



We're just gonna do it anyway

I got involved with Sustainable Wantage when my eldest two kids were really small, and it was on the back of reading an article which I cannot remember now anything else about except that it said, "All the actions that you take yourself at home are really important, but if you really want to make a difference, you have to get active, like be an activist, and get active in your community and start spreading the word". And that was what prompted me to go and seek out Sustainable Wantage and find out what was going on. And then I just got wholly sucked in.

It started way before my time. It was a student I think – a sixth former started it off and it was quite a political thing, quite a campaigning group at the beginning. And then it became a community action group in 2008. So up until that point, we were kind of just getting together and going, "Oh, what can we do in Wantage? Let's put on a film or let's invite a speaker", that kind of pop-up event type thing. But then there was a bit of woodland, Pewit Woodland, up on the ridgeway that the Woodland Trust were looking for a warden for, but we needed a legal form to take on the lease, so that's when we went through the process of becoming a Community Benefit Society in 2013.

Actually, that was a bit of a game-changer because a year later, we got the opportunity to take on what's now 'The Mix', which was a completely rundown, former shop and the deal was that we would use it rent free in exchange for doing it up to a lettable condition. So it was designed to be quite a short-term thing, really, and then we ended up carrying on renting it. We started off using it for hot-desking and the occasional activity on a weekend, all managed by volunteers for a really long time.

It's like a little shop in the town centre, so it's kind of our public face. And so in normal times, we'd have a monthly repair cafe, which has been mostly online, but it's back live now which is very exciting. And we've got a refill station with things that people can buy. We've got a resource bank, which is a bit like a very mini version of a scrap store, with people saying, "Oh, have you got this?" and us going and finding it, or people saying, "I need to get rid of this" and us finding homes for it and the Community Fridge, which is what totally took over in the past year.

We had 270 families, I think, signed up, with different levels of need. They could kind of self-assess how much and how often they thought they needed something. So we did a lot of delivering. Basically between the beginning of the Community Fridge in December 2019 and the end of March last year, we gave away about two tonnes of food. And then March last year to now we've given away another 53 tonnes of food.

We just kind of built up from there really. Now we have the woodland and The Mix, and then we've also got a Market Garden Project which is a partnership with Oxfordshire County Council day centre and Style Acre charity, so we do that together with them. We run a Sustainable Wantage work party each Sunday afternoon and there's quite a lot of people that pop up regularly. Some of them want to learn about gardening, some of them just want to be outside, some of them just want to have a cup of tea and piece of cake- maybe people that have moved into houses with no gardens- that happens quite a lot.

We have, since the beginning of this year, been working with a charity mentor to try and do some strategic planning so that we know that what we're doing is kind of where we want to go, rather than just us going, "Oh, there's an opportunity, we'll do that". So we're trying not to do lots of little things when we could be doing a bigger thing that has a better impact. But actually, it's just made us go, "We want to do it all!"

We've chosen five different areas – waste, energy, food, community engagement and biodiversity - and the one I'm doing is 'waste'. The mentor said, "Okay, now what you need to do with all your ideas, you need to decide what you're going to do in year one, year two and year three".

And I'm like, "I want to do them all in year one!"

"That's not how it works".

"But they're all like really important, they need to happen now!"

Up till now, the main aim has been keeping The Mix as a hub running, having different things happening there. And now we want to have that and also have a kind of sustainability co-ordinator for Wantage. So far, we've been doing a lot of things with individuals, but we want to be able to do things with businesses and more stuff with organisations. We've made really good contacts in a lot of the schools, and now they're starting to say "Oh, have you got somebody who could come and talk to us about wildlife habitats on our site? Have you got somebody who could come and talk to us about litter picking?"- there's lots of opportunities popping up.

It's changed my outlook of how I approach things and what I think is possible. And I feel like I can do stuff to make a difference in environmental terms, and also just personally. I would never be the kind of person who would stand up and talk to a room full of people. I would actively avoid that situation, but I've had to do it and now I wouldn't say I enjoy it, but I've had lots of things that have put me on the spot and made me do things that I wouldn't have done otherwise. When the



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Community Fridge was hugely busy and people started coming to us, we were having queues all down the road and it's quite a busy road and it's not a very pleasant place to be. So we were standing out in hi-vis, kind of managing the queue and I would never have done that kind of stuff. But actually, you know, chatting to people on the pavement, I found I quite enjoyed. So I think it's kind of really pushed me not to play safe.

After my youngest was born, I was working for a pre-school locally. So I was doing that up until a year and a half ago, doing kind of half of that and half of looking after The Mix. And then, it must've been December 2019, when I became actually an employee at Sustainable Wantage and my whole life changed. I've always been interested, but when I was younger I felt really powerless, like all these decisions about whether or not we were going to achieve certain things were all with Government or with Councils and things that I couldn't have any effect on at all. Whereas now, not only have I become very involved, it's actually become my job! So I feel much more like, we're doing stuff and I can help things change, even at a very little low level, but we can make a difference.

And being part of the CAG network is amazing, just feeling like, all those other people are out there doing stuff too. And regardless of what goes on at the higher level, we're just gonna do it anyway!



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