

# Growing the Social Role



## Partnerships in the community



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## **Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI)**

BGCI is the largest international network of botanic gardens and related institutions working collectively for plant conservation and environmental education. Its mission is “to mobilise botanic gardens and engage partners in securing plant diversity for the well-being of people and the planet.” Established in 1987 and with over 700 members drawn from almost 120 countries, BGCI provides technical and policy guidance as well as regular up to date information through its newsletters, magazines, conferences and courses. From influencing government policies and priorities to encouraging grassroots action, BGCI’s global reach and professional expertise enables it to achieve real conservation milestones. For further information, go to [www.bgci.org](http://www.bgci.org)

## **Growing the Social Role of Botanic Gardens: Partnerships in the community**

Published by: Botanic Gardens Conservation International  
Descanso House, 199 Kew Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 3BW, UK

November 2011

Design and editorial production: Earthscope, [www.earthscope.co.uk](http://www.earthscope.co.uk)

Supported by



CALOUSTE  
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FOUNDATION

**Cover photograph:** Members of Birmingham’s Muslim community working on Winterbourne Botanic Garden’s *Urban Veg* project.

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## Foreword

In this, the second of our landmark series of reports on the social engagement of botanic gardens, BGCI develops the themes we started to address in our 2010 study, *Towards a New Social Purpose: Redefining the Role of Botanic Gardens\**.

As a frank account of the realities and challenges of engaging with the social role of botanic gardens, *Growing the Social Role* stress tests the prevailing organisational cultures and structures of UK botanic gardens to see if they are fit for purpose for the 21st Century. Which is not to say that it's the working assumption of this report that the current model is exhausted and in need of revolution. Far from it, indeed, since the evidence is there for all to see that when they're playing to their historical strengths and catering for their traditional audiences, the UK's botanic gardens remain a potent force. But this begs the question: how much better would they be if, like our partner gardens here, they looked to engage with non-traditional audiences on globally significant issues such as global climate change and social and environmental justice?

Irrespective of the outcome of their projects – and, as the report suggests, it may not have been an easy ride for any of them – our partner gardens at Ness, Winterbourne and NBG Wales have to be congratulated for their courage and ambition in being prepared to put themselves so publicly under the microscope. It was an important task and one not to be undertaken lightly, and the learning that has come from it will, we hope, not only inform their practice but the wider botanic garden community too.

It has also certainly been an important learning experience for BGCI and will help us with the next phase of this project, which is to work with five UK botanic gardens to develop their social role and to develop an on-line manual to share our experiences and learning as wide as possible. As part of the project, we will be setting up a blog on the social role of botanic gardens with the aim of developing a community of practice. We look forward to your garden participating.

\*Redefining the role of Botanic Gardens: Towards a new social purpose (2010)  
<http://www.bgci.org/education/bgsocialrole>

## BACKGROUND

*Growing the Social Role of Botanic Gardens* was developed by BGCI, with support from Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, following the publication of its landmark 2010 report *Towards a New Social Purpose: Redefining the Role of Botanic Gardens*. The key recommendation of the 2010 report was that, in order to fulfil their social role and stay relevant in today's world, botanic gardens needed to relocate their social and environmental roles within a modern framework of values, mission and vision. Fundamental to this process, argued the report, was the recognition by botanic gardens that their social role was inextricably linked to environmental issues, such as climate change and social justice:

“Embracing the concept of social and environmental justice is... critical if botanic gardens are to reinvigorate their fundamental purpose.”

*Growing the Social Role* has built on the foundations of *Towards a New Social Purpose* by working closely with three botanic gardens – Ness Botanic Garden, Winterbourne House and Gardens, and the National Botanic Garden of Wales – to help them re-evaluate their mission, philosophy, values goals and practices within a framework of social responsibility. The project was led by BGCI in collaboration with RCMG. The results of RCMG's research are intended to inform future work with the botanic garden community, both in the UK and globally. The project took place between Autumn 2010 and Summer 2011.

### Project partners:

- Ness Botanic Garden – is part of University Liverpool. Located on the Wirral Peninsula, it has 18.4 hectares of ornamental gardens.

■ Winterbourne Botanic Garden – belongs to University of Birmingham and is located on the university's Edgbaston Campus.

■ National Botanic Garden of Wales – NBGW is situated in Carmarthenshire, West Wales, and was the first national botanic garden to be created in the new millennium. It hosts several important plant collections.

## Evaluation

The evaluation of *Growing the Social Role* aimed to:

- Understand the context for botanic gardens to engage with their social role.
- Provide evidence for future funding streams to develop the work of the project further.
- Provide models of action for the botanic garden sector – to demonstrate the process and potential impact of engaging with their social role.

Mindful of BGCI's earlier conclusion in *Towards a New Social Purpose*, that there is little compelling evidence of the social impact of botanic gardens, the evaluation posed the following questions:

- How open are botanic gardens to examining their social role (**attitudes**)?
- How can botanic gardens examine their social role (**organisational delivery**)?
- What social impact can botanic gardens have (**impact**)?

With the small number of participants ruling out a Quantitative research approach, Qualitative research methodologies were adopted to enable the research team to explore and understand the experiences of individuals and organisations in their wider contexts. Case studies were seen as an effective research

strategy that encouraged the generation of 'detailed, intensive knowledge' about a particular setting or location. With the two projects that went through to completion – at Winterbourne and Ness – this meant in practice the gathering of information from multiple perspectives, including botanic garden staff, project facilitators, project partners and participants.

The evaluation gathered evidence about the botanic gardens' projects in three key areas:

- Context,
- Process, and
- Impact

**Contextual** information was collected from the following sources: visitor demographics, information and statistics on the areas local to the botanic garden, the specific locations of communities, and information supplied by the botanic gardens through their project plans. The project gardens were also asked to photograph the project process, both for BGCI and RCMG's purposes and for their own use.

**Process** evidence – on the two projects that went forward and the programme as a whole – was secured by inviting botanic garden staff to complete a Project Significance Form, which gave each garden the opportunity to reflect on the process they had been through. To this end, staff were asked to work as a team to discuss and collaborate on their answers. Face to face, semi-structured interviews with botanic garden staff – including directors, curators, and horticulturalists – were also conducted during the case study visits.

Written responses to a series of questions about the project were invited from programme

facilitators, BGCI and the Eden Project. NBGW was also invited to respond to a series of written questions about its involvement in the project. Finally, the role of RCMG researchers as facilitators in the workshops was intended to provide direct observational experience, which was amplified by e-mail contact and discussion with project facilitators and botanic garden staff during the development of their projects.

Capturing the **Impact** of the project required information drawn from a range of perspectives, including participants, project facilitators and botanic garden staff and their project partners. For the project facilitators and botanic garden staff, there was some overlap with the methods used to collect evidence of the process. Securing the responses of project participants was regarded as a critical to each case study. These were obtained through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, either with individuals or with small groups of participants. Interviews were carried out with project partners from Islam Awareness Week (Winterbourne) and teachers from Shorefields Technology College (Ness).

A response card was used with participants and administered by botanic garden staff at the beginning and end of the project. Participants were asked about their expectations of botanic gardens were before and after the project and each question was framed to suit the specific garden project.

In order to ensure that the research methods used were ethical and appropriate for the project participants, a Research Ethics Review was submitted to the University of Leicester. A written information sheet was provided for participants, as well as a consent form that affirmed their informed consent to the research.

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

The three main components of the programme were:

- four workshops held at different venues around the country;
- each garden's unique project on a social issue or community specific to them;
- and the evaluation by RCMG

Four workshops were held, one at each of the participating botanic gardens and also at the Eden Project, bringing garden staff together with facilitators from BGCI, RCMG and the Eden Project. The workshops were designed to support the botanic gardens through their engagement with their social roles and help them deliver their chosen project. The first two workshops set out the context for the project and involved a series of presentations and activities designed to encourage the botanic gardens to re-examine their social practices in relation to their potential social role.

Workshops 3 and 4 provided a forum for the gardens to present their projects to the rest of the participants, discuss the process, progress and issues arising, and to assess the impact and legacy of the programme for the botanic garden sector.

The rationale for the workshops was to develop the partner gardens as socially and environmentally responsible organisations. They would be encouraged to embrace organisational change in order to embed their social and environmental roles. Workshop activities and presentations had a dual focus, to support the gardens through their own projects and also to frame the issues they raised within the wider context of the global botanic garden community. Examples of successful projects were provided from the Eden Project, Chicago

Botanic Garden and BGCI. An informal atmosphere was fostered to facilitate open discussion and the relaxed sharing of ideas. Partners were actively encouraged to support each other. In the inaugural workshop, the key findings of *Towards a New Social Purpose* were shared with the group.

Organisational buy-in, in terms of the collective development of the botanic gardens as a group, as well as individually, was seen as critical to the effectiveness of the programme. Since the workshops were intended as an iterative process of development, as well as a collaborative way of working, it was considered essential that the same botanic garden staff attend every workshop.

### The botanic garden projects

The three participating botanic gardens were asked to develop and deliver a discrete project that would address a social issue or community group relevant to their garden. At the inaugural workshop, the three gardens provided suggestions about potential target groups.

Winterbourne identified a joint enterprise with Birmingham's Muslim community; Ness targeted socially disadvantaged people in its catchment area, while NBG Wales was looking at working with deprived rural communities. Between workshops, the three botanic gardens worked on developing their projects. Support was provided from the project facilitators (BGCI, RCMG and Eden Project) through site visits, email and telephone contact. A project plan template was provided to help the gardens with their planning.

NBGW was involved in the early stages of the project and attended the first two workshops. However BGCI and RCMG became concerned about the quality, scope and scale of NBGW's

## CASE STUDY: *Urban Veg* at Winterbourne House and Garden

A community-based vegetable garden, *Urban Veg* involved the University of Birmingham's Winterbourne House and Garden and Birmingham's Islam Awareness Week Committee. Winterbourne had been invited to join *Growing the Social Role* on condition that it would work with the city's Muslim community, which, in 2010, amounted to around 17 per cent of its total population. For Winterbourne the project represented an opportunity to improve its visitor diversity. Typically, in line with most UK gardens, Winterbourne's visitor profile was predominantly white, middle class and relatively elderly.

