

Bytham Community Shop



Location

The Bythams – Little Bytham and Castle Bytham, near Grantham



Founded

In set-up stages but has had a steering group since 2014



Legal structure

Community Benefit Society



Description of services

Community shop and hubsocial enterprise, which develops, owns and operates renewable energy schemes'

Overview of the business

The shop has been set up in response to local shops closing; the neighbouring villages of Little Bytham and Castle Bytham both had a shop until very recently. For different reasons, both closed within a week in December 2013. Local residents raised concerns about the shops closing with the now treasurer and chair of the shop: '... he said to me "the shops have closed – what are you going to do about it?"! That was the start of the project!'

After this, the idea was tested with a wider group: 'The outset was the day after the shop shut at Christmas 2013. I put an open invite in the Parish Magazine and a few people came on board at that stage. By the end of January 2014 a feasibility study had been undertaken and nine possible locations for development identified. However, we felt that all the possible sites failed to meet all of our original criteria (e.g. a central location; off-road parking). We were then offered a plot by the crossroads. We submitted a planning application but it was turned down as this was a greenfield site. Shortly after this we were offered

a nearby brownfield site on a disused quarry and set about raising the required funding.'

The shop is guided by a steering group that comprises a range of individuals with strong local networks and long-term connections. For example, the treasurer has been in the village for 30 years and has known the chair for 25 years; he has been involved in lots of different forums and activities locally.

The vision for the shop is to have a 'community-owned shop and a social hub' that is a feasible business and provides 'an essential facility for the village... and a vibrant community'.

Why is community accountability important?

The shop will be a direct response to community demand for both somewhere to purchase necessary daily items and a community hub for activities and people to come together. Accountability to the community is therefore central to its reason for existence.



At this stage in the development, 'accountability' is about forming the ideas of what the project should deliver and being able to realise this in ways that relate to community needs – balancing feasibility in terms of size and location of the shop and developing the idea of a community facility, and what would be financially feasible. Hence, there has necessarily been a fair amount of committee work in taking on the shape of community needs and aiming to make the financing work to deliver this.

'The ambition of the plan is deliberate. Elsewhere village shops have been too small to be viable businesses. They either couldn't stock sufficient goods – so people had to go elsewhere – or they had to rotate their stock – not having space to display all on a given day.'

What does community accountability look like locally?

Here we use three categories to provide a snapshot of some of the mechanisms and methods that the business uses in community accountability. These categories are not hard and fast; there is some overlap between the areas outlined.

Structures

The shop is currently overseen by a steering group of local residents with a range of experience and skills. This community-led governance is felt to be appropriate for the current stage of the work, but the steering group recognises that it will need different formal arrangements as the work continues and the shop opens: *'We aim to set up and then the others will gradually take over and run it – so there will need to be a more formal management committee when it is up and running.'*

There will shortly be a shareholders' meeting (AGM) where shareholders can vote on the direction of the business. After the AGM a new more formalised structure will take over from the development phase: *'There's an existing legal company... At the end of the share issue, we'll have an AGM, we're waiting until the share issue closes before holding that AGM – so at that point all can participate/ vote and select a board.'*

There are a number of sub-groups working on specific elements, for example governance and financial loans, design and build, human resources. These groups actively seek to draw residents and local businesses into the work.

Relationships

Members of the steering group live in the village and most have for many years; they have had strong involvement from different groups and have a public profile of reaching out via local magazines and public meetings.

'Our people are involved in planning and that includes critical friends... we snare people in!'

'We have some devil's advocates too – so if we can please them – we can please others – they act as critical friends.'

Much of their accountability during these early stages has been through the relationships and networks described above. In addition, there have been key relationships to funding bodies that helped in understanding the best model to realise the ambitions of the villages: *'People say "I'd like this" – the idea was always that it would be a shop + café (e.g. a community hub), so now it has become a community shop and hub. We used case studies from*

Plunket and looked at organisational models (the outline planning application made by the landowner suggested 80 square metre footprint – but we wanted somewhere with a sit-down place for a chat as well as a shop – so early on we decided that 80 square metres was not big enough... and the first major grant we got was for kitchen equipment.'

The work has also drawn on the parish and village plans, which involved surveys of what local people wanted.

Communications

In addition to the informal links and contacts, they have hosted a number of public meetings and local consultations: *'PowerPoint presentations in village halls – five meetings over the last three years.'* They also have an email contact list and use the Parish Magazine to keep the community up to date.

'... we undertook public meetings – some large (over 140 people e.g. for the quarry development idea – of that around 102 were in favour), some small meetings.'

'Sunday last week – we had street displays etc, that happened 2 years running in the Village festival.'
