

# Weston SOS Limited – AGM 25 – Chair’s Report

## Welcome and Introduction

Good evening, everyone, and thank you for joining us at our first members’ meeting. I trust that you are enjoying the wine provided by our supplier, Oxford Wines. We are, as always, grateful to the Village Hall for hosting us this evening.

Our Annual General Meeting is slightly overdue, as our regulations require it to be held within six months of the financial year end. The committee chose to postpone the meeting to avoid any unnecessary disruption during the initial months of trading after the purchase. Next year, we will ensure the AGM is scheduled earlier and in accordance with our rules.

## Purchase of the Shop and Post Office

It is with great pleasure that I can say: we did it! On 24th March 2025, after just over two years of dedicated effort, we completed the purchase of Weston Pantry Shop and Post Office. The shop reopened that afternoon as a community-owned business – ‘Weston Community Shop’.

The journey to this point was not without its difficulties. The application and vetting process for the Post Office proved much lengthier than we had anticipated, and we were surprised by the high commercial interest rates offered by the banks, which threatened our business plan. We also needed an extension to our COF Grant, a scheme that has since been closed by the government. This closure means that other similar ventures will no longer benefit from the funding that was crucial for our success.

We overcame these challenges due to the generosity of several members, who provided us with loans at considerably lower interest rates, enabling us to raise the necessary funds for the purchase. Everything finally came together in March.

## The First Six Months

Despite a thorough handover from the previous owner, the early days of community ownership came with some challenges. The shop experienced staff shortages, and members of the committee enthusiastically stepped in to assist with back-office duties and the daily running of the shop. We also ensured that our Health & Safety obligations were met. I am deeply grateful to the committee for their dedication, as well as to the staff and customers for their patience while the shop found its footing in these initial months.

Some teething issues did arise, such as the temporary loss of some Friends Produce and an unexpected change in our newspaper supplier. The Friends Produce scheme has now been reinstated, and we have been making regular payments to both the Village Hall and the Church. The Shop Manager and committee are committed to resolving these and any other issues for our members.

In June, we were delighted to appoint Samantha Boshier as the Shop Manager. Subsequently, staffing gaps were filled with both paid staff and volunteers. I will not steal Sam's thunder, as she will shortly discuss the fantastic changes made in the past six months and her vision for the future. This transition has allowed the committee to move into more of a supporting role for the shop and its staff.

Also in June, after some cleaning and refurbishment, the flat above the shop was rented to a village tenant, putting the space to good use and providing an additional income stream for the shop.

Our COF Grant funding period concluded at the end of June. We were able to report that 100% of the capital and revenue grant had been spent before the period ended. This week, our final report was submitted to the grant manager for approval, including an independent accountant's report on our income and expenditure during the grant funding period.

## Accounts and Financial Oversight

Accounts for the year ending 31st December 2024 have been prepared by Cadwallader & Co of Chesterton, approved by the Initial Management Committee, and submitted to the FCA. The Initial Management Committee voted against requiring a full professional audit. The accounts are available online on the FCA website and cover the 'pre-trading' period from the end of our share offer and receipt of our COF grant to the start of the legal process for the purchase towards the end of 2024.

For some time, the committee has operated without a designated Treasurer, a role which I have temporarily fulfilled in addition to my duties as Chair. This has involved book-keeping and ensuring timely and accurate payments to suppliers and staff. These responsibilities have now been handed over to the Shop Manager, for which I am extremely grateful. The committee members elected this evening must appoint a Treasurer in line with our Society rules, to support the Shop Manager and provide financial oversight for our members.

Despite these challenges, I have monitored the shop's financial performance over the past six months. Our sales, Post Office revenue, and cost of goods sold have exceeded the figures projected in our financial forecasts.

However, staffing costs have been considerably higher than expected, partly due to additional staffing hours, the national minimum wage increases and rising costs from our suppliers. We have also faced several one-off expenses for repairs and maintenance. In my opinion, due to these challenges, the shop has operated at a slight loss during these initial months, especially after the first loan interest payments in September. However, these are still very early days of trading; the committee and Shop Manager are continuing to monitor the situation and are committed to ensuring the shop's sustainability as a priority. Our strong cash position enables us to invest sensibly (for example, in renovation works) to expand the shop's offerings, provides flexibility to manage short-term losses and to potentially also reduce our loan liability to reduce interest payments.

## Membership

Following our Share Offer, the Society now comprises 116 members, with community share capital of £161,250. In accordance with our share offer documents, share withdrawals and interest payments on community shares are paused for the first three years following the share offer to allow the Society time to stabilise.

Due to operational pressures on the committee over the last 18 months, active recruitment of new members to the Society has not taken place. This should be a priority for the new committee: to develop a membership strategy that welcomes newcomers to the village and encourages those previously undecided to join us at this significant moment for the village.

## Looking Forward

As we look ahead to the coming year, the primary focus of the incoming committee and Shop Manager will be to implement plans to ensure the shop operates profitably and sustainably, while continuing to serve our customers' needs. Clive and Sam will elaborate on some of the strategies we intend to pursue in their reports.

One way to reduce costs is through the use of volunteers to assist the Shop Manager and work alongside the paid staff. The committee and Shop Manager invite anyone willing and able to volunteer in any capacity—whether through restocking, running errands, working shifts in the shop, or joining the committee—to let us know how they can help.

Under the leadership of the Shop Manager, with the committee's support, we will continue to seek improvements for the Shop and Post Office, explore new ways to support community events and key community assets like the Church and Village Hall, expand the Friends Produce fundraising initiative, and seek to increase our membership following our success in achieving community ownership of the Shop and Post Office.

## Thanks and Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who has contributed to our success: the Initial Management Committee members (past and present), the Shop staff, volunteers, the previous owner Yasemin, the Village Hall, our Friends Produce suppliers, and, most importantly, our members and customers. Your support has been vital in helping us fulfil our mission to save our shop, sandwiches, and sausage rolls as we embark on this exciting new journey together as the Weston Community Shop, owned by the community.

Sam Sharp

Chair – Weston SOS Limited