

## **Farming with care/Cream of the crop**

### **By Debbie Wilcox, Network Coordinator, National Care Farming Initiative (UK)**

Care farming is an embryonic but growing movement in the UK. It is about promoting physical health and mental well-being through farm work, and is aimed at a wide range of people including those with defined medical or social needs, or suffering from work-related stress or ill-health arising from obesity.

While there is no standard model for this work, in the last couple of years an increasing number of farms across the country have been applying the care farming approach to working with young offenders and disaffected young people.

Such farm-based projects can overcome isolation, develop skills and improve employment prospects, as well as providing the benefits known to accompany exercise.

Young people, particularly boys, who have come from a background of confrontation and physical violence often find a sense of purpose in the physical activities that working on the farm involves – fencing, vehicle maintenance, stacking hay and straw, and land and crop management, for example

Looking after animals is equally important – connections are made through feeding and caring, particularly with young animals, and the responsibility for this care can dramatically improve self-esteem. A cow that moos when it's hungry is a much more powerful motivator than a teacher or parent telling you to do work which doesn't seem relevant.

And this is why care farming works. The work is for a purpose and not an activity for activity's sake. The young people become members of a team that is part of something that matters. The variety of work changes with the seasons, and no two days are ever the same. Farms are great places for learning any number of skills to go on to gain better employment.

Roger Hosking at Highfields Happy Hens in Derbyshire knows just how successful these farms can be, as he has been running one for the past 20 years. Highfields is part of the Restorative Justice Project for the Youth Offending Service for offenders too young to go to prison.

The youngsters collect eggs from the 20,000 hens and help out with animal care and maintenance on the farm. Roger says, “at Highfields we seek to develop the youngsters' possibilities rather than focus on their limitations. When they come to us society has given up on them, they have often been expelled from school and are heading into the cycle of repeat offending. The Highfields experience breaks that cycle and many go on to get stable jobs”

The National Care Farming Initiative (UK) aims to promote and support the expansion of care farming throughout the UK, co-ordinating a network of farms that use agricultural activities to offer a range of services - health support, social

rehabilitation and/or educational provision to many people. For more information visit the website at [www.ncfi.org.uk](http://www.ncfi.org.uk) , email [enquiries@ncfi.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@ncfi.org.uk) or telephone Debbie Wilcox on 01952 815335.