Our Story

Sowing the seeds

The seeds of The Comfrey Project were sown in 2001, at Moorside Allotments in the West End of Newcastle. During our first summer, we worked as a pilot project with six refugees and asylum seekers who were referred through GPs, housing associations and the West End Refugee Service.

In 2002, The Comfrey Project became a registered charity, with five trustees to help guide our growth.





Putting down roots

In 2005, as The Comfrey Project began to work with larger numbers of people, we acquired two new allotment sites – one in Felling, Gateshead, and one in Walkergate in Newcastle becoming almost entirely volunteer-run and provided a progression route for those ready to use their gardening skills more independently.

In 2007 then-Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, included The Comfrey Project in his book, *Britain's Everyday Heroes: The Making of the Good Society*, and in 2009 The Guardian newspaper named us as its Charity of the Year.

In 2015 we moved to the Windmill Hills Centre in Bensham, Gateshead. From 2016, we had 21,000 square feet of land under cultivation on our three sites: Windmill Hills, Moorside and Whinneyfield allotments.

Cultivating our offer

In 2016 we welcomed thousands of new residents to our Windmill Hills site in the form of a swarm of bees, and we worked with a local contractor to excavate a pond, which became a haven for wildlife.

The Windmill Hills site has been transformed into a bustling urban garden, complete with a polytunnel, bee garden, pond, wildflower meadow, herb garden, bird habitat, and a workshop for woodworking.

And a new partnership with Freedom from Torture meant that, from 2017, we could offer more intensive support to refugees and asylum seekers who are survivors of torture.







Branching out

In late 2017 we had a break in service to review our strategy and staffing, making sure that The Comfrey Project would be equipped to take on ever-changing challenges. Following this strategic review, we registered as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) in 2018.

We soon resumed activity and from early 2018 The Comfrey Project continued to grow. Since having our own indoor space at Windmill Hills, we were able to increase the range of support on offer to include language classes, training courses, women-only sessions, family programmes, and a creative drop-in for the whole community, the Culture Hub.

Growing

In recent years The Comfrey Project and the community we serve have been impacted significantly by the COVID pandemic and the cost of living crisis as well as an increasingly hostile environment and narrative in the media, the community and in national policy.

Those challenges have led to a restructure in our team and service so that we can more adequately respond to the changing and increasingly acute needs of our community.

At the same time, we took the decision to close our operations at Moorside and Whinneyfield Allotments in order to deal with the increasing financial pressures, and in order to focus our attention on a more sophisticated service which puts more emphasis on addressing individual needs and on progression opportunities for our volunteers.

Focusing our efforts in this way allows us to take advantage of some of the opportunities from having embedded ourselves in the community of Gateshead for the past ten years, including important and exciting partnerships and working towards securing a long-term Community Asset Transfer of the Windmill Hills centre and garden.



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