

Loxley Valley Community Farm, South Yorkshire

Summary

A community-initiated project, started in July 2009, on a 6.5 acre site with 25 members growing vegetables and keeping pigs, ducks, laying hens, turkeys and bees.

Getting Started

Just outside Sheffield, past the end of the last tram stop, in a field on the slopes of the valley, is the site for the latest community farm. Set up in July 2009, a group of people have come together to produce their own food.

The initiative for the farm came from Mark Whitehouse whose garden almost backs on to the field. He'd been renting the land for a number of years but since his horse died, he set about realising his dream of starting a smallholding. But rather than do it alone, Mark advertised the land on the [Landshare](#) website on 20 April 2009 and within hours got his first reply.

At the first meeting, which was held in the field, back in April, Mark described his idea for a community growing scheme in preference to everyone just having individual allotments. At first, people were quite reluctant about the idea, but by the end of the meeting, there was all round enthusiasm. Mark insisted that trust amongst the group was essential if they were going to make a success of it. Twenty people signed up to being in the group.

In May, shortly after the group had formed, Mark, Matt and Gary had a meeting with Kirstin Glendinning, Soil Association CSA regional coordinator, at Swillington CSA, near Leeds, to tour the farm and see at first hand what this farm has achieved.

On Open Farm Sunday in June, a group of the members and their families also visited Swillington Organic Farm and CSA to get inspiration and ideas.

A shared vision

The group developed a shared vision of what they wanted on their farm which essentially was to grow their own Christmas dinner! They agreed on pigs, chickens, ducks, turkeys, vegetables and bees.

Bringing together a diverse group of people also brought together a wide range of skills which were essential for taking the work forward.

It also of course brings together a lot of diverse ideas and opinions but having a clear structure for decision making helped them move forward and not get stuck.

Motivation in the group was extremely high as it was clear there was no time to waste. If they wanted to grow their own Christmas dinner, then the seeds needed planting and the animals needed to be purchased as soon as possible.

Sharing out the tasks

Weekly meetings were arranged in a meeting room at the parish council offices as nobody had a sitting room big enough for 20 people! Each week, as details of what they wanted were agreed, they developed clear work plans and formed work groups to take forward the different areas.

Wendy, an accountant, led on the finance group to look at which legal structure they should choose in order to secure a tenancy agreement with the land owner, and open a bank account. Gary, an IT specialist, led on designing their website, Chad, a professional fundraiser, led the fundraising group, and Richard, a scientist, led on researching what rare breed pigs to buy and where they could buy their livestock. Matt, a keen allotmenter, led the horticultural work. Everyone helped out and although not everyone could attend every meeting, whoever was there, made the decisions that were carried forward.

Matt, also a tutor at Freeman College in Sheffield for people with special needs, had attended a workshop organised by the Soil Association introducing the concept of community supported agriculture back in February and so was able to bring these ideas to the group and information on the free resources and support available.

Throughout the months, the group was able to call on the Soil Association for free technical advice available by phone and through the website.

Legal Structure

The group established itself as a company limited by guarantee, with the core group of 20 founding members being named as directors. The landowner provided a tenancy agreement that the Company signed, in order to secure the land for an annual rental of £1,200.

Funding

Early on they received a grant of £1,000 from the Parish Council and £250 from Sheffield City Council. The money was used to buy fencing for the pigs, hens and turkeys and in addition, public liability insurance and produce insurance.

Livestock

Everyone was keen to keep pigs but as they knew nothing about pig keeping, the pig group sought out some local pig keepers who willingly gave them the advice they needed and also helped out with explaining all the Defra paperwork etc.

The decision was made to buy saddleback piglets and they found what they were looking for from a farmer in Lincolnshire at a cost of approximately £40 each. Fencing was erected around land at the top of the field which was flat and included a spring so that the pigs could enjoy a muddy wallow. They were six weeks old when they came to the farm on 25 July 2009 and will be 6 months old when they go to be slaughtered on 2 December. A butcher will joint the meat according to the list the group have provided and then the members will receive their share of half a pig. They plan to buy in their next batch of piglets at the end of January.

The turkeys were bought as one day old chicks from a local farmer for approx £2.40 each. The turkeys have been extremely easy to keep though they've lost a few along the way so would recommend buying more turkeys than you need.

They currently have 8 laying hens and hope to increase this to 50 when possible. Having surplus eggs and produce to sell off will bring in capital for expanding the enterprises and improving the site.

They also keep bees which a number of the group are really passionate about and currently have 4 hives.

Feeding rota

Gary put a calendar on the internet which everyone can access and enter the dates they want to work. As there are so many people available to do the morning and afternoon feeds, the members may only get to do one session a week. But of course this doesn't stop people

going to the farm whenever they want, to see how things are going and help out with any jobs that need doing.

Membership

They currently have 25 members, all of whom pay £26.00 for annual membership. This provides an annual income of £650 which is used for ongoing costs such as buying seeds, land rental, new equipment etc.

Each member is expected to work for the farm. They have to attend 2 six hour work days each month and work an additional 2 hours per month per share.

