

Perspectives on educational visits to farms: a report on research with farmers, teachers, children and parents.



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Funded by the Ernest Cook Trust

Executive summary

The many recent developments encouraging more visits by school children to farms have highlighted the need for research on the interaction between farmers, schools, teachers and school children, and the effect of these visits for both farms and the schools. This research aims to

1. To identify how farmers responded to the challenge to engage the public in farming
2. To identify how teachers integrate farm visits with teaching the national curriculum in the classroom.
3. To record children's reactions to farm visits.

Research was carried out in three regions: the South East, the North East and the West Country.

Interviews with 46 farmers hosting visits from primary schools showed that farmers are motivated to host visits as they are keen to teach children about where food comes from. They are also pleased to be able to provide an alternative to learning through books and computers, and instead allow children to explore their environment and the real world around them. Farmers want to share the countryside that they own or manage with a wider group of people. This allows them also to justify the finding which the farming industry receives, counteract some of the bad press with which farmers are associated, and promote the industry in which they work. Farmers also said they found hosting visits enjoyable and that it was rewarding seeing school children enjoying themselves. Hosting school visits also provides a welcome addition to the routine farming activities, and for some, a form of diversification.

In order to host visits, many farmers need to adapt their farm to provide key facilities such as toilets, a classroom, and even convert trailers to enable them to transport children. Increasing numbers of farmers are taking the CEVAS course which provides training in all aspects of hosting farm visits. This includes training in public speaking and specifically talking to a young audience. Overall, farmers were not very familiar with the content of the national curriculum and how to link the visit with classroom activities, although the CEVAS course helps with this. Most speak from the heart about what they do on a day-to-day basis.

Establishing links with primary schools can be difficult. Regular and repeated visits were usually arranged once a rapport had been established between the farmer and a particular teacher. If teachers moved, the link with the farm was often lost.

Interviews with teachers indicated that those who had been on visits were very happy with the experience, and found the visits linked into many aspects of the curriculum. The hands-on learning approach worked well with young learners. However there were concerns over health and safety, the weather, and the added burden of paperwork associated with an off-site visit. Teachers used very little of the teaching materials tailor made for farm visit which are available on the web.

Farm visits stimulated learning in many ways, including literacy, numeracy, science, art, design and technology, ICT, history, geography, PSHE, citizenship and RE. Farm visits were the inspiration for many different activities and discussions in the classroom. However, some teachers saw the visits as a nice "day out" and did not make the most of the learning possibilities related to the event. Embedding the experience of a farm visit in classroom learning was best achieved when it was planned well in advance, to coincide with specific curriculum topics.

Many organisations in the farming and conservation industry have developed websites and educational materials linking land-based activities to the national curriculum: few teachers mentioned using them. Time was the limiting factor.

Feedback from parents of school children indicated that children thoroughly enjoyed the farm visits. They enjoyed seeing new things, learning about farming and where their food came from, and being outdoors. They enjoyed the “hands on” nature of learning on farm visits. They remembered many details, which they told their parents. Farm visits also allowed children to learn about their local environment (if the farm was near the school).

Although farm visits target school children, many adults are involved, either as teachers, teaching assistants, or as parent helpers. Therefore the visits reach a wider and more varied audience than initially perceived.

However, there is limited ability for parents and helpers to send their responses back to farmers. Farmers repeatedly host visits from schools, with little feedback from teachers and children about the perceived success of the visit.

The new LOTC badge is another qualification farmers should obtain if they are to host school visits. At a time when farms are faced with a lot of paperwork, an added kite mark is another burden. Most farmers host between 4 and 25 visits per year, earning a maximum of £3,000 if funded under the HLS scheme. Farms receiving few visits will not find it worth their while, but it would be unfortunate if children are unable to visit local farms. There needs to be a balance between ensuring children’s safety and curriculum links through the badging scheme, and making the regulatory framework so demanding that farmers decide not to bother to host visits.

Farm visits provide a venue for children to focus on many environmental awareness raising campaigns which promote awareness and understanding of the environment, increasing physical activity and healthy eating. There is potential for synergies between farm visits and many campaigns which target school children, including Change 4 Life, 5-a-day, and eat well and initiatives.

Recommendations:

As DEFRA encourages educational access to farms, there needs to be a parallel commitment to encouraging schools to find farms and make the most of the opportunities created by the Educational Access scheme.

Teacher training (whether at PGCE stage or during continuing professional development inset days) should include a day on a farm visit or other outdoor environment which can demonstrate the wide range of learning opportunities and links to the curriculum.

Funding and efforts spent on developing educational material placed on the web could be better allocated to more direct teacher engagement.

Funding should also support repeat visits, which allow a more detailed exploration of how the environment changes over time and /or through the seasons.

Farmers would appreciate specific funding to enable them to build outdoor toilet blocks (especially with disabled access).

Care must be taken to ensure the new LOTC badge does not rule out the development of visits (and potentially an ongoing relationship, through repeat visits or forest schools) between primary schools and their local farms. Perhaps exclusion for farms hosting only 1 school, or less than 5 visits per year, could be negotiated.

There are many programmes which target school-aged children, aiming to raise awareness of where food comes from, healthy eating, local food, the importance of exercise, experiencing the outdoors and their local environment etc. Rather than competing for attention, these programmes should be developing in partnership, making the most of synergies. For example, following a farm visit, children could be introduced to the Change for Life programme, NHS' 5-a day, and other similar materials.

1. Introduction

This research highlights the interest in reconnecting the public with farming and the countryside. It focuses on educational visits to farms by primary school children. The farming industry is taking on this challenge, supported by developments in the education sector, particularly the new Learning Outside the Classroom Initiative (LotC), and growing interest in promoting outdoor activities by the health sector, eager to encourage healthy eating and exercise.

The Year of Food and Farming was a unique event, which aimed to strengthen links between the farming and food industry, and the wider public, focusing especially on school children. The year began in September 2007, and officially closed in September 2008. However, the goals of the Year of Food and Farming are being pursued through the Think Food and Farming campaign, which continues. The aims of the Year of Food and Farming, and now the ongoing campaign, include widening awareness of British food and farming through bringing school children in touch with farms and farmers, and raising awareness of the countryside as a location for healthy exercise.

Think Food and Farming is not the only initiative which promotes wider understanding of farming. Open Farm Sunday encourages many farms to open on a single day, the Countryside Stewardship Scheme rewards farmers for granting educational access to farms, and new environmental schemes under DEFRA, such as the Higher Level Scheme, can also involve a commitment to hosting visits. These initiatives have challenged many farmers to engage with the public directly for the first time, and to explain the science of farming in simple language to the public.

The many recent developments encouraging more visits by school children to farms have highlighted the need for research on the interaction between farmers, schools, teachers and school children, and the effect of these visits for both farms and the schools. This research aims to

1. To identify how farmers responded to the challenge to engage the public in farming
2. To identify how teachers integrate farm visits with teaching the national curriculum in the classroom.
3. To record children's reactions to farm visits.

This research focuses on visits of primary school children to working farms, thereby corresponding with one of the key aims of the year of food and farming, which was to ensure all primary school children visited a farm, and focussing on the working farm sector, rather than commercial visitor attraction centres and petting farms.

The research has three components:

Interviews with farmers to find out what prompted them to host farm visits (whether they already hosted visits, or whether the initiative came from the YFF, HLS, LEAF, Open Farm Sunday, other reasons); what preparation (in terms of training, links with curriculum etc) was carried out; what support, if any, was used; and what farmers gained from the experience (e.g. enjoyment, links with community, grants, entrance fees, sale or publicity for products etc). Research was carried out in three regions: the south east (Hertfordshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, Kent and Sussex), the north east (Tyne and Wear and County Durham), and the west country (Somerset, Wales).

This was matched with a focus on the response of schools and school children to farm visits. This information was gained by following up with schools who went on farm visits to find out which classes went on trips, and find out what the school and teachers appreciated about the visits – from links to the curriculum to engagement with local community. The research was especially concerned with how the farm visit was integrated with teaching the national curriculum in the classroom. What follow-on activity was there in the classroom?

Finally, with the collaboration of those schools who granted permission, a questionnaire was sent to the parents of children who went on farm visits. It asked what children enjoyed, what parents learned from their children, and whether the experience encouraged the household to visit other farms, or consider changing food purchasing habits?

