

Beetle Bank Social Farm

North Yorkshire

Key facts

Beetle Bank Social Farm in York was set up, and is run, by Justin Mazzotta – who has a work background and educational training in dementia care. Beetle Bank is one of several care farms working successfully with people living with dementia.

Our story

Justin has several years' experience of working in dementia care. *"It is an undervalued industry,"* he says. *"Services for people living with dementia are often run from indoor settings. I wanted to increase the spectrum of services available and improve older people's quality of life."*

That was his starting point and so several years ago he went off to the local livestock market in search of a farmer – quite literally – with whom he could work. *"Many of the farmers I talked to thought it was a good idea,"* he says. *"But also quite risky, because of the inherent risks on a farm, so they wouldn't entertain it."* Undefeated, however, Justin went to speak to the auctioneer, and she gave him the names of several farmers that were engaged with the general public – one of whom, Angela Serino, he has now been working with for 18 months.

What we do

The social farm is for people living with dementia – a service user group with whom Justin has worked, as well as being the subject of his master's degree. It operates one day per week (Tuesdays), for around four or five people at a time. Because of the work-like nature of the activities, it has so far appealed mostly to men.

The operational capacity is a balancing act between commercial viability and operational necessity. The ideal ratio is one staff member to five clients, but until recently Justin hasn't had any volunteers to help him.



Angela's mixed, 30-acre farm has lots of small animals (such as guinea pigs, rabbits and sheep), which are mostly visited for 'petting' by parents and their young children – whereas the care farm tends to work with the larger animals such as pigs, ponies, cows, llamas and sheep etc.

When service users first arrive, they and their families complete a 'Life History Form', which gives Justin a useful starting point for working with them. *"It tells us their interests, and provides a stimulus for things that we hope our clients will want to be involved in,"* he says. Feeding and mucking out the animals has proven particularly popular, and for several reasons. It's a job that the farmer needs getting done, as well as being one where the service users feel valued – and which, on the whole, they enjoy. As a routine job, it also helps service users know what is happening and what they need to do.

The charge for coming to Beetle Bank Social Farm is £50 per day. As a small-sized operation, it's hard to be any cheaper – and Justin defends it given the value of the experience they are getting. Funding for service users comes via Personal Budgets and self-funding.

Challenges and achievements

Local stakeholders are aware of the service, says Justin, but it is not easy to find people who understand the potential benefits to service users and that also have the necessary budget – especially in the face of staff turnover. *“I think some people may not understand the value of social farming, in particular its value for those in the earlier to middle stages of dementia,”* he says. *“Often people with dementia go into day care – the traditional alternative to social farming – but that tends to be when a family carer/partner needs respite, rather than when it may benefit the person living with dementia,”* he stresses.

Another challenge has been balancing how much service users are able to do with the expectations of the farmer Angela. *“Ultimately, we are aiming to make the day as pleasurable as possible for our clients, rather than do as much work as possible”* says Justin. But for operational challenges such as these, he praises a Senior Occupational Therapist, who volunteers her time as his supervisor and with whom he can discuss things.

For those considering going into care farming, Justin praises the boost he got from attending the two-day course run by Care Farming UK (now Social Farms & Gardens). But it was just a start – care farming for dementia is a highly skilled area to work in, and there has been a lot more for him to get on top of.

He also encourages people to be creative and take risks. *“The care sector is largely risk averse, and tend to think of providing services for people with dementia from indoor settings,”* he says.

“Go for it,” he concludes. *“But do it seriously and with others, so that you can support one another”.*

What people say about us

Service users living with dementia have spoken out about why they like to come to the social farm:

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

Andy

“Small group of people work well together”

Brian

“In a way we’re very lucky. We’re doing this, we’re doing that”

Peter

“I like being active, I like having things to do”

Keith

“It has helped me knowing that John is happy and enjoying life – and given me time out from caring, which enables me to be less stressed and able to cope. He absolutely loves it. Being outside, helping and being seen as useful is so valuable.”

Sylvia

For more details

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Social Farms & Gardens, in partnership with Thrive, are delivering the Growing Care Farming project. See **www.farmgarden.org.uk/GCF** for more details.