

**'DEVELOPING WORK EXPERIENCE
PROJECTS FUNDED BY
COMMERCIAL SALES:**

**THE EXPERIENCE OF
CHERRY TREE NURSERY'**



SWOP'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE MIND CONFERENCE

ENTITLED:

**'HORTICULTURAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR
PEOPLE WITH MENTAL
HEALTH PROBLEMS'**

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'DEVELOPING WORK EXPERIENCE PROJECTS FUNDED BY COMMERCIAL SALES: THE EXPERIENCE OF CHERRY TREE NURSERY'

Cherry Tree Nursery was first set up in 1990 on a 2.5-acre site in Northbourne, Bournemouth. This was an old local council Nursery site, which had been closed down and left to nature. The site was overgrown and derelict and the people who had the idea of setting up the project came across it after driving around for several days searching.

Cyril Speller, founder member, would I am sure be surprised and pleased at the result of the project he thought of and started eight years ago. Sadly he died in December 1990 but the project he started has developed way beyond anyone's wildest dreams from its meagre beginnings. Flushing toilets were only introduced in 1993 after three years. Before this portaloos were the only toilet facilities available.

Fundraising and grants have enabled portacabins, offices, tearooms, a quiet room, large glasshouse, polytunnels, tool sheds, chemical shed, vehicles, trolleys and tools to be purchased.

Today, eight years later, Cherry Tree Nursery (SWOP) is a thriving nursery selling 70,000 hardy shrubs every year. There are sixty-five volunteers on the register at the moment and we are heading towards our maximum of seventy. On average thirty volunteers attend each day, five days a week, to work at the Nursery, which has now expanded to cover 4.5 acres. We cannot grow any larger as we have reached the boundaries of the land available.

The project is staffed by five fulltime and three part-time members who are kept busy every working minute including tea breaks and lunch times, never a minute's rest!

Our success in producing and selling shrubs has brought with it problems. An increasing number of traders and friends of the project now visit the Nursery. You would think that this would be our aim and that we would be pleased but in fact the volume of people now passing through the Nursery can cause our volunteers stress which is exactly what they have come to the project to escape from! To try to prevent any further stress to our volunteers we have fenced around the plant display area to try to restrict members of the public from wandering all over the site. We have also set up a large information/sales hut sixteen by twelve feet featuring a permanent exhibition showing the work and history of the project, and providing information on mental health issues about which many members of the public are ignorant. This is after all what our project is here for – to help people in their recovery from mental health problems – and to our amazement many people who visit us have not read our literature or realised the purpose of our project, who produces the shrubs and why.

Being an independent charity has advantages and disadvantages. The major advantage is that we have more freedom – the Trustees and staff can make their own decisions on development, purchases or outings and treats we can offer. There is more flexibility and this may be a sweeping statement but there seems to be more

commitment where you have more say and feel more in control over the project you are involved in, with less feeling of being a small part of a big machine.

We are not restricted as to our client group (who have chosen to be called volunteers). We can take on people who are unemployed or who have been made redundant and need to occupy their time, retired people who need to feel useful and most importantly of all, people who have fallen through the net and have not been offered any help through the normal channels.

Being outside the Health and Social Services we have greater flexibility and the project can be more realistic and rewarding. We have had feedback from our Trust projects who envy our freedom. Our client group also have a feeling of ownership and satisfaction in seeing the project grow and flourish. They do not have the pressure of having a limited stay nor of having to be constantly assessed, although we do carry out regular informal reviews. This gives them a stable environment in which to recover mental stability and they can develop confidence as the project becomes more successful. They are part of a commercial concern, which is a realistic and purposeful working environment and not just a training or occupational therapy centre, which gives them much more prestige. Because we find our own funding and are therefore independent, we are not answerable to anyone but ourselves and can use the donations and grants for the specific purpose they were applied for. We thus do not have the pressure on unrealistic targets to fulfil.

Disadvantages of being an independent charity include the difficulties of finding initial funding, it is harder to set up a project and get it running.

It is harder to keep pressure off our clients with so many traders and customers now visiting the Nursery, but it is essential to try to avoid stress and to keep the customers away from the volunteers if necessary. There is also more pressure on the staff with the high ratio of volunteers to staff – sometimes we would like to employ octo-persons with eight arms and legs and eyes and ears – having to tread a fine line between running a commercial concern and at the same time looking after the welfare of our volunteers. This is especially difficult in the case of staff who have originally come as volunteers themselves and have progressed into employment, with the need to keep themselves free of too much pressure. The staff do need to be multi-talented as well as multi-limbed!

The danger we felt at one time was that the project was growing too large too quickly. This was largely due to the fact that the local Council gave us two acres of extra land for the project to use. This meant that over a period of eighteen months we almost doubled our size and together with the successful fund-raising, the expansion galloped away at an amazing speed. The situation has calmed down now that we have cleared out the extra land and laid out the site.

As SWOP was set up as a registered charity we have had no automatic statutory funding except a clerical assistant, who was eventually funded by the NHS Trust. Our aim originally was to become ultimately entirely self-funding but we now realise that this may not be actually achievable. We shall probably always need to fund-

raise for major development projects and staffing salaries. (Figures for sales and running costs included herewith.)

The day-to-day running costs for our volunteer group of seventy are largely met out of plant sales. SWOP provides a realistic commercial working environment thereby giving our clients a feeling of dignity and self-esteem. Typical statements by volunteers are "I work at a Nursery". We have achievable goals and we sell the shrubs to keep the project running.

The Nursery needs to project an image of being a high-quality shrub nursery (we make a point of not having any yoghurt pots or jam jars etc. lying about.) Our image now shines through with professionalism – a high quality nursery – better in fact than some commercial concerns locally, and not just another charity making baskets and dried flower arrangements!

Our volunteers can become involved in plant sales, in local Shows, in marketing, stock control, mail shots etc as well as basic horticultural work and thus gain the widest possible variety of experience. We can therefore take a wider-based volunteer group.

Not everyone likes, or is suited to, horticultural work, but a commercial nursery provides scope for many different skills.

Bournemouth Town Centre is just four miles away from our Nursery and is rated as one of Britain's top holiday resorts. Boscombe, a small suburb of Bournemouth, was recently featured in a major article in the Sunday Telegraph entitled 'Costa del dole'. The article stated that Boscombe had the largest heroin problem in Britain and that other drugs, drinking and associated problems were rife. Begging on our streets and sleeping rough – homelessness is also on the increase in our area. A number of our volunteers have experienced substance-induced illnesses or psychoses and it is a sad fact that an increasingly larger percentage of our prisons are filled with people who are mentally ill.

The point I feel I am trying to make is that places like Cherry Tree Nursery offer people who, through whatever set of circumstances, find themselves drawn into a downward spiral of drug/drink addiction BECAUSE of their vulnerability. A haven of hope, inspiration, care, a purpose for living, can help to rebuild self-esteem, confidence and give a feeling of belonging. Not just Cherry Tree Nursery and our staff but many other similar projects DO seem to work. If we and similar projects could save even one person from the misery and despair of mental illness, then it's all worthwhile. I know we all feel the same or we would not be here would we!

It only remains for me to invite you all down to Cherry Tree Nursery to see how our project runs, so you can pick our brains and pinch any of the ideas we may have pinched ourselves!!

ISSUES TO BE AWARE OF WHEN DEVELOPING A WORK EXPERIENCE PROJECT FUNDED BY COMMERCIAL SALES

- 1 It is necessary to provide all the year round work and income – therefore don't just grow bedding plants!
- 2 Although work experience in a nursery provides a wide variety of on-the-job training in many areas, as well as training in social and communication skills, general work skills etc, we do not believe it to be possible to realistically combine NVQ training in horticulture with funding a project from commercial sales – these are better done in separate projects. This does not mean NVQ centred projects cannot sell their products, but other sources of funding would also be required.
- 3 It is important always to be aware of the delicate balance between commercial sales and a pressure-free environment. It is essential to establish a maximum size for the project in which the volunteers can remain safe and comfortable while keeping plant quality and numbers high.
- 4 Volunteers working in the project need to feel involved and aware of what is going on – this is harder as the project grows in size and volunteer numbers.
- 5 To run a successful commercial project, there is a need for some of the volunteers to be quite well and able to work harder and more consistently. It is, however, vital to ensure that the nursery does not become selective and discriminate against the less able volunteers, nor to hold back the best workers or discourage them from moving on.
- 6 The quality of plants produced must be first class. The most successful part of the therapy to the self-esteem of the volunteers is the success of the project – being part of something which is highly respected and valued.

COMPARISON BETWEEN PROJECTED AND ACTUAL FIGURES FOR THE NURSERY

When the charity was set up in the late 1980's, the initial budget, starting-up costs and horticultural requirements were laid out and a six-year projected forecast produced by a local shrub nursery.

It is interesting to see the difference between the initial forecast and the actual figures. This highlights how hard it is to estimate the costs of such projects. We have learned that you need far more resources than you anticipate. I will quote two examples to illustrate this.

Firstly, the initial aim of the project as set out in the original proposal was to provide sheltered work for fifteen workers daily, allowing up to forty-five people work opportunities on a part-time basis

In actual fact we now have sixty-four on our books with an upper limit of seventy and there are about twenty in the process of referral. The Trustees of the charity readily admit they did not anticipate the size of the demand from people with long-term mental health problems, which has currently arisen partly due to the downturn in the economy.

Along with this, we did not anticipate the amount we would need to put back in terms of volunteer welfare, one of our largest costs and the probable reason why we may not ever be able to make a surplus. This is a point we advise all people initially setting up such projects to hear in mind as a priority.

Secondly, the projected figure it was anticipated the Nursery would be able to produce at maximum was 100,000 hardy shrubs. In fact this number has proved to be impossible to produce due to the size of the Nursery, which allows at maximum 70,000 shrubs to be produced annually, the figure depending upon selling 20,000 between May and July.

POSTSCRIPT 2006

The nursery now has well over 100 volunteers attending and produced over 100,000 plants annually, but it still runs at a loss!!