



Coming CLEAN

If you are thinking of opening your smallholding to the public, make sure you know the rules on hygiene. Rosie Beat reports on the risks, and the precautions you can take



More and more farms and smallholdings are opening their gates to the public, either for isolated events such as Open Farm Sunday, or to host regular visits from schoolchildren and adult groups under stewardship schemes such as Educational Access.

Last summer, the national media covered a series of E coli outbreaks on 'petting farms', where children are encouraged to handle tame livestock. Several such farms, in different parts of the country, were closed after a number of young children became seriously ill. So, is it safe to open your smallholding to the public, and should children be encouraged to

THE LAW

The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations 2002 require an employer or self-employed person to: assess the risks to employees, self-employed people and the public from exposure to hazardous substances, including micro-organisms; and take appropriate action to prevent or adequately control that exposure.

handle animals during a visit?

Many children who visit our smallholding, even in this rural area, have never touched a sheep or pig, and this close contact can be the highlight of their day. It would be over-reacting to deny this experience because of the hazards associated with animals, for while the risks are real, they are readily controlled by simple measures.

Farms and smallholdings participating in Open Farm Sunday or Educational Access are given detailed advice concerning on-farm hygiene, based on Health and Safety (HSE) Information sheet no 23. This was revised after the 2009 E coli outbreaks and contains supplementary advice for teachers. It gives detailed information about the different micro-organisms that can cause ill health, and also points out that you have a duty of care under the law.

E coli is not just caught by touching animals. Another way of contracting infection is via dung picked up on footwear and passed on to hands when changing. And it isn't only farm animals that transmit E coli – you can pick it up from wild birds, badly stored cooked meats and even from prepared washed salad leaves!

If you intend to open your farm or smallholding, the first requirement is to assess the risk. Current veterinary and medical opinion is that farmers should assume all ruminants (cattle, sheep, goats and deer) carry E coli, and understand that it may be introduced to the farm at any time by new stock, wild birds and animals, or by visitors such as delivery drivers who have visited other farms. As E coli can persist for long periods outside the body

(up to 150 days in soil and 90 days in cattle dung) other animals on the farm, including pets, can easily acquire the bacterium.

Accepting that some, or all of your stock, may be carriers, the priority is to control the risk when contact is made with animals during stroking, bottle feeding, touching gates and animal pens, or walking through areas contaminated with dung. The most obvious thing to do is to provide adequate hand-washing facilities for visitors - and by 'adequate', the HSE mean running (preferably hot) water.

Over many years of school visits to our smallholding, visitors all used the single downstairs toilet in our farmhouse, but you can imagine the queue by the back door as a whole class waited to wash their hands before eating. To ease the situation, we would carry bowls of warm water into the yard with soap and towels. However, the sharing of water and towels in this way is no longer considered adequate.

The key element here is running water, so that bacteria are not passed from person to person by

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the shared bowls or towels. To achieve this with cold water, you can attach a section of hose to an outside tap and make holes in the hose at intervals. Visitors wash their hands as the water trickles out at various points along the hose and a trough or gutter placed below will collect the waste water and carry it away. It's quite simple to set up, and may be adequate if the smallholding is open on a very occasional basis.

Soap is the next consideration. We have always preferred bars of traditional soap over liquid dispensers and avoid anti-bacterial hand sprays, as we have a septic tank to consider. The last thing we want is for a class to wash all their anti-bacteriological chemicals into our system and kill the good bugs in the tank! Also be aware that alcohol-based gels and hand wipes do not offer sufficient protection and are not an adequate substitute for hand washing.

Shared towels are not good practice, so you do need to invest in some paper towels; these can at least be made from recycled paper and composted after use. Hot air hand dryers are also suitable,



Touching a sheep may be the highlight of a child's visit

RESOURCES



Free publications are available by mail order from HSE Books, PO Box 1999, Sudbury, Suffolk CO10 2WA

Tel: 01787 881165

<http://www.hsebooks.co.uk/>

Free leaflets can be downloaded from the HSE website:

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/>

For regular school visits, consider an accreditation course such as the Countryside Educational Visits Accreditation Scheme (CEVAS).

Website: www.face-online.org.uk/cevas

though obviously expensive to install.

A further consideration is to ensure that visitors understand the need for careful hand washing. Before school groups visit our smallholding, teachers receive the HSE information sheets, make their own risk assessment, and are responsible for ensuring that children wash their hands before eating any food. However, with events like Open Farm Sunday, members of the public may be wandering round on their own, so it is important to put up signs near any animal handling areas to inform them of the risks and direct them to the hand washing area.

It's good practice to provide a trough of water containing disinfectant for visitors to dip their boots before they leave the farm, as this will reduce the risk of infection being carried on footwear and transmitting to hands as people change to go home. It also helps if access areas are kept clean.

So, you go to all this trouble but remember the old adage: "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink!" You just need to show that you have done all that is necessary.

Finally, remember to protect yourself financially by ensuring that your smallholding has adequate public liability insurance cover for opening to the public.

NEXT MONTH: The Beats build a washroom for visitors - step-by-step guide.



Writers -----

To find out more about Rosie Beat, visit www.thebridgemill.org.uk



Leading visitors round the smallholding reduces risk

