

# Established Foundations of Community Development in Ventnor

## By the Community Development Team

In January 2012, Ventnor Town Council hosted engagement events which were to change the approach to future community projects in the town. The events involved community sector representatives who came together to examine issues in the town which are symptomatic of Ventnor's geographical position and lack of services. It also involved local agencies, responsible for delivering services to people in the town.

So why did VTC get everyone together? Having developed significantly through a period of relative affluence in the previous century, modern day Ventnor is home to a community which is polarised in the East and West. The relative wealth in the two areas of Bonchurch and St Lawrence contrasts sharply with the deprivation of North and Central Ventnor. Over the past years parts of the town have suffered from a cycle of decline that has already left half the town's population living in two Lower Super Output Areas. Of major concern for future generations is upper Ventnor which falls within the 20% level on the income, education and children in poverty domains. Put simply, the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment and the Index of Multiple Deprivation meant inaction was not an option. The stats painted a dark cloud at odds with the perceived sunny day reality of living in Ventnor.

In spite of this story of decline, Ventnor is a vibrant and exciting place to live. Under the backdrop of the fabulous downs with far reaching sea views and a sandy bay, the town supports various networks, a lively third sector offering a range of activities, personal support networks of families that have grown up together. Perhaps inspired by the natural environment, there is a thriving network of environmentalists, foodies, artists. Whatever your interest, the size and shape of Ventnor means it is a place of networks and community development is possible using these networks as a means of getting people involved.

Lively discussions at our community meetings generated a clear list of ideas which could be easily categorised into different areas such as culture, education and training, town centre etc. This list has been invaluable for the staff team that was to follow. Shortly after these meetings a Community Development Worker was appointed on a 20 hour per week contract to look at innovative ways of bringing people together to tackle the downward trends.

One of the agencies involved in the engagement meetings was Southern Housing Group. At the same time as VTC was looking at new projects, they had been approached by Timebanking UK with the idea to set up a Timebank project on the Isle of Wight. Ventnor Timebank was launched at Ventnor Library in September 2012 after an intense period of development. The event, captured in this [short clip](#) had a positive vibe and involved our local MP, Andrew Turner, local politicians and the people that had planned and developed it. The headline was recognising that a Timebank could redistribute the wealth in skills and knowledge that there is our varied population.

[Ventnor](#) Timebank has attracted funding from Awards for All and Southern Housing Group and has now has about 100 volunteers. Through the Awards for All funding, two part time officers were appointed who have been out in the community, establishing relationships with local people. We

have been able to find new volunteers for a local gardening project and run a weekly job seeking support session from Ventnor Library, thanks to those volunteers who have offered their time. We don't know what the future holds for Timebank, the concept is fantastic but there is a challenge to get people using the bank regularly, we have more helpers than people who need help but the structure is in place recognises that there is a tremendous asset in the people of Ventnor.

Through Timebank, we have trained community group members, saving their organisations hundreds of pounds. We have also supported job seekers in essential Level 2 Qualifications, we have seen people find work and one volunteer achieve a Financial Capability Qualification through Timebank support. There are individual stories which verify the value of this project but creating a network within the networks Ventnor already has will take a long term commitment and the involvement of key people.

During the course of our community development project, we have amassed contacts within CAB, Age IW, My life a Full Life, Isle of Wight College, training and apprenticeship agencies, alcohol awareness counsellors and fitness coaches. We have developed a facebook link with hundreds of local people whereby we can communicate quickly on local issues.

We have laid the foundations for what will come. Through the ground-breaking work of the town council we will have a new community facility The Green Room so local agencies can bring their services to Ventnor, to our residents to help local people problem solve and gain confidence. We hope that this will make progression feel possible and that the Green Room can bring together all the local opportunities and support local groups.

Local groups tell us there is a pressing need for a team of volunteers to help with a range of activities, local events like the Carnival, Isle of Arts, cleaning up Ventnor, maintaining our skatepark and Outfit equipment. Timebank has helped with this but there is more that can be done, progression from people knowing there is a volunteer need to asking for help is surprisingly rare. Timebank can't help every time but will always try and we have to get that message out, to keep the conversations going. Likewise, local people may see a volunteer opportunity feel it is meant for someone else, we would like to see that feeling of local action being possible and people working together to achieve great things in their town.

Timebank has been a very important engagement experience, it has given us a unique opportunity to talk to people and to gain an understanding about what is likely to work in the future. We have identified key issues around access to services, seasonal employment and housing issues which can gradually be addressed through service delivery from The Green Room and existing projects with key partners in the town. Whilst Timebank will continue to offer activities like bread making to bring people together, the future for Community Development in Ventnor has developed beyond that.

The foundations are in place, literally as the Green Room will offer the first place where services can be co-located, meaning we can support the agencies looking to reach our residents and our residents have a place where they feel they can be part of the positive social change which will evolve.