

Business case ID Card

Name of the company: Glen Keen Sheep Farm

Country: Ireland

Size of the business: Family business

Website: <https://glenkeenfarm.com>

Contact: Catherine O’Grady-Powers

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpYWfHbwWd4>

History

Since the 17th century, the Glen Keen Sheep farm, located on the Irish Atlantic coast, has been passed down from generation to generation. The current proprietors’ grandmother bought the farm after Ireland’s independence from Britain in 1921, but their ancestors were already tenant farmers before landownership became open to all.

After inheriting the family farm in 1999, Catherine O’Grady Powers and Jim Powers moved back from the United States to Ireland. Very quickly, they realised that a second source of income was needed to support the family sheep business. Since the farm is located along the Wild Atlantic Way, a famous tourism trail featuring Ireland’s most spectacular coast-side routes, Catherine had noticed as a child that a lot of American and German tourists would pass around the farm to take pictures of her father cutting turf. Catherine and her husband saw this as an opportunity to diversify their activities by opening the farm to visitors and offering them the unique experience of living at a traditional Irish sheep farm.

To make their wish come true, they applied for funding from the LEADER rural development programme, which enabled them to create a visitor centre, a café, and a craft shop, displaying and selling local craft. Building on her previous discussions with coach drivers to gain insights into what would appeal to the bus tour market, Catherine developed a saleable experience pitch for overseas tour operators and attended her first fair in Meitheal in April 2013. There, she managed to sign her first trial contract with CIE Tours International and the new facilities opened to the public in 2014. After six years, the farm is welcoming over 55,000 tourists per year, and the couple is now entering its seventh tourist season.

Main activities

Sheep breeding was the core activity at Glen Keen farm when Catherine inherited the business. Today, they still have close to 600 sheep roaming on 1,700 acres of



land (670 hectares), and approximately 100 acres (40 hectares) of lowland. During the tourist season, from March to October, the farm also runs a visitor centre, including a café and a craft shop, displaying and selling local art. The visitor centre is mainly open for bus tour operators and group tours, but individual visitors can also join group tours upon request. The visitor centre offers 12 different kinds of experiences, from sheep shearing and wool spinning demonstrations to sheep herding and wool dyeing, traditional turf cutting, guided historical walks focusing on the Great famine, or traditional Irish singing and dancing. In the gift shop, visitors can buy local products, including crafts, jewellery and knitwear, as well as homemade jams and chutneys. The couple runs the business alone, with up to eight employees.

Market

Sheep breeding and associated subsidies still provide some revenues to the farm, but they are now complemented by the solid income provided by the visitor centre during the tourist season. The farm is easily accessible by road, and ideally located along the Irish Atlantic Coast, on the famous touristic route of the Wild Atlantic Way. The latter is a heavily promoted tourist destination in Ireland, and the Glen Keen farm builds a lot on this renowned brand to sell their services. There are a few competitors along the road, but the farm offers a wide range of services, which enables tourists and tour operators to get a customised and truly immersive experience.

The Glen Keen farm visitor centre only welcomes groups, though individual visitors can request to join a group visit. When developing their agri-tourism business, they targeted mainly tour operators, which they knew would be essential to generate the volumes of sales required for the business to be sustainable. Tour operators usually sign three-year contracts, in order to test the services and make sure that the company stays in business long enough. Most of the new contracts with tour buses are acquired through regular participation in attending International trade shows, but Glen Keen farm is building more and more on the power of social media, writing stories and testimonials for the website in order to promote their activities.

The farm is now welcoming approximately 55,000 visitors per year, from March to October, a mix of international Coach tour guests, some school tours and scheduled private tours/chauffeur drive guests. History represents a critical factor for drawing tourists to the region: on the farm, 70% of the visitors are coming from the United States to learn about Irish history and a journey of re-tracing their ancestors footsteps. Glen Keen offers authentic built heritage tenant cabins and bronze age sites which, provide the visitors with a very tactile & immersive experience of connecting with their ancestors, their history and the way they farmed and lived.



