



Let Nature Feed Your Senses

Taking part in the life of a working farm

In 2013 FarmAbility, a programme of the farm-based charity the Farm Inspiration Trust, and Kingwood, a trust that enables people with autism and Asperger's to live in their own homes and enjoy full and active lives in the community, got together with Let Nature Feed Your Senses (LNFYS) to develop a programme of farm visits tailored to the needs of adults with autism spectrum disorders.

This series of visits would involve the visitors directly in the life of the farm as co-farmers. Working in small groups, accompanied by their support workers, they would achieve useful farm tasks, raising their confidence, whilst having fun too! Sarah Giles, FarmAbility host said, "I really felt that when people are given a job to do (as long as it's something they're not fearful or anxious about), they engage much more strongly. Using their hands focuses them on the activity and the environment. These kinds of activities generate the most vivid responses."

A working farm is a unique place. The complex dynamic of animals, people, plants, weather and machines interacting to produce mainly food, makes for a stimulating and purposeful place to be a part of. The visitors would learn practical farming skills and be involved in the social life of the farm, whilst gaining all the benefits of being outdoors.

Careful planning was needed to take into account individuals' likes and dislikes, sensitivities and needs in such a sensory rich and social environment. The majority of the visitors have one to one support and the visits would be framed to work for both the visitors and their accompanying support workers.

People like doing jobs!

The following pages illustrate how an activity-focused schedule, encouraging people to take an active part in farm-based tasks, whilst emphasising the sensory aspects of what they were doing, is enjoyable and has many positive benefits for adults with autism.

A huge, wide range of abilities

Three groups from Kingwood would visit FarmAbility on the first, second and third Tuesday for four consecutive months (May to August in 2013). Prior to the start of the visits Sarah met each person that had indicated an interest in participating at the farm. She said, "These felt really important for me to start getting to know them, and so that they would have a more familiar face to greet them when they arrived at the farm. I was told by the support workers that the pre-visit meetings were good for reducing anxiety around the visit. This was definitely the case; several of the visitors had been talking about the upcoming farm visit and when arriving for the first time demonstrated that they remembered me."

"If you are welcoming people with autism onto your farm, it's good to understand beforehand what level of support each person would need for each activity and plan accordingly. I realised that the diversity of people's interests and responses required me to interact individually with each visitor as much as possible." Sarah