Designed as a 'two-way cultural exchange and learning experience,' the project spanned the growing season of spring to autumn, from March-October 2011. The fifteen adult participants were recruited through Islam Awareness Week from a range of backgrounds among Birmingham's diverse Muslim population. Participants were responsible for every stage of the process, from deciding what to grow, maintaining the plot and harvesting the crops. Winterbourne staff led workshops on growing vegetables organically that including sowing, planting and maintenance techniques. Environmental issues related to gardening were highlighted, including water conservation, sustainable growing media, chemical pollution, wildlife awareness, 'growing your own', reducing carbon footprints, food miles and the value of the environment in promoting healthy living.

The project was documented through a newsletter (*Sprout*) and showcased in Winterbourne's 'Spring Fling' event. Other activities focused on the harvesting of the crops. *Urban Veg* will also be the theme for a planned 2012 exhibition. Although their faith requires Muslims to protect the Earth, BGCI commissioned research (*Islamic Gardens in the UK, 2009*) has found that UK Muslims are substantially disengaged from environmental issues, the research revealing a struggle against apathy in local communities. *Urban Veg*, with its core message of sustainability and caring for the environment, was seen as an opportunity for Birmingham's Muslim communities to meet their environmental responsibilities with the skills and support of Winterbourne's garden staff.

Public accessibility was a hallmark of the project, which was centrally located in Winterbourne's walled garden, where visitors observed participants working on their distinctive and visually stimulating plot. Signs in multiple languages and a weekly noticeboard, provided information and reported progress.



Planting potatoes at Winterbourne. *Urban Veg* invited members of Birmingham's Muslim community to set up a community garden on site.

Winterbourne staff found that the challenge of helping participants grow unfamiliar crops tested their horticultural skills in an unfamiliar context. And in engaging with participants from very different backgrounds, they also developed their listening and negotiating skills. As a two-way cultural learning exchange, *Urban Veg* was not a formal process of instruction but a collaborative process. Staff confidence and understanding across the organisation was developed through training, enabling them to engage with the Muslim participants in a culturally sensitive way – dealing with language difficulties, for example, and providing washing facilities and space to pray.

*Urban Veg* was well planned and effectively managed, both strategically and on the ground. Staff understood the project's goals and used this knowledge effectively to shape the project plan. Not only did this provide a framework for *Urban Veg*, but it proved adaptable when change was necessary.

The project attracted a core group of committed and enthusiastic participants, mostly highly educated, for whom new learning experiences were very important. They shared a strong community ethos and were keen to take the idea of *Urban Veg* back into their communities, to share their harvest and their knowledge with friends, neighbours and families. Good participation levels were achieved with this core group, although others



struggled with family and work commitments. The language difficulties facing some participants required Winterbourne staff to adopt appropriate supportive measures. Interactions between visitors and project participants were energetic, often leading to detailed discussions about what was being grown and how.

Participants were encouraged to work independently and at their own pace by garden staff, who participants described as 'approachable and accessible and friendly'. While some participants identified with the project, even expressing a sense of ownership, others were conscious of barriers that still impeded their community's access to the garden. Transport, admission costs and the programming of events were still skewed towards the white, middle-aged, middle-class. Winterbourne still has some way to go to remove this perception.

The environmental aspects of the project were embedded by garden staff through what they described as the, 'practical side of things rather than kind of a classroom experience'. For participants, their interest in the natural world and receptivity to organic methods, which was mediated through their spiritual and religious duty to God through caring for the environment, was a key aspect of their engagement with the project.

However in their daily lives, many found it difficult to find organic, locally grown foods in shops and supermarkets. In a city where allotments are hard to obtain, *Urban Veg* gave participants the chance to be self-sufficient, learn to grow organic produce and repatriate this learning to their families and communities.

While Winterbourne staff envisaged that, after training, the group would carry out activities unaided (as would be the case with volunteers), they quickly realised that the group required constant interaction. Participants had questions and ideas they wanted to discuss with staff directly, and they did not want to follow a written list of tasks. Similarly it was assumed that participants would take over the production of the newsletter and keep a diary of their involvement, but this was not the case. Staff began to learn that working with communities demands different skills and a very flexible and consultative approach.

Projects like *Urban Veg* were seen as challenging some of the hostile contemporary assumptions about Islam in the UK, namely that it fosters terrorism, is anti-Christian and fundamentally committed to overthrowing the secular values of the West. This perception has not been helped by a tendency for Muslim communities to isolate themselves from mainstream UK life in the face of perceived threats of violence and persecution. By

encountering participants working in the garden and engaging with them, Winterbourne visitors were invited to form a positive, more balanced view of the Muslim community. Overall, although there was some slight evidence of prejudice among a minority of visitors, the interaction between visitors and participants was generally encouraging. One drawback revealed by the self-selection of *Urban Veg* participants was that it tended to attract middle class Muslims, generally highly educated, active in their communities and living in the more affluent, leafy areas of Birmingham. They were perhaps untypical of the target community – Muslims disengaged from environmental issues – that *Urban Veg* originally had in mind.

For Muslims from more disadvantaged communities, access to *Urban Veg* was problematic. Many live in densely populated inner-city areas, characterised by high levels of social and economic deprivation, unemployment and inequality. While the *Urban Veg* participants clearly gained from the project, they too were aware of the need to take their skills out into the community, to support those who would not be able to access the botanic garden or benefit from projects such as theirs.

*Urban Veg* undoubtedly made its mark on Winterbourne, but what will its legacy be? One motivation for the project was to broaden audiences to the garden, making the garden less white and less middle-class. The visible presence of the project certainly had an impact, but how will the garden sustain the work it has done with Muslim communities? And will Muslim communities find themselves acknowledged and incorporated in Winterbourne's future programme planning and projects?

Staff are clearly more conscious of awareness training and undoubtedly their thinking is changing: as the former BBC Gardener's World plot adjacent to the gardens becomes available, plans are focused on using it for further community projects. Yet the question remains, how much is Winterbourne really listening to the needs of the Muslim community? Participants came up with inspiring suggestions for the development of *Urban Veg* – extending the concept of growing vegetables into the community; seeing Winterbourne represented at festivals and melas; and using local radio stations to highlight the work of Winterbourne for Muslim listeners.

While Winterbourne evidently travelled some way with this project towards becoming more socially relevant, it remains a work in progress. It is important that the garden listens more closely and works more collaboratively with communities to develop new initiatives, focusing on their agendas, rather than remain in its comfort zone.

project proposals and its planned use of the budget. After extensive discussions, NBGW withdrew from the project and did not participate in workshops three and four. Following NBGW's withdrawal, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation commissioned an independent report to examine the issues that led to the Welsh garden's departure.

A draft research plan for RCMG's evaluation was introduced formally to the partners in the third workshop. Partners were also asked to develop their own evaluative strategies for capturing the impact of their projects. To this end, Winterbourne asked participants to keep a diary of their experiences during the project, while Ness planned a questionnaire and aimed to secure feedback from teachers and students at Shorefields and the staff at Ness.

### IMPACT OF THE PROJECTS

Both Winterbourne's *Urban Veg* and *Engaging Secondary Schools* from Ness were relatively modest in scale and scope – Winterbourne's project involving eighteen adults and Ness fifteen Year 7 students from Shorefields – but both had a significant impact on individual participants and on the botanic garden staff. While neither garden found the process straightforward, their engagement with new groups demonstrated the benefits that botanic gardens can offer marginalised communities when they embrace their social role.

The challenge for the gardens is not to assume that, with one project, they have demonstrated their garden's social role, but to understand that they need to build on their learning.

Whereas botanic gardens may claim to be open to everyone, this in itself is not enough. Factors such as their location and layout, their

PR and events – as well as entrenched public perceptions – foster assumptions about who is welcome to visit them. Without tackling these assumptions head-on, gardens will continue, even passively, to exclude particular groups and individuals. In this regard, *Urban Veg* and *Engaging Secondary Schools* were important steps to enabling greater access to two previously marginalised groups.

Very few of the students from Shorefields School knew what a botanic garden was or had visited one with their families. Unfamiliar with botanic gardens, the young people believed they would resemble the green spaces they did know: parks, gardens, greenhouses, and allotments. "I expected it to be quite small," said one of the students, "but it was massive!"

Although participants in *Urban Veg* were more familiar with botanic gardens, their knowledge of Winterbourne was limited. It was for 'middle-class white people', – a perception corroborated by their own observations. While *Urban Veg* went some way towards removing the barriers to visiting the garden, many still remain for Muslim communities – admission costs, transport issues and, as one participant suggested "if you want the Muslim Community to come as visitors, then there needs to be some ownership". Some of the Winterbourne staff had started to grapple with these realities.

The two projects were undoubtedly useful steps towards making Ness and Winterbourne more accessible to hard-to-reach communities. However their interpretation of what access means was narrow and did not embrace its corollary, exclusion. In order to achieve a more profound understanding of these related phenomena, by successfully encouraging hitherto excluded communities inside their

gates – and addressing their needs once they've got them there – the gardens would have to consider systemic, long-term, cultural change.

### **A sense of belonging**

So what did Ness and Winterbourne do to create a welcoming environment for those not usually represented in their visitor profiles?

The intensive nature of Winterbourne's multiple-session project enabled a strong relationship to develop between participants and the garden staff. Urban Veg's sympathetic attention to detail was also a factor. The plant labels, for example, were transcribed in Urdu, Arabic and Punjabi. And the provision of a prayer room was another. Islamic Awareness Week praised the amount of time and effort that staff had given to the project.

