



Celebrating
Social Enterprise
in England's Far North



**A ONE-DAY
GATHERING
IN**

**ALSTON,
CUMBRIA,**

**exploring issues
around social
enterprise**

ALSTON TOWN HALL

SAT 27 MARCH 2004





Catering for the event was by The Moody Baker, a workers' co-operative based in Alston. The conference venue was dressed by Malcolm Goodman ('The Kiteman') of Middleton-in-Teesdale, with a spectacular display of kites from around the world. There were fifteen displays and stands illustrating the range of social enterprise activities and support agencies.

In addition to the display of kites and stands, Business with Altitude included a 'cartoonist-in-residence' for the day, Andrew Morley, who created caricature portraits of delegates over the course of the event.

The programme for the day started with keynote presentations by Pam Warhurst, Chair of the Countryside Agency, and Jon Walker, General Manager of Out of This World retail co-operative at Gosforth. These were followed by a set of workshops for delegates.

A long lunch break gave delegates the opportunity to network and enjoy a bar provided by the Old Crown, a community-owned pub at Heskett Newmarket, with beer from its co-operative brewery. Delegates could also participate in a 'social enterprise trail' around some of the surprising nooks and corners of Alston.

Afternoon workshop sessions were followed by a panel discussion, which concluded the day's events.



Alston is England's highest market town and at the hub of the North Pennines Area of Outstanding Beauty, (UK's only mainland Geopark), straddling the roof of England and the watersheds of the rivers South Tyne, Tees and Wear.

It is also a hotbed of social enterprise, with community businesses ranging from wholefoods to broadband, from a community gym to a museum about the area's life and transport.

With so much local activity, and situated at the mid-point between Tyneside and the Solway Firth, Alston seemed a natural choice for Enterprising Communities, an organisation based with Voluntary Action Cumbria, to bring the people of the north together.

The event was attended by around 60 people, representing the broad and diverse range of the social enterprise sector. This report aims to share some of the thinking from the event, and to invite those who attended to form an informal network. By these means, the organisers, Enterprising Communities, can plan for future events that are relevant, useful and topical for the sector. Therefore it is worth reiterating the intended aims of the event, which were:

- a) To demonstrate how the social enterprise and co-operative sector, and approach, can contribute to the building of economically sustainable communities and address issues of economic and social exclusion, by giving event participants and members of the wider public the opportunity to meet and learn from genuine practitioners in this field.
- b) Using and disseminating the experience, contacts and information gathered during the organisation of the event and at the event itself, the project will aim to build capacity and a community of support and mutual aid for social enterprises operating in the Alston area and throughout the wider region.



Keynote presentations

Although Pam Warhurst is Chair of the Countryside Agency, for many years she has also been part of a workers' co-op in Todmorden running a wholefood shop and cafe called The Bear. She spoke from the perspective of the countryside agenda and the influences of social enterprise on rural regeneration.

Jon Walker is from Out of This World, Gosforth, where he is General Manager and Buyer, with a background in wholefoods and co-operatives. After doing a degree in engineering and a doctorate in cybernetics, he left academia to establish a wholefood shop in Huddersfield. Then he worked with various recycling projects, a small-scale wholefood processing co-operative, and the wholefood wholesalers SUMA, also a co-operative.

Workshop sessions

Community Broadband; Daniel Heery of Cybermoor

This workshop looked at some of the unexpected challenges faced by the UK's first broadband co-op and the benefits that it has created.

Cybermoor Ltd. now has the highest penetration of broadband in any rural area in England. Its trading activities cover the sale of computer consumables, hire of equipment, and consultancy for local authorities and government agencies.

The key findings of the social benefits from the Cybermoor Evaluation Report illustrate how the project has 'catapulted' the local community from relative disadvantage to a point where they are ahead of the national average for IT use', with 81% of households having Internet access, compared to 50% nationally. The Internet is used primarily for finding information and for e-mailing. It has stimulated local voluntary and social activity, particularly amongst groups traditionally perceived to be at risk of social exclusion, such as the elderly, disabled people, single parents and young people. The head teachers of the three Alston Moor schools all say that the Cybermoor project has had a substantial effect on the IT skills of their pupils.

