

'The Folkestone Status'

www.folkestonestatus.com

Introduction

“There was loads going on in Folkestone, but no-one knew... we did something about it, and reaped other benefits”

David Sharp - Station Manager, Academy FM Folkestone

Our entry for this category is probably different to those of other stations. Sure, we've innovated with electronic studio switching systems that children can use with ease... and we're innovative at how a licensed radio station integrates education into its activities... and we've recorded live music in some pretty weird places... but we think this project should be recognised because its innovation deals directly with problems faced by many Community stations: Funding, true multimedia content, building an online presence in an increasingly online world, and how the station can best serve the community.

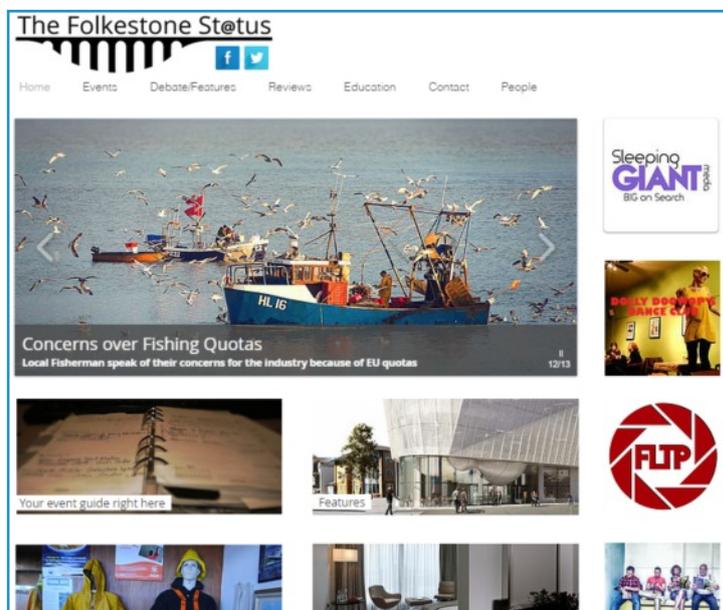
Academy FM Folkestone is based in an Academy school, although we are a separate charity. Our radio station is popular, and has a dedicated group of volunteers and many quality programmes (OK, we're biased!). We are nominating 'The Folkestone Status' project. It is essentially a website and social media presence separate to the radio station's, and its purpose is to promote events and community activities in Folkestone. OK, let's face it, a 'What's On' service isn't exactly innovative, is it? Actually, in the way we've done it, we think it is. Here's why:

Folkestone had a communication problem – there were loads of community events going on (ranging from major festivals to evening exercise classes), but not enough people knew about them. Considering the growth in social media (particularly Facebook) in Folkestone, we thought we'd start a platform to tell people what's going on. It would have been wrong to do this from the radio station's social media and website, which benefits from being focused on the station's activities. Other 'What's On' services were poorly managed.

We wanted to diversify our income. Funding Community Radio is difficult. Making us capable of delivering different types of project that can bring in funding made sense. We got funding to run the Status, and employed two people.

The Folkestone Status is an online platform that mainly delivers Facebook posts and website articles. Radio stations are good at teaching people (especially young ones) communication skills and self-confidence, but young people increasingly need opportunities to improve their written English. For the 'Status' project we worked with a large number of young people, and they had the chance to work on articles for publication. It's another way of helping the young people of our town. And it helped secure funding.

We made everyone aware of the link between the radio station and the 'Status'. For a time, we published a 'Folkestone Status' magazine to enhance the brand; we used to be one of the stations that couldn't take on-air advertising, but when the rules were changed our brand strength meant we went from zero on-air advertising revenue to nearly £2000 per month in 7 months, thanks partly to the Status.



