ENVIRONMENTAL CRIME AND JUSTICE

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CARE FARMING is an alternative type of social service that is starting to grow in Scotland. A care farm is one that is used to promote the mental and physical wellbeing of people through the working of the land. Care Farming Scotland has been set up to support care farmers and promote the movement. The charity hopes to increase the number of farmers who wish to diversify into care farming and highlight the benefits of this type of service to politicians and commissioners in the public, private and third sectors.

Using farming to help fragile members of society is not new. When I was growing up on the family farm in the 1960s, my father hired people with learning difficulties and some who had been mentally scarred by fighting in the War. These men were valued by our family and did their jobs as farm workers very well. The advancement of agricultural technology and changes in farming policy resulted in a loss of employment for these people. Furthermore mental health institutions habitually had a farm as part of their estate and this was used as part of their therapeutic regime. These farms were closed down during NHS re-organisation with cost-savings invested in more acute service delivery.

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Care farming, social farming or Green Care is well established in parts of mainland Europe, in particular The Netherlands and Norway where health and social services have teamed up with agricultural departments to develop a framework for green care, contracting with farmers for a therapeutic service for disadvantaged citizens.

Care farming users can be from a varied backgrounds including: physically and mentally ill, adults with learning difficulties, elderly people, children with special needs, disaffected youth, long term unemployed, offenders, addicts and war veterans suffering from post- traumatic stress. For many of these people, mainstream schools, clinics, and day centres do not meet their needs. They respond much better to less formal surroundings participating in more meaningful activities. The concept of the restorative power of non-verbal communication with nature is widely acknowledged. Being removed from stressful environments and experiences in the tranquility of green countryside contrasts with grey concrete and can be a healing experience, especially for city dwellers. Care farming offers this possibility along with learning opportunities and meaningful employment.

For farmers who have diversified into care farming the experience has been both challenging and rewarding. Attention to health and safety, public liability insurance and Disclosure checks have to be a priority. On the plus side, most care farmers will say that they enjoy hearing their client’s stories and teaching them how to rear animals and tend to crops. The best reward is to see a client grow in confidence and self-esteem as they develop new skills and fit into the farming team. It is amazing to see a timid, anxious person start to assert himself or herself whilst ‘hard men’ can be soothed and humbled by working with animals and growing crops.

There are opportunities for care farming to grow in Scotland and this type of service may be useful in the rehabilitation of offenders. Some farmers may be interested in contracting directly with the prison service and others may offer to host a third sector body who will provide supervision and structure on the farm. However, it may take some persuasion to convince farmers to allow offenders on to their farms for fear of assault, theft and vandalism: good news stories will be key to getting a positive message across. Apex Scotland has already done some positive work, using farms and small-holdings to assist offenders to gain work experience and improve their self-esteem and social skills.

For me, (who has a background in the health service), care farming has been a rewarding experience. My clients, who have health and social difficulties have focused on health improvement and developing their employability skills, using the experience as a positive catalyst to improving their lives. All clients are assessed individually and together with a lead professional, we write a holistic, person centred plan focusing on what they want to achieve. For most, the intervention has been beneficial and has been a step towards work or other useful activity.

The potential for care farming to be a mainstream service in Scotland is thinkable and demands a collaborative and innovative approach at all levels. You just need to look across the North Sea to glimpse what is possible!

Caroline Matheson is development consultant, Care Farming Scotland.

For more information on Care Farming Scotland check the website www.carefarmingscotland.org.uk/