At Ness, the staff's welcoming attitude put the young people at ease. Students also said they valued the freedom they were given on site and enjoyed being trusted. They appreciated the prizes and gifts they received and reported how they felt 'really comfortable' at Ness, both welcomed and respected. As one student said, "they gave us presents at the end of the last (session) ... but, like, everyone got one, not just the winners".

Both projects were in the public eye and this created opportunities for meaningful interactions with other visitors. As the project unfolded at Winterbourne, staff anxiety about dealing with people from different cultures was substantially reduced. An event involving ambassadors from Egypt, Yemen and Kuwait was regarded as tangible evidence that Winterbourne was now better equipped to welcome people onto the site and

accommodate their needs. Nevertheless, while participants were delighted with their involvement with the project, they had a sense of unease at a project specifically aimed at Muslim communities. "Yes it's been targeted to my community as ... Muslim minorities," argued one participant, "but ... we are just normal human beings ... And that's what we want. We want to be closer to each other."

For Winterbourne the temptation to simply export the *Urban Veg* model to other groups and communities is bound to be great. But that would be a disservice to the original project, which was modelled for a specific audience. Instead it should be seen as one positive example of how different communities may be brought together.

### **The importance of green spaces**

The beneficial effect of natural spaces on the human psyche is a familiar, yet still meaningful trope. They are "beautiful places that can put people in a receptive frame of mind," one of the project facilitators noted. Participants at Ness and Winterbourne mentioned the fresh air and the feelings of calm and tranquillity they experienced in the gardens, making them, as one *Urban Veg* participant said, happy "from the inside". For young people from deprived areas of Liverpool, this access to clean air and space where they could safely play and explore, were important antidotes to the corrosive impacts of social and economic deprivation on their health and wellbeing. "You feel different," said one Shorefields student. "Like different feelings ... there's not that many people and you feel calm." And as their teacher reported, "they usually nod off and fall asleep" on the way home. The physical activity had exhausted them, he said. "They've enjoyed their day, they've had fun."

### Good food and healthy living

*Urban Veg* participants were attracted to their project because they saw an opportunity to grow good quality, fresh, organic food as fundamentally important. They agreed on the value of a direct connection to the natural world and its beneficial effect on their health and wellbeing. “We try and do what we can to lead a greener lifestyle,” said an *Urban Veg* participant. “Not just about the environment, but to protect our health.” In the past, however, they felt they had encountered obstacles to finding suitable, reliable and accessible sources of organic produce. *Urban Veg’s* emphasis on ‘growing your own’ gave them the opportunity to find their own solution to the problem.

### The spiritual benefits

The spiritual premium from engagement with the natural world endowed *Urban Veg* with a depth of meaning quite untypical of most community engagement projects. Referring to the Qur’an and the Hadith (the sayings of the Prophet Mohammad) participants accepted that they had a religious obligation to behave as custodians of the environment. As the Islamic Awareness Week co-ordinator put it, “We have been put on this earth as custodians to look after our environment and think about what we use and what not to waste. And whatever we take from the earth, we should try and replace.”

Botanic gardens therefore may have a potentially key role in enabling Muslims to meet their responsibility, especially since some in the Muslim community may be unaware of it. Although gardens are demonstrably part of Islamic heritage, their importance to Islam may not be so clear-cut to modern urban Muslims. *Islam Awareness Week* intends to address this theme in the future, offering further potential opportunities to Winterbourne.

It should not be forgotten, either, that the association of religious belief with nature has a broader ecumenical significance, since other religions also affirm a commitment to caring for the world as God’s creation. From an inter-faith perspective this could foster a sense of common purpose, between Muslims and people of other faiths, over shared values.

### A real world environment for learning

The projects at Ness and Winterbourne exemplified the importance of botanic gardens as venues for lifelong learning, where learning is ‘a process of active engagement with experience’. They demonstrated that learning was not the province of children and young people alone. The adult participants in *Urban Veg*, and the staff at both gardens, underwent concrete learning experiences that altered their views, enhanced knowledge and understanding, and inspired them to act differently in the future.

The key to *Urban Veg’s* success as a learning experience was its practicality. In eschewing theory, it encouraged a hands-on approach to growing vegetables. Where participants may have struggled previously with books and manuals, here they acquired practical skills, while access to the expertise of botanic garden staff greatly increased their understanding. Significantly, participants expressed their satisfaction with the process of gardening, the sense of feeling involved at every stage. “I like it when I’ve got mud on my hands,” said an *Urban Veg* participant, “I want it to be real ... I don’t want it to be theory.”

For the young people of Shorefields, biology and the natural environment was no longer a set of abstract concepts in a textbook; Ness brought their science learning into the ‘real

### CASE STUDY: *Engaging Secondary Schools – Ness Botanic Garden*

In the Summer term of 2011 a group of Years 7 and 10 students from Shorefields Technology College in Liverpool took part in a joint project, *Engaging Secondary Schools*, with Ness Botanic Garden. For six day-long sessions, they swapped urban classroom for the garden, planting and growing potatoes and wildflowers, going on nature trails, hunting for insects and wildlife, pond dipping and learning about the life cycles of aquatic life and finding out about bees from a real beekeeper.

Shorefields Technology College serves some of the most socially deprived areas of Liverpool. Working with a secondary school from the inner-city of Liverpool was a new experience for the staff at Ness. Situated on the Wirral peninsula in a predominantly rural and affluent area of Cheshire, Ness, like most botanic gardens attracts a predominantly white, middle-class, and middle-aged audience. Working with Shorefields was seen as an opportunity for Ness to 'reach out' to socially disadvantaged groups in Liverpool and Cheshire. The project challenged many staff assumptions, including the perception that secondary school students are harder to engage with than primary school children. They also harboured negative views about young people from Liverpool.

Shorefields Technology College is a small secondary school located in an inner city area of Liverpool exhibiting some of England's lowest socio-economic indicators. The school serves two distinct communities, Dingle and Toxteth, the former largely white and the latter more ethnically mixed. Both areas are blighted by high rates of long-term unemployment, ill-health, poverty and crime. Household incomes are significantly below the national average, and many children live in poverty. There is a high incidence of lone parent families. Life-expectancy is lower than the national average, with a high mortality rate associated with smoking, alcohol and obesity.

Seventy four per cent of Shorefield students are eligible for free school meals and there are many EAL (English as an Additional Language) children. Thirty-three first languages are spoken. Levels of attainment for students are very low. In 2011 only 23 students were in the school's sixth form. The school is working hard to improve the life opportunities

of its students. In 2009, the school became a National Challenge Trust School and implemented a more flexible, community-based curriculum. Alongside the more traditional subjects, the school provides their students with a range of 'authentic' experiences designed to build their self-confidence, develop their team working and communication skills, their ability to use information effectively, and their leadership qualities. A recent Ofsted report praises the school for the 'outstanding' learning and progress of its students considering the challenging circumstances of many young peoples' lives. In particular, Ofsted notes the 'firm conviction that education and knowledge are empowering and this pervades all aspects of the school's work.'



Year 7 students from Shorefields Technology College getting their hands dirty at Ness Botanical Gardens on the Wirral

Students selected for the project were motivated and able scientists. Many wanted to go to University. Shorefields was keen to ensure that the students were not discouraged by the experience of classroom learning. For both students and teachers the collaboration with Ness proved a very positive experience. Students talked enthusiastically about the activities they had been involved in and greatly enjoyed their

learning experiences outside the classroom, especially the practical elements of the sessions. They were allowed considerable autonomy within the safe boundaries of the garden.

Shorefields was pleased with the planning and organisation of the project, which offered a range of activities relevant to science and the wider natural world. Visits to Ness were described by a Shorefields teacher as 'organised and very professionally run'. Young people met adults from very different backgrounds, including specialists and experts with links to the University, who worked well with them. The lack of negative feedback from the students and their obvious excitement about visiting Ness were notable.

Garden staff also saw the experience as very positive and enjoyable, reporting that a good relationship had developed with students and teachers. In spite of this positive feedback, however, neither students nor garden staff could remember each other's names. Evidence of anything other than the germ of a positive relationship was slight.

Many of the students did not have gardens at home and most had not visited a botanic garden before. Their initial comparisons were with what

was already familiar to them – parks, greenhouses and allotments. Rather like the 'Day Out' experiences at Eden, the sessions at Ness removed the young people from their usual environment. Garden staff reported that seeing the students' 'enjoyment of being outside' made the project worthwhile. Shorefields' teachers saw the visits as an opportunity for their students to compare urban with rural environments and understand the value of both.

Shorefields was clear about the project's focus on the needs of its students. It was a learning experience that took them away from their everyday lives and brought them into contact with a range of people within a new environment. The desire to raise the aspirations of its was a key motivator. The garden's link with the University of Liverpool – a member of the elite Russell Group of universities – was critical. Shorefields saw an opportunity to make the idea of university more accessible to their students, many of whom are from families with no experience of university, and to plant the idea of potential careers in the sciences.

For Ness, the project synchronised with the University's strategy of championing activities that involved knowledge exchange, widening participation, research and innovation. It was also linked to a 'sustainability framework' designed to 'enhance the purpose and relevance of university botanic gardens and their plant collections by utilising skilled and knowledgeable staff to benefit the community and society as a whole.'

Through its partnership with Shorefields, Ness wanted to develop a framework for engagement in vocational NVQ and BTEC learning programmes, placements and apprenticeships for both horticulture and the tourist/customer service industry. The key outcome for Ness was to help Shorefields to develop its own vision of food production and sustainability and create a best-practice learning model for other secondary schools.

Although ambitious, this vision was perhaps over-complicated and incoherent. Project development was slow and haphazard and Ness was probably unrealistic about what could be achieved within a relatively small project. Staff were unclear about the focus of the project and structural challenges – a deficit of project management skills, hierarchical organisation and a tendency towards 'top-down' communication – stifled creativity and periodically stalled the project's development. The partnership with Shorefields was serendipitous rather than part of a coherent strategy and for a project that was centred on

learning and environmental issues, staff struggled to articulate the learning opportunities for young people. The absence of an education officer was also problematic.

