

Interreg



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NEWSLETTER

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HELLO

As we fast approach the end of 2019, it presents the ideal time to publish the second newsletter for the Support Network for Social Entrepreneurs (SuNSE). This year has been a busy and productive period for SuNSE, the value of transnational learning and collaboration has been clear.

We would like to use this edition to share some of the learning gained through the partnership over the last 12 months and reflect on some of the key points. From rainy Wales to a heatwave in Luxembourg, it has been an eventful year.

ENJOY!

The Value of Collaboration

SuNSE began in 2018 with a partnership of nine organisations but has quickly expanded to include support agencies from across each region, existing social businesses and budding social entrepreneurs. Capturing the knowledge and expertise across this growing network offers a unique opportunity to develop support mechanisms that truly reflect the needs of social entrepreneurs at a local level.

SuNSE is not just about learning from our partners but gaining knowledge from the existing social business landscape across North West Europe. Our partnership visits have created the ideal opportunity to do this, meeting with organisations and businesses as we move around the area. The value of face-to-face conversations and seeing business operations first hand cannot be underestimated.



Merthyr Tydfil, town centre.

A Welsh Perspective

In March 2019 the SuNSE partners travelled to the Welsh Valleys, for our steering group meeting in Merthyr Tydfil. Characterised by its mining and steel heritage, the region is home to vibrant but also deprived communities, still struggling with the legacy from downturn in industry. The area was once the greatest iron producing centre in the world, with four huge ironworks, Merthyr was also a railway hub.

Merthyr Tydfil Community Council are utilising their involvement in SuNSE to drive local support mechanisms for social businesses in the area. The goal is to drive community ambition, create employment opportunities and to overcome some of the longstanding market failures in the area, ensuring the area is a more vibrant place to live. Increasing entrepreneurial activity will also encourage skilled and young people to stay, work and live in Merthyr.

Partners were struck by the levels of recent development in the town, with new roads, offices and shop developments. It was clear that the Council are committed to developing the area and to drive investment. We met with Councillors and the Leader of the Council, Kevin O'Neill. This gave the opportunity to discuss wider growth initiatives around tourism developments, with ambitions to market Merthyr as a key tourist destination in Wales.



Conversation with C. Wickler, Pall Centre, Luxembourg.

“While it was once the iron capital of the world, Merthyr Tydfil is currently the smallest of the local authorities in Wales” said Cllr Thomas. “Whereas heavy industry was once the towns past, it is tourism, retail, light industry and the service and public sectors that are its present. SuNSE aims to encourage and nurture social business to be a significant part of its future”.

Merthyr Tydfil Enterprise Centre

Opened in 2015, Merthyr Tydfil Enterprise Centre (MTEC) was established to encourage enterprise, employment and entrepreneurship in Merthyr Tydfil.

MTEC provides support to existing businesses, start-up businesses and entrepreneurs looking to develop their business idea. They offer a variety of services including workshops, office space, hot desking and test trading.

Through the SuNSE project (in collaboration with MTCBC), MTEC are now able to offer support to social entrepreneurs and social businesses. This support is seen as significant, given the range of social and environmental impacts that could result from the development and growth of social businesses in the region.

The SuNSE partners were really impressed with the facility. The provision of co-working space can have real impact to entrepreneurs, not only by offering desk space but creating collaboration opportunities and reducing isolation of lone working, which can impact mental health.

The strength of collaboration between the council and key organisations supporting economic and community development was clear. A strong network with regular meetings and information sharing is in place and is proving very effective. Issues and opportunities are approached with collaboration in mind, minimising duplication of support and maximising project impact.

Carole Thurston, South East BIC said “The connectedness of the SE support network in Merthyr and collaborative approach was impressive. We hope to learn from this set up and it will influence how we further develop the support network across Ireland”

A Look at Luxembourg

During a very hot June, partners met in Luxembourg City. Ecotransfaire hosted the visit, providing a unique insight into the development of the social enterprise sector in Luxembourg and across the border into France, Germany and Belgium.

Ecotransfaire specialise in the development of a local ecosystem for sustainable development, energy transition and community involvement. During our visit we were welcomed at The Pall Centre, a business rooted in both a local and transnational ecosystem, with clear sustainable objectives. The Pall Centre Shopping Village was formed in 1982 and has developed from a simple petrol station into a “lifestyle” concept store nestled in a nature project on a green space of 70ha, with walks around the Pall River.

