

# Social Farming with....People with Physical Disabilities



## Background information and understanding

- People with physical disabilities are first and foremost **unique individuals** with their own contribution to make, their own personalities and motivations and their own individual challenges. In simple terms, a physical disability is a temporary or permanent reduction in physical function and the inability to perform some activities that most others can perform. But this is largely a **medical perspective**, which tends to focus on a list of skills or abilities which the person in question *doesn't* have and which requires sustained medical care by professionals.
- A more **social perspective** or model says that disability is caused by the way society is organised rather than by a person's impairment or difference. Or as Robert Hensel put it; **"There is no greater disability in society than the inability to see the person as more."** So, instead of thinking about what people can't do, the focus should be on creating a world - including spaces and places like your farm - which can support people to live more full, independent and active lives.
- It is useful for you to be able to distinguish between the most **common physical disabilities** and to be open to finding out more about them if you think it would help you support people better.
- Two people with the same physical disability will **not necessarily have the same level or type of impairments**. They will each have their own set of challenges, particularities and strengths.
- **Every situation, every person, is unique**. Factors such as age, gender, education levels, financial resources, family support systems, the quality of health and social care systems: these will all help determine how people engage with the world and how they will engage with you and with social farming.
- In practice, it is not that common to have people with physical disabilities only on social farms. Physical disabilities are **predominantly found in combination with other disabilities**, most often intellectual disabilities. So some of the other guides in this series may also be useful to you.

### Common Physical Disabilities

**Cerebral palsy:** Mostly caused by pre, peri or post-natal conditions or by brain injuries, infections and degenerative diseases. Different forms of cerebral palsy exist, based on the part of the brain that is damaged.

**Spinal cord palsy:** It can be caused by many illnesses, but the most common cause is spinal cord injury due to car accidents and traumas inflicted in adrenalin sports, etc.. The health status and motor abilities depend on the level of the spinal cord damage and also on the location of the damage.

**Spina bifida:** This is present from birth, caused when the spine and spinal cord don't form properly.

**Amputation:** Loss of one or more parts of the body due to accident, injury, infection, etc.

**Muscular dystrophy:** is a progressive illness associated with loss of muscular tissue and a decrease in muscular strength. It has a genetic background and the motor abilities of a person gradually deteriorate over time.

# What can (and should) the farm offer?

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| <p><b>In general to (most) people with physical disabilities</b></p> <p><i>"Here...I feel good. Here, I feel like I am a valuable part of society for the first time."*</i></p>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acceptance and being <b>seen as a person</b>, not just a person with a disability.</li> <li>• A chance to have experiences comparable to ones peers in wider society: to use machinery, to ride on the tractor, to sit and have lunch and chat together in the middle of the working day.</li> <li>• <b>Meaningful work</b> and the chance to contribute.</li> <li>• Social connection, friendship and sense of community.</li> <li>• Improved mental wellbeing and reduced feelings of anger, depression, stress and fatigue.</li> <li>• A <b>non-clinical</b> and more <b>relaxed, informal</b> and homely place to be.</li> <li>• The opportunity to interact with animals, <b>to care for rather be cared for</b></li> <li>• Learning involving practical activity.</li> <li>• New sounds, smells, views, the feel of things—these <b>positive sensory experiences</b> are available to almost everyone regardless of the severity of the disability .</li> <li>• A chance to increase independence and capacity.</li> <li>• <b>Fun</b> 😊</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>For people not born with a physical disability</b></p>   | <p>It can take time to adjust to the emotional and physical challenges their physical disability now poses and feelings of helplessness, anxiety, frustration and self-pity can be common. Being on the farm should provide an opportunity to <b>use their skills and knowledge</b> in carrying out practical and useful activities and to see for themselves —rather than be told— that they (still) have <b>lots to offer</b>. Instead of thinking only of themselves, people find that animals and plants depend on their work which increases their self-esteem.</p>  |
| <p><b>For people born with a physical disability</b></p>   | <p>There is an element of stability in the cyclical nature of the farm and a variable environment which can be experienced in a group or alone sometimes. There is plenty of time to observe and to participate in the work and to see oneself <b>growing in independence and capacity</b>.</p>   |
| <p><b>For young people with a physical disability</b></p> <p><i>"It is important for boys in a wheelchair that they can chop wood with an axe and feel like 'normal' guys. " *</i></p> | <p>Young people with a disability are often restricted in daily activities and participation in social roles and face more difficulties in employment, leisure activities and mobility and may have less experience with intimate relationships. They typically have less opportunity to experience normal teenage activities such as socialising, mixed peer contacts and or having small jobs such as babysitting. Their general quality of life is often influenced by chronic impairment-related pain and they may have poor physical fitness, fatigue and higher levels of depressive and stress symptoms.</p> <p>Social farming involves meeting different people and <b>the opportunity to experience a world outside of one's own limitations</b>. It can also allow people to experience at least <b>some of what their peers might</b>. The general mental health benefits of social farming are particularly relevant here.</p>  |

