

Windmill Hill City Farm

Providing volunteering opportunities to improve the wellbeing of people with additional needs



Context

Windmill Hill City Farm was set up in the 1970s and is an important community hub in south Bristol. In addition to a community farm, it has a café, day care nursery and outdoor play areas, and an education department to welcome school visits.

The organisation has around 100 paid staff, but this reduced to 13 over the summer of 2020, with many on furlough. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, they were supported by 60 regular volunteers. All volunteering was suspended in the first lockdown. This was due to some of the farm's services being closed during periods of lockdown, fewer volunteers being able to participate when restrictions were eased because of social distancing requirements, and some volunteers having to shield.

Challenge

The farm requires a lot of people power to maintain the site and volunteers are critical to this. The farm has developed two engagement pathways for volunteers. One group is recruited to assist service delivery and the other focuses on volunteers who may need extra support. The latter includes both people with learning difficulties and those suffering from poor mental health. The group is assisted with tasks in animal care, gardening or site maintenance.

Action

Regarding the supported volunteering opportunities, in non-lockdown times the farm runs specific wellbeing volunteering sessions for a couple of hours a day during the week. These are facilitated by a member of staff and supported by more experienced volunteers. The farm works with local organisations to identify people who might benefit from their sessions, which focus on relatively uncomplicated tasks delivered in a structured way.

These can include a tutorial about how to carry out the task and an explanation of its purpose and value.

“The eight-week garden placement was amazing because it was really structured, they give us a timetable of week one it would be learning how to use a garden mower, doing a bit of weeding, then we did another week on building a raised garden bed. There was another week on harvesting fruit and veg, [for example] weighing it, what they do with the veg once it's all been harvested and weighed and logged. Another week we went down to a garden centre, and we did a tour with the manager there to see whether it was something that people were interested in with regards to future employment.”

Volunteer

During the national lockdowns, when the wellbeing volunteering sessions were not available, the farm continued to support its volunteers.

“... We are continuing to support our volunteers as best we can, we're keeping in touch with them ... that's mainly done electronically via a weekly email. And we've updated our website to have a section of support and help, as well as wellbeing suggestions ...”

Community business representative

Result

The wellbeing volunteering sessions not only ensure that the farm is maintained, and its animals looked after, but that participating volunteers with additional needs benefit from interacting with other people, connecting with nature and learning new skills.

“All volunteering has that dual purpose of helping the organisation and helping the volunteer in some way ... But those [wellbeing] sessions are much more focused on the individual's benefit ...”

Community business representative

One volunteer's journey demonstrates how participating in the farm's wellbeing sessions improved their mental health to such an extent that they now support other volunteers who require additional assistance.

“I started at the farm back in September 2019. That was through recovery from my own personal mental health difficulties. I was in contact with Bristol Mental Health Employment Service fortnightly and they [recommended] for me to do an eight-week garden placement at the farm. And from doing that I really wanted to give something back to the farm, still in the volunteering capacity. So, I then applied to do the volunteering on a regular basis [helping with a support group for people with disabilities], so I've been doing that since September [2020].”

Volunteer

The increase in confidence and development of new skills which volunteers gain from the wellbeing sessions can help them return to education and change their career trajectory.

“It's giving me a stepping-stone to build that confidence to go back into education myself. [If I hadn't] done the eight-week garden placement and had the practical opportunities to build on my skills and my development, I doubt that I would have had the confidence to then go on and apply for the RHS [Royal Horticultural Society] Level 2 course.”

Volunteer