Care Farming: The Benefits for Farmers and the Rural Community

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About the Author

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In 2018, while supporting a young person at risk of exclusion from school, she visited a care farm. Since then, she has been fascinated by the concept of care farming and green care and how this could support education, health and wellbeing for vulnerable individuals. Between 2019 and 2021 Joy was a Director of a Buckinghamshire-based care farm.
She is currently reading for a Doctor of Education at the University of Buckingham and working part time for the charity Farming Community Network as the Regional Support Officer for the South East of England.

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Glossary

**Animal Assisted Interventions** - the general term for all activities, therapies and interventions involving interactions with animals. They include: Animal Assisted Psychotherapy, Play Therapy, Counselling, Social Work, and Animal Assisted Psychological First Aid such as may be employed after a significant traumatic event. Other examples would be Occupational Therapy, Educational Programmes, Hippotherapy (such as Riding for the Disabled), facilitated sessions in care institutes, interactive sessions in residential homes and pet visits (a volunteer bringing a well-behaved pet into a setting to meet and interact with people). It is important to note that education sessions may only be delivered by qualified teachers, social work sessions by qualified social workers, and therapy or psychology sessions by practitioners qualified in
psychology, therapy or mental health. Such sessions may take place on farms, in gardens, in hospitals, schools, care homes or similar venues and are aimed at people of all ages and with all levels of health and ability.

**Care Farming** – This may also be known as Green Care Farming, or Social Farming, or Social Care Farming, but for the purposes of this report I shall use the term ‘Care Farming’. Care farming provides health, social and educational care services on working farms or purpose-built farms through farming-related activities. The three key elements for care farming include: purposeful work, social interaction and being outdoors.

**Client** – Different farms use different names for the individuals that visit the farm such as: tenant, guest, visitor, helper, volunteer or client but for the purpose of this report I shall use the term ‘client’.

**Green care** - includes not just Care Farming but also: Animal Assisted Interventions, Green Exercise, Environmental Conservation and Therapeutic Horticulture including Food Growing.
Executive Summary
“If you are planning to do this, you must have a passion for it” - Farmer participant.

Background Context

In 2018, while supporting a young person at risk of exclusion from school, I visited a care farm in the Home Counties in the hope that it might offer an alternative education placement for them.

Later, while learning more about the subject, I arranged visits to almost 50 care farms, city farms and social or therapeutic gardens across the South East of England. During discussions with farmers, founders or owners, they went to great lengths to tell me about their projects and programmes, how they had begun, and the benefits they provided for clients.

Most shared their private concerns and worries, which usually centred around funding and attracting enough clients, and explained that it had taken several years for them to break even financially. I began to wonder if there were any real benefits for anyone other than the clients themselves, in a care farm set up. Being keen to investigate further, I applied for a Churchill Fellowship to research care farming with a focus on the benefits to the farmer, the local community and the rural economy.

After a delay of fourteen months due to the global pandemic, I accepted the opportunity to complete the information gathering element of my research through a ‘Digital Fellowship’ route rather than by visiting my intended research locations in person as originally planned. In fact, I have the honour of being the first UK Churchill Fellow to complete a Digital Fellowship. One benefit of following this alternative method was that, because I would not be losing time in physically travelling, I was able increase the number of countries I could include in my research and I decided to add Australia, Austria, Israel and the United States to my original list of Ireland and Italy.

Care Farming in the UK
There are currently three support organisations working with social farms and gardens in the UK. Farm Buddies, which works across the South East of England, Social Farming Northern Ireland which works in Northern Ireland as well as on cross-border projects with Social Farming Ireland, and Social Farms and Gardens UK, whose literature says they currently support approximately 2000 organisations including city farms, school farms, community gardens as well as the UK’s care farms.

In some of the people I spoke with, there was a perception that working family farms in England, Scotland and Wales are being overlooked in favour of what they called ‘specialist farms’. They explained that, in their opinion, a specialist farm was a care farm that has been set up to be similar to an adult day-care centre that would take clients five days a week, perhaps run by a charity and which was located on a farm or in a garden.

Aim of Study

- To understand the barriers for farmers in the UK who are considering care farming.
- To research the benefits and challenges for farmers operating care farms in Austria, Australia, Ireland, Italy, Israel and the USA.
- To use the findings to inform UK farmers and offer practical ways of mitigating issues.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews together with a desk-based analysis of any articles, websites, video, or materials provided by the participants.

Destination Selection

The destinations selected as part of my Digital Fellowship were:

- Ireland, Italy and Austria, because they have well-established, albeit differing, care farming service models based on working family farms and supportive government policies and funding.
Israel, as a new entrant into the care farming world that only established their first two care farms in 2020. However, they are already in discussions with their government on provision of funding and legislation which they hope to have in place shortly.

The United States, where there are several well-established therapeutic residential care farms and the beginnings of care farming within small family farms.

Australia, which is also developing its first residential therapeutic care farm and also has a number of other established care farms.

Findings

Health and Safety was the most common concern raised by participants. Many suggested working practices that could help to mitigate some of these concerns including: physically separating the care farm from the working farm, limiting the number and level of client support per session, staff to client ratios, limiting the number of hours the care farm is open per day, or per week, and ensuring the relevant police checks had been carried out on all volunteers and staff.

Farmers felt that they should be able to set boundaries that defined what ‘type of clients’ they would accept and feel comfortable working with. Different farms and farmers had differing appetites for the level of support that a client may need, and that they were happy or able to provide.

Farmers need to have detailed risk assessments in place for the farm setting and all planned activities, seeking professional advice, guidance and training from the relevant health and safety authority as appropriate.

Farmers need to consider the potential health and wellbeing of the farming family when first deciding to set up a care farm. Several participants said that operating a care farm had brought them many benefits, and that they had found it to be a very rewarding experience, but it was certainly not problem free.

