

## Social Enterprise & Community Café Activity



ROAR: Connections for Life, Paisley

### Background

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Over the past few years, SEN members have increasingly referred to various forms of community café activity taking place within their social enterprise. Though primarily an issue for members whose core work relates to community food, community café activities are also commonly linked to thematic areas such as health, employability, culture and sport. This is particularly relevant where ‘space and place’ or ‘creating connections’ are a key element of a social enterprise’s core objectives.

The sustainability of community cafés, however, is a common concern for SEN members across Scotland. With most cafés only able to sustain a modest income stream, it is generally accepted that running a café which regularly returns a profit is one of the most difficult challenges that members face.

Despite this, there appears to be a growing interest in community café activity – specifically in how using food as a unifying force can help address issues around sustainability, community cohesion and inclusion.

Given the enthusiasm for involvement in community café activities – despite the challenges involved – Sencot was keen to engage with local and thematic SENs to understand the role that community café activity plays within social enterprise.

We aim to establish the core purposes these activities serve and gain insight into how community café activity is resourced, particularly with regards to the challenges of turning over a surplus.

Over 30 social enterprise participated in discussions across the country to share their experience of developing and managing community café activities. These forums have provided a valuable insight on the purpose this activity serves, highlighting the challenges faced, how these were overcome and how they could have been avoided. A further 40 social enterprise have similarly provided input via a short survey.

The openness with which participants spoke about their successes and mistakes, and their eagerness to share ideas and learning with one another, illustrates the huge resource of knowledge and experience that has already been developed across the SENs.

Recognising the potential for growth in this area, and the common challenges faced by many SEN members, this paper will lay the foundation for peer-to-peer learning through a series of shorter publications. Each publication will focus on a specific scenario, such as setting up a community café from scratch or bringing in an external caterer to run a community café on your existing premises.

In these publications, we will draw on the experience of SEN members who run established community cafés to outline the opportunities and potential pitfalls of each scenario.

## Defining Community Café Activity



Larder Cook School, West Lothian

Community café activity is wide-ranging in its scope – it is certainly not limited to food in a traditional hospitality sense.

Community café activities also include programmes, initiatives or events which are designed to tackle specific social challenges faced by the local community, as well as activities which provide physical and mental health and wellbeing benefits.

These can include:

- Community meals
- Pay as you feel initiatives
- Volunteering support
- Signposting local services
- Community gardens & growing spaces
- Providing market space for local goods
- Holiday hunger programmes
- Surplus food distribution
- Promoting healthier cooking methods
- Room hire and events catering
- External catering

Given the wide range of activities outlined above that relate to community café work, it's unsurprising that many social enterprises don't identify as strictly being a community café or as running a community café.

While there are self-defined community cafés (27% of participants), over 65% described themselves as hosting or

providing some type of community café activity as part of their overall social enterprise.

Based on this, we describe community café activity as having the following characteristics:

- Operates from a fixed premises or provides a pop-up café from different locations
- Buys in and/or sources products and produce, often locally
- Engages staff, volunteers, trainees or members of the community in carrying out tasks associated with sourcing, preparing and providing its products
- Café has regular customers, passing trade or a combination of both
- Customers buy or receive the product to sit in or to take away

Of the social enterprises that did identify specifically as operating or hosting community cafés, several descriptions emerged, including:

- Running a community café social enterprise with an employability purpose
- Running a community café for another organisation
- Bringing in an external organisation to run a community café
- Providing community café as part of a wider social enterprise

## Core Purpose

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Most social enterprises were very clear on the reason they provide community café activity, with this being either for commercial or social purposes.

Around a fifth of social enterprises state that the core purpose is commercial, i.e. to generate income.

The majority (80%) of social enterprise indicate that the café activity primarily has a social purpose.

The social purposes stated largely fall into the broad categories of: health and wellbeing; providing opportunity for social connections; and employability. See below for a breakdown of core purposes and common services offered by community cafés.

### Commercial



Generate an income



Profits for social impact

### Health & Wellbeing



Encouraging healthy eating



Signposting services



Addressing food poverty



Supporting mental health

### Creating Social Connections



Addressing loneliness & social isolation



Creating a community hub



Providing co-working spaces



Developing relationships through food

## Employability



Work experience



Training opportunities



Skills development



Professional qualifications

### Others



Café brings all the activities together



Reducing food waste



Creating awareness of an issue



Economic development



Community development

## Core Purpose & Business Model

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What a social enterprise wants to achieve ultimately determines the approach and business model developed, especially in relation to issues around:

- Legal structure
- Staffing
- Size and scale
- Location and accommodation
- Customer base/target groups
- Needs
- Profit
- Sustainability
- Risk assessments
- Pricing
- Partnerships

With this in mind, it's vitally important that everyone involved with the enterprise shares a clear understanding of its core purpose from the outset.

## Resourcing Community Café Activity



Garadh a Bhagh a Tuath, Isle of Barra

Among the wide range of issues and challenges discussed, how to successfully make a profit and how to resource community café activity was highlighted as a key issue.

While some are developed with the intention of generating a surplus, others are designed to cover their costs and breakeven. Others still will be prepared for, and even expect to, run at a loss, with the activity being resourced through other revenue sources and local assets.

Social enterprises referred to the following broad areas to resource community café activity:

### Income Generation



Sales



Venue hire



Patron scheme



Surplus from café activity



Sponsorship



Community shares



Service level agreements



External catering

### People



Trainees



Paid staff



Volunteers



Local community

### Grants & Donations



Grant funding



Fundraisers



Pay as you feel



Pay it forward



Crowdfunding

### Equipment & Products



Sourcing equipment



Local produce



Technology



Surplus food (eg FareShare)

### Initial Groundwork & Development



Business planning



Measuring impact



Local and national support



Market intelligence



## Other Issues & Challenges



Grassmarket Community Project, Edinburgh

A whole host of other challenges were identified, with these varying very much depending on the core purpose, stage of development, scale, location, etc of the café.

The most frequently mentioned include:



Knowing where to start



Deciding customer base



Identifying competitors



The food: getting the menu right



Staffing



Sourcing equipment



Consistent income and cash flow



Getting price points right



Premises



Food hygiene regulations



Marketing and raising awareness

## Learning Across the SENs

From the sessions, there was a real willingness to share learning from previous experience, with SEN members keen to help others avoid making the same mistakes.

Similarly, there has been lots of interest from members still in the development stage of a community café to learn from those who are further down the line in this process.

Although many SEN members with experience in this highlight the hard work involved and numerous difficulties encountered, they also emphasise the benefits that have emerged throughout the process.

These can range from outcomes such as connecting people experiencing loneliness and isolation, or providing people with access to affordable and nutritious food. There are always things that we would do differently a second time round – learning from mistakes is a vital part of any development process.

It's this experience that more experienced SEN members running established community café activities can share with you to guide your journey.

With input from SEN members across the country and operating in a range of thematic areas, we're now collating a series of shorter, peer-led publications that will aim to facilitate the sharing of valuable lessons and experience.

Based on feedback so far, we're intending for these subsequent publications to focus on specific scenarios, including: setting up a community café from scratch; bringing in an external caterer to run a community café on existing premises; running a café for another enterprise; and running a café with an employability focus.

**For more information, contact Senscot's health & community food coordinator Mary Sinclair at [mary@senscot.net](mailto:mary@senscot.net).**