



Growing Communities - end of project report

About this report

At FarmEco we are passionate about supporting our communities, nature and farming. We are enormously grateful for the grant funding we receive which helps us to achieve our ambitions. This report helps us to tell people about the projects we have been running, sharing our successes, our challenges and to look ahead at what we plan to do in the future. This report also provides reassurance to the organisations that have funded us that we have achieved the goals we agreed and if not, explaining why!

The information presented in this report has been gathered whilst our projects have been running using simple, well-designed methods. This was planned before the projects started and the details are explained in the evaluation framework, which has ensured that the summary we present here in this report is good quality and reliable. The technical document isn't included in this report as we wanted to keep things short and simple, however we are happy to provide you with a copy if you wish (see contacts list at the end).

We could not run our programmes without the many many hours our volunteers dedicate to supporting FarmEco. We'd like to take this opportunity to say a **heartfelt thank you** to everyone who has helped at the farm and hope that they have enjoyed a little of that 'FarmEco magic'. This is a term we hear people say at the farm regularly - there is something remarkable about the farm, the heartening people who spent time there, the vibrant wildlife, the enchanting green spaces...if you haven't visited us yet, please do come soon.



Summary

About FarmEco

FarmEco, a community farm in Nottinghamshire, is dedicated to sustainable farming and creating a positive impact on both people and the environment. By reconnecting people with nature and the land, the farm fosters community health and wellbeing, combats climate change, and produces local, sustainable and nutritious food.

Growing Communities

Funded by the National Lottery's People's Project, the Growing Communities initiative ran from September 2023 to November 2024. It expanded FarmEco's activities, supporting diverse groups including individuals with mental health challenges, dementia, carers, and socially isolated individuals.

Green Social Prescribing Programme

Our Green Social Prescribing Programme builds on the strong evidence base that nature connection can benefit physical and mental health. We supported 232 people through:

1. Nature Care Courses

Designed for those with mental health conditions, these courses used nature to promote resilience and wellbeing. Activities ranged from mindfulness exercises to arts and crafts, and were underpinned by Derby University's "Five Pathways to Nature Connectedness." Participants reported significant improvements in mental health and a stronger sense of connection with nature after completing the program.

2. Creative Nature Walks and Wellbeing Walks

These gentle, inclusive activities provided participants with opportunities for socialising, mindfulness, and connection with nature. Tailored for accessibility, they included a "Green Memory Cafe" for individuals with memory loss. Feedback highlighted improvements in mood, relaxation, and a sense of belonging.

3. Wellbeing Days

Focused on introducing community groups and frontline staff to FarmEco's offerings, these days encouraged referrals and collaboration. Many attendees registered for future programs, and professional staff noted the farm's unique role in supporting community health.

Green Fingers and Volunteering Programs

FarmEco's Green Fingers project created opportunities for therapeutic horticulture and conservation. Volunteers participated in activities such as planting, harvesting, and animal care. Over the funding period:

- 43 volunteers joined, contributing to projects like harvesting 2,000 kg of fruit for local food initiatives.
- The new polytunnel provided essential shelter during extreme weather, ensuring uninterrupted activities.
- Participants valued the sense of community, skill-building opportunities, and meaningful engagement. Some volunteers credited the experience with helping them return to employment or overcome personal challenges.

FarmEco's land-based course addressed community needs and horticultural skill shortages by offering practical training in a supportive environment. Collaborations with Portland College and Broomfield Hall provided hands-on experiences in gardening, animal care, and



conservation for 43 students with additional needs, helping them build transferable skills, confidence, and resilience while fostering independence and wellbeing.

Achievements and Impact

FarmEco's initiatives led to measurable improvements in participants' mental health, physical wellbeing, and social connectedness. Highlights include:

- **Improved Mental Health:** 77% of Nature Care participants reported frequent mental health challenges at the start, which dropped to 28% by the programme's end.
- **Strengthened Community Bonds:** Activities fostered trust, friendships, and ongoing connections through peer groups and events.
- **Enhanced Accessibility:** New paths and transport services addressed barriers, allowing more individuals, including those with disabilities, to participate.

Challenges and Adaptations

The project faced challenges such as extreme weather and accessibility issues. FarmEco adapted by utilising the polytunnel for activities and modifying session formats. These adjustments ensured continuity and set the stage for long-term improvements, including future infrastructure upgrades.

Future Plans

FarmEco is committed to sustaining and expanding its impact. A lack of steady funding continues to be a significant challenge for keeping our impactful programmes running. Planned initiatives include:

- Enhancing accessibility for people with mobility challenges.
- Expanding community engagement and volunteer recruitment.
- Developing a commercial arm to increase income through fruit sales and processing.
- Developing a multi-faceted sustainability plan.

Final Thoughts

FarmEco's Growing Communities project demonstrates the power of nature in transforming lives. The farm's unique approach—blending conservation, education, and community care—has made a lasting impact. The support of the National Lottery has been instrumental in enabling this success, and FarmEco remains committed to fostering wellbeing, sustainability, and inclusivity for years to come.



Who are FarmEco?

FarmEco is a community farm located just outside Bingham, Nottinghamshire. We want to farm the land in a sustainable way that benefits both our community and the environment.

Through reconnecting people to land and the environment, we aim to:

- be a hub for the community allowing everyone to experience the health and wellbeing benefits of farming life and nature
- use conservation and nature to help tackle climate change and improve biodiversity
- grow nourishing and delicious food to sell locally using practices that are kind to the environment

Growing Communities

The funding for Growing Communities was kindly provided by the National Lottery as part of their People's Project where, local residents vote for the project they would most like to see delivered for their community. Growing Communities aimed to develop our existing projects by increasing the number of people we support and expanding the range of activities we offer. We also wanted to support people with a broader range of needs including young people with special educational needs, carers, older people, those living with dementia, people experiencing financial difficulties and experiencing low level mental health conditions or loneliness. We also wanted to reach more men in our communities to ensure our visitors were more representative of our local communities. Activities took place between September 2023 - November 2024.

Our Green Social Prescribing Programme



There is a wealth of strong evidence that our health and wellbeing is dependent upon the natural world. For thousands of years humans from many different cultures have been going into nature for our health and wellbeing. Nature connection enhances personal wellbeing, reduces stress and anxiety, improves a sense of happiness and brings greater feelings of meaning and purpose. Green spaces can help people to disconnect from everyday life and reduce feelings of loneliness by bringing people from different communities together. More recently, our NHS and social care systems have experienced the challenges of growing demand and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. They have recognised the important part that community and voluntary organisations play by providing non-medical ways of supporting physical and mental health. Connecting people with nature also helps to encourage them to care for nature, vital at a time when we are experiencing an



environmental crisis. Our evidence-based Green Social Prescribing programme aims to bring both of these aspects together by creating healthier people and a healthier environment.

Our Green Social Prescribing Programme consisted of four separate projects: Nature Care Courses, Creative Nature Walks (including Green Memory Cafe), Wellbeing Walks and Experience Days.



