

CASE STUDY

Highfields Happy Hens, Derbyshire

National Care Farming Initiative (UK)



Introduction

Highfields Happy Hens is a poultry farm set in Etwall in the south Derbyshire countryside. We have a very different story to tell from other free range poultry farms. The farm and the work that it provides has helped young people with big problems find peace, hope and a future through realistic training and companionship. Because of Highfields many lives have been, and continue to be, dramatically changed.

Highfields didn't just happen but nor was it planned, we simply added to it as the needs of our young people arose. We believe that everyone is entitled to a hope and a future and so it started with a bed and food, a loving environment, a job and some money – and so our incredible story began in 1984.

Highfields Happy Hens – ‘The Incredible Story’

We didn't go into free range egg production for eggs – no, we ran an open home on our farm for homeless youngsters and they needed something to do. We had helped the next door neighbour to build a 5000 bird shed and when the birds arrived he offered me (Roger) a part time job egg collecting. The lads that were with us at the time came to help me. One of them was particularly disgusting, he was snotty, dirty, his language was the pits (despite our efforts), he could neither read, write nor count but he could collect eggs and one day he asked if he could do it on his own. I explained he couldn't as he needed to count and record the eggs.

“Well teach me,” he said.

In 3 weeks he could count accurately up to 5000 and later learnt to keep the records. He became clean and pleasant.

In 1989 Highfields Happy Hens was born (hatched). We built our first shed of 2,500 birds. It was built from all the junk we could scrounge and we saw so many lives change – angry, aggressive hands became gentle hands (essential for egg collecting). They learned to count (cor, f'in hell mister, how many eggs have we just collected?!). We built a shed a year, all very second hand until we had 20,000 birds.



Chicken shed or therapy room?

“Highfields Happy Hens are part of the therapy our young people experience - they learn about the responsibility of working on a commercial farm and can take pride in producing something that benefits the environment and the community. And having built a successful free range egg business, Highfields now produce other welfare friendly food including chicken, duck, lamb, pork, turkey and vegetables”.

In 2001 we started working for the Youth Offending Service with youngsters who were too young to go to prison. Then we started working with the education authority as most of our young offenders had been excluded from school. We started as “school” for just one lad in 2001. Now we have up to 30 each week. To our surprise and pride many have just sat their GCSE's and at least 2 are going to college.



In 2003 our world collapsed. The RSPCA and the Lion Brand both had problems when assessing our sheds which were in very poor condition and finally condemned them. I had a complete breakdown and was off work for 6 months. If we lost our hens the whole project would close down but to rebuild was surely financially impossible. However, I began to get well again and had a meeting with our accountant and bank manager who both assured me I had little option. The farm could not be viable without the hens and the project would indeed have to close down.

Local companies Harlows, New Quip and Tim Bates plant hire were brilliant. They helped me to design the replacement sheds and the cost would be around £16-20 a hen using much of our old equipment.

Because of the work we do with young offenders people started to offer to sponsor a hen (£16-20). I go out speaking about our work which really helped the message take off and travel fast. Local churches, schools, the WI and others all got excited. A soldier at the Lichfield barracks saw an article about us in the newspaper. He and his mates started to throw their loose change into a bucket and I was asked to go and speak at the barracks church the Sunday before they went to Iraq, after which they gave me a cheque for £920.

A young lad excluded from school

“Why does everyone here like me when at home they tell me I’m a little bastard?”



We started rebuilding in 2004. Now in 2007 and over £450,000 later, we have completed the last shed. We have until November 2007 to pay for the last shed and need 2,000 more sponsors!

Out of prison and into farming

There is another side to this incredible story – so many damaged young lives turned around. We have a policy at Highfields of never asking anyone to leave. This is testing, but some people just need someone to scream at and the space given to be allowed to be angry. The education authority inform us that we are one of the only positive project they have for getting youngsters back to school. One of our lads from 18 years ago, now married, has bought a farm and is building a 12,000 bird shed which may, like Highfields, be used to look after young offenders.



We now have a regular contract with the education authority and the Youth Offending Service, both of whom are easy to access and willing to use suitable work experience places. They will send their own supervisors (with the farmer receiving nothing) or you can provide suitable supervisors and negotiate a price per hour.

The schools' work means that we have all the holiday breaks - but potential care farmers should be aware that this does involve paying wages through these periods. However, this time does also allow us to work for the Youth Offending Service and with youngsters who will not survive the holidays without being arrested. These will be recommended by a social worker or the school.

