



Community is important to Joy*. Having spent 18 years as a nurse before retiring due to ill health from the debilitating condition, fibromyalgia, Joy has always enjoyed making a difference.

Now she is a committed participant in local charity, the Surrey Care Trust's Gateway Community Allotment project.

The project, which is funded by the European Social Fund and the National Lottery Community Fund, aims to help anyone at risk of isolation and the long-term unemployed to make positive changes by developing practical skills and to benefit from the therapeutic benefits of gardening.

Joy was referred to the project by a job advisor at the job centre, where she is also learning how to use a computer, to broaden her skills.

As the project has been designed to accommodate people of all ages and abilities, Joy feels she has something to contribute no matter how well she is feeling. Joy says: "I like to get involved with everything but it depends on my pain levels. I can push myself physically more here because I am enjoying it – I find I can almost push the pain to the back of my mind but I still need to be careful not to get carried away and over do it!"

As improving confidence, skills and self-esteem are key to enabling people to develop and progress into training, education or employment, clients are encouraged to take the lead and make suggestions. But the project also enables people to feel comfortable to do as much or as little as they choose during sessions - just being present in a safe outdoor space can have a profound effect on an individual's mental health.

Joy adds: "Because of my condition, I would just stay at home most days but working on the allotment has lifted me up. We're all like family now and mentally, for me, that really helps. I also think of the allotment as a job now so Tuesdays feel like a work day for me – I'm getting into a routine. This what I love doing – I am learning so many different things and I'm really glad to be involved with my community. I'm so happy to have been a part of it from the beginning and able to see our allotment grow."

*Name has been changed

