Josh: Hello and welcome to ‘Third Sector Insights’, the knowledge and learning podcast from The National Lottery Community Fund. I’m Josh Coles-Riley, and I work for the Fund in the Knowledge and Learning team.

We’ve created ‘Third Sector Insights’ to give a platform to organisations funded by The National Lottery Community Fund, to share the knowledge and insight they’ve gained through their projects. Each episode, you’ll hear directly from third sector leaders, project staff, volunteers, and the people and communities they support. We’ll talk to them about their projects and the difference our funding makes, and about key lessons, challenges, mistakes and successes – basically any learning that might be helpful to other groups and organisations seeking to make a difference in their communities.

Each episode will focus on a different topic – an area of special, or maybe a challenge or experience that lots of third sector organisations have in common. We don’t want this podcast to be about us as a Funder giving our position or saying, “this is the view of The National Lottery Community Fund on x”. Instead, Third Sector Insight (the clue’s in the name!) is about drawing out the wealth of insights, wisdom and experience third sector organisations are gaining through the projects we fund.

On this episode, we’ll be focussing on something which is a thorny issue for lots of organisations; project sustainability. This is something many grant makers encourage, or even require organisations to plan for when they’re applying for funding – how are you going to ensure that the project activity is able to continue once the grant comes to an end? It’s no secret too that lots of third sector organisations struggle with, and have struggled with increasingly, as the external operating environment has grown more challenging. Before we get going on this, I want to emphasise that there are no easy answers to this; every organisation is different so we’ll need to be thinking about project sustainability very specifically in relation to their own mission, context, and resources as well as the specific activity that they’re delivering. I also wanted to say that sustainability isn’t necessarily good in and of itself, so whilst every project should have a plan for what happens at the end of the grant, that doesn’t necessarily have to be a plan for keeping the project going long term. Having said all of that, with all those privisos out the way, we wanted to talk today with a charity we think has a real vision for future sustainability who’ve been thinking about sustainability in quite creative ways and really integrated it all the way throughout their project. So I’m here today at our Cardiff office with Reynette Roberts, Director of Oasis Cardiff to talk about their National Lottery funded project, and how they plan to keep it going after our funding comes to an end. So hello, Reynette.

Reynette: Hello

Josh: Thank you very much for coming down today; to start us off, can you just tell our listeners a little bit about Oasis Cardiff?

Reynette: Yes, Oasis Cardiff is a centre for refugees and asylum seekers based in Splott. We’ve been running for 11 years on Monday [14th October 2019]. We provide services and activities that help refugees and asylum seekers feel they have a safe place to go and also integrate into the local community.

Josh: Could you tell me about how the organisation got started and how it got to where it is today?

Reynette: It’s my fault that it got started! I started it… I was volunteering in different organisations and I couldn’t see a place that brought refugees and asylum seekers out of where they were living to mix with the local community and to give them a safe place to tell their stories and share experiences, and just have a place to be. So, we opened up 11 years ago and it’s just grown over that time to being in a small room to a whole big building which is literally filled to the roof with different people and different activities, and all the activities that we’ve done have developed out of what clients want – not my ideas; I always said that we’d never do English classes and now we do multiple English classes, because I don’t like teaching English but there we go!

Josh: One of my colleagues mentioned that when Oasis started there were about four of you, maybe even smaller and now you’ve expanded.

Reynette: Yes, we were all volunteers at the beginning and slowly we got funding of the years and it’s just grown. There are quite a lot of staff now, I keep losing track, but we have more than 10 now so it’s pretty amazing.

Josh: So now that you’re operating on this much larger scale, how do you keep that going, or are there challenges associated with that?

Reynette: The challenges are getting funding and getting funding for the right project that you want to do, not looking for funding and trying to fit a project around it - I don’t think it’s the right way to be. And to keep focused on your aims and objectives; I think that’s really important because it’s very easy, and I’m very good at going off on a side-track, so we try and keep things focused on what our goals are. It is hard, and we don’t have government funding so we are really grateful to people like yourselves and other funders that fund us, and people that donate as well, so I think it’s really important.

Josh: Something that my colleague mentioned is that you have support from the Lloyd’s Foundation with a grant around capacity building; would you tell us a bit about that as well?

