

ASTH Practitioner Competencies

These competencies outline the skills and abilities that Social and Therapeutic Horticulture (STH) Practitioners need in order to fulfil their responsibilities safely and effectively, in line with the ASTH Practice Standards and Code of Ethics.

This document is intended to guide registrants in their personal and professional development and practice, and to support the ASTH to make decisions about suitability of prospective registrants. In order to be registered, STH practitioners will need to demonstrate they meet these competencies through one of the routes to registration.

An STH practitioner is a trained professional who engages with people using plants, activities centred on horticulture and nature connection to enable people to improve their physical health, mental health and wellbeing. Practitioners seek to bring about a tangible or experiential benefit for each client in response to their defined need(s) and goal(s), taking a holistic and person-centred approach.

Practitioners bring about benefits through three key processes, facilitating time:

- in nature,
- in meaningful activity, and
- in a positive social environment

The highlighted words are key terms and are defined at the end of the document.

At the point of registration and throughout practice, Social and Therapeutic Horticulture practitioners must have the knowledge and skills described below and be able to apply these in their practice.

1. Use appropriate horticulture knowledge to practise STH:
 - a. Develop and manage garden areas/plants to support the therapeutic programme(s) enabling both the passive (experiential) and active (interactive) benefits.
 - b. Plan and manage resources to ensure the garden/plants can support the therapeutic programme(s).
 - c. Maintain up to date horticultural knowledge, particularly in relation to outbreaks of pest and disease.
 - d. Identify and mitigate the risks of tools, machinery, chemicals and horticultural resources to health, and the related regulations in line with HSE.
 - e. Understand core horticultural principles and practices, including propagation, maintenance, **maturity**, soil assessment and preparation.
 - f. Gain and maintain knowledge of the relevant horticulture skills needed for the programme(s) being delivered.
 - g. Able to create and maintain therapeutic garden environments that are safe for participants and nature, using environmentally sustainable approaches and avoiding damaging products and techniques where possible.
2. Analyse and assess therapeutic sites to ensure they meet the needs of participants, considering accessibility, safety, and suitability for activities. Provide valuable and effective programmes and contribute to their design and development:
 - a. Enable activity and meaningful occupation.
 - i. Support clients to engage in meaningful occupation
 - ii. Identify, adapt and grade activities

1. to enable access and engagement, and
 2. in line with client needs and outcomes.
- b. Understand co-creation, and how to involve clients and balance the needs and capabilities of the group, in the development of programmes.
 - c. Undertake suitable planning to manage groups of clients and support engagement including appropriate risk assessments to ensure safety.
 - d. Know how to communicate relevant information (e.g. aims, expected outcomes, inclusion criteria) to support informed access and enable clients or their carers to make informed decisions.
 - e. Understand the aims of evaluating STH programme outcomes, be familiar with current commonly used methods of evaluation and contribute to the selection or development of evaluation tools for the programme. Use existing reputable research and evaluation to develop and improve the programme over time.
 - f. Identify and utilise reputable and reliable research findings and apply them to improve the programme over time.
 - g. Understand and implement measures that can promote, enable and maximise independence and agency.
 - h. Identify and mitigate the risk of **overlapping agendas** that may conflict with client needs and outcomes.
 - i. Facilitate and manage overlapping agendas (e.g. client advocacy, environmental, heritage, production) to increase/maximise the value of the programme to the clients.
 - j. Create a programme suited to the characteristics of the client group, in line with the inclusion criteria, identifying how the programme can be optimally inclusive across the target client group.
 - k. Gather evaluation and feedback data in a way that suits client needs and preferences to maximise accuracy and completeness, including constructive criticism to support programme improvement.
3. Provide person-centred sessions that benefit clients:
 - a. Understand the benefits of time spent in meaningful activity, positive social environments, and in nature, and how to incorporate all these elements into the therapeutic process.
 - b. Understand the principles of **Mental Health Personal Recovery** and **Trauma Informed Practice** as they apply to all clients (not solely those referred because of a mental health diagnosis) and how to apply these appropriately.
 - c. Understand how to assess and understand client needs and how to work with clients to identify individual goals.
 - d. Plan seasonally appropriate therapeutic sessions to meet individual needs and desired outcomes of all clients.
 - e. Observe how clients are presenting (behaving/reacting/feeling) at any given session / time, and adapt sessions in response.
 - f. Balance the session appropriately between passive and active engagement, in line with the needs and preferences of clients and the aims of the programme.
 - g. Know when and how to promote independence and agency for all clients.
 - h. Adapt and use appropriate communication strategies to suit the session and clients' needs, taking account of different preferences, needs and learning styles.
 - i. Identify and mitigate any risks arising during the course of a session or programme and be able to deal with issues that arise.
 - j. Identify and understand the requirements of the practice setting and adapt accordingly.
 - k. Ensure clients experience equity within the session and enable inclusion.

