



The founding of The Mill

by Alison Griffin, 1st Chair of Trustees

We just never gave up.

The council decided to sell the library building in autumn 2010, after three years of increasingly fruitless community campaigning to get it reopened as a library. But our new ward Councillor Clare Coghill threw us a lifeline – she campaigned for and set up a meeting with a council cabinet

member, at which we were given a short window to come up with an alternative proposal and finance to match it.

Clare came to our meetings as well. These pretty much all took place at my house, because of childcare. They were now a potent mix of hope and desperation. Janet Wright in particular worked incredibly hard putting calls out for people to work with us on this. A local supporter, working in Brussels, Haroon Khan saw one of her emails and got in touch, recommending we apply ambitiously to be part of the Nesta Neighbourhood Challenge. With little to lose, we filled in the form as ambitiously as we could (and with Haroon helping us navigate the jargon of the programme – asset based community development, social capital, etc – and my fundraising background coming in useful). If we're honest, we did it partly because Nesta were going to announce a shortlist just before our council's December deadline, and if we could get on that it might, along with all the other campaigning work, buy us some more time. That's exactly what happened – we were surprised and delighted to be shortlisted, and the building sale was duly postponed until the Nesta process was finished.

So Neil Meads of the Blackhorse Action Group (our residents' association, who'd kindly allowed us to bid in their name, as they were constituted) and I were slightly stunned to find ourselves at a shortlisted organisations meeting in the swish offices of Nesta in town just before Christmas 2010. But that was nothing compared to the shock when, having gone through their full application process with our best ideas, we got an email in early February to say we were one of the organisations selected. We had one year, up to £150,000 (which would only be released in tranches) and some support to put our ideas into action.

Members of the St James Street Library Campaign were joined by many of the committee of the Blackhorse Action Group and Clare Coghill in a rapid succession of meetings to get things going. We had Ruth, Sarah, Mo, Janet, Dave and me from the library campaign and Neil, Irina, Michael, Sue and Peter from BAG at the early meetings. Some key new people also came forward in the early weeks after hearing us speak about our project – most notably Ingrid and Russ, and Amarjit and Sultana, who have since been some of our key people.

The name “The Mill’ was conceived and the wonderful Fabien Ho worked with Mo on our lovely logo. We registered as a company – with a view to registering as a charity soon after – and signed a lease with the council for the building. Less than two months after the shock news that we were part of the Nesta Neighbourhood Challenge, we were company directors and leaseholders on the St James Street Library building, that the community had been campaigning for so long to save.

From the weekend after we get the keys, we start to open up the building to the community on periodic weekends to talk to people about what we’d achieved so far and what needed to be done, and generally engage with the neighbourhood. The community responded very positively.

Committee meetings happened weekly – the regulars were Sultana, Sarah, Ruth, Nuria, Neil, Michael, Janet, Irina, Ingrid, Dave, Clare (observer), Amarjit and me. With so much to do we set up recruitment, buildings and constitution teams amongst ourselves, to work together on key tasks and report back to meetings.

I was lead contact for Nesta and started to have monthly mentoring and advice phone calls with Katherine Williams-Powlett, a consultant from NCVO, that were very useful to us. They focused in these early months on charitable structure, trustees, constitution, management, etc, to create the best possible platform for The Mill to succeed. From this, we were able to move to constitute and register as a charity and appoint our first trustees from amongst our number in June: I was honoured to be chosen as the first chair, Michael Leigh became treasurer, Mo Gallacio the ‘What’s Happening’ trustee, Ingrid Abreu Scherer the ‘Building’ trustee, Neil Meads the ‘Communications’ trustee and Ruth Duncan the ‘People’ trustee. With trustees being the lead person on the different key areas, we were able to grow our capacity in a structured way and have everything reporting in to our weekly meetings. Others who had become involved took part in the different areas and made very wide ranging contributions.

And so the work of The Mill began. Looking back, I am so proud of everything that we did as a community and as a team at that time, and quite how many obstacles our enthusiasm and hard work overcame. The Nesta grant and accompanying support were crucial too. So many people took on so many tough challenges and projects. Not one of them gave up. We were an empowered community and it was a wonderful thing to be part of.