



# How to run a Volunteering programme

## Keywords:

Youth. Education. Community. Inclusivity. Networking. Capacity Building

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- Can running Volunteering Programmes enhance the impact of our work?
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- Does running Volunteering Programmes help us strengthen networks and community connections?

## Overview

Volunteering can be a useful addition to the work that we do in our Centres, or can in fact become a key part of it in terms of social inclusion, awareness raising, education and capacity building.

Volunteers can come from within the membership of your organisation and from the local community as, for example, with residents in our Ecovillage who contribute their personal time to help get the organisation's work done. A central tenet of the ethos of our Ecovillage, which focuses on sustainability education, is that each person living in the village gives about 100 voluntary hours per year to the work of the Ecovillage and its management company, Sustainable Projects Ireland, in whatever form they can.

However, in addition to the maintenance of core work, it can be beneficial for Centres to engage external Volunteers to carry out specific aspects of projects in order to enhance the organisation/Centre's capacity to deliver on the practical application of sustainability learning, to achieve educational goals, introduce creative ideas and fresh approaches to learning and even, in some cases, to create new infrastructure and useful assets for the Centre itself e.g. an educational cabin or a polytunnel for experimental, climate resilient growing; a cob pizza oven or a composting station; a digital hub for an online market or a website for a fledgling project!

Such Volunteering should be seen as a mutual educational exchange with benefits for both parties: the visiting Volunteers get immersed in a new community with value systems that may also be new to them and they enjoy a series of hands on experiences within a specific context, learning valuable skills on the way; the host Centre gets the benefit of fresh energy, enthusiasm, interest in the work being done and gets to benefit also from skills that may not already exist within the community.

In the case of engaging with Volunteers who may have additional needs, such as those from marginalised groups and those with intellectual, physical or emotional special needs, inclusion is the key objective and engaging volunteers via Social Farming and similar models can help target the most isolated in our society and involve people in meaningful tasks which enhance personal growth and, in the process, add rich layers to the work being done.

Running Volunteering programmes has pros and cons- work has to be put into training, managing and accommodating Volunteers- but the value of their input usually outweighs the administrative effort and challenges.

## Background

**The European Solidarity Corps (ESC):** [https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity/mission\\_en](https://youth.europa.eu/solidarity/mission_en)

The ESC is perhaps the most recognised and well established European wide Volunteering Programme for youth between the ages of 18 and 30. It runs a range of volunteering programmes of varying length and intensity which allow for social enterprises, non profit organisations, NGOs, and sustainability focused organisations and communities- including learning centres - to avail of the energy, creativity, skills, ideas and altruism of young people from diverse backgrounds from all over Europe.

Inclusion, personal growth and empowerment are central to its ethos as well as the fostering of collaborative teamwork and the contribution of skills and knowledge for the betterment of the community they are living in. Key guiding values are encapsulated on the ESC website above- two are quoted here:

“European Solidarity Corps participants embrace the values of solidarity, respect for human dignity and human rights, and believe in the promotion of a fair and equal society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality prevail.

European Solidarity Corps participants strive to enhance solidarity between people, while respecting their cultures and their traditions, and aim to build a community of shared responsibilities and mutual support.”

It is also a more formal approach to Volunteering. Before you embark upon the application process, you are first required to obtain a **Quality Label** for your organisation/Centre: this is certification that an organisation is able and willing to carry out high quality solidarity activities in accordance with the principles, objectives and quality standards of the European Solidarity Corps. And the work doesn't end there! The process of then making an application to the ESC to obtain the funding necessary to support the Volunteers and their work at your Centre requires guidance and advice from your **National Agency** and other more experienced organisations or Centres -(see **Resources**).

**WWOOFing:** <https://wwooof.net/>

**Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF)** is a worldwide movement to link visitors (WWOOFers) with organic farmers, promote a cultural and educational exchange, and build a global community conscious of ecological farming and sustainability practices. WWOOF started 50 years ago and has grown from a small group in the 1970s to a worldwide community of hundreds of thousands of people today.

