

# **National sales platform triples income of Livingston social enterprise**

**Livingston social enterprise Spark Creations is now selling its products nationally across the UK, leading to a tripling of its income.**

The Craigshill-based provider of gifts, which are all made by local volunteers, recorded profits of more than £10,000 after its most successful year yet, by introducing trading on eBay, Etsy as well as on its own hugely successful online store.

Organisers are now beginning an ambitious expansion by moving into the corporate market, selling their products as gifts for large employers and organisations locally and across the UK.

The social enterprise is a commercial arm of Spark – formerly the Craigshill Good Neighbour Network – whose aim is to reduce loneliness and social isolation by providing activity groups, trips, events, and volunteering opportunities.

Spark Creations began four years ago after organisers sold marmalade made by a local member and the business snowballed from there. Its range now includes knitwear, produced by 15 volunteers, confectionery bouquets and branded goods, including t-shirts, mugs and umbrellas.

Spark CEO Alex Fleming said the business has caught the public imagination because of its self-help philosophy.

She said: "I think people appreciate our entrepreneurial approach. Rather than relying solely on funding streams to pay for the important services Spark provides, we have developed a successful way of generating our own income.

"As well as encouraging people to buy from Spark Creations, to keep the money in the local economy, we also provide employability opportunities for our volunteers.

"Our experience of being a successful social enterprise means we have acquired key skills that we can pass on to our members and it also serves as an example to those who were perhaps thinking of starting their own business."

Enterprise manager Pauline Hanratty said Spark Creation's business plan for the next year is to consolidate on its nationwide retail success, while pushing further into the corporate market.

She said: "Last year we produced an item specifically for Sky, one of our area's biggest employers, for them to put on their online catalogue. At Christmas Remax bought personalised baubles from us which they used as gifts for their clients.

"We also produced a range of branded products, including mugs and umbrellas, for one of the local football teams.

"Our appeal to businesses, when they are buying gifts for staff, clients and suppliers, both at Christmas and at other times of the year, is that rather than going to a commercial enterprise, to buy from us instead.

"It is a simple way of helping them to meet their corporate social responsibility targets, while contributing to a worthwhile cause and also helping us to deliver our employability programmes."

She added: "Our people are learning new skills all the time. We buy in the raw materials, and they are turned into gifts by

our 15 volunteers. Most of them come into the building but there are some who work from home.

“They enjoy it, and it gives them a purpose. They like to knit but for a purpose. They will knit away, confident and pleased with the knowledge that some good will come from their knitting.”

According to Hanratty, the business model works because of the support the organisation receives both from customers and local volunteers.

She said: “Our customers are members who use the club, including volunteers and now, because we sell online, we have customers from across the UK.

“We have a good following and an enormous success rate on eBay. All the items we sell on eBay is donated so everything, apart from the packaging and posting, is profit.

“Other things, the sentiment gifts, the sweetie bouquets, all the knitted items, which are made by our volunteers are sold on Etsy and on our online shop as well as in the physical store.

“We are not at the stage where we benefit from discounts from suppliers because our bulk orders are not big enough, but we plan to expand and, hopefully, our orders will grow to a level where we can take advantage of those cost reductions. It’s all about economies of scale.”

She added: “Fundraising of any kind provides volunteers with a deep sense of achievement. One of our ladies has just been trained in how to sell items on eBay, which involves knowing how to take photographs of the products to show them to their best advantage, listing them with a compelling description, researching price and promoting them so that they come to the attention of potential customers.

“When that volunteer comes in to Spark the next time, there is a deep sense of satisfaction and achievement in seeing that that item has sold, often in numbers. She then has to package and post the items out, knowing that she has helped to generate.”







