

# Evidence Report: The impact of sensory farm visits on older people with dementia

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'Let Nature Feed Your Senses' is a project run in partnership between LEAF (Linking Environment And Farming) and Sensory Trust. The project aims to engage people with nature, food and farming on a network of farms and nature reserves across England. Whilst the project's funding has now come to an end, the sensory farm visits advocated by the project continue through a dedicated network of host farmers.

After taking a group of elderly care home residents on a Let Nature Feed Your Senses visit, the group leader said *"Visiting a farm might sound like just a nice day out, which it certainly is, but for our residents the benefit to their physical and mental wellbeing was huge. When residents have visited a farm we've seen a huge transformation with people laughing, smiling and talking. Even after the visits we've noticed that the residents seem calmer, happier and will sleep better at night."*

## Introduction

- Dementia directly affects 820,000 people in the UK, while 25 million people have a close friend or family member with dementia (Alzheimer's Research UK).
- By 2040, the number of people affected is expected to double and the costs to the economy are likely to treble. Dementia currently costs the UK economy £23 billion a year, more than cancer and heart disease combined (Department of Health, 2013).
- There is evidence to suggest that keeping mentally, physically and socially active can reduce the risk of dementia (Heyn et al., 2004; Dröes et al., 2011; Moniz-Cook et al., 2008).
- Mental health can be enhanced by exposure to nature, including being in nature (Pretty et al., 2005), exercising in nature (Mapes, 2011) or even a view from a window (Ulrich, 1984).
- After a Let Nature Feed Your Senses visit, one group leader said *"clients with dementia, who have little chance to go out, all managed to engage with the animals. Some clients find it hard to engage with each other but the animals were very accepting and validating."*



## Connection to nature

- Connection to nature can enhance verbal expression in people living with dementia (Chalfont, 2006).
- Humans have a fundamental and ancient connection with nature and a strong sense of place, and this emotional connection with, and need for, nature remains present in the dementia process (Mapes, 2011).
- After on Let Nature Feed Your Senses visit, the visit group leader commented, “[the visit] brought back memories for them, things they haven’t seen for many years”

## Exercise

- Care Farms<sup>1</sup> typically provide older patients with dementia more varied programmes than regular day care (De Bruin, 2009). People with dementia at care farms are more frequently outdoors (e.g. garden, forest, yard) or in other buildings belonging to the care farm (e.g. stable, greenhouse, workshop), whereas people with dementia in regular day care facilities typically spend almost all day in the same room (De Bruin, 2009).
- During an after visit interview following a Let Nature Feed Your Senses visit, a group leader said “[the visit] gave them an outside interest and stimulation” and “[in comparison with indoor activities, it’s] not the same as being out doors with nature. One man never joined in with activities in the home but the next day I was doing chair exercises which he usually just observes but he joined in”

## Nutrition

- Many older patients with dementia run the risk of being underfed and experiencing undesirable weight loss. De Bruin (2009) found that older dementia patients who participated in weekly care farm activities had a higher average intake of energy (1.2 MJ per day higher), carbohydrates (39 g more per day) and fluid (441 g more per day) than their peers in regular day care. Their programme of visits resulted in a significantly better nutritional status, and the author concluded that day care on a care

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<sup>1</sup> Ecotherapy, Green Care, Care Farming and Animal-Assisted Interventions, are all part of a broad family of nature based interventions, of which Sensory Farm Visits are a related but distinctive component.



farm can have a significant impact on the prevention of dehydration, undesirable weight loss and underfeeding.

- After a taking a group of elderly care home residents with dementia on a Let Nature Feed Your Senses visit, the group leader said, *“the group finished the day with tea and homemade bread and jam. Rose sat with the other residents and enjoyed eating the food, which was highly unusual for her. That evening she also ate all her evening meal with the other residents.”*

## Wellbeing

- The farm environment positively affects the health and well-being of persons with dementia (Bergland & Kirkevold 2011).
- Both the buildings and outdoor areas of a farm represent a recognizable and meaningful non-medical context, which can stimulate activities, memory, work and conversations (Strandli 2007; De Bruin 2009).
- After taking a group of residents from a care home on a visit to a farm through the Let Nature Feed Your Senses project, the group leader said, *“There was one gentleman we felt [the visit] made a difference to his wellbeing. He has a learning disability and a little bit of alzheimer's and he was a different person on the day. He used to live on a farm and the wellbeing for him on the day was 100% better. He didn't stop talking about what he knew, normally he is really cautious worried he might hurt himself, but he was hurling himself into the dairy part. It was amazing and interesting for us to see.”*
- Another group leader said, *“All the residents seemed much more relaxed; they were calm, happy and engaged which was fantastic just to see.”*

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