

NHS Forest

Category: Community Involvement

Please detail your project below:

Cirencester Hospital Green Gym

Best Community Engagement

How many different communities have engaged on the site?

The green gym at Cirencester has engaged a broad range of local partners and over the years that it has been in place the community have developed a real fondness and sense of ownership of the site.

Staff past and present

Staff past and present have been involved in the green gym and orchard and have enjoyed the circular walks that have been established through the woods and orchards. At the start of the project there were no paths and no way through or around the orchard it was just so overgrown! One of the first group of volunteers included a former dentist who worked at Cirencester Hospital (a community hospital) and wanted to get involved and put something back.

Local community volunteers

In partnership with the support of Cotswold Volunteers a steady stream of volunteers have attended the green gym session. There is a real mix of people, some who have not left the home for a significant period of time, others who are unemployed and that has dented their confidence. Volunteers also have differing physical abilities and the benefit of a supportive network of volunteers is that there is always someone there to support.

Local education

Cirencester College and Royal Agricultural University

What really exemplified how involved and committed the community felt to the Green Gym and orchard was when Cirencester College told us that they wanted to present us with a cheque for £700. The students had decided to take the opportunity at their charity auction to raise money for the gym without any encouragement from anyone involved in the project! This was a wonderful surprise and the £700 was put to good use to run another Green Gym session and to contribute towards the cost of woodland sculptures created by local chainsaw artist, Dan Hunt.

Through Young Gloucestershire and the National Citizens service several groups of young people (NIETS) have undertaken 2 week mini-projects in the woodlands, one of these involved - moving the timber from the large lopped Cedar tree to the picnic area to be used as outdoor furniture, Construction of the path that cuts through from the Amphitheatre across the woodland.

The students have also helped out at events to help promote healthy eating and the 'five-a-day' message and have also allowed children to make creatures out of fruit and vegetables. As well as Play Gloucestershire they have been supported by The Royal Agricultural University, whose students have attended to help children with the activities.

Cirencester Town Council

Cirencester Town Council has been enthusiastic about the scheme from its inception and the momentum built at Cirencester Hospital orchard and grounds has spread across into other areas.

The Green Gym is significantly contributing to conservation improvements in the wider community as well as creating a safe and accessible circular walk linking the town and the hospital and the local village. Lots of partners have wanted to make a contribution to this fantastic work with OVO, Waitrose, the Big Lottery and Cotswold Tree Wardens all making financial contribution. We have been able to establish wildflower meadows, sculptures and a whole host of Friends Groups in the surrounding green space at Cirencester.

Hannah Sturman, Cirencester Town Council

How have you engaged the community? What did you do?

Cirencester Hospital's Green Gym was officially launched on the October 10, 2010 (10:10:10) thanks to collaboration between Gloucestershire Care Services and The Conservation Volunteers (TCV) and local people. Off the back of this launch we networked with local GPs, local schools and the local council to encourage people to come along to the scheme.

The partnership with Cotswold Volunteers and Cirencester Town Council was pivotal in the growth of the success of the green gym. The Cotswold Volunteers provides a recruitment and placement service for volunteers and thus ensures a widespread understanding of the scheme and in particular provides chaperoning to give people that would not otherwise have the confidence to come along.

We noticed in the first year that we had a glut of autumn apples and we thought that it would be great idea to host an apple day. This meant that children and their parents have become aware of the scheme and thus the scheme grew from there.

Case Study – Shaun Wiggins

Green Gym was my first foray into volunteering. Before that, I was one of the 'long-term unemployed'; basically unemployable, unmotivated and unhealthy.

I'd been directed to the Green Gym after visiting Cotswold Volunteers; an organisation providing information on volunteering opportunities in the Cotswolds. I liked the idea of going the Gym as I was told that even people in their 60s and 70s went along and it was only half a day every two weeks so didn't worry me that it might be too demanding.

I was still slightly apprehensive on my first day but didn't need to be as I found the group to be both friendly and helpful. The people that attended varied in ability but our supervisor, Archie, was very good and gave us each jobs that we would be comfortable with.