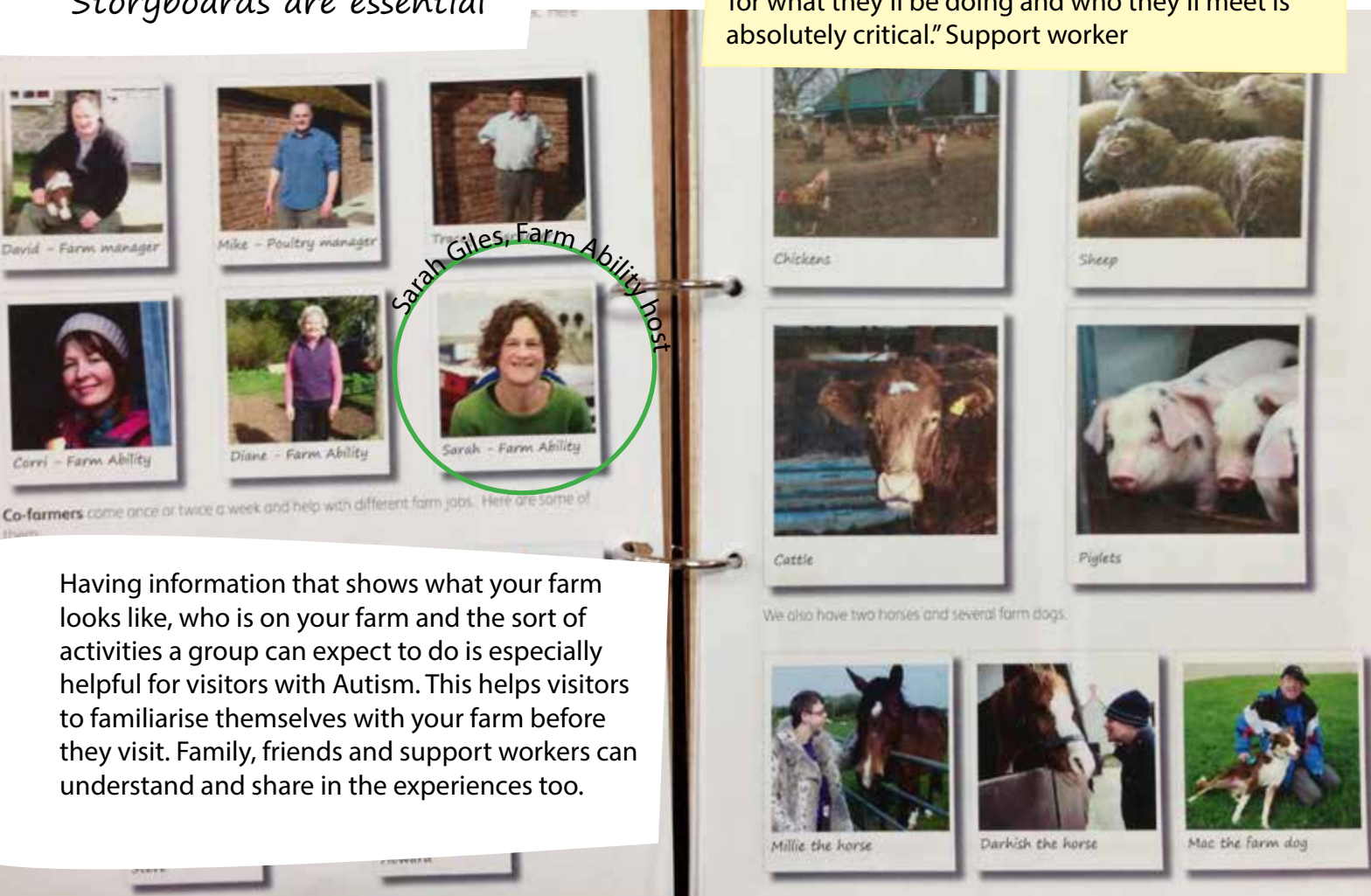
Taking a sensory approach

In addition to meeting everyone individually Sarah attended Kingwood's Tuesday Club to introduce the farm and discover people's interests, likes and dislikes. She took a sensory approach, taking in crops and plants for them to touch and smell. She also downloaded the countryside sound archive from the Let Nature Feed Your Senses website. She said, "We played them all and people tried to guess at the tunes they heard. That was brilliant. They really enjoyed that, because there were some great noises. There's a sheepdog lapping up water after a day out in the field and a really old tractor starting up. Quite a lot of people focused on the sounds and the tactile crops too and it was very engaging."

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"The visit to the Tuesday Club by Sarah from FarmAbility was very important as being prepared for what they'll be doing and who they'll meet is absolutely critical." Support worker

Storyboards are essential



Having information that shows what your farm looks like, who is on your farm and the sort of activities a group can expect to do is especially helpful for visitors with Autism. This helps visitors to familiarise themselves with your farm before they visit. Family, friends and support workers can understand and share in the experiences too.



Establishing routines

Getting the structure of the visit stable was important for visitors with autism.

Several activities formed the basis of a visit. The duration was usually several hours with a lunch break in the middle. This varied at times as some individuals might arrive late or leave early if they had other appointments. Sarah was very adaptable, and learnt ways of changing the schedule in a calm and reassuring way.

The first visit was an opportunity to familiarise everyone with the tasks and ask for, or observe, their feedback. It was important for Sarah and the support workers to gauge what was of interest, what caused anxiety, the appropriate pace of activity and what was achievable.

"Sarah is very calm and natural. When you have the leader generating that energy and the group are confident in what you are doing, they pick up on that. Although the farm doesn't have boundaries, the boundaries come from the leader in an invisible but certain way."
Kingwood Service Manager



Washing wellies



The pattern of subsequent visits constituted several regular tasks e.g. egg collecting, pig feeding, with one or two new activities. The more active tasks first and ending with more gentle, reflective activity as a sort of wind-down seemed to work best for all. The first task was, of course, changing into the wellies! The last task - washing them!

