

## Background information and understanding

- What is defined as 'youth' varies but we mostly mean young people between the ages of 12 and 24.
- **Young people in general face a range of challenges** including: uncertainty about their future; worries about issues such as climate change; the pressures of materialism and 24 hour social networking; and the need to establish their own identity and 'place' in a very complex world.
- Arguably, nearly *all* young people could benefit from spending time on a social farm, but the young people who do will usually have **additional challenges or disadvantages in life**. These could range from lack of interest or engagement with school or work to having a challenging background possibly without strong bonds, to substance abuse to displaying behavioural and social difficulties. Often their needs are complex and involve **multiple or co-occurring problems**. They can come from a **range of services**, including youth and community services, foster-care, the education system, crisis weekend support services, etc. or may be paid for/supported by their own families.
- You may also sometimes work with younger people with disabilities or who are accessing mental health services or who are members of minority communities, for example. This brochure will also be useful for you in these situations.

Some **common characteristics** include: having limited experience of achievement or success and low levels of confidence and self-esteem; a tendency to underestimate themselves (or sometimes to overinflate themselves); difficulties communicating, especially with adults; and negative or defensive attitudes generally but often specifically towards authority.

*Seeing past these, creating a safe and accepting environment, and supporting young people to contribute, to gain confidence, to find themselves are what social farming is and should be all about.*

## Particular Benefits & Outcomes

### .....which you can support young people in achieving

- Experience of being in a good routine and of having good working habits and self-discipline .
- Chance to establish good relationships with people in an environment that feels safe and accepting .
- Improved social skills and ability to communicate with those in a natural position of authority.
- Improved confidence and self-esteem.
- Chance to be in and to contribute to a 'live' and ever-changing environment, where there may be more comfort with risk and with the 'messiness' of life compared to some other settings they are used to.
- Development of new skills and learning which can be leveraged into further training, work, etc.
- New connections with nature and the environment (especially important for a generation who may be particularly disconnected from these).
- Possibility of finding a sense of purpose and meaning which can be carried into the future.
- Improved physical fitness, strength and agility.

# Key success factors in working with young people

## Create a safe environment....

Young people on the farm as well as staff have to observe safety standards and should not of course be exposed to physically dangerous situations. However, creating a safe environment is primarily about **the relationships between people and the long-term climate they create**. As a farmer you will already know that when any animal (including us humans!) doesn't feel safe, they feel insecure and will try to create an environment in which they do not feel threatened. It is only in a safe environment that people become open to new impulses and new perspectives, that they are ready to learn and to establish healthy relationships. For young people with some of the challenges we have described, this may be especially true.

### How to foster a safe environment

- Be fully present in every moment, be authentic
- Pay equal attention to all group members and show an interest in them as people
- Involve young people in (at least some) decision-making
- Become a natural authority, being neither parent, teacher nor friend
- Promote cohesion and teamwork in the group
- Make sure everyone understands and accepts the rules and norms
- Foster healthy relationships on the farm

### Signs of a safe environment

- Honesty among group members
- People trust one another when they are working together
- Humour – people are laughing and making jokes (but beware of irony and sarcasm)
- Group/community cohesion
- Group/community satisfaction
- Safe methods of conflict management
- Good concentration on assigned tasks
- Striving to do well as a whole group/community

## ...But with the right level of challenge

Working from a position of safety and mutual trust, it is easier for you to challenge young people to strive to perform well, to experience success, to achieve things, and for them to want this too. This will probably involve them stepping out of the zone of comfort where they feel safe (even if not necessarily working in their own best interests) to the **zone of light discomfort and learning**. Here, a suitable challenge almost invites itself to be tackled. On the farm, this could be encouraging them to take responsibility for milking the cows or dosing sheep or taking the lead in doing a group task. While too easy challenges are boring, too difficult challenges might cast the person into the danger zone – a situation in which they don't feel safe. And while someone might be healthy, strong and in good physical condition, they might be very fragile when it comes to what they might see as psychological pressure or an uncomfortable interaction. It is **crucial to treat young people individually** and to be attentive to their needs and the boundaries of *their* particular comfort zones.



## Be genuine and really present

You can have a great impact by simply just being there fully in the moment, by really paying attention to and listening to the young person, by taking them seriously, by showing through your interest in them that they matter and that you are learning from each other *and* from the environment around you.

