

# Social Farming with .... Older People



## Background information & understanding



On one level it is obvious that when we talk about ‘older’ people we are referring to those who are above a certain chronological age. But of course that is only a small part of the story! There is **great variation** in people’s lives as they age in terms of things like their income and family status, how healthy they are, their levels of social connection and social activity and even whether they continue to work.

There is a strong focus in recent decades on **active ageing** described by the World Health Organisation as “the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age”. So social farming might contribute to an increase in the **quality of life** of some older people who are a target group for social care, for example older people who are affected by loneliness and social isolation, or by illness, disability or poverty. However, there are **three specific groups of older people** for whom the concept of social farming may be especially relevant.

### Older people living with dementia

- Dementia is a progressive mental illness characterised by memory loss, loss of orientation, confusion and difficulties in communication. Symptoms tend to start mild and get progressively worse over time. It is usually possible to live for several years with dementia with a good quality of life and there are ways to slow down the progression and to treat some symptoms.
- Due largely to an ageing population, dementia rates are expected to increase significantly in the coming decades: by almost 74% between 2019 to 2050 in Western Europe, for example (The Lancet, 2022). When we look at the very real benefits of social farming to this group - and the respite for family/carers provided by farm-based day services - we can see why this is **the most significant sub-group of older people to interact with social farming**, with great potential for more people to benefit in the future.

### People who are looking for alternative housing concepts for old age

- In a rapidly ageing population, there are a sub-set of active older people who might wish to live in a assisted living community in a rural/farm setting. They might need help with everyday tasks now or in the future - or long term care - but can contribute to the life of the farm.
- The extent to which people might participate in farm-life could vary according to personal preference and the needs of the farm. One possibility is of volunteering on the farm in working alongside other target groups.

### Older people in need of long-term care

- Social farms have the potential to provide a care setting for older people which is on a small scale with personal attention and individual care, more akin to a home than a large scale institutional setting might be. People who have lived in or around farms their whole life might find this especially fulfilling and even fundamental to their well-being.



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## Benefits and outcomes that social farming can deliver (and which you can support people in achieving)

- Improvements in mental health from spending time in nature and in the fresh air, from caring for plants and animals.
- A feeling of being needed and valuable, of (still) having a contribution to make to society.
- The change to be in a more homely, family-like atmosphere than the typical care setting.
- The chance to make new friends and social contacts. New exchanges between different generations can be particularly valuable.
- The opportunity both to learn new things and to share knowledge, skills and experience with others.
- Improvements in physical health and in strength, flexibility and vitality from moving around and doing everyday jobs on the farm. This can help slow the effects of ageing.
- Improved appetite and eating patterns from sharing wholesome meals in the company of others.
- Better daily or weekly routine and having something to look forward to.
- In some cases, the chance to recall and revisit childhood memories and happy times.
- ...But also to have fun, to have new experiences and make new memories.

## Which Activities?

**KEY POINT: There is no ONE set of activities or approaches which are of particular value and relevance to this group. ANY activity on the farm could be the right activity if it is enjoyable, suitable and safe for the individual.** Some suggestions from existing practice include:



- The opportunity to be around and interact with the **farm animals** is especially valuable. This might range from simple observation or petting of animals right up to feeding, grooming, collecting eggs or cleaning sheds.
- Working in the **garden** with vegetables, fruit, flowers and herbs can be of great benefit in terms of the sensory experience and providing an opportunity to connect with the seasons and with new life. This group may have a high level of knowledge and growing experience from their own gardens or from their upbringing: working together side by side can provide a good opportunity to contribute and to share this knowledge. This knowledge and life experience can also be tapped into in **farm or household maintenance tasks** like mending implements and equipment or helping to fix problems in areas like heating systems or machinery.
- Similarly, any **activity carried out in the farm kitchen**, like cooking, baking preserving, drying herbs etc. can unlock people's knowledge and memories as well as providing a sense of homeliness and togetherness. **Eating together** is really important, better still if people have helped prepare the food.
- Provide opportunities for simply walking around or using the farm landscape or the farm equipment to get **gentle exercise** according to people's physical capacities.
- Many farms that work with older people incorporate some **art or craft work** which enables people who may not be so physically mobile to still feel part of life on the farm. Many of these can be linked to the identity of the farm. So people could, for example, sketch or paint scenes from the farm, do wood work using timber from the land, take photos and create scrapbooks, create seasonal decorations, or collect and display dried leaves and flowers.
- **Anything social!** Opportunities to be gathered, to chat, to listen to music, to sing, maybe even to dance—all of these should be grasped and enjoyed when they arise.

