

Review of the Thematic Social Enterprise Networks

A Report for Sencot



Social Research



Service Design & Innovation



Strategy & Collaboration



Evaluation Support



Social Impact Measurement

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This paper outlines the main findings of the review of the Thematic Social Enterprise Networks (SENs) and associated Roundtables.

Thematic Activity

Sencot has provided active support for the development of area and thematic Social Enterprise Networks (SENs) for over a decade now. These SENs have been designed to provide members with opportunities for:

- Peer support.
- Resource sharing, joint working and development of markets.
- A focal point for issues specific to social enterprise.
- A collective voice both locally and nationally.
- Raising the awareness and profile of social enterprise both locally and nationally.

The vision is of a growing community of frontline social enterprises across Scotland - connected and energised through a network of Networks.

From 2009-10, Sencot turned its attention to the establishment of a number of Thematic networks, each developing in response to grassroots demand but organised along broadly similar principles. Each takes the form of a broad-based network that enables social enterprises to remain connected through regular meetings, events, information bulletins as well as ad hoc briefings and papers.

There are now four established Thematic SENs. These focus on Community Food, Culture, Health, and Sport. A fifth network focused on Employability has recently been established although it is still at a very

stage and has not been included within the scope of this review.

Thematic Roundtables have emerged from each of the SENs. These Roundtables offer a way of engaging relevant public agencies and intermediary bodies in regular policy discussions in order to: raise the profile of social enterprise; explore the strategic opportunities and concerns for social enterprises in each field; and exert a positive influence on the policy and funding landscape. The Roundtables take the form of quarterly meetings involving between seven and ten partners.

Collectively the Thematic SENs and Roundtables involve a membership of around 284 social enterprises, as well as a selection of national agencies and intermediaries. Approximately 17% of all Scottish social enterprises operating within the relevant thematic fields are currently subscribers to the SENs¹. Some social enterprises take an active interest in more than one network, the most notable overlap in membership is between the Health and Community Food SENs.

TABLE 1: MEMBERSHIP OF THEMATIC GROUPS

	SEN Members ¹	Roundtable Members ²
Community Food	48	7
Cultural	93	10
Health	102	8
Sport	70	9

¹ Number of unique organisations that subscribe as members of the Thematic SENs.

² Includes agency departments, intermediary bodies, and social enterprise representatives.

¹ Based on estimates derived from Social Enterprise in Scotland Census 2015

Purpose and commitment

There are varying levels of understanding and commitment to thematic group activity among members.

The work of the **Thematic SENs** appears to command broad understanding and respect among members. The members interviewed were generally knowledgeable about the role and purpose of the SENs. They characterised the SENs as a helpful opportunity to raise the profile of the work of social enterprises, network and enjoy the benefits of collaboration. However, the survey feedback from the wider membership found that only three-in-five respondents consider the 'purpose of the SEN as clear and widely understood', half of respondents stated that 'members play an active role and usefully contribute', and in only two-in five cases there is a 'strong sense of ownership of the SEN among members'. There are therefore implications regarding the continuing focus and direction of the Thematic SENs should Senscot wish to step back at this stage.

Generally, those involved in **Roundtables** view these forums favourably and understand what these meetings are trying to achieve. The interviews revealed, however, that attendees are often unclear about the detailed goals, objectives and role of the Roundtables. It should be noted, however, that feedback does vary between and across the Roundtables. During the interviews there was also some debate about the appropriate orientation of the Roundtables, whether towards a more strategic or operational role. If it is to be strategic, then a number of the agency representatives recognised that they might not have the required level of knowledge, insight, or seniority to contribute fully to discussions or to influence the level of support for social enterprises offered by their agency.

Networking and Communications

Both SEN and Roundtable members generally appreciate the opportunity to come together and welcome the regular flow of information that supports this.

The **Thematic SENs** were established as an opportunity for members to come together in one place, although this has become more difficult as the number and geographic spread of members has grown. Nonetheless, through a regular flow of information, three-in five Thematic SEN members have reported being 'adequately informed about the work of the SEN'. Both the news e-bulletin and other email communications are viewed as effective, by 84% and 68% of survey respondents respectively. However, in interviews, SEN members have acknowledged that communications can sometimes be lost amidst the clutter of other social enterprise and topic related communications from various sources. The feedback from interviews also identified the continuing appetite for direct networking, and a number of suggestions have been provided on how this might be further assisted through telephone and video conferencing, information-sharing tools (e.g. Dropbox), as well as social media (e.g. LinkedIn, Facebook. etc.). The importance of holding meetings in the north of Scotland was also cited as important to reach out to members beyond the central belt of Scotland.

