

'The aim of the SLI is to improve the quality of life for individuals, communities and for our environment through better health, activities, and training.'

We do this by providing outdoor activities that are currently centred on growing fruit and vegetables, horticulture, training courses, cooking, herbs, bees and forest gardening in an environmentally sensitive manner.'

(SLI Governance)

The purpose of this evaluation is to provide information to the SLI trustees on what the SLI project has done well or not so well - particularly in the last three years - and how the project can improve.

To this end we have asked members

- What difference has SLI made to them?
- How well do they think the project is managed
- What ideas and plans they have for the future of SLI.

How was information gathered? To gather this information 115 questionnaires (see Appendix 1) were sent to the current membership. 52 members or 45.2% of the total membership provided responses.

Who provided the information? The largest number of responses came from individual or community group plot holders (37); non-plot holding members (10) and volunteers (5) are also represented. Responses came from members based at both sites; Bluebell(30) and Marlpit (20). New members (15), those with a membership of 1-3 years (16) and 3+ years(19) are fairly evenly represented.

What did SLI members say?

51 members (98%) said that the project has had a positive impact on them.

29 members (55.7%) said that the project has had a positive impact on their family/friends/group/community.

41 members (78.8%) said that the fresh air/exercise/space/friendly people have improved their health and sense of well-being.

33 members (63.4%) said they save money through SLI.

32 (61.5%) said that membership means they eat more fruit/vegetables.

Members speak about their experience of the project in overwhelmingly positive terms. The most frequently used words are friendly; helpful; positive; fun; welcoming; good will; cooperation; growing and learning.

Experiences are reflected in these quotations:

'I love just being able to go up there, even if I don't do much on my plot; really enjoy the monthly lunches; lots of really nice people, also learn a lot informally from chatting to people or listening to them do so.'

'The space that has been created is wonderful. It has been great meeting with other members and using the garden with friends and children, taking time to be outdoors and in nature.'

'My experience has been wonderful. Everyone I've met at the garden has been so friendly and helpful. I immediately felt part of a community of caring people. I've learned a lot about growing in the short time I've been at the garden, which has been very satisfying.'

In summary, members say they value:

- Meeting a wide variety of helpful people, forming friendships or simply working and eating together.
- Growing what they like to eat and working on something 'the right size'.
- Learning about planting and growing in a variety of ways.
- Getting seeds and plants on site and at the right time. Having equipment ready and available
- Having time outdoors, in a green space on their own or with family and friends.
- Experiencing goodwill and cooperation.
- Having fun and getting exercise all year round

Members describe the impact SLI has on them again frequently using positive words such as therapeutic, confidence, enabling, thoughtful, better, happier.

Gains are reflected in these quotations:

'I genuinely feel happier, I've been learning skills and working on a project that actually means something to me. When I've grown something successfully I really feel that I've achieved something and I feel so proud of the work I've done. I also know that there's always a quiet green place I can go to'

'My well-being at work has definitely increased, as I have been able to take groups outside and be active. It's given me more energy and insight about youth work as I have been able to practice it in a different and dynamic environment outside. I personally have learned a huge amount about growing, and have been able to take my knowledge and use it at home. This is just from talking to volunteers and MCG staff who are more than happy to share their skills and knowledge.'

'Although I have been going to the garden for only 4 months, I feel that it has allowed me overcome the isolation and inactivity. I'm indeed a more happy person.'

In summary members said that they:

- Are able to have their own garden and grow food and flowers even if they live in homes without gardens or with only a courtyard/ balcony.
- Can commit a lot of time to the project if they choose to; become confident about growing; more self-reliant; develop practical skills and knowledge; practice management and social skills.
- Have a more varied diet and recipes.
- Think more about what they eat, where they buy it and where it comes from and change their habits.
- Overcome isolation, find diversion from stress in other areas of their lives and feel more positive about life.

Some members' family and friends, some community groups and other local organisations have been impacted by the project.

The comments below are examples:

'Several of our friends have joined us at Bluebell over the years, and some have left. Our sons have a better sense of community from seeing how the activities benefit us.'

'Yes, we have been spending time in the garden as a group of parents with pre-schoolers.'

