

Unique volunteering project celebrates its third birthday

The Skills Exchange, a volunteering project run by Nottingham's Partnership Council charity is celebrating its third birthday – and the amazing difference it's made to people's lives - with a special event on Friday 28th May from 5pm to 7pm at Tennyson, Forest Road West, Nottingham.

Anyone who wants to find out more about volunteering is welcome to go along. The event is free and will include refreshments and entertainment as well as the chance to meet the project's leaders and volunteers.

The Skills Exchange project was set up in May 2007 with the aim of encouraging volunteering and restoring a sense of 'community' to neighbourhoods including Radford, Hyson Green, Forest Fields, New Basford, Sherwood Rise and the Arboretum area.

Three years on, the project has certainly succeeded in its aim. The Skills Exchange has over 200 members including 197 individual members and 31 organisations. Members range from 17 to 82 years of age and include people with full time and part time jobs, students, pensioners and those who are currently unemployed.

The project works by members volunteering their skills for free in exchange for 'Time Credits'. One hour of volunteering equals one 'Time Credit'. Members can then spend their 'Time Credits' on 'buying' free help of their own.

Since it started, the Skills Exchange has organised over 3,928 hours of skills swapping.

In addition, the Skills Exchange holds regular social events for its members including weekly coffee mornings. This has also inspired members to plan their own social events, such as a 'Girl's Night In' event held by one member recently.

Free skills on offer via the project include gardening, hairdressing, household repairs and decorating as well as more unusual skills including bee-keeping advice! In addition, members of the Skills Exchange regularly donate unwanted items including telephones, books and gardening tools, which are then passed on to other members.

Some of the most unusual swaps have included members helping to blow up balloons and put up decorations for a child's party, whilst another member helps to make costumes for the Independent Street Carnival Troupe, which is an organisational member of the Skills Exchange. In return, the carnival troupe offers its services for free at Partnership Council events.

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Helen Rigby who runs the Skills Exchange says:

"The last three years have been amazing and it's been fantastic to see so many local people joining the project. The idea of people being neighbourly and helping one another is nothing new of course but the Skills Exchange enables people to do this in a way that's safe, enjoyable and rewarding.

Because members earn 'Time Credits' for volunteering their skills they can then get free help of their own in return, rather than being expected to 'give' all the time. The project has also enabled people to benefit from skills that they couldn't otherwise afford, such as help with gardening for instance. The breadth of membership speaks for itself; we literally have members of all ages and from all walks of life. Here's to the next three years!"

A recent survey carried out by the Skills Exchange amongst its members revealed that:

92% of members liked the Skills Exchange because they could choose when to volunteer, rather than being tied down to certain days or times.

72% said they'd received help that they wouldn't have been able to afford otherwise.

95% had met new people since joining

64% joined to get help, as well as to volunteer

One member who took part in the survey said:

"I think it's a brilliant scheme and I hope it will continuously grow as it makes a lot of things possible and accessible without money. It also contributes to building community and to people being valued for the many skills they have."

The Skills Exchange birthday event is open to all members of the Skills Exchange and also local people who'd like to find out more about the project or the Partnership Council charity. Simply come along to the charity's offices, Unit C, Tennyson, Forest Road West on Friday 28th May anytime from 5pm to 7pm.

The Skills Exchange is part funded by Nottingham City Council.

To find out more or to join the Skills Exchange call Helen or Lesley on 0115 970 8200 or email helen@partnershipcouncil.co.uk