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Introduction

Employment can be an important part of people's recovery from mental health problems (Bond *et al.*, 2008; Dunn *et al.*, 2008) and improving employment rates for people with mental health problems is a UK government objective (Department of Health, 2011).

Natureways was a time-limited collaboration between an NHS Trust Vocational Service (NHSVS) and a voluntary sector horticulture-based community interest company (CIC), providing training and work preparation for adults with mental health problems. It received government funding via Public Service Agreement (PSA) 16 (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010) for one year. PSA 16 (now ended in the UK) addressed the employment, education, or training needs of vulnerable and socially excluded adults.

Of Natureways' 16 trainees: six gained paid employment, three found voluntary work, and four joined Natureways' external landscaping team. Additionally, ten people gained a City and Guilds Level 1 qualification, and one trainee accessed higher education. Several positive soft outcomes – such as improvements in confidence, stamina, attendance, and interpersonal skills – were also noted through regular assessments under the Care Programme Approach (CPA) (Department of Health, 1990).

An action inquiry – led by occupational therapists from the University of the West (UWE) of England, Bristol (the authors) – was commissioned to explore how these outcomes had been achieved and to disseminate good practice (see report at www.uwe.ac.uk/hls/ahp/aboutus/serviceevaluations.aspx).

Community Interest Companies

Natureways operated a cut flower nursery and floristry business, plus a landscaping and garden maintenance service. CICs have had a growing role in the mixed economy of healthcare provision in the UK. Since 2005, social enterprises – businesses with social aims at their heart (Economic and Social Research Council, 2011) – have been able to register as CICs, which offer a particularly flexible business model (Marks and Hunter, 2007) and health professionals have been encouraged to establish themselves in such organisations (Pollard, 2011; Stickley, 2011).

Action inquiry (AI)

AI brings people together to learn from each others' experience (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2008). This inquiry aimed to combine trainee, staff, and management viewpoints about what had "worked" at Natureways and to make sense of this experiential knowing so it could inform future service development. To this end three AI workshops were facilitated (one with trainees and two with staff and managers) using four distinct AI techniques.

Freefall writing uses writing as a projective technique to reflect on experience and turn tacit, unarticulated experiential knowledge into communicable form (Fieldhouse and Onyett, 2012). Story circles offer uninterrupted time for individuals to draw on this written material and to recount a story about their experience to their peers in such a way that the narrative thread helps them make sense of it. Equipped with new insights from the above, a knowledge cafe is an environment where an open and creative conversation on a topic of mutual interest to participants can flourish (Brown and Isaacs, 2005). A learning history is a way of drawing together different perspectives aiming "to capture what an innovating group learned and can transfer from their 'new knowledge' to other groups and organizations" (Roth and Bradbury, 2008, p. 350). These techniques are described more fully in action later.

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Each workshop was facilitated through insider/outsider teamworking. This is both a means of member checking participants' ("insiders") observations – ensuring they are understood correctly by the facilitators ("outsiders") – and a means of developing new perspectives on those observations. Essentially, "insiders" and "outsiders" co-create new knowledge together. The workshops drew on the principles of co-operative inquiry (Heron and Reason, 2008), which draws project stakeholders together to create a learning community, and appreciative inquiry, which sees dialogue within project teams about their strengths or successes as transformational for projects (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005).

Ethical considerations

The inquiry design was approved by UWE's research ethics committee. Pseudonyms are used for participants.

Trainee workshop

This five-hour workshop, involving six trainees (all male), began with a trainee-led tour of the horticultural site, followed by a slideshow of photographs of Natureways' activities taken by staff and trainees. This aimed to reduce trainees' participation anxiety by reconnecting them with their subjective experience of accomplishment, which was integral to the appreciative ethos (see above).

Employment programmes have traditionally focused on "hard", quantitative outcomes, such as the number of jobs or qualifications gained, but it is recognised that such measures alone are inadequate in understanding the success of a project – particularly for groups who are most socially excluded, such as people with mental health problems (Dewson *et al.*, 2000). Consequently, it was anticipated that softer outcomes, including changes in attitudinal skills (such as increased motivation, confidence, and self-esteem) and personal skills (such as timekeeping and social skills), might emerge in the workshop as these had been observed through CPA assessment, as noted earlier.

