

OUR FREE MINDS CIO

TRUSTEES ANNUAL REPORT

FOR THE PERIOD 15.11.22 TO 25.01.24





A WORD FROM THE CHAIR

This year we've seen so much growth and change at Our Free Minds - we have more students than ever attending and have consolidated our structures and governance to support this growth. A major part of this work has been our policy review.

We have also welcomed new trustees with a passion for progressive education and play, and a wealth of experience and knowledge to bring to the team.

With so much energy and enthusiasm from the students and their families, we are proud of continuing to provide the space for them to explore what they find interesting and important in a non-directive and non-judgemental environment.

It is gratifying and heart-warming to see our small community evolve and expand, but it is witnessing the positive changes in students attending that is the stand out advantage of being involved with Our Free Minds.

KATIE KOTTING

CHAIR OF THE BOARD OF
TRUSTEES



OUR PURPOSE

AS SET OUT IN OUR GOVERNING DOCUMENT

The advancement of education for the public benefit in the South West of England by:

- a) establishing project-based educational settings designed to provide activities which develop the capabilities, competences, skills and understanding of home-educated children and 'school refusers' aged between 5 and 18.
- b) offering out of school extra curricular activities to all children aged between 5 and 18.



158,000

pupils were severely absent (missed 50% or more sessions) in autumn and spring 2023/24, an increase from 1.9% in the same terms in 2022/23.

97,000

children in England are home educated (likely more as registration is not mandatory), demonstrating an increasing trend, rising particularly sharply following the pandemic.

OFM

At Our Free Minds, we offer our educational support service to meet this growing demand and help families provide educational resources and a supportive and sociable community for their children.

OVERVIEW

ACTIVITIES, PROJECTS AND SERVICES

We create a space for young people to explore what is interesting and important to them, facilitated by open and interested adults and supported by a flexible community structure in which their voices are heard.

We do this by renting a space, during this period the Scout Hut in Burbage, three days a week and providing three adult facilitators who are available to support children with their learning projects and personal development.

During this period we worked for at least one day a week per term with over 51 different home educated children, two children who were attending a mainstream setting on a flexi-school basis and one child who was attending school on a regular basis and came to us as an extra-curricular activity during his school holidays.

We also provide regular family days (7 days during this period), where the families of children can come together at the rented space, use the resources, connect and support one another, and socialise. We find that the families of children either struggling in school or during the de-registering or de-schooling process benefit from connecting with others who have been in a similar position and this in turn creates more stability and better quality of support for the children from their families.





HOW THIS WORKS

SELF-DIRECTED, CONSENT-BASED, COMMUNITY-FOCUSED

As a self directed learning group, our members decide how they invest their time and can opt in or out of every activity. Each day will vary depending on the individual's mood, interests, ideas and inspiration.

The Charity's activities have been designed to deliver benefits in accordance with its objectives. Our activities have been reviewed through the year, referring to the Charities Commission's guidance on public benefit so as to ensure that our work complies with these requirements.

The types of activities the children undertook during this period are described in the following two pages.

Understanding Yourself

- Our high facilitator-to-child ratio allows for children to have plenty of individual as well as group attention.
- We offer all our young people regular one to one mentoring sessions with a facilitator.
- Our daily meeting provides opportunities for group discussions and consent-based agreements.
- Conflict resolution and peer support are a natural and important part of learning at Group.
- Projects are self-directed and self-managed: young people have the opportunity to be bored and create their own motivation and direction.



Science

- Using the microscope to view objects up close and learn about the parts of flowers and insects.
- Cultivating our own pollinator-friendly fruit and veg beds, learning about pollinators.
- Creating Marble Runs and learning about how to build more stable and efficient systems.
- Testing and comparing different household liquids with pH test strips, and using tables and graphs to compile and compare the data.
- Using our scrap paper to make paper pulp, and using the mould and deckle to turn that into new paper.



Creativity

- Creating tiny houses in clay, cardboard, mud and mixed media, and imagining the lives of inhabitants.
- Exploring centripetal force with an electrical art spinner.
- Using pairs of compasses and rulers to create intricate geometric patterns and turn them into mandala images or other artworks.
- Sketching outdoors to practice our pencil skills and look at nature up close and at a distance (insects, wildlife, plants, cloudscapes, landscapes).
- Exploring a range of media including powders, paints, clays, pencils, pens, graphics pad.
- Baking and cooking.





Communication

- Using story cards to create our own collaborative modern fairytales.
- Creating stop motion animation videos.
- Devising our own dramatic interpretations of the Wizard of Oz, mini zombie movies, and working on plays written by members.
- Devising Dungeons and Dragons scenarios and taking part in games.
- Word games such as “Poetry For Neanderthals” focussed on getting meaning across with single syllable words.
- Writing stories, poems and articles and scripts.
- Using Minecraft: learning the words for the passwords, finding a world, choosing an item, working with friends to solve problems and using the laptop keyboard.



