

Running a Community Beer Festival



"I started Ovington Beer Festival in 2022, mainly because I wanted something to look forward to amidst prolonged closures of pubs, clubs and other social spaces over the previous winter. I also wanted to support local breweries and help our village club to attract more people... Five years on, and it has largely been a success so I wanted to share a few things that we have learned along the way for anyone else thinking to try something similar."



Our Location – Ovington, Northumberland. We are a village of just over 500 people with an hourly bus service linking us to Newcastle and Hexham that runs until around 8.30pm. When we started there were no Sunday buses so we just opened on Friday night and Saturday. We are about half an hour's walk across the fields from our nearest train station and there is only a small car park, and we don't want to encourage people to drive to a beer festival anyway.

The event is held in the function room of our Social Club, which has the advantage that there is a stage and equipment for entertainment, a small kitchen and a general bar for those who are less keen on real ales and cider. We only have a small outside area, so that is limitation for any growth. It is just enough room for a food van and a few seats!

Until this year, we had a small pub-restaurant opposite, and we promoted their food and terrace to ensure that we were supporting them too. Sadly, that business has now closed.

What is the aim of your event & who are you doing it for?

For us, it is fundraising and bringing new people into the Club, but also supporting local businesses and bringing the community together. Changing the image of a social club to being something for the community is the long-term goal, but that needs new people involved.

Get a good mix of people from the start who can engage with different parts of the community. Create an informal sub-committee dedicated to the event so that it is not a burden on the regular Club or Village Hall committee. Try to invite a mix of people who can reach out to different parts of the community.

If there are different groups in the community, think about how to attract them to different sessions. In the first 2 years we had children's activities on the Saturday afternoon to try to appeal to younger families (that didn't work so well); We theme the music offering on each night ("Friday Folk" is slowly catching on, and the local bands on the Saturday night have always been successful). You could try a Local Business Network session, a "meet the brewer" session for beer enthusiasts, arts & craft stalls... it depends on your space and who you think you can attract.

Practical Advice

CAMRA are fantastic – they loan the equipment, build our bar, clean the lines, tap the beers and take it all away again afterwards. They also advertise in the regional magazine, all for an agreed price. Other private suppliers are available!



Set up a volunteer rota for working the bar and the door/token sales. Tokens allow the bar to be cashless and the entry/token sales area is the only place where money changes hands making it easier for contactless payments and a cash float. It avoids risks of cash disappearing and with more and more fake notes around, consider going totally cashless too.

People expect to have their own glasses for the event so include this in the ticket price if you can, and be wary about hiring glasses. It's expensive to get branded ones for small events, but if you can find a generous sponsor, people like having a souvenir glass. Other larger beer festivals may have spares that you can borrow too.

Food is essential. We sell snacks from a local farm shop (provided at cost in return for advertising) for beer-tokens and this year a local scouts group also baked some snacks as part of their fundraising. If you don't have a bar, think about crisps and other healthier and cheaper pre-packed options that can be simple to sell. Perhaps a local shop can step in and run small stand to raise their profile too?

Bring in a food truck for the busiest times. Food vans don't charge, just tell them how many people you expect and provide them electricity and they'll do the rest. They can also sell to other local residents who might be curious to see what your event is like.

Set up a pre-sales website for tickets. They take a commission charge which is very annoying but having a link and QR code makes you look professional, allows people to share your posts online and helps you to predict numbers. Consider "weekend passes" at a discounted rate, or "early-bird" prices to encourage people to commit early.

Choosing the beer (The fun bit!)

- Blonde/Gold/Pale beers sell much better than dark or ruby ones, but you need a mix.

Also have one or two familiar

names as not everyone likes to try new beers all the time.



- We try to avoid strong beers: they cost more, people generally can't drink as many, and we don't want to encourage irresponsible behaviour.
- Don't expect discounts, breweries are struggling to make money too and you are not a big customer for them. However, if you are a pub/club or have one nearby, make sure their regular supplier gives you a deal on something.
- We do real ale (that's on the hand-pumps) and ciders. Keg beers and lagers need different equipment for service and can cost more. We sell all our beers for the same price per half pint to keep it simple, but if you can differentiate your prices, you could increase your variety.
- Remember to ask for pump clips
- Think about zero and low alcohol beers too – these are increasingly popular, but not something we have done yet.
 - If you don't have a bar on site, you might also want to think about a gin or prosecco bar but get enthusiasts to run these separately so that they can help promote the event as well.

Get the beer sponsored (This is the best advice I ever had!) As a small event, we have “pins” (36 pint barrels) which cost c. £60+VAT. If you can get each one paid for by a business sponsor, it is hard to lose money!

Tips for sponsorship:

- Find other upcoming bigger events which you can publicise (e.g. our County Show is always about a month after our event).
- Get villagers to ask their employers (It's £60 and it's tax deductible!)
- Ask other village organisations to sponsor (e.g. our Leek Club advertise their Autumn show to remind people to start growing)
- Sponsors receive 1 entry ticket, social media publicity and their details/slogan alongside a selected beer in the programme.

Have a “festival charity”. You might be trying to raise money for your venue, but business sponsors want to see a “real” charity to justify their CSR budget. It helps your publicity in local newspapers and if you select a local charity; they can help promote the event for you too. Make sure to manage their expectations – you are only giving a small donation, not the whole proceeds! Our donations are generated from unused beer tokens (justifies a “no refund” policy) and selling left-over beer to the volunteers the day after.

Entertainment. Live music creates the atmosphere you need. There will be quiet sessions for those who want to chat and enjoy trying new beers, but bands bring people in, and help you to promote the event. I'm not a music promoter so I look on the Facebook pages of a couple of local venues to see who was popular and who sounds good (there's usually a video somewhere!) Contact them early, be clear on what equipment you can provide or whether they bring their own, and agree a price. This could be your biggest outlay, so think carefully about what people will enjoy and what will fit with the overall feel and aims of your event.

MOST IMPORTANTLY... make people feel involved and share the event with as many people as you can. If it is a community-focused event, you should try not to exclude anyone. Over the years, we have had local Irish Dancers, a local history group and a local scouts group raising money. If people have suggestions – try to include them because it has to be more than just one person's vision. That's the only way that you can start to build capacity for more events and activities that will help to keep your venue and your community to grow stronger.

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