Participants were first asked to write "three good things about Natureways" on post-its, which were stuck on the wall and collectively arranged in a time-line reflecting how important each had been at different stages of trainees' journey through the project. This led to a story circle where participants recounted particular experiences illustrative of these qualities. Critical reflection on this material was prompted by three questions: "What are the key features of an effective work placement?", "What are employable skills?", and "What's the most important message you'd like managers to take forwards?"

Overall, participants felt their employable skill set comprised horticultural skills, interpersonal skills, and a knowledge of self which supported self-management, goal-setting, enhanced self-esteem, consistency, and determination. The rehabilitative or therapeutic process underpinning these outcomes was attributed to a combination of factors, presented as themes in Table 1.

To minimise trainees' anxiety, consent for audio-recording conversation was not sought (on Natureways managers' advice) so there are no verbatim quotations from trainees.

Staff and management workshops

Two, three-hour staff workshops were conducted one month apart. There were 13 participants overall (see Box 1), comprising the Natureways manager, 6 Natureways staff members, the NHSVS manager, three NHSVS vocational specialists, and an NHSVS occupational therapist. A Primary Care Trust Commissioning Manager also attended one workshop. Both workshops were audio-recorded by written consent.

The first workshop also began with participants writing "three good things about Natureways" on post-its, which were stuck on the wall and collectively viewed. Each person then did free-fall writing for ten minutes responding to the question: "At what point did you first feel that Natureways was moving towards its goals?" This written material informed a story circle where each participant recounted a two-minute story about some aspect of the project they felt had worked well.

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Group discussion highlighted three key features of Natureways that made it successful:

1. it was a realistic workplace;
2. there was an empathic, supportive environment; and
3. there was creative, innovative inter-sectoral working.

Significantly, the first of these features was similar to trainees themes 1 and 2, the second related closely trainee themes 3 and 4, and the third is, arguably, what underpinned trainee theme 5. At this stage, however, the trainees' themes had not been disclosed to staff or managers. This triangulation (Silverman, 2010) indicates that these key features – seen from different perspectives – were indeed the principal ingredients in Natureways' success.

The second workshop elicited rich descriptions of these features "in action". This occurred in two stages: a knowledge café, and co-construction of a learning history. At this point the trainees' material was also introduced to workshop participants (see later Critique).

Three small groups (one comprising managers, one NHSVS practitioners, and one horticulturalists) convened as a knowledge café to consider, "What are the key features of the Natureways model that made it successful?" from their own perspective. Each group sat talking around a "café" table and writing on the paper "table cloths" which then served as prompts for facilitated discussion in the large group. This got the system thinking together (albeit without the trainees direct input) and brought different viewpoints of the project together as one whole. This was then captured in a learning history. Participants wrote post-its reflecting their own viewpoints of the "key features" and arranged them along a single, collective project time line. This revealed different perspectives in relation to each other, enabling participants to understand how particular events and decisions had interacted to produce an effect.

Four themes emerged (Table 2) as participants' developed their understanding of how the "key features" worked together. This reflection may have been assisted by the month gap between workshops.

1. Specialisation in work preparation evolved as Natureways streamlined its referral process, becoming a direct "in house" resource to the NHSVS, thus improving accessibility to referrers for work rehab (1.1):

> Sue: *There's a gate-keeping role that Bill's team take with referrals […] that does cut down a lot of "wasted referrals" which we used to have more of […] We've streamlined that whole process.*
>
> Sue: *The model works now because we've developed […] a good clear definition of the project as a work preparation project. I think that really is the "headline" bit of the model.*

For those referred to Natureways, the project could now be an immediate experience (through a timely visit to the site) rather than the outcome of a sometimes lengthy brokerage process, improving the accessibility to trainees (1.2):