Nature Care Course

'Nature Care' courses were part of our Green Social Prescribing Programme. They supported people with low level mental health conditions and loneliness. People could book on the course themselves or could be referred by a professional such as a social prescribing link worker. Nature Care Courses helped people to learn how to manage their own health and wellbeing through connecting with nature. It was designed using the Five Pathways to Nature Connectedness published by Derby University (see reading list) - different activities were used to help people connect with nature. These varied with each session but might include nature-based mindfulness (such as breathing techniques, forest bathing etc) alongside nature-based arts and crafts, time to reflect in nature, countryside skills and seasonal celebrations. The course also included a resilience framework which was built on core principles of human psychology and used nature as a metaphor for resilience. It provided six key steps that were introduced mindfully using nature and the outdoors, helping participants to consider their own journey and how the resilience habits could help them to manage life's challenges. Afterwards people were encouraged to stay in touch through their peer support group or come to our seasonal gatherings for participants or by joining our other activities at the farm.



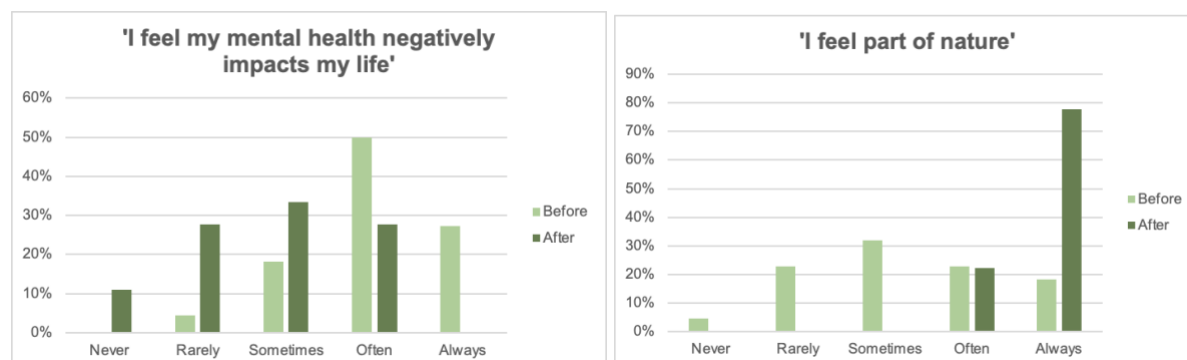
What did we do?

We designed and delivered 3 Nature Care courses and taster sessions in autumn 2023, summer & autumn 2024. 28 people said they were interested in our Nature Care courses and of these 18 joined in. Most people who started a course completed it and our attendance rate for the sessions was higher than in the past. More than 3 out of 4 people said they had a mental health condition (85%) - mainly anxiety or depression. About half of people said they had a physical health condition (52%). Our clients had higher levels of physical and mental health conditions compared with previous courses, and more were aged 65+ which indicates we are reaching our community members with higher needs. Most people had heard about the course through our social media, website or via frontline staff such as social prescribing link worker.



Did we make a Difference?

Our Nature Care clients were asked questions about their wellbeing, how connected they felt to nature and how often they had seen their doctor. They were asked at the beginning and the end of the course and we compared whether there had been a change over time. At the beginning of the course 77% of clients felt that their mental health negatively impacted their lives 'often' or 'always' but by the end of the course this had dropped to 28%. There was no consistent change in how often they visited their doctor. People felt much closer to nature after attending the course with 41% feeling part of nature 'often' or 'always' before the course and 100% afterwards.



These results suggest that mental health of clients improved whilst they took part in our Nature Care course. It's important to recognise that we cannot be certain that the improvements in mental health were directly because of the course. We do not know how long improvements lasted however we have recently spoken to clients who attended our first courses in 2022/23, and they indicated they have felt more confident in their lives and able to apply for promotion, employment, seek friendships and become involved in wider community activities which they feel are a result of attending our course.

These measures of the change in people's wellbeing are helpful to suggest whether our course helps people's mental health but it is the comments and stories from people who



have taken part in the course that touch our hearts. We asked clients what went well and what they felt they had achieved and grouped their responses into themes.

1. Sense of community and trust.
 - *"meeting such warm, lovely people"*
 - *"Going to miss you guys but with the knowledge you've given me will help me move forward."*
2. Personal growth and emotional resilience:
 - *"Proud of my journey and more resilient to keep on going and growing."*
 - *"I have learned more coping skills than I did in counselling."*
 - *"I have learned to stop and think about how I feel before making decisions."*
3. Improved wellbeing:
 - *"An improved sense of well-being, especially as I am in a state of depression complicated by grief."*
 - *"Calmness. Hope. Tools for life management in a sensible way."*
4. Connection with nature:
 - *"Learning how nature can help with stress."*
 - *"I now take more notice of nature and use it to help me relax."*
5. Skill development for managing stress and anxiety:
 - *"Tools for life management."*
 - *"Controlling my breathing and emotional response."*
6. Reflective, peaceful space and safe environment:
 - *"Expressing my feelings, the peace and calm space."*
 - *"Open and safe environment."*
7. Acknowledgment of facilitators
 - *"Hosts were a great team - worked well together. Felt confident in their care, compassion and knowledge."*
 - *"Tim + Kristina were amazing course tutors. Kind, caring + honest people. A joy to be around."*

The comments from participants highlight the strengths of the course which:

- Fostered deep connections among participants.
- Addressed specific emotional and psychological needs (e.g., resilience, mindfulness).
- Delivered practical tools and strategies that participants could apply to everyday life.
- Used nature as a powerful tool for learning and therapeutic activities.
- Created a safe and supportive environment for personal growth.
- Removed barriers to access through the provision of transport for those who don't own a car and the recent improvements in accessibility of the site.

The comments and experiences of participants raised issues for consideration:

- Ensuring follow-up support with partner organisations for participants processing complex emotions (e.g. grief, PTSD).
- Providing additional resources for participants to continue working on their resilience and mindfulness tools outside the sessions.
- Continuity of support after the course for example through Nature Care seasonal gatherings, moving to a peer support group or engaging in other activities at the farm.





Lisa's story - she tells us how Nature Care has helped with her manage her anxiety, depression and PTSD on a daily basis.

"I have suffered with Anxiety and Depression and PTSD since I was around 12 years old. I have always loved nature and being outdoors so was interested in the course. As I am on benefits, I was really pleased that the courses are free.

The group was a small group which is perfect for me as I do struggle with social anxiety. Kristina and Tim were very welcoming and helped me to feel at ease within the group. Each session is well thought out with space for everyone to share and express their thoughts and feelings in a safe, non-judgmental, confidential environment. It was fun to let go of some of my inhibitions regarding artwork and to hear and see others' creativity in the group.

Attending the group has been an extremely positive experience for me. Using techniques and tools from Kristina and Tim I have learned the art of 'just being' and of how to really tap into nature for creative and therapeutic purposes.

