

# Evidence Report: The impact of sensory farm visits on people with learning difficulties

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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.

Speaking about the impact of a Let Nature Feed Your Senses visit on a group of young adults with learning difficulties, the group leader said *"I think this kind of visit will always benefit an individual, I would struggle to say it wouldn't impact on their lives in a positive way. It's got to have a positive bearing."*

## Introduction

- Ecotherapy<sup>1</sup> services have proved to be a valuable route for people with learning disabilities to be part of their community, take part in a meaningful activity that makes a difference, and be more physically active (Bragg et al., 2013).
- Children and young people with learning disabilities are much more likely to live in poverty, to have fewer friends and to have additional long-term health problems and disabilities such as epilepsy and sensory impairments. All of these factors are positively associated with mental health problems. (Foundation for People with Learning Disabilities, 2014) which means the mental health benefits of farm visits are of particular relevance.

## Improve mental wellbeing

- Many tasks on a care farm are carried out by participants jointly. This helps to bring about a feeling of solidarity between the participants, care farmer and the care workers. Participants find it a stimulating experience 'to complete the task together' (Elings, 2004).

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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.



- After taking a group on a Let Nature Feed Your Senses visit, one group leader said, *“One of the girls is always very enthusiastic about something at the time, but then changes her mind. She has remained the same on this and wants to visit the farm again. She really enjoyed the experience and has remained positive and enthusiastic about it.”*

## Improve life skills and social interaction

- A study found that contact with goats spontaneously increased 'joy of life' in most participating clients. During their time in contact with the animals, participants became more attentive towards their surroundings, and some withdrawn clients became more openly communicative with the goats. Communication was also triggered between some participants and conflicts were avoided (Scholl et al., 2008)
- Marjolein Elings (Wageningen UR, 2004) studied the specific value of care farm experiences for people with learning difficulties. Elings identified five qualities that are important to make care a positive experience for adults with learning difficulties; the farmer as role model, meaningful work, small scale, social network, and clients addressed on the basis of possibilities.
- Ecotherapy has been shown to increase social inclusion and develop social skills (Bragg et al., 2013), through feeling accepted and 'normal', introducing routine and a regular place to go to, valued social contact.
- Comments from group leaders following Let Nature Feed Your Senses visits have indicated impacts on visitor's social interaction and life skills. One group leader said, *“They really had a good time, I can tell because I know them well and from their reactions, they really enjoyed their visit, not all of them can verbally communicate”*. Another group leader said, *“We felt really comfortable, the other clients who were there for the day and the staff all sat down together for lunch and it was lovely, everyone mixed.”*

## Financial benefits

- Leck's (2003) assessment of the overall impact associated with an individual care farm involved the application of Social Return on Investment and included adults with disabilities. The study took account of all elements of associated change and assigned justified financial proxies so that overall value could be conceptualised. The analysis suggested that, for every £1 that was invested, there was a social return that exceeded £3.50.



## Bibliography

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