

## Celebrating entrepreneurs

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# Vine Trust branches out beyond its roots in 'Walsall's worst pub'

Partnership is the key to providing a second chance for young people, reports Daniel Allen

**T**he Vine Trust has come a long way since it took over a derelict West Midlands pub once notorious for drugs, prostitution and violence.

That was in 1989 and in the years since the trust has been so successful in building partnerships that, according to Kevin Davis, its chief executive, its model of social enterprise and community development is beginning to spread.

Like any small business, the trust has to balance its books and generate enough income from its activities or from investment in its enterprises to cover costs. According to Mr Davis, as a charity, the trust's accounts are subjected to even closer scrutiny than many organisations and nearly 25 years of successful operations have proven its financial sustainability.

Conceived simply as a means of bringing young people together, the trust runs a mix of services that include employment training, education and a new £3 million youth centre housing start-up businesses, performance space and training rooms. Not bad for an organisation that began life in — in Mar Davis's words — “the worst pub in Walsall”.

Mr Davis, 39, joined the trust in 1997. “They asked if I could bring some vision to the operation. What I discovered was that we couldn't do the job on our own. So we started a number of partnerships, conversations with people, to help to overcome some of the challenges our young people were facing.

“It started with a donation of flat-pack furniture from Ikea, which we used as a low-risk means of giving young people some training.” When the local store had problems one weekend with a contractor who was meant to assemble items for the company's “bargain corner”, he spotted an opportunity.

The trust stepped in, a partnership was agreed and Project 390 was born, giving work experience to



Kevin Davis began the Vine Trust merely as a means of bring young people together, but it has grown hugely since then

hard-to-employ young people. The project takes its name from the designation Ikea gives to reject goods that still have a marketable value. “That was descriptive of the young people we were working with who have had knocks and bruises but, if you give them some time and energy, you can get them back into the bargain basement,” Mr Davis said.

The enterprise side of the Vine Trust specialises in “de-risking” relationships between employers and young people. Its success has led to productive partnerships with businesses in a range of sectors.

Mr Davis's passion for developing employment opportunities for marginalised young people is matched by a desire to build models of education that meet their needs. “I discovered that the type of education

### Kevin Davis's top tip

Be audacious. Don't be afraid to ask — see the opportunity and exploit it. I'm not embarrassed to ask the chairman of IBM for input or for Ikea to be supportive of our growth

we were offering our hard-to-educate kids — what schools were offering — wasn't working for them.”

After a successful bid by the trust, in partnership with the local Queen Mary's Grammar School, the Walsall Studio School opened its doors to students in September. Studio schools combine core subjects with work experience and employment skills and the Walsall edition, Mr Davis said, is the first to be run by a social

enterprise. “This isn't just an ‘alternative’ school. We're serious about education — we got the best school in our area to partner with us — and we're serious about preparing young people for industry and work.”

Key to the trust's success is having a compelling vision. “You're not trying to create some Marxist utopia. You're dealing with the reality of what we can do together. In these hard times when money is scarce, particularly in the public sector, people have got to start thinking differently about how we can create meaningful growth, especially in those areas that are under more challenge because of the shrinking state. We've got to do things differently; we've got to try to articulate something that allows those areas not to be forgotten.”

## Start-ups need to make a fast start

Barry Evans

What banks are looking for is evidence that money lent will be repaid — and this requires a thought-through plan that should include budgets demonstrating cashflow, forecast income and expenditure, contracts and contingency arrangements.

I always advise my customers to, as far as possible, take a “no surprises” approach. I encourage businesses to see me early in the process and to invite me to visit their workplace. This enables me to understand how the business works and to work with it to access funding. This also means that if a challenge or an opportunity emerges quickly, I am much better placed to provide prompt assistance.

Of course, budding entrepreneurs and start-ups rarely have a track record. This circle is hard to square. Banks provide debt finance, not equity — we are not *Dragons' Den!* We do not take punts, nor do we take a stake in the company or a share of its profits.

Yet this does not mean that banks cannot help start-ups. Last year we helped more than 100,000 such businesses. My end-goal is to lend money to those that come to see me, but I also provide advice and guidance. Sometimes, I cannot offer a loan at the first asking, but, through regular contact, support and networking, once start-ups get up and running they can access loans further down the line.

Through my experience supporting businesses to develop and grow, I know the commitment required and what a hard slog it is. I have enormous respect for the ingenuity, originality and sheer determination of entrepreneurs. My advice is plan early, research your market well and seek advice.

● Barry Evans is the regional director for the South-West and Wales, RBS/NatWest

## Building community links may mean going back to the classroom

Daniel Allen

Small businesses want to engage with the communities around them, according to Stephen Howard, chief executive of the charity Business in the Community. The problem is that they are not always clear how to go about it.

Nevertheless, it is not something that they should overlook. “It's part of how you build the brand and reputation, and it's part of how you recruit, retain and develop the best people,” Mr Howard said, adding that

for small businesses beginning to look at how they can work more closely with the local community, schools and colleges are the place to start. “Education usually seems closer to what the business is trying to do, perhaps because they've been students themselves or have children in local schools or because they will at least on occasion have been involved in a work experience situation.”

One of the keys to success, he believes, is to keep it simple and not to be overwhelmed by the bigger

issues, such as youth unemployment, inequality or, as he put it, feeling as if you have to “boil the ocean”.

“It can sometimes feel like: ‘Wow, all these things are way too big for my little business.’ But if you think of it in terms of how you can spend a little bit of dedicated time in a local school, in a structured way with a programme that has been thought-through already, then you don't have to invent anything, you just have to carry it out.”

Running an education programme alongside other businesses can bring

extra benefits. “Then it becomes not only an interesting individual engagement for your organisation but perhaps even a more collaborative one and a networking one.”

Working with local social enterprises or social enterprises is another way forward, although Mr Howard acknowledged: “We often find that community activists and social entrepreneurs speak a different language to the business people. Their idea is that business is only about making money and yet we know its purpose isn't just

about maximising returns. If it were, it wouldn't last very long. It's got to be about delivering value to customers, delivering quality, all those kinds of things. And when you begin to think about it in that context, it's clear that business is a force for good.”

It is also important to remember that engagement with local schools or any other community organisation is a partnership, Mr Howard said. “It's not one-way traffic. You're going to deliver, but you're also going to benefit. And you're going to be surprised how much comes from it.”