



**PERMACULTURE**  
ASSOCIATION

# CASE STUDY

## Creating Thriving Communities

### A Permaculture Approach

Permaculture is an ethical framework used to design regenerative systems at all scales – from home and garden to community, farm and bioregions.

We live in a time of great uncertainty and unfolding crises with the social, environmental and economic failures of the current system being cruelly exposed by rising inequality, social division, increasingly precarious and insecure employment, loss of biodiversity, accelerating climate change and the inability of an increasing number of people to meet their basic needs for good food and housing.

In this project we are exploring how people across Britain are working to create thriving communities!

[www.permaculture.org.uk](http://www.permaculture.org.uk)



**NATIONAL  
LOTTERY FUNDED**

# Headway Cambridgeshire

## Cambridge and Peterborough

[www.headway-cambs.org.uk](http://www.headway-cambs.org.uk)

Community: Adults with brain injury, local community

### Overview

Headway Cambridgeshire provides specialist services and support to people with an acquired brain injury, their family and carers. It was established by Sarah Durrant in 1989 when she couldn't find the services she needed for her brain injured husband. They now offer a range of services from their hubs in Fulbourn and Peterborough as well as at Addenbrooke's Hospital and in the community.

Simon Lacey joined Headway Cambridgeshire in 2013 bringing with him experience as a psychotherapist and horticulturalist and some training in permaculture. In 2015 he established a free six month permaculture gardening course which brings together local people with, or without, gardening experience and people with brain injuries to all learn together. Participants meet every week for 6 months and are then supported to become involved with community growing projects in the community where they can practice their design and implementation skills for real.

### Permaculture

Headway Cambridgeshire is a fantastic example of a project that uses the ethics, principles and process of permaculture explicitly in its work to offer therapy, skills and community building. The permaculture gardening course is tailored to create a safe learning environment, where the traditional elements of a Permaculture Design Course are tweaked to maximise their therapeutic potential. For example, sessions on soils focus on the interconnection of elements as a metaphor for how our brains and communities work and what we can do to enhance our own connections and support networks.

## Earth care

Headway have operated on a site in Fulbourn for the last five years. Over that time, in part through the Permaculture Design Course but also with other gardening opportunities and the support of volunteers, they have created a wildlife oasis bursting with food, flowers, trees, a pond, quiet spaces and wildlife. Through the Permaculture Design Course, participants also support the development of other growing spaces including Clay Pit Community Farm in Cambridge and the Green Backyard in Peterborough.

## People care

The courses use permaculture as a framework for learning how to nurture yourself and others. Every aspect of permaculture is used as an opportunity to explore the nature of ourselves and our communities, what we are able to offer, how to overcome things we perceive as limitations and how to work together.

Participants report significant benefits from being involved in the course: "I have learnt much more about how the natural world related to and influences our own growth and development and our connectivity with other people."

## Fair Shares

The Permaculture gardening course is offered for free thanks to funding that Headway receives from the Health & Social Care Volunteer fund and what they are interested in is taking volunteers from the local community. It is about engaging local people who are not otherwise active for a host of reasons. People on the course learn how to volunteer and support people. Then everyone goes out into local projects and work in groups that use the principles they've been working with to support local projects and make things happen. It is open to local people as well as adults with brain injuries.

Participants on the Headway course have been vital in enabling the development of a community garden on a plot of land in a large new development just outside Cambridge. Explicitly spend time focusing on the edge during the course.

## Outcomes & Monitoring

As part of Growing Together people come together to work as a team and to approach the design of spaces by learning how to work together using

permaculture. Volunteers and adults with brain injuries work together without knowing who is in which group and so everyone starts from the same place. People work together for 6 months on a weekly basis learning about permaculture as a metaphor for ourselves and our health and through doing and then they go onto a placement for 3 months.

The Health & Social Care funders look at how people learn basic skills such as gardening, learning to support people and practical placement. The outcomes are increased confidence, communications, team work and vocational skills. For Headway the outcomes are to do with building people's capacity to support other people, contribute something, looking at things through new eyes and developing understanding and awareness through observing and interacting.

We also like to diminish the idea of an expert, meaning anyone can have a go. We encourage people to observe, trust their own instincts and learn from nature. The course is a blended permaculture approach to horticultural therapy, learning as a group and designing using natural systems in the local community. People have the luxury of time to observe nature over 6 months, when they go out into community gardens, they will introduce techniques such as mulching and can see the reasons behind these techniques working. People often go on to do permaculture intro courses. In terms of monitoring we use questionnaires at the beginning and end of the course. People self-report improvements against their skills. They also self-report changes in a whole range of things to do with confidence and ability to work as part of a team. Nevertheless, feedback throughout is also valuable whenever something happens for an individual.

## Case Study

Clare suffered a brain injury 2 years ago while working to get things for her garden when she had an accident that knocked her out and caused her serious concussion. Her speech and memory were affected. Her sister took her to the GP and she eventually went to Headway and was sent to the hospital where she got a diagnosis. She was obsessed with her garden and Sharon suggested she join the gardening Growing Together group.

Clare says: "I have learned such a lot on this project. Simon, the course leader links so much of gardening to illness and recovery. It's amazing how we can be talking about soil composition one minute, and someone will make a comment and all of a sudden we are talking about someone's personal journey. I think I have got as much from that aspect of the course as I have the technical parts of it because it has provided an opportunity to share what has happened to me with other people. It has been so comforting that this journey isn't one that I am travelling alone.

Having a brain injury is very isolating and the medical profession can be very clinical and one-dimensional.

If it wasn't for the support I have received I would have given up. I have gained a greater appreciation of the word **hope** since I have done the course. I have discovered that once you choose **hope**, anything is possible."

