

A Case Study - A Rotary club for the future...change or die!

It was in October 2017 that President Paul Lockley spoke to a meeting of past Presidents about the decline in membership at the Rotary club of Wolverhampton. He said there was an urgent need to take positive action if the demise of one of the oldest and previously largest clubs in the District was to be avoided. There was some resistance bordering on complacency, but eventually he was given some valuable support and a President's Review Group (PRG) was established to look at ways and means of making the club more attractive to new, and younger, diverse, members.

After much consideration, a plan was formulated under the headline 'where do we go from here?'

The key points in the plan were:

- Stripping out some of the stodgy regalia and symbols of a staid lunchtime club – including the mothballing of lecterns, the very large wooden Presidents' chair and the display of past Presidents' banners.
- The establishment of a ladder of incoming Presidents to cover the next 4 years to give a stable background of enthusiastic support for the changes.
- More flexibility in the style of meetings – which led to the introduction of at least one so called 'freestyle' meeting every month whereby there was no formal lunchtime meeting but visits to theatres, other clubs, places of interest and informal, fellowship evening events.

Rotarian Jerry Hobbs took over the responsibility for recruitment with a very broad brief. He instigated a programme called 'Let's Talk Rotary and You.' One of the features of this was the adoption of the term 'bespoke membership' and this was introduced at a series of informal gatherings in non-Rotary settings at which prospective new members were invited to meet a very small group of club members, having previously been met on a 'one to one' basis. There was a candid exchange of ideas of how Rotary can meet the aspirations of younger generations who want to serve their communities whilst prioritising their families, their developing careers and pursuing other good causes that they may already be involved in. Some made it clear that they couldn't possibly attend lunchtime club or weekday committee meetings because of work commitments. Thus, it was clear that the club had to make changes, including to its committee and regular meeting schedules.

The need for change became very obvious if the club was to lower the average age, break the glass ceiling of female membership and become more ethnically diverse, reflecting the nature of the City of Wolverhampton. Indeed, one small, but significant change introduced was that the club is now called The Rotary Club of the City of Wolverhampton – a change that has been ratified by Rotary GB and I. The name change represents a symbolic outward expression of the changes that are taking place in the club, giving it its new, modern outlook.

The findings and recommendations of the PRG generated a questionnaire to all the members intended to gauge the willingness for change. The results showed that there was widespread concern and support for change and although there was some, not unexpected, divergence of views it was clear that we could proceed with the plans.

In January 2019, Les Goodchild from the Newport Lite club was invited to visit to give an outline of the new style of Rotary as demonstrated by his club. We gained some valuable guidance and encouragement to continue with the changes that were already underway.

The process is ongoing and a major review of the committee structure covering the way the club conducts its Rotary work is currently under discussion. One valuable lesson we learned was that it is essential to have at least one strong willed driver who is willing to take ownership of change to overcome the 'naysayers' and those who simply wish to see out their time in Rotary in the comfortable, old fashioned environment they are used to.

The overall aim is to reinvent the club to create a welcoming, flexible atmosphere.

Have we succeeded?

In the last thirteen months we have been joined by Andile (32), Alvine, Susan, Lisa, Julie, David, Sudhir, Sally and Katie, with more in prospect. There have been 2 transfers from other clubs.

Here's what one of our newer members, 32-year-old Lisa says: (Lisa, a keen Wolves fan, became a Rotarian in October 2019. She works for the City Council in supporting care home residents when they are admitted to hospital; She is co-founder of the Wolves Play Cafe, a social enterprise supporting young children in deprived areas.)

Lisa, along with another new member, Dave, has joined the club governing council.

"Perception before:

I was aware that Rotary donated to charitable causes in the city and held fundraisers locally – two of which I was familiar with from being a citizen were Dragon Boats and Tree of Remembrance but was not familiar with Rotary's national and international significance and impact, or even that there was more than one club in the city. I actually came to raise my awareness when visiting due to a recommendation from VSO to share the voluntary work I had undertaken in Nepal through International Citizen Service.

I had a perception it was for older businessmen and was definitely unclear about how joining as a member could come about. I also had a perception that it was far more expensive to be a member than it actually is.

Now:

It's full of passionate, experienced, friendly people who want to make a difference where it's needed locally, nationally and internationally. I have been welcomed at every opportunity – authentically and warmly. There are certain traditions that naturally have led to the preconceptions I highlight above but there is a clear sense of embracing change and difficult conversations within the club and appetite to move forwards to be able to create impact in our city. It was helpful to have a few friendly mentors who were always on hand to help explain the workings and feel at ease, including how the structure and committees worked in action.

Comments for the future:

I think the foundations for the future are in and to use the impetus to continue on the same path. Let's embrace some of the positive energy and movements that this current crisis has created – for example – let's echo the diversity of Wolverhampton in the club, where in our city 40% of the population are from BAME backgrounds. Let's work with our communities and listen, empower ideas and people as well as continuing more traditional forms of donating and traditions, which still have an important place too in the club.

In practical ways – when it's safe to do so - let's use more of the city and be more visible locally; move meetings and social events around such places as LightHouse or some of the community spaces to further strengthen city relationships and new potential members. Virtual meetings are great and though both email and Zoom I think it's a really flexible way to welcome new members and gain engagement with busy schedules."

PDG Richard Green