

Windmill Hill City Farm

Bristol

Key facts

Windmill Hill City Farm's health and social care activities operate on a mixed model with some activities being free to service users and others accessed through Direct Payments. As well as nature-based activities the farm also runs a weekly mental wellbeing group, a mental health employment service, and cooking sessions for older people.

This is the oldest city farm outside London, recently celebrating their 40th anniversary (1976–2016), and unlike many care farms Windmill Hill City Farm is open to the public seven days a week.

Our story

The origins of the farm go back to 1976. Back then, the site was just a rubble landscape – derelict following the Second World War. But when the council announced plans to transform it into a lorry depot, local residents objected, saying that they wanted the space to be of benefit to the local community (Bedminster is a deprived part of the city).

"It was the start of the local community taking action and gaining access to the land," says Sam Lloyd-Smith, the farm's Health and Social Care Manager. "For the community, it was to be a place of education, and somewhere for growing food and looking after animals – all of which is still important today."

What we do

The Health and Social Care activities that take place on the four-acre farm are focussed on three key principles: improving people's well-being, being there for the people of Bristol, and addressing disadvantage cross the city.

Three main groups of people ('volunteers') access the farm's activities: people with mental health issues, or of ill-health who may be isolated, have



anxiety issues, feeling low, or have chronic or long-term problems (70% of clients fall into this category). The two other groups are people with learning difficulties (20% of clients) and people recovering from addiction to drugs or alcohol (10% of clients).

Throughout the week, people can take part in a choice of activities, each of which are run as half-day sessions: animal care (currently the farm has 18 pigs, 10 sheep, 50 chickens, etc.); therapeutic gardening (mostly growing vegetables, flowers, and maintaining the gardens); woodwork and maintenance (mostly making things for use around the farm); and helping out in the award-winning café (which uses vegetables from the farm).

Supported volunteer sessions have approximately six people in them and are facilitated by one or two experienced staff members. In total, each week about 70 people attend these sessions.

Also taking place are all kinds of art and wellbeing courses, which are run by external parties. These include: Art, Pottery and Jewellery classes, as well as Massage, Mindfulness and Meditation.

Three operational principles make the farm distinctive. The farm is open to the public 7 days a week and is free to enter (but donations are suggested). Many of the wellbeing sessions (gardening and animal care) are free, as they are covered by the farm's current existing funding.

Some people self-refer; others are referred by support agencies/professionals. Funded volunteer placements are arranged through individual 'personal payments', and via referrals through Bristol City Council's day care services or from North Somerset Council. The only people who pay are those with high levels of care needs that requires a higher staff to client ratio.

"The diverse mix of people who attend volunteer sessions and activities is what makes the farm feel unique" says Sam. "Everyone who attends sessions at the farm is called a 'volunteer', even if they require some support from staff; we want everyone to feel a close part of the farm community."

Challenges and achievements

Even for a well-established care farm like this, there is still the usual challenge of finding sustainable income. It is not easy to offer a service that is essentially free, and for which there is a relatively limitless demand. And it is not easy to do it on a farm that is small (just four acres), which restricts some activities – and the number of people that can take part. *"We'll always be juggling resources,"* says Sam.

Sam cites several important achievements in the farm's history. Being here for 40 years is an achievement in itself. Facing up to rocky periods and coming through them - for years the farm benefitted from annual City Council funding, but this ceased in 2017.

Providing a unique service to people in Bristol – offering a very different way of improving people's 'wellbeing'. Seeing all the current health and social care programs thriving.

Summarising the farm's work, Sam proudly says: *"We have a model that works, as evidenced by the number of referrals we receive. It has been developed over the years, reactive to the needs of people in Bristol. We have established a programme of nature-based (and other) activities that offer an alternative style of intervention, and we know they have an empowering effect."*

What people say about us

"It's helped me to manage my anxiety and depression- it gives me a boost being outdoors and contributing to something meaningful as well as socialising with others. Learning new skills has also helped improve my confidence."

Service user

"I feel that the more I am able to be the real me and feel valued and appreciated for the work I do at the farm, the more confident I feel to be the real me in other aspects of my life."

Service user

"The farm has helped my personal goals of getting out and meeting new people."

Service user

"I have become more social and always on the lookout to get involved within the community."

Service user

For more details

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Social Farms & Gardens, in partnership with Thrive, are delivering the Growing Care Farming project. See **www.farmgarden.org.uk/GCF** for more details.