

RESULTS OF CHERRY TREE VOLUNTEER EVALUATION 2008

Cherry Tree nurtures broken people as much as it nurtures plants. I owe a great debt of gratitude to this patch of Paradise'

Introduction

It is estimated that around one in four adults experience a mental health problem at some stage in their lives and also that, while many will make a full recovery, some will endure a prolonged period of illness, possibly rendering them incapable of work on the open employment market. Previous research has indicated that whilst the majority of those with a long-term mental health problem were unemployed, over half of these people actually wanted to work.

The need for meaningful occupation was identified by a group of people in Bournemouth who regularly worked with people with long-term mental health problems. They decided to form a committee, and the notion of the Sheltered Work Opportunities Project (SWOP) was born. With the known therapeutic benefit of working with plants, it was decided that the proposed project would be in the form of a wholesale shrub nursery. A site was acquired from Bournemouth Borough Council, and the project became a charity in February 1990. The first project was named Cherry Tree Nursery.

Since 1990, Cherry Tree Nursery has grown constantly, from four volunteers and one member of staff in 1990, to around 150 volunteers and six members of staff today, and continues to have a long waiting list. In 2000, SWOP opened a second project called Chestnut Nursery in the centre of Poole, which specialises in growing bedding and perennials, and currently has fifty volunteers and three members of staff. This suggests that there is still a chronic lack of suitable opportunities and support for adults with long-term mental health problems, making it all the more important that SWOP publicises itself to make the local and wider communities aware of its vital role.

It is equally important to ensure that the project is continuing to meet the needs of its volunteers, by providing a safe, supportive environment in which volunteers are given the opportunity to learn new skills and perhaps, in the long term, return to the open employment market.

Methodology

This evaluation focuses on the volunteers who attend Cherry Tree Nursery, and has the aim of pinpointing what Cherry Tree Nursery is doing well and what can be improved. A questionnaire was designed in 2007, which looked at three key areas;

- Skills acquired
- Support received
- Future possibilities

The questionnaire contained a total of nineteen questions, and the volunteers were asked to rate each question on a scale of one to five. Each question also provided an opportunity for volunteers to add their comments. The questionnaire was optional and

confidential, with volunteers only asked to identify their gender, age group and length of stay at Cherry Tree Nursery. All volunteers who attend at least one day per week and had been with Cherry Tree Nursery for at least three months were asked to complete the questionnaire. We received 68 completed questionnaires, covering a real cross-section:

- The youngest volunteer is 34, the oldest 73
- There are 45 males and 23 females
- The length of stay at Cherry Tree Nursery ranges from 3 months to over 17 years (averaging 7.13 years)

It is important to note that these results reflect the volunteers' perception of themselves, and that not all the questions asked are relevant to every volunteer.

Results

The results are displayed on the following pages. Each question is listed, together with an overall percentage approval (the sum of the responses divided by the number of responses). For detailed results, please contact Cherry Tree Nursery so that these can be provided.

Q1 – What were your reasons for coming to Cherry Tree?

	Agree
Gain a structure	87.94%
Build confidence	86.27%
Meet new people	84.83%
Learning new skills	82.45%
Nursery work	81.50%
Part of care plan	78.97%
Construction work	54.91%

This suggests that the main reasons for volunteers coming to Cherry Tree are to gain a structure in their lives, to build confidence and to meet new people. Fewer people came to Cherry Tree to do construction work, probably because this is a specialised interest or skill. Here are some of the volunteers' reasons for coming to Cherry Tree:

'Coming to Cherry Tree makes you feel you are doing something worthwhile'

'To give me a purpose to my life'

'To see if I liked horticultural work'

'To work as part of a team'

'For social inclusion'

'To stop me from committing suicide'

Q2 – Since you have been at Cherry Tree, have you achieved all that you wanted to achieve?

	Agree
Total	84.56%
Male	81.56%
Female	90.44%
Length of stay, up to 3 years	81.33%
Length of stay, 3 to 6 years	82.67%
Length of stay, 6 to 10 years	89.47%

Length of stay, over 10 years

83.68%

As can be seen from the figures above, female volunteers seem to agree more strongly that they have achieved what they wanted whilst being at Cherry Tree. It is also noticeable that the 31 volunteers who rated this question as 5, had attended Cherry Tree for an average of 7.77 years (including eight of the fifteen volunteers who have attended for more than ten years), which is a little above the average of 7.13 years attendance.

This may suggest that those who attend Cherry Tree regularly for a reasonable duration, will achieve their objectives - everyone has a different level of what they want to achieve and it can take time.

Here are some of the volunteers' thoughts on this:

'I think you have done everything to help me. The care and attention by staff is excellent'

'I would like to learn more about horticulture'

'I want to get back to permanent employment, but there is no suitable work available'

Q3 – What do you like about Cherry Tree?