Physical Development

- Marco Polo in various versions, always negotiated and renegotiated.
- Chaos tag and other running games.
- Variations of ball games, climbing, skipping, running, jumping.
- Exploring the outdoor space and using the rope swing.
- Gymnastics challenges.
- Yoga sessions.
- Dance choreography and creating dance shows.
- Twister games.
- Balance challenges.
- Obstacle courses and hurdling races.



Strategy, Number & Logic

- Logic puzzles, chess and board games.
- DnD and other role play games designed by the young people.
- Gathering data from science experiments and presenting it in table and graph form.
- Collecting names for start up games, and taking votes.
- Measuring ingredients for baking, working in fractions and converting.
- Measuring time and distance e.g. in long jump tournaments or hurling competitions.
- Using pairs of compasses to create mandalas and other geometric designs.
- Building understanding of shape and directional and geometric language by creating origami.
- Applying geometry in woodwork and junk modelling creations.

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FAMILY CONNECTION

Beyond our sessions we constantly look for ways to create opportunities for connection between the families in our community, and offer support not only to our children but to their families too.

During the Summer of 2023 we organised three family activity days:

- BayLab science workshop
- Woodland Walk
- Lake day with raft building and campfires

These develop confidence in our young people, and create more opportunities beyond our walls for them to engage in and develop their own learning and interests, as well as enhancing the strength of our community by providing more opportunities for whole families to connect.

We also provide regular family days (7 days during this period), and two camp out experiences, where the families of children can come together at the rented space, use the resources, connect and support one another, and socialise. We find that the families of children either struggling in school or during the de-registering or de-schooling process benefit from connecting with others who have been in a similar position and this in turn creates more stability and better quality of support for the children from their families.

We connected with the Local Authority in order to better support our families to understand how to connect with the LA and what the requirements are from them.





ACCESSIBILITY AND HARDSHIP PLACES

- We have a number of young people self-diagnosed and diagnosed as ASD or ADHD. We provide them with an environment in which their neurodiversity is embraced and valued, and in which they can find confidence within community and develop their skills at their own pace and in their own interests.
- We also offer Hardship places - during this period we supported 4 families (6 children) who would not otherwise have been able to afford our fees with reduced rates according to their financial need. We were able to offer these places due to fundraising and charging full fees to those who can afford to pay.



STRUCTURE AND ORGANISATIONAL IMPROVEMENTS

- We grew our trustee board from 3 to 4 trustees.
- We conducted an entire policy review and overhaul, and ensured all our policies are available to parents and the public via our website.

MARKETING AND FUNDRAISING INITIATIVES

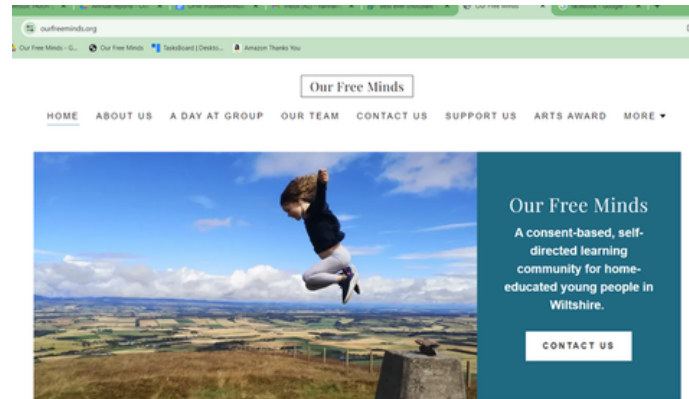
We developed and re-designed our website:
www.ourfreeminds.org.

We began publishing a termly parents newsletter online.

We created a blog with weekly updates, and used Facebook to communicate with current parents about our activities and more broadly to communicate our offering to new families and the wider community.

We fundraised for a Quiet Space. We wanted a space for members to use to regulate or have small break-out groups in, or to use for projects that would benefit from a separate space such as yoga, videos, accessing online calls, or simply a space to relax and chat to friends. The idea for what type of space to invest in developed from upgrading a tent that has been borrowed from our CEO, to buying our own tent, and exploring possibilities of creating a separate space in the main building. However, after a consultation with our fundraising taskforce we elected to go for a self-contained shipping container that would be more weather proof and could be moved with us should we move sites.

Our fundraising efforts this period (some of which were ring-fenced specifically for this objective) included a crowd-funding page, a sponsored danceathon, a Christmas Fair and a community Fireworks event organised jointly with other charities in the local area. We also set up an Easyfundraising account for raising additional funds, and Paypal to make donating to our charity easier for people.





