

Summary

- Large scale poultry farm with 24,000 free range hens, started in 1989 by Roger and Beryl Hosking
- There are also 3 acres of vegetables, 200 sheep, and other income generating activities: the farm rents out premises for conference facilities and parties, conducts farm tours, has a shop/tea room, and offers vocational training in commercial horticulture and agriculture.
- STAFF DETAILS? Includes one special needs teacher

What is special about this care farm

The Hosking's have had an open farm for homeless youngsters since the 1980s. But it didn't start with chickens. That came from Roger helping collect eggs on a neighbouring farm, and the youngsters coming along to help. Roger then realised the potential – "It provides something simple that the young people can do, and can't possibly fail at," he says – and built up his own enterprise.

The farm enjoys wide support from the local community. Some eggs are sold through 'Highfields Agents' – people who sell them at a preferential rate to friends and relatives, and in their workplace and local community (and earn a bit for doing so). And the move to new chicken sheds in 2004 was only possible through support and fundraising from local businesses, and individual sponsor-a-hen contributions of £16-£20.

Every farm decision has to be for the benefit of the young people, says Roger. For example, the recent building of a tearoom and farm shop (it also sells other locally-produced food) was done with the knowledge that it would significantly widen the learning and training opportunities for youngsters.

Another of the farm's principles is that the youngsters are never ever asked to leave. Says Roger: "It can be testing, but they need somewhere to be angry and people to scream at. This is what we are here for – not just to give kids a bit of an extra leg up at school. You can't just chuck them out because they are bad."

Target market

The care farm provides places for disadvantaged youngsters who have been, or are at risk of being, excluded from school. Over 30 attend each week, under a regular contract with Derbyshire's education authority (capacity is for 9 each day, and up to 40 per week).

Even the most 'damaged' young person can find a place where they can fit it and feel useful. The youngsters learn to grade, pack and deliver eggs; to read and write; and to deal with money and customers (in the tea room). In this way the farm and the work it provides has helped young people with big problems find peace, hope and a future through realistic training and companionship.

Special schools in the area also bring their students on an ad hoc basis.

The bottom line

The farm receives £9 per hour for each pupil, with the LEA paying for the youngsters' travel.

If the farm only consisted of the hens and the shop, says Roger, it would be financially viable. But having the care farm imposes lots of additional costs.

Says Roger: "It looks a brilliant place, but we still don't seem to be able to make a profit here – our overheads are enormous." Last year the farm made a loss of £4,000. "Compared to some care farms, the fact that it can pretty much break even looks like a miracle," says Roger.

But he is hopeful about the future. In 2011 the farm plans to build a wind turbine – which will have no labour costs, save on electric bills, and even provide a bit of income. Outside help, donations and sponsorship are being sought to help with the initial investment.

In their own words

Motivation – Roger's driver is partly his religious faith and partly personal. His life 'crashed' after he experienced family problems when he was young, which led him to be a rebellious and difficult teenager. Happy Hens provides opportunities for those experiencing what he did.

Approach – Each student works alongside a member of staff. "We try very hard within their first week, to find something that each youngster can latch onto and enjoy," says Roger. As he points out, egg collecting is warm work, and the youngsters can quickly see the fruits of their labour. Unlike some farm enterprises it also means that each day, irrespective of the weather, there is work to do – be it egg collecting, packing, and delivering, or working in the shop.

Benefits – Many of the youngsters take GCSEs and then go to college, and the LEA say Happy Hens is one of the only positive projects it has for getting young people back into school. One former helper has even set up his own egg farm, with 12,000 birds, in Devon.

Hundreds of children have been helped by working at Happy Hens. Roger cites two expressions that demonstrate its life-changing benefits. First, 'Angry hands become gentle hands'. The second is a typical remark made by new youngsters: "Cor, f'ing hell, Mister, how many eggs have we collected?" (After which they typically ask a member of staff to teach them how to count the eggs.)

Other telling comments made:

- Why does everyone here like me, when at home they tell me I'm a little bastard?
- Mum, this isn't a place – it's a feeling.
- Thank you all for welcoming me in the way that you did, when others would never have given me a chance.

For more information

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Key challenges

The two main challenges, says Roger, have been financial (see above) and emotional. Of the latter he says: "There are days when you just never want to see another kid. If one runs off the farm, for example, this has huge consequences on others, plus staff etc."

Tips for others

Work out where your income is coming from, says Roger. "If your income is coming from grants and gifts, you won't have much continuity of a regular income," he warns.

Roger is convinced of the potential and benefits of keeping chickens, saying they are cheap to buy, easy to manage, have lots of market potential, and create work and income every day – which means a good cash flow.



It will be eggs for breakfast.

If you want to learn more about Care Farming UK please visit www.carefarminguk.org or email enquiries@carefarminguk.org