The Pall Centre works directly with suppliers in Luxembourg and Greater Region, offering local, organic and sustainably produced products. We had the opportunity to meet with Christiane Wickler, founder of Pall Centre. We discussed her entrepreneurial journey, ambitions and drivers.

Christiane explained that being “different” has been the key to success and this difference has been driven by her ambitions to service the community and be environmentally sustainable. The Pall Centre supports merchants and independent retailers, which are becoming rare today, encouraging innovation and genuine commerce. Christiane is committed to doing charitable work, engaging local stakeholders, and being active in the struggle for sustainable development.

The visit highlighted the varying models of social business that exist. Although the Pall Centre model was generating profits for its shareholders and not reinvesting income directly into a social purpose, the core ambition to support local traders, producers and communities (creating employment and commerce opportunities at a local level), whilst being as environmentally friendly as possible (with solar panels, bee hives etc), is creating clear social and environmental impacts. Identifying social business is not as clear cut as looking at legal structure, it must be done on a case by case basis, focusing attention on the impacts that a business has on its surrounding community and environment.



Sutherland Start-up School, workshop session

In October 2019 the SuNSE partners met in Inverness, Scotland. Alongside viewing the spectacular autumnal scenery, we visited several social enterprises in the region. The Highlands and Islands of Scotland is already home to a thriving social enterprise sector, and in Inverness we did a tour of social enterprises, visiting five businesses all within walking distance of one another.

The recurring message from all these visits was the importance of sustainable income streams, with enterprise being key to the success of socially driven businesses.

Social enterprises/ businesses must focus their attention on creating viable, sustainable income streams, not just on the social/environmental impact of the operation. As businesses, they need to have strong and commercially viable models, whilst ensuring that this does not conflict with their social/ environmental missions.

We visited seven social enterprises during the trip, including; Velocity Café and Bicycle Workshop, Highland Blindcraft, Impact Hub Inverness, Eden Court and Café Artysans, Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust and the Highlanders Museum.

We've included links at the end of the newsletter if you would like to find out more.



Conversation with Ferga Perry, Velocity Inverness.

Velocity Café and Bicycle Workshop

Velocity's aim is to inspire people to cycle and lead a healthy, happy lifestyle. To do this they started a Fix Your Own Bicycle Workshop and a locally sourced, organic, delicious Cafe in 2012. They started in a park early 2012, eating soup and teaching bike maintenance and opened their city centre space in October 2012. From 2013 to 2015 they ran an outreach project, GoByCycle, working with young people in schools to inspire more cycling, which was funded by Scottish Government's Climate Challenge Fund. They now run the Women's Cycle to Health Group and deliver Bike Academy to pupils who aren't getting lots out of mainstream education and are continuing to work with both school children and adults across Inverness to promote and encourage cycling.

The enterprise comprises of three divisions; café, bicycle workshop and project delivery. These streams operate from the same location, sharing audience (customers) and costs (overheads). The organisation must ensure a careful balance between activities so that the model is sustainable. Set up as a Private company limited by guarantee without share capital, the organisation is governed by a voluntary board of directors.



Above: Highland BlindCraft, Mattress Workshop. Below: SuNSE Group, Dornoch Firth

Highland BlindCraft

Highland BlindCraft was founded in 1881 to provide employment opportunities to children ready to leave the Blind School in Inverness. Today, as a registered Scottish charity, it is still run on the same founding principles, with the mission of providing meaningful employment and suitable training for people living with a disability. In their full production factory, based in Inverness, they employ 19 highly skilled visually impaired and disabled people, alongside four other able-bodied individuals.

All their employees contribute towards designing, manufacturing and selling their great product range to the highest standard including divan beds, mattresses, headboards and foot stools. Through an ongoing programme of training and assessment BlindCraft ensures all their employees make a very valued contribution to the manufacturing process within the factory, continually working together to enhance both their employees' job skills and satisfaction.

They offer unique training which caters to each individual employee regardless of their disability and help them to develop transferrable skills to move into unsupported employment if possible. BlindCraft is an ethically run business, employing and supporting local people.

Following on from the social enterprise visits, Frédéric Théate, Ecotransfaire said "Our trip to Inverness helped us better understand HIE's distinctive business/ working methodology, with a very straight, pragmatic and human approach.



