

4.3 Newcastle University Research with Moorside Allotments

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Over the academic year 2009/10 a linked research project was set up between Moorside Allotments and senior planning students at the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, Newcastle University. The key aim of the project was to undertake a robust qualitative study of the benefits of allotments on the day-to-day lives of those who work them and to explore their potential for improving the lives of communities more generally.

The project had four sub-themes of investigation, diet, exercise, well-being and carbon footprint reduction. Data was collected through a 35-point questionnaire (designed by the university in association with Moorside Allotments) this was sent to all allotment members (a 46% return was achieved); followed by a series of follow-up interviews (26 in total) these were recorded, transcribed and analysed using a framework method.

Some key findings of the study are as follows:

- The quality of Moorside Allotments was very important to members, comments like 'well-run with a good mix of people', 'good atmosphere', 'friendly' etc were frequently used.
- In terms of diet, an estimated 62% of plot space was given over to vegetables a further 19% to fruit and 5% to herbs. There were many aspects to growing produce - knowing it was 'fresh' and/or 'organic', having more taste, to the ability to grow specific varieties 'my choice not retailers'; and in turn respondents commented that they perceived themselves to be healthier because their own produce was fresher than shop-bought. Some linked their fruit and vegetable consumption to initiatives such as the national '5 a day' programme.
- Overall notions of health and well-being came out strongly through the study. Respondents talked about being 'mentally', 'physically' and 'emotionally' healthy and 'relaxation' and 'reducing stress' were key themes.
- Issues around carbon footprint reduction and sustainability generally were expressed less in the responses than other issues; the University team are considering this for future studies.
- Finally there were also important issues raised around communing with nature (even if some 'pests' were unwelcome) and understanding man's relationship with natural processes and cycles.

That having an allotment was seen as an extremely positive thing in the eyes of respondents was hardly an unsurprising outcome to the research. What was more unexpected by the research team, however, was the sheer diversity and depth of benefits expressed. Moreover while many interviewees talked about having an allotment as part of 'lifestyle' and a 'shared sense of community', clearly allotment ownership often reaped very personal and unique rewards.

This was a qualitative study and so little work was included to try and quantify the various benefits discussed, though there was some attempt at rank ordering responses

etc. The study is intended to provide a baseline for further investigation over the coming academic years.