It can be expensive to set up a care farm depending on how ambitious a farmer’s initial plans are. Funding may be available from a number of sources, but this is never guaranteed, and it can take a great deal of effort to secure.
o In order to protect family farm succession some farms chose to cover the financial costs of set up themselves believing that this gave them sole control over the future of the land and buildings.

o Commonly, organisations that supported clients with severe health, mental health, education or care needs employed highly qualified clinical or therapeutic staff in addition to a qualified farm manager and farm team.

o There was an expectation among many of the participants that farmers who supported clients with mild to moderate conditions should complete comprehensive training programmes. However, there were often opportunities for farmers who did not wish to train, to form partnerships with a community charity to deliver care farming services.

o Regional Support Coordinators or similar were available to support farmers throughout their care farming journey in Austria, Ireland, Israel and the USA. Similar support was also available in Northern Ireland and South East England.

o Farmers in each overseas country, as well as in Northern Ireland and South East England, generally welcomed the training programmes available to them because it enabled them to show a level of professional credibility and secure funded-clients.

o Some participants felt that care farming on family farms within parts of the UK were often overlooked in favour of ‘specialist’ care farms.

o There were many different reasons, sometimes very personal, why people chose to set up a care farm.

o Not every care farmer needed to secure new clients for their care farm indeed many had a waiting list for places.

o Not every care farm relied solely on the funding that clients could bring with them. This was usually because additional income came from charitable support, from the use of personal funds, or from the working farm.

o For other farmers, setting up the care farm and securing funded clients had been a lifeline for the farm. The farmer or spouse no longer needed to work outside of the farm in order to bring in additional family income.

o It was generally accepted that those organisations who had secured long term funded client contracts had done so because they had been able to demonstrate a high level of appropriate training, achieve accreditation,
and were seen as professional and credible organisations by potential commissioners.

- There were many benefits for farmers who ran care farms, other than purely financial, and these included a greater sense of purpose and pride in their farm, enjoyment in hosting visitors and reduced loneliness.
- For some farmers, the process of setting up their care farm had acted as a catalyst for change, promoting new ideas that generated additional income streams or perhaps encouraged them to change their existing farming methods to include more sustainable and ethical practices.
- Many care farmers described that they had forged very supportive links with their local community and support agencies and had established highly effective collaborative partnerships.
- Some participants hoped that care farming could support diversity, inclusion and a wider conversation around mental health policies and provision.
- Most participants said that they never previously considered if they were contributing to the local economy, but on reflection, found many examples where they did precisely that, either directly or indirectly.
- Further research is needed if the true scale of benefit to the rural economy arising from the operation of care farms is to be fully understood.

**Recommendations**

- The development of a robust care farming information package would help prospective care farmers, including those based on small family-run farms, make well-informed decisions.
- A comprehensive training programme should be developed for farmers who are considering setting up a care farm. This should include business, funding and financial advice, and information about the establishment of charities or social enterprises.
- Working in partnership with farming charities, focus groups should be established to consider issues highlighted in this Report including the need for, and the role of, regional support coordinators, how to secure contracts, access appropriate training, and the need for perhaps more formal quality assurance and accreditation.
o Institute a peer-to-peer global social care farming network which could include opportunities for mentorship programmes.

o Further research should be conducted into the perceptions of commissioners when they are considering social care farming placements.

o Establish a working group with partners to investigate how care farms might introduce more sustainable farming approaches.

o The formation of a global social care farming research centre within a recognised university or organisation to promote multi-disciplinary social care farming research.
Background

The Project

In 2018, while supporting a young person at risk of exclusion from school, I visited a care farm in the Home Counties in the hope that it might offer an alternative education placement for them. I was fascinated by what I saw and became immediately ‘hooked’ by the concept of care farming and green care and how this might be used to support education, health and wellbeing for vulnerable groups and individuals.

I had read some research articles from a number of organisations across Europe that discussed care farming on family-run farms. The research suggested that the farmers who had followed this route felt less isolated as a result, enjoyed spending time with visitors or clients and that it boosted the farm finances as well. This was encouraging but seemed to be mismatched with my own experiences of visiting farms in the South East of England. I was keen to investigate further and decided to apply for a Churchill Fellowship to research care farming with a focus on the benefits to the farmer, the local community and the wider rural economy.

However, in light of the delay to my starting the project and being aware of the changing global situation due to the pandemic and national issues affecting farmers in the UK such as Brexit and changing funding formulas for English farmers, I wanted to be sure that my original research topic was still relevant. As I had spent the fourteen-month period getting much more involved in the farming community through my work with the Farming Community Network, my understanding of wider farming issues had grown. As a result, I wanted to be assured that I captured current issues or questions related to care farming and that I had considered them within the research. Therefore, I reached out to farmers and farming consultants in the UK to ask what they thought the barriers were for UK farmers who were considering setting up a care farm within their family farm. In general, they described that they were concerned
about the health and safety implications of having visitors on site, the ‘built
environment’ (any physical changes required to be made to the farm) in order
to take clients and the cost involved. They also expressed concerns about the
training needed to set up and run a care farm safely and how they could
identify and secure sufficient numbers of funded clients to ensure the financial
success and sustainability of the enterprise.

Countries Researched

In Australia, I found out about the very first care farm to be established in the
country, which was set up sixteen years ago as well as more recently created
care farms. I looked at how the development of a new residential therapeutic
farm model has the potential to change mental health services in the country. I
explored the research being carried out at the University of Tasmania and a
well-established community charity for children and young people that has just
moved onto a working farm. I also discovered how Animal Assisted
Interventions are being considered as part of a number of these programmes.

In Austria, I gained an understanding of the six-stage model that is in place to
support farmers as they move through the process of setting up a care farm.
This includes training, preparing their farm, putting legal and business
procedures in place, external accreditation and securing long term contracts
for clients and how this approach has brought benefits to small family farms
across the country. I also learnt about the academic research that has
underpinned this work over recent years.

