

Key areas of learning

- Experienced professional input at the outset can really fast-track an initiative's evolution to result in a robust proposition and structure.
- The high quality promotional video had an immediate impact, helping to visualize and articulate the project goals, resulting in widespread local endorsement which would otherwise have taken much longer to secure
- The VSOS process enables other organisations to be brought in, besides the main delivery partner, helping to add further value and contacts to build capacity faster than would otherwise be the case
- With the right kind of advisory support communities can feel in full control and able to critically appraise commercial development propositions that may not completely meet their needs.
- There is often scope for examining potentials arising from the local planning process with the aim of maximising the beneficial use of "planning gain".

'Heart of the Village' Cradley Case Study



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Evaluation prepared for Big Lottery Fund by Catalys Ltd
Reporting on delivery of Village SOS (VSOS) Learning,
Outreach and Engagement Campaign

1st December 2014 to 1st September 2015

Campaign Lead partners: Action for Communities in Rural
England (ACRE), Rocket Science and Rose Regeneration

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Summary

The Challenge	Closure of the shop and Post Office serving the villages of Cradley, Mathon and StorrIDGE
The Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free promotional video via ACRE • Community event presenting video and inviting feedback • Professional loan share and Action Plan developed • Community needs survey aligned with the development of the Neighbourhood Plan • Identification of 'Heart' location and facilities
How Village SOS added value	<p>Professional action plan and priorities for securing investors put in place very rapidly</p> <p>Direct, invaluable support from Community First and others resulting in wider community support, capacity and confidence.</p> <p>Enabled immediate endorsement from the Parish Council which may otherwise have been slow to respond.</p>

