

# OPEN NEWTOWN, POWYS

## SUMMARY

- Name of Organisation/ Parent Organisation: Going Green for a Living Community Land Trust Ltd.
- Number of Employees: 4
- Number of Volunteers: 4
- Structure: Community Interest Company and Land Trust
- Turnover: £1.9 million investment so far, no turnover figure yet published.
- Website: [www.opennewtown.org.uk](http://www.opennewtown.org.uk)

## PRODUCT/SERVICE

Open Newtown is the trading name for Going Green for a Living Community Land Trust Ltd.

Led by the community, Open Newtown runs a range of projects and services that aim to improve local life, particularly helping to enrich and develop wildlife and green spaces within Newtown.

Their key project is the signing of a 99-year lease for a 130+ acre community asset transfer from Powys County Council and through Newtown and Llanllwchairarn Town Council, including all of its urban parks.

The project has been supported by a 5-year Community Asset Transfer Development Grant from the National Lottery and comprises a number of capital and environmental improvement initiatives within the green sites, including the creation of a new riverside recreational facility and large play area, the development of canoe access hire points along the river and cycle hire facilities.

The Riverside building has attracted £950,000 of Welsh Government investment and will provide a 'dirty boot' / dog friendly café and community / conference space, helping to open up canoe and cycling routes, and also house a new tourist information centre provision.. Each part of the project aims to create sustainable activity and stimulate economic regeneration of the area, through increased access and usage of the town's urban green spaces. The project offers much potential to boost tourism within the area. Enterprise Development Officer Stuart Owen, describes how Mid Wales lacks the populism of coastal parts of Wales or the allure of the mountains of North Wales. With no obvious 'selling points', it is essential that Powys is able to tap into its natural assets and strengths to overcome this barrier. Walking, heritage and nature trails, cycling and canoeing are all central to this, and the project is galvanising Newtown to be 'open' to all.

### HISTORY

Open Newtown has developed from the seeds of community consultation. Stuart Owen is a local businessman who volunteered on the consultation, a descendant of a local Newtown family that has lived and worked in the area for generations. Having established a steel design / engineering practice in the town, his newly established offices meant he regularly had to walk through the town to work, and on his walks he began to notice the lack of development within the area, and the opportunity that existed to make improvements that could help to improve local life.

At the same time the local authority and Newtown Town Council had commissioned a consultation to produce a 'community-led action plan' and he began to attend a series of meetings where a range of people talked about what they wanted for their town. It was clear that to take any of the ideas forward a strong evidence base would be needed. A key group of local community members formed a group with the ambition of gathering this evidence and helping to push forward the vision for a better town. This involved online and hand-written surveys by over 1,000 people talking about their top priorities, which elicited hundreds of ideas and suggestions which were eventually condensed down to the top 50 priorities.

The group, that was regularly supported by town councillors, had dwindled at this point from about 30 active individuals to 5, but with town council support and officer time allocated, they started to contact and map lots of local organisations, with the aim of getting them involved with the new 'Town Plan' vision, which was heavily focused around the regeneration and improvement of greenspaces. Groups such as the River Severn Custodians, local football clubs and local wildlife trusts began to collaborate and feed in ideas, creating a dynamic vision for the green spaces, to make the area responsive to the community's local needs. Stuart describes how Cwm Harry Land Trust were also hugely supportive at this time, gifting their time and knowledge to help formulate a robust development plan, bringing together the component parts of the vision. At this point, the discussion began about the possible transfer of the urban green spaces to the community, resulting in an ambitious plan for the group to take on the management and development of 130 acres public space.

According to Stuart, the resulting plan was well-formed, showing true community involvement and partnership and as a result it was met enthusiastically by funders, including the National Lottery, Welsh Government and Sports Wales, leveraging in over 1.9 million in capital and revenue funding to develop the site over a 5-year period.

### ACHIEVEMENTS

At its heart, is the vision of making things accessible to people on their doorsteps, opening up Newtown to make it accessible for all. It aims to create local opportunities to utilise the towns natural green spaces through sport, leisure, business and tourism, which will help to create sustainable use of those spaces. The strategy

for the spaces, is to work in partnership with groups across the area, including the town council, so that the individual projects become self-functioning and able to look after themselves in the future. An example is the football playing fields, which have involved a number of local football clubs merging together to jointly form a new constituted group, so that in the long-term they may take ownership and responsibility for the land maintenance.

Other self-managing aspects will include the new Riverside venue, with canoe and bike hire facilities and potentially an activity hub. The infrastructure for these activities will be funded by the initial investment project, but the enterprises will be operated and developed by local businesses.

### CHALLENGES

Despite a huge majority of public support a number of local business owners felt challenged by some of the plans, fearing that their own businesses would be at risk from the new Riverside venue, one of the flagship projects of the new venture. This led to objections that were sadly based on misinformation, but it did feel like a threat to the project's progression at points, which were intended for community benefits.

The community asset transfer took time and was not always a straightforward process. The land was initially assessed as having no value, but this changed as things progressed and the terms of the transfer changed from initially being freehold to leasehold.

### WHAT COULD BE DONE DIFFERENTLY?

Stuart suggests that a clear explanation of the process of a community asset transfer to any future community group would be useful. It is important that there is an understanding that in a large county, a local authority cannot be seen to have 'gifted' a parcel of land to one group, without acknowledging that other towns may be asking for the same. He comments that it is, after all, 'a liability transfer' until such time as the asset value can be unlocked through investment of local community time and money.

### SUCCESS CRITERIA

Stuart explains that it has been important for the project to have local people at the helm, along with an involved, forward thinking town council, and to have community leadership from the start.

Without the passion of local and skilled community members, he says, the project would not have had the necessary momentum to move forward. Having continued involvement of the same people from the start has helped the process, as the knowledge has been retained and built on along the way. It is also helpful that people are geographically close to each so that they can easily meet up and be involved.

## MAPPING COMMUNITY ASSETS IN WALES: CASE STUDY

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Having people who are willing to give their time, skills and resources to the project has been a major part of the project, from the gifting of free office space, to the hundreds of volunteer hours provided by key individuals.

Creating trust is essential and honesty is key in terms of bringing the public with you.

On a practical level, it is very useful to have evidence-based project plans available 'off the shelf' to be able to respond to opportunities.



*Artist's impression of the new Riverside venue.*



Signing the Asset Transfer Lease



Plans for the new Riverside Venue and surrounding area