

Research Report on Volunteer Centre Nuneaton and Bedworth's Long-term Sustainability

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1. Introduction

A research project was set up in support of the objective to establish an income generating unit and improve Volunteer Centre Nuneaton and Bedworth's [VCNB] long-term sustainability.

2. Anticipated Outcomes of the Research Project

Research was undertaken in relation to 3 broad areas:

- Comparative social enterprise projects involving volunteers or having benefit to volunteers and volunteer issues
- Existing income generating community enterprise projects and activities
- Market conditions for community enterprise development

3. Definition of Social and Community Enterprise

Formal definitions exist for these types of organisations as follows:

Social Enterprise -

An initiative or activities that use a commercial approach to fund social or community based activities.

Community Enterprise -

A registered not for profit organisation that acts as a community owned and controlled holding company in supporting residents to develop new initiatives, manage commercial and social projects and run local commercial enterprises. It owns assets and distributes profits and benefits to the community, is managed democratically, based on one person one vote.

Early on in the research project it became evident that it would be problematic to accurately determine the status of each individual organisation and project, owing to the interpretation of these definitions by those surveyed and in many cases complex affiliations to parent companies, local councils and charities etc.

4. Contributors to the Research

I would like to thank all those individuals that freely gave their time to participate in the data gathering and shared their experiences.

5. Identification of Comparative Social Enterprise Activity That Could Be Adapted For Use by the Volunteer Centre Nuneaton and Bedworth

Contact with the Coventry and Warwickshire CDA [CDA] revealed that there are around 180 social enterprises and support bodies registered as members of their network in the West Midlands.

However it was not possible to identify those organisations using volunteers, directly from the CDA database.

The following organisations were amongst those selected and became the sample that was successfully interviewed to establish the activities that they were involved in, the lessons learnt along the journey of creating the enterprise and the success strategies deployed to maintain self sufficiency, maximise opportunities and cope with challenges. Many of the sample organisations surveyed did prove to use volunteers, the definition of which they chose to extend to students on university placements.

Busy Bees Nursery

2nd Chance Furniture

Skillbuilders

Car-Go-Bus

Ignite Creative

First Honey Co-operative

Gateway Family Services

Pastels

Pure Oxygen

Hybrid Arts

The Savoy Centre

Amazon Initiatives

Illuminate ICT

Business in the Community

6. Setting up Social Enterprises – Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats

On the whole, the organisations were set up to deliver a service that the founders were committed to and already had skills and some knowledge in the area, making a strong link to existing experience and resources. Moreover, it was sometimes the case that they were doing what they did before when they solely relied on funding. Other ventures were born from a great idea and recognising a gap in the market.

Usually the original idea was a simple one based on a need in the community.

Frequently the enterprises grew out of a community group or volunteer project and retained this status until the business activity grew to a sufficient size or strategic point where a change of status was required to protect the 'parent company' against risk, or separation was necessary to fulfil the strategic plan.

Over time several of the organisations had diversified to implement other ways of generating income in addition to the original idea. Diversification was recognised as a key success factor. This was balanced with the view of some respondents who said that on reflection it may have been wiser to start small and grow slowly rather than be too ambitious. For those, however, who found themselves under pressure to save a declining service which was under threat; it was imperative that they got up to speed very quickly.

The CDA was recognised as a good resource to facilitate the set up of such organisations by offering business advice and business support, including the practical service of choosing the right legal structure and completing the registration process [which they also paid for]. In general, significant amounts of help are available from the CDA alongside other organisations such as the Coventry and Warwickshire Reinvestment Trust who can provide working capital for start up.

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Decisions regarding set up status that were led by the CDA could account for one of the reasons why some respondents were not necessarily aware of the type of legal, governance and trading structures in place.

Most organisations financial income at the start of the trading activity were of a funded nature, however there were several examples of resourceful approaches to procuring essential items for free, such as accommodation and vehicles. A strong message throughout the research was a reminder not to rely on any one source of income and to build up various strands over time.