In Ireland, I was informed about Sli Eile, Ireland’s first therapeutic residential
care farm, and the creation of Kyrie Farm, the second such establishment in
the country. I spoke with Helen Doherty from Social Farming Ireland, and
Professor Jim Kinsella of University College Dublin, and discovered the history
of how social care farming in Ireland has been developed since 2000 and how
closely they work with Rural Support Social Farming Northern Ireland.

In Israel, where care farming is a very new concept having only been
introduced in 2020, I discovered how quickly it is possible to introduce relevant
legalisation and how discussions are currently taking place with the
government to fund and accredit two new care farms that were established that year.

In Italy, I learnt about the importance of community food growing post World War 2 as people struggled to feed themselves, and how that has become part of the culture in many Italian communities. I looked at the fundamentals behind care farming in the country and how social horticulture is being added to care farms to encourage members of the local community to get involved.

Finally, in the USA I was fascinated to hear from the Director of a care farm which focused on supporting those who have suffered bereavement including traumatic bereavement and how these clients travel from across the globe to access this service. I spoke with an established residential therapeutic care farm and a residential therapeutic school with care farm and discovered the differences between how they approach the use of animals, as either livestock or companion animals through Animal Assisted Interventions and therapy. I also learnt about a group of newly established care farms in the community in Montana, and the academics from the University of Texas and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University that supported their creation.

I hope my findings will inspire UK farmers to consider care farming and offer practical solutions to allay any concerns as well as explaining the benefits that such initiatives can bring.
Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to inform farmers, farming consultants, and farming charities, of the opportunities and challenges presented when creating care farms within family farms in the UK. Additionally, the report also aims to start a discussion on international good practice and research in care farming and how we could work together effectively in the future.

Methods

During this research I used semi-structured interviews as my main method of data collection along with a desk-based analysis of any articles, websites, video, or materials provided by the participants.
Photograph reproduced by kind permission of Hopewell
Findings

I have grouped my findings into seven separate themes: health and safety, built environments, training, securing clients, benefits for farmers, benefits for the local community, and benefits for the rural economy.

Theme One – Health and Safety

Health and Safety was the most commonly expressed concern raised by the UK farmers and farm consultants I have spoken with, and generally, was the one aspect that worried them the most. Accordingly, I asked all the overseas participants for their thoughts on health and safety, if this had been a particular concern to them, and what steps they had taken to mitigate issues. Every participant I spoke to, regardless of the country they lived in, said that health and safety on the care farm was their greatest concern. I was often told “farms are dangerous places with many risks” and many felt that “the majority of farmers wouldn’t even consider care farming” because of the potential risks involved. However, it was interesting to note that many participants felt that it
was “important to expose clients to some managed risk and teach them safe working practices” in order to give them a perhaps more realistic experience during their time on the farm and help them to develop life skills and coping strategies, building resilience that will better prepare them for whatever they go on to do in their lives.

A number of the participants shared concerns that had been raised by their local communities. Some local people were fearful, worried that clients may abscond, and cause upset in the towns or villages or even on neighbouring farms. Several farms had set up community outreach programmes to try to counter any negative perceptions in the neighbouring area. Where this had been done successfully, some farms reported that the local community had become one of their most committed advocates.

Concerns were also voiced by several academics that they were aware that potential commissioners were often reluctant to include care farming in their programmes. One academic said, “health and safety is the main reason that some health services won’t pay for social farming services”.

It was not just the potential health and safety risks to clients arising from their exposure to farm equipment, practices and animals that caused concern, but also what potential risks might arise from the clients themselves. One farmer said, “we are farmers, we have no knowledge of medical issues, we don’t know what to do if someone has an epileptic fit on the farm”. They stated that a person with such a medical condition would need to be accompanied by someone, a qualified carer perhaps, who could manage any incidents that arose during the visit. Another farmer told me that “clients cannot be in acute distress when attending the farm” meaning that they could not accept clients who were known to be in such distress on the day of the planned visit, and that they would defer the visit accordingly.

**Case Study** - One farmer explained how she had fenced off a part of the farm that would be specifically used as the care farm in order to reduce exposure to the most serious potential risks. The participant explained how she is adding walking tracks together with wheelchair-friendly tracks to facilitate safe movement around the site. She was providing informative guides, supported by quizzes and the like, to capture visitors’ interest and encourage them to
remain within the specified care farm areas. She was also planting trees and adding indigenous fruit trees to help maintain that interest whilst perhaps teaching visitors about the local environment in a pleasant and nurturing atmosphere. The visitors or clients are prevented from coming into contact with the farm’s beef herd so she is adding animals they can mix with safely such as ducks, chickens, dogs, wombats, echidnas, goats and is currently building paddocks to rehome horses in the hope that she can offer equine-assisted therapy in future. She has also increased the size of her citrus orchard and stone fruit orchard as well as building a kitchen garden and planting French Oaks and Italian Pines.

My discussions with participants identified the following approaches that could be considered as best practice:

- Physically separating the care farm from the working farm.
- Conducting robust and appropriate medical assessments of the clients prior to the visit. This would usually be done by the organisations who wish to use to send clients to the farm and communicated to the farmer. Four participants said that they needed to ensure that the clients are “stable enough to be on the farm” and while taking part in purposeful work.
- When engaging with the person or organisation that seeks to place a client with the farm, farmers should be able to set boundaries that confirm what ‘type of clients’ they will accept and will feel comfortable working with. Different farms and farmers will have differing appetites for the level of support that a client may need and that they are happy or able to provide. For example, they might state that they are not prepared to deal with a client’s personal care issues such as toileting. Others said that they would not accept clients where there were specific concerns, indeed, all participants that I spoke with said that they would be extremely unlikely to accept any client who had a history of violence or clients who may harm others or themselves.
- Considering the number and type of clients per session, their personalities and emotional stability, and the staff to client ratio required to manage the session appropriately. Most participants said that in their view, reducing the number of clients in sessions reduced
the potential health and safety risks as they were more able to monitor and supervise smaller groups than larger ones.

