

Social Crofting CASE STUDIES



Case Study 4 - Knockfarrel Produce

Author: Dr David Heaney, Rossal Research & Consultancy

This croft was set up 10 years ago, on bare ground, and an empty house – a blank canvas. The crofter was a new entrant producer with experience of organic farming from an environmental and economic perspective, and training farmers and crofter about the business side of agriculture. The original aim was to do something looking after the environment and at the same time something social useful: **“growing organic vegetables rather than writing reports”**. In early days, they got a lot of support from local crofters, who gave weeks of their time. **“Showed us how to plough, how to fence, they were pleased to see someone working the croft”**

There has been training and mentoring events on the croft, leading to people asking to work on the farm, as volunteers. Initially these interested volunteers were turned away as the idea was to pay people working on the croft a living wage, and that is what happened for the first three years.

“We began with this naive ideal that we would pay everyone the living wage but it soon became apparent that neither me, or anyone else was making anything like the living wage”

However, the saleable value of the produce did not justify this, the business struggled, and needed to change away from contracts for school meals and selling kale to London, into totally selling veg boxes locally direct to customers so the croft got the whole mark-up on its produce. This was an attempt to pivot at a key moment to make the croft stand it on its own two feet. It was at this point that volunteers, who again approached the croft, were accepted.

The croft has never advertised for volunteers, people have just wanted to do it, and approached the croft. Initial concerns were that volunteers are exploited, but a respected colleague said – **“If they want to come, they must be getting something out of it”**.

The first person who volunteered was someone who wanted to re-enter the labour market. The second person was a bored retired person, who now has been coming for 5 years. Some people who wanted the experience of working the land in preparation for setting up on their own. So, they come to grow, to learn, to chat, to investigate how to set up by yourself.

One day a week volunteers do the labour-intensive work of mucking in with whatever is needed done on the croft -planting seeding transplanting weeding picking packing. They don't do machine work, for health and safety reasons. The social interaction is important. The crofter enjoys the chance to work with a team **“working in a team is what I have been used to and it builds my self-esteem”**.

There have been 25-30 local people worked as a volunteer, many staying for over a year, at any one time between 3 and 8 people are doing this. **“There is nothing formal, there is no contract, with individuals or agencies. It's up to them, it's flexible”**. In terms of health and safety volunteers are equivalent to employees.

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Early retirees tend to stay, young entrants come from 6-8 months and move on. Four people who have come have now got their own crofts/farms. New entrants bring skills with them but working on the croft improves their farming skills. Routes into farming and crofting are limited despite a strong desire for it, so a spell volunteering can help people make their minds up how much they want to follow this route. On the other hand, the reality of the economics of crofting can help to change plans. One woman decided to set up a food business rather than a croft after several months of working on the croft.

The physical product at the end of the job is important. **“Getting close to nature is these days is a novelty, and you’ve earned your lunch”**. The crofter noted that his phone pings 10,000 steps every day by 3pm. I spent an afternoon working on the croft and enjoyed talking to the team, the exercise, being effective being shown by someone who knows what they are doing. Picking cucumbers was enjoyable, and taking a few home at the end of the day even more so.

The Wednesday is an important day for the croft- it’s now an integral part of the business. Getting the veg boxes filled is a good group activity. Its fine to do any task for two hours, after that it maybe feels a bit more like a job. People keep coming back to volunteer. They go away with extra produce, a payment in kind. The economics of a small croft means the volunteers can’t be paid. After a few weeks there is a check to make sure the volunteer understands the reality of the business.

“you don’t start doing new things until you stop doing the old things, so if our business had worked, we wouldn’t have had to bring in volunteers”

As it turned out the business got a valuable resource. The crofter had been isolated before, and is now socially in a much better situation, and it was a relief to change from trying to make a profit into succeeding at making a living. The change from a business focus to a people focus meant voluntary effort becomes valuable. The business has improved to some extent. With an economics background, the crofter calculated he was earning £1.20 an hour – making a living but not making cash. With this type of business there are high overheads and the croft are re-investing in the business.

Other features of the business that are worth noting

- Uniformity of product is important, so regular customers required, who take what is ready, one-offs and tailored veg boxes are too difficult. There is now a long waiting list to join. The crofter emphasised the close relationship he has with his customers who he knows and likes – its not just a financial transaction.
- The veg boxes are delivered once a fortnight right across North West Highlands, the crofter does the west coast and meets his customers but there are also volunteers who help with the drop off.

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- Overflow goes to foodbank, the volunteers, and there is a bit of co-operation with local farms. And other veg box schemes in the wider area have agreed their territories informally, and share produce gluts or help to fill shortages.
- There is a two-way commitment between the croft and the volunteers. The croft makes sure they get a nice lunch and undivided attention on Wednesday – no emails, no phone calls. The crofter works alongside them in the tasks, and interacts socially and teaches, and demonstrates. This interaction is critical from all perspectives.

Future areas the croft might be interested in

- The croft could add other peoples' products to their boxes – they already include cheese, but there is the potential for bread etc.
- It would be good to have more trainee growers coming.
- Healthy food prescription scheme has been investigated as a possibility with local GPs.

Food prices in the UK are historically low – only 11 percent of income is spent on food. Supermarkets mean that consumer price expectations are low. The use value is high, exchange value is low. Social benefits are not valued by the market.

Elsewhere, this is different. There is a minimum wage for small farms in Spain. Italy a contract which includes providing local produce. In Norway there is an ethos of supporting local solutions. demonstration these people can deliver on social outcomes. In Scotland, policy is geared to the 1000 big farms who supply the raw materials for whisky industry. There could be demonstration sites to show crofts and smallholdings can deliver on social outcomes. Grants could be redirected to reward the things crofts can deliver – good food – high animal welfare – social activity– environmental outcomes – and healthy food in rural areas. Current grants are rewarding people farming which has no social benefit. New post Brexit regulations in England are aiming to reward farmers for delivering and this could shake things up.

This croft has found success though adopting a business model called Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), that is popular in the United States, as a way to serve local people and work with them to supply food in exchange for their long term custom and support. CSA has worked better for them than a social enterprise business model, as it makes the connection direct to local people without the need for payment through public sector care contracts. There are, however, clear health benefits to the participants, who report improved physical and mental health, and a sense of belonging and helping their community

“I look forward to Wednesdays, good fun, good company. Thursdays, I love it. I drive around the Highlands and chat to people about vegetables.”

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Find out more about Knockfarrel Produce [here](#)

The nature of case study 4 meant it was possible to ask volunteers what they thought about volunteering. They completed an anonymous questionnaire, which they posted to Rossal Research. I prefer to keep this in their words.

“I’m enjoying working on the croft at the minute because it gets me out of the house to do something different to the everyday. The fresh air is good for me and I like seeing things growing. Also being around the pigs brings me a great deal of joy” (1)

The volunteers answered three questions

1. What do you enjoy about volunteering at the croft?

- Learning about organic growing and the physical work (2)*
- I'm not volunteering. I'm working. That's the term I would choose. (3)*
- I am filling in the labour gap brought on by the pandemic, allowed several needs to be met - to be of service, to learn and to earn. Three enjoyable components of work. (3)*
- Volunteering on the croft I get to be part of the food cycle: seeding plants; preparing the soil; planting; weeding; harvesting; preparing veg boxes; and the delivering to customers. Most jobs today specialise in one thing. This is the opposite: it's really satisfying to see through the annual cycle, from seed to plate; and to see something real and delicious, that people enjoy, at the end of it. (4)*

