

Let Nature Feed Your Senses

*Host farmers journeys
and experiences*



www.letnaturefeedyoursenses.org



LINKING ENVIRONMENT AND FARMING
Integrated Farm Management

LEAF (Linking Environment And Farming) is the leading organisation delivering more sustainable food and farming. We work with farmers, the food industry, scientists and consumers to inspire and enable sustainable farming that is prosperous, enriches the environment and engages local communities.

www.leafuk.org



The Sensory Trust promotes and supports the development of inclusive outdoor environments. Our work with socially excluded groups goes beyond physical access, building richer connections between people and place, to ensure access for everyone, regardless of age, disability and background.

www.sensorytrust.org.uk



Let Nature Feed Your Senses brought together two charities, LEAF (Linking Environment And Farming) and The Sensory Trust, to deliver a big national project. Working with farms and nature reserves, we have welcomed people from villages and cities, old and young, with and without disabilities to enjoy sensory-rich visits exploring the connections between food, farming and nature.

This booklet sets out the journeys and experiences of a small number of our host farmers. Each and every one of our host farmers have encouraged, stimulated and provided visitors with new experiences of the countryside. This booklet is all about their journey.

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How it all began

For me, getting involved with Let Nature Feed Your Senses was all about giving something back. I've always been passionate about helping people understand where their food comes from and how it is produced. Working with a whole range of people with different needs and developing sensory-rich visits to explore the connections between food, farming and nature, really captured my imagination. It sounded like a fantastic project and I just wanted to be part of it.



Life before LNFYS

Before LNFYS I did have some experience of hosting farm visits and had opened for LEAF's Open Farm Sunday. But hosting visits for people of all different abilities was completely new to me. I just knew I was going to enjoy the challenge. I was definitely very apprehensive to start with, but it certainly didn't put me off, I just went with the flow!

A helping hand

With no experience of the target groups the project was looking to engage with, I found going along to the regional training events invaluable. Talking to other people, listening to how they dealt with a particular group or situation made a big difference. I felt supported, engaged, inspired and definitely less scared! I always went away feeling more confident, better equipped and prepared. As well as picking up activity ideas and



resources, the practical information I learnt was fantastic, like learning how to touch a partially sighted person in the right way so they would follow me.

Engaging all the senses

Developing visits that engage all the senses was a real challenge, but now it's just the way I do things. I'd say all my visits now are sensory-rich. You've got to work hard to get some visitors interested in things

and sometimes, keeping it simple is the best way. If you try and complicate things too much you'll just see they are not connecting. A group of elderly visitors we had, gained so much from podding peas, it really took them back to their childhood. Another group loved looking at the old farm machinery which, for many, stirred memories of happier times. Above all, I've learnt to be inventive, to 'feel' my way with the group, see what's working and run with that.



“It’s taught me to keep trying. Not to give up until I am certain that the group has had a great sensory visit.”

What next?

I can't tell you how much I've personally got back from being involved in LNFYS. It has completely changed the way I view the disabled, elderly and disadvantaged members of our society. I feel so much more confident being around them. I know many of the groups will continue to come to the farm – we've built up some very special links.

“They are all equally individuals to us. It is possible to connect with each individual but the path to making that connection can be very different.”

What I learnt?

- Let visits flow, be flexible
- Don't complicate things – often the simplest of activities will have the greatest impact
- Keep trying. Don't give up until you are happy that the group has had a great sensory visit
- It is possible to make connections with every individual
- Finding that special connection may take longer with some people. But it's definitely there if you look hard enough.

Julia Hawley, Hall Farm, Leicestershire

Julia Hawley farms a traditional 300 hectare mixed farm in Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire, together with her husband John and son Robert. They have a small herd of 60 pedigree Holstein milking cows and around 40 dairy heifers and calves. A flock of 300 ewes grazes much of the pasture. Julia had hosted visits through Open Farm Sunday and Educational Access, but had limited experience of hosting visits for other groups.



How it all began

We'd been involved with LEAF's Open Farm Sunday for about three years and had hosted a small number of visits through Educational Access. I got a real buzz out of showing people the farm and talking to them about how their food is produced. So when I received an email from the Let Nature Feed Your Senses team at Stoneleigh, asking whether I'd be interested in the project, I was keen to sign up. With a couple of relatives with learning disabilities and an interest in how people with different abilities use their senses, it was something I was keen to be part of.

