

O Law i Law and the best start: Caernarfon Town Council

Hello, this episode will be in Welsh.

If your Welsh isn't up to following along, then we are completely fine with you skipping to the next one.

Siôn Owen (Audit Wales)

Hello and welcome to the exchange, a podcast produced by Audit Wales.
I'm Siôn Owen and I'm working for the exchange on good.

This episode is part of a series looking at the Community and Town Council sector.

This time, we went to Caernarfon to learn more about O Law i Law, a charity shop specialising in clothing for babies and children, which initially struggled to open during the pandemic.

I'm in a room at the Institute in Caernarfon, the town council buildings, and I'm here with people who are involved with the O Law i Law project.

'Have you introduced yourself please?

Councillor Anna Jane Evans (Caernarfon Town Council)

Councillor Anna Jane Evans, I'm one of the volunteers in the shop.

Councillor Ann Hopcyn (Caernarfon Town Council)

Ann Hopkin, again a town councillor and one of the volunteers at O Law i Law [From Hand to Hand].

Ellen Owen (Hand to Hand Manager)

Ellen Owen, O Law i Law's shop manager.

Siôn Owen (Audit Wales)

Thanks, hello. To begin with, can you describe what the O Law i Law project is?

Ann Hopcyn (Caernarfon Town Council)

O Law i Law is a shop that sells second-hand goods, under which we receive donations from the community. But what's unique about O Law i Law, it's all about children, from newborn babies, up to teenagers, clothes, toys, chair coaches, books, everything about parenting.

Siôn Owen (Audit Wales)

Thanks, then what triggered the start of the store, its opening and so on?

Ann Hopcyn (Caernarfon Town Council)

At the time of Covid when lockdown was in full swing some of the councillors on the Town Council realised that residents were either seeing a reduction in their salary or losing their wages altogether but still being born with their children still growing and we decided to go to our families and ask if they had any clothes their children didn't need anymore.

And that's what we did: we gathered those together in the cellar of the institute, which is the Town Council building in Caernarfon, and there's a big cellar where we collected the clothes, and then during that time the social service would come to us with a request, for example, a bundle of clothes for a five-year-old.

We would gather those together and hand them over to the social workers who would take them to the families. It became apparent after a few months of this that it was unsatisfactory that people were not given a choice of clothes themselves. So some five-year-olds are big kids but others are small kids so we felt we needed to move on from the Institute so that we had a place where the public could come and make their own choices.

Siôn Owen (Audit Wales)

And then was that the core trigger that part of the public world all pulled together during the crisis?

And then as the crisis stabilized a little bit where you then felt that people needed to be given a choice?

Ann Hopcyn (Caernarfon Town Council)

Yes and maybe Anna Jane would be talking a bit about Porthi Pawb at that time.

Anna Jane Evans (Caernarfon Town Council)

Yes, Porthi Pawb was also started during the Covid period. We were feeding people on Thursdays.

There was a bunch of volunteers coming together to cook and then distribute food to the families in the Town and there were also volunteers collecting prescriptions and going round. Was there so much hustle and bustle when during the Covid period there was pulling people together and building people, O Law i Law was just one of the things that was part of that buzz during that time.

Siôn Owen (Audit Wales)

Yes, then when you then decided to move from delivery to the store, what happened there?

Ann Hopcyn (Caernarfon Town Council)

We decided to have a shop but also that we were locating the shop in a more challenging area in relation to Caernarfon, a very important area, namely Llyn Street. But maybe there is Llyn Street, that things haven't been as prosperous in

Lake Street in the past years compared to other streets, so decide to have a shop at fourteen Lake Street and from then on March 2021 or Elen?

Ellen Owen (O Law i Law)

Yes. I started there then in May. Opened the shop, put everything in place, painted, painted, we were all busy on Sunday morning and so we lifted the tiles of the floor up and there was a lot of work but we didn't. And we opened in July and since then it has gone from strength to strength and there is still a need for the shop in town.

Siôn Owen (Audit Wales)

So still a need for it, therefore?

Ellen Owen (O Law i Law)

Yes, definitely.

Siôn Owen (Audit Wales)

Did we take a quick trip round before coming here to record and there's a lot of stuff, isn't there?

Ellen Owen (O Law i Law)

Yes, there's a lot of stuff and that's weekly. It goes down a bit for a while and then it's back again in a big pile. 'We appreciate everything we get to the shop, loyal people who come into the shop and also visitors who come into town at the time of the holidays' on the daily tripia from Llandudno. A ma' pawb di gwirioni efo'r siop ac deud pw dŵd y'n gŵd y bod all yn un un un pos to uns children yn rhan mwya but do's na'm byd yn i areaal n'w o such where ma' nw'n dŵad o so then na mae o'n it's a very good feeling.