From the international Wwoofer website (*link above*):

‘As a WWOOFer, you will participate in the daily life of your host, help on the farm, learn about sustainability, experience a new culture and meet new people, and receive free room and board during your stay. As a host, you will open your home to receive visitors who want to connect with organic food, farming and support the sustainability movement.’

This is a less formal volunteering programme than the ESC, with less investment in administrative terms required from the hosts than for the ESC or Social Farming approaches but

Wwoofing is usually shorter term and focuses mainly on agriculture and ecological farming so has a narrower application for our education Centres- but is highly a highly useful source of seasonal help for those of us running organic farms or producing our own food.

**Social Farming:** <http://socialfarmyouth.eu/>

Social farming is both a new and a traditional concept. It originates from the traditional rural self-help networks that were well established in rural areas before the modernisation of agriculture and the rise of the public welfare system. Increasingly referred to now as *Green Care Farming* or *Social Agriculture* in its more progressive forms (such as seen in the *Thrive* organisation and the *Social Farms and Gardens Network*, both based in the UK) social farming is now a concept which has evolved to include different stakeholders across Europe: farmers, farmers' organisations, providers and stakeholders in social and health care and local, regional and national authorities. Prevention of illness, social inclusion and a better quality of life are features of social agriculture. Social farming therefore includes:

- agricultural enterprises and market gardens which integrate people with physical, mental or emotional disabilities;
- farms which offer openings for the socially disadvantaged, for young offenders or those with learning difficulties, people with drug dependencies, the long-term unemployed and active senior citizens; also for ethnic minority and marginalised communities.
- school and kindergarten farms and many more.

The special added value of Social Farming is creating the possibility for young, disadvantaged people to become integrated into a living and working context, where their personal capabilities may be valued and enhanced. Social farming fits with the changing needs in society and is linked to the strong demand for socialisation and personal autonomy which should be central to the values of health and social care entities and community organisations caring for the vulnerable and marginalised. A succinct description of the practical benefits of Social Farming for both the farm and the volunteer organisation is outlined in the (Irish) *Social Farming Handbook 2014*:

'Social farms provide additional choice to service providers in terms of the options available for clients and to develop more person-centred opportunities. In return, the farmer is rewarded for the provision of the service through the opportunity to expand and diversify their income with a new service on the farm.'

Similar projects including marginalised groups as Volunteers for periods of time could also be run in settings where the focus is not purely agricultural.

Note: There are 'back to work' training and/or reemployment programmes in many of our countries which may contain volunteering modules within them - but we are focusing here on Volunteer led programmes suitable for place based Centres of learning: Wwoofing, Social Farming and especially **ESC Volunteering** as practised at Cloughjordan Ecovillage and Community Farm.

# Getting Started

## European Solidarity Corps (ESC) and its Volunteering Programmes:

In terms of Getting Started, we are focusing on how to start an **ESC Volunteering programme** as it is probably the most universally applicable form of Volunteering within sustainability education Centres.

1. First examine the structure of your community and explore how it could integrate Volunteers into aspects of its work
2. Contact your **National Agency** for ESC and Erasmus+ Projects for guidance, advice and training on obtaining a *Quality Label* so you can run Volunteer programmes and access training and advice on managing and reporting on your programme or projects. *(In Ireland, the National Agency is LEARGAS- <https://www.leargas.ie/>)*
3. It would be a good idea to join the annual Global Ecovillage Network, **GEN Europe Conference** <https://gen-europe.org/> to get in touch with other international organisations and make your Centre known.
4. Enquire within your **National Ecovillage Network** (in Ireland that is the [Irish Environmental Network](#), IEN) to ask if they have contacts to national organisations with ESC expertise, for advice and guidance.
5. Get in contact with the Team from "[Yes to Sustainability](#)", an ESC related platform and forum for engaging young Volunteers, sharing project ideas and co-creating applications, As a site to gauge the type of projects run, and what kind of projects successfully get funded, this is a good place to start. When more confident, you could consider being included in a Project Call for Partners -or, alternatively, acting as Host for some of the Project events.
6. See the **Resources** section for useful links and guides to the ESC Programme itself.

