

Multi-use community centres - the pitfalls and the positives

THE CHALLENGE

For many years, most community events in Winchcombe were held in a former Baptist Chapel hall which, despite being centrally located in Cowl Lane, had no car parking facilities, required considerable maintenance and had a layout that was unsuitable for modern community activities. As a result, in 1998, the Town Council decided to seek an alternative site for the development of future community facilities.

DEVELOPING THE IDEA

Following the amalgamation of the Primary and Junior schools in 1999, the old Junior School was declared surplus to requirement and the County Council had to dispose of them.

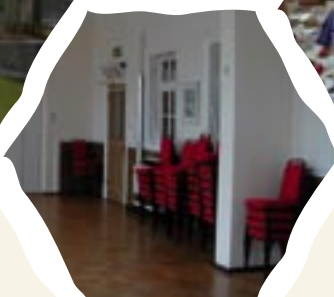
Because the site had Scheduled Ancient Monument status, English Heritage would not permit any new build and the school buildings were unsuitable for conversion to domestic dwellings. This proved fortuitous for Winchcombe Town Council, who rightly concluded that the County Council could therefore be persuaded to sell the site to them at a greatly reduced price.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Following surveys and reports by both the County and Town Councils, Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) agreed to sell the one-acre site and buildings to the Town Council for £275,000 (at that time local building land was fetching around £500,000 - £600,000 per acre).

GCC complicated the negotiation process by insisting that the pre-school playgroup located across the road in prefabricated buildings and local police should be re-housed in the new centre with protected tenancies and fixed rents. Their motivation for this was to facilitate the sale of both the playgroup and police station sites for future housing development, thus maximising the potential financial gain to the County Council.

Final agreement was further delayed because the County temporarily re-housed the pupils of nearby Didbrook Primary School at the Junior School while their premises were being refurbished. Concurrently, the Town Council was involved in some fairly difficult negotiations with English Heritage regarding the archaeology of the site and EH demanded strict written assurances regarding its future protection.





During this extended negotiation period, the Town Council established a sub-committee to look into the financing and running of the new centre. This team was chaired by John Gerrard, Chairman of the Friends of Winchcombe group, which had been established as a local Amenity Society with Registered Charity status in 1998. In their final report dated June 2001, the following main requirements were identified:

- Based upon the experience of the Chipping Campden project, a Business Plan and Articles of Agreement were needed.
- Funding options were to be reviewed, including, if necessary, an approach to the Public Works Loan Board.
- The appointment of Grahame Poulton FRICS to act for the Town Council in their purchase negotiations.
- Protection of the site against further vandalism.
- The appointment of a local architect and quantity surveyor to develop the design of the building alterations and to provide a Bill of Quantities and detailed cost estimates for the entire works.
- A detailed assessment of potential future users and likely charge levels.

More than three years after the start of negotiations and following acceptance of the Business Plan and the satisfactory agreement of funding arrangements, the Town Council agreed to proceed.

An initial contract for the refurbishment of the newer school section was paid for by GCC so that the pre-school playgroup could move onto the site early, thus facilitating the sale of their premises across the road.

The main contractor – Messrs Thomas Holding – was appointed in May 2004. The contract involved the complete refurbishment and redecoration of the main and outer buildings, the replacement of the gas-fired central heating boiler, provision of a new kitchen, toilets and services, the replacement of 54 broken windows, roof repairs and general external improvements. The project was finally handed over in February 2005. The final cost, inclusive of fees was £570,000 The contractor was first-class.



KEEPING IT GOING

The Community Centre has now been operating for about two years and results thus far have amply demonstrated its value to the community.

The three main buildings are in regular use throughout the week and enjoy a wide range of activities. In addition to the three main rooms, the centre has a meeting room, a one-stop shop staffed three days a week by the Borough Council and also houses the local Police Station. This latter facility is of great value since it greatly enhances site security and provides a regular income for the centre.

The newer buildings adjacent to the main school provide excellent play-school facilities for local toddlers and an office facility for the Town Clerk.

Since its opening in 2005, Abbey Fields has always covered its costs and is now starting to build up a respectable reserve for future maintenance works. In this regard the Management Committee is currently developing a maintenance plan to ensure that Abbey Fields is properly maintained and that likely future funding needs can be properly identified.

The Management Committee, which has three Town Council and four non-Council representatives, meets at bi-monthly intervals to review finances, bookings, maintenance, improvements and other associated matters.

A recent initiative identified in the original business plan has been the establishment of a cinema. This is proving highly popular with local residents and once fully established should bring in a net revenue stream of around £4,000 p.a. The main hall is now equipped with a modern projector and retractable screen and is able to accommodate an audience of up to 100. At a Saturday evening showing of the Queen, demand was such that a matinee performance had to be introduced on the following day, with full houses on both days. Ticket prices for 'Block Busters' are £4 per person.



