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# Ayrshire Business in the Community

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## 1. Outline

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The Ayrshire Business in the Community initiative (ABITC) aims to build links between businesses in Ayrshire and the groups and areas within Ayrshire that suffer social and economic deprivation. The goal is to create mutual benefit for both businesses and communities by building on the skills, resources and generosity that exist in the area. The scheme is run in partnership with Ayrshire Chamber of Commerce. It has been in existence for three years.

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## 2. Funding Partners

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ABITC is primarily funded by Scottish Enterprise Ayrshire (the local economic development agency) who initially provided funding for three years and have recently re-funded the scheme for a further three years. Some additional funding is also provided by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

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## 3. The area

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The Ayrshire region lies to the south-west of Glasgow and has a population of around 368,000. Beyond the three large towns of Ayr, Kilmarnock and Irvine, the area is predominantly rural with many people living in smaller towns and villages. The vast majority of businesses are SMEs with many being family-owned enterprises employing just a few people. There are, however, some much larger companies who are also major employers. Examples include the drinks manufacturer Diageo who have a strong presence and the pharmaceuticals company Glaxo SmithKline.

#### 4. The need

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Jan Hay, ABITC manager, explains that parts of Ayrshire suffer from problems of high unemployment, low skills and low self-esteem among the workforce. In some areas, unemployment is running at over 18% compared to a Scottish average of 5.6%. There is also little spirit of entrepreneurship among young people and many of the most talented individuals move away from the area to find work. These factors have combined in some areas to create acute social problems and fractured communities.

#### 5. The strategy

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ABITC's main aim is to try and alleviate Ayrshire's social problems and develop the local economy. This is done by making use of the skills that businesses already have rather than encouraging simple cash donations. ABITC tries to "focus on the good organisations in Ayrshire" and help them interact with the communities in which they operate and depend on.

To aid this process, ABITC (in partnership with Scottish Enterprise Ayrshire and Ayrshire Chamber of Commerce) is developing a Bronze, Silver and Gold award scheme to recognise and reward companies that contribute to their communities. This 'stepped' scheme means that businesses can progress at their own pace on social engagement issues. A Bronze award is relatively easy to achieve: Silver and Gold more challenging. ABITC also work with businesses who are working towards the EFQM Business Excellence Model. By participating in an ABITC scheme, companies can achieve points towards the 'social engagement' part of the EFQM model.

When working with businesses, Jan is insistent that ABITC "try not to use terms like CSR" because it often confuses and demotivates companies. Instead, she gradually builds up a relationship of trust and understanding by initially focusing on relatively simple issues like health and safety policies and then gradually moving on to more complex community engagement programmes when the company is ready. "You can't eat an elephant in one go", she says. Wherever possible, ABITC try to get as much local recognition for a company's efforts as possible – often by involving the local press – which gives the company good publicity and is another reward for their efforts.

Jan says that the first three years of ABITC have been a learning curve in which she has found out much about the problems the area faces and the resources that exist to deal with them. Becoming known the local 'hub' for information and advice on business and community issues also takes time. Companies and community groups need to know that an organisation is stable, trustworthy and professional before they will commit to working with it.

## 6. Key achievements

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ABITC has met all its original targets for involving businesses and community groups to tackle social problems. Alongside this, many other initiatives have also been created:

- **NEST Programme (Non-Employee Supported Training)**

This scheme involves companies providing one or two free places on their existing staff training courses for unemployed people. This allows unemployed people to gain valuable training but costs the participating company very little because the courses would already be run for their employees.

For example, the engineering company Dana Glacier Vandervell agreed to provide a four-day fully-certified forklift driving course free of charge to a participant from the Kilmarnock area. ABITC then approached East Ayrshire Employment Initiative and through them identified Robert, unemployed and living in a deprived community (social inclusion partnership area). Robert had been unemployed for a long period of time, and was delighted to be given the opportunity to take up the training place offered. After completing the training Robert went on to find full-time employment.

