

Social Enterprise East of England (SEEE)

SEEE promotes 'business with a social conscience'

Summary

EEDA-funded SEEE is the only region-wide organisation that co-ordinates and promotes the work of "social enterprises" across the East of England. With 200 members, SEEE provides a voice for organisations that are in business to work for the good of the community.

County:	Region-wide
EEDA theme:	Economic participation
Date:	April 2008

Main messages

- EEDA-funded network promotes growth, innovation and social benefit
- Representing over 200 social enterprises across six counties
- Helping small-scale organisations to punch above their weight
- Working to achieve maximum profitability for its members
- Benefiting those at risk of social exclusion, as well as the region as a whole.

Case study

Business drives social benefit

When Keith Smith established The Ferry Project in 1998, the Fenland town of Wisbech had no organised services or accommodation for people sleeping rough. Determined to change this, Keith decided to form a business that would be run by local people for the benefit of the homeless, and would not depend on charitable donations. "We set up a social enterprise without knowing what the phrase meant," he said.

Keith has no doubt that the EEDA-backed SEEE has been a massive help to the company, which now also works closely with housing provider Luminus Group of Huntingdon. "We

didn't join forces with SEEE until 2005," he said. "Until then, it felt like the Ferry Project was working in a vacuum. It seemed no-one else in the Fens understood our objectives. But SEEE recognised our approach as a sensible and rational way to tackle social problems in the area, and that boost to our confidence has been invaluable."

The Ferry Project now maintains 86 beds in Wisbech and the surrounding area, and provides shelter, advice and guidance, as well as work opportunities, to homeless people in one of the project's three enterprises:

1. An accommodation and advice service
2. An agricultural concern to grow and sell crops through markets, van delivery and a Ferry Project shop
3. A furniture recycling centre that restores household furniture for use within the project's hostels or resale to the second-hand furniture market.

Keith has been able to bounce ideas off other social enterprise pioneers, discuss funding ideas with SEEE board members and attend conferences and workshops in different parts of the country. All this has helped his business to expand and innovate. "In 2005, our agricultural concern was making about £8,000 per year. This year, we'll turn over £25,000 and we expect to be making £45,000 in the next couple of years. Our core business of housing is now profitable."

How does SEEE help?

The Ferry Project is just one of the 200 members that make up SEEE, which has £160,000 core funding from EEDA. Michele Rigby, SEEE's chief executive, explains her organisation's unique position: "We're the only region-wide social enterprise institution that's in touch with business and also has the ear of regional bodies like EEDA, so we're able to promote social enterprises at a policy-making level. Our purpose is to embed social enterprise firmly into the region's economic framework".

SEEE operates six sub-regional networks in Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Norfolk and Suffolk. The members of each sub-region return representatives to the SEEE board, who work together to co-ordinate the work of social enterprise entrepreneurs in the East of England. "When important policy issues such as the direction of the regional economic strategy arise, we make sure social enterprise has a voice," said Michele Rigby.

The benefits SEEE offers are not just top-down. Keith Smith said: “SEEE’s collaborative structure allows us to undertake complementary work. For example, Diverse (a local AIDS charity and SEEE member) needed a base in Wisbech from which to extend hospice and advice services to this part of the region. We had the space, so we were able to offer it to Diverse, giving them the chance to operate in a supportive and understanding office environment.”

Conclusion

With the backing of EEDA, SEEE is helping social enterprises such as the Ferry Project make an important contribution to tackling social and environmental issues across the East of England.

Additional information

What are social enterprises?

Social enterprises are businesses that have social or environmental objectives. They reinvest their surpluses into the business or community. They are organisations interested in overcoming social injustice or exclusion and contributing to society. [SEEE website]

For more information about SEEE, please visit www.seee.co.uk

In 2006, seven clients found permanent jobs with the Ferry Project, and over 70 gained valuable work experience. The Ferry Project helps over 200 clients a year, working closely with Huntingdon-based housing provider Luminus Group.

Extra quotes

Michele Rigby, SEEE chief executive

“EEDA are quite extraordinarily helpful – the people there are very approachable and willing to listen, and they always appreciate the fact that we know what’s happening on the ground.”

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