

Building relationships through off-farm visits



Liz Nottage explains how she has proactively developed relationships with groups of older people through off farm visits. She also explains how growing potatoes in buckets has enabled ongoing contact with groups through the growing season.

- Liz and Andrew Nottage work for College Farm (part of Russell Smith Farms) whose mission is to grow high quality wholesome food, whilst providing employment for local people and conserving the countryside on 800 hectares around Duxford, Cambridgeshire.
- The farm specialises in the production of premium quality vegetables for different customers, including supermarkets and local shops and box schemes.
- College Farm is a LEAF Demonstration Farm, hosting visits for schools, colleges and local interest groups. Liz and Andrew also deliver LNFYS visits for care and residential homes, utilising a wide range of small arable plots to deliver sensory activities.

<http://www.russellsmithfarms.co.uk/>

What first gave you the idea for doing visits off farm?

A group of older people from a club in Duxford approached us. They felt they couldn't travel to the farm so asked if we could visit their club. I felt a bit nervous initially as I wasn't sure how we could make off farm visits multi-sensory. But we took in photos of the farm and potatoes of different varieties for them to taste and see which ones they liked, and we also had a sensory quiz with various different crops and vegetables to identify. After we had visited them the group decided they could manage to come out to the farm, so a few months later they visited us and had a really good visit. We have done the same thing with a group in Newmarket where we have done similar visits. The youngest were aged mid 70's and the oldest were in their late 80's with varying degrees of mobility.



So it was only because you went out and visited the groups that made them realise that they would be able to come out to the farm?

Yes, at first they said that they couldn't come to us and said that there was no way they could manage it. But with our encouragement they decided while we were there that they could make a visit. Most of the group members came on the visit and we tailored it to their needs. Some of the older visitors couldn't manage the tractor and trailer ride so we also used a car. So yes, our visit to them encouraged them to come here. It has led to an on-going relationship and they are coming for another visit this year.

You said that initially you were nervous as to how to make it multi-sensory, what would you say has been your main learning?



You are taking the farm to them so it is important to have a mix of things to show them. Within the group there are those who are highly intelligent, alert people who need some facts and information to keep them engaged with you and others who are not so interested and need sensory stimulus. So it is important to make it interactive, have lots of things to do as well as looking and listening and linking up the farm with photos and tasting one or two examples of farm produce.

I know that you've given several groups potatoes to plant and then you've harvested them together later in the year?

Yes, we have done that with Orchard Manor, who are a residential home for young people with physical and learning difficulties. For the last two years I have gone into their centre and had a session planting potatoes, then later on in the summer residents have come out to the farm with their potatoes which we have harvested together along with other activities. We have linked it to the harvest on the farm and it has worked really well. The group are responsible for looking after the potatoes which they really enjoy and take ownership of the task.

In a nutshell!

- Two groups of elderly people asked Liz and Andrew if they could visit as both groups felt they couldn't manage a farm visit.
- Following Liz and Andrew's visit both groups came out to the farm and thoroughly enjoyed themselves. Return visits are planned in 2013 for all the groups mentioned.
- With sufficient preparation and activities it's possible to make off farm visits sensory rich.
- Potato planting and harvesting is a great way of maintaining contact with groups through the spring and summer.