



## ETNA Community Centre, Richmond Upon Thames



### Location

Richmond Upon Thames, London



### Founded

1985



### Legal structure

Registered charity (290922)



### Description of activity

A community centre that offers recreational and educational activities, and self-help groups, for people of all ages in the surrounding areas. The Centre provides facilities for small groups with rooms of varying sizes to rent out, and an administrative base for other local charities and organisations.



### Key assets

Large Victorian building consisting of seven offices, six meeting rooms, large hall, kitchen (and an upstairs kitchenette), an artificial turf garden, and a car park



### Staff and volunteers

ETNA Community Centre has four paid staff. There are eight people on the board of trustees. Occasionally volunteers are called on to help with events.

## Overview

ETNA Community Centre was established in 1984 and registered as a charity in 1985 by a group of local residents driven to set up a community centre in response to limited services and poor transport links in the surrounding area. The building is owned by the local authority and previously used by magistrates and then as council offices. When the building became unoccupied, local residents lobbied to access the building and were given a lease on a rolling annual contract, with a matched grant from the local authority to the equivalent of the rent. It was not until 2016, when the Centre was commissioned by the local authority, that it was given a 15-year lease.

Since the Centre was established, the building has been used for a mixture of activities including: hiring out rooms to local groups and individuals (such as a nursery), self-help groups, and ESOL classes; and renting out office spaces to small charitable groups. The initial purpose of the Centre has remained consistent over the years – to provide a space to run activities that support different needs and issues within the community. *“When we read the aims of what it was in 1985, we were shocked by how they haven’t really changed ... for the local people to have a place to meet, to run different activities ... with no bias, that’s one of the key things, with no religious bias, no political bias, no social or demographic bias.”*



Recently, renting out rooms to local groups and charities for affordable rent has increased in priority, so that they can use local connections and build a supportive network at ETNA. ETNA also offers additional support with administration, marketing and branding, which contributes to building the capacity of the voluntary sector by *“being an incubator to help support those organisations with low income to set up”*. In turn this has created jobs and volunteer opportunities, and brought income revenue into the local area.

Although the property is not owned by the community, there has been a long history of community involvement in shaping how the building has been used, by local residents sitting on the trustee board, activities run by local groups, and several examples of lobbying, campaigns and fundraising over the years. For example, over the organisation’s lifespan there have been two successful ‘Save ETNA’ campaigns when the Centre has faced financial uncertainty.

The involvement of the community has been crucial to the Centre’s survival by drawing on a range of skills, expertise, networks and resources, adding to the commitment to keep the Centre running.

Richmond Borough has limited spaces that are open, that deliver a range of activities to the whole community, and that provide a safe and welcoming environment at an affordable price. This space allows barriers to be broken down between groups by having a common purpose of working with, and for, their community and creating social cohesion. Additionally, the long history of community involvement has developed a sense of pride and ownership within the community which wants to use the space. *“When doing the fundraising we got them [local donors] to make pledges. Our strategy included ‘buy a brick’, so that the community could feel like they have a real say in their centre, and feel they have invested their bit into the project ... we got 300 pledge donations from the community.”*

## Financial health

The Centre’s financial health has fluctuated over the years. As a consequence of having a small staff team, the Centre has not dedicated time to writing funding applications but focused on utilising the space and generating earned income. In previous years, renting rooms on annual contracts was supplemented by income from hiring out rooms to groups to run activities. Recently, this has shifted to a balanced portfolio of renting and hiring out rooms with the implementation of a more sophisticated booking system, which allows greater flexibility and

control for those wanting to book for a specific event as well as on a regular basis. It has also freed up office time for other activities and initiatives, renovating the building, and restructuring the use of the space to maximise flexibility and income.

Although this new way of operating has given the organisation less financial security, with the hire of rooms having no fixed length, this has been balanced by a more responsive community-based strategy to ensure that a larger range of activities and users have access to facilities that reflect the needs of the community. This, in turn, increases the visibility and social impact of the Centre.

In 2016, when the lease changed from a rolling annual contract to one of 15 years, the terms also changed. In its first 31 years (1985–2016), the Centre had no responsibility for the maintenance of the building and the associated costs. However, the drawbacks of such a lease were: not being able to secure charitable trust grants to renovate or make amendments to the building, such as disabled toilets; an uncertainty as to the building’s future; and the need for the Centre to fund any initiatives directly from earned income. From 2016 the longer lease has opened up funding opportunities which have been embraced by the new management team and board of trustees, leading to increased confidence to think about and plan for the future.

