

Sowing seeds – fragile sustainability of a volunteer led urban food growing project working in a deprived area of the UK

Case Study of the Green Prosperity project in east Hull



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Introduction

Exploring sustainability of volunteering for marginalised people

Emphasis on volunteering 1) to help marginalised people as volunteers, 2) to help develop community gardening projects (as a *Sustainable* development/*Sustainable* place-making project), and then 3) to become a sustainable group

Volunteers voiced many benefits: mental health, reducing isolation, resilience

Also, helping them give back to their local community

Big Lottery funded project managed by civil society organisations, but funding finished

Fragile sustainability of the volunteer group (transition, support, land)

Case study - considerations for future of volunteering?

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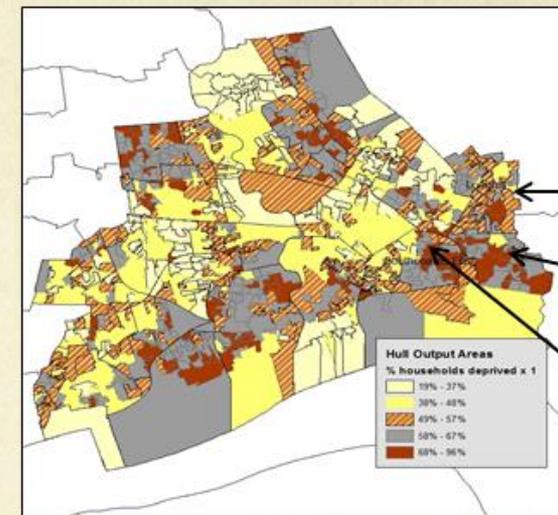
1. Local context of Hull
2. What is the Green Prosperity Project?
3. Methodology
4. Research findings: gardening and volunteering.
5. Fragile sustainability (as different to Sustainability) of the volunteer group
6. Conclusions/ questions

Local context of Hull

- Population of approx 250,000
- 3rd most deprived area of the UK in 2015 as per government statistics (5th in 2010)
- north Hull and east Hull more deprived
- White working class, but Refugee Gateway city
- Decline of fishing, docks and other industries
- Hull Floods in 2007



Kingston-upon-Hull



Longhill

Marfleet

Southcoates East

But positive news too: Renewable Energies, plus a growing local food movement (including Feastival) and City Council Affordable Food (Eat Well Do Well).

- and City of Culture 2017



What is Green Prosperity?



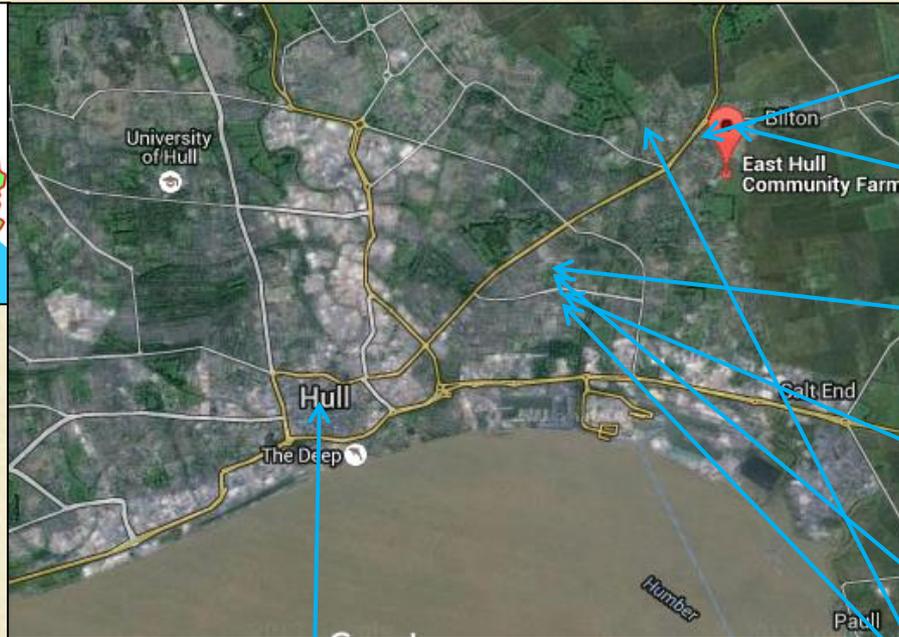
- 10 Communities Living Sustainably (CLS) projects supported by the Big Lottery Fund (BLF) across the country
- 3 year £900,000 project completed by the end of 2015.
- Aim: *'use **Sustainable living** as a vehicle to improve the quality of life of residents, and to build more prosperous and coherent communities which will significantly reduce their carbon footprints.'*
- activities including: **community food growing (working with volunteers)**
Plus, activities to save money and contribute to the local economy: energy reduction, *eco-housing, enterprise development, waste recycling*
- target groups: all 20,000 residents of two deprived electoral wards in east Hull: Southcoates East and Longhill.
- Two locally based Civil Society Organisations (CSOs): Environmental Management Solutions Yorkshire and the Freedom Centre, plus Probe Ltd.

