

BROCKWEIR AND HEWELSFIELD THE PRINCE OF WALES LAUNCHES COMMUNITY SHOP



Just before Christmas 2004 the Prince of Wales was guest of honour at the launch of the remarkable new community shop at Brockweir in Gloucestershire. The words of project manager Fred Simpson tell the Brockweir's story.

Why we did it

In 2000 our sole shop and PO closed AND like many other things in life we didn't understand how valuable it was until it had gone. A group of villagers got together to see if they could come up with a plan to replace the shop. They turned to ViRSA for advice about organisational structures and constitutions and for help drawing up a draft business plan. ViRSA put the group in touch with other similar projects and attended early public meetings to help persuade local people that it really could be done. As a result we registered as a 'not for profit' Industrial and Provident Society through ViRSA's model rules.

The total cost of building and setting up a community owned shop turned out to be around £400,000 with the money coming from DEFRA's Rural Enterprise Scheme, The Countryside Agency's Vital Villages Programme, and The Forest of Dean District Council, with specific funding for the Photo-voltaic roof from Energy Savings Trust, SEED programme and Scottish Power's Green Energy Trust. The community stumped up the remaining £70,000 in donations, a community bond and contributions in kind.

What we got

Thanks to all this effort and support we ended up with a wonderful building in local green oak which houses a well used general store of about 80m². The very well attended shop focuses on local produce and offers a home delivery service.

The building also has a cafe used as an informal social hub, a small commercial office space currently leased to a national charity providing local employment for two people, a spacious conference resource and an eight station IT facility that also offers hugely popular computer training courses.

Post office services

When the shop opened we were unable to have a Post Office counter, so we looked into ways we could provide alternative post office services. Customers can weigh letters, packets and parcels, buy the necessary stamps at our till, use the post box on the premises and be assured of a daily Royal Mail collection. As business customers of

Royal Mail we are able to send 1st and 2nd Class letters and parcels inland, overseas packets and parcels, Recorded 1st and 2nd Class inland mail, and Special Delivery items.

We had a secure post box built in the shop, in the form of a large secure cabinet. It has an opening big enough for A4 packets, and larger parcels and packets are placed inside by a member of staff. The keys are kept in the till. When the postman arrives he requests the keys, opens the secure post box, retrieves the mail, signs for any Recorded or Special Delivery items, and locks the post box again, giving the keys back to a member of staff.

On top of the post box we keep two sets of scales (one for letters and one for parcels), along with detailed instructions and postage rates. Customers weigh their items, work out the correct postage and then buy their stamps at the shop counter. If necessary they complete a customs declaration sticker and attach it. Members of staff are available to help.

The postman arrives in the afternoon each weekday and in the morning on Saturday. The service began in April 2005 and to date we have had no complaints with regard to lost or late mail. We stock a complete range of stamps which we order from the Royal Mail, along with airmail stickers.

Customers are also able to get cash back through the shop till on debit card transactions. There is a charge to us for this service, but we see it as a cost worth paying in return for higher sales in the shop. We have a minimum spend of £5 before offering this service and the maximum amount we give in cash back is £30 per transaction so as to ensure that the shop till does not run out of cash.

Through our internet computers customers can have access to other services including car tax, passport applications and internet banking. We have a trained member of staff to help customers with navigating around the internet.

We have 35+ volunteers who contribute to the day to day running and the social benefits for them and the local users go way beyond what we anticipated. The project has involved the whole village and is a wonderful achievement that demonstrates all the key elements that make for a viable and sustainable community. The project has delivered everything we wanted and more.

Acknowledgments:

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