

CLETWR, CEREDIGION

SUMMARY

- Name of Organisation/ Parent Organisation: Cymni Cymunedol Cletwr
- Start Date: 2011
- Number of Employees: 20 (9 FTE)
- Number of Volunteers: 50
- Structure: Company Ltd by Guarantee
- Turnover: £600,000
- Website: www.cletwr.com

PRODUCT/SERVICE

Cletwr is a community shop, café and community hub located in the village of Tre'r-ddol and within the parish of Llangynfelyn, an area comprising of a population of approximately 650 people. Located on the A487, where 'South Wales meets North Wales' Cletwr is a community-managed and owned amenity, sited on the former 'Cletwr' roadside services. Now a sustainable community enterprise employing 20 local people, Cletwr is evidence of how a community can come together to find sustainable solutions that builds on natural assets, strengths and opportunity.

HISTORY

Cletwr Road Services was established in the early 1960s but had seen a slow decline, closing in 2009. The owner had attempted to sell the site, but in 2011 came up with the idea of developing it into a community shop. In 2013 Cletwr community shop opened to the public, entirely run by local volunteers. The owner gave free rent to the venture for 18 months in order to pilot the initiative to test its viability. This was quickly established as there was significant demand and footfall, leading to the group developing a far more ambitious plan to create a new building which would offer a new café, shop and meeting space for the community to develop opportunities that would help to enrich community life.

Over £900,000 was raised from a range of funders and in 2017 the new facility was opened. Using local architects and builders, the new premises is built on sustainable principles and offers a contemporary facility that is accessible to the wider community.

ACHIEVEMENTS

According to the Chair, Nigel Callaghan, the business has seen year-on-year increases in turnover, with the shop, café and public toilet facilities working effectively in tandem, providing multiple entry points into the business - often

someone will stop for a coffee, for example, and then venture into the shop area to buy a gift. Footfall is now at 200,000 people each year and the enterprise expects to have turned over £600,000 this year, resulting in surpluses which can be re-invested in providing community activities such as IT training, Welsh lessons, a library and running events such as talks and gigs. With core costs now covered by trading activity, the enterprise is in a comfortably sustainable position.

Cletwr is on a key trunk road between the north and south of the country and is a main travel route for tourists. Thus, Nigel says, it is in an excellent position to maximise trade from external visitors as well as serving its own rural communities. With Machynlleth and Aberystwyth both a 9-mile drive away in either direction, it proves to be a convenient stop off for tourists, and its café is a particularly strong attraction. According to Nigel, Cletwr is also providing a vital amenity for its local residents, supplying groceries to help sustain people in between larger and less frequent supermarket shops.

With 50 volunteers, Nigel believes that Cletwr is playing a key role in bringing the community together, enabling people to connect with their neighbours through activities, volunteering and social opportunities such as the café itself, and events such as monthly gigs, organised by the team.

A particularly good outcome has been the incidental benefit of friendships developing between the young and old. Cletwr has provided what is felt to be much needed casual employment opportunities for young people during school holidays and at weekends, and this has led to many more opportunities for the elder users of Cletwr, to get to know local young people, removing previous stigma that may have existed on both sides.

Giving young people vital work experience, has resulted in building their confidence and skills to support their personal development and growth. Within such a rural area this is a unique and hugely beneficial feature of Cletwr in terms of creating opportunities for its young people.

Cletwr also raises money for other local organisations, with fund-raising events and collections. Customers using the toilets are asked to contribute to Toilet Twinning, which provides sanitation in countries and communities without toilets. £4,000 has been raised for this in two years.

Nigel describes how Cletwr has helped to build a strong community, how it has strengthened people's skills and confidence, and got them out of the house to meet people. He believes it has successfully filled a void in the community that had developed since the closure of the local school, shops and church, through which people had become at real risk of becoming isolated. Now he has got to know so many of his neighbours that he had never met before, and there is a much stronger sense of community cohesion.

CHALLENGES

There have, however, been challenges along the way. According to chair, Nigel, the group have very much played to their strengths and assets to address these challenges and this has made the whole process a lot easier. The board recognise that they had specific advantages such as the location, that have made it relatively easy to generate a good level of income to make the venture sustainable, which has been critical.

One challenge was the need to have a budget for shop stock before opening. They came up with the idea of a 'reverse credit' scheme. This is where people open an account, make a monetary deposit, against which they can then place orders. This system allowed the shop an initial budget of £5,000 to purchase stock. The system continues to be popular with over 150 accounts opened. Equally important was deciding on the purpose of the shop and the range of goods stocked. Nigel says that the success of the approach is largely thanks to having excellent management staff with long experience in retail. Fundamentally the shop must function as a village shop, offering essentials like bread, milk and newspapers at reasonable prices. However, they also stock a wide range of 'premium' products, often from local producers (and including a range of vegetarian and vegan products), which will appeal to locals and to visitors. The café also has a clear focus: good, simple food using local ingredients where possible. An important decision was that the café would not offer full restaurant-style meals as it did not want to compete with the village pub, only 200m away.

Nigel, says that probably the biggest challenge in their journey has been securing the funding sources needed to fulfil their ambitious new build. This involved a lot of work and nail-biting as different grant applications needed different approaches and one outcome would be dependent on the success of another. Juggling deadlines and aligning different match funding sources to the same time schedules was hugely nerve-racking. The project at one point felt like it was on a knife edge, even though they had already raised the larger part of the total budget. If the final grant application had failed, the project would have been on a much more restricted scale, without the new building. The fact that everyone involved was putting their time in on a voluntary basis presented an additional challenge at times.

SUCCESS CRITERIA

Chair of the board Nigel, says that the following factors have been crucial to the success of Cletwr:

- Know your community and its assets and play to the strengths of what is already available in your community, in terms of its people, age profile, amenities, places, spaces and resources. This model would not work for everyone and each community should look at its own set of circumstances.
- Having businesspeople on the board has been a huge help with 4 of the 7 directors having run their own business at some point. Also, it is important to

recognise everyone's contribution - you never know what experience someone may have had in a previous life, even if it is historical.

- There is a big difference between setting something up and running it, and the skill sets are very different. Ensuring that there is a continuity plan and risk strategy is important so that the business is not too reliant on one person - that systems, plans and procedures are in place so that there are controls and shared management procedures.
- Bringing on new talent to the board is important so people have new ideas and energy. It's important to have volunteers involved who are prepared to take on responsibility - most volunteers don't want that as they may have just retired from stressful jobs - but having a core of people who are willing to do so is really crucial.
- The business side of things must stack up - the financial success of the business is the thing that makes the rest of it possible.
- Using capital grants to get things started is a good strategy as revenue grants are so hard to come by. However, a sensible business model is needed so that the initial grant can help generate sustainable income.

