

Chestnut Nursery and the Five Ways to Well-being – a Case Study

Chestnut Nursery aims to improve mental well-being through the healing nature of horticulture. Chestnut is a project of the registered charity Sheltered Work Opportunities Project (SWOP). Based in the centre of Poole, it provides voluntary work for adults with severe and enduring mental illness. In 2015, 68 volunteers with severe and enduring mental health conditions attended the nursery, 12 of them new to the project.

Volunteers can work in all aspects of the nursery, including seed sowing, potting plants, serving customers in the shop, carpentry and construction work, as well as office and computer work. Chestnut works hard to establish links and gain support within the local community. They hope that by forging new relationships within the community and creating more awareness regarding mental health issues they will help in some way to dispel the stigma attached to mental illness. They also hope to encourage new customers and supporters and to raise the profile of the nursery.

The nursery asks its volunteers to fill out an evaluation form once a year. This gives staff a valuable insight into how people are progressing and gives them some measure of volunteers' well-being. The most recent survey provides positive results around each of the five ways (see below) and shows that 98% reported an improvement in their confidence and how in control/influential they felt. New volunteers to the project are introduced gradually, having been referred by a health professional or mental health worker. They can also self-refer. They are all people who have had a mental health diagnosis. They first arrive at the nursery for a taster day, often having been very ill and very socially isolated. There follows a four-week trial period before full registration to the team. The well-being of the volunteers is nurtured and developed as they work on nurturing and growing the plants and the nursery business: "Caring for people, caring for plants." The whole experience can be documented and framed using the Five Ways to Well-being.



Connecting People



The connection begins with the gradual induction into the nursery. New volunteers are welcomed first into the small group of fellow volunteers, Friends of the Nursery and staff that they will be working with. Gradually they start to make friends, sometimes encouraged through an informal buddying process set up by the staff. They have a chance to get to know more of the volunteer team through the social events organised. When comfortable they are able to work in a customer facing position in the nursery. Volunteers are also encouraged to take a step further and work in the wider

community supporting nursery sales at community events for example school fairs and events at Upton Country Park. The nursery team go out and talk to various community groups and volunteers attend and explain to the audiences what the nursery means to them. In 2016, the nursery's

evaluation report highlighted that 67% of volunteers report diminished feelings of social isolation since attending the nursery.

Being Active

The nursery provides a place to go for volunteers. In the early days of their work, for some, the very act of leaving home and making the journey to Chestnut is a big step. Both the retail and the horticultural work provide a sense of purpose for the volunteers and the chance to be very active. Each volunteer attends at least once a week, up to a maximum of four days. The gardening and retail roles are physically demanding and require considerable effort. Digging beds, weeding, hoeing and moving stock develop physical fitness and mental activity and thinking skills are required to help run the business and to forge relationships with the rest of the team. Social activities provide a different chance to be active; a trip from Poole Quay, fact finding expeditions to other garden centres and visits to the Sea Life Centre. The nursery's 2016 survey shows 72% of volunteers felt that their physical health had improved since joining Chestnut.



Keep Learning

Volunteers can learn all aspects of horticulture and the nursery retail business. They do not necessarily have an interest in plants when they join, but have plenty of opportunities to acquire new skills, from propagating and nurturing seedlings to pruning, pest control and weeding. There is carpentry, construction and office and administration roles to learn. They develop their thinking skills as they plan and discuss how to undertake tasks

including fundraising and gain retail skills such as visual merchandising, labelling and dealing with customers' queries. Through the support of the team and peers, they also develop the skills to re-integrate into society: Key life skills such as communication, consideration, sharing and empathy. With time, volunteers begin to broaden their horizons, getting involved in other projects in the community. At this point, they may reduce the time that they want to spend at Chestnut and in 2015, 14 volunteers moved on from the project. In 2016, 71% of volunteers reported an increase in their skills and/or knowledge since starting at the nursery. They also reported an improvement in motivation, organisation and timekeeping.

Taking Notice

For some volunteers who have been very poorly and isolated, re-socialisation is very important. The staff encourage them to take notice of others and be aware of when people need help, for instance with lifting and carrying, or offering to make cups of tea and share. Management meetings are a time when taking notice of others and what they say is important. Staff have a chance to help volunteers develop these skills through their one to one discussions with them. As volunteers

progress, taking notice plays a significant role in customer service skills; being aware of customers' needs and knowing where products are is important.

The horticultural work promotes an awareness of the natural world and an appreciation of nature. Understanding how the seasons are connected to the cycles of growth and decay is essential knowledge for gardeners. This and an appreciation of the weather and its actions provide the structure for the tasks around the nursery. Careful observation helps maintain and nurture the stock, without this plants would wilt, pests and disease would thrive and business would suffer. The annual volunteer survey reports that 96% of people have increased concentration and 69% reported an improvement in their ability to help others since attending. They also reported an improved willingness to try new things.

Giving

The volunteers (54 altogether) give of their free time to work at Chestnut, working there at least one day per week and up to four days. This is also matched by donations from supporters of Chestnut; only half the costs of the nursery are covered by plant sales, as a result donations and fundraising are very important.

The volunteers also give to each other, in a spirit of peer support and mutual understanding. The volunteers are encouraged to look after fellow team members: "Shall we invite so and so for a cup of coffee?" They bring their own food contributions for the social events, to share with others. The opportunities for conversation over routine tasks is a chance for people to share experiences and support each other, perhaps through difficult times.

The nursery provides fantastic floral displays for Poole Park, improving the environment and bringing volunteers a sense of purpose and achievement and giving smiles to locals and visitors alike. These feelings are reflected in the survey results, 98% of volunteers saying that they feel useful, productive and valued working at Chestnut Nursery.

Bournemouth CVS and Poole CVS are working with Public Health Dorset to support local voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) organisations to deliver better public health outcomes. This project is to help the sector measure and demonstrate the impact their work has on health and wellbeing in their communities. These case studies are designed to highlight the varied and substantial impact VCSE organisations have on the Five Ways to Wellbeing. The Five Ways to Wellbeing is a tool comprising of a set of five, evidence based public health indicators about the kinds of activities that individuals can do that are known to improve their health and wellbeing: Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning and Give.

To learn more about the work of the Bournemouth and Poole VCSE sector please contact Liz Cooper 01202 682046, liz.cooper@poolecvs.org.uk

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