

## **Defence Gardens Scheme –Written evidence (NLR0158)**

### **Question Addressed**

*"How were preparedness and resilience achieved in the past, such as during the Second World War, and what are the implications for the current environment?"*

### **1. About the Defence Gardens Scheme**

The Defence Gardens Scheme (DGS) is a Community Interest Company that delivers nature-based therapy (NBT) and therapeutic horticulture programmes for the Armed Forces community across the United Kingdom. Founded following a Churchill Fellowship awarded in 2019 to research nature-based therapeutic approaches for military veterans, DGS has developed over five years into a nationally operating programme with a track record of evidenced delivery.

DGS has delivered Grow Your Own courses at the Eden Project in Cornwall for five consecutive years and is currently delivering Grow Your Own workshops at the Royal Hospital Chelsea — home of the Chelsea Pensioners — with a showcase video of that programme due to be published on the DGS website this week. In April 2026, DGS launched Grow Your Own workshops at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, bringing a further high-profile national partner into the programme and extending delivery into Scotland. DGS is also well established in Northern Ireland. DGS has established partnerships with the Poppy Factory, Royal Hospital Chelsea, the Scottish Government, and a growing number of NHS and voluntary sector organisations. In April 2026, DGS received a grant of £30,000 from Wiltshire County Council's Crisis and Resilience Fund to deliver 24 therapeutic horticulture workshops per year over three years —

direct recognition by a local authority of the scheme's contribution to community resilience.

DGS is currently in dialogue with the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS), who are keen to certificate the DGS Grow Your Own programme. This accreditation will form the foundation training qualification for DGS Growing Champions, ensuring that veterans entering the programme as community leaders do so with a nationally recognised horticultural credential, further strengthening the credibility and replicability of the model.

This submission is made in response to the Committee's specific question about the lessons of the Second World War. We submit that the wartime Growing for Victory campaign offers a directly applicable and largely unexamined model for building societal resilience today — and that DGS Growing Champions, a programme of veteran-led community food-growing leadership currently in development, represents a viable, scalable and immediately replicable mechanism for translating that historical lesson into practical action.

## **2. Growing for Victory: A Model of Integrated Societal Resilience**

The wartime Dig for Victory campaign, launched in 1939 and renamed Growing for Victory in 1941, remains one of the most successful examples of rapidly mobilised societal resilience in British history. At its peak, it had transformed an estimated 1.4 million allotments and millions of private gardens, parks and public spaces into productive food-growing land, contributing materially to national food security at a moment when Atlantic supply chains were under existential threat from the U-boat campaign.

What is often under-appreciated about Growing for Victory is that its success was not primarily logistical. It was social. The campaign achieved

four interlocking outcomes that together constitute a model of integrated resilience:

- **Supply chain resilience:** Food security through distributed production, reducing dangerous dependence on centralised supply chains and long-distance imports.
- **Population health:** Physical and mental wellbeing for a civilian population under sustained psychological strain, through purposeful outdoor activity and connection with the land.
- **Community solidarity:** Social cohesion through shared endeavour. Growing was a collective activity undertaken by neighbours, street communities, workplaces and civic organisations, rebuilding and reinforcing social bonds under pressure.
- **Purpose and agency:** Civic agency. Ordinary people were given a meaningful, practical role in national defence. Growing was framed explicitly as a patriotic contribution. This sense of agency was profoundly important for morale and for trust in government.

The campaign was also, critically, delivered through existing community infrastructure — parks departments, Women’s Institutes, British Legion branches, churches and schools — rather than through new bureaucratic structures. Its reach was multiplied by local champions: knowledgeable, trusted individuals who could demonstrate, encourage and support their neighbours.

### **3. The Relevance to 2026**

The United Kingdom in 2026 faces a convergence of threats that maps with uncomfortable precision onto the vulnerabilities that the Growing for Victory campaign addressed.

### **3.1 Food Supply Chain Fragility**

The UK currently imports approximately 46% of its food. Supply chains that were already exposed to disruption through the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit, and climate-related harvest failures are now additionally threatened by the geopolitical instability across Europe and the Middle East. The conflict in Ukraine has already demonstrated the speed at which global grain supply can be destabilised. A more serious deterioration of the European security environment could expose critical dependencies in a matter of weeks.

