



What the Green Gym means to me

Anna Ware, Camden Green Gym volunteer

Early last year I found myself in a position the same as many people in this economic climate. I was unemployed after being made redundant, sick of applying for jobs, unable to spend money going out, and was looking for a reason to get up and out of the house. I had been looking for volunteering roles through a number of organisations, and was put off by the long application forms (of which I had already seen all too many) and the length of commitment needed by many of the roles offered. There seemed to be a lack of casual, worthwhile volunteering opportunities.

This is how I came across the Green Gym.

The first time you go to events like this, it is always a nerve racking experience. You don't know who will be there, what to expect. The act of just making it to the site is difficult for many people. When I arrived I was greeted by an incredibly friendly Project Officer and some regular Green Gymers. I was immediately put at ease.

One of the things I am most grateful for was all the opportunities I was given once I had joined the Green Gym. Almost as soon as I had mentioned I was interested in Project Leading, I was booked on training, and meeting with the Project Officer to write out what I was wanting from the volunteering role. From there I was able to lead my own sessions, I started helping out at the office updating the database, I was tagging along to site visits and helping to find materials for raised beds. I was offered the opportunity to help with a stall at the flower show, and assisted at park events.

Soon I was running the project while the Project Officer was away, but more importantly, I set up and ran my own projects too. I coordinated a Green Gym corporate day, which is where employees from companies come to volunteer on a site. And I also set up a young persons 2 day pond digging project, by applying for the funding through BTCV, finding an appropriate site, all the way through to running the day. Getting these days planned and organised gave me solid experience of managing projects.

And because my enthusiasm for getting involved was matched so quickly with opportunities for me to take responsibility, I had gained a remarkable amount of experience in a very short of time. Not only that, but I had personally discovered my strengths in an entirely new sector, and most importantly, found a potential career that I could wholeheartedly enjoy.

I came from a ruthless area of the corporate world, where volunteering was a dirty word. After volunteering for a while, it got to the stage where I needed too start looking for work, and my agency started sending me to interviews straight away, but in my old career. My friends were saying that this volunteering stuff was all well and good, but in the real world, life doesn't work like that.

The scariest moment was when I rang up my recruitment agent, and told her I didn't want to go to any more permanent interviews. I would take my chances with temp positions, continue the volunteering in between, until eventually I found a role in this sector. And I set about looking for community engagement positions while continuing the volunteering as and when I could.

It wasn't long before I got offered a position, in a job I thoroughly enjoy, coordinating and engaging people in community health projects, such as connecting residents with food growing sites, or setting up walking groups – the objectives of the project being to reduce health inequalities. An opportunity I never would have had if it wasn't for the Green Gym.

I knew nothing about local nature reserves, wildlife or biodiversity. Everything I now know I learnt along the way. And what started as 3 hours twice a week of dead wood hedging, wildflower identification and bramble clearing, soon turned into 4 days a week, plus opened doors onto other projects, and ultimately helped me to achieve a change of sector in to a community development role that I am now in.

I've also met so many different and fantastic people through the Green Gym, some went for the same reason I started going, looking for work and needing a break from applications, some were recovering from their previous lifestyles, some were avid environmentalists, some were mental health service users. Every person had their own story, and what always amazed me was the ability and natural inclination everyone had to work together. People that normally would never have cause to interact, were building steps and creating meadows in perfect harmony.

When you begin a task at the site, you work as a team, you feel like you are giving input and making a difference. The Green Gym changes things for a lot of people. One of the volunteers was an NHS referral, this was recommended to him as part of his recovery programme. On his first session, he threw all of his energy into the task, speaking to the other volunteers, learning about the environment and being part of the team. He came back regularly, and commented later that he felt it was a huge contributing factor to his getting his life back on track. I hear comments all the time from volunteers who struggle to make it out of bed some days, but make the effort to come to the Green Gym and are always glad they have once they finish the session.

Only the other day, I was talking to a volunteer who originally planned on going once, but who enjoyed it so much she stayed on for weeks.

It is the flexibility of being able to come and go, the friendliness of everyone, getting back to nature, making a difference to the area biodiversity and an overall sense of achievement that creates a relaxed atmosphere. And it's the little things, such as the ability to earn a t-shirt after three sessions, which encourages people to come back. There's something about working in the natural environment that creates this positive and passionate experience.

You see the benefits and difference it makes to people every day you are out on site, and that is why the leaders commit their extra time.

And those that commit more of their time. It is those people that turns these projects into the sustainable events that they become. Resident and locals are then empowered and supported to take ownership, allowing the Green Gym to be entirely community run. Which is one of the best things about it.

The Green Gym means a lot of things to a lot of people, and each person gets something different out of it.

There could be a thousand volunteers standing up here, with a thousand unique stories, and there would be a thousand ways the Green Gym has made a positive impact on their health and wellbeing.

And that is what makes the Green Gym so successful in improving people's lives.