Anna Jane Evans (Caernarfon Town Council)

I think that the fact that it's a children's thing, charity shopping in general doesn't sell children's goods and so it's, O Law i Law has identified a big gap in the market then the truth comes and has filled a very obvious gap, to be honest isn't it?

'Do you know? But because they're stuff that takes up a lot of space and charity shops in general don't accept the goods then because they don't have a place to store them.

Siôn Owen (Audit Wales)

And just for context for people who don't know Caernarfon. Lake Street is the street where the national chains and big shops would be. A street without traffic most of the time. And then of course there are all those who have suffered over the last twenty years, as the chains have moved out of the middle of town. So it's nice to see a thriving shop in the middle of that street isn't it. So, volunteers staffing the store?

Ellen Owen (O Law i Law)

Yes, me as a manager and then a team of volunteers doing two shifts in a day ten under half an hour two days, half an hour two two days under three. They're willing to work all day because they love having the company, seeing new faces and also being with each other in the shop volunteering.

Siôn Owen (Audit Wales)

Yes, it's a community element for volunteers so yes. The community of volunteers as well as helping the community by volunteering.

Ellen Owen (O Law i Law)

Yes, it helps them too, it's not just what they're doing, it's helping them. Quite a few of them live alone, they don't see family every day, then they come to the shop with pleasure. Help and see babies bach and yes there are quite a few babies coming along.

But does everyone love the shop?

Siôn Owen (Audit Wales)

Oh well, that leads to the next question:

What difference do you see in how the shop has developed and flourished over the years since we started?

Ann Hopcyn (Caernarfon Town Council)

The shop has long since gained its place in Caernarfon and with the local people people come from other places in unison to come to O Law i Law and Anna Jane was talking about the children's thing in particular. We have things for little babies but we have stuff right through where in a normal charity shop they have one railing of children's things. So people have realised that.

They have also realized that the clothes, especially the first sizes, are no worse. They've barely worn them so they come back for that but I love it when visitors come and you get to ask them 'if you have a shop like this where you live?' And of course the answer is no. The shop is very special in its provision and there are visitors coming back too.

They come on their holiday to Llandudno and they have a day in Caernarfon and they call in with them down again. So, certainly there is a great welcome and there has been good support for her in this community, in the area and beyond as well.

Siôn Owen (Audit Wales)

Yes and then this is also an example of how a competent council can use the general competence power because under that the shop has been set up.

Ann Hopcyn (Caernarfon Town Council)

Yes. That power shows that the council is run in a proper way and therefore we can then maintain our shop under that jurisdiction.

Anna Jane Evans (Caernarfon Town Council)

And I think that the shop has helped us to have the competence then too because I think that neither thing feeds the other.

Ellen Owen (O Law i Law)

It's helped me terribly too. Personally, I've the best job ever.

Okay, like I'm ready to be retired, but I don't know what to do about that, I've done five years, it was two months, and we've got two others I think, and then no, I don't know what's going to happen but yes I've had great pleasure and I'm getting hired for doing something I enjoy.

Siôn Owen (Audit Wales)

Yes and that's very nice to hear

Ellen Owen (O Law i Law)

Yes, it is.

Anna Jane Evans (Caernarfon Town Council)

Then volunteering is fun too. I mean, I'm ironing at home but I'm ironing at the store. Being in the back of the shop and just going through a bag and there's some satisfaction in emptying a bag or emptying a box and getting them out there. Because you see the piles and stuff coming in, you just see them cleared and go out and then. Or if you're on the till and you see people buying them you're thinking 'oh me smuddied that' but it's just, there's that feeling that all that stuff goes to landfill or under us in terms of the waste under us producing so much stuff. A lot too much stuff and it's just a good use of our hamsar and of and of the stuff that we can reuse and recycle like this. And that he's helping people financially and in the way that families come in who can afford it, well we're able to supply a need when we're asking for help is also Ellen. There is great value to the thing.

Ellen Owen (O Law i Law)

Well I'll have one young girl saying that she'll be able to stay at home for an extra three months after the birth of a baby because she's going to have money in the shop with coaches, clothes, moses baskets, whatever she needs from in the shop. And if she didn't decide 'just three months of our salary if you're going to pay for that, I can stay home with the baby for three months longer'.

