

ABERGAVENNY COMMUNITY CENTRE

GENERAL INFORMATION

- Name of Organisation: Abergavenny Community Trust
- Established: 2015
- Staff (all part-time): manager, part-time chef, kitchen assistant
- Volunteers: 58 (April 2019 - March 2020)
- Legal Structure: Charitable Incorporated Organisation (2018)
- Tenure: 25 - year lease from Monmouthshire County Council
- Turnover: £93,015
- Website: www.abergavennycc.org

PRODUCT/SERVICE

Abergavenny Community Centre is housed in a former Victorian infant school near the centre of the historic market town of Abergavenny. After charity status was achieved in 2018, the Trust has attracted diverse funding enabling it to develop into a versatile, welcoming and functional community hub, used by approximately 500 people each week.

The centre works upon the notion of 'Together under one roof' – the idea that bringing people with different backgrounds, ages and interests together will create positive outcomes including intergenerational understanding.

Activities at the centre include 'See you for lunch' on Wednesdays, a Friday coffee morning followed by a light lunch, craft groups and activities promoting well-being, such as chair yoga, as well as Community Kids for parents and toddlers. Sunday afternoon tea takes place monthly, and a 'world bistro' offers an occasional evening meal, introducing food from different cultures when local people from minority groups showcase their cuisine.

Volunteering is a vital element of the centre's success, and the majority of activities are volunteer led.

Self-help groups are a feature of the centre, include 'The Lonely Parents Club' and there's also an 'Invisible Illness' group and the 'Aphasia Café' where people can stay on for lunch.

Pilates, yoga, tai chi and qigong are among the many wellbeing activities which have found a home in the centre and these are usually run by individuals.

Additionally, agencies and public sector bodies hold meetings and workshops at the centre, preferring the non-clinical setting for their clients. NHS stress control workshops and Fareshare's supermarket 'waste' scheme are just two examples of mutually beneficial relationships which have been nurtured.

HISTORY

The community centre is an entirely community led endeavour, and the result of fifteen years' hard work and perseverance by a core of residents, including Marion Pearse.

Australian born Marion, moved from London to Abergavenny in 1995 with her partner and two children, where they settled in Park Street.

"Coming to a new place and feeling limited by opportunities to make meaningful connections, highlighted my sense of being alone and unable to cope with the growing challenges of family life."

She had grown up in rural Australia, where a deep sense of community and sharing of resources was a natural part of life, and sorely missed the 'unconditional support' of an extended network of family and friends, which many people take for granted. In 2002, Marion and her family returned to her roots for an extended stay, and it was only upon her return to Abergavenny that she began to develop the vision of a 'cradle to grave' community initiative that could help others that felt isolated. Her belief was always that a building was critical in developing a community model of social capital, to which she aspired.

In 2006, after much community opposition, Park St primary school closed, making the way clear for the fledgling group to galvanise. The building itself, would be instrumental in creating a foundation for the development of the centre. In the years that followed, the group grew in strength and purpose, culminating in securing a three-year lease of the old school in 2014. In 2018, after gaining charitable status and full cabinet support for a revised business plan, the Trust and Monmouthshire County Council entered a 25-year lease on the building and a one-year rolling lease on the adjoining carpark.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Since the centre opened on St David's Day in 2015 it has:

- Raised £20,000 to transform the former school kitchen into a commercial standard kitchen.
- Received £150,000 from the Garfield Weston Anniversary Fund to improve access.
- Agreed a funding partnership with Abergavenny Town Council, with a grant of £25,000 for energy efficiency measures and £10,000 per annum towards running costs during the lifetime of the current council.
- Fitted a new suspended ceiling, insulation and LED lights in the small hall and invested more than £20,000 in maintenance and repairs in the past year.
- Created a garden in the former playground.
- Developed opportunities for volunteering, with 58 volunteers recruited.
- Supported the development of local support groups by waiving room-hire charges.
- Supported reduction of food waste by making good use of 3,913 kg of supermarket food waste and saving 12,521 kg of carbon emissions in doing so.
- Served 1,900 meals and hosted 40+ coffee mornings between April 2019 and March 2020.

CHALLENGES

1. SECURING THE ASSET FOR THE COMMUNITY

It was a 15-year journey to reach the point at which the community centre fully opened its doors to the public, and there were many challenges that had to be overcome.

The biggest challenge was in gaining the support of the local authority in considering a leasehold. Marion states that *"Politically the situation was tense with many competing priorities between councillors, the local authority and the private sector, due to the potential market value of the site. On two occasions the site was put to public auction and on both occasions withdrawn at the eleventh hour. A seed change was underway, with the Beecham Reports [Review of Public Services Delivery] which highlighted the need for governments to work differently with its citizens."* She believes that this greatly assisted the group, who then felt able to engage politicians and officers with legitimacy.

