

## The Centurion



Location	Vicars Cross, Chester
Founded	2016
Legal structure	Community benefit society (the Centurion Community Action Group Ltd.)
Description of services	A sustainable pub and social hub for the community to use at reasonable cost. Also a space for local charities, clubs and groups to meet
Key assets	None – as currently lease pub building from commercial owner
Employees	Two full-time, seven part-time
Volunteers	30 part-time
Most important skill set(s) to successfully running the business	Financial management skills
Biggest obstacle to success	Other providers in the areas competing with the community business
Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Local authority</li> <li>– High street bank</li> <li>– Third sector funding provider</li> <li>– A sector body</li> </ul>
Notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– The pub aims to be “family friendly”, providing a meeting space for residents, a venue for celebrations/events such as birthdays and a facility for local sports clubs</li> <li>– Keeping costs low has been important to the financial success of The Centurion. This has been achieved through purchasing products on the open market and negotiating with suppliers to reduce overheads</li> <li>– The pub has a democratic management style that encourages community involvement, constructive debate between committee members and transparency in decision-making</li> </ul>

This case study report provides an overview of The Centurion, a community pub in Vicars Cross, Chester, and describes the factors that are perceived to underpin its success. The findings are drawn from research commissioned by Power to Change and carried out by NatCen Social Research and WPI Economics. More information about the study and additional research reports can be found on the Power to Change website.

## Overview of The Centurion

The Centurion is a community pub located in the heart of the Vicars Cross community in Chester. It is run by the Centurion Community Action Group Limited (CCAG), a community benefit society formed in 2016 to enable local people to take over the lease and running of the pub. After being informed that the pub would be closed and sold to developers, a group of local residents organised community meetings to oppose the sale and developed plans to secure the lease of the pub.

The CCAG had to overcome a significant battle to successfully secure the lease of The Centurion. Support from the local community was overwhelming. Over 400 people submitted objections to two planning applications. The community also provided financial support by raising £21,000 to cover the cost of reopening the pub under a 12 month lease arrangement. Alongside strong community support, there was also wide ranging political support from Great Boughton Parish Council, councillors from Cheshire West and Chester Council and the local MP.

CCAG successfully negotiated with Admiral Taverns, the owners of the pub, to take on the lease and in September 2016, following a week of substantial volunteer effort to get the pub ready, The Centurion opened its doors to the public.

The Centurion is the only pub in Vicars Cross, a large housing estate on the outskirts of Chester, and is seen by residents as an essential facility for the local community. The CCAG aims to provide a sustainable pub and social hub for the community to use at a reasonable cost. The pub provides a space for local charities, clubs and social groups to meet as well as hosting a wide range of events for local people of all ages. The business contributes to the local economy through creating employment opportunities and buying produce from local suppliers.

Initially formed as a working group of local residents to oppose the sale of the pub the CCAG board members were formally elected in October 2016. The board is

governed by five directors who oversee the running of The Centurion, who manage the building and who are working to secure the long-term future of the business for the community.

CCAG employs a landlord to manage the pub who is responsible for two full-time members of staff and seven part-time staff. CCAG has a volunteer management committee which has 10 members. There are up to 20 local volunteers help with maintenance and repairs e.g. painting, joinery, plumbing.

## Success factors for The Centurion

This section summarises the key factors that are perceived to have influenced the success of The Centurion, based on interviews with those involved in contributing to or using the community pub. Success factors are grouped according to whether they relate to the business, people involved or the wider community and external environment.

### Business

There are two key business-related factors that have contributed to the success of The Centurion. CCAG is developing a business model that responds to the needs of the local community and delivers affordable services for local residents. Ongoing access to grant funding and loans is required to pay for maintenance of the building and ensure the facilities continue to be available to the community.

### Business model

The business has worked hard to respond to local need through providing a diverse range of services for the community. For example, the pub aims to be 'family friendly', provides a meeting space for residents, a venue for celebrations/events such as birthdays and a facility for local sports clubs/interest groups. These combined activities meet the social goals of the community pub and provide a consistent customer base for the business.

Keeping costs low has been important to the financial success of The Centurion. This has been achieved through purchasing products on the open market and negotiating with suppliers to reduce overheads.

The Centurion has only been trading for five months, so challenges may emerge in the longer-term. In particular, a possible risk to continued success is the need to move forward with purchasing The Centurion from Admiral Taverns or negotiating a long-term lease. This may require the business to adapt its strategy substantially in the future, but the fact that a business plan and community share prospectus are in development is a promising step.

#### Access to donations, grant funding and loans

The board are in the process of developing a plan to allow the community to buy the freehold for the pub and secure the long-term sustainability of the business. Owning the business would help to further reduce costs and allow any surplus to be reinvested in the community.

The availability of funding is therefore important to the ongoing success of community businesses like The Centurion, as currently the community business has been totally funded by the combination of a grant and community donations. In particular, the fact that the business only has approximately five weeks of liquid reserves suggests that in the future more may need to be done to boost financial sustainability. This is in turn linked to the need to continue providing a product that the community support, something that was identified as a key challenge by the business.

#### People

Having a small group of volunteers who were committed and determined to re-open the pub was important for success. Since the pub has successfully re-opened it has been important for board members to continue this commitment and determination to make the business successful in the long-term.

#### Committed and determined founders

The Centurion has benefited from the hard work, commitment and determination of a small group of volunteers who have driven the project from the start. The working group galvanised the support of the community to oppose the redevelopment of the pub,

negotiated with the owners to purchase the lease and organised volunteers from the community to prepare the pub for opening. The following skills and qualities were highlighted as important:

- Access to a broad range of skills and experience including finance, law, architects and civil engineers.
- A democratic management style that encourages community involvement, constructive debate between committee members and transparency in decision-making.
- The ability to fill gaps in knowledge through drawing on support from a wider network of contacts outside the local community who could provide their skills and expertise for free.

#### Ongoing dedication of elected board

The Centurion continues to benefit from a dedicated elected board who are responsible for monitoring finances, purchasing and managing and coordinating volunteers.

The management and staff play an important role in the successful running of the pub by creating a friendly and welcoming atmosphere, demonstrating good knowledge of what they are selling and paying close attention to customer needs. The board appointed a manager with substantial experience and contacts in the trade that have been important to keeping costs low.

#### Community and external environment

Wide ranging political support from the local community and specialist advice have been important to the success of The Centurion.

#### Political support

Political support was central to the initial success of the CCAG securing a lease of The Centurion. Members of the parish and district council attended the initial community meetings, listened to why the community wanted to save the pub and provided support to the community action group during both appeals against planning permission applications submitted by the construction company. Without this political support the community action group were unsure that they would have been successful in winning their appeals.

### Support of the local community

Community support has been crucial to successfully opening and running the pub. There was widespread interest from the community in contributing to efforts to save the pub. This is demonstrated by the community raising £21,000 in donations to cover the set-up costs. Community members also volunteered their skills and time over an intense week of cleaning, repairs and reorganising The Centurion to get it ready for re-opening.

Local enthusiasm and interest in the pub remains and The Centurion continues to draw on the skills and time of customers/volunteers who are committed to the success of the pub. However, the business has expressed that a challenge it continues to face is competition with other similar providers, and sustaining the unique appeal of The Centurion is therefore considered important.

### Specialist advice

seeking advice from organisations that support community businesses and the pub sector, such as the local branch of the Campaign for Real Ale. Based on this advice, the working group secured small grants to set up and formalise the CCAG and reduce the running costs of the business.

### Financial information

The Centurion opened in late 2016; as yet there is no publicly available financial information.