TRAINING AND CPD

- Our volunteer facilitator completed a two day Paediatric First Aid Course so that now all three facilitators are First Aid trained.
- Two facilitators completed the NSPCC level 1 Safeguarding training to upgrade their existing training.





NEW PROJECTS IN THE MAKING FOR 2024 AND BEYOND

- We began work on creating a Young Facilitators Training Programme, which we expect will take around 2 to 3 years to put together and will likely include other similar settings around the country to complete.
- We agreed that in 2024 we will train one facilitator as an Arts Award advisor and register Our Free Minds as an Arts Award centre, in order to increase our offering to our young people aged 8 up as they naturally become more goal-oriented. We plan to have our first group of young people enrolled on the Arts Award by the Q4 2024.
- We aim to have bought and kitted out our new Quiet Space by Q2 2024.



CONTRIBUTION MADE BY VOLUNTEERS

We pay two facilitators for 21 hours a week to cover their time during sessions. They volunteer an extra 4 to 39 hours a week. We also have a volunteer who volunteers her time as a facilitator 18 hours a week and also provides admin support for 4 to 9 hours a week .

The volunteered time during this period was spent:

- Hunting for a new space to house our sessions, so that we can leave long term projects overnight and create more opportunities for our young people and the wider community beyond our current hours.
- Marketing - for example, creating the website, advertising on Facebook, designing and creating posters and online banners, creating our info pack and other materials that describe who we are and what we do.
- Planning, organising and attending fundraising events and activities such as the Sponsored Danceathon, Christmas Fair, Fireworks Night.
- Communicating with parents and supporting and nurturing our community such as writing the parents newsletter, communicating and moderating the WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages for parents and prospective parents.
- Organising and attending the Family Days, Family Walks and other extra activities such as Baylab and the lake day.
- Managing finances and other admin tasks.
- Attending training / CPD sessions.
- Communicating with the wider network of Self-Directed Learning settings to share best practice and create a supportive wider network.
- Buying and managing resources.
- Cleaning and maintaining the premises.
- Travelling to and attending team meetings, finance planning meetings, meetings with the LA and trustee meetings.

We have 4 trustees who volunteer their time to support the charity, attend the quarterly meetings and fulfil their trustee duties.

SUMMARY OF ACHIEVEMENTS

158,000 pupils were severely absent (missed 50% or more sessions) in autumn and spring 2023/24, an increase from 1.9% in the same terms in 2022/23 (www.gov.uk 17 October 2024). Some of these children lose confidence, becoming anxious and isolated.

97,000 children were home educated in 2023's summer term, an increase of 11,000 compared with the 86,000 home educated at the start of 2023 (*The Guardian*, Thu 25 Jan 2024)

Our Free Minds exists to fill the gap, providing:

- a place to feel safe with a wealth of resources.
- a chance to develop citizenship and voice in a supportive, sociable, stable community.
- opportunities for children in mainstream schools to access a self directed approach.

We hope that the three anonymised and combined example case studies on the following pages may illustrate this better than anything else.

“The benefits of these kinds of transformations to both the individuals directly involved and society as a whole are far-reaching.

To have the opportunity to be immersed in and embraced by a stable democratic community helps to prepare children for life in the wider community - and importantly, it enables them to begin to develop and grow into people who know their own interests and know how to pursue them so that they can live fulfilling and happy lives.”

Hannah Woolven, parent and facilitator

Meet “Jamie”

Jamie is 10. At school she was becoming increasingly anxious. She found it impossible to eat with the other children. Well-meaning teachers isolated her during lunch and play times. Soon she was lonely and underweight.

Her family were desperate and terribly worried about Jamie. They knew that school wasn't helping her, and seemed to be making her ill, but they weren't sure whether home education would give her the social life and confidence she needed either.

Jamie now

Jamie joined Our Free Minds as one of our first members. When she first joined she was demonstrably shy and nervous. She found it difficult to speak out for herself. She shied away from other children and seemed only to speak to adults. She hardly ate a thing, and would quickly become overwhelmed and tearful.

Fast forward and she is now an active and vocal member of our group. She is passionate about acting, film directing, stop motion animation, drawing, the natural world and junk modelling. She has built a full scale model of one of her favourite TV villains and regularly leads groups of children in theatrical endeavours. She speaks up in meetings and advocates for herself and others.



Meet "Graham"

Graham is 12. He is autistic. At primary school he managed well, masking his differences. But when it came to secondary school, it all became too much. His confidence plummeted and he became increasingly emotionally dysregulated and isolated. He was suffering from depression and social anxiety. He didn't want to leave his bedroom, let alone his home. His parents were beside themselves with worry.