- l. Encourage a connection with nature, in meaningful activity and social activity beyond the programme/setting, where appropriate.
4. Connect people to plants, gardens and their ecology:
 - a. Assess clients' affinity for plants/gardens/nature and degree of nature connectedness.
 - b. Enable clients to connect with plants and gardening during the session in line with clients' preferences and affinities. Facilitate continued nature connection beyond the session where appropriate.
5. Manage relationships and maintain a positive social environment:
 - a. Utilise effective and appropriate verbal and non-verbal communication skills, including active listening, when interacting with clients, carers, colleagues, and others.
 - b. Modify our means of communication to address the clients' communication needs and preferences. Where possible remove any barriers to communication.
 - c. Recognize the importance of supporting the communication needs of clients and carers and adapt accordingly e.g. such as facilitating access for an interpreter or support worker.
 - d. Understand how to provide appropriate physical support when required, ensuring safety, dignity, and respect for autonomy. Demonstrate sensitivity to consent, non-verbal communication, and individual comfort when physical contact is needed to assist participation in horticultural activities.
 - e. Safely and effectively conduct appropriate client assessments and monitoring procedures.
 - f. Support clients from initial interest throughout the programme and as they move on from the programme. Identify when and how to flex the approach to meet individual needs.
 - g. Identifying risks and signs of clients becoming dependent on a team member or the organisation and understand how to mitigate.
 - h. Engage with, understand and promote a client's relevant interests, to support participation in the programme.
 - i. Apply understanding of Mental Capacity in the STH context
 - j. Treat individuals with respect, ensuring the protection of their rights, dignity, values, and autonomy. Acknowledging the clients role in the assessment and continuous evaluation of the therapeutic process.
 - k. Risk assess client behaviours that may present a challenge to the service and others present, and how this might impact the session/group.
 - l. Understand how unmet needs can influence client behaviour, the importance of observing behaviours, potential triggers, and how to follow strategies that support, encourage, and reduce the risk of **behaviours that challenge**.
 - m. Recognize the power dynamics of the client- practitioner relationship and understand how to prevent its abuse.
 - n. Respond effectively to the needs of all groups and individuals, understanding that these needs can be affected by differences of any kind.
 - o. Understand group dynamics and roles, and be able to foster a positive social environment to maximise client outcomes.
 - p. Understand and practice principles of **unconditional positive regard**, setting aside personal judgements and accepting clients as they are.
 - q. Understand, where appropriate, how to harness the dynamics within groups (including clients, colleagues/volunteers and support workers) to facilitate learning, involvement and development.
6. Establish and maintain safe practice:

- a. Recognize the importance of maintaining our own safety and the safety of others and be able to communicate safety information.
 - b. Be aware of our own emotional health and emotional responses to clients, to avoid any negative impact on client experience and maintain the therapeutic environment.
 - c. Recognize when our own health or potential triggers may affect our ability to practise safely or effectively, and how to identify the appropriate steps in response.
 - d. Understand how to assess risk to clients of using specific tools and undertaking activities in view of a client's needs, ability and emotional state. Be able to identify suitable activities and tools:
 - i. Considering the value of positive risk taking,
 - ii. Understanding the role of **grading** and how this enables safe engagement, and
 - iii. Recognising that a client's physical and emotional state can change and this may affect what might be safe at a given time.
 - e. Know how to research and select appropriate personal protective equipment (for ourselves and clients) and how to use it correctly.
7. Practise within legal and ethical boundaries:
- a. Understand what is required of us by ASTH including, but not limited to, compliance with ASTH practice standards and code of ethics.
 - b. Recognise the boundaries of our practice, when to seek guidance, and when not to accept a client or refer a client to another professional or service.
 - c. Understand the importance of and our role in safeguarding, being able to identify potential signs of abuse and know how to respond appropriately.
 - d. Understand and comply with relevant legislation, policies, and guidelines.
8. Make reasonable adjustments to enable inclusive access for participants, and know how to provide additional supportive measures when ethically appropriate to enhance therapeutic engagement. Practise professionally, using our own professional judgment:
- a. Engage in evidence-based practice and understand the theories and evidence that underpin STH.
 - i. Collect relevant information, analyse and critically assess it, and adjust our practice as necessary to accommodate new developments and evolving contexts.
 - b. Be able to justify our decisions and actions and make sufficient records of practice decisions, situations and outcomes.
 - c. Identify and address our personal development needs, understand the significance of continuing professional development and plan how to update our skills and knowledge.
 - i. Appreciate the value of engaging in reflective practice to support continuous personal development.
 - ii. Be aware of the practice of **supervision** and understand when and how it might be beneficial to our practice (both for emotional support and professional development).
 - d. Uphold the duty of confidentiality and recognise situations in which disclosure may be necessary.
 - e. Comprehend the principles of privacy and information governance, and be aware of how to use health, social care, and other relevant information safely and effectively.
 - f. Understand the role of health and social care professionals and the need to work with such professionals who provide other services to best meet client needs.

Key terms

- **Behaviours that challenge:** Actions or responses expressed by an individual that may be distressing, disruptive, or difficult for others to manage, and which often reflect unmet needs, communication difficulties, distress, or barriers in the environment. These behaviours may be signals that something is not working for the person and that support, adaptation, or intervention may be required to reduce distress and promote wellbeing.
- **Grading:** The process of adjusting the difficulty, complexity or intensity of an activity to match a client's current abilities and promote skill development or therapeutic progress.
- **Maturation:** the process by which a plant or its parts (such as fruits, seeds, or vegetables) reach full development or become ripe, or by which a garden layout and its plants reach an established state.
- **Mental Health Personal Recovery:** A person-centred, respectful approach. Seen as a transformative process through which individuals enhance their health and wellness, lead self-directed lives, and strive to reach their full potential.
- **Overlapping agenda:** is an aim or policy directed at achieving a positive outcome from the process of STH that is beyond the outcomes of individual health and wellbeing. Such as improved environmental outcomes, improved, food security outcomes or maintenance of heritage. They are called overlapping agendas because in STH the primary outcome remains the health and wellbeing of the client, and competing agendas must harmonise with and/or be subservient to this.
- **Supervision:** A structured process of professional support, reflection, and guidance that promotes staff development, supports the emotional wellbeing of the practitioner, ensures safe and effective practice, and enhances the quality of care provided. Supervision within the therapeutic professions has specialist features that differentiate it from that which might take place in other work contexts not related to therapeutic outcomes.
- **Trauma Informed Practice:** An approach that recognises the prevalence and impact of trauma, prioritises safety, trust, and choice, and seeks to avoid re-traumatisation while promoting empowerment, wellbeing, and positive engagement.
- **Unconditional positive regard:** An attitude of accepting and valuing a person without judgment or conditions, regardless of their behaviour or choices. This attitude is cultivated and applied by practitioners working in many therapeutic fields.

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