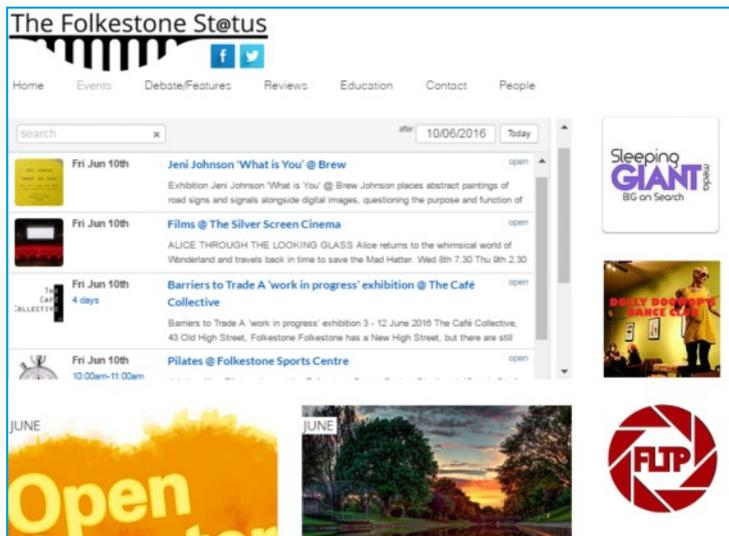
Funding the Folkestone Status

We secured £33,000 from the Colyer Fergusson Charitable Trust, and £14,000 from the Roger De Haan Charitable Trust. This went towards setting up an office, and employing a Project Leader (Journalist & Trainer) and an Apprentice for 2 years. This recently ended, but we have already secured a grant from Kent County Council to continue the work, with other bids in progress.

Promoting local events

Numerous radio stations have event listings on their websites. Many are not very thorough, and not regularly updated. Our research found that members of the public are only likely to go to sources they know can be trusted. As part of the project, we employed an Apprentice to create Folkestone's most complete 'What's On' calendar for the Status website. She also uses this information to record daily 'Folkestone Guide' pieces for radio broadcast; each platform can promote the other, and the Status website gives us another place to sell advertising on - we're currently building a system to host adverts across both the Status and the radio station website, which clients are positive about.

Here's one major advantage you might not have thought of... When you provide this sort of service, event organisers *really* like you! Since starting the Status the amount of *paid* Outside Broadcasts the radio station has done has doubled.



The 'Events' page of the Status website

Educational Work

The radio station, Academy FM Folkestone, runs numerous educational projects. They cover all sorts of areas including science education, helping the unemployed find work, teaching young people about local agriculture, and many more. All of our work was, understandably, radio-based.

Young people need help with their written English. Part of the Status' brief was as a writing project, with a variety of young people. We taught some in their school English classes where they worked in groups to write articles about events for young people. We gave some A-Level students the opportunity to write reviews - not many youngsters have the opportunity to get their work published. And we worked with hard-to-access groups like young asylum seekers, who wrote stories (and a play!) about their lives. This type of work was the cornerstone in us getting funding for the project. Why don't more stations run projects like this? Could many other small towns and radio stations benefit? There's some good examples of audio from our educational work on the link on the Status homepage (link at the bottom of the page).



An online article, with audio, written by young asylum seekers

Successes & benefits

Before the Folkestone Status, we struggled to build our brand. Our radio station was popular, but surveys told us public awareness and listener numbers were healthy but not growing that rapidly. Our online presence was good, but like many Community Radio stations we had around 3000 people on Facebook - considerably less than other local media. We now have 5000 on the radio station Facebook, and 3000 on the Status.

The Status helped to build our brand. We started a magazine - initially our funding covered it's printing, but soon advertising revenue did. We had the staff to post newsy stories quickly, and record radio pieces. Some Facebook posts had over 60,000 views, and we regularly get over 3,000 views. Often, when we post a story on the Status, we record a radio interview - hear the samples on the website. This multimedia working is not new, but is it something many Community stations could do better? For us, the benefits were immense - our reputation increased, businesses wanted to advertise with us, and the educational work increased our reputation with other funders.



A sample of the magazines we produced. They discussed local events and items of interest and debate. While the economics of magazine production are challenging, they did more than anything else to promote us as a quality local 'brand'.