



The Sweet Project



Location

Birmingham

Founded

2009

Legal structure

Company Limited by Guarantee

Description of activity

A not-for-profit organisation established by social workers to provide support to vulnerable children, families and adults and to offer placements for social work students. The business operates in deprived areas of South Birmingham and provides social work placements for numerous Universities nationwide.

Key assets

Staff skills, knowledge and partnerships.

Employees

Seven full-time equivalent staff

Volunteers

Six

Biggest obstacle to success

Lack of access to key qualified staff and limited resources to develop partnerships.

Overview of The Sweet Project

The Sweet Project emerged in 2009 as the brainchild of two experienced workers after they were made redundant by a national charity. After redundancy, the Project's founders embarked to re-establish services to residents in the areas of Sandwell, Dudley, and Worcester. To create a viable business, the founders developed an innovative model of support based on their strong knowledge of student placements, the pressing social needs of the local community and an emerging relationship with the University of Birmingham. From this combination of skills and local need, the SWEET (Social work, education, experience and training) model of support for families was established. The business aims to provide social services to the local community, and meaningful placements and learning opportunities for social work students.

At present, the Sweet Project provides support to children, families and adults facing challenges with mental health, poverty, poor housing, domestic abuse, sexual abuse, child protection, adult safe guarding, benefits dependency and lack of education provision. The business has an average caseload of one hundred cases per week and works closely with the local authority, the local Member of Parliament, food banks, schools, dementia units, and local organisations, e.g. mental health organisations and employment and refugee agencies.

Simultaneously, the business works with 43 universities nationwide providing placements for social work students. The business has developed a strong expertise in encouraging and supporting social work students to work proactively with clients and organisations, whilst being closely supervised by key staff members.

Although not a registered charity, the business delivers charitable work in the communities in which it operates. One of the main drivers of the business is to provide much needed services to different members of the community, and as such the business has broad community impact. For instance, the Sweet Project works closely with a wide range of agencies and organisations to provide holistic advice and signposting such as West Midlands police, fire services, schools, children, adults and judicial services. In this way, the Sweet Project is providing services that directly benefit local communities.

The Sweet Project's journey to success

The Sweet Project considers that an important factor of their success is being able to achieve their goals of ensuring efficient signposting for the users of their service, and providing excellent work placements for social work students. Specifically, the Sweet Project believes that inter-related factors that have contributed to the success of the business include measuring their impact, having access to qualified staff, recruiting committed volunteers and forming strong partnerships.

Achieving the business goals

The Sweet Project has two interdependent priorities. The first is to ensure that local families and adults in the greatest need receive support to help them overcome their difficulties. In doing that, the Project is addressing the second priority of providing meaningful placements for social work students. The business evidences these goals by measuring the number of successful service referrals it generates and collecting student and university feedback.

The Project believes that factors contributing to the successful delivery of their services include the high quality of advice and supervision it gives to both users in the community and students. In order to achieve these high standards, the business has a cross-section of expert staff to ensure the services that the business provides are person-centred at all times. As a result, the Project has identified additional services that are needed in the community and is considering developing new provisions to fill these gaps. One of the avenues the business is presently exploring is the possibility to expand their academic offering to local residents by developing and delivering specific training courses, e.g. parenting, early years care, debt management, and relevant NVQs. By responding to this local demand, the business will also benefit as it will support the diversification of its income streams.

However, providing additional services will demand higher staffing capacity, which the business has reported as a major challenge. Because of the nature of their business, it is paramount for the Project to ensure consistency and high standards of service. In order to address staffing challenges, the business aims to increase their income streams by seeking commissioned work from the local authority and reaching out to universities across the nation to develop new partnerships.

Impact

As the top priority of the business is to support vulnerable people in difficult situations, measuring impact has been a fundamental aspect of the business. Specifically, the Sweet Project's impact is evidenced on two levels. First, the Project measures the impact it has on students, as they need to perform well and demonstrate satisfactory progress in order to pass their university courses, and ultimately secure a good degree level and post degree employment. In addition, based

on student and university feedback, the business is able to track student growth and inform new approaches to providing students with suitable placement opportunities.

Second, evidence is collected on the tangible benefits the business' work is having on the local community. An example of this impact is the work the Project conducts with domestic violence perpetrators. In this case, the business was able to collect data and build a case to the local authority that highlighted this group's lack of support, and the need for investment in their rehabilitation and integration. This example highlights how the business has identified a local need and used the data it has collected to secure commissioned work to address a gap in local services.

The Sweet Project has built a strong reputation for delivering an impactful service with key partners, i.e. universities and the local authority. The business is confident that the project's ethos of promoting independence amongst both service users and students resonates with the community, funders and other key partners.

