

From the Ground Up: Horticulture and Occupational Therapy in Mental Health



Josh Jones - Regional Lead Occupational Therapist & Head of Occupational Therapy - Cygnet Hospital Kewstoke
Maria Harris - Head of Occupational Therapy - Cygnet Hospital Taunton

Introduction

Research supports **Horticultural Therapy (HT)** as an effective intervention in mental health settings. Joubert et al. (2024)¹ conducted a randomised controlled trial that demonstrated **significant reductions in anxiety**, as measured by the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS), observed pre-, during, and post-intervention. Lu et al. (2021)² conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of 23 studies, confirming HT's ability to reduce anxiety, depression, stress, and symptoms such as hallucinations and delusions in adults with schizophrenia. Participants reported that **engaging with nature fostered positive emotions and supported emotional regulation**. Additionally, Pieters et al. (2018)³ identified natural environments as **calming, reflective spaces that help distract from negative thoughts and promote grounding**.

This project summarises the work carried out across two Cygnet hospitals in the South West. One involved transforming an overgrown, unused green space within **Cygnet Hospital Kewstoke** into an outdoor hub for horticulture-based therapy, promoting access to nature and outdoor occupations. Service users and staff co-produced a large-scale renovation to create a therapeutic environment supporting recovery and well-being through nature-based interventions.

The other, based at **Cygnet Taunton**, includes the development of the extensive grounds to allow for therapy space beyond a traditional clinical setting, from the creation of an on-site allotment, to spaces that connect the woods, to on-site woodwork workshops. Both projects highlight the impact of nature based and horticulture approaches in Occupational Therapy (OT), within an inpatient mental health setting.

Objective/Aims

This is a preliminary exploration into the **impact of nature based/horticulture sessions delivered as part of a co-produced Occupational Therapy programme** in an inpatient mental health setting:

- Measure engagement through attendance data
- Capture patient experience through feedback
- Use findings to demonstrate need, justify resources and inform future outcome measures.

Methodology

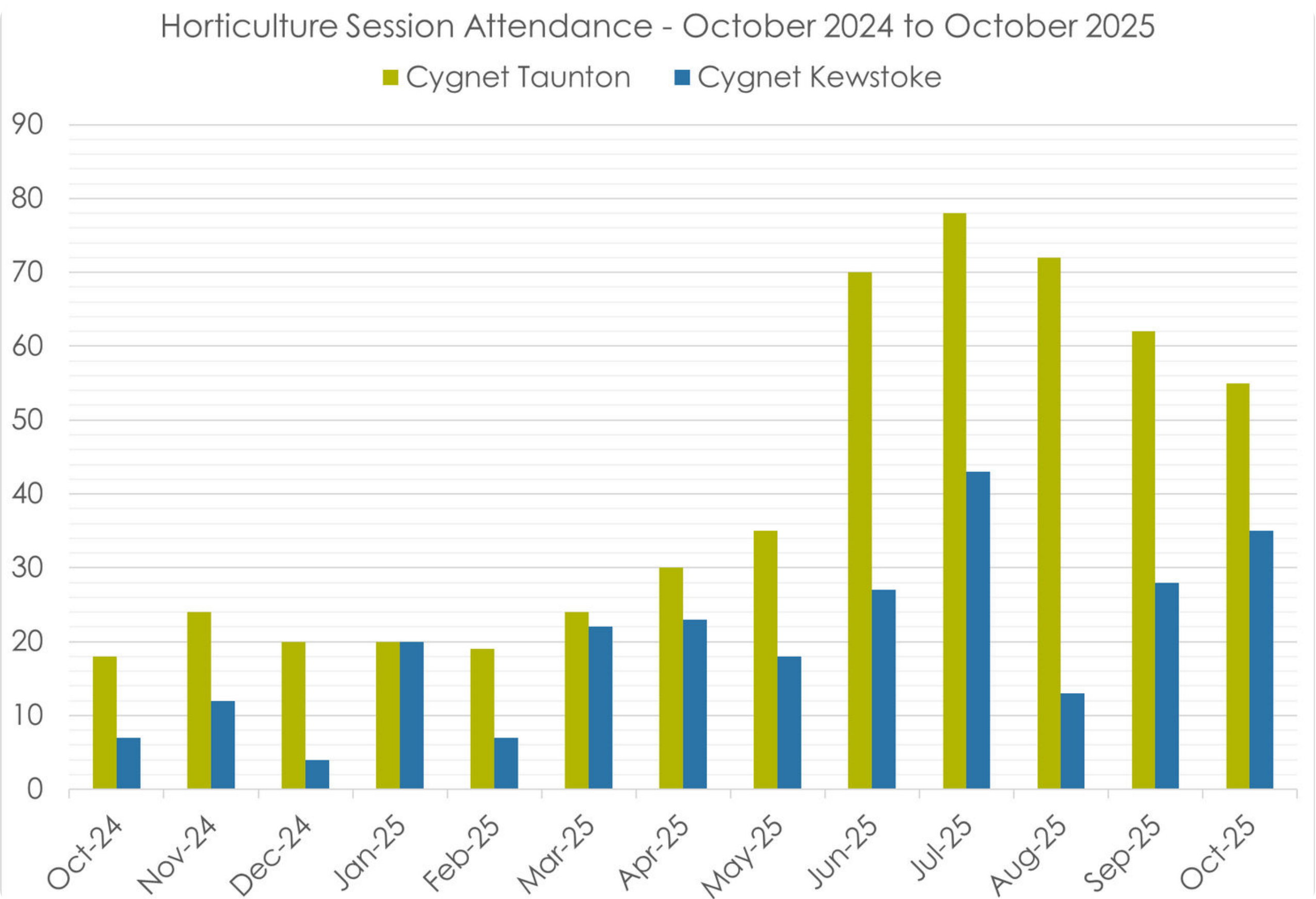
The approach used was mixed method, using both quantitative and qualitative data. The data was collected from both hospitals involved in the project, over a 12 month period. The client group included both female and male patients who were receiving treatment in an inpatient setting, across a range of acute, PICU, personality disorder, rehabilitation and learning disability wards. The horticulture sessions were offered as part of a structured Occupational Therapy programme and offered on both 1:1 and group basis at both sites.

