What are the benefits of social farming?

This month, Robin Asquith from Camphill Village Trust discusses the social farming movement

WHAT CAN HELP YOUR APPROACH

- Farming is multifunctional and has more to offer than simply food production. If you visit a social farm as a vet, take an interest in the people it supports – showing and explaining what you’re doing will be a highlight for them.
- Nuffield Farming Scholarships are open to anyone aged 22–45 who works within the farming, food, horticulture, rural and associated industries or are in a position to influence these industries. The award provides travel expenses for the holder to research a topic related to these areas. For more information, see www.nuffieldscholar.org. For an overview of the experiences of a vet who recently received one of these scholarships, see veterinaryrecord.bmj.com/content/184/1/1
- For more information about social farming in the UK, see www.farmgarden.org.uk. To find out more about Robin’s farm, see www.camphillvillagetrust.org.uk/locations/botton-village

SIX years ago, I had no idea what social farming – or care farming, as it’s sometimes called – was. Having now managed social farms for over four years, and travelled the world visiting them as part of a Nuffield Farming Scholarship, I’ve built up experience in this area and work as an advocate. I currently oversee the 650-acre Botton Village Estate, which is part of Camphill Village Trust – a national charity providing opportunities for adults with disabilities to develop new skills.

Social farms evolved as a form of diversification following the foot-and-mouth disease crisis of 2001, but they are so much more than that now. They can be small upland hill farms or large mixed farms, and a small number of city farms also operate under this model. The concept is very simple: to combine agriculture with health and social services provided to people with different types of disability or mental health concerns.

There are many different types of social farm, catering for a wide range of client groups (including those with learning disabilities, mental health issues, dementia or problems with substance misuse, as well as adult offenders and ex-service personnel), but they all provide clients with meaningful, purposeful work. The value of this cannot be underestimated.

As a farmer, I know how lucky we are to work outside. Being able to share this with people who have never had the opportunity is incredibly rewarding. The individuals who come to the farm respect the fact it’s your farm, they respect that they are here to work alongside you and they respect you because you treat them as you would any other worker. This is an experience many of the people who attend social farms have never had.

Clients get involved with all the regular farm jobs, from feeding, bedding, cleaning out, fencing, worming stock and helping with lambing and calving. For me and many others, this makes the job even more rewarding as it brings the social buzz of people back to the farm.

Of course, break time and dinner time are also vital parts of the day. These are great times for helping people socialise and develop softer life skills. People learn more than just farm skills when they attend a social farm.

There’s a financial benefit for farmers embracing social farming too – the average UK social farm placement is £50 per person per day. A common misconception is the perceived headache of health and safety. Yes, you do need to do risk assessments and ensure that your farmyard and buildings are safe to work in, but this is nothing that a farm shouldn’t already have in place. In fact, accidents on social farms are rare. Due to the different abilities of people attending, jobs tend to be carried out at a slower pace, and this reduces the risk of mishaps.

The reason social farms work so well compared with regular day services is because they are real life, and vets are an important part of this. No other day service can replicate a vet coming out to a farm to care for a sick animal. Interacting with vets on-farm not only broadens clients’ knowledge but also helps them feel valued as members of the farm.

Social farming isn’t for every farm or everyone, but there is a huge role that agriculture can play in delivering social care, both now and in the future. I’d like to challenge all of you to visit a social farm to see how they operate and how rewarding involvement can be.

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DO YOU WANT TO GET INVOLVED?

If you know a client who might be interested in writing for us, please contact us at vet.clientview@bmj.com. Any contributions will be assessed by the column’s veterinary coordinator, Zoe Belshaw.