However, the business has still found disseminating its impact to a wider audience complex, especially through social media. Although the Sweet Project is aware of the importance of making the business more visible through using social media, clients' privacy is also fundamental to the reputation of the business. Therefore, the business needs to find a secure way to use social media to advertise more widely and encourage future students to get involved, without exposing clients' affiliation to the project. To that end, the business is considering the development of a marketing strategy that will focus specifically on facilitating student recruitment.

Qualified key employees and committed volunteers

Because of the sensitive nature of their business, the Sweet Project finds that having well qualified staff and motivated and knowledgeable volunteers are key enablers to success. Since the project has two types of service users, (community residents and social work placement students), the business needs capable staff who can deliver services to both groups whilst ensuring the financial stability of the business. For example, from a business management point of view, it is vital for the business to have expert staff in financial management, whilst from a service delivery point of view it is essential to have staff with knowledge of debt management as this is an area that seems to be an area where support is regularly required amongst clients.

In addition, staff are also responsible for recruiting and training volunteers to work alongside social work students, and as core staff also supervise student work to ensure high standards of service delivery it is essential for the business to have a core supervisory team overseeing all services. The business has also seen success stories where users of their service have become avid supporters of the organisation by

becoming committed volunteers. For the business, having former users of their service becoming volunteers represents success in two ways. First, the business has been successful in providing support that was effective in assisting their clients, and second, volunteers' knowledge and experiences represent a valuable asset in informing the business' approach to service delivery. Despite the business' efforts to retain key staff, the Project has experienced particular challenges in finding people with the relevant business and/or funding expertise. This was particularly the case in 2016/17, when the number of suitable skilled staff decreased due to retirement and a lack of grant funding to cover certain posts. Conversely, and more positively, the number of volunteers bringing a diverse range of needed skills increased in same year.

Due to these changes, the business has now focused its efforts on developing partnerships with a greater number of universities to increase trading income and decrease grant income. And as the business is confident that demand for its services will remain high, as there are always vulnerable people who will need their support, the business is also considering crowdfunding as a future funding stream to alleviate staffing issues as they see this as a viable option based on the positive rapport they have built within the local community.

Strong partnerships

The Sweet Project finds that a vital factor of its success is the time and effort spent in identifying and developing beneficial partnerships, both inside and outside the community they work in. The project has developed excellent working relationships with universities across the UK, with students, the local authority, local schools, churches and diverse local social groups. To illustrate this point, the Sweet Project has developed an innovative initiative to place social work students at the local Member of Parliament's office to screen phone calls addressing social care issues, allowing them to signpost callers appropriately and efficiently. Having access to a wide and strong network enables the business to expand on the services they provide both to users of its service and placement students. For this very reason however, the project finds that limited resources to develop partnerships is a main barrier to the success of the business.

Future direction

The Sweet Project is very confident that their business will be sustainable for the long term future. This assertion is based on tangible results with the community and with the students with whom they work. However, considering their future plans, the business finds it helpful to be aware of its current strengths and weaknesses. The business' strengths include; its reputation with users of its services and partner organisations, its strong monitoring and evaluation processes, and good quality assurance procedures, which in turn, allows them to continually improve and keep up to date with relevant information. An identified weakness is the lack of visibility on social media sites, and therefore this is a priority area for

development in the future. The business is also hopeful it can develop a marketing campaign which highlights the business services without compromising user confidentiality.

In terms of future income streams, the Sweet Project is confident their business can diversify its services to offer other training opportunities based on their expertise. Initially, the project generated most of its income from students' placement fees (90%). However, a dip in student placements represents a risk to their sources of income and subsequently, the Sweet project is considering crowdfunding as a potential new source of income. In addition, the business is also looking into developing NVQ qualifications in social and health training to fill an identified gap in local social skills training.

The business is also clear about the need to focus on generating income from trading that can support key staff members and can keep the business afloat in challenging times. This strategy is in tune with the business' culture of being proactive rather than reactive, an approach that has supported them through the years.

Financial information

The following table provides an overview of The Sweet Project income, expenditure and assets for the period 01/09/2014 to 31/08/2015*.

Income	£382,430
Expenditure	£380,689
Difference between income and expenditure	£1,741
Surplus/deficit on ordinary activities before taxation	£1,741
Annual income from grant or subsidy	£31,755
Fixed assets	£38,675
Current assets	Stocks: £0 Debtors: £27,924 Cash at bank and in hand: £89,906
Total	£117,830
Net assets	£89,021

Source: The Sweet Project Accounts 2014/15, Companies House.

*Despite an abbreviated set of annual accounts for 2015/16 being available, the 2014/15 annual accounts represent the only full set available from which the relevant information could be sourced.