

SUBJECT:	GREENFINGERS SERVICE
DIRECTORATE:	SOCIAL CARE AND HEALTH
MEETING:	Cabinet
DATE:	15th May 2024
DIVISION/WARDS AFFECTED:	All

1. PURPOSE:

This report is brought forward to seek the release of the Greenfingers site in the grounds of Melville Centre for the Arts in Abergavenny with the view to it being made available for a community organisation(s) to develop an inclusive horticultural or gardening project.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS:

That Cabinet agrees the following:

- (i) That the current Greenfingers site should be released to Landlord Services in order to seek expressions of interest from community organisations to develop the site as an inclusive horticulture related project.
- (ii) For Landlord Services to work in partnership with the Green Infra-structure Team, Community Animation Team and Social Care and Health directorate to ensure that the site is developed in accordance with current policy objectives regarding the climate and nature emergency.
- (iii) To continue supporting people with learning disabilities to access community gardening opportunities.

3. KEY ISSUES:

Background

3.1 Greenfingers was originally established in 2007, alongside a series of other enterprise opportunities for people with a learning disability in Monmouthshire and became part of MDML in 2012. The service was set up to provide people with an opportunity to develop skills in gardening and engage in meaningful activities that might help with employability.

3.2 The project had several strands to it including undertaking maintenance in community gardens such as grass cutting, general park maintenance and maintenance of flower beds in various community locations in particular Linda Vista Garden, Bailey Park and Castle Meadows. As well as this, work at the Greenfingers base including making reindeers and wreaths for Christmas, growing and selling vegetables and supporting the community's food coop.

3.3 Since Greenfingers was first established, the landscape of disability services in Monmouthshire has changed fundamentally with a move to strength-based

approaches, enabling people with learning disabilities to develop and pursue personal outcomes and social connections in a more person-centred, individualised way.

3.4 Prior to the pandemic, 20 people attended Greenfingers for a couple of days per week (on average). Most of the previous attendees now access different activities within the community, including various community-based gardening / horticultural projects, either independently, with support through MDML or with support from their accommodation providers. This also coincided with a change in the arrangements for enabling people in residential or supported living placements to participate in day opportunities (with day support now being provided through the accommodation provider rather than through MDML).

The Development Opportunity

3.5 The site itself is in the grounds of Melville Centre for the Arts and has remained unused since the start of the pandemic, when MDML suspended site-based services. The site comprises 662 sqm / 7127 sqft / 0.16 acres and has a main building, a shed and 2 polytunnels. The site needs some attention, although the polytunnels and one of the sheds are in reasonable condition and are useable aside from some minor work.

3.6 The site represents a great potential development opportunity for an inclusive community venture, ideally based around horticulture/gardening or something aligned to that. So that a positive link can be maintained with MDML, the proposal is to stipulate that any project or community group using the site should be inclusive and offer opportunities that benefit the whole community, including those receiving support through MDML. Given the decision to locate one of the MDML home-bases at the Melville Centre for the Arts, this presents an exciting opportunity for some innovative community partnership working.

3.7 There is a consensus that the site would be very attractive to community groups and there has already been some keen interest. Interest has come from existing gardening groups in the area, food growing/cooking groups and allotment groups. The site could be offered as is with responsibility for development resting with the successful community group(s) to ensure its specification meets their future aspirations.

3.8 Arriving at a decision over which community group(s) would be selected to occupy the site will require a thoughtful and evidenced based process involving a number of stakeholders and would be undertaken in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Resources. To encourage a positive and creative response from interested organisations, the first step will be to provide a clear brief setting out the Council's objectives and aspirations for the site. Given its co-location, the Melville Centre for the Arts, would be a key-stakeholder in any decision about how the site should be used and in the on-going management arrangements. The development of positive working relationships between stakeholders would be essential to supporting a sustainable project.

Ensuring People with Learning Disabilities are Supported to Access Gardening, Horticultural and Outdoor Activities

3.9 There are several community-run gardening opportunities in Abergavenny, such as Growing Spaces, many of which are attended by people with learning disabilities including some who are supported by MDML. These groups offer increased social inclusion and integration as well as somewhere to meet up with existing friends. There are also a number of inclusive outdoor volunteering opportunities and community groups that people can participate in such as Friends of Linda Vista, Abergavenny Community Orchards, Volunteer Shepherds, Friends of Bailey Park and Castle Meadows and more.

3.10 Following the Practice Solutions review (March 2022 – Nov 2023) there is a renewed impetus within MDML towards supporting people to access day opportunities that are designed around their own strengths and interests with an emphasis on using inclusive, community-based settings where this is possible. So that people have genuine choice over what they do, it is important that there are a range of opportunities available for people to enjoy and be part of. It is envisaged that an additional opportunity to access an outside activity, located in the same grounds as the home-base for MDML, would become a valuable addition to the overall service offer.

4. EQUALITY AND FUTURE GENERATIONS EVALUATION:

4.1 An Integrated Impact Assessment has been undertaken, attached as Appendix 1.

4.2 A summary from Section 8 of the Integrated Impact Assessment identifying the significant positive and negative impacts is detailed below.

