

# Evidence Report: The impact of sensory farm visits on people with mental health challenges

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'Let Nature Feed Your Senses' is a project run in partnership between LEAF (Linking Environment And Farming) and Sensory Trust. The project aims to engage people with nature, food and farming on a network of farms and nature reserves across England. Whilst the project's funding has now come to an end, the sensory farm visits advocated by the project continue through a dedicated network of host farmers.

After a visit to a farm, one visitor with mental health challenges said, *"I really enjoyed my day at your farm and thought you made all our group really welcome, but for my own experience I felt relaxed for the first time in years! It felt so great to see all the animals and get up close to them ... I felt totally safe around you both and that's a rarity for me, to trust people freely and so quickly"*

## Introduction

- Mental health costs £105 billion a year in England; £21.3 billion in health and social care costs, £30.3 billion in lost economic output and £56.3 billion in human costs (Centre for Mental Health, 2011).
- At least one in four individuals are affected in any one year by mental illness in the UK.
- Engagement with natural places has been shown to improve mental health (Pretty et al., 2005, Mapes, 2011).

## Reduce symptoms of mental ill health

- A University of Essex evaluation of the impact of Let Nature Feed Your Senses visits found an increase in average positivity scores amongst visitors as a result of a farm visit, and a statistically significant increase in mean self-reported health status (Bragg et al., 2012).
- A University of Essex evaluation of the Ecominds programme found that 63% of people with mental health problems felt more positive about their lives and that that 69% of people experienced significant increases in



wellbeing following participation in an ecotherapy<sup>1</sup> project (Bragg et al., 2013).

- Other evidence shows a decline in anxiety from a 12 week farm animal-assisted intervention (Berget et al., 2011), and a decline in depression mediated by fascination and a sense of 'being away' (Gonzalez et al., 2010).
- Relatively small doses of outdoor activity can boost mood and self-esteem (Mejia, 2010).
- After a visit to a farm through the Let Nature Feed Your Senses project, one group leader said, *"The group was very enthusiastic. Some had never been on a farm before. For some, it provides a way of managing mental health."*
- After a different visit, a group leader spoke about the improvement in wellbeing and confidence, *"One lady has her own copy of photos I took, her wellbeing, esteem and confidence went up, she spoke about it when she went back home. That particular visit created the opportunity to go out and create memories."*

## Social interaction

- A University of Essex evaluation of the Ecominds programme found that 81% of people became more involved in community activities following involvement in an ecotherapy project (Bragg et al., 2013).
- A University of Essex evaluation of the Let Nature Feed Your Senses project found that 78% of visitors felt that being with other people during their visit was 'very important' to them (Bragg et al., 2012). Indeed, visitor perceptions on the importance of being with other people (assessed using a question "how important is being with other people to you?") increased slightly following a farm visit.
- One mental health team took a group to visit a farm through the Let Nature Feed Your Senses project. During an interview after the visit, the group leader said, *"The social interaction and that experience of different activities, it's not something they would have experienced otherwise and a chance to be up close to the animals."*

## Financial case

- A study for the Let Nature Feed Your Senses project by New Economics Foundation Consulting into the impact of a series of sensory visits by a mental health support group, suggested the following savings to the State from a series of farm visits for one individual;

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<sup>1</sup> Ecotherapy, Green Care, Care Farming and Animal-Assisted Interventions, are all part of a broad family of nature based interventions, of which Sensory Farm Visits are a related but distinctive component.



<b>Economic Benefits</b>	<b>Value (£)</b>
Avoided prescription costs	£765.32
Avoided medical consultation costs	£483.36
Avoided use of community psychiatric nurse services	£1,742.00
Avoided costs to the NHS of physical inactivity	£48.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>£3038.68</b>

- Furthermore, for five typical Ecominds participants, a study by New Economics Foundation Consulting identified savings of £35,413 in one year (£7,082 each) through reduced NHS costs, benefits reductions and increased tax contributions. Using NEF's formula for just one year, savings of £1.46 million were projected for the 246 people who found full-time work through Eco-minds.

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