

Over the years Action with Communities in Cumbria (formerly VAC) has explored the challenges faced by rural service providers and their customers in rural communities.

In 2007 ACT led the way in forming the Rural Retail Advisory Partnership from which the Revitalising Retail Programme grew.

Background

The Revitalising Retail Programme was run in partnership with Eden District Council (EDC) and South Lakes Development Trust (SLDT).

It was based on the activities and good practice of the Rural Retail Advisory Partnership and the Community Solutions Project, a support programme for rural business and social enterprise.

The aim of the programme was to support retailers in rural Eden facing the challenge of; reduced customer numbers, supermarket competition and rising operating expenses, to improve their viability and long term sustainability.

The need for support was evidenced through:

- EDC's priority of supporting economic vitality.
- The commitment of Eden Local Strategic Partnership to enable the exploration of innovative solutions to service provision.
- Evidence set out in ACT's Sustainable Rural Services research reports.
- Prioritisation of rural service issues in Community Led Plans (e.g. Upper Eden)
- The anticipated impact on Eden communities of the downturn in the economy.
- A survey of rural retail enterprises which has highlighted the vulnerability of a significant proportion of smaller rural retail outlets.



'First Impressions' workshop in Alston

Activity

The programme delivered free advice and support to retailers through a series of workshops and one to one support. These covered; display and merchandising, finance, marketing and promotion, and customer service training.

13 businesses from Kirkby Stephen and Appleby participated during 2008/09 and 11 business from Alston participated during 2009/10.

What has been achieved?

Feedback from the sessions showed that participants recognised the importance of taking a step back from the day to day running of the business and looking at it with fresh eyes.

As some of the recommendations have cost implications, some improvements have not happened immediately.



Christine Rose Designs (Appleby) winner of a the window dressing competitions



Participants providing feedback at the end of one of the workshop sessions

What has been achieved? (cont.)

The businesses concerned plan to work towards implementing changes as finances allow. One retailer reported an increased turnover of 30% following major refurbishment of their premises and other changes made. The owner also said that as a result, they had been able to take more personal time away from the business, and increase the working hours of staff.

Following the programme, one of the participating shops won a local window dressing competition and went on to win a national award for their Christmas display.

The Learning

Elements of programme delivery were amended in year 2, following feedback from participants. These included running the customer service workshop over two evening sessions rather than one full day.

ACT subsequently re-visited the businesses involved in the programme to assess how useful the programme had been.

Feedback received at this later stage was extremely useful as it recognised the longer term benefits to those involved in the programme:

“This programme is excellent with very helpful people”

“Very useful personally tailored advice and guidance.”

“This programme has been a fantastic help to all of us in Appleby and has no doubt increased sales!”

“It must have improved many businesses in Cumbria and also enhanced the look of shopping towns in our county. Good idea!”

“Increased turnover by 30%!”

“Interesting and very good to meet other shop keepers and trade stories and information.”

The programme was funded by EDC and facilitated and administered by ACT. The one to one advice sessions and workshops were delivered by SLDT with support from ACT.

Contact Details

For more information on the programme, please contact Claire Hudson at ACTion with Communities in Cumbria on:

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