

Subject: Your Twitter Feed -- Good support for Social Enterprise Start-Ups

Date: Tuesday, 31 January 2012 17:19

From: Alun Severn <alun@bssec.org.uk>

To: <hurdn@parliament.uk>

Cc: <nick.hurd.mp@parliament.uk>

Dear Nick Hurd,

I've just picked up from your Twitter feed the questions you put regarding great examples of support for soc/ent start-ups.

BSSEC members have a wealth of experience regarding social enterprise business support and the first thing they would say is "it isn't that simple" — first of all some thought needs to be given to what kinds of clients are involved in the start-up, how complex it is, what scale might it operate at, what sector is it in etc.

It will be no surprise to hear that many of the sources of funding that have previously made it possible to deliver business support for SEs free at the point of delivery have dried up and hence there is a major shift to charged-for services. This may be OK for social entrepreneurs that have all or most of the skills in place, require only moderate support and may have some personal resources to spare with which they can buy in the support of choice.... But most SE start-ups, especially those at the local grassroots/community level aren't these kind of people — they're people who have very little or are business ideas being pursued by existing (but under-capitalised) civil society orgs or community groups.

In these cases not only do they not have the resources to pay but they may need more intensive and longer-term help.

One of the key points about SE business support is that it is rather different to mainstream business support. There are two key areas of difference:

- 1) It happens over a longer term, it typically involves a group of people and not a single entrepreneur, and in the case of new-starts it needs to be a planned developmental process which can help with initial feasibility research, market analysis, business planning, developing an appropriate business model and even in some cases basic stuff like raising awareness and understanding about SE and how and why it is a different way of doing business.

2) But the bigger difference is that SE support has never been exclusively concerned with new-starts in a way that conventional business support would understand. If SE is to play a bigger role in creating social and economic opportunities in some of the poorest communities and most hard-hit local economies — where these opportunities are most needed — then a huge amount of outreach and pre-enterprise support is also called for. This kind of proactive “evangelising” SE support is currently disappearing from the map because of lack of funds....

So to try and summarise:

- There is a place for online, virtual and other IT-based forms of support — and indeed these need further development and exploration, not less — but experience demonstrates that for some client groups these alone do not offer adequate support nor build sufficient confidence. They are not a great way to transfer skills, especially where client groups may be hard-pressed for time, have limited resources and need more personal support.
- Peer support and help from “those who have done it” can play a big part in offering this more personal support but in our experience peer support is frequently inconsistent and rarely available in the longer term or in a way that enables groups of individuals to follow a longer term developmental plan — but it is good for problem-solving and tackling specific business issues or ideas through discussion and collaboration.
- SE business support needs to move at the speed clients need and not the speed advisors need.
- SE business support above all needs to be appropriate (it needs to be steeped in and understand the values of social mission businesses/organisations) and above all it needs to be contextualised — it needs to reflect and understand the markets, the developmental options and circumstances and the aspirations of the client groups involved. Something that mainstream provision has rarely been good at and which it is not necessarily accessible through mainly online sources.

If you (or your aides) are ever in Birmingham and want to talk to

members of a social enterprise consortium that has been operating for over a decade to grow the social enterprise sector and improve and innovate SE business support (and some of our members significantly longer than that) then we would love to talk to you — we live and breathe this!

Kind regards,
Alun Severn
Secretary
BSSEC

Birmingham & Solihull Social Economy Consortium

Alun Severn: BSSEC Secretariat

tel: 0121 233 0278 email: alun@bssec.org.uk

Web: <http://www.bssec.org.uk>

Blog <http://www.bssec.org.uk/blog/>
