

Summary

- 500 acre mixed farm, run by the Gaunt family, which in 2004 decided to convert some of its sheep barns into fully equipped classrooms, IT room, art room and other facilities for a care farm, Carlshead Ltd.
- The care farm is a VAT registered, not-for-profit training company. There are four family members on the company board, with day-to-day management done by Gareth Gaunt.
- Client group is young people who are at risk or have been excluded from school. There is a strong emphasis on personal development, and the students work towards courses accredited with the Open College Network, that provide GCSE equivalent points.
- Currently, funding is entirely from the Local Education Authority. To improve Carlshead's viability and profitability, Gareth would like to diversify to new clients, or set up a regional group of care farms in order to tap into the government's regional funding regimes.

What is special about this care farm

The care farm was set up by the Gaunt family to help diversify their main farming business, and they took out a £450,000 loan to establish suitable premises etc. The two operations are well integrated, and are run by the same family members, but are legally and financially separate. For example, the care farm pays a fair market rent for land and premises (VAT is claimed back, since Carlshead Ltd is a registered training facility). The overall project has been entirely self-funding, apart from a small Rural Enterprise Scheme grant received after starting up.

Gareth does not use formal teachers to support the students, but people he describes as 'highly motivated self-starters' – who do not feel threatened by the students, but who can communicate well, have the energy to cope with them, and can inspire them. Many work part-time and run their own business when they are not at the care farm. Using people like this, says Gareth, ensures that the teaching experience is more akin to an apprenticeship than a classroom.

Target market

Young people usually aged 14-16 with learning and/or behavioural difficulties, some of who may also have special needs (50-50 split, male-female). They have been excluded or are at risk of being excluded from mainstream schools, and are referred by the Local Education Authority.

Students attend the farm between one and five days a week, for five hours a day. They work in two groups of four, each one with a 'teacher.' A mentor, employed by Education Leeds, oversees discipline and counseling. They also do much of the associated paperwork. "It leaves us to do what we are best at," says Gareth.

The students are offered a broad range of alternative education opportunities including animal and horse care, mechanics, fishing, art projects, green woodworking and horticulture.

Possible new client groups in the future might include people with Asperger's Syndrome, special needs, mental health, or adults.

The bottom line

The LEA pays £20 per hour for each student. With eight students per day, five days per week, Gareth says the care farm is viable. But there is capacity for increasing to 12 students per day.

All the care farm's income comes from education. "It's a problem and one I am trying to change," says Gareth. He has been trying to apply to one or two charitable trusts, but only to fund capital items such as equipment and new facilities. "I felt it was very important to keep the charitable funding away from day to day running costs," he says. "It is the government's responsibility, not charities', to educate children."

There are three full-time and four part-time staff and annual turnover is around £150,000 per year. Gareth says the care farm should be paying £50,000-£60,000 pa for his management time and rent of premises, but at the moment can only afford around £20,000. "I would love to be able to make a little bit of a profit to invest in new courses and equipment, but so far that has not been possible," he says.

In their own words

Motivation – Farm diversification was one driver for the Gaunt family, but Gareth also has a strong social interest. He read about care farming in mainland Europe and became impressed how in Scandinavia, for example, care farms are used to help children with behavioural and other issues. “We have some big problems in society, and care farming really appealed to me,” he says.

Approach – The care farm places a strong emphasis on personal development, and giving young people genuine job prospects grounded in real practical skills. “They like it here and they enjoy it,” says Gareth. “It’s been a long time since some of them enjoyed themselves – and once you have that you can start teaching them things.” He adds: “I hope most of them have been inspired into the satisfaction of work, earning and having a job – because they have no clue about that when they arrive.”

Benefits – Gareth is confident of the benefits his care farm provides, saying: “It teaches the young people life skills, and it broadens their horizons, so that they have a bigger view of what they could do in life... They come out much more rounded and confident – they have fun.”

The care farm has also brought benefits to the main farm, continues Gareth. It has helped with farm’s diversification, and there is now much more vibrancy to the place. Parts of the farm that were never used before, such as the woodlands, are now used all the time, he explains. And there are now lots of staff around the place, rather than just one farmer, as before. “The whole place is buzzing,” he says.



For more information

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Key challenges

Funding – Gareth has a good support from someone at the LEA who he says “really understands and believes in what we do, and gives us a lot of support.” But he worries about the potential consequences of relying on one person and (as other care farms probably) not having a written contract. Funding pressures over the next few years could mean a reduction or termination in LEA referrals, says Gareth. “We might get the carpet pulled from underneath us – I don’t know.”

Staff – Finding the rights staff is always difficult, says Gareth. Advertising hasn’t been successful, he says; most come through word of mouth.

Bureaucracy – He is also critical of the government. “There is more and more paperwork, and more and more qualifications to justify what we do,” he says. By way of example, he says the government is planning to introduce a requirement that anyone giving instruction, such as his own staff, should have a teacher training qualification. “It gets worse and worse all the time and it doesn’t improve things,” he says. And as a result he is looking to work with new client groups.

Contrary to many potential care farmers’ concerns, Gareth says Health and Safety has not been a problem. He says: “It has been pretty straightforward – I do not have to worry about it at all,” and he praises the support he has had from Mentor Services, who have provided him with legal and other support.

Tips for others

“Make sure you run a business and not a charity – make sure you make a proper return,” says Gareth. “A lot of care farms are really underpaid for what they do and spend their lives chasing grants,” he says. If we are going to persuade other farmers to go into care farming, we have to show them they can take some money from it – and by diversifying they can keep their farm going.”

You don’t need to ‘go big,’ is his second tip. Pointing to other farmers, he says, “We have all got a toilet, a kitchen and other facilities... it can be as simple as that.”

Students spend a year on the tractor mechanics course learning all about servicing, restoring and driving a diesel-engine tractor.

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