



Sally Pike, Partner at Thrings and Jane Cooper, CEO, Countryside Education Trust

Thrings Eats...

with Jane Cooper, Countryside Education Trust

The Thrings Eats series of articles supports the Countryside Education Trust, which has experienced both sides of lockdown – its devastating impact, and an outpouring of community support. Sally Pike, a Partner at the Romsey office of the law firm Thrings, finds out more

Over the summer months, the beautiful farm and woodland at the Countryside Education Trust, near Beaulieu in the New Forest, should be teeming with visitors.

The centre would usually welcome hundreds of schoolchildren for day visits and residential stays, as well as community groups and people from local care homes, to learn about rural life and the relationship between farming and the food we eat.

This year, of course, it's been a different story. The Trust's CEO, Jane Cooper, pulls no punches when asked how difficult 2020 has been.

"It's catastrophic financially," she says. "All of our income-generating activities stopped overnight. In the summer term, we would have had over a thousand kids coming to stay with us, plus about a thousand on day visits. We hold two community events – Spring on the Farm and Open Farm Sunday, which bring in about 1,500 to 2,000 people – so it would have been a very full time.

"Without a doubt, this has been our most challenging year ever. But we're very

determined that we will survive it and are just trying to imagine the shape of that at the moment."

Despite the difficulties, Jane highlights the positives that have come out of lockdown. A crowdfunding campaign, Feed Our Farmyard, raised around £5,000 and donations are still coming in. As staff were furloughed, local farmers helped out with the haymaking and volunteers stepped in to help care for the animals. The Owls Clubs for children kept going online – and the Trust developed its overall online offering, which may ultimately increase its reach to schools outside the area as part of its mission to "connect people with the countryside".

"One result of lockdown is that everybody now realises how important having access to the outdoors is," says Jane. "Imagine the additional level of disadvantage faced by families living in tower blocks and urban inner-city environments, whose options were very limited even when they were allowed to exercise. There are lots of new challenges to consider while our usual activities are on hold."

A return to anything like normal is going to be slow, so the financial implications are likely to be felt in the long term. Jane hopes to generate some income through activities such as renting out the farm's residential centre and cottage for private groups. She is also hopeful that some outreach work, such as visits with animals to schools, can be safely resumed – but the Trust will need to rely heavily on donations and other support if it is to survive.

"We've been here since 1975 and want to still be here in 2025, so we've just got to work out how we do that," she says. "What we do is so valuable to those who visit – from elderly people to kids from inner-city London who have no idea what the wider world looks like. If you don't help children to love the countryside when they're small, that door can be closed to them forever. We've got to find a way."

To make a donation or to find out more about ways to support the Countryside Education Trust, visit www.cet.org.uk/about/donationsandsupport ♦