

Helping your town bloom - developing an In Bloom partnership

THE CHALLENGE

Hanging baskets, troughs and planters filled with seasonal colour give local people a sense of pride in their community, and visitors an additional reason to spent time (and money!) in your market town.

But reluctance on the part of individual traders to take on the heavy responsibility of watering and maintaining those blooms was at the heart of a 10-year debate in Newent.

The Civic Society used to put out five flower tubs, and the former Chamber of Trade persuaded a local garden centre to donate hanging baskets, but few traders were prepared to take individual responsibility, and the baskets withered and died.

DEVELOPING A SOLUTION

As part of the Newent Initiative's plans to enliven the town centre, Partnership co-ordinator Peter Street invited local trader Lynn Ashton to take on the challenge of putting the bloom back into Newent.

Lynn, who runs the town's Memento gift shop, had just moved into the community from Usk, a small town over the Welsh border which had run such a successful 'In Bloom' project that it was now entering Europe in Bloom.

The Usk organisers were invited to Newent in 2003 to give a talk and presentation on how they had achieved their aims, and representatives from a large number of local organisations attended.

A voluntary group was launched with the support of the town's Civic Society, with a formal Constitution, to get the In Bloom plans underway and a small committee co-ordinated the support of around 60 local groups and individuals – up to 80 per cent of all the town's traders contributed in some way.

Lynn took the job of secretary with the Civic Society taking the chair, and a representative from the Newent Initiative (the MCTi Partnership) as treasurer. The Constitution was one the Newent Initiative had used.

In 2006, Newent had the confidence to enter the Heart of England In Bloom competition for the first time, winning the Silver Gilt Award – an astonishing achievement for a first entry. And this success gathered momentum – in 2007 the town won a Gold Award.





MAKING IT HAPPEN

Learning from Usk's experiences, the committee agreed to involve as many local organisations and individuals as possible, sharing the responsibilities and tasks so that no individuals felt overwhelmed.

Funding comes from the Newent Initiative (part of the SWRDA-funded regional Market and Coastal Towns Initiative), the Forest of Dean District Council 'in bloom' promotion scheme, Newent Town Council and sponsorship from individuals and from businesses.

A small committee of dedicated volunteers, which now needs new members, oversees the activities of a large number of associated groups and individuals. This takes time to manage, but the response from the community makes it worthwhile.

The Heart of England judges acknowledge that behind every successful scheme is someone with a passion – you also need unending enthusiasm and people skills and, beyond that, some gardening skills, although these skills are usually available among In Bloom volunteers!

KEEPING IT GOING

The watering issue is being resolved as District Council funding has helped pay for automatic watering systems to be installed gradually around the town centre streets – this takes time as each property owner has to be contacted and agreement reached.

Over half the local youth organisations are involved, as well as the secondary, primary and nursery schools and the town's youth drop-in centre, who have 'adopted a bed' or helped plant up thousands of wild flower seedlings donated by local nurseries. Local Scouts completed their Environment Badge by becoming directly involved.

It's not just the market town's streets which have been enlivened by the planting – the town's lake, arboretum and approach road verges have benefited from the enthusiasm of youngsters who have planted up wildflowers, while local nurseries have planted drifts of wildflower seedlings to welcome visits to the outskirts. There are imminent plans to add hosts of native species daffodils to add to this welcome splash of colour.

The Newent in Bloom group launched its own annual town In Bloom competition linked to the town's annual Onion Fayre, with a range of prizes to encourage of all ages and local voluntary groups to take part.

It has also helped spearhead a Tidy Town campaign discouraging litter, launched with the Town Mayor and fellow Town Councillors actively getting involved by sweeping the streets. Local car parks have been cleared and tidied through the Community Payback scheme through the Probation Service. A restorative justice initiative, this involved selected offenders doing community work.



And local Police Officers have been involved in developing defensive planting schemes with funding through the Crimestoppers initiative.

Such was the local In Bloom team's confidence in their success story that in 2006 they decided to enter the Heart of England Tourist Board In Bloom contest – and won a Silver Gilt Award in the small town section.

TOP TIPS

- Invite other towns which have a successful In Bloom scheme to come and talk to you about the hows and whys – learn from others and share your knowledge, as exemplified by the Gloucestershire Market Towns Forum.
- Recognise what might put traders off getting involved – the onerous responsibility of watering hanging baskets or tubs – by considering automatic watering systems so the responsibility on individual shoulders is lessened. Funding will be needed.
- Involve a large number of local organisations and individuals – particularly young people - and give each a suitable, easy-to-achieve task, so the community feels part of the whole project and no one organisation or individual is regarded as sole 'owner' of, or responsible for, the idea.
- Think 'outside the box' – consider working with your local Crimestoppers initiative to develop defensive planting in areas which are affected by vandalism or skateboarders.
- Work closely with all the local garden nurseries to bulk-buy and negotiate in-kind sponsorship. In Newent, one particularly nursery, Hazelfields, has become a major supporter and sponsor – but do not take this sort of support for granted.
- Be aware that involving a large number of organisations does take time to manage but the results for the whole community are worthwhile.
- Be aware that traders who are initially unenthusiastic will change their minds once they see the difference the baskets and planting make to a town centre street scene and as they realise they are one of a dwindling number of 'gaps' in the planting scheme.
- Do not regard flowers and planting in isolation; consider a Tidy Town initiative to run alongside – and involved your local Councillors and Town Mayor, challenging them to become actively involved!
- Keep on asking – in Newent, it took a while to bring organisations like the secondary school and the Police station on board but now they are enthusiastic supporters.
- Give everyone a chance to join in a local In Bloom competition with categories to include window boxes, young people, recycled container, best neighbourhood and an 'X Factor' to recognise 'behind the scenes' activity, such as sponsors.



- Be aware that adding baskets or displays to listed buildings (like Newent's historic Market House) can involve innovative ways of not impacting on the stone or wood construction. In Newent, rubber tree ties were used along with padding to ensure nothing touched the fabric of the building.
- Where the pavement is too narrow for displays or shop fronts are listed, invite those traders to sponsor a flower bed or trough elsewhere.
- Don't be tempted to include back gardens in your town's In Bloom competition – they can be fraught with health and safety issues.
- Consider developing an Open Gardens scheme linked to the main winners from the previous year and involve local food outlets and a heritage trail to attract even more visitors.
- You need to be increasingly aware of environmental issues both because it is good for the environment anyway but it also increases the chances of acquiring funds. Schemes that involve composting and planting of permanent native trees and plants have got to be good schemes.



CONTACTS

Lynn Ashton

Memento Gifts, Newent

Tel: 07074 235914 • E-mail: lynn@memento-gifts.com

Newent Initiative

Tel: 01531 820903 • E-mail: peter.street6@btinternet.com

www.newent-online.co.uk

Gloucestershire Market Towns Forum

Tel: 01452 425953 • E-mail: daniel.judges@gloucestershire.gov.uk

www.town2town.org.uk

Heart of England Tourist Board - the regional campaign supporting the national Britain in Bloom Awards

www.rhs.org.uk/britaininbloom

Market and Coastal Towns Association

www.mcti.org.uk

South West Regional Development Agency

www.southwestrda.org.uk

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'Helping your town bloom – developing an In Bloom partnership' is one in a series of case studies, sponsored by the Market and Coastal Towns Association. Each spotlighting an issue or challenge faced by a GMTF member town.

Each case study presents:

- the **initial challenge** or issue faced by the town
- how a **solution** was developed
- how it was **rolled out**
- how it is being **sustained**
- **top tips** – useful information and advice to other communities which may be facing similar issues
- **contact details** to help you find out more

