

Stonebridge City Farm



Main theme: Increase income lost due to grants

Stonebridge City Farm is based in the St Anns area of Nottingham. It provides education and training for adults with learning disabilities and young people who are not attending school. Their clients work on every aspect of the farm, from caring for the farm animals and horticulture to building brick walls. The farm has been open since 1979 and for a long time the majority of their funding came from grants. In recent years funding has been difficult to obtain the team at farm have developed several enterprises including a farm and charging for the delivery qualifications. Farm Manager Marie Rogers explains how the farm developed their trading activities...

"I've been here for ten years and have seen quite a lot development over that time. We were mainly funded through grants but they are disappearing and so we've had to develop other ways of being sustainable. We were very much a community and voluntary organisation but we've had to move towards social enterprise over time. We have a farm shop where we sell our produce; we sell rabbits and guinea pigs but not larger animals, we also sell hay, straw, animal food and vegetables that we grow on site. We also have a café and use eggs, fruit and vegetables from the farm but no animals! However the majority of income is from paid work placements for adults with learning difficulties and alternative education courses for youngsters who are not attending schools."

As grants have become harder to come by Stonebridge has begun charging for the work placements and alternative education courses undertaken at the farm. This provides income for the farm but also presents challenges...

"Before we used to pay for all our placements out of grant funding but now we charge ever person we work with; we've gone from not charging anybody anything to charging everybody everything! For example we work with an organisation called 'Enable' who access funding so we can deliver qualifications for adults with learning disabilities. We deliver a variety of Open College Network (OCN) qualifications; all of our clients are working towards a diploma through what are called 'step-up qualifications' that combine farm work with team-building skills and personal development. It works because the qualifications are made up of small chunks and so they don't get bored and they can earn qualifications quickly."

Our difficulty is that we offer such a wide variety of activities and it is increasingly difficult to secure the funding to pay staff and deliver outputs. When you're charging to deliver qualifications you need staff that are qualified to a high level and they cost more to employ. It is hard to access funding to pay for salaries and there is movement towards procurement through contracts."

Stonebridge also operate a farm shop to generate revenue through selling their produce and other items...

"We had some money to set up our farm shop but that funding has to an end now. At weekends we have volunteers open the shop and in the summer we can take as much as £200 a day, but during the winter it's very quite. At present we do have staff in the shop through the city's Future Jobs Fund and we want to access funding to deliver retail qualifications through the shop. This will serve two purposes, providing training for the people we work with and an income to pay a staff member who can open the shop throughout the week."

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Stonebridge City Farm is successfully adapting to create revenue streams as grant funding disappears but the transition has been challenging. Marie shares some of the lessons that she has learnt over the past ten years.

“The real irony is that the more successful we have become the more difficult it is to get grants. We have a turnover of £250,000 now so funders look to us and think that we don’t need their support. The problem is that of course we do need the support if we’re going to keep doing well. It’s a Catch 22 situation – the better we do as an organisation the harder it is to get the funding we need to survive!

The paperwork for accessing grants can be horrendous and we employ somebody to write funding bids but for smaller organisations it can be very hard to cope. You not only need a plan to find the funds to get started but a longer term plan to keep that funding coming in. Get a business plan together before you start so you know what you’re trying to achieve. For example we had a business plan for the shop but in retrospect we would have benefitted from including more detail. I think because it was all new we weren’t as thorough as we could have been.

Most of all you’ve got to be committed to the project whether it’s over your working hours or not. I spend a large amount of my life, paid or unpaid, trying to make this farm sustainable. That’s the most important thing – be totally committed.

Key lessons:

- When grants are no longer available you may be able to begin charging for your services
- You may need access to funding or investment before you can exploit a trading opportunity
- When you start trading it may become harder to access grants

Legal structure: Charity
Main activity: Delivery of OCN qualifications
Number of employees: 13
Turnover: £250,000
Location: St Anns, Nottingham
Date formed: 1979
Percentage of generated income: 10%
Date written: February 2010
Website: www.stoneridgecityfarm.com

This case study is one of a series produced by the Capacity Builders funded ‘Stepping Up To Enterprise’ project in the East Midlands.

The case studies tell the stories of voluntary or community organisations and how they moved to developing trading. The case studies are available on the website www.oneeastmidlands.org.uk/sute.