

Learning Paper: The role of social entrepreneurs in supporting community responses to COVID-19

January 2021

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In this paper we present six key highlights from a review of the growing body of literature demonstrating and celebrating the integral role that social entrepreneurs (SEs) have played, and continue to play, in helping communities respond to COVID-19. SEs are naturally well-positioned for this role given they are already working in relevant areas, tackling a wide range of social and community issues relating to immediate social need during the crisis. Box 1 highlights how this work is relevant in response to COVID-19¹. In 2021 we will build on the insights presented in this paper and integrate them into our future research and evaluation activity to further develop the evidence base.

SEs are supporting communities to respond to COVID-19 through:

- Enabling, and easing the pressure on front line health and care services by, for example, producing PPE, delivering food, transporting staff to and from work.
- Providing home support to the most vulnerable, or those who are shielding. This includes providing food and delivering prescriptions.
- Facilitating online education and training, and support for remote working.
- Activities to reduce isolation and support well-being.
- Providing reliable information through their communications channels.
- Co-ordinating community activities.

Box 1 - Some of the key ways SEs are supporting communities in response to COVID-19

Key highlight 1: SEs are collaborating more, and as a result have been at the heart of joined-up community responses

At the start of the pandemic, evidence suggested that [SEs were responding to the crisis in four key ways](#) by pivoting, piloting, pausing and/or proceeding (see Box 2 for examples). Further evidence suggests that some SEs are also using an additional strategy through strengthening existing, or creating new, *partnerships*. This has allowed SEs to harness opportunities to do more and/or to do things differently. A recent Social Enterprise UK survey [found that only 4% aren't actively engaged with other social enterprises](#) at the moment.

Social entrepreneurs are integral for resilience building at the local level and are using their embedded networks within their local communities to create a safe collaborative space that enhances mutual aid and social capital (see Box 2 for examples). Some have suggested that



those in rural settings have been able to pivot their activity more quickly to meet local need,¹ although the reasons behind this are not entirely clear. SEs are embracing overcoming the issues they are faced with rather than focusing on a set solution, which enables an enhanced level of innovation and adaptability. They are using their networks and communities to quickly adjust their activities in response to changing needs.^{2,3,4}

Cardiff Salad Garden – This Cardiff based enterprise grow and sell high quality fresh cut salad leaves with the active participation of disadvantaged groups from in and around the city. They usually sell to restaurants all year round but due to restrictions and closures they have diversified their activities, and are now providing a home delivery service through the integration of their online ordering platform.

The Bevy – This Brighton based SE provides a safe space for their community to come and keep connected and engaged with one another. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions they had to close their doors and usual activities. During the restrictions, they piloted a new meals-on-wheels service funded by donations, as well as online events to keep people engaged.

Good Life Sorted – This London based SE has continued to deliver its services to the clients they already had as well as the new demand that has arisen due to COVID-19. This SE connects vulnerable 70+ clients with home delivery services including haircuts, food shops, repairs and prescription services.

Box 2 - Examples of SE responses to COVID-19 restrictions

Key Highlight 2: SEs are at the forefront of local responses to reducing isolation

Before COVID-19, we knew that SEs are a major force in fighting loneliness and reducing isolation.^{5,6} SEs have continued to play this role throughout the pandemic in innovative ways, such as moving services and educational activities on-line, using other technology (for example setting up WhatsApp groups) to ensure people remain connected, or doing door-to-

¹ <https://www.pioneerspost.com/news-views/20200422/one-fifth-furloughing-first-findings-on-impact-of-covid-19-on-scotland-s-social>

² <https://www.salford.ac.uk/news/covid-19-social-enterprises-are-leading-business-response>

³ <https://www.socialenterprisemark.org.uk/how-social-enterprises-are-adapting-to-the-crisis/>

⁴ http://www3.weforum.org/docs/COVID19_SocEnt_Alliance_Report_2020.pdf

⁵ <https://www.ruralsehub.net/mental-health-and-wellbeing/>

⁶ <https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/resources/report/transform-ageing-later-life-living-final-evaluation-report> and UnLtd 2020, Solutions for an Ageing Society Impact and Learning Report, funded by Esmée Fairbairn



door socially-distanced visits (see Box 3 for examples).⁷ SEs have become even more pivotal in this space.

Vibe Youth CIC – This Swansea based enterprise provides well-being support for the most vulnerable young people, usually at risk of exclusion from school. However, due to COVID-19 they are unable to provide their face-to-face services and have moved online to deliver their invaluable work through virtual platforms.

