



Care Farming West Midlands

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## INTRODUCTION

- Formed as a Company Limited by Guarantee on 30.9.2008
- CFWM has a Board membership balanced between Care Farmers and Commercial Professionals.
- As an Organisation we are approaching our 4<sup>th</sup> Birthday.
- Emerged from the original NCFI Group, with a pioneering approach, first developing awareness, then progressing to building capacity in order to see Care Farming adopted as part of the UK's mainstream Health, Wellbeing and Social Care provision.
- Successfully attracted funding, through the Regional Development Agency, Advantage West Midlands, to enable an initial capacity building project to be undertaken.
- Twelve months ago, with the benefit of further Government Funding through DEFRA's Rural Development Programme for England, CFWM was able to recruit a new team, to become more focussed on Service Development and Service Delivery.
- Care Farming West Midlands has three full-time Regional Development Officers each looking after two Counties within the West Midlands. The West Midlands Network now comprises almost 50 active Care Farms with several more in the pipeline in Warwickshire, which is a relatively new territory for us.

## **AIMS**

- We provide support advice and guidance to Care Farmers, where required. Our primary goal is to ensure that potential Commissioners and Service Users are aware of the existence of the facilities in their area and the activities and services available.
- It is critically important that Commissioners recognise the value and understand the benefit of care being delivered in this way and an important part of our role is to provide them with the evidence which underpins this.

## **ACTIVITY**

- Over the first twelve months, of what is an eighteen month project, we have successfully invested in a number of key areas which we sincerely hope will benefit to all involved in Care or Social Farming.
- Our work has included the development of a resource rich website, initially for our Regional Network Members, but with the scope for this to be extended. A dynamic, directory facility is also available to help promote their activity and help Commissioners identify where services are available.
- In an arena where there is not yet a good understanding it is quite possible that uncertainty will creep in and we have therefore felt it to be particularly important to be proactive and “write the future” – a phrase which I believe helpfully sums up our approach.
- We have researched and developed a Quality Standards Framework which has recently been launched in the West Midlands as one of the benefits of being a network member. In our experience many are entering new territory and it can be dangerous to assume that everybody is aware of the risks and the challenges they could meet. We

have sought to create a framework which will help Farmers operate “Safely, Successfully and Sustainably”.

- We believe it is very important to bring an holistic approach to Quality Standards and anticipate what Commissioners will be looking for in the future.

## **PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE**

- Turning the conversations into contracts takes time and needs evidence to build confidence, particularly when you are providing services for some of the most vulnerable in society,
- In the West Midlands we have enjoyed particular success, working with the Probation Service and with Drug and Alcohol Action Teams and their Contractors in various local authority areas. Success and consistent results have been the catalyst for discussions with other potential commissioners dealing with homelessness and unemployment.
- We find there is no substitute for letting a Commissioner, or a potential Client, see what is on offer for themselves and therefore having Farms who are able to host visits is really valuable. (Indeed for many would be Care Farmers this is their first step, to visit a farm that is up and running and find out what life is really like – and I know that is part of the plan for this project so if you are considering Social Farming I would strongly recommend it as part of the research that you do).

## **DEALING WITH THE CHALLENGES**

- During the relatively short life of Care Farming West Midlands we have only really known one set of economic circumstances – tough ones – but we live in hope that the green shoots of recovery will continue to develop and create the confidence, stability and resources necessary to implement some of the much heralded and long awaited changes in Commissioning practice.

- For any business, in challenging economic times, finding business gets more difficult and budgets for marketing can evaporate without any return. The typical potential Care Farmer has not got money to burn but they do have valuable skills and, as a Regional or National Organisation, we can do a great deal on their behalf to raise awareness and stimulate demand and hopefully help create more favourable circumstances.
- Having a good knowledge of what the marketplace is like is not easy to maintain on your own and sometimes the value of the network is to know that you are not on your own, if you are struggling, perhaps everybody is finding it just as tough.
- Having a team of people in the field regularly exploring new opportunities with Commissioners is important because things change and people move. It is often helpful to discover something working well in one area, and bring the know-how and see it replicated in another. You are also more likely to pick up on trends when you look at things from a wider perspective.
- Everybody benefits from encouragement and sometimes a visit from somebody who has your interests at heart is all you need, even if they cannot change the circumstances there and then.

## **BALANCING THE NEEDS OF FARMING AND CARE SERVICES**

- The Farmers I know have two plans: the dry weather plan and the wet weather plan. First and foremost they are Farmers and have a farm to look after. Some of what they do can be therapeutic but a lot of what they do is simply hard graft and needs to happen around the provision of care and activities.
- Our experience is that often Care Farming is part of the week and represents an element of diversification introduced into an otherwise commercial farming operation, it does not have to be an all or nothing commitment.

- Often building up activity and experience with smaller numbers one or two days a week can help both parties develop confidence and understanding before significant resources become involved.
- Commissioners will naturally expect certain basic provision to be made both in terms of facilities, safe guarding and risk assessments but the pace of development is totally the Farmer's choice.

### **THE FUTURE PROSPECTS**

- The value of Care Farming will not decrease and awareness will only increase.
- Demand is likely to increase slowly but consistently.
- It is important for Care Farming to operate with a realistic business model and an appropriate pricing for the service in order to avoid Care Farming or Social Farming simply being seen as a Charitable activity undertaken by kind hearted members of the Rural Community.

### **PERSONAL OBSERVATIONS**

- I feel hugely privileged to have been asked to speak here today as you formally launch this project.
- Like many in the room, I choose not to ignore the problems I see, and can do something about.
- One very exciting component of this project, I recognise as being of special worth, is the focus on family farms.
- In our society the fundamental building block of the family seems to have lost its place, but it will never lose its importance. There is a wealth of evidence to back up this view.
- We live in a fatherless generation and Farmers and Farming Families model something that is of great value – do not underestimate the value of who you are and what you represent. A home with a kitchen table that the family sits around to eat together is not as common as it once was.

- This time last week, across the water, we played host to the Paralympic games and time after time you heard the athletes say how the crowd had inspired them, lifted them.
- Their disability in most cases was visible, but when their “capability” was displayed, misplaced attitudes changed, and they were cheered on and they responded with personal bests and even set new records.
- I ask myself this question: “what about invisible “disability”?” That comes from anxiety, depression and through poor mental health?
- What if we choose to ignore it, in favour of the “hidden capability” and start cheering on those that we deal with, celebrating every step of progress they make?
- I suggest you will find the same response, hear the same comments and be rewarded with new personal bests and seeing new records set before your very eyes.