

# A case study of Whitmuir Organic Farm supporter scheme

## **Introduction**

Whitmuir Organics is a small, organic farm in the Borders. Farmed by Peter Ritchie and Heather Anderson, the 140 acres of grade 4 and 5 agricultural land is on a north-facing slope, 900 feet above sea level. They keep pigs, laying hens, turkeys, sheep and beef cattle and despite the very short growing season, produce a range of soft fruit and vegetables on 2 acres of land and 2 poly tunnels.

Because of a deep passion for growing vegetables and desire to keep livestock, they started farming at Whitmuir 2.5 years ago. Their plan, from the beginning, was to grow for people they know and provide them with fresh, seasonal food when available.

## **Finding supporters**

In order to make contact with local people, they held a meeting in the local village hall where they talked about the farm and their vision for creating a local food enterprise for local people. As a result, 20 people signed up to joining Whitmuir Organics as supporters and making a commitment to setting up a monthly standing order for their chosen amount.

## **Funding new development**

In spite of being only 20 minutes drive from Edinburgh, the majority of their supporters come from surrounding villages, and only 20% from Edinburgh. The financial commitment from the local people enabled them to get a bank loan from Triodos Bank. They also secured a grant for 25% of the money, Triodos funded the balance. With the money they were able to replace the dangerous old road to the farm with a new surface to enable public access. They also purchased their first polytunnel and converted a barn into an on-farm butchery.

They set up a farm shop, 1.5 years ago, from where they sell all their meat, eggs, fruit and vegetables. In addition, the shop stocks a range of products including, bread, cheese, milk, groceries and ice cream, Fair Trade tea, coffee, chocolate, wine and beer. All products are organic. They also sell a wide range of ethical toiletries and cleaning products in order to provide customers with all the items they might need.

They buy in some fresh produce and meat to provide a broader range and for when their own produce is not in season. They share pallets of vegetables and fruit with another box scheme in order to spread the cost.

They now have 2 polytunnels which they use to grow a range of salads, French beans and other tender crops. The 2 acres of unprotected cropping rotate potatoes, brassicas, carrots and parsnips, leeks and onions. Three more 2 acre paddocks are in

fertility-building clover leys allowing for the vegetable area to be expanded in future years.

The livestock on the farm include 13 Shorthorn cows and followers , 200 hens, and 8 sows. They have just sold their breeding ewes and will buy in Blackie store lambs from a nearby hill farm in future. They are fortunate in having a local abattoir 28 miles away, and of course the meat is then butchered on the farm and packaged for sale in the shop.

They employ 9 people on the farm, 3 on the production side, 3 in the butchery and 3 in the shop. Most of them are employed on a part time basis. They are keen to engage more people in farming though and have a young person volunteering every Saturday in order to learn more about farming as she would like to become a farmer.

### **Getting started**

The idea for developing the supporters of Whitmuir Farm came at a Soil Association conference in Scotland when Pete and Heather attended a talk from a Cumbrian beef and sheep farmer who created a committed supporter club for their produce.

From the original 20, the number of supporters has now grown to 160 families. Monthly standing orders are set up which range from £15 to £600 with an average of £55 per month. This brings in a monthly income of £9000 which represents about one third of total sales. The rest of the sales are from general shop customers, a handful of local restaurants and specialty retailers, and a cookery school.

Having a secure consumer base has enabled the farm to secure income for development and also clear crop planning.

### **The supporter group**

They would like to build to 250 supporters which would provide a sustainable income. They are clear that they wouldn't want it to be any bigger than this as they want to keep a sense of community, and deal with people they have met and can remember their names

*It is great having a committed supporter group so that on a wet Tuesday morning when the shop is empty but staff costs still have to be paid, you know you're getting an income. Peter Ritchie*

Most supporters come to the shop to pick up their produce, but home delivery is possible for a £2.00 delivery charge. They make a weekly drop in Edinburgh and a couple of deliveries to more local villages. They are able to tie in deliveries with staff journeys to work and back using their second hand refrigerated van.

The farm are very keen to maintain a good link with their supporters and send out a weekly email newsletter with information on the farm and the produce available. This also provides them an opportunity to flag up any special offers of seasonal produce coming into the shop, such as boxes of apples which have just arrived. Supporters can often buy in bulk for a good discount. All supporters are also encouraged to visit the farm at least once a year to maintain links to the farmers and the land. Lovely summer days provide a good opportunity for supporters to visit the farm and also do some shopping.

They provide opportunities for their supporters and customers to get involved, for instance through a pick your own strawberry day and a summer BBQ. They also organise winter talks in the village hall about a range of interesting topics for example bread making by Andrew Whitley, olive oil by Palestinian olive growers, poultry welfare, bee keeping, chocolate making and jams and preserves.

### **Marketing the supporter opportunity**

At the beginning the farm printed 10,000 postcards with information on the farm and the details of the supporter group. This promotion produced an initial response from 100 people but even after 6 months, people are still bringing cards into the shop. Marketing is tricky, but many people will drive 10-15 miles to come to the shop.

Engaging the Edinburgh media has been difficult but the farm won the Future Farmer award and has been nominated for the UKTV Local Food Hero Award, both of which are generating some good publicity.

### **The Future**

They are keen to encourage more people out of the city and onto the farm and are therefore creating a more interesting and pleasurable environment for visitors. They have secured another loan to relocate the existing cattle sheds and build a new shop with a café and art gallery, along with a wind turbine and an education centre for school and other visits. (This year they hosted several visits from schools, youth groups and nurseries as well as farmers from Austria, Italy and Pakistan.) The new carbon-neutral building will be a regional visitor attraction for people interested in sustainability as well as good local food.

**[www.whitmuirorganics.co.uk](http://www.whitmuirorganics.co.uk)**

#### **Quotes from supporters:**

*Heather and Pete have a vision I'm glad to be a part of and a commitment to making it happen. It's more than a shop, it's an education about food and there is something to learn every day. If there were more Whitmuirs, then there would be no supermarkets and farmers would get a better deal!*

*Becoming a member of Whitmuir has revolutionised our approach to shopping especially meat.*

*We've been a supporter of the farm for over a year now and watched them go from strength to strength. We've switched about 80-90% of our supermarket shopping to them.*

*When we first became supporters we feared it might be a bit meaty for us vegetarians, but our needs are kept in mind too. Hearing what people say about the meat, I've been tempted to eat meat for the first time in years. The great thing is you know where it's all coming from. They are always willing to let us look around the farm and seeing the happy chooks, pigs, cattle and sheep is a joy. You can even see your veggies growing!*