## Three key factors that have affected its development and financial health:

### 1. Leadership

In 2014, there was a significant shift in leadership; a new centre manager was recruited after 20 years, plus several new trustees and a new chair. This gave the organisation an opportunity to reflect on how the building was being used, review any operational and financial aspects, and to go *“through everything with a fine-tooth comb.”* The Centre has increasingly provided a more supportive role to small charities, maximising the use of the space by individuals and groups, and diversifying the revenue from earned income. This shift required a different skill set, formalising the staff roles, and bringing in new systems and procedures, with the idea *“to always be fully informed about the asset’s financial situation.”*



It was viewed as important for the centre manager to have a good relationship with the board – particularly the chair – and to be supportive, have tenacity and to share a vision of future developments. *“The board needs to be able to deal with the challenges of what is going on today with people behind you who have your vision and have a strategy to move the organisation forward, because I think we were just plodding along and the place was getting run down.”*

## 2. Networks and building relationships

The Centre has been successful in tapping into networks and contacts within the local community and accessing relevant skills and expertise, while having the flexibility to *“use whoever will help us”* – staff and board members are local residents and operate within a tight-knit community. Chance meetings in informal social situations are a regular occurrence, and lead to building connections and developing initiatives. For example, the Centre heard about the Junk Food Project from one of the groups based there and contacted the project to offer a free space. This has led to a hugely popular weekly café, open to everyone and encouraging more people from diverse backgrounds to access the building.

Building relationships is undertaken formally as well as informally, a key example being the board of trustees undertaking strategic development. *“They [the trustees] have contacts, support within the community and listen to ideas within community. We have a local councillor and an ex councillor, with brilliant networking, intelligence, and knowledge [of] what’s needed locally.”* In particular, the involvement of a local councillor has been a significant development for the organisation, by breaking down barriers around knowledge (e.g. certain legalities), language used, and power dynamics.

## 3. Gaining control of the asset

While the Centre had a rolling annual lease for over 30 years, the relationship with the local authority was felt to be relatively hands off. This involved the local authority providing a grant for the equivalent of the rent, but also the council acting as a landlord and having prime responsibility for any repairs, such as heating, fire alarms, windows, leaks on the roof, and plumbing. Although the organisation was required to ask permission to alter the building, they felt they had autonomy over the use of the building.

The Centre’s leadership development brought expertise onto the board and a closer relationship with the local authority who commissioned ETNA to continue to provide its services linked to a 15-year lease. This has been hugely influential in developing the Centre’s vision and future strategy by: creating a sense of stability and ability to

access additional resources; gaining more control over the renovations of the building; and receiving increased investment in the future developments. For example, since obtaining the long-term lease ETNA has been able to crowdfund using the Mayor of London platform to build a new community kitchen. This has not only been important to raise over £100,000 for the kitchen but has also raised awareness and support for the Centre. *“We could never have envisaged four years ago that we would be in a position to crowdfund – it also gives a lot of publicity and has shown us how much we can achieve with a clear vision and significant buy-in from the community. It has opened a massive door and so many new and exciting opportunities.”*

## Future direction

The Centre foresees continuing to provide the services the way it always has, through renting rooms to small charities and hiring rooms to individuals and groups. While the Centre has always aimed to support the community, this has been fairly reactive, and it now seeks to have increased autonomy and direction with an improved service for the community and, in particular, the voluntary sector. For example, the Centre has selected tenants with a view to promoting a supportive network and environment for the organisation and a common focus on having a positive impact on the community.

The Centre realises that to achieve this goal it will need to be flexible and adaptable to changing social issues and the needs of the local residents by being fully rooted in the community, broadening its networks and developing positive relationships. This means the Centre can take on a more supportive role, building capacity for organisations, or subsidising others if they are struggling. For example, the Centre strives to tackle issues on social isolation in the area due to the aging population. A group of older men have played bridge at the Centre for over 20 years, which has prevented the group from becoming socially isolated. When asked about the importance of the group coming to the Centre, *“... if they don’t pay rent I don’t mind, it’s more important that six or eight people are coming to the Centre and it’s tackling social isolation ... They wouldn’t want change, they hate it when I change a cupboard.”*



## Financial information

The following table provides an overview of ETNA Community Centre income, expenditure and assets for the period 1st January 2017 to 31st December 2018.

<b>Income</b>	<b>£187,966</b>
<b>Expenditure</b>	<b>£193,484</b>
<b>Difference between income and expenditure</b>	<b>-£5,518</b>
<b>Surplus/deficit on ordinary activities before taxation</b>	<b>Not available</b>
<b>Annual income from grant or subsidy</b>	<b>£59,400</b>
<b>Fixed assets</b>	<b>Not available</b>
<b>Current assets (Debtors; cash at bank and in hand)</b>	<b>Debtors £3,287; Cash at bank and in hand £53,725</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>£57,012</b>
<b>Net assets</b>	<b>£50,333</b>

Source: ETNA Community Centre Financial Accounts 2018, Charity Commission