We shared hot drinks, homemade soup and cake. This communal 'breaking of bread' adds to the group bonding and is a really lovely touch. I have made friends on the course who have similar interests and experiences as me. We keep in touch via the Whatsapp group and have met for coffee.

Living in a village can be socially isolating with resources being limited. Many of the support organizations are in the town, which can be quite intimidating for anyone who suffers with social anxiety. The Nature Care course is held in a rural setting which is accessible to many local villages making it a very valuable attribute."





We have received acclamation from many professional frontline staff. The following is a testimony for our Wellbeing Walks and Nature Care course from Laura Steed, Social Prescriber in Rushcliffe.

"I have found that FarmEco is an invaluable resource for residents in north Rushcliffe. Unlike the rest of Rushcliffe, we don't have any walking 'move & mingle' groups in the north and limited outdoor gardening groups/allotments here too... So FarmEco providing walking groups and a safe outdoor space with courses and most importantly, transport, has been influential in people moving for their physical and mental wellbeing.

The Nature Care course has supported a number of my patients who have perhaps done classic talking therapies and have been referred back after a while because they are still struggling. A lot are isolated and have limited access to green spaces because of their mobility, health or resources.

I have seen first-hand the impact of being at the magical space and having done a couple of taster sessions. Patients are smiling – beaming, even. J, a single widower with severe physical difficulties mentioned how she feels energised from being there. Another lady, K, a previous cancer patient still struggling with mood said that she felt emotional being at the space and wanted to give me a hug as it was the first time I had got to see her in person in the community despite several attempts. J [...] found the course was influential in helping her process her grief. It has also supported younger clients, one of which comes to mind who has neurodiversities and had dropped out of university due to his mental health, he has not only benefitted from the course, growing in confidence but has been championed by Tim to set up his own business!

The courses and space wouldn't be what they are without you, Kristina, your creativity, knowledge and experience in supporting such a diverse number of people. You are an asset to FarmEco, and the community. I believe you have helped the Health & Social Care sectors more than you probably realise. I must admit I do find I struggle with peoples care plans when I am not having these courses over the winter months, which shows what an impact it truly has. I really hope these offers continue so that the community can continue living the life they would like to."



Summary: We feel confident that our Nature Care course makes a difference in supporting people to manage their mental health, not just whilst they are at the farm, but in their everyday lives. Most of the people who have been on our course are still in touch with us either through our coffee morning get togethers at the farm or because they have joined other groups such as our Green Volunteers or Sheds woodworking group. The supportive course, the amazing surroundings of the farm and the wonderful people who work there make a real impact on people's lives.

Creative Nature Walks, Green Memory Cafe & Wellbeing Walks



Creative Nature Walks were part of our Green Social Prescribing Programme. They combined gentle exercise, nature connection and nature based arts. The drop-in sessions aimed to offer people short sessions, introducing them to the farm and to improve their health and wellbeing. The group walked around the different green spaces at the farm where they focused on the process of noticing and creating with nature, not the end result, developing a deeper connection with and appreciation of nature.



We also adapted our creative nature walks for people with memory loss by establishing the first green memory cafe in Rushcliffe with our partners in the Rushcliffe Dementia Awareness Network. This took place bimonthly at Rushcliffe Country Park as the facilities are more accessible and centrally located for clients. Sessions involved a sensory walk around the lake where we embraced all weathers, followed by an indoors nature-based crafting session and ending with a sing-along, a cuppa and snack. The purpose of these sessions was to experience the benefits of nature connection, creative practice, gentle exercise and socialising with others with lived experience.



Our wellbeing walks developed as a simple drop-in activity to encourage people to visit the farm for the first time without long-term commitment to a group or course. Feedback from previous participants indicated that the first visit to the farm was sometimes challenging especially for those living with social anxiety. Also commitment to a weekly group or course was also identified as a barrier to accessing the farm. The walks were advertised to attract people who might not feel comfortable on a conventional walk - short in length, gently paced, adapting to needs, offering a mindfulness activity and socialising with a hot drink and snack afterwards.



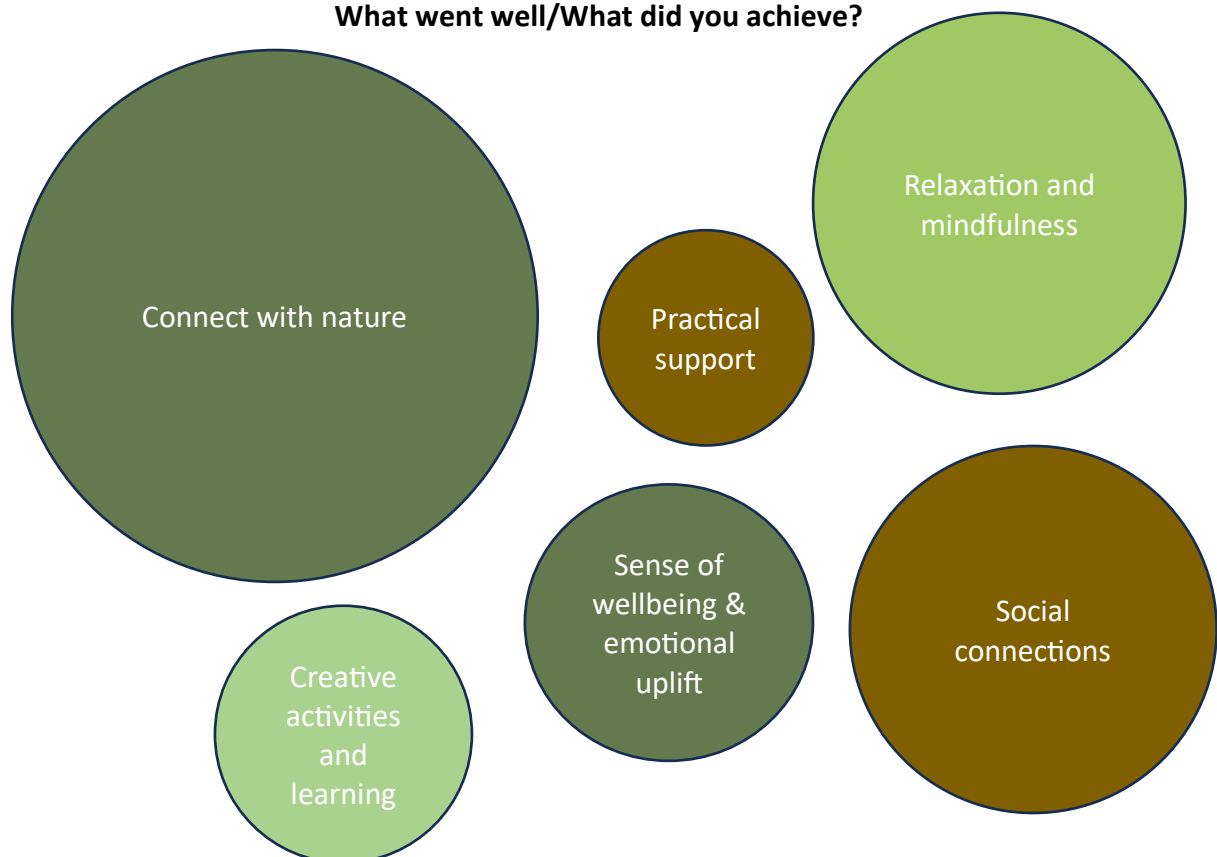
What did we do?

