



Health and wellbeing
benefits of care farming
research overview

Health and wellbeing benefits of care farming

In brief

There has been much research published on the health and wellbeing benefits of green care interventions such as care farming. Existing research covers a wide range of activities, people, timescales and methodologies which can make an overview challenging.

Care farming combines contact and connection with nature, social interaction and farm-related activity. All these things are beneficial for general health and wellbeing in themselves. There is also a benefit from the combination of these elements together. Care farming can be beneficial to anyone. However, where service users have a defined need, this combination of benefits can create a complex intervention. These interconnected physical health and mental wellbeing benefits can help many different people.

Research overview

Research into the health and wellbeing benefits of care farming builds on existing nature and health studies. Care farming links to the wider subjects of nature and health and connection to nature.

Specific research into care farming as a health and wellbeing service is growing but currently limited. For example, there are only a small number of randomised control studies. Often studies involve small sample sizes, due to the nature of care farming delivery.

However, there are many convincing quasi-experimental studies into care farming. User experiences and perceived benefits of care farming interventions have been successfully documented through qualitative research. Research has also highlighted the key role that care farmers themselves can play as mentors and supportive role models.

Care farms in the UK typically deliver services for multiple service user groups. On average, farms work with five different user groups. People benefit in many ways from their care farming sessions. In this section we highlight some key studies for certain user groups, with a focus on health and wellbeing. Other benefits of care farming include learning and social outcomes.

Learning difficulties and disabilities

People with learning disabilities and learning difficulties make up the largest proportion of care farm service users.

In the UK in 2020, approximately 72% of care farms were delivering services to adults with a learning disability. The percentage of care farms delivering services to adults with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) was 65%. Around 54% of care farms were delivering to adults with a learning difficulty.

Despite these high proportions, there are few studies into the direct health benefits of green care services for these groups in the UK. This may be due to the limitations in appropriate quantitative measurement. For example, lower levels of literacy can mean questionnaires are unsuitable for many people. It may also be because other benefits, such as socialisation and education, are often the primary focus of activities.

However, Rotheram et al (2017) conclude that care farms provide a positive social space for people with a learning disability. The research found that care farms contributed to mental and social wellbeing. Kaley (2015 and 2018) concluded that care farming enables service users with a learning disability to participate in meaningful and productive activities. This contributes significantly to self-esteem and sense of self-worth.

Mental health and wellbeing

Adults with mental ill-health are the second largest group of service users for UK care farmers. In 2020, 67% of care farms were delivering services to this group of people.

It is already well-evidenced that spending time in nature can have a positive impact on mental health. Research into the benefits of care farming for mental ill-health builds on this.

Bragg (2014) finds that mental wellbeing improved across all green care types studied. Mental wellbeing improved after one session and over the duration of the programme. The majority of participants benefited from multiple wellbeing outcomes. They also felt more socially included and connected to nature. People often gained new skills and developed healthier, more sustainable lifestyles. Also see Bragg and Atkins 2016.

A review of mental health rehabilitation at Norwegian care farms (Pederson et al. 2016) concluded that participating in care farming positively influences mental health. It can be a supplementary approach in mental health rehabilitation. A recent study also supported green care as a potentially effective therapy for traumatic grief (Cacciatore 2020).

Green care can also be an effective therapeutic intervention when delivered alongside more typical forms of support. For example, including social and therapeutic horticulture alongside psychotherapeutic treatment for PTSD. The Dorset Family Matters programme found that domestic abuse flags reduced by 51% when equine assisted interventions were included in their support for troubled families. It was the greatest reduction achieved across the programme.

Older people and dementia

There are relatively few studies into the impact of care farming and green care for older people and those living with dementia.

Incorporating natural elements into residential homes has had proven health and wellbeing benefits. As have nature-based activities for older people. The Netherlands and Norway lead the field for studies in this area. See for example de Bruin et al 2020 and Ibsen et al 2018. There is also Sachiko Yamazaki et al (2019) in Japan.

In line with the aging population of the global west, the number of people in the UK with dementia is increasing. In 2020, just over 30% of UK care farms were providing services for

adults with dementia. A study from the Netherlands hypothesised that care farming interventions will have greater health benefits for older people with dementia than regular day-care services (de Bruin et al 2010).

Young people

There are a small number of published studies examining health and wellbeing benefits of care farming for young people.

Research in 2017 and 2020 found strong evidence of health and wellbeing benefits for young people. Studies found that care farms provide nurturing settings and experiences. Care farms were found to be highly conducive to learning and development. Health and wellbeing benefits were also reported through reductions in depression, anxiety and stress (Hambidge 2017, Fell-Chambers 2020). Norwood et al (2019) also showed promising findings.

Sources

- Social Farms & Gardens 2020
- Bragg 2014
- Bragg and Atkins 2016
- Pederson et al 2016
- De Bruin 2010
- De Bruin et al 2020
- Elsey, Murray and Bragg 2016
- University of Bournemouth 2020
- Rotheram et al 2017
- Kaley 2015 and 2018
- Ibsen et al 2018
- Sachiko Yamazaki et al (2019)
- Fell-Chambers 2020
- Hambidge 2017
- Norwood et al 2019

Further Reading

- Murray et al 2019

More information

Find out more about the [health and wellbeing benefits](#) of care farming on our website. This resource is 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 for more details or follow our latest updates on Twitter [@GrowCareFarming](#).

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