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Introduction

Solstice is a wholesale nursery and garden maintenance service offering a range of realistic work experience and training to people recovering from mental health problems.

Solstice mission statement is "Growing people and Plants"

Issues addressed:

- A real working environment
- Creating employment opportunities
- Promoting a learning environment
- Involving employees and participants in decision making
- Team working and communication
- Supporting and valuing the individual
- Promoting healthy living
- Creating a therapeutic environment

Social Firms seek to create good quality jobs for severely disadvantaged people within supportive and successful enterprises

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Evidence of success

- A number of participants have moved on to open employment
- One participant has successfully been employed full time within Solstice
- Growth and expansion of the business over the past 3 years
- The expansion and impact of the healthy eating has improved people's well being, and confidence with cooking healthy meals
- Participants report improved well being, reduced hospital admissions, and the benefits of the support from the Solstice in keeping them well

The approach taken

• A real working environment

Solstice evolved out of Unicorn Enterprises, a sheltered workshop complex providing training and work opportunities for people recovering from mental health problems in Aberdeen. Participants of Unicorn and training instructors recognised the potential for developing sustainable employment opportunities from an established client list.

In 2004 Solstice became a contractor to Grampian Housing Association undertaking maintenance work within Aberdeen City. The income from this contract has been calculated as over £50,000 a year.

In October 2005, Solstice launched their newly acquired wholesale nursery and office site, located a few miles from Aberdeen City Centre in an idyllic setting. HRH Princess Royal officially opened the new site.

Solstice is now an independent company limited by guarantee and a thriving Social Firm.

• Creating employment opportunities

Solstice employs a Business Manager, Maintenance Supervisor, Nursery Assistant, Part time Administrator and Part time Personnel Officer. 15 participants work at Solstice in a variety of roles, some working on a voluntary basis and others under Permitted Work regulations.

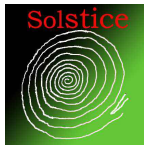
Solstice has successfully employed one participant as the Maintenance Supervisor following an open recruitment process.

• Promoting a learning environment

Solstice offers a range of learning and training opportunities. Employees and participants are encouraged to complete SVQ accredited training in horticulture with support from the local college. Employees and participants also complete Health

Key Learning Points

- Determination – it has taken Solstice a number of years to become established, and it is the determination, long term commitment and drive of the team that has got Solstice to where they are now
- There are many different levels to creating a supportive working environment
- Create an environment where there are a number of opportunities to develop into



Top tips

- Believe in what you are doing and build a network of support around you that will help you to develop as a business and as a good employer.

and safety and manual handling training. Solstice offers a range of sessions around promoting well being, promoting a holistic approach to learning and personal development.

- **Involving employees and participants in decision making**

Solstice has employee and participant representation at their management meetings and at Board level, ensuring that the employee and participants views are represented at critical points of decision making. Solstice's board is supportive of their ongoing growth and development as a Social Firm.

- **Team working and communication**

Employees and participants in Solstice emphasise the role of communication and team working in creating an environment where everyone feels supported. There is a shared responsibility for all aspects of the business, with everyone having the opportunity to work in different areas of the business, so that one job is not dependent on one person. Team working encourages healthy debate, and shared decision making, and it is clear that everyone is working towards the same shared goal – Solstice's continued growth. The team meets informally everyday to plan the day ahead, and a weekly team meeting encourages everyone to keep up with what is happening, and discuss any issues that are arising. Regular social events help to build relationships between team members.

- **Supporting and valuing the individual**

Employees and participants highlight the individual focus on supporting people to settle into their roles at their own pace. The culture of Solstice means people feel comfortable asking questions in the knowledge that the time will be taken to explain things to them.

- **Promoting healthy living**

Solstice has promoted healthy eating to all the employees and participants, and this has become a central part of the week. Through a link with a local chef, Solstice starting to introduce healthy soups once a week on the day of the team meeting. This has led to sharing recipes, not just for soup but also other healthy meals, and people trying out the recipes for each other at home. Solstice now gets the fish man round once a week for everyone to order fresh fish.

- **Creating a therapeutic environment**

Solstice with some financial support has built a polytunnel that employees and participants can use to grow their own fruit, vegetables and flowers. Fruit and veg are then used in cooking the healthy meals.

Next Steps

- To establish Solstice and see it up and running
- To sell wholesale stock
- To become self financing