

Glossopdale Furniture Project



Main theme: Generating the idea organically

Glossopdale Furniture Project collects unwanted and discarded furniture to sell it at affordable prices to those on low-incomes in the High Peak area of Derbyshire. Over time the project has also expanded to provide restored furniture and produces made to measure items from recycled wood. From the beginning the project has always developed organically and has grown from a small project in a local volunteer bureau to become a successful social enterprise its own right. The project's manager Joan Cook explains the origins of the enterprise...

"I used to work in the Glossop Volunteer Bureau and people would come asking where they could send their old furniture, so we started to keep a book of what people had. Other people would come in and ask where they could get hold of furniture and we would try and match up the people who had furniture to give away with the people who needed it. Of course as a system it didn't always work very well but we were able to identify a clear need for cheap second hand furniture."

We managed to get some initial funding; I was paid to be the part-time manager and with some volunteers we started doing furniture collections around Glossop three days a week. Then when we got a grant of £130,000 from the Lottery we were able to pay our driver and the driver's mate. That allowed us to cover the whole of High Peak. Over time we've grown to employ three people full-time and four people part-time. Quite a few of those people were unemployed before the project started.

We got a grant from Derbyshire County Council, Derbyshire PCT and the borough council. We have had those grants pretty

much since we started. Over time we have boosted our income with sales of furniture. About two years ago only about 45% of our revenue came from sales whereas now it's over 80%."

The services that the organisation provides have also grown organically over time to serve different customers and create new income streams...

"When we first opened we were just here for people who were referred to us by social services, women's aid and social housing organisations. Then we realised there are a lot of people out working who aren't very well off either so we opened it to the general public and started a two-tier pricing system. For instance, if we had a three-piece suite on sale for £50 then someone on benefits would be able to buy it for £25. There are occasions where people are referred to us who really don't have any money and aren't eligible for any grants so we provide them with furniture for free. In the last year we have started to receive funding from the PCT and the Big Lottery's Awards for All fund to provide start packs, people can choose from a whole range of furniture plus a brand new microwave, kettle and toaster so they can move into their home with everything already there for them.

About five or six years ago we noticed there was furniture coming into the project that was damaged or old fashioned and it was going to waste. We started with a couple of volunteers just restoring the furniture and then making furniture from recycled wood. We just saw the need and it slowly evolved from there. So if we have furniture and wood coming in, particularly pine or oak then we make things like toy boxes and bird tables from it. Now we make made to measure furniture and people will come in with an order for

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something like a bookcase and it is made specifically for that person.

The next thing we want to do is establish some kind of training for people in carpentry skills and furniture restoration. We get asked all the time by Connexions and the local volunteer bureau to take people on placement so now we've started fundraising so we can do that."

Joan explains what she believes are the strengths of the project...

"I think our greatest strength is that we have a very strong team of staff and volunteers who have been here for a long time. We don't have a high turnover of staff because they are very committed to the project. It's not just a job to them and they will do anything for the project. I think it comes down to the way you treat people. One of our volunteers has mental health issues and I remember asking him why he came to work here and he said it was because he felt safe.

When people come in, whether they're a member of the general public or a referred customer, I think you just need to treat them well. It's important to make a bit of fuss over them. I remember I went to one furniture project and watched a man come in. the volunteer in the shop pointed to a nearby sofa and said 'that one up there will do you fine'. I was taken a back because we want to help our customers by making sure they find the sofa comfortable and that it will fit in with the colours in their home. We just try to treat people with dignity and courtesy whoever they are because seconds-hand items doesn't mean second class people."

Joan has the following advice for other organisations setting up their own enterprises...

"I think growing at a slow pace has been very important to our success. I do know of

a furniture project that went into administration because they took on so many projects and diversified into so many different things in such a short space of time that they couldn't control it anymore. It's easy to get fixated on rapid growth but I think it's better to work at a slower pace and expand when you identify real needs."

Key lessons:

- Your stakeholders may have unmet needs that provide an organic opportunity to start an enterprise
- Growth can be important to sustainability but avoid expanding simply for the sake of it
- The most stable and sustainable enterprises are those built to serve genuine needs

Legal structure: Charity and Company Limited by Guarantee

Main activity: Sale of second hand items

Number of employees: 7

Turnover: £133,000

Location: Glossop, Derbyshire

Date formed: 1998

Percentage of generated income: 80%

Date written: February 2010

Website:

www.glossopdalefurnitureproject.co.uk

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