It was interesting to get to know the similarities but also differences that exist between our respective regions in terms of support to social entrepreneurs. Some social business models are surprisingly similar from what we know here in Luxembourg, which raises the hope for closer inter cluster collaboration. At the opposite, the way social entrepreneurs are supported and the existence of such a support within smaller cities is something which we note as being different from our experience."



START-UP SCHOOL

Make social impact your business

On the second day of the trip to the Scottish Highlands, partners travelled north of Inverness to Sutherland. Sutherland covers a large area of the North Highlands including some of the most remote and dramatic scenery in mainland Scotland and is the location for HIE's first SuNSE hub model, which is known as Start-Up School.

Across the Highlands and Islands, HIE will be delivering four Start-Up Schools, located in Sutherland, Wester Ross, Invergordon and the Outer Hebrides.

The Schools are being delivered by Social Enterprise Academy (SEA), a social enterprise themselves, utilising local delivery partners in each location. SEA deliver learning through a range of approaches that use real life experiences and mutual support to bring theories and problem solving to life, using non-directive coaching techniques.

Each Start-Up School will run for 18-months, taking an individual on a journey. Developing and refining their idea, providing them with the skills to take it forward and most importantly empowering them with the confidence to make their concept a reality.

The schools are open to anyone with a business idea that could positively impact their community or environment. The idea can be early stage, an individual might have seen an issue within their community and have an initial concept as how to resolve, or someone might have been sitting on a business idea but needs a little push to get it going. There are no barriers to entry, HIE will consider any age, education or employment status.

Start-Up School offers a new model for HIE, targeted at very early stage ideas, developing support around the needs of individuals, their communities and delivering it locally – it is a flexible and accessible approach which really fits HIE's move towards more place-based support.

The learning gained through the partnership so far has been invaluable, reflecting on the project to date Chris Birch, UOG said "Part of the philosophy of InterReg projects is to learn from one another, but also from what is already there. We have put this at the heart of Project SuNSE. In our first phase of project development, we have visited sites in South Wales, Luxembourg and Northern Scotland. This was illuminating and heartening, and we have seen first-hand what a difference viable and sustainable social enterprises can bring. And how they fill gaps that market provision has missed.

The Highland Blindcraft in Inverness company makes bespoke beds, employing blind and partially sighted people. Profits are re-cycled to further benefit those with visual challenges. The Velocity Bike Café and Artysans café train and develop long term unemployed, preparing them for future employment and giving them a new sense of self-worth.

The Pall Centre in Luxembourg aligns a renewable energy scheme and retail and provides local people with a place to meet. Visits to Bonar Bridge, The Impact Hub, Eden Court and the Highlanders Museum all demonstrated other innovative, creative and sustainable ways of developing new business models that add value to local communities and have long term positive social impact.

What is clear to all is that we need new ways to do things, and if they are planned and thought through, future generations will inherit a legacy to be proud of. Our next steps are to produce supporting tools to enable those with new socially enterprising ideas to develop, nurture and grow them. And part of our learning approach will be to co-create interesting content with those already successful, and those that are on the journey."

Top 5 key takeaways:

1. Interactive, face-to-face collaboration opportunities are invaluable.
2. Models for social businesses vary greatly across the North West Europe, SuNSE support must reflect this.
3. Developing support which is flexible to local needs will be key, each region presents such distinctive challenges and opportunities a top down approach would fail.
4. Social enterprises are businesses and must be structured and operated in a way that allows them to be commercially viable to ensure sustainability.
5. Collaboration is not only the cornerstone of the SuNSE project, but it is at the heart of creating strong and sustainable social businesses.

Want to know more about the organisations and social businesses we visited?

Pall Centre

pallcenter.lu/fr

Velocity

velocitylove.co.uk

Highland BlindCraft

highlandblindcraft.co.uk

Impact Hub Inverness

inverness.impacthub.net

Eden Court

eden-court.co.uk

Café Artysans

cafeartysans.org.uk

Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust

kyleofsutherlanddevelopmenttrust.org

The Highlanders Museum

thehighlandersmuseum.com

To keep up to date with SuNSE and find out more about our work please visit:

nweurope.eu/projects/project-search/sunse-support-network-for-social-entrepreneurs/

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