We ran nine Creative Nature Walks, two of which were for families. During the reporting period we ran seven Green Memory Cafes, three of which were funded by the National Lottery. We also ran 13 wellbeing walks, 7 of which were funded by the National Lottery. The National Lottery funded sessions welcomed 154 people* to the farm, many of whom came to a number of sessions.

Did we make a difference?

People who came to our Creative Nature Walks and Wellbeing Walks gave us similar feedback, so we have combined these responses. The themes have been summarised in the bubbles below. A number of people attending these activities have continued their connection with FarmEco through Nature Care Courses or our Green Volunteer sessions.

What went well/What did you achieve?



"Lovely relaxed enjoyable walk lots of trees, plants, wildlife to enjoy."

"Relax. De-stress. Concentration on the moment."

"Meeting new people in a relaxing environment."

"The whole session was good for my wellbeing."

Loan of a walking frame - perfect!

"A sense of wellbeing and realising art in nature is easy and accessible"



What could have been better?

The majority of people were very satisfied with the session, with no suggestions for improvement. Weather-related concerns and a desire for longer sessions were the most frequent constructive suggestions. Other comments focused on practical aspects and accessibility (e.g. navigating to farm, café access, knowing session plans).

We have responded to these suggestions by improving the instructions for driving to the farm, signage and ensuring sessions are outlined at the start. Unfortunately we can't yet control the weather but we do let people know in advance what to wear for their comfort.



People who came to the Green Memory Cafe told us of their experiences which included:

1. Improved well-being
 - *"a good feel well factor was achieved."*
 - *"sprints raised...feeling happier"*
2. Sense of community
 - *"Sharing time with others, memories, photos"*
3. Spending time outdoors
 - *"lovely walk around the lake and going to the hide to hear the birds"*
4. Balance of activities
 - *"It was a lovely mix of activities. Thank you"*
 - *"120 minutes of simple entertainment + exercise"*
5. More frequent sessions
 - *"It would be nice if it could be once a month"*
 - *"Offer more sessions"*





Wellbeing Days

Wellbeing Days were developed to promote our regular programme to existing community groups and frontline staff, in order to increase referrals. We offered community groups a visit to the farm to experience how connecting with nature benefits their wellbeing. We aimed to understand community needs and build their confidence to attend our regular wellbeing activities. Frontline staff would not only experience benefits themselves but would be able to promote the activities to their clients. It also offered the opportunity for us to understand how we could adapt our activities to meet client needs.

What did we do?

We invited 3 groups with a total of 60 people to Wellbeing Days. These included frontline staff, those living with mental health conditions, social isolation and physical disabilities.

Did we make a difference?

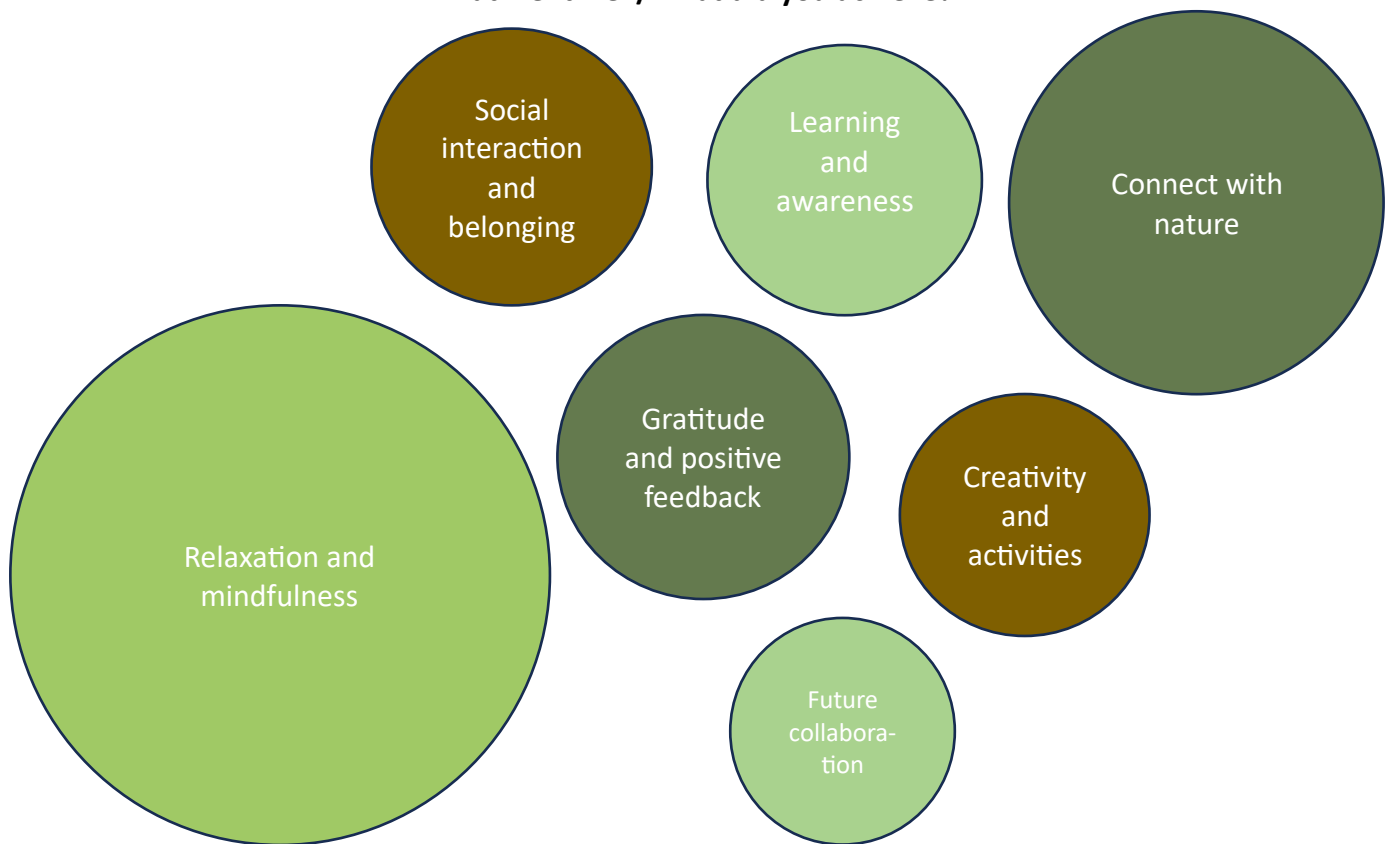
The experience days were successful in developing our understanding of community needs: we provided transport for people without a car, which had previously been a barrier to attending. Our improved pathing and signage enabled people using mobility aids to experience the site and give them confidence to return for our regular activities and courses. Attending with a support worker and within a familiar group gave individuals the confidence to participate. A high proportion of those attending the Wellbeing Days subsequently registered for the Nature Care Course.

