



# Why volunteering at a care farm is good for you

## The benefits of volunteering

Volunteering has been described as any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group or organisation (Wilson, 2000). It can provide opportunities to gain new life experiences, skills and social connections, and can have positive outcomes for both the volunteers themselves and the beneficiaries. This project considered the role that volunteering may play in a specific setting - care farms.

## What is care farming?

Care farming is where agricultural and health and social care sectors meet in the form of a range of therapeutic farming practices (Hassink, Hulsink & Grin, 2012). It can also be defined as a type of 'green care', which utilises nature for therapy or interventions with vulnerable individuals. Care farms are relatively new to the United Kingdom and therefore have fewer numbers than neighbouring European countries (Bragg, 2012). There are an estimated 230 care farms established across the country (Bragg et al. 2014), which have become particularly popular for the variety of services they can provide. Care farms can aid the development of social, basic and work skills and as such have drawn the attention of the health, prison and probation services (Hine *et al.*, 2008a). Care farms may work with those experiencing work-related stress, individuals with learning disabilities, vulnerable young people and those with a history of drug abuse.

## The benefits of care farming

There is much evidence that contact with, and spending time in, nature can foster a sense of well-being and be beneficial to physical and mental health. This has resulted in a White Paper entitled 'The natural choice: Securing the value of nature', outlining the need to strengthen the connection between people and nature in the UK (DEFRA, 2011). Care farming is one of the ways in which this can be achieved through provision of therapeutic interventions for individuals from a wide range of backgrounds. Research indicates that care farming initiatives can promote higher confidence and self-esteem, an increased sense of purpose, improve psychological health and lead to moderate increases in general exercise (Elings & Hassink, 2008; Hine et al. 2008b). These benefits are attributed not only to the beneficiaries or service users of care farms, but extend to the staff working at the care farms.

## Aims of this project

The smooth running of care farms is dependent on a dedicated team of staff, and in many cases on volunteers, who offer a substantial contribution through their involvement in a wide range of tasks. Volunteers undoubtedly offer a valuable service to care farms but there is little known about why someone may choose to volunteer at a care farm and how this role might be of benefit. Given the known benefits of volunteering and the independent value identified from being involved in care farming, it is likely that this form of volunteering may have multiple benefits. Therefore, this study aimed to explore why individuals chose to volunteer in a care farm setting and what the benefits were for them.



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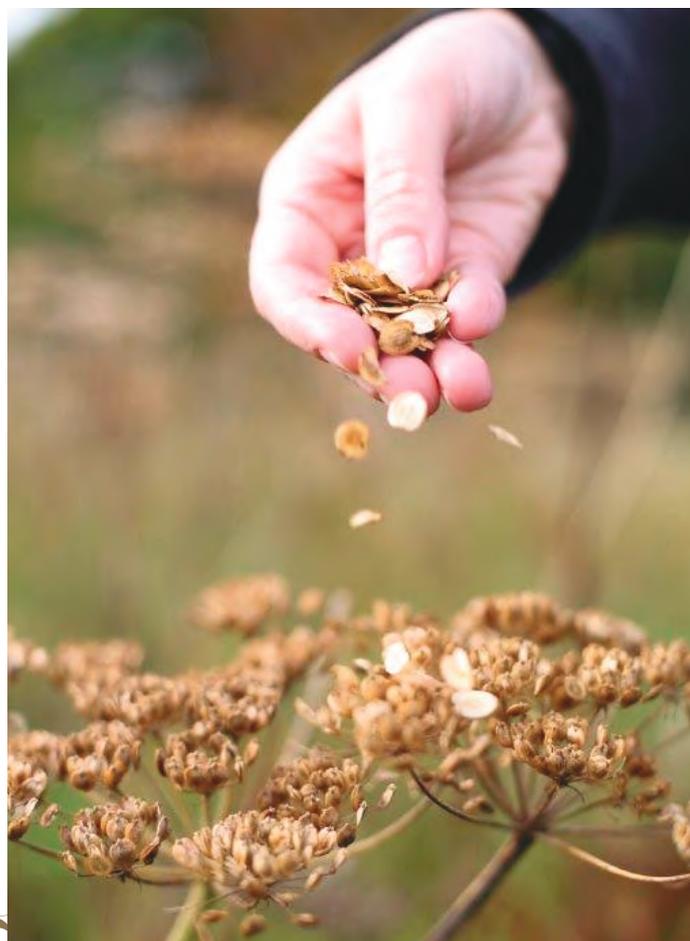
## The research process

A mixed methods approach was adopted which had two phases:

**Phase 1:** a quantitative survey design administered to volunteers across three care farming settings. **Phase 2:** a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews.

For the first phase 103 participants completed an adapted version of the Volunteering Functions Inventory (VFI: Clary *et al.*, 1998). The VFI is a standardised questionnaire that allows researchers to measure on a scale from 1-5 (1= not at all important and 5 = extremely important) to what degree a range of factors are important for individuals' volunteering experiences. The original VFI measures six factors; values, understanding, enhance, social, protect and career. Two factors were added to the VFI to specifically target the care farm volunteering experience, these were 'connection to nature' and 'health and physical activity'. See Table 1 for definitions of all eight factors measured in this study. A score is given for how much this factor acts as a function for volunteering (i.e. is this a key reason for taking part in this volunteering activity) and the degree to which this factor is an outcome for volunteering (i.e. is this a key benefit gained from taking part in this volunteering activity). Overall satisfaction of the volunteering experience was also measured using a Likert scale (1= extremely unsatisfied, 7 = extremely satisfied).

For the second phase we conducted interviews with 28 volunteers and asked them about their experience of working at a care farm. This more open-ended approach allowed the project to capture the volunteers' voice to complement the responses to fixed choice questions in the quantitative phase.



## Who took part in the research?

The majority (60%) of the 103 volunteers who took part in phase one of the study from across the three care farms were female. Participants ranged in age from 18 to over 75, however, the distribution was skewed towards the older age brackets with 54% being over 55 years of age. Although a large proportion of the volunteers were retired (43%) 20% were in full-time work. Interestingly, participants were almost equally divided in their choice of work environment, with 54% selecting to work indoors and the remaining working outdoors. Males were significantly more likely to work outdoors (64% of males selecting this environment) compared with 34% of females ( $p < 0.01$ ).

Ten males and 18 females took part, ages ranged from 21-79 years of age. Of those not retired, eight were undergraduate students, two were employed and two were unemployed. Participants undertook a range of volunteering roles for example, cooking or serving food and drinks in the café, general maintenance, gardening and animal husbandry.



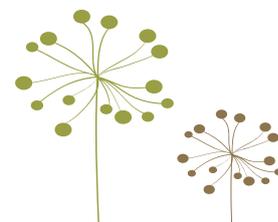
# Functions, outcomes and satisfaction with volunteering in a care farm setting

Satisfaction with the volunteering experience was high, with a mean score of 6.0 out of a possible maximum score of 7. The reasons why people volunteered on a care farm were wide ranging. Specifically, the functions of 'values', 'understanding', 'health and physical activity' and 'enhance' were rated as being the most important, (see Table 1). In other words, volunteers were motivated to volunteer on a care farm in order to (i) act on important values such as helping the less fortunate, (ii) learn more about the world, (iii) improve their physical health and (iv) grow psychologically.

High correlations (>0.7) between functions and outcomes for the majority of factors suggest there is a good match between volunteers' motivations for volunteering and the beneficial outcomes gained from their volunteering experience. The one exception was the relatively low correlation between functions and outcomes for the 'social' subscale (r=0.47). The explanation for this is unclear, however, it should be noted individuals perceived the function of 'strengthening social relations' as only the sixth (out of nine) most important function for volunteering and yet 'social' was judged as the third most important

beneficial outcome. It may be that strengthening social relationships is an unexpected outcome or an important outcome, but that it is not perceived to be the main purpose of volunteering. Another explanation is that this is a measurement artefact and that the VFI may not be fully capturing the type of social experiences afforded by volunteering in this setting. The latter explanation is supported by the results of the qualitative phase where social connections was a key theme identified by care farm volunteers (see below), and highlights the value of the mixed method approach used in this research.

