

GWYNFI MINERS COMMUNITY HALL

SUMMARY

- Name of Organisation/ Parent Organisation: Gwynfi Miners Community Hall
- Start Date: The company was established in Oct 2012 and took over the running of the hall in April 2013
- Number of Employees: 3
- Number of Volunteers: 30
- Structure: Charity
- Turnover: £60,000
- Website: www.theworkmenshall.co.uk

PRODUCT/SERVICE

Gwynfi Miners Community Hall is a community enterprise and hub located on the main street of the small ex-mining village of Blaengwynfi in the Afan Valley. Nestled in the shadow of the stunning beauty of the hills of the Upper Afan, the area has many natural assets but also faces high levels of deprivation, with some of the worst educational and health outcomes in Wales.

Providing a library, community kitchen, sports hall, a fully equipped gym, a community boxing gym, community cinema and range of meeting spaces, the hall is the only public facility serving the community of Blaengwynfi, other than its local shops, primary school and health centre. The facility provides a range of community services and activities that help enrich the lives of local people and help keep people connected.

HISTORY

The Gwynfi Hall is a community heritage building that opened in 1901 and was paid for through the subscriptions of local miners. It was originally used as a dance and concert hall and was later converted into a cinema. Following the closure of the local Avon Colliery in 1969, the running of the hall passed to the local authority, Glyncoed Urban District Council. In 2012, Neath Port Talbot Council, which was responsible for the hall by then, announced its planned closure, whilst offering it up to any local community group that wished to take it over. Knowing that the hall was the 'heart and soul' of the village, members of the community felt they had no choice but to come together to try and manage the building themselves, ensuring it remained open for public use.

Now the building is run by a volunteer committee made up of local people and is operated on a day to day basis by manager Simon Matthews, who had previously worked there as an employee of the local authority and who took reduced terms and conditions, as he believed as a local resident how vital it was to try and keep the amenity open and operating. Since 2012, the team have worked hard to create a wide range of opportunities and activities that have helped breathe new life into the building and create new income streams. With a local population of only 1,300 people, visitor figures have increased by 25% to 15,000 each year and the gym now has over 130 regular users. An example of the halls local popularity is the regular Thursday lady's coffee morning that is regularly attended by 50 senior women from the community.

Gwynfi Hall lived to see another day when the community was compelled to step in, knowing what its loss would mean to the community, but despite its achievements the hall's long-term continuation remains in a precarious state of unknown.

"Gwynfi is a hallmark of our village and there is so much to see, do and get involved with keeping the community spirit alive. This is a fantastic place to call in." Carolyn Boast, Community Member

ACHIEVEMENTS

Manager, Simon Matthews, says that one of the first things that was achieved when the community took over the management of the hall, was an extensive review of expenditure that resulted in major cost savings, enabling the hall to function far more efficiently and sustainably than it had previously. For example, by being freed from corporate service contracts, they were able to change their gas supplier bringing the annual bill down from £12,000 to £3,000.

According to Simon, being independent is an advantage in this respect. Previously under the ownership of a local authority they would not have had the autonomy to find better deals, and they are now freed up to go to any supplier they choose to reduce overhead costs. Simon describes how as a local authority venue, you knew that if you significantly reduced an outgoing, that this would then be cut from your budget the next year - there was therefore little will or motivation to strive for individual efficiency in the same way they now do.

They now offer a wider range of services for 50% less overheads than were previously being paid out. Such major efficiencies have only been achieved through local ownership and the careful review and adjustments of spending and procurement of services by the trustees themselves.

The venue's gym and boxing gym are both very successful initiatives, supported by GP referral schemes that have been established under the new governance. This has been so successful in its uptake that local GP clusters are now going to provide funding for its continuation.

There is evidence of significant activity now, with many new community links and collaborations that have been made building on Gwynfi Hall's strengths, and those of the community itself.

From discussions with the hall's management, community ownership appears to have led to the invigoration and development of this local asset, that in 2012 had been viewed to be unviable. Without some of the restraints of local authority control, in some ways Gwynfi Hall appears to be taking a more creative and place-based approach that has kept the facility alive now for 8 years in the face of difficult financial circumstances.

CHALLENGES

Due to the geographical isolation of Blaengwynfi, its declining population (population figure has decreased roughly from 2,000 to 1,300 since the 1980s according to trustees), combined with economic and social deprivation factors, creating sustainable income streams is a challenge. The management of Gwynfi Hall, say that the reality is there will always be a core funding requirement. At a time when there is stiff competition for funding and with limited capacity of staff to undertake the necessary funding applications, Gwynfi Hall 'lives on its wits' and has a hand to mouth existence from a financial perspective. According to Simon, this creates an ongoing feeling of instability for the management and for the community, never being sure whether the doors will still be open in 6 months' time.

Local organisations within the Afan Valley are now working together to form an over-arching body 'Community Organisations Giving Support' (COGS) that could help to merge the governance and operational functions of all the organisations, including a community library, the South Wales Miners Museum, community centre and biking centre, most of which have been transferred into community ownership, and all of which have sustainability challenges. However, Gwynfi Hall management, say there is a feeling amongst some of the organisations that the priority should be for them each to have a small amount of core funding which would help to keep the doors of these community assets open.

According to Simon, Joint working has started to increase, for example, to achieve greater joint purchasing power. The new proposed over-arching body, could potentially reduce the burden of governance on individual committees, although there are also concerns around duplication from some members.

Finding new trustees to replace the original community founders continues to be an additional challenge. It has been hard to find people with the interest, time and skills to take on the role and Simon describes how it is often the same key people who do the majority of work, many of them active on numerous committees in the area. Many are elderly and would like to step away, having felt that they have made their contribution. Finding people to succeed them is critical, yet this remains an ongoing problem.

WHAT COULD BE DONE DIFFERENTLY?

The message from Gwynfi Miners Community Hall is that if a local authority wants a community to successfully take over an asset then there must be ongoing dialogue and financial support. Although there was a tapered funding package in place for the first 3 years, since that time Gwynfi Hall feels that it has been essentially left to its own devices.

Management feel that it would be helpful if there was continued communication and support, even if this was informal, or 'in-kind' support such as advice, or access to certain services that may not cost much for the authority to undertake, but would help ease the burden.

They also comment that support that is available from the local CVC is good, but they feel they are over-stretched, and lack capacity to support local organisations to the extent that they need it. However, they feel that core funding should be prioritised over paying for external support that does not have enough direct impact. They say that keeping the doors open is the bottom line and finding ways to ensure this happens is vital.

SUCCESS CRITERIA

Manager, Simon, says that cost-cutting, and rationalisation have been critical in their ability to keep Gwynfi Hall afloat, making the significant savings needed to remain in operation.

Remaining agile, working in partnership and supporting each other is a crucial aspect of successful continuation, helping to find ways of saving money but also contributing to each other's sustainability.

Having professionalism at all times in the way that the asset is managed is essential, as many individuals do not have the experience and understanding of the governance and legal requirements of running a building such as this.

Training trustees and staff and having access to professional expertise in key areas such as health and safety, finance, governance and law are all areas which must be addressed from an early stage in order to operate safely and sustainably.