

Developing care farming services

Dementia support

About the care farm

Pathways Care Farm in Suffolk was set up to help people living with dementia in 2016. The farm also provides services for adults and young people with learning difficulties, mental health issues or those on rehabilitative programmes.

An inclusive approach means that people referred to Pathways are known as co-workers. Activities include animal care, growing vegetables, cooking, woodwork, site maintenance and building projects.

Farm Director Geoff Stevens and his wife Den, Care and Activities Coordinator, have drawn on personal experience of caring for a family member with dementia. They are passionate about providing real outdoor experiences tailored to people's interests, skills and backgrounds.

Pathways has found new ways to support people living with dementia thanks to specialist training with the charity Dementia Adventure.

Dementia training

After running a successful dementia support service for two years, the team were keen to connect with other providers across different sectors as well as share learning and best practice.

Through a collaboration by Social Farms & Gardens and Dementia Adventure, Pathways was selected for dementia training and support. The initiative, called 'Dementia Adventure in a box', was funded by the Community Lottery Fund.



New resources and a detailed grounding in dementia awareness helped the team expand on their knowledge.

The training highlighted the good practice approaches already in place at Pathways and gave the team confidence to build on the work they were already doing.

New ways to evaluate sessions for impact and outcome meant Pathways could continue to offer high quality, personalised support. The team introduced daily debriefs and note-taking to record engagement with sessions.

A top up grant from Dementia Adventure funded toilet seats in a contrasting colour to support people who experience visual and spatial perception difficulties.

“You find that fear of doing something new falls away once you become involved in people's lives.”

Geoff Stevens

Dementia provision

The ethos of Pathways has always been on caring for people using the farming environment. "This is a caring organisation that uses a farm," said Geoff. Both he and Den have used their personal experience as well as backgrounds in business, design and communication to provide a care service rooted in the outdoors.

Pathways offers respite to carers and gives people living with dementia a break from their home environment. People are referred to the farm through Suffolk County Council and Norfolk Health and Social Services. Each person is supported one-to-one by a staff member or volunteer so activities can be personally tailored.

Pathways focus on what people can do and the skills and abilities they bring to the farm. "We try and normalise everyone's day," said Geoff.

With a diagnosis of dementia, people's symptoms can be worse on some days than others. A one-to-one approach gives time and capacity to meet someone's needs. It could mean a change of focus or task depending on how the person feels.

"For people living with dementia, tasks and activities may have a focus on the present and immediate experience. Doing day-to-day tasks amongst the smells, sights and sounds of the farm can really stimulate the senses."

Geoff Stevens



Pathways have a vision that every person can access a social care farm within 10 miles of where they live. The farm runs events and links with other dementia support initiatives in nearby Lowestoft. They are also building a kitchen and café which will be open to the community and provide opportunities for new skills and experiences for farm workers.

Geoff said: "We want to get back to the roots of a farm being at the heart of a community and restore that crucial element of sharing. Our aim is to bring people together who are in need of support to improve both physical and mental health and wellbeing."

Challenges and achievements

Pathways are experienced at navigating the highs and lows of care farming but running such an important community service demands emotional energy too.

The team develop strong bonds with co-workers and it is difficult to see someone's condition deteriorate.

In the wake of a dementia diagnosis, Pathways is a place to find joy, normality and mutual support. On the 13-acre site people are safe, free to follow their own interests and to live in the moment.

Fully committed to enriching people's quality of life, Pathways continues to develop their care.

The farm first offered dementia care on a specific day, but when they saw how positively different ages and groups of people interacted with each other, the team adapted their service. The farm now offers dementia care services throughout the week.

The biggest achievement for the farm is harnessing the connection and purpose that comes from bringing people together outdoors. Dementia training has enabled Pathways to continue to build confidence and independence, helping people to rediscover themselves beyond a disease or diagnosis.

"The greatest achievement is getting to know the real person behind the disease, their personality, their humour, their life story."

Geoff Stevens



Service user story - 'D'

The farm's co-workers include a former builder, 'D' who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease.

D has found an outlet for his practical skills at the farm as well as similar camaraderie to his days on building sites. D works with a Pathways volunteer who is also a builder. Together they have cladded a barn, built a kitchen and decorated rooms.

Geoff said: "D can be brilliant and so quick with his humour. He thought his life was over when he was first diagnosed. Two years later he said, 'they told me I had Alzheimer's, I don't think I have dementia.' It shows that outdoor activities and company work - he has improved so much."

More information

This case study is one of three produced by Dementia Adventure and Social Farms & Gardens to highlight the development of care farming services for people living with dementia. The case studies feature different funding and support approaches.

Between 2017-2020 Dementia Adventure received funding from the Community Lottery Fund to deliver funding and support called **Dementia Adventure in a Box**. The three-year partnership project gave people living with dementia the opportunity to access supported nature and outdoor experiences.

Research shows that regularly spending time in nature can slow progression of the disease. It can also improve sleep, concentration, appetite and communication skills. There are very few opportunities for people living with dementia to join outdoor activities compared to joining indoor activities and support groups. This means that people living with dementia and family carers are much less able to gain the health and well-being benefits from time spent outdoors.

Tailored training and support covered the steps needed to make a care farm inclusive to people living with dementia. This included:

- Understanding dementia and strategies to support individuals
- Risk benefit assessment and site audits
- Partnership working, connecting social care provision with care farms
- Practical exercises to increase staff skills & confidence for engagement and using nature and the outdoors



- How to build co-production and lived experience into care farm programme
- Bringing together people from the social care sector as well as other care farms to share practice and learning

Pathways Care Farm provides therapeutic day care for people living with mental ill-health, learning difficulties and dementia.

www.pathways-care-farm.org.uk

Dementia Adventure helps people to think differently about dementia and retain a sense of adventure by connecting to nature, the outdoors, themselves and their community.

dementiaadventure.co.uk

Social Farms & Gardens is a UK wide charity supporting communities to farm, garden and grow together.

farmgarden.org.uk