

Sunderland Community Enterprise Network (SCEN)

Introduction

Sunderland Community Enterprise Network (SCEN) was a three year project (2003 – 06) funded from a variety of sources that enabled Social Enterprise Sunderland (SES) as lead partner to form a coalition of area-based enterprise support agencies in Sunderland. SCEN co-ordinated and supported the work of its partners in stimulating and helping organisations and individuals to start small businesses and social and community enterprises. During its existence it had an annual turnover of between £100,000 and £250,000 and employed 4-5 staff members, several of whom were seconded to its partner organisations.

Social accounting and audit

SCEN's original social enterprise plan committed the organisation to keep social accounts which were independently audited annually (2003/04, 2004/05 and 2005/06). It started practicing social accounting and audit to assess its performance and impact; but also used it to focus a rather loose consortium around a number of agreed objectives which helped the co-ordinator along with partner organisations to keep the project on track. Using social accounting as a management tool was important but equally SCEN was keen to prove and publicly demonstrate its "added value", listen to its stakeholders, and improve its accountability to its key stakeholders. SCEN had a specified budget for the social accounting and audit which was written into the original funding bid. This enabled them to contract an external consultant who guided them through the process using the SAN Manual (2005) and who helped draft the annual social accounts. The co-ordinator, however, had to allocate time to focus on the collecting the quantitative and qualitative data and ensure all steps in the process happened. SCEN is no longer a project but the links between SES and SCEN's partners still exist and they continue to work together. SES has continued with social accounting and audit.

Benefits and value of social accounting and audit

SCEN found the social accounting and audit process useful and they used it to re-vamp a number of critical data collection systems and try to standardise them amongst the area-based enterprise agencies across Sunderland. This was not an easy task as many of the partners' management systems did not immediately match the information highlighted through social accounting. On top of this, different funders wanted progress reports in a particular form which did not necessarily sit easy with information collected via social accounting. As part of the process, funders and *"organisations SCEN sought to influence"* in the region were interviewed and over the years this *"was found to be illuminating"* and at times quite surprising. One of the main

benefits was that *"the social accounts brought the consortium partners together"* and demonstrated to them the value of SCEN and its operation – which otherwise might have been less obvious. It also required the partners and others involved in SCEN to think about the importance of shared values within an organisation. The SCEN co-ordinator reported that he found social accounting and audit to be a useful management tool, it reinforced to him the importance of individuals and organisations sharing the same values, and the annual social report enabled him to push forward his arguments for change.

Negatives, problems, snags

One of the main problems with SCEN was inherent in its structure. The co-ordinator was the main person involved in the social accounting and initially there was lack of interest amongst the partners which caused difficulties in getting data back from partners. The writing of the annual social accounts was greatly helped by the consultant but at the same time SCEN saw the benefits of taking control of its own monitoring and evaluation and used the findings to learn and progress. Furthermore, the co-ordinator reported that annual social accounts would not have happened without external assistance but this was not greatly expensive (£6,000 pa) given the need for the project to have built-in monitoring and evaluation systems.

General thoughts on social accounting and audit

SCEN's hands-on experience of social accounting was generally good but they would not like to see it "enforced" in any way. They liked the idea of an overarching flexible framework and would not like to see the social accounting process *"dumbed down becoming a ticky-box exercise"*. Similarly, they would be opposed to social accounting having different levels of achievement as *"external people would have too much influence"* and imposition of the levels would *"dilute the whole principles of social accounting and audit and become a costly and time-consuming exercise"*. The co-ordinator said that social account should "move away from accreditation and paper chasing exercise which detracts from the value of learning."

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