

OUR FREE MINDS CIO

TRUSTEES ANNUAL REPORT

FOR THE PERIOD 26.01.24 TO 25.01.25





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 the addition of our shipping container has added a much needed retreat space. Used as a quiet space, a break out room, or whatever else is needed or decided on at the time, the shipping container has given us some breathing room whilst we continue to look for a more permanent location or 'home' for Our Free Minds.

We have also welcomed new trustees and have a dedicated fund-raiser on the team. Our offering has expanded with Guy Asherson-Taylor qualifying to teach the Arts Awards - our first group of students is currently preparing their coursework and exhibitions.

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.

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.



157,000

In Spring 2024, 157,038 pupils were absent from school more than they were present (severely absent), which is 2.18 per cent of the school population.

*<https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/>

111,700

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*<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/>

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 41 different home educated children.

We also provided a variety of family activities, where the families of children can come together to connect and support one another, and socialise. We find that the families of children (whether home educating by choice, 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. These events included two family walks (in March and August - making use of local outdoor spaces Savernake Forest and Coate Water), two family seasonal parties (Halloween and Christmas) two family summer camp out nights at the rented space in Burbage in July, and an off-site camping weekend at Litton Lakes in Dorset in July.





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.

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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.
- Learning about different power sources, using kits to harness solar power and wind energy.
- 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.
- Chromatography - separating pigments using water .
- Building and materials - junk modelling, tower building, straw structures.
- Floating and sinking, freezing and melting.
- Learning about the solar system.
- Creating a feather collection and researching birds.



Creativity

- Creating tiny houses in clay, cardboard, mud and mixed media, and imagining the lives of inhabitants.
- Team drawing games and challenges.
- Exploring a range of media including powders, paints, clays, pencils, pens, graphics pad.
- Sculpture using air dry clay, polymer clay, papier mache, junk modelling and wood carving
- Whittling, woodwork and pyrography.
- Crochet, knitting, French knitting, braiding and weaving.
- Portrait-drawing and art sessions with an external art teacher
- 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 stories 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

- Dancing and choreography including sessions from an external street dance teacher
- 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.
- Balance challenges.
- Long jump contests
- Offsite walks and trips to the playground.
- Obstacle courses and hurdling races.



Strategy, Number & Logic

- Logic puzzles, chess and board games.
- DnD and other role play games.
- 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.
- Studying for GCSE Maths exams.

FAMILY CONNECTION

Beyond the learning opportunities within the setting, we invested time and energy into other areas that are crucial in stabilising the wider support of network of the children.

During this period we organised the following opportunities for our families and wider community,:

- Springtime Lakeside Walk and Playground Visit at Coate Water.
- Summer Woodland Walk and Picnic in Savernake Forest.
- Summer Family Camp Out - two nights of camping at our rented site in Burbage including BBQ and campfire.
- Lakeside Camping Trip to Litton Lakes in Dorset, with lake swimming, woodland walks and campfires
- Halloween Party with spooky activities and feast
- Christmas Party with Accessible Performance of The Snow Queen by Travelling Theatre Company.

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.





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. During this period we were also able to introduce a second level of reduction in fees, so that we could offer even more affordable rates to those most in need.



STRUCTURE AND ORGANISATIONAL IMPROVEMENTS

- We maintained our trustee board at four trustees.
- We recruited for two new unpaid roles: Location Hunt Taskforce Leader and Fundraising Advisor.
- We reviewed and updated the following:
 - Financial Management Policy
 - Safeguarding Policy
 - Admissions and Fees Policy
 - Missed Payments and Debts Policy
 - Role description for designated safeguarding officer
 - Role Description for Facilitator
 - Staff Handbook

MARKETING AND FUNDRAISING INITIATIVES

We updated our website: www.ourfreeminds.org.

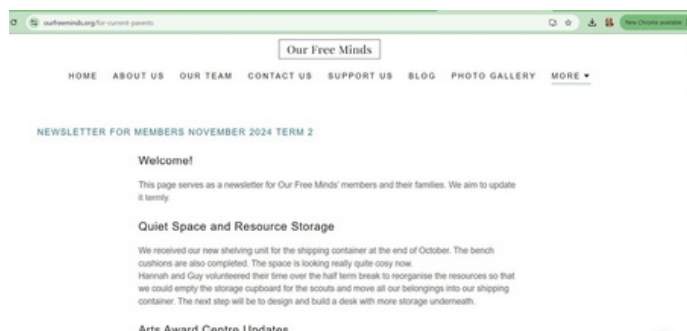
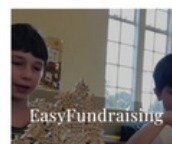
We continued publishing a termly parents newsletter online.