Reynette: Yes, we’ve had it a third time now, in fact it started paying my salary so it’s been amazing, and they also have add-on support so we’ve had development support, consultants come in. Lloyd’s bank have come in and developed a process for us so when we have ideas for projects from clients, volunteers and staff, we are going to have, twice a year a focus week where we get ideas from people and we go through a process to see whether they would work, whether they would fit with our aims and objectives, and where we’ll get the funding from, or if we even need funding for them. That’s really exciting support that we’ve had, and it’s a really exciting plan for us to make sure that we get ideas from the people that we serve rather than think of the ideas that we want because there may be some amazing ideas out there that we haven’t thought of.

Josh: And that really chimes with the values of The National Lottery Community Fund and our “people in the lead” approach as well. The project that we fund is call “The Plate Project”, is that right?

Reynette: Yes

Josh: Do you want to tell us a little bit about that?

Reynette: The Plate Project was a long time coming. I was talking about a food project for a long time because food is very central to people’s existence, we need it to survive but it also brings people together, it brings communities together. Whether it’s to argue about the origins of falafel, where they come from or where humus comes from because each different country claims it for their own, and are quite territorial about it! But it also helps some people to talk at all about issues, to chat to each other, to get to know each other without feeling awkward or threatened. We had talked about doing a food project that trained people in hospitality and catering to get them into employment, and also to serve our clients because we feed about 140 a day. That’s what the plate project was; an added bonus was we bought a food trailer with funding from another funder and we’ve used that as a tool to go out to different places, and also in our car park, to sell refugee-focused food to raise awareness of refugees and asylum seekers’ issues without shoving it down people’s throats and making them feel threatened.

Josh: You talked a little bit about how the project idea came about, how did you come up with the project plan?

Reynette: We went for a project plan because we felt that would help us focus on the five years of the project, so we could see how it was going to develop with the timeline. We thought about what our aims and objectives were going to be, what we wanted to see at the end of the project because for us it will continue, but we need it to be sustainable, and that was a really important part for me.

Josh: I think you’re about six months in so far? How would you describe the journey of the project?

Reynette: It’s been really interesting because it’s meant that we can employ staff to run the project which has made life a lot easier. We always ran the kitchen with volunteers before, so that has given some continuity, we’ve been able to train clients in food and hygiene certificates, and have volunteers in the kitchen. We’ve also had volunteers that work on the food trailer, and we’ve also been able to employ refugees to work on the food trailer as well so we’ve been able to give four clients employability; and we’ve taken it out to different places and we’ve developed partnerships. For example, we work with Cowbridge Food Festival, we worked with them this years and next year we’re going to do a bigger project with them – we’re looking for joint funding together for that. We’ve been working with Green Man Festival, and Green Man Trust supports us, so we took the food trailer along this year and we actually sold food, which was amazing and our clients loved it. And they’re off to Cheltenham Literary Festival so there’s lots of different ways but also a way of using it that I didn’t think of was to open it out in the car park once a month. We’ve opened up the food trailer in the summer months, we’re not going to do it in the winter because it’s a bit too cold and wet, but we sold food and a lot of people from the local community have come along. People have just walked passed, and we’ve got a music group who perform; and it just draws people in, and it’s meant that the community see it as not just for refugees and asylum seekers but also for them as well, and it’s given them a bit of ownership. Also with the supper clubs that we’d actually started before but we’d developed more have actually sold out so that’s a really exciting way of sharing different cultures’ food, sharing a bit about the different countries that people come from, and sharing food together.

Josh: Great. I know you haven’t been going an awfully long time but I wonder if you could talk about the difference you see the project making so far, or already?

Reynette: It has given confidence to clients; some people didn’t know how to cook, and they’ve learned how to cook and volunteer in the kitchen, and their levels of English have improved because they’ve had to use their English, and it’s given them pride for their food and their country, and it’s been really lovely to see confidence growing – people that are quite quiet being able to shout out orders and feel competent in the food trailer and supper clubs. So that has been lovely to see, and to see people going into employment as well has been a really positive effect on it. And also being able to feed people on a daily basis - good hot food, has been a real bonus, and we use fairshare and donations from supermarkets; so Nando’s has given us chicken, and Pret a Manger’s helped us as well, so there’s been lots of ways of using food that wouldn’t normally get used as well.

