

CASE STUDY

SEASON: Supporting Social Enterprise Advisors in the South East

Delivered by Co-operatives South East, ESSEN and the se² partnership, this project aimed to improve business support in the South East through the establishment and development of a regional network for social enterprise advisors. The idea for a social enterprise advisors network came out of a se² partnership consultation with their members, to ascertain what business support was needed in the region. Through the network, advisors have been able to share best practice, address hot topics and undertake relevant training and professional development.



The aim of the 'SEASON' project is to:

- Build a strong regional network encouraging engagement from relevant advisors (i.e. people working in the South East region whose primary role is to provide direct business support and advice to social enterprises)
- Build a better standard of advice available to the region's social enterprises through increased accreditation and the sharing of best practice models
- Build greater awareness of, and improved access to, good quality social enterprise advice for third sector organisations in the region

SEASON project activity so far

Over the course of the network development, SEASON ran a number of events and seminars for its members, delivered by social enterprise sector experts. The social enterprise advisors that make up the network were granted access to continued professional development (CPD) opportunities through the seminars and great feedback was received throughout the project: an interim evaluation identified that 100% of participating advisors felt the network was meeting all, or a proportion, of their needs.

Co-operatives South East developed the “Meet Each Other” programme for the network, where travel costs were covered for advisors to meet up. The aim was to develop relationships between advisors, encouraging culture of DIY which would foster self-help, and enable advisor to organise their own meetings and maximise connections.

A peer review pilot was also developed, where SEASON members could work with other network advisors to review their business objectives and progress. The arrangements and resources for this

were set up by Co-operatives South East, but the programme itself was to be sustained by the advisors themselves.

The SEASON project learning was shared with Social Enterprise West Midlands (SEWM), Social Enterprise East Midlands (SEEM), and discussions were held with RISE, the regional infrastructure body for social enterprise in the South West, and Selnet, Lancashire's Social Enterprise Network. Throughout the project, Co-operatives South East and the se² partnership were able to work more closely with sub-regional network and individuals, increasing their support within the social enterprise sector in the region.

Challenges and Insights from the SEASON Project

- SEASON will have a strong online presence, enabling advisors and social enterprises to contact each other, share resources, and create trading opportunities. In light of impending spending cuts and the possible effects on physical support bodies, virtual networks and resources such as SEASON could become a key aspect of the social enterprise business support landscape.
- Funding timeframes can sometimes constrain the organic growth of a project. Network development often occurs slowly as relationships are built, and consideration needs to be made for this process.
- When subcontracting work out, ensure there is full understanding and buy-in to the project. Shared responsibility will create wider ownership of the project, but it is important that the person who leads has enough capacity to commit to the project.
- Encouraging a culture of DIY within a network helps to create sustainability for the future – the project looked to foster self-help, and enable advisors to organise their own meetings and maximise connections.

The future of SEASON

A website (www.seasonadvisor.org.uk) is planned for launch soon which will host a directory of advisors across the region, and encourage interaction and partnerships between social enterprises, advisors, and support organisations, serving as the key communication tool for the network. There will also be a Members only section, where advisors can communicate with each other, upload resources and share information.

A consultation is currently out with the network membership to map a vision for the future, with a view for the SEASON network will continue beyond the end of the project, aiming to become self-funded, led and maintained by the advisors themselves.

The SEASON network will look to be driven forwards by the social enterprise advisors, who will access the network to attend regular meetings where best practice is shared, hot topics are addressed and continual professional development is achieved.

For further details please contact:

Jo White
Executive Director
Co-operatives South East
jo.white@co-operativefutures.coop
www.cooperatives-se.coop