Life before LNFYS

Before LNFYS, I would not have approached groups with learning or physical disabilities to visit the farm. I guess I wasn't too sure what the farm could offer them, how I could make a visit interesting and stimulating and tailored to their own unique set of needs. Access and health and safety issues were also a concern. But this didn't put me off. I knew the value that mainstream groups got out of visiting us and wanted to give the same opportunity to those 'harder to reach' groups.

A helping hand

I attended most of the LNFYS regional training events. What I gained most was reassurance. They really helped to put my mind at rest and certainly made me feel far less daunted. Knowing what to expect from different groups, their abilities and limitations was really helpful. The more knowledge I gained and the more I talked to other host farmers, the better prepared I felt.



"I always went away from the training events feeling better equipped and definitely full of new ideas and inspiration."

Engaging all the senses

During the four years we've been involved in the project, we've established some close links with many different groups. You get to know them as individuals, their characters, how they react to different situations and how much sense of humour you can adopt. This has been a huge privilege. There's one lady who is fixated with her cup of tea, so I always know to put the kettle on shortly after she arrives! Another boy loves dogs, so I'll make sure our farm dog goes to say hello at the end of the visit. One chap likes to see the cows come past the gate on their way to milking. He will now ask to see them, so if I haven't planned it into the day's activities I quickly swap the agenda around. I've learnt to be flexible and to shape the visit to the particular needs of each group.

What next?

We'll continue to host visits and build on the links we've established. Now I've got the knowledge and experience, approaching other groups is far less daunting. I still worry about whether I am using the right terminology and always have a small niggle about health and safety – but being involved in the project has given me so much confidence. We are looking to set up a sensory rich nature trail on the farm through an area of woodland and I'm planning to involve one of our regular groups to help build it. They'll love to have some 'proper' jobs to get involved with and the sense of achievement they'll get out of it will be tremendous.

Let Nature Feed Your Senses has left me with so many positive experiences. When you see people enjoying the things that we on the farm take for granted, it leaves you feeling warm and cosy!

What I learnt?

My perceptions of people with different needs and abilities have certainly changed. I try not to make any assumptions now about what they know or don't know. One gentleman who comes to see us speaks very little. His carers had told me beforehand that he was unlikely to talk during the visit. When we were in one of the fields listening to different birds, I would usually tell the group which bird it was, but he actually beat me to it and said "chaffinch." It was clear he knew a lot about bird species but his carers had been totally unaware of it. Back at the home, they are now planning a sensory rich nature trail and are much more aware of the interests of their residents and put on a range of activities to tap into them.

"It's often the things we take for granted that can offer so many valuable sensory experiences."

The impact of Let Nature Feed Yours Senses has been far reaching. It's made me do things differently and see my farm in a completely new way. I know the relationships I've built up will continue to shape the visits we offer for a long time to come.



Claire Morris, College Farm, Buckinghamshire

College Farm is a 400 acre beef and sheep farm, set in the rolling hills of the Aylesbury Vale in Buckinghamshire. The farm is run by the partnership of J & R Morris & Son, consisting of John and Rosemary Morris, son George and his wife Claire. Before getting involved with the project, Claire had no experience of hosting farm visits. She describes her time with Let Nature Feed Your Senses as 'life changing'.



How it all began

It happened purely by chance. We were putting together our Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) application and a flyer came through the door, all about 'sensory rich visits', 'disengaged groups', linking food, farming and nature – and they were looking for host farmers. I was really lucky, it came along just at the right time – both for me personally and the farm.

“The people I’ve met, the fantastic groups we’ve had around the farm, seeing the transformations that have taken place, has been life changing.”

Life before LNFYS

I hadn't done any visits before I got involved with LNFYS. But I just felt it was something I could do and would make a meaningful contribution to the farm. The idea of using the farm to help people with a whole range of different abilities, engage all their senses, sounded amazing. It's made me look at the farm in a totally different way.

“Visits are no longer a chat about what we do but more a sensory experience – smell, touch, taste and sound. I know the quality of the visits has improved because of the project.”

A helping hand

The training I got as a host farmer was brilliant. Nobody understands the LNFYS visits like other hosts so talking to different hosts and hearing their ideas, really helped to build my confidence and knowledge. In particular, there was a huge focus on the new

HSE Industry Code of Practice, which explained to all hosts how we should implement the code in a practical and achievable way. The conferences were inspirational and helpful in a practical sense. I never felt alone.