## The Benefits for your Centre and Community

- Increases opportunities for European Centres to meet, collaborate and create Partnerships through ESC exchange programmes, trainings and events
- Leads to awareness and appreciation of different cultures and backgrounds, facilitating diversity within the work setting
- Creates greater physical capacity for community building via increased people power to complete specific, one off projects
- Creates possible new strands of learning opportunities beyond your Centre's core work

- Keeps long term work fresh and interesting with the input of new ideas and energy-stagnated projects can get rejuvenated and more creative and innovative approaches can get implemented.
- Facilitates the development of more formal training programmes as the Volunteers require educational input. This can benefit the wider community with the creation of topical workshops and events.
- Enhances the impact of your Centre's work by imparting knowledge to new generations
- Gets your organisation known on European networks and makes useful connections with those influential networks
- Opens up a source of funding to help implement and complete projects

## Resources

The **ESC programme** itself produces quite substantial guidelines to the various programme types, with much useful additional information on how to apply for Volunteering programmes:

<https://eusolidaritycorps.eupa.org/programme-guide-2022/>

Cloughjordan Community Farm (CSA) co-created the following website as part of a partnership project with Denmark, Sweden and Germany. This *Volunteering in Eco Communities* website contains: **How to Get Started with an ESC Volunteering Programme** and **Running a Volunteer Project**: <http://volunteers-in-ecocommunities.eu/>

Highly useful practical info on tools and techniques for running a Volunteer programme is arranged under the following headings:

*Recruitment and preparation; Arrival; Community Living & integration & inclusion; Workflow and Social Cohesion; Mentoring; Learning and Personal Development; Departure.*

The second document below, co-created in Cloughjordan via a EuropeanExpert's meeting exploring the current **Erasmus+ and ESC programme**, distils and outlines the most useful themes ('green' issues: recycling, energy saving, ecological awareness, etc) within that **Programme Guide 2021-2027**, for application within Ecovillages and eco community settings, most of which applies to sustainability education organisations and Centres everywhere.

[Ecovillage Companion Guide to ESC and Erasmus+](#)

Both of the above provide in depth practical information and methodologies as well as selected best practice examples. They contain useful information on many topics including:

- how to make ESC/Erasmus+ applications
- the different categories of volunteering
- the educational and social needs of the Volunteers
- administrative and staffing requirements
- how to set up financial structures
- how to implement supervision, evaluations and reporting
- creating Partnerships with local organisations and projects.

# Case Study

## Cloughjordan Community Farm ESC Programme



Cloughjordan Community Farm 2022

Cloughjordan Community Farm (CCF): <https://cloughjordancommunityfarm.ie/> is a member owned and operated Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiative based in Cloughjordan Ecovillage.

As a social enterprise, the Community Farm seeks to promote a healthy food culture and to guarantee a secure local food supply, as well as hosting training in resilient food systems and sustainable agriculture. Our aims are to improve the quality and quantity of food provided locally while reducing the environmental impact of food production, packaging and transport. Our organic standard food is delivered fresh from the ground, packaging free, to a nearby local collection point for our community. Alongside this, we're building direct and fair economic relations between producers and local consumers and providing viable and secure livelihoods for those involved.

Our organisation is part of Cloughjordan Ecovillage, Ireland's first intentional community, which is actively focused on practically showing examples of how, on a community level, to respond to local and international issues concerning our environment and society. Any young people volunteering here with Cloughjordan Community farm have a rich learning experience: they learn about sustainable agriculture but set within the innovative context of a wider ecosystem, within an ecovillage that is modelling many other aspects of sustainable living. This makes for a highly rounded and enriching learning experience and is why we think our Farm is uniquely well placed as a venue for receiving young European volunteers who are interested in sustainable growing and exploring our ecological impact on the earth.

