



NEW VENTURE ... Co-operative directors Richard Jones (organic farmer); Cris Tomos (voluntary sector worker); Shan Williams; Richard Williams (IT worker); Clive Davies (IT worker); and Aled Rees (organic farmer) display images of shareholders helping to clear the derelict site

Welsh co-op fights for a small town's survival



By **Kevin McGrother**

UNDERCUTTING county council parking charges, providing an outlet for local producers and developing renewable energy are all on the agenda for a West Wales co-operative.

The Cymdeithas Cynnal a Cefnogi Cefn Gwlad (or 4CG) co-operative won its first battle when it issued community shares and raised enough money to outbid a Cardiff property developer to secure its Cardigan town centre base. For group member, town councillor and proud farmer's daughter Shan Williams, the co-operative was fighting not just for a collection of derelict buildings but the very survival of the market town.

She says: "We have high unemployment, falling numbers in our primary schools, high levels of social housing and retailers who are struggling to make ends meet. If we'd lost, we wouldn't just have lost the site, we'd have lost the chance to turn our town around.

"If the developers had got the site it would almost certainly have meant more flats and even I would have considered leaving — and I'm Cardigan born and bred.

"The bidding process was heartbreaking at times as we constantly had to top the rival bid, but eventually we won."

More than £350,000 was required, with £200,000 of that being raised through the issuing of community shares.

"We have 460 shareholders from all over the world," says Ms Williams. "Many are local but others have signed up from Australia and Cyprus. We've contacted them to see if they have links with the town but many don't, they just like the sound of what we're doing and want to be part of it."

Perhaps fittingly, part of the site bought by 4CG used to belong to a farmers' co-operative — and in a few months time it will be providing car parking spaces for locals and visitors in the first stage of 4CG's renewal plans.

"Initially we'll have spaces for 55 cars but when the car parks are complete we will have parking for 100 and we'll be charging people half the price charged by the county council in a bid to get more people back into the town.

"At the moment people can't find anywhere in the town centre to park — or they find the fees too expensive — so they go and park out of the town centre at the big supermarket.

"With our scheme you'll also be able to get discount on your parking, and in some cases your shopping, if you

show your ticket when shopping at some local shops — not chain stores, but those shops that genuinely benefit local people. It's all about ensuring that money spent in Cardigan stays in Cardigan."

And supporting local producers is the aim of the co-operative's community shop, due to open next spring — the team has to wait for a survey to make sure there are no bats in the premises before demolition work can begin.

"The shop will sell anything that's been made, grown or caught locally," says Ms Williams. "Each producer will be allocated a bar code so that every time one of their products is sold, apart from a small administrative fee, the money goes straight to them.

"We're hoping the shop will encourage people to start their own businesses and give them a chance to test the market before deciding whether they can sustain a shop of their own."

Struggling

The co-operative also hopes the shop will help the town's struggling fishing fleet. There are currently 29 boats operating out of Cardigan but unless their fortunes improve that number is predicted to drop dramatically and rapidly.

"The fishermen tell us that while they can find markets for the bulk of their catches they always have a good £200-£300 worth of produce left each week that they cannot sell. If we can help them with that we will," says Ms Williams.

"As well as selling it in the shop we will be alerting local restaurants to let them know what fish is available each day."

The co-operative, which is managed by a team of six local people, also hopes to breathe new life into the villages surrounding Cardigan by looking at the possibility of reopening their closed village shops and running them as community outposts from the main store.

It also wants to help local farmers by offering a "fair and decent rent" for land on which it will site community wind turbines. Ms Williams believes this is an opportunity that farmers will welcome and an initial meeting is planned for later this month.

• To support the co-operative by purchasing community shares, or for more information, visit www.4cg.org.uk