Aims: community gardening (and volunteering)

1. Main aims around supporting local residents to grow their own food
2. Then social aim to help vulnerable people through volunteering, but inclusive approach
3. Volunteers contributing to helping the local community and Sustainable place-making (social and environmental).
4. *Then came* sustainability of the volunteer group

Location of project sites

Map showing East Hull Community Farm and the location of the main projects supported by volunteers



Thanet Primary School (Longhill) 80 hours

East Hull Community Farm (Longhill) – **3820 h**

Eco-House – 153 hrs (Southcoates East)

Green Prosperity office (Southcoates East)

Seed Swap – 422 hrs (Southcoates East)

Hull Harvest Festival (City Centre) -110 hrs

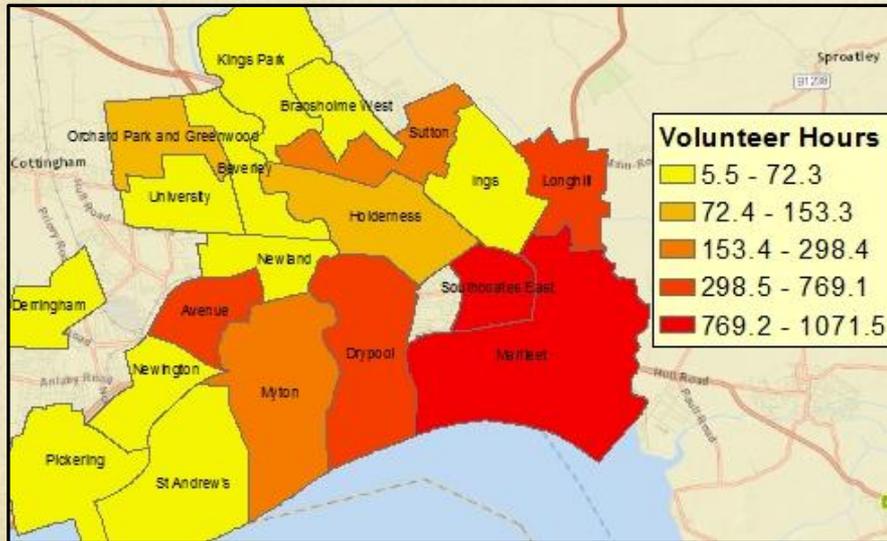
Family Growing Project (both wards) – 375 hrs

Methodology

- Collaborative research: M&E role with the project set up as PhD, ongoing input & evaluation reports
- 2 years field work during project, now final year writing
- M&E role finished but still supporting CSO partners and volunteers
- Empirical/ Ethnography/ Case study approach
- Quantitative and **Qualitative** - 100 interviews
- PhD focus: Sustainable place-making in communities (Environment, **Social** and Economic)
- Grounded theory approach, Actor Oriented approach (Long 1992)
- Outcomes for volunteers and their stories have come up as very important
- Positionality – tried to be ‘distant critical friend’.