Hands on and purposeful tasks

Feeding hens and collecting eggs

"On her second visit to the farm Sarah was so much more engaged with the egg collecting; much more pro-active and collected several eggs, asking me later how many she'd collected." Sarah



"Tosha was very anxious about entering the hen house to collect eggs, his support worker left him outside as he didn't think he would be able to enter. I encouraged him, took him by the hand and together we entered, step by slow step. He collected an egg! It was great to see Tosha overcome his initial fear of the hens." Sarah



Egg collecting



Grading, sorting and packing eggs

"One of our visitors, Paul, came into his own when we started grading the eggs; he smiled, was very animated and gave himself a round of applause when we'd finished grading! A complete change in behaviour. He was very pleased at being able to take home eggs, and held on to them tightly." Sarah



Sorting



The role of support workers

When support workers are interested, enthusiastic and engaged with facilitating the person they support to access the farm, it's fantastic – makes all the difference. Again, knowing them well and understanding their limitations and how to encourage them, and reassure them when they were anxious or agitated. It really was great to see how, with encouragement from support staff, people brought energy to the tasks and seemed really happy to move from one activity to another.



Packing



EGGS FOR PIGS

6 TRAYS 10 KG

Feeding the pigs

"Sarah was initially aloof and serious and needed to keep herself a little separate – seeing her join in and become animated was a big change. When she was feeding the pigs a couple of visits ago, she lobbed an egg and it bounced off the pig's back and she just roared with laughter. And it was brilliant. And I just laughed with her. There was absolute sudden animation sparked off by this incident. It was really great."

Sarah

"Feeding the pigs and collecting the eggs clearly the top activities - the ones they talked about the most at home."

"Feeding the pigs was one of the group's favourite activities. It engaged people on several levels: first the physical activity of throwing (how often are we allowed to throw things, particularly fragile objects?), and then the satisfying response of the pigs to the arrival of the eggs in their sty - they become really animated and instantly snuffle around to search for the eggs. The activity allows everyone to engage at close range with the pigs, encourages us to observe their response, and we feel happy seeing that our actions have pleased them so much!"





Highlighting the sensory aspect of a task
Mulch from different trees -
each with a distinctive aroma!

Gardening

Gardening was another of our regular activities - we mulched, planted, watered, gathered, dug, shovelled, pulled up, composted, tasted, smelled aromas, worked together and sweated.




Poo collecting!

"Filling a bucket with sheep's poo(!) to make tomato feed engaged everyone. I was pleased and a bit surprised that poo collecting worked so well!"



Leading the horses

A man with red hair and glasses, wearing a black zip-up jacket over a white shirt, dark blue trousers, and green rubber boots, is leading a brown horse with a white blaze on its face. The horse is wearing a blue halter and a red lead rope. They are walking on a grassy field with a line of green trees in the background.

“What we really noticed about Daniel was how keen he was to engage with the horses. He helped harness them, lead them from their field, groom them and he even learnt to use the hoof pick to pick out the stones. The support worker was really impressed with him doing this as you have to be firm and understand that you are not hurting the horse and he was brilliant at it. When he gave his feedback on how he felt about the horses on the last visit he said he felt nervous but it was a ‘good nervous’. It was a new challenge, and he gained a sense of achievement by overcoming his nervousness.” Sarah

The kit!



Grooming the horses

The horse grooming is a very sensory-rich, rhythmic and calming experience, as well as being quite powerful in that it involves close contact with a large animal. It requires the ability to focus, concentrate and be responsive.





"Tosha came with me for a walk with Mac, and I asked him if he'd like to do a nature palette, which he did. He was very pleased with his creation and decided to take it home for his friend Faith, another support worker."

Nature walks



My nature palette



Mac the farm dog

Mac is a working sheep dog whose personality perfectly suits a therapeutic environment; he's friendly, loves affection, and adores being with people. Although visitors can't touch most of the livestock on the farm, they can engage fully with Mac - stroking him, walking him on the lead, chasing with him on walks, and talking to him. He responded very positively to the attention from the Kingwood group, and his clear enjoyment of their company was really appreciated by our visitors. Meeting Mac's needs for human contact and positive reinforcement is satisfying and rewarding - therein lies the therapeutic benefit.



