



# Improving Accessibility

## Shop In A Box

### Elston Village Shop

'Shop in a Box' repackages the traditional village shop into a modern form. The shop is housed in a portable building which can simply be craned into position, thus overcoming the major problem of finding suitable, affordable premises in the village.

Elston Village Shop is an amazing example of how 'Shop in a Box' has helped a community recognise the need for retail provision in their village.

The shop, owned by and entirely for the benefit of the community, has been trading since May 2005 and has already made a substantial impact on village life.

#### Key messages

- It is important to consult with everyone in the village and to develop good partnership working for this project to be a success.
- Volunteers are also an essential component of this project, and it is therefore important to offer incentives such as training in areas like Customer Service, Lifting and Handling, and Fire Precautions, as well as a flexible attitude to delegated hours of work.
- It is important to encourage as many local people as possible to use the shop; publicity and marketing is essential.
- Air Conditioning is essential; much of the stock was spoiled because of hot weather in the first summer.
- The management committee needs to be committed for the long term, as well as being supportive of staff and shop volunteers.
- There needs to be someone involved who has sound business experience.

#### Background

Over half the parishes in the UK now have no village shop and this decline continues with an estimated 200 closures per year. The loss of a shop can create the social exclusion of rural people without their own transport - particularly the young, mothers with young children, older and disabled people.

#### Who was involved?

Funding for the project came from the Countryside Agency and after that the committee was guided through the process by Notts RCC now Rural Community Action Nottinghamshire (RCAN).

A steering group was formed from the audience of an open Parish Council meeting in September 2002 and they decided to carry out a village appraisal. It was believed that only by asking everyone what they thought could the results be said to represent the wishes of the whole community. A questionnaire was devised and it was then distributed and collected by a group of volunteers. An impressive 80% of the forms were returned. What was wanted, above all else was a shop / cafe for the village.

A volunteer group was formed to work on turning the wish into a reality and this group now forms the backbone of the management committee. Luckily, funding was obtained from various places with the help of RCAN and a dedicated project worker. Below are some of the funders.

- Rural Community Action Nottinghamshire
- Defra
- Newark and Sherwood District Council
- Greater Nottingham Partnership
- Nottinghamshire County Council
- European Social Fund
- Alliance SSP

## The problems and how we tackled them

**No overdraft** - the committee did not want an overdraft, so expenditure has had to be monitored very closely. Sales fluctuate randomly, so fundraising is carried out locally to ensure a constant cushion of funds is available to keep the business going.

**Being realistic about use of the shop** once the novelty has worn off, and being flexible with regard to stock and services. Income from sales is lower than was initially anticipated; only about 30% of the local residents use the shop regularly. The shop offers a variety of services to attract different types of customers. We now also offer PayPoint which has proved very popular. Ongoing fundraising events are essential to fill the profit gap.

**Staff** need to be included in discussions and decisions, and should be listened to.

**Volunteers are invaluable** but do have other things to do; the shop could not operate without them but they do need to know what to do and how to deal with problems should they arise. Good training and clear instructions/communications are vital, or they will leave. Recruitment is ongoing for volunteers.

**Opening hours** - make sure these are realistic and achievable. Keep hours as regular as possible and let everyone know about any changes.

**Storage space for stock** - this was a great problem within the portacabin, but more space was obtained in the Village Hall and a storage shed was purchased. Now 'just in time principals' apply and nearly all the stock is on sale.

**Shoplifting** - this is a problem which has escalated of late. Some of the culprits were known to staff and volunteers and in some cases this has been resolved with a word of warning from the local Police Officer. A new layout of the shop has improved visibility and created a more open aspect.

## Outcomes and impact

By operating as a social enterprise, owned and run by the community, the shop provides an opportunity for the local people to be involved through volunteering and contributing to the running of the shop. Elston Village shop offers training in several associated subjects to its volunteers.

The shop reduces travel time and expenditure on essential shopping for customers, as well as food miles.

In addition to supplying essential grocery and household products, 'Shop in a Box' provides photocopying, faxing, laminating and internet access, which helps local businesses. Locally grown produce and meat products are sold, along with craft items which help to stimulate local micro-enterprises. The Elston Village Shop also acts as an important focal point for village events, information, and provides a venue for the Community Police Surgery.

## What could have been done better

The portacabin would ideally have been larger.

There was initially a café area in the shop, but it proved unfeasible due to a lack of space and privacy for customers.

It would have been better to have more storage space to be able to buy in bulk at cheaper prices.

It would have been good to have set up a link with other small shops to improve accessibility to wholesalers.

Marketing and publicity is currently limited and could be improved.

## Next steps

We are working with the Village Hall Committee to obtain a new Village Hall with additional services including the shop and better café area, as well as computer and internet access.

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