

Green Synergy



Website: greensynergy.org.uk

Location: Lincoln

Founded: 2012

Legal structure: Charity, company limited by guarantee

Description of services: community gardening, therapeutic horticulture and city farming to improve mental and physical wellbeing, bring communities together and enhance environmental sustainability

Employees: 1 full-time, 7 part-time

Volunteers: 10

Overview

Green Synergy uses community gardening and horticultural therapy to build skills for life and work, improve mental and physical health and educate people about the environment, food and farming. The organisation works in disadvantaged communities and with vulnerable people, including those living with mental health conditions, learning difficulties, physical disabilities, long-term health conditions and unemployment.

Good work practices

Good working conditions are crucial to creating a skilled and motivated workforce. As part of a [research study](#), Middlesex University explored good work practices at Green Synergy across seven dimensions. The findings also informed the development of a '[Pathways to good work](#)' toolkit with Locality which sets out the practical steps that community businesses can take to improve job quality in their organisation.

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Good work means putting people first and trying your best but not to the extent, where you don't look after yourself. And I'm a great believer in that you can only care for other people if you care for yourself first.

Staff member

1. Meaningful work



A good job brings good energy. Oh yes, I enjoy [the work here], that's why I came here; I share similar values.

Staff member

Staff and volunteers at Green Synergy believe in the value of gardening to give people opportunities to have a better life. The organisation works with people across the life course, and aims to positively influence personal and family lives. As one staff member argues, “People appreciate what we do as an organisation and get pleasure out of it, both physically and mentally, it’s good for people’s wellbeing and it gives them confidence, so that’s meaningful”. Another employee emphasises that the work at Green Synergy provides lots of variety, interest and stimulation: “I never get bored ... there are different things to do as the seasons change, you know, one minute we’ve got sunflowers, and right now it’s nice to see the crocuses and the snowdrops”.



I think meaningful work is just anything that contributes to society, really, and that could be on a whole lot of different levels, [...] it's just anything that kind of contributes and makes life a little bit easier and a little bit better for people. [...] You know, in everybody's job there are elements that they don't love and that aren't their favourite things but I feel my job gives me a real sense of purpose and I feel quite proud of it.

Staff member

2. Voice, democratic governance and inclusive culture



I think we actually are a really good team, I think we all get on really well. [...] I think it's a very caring workplace and we have a lot of fun, it's a lovely team.

Staff member

Employees at Green Synergy praise the good workplace culture which is characterised by open communication and opportunities for staff and volunteers to participate

in decision-making through weekly team meetings, fortnightly one-to-one supervision with line managers and regular informal conversations:



All decisions are filtered through the team meeting and there are opportunities for people to input. [...] I'd say that it's something that we're very, very good at. [...] Even when there was a period of time when it was only me and [the CEO], she would still sit down with me as a junior member of staff and say, 'This is what I'm thinking, what do you think?' Everybody has a voice and a say, and it might be, what your opinion is or what you've suggested can't happen or not everybody agrees, but I'd say we're quite diplomatic in terms of how we deal with those things and we listen to people's views and opinions and try and work out what's best for everybody.

Staff member

There is at least one annual away day where all the staff and trustees collaborate on strategic topics. The last one, for instance, was used to review and update the organisational values statement and to create a new values-based best practice guide for staff and trustee conduct. Trustees and staff also collaborate closely on issues such as safeguarding queries, business planning, policy updates and fundraising events, and staff develop project reports to inform the board of project achievements. Unlike many other small organisations, Green Synergy has clear communication systems in place for situations such as emergencies and grievances.

3. Contracts and job design

Most staff are on permanent contracts with only a few on short-term (less than two years) contracts and written agreements are provided for volunteers. According to the CEO, “providing permanent contracts to staff builds trust and provides assurance that we are committed to granting them full employment rights, redundancy pay etc.” However, Green Synergy is also transparent about the challenges of long-term job sustainability in the third sector. Most staff work for the organisation part-time in line with their preferred hours of work and there is the opportunity to increase working hours and developmental opportunities as the venture continues to grow.

4. Pay and benefits

Most staff already receive the [real Living Wage](#) as a minimum, apart from apprentices who are quickly moved on to higher rates of pay on completion of their apprenticeship period. Green Synergy is aiming to become a registered Living Wage Employer in the near future. Staff understand the challenges faced by this and other organisations in the sector that make it difficult to increase pay. They also, however, appreciate the good developmental opportunities and, as one employee explained, the “caring workplace culture” and the “lovely team” which helps to compensate for the lack of higher levels of pay.

5. Skills and development

Recognising and developing everybody’s strengths and particular skill sets is an important value at Green Synergy. This is illustrated by cases where volunteers have gone on to gain employed positions and progressed further within the organisation. For example, one former service user and volunteer, who joined Green Synergy after a longer period of unemployment, has experienced several promotions and shared how this experience of being valued as an employee had increased her self-confidence and overall sense of wellbeing (see Section 7). The organisation also provides staff with developmental opportunities, including formal qualifications that support their personal interests as well as benefitting the organisation.

6. Flexible working, work-life balance and family-friendly support

Green Synergy understands the importance of providing staff with working conditions that allow for a balance between their jobs and personal lives. Most staff at the organisation work part-time but other ways in which employees can work flexibly include swapping days with colleagues or working from home. Options for home working depend on the job role and some projects require the team to be present on site. However, there is still room for some flexibility and staff requests are accommodated wherever possible.

7. Health and wellbeing

Improving people’s health and wellbeing is another core value of Green Synergy’s work and also reflected in the working conditions for staff and volunteers. In two cases, staff had started to work for Green Synergy as volunteers and were offered part-time employment. One of them had subsequently progressed to a more senior position within the organisation and shared how this experience had boosted her confidence, self-belief and wellbeing:



When I was offered the position [at Green Synergy], it felt like they believed in me, you know, that they’d seen something in me that they thought was valuable and that they wanted me to get back into the swing of things. It wasn’t going to be an easy road, that was clear, but they could see that if they worked with me that there was a lot of potential there, more than I could see, I mean.

Staff member

The same employee emphasised how Green Synergy has always been mindful of her mental health needs by not expecting the same level of productivity every day to help her manage her own wellbeing.

Taking stock and looking ahead – pathways to more good practice



Going forwards we wish to keep building on good practice. We already offer external supervision for staff with a qualified counsellor/therapeutic supervisor. One of our trustees is currently qualifying in coaching and mentoring and will be offering sessions to the staff. We are also looking at other ways of demonstrating our appreciation to our staff such as giving people their birthday off work and increasing the number of annual leave days once an employee has worked for Green Synergy for five years. In future, as the organisation grows, we also plan to go for quality marks such as Investors in People and the Trusted Charity Mark (formerly PQASSO). We endeavour to continue to be a values-based organisation where all staff, beneficiaries, volunteers and trustees feel a sense of shared ownership and know that all roles are valued equally.

CEO