While Shorefields saw the project as inspirational for the future of their students, Ness was more focused on the vocational or volunteering possibilities for young people. It was unable to articulate how session contents could be linked to Shorefield's aspirational agenda. Although the Shorefields collaboration represented a step towards overcoming its inhibitions about working with secondary schools, the extent to which Ness understood the potential in relationship is not apparent.

Staff at Ness recognised that botanic gardens do have a role to play in developing young people's learning beyond the curriculum, but they lacked the means to communicate how. In adhering to management-focused objectives, their vision for the project was relatively mechanistic. The opportunity to work more closely with Shorefields in developing a suitable programme was not taken. Moreover BGCI's social justice and environmental agenda seemed lost in a muddle of organisational objectives that had little to do with the needs of disadvantaged young people from Shorefields.

Teachers at Shorefields readily grasped the advantages of continuing to work with Ness, to both widen their student's horizons and meet the needs of the changing Science curriculum. Using Ness to access history, geography and the natural world was seen as highly relevant to the combined curriculum that Shorefields planned to adopt. And the potential for sensory, experiential and practical hands-on learning opportunities to enliven the curriculum and engage young people in science, was also important. Shorefields is keen for a school garden cared for by students and staff and wants to develop what a Shorefields teacher called a 'culture of growing plants and being part of caring for something', reinforcing the links between sustainability and caring for the natural world.

Whether and how Ness will continue to develop this relationship with Shorefields is uncertain, although it may be that the garden is looking for a model to replicate with other schools. Neither is it clear that the inherent structural weaknesses that the project highlighted are properly understood. While the project showed what Ness can do, it also highlighted its limitations. The contrast with Shorefield's clarity of vision, ambition and readiness to make the best of its opportunity is sobering. Ness, on the other hand, appeared to be stuck in a narrow view of what was possible in terms of developing its social role. Does it have the commitment and drive to resolve this dichotomy?

world' and provided opportunities for 'experiential learning'. "We actually got to do things," said a Shorefields student, instead of sitting in a classroom or "just copying out of a book".

### Generic Learning Outcomes

RCMG applied its own conceptual framework of Generic Learning Outcomes (GLOs) to the Ness and Winterbourne projects. GLOs are based on constructivist learning theories that understand learning as a lifelong process of making meaning.

The GLOs identify **five** categories of learning:

- knowledge and understanding;
- skills;
- attitudes and values;
- enjoyment, inspiration, creativity;
- action, behaviour, progression.

### Knowledge and understanding

Enhancing their participants' knowledge and understanding was a significant learning outcome at both Ness and Winterbourne. For the Winterbourne participants, acquiring organic gardening skills was seen as beneficial to their faith, personal interests, their love of nature and the desire for good quality, healthy food. The Shorefields students were already highly motivated and keen to learn; they wanted to do well at school. All the participants came away with a greater understanding of how botanic gardens worked and what they did, gaining insights into the scientific and practical horticultural components that went into their composition. Practical horticultural skills, from propagation to harvesting were also imparted and teachers valued the garden's role in science teaching. "There's actually quite a lot of science and monitoring involved," one said.

In both projects participants made practical and conceptual connections between gardening and environmental responsibility – using garden waste for composting, for example. And having access to patiently communicated professional expertise formed an essential part of the learning experience. At Winterbourne, staff also found that they were learning how to identify with different cultural and religious values from hitherto marginal communities. In this respect their pre-project training in cultural awareness paid dividends, although as one staff member acknowledged "if we were to undertake something in the future, we would be more conscious of the fact that you need longer to develop these relationships before the actual main project gets underway".

### Skills

Some of the knowledge and understanding acquired by participants may be categorised as skills, acquired for the long-term. Learning how to garden exemplifies this. The in-depth process and multiple session model of Urban Veg supported long-term learning outcomes and the development of new skills among staff and participants. Project development and management, the successful negotiation of language and cultural barriers, and effective communication (both in terms of communicating horticultural methods and socialising) are all skills critical to the future development of community projects.

At Shorefields, skill development was identified as a priority. The Ness project was an opportunity for year 7 students, drawn from different feeder primary schools, to work together in small groups and form new social relationships. Students discovered they were able to collaborate with little input from the teachers. They learned to negotiate, assume responsibility for their learning and behaviour

and manage deadlines effectively. And according to one Shorefields teacher, these skills already seem to have transferred to the classroom. “I teach quite a lot of them in science and ... since we started the project, they seem to have come together quite a lot and they’ll work together a lot easier.”

### **Attitudes and values**

Of the five GLOs, learning related to a change in attitudes and values generated the least amount of evidence. The most visible example concerns Ness staff, whose prejudices about working with pupils from secondary schools – particularly inner-city children – were comprehensively challenged. “You see a group of kids from Liverpool,” said a Ness staff member, “and you think ‘oh, I’d better watch myself’.” But, he went on, encountering enthusiastic and motivated students changed opinions entirely. Among the younger staff especially there was a significant shift in attitude as they embraced the value of community engagement projects. The project both increased their confidence in working with community groups and in their horticultural roles too. Younger staff also developed encouraging perspectives on the social potential of botanic gardens.

### **Enjoyment, inspiration, creativity**

RCMG research has found that enjoyment should not be underestimated as critical part of learning experiences. For participants on both projects, enjoyment was certainly seen as essential. It motivated them to stay engaged. At Winterbourne participants enjoyed being part of a project that they felt was relevant to their interests and concerns. For the Shorefields students enjoyment manifested in the lack of any negative feedback to teachers and the enthusiasm they displayed about their

visits to Ness. They were also vocal in their appreciation of the project, describing it as ‘fun’, as ‘brilliant’, ‘amazing’. Enjoyment was also important to staff in both gardens. For them, working with new groups and seeing their enthusiasm and motivation, was an experience out of the ordinary, a change from their everyday work.

Concerns about the projects or negative learning experiences were confined to a minority of participants. At Winterbourne many struggled to attend sessions because of other commitments (and some participants had to leave the project because children were not allowed to take part). The season-long project demanded a heavy time commitment. The challenge of attending regularly had implications for the learning process and how far the participants could manage themselves independently.

Only two Shorefields students expressed less enthusiasm than their peers and this may reflect negative feelings about themselves and their scientific ability rather than criticisms of the content and structure of the sessions.

### **Action, behaviour, progression**

Although neither project was finished at the time of the evaluation, participants gave some indication that their learning experiences would not stop with the end of the project; rather it was the beginning of their journey. For both groups increased confidence was a longer-term outcome of the projects: confidence in science learning, confidence in using a public place previously inaccessible or unknown, and confidence in growing good, healthy organic food. For communities situated on the margin of society, the importance of such outcomes should not be underestimated.



## CASE STUDY: The National Botanic Garden of Wales

As one of the original project partners, the National Botanic Garden of Wales (NBGW) participated in the early phases of *Growing the Social Role* before withdrawing because of irreconcilable differences over the direction of travel of their individual project. Despite extensive discussions between the parties, the impasse could not be broken and it was decided to take the project forward with the two remaining gardens, Winterbourne and Ness. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation commissioned an independent evaluation of NBGW's engagement with the project. From BGCI's perspective the failure of the NBGW initiative has been a salutary lesson in the challenges that botanic gardens continue to face in adapting to and embracing their social roles.

NBGW was identified by BGCI as a potential project partner following its earlier enthusiasm for BGCI's *Towards a New Social Purpose* programme. A new model institution, having opened as recently as 2000, NBGW appeared to be unencumbered by the historic legacies of older gardens and is avowedly forward-thinking in its vision of a garden 'dedicated to the research and conservation of biodiversity and its sustainable utilisation, to lifelong learning and to the enjoyment of the visitor.' In accepting its invitation to join *Growing the Social Role*, NBGW affirmed that engaging with its social role was 'absolutely core to our mission here in Wales'.

Sustainable practices are embedded in the garden's working practices. It promotes sustainable lifestyles and green technologies and has an organic working farm, allotments and beekeeping. Discounted entry is given to visitors who come by bike or public transport. With its mission to educate visitors on plant conservation, biodiversity and sustainability, and a range of resources available on site, the potential for NBGW to develop an interesting project relevant to growing its social role appeared high. Initial signs were encouraging, with NBGW staff playing enthusiastic and key roles in the first two workshops.

Unlike Winterbourne and Ness, NBGW operates within a clearly defined policy context. An independent charity, the garden has support from the Welsh government, the Countryside Council for Wales and Carmarthenshire County Council. The Welsh government was one of the first governments in the UK to develop its policies around sustainable development and organisations like NBGW are well placed to develop community understanding of environmental issues. While, during the workshops, garden staff were encouraged to work with the rural Welsh community to support the policies of the Welsh Assembly and



The National Botanic Garden of Wales. Opened in 2000, the garden has incorporated sustainable policies and working practices from its inception

Carmarthenshire County Council – on such issues as job renewal, food security, sustainable development, and the Welsh language – it proved difficult for NBGW to come up with a viable proposal that met the project imperatives of 'growing' its social role.

NBGW attracts few visitors from the local, rural Welsh community and is understandably keen to become more involved with – and valued by – this community. A socio-economic comparison of its current visitor profile with local residents reveals a not unfamiliar gulf between affluent middle class visitors and relative deprivation in the host community. Most visits come from outside the local area and few are repeats. Almost 60 per cent of visitors are over fifty-five. Evidence suggests that the local rural population does not identify with the garden and, perhaps worryingly in a Welsh-language hotspot, the proportion of Welsh-speaking volunteers is below average.

NBGW's initial proposal incorporated an existing arts-based outreach project, that used ceramic artworks inspired by the DNA bar-coding of plants to communicate science research to visitors. The 'social role' strand in this project was identified as the artist's engagement with disadvantaged communities throughout Wales – including homeless people and methadone users – who rarely, if ever, accessed botanic gardens.