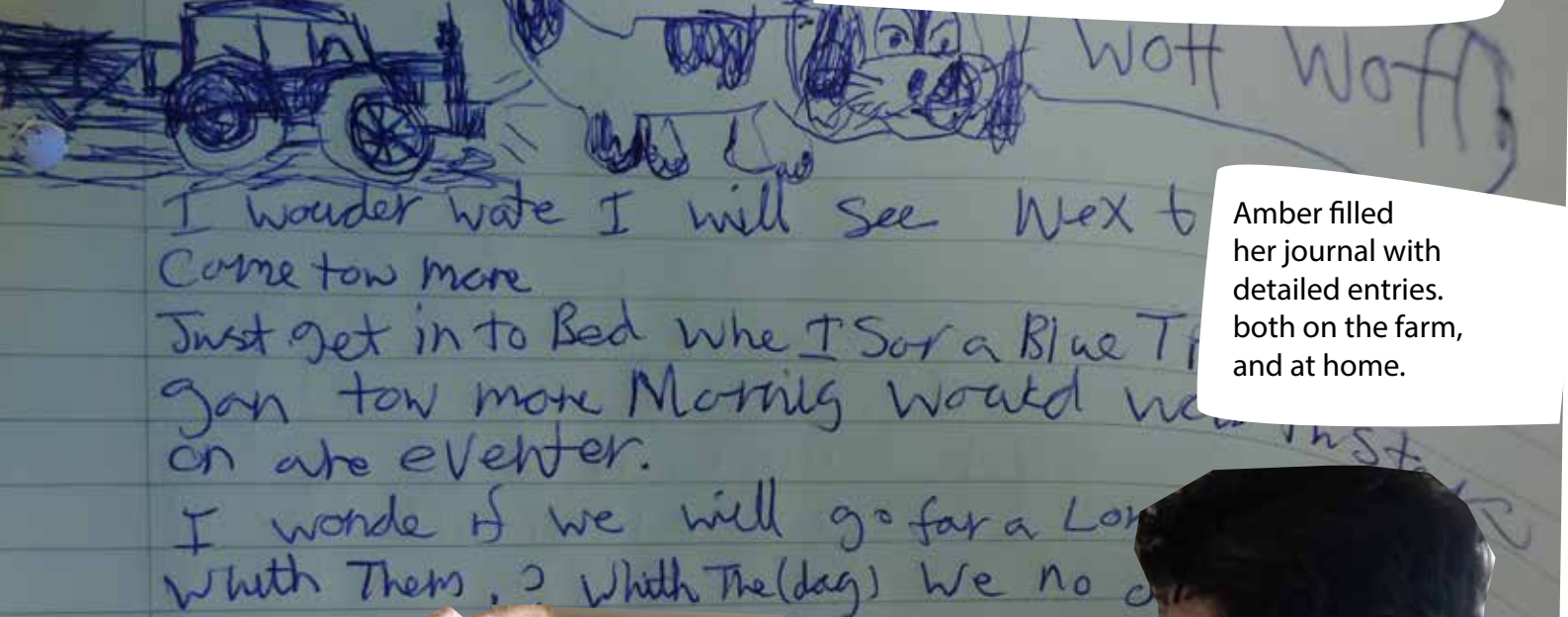
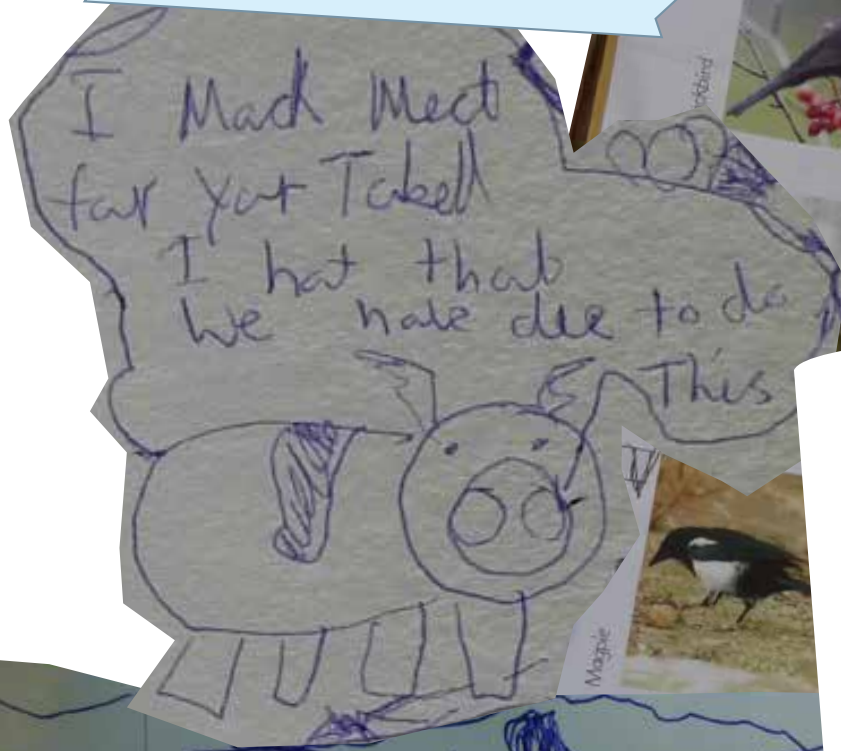
"Two of the group were definitely not keen on the farm dog; however, one woman overcame her fear surprisingly well as we walked Mac – she became very interested in him, called him, smiled at him and came very close to stroking him.

