



Charlie Mitch with a friend

Farming proves the best medicine

Can pitchforks beat pills for curing our ills? **Sue Scott** looks at a step change in attitudes to agriculture and how an innovative plan hatched in the South East could prove a tonic for tenants.

For those families who turned in ever greater numbers last year for help from the charity, Farm Crisis Network, news that farming is good for your health must seem something of an irony.

But the idea that a dose of the great outdoors is more powerful than a prescription for Prozac – and, crucially, cheaper – is gathering pace among doctors and care workers, while many colleagues working in the probation and special needs services are already convinced that the future for some farmers lies not just in growing food, but in ‘growing people’.

“I wouldn’t call it therapy, it’s a relationship. Whenever you interact with somebody two individuals become richer,” says Sussex-based rural surveyor Robin Hobson, who became involved in what is variously described as ‘care farming’ and ‘green care’ at

the start of the National Care Farming Initiative NCFI(UK). Based at Harper Adams and now in its second year, the association is attracting high-profile support from mainstream health workers, as well as more ‘alternative’ champions, including Prince Charles. It recently recruited countryside champion Baroness Byford to the cause, who, with characteristic vigor, has been busy persuading fellow peers to inject some enthusiasm into policy makers.

For London GP Kim Jobste, who sits on the NCFI(UK) board, the debate on whether farmers can offer an effective remedy for a wide range of social ills is already won; what’s needed now is proof that there’s a healthy financial incentive for both users and providers.

Care farming isn’t a cash cow, but it could be the aspirin that alleviates some of the farming industry’s

economic pain, even – and perhaps especially – in the tenanted sector.

According to Robin Hobson, who is working on an innovative care farming model inspired by the East Clayton Farm Project for adults with severe learning disabilities near Storrington, the biggest problem is bridging the gap between those paying for what one psychotherapist described as ‘idylls of soothing’ and farmers, for whom even the impenetrable bureaucracy of the RPA is a walk in the park compared to the minefield of dealing with health and social care offices.

“The time and effort dealing with government

bodies is massive,” says Hobson, who believes a more innovative approach is needed if the UK is to substantially increase the number of care farms from the current estimate of 43 to anywhere near the 600 used by more than 10,000 people a week just across the Channel in Holland. There, you’re as likely to be referred to a farm yard as a psychiatrist’s chair, with care farms now the fastest growing branch of ‘multifunctional’ agriculture, generating an impressive 37m extra euros for Dutch farmers every year. Just as important has been the positive impact that integrating farming and health has had on agriculture’s image and in bringing urban and rural communities closer together.

Hobson’s vision for “social farming without having to deal with the social services” could help put agriculture on a path to recovery, while also speeding up the delivery of health and welfare services to anyone who’s fallen off the social ladder and ends up hanging on by their finger tips to the fringes of society.

Whereas in the past care farming has been largely

According to on-going research there are 43 care farms in the UK, the majority mixed, commercial units offering day care facilities which are used by around 3,500 people a week. But farmers struggle to find start-up funding, says Essex University’s Rachel Hine, even though one farmer generated more than £1 million for the local economy and created 25 jobs in a rural area. Overall, she said, UK care farms employ around 300 workers – substantially more than would be needed for pure farming activities.

“How much better is it to put money into care farms rather than pick up the pieces afterwards?” she argues. “In the past we have concentrated on the negative aspects of agriculture; this is a way of changing the thinking of what farms provide for us. As one care farmer said, it’s nice to see farming put a smile on somebody’s face.”

Key contact

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Philip Berry ready for work

limited to charities who have ploughed hard-won funds into buying land and buildings, his plan is to use them to broker a 'new deal' for agriculture, striking a contract between tenanted farms on larger estates and health and welfare services.

The range of suitable holdings is as diverse as the people they can help – from ex-cons to stropky youngsters, adults with learning difficulties to those with short-term depression or long-term mental health problems.