Members of the **Roundtables** are also complementary about the mix of information and meeting opportunities provided. The required commitment on the part of Roundtable members was not viewed as excessive and the opportunity to hear and learn from others at Roundtable meetings was welcomed. The Roundtables were said to have created a forum in which members could speak openly about their work and learn more about wider social enterprise activity in their field. There was acknowledgement among some members,

however, that they often got more from the Roundtable meetings than they contributed. There was also a sense that more could be done to engage with a wider audience (particularly other senior decision-makers within the public sector) and to tell the story of social enterprise more generally as well as showcase the sector's contribution.

Connectedness

The evidence suggests further work is required to align the work of the Thematic SENs, Roundtables and other relevant national and local networks.

Thematic SENs members are generally positive about the SENs role as one of many network opportunities. Members may perceive themselves to be part of the social enterprise movement but also affiliate with a range of other networks in their locality or field of activity. In this respect Area SEN co-ordinators noted a growing interest in thematic opportunities and generally a good connection between area and thematic SEN activity. Also, members typically welcomed interaction between thematic groups (a number of social enterprises were members of both the Health and Community Food SENs for example) and there was considerable praise for the annual gatherings of SEN members. However, most SEN members responding to the survey were unable to offer an informed opinion on the extent to which their Network is linked effectively to a Roundtable, other SENs or related networks. Indeed the survey findings show that in only two-in-five cases members are aware of the work of the Thematic Roundtable that sits alongside their SEN.

The members of the **Roundtables** recognised the challenges associated with the strategic positioning and alignment of the thematic work of Sencot. This reflects the complex mix of networks, forums and events that reach out to social enterprises as well as those that relate to the fields in which they operate. In practice, this means

that busy social enterprises and agency representatives have many opportunities to engage in relevant and interesting discussions and must therefore prioritise their time. Some questioned whether the issues raised at the Roundtable were not already being discussed at a more strategic level elsewhere and how the Roundtables added value. Others recognised the unique role of the Roundtable in joining up social enterprise with associated policy themes. The discussions suggested that there is a more distinct and valuable role for Roundtables in topic areas where social enterprise is not yet widely recognised (e.g. Sport) than others where recognition is greater and the agenda is more mature and contested (e.g. Health).

Performance

After operating for some time, there is evidence that both the SENs and Roundtables are 'treading water' to some extent and that work is required to ensure that they remain focused and effective.

The work of the **Thematic SENs** is broadly satisfactory to members. The survey findings show that in two-in-five cases the expectations of members are 'fully' or 'mostly' being met, with most others indicating that this is partially the case. Almost half of SEN members responding have rated the SENs at least the same if not better than similar networks and forums, although just over one-third are unable to provide an opinion. From a wide range of objectives, survey respondents identified three main areas where the SENs are performing well: 'Raising the profile of the sector', 'Creating a collective voice' and 'Encouraging joint working'. The interviews with SEN members reinforced the view that Networks continue to command broad support, although members are not as enthused and inspired about engagement in SEN activities as they might be.

Those attending the **Roundtables** generally viewed participation as both positive and interesting. Discussions were typically

regarded as relevant and timely, although the coherence and sense of direction to the discussions appears to vary somewhat across the Roundtables. There was acknowledgement that progress had been made by the Roundtables, including in the development of policy position papers and an ongoing collection of case studies. However, some agency representatives did not feel adequately involved in the Roundtables, or sufficiently clear on its goals or priorities to provide an informed opinion on progress or performance. Others were critical of the lack of action-orientation to their Roundtable and the inability of members to move beyond discussion to progress ideas and action points between meetings.

Benefits

The review suggests that the benefits of participation in the Thematic SENs are somewhat more pronounced than in relation to the Roundtables.

Broadly the members of the **Thematic SENs** find their involvement beneficial. Two-thirds of respondents have indicated some form of benefit from their involvement and in just over two-in-five cases 'major benefits' have been reported. These benefits are generally derived from the connections made between members, the knowledge gained, and the collaborations with like-minded social enterprises that ensue. The feedback from discussions indicated that these benefits may be more significant for smaller and newer social enterprises that are still finding their feet as part of the social enterprise movement. The interviews with SEN members also suggest that they value and benefit from the wider connections, knowledge and advice that the Senscot team brings, and deem this an important part of the SEN offering.

The contribution of the **Roundtables** is less clear-cut. Broadly the Roundtable members interviewed talked about the helpful nature of information sharing and networking,

although most found it difficult to describe direct benefits that had arisen for them or their organisation. There was recognition in some cases that tangible achievements had arisen from Roundtable discussions for the sector itself, including the establishment of a new SportsScotland funding programme for social enterprises and new initiatives emerging in the field of tourism. However, most interviewees were unable to point to any significant influence or tangible achievements that could be attributed to the Roundtables, other than feeling better informed. Some debated whether greater influence and impact might be achieved if the Roundtables were to focus on a smaller set of the most significant issues, or whether greater influence could be achieved through different means such as Senscot involvement in other policy forums.

Senscot Role

There has been considerable praise for the role and contribution of Senscot, both in relation to its support for the SENs and Roundtables.

