

Health and Harmony: the future for food, farming and the environment in a Green Brexit: Response to consultation from Social Farms & Gardens, May 2018

Background

Care farming (the therapeutic use of farming practices) has grown in prominence in the UK over the last decade as an effective form of health and social care - so much so that commitment to supporting the expansion of care farming in the UK is specifically mentioned in the Defra 25-Year Environment Plan.

Care Farming UK has joined with its sister charity, **the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens**, to form a new organisation - **Social Farms & Gardens**. The two organisations have merged to better support and represent its membership base (including care farms, city farms, community farms and gardens, school farms and Community Supported Agriculture schemes). The farmers and growers delivering care farming and community-based engagement services to beneficiaries and engaging people in growing and cooking to improve their health and wellbeing all form an important part of our membership.

This response to the consultation is on behalf of all members of our new organisation, specifically responding to Chapter 3: *Connecting people with the environment to improve health and wellbeing*, whilst also recognising that our members contribute to many other goals, both in rural and urban environments. We approve all the Chapter 3 policies and with our members, actively pursue every one, and with greater support and recognition could do considerably more.

Care farming and community agricultural initiatives in the UK

To evidence the report recognition that the [care farming sector](#)¹ has gained momentum in the UK, we can say that the number of care farms has grown from approximately 70 in 2008, to a current level of over 250. There are also over 100 prospective care farms in various stages of development, representing a marked increase in the last 18 months. Start-up support includes access to the care farming 'Code of Practice'. School farms have increased from 66 in 2006 to 126 today. Social Farms and Gardens supports around 250 care farms, 63 city farms, 126 school farms, 1,200+ community gardens, and hundreds of Community Supported Agriculture enterprises.

In addition to the growing interest from new farms in the UK, proof of the need and potential scale for care farming can be seen by the success in the Netherlands, where the 'green care farming' approach was first established in 1998. Over the past 20 years, the sector has grown to encompass over 1,000 farms serving a population of 17 million people – which equates to roughly 15 times the level of the UK's current care farming provision. The growth of community gardening-based activities has also seen a substantial increase over recent years, associated with people becoming more aware of its value to improving health and well-being and greater awareness of questions related to food security in urban areas.

The need

There is a significant potential for care farms, city farms, school farms and community gardens to expand their offer as a high-quality option in health and social care and specialist education in the UK. There is growing recognition of the value of 'green care social prescribing' – nature-based, meaningful activities on referral – of which care farming is a prime example. Our approach integrates health, education and social care and provides exactly the style of community-based, non-clinical care set out by the NHS England Chief Executive, Simon Stevens, in his NHS Five Year Forward View report.

There is also a growing need to improve social and health provision particularly for people experiencing mental health issues. The Five Year Forward View for Mental Health acknowledges that too many people with mental health

¹ Care Farming in the UK and Ireland: Annual Survey of the sector 2016/17 - Overview

problems have been stigmatised and marginalised. Mental illness is estimated to cost the UK economy as much as £100 billion a year in terms of healthcare, lost jobs, unemployment benefits, homelessness support, police time and prisoner places. Care farms, city farms and community gardens help a variety of people with mental health issues to feel better and to re-build their self-esteem by gaining valuable skills in a supportive and green environment.

Spending time in care farming and community agricultural settings can also help service users to improve their chances of finding a job or forming good quality relationships in their local communities. Many of our member settings provide training and outdoor working skills that are needed to ensure a skilled workforce, essential to the growth and competitiveness of our agriculture, horticulture, forestry and food supply industries post-Brexit.

In addition, supporting more pupil contact with local natural spaces, is a major element of our members' work to many thousands of pupils each year; we are ready to engage further, whether increasing care farming or gardening funded-places in rural or urban areas, pupil experience during visits, and providing advice and practical help to establishing productive nature areas within school grounds.

Care farming is particularly important to the rural agricultural community as it provides an opportunity for on-farm income diversification whilst at the same time continuing and enhancing existing farming activities and skills. The past few years have been challenging times for the agricultural sector as years of declining farm gate prices have put an unprecedented strain on these rural businesses, and in 2015 the average farm income fell below £20,000 for the first time since 2007.

Many farmers are keen to try new enterprises to supplement their income and care farming provides crucial new opportunities for small family farms who may be seeking alternative ways to use their farms and farming experiences post-Brexit. Care farming enables farmers to diversify their farming activities and their income without leaving agriculture, irrespective of farming prices and the weather, thus bolstering the rural economy in uncertain and volatile times. Care farming therefore helps to support a dynamic, more self-reliant and resilient agricultural industry and it is crucial that any future agricultural policy recognises this. Expanding on the existing HLS payment for care farming services through educational visits payments should be considered in designing a new, improved post-EU exit offer for farmers.

Care farms, city farms, community gardens, community-managed allotments and CSAs help bridge the perceived divide between urban and rural communities and help reconnect people with the land and food production which in turn helps rural communities and economies prosper, whilst increasing access to land, engagement, and understanding of where the consumer's food comes from. Community farms and gardens positively influence a wide array of important social aspects, including improved cooking and eating habits through access to local, seasonal food.

Agriculture sits within broader rural communities with specific challenges, including isolation and loneliness. Supporting farmers to connect with the wider community and increase public engagement through care farming and Open Farm Sunday for example, not only raises awareness and education of food and farming but can be beneficial to their own mental health; access to urban farms increases the understanding of the rural provision and encourages visits.

In conclusion, care farming and community agriculture initiatives contribute – and could do considerably more, to the following:

- Contribute to the payment of public money for the provision of public goods
- Support farmers to prepare for change and improve resilience in the sector
- Deliver cultural benefits that improve mental and physical well-being
- Increase public engagement and education of food and farming.

Social Farms & Gardens would like to submit this evidence to the consultation, *The future for food, farming and the environment*. Care farms, city farms, community gardens and similar offer a vital role in providing public goods for



public money; they could offer increased potential savings to health, education and social services; help re-connect people with food and farming and help maintain viable and thriving rural communities, improving mental and physical well-being for the population, while protecting our vulnerable family farms. Any future agricultural policy post EU exit should therefore include an enabling policy environment for continuation and growth of care farming and community agriculture opportunities.

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Please Note: Social Farms & Gardens is temporarily still operating as the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens (FCFCG) for legal purposes. FCFCG is a registered company and a registered charity (with the Charity Commission). Company number: 2011023 Charity (England & Wales) No: 294494, Charity (Scotland) No: SC039440

