

SOFA SO GOOD

SOFA Project, Bristol



Source: SOFA Project

“It’s a real pleasure seeing people appreciate the service we provide.”

Paul Townsend, SOFA Project’s Operations Manager

Wondering about a new colour scheme for the lounge or how you’re going to afford a bed for your daughter? Or are you simply annoyed with the amount of furniture you see dumped in your neighbourhood? Peter Townsend knew that it should be possible to keep furniture out of gardens, create new jobs and help those who wouldn’t normally be able to afford to set up their home to do it, all at the same time.

When did you set up SOFA and why?

We set up SOFA (Shifting Old Furniture Around) in 1980, in Bristol. We wanted to create a project that would help people, provide jobs and protect the environment, which was pretty good going for a simple idea. SOFA’s aim is to recycle all kinds of household furniture and electrical equipment. We also have a small range of brand new kitchen items such as kettles, toasters, microwaves and halogen heaters.

It sounds simple, but was it really?

No it wasn’t that easy. **We started small: we had one van and a handful of volunteers working in the Bristol area. But we knew there was a need for SOFA. It was important to stick it out.**

You had objectives to help people, provide jobs and protect the environment. Have you?

Well it’s a continuous job, but we think we are making a difference. SOFA helps over 5000 households a year to furnish their homes at affordable prices. We collect over 25,000 items a year that would otherwise have gone to landfill. **From a handful of volunteers, we now have 36 permanent members of staff** and we deliver all over the Avon area.

What has been your best moment?

Our best moment keeps repeating itself – every time we deliver furniture to people who don’t have any is the best part. Until you’ve seen a family living literally without anything on the floor other than maybe a bean bag you don’t realise what a difference projects like this can make. It keeps us wanting to do it.

And the worst?

Undoubtedly the worst thing that has happened to us has been building up part of the business on Government promises, only to watch those promises not be delivered. In anticipation of the European

Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) Directive we leased a new building and took on additional staff because of the demand that the Directive would create. But then the Government delayed implementation until July next year. We had already invested in people and buildings – we couldn't get out of the lease so we had to let good people go which was the worst thing.

SOFA has done a lot since it started. What next?

SOFA works with manufacturers to pick up old washing machines. We are looking forward to next July when the WEEE Directive comes into force as it will mean that more equipment will be recycled.

What advice would you give to anyone thinking of starting a project like yours?

Make sure that you have work actually agreed and income coming in before you start investing. **There isn't a lot of money in this industry but there are people with lots of social conscience and there is a lot of reward in this work.**

Facts

- There are approximately 400 re-use organisations working with social and environmental aims across the UK. These vary in size from small local charities to large social enterprises.
- The Furniture Re-use Network estimates that around 2 million items of furniture/white goods will be collected for re-use in 2007.
- The furniture re-use sector:
 - employs around 3,000 staff
 - provides training for over 5,000 trainees
 - supports and occupies over 8,000 volunteers
 - helps around ½ million low income households
 - reuses 2 million items including ¼ million electrical items
 - diverts 85,000 tonnes of waste from landfill

Further Information

What can you, your group or your organisation do? Everyone can do something about recycling - in their homes, as a member of a group or club or even in their work place.

- The Furniture Re-use Network is the national body which supports, assists and develops charitable re-use organisations across the UK through information, representation, events and other support. If you wish to donate furniture, contact the FRN on 0117 954 3571 or visit www.frn.org.uk
- For general information on the community waste sector, visit www.communitywaste.org.uk