

**Sauna event for farmers warms up the discussion on wellbeing**

Appreciating “blue space”, a body of water that you can sit and look at, and taking time out of the busy farming day, is something East Lothian Farmer Stuart McNicol only knows too well.

Since October, he has committed to jumping in a sauna two to three times per week to help relax his body and mind. Located at Drift in North Berwick, a coffeehouse built in an up-cycled shipping container run by his wife Jo, the sauna looks out to the sea, with a wood-fired stove providing flickering flames offering a calming effect.

Following a newsletter from Farmstrong Scotland, where Stuart read about Hazel Moss and her love for wild swimming in Orkney, he was inspired to pilot a new event. A group from the farming community came together to enjoy time in the sauna, learn more about Farmstrong and share what small steps each of them took to improve their wellbeing.

“Farmers and crofters need people to speak to, it can be a very lonely sector and right now, we are all hacked off by the weather. Serious discussions about what we can realistically grow this season, following this continuous wet weather, are playing on everyone’s mind.

“For a long-time we have all stayed behind our farm gates and not discussed the challenges that face us, but we are all experiencing the same ups and downs. People do want to come together and natter – whether it is about their business, something in their personal life or just to get that reassurance they are not the only ones feeling the way they do.”

Stuart feels by incorporating a sauna, food and drink into the discussion, people felt more relaxed to openly chat about what matters most to them.

“Everyone needs some “me-time” and during Covid this was something people took more notice of, but recently everything has sped up again. People are rushing from one thing to the next, putting every hour into their work but forgetting about their own wellbeing. We need to find a better balance and follow the example of Scandinavian countries where they value time out.”

It was these countries that sparked the idea for a sauna, but it was a trip to the Royal Highland Show in 2023 that finally sealed the deal.

“I have been looking at building a sauna for a few years as we get lots of visitors to Drift who value the benefits of exercise from wild swimming in front of the café to walking to see us with their dog. What better way to warm up after a dip or cold walk, than by sitting in a sauna with temperatures of 75 Celsius, all while enjoying the Scottish countryside.

“I was walking around the Royal Highland Show last year with my Dad and Jo, and noticed the Sauna Cube. Within 24 hours it was purchased, and plans were in motion.”

Whilst there were some sceptics from a few farmers at first, Stuart is already getting asked when the next sauna event will take place.

“Just this week I have received a message from a local farmer asking when the next session will take place. We want to ensure we keep the groups small, no more than 8 to 12 people, and it's important that the people attending determine how the session takes place. For example, with our pilot event, we split the group into two so some sat and nattered over a drink, while others were in the sauna and then they swapped.

“Going forward, it might be we have one session for ladies and another for men, and then they both come together for food and drink after. Likewise, if everyone is comfortable, we could do a mixed gender session to bring in different perspectives and views. It doesn’t matter how it runs, the important thing is farmers and crofters need support and we want to bring people together.”

For Stuart, Farmstrong is the catalyst to deliver this support and he is looking to run another pilot event at the end of April, before starting monthly sessions.

“Farmstrong puts an important spotlight on our wellbeing and gives us the space and encouragement to listen to each other. There are lots of great organisations in Scotland already but there is nothing like Farmstrong, encouraging that relaxed atmosphere with a sense of unity.”

In Scandinavian countries, Sauna’s are used to give birth and whilst this is maybe one-step too far for Drift, Stuart and Jo are keen to make it as inclusive as possible with plans to make the sauna available for visitors to book. They already host a popular yoga session at the café on the last Sunday of each month, with noticeable benefits to those who take part.

**Stuart and Jo farm 430 acres including malting spring barley, winter wheat & spring beans for seed, along with a newly planted orchard of 2000 fruit trees.**

**The next Sauna Farmers session will take place at the end of April at Drift, Quarrel Sands, North Berwick. To find out more, contact** [**hello@farmstrongscotland.org.uk**](mailto:hello@farmstrongscotland.org.uk)

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**Notes to Editor**

Farmstrong Scotland is supported by RHASS, the Movember Foundation and NFU Mutual, who supported the launch of the organisation.

Movember Foundation are matching every £1 raised by Farmstrong Scotland, to the sum of £350,000. Anyone wishing to donate or find out more about supporting the charity, can get in touch via hello@farmstrongscotland.org.uk

A core principle of Farmstrong Scotland is its five ways to wellbeing. These are:

• Connect - developing new friendships and spending time with friends. Prioritising time away from work.

• Give - Giving your time to others, be that through supporting those having a tough time or spending quality time with family.

• Take notice - Take time to pause and think about what you appreciate. Find the simple things that make you happy and pay attention to them, if only for a few moments.

• Keep learning - Be curious on and off the farm. Learning new things is good for your brain, will keep your mind active and help you farm smarter.

• Be active - Working up a sweat releases endorphins that make you feel alert and better able to cope with challenges. Make physical activity a habit, aim for at least 30 minutes of movement a day.