

Northamptonshire-based cancer charity The Lewis Foundation, is going from strength to strength thanks to a £5,000 grant from Northampton's Social Investment Fund and a revolutionary new business model for the humble high-street charity shop.

Here, co-Founder Lorraine Lewis talks about the difference the grant made to getting their new retail offering off the ground ...



Starting strong

We founded our charity, The Lewis Foundation, in 2016. It started with us sourcing, packing and hand delivering free gifts and support packs to adult cancer patients in hospital, with the simple hope of bringing a little joy and support to people at what can be a devastating time.

We were blown away by some of the donations we received from local businesses – brand new items, often delivered by the palette-load, that we could include in our gift packs. We were soon overrun with stock.

By 2021 our vision had evolved - we now dreamed of having a physical space where we could sell the brand new, end-of-line or excess stock that had been donated, to raise funds to sustain the charity and reach even more people.

We set up our first pop-up shop in the Grosvenor Shopping centre, in the heart of Northampton town centre, with the intention of running it one day a month. It was incredibly popular, and it soon became clear there were implications far beyond just raising money for our charity. We were selling quality products that would have gone to waste, to people in a low-income area who would not otherwise have been able to afford them. It felt like a win-win-win.

The model was so popular, we found ourselves running the pop-up shop more frequently. Until finally, the shopping centre offered us our very own dedicated retail unit.

Taking a leap of faith

To take this next step, we knew it was vital that the new shop looked professional. It had to be inviting, slick and it had to own its place alongside other shops in the mall. But we didn't have the cash to deck the shop out as we envisioned. That is when we got in touch with WSNET to talk about grant funding.

To be honest, when I first looked at the application form it seemed quite daunting. Having a vision for your enterprise is one thing – documenting and explaining why you should be gifted money to support it, is quite another.

But the whole WSNET team were fantastic. They talked us through the process, advised how best to approach the application and, even now, months after receiving the funding, they keep in touch and follow our progress. It has been a great experience all around.

Doing things differently

Our permanent shop in Grosvenor Shopping has been a phenomenal success. We wanted to dispel the idea of a traditional charity shop and thanks to this grant funding, we have been able to kit it out to look smart and professional, with branded signage, bespoke display racks and a full till system.

We have a donation station in the shop if people want to make an extra charity contribution, but essentially just by buying from us, people are doing their bit.

Branching out

The business model we have created is so sustainable and scalable, that when we were offered another retail space in another shopping mall, we couldn't say no.

We also need to keep thinking big thanks to an increased demand for our gift packs. After hearing us talk at a recent conference, nine more hospitals across the region and beyond want us to support their cancer units.

Giving something back

Branching out into retail with the support of WSNET funding has been a fantastic step for the growth of our charity. And one aspect of which we are most proud, is that we have been able to provide work experience placements for students of Northgate School in Northampton.

Seeing these young people, many with additional needs, develop new skills - helping customers, handling money, using the till system to name a few - is the most wonderful benefit of having opened the shop. We hope in the near future to start a full apprenticeship scheme, to equip these fantastic young people with an accredited qualification for life.