> Bill: *You get quite strong responses from people when you come up here. When I say "strong responses" I mean it's usually very, very positive […].*

Additionally, Natureways' accessibility to public volunteers (1.3) was an important factor in the perception of it as a realistic work setting:

> Sue: *We're very open access, but there's a natural pruning process […] The people who stay as volunteers tend to be the ones who understand what's happening.*

2. The project team enjoyed a strong sense of project ownership due to Natureways' independence and smallness, allowing them to carefully craft an empathic therapeutic milieu (2.1):

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> Sue: *I've always felt we should be the model of the best workplace you could ever have.*

This empathic milieu was enhanced by Natureways' employment of former service users, seen by trainees as role models:

> Sam**:** *I started as a volunteer. I had my own mental health issues […] And because I was in that support role I was able to transmit my own experience.*

> Bill**:** *Yes […] I know that experience has been really valued by the other trainees.*

Consequently, the team were attuned to trainees' needs and well regarded by external referrers for their high quality CPA reviews (2.2):

> Sue: *We get the feedback every day that the referrers don't get. We see something positive most days.*

3. Natureways' adaptability was central to its success as a intersectoral project.

Having a small core of three to four decision-makers enabled swift executive decision-making (3.1) whereby learning could be quickly recycled into practice, supporting rapid adaptation as a specialised work preparation project, as described above. This increased Natureways attractiveness to referrers in a competitive provider market. The commercial focus placed expectations on trainees for good working habits:

> Sam: *Time keeping is important in the workplace and this is a workplace.*

A flair for working creatively (3.2) emerged in response to the changing funding landscape. This was felt to be different to the NHS culture:

> Bill: *It is an enormous break from the very "stuck" feeling that you get from working within the NHS […] where you can't make quick decisions because you are constantly up against limits, y'know, bureaucracy. So I think there is quite a sense of freedom in coming here and stepping outside the norm.*

4. Effective partnership working found expression in various ways. There was a fusion of "therapy" and "business" ideologies (4.1), harmonised together in Natureways' simply stated purpose:

> Sue: *We sell cut flowers.*

This business imperative contributed to a de-stigmatising, "real world" context for trainees' skill acquisition:

> Sue: *You have to have that hard edge […] People understand that "you need to do that again because we can't sell that". It's much easier really. It's not personal […] The demand comes from the plants. It's very unthreatening, very obvious […] They have a pull of their own, external to us.*

This combination of therapeutic and business ideologies reflected major changes in UK health and social care provision, such as moving away from block contracts into spot purchasing (discussed later):

> Jane: *I think you've piloted what the whole of health and social care is doing […] which is why the evaluation is so important.*

There was also a fusion of voluntary and statutory sector cultures (4.2), as indicated above regarding quick decision making. NHSVS employees enjoyed the flexibility of the CIC, while CIC staff valued

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input from statutory mental health workers, particularly when supporting trainees through episodes of acute distress:

> Sue: *We can make quick decisions. But actually sometimes we need the stability of somebody behind us, and Bill was that […] a very grounded professional that I can check with […] We are very creative but sometimes you need a secure base.*

Good horticultural industry connections (4.3) offered external placements in commercial garden centres, creating a culture of progression for trainees towards employment or further training:

> Sue: *This was what we wanted it to be about […] about open employment and not keeping people here for too long. I did feel there was progress once we started getting people into industry placements.*

> Pam (Natureways florist): *And then there was a system of introducing them [to employers] and getting them to actually "go to work" and not "over-supporting" them […] And it worked really well.*

Additionally, a contract landscaping team introduced trainees to off-site working:

> Sue: *It's real work, probably a bit more "real" than here really because you're dealing with customers […] who are paying directly. So, it's not as "safe" as here, but it's "safer" than them going to [a local] Garden Centre on a placement, on their own.*

> Steve (NHSVS vocational specialist): *We take the Natureways ethos with us wherever we're working so we've still got the supportive environment but it is a professional outside job.*

The common ground, noted earlier, between trainee and staff/managers perspectives is depicted in Figure 1 and both viewpoints are crucial to understanding the whole. The staff and managers' perspective represents an analysis of how an effective project was created, whilst the trainees' viewpoint reveals how the project was experienced.

