



History of the Forge

In the mid-1990s a group of people with strong interests in their local community in Hoyland and the surrounding area started meeting together. Some were part of other community groups, especially local churches, some just concerned individuals. They were motivated by a desire to see improvements in the community and the lives of its people, as well as frustration at seeing consultation exercises in the community which, if they led to anything, led to projects elsewhere.

In time this loose gathering began to form itself into the Forge and to hold regular meetings at various local venues. Membership was at this stage very fluid, some early members left as the group appeared to be making no progress, others joined as they saw that the initial meetings seemed to be leading to a worthwhile group, and some of the original members remained simply because of their commitment. A very small amount of funding, the involvement of Northern College staff and the beginning of encouragement by Barnsley Council, all gave hope that the group might be able to achieve something, though with little idea what that might be.

In 1998 the Forge became a company limited by guarantee, the Forge Community Partnership, and then two small grants were secured to allow computer equipment to be bought, closely followed by a key breakthrough when Neighbourhood Support Fund funding was secured for the Forge Youth Project. This created the first Forge employee in the first Forge project, a turning point for the Partnership. This was then closely followed by a grant to employ a Sports Development Worker.

But then two even more significant events occurred which together transformed the Forge. First was the Partnership's success in being accepted to run the new national and local Sure Start in the area, followed by Forge's volunteers producing an Action Plan, which was successfully endorsed and so secured Objective 1 funding.

The regeneration phase (2004 - 2008)

During this phase the availability of Objective 1 and other funding streams led to a rapid expansion of the Partnership. Even early in the phase this was apparent, and by the end of 2004 the number of Forge employees had risen from none to 32 in just 5 years. The rising number of employees led the Forge to becoming an admitted body for pensions so that employees had a more secure base for a career and to be an attractive employer.

2004 also saw the acquisition (described in Appendix 1) of the Hoyland Common Community Centre, a key second base for Forge operations. Such was the expansion, with the Learning Net and Arts for Health beginning to make an impact that the next year a Meet the Team event was held to publicise more widely what the Partnership was doing and offering.

A key focus in the latter part of the phase was how to manage the inevitable ending of key funding streams, so that the Forge could continue to provide services. One feature of this was that it proved possible to extend elements of the funding for longer than had originally been anticipated, and every opportunity to do this was taken.

Although this phase of the Forge's development was hugely important and successful, it also held considerable risk for the Partnership. Decisions about what to take on had to be made very rapidly, and often without full prior information being available. For a young organisation with little in the way of paid infrastructure this placed great demands on volunteers, who had to balance their desire to respond to opportunities for the community and the Forge against the risk of over-stretching and being unable to sustain projects. The more settled leadership described in the company phase was important in enabling the members of the Forge to take such risks in the long term interests of the Partnership.

(Building on Community Strengths.)

The consolidation phase (2008 - 2013)

The ending of Objective 1 funding and the general decline in the availability of grant funding forced the Partnership into a period of consolidation. Projects which had formed an important part of the Forge's portfolio gradually came to an end, and new opportunities became more difficult to identify and resource. During this phase key projects were Sure Start, together with two completely new projects, the Rockingham Centre and Elsecar Nursery. As the Learning Net and Arts for Health eventually closed, these projects together provided a sound base of operation and several good venues, allowing other smaller projects to be considered. From being largely grant-reliant at the start of this phase, by the end the Forge was operating on a mix of commissioned and self-sustaining activity.

The two new major projects in this phase presented significant risks to the Forge, not all of which were fully apparent at the time. Both were independent trading activities without any revenue funding to support them. In the case of the Rockingham Centre the challenge was to bring back to life a centre which had been in terminal decline, and to create a different sort of centre in the process. Elsecar Nursery on the other hand was an apparently reasonably successful going concern, but limited disclosure of information meant that there were more hidden risks than anticipated. In both cases, had the Forge been more fully aware of some of the difficulties which lay ahead in seeking to make the projects self-sustaining it is possible that different decisions may have been made. Nonetheless, in each case the Forge continued to support the projects because of the community needs and benefits, including sustaining facilities, services and employment opportunities, which it was able to do because of its resilience as an organisation.

The restructured phase (2013 onwards)

As this paper shows, by 2013 the Forge had developed in 15 years from being a small group of enthusiasts with a vision to a vibrant organisation delivering important community services in a range of centres, employing some 50 staff, and in the process had adapted, survived and flourished in a very difficult climate. Not for the first time the Forge was successful in securing a new project, the Tidy Teams, because of its track record of delivering successful projects.

Through the first 15 years, the Forge's basic organisational structure had not changed from that set up in 1998 which had served it so well. But it became apparent that in order to protect the various activities and projects and to minimise the risks associated with them, a new approach would be more appropriate. It was therefore decided to create three new related companies to manage specific parts of the Partnership's activity, and to enable the parent company to become a charity and in time for two of the other companies to do so too.

Two satellite companies were created to manage Elsecar Nursery and the Rockingham Centre, two significant parts of the Forge, each with risks attached to their operation. A third was created to be vehicle for accessing funding for new work. By the end of 2014, with this new structure in place and charitable status being sought, the members of the Forge felt confident that the Partnership was fit for purpose for the immediate future and able to continue to deliver existing work and able to take up new opportunities when they presented themselves.