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# LET NATURE FEED YOUR SENSES

SENSORY-RICH VISITS  
CONNECTING PEOPLE  
TO NATURE AND FOOD



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**Sensory-rich visits  
connecting people to  
nature and food**



## ABOUT THIS PAPER

Welcome to this Learning Paper, one of two in a fourth and final series of papers. **Here we focus on the learning from Let Nature Feed Your Senses, a flagship Access to Nature project<sup>1</sup> that worked with farms and nature reserves to provide sensory-rich visits that explored the connections between food, farming and nature.**

The fourth series of papers uses information gathered from well established projects and follows on from Access to Nature's early findings papers. These papers have been produced across the lifetime of Access to Nature and demonstrate what has been learnt about encouraging people who have little or no experience of the natural environment to go into the outdoors. This includes messages which seek to inform the continuing work of Access to Nature successor projects and the work of other organisations interested in, or committed to, this kind of work.

## PROJECT FACT FILE

Let Nature Feed Your Senses (LNFYS)<sup>2</sup> was an England-wide, Access to Nature flagship project that sought to encourage a life-long love of nature. It provided memorable, sensory-rich encounters with nature, food and farming for people unable to visit the countryside - older people, people with disabilities, those living in the most disadvantaged areas, and schools that are unable to access the countryside. Over a period of three and a half years, 85 farms and nature reserves from Cornwall to Cumbria hosted hundreds of visits for thousands of people who hadn't previously had the opportunity to explore the countryside.

“Nostrils have been stung by farmyard smells, taste buds have been tempted by homemade delights, ears have been opened to the sounds of the countryside, eyes have been focused on the big picture and the small details, and fingers have explored how food, farming and nature feels<sup>3</sup>.”



### LNFYS key outputs:

- 85 farms and nature reserves hosted visits
- 928 visits
- 14,446 people from beneficiary groups took part in visits

LNFYS made the most of its two partners' individual areas of expertise. It combined Linking Environment and Farming's (LEAF) extensive experience of working with farmers and their understanding of farming and the natural environment, with the Sensory Trust's sensory approach to nature and outdoor experiences, as well as its track record in working with the beneficiary groups<sup>4</sup>.





## LEAF

LEAF works to inspire and enable prosperous farming that enriches the environment and engages local communities. LEAF develops management tools and sets up demonstration sites to show farmers the principles behind Integrated Farm Management and how profitable farming and nature conservation go hand in hand. LEAF also gives the public an insight into sustainable production and consumption through farm visits and in the market place with LEAF Marque. [www.leafuk.org](http://www.leafuk.org)

## SENSORY TRUST

Sensory Trust is a UK organisation promoting and supporting inclusive environmental design and management to build richer connections between people and the natural world. Sensory Trust is experienced in addressing the barriers to access that prevent use of the outdoors by socially excluded communities, particularly older people, disabled people, and families and carers. All aspects of accessibility are covered, from physical access and site design, through information and interpretation, to education and policy issues. [www.sensorytrust.org.uk](http://www.sensorytrust.org.uk)



## CONNECTING WITH NATURE

In our industrialised society, with few opportunities to be active outdoors in everyday life, many people feel disconnected from the natural environment<sup>5</sup>. This is significant because there is a growing body of evidence suggesting a positive link between health and nature. The evidence emerging shows key health benefits for many people as a result of spending time in the natural environment<sup>6</sup>. For example, being in the natural environment can contribute to recovery from stress, encourage exercise participation, stimulate development in children, and provide opportunities for personal development and a sense of purpose in adults<sup>7</sup>.

**“Nature is good for human health<sup>8</sup>.”**

The 2011 Natural Environment White Paper set out a clear aspiration for everyone to be able to make the most of what it calls ‘nature’s health service’<sup>9</sup>. Natural England is working in a number of ways to connect health and wellbeing improvements with the natural environment and is contributing data to the Public Health Outcomes Framework<sup>10</sup>.

## A SENSORY APPROACH

LNFYS was all about making the connections between people and nature, within a context of farming and food. It also sought to remove the barriers to active and creative participation for all visitors by developing engaging activities that reflected and worked with different levels of sensory and communicative ability.



