

Windmill Hill City Farm

Website: windmillhillcityfarm.org.uk

Location: Bristol

Founded: 1976

Legal structure: Charity, company limited by guarantee

Description of services: City farm providing educational, therapeutic and recreational activities

Employees: 84 contracted, 15 sessional (ad-hoc hours)

Volunteers: 400 per year – 63 per week are regular

Overview

Windmill Hill City Farm was founded more than 40 years ago as the first city farm outside London. It aims to promote environmental education and addresses disadvantage by providing a green, recreational space in the heart of Bristol. The organisation has grown over time and now provides a children's nursery, wellbeing-related activities with a key focus on mental health and learning difficulties, room hire and on-site tenants, and runs a thriving café. Throughout its growth and diversification, the farm has stayed true to its original social aims of addressing disadvantage and building community cohesion, and continues to attract general visitors from the local population.

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 Windmill Hill City Farm 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 organisations can take to improve the quality of the jobs they provide.



1. Meaningful work

People come to work at the farm because they are passionate about its work and how it has served the community over many years:

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People want to be here because they are like-minded. [...] So they come because the ethos of the farm has really developed and that's because of a lot of reasons, I think. Many employees and volunteers are from the local area and have happy memories of coming to the farm as a child.

Staff member

The farm is a busy site and, regardless of the job role, there is always a lot to do and no one day is like another. So variety and challenge are part of the job and some staff with cross-cutting skills work in more than one service area. There are also opportunities for staff to expand their skills and experience by working in other departments, also providing them with variety and developmental opportunities. Regular formal reviews and informal conversations are used to assess whether staff and volunteers still find their roles interesting and stimulating.



I've always said, I will move on from this job, when I feel I've reached the point it is no longer stimulating, or the work gets mundane and boring ... But it's never boring! At the moment, I am not even halfway through my journey here, there's still so much to do [...] For everyone that comes to work here there's never a dull time at the farm, there always is something going on whether it's chasing pigs around the farm or herding escaped goats back to their field, no two days are ever the same.

Staff member

2. Voice, democratic governance and inclusive culture

Democratic inclusion and engagement with staff, volunteers and community members is vital to maintain the organisation's shared vision and approach to decision-making and governance. Its most recent strategy was created by the staff and board of the organisation with input from members, volunteers and service users. Other consultative channels include staff surveys held twice a year and annual appraisals in some service areas, as well as regular informal catch-ups with line managers, for example, while going for a walk around the farm. Windmill Hill City Farm is currently reviewing with staff how opportunities for them to be heard can be further improved.

3. Contracts and job design

As with many other community organisations, Windmill Hill City Farm makes flexible use of various types of contract, including permanent, fixed-term and a few non-exclusive zero-hours contracts. Permanent and fixed-term contracts include part- and full-time contracts and range from 4 to 40 hours a week. Staff on fixed-term contracts are usually employed to provide maternity cover or to work on short-term projects; apprentices are also on a two-year contract. Staff on zero-hours contracts are used to retain a pool of people to cover sickness in the nursery, the café and the cleaning team. The farm tries to keep valued staff on short-term or non-exclusive zero-hours contracts in the organisation by offering them a more stable contract. For instance, one employee had joined Windmill Hill City Farm as a short-term maternity cover but stayed on after her colleague returned from maternity leave.

4. Pay and benefits

The real Living Wage is paid to all staff as a minimum as well as other statutory benefits. As the HR lead of the organisation points out:



People don't come here for the pay: as a charity we are unable to pay top wage. [but] we are lucky to benefit from the highly skilled and experienced individuals who come to work at the farm because of our ethos and community services. [...] We don't offer things like healthcare or gym memberships, we can't ... but we offer other benefits by ensuring everyone receives the right skills, development and training they require.

HR manager

5. Skills and development

A developmental approach is core to the organisation's ethos:



I'm very keen on developing and making sure that people have the right tools, I don't want people to be stagnant, because then they're not going to stay, there's no reason for them to be here. Whereas if you can constantly identify someone's skill set and what they're passionate about, and if you can incorporate that into a role than I don't see why you shouldn't do it.

HR manager

Staff developmental needs are assessed on a regular basis and addressed in line with individual aspirations and needs. For instance, some staff thrive by being confronted with new challenges on a day-to-day basis, whereas others give of their best in more predictable and routine roles.

The organisation recognises the mutual benefit of investing in its staff. For example, a nursery staff member was supported in obtaining a degree in early years education which also involved providing cover one day a week while the employee was attending college. Benefits to the nursery included the staff member's increased motivation, her ability to apply her newly acquired knowledge by "bringing good, fresh ideas" and "being a good role model" for her colleagues.

Some roles within the farm are seen as stepping stones to other roles and career paths, both within and beyond the organisation. Examples include apprenticeships in the nursery and people who joined as assisted volunteers and went on to become employees with the farm when the opportunity arose. Alternatively, if there is no vacancy at the time, volunteers are supported to obtain employment elsewhere.

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

The organisation aims to accommodate requests for flexible working and family-friendly support wherever possible:



I'd like to think that people are very aware that, if they have a certain situation, we will try and accommodate their requests or support them if they have a change of circumstances. This could be adjusting their contracted hours or having more flexible working patterns or working from home. [...] It is important for a line manager to understand their team's personal situations and having the autonomy to give guidance and support individuals as and when it's needed.

HR manager

Staff have sometimes brought their children to work in emergencies. However, some flexible options cannot easily be accommodated in all service areas. For example, nursery staff have to be in an appropriate ratio and have to be on site during opening hours, whereas the admin staff have more flexibility. However, there are other ways in which staff with young children can be supported. Windmill Hill City Farm welcomes breastfeeding on site and has also had a couple of cases of staff returning from maternity leave being provided with a comfortable, private space to allow them to express their breastmilk and a safe place to store it.

7. Health and wellbeing

Wellbeing-related activities with a key focus on mental health, learning difficulties and disabilities are an important element of the work of the organisation. It supports a lot of people with their health needs, service users as well as staff and volunteers. In cases of increased sickness-related absence, line managers will undertake a health review with the employee with the support of the HR manager, to identify any support needs and develop a 'wellness action plan'. There may be times where external resources are required and the employee will be signposted to a relevant organisation. Line managers routinely catch up informally with at least one of their staff every day to make sure they are OK.

Taking stock and looking ahead – pathways to more good practice



We are currently developing an employee programme which is a framework based on the principles of 'good work' and the seven dimensions. Over the next few months we are carrying out a series of workshops and training sessions to get staff to input their thoughts and ideas with the aim to implement, promote and embed good work across the organisation.

HR manager