## Our Farm's ESC Programme

Our farm ESC Volunteers arrive in March of each year and stay with us to work on the Farm for 12 months.

They are chosen largely based upon their interest in growing, in horticulture and food production and/or the environment and ecological issues; as well as on their ability to work within a team and their willingness to share accommodation and facilities with others they have not yet met.

All Volunteers are provided with a high standard of rented accommodation, in shared houses with individual bedrooms. One of the houses is situated within the Ecovillage and the other is located on the main street of the town.

Two **Volunteer Coordinators** currently run the Volunteer programme. They make the applications each year, welcome the Volunteers and run an *Induction Week* full of activities designed to introduce the Volunteers to each other and to their new community. The Vol Coordinators are also the first port of call to resolve practical issues for Volunteers such as food and accommodation needs, but also to resolve any initial interpersonal or team related problems. They introduce conflict resolution tools and support positive social interaction via collective meals, film nights and board game nights, amongst other social activities. The two Coordinators are supported by a qualified Counsellor/Therapist to resolve any emerging conflicts and issues and there are also health professionals on hand for more serious illness or problems.

There is also an additional informal support network: **Friends of Volunteers**- this Whatsapp based group is a list of local people who have signed up to offer additional community support to ESC Volunteers; they can help out with practical needs such as lifts into town or the bus; clothing and camping gear; borrowing of tools and kitchen gadgets etc.

The Vol Coordinators are also responsible for organising the educational, social and cultural content of the Volunteer programme, for monitoring personal projects, organising field trips and handling all administration for the year long programme, including evaluating Volunteer Progress and keeping records.

In addition there is a **Farm Work Coordinator** who is responsible for helping organise and supervise the work on the ground for the Volunteers i.e. liaising between the farmer and the Volunteers. The work Coordinator helps organise work rotas, communicates the Farmer's task priorities, and again helps to problem solve when teamwork issues arise or when extra training or input is required. They can feed back any issues of concern/report on positive progress to the Volunteer Coordinators.

During *Induction Week* the Volunteers are introduced to the Farmer, Farm members, the Farm Coordination Committee and Board members, the Farm Education team and receive any health and safety training they need to do; they get a tour of the Ecovillage and are introduced to as many people in the community as possible.



Other non farm ESC Volunteers such as those who work for *Ecovillage Education* and *Cultivate* are included in the above Induction week, in the volunteer social and cultural activities and also have access to the same counsellors and support regime. The Farm ESC programme is specifically highlighted here as it is the longest running ESC programme within the Ecovillage- in existence for about eight years now- and has evolved to become a model of best practice in terms of Volunteer support and quality of experience. This best practice approach has now been extended to encompass the additional ESC Volunteers mentioned above.

See link below for the **Volunteers Handbook** as developed by the Cloughjordan Volunteer Coordinators: it does not contain a formal Volunteering policy but it does contain a **Volunteers Manifesto** as created by a previous group of ESC Community Farm Volunteers, which can be tweaked and adapted for each ESC group; plus information on conflict resolution, backed up by organised ongoing practice in using these tools and techniques throughout the year.

[http://volunteers-in-ecocommunities.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CCF-Infokit\\_Website.pdf](http://volunteers-in-ecocommunities.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CCF-Infokit_Website.pdf)

## Questions Asked

Can running a Volunteer programme contribute to our education offering?

The process of assessing the educational content of a work programme for Volunteers enables us to examine the learning to be obtained from aspects of what we do in the course of our daily work and even to expand upon that learning to go beyond the central aim of the work.

In our Community Farm's case, it has enabled us to go beyond sustainable production of healthy, additive free food into running training courses, workshops and event days as well as developing an educational area with a specific theme in mind.

The Volunteers' input this year has enabled the Community Farm to look at developing a designated area of the Farm specifically for **Biodiversity Education** - focusing on creating an outdoor, interactive classroom for this purpose, as well as embarking upon a Community Seed Saving programme with the intention of helping set up a **Community Seed Bank**.