	Agree
Support from staff	93.88%
Family atmosphere	91.67%
Friendship	91.62%
Support from volunteers	89.69%
Social events	85.16%
Potting	78.07%
Weeding	70.52%
Holidays	65.96%
Propagation	65.93%
Selling plants	62.18%
Office work	60.70%
Construction work	57.74%
Computer classes	53.91%
Literacy/Numeracy classes	50.00%

In many cases, volunteers arrive at Cherry Tree low in confidence and with few friends, so it is important to recognise the very high level of approval volunteers have given the social and support categories. Less popular are some of the specific classes and skills, such as literacy and construction. This could be explained by the fact that not all volunteers have taken part in these, and may not want to – after all, people are different. The provision of these courses and opportunities has led to new interests and skills in many cases. Here are some of the volunteers' comments:

'Staff and volunteers are very helpful'

'Cherry Tree is like a comfort blanket'

'I haven't put a code alongside the classes, as I feel that I did not need to access them'

'I've learned not to be so afraid of people'

***'It's given me a chance to undertake projects, e.g. Bolivia'
'Family support'***

Q4 – What new skills have you learnt since joining Cherry Tree?

	Agree
Potting	84.92%
Social skills	83.50%
Weeding	76.27%
Propagation	68.33%
Office/Computing skills	64.04%
Construction work	55.47%
Selling plants	55.00%

The very high rate of volunteers who have learned potting, is perhaps due to this task being one of the most crucial – if plants are not transferred from plugs to pots, they do not get sold, and Cherry Tree is heavily reliant on plant sales to keep functioning. Again, social skills have been rated high – the family atmosphere of the project and the large number of social opportunities such as the Christmas Party, barbecues and visits to local gardens do give ample opportunity to forge close bonds between volunteers. The relatively low scores for selling plants and construction work is simply due to personal preference – these are not skills for everyone. Some other skills are quoted below from volunteers:

***'Mini-bus Driver, First Aid, Health and Hygiene'
'I have learnt far better social skills that I have had for a long time'
'From finding the answers to customers' queries, I have learnt a lot about the plants we sell'***

Q5 – When you joined Cherry Tree, did you find it easy to settle in and feel comfortable?

	Agree
Total	84.78%
Male	86.14%
Female	82.17%

Joining a project where there are as many as sixty volunteers on site at any one time is inevitably going to be a daunting experience at first. However, the high score for this question would suggest that, once initial nerves are overcome, the warmth and family atmosphere (a cornerstone of the project's philosophy) help make volunteers feel part of the 'family'. It is also worth noting that there is little difference in scoring between the genders. Here are some of the volunteers' comments:

***'I was apprehensive about coming here'
'It did not take as long as I expected it to'
'Everyone was very friendly and after the first few weeks of nerves, I settled in and felt very comfortable'
'I felt very welcomed by everyone'***

Q6 – Is it easy to talk to the staff about any problems?

	Agree
Total	92.84%

Despite the increase in the number of volunteers, and all the work that is involved in running a four-acre nursery, the high score for this question would suggest that the nursery staff are approachable and are able to make time for the volunteers. A couple of volunteers commented as follows:

'I find it easy to talk to staff'
'Staff excel in sensitivity and care approach'

Q7 – Do you feel that your opinions are listened to by the staff?

	Agree
Total	90.74%

The vast majority of volunteers do feel that staff listen to their opinions, which is vital. There are opportunities for volunteers to express their opinions at regular Management and Family Meetings, as well as on a one-to-one basis with a member of staff.

Q8 – Do you participate in Management/Family Meetings?

	Agree
Total	64.38%
Male	62.86%
Female	67.27%
Age 31 to 40	48.57%
Age 41 to 50	68.24%
Age 51 to 60	65.22%
Age over 60	78.00%

This score was relatively low, with little difference between the genders, although there is a noticeable increase in participation for older volunteers. There are a number of possible reasons for this. Firstly, some volunteers do not feel comfortable in a meeting situation, often on account of the fear of having to speak in front of people. Another reason is that most volunteers attend on a part-time basis, so may not be in when the meetings occur. There were also a few volunteers who did not seem to be aware that these meetings even took place, or what they were about. As a result, the staff at Cherry Tree have already taken measures to ensure that all volunteers are aware of meetings and their purposes. This has taken the form of ensuring that meeting notices are displayed on notice boards at the nursery, and letters have been sent to volunteers inviting them to attend.

Comments from volunteers include:

'No, this is mainly due to meetings being held on days that I am not here'
'Don't know when they are'
'Not really interested'
'Don't go to the Management Meetings because I don't understand what goes on'
'Don't feel I have anything to say'

'I have been to a couple, and it's nice for someone to ask for your opinion'

Q9 – Do you feel your review/support sessions are worthwhile?