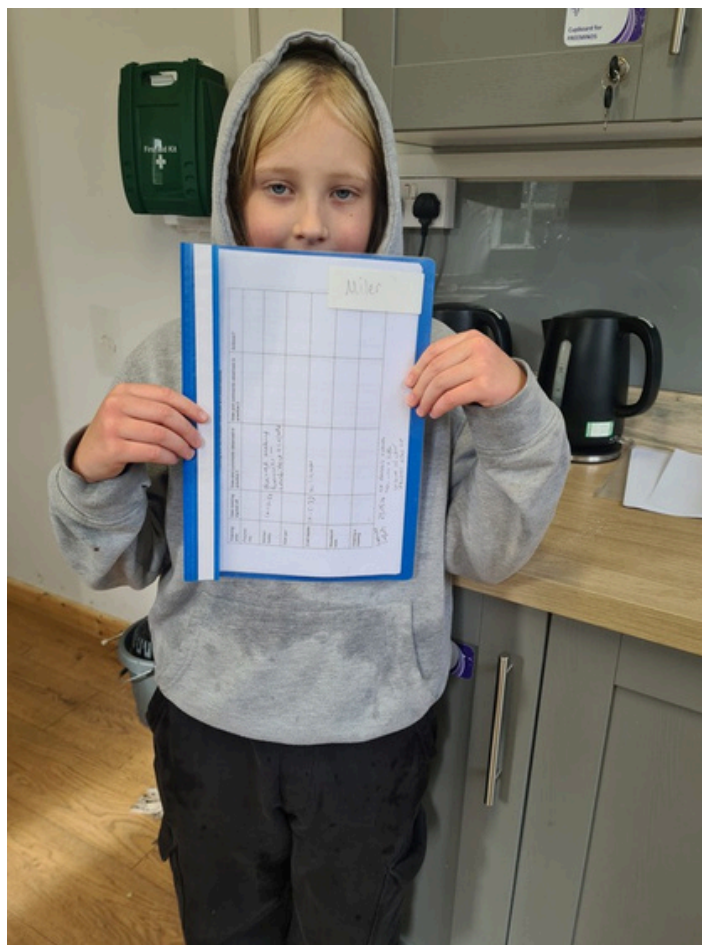
We created content for a blog with weekly updates, and used Facebook to communicate weekly with current parents about our activities and more broadly to communicate our offering to new families and the wider community.

We fundraised for and purchased our 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. We invested time, energy and some finances into beginning to furnish the space with cushioned bench storage seating and tray shelves.

Our fundraising efforts this period included:

- Creating a new space on our website specifically for donations;
- A community Fireworks event, organised jointly with other charities in the local area;
- Ongoing pushes to our Easyfundraising account for raising additional funds;
- Our family Christmas Show.





TRAINING AND CPD

- All three facilitators are current Paediatric and Forest School First Aid trained with Different Perspective Training.
- Two facilitators completed the NSPCC level 1 Safeguarding training in March to upgrade their existing training, and one completed the Flick Level 3 Safeguarding training in November.
- One facilitator completed training as a Bronze and Silver Level Trinity Arts Award Instructor, and we are now a registered centre for delivering the Arts Award.
- Two facilitators attended the Freedom To Learn Forum, investing a weekend at the conference in East Kent. This was an opportunity to share best practice and make connections with other settings around the country and beyond. This also led to a visit from a team from a similar setting in Bristol, which we plan to return in 2025.
- One facilitator has regularly attended the Freedom to Learn monthly call with other settings, offering mutual support and sharing experience.



NEW PROJECTS IN THE MAKING FOR 2025 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 continue to devote time and energy into finding a permanent home and aim to have achieved this within the next 24 months.
- We aim to be in a financial position to pay an administrator one day a week by the end of Q1 2025.
- We also aim to recruit one more volunteer facilitator for two days a week by the end of Q1 2025.



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, working on 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 Christmas Show and 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 Family Activities and Events such as Family Walks, Seasonal Parties, and Family Camps.
- 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, including attendance at the Freedom to Learn Forum and monthly calls.
- Buying and managing resources.
- Cleaning and maintaining the premises.
- Travelling to and attending team meetings, finance planning meetings, and trustee meetings.
- Completing questionnaires and online meetings to assist with diagnoses requested by families of young people.

We have four trustees who volunteer their time to support the charity, attend the quarterly meetings and fulfil their trustee duties. We also have support from our fundraising advisor and Location Taskforce Leader.

SUMMARY OF ACHIEVEMENTS

In Spring 2024, 157,038 pupils were absent from school more than they were present (severely absent), which is 2.18 per cent of the school population (<https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/>). Some of these children lose confidence, becoming anxious and isolated.

As at census date in autumn 2024, local authorities reported 111,700 children in elective home education. This is an increase from an estimated 92,000 in the previous autumn term (<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/>).

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 and parent testimonials 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

Parent testimonial

“Alfie attended Our Free Minds (OFM) for 18 months and our daughter Rose attended for 6 months. OFM supported Alfie during a very difficult time and provided much needed care, support and a regular opportunity to socialise and learn with other children and adults. OFM is the most inclusive service for children that we have encountered and had a huge positive impact on our son’s wellbeing. There isn’t another organisation like it in our area which is why we travelled 40 minutes each way to attend. I believe it offers a vital service to young people who are home educated / not in school. I wish there were more organisations like it so more families could access the benefits. More and more families are choosing to home educate or feel there are no other options for their child. OFM provides a regular opportunity for these children to socialise and learn together. It recognises that not all children can thrive or cope with our mainstream education system. It is also one of the few services in our area where parents do not have to be present which provides a much needed break for parents. Both our children thoroughly enjoyed attending and learnt so much during their sessions. My son developed an interest in 3D printing, flint mapping, Minecraft and whittling. He was supported in a range of social skills such as conflict resolution, making agreements and the need to follow these, turn taking and understanding others’ differences. Our daughter developed close friendships with children of a variety of ages and was able to develop her interest in outdoor play and art. We would highly recommend OFM to any family and believe it provides such an important service and community.”

