

FarmAbility

Oxford

Key facts

FarmAbility is a social farming programme based on a commercial working farm. In addition to its farm-based programme at Wytham, FarmAbility is working to spread its model to other farms in Oxfordshire, enabling 'co-farmers' to progress on to suitable employment opportunities in traditional workplaces.

FarmAbility has ties with both the city's universities. It is based at FAI Farms, Wytham, on land owned by Oxford University. The charity provides placements for Occupational Therapy (OT) students from Oxford Brookes University – with both sides benefitting from the engagement.

FarmAbility meets the care farming Code of Practice

Our story

Several developments led to the farm. Firstly, FAI Farms' interest in using part of its commercial farm to allow primary school children to learn more about farming and food, part-funded by Natural England. Secondly, the farm's participation in Let Nature Feed Your Senses (LNFYS), a Big Lottery Funded collaboration between LEAF and the Sensory Trust in 2011; which opened up green spaces to a wider population – including people with learning disabilities and autism. *"The visits we ran to FAI Farms as part of LNFYS went really well,"* says FarmAbility's Director, Sarah Giles. *"The families of those who'd been to the farm said: 'Please can they come again. They're bored of Day Services.'"*

After a few years developing the FarmAbility programme; strengthening their understanding of what works and building up the range of activities they offer – the FarmAbility team is now replicating and extending their model to cater for more people and to spread the opportunities. FarmAbility's outreach programme takes co-farmers to a number of partner farms across the county.



In 2019, FarmAbility hopes to develop their first off-site programme, or 'hub'. They are also partnering with other Oxford-based charities to identify suitable job roles and workplaces where co-farmers can progress onto, to further build their skills and confidence.

FarmAbility embeds occupational therapy practice within its programme. *"Parents said they were noticing changes in their sons and daughters, so we wanted to understand why it was working,"* says Sarah. This has led to the farm hosting several student placements from Oxford Brookes. *"Here, the students work with people doing practical things – in a real, live working environment rather than the normal clinical setting"* she says.

Both sides benefit from the experience. *"The OTs give us a language, new theories and a framework for working with our co-farmers; and from us they gain added energy, interest and motivation for their work."* As the farm's website highlights, research shows that engagement in meaningful occupations – especially when done regularly – really helps improve people's health and wellbeing.

What we do

The farm caters for people with a moderate/severe learning disability; many of whom also have autism. A total of 60 co-farmer places are offered over five days each week, with 12 co-farmers coming each day for 6-hour sessions. During the academic year, this includes 10 young people with learning disabilities and autism from local schools aged 16–21 who visit once a week.

In addition to seven staff (only one full-time) there are 10 regular volunteers and at least one occupational therapy student on placement.

Co-farmers are actively involved in small group activities, be it: vegetable growing, orchard management, horse care, animal husbandry, or egg collection, grading and packing – as well as woodwork and seasonal farm tasks. Referrals are made by the county's three Learning Disability Teams; others find out by word of mouth and from the website, etc.



Challenges and achievements

The farm's achievements are obvious. *"Co-farmers, their families and support teams are universally proud of being involved with FarmAbility,"* says JP O'Connor, the Programme Manager. *"They rave about it. We are not just where co-farmers happen to spend their time, but part of their life. There is a sense of community about what we have created here together."*

Fundraising can be difficult, but it is manageable, says Sarah; so, it is challenges more specific to the farm that she first discusses. First, FarmAbility is limited to 12 co-farmers a day on FAI Farms, which means that any expansion in numbers needs to happen off-site. Running their programme elsewhere requires adapting the model to suit a new environment, possibly with different activities and additional resources.

Second, supporting co-farmers to progress from the farm to employment is made difficult by the lack of opportunities for people with learning disabilities in the workplace. *"Across the voluntary sector, groups focus primarily on supporting people with disabilities to become 'job-ready',"* she says. *"But there are very few employers who actually provide suitable job opportunities – for example, by breaking a job down into various roles, some of which may be very suitable for being carried out by a person with a learning disability."*

In conclusion, FarmAbility believes that social farming programmes like theirs can help build a more inclusive society, by giving people with disabilities the opportunity to contribute, and by giving people without disabilities the chance to see what a fantastic contribution they can make.

What people say about us

"I love being with people, being outdoors, I love the socialising aspect, love the animals – everything – I feel it is really good for my emotional wellbeing. I really enjoy coming here because I feel like it's my extended family. I have found my Eutopia or Eden."

Co-farmer Fiona

"FarmAbility has brought the outside to life for Fiona, it has been an inspiration for her. FarmAbility is full of people who listen; Fiona feels listened to and supported."

Fiona's family

"Bryan has a new-found confidence and is proud to tell me that he has a job. Thank you FarmAbility for making me proud of my son, and for my son feeling proud of himself."

Co-farmer Bryan's family

“Since coming to FarmAbility, John has become much more assertive at home; he is asking for help more at home, being more independent at home, and offering to do more, like mowing the grass, using the shears and washing the car. He is definitely more confident.”

Co-farmer John's family

“We are thrilled with FarmAbility; we feel the balance of risk and opportunities is well-managed, and the variety of activities is good. It is an excellent opportunity for co-farmers to experience farm life in a controlled environment and in a friendly welcoming atmosphere with staff who are truly dedicated. We feel Rachel is happy experiencing all aspects

of farm life and benefits from changing her options after a certain period of time. The outreach scheme was a very popular choice and a brilliant idea.”

Co-farmer Rachel's family

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.