Members are involved in tending the vegetables, being part of a feeding rota for the livestock and maintaining and improving the farm's infrastructure. Some members, who've chosen just to have a vegetable share, still have to take their turn to feed the livestock and shut them in at night if appropriate. Some of a member's work can be admin based depending on the requirements of the farm and the skills and abilities of the individuals. The additional work associated with shares allows people with less time to be involved in the project, by having fewer shares. The amount of time spent on the farm will also be subject to seasonal and project based variation.

Number of shares	Basic time commitment per month	Time commitment per share	Total time commitment per month
1	12	2	14
2	12	4	16
3	12	6	18
4	12	8	20

As Loxley Valley Community Farm is a company limited by guarantee, each member upon joining the group pledges, to pay up to £100 if the farm is wound up with insufficient funds to pay its debts.

Membership of the farm is open to residents of Sheffield and the surrounding communities and they are keen to be inclusive and welcome everyone.

The Shares

Everyone is eligible to buy one share or less in each enterprise but not more than one at this stage.

The cost for the shares for the first 6 months was:

Vegetable share: £15 token gesture for first short season of vegetables
Pig share (half pig): £95
Turkey share: £25
Egg share: £15

The group works as a cooperative with members working on the farm and all getting a share of the produce, in accordance with the type of shares they hold.

Fourteen people wanted to have a pig share (half a pig) but the group decided to buy 9 pigs so that they could have one for bacon and another spare just in case.

On going organisation

The ongoing organisation of the group has been broken down into the different enterprises, so there are committees for each of the main enterprises including horticulture, livestock, poultry, and in addition education and outreach. Each committee has a chair.

They are very committed to their education and outreach work. They've already made contact with the local primary schools to encourage visits and offer them an area of land for growing. Links are also planned with a number of colleges including for therapeutical horticulture.

Open Day

On 31st October, Halloween, they organised an open day which was attended by over 300 people. Everyone had told family and friends, and an article in the local Telegraph, also ensured a good turn out. Members gave talks and tours of the site, provided homemade food and drinks and ran lots of fun activities for the children.

Vision for the future

As the project has worked so successfully for them, the Loxley Valley community farm members are very keen to help other communities in the Sheffield area to set up similar schemes.

They also hope to create an opportunity for local people to come together, as there is no local smallholders association in the area.

Establishing a breeding programme and increasing the area for vegetables and planting fruit trees is also on the agenda.

The members would like to be in a position to donate surplus produce to local people in need and charitable organisations.

Quotes for some of the founding members of the farm when asked what the farm has meant to them:

Mark: For me its been realising a dream – I always wanted to have a smallholding – but this is better than doing it alone – there's less time commitment and I'm doing it with friends. The highlight of my visits is always spending time with the pigs and giving them a good scratch.

Richard: The coming together of people with different skills has been the strongest point of the farm. A highlight for me is the knowledge that the animal welfare is very high and so they have a really happy life.

Stephanie: I'm just starting to really learn about growing vegetables. When I was growing up my parents had a vegetable patch in the garden, and I tried growing stuff last year when I was a student, but am really keen to learn real skills now. There are no allotments available round here so this has provided me with a fantastic opportunity to get involved. The highlight for me is actually growing my own food. Watching a tiny seed develop into a cauliflower is what its about. Knowing where my food comes from, and that there's no waste. When you've grown it yourself, you feel a real pride and so, whatever the shape or size of the produce, you want to eat it!

Lee-Anne

I love coming up here and bringing the kids after school. They really enjoy feeding the pigs but of course they always have to change out of their school uniform on the days they do the feeding! Its just lovely knowing you'll be eating the food you've produced

Gary: I just got sick of the rubbish from the shops and also wanted to show my kids the reality of producing food. I wanted to get in touch with the earth and the seasons, and learn the patience that you acquire from growing, waiting for those broccoli seeds to grow and

mature takes 8 months – and yet you can buy a head of broccoli for 50p in the shops and not think about the growing process. I was also keen to reduce my carbon footprint. I got an allotment a few years ago, which I still maintain but am really delighted to be part of this project too. I feel there's a revolution going on in people wanting to get in touch with nature.

Grace 11 years old: Before the farm, there was nothing to do after school. But now I love coming up here and looking after the animals. It's good to eat animals when you know they've had a happy life.

Richard Allison

His interest started with cookery programmes on TV which in turn led him to wanting to know where his food comes from, especially the meat and even to wanting, one day, to set up a smallholding to keep pigs. He sees the community farm as providing a fantastic opportunity to learn skills in pig keeping and vegetable growing, which can enable him to go on to establish another community farm one day.

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This case study has been written by the Soil Association as part of the Making Local Food Work project to support the development of Community Supported Agriculture. The Soil Association is providing information, advice and technical support to farmers and communities setting up Community Supported Agriculture projects.

www.soilassociation.org/csa.aspx

Making Local Food Work is a partnership project which aims to reconnect people with the land through food and community enterprise.

www.makinglocalfoodwork.co.uk