# How to approach working with this group?



## Dignity and Respect

All adult people with physical disabilities should be treated as an adult. This means being respectful, courteous and kind when assisting them. It also means promoting the person's dignity by being mindful of privacy, respecting confidentiality, including their decisions, respecting their rights and valuing their differences. **Remember always to see the person and not the disability.**

## Familiarisation and goal-setting

Before people with physical disabilities join the social farm, it is good to figure out what the **possibilities** for that person will be. Can they move around enough on the farm and the yard, or do adjustments need to be made? What activities **can** the person do? And what is possible over time? This is best done on the ground, with a good tour around the farm. After this, it is crucial to **promote self-determination** by encouraging people to set their own goals and to figure out how these can be met within the context of the overall farm operation.

## Flexibility is key

Work arrangements can and should be continually adapted and adjusted according to people's individual challenges and capacities. Rotation of activities, adjusted hours, allowing for both individual and team work can all be considered. Through trial and error, it can be seen what a participant can do. Through the entrepreneurial spirit of farmers, it is often possible to adapt things.

## Patience and time

A balance has to be struck between getting on with things, supporting people to make a genuine contribution and with the need to ensure people are **working at a pace which is comfortable for them**. For people with physical disabilities, lower work pressure plays a vital role as they may naturally have limited capacity to perform work. Ensuring people have enough time to complete things—and as independently as possible—means they will be more willing to continue to try to do them themselves. Pushing people to do something they may not be able to manage might backfire and lead to a sense of failure and guilt.

## Be aware of limitations and challenges

Although social farming tends to be an overwhelmingly positive experience, you should also be aware of some challenges and limitations.

- There will always be some risk of accident in this environment and a **focus on safety** must underpin everything. You will need to adjust for the limited motor skills and mobility of this group in terms of elements like being in close proximity to large animals, operating machinery, etc.
- It **can be a challenging environment for people** and not everyone will feel comfortable negotiating it, regardless of the efforts or adjustments you make. Don't take it personally.
- Equally, there may be particular aspects of life on the farm which people are unfamiliar with or negative about (e.g. farm smells, particular tasks). **Flexibility, patience and humour** will all help in navigating this.
- If this is an new environment for them, people may have or may discover phobias or allergies which will need to be managed.
- **Consult with experienced support workers or services if you have any questions or concerns.**

# What Activities ?

## Everyday farm activities

Do not overthink it. Simple and **ordinary activities** in which people feel confident should form the core of their time on the farm. It is important that people enjoy their work and that the work they do is **genuinely useful**, e.g. feeding the sheep, collecting eggs, sowing seeds, brushing the pony.

## Activities which can be done independently or which build independence

This is one of the most important goals as it is often one of the biggest gaps in the life of people with disabilities. People should be encouraged to at least **try things, to get involved in planning and decision-making, to step out of their comfort zone** and to **do things by themselves where possible**. The kind of adjustments described below can support this.

## Activities which build physical strength, fitness and capacity

This can be a group with poor fitness and physical health overall and farm-based activities can provide excellent opportunities to gently build fitness, strength and agility in a **'health by stealth' approach**. Think of it as 'physiotherapy on the farm'. Bending, stretching, lifting, pushing, pulling oneself up using everyday farm equipment, where possible walking uphill and on uneven surfaces (for those not in a wheelchair): all of these can make a big difference over time.

# Adjustments

There may be a need to make some adjustments on the farm if you wish to accommodate people with a range of mobility issues. It's worth noting that **lots of other people who come social farming might benefit from these**, as may other visitors to the farm and even family members. The overall goal should be for people to be able to **move about and work on the farm as smoothly and independently as possible**, to not be continually confronted with barriers, with things they can't do, places they can't go. You should work with individuals to plan what they need but some of the key physical adjustments might include:

- Raised beds at various heights and sizes to account for different height levels and reach.
- Ramps to get in and out of sheds and buildings, polytunnels, etc.
- Floors and surfaces that are non-slip and barrier free .
- Use of railings and grab-bars in the right places and at the right heights.
- Adjustments to animal pens to enable people to safely feed, pet, or manage the care of animals.
- Good lighting for people with vision problems .
- Barrier-free toilets.
- Accessible and comfortable places for eating, hanging out, etc.
- Making sure that tools to be used are within reach, in proper working order and suited to the participant's abilities. It may be necessary to modify tools or provide special tools but often with patience and time, people can be supported to use the same as everyone else.
- There may be some tools and machinery which people will never be able to use alone but with creativity, they may be able to approximate the experience (e.g. driving the ride-on lawnmower if not the tractor).

*"We have an employee who needs a walker. He uses a rollator. He does activities he can do sitting down: for example, planting tomatoes in the greenhouse. "\*"*