- Restricting the number of hours the clients spend on site per day and/or the number of days per week and/or the number of weeks per year. Many care farms within working farms only opened a few days a week and for between 24 and 48 weeks of the year. Farmers said that this allowed them to work around the known busy periods or to carry out potentially ‘dangerous’ jobs when clients were not on site. It also supported a better work/life balance for farming families.

- Ensuring that appropriate police checks are conducted in respect of staff and volunteers and ensuring that appropriate safeguarding training is put in place for those persons.

- Where farmers have concerns about meeting the needs of clients, it is not unusual or inappropriate to require that their carers also attend the sessions.

- Carrying out detailed risk assessments for the farm setting and all planned activities, seeking professional advice, guidance and training from the relevant health and safety authority as appropriate.

- Considering the potential health and wellbeing of the farming family when making decisions on setting up a care farm. Several participants said that operating a care farm had brought them many benefits, and that they had found it to be a very rewarding experience, but it was certainly not problem free.
Theme Two – Built Environments

All participants raised the topic of the ‘built environment’ on care farms. For clarity, the term built environment includes the infrastructure of the care farm, including any adaptations and additions that need to be made, whether permanent or temporary (such as portable toilet facilities) to meet the needs of the visiting clients. Specifically, there was universal concern from the participants in the UK about the cost of such works and how they would be funded - “The cost is a big concern” stated one farmer. Accordingly, I asked all the overseas participants for their thoughts on the built environment, if this had been a particular concern to them, and what steps they had taken to address the issues.

Most of the participants agreed that at the very start, the most important facilities to provide for clients was somewhere to sit and eat, go to the toilet and wash their hands, even if this was a simple as a tent and a portable toilet. “You absolutely need sufficient toilets because it’s not easy sharing family farm toilets with clients” explained one farmer who recounted the story of how some clients using the toilets in their farmhouse had detoured into the adjacent utility room and had meddled with their washing machine and the family’s clothes. “If you allow your farm to be used then you will give up some of your privacy and that needs to be taken into consideration” she added. Some farmers chose to use their own houses for shared lunches and cooking
activities but in other participant countries, this was discouraged, and it was expected that cooking and eating areas, separate from those used by the host family, would be provided for visiting clients. However, many family farms wished to increase the range of services they could offer to clients (and the wider community) and had added, or planned to add, buildings such as kitchens, classrooms, disabled toilets, cafés, farm shops, dining rooms and in some cases, residential accommodation.

Participants had differing views on how this could or should be funded. Examples ranged from charitable grants, with one organisation providing a £5000 grant to assist with start-up costs for each new farm, and government grants, with another organisation securing funding for farmers across the country “towards the set-up costs and equipment, up to 30% of the costs” (capped at 400,000 Euros). Other options included approaches made to high wealth donors and this had been successful for several residential therapeutic care farms where the secured donations not only paid for the land, but also the set-up and initial running costs. Other farmers wanted to ensure that the farm could be transferred to future generations as part of their inheritance planning and were concerned that by accepting external sources of funding and using anything other than personal savings or financial assets on the care farm, might jeopardise that.

One farmer told me “We were worried we wouldn’t break even with the set-up costs, but it’s not been such a hurdle, but be aware that anything to do with people is expensive”. However, it’s not just money that can be in short supply when setting up a care farm and another participant told me that “time is precious, and you never have enough time so actually you need lots of people to help as well as money”.

**Case Study** – One community charity have been working with children and young people on the autistic spectrum and their families in the community, and making use of existing community spaces, since their foundation began in 1968. They have created a programme of activities that enables the children to spend time in nature, have fun, and learn how to self-regulate their emotions and behaviour. The list of pursuits includes river activities, sports, bike riding, horse riding and spending time in equine facilities, spending time in nature and bush walks. A local 100-acre farm came up for sale and the charity felt that the
farm would make an ideal new home for them because they could establish a more permanent presence within the community, expand their existing programmes, use the farm as an ‘enabling environment’ for the children and as a source of income for the organisation. They applied for and received AU$7.8M in government grants to purchase the farm, refurbish the farm buildings, add any additional purpose-built facilities and transfer the charity onto that farm.

My discussions with participants identified the following that should be considered:

- Farmers should be aware that to set up and run an effective care farm “You need to like people and be happy to spend time with them”.
- Farmers should understand that it may take time to break even financially or make a modest profit. However, care farming was seen by participants as a good option to be included within a portfolio of income streams.
- It can be expensive to set up a care farm depending on how ambitious a farmer’s initial plans are. Funding may be available from a number of sources, but this is never guaranteed, and it can take a great deal of effort to secure.
- In order to protect family farm succession some farms choose to cover the financial costs of set up themselves believing that this gives them sole control over the future of the land and buildings.
- Time is as valuable a resource as money when setting up a care farm.

Theme Three – Training

Training for prospective care farmers was the second most commonly raised concern, after health and safety, for all UK participants. As one farmer told me, “we may be good at farming but do we have the skills to do this?” Another told me, “not all farmers have the transferable skills to set up a care farm”. However, this was not a view shared by all with one farmer saying, “we felt it was more important to have the right mindset rather than have lots of training”. All UK participants except one felt it was important to have both the
right mindset and training and that this training should encompass both care and farming. Some of the participants I spoke with had grown up on farms but had decided to follow careers off the farm, such as teaching or youth work. They felt this positioned them perfectly to set up a care farm from the care perspective but acknowledged that they may need support with the farming side of the organisation.

I asked the overseas participants for their thoughts on training, whether this had been of similar concern to them, and what steps they had taken to address any issues.

One residential farm told me, “we look for a person’s energy, empathy, personality and an openness to train. Staff need to be aware of the boundaries when supporting people and put those in place. Everyone regardless, attends the training sessions together because staff need to feel comfortable with conditions around clients”.

In organisations that supported clients with more severe health, education or mental health conditions it was common, particularly in residential therapeutic care farms, to employ a farm manager and farm team to deal with the practical elements of running the farm as well as a clinical or therapeutic team to support the clients. These organisations felt that these types of clients had considerable needs and that it was vital to employ a wraparound team of highly qualified professionals to make sure that every aspect of the client’s time at the farm was well managed.