Alston Moor has a significant number of micro-businesses and people whose work is home based. So although Cybermoor was not supplying computer equipment to businesses, 80% of all business owners have a home computer supplied by Cybermoor, and a quarter of households have someone who uses a computer working from home. Over the course of the project, the use of ICT by local businesses has increased by 30%. The increasing use of broadband is continuing to have an increasing impact on local businesses. The writers of the Cybermoor Evaluation estimate that the increase in employment and efficiency/ productivity benefits represents an additional £300k to the local economy, covering the initial grant investment after five years.

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Childcare Community Co-operative; Pamela Johnston of R.A.S.C.A.L.S., Ashington

Pamela is a founder of R.A.S.C.A.L.S., an Out of School Club incorporated as a limited company and not-for-profit community co-operative in South-east Northumberland. She explained how to set up a childcare co-operative, and explained the process of formalising the group, where to go for help, who to tell (OFSTED etc.), and also what can go wrong, and does.

As a community-owned co-operative providing a crucial service to children, R.A.S.C.A.L.S. is driven by a clearly defined set of policies and procedures, including staff development, health and safety, risk assessment, admissions, recruitment and induction.

It has developed since 1994 through partnerships with local authorities and agencies, from one club on school premises to five in the Ashington area and three in Blyth, plus a 110-place nursery childcare centre in Ashington converted from a garage. It also initiated a community transport system. The childcare centre opened within 10 weeks of receiving planning permission and employs 30 staff. In line with R.A.S.C.A.L.S.' ethos local builders were used to undertake the conversion, and toys and equipment were sourced locally where possible.

The next phase in the development of R.A.S.C.A.L.S. is to create a childcare training organisation.

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Collaborations; Phil Barratt of CMS (Co-operative and Mutual Solutions)

This workshop provided a review of the different legal structures that may be used, and discussed issues around incorporation and the potential advantages and disadvantages of collaboration, as well as some practical steps towards collaborative ventures.

Co-operative and Mutual Solutions is an employee-owned business providing specialist consultancy to co-operatives and social enterprises. CMS's three consultant Directors have over thirty years of combined experience developing co-operatives and social enterprises (worker co-operatives and employee owned businesses, community businesses, social firms, credit unions and other community finance initiatives). CMS consultants have experience in both urban and rural environments, in designing and delivering development and support programmes (Government and European). CMS has close links with national and regional co-operative organisations and are recognised experienced practitioners with a keen understanding of the regional and national policy environments.

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Community shops; Beren Aldridge of Enterprising Communities

The workshop looked at examples of community-owned and community-run shops, and examined the stages a community might expect to go through from developing an idea to managing a business.

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Eco development at Nenthead Mines; David Flush of North Pennines Heritage Trust

The North Pennines Heritage Trust manages a number of properties and projects in the North Pennines, of which Nenthead Mines is the largest as an operation and most extensive in land mass. It contains over 100 miles of underground mines, a visitor centre, museum and shop.

Future development at Nenthead Mines includes an ECO housing project, featuring the design of stilted houses to minimise the amount of concrete used. The houses will be mega-insulated using new technology and incorporating solar gain into the design. They will be serviced by a number of eco-friendly systems such as the recycling of grey water to reduce the use of mains water. Electric power will be supplied from another of the Trust's projects - a 375kw Hydro Generating Station. The houses will be heated using a communal heat pump system extracting heat from mine water and supplemented with immersion heaters powered from two water wheels. The sewerage will be treated using a reed bed filtration system.

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Approaches to Group Development: Anne Cunningham & Kris Brenan of Enterprising Communities

Area Officers from Enterprising Communities introduced the activities and sequence of its Group Development Workshops, which assist emerging rural social enterprises to identify what it wants to do, why, and how it will go about it.

Enterprising Communities was set up by Voluntary Action Cumbria (VAC) in 2002 to support social enterprise throughout rural Cumbria. Its team of nine consists of a

project manager, enterprise manager, office manager and a research manager, and five area officers covering rural Carlisle, Eden, South Lakes, Allerdale and Copeland. The team works with any group that meets its criteria of having social aims, being managed as a business (with income generation), having an appropriate legal structure, providing paid employment, or working towards these - in other words, leading to sustainability.

Examples in Copeland of existing and emerging social enterprises include: training, horticulture (e.g. existing SE having dual purpose: training / produce, salad crops, vegetables + shrubs, etc), digital technology, finance (e.g. Credit Union), meals on wheels, and community transport.

The process of support explores ideas, feasibility, the group development workshops, funding, legal formation, business plans, and after-care. During Workshop 1, models are used for identifying stakeholders, a stakeholder map, for ranking stakeholders (importance and influence), as well as questions to examine purpose. Workshop 2 identifies critical success factors, evaluates their relative importance and develops action plans. The final Workshop 3 examines the use of profit, forms of ownership and governance, and determines the most appropriate form of legal structure for the group, using I.C.O.M.'s Select-A-Structure exercise.

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Organic Food Marketing Co-operative; John Thorpe of Hadrian Organics

Hadrian Organics Limited comprises seven registered organic farm businesses located in North Cumbria. It is a Cooperative Consortium, a private company limited by guarantee. All members have an equal say in its running and there is an elected secretary. Membership was dictated by the common desire to work collaboratively as established organic producers in North Cumbria. Effectively a marketing co-operative, Hadrian Organics can access funding that is not available to primary agriculture under current legislation. It is a prerequisite for joining the group that all members are certified organic producers.

In addition to producing livestock and other foods of the highest organic standards, all of the farms place great emphasis on conserving and protecting the environment, wildlife and local landscape. Many are covered by the Countryside Stewardship Scheme agreements and some also have education facilities open to the public. Members of the group have considerable knowledge and experience of running their own businesses and from working in both the private and the public sectors prior to coming into the organic farming business.

Members benefit from having a phased development programme that will help the group to become financially

sustainable by meeting its business and social aims through the growth and success of its member businesses. Some members of the group are small businesses who could not justify or afford the cost of marketing, equipment and access to the marketplace that are provided by cooperation through Hadrian Organics.

Hadrian Organics trades at a number of established farmers' markets in the area. They would also like to develop new markets and outlets for their organic produce by focusing on the tourist and catering industries along Hadrian's Wall.

A major benefit to members is that all of their produce ready for sale can be displayed at each market attended without the need for all of the members to be present. Who attends each market is agreed at regular board meetings, but is also influenced by the availability of produce, some of which is seasonal. The associated costs of attending each market are proportional to the sales of each member with produce for sale at that market. Transport costs are also minimised, as only one vehicle is needed for each event. Working collaboratively allows members to learn from each other and to benefit from each other's experiences. It also allows them to plan production well in advance to enable continuity of supplies to be maintained throughout the year, thereby avoiding losing customers who need that assurance. Members also benefit from promotional material produced by the Soil Association as it strives to broaden its own appeal to purchasers.

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"Democratic Management AND Business Success" or "Sack your CEO and DIY";

Bob Cannell of Suma Foods

Bob is a member of the Personnel Team at Suma, one of the largest and most successful worker co-operatives in the UK. Bob described Suma's radically democratic management structure, its policy of equal pay for all its 100 employees, and why these principles could benefit other social enterprises.

Suma's management policy and its development from a lone hippy-and-lentil-living-room into one of Britain's largest co-operatives are described in detail on its website at www.suma.co.uk. It is based on the Government's Investor in People programme (IIP); a difficult four-year course more usually associated with large companies and public bodies.

Suma subscribes to the International Co-operative Alliance principles:

1. Open membership
2. Democratic control and ownership
3. Rewards are proportional to contribution to the coop.
4. Autonomous commercial business
5. Education on cooperation
6. Cooperation between cooperatives
7. Social and Community responsibility

The Investors in People process stresses business success by managing and developing people rather than operational systems. It is not prescriptive. It encourages empowerment of workers, is supported by the Trade Union movement and enables workers to fruitfully but safely use their initiative, which allows Suma to be, for its individual members, a 'High Initiative Organisation within Collective Responsibility'. IIP is highly regarded by businesses and organisations of all types for the major improvements in profitability, efficiency, productivity, customer service and staff morale it engenders, with consequent reductions in cost of personnel and supervisory management functions.

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The Co-operative School model; Rose Bugler of Lowick Community School, S. Lakes

The community at Lowick has, in response to the decision to close Lowick CE School at the end of August 2004, created a proposal to establish Lowick New School on the same site in September 2004. The proposal process has involved carrying out a wide consultation process that included discussions and contributions from community members to an outline proposal at a series of community events including "Design A School" workshops and a series of community arts events. The proposal is for a cooperatively managed school co located with Community Learning Lowick, which will act as an incubator for community development and regeneration in the area.