"Kevin was initially very wary of Mac, the farm's sheep dog, and wasn't sure at all if he'd like us to take him down to the horses. But he overcame his worry brilliantly, and held Mac on the lead all the way, talking to him and engaging with him." Sarah

Journals



The journal keeping worked really well for the people who can make entries independently. For others a simple photo scrapbook that was regularly updated with photos after each visit would have been more useful. The photo storyboards worked well for everyone. They were great for familiarising individuals at the start of the visits. Bird-spotter sheets were popular too.



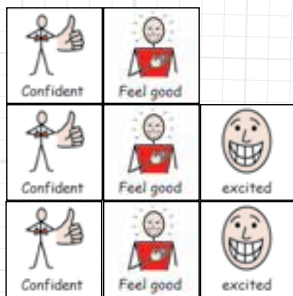
Amber filled her journal with detailed entries, both on the farm, and at home.





Visitors' feedback

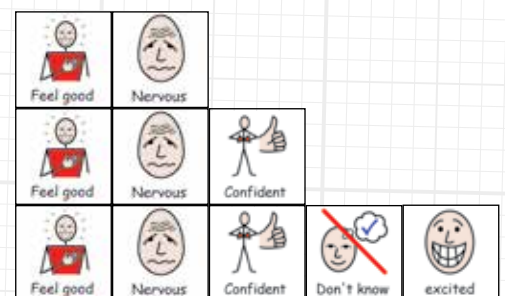
Everyone in the group gave their personal feedback on their last visit. A table for each of the routine activities they had experienced was set up with a mix of photographs and elements of the activity to make it as representational as possible. Each group member had a series of six widgit stickers for each activity, Confident, Nervous, Excited, Feel Good, Dislike, Don't know. Individuals could select as many or few as they wanted to stick beside their name, for each activity. Reflecting on their experience and using widgits to express their response was a new experience for everyone in the group.



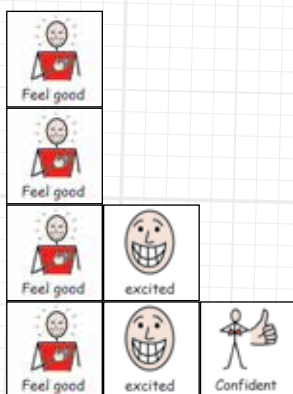
Egg collecting



Egg grading



Grooming the horses



Feeding the pigs



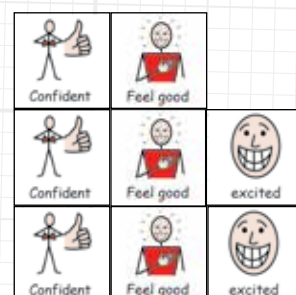
Walking the dog

Sarah asked Lee 'Can I ask you about the farm?' He replied 'Yes' (Lee very rarely says 'yes' in response to a question.) Lee said he,

- Liked walking Mac best
- Liked the horses
- Don't really like gardening
- Liked egg collecting, grading
- Liked eating outside by the caravan
- Liked feeding the pigs
- Not keen on the bulls
- Would like to come to the farm a lot



Gardening



On the farm with Sarah

Parents' feedback

"I know Lee really enjoyed his farm visits. I would be very happy if he could come to the farm again."

