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## How one couple set up in free-range egg production

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Price volatility is a well-documented feature in egg production. But when Ben Anthony and Diana Fairclough weighed up returns against income from their suckler beef and sheep enterprises, the figures stacked up – even when they factored in market dips.

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It gave them the confidence to invest £2m in establishing a free-range unit across 16ha (40 acres) of their farm in Carmarthenshire, incorporating a purpose-built muck store and an off-grid electricity system as well.

Nearly a year after the first eggs were produced at Frowen Farm, near Llanboidy, they say it was the right decision.

"When we sell a trailer load of lambs, they are gone, but when we sell pallets of eggs, there will be more eggs to sell again the following day.

"It is more or less a constant income, apart from a few weeks when we are empty between flocks," Diana explains.

However, it has been a steep learning curve and not all plain sailing for the couple.

For others considering diversification into poultry, they offer some valuable advice.



Diana Fairclough and Ben Anthony © Debbie James

### Farm facts: Frowen Farm, Llanboidy, Carmarthenshire

- 73ha of owned land, and 16ha rented
- 380 Aberfeld and Abermax ewes
- Breeding rams supplied to Innovis
- Lambs mostly sold liveweight at local livestock mart
- Silage grown on contract for local dairy farm
- One full-time employee, Clare Robinson, in egg business

### Getting started

Having two young sons, seven-year-old Deri, and Dion, five, was the incentive to consider ways of generating more revenue from the farm.

The business is a breeding partner for a sheep genetics company, earning income from producing rams.

Before the diversification they had a herd of Welsh Black-cross and Stabiliser suckler cows, which they sold to reinvest in egg production.

Initially the idea was for a flock of about 1,000 hens to produce premium eggs for local and direct sales, yet reviewing that model, Ben admits they could not make it pay.

A chance meeting with a member of a free-range egg integrator got them thinking bigger. And the inclusion of a built-in wage in the projected figures stood out.

"That was a big draw, because we previously had to work off-farm to supplement what the farm made," says Ben.

"As farmers, we can be guilty of not taking into account a wage in our cost of production."

### Securing finance

Establishing the diversification required significant capital.

However, their bank manager was very supportive and confident the new business would generate sufficient return to service the borrowings.

In fact, he suggested that they scaled up their ambition from a 16,000-bird system to 32,000.

"Our plan was to build one shed and perhaps a second one at a later date, but because some of the costs would have been the same across 16,000 birds as over 32,000, it made sense to spread that cost across a greater output of eggs [from the start]," says Ben.

"When your bank advises you to be more ambitious and is willing to lend you the money, it does give you greater confidence that the business decision you are making is the right one."

### Planning process

A planning consultant was appointed in August 2020 and the pre-planning application submitted that autumn.

Unusually, the ammonia assessment showed there were no background levels, which was a positive start in convincing planners to back the application.

The number of surveys required, however, protracted the planning process and it was 18 months before approval was granted.

There were no objections to the application, although a small number of local people had initially expressed concern via social media posts.

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The couple engaged with those detractors to allay any worries.

"There is a lot of false information out there about poultry, so it is important to have a dialogue with people who raise any issues and answer their questions," says Ben.

The cost associated with securing planning was roughly £50,000, and that outlay was a gamble, he admits.

"It is huge pressure, to know you are spending so much money and that you could see nothing at the end of it if you don't get consent."



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### Learning from others

Ideas for the business came from visiting several established free-range egg farms.

The couple also had some online training and increased their knowledge by talking to the right people.

Their contract is with Lloyds Animal Feeds, and having expert advice from the company in the first few weeks was important.

"They were there to hold our hand as we navigated any teething issues," says Diana, adding that many aspects of managing hens are easier than for sheep and cattle.

"Vaccinating chickens [for infectious bronchitis every eight weeks and E coli every 20 weeks] is far easier because it is done through the water," she adds.

### Infrastructure

Two 16,000-bird sheds connected by a packing area were built by Monmouthshire poultry building specialist Morspan Construction, and were fitted out with Big Dutchman multi-tier systems.

The business opted for the most modern technology in everything from the egg sorting line, to the drinking water auto flushing lines.

"If you install technology that is already five or 10 years old, then it will be out of date before you have finished paying for it – it is worth paying a bit more for the most recent kit," Ben reasons.

Additional investment in a palletising robot has paid off: "It was taking up an hour and a half a day to stack the pallets but the machine now does that," he adds.

Further investment has been needed in fencing to deter foxes.

"We had fencing, but it wasn't enough to keep out the foxes so we are in the process of erecting a 2m fence around the perimeter."

### Hens

The sheds are populated with H&N brown commercial layers and each flock has access to an 8ha (20-acre) ranging area.

The hens have an expected laying cycle of 82 weeks.

Incidence of floor and system eggs is low and only 2% of eggs produced are second quality. Eggs are sold to Ellis Foods through Lloyds.

The agreement allows for direct sales of up to 5%, which Ben and Diana are starting through their brand, Carmarthenshire Free Range Eggs.

Direct sales require the business to be registered as an egg packing station by the Animal and Plant Health Agency.

### Energy supply

The initial plan was to install three-phase electricity, estimated at £90,000.

Not only was the cost high, but the major barrier was timeframe: it would take nearly five years to be operational.

Instead, the business invested in renewable energy – a 125kW roof-mounted solar system and 150kW battery storage – to allow the sheds to run off-grid.

At £247,000, this was considerable, yet the system, supplied by AM Power Solutions, is expected to pay for itself within six years.

"The sums looked better when we took [the £90,000] into account and, by having renewable energy, we have future-proofed the business against energy price rises and power cuts," says Ben.

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