



## Spaces of well-being: Social crofting in rural Scotland

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### ABSTRACT

The transformation of nature-society relations towards conditions of wellbeing and sustainability is of major global concern and academic interest. Contributing to this important area, this research examines the inter-connection between rural development, wellbeing and agriculture in Scotland through a qualitative study of ‘social crofting’. Social crofting is a type of care farming, which is increasingly prominent in the UK context and beyond, but under-developed in Scotland. Drawing from the existing literature, we apply a wellbeing lens to the unique conditions of crofting in rural Scotland through the concept of ‘spaces of wellbeing’. We show the diverse practices that constitute social crofting and enable different kinds of wellbeing within rural communities. Our findings point to the challenges and barriers for social crofting which is under-resourced and under-valued in Scotland and we contextualise this within a hybrid neoliberal policy context. Given the potential for transforming nature-society relations and contributing to the wellbeing agenda, greater support is needed for crofters to pursue social crofting in rural Scotland.

### 1. Introduction

This research sits at the nexus of wellbeing and rural development and is concerned with how to meet people’s needs in the context of intersecting global environmental, economic and social crises. Arguably, ‘wellbeing is one of the most important issues facing the world today and is central to the development of social policy for rural areas’ (Vaznonienė, 2014, p.247). More broadly, the idea of a wellbeing economy recognises the interconnections between society and nature and calls for the transformation of current systems towards a holistic approach to prosperity (Costanza et al., 2018). Wellbeing is thus central to transformation, as we must ‘challenge existing ways of thinking and behaving ... To consider alternative futures’ and move away from individualised responsibility towards a relational view of people and planet (Searle 2021, p.282). For McAlpine et al. (2015) transformational change is needed to better integrate ourselves into our communities, as well as re-connecting with and valuing nature and being ethical in our dealings with people and environment.

In the UK, Scotland was the first administration to adopt a ‘wellbeing framework’ which was introduced in 2007 through the National

Performance Framework (NPF) (Wallace, 2018). On the one hand, this has been considered ‘transformative’, however, from another perspective, the scale of change necessary, has not been achieved (Wallace, 2018). The framework was updated in 2018, and as a whole government approach to wellbeing it aligns 11 national outcomes with the 17 UN sustainable development goals (Scottish Government, 2019). Currently, Scotland is one of the countries in the wellbeing economy governments initiative, alongside Finland, New Zealand, Wales and Iceland which was launched in 2018. The basis for which is that development ‘should deliver human and ecological wellbeing’ (WeGo, 2021). Scotland has made the creation of a wellbeing economy a priority (Scottish Government, 2021). In this context, wellbeing can be conceptualised in three ways. Personal wellbeing refers to how one feels about their own life, community wellbeing to what we need to live well locally, and societal wellbeing is what we need to live well together as a society now and into the future (Boyce et al., 2020). Boyce et al. (2020) argue rather than viewing these as being in conflict with each other, (as is often seen to be the case related to resource allocation), they can be considered three interconnecting layers of wellbeing. This also speaks to Fisher’s (2019, p.8) definition of public wellbeing as having and exercising certain

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<sup>1</sup> Dr David Heaney is sadly now deceased. This occurred shortly after we began writing this article. Dr Heaney was the principal researcher and made a substantial contribution to this work and we wish to acknowledge him as a co-author.

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abilities, 'which are always developed and exercised (or not) through constant processes of interaction between individual and environment'.

In Scotland, despite a relatively advanced agenda surrounding wellbeing, there remains an absence of academic attention to, and policy for the connection between agriculture and wellbeing. This is despite [Skerratt and Williams' \(2008\)](#) call for a more supportive policy environment to grow social farming in Scotland. The lack of action is made more concerning in the context of the challenges facing rural communities in Scotland including 'the imminent crisis in rural social care delivery', access to fair/good work and experiences of poverty and social isolation ([Shucksmith et al., 2021](#), p.4). For [Shucksmith et al. \(2021\)](#) place-based and person-based approaches need to be combined in rural policies for addressing vulnerability, hardship and improving wellbeing. We explore the connections between people and place in rural Scotland in relation to 'green care', which connects healthcare and agriculture through local interventions for health and wellbeing. Our context for doing so is the Moray and Highland regions of rural Scotland and the focus is on the specific practices of crofters doing 'social crofting'. This paper is the first to adopt this terminology and contributes to the under-researched area of social farming in Scotland by exploring different models of social crofting, the interaction of crofters with health services, the barriers and challenges to developing social crofting as an income stream and the main benefits of participation. The paper begins by defining crofting and contextualising the research within relevant international literature on care farming and introducing the concept of 'spaces of wellbeing'. It goes on to outline the qualitative research approach which was taken and the use of participatory methodology working with the needs and perspectives of crofters for transformative action related to wellbeing in Scotland's rural communities. The findings are presented as key themes which emerged from across the six case studies and analysed in relation to the academic literature on wellbeing and rural development and situated within the current Scottish policy context.

## 2. Theoretical context: crofting and wellbeing

Crofting is an agricultural practice unique to the Highlands of Scotland with importance as a culturally and geographically specific interaction between people and place. Crofting is valued as a small-scale, low intensity practice that is vital to the continued use of land and population retention in the Highlands and Islands, important to cultural heritage, rural stewardship, economy and community and wellbeing (see [Shucksmith, 2008](#)). Crofts are small parcels of land that often include a croft house and can be used in ways similar to other smallholdings, but within a specific legislative framework and regulated through the Crofting Commission. Central to crofting are rights to use common grazings, which are one of very few remaining examples of common property that survived the near elimination of such regimes in Western Europe ([Brown, 2006](#)). Crofts were never designed as a viable way of securing self-sufficiency for crofters themselves, the origins of the system being rooted in the Highland Clearances and the crofters representing a source of rural labour for landlords ([Shucksmith and Rønningen, 2011](#)). Hence, crofters participate in other areas of employment and social roles within the wider community ([Hains et al., 2013](#)), thus perpetuating the primacy of cultural and community traditions over commercial gain. However, the question remains surrounding how to 'promote economic activities that are both lucrative and compatible with a crofting lifestyle' ([Shucksmith and Rønningen, 2011](#), p.280). This is set within a challenging contemporary context where crofting itself is under strain with tensions surrounding the inflated market values of croft land and tenancies,<sup>2</sup> the continuation of

unsustainable practices related to overgrazing and the difficulties surrounding the enforcement of regulations around neglected land and absentee owners ([Shucksmith, 2008](#)). This is accompanied by challenges associated with under-utilising of common grazings in contemporary contexts, and overall decline of crofting practices, partly due to the ageing population of crofters and the struggle to retain young people in rural communities ([Brown, 2006](#)). Crofting predominantly involves agriculture, fishing, and tourism diversification, with health, wellbeing and social care emerging anecdotally as a newer avenue for sustaining crofters and communities. Beyond the issue of sustaining crofting for rural livelihoods, we sought then to better understand the potential role for crofters in the context of creating a wellbeing economy. This is conveyed through the idea of 'social crofting' which denotes using crofts for the purpose of improving health and wellbeing as commonly understood through the terminology of 'care farming/social farming'.

Social farming belongs to 'a grey zone occupied by agriculture, social, education and health sectors' and requires a transdisciplinary approach ([Di Iacovo et al., 2016](#), p.27). In the UK, social farming is gaining popularity for its potential to meet diverse societal care needs by ethical means, defined simply as the idea of 'using commercial farms and agricultural landscapes as a base for promoting mental and physical health' ([Hine et al., 2008](#)). The distribution of care farms in Scotland appears to be growing, although current numbers are unclear with recent studies citing as low as six ([Leck et al., 2014](#); [Rotherham et al., 2017](#)) and as high as twenty ([Merry, 2017](#)) between 2014 and 2017. This is markedly lower than projections in 2008 that predicted by 2018 there could be nearly 500 care farms in Scotland, generating an income of over £24 million per year for the agriculture sector ([Skerratt and Williams, 2008](#)).

A growing body of evidence identifies the range of health and wellbeing benefits that specific groups can derive from social farming (for example see [Gorman and Cacciatore, 2017](#); [Guirado et al., 2017](#); [Ibsen et al., 2018, 2019](#); [Murray et al., 2019](#); [Pederson et al., 2016](#)). This is contextualised broadly by the idea that connection with 'nature' is crucial to human wellbeing, which [Crowther \(2019\)](#) suggests can be potentially transformative for individuals. Across Europe, social farming has existed since the 1960s, with diverse paths of development in different countries ([Di Iacovo and O'Connor, 2009](#)). The Netherlands are pioneers of social farming ([Dell'Olio et al., 2017](#)) whereas Portugal and Spain have relatively fewer examples with care farming in the early stages in Catalonia ([Guirado et al., 2017](#); [Tulla et al., 2017](#)). In Italy, there has been attention to fostering further development of social farming by ensuring its practices and success are visible, entrepreneurial skills are cultivated, and networks for support are built between actors with different backgrounds to facilitate knowledge exchange ([Dell'Olio et al., 2017](#)). In Norway, social farming is well developed ([Pederson et al., 2016](#)) and collaboration between municipalities and farmers, means the former paying for and maintaining overall responsibility for the quality of the service ([Ibsen et al., 2018](#)). Despite this, agriculture is still considered an 'underused resource' for health promotion with new interventions being developed to support the ageing population to live well ([Sudmann and Borsheim, 2017](#)).

Social farming is not heterogeneous, differences exist based on factors such as which sectors are involved in organising the activities and whether they are family, community or professionally based ([Dell'Olio et al., 2017](#)). Hence, social farming, is not only based on state intervention, but a socio-cultural framework involving private farms, health and social workers, voluntary associations, cooperatives and consumers which organise in ways to create a more resilient and sustainable local society ([Di Iacovo et al., 2016](#)). For example, social farming is considered a nature-based solution that can reconnect human wellbeing with natural landscapes, delivering rural sustainability through multiple ecosystem services benefits ([Garcia-Llorente et al., 2016](#)). Furthermore, it can advance food sovereignty in Europe and public policies ought to be geared towards working with the third and private sectors to foster social farming ([Tulla and Vera, 2019](#)).

<sup>2</sup> The register of available crofts for March 2021 shows a total value of £12,265,239 and an average price of £74,280.24 - using data from 165 crofts and excluding those with no price advertised.

As an approach to sustainable rural development, different organisational models across Europe can be identified: the social welfare/democratic model dominant in northern Europe; the corporate model common to central Europe; the neo-liberal model of the UK; and the mixed model of the Mediterranean (Tulla et al., 2014). The UK model is characterised as ‘neo-liberal’, based on voluntary assistance in a context where the public system does not provide universal coverage for individuals and families and provision often relies on private contracts and the third sector (Tulla et al., 2014). Thus, care farming in the UK is situated in a context where ideas of ‘(connected) individual, collective and place-based notions of wellbeing have not featured in government policy on health and healthcare; rather the stress has been on the individual and on health-related behaviours’ implemented by successive neoliberal governments (Hall, 2010, p.276). The neoliberalisation of health and social care in the UK has been conceptualised as a crisis, related to the problematic ‘commodification of care framed ideologically by consumer choice and individual responsibility’ (Ward et al., 2020, n.p). In Scotland specifically, the use of ‘assets-based’ approaches to health, for example, have been branded neoliberalism with a community face (MacLeod and Emejulu, 2014); a critique which sits alongside broader recognition of the negative impacts on public health from four decades of neoliberalism (Garnham, 2017). That being said, when it comes to social farming, regarding whether Scotland’s approach should sit within the same UK neo-liberal model is open to question on the basis both of devolved healthcare arrangements and approaches to agricultural policy. The broader neoliberal policy environment also underpins the UK Government’s approach to agriculture and the environment which emphasises liberalisation, marketisation and competitiveness (Stock et al., 2014). By contrast, Scottish agricultural policy is rooted in public value (Midgeley and Renwick, 2012) and the above characterisations for care farming do not translate easily to crofting, which has a more complex relationship to neoliberalism. Shucksmith and Rønningen (2011, p.285) for example suggested ‘pluriactive small farms may be seen as central to an alternative, post-neoliberal future for upland communities’. More recently, Sutherland et al.’s (2019) research on farming in Scotland (which includes crofting), also highlights how non-commercial farms (NCFs) whilst less production-orientated, are well placed to provide public goods related to environment and climate change. To this we propose the potential addition of the provision of wellbeing.