Critique

It is acknowledged that separate workshops for trainees and staff/managers did not allow all stakeholders to share their learning together in person. Ironically, this situation arose from a strong desire to include a trainee "voice" rather than lose it. The inquiry team were advised by Natureways managers that inviting trainees to a workshop with staff and managers could be anxiety-provoking for trainees, possibly discouraging their participation. Separate workshops which would, at least, generate trainee material that could be brought into the mix later, was a pragmatic solution. However, this dilemma highlighted the ethical challenges of AI, where the desire for a flexible inquiry process may be at odds with an ethical scrutiny process requiring assurances and predictability. Here, with a fixed design in place, no scope existed for offering a further workshop to bring all stakeholders together if they had wanted that, unfortunately.

Actionable learning

Several learning points emerged indicating how Natureways had achieved its success:

1. *Effective intersectoral action*: Natureways overcame the barriers often associated with intersectoral collaboration such as disagreement on target population, poor communication, role ambiguities, and conflicting priorities (Lal and Mercier, 2009) and was highly adaptable.
2. *Adaptability to changing commissioning frameworks*: Natureways adapted to the shift from block purchasing (where large-scale contracts are set up to fund longer-term service provision by large projects) to smaller-scale spot-purchasing (or case-by-case purchasing) orientated to individuals' needs.

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3. *Accommodating changing funding methods*: Natureways accommodated the personalisation agenda whereby service users have greater choice and control over their care, using resources provided by the local authority. Personalisation is seen to resonate with third sector ideals and warrant full engagement by such organisations in order to develop it further (Dickinson and Glasby, 2010).
4. *Community embeddedness*: Good horticultural industry connections (and the in-house contract landscaping team) allowed the "Natureways ethos" to be exported off-site. This created a flexible, supportive psychosocial micro-environment further along trainees' progression pathways towards employment. These affirmative environments have been shown to develop mental health service users' confidence to experiment with new roles (Fieldhouse, 2012) as evidenced by the proven effectiveness of the community-based gardening "work crew" (Herron *et al.*, 2009).
5. *Specialisation in work preparation*: This positioned Natureways favourably within local care-planning pathways. The bespoke 1:1 support for trainees moving into open employment mirrored the individual placement and support model that is particularly effective for people with mental health problems (Burns *et al.*, 2007; Browne *et al.*, 2009).
6. *Social inclusion and recovery are linked to work readiness*: Off-site work increased trainees' contact with the general public and also made them economically productive; a key dimension of social inclusion. Employing former service users as staff also modelled inclusive employment to other local businesses:

> Sue: *If we couldn't overcome some of the barriers with our own workers, how could we guide employers or expect them to do the same?*

7. *Work readiness instilled hope*: Hope is "a frequent self-reported component of recovery" (Slade, 2013, p. 9). Additionally, personal recovery is based on a positive self-identity, a sense of meaning and purpose, and personal responsibility (Slade, 2013). Natureways supported trainees in each of these areas.
8. *A business ethos can be "therapeutic"*: Natureways placed an expectation on trainees for marketable cut flowers. This acted as a natural, de-stigmatising spur to team working, which was experienced as part of a nurturing environment. This is significant in the light of early findings that social exclusion was related to staff's low expectations of service users' abilities (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2004).
9. *Horticulture is an effective work preparation medium*: All participants highlighted the restorative impact of Natureways' natural green environment and how this underpinned and meshed with the supportive social milieu. This phenomenon is widely acknowledged within social and therapeutic horticulture literature (see Sempik *et al.*, 2005).

Additionally, the project team learned that AI can add value to service evaluation. In this inquiry, "outsider" (UWE) facilitation brought together hitherto unconnected fragments of "knowing" from across the project team, enabled participants to validate (or otherwise) these new connections, and presented them as parts one whole system. It accessed the collective organisational memory to help Natureways describe itself in action and added value to its employment statistics by developing an understanding of how they had been achieved.

