

The Design Process

SURVEY

Before the initial founding meeting, I did lots of research to establish whether a tree nursery was viable, and who the competitors would be (there is a local Gower Tree and Shrub Centre, but they are not actually a nursery – they buy in all their trees, sometimes from unknown sources). Some of the research had previously been done for my own business plan.

I spoke to various professionals, including an advisor from Environment Wales who gave me very helpful initial suggestions and sent photos and information about a tree nursery she had visited on the Llyn Peninsula in North Wales. She sent me a fantastic document – the Glasu Study for small tree nurseries in Powys. This document details everything you need to know to set up a tree nursery! Other advisors included the local National Trust warden, the Forestry Commission, Coed Cymru, the local Biodiversity Officer and a tree nursery owner from mid Wales. I was already working for a local voluntary organisation so I had a good idea of the local networks of support and the local and national grant providers. Early on I had approached another local organisation to see if there was a chance to work in partnership with them, without success. I had also previously had talks with another local organisation who wanted to set up a small nursery to grow trees to supply their own woodlands, but this never happened.

ANALYSIS

The market research analysis I had previously done for my own business plan was helpful here. Although relating to an arboricultural business, it does give some idea of what kind of personal customers we might expect. Having done my initial research I was able to conclude that there was a need for a local tree nursery and that running this as a community venture would make this a unique project in South Wales. I thought about what skills and expertise might be needed and invited a few key people to the initial meeting. I looked into possible legal structures for the organisation and the initial meeting enabled me to research who else would like to work on such a project. Gower has a diversity of woodland habitats and there would be no shortage of places to gather tree seed.

DESIGN

In our first few meetings we created a design for our organisation with a vision, aims, name and constitution. Our start-up grant became the design for our organisation. We kept our aims as broad as possible, as it felt important to allow the project to grow and develop organically.

IMPLEMENTATION

I was passionate about the vision of the community tree nursery and I led this design process with enthusiasm. A major initial challenge was that people in the group had some different ideas of what they wanted from the organisation. My initial publicity was very clear – that this was about setting up a tree nursery, but it quickly became clear that some members had come with their own agendas of more general woodland projects. I was in a quandary about what to do about that, as I hoped this would be a true community organisation, with shared ideas, but I also felt strongly that we could end up taking on too many different projects and moving away from our initial aims. I therefore decided to clarify the situation with the group. I sent an email telling the group that I thought there were some great ideas coming out of the discussions, but that personally I wanted to give my time to the initial aim of the tree nursery. Other people were welcome to work on different projects if they wanted to. Nobody challenged my comments, and everybody focused their energy on trying to make the tree nursery happen.

We knew it would take time to find a site, so in the meantime I put in a grant for a Peat-Free Project. This served the purpose of getting us known locally, as we ran some workshops and attended stalls and events. It also brought in lots of tools and equipment that would be useful once we found our site and enabled us to work in partnership with the More Green Project – another local community project that had an allotment site. Applying for grants helped progress our implementation as each grant provider required different policies and organisation documents, which led to the creation of all the documents we needed.

People in the group found it frustrating waiting for a site and I think some wondered if we would ever really make the project happen. My role seemed to be to continue to hold the potential vision and keep people inspired and motivated while we moved through the process. I used my organisational skills to lead the creation of the organisational systems and used the time while we researched sites to work with the group to set up all the infrastructure we would need. This included getting tools, creating policies, getting everyone police checked so we could work with children, and getting people trained in first aid. We also created a membership form and invited people to become members and receive regular emails from us.

Looking for a site was a long-winded process. People kept suggesting different woodland sites and we went to look at a few. The council really wanted us to take over the old tree nursery but this was outside Swansea requiring all of us to travel up to 10 miles to get there. It did not feel suitable as the ground was poor (waterlogged in places) and it was in an isolated spot with lots of vandalism. We also considered a local Forestry Commission woodland site. This had been previously used by a local charcoal producer. It was really near me, and was in a lovely established woodland with a very supportive Ranger. However the area had the potential to flood which felt like a huge risk to take.

Lots of the places that were possibilities had really poor access – on foot only - as they were in woodlands. A breakthrough came when we were offered an opportunity to look at a field site at an animal rescue centre. It was to the North of Swansea which was only near to one member. However the centre owned acres of beautiful farmland with a nature reserve and plans to build an educational centre. We were uncomfortable with the organisation structure, which meant that our decisions would have to go through a process of being agreed by the local committee plus the national RSPCA body. We quickly realised that their vision for us was of a few rows of trees growing alongside the existing woodland, whereas we were hoping for a bigger and more complex project with a demonstration forest garden etc. We drew up a suggested site plan to give them a feel of what we were hoping for. Disappointingly they did not give us the opportunity to come and present the design, or even discuss it with them but said they did not feel it was suitable. We felt it was better to be clear about our plans early on, than get involved in a long winded negotiation process that was unlikely to be successful. However this process did help everyone become clearer that what we needed was a field site, not a woodland!

Shortly after this we began negotiations with the Noel family who owned a field on South Gower, near to many of our members. I regularly walked past this field on the way to another job, and had noticed that it was a beautiful south facing field, but seemed unused. Fortunately one of our members knew the family, and we approached them. Negotiating with the family has proved challenging at times, but they did generously agree to us using the field and we began to manifest our vision, just a year and a half after our initial meeting.

MAINTAIN

Maintaining our financial stability is crucial. Continued funding is needed to keep the organisation developing as we are not able to be financially independent at this point. Grants are given to us in the form of restricted funding – money for particular projects. Growing trees takes time and it will be another year before we have a good variety of marketable trees for sale. We create unrestricted funding by buying in trees to sell, selling related products and through training.

We need to maintain our people – we keep the membership updated and informed. We look after our volunteers and workers by giving them tea and refreshments, listening to their needs, offering free training and giving support where needed. We have monthly committee meetings to oversee the work and the finances of the organisation. We have regular site team meetings to plan and review the work at the nursery. We also have sub-group meetings where appropriate eg planning, design, personnel, policies etc. Each year in the winter we hold a planning meeting to review and update our business plan. Every summer we invite the local community to our Annual General Meeting and create an Annual Report to publicise our work.

EVALUATION AND TWEAKING

Now that the organisation has existed for 3 years, we are aware that our simple 2 page constitution is not enough to legally protect us as we develop. We are therefore moving towards becoming a Social Enterprise with a stronger constitution. This will enable us to continue to receive grants (as a charity would) but also trade (which a charity can't do).