Hundreds of young people have had their lives radically changed over the 16 years that Highfields Happy Hens has been in existence. We have lost contact with many of them. Although their time with us was life-changing, we recognise that we are also part of a past that, understandably, they do not want to remember. Happily, we do get phone calls and surprise visits from those we have helped, months or even years later, thanking us for giving them space to deal with their problems.

Recently we had a lovely young girl with us, she had been tagged but we could not understand how she had got into trouble (we never ask, this is a new life). She later wrote to us. The letter closed with, "Thank you all so much for welcoming me in the way that you did when others would never have given me a chance". It was so simple and has happened so many times.

"This shed is being managed by a young lady who came out of prison in January! 24,000 birds in fantastic new accommodation, fantastic for the hens and fantastic for our young people! Young people benefiting from the farm started out as 100% male but this is much more balanced now with about 40% female."



Finance

The farm charges client commissioners covering 9am until 3pm each day. Taxis are paid for by the education authority to get the clients to the farm. Clients usually have to travel on their own to Highfields to stop them getting into arguments before they arrive!

We have one qualified special needs teacher. Otherwise the main qualifications for our staff are a clear desire to work with and help young people. We do not take on volunteers as all people involved require a full CRB (criminal record) check.

Like many organisations that dedicate so much to helping the less fortunate, we rely on customers and donations to be able to continue our work effectively. With this in mind we have also diversified into offering conference facilities to businesses and individuals, birthday parties, farm tours and accredited vocational training in commercial horticulture and agriculture.

The Highfields experience is like a chain reaction

“We have thousands of chickens producing thousands of eggs each and every day. Those eggs need to be collected, counted, packed and delivered. Even the most damaged young person can find a place where they can fit in and feel useful, and our staff have the time to talk to them in an atmosphere of love and healing”.

Highfields Happy Hens also operates a very successful egg selling agency package for individuals, schools, clubs, churches and other groups. We need more customers for our real free range eggs and other produce so that we can provide more employment and training for special needs young people and youngsters being excluded from education.

Churches and individuals help Highfields in a very practical way, by becoming Highfields agents. Our agents sell our produce at preferential rates to their friends, neighbours and congregations. This enables them to earn a little extra, and us to continue our work with young people. And of course, our customers enjoy well-produced, healthy food at fair prices!

It is a unique idea from which everyone benefits. The customers get the freshest, best eggs and produce, the group makes a profit and we can help more young people who would otherwise have nothing to do and nowhere to go.

To increase our income and create more jobs we have become an open farm, charging visitors to look round. We sell animal food and allow people to collect their own eggs and some vegetables. Disabled facilities are now a legal requirement and insurance will depend on your insurer but the NFU have been OK with the idea.

Something special

Our birthday parties happen after our young people have gone home or at weekends, so there is no conflict of interest or safety. These events generate a lot of new customers for the shop and open farm as all invited kids are encouraged to come back with Mum and Dad - and of course they want their party here and so the news spreads..

If we have any regrets it is that we cannot stop the project from growing. It is a financial nightmare offering such a worthwhile and rewarding service whilst maintaining an income to cover what are very high overheads. But each year we do seem to manage and I am happy to share our experiences with anyone who is interested.

A young girl talking to her mum at a birthday party

"Mum this isn't a place, it's a feeling."

Mum, dad and children

"We love being here, we feel so safe."



Farm Standards

Many people are confused about food scares and where their food comes from. Highfields welcomes visitors and all our hens, other animals and crops are raised to the highest standards of animal welfare and public health. Our eggs won the National Award for Quality in 2001, the highest accolade a free range farm can receive.

Highfields Happy Hens has received a number of industry awards in recognition of the quality of its produce and farming best-practice.

These are our customers' guarantee that the food they are buying has been produced to the highest environmental and animal welfare standards. As always, visitors are made very welcome to the farm to learn about these principles in action.

Improving farm standards means that battery cages for the production of eggs will be banned from 2012 onwards. There is a great shortage of free range egg producers in the UK – meaning that there is great scope for more Happy Hen inspired projects!

Happy Hens, Happy Customers

- Our eggs are LION brand approved
- All hens are Free Range and RSPCA Freedom Food inspected
- All our meat is produced to the highest welfare standards
- No antibiotics or growth promoters are used
- No fertilisers are used on the vegetables
- All our food is extremely competitively priced, comparing very favourably with supermarket chains
- We do not sell any eggs that are more than two days old.



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