

Common Ground Suffolk

Volunteer Handbook

Growing food. Building community. Cultivating resilience.

Version 1.0

Adopted by the board of Common Ground Suffolk

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1. Welcome

Thank you for choosing to volunteer with Common Ground Suffolk. Whether you have years of growing experience or have never planted a seed in your life, there is a place for you here, and we are genuinely glad you have joined us.

Common Ground Suffolk exists to advance food security and climate resilience in Suffolk and the surrounding areas. We do this by connecting people who want to grow food with the skills, support, and infrastructure to do so, and by sending volunteers to help those who cannot manage a growing space on their own. Every session you give, every raised bed you help build, every person you support to grow their own food, makes a direct and lasting difference to someone's life and to the resilience of our community.

This handbook tells you everything you need to know about volunteering with us. Please read it carefully before your first session and keep it somewhere you can refer back to. If anything is unclear, or if something comes up that is not covered here, please do not hesitate to get in touch. We would always rather you asked than felt uncertain.

We are a community benefit society, run by and for the people of Suffolk. You are not just a volunteer. You are part of what we are building.

This handbook should be read alongside the Society's Code of Conduct, Safeguarding Policy, and Health and Safety Policy, all of which are published on our website. Where this handbook summarises those documents, the full policy always takes precedence.

2. About Common Ground Suffolk

What we are

Common Ground Suffolk is a community benefit society (CBS), registered under the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act 2014 with the Financial Conduct Authority. A community benefit society is a democratic, member-owned organisation that exists not for profit but for the benefit of the wider community. Our assets are permanently locked for community use and cannot be distributed to members.

We are guided by Co-operative Values and Principles, including voluntary and open membership, democratic member control, and concern for the community. These are not just words on a page; they shape how we make decisions and how we treat everyone involved with the Society.

What we do

Our work falls into four main areas.

- **Volunteer growing support.** We send trained volunteers to help individuals, households, and community groups plan, establish, and maintain productive growing spaces, including gardens, allotments, window boxes, and communal areas. Where a person is unable to carry out the gardening themselves due to age, disability, or other circumstances, our volunteers carry out the work on their behalf.
- **Community infrastructure.** We fund and install growing infrastructure including raised beds, composting systems, and water storage facilities in community spaces, schools, care homes, and other settings.
- **Education and outreach.** We run workshops, events, and educational activities on food growing, environmental stewardship, and community resilience, working with schools, community organisations, and the public.
- **Produce distribution.** We facilitate the distribution and sale of surplus produce at affordable prices, helping to make fresh, local food accessible to more people.

How the Society is governed

The Society is run by a board of directors elected by its members at general meetings. Membership is open to anyone aged 16 or over who supports our objects and has a connection to Suffolk. Becoming a member is not a requirement for benefiting from our activities or volunteering with us; it is an option for people who want a formal say in how the Society is run.

The board meets regularly and is accountable to the membership. All decisions are made in the interests of the community the Society serves, not in the interests of any individual.

3. Types of Volunteering

We offer a wide range of volunteering opportunities to suit different skills, interests, and levels of availability. You do not need any particular experience to get started, and you are welcome to try different types of activity over time.

Growing support visits

This is the heart of what we do. Growing support volunteers are matched with individuals or households who need help planning or maintaining a growing space. Visits typically last between one and three hours and involve practical tasks such as bed preparation, planting, weeding, watering, harvesting, and composting. Where a person is unable to carry out any of these tasks themselves, the volunteer takes on the full growing role on their behalf.

Growing support volunteers work in pairs wherever possible. Solo visits may be permitted in certain circumstances but must be agreed with your coordinator in advance. Please see Section 7 on lone working for more detail.

Community site days

We organise regular group working days at community growing sites, schools, care homes, and other settings where we are building or maintaining infrastructure. These sessions are a great way to get involved if you prefer working as part of a larger group. Tasks might include constructing raised beds, installing water storage systems, preparing compost areas, or running a planting day with residents or pupils.

Events and outreach

From time to time we run public events, workshops, and educational activities. Volunteers are welcome to help with these in a variety of ways, including setting up and packing down, welcoming attendees, demonstrating growing techniques, and speaking about the Society's work. No specialist knowledge is required for most event volunteering roles.

Administration and coordination

If your skills or circumstances mean that practical outdoor work is not possible, there are meaningful ways to contribute from home or in an office setting. We occasionally need help with tasks such as data entry, correspondence, research, social media, and coordination support. Please let us know if you are interested and we can discuss what might suit you.

Skills-based volunteering

If you have a professional background in areas such as ecology, horticulture, finance, communications, legal, or technology, we would love to hear from you. Skills-based volunteers help us operate more effectively and can contribute in a flexible way that fits around other commitments.