## Build a relationship

While ultimately you have to **be yourself**, there are some practices which work well with this group. These include giving authentic compliments, noting when things go well, weaving 'safe' topics in with more challenging ones and really paying attention to the interests, particularities and personalities of individuals. To work effectively with this group, you will probably need to **move between various positions or roles**. You are not just the boss but sometimes confidante, advisor, messenger and friend. Humour, empathy and a willingness to share some of your stories too are all key.

*"You go in with the basic attitude: people are good. That's already creating a very different framework, rather than: 'Oh God, you're a highly traumatized, disturbed teenager I have to pay attention to'. It's about listening and building people's confidence. I truly believe everyone has a story to tell and young people want to tell their story."\**

## And then let the farm and nature work its magic

In most cases, the young people coming to your farm will have reasonable fitness and capacity to undertake a wide range of tasks. Unlike with some other target groups, there is not necessarily a list of activities which are particularly suitable or unsuitable. Everyday, valuable and meaningful activities and tasks, where everyone can contribute and where people can learn and grow in confidence are naturally present. In a lot of ways, it is simply about **allowing people to find their place and space in that, allowing the shared tasks, the benefits of being in the natural environment and the bonds which naturally develop between everybody to do the work**. It is about finding a balance between 'letting go' and putting effort in. Some useful pointers:

- Boys or young men especially appreciate **physical work with clearly visible results**. Working in a group with wood, lifting something, working with various tools or building something gives them a feeling of being a (strong) man, of being useful etc. The work itself is key but so too are the necessary breaks that bring the feeling of belonging, of having moments of shared experiences, of responsibility in discussing the strategies on how to proceed.
- It is very important for young people to **feel they are in charge of their lives** to at least some extent, that they can decide for themselves. Offering opportunities or challenges and including young people in some decision-making processes instead of merely directing and ordering are key to building engagement and confidence.
- Make use of **'anchor' objects or opportunities** to build bonds and friendships. Having a firepit, for example, provides something which needs to be tended but is also a focal point which delivers warmth and light and fosters a sense of community in a very elemental way. People might be more likely to tell stories or sing songs around the fire which helps strengthen the bond with each other, with nature and with the farm.

*"Some seek out responsible tasks all by themselves. Most of the people here feed the animals. I think that's great. Or the one continues now at building the fence. They then try it all by themselves and to give them freedom in this without saying 'you must', but only 'you could', that's important."\**

# Potential challenges... and how to overcome them

- Young people who come to social farms may have problems not only with their socialisation, but may possibly have had very **negative life experiences** such as drug or alcohol abuse, criminal past, loose or absent family bonds, lack of education etc. You will have had nothing to do with that but will sometimes have to **deal with the legacy of it**, including mistrust or defiance of authority, withdrawal and difficulties communicating, behavioural issues and low self-esteem or confidence.

- Social Farming **may not be perceived as 'cool'** by some young people and there may be a resistance to fully engaging with it. They may not wish to move outside their existing social 'bubble' even though doing so is necessary to give them a new perspective.

- Some may **struggle with the 'realness' of the farm environment**: the relative 'messiness', the ongoing nature of the cycle of work, the smells and the dirt involved in animal husbandry or with being out in the elements and getting too hot or cold or wet. But equally, some may relish this and loosen up and relax as they feel the environment is not perfect or spotless so they do not have to be perfect either. And some will take a journey from resistance to relaxation, from worrying about getting their trainers dirty to happily wearing work boots or wellingtons.

- Physical work can be very demanding and many young people will not be used to it, indeed many will live very sedentary lives normally.

- There is a strong element of **repetition and routine** on farms which some might find boring or pointless (at least initially). Young people will need to be guided to understand the true meaning of every day work and chores. Once they do, they will usually respond well as they typically appreciate when they do 'real' work which is necessary and important.

**Many of the challenges cannot be eliminated! But if a safe environment is created and maintained, then with patience and flexibility, they can be largely overcome.**

**Once young people are treated as partners, once the farmer genuinely *likes* young people, once they understand how and why things are to be done, once the farmer is authentic and sets an example by means of their own behaviour, then young people will be more likely to overcome the obstacles.**

So, for example, physical work may become tiresome and monotonous but you can look for means to make the work more interesting either by letting young people work with specialised tools, putting trust in them or by working on group dynamics.

A good social farmer knows that even the most boring and tiresome work feels better when the group dynamics are healthy, when there is a humour in the group and when people want to spend time together.

*There will be a cohort who will decide that **social farming is simply not for them** - or perhaps not for them at this stage in their life - and that is fine. Participation should always be the choice and wish of the person, regardless of who they are.*