Before attending the Gym I had been someone who had become socially isolated and had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. The Green Gym was the beginning of me turning my life round. Interacting with the group helped me rediscover my social skills and the work helped improve my fitness, motivation and ability.

I could see the improvement in myself and wanted to push myself more so signed-up with another volunteering organisation, FairShares community time bank. Shortly thereafter I also started volunteering as a receptionist one day a week at the Cirencester Info Point; a community hub providing information on the local area and acting as reception for Cirencester Town Council, Cotswold Volunteers, FairShares and Corinium Radio (a local, community radio station).

Although I found these other volunteering opportunities enriching, it was thanks to Green Gym that I now knew that my real ambition was to work outdoors doing physical work.

Cirencester Town Council (CTC) has a land-management team who maintain the parks and green spaces within Cirencester. CTC has close links with Green Gym, having carried out several projects together. It was due to Green Gym and my time spent at the Cirencester Info Point that I was introduced to Martin Conyers, the CTC Land-management Officer. Martin heard of my work with the Gym and decided to give me the opportunity to start volunteering with the land team.

After a few months Martin employed me two days a week part-time as a Grounds Worker / Park Keeper. I love the job and we have a great team. In fact I like it so much that I still volunteer with the land team for the other three days of the week.

In three months there is the opportunity of a full-time job there and I'm in the top position to get it. Even if I don't get it I won't be unhappy. Why? Because for 14 years nothing changed, I stayed unemployed with no ambitions or prospects, just stuck in a rut with life passing me by. Fast forward and it's now a year and a half from when I attended my first Green Gym day and since then I've signed-off Jobseekers Allowance, been employed, completed a college course (NVQ Level 2 Environmental Conservation), been trained and certified to use equipment at work (brushcutters/strimmers, manual handling), got myself driving lessons and passed my test and have just been presented with a certificate for completing 1,000 hours of volunteering. On top of that is all the experience and on-the-job training I've received.

Whatever happens, I'm now a more capable and fully-rounded individual and it's all thanks to those first, tentative steps I took towards the world of volunteering with Green Gym.

Shaun Wiggins, Green Gym Volunteer Cirencester Hospital

Who benefited and roughly how many?

The schools have enjoyed apple days 3 years running and 180 pupils have therefore benefitted from attending the annual apple days. Last year we ran our first NHS Sustainability Day event that featured tree planting, and sewing 2 wildflower meadows at the hospital and at the nearby field there were likewise 60 attendees at this. Adult attendees, college students and university students that have attended the green gym is now over 200 people with some attending weekly and the students doing pieces of work that contribute to their horticulture qualifications. Putting all of these attendances together we have enabled 400 nature contact sessions and this has had the added benefit of inspiring a number of other greenspace projects in the local area.

We have also produced a grow your own apple tree leaflet that goes back with the school pupils to spread the word that growing your own apple tree will bear fruit in just 2 years and will be better than getting your apples from the supermarket.

Over 200 volunteers have attended the volunteer sessions which started as a monthly supportive volunteer group and has now increased to weekly session the success of this has been benefitted

What has been the impact?

The concept of the Green Gym was to combine healthy physical activity – through tree-planting and landscaping – with the social benefits of volunteering, using a large area of green space on the hospital site.

The impact of the green gym has been felt a range of means. The stories of local isolated people in the local area and how it has transformed their lives has been the most heartwarming:

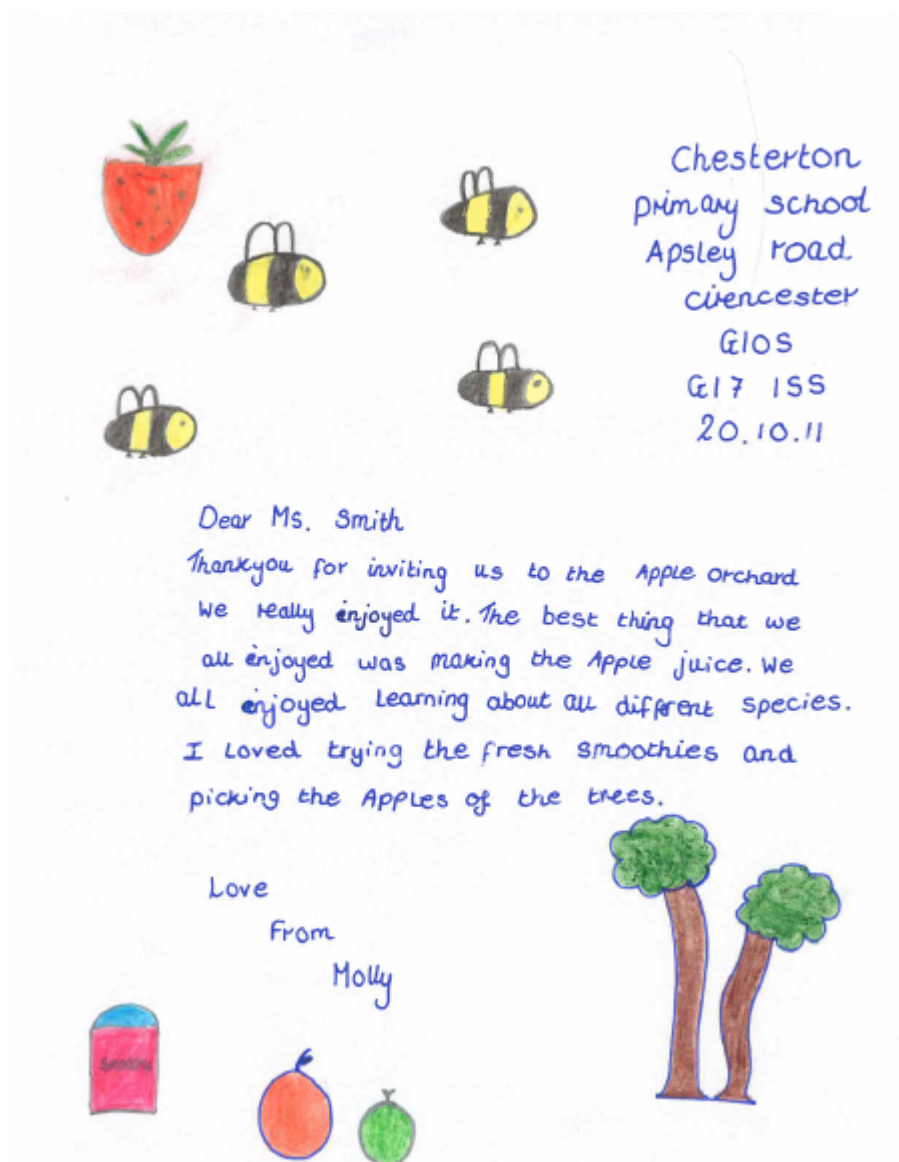


"I have been going to the Green Gym for almost a year now and it's because of this I have managed to turn around and improve my life. I lost my job a few years ago due to depression and I gradually withdrew from everything and found it difficult to even leave the house. I felt like there weren't many options left for me until Cotswold Volunteers mentioned something about a Green Gym. I have never had any experience with conservation work so I was a little cautious about it, but with their help I made it along to a session and since then I have been going every week I can.

As well as getting me out the house and keeping me fit, it has helped me make new friends, learn something new and most importantly build my confidence. I have recently returned from a two-day project leadership course with The Conservation Volunteers (TCV), something I would never have dreamt I could do before, and I have also started my Level 2 diploma in Work-based Environmental Conservation

and I hope one day I can find work using everything I have learnt through the Green Gym!"

Volunteer, Cirencester Green Gym



It has been great to encourage the local school children to spend time outdoors through attending the green gym sessions.

We also wanted to make a contribution to the growth of the NHS Forest – whose aims include improving access to green space, adding trees to NHS land, and greater community involvement with the NHS. These aims aligned very much with those of the Green Gym so we put ourselves forward to be one of the first NHS Forest sites.