Josh: How brilliant, and when you say being able to feed people every day, you’re referring to refugees and asylum seekers…

Reynette: Yes, which is distinct from the outside community.

Josh: Has anything surprised you in the delivery of the project so far?

Reynette: \*Laughs\* When we bought the food trailer we didn’t realise we needed to have vehicles to pull it so that’s been quite interesting. We’ve had a few hiccups with that, and also realising that our kitchen, because we feed so many, we need to improve it. We hadn’t thought that through and we’re hoping to change our kitchen, and make it more of a commercial kitchen. But I think seeing how people will suddenly become interested in something and I think that has surprised me – how passionate people are about their food and also how similar some foods are as well.

Josh: How many people are you feeding every day?

Reynette: When we last counted it was a 143 for lunch but for a short time we’re going to be doing some more catering so it’s going to be a bit busier.

Josh: What are your plans, or vision, for the next four or five years of the project?

Reynette: I think we’d like to continue using the food trailer, the supper clubs, the pop-ups, do more restaurant events – we’ve got one planned for this autumn, and do more festivals as well, but be more organised about where we’re going with the festivals. And just develop better training for our clients as well as cookery classes for our community, the refugee community, because some of the men don’t know how to cook because traditionally the women have done all the cooking, so they can make meals that are healthy and well-balanced without costing a lot of money because they don’t get much monetary support when they’re asylum seekers, and also using it as a tool to reach the wider community so we can break down barriers, build bridges, and get the local community into the building as well so that they don’t see it as an alien place.

Josh: So one of the features of the grant that I was quite interested in was, your project plan is basically designed so that you get less and less funding from us each year, can you tell me why you designed the project in that way?

Reynette: We were being creative with how we were using the money \*laughs\*, so we knew when we started that we would need more start-up costs, we would need to buy some equipment, pay salaries, but we also recognised that as we develop more and we can do more outside catering and do more events we hope to generate income that will help us make the project sustainable after the project ends. So The Plate will continue regardless of whether we are funded or not, that will be the ideal, but it will take a lot of hard work and a lot of diversifying so we need to sell spice packs and coffee and tea packs so it’s trying to think outside the box as well.

Josh: A related point; a slightly unusual feature of the project is that you’re employing a food consultant, is that right?

Reynette: Yes, we recognise that we didn’t have the expertise – we might have the ideas, but we needed extra support for portion control, where the best place to get your orders are, how to best serve the food, different ideas of how to adapt some recipes so that they’re manageable because some of the food will take a long time to prepare. It’s been a positive learning experience, it’s been great.

Josh: I was at Green Man, and I went to the truck so I can testify that the food is really, really good, and it’s a very professional operation.

Reynette: Yes, and I’ve made enough Albanian spinach and fetta pies from when we’ve first used the festival down the Wales Millennium Centre but I’ll still eat it. Even at Green Man I was having for my supper feta pie because I like it so much, it’s really nice. But it’s something that I would have never thought about eating, but I love it, so yes.

Josh: So that’s actually something that quite a lot of other grant holders are doing, is some kind of catering element to try and generate income for their organisation, whether that’s a community centre or a project like yours. What advice would you give those other organisations?

Reynette: I would say if they’re applying that they should speak to someone that works for the Fund because they can tell you whether it’s totally off the scale or feasible because it’s very easy to have ideas but sometimes you need to be reined in a little. I think also to not feel frightened to do it; I think if you think too much about what you want to achieve, you might never go and even try it. And it’s better to try than not bother at all, and I think that you should just go out and do it.

Josh: That was some really encouraging advice, \*laughs\*, but I actually meant specifically in terms of using catering.

Reynette: No, I think go for it. I think food is really important. As a country, and for Cardiff, we’re quite a diverse city and I think we have a lot of traditions to lose with food and I think it’s really important that we have a lot of diversity and give people choice. I think good food is really important.

Josh: I’d definitely agree with that, and we’ve touched upon it a bit, and as I said at the beginning the episode is about project sustainability, and it’d be great if you could share some of your plans for keeping the plate project going in five years after our grant funding comes to an end.