The answer cannot be solely industrial or policy based. A resilient food system requires distributed capacity: communities with the knowledge, skills, land and social organisation to supplement centralised supply. The wartime model was built on exactly this insight.

### **3.2 Deteriorating Community Cohesion and Mental Health**

Social isolation, declining civic participation and rising mental ill-health represent structural vulnerabilities in the UK's societal resilience. The evidence from DGS's own programmes is consistent with the wider research literature: engagement with therapeutic horticulture and community growing reduces social isolation, improves mental health outcomes, builds purposeful social networks and increases participants' sense of agency and belonging. These are precisely the social foundations that sustained civilian morale during the Second World War.

### **3.3 The Veteran Asset**

The United Kingdom has a veteran community of approximately 2.1 million people. This community is a significant, systematically under-utilised national asset. Veterans bring leadership capability, a culture of service, and practical skills in logistics, planning and working effectively under pressure. They are present in every region of the country. They

are, in short, the natural successors to the local champions who made Growing for Victory work.

DGS's experience over five years of delivering therapeutic horticulture programmes for veterans demonstrates that engagement with growing can be genuinely transformative for veterans themselves — addressing isolation, providing purpose, and building new professional skills and networks. The DGS Growing Champions programme proposes to take this further: to train veterans not only as beneficiaries but as community leaders in growing and food resilience, replicating the wartime model of the trusted local champion.

#### **4. Alignment with Government Strategy**

The DGS Growing Champions programme has been developed explicitly in response to two major government strategies published since 2025. It is not a proposal in search of a policy home. It is a practical delivery vehicle for commitments the government has already made.

##### **4.1 The Strategic Defence Review (June 2025)**

The Strategic Defence Review, published on 2 June 2025 and led by Lord Robertson, General Sir Richard Barrons, and Dr Fiona Hill, places a whole-of-society approach to national resilience at the heart of its vision. The review calls explicitly for "widening participation in national resilience and renewing the Nation's contract with those who serve." It recognises that effective deterrence and defence require the active engagement of civil society, not merely the strengthening of military capability.

Dr Fiona Hill, one of the three independent Reviewers who led the SDR, gave oral evidence to this Committee on 26 March 2026. Her evidence and the SDR's central argument are directly relevant to this submission: that a resilient nation requires an engaged and purposeful citizenry, and that the Armed Forces community has a particular role to play in building

that engagement. The SDR's vision of defence as "an engine for growth" and its emphasis on breaking down barriers between the Armed Forces and wider society are directly embodied in the Growing Champions model.

#### **4.2 The Veterans Strategy (November 2025)**

The Veterans Strategy, published on 10 November 2025, is built around three core themes: Celebrate, Contribute, and Support. It explicitly reframes veterans as national assets — "whose unique skills strengthen communities, boost the economy and enhance national security" — rather than solely as recipients of welfare. The Strategy's 'Contribute' theme states directly that the government wants "the unique skills, experience and personal values of veterans to be appreciated and understood, including how they contribute to our national security, our economy and our communities."

DGS Growing Champions delivers against all three themes simultaneously. It Supports veterans through the therapeutic and social benefits of growing and purposeful community leadership. It enables veterans to Contribute their skills, discipline, and experience to building community resilience. And it Celebrates their service by giving them a visible, valued and meaningful role in national life that draws directly on what they have given to their country.

DGS is a founder partner of the VALOUR SW Veterans Hub, run by Alabaré in Salisbury. The VALOUR Hubs are an Office for Veterans Affairs policy initiative launched in March 2026, designed to create integrated local support ecosystems for the veteran community. As a founder partner, DGS is positioned to deliver Grow Your Own programmes through the VALOUR SW consortium over the next three years, providing a direct and immediate delivery mechanism for Growing Champions activity embedded within a government-backed veterans infrastructure. This partnership is a practical demonstration of how the Veterans Strategy's

three themes can be brought to life at a local level — and a model that could be replicated through VALOUR Hubs as they are established across the country.

The SDR and Veterans Strategy together represent a clear government intent to harness the veteran community as an active contributor to national resilience. Growing Champions is one of the most direct and practical ways that intent can be realised. DGS respectfully invites the Committee to note this alignment in its report.

