

RESIDENTS WHO CARE ASSOCIATION A Local Community Perspective

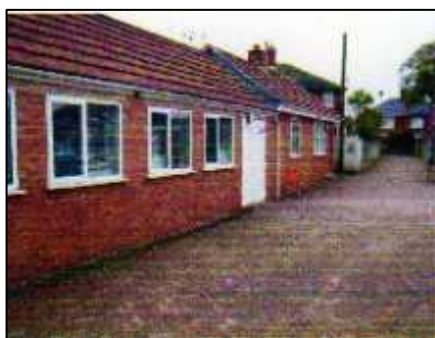


The 'Residents Who Care Association' (RWCA) covers 385 households in the Lightwood / Meir area of Stoke-on-Trent, bounded by the A520 – Sandon Road; Queensmead Road; Ridge Walk and Gravelly Bank. The Association was formed in 1998 by members of the local community, 10 of whom underwent Play Leader training with the City Council's Leisure & Cultural Services, using this qualification to escort children from the estate to a local play area; organise outdoor activities for them in the evenings, and holiday play schemes at a local church during the school summer holidays.

The Association was formally recognised by Stoke-on-Trent City Council in 1999, when its scope was extended to involve the whole community, with activities for the elderly residents, such as flower arranging, and dough-craft.

In the centre of the estate, there was a disused City Council depot, which local children / young people identified could make a good play area. They approached the City Council about this, but at the time, the City Council had its own plans for the site. Undeterred, the children / young people gathered signatures of support to get the Council to reconsider their request, and as the site was central and land-locked by houses, the RWCA Committee proposed that instead of a play area, it be converted into a community area, including facilities for the children / young people to enjoy under adult supervision.

By March 2007, the Association had enough funding to start the restoration work on the site, and by August 2007 the doors had opened to the community. Since it opened, 'The Yard', as it is known, has grown tremendously in popularity, to the extent that the Association now need to have an extension on their kitchen block to accommodate the people using it. This will also provide the additional space to provide further activities in the future.



A regular programme of activities is available to a wide spectrum of the local community, and the Association is always looking to provide other programmes to meet local needs and requests.

Already an established community hub, 'The Yard' has available space between the buttresses of the boundary wall to accommodate the construction of raised beds for community food growing. It also has the training space to run a support / education group, to teach and mentor local people in the practicalities and benefits of 'Growing Your Own at Home'.

Association Chairperson, Debbie Wheeldon would be keen to add a 'Growing Your Own at Home' programme to the range of activities 'The Yard' offers the local community. She said *"This type of initiative fits extremely well with what we are trying to achieve here. It would give us the opportunity to develop an inclusive cross-generational programme to engage families, and help them think positively about and develop healthier lifestyles. We already have a 'Happy People's Club' operating here, which is encouraging people to slim, exercise and get fitter, so this would be an ideal and logical progression."*

She added *"In the past, we have tried growing a few things in small containers, which generated a good level of interest from the local children, but we were limited in what we could do by available resources. We have volunteers who already have an interest and expertise in growing, and it would link in nicely with what the children are doing at school these days."*

Getting people interested in the concept of 'Grow Your Own at Home' could be as simple as providing households with a 'Starter Kit', comprising of a seed propagator; some potting compost; plastic plant pots or a grow bag; a variety of easy to grow, high yield crops – e.g. beans; tomatoes; peas, and some hand tools to aid planting out.



Add to this, access to some regular support / advice from a group established at the community hub, and perhaps the use of a rotavator to create viable vegetable plots from bits of their gardens people don't currently use, hired by the Association for a 'Grow Your Own at Home' preparation day event, and you have a relatively low cost, but potentially effective intervention.

Raised beds could also be created at 'The Yard', to enable fruit and vegetables to be grown for distribution to the more vulnerable people in the community. These could also become a focus for developing a 'Community Garden' facility, allowing people with disabilities and other isolated individuals to benefit from the participation and social interaction such a project can offer.

Regular events, such as Harvest Festivals or Shows, to enable people to exhibit and share the produce they have grown, could provide focal points in the year to engage even more people in the programme.

Debbie summed up the potential of the initiative when she commented *"I think the key to being successful with a programme like this is to get the widest possible 'buy-in' from the community. The best way to achieve this is through community organisations that are recognised and trusted by the local community. The RWCA is lucky in having 'The Yard' as a great facility to work from, combined with over 12 years experience of working within our local community. We know the types of things that are likely to capture people's interest, and we also know that good news travels fast in such a close community. The recession has made people think a lot more about their cost of living these days, so perhaps now is the ideal time to persuade people that 'Growing Your Own at Home' makes economic sense, as well as being a healthier choice?"*