Positive Impact

- The proposal will ensure that people with learning disabilities who are supported by MDML will continue to be supported to access community gardening opportunities and other opportunities suitable to their aspirations and needs.
- The proposal to offer the site for community development will enhance the availability of opportunities that are open, accessible and of interest to people of all ages and abilities.
- Developing the site as a community asset/opportunity will further extend the range of opportunities and activities within the community which people with a disability can access.
- This proposal will strengthen and widen the opportunities available to people in a way that meets their needs. Therefore, likely to increase and advance equality of opportunity for people with disabilities in Monmouthshire.

Negative Impacts

- There are <5 people* currently receiving support from MDML who used to attend Greenfingers when it was open. < 5 people* have indicated they wish the service to re-open so maybe negatively affected by the proposal to cease operating the service, albeit that other similar opportunities are available.

- Ceasing the operation of the service has the potential to negatively impact the staff team as their current roles will no longer be needed. Redeployment opportunities will be fully explored.

*Where actual numbers are fewer than 5 it is our policy to represent the response as <5 to avoid individuals being identified.

5. OPTIONS APPRAISAL

- 5.1 There is an option to re-establish the Greenfingers service on its existing site (following any running repairs and improvements required). The service could utilise the current Greenfingers workforce, avoiding the need for potential redeployment. However, this would reduce the availability of the MDML workforce to support people undertaking activities of their own choosing and would not be aligned with the direction of travel for MDML. This option would not readily enable a potentially innovative partnership with a community based horticultural project and is discounted on that basis.
- 5.2 The option to release the site without stipulation for its future use has been discussed and discounted. When land/property is declared surplus Landlord Services would normally seek to repurpose or dispose of the asset in a manner that generates best consideration or value. The sites alternative uses are considered to be very limited, given the various constraints impacting access, the listed building status of the adjacent land/property, and it's location within the C2 Flood zone. Given these constraints, the opportunity to develop and facilitate a community horticultural project is recommended as the appropriate use.
- 5.3 Given that the site is in the grounds of the Melville Centre for the Arts, which is currently being developed as the future home-base for MDML in the North, it is felt that the connection with MDML should be preserved whatever the site's future use, and that it should continue to be inclusive and accessible to people who use MDML. The stipulation to seek partners who want to use the site for an inclusive, community-based gardening project supports this idea and has the added benefit of supporting wider policy objectives around local food production, green spaces and biodiversity.
- 5.4 The current proposal, to formally cease the Greenfingers service and to use the site in a different way through seeking a partnership with an inclusive horticulture related project, is the recommended option.

6. EVALUATION CRITERIA

- 6.1 The service will continue to monitor the numbers of people using MDML who are supported to participate in community-based gardening and horticultural projects. The degree to which accessing such projects is conducive to people's personal wellbeing will be reviewed through their individual care and support plans.

- 6.2 Moving forward, the success of the proposal will be evaluated via the extent to which we are successful in achieving the ambition of working in partnership to develop an inclusive horticulture related project(s) on the current Greenfingers site.

7. REASONS:

- 7.1 The Greenfingers site offers considerable potential for partnership working and specifically for the development or expansion of inclusive community-based gardening or horticultural projects.
- 7.2 Providing a MDML gardening service (Greenfingers) is no longer desirable in terms of the direction of travel for the service or needed in terms of demand. Greenfingers has predominantly been a service accessed only by people with a learning disability and has had minimal levels of community inclusion. Re-establishing Greenfingers gardening service as it was, is inconsistent with the overall direction of travel for MDML towards individualised community-based support. Furthermore, Greenfingers is no longer required on the basis that a range of alternative community-based gardening and horticultural projects are now available for people to access.
- 7.3 Approval for the cessation of the Greenfingers as part of the MDML service is necessary to support the wider service development and staffing restructure across MDML and ISS (as per the recommendations of the Practice Solutions review March 2023). The current proposal would support this re-organisation and aligns with the idea of people being supported in a range of different activities, according to their individual interests and preferences, rather than through a more static service offer.

8. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

- 8.1 The current total net non-staff budget element of the Greenfingers budget is £9,674. A decision not to re-establish the service as it was, would result in a saving of £9,674 (full year).
- 8.2 The Greenfingers's workforce (of 3.6 FTE) have differentiated Job Descriptions within the overall MDML staffing structure. Since the pandemic, those MDML colleagues with Job Descriptions specific to Greenfingers, have been supporting people in the community in a range of activities either through MDML or Individual Support Services (ISS).
- 8.3 Recommendations from the Practice Solutions review included consideration of bringing Individual Support Services (ISS) and MDML support services together, something which is now underway.
- 8.4 The additional cost implications associated with the proposal to cease operating the Greenfingers service will be in regard to the potential redundancy and pension strain costs of the staff team. This would be taken forward within the overall workforce re-organisation of both MDML and ISS, with re-deployment opportunities being fully explored.

9. CONSULTees:

- Nicholas Keyse -Acting head of Landlord Services
- Social Care & Health Directorate Management Team
- Ian Saunders, Chief Officer Customer, Culture and Wellbeing

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS:

Implementation of the My Day, My Life Review Recommendations Report
Cabinet 26th July 2023

12. AUTHOR:

Jane Rodgers – Chief Officer, Social Care, Safeguarding and Health

JaneRodgers@monmouthshire.gov.uk