1. Name of project you are entering for The Growing Localities Awards

Furry Tales

2. Describe your project in one sentence

Furry Tales combats the social isolation of elders through therapeutic animal-handling sessions and contact with nature at Stepney City Farm.

3. Specify the setting(s) where your project is delivered (e.g. homeless agency, social housing, prison, community, etc)?

We deliver outreach sessions to residential homes and day care centres in Tower Hamlets and onsite sessions at Stepney City Farm.

4. What are the project’s objectives?

To improve quality of life for elders and elders with dementia by increasing their opportunities for sensory stimulation, intergenerational interaction and physical comfort.

To achieve the above by delivering therapeutic animal-handling and nature-based sessions that prompt reminiscence, storytelling, curiosity and laughter.

5. What are the project’s activities?

Outreach sessions: We take guinea pigs, rabbits and bantam hens to local residential homes and day care centres for observation, handling, feeding and often cuddling too. We also take a range of farm materials (eggs, feathers, herbs, flowers and photographs) to use as a warmer and stimulate the senses. Sessions last an hour and are delivered by the Project Manager and a team of trained volunteers.
Onsite sessions: We host sessions at Stepney City Farm for vulnerable isolated elders who are referred by their GP as part of an NHS funded social prescriptions pilot. Participants can also be referred by local community centres. The sessions are structured in a similar way to outreach but also involve a tour of the farm and the chance to meet larger animals and explore the forest garden.

6. What has been the impact / achievement of the project?

Whilst therapy animals are becoming more common, we are unique in creating a connection between a city farm and elders in the community through therapeutic animal-handling sessions. Our sessions provide a space for young and old to come together, share their stories and enjoy the immense benefits that nature brings. They celebrate the East End haven that is Stepney City Farm and have allowed the Farm to reach a large demographic that it had not previously provided for.

Over the past 12 months, we’ve delivered sessions to approximately 330 elders in 12 different homes, centres and older people’s organisations – all of which agree that the self-esteem, social interaction, laughter and general wellbeing of participants are increased by our sessions. 100% of these organisations have said there is a need for this service in London. This has led to funding from NHS Tower Hamlets CCG, who are supporting us in developing a social prescriptions programme with local GP surgeries. Rather than resort to medication, GPs are being asked to refer vulnerable individuals aged 60+ who are at risk of social isolation. Through coming to the Farm, engaging with our volunteers, meeting animals and getting some gentle exercise outdoors, participants can connect meaningfully with a community and find the emotional and physical connection they are perhaps missing. Through this pilot, we have already hosted 4 onsite sessions to 35 vulnerable older people and have received interest from 2 new surgeries who want to get involved.

Whilst we measure session attendance and have the organisations we work with complete evaluation scales, we believe in the importance of qualitative measuring - in Brené Brown’s view that ‘stories are just data with a soul’. We collect photos, sound and testimonials to document the social impact of our work. We consistently receive incredibly positive feedback from care staff, participants and volunteers alike.

‘The highlight was walking around the farm and enjoying the wonderful surroundings together. The company and having the time to sit over a cuppa and chat and pet the animals... it would be great for everyone to have access to this wonderful experience, young,
old and everything in between!’ (Magic Me)

‘I have enjoyed the company. I feel like we’re old friends and we just met today... Thank you for accepting me.’ (Participant)

‘The whole day was absolutely great... I think anyone who's on a downer, which enough people are, it'll lift their spirits. It's brilliant, so what can I say - when we coming back?!’ (Participant)

‘I want to come again and again... I liked being in touch with nature.’ (Participant)

‘I could see how incredibly important it was for this resident to tell his story and have someone listen.’ (Volunteer)

‘My favourite aspect of Furry Tales has been seeing and paying witness to the positive effects of animal therapy.’ (Volunteer)

We have recently received media recognition for our work in The Guardian’s Healthcare Professional Network, The Wharf, GP Journal Pulse and BACP’s Therapy Today. This has helped us attract more volunteers and has led to contact with Vauxhall City Farm, where we would like to extend the project next year.

7. How would you spend any prize money to further your project/initiative?

Despite growing success and interest in Furry Tales, our current grant comes to an end in February 2015. We have applications underway for further funding and are developing a sustainability programme which would see homes take the project into their own hands with us equipping them with small animals and a package of sessions and training so they can bring elders and animals together every day. Anchor, England largest not-for-profit provider of care for older people, have expressed an interest in this, as have Sanctuary Care, and working with Vauxhall City Farm would enable us to take this model into the boroughs of Lambeth, Southwark and Westminster, potentially tripling our reach.

However, this will require start-up funding and we need to be able to cover session costs in the meantime so that we can continue our social prescription programme. Having invested 6 months in preparation, delivery and continuous development, we are just starting to gain NHS recognition as an established service that GPs can rely on. We know that time spent with nature and animals can be as powerful as medication in alleviating isolation and depression.
‘We have unusually high levels of depression and social poverty in Tower Hamlets, both amenable to talking therapies. Contact with animals in a non-clinical setting in the presence of other clients might just reduce the barriers to chat about issues and make new friends.’ (Dr Dirk Pilat, local GP)

With a Growing Localities Award, we could achieve the following:

**£500** could pay for
2 onsite sessions at Stepney City Farm (SCF) for GP referrals, allowing us to help a further 15-20 vulnerable isolated elders over 1 month
OR
2 training sessions for the staff of a local care home in facilitating therapeutic nature-based sessions at SCF, allowing the home to start visiting SCF independently for self-guided tours
OR
the set-up of a hutch and two guinea pigs at a local care home, allowing the home to hold their own animal-handling sessions

**£1000** could pay for
4 onsite sessions at Stepney City Farm for GP referrals, allowing us to help a further 30-40 vulnerable isolated elders over 2 months
OR
the set-up of a hutch and two guinea pigs at a local care home, along with 2 training sessions for staff, allowing the home to hold their own animal-handling sessions and start visiting SCF independently for self-guided tours