**“Working with visually impaired students, it’s really important to look at your site prior to a visit almost with new eyes. Look at the details – how many steps down from the bus bay to the yard? How big or small is the doorstep into the classroom, what different surfaces will the students walk on, will they be uneven, slippery or have trip hazards? You will also need to think really hard about the language you use. You can’t just point and say ‘this x, y, or z’ you have to describe things.**

**We explored the ponds as part of one of our visits and I had some plasticine and matchsticks with me to quickly model the shapes of the creatures so the students could touch. It’s also good to ask the school how they do things as they have techniques for describing things – special plastic paper that when you draw on it makes an indent that the students can feel.**

Often students with sensory difficulties have stronger senses of touch, smell, hearing and taste so use these. On another visit we looked at fruit and veg. Students got to feel the veggies growing in the garden, work out what they were, we harvested some and they smelt and tasted them to make connections. The best part of this day was students being totally baffled by brussel sprout plants!" **Farm host**



This multisensory and experiential approach to learning about the natural environment aimed to transfer new skills and knowledge to visitors, as well as strengthen emotional connections to the natural world, creating a positive impact on motivation and the desire to maintain such connections.

"There was one gentleman we felt made a difference to his wellbeing on the day. He has a learning disability and a little bit of Alzheimer's and he was different person on the day because he used to live on a farm and the wellbeing for him on the day was 100% better. He didn't stop talking about what he knew normally he is really cautious and worried he might hurt himself, but he was hurling himself into the dairy part. It was amazing and interesting for us to see."

**Support worker, older people's care home**



## THE LNFYS HIGHLIGHTS

There are **successes that relate to improving the health and wellbeing** of the visitors:

- Positive impact on the health and wellbeing of participants
- Improved connection with nature
- Improved social interactions, bonding and communications.



'It's a bit like entering fairyland. Because we arrive... you know, we've left home in a minibus, we have travelled on a road with lots of other cars and then we turn off and we drive up and everything is quiet and it's calm. Then we did the soundscapes. That was a really good comparison. Because here, when we did the sound maps, we had ice-cream vans, we had sirens, we had planes, we had motorbikes. The farm, you had birds, and sometimes you just had silence. And we'd very, very rarely have silence.'

Group leader, family centre from a disadvantaged inner city area

## OTHER ACHIEVEMENTS INCLUDE:

- Making the natural environment more interesting, appealing and accessible by focusing on a sensory experience
- Increasing visitors' understanding of farming and food production
- Creating a network of hosts who are confident to deliver sensory visits to a wide range of groups<sup>11</sup>
- Demonstrating the economic benefits to society of farm visits, for example, in terms of avoided costs to the NHS for prescriptions, medical consultations, and the use of community psychiatric services as a result of physical inactivity<sup>12</sup>.

# THE EXPERIENCE



therapeutic value of  
a positive memory

growing  
confidence

calm and  
relaxing  
environment

nature, food  
and farming

incorporating taste

engaging  
with animals

fun, laughter  
and enjoyment

exploring sound

new experiences

flavours of fresh food

sharing  
experiences

recalling the past

getting  
growing

hands on

seeing,  
smelling,  
touching

boosting  
morale and  
self esteem

more accessible sites

first time  
experiences

inspired conversations



## MAKING IT WORK:

### key messages about running a project like LNFYS

As part of the Access to Nature programme, LNFYS was required to undertake formative evaluation of its work; it engaged in a thorough process of capturing evidence and reflecting on its practice throughout its lifetime. The following key messages reflect the project's key learning about how it approached its work.

#### 1 Find approaches that enable local delivery within a national project

LNFYS recognised the need for a localised, physical presence to facilitate communication with hosts and broker local relationships with beneficiary groups; the project knew that solely working at a distance would not be effective. As a result, eight Regional Co-ordinators (RCs) were employed for up to 20 days per year to support project delivery. RCs played an important role, and where the role was implemented well and where they were confident engaging with the target beneficiary groups, visitor numbers were higher.

#### 2 Direct contact is the best way to reach beneficiary groups

The experience of LNFYS was that the best way to communicate with potential visitors was via direct contact by phone in the first instance, from project staff, host farmers, RCs or volunteers. This allowed for questions and concerns to be raised and addressed straightaway, and to overcome the initial hurdle of "is this the right kind of thing for us?". Many of the hosts also 'took their farm to the group', to build people's confidence about coming to the farm. These 'taster visits' were hands on, with the farmers bringing along farm products, tools or even animals. Some group leaders also went to the farm for a pre-visit to better understand what the group would experience.



### 3 Build hosts' confidence in providing sensory-rich nature experiences for the target groups

The majority of hosts had experience of hosting school visits to achieve specific curriculum related outcomes, but the idea of providing sensory-rich visits, for a wider variety of groups, was initially daunting for many. The key challenge was to bring about a change from a primarily verbal 'show and tell' approach to a sensory-rich, hands on, visitor focused experience. This was achieved as a result of the support and resources provided by the LNFYS project team – regional training events, materials and activity ideas, and opportunities to share their learning – as well through their own 'learning by doing'.



