

In this instance, mentor support has been extremely valuable as the group has felt able to refer directly to the mentor on many aspects of running a social enterprise. However, as the mentor was already known to the group and has a remit to provide business support to social enterprises in the local area, it is likely that this input could have happened without intervention from VSOS. Where VSOS intervention has been valuable is in focusing and moving the project on through structured planning and a tangible output.

A key element of the project was to carry out some analysis of impact at a community level. The results of this are not yet available but the engagement process itself has been seen as valuable by the group in increasing their levels of understanding and increasing their confidence to extend their reach to more diverse groups and more communities. The group are particularly proud of work they have done to bring catholic and protestant members of the community together and are very keen to share their experience of this with other communities in Northern Ireland. A comment from the group was that, for them, it was crucial that 'the *social* remained at the heart of the social enterprise'.

The aim is for Variety Crafts to be financially self-sufficient and to generate revenue to support the Dromboughil Community Centre whilst offering the opportunity for local people to participate in craft workshops. They are not currently looking for additional grant support but it is likely that they will continue to access support from Workspace as the social enterprise develops.

Key areas of learning

- VSOS has been an effective way to build further capacity within a social enterprise that has received VSOS support in the past
- VSOS's flexibility allows it to complement the work of the RCN and other partners such as Workspace to develop social enterprise in Northern Ireland
- The process has given focus and direction to Variety Crafts to grow their business and expand into markets beyond Dromboughil
- The structured, tangible nature of the support offered has allowed the group to build skills, capacity and confidence with the support of the RCN, Workspace and mentor
- Both RCN and Workspace have offered their services in-kind as it complements the work they are doing with communities. The flexibility of the VSOS campaign allows for this it is an approach that relies on external sources of funding

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Variety Crafts Social Enterprise Dromboughil Case Study



Figure 1: Screen Grab of Variety Crafts website under construction

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



Summary

The Challenge	Increase the impact of the Variety Crafts social enterprise and expand the business by developing an on-line shop to complement the local craft and textiles outlet established with VSOS support in 2012.
The Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • E-commerce enabled website • 3 year business plan and cash flow forecast • Measuring impact of textile business on participants and volunteers
How Village SOS added value	As a result of VSOS support the group have improved their knowledge of business planning and understanding of business finance. They have also developed skills in buying stock, stock control, publicity and postage & packing. The e-commerce website is still under construction but the indications are that the business will have the potential to generate more income and contribute to the running costs of the community centre. The group have developed skills in community consultation and in assessing the impact of the project on community members.

The challenge

The Variety Crafts @ Dromboughil shop and teaching facilities were set up with VSOS grant support of £49,999 in 2012. The craft supplies outlet and community textile workshops are based in the Dromboughil Community Centre and are managed and run by volunteers. The revenue generated by the shop contributes to the running costs of the community centre thus enabling it to become more financially sustainable in the longer term.

The social enterprise has been successful in its first year of trading - both in sales and in engaging local people in workshops - and wanted to further expand the business and increase revenue generation through online sales. Support was sought from Village SOS to provide expertise in business planning and financial forecasting, creating an e-commerce enabled website, and carrying out a consultation exercise to assess the impact that the existing business has had on the volunteers and community members who have been engaged in the enterprise.

Who's involved?

The Dromboughil Community Association were directed towards VSOS support by Rural Community Network. *Michelle Clarke*, Workspace Social Enterprise Advisor acted as mentor for the project and received an additional fee of £215 from VSOS to develop an initial needs assessment for the group. Workspace also provided in-kind support to assist the group with producing a business plan, 3 year financial forecasting, marketing plan and framework to monitor the impact of the social enterprise on participants. £1000 was paid to a local web design company to develop an e-commerce enabled website that would showcase products and workshops to a professional standard. In this instance, none of the VSOS budget was used to cover the cost of the delivery partner RCN.

Plan of support

- E-commerce enabled website
- Initial Needs Assessment
- 3 year business plan and cash flow forecast
- Measuring impact of textile business on participants and volunteers

Capacity

- Better knowledge of business planning and understanding of business finance
- Improved skills in buying stock, stock control, publicity, postage and packing
- Improved skills in stakeholder consultation
- Improved understanding of the impact of the project on participants

Sustainability

- Potential to increase income and contribute to the running costs of the community centre.
- Increased capacity of managers and volunteers to run a profit making social enterprise

Resources

- E-commerce enabled website
- Framework for monitoring the impact of project on participants
- Financial forecast and business plan

Action and activities

With the structure and direction that the VSOS process offered the group have been active in developing the online sales aspect of the Variety Craft business. The website is nearing completion and provides a professional online presence for the social enterprise that will extend its reach into markets beyond Dromboughil.

The process of developing the project plan and carrying out the project has been valuable in developing the skills and expertise of key volunteers managing the social enterprise. Comments from the group are that they feel more confident, have an improved knowledge of how to manage the financial aspects of the business and understand a lot more of the 'nitty gritty' of running a shop and online sales including buying stock, stock control, publicity and postage & packing. The capacity of the Variety Crafts managers has increased and there is an increased potential for the social enterprise to be profit making and financially sustainable into the future.