Graham now

Graham was so anxious that his first contact with Our Free Minds was by a video we made introducing ourselves to him.

After only 6 months with Our Free Minds, Graham is a model community member. He seems to intuitively know how to help other members, with a word of encouragement or a gentle shoulder squeeze. He regularly chairs our morning meeting and helps organise us all. During the sessions he works with incredible focus on his various beautiful art and creative writing projects. He is often seen taking breaks with a book, or initiating some sort of physical challenge game. He is a keen natural scientist and loves to laugh and joke with other group members. He is planning to take part in our Young Facilitators Training Programme as soon as it is in place, and we have no doubt that he will excel.



Meet "Sarah"

Sarah is 9. She has been home educated for the last few years, but she was lonely and found it hard to make lasting friendships. Being home educated, Sarah's family found it difficult to meet other families. Sarah played increasingly alone and was often left to her own devices due to work schedules and illness in the family. She found socialising very difficult, and hadn't learned a lot of the skills that most children her age would have picked up. She was reactive and volatile, and found sharing and losing games overwhelmingly difficult. She was also desperately lonely and her self-esteem was low.

Sarah now

When Sarah first started at Our Free Minds she was bursting into tears at least 5 or 6 times a day. She often found it hard to make herself understood. She would regularly emotionally lash out at other members, and didn't seem to understand boundaries.

Our Free Minds has provided that all important ingredient Sarah needed: a community. Through the relationships she has made at our group, she now has regular meet-ups outside of our sessions as well, so that she spends time with other children and is building relationships.

Through her interests at group sessions, Sarah's literacy is improving and she is also learning how to communicate clearly and effectively with other people. She still gets upset sometimes, but we now rarely see tears more than once a week, which is a sign of her increasing resilience and understanding of social transactions. She has become a regular participant in role playing games, which has been incredible for her development in terms of communication, imagination and social engagement. Her parents also now have other parents to lean on and connect with, so that they can better support Sarah.



FINANCIAL REVIEW

The charitable incorporated organisation ended the year with an increase of net income and movement of funds of £11,324. The charitable incorporated organisation's total funds as at 25 January 2024 were £11,324, which are made up of £11,324 of unrestricted funds.

It is the policy of the charity that unrestricted funds which have not been designated for a specific use should be maintained at a level equivalent to between three and six month's expenditure. The trustees considers that reserves at this level will ensure that, in the event of a significant drop in funding, they will be able to continue the charity's current activities while consideration is given to ways in which additional funds may be raised. This level of reserves has been maintained without throughout the period within the charity's current account. We do not currently have a separate account for reserves but plan to set one up within the next two years.

Amount of reserves held in a separate reserves account is zero.

The reasons for holding zero reserves is that during this first year as a CIO we needed the flexibility to invest in items like resources and our shipping container while we grew and settled. As our member numbers stabilise we plan to open a reserves account and begin transferring funds into it from our current account at a reasonable rate.

We have no funds materially in deficit.

At the time of approving the financial statements, the board of trustees has a reasonable expectation that the charity has adequate resources to continue in operational existence for the foreseeable future. Thus the trustees continue to adopt the going concern basis of accounting in preparing the financial statements.

STRUCTURE, GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

Trustee selection methods as per the Charity's Constitution:

18. The CIO shall have a Board of Trustees (the "Board") comprising at least 3 persons.

19. (i) New Trustees may be recruited to the Board at any time by the Trustees. In selecting individuals for appointment as Trustees, the Trustees must have regard to the skills, knowledge and experience needed for the effective administration of the CIO.

(ii) The Board may elect such officers (chair, secretary, treasurer) as they see fit.
First Trustees

20. The first Trustees are as follows:

Katherine Kotting

Jemma Eadie

Mara Simmons

REFERENCE AND ADMINISTRATIVE DETAILS

Charity name: Our Free Minds CIO

Registered charity number: 1201014

Charity's principal address: 4 Old Meadow Cottages, Lockeridge, Wiltshire SN8 4EN

Director name: Guy Asherson-Taylor

TRUSTEES

None of the trustees has any beneficial interest in the Charity. All of the trustees are members of the company and guarantee to contribute in the event of a winding up.

None of the trustees hold title to property belonging to the charity .

No funds are held as custodian trustees on behalf of others.

		Trustee name	Office (if any)	Dates acted if not for whole year	
	1	Katie Kotting	Chair		
	2	Mara Simmons			
	3	Clea Sambrook	Safeguarding and Treasurer	Appointed 08.05.23	
	4	Sze Wai Wong	Secretary	Appointed 09.05.23	
	5	Jemma Eadie	Secretary	Resigned 10.05.23	