

Style with a social heart

Background

Steve Mollison, a graphic designer and print technician and his partner Lillian Mollison, a former senior social worker, gained an interest in social enterprise during previous careers in the Highlands and Islands of Western Scotland. Working through a local charity, Steve had become involved in delivering graphic design and print training to learning disabled people in the local community. On moving to Norfolk several years ago, the couple knew they wanted a more structured and formal approach which would have a bigger social impact. Already familiar with the trading potential of becoming a CIC, they were convinced that this was legal structure they should adopt. "We believe firmly that this route is the best way to affect social change," states Steve. However, they were unsure of their next steps.

Finding a way forward

"When we were first approached for help, it was difficult to see a way forward. Social enterprise locally was still seen as a very novel and untested concept," says Sally Kelly, Principal Consultant at The Guild. "However, in July 2007, we registered Graphic Print and Design as a CIC and we were able to help Steve and Lillian prepare a bid for both capital and revenue monies from the Investing in Communities Fund, subject to a State Aid minimus."

"It was a very stressful time and the moral support we received from The Guild was invaluable," says Steve. "Sally was of great help getting the IIC bid into a credible format and structure, drawing heavily on research into deprivation in Norfolk that she was already familiar with. The Guild were also key to getting the underpinning financial forecasting right as we had to make several major adjustments to our projections."

"Negotiations with Norfolk County Council were tortuous at times, but we were absolutely delighted when a grant of £130,000 was awarded, even though it then had to be matched," continues Sally. "The challenge then was to identify and approach other potential funding agencies. However, CIC was still a very new form of trading entity and although the limited by guarantee status meant that the directors could derive no personal gain from the assets, a lot of suspicion remained because Steve and Lillian, as a husband and wife team, were the sole driving force."

Expanding the Board membership to include two former colleagues, who were very highly regarded for their work with the target group eased the path, but it was a high street bank, in this case Nat West in partnership with Lombard Finance, who transformed the outlook of the embryonic CIC.

"We worked with Nat West to negotiate a brokered arrangement of an unsecured overdraft and a wide-ranging package of other support. With full banking services and working capital in place, the business could finally move forward," she adds.

Graphic Print and Design CIC today

A year after registering as a CIC, the company has a state-of-the-art digital print facility. The centre-piece is a Konica Minolta Bizhub Pro 6500 printing press - purchased with the capital funding awarded via IIC. This gives the company a leading edge in a highly competitive industry by enabling it to call off short runs as required on a just-in-time basis. A comprehensive project management service is available for longer print runs.

Then there is a concept to completion website design service. "We have just completed websites for a cosmetic dentist, an electrical contractor and a hotel which shows the range of our capabilities," says Steve.

"However, our reason for existence and our passion for this work stems from the 2001 White Paper, 'Valuing People'. In that Paper, learning disabled people were identified as the most socially isolated and vulnerable in our society," he continues.

The company has a bank of training computers offering customised taster courses in graphic design and print to learning disabled school leavers and other young people with a learning disability. With the backing of the British Printing Industries Federation Graphic Design and Print CIC is geared to deliver three modern apprenticeships to young people successfully graduating from the initial training. Managing this period of transition is seen as key to a successful outcome and Steve laments the inadequacy of much of the current existing provision for learning disabled school leavers.

"Our main focus is to feed the print industry with highly skilled people with a nationally recognised qualification, people who can compete in the open employment market," says Steve. "Unlike other providers, we have no volunteers and our first full-time employee is already in place and another will shortly be recruited. Eventually we will have up to eight employees, including some who have graduated from our own apprenticeship, although ideally they will find mainstream employment so their place can be freed up and we can benefit as many people as possible."

Setting up the business was, at times, a long, arduous and disheartening struggle. The company is still held back by its repayments to Nat West and Lombard Finance, but is now in negotiation with an agency that will hopefully meet that obligation. "Our objective is to be totally self-supporting within three years of launch and I feel certain we will achieve that goal," he adds.

Social Impact

The Government has repeatedly stressed its determination to create opportunities that will enable children and adults with learning disabilities and their families to live full and independent lives as part of their local communities. Yet in 2005 a subsequent Green Paper highlighted the failure of statutory authorities to affect that change. Steve Mollison believes that enterprises such as the one he has helped create can transform individual lives and the perceptions that society has of people with a learning disability. "We believe that we are living proof of the potential inherent within the CIC model to enable people with a learning disability to lead viable, productive and integrated role in employment and in society. We hope our success will inspire others to follow."