Wellbeing itself has no universal definition (Fleuret and Atkinson, 2007) however it brings to the fore a sense of subjective experiences rather than objective indicators of health such as individual fulfilment, realising one’s potential, experiencing peace of mind, resilience, and positive relationships (Rotherham et al., 2017). Hence, it should be acknowledged that people experience spaces of wellbeing differently and no single approach can create universal wellbeing. The difficulty defining and measuring wellbeing has resulted in the concept not being widely applied (Hall, 2010). However, attention to therapeutic landscapes and ideas of social capital in health geographies are increasingly demonstrating the value of a wellbeing lens for understanding how physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing can arise from a range of sources, places, environments, and social relations (Hall, 2010, p.276). Care farms can be understood conceptually as ‘spaces of wellbeing’, invoking the relationship between health and place, and the shift towards emphasising the social and spatial aspects of health (Fleuret and Atkinson, 2007). Spaces of wellbeing are conceived as: spaces of capability; spaces of security; integrative spaces and therapeutic spaces (Fleuret and Atkinson, 2007). The model conceptualises wellbeing as based on the theory of needs, of relative standards and theories of capability and each confronts the challenge of incorporating both objective and subjective elements of wellbeing, the former for example, living conditions and resources, the latter perceptions and goals (Fleuret and Atkinson, 2007). Thus ‘spaces of wellbeing’ emphasise the complexity and potential of wellbeing ‘an individually judged, yet socially experienced, status of happiness, freedom, safety, and capability,

shaped by interrelations with social and cultural (and natural) environments’ (Hall, 2010, p.277). This lens has yet to be applied to crofting, which as a distinctive, place-based, (agri)cultural practice. Thus, social crofting requires further analysis in this context to consider the possibility of a Scottish model of care farming and the potential for producing wellbeing in rural communities.

### 3. Methodology

The overarching methodology of the research was shaped by a timeline of events which are presented below in Fig. 1.

The foundation of the work was the Social Farming Across Borders (SoFAB) meeting in 2015. The SoFab project was funded by the EU Interreg 4 scheme to enable cross-border communication and co-operation to build a shared identity through co-operation and understanding cultural differences and commonalities (McCall, 2011). The meeting was attended by both farmers and crofters who moved to establish an informal network to support and grow a movement for social crofting in recognition of its unique cultural identity (Busby and MacLeod, 2011), distinct from farming.

Despite anecdotal evidence presented at the 2015 meeting, there was little empirical evidence to substantiate a firm definition of the movement. Furthermore, there was an expressed need from the grassroots membership to explore and ratify social crofting as a movement for social justice which situated the epistemological assumptions of the project as a transformative exploration of rich qualitative data (Mertens, 2010). Following an initial team meeting led by SCF a methodology was drawn up to develop a social crofting study in co-operation between two crofting regions, Highland and Moray.<sup>3</sup> The rationale for choosing these counties was to make links and share understanding between an established crofting area and a relatively recent crofting county, included within the crofting regulatory framework since the 2010 Crofting Act (Flynn and Graham, 2017). This echoed the tenets of the SoFab initiative (McCall, 2011), the aim of the co-operation being twofold; to understand and clarify practices within the definition of social crofting and to understand how place-based definitions (Busby and MacLeod, 2010) could inform non-traditional crofting activities (Sutherland et al., 2014) for wellbeing.

The idea of transformation was central to the framing of *project name* and this research, which emerged out of grassroots engagement with crofters. The methodological approach is rooted in a critical social research paradigm, where the aim of inquiry is not simply critique but also transformation of existing social, economic and political structures of inequality (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). It reflected a concern with doing participatory action research with communities, which involves forming relationships and partnerships with participants ‘to identify issues of local importance, develop ways of studying them, collect and interpret data, and take action on the resulting knowledge’ (Smith et al., 2010, p.408). Hence the starting point of the research, was the co-creation of a project focused on the possibilities for ‘social crofting’ an emic term which emerged out of initial conversations with crofters. The ontological assumptions that shaped the study were led by a call from the grassroots membership of a third sector agricultural organisation that represents the rights, livelihood and culture of crofters (SCF, 2021). Additionally, thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) of the key terminology and issues relating to the definitions and understanding of social crofting as a concept was drawn out through a series of five network meetings which were held throughout the project to scope the opinion and understanding of those attending. Over the five network meetings a total of 185 participants attended and a further

<sup>3</sup> Moray region comprises ‘70% open countryside’ and ‘25% woodland’ (Moray Council, 2020) and Highland region is described as including the ‘most remote and sparsely populated parts of the United Kingdom’ (Highland Council, 2020).

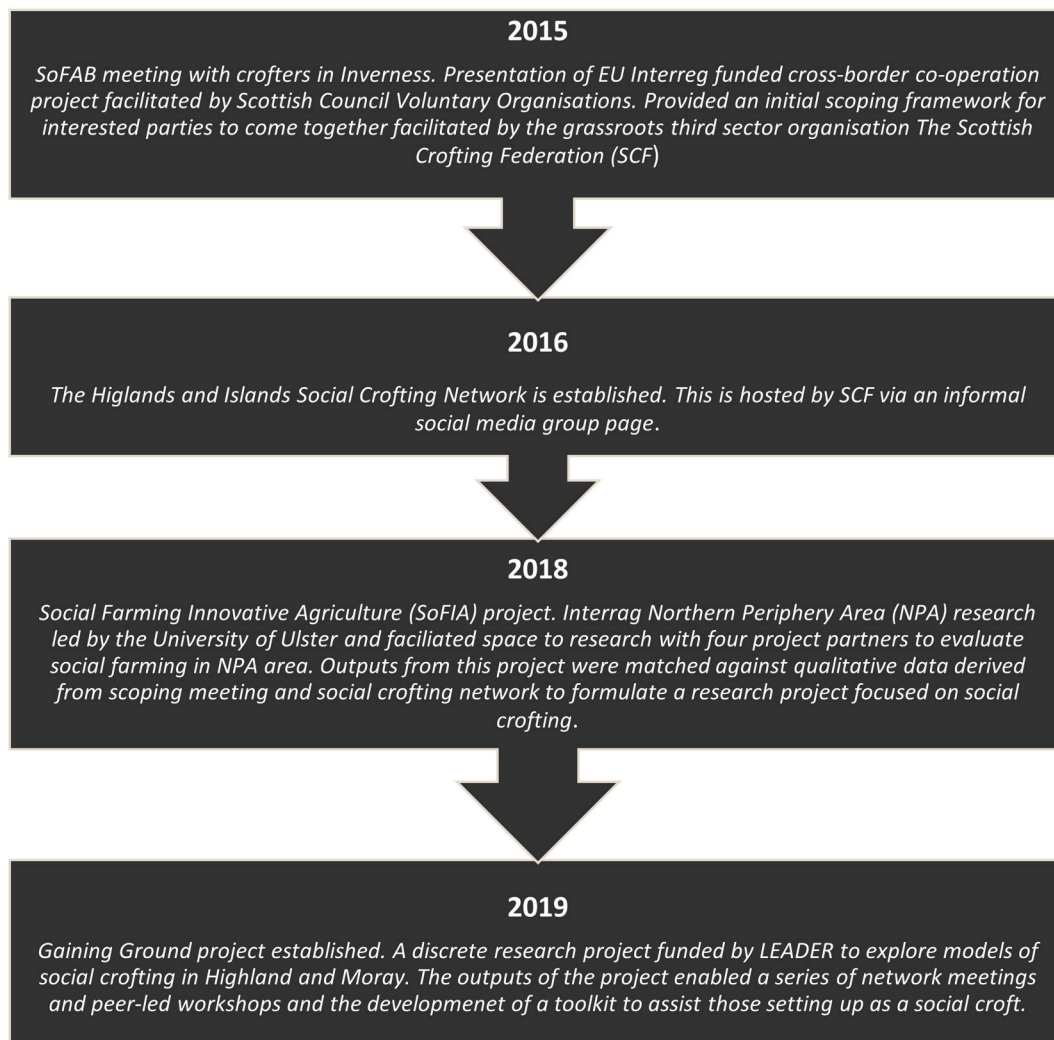


Fig. 1. Timeline of activities informing current research project.

dissemination meeting took place led by the principal investigator at the Oxford Real Farming Conference in January 2020.

For the *Gaining Ground* project, the research aims were specifically to identify the status and characteristics of social crofting in Scotland, exploring different models of social crofting, the interaction of crofters with health services, the barriers, and challenges to developing social crofting as an income stream and the main benefits of participation for crofters and clients. This would form the basis of understanding the process of transformation that may be required in order to develop more sustainable models of crofting and represent a body of knowledge to be shared among crofters. The methods used thus focused on the perspectives of crofters themselves, service providers, client groups and carers, and the wider community contextualised by thematic scoping of LEADER core themes against crofting development goals and broader questions surrounding the extent to which social crofting could contribute to wellbeing and rural development in Scotland.

Approaching social crofting practices as case studies was useful to gain comparative and qualitative understanding, addressing the research aims and questions in the context of a lack of existing data on social crofting in Scotland. Thus, a comparative case study approach was useful in identifying different models of delivery and the diverse practices that might be conceptualised as social crofting. This approach also responds to the call for future research to ‘critically engage with the heterogeneity of... care farms [to] widen the evidence base for care farming as a useful intervention for a much broader variety of contexts’

(Gorman and Cacciatore, 2017, p.20). Cases were ‘developed in relationship’, based on social interaction between the researcher and informants in each case, a socially constructivist approach (Hyett et al., 2014). Face-to-face approaches to data collection are particularly advantageous when working with agricultural producers (Kuehne, 2016), and the use of participant observation and interviewing within each case were part of the broader participatory approach of working together with participants in the context of their croft and network activities.

Developing the case studies involved twelve site visits to crofts for participant observations and themes identified within the network meetings shaped questions for informal interviews which were carried out alongside an analysis of relevant documentary materials (such as website information, leaflets and business plans). Sampling was a mix of snowballing, purposeful and convenience approaches, based on the limited number of total cases available for inclusion within the geographic scope of the project and the challenge of reaching crofters who can be described as a marginalised population (Sutherland et al., 2014; Woodley and Lockard, 2016). Preliminary focus group meetings were held to create a space for participants to come forward as possible cases for in-depth exploration. Furthermore, this enabled discussions of themes such as the challenges of establishing a social crofting enterprise and contributed to the aims of the project which included developing a social crofting network to share knowledge of existing practice. Six crofts were recruited as case studies. A mixture of verbal and written consent was secured from participants to note-taking, recorded



interviews, and analysis of materials for publication with measures taken for anonymity. Data collected was stored in NVivo for easy handling and analysis. Interview transcripts, notes, and documents were analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to draw out key themes from the data through a process of inductive coding. Inductive coding is beneficial for its methodological flexibility (Liu, 2016) and was useful as a qualitative and interpretative approach grounded in the data generated through the experience of participating in the case studies.

#### 4. Findings

The summary characteristics of the six case studies are presented in Table 1. It shows social crofts in Highland and Moray are varied in their approach and set up, offering a range of services directly or indirectly with different social groups in rural communities.

##### 4.1. Spaces of wellbeing

Across the six case studies, crofters are engaging in a diverse set of practices related to the production of wellbeing for themselves and their surrounding communities. This includes a range of agriculture activities, social activities and specific health and wellbeing assessments and interventions. The cases suggest that the idea of ‘social crofting’ refers to a plurality of ways that wellbeing can manifest physically, emotionally, and socially. This is both for participants of the social croft, and the crofters themselves, who derive wellbeing from their interactions with each other and the croft environment. Crofters across the cases showed a high degree of adaptability, creating programmes of activity tailored to their participants needs and life circumstances. Some of the activities contribute to the everyday maintenance of the croft with wellbeing derived from for example planting, growing, ploughing, and associated social interaction from doing these with others. Other activities are more tailored towards specific outcomes such as returning to work or improving specific physical and mental health conditions. This is enabled by professional health backgrounds that crofters engaging in social crofting hold, for example previous experience as an occupational therapist.

Applying the spaces of wellbeing lens (Fleuret and Atkinson, 2007), social crofting offers a space of capability as seen through enabling participants to realise a range of abilities, live with a purpose and engage in meaningful work. For example, participants felt working on the croft means ‘you’ve earned your lunch’, ‘tasks completed make me feel good’ and ‘I worry less when I do physical work’. As integrative space, the social crofts create social networks and meaningful interpersonal relationships both within the croft setting between providers and participants, among participants and with the wider community. Comments from croft participants for example were that ‘the social side of the crofting is great for my mental health’. Additionally, crofters expressed how working as a team, helping someone, or teaching someone combats their own isolation as ‘working in a team is what I have been used to and it builds my self-esteem’. As a space of security, social crofts provide participants with a secure, protected space of work where they can be valued and included, with adaptations tailored to individuals’ needs. For example, in the experience of one participant, ‘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’. Finally, as a therapeutic space, social crofts generate positive outcomes for participants with a range of needs, which was evident in the diversity of participants benefiting from participation on a social croft. Underpinning the diversity is the notion that ‘getting close to nature is these days is a novelty’ and ‘the fresh air is good for me and I like to see things growing’. The interaction with the physical environment of the crofts, invokes notions of ‘therapeutic’ landscapes, described by Gorman (2017) as a sensuous experience, incorporating not just audio and visual dynamics, but also smell and touch. The specific physical characteristics of crofts are important, namely their small-scale

**Table 1**  
Case studies summary.

Case Study	Description	Service details	Main activities	Purpose
1	A day service for adults with a learning disability, autism or Asperger’s and those with a Self-Directed Support (SDS) budget. Set up by persons with previous experience of ASN.	Referrals from local council. Established pattern of collaboration with NHS and local authority. (Highland – Crofting business)	Daily activities with community vegetable garden, woodlands, seeding, planting. Developing social and practical skills including creative sessions. Community lunches and celebrations.	Set up to target certain groups to interact more with the community increasing social inclusion. Giving participants confidence, fresh air, skills, food and social interaction.
2	An established site where social crofting has been in place for 12 years. Set up by an individual with NHS experience.	Contract with DWP initially. Contract with NHS from adult social care budget. Contract with local council. (Highland – Family owned croft)	Open 3 days a week. Looking after animals, growing things, woodwork. Employability, health support and mentoring.	Clients get a purpose in life, enjoyment from day on the croft and camaraderie.
3	A small holding on which the social croft was planned to be the primary source of income. Set up by an individual with experience as an occupational therapist.	Difficulties securing contracts with NHS and SDS budgets not applicable to their services. Regular private paying clients and work with schools. (Highland - Crofter)	Outdoor and indoor activities adapted to needs of individuals. 1–2h croft placements. Working with plants and animals and support for reducing social exclusion.	Croft designed as an education and therapeutic space for those with disabilities and young people.
4	A social business with volunteers contributing to the production on the croft. Set up by new entrant with agricultural experience.	Informally, volunteers from the community (overall approx. 20–30). No social care provision. (Highland – Family owned croft)	Planting, seeding, transplanting, weeding, picking and packing. Improves volunteers’ agricultural skills. Social interaction crucial through team working.	Aimed to look after the environment and contribute something socially useful. Volunteers gain physical wellbeing from work on the croft & social connection.
5	A farm that has placed community at the heart of what they do. Rearing goats and food selling is main business with education considered central to croft.	Croft visits and activities undertaken informally by children, disabled adults and other local individuals and community groups. (Moray – family owned croft)	Visitors interact with croft goats and get experiencing working the land. Young people taught physical skills and practical learning. Benefits from the social experience of collective activity and wellbeing through physical activity.	Croft set up on basis of holistic principles of sustainability. Idea of mutual benefit from help on the croft, social interaction and eating together.

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

Case Study	Description	Service details	Main activities	Purpose
6	A centre designed for learning that offers delivery of the school curriculum, community events and training for adults with ASN. Crofter has a background in education.	An emergent social enterprise currently in the process of establishing policies, applying for funding and making links with local social care services. (Moray - Crofter)	Adults and children offered programmes around framing, growing and environmental education. Development of skills, independence, self-responsibility. Work 1-2-1 with 'buddy' on a weekly short-term basis.	Believe in the value of learning across the community and knowing about food production and environment. Want to offer people the chance to fulfil their potential.

nature which was thought conducive to wellbeing. For example, one crofter characterised large farms as factories, hostile towards visitors, whereas small crofts and farms welcome people on site. They can offer meaningful interaction with animals (Gorman, 2016) as a source of wellbeing, for example, 'being around the pigs brings me a great deal of joy' and the 'enthraling' as well as calming influence of goats, particularly for those with autism was noted by another crofter.

Across all cases social activity on the land brings forth the interconnected layers of wellbeing: personal, community and societal (Boyce et al., 2020). Importantly, personal wellbeing is not for participants of social crofts and rural communities, but crofters themselves, who are a group at risk of experiencing loneliness and isolation through lone working, especially in areas where collaborative working practices have declined. In terms of participants' personal wellbeing, every site is making an impact here. Whilst wellbeing benefits are not always easy to capture quantitatively, qualitatively they were reported to include fresh air, challenging work, sense of purpose and being closer to nature. In terms of community wellbeing, in most cases the social activity was bringing the enterprise closer to their local communities. For example, case study one prioritised interaction between clients and the local community in shared spaces and activities such as community lunch and celebrations. As spaces of wellbeing social crofting involves the integration of individual and collective place-based understandings (Rotherham et al., 2017). Harmonious relations between crofters and communities are not a given (Busby and Macleod, 2010) and the ability of social crofting to generate community wellbeing has the potential to overcome conflict within communities through creating shared sense of belonging and purpose. Finally, societal wellbeing emerged through the social activity on crofts which places agriculture at the centre of better ways of living and tries to re-engage people with their environment and food production. When asked what they had learned whilst working on the croft, one participant stated:

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.

Hence, social crofting offers opportunities for all sections of society to connect to new ways of being but importantly, often focuses on bringing in sections of society experiencing the most social exclusion. For example, younger people, older people and those with disabilities often face social exclusion, as do crofters themselves, as residents of rural areas with a lack of local services (Atterton, 2019). One crofter, in response to the rural transport barrier for access to outdoor activity, sought to incorporate travel into the service as a positive. Specifically, using one-to-one time in the car, between the client and the therapist or

other staff member as a valuable and highly effective 'talking therapy' time that frames and strengthens the practical activity on the croft.

#### 4.2. Social crofting in the Scottish context

In analysing the models of care farming elsewhere, relevant factors for typologies have been identified as: holding type, services offered, users, project characteristics, available resources, degree of involvement by authorities and families, formal and informal relations with other parties, and reference context (Torquati et al., 2019). Typologies have been produced for specific national contexts, for example, the Netherlands has six main types of care farm, two of which were started by new entrants to agriculture and four initiated by farmers and their families (Hassink et al., 2012). We mapped our six cases as shown in Fig. 2 across dimensions of volunteer-contract and croft-care. This encapsulates: the aim of the enterprise; whether the croft is the main business; if they are providing a (paid for) service; whether participants contribute to the business of the croft; and is the provider already an expert in health or social care and moving into a croft setting, or someone in a croft setting who wanted to move into social care. Hence assessing the position of the 'care' in relation to the croft. So, is the main purpose care and the croft is simply the setting, or is care integral to the croft, a small part of the croft, or a by-product of the business.

The typology above reinforces that just as 'there are many different types of care farm with regard to the extent of 'farming' and 'care' that they offer' (Gorman and Cacciato, 2017, p.14). However, what does seem to differ in the social crofting cases is the extent to which care is usually parallel to or marginalised alongside commercial agricultural activities (Gorman and Cacciato, 2017). In the crofting case studies, care was often integral to the agricultural activities which were supporting crofters livelihoods but not bringing them any commercial gain. The crofts in our study were often set up by new entrants to agriculture with backgrounds in health and social care. Although our sample is relatively small, it seems the journey from social care to croft is a common route in the Scottish context, compared with crofter to social care provider, which may be more challenging. Broadly, crofts are well-placed for diversification, but crofters often lack the skills to provide social care and negotiate with public authorities to win contracts. This limits opportunities to use social crofting as a source of wellbeing for rural communities through connection to and use of land. However, there are considerable skills across the Highlands and Moray area, with those interviewed including those who understand the complexities of SDS, having a background in education, health, economics and business

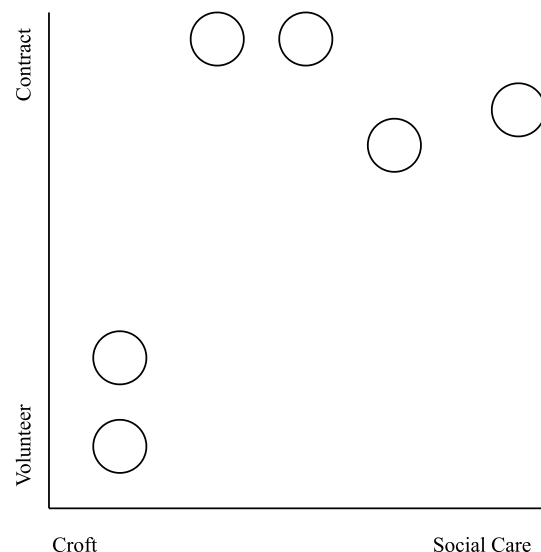


Fig. 2. Mapping of social crofting case studies.

and farming. Skills sharing across the area would therefore support existing and new crofters to diversify into social crofting, especially if it can become a viable option for income generation to support keeping people working the land.

There were several barriers and hard lessons faced by social crofters, including overcoming bureaucracy at all levels. Particularly, engaging with agencies, and the difficulties getting contracts from local councils and the NHS:

I had the frontline staff, I had the high up strategic staff, all supportive, I missed one vital level which was the middle management who sign off on local budget decisions.

When it came to it, we never got the ‘okay’ that would have allowed for SDS budgets to be spent on our service – which was one of the key funding streams we were looking at. We were asked to come back if we could make it ‘cost neutral’ for the NHS, which for us was an unrealistic ask.

The latter commentary is indicative of the discourse of cost-efficiency in the provision of public services in Scotland, especially personalization schemes (Pearson et al., 2017; Pearson and Ridley, 2016). Crofters felt at times that middle management are not able to implement policy rhetoric, reluctant to see health and social care budgets leave their organisations and are ill-equipped to deal with small private enterprises, even being suspicious of their motives. In contrast, staff working on the frontline appear more likely to understand and see what socially-orientated enterprises like social crofts can achieve. For example, social enterprises can ‘enable an integrated approach to addressing local issues at the local level’ that suit the rural context (Steiner and Teasdale, 2019, p.144). However this requires going beyond siloed policy approaches, and crofters often perceived a lack of ability and/or willingness to innovate locally, and with limited funds, and good policies such as SDS falling short in implementation. This is not unique to social crofting however, as Pearson et al. (2017) explain the implementation of SDS has suffered due to the context of acute austerity in social care which has limited possibilities for transformative change.

Bureaucracy also emerged in relation to creating social enterprise, the structure of which one crofter described as rigid and a real risk to individuals who own land. Social crofting may therefore be another example of the missed opportunities for local communities to achieve collective social purposes through entrepreneurship (CEIS, 2015). This is particularly unfortunate given social enterprises offer ‘place-based approaches to wellbeing and socio-economic development’ (Munoz et al., 2015, p.298). The relationship between social enterprise and crofting is an avenue for future research, but in the broadest sense all the case studies are social businesses, delivering public goods within local communities. However, the process of starting a business, and deciding on a model is complex and most cases had financial issues including whether it is possible to make a living and generate income from a social croft. Future research could examine how the creation of agricultural co-operatives might enhance the economic viability of crofting, and particularly the effects of entrepreneurial assistance programs (Hains et al., 2013). Crofters felt that whilst the benefits to themselves and clients transcend the financial, crofters need resourced to deliver these. Some suggest the solution might be direct social subsidies to crofts providing social benefits, rather than trying to get contracts from hard-pressed and bureaucratic public authorities. It was felt that social crofting is unlikely to be for all crofters, but for the socially minded and community-minded a direct subsidy would help them develop these kinds of service.

Reflecting on the broader picture, one crofter perceived Scotland as behind England in terms of investment in social farms. They felt in the Highlands, there is not the population for specialist services available in cities, but there are unique assets and opportunities that come with the geography and people, such as crofting which can offer a strong solution to local health and social care issues. This encapsulates the double-edged

sword for rural communities where ‘economic and social challenges might also offer opportunities’ (Steiner and Teasdale, 2019). The challenge then is how to make social crofting sustainable, because as one crofter felt, although ‘the interest and need are there, not so for crofters to make a living’. There is a need for people with vision, community development skills and influence to push things forward, and challenge ideas that social crofting services could be cost-neutral. Whilst cost-neutrality might be possible considering the improvement in health and wellbeing associated with a placement against prescription costs and reduction in demand on other services, individual crofters are unlikely to succeed making this case.

## 5. Discussion

Social crofting is one of many rural development practices across Europe driven by farmers continued search for ‘new possibilities that enhance the likelihood of maintaining the continuity of their farms’ (Van der Ploeg et al., 2015, p.19). Social crofting has emerged from crofters’ determination to pursue new rural futures for themselves and their communities, largely outside of the mainstream provision of health and wellbeing. Whilst many built on experience in health and social care, rather than crofting, social crofting still reflects the broader UK trend where care farming is initiated by farmers rather than health care providers (Leck et al., 2014). Our findings show that as a rural development practice social crofting can ‘contribute significantly to the quality of life not only of those who are directly involved in them, but more broadly’ (Van der Ploeg et al., 2015, p.27). Furthermore, social crofting can play a role in ensuring the viability of the agricultural community, and as a form of ‘connective agriculture’ (Leck et al., 2014). Positive outcomes are generated for both crofters and participants arising from connections between self, others, life, food, nature and through the generation of a sense of community (Leck et al., 2014; Hemingway et al., 2016) which can transform nature-society relationships. Social crofting offers similar embodied relationships found within care farming practices in England and Wales, described as therapeutic spaces tied to the senses (Gorman, 2017) and involving engagement with place and animals (Gorman, 2016).

At present crofting is mostly recognised for contributing to the creation of a diverse environment and sustaining rural communities on the land and its relationship to health and wellbeing is less prominent. This research highlights that one of the ways crofts have been diversifying in recent years is through social crofting which brings health and wellbeing to the fore. This is beneficial for bringing activity back into the agricultural space (Leck et al., 2014) in contrast to other kinds of diversification which takes crofters away from their crofts to sustain a livelihood. That being said, as with care farming, social crofting is not an easy form of diversification (Leck et al., 2014). Our findings suggest that social crofting in Scotland is hugely under-valued as a source of wellbeing for rural communities with little to no mainstream support or indeed knowledge about social crofting and the benefits it brings. Social crofting must be included in future discussions of non-commercial farming in Scotland, which is already identified as being well-placed to provide public goods from agriculture, namely in relation to the environment (Sutherland, 2019).

Across the crofting counties, crofters are creating spaces of wellbeing, using crofts to support and sustain rural communities where public services are limited and challenges are manifest (Shucksmith et al., 2021). Some are using professional backgrounds and business approaches based on experience with health and social care to do so, whilst others may have lived experience of poor mental health and wellbeing and offer a volunteering model. All see the value in social crofting, even where this does not relate to income-generation opportunities. However, for social crofting, as with care farming, adoption and implementation are dependent on the willingness of others to embrace the idea, and the ability of those delivering programmes to form relationships and address emergent challenges and champion the concept

(Anderson et al., 2017). The wider challenges for social crofting are similar to those for social farming, including: a lack of clients, inadequate financial support from the state, a changing legislative context, leaving the EU, complex negotiations with local authorities and a failure to appreciate the role of social farming and its societal contribution (Fromadova et al., 2017). Parts of the Scottish policy context are broadly supportive of the logic behind social crofting, for example, the policy ‘our natural health service’ is based on the idea that ‘the natural environment is a valuable health resource. That can help deliver the new public health priorities’ (NatureScot, 2020a). However, the role of agricultural spaces within this is limited, the focus being on access to greenspace, rather than rural development. Thus efforts should be made to incorporate agricultural spaces in mainstream health and wellbeing policy, especially where these relate to the environment. Not least, because Scotland’s land is 75% agricultural (NatureScot, 2020b), meaning there is enormous potential for social farming across the country, and social crofting in the Highlands and Islands.

We set out to explore the possibility for a distinctly Scottish model of social farming in the form of social crofting which is culturally specific and place-based. Whilst the findings show support for a distinctive model, offering spaces of wellbeing, on the other hand, social crofting operates within a hybrid neoliberal policy context. Whilst there may be a Scottish policy approach, normally compared ‘against the worst excesses of ‘neoliberal’ UK government and governance, [in fact] the Scottish Government faces the same problems as any other and addresses them often in similar ways’ (Cairney et al., 2016, p.347). As Garnham (2017) puts it, neoliberalism cross-cuts policy and reaches into every area of people’s lives. However, the emphasis on creating a wellbeing economy in Scotland, and the continued push against neoliberal models for healthcare and agriculture, suggest the potential for social crofting to offer a post-neoliberal alternative for wellbeing in rural Scotland. This would require building on the tenets of localism within policy for wellbeing (Scottish Government, 2019) and making linkages between rural development and health and wellbeing through place-based practices. In order to improve conditions for social crofting, the barrier of attitudes from local authorities and health services will also need to be addressed and place-based approaches to wellbeing for rural development resourced. This aligns with Murray et al.’s (2019) argument to increase knowledge within health care commissioners of the value of social farming models. Given the range of wellbeing benefits created from social crofting, and the likely increase in demand for outdoor care (especially in the aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic), it is likely there would be a supply of interested crofters and smallholders if conditions were more favourable.

Lessons for Scotland can be learned from other more mixed models of care farming including the Mediterranean model, which involves cross-sectoral working. For example, in Italy care farming advances the idea of agriculture as social innovation that strengthens service provision in rural areas and builds networks and relationships for individuals and communities overcoming public-private binaries (Moruzzo et al., 2019). Likewise, the Nordic models of care farming show the benefits of collaboration between municipalities and farmers (Ibsen et al., 2018). Whilst there are many good policy intentions in Scotland, such as SDS, and the wellbeing framework, rhetoric can differ from reality. Scotland lags behind other European countries in support for social farming, where investment has ensured practices and policies are further advanced. Historically, Skerratt and Williams (2008) identified funding, and applicability across areas of policy as the biggest challenge to the existence and spread of care farming in Scotland. Thirteen years on, their call for a supportive policy environment, funding for mainstream provision and a better understanding of the sector in Scotland remains unanswered. Social activity on crofts and farms could be funded directly, such as through agricultural diversification subsidies, emulating those that encourage good environmental practice and changing the dynamic between authorities and social crofts. This would address the problem that funding provision often relies on the direction of ‘individual

commissioners and their belief in the existence of wellbeing from human-nature relationships than from formal care objectives and policies’ (Leck et al., 2014, p.322). Financial support for social crofting is also one potential response to Atterton et al.’s (2018) question of how crofters can be rewarded for delivering public goods post-Brexit.

Finally, further policy implications and research challenges to address include situating social crofting within the complex legislative context of crofting and addressing barriers for accessing and using croft land for social purposes. A newly published strategy for crofting development sits alongside ongoing discussion of proposed legislative reform, which will shape the future of crofting. At present the development plan does not consider the potential for social crofting, with the emphasis on food production and environment, related to the aim of creating ‘low carbon sustainable crofting [and] to enable crofting communities to play a greater part in addressing climate change and enhancing biodiversity and the environment’ (Scottish Government 2021, p.86). Whilst this is a welcome aim, the connection to wellbeing is also vital as part of the transformation of nature-society relations and the creation of a wellbeing economy. Thus, crofting policy should look to incentivise the use of crofts for the delivery of public goods and encourage innovation (Jones, 2018) including wellbeing through social crofting. Beyond crofting policy, support for social crofting must be included in calls for developing a coherent, co-ordinated rural policy built on a place-based and person-based approach to strengthening rural communities (Shucksmith et al., 2021).

## 6. Conclusion

This paper aimed to connect the literatures on health and social care and agriculture through a study of crofting and wellbeing in rural Scotland. In both fields, calls for rejecting neoliberal models of policy highlight the importance and relevance of moving towards the creation of wellbeing economy, set within the wider global context of transforming nature-society relationships. Working directly with crofters, this research enabled new understandings to emerge including the concept of social crofting and how diverse practices constitute the production of ‘spaces of wellbeing’ in rural communities. Social crofting is an innovative form of rural development that can address issues of social exclusion and provide wellbeing for crofters, participants, communities, and society. Across Moray and Highland social crofting creates personal, community and societal wellbeing, within therapeutic spaces of integration, capability, security. However, the research identified key challenges for social crofting, related to the wider policy and rural context including bureaucracy and neoliberal discourses of cost-efficiency within healthcare settings. By contextualising our findings in the wider policy context in Scotland, we show what might be needed to allow social crofting to flourish as part of a broader agenda for wellbeing and rural development. Our work was limited to exploring six case studies in qualitative depth and there is huge potential for future research into social crofting and social farming generally in Scotland.

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## Author statement

**Lucy Beattie:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Project administration, Writing.  
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**Zoe Russell:** Conceptualization, Writing, Visualisation.



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