Care Calls – This UK wide organisation have been providing support for the NHS and the users they engage with. Care Calls provide updates to their clients regarding COVID-19 restrictions as well as a means to proactively monitor the wellbeing of vulnerable individuals. They talk with their clients as well as reminding them to wash their hands, eat, take medication and continue to social distance.

International Mixed Ability Sports (IMAS) – This Bradford based CIC promotes the innovative Mixed Ability sports model, where disabled and non-disabled participants enjoy sports together. Although COVID-19 has prevented a lot of practical sports activities the organisation is keeping in regular contact with their Mixed Ability trainers through the weekly online sessions, producing resources and delivering presentations.

Box 3 - Innovative ways SEs are remaining connected during COVID-19

Evidence also shows that SEs are likely to be dealing with, and supporting, mental health and wellbeing challenges on three levels: their own, their employees and the communities they work with.⁸ This is particularly apparent and important in rural areas or communities that are not well served by local authorities due to budget cuts.^{9,10} SEUK found that SEs would like access to a variety of downloadable resources in order to help support them around mental health.¹¹ In common with other organisations, morale is often low and SEs have found it difficult to keep both staff and service users engaged and motivated as the impact of the pandemic continues.

⁷ For other examples of this in different settings see Beyond Food <https://beyondfood.org.uk/our-story/>, or Sixty Six Ninety Nine <https://sixtysixninetynine.org/>

⁸ http://www3.weforum.org/docs/COVID19_SocEnt_Alliance_Report_2020.pdf

⁹ <https://storage.googleapis.com/scvo-documents-evidence/0693z00000AuvadAAB-SEN-SCOT%20Social%20Enterprise%20Reset%20Report-%20May%202020.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/>

¹¹ <https://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/SEUK-SEAP-Survey-Report-4-Oct-v2.pdf>



Key Highlight 3: Many social entrepreneurs are not furloughing people, they are continuing to provide employment and are putting their social mission first

Social enterprises have played an integral role in combatting the unemployment crisis caused by the pandemic. In proportion to “traditional” businesses, social enterprises hire more staff from groups furthest from the labour market.^{12,13} An estimated 35,000 social enterprises employ people with disabilities, homeless people, older people, those that have suffered from drug or alcohol addiction, or people with criminal records who would find it difficult to gain employment if the social enterprise they worked for closed.¹⁴ A core focus of social enterprises during the pandemic has been on retaining employment rather than using the furlough scheme, as a 20% drop in income would have significant ramifications for themselves and their families.⁷ A recent study suggests that [a quarter of social enterprises expect to take on new staff](#) in the next three months.

Key Highlight 4: There are disparities in who has been able to access government funding and where additional funding has been available. More financial support is needed.

Evidence suggests that, during the crisis, SEs have needed help with costs and overheads to avoid closing. However, financial support in the shape of furlough payments and/or grants and loans have not always been available to, or have not been appropriate, sufficient or accessible for SEs. This is reportedly due to legal structures and other organisational properties that mean they have often slipped through the net for support.¹⁵

There is some evidence of regional disparities in terms of how quickly funds and support to SEs are being distributed.¹⁶ Wales and Scotland appear to have been quick to respond to SEs’ funding needs, by directing financial support and grants towards them and the Third Sector

¹² <https://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Capitalism-in-Crisis-State-of-Social-Enterprise-Report-2019-1.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Social-Enterprises-and-COVID19-research-report-May-2020.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/coronavirus-information/coronavirus-blogs/social-enterprises-are-a-critical-part-of-the-uk-economy-and-must-be-supported-through-covid-19/>

¹⁵ <https://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Social-Enterprises-and-COVID19-research-report-May-2020.pdf> and <https://www.pioneerspost.com/news-views/20200504/uk-policy-failing-factor-social-businesses-social-enterprise-uk>

¹⁶ <https://wales.coop/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SE-COVID-19-ENGLISH-REPORT-1.pdf>



more widely,¹⁷ as have some English cities, notably Liverpool and Manchester. There are also concerns that where support packages have been available, these are drying up, and that future local authority budget cuts will put the sustainability of organisations under threat.^{18,19,20}

It's also evident that, despite the success of individual programmes such as the Social Enterprise Support Fund, which has dedicated 50% of funds to social enterprises that are led by, or are supporting people from diverse ethnicities or disabled communities,²¹ social entrepreneurs from these communities continue to be disproportionately affected. They are most likely to report being negatively impacted and least likely to have been able to access emergency finance.²² SEs, therefore, need more financial support that adopts an equity lens.

