



Case Study: Age Concern Montgomeryshire

“Sustainability is not just about financial sustainability – it is sustaining the community and volunteers as well, and helping everyone to feel like they are contributing.”

(Pam Honeyman, Chief Officer, Age Concern Montgomeryshire)

About Age Concern Montgomeryshire

AGE Concern Montgomeryshire Age Concern Montgomeryshire is an independent charity serving the north of Powys in Mid Wales. Established in 1995, Age Concern Cymru’s mission is to improve life for older people.

Age Concern Montgomeryshire is one of two Age Concern offices providing services to older people in the Powys region, which has over 30,000 people, aged 60 and older (based on the 2001 Census). The organisation operates five Healthy Living Centres in different parts of the rural county (serving about 100 people each week). They offer three walking groups (the Severn Valley Strollers) and plan to have two new groups added in 2008. In the 2006-2007 year, the organisation had 1796 enquiries through their Information and Advice Service; a 266% increase from the year before.

In 2006-2007, the organisation raised 43% of its own funds. They have no service level agreements with the local authority, so their fundraising activities are a critical part of ensuring that they can continue to provide services. Their large group of volunteers is a crucial part of the organisation’s success. They pay volunteers for out of pocket expenses, and seven volunteers assist in the office with finance, marketing, and general enquiries. Another 28 volunteers are qualified walk leaders, 60 volunteers assist in the Healthy Living Centres, 12 visit individuals and residential/care homes as befrienders, and 200 volunteers in the county are knitters. There is only one full-time, paid staff member.

The Big Knit

Knitting is a big activity for Age Concern, not only in Montgomeryshire but also across the UK. Four years ago, Age Concern Montgomeryshire created a partnership with [Innocent Drinks](#) (a healthy drinks manufacturer) to provide tiny bobble hats for drinks sold in the UK. Montgomeryshire was the first to start this process, but it is now part of a project called ‘The Big Knit’. In 2006, volunteers in Montgomeryshire knitted 28,535 tiny bobble hats to place on the drinks containers: in 2007, they knitted 48,666. For each drink sold with a bobble hat, 50p goes to Age Concern, allowing Age Concern Montgomeryshire to raise over £24,000 in 2007 (of £200,000 raised across the UK).





The Big Knit (continued...)



The best part of the project is the way that it involves the volunteers. Many of the volunteers are themselves Age Concern clients, and the project involves 200 volunteers from the local community. The supermarket Sainsbury's has the exclusive rights to sell the bobble-hat drinks bottles, and in November 2007, opened its first store in the local area. When Chief Officer, Pam Honeyman, went into Sainsbury's to check on the bobble hats, she remarked to the cashier that it was Age Concern's volunteers that had knitted them. Suddenly, a

woman behind her in the queue said that she had contributed 2,000 hats to the effort, and a woman in another checkout line said she had also knitted for the project. The impact on the small community is enormous.

In another case, a woman dropped off her knitted hats each week to the local office and had occasion to talk to the staff there. As time went on, the staff were able to help the woman with services she had not known she could access. In many of its projects, Age Concern volunteers are also its clients.

What started out as a small initiative is now a winter institution. Innocent asks people to post pictures of the hats they knitted on their website, and site visitors vote on the best and most inventive. Celebrities design hats, which are then knitted by volunteers, and it is hard to keep the bobble-topped drinks in the store. More information on the Big Knit initiative can be found on the [Innocent Drinks website](http://www.innocentdrinks.co.uk) (www.innocentdrinks.co.uk).

And there's more...

In the beginning, volunteers provided their own wool, but this year, Age Concern Montgomeryshire applied for a small Keep Well This Winter grant (£500) from Age Concern Cymru, which helped to pay for the wool and the volunteers who were already giving their time. The organisation is able to continue knitting, but now they are making hat, gloves and scarf sets to distribute with an information pack, room thermometer and energy efficient light bulbs to anyone over the age of 60 who needs them during the winter months as part of their Keep Well This Winter campaign.

In the past, Age Concern Montgomeryshire has received grants from the Big Lottery Fund but now must find other means of funding the services they provide, so they have had to become more creative in their approach. In addition to their work with Innocent Drinks, the organisation has participated in a sponsored a zip slide and abseil off the Newport Transporter Bridge. One woman raised nearly £1,000 and another celebrated her 70th birthday by jumping off the bridge with the organisation's staff. They have also held a sponsored walk (£3,000), open gardens (£3,000), a prize raffle, a fashion show (modelled by service users and volunteers), and many other smaller initiatives. They aim to have one big fundraising project per quarter.



Top tips

- It is always good to keep a positive relationship with your volunteers and supporting organisations. Keep them informed of the good stories and about the volunteers who are helping themselves.
- It is important to keep volunteers engaged in a project, including letting them know how it is progressing. Ask volunteers for feedback, and most importantly, thank them. This year, Innocent Drinks made thank you cards for all of the bobble hat volunteers, and Age Concern Montgomery added their own personal thank you to each card.
- Volunteers and the local community can benefit greatly from fundraising projects – Age Concern clients are often its most dedicated volunteers.
- Set realistic goals. When Age Concern Montgomeryshire first started the Bobble Hat project, they thought they would try to start with a few hundred hats. When they met that goal, they were asked to do more. Setting realistic goals means that you do not let your funders, or your own organisation down.
- Recognise that funding partnerships can be mutually beneficial. Although there are financial and community benefits to the knitting campaign for Age Concern (including raising the profile of the organisation), Innocent Drinks also benefits. Their sales increase, and it helps to support their image of a caring company.
- Keep funders well informed about how they are helping your clients. Case studies are a great tool to develop and sustain emotional attachments to a project.
- Be creative in your thinking and maximise potential public relations opportunities.

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Photos provided by Age Concern Montgomeryshire.