"The children we have can be volatile and impulsive. The farmer kept them engaged, spoke to them appropriately and adapted his tour according to the pupils' needs." **Group leader**

"I was very reluctant at first to move away from my comfort zone i.e. 30 kids on a farm visit. The thought of working with people with learning difficulties, disabilities etc. unnerved me... But bring it on. I have had some fantastic experiences this last year or so through LNFYS. The feeling of satisfaction - that I gave these groups the opportunity to experience something new is overwhelming. To see people smile who don't ever smile, to hear chatting and laughing from those who struggle to communicate, is really heart-warming. I think the animals, fresh air, change of scenery all help to make that experience real." **Farm host**

## MAKING IT WORK:

### key messages about sensory-rich visits that link the natural environment, farming and food

There have been two components to improving accessibility for visitors: making the activities within visits interactive and accessible, and improving the physical accessibility of host farms.

#### 1 Use tailored activities that engage visitors' senses

All five senses were engaged during the visits to host sites - vision, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. Hosts used tailored activities and interacted with their visitors in a way that gave them all the opportunity to see the farm environment first hand; to hear the farmyard sounds; to smell the animals; to bake and taste food made from farm produce; and to touch livestock, plants and farm equipment. The project developed a wide range of resources to help inspire a love of nature among visitors, from activity books and discovery bags<sup>13</sup>, to tea towels and chalk notice-boards<sup>14</sup>. LNFYS also implemented the use of visual symbols and Widgit symbols<sup>15</sup> for those who could not read. As their confidence grew, host farmers were able to customise their own ideas, for example, creating story-boards for anxious visitors.



"Discovery bags are brilliant – you take them with you and if one activity becomes inappropriate then you don't need to go back to the farmyard to restock. You just magic the next activity out of the bag. I love them!" **Farm host**

"A momento of seeds on a sticky pad was a good idea, they're still on display in the home now." **Group leader, older people's care home**

"We tried the sound maps with adults – they loved it and several shared it was the special moment of their day. We asked them to mix up their senses and try drawing the shape of the sounds as well, and this triggered a lot of lively conversations. Next time we'll ask people about the texture too – if you could touch that shape, what would it feel like? It really gets people into their senses, and it's fun and pleasurable." **Farm host**

# THE ACTIVITIES



farmyard bingo  
 farm on a plate  
 farm storyboard  
 seed bombs  
 mini-fields  
 bug hotel  
 sound activities  
 buoys  
 bird poetry  
 dice  
 picture framing  
 texture throw and tell  
 felt making  
 widgeo resources  
 nature palettes  
 reminiscing  
 drawing with stuff  
 texture rubbing  
 story walking  
 cooking hoop and loop



## 2 Adapt sites to ensure they are accessible to all

Physical access improvements on host farms included the provision of accessible toilets and changing facilities (often via Changing Spaces grants) or building access ramps in some instances, but costly solutions were not always necessary - sometimes it simply required some lateral thinking, for example:

- Placing chairs at the top of a slope so visitors can sit to catch their breath
- Providing a quiet space for visitors with autism
- Finding ways of bringing the farm to the visitor when mobility was a barrier
- Tractor trailer rides that took wheelchairs to the top of hills to see vistas
- Sensory gardens and trails.

The pre-visit conversations played a vital role in making sure the host was aware of visitors' needs and provided the opportunity to discuss with the group leader what provision would be needed. However, the starting point was always "what can they do" rather than "what can't they do".



"Making the visit appropriate to the group i.e. visit from elderly group with real problems of walking even a short distance - so we brought the animals/animal feed/wool and provided a big table to sit around. Learnt that groups generally don't want to hear me talking but would rather see and participate." **Host farm**

"The farmers were so thoughtful. Wheelchair access can be a challenge on a farm, but they had thought of everything - even putting down cardboard in areas where the ground was particularly uneven. They were also brilliant at presenting information in a way that made it accessible to each person." **Group leader**

## LET NATURE FEED YOUR SENSES

LNFYS created profound benefits to many of the people who attended visits. They have felt better, been more interested in accessing nature more often, and had a better understanding of nature, food and farming. This was true of 'one off' visits, as well as where hosts sought to maintain communication with visitors or provided 'take home' activities<sup>16</sup>. This paper has sought to capture the key aspects of the project's success to help others planning similar initiatives.

The unique approach of LNFYS is captured in the project's delicious recipe for organising sensory rich farm visits<sup>17</sup>.

### Recipe for success

#### Essential ingredients

- 1 great destination
- Plenty of good communication
- 5 or more senses to engage
- A mix of food, farming, nature

#### Added flavour

- A few activities

#### The icing on the cake

- 1 or more activities for people when they get home

#### Method

1. Prepare your eager visitors well in advance with good communication
2. Combine your great destination, eager visitors and the rest of your essential ingredients
3. Season generously with activities that get people involved and hands-on with food, farming and nature
4. Mix well for around 2-3 hours

#### Variations and top tips

- Added volunteers can really enhance the experience
- A sumptuous experience can be had in May or November – every season has plenty to offer
- Change the recipe! Allow your eager visitors to follow their interests and concentrate on what they can do, not what they can't.



"The care home manager said the visit to the farm really lifted the general atmosphere for both the residents and the staff." **Farm host**

"One young man had been quite frightened. The visit really boosted his confidence and self esteem. He felt proud of himself." **Group leader**

"They have continued to talk about it which is amazing. They have dementia and usually don't remember anything, so it's amazing that the visit stimulated them like it did." **Group leader, care home**



## ABOUT ACCESS TO NATURE

Access to Nature is a scheme run by Natural England and funded by the Big Lottery Fund. Natural England works on behalf of a consortium of eleven other major environmental organisations and distributes £28.75 million Lottery funding under the scheme, which has been developed to encourage more people to enjoy the outdoors, particularly those with little or no previous contact with the natural environment.

Funded projects range from local community based schemes through to national initiatives from large organisations. Diversity in scale is mirrored by a diversity and richness of projects, from equipment to allow people with disabilities to access the natural environment; supporting disadvantaged groups and those who ordinarily face barriers to visiting the countryside; as well as many projects which are providing a range of volunteering and educational opportunities for local communities and young people.



## FOOTNOTES

- 1 Three projects with a grant award of £50,000 or over, an England-wide focus and the potential to make a significant and lasting impact on community awareness and participation were awarded 'flagship' status within Access to Nature.
- 2 See [www.letnaturefeedyoursenses.org](http://www.letnaturefeedyoursenses.org)
- 3 Extract from the 'Legacy Book', a final product from LNFYS that has been distributed to project stakeholders, 2013
- 4 Aspects of the partnership working between LEAF and the Sensory Trust were included in the Access to Nature Learning Paper, *Making Partnerships Work*: <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/file/6469529571950592>
- 5 Bragg, R., Wood, C., Barton, J., Pretty, J., 2013. *Let Nature Feed Your Senses*. University of Essex
- 6 Bragg, R., Wood, C., Barton, J., Pretty, J. 2013. *Let Nature Feed Your Senses*. University of Essex
- 7 Bird, 2007; Barton and Pretty, 2010; NEA, 2011; Wilson, 1984; cited in Bragg, R., Wood, C., Barton, J., Pretty, J. 2013. *Let Nature Feed Your Senses*. University of Essex
- 8 Natural Environment White Paper 2011, page 46
- 9 Natural Environment White Paper 2011, page 46
- 10 The Public Health Outcomes Framework *Healthy lives, healthy people: Improving outcomes and supporting transparency* sets out a vision for public health, desired outcomes and the indicators that will help us understand how well public health is being improved and protected. See [www.phoutcomes.info](http://www.phoutcomes.info)
- 11 Bragg, R., Wood, C., Barton, J., Pretty, J. 2013. *Let Nature Feed Your Senses*. University of Essex
- 12 Work completed by the New Economics Foundation on behalf of LNFYS, 2013
- 13 Jute bags containing resources for a number of activities (for example, picture frame, magnifying glass, sound map, nature palette, sprouting seeds, paintbrush) for which instructions were also provided.
- 14 Example activities and training videos are available at: <http://letnaturefeedyoursenses.org/resources.htm>
- 15 Widgit have pioneered the use of symbols in learning and communication for over 30 years. [www.widgit.com](http://www.widgit.com)  
See [www.widgit.com](http://www.widgit.com).
- 16 Bragg, R., Wood, C., Barton, J., Pretty, J. 2013. *Let Nature Feed Your Senses*. University of Essex
- 17 Extract from the 'Legacy Book', a final product from LNFYS that has been distributed to project stakeholders, 2013.

## ALTERNATIVE FORMATS

Our documents are available as pdf downloads from our website, suitable for text reader technology. We may be able to provide other formats (e.g. Braille, a minority language, or large print) for specific documents where there is a proven communication need.

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## PHOTO CREDITS

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