

Community Enterprise in Scotland (CEiS) 25th Birthday Party

Delighted to be here this evening.....amazing to reflect how social and community enterprise has evolved and developed over the last quarter century....and become a significant part of our society's landscape.

Pleased that CEiS has retained the phrase Community Enterprise in its name rather than opt for the more fashionable term Social Enterprise. Twenty-five years ago community was a key concept when Strathclyde Community Business was established. The community enterprise idea had evolved as a community development strategy and, whilst originating in Strathclyde's social strategy, was a conscious attempt to acknowledge that social and economic issues needed to be tackled together. It was also about giving communities the capacity to take action on their own behalf about those issues which affected them. As such it was never just a "business model", more a movement towards empowering communities to tackle the issues facing them and to do that through a mix of business and other activities which, taken together, could be financially sustainable.

Although the driver was historically high unemployment in the most disadvantaged areas of Strathclyde and most of the funding was directed to the "areas for priority treatment" SCB saw community business not just as something for the disadvantaged but as an idea relevant to all communities and supported initiatives elsewhere. The popular slogan of the time: "There is another way" neatly summed up that wider, political vision which lay behind community enterprise – that there must be an alternative option alongside capitalist models of private business and bureaucratic, statist management. Community enterprise was about achieving a social purpose through business activity and not about accumulating wealth for owners and shareholders, and it was about local people doing local work..

It was of course not a new idea when Strathclyde Region, with the backing of the Scottish Office, launched Strathclyde Community Business. It built on pioneering work of the previous decade which had experimented with the creation of community-owned business. That work in turn drew inspiration from the Community Co-operative programme launched in 1976 by the Highlands and Islands Development Board under the leadership of the late Sir Kenneth Alexander and from the community co-ops of the West of Ireland. Inspiration also came from the co-operative tradition initiated in the nineteenth century by the Fenwick Weavers and the Rochdale Pioneers developing structures co-operatively owned by working people and seeking to provide goods and services, education, housing and welfare as well as becoming a major agricultural force in the country.

Today, as we witness the collapse of financial systems, the growth again of unemployment, further re-structuring of our economy there is talk of fiscal stimulus. Maybe we should be expecting talk also of fiscal preference in favour of social and community enterprise – to purposefully expand that values-driven sector of our society. And alongside that we should demand a robust social enterprise mark – not only so that we can be sure of what are social enterprises but also so that other bodies may not masquerade as such.

Opportunities were taken in the 1980s at a time of social and economic problems. Maybe now there are more opportunities to be grasped and the chance to really build that "other way".