



Supporting our communities...

Our volunteering

We take great pride in supporting our local communities, volunteering and fundraising for local charities and causes close to our heart. As part of our 70th Anniversary celebrations, aligned with our continuous commitment to local communities, we set ourselves a target of 70 hours' volunteering in 2023 - and we delivered over 300 hours! Congratulations to all of our colleagues for this achievement, we're very proud of you.

Here we highlight some of the fantastic causes our colleagues volunteered for during the last 12 months.



**2023:
OVER 300
HOURS**



Small Acts of Kindness

Small Acts of Kindness (SAOK) are a charity that source and distribute practical gifts to older people in Hertfordshire. Their aim is to ensure that every older person feels warm in their home and connected to their community. They do this by sourcing and distributing practical gifts that reduce the negative impact that feeling lonely and isolated can have on older people's physical and mental wellbeing. Their gifts help older people who are cold in their homes and often have to make the impossible choice between heating their homes and buying food.

Throughout winter 2023, SAOK sourced, packed, and distributed 12,000 Warm in Winter gift bags, helping to heat the person, when they can't afford to heat their home ensuring that they are warmer in their homes, happier and a little more connected to their community.

Following a previous successful volunteering day, ten colleagues volunteered again back in November to help pack bags of kindness and pass these onto a central collection point for onward distribution.

Our colleagues attended two separate sessions where they worked alongside other volunteers in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. It was enlightening seeing all the hard work that goes into packing and distributing these bags. With a cost-of-living crisis too, the fantastic work that SAOK does provides a lifeline to many who are struggling throughout the winter months. We are proud to play a small part in the process.

[Small Acts of Kindness](#)



Watling View School

On a warm summer's day back in July, seven of our colleagues made their way to Watling View School for a day of painting and garden clearance. Watling View is a maintained special school in St Albans, which caters for up to 92 pupils from 2-19 years old, with a wide range of complex and profound learning difficulties.

Our team was split into two groups – one to clear outside and the other to paint classrooms (swapping duties after lunch). The first outside “task force” were required to clear all the bricks, rocks, wood, netting, and general building materials from beside the hydrotherapy pool shed and move them to behind the café and a further storage area. Wheelbarrows were filled and trundled all morning and by lunchtime the area had been completely cleared. The reason for doing this was to make space for the hydrotherapy pool shed to be demolished and a new larger, more fit for purpose building constructed in its place.

Meanwhile the “interior design force” had been very busy painting a large classroom

– trickier than first thought as there was a huge amount of educational information and equipment attached to the walls that needed to be painted around.

After lunch our teams changed over and the outdoor crew took down and moved the ingenious plastic bottle greenhouse (which the students had built some years previously), whilst the interior force painted a second classroom. The greenhouse had been set up with a self-watering system, so that all the vegetables and fruit that the students had planted during the summer term would survive and flourish over the holidays when no-one was available to manage and water them.

Finally, our team all pulled together at the end of the day to lift and move the various sections of the greenhouse (which were very heavy and bulky) to a far fence for storage until the new building had been completed and the greenhouse could be refitted.

It was a very busy and fulfilling day enjoyed by all and great to help such a fantastic cause.

Sunnyside: Part 1

Sunnyside Rural Trust was founded in 1990 as a small, horticultural project for young people and adults with learning disabilities. It is now a thriving charity and social enterprise with three sites, offering training and work experience for over 150 vulnerable people (trainees) in the local community. Sunnyside train people with learning disabilities allowing them to acquire skills in a number of rural activities. These include beekeeping, looking after chickens, growing a wide range of plants and produce, landscaping and garden maintenance.

In 2022, we provided a grant to Sunnyside to help open a community café at their Northchurch site and have continued our relationship with them ever since.

In 2023, we dedicated two separate volunteering days with Sunnyside at their Northchurch and Hemel Hempstead sites respectively. In May, our first day took place at Northchurch with five colleagues volunteering to help out.