The frontline staff day brought social workers, occupational therapists, housing officers, community nurses, care co-ordinators and dementia teams from local organisations to the farm. The staff enjoyed the wellbeing benefits of the day whilst building their awareness about our activities. The FarmEco staff gained insight into the needs of a diverse range of potential clients. In addition, a number of opportunities were raised for delivering commissioned services directly to client groups and offering staff teambuilding days. Referrals into our activities increased after the event, implying that raising awareness of our services through direct experience is an effective method.



People mentioned a number of similar themes in their feedback from their visits. This has been summarised in the bubbles below.

What went well/What did you achieve?



"Relaxation + mindfulness. Both workshops were excellent."

"Feeling more connected with nature and having a greater appreciation for the range of benefits—both mentally and physically."

"Sense of belonging to new people."

"Understanding of what is available on the Ecofarm. How to signpost clients."

"I realise now that I enjoy artwork, which is very relaxing."

"This farm is an absolute treasure—we are so lucky to have you on our doorstep."

"It would be really great to speak more about how we can work together for mutual benefit for your organisation and people who use our services."



What could have been better?

Most people were satisfied with the experience saying nothing could be improved. Some people wanted longer sessions and to experience more activities as well as a tour of the wider farm. We will offer longer days for frontline staff in the future.



We collected demographic information from people who completed a feedback form for our green social prescribing programme. We welcomed a larger proportion of males, older people and those with disabilities compared with previous years, however the ethnic diversity of our visitors has reduced.



What did we do differently from our plans and why?

We originally planned to deliver 5 Nature Care courses and 12 Creative Nature walks, but after receiving feedback from previous courses we decided to deliver a slightly different offer of activities. Some clients living with mental health conditions found it challenging to come to the farm; a new place and new people often presented a barrier to them coming. In addition to the 3 Nature Care courses we delivered 7 monthly wellbeing walks as a simple drop-in activity to attract new people to come to the farm, bringing a companion if they wish. This worked well and we now have a regular attendees on our monthly walks as well as new people who have shown an interest in our Nature Care course, a number of whom have gone on to attend.



Our group visits were also successful in bringing new clients to our Nature Care course and the staff wellbeing days increased referrals as well. This model of offering short 'taster' sessions and days really does help promote our courses and activities. We now have a waiting list for our Nature Care course.

Some of our Creative Wellbeing walks were delivered on the farm but, due to accessibility issues, were also adapted to support a green memory cafe at Rushcliffe County Park, which we hope to bring to the FarmEco site when accessibility is improved.



Our Green Fingers Programme

Our Green Fingers and Green Volunteers Projects bring together community growing, with opportunities for volunteers to get involved in seasonal countryside, farming and conservation activities in a friendly and supportive environment. We also developed a land-based skills course to support young people with additional learning needs and welcomed groups for farm experience days.

What did we do and did we make a difference?



Improved growing spaces

The 'Green Fingers' growing area was developed during autumn 2023. We erected the polytunnel with the help of volunteers and interns from Portland College. October saw some of the worst flooding the farm has seen this century. The polytunnel was a safe dry space for volunteers and groups visiting, and was used to teach and develop horticultural skills, sowing lots of seeds from our native trees and hedgerows to support in the development of the Farm's tree nursery. When weather permitted we put energy into making the farm as accessible as possible building pathways from woodchip, and managing the large fruit orchards we have. The polytunnel has been a vital space for delivering our activities this year and has withstood the extreme weather conditions we have experienced.

A growing area area adjacent to the polytunnel was established with raised beds made by our Sheds group for growing fruit and vegetables. Due to the weather conditions we experienced this year the woodchip pathing around the beds and to the polytunnel was very wet and unstable underfoot. This limited access to the area for people with mobility issues during the project.



Green Fingers and Green Volunteers

Green Volunteers. Our food production at the farm is reliant on a team of volunteers to enable us to maximise the potential of the farm, enabling us to look after our wildlife areas animals and crops, harvesting them in a timely fashion to supply local food insecurity initiatives.

Our community partners also identified the need for supported outdoor volunteering opportunities and refer people to volunteer with us. FarmEco provides a supportive



environment where volunteers can experience the health and wellbeing benefits of connecting with each other, engaging in meaningful activities, learning new skills, improved fitness and sharing healthy meals together.

The volunteer co-ordinator, Lil, welcomed new volunteers, taking the time to find out why they had volunteered and the kind of activities they would like to get involved with. This might include pruning trees, tree planting, removing weeds from crops, picking and packing apples and fruit crops, looking after the animals and getting involved in community activities at the farm. Volunteers also enjoyed sharing a hot meal together during harvest time provided by Bingham Food Warriors.

