



Gatis Community Space, Wolverhampton



Location

Wolverhampton



Founded

2013



Legal structure

Community Interest Company



Description of activity

Community space: including a café, bookable hall, garden, playground, Real Junk Food Project



Key assets

Gatis Community Space



Staff and volunteers

Three staff and 100 volunteers

Overview

Gatis Community Space was established in 2013 by the local community who set up Acts of Random Caring CIC (ARCCIC) in 2015 to create a community hub on a previously council-run site. The Community Space provides a diverse range of facilities and activities, including a café, bookable hall, garden, playground and the Real Junk Food Project.

Before ARCCIC became involved the site was home to an outdoor adventure playground, one of several across the city. When this playground was faced with closure a group from the community proposed to take over the running from the council. The council agreed to a six-month license to occupy in order to allow the group to take the necessary steps to set themselves up as a Community Interest Company (CIC) and to develop a business case for the Gatis Community Space. The group initially consisted of five local individuals who each became the CIC's original set of directors. Each individual brought a set of complementary skills that allowed this group to successfully navigate the challenges of creating such an asset. As time has progressed, community involvement has grown. For example, the community users are asked to make suggestions for what types of activities they would like to see. The directors will work with them to apply for grant funding to support the proposed projects.

At present the Community Space is in the asset transfer process. Despite support from the City of Wolverhampton Council it has been a protracted process and is yet to be completed. The transfer has been approved but is yet to be legally formalised, although it will be a 35-year lease.

What difference community ownership makes

By taking the asset on, ARCCIC were able to prevent the site from falling into disrepair or being sold for an alternative use, such as housing. As the site was already a community space the group have been able to build from this to create a highly popular community hub that serves a variety of local people. The space attracts a range of groups who book the hall or outdoor space for different clubs and event. Gatis also provides a supportive environment in which individuals can volunteer, this includes more vulnerable members of the community. As the asset has sought to develop its business and develop a revenue stream, several jobs have been created, this includes the community cafe “Love n Peas”, which serves as the main community hub. It also runs a Real Junk Food Project (trjfp.com/about) from Gatis.

Financial health

The asset’s financial health is considered good. It has improved somewhat over the past three years and the management team anticipate it continuing to strengthen in the next few years. There are, however, regular expenses associated with the running of the assets which it is not always able to consistently cover. Where there have been more significant expenses, such as maintenance of the building, ARCCIC has typically been supported by Wolverhampton Council. This is because the asset has not fully transferred over to ARCCIC and therefore the council has an obligation to cover certain costs concerning the building.

The management team has been able to consistently secure grant funding to support the activities it undertakes as part of its business plan. As it has built a track record it has been able to secure increasingly larger amounts of grant funding. It has found itself to be slightly limited in the type or scale of grant funding it might apply for owing to its lack of leaseholder status. However, as the asset transfer process is well underway the management team does not see this being a significant challenge to its financial health moving forwards.

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

1. The skills and leadership of the management team

When the asset became available, it was a group of five directors who led the efforts to take it into community ownership and set up the various legal business and management arrangements. The leadership provided by this team, and the skills they were able to draw upon,

has been vital to the asset’s success. The directors and the management team are now ensuring the safety of the site, its continued development and the financial security of the company, with the directors taking more of a back seat on the day-to-day running of the centre.

The day-to-day running is now led by the management team but in consultation with volunteers and site users. The management team has also demonstrated its ability to adapt and learn, and to take a firm stance when needed. Since it began the process of managing the space and seeking the legal transfer of the asset, the team has come up against various barriers. The legal process, for instance, is acknowledged to often be difficult to navigate and can be prohibitive for community groups seeking to take on assets of community value. The team at Gatis has effectively drawn on legal advice to overcome such challenges but has also demonstrated an ability to query certain aspects. For example, it refused to accept the ‘Heads of Terms’ as they were, and has successfully negotiated more favourable terms with the council.

2. The increasing involvement of the community

Whilst the asset is grounded in the community through its management team who were the original driving force behind it, it has sought to increasingly involve more members of the community as it has evolved. This includes in the creation of both jobs and volunteer roles for members of the community, for example in the café, but also in developing a broader decision making process. As time has progressed, community involvement has grown, the community users are asked to make suggestions for what types of activities they would like to see in the community space. This generates diverse suggestions which usually draw upon the skills of those community members suggesting them (e.g. bee keeping). The directors will even work with them to apply for grant funding to support the proposed projects. The strength of such a community-led approach is that it helps to secure the asset’s future by providing the community with a greater stake in the management and direction of its asset. The directors have sought to further create an environment of greater equality by changing the management structure to reflect the increasing involvement of community members in the decision making of the asset. To enable this to happen there is a lot of work being done around changing the language used across the whole centre and all projects, making language less formal and easy to understand. This includes changing role titles for the management team, for example, Project Manager is now ‘Project Catalyst and Number Cruncher’.



3. The ability to consistently secure grant funding

ARCCIC have been highly successful at securing grant funding. This has allowed them to deliver a wide range of services to the community and to invest in building the business. Their successes include £45,000 (over two years) from Esmee Fairbairn to develop staff roles and cover overheads, this also includes an additional two years funding to support staff roles. In addition, ARCCIC secured £119,000 from Power to Change over two years to support staff, develop the business, and enable some refurbishment to the building.

They have also secured grants for specific projects, including £3,000 from Barrow Cadbury to support the development of the community café. A big feature of the Gatis Community Space is their outdoor area, which hosts a wide variety of outdoor activities. They have been awarded £2,000 from Grow Wild to support the creation of wild flower areas and a fire pit area, and £10,000 from Awards for All to develop a Wilderness Bushcraft area and provide workshops free to the local community.

Future direction

The primary objective for the asset in the short-term is to secure full asset transfer. To date the transfer process has been somewhat protracted. The transfer is agreed but yet to be legally formalised. Securing the asset for the long-term (likely to be a 35-year lease) would provide stability and enable longer-term planning to be undertaken. Ownership of the asset would increase the community's liabilities around the asset but also mean that it could secure larger, longer-term investments to help fund its activities.

The asset aims to continue to expand the activities it undertakes for the community benefit and is seeking greater community input in this process. They also are aiming to generate more sustainable revenues that would enable them to cover their expenses and to make improvements to the building and land where necessary.

Financial information

The following table provides an overview of Gatis Community Space's income, expenditure and assets for the year ending 31st October 2017.

Income	£66,265
Expenditure	£24,148
Difference between income and expenditure	£42,117
Surplus/deficit on ordinary activities before taxation	£20,177
Annual income from grant or subsidy	N/A
Fixed assets	£93
Current assets (Debtors; cash at bank and in hand)	£26,465
Creditors: amounts falling due within one year	-£17,221
Total	£26,558
Net assets	£26,558