I seemed to have acquired some media experience as well - the BBC Radio 4 programme 'In Touch' joined us on a visit I was doing for a visually impaired group. I didn't expect to enjoy it as much as I did – I loved it! This is an area I'd definitely like to explore further – move over Kate Humble!



Towards the end of the project we were lucky enough to be involved in some research regarding the economic implications of a series of visits from a MIND support group. It was brilliant to be part of the research and meeting the participants on a regular basis was really satisfying. Long term it has planted the seed of an idea where we could offer some sort of group farming therapy, where people suffering from depression could come one day a week for some 'green therapy'. Its a growing movement, and I feel well placed to go with it because I have been involved with the LNFYS project. Time will tell!

Engaging all the senses

I approach visits now thinking what groups can do, rather than what they can't. Before LNFYS, I thought it was necessary to explain exactly what we do on the farm, but actually the experience of just being on the farm is often enough. You just learn to stand back, close your eyes and look at the farm and the environment in a totally different way. I've had some very special experiences and lots of smiles – the moment when a child with special needs finally plucked up the courage to touch a chicken or lamb. The absolute joy as a lovely elderly man held and chatted to a baby lamb. The repeat visit where a man brought a carrier bag to fill up with straw to take back to his toy farm in his room at the home. Simple things such as feeding hay to a cow bring so much joy.

All my visits are more sensory. It's made me really think outside the box – how can I make this fact memorable to a group of excluded boys? How can I bring the farm alive to a group of visually impaired children? What aspects of the farm can I bring to a group of physically disabled adults?

Farms and the countryside are a rich feast for the senses. A puddle is a fantastic sensory mud filled experience to wallow in. The feel of barley grains running through your hands, the smell and dampness of sugar beet pulp, chickens taking food from your hands, the sound of Sid the sheepdog rounding up sheep, the rushing of hooves and the whistles of the farmer. These experiences can reach out to everyone, regardless of age, disability or background.

“Sensory visits to the farm are now such a big part of what we are about.”

What next?

The LNFYS project has been totally fantastic, inspiring and life changing. It has brought me into contact with people that I never thought I would meet and given me the confidence to deal with just about any situation! And the chance to make a difference – wow! I’ve been so inspired by hosting visits that we’ve now got a purpose built outdoor learning facility on the farm. It’s taken a long while, but we finally opened in early 2014. We’re really proud of it – it’s got amazing views, all the latest equipment and full disabled access. We’ve also created a sensory garden next to it, specially designed to create a relaxing and sensory rich experience. This will give us the scope to do longer and better visits. We particularly want to incorporate food preparation into the visits and intend to do bread making with lots of hands on kneading. None of this would have happened without Let Nature Feed Your Senses.

What I learnt?

- See all visits as a sensory experience
- To think outside the box, be imaginative
- Keep things simple – sometimes just being on the farm is enough
- Stand back and try to see your farm through your visitors’ eyes.



The Wildlife Trusts

The Wildlife Trusts

We were really lucky to have three Wildlife Trusts involved as host sites – these were in Worcester, Cleveland and Essex. They brought to the project a wealth of previous experience hosting visits, well established educational facilities, resources and links with a wide range of community groups. Our Wildlife Trust hosts tell us why they got involved with Let Nature Feed Your Senses, what they got out of it and how their experience has impacted on what they do now.

Debs Richardson Bull, Worcestershire Wildlife Trust

Every year, The Wildlife Trusts engage around 5,500 schools with the natural world and here at the Worcestershire Wildlife Trust, we deliver around 100 visits a year to mainstream schools. We are all about reconnecting people with the natural world, engendering a love of nature and wildlife and promoting the benefits it provides – nature makes people happy! Getting involved with Let Nature Feed Your Senses

was a great way for us to work with groups that wouldn't normally have come to us, often for financial reasons. From a personal point of view, I am really interested in the therapeutic benefits of nature, so I was particularly excited about reaching out to more diverse groups with different abilities, groups that would really benefit from experiencing what we have to offer.

