

talking point



James Taylor LEAF

Farms key to tackling depression and obesity

Changes in how the NHS budget is structured could give farmers exciting opportunities

“The World Health Organisation estimates that depression-related illness will become the greatest source of ill-health by 2020. In the UK alone the cost of the disease was £8.6bn in 2009. Meanwhile, obesity currently costs the NHS £4.2bn a year and doctors warn that without a change to the nation’s eating and exercise habits this figure could double by 2050.

More of the NHS budget will shortly be in the hands of GPs, and the introduction of personal care budgets will give patients greater choice in the services they receive. The opportunities this creates for some farms are exciting. For the first time a farm offering care services, whether short visits or longer-term care, will be able to compete directly with other local care providers.

There is a growing body of evidence that demonstrates the health and well-being benefits that farms can offer. Nature has often been used as a therapy for people with physical and mental health problems and also to improve mood.

Dr William Bird, Natural England’s strategic health adviser, explained recently that contact with nature can moderate the effects of stressful life events on psychological distress, as well as reducing depression and obesity. Dr Bird also authored a recent RSPB-commissioned report which concluded: “The countryside can be seen as a great outpatient department, whose therapeutic value is yet to be fully realised.”

One of LEAF’s aims is to build public understanding of food and farming. Let Nature Feed Your Senses (run by LEAF and the Sensory Trust)

proactively removes barriers that stop hard-to-reach groups visiting farms, and helps host farmers to create engaging activities that are relevant to all people of all abilities.

Farm visits communicate the links between food, farming and nature in sensory-rich ways. Our challenge is to tell the story of food through the senses. Whether rolling a greasy fleece, tasting wheat, watching milking, listening to bird song or smelling spring rain, the farming year is full of intrigue and adventure for young and old. Indeed, research shows that responsible stewardship among the wider population will happen only if people can be re-awakened to a childlike sense of wonder about the natural environment. When this is done well, people are motivated to continue getting out into the natural environment.

The rewards of hosting visits run deep. Many host farmers have said: “I am the real beneficiary here; I hadn’t seen it like that before.” Every farm has something unique to offer, and every visitor their own character and interests.

Will the countryside now be recognised as the great NHS outpatient department it could be, with reconnection to food and farming thrown into the bargain? Opportunity knocks.

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James Taylor is LEAF project manager for Let Nature Feed Your Senses. www.letnaturefeedyoursenses.org