

HEALING from work on the land

The therapeutic qualities of rural life have long been recognised. Now farms are providing solace for people in need. **Johann Tasker** reports

Recovering alcoholic Paul Bird believes farming saved him from the bottle. For the past two years, he has lived and worked at Risdon Farm, a 130ha (320-acre) dairy unit near Okehampton, Devon.

"It's good to have a purpose in what you do," Mr Bird told *Farmers Weekly*. "I enjoy working here – it's much better than regular rehab where you often find yourself at a loose end with nothing to do between therapy sessions."

Risdon Farm is a care farm – a commercial farm which promotes the physical and mental well-being of people with a range of disabilities, or medical or social needs. And Mr Bird has just signed up to stay for a further 12 months.

There are 40 similar farms across the UK, offering therapeutic work-based learning and rehabilitation services to more than 3000 people every week, according to recent evidence from the University of Essex.

Care farming is a growing phenomenon. But the UK still lags behind countries such as the Netherlands and Norway, where more

than 1000 care farms are seen as vital healthcare providers that also generate an additional source of agricultural income.

A powerful injection of funding and backing from policymakers is needed if care farming is to realise its potential in the UK, says university researcher Rachel Hine. "Amazingly, it's not on the health and social care agenda."

The Dutch experience suggests that the potential development of care farming in the UK is huge.

Research published last November has shown that care farming is by far the fastest-growing farm diversification in the Netherlands. In 10 years, the number of Dutch farms involved in care farming has grown from 75 to more than 800. If developments here follow a similar trend, care farming could be worth more than £149m a year to the UK rural economy within a decade.

A single care farm operation could generate revenue of £52,517 annually, according to calculations by the National Care Farming Initiative (NCFI), an organisation based at Harper Adams University College, Shropshire.

The NCFI highlights the work

WHAT IS CARE FARMING?

* The therapeutic qualities of living in the countryside have long been recognised. Compared with the impersonal bustle of the city, rural life operates at a more measured pace, frequently based around the weather and the seasons.

But only recently has the concept of care farming – which combines care of the land with care of people – started to gain acceptance. It works by using farms to promote mental and physical well-being more efficiently than traditional social services.

Although still in its infancy in the UK, more commercial farms are offering on-farm health,

education and welfare services for people who would benefit from a more structured lifestyle and meaningful work in a natural environment.

Usually referred to as residents or clients rather than patients, many care farm participants soon experience improvements to their physical, mental and spiritual health and well-being.

Becoming involved with activities on a working farm can be especially beneficial for rehabilitation and re-education for disaffected youths. In the UK, care farms range in size from under 1ha to over 360ha and offer care to 3500 participants a week.



taking place on farms offering health, education and welfare services for people with a range of specialist or particular needs. It also provides networking and research opportunities for its members.

Care farms are very much commercial working farms, explains NCFI policy officer Jon Dover. "Meaningful work combined with connection to other people and nature is a winning and cost-effective combination."

A Care Farming Practitioner Steering Group, formally established late last year, has now brought together 12 of the sector's most experienced practitioners. Run by farmers, part of its work

is to lobby for more government support for care farming.

Joint chairman Gareth Gaunt of Catshead Farm, Wetherby, hopes the group will be instrumental in the development of what he describes as one of the most exciting diversification opportunities available to British farmers.

"Farming and rural communities can uniquely help and improve the health and social well-being of many individuals in need of assistance and support. Visiting and completing tasks on a working farm can be life-changing for many people."

Fund-raising, however, remains an issue. Many care farms face an

Case Study

GILEAD FOUNDATIONS, DEVON

Gilead Foundations is a Christian rehabilitation centre, based on a 130ha (320-acre) dairy farm near Okehampton. It helps people battling with addiction problems, such as drug abuse, alcoholism and related issues.

Up to 30 residents live on the care farm at any one time. Often working towards NVQ qualifications, they are trained in all aspects of farm work, including early morning milking, animal husbandry and tractor driving.

As a registered care home, the farm aims to restore independence and stability to people's lives. Residents, often from inner-city backgrounds, are encouraged to lead responsible lives in their own homes once they leave.

Even so, Gilead is very much a working farm. Its milk processing operation handles about 2000 litres of milk each day, which is either sold to a wholesaler or packed and delivered to local customers.