

More2Life

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A TOWN'S BEST-KEPT SECRET

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THE INSIDE SCOOP

Jade Beecroft meets the woman behind the co-op, cafe and community
hub bringing life and soul back to the Lisburn high street. Pages 34&35

'Our radical welcome is the secret sauce of our business'

If you're looking for a little soul on the high street, as well as locally sourced food and a "radical welcome", Sonas in Lisburn might be just the place.

The cooperative, on Market Square, recently celebrated its second birthday and has become known as a community hub and cafe, refill shop, supporter of local growers and makers and a champion of sustainability.

It is run by Julie Hoey, who found herself heading up the cooperative by accident alongside a career in public sector health policy.

Her dreams of creating a shop and cafe that prioritises staff wellbeing, customer service and quality food have now become a reality.

"If you feel that the high street has lost its soul, come and see us," she says.

"The word 'sonas' is Gaelic for happiness and good fortune, and that's what we want to spread."

The idea sprouted from a community farm project to grow vegetables during the Covid-19 pandemic.

"Originally, we were just looking to sell our extra courgettes," Julie jokes.

She remembers going for coffee at a local cafe and staring out of the window, across Lisburn Market Square, to where a unit stood empty.

Julie says: "We had a group Zoom call, formed a cooperative and signed the lease in 2021, but the building needed serious renovation and it took two years before we were ready to open."

"We had a lot of support from the council and urban investment funding, but it was also a huge learning curve for me."



Julie at work behind the counter in Sonas

Julie started with the idea of providing "good local food" and bucking the trend of empty shops left in the wake of the pandemic.

"There's so much wrong with our food system. We've become disconnected with how things are grown and made," she says.

REGULARS

"Lisburn seemed like the perfect place because the high street was still alive — there were still butchers, bakers and greengrocers."

Julie was determined to make quality food more accessible, so from the beginning, the walls at Sonas have been lined with refill containers so customers can weigh, measure and help themselves.

"Buying in bulk means we can focus on quality and customers can get better food but only buy what they actually need," Julie says.

"If you only need 50g of oats, six Brussels sprouts, a small container of pasta or two potatoes, that's fine."

She and her staff also focus on giving everyone what she calls a "radical welcome", inspired by the book *Unreasonable Hospitality* by Will Guidara.

They know their regulars by name, set aside things they know particular customers will like and offer "coffee and a toilet break" to bus drivers who pull up outside.

"Offering a radical welcome is our secret sauce," says Julie.

"We try to greet every single person who comes into the shop and make them feel at home."

"Shopping is a form of connection, and sharing food is also a form of connection."

"If you're just shopping and ordering online, you lose that connectedness to your community."

Sonas operates in a spirit of connection with other businesses in Lisburn, promoting and looking for opportunities to collaborate together.

"We're now established in Lisburn, and our fellow traders believe in us," says Julie.

"They know that we try to do what we say we're going to do and make good on our word."

"We also say sorry if we get something wrong. I feel that's really important."

Sonas offers simple, homecooked hot and cold food with locally sourced ingredients, bakes, coffee and Suki tea.

It also hosts regular "long-table" evenings with a meal and chance to socialise.

The space is available for other businesses and community groups to host events too, including a book club and a men's social group.

Julie and her team work hard to source the food and other goods they then sell as sustainably as possible.

"We sell eco-friendly household products from a small business in Yorkshire called Miniml, and customers can use our refill containers to keep costs down," she says.

"We try to stock locally produced dry goods where possible, such as White's Speedicook Oats, from their mill in Tandragee, and Neill's Golden Fleece Flour, produced in Belfast."

Sonas collaborates with Helen's Bay Organics so customers can collect a vegetable net from the shop and get 10 per cent off their dry goods at the same time.

It also stocks produce grown regeneratively at Green Goodness Farm in Lisburn.





Julie outside the community hub. Below: One of the refill stands



‘We’re here for the long term. We’ve been supported by the community and we want to add value’

In the fridge, there are plant-based cheeses from Bangor’s Cult, and Hungry Soul —made in Co Clare; locally produced dairy products, drinks and small-batch jams and pickles from Peggy’s Family Farm in Tandragee and Bethel’s Kitchen in Dromore.

ORGANIC

“We try to minimise waste as much as possible,” says Julie.
“We donate boxes to people moving house or doing no-dig gardening.”
Sonas, now entering its third year of business, employs eight staff, including team leader Katy Gaston, and offers opportunities for volunteers.
The shop opens Wednesday to Saturday, 10am to 4pm, and all special events are publicised on its Facebook page, as well

as other local events and businesses, with the hashtag #getintolisburn.
Looking to the future, Julie is focusing on “just doing the next right thing”.
She says: “We’re committed to organic growth — no pun intended — and we’re here for the long term.”
“We’ve been really well supported by the local community and we want to add value.”
“Our message is that Lisburn is open for business and that there are so many great things about this city.”
“Shopping on the high street can be good for you, good for your pocket and good for local traders.”
“You don’t have to commit to doing all your shopping with us.”
“If you come here every week and spend a fiver, you will help keep us in business and support all our suppliers too.”

Julie Hoey (left) and Katy Gaston at Sonas Lisburn
Pictures: Belfast News and Features