

ARK at Egwood

Aligning volunteers' skills and interests to business need, so volunteering is rewarding



Context

ARK (Acts of Random Kindness) at Egwood is a land-based day facility in South Somerset set up in 2019. It offers therapeutic activities, experiences and support services on 12 acres of land with animals, horticulture and communal buildings to improve people's health and wellbeing. It has two paid staff and about 35 volunteers who regularly support its work. These numbers have stayed relatively consistent despite the pandemic, as ARK's activities mostly take place outside so can be conducted safely except during national lockdowns.

It aims to help its users 'be actively, consistently and meaningfully engaged' in its activities and this approach applies to its engagement of volunteers as well.

Challenge

ARK seeks to keep its charges for service users low, so has few paid staff and is heavily reliant on volunteers to provide capacity and skills. Therefore, the organisation needs to use its volunteers' skills and experience effectively.

“... We're trying to do [this] as a not-for-profit, if we paid everybody ... we'd have to either charge a fortune and then we wouldn't get people in the door ... [so] the volunteers are essential. The difficulty is getting into that position where you've got the right volunteers in the right place.”

Community business representative

Action

The organisation has a volunteer coordinator. A key part of their role is to host 'meet and greet' sessions with volunteers to identify their interests as well as the skills and experience they can bring to the organisation. During the induction process, the coordinator also sets out the organisation's expectations and the importance of the volunteers' work.

“And we have learnt, over time, when volunteers come to us and we do the induction, we need to be clear to them what we need from them as well as what they want from us ... otherwise we could just end up having a social club here for lots of people who are bored ... we'd get nothing out of that as an organisation, yet it would take us a lot of resource to manage that.

Community business representative

This clarity enables volunteers to put their skills and experience to good use.

“I have a real passion for nature conservation and good, sound land management. So, my motivation is for helping others to see the importance of that ... I definitely feel that my knowledge and skills have been appreciated.

Volunteer

Result

By aligning volunteers' skills and experience with ARK's needs, the organisation is able to develop the activities and services it seeks to provide.

“... We've got a couple of people who are retired engineers, they've set up a woodcraft area in the woods ... we've got people that've got lots of good gardening experience, so they help with the planning and the growing and the crop rotation ... and a few people have got experience in working with vulnerable people and they want to give something back, whether that's helping people to cook on site or engaging in the activities we do alongside people.

Community business representative

While the opportunity for volunteers to use their skills to make a difference for service users gives them a sense of purpose, the very act of volunteering, particularly in the outdoors, helps improve their own health and wellbeing.

“[One volunteer], he'd worked for 28 years in engineering, stuck in an office all day. He said now he's working outside, he's mixing with people, he's lost weight, his blood pressure's reduced and it's the healthiest and happiest he's been in a long time ... When they see some of the difference we're making at ARK, they know they're a part of that, so that they are helping to make a difference.

Community business representative

Volunteers, particularly those who have retired, value their role for enabling them to socialise with others and be part of a collective project.

“... When you're [retired, so] not in a paid job, you miss your colleagues, you miss not having projects to be working on together. So, volunteering helps satisfy some of those kinds of needs.

Volunteer