

## MUCKLE TOON MEDIA CIC

### **HOLD THE FRONT PAGE! - FINAL REPORT**

#### **SUMMARY**

Muckle Toon Media CIC (“MTM”) was set up to take over the running and publication of the Eskdale & Liddesdale Advertiser (“E&L”) at a time when Langholm was experiencing business closures, transfers of office bases, bank and post office closures and an overall concern about the future of the community. The Dumfries & Galloway LEADER (“LEADER”) grant as well as funding from local trusts and donors enabled the company to safeguard the employment of existing staff and continue to publish Langholm’s weekly newspaper from May 2017 onwards.

#### **Background to the project**

##### **1. How was the idea for the project developed?**

Before the project began, a public consultation event was held in December 2016. The community was very concerned about the proposed closure of the E&L and the event was well attended and people were very supportive of the idea of community ownership. A wide range of other stakeholders were consulted, including funding bodies and meetings with the chief executive and senior staff of Cumbrian Newspaper Group (“CNG”). Agreements were reached and funding applications submitted.

“Hold the Front Page!” was a unique opportunity to create a local media Community Interest Company and capitalise on the gap left by the planned closure of the E&L by CNG at the end of March 2017. CNG was very supportive of our project and agreed to give MTM the option to acquire the goodwill and assets of the E&L for £1, providing CNG continued to print the newspaper for the two years after purchase. The ongoing printing was a main concern of MTM, so this condition seemed mutually beneficial. In addition, CNG would also organise distribution of the newspaper through Menzies.

MTM agreed to:

- Present news, views and features on Langholm and Eskdale in an up-to-date, informative, entertaining and innovative way to residents, former residents, businesses, community groups and visitors to the area;
- Introduce the use of social media, an online version of the newspaper, a YouTube channel, themed supplements and a seasonal magazine as part of an integrated media platform;
- Provide skills development, training and work experience opportunities with an emphasis on the young people in the area;
- Support and promote the activities and profiles of businesses and community groups;

- Present a wide range of volunteering opportunities for people of the community;
- Operated by a board of unpaid directors, a small core of paid staff and the support of volunteer reporters, contributors, and photographers from home and abroad but all with a local connection;
- Buy the assets of the E&L as the first stage of the company's development, safeguard two FTE jobs and create a third employment opportunity;
- Champion Langholm and Eskdale at every opportunity and ask difficult questions of those with power and responsibility.

## **2. Who was involved in the project?**

- **Individuals.**

The voluntary board of directors of the company consists of five members, who have an appropriate mix of skills, and a company secretary. On the advice of LEADER we have tried to diversify the board. We took on a younger shadow board member who supported the board for one year before he resigned because of other work commitments. We also recruited a female board member who is an experienced journalist. The board meets regularly and the chairman has responsibility for day-to-day management of the staff.

## **3. What were the aims and objectives of the project?**

The project supports the economy and culture of Eskdale through reporting on news, events and activities, people and places in Eskdale and Liddesdale in an entertaining and informative way. We believed the project would help LEADER deliver on a number of themes but chose to focus on the 'Economy' theme.

People have had the opportunity to learn new skills such as writing for the paper, interviewing, photography, editing, film-making, reporting, designing adverts and other media-related activities.

The objectives of the project were to:

- Ensure the safeguarding of two FTE jobs – one full-time news editor, one 0.8 editorial assistant and one part-time cleaner (3hrs/week) and create a third, an advertising sales executive;
- Continue to publish a weekly newspaper, the E&L;
- Promote community contributions and support for the publication;
- Reverse the decline in sales and increase advertising revenue;
- Support the local economy and skills development and ensure the communities within its catchment become more sustainable settlements;
- Work with schools, youth groups and the Xcel Trust in Langholm to engage young people in having a real time journalistic experience.

#### **4. How was the funding package assembled?**

Langholm is particularly lucky in having a number of local trusts who are willing to support projects. Hold the Front Page! project was fortunate enough to be awarded £50,000 funding from local trusts and a private donor, with a further £100,000+ from a revolving credit facility. We were delighted this support was forthcoming so the project could materialise.

Funding was received from the following:

- Bowman Little Trust Fund	£10,000
- The Stevenson Trust	£10,000
- Stoneypath Trust	£10,000
- Arthur Bell Trust	£5,000
- MTM Own Resources	£5,000
- Private Donor	£10,000
- LEADER	£50,000
- Ashleybank Investments (loan)	£107,214

### **The Project Experience**

#### **5. When did the project take place?**

The project ran from 1st May 2017 to 31st October 2019; a period of two years and six months.

#### **6. What actually happened?**

The E&L was acquired from CNG in April 2017 and continuity of publication and sales and admin services were ensured. In 2018, CNG was taken over by Newsquest Media Group (“NMG”) which had implications for us because this new company decided to cut costs by closing the Carlisle printworks almost as soon as it had taken over. In addition they discontinued the support services threatening the entire future of the project.

We therefore made a decision at that time to do the following:

- Desktop publishing the newspaper entirely in-house;
- Cutting out the need for sub-editors;
- Dealing with Menzies the distributors directly;
- Selling all our own adverts.

We continue to print our publications with NMG at its Cambuslang printworks.

Publication of the E&L never stopped and the transition from its publication by CNG to MTM was smooth. CNG continued to deliver certain elements for us, including sub-editing services, advertising sales, printing and distribution until May 2018 when we opted to do these things for ourselves, thereby reducing costs.

Projects rarely run like clockwork and ours was no different. After the first year, we had to produce and sell advertising in-house after the takeover of CNG. This meant staff had to learn new skills and take on new roles. This was not without challenge.

We initiated regular planning meetings to ensure the team of people involved in the project could work effectively together and set up shared electronic filing systems to facilitate file-sharing.

We moved office to give us more space and the opportunity to have a more welcoming atmosphere for volunteers and customers.

We were effectively running a small business so we had to work out a way of managing it and carrying out tasks such as booking and organising our advertising to ensure adverts were placed at the right time and customers were invoiced appropriately and took some advice on this.

We changed the format of the paper considerably and increased the editorial pages, agreed that we'd have three sports pages weekly, included a weekly What's On page, invited people to contribute reviews and photos for the E&L Gallery and tested other features such as people's jobs and businesses. We included occasional features on artists. We increased the people content of the paper by increasing the number of photos.

As we made changes to the paper, the public feedback was very positive.

We reversed the decline in sales of the newspaper and have targeted advertising sales over a wide geographical area. At times, this has proved challenging because of the digital and other marketing arrangements businesses now have in place.

## **7. Detail how the project fits with the Local Development Strategy.**

MTM safeguarded jobs in Langholm, a small rural town which had undergone continual job losses over 30 years with the closure of nearly all the tweed mills, the closure of Border Fine Arts and, during the time of our project, the move to Carlisle of the Edinburgh Woollen Mill headquarters.

This project supported the area's economy and skills development.

The LEADER Local Development Plan wished to support communities in areas where there is deprivation. The area to the north of Langholm includes a data zone which has evidence of rural deprivation and covers the communities of Eskdalemuir and Westerkirk. It is one of the twenty most-deprived data zones in terms of geographical access to services, identified in the LEADER programme's Local Development Strategy.

The project helped address Dumfries and Galloway Council's priority of building the region's economy, by improving the level of skills within our community and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises growth and development.

The project had an excellent fit with the Regional Economic Strategy, whose vision is to improve the diversity of businesses in the region, empower communities to ensure resilience, ensure businesses can become more connected, and by being inclusive and offering skills to people at a distance from the labour market.

In addition, the Hold the Front Page! project was shortlisted and a finalist for a Dumfries and Galloway Leader Rural Award in the Rural Resilience category.

### **Enabled young people to find employment and purpose**

MTM worked with schools to engage young people in having a real-time journalistic experience. Through this, they developed skills in writing, reporting, taking photos and editing them.

We ran a young writers' competition which was very successful, and the winning stories were published in the E&L.

These activities will raise the skill levels of our young people, their employability and their self-esteem, whilst highlighting the career opportunities on their doorstep.

### **Support Sustainable Settlements**

The project offered a solution to delivering news and information to the people of Eskdale and working with volunteers through a community interest company.

The project is innovative as it uses a range of media to present its message, works well for the community, helps link small businesses by offering a regular business directory on its web pages, provides work placements and opportunities for young people, including school pupils. It involves volunteers in its production and supports events such as the Muckle Toon Adventure Festival and the Common Riding to maximise benefit to businesses.

It delivered special editions and magazines to coincide with events, thereby offering businesses the opportunity to advertise.

It carries features about activities for visitors in the area. Langholm is within easy driving distance of Hadrian's Wall, Melrose Abbey, Caerlaverock Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust and the Lake District. We believe we made it more relevant to the people of Eskdale so they were better informed and had access to local and other news which is meaningful to them.

We believe our media helped increase social and community cohesion and helped sustain businesses. We were shortlisted for a LEADER Dumfries and Galloway Rural Award in the Community Resilience category which backs up this assertion.

### **Support Arts and Culture**

Langholm and Eskdale attract artists and artisans in increasing numbers and we now have nationally-recognised artists working here. We have painters, illustrators, furniture-makers, jewellers, potters and other artists. We have profiled many of them in the paper.

We have worked with The Buccleuch Centre, our community-run cultural venue, to offer regular advertising at reasonable rates to increase audiences and sustainability.

We will work with the Buccleuch Centre to get writers and journalists included in the programme of events so the community can hear from them about their experience of the media.

Hold the Front Page! championed our arts, artists and artisans by profiling their activities, their talent and their product and encouraged and promoted exhibitions, performances and open days to increase participation as well as visitor numbers to the area.

### **Support Tourism (as an economic sector alongside its role to strengthen services)**

Langholm and Eskdale have been undersold as a tourist destination for many years for a combination of political and geographical reasons.

Eskdale is a gateway to Dumfries and Galloway from the Scottish Borders in the north and Cumbria to the south via the A7. We have provided information about the wide range of opportunities for visitors.

We profiled and reviewed visitor attractions within the valley and activities such as the Muckle Toon Adventure Festival, the Common Riding and walking to encourage longer stays.

We know that print and social media can play a central role in ensuring visitors have the information to make choices about places to visit. Eskdale boasts Roman and Iron Age sites as well as heritage related to the Border Reivers, Thomas Telford, the Covenanters, the Johnstone family of Westerhall, the Malcolm family, Hugh MacDiarmid and Neil Armstrong.

Our magazine E&L Life has championed the area as a tourist destination by focusing on the month or season ahead. In the paper we include a full listing of What's On, previewing forthcoming events, things to do, places to visit as well as hospitality services.

### **8. How was the project delivered?**

A board of suitable qualified volunteers were recruited locally and through the chairman, managed the activities of the small staff. The business depended on a large body of volunteers who were recruited and managed by the editor and the Project manager.

### **9. What marketing was undertaken?**

As a media organisation, we have done our own marketing using adverts in the newspaper and on Facebook. Word of mouth has also been useful and maintaining regular contact with people on an ongoing basis. We are in a central spot in Langholm High Street and very visible to the community and visitors to the town. We have displayed the logos of our funders and included these in the newspaper weekly.

### **10. Who benefited from the project?**

The main beneficiaries of the project have been the communities of Eskdale and Liddesdale who provide our readers. We estimate that readership is around 4,000 and the publication is bought by the majority of the households, particularly in Eskdale.

In addition businesses have had an opportunity to be profiled and to advertise with us, the staff, whose jobs were saved, and the people, who have gained new skills or work experience through the life of the project.

We have also given people the opportunity to have their photos, stories or reports published, particularly young people.

We believe we have given hope to our communities by demonstrating that things, which were going to close, could be saved and offered an alternative way of delivering important services. Through social media we know we have followers in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA and in many parts of the UK.

The Paper Shop posts 34 copies of the newspaper weekly to people who subscribe to it through the shop – two of these are sent abroad.

There have been significant events in our area over the lifetime of our project pertaining to land use and land sales, windfarm developments, business closures

and moves, changes in council services, road closures and other issues which, otherwise, would not have had the news coverage we have been able to provide.

We believe we have been able to hold agencies to account on behalf of our communities. Although it is difficult to measure the impact this has had, we believe it has made a difference to the way things have subsequently been managed.

### **11. How did the final budget turn out?**

The budgets turned out fine but over an extended 2.5 years rather than the 1.5 planned. The one cost we did not anticipate was that of meeting the reporting and claiming requirements of our funders. LEADER was the greatest challenge in this respect and the cost of meeting their requirements created an additional unbudgeted funding requirement of £25,000, equivalent to 50% of their funding. This may have been caused by the nature of our project, but we found the procedures used by LEADER to be particularly cumbersome, time consuming and inefficient resulting in time having to be allocated to outsource this work.

On the other hand, this project could not have proceeded with such help and this is appreciated.

### **12. What lessons have been learned?**

It doesn't matter how much work you put into your Business Plan, the real world makes a mockery of it and it's your ability to deal with setbacks that ultimately determines whether you'll succeed or not. Setbacks have been mentioned throughout this report but here are a few of the lessons learned.

We learned that we should fully understand the administrative requirements of our funders, particularly LEADER and ensure additional funding is in place to meet the cost of such work.

The website took longer than anticipated to get up and running, mainly because of challenges in deciding what we could make available free of charge to readers.

The closure of the Carlisle print works and a takeover of CNG by NMG was unanticipated and drove operational changes at a faster pace than planned. Staff had to learn new skills to be able to manage the change.

We found it challenging to recruit staff to cover the Editor's annual leave but managed with freelance staff to publish newspapers during this period.

The timescale was too ambitious and it took an extra year to complete and for the past six months has been under threat from Covid -19.

**13. Will the project be mainstreamed or transferred?**

We continue to seek ways of sustaining the business of MTM and the board is considering various options to ensure a weekly newspaper and monthly magazine can continue to be published. We recognise we have challenges ahead but believe we are valuable to our community and would be reluctant to see it fold. We are exploring other business models and funding streams and looking at how our costs can be reduced further and Covid-19 hasn't helped either.

**14. Detail the sustainability of the project and/or the exit strategy?**

The company is still working towards a break-even position and will continue to aim to increase income through advertising sales, sales of papers and sales of such things as calendars.

We will continue to apply for grants from local grant funds such as windfarm community benefit funds.

The board will continue to monitor staffing and revenue costs to identify if further cost savings can be made.

There continues to be community support for the newspaper and we continue to get community contributions including photographs and stories.

**15. Targets**

All targets have been met and we are particularly proud to have significantly beaten the two most challenging ones – to engage more than 50 volunteers and to give more than 50 young people a new skill through our Story Writing project. We confirm that the targets have been achieved but we regret the evidence to record them as achieved cannot be provided.

David Stevenson  
Muckle Toon Media  
13<sup>th</sup> January, 2021

