

## **SENS AGM 2008: Management Committee Report**

### **History & Framework**

Social Enterprise Network Suffolk (SENS) was launched in November 2005 and today's meeting represents the first attempt to hold an AGM – over two and a half years later.

SENS exists to day as the embryonic trade association for social enterprises in Suffolk, especially the bulk of SME's based and operating in Suffolk. It is also a sub-regional network linked to the Social Enterprise East of England (SEEE).

Most of the sub-regional networks (SRNs) were in existence before the creation of SEEE in 2005 and were created as part of the same Supporting Social Enterprise in the Eastern Region (SSEER) programme from which SEEE emerged. However, SENS was originally set up as a top-down network originally sponsored by SEEE/Suffolk ACRE without any real engagement from 'on the ground' enterprises and individuals. After launch it lay relatively dormant and began to stagnate when external funding / support dwindled. It only had a central co-ordinator managing a relationship with a few network members. SENS lacked direction, organisation and funding.

Eventually, last year, some SENS members came forward to form a management committee and agree a constitution. Having gained some structure the committee also agreed to become pro-active and start to build some momentum, albeit reliant on a small number of committed volunteers. And, rather than start again, the committee decided to build a more bottom-up network to foster more trust and reciprocity with existing social enterprises in Suffolk.

The six SRN's in the East of England are a bit of a mixed bag with different legal entities, organisations, focus and funding. As a result there have been continuing changes of organisation and personnel.

The other East of England SRNs are run by part-time co-ordinators based at and part-funded by host organisations like The Social Enterprise People (Cambridgeshire) or Exemplas (Hertfordshire). and part-funded by, host organisations like The Social Enterprise People (Cambridgeshire) or Exemplas (Hertfordshire). In Norfolk, the network's officers have given their time voluntarily and Essex is in another state of change as we meet. The SRN for Bedfordshire apparently started, in 2005, as a company limited by guarantee, with a formal board of directors made up from operating social enterprises. This structure and set-up formalised the network's independence and allowed it to directly seek funding in its own right.

However the common themes among all the SRN's are:

- to be the voice for social enterprises within the county
- to share learning and promote mutual support
- to influence public policy and funding agendas
- to raise awareness of social enterprise
- to promote and support social enterprise development
- to increase trading opportunities

SENS has been looking at each of its neighbouring SRN's, and others around the country, to learn the good practice lessons for the future of SENS and its members. It has also consulted with its members and potential members.

We have started to share ideas and experience and support each other, and as membership slowly grows we expect to generate new business. Meanwhile we seek to inspire each other, help solve each other's issues and help to address challenges. We believe that this shared learning will help to develop our respective businesses, recognising that at the end of the day if SENS produces no added-value it will not grow and develop itself. The relationship between SENS and its respective members should prove mutually beneficial. SENS exists to serve its members and be judged by them as the key stakeholders.

Unlike national and regional networks, SENS as a sub-regional network, is more informal and ad-hoc, reliant upon a small number of committed individuals, currently has no external funding, and therefore and is still in a formative phase.

### **Past year**

In the past year, as well as gaining a management committee and agreeing a constitution (as an unincorporated association) SENS has managed to hold monthly committee meetings - at various locations around the county, mainly using member bases offered on an FOC basis.

Attempts have been made, so far unsuccessful, to secure some "seed corn" funding from SEEE and establish a bank account. It has been agreed that at the earliest opportunity we open up an account with a credit union to support a fellow social enterprise.

However, SEE has managed to cover the cost of committee members' travelling expenses, the cost of a website ([www.sens-suffolk.co.uk](http://www.sens-suffolk.co.uk)) and the cost of a trial workshop. The total costs accounting for only a matter of hundreds of pounds and are accounted for in SEEE's accounts.

## **The Present**

Recently we have had success in becoming a One Voice Suffolk partner. OVS is the group of infrastructure organisations which meet to develop and implement the ChangeUp county plan in Suffolk. This will allow us to integrate our work and to provide a focused, coherent and enhanced service for our members and future members, as social enterprises.

Currently SEEE/SENS members in Suffolk total less than 20. Having an AGM quorum set at 10, therefore, always looked extremely ambitious and so this will have to be revisited at a later date.