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- *Being outside all day (5)*
- *Providing wonderful veg/fruit for our customers (5)*
- *I enjoy helping my friend, the crofter, to produce local food and learning all aspects of crofting (6)*
- *I get lots of fresh air and really enjoy being outside in all weathers. It makes me feel in touch with the natural world. (6)*
- *The social aspect is great as is the joint completion of tasks. In COVID19 times getting out of the house is of great value*

2. Can you tell me about the physical or mental health benefits this brings for you?

- *Makes me feel tired at the end of the day (2)*
- *Outdoor team work in a rural community is an environment that I'm comfortable with. (3)*
- *Small scale organic vegetable farm supplying a local market is a model of production that I'm happy to promote through participation. (3)*
- *Learning and earning amplifies the feeling that working in agriculture is time well spent if not yet adequately rewarded. (3)*
- *For our society to fully benefit from the benefits of land work then we need to make that work pay. (3)*
- *The health benefits of collaborative work associated with food orientated land work are huge - direct and indirectly (3)*
- *I suffer from PTSD and anxiety. Since working on the croft, I have become a lot fitter, but most importantly a lot calmer. It's a great team, and I have learned to trust people again. (4)*
- *I worry a lot less when I am doing real physical work. (4)*
- *Is hard work for no money but it's worthwhile and I feel a lot happier than I did. (4)*
- *Becoming fitter and stronger (5)*
- *It is better for mental health being outside all day rather than being stuck in an office (5)*
- *The social side of the crofting is great for my mental health. (6)*
- *Tasks completed make me feel good. (6)*
- *Seeing the weather changing and listening to the abundant wildlife is a real tonic (6)*

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- *The physical health is mainly increasing strength and stamina from doing reasonably hard work. Working at a desk does not do much for your strength. Even after 4 weeks of 2 days a week /I can feel the difference with heavy work becoming easier (6)*

3. What have you learnt being a worker on the croft?

- *How to centre a weak seed. (2)*
- *Scale – site is labelled as a small farm. My definition of small differs. I've learnt a small amount in my first week. Whenever my time ends at the farm - ideally not for a year or so yet - I'd still leave with more questions than answers. Fine. (3)*
- *A point worth emphasising to young people looking to start a working life - in return for commitment, learning and practice, farming offers variety and lifelong learning. That's a strength and selling point of the job. It might not register because other work that offers the same come with the security associated with earning potential. We need to redefine, reorganise and reallocate language, systems and resources. (3)*
- *What if all non-organic produce was labelled industrial? What if school curriculum involved work experience along the food mile route - from the land to the school canteen? What if small parcels of productive and non-productive land were readily available for people wishing to develop them for the purpose of food production? These ideas existed prior to starting work here. They will grow and change with further hands on experience here and elsewhere. (3)*
- *Collectivism and different models of tenure. The former has been lost to crofting and the later has been dominated by one or two models. Not everyone wants to own a home or take on work of a scale required to primarily make it pay. Brings us back to scale and the knowledge required to assess all the inputs required to deliver the output desired. This requires training and support that is thin on the ground. (3)*
- *Prior to doing what I do now I worked for 15 years in a variety of clinical settings around the world. Mainly it was Community orientated work - paid employment targeting social disadvantaged groups that have the highest incidence of disease. Urban and rural settings equally. Behaviour change is the key to public health. A key component to achieving change is social cohesion. (3)*
- *Practical stuff. Growing veg. Looking after animals. But mostly I have learned that we – me, you, all of us – are part of nature. We have to balance what we want and need, with what nature can supply and sustain. It's a key lesson for our survival, but most of modern society ignores or does not even understand, or consider (4)*

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- *Learning how to grow veg/fruit on a larger scale (5)*
- *Looking after pigs, hens and ducks (5)*
- *I have learnt about animal husbandry (pigs) and the sowing regime of the croft (6)*
- *just what a great deal of hard work, for relatively little return a mixed croft delivers. (6)*

Taking these comments together, they are a strong set of statements and they demonstrate the value of what is being achieved on the croft. This is a model that could be explored on other sites.