Lee spoke to his dad a lot about the visits, telling him what he did - collecting the eggs, feeding the 'spotted' pigs and walking the dog being the favourite activities. Derek thinks Lee enjoyed the sense of freedom he felt up there, and emphasised how beneficial it is for Lee to take physical exercise. He said it's great for Lee to be around animals and interacting with them. He's glad he had the chance at the farm to groom the horses and walk Mac.

Tosha's mother said that the farm visits were very definitely a positive experience for him. She said that Tosha referred to his visits as him 'working' on the farm, and that he said this clearly with happiness and a sense of pride. She said that Tosha prefers to observe others doing activities, but that clearly this had not happened on the farm, and she was very pleased that he'd participated - and that as a result, he'd gained a sense of pride from seeing the results of his work. This is "fantastic" for Tosha. She would love to see Tosha coming regularly to the farm - she recognised the positive impact this has on his physical health as well as his mental health.

Memorable moment

Recognition of achievement at the Kingwood Christmas party, everyone visiting the farm proudly received a certificate



Support workers' feedback

"Tosha regularly expresses his delight at being on the farm. At the beginning of his first visit he was saying, 'Oh, is it time to go yet? When are we going?' By the end of the visit he was saying, 'I'm a farmer. Call me Farmer Tosha.'"

"On one woman's third visit one of the group's support workers noticed, how significantly more engaged Sarah was this time – it was really noticeable. Added to this, she was much more cooperative. She left the car, came over to me and immediately started talking. This is from someone who barely acknowledged me on her first visit. The day that the support worker says, 'We are going to FarmAbility,' she is out of bed 'like a shot'. And when she saw her weekly activity plan and would see 'farm visit', she would say 'Ooh, farm visit!'"

"Coming to the farm, they get the same sort of things as they do when they have been on holiday and I think it's so lovely to see them, how they blossom."

Kingwood Service Manager

"Daniel and Sarah slept all the way back to Beeching Way in the car after their last visit and on waking, Daniel said, 'Can we go back to the farm tomorrow?' Daniel loves all the visits. How do we know he loves it? Because in the morning of a visit he gets up, gets dressed and comes straight over to Beeching Way ready to go - we usually have to go over to his flat to get him up."

"Caryn supports Lee a lot, and has noticed some changes – for example Lee will make connections with things he sees out and about, with stuff he's seen/done on the farm (sheep, dogs)."



To sum up

Giving people the opportunity to engage in meaningful, worthwhile work by taking part in the life of a working farm led to:

- Learning new skills
- Taking pride and experiencing satisfaction with participating in purposeful work
- Overcoming some of the sensory challenges, for example the sensory overload of the hen house – being able, through time, participate with the group by acclimatising to the rich smells and sounds. Someone on the first visit wasn't able to go into the hen house, but by the third visit he was able to collect the eggs, and that was incredible!
- Being active, getting exercise and being outdoors in fresh air
- Taking responsibility for feeding and grooming the horses – led to respectful interaction
- Overcoming fears of animals e.g. terrified of the dog but over the course of four visits being able to walk the dog on a lead, built confidence
- Engaging in the social life of a working farm - rich social context – talking with farm staff, meeting farm volunteers, sitting and eating lunch together, part of the social life of the farm

"It's not at all surprising that the people who come to the farm get a lot of benefit... because we all do, I mean everybody who comes to the farm, regardless of your background or what you do as a job, you just sense it. There's lots of things to see and to take in. And it probably does come back to those basic ingredients of fresh air, stimulation, sense of freedom and peaceful as well; it's not a busy place and there's lots of space."

www.farmability.org
www.kingwood.org.uk



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