Summary

CICs not only offer a flexible response to an increasingly market-orientated NHS but also encourage practitioners to develop a truly community-orientated paradigm of rehabilitation; one that enables and celebrates a shared role between health and social care professionals and the community they serve. In this context, horticulture appears to be an effective medium for engaging people with mental health problems, developing their skills, and creating pathways for them into employment and/or training.

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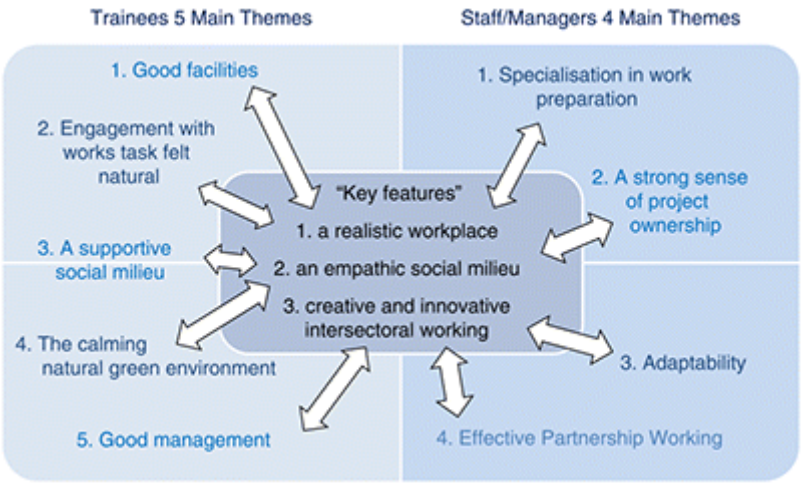

Figure 1 Indicating different perspectives on similar "key features"

Trainee main themes	*Trainee sub-themes*
1. Good facilities	1.1 A comfortable social space for breaks
	1.2 Good tools and resources
	2.1 Work tasks were varied
	2.2 The working day was structured
	2.3 Tasks were graded and paced
2. Engaging with work tasks felt natural	2.4 Skill acquisition felt natural
	2.5 New skills were transferable to daily life
3. A supportive social milieu	3.1 Friendship and peer support
	3.2 Role modelling and empathy
	3.3 A strong team-working ethos
4. The calming natural green environment	4.1 Reduced stress
	4.2 Raised mood
5. Good management	5.1 Good interpersonal relations
	5.2 Feeling "known"
	5.3 Good leadership

Table 1 Themes from trainee workshop

Staff/managers main themes	*Staff/managers sub-themes*
1. Specialisation in work preparation	1.1 Accessibility to referrers for work rehab
	1.2 Accessibility to trainees
	1.3 Accessibility to public volunteers
2. A strong sense of project ownership	2.1 An empathic therapeutic milieu
	2.2 High quality CPA reviews
3. Adaptability	3.1 Swift executive decision-making
	3.2 Working creatively
4. Effective partnership working	4.1 A fusion of "therapy" and "business" ideologies
	4.2 A fusion of voluntary/statutory sector cultures
	4.3 Good horticultural industry connections

Table 2 Themes from staff/managers workshops

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Participants in staff workshops

- Sam – Natureways employee (horticulturalist and trainee support role).
- Bill – NHSVS Manager.
- Sue – Natureways Manager.
- Amy – NHSVS Vocational Specialist.
- Pam – Natureways employee (commercial florist).
- Steve – NHSVS Vocational Specialist.
- Andrea – NHSVS Occupational Therapist.
- Catherine – Natureways employee (horticulturalist and floristry assistant).
- Duncan – NHSVS Vocational Specialist.
- David – Natureways employee.
- Jane – Primary Care Trust Joint Commissioning Manager (Mental Health).
- Brian – Natureways employee (horticulturalist).
- Claire – Natureways employee (horticultural support worker).

Box 1 Participants in staff workshops

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Further reading

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