Few organisations started with a full time paid staff compliment. Priority personal skills cited for 'leaders', 'trail blazers' and social entrepreneurs included 'thinking on their feet', devoting a large amount of personal time to infrastructure, high energy, influence and confidence, particularly at the inception of the organisation.

The key driver for these individuals was focussing on the people they wanted to help or the social issue that they wanted to tackle, or put another way, clear purpose, determination and passion.

It was recognised as important to agree and document the organisation's long-term goals and put in place a framework [depending upon the trading structure] such as a constitution, MOU and articles, and to create a business plan [support to achieve these again is available from the CDA]. Access to knowledge of business planning and financial procedures such as cash flow forecasting and invoicing emerged as critical.

In summary proper infrastructure is a must. Experience with formal tendering procedures was necessary for those organisations seeking work with large public commissioners such as the NHS. For many organisations formal evidence of a track record of successful delivery was essential to accessing bids and winning contracts to deliver continued sustainability.

One of the biggest challenges was found to be a lack of professional staff to support organisations. Creating the right culture to use volunteers to their maximum potential was also identified as challenging for many organisations. Strategies to help with these volunteer issues included linking the volunteers' work closely to their personal development and paying for childcare to provide access to a wider range of opportunities including training.

Strategies to recruit volunteers included the provision of accredited training qualifications in addition to the well recognised benefits of volunteering. However, high profile and visibility of the organisation was essential to attract volunteers as well as 'customers'. Unfortunately the research gave indications of a possible risk for businesses engaged in the supply of goods produced through individual volunteer's resources, that of self interest and lack of commitment to the social enterprise. Challenges also exist around managing the complex relationship with volunteers and

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one strategy can be to have volunteer positions described in terms of job roles to structure the direction of effort. Other problematic situations can arise from a failure to identify meaningful work for volunteers and if there are too many volunteers.

A distinct advantage for the inception of a social enterprise lies in being 'known already' and the propensity for copious amounts of networking. Another reminder of reality came in the form of a clear message from some respondents that reliance on government funding to underpin the social enterprise, although tempting because many promises can be made, is a risky strategy. The process of 'selling' has to be readily accepted. Several respondents commented that sales and marketing skills would have been a huge advantage for them, and still remain lacking today.

A presence 'on the ground' is very important. This was not only endorsed by social enterprise organisations but also by larger training institutions who desired a higher profile in the community.

Organisations offering services such as training use the loss leader marketing approach whereby they offered initial training free and then did more and more paid work. Many organisations operate a varied charging structure with reduced rates or free services to certain types of social or community enterprises and higher rates to commercial businesses. It was common for organisations surveyed to operate with generated income and funding in parallel.

Any business activity based on café, restaurant or retail outlet relied upon good location and knowledge of the buying habits of the local customer market for success. Visual appearance of buildings is also important to attract the target market. For example a café located in a social services building appeared to be less successful than anticipated and is failing to attract workers from the nearby building site who prefer to use the snack van. Sadly for many good ideas, buildings and surroundings that do not have the right image may be barriers to success.

As the organisations grew many became more 'strategic' over time, developing strategic partnerships with target markets in mind, seeing new opportunities and responding quickly.

Other challenges identified were reaching the point of self sufficiency in their terms, remaining that way, being seriously short of administration support and the fluctuations of the economy.

Other strengths and success strategies included involving the community heavily in the launch of the enterprise, investment in PR [make the most of free PR]; and awareness of the criteria to attract funding e.g. a community enterprise may not attract huge capital funding for building development whereas a social enterprise could.

7. Existing Income Generating Community Enterprise Projects and Activities

Owing to the lack of differentiation of activity by social enterprise and community enterprise there was no significant, discreet research groupings associated with this term.