While unarguably laudable in its own right, the proposal troubled BGCI and RCMG because it did not fit with their perception of 'growing a social purpose'. Specific concerns focused on the pre-existing nature of NBGW's proposal, which was at odds with the Growing the Social Role's requirement for a project that addressed the needs of the local community. Nor was it clear how NBGW's project accommodated the essential climate change and environmental criteria identified in Growing the Social Role. This conceptual dissonance, it is fair to say, dogged NBGW's remaining participation in the programme and reflects a genuine struggle by both sides to engage with the other on common ground.

A revised proposal envisaged a project with the Wales Young Farmers Club, to 'raise awareness of the social role of NBGW within the farming community'. With 6000 members throughout rural Wales, a high proportion of them Welsh-speaking, this group was seen as offering NBGW the opportunity to dispel notions that botanic gardens were irrelevant to the farming community by promoting sustainable farming and green technologies.

Several potential initiatives were explored with BGCI and RCMG, including:

- A workshop with the theme of Farms for the Future, inviting speakers from The Soil Association, successful organic farmers and from the botanic garden itself.
- Providing the Young Farmers with a tour of areas of the garden that emphasise what NBGW was doing to be more sustainable, including the double walled garden, natural area, and reed beds.
- Offer a challenge to the Young Farmers to come up with an idea for making a farm more sustainable, with the possibility of a cash prize to implement the most innovative idea. There would be a follow-up six months later to assess the changes that have been made to farming practices.

In the event, NBGW's revised project plan, *Coping with climate change - a Welsh agricultural perspective*, proposed a day event designed to demonstrate NBGW's importance as a site where young farmers could see, learn and talk about the future of agriculture, biodiversity, climate change and sustainable farming. Furthermore the garden was keen to emphasise its utility for future Young Farmers Club activities. Both were seen by NBGW, taking into consideration the resources and capacity available, as essential for building a more sustainable relationship with the Young Farmers.

From BGCI and RCMG's perspective, however, the revised plan did not match their criteria for a socially responsible project that involved developing long-term relationships to explore and examine attitudes and values. Neither, in their view, did it seek to address organisational change in relation to social and environmental needs. The project leaders were also doubtful about the longer-term impact of a one-day event - in the absence, as they saw it, of persuasive evidence in favour of a continuing relationship with the young farmers on project-relevant themes.

Disagreement over resource allocations also surfaced. Project leaders were understandably keen to see effective deployment of limited budgets by partner gardens, while it could be argued that NBGW was framing its project responses in the light of some very real financial challenges to the organisation as a whole.

NBGW maintains that the primary reason for its departure from *Growing the Social Role* was not a conceptual misunderstanding about criteria and objectives, but the difficulties it faced in reconciling the project's time and resource commitments with NBGW's priority of meeting its visitor and funding objectives. For NBGW this was the critical gateway through which every project proposal would need to pass. Staffing costs were identified as particularly problematic.

Regrettably, this may have impaired NBGW from engaging with and developing a socially-minded project with local, socially and economically deprived communities, in a way that was congruent with *Growing the Social Role's* objectives. While NBGW demonstrated its clear understanding of the policy context and the need for sensitivity to local communities, it struggled to translate this into a viable project.

This outcome should not be allowed to obscure the undeniably important work that NBGW is undertaking to highlight sustainability and climate change. It may be that the garden's understandable preoccupation with financial and organisational matters prevented it from embedding the project within its overall strategy, so that, rather than looking out to the local community, it sought to frame the project within its own organisational imperatives. Perhaps inevitably, this brought it up against the contrasting requirements of *Growing the Social Role*.

NBGW's withdrawal from Growing the Social Role represents a missed opportunity to examine the contribution of one of the most important new gardens in the UK. Critically, the garden's view that it is already reaching out to excluded groups has not been tested as it would have been had it been able to stay with the programme.

The Ness project was a maturing experience for young people, offering them the freedom and responsibility to take charge of themselves and their own learning. Most Winterbourne participants expressed their appreciation of the value of botanic gardens and were keen to bring friends and family to the garden. “Whereas before,” said one, “I probably wouldn’t have spent the money to go to a botanical garden ... now I will take joy in doing that.” Winterbourne staff, too, regarded the project as a success and were keen to keep it going. With this in mind, they were examining the possibility of taking on additional land for new community plots.

The dynamic individuals involved in *Urban Veg* were determined that the skills and knowledge they had gained through the project would be used to benefit their families and their communities. In their view, if *Urban Veg* was to have a lasting impact, it would need to be taken out into the communities of Birmingham, to work with older and younger generations.

### **BROADENING EXPERIENCE**

For the participants of both projects, Ness and Winterbourne provided new and stimulating environments in which to learn. Participants described how they felt invigorated by the experience of being in nature: the adults because it made them feel happy and relaxed, away from the cares of the everyday, and the young people because it was different from school, a vast outdoor classroom in which they were given the freedom to roam and discover the natural world.

While the Ness project was harmonised with the science curriculum, from the school’s perspective it was so much more about broadening the skills of their young people and

getting them out of Liverpool; to offer them experiences of, and in, nature that were out of the ordinary. Paradoxically, although many Shorefields students originated from elsewhere in the world, for them to leave the narrow confines of their community is, as one teacher acknowledged “fairly rare”. To Shorefields, committed to raising its children’s aspirations, Ness also provided a critical link with the University of Liverpool. And exposing their students to the potential of a wide range of science-related careers was an invaluable opportunity.

Research with young people suggests that coming into contact with specialists and experts – and other ‘significant adults’ – can profoundly impact on learning. For the Shorefields teachers the interaction with experts at Ness built on classroom learning was to provide, ‘a really valuable and deep learning experience’.

As is noted elsewhere in this report, however, the reported good relationships between students and staff at Ness did not translate into something more meaningful. Neither staff nor students could recall each other’s names – essential to building trust and familiarity. It is not clear either whether staff, who had little prior experience of schools or groups, were aware of how significant this was. All projects should consider planning sufficient time to facilitate this trust-building process.

### **Social spaces**

It is axiomatic that learning can be a social as well as individual process and both gardens provided suitable venues for socialising and social learning. The activities developed by Ness and Winterbourne brought people together in co-ordinated action, whether in small groups or as one group working together.

By recruiting individuals, *Urban Veg* provided an opportunity for Muslims from across the city to meet. One participant, who no longer lived in a Muslim community, said they enjoyed meeting like-minded people from a similar faith background.

### Connecting with prior experience

In common with other cultural institutions, botanic gardens employ distinct patterns of knowledge-creation (i.e. taxonomies of plants and species, the use of Latin for plant names). They have their own value systems and ‘ways of seeing’ that frame particular explanations about the natural world, in the same way that museums interpret material culture or history. Visitors to museums or botanic gardens bring their own knowledge, experiences and ‘ways of seeing’ that can enrich or sometimes contradict the institutional perspective. Project participants at Ness and Winterbourne used prior experience to interpret their new experiences in the gardens to give them meaning and relevance.

### Incorporating climate change

*Towards a New Social Purpose* recommended that, in order to redefine their social purpose, botanic gardens should embrace the concept of social and environmental justice. They had to become ‘authoritative commentators on climate change, offering solutions through articulating and enacting sustainable behaviour and responding to community needs.’ Climate change was incorporated into *Growing the Social Role*, most notably in *Urban Veg* because it was relevant to the interests of the participants. However staff at both gardens struggled to reconcile this environmental requirement of their projects with the need to broaden access.

Participants in *Urban Veg* urged Winterbourne

staff to teach them knowledge and skills to grow a range of vegetables organically. They were already well aware of the benefits of producing food organically and locally, saving on transport, on money and enhancing health and wellbeing. And they grasped the social and economic importance of communities growing their own food (combining environmental and social roles). This understanding, rooted in community development, has exciting potential for a post-*Urban Veg* reciprocal knowledge-exchange with Winterbourne staff.

The students at Ness considered climate change fleetingly. It is not taught in Year 7, and staff at Ness did not push the environmental message strongly, focusing instead on the link between growing one’s own food and the benefits that accrue from this. Students were aware of the importance of the natural world to the survival of humans, as well as some of the consequences of climate change and the implications of growing their own organic food. How much of this emerged from the project and to what extent students were repeating what they had learned at school, is not clear.

Staff at both Ness and Winterbourne used the practical gardening activities to discuss the impact of organic methods, the use of peat-free compost and non-chemical pesticides. They were articulated throughout the project in a clear and concrete way. So too, as one staff member pointed out, were the benefits of achieving edible outcomes “just in the fact of them growing vegetables and understanding that the food that they’re going to eat has literally come from here to here”. Climate change, too, was seen as having an impact on the working practices of the gardens. But were the gardens genuinely changing, or were they actually more focused on broadening their

audiences at the expense of addressing issues of social and environmental justice properly?

### Conclusion

While it could be argued that both projects impacted positively on a range of learning outcomes experienced by the participants, the effect on environmental or climate change outcomes was much more limited. At Winterbourne the participants were already interested in, or knowledgeable about, these issues and this was an important driver for their involvement in the project. But if they had not been so readily engaged in the natural world and organic farming, would this element have been quite so strong in *Urban Veg*?

The projects undoubtedly benefited from the high levels of motivation and engagement, but it is questionable whether they would have been so successful had they involved more challenging, less engaged participants. It is interesting to note that those participants who stayed the course at *Urban Veg* were well educated, some working as professionals. Participants those whose attendance quickly tailed off faced many more barriers to engaging with the project.

On the whole these were two good projects with a range of learning outcomes that enriched the lives of their participants. However, while the projects confirmed the potential of botanic gardens as agents of social engagement, RCMG's evaluation uncovered structural phenomena in all three gardens that inhibited their delivery of *Growing the Social Role*.