- **Ayrshire Modern Apprentice Community Challenge**

To date, this scheme has involved 18 different companies in the Ayrshire region. The programme challenges young apprentices at these companies to organise a community project, such as refurbishing a play area. The young apprentices, who work together in teams, are not given any money for the projects but instead are encouraged to seek help and resources from others in the local area to help them complete their projects. This helps forge links in the community and introduces young people to the idea of community engagement. The scheme has been so successful that is now being rolled out across Scotland.

- **Human Resources Group**

This scheme works via a group email network that allows companies to swap experience and expertise on HR issues. It allows the larger companies in the area (such as Diageo and GlaxoSmithkline) who have dedicated HR departments to provide quick and useful advice to smaller companies on issues such as equal opportunities and staff management. The scheme was virtually free to set up and has proved very successful.

- **Community Support Programme**

ABITC developed this programme in 2003 as a method of persuading professional firms to become more involved in their local communities. A letter was sent out to a number of

professional firms in Ayrshire such as architects, accountants, IT professionals, solicitors etc. asking them if they would provide an 'in principle' agreement of their support.

The response was good and the firms were asked to provide a 'bank' of hours that could then be used to assist local community groups and other voluntary sector organisations. For example, ABITC identified a local project 'Mothers Against Drugs' in Ardrossan who were in the process of moving to larger premises and required assistance with a planning application. ABITC had been offered a 'bank' of 4 hours per month from a local architect, WI Munro in Kilmarnock. David McCall from the firm met with the group and talked over their issues to find a solution. The group were given drawings and advice on planning procedures. No charge was made for this service.

Another case involved a local community sports project which had been given funding to employ two members of staff but had no experience of HR procedures and were afraid of making costly mistakes. Brian Murphy, an Employment Law Solicitor from Ayr, agreed to provide the group with guidance in the area of contracts, interview procedures, and grievance procedures.

## **7. Role played by public bodies**

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The support of Scottish Enterprise Ayrshire (the local economic development agency) has been instrumental to the success of ABITC. Not only did SE Ayrshire realise there was a need to bring businesses and communities closer together, they also realised that they themselves lacked the skills and expertise to make this happen. This resulted in them establishing a dedicated body (ABITC) to facilitate greater activity in this area. ABITC's association with the well-established Ayrshire Chamber of Commerce has also meant they can share resources and contacts and work in harmony towards improving the region.

## **8. Role played by businesses**

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Jan says that there is a real culture among Ayrshire businesses of wanting to help tackle social problems. Because of the family-run, local nature of the business community, most people working for or running companies in Ayrshire are confronted with the problems of unemployment and community breakdown on a regular basis. Jan says that she rarely has to battle against the "what's in it for me?" attitude from businesses that schemes promoting CSR in other areas have to confront. Most companies she works with can see beyond the 'bottom line benefits' and have a real desire to help where they see problems. Jan finds that in many cases there is a real "generosity of spirit" that makes the job of convincing companies to help in the first place much easier.

## 9. Conclusions

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The scheme is successful for two main reasons: its acts as a visible ‘hub’ of information and it is a local initiative dealing with local problems. It can become known amongst businesses as “the place to go” for any information on working with the community. It removes the confusion of having multiple bodies doing similar things. This is not to say that ABITC can always help, but it can often point businesses in the right direction.

The scheme is also very much an Ayrshire-based initiative to tackle Ayrshire’s problems using the resources and knowledge of Ayrshire people. This local approach is vital, since different regions have different issues and require different strategies to solve them.

Jan says that any difficulties the scheme has faced have tended to arise from the community rather than from businesses. Sometimes community groups reject companies’ help in the form of skills and advice because they would rather have money. Changing this mindset can be difficult.

Securing funding for the scheme can also be a distraction to its main activities. Even though funding is now guaranteed for three years, it won’t be long before Jan’s attention is drawn towards finding further funding.

## 10. Conclusions

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“More of the same!” The plan is to nurture the relationships that ABITC has already built up, forge new ones and increase the organisation’s visibility as much as possible.

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