get from gardening, growing food and the outdoor environment has a strong and positive impact on our physical and mental health.'

'Our research shows that gardening can help people through a specific period of difficulty in their lives, help them get back on top of things and restore balance when it feels that life may be veering out of control.'

For Sharon and her colleagues at Hopewood Park, setting up such a useful project for everyone couldn't have been easier, thanks to the openness of the village community.

She says, 'Patients were already growing plants on site at the hospital as part of a project, so it was lovely to then be able to take this into the local community.'

'We started once a week, service users went down putting in plants and linking in with the local community.'

Since beginning in 2016, the project has truly grown, seeing more than 100 people from the village and hospital head along to till the soil, plant the bulbs and then celebrate the beautiful scenes they've created together come spring.

It has also branched out into Recovery Voices, a joint outdoor singing event held at Easter to mark the project's achievements. Joint carol services were organised for Christmas, and there are now plans for art exhibitions and sculptures to continue the garden's good work.

'This garden is growing into something more,' adds Sharon. 'It has been marvellous to see and we're so excited to see what's to come.'



Daffs brighten the approach to St Paul's Church



The fruits of locals' labours



Alyson Chorley promotes gardening as therapy