'Young people go home and tell their parents about what they've learned – and one young person has started growing potatoes and tomatoes at home. Their enthusiasm for vegetables has definitely been shared with their siblings and parents! Young people feel valued in this space; like they own a little bit of their community and have a stake in it..... Their behaviour at MCG was impeccable, and that's because they are in an environment where they are engaged and have space to use some pent up energy. They are genuinely interested in the way the gardens works, and were totally engaged in the tasks they were given. This was also down to the respectful and non-patronising manner the MCG staff showed them.'

In summary, some members said that SLI

- Provides a space for them to spend a fruitful time with family, friends and group members.
- Enables friends, family and the wider community to share their produce; their appreciation of the difference in produce cost and taste; the growing tasks and what they learn at the project.
- Gives young people a chance to demonstrate what they can do and be valued as part of the project.
- Provided friends and colleagues with an opportunity to volunteer.

Most members think that SLI is extremely well run. This validation and thoughts about organisation in the future are reflected in the quotes below:

'I think that it's run very smoothly. It's definitely very well organized. You always know where (and when) you can find the answer for your questions.'

'It is quite difficult to find out about how things are done and to help sometimes'

'The project is less demanding and more understanding of its members' diverse needs than larger or more official organisations. It is difficult for all members to understand and properly share the costs of running the project – both in terms of money and in effort and time.'

'It needs some new members who are willing and able to help run the project – the founder members are getting older and less able to do heavy work.'

'Core structure has been sound – in the 3 years of witness - it's in need of TLC.'

In summary members say that they:

- Appreciate Mahesh's vision, skills and hard work.
- Recognise that a great deal of work is put in by a core group of people to enable the scheme to operate effectively.
- Appreciate the light handed management, the encouragement and the community spirit that provides the basis for people to work well together.
- Feel management responsibilities as onerous at times. Management group can appear closed at times.
- Know that there are communal tasks that need doing but that some members have fewer opportunities to commit to this than others.
- Anticipate that SLI will continue to need to "grow" more mentors; more energetic and visionary people; future team leaders and volunteer organisers.
- Recognise that communication within the scheme is complex and needs to continue to be 'a work in progress'. Forms of communication are changing all the time and members give and receive communication in so many different ways.

Half of respondents suggested some ideas about how SLI can improve and half either said that they like it the way it is or had no helpful suggestions at the moment. Ideas fall into some broad categories:

Communal areas

- Map out the communal areas and have groups responsible for "their area". These groups to meet when convenient to them.
- Re-institute volunteer morning at Bluebell. Have more than one possible day to volunteer in a month.

Administration

- Information on site about where to get new entrance gate keys.
- A sign on the toilet to explain where to find the toilet key.
- Another sign that explains how the toilet locks.

Communication

- Information about what needs to be done so that more of the practical work is delegated to more people.
- Improve communication within teams. Teams to meet up and plan projects and events.
- Bring back the newsletter.
- Good regular information needed in a variety of mediums.

Resources

- More modern mowing and cutting equipment and some training sessions to use the trimmer on plot surrounds.
- Develop an indoor base at Marlpit
- More animals on site – they encourage young people to engage with the scheme.

- Increase funding – to enable members to do more of the same but on less of a shoe-string.
- Members with individual plots to put in an order with the seed team at the beginning of the season. Once growing they are kept in named pots until collected to be planted by grower.
- More plants
- More well-rotted manure. Good grade compost from city recycling.

General

- Maintain members' network with more informal meeting opportunities – building on the success of the food-share.
- Create greater cohesion between the two growing sites by organising more joint activities.
- Need more members. Advertise for plot holders and volunteer growers in a wide variety of mediums.

Challenges for the Future

In summary:

- SLI to find ways to include more members in the variety of opportunities offered by the scheme such as cooking, training and bulk ordering.
- Develop the social aspects of SLI that many members refer to as such a key part of their growing experience.
- Gradually induct and develop new group leaders and support them to maintain their energy and commitment as well as honing their skills.
- Develop volunteering and joint project working on both sites.
- Secure some additional funding to meet capital and running costs as they rise.

Roberta Manners, Member of SLI Trustees and Plot holder.