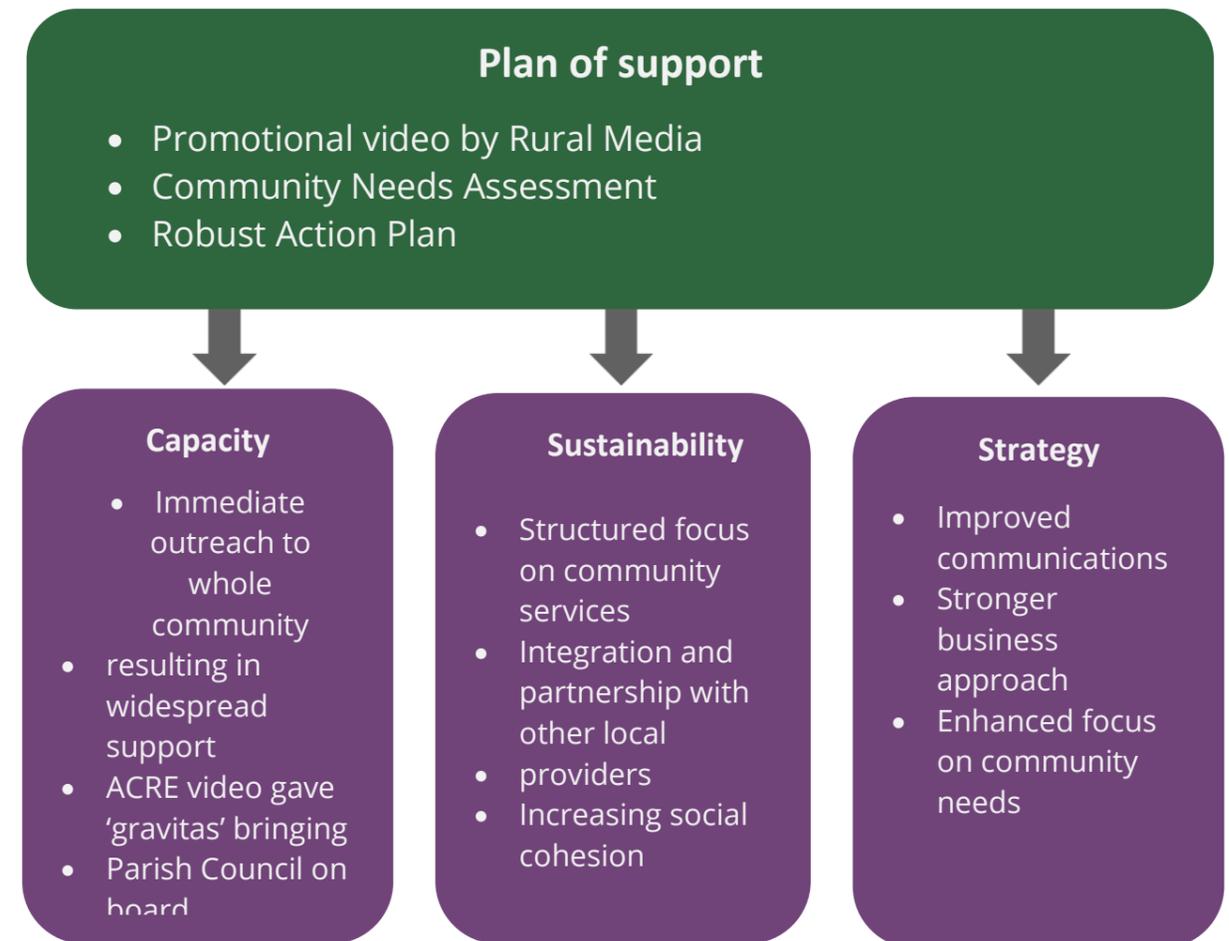
The challenge

For several decades the neighbouring communities of Cradley, Mathon and StorrIDGE shared Cradley's village shop and post office but this "social and business hub" closed down in mid-2013 as the owners felt unable to overcome economic difficulties. Within a matter of weeks a local business owner raised the idea of a new 'Heart' for the three villages, bringing together a small team to lead the project's development. The team's aim is to provide a central focal point that will enable people to regularly come together to meet, exercise, shop and eat in a stimulating and creative environment. The new focal point or 'Heart' will need to be located to work in conjunction with long-established community facilities including 3 churches, 3 village halls, a school, The British Legion, The Butchery, Blue Ginger Gallery and the Red Lion pub. There appears to be huge scope for an integrated partnership approach and the team are committed to this being focused on and driven by village needs so that the right mix of services are provided for those living and working within each village and local area.

Who's involved?

Being aware of Village SOS Phase 1, one of the Cradley 'Heart' team attended the Bristol VSOS Phase 2 launch event in April on the basis that the campaign offered a chance of support for Cradley. By approaching ACRE about VSOS support, the Cradley team was put in touch with Community First Malvern for direct, face-to-face professional support for creating a Community Benefit Society. The approach to ACRE was also very timely as the campaign needed 5 promotional videos and the Cradley 'Heart' project fitted the bill perfectly for one of these, filmed and produced by specialists Rural Media.

The project group is setting up a new Community Benefit Society to eventually run the new "Heart of the village" but first the funding for the proposed development needs to be secured.



Action and activities

Whilst the project would have developed without VSOS support, what has made a real difference is having a high quality, professionally filmed and produced promotional video to reach out to members of the whole local community for their engagement and active support. The video, with all costs covered by ACRE, was first endorsed by the Parish Council; having their full support has given the project real validity. Having gained Cradley Parish Council's blessing, the team organised a gathering of 200 villagers to show the video and discuss a proposal to create "a beautiful, modern Heart" and encourage community members to volunteer with practical and other skills as well as ideas for fund-raising. A potential location - a field on the immediate edge of Cradley - has been identified costing £12000 to pay-off the current tenant. A commercial developer has offered to provide a new shop as part of a planning condition agreement for new village housing but the community prefers a new facility they will have 100% control over in terms of design, size and functions; there may yet be some financial contribution from this developer. The initiative has also benefitted by being able to gain further insights on community needs as part of the Parish Council's Neighbourhood Development Plan needs assessment and local survey. In addition to Community First's invaluable advice in preparing loan share documentation, they were also able to put the group in touch with the Plunkett Foundation who provided 2 days of specialist advice, helping to develop the initiative's first Action Plan. Plunkett also put Cradley in touch with similar initiatives and contacts for further knowledge transfer, adding to Community First's strategy.