From its earliest beginnings, the community centre idea enjoyed the support of the ward member, who, in later years joined the board of directors. In 2006, after a period of local engagement, Marion sought election to the town council in the belief that this would provide a useful platform for growing understanding and achieving cross-party support for the idea. However, she says that it turned out to be unhelpful, and at times, she

describes the opposition as being 'brutal'. Rather than seek re-election, therefore, she decided to return to the task of "*changing hearts and minds*" on the ground. She feels that political will, remained the single most important influencing factor throughout the entire campaign.

They received support from the Wales Co-op Centre in the early stages to help explore the Community Shares scheme (when they were considering ways to buy the school) and they accessed networking / community-capacity building / community resilience toolkit training activities facilitated by DTA, PLANED, NCVO and others.

The group felt they did not strongly benefit from the local CVC, saying that "despite a lot of note-taking"; there was little practical help or assistance in helping to move the project along".

Marion says that "*a tipping point was eventually reached, but only as the result of getting to know the system and rooting out individuals that were willing to listen and create a dialogue*".

2. REACHING SELF-SUFFICIENCY BY GENERATING INCOME FROM THE ASSET

The Trust recognises that it needs to become self-sufficient as far as possible in meeting the core costs of running the community centre, acknowledging that few funders will provide grants to meet those costs. In the year ending October 2019, the Trust generated 60% of its income by making use of the community asset. Room hire was the most significant source of income, followed by food and refreshments, and catering.

There are several challenges associated with increasing the income from the asset, according to the group. The first of these concerns the level of room hire charges. While in theory these could be increased, there is the risk that hirers will seek cheaper venues elsewhere. Another option would be to seek to increase the occupancy rate significantly. However, there are capacity issues to address such as caretaking and the increased costs associated with that.

3. MAINTAINING AND IMPROVING THE ASSET

Having a full repair lease on an old building represents a further major challenge. Electrical work has needed to be undertaken to comply with current standards and to improve health and safety with new external lighting. There have been challenges in the grounds also, such as a dangerous wall to be made safe and the car park needing to be re-

surfaced. In the year ending October 2019, £17,000 was spent on essential maintenance and as a result expenditure in the year exceeded income.

The energy costs of a draughty building with very large single glazed windows and no roof insulation are high. As a result, trustees have prioritised fundraising to improve energy efficiency and simultaneously reduce the centre's carbon footprint. Since the installation of a new central heating system for the hall and welcome room, gas consumption has reduced. It is calculated that a further £100,000 will be needed to replace all the windows and insulate every room.

4. FUNDRAISING IN WHAT IS SEEN TO BE AN AFFLUENT AREA

Income and wealth is higher in Monmouthshire than most of the rest of Wales, so Marion says it is understandable that funders will be less inclined to support initiatives in the county. She acknowledges that whilst the generalisation may be true, the pockets of deprivation that exist in Abergavenny and elsewhere can be overlooked. The problems of loneliness and isolation that the centre is addressing are not confined to the poorest in the population. They feel that it is possible that funders and policy makers may consider that the community has greater capacity to fund initiatives in Abergavenny than elsewhere in Wales.

SUCCESS CRITERIA

Based upon the experience of the Trust, Marion feels that the following points have been critical to their achievements:

- Having a clear, consistent vision and keeping the idea (story) simple and clear.
- Politics plays a major role and you must find allies.
- Remember there are 'real' people behind 'the state' and someone will listen.
- Beware of the Lemon! (i.e. If the asset is a building, be sure that it is up to the job and understand the implications of any limiting factors.)
- Keep things in order and be methodical.
- Acknowledge weaknesses and look to plug gaps in your planning and management.
- Having a business head is important, and so is listening to your heart.
- Model the behaviours you want to see in others i.e. be the change you want to see.
- Honesty, hard work and dogged determination is needed.

- There are social entrepreneurs in every community, so “don't be too quick to judge” people who may be different to you.
- Be curious. Contact projects with a similar energy to listen and learn from.
- Association is powerful, and when one ‘credible’ person steps forward, others follow.
- Be prepared to take risks, but “exercise caution when people come bearing gifts”.

TESTIMONIAL FROM A USER OR PARTNER ORGANISATION

‘I moved to Abergavenny just over a year ago. The centre has enabled me to meet people, make friends and begin to form a social network. I did not know anyone before I moved here.’ *Centre user*

‘the enthusiasm and energy they have there is totally in line with our social justice principles’. *Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Monmouthshire County Council*