Key Highlight 5: We don't know much about social ventures that are closing, and there isn't much support on how to do this well

There is an evidence gap around SEs not making it through COVID-19 with their enterprise intact. This suggests SEs may not feel safe disclosing challenges or talking about it for fear of judgement or reputational damage. We know from previous [research that this can be difficult to talk about publicly](#), and highlights the need to create an environment where they feel they can ask for help and seek support from other organisations (such as SEUK, the government, relevant financial institutions) and their community. There is also anecdotal evidence that SEs do not feel supported in 'ending well'.

More information on both these aspects would provide valuable insight and learning to facilitate good practice more effectively and provide a framework of difficult/failed case studies so that people can learn about these challenges.

¹⁷ <https://www.gmcvo.org.uk/news/%E2%80%98no-going-back%E2%80%99-22-voices-manchesters-vcse-sector>

¹⁸ <https://www.socialeconomy.eu.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/SEE-Report-The-impact-of-COVID-19-on-Social-Economy.pdf>

¹⁹ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/09/social-entrepreneurs-are-first-responders-to-the-covid-19-crisis/>

²⁰ <https://socialenterprise.scot/cms/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-SES-member-feedback-1.pdf>

²¹ <https://www.the-sse.org/news/apply-now-to-our-new-18-7m-grant-fund-for-social-enterprises/>

²² https://bigsocietycapital.fra1.cdn.digitaloceanspaces.com/media/documents/Mapping_the_Needs_-_Emerging_Trends_-_Summary_of_Findings.pdf



Key Highlight 6: SEs are likely to play a key role in creating a more sustainable society (and they want to)

Social entrepreneurs are likely to be critical in community and national recovery from the impacts of COVID-19. SE's emphasis on innovation and connection, as well as their high levels of social capital and trust, through place-based work especially, means they are integral to resilience building at the local level.²³ Their experience in leveraging resources, collaborating, knowledge sharing and advocacy means they have a clear role in moves to 'Build Back Better' and in developing a more sustainable inclusive society.^{24,25} Evidence suggests that SEs don't want to merely survive and go back to how it was before COVID-19, as it wasn't an ideal situation for them to begin with. Rather they aim to 'reset' society and pave the way for a new era of a more inclusive, sustainable, environmentally friendly, equal, just, diverse, resilient and climate conscious society (see Box 4 for examples).^{26,27,28}

Box 4 - Examples of SEs aiming for a more sustainable future

Good Wash Company – The Welsh social enterprise manufactures soap and other luxury beauty products and uses all their profits to support projects set up to reduce inequalities and also improve animal welfare. They are now upping their activities by working with volunteers to deliver good wash packages to NHS workers in Wales, as well as to food bank drop offs and other local charities. To further involve the community, they have set up a buy one, give one scheme to help support heroes in their communities.

Human-Nature Escapes A CIC based in North Staffordshire, Human-Nature Escapes previously offered green exercise integrated with creative activities and has continued to offer weekly wellbeing support to regular participants, as well as developing online delivery. The organisation was awarded COVID-19 response funding from the National Lottery, which has enabled the continuation of a pilot project to support NHS staff with stress and anxiety causing absence from work. Human-Nature Escapes was featured in the Social Enterprise Support Programme video released in May 2020. The organisation's Director said that the film would be useful to support future crowdfunding campaigns.

²³ <https://storage.googleapis.com/scvo-documents-evidence/0693z00000AuvadAAB-SEN-SCOT%20Social%20Enterprise%20Reset%20Report-%20May%202020.pdf> and <https://plymsocent.org.uk/category/social-enterprises/>

²⁴ <https://www.socialenterprisemark.org.uk/how-the-ecosystem-can-enable-social-enterprises-to-build-back-better/>

²⁵ <https://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/blogs/why-working-together-is-part-of-our-commitment-to-help-social-enterprises-build-back-better/>

²⁶ <https://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Rebuilding-Business-for-Society.pdf> and <https://storage.googleapis.com/scvo-documents-evidence/0693z00000AuvadAAB-SEN-SCOT%20Social%20Enterprise%20Reset%20Report-%20May%202020.pdf>

²⁷ <https://www.socialenterprise.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/climate-change-what-we-know-social-enterprise-uk-2020.pdf>

²⁸ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59242ebc03596e804886c7f4/t/5f33988662d4d76db5a650d9/1597216914130/Building+Business+Back+Better+-+Traidcraft+Exchange+briefing.pdf>