I learnt loads. Thinking about the kinds of activities we usually deliver but in a different way was really energising. It made me realise that although I may have done a particular activity lots of times before, it was the first time for the group. The poetry bags, wild cooking and pop up kitchens are now a regular feature of all our visits.

We are now hosting regular visits to special schools, a care home for the elderly and autistic children. In fact, we are looking to develop story cards for learners of the autistic spectrum to help them order their visit and cope with the change in routine.

Projects come and go. But Let Nature Feed Your Senses has been THE most inspiring project I have ever been part of.



Steve Ashton, Tees Valley Wildlife Trust

As a Trust, we had done quite a lot of sensory visits, and I think that's why the project appealed to us. In lots of ways, it was expanding on what we were already doing, and it was a good way to widen the groups we work with.

The resources we received improved what we were already using. It was good going along to the conferences. Meeting with farmers and seeing how they were hosting visits to different groups was really interesting. It gave me a new angle on things. Encouraging everyone, whatever their ability, to take a hands on approach, getting to know things and following stories through. Trying to link our visits with the food and farming story wasn't something we were focusing on before Let Nature Feed Your Senses, but it's now a big part of what we do. Getting people to understand the connection between what they eat and the countryside around them.

The highlights of the project for us have come from working with new groups. This has included using the soft toy birds with a blind group which allows them to hear the sound of birds. The 'smelly tea activity' also went down very well with a deaf group that visited us. The project has enabled me to put together a series of activities that can be used for groups with different needs. We've also looked at access arrangements to our educational space. The idea of using objects as a way of inspiring thoughts and memories has also been very useful.



Roz Wisniewski, Essex Valley Wildlife Trust

The highlights and special memories that have come from being involved with Let Nature Feed Your Senses have been many. The interest and enthusiasm of visitors, their enjoyment of the outdoors and sampling food in the fresh air! And lots of laughs! The diversity of groups that have visited us has been wonderful from OAPs, adults with learning difficulties to young people with autism. Seeing how they all view the farm from their own perspective has been a privilege. We now plan our activities to include all the senses, which we tailor to the needs of each group. The story of wheat from the field to cooking pancakes is something that can be delivered at many different levels. What I've learnt and the links we've made have changed how we think and what we do. It has been brilliant to be involved.



Emma Harrison, Sandfield Farm, Worcestershire

Emma Harrison farms Sandfield Farm, a 200 acre dairy farm in Sedgeberrow, Evesham, Worcestershire, together with her husband, Robert. Emma oversees all the work of the Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme, which she began in 2009 and hosts around 60 visits a year.



How it all began

My involvement with Let Nature Feed Your Senses grew out of the visits I had already been doing as part of HLS. I was really enjoying sharing what we do on the farm with different groups and, having hosted a number of visits for some special needs schools, I knew it was something I wanted to explore further. LNFYS came along at just the right time, when I was really beginning to find my feet as a host farmer. So getting involved in a project which would bring a whole new range of people onto the farm was the natural next step.

Life before LNFYS

It all started back in 2009, when we'd been accepted into HLS, which involved hosting visits for the public to encourage a greater understanding of farming and the countryside. I was really enjoying sharing what we do on the farm with different groups. During that first year, we were mainly hosting visits for local schools, but I also had a couple of visits from local special needs schools. Seeing how people with very different needs benefited from visiting the farm was quite amazing. I loved it! So about a year later, when I heard there was an opportunity of doing more visits for these 'hard to reach' groups, I jumped at the chance!

The groups we've had around the farm during the course of the project have been hugely diverse - children and adults with learning disabilities, physically disabled adults and families with children with special needs. At times it's been challenging but hugely positive and rewarding. I've been inspired to try new activities, do things differently, involve all the senses in every visit and to slow down! The LNFYS project has really helped me to think about the five senses and what stimulus the farm provides. The activities I have learnt or developed from the project have been replicated in my main stream school visits.

A helping hand

Being a farmer can sometimes feel quite isolating. So meeting up with other farmers, doing similar things, through the LNFYS conferences and regional training events has been really helpful. It has all been about learning from each other really. Not just with other host farmers, but we've gained so much from the groups visiting us. Later in the project, I became a 'Mentor Farmer', supporting other host farmers, lending a listening ear, sharing activity ideas and telling them my own stories of what worked, what didn't and what made me smile. It was wonderful. I felt I was really giving something back to the project. To be able to pass on my own experiences to other farmers, who were feeling just as daunted as I did at the beginning felt quite a privilege. In fact, I learnt as much from them as they did from me!