4. Getting Started

How to apply

To volunteer with Common Ground Suffolk, please complete a Volunteer Application Form, available on our website. The form asks for your contact details, any relevant experience or skills, your availability, and whether you have any health conditions or other factors we should be aware of when matching you to activities. All information is held securely and used only for the purposes of managing your volunteering with us.

DBS checks

Some of our volunteering activities bring volunteers into contact with children or vulnerable adults. Before undertaking any such activity, you will be asked to complete an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check. We will guide you through this process and cover any associated costs. If you already hold a current enhanced DBS certificate through the Update Service, please let us know.

A DBS check is not required for all volunteering roles. Your coordinator will confirm whether one is needed for your specific activities before you begin.

Induction

All new volunteers are asked to complete a short induction before their first session. The induction covers the Society's purpose and values, your role and responsibilities as a volunteer, key points from this handbook including safeguarding and health and safety, and the practical arrangements for your first activity. Inductions are currently held online and take approximately one hour. Your coordinator will arrange this with you once your application has been accepted.

Your first session

Your coordinator will be in touch before your first session to confirm the arrangements, introduce you to any other volunteers you will be working with, and make sure you have everything you need. Please do not hesitate to ask questions at any point. There is no such thing as a silly question, and we would rather you felt fully prepared.

After your first session we will ask you for a brief informal conversation about how it went. This helps us make sure you are well matched to your activities and that your experience is as positive as possible from the start.

Equipment

The Society provides hand tools, gloves, and other equipment needed for most activities. You do not need to bring your own tools unless you prefer to. Please wear appropriate clothing and footwear for outdoor work. Closed-toe shoes or boots are required for all practical growing sessions. Details of any specific equipment requirements will be provided with your session briefing.

5. What We Ask of You

Volunteering with Common Ground Suffolk is built on mutual respect and a shared commitment to the people and communities we serve. We ask all volunteers to uphold the following principles in everything they do on our behalf.

Reliability

The people we support often depend on our visits and activities. Please only commit to sessions you are confident you can attend, and give as much notice as possible if you need to cancel. If you are unable to attend at short notice, please contact your coordinator directly rather than simply not showing up. We understand that life sometimes gets in the way and will never penalise you for a genuine cancellation, but communication matters.

Conduct

We expect all volunteers to behave with courtesy, respect, and professionalism at all times, whether with beneficiaries, other volunteers, members of the public, or anyone else they encounter while representing the Society. The full standards of behaviour expected of all volunteers are set out in the Society's Code of Conduct, which you are required to read and agree to before your first session. A copy is available on our website and will be provided to you as part of your induction.

Key points from the Code of Conduct include: treating everyone with dignity and respect regardless of their background or circumstances; maintaining appropriate professional boundaries with beneficiaries; not using your position as a volunteer for personal gain; representing the Society fairly and accurately in any public or online communication; and reporting any concerns through the appropriate channels rather than ignoring them or handling them informally.

Confidentiality

In the course of your volunteering you may come into contact with personal or sensitive information about beneficiaries or other individuals. This information must be treated as strictly confidential. Do not share it with anyone who does not have a legitimate need to know, including friends, family, or other volunteers. If you are unsure whether something should be shared, ask your coordinator before doing so.

Punctuality and communication

Please aim to arrive on time for all sessions. If you are running late, let your coordinator or fellow volunteer know as soon as possible. Keep your contact details up to date so we can reach you when needed.

Representing the Society

When you are volunteering, you are representing Common Ground Suffolk. Please be mindful of this in how you speak about the Society, its work, and the people we support. If you are asked to comment on the Society in a public or media context, please refer the enquiry to a coordinator or board member rather than responding on our behalf.

Social media

Please do not post photographs or identifying information about beneficiaries or their properties on social media without their explicit consent and the agreement of your coordinator. If in doubt, do not post. General posts about your volunteering experience and the Society's work are welcome and appreciated, provided they are respectful and accurate.

6. Working Safely

The safety of our volunteers, beneficiaries, and the public is one of our most important responsibilities. This section summarises the key health and safety principles that apply to your volunteering. The full detail is set out in the Society's Health and Safety Policy, available on our website.

Before you begin a session

Before starting any practical work, take a moment to assess the environment you are working in. Look for potential hazards such as uneven ground, unstable structures, standing water, overhanging branches, or signs of pests or chemicals. If you identify a significant hazard that cannot be managed safely, do not proceed. Contact your coordinator to discuss the session before continuing.

Hand tools

Always use the right tool for the task. Inspect tools before use and do not use anything that is damaged, loose, or otherwise unsafe. Carry tools safely, with cutting edges pointing down or away from the body. Clean and store tools properly after use. Report any damaged tools to your coordinator.