Our Free Minds parent, Edie Methven

Meet “Gwennie”

Gwennie is 13. She is also autistic. At school she was meeting academic requirements and doing well socially, but found that she had no energy for pursuing any of her other interests, or even attending after school clubs or making the most of the other extra curricular opportunities available to her.

Her family was concerned that her mental health was suffering, as her energy levels were so low she was spending most of her time on the sofa or in bed outside of school hours. It felt like years since she had followed her passion of creative writing or theatre, or even read books for pleasure. It seemed like she was also in a state of constantly high anxiety, which was draining for everyone.

Gwennie now

On her first day, Gwennie compared her experience at Our Free Minds with that of school: “at school it’s like everyone is judging each other all the time. Teachers are judging kids, kids are judging teachers, teachers are judging each other, kids are judging each other. Here, it seems like no one ever judges anyone else! It’s very freeing.”

Fast forward and she is now an active and vocal member of our group. She is passionate about writing poetry and short stories and regularly asks for feedback or editorial support from adults and other young people. She has achieved top marks in two GCSEs, years earlier than she would have taken them in school, and has also made use of our new Arts Award scheme, having completed and submitted her Silver Award in December. She says she has found her own rhythm, and that has enabled her to pursue her passions at her own pace.



Meet "Kit"

Kit is 8. He left school after his parents noticed that he was feeling a lot of rage, and his relationship to learning had deteriorated. He was not only uninspired, he had begun to sabotage his work and anything that was related to school. He was expressing a great deal of anguish and despair, and his confidence had shrunk. He was at the point of hiding behind his parents at social engagements, even with wider family and close friends.

Kit now

After only six months with Our Free Minds, Kit is a model community member. He is deeply empathic, and sparkles with joy. On arrival in the morning he will get straight on with some activity or other - often drawing or crafting. He organises himself, getting all the materials he needs without the need for any support at all. During the sessions he works with incredible focus on his various beautiful artistic and creative writing projects. He is often seen taking breaks with a book, or joining some kind of role play game. He is a keen natural scientist and loves to laugh and joke with other group members. His parents say that he has grown immeasurably in confidence - and even other family members have noticed the change.



Meet "Jennie"

Jennie is 9. She has a diagnosis for ADHD. She began her home education journey by flexi-schooling, but her anxiety levels were so high that it seemed untenable for her to continue in a mainstream environment. Her response to the pressure she felt at school was to lash out, and she felt like she was constantly letting everyone down. Her mood was low, and her stress level was high. She seemed to be very volatile, and would be quick to use attack as a method of defence - verbally and physically. Her parents were concerned about her future, fearing exclusion from school and wondering how to help their child find their place in the world.

Jennie now

When Jennie first started at Our Free Minds she was bursting into tears several times a day. She would occasionally lash out at others, and didn't seem to consistently respect boundaries.

Our Free Minds has provided that all important ingredient Jennie needed: a space to be accepted just as she is. Through the non-judgmental, consistent positive regard she has experienced, Jennie has come to relax into her life and build some wonderful friendships. She engages with passion in many activities throughout the day, and is learning how to communicate clearly and effectively with other people. She is also getting better at accepting boundaries, and is able to advocate clearly for herself and others. She still gets upset sometimes, but we now rarely see tears more than once a term, which is a sign of her increasing resilience and self-acceptance. She is often to be found designing creations, engineering and junk modelling, drawing maps or joining in running games and competitive activities. She is a dearly valued member of the community.



FINANCIAL REVIEW

The charitable incorporated organisation ended the year with an increase of net income and movement of funds of £10,844. The charitable incorporated organisation's total funds as at 25 January 2024 were £22,168, which are made up of £19,663 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 second year as a CIO we felt it important to ensure we maintained flexibility and a financial buffer in our current account while we grew and settled. As our member numbers stabilise we plan to open a reserves account in 2025 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

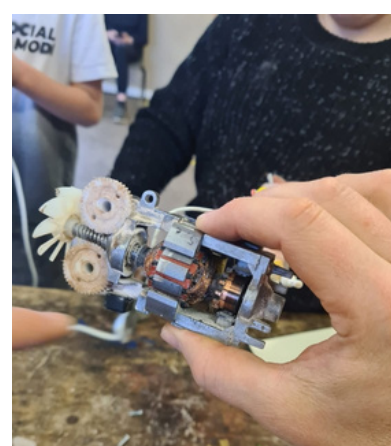
TRUSTEES

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		
	4	Sze Wai Wong	Secretary	Resigned 29.04.24	
	5	Poppy De Witt	Secretary	Appointed 29.04.24	



THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT

