

Solva Care: not the only model, but our model



Part 1

Introduction, and a bit of history

When describing something as complex as grassroots community development in social care, it can be helpful to delve into the past, jump to the present and then fill in the bits in between. That is what we are going to do in this part of our website, which is dedicated to sharing our experiences and tools in setting up and running Solva Care – now in 2018, in its fourth year of existence.

The need for a community project centring on home-based support for older people was first mooted in Solva over ten years ago, at a village appraisal undertaken by our Community Council. Over the years, the idea was often revisited in council meetings – and was finally made a reality by Community Councillor Mollie Roach, our founder and Chair.

We like to think of Mollie as a true 'community connector'. This is a resourceful person who knows their community well, and can make connections in order to bring about improvements in people's lives. Mollie gathered around her a small collection of interested people – a working group – to investigate whether there was a need for a support and wellbeing project focusing on the older members of our community, and to start exploring what such a project might look like. This was done by talking informally with individuals and groups at the weekly coffee mornings held in the village hall. The working group also embarked on a community-wide survey on care and support. This survey found much support for the idea of a project that would help people with the daily tasks that they found difficult, and which would enable them to live in their own homes and stay rooted in the community. The findings also showed that many people, including those in need of support, were interested in volunteering and were prepared to commit time to such a project.

We spent much time acquainting ourselves with the myriad policies and strategies of government as well as local and regional statutory services, to ensure that our plans fitted with theirs and to stand the best chance of securing resources from external sources. We also looked at what other communities

were doing, in order to learn from them, and contacted key people from the statutory and third sectors to share information to help us place ourselves in a good position to succeed.

What grew out of this lengthy period of community-wide reflection and networking were the initial ideas for Solva Care – that it would be a social enterprise, operating under the auspices of the Community Council. This social enterprise would consist of two parts: tailored, person-centred support delivered by volunteers; and a village-based, locally owned, not-for-profit domiciliary-care company. We felt that the launch of such a project was timely – social care was starting to feel the effects of years of austerity, care homes were disappearing, domiciliary care was hard to come by in rural areas and lacked a flexible person-centred approach, and the promised integration between the services remained elusive.

We started to organise the voluntary 'service' immediately following the survey, even before we secured funding for it. This part of Solva Care grew from strength to strength, and now operates with over 30 trained, DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) checked volunteers, managed by a part-time coordinator paid for by grant funding. In addition to the support provided for individuals – e.g. shopping, transport, errands and dog walking – we hold regular weekly social events to bring together people who might otherwise be isolated and confined to their homes. This programme has recently been extended – with an additional, paid part-time worker – to the wider community in order to foster wellbeing in all adults.

But it has not all been plain sailing. Our preference for operating under the governance arrangements of our Community Council, which we think is the best body to coordinate the many interlinking initiatives in our community, was challenged by the law that prevents councils from 'trading'. Furthermore, human-resources regulations and financial constraints prevented us from starting and operating our own domiciliary-care company. Funding was hard to come by for our core activities, running the voluntary service with many funders wanting the 'new' and the 'innovative', and an expansion of our initiative beyond the borders of our parish. These duties all ran the risk of making us too big to be effective and sidetracking us from our core purpose. Additionally, we found it difficult to influence the policy agenda despite government policy being clear and unequivocal on the importance of communities taking on a slice of social-care provision.



To overcome these obstacles and survive, we have had to be flexible and resourceful and, to quote a member of our team, 'just get on with it'. We reviewed our status and concluded that the best way forward was to become a charity, which we now are. We haven't set up a domiciliary-care company but are starting to coordinate Solva Care with the work of private providers in the community, and are embarking on creating a cooperative to enable people to pool their payments to procure the best personalised care that their money can buy. We have also looked for, and found, champions in the public sector – senior people who, whilst grappling with the challenges posed by Wales' innovative policies in Social Care, and having to think and work in new ways with limited resources, are vocal in supporting what we are trying to do.

Two years after starting, we called an end to our successful pilot phase and declared ourselves a fully fledged community-care and wellbeing endeavour.

What have we learned from our three years in existence:

- You need to be resourceful, tenacious and adaptable in order to achieve your goals.
- Don't keep checking the rule books – do what's *right* and do it *now*.
- You can achieve a lot with a little or no funding, especially at the start.
- 'Small is beautiful' in community-led care and wellbeing strategies. Fight for staying small.
- Keep chipping away, to influence the implementation of policies – but with grassroots action, you will always be 'ahead of the game'.
- It helps to develop an understanding of the constraints under which the statutory services are operating.
- Research and evaluation can help set direction and provide the evidence needed to successfully push for resources.
- It can all feel messy and precarious at times, but you will make a massive difference to people's lives.