"Looking back, despite being full of self-doubt, wondering whether I would be able to meet the needs of a very different kind of visitor, it was the best thing I could have done."

What next?

I want to continue to explore how the farm can have a positive impact on the lives of people with different needs. It has been a privilege to be involved with LNFYS, I've learnt so much but there's so much more I want to do. This is just the beginning!

What I learnt?

- Don't be afraid to just 'give things a go'
- Have fun with your visitors
- Reach out to other farmers and learn from each other – you'll never stop learning
- Learn to laugh at what goes wrong!



John Plumb, Southfields Farm, West Midlands

John Plumb farms Southfields Farm, a 120 hectare arable and sheep farm, with Higher Level Stewardship, in Coleshill, just outside Birmingham. He has been involved with the Let Nature Feed Your Senses project since it started in 2009. During this time, he has hosted numerous visits for his neighbouring Special School, disengaged teenagers and profoundly disabled Asian children from inner city Birmingham. John tells us more about his LNFYS experiences and how it has inspired him for the future.



How it all began

To be honest, I didn't really know I wanted to be involved in the project! I got a phone call, out of the blue, asking whether I'd like to be part of a project giving 'sensory rich' farm walks to a whole range of groups. This is really where it all began. I'd never heard of 'sensory visits' before and my experience of hosting visits for disabled groups was fairly limited. But I knew from the end of the phone call that it was something I wanted to be part of.

Life before LNFYS

Before LNFYS we had hosted a few visits for the local Special School, so I knew something about the positive effects of getting people out on the farm. I also knew that I could be doing things a lot better! I'd hosted many visits to the farm before for mainstream groups, and felt I knew what I was doing. But having people on the farm with a wide range of disabilities felt daunting and if I am honest, I was a bit afraid at first - 'what could I offer?', 'would I say the right things?', 'would they enjoy it?' were just some of the uncertainties I felt.

A helping hand

Very soon after getting involved in the project, we were hosting visits for disabled, blind, disengaged teenagers and elderly people. Going along to the regional training events really helped build my confidence. The ideas I picked up on different activities, chatting and comparing notes with other people was incredibly helpful. It made me realise that there was no 'right and wrong' way to do things. You just have to 'feel' your

way with particular groups, be prepared and, most of all, be flexible. I always went away from these events feeling inspired and supported. Looking back, they really helped to build my confidence. I learnt a lot, most of all, to relax, be myself and to push the boundaries at every visit.

“LNFYS has changed me and the way I look at people with different abilities. It’s all about what they can do, not what they can’t.”

My involvement in Let Nature Feed Your Senses over the past four years has changed me as a person, the way I view the farm and how I host visits. I’ve built up close links with a wide range of groups and organisations – not only within my local community but all over the country. I know they will keep coming back to the farm. I will now initiate visits, rather than waiting for them to come me. The connections keep growing.



What next?

Recently, I have been giving a lot of thought to where we go from here and how to build on my time with Let Nature Feed Your Senses. I found myself considering how far we venture into Care Farming, then suddenly realised that is what we are already doing! It is just a question of how much more we want to do. There is a lot of interest and demand for what we are doing and we have recently been approached by a local University who are looking at developing a community based project on the farm. We are also exploring what more we can offer on a regular basis for our local special needs school. The legacy of Let Nature Feed Your Senses will continue to have a hugely positive impact on everyone's lives.

What I learnt

- Be prepared and be flexible
- Be bold! Approach each visit thinking 'what can the group do', rather than what they can't
- See every visit as a sensory visit
- Know the value of your own farm
- There is no such thing as a perfect visit!





Thank you!

Thank you to all the host farmers featured in this booklet, who shared their experiences with us. All of our host farmers gained so much from their involvement with Let Nature Feed Your Senses. We owe them all our grateful thanks. They put in so much time and effort, welcomed new audiences to their farms and nature reserves and enthusiastically took part in training and events. They will continue to inspire and engage people with food, farming and nature for many years to come. Thank you.

To learn more about hosting sensory rich visits for hard to reach groups, please visit

www.letnaturefeedyoursenses.org

www.sensorytrust.org.uk

www.leafuk.org





www.letnaturefeedyoursenses.org