



# Economic benefits of care farming and green care research overview



# Economic benefits of care farming and green care

## In brief

There is convincing evidence that the benefits of care farming and green care go wider than improved health and wellbeing. Care farming and green care also positively impact local and national economies. Direct examples include providing access to countryside and natural spaces. Rural economic opportunities can also be a benefit. Indirect benefits are societal improvements and associated cost savings. This could mean reduced dependency on healthcare, or other avoided costs.

Attributing exact financial values to the wider benefits of green care is complicated. Calculating the true value of both direct and indirect benefits of green care services such as care farming can be challenging. To date, there are few studies that have done so. Yet, the existing research shows a clear economic benefit.

## Research overview

Many studies into green care examine some economic delivery and associated impacts. Yet, to date there has not been a full and systematic investigation into the economic benefits of green care interventions. Reviews of European activities in Norway and Holland do contain detailed economic analysis. This can help draw inferences, but more research is needed.

In the UK there have been SROI (Social return on Investment) studies and other types of analysis. These are generally case studies of sites rather than sectoral evaluations. Social Farms & Gardens holds substantial data on fees and cost of services thanks to regular sector surveys. However, there has not been an economic review of the sector as such. What research there is, shows economic benefits representing excellent value for money. Green care benefits service users and commissioners, along with farmers and rural economies.

## Value of health and wellbeing benefits and offset costs

The health benefits of care farming and green care are evident and established. However, the direct and indirect value of these benefits is less clear due to their complex nature. There is growing awareness of the potential savings in health spending. A study published in Pretty et al (2011) suggested that just a 1% shift in the sedentary UK population to a 'healthy pathway' could save 1,063 lives and £1.44 billion each year. A more recent review of nature-based and mind-body interventions (Pretty and Barton 2020), showed that the associated increase in happiness and life satisfaction from woodland therapy, therapeutic horticulture, ecotherapy/green care, and tai chi, predicted savings in public service use per person of £830–£31,520 (after 1 year) and £6,450–£11,980 (after 10 years).

Cost benefit, triple bottom line and social return on investment analyses seek to quantify complex and interrelated factors to define the holistic value of an activity with a precise financial figure. This figure considers wider social and environmental impacts, rather than just direct outputs. For care farmers this involves quantifying the social benefit of an activity. For example, the savings to society that result from reduced offending rates because of a programme for offenders. Or the savings to the NHS because a care farming intervention improved health and wellbeing. These savings are known as 'avoided costs'.

A review of evidence into the economic value of care farms (Elsey et al 2018), found there are relatively few studies to date that have applied these described methodologies to care farming activities. Those that have, show clear positive economic impact. A 2011 SROI study at Nineveh Ridge Care Farm found a created social value of between £3 and £4 for every £1 invested there. A 2015 review of a programme for offenders at SHIFT Care Farm found significant potential savings created by reduced levels of offending.

## Cost of provision

The direct cost of services varies between care farms depending on session length and service user need and ability. In 2020 the average cost was £59 per day session per participant. The total number of weekly care farming places was estimated at approximately 10,210 per week bringing in nearly £3M to the UK's rural economy annually.

Some care farms charge for individual sessions by the hour, others charge for a full day session. Some charge for a group of between 8-10 service users. How care farmers charge for their services depends on how the service users are referred or services commissioned.

The service may often be free to the referred service user at point of delivery. However, referral routes for services do not always come with full funding. Care farming services are funded through a range of means. This includes commissioning, direct payments from participants and charitable grants. Where the full cost of delivery is not met through commissions, the care farmer must find extra funding elsewhere. Where services are not free to service users, they are usually funded through private means or personalised health care budgets.

This complex picture means that care farms often have blended income streams. A typical UK care farmer in 2020 accessed funding from at least five different sources, and 63% of care farmers highlighted funding as their biggest challenge.

## Additional income stream for farms and land managers

For small to medium family run farms particularly, care farming can offer an extra income stream. It uses existing agricultural resources, so care farming can be part of income diversification. Increased income is not typically the main driver for delivering care farming services. However, it can help maintain a profitable and resilient farm businesses, especially after Brexit. Care farming may also enhance other farm functions. For example, extra support with tasks can help with landscape management or animal welfare.

## Supporting rural economies

Based on data from the annual UK care farming survey, farms are delivering services for an average of 46 weeks per year. It is reasonable to conservatively estimate that care farms are currently delivering 469,660 places per year. With an average cost of £59 per session, care farming was bringing an estimated £2.77million into the UK rural economy in 2020. This helps rural economies under increasing pressure from industrialisation, aging populations and urbanisation.

A report on the implications of social farming (care farming) on rural poverty to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, found that social farming had a number of beneficial impacts. For example, social farming resulted in economic empowerment of women through recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work.

## Sources

- Elsey et al 2018
- Marshall and Wakeham 2015
- Leck 2011
- GCF Annual Report 2020
- Dessein and Bock 2010
- FAO-UN 2015
- Pretty et al 2011 – Human Wellbeing, Chapter 23: Health Values from Ecosystems
- Pretty and Barton 2020

## Further reading

- HM Government 2011 – The Natural Choice

## More information

Find out more about the [economic benefits of care farming and green care](#) on our website.

This resource was produced by the Growing Care Farming team at Social Farms & Gardens. Growing Care Farming aims to increase access to health, care and educational services on care farms. Growing Care Farming is part of the Government's Children & Nature programme and is delivered by Social Farms & Gardens, in partnership with Thrive.

Visit [www.farmgarden.org.uk/gcf](http://www.farmgarden.org.uk/gcf) to find out more about the project.

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