

Flower Pod

Southwell Care Project (Soon to be: 'REACH learning disability') aims to support adults with learning disabilities, Asperger's and autism to achieve and sustain the best possible quality of life within their local community.

We offer over 40 courses and activities a week in Southwell, Newark, and Mansfield. Our 150 clients (adults with learning disabilities) come from all over Nottinghamshire and can choose from a wide range of courses like healthy cookery, money management, basic skills, arts and crafts, drama and tailored activities to build confidence, self-esteem and communication skills. We organise social nights and holidays too.

Flower Pod

Flower Pod is our new horticultural-based social enterprise.

We are focusing on growing beautiful cut flowers, while giving our service users meaningful activities in the horticultural industry, and we encourage the interaction of people within our community by recruiting volunteers. Our flowers are sold to both the retail and business markets to generate a sustainable income for REACH for years to come. Flower Pod offers customers the opportunity to buy locally produced flowers (at present the UK imports 85 per cent) with a low carbon footprint whilst supporting some of the most vulnerable people in society and offering them an opportunity to raise their self-esteem and encourage good personal health and wellbeing.

Flower Pod is located on 1.5 acres leased to us by Nottingham Trent University. Having changed the landscape completely in the last year, the Flower Pod site near Southwell now incorporates a beautifully terraced growing area with fabulous views of Southwell Minster. An outside amphitheatre will be created in order to add another income stream to the enterprise. We have erected a large commercial poly tunnel enabling us to grow and sell flowers from February to November. We have other income streams mentioned below for the winter months. We have built a cutting edge, traditionally constructed, beautiful resource and social centre which maximises renewable energy sources. This incorporates straw-bale walls with large timber verandas, lime rendering, sheep's-wool insulation and rain-water harvesting. The veranda roof will be sown with a wild flower meadow mix.

Flower Pod aims to:

- create a relaxing setting where adults with learning disabilities and volunteers can join together to grow and sell beautiful flowers and take part in all sorts of activities
- create new opportunities for community involvement
- generate new sources of income for REACH
- have only a positive impact on the environment

Flower Pod will enable adults with learning disabilities to:

- participate in the growth, care and selling of beautiful flowers
- gain important skills needed for more independent living
- enjoy physical activity, fresh air and the natural world
- get to know other people beyond their immediate circle of family and paid-for carers
- participate in development of Flower Pod activities and support others to enjoy and learn

How have we got this far?

With a kick start from the Department of Health's Social Enterprise Investment Fund, we were able to source land to rent, get planning permission and start work on a challenging north facing rubble site within 15 minutes walking distance of Southwell.

The enormous amount of work undertaken so far has largely been done by generous contractors and masses of enthusiastic and talented volunteers. We have removed 200 tons of rubble, turned the orientation of the site inside out and imported 400 tons of top soil to spread over newly created south facing terraces on which to grow the flowers. We have built a beautiful building, conducive to wellbeing and inclusivity.

Construction work and associated activities are currently co-ordinated by an interim Project Manager (a qualified landscape architect), supported by the chief executive and expert steering group of volunteers, which includes a renowned international floriculturist, a senior manager from NTU B, a plant physiologist and a talented graphic artist.

The Flower Pod building is now operational. The poly tunnel is fully functioning and has been generating an income since the beginning of May. Our clients and volunteers are an enthusiastic bunch of people and have learnt to propagate, prick out, plant and prune. They have enjoyed working in a healthy outside environment and have become a great team. They welcome new people to help cultivate over 40 species and they are already reaping dividends in terms of health and reduced isolation.

The basic layout of the landscape is almost complete and has started to be planted. Three ponds have been excavated. Construction of the performance area will be commenced once funding has been secured.

Outline timetable

January – April 2014	Completion of the landscaping. Project Coordinator and Volunteer Horticulture Manager in post. 2 days of activities including 16 clients and 15 volunteers working at Flower Pod every Tuesday and Wednesday. Continual planting. Seeking funding for revenue and small capital. Putting on ACLS courses. Evaluating outcomes. Recruitment of more clients and volunteers. Utilising the building for events, tours and talks and club nights. Continuing trading. Further collaboration with the university.
April – September 2014	Planting trees and shrubs for shelter and florists foliage. Planting perennials. Sowing seeds. Installation of a reed bed and surrounding picnic area. Installation of a computerised irrigation system. Refinement of procedures and policies. Launch party. Briefing and induction of tutors. Pilot courses. Recruitment of Assistant gardeners. Continue recruitment of adults with learning disabilities and volunteers. Instigating a third day of day service. Further development of tailored courses. Evaluation and outcome monitoring. Networking/promotion/marketing activity. Funding sought for small capital and revenue activity
September 2014 - April 2015	Project Manager and Horticulture Manager in post. Launch party. Promotion of securing other income streams from sale of natural confetti, bat/bird/ferret boxes, tool refurbishment, craft markets, soup and bread sales, workshops and lunches. Tours and talks. We will offer a 3-day week service increasing to 5-day week service to 40 awlds by April 2015.

Anticipated numbers of beneficiaries

We anticipate that 40 adults with learning disabilities, Asperger's and Autism will benefit between now and December 2014. Family carers will also benefit from knowing their loved one is engaged in meaningful activity. The wider community will benefit through new opportunities for volunteering and personal development, a new venue for community use at weekends and evenings; opportunity to witness innovative sustainable renewable technology and conservation practices.

Horticultural learning

Seasonal tasks and activities relating to the growing and nurturing of cut flowers, and foliage, preparing flower beds, propagation techniques, tool use and care, harvesting, packaging of flowers for internet sales, flower arrangements and presentation for market are being undertaken by clients and volunteers.. Winter activities, including herb growing, wreath making, woodwork, confetti drying from up cycled flowers and festive art and craft activities involving plant material.

Personal and social development learning programme

Tailored support to each client is going to be offered to increase self-fulfilment and achievement and to raise aspirations for the future. A range of activities to build confidence, esteem and communication skills are programmed to take place. The building will offer the opportunity for all-weather learning activities including healthy cookery etc. Opportunities to improve basic skills (literacy, numeracy and IT) will be embedded within all learning. Volunteers provide additional support on one-to-one basis and to groups as required.

Monitoring and evaluation

A Project Manager and a REACH Systems Development Manager will agree detailed work plans with key milestones and targets. There will be key indicators for each of the project courses.

Funding

By 2016, we intend Flower Pod to be largely sustained through clients' personal budgets, flower sales, other produce sales as detailed above, hire of Flower Pod building, and our own community weekend workshops and markets and fund raising events. Profit will be re-invested into REACH.

We now require funding to recruit staff for Flower Pod and help us get the project fully up and running in order to build firm foundations for the charities future. While establishing this business, we still have to maintain and attract the funding required to sustain our centres in Newark, Southwell and Mansfield.

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