



# FARMERS' HEALTH MATTERS

How rural communities are reducing inequalities in health and social care



BY *Rachael Rowe*



## “FARMERS WILL GET AN ANIMAL TO THE VET MUCH FASTER THAN THEY WILL GO TO THE GP ABOUT THEMSELVES”

- Jane Fitzgerald, neighbourhood service lead, Somerset

AT FROME CATTLE MARKET, one of the busiest livestock auctions in South West England, the scene is vibrant with farmers from all across the

region, their trailers dotting the car park. Amid the lively scenes of auctioneers evaluating sheep and old friends catching up over breakfast, an unlikely visitor can be found: a podiatrist. This presence marks an innovative approach to bringing health services to rural communities.

### Caring for farming communities

Frome Cattle Market hosts a pioneering health clinic, a collaboration between Somerset NHS Foundation Trust and Frome Market Health Hub, providing crucial healthcare to farmers and their families. Initiated in 2017 at a

Somerset cattle market, the clinic was inspired by Catherine Hawk's desire to fulfil her late father Derek Mead's vision of a health hub for the farming community. Despite his tragic passing in a farming accident, community fundraising brought his idea to life, establishing rural health hubs across Somerset.

Jane Fitzgerald played a pivotal role in establishing the first hub. A neighbourhood service lead with a farming background, she boasts an impressive 48 years of NHS experience, including community nursing. Jane reflects, “I'm proud that we decided to set that up; everyone had a connection with farming so they could speak the same language.”

The clinic's core mission revolves around offering vital health assessments and guidance, continually adapting to meet the evolving needs of the community. A critical aspect of their approach is relatable communication—an aspect deeply valued by Lottie Cruse, a senior nurse married to a farmer. Lottie emphasises, “In our line of work, we don't just conduct health checks; we listen. Sometimes, I initiate conversations by discussing cows because it's a language we all share.”

Another significant facet of Lottie's mission is raising awareness about critical health issues within the farming community, such as sepsis and prostate health. She highlights,

“Sepsis is a huge problem for farmers as they are at a higher risk from barbed wire and unsanitary conditions.”

Foot problems are also prevalent among farmers, as noted by podiatrist Natasha Peck. She explains, “Farmers spend all day in wellington boots. We see lots of fungal toenails, thick skin, and neglected feet. On occasion, we've identified foot problems that hinted at

Lottie Cruse at the Frome Cattle Market Health Hub in Somerset



diabetes. It's much better for everyone if we can catch problems early."

Mr Plummer, a semi-retired farmer from Hampshire, was one advocate of the Frome service. "I come here every few weeks to meet up with my friends. I've been coming to the clinic for a few years. They do your feet, and I find this very convenient. This is a wonderful service."

## Improving Access to Rural Care

When developing services, it's essential to understand the community's needs. One Devon, a collaborative effort between NHS and council organisations, spearheads service planning across the county. Before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, they examined the needs of North Devon's rural areas. Andrea Beacham, the project lead, focused on improving health in rural, coastal and disadvantaged communities. "The gap in life expectancy between deprived coastal areas and the wealthiest regions is stark, with a ten-year difference and even a 14-year disparity in healthy life expectancy. Notably, Ilfracombe Central's working-age population sees 12.5 per cent living with multiple long-term conditions, while Barnstaple reports Devon's highest alcohol-related hospital admissions," Beacham notes. The connection between lifestyle behaviours and deprivation is clear, leading to

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initiatives like community sports for health-risk individuals, addressing the 27.5 per cent adult inactivity rate.

The challenge in rural Devon isn't just health-related but logistical, influenced by its expansive geography. This affects staffing and access to services for its ageing population, where the majority fall in the 50-to-59 age bracket. With North Devon's vast area and limited transport, accessing urban-based services like acute hospitals is a struggle for those with low incomes or rigid work schedules. One Devon's approach involves fostering community support and collaboration to sustain rural services, making them accessible to financially disadvantaged groups.

Emotional wellbeing is particularly crucial in farming communities, where isolation and stress prevail. Beacham's team discovered that mood and anxiety disorders, along with self-harm hospital admissions, are significantly



higher in North Devon compared to other areas. To address this, they've introduced innovative mental health support, including "Arts on Prescription" and "Nature on Prescription," which also offer transport solutions for those in need.

## Rylands Farm, Dorset: A Haven for Rural Care

What do you do when your nearest and dearest need care, but the facilities available are not quite right for someone who has spent most of their life outdoors? That was a dilemma for John Stockley's family when he developed Parkinson's

disease and needed support. Looking for a solution, his daughter Julie Plumley, a qualified social worker, established the Countrymen's Club at Rylands Farm near Sherborne, Dorset.

"Dad said: 'I don't want to see my future; I want to be involved in living'. His interests were farming animals and the countryside, having farmed since he was 14. He wanted to be outside and had lost his opportunity to talk to other men."

Now, a decade later, the farm is thriving. They accept men with a range of health issues, including dementia, heart disease, mental health issues and Parkinson's disease.



The Countrymen's Club has made "a world of difference" to Glenn Hamblin's life



Manager Jan Millward has a background in facilitating activities for older people and also in farming. She describes the service: "Many people who are here have worked the land all their lives and need to get outside. When men come here, they feel they have a purpose. We're a club that cares for them and supports their families. Their wives get respite for two to three hours a week and precious time to speak to other ladies. "While the men are here, they can engage in woodworking, assist with animal care, or cultivate vegetables.

Some simply desire a friendly conversation. We've even set up a polytunnel for them to pick flowers for their wives."

Referrals flow in from social prescribers, GPs and, increasingly, caregivers. A humble shed filled with tools and craft projects stands as the heart of the Countrymen's Club. Here, the men gather with support workers

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to reflect on their day, perhaps sing a song and indulge in tea and cake.

"Indeed, cake is an essential provision!" Jan remarks with a smile.

Ryland's Farm buzzes with activity as people tend to the animals. Some traverse the trails with mobility scooters, actively participating in planting. Jan elaborates:

"When someone is referred to us, we invite them for a session. For

instance, we once had a gentleman who was grappling with emotional despair. Building back his self-confidence and belief in himself was a gradual journey. We all need a sense of purpose in life, one that surpasses the solitude of being alone."

Amid the backdrop of Ryland's farm, Glenn Hamblin trims the garden's bushes and shares his experience: "I had heart problems and needed quadruple bypass surgery. I have been in agriculture all my life. It's made a world of difference to me. It's not the place but the people who make it special."

Acknowledging the crucial roles farming and rural communities play in ensuring food security, environmental preservation, and local job opportunities is heartening. It's equally encouraging to witness innovative solutions emerging to address the unique needs of these rural populations. ■



**Amazing Animals**

Flamingos are naturally white—their diet of shrimp and algae turns them pink

Capuchin monkeys pee on their hands to wash their feet

Baby elephants suck their trunks for comfort

Sea otters hold hands while they're sleeping

Cats can't taste sugar

SOURCE: MENTALFLOSS.COM