

## Partnerships Case Study 1



### Barnes Community Gardeners - Crispin O'Brien

#### Background of the organisation

Barnes Community Gardeners (BCG) is a collaborative initiative rather than a formal partnership.

It sprang to life in November 2021 with the encouragement, and support of three local charities - Barnes Common Limited, The Barnes Community Association and FiSH Neighbourhood Care who all recognised BCG's potential.



Barnes  
Community  
Association



BCG's mission is to bring people together through sustainable community gardening, providing companionship, promoting wellbeing and biodiversity. Green fingers are not required, we all grow and learn together, although the sessions are led by two experienced gardeners. Mental and physical wellbeing are improved by companionship and being outside. Working together as a group counteracts loneliness.

In their first year, BCG's 25 volunteers spent over a thousand hours on community gardening projects in Barnes, Mortlake and East Sheen. They now work regularly at seven sites with housing association residents, at two primary schools, and at the Barnes Green Centre. They also help the elderly and vulnerable who are no longer able to cope in their own gardens and have completed several one-off projects.

#### How did the idea of BCG come about?

Many local volunteers helped FiSH clients in Barnes during lockdown. We noticed that often their gardens had become unkempt. An overgrown front garden can lead to an increased risk of crime for vulnerable residents.

Several of us started to help clear people's gardens, and noticed they were coming out to chat to us as we did so, and we could see the benefits for those who were elderly and isolated. Then it occurred to us that there were also people in flats locked away with no access to outdoor green spaces and little or no social contact.

It was hard working individually on neglected gardens and we began to think it would be helpful to work in groups and share tools.

## **Tell us about the history of the partnership (who approached who?)**

We'd undertaken several garden clearances with volunteers from Barnes Common, Barnes Community Association, and FiSH. The benefits of combining and sharing skills, resources and local knowledge rapidly became apparent.

Crispin then approached the three charities who each kindly donated £500 seed capital, we then applied to the Barnes Fund who generously awarded us a grant which was matched by Council funding which allowed BCG to employ Susie Pugh as our wonderful Volunteer Coordinator.

Most importantly, Barnes Common took the bold step to host our project which saved us the expensive and time of having to set up a new charity.

## **What have you learned from this collaboration?**

The huge benefits of sharing resources and greater cooperation between charities and other organisations.

The importance of trust. It helped that we had worked with each of our three sponsoring charities for many years.

The importance of clarity and responsibility. We agreed and signed a detailed Memorandum of Understanding with Barnes Common and Crispin became a trustee.

Our approach worked well in Barnes as there are many active organisations and a strong sense of community in the village.

We've learned how long it takes (one to two years) to build trust with individuals who are vulnerable and may not trust authority.



## **Were there any challenges along the way?**

### **How have you overcome these?**

Yes, many, but all the partners came together to help us overcome the challenges of starting a new community initiative.

For instance, we adopted the safeguarding and risk policies of our hosts, Barnes Common, who helped with accounting, insurance, training, the loan of tools and the use of their polytunnel. FiSH help us with office facilities at the Barnes Green Centre, and the BCA initially managed our volunteers.

## **Any problems balancing the priorities of the partners?**

It's important to be aware that something like 90% of a partner's objectives may lie outside the areas of overlap. Barnes Common is principally a conservation organisation, FiSH provides neighbourhood care to the elderly and vulnerable, and the BCA was founded to support the social life of the village.

It's important to respect this and not to be pushy or ask for too much.

## **Any unexpected benefits?**

Finding out how important gardening together has been to people's emotional and physical wellbeing.

We now see how this connects with the Five Ways to Wellbeing (Connect, Be Active, Keep Learning, Take Notice, Give).

Gardening is a fun and non-threatening way to improve wellbeing and social contact and the collaboration has become more about wellbeing and befriending than just gardening.

## **What advice would Crispin give to other charities considering cooperation, collaboration or a partnership?**

*Be curious about other organisations and network like crazy*

I'm an inveterate offerer of a "chat over a coffee" mostly not knowing where it might be going. There has definitely been an element of serendipity in BCG's development.

I've met some wonderful people and had help, support, advice and loads of good ideas from Richmond CVS, our local Councillors, [The Barnes Fund](#), The Richmond Furniture Project, Habitats and Heritage, The Good Gym, the Royal Horticultural Society, Edinburgh Garden Partners and many others".

### *Communications*

It is important to keep in the public eye, via Instagram and other social media and newsletters. Give credit and show appreciation to all the people and organisations that help you.

### *Don't Over Extend*

Stick to your core purpose and learn to say no sometimes, the temptation to move into other areas should be resisted.

## **Anything else?**

I'd love to see more collaboration between charities in Richmond. Perhaps make it a condition of funding that charities spend time talking and exchanging ideas, who knows where this might end?

I wish I'd known what a treadmill it is applying for funding.



In Barnes we have a cohort of relatively privileged people who have been in a position to retire in good health in their 50s and 60s and spend much time volunteering, this may not be the case in the future.

We are very lucky to have so many green spaces in Barnes. Looking after them and each other we can really make a difference to our wonderful local community.