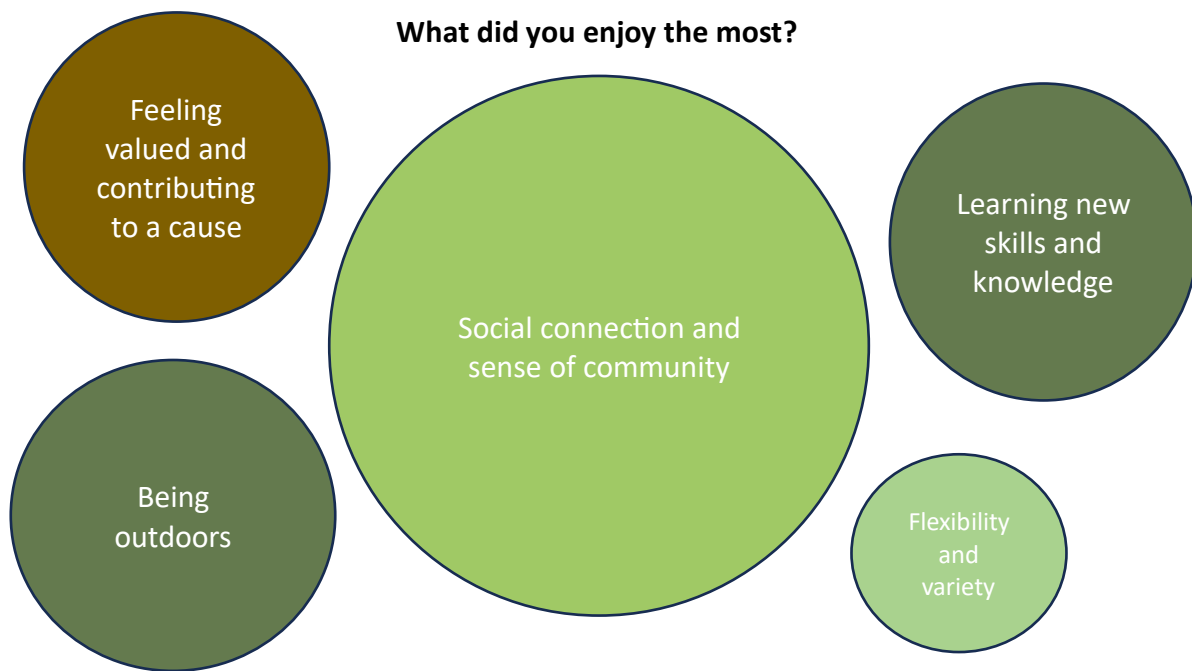
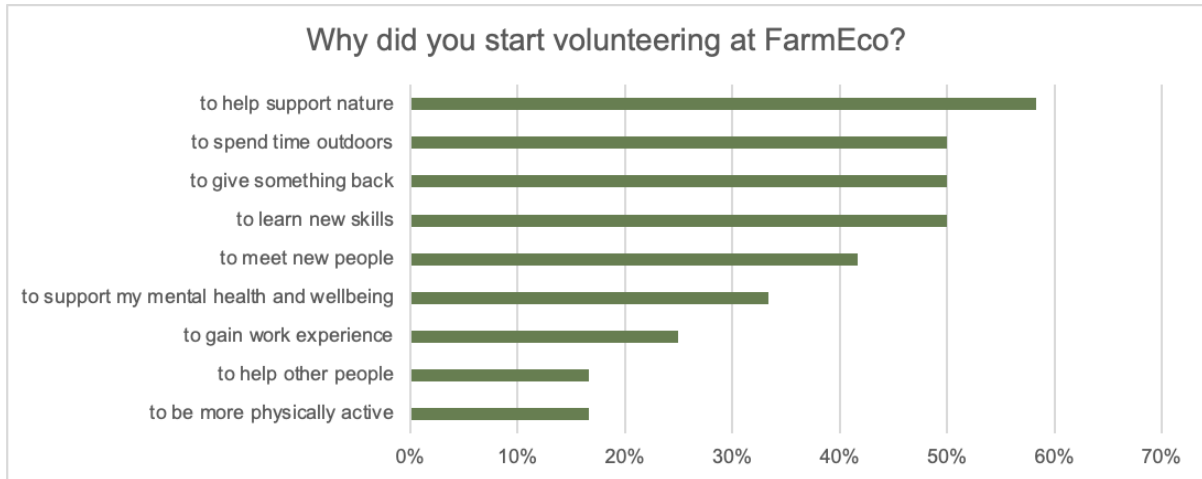
In total we had 43 new volunteers start during the funding period. 14 of these came specifically during the lambing period, 29 of these participants came to more than 2 sessions 16 participants attended more than 10 sessions. There was a good level of continuity and buy in from our volunteers. We now have a core team who get stuck into a huge variety of activities in sunshine, rain, gales and snow! Volunteers have supported our college and group visits and our Green Fingers growing project, as well as undertaking seasonal work around the farm. Our volunteers come from diverse backgrounds and include groups who are more likely to experience poorer outcomes in life such as young people with learning disabilities, carers, people with long term mental health conditions and people in long term unemployment.

Our volunteers meet at the farm on Tuesdays and Fridays. Tuesdays mainly involve agricultural, horticultural activities and habitat maintenance for example planting, pruning and harvesting our 1000s of fruit trees. Volunteers also supported the Green Fingers growing group. Fridays were primarily animal husbandry days with tasks such as feeding, mucking out, health checking, worming, vaccinations, shearing and general shepherding. During the lambing season volunteers were actively involved in aiding the ewes and lambs.

FarmEco aims to be part of a localised food system, supplying local communities with traceable, sustainable, nutritious food. This year our volunteers have supported our Crop to Drop project by helping to harvest approximately 600kg of fruit crops which have supplied local community food schemes through our partnerships with Fairshares and Himmah. We have also begun to develop a commercial output for our fruit harvest which we plan to develop over the coming year (see [What Changes we Will Make for the Future](#)).



We asked our volunteers about their experience with FarmEco to help us understand what was working well and where we could make improvements to their experience. Most people started volunteering to help nature and spend time outdoors but overwhelmingly said they enjoyed the social connections they made and sense of community whilst volunteering. Most people volunteered for around 10-20 hours per month.



These themes reflect the rewarding and holistic nature of volunteering, combining social connection, learning, outdoor activity, and purposeful work.

"The people and the community aspect of the farm!"

"Meeting other people. Working as a team."

"Amazing opportunity to learn new skills, very friendly and communicative team."



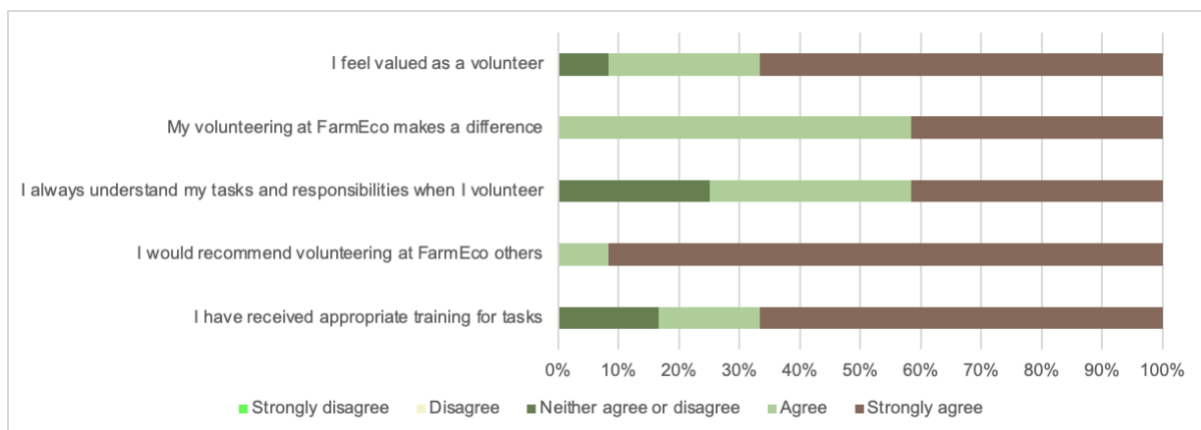
"A lot of the tasks feel quite mindful, so it's a good place to take a break from everything."

"Knowing my help is valuable."

"Worthwhile work, outdoors, good team spirit."

"Flexibility, friendly people."

When asked to respond to a series of statements, most volunteers indicated in general they felt valued and would recommend volunteering at FarmEco, however some people indicated there were opportunities to improve training and communication about tasks and responsibilities.



