

# DEVELOPMENT OF A UNIQUE HOLIDAY FACILITY FOR DISABLED VISITORS TO THE HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTRYSIDE

Case Study Helen Clark 2005



Helen Clark purchased 20 acres of land on Mangrove Lane just outside Hertford in 1981. The parcel consisted of a disused, overgrown paddock and a derelict shed with no house. Helen lived on site in a mobile home for 11 years before moving into a permanent home. The new house was built to Helen's own design. Meanwhile in 1983 the existing, old building was converted for use as a calf-rearing unit.

Since these early days Petasfield Stables has been developed as a successful equine business offering riding tuition and livery. Some rearing of pork and beef for the freezer continued.

Enough is never enough for Helen and in 2001 she started to consider ways of expanding the business further in order to develop additional income streams. Never shy, she explored all sources of advice and took all relevant training opportunities. Helen attended a range of training courses run by AGRE and took advantage of the 1to1 training opportunities in both business development and computers studies. As a consequence, a decision was made to develop a part of the stables into holiday cottages. A further stipulation was that they should provide an outstanding level of facility for disabled clients. The desire to help disabled people arose from Helen's deep-rooted understanding of the problems encountered by disabled people that arose from many years of care provided to her own handicapped mother.

Deciding what to do is the easy bit! Making it happen is another thing altogether. Adjectives such as tenacious, bloody-minded, dogged and determined are appropriate when describing the character strengths demonstrated by Helen in bringing the project to a successful conclusion.

The first step was to carry out market research in order to establish the likely need for the facility proposed. A variety of data was collected from a range of sources in the disabled, equine and tourism sectors. It was clear from the results that there was a shortage of self-catering accommodation in the area. Not only that but a severe shortage of facilities for disabled people and those wishing to take their horses and ponies away with them for the weekend. The ease of access from London is a particular strength in this regard.

In defining the features required of the proposed development it is clear that the easy option was not being taken. Helen wished to convert the rear section of the stables, previously used for calf rearing, into four self-catering holiday cottages. Nothing extraordinary so far, but each of the cottages was developed to provide features that would allow disabled visitors to holiday independently using a host of purpose designed facilities. One of the units in particular was to include features allowing wheelchair users complete independence. To this end Adam Thomas of Access Matters was recruited to advise on the design of the kitchen and bathroom. The kitchen for example includes an electric sink and hob riser a feature that pushed the cost of that room alone to £18,000.

Equitation was also a key feature of the development. Able visitors may take advantage of the stables and bring their own mount for their holiday or may hire horses from the stables for hacking with or without riding lessons. Wheelchair users may also experience equine transport by taking a ride in the specially designed trap.

Following advice from the Hertfordshire ADER project officer (Agricultural Development in the Eastern Region) a decision was made to pursue a grant from DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) under the RES (Rural Enterprise Scheme) section of the ERDP (England Rural Development Programme). The complexity of the jargon is indicative of the number of hurdles to be overcome if such an application is to be successful!



## **AGRE Business Support**

The AGRE Team recognised the support of our funders that has enabled the project to provide business development training to businesses throughout Hertfordshire.

In any event, the first step is to approach the local planning office to assess whether the planned development is likely to be approved. If the project is acceptable to the planners then the Defra RDS (Rural Development Service) should be contacted

to arrange an appointment at a monthly clinic. At the clinic the intended applicant has the chance to establish eligibility for grant.

Having received positive responses from planning and DEFRA, Helen decided to go ahead with the application. A full business plan and application was drafted with the assistance of the AGRE team and duly submitted. The RES is a finite fund and there is no guarantee that a grant will be awarded since it is assessed with other applications in a competitive process. In the event Helen's application was unsuccessful.

Since the 50% funding applied for was not forthcoming Helen revised her plans and decided to develop only two of the proposed four units thus committing approximately the same amount of her own resources. During April 2005 the first clients stayed in the new cottages.

## AGRE Business Development Support

AGRE held an official opening and networking event on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2005 with Cllr James Ranger from East Hertfordshire District Council officiating. Over 50 people attended and include delegates from the East of England Tourist Information Service, Business Link's Disability Advisor and proprietors and staff from a wide range of businesses interested in the diversification project.

To develop her skills and knowledge Helen has attended a wide range of AGRE courses over a number of years. She has accessed Quality Grading Training and as a result of this, has her business graded by East of England Tourist Board. 1to1 help to improve her I.T. skills, marketing training supported her brochure design and the rural business Network meeting helped Helen to launch her business. All those who attended the Network meeting were impressed by the excellent finish of the cottages and could only admire the first-rate disabled facilities.

Attention has also been paid to the surroundings with a wild woodland area and a "sensory garden." Horticulturalist Christine Walkden, author and broadcaster who is featured in Christine's Garden, a series commencing on 20th December on BBC2 television, developed the principles of the sensory garden. The garden includes a range of raised beds containing plants chosen for their aromas and tactility to allow wheelchair users and those with impaired vision to enjoy the outdoors.

There is nothing like satisfied customers to prove the quality and value of the facilities and some visitors have already booked their next stay at Petasfield Cottages. So as awareness develops as a result of the marketing activity it is likely that prospective visitors will be turned away under a "no vacancies" sign. All being well, the Cottages will generate a good income for Helen that will allow her to launch the development of the second two cottages envisaged in the original plan.



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