Community food growing and working with Volunteers

Volunteer hours per ward



'Coming here, it is flexible, nobody criticises, or says anything negative about where were you last week or whatever, and that's one of the things that I enjoy about it, you've got the freedom to come and go.. when I'm here I can more or less pick and choose what kinds of jobs I do' [Regular volunteer Helen]

'It's an environment that's still safe and secure, where we are both doing something that we like, which isn't actually, where we can be at war with each other, it's common ground.... and it's good for me because everyone else is aware of the relationship, and the situation, so I feel supported as well.' [Regular volunteer Bel]

'some projects are there to use you, and they are there to make money at the end of the day, GP don't make money at the end of the day, which is more beneficial to an individual, than going somewhere, making stuff for them – they're selling at a profit and you're not making any money, that money just goes back into their project'. [Regular volunteer Terry].

Positive stories

- 116 vols, 25 regulars, 6000 hours
- Mix of volunteers and motivations
- Enjoy gardening
- Helping mental health and wellbeing
- Respite
- Resilience
- Employment skills
- Sense of community
- Enable more projects (e.g. Family Growing Project and Festival).

But challenging to manage:

- Methods of engagement
- Flexibility
- Appropriate/ Interesting tasks
- Pastoral care
- Drop out rates
- Legal issues (DBS)
- Benefits
- Gender
- **Sustainability?**

Very committed and skilled staff

Outcomes from the project:

Volunteering at the community garden (3,677.5hrs) - helping with mental health & well-being (20 vols):

- *'it has been fantastic for me health wise, mental health wise. This project has helped me get ready to go back to work, I want to go back to work'. [volunteer Nancy]*
- *(Q. Does coming to the farm help you?) ' Oh definitely....I've got somewhere to go, I can see people,....before I had the farm, I had no one, I didn't see my family, I didn't have friends.....I was very lonely. But now I've got somewhere to go, even if it's only once a week, yes, I can look forward to it. So I think its really helped yes". [volunteer Paul]*
- *"you wouldn't know him from 2 years ago, because he wouldn't look at you.....but he even asked me how I am which nearly bowled me over, because he never used to..... But it is better now that it has ever been (Q. Would you put any of that to coming here?) Oh yes, and CASE as well, both these places have been an absolute god send. Without it, he wouldn't be like he is, because [he does] like to be out". [volunteer Graham's family member – volunteer now attending without support worker]*



SROI audit identified social return of £11 per £1 investment for the community farm – mainly from reductions in use of mental health services.

Outcomes from the project:

Developing skills and livelihoods/ resilience

Many volunteers wanted to develop gardening skills for using for themselves, for the community or in work – **if there is any**. One third of the volunteers were long term unemployed (some had benefit sanctions).



- 6 volunteers (2 Itu) supported to do horticulture course qualifications at Hull College
- 2 long term unemployed volunteers stopped being involved after finding paid work.
- 2 volunteers now volunteering on local wood recycling project to increase woodworking skills
- 1 volunteer went to University and wanted to build on the food growing and health knowledge and skills.
- 2 looking to start own business.

I was just stuck in my flat, just watching TV, so it was nice just to come, also I can get a reference..... The benefits office last year, telling me to go and look for work, I know for a fact there's no work....it just makes you depressed'.

'no jobs about. What am I going to do. Like being outdoors for a bit and doing this voluntary work.....I like them both, ..do the gardening, making things, working as a team, making friends....'

"I do this and I volunteer, and it keeps them off my back – they know I'm not sat at home – they know I'm doing summat, they don't hassle me".

"I had an epiphany a while ago. I learnt about where was going wrong with my diet, I like learning about food, I like helping people. I really liked what I was learning....why not do it as a job'.

Outcomes from the project:

Giving back to the local community and an ‘antidote to austerity’. Volunteers input over 6,000 hours into the project (including the family growing project -376.5hrs, Festival – 108.5, and work in local schools 80).

