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Grand plans for Limerick grocery as it marks a year in business

by Nick Rabbitts 26 Oct 2014

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Privacy

Just over a year ago, 19 volunteers met for the first time to put in plans place for the city's first co-operative store, with Bill Kelly having already secured use of the former Esso garage in Mulgrave Street.

Since then, the facility has gone from strength to strength, and can now boast almost 300 members.

In addition to this, the co-operative is the Limerick Leader's representative in the Get Involved competition, an initiative developed by the Local Ireland, the body previously known as the Regional Newspapers and Printers Association of Ireland.

The difference between a co-operative company, and a regular company is that all the profits it makes are ploughed straight back into the business.

Members also have a say in how it is run, and this was evident when at its monthly meeting, it was immediately decided to have the facility open between 4pm and 7pm on Thursday evenings, alongside its regular opening times on Friday and Saturday. Bill, who is one of the founding volunteers, said: "We are definitely going in the right direction. Our pilot 12 months has just completed. The omens are good, and we are ready to redevelop the premises."

Over the next year, it is hoped this will result in the building of a new cafe on top of the current building, automated tills, and a refurbishment of the interior.

Although the grocery is debt-free, it needs third party funding to make this dream a reality.

And to this end, a business plan has just been submitted to Limerick City and County Council.

"We have 12 months financials in there. You can see a very definite path of progression, and we can demonstrate sustainability," Bill explains, "The plan refers to the Park Slope co-op model in Brooklyn. We had these guys over in July, and they have detailed how their model works. They can compete with the multiples, and they have shown us how we can compete and carve out a niche for ourselves."

The Community Grocery is seeking €100,000 from the local authority, and a number of philanthropists have agreed to match this funding, which will also see the grocery create paid positions for the first time.

If the plan is accepted, it is anticipated a grocery manager will be brought in from the USA to move the project forward.

It is anticipated the cafe will open by 2016. Bill hopes the council will include the grocery in its 2015 budget, and is "quietly confident" this will be the case.

Councillors have already been lobbied in the hope they agree to support the concept.

Asked what is in it for the local authority, he said: "You are talking in terms of employment for the long-term unemployed. You are talking about a model which we can demonstrate has worked. We can build enterprises with this model. There are all sorts of ancillary food-related businesses which you can build around this store".

The grocery's product range has broadened out in a few short months. Initially, they were only selling fresh vegetables, and home-made cakes, with the building acting as a collection facility.

However, now, pre-packed niche products - like olive oil from Italy - are made available on the shelves, like a supermarket.

"We are getting traction, we are starting to develop. When you have the goodwill there, and the labour, there is a lot that can be done," Bill concludes.

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