For those care farms that supported clients with mild to moderate health, education or mental health issues, which were more often run-on small family farms, it was generally expected that farmers would participate in appropriate training programmes to equip them for their role. Differing programmes are available in each country, but it was generally accepted by care farmers that holding national qualifications or accreditations would promote confidence in the farm, foster a sense of trust and encourage and lead to more funded-client placements.

Where farmers had particular concerns over training or felt that it was something they themselves were not able, or did not wish to undertake, it was
often suggested by care farming support organisations that the farmers might consider forming a partnership with a suitable local charity to deliver the care farming services. Several participants told me that farmers who refused training and/or the opportunity to partner with another organisation, would find it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to secure support, funding, or to attract clients.

Participants in Ireland, Austria, Israel and the USA told me that they had access to regional support coordinators or similar to advise them on every step of the care farming journey. This included: initial discussions with farmers to ensure they understood the process, preparing the farm to receive clients, support with the legal and business elements, staff training, understanding funding options, a broker service for contracts as well as care farming verification and accreditation. Participants said that these support programmes had been well received by farmers in those countries because they felt better prepared, more confident, were delivering a more professional service and that by demonstrating that they were running a ‘higher quality’ care farm, could command a higher payment per client.

Although support and training programmes are not yet established in Australia, participants told me that those setting up care farms invariably took it upon themselves to seek out suitable training to show that they were, “credible, safe and could offer services with integrity”.

Closer to home, Social Farming Northern Ireland supports farmers who are delivering, or preparing to deliver care farming, helping them to meet the necessary requirements in Northern Ireland. This includes a comprehensive training programme, police background checks, help with securing funding, supporting farmers with health and safety management, and brokering client placements. Farming Buddies offers their own slightly different support programme in the South East of England although both organisations specifically aim to support family farms. One European participant said “farmers in the UK are too independent to want to be involved in regulated care farming”, however, I have not yet found evidence to support the claim that UK farmers who are considering care farming would not welcome support and assistance through a more regulated approach. I will address this issue further in my recommendations.
Case Study - One farmer told me that while she was running her working farm and setting up her care farm, she, “decided to take some courses in youth work, horticulture, training and assessment”. She hoped to be able to offer support sessions to traumatised children and young people but felt that she needed to demonstrate that she was appropriately trained and qualified in order to do so. She did this because it increased her knowledge, gave her the skills to be better able to support the children on her farm, gave her credibility with schools and commissioners and in return she secured guaranteed funding for every child or young person she accepted onto the farm.

My discussions with participants identified the following that should be considered:

- Most participants felt that it was important to have both the right mindset and training and that training should include client care.
- Commonly, organisations that supported clients with severe health, mental health, education or care needs employed both a highly qualified clinical or therapeutic staff as well as a qualified farm manager and farm team.
- There was an expectation among many of the participants that I spoke with that farmers who supported clients with mild to moderate conditions should complete comprehensive training programmes. However, there were often opportunities for farmers who did not wish to train, to form partnerships with a community charity to deliver care farming services.
- Regional Support Coordinators or similar were available to support farmers throughout their care farming journey in Austria, Ireland, Israel and the USA. Similar support was also available in Northern Ireland and South East England.
- Farmers in each of the participating countries, as well as in Northern Ireland and South East England, generally welcomed the training programmes available to them because it enabled them to show a level of professional credibility and secure funded-clients.
- Farmers who did not wish to train or partner with a community charity would find it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to secure support, funding, or to attract clients.
A lack of a national programme of care farming training in Australia prompted many care farmers to seek out relevant training courses for themselves to enable them to offer credible and safe placements for their clients.

**Theme Four – Securing Clients**

This was perhaps the most nuanced of all the themes that I explored. For some farmers, it appeared to be a simple matter of gaining the required qualifications and meeting national accreditation standards in order to secure funded client contracts. For others, the process was more complicated.

Securing clients was a topic raised by all the UK participants and specifically, they worried that if they had taken the time and spent, sometimes significant, money on setting up a care farm, would they then be able to secure funded clients? One farmer told me, “we are concerned who will pay to use this? Will it be profitable? We’ve invested our inheritance to get to this stage”.

I asked all the overseas participants for their thoughts on securing funded clients, whether or not this had been of similar concern to them, and what steps they had taken to address any issues although it was recognised that
significant differences in commissioning processes in the various countries would be a factor in their responses.

There have been concerns in Europe for a number of years about the sustainability of small family farms. In many cases, a farmer or their spouse needed to take a second job off the farm in order to bring in additional income. There was also a wider concern from governments and policy makers around rural gentrification as farms were sold to wealthy individuals from cities who, it was felt, often had no desire to preserve the heritage of the area and may only spend “one weekend a month on site”. There was a general desire to see small family farms thrive and some of the participants shared how this had led to the establishment of a number of business or farming support programmes, including care farming, to enable farmers to diversify, widen their activities and build resilience in their business. Many of the participants commented that this had offered a lifeline to family farms.

It was generally seen as important that alongside the care farming element, family farms continued to farm in the traditional sense and that the working farm element of the business was not left to fail because, in many countries, it is seen as being central to the whole care farming experience.

Some farmers found managing some aspects of care farming problematic, especially the ‘securing clients’ element, because they didn’t always fully understand what was expected of them, particularly in respect of what commissioners are looking for when approving client placements.

Several participants said how difficult it had been to secure clients in the early days, perhaps because commissioners were concerned that not all care farmers would know how to look after clients appropriately or understand health, education, and social care issues sufficiently. Some participants reported that commissioners had told them that they were worried about awarding contracts when it might be perceived that some farmers were simply trying to secure free labour for their farms. However, these worries were often allayed once farmers could demonstrate that they were genuinely committed to the enterprise, had been properly trained and appropriately accredited and they quickly secured contracts, commonly one to five years in length.
Some participants raised concerns about social care organisations that moved onto a farm setting but did not intend to maintain the working farm element. Particularly in the UK, some felt that the family farm had been overlooked in favour of these ‘specialist farms’. They felt that this presented clients with a somewhat sterile and less authentic experience that would not be rooted in a “real-world environment”. But because many of these organisations were very experienced in delivering social care, they felt that some commissioners were perhaps more inclined to trust them from the outset and therefore they had found it easier to secure funded clients.