Since 2010 we have planted over 700 trees in the orchard and woodland area including local pears, apples and plum species. The physical activity comes from

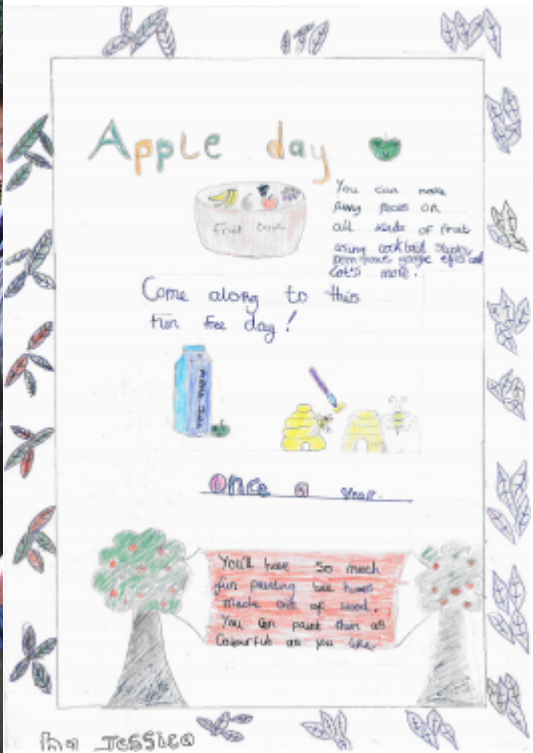
planting trees, cutting back bramble and building steps and pathways. This has the added benefit that it makes Cirencester Hospital look more attractive and patients and visitors have commented upon the improvement.

Cirencester Town Council have linked the orchard and woodlands to their other local greenspaces and historic sites in a greenspace strategy and have continued to grow the community involvement with their Friends groups. The Cotswolds Volunteers have been able to encourage individuals to the group, many of whom do not leave their houses regularly. Coming to this group was the first time that one volunteer had left the house for weeks.

Through creating this Green Gym network and bringing together local voluntary agencies, schools, retired people, unemployed and those off work through long-term sickness we have aimed to educate people about nature, the importance of trees and habitat for wildlife and the crucial role that trees and green spaces play in the health of the planet as a whole. Simply bringing local people together to form networks has helped to reduce isolation - improving the health of the community.







How has your project demonstrated sustainable change within your organisation or community setting?

The launch of the Green Gym at Cirencester Hospital has provided a point of interest to engage with staff and the local community regarding the importance of green spaces to health and well-being.

A phenomenal amount of work has taken place in the orchards and the surrounding woodlands since the Green Gym was created with local people able to utilise the cleared paths for travelling to and from the hospital. Cirencester Town Council became heavily involved in the project in its second year and have been able to re-launch some of their 'working parties' to complement the green gym sessions to provide additional opportunities people to socialise and get fit outdoors.

Local schools have been involved in the Apple Days which we have been a huge success. Children come to celebrate the apple harvests and take part in activities including creating bee houses to explain the importance of pollination, collecting and pressing apples into apple juice and working with Play Gloucestershire's Play Rangers to make smoothies on a 'smoothie bike'.

The events have also promoted healthy eating and the 'five-a-day' message and have also allowed children to make creatures out of fruit and vegetables. As well as Play Gloucestershire they have been supported by The Royal Agricultural University, whose students have attended to help children with the activities.

As a follow-up for the parents of the primary school pupils we produced a leaflet to explain that if they plant a tree now they will have their own apples within two years! If everyone did this it would make a contribution to reducing the carbon footprint of all of those supermarket apples!

Green Gym member Shaun Wiggins was able to develop a career path and gain employment in land management after learning new skills through the project.

Staff at the hospital have started used routes through the orchard and trees to organise 20 minute lunchtime walks, launched during Workout at Work Week. We are further developing the walking routes and promoting them to staff and visitors.

The long-term hope is that the Green Gym will grow into its own self-sustaining community group with more volunteers coming to the group via GP prescribing. There will be many more local community events taking place in the orchard and woodland including woodland skills and music events!

But ultimately the main contribution of the Green Gym has been to the lives of individuals whose well-being has been significantly improved through the social opportunity that it has provided.



