

How Business Ready helped Cenu Cacao scale-up artisan chocolate production in Leamington

Cenu Cacao, an independent chocolate maker in Leamington Spa, has transformed from a small one-woman operation into a growing manufacturer with its own factory and café thanks to strategic advice from Business Ready and grant support from Warwickshire County Council's Small Capital Grant scheme.

The artisan business, founded by chocolatier Rosemary Ndukuba, contacted Business Ready for support around earning a grant for a chocolate roasting machine back in 2020 after she heard of the help it gave to innovative businesses like hers.

It now employs 11 people and is preparing for further expansion after receiving guidance from the fully-funded business support service at a key crossroads in its development.

The Company

Founded in 2017, Cenu Cacao began life in a shared sweet shop on the corner of Regent Street in Leamington Spa. Rosemary's vision was to handcraft premium chocolate using traditional methods, ethically sourced cocoa beans, and techniques that preserved the flavour and character of the raw ingredients.

In the early days, Cenu Cacao roasted the cocoa beans manually, refined the chocolate in small batches, and oversaw every stage from recipe development to

presentation. This earned the company a loyal local following, particularly among customers who appreciated its authenticity and craftsmanship.

As footfall grew, so did Cenu Cacao's reputation. The business had to juggle production with retail, all while operating from a small shared unit. When the lease on the shared shop was approaching its end, Rosemary recognised that simply maintaining the status quo would hold the business back. The business needed a larger space, more efficient equipment and a clearer strategy to grow.

The Challenge

Despite strong customer loyalty, Cenu Cacao was reaching a production ceiling by early 2020. Manual roasting slowed down output and required significant time and physical effort. This made it difficult for it to respond to increasing demand and created a bottleneck on growth.

The end of the lease brought the issue into sharper focus. Cenu Cacao needed

to secure a new premises that would allow her to expand, but it also needed to ensure the right infrastructure and financial robustness was in place to take that step.

Rosemary said: "I knew the business had potential, but I knew that getting a new premises and a roasting machine was the key to further growth. I had always roasted the cocoa beans by hand because I wanted the chocolate to be authentic, so I did not want to compromise by getting something in that would dilute the quality of our products.

"However, the machine was expensive, and the specific type I wanted had to be imported from Turkey, so it was a big outlay for us."

After hearing through her network about Business Ready – a funded business support service provided by Warwickshire County Council - Rosemary decided to contact them to see if they could provide any support around the purchase and the next steps Cenu Cacao should take.



Pictured is Rosemary Ndukuba (founder of Cenu Cacao), Ian McFarlane-Toms (Business Ready Programme Manager), and Cllr Rob Howard (Portfolio Holder for Economy at Warwickshire County Council).

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The Solution

Business Ready Programme Manager Ian McFarlane-Toms met with Rosemary in early 2020 to understand her ambitions for Cenu Cacao and identify the barriers preventing that growth.

Ian advised her that grant funding – a Small Capital Grant from Warwickshire County Council – could be available to support the purchase of a cocoa bean roasting machine, and guided her through the application process.

"Ian helped me realise what was possible at a moment when I was overwhelmed by decisions," Rosemary said.

"He carefully explained the range of available grants that might help with the cost of the machine, and gave me the reassurance I needed to go ahead with the purchase."

Cenu Cacao faced disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic shortly afterwards. Rosemary signed a lease on the business's now current Regent Street premises just before the first lockdown, which meant the business could not import the roasting machine as no-one could install it.

While this delayed Cenu Cacao's growth, Business Ready were still able to share advice with Rosemary.

Alongside the funding application, Ian worked with Cenu Cacao around how it presented itself. His advice centred on positioning the business firmly within

the premium chocolate market, ensuring that branding, customer experience and product development all aligned with that ambition.

Ian said: "Rosemary had created an exceptional product with a clear identity, but she needed support to elevate the business to the level it deserved.

"Helping the business secure the roasting machine was a practical step, but equally important was encouraging the Cenu Cacao to act a high-end manufacturer and articulate the value behind its craft."

The Results

Once the pandemic eased, Cenu Cacao got its new automatic roasting machine up and running, which had an immediate impact on production. Output increased significantly, consistency improved and Cenu Cacao was able to experiment with new flavours and product lines without the previous bottlenecks.

This boost in productivity and the continued support of its customers gave Rosemary the confidence to acquire a dedicated unit in Lillington, which she transformed into a small chocolate factory and café. The space allowed the business to separate production from retail, host customers in a more welcoming environment and create an experience that reflected the brand's artisanal values.

Cenu Cacao has since grown to employ 11 people across production, retail and hospitality roles, with the new premises

giving it the breathing room needed to innovate and expand.

Rosemary added: "Looking back, I'm so grateful for the support from Ian and Business Ready. The roasting machine changed everything for us. It meant I could grow without losing the personal touch that defines Cenu Cacao.

"Despite a few bumps along the way, opening our factory and café in Lillington has been fantastic, and our customers in Leamington have been incredibly supportive. Their loyalty means so much and gives me confidence for the future."

Cenu Cacao is now exploring opportunities for further growth, including hiring new staff. With production running efficiently and a strong brand identity in place, Rosemary is optimistic about the next chapter.

Councillor Rob Howard, Portfolio Holder for Economy at Warwickshire County Council, said: "The Business Ready Programme and Small Capital Grant has supported Rosemary to grow her business.

"It's great to see how the dedicated support from the programme has allowed Rosemary to develop her business, open new premises and improve her production processes, all of which have allowed Cenu Cacao to grow in line with their business goals and now explore further business growth opportunities. It is vital that we continue to support programmes that bolster local businesses."

Business support for the next level

The Business Ready programme is managed by the business support team at the University of Warwick Science Park. The experienced Business Growth Advisers team have been delivering business growth and support services to technology based businesses for over 30 years.

In addition, the team are supported by a range of specialist mentors who have run their own businesses and have expertise and experience supporting, advising, coaching and mentoring other growth businesses.



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