

Starting and funding a club for retired farmers

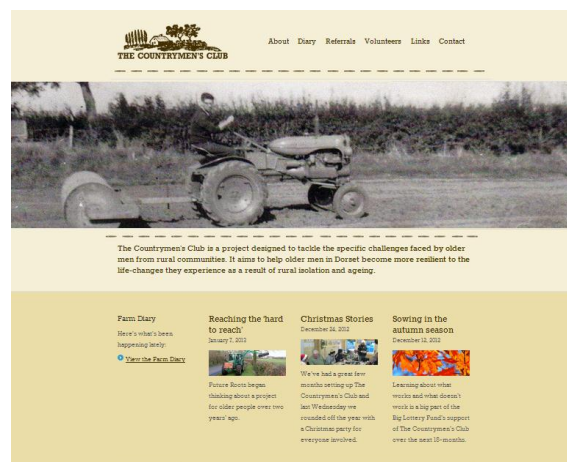


Julie Plumley of Future Roots explains how she set up the Countrymen's Club in 2012, which aims to help older men in Dorset who have worked on the land become more resilient to the life-changes they experience as a result of rural isolation and ageing. Julie explains some of the activities club members engage with, the difference club activities are making in some members' lives and her plans for making the club sustainable post-project through a club membership fee.

- Future Roots is a social enterprise company, based at Rylands Farm, a 30-acre livestock farm in West Dorset.
- One of the projects Future Roots deliver is the Countrymen's Club. Operating in collaboration with local Community Mental Health Teams (CHMT), club members are encouraged to share their knowledge of farming and rural skills with others.
- The Countrymen's Club operates every Tuesday to Friday afternoon. Funding by the Big Lottery Fund's Silver Dreams Fund means that sessions are free of charge between September 2012 and March 2014.

<http://www.countrymen.org.uk/>

<http://www.futureroots.net/>



Where did the idea for a Countrymen's Club first come from?

We delivered some LNFYS visits for older people and it helped me identify the need for a Countrymen's Club. My Father has Parkinson's and I spoke to about ten retired farmers locally who had all become ill with various things and there was nowhere for them to go. Day centres are alien for someone who has been working outside with other men all their life. Countrymen can find themselves surrounded by women in a care setting and shut off from the man's world that they have been part of. Women often maintain their role later in life, but men who are farmers don't when work ends, and they wonder who they are and don't feel that they belong to anything. They all used to go to livestock markets, even if they had sold up they would all meet up at farm sales and markets. But no one in the health and social services provides for a man who can't be quite as independent as he was. I have being criticised for making it a man's club, but I feel very strongly that there is nothing for older men from the rural community, and so that is how it became a Countrymen's Club.

How did you go about taking that need and shaping it into a funded project?

I asked retired farmers "what would you like?" and the feedback was that they wanted to come on to farm and meet up, they wanted something they could belong to but not something we were doing 'to them'. They didn't want to come here for nursing care, but rather to meet likeminded people. They wanted to help me to run the farm with advice, and for the group to have a purpose. So we went for Lottery funding to take it forward and we were successful in our application to the Big Lottery Funds Silver Dreams programme. We have 18 club members on our books at the moment and are aiming for 25 this quarter.

As you've just started the club I imagine it's too early to evaluate impacts, but so far have you had positive feedback?

I wheel them in to the place where a cow is calving, and they feel they have a role back in life and see that helping me helps the teenagers who are also on the farm. One chap with early dementia never left his residential home, he now comes out in a taxi and he knows the cows inside out, he walks about the farm saying 'smell those cows', and 'I have never been happier'. His wife says she has seen a remarkable change in him. He is talking more, it's made a huge difference. We are told some of the guys can't use their hands, can't walk, can't move, but we are seeing that when they are in an environment they know they can use their hands, can use their legs, and can move. We talk about their history, which is often amazing. We don't know long-term how it's having an impact, but we can see physical improvements straight away and you can see their enjoyment of life is increased straight away. I felt it was important to have an external evaluation so Bournemouth University will be evaluating the impact of the project over an 18 month period.



Do you also have a transport budget or do people have to pay transport costs themselves?

I am still trying to find volunteer drivers, we can pay mileage but we struggle to find drivers. If we can get at least six people to use it Dorset Concessionary Bus Service will work out a basic route and provide a bus service for free.

Do you have a focus for each day's activities?

We always start with about 45 minutes inside where we ask everyone to talk about themselves with tea and cake to get to know each other. There is then one hour outside no matter what the weather. We organise something structured for that, for instance at Christmas we made wreaths and gathered greenery, holly, and berries. Walking sticks can take two or three weeks to make. The guys love being with the cattle and sheep, even though they're not able to work with them, they love telling you what they know.

Do you think an activity like this is always going to need external funding?

Well, what we have suggested is that it is a club so members will have to pay a subscription when funding comes to an end. Club members have a website, receive a newsletter every four weeks and a phone call every week, which if they live on their own can last up to an hour. For this they could come two afternoons a week, and every six weeks they are able to participate in an event like a dinner, cheese and wine, or cheese making. We have asked members, "when our funding runs out will you be willing to pay a subscription of £50 every six weeks?" A lot of them said they would be willing to pay and some health services, like the ones that deal with early dementia, have also said that they will pay, as they recognise the benefits the club's activities deliver.

What would be your tip for anyone who at the moment is doing LNFYS visits and is interested in doing something longer-term like this? How would you suggest people try and access local funding opportunities?

Local businesses are a really good thing, they have supplied me with wellington boots and wet weather gear, it is definitely the way forward. You need to separate what you are offering commissioners with your educational offer, as you can't go with an educational slant if you are wanting to sell the changes in behaviour a visit makes. You need to have a clear message and be clear what you can offer.



In a nutshell!

- Julie asked older men who used to work in farming what sort of club they would like to participate in.
- She successfully applied to the Big Lottery Funds Silver Dreams programme.
- The men Julie consulted with wanted something they could belong to and to meet likeminded people, but they didn't want a nursing or care service to be done 'to them'.
- They wanted to help advise on the running of the farm, and for the group to have a purpose.
- Although it is too early for Bournemouth University (who are conducting the project's evaluation) to report results, several club members are more engaged and communicative due to the club's activities.
- When project funding comes to an end, club members will be asked to pay a subscription of £50 every six weeks. Several health services involved have said they will pay the subscription fee as they recognise the benefits the club's activities deliver.
- Consider whether club membership might be a revenue generating option for some of your activities.