Once the formal proposal was published a six week consultation process was initiated that resulted in support being given from a wide variety of local regional and even national organisations. Support was not given to the proposal however by the Cumbrian School Organisation Committee which represents existing providers of education in the area and who had previously supported the closure of Lowick CE School. As a new provider of education in the area the community has been able to forward the proposal to a national adjudicator who will consider the case over the next six weeks.

*More detailed information can be found at: <http://www.enterprisingcommunities.org.uk/lowickschool.htm>
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Question Time

The Question Time Panel at the Plenary session consisted of Bob Cannel of Suma Wholefoods, Viv Lewis of Enterprising Communities, Sam Gilchrist, Regeneration Manager with the Alston Partnership, and Jon Walker from Out of This World. It was chaired by John Payne of Enterprising Communities.

Discussion was focussed on the role of social enterprise within social and economic regeneration, and around the influence of co-operative and mutual support models on general business practice across all sectors. The support for social enterprise from Government was highlighted; it was noted that this was a two-edged sword. On one side the support was welcome, as it was an acknowledgement that social enterprise can bring about positive change and provide flexible bespoke solutions to local challenges, as well as influencing reform and modernisation of working practices. On the other side, it was observed that the burden of providing a full range of public services was being shifted from the public sector to the third sector. This dichotomy could be resolved in the future by negotiating and establishing long-term partnerships between NGOs and social enterprises.

DISPLAYS & STANDS

Alston CDC & Adult Education
Alston Craftworkers
Alston Moor Partnership
Alston Wholefoods
Business Link Cumbria
Co-operatives UK
Cumbria Rural Enterprise Agency
Cybermoor
Eden Arts
Cumbria Association of School Governors
Suma Foods
The Hub
The Moody Baker
Woolclip

EVALUATION

Delegates:

58 were recorded as attending including 'active participants' (those delivering workshops, speakers, helping, coordinating etc). Others were there (e.g. members of the Moody Baker providing catering etc), but exact numbers are not available.

11 of these were Alston Moor residents who received bursaries to cover their £10 entrance fees from the Alston Moor Partnership

28 places were 'free of charge' as they were either delivering workshops/ speaking, involved in organising the event/helping on the day or helping to fund it (of these; 12 speakers; 10 helpers/organisers (inc. the coordinator; 6 'funders'); 8 members of the Enterprising Communities team were present and 5 members of the event steering group

Evaluation Forms

These were provided at the registration point and people encouraged to fill them in, but;

Only 11 completed.

Responses as below

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Access to venue		2		7	2
2. Facilities at the venue	2	2	2	4	1
3. Structure of the conference			3	7	1
4. Catering	1		3		7
5. Keynote addresses		2		8	1
6. Morning workshop		1	3	5	1
7. Quiz trail		1		1	2
8. Afternoon workshop	1	1		4	4
9. Question time panel		1	2	1	

(1=highly unsatisfactory, 3=satisfactory, 5=highly satisfactory)

Few people did the quiz trail; *too busy networking?*

Few commented on the panel; *had they already left?*

Comments digest

People who commented on the speakers and workshops said they felt inspired and that the content was relevant and useful. They enjoyed hearing about the work and meeting people involved in it. There were some comments about the suitability of the venue for this type of event, that it lacked sufficient spaces and access. One commented on how the venue's shortcomings reflected a poor image of the social enterprise sector. Suggested improvements included lighting and sound, better disabled access, more space for workshops and inclusion of decision-making structures as a topic.



Evaluation by Steering Group

After the event, the Steering Group met to evaluate it against its original aims and objectives. The meeting was also attended by representatives of Alston Town Hall Trustees (i.e. Alston Parish Council) who are responsible for the venue's management, and for whom a separate evaluation has been written in preparation for a feasibility study into developing it as a conference venue.

The Steering Group's evaluation raised the following points:

Geographic spread was over 'England's Far North', but none came from over the Scottish border, and most were from the west side of the Pennines. (Alston Moor & N. Pennines: 21; Penrith/ Eden Valley: 14; Carlisle: 5; North East: 7; West Cumbria: 3; South Lakes: 3; Lancashire & Yorