

# Take a Break

## BRING IN THE MINDERS



*When keeping up the lifestyle block becomes a headache, help is at hand. John Cutt and Vicki Jayne talk to some lifestyle minders*



One of the great things about living on a rural block is having room to extend your four-legged, or many-feathered, family. In no time, you find the family dog or cat has been joined by some sheep (to keep down the grass), a few goats (to keep down the weeds), a couple of cows (fresh milk), a pair of ponies (well, there's room!), a clutch of chooks (those yummy-yellow yolks) and a few rabbits (the kids insisted). All good fun – until you want to take a holiday. By now, you've also discovered your fence-fixing skills or sheep-shearing techniques leave a lot to be desired and you're worried about if, when and how various members of your growing menagerie need drenching – or extra feed given the dry summer.

**Enter the minders** – Helen McFarlane runs Christchurch based Town and Country Housesit. It functions like an agency that has on its books a range of police/reference checked sitters who look after properties while their owners are away.

"We've been operating around the Canterbury area for nearly two years now – dealing with town and rural properties. Our country sitters are usually ex-farming couples or stock agent types with plenty of animal experience – though we've also got city dwellers who are really good with animals and just want a spell on a lifestyle farm."

Previously the owner of a florist business, Helen is in a farm partnership with her husband and breeds border collies (she's also bred birman cats) so is well aware of animal needs.

She works in with daughter Lisa, whose offshore experience in human resource management comes in handy when matching property owners with suitable sitters.

"We do have clients who use us solely for security while they're away, but most of our clients have at least one pet.

We've had everything from guinea pigs to alpacas the only one we had to decline was someone asking about a couple of rats." Sitters basically take on whatever needs to be done on a property – often going beyond the call of duty.

"We had a couple looking after a West Melton property a year ago when storms blew trees down on the property. By the time the owners got back, this couple had them all sawn up and neatly stacked."

"We check what exactly needs to be done and have a standard form which covers everything from vets to neighbours, security systems, insurance etc. We also have legal terms and conditions that cover things like confidentiality, right of entry, homesitter responsibilities, extraneous expenses, maintenance, repairs and so on."

Advertising is largely word of mouth, with referrals coming through such sources as vets, insurance companies, the SPCA, dog breeders, Neighbourhood Watch and crime prevention groups, as well as hospitals and doctors.

"It's a huge worry for people who are unexpectedly taken ill and their pets are left at home. We had half an hour to arrange one sit recently when a client had to urgently fly to Auckland because of an accident in the family. But we were able to find someone who could stay."

Helen also has a store of stories to tell – the boxer pup who thought it could still fit through the cat door, demolished the lot and then roared around the terrace with the door still attached around its tummy inadvertently destroying all the pot plants. Or the knicker-shredding dog... Or the collapsing toilet... "Sometimes you just have to laugh."

The business has built up slowly and tends to be seasonal. "Christmas can be a bit of a nightmare – we have a lot of clients from last year who have booked in again. And we were very busy over winter, with people going overseas." ■