The Family Growing Project: support to 10 local families to grow their own food through 2015, supported by staff and existing volunteers as **mentors (4)** and **garden team (5)**.

10 families stayed involved - beneficial outcomes included providing education to children, providing fresh fruit and vegetables to families, improving health and well-being, helping families in financial hardship and improving self-reliance.



‘the idea of the mentor project just came from the volunteer group, that we had at the time and the fact we had quite a few experienced gardeners who were working with us, and it just seemed like common sense that they should be linked with families – if our objective is to work with local families’. [Staff member]

‘really good, because with them putting my beds in, with my health issues, I could still do my veg.....if there hadn’t have been this scheme, I wouldn’t have been able to do what I’ve done’. [Barbara talking about Garden Team].

‘I think this is the future, environmentally, self-help and everything. I mean people have forgotten how to do it you see’. [Volunteer mentor]

Outcomes from the project:

The Hull Harvest Feastival - held in the city centre in October 2015 aiming to 'share food as a whole community, inspire people to cook from fresh local ingredients, and to grow food themselves' It was estimated that over 500 people came to enjoy the food'.

Number of individual and partners: mix of activism, celebrating existing projects, and helping people and the local community (e.g. homeless people).

GP staff and volunteers were a strong component to the Feastival (110 hours of volunteer time) - growing food, preparing vegetables, gardening advice, setting up the event, and cooking.

"I did grow potatoes, which I donated to the Feastival. I grew carrots, they were only small but they were good, they were my carrots, and I were chuffed – so I donated them".

[Volunteer who donated food to the Feastival but had experienced financial challenges in the past including needing to go to a foodbank].



Very little chance would have got involved without GP project – Timebank not reached into east Hull.

"I did it because I just love food! How I got into it? My family was going to the community farm, I had a day off so I thought I'll go with them... and as soon as everyone found out I was a chef 'it was like, oh you can do this for us can't you'.

Case study Arthur and Tony (work-clubs to volunteers)

Arthur and Tony are regular volunteers studying for the Level 1 Horticulture Diploma at Hull College.

Both came to the project through a **work-club**. Both unemployed and frustrated at being stuck in their homes with nothing to do and with few volunteering opportunities.

Arthur nearly 400 hours for the project working at the community farm, the family growing project, seed swap and the Festival. Tony has dedicated over 150 hours (not able to attend the farm on Wednesdays).

The GP project facilitated attendance at Hull College due to volunteering commitments.



Both attend free of charge through Job Seekers Allowance. Passed their L1 Horticulture Award, the Level 1 Certificate and are now working towards the Level 1 Diploma.

Both have really enjoyed the course, including the skills and experience of the staff, the flexibility of days they can attend (e.g. due to sign-on requirements), and the practical focus they can use in other gardening activities:

'Everyone is friendly for a start, the tutors are real nice people, and everyone else is very pleasant'... 'there are plants here that I never knew about, when I had my allotment, I never grew anything like that, I wish I had now, Primula's really sell – people love them, they really sell. That's the income for this place you see...yes, we could grow them at the farm'. [Arthur]

It has taken a lot of hard-work and dedication for them to progress through the course - Tony has severe dyslexia but has been very committed to improving his reading and writing.

'Q - Would you like to move to the next level?' 'I am going to try, but I can't read you see, so it will be a bit harder'. 'Q - What did you enjoy about it?' 'Everything was great, enjoy everything, I knew about plants anyway because I used to go out with my nanna, when I was younger.'

Both say that the DWP (benefits office) have been supportive of their studying and volunteering – except for needing to rearrange attendance at college when needing to sign-on. Arthur said that volunteering and studying has helped his relationship with the benefits office, he had been sanctioned before resulting in going to a foodbank, but this has not happened recently. They both would also like to find full-time work in gardening related activities, if this kind of work was available.

Both Arthur and Tony have really enjoyed the other volunteering activities, and want to stay involved as part of a team, giving back to the local community.