Correlational analyses showed there were significant relationships between all potential beneficial outcomes and satisfaction with the volunteering experience, (see Table 1). However, there were particularly strong positive correlations (>0.5) between satisfaction levels and the following beneficial outcomes: enhance, understanding, social and connection to nature. Thus suggesting that where individuals feel their volunteering experience delivers the above outcomes, they are more satisfied with the experience.



**Table 1:** Functions, outcomes and satisfaction with volunteering at a care farm as rated by an adapted version of the Volunteering Functions Inventory

Factor	Definition	Function Mean (S.D.)	Outcome Mean (S.D.)	Correlations between outcomes and satisfaction
Values	the person is volunteering in order to express or act on important values, such as humanitarianism and helping the less fortunate	27.11 (6.80)	10.46 (2.94)	0.42**
Understanding	the individual is seeking to learn more about the world and/or exercise skills that are often unused	23.25 (8.20)	9.97 (3.52)	0.56**
Health and physical activity	the individual is volunteering to increase physical activity and improve physical health	22.18 (7.95)	8.33 (4.16)	0.48**
Enhance	the individual is seeking to grow and develop psychologically through involvement in volunteering	20.49 (8.19)	9.11 (3.63)	0.60**
Connection to nature	the individual is volunteering to enable a greater opportunity to connect with the natural environment	17.94 (9.77)	9.00 (4.03)	0.50**
Social	volunteering allows the person to strengthen one's social relationships	17.32 (7.85)	9.48 (3.87)	0.50**
Protect	the individual uses volunteering to reduce negative feelings, such as guilt, or to address personal problems	16.22 (8.32)	6.32 (4.18)	0.33**
Career	the volunteer has the goal of gaining career-related experience through volunteering	13.13 (10.04)	4.89 (3.98)	0.34**

Possible mean scores for functions range from 5-35. Possible mean scores for outcomes range from 2-14. Correlations are statistically significant at \*\*p<0.01.





**Table 2:** Themes identified from the interviews

Higher Order Themes	Themes	Indicative Content	Selected extracts from the interviews
<b>Social connections</b>	Social interaction	Chat to people, company, companionship, likeminded people, camaraderie, support	"Yes I've made new friends and funny we've had people come from our course who are in our year who we've never really spoken to before, but it's now quite nice to have that...Yes so just meeting lots of new people has been really, really good" (female, aged 21)
	New friendships	Friendships, meeting different people, people one might not usually come into contact with	"that sense of belonging somewhere" (male, aged 53)
	Keeping in contact	Keep in touch with people, talk about past	"...you're a part of the same community" (male, aged 53)
	Maintaining relationships	Something to talk about at home, connecting with other family members, environment a source of reminiscence (e.g. childhood memories)	"coming down the farm (.) is-is very pleasant for us because we've-we've taken on this community, we're like almost a family" (male, aged 62)
	Being part of something	Feel part of an organisation, a family, community, feeling part of a team	
<b>Meaningful volunteering</b>	Doing something for others	Seeing young people develop, contributing to the survival of the farm, saving the organisation money	"but this seemed to us to be a living thing that is valuable, which you can really get your teeth into, to do something to make a difference" (female, aged 64)
	Sense of purpose	Contributing, playing a role in the organisation, doing something good, making a difference, doing something worthwhile	"there is a sense that, you know this place does a good job it really does, people's lives have been changed by it a lot and from that point of view it makes you feel you're doing something worthwhile" (male, aged 66)
	Being appreciated	Feeling appreciated, feeling valued	"Um the role it plays is to make sure I don't turn into a cabbage I suppose. It relieves any frustration I might have about feeling discarded at the end of the working life, so yes it fulfils that side of it" (male, aged 67)
	Fits with values	Believe in the ethos, Christian beliefs, values about helping other, volunteering representing part of one's identity	
	Giving something back	To society, to those less fortunate than yourself	
	Vicarious rewards	Feel reward through helping others, see others get benefits, observing development of those who come to the farm	
	Perspective setting	Helping others who are worse off than you, realising you are fortunate	
<b>Connecting with nature</b>	Animals	Working with donkeys, feeding lambs, learning how to be around animals	"I can breathe with fresh air and smell something different from the city" (male, aged 22)
	Sensory-sights, sounds, smells	Sounds - birds singing, pigs snorting, sheep Smell of the animals Observing the changing seasons, fields, woods, green, trees, plants	"...yeah probably just being in the environment because it's natural and it's fresh and it's all the kind of farm smells and stuff and also the relaxation element of the peace and quiet. So it's two things, sort of a physical health related, being out in the sun and feeling physically better for being in the fresh air, and then there's the psychological benefit of being in a natural environment where it's quiet and peaceful, so both those things" (female, aged 32)
	Mud	Getting muddy, hands dirty	
	Tranquil environment	Fresh air, being in the country side, open space, tranquil, peaceful, beautiful, safe environment No traffic noise, no mobile phones	
	Rural vs urban landscapes	Contrast to the city, sky scrapers, building, cooped up, open space	
	<b>Therapeutic potential of volunteering</b>	Pleasure	Something for me, time to self
Relaxation		Feel calmer, peaceful environment, stress relief, energised, refreshed	"...well I get a lot of pleasure out of it" (male, aged 79)
Escape		Escape from expectations of others, family commitments, a distraction, contrast to pressures of work, forget work, forget about other things.	"I refresh myself very much I think. Yeah even though I have muscle pains and I ache after the day, it doesn't matter, I enjoy it, I feel very good [...] Yeah less stressed and...it gives me refreshment" (male, aged 22)
Physical impact		Keeping active, keep moving, keeping healthy, form of exercise, good to feel tired after the physical exercise, feel physically better	
<b>Individual growth &amp; development</b>	Confidence	In communicating with others, in working with different client groups, through rising to a new challenge	"I think it's important because you learn so many new skills and I think it's good to put yourself in situations with people you might not usually meet, I think that's quite good, to push yourself in that environment" (female, aged 21)
	Learning new skills	Skills working with animals, learning about gardening, plants, woodwork skills, DIY	
	Employability	Working with specific client groups, relevant for career, enhance CV, good work experience, helps with job applications, helped with career choice	"[described as good from a career perspective] ...because I can write it on my CV" (male, aged 21)



## Interviews with the volunteers

Analysis of the interviews with volunteers conducted for phase two of the research identified five main themes: Social connections, Meaningful volunteering, Connecting with nature, Therapeutic potential of volunteering and Individual growth & development. These are outlined in further detail in Table 2.

The most salient of these was 'social connections', which every participant commented on. This supported our initial finding which demonstrated while social connections were not an immediate motivation, they may still be a vital aspect of volunteering at a care farm. For the younger volunteers who were students the role allowed them not only to interact with people they would not usually come into contact with, but also to speak to people on the same course in greater depth. The older participants talked of the sense of camaraderie felt between the volunteers, new friendships emerging and existing ones being maintained. Therefore it can be assumed, based on our findings, that developing and maintaining social connections is a particularly essential aspect of the care farm volunteering experience.

## Social Maintaining Relationships Friendships Interaction Contact

## Values Perspective Appreciated Rewards Purpose Giving

A sense of value appears also to be an important aspect, which was the most substantial finding of the first phase of our research. The care farm environment appears to afford the opportunity not just to do something, but to engage in something meaningful, and was especially important for those who had retired. Participants also talked about believing in the ethos of the care farm, and felt that they were contributing to something worthwhile. These findings are supported and relatable to the motivations of care farmers themselves who have indicated the importance of values, such as seeking to make a difference, among other reasons for being involved in care farming practices (Bragg, 2013).

The notion of 'individual growth and development' was also especially relevant for the student and younger volunteers. It refers to motivations for volunteering around employability, but also the opportunity to learn new skills. Many of the students had volunteered previously in other locations, and viewed the care farming environment as something different. Being out in the countryside and open space seemed to contribute to this, which is described under the theme of 'connecting with nature'.

## Summary and implications of the findings

- Our research reveals that volunteers were motivated for a wide range of reasons, and that the benefits experienced for volunteering at a care farm are multi-faceted.
- Benefits of volunteering in a care farm include individual psychological growth, social connections, physical health, sense of giving back and helping others, connection with nature and a chance for relaxation and restoration.
- Such a range of motivations and benefits should be showcased in order to actively promote care farm volunteering.
- The findings add to the growing evidence base highlighting the advantages of working in natural settings for health and well-being.
- The findings indicate that care farm volunteering can and does provide opportunities for both active and healthy ageing across the adult lifespan.
- The benefits gained from volunteering at a care farm can be mapped to the five components of Well-being as recommended by The New Economics Foundation (NEF, 2011). The five things we are recommended to engage in to improve our well-being are Connect, Be Active, Take Notice, Keep Learning and Give, which are all demonstrated above as benefits of volunteering at a care farm.

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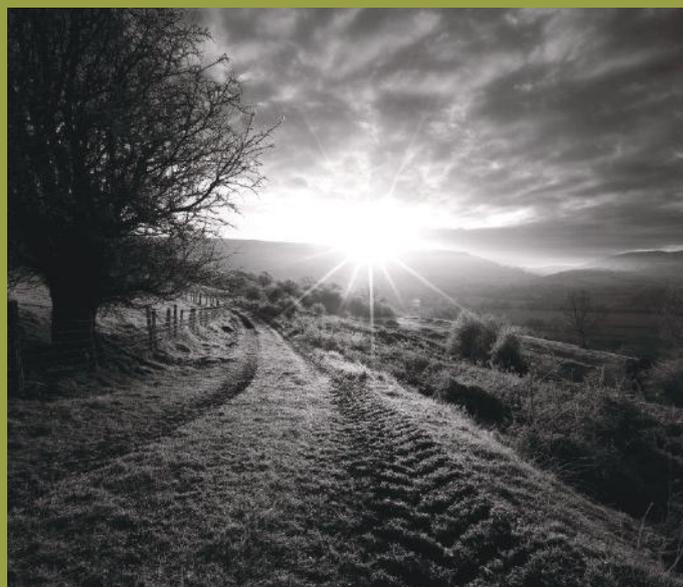
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## About the Centre for Outdoor Activities and Leisure research

COAL is a research group located within the Department of Applied Psychology at Cardiff Metropolitan University. Our aim is to evaluate and understand the role that the outdoors, volunteering and purposeful leisure may play in enhancing health and well-being. We work collaboratively with other academics and community based organisations.

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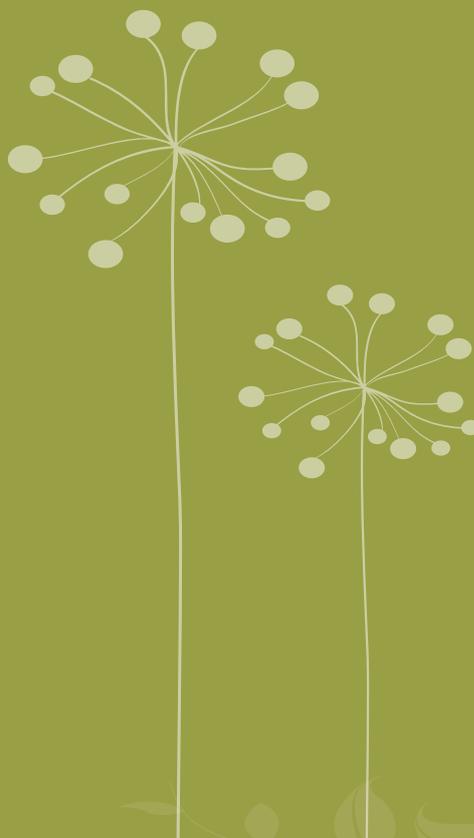


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