"What I'm looking at is a model where the charity signs a long lease, develops the buildings and takes care of social services," says

Hobson. "It pays the farmer for growing crops and raising livestock and if he wants to get involved in activities with people, he will receive an income for that, too. The farmer benefits by diversifying, but in a very clear-cut way, using what he already has experience of, farming."

In other words, double-cropping agricultural commodities and health. It also goes some way to clearing the conscience of farmers who might otherwise be troubled by the idea of making money out of others' misfortune.

Hobson agrees that, as diversifications go, it's a hard one for farmers to get their heads around. "It's important for them to work out why they are interested in it. If they want to make money, that's fine, but for many the whole lot is muddled up."

Arundel farmer Gerald Sercombe, who is keen to extend the care he and his wife Henni have been offering to a series of challenging youngsters for the past five years, has struggled in his dealings with government departments. He says he would like to see them get behind any initiative that puts farmers in the front-line of health and social care. If it has a value for society, then farmers should be rewarded appropriately, he says.

In his view, there is no right or wrong farm: "It just has to be appropriate to the problem. Take learning disabilities, which is more about keeping people occupied: even if you're a very small arable farm, you could go out with a little Fergie and have them planting potatoes."

According to Dr Rex Haigh, a psychiatrist who heads up the Thames Valley Initiative working with people suffering from severe personality disorder, support for care farms is gathering pace as mental health services look for holistic alternatives to conventional therapy. He is keen to find farmers in Berks, Bucks and Oxon who are willing to work on developing a care farming project, providing non-residential facilities for up to 24 people. He can be contacted at rex@haighz.net.

Like many drawn into care farming, Chris Cook had personal experience of looking after a family member with severe disabilities and had been frustrated by trying to find appropriate facilities to help them.

"I fostered two young people with learning difficulties and when they turned 19 there was nothing suitable," says Chris, who, having complained about the appalling lack of provision, took matters into her own hands by setting up the John Graham and Blean Farm Shop Day Centre at Lucketts Farm near Rochester.

A former nurse, she was better equipped than most when it came to finding her way around the local health departments, but admits it's tough going if you're not plugged into the network. "It's not easy working with social services," she says.

A dozen students – including Chris' own daughter who suffers from Downs Syndrome – look after livestock on an eight-acre smallholding and supply the farm shop with crops: "There's a lot of emphasis on healthy living."

Visitors remark on the happy, positive atmosphere, which gives young people with little or no chance of employment a rewarding sense of self-worth. And, with a distinct change in direction in the provision of therapeutic services, it's aroused the curiosity of a number of other health professionals working in the mental health arena.

The introduction of what are known as direct payments, which gives clients the right to choose their own care using money that would have been spent on county council services, will create more opportunities for independent facilities like Lucketts.

"A lot of the people at Lucketts have taken direct payments – the advantage to the client is choice and flexibility," says a spokesperson for Kent County Council. "We have moved away from 'you are our client and this is what you will do' approach. It's much better for everyone if people are in control of their care – it can transform their life."

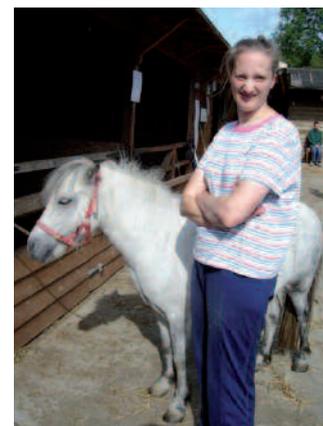
"For those who come here it opens up a whole new area for them," adds Chris. "A lot of students haven't had experience of a cat or dog, let alone farm animals. Now many of them would come all week if they could."

All farms, he believes, offer a unique environment in which troubled minds can be 'rewired' and he's witnessed some remarkable results among the children he's helped.

"They test the boundaries, of course, but not because they want to move them, just to know they are there."

"There's something in this world that farming is linked to ... some of the kids just

want something to hug. You see them going off and talking to the animals, telling them all their woes when people do not want to listen any more or they are feeling hurt. A farm gives them the space and direction they need."



Sam Burden at Blean Farm