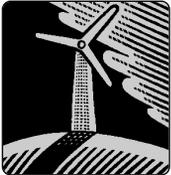


re-use shops – a model ‘big society’ approach?



In July, my colleagues at Warwickshire County Council and I had some cause for celebration. Over the last few years several of the County Council’s household waste recycling centres have hosted re-use shops as part of the service offered to users. The shops take and re-sell goods that householders don’t want any more, but which are nevertheless perfectly re-useable – everything from prams to karaoke machines, DVDs to teapots. It’s a great way to reduce the cost of landfill (and landfill tax!); it saves resources as everything is re-used; it encourages people to think about things that others might not want and donate them (when undertaking a house clearance, for example); and it provides quality goods cheaply for bargain-hunters and those who might not be able to afford to buy new.

So far, so straightforward. The unique selling point (literally) is that the sites are run by local charities, and the first one to take up a shop at a recycling centre – the Shakespeare Hospice at Stratford, which offers specialist palliative care for adults in the area diagnosed with life-limiting illnesses, and support for their families – has, after seven years of operation, announced that it has turned an operating profit of £1 million over that period. This is a huge amount for an independent local charity. The project has been a success from the start, and people like to think that what they are donating is making a difference to a local charity – and, of course, because it is run by volunteers the shop’s overheads are low.

The model has been replicated in Rugby with Age Concern Warwickshire, which provides information and support for older people, their families and carers in the Rugby area; and in Leamington Spa with Action 21 – a local social enterprise working with organic growers, including Canalside Community Food (a community-supported agriculture project at Leasowe Farm near Leamington), an allotment project in Leamington, and a cycle repair business which refurbishes

donated bicycles (along with others acquired from other sources) and in so doing develops skills among local young people and provides a supply of good-quality, inexpensive bikes. Again, the profits from the re-use shops support all local voluntary initiatives.

All over the country, charities and social enterprises are bracing themselves for the impact of public spending cuts on the support given by local authorities. Grants will be withdrawn, contracts cancelled or revoked half-way through, services to the most vulnerable in society put at risk. While on its own hardly a complete solution, the re-use shops model helps in side-stepping these issues by enabling charities to access a secure, long-term source of income through the local authorities’ activities. The result in Warwickshire: local people give support and receive benefits, Council grant expenditure is reduced, the security of the charity or voluntary body is enhanced while grant dependency is reduced, and the Council saves about £25,000 a year in waste disposal costs and landfill tax.

You might ask, if it is that great, why doesn’t the Council do this all itself and keep the profit? There are two reasons why not. First, the initiative is labour intensive: a lot of items coming in need sorting and pricing, and there is a rapid turnover in a seven-days-a-week operation. This is all done by volunteers. Such activity is highly unlikely to be economic for a local authority who would have to pay staff. Second, the public’s incentive to give would be greatly reduced. The idea that their donations would be used to pay council staff wages isn’t quite as attractive as providing palliative care for terminally-ill people and support for their families.

Is this the ‘Big Society’ that politicians are grasping for made flesh? Probably, but it is worth bearing in mind that success has required strong and confident local government, as well as a robust charitable and social enterprise sector. If, as part of the 30% cuts being dished out across the public sector, household waste recycling centres were to be shut – a serious option for many local authorities – none of this could happen.

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