Siôn Owen (Audit Wales)

Yes there's a lot of things, a lot of kit coming with a baby especially the first time yes?

Ann Hopcyn (Caernarfon Town Council)

Yes, but we're also pretty selective with our stuff, you know, there's some things that aren't good enough to go out, so we're able to pass some of them on.

Siôn Owen (Audit Wales)

Yes, because there's a lot of stuff in the back there, but yet there's a routine when someone gets their eyes in. No, it's nice to see.

Ann Hopcyn (Caernarfon Town Council)

I'm glad you see the order that's there. There's order, there's a lot of stuff and it's work. We need to keep on top of the donations and I remember when we got the first donations I thought well that's it now, there is gin people in Caernarfon no more things to give.

And here we are five years later trying our best to keep on top of the things that arrive and ma' na bethe excellentch yn arriving, a brand new thing especially in the first sizes ma' na bethe fanna with a label. It hasn't been worn at all, so we're so glad that we're able to supply the need and save, save throwing where it might happen otherwise.

Siôn Owen (Audit Wales)

And on that you can share what the future holds for the shop, the project and the ball?

Do you carry on if, plans to develop?

Ellen Owen (O Law i Law)

I didn't think it would have lasted five years when I started. I got my first contract for six months I think and five years on and I'm still there. I hope in another five years she'll still be there, she's not the same people running the shop but she'll still be there to help people.

Anna Jane Evans (Caernarfon Town Council)

It's very difficult to imagine Caernarfon without O Law i Lawr ŵan deud y tigr cause mae o'n... There are so many people involved in it. I guess, not just the volunteers. It's the people who bring stuff.

He's created momentum of his own in so many ways to tell the truth. As far as we're concerned, I can't predict that we're going to be shut down or whatever. No it may be that we will want to move or we will want to look at the other possibilities, but the service will certainly be on I'm hoping I can continue.

Ann Hopcyn (Caernarfon Town Council)

We would very much hope as an entity that O Law i Law will be here for years to come. Consideration will need to be given to location and so on possibly in the coming years. There's also a need, maybe one of the challenges is to attract

volunteers, and if we're as volunteers we're five years older than when it started when the shop started, so that's one of the challenges I would assume is getting people in.

But once volunteers arrive and start working then they become part of the family. And yes, the shop gets what they donate to the shop, but the shop contributes so much to us as volunteers too.

And we meet people and 'what's the baby's age?' and 'what's the baby's name?' and we're having a conversation with mothers if no one has spoken to them all day. Maybe that's the first conversation they have that day and we're here to welcome them and just some little thing. Nothing big you know just some little thing. Well I think that's also because that community involvement makes it a lot more valuable than just shop.

Siôn Owen (Audit Wales)

Yes, it eventually creates a community in it?

Anna Jane Evans (Caernarfon Town Council)

Yes, and he sees children coming in with their pocket brass wanting to buy things, that they choose to come to O Law i Law. That's always the case on a Saturday morning sometimes, so no children come in and choose to come to there to buy.

The whole charity shop idea, the stigma of a charity shop, was shattered in their childhood then, right? It's become a habit and it's, that's a long-term thing then in their way of seeing things and choosing to buy a lot.

Ellen Owen (O Law i Law)

But a lot of the children don't spy on us as a charity shop either, they just spy on us as a dois shop, a blue shop, an Anti Ellen shop and so they love to come in. And it doesn't matter how much they spend fifty pence five pounds, they lick to buy something in the shop.

That's what's going far, isn't it?

Anna Jane Evans (Caernarfon Town Council)

Yes, it's something they're up to themselves.

Ann Hopcyn (Caernarfon Town Council)

At a very reasonable price.

Ellen Owen (O Law i Law)

Terrible.

Siôn Owen (Audit Wales)

Yes, then O Law i Law, on a lake street in Caernarfon, a shop that is a community in its own right and makes a positive difference to the community.

Ann Hopcyn (Caernarfon Town Council)

Definitely we would, and I think it's also important for us to remember that we thank Elen as manager. We're certainly thanking our volunteers who keep us going. But the community, the people who bring gifts, the customers, the customers who may come once, the regular customers under us thank those too, and thanks to the Town Council.

Cyngor Tre has been extremely positive about O Law i Law since the beginning and continues to be so, so we are very grateful for the councillors' support for the initiative.

They see the value, their constituents see the value, so it's good that that support is so ready.

Siôn Owen (Audit Wales)

Thank you very much. Thank you very much for sharing your story.

Rhian Jones (Audit Wales)

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