Volunteers also said they strengthened a range of practical skills, particularly in horticulture (pruning, propagating, and plant care) and farming (livestock and crop skills). Additionally, they improved adaptability, teamwork, and communication through engaging in a variety of tasks and working with others.

We asked if they had ideas for improving the volunteer experience. Most were satisfied with their current experience however some suggested additional social events, improved facilities (like access to free refreshments), and weekend opportunities. They also highlighted the value of feedback on their contributions.

We are keen to expand our number of volunteers and our current group suggested ideas such as improving promotion through digital outreach and local media, targeting young people with skills-focused events, fostering partnerships, increasing visibility on-site, offering incentives and flexible opportunities, and utilising word-of-mouth recruitment through current volunteers and community networks.



Lynne Brooks was a volunteer at FarmEco and tells us how the experience helped her through a tough time enabling her to return to full time employment.

"I found FarmEco through my GP Social Prescribing Team. I have been through a very tough time recently and was left feeling very anxious, depressed and nervous for my future. Speaking to the team, they know I am a keen gardener and love animals and being outdoors so when they suggested I volunteer at FarmEco this ticked all my boxes!"

The FarmEco staff and volunteers are super friendly and welcoming and I soon looked forward to my Tuesday mornings. There are always different tasks to try your hand at, even sheep shearing!. You are never far away from a friendly conversation and laughter. My mood improved greatly on my visits to the farm and I have now been able to return to full time employment and feel so much better.

I know FarmEco has played a massive part in my recovery and I want to say a huge thank you for your help and support and for the fantastic work you do. I really miss my Tuesday mornings and intend to visit whenever I am able."



Our Green Fingers community growing project was underpinned by therapeutic horticulture practices where engaging individuals in gardening activities to enhances physical, emotional, and social wellbeing.

March showed a much needed shift in the weather and activity to develop our outside growing beds began. Seeds were started under the protection of the poly tunnel, and accessible raised beds built by our 'Sheds' group were being filled with soil and compost ready for our veg and flower gardens over the summer. These were planted up in May and



tended to throughout spring and summer. There was a bounty of crops to harvest for people to take home, often sharing recipe ideas with each other.

Throughout the year volunteers and garden club members learned many skills from propagating, planting, pruning, making compost, plant identification skills and many transferrable skills, such as working as a team, communication; and we had lots of laughs! The volunteers and garden club members often had their own skills to share and the sessions became a great community learning experience.



Land-based skills

Our land-based course was developed at the farm to meet expressed needs of our local communities and support horticultural sector skills shortages which are widely acknowledged.

We worked with interns from Portland College which is a specialist college, residential care provider and Centre of Excellence for Autism. Their learners benefit from being able to experience work in a real-life setting and the college lacks suitable facilities to support practical experience of land-based skills. 3 graduate interns and 16 students from Portland College have been given structured work experience in the supportive environment of FarmEco which we hope is a crucial step towards employment that could transform their futures. Our work with the students at Portland College was pivotal in helping us to understand the potential benefits and needs for students from specialist colleges and in developing our land-based skills course.



Broomfield Hall is part of Derby College specialising in land-based and leisure courses for young people with additional learning needs. We worked closely with the educational team at Broomfield to develop a land-based skills course, which incorporated transferable and soft skills. The course aligned with the outcomes for their students with additional learning needs, who were on a learning programme called 'Pathways to Working Life'. 24 students engaged in practical, hands-on activities such as gardening, animal care, and conservation work over an 11 week period, developing valuable skills like teamwork, communication, problem-solving, and time management. These activities not only built confidence and resilience but also helped improve physical and mental well-being. The course equipped young adults with transferable skills that can be applied in future employment or daily life



while creating a supportive and inclusive environment that promoted personal growth, independence, and a sense of achievement.

Broomfield college provided transportation and additional support staff to work alongside FarmEco staff which worked very well as a partnership, giving us the opportunity to work with young people who really benefited from the vocational skills we offered.

Below are excerpts from the learning diaries for the students:



WEEK 3

What went well – You all listened to instructions about how to plant a tree properly and how to prepare the ground for it. You use the tools provided correctly and some of you put maximum effort into working as independently as possible.

Even better if – There will always be jobs that we don't like doing at any job, remember that putting effort into any part of it is what working is. Don't wait just for the parts you find more enjoyable.



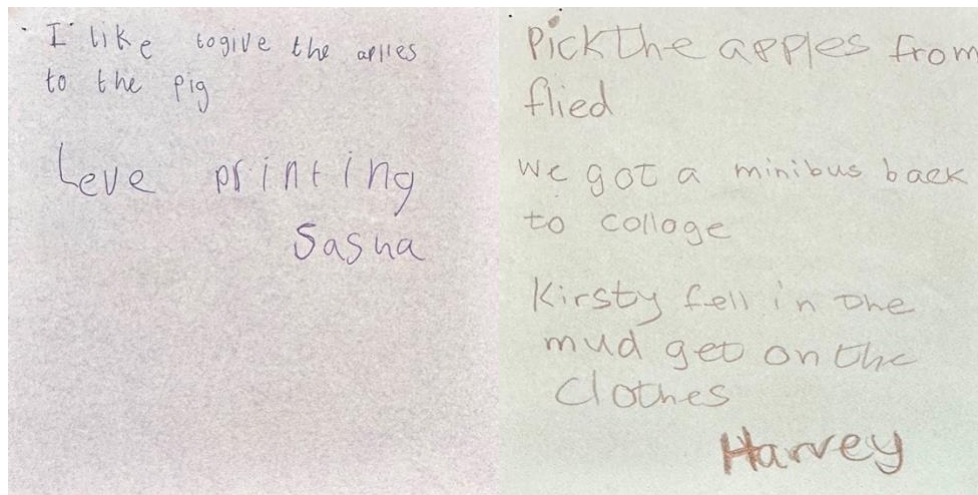
Week 6

- What went well – You all listened to instructions and worked as a team to be able to clean out the various sheep pens. You listened and learned how to perform animal husbandry on some of the male lambs and did so respectfully.

- Even better if – Some of you listened to the instructions and followed them without prompts from the college staff to continue to do the work.



We also asked the students what they enjoyed about their experience at the farm. They enjoyed working with the animals especially the pigs and lambs, setting up wildlife monitoring, picking the apples, planting trees and generally being around the farm. They learned many of new skills with plants and animals, and skills they can use in any workplace. They would have preferred less mud though!



Samantha Smith from Broomfield Hall, tells us how the staff and students benefitted from their experience at the farm.

"The students experience at FarmEco has been amazing! The students have been able to learn and gradually build understanding and knowledge around the skills needed in a horticulture and agriculture environment, as well as building on interpersonal skills such as positive communication in the workplace, the importance of work ethic, with the staff at FarmEco also helping the student to understand the benefits to mental health these activities can have.

The staff at farm eco have gone over and above to help support and meet the individual needs of the students based on information given to them by college staff, and the students have reported that it was such a positive experience at the farm with some now wanting to look further into being able to do work in some of these areas in the future!