The Northchurch site has various habitats. Fruit, vegetables, herbs, and plants are grown organically for sale in the farm shop or use in the kitchen. They also have chickens, goats, pigs, and sheep which help provide therapeutic and practical skills for trainees.

Under expert supervision, our colleagues were put to good use, tasked with clearing a couple of polytunnels of weeds before planting various vegetables, including pumpkins for the Autumn. The supervisor Catherine was incredibly knowledgeable and even taught our team how to eat a nettle without being stung and provided us with a recipe to make dandelion honey.

A fantastic lunch was provided on site, which had been prepared by trainees in the kitchen using ingredients grown on-site. Later in the day, our colleagues got to feed the chickens as well as the goats who were pleased to see our team as they were armed with produce that were hand-picked earlier in the day. A great day was had by all our team with staff really appreciating our help.



Sunnyside: The sequel

Our second volunteering day took place on a hot September day at Sunnyside's Hemel Hempstead Food Garden site. This time three colleagues took part in volunteering. The Hemel site is similar to Northchurch in many ways, including having a farm shop which sells Sunnyside produce (fresh eggs, honey, jam and vegetables).

Adjacent to the farm shop is also the Sunnyside Up café. The café has a relaxing atmosphere making it a popular destination for passers-by along the canal. The café provides trainees the opportunity to learn all the skills required to run a café, such as customer service, handling money, acting as a barista, cooking and stock control.

Under the expert supervision of Nick, our colleagues were put to hard work, tasked with clearing one of the vegetable beds that had come to the end of its season and planting out another area. The day was hot, and our team were grateful Nick selected an area that was pleasantly shady.

Lunch was a tasty mix of sandwiches, prepared by trainees in the kitchen using ingredients grown on site just like Northchurch. Our team had the chance to talk to Paula, Sunnyside's volunteer co-ordinator, to learn more about the Sunnyside project and some of the lives that have been transformed by the great work it does.

The afternoon found our team in a fruit cage full of redcurrant bushes that had reached peak ripeness and needed picking. The redcurrants would be turned into jam for sale in Sunnyside's farm shop and also used in their café.

We were delighted to provide our time in helping Sunnyside for a second day and look forward to more day's volunteering across their sites in the future.

[Sunnyside Rural Trust](#)



Riding for the Disabled

Our Branch Associate, Nicola Howes, volunteered at Digswell Place Riding for the Disabled (RDA). Digswell Place is a purpose built, voluntarily run stable in Welwyn Garden City for adults and children with most kinds of disability. Their aim is to give the opportunity of riding to any disabled person which may benefit their health and well-being.

Below is Nicola's story about her volunteering days from September 2023.

"I was very lucky to choose two beautiful days weather wise for my volunteering. The RDA at Digswell has been in operation for 50 years with the same person at the helm for this entire time. In celebration of this achievement, their Patron Princess Anne visited them last week. Sadly, I was a week late and there was no such celebration when I turned up, but they were all very pleased to have an extra pair of hands to help and were very welcoming.

On both days I started at 8.45am and my day consisted of stable duties in the mornings i.e. mucking out, filling hay nets and cleaning and filling lots of buckets of water. In the afternoon, I did what they call side walking both in the woods and the arena. This consists of walking at the

side of the pony close to the rider or in some cases holding the rider in place depending on the level of disability.

Digswell centre is a beautiful place and immaculately kept, no stone is left unturned with the welfare of the ponies, which must all have very special qualities in order for them to be suitable for this job.

It costs approximately £100,000 per year to keep the centre operational. There are only 3 employed staff and an army of regular volunteers that help with all the work that goes into making this a very special place.

They provide riding therapy for physically and mentally disabled individuals and have recently introduced a new therapy called Picnic with a Pony for people with dementia and PTSD issues. Horses are like all animals, non-judgemental, and are very tuned into human emotions. They can prove to be very therapeutic, just being in their presence can bring many benefits to a troubled mind. I thoroughly enjoyed my two days and would encourage anyone if they enjoy the company of animals or ponies in particular, to volunteer for an incredible cause".

[To find out more about Digswell Place Group Riding for the Disabled](#)