

## **STORE IS THE CORE**

The RSA is unusual as a trade association in the extent of its involvement at local level. We believe that county and regional organisations have a key role to play supporting rural shops. Here is one such scheme in which we have been very closely involved.

A few years ago, the Haskins Committee reported to Government that there were too many different agencies working to support the rural sector. As a result, the Countryside Agency lost its economic support functions. Until then, they had been very active in helping rural retailers through a team of retail advisers (several of whom are still involved with the RSA) and grant schemes to encourage capital investment. This economic role was taken over by Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). However, as a group these organisations have had far less interest in supporting rural micro-businesses - their priorities have tended to lie elsewhere.

One key exception to this pattern has been the South West Regional Development Agency (SWRDA), which has backed the Store is the Core (SITC) programme. This scheme is run by a partnership of which the Rural Shops Alliance is an active member. The other main organisations involved are Wiltshire Community First (the rural community council for the county), The Plunkett Foundation and SWAN.

Store is the Core is a regional programme that offered grant investment and professional advice to retailers and start-up community groups across the South West. The objective was to help secure a more viable future for current village shops and in a few cases to help communities to replace a lost facility. The scheme has provided consultancy support for 58 shops, with 25 receiving grants to help with capital investment. In addition, start-up help was delivered to 13 community shop groups, with 5 also receiving grant support. The RSA provided retail consultancy to a significant number of them.

However, it was Tim Coomer of Community First who supported Winterbourne Post Office and Stores located 6 miles North East of Salisbury and owned by Wendy and Trevor Merrifield. It is the only outlet in the village, serving a close knit rural community with a population of about 1,350 people. They applied to the Scheme for advice and grant investment towards desperately needed external structural and cosmetic works to improve the outside of the shop. The shop also needed internal refurbishment to upgrade shelving, lighting and improve the store's layout, thus helping to increase sales and profitability. Ultimately this would increase the long-term viability of the store.

In July 2008 the Merrifield's were told they had been successful and the full £5,000 had been awarded towards the costs involved. Work began in earnest on Tuesday 5th August, ripping out the old shop fittings and flooring. Wendy, Trevor, their staff and family all got stuck into removing the stock and equipment and to maintaining a reduced service to their valued regular customers, including continuing their daily paper rounds. After a chaotic week

of dust, crumbling ceilings, and late nights the shell was finished, with flooring in place, new lighting, shelving, slat boarding and counter. With the assistance of Tim Coomer from Community First, staff and family members the shop was put back together to reopen just a week later. Since then customers have been extremely impressed with the improvements and sales have increased significantly.

It is important to realise that this type of support is a positive recognition that village shops have a role far beyond being a source of cans of baked beans. Anybody who has spent any time in one will know how important they are as a centre of the community and as a keystone to the lives of many of the residents.

This relationship between community and shop was something that SITC attempted to foster. The RSA ran a residential training course for staff members from all of the community councils in the South West to help them appreciate rural shops, their problems and their strengths. This in turn helped them to help local communities to understand the importance of their shop and the crucial need to support them.

To date, SWRDA is the only RDA to have funded a programme of this sort.

The Store is the Core Programme is currently closed for applications but subject to further funding it is hoped to be able to offer a similar programme of advice and financial investment later in 2009.

For more information go to: [www.storeisthecore.co.uk](http://www.storeisthecore.co.uk)

#### **THE RSA VIEW**

**This has proved to be an excellent scheme with long-term benefits to the shops and communities involved. In the coming months, we hope to work with other partner organisations to interest RDAs in other parts of the country in supporting this relatively low key but vital work.**