	Agree
Total	77.41%

It is worth clarifying that this question did not refer to informal reviews, which happen on a regular basis, but rather to official reviews, between the volunteer, staff member and the volunteer's keyworker. The message from the results suggests that those volunteers who have had a review believe them to be worthwhile, but for the ten volunteers who did not respond, it can only be assumed that they have yet to have a review. Perhaps the sustained expansion of Cherry Tree and continued demand has come at the detriment of one-to-one time between individual volunteers and staff. Also, there are fewer volunteers who have keyworkers. Of course, some volunteers are perfectly happy not to have a review, as may be gathered from the following comments:

'Never had one, but happy with that'

'It is very good to know what the volunteers think about Cherry Tree'

'Used to have them, but haven't had one for two years'

'Might be worthwhile, but never had one'

'I do think they are worthwhile because it shows how I have improved at Cherry Tree since I have been attending'

Q10 – Since coming to Cherry Tree, do you feel more confident?

	Agree
Total	90.30%
Length of stay, up to 3 years	90.00%
Length of stay, 3 to 6 years	90.67%
Length of stay, 6 to 10 years	91.05%
Length of stay, over 10 years	89.44%

This result suggests attending Cherry Tree has substantially improved the vast majority of volunteers' confidence, which does tie in with the high scores in questions concerning staff support, social skills and family atmosphere. There is little variation in the score according to volunteers' length of stay. Here are a couple of comments from volunteers:

'As a result of becoming part of Cherry Tree, my shattered confidence was rebuilt – the skills I had before I became ill were nurtured, and given the opportunity to flourish'

'Yes, I am more confident to socialise and work, my concentration is better'

Q11 – Since coming to Cherry Tree, do you feel less lonely/isolated?

	Agree
Total	89.70%
Length of stay, up to 3 years	88.00%
Length of stay, 3 to 6 years	90.67%
Length of stay, 6 to 10 years	87.89%
Length of stay, over 10 years	92.22%

The great majority of volunteers now feel less lonely and isolated since attending Cherry Tree, with the highest scores found among the volunteers who have attended the project for ten years or more. However, it is worth remembering some volunteers were not lonely or isolated at the time they joined Cherry Tree, so this was not a factor for them attending the project. This is a typical comment from one of the volunteers:

'Since coming to Cherry Tree, I do not become lonely or isolated, since there are a lot of tasks to do'

Q12 – Since coming to Cherry Tree, do you feel more independent?

	Agree
Total	86.92%
Length of stay, up to 3 years	85.71%
Length of stay, 3 to 6 years	84.29%
Length of stay, 6 to 10 years	88.42%
Length of stay, over 10 years	88.33%

Overall, most volunteers do feel more independent since attending Cherry Tree, with a slightly higher score for volunteers who have been attending for six years or more. SWOP does encourage independence in a number of ways, such as reimbursing travel costs to volunteers, organising holidays etc. However, it is worth remembering that some volunteers were independent when they joined Cherry Tree, and that whilst the project has helped them in other ways, the lack of independence was never an issue. A couple of comments from volunteers include:

'I feel less independent because I totally rely on Cherry Tree'
'I still have major issues with independence, but I am a lot better than I was'

Q13 – Do you feel that you think more about other people since attending Cherry Tree?

	Agree
Total	87.23%
Length of stay, up to 3 years	90.67%
Length of stay, 3 to 6 years	87.14%
Length of stay, 6 to 10 years	88.89%
Length of stay, over 10 years	82.78%

It is perhaps a little surprising that although the score for this question was high, the score declines for those volunteers who have attended for ten years or longer.

This is a very important question – the staff of Cherry Tree firmly believe that volunteers can help heal themselves by helping to heal others, and the quotes below from volunteers help bear this out:

'I have found that, since attending Cherry Tree, I have met so many kind and caring people, and can understand and relate to many of their problems'
'Before coming here, I didn't know too much about people with mental health issues'

'I am much more aware of mental health issues and problems that other people have'

'Makes you aware of other people's problems and helps you to talk to others about your own problems. There is mutual support and understanding'

Q14 – Do you feel you are receiving sufficient support at Cherry Tree?

	Agree
Total	90.31%
Length of stay, up to 3 years	86.15%
Length of stay, 3 to 6 years	91.43%
Length of stay, 6 to 10 years	91.58%
Length of stay, over 10 years	91.05%

This is a high score, and indicates that the support that volunteers are receiving (which can be from other volunteers as well as from staff) is good. However, there is a noticeably lower score for those volunteers who have attended for less than three years – this may be purely due to them being new, and not having forged relationships with other volunteers and staff.

Q15 – Is it important to you that your work keeps Cherry Tree going?