Thematic SEN members recognise the value of the work of Senscot. Of the SEN survey respondents able to comment, almost all reported that their thematic SEN is well co-ordinated and supported by Senscot. The interviews revealed particular praise for the consistent, trusted and knowledgeable presence of the Senscot SEN co-ordinators. However, equally there was acknowledgement among SEN members of the real limitations faced by Senscot, with only two-in-five survey respondents characterising the work of Senscot as 'adequately resourced' in relation to the Thematic SENs.

Likewise, members of the **Roundtables** roundly welcomed the role and contribution of Senscot. The agencies involved indicated that the visibility and contribution of Senscot had grown significantly since Roundtable activity had commenced some years ago. There was

also considerable praise for the professionalism, knowledge and pragmatism of Senscot staff in the way that they have gone about supporting Roundtable activity. The consensus among interviewees was that Senscot was playing an effective role given the resources available to support the Roundtables.

Continuation

There is clear support for continuation of the thematic networks in their current form, although the future direction of the Roundtables is less clear.

There is broad support among **Thematic SEN** members for continuation of the thematic activity. Where respondents were able to offer a view, nine-in-ten SEN survey respondents indicated a 'strong' continuing role, most others reporting some role, and only one respondent highlighting 'little or no role'. There were some caveats expressed in interviews, with a continuing and effective role for the SENs subject to a clearer remit, more focus, and fuller participation.

Opinion regarding the future direction and orientation of the **Roundtables** is more mixed. None of the interviewees explicitly called for the Roundtable meetings to come to an end, but most talked about the potential of Roundtables to achieve more or for them to take a somewhat different form. Some members fundamentally questioned the added value of the Roundtables, whether they were delivering on intended outcomes (as variously interpreted) and whether they were always the most appropriate vehicle to achieve policy influence on behalf of social enterprises.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Thematic SENs and later Roundtables have been operating for more than five years. During that time much has changed

in relation to the priority themes (e.g. Health and Social Care Integration) and the associated opportunities and challenges for social enterprises. While policy has generally become more attuned to the opportunities offered by the social enterprise sector, progress is more evident in some fields than others.

It is now timely to take stock to ensure that the SENs and Roundtables are contributing as much as they can, and that neither mechanism is treading water.

The evidence gathered as part of this review points to a continuing role for Senscot in relation to Health, Food, Culture and Sport.

We offer three recommendations to refocus and strengthen this thematic activity.

Refresh the SENs

The feedback from among the SENs is broadly positive about their past and continuing contribution, although enthusiasm may have waned somewhat over time. Given this, we recommend that the Thematic SENs continue to operate largely as they are, but with clearer priorities, strengthened channels of communication, and more inclusive methods of involving social enterprises from across Scotland. It would now be timely to agree with each of the SENs their priorities for the coming period and how best to engage members around these. It may be helpful to have some form of relaunch to signal any new direction and to engender more awareness and commitment.

Rethink the Roundtables

The evidence points to no simple one-size-fits-all approach to furthering the strategic ambitions of social enterprises in the four priority fields. The Roundtables have varied in their usefulness and added value across the themes, and therefore a more flexible and pragmatic approach is recommended.

This would start by agreeing a set of annual goals for each of the four themes (informed by each SEN). This would help to determine the necessary points of influence and actions most likely to transform the prospects of social enterprises in each field. Roundtable discussions may or may not be one of the resulting actions (dependent on context and goals), along with direct discussions with senior decision-makers, involvement in other policy forums, formal responses to policy consultations, direct lobbying, and organised grassroots campaigns. This approach would free up Senscot staff to determine the actions most likely to deliver benefits in each of the four areas.

Resource adequately

If Senscot is to make a meaningful impact in any of the thematic areas it must be appropriately resourced to do so. The review suggests that staff resources are currently spread thinly, overly reactive and subject to short-term and cyclical funding. There may be a case for re-prioritising existing staff time and for seeking additional staff capacity to support policy and communications work. Staff have also called for additional professional case studies and other promotional material to support engagement with the public sector in each field. This might be something that can be co-ordinated and progressed with Social Firms Scotland and/or Social Enterprise Scotland, both of which share policy and communications remit in the sector.

About the Review

This review was carried out by Social Value Lab during October and November 2015. The findings set out in this paper are based on:

1. **An online survey that gathered feedback from SEN members.** This received 41 responses across the four thematic networks, comprising one-in-eight social enterprise members. This breaks down as follows: Culture (11 respondents), Health (11), Sport (14) and Community Food (5).
2. **Semi-structured interviews with a representatives from Roundtables and SENs.** These included 8 interviews with 'agency' representatives and 5 intermediary bodies that attend Roundtables, as well as 12 social enterprise members that attend both the Roundtable and SEN meetings.

The combination of views received online and in-person has offered appropriately robust evidence of the operations, progress, achievements and scope for development of the SENs and Roundtables.

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