Conscious of SEEE's experience with introducing a £25 annual base membership charge (higher for pre-starts and larger organisations) whereby membership dropped from around 200, over 6 counties, to around 100, the SENS management committee forwarded the proposal to SEEE that free membership be offered to pre-starts and micro-enterprises (up to 10 paid full-time equivalent staff), with the view to "upsell" at a later, more appropriate, time. To date this proposal has yet to be adopted by SEEE, but as SEEE and the SRN's are all autonomous bodies, SENS has already recently introduced it for Suffolk and their current and future members. It is hoped that this will accelerate growth of the membership base, the great number of whom would qualify for free SENS membership.

SENS currently offers its member the information contained on its new website, updated weekly, which includes local news and events. This is shortly to be further enhanced by a monthly eNewsletter, as per the one put out by the Norfolk SRN. Because of the rural challenge of membership geographical spread and infrastructure issues, SENS will look to make greater use of ICT in the future eg Skype, webinars and online surveys which require a certain amount of local hand-holding and familiarity.

Recently work was commissioned by the Suffolk strategic Partnership and Suffolk County Council to provide some baseline research on social enterprises in Suffolk and the findings will be presented and debated in September. However, this work only managed to identify less than 100 "social enterprises" but, even then, on closer inspection a number of these were either not social enterprises ( eg in-house units of Suffolk County Council), ceased or not in Suffolk. Interestingly a great number were relatively new i.e. started in the last 3 years and of these the group of community interest companies was growing and approaching 25 in the county.

Social enterprises are very much an emerging sector in Suffolk and SENS is well-placed to support this nascent growth on the ground.

It is suspected that there are, of course, great number more social enterprises to be found but many probably don't recognise themselves as social enterprises. This in turn highlights one of the major findings of this first-cut research i.e. low awareness and agreement on the definition of a social enterprise.

SENS aims to take this baseline research and greatly expand on it, as without good base knowledge it's difficult to generate meaningful plans and strategies to support social enterprise in Suffolk.

However, with SEN's own existing knowledge and consultation with members and interested parties, SENS has produced its first prioritised strategy document for promoting social enterprise in Suffolk – available from the SENS website (on the News page). However lack of funding prevents putting it fully into action and it is hoped that SEEE will soon be able to identify and secure funding for SRN's. Meanwhile SENS is also looking to address the issue by taking action itself and has been actively investigating alternative legal structures, yielding additional fund-raising and operational benefits for itself eg becoming a CIC itself.

Some of the funding is required to build and develop an ongoing series of semi-structured workshops around the county for 8-12 members at a time, already successfully trialled at local enterprise agency offices in Felixstowe. SENS identified that members and potential members wanted such events where there are no long speeches, no 'expert' panels. no being talked at, instead, members contribute the content themselves at workshops hosted by their Suffolk peers - making their own highly-interactive event. Importantly, SENS needs to constantly monitor members' wishes and design services accordingly. As the committee members are practising social enterprises themselves there should be a greater understanding and anticipation.

Another major matter currently occupying the SENS management committee are meetings with The Boundary Committee (looking at introducing unitary authorities in both Suffolk and Norfolk), and local authorities, to promote the interests of social enterprise and encourage social enterprises to make their own representations direct to the Boundary Committee and their local authorities..

SENS have also started a dialogue with its contiguous neighbouring SRN's, especially Norfolk, with the current work of The Boundary Committee potentially forcing major upheavals in both counties at the same time.

## **The Future**

SEN's immediate focus is both to grow membership - especially among pre-starts and micro-enterprises to build a more solid base - and acquire independent funding, but longer term we are interested in generating plans with SMART objectives so that we can demonstrate our direction and the outcomes and impact we are making on the ground in Suffolk.

As social enterprises, representing a business model with a social aim and covering many business activities, are probably more closely aligned with the private sector, SENS will be looking to build relationships with other SME's and their trade associations eg Ipswich & Suffolk Small Business Association (ISSBA).

We will be looking closely at the value of the Compact for Suffolk and ways to strengthen it for our members who are, or wish to, contract with the county (unitary) authority. This will include covering the issues of social accounting and auditing and the value of local social enterprises to the local economy, as well as the issue of breaking up county contracts.

We will develop self-evaluation with stakeholders, with particular focus on SENS members and potential members.

We aim ultimately to be evaluated in terms of our structure, membership, resources, activity, connections, measurable objectives and our longevity.

SENS now looks forward to recruiting not only more members but also more volunteer members to the SENS management committee - who with the high opportunity cost manage to mix business with socialising.

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