



### Summary

- A small 1½ acres care farm situated within a 500 acre 'regular' farm, from which it rents its land. The latter provides Top Barn Training with access to a farm shop (where Top Barn Training sells its produce) and woodlands (which offer scope for a wider range of activities than would otherwise be possible).
- Most of the students have learning disabilities, but the care farm also works with disadvantaged young people, mainstream schools and others with mental health issues. Top Barn also works with local pre-school playgroups.
- Noelle Wilson runs Top Barn Training, supported by four full-time tutors and nine regular volunteers.

### What is special about this care farm

The care farm has an unusually wide range of users, who span five decades – see target market, below.

A 1000 sq feet purpose-built pine kitchen provides a warm and attractive welcome, and a facility for cooking things that are then sold in the farm shop. It has also enabled Top Barn Training to develop new courses such as 'Plot to Plate', that gives primary school children the experience of working with the soil, growing food and cooking

The care farm is benefiting from the introduction of personal budgets for people with special needs. "I think this is going to be a big part of our future – especially with colleges cutting back on adult special education," says Noelle.

Top Barn has held Open Days to promote care farming to others, and is currently working with two local farmers who take some of its excess students.

For aspiring care farmers, staff from Top Barn Training can offer practical 'work experience' days with a group of service users, as well as help with paperwork and aspects of facilities which need to be considered.

Top Barn is a not-for-profit organisation, with all surpluses ploughed back into the business for the improvement of student facilities. It seeks to produce high quality meat and vegetables, naturally and without chemicals, and in harmony with the seasons. And it uses sustainable practices, including recycling, and organic gardening and livestock rearing.

### Target market

Top Barn Training's aims are to: 'provide training, education and therapeutic opportunities to members of our local community, particularly those with any sort of disability or those excluded from the education system.'

The care farm is working to near capacity: each day there are three or four groups of students, of eight or nine people each. Most of the students come once per week, but some come for up to three days.

Most of the students have learning disabilities. However, the care farm also caters for an unusually wide range of others: disengaged young people (who are referred from schools and Pupil Referral Units), mainstream schools (to whom Top Barn offers OCN and ASDAN courses) and playgroups (a local group comes on a six week course during the summer). There has also been interest from the county council's Drug and Rehabilitation Unit.

The training takes place indoors and outdoors, and is centred on land based skills: farm animal care (the care farm has pigs, poultry, goats, and the main farm has cattle and sheep), rural skills, horticulture, farmhouse cooking and sustainable building. The training is 'meaningful and engaging' and the courses are very practical.

### The bottom line

Top Barn charges approx £110 per person per day for students who need one-on-one support. For each excluded student who comes as part of a booked group it charges an additional £25, since they often require a higher staff ratio.

Those using personal budgets are charged £40-£45 per person per day, depending on their needs.

At present 12 students access Top Barn Training on personal budgets. From September there will be 24. This is an expansion area, however future numbers will depend on the speed at which social services process applications and the effect of the recession on funding made available for the process to happen.

Crucial to making the care farm develop is David Harper, with whom Noelle developed her ideas, and who runs the main farm. "David made it all happen," she says. "He is very good at helping others fulfil their dreams."

### In their own words

**Motivation** – Top Barn Training is keen to promote care farming and believes it has experience to share. It was involved in the formation of the first regional group of care farms, in the West Midlands.

**Approach** – Says Noelle: “We firmly believe the care farming adage of seeking to develop people’s possibilities rather than focusing on their limitations.”

**Benefits** – Ian Iontton, who has a visual impairment and worked for several years as a chef in the kitchen, talks about the benefits of coming to Top Barn Training “There is a relaxed feel to the place,” he says. “Being with animals and out in the countryside is better than being in a classroom, all ‘closed-in.’ Here, I am thrown challenges that show me I can do things rather than getting stressed about things I can’t.”

### Key challenges

To get the care farm started Noelle went everywhere in search of funding. “Wonderful idea,” they all told her, “but sorry, we can’t help you.” Until finally someone in social services, whose daughter worked in the same area, expressed an interest. Now, says Noelle, every organisation that said it could not give any funding is working with her.

Noelle started out with a bulldozed bit of land on a former gravel pit – not an ideal place to start a farm. “The soil was dreadful – it was all silt, without a worm anywhere,” says Noelle. But years later she has created an intensive enterprise, from virtually nothing.

Another challenge, says Noelle, is that “funding agencies obviously want to measure and demonstrate the effect of their funding, but they need to realise that for some groups of people progress can be slow, and measurement difficult.”

### Tips for others

Noelle’s first tip for others is get your policies and procedures in place ... and basic facilities such as a decent loo, hot water and a mess room... and think about alternative wet weather activities.

Many care farms can find the bureaucracy daunting and a distraction. But Noelle’s view is different: “Care farming requires good health and safety supported with policies and procedures to deal professionally with issues that may arise. We have around 20 key health and safety procedures from buildings insurance through to fire alarms and protective equipment. New care farmers may find this daunting to begin with but it becomes habit quite quickly. Policies covering child protection, volunteers, and how to deal with grievances and complaints, are all essential ... this greatly helps to provide a safe environment for all and is essential to maintain the necessary reputation with commissioners.”

Her second tip is: “Start small and get used to a group of service users – some groups will be easier to work with than others, and staffing ratios need to be adjusted to suit.”

And if you are thinking of working with a college, and providing training to students, make sure the college realises that your students may take considerably longer than the norm to achieve their qualification.

And finally, a tip on quality standards: Top Barn has found that PQASSO, which is promoted to third sector organisations, involves a lot of paperwork. It recommends the accreditation offered by the Countryside Educational Visits Accreditation System as more suitable for care farms.