The results provide an interesting insight into farmers' experiences of hosting farm visits, and schools' and children's experience of visiting farms. This information will be useful in preparing guidance and training material for farmers hoping to host visits, dovetail farmers' and schools' concerns about farm visits, encouraging future collaboration. It will link with wider concerns about the nature of teaching, the use of open spaces for learning, and the growing interest in outdoor learning and "forest schools". Responses from wider households will provide insights into how well school visits foster wider engagement with farming.

The results will be of interest to a range of organisations involved in environmental education. Results (as reports or briefings) will be distributed widely, and in particular to organisations such as FACE (Farming and countryside education), LEAF (Linking environment and farming), the Growing Schools programme, which seeks to encourage school visits to farms.

2. The context

2.1 The view of the farming sector by the public

Much of the British countryside, which many seek to access through footpaths and the right to roam, is owned by farmers. While the public see the countryside as a place for recreation and enjoyment, farmers see it as a place of work. This has resulted in conflict and tensions. The farming sector has long been viewed by the public as a group that own much land, are wealthy, receive enormous subsidies from the CAP, and possibly represent the “get off my land” contingent. Farmers wish to keep people away from fields of crops, conservation areas, and out of farmyards, whereas the public see this as infringement of their rights to access “their” countryside. The fields, crops and grazing livestock of the farming industry are easily visible by passersby. However, rarely do those who frequently visit the countryside have an opportunity to meet with a farmer and discuss what they are doing and why.

Over the years, scandals concerning the farming industry have done little to enhance its reputation with the wider public. The butter mountains (and wine lakes) of the 1980’s presented an image of an industry subsidised to produce more than people need, resulting in waste. A large proportion (circa 50%) of the EU budget goes to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which supports, or subsidises, the farming industry across Europe. Area payments and guaranteed revenue for growing crops, payment to set land aside rather than grow crops, and favourable rates for diesel are some of the many ways in which the CAP and the UK government have supported farmers. This has not made sense to those outside the farming industry. Anger has been increased when food scares have arisen – Salmonella in chicken and eggs, mad cow disease and its human counterpart – CJD. There has been a backlash in the form of consumers wanting traceability in their food supply. Some consumers have turned towards organic produce, believing it to be a better alternative.

Farmers now realise they need to re-connect with consumers to explain their industry and re-establish confidence in the food they produce. A general growing interest in where our food comes from and how it is produced has resulted in a rise in popular television programmes about farming, both positive (e.g. Jimmy’s farming heroes) and negative. There has been a surge in farmers’ markets and an increase in local food at supermarkets. LEAF, and other food labels, produce links to individual producers.

2.2 Farm visit initiatives and the Think Food and Farming Campaign

Quite a few new initiatives seek to counteract the bad press which farming has received over the years. Through the Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS), run by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), farmers have been able to open up their land for “educational access”, hosting visits by schools to enable children to find out more about farming and the countryside. Linking Environment and Farming (LEAF) offers guided visits to farms. Through contacting LEAF, groups (not necessarily schools) can be put in touch with nearby LEAF member farms which are able to host the visits. Through LEAF, a wider scheme, Open Farm Sunday, was established in 2006. Farms across the country open their gates on one Sunday in June. As the CSS scheme draws to a close, farmers are able to volunteer for similar educational access activities through the new Higher Level Scheme (HLS). And of course, over many years, individual farms have opened to host local groups, whether it be the WI, a conservation group, or the local primary school.

The Year of Food and Farming (September 2007 – September 2008) aimed specifically to promote food and farming to the wider public. Sponsored by DEFRA, the Department of

Health and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). One of its aims was that every pupil would visit a farm or other countryside location during primary school years.

Links between schools and providers of activities were made through an interactive mega map on a web site. 3000 schools registered on the website, and 2762 providers (YFF evaluation report section 2.2). 71% of participating organisations were primary schools, though not all of them participated by visiting a farm. Many carried out cooking or growing activities at school, or planted vegetables at school, or were visited by farmers. The motivations were the “educational value of food and farming as a teaching resource (71%), free resources (38%) and personal interests (37%)” (Rickinson, 2008, appendix II in YFF evaluation report).

The Think Food and Farming campaign has linked the YFF mega map with the Growing Schools database, which enables schools to search for farms near them, and also provides teaching material and links to further websites.

Open Farm Sunday has run since 2006. In the first year, nearly 300 farms opened. In 2007, more than 400 farms opened, hosting an estimated 150,000 visitors. In 2008, 400 farms opened again, and in 2009, 425 farms opened receiving more than 140,000 visitors. Individual farms commonly received 400 or more visitors. The largest open farm, Annables, received more than 3000 visitors (LEAF, nd). This is opened by the farmer who first championed the idea of Open Farm Sunday, Ian Piggott.

There are 62 farms on LEAF’s demonstration farm network. Thirteen are research centres (e.g. conservation trusts, or located on agricultural research stations such as ADAS, SAC etc), and the remainder are working family farms. Throughout the year, LEAF can put interested groups in touch with farmers who are able to host farm tours, usually for free. This liaison role between farmers and schools takes part of the organisational work from farmers.

There are 17,000 CSS agreement holders. However, among the management options chosen, access accounts for only 2% of the land use options, but it does cover 9,000 ha of land. (<http://www.defra.gov.uk/erdp/schemes/css/cssuptake.htm>). The HLS and CSS together have 800 farms signed up to educational access (Natural England, interview November 2008). Farmers are encouraged to host educational visits (for children or adults, schools or clubs). Visits must have a minimum of 6 people, and last for 2 hours. Farmers must host at least 4 visits per year to be on the scheme, and maximum of 25. Most farmers do not approach the maximum of 25 visits each year. Farmers have to complete an education pack as part of the grant, showing an awareness of the educational assets of the farm, and how these can be linked to the national curriculum to ensure that visits are appropriately lead.

Initial data from feedback forms after visits to farms registered under HLS suggest that 40% of visits are by schools, and 99% say they could visit again, saying the visits are good or very good (96%). Of those from schools, 21% are from Key Stage 1 (KS1), 41% from KS2, 9% from KS3 and 6% from KS4, thus providing evidence for the impression that farm visits are more suited to children of primary school age. (R Cook, pers. com). As the adult:child ratio on these visits is quite high (typically 1:5 for younger primary school children) many parent helpers also visit farms through these visits. Farm visits are also popular with groups with learning or behavioural difficulties.

The Country Trust supports farm visits through linking larger farms with schools for disadvantaged urban areas. The Country Trust also subsidises the cost of transport to the farms. Their regional managers can work with farm owners to ensure a good day out is provided.

The Food for Life Partnership is organised by the Soil Association. This programme links schools with farms and encourages and assists schools to form close links with farms. Within this programme is a strong belief that one-off farm trips should be replaced by a series of small groups making repeat visits, so that they can engage more closely with farming, and appreciate the range of seasonal activities undertaken. Schools would visit 3 or 4 times per year, 3 with an educational purpose, and 1 a celebration for example harvest festival. The farm and school would have links beyond the visit, e.g. harvest festival, staff training day on the farm, and the farmer would return to the school. The driving force held by the Food for Life Partnership directors is to enable a closer understanding of what goes on on the farm, as they feel that a one-off visit has less educational depth. Within this programme, it has been found that schools are happy to commit time, but not the cost of transport. Therefore there is funding support for flagship schools (Karen Brenchley, pers. com.).

2.3 Training for farmers

Farmers can gain confidence and training in farm visits through the CEVAS course, which has to date trained almost 1000 farmers to host visits. The two-day course discusses a broad range of issues from health and safety, promoting the farm to schools, and risk assessments through to curriculum links and preparing a presentation appropriate for school children. Farmers complete and submit a portfolio to gain the CEVAS accreditation.

Other training for farmers is available through the LEAF Speak Out course and one day events in preparation for OFS.

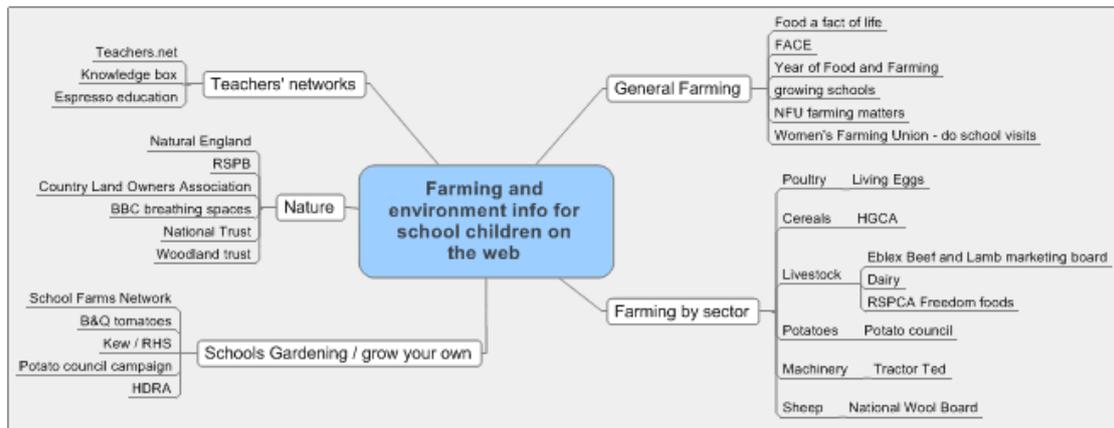
2.4 Learning outside the classroom

The introduction of the national curriculum in 1988 standardised teaching in the UK. As teachers adjusted to the new curriculum, many felt that more informal, open-ended teaching was no longer allowed. The LOTC manifesto was launched recently. It aims to encourage learning in more informal settings, away from the classroom. This can be through learning on school grounds or in the local neighbourhood, or through visits to museums, theatres, educational centres, farms and expeditions.

The LOTC manifesto is supported by many groups, including the Campaign for Real World Learning, which promotes outdoor learning in natural environments. In order to reassure schools that outdoor learning providers meet suitable standards, a LOTC quality badge has been introduced. In order to gain this badge, providers must meet requirements concerning knowledge of the curriculum as well as health and safety. This new badge was introduced in January 2009. For farmers, accreditation is via the CEVAS course, followed by further inspection of premises.

2.5 Supporting materials

The growing schools website and FACE website provide information on farming, including worksheets. Other materials are produced by levy boards (HGCA, Potato Council, Dairy), conservation groups (RSPB, RSPCA), the National Farmers' Union, the Woodland Trust, National Trust, and other interest groups. An initial typology of farming and environment information for school children available on the web is below. Preparation of these teaching materials represents a large investment in promoting teaching about farming and environment to school aged children.



3. Farmers' views on school visits

This project interviewed farmers from 34 farms hosting visits from primary schools. Farms were identified through several sources: the Growing Schools web site, Open Farm Sunday website, through FACE, and through word of mouth. Farmers were contacted by letter informing them of the project, and then telephoned a few days later to arrange an interview if they were willing. Most farmers were extremely willing and helpful, and generous with their time.

Key issues discussed in semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were:

- The types of visits hosted, their timing (season) and frequency, and activities on visits.
- Motivations to conduct visits and support received. Also barriers.
- The farmers' relationship with visitors (whether individual teachers or schools) and whether visits were regular or repeated.
- How farmers related their visits with the school curriculum.
- Resources created by farmers to accommodate school visits, whether physical (dry learning areas, toilets) or educational (curriculum material).
- Farmers' perceptions of the school children
- The rewards farmers gain from hosting visits
- The importance of farm visits to the farming industry.

The 34 farms which were the subject of interviews were distributed between Cambridgeshire, Co. Durham, Glamorgan, Hertfordshire, Kent, Norfolk, Suffolk, Somerset, Sussex and Tyne and Wear.

3.1 Results

3.1.1 The farms and farmers

34 farms were interviewed concerning farm visits. Some farm visits were organised by couples, in which case both may have been present at the interview. In all, 46 farmers were interviewed, 16 women, 30 men. Almost all were between the ages of 40-60.

All farmers were based on working farms, and hosted visits of school children (and possibly other groups too). The farms range in size from 1 ha to large estates. Some farmers had been hosting visits for their entire farm career, while others had started in the last year or two. At least 3 farmers claimed their parents had hosted visits; and one said generations had hosted visits. A few had a background in teaching, which may have made them more interested in using their farms to educate school children.

Many farmers began by hosting a class from their local primary, often when their own children are attending school. As children progress through schools, links with the local primary diminish. For other farmers, funding programmes such as educational access schemes have provided incentives to host school visits. For one farmer, the collapse of farming after food and mouth in 2001 provided the incentive to change completely from farming to full time visits, initially by going out to schools (if you can't bring them to the farm, bring the farm to them) and then by coordinating school visits to farms.

Most farmers were visited by a range of schools, but a few had very specific arrangements, such as a farm that had one class from one school weekly throughout the school year, and a

farm which hosted a forest school. Five farmers had higher profiles in the farming community, acting as leading lights in LEAF and the NFU, the Soil Association, the Country Trust, or hosting the Cereals Show. Among these were farmers involved in organising visits not just on their own farm, but also linking schools to other farms, either through the Country Trust or other access programmes in Wales and the West Country. Two farmers relied on the Farms For Life programme of the Soil Association to coordinate visits. Most of the farmers were from normal working farms who found time in a busy normal farming calendar to host groups of school children and explain “why we do what we do” (1).

The study aimed to focus on farms hosting primary school children, and all farmers did this. Primary school aged children seem to be the core of the visits, whether visiting from schools, or through beavers, scouts, cubs and other play groups. Other regular groups were the WI, and clubs such as photographers and nature groups. Secondary school or college visits to farmers do occur, but were much less frequent. These were not included in this research.

3.1.2 Motivation to do visits

Farmers were proud to do visits, largely driven by the belief that the wider public (children and parents alike) had lost touch with knowledge about where food comes from. They were keen to explain how food was produced, and teach children about the source of the food they ate.

“Some of them haven’t a clue about agriculture and the countryside. Still think milk comes from bottles, even in rural areas. Still real basic problems to overcome. i.e. children think there is one kind of cow, not varieties.” (3)

“Children haven’t a clue about farmers and farming life. My kids know so much. Their friends don’t want to go home when they visit.... Kids’ impressions of farmers – must educate. For example, they don’t expect a woman – especially one who is blond, bubbly, young...(10)

“King’s Lynn is a fairly rural area but it’s surprising how many don’t know what sugar beet looks like, haven’t seen a cow.... adults don’t know.... Important to try and teach them.” (11)

Within this, there was some realisation that children needed to be taken out of the classroom to experience different learning opportunities.

“[provides] practical experience to disadvantaged children...show practical farming and commercial application. ...getting out of school environment: change from normal daily life is stimulus in itself – and then practical work.removes kids from technology – screens and computers. ...Curriculum [comes from] far afield: Africa, S America... but local countryside should be included also” (3)

“Astounded by questions e.g. muddling sheep and goats. Children don’t read books like we do, with cows / sheep – instead have play stations.” (9)

“Education of children through hands-on visits to farms rather than books and academic work a better way” (21)

Many farmers felt privileged to have access to the countryside, and wanted to share this with others.

“A conscience that you share. DEFRA has helped to cement it. Over last 10 years farming has had to survive, so you had to open your door. Even M15 has opened up. If it’s government sponsored.....” (1)

“Sharing countryside with people who wouldn’t normally have the opportunity to be there.” (7)

There was also a wider desire to “show them why we do what we do (1)”. This related in part to explaining complicated farming operations to those who might observe this from a distance. It also, however, related to justifying the use of current farming practices, including methods of rearing livestock, use of pesticides and herbicides. Within this was a realisation that by reaching out to children, they could also reach out to adults.

“By talking to them they then start asking adults so [we are] inadvertently educating adults too. They soak it up at that age. School visit – good questions from kids. Feedback via parents positive”.(4)

Adults did engage and learn. A farmer from Northumberland said that she had hosted classes with Asian students. The mothers often had the best questions and comments, relating their own knowledge of farming from their own home villages.

There was also a desire to justify the subsidies that farmers are given. Farmers were well aware that they receive a large amount from the public purse in the form of subsidies and grants, and felt they should show how the money was used, and why it was needed.

“Most people see farmers – moan, lots of money. Different even from last generation. Get people out, see what we do, grow.” (11)

Finally, farmers were aware that farming had received a lot of bad press, through food worries such as E. coli and Salmonella outbreaks, and Mad Cow disease, and wanted to counteract these fears by showing that they were farming responsibly.

“Its important for the agricultural industry to engage with customers and future customers. The more we can interact with children it will affect their decisions about what they want to do and where they want to work.” (5)

“Take a pride in what we are doing. Farmers get bashed about in the press a lot, show how we make food safe and affordable.” (5)

“Younger [farmers] have been through a tough 10 years, not engaging with customers. Must get in contact with farming, sell what we do, look after countryside.” (5)

“Overcomes “get off my land” perception.” (13)

In addition to these industry concerns, many farmers said they did it because of the personal rewards of seeing children really enjoying themselves, and discovering about food, farming and the countryside. This personal, heart-warming reward was, for many, justification in itself to do the visits.

“Fun; putting something back. Raised our profile with the National Trust and National Park; Made us more “friendly”; Quite good PR.” (6)

“Pleasure out of seeing them enjoy themselves.” (7)

“It was great to see how enthusiastic they were.” (13) These school children went on to make a video about “Farmer Ken” based on the visit, and invited him to the school to watch it.

“Warm glow....Giving back something Important...very important that children understand the countryside. Children live 1 mile from countryside but won’t have access to it. Teach them respect for countryside.” (14)

“Feel it is part of the social responsibility of farmers to educate the wider public.” (16)

In some cases, it made farmers realise how happy they were to be doing the job they did.

“Sometimes the job gets a bit mundane. What seems unexciting for me is mind-blowing for children. I’m very lucky in what I do.” (4)

A few, such as Ian Piggott, the farmer who spearheaded the Open Farm Sunday initiative, are passionate about farming as an industry, and feel that it is imperative that youngsters get onto farms, and see what is happening. This is partly about ensuring the next generation understand where their food comes from, but is also about encouraging the next generation into land-based careers, including farming. There are constant concerns that the average age of farmers in the UK is increasing, and that young people are not entering this industry.

“To promote the industry we spend our lives in.” (3).

Few farmers cited financial rewards as a motivation to open for farm visits. Although there are “Educational access” grants for farmers to open, and some did do this, most made it clear that this did not cover costs. By the time they had prepared for the day, hosted the visit, and cleared up afterwards, the £100 or so provided by the grant did not cover the staff time involved. In addition, there were significant other costs to be covered (See below, under facilities) so that farm visits were not a profitable enterprise.

One farmer said she loves doing visits, but said,

“its good fun, but not worth doing financially. £100 for 60 kids, and [we have to] bring in staff. We love doing it, but don’t push for more visits. Our friends say we’re bloody mad!” (11)

However, another farmer took the opposite view:

“Would hate people to think I was doing it for the money. Like the idea that I did it before I got paid for it.” (9)

Some farmers found it a welcome addition to their activities.

“Diversification – a new career; Work off the farm; Get brain going..” (5)

3.1.3 Facilities needed

Farms are working environments with, generally, relatively few employees. Hosting a school visit can necessitate changes in the facilities available, especially when it may involve children eating at the farm.

Overall, farmers had invested in many ways in hosting visits. Common investments had been the time and commitment to completing a CEVAS training course to gain CEVAS accreditation. FACE says almost 1000 farmers have completed the course.

Many farmers had also managed to find space or convert buildings to create a “classroom”. This may have been a garage converted to a permanent display area to create a “museum” or an old barn restored to be weather proof and provided with chairs, tables, and display materials about farming. These areas provided a dry, safe area for discussing farming, and a bolt hole if inclement weather affected a farm visit.

A real challenge was the creation of appropriate hand washing and toilet facilities, especially if these were to be suitable for disabled users as well. At least three farmers opened up their own homes to enable visitors to use toilets, and one even opened up her own living room to allow children to picnic on the floor if the weather was poor. There was a real plea that support would be provided to enable farmers to make these more costly renovations.

A few farmers have converted a trailer to make it suitable for carrying passengers safely. This is a big investment, as it means giving up the use of a trailer, and requires time for the construction, as well as purchasing materials to make the conversion.

Farmers on the new HLS scheme are required to prepare a teacher information pack about the farm, what it can offer in terms of visits, and how this links to the curriculum. Many farmers have also developed specific activity sheets to be used alongside the activities they do. Other supportive material can be wellies, waterproofs (especially all in one suits for younger children), posters and brochures for children to look at, and other teaching props.

3.1.4 Links with schools

While farmers can open their doors to schools, getting school children to the farm gate is still a challenge. Farmers commonly assume that by going onto the CSS or HLS scheme, and preparing a teaching information pack, that this will be enough. Sadly, this is not the case, and farmers have had to work at getting visitors to come.

Most farmers begin with their local primary schools. Often the contact is made through their own children. Once schools come, they are likely to return, perhaps with a different teacher or year group, but often the same teacher comes year after year. Word of mouth seemed, in the end, to be the best form of advertising.

Several farmers spoke of great efforts, without success. One farmer related how he sent 50 letters to Bath primary schools, but received only 1 reply. They then made their letter more like advertising, and received 12 responses. Other farmers have similar stories of writing to all the local schools, but receiving little response. One farmer contacted a school 3 times as she was told that a teaching assistant, sister of the farm’s stockman, was keen on bringing a class. Despite highlighting this in a letter, the school never replied, and a visit was never made.

Post to the school is often sorted by administrators, who receive “advertising” from so many sources. As one farmer said

“School secretaries are a filter. Teachers don’t always follow links. If it gets past the administrators, it goes on to the the head, who may pass it on to teachers, who may follow it up.” (3)

Several farmers have said that the best way is to get into the school, and speak to the teachers. Armed with a flyer or teacher information pack, getting a short time in the staff room to make a quick presentation, and leaving leaflets with the keenest teachers, is the best way.

Many farmers said that their link with a school was through a particular teacher who was keen. This teacher would bring a class year after year. If that teacher moved on to another school, the link with the local school could be lost.

“[I’ve been doing] year on year visits with 2 schools for past 8 years. Know which year groups going where, know visits will be safe and worthwhile. They trust me to deliver” (5)

Thus individual relationships and trust that the farm visit will “deliver” learning outcomes is crucial. These teachers are often keen on outdoor learning and farming already (perhaps from a farming background) and so can see the opportunities for learning in a farm visit. It was suggested that teachers who are not keen on the great outdoors may be reluctant to plan a visit to a farm, perhaps even being afraid of being shown up by the farmer and their own pupils (see section on teacher interviews below).

Teachers who are unfamiliar with organising visits are likely to be put off by the extra bureaucracy of organising a visit to a farm, which is considered more risky than a museum or even a country park. “School teachers are scared about taking children out.” (20)

Where support is available to provide a liaison between the farm and schools, this takes a huge burden off of farmers hosting an event, and they can then concentrate on the activities at the farm, and spend less time worrying about publicity.

LEAF organises a central website to register farms opening for Open Farm Sunday for which they also organise publicity, provide signs so all farms that are opening can easily be found, and provide training days for farmers to ensure that the day goes well. The liaison role LEAF has between demonstration farmers and visiting groups also takes the administrative burden from farmers.

The Country Trust liaises between schools and farmers, releasing farmers from the organisational side of visits, allowing them to focus just on the events of the day.

The Growing Schools website provides an interactive map, and searchable database, through which schools can identify farms nearby. Farms can post summaries of the resources available and activities on offer.

3.1.5 Health and safety

Obviously the biggest concern to farmers is to ensure the health and safety of children while visiting their farms. The range of legislation, and insurance caveats, can be quite off-putting. Health and Safety is perceived as a significant barrier to offering farm visits. The CEVAS course, which many farmers had completed, tackles health and safety issues, advising farmers on how to complete a risk assessment, and providing guidance on specific activities such as offering tractor-trailer rides. However, there remains a confusing mix of farmers, insurers, schools and LEAs all having to either prepare risk assessments (from their individual

standpoints) and agree that the proposed visit meets Health and Safety standards before the visit can go ahead. Concerns over the potential liabilities can result in farmers turning away from hosting visits. One farmer who was interviewed stated that, although he had entered an educational access agreement, he had then decided to change it for something else, having interpreted the fine print on his insurance as meaning that it would be impossible for him to provide a sufficiently risk-free environment to ensure visitor safety. As one couple put it

“Health and safety is difficult to do. We received very little help, and very little funding.” (11)

Farmers also reported different responses of insurers to farm visits. Some insurers appeared to be happy to allow some school children to visit farms; others required a higher premium to be paid.

Of course, the risk is not only to visitors. There are significant biosecurity risks faced by farmers who have regular visitors to their farms. At times when livestock disease outbreaks are a great concern (particularly FMD), farmers are concerned about encouraging visitors. Although most children are not from farming backgrounds, many may have been on walks on footpaths through other farms, or come across other animals through visits to riding stables, petting farms, or occasionally, friends and family who own farms. Increasingly, people are travelling abroad to countries where diseases (including FMD) are endemic, and they may return to visit a farm in the same shoes or boots which were worn overseas. Thus the risk to farmers for the health of the livestock is also significant.

Provision of hand washing facilities was always considered important, but not always easy. Fortunately hand gels provide a portable system for removing germs from hands, but are not sufficient for removing lots of mud! The request for assistance in provision of toilets would also enable there to be more and better hand washing facilities, with hot water, soap, and paper towels to dry hands.

3.1.6 Public speaking and the ability to talk to children

Hosting farm visits requires a confidence in the ability to speak to large groups, and to explain farming activities in an interesting and understandable way. School visits present the further challenge of engaging young children, and translating day-to-day activities and farming techniques into a language that children can understand. There is the added issue of coping with questions from children, which can be challenging, unexpected, or critical. Many farmers find the thought of this daunting, if it doesn't put them off hosting visits altogether.

One farmer who regularly hosts visits from other farmers said

“I was more terrified of talking to 2-5 year olds than a large group of farmers.”(4)

He went on to explain that he was concerned about their short attention span, and that he would “waffle on too much.” (4)

Another farmer felt he took on the role of a speaker about farming because he recognised that within the agriculture industry, some people would enjoy talking about farming to non-farmers, whereas others wouldn't feel comfortable. He felt he was more comfortable with communicating about farming to the public, and so took on the role. (29)

Both CEVAS and LEAF respond to farmers' needs to know more about how to engage the public with farming. With the CEVAS course, training is provided concerning farm talks, and

farmers are assessed on their ability to do so. LEAF provides “Speak out” training for farmers hosting visits, or opening for Farm Sunday.

3.1.7 Resources to engage children

Obviously, some farm activities lend themselves to farm visits more than others. Many farmers claimed that children enjoyed seeing farm animals, and that an arable farm had less to immediately engage children. Another farmer, who raised chickens indoors, felt that there was less to show children, and perhaps more for the public to be critical of, and so was reluctant to show this part of his farm to school children. This research was done at a time when chicken welfare was a key issue on television, with Hugh Fearnley-Wittingstall, and other leading chefs, all promoting animal welfare issues.

Other farmers have not only animals, but also a range of features, such as historical features (e.g. Hadrian’s Wall, Roman mounds, WW2 shelters), vegetables, fruit (great for picking and tasting), lambing, egg collecting, ponds, woodlands, birds...but farmers could also make use of animal tracks and foot-prints, fallen branches for den making, scavenger hunts, wild flowers.....

3.1.8 Familiarity with curriculum

For those farmers without children currently in school, the national curriculum can seem baffling. Parents whose children are now grown up (and the average age of farmers is representative of this age group) will not have come across the National Curriculum, which was launched in 1988. The use of phrases such as Foundation Stage, Key Stage 1, and Key Stage 2 is bewildering to those not involved in education. Phrases such as “lesson plans” and “learning outcomes” are not common in the farmers’ lexicon. The CEVAS course did much to resolve this problem. However, for farmers who do not complete the CEVAS course, there is still a gap in communication. So when farmers were asked about how they linked farm visits to what goes on in schools, the answer was quite simple:

"I'm not really sure what's on the curriculum."(2)

Younger farmers, who are not parents, may not be familiar with what they can expect from children at different ages.

“The most useful part of the CEVAS training for me was the explanation of the national curriculum, and discovering how to find the curriculum material on the web.” (30)

“Since CEVAS training, I have an insight into how to adjust the practical side of agriculture to age range and subject. I.e. Science day (biodiversity, environment and food production, insects etc) or history (fields) or geography (footpaths)..... See what work is all about.” (3)

However there remains a question as to whether it is up to teachers to make links with the curriculum, or whether farmers should be aware of the exact requirements of the curriculum, and seek to deliver against those learning outcomes.

Increasingly, school teachers need to justify a trip out by showing that it was embedded within the curriculum that was to be delivered.

“He asks them what they want...In science week, local school came. Discussed nutritional value of foods, feed rations for cows, soils, fertilisers ... only time school has made a request. (9)”

“Initially formal - teachers came with questions children had to find answers to. Preparation with teachers beforehand – geography, history. With time became more informal.....Children to gather information and find things out for themselves, and then do classroom work based on discoveries.” (6)

Much of the material available on the internet concerning using farm visits presents curriculum links in the vocabulary of key stage 1, key stage 2.... which needs to be linked more clearly to children’s age if it is to mean something to those from outside the teaching profession. Few farmers used web-based materials linking farming and environment with the national curriculum. Most preferred to speak from their own experience, about their own farm.

3.1.9 Response of different visitors

Farmers were asked if they noticed a difference between urban and rural children. The general consensus was that most rural children are not aware of farming. They may live in a rural area, but they are not involved with farming. Some children ride horses, and may see their parents gardening and growing vegetables, but few get onto a farm.

One farmer commented that children from Asian backgrounds, whose parents had emigrated to England, sometimes had greater awareness of farming. They would comment “it smells like home”, and although unfamiliar with some of the animals, they were more comfortable in the farm environment.

Farm visits also involve many adults, as teachers, teaching assistants, and as parent helpers. Although the visits are focussed on primary school children, these adults also benefit from seeing the farm, and learning about the farming industry.

“Quite often, I find it’s the parent helpers who keep asking questions, and want to know more.” (34)

3.2 Discussion

There is a strong feeling among farmers that it is important for the industry to be reaching out to the public in this way. It is also clear that farmers have made huge efforts to host visits onto their farm. The enthusiasm and dedication of farmers has been seen time and time again in farmer interviews, as farmers (and in some cases generations of farmers) open their farms regularly to take in school groups, often opening their own homes to provide handwashing and toilet facilities, and even shelter in times of extremely poor weather. Farmers have also diverted resources towards accommodating visits, from allocating staff time, to clearing out and renovating farm buildings to provide “classrooms”. Farmers give up significant amounts of time to prepare for visits, and most say that it doesn’t “pay” to host the visits, even with CSS or HLS educational access programmes. They do it because they feel it is rewarding, it is enjoyable, and because they feel it is important for the industry to promote itself, and explain to the public “why we do what we do”.

While farmers offer so much, they often find it hard to attract the attention of schools and get school groups to visit. Alongside the promotion of educational access through programmes such as the HLS, LEAF demonstration farms, CSS and FFLP there needs to be a

complementary effort to urge schools to look to farms to provide educational visits. The YFF, and now TFF campaign, as well as the LOTC manifesto, may act to promote teachers to consider farm visits, although they also promote other interaction. The TFF campaign also promotes growing activities in school grounds, or farmers visiting schools. The LOTC initiative promotes all types of learning outside the classroom, so that farmers are “competing” with museums, theatres, adventure sports and many other activities.

Farmers are not trained in the national curriculum. Those with school-aged children may understand terms such as Key Stage, but few will be aware of the particular curriculum topics associated with differently aged children. However teachers are under pressure to ensure that trips provide good learning value to justify the expense both in terms of financial preparation and paperwork (risk assessments, permission slips, finding extra adult helpers etc.). The CEVAS course is key in assisting farmers to understand curriculum links. However, teachers should not expect farmers to stand in and deliver the national curriculum.

4. Teachers' views of farm visits.

While farmers offer education access to school children, success only comes if teachers and head teachers take up the opportunity to visit a farm. From a teachers' perspective, a field trip to a farm must offer significant learning opportunities that fit into the curriculum, so that the time and expense of a visit can be justified. This section of the report draws on individual interviews with 21 teachers who had taken their classes on a farm visit (in several instances, had repeatedly taken classes on farm visits), group discussions with teachers from Essex at a meeting to promote farm visits (November 2008), a key informant interview with those responsible for educational access visits under the new Higher Level Scheme, at Natural England, and a focus group discussion held at a Learning Outside the Classroom event in Peterborough, May 1st.

During the one-to-one interviews with teachers, key questions asked were

- Why did you choose to visit a farm?
- What information were you given beforehand by the farmer?
- How did you prepare yourself and your class for the visit?
- How did you use the farm visit in the classroom after the visit?
- For how long did you use the visit as a stimulus in your teaching?
- How did it link into your teaching plans / the national curriculum?
- Were there any teaching materials which you found particularly helpful or unhelpful?
- Were there any unexpected outcomes?
- Did different children respond differently to the visit?
- Would you visit a farm again?
- Overall, what did you, and the class, gain from the visit?

In discussions with teachers who were interested in finding out more about farm visits, the discussion focussed on meeting health and safety requirements and organising the visit, and the potential learning opportunities to be gained from such a visit.

4.1 Results

All of the teachers interviewed were positive about farm visits: they were fun and enjoyable days out, which children really enjoyed.

4.1.1 Why teachers chose to visit a farm.

There were several reasons for choosing a farm visit for school groups. In general, they were more popular with younger children in Key Stage 1. Teachers know a farm visit will be popular with the children. They also know it supports early years learning about local environments, the world around us, and geography.

“Children just love it - baby animals, where food comes from.” (T1)

“It's on their doorstep; their own environment.” (T2)

“Local geography - what people do for jobs, what land is used for as well as science - what makes plants grow well, plants as food source.” (T10)

“Children are naturally interested in animals. What is on their doorstep and why, produce, hands on, walking, good community links” (T14)

“seeing nature, opportunities to see things they couldn't see at home, understanding countryside; life-moving experiences e.g. handling small animals” (T9)

“See the "real world" and how what we talk about in class really happens.” (T10)

“For less able children, allows them to find the vocabulary to talk about things, contributes to sentence formation, to talk about things, develop language” (T11)

4.1.2 Preparation prior to the visit.

Preparation for visits varied tremendously, with some teachers just talking about health and safety issues, others talking about what they might see, and a few reading stories about farms, engaging in role play activities, and making sure children had thought a lot about the farm before going. In one class, which contained two year groups, the older group had visited the farm the previous year, and so was able to advise the younger children about what to expect. For children in year 3 and above, the visit was sometimes used as either preparation for, or the culmination of, a term spent talking about how plants grow, land use, and landscape issues. When the visit was part of a repeated set of farm visits to one location (e.g. through Farm for Life Partnership) teachers spent less time preparing children for the visits, as they were already familiar with where they were going.

Many teachers had discussions with the farmer, either by telephone or on a pre-visit, to discuss what the class was doing, and the hoped for learning outcomes of the day. However, a few still thought of the visit as a nice day out, and didn't attempt to embed the day in the classroom activities.

4.1.3 Reaction to the farm visit

“Kids need to be doing, hands, seeing, listening.” (T1)

On the day, teachers said children enjoyed doing things – touching and or feeding animals, feeling straw, smelling and touching feed, collecting and counting eggs, watching eggs hatch, seeing how the umbilical cord connected newborn lambs to their mothers, examining cattle ear tags.

They also commented that children enjoyed walking, and participated. Many said those who don't normally participate, or enjoy numeracy, were happy to get involved in this different setting. All enjoyed tractor trailer rides. One teacher commented that the tractor ride was “to die for” and that it was the most memorable day out in her 40 years of teaching (T9).

“Early learning goals are achieved via experiences - knowledge and understanding of the world. Curiosity...., observes, selects, and manipulates objects... identify similarities and differences.”(T14)

Teachers felt that farm visits matched the kinaesthetic learning styles of KS 1 children.

4.1.4 Links to the national curriculum

After the visit, many teachers made the most of the day's outing with follow up activities in the classroom. These were hugely varied and imaginative. Many had taken photos while on the trip, and used these to stimulate discussion, and writing. With younger children this might have been writing a sentence to label the photo. In one class the children (R / Yr 1) were so enamoured with the animals they saw that they created a whole story about the calves (who went to the beach and bought ice-creams!). Most wrote thank you letters to farmers, saying

what they liked best. Many farmers proudly exhibited these during their interviews. Plenty of drawing was also done, with walls covered in paintings and drawings. Apples were used to do printing.

In addition to numeracy and literacy, the visits contributed to PSHE (personal, social and health education). Children were challenged in a new environment. They were sometimes asked to do things in groups. They could consider how different people preferred different diets (vegetarianism, avoidance of certain meats such as pork or beef). They considered animal welfare issues. When examining either varieties of apples, or daffodils, they considered how individuals vary, and one teacher linked this to diversity among people, and how people vary in colour, shape or size (T6). There was also role play activity, and one reception teacher said that her class were more interested in the farm in the classroom after the visit (T5).

Children also explored issues concerning food and where it comes from. Some took home produce to cook. One class heard about how wheat produces flour and bread, but wondered about pasta. A parent who was a chef came in and made pasta in front of the children. Bread baking and tasting also followed visits (T1). Another class made pumpkin soup, and linked this activity with reading a children's story about making pumpkin soup (T5). This also linked to healthy eating. One teacher said that the visit had provided stimulus in teaching for 2-3 weeks after the visit (T7). One of her pupils took his parents on a walk and collected cereals. In class, they purchased breakfast cereals and talked about their content, both in terms of the cereal ingredients (wheat, oats, barley, rice...) and the amount of sugar. Others were prompted to grow vegetables in their school grounds, and monitor and measure their growth.

Another teacher said that her pupils were very proud to present their findings in assembly on the day after the farm visit.

Children from years 3 and 4 developed ICT skills using the photos as screen savers (T4).

“farm visits are very important because farms are very much a part of their community - geography - start with what they know under work and play theme; also history as farming year ties in with holidays, and religion - harvest; seasons – geography.” (T6)

Other teachers used the visit as a chance to reinforce teaching in the classroom.

“Great opportunity for children to reinforce work on lifecycles, healthy living, survival and plants.” (T21)

There is some concern that the national curriculum is “very controlling. Usually there is 1 trip out per term, often to museums - indoors, controlled environment.” (T9) However more experienced teachers were more open to the possibilities.

"You can make anything extracurricular if you think about it... You're supposed to be creative - creative curriculum topics back on the agenda." (T6).

A few teachers made no attempt to follow up visits with classroom activities. One, who took children from a disadvantaged school on a trip organised by a charity, said it was “a fun day out” (T16). There was a similar response to a FFLP visit. This undermines the efforts of the charities in organising the events.

4.1.5 Persuading teachers to take classes on farm visits.

However, a big challenge is to convince school teachers who haven't taken their classes to farms to try a farm visit. Teachers who have experienced farm visits are keen to go again; others are reluctant to even try a farm visit. There are a range of reasons why.

One long-term primary teacher, keen on the countryside, and now retired, commented that

“Teachers are not keen – because of poo. Animals excrete, are dirty. Farms may be dangerous due to machinery, and animals which may bite and kick. Suitable shoes and clothing are needed.” (T9)

It was also speculated that teachers who are not familiar with the countryside and farming are afraid to take their children to a farm in case they are shown up as knowing less than their pupils. Certainly, those already confident in the outdoor environment are more comfortable with an outdoor fieldtrip.

“Some primary school teachers are “tree huggy in nature” keen on pond dipping.” (T17)

“Teachers claim to be reluctant due to health and safety issues, concerns that the farmer may be a paedophile, or due to transport costs.” (T17)

There are concerns that a visit to a farm will involve enormous amounts of paperwork, and a high level of risk. In the workshop promoting farm visits to school teachers, considerable amount of time was spent discussing risk assessments and health and safety procedures. There is confusion over who is responsible for what, particularly in terms of a risk assessment. Furthermore, the arrangements vary from county to county, with some county council education departments having to give approval for farm visits, and others delegating that role to head teachers. Despite all the concern about safety and risk, it was interesting to note that many teachers are reluctant to find the time for a pre-visit to assess the risks (and learning potential) prior to the visit .

In addition to a risk assessment, teachers need to know enough about the visit to embed the learning activities at the farm visit to teaching in the classroom, both before and after the event. They also need to obtain permission from parents, possibly money to pay for transportation, and enough parent volunteers to ensure appropriate parent / child ratios. However, one teacher, for whom a farm visit was the first fieldtrip she had organised, stated

“I thought it would be more work but it wasn't really. Risk assessment not difficult, and permission letters, helpers.... Once half way through, realise its fine. Returning would be easier.” (T15)

There is a concern that while a farm visit can cover some of the science and environment aspects of the curriculum, it does not meet other curriculum demands.

“What about maths? Schools are not just interested in food, farming and the countryside. They are also interested in history, geography, French, English... therefore the farm needs to be an outdoor classroom. We need to encourage farmers to discuss with teachers and find the right topics to cover on visits.” (T17)

In fact, in interviews after visits, teachers commented on the wide range of curriculum issues covered in the visit, and in the follow-up teaching (section 4.1.4).

Those who had been on trips were very enthusiastic.

“Wouldn't change it for the world; farm visits great - get so much from it. All city children should do it.” (T14)

4.1.6 Teaching materials

When it came to finding support for teaching about farming and related topics, teachers only used a fraction of the material available on the web. Teachers specifically mentioned the HGCA's “Fun with Flour”, the Growing Schools web site, and the “Food a fact of life” website, concerning diet, games, videos, ppt, worksheets” Others cited more general information sources: “used pamphlets about apples, farming web sites about growing wheat (child education) for info, quizzes” . However, despite the enormous amount of material on the web, or perhaps because of it, it was often daunting for school teachers.

“Google - everything's there on the internet; 5 years ago had favourite sites, now there are so many.” (T16).

On the other hand, another teacher commented

“might use info from web if I knew what to look for / list of sites. (T15)”.

There are also other information points specifically accessible to teachers, such as Espresso education, or Knowledge box.

“I don't really use the web. Espresso education provides 2 minute video clips. So much material available, but only 2 hours per week planning time. Too much to trawl through. Espresso and Knowledge box - 2 sites especially for schools.” (T14)

“Service in Taunton sends teaching resources.” (T16)

Many organisations have developed materials to support the links between the farming environment and the national curriculum, but it must be said that these are not used widely. The considerable investment of time, talent and funds, in preparing these materials, might have been better spent elsewhere. Few teachers had heard of the YFF, or the Think Food and Farming campaign.

4.1.7 Reaction to new learning styles

A final consideration is the effect of moving learning from the classroom to the farm environment. How would children react to such an informal learning environment? Would the change of environment stimulate learning?

“Worked for all kids. Certain children more focussed than expected. Better at keeping them motivated and on task. Often children [who are] not good at classroom better outside. e.g. addition in class boring, but counting games outside fun.” (T1)

“Usually bored children were engaged.” (T15)

“Outdoor leaning env - kinaesthetic learner.Doing, learning through experience.” (T14)

“Children who find school challenging particularly enjoyed the visit. Boys really enjoyed being outside and hands on approach. SEN children found experience good.” (T20)

“Many children became more engaged and active in lessons. Encouraged the children to write” (T18)

“Some children who are "SEN children" were really able to shine. One child who experiences learning difficulties was actually teaching the rest of the group about nature and wildlife. We didn't realise his knowledge was so good!" (T17)

The potential of outdoor learning experiences such as farm visits to engage more challenging students needs to be investigated more fully. The evidence presented here suggests that this could be a good opportunity to engage more children in learning, and also to allow students with particular expertise to shine in a new environment.

4.2 Discussion

Children and families are bombarded with information about healthy eating, food miles and farming methods. Since the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988, schools have faced a range of initiatives and challenges, from Education for Sustainable Development, to Every Child matters, Learning Outside the Classroom, Eco-schools, Healthy schools, as well as trying to ensure that they maintain standards and achieve good results in SATS and later GCSE's. There are programmes to encourage more exercise and walking to school to combat the rising obesity epidemic. Curriculum topics such as Citizenship and PSHE include the role of individuals as caretakers of the environment, the importance of sustainability, and the need to be responsible citizens in terms of both the environment, but also our relationships with others (social issues), and our responsibility to look after ourselves (personal health and welfare).

Teachers who have been on visits described how the event was integrated into classroom learning in the days and weeks following the visit. Farm visits stimulated learning in many ways, including literacy, numeracy, science, art, design and technology, ICT, history, geography, PSHE, citizenship and RE. Although there is concern among teachers that a farm visit may not provide significant learning outcomes and links to the curriculum, in fact, it appeared to be the inspiration for many different activities and discussions.

The reaction to farm visits mirrored the results of numerous studies on outdoor learning which show it is more memorable, enjoyable, and contributed to the development of personal skills as well as increasing attainment. Some teachers also noted the children with particular learning difficulties benefited from these opportunities.

Many organisations in the farming and conservation industry have developed websites and educational materials linking land-based activities to the national curriculum: few teachers mentioned using them. Time was the limiting factor.

As provision for farm visits increases (through rising numbers taking up educational access programmes) there needs to be a campaign to increase awareness of the potential for farm visits to meet curriculum needs. This could be achieved through inset days for teachers, or by providing input (ideally by offering a farm visit) to teacher training courses, so that newly qualified teachers are aware of the potential benefits of a farm visit. Funding to develop teaching materials might be better used in taking teachers on farm visits, to show them the potential farm visits offer.

Both teachers and programmes such as the FFLP or Forest Schools see the potential benefit of repeat visits to a farm or outdoor environment. This allows teachers and school children to become more familiar with the environment, enabling a more detailed exploration of what it has to offer, more in depth learning, and learning about how the environment changes over time and /or through the seasons. Repeat visits also present added value to the teacher, as returning to the same location is easier than trips to new locations, in terms of risk assessments and travel arrangements.

5.Children’s reactions to farm visits.

It is useful to consider what children, and their parents, thought of the visit. Did children enjoy it? What did they learn? What excited them, and conversely, what didn’t? What did children enjoy about the farm experience? What messages and information did they take home? Did those messages result in changes at the consumer level?

Assessing and analysing children’s responses to farm visits proved logistically difficult. The research focused on primary-school-aged children, many from the foundation and Key Stage 1 age range (4-8). Quite a few would not have been able to read a questionnaire, let alone write responses: the approach used was to send a questionnaire home to parents, asking them to comment on what children thought of the farm visit, and whether the information children brought home affected wider perceptions and practices in the household. This still proved challenging, as it required identifying schools planning farm visits, and sending questionnaires out to schools just prior to, or immediately after the visit. The ideal was to have the questionnaire completed about 4-8 days after the visit. This gave children time to talk and reflect on the visit, and for parents and families to digest the information. It is realistic to assume that young children could be extremely tired after a farm visit, and it might take a few days for them to discuss all the things they had seen and heard.

Identifying schools with impending farm visits was difficult. Farmers may host visits, but chasing up schools weeks afterwards would not have provided satisfactory results. During the research, 12 farm visits were followed up with questionnaires, from which 21 teacher interviews and 81 parent feedback forms were obtained. Not all teachers attending farm visits distributed forms to their children, and not all parents returned the questionnaires. This response rate is typical of distant sampling procedures, such as postal questionnaires. Parents were reporting on farm visits to different farms, different locations, and at different times of year, so that the activities each class was exposed to varied.

As questionnaires were anonymous, it is not possible to attribute quotations to individual people.

5.1 Results

5.1.1 What children enjoyed most

When asked what their child enjoyed most, parents presented a range of answers. If tractor trailer rides were offered, these were the most memorable thing children commented on. However, other activities also highly enjoyed were seeing animals, and tractors. Children also enjoyed hands-on activities such as feeding animals, planting (e.g. potatoes, seeds), and activities in woods.

In addition to their favourite activity, parents were asked what their child told them about farming and the environment. Again, many things were suggested, with some children obviously telling their parents about everything that happened on the day.

“Everything ... he wouldn’t stop talking!”

Children seemed to remember very detailed and specific things. For example they were interested in the food chain, whether it be that wheat makes flour which makes biscuits, or cows produce milk or beef. They also remembered numerical facts – the number of piglets born to a pig (10) versus the number of lambs born to a sheep (2); that cows are milked twice

a day; that lambs are weaned at 8 weeks. Children were intrigued that crop varieties have names (e.g. Wheat varieties Claire, Zebedee, Wizard) and remembered the crop's names, as if it was a person. They also remembered details of animals' homes (field margins, trunks of fallen or dead trees).

Table 1. What children enjoyed most

Activity	responses	Details
Tractor ride	17	
Woods	13	including variety of trees, learning about trees and coppicing, den making
Looking at tractors	3	
Planting seeds	2	Including planting potatoes
Animals	4	
learning about small animals	4	
feeding animals	4	
Lambs	5	
Bull	2	
Cows	2	
Deer,	1	
Chickens,	1	
Duck,	1	
Variety of birds	1	
All of it	3	

In addition, children enjoyed learning about crops and woodland; about how food grows, harvesting, wheat plants, wheat varieties; the long walk and climbing over a stile; Roman road; Flowers; seeing traces of wool on fences; compost; biscuits.

5.1.2 Farming knowledge gained by parents.

Parents were asked whether they learned anything new about farming from their child, and if so, what. 46% of parents said they didn't. However, this isn't surprising when you consider that 42% of parents said they already spent a considerable amount of time in the countryside, and quite a few either lived on a farm / stable yard or had farming relatives. However, the remaining 54% learned many things.

5.1.3 Changing practices

Children are often credited with "pester power": the ability to influence parents' behaviour by repeated reminding (or nagging) such as "but the teacher said we should" Or "but I heard on the telly that....". The farming industry may be seeking to tap into this potential through primary school visits. Two questions were asked of parents regarding changes in behaviour.

Had they, as a result of the visit, changed the food they bought and ate? Had they changed the amount of time spent in the countryside?

21% said they already purchased local, organic or British food. 16% said they would change their purchasing habits, towards such an approach. 44% said they would not.

The predominantly rural dwelling population involved in the survey, and the fact that more environmentally engaged parents were more likely to answer the questionnaire, biased the results.

5.2 Discussion

Outdoor education is cited as an experience that can allow children to experience nature (in all its rawness), face challenges, and in the process develop team working and negotiating skills, engage in creative thinking, critically analyse situations and develop problem-solving skills (Cooper, 2003). It is argued that outdoor learning can provide a more stimulating environment, in which children find learning more enjoyable and more motivating (Nundy, 2001) a more memorable learning experience (Dillon et al 2006; Dierking and Falk, 1997; Nundy, 2001), and can increase attainment levels (Education and Skills Select Committee 2005).

This study has been too small to be able to provide a definitive assessment of children's learning experiences, or their attainment. This initial research presents a picture of what children take home from farm visits. It has shown that children thoroughly enjoyed the farm visits. They enjoyed seeing new things, learning about farming and where their food came from, and being outdoors. The occasion was memorable. It linked well with the kinaesthetic learning style of young children, as they enjoyed the "hands on" nature of learning on farm visits. Through this learning environment, they remembered many details, which they told their parents. Teachers reported instances of children then returning to farms with their parents, or gathering cereals when on walks. Thus the visits have encouraged some children, at least, to take a greater interest in the world around them.

Further data will be collected over the next few months, as early summer is a key time for farm visits. This will be added to the existing small data set, so that more substantial conclusions can be drawn. This pilot study will be used to develop more detailed research proposals, in collaboration with primary education specialists, to pursue this area in more detail.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This research has studied the process of farm visits, starting with what motivates farmers to take on farm visits, through the potential benefits of farm visit experiences in delivering the learning outcomes of the national curriculum, through to the messages about farming which are taken home by the children. This more holistic approach allows the research to draw conclusions about the process as a whole, and identify the links, and gaps, in the flow of information from farmers through schools to the wider public.

It is clear that farmers have made huge commitments to open their farms to visitors, especially school children. Despite the range of supporting programmes, such as educational access through CSS and HLS, this is often done at personal cost.

Farmers give up their time and open their farms (and often homes) because they feel the need to re-engage with the wider public, to justify the public money that is spent on the farming industry through subsidies, and to regain public trust in the food production system.

Farmers struggled to make contact with teachers to initiate new visits. Without a keen farm visits champion within a school (whether it be the head, or a teacher), it was difficult to set up school visits. Farmers with long-term links with a particular school felt that it was based on personal relationships with a specific teacher or individual. If that teacher moved on, the link with the school often collapsed.

Teachers who were familiar with the rural environment or who had been on farm visits in the past, thought that visits presented a tremendous learning opportunity, both in terms of personal development of the children, the development of soft skills such as teamwork, and linked to specific curriculum topics.

However, those not familiar with farm visits were reluctant to take on the perceived burden of paperwork in organising a visit. They were also unaware of the many curriculum links which could be made.

Children thoroughly enjoyed the farm visits. They enjoyed seeing new things, learning about farming and where their food came from, and being outdoors. They enjoyed the “hands on” nature of learning on farm visits. They remembered many details, which they told their parents.

There is limited ability for parents and helpers to send their responses back to farmers. Farmers repeatedly host visits from schools, with little feedback from teachers and children about the perceived success of the visit.

Many organisations in the farming and conservation industry have developed websites and educational materials linking land-based activities to the national curriculum. Sadly, few farmers, or teachers, mentioned using them. The effort and funding allocated towards developing these activities could perhaps be better spent on other outreach activities, such as assisting farmer-teacher contacts or embedding an ethos of learning outside the classroom, and particularly farm visits, within teacher training or teachers continuing professional development courses.

Although farm visits target school children, many adults are involved, either as teachers, teaching assistants, or as parent helpers. Therefore the visits reach a wider and more varied audience than initially perceived.

The new LOTC badge is another qualification farmers should obtain if they are to host school visits. At a time when farms are faced with a lot of paperwork, an added kite mark is another burden. Most farmers host between 4 and 25 visits per year, earning a maximum of £3,000 if funded under the HLS scheme. Farms receiving few visits will not find it worth their while, but it would be unfortunate if children are unable to visit local farms. There needs to be a balance between ensuring children's safety and curriculum links through the badging scheme, and making the regulatory framework so demanding that farmers decide not to bother to host visits.

Farm visits provide a venue for children to focus on many environmental awareness raising campaigns which promote awareness and understanding of the environment, increasing physical activity and healthy eating. There is potential for synergies between farm visits and many campaigns which target school children, including Change 4 Life, 5-a-day, and eat well and initiatives.

Recommendations

As DEFRA encourages educational access to farms, there needs to be a parallel commitment to encouraging schools to find farms and make the most of the opportunities created by the Educational Access scheme.

Teacher training (whether at PGCE stage or during continuing professional development inset days) should include a day on a farm visit or other outdoor environment which can demonstrate the wide range of learning opportunities and links to the curriculum.

Funding and efforts spent on developing educational material placed on the web could be better allocated to more direct teacher engagement.

Funding should also support repeat visits, which allow a more detailed exploration of how the environment changes over time and /or through the seasons.

Farmers would appreciate specific funding to enable them to build outdoor toilet blocks (especially with disabled access).

Care must be taken to ensure the new LOTC badge does not rule out the development of visits (and potentially an ongoing relationship, through repeat visits or forest schools) between primary schools and their local farms. Perhaps exclusion for farms hosting only 1 school, or less than 5 visits per year, could be negotiated.

There are many programmes which target school-aged children, aiming to raise awareness of where food comes from, healthy eating, local food, the importance of exercise, experiencing the outdoors and their local environment etc. Rather than competing for attention, these programmes should be developing in partnership, making the most of synergies. For example, following a farm visit, children could be introduced to the Change for Life programme, NHS' 5-a day, and other similar materials.

7. Acknowledgements

Bill Graham and Janet Hickinbottom from FACE were very helpful from the outset of this project. They provided ideas and support as the proposal was developed, and directed me to potential sources of funding. Throughout the research, FACE assisted in identifying farmers hosting visits who I could interview.

Moya Myerscough of FACE was also helpful, in identifying farmers from the Eastern region for visits, and in several discussions about farm visits while the research was ongoing. She also provided links to school teachers and groups of school children who had visited farms.

Karen Brenchley of the Food for Life Partnership provided information their programme, as well as allowing me to attend a workshop of teachers interested in learning more about farm visits.

Richard Cook, of Natural England, provided information on the HLS programme, and a very useful discussion about the Educational Access programme in general. He subsequently put me in touch with others concerned with Educational Access arrangements in Natural England.

Many farmers were contacted and interviewed over the course of this research. I owe them thanks for cups of tea and coffee, but more importantly, the wealth of information they provided which has provided the data on which the first part of this research is based.

Likewise many teachers were interviewed, often at the end of a long working day, and they also chased up parent feedback forms which were forwarded to me. Therefore many thanks are owed to the teachers and the parents, who provided the data for the latter part of this study.

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