

ARTS FACTORY

SUMMARY

- Name of Organisation/ Parent Organisation: Arts Factory Ltd
- Start Date: 11/4/1990 – 30 years old this month.
- Number of Employees: 7, 5.8 FTE
- Number of Volunteers: 40 volunteers.
- Legal structure: Limited company by guarantee with charitable status.
- Tenure: Owned outright
- Turnover: Circa £250k per annum
- Website: www.artsfactory.co.uk
- Design website: www.artsfactorydesign.co.uk

PRODUCT/SERVICE

Arts Factory's ethos is captured in its strapline: 'No more throw away people', taken (with his permission) from Professor Edgar Kahn, one of the earliest developers of co-production approaches. Arts Factory's purpose is to 'create life changing opportunities for individuals who are marginalised in an already disadvantaged community' and although it has always provided volunteering opportunities and training and employment help for this group, there are a host of other activities and groups in the centre that are driven by the community and their needs. These include health and wellbeing programmes, mental health workshops provided by a local psychologist, dementia cafes and a parent and toddler (ready for school) group.

Arts Factory is based in Ferndale, a community recognised as being uniquely isolated from other Rhondda settlements and for many who live there, transport to other areas is prohibitively expensive. Arts Factory brings additional services into Ferndale such as a Citizen's Advice Bureau drop-in and mental health recovery college courses, as well as acting as an outreach centre for a local food bank, holding food parcels and distributing vouchers on their behalf. Recognising that many others in the community not eligible for food bank vouchers are in need of food, Arts Factory is also part of the FareShare scheme, a national network of charitable food redistributors that has enabled them to prepare and deliver 12 food parcels every week during the coronavirus crisis for vulnerable people they know through their community work or partners, such as local schools. People they support have often 'fallen through the gaps' or are struggling to manage budgets and debt, without necessarily being recognised as vulnerable or getting support elsewhere.

No-one from Rhondda Cynon Taf is excluded from coming to Arts Factory but, in reality, and because of geography, 90% of people it serves are from the Rhondda valleys (primarily Rhondda Fach), with around 8% from Taf and 2% from the Cynon valley.

Arts Factory runs 2 social enterprises to reduce its dependence on grant funding and its reception and many of its office functions are run by volunteers with additional learning needs and/or mental ill health.

HISTORY

Arts Factory started 30 years ago when a local 'man with a van' set up a garden clearance business with people with a learning disability because he recognised they had nowhere to go and felt 'written off' by society. Although it has grown and diversified over the years, this is still the core of what Arts Factory does today. It began by renting 2 sites from the local authority on 25-year leases, but in 1997 was part of a community fight for Trerhondda, a dilapidated church that the local authority planned to demolish to build a car park. Following a campaign by the community and a public enquiry, it was sold to Arts Factory for £1 to be used for general community benefit and fundraising for £500k to regenerate it for community use began. The refurbishment was carried out in 3 phases and funded with a mix of funding from the Welsh Office, CADW (as it is a listed building) and ERDF. The vestry part of the building continued to be used by the local congregation until about 10 years ago and for many years the building hosted further education and community adult education classes, drawing around 500 people every week. A Heritage Lottery Fund grant paid for a project charting the history of the building and its refurbishment, which is now displayed on storyboards around the building.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Arts Factory's successes are most evident in the people who use it and volunteer in it every day and its ethos of inclusivity and opportunity for all is clear when you enter the building, which is staffed almost entirely by confident and professional volunteers, many of whom have a learning disability or mental ill health.

Around 50% of Arts Factory's income is from trading through their 2 social enterprises. They run a profitable, award winning graphic design service employing 3 staff which is marketed to all sectors as a way of meeting their corporate social responsibilities; they count Cardiff Council, Transport for Wales and a number of housing associations among their clients as well as London-based businesses. They also run Factory Books, an online bookselling enterprise that sells collectible editions all over the World and is entirely run by volunteers. While Factory Books is less profitable financially, it more than covers its own costs while providing a valuable opportunity for people to learn a range of skills; Factory Books volunteers range from individuals with very low literacy skills to those with degrees.

The CEO is proud of the fact that Arts Factory has been a permanent fixture in the community for so many years and for some people, has provided lifelong support at critical points; people who volunteered 30 years ago still come back to the centre after long absences, either when in crisis and they need help or to take part in other activities when they need to. This is attributed to Arts Factory knowing the local community and building trusting relationships within it.

CHALLENGES

15 to 20 years ago, Arts Factory was turning over an average of £1 million per year but this was all grant funding and challenging to sustain. Following the 2008 recession everything changed: grants became much more difficult to obtain and other agencies housed in the building began to leave, taking valuable rental income with them. Following a very challenging time and a change of CEO, those still involved managed to transform their income stream from 80% grants and 20% unrestricted income to 80% income from trading and 20% from grants by building the graphic design business. This lasted until 2014/15, when major clients began to take graphic design inhouse and Arts Factory had to restructure again and reduce staff salaries. In 2016, Arts Factory lost its CEO post and its Head of Operations, Lisa Wills, became responsible for its sustainability; Arts Factory has made a surplus every year since, managing to hold the balance of grant and trading income at around 50/50 and developing more partnerships that brought value for the community that was not always in the form of direct financial benefits.

Lisa was promoted to the CEO role in January 2020 and is currently exploring new ventures to meet community needs while making Arts Factory more resilient in future.

Arts Factory has sometimes been challenged by statutory initiatives aimed at supporting communities which overlap with the work done by community-built assets. These initiatives can result in funds for community organisations being redirected or withdrawn, or in some community assets becoming dependent on them for income and collapsing when they come to an end. 'Top-down' initiatives by their nature also run the risk of applying prescriptive 'blueprints' of community support that are not the tailor made responses that communities themselves come up with.

There are some concerns locally that this pattern could repeat itself with the recent investment by the local authority in a pilot 'community hub' near to Arts Factory. While such investments have great potential for change, they can upset the balance of long-standing community led infrastructures which could ultimately lead to their demise.

WHAT COULD BE DONE DIFFERENTLY?

Management feel that it would be helpful to have a clear and transparent process for statutory investment in community assets that engaged communities in planning, mapped established infrastructure and made long term commitments to supporting

sustainability in a non-prescriptive way, perhaps by providing small revenue grants for overheads.

SUCCESS CRITERIA

- Being prepared to listen and change what you do to meet changing needs or the asset won't survive; also to diversify what you do to reduce reliance in one area.
- Knowing your community and what they need at any given time as well as understanding what they can offer.
- Good financial management and an understanding of what's needed to sustain the asset for the community it serves. This includes having business sense and not only thinking about or chasing grant funding for activities that might increase income but aren't a good 'fit' for the community. The CEO is originally from the private sector and brought some of this ethos to Arts Factory. Although she thinks all the time about profit-making for sustainability, Lisa recognises that at Arts Factory this needs to be focussed on the 'profit' that can be brought to people's lives, so it's crucial to understand what is needed to achieve this and focus on getting that in place.

TESTIMONIAL FROM A USER OR PARTNER ORGANISATION

"School wasn't a good experience for me. The teachers didn't explain much to me and I didn't get along with some of them. In the end I had to leave. It was a relief in a weird way. At Arts Factory I work on the Factory Books project, listing books and handling sales. I love it here. I love the people I work with and the feeling that this is something I can do. I have learned a lot too – how to work as part of a team and how to use spreadsheets. In the future I would like to get a job in IT."

"I like Arts Factory because I enjoy meeting nice people. I help out in the playgroup making tea for the parents and refreshments for the children, singing songs and reading stories. I help with the cleaning and help out in the finance office."