Manual handling

Avoid lifting heavy objects alone where possible. When lifting is necessary, bend your knees and keep your back straight. Ask for help or use mechanical assistance for anything heavy or awkward. Do not try to lift more than you can safely manage. This applies to bags of compost, raised bed timbers, water butts, and any other heavy materials.

Water storage and composting

Water butts and storage tanks can become very heavy. Take care when positioning or moving them, and ensure they are securely supported once in place. Composting materials can harbour bacteria and fungal spores; wear gloves when handling compost and wash hands thoroughly afterwards. If you have a respiratory condition, please speak to your coordinator before undertaking composting tasks.

Working in private gardens

When working in a beneficiary's private garden or on their property, be respectful of their home and belongings. Do not enter any part of the property beyond the area where you are working unless invited to do so. If the beneficiary is present, check in with them before starting and let them know what you plan to do. If you have any concerns about the condition of the property or the welfare of the person, please raise them with your coordinator.

Lone working

Where possible, volunteers work in pairs. If a solo visit is agreed with your coordinator, you must follow the lone working procedure: share your planned location and expected return time with your coordinator before you leave; check in by text or call when you arrive and when you leave; and contact your coordinator immediately if anything unexpected arises during the visit. Do not enter a property alone if you feel unsafe for any reason.

First aid

A basic first aid kit is provided for all sessions. Your coordinator will identify who holds first aid responsibility for group sessions. In the event of a serious accident or medical emergency, call 999 immediately. Do not attempt treatment beyond your level of training. Record any accident, however minor, in the Accident and Incident Log and report it to your coordinator at the earliest opportunity.

Adverse weather

Sessions may be postponed or modified in adverse weather conditions, including heavy rain, strong winds, ice, or extreme heat. Your coordinator will contact you in advance if conditions are likely to affect a planned session. Use your judgement: if conditions worsen during a session and you feel it is unsafe to continue, it is always appropriate to stop. Your safety comes first.

Reporting incidents

Any accident, near miss, or unsafe situation must be reported to your coordinator as soon as possible. This is not about blame; it is about making sure we can learn from incidents and prevent them from happening again. Reports are made using the Accident and Incident Log, which your coordinator can provide.

7. Safeguarding

Common Ground Suffolk is committed to the safety and wellbeing of all children and vulnerable adults who come into contact with our work. Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility, and all volunteers play a role in it.

This section provides a plain-English overview of our safeguarding responsibilities. The full detail is set out in the Society's Safeguarding Policy, available on our website. Please read the full policy as part of your induction.

What safeguarding means in practice

Safeguarding means taking reasonable steps to protect children and vulnerable adults from harm, abuse, or neglect. In the context of your volunteering, it means being alert to signs that someone may be at risk, knowing what to do if you have a concern, and not putting yourself in situations where your conduct could be misunderstood or where a vulnerable person could be harmed.

Recognising a concern

Signs that a child or vulnerable adult may be at risk can include unexplained injuries, significant changes in behaviour or mood, withdrawal, fearfulness, signs of neglect such as poor hygiene or inadequate clothing, or disclosures by the person themselves. You do not need to be certain that abuse is occurring to raise a concern. If something does not feel right, report it.

What to do if you have a concern

If you have a safeguarding concern, do not try to investigate it yourself. Do not promise confidentiality to the person disclosing. Do not confront anyone you suspect of causing harm. Instead, make a note of what you have seen or heard as soon as possible, using the person's own words where relevant, and contact the Society's Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) without delay.

Designated Safeguarding Lead: Jadie Moore

Contact: Jadie.moore@yahoo.com

If you cannot reach the DSL and you believe a child or vulnerable adult is in immediate danger, contact the police or social services directly without waiting.

Safe working practices

The following practices apply to all volunteers working with or near children or vulnerable adults.

- Do not be alone with a child or vulnerable adult in an enclosed or private space.
- Do not initiate physical contact with beneficiaries. If physical assistance is needed, ask permission and explain what you are going to do.
- Do not share personal contact details such as your phone number or social media profiles with beneficiaries or their family members.
- Do not accept gifts of significant value from beneficiaries.

- Do not photograph children or vulnerable adults without the explicit consent of a parent, guardian, or the person themselves.
- Do not engage in conversations or online contact with children outside of the Society's organised activities.

These boundaries exist to protect beneficiaries and to protect you. If you are ever unsure whether something is appropriate, ask your coordinator before proceeding.

8. Your Wellbeing

We want volunteering with Common Ground Suffolk to be a positive, rewarding, and sustainable experience. Your wellbeing matters to us, and we want to make sure you feel supported throughout your time with us.

Support from your coordinator

Every volunteer is supported by a coordinator who is your first point of contact for anything related to your volunteering. Your coordinator is there to help you with practical arrangements, answer questions, discuss any concerns, and make sure your volunteering experience is working well for you. Please do not hesitate to reach out to them.

