

Summary

- Set up in July 2008 by nurse/midwife of 30 years, Caroline Matheson, who is a member of the Steering Group for Care Farming Scotland
- Small-scale operation (three clients per day), integrated with a largely arable 400acre farm with livestock.
- Provides 12 week placements for people on long term benefits and looking to return to work, under written contract with Job Centre Plus
- A static portacabin provides an office, tearoom, kitchen and toilets "Its OK for the short-term," says Caroline.

What is special about this care farm

Drawing on Caroline's experience of rehabilitation, clients start part-time, working on small projects, and then build up to larger activities as their skills and confidence grow. Goals are set with the clients each month, with a review of progress at the end of their placement.

Although Caroline's 30 years working in health means she had the necessary caring and people skills, she believes the key person in a care farm is the farmer – in this case her husband, Brian. In her view, clients (not just those at Ballicherry) come to a farm wanting to be part of team, and the farmer provides the role model of 'the boss.'

Target market

The target client group is people on the former Incapacity Benefit - now the Employment Support Allowance - and lone parents/long term unemployed looking to improve their employability. Up to three people attend each day, up to five days per week. Referrals are by Job Centre Plus and a wide range of partner agencies.

All the clients have health needs, says Caroline. Some are 'work ready' and some are looking to go into training. For those 'further away from the labour market', the experience is more therapeutic.

In the care farm's early days, selection of clients was undertaken by JCP or referring agency. But Caroline noticed the attrition rate was high, possibly due to inappropriate referrals. As a result, she now interviews and selects people herself, taking about 50%-60% of the people she meets. "Not everyone is suitable to getting up early, and working on a farm," says Caroline. The key thing she looks for is commitment. "Clients have to earn a place here, and that's good," she says. "I can tell them, 'Not everyone gets here you know.' "

The bottom line

Funding from current commissioners, JCP, Skills Development Scotland and Highland Employer Coalition is around £50 per day, per client (as a pilot project, Ballicherry received a lump sum for its operations).

With all the funding coming from JCP and current funding partners, Caroline is looking to secure additional support, be it from the NHS, council, or whoever. She says JCP are keen for the project to continue but they prefer contracts with larger agencies and their contracting process is very complex. She is hopeful of initiatives such as Fairer Scotland Funding, one of whose priorities is helping vulnerable people /groups, and which has a multi-disciplinary approach that may be receptive to care farming.

Caroline is also thinking of turning the care farm into a social enterprise, since most funders prefer to give to not for profit organisations.



In their own words

Motivation – Like others, Caroline was motivated by what she read of care farming in mainland Europe, and ones she visited in England. Her health background was also an influential factor.

Approach – “We focus on what people can do rather than what they can’t do,” says Caroline. “The farm is a diverse place - there is usually some interesting aspect of the farm that they can tune into. We start them on that and then build up their skills and confidence, setting goals for them each month.”

Benefits – An independent evaluation organised by JCP concluded most clients moved positively on the Rickter Scale (which measures health, well being, mood and other lifestyle factors). “Being here gives them a bit of a lift, and they get their confidence back and their self-belief,” says Caroline. The care farming has also helped diversify and add another dimension to the main farm, she adds.

Anne Maguire MP (left), and at that time Minister for Disabled People, with our ponies Tommy and Bobby, meets Val Rolfe (right) who worked with me on the care farm and specialises in teaching equestrian skills.

The ponies are very therapeutic for clients who work with them.

Key challenges

Caroline says her biggest challenge has been convincing funders that care farming is a worthwhile service – both the time and work involved. Although she has a written contract, it is only short-term and it took about a year to secure. She says, “I did not realise it was such a long process – it was quite a challenge.”

Keeping a business growing, keeping that energy going and keeping focussed has also been a challenge. Agencies can be desperate to send you people who are not suitable, and you have to remember what your aims are and avoid diluting what you set out to do.

Tips for others

- 1) Don't have all your eggs in one basket. (ie sources of funding)
- 2) Take the leap of faith. Caroline says she knows farmers who would like to give it a go but they are too frightened.



For more information

Caroline Matheson. Tel: 01381 610355
e-mail: ballicherry@btinternet.com

If you want to learn more about Care Farming UK please visit www.carefarminguk.org or email enquiries@carefarminguk.org