The regular and reliable input of the ESC volunteers has allowed this educational work to progress and soon we hope to be able to offer courses to the public throughout the year.

The additional skills and interest of the group plus their regular availability has meant that new and emerging strands of our work can be encouraged to thrive and grow.

In this way, an adding of value to the core production work comes in the form of education and awareness raising on all sorts of potential topics related to our main work (sustainable growing) but going beyond it and, whilst exemplifying the working ethos of our organisation in new ways, adds to the richness of ecological education available in our Centre and wider community.

Does running a Volunteer Programme improve our creativity, outputs and productivity?

Having added support in the form of Volunteers whose focus is our organisation for a year does help build capacity to implement projects, especially those which rely on physical, hands-on input. The adage 'more hands make light work' is very applicable in terms of boots on the ground capacity to implement ideas and eager young people can achieve a lot in a relatively short time.

It is also demonstrably true that a fresh perspective on ongoing projects can rejuvenate them and lend them new life. For example we have been developing an educational area for our Farm since late 2019. Its development was halted for over two years by Covid. But with the arrival of the new set of ESC Volunteers, fresh life was injected into plans for developing the area beyond what was originally intended and the Volunteers' creative ideas for the design of the space- unencumbered by past intentions or failures- have enabled it to evolve in a more imaginative way.

The original thinking and creative approach of young people who have faith in their ability to achieve results despite the risks (of potential problems or failure) means that innovative new approaches can be taken to the work- this originality, optimism and energy does lead to sometimes unexpected and often very rich outcomes e.g. a cob pizza oven inspired by Japanese anime; a disability accessible compost toilet.

## Can running Volunteering Programmes enhance the impact of our work?

The educational benefits are twofold. With ESC Volunteer help, you can develop an Education Programme which complements and enhances the existing educational offerings within the organisation. In the process, by imparting knowledge and direct experience to the Volunteers, the next generation of young people will be manifesting their learning in the wider world and hopefully spreading that knowledge to others. Some of those young people will become leaders in their communities, perhaps taking up roles that can help frame and influence public policy and radically re envision the future.

You also get to apply your methodologies with willing learners in a practical setting and have the chance to improve on delivery and content according to the constructive feedback and critique received.

The fact that the learning happens within the context of sustainability (in our case on an eco farm within an ecovillage demonstrating the transition to lower carbon living) and while immersed in sustainability values means that complementary learning takes place and adds layers of awareness to the experience.

It is an added bonus that the familiarity of young Volunteers with social media greatly enhances the reach and profile of the work: promotion of project activities on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook, and via Patagonia social media, mean a greater advertisement of our work. As an example, our rural Irish Community Farm was recently featured in a Dutch environmental magazine.

## Will running Volunteering Programmes help us strengthen networks and community connections?

The ESC programme in particular is recognised and supported by many European and international networks such as **GEN Europe** and **Ecolise** as well as national groups and networks. Connections can be made between countries through small scale or large scale partnerships created as part of the official ESC programme, or unofficially with valuable friendship and work connections being created between workers at learning Centres, enabling informal support.

The partnerships created by such ESC programmes, both formal and informal, can forge connections between the Volunteers and the wider community and beyond i.e. training days and workshops for the Volunteers which can be extended to include the wider community; ESC Solidarity Projects in which local young people can participate with European peers on short term projects; plus activities being run in collaboration with organisations and service providers involving marginalised groups, all help reinforce community interaction and connection. Formal partnerships for trainings and one off projects can extend those connections to other European Centres.

All in all, the benefits to our Centres of running an ESC Volunteering Programme include: strengthening networks via partnerships and collaborations; enhancing our own work practices; increasing and improving our educational offerings; making community connections via events and trainings; building Centre capacity to carry out projects.

Although administration and reporting can be rigorous and demanding and requires enough staff, voluntary or otherwise, to help run such a Volunteer programme, the benefits to working practices are both qualitative and tangible.