## **5. The DGS Growing Champions Programme**

DGS Growing Champions is a programme currently in development, subject to funding, that would train cohorts of veterans to become community-based food-growing leaders. Drawing on DGS's established five-year curriculum at Eden and its national network of delivery partnerships, the programme would:

- Provide veterans with structured training in growing skills, community leadership, and programme facilitation.
- Deploy Growing Champions into communities across the UK as trusted, accessible leaders in local food growing and resilience.
- Create a network of locally rooted, nationally connected food-growing hubs in schools, community gardens, veteran support organisations, and public spaces.
- Build practical community food resilience skills in populations currently without them, with particular focus on areas of economic deprivation and social isolation.
- Deliver measurable mental health and wellbeing benefits to veterans engaged as Growing Champions, consistent with DGS's evidence base.

## **Proof of concept: Already delivering at scale**

*DGS has delivered Grow Your Own courses at the Eden Project for five consecutive years, is currently running workshops at the Royal Hospital Chelsea — with a showcase video publishing this week — and launched at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh in April 2026. DGS is also well established in Northern Ireland. The Wiltshire County Council Crisis and Resilience Fund grant of £30,000 (April 2026) funds 24 community workshops annually for three years, explicitly recognising DGS's contribution to local resilience. DGS is in active dialogue with the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) to certificate the Grow Your Own programme as the foundation qualification for Growing Champions. The model is proven, credentialled, replicable and ready to scale nationally with appropriate investment.*

The programme is designed to be replicable and scalable. The Eden partnership demonstrates a proven curriculum and delivery model. The Wiltshire grant demonstrates local authority recognition of the programme's resilience value. The national DGS network of delivery partnerships provides an infrastructure through which trained Growing Champions could be rapidly deployed across the country.

## **6. Recommendations to the Committee**

DGS respectfully asks the Committee to consider the following recommendations:

### **Recommendation 1: Recognise veteran-led community growing as a national resilience asset**

The Committee should explicitly recognise therapeutic horticulture and community food growing, led by trained veterans, as a component of the

UK's national resilience architecture. This is not a welfare programme. It is a resilience investment with evidenced returns in food security, mental health, social cohesion and civic agency.

### **Recommendation 2: Establish a Growing Champions national fund**

The Committee should recommend that government, working with the voluntary and charitable sector, establish a dedicated national fund to develop and deploy veteran Growing Champions across the UK. Based on an indicative budget developed by DGS, a three-year programme operating across the 14 VALOUR round-one hubs — delivering two to three 10-week cohorts of 10 veterans per hub per year, training up to 1,050 Growing Champions in total — would require approximately £700,000. This covers programme management, RHS-accredited training delivery, graduate fleeces, a national online learning platform for peer support and continuing development, travel and coordination, impact evaluation, and a 10% organisational overhead. The cost per graduate is approximately £670 all-in, rising to around £2.5–3 million if the programme is extended to the full national VALOUR network as further hubs are confirmed through the VALOUR 2 funding round anticipated in spring 2026 — representing an exceptionally strong return on investment against the resilience, health and community outcomes generated.

### **Recommendation 3: Embed community growing in the National Resilience Framework**

The Committee should recommend that the revised National Resilience Framework explicitly include community food growing capacity as a metric of local resilience, alongside existing indicators for emergency services, communications and supply chain. Local Resilience Forums should be required to assess and report on community growing capacity in their areas.

#### **Recommendation 4: Draw on the wartime model for public communication**

The Committee should recommend that the government consider a modern Growing for Victory communications campaign — publicly accessible, positively framed, and anchored in practical action. The wartime campaign was successful in part because it gave the public something meaningful to do. The evidence from DGS and the wider therapeutic horticulture sector suggests that the same instinct remains latent and ready to be activated.

#### **7. Conclusion**

The Second World War demonstrated that societal resilience is not built primarily through government planning or military capacity, important as both are. It is built through the active, purposeful engagement of communities, led by trusted individuals with the knowledge and authority to help their neighbours prepare and act.

The Growing for Victory campaign mobilised millions of people around a practical, positive contribution to national security. Veterans trained as DGS Growing Champions offer a direct contemporary equivalent: trusted, skilled community leaders who can build food security, social cohesion and civic agency in their communities, drawing on their own experience of service and the DGS's proven curriculum.

The model is not theoretical. It is already operating. It is ready to scale. We respectfully invite the Committee to consider how this approach might be supported and amplified as part of the UK's national resilience architecture.

*27 April 2026*