TOP TIPS

- **Set up a committee** to look at the practicalities of finance and running of a new community building. In Winchcombe, this was chaired by John Gerrard, of the Friends of Winchcombe group.
- **Write a Business Plan and Articles of Agreement** – Winchcombe was aware of the need for these documents based on the experience of Chipping Campden’s development of its former police station and jail into a community centre. Both towns would be prepared to share their expertise (see contact details on page 6).
- **Research and carry out a detailed assessment of potential future users** and likely charge levels.
- **Communicate!** Winchcombe Town Council carried out a comprehensive local consultation exercise, which resulted in a wide acceptance of the project. The building now has regular and occasional bookings from a range of organisations and societies including the Town Council and Friends of Winchcombe committee. Birthday and wedding parties, charity fund-raising events, adult education classes and a ‘one stop shop’ for Tewkesbury Borough Council information.
- **Stay flexible over costs.** In Winchcombe, the asking price for the buildings and land was reduced by £55K to £220K, but the conversion costs were about £200K higher than the £150K estimate. The final scheme was significantly different in scope from the original proposal, but the Management Committee now has a much wider range of options for future revenue generation and the townsfolk have a much better choice of facilities. In addition, as a result of the extra restoration work, the original provision of £10K p.a. for maintenance will not now be required. *For a full breakdown of the costs of this project, including the final real costs in comparison with the earlier envisaged costs, visit www.town2town.org.uk and click on Winchcombe’s page to read the detailed case study.*
 - Much of the cost over-run related to the fact that the final scheme allowed for a full refurbishment of the entire building rather than a long-term phased improvement.
 - The additional **professional fee** element amounted to about £57K (Quantity Surveyor/ Solicitor/Architect/Surveyor etc).
 - Check that suitable **noise attenuation arrangements** are put in hand before applying for an entertainment licence. In Winchcombe’s case this has involved the **retrospective fitting of secondary glazing** to the main windows with the associated need for installing overhead fans and an expensive modified security lock on the main fire exit. This additional work has cost around £5,000.
 - With electrical and gas prices rocketing it is essential that the project designers think seriously about increased **up-front insulation costs** to minimise long-term running costs. In this regard it is essential that the control systems for the heating system are “user friendly” and able to accommodate sudden changes of usage without resort to complex programmer changes.



- Seriously consider **installing a good PA system**, complete with CD player and associated hearing loop facilities. Our system cost around £4,800. The installers were Wight Audio Services of Chepstow (Tel 01291 625490) and they were absolutely first class. Early in 2006 the management committee decided to develop film viewing facilities for local residents and we have now installed a large (4m x 3m) electrically operated retractable screen, projector and DVD player. Total cost was around £6,000.
- **Establish a separate management team** to run the centre for reasons of good practice and to avoid a large VAT bill. The Trustees pay a nominal annual rent to the Town Council and since they will be operating as a Charitable Trust, any profits are ploughed back into the centre.
- **Accept your limitations! Appoint professionals** where they are needed – a good investment over the long term – for example, appoint a professional Project Manager and a Chartered Surveyor to act for your organisation in any negotiations over purchase of buildings and/or land and a local Architect and Quantity Surveyor to develop the design of any building alternations, provide a Bill of Quantities and provide detailed cost estimates for the work.
- **Be patient!** More than three years after the start of negotiations and following acceptance of the business plan and the satisfactory agreement of funding arrangements, the Town Council agreed to proceed with the project.
- An **entertainment licence** could be crucial to a community building's future range of activities – but this involves a large number of regulations including the provision of fire evacuation instructions and extinguishers and the need for all exits to conform to fire regulations. In this regard, careful thought should be given to future alcohol sales at functions and the associated need for specific licensing arrangements. (These can be somewhat onerous for the Management Committee).
- Offer **preferential hire rates** to all local organisations and societies, especially those that use the centre on a regular basis.
- Make sure all **disabled access** arrangements and signage are strictly complied with.
- All **car parking areas** should have suitable signs indicating that vehicles are parked at owners risk. Careful thought should also be given to the potential problem of illegal parking on the premises. This can become a major problem for weekend and evening events if the car park is already half full of local residents' cars.
- Make sure you provide **sufficient storage** for all community centre users.
- Provide **an office for the secretary!**



CONTACTS

John Gerrard Chairman – Friends of Winchcombe and Member of Abbey Fields Management Committee
Tel: 01242 602229 • Email: johngerrard@tesco.net

Gloucestershire Market Towns Forum
www.town2town.org.uk and click on Winchcombe

Market and Coastal Towns Association
www.mcti.org.uk

South West Regional Development Agency
www.southwestrda.org.uk

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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