

Developing a community social enterprise – what we discovered



INTRO

Alan Kenny and his team have been developing a social enterprise in the form of a community garden over the last three years. In partnership with the local church and primary school, Alan and his team have established a place in the centre of a disadvantaged borough of Bournemouth which provides a place for learning, skills development and even discipleship through running a profitable enterprise.

While Alan would say that their model of working is still being developed, he has learned valuable lessons in establishing a community social enterprise, which he shares below.

What we discovered:

1. Vision and calling:

Hearing God is vital! You need to be very clear what God is calling you to, and know that whatever it may be, that it is more than just a great idea. You need to know that God has called you to it. Knowing that will help you through the moments when doubts creep in, and help when you know that despite none of it making sense, you are still willing to continue!

2. Scale:

You may have a big vision, but you have to start small. That can be frustrating – especially if things take a while to grow, and especially if you have a big vision! But starting small is absolutely the right thing to do. Be small and brilliant. Don't expand until you feel you have got the model right.

3. Refining the model:

Your vision may be clear, but how to get there is a different matter. You need to try and develop a working model that is genuinely sustainable before expanding. Be very wary of building on external funding alone, or you run the risk of your ministry being driven by the need to source funding (see below). We are still trying to do that in the garden...developing a profitable model is so important to us before we expand or add lots of people or ideas in.

We are learning how to profit, and in so doing, then to share that profit with the poor. This has meant declining funding, but if that helps us refine the model and what we are trying to do, then that is positive.



4. Think carefully about reliance on external funding:

The temptation to rely on external funding is huge. When you start to do something – it immediately draws attention, even more so if it is successful. Other agencies, local authority, and other organisations will become interested and offer funding but don't pursue it if it is not in line with your vision.

If you expand your ministry on external funding alone then you are in danger of focussing on the funding rather than the vision itself. When developing this type of enterprise, having a model that is profitable is far more important than accessing lots of external funding. Whether it is a garden, a café, or a scrapyard, the model of how it works has to be profitable, or it will be driven by need. External funding is not wrong – but it needs to be carefully managed or it can end up redirecting or even driving your mission.

Meeting needs is important but bringing people into a solution which is profitable and genuinely useful has a far greater value. Otherwise the 'poor' become the harvest rather than providing an opportunity for the poor to succeed. Using the poor to access funding can be a trap and could become unintentionally institutionalised into the business plan if not careful.

5. Building on the 'Leviticus principle':

The Bible offers a picture of sustainable development through the 'Leviticus principle'. In Leviticus 19:9-10, God says, "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you."

The encouragement isn't to give away part of what you have gathered, but to deliberately leave "gleanings" for those who have nothing.

This is about application of labour and being given an opportunity rather than a hand out. This gives the person respect and dignity. A satisfactory reward for a day's work.

We are trying to work out this principle in the garden.

6. Having a committed team:

Having a good core membership or team is really important. This will involve picking people out rather than just waiting them to emerge from all the different volunteers who may come along. There is nothing wrong in approaching people and asking them to come with you! They will need to be committed to follow your lead and vision. Overall there has to be a leader who carries responsibility and the vision for the ministry. A committee will only get you so far – you need leadership!

Valuing volunteers and having some boundaries for who is able to take part can increase the value that is placed on being part of the team and develop a greater ownership of the ministry.

Some of your core team members may also not be Christians. That is ok! We can retain the vision and values of the ministry while harnessing the many skills and great experience of other volunteers.

7. Learning through the journey:

People so often want to hear the success story - a quick story of something coming good. However, the process of getting there is the significant bit!

The journey of how we got there though is how we learn, how God shapes us, and how we grow into the achieving the vision that we were called to. Don't be quick to overlook the lessons that God is teaching us along the way.