

Reflections on the co-production of a social farm service model for dementia

Social farms, also referred to as ‘care farms’ and physically based on working farms, can provide a number of benefits to people with dementia. **Justin Mazzotta** describes a social farm on the outskirts of York, and how it has been established and developed using a co-production approach involving people with dementia

“I like to work... summat to move, not just talk.”

“We should do what she [the farmer] needs us to do. It’s good as it keeps us active and we’re not sitting on our arse all day.”

“I don’t think you need more people, half a dozen is enough...If they can’t do it we will help them.”

“I love it. That’s why I like coming here, it’s easy. When you get there you know what you’re doing.”

“I’ve done some work and I’m happy.”

“It’s the enjoyment of being with all the animals.”

“When I’m doing summat like this [mucking out ponies] I’m thinking about this. When I’m out, even walking, my dementia keeps coming back.”

These comments and many others from people with dementia who have attended our social farm service over the years have helped us establish and develop a unique service model: The quotes show that people with dementia wanted to be physically active, work in a small group setting, and be useful by helping the farmer with their jobs. Being active and occupied with work also helped some group members to cope with their dementia. They wanted the familiarity of routine to help them to function well, and to be around the farm animals which were of interest to them and brought joy.

Introduction to social farming

Social farms, also known as care farms, were established in the UK in the early 2000s (Asquith, 2017), and there are now over 400, with around 80 providing regular services to people with dementia (Bragg, 2022). Social farms are often based on agricultural farms in rural as well as urban locations. Typically they are set up and run by landowners looking to diversify into care, or care practitioners who rent or have been given land to use (Bragg, 2022). There

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Summary

In 2018 a social enterprise, Partners in Dementia, set up a social farming model of care, aimed at supporting people with dementia to be involved in the running of a working farm, on the outskirts of York.

Social farms are services physically based on farms. They aim to support people with a defined need, including those with dementia, through a facilitated or structured programme of activity on a regular basis. They use traditional farming practices to enable therapeutic outcomes for those that attend.

Social farms are an established and integrated model of care for people with dementia in other parts of Europe, notably in Holland. They are becoming increasingly recognised in the UK as a viable alternative to traditional forms of services such as day centres.

Our unique service model was established and developed with the guidance and support of the people with dementia who have attended our service over the years. From the start, involvement approaches enabled people with dementia to play a key role in directing the way our service was designed. For example, service users told us they wanted to be physically active and help the farmer with her work and be useful. They wanted the service to support a small group, and to develop routines such as feeding the animals as that helped them know what to do and maintain their independence.

Over time, our service users with dementia advised us to introduce new ideas and our service developed accordingly. For instance, we created an allotment and started undertaking woodwork projects.

are various options for funding, including private, grants, donations, crowdfunding or sponsorship (Social Farms & Gardens, 2025).

Social farming is ‘the therapeutic use of farming practices’ (Bragg, 2022), and an approach which enables people with dementia to contribute to the running of a working farm. This type of service offers an alternative to traditional care models such as day centres, and enables a unique range of both indoor and outdoor based activities or occupations (de Bruin *et al.*, 2017), such as woodwork or growing vegetables, for people with dementia and others with a defined need. Sudmann and Børshiem (2017, p.11)



People wanted to be physically active, work in a small group setting, and be useful by helping the farmer with jobs

highlight how social farms “abound with opportunities for a strengths-based and empowering approach to the participants” with dementia.

Our social farm service

Beetle Bank Social Farm was set up in 2018 on the outskirts of York in response to feedback from families living in rural communities, who said there were no suitable groups for people with dementia from their communities. Many people from rural communities have been farming all their lives and indoor day centres with games and quizzes are not necessarily meaningful to them. Once our social farm was set up, which included obtaining the lease of a farm from which to run a service from, we held a launch event to attract interest. From this event, a small group of five people with dementia started to attend our social farm regularly.

Involving our service users with dementia

Involving service users with dementia in the services they are part of can be a way to protect their rights, autonomy, decision-making (Gove *et al.*, 2017), and empower them (CSIP Older Peoples Mental Health programme, 2007). We trialled a variety of approaches recommended in research, as we endeavoured to involve our service users to help establish and develop our social farm in the way they wanted. For example, having opportunities to be helpful rather than being helped has been a useful approach to support people with dementia to participate at our social farm (Fetherstonhaugh, Tarzia and Nay, 2013). Engaging in physical work, being active and

trying new things (Fetherstonhaugh, Tarzia and Nay, 2013) was the approach we used the most, as it meant the group could get involved in the running of the farm and the jobs which were needed. We ran regular focus groups with agendas set by our group members (O’Sullivan, Hocking and Spence, 2014), and sometimes staff when this seemed helpful. During our focus groups we would incorporate strategies to help build confidence, limit choices to help with decision-making, provide written and pictorial memory aids (Hamann *et al.*, 2011), and seek people’s views. These approaches enabled our group members to set goals (Martin *et al.*, 2015), such as a strong preference to keep active and be useful to the farmer.

We paid close attention to comments made by group members in the general day-to-day interactions within the group. We used a shared decision-making process (Gill, White and Cameron, 2011), and this helped support those who had impaired speech (Daly, Bunn and Goodman, 2018) to agree with their peers when they wanted to. We adapted life story profiles (May, Edwards, and Brooker, 2009) and included input from family members and service users with dementia, which made it easier for us to get to know each other. Life story profiles also helped staff and volunteers interpret meaning when speech became difficult due to word-finding problems (Phinney, Chaudhury and O’Connor, 2007). These approaches have not always gone perfectly, but creating involvement opportunities for our service users with dementia wherever possible has helped us to learn and get better at what we do. ▷



Social farms can support people to hold onto their status as knowledgeable individuals who have value

▷ The meaningful nature of our social farm

The experiences and types of work inherent at our social farm tends to be meaningful to the people with dementia who attend the service, as we try to focus on occupations that are relevant and tailored to our group members. These include feeding the farm animals, growing fruit, flowers and vegetables, doing odd jobs around the farm, woodwork, baking and washing the dishes. These are activities that are common and appealing to many people from the generations who attend, from both rural and urban communities. The life story profiles of service users has often played an important role in helping us to create meaning for our service users. For example, we learned one of our group had been a chef in the army and that the task of baking bread rolls was a regular meaningful occupation for him. We were then able to support him to bake bread again. It became especially useful to utilise his procedural memory for baking and other activities, as his speech was very impaired.

The farm environment also provides many sensory cues to help convey meaning: for example, sheep bleating denotes the presence of these animals, but also that they might be hungry, and therefore creates an opportunity to do something in response and connect. Being outdoors in different weathers and noticing its effects is also meaningful and often commented on by people who attend, as is noticing changes in the seasons: “Fluffy clouds, blue sky, a gentle breeze. It’s a beautiful English summers day”.

Different motivations for attending our social farm

Understanding the motivation of a person with dementia is integral for providing meaningful activities to them, which then has the potential to benefit them in numerous ways (Han *et al.*, 2016). As we got to know each other we learned that our social farm appealed to different people with dementia for a variety of reasons. For example, a love of animals was sometimes the main motivation for attending; sometimes it was having opportunities to do physical ‘work’, such as odd jobs for the farmer, or gardening and woodwork. For other people, the main motivation for attending our service was social interaction, or simply wanting to be outside more. Often there was more than one factor involved – for instance, loving

Key points

- Social farms offer a meaningful alternative to traditional care service models such as day centres.
- Social farms have an established evidence base, and there are examples of them in practice in the UK and elsewhere.
- They should be seriously considered by service providers and commissioners as alternatives to other forms of care for people with dementia.
- Social farms can support people with dementia to hold onto their status as individuals who have value and possess knowledge because they are meaningful.
- Involvement approaches support people with dementia to be included, and to play a key role in establishing a service model and its ongoing development, such as a social farm.

animals and being with people, and the banter that came with that. On several occasions different stakeholders have described our service as providing opportunities to be purposeful and useful: “It offers John a purposeful and meaningful day ... rather than sitting in a day care setting” (family care partner).

The different roles for people with dementia

Over the years, people with dementia at our social farm have taken on a variety of roles, from deciding what they enjoy doing on a day to day basis, to helping with decisions, such as what to spend grants on and which staff to employ, or choosing to become directors of the social enterprise. Our service users have the status of ‘active agents’ who can influence change within our service and make decisions (Haugen, Slettebø, and Ytrehus, 2019). They often make suggestions and we collectively try to find ways to make these happen: “let’s have a Christmas party and invite all our families” was one suggestion which led to regular Christmas parties involving family members.

Beetle Bank Social Farm Case Study:

Geoff, a retired livestock farmer

Geoff had been a livestock farmer almost his whole life. Farming was a way of life for him and he had not had much time for other occupations or hobbies. Geoff and his wife Maureen had a history of a difficult relationship, and since his diagnosis of dementia this situation had become worse. Geoff was retired but was still very knowledgeable about and interested in farm animals, so a referral to Beetle Bank Social Farm was particularly well suited because of the traditional farm animals on site.

Attending Beetle Bank Social Farm

Geoff quickly settled in the service and bonded with other service users, volunteers and staff. He expressed a desire to be involved in the care of the farm animals: "feeding the animals, there is something interesting in them for me". As a result, activities around animal care became a regular feature of the service. We would also

frequently support the farm owner by helping her with maintenance jobs, which were also familiar and meaningful to Geoff. He had opportunities to closely observe the farm animals and provide feedback about their health and welfare, an important role for a farmer, thus helping Geoff maintain his status as a person with knowledge.

Key benefits for Geoff

The animals and environment at our social farm service were familiar to Geoff, enabling him to have access to meaningful occupation and purpose.

Geoff was able to retain his status of someone who is knowledgeable and therefore important in a farming context.

It would have been difficult to find other suitable placements for Geoff as farming was so dominant in his life.

Please note: All names have been anonymised

"We could do with a polytunnel to grow veg in", led to accessing funds to acquire a polytunnel. "Let's try to get some raised [vegetable / flower] beds to help us from bending over and hurting ourselves", resulted in a grant to acquire raised beds. "I think they [the animals in the fields] could do with more [food]", led to discussions with the farmer and a commitment to regularly feeding her pigs with apples, carrots, potatoes and bread. "I don't think you need more people, half a dozen is enough", guided us to a service user to staff ratio of six people with dementia to two staff and volunteers. Comments were sometimes a starting point for ongoing discussions and collective decision-making.

Read on

Read more about social farming via this link: <https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/growing-care-farming>

Read more about Beetle Bank Social Farm via this link: <https://www.partnersindementia.org/beetle-bank-social-farm/>

Beetle Bank Social Farm is run by Partners in Dementia, a not-for-profit social enterprise supporting people affected by dementia in and around York. Read more about Partners in Dementia via this link: www.partnersindementia.org

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