'Helping people? Yes I love helping people me, ...this lady's got a garden, the Council nag her, to get it done, sent her a letter saying if she don't get it done...she gets a lot of volunteers like us, spend a day on the garden, cleared it, dug it, it's beautiful. [Arthur]

Sustainability of the volunteer group

Uncertainty over future? Support and access to the farm.

10 volunteers very committed to continuing Wednesdays and the garden

Fragile – short transition from being heavily supported to very little support (staff time)

One partner providing formal support (staff and funding) but one org not providing formal support due to lack of funding and boundaries (although actively involving the volunteers in other projects)

Some **tensions** – dominant personalities and lost lunch as natural meeting point

Middle class capture? More ‘middle class’ vols became post-holders, but very focused on supporting democracy and participation within the group.

More vulnerable people – continue without staff support?

Balance: bedding down and attracting new members.

But ongoing commitment, and support to wider community (food for homeless, Feastival)



GP stakeholders - very committed to ensure continued involvement of volunteers in community gardening projects.

Including new CSO Down to Earth - set up by GP staff – managed to obtain land, working on staff costs.

Will also help them take part in Feastival

Sustainability of the partners volunteering projects

Partners focused on supporting the volunteers

3 year project not long enough to ensure sustainability

Austerity brings funding difficulties, not creating a vacuum/ opportunity

Big Lottery Fund is best way for major funding

Pockets of funding, council contracts, social enterprise model, (but finding funding is a major focus of staff time)

Local Government: little funding, focused on mainstream anti-poverty projects and organisations (e.g. little support for community gardening – focus on affordable food, food in schools)

Partner considering route of working with vulnerable people as 'clients'

Without funding skilled staff will leave.



Conclusions: 1) the need for CSO led positive projects

- The GP project successfully engaged with vulnerable people with beneficial outcomes for the volunteers and for the wider community.
- We need CSOs to develop and sustain activities for environmental and **social** aims and values (including managing volunteers)
- Want all sections of the population participating in positive projects and volunteering for benefits to individuals and communities: effective and transformative agency (Kabeer 1999), just Sustainability, Sustainable place-making, progressive localism (Agyeman 2008, Featherstone et al 2011, Franklin and Marsden 2012, Crisp 2015)
- Working with vulnerable people requires appropriate **activities** (positive projects - community gardening), ways of **engagement** (e.g. participatory approaches work *for some people* (Williams 2003), and effective **management and support**.
- Community gardening projects – many positive impacts for disadvantaged communities (Baker 2004, Milbourne 2012) and example of progressive localism
- But also **sustainability** e.g. activities over 3 years (Creamer 2015, White and Stirling 2013) (including relating to funding and sources of income, planning activities).
- but big reductions in funding available and finding funding is a major effort of CSOs (Lambie-Mumford 2013, Creamer 2015, Milbourne 2012)

Conclusions: 2) broaden definitions of volunteering?