The students gained so much from the enriching experience, and as a result, have been able to follow the process of harvesting some of the crops that have gone to Fareshare, with the students now also volunteering there.

It would be wonderful to be able to extend the time we had at the Farm in the future should opportunities to do so arise.

Thank you to all the FarmEco staff."



What did we do differently from our plans and why?

The greatest challenge we faced was the extreme weather. We had to adapt our plans due to the restricted access on the farm. We adapted tasks to make them appealing and ensure it was safe for visitors to attend. The polytunnel became a vital resource for us during the wettest months. A number of scheduled visits were cancelled or postponed at short notice. We adapted very quickly and worked closely with our partners to ensure we were still able to deliver our objectives.

Our original plans focused primarily on horticulture, agriculture and countryside management skills however we incorporated animal husbandry into our activities and learning plans. Feedback from previous groups and funding evaluations identified a strong desire for people to become involved in developing animal husbandry skills and 'clients' wanting to develop skills associated with 'homesteading' which incorporates animals into the growing. Research with our stakeholders and examination of wider research around experience-based learning has shown that there is a strong therapeutic benefit to working with animals.

The work with animals was also a solution to the weather issue for us. The poly tunnel was erected in September and by mid October the majority of the farm was under water and for welfare reasons the animals were housed all winter. The barn was a dry alternative to working in the polytunnel and provided diversity for volunteers and students.

Accessibility to the Green Fingers growing area during such wet conditions proved a barrier for older people. It was so wet underfoot that for large portions of the year the site was difficult to navigate for anyone with restricted physical ability. We applied for additional funding to improve accessibility for people using mobility aids. This was successful and at the time of writing, new pathing around this area is being laid enabling us to invite residents from the local care home to our gardening club in 2025.

Another limitation was the level of additional support that was required to work with young people with complex needs. Our connections with specialist learning facilities meant that we were often able to utilise professional support workers to assist however, where this was not available, this did place an additional resource burden on farm staff.

We are very proud that we were able to pull together as a team and respond to the unprecedented conditions at the farm this year to deliver a comprehensive, varied programme of learning and activities. We hope the feedback from those who have visited the farm is a testament to our success.



We would like to acknowledge the valued contributions of Lil Hammond and Liz Lakesman to our volunteering, horticulture, animal husbandry and education programmes. They have both moved onto pastures new and we wish them the fondest farewell and the very best for the future.



How did we spend our National Lottery Funding?

The Peoples Project	Budget	Spend	Balance
Nature Care			
Staff (a)	£13,000	£13,788	(£788)
Materials	£1,500	£1,498	£2
Healthy lunch (b)	£1,500	£1,103	£397
Admin	£900	£900	£0
Overheads	£6,000	£6,000	£0
Evaluation	£1,000	£1,000	£0
Travel (NEW) (c)	£0	£393	(£393)
SUBTOTAL	£23,900	£24,682	(£782)
Green fingers & Volunteers			
Staff (d)	£20,000	£21,216	(£1,216)
Transport (e)	£1,000	£474	£526
Healthy lunch (f)	£2,000	£329	£1,671
Admin	£3,000	£3,000	£0
Evaluation	£1,300	£1,300	£0
Overheads	£10,000	£10,000	£0
SUBTOTAL	£37,300	£36,319	£981
Creative nature Walks			
Staff	£1,800	£1,800	£0
Admin	£300	£300	£0
Materials	£500	£471	£29
Overheads	£900	£900	£0
Evaluation	£300	£300	£0
SUBTOTAL	£3,800	£3,771	£29
Polytunnel/hort equip	£5,000	£5,224	(£224)
TOTAL	£70,000	£69,996	£4

(a) we delivered more group visits to balance the underspend on staffing in our Green Fingers & Volunteer programme

(b,c) we spent less on food as we delivered our Nature Care project differently from our original plan which required less provision of hot meals, however we did provide taxi transport for clients without their own car which was budgeted for.

(d,f) slight overspend for our Green Fingers/Volunteers projects due to additional groups/events visiting the farm to make up for the underspend in healthy lunch (most of our volunteers and visitors brought their own lunch, apart from at harvest time).

(e) most of our volunteers and visitors drove or had transport provided by their organisations.



What changes will we make for the future?

Community engagement. Community engagement is a vital element to everything we do at the farm and we need to ensure this is embedded across our organisation and suitably resourced. By actively involving the community, the farm becomes a collaborative space and also raises awareness of the farm's offerings, encouraging greater participation in our activities. This will ensure the farm remains a sustainable and valued resource that meets the evolving needs of the community it serves.

Additional support for people with higher needs. We would plan to resource additional support required to work with people with high additional needs eg dementia, autism etc. What worked well was the relationships we built with organisations and groups who could offer support and transport.

Administration. We underestimated the level of administration required to deliver our programme and we will revisit this to ensure it is resourced in the future.

Commercial sales. As we increase our volunteer numbers, we hope that we can improve the care of the fruit trees, reducing pests and diseases as well as pruning and mulching to increase crop production. A lot of fruit was not harvested this year due to lack of manpower and lack of storage facilities so we also hope to improve on this. We want to develop a comprehensive annual tree management plan which will cover the 30 different tree species we have on the farm. We have started to build relationships with markets as well as food banks. We are also looking at how we can process some of the fruit e.g. into juices, jelly, curd as this provides larger profit margins.

Sustainability plans. A lack of steady funding continues to be a significant challenge for keeping our impactful programmes running. We will start to incorporate more income generating activities into our plans for the coming years. We need a multipronged approach. Ideas include renting out the labyrinth area at times it is not being used by the wellbeing staff or other FarmEco groups. We also hope to attract businesses to hold their corporate days at the farm. We are partnering with a local forager to run an activity day for paying visitors and have booked in our first such day for March. Providing commissioned services for local authorities is under discussion with our partners as well as investigating whether we can receive payment for providing work experience for young adults with neurodiversity. Marketing our services and generating income via events throughout the year, such as Open Farm Sunday, is a key part of our planning for 2025.

As we develop a sustainable model, we need to generate enough funds to cover the costs of core management and administration staff, and other overheads. With intentional planning and building on our successes we do believe that this is an achievable goal. We will then be in a strong position to help more people, grow more food and protect the beautiful nature and wildlife on the farm.



Final note

We hope this report helps to paint a picture of the wonderful projects we have run at FarmEco to help some of our vulnerable, isolated communities who are at greater risk of poorer outcomes in life. We feel confident that we have made a real difference in people's lives, and this would not have been possible without the funding we received from the National Lottery. We are truly grateful for the opportunity, and we are passionate and determined to continue with our work.

Contact

If you have any questions about this report or would like further information, please contact kristina@farmeco.co.uk. We'll respond as soon as we can but we might be out in a field with the wind in our hair, mud on our faces and joy in our hearts.

