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**CAWTHRON MARLBOROUGH
ENVIRONMENT
AWARDS
2023**

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JUDGES' REPORT COMMUNITY INNOVATION THE BLUE DOOR

INTERVIEWED

Bronwen Demmocks, Manager

DATE

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JUDGES

Kay Saville-Smith, Julia Brown, Kaja Jungersen

INTRODUCTION

The Blue Door was Marlborough's first recycling shop, opening in 1998. It was the idea of Nativity Church parishioner Beverley Kingston, who recognised the value of donating secondhand goods for sale as well as reducing the amount going to landfill.

The Blue Door is now a substantial charitable organisation selling affordable recycled items and distributing their surplus profits back to local groups. Since 2005 they have distributed more than one million dollars in community grants.

Its mission is to be a leading re-use organisation that supports the Marlborough community through actively encouraging re-use, financial and people support.



The Blue Door focuses on:

- Benefiting and protecting the environment by encouraging the community to recycle and reuse unwanted goods, rather than sending them to landfill.
- Working with other community organisations to distribute donated goods to whānau in need, rather than purchasing new items.
- Paying their surplus back to the Marlborough community by providing grants to not-for-profit community groups.
- Ensuring a sustainable operating model to enable The Blue Door to continue to serve the community long-term.

GENERAL INFORMATION

The Blue Door shop and sorting area is at 46 Seymour Street, Blenheim. It accepts donations of clean and functional furniture, kitchenware, linen, books and magazines, clothing, outdoor and sporting equipment, fabric, wool and craft materials, jewellery and plants. They don't take large whiteware, televisions, computers (and accessories), house parts or car parts.

Some donations turn out to be unusable and must go to landfill. Marlborough District Council has been very supportive and provides a skip at the back of the shop and a plentiful supply of official rubbish bags for items that can't be used or recycled.

Staff and volunteers sort some donations such as metals and some plastics for recycle. Buttons are retrieved. Clothing accounts for 20-25% of sales and they are committed to keeping clothing cheap and affordable. Some items have increased in price slightly, but overall, they strongly believe goods need to remain affordable.

There are four paid staff, with a new Assistant Manager starting at the end of 2022. There are 42 volunteers, who are the heart of The Blue Door. Two work on the counter and the rest are sorting, pricing and driving to pickups. The youngest are in their 20s and the oldest in their 80s.

There have been some challenges with Covid, but work has continued with thousands of volunteer hours contributed. In the past financial year, 8357 hours of work was undertaken by volunteers. Most say they volunteer to make a difference, and their efforts are appreciated and acknowledged by the manager:

“The volunteers who work with us are incredible. We are humbled by how much of their time they dedicate to the service of the community. One of the biggest rewards is knowing that financially disadvantaged individuals and families, not-for-profit groups and community organisations are funded and enriched by items that in the past would have become land-fill. We get excited knowing that pre-loved items have the opportunity to be re-used and re-loved by new owners”.



The Blue Door has a lot of regular customers, and volunteers greet them by name. Social interaction is part of the job. For some customers, coming to The Blue Door is an outing and it's important they get a friendly reception.

Sometimes security and shoplifting is a problem and cameras have been installed. Volunteers call the manager if difficult situations arise. Covid and issues around mask-wearing have resulted in some long-time customers becoming troublesome. Sometimes other customers

step in to help or the police are called. Recently staff participated in a police-led training session on managing difficult customers and shoplifters.

While first established through the Nativity Church, The Blue Door is now a standalone incorporated society with a Board of seven members, each selected for their skill set, such as finance or marketing. They undertake a term of three years with an option for a further three years.

There are no sponsors and no grants are received by The Blue Door. Everything is funded from the surplus made from the sale of donated goods, even the ute used for pick-ups. The Blue Door keeps a reserve for future operating costs and to deal with fluctuations in income.

From the surplus made from sales, The Blue Door distributes a significant amount of money into the community. Annually there are two funding rounds. Since 2005 they have distributed one million dollars in community grants. The December 2022 distribution was \$25,000. There are no stringent requirements for grants apart from the organisation being a Marlborough-based not-for-profit and that the grant is used appropriately. Applications for grants are assessed on their merits.

The Blue Door collaborates with other community organisations such as Plunket, Women's Refuge or Piki Ora, who might refer whānau. Sometimes people have a goods voucher which may be redeemed on a house-load of essentials such as furniture, linen and kitchen goods.

Another Blue Door initiative, the Kingston Fund, distributes funds to individuals who may have had unexpected costs, such as car repairs. The Blue Door may be approached by schools who are often the first to see whānau in need or organisations working with vulnerable people.

During the year, as goods come in, staff collect unused items (often still in their wrapping) and students from Marlborough Girls College wrap them up for Christmas. In 2022 there were 19 banana boxes of new, unused gifts to distribute. Other collaborations include small jars for the foodbank and a battery collection point for recycling.



THE JUDGES WERE IMPRESSED BY:

- The commitment and engagement of the staff and volunteers is testament to the ethos of the organisation. They are clearly innovative and creative and able to think about myriad uses for discarded items and share those with shoppers.
- The Blue Door is an organisation that cares for both volunteers and also the community it serves. The focus is on keeping things affordable.
- The surplus generously distributed to community organisations makes a real difference to the lives of people in the Marlborough community.
- The organisation and layout of the shop makes browsing a pleasurable and interesting experience.

PROBLEMS AND HOW THEY HAVE BEEN TACKLED

- While the shop is much larger than previous premises, there is a need to increase the size of the shop and storage spaces to cope with the increase in donated goods. Currently the storage spaces are full, exacerbated by the big cleanups people had during Covid lockdowns. Volunteers work constantly to keep on top of the volume of goods.
- Like other organisations, recruitment of volunteers is ongoing. Roles and skill sets required are varied - drivers (distribution and pick-up), shop workers (sorting and pricing) and technical crew (managers of social media online platforms) are vital to the survival of The Blue Door. Since Covid, online channels have been increasingly important in that they complement the foot traffic and street sales.
- Time is a constant pressure. Promotion of the services that The Blue Door provides and the reciprocal links with community groups who receive grants from The Blue Door requires constant attention.
- There has been an ongoing issue with people dumping rubbish at the weekends, to the extent that the Council comes regularly to clean up the detritus. Chains across the carpark entrance have been a deterrent.

SUMMARY

Many members of the public have no idea how involved The Blue Door is within the community, nor how much they contribute in the way of small, 'no strings attached' grants which enable small groups to survive. The move into the larger Seymour Street premises with a substantial showroom and parking has consolidated their position in the community. For many, The Blue Door is the first port of call to donate goods or to find a bargain.

The success of The Blue Door lies in its clear mission – to reuse and recycle goods, minimizing what goes to landfill and to donate surplus profits back to the community. The success of this is due to capable staff and an army of dedicated volunteers who have helped to build The Blue Door reputation over the years.

SUGGESTIONS

- More detailed record-keeping would help you assess environmental impacts.
- Increase partnership with the senior students at the Marlborough Colleges to establish projects to develop methods of assessing environmental impacts.
- There is huge potential to promote upcycling and the creative, repurposing of unwanted goods, not only into a new lease of life but also an unusual artwork. This could be explored with the local college art departments, U3A (University of the Third Age) or a community-minded business.
- Continue to build on the collaboration with the Repair Café.