

Delivering day care services



Corri Waitt explains how she has worked to set-up Farm Ability, which provides training, therapeutic activities and work experience for adults with autism and learning difficulties who have a personal care budget near Oxford. She explains the importance of identifying the relevant person to speak to in your Local Authority and working with a social worker who will help champion your services.

- Farm Ability is based at FAI's (Food Animal Initiative) livestock farm three miles from Oxford. Set up in 2012, Farm Ability provides training, therapeutic activities and work experience for adults with autism and learning difficulties in a supportive and caring environment within a working farm setting.
- Visitors come to the farm every week and become 'co-farmers'. Activities are designed to address one of the biggest challenges for those with learning disabilities, which is a lack of suitable work-based training. Co-farmers work in a variety of jobs to suit individual interests, needs and abilities in small mixed ability teams.
- Farm Ability aims to continue to grow annually, ensuring that more local adults with learning disabilities have an opportunity to work outdoors, surrounded by nature and the beauty of a farm on the River Thames.

<http://www.farm-ability.org.uk/>

Where did the idea for Farm Ability come from?

It was partly from the LNFYS project, as before that we hadn't hosted groups of people with learning disabilities. We developed a relationship with a local group called Home Farm Trust, a major local care provider who run residential and day services for adults with learning disabilities. We did repeat visits with them and found out what their service users enjoyed. Everyone on the farm could see how much people were benefiting from being here, so we decided we needed to explore how to make this accessible more regularly and to more people.

We also had a volunteer at the time, Diane Horsman, who had worked in special needs education, and she came on board to lend her expertise in shaping the Farm Ability programme. Having someone with this sort of knowledge is invaluable.



What were your main concerns when you set up?

Making sure we had the right insurance, and conducting an appropriate risk assessment. It took a while to get all the right information together and to make sure we had the correct insurance in place. Then it was a case of deciding which activities we could offer and seeing if we could get enough people who wanted to use the service to make it viable. We weren't sure until we gave it a go, but there was nothing else on offer locally, and we thought there would be demand.

How did you go about setting up Farm Ability?

One of the first things we did was to speak to the head of Disability Services at the County Council, he really liked the project and was so positive about it. He thought there would be demand and we were good to go. We also went and spoke with Ann De Bock at Church Farm who was really helpful, she gave lots of great advice, without which we would have been lost. She was the one who suggested we get in touch with the Local Authority to see how we could access people who have personal budgets to allow direct payments. A person's personal budget depends on the nature of their disability and the amount of support they need. She helped us make sense of it all as the funding situation can be confusing.

We asked if we could attend a Local Authority Learning Disability Team meeting to present the project to them. It was a bit like the Dragon's Den, as they asked lots of probing questions. Despite that they were overwhelmingly positive and they had some very helpful advice. This meeting was critical as the learning disability team signposts people to services. If people don't know about you, you won't get referrals.

How did you work out how much your service would cost per person?

We took some advice from similar services and the learning disability team, and worked out our costs. Our charges vary depending on the ratio of carers to co-farmers. One support person to five co-farmers is the cheapest, through to one to one support. It also depends whether the co-farmer brings their own carer. We offer services three days a week for five people each day.

What have you learnt about the activities you offer?

We have focused on tasks that are real farm jobs, we try and make the activities meaningful and that they enjoy it. People like different things; one chap likes machinery, others like poultry, so it is good to have variety planned into your day so everyone has the chance to do something they are keen on. For others with more acute disabilities, interacting with others and doing certain tasks is a challenge for them, so you need to be flexible to allow everyone to engage at the level they are able. But all jobs are real tasks that need doing.



How are you gathering evidence of impact?

We only have anecdotal evidence at the moment, such as people losing weight, improving their diet, reports from parents that our co-farmers are sleeping better and that their behaviour is improving. However we are in the process of creating an evaluation process with the University of Oxford to collect evidence of impact over time. Good evaluation is really important, especially if you are hoping to apply for grants and for funding from the local authority as many funders require this. Also it is really helpful to recognise the progress that has been made as this can get lost day to day, and to help improve and refine the programme.

What would you say to someone who was thinking about offering a similar service?

The best advice I had was from Ann De Bock at Church Farm who suggested finding a sympathetic social worker who supports the project, as they can open doors in terms of getting referrals and helping to spread the word about your programme. We have found this to definitely be true. Also, social services can be very slow, and there can be a long time lag between a potential service user coming and saying yes, we'd like to take part, and then their budget being released. It can make planning difficult and can mean you're operating at a loss as you wait for the paperwork to be sorted, sometimes for several months. It might mean that it can take over a year to offer a sustainable service.

In a nutshell!

- If you are interested in offering care services to people with personalized budgets, try and find out who in your Local Authority Learning Disability Team you need to speak to and arrange a meeting.
- If possible find a sympathetic social worker who supports the project, as they can open doors in terms of getting referrals and can spread the word about your services.
- Social service processes can be very slow, and there can be a long time-lag between a potential service user saying they'd like to take part and their budget being released.
- Think about how you are going to monitor and record the impact of your services.
- Each co-farmer will like different jobs, but focus on real farm tasks.