Reynette: My dream would be to have a good quality restaurant that serves refugee food that people come and learn about where we can have clients serving, cooking and cleaning, and being part of the whole setup, and hopefully managed by them as well but it would also generate income for Oasis. I’m aware that you need a lot of income to run our organisation but every little helps; I sort of look at The Clink and think how that’s run, and it would be really nice to do that to feel like people are being trained because hospitality is very short of good quality staff – that’s what I’ve read in the papers, and I think it’s an opportunity that I don’t want to miss out on. I think there’s some amazing food, and people have brought their culture and heritage, and it’d be really nice to share that with the wider public.

Josh: That’s really exciting and ambitious. Do you mind quickly explaining what The Clink is to anyone that’s listening who doesn’t know?

Reynette: The Clink is a chain of restaurants that are run by prison inmates, and I think they’re often in open prisons but I think they have a very good reputation for high quality food, and that’s what I would like to aspire to be like.

Josh: Are there any elements of the existing Plate project that you think would be sustainable outside of the restaurant ambition?

Reynette: Yeah, the food trailer. I think the food trailer has been a really positive influence as part of The Plate project. It wasn’t what we originally thought of but it just goes to show that you get different ideas when you bounce ideas off each other so it’s definitely something that we would keep going, and I think catering for events, and people for events as well.

Josh: How did the idea for the food trailer come about then?

Reynette: \*Laughs\* We hadn’t ever been out for a staff Christmas meal before, and we went out to one and were given humus and it was awful, and we sat down and said that we could do better than that. And so we started sending eBay pictures of food trailers between two of us over Christmas, and we applied to get some money, and someone through Festive Voice told us about the food trailer that we have that was for sale and we bought it, and it’s amazing.

Josh: Sounds like an amazing find.

Reynette: It was an amazing find; it was in Brighton – I’m not able to say where we got it from but they gave us a very good price, it’s amazing.

Josh: Fab, so I think going beyond Oasis and thinking about project sustainability more broadly. What do you think are the main things organisations need to think about in their main plans for sustaining their project if they’ve got a funded project.

Reynette: I think you need to look at who your client group is, what skills they have, and whether it’s something that’s marketable that the general public will want to buy or utilise because you can have some great ideas but there may not be there desire to purchase anything. I think you need to be realistic, you have to provide a high-quality service or product – so I think start small and then grow bigger – take your time because it’s very easy to think, “oh, I have a factory so we’ll hand-make wooden items and I’ll upcycle.”, but you need to start with what you’ve got and build it up slowly so maybe if you’re applying for funding you develop it over the five years.

Josh: This is a similar question, what advice would you give another organisation that has funding from us about how they can keep their project going after our funding comes to and end?

Reynette: I would think if you are going for more funding from somewhere else I would start planning to apply for funding early because it takes time. I think as well, keep a record of what profit you’re making if you’re doing a sustainable project so you can see how you are balancing the books – but start planning it say, two years into the project if you’ve got a five-year project because you need to look at your cashflow projections. And also be realistic but also be optimistic.

Josh: I like that, and the rhyme there. Thank you very much for coming today to talk about The Plate project, and keep up the good work.

Reynette: Thank you, and you’re welcome.

Josh: Thank you you've been listening to Third Sector Insights, the knowledge and learning podcast from The National Lottery Community Fund. The projects you heard about in this episode is one of 11,000 funded every year across the UK with money raised by National Lottery players. To find out more about Oasis Cardiff you can visit their website at [www.oasiscardiff.org](http://www.oasiscardiff.org)

If you’re interested in learning more about financial sustainability in the third sector you’ll be pleased to know that we recently commissioned some research around third sector resilience. You can access the report, including the directory of services available to support third sector organisations in Wales via our blog [www.bigblogwales.org.uk](http://www.bigblogwales.org.uk). We’d love to know what you think of this podcast, please let us know by leaving a review or you can email me your thoughts directly at Joshua.coles-riley@tnlcommunityfund.org.uk. Thanks for listening to Third Sector Insights; keep a lookout for future episodes where we’ll continue to talk to third sector organisations and find out what knowledge, learning and insights they’re gaining through projects funded by The National Lottery.