	Agree
Total	94.00%

This is the joint highest score for any question, and ties in with Question 13 – volunteers know that they **ALL** make a contribution to the running of the nursery, and without their work, the nursery would not exist. The quote from a volunteer below sums this up well:

'Without Cherry Tree, I would not have regained my self-esteem – I feel part of a team where everyone has a vital role to ensure Cherry Tree flourishes'

Q16 – Do you feel that in time, you will feel able to consider open employment?

	Agree
Total	55.82%
Age 31 to 40	62.14%
Age 41 to 50	60.00%
Age 51 to 60	52.00%
Age over 60	35.00%

This was one of the lowest scored questions, and reflects the fact that for many volunteers, open employment is not an option. This may be due to the severity of their mental health problems, plus the fact that some are retired (accounting for the very low score for those aged 60 and over) or have physical impairments. However, 25% of those who responded did agree that, in time, they may consider open employment – a couple of volunteers now even work part-time. Here are some quotes from volunteers:

'Unsure about ability in workplace'

'I am very fortunate to now be working 26 hours a week with children, something I thought would never happen'

'I cannot cope with the pressures of working'

'The nursery is my work'

Q17 – Do you feel that in time, you will feel able to consider external full-time training?

	Agree
Total	53.82%
Age 31 to 40	50.00%
Age 41 to 50	67.06%
Age 51 to 60	49.00%
Age over 60	35.00%

This was the lowest scored question, and the reasons are likely to be similar to Question 17. However, nearly 30% suggested they may consider full-time training in the future. It is also worth considering that, since Cherry Tree provides certain courses on site, such as numeracy, literacy and computer skills, some volunteers may feel that they don't need any further training. Here is a quote from one of the volunteers:

'I can now access courses with confidence'

Q18 – Please rate how satisfied you are with the following factors at Cherry Tree;

	Agree
Social events	94.00%
Refreshment provision	92.27%
Break times	91.97%
Timing start	91.85%
Christmas Party	90.78%
General facilities	90.62%
Travel expenses	90.48%
Timing end	90.31%
Workload	88.33%
Training opportunities	84.15%

These scores indicate a high satisfaction rate with most of the listed factors, in particular social events. This is echoed by the volunteers' comments below:

'I believe Cherry Tree should be open longer in the day, especially in the summer months'

'Christmas Party very excellent, long may it continue'

'Cherry Tree over the years has built up rapidly, it is amazing'

'I have been so happy here that I hope the construction team will make me an excellent wooden coffin as I am staying!'

'I really enjoy social events done at SWOP'

Q19 – Have you found the Disability Rights Advisor service useful to you?

	Agree
Total	86.32%
Length of stay, up to 3 years	83.64%
Length of stay, 3 to 6 years	96.92%
Length of stay, 6 to 10 years	88.89%
Length of stay, over 10 years	76.00%

Whilst this score is high, it is worth remembering that some volunteers have not yet had the need to access this service, but the response from those who have, has been overwhelmingly positive:

'June has been a terrific advisor, helping with invaluable support with all the benefit bureaucracies'

'She's a gem'

'Haven't had to use this service, but good for it to be available'

Conclusion

The overall approval rating (calculated by adding up all the scores for all questions apart from Q1, Q15 and Q16 and dividing by 53) was 81.42%, which suggests that overall, volunteers are happy to be at Cherry Tree Nursery. Whilst there are questions which do not score so well, in particular the desire to take up open employment or full-time training, it must be remembered that some volunteers will probably never leave the project;

'Can I stay here for the rest of my life?'

There are certainly some actions that Cherry Tree could take to further improve the satisfaction rate, such as holding regular reviews with volunteers, and possibly extending the opening hours of the project. However, Cherry Tree has already responded to the quotation below, and a recycling lorry now comes to the nursery once a week.

'Not enough recycling facilities of all types'

For many volunteers, Cherry Tree represents an oasis of safety, support and love, and ensuring that this atmosphere is maintained is the most important task of all.

Finally, here are some more moving quotes from the volunteers:

'Cherry Tree is one of the few places I feel safe...I don't feel the crippling fear I feel in many places. I think without Cherry Tree staff and friends, I would be locked up or dead'

'I think that Cherry Tree is Heaven on earth, and I have a lot of respect and love for all that are part of such an amazing place'

'This place is amazing, everyone is so supportive'

'I hope to be able to expand the role Cherry Tree has in the wider community, especially with children in understanding mental health, so reducing the stigma'

'The staff need so much praise for all they have done for me'

'I was like a broken jigsaw puzzle when I came here, but I have slowly been put back together again by the amazing support from the staff and care from the other volunteers...without Cherry Tree, I wouldn't be alive today'

Research conducted by Cherry Tree volunteers, Matthew Israel, Jane Colleau and Sheila Halsey

This survey was conducted on a voluntary basis by the Cherry Tree volunteers. The results were then analysed, and the report written by a former Cherry Tree volunteer. This is therefore an evaluation done by and for the volunteers.