

HEALING IN HEELEY

Heeley City Farm, Sheffield

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A bench made from old tyres (Source: Heeley City Farm)

Heeley City Farm produces local organic food, breeds rare breed animals, generates its own electricity and has around 100,000 visitors per year. What's even more remarkable about the farm is that it's not in some rural idyll but in urban Sheffield, run by the local community, and has provided the local area with economic, social and environmental revival. Read our in-depth interview about it...

Sheffield is more known for its steel than for its farms. What made you decide to set up a farm in an urban environment?

The farm's founders were motivated by a number of factors – making constructive use of a derelict area of land, the desire for a city farm and the wish to contribute to employment, education and the local environment.

[A group of local people, led by the Heeley Residents and Tenants Association, successfully campaigned against a major new bypass. They went on to think about what they could constructively do to improve their area.](#) The farm was set up in the early 1980s on land earmarked for the bypass but local campaigners wanted something more sustainable and used the derelict land to create jobs. The aim was to promote community regeneration and environmentally friendly self-help in what was one of the most deprived areas of the town.

"For everyone at the farm, caring for or improving your area is not only about making something look pretty, that's important, but it's also about creating economic, environmental and social benefits to a diverse community with different needs and backgrounds."

So they won the campaign and you wanted to create a city farm? What happened next?

They chose a city farm because one of the members already had an outline proposal, they had an area of derelict land, and the idea fit with their priorities of employment, environment and education. In 1981 the local authority granted them a license for the land, and the farm soon won funding to employ workers to deliver a government training programme. It started running youth work in the area, building links with local schools and working with truanting young people. As time progressed and unemployment in the area became a long-term problem the main focus shifted to training and job creation.



Inside a polytunnel (Source: Heeley City Farm)

Has the farm got any examples of how they improved the local areas?

There's quite a lot. For a start, they've turned wasteland into an environmental oasis. Through coming to the farm, local people are becoming more aware and increasingly engaged with environmental issues; for example, through the recycling scheme. It takes on over twenty volunteers and provides them and other people with training in what some might say is a 'deprived area' and provided 34 jobs to people who initially worked for the farm as volunteers or who got trained on the farm.

The farm's new building is environmentally friendly and generates all of the farm's electricity needs with our new wind turbine. We work with school children and the local community on energy efficiency. The farm has also formed an alliance with another group to lobby for kerbside collection of recyclables, including organic wastes, throughout Sheffield.

What have been the high and low points for the farm?

Highs:

- A local appeal fund raised £60,000 to rebuild the farm and buy new animals as well as further funds to develop a major new 'eco-friendly' building on the site with training rooms, a visitor reception, new stables and an electricity generating wind turbine

- Working closely with other organisations the farms helped develop; to form a significant local economy employing approximately 60 people

Lows:

- An arson attack destroyed the farm's stable block and killed a number of the animals
- Not always been given the credit by some other organisations and agencies for the good work we do
- Not being sure that the community would win the campaign against the bypass

What are the future plans for the farm?

The farm plans to help set up a South Yorkshire food partnership and increase its local food production. It has recently taken over the running of the National Community Composting Network and is looking at having an impact on more land in Sheffield, with spin-off effects on wildlife and biodiversity. Last but not least, it aims to sell off the extra energy produced from its wind turbine to the national grid.

Facts and Information

- There are 59 city farms, nearly 1000 community gardens, 66 school farms and a number of community-managed allotments in the UK. The farms and gardens significantly contribute to improving an area and the quality of life of people living there (*Source: Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens*).
- People can improve their area, in lots of ways, creating green spaces but also in supporting their local economy, providing training and jobs, volunteering using environmentally friendly energy, supporting community transport, setting up recycling schemes, organising street clean ups and working together. There are a hundreds of communities doing this. Check with your local CSV or local authority to see what projects or schemes are operating in your area.

Further information

- If you want to know more about setting up a city farm or a community garden, contact the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens (FCFCG). They exist to support, represent and promote community managed farms and gardens. In addition, they provide information, advice and publications. Visit their website at www.farmgarden.org.uk.
- To find out more about using environmentally friendly energy in your home, office, community centre, school or place of worship, call Community Action for Energy (CAFE) at 08701 261444 or check out their website: www.est.org.uk/cafe/welcome/. For community recycling, contact the Community Recycling Network – www.crn.org or 0117 9420 142.
- You can find out more information on improving your area from the Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation (www.nif.co.uk) or from the Department of Communities and Local Government – the government department responsible for neighbourhood renewal and sustainable communities (www.dclg.gov.uk). Groundwork can also offer advice and help (www.groundwork.org.uk), and BTCV provide environmental volunteer schemes that improve local communities (www.btcv.org).