Session attendance was monitored using a basic recording system after each session. Qualitative feedback was also obtained via therapy feedback forms offered throughout the admission. These forms incorporated both quantitative rating scales of therapy provision and open-ended items that allowed patients to provide detailed comments on their experience. Clinical observations by session facilitators also supported with the corroboration of data collected.



Analysis/Results

The quantitative data shows a gradual increase in the engagement and attendance to HT sessions across both sites, with an increase also noted over the warmer months of the year. Patient feedback suggests that engaging in nature based occupations has given them the chance to try something new and potentially discover a new sense of purpose. Through clinical observation, OT teams witnessed first hand how the co-developed spaces provided calming, grounding and relaxing input whilst also offering a vital space for connection and social participation.



Being in these outdoor spaces has been good for me socially, I haven't felt this relaxed for a while - Service User, Cygnet Hospital Kewstoke

I never thought I would be able to do this in 30 years of being in and out of hospital, it has given me opportunities, empowered me to try other things and freedom - Service User, Cygnet Hospital Taunton

Spending time at "the farm" improved my mental health and I now i know how therapeutic spaces like this can be - Service User, Cygnet Hospital Kewstoke

Conclusion/Future Steps

This preliminary review has given the OT teams and wider inpatient mental health teams, the opportunity to explore and support therapeutic engagement beyond the walls of a traditional clinical setting, displaying the value of co-production and least restrictive environments as well as an insight into the potential impact of HT and nature based OT interventions. In the next steps of these projects, we aim to continue to see these spaces thrive and grow, *from the ground up*, and hope to explore the use of standardised outcome measures to measure impact on well-being and recovery whilst continuing to promote HT and green care initiatives as a vital therapeutic approach.

We would like to thank the Occupational Therapy teams at Cygnet Kewstoke and Cygnet Taunton for their continued support and enthusiasm for these projects. Special thanks to Matthew Austin for his contributions during placement, Joshua Tapp for consistently advocating and backing project ideas, Nigel Cox for helping us navigate the terrain, Dr. Sharon Collins for planting the seed of the project, and to the service users and volunteers who have nurtured these spaces and supported their growth.

References

- (1) Joubert, A., Jankowski-Cherrier, B, Rossie, A., Teyssier, L, Suraud, V., Presle, E., Pommier, R., Mssoubre, C and Verot, E. (2024) Impact of horticultural therapy on patients admitted to psychiatric wards, a randomised, controlled and open trial, scientific reports, 14 (14378)
- (2) Lu, Zhao, Y., Liu, K., Xu, F., Wang, Z. (2021) Effectiveness of Horticultural Therapy in People with Schizophrenia: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis.
- (3) Pieters, H. C., Ayala, L., Schneider, A., Wicks, N., Levine-Dickman, A., & Clinton, S. (2018). Gardening on a psychiatric inpatient unit: Cultivating recovery. Archives of Psychiatric Nursing.

Acknowledgements

Digital Version

