

FOREST OF MERCIA/GROWELL: COMMON CARE PROJECT



Introduction & Location

Common Care is a partnership between the Forest of Mercia, the GrowWell Project and South Staffordshire and Shropshire Healthcare (SSSH).

GrowWell commission volunteering programmes from the Forest of Mercia, encouraging new service users with mental distress issues, through SSSH. The service users will typically work in public open spaces and common areas on tasks that are specifically designed to match their capabilities. They will work, where appropriate, with selected members of the general public who volunteer with the Forest of Mercia.

Objectives:

- Service users will be selected and assessed before joining, have tasks suited to their ability, and have on-site support at all times during their work.
- Volunteers will work to improve access to, and appearance of, Common land and public footpaths.
- People with mental distress will work with members of the public on joint volunteering tasks.
- Service users will work outdoors in a supportive context which is known to have beneficial effects.
- Service users will learn to do conservation work and have the opportunity to move on into GrowWell's main project which is commercially based.
- Create volunteer communities around local open space and footpath amenities.
- Service users directly involved in amenity improvement with local people and gaining social confidence.
- People with mental distress have work opportunities designed to meet their needs and work with members of the public in a supportive context.
- Outdoor work will help improve volunteers' physical and mental health, encourage exercise and reduce dependence on medication.

Actions:

- Develop contacts with community, volunteer and service user groups and individuals.
- Set up a Steering Group, agree its role, clarify partner responsibilities.
- Identify appropriate sites and make contact with local community groups, and take "before" photos.
- Plan and deliver work days.
- Record work done, take "after" photos and review at the Steering Group meeting.
- Collect and collate evidence of project benefits and prepare plan for future funding.

Achievements:

- Successful promotion of the activity among existing register of people with mental distress and other volunteers.
- Assessments undertaken and dates arranged with selected service users.
- Delivery of the work activity ongoing.

GROWING OUR FUTURE

WEST MIDLANDS
FORESTRY FRAMEWORK

Background:

Since March 1996, GrowWell has offered voluntary horticultural work opportunities to people with long term mental distress. The work is done for customers whom are charged on a contract basis. The income from this work is used to cover operating costs.

There are very few opportunities in this area for people with mental distress to do outdoor work in a supportive environment. Such work is known to have direct therapeutic benefits, as well as improving general health and well-being. Working to improve public amenity also increases a sense of personal worth, which is often lacking in our target group. The locality has a number of key natural and historic sites and lies at the heart of the Forest of Mercia.

The Work Experience Officer in the SSSH Mental Health Team helps people to find volunteering opportunities as part of their care plan. Many people ask for outdoor work, but there are few appropriately supported opportunities in this area. The Forest is responsible for maintaining access to recreational areas and public footpaths and has volunteering opportunities within this. GrowWell has experience of undertaking horticultural work with volunteers who have mental health problems, and can provide transport for volunteers and empathetic support. GrowWell can also offer work experience in a more commercial setting.

Each volunteer/service user is assessed by the NHS's Work Experience and Training Development Officer and briefed about the expectations and content of the project. The service users will be picked up from near their living accommodation and taken to the work site (transport is the biggest single problem for service users of this kind of project). GrowWell's manager is on site throughout the work period, which is organised by a professional from the Forest of Mercia.

Service users benefit from outdoor work and the sense that they are contributing to public amenity. Users of public open spaces and footpaths will benefit from improved access and maintenance of the facility.

The project has four classes of beneficiary: the service users, their families, customers for its contract services, and the communities that use the grounds that are maintained by the project. Service users benefit because they become more active, work together, and become healthier mentally and physically. Therefore, they are less isolated and grow in confidence and self worth.

The longer term aspirations are to develop other projects using a similar model so that we can extend the volunteering opportunities in application and scope. It is envisaged that projects in plant rearing and general gardening, and in more challenging conservation work.

Partners:

- Staffordshire County Council
- Cannock Chase District Council
- Lichfield District Council
- South Staffordshire District Council
- Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council

Funding:

- Forest of Mercia
- Staffordshire County Council
- Lichfield District Council
- Potentially 'Big Lottery Fund's Ecominds'

WMRFF Objectives: Main Theme & Others

- Fostering Social Inclusion: Successful engagement of the local community in woodland management
- Fostering Social Inclusion: Develop a programme of specific initiatives for hard to reach groups
- Health & Wellbeing: Good example of partnership working to achieve benefits for both physical and mental health and wellbeing

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