STRONGER ROOTS

STARÁ JEDÁLEŇ:
GETTING TO KNOW OUR COMMUNITY BETTER

How a community centre in Bratislava identified the needs of its neighbours and found the right way to care for its volunteers

Nadace OSF
Nadácia Otvorenej spoločnosti
NIOK
glopolis
Batory Foundation
Financováno Evropskou unií

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Photo: Rasťo Blaško – Traditional Christmas punch at Stará jedáleň

Stará jedáleň

is a multigenerational cultural and community centre in the Rača district of Bratislava. Its vision is for people to spend time together instead of staying shut inside their apartments. Through shared experiences and connecting people from different backgrounds, the centre aims to promote social cohesion, build civic awareness and foster a friendly social climate in the community.

The centre was founded by three local civic associations and three individual community members from the neighbourhood who joined forces to acquire and renovate the old canteen building. It officially opened in 2020. The current team consists of three employees (adding up to two full-time jobs), one volunteer responsible for social media, and a few collaborators managing specific programmes.

Time for a restart

After the renovation and launch of the centre, the original team of founders stepped back and took on a supervisory role. The centre was run by two people, who were successful in launching new activities, but they soon reached their physical limits. They felt the need for a restart – to reflect on the original vision and goals, evaluate how things had been working, and better define what the community centre should offer and how.

During the renovation, the community changed and grew dynamically. Some people left completely or stopped coming to the centre. The centre's team, therefore, needed to understand whether it was responding adequately to the needs of local residents and whether a certain outflow of supporters was natural.

From professional research to neighbourhood breakfasts

Initially, the organisation planned to collaborate with a professional agency to conduct a needs assessment among local residents. However, after a discussion with their mentor in the Stronger Roots programme, they decided against it. Since the centre was still fundraising for its own activities, hiring an agency would probably not have been received well by the community. Instead, the team decided to talk with local residents during informal and friendly gatherings.

They took advantage of the already existing format of neighbourhood breakfasts. People were invited to participate in community centre events, such as art workshops, on social media, and individually via WhatsApp, where the team used contacts gathered in previous years. The broader community includes around 300 people, with an additional 60 people being contacted individually.

The concept of neighbourhood breakfasts originated in previous years, when breakfast was served as a way of looking after volunteers who spent their weekends at the community centre mowing the lawn or taking photos at events. Over time, breakfast became a social event to which the wider community was invited, and everyone was asked to bring something to share. These breakfasts, along with other events and one-on-one conversations, provided opportunities for joint reflection on what was working well at the centre and what could be improved.

"We realised that we were perhaps being too self-critical and taking things too personally. People leave or become less active simply because their life circumstances change – they may have more or less time. What works one year may be completely different the next. Needs often change, so the most important thing we can do is create space for neighbours to come together and for some, to realise their ideas. If someone then decides to move on or needs their own space, that is natural and completely fine."

Anna Karako

Photo: Rasťo Blaško – Neighbourhood breakfast

Neighbourhood events: clear boundaries, better cooperation

One of the practical outcomes of these discussions was the introduction of the “neighbourhood events” label. The centre‘s team found that the community needed to clearly distinguish between events organised by the community centre and those initiated by the community itself. After consulting with PR experts, they created this category, which helped define the centre‘s role as a platform for local initiatives.

Neighbourhood events thus created space for activities initiated directly by community members, whether thematic meetings, workshops led by local enthusiasts, or simply informal get-togethers. For the community centre, this meant the opportunity to support community activities without having to organise and finance them. For the community, it meant recognition of their own ideas and space to implement them.

This categorisation proved crucial for maintaining a balance between the centre‘s professionally run activities and organically emerging community initiatives. While these formats may seem simple, the fact that they are created by neighbours makes them powerful tools of participation. It shows people that they, too, can shape the environment they live in.

Photo: Janka Hrdlička – Community day with the Amos team

Photo: Rasťo Blaško – Community games evening

Caring for volunteers: Not everything can be paid for

Another task was to strengthen the community centre‘s volunteer base. Together with their mentor, the centre‘s team created several categories of volunteers based on their motivation and the appropriate ways to reward or support them. They defined a group of people who are civically engaged and interested in participating in strategic processes, a group of professional volunteers who can develop their profession in cooperation with the centre, and then a group of people who mainly want to socialise. They also mapped who fell into which group and tailored their communication accordingly. For example, photographers are invited to document events that may lead to other professional opportunities for them.

The smallest group of supporters – civic activists – felt a bit awkward when they were offered free use of the venue (e.g., for a family celebration) as a reward. The team concluded that in this case, material reward was less important than a sincere thank you and recognition of their contribution. “The biggest mistake is that once you have funding, you should start paying the volunteers – this can create confusion. It is more appropriate to highlight the real value of their work,” explains Anna Karako. “The form of financial incentives or small remuneration can be used for volunteers with whom you already have such close relationships that you can explain to them the circumstances of the organisation‘s financing,” she adds.

According to the community centre team, a personal thank-you that you find time for also works well for other volunteers. For example, the team organises Christmas punch gatherings, writes personal thank-you notes, sometimes accompanied by small gifts, or offers tickets to theatre performances held at the centre.

Photo: Rasťo Blaško – We Are All Tepláreň discussion

The admission fee dilemma

An important question for the community centre team was whether to charge admission to events and, if so, how much. Sometimes the admission fee seemed too high, or visitors were surprised that they had to pay at all. They included this topic in the survey as well. They found that most visitors belong to the middle class and are not put off by paying €4 for admission. On the contrary, when the admission fee for an art workshop was just €2, some people assumed it would be of low quality and did not attend. According to the team, most visitors are aware of the technical and material costs of organising the events and even expect to pay an entrance fee, although there are always exceptions who complain.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Changes in any community are natural**
  People come and go; their needs and possibilities change. Don't take it personally; it is a natural part of community life.

- **A personal approach is irreplaceable**
  Instead of expensive professional surveys, informal conversations over breakfast can be just as effective and help build relationships.

- **Volunteers are not all the same**
  Different types of volunteers have different motivations and need different forms of recognition and care.

- **Money does not always solve everything**
  Civic-minded volunteers may even be discouraged by financial rewards – for them, recognition of the value of their work is more important.

PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

01

Shared meals always work

Food is a great tool for activating and expanding the community.

02

Build gradually

It is good to build a community together – start with easier activities, grow your community slowly, and identify who are the enthusiasts who enjoy working together and are active.

03

Categorise volunteers

Create clear categories of volunteers according to their motivation and tailor your communication and forms of care accordingly.

04

Don‘t avoid admission fees

If set reasonably, people expect them, and they can even signal the quality of the event.

05

Make space for grassroots initiatives

A community centre should be a platform for community ideas, not just a place to implement your own projects. It is an important tool for civic participation.

STRONGER ROOTS

This case study was developed within the Stronger Roots program.

The aim of the Stronger Roots program is to increase the resilience of civil society organisations and their networks, strengthen their social capital, and integrate them into the communities and societies in which they operate. The program is implemented by the Open Society Fund Prague, the NIOK Foundation, the Open Society Foundation Bratislava, and Glopolis.