

The Community Programme

The Community Programme was a wonderful government scheme, operating during the 1980s, for the long-term unemployed who wished to do something useful with their time. It transformed the lives of many people with long-term mental health conditions and should undoubtedly still be operating in every area. It was out of the ashes of this scheme that Cherry Tree was born, but it was because the scheme closed that the need for projects such as Cherry Tree became so great.

Under this, and other even better earlier schemes operating in the 1970s, members of communities got together and decided what work most needed doing. Projects were then set up to ensure this work was done and the workforce recruited from those unemployed people who wished to work but were for various reasons considered unemployable.

The long-term unemployed were thus given the dignity and status of a wage, job title, and above all of spending their time working for the community. Many were only able to manage working on a part-time basis, 2 or 3 days a week. The more able were employed on a full-time basis as supervisors.

It was through schemes like these that the gardens of the elderly were kept tidy and bulbs were planted along roadsides. Conservation areas were studied and the public educated through displays and guided walks. Streams were cleared and footpaths restored. Theatre groups were set up, poor communities developed, and roads were built to isolated homes.

Like all such schemes, these operated differently in different areas, and some were more successful than others, but in the best schemes, people were supported and helped through their difficulties and had the opportunity to make friends, gain self-esteem, and restore meaning to their lives.

We have no doubt whatsoever in saying that if a programme like this was re-introduced, it would do more to reduce mental illness than any number of drop-in computer suites and talking books ever will.