



Surrey Network for Social Enterprise

Old Moat Garden Centre



Drawing courtesy of Old Moat Garden Centre

Background

The Old Moat Garden Centre in Epsom is a popular retail destination for the area's gardening enthusiasts, selling a wide range of bedding plants, herbs, perennials and plant sundries.

Part of Surrey and Borders Partnership NHS Trust, the Old Moat Garden Centre also offers training and work experience in a horticultural environment for people with learning disabilities and mental health problems.

The garden centre started in the early 1980s as a charitable enterprise, and now has five staff and seven volunteers. "We currently work with up to 40 service-users per week and our volunteers work closely with them," centre manager Jackie Connelly explains.

Situated in the former hospitals cluster site to the west of Epsom, the Old Moat Garden Centre is surrounded by land which has now been extensively redeveloped with new housing.

The garden centre itself is situated on a three acre site with an undercover

growing area and a vegetable growing plot. "We have our own propagating house and we also buy in small plugs and shrub lines to grow into a saleable size, just like a commercial garden centre," says Jackie. "We also undertake horticultural and gardening contract work for companies such Dorking based insurance giant UNUM."

Lessons learned

"We have learned to strike a balance between generating revenue from our commercial activities and reaching our training aims, says Jackie. "We are a definitely a social enterprise, in that we are in business for a social purpose, rather than a social firm* which would exist only to provide employment for people disadvantaged in the labour market. We would not be economically viable as a social firm.

"I do believe we have struck that balance at the moment, but we've learned that can't be all things to all people. We've learned that for some people, this type of environment is not appropriate for their needs."

Achievements

The Old Moat Garden Centre offers training in horticulture, conservation and retailing skills including National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) training and the opportunity to gain Skills for Working Life certificates.

"We have probably helped 30 people gain qualifications over the last three years," says Jackie. Many people looking for supported employment come to us through national and local mental health charities including Richmond Fellowship, Shaw Trust and ESRA (Employment Support and Retraining Agency). We also offer work experience to students following land-based courses at East Surrey College.

"We are registered as NVQ training centre in our own right. The staff here are all A1/A2 qualified NVQ assessors and we have two external verifiers on site."

The centre is open all year round and does a roaring trade at Christmas with

continued

* for more information on social firms see www.socialfirms.co.uk

freshly cut trees and wreaths. "In 2006 we won the prestigious Retailer of the Year awards. We now have a very loyal customer base as we are able to sell at very reasonable prices. We also deliver to new estates built around us on the old hospital cluster sites – they are very good source of business," Jackie adds.

The future

Through its work with people who would normally find it difficult to find paid employment on the open market, the Old Moat Garden Centre is fulfilling an identified need on behalf of the county's social services. However, its future is currently under review.

With adult mental health services within Surrey due to be 'externalised' or res-structured in the near future, the enterprise is eager to find to find a charity or other organisation to take it over.

Old Moat Garden Centre

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Old Moat Garden Centre is a member of the Surrey Network for Social Enterprise. To contact the Network Co-ordinator telephone 01483 566072.

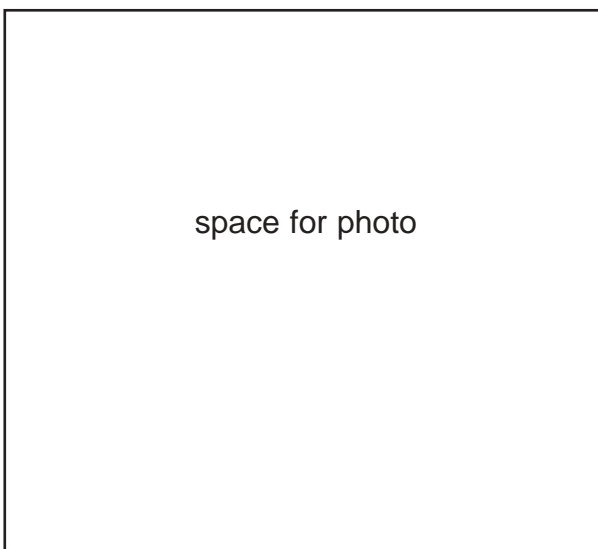


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