

Grow Along With Us – K's Story

K has been supported through Participatory Budgeting funding and our Grow Along With Us (GAWU) programme for the past three years, developing her skills and confidence to grow food at home.

In previous years, we supported K with containers, compost, seeds, seed potatoes and onion sets. K is a regular Village Larder customer and a lone parent who works hard to provide healthy food for her family on a low budget.

This year, K chose two smaller raised-bed units along with compost and seeds. Having these provided through GAWU meant that she could free up some of the money she had put aside for gardening. Combining this with birthday money, she was able to buy herself a small greenhouse.

Since then, she has been in full growing swing.

K regularly engages with our GAWU WhatsApp group, "Your Gardens", sharing photos and videos of what she is growing and harvesting, asking for advice when she is unsure about something, and offering encouragement to others. Some of our favourite updates have been the plates of meals she has prepared using food grown in her own garden.

It has been a joy to follow K's progress over the three years. She has gone from needing the basic materials and support to get growing to now producing a significant amount of her own vegetables. She tells us that much of the veg her family eats now comes either from her own garden or through the Village Larder, rather than having to buy it.

The benefits have gone well beyond saving money and accessing fresh food.

K lives with complex health issues, which also affect her mental wellbeing. She has told us on many occasions that growing food gives her an escape from that stress. Even when she has been poorly, she often finds herself going outside and doing whatever gardening she feels able to manage that day. Her garden has become something positive she can return to at her own pace.

Another unexpected and particularly lovely outcome has been the friendship that has developed between K and T, another lone parent who regularly takes part in GAWU and the "Your Gardens" group.

They now swap seeds, plants and produce and help each other make the best use of the resources they have. Because K has a greenhouse and T does not, K can start some plants off for T. They also discuss which of their two gardens has the best conditions for particular crops, decide where to grow them, and then share the resulting produce between their households.

One of the things we particularly valued about this year's GAWU project was changing the way support was offered. In previous years, we selected the growing items that we thought people would need. This year, participants were instead given the opportunity to choose the things that would be most useful to them and their own growing spaces.

This reflects the approach we take within our Village Larder: people are best placed to know what they and their families need. Rather than prescribing support, we want people to have genuine choice and control over how they use it. We found that this approach gave participants greater ownership of their growing projects and supported confidence and dignity. It also meant that the funding could respond to very different gardens, circumstances and levels of growing experience rather than offering everyone the same solution.

K's experience is a great example of why this worked. Her choices complemented what she already had and what she was able to contribute herself, enabling her not only to expand her growing space but ultimately to invest in a greenhouse and take her food growing much further.

What began as providing people with some compost, seeds and somewhere to grow has developed into something much bigger: people gaining skills and confidence, growing affordable healthy food for their families, supporting one another, sharing resources and building friendships around food growing.

This is exactly what we hoped Grow Along With Us would achieve.

Many of the photographs and videos submitted alongside this feedback are from K's garden and show the progression she has made through her involvement with the programme.