Challenges and solutions

WiFi is an essential feature for tourists nowadays: they need to be able to post pictures on social media instantly during their holidays. Nonetheless, getting broadband to the farm was a real challenge. After approaching the Local Community Futures group, which considered that domestic broadband was already satisfactory in the region, they had to go down the private route and approached Westnet and invited them to survey the farm to find a suitable location for a Broadband stationary mast. The Westnet Broadband Team found a perfect spot in a corner of a field, where a mast could bounce the signal in the whole village, but there was no road to access it. Glen Keen had to take the matter into their own hands and hire yet another contractor to build a road, finally getting access to decent working broadband, allowing them to offer WiFi to their customers and conduct their daily busy online. Glen Keen is very grateful to Westnet for providing this fantastic service which, also benefits the local community with access to Broadband.

Since the tourism sector is too often considered as a low profile industry, there is often a shortage of skilled labour in this area. Customer service and hospitality geared courses are too often lacking from the employees curricula. To counterbalance this trend, the company provides in-house training on customer service, using roleplay to encourage the staff into looking at the mindset of the customers so they can understand what the clients would like and expect from their experience at the farm & Visitor Centre.

At the beginning, accessing funding also appeared to be difficult and time consuming for the owners, but fortunately, they could benefit from the advice of local networks, who helped them go through the procedure successfully. Failte Ireland and the Mayo LEO office have been a huge support and resource in training and business supports to Glen Keen Farm. On the political side, Brexit is of course a potential black cloud on the Irish tourism industry as a lot of international visitors come through on tour buses from the United Kingdom, Ireland usually being just an 'add on', while the value for money is considered better in Scotland.

Funding

The initial funding used to create the tourism centre reached €149,000. This first investment was financed through the LEADER rural development fund, and some funding received from the Local Enterprise Office. In counterpart, Glen Keen farm had to keep the same business model for five years, but this initial funding was essential for the company to start on the right foot. Since then, they added up €850,000 of investment, coming from their own savings and profits, to this initial funding, in order to develop the company's activities and renovate some buildings. At this point, the farm thinks that it would be easier to receive funding from a bank, now that they have proven that their business model is working, and a bank actually recently accepted to grant them a loan to build two foot bridges for hill walking.



What makes this case innovative?

Building on the Wild Atlantic Way brand, Glen Keen farm has developed a wide range of services, enabling tourists to dive into the history of the place while learning about the traditions of sheep breeding, sheep farming through a truly immersive experience. Drawing on Catherine's childhood memories is what makes the experience feel authentic for tourists. Thanks to the quality time spent by tourists on the farm, they received the golden Award of Excellence of the tour operator CIE Tours International after their first year in 2015, citing Glen Keen Farm as the Best Tourist Feature on the CIE International Ireland itinerary.

Jim and Catherine have invested their time, money, and experience to adapt their services to the expectations of tour operators, and can now offer tailor-made experiences to the different groups of visitors coming to the farm. The fact that the visitors' experience is linked to the everyday farm life means that both activities can work efficiently in parallel, which is also quite important for the business.

Key takeaways / Lessons learnt

Timing was critical to the successful launch of Glen Keen farm's visitor centre, and was controlled by the couple. As they were doing their own research, questioning coach drivers to identify what would appeal to the tour operators' market, they heard of the development of a brand new tourist road, the Wild Atlantic Way. To secure their success, they set their plans in motion to have the visitor centre up and running to coincide with the launch of the brand in July 2014. This approach happened to be quite profitable, since the Wild Atlantic Way has been then heavily promoted as a tourist destination.

In parallel, Catherine's background in hotel sales and marketing helped the couple to identify their target market and reach it in an efficient way. Before launching the business, the couple discussed a lot with local tourism operators to learn from their experiences and get some advice and statistics on the tourism market in the region. Proper in-house customer service training for the farm's employee also happened to be critical to enhance clients' experience on the farm and earn the trust of tour operators. Support, and funding made available by the Local Enterprise Office has been essential for the couple to get the confidence they needed to go ahead with their business idea.

Currently, they are planning to build a big outdoor shed area for the sheep herding experience, in order to protect the visitors in case of bad weather. They are also very active in a local group to support the connection of the village to the Greenway, a cycle and walkway connecting towns across the country, which could bring even more tourists in search of nature to the region, and they have even offered for the pathway to go through their farm. In the future, the Glen Keen farm would also like to find a solution to use renewable energy sources to decrease



its energy costs. They are thinking about getting some solar panels, but could not yet find the appropriate source of funding. Another option could also be to install a wind turbine, or exploit the waterfalls nearby to produce hydroenergy, but more research is needed to identify the best option.