If something is not working

If your volunteering role is not feeling right for any reason, whether that is the type of activity, the frequency, a particular match, or anything else, please tell us. We would much rather adjust your role or find you a better fit than lose you as a volunteer. There is no need to simply stop coming; a short conversation can make a big difference.

If something concerns or upsets you

Volunteering can sometimes bring you into contact with difficult situations. If something you have witnessed or experienced during a session has left you feeling distressed or unsettled, please talk to your coordinator. We can provide a listening ear, advice, and if appropriate, a referral to further support. You do not need to manage difficult experiences alone.

Taking breaks

There is no minimum commitment required of volunteers. If you need to take a break for any reason, whether for a week, a month, or longer, simply let your coordinator know. You are welcome to return when you are ready. We understand that life has seasons and that availability changes.

Boundaries and your own safety

It is important that you feel safe and comfortable in all your volunteering activities. If you ever feel unsafe, uncomfortable, or pressured in a session, you have the right to leave and to report the situation to your coordinator. Your safety always comes before the completion of any task.

9. Expenses and Recognition

Claiming expenses

Common Ground Suffolk reimburses volunteers for reasonable out-of-pocket expenses incurred directly in connection with their volunteering. Reimbursable expenses include travel to and from sessions by public transport or by car at the standard HMRC mileage rate, and any materials or supplies purchased on behalf of the Society with prior authorisation from your coordinator.

To claim expenses, please complete an Expenses Claim Form, available from your coordinator or on our website, and submit it with any relevant receipts. Claims should be submitted promptly and within one month of the expense being incurred. Late claims may not be reimbursable.

Personal expenses such as meals, clothing, or equipment purchased for your own use are not reimbursable unless agreed in advance.

Recognising your contribution

We know that volunteering is a significant contribution of your time and energy, and we do not take it for granted. We recognise our volunteers in a number of ways, including regular thank-you communications, volunteer socials and celebration events, references for employment or further volunteering, and mentions in the Society's annual report. If there is a particular way in which you would value recognition, please let your coordinator know.

10. Your Data and Privacy

When you apply to volunteer with Common Ground Suffolk, we collect and hold certain personal information about you. This section explains what we collect, why, and how it is used. The full detail is set out in the Society's Privacy Policy, available on our website.

What we collect

We collect the information you provide on your Volunteer Application Form, including your name, contact details, emergency contact details, relevant experience and skills, availability, and any health or other information relevant to your volunteering role. If a DBS check is required, we collect the information needed to process that check.

How we use it

We use your information to manage your volunteering with us, including matching you to appropriate activities, communicating with you about sessions, and keeping records required by law or good governance practice. We do not use your information for any purpose unrelated to your volunteering without your consent.

Who we share it with

We do not sell or share your personal information with third parties for marketing or commercial purposes. We may share information with third parties where required by law, for example in connection with a DBS check or a safeguarding referral, or where you have given your consent.

Your rights

You have the right to access the information we hold about you, to request corrections, and in certain circumstances to request that your information be deleted. To exercise any of these rights, please contact us using the details in Section 11. Further information about your rights is available in the Society's Privacy Policy.

11. Becoming a Member

Volunteering with Common Ground Suffolk does not require you to become a member. Membership is entirely optional and is a separate role for people who want a formal say in how the Society is governed.

Members of the Society are able to attend and vote at general meetings, stand for election to the board of directors, and shape the strategic direction of the organisation. Each member holds at least one share in the Society, the price of which is set by the board from time to time and published on our website.

If you are interested in becoming a member, please speak to your coordinator or visit our website for details of the current share offer. We would be delighted to have committed volunteers take an active role in the governance of the Society.

12. Useful Contacts and Further Information

Your coordinator

Your first point of contact for anything related to your volunteering. Your coordinator's details will be provided to you during your induction.

Designated Safeguarding Lead

Name: Jadie Moore

Contact: jadie.moore@yahoo.com

Health and Safety Lead

Name: Connor Jacobs

Contact: 07513 854770, connorjacobs87@gmail.com

General enquiries

Website: www.commongroundsuffolk.org

Email: general@commongroundsuffolk.org

Emergency contacts

Emergency services: 999

Non-emergency police: 101

NHS non-emergency: 111

Society policies

All Society policies are published on our website and available on request. These include:

- Code of Conduct
- Safeguarding Policy
- Health and Safety Policy
- Privacy Policy
- Conflicts of Interest Policy

13. Volunteer Acknowledgement

Please sign and return this page to your coordinator before your first volunteering session. By signing below you confirm that you have read and understood this handbook and agree to abide by the Society's Code of Conduct and all other policies referenced within it.

Full name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

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