

Aqoon



Main theme: How an organisation has used support, Feasibility studies – use of, Being entrepreneurial

Aqoon Home-School Support Services was set up in 2003 to support the growing Somalian community in Leicester. They provide services both for children in schools and for their parents or carers. Aqoon was set up using grants but began trading by offering translation services to schools and operating some of their education services through a service level agreement with the local council. They have expanded quickly and have utilised the support of local infrastructure organisations such as Social Enterprise East Midlands (SEEM) and the Co-operative and Social Enterprise Development Agency (CASE-da). Aqoon's Managing Director Abdish Takar explains how they have developed over the last seven years...

"We were set up in 2003 following some research into the education needs of the local community. Somalians had started moving to Leicester in large numbers and they needed support. Many were refugees recovering from traumatic experiences and they needed assistance in understanding the UK education system. However we provide services for all the people in Leicester and not just the Somalian community."

"For children and young people we provide complementary education programmes in schools, school bases mentoring, mediation and volunteering placements. For parent and carer new provide support for any issues with their children's education such as behavioural issues, learning difficulties or truancy. We also help them by providing translation at parent's evening and running workshops to

help them understand the UK education system."

Abdish explains how Aqoon have established trading activities to support income from grants...

"Our set-up costs were met through a grant from the Leicester Culture and Development Agency and we have further contributions from other local agencies too. However I think the key to our success is our entrepreneurial skills, although we try to provide some services for free we have also entered several agencies that provide these services in the city but schools are very confident in us because we are specialised in providing services to school and they allows us to be more professional."

"We have also watches the market carefully and that allows us to start charging for our services. So when the local authority is tendering for complementary education classes for under-privileged children we have entered into a service level agreement to provide them. This means that we change bases on a unit cost for each child that attends rather than a single cost for the project. For each child that comes to the class it costs about £15, the parents contribute £2 and the rest we charge to the local authority"

As Aqoon has grown and developed that have utilised the services and expertise of local infrastructure organisations including SEEM and CASE-da.

"Once we were all established we decided we wanted to move into providing training and support for the unemployed and also offering work experience. SEEM gave us a grant to undertake a feasibility stuffy and so we contracted a consultant who

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undertook a wide consultation with our stakeholders, meeting the people, meeting the school and further education colleges to understand the kinds of service they need. This has allowed us to take the right strategic decisions to get into a good position.”

“We also work with CASE-da and they always support us and give us the business and technical advice we need. For example, if we want to recruit staff and we don’t understand what kind of person we need to hire in terms of grade or level then they usually come back to us within an hour. Sometimes they struggle because of their funding but they have never turned us down or said that they don’t want to help us. I have heard that they are no longer getting as much financial support and I hope that they will still be there in the future or we may struggle.”

Although Aqoon has been very successful, they still face challenges in getting recognised at the same level as larger voluntary organisations...

“Unfortunately in Leicester social enterprises do not receive the same level of attention that other organisations do. The council tend to focus on larger voluntary organisations that have the capacity to operate across the city. Although we are classes as a voluntary sector organisation, the way we provide services is not the same they the way voluntary organisations provide services. We work to retain people as customers by satisfying their needs and getting customer feedback and this make us more sustainable. I think enterprise is a very good told for us and it makes us more effective. I think there needs to be more promotion in Leicester City Council of how useful social enterprises can be”.

Key lessons:

- Be entrepreneurial; watch you market and look for opportunities
- Infrastructure organisations such as CASE-da can support you development
- Undertaking a feasibility study will allow you to better understand your stakeholders and their needs

Legal structure: Company limited by guarantee
Main activity: Education and translation
Number of employees: 5
Turnover: £140,000
Location: Leicester
Date formed: April 2003
Percentage of generated income: 55%
Date written: February 2010
Website: www.aqoon.org

This case study is one of a series produced by the Capacity builders funded ‘Stepping Up To Enterprise’ project in the East Midlands.

The case studies tell the stories of voluntary or community organisations and how they moved to developing trading. The case studies are available on the website www.oneeastmidlands.org.uk/sute.