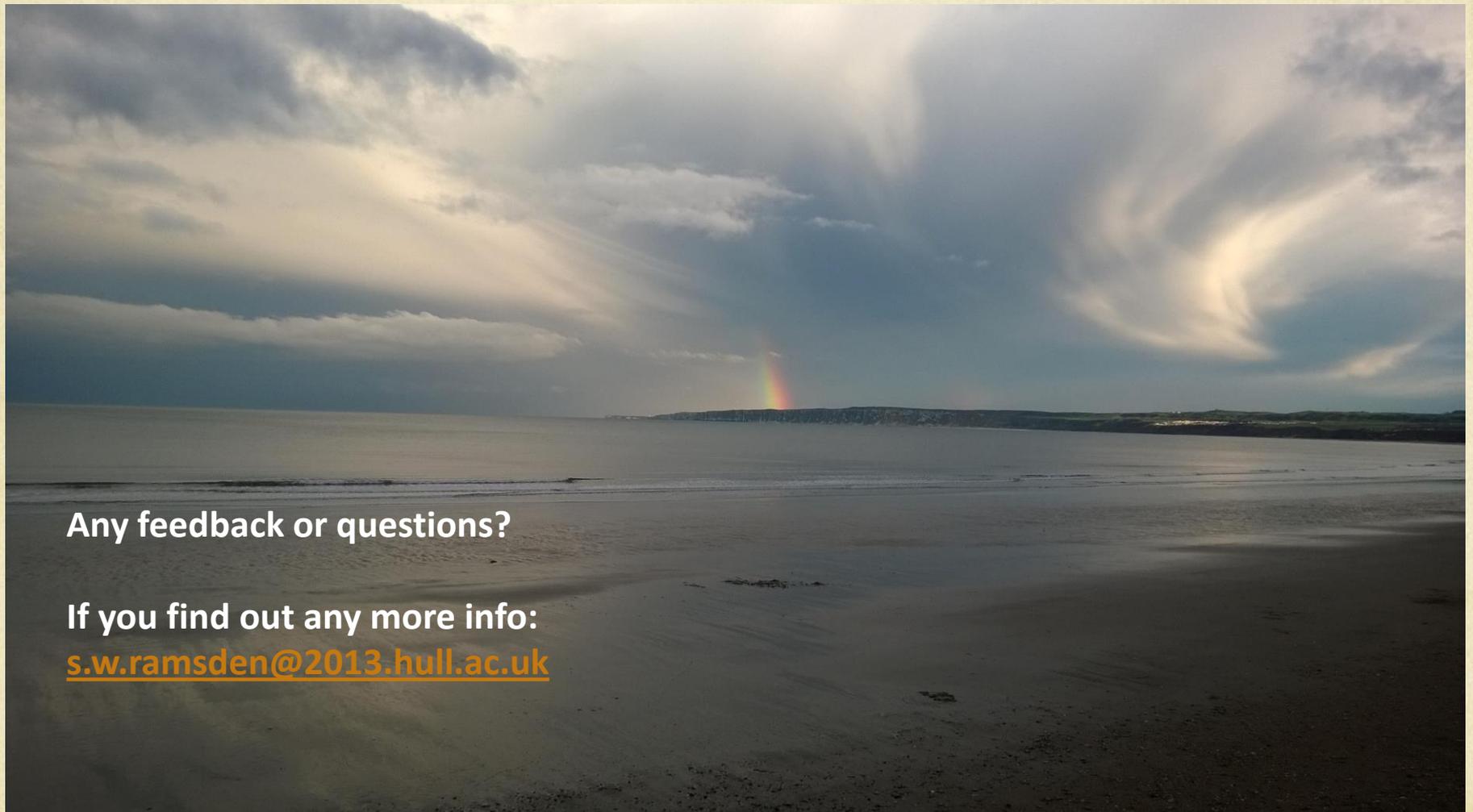
- Need to have broad definition of **volunteering** and consider how marginalised and vulnerable people can volunteer (complex, contested, hidden, fluid).

Is it about opportunities to volunteer? And some people need more help than others?

- Can people on work-clubs be volunteers? What about Arthur and Tony who are giving back?
- Can there be blurred boundaries between volunteers and clients? (Milligan and Fyfe 2005) A number of the volunteers are also providing care to relatives and need rest & support
- *Can national government support 'volunteering' more? (Flexible/ Supportive Benefits, personal care allowances, investment in small scale work-clubs (e.g. Crisp 2015) – CSOs could then work with this.*
- Case study shows that many people want to volunteer and give back to their communities if they have an opportunity – and these are not 'traditional volunteers'. Neo-liberalism not killing altruism (Rochester in Dean 2015), but austerity hitting positive projects and opportunities.
- Otherwise, will be the middle classes with more spare time and resources to volunteer (Featherstone et al 2012)
- Number of spin-offs from the GP project (volunteers helping each other, Down to Earth), in line with arguments that CSOs, Vols not passive victims of change (MacMillan 2015)
- **Community gardening 'an antidote to austerity'**

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Any feedback or questions?

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