# Which Approach?...

## Respect the individual and their autonomy

All adults are different and bring their individual biographies and experiences with them. Individual preferences have to be respected and it is essential to respect the autonomy of older people, even if they are impaired to some degree.



## Avoid assumptions

It is really common to carry negative (or sometimes even positive!) stereotypes about older individuals in terms of things like what they will be interested in or what their capacities are (e.g. in relation to technology). Or there can be a tendency to patronise or to pity people. To **avoid ageism** becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, we can ask ourselves what our views on ageing are and what we expect from others in the future when we are old. Operating from this basis makes us far more likely to treat older people simply as people, with all of the variety of opinions, perspectives, capacities and challenges that this implies.

## Promote independence & capacity

What people can do something for themselves without the help of others, they should do so even if they need more time to do it. This can also help to **strengthen remaining capacities** and to slow the ageing process .

## Allow that people will want and need different things from being on the farm

This group naturally incorporates a **wide variety of capacities**, from those who are very fit and agile and capable of performing core and ordinary tasks to those who have physical or mental health challenges which mean they may be more limited in what they can do and/or will need adaptations made to the work which is carried out. For example, having substantially raised beds in the garden or polytunnel will be easier for people than working at ground level. Equally, some may be content and will gain substantial benefits from **just being on the farm**, enjoying the environment, the company and meal times. Their focus might be very much on the farm as a social outlet.

Others may wish to be much **more substantially involved**, up and including being involved in some planning and decision-making and using their skills and life experience to do so. This group may like to work alongside and even support other participant groups, acting as a kind of a volunteer as well as a participant. Ideally, you should be **able to adapt** accordingly and where it is a group of people, ensure that a balance is achieved so that everyone gets at least some of what they wish for and need.

## Residential social farms....a complex undertaking

Where people are living on the farm, they will be somewhere on a continuum from having high independence to possibly needing substantial levels of care. And this can change for each individual over time. This type of social farming would require a **specialised approach** to that required in the more typical day service. Everything from the building and facilities design to the input of or proximity to professionals and services in areas such as medicine, social care, nursing, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, etc. to planning on what will happen when the person is no longer able to be cared for in this setting would all need to be considered.

# Possible challenges working with this group

<b>Mobility problems and physical limitations</b>	<p>If you are used to working with other groups, <b>adaptations</b> may have to be made to the kinds of activities carried out on the farm, to the pace at which activities are carried out and the extent to which activities can be done in poor or more extreme weather. You will almost certainly need to have the capacity to carry out a larger number of <b>activities indoors</b> than might be the case with other groups and to have a warm, comfortable and welcoming space to gather, to socialise and to eat meals.</p> <p>Some <b>physical adjustments</b> may be required on the farm. These include: having raised beds at various heights; providing ramps at entrances; ensuring floors are non-slip and barrier free; ensuring good lighting; providing accessible toilet facilities; and ensuring that tools are within reach, in good working order and suited to the participant's abilities. It may be necessary to provide specially adapted tools to enable people to participate fully.</p>
<b>Challenges associated with dementia</b>	<p>People living with dementia may display a <b>range of behaviours and symptoms</b> which you should be aware of. These include the obvious memory issues - including forgetting what happened previously on the farm - but also disorientation and confusion. People may react to their situation with frustration, depression or aggression. In practical terms, people can have a tendency to wander off or be in greater danger of getting involved in an accident or being injured. There are not necessarily 'solutions' to these potential challenges but ways of creating the kind of <b>atmosphere and conditions</b> which can enable you to manage them.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>⇒ It is important to create a good sense of <b>structure and reliability</b>. So things are done in a similar order each day and people know what to expect. Allowing lots of time for everything and not rushing people is also important.</li><li>⇒ Some people may need company and support around the clock to ensure their safety and welfare.</li><li>⇒ Approaches like <b>validation therapy</b> follow the idea that it is more positive to enter the reality of the person with dementia than to force the person back into our reality.</li><li>⇒ In line with this, it is important to avoid confrontation, or challenging the person, or provoking them by teasing or laughing or criticising.</li></ul>
<b>Lack of motivation and enthusiasm</b>	<p><b>Don't panic about it or take it personally.</b> You may need to lower expectations of what will be done on any given day and adapt to people's moods and energy levels. Some days will be livelier than others and just providing that space and place for people to go and to be, is itself a great positive.</p>
<b>Sense of loss and ending</b>	<p>Many of the older people who will access social farming - especially those moving to a farm-based residential care setting - will be at the beginning of the final stages of their lives. You have an important contribution to make to ensuring that they have a good <b>quality of life</b> until death. You also have to be willing to accept dying and mourning as part of your life and as part of the lives of the people you are working with and alongside.</p>