Searches to identify community enterprises for example generated a minimal number of contacts including:

Nuneaton and Bedworth Citizens Advice Bureau

Nuneaton Credit Union

Cheers [part of the CDA]

Chess [Camphill Education, Sports and Social]

Pride in Camphill

Home-start North East Warwickshire

Furthermore, social enterprises in fact include all of the following:

Community Enterprise

Credit Unions

Trading Arms of Charities

Employee Owned Businesses

Co operatives

Development Trusts

Housing Associations

Social Firms

LeisureTrusts

On this basis a judgement was made that a sufficient variety of contact and resultant data would be achieved under objectives 1 and 3.

8. Assessment of Market Conditions for Social/Community Enterprise

Business Services

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The survey revealed an opportunity to provide a range of professional support services for other social enterprises, particularly those in the voluntary and community sector initially and then moving into other sectors. The VCNB could help to sustain other social enterprise organisations via the provision of practical, value for money office support solutions.

These services could include:

- Administration support [e.g. office organisation and filing systems. HR procedures, training coordination, volunteer co ordination]
- Recruitment and selection of staff
- Social responsibility accounting support, assessment and production of social responsibility accounts
- Sales and marketing services
- Relationship building and lead generation through telemarketing
- Advertising
- Mystery Shopper Services
- Translation/interpretation services

Demand indicated by: Social enterprises and volunteer sector e.g. - First Honey Co-operative, 2nd Chance Furniture and Illuminate ICT for administration services and recruitment and selection support.

Mystery Shopper Services - evidence obtained of this requirement being registered on the CDA database as a contract for tender on previous occasions. Large number of volunteers available is an advantage.

Sources at Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council were asked to identify services that were notoriously expensive to purchase. Translation and interpretation were identified and warrant further investigation alongside the requirements of other consumers of these services such as the Police Force. This may be an area where the VCNB could compete if it had access to the skills.

Resources: Office premises and office equipment. Suitably experienced volunteers, with the agreement and ability to deliver some support services in the client's workplace as well as from a central hub of office support.

Although a considerable amount of business support was identified for SEs and the voluntary sector, there is a gap in the market for 'outsourced administration support' which was identified in nearly all cases as a major challenge.

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Large number of volunteers who could form mystery shopper teams and focus groups.

Volunteers with language skills, or specific 'bought-in' expertise.

Skills, Education and Training

Conditions exist to develop a business and community responsive range of training courses in recognition of the barriers that prevent many social and community enterprises from achieving. The perception in the wider community of the VCNB would support a natural progression to training provision. Again many other organisations, areas of the community and individuals would benefit greatly from a practical and creative approach to their training needs. An offer could be made to organisations to take on a volunteer and get discounted training.

Training courses could include:

- Influencing and persuading
- Negotiation
- Networking
- Customer Service
- Project co-ordination
- Accredited courses to build confidence and life skills for vulnerable groups for whom it is traditionally hard to find support and funding e.g. Asylum seekers
- Placement and job generation training and development for specific groups such as NEETS, care leavers, ex offenders, through volunteering
- Construction and IT recognised as skills gaps in the area
- Tuition for children in maths, literacy and languages – mobile [innovative vehicle, e.g. bus] made accessible through outreach and reasonable pricing.
- Evening classes in sewing, knitting, bag making, jewellery design, upholstery and quilting, making food fun again

Demand comes from: Indications that practical skills courses to help SEs achieve a commercial approach are not easy accessible possibly because some SEs need help with training needs analysis or costs are prohibitive. Although it was not possible to establish a link with a training provider to deliver sub contract services, dialogue with North Warwickshire and Hinckley College is ongoing.

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Ideas concerning improving the educational standards for children appealed to members of the council Regeneration Team during meetings and discussions.

Feedback from local politicians and other stakeholders in the area highlighted evidence of the need to establish stimulating events for all parts of the community to enhance social well being.

Resources: Volunteers with a teaching background. Freelancers. The use of lecturers/trainers employed by the local college and NBBC; model exists at The Savoy Centre in Netherton, Dudley, Black Country. Suitable training accommodation. Vehicle.

