

A group of nursery school children from Tomintoul are four months into a year-long project to learn about life on a farm. Gemma Mackenzie joined them on one of their visits

# Farm a class act as it hosts nursery pupils

A sea of smiling faces peeping out of bright blue boiler suits and brightly coloured wellies greets Glenlivet farmers Colin and Kelly Stuart every month as they welcome 10 youngsters from Tomintoul Nursery to learn about farming.

The duo, who farm around 850 acres at Belnoe and Lettoch farms on the Glenlivet Estate, are the host farmers for an innovative learning project instigated by senior nursery nurse Mitch Fraser.

Mrs Fraser, who lives on a farm herself, says the year-long project, entitled: A Year on the Farm, meets all the curriculum requirements and helps the children learn more about farming and the countryside.

The project consists of eight visits to the Stuarts and two visits to Les Durno at Auchorachan, Glenlivet, to learn about tatties.

"I think it's very important that the children learn



Hollie Smith, left, and Naomi Sawyer fill the feed bucket

about their local community," said Mrs Fraser.

"We want people to stay in our area and we want to promote the jobs that are in our area. I think it makes them very good citizens in the community."

She said the children learn a whole range of

things from health and wellbeing, to maths and counting.

"We have had a soup and bread day and invited the community in, using the tatties we lifted and we ground our own wheat into flour," added Mrs Fraser.

"We have been looking at

olden days and we are going to have both ballads for St Andrew's Day."

She said she hoped to arrange a mart visit for the end of the project.

"The idea is that every time we do something small we raise a little bit of money ourselves to fund a

visit once a month, the Stu-

arts also email updates about what's going on at the farm to Mitch who then passes on the information to the children.

"We aim to produce a fac-

bus to go to the market," said Mrs Fraser.

And for Colin and Kelly, it's a relatively easy process thanks to Mitch's forward planning and discussing potential risks and hazards with the children before each visit.

The couple, who have three children themselves - Molly, 11, Harvey, nine, and

**"It's important children learn about their local community"**

Jack, six, - say the youngsters have been fun to have on the farm and it hasn't interfered with day-to-day tasks.

Mr Stuart said: "A lot of the kids are not from a farming background these days and it's a chance for them to see what's going on. It just takes a couple of hours each month and I do my chores as normal."

On the issue of health and safety, she says the kids



YOUNG FARMHANDS: Kelly Stuart with nursery pupils, from left, Elsa Nairn, Joseph McGregor, Eva McFall, Hollie Smith, Connor Chatterton, Aaron Hanmer, Phoebe Neal and Naomi Sawyer.

Photographs: Kami Thomson

book with the children, recounting their visits, to use for reference in future years," said Mrs Fraser.

and deal with it if something should happen," she said.

She says the project would not have gone ahead without financial support

from NFU Scotland's Centenary Fund and the union's Banffshire branch.

The funding will be used to cover transport to and from the farms, which

Mitch says is the main barrier to such project as transport costs are "extortionate".

The children involved in the project are: Aaron Han-

mer; Connor Chatterton; Eva McFall; Elsa Nairn; Hollie Smith; Joseph McGregor; Naomi Sawyer; Phoebe Neal and Ian and Samuel Morrison.



Connor Chatterton puts feed out for the cattle from his bucket watched by, from left, Elsa Nairn, Naomi Sawyer and Hollie Smith



Nursery pupil Hollie Smith helps Kelly Stuart feed the cattle at Lettoch Farm

ANGUS McCALL

The controversy surrounding the impending eviction of Andrew Stoddart, tenant for 22 years on Colstoun Mains, has dominated the national and farming headlines over the last couple of weeks and attracted intense public interest and sympathy.

An online petition in support of the Stoddart family has now reached just shy of 20,000 signatures and a worried Colstoun Trust now seems to be shifting its position by the day in response to the intense public pressure. There is no doubt that this situation has been badly handled and the government must bear responsibility for this, but, under the watchful eye of the rural affairs committee, government officials are now trying to move heaven and earth to resolve the stalemate between Andrew Stoddart and his landlord to allow Andrew to move on with reasonable and fair compensation for all his tenant improvements to the farm. There is a further commitment to start the mediation process with Andrew and the rest of the affected tenants as soon as possible.

It is all too easy to lay the blame for this sorry affair at the feet of the government, defective legislation passed in 2003 and "rash" and "drastic" steps taken by Ross Finnie, rural affairs minister in 2003.

However, it is worth remembering that this course of action was undertaken after Ross Finnie had been presented with evidence that some landlords had been serving notices to terminate Limited Partnership tenancies because of concerns about the introduction of a right to buy for tenants. Acting on this evidence Ross Finnie decided to introduce measures to put a stop to what appeared to be the start of a spate of notices to quit on what was the younger generation of tenant farmers.

Getting wind of Ross Finnie's intentions, a minority of landowners, took avoidance measures and served notices on an estimated 200 tenants in what has been dubbed "the night of the long knives".

It is interesting to note if a handful of lawyers had not advised this course of action, we would not be in the position we are in today.

One of the young tenants was Andrew Stoddart who, in 1993, took on the tenancy of Colstoun Mains, in all good faith, for a 15-year initial term and thereafter year to year, with the expectation, reinforced by the factor at that time, that the tenancy would be in all probability extended beyond the 15 years.

On that basis he agreed to commit to improving the farm and built a large shed with a contribution from the landlord. Along with another 200 tenants his world was shattered on February 3, 2003, when a notice to quit in 2010 was served on him. He now faces the prospect in mid-life of having to rebuild his farming career and salvage what he can from the wreckage of his tenancy.

The current government has the unenviable task of sorting out this mess but in doing so, must make sure that the tenants whose lives have been disrupted by this affair are treated fairly and compensated for the harm caused.

On a positive note, having been once burned by defective legislation, the government will not make the same mistake again and, while the Land Reform Bill may not be as radical as some

would like, it will undoubtedly be thoroughly checked as compliant with human rights legislation and able to withstand legal challenges.

Angus McCall is executive director of the Scottish Tenant Farmers Association