The priority placed on securing funded clients varied and depended on the financial resources the organisations they had access to. Some care farms did not need to secure new funded clients because they had a waiting list of people wanting to access their provision and sufficient financial resources were already available to them, either from charitable sources, or from personal funds, or arising from the operation of the working farm. However, all participants were clear that if farmers had taken time away from the working farm to take clients, then they should receive a fair remuneration for their work.

Some participants said that they were aware of people who had considered setting up a care farm as a business with the sole aim of making money, only to lose interest once they realised the true scale of work and personal commitment that is involved in such a venture.

Interestingly, for some participants, there were clearly drivers other than financial for them setting up or maintaining a care farm. There were other elements at play and different personal motivations for doing so.

Approximately one third of the participants explained that their care farms had been established due to the lived experience of the founder or a member of their family. Examples given included experiencing neurodiversity, physical or mental illness, suicide, bereavement, or other trauma. Some said that this experience prompted them to offer a bespoke, perhaps unique, service to support certain individuals where it was hard, if not impossible, to find suitable support elsewhere. In such cases, it appeared common for them to have a
client waiting list rather than needing to actively to seek out and secure new clients.

Two participants said that they were driven to set up their care farms by their faith and wanting to give something meaningful back to society. Several examples of such faith-based altruism emerged in Europe in the late 1990’s and early 2000’s when many of the first care farms were established by farmers of faith who wanted to benefit their community.

Just over half of all participants had previously trained in health, social care, education, youth work or a similar field, and they wanted to find a way to blend that experience with their knowledge of farming to support clients in need.

**Case Study** – one participant told me about their care farm which was part of a larger charitable organisation supporting the needs of traumatically bereaved individuals and families. Their very specialist provision attracted a significant number of clients each year from across the world and they have a waiting list for placements. Rather than charge a fee for their services, which might prevent those of different socio-economic backgrounds and circumstances from having access to their provision, they ask clients to make a voluntary donation. Additional funding from their umbrella charitable organisation means that this care farm does not need to secure funded client placements.

**My discussions with participants identified the following key points:**

- Some participants felt that care farming on family farms within parts of the UK were often overlooked in favour of specialist care farms.
- There were many different reasons, sometimes very personal, why people chose to set up a care farm.
- Not every care farmer needed to secure new clients for their care farm, and many had a waiting list for places. This was often due to the specialist provision that they provided that was very difficult to find elsewhere.
- Not every care farm relied solely on the funding that clients could bring with them. This was usually because additional income came from
charitable support, from the use of personal funds, or from the working farm.

- For other farmers, setting up the care farm and securing funded clients had been a lifeline for the farm. It meant that the farmer or spouse no longer needed to work outside of the farm in order to bring in additional family income.

- It was generally accepted that those organisations who had secured long term funded clients had done so because they had been able to demonstrate a high level of appropriate training, achieve accreditation, and were seen as professional and credible organisations by potential commissioners.

**Theme Five – The Benefits for the Farmer**

The first of my three original research questions asked: What are the benefits for farmers who have set up a care farm?

This question was one that participants from support organisations or academia answered without hesitation but that seemed to take most farmers by surprise. I observed that all farmers had to pause and reflect before answering and I wondered if any had ever stood back and really considered if care farming had been beneficial to them before.

The benefits described fell broadly into three categories: personal benefits, benefits to the farm and to the business.

**Personal benefits** – All farmers told me how much they enjoyed hosting visitors, delivering their care farm programmes, and how proud they were of their farms. One said that once she had made use of the support available, had undertaken training and had put her own care farming programme in place, “It gave me the confidence to speak about care farming”. She described how in 2018 she had been asked to speak to parliamentarians on the subject. Another farmer said “It has been a real positive. We’ve seen the impact and it’s very gratifying”.
Others spoke of feeling more ‘connected with people’ through their involvement with care farming and less lonely as a result. They said that it had also been a positive experience for the wider family. Participants spoke of how it had given farmers “a new lease of life “because they felt personally fulfilled and had a greater sense of purpose. “It’s good to know you are providing something that helps people “.

Several farmers shared how they had gained new skills and expanded their knowledge through courses that they had undertaken and through the lived experience of care farming. They had enjoyed ‘teaching, showing and mentoring’ clients and for some this was their first experience of such a role.

Benefits to the Farm – “The care farm is a great asset [for the working farm], it’s not the money, the clients would love to trade places with me. I’m doing a job everyone would love to do”. All farmers described how they have become more involved in their community as a result of care farming and several said that their farm was now seen as a community hub, especially those that welcomed people on to the farm for tours or sold produce. They felt that they were now involved in their communities in ways that they had never been before. Generally, local communities were very supportive of the projects, and it was not uncommon for people to volunteer to assist. One farmer commented that she was inundated with volunteers, said how much they seemed to enjoy being on the farm and joked that she thought some volunteers actually gained more benefit from being on the farm than some of the clients did!

Others said that in several cases, volunteers, and indeed past clients, had gone on to become permanent members of staff and helped bring new ideas to the team or had themselves decided to pursue a new farming related career path.

Business - “So, it is a lot of work, but it brings financial dividends into the farm”. Many participants talked about how care farming had brought in much needed additional income and in some cases, care farming had proved to be a lifeline to the working farm. One farmer told how, once she had proved herself credible with commissioners and had secured contracts to deliver care farm services, that she “no longer worries about money and being paid”.
Others reported that in their cases, the financial rewards of care farming were more modest, with one saying that “we are only just seeing any benefits after 6 years”.