Transport

A lack of available, affordable transport solutions was evident from many of the research surveys and enquiries. For example:

Transport for nursery children on day trips. Smaller play schools and nurseries without their own transport suffer from high pricing for the services of a coach to take children on day trips. They have to pass the costs on to parents who find it difficult to afford the trip especially as they like to accompany their child on the trip [which also helps the nursery staff] so the cost multiplies up. They would be interested in a value for money transport service [e.g. a minibus] that they could rely on for these occasions.

Opportunities for organisations to pay for advertising on VCNB vehicles would also generate income.

Demand comes from: Rural locations where people need an organised reliable transport service and costs of other offerings are prohibitive both for those in urban and rural locations. Aligns with Medicar service.

Resources: Volunteers with insurance, appropriate licensing. Suitable vehicles. Co-ordination infrastructure.

Shopping Service

The Town Centres Manager is interested in setting up a home delivery service from the street market in Nuneaton. An initial meeting with Alan Ottey Town Centres Manager and Anne Startin has taken place to explore the idea:

- It could include operating a storage area for shopping to be collected later.
- Supply of environmentally friendly carrier bags which local businesses could pay to advertise on

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- Gift wrapping service at Christmas
- Local delivery services within 2 -3 miles for around £2
- A 'buddying' service for older members of the community who would like to be accompanied on their shopping trip

This is a long term goal of Alan Ottey's [Town Centre Manager] and he has offered the free use of a market stall to develop a pilot of the service. He looks forward to an opportunity to meet with you to discuss it further. He is confident of the need for such a service and recognises it as part of the enablers of the Community Plan and the council's mission to provide a family friendly environment.

Resources: Volunteers, suitable transport, drivers and insurance. Safe storage in the city centre.

Lifestyle – Catering for different parts of the community [high income/low income]

Mobile catering – making access to healthy and nourishing food, fun, for example, nutritious fish and chips, homemade soup etc made available to families, older people even businesses in an innovative way, to their door, party or community event, work place with an educational element explaining how to grow, prepare and enjoy food. The key to success of this type of activity will be to make it about fun, not about being 'good for you'! A working kitchen could be created at School Lane to prepare the food.

Demand comes from: Endorsement of the broad theme by many of the research respondents but would be subject to specific consumer research. Links to prime concerns about obesity, cardiac health, diabetes and failure to equip future generations with life skills.

Resources: Suitably skilled volunteers or, bought- in staff. Compliance with health and safety and Food Hygiene standards. Appropriate licensing, vehicles. Direct marketing campaigns.

Rehabilitation Services

Reinvent the current services accessed by older people and volunteers as rehabilitation services that the PCT may want to purchase. Identify projects that the PCT could fund to ensure all community groups are accessing the services they need and are available to them.

Demand comes from: Adapting ideas from other SEs who have found niche markets for specific rehabilitation services or have successfully delivered services in a more competitive way than the PCTs. [See Pure Oxygen and Gateway Family Services]

Social well being, involvement in the community and enrichment activities

Hosting social events such as: speed tasting, wine tasting, Spanish nights which give people the opportunity to experience the culture and learn some holiday Spanish.

Local [short] day trips for older people

Lunch clubs

'Themed' children's birthday parties

Demand comes from: The research identified a market for the above events with similar activity attracting large amounts of interest.

Resources: Minimal. Organisational and basic marketing skills. Volunteers and appropriate venues. Volunteers who meet the required standard for supervising children alongside their parents.

CRB

Online search for CRB services in the locality identified 46 providers in the area. The requirements are heavily bureaucratic and are resource hungry. Successful commercial return is dependent on volume and business would need to be gained outside the area, involving substantial marketing.

Community Outlet

This emerged as a secondary opportunity based on desk research. The direction such an enterprise could take would be quality, local, food basics, combined with homespun handicrafts and tea shop. A full investigation on the quality of location and premises and local customer need and desirability would need to be conducted. Economic fluctuations are also now an important factor.

Other Findings from the Research

- 'Farmers Market' – First Honey Co-operative need a local agent for their product.
- Town Centres would also supply a market stall free of charge for selling handicrafts.