### ORGANISATIONAL CHALLENGES

*Growing the Social Role of Botanic Gardens* provided valuable insights into how three botanic gardens engaged with exploring their

social role. Their learning is relevant to the wider botanic garden community and reaffirms much of the argument that informed *Towards a New Social Purpose* (2010). If, as RCMG found, botanic gardens are to 'genuinely reposition themselves and redefine their social purpose...' more integrated action and further evidence is required. Impediments to change were identified in the earlier report and the evidence of this evaluation tends to support that view.

### Inhibitors for engagement with social roles

In its 2010 study for BGCI, RCMG found that historically botanic gardens have 'seldom examined their public roles, the implications of which are still evident in their organisational structures and staff populations today.' This analysis applies equally to the three gardens that took part in *Growing the Social Role*. Among the most challenging findings to emerge from this latest study is the belief, shared by two of the gardens involved in *Growing the Social Role*, that they were already successfully engaged in work around their social role. Their involvement in the workshops appears not to have encouraged the insight that may have led them to an alternative conclusion. Only Ness acknowledged that it was not reaching out to communities beyond its comfort zone.

One view expressed was that botanic gardens could address their social role by working with groups and organisations that approach gardens of their own volition and join in guided tours, talks and other events. This may suit groups such as the University of the Third Age (U3A), with their articulate and confident membership of retired professionals who are well networked and able to negotiate access at will. There is no need for botanic gardens to be proactive with them. But this passivity, even

inertia, on the part of botanic gardens is anachronistic and problematic, since it inhibits them from seeking out and meeting genuine social need in disenfranchised groups.

*Growing the Social Role* workshops were designed to question the gardens' assumptions that they were discharging their social roles, as well as highlighting projects that did have a clear social purpose. The evidence of this report suggests, however, that gardens still lack that capacity for self-reflection that would enable them to look beyond what they say they are already doing. It raises a fundamental question about their understanding of what a social role really is.

This distortion of perception and reality means that genuine progress is difficult, as evidenced by the difficulties encountered by one garden in developing its project focus. Where these misconceptions are held at senior management level, the obstacles to change are formidable.

### **Financial concerns**

Finance was the understandable preoccupation of every director involved in *Growing the Social Role* and all other considerations were secondary. Contrast this with the Eden Project, which embraces the 'triple bottom line', a trinity of financial, social and environmental elements. The more pervasive 'here and now' crisis management, intended to ameliorate financial difficulties, acts as a brake on new initiatives and the readiness to take risks.

Both Ness and Winterbourne were interested in the marketing potential of the project, while NBGW saw itself as running a business and looked for evidence of cost-effectiveness in developing its social role. All three gardens

cited limited financial resources as inhibiting them from addressing their social role. NBGW went further, in stating that the resources offered by the project were insufficient.

In the current economic climate finance is a reasonable concern, but this begs the question: to what extent is non-engagement with the social role explained by this compared with ambivalence, ignorance or misunderstanding?

There is no doubt that the financial challenges facing the botanic garden community, especially at this time are considerable. Funding opportunities and staff numbers are limited. And because senior managements are focusing on their own organisational agendas, they appear to regard the social role as peripheral and perhaps do not appreciate that engaging with it could open up potential sources of funding, rather than act as a drain on resources. Neither, it seems, had senior managers understood that social projects could generate funding that supported core costs, while many funding streams now seek evidence of support for social engagement.

As *Towards a New Social Purpose* highlighted, botanic gardens do not see their activity in a wider policy context. Even NBGW, which has a much more explicit link to government policy agendas than either Ness or Winterbourne, seemed unable or unwilling to translate this into a meaningful strategy. Without the ability to see beyond traditional business and organisational models or showing that they are responding to contemporary social concerns, botanic gardens may find themselves becoming increasingly marginalised. They cannot expect to continue to rely on funding from councils, governments and universities unless they are seen to be relevant to society.

### Questions of motivation

One of the salient objectives of *Growing the Social Role* was to persuade botanic gardens that they have immense potential for engaging with social issues and addressing climate change. However on the evidence of this evaluation, neither climate change, nor social role are recognised by senior managements as essential. The inertia around these issues, highlighted previously by RCMG, led gardens to a lukewarm engagement with them in *Growing the Social Role*.

Both Ness and Winterbourne were fortunate to find project partners who recognised the value of their projects and exploited the garden spaces to community garden at Winterbourne and enhance the experiences and aspirations of young people from inner-city Liverpool at Ness. Institutional barriers were also erected by the universities' definitions of community and cultural engagement work. University community models are very different from community engagement models and rather than lead to greater clarity for botanic gardens it actually exacerbated issues and clouded understanding.

Worried about job security, garden staff were also understandably risk-averse, afraid to rock the boat because of their gardens' perilous financial circumstances.

### Staff values and aspirations

Work around the social role and climate change relies on people and organisations possessing an innate value system that recognise the importance of social and environmental justice. A reluctance to embrace the social role may therefore be associated with an institutional disinterest in social issues that are not considered relevant to botanic gardens. It's

worth noting that during *Growing the Social Role*, the values and aspirations emerged mostly from staff on the ground, a bottom-up rather than top down, phenomenon.

The Eden Project was referred to throughout as example of passion and determination by staff to make the world a better place. While inspirational to many, it was however dismissed by one senior management figure as not even a 'proper' botanic garden. Eden was, they felt, in a different position from organisations with botanical collections and the 'curatorial imperatives' of a botanic garden.

An initial disinterest among garden staff about groups who did not meet their traditional visitor profiles was also observed. They had little understanding of social exclusion and how it manifested in marginal groups in society. Neither was there much evidence that senior managers had thought about, or were interested in, the needs of communities who did not match their traditional visitor profiles. On the other hand, the project participants seemed more savvy, understanding the social potential of botanic gardens far better than garden managers.

### A clear values-led leadership

A recent report on the community engagement work of museums by Bernadette Lynch for the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, *Whose Cake is it Anyway?* highlights how visionary leadership is critical to driving socially-engaged work forwards. Key to effective leadership, says the report, is incorporating the social role as a core value of the organisation, providing vision and clarity of focus. While the senior management in every garden employed the correct language, their respective organisational situations dominated their thinking.

Several factors seemed to account for the leaders' reluctance to develop a social role for botanic gardens:

- Perception that engaging with socially disadvantaged groups will be expensive.
- Apparent lack of empathy towards different groups that do not already fit the visitor profile of the gardens.
- Financial constraints including staff resources.
- Time, the three directors always seemed to be too busy to engage with the project.
- Lack of awareness of the skills needed to develop this work – project management communication and education skills, public engagement techniques, creativity, etc.
- Conflicting agendas and priorities between directors and staff.

Without the full involvement and support of senior management it is very difficult for botanic gardens to respond to the social purpose agenda. It needs to be seen as significant and valued throughout the organisation, including at the top, since senior management are key to resource allocation and the strategic positioning of the organisation.

*Growing the Social Role* unfortunately failed to engage the senior management of its partner gardens in a way that could have offered the garden community at large a clear sense of leadership. Collectively, a group of senior managers, championing the social role of botanic gardens, would be hugely influential. Sadly, for the time being at least, a leadership vacuum exists.

## WHAT IS REQUIRED?

*Towards a New Social Purpose* argued that if botanic gardens were to reposition themselves

as socially-engaged organisations, they would need to develop relevant skills, since few garden staff have experience of working on community engagement projects.

## Project management

The three botanic gardens manifested different project management capabilities in the delivery of their projects and their communication to BGCI and RCMG throughout the wider programme.

Winterbourne was organised, well planned and reflective, making changes when necessary. It understood the importance of adaptability. During the workshops, staff gave good, clear presentations and communicated well. They understood the process and rose to the challenge of what was expected of them. Ness and NBGW both struggled to come up with an effective project concept and rationale for what they were trying to do and why, which impaired the development of their projects. It was difficult for them to know what they were trying to achieve or why their project was difficult to achieve.

Without clarity of focus there was, for NBGW especially, a tendency to overcomplicate what they were trying to deliver, or try and make an existing project idea fit.

Ness suffered from poor time management and wayward organisational processes that impacted on its relationship with the project organisers. One learning outcome for Ness was the need for it to be clear in its communication. With little or no experience in external project funding, Ness also struggled to understand the roles of funders and commissioning organisations and the relationship they had with them.



One reason why Ness and Wales were less successful in their project management was their limited employment of the project plan. The role of the project plan was to develop a clear focus for the project, including its structure, timing of activities, the budget and resources needed, and to clarify the roles of staff.

### **The benefits of team-working**

Effective team working is self-evidently essential to delivering successful group projects. Evidence of this was easier to find at Winterbourne and less so at Ness and NBGW, where leadership styles were sometimes unhelpful. At Ness an authoritative and hierarchal management structure actively discouraged team working. In the case of NBGW, there was a lack of clarity over roles and who was responsible for the project.

The comparative effectiveness of Winterbourne's project management underlined the value of good teamworking and its potential impact on every aspect of the garden's activities. This applied to recruitment, events, programming, publicity, and even the café food. Winterbourne's holistic approach was impressive – cultural awareness training was provided across the organisation, not only to staff working on *Urban Veg*.

### **Skills and experience?**

Staff allocation for the projects appeared to be based on organisational rather than project needs. It is noteworthy that none of the gardens introduced their education or learning staff into the projects, even though they were the most likely to possess the necessary skills for working and communicating with groups and communities. The projects highlighted the importance of a skill set necessary for

community engagement work: the ability to work in partnership and an understanding of community needs, together with more fundamental capabilities such as the ability to listen, time management and administrative skills. Although most of these are already present in botanic gardens – horticulture, for instance, requires planning and resource management capabilities – it was not always clear whether staff were able to transfer them into new situations.

### **Focus on the achievable: keeping it simple**

There was also a tendency for the gardens to overcomplicate what they wanted to achieve, instead of keeping it simple and attainable. Rather than relying on their existing strengths, they tried to be too ambitious or reach out to groups that for organisations unused to working with external partners, would be very challenging to work with. They tried to second-guess or fit participants into existing projects and did not attempt to find out what people really wanted or needed. As one of *Growing the Social Role* facilitators remarked, “just because you are interested in something doesn't mean everyone else is. For social projects to work you have to understand what the people you are trying to work with want to do and not just what you want to deliver to them”.

### **Focus on developing a social role**

The experience of Winterbourne and Ness demonstrated that botanic gardens are particularly suited to engaging with communities, providing stimulating and rich learning environments that can lead to significant learning outcomes, despite the challenges and haphazard project management that both projects threw up. They offer a wealth of spaces for creative discussion and the development of shared solutions to problems.

Gardens also embody change through the seasons, reinstating the link to nature that many urban inhabitants have lost sight of. And through their plant collections and their links with related organisations around the world, they can help people develop a global perspective on a wide range of issues. Horticulture is also accessible on many levels, enabling the development of inclusive projects that bring people together across a range of abilities and backgrounds.

Ness and Winterbourne both benefit from proximity to sizeable urban populations. They enjoy relationships with universities and schools that provide them with access to bright young people. Their potential for helping them grapple with issues such as climate change is considerable.

### **Barriers to developing a social role**

It is imperative that botanic gardens overcome the barriers that prevent them from developing their social role. These include: funding, time pressures, perceived risks, lack of internal and external support and training for staff to amplify their skills. For the communities they worked with, too, there remain significant obstacles to engaging with the gardens: entrance fees, lack of public transport options, suitability of events and catering and the perception that the space is 'not for them.'

To overcome these obstacles, gardens should:

- Challenge long-established existing organisational and cultural practices.
- Strive to overcome staff inhibitions about the need to adopt a more social role.
- Understanding and make more explicit the links between the social role of botanic gardens and climate change.

### **Barriers to a community engagement model**

While they remain focused on their own agendas, botanic gardens are unlikely (and unable) to adopt the community engagement model that would see them working equitably to empower their communities and failing to do so will compromise their ability to engage with communities. With little empathy for, and scant motivation to understand, their communities botanic gardens will struggle to see themselves as others do and consequently appreciate the effect their lack of engagement could have.

Despite the success of *Urban Veg*, that project is merely the start of the journey for Winterbourne. The garden's relationship with its *Urban Veg* collaborators reflects some of the concerns raised above. In particular there was disconnect between the skills and experiences of participants on the one hand and the attitudes of staff groups who evidently saw them as 'beneficiaries' of the botanic garden and failed to understand the level of sophistication that some individual participants were working at. Nevertheless there is a genuine opportunity to develop a number of future initiatives, with Winterbourne for example thinking seriously about its relationship with Birmingham's Muslim communities. There are sensitive issues involved and Winterbourne would benefit from working more closely with people who know these communities and their needs very well.

It was difficult to gauge the extent to which Ness had understood the need for a community engagement model. The garden conceded that it had not communicated with Shorefields well enough or involved the school in its decision-making. Consequently staff misinterpreted the needs of the young people, who came with

much higher expectations than they expected. Nevertheless, both Ness and Winterbourne accepted the importance of discovering what their target groups wanted and modified their thinking to reflect this. This did not appear to be something, at least in the context of this study, that NBGW was prepared to do.

What else should the gardens have done to enable them to engage more successfully with communities?

- Inbue staff with the confidence and authority to engage with local organisations and community members that may not have obvious and direct links to the traditional core enterprise of a botanic garden.
- Adopt a more participatory approach to developing projects. From the experience of this evaluation, the gardens were delivering a project to their group, rather than working with it to learn its needs and jointly develop a project around this.
- To develop relationships with organisations working with different, perhaps excluded, social groups, such as young offenders, the homeless and people with special needs.

Another factor in building successful relationships with communities is conducting multiple sessions rather than one-off events. Building trust and confidence takes time and experience suggests that multiple sessions do enhance learning outcomes. Both Winterbourne and Ness achieved this (although Ness was not so successful in building relationships between staff and students) and it is disappointing that NBGW did not engage with the proposition.

### **Quality and competency**

Botanic gardens have to show that they take their social role seriously, acknowledging that

working with communities is as important as their mainstream activities with core audiences. They need to demonstrate both quality and competency in order to prove to communities and potential funders that they can deliver projects that address social issues.

Winterbourne was most successful at this.

*Urban Veg* took place in a public location with quality signage and a plaque to promote the group's work. Participants were welcomed and treated with respect and they in turn valued the quality of the experience and their access to staff expertise.

### **Reflective practice**

When evaluators asked the gardens to reflect on their work the feedback was positive. They wanted to celebrate their project (Ness) and to demonstrate that it had led to a change in visitor demographics (Winterbourne). However it should be remembered that gardens are still at an early stage of developing their capacity for self-reflection, analysis and team discussion (including equitable conversations with community participants). Staff on the ground were notably more realistic about progress than senior management. They displayed a sounder grasp of the issues and readily acknowledged that they still had much to learn.

### **Communication, a two-way process**

A real challenge for the gardens in this project was how to communicate effectively with their stakeholders, both internally and externally. Leadership is a critical factor here because open communication is difficult when there is a lack of shared vision. It is no coincidence that directors and staff had markedly different perspectives on the project.

Communication at both Ness and NBGW was compromised and sometimes confused and

this adversely impacted on their ability to develop coherent and straightforward projects. Active listening – hearing and understanding – is vital for effective communication. When working with communities, botanic gardens have to be able to ask the right questions, to listen to and understand community needs (rather than tell communities what they need), and understand the importance of a consultative process. And it's important for gardens to be able to share their understanding and make their social role evident in everything that they do.

### **The importance of language**

Bernadette Lynch argues in *Whose cake is it Anyway?* (Paul Hamlyn Foundation, 2009) that the language organisations use is critical to establishing an equitable and respectful relationship with their community partners. Too many organisations employ patronising language emphasising their role in 'caring' for communities, implying that the communities are 'passive subjects' that need improvement. Some of the language used by Ness and Winterbourne in their communications with participants reflected this unconscious bias.

At Winterbourne, staff displayed an anachronistic, didactic sense of their place in the community, stating that it was their role to 'educate locally' and for communities to 'gain knowledge and benefit from learning about horticulture, growing plants, sustainability, greener living'. To this end, they said, learning needed to occur within a formal structure, 'to actually feel that you've taught them something properly, they need to come once a week at least for an hour and a half'. This was difficult to sustain with participants who could not, for personal and professional reasons, commit that much time.

The language used at Winterbourne could be construed as implying an unequal relationship, one in which the garden is dominant. Communication here is one-way, not reciprocal. When senior management referred to 'community engagement' and 'knowledge exchange' it was clear that their understanding of these terms was limited, for example, to taking communities into the garden and giving them the benefit of the garden's knowledge. They did not see their social role as a bilateral or consultative process.

### **Developing a community of practice**

The emergence of a community of practice between the three botanic gardens was frustrated by the weaker, less coherent projects at Ness and NBGW. This disappointed Winterbourne staff, who had wanted to work with and learn from their partner gardens. NBGW's withdrawal and the obvious difficulties faced by Ness left Winterbourne feeling isolated from the other gardens. "I don't feel as though it's one combined project," reflected a Winterbourne staff member. "I feel it's our separate project and then we're kind of meeting up and finding bits out about others."

While it is fair to say that Winterbourne's senior management remained sceptical about the wider value of *Growing the Social Role*, the thoughtful engagement of junior staff was encouragingly positive.

### **Understanding climate change**

Establishing the link between the social role of botanic gardens and climate change is, as this analysis has argued, a key challenge facing botanic gardens today. This was not seen as a priority by senior managers, who were more interested in the audience potential of the projects.

BGCI recommends that, in relation to climate change, gardens should:

- Decide where they stand on climate change and determine what role they see themselves playing to support people to mitigate and/or adapt to climate change.
- Understand that climate change is a social *and* environmental issue.
- Consider the social, economic and political framework within which they as gardens operate and examine how to align their programmes/work accordingly.
- Compare the needs of local communities with what they are able to offer.
- Know the profile of their visitors in order to identify who is not visiting the garden and plan how they might approach and engage with them.
- Examine their working practices to ensure they are congruent with the messages they intend to communicate to their public (e.g. on recycling, fair-trade, etc).
- Allocate resources to activities related to this work, including human resources.
- Be more inclusive in their working practices. They should review whether the staff profile is reflective of the audiences/communities they want to attract and work with. This may mean that they re-visit their recruitment policies.
- Entrench their programmes and practices related to climate change in every part of the organisation. Climate change should not be treated as a one-off event.

While climate change factors are already impacting on botanic gardens (for example in composting, water harvesting, pest control, and sustainable cultivation), the gardens in *Growing the Social Role* struggled to exploit this reality. At Winterbourne, any links with climate change

and the environment were made by the participants themselves, while at Ness, in spite of the comparisons drawn by students, its climate change response was weak. Gardens seemed to underplay the link with climate change, calculating that participants would pick it up 'naturally' rather than making it an explicit part of the process.

As Eden has demonstrated, there are many opportunities to relate climate change to people's lives at a fundamental emotional as well as scientific or abstract level. Eden believes that by providing stimulating and reflective environments, botanic gardens are able to create memorable experiences for people so that they emotionally connect to an issue and feel passionate enough to do something about it.

### **Understanding evaluation**

The markedly different responses of garden staff to the RCMG evaluation was an insight into how they interpreted evaluation as a means of understanding practice and evidence of impact. Administratively Winterbourne was very supportive of the evaluation process, setting up a whole day of interviews with a range of participants and staff. However the senior management was unhappy at what it saw as an evaluation disproportionate to the funding received, observing, as one manager put it, that "the expectation of what has been produced and produced in terms of evaluation and monitoring for that amount of money is excessive". Concern was also expressed at what was seen as the ambiguous relationship between RCMG as evaluators and the wider project.

One lesson for the future is to ensure that the evaluator plays no active role in the wider

project. In Winterbourne's case this confusion about role may have led to a perception by the garden that the evaluation was a judgement on its ability to meet the needs of the project. It is important also to clarify that the evaluation is not just a means of simply monitoring the successful completion of tasks but is instead a process of reflection, intended to encompass what has occurred during the project and examine its wider impact on participants. It should be a means of improving rather than judging practice.

### **Sustainability and legacy: where now?**

All three botanic gardens involved in *Growing the Social Role* identified potential legacies from the projects they developed. However the demands on staff time and resources raise doubts about their viability over the longer term. There may indeed be simpler ways for gardens to integrate communities into the mainstream – Eden's *Big Day Out* is one example.

Winterbourne, nevertheless, is keen to repeat *Urban Veg* with other groups: it regards it as an easily adaptable concept with a robust structure. However the garden should be cautious about defaulting into a 'tick-box' mind set, in which it simply exports this model to other groups without fully understanding the implications of what they have already initiated with the Muslim community.

Ness is planning to continue working with Shorefields, by developing the school garden and sharing its expertise with the school. NBGW has reported plans to continue its dialogue with the Young Farmers, anticipating that it may lead to 'down-stream benefits in relation to visitor engagement and wider climate-change/biodiversity collaborations'.

Believing that they were already engaging with

their social role, the gardens have perhaps been a little premature in their eagerness to share their best practice before it had time to become established. Ness and Winterbourne were both very fortunate with the groups they encountered, teams of dedicated enthusiasts who came ready to exploit and profit from their relationship with the garden. How would the gardens cope with more challenging or hard to reach groups?

### **Conclusion**

The involvement of Ness, Winterbourne and NBGW in *Growing the Social Role* tested their management structures and organisational practices and challenged them to reflect on and develop their social roles. In line with *Towards a New Social Purpose*, this study argues that the development of the social role of botanic gardens is compromised by historical structures of hierarchical management that stifle team-working, creativity and risk-taking. It suggests that there is a lack of visionary leadership at the top with the requisite passion or motivation to drive this work forward, although lower down the organisational ladder these qualities do exist. However decisions about resource or organisational focus are not made at those subordinate levels.

In fairness to the senior management, their concerns in the current economic climate were primarily financial and they saw the social role as ancillary to their mainstream work. Nevertheless, if gardens are to look beyond their walls to engage with the disenfranchised communities around them, garden leaders have to genuinely understand and embrace the opportunities that an active social role will bring them.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS by RCMG

*Growing the Social Role of Botanic Gardens* showed that botanic gardens have the potential to significantly impact on individuals, garden staff and communities. The examples of Ness and Winterbourne also demonstrated that that even apparently disenfranchised communities can be willing and enthusiastic partners in joint social enterprises. Moreover the barriers to their involvement are not insuperable. Gardens are still at an early stage in this process of engagement and there is much work to do if they are to demonstrate their real potential.

*Growing the Social Role* also corroborates findings from RCMG's research in *Towards a New Social Purpose*. It adds more evidence and a greater depth of understanding of the forces for change and change inhibitors that were identified throughout the botanic garden community.

Although a lack of resources is usually cited as the reason for restricting this work, the RCMG evaluation identified a lack of belief, values and readiness to change as far more powerful brakes on developing this agenda in botanic gardens. Gardens, and in particular their senior management staff, believe they are doing enough already and appear to be unwilling to reflect on the limitations of their approach. Their focus, dominated by financial considerations, is perforce narrow and prevents them from looking beyond the boundaries of their organisation. Where organisations are operating 'in survival mode', as many are in the current financial crisis, this tendency becomes even more acute.

The lack of visionary leadership creates a real

policy vacuum in botanic gardens; leaders simply do not seem to be interested in developing a social role. This potential is more apparent in younger staff. They are generally enthusiastic about this agenda, but they need to be nurtured.

The experience of this project also suggests that botanic gardens have the tendency to over-complicate what they want to achieve. Both Ness and NBGW struggled to develop their projects. Winterbourne had a simpler and clearer focus, so does being more prescriptive help?

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Creating a vision for the sector:** Having a vision is critical to developing good practice. The lack of vision and the leadership vacuum in botanic gardens suggests that a sector-wide approach is critical. And it has to involve individuals who both possess the ambition and drive to create gardens relevant to the multi-cultural fabric of modern British society and who also are prepared to become social engagement advocates.

As this study has shown, these advocates in embryo are already to be found among young botanic garden staff, in the early stages of their careers. So their involvement is essential, but the question remains: how may this be achieved within the organisational and cultural frameworks prevalent in most gardens?

**Work needs to be rooted in the wider national policy context:** Botanic gardens do not yet have a convincing rationale for engaging with their social role. They tend towards introspection, divorcing themselves from the dominant social and environmental issues of the day. Gardens need to be able to

relate what they are doing to the wider policy context and see how they are part of a bigger societal picture.

As the evidence from this study suggests, however, there is so much more that they could do to support the health and wellbeing of their local communities. They could, for example, align themselves with the Department of Health's *Change 4 Life* programme, which encourages families to eat healthy food and take part in physical activity.

The Government's strategy for public health, *Healthy Lives, Healthy People* highlights the need to empower local communities to take responsibility for their health and wellbeing 'and tackle the wider factors that influence it.' Botanic gardens could help communities to increase the number of green spaces for growing vegetables or plant trees. They could also work in partnership with these communities to access funding.

The Department for Communities and Local Government publishes a guide for community and voluntary organisations wanting to create community green space initiatives.

Defra has published *Biodiversity 2020* which aims to 'engage more people in biodiversity issues so that they personally value biodiversity and know what they can do to help.' The experiences and life chances of young people are currently high on the political agenda.

Youth unemployment is at a record high and the fallout from last summer's riots in England offers scope for botanic gardens to look at how they can work with young people. There is potential for lifelong learning opportunities and, for example, apprenticeships.

**Climate change:** Climate change is a highly complex phenomenon, difficult to understand, but the current consensus is that it is likely to have the greatest adverse impact on those communities with the least resources to cope with it. Although it straddles scientific, environmental, economic and social thinking, many in botanic gardens still appear to regard it as a narrowly scientific and environmental problem. They have failed to grasp that tackling it calls for behavioural changes that require social as well as technical responses to its challenges.

For most gardens, climate change is already an everyday reality, manifested, for example, in their water harvesting, recycling policies and cultivation strategies. But many fail to exploit the social potential of this reality to engage meaningfully with local communities – especially the hard to reach ones – on climate change issues.

### POTENTIAL STRATEGIES

**A national project:** One option could be to develop a national project for botanic gardens that combined a core rationale and overarching theme – greening the city, for example – with locally relevant components to encourage buy-in from individual gardens. A project of this scale would probably require a cohort of launch gardens in order to give the enterprise some traction and it is likely to require ambitious funding too.

**Professional development activities:** These would be designed to encourage botanic gardens to start engaging with their social role. Mentoring support could be offered, together perhaps with staff secondments to organisations already working in their own communities. Study visits, to UK and



international organisations successfully delivering inclusion products, are another option. Conferences and seminars would provide opportunities to discuss work and promulgate best practice.

Training is essential – engaging with their social role requires gardens to understand:

- Context and barriers to participation and what it means to be socially excluded.
- The meaning of community engagement and partnership, being sensitive to community needs and aspirations. Community representatives could lead the training here.
- The importance of effective project management skills.

Highly motivated staff with a passion for engaging with the social role should be identified and nurtured as future leaders in this field. From the experience of this project, creating a forum for senior managers to take this work forward would be a much more challenging proposition.

The capacity for reflective practice is an essential component of effective self-evaluation. Gardens have to be able to identify their strengths and weaknesses and develop strategies for future success. They need to learn about the groups they are reaching out to and the effects of what they are doing, and to evidence that impact both internally and externally.

**In-depth review of services:** Robust, independent and detailed analysis of the support that selected botanic gardens required to engage with their social role would be invaluable. And as the gardens who benefited from such analysis developed their strategy and practice, they would be well placed to become role models for the whole garden community.

**Embedding social awareness throughout the organisation:** Operating with social purpose should become a leitmotif of the whole organisation. In all areas and activities gardens should be sensitive to how their social role is manifested, from the relevance of their public programmes to the café menus. It needs to become part of the everyday business of the garden, not something to be neglected once specific projects are completed. Gardens must be demonstrably welcome to everyone.

**Adopt the Community Development model:** Working with a community means empowering its members to take authority for their own actions, not to manage them prescriptively towards a certain goal. Implicit in the community development model is the shared understanding that engagement is two-way processes. To this end, gardens need to reach out into their neighbouring communities to establish meaningful and mutually beneficial relationships. They cannot merely see themselves as islands separate and distinct from the world around them. That way lies irrelevance.



Research Centre for  
Museums and Galleries



University of  
**Leicester**

### **Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG)**

Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG), School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, Based in the School of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, The Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) researches into the social role, impact and agency of museums and galleries, focusing on themes of disability, representation, education and learning. The Centre works closely with cultural organisations to reflect on practice, report on the impact of practice, and, ultimately, improve practice. Its vision is to make museums inclusive, challenge prejudice, inspire learning and be relevant in contemporary society. The RCMG works with a range of organisations, museums, galleries, libraries, archives, and botanic gardens.

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### **Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation**

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation is an international charitable foundation with cultural, educational and social interests. Based in Lisbon with offices in London and Paris, the Foundation is in a privileged position to support national and transnational work tackling contemporary issues. The purpose of the UK branch in London is to connect and enrich the experiences of individuals, families and communities, with a special interest in supporting those who are most disadvantaged. Its current work focuses on three areas: cultural understanding, fulfilling potential, and the environment. Its aim for the environment is to help in the development of a society which benefits from a more sustainable relationship with the natural world and understands the value of its resources. For further information, go to [www.gulbenkian.org.uk](http://www.gulbenkian.org.uk)

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