Some participants explained how care farming had acted as a catalyst prompting them to think of new income opportunities that could be exploited. Having a greater number of visitors to the farm and having a much closer relationship with their local community, had afforded them the opportunity to start selling farm produce such as fruit, vegetables, meat, flowers, honey, homemade chutneys and jams, and eggs, and later expanding into pop up markets, regular local markets or selling produce through other nearby farm shops. Several were in the process of setting up cafes, others were looking at offering accommodation (agrotourism) and one had even opened their own bakery on the farm.

Several said that since they became involved in care farming, they had found themselves thinking in new ways, considering ideas that they had never thought of before. Sustainable and social considerations were a common theme, and many had adopted new farming practices such as agroforestry and permaculture on both the care farm, and its parent farm, as a means to reducing costs and increasing productivity in an ethical way. One in Australia had gone one step further and had become part of a government pilot scheme where in the future, the farm will be able to sell carbon credits to those wanting to offset their carbon footprint. It is hoped that will prove to be a useful additional income stream for the farm.

**Case Study** – One farmer told me that their having another job outside the family farm had been a financial necessity but they had not been happy in themselves and had spent those days away wishing they were back on the farm. They had undertaken a number of business courses over the years, hoping to find ways of expanding the farm and to make it more profitable but it seemed that the right opportunities had just not presented themselves. When they were invited to an information event which discussed setting up a care farming project they had jumped at the chance. They farmer explained that as they sat and listened to the presentation, they “just got it” and understood the “essence behind care farming” immediately and could see how it might be applicable for *their* farm. They signed up to the project and have
been involved ever since. As the project progressed and became successful, they had been able to leave their outside employment and return to the farm full time. She stressed that their involvement with care farming had not only brought financial benefits, which had helped to secure the future of their family farm, they felt it had also improved their skills, built their confidence, and forged connections and that they had “become a conduit between families, the wider community and other farmers”.

**My discussions with participants identified the following key points:**

- Setting up care farm projects had produced additional income for the majority of the working farms involved.
- There were many benefits for farmers who ran care farms, other than purely financial, and these included a greater sense of purpose, a pride in their farm, enjoyment in hosting visitors and reduced loneliness.
- For some farmers, the process of setting up their care farm had acted as a catalyst for change, promoting new ideas that generated additional income streams or perhaps encouraged them to change their existing farming methods to include more sustainable and ethical practices.
Theme Six – The Benefits to the Local Community

The second of my three original research questions asked: What are the benefits of care farming for the local community?

The responses fell broadly into three categories: Job creation and partnership opportunities, connections, and inclusion and wellbeing.

**Job creation and partnership opportunities** - A number of participants described how, in their experience, setting up care farms had served to secure existing jobs and created new ones on farms in rural areas. Several commented that this often included several jobs for individuals with disabilities who had been perhaps struggling to find work elsewhere. Providing job opportunities for people in rural areas had been of benefit in reducing the need for people to commute to work.

Participants also highlighted the benefits of forging partnerships between the farmer and the community and/or with local charities. One participant said that they were using some of their land to offer ‘business incubator sites’ to
the local community whereby farming-related start-ups or early-stage businesses, are provided with advice, practical support and resources.

As previously described in theme three, some farmers were perhaps, happier working in collaboration with a suitable local charity or other organisation to offer care farming services rather than ‘going it alone’.

**Connections** - Participants spoke about building connections with the community that went beyond simply offering volunteering or employment opportunities for local people.

A number of farmers worked especially hard to make the families of their clients feel truly welcome by inviting them to join their family members at social events on the farm such as barbeques.

In Italy, clients on some care farms that operated growing spaces were encouraged to take on a ‘leader role’ by teaching visitors from the local community how to plant, grow, and harvest a range of fruit and vegetables, skills that they themselves had learned during their time on the farm. This was seen as extremely valuable as it gave the client a genuinely purposeful role, strengthened links between the community, the farm and its clients, whilst also helping to build understanding of mental health and disability issues and combat stigma.

In Ireland, members of the local community were encouraged to join the Board or other governing body of a care farm. These links between the farm and the community allowed those with local knowledge to contribute to the strategic development of the care farm.

Looking at the findings of my research through a wider lens, and having spoken to several participants who had, or were, conducting academic research into care farming, I would suggest that forging connections between researchers and practitioners where best practice is shared and ideas explored may have benefits for care farming communities globally.

**Inclusion and wellbeing** - There was a desire from several participants to create or expand projects and programmes that would support diversity and
inclusion. One participant thought that farms, or growing spaces within farms, had the potential to become hubs of civic engagement that offered inclusive learning opportunities for everyone in the community. Other participants hoped that care farms could offer education on healthy life choices and support wider personal health and wellness or mental health initiatives. If these types of programmes were run in rural locations it would allow those living in such areas to receive support within their own communities, rather than having to travel to access such services elsewhere. It was said that there was a lack of adequate provision outside urban areas and “bringing any level of mental health services [into the rural community] would benefit young people brought up in rural areas reluctant to access services in the city”.

For those participants who had established, or were in the process of establishing, therapeutic care farms there was often a wider perspective. They said that it was not just about providing day-to-day support to clients but about driving discussion and shaping policy to address how people with severe mental health needs receive treatment. Many founders sought to change current ways of working by presenting government and other health agencies with an evidenced-based alternative approach centred on a therapeutic farm model.

**Case Study** – One of the participants told me of the community outreach work that their residential therapeutic farm had been involved with for many years. They had set up a very successful ‘Farm-to-Plate’ Programme, which sold meat raised on the farm, eggs, herbs grown in the kitchen garden, honey, and maple syrup, all produced with the support and involvement of the clients, through a weekly market. They had also established an Arts and Crafts Programme that “allows members of the community to view and purchase artwork, candles, pottery, textiles and wood crafts that have been made by clients”.

**My discussions with participants identified the following key points:**

- Many care farmers described that they had forged very supportive links with their local community and support agencies and had established highly effective collaborative partnerships.
- Some care farms actively involved the local community in growing programmes or by offered land for incubator projects.
Some farms recruited members of their local community as trustees or board members.

Research into care farming has been conducted across a number of countries by researchers largely working in isolation.

Some participants hoped that care farming could support diversity, inclusion and a wider conversation around mental health policies and provision.

**Theme Seven – The benefits for the Rural Economy**

The final of my three original research questions asked” What benefits can a care farm bring to the rural economy?

It was one that many participants struggled to answer and many said that they had never given any consideration to the rural economy and their place within it. Farmers, especially those with small farms, told me that they had not thought that their small operation could impact on or contribute to the rural economy. However, on reflection, they began to cite examples that clearly showed that they did!

Farmers told me, that where possible, they aimed to recruit people from the local area for jobs on the farm. There was a recognition that if the farms were in very isolated areas with low population, or staff with specific or specialist skills were needed, that they may have to recruit from further afield. One residential farm explained that they were the “biggest employer in the community”.

Another way in which farmers said they were contributing was in the use of local suppliers for regular and occasional purchases or services, such as feed merchants, veterinary support, farriers etc and by employing local firms when building work was required. One farmer told me of the large financial investment she had made in the building of a ‘Discovery Centre’ on the care farm that included a “commercial kitchen, dining room, meeting room, library and quiet room, farm shop, café and a purpose-built vegetable garden”.

It was perhaps surprising to many of the farmers to realise how much they actually contributed to the rural economy, albeit that it was obvious to me as a
researcher looking in from the outside. It is difficult to quantify, in monetary terms at least, what the scale of that contribution is, but it is an area that might benefit from further research.

**Case Study** – One participant told me of the creation of their new residential therapeutic care farm and how it was currently contributing to the local rural economy through the use of local suppliers and tradespeople. They plan to employ 40 additional staff once they move beyond the initial establishment stage. The farm is also planning to build and operate a farm shop which will give yet more work to local tradespeople and will employ further staff to run it once complete.

**My discussions with participants identified the following key points:**

- Most participants said that, where possible, they employ local workers with one farm saying that they had become the largest employer in their town.
- Most of the participants said that they never considered before if they were contributing to the local economy, but after reflection, found many examples where they did precisely that, either directly or indirectly.
- Further research is needed if the true scale of benefit to the rural economy arising from the operation of care farms is to be fully understood.
Conclusion

This research project looked at the benefits of care farming to farmers, to the local community and the rural economy. The aim was to examine existing care farms overseas in order to identify best practice that might be beneficial to family farmers in the UK who might be considering setting up a care farm. These practices may also prove useful to existing UK care farmers.

The project also identified four perceived barriers to the establishment of care farms as described by members of the UK farming community. These areas were: health and safety, built environments, training, and securing clients. The research interviews invited overseas participants to share their thoughts on these themes and asked them whether these issues had been of similar concern to them, and if so, what measures did they take to address them.

I noted that, regardless of the location or country context, every overseas participant confirmed that they had indeed faced the same issues as those described by the UK participants albeit that they may have tackled them in slightly different ways.
There was a general sense, from the overseas participants, that although farmers in the UK were right to consider these issues thoroughly, they should not be dissuaded from proceeding, if they were serious about establishing a care farm, as such obstacles were not insurmountable. It was felt that with the right mindset, a desire to support vulnerable groups, a willingness to train, and demonstrate their skills and knowledge through accreditation, that funded clients could be secured and viable care farms established.

Overseas participants commented that in their experience, working with commissioners in the health, care and education sectors required a very different approach than one which many farmers would be familiar with. Understanding what commissioners look for when they purchase services for clients, and how to demonstrate to them that your farm can deliver those services, would be invaluable information for farmers. Many participants felt that where Regional Support Coordinators were available, they played a crucial role in guiding farms through the commissioning process, helping them to understand what high quality care farming ‘looked like’, and often acted as a broker between farmers and commissioning bodies.

However, it is clear that having willing and highly motivated farmers involved, farmers that are appropriately skilled, running care farms that have met high standards of accreditation is only part of the story. If policy makers, and those working in the social care, health, and education fields do not see the value of care farming and the benefits that it can bring in meeting the needs of their clients, then it is unlikely to ever reach its full potential. Perhaps there should be a conversation on the future shape of mental health, care and education provision across the UK, and the valuable part that could be played by community green care initiatives.

There was palpable sense of passion, enthusiasm, clarity and drive from the overseas participants when they talked about their care farms or research projects and I found that to be inspirational. I believe that learning from their experiences, capturing and sharing best practice where seen, making best use of evidence-based research to underpin and shape future policy would be of immense benefit to the development of care farming in the UK.

Recommendations
o The development of a robust care farming information package would help prospective care farmers, including those based on small family-run farms, make well-informed decisions.
o A comprehensive training programme should be developed for farmers who are considering setting up a care farm. This should include business support, funding and financial advice, and information about the establishment of charities or social enterprises.
o Working in partnership with farming charities, focus groups should be established to consider issues highlighted in this Report including the need for, and the role of, regional support coordinators, how to secure contracts, access appropriate training, and the need for a perhaps the need for formal quality assurance and accreditation.
o Institute a peer-to-peer global social care farming network which could include opportunities for mentorship programmes.
o Further research should be conducted into the perceptions of commissioners when they are considering social care farming placements.
o Establish a working group with partners to investigate how care farms might introduce more sustainable farming approaches.
o The formation of a global social care farming research centre within a recognised university or organisation to promote multi-disciplinary social care farming research.

Next Steps

o Reaching out to international colleagues to set up a working group to consider and implement where possible the recommendations in this Report.
o Arranging farming focus groups for Autumn 2021.
o Continuing my conversations with farming organisations on the design and development of introductory information and training programmes for farmers interested in setting up care farms.
o Beginning research in Autumn 2021 as part of my Doctor of Education into the perceptions of commissioners into care farming.
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