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- Warwickshire EBP is actively seeking volunteer business people to go into schools.
- The VCNB has an invitation to visit The Savoy Centre in Netherton to see how this social enterprise manages a diverse range of activity, property and volunteers.

Contact Information and Information References

Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council 024 7637 6376

Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council Local Economic Regeneration Team –
Gordon Mercer, Rose Selwyn, Abu Male-Baker

The Sustainable Community Plan for 2007 – 2021 for Nuneaton and Bedworth

Community Plan Dr. M. Stern 024 7686 5583

Town Centre's Vision

Nuneaton and Bedworth Town Centres Action Plan 08/09

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Town Centres Manager Nuneaton and Bedworth Alan Ottey [Supported by Anne Startin] 024 7637 6376

Museum Collection Outreach Matt Johnson 024 7658 0962

Jubilee Sports Centre 024 7640 0503 Nick Malin

Warwickshire County Council Shire Hall Warwick CV34 4SA 01926 410410

Warwickshire County Council Head of Transport Roger Newham 01926 412046

Warwickshire County Council Community Development and Regeneration Mandy Walker 01926 412843

CDA Ranjit Bansal Information, Promotion and Marketing. Sandra Crowder, Membership

CSW Partnership Regeneration Team

PCT acting Director of Community Services Michelle Clark 01926 493491

Just Assurance John Woodhead 01225 469802

The Eden Project 01726 818878

15 Restaurant Angela Morris 0207 566 1796

Warwickshire Employer Business Partnership [EPB] 024 7632 5336

Various businesses at the Bryant Road Industrial Estate Bedworth

The Old Rectory Residential Care Home Mrs Dwyer 024 7631 8863

Gildawood Court Residential Care Home 024 7634 1222

Attenborough Grange Residential Care Home 024 7638 3543

Debenhams Nuneaton 024 7634 6933

Coventry and Warwickshire Reinvestment Trust 0845 606 6216

North Warwickshire and Hinckley College Jane Kimberly, Andy Horton [Learning Centre Manager and Annette Guerrini [WBL manager]

P3 Charity www.p3charity.com Mark Simms 0115 930661

Jim Gibney

Foleshill Women's Centre Ruth Colgan 024 7678 5575

Leisure Trust – Kevin Hollis 024 7640 0581

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Connexions Service 024 7632 4620

www.theresonenearyou.com

www.investinginvolunteers.org.uk

www.volunteering-ni.org

www.warwickshire.gov.uk

www.socialenterprisewm.org

www.watch-hillfields.org.uk

www.crt.uk.com

www.warwickshirefarmersmarkets.co.uk

www.csrnetwork.com

www.crb.gov.uk

www.open4community.info/nuneaton

SETAS

Local politicians/councillors – Julian Gutteridge 0752 2573088, Des O'Brien 024 7674 0621, Bill O'ner 0247664 2222

Various organisations offering CRB services [see CRB national website]

Busy Bees Play School 024 7637 4099 Lisa – manager

Pure Oxygen 024 7661 4425 Matthew Ali

Hybrid Arts 01926 886188 Stella Carr

2nd Chance Furniture 024 7632 6189 Peter Whitehead

Car-Go-Bus 01827 722617 www.car-go-bus.org.uk Mike Brooks

Ignite Creative Steve Holdsworth www.ignitecreative.co.uk

First Honey Co-operative Sam Greenback 01462 743987 www.sam@virgin.net

Gateway Family Services Liz Carroll www.gatewayfs.org 0121 772 8525

Pastels Community Café 024 7634 2642 Roy Gbysai

Business in the Community 024 7640 1054 John Guilford www.bitc.org.uk

Skillbuilders Graeme Perks 07977 892097

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The Savoy Centre Chris Woods/Dave Ariston 01384 818156
www.thesavoycentre.co.uk

Amazon Initiatives www.amazon-initiatives.org.uk 024 7668 5889

Illuminate Pete Read 024 7637 4099 www.illuminateict.org.uk

Redditch Advocacy [CRB]

Warwickshire Police Rachael Walker Corporate Communications Policy 01926
415000