



Common Soil – ‘Hands on the Land’ sessions for young people

End-of-project report

We were very grateful at Common Soil community farm to receive a grant from Nineveh Charitable Trust in May 2024 to support a programme of outdoor learning sessions for young people (11 to 18 year olds) to connect them to nature, the local food system and how to grow and work with nutritious, agroecologically-grown food. In the planning stage, it was decided that we would hold a series of different sessions to reach different young people and engage them with the beautiful natural site that we steward.

What was delivered and how the funding was used

The sessions ran through summer and autumn 2024 and included:

1. Three outdoor cookery half-day workshops for 15 young people (aged 11-18) per session. Young people harvested vegetables fresh from the farm and prepared, cooked and ate a meal together around an open fire, guided by two professional chefs. These were openly advertised for anyone to attend, with priority given to those hearing about it through the food bank situated on the same road as the farm.
2. Three half-day workshop sessions for seven 14 and 15 year olds with additional needs for support, from a local Secondary school – one focused on touring the farm and planting garlic, another on seed saving and a third on composting.
3. Four fortnight-long work placements for young people from Stroud College and Cirencester College (at separate times). Two of whom had additional needs for support.

The funding covered time for an outdoor education teacher for the sessions and to support the work placements, local community chefs, administration and planning. It was also used to purchase some garlic bulbs and compost, outdoor cooking and food growing equipment.

A total of 52 beneficiaries, all aged under 18, were supported through this work (a few young people attended more than outdoor cookery workshop).

Results

Outdoor cookery workshops

The funding allowed us to trial running these outdoor cookery classes for young people at our community farm. The sessions combined exploring the farm, harvesting the produce, preparing it, cooking it and eating it together around the fire. We wanted to provide something ‘cool’ to engage this age group with the natural environment, learning about food growing and cooking, eating nutritious food and connecting with others outdoors.

The first session was fully booked in just a couple of days! We hit on something needed in the community and parents told us that they struggled to find things that their young people wanted to do in the holidays, particularly for boys (that their parents also wanted them to do). The next two sessions were both also fully booked. At least half of each group was made up of boys, which we were pleased about as we had considered that there may be some stigma around the cooking activity not being of as much interest to them as girls.

In an evaluation following the sessions, parents reported that their young people had learnt the following things:

- What a community farm is and how it works
- How food actually grows (e.g. green bean vine, root veg below the soil etc.), what grows well in the UK and how it's different to what's found in the supermarket
- How to harvest produce
- A new recipe and working with a new food
- How to cook over an open fire outdoors
- How to use knives and other tools safely in cooking

Many of the young people also reported trying a food for the first time and making new friends and following up with them afterwards.

Parents noted that this was a new and special experience for the young people, that they returned home 'inspired' to work with food more outdoors and all had fun:

"Thank you so, so much for this afternoon – he really enjoyed it! What a wonderful experience for him" (parent of attendee)

"It's hard to find things that my boys can do over the summer. Your cookery sessions have been my children's favourite thing this summer" (parent of attendee)

"My son loved it, which is encouraging as he isn't usually that interested in cookery." (parent of attendee)

"My son was so excited by the whole process. He doesn't cook at home but has since been showing an interest. I think they felt a sense of ownership of the meal as they had harvested the food themselves." (parent of attendee)

For a video of highlights from one of the cookery sessions, please see our Instagram account: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DCPPhAlMXVG/>

A selection of photographs from across the three workshop sessions follows.



Workshops for school students with additional needs

Three half-day workshop sessions were held for seven 14 and 15 year olds with additional needs for support, from a local Secondary school. The same group attended each session, allowing them to build up a connection with the farm and follow tasks through.

The class teacher answered some questions following the workshops:

1. Do you think the young people enjoyed the sessions and/or did they benefit from them? **Pupils massively enjoyed their sessions. The pupils learnt new skills, in a holistic environment. The pupils in the group are the most vulnerable in the school, some with anxiety and mental health difficulties, and this was a wonderful experience for them.**

2. Did the young people learn anything about growing food during the sessions? **Pupils gained a wealth of learning. In the first session, they learnt about garlic planting, including how to prepare the bed and the garlic, as well as different varieties. In the second session, they learnt about the importance of seed saving and had a go at harvesting, preparing and storing carrots for seed saving. In our final session, they focused on the farm's infrastructure and got stuck in digging a trench for a water pipe and turning a compost heap.**

3. Did our sessions help your group connect to the natural world? **The Common Soil farm is situated in an idyllic spot and the pupils did connect with nature, they often asked when we would be going again and their attendance on these sessions were excellent.**

4. Is there anything in particular that you valued about the opportunity to come to the farm? **We valued the opportunity to get pupils out of the classroom and into the countryside and the Common Soil project was a spectacular setting. At the moment, we are in temporary accommodation while we have a new-build school so our garden at school is very small and this space at Common Soil has been important to them.**

Some photographs of the activities during the sessions (some students didn't want to be photographed):



Work placements

Hosting work placements, with support from our outdoor education teacher, felt like a crucially important way for students to learn about agriculture and to put regenerative agriculture in their awareness as an important and satisfying career path.

We hosted four fortnight-long work placements for young people from Stroud College and Cirencester College (at separate times). Two of whom had additional needs for support.

One of the young people supported on a work placement, who had additional needs, particularly benefited as he worked one-to-one with our outdoor education teacher on food growing and building tasks while onsite. His parent reported:

“We’re really grateful to Common Soil for providing an opportunity for him to do something worthwhile, particularly outdoors as it can be hard to get him out. He’s really enjoyed it and come home every day talking about it.”

The future

Having this funding to support engagement of young people in this community farm has enabled us to set up structures and processes for even more engagement in the future. As a small and fairly new organisation, it was quite new to us to work with this age group. Planning for it required lots of risk assessments, creating parental disclaimer and contact detail forms, DBS checks, reviewing Safeguarding policies, discussions about use of fire and knives in the age group and engagement of new volunteers to increase our support ratios (we discovered that the sweet spot is 4 adults to 15 teenagers for the cookery session).

All of this felt new and like a lot of work at the time but we now have the appropriate processes in place for the future and they also apply to other vulnerable client groups. We have also established new outdoor cookery equipment stocks.

Based on the success of these sessions as a way to engage young people with agriculture, nutritious food, the land and cooking, we’ve now managed to secure some Government funding to continue running some outdoor cookery workshops this year as well. We’ve also opened up our site to offer one-off tours and workshops to the local College, specifically for 14 – 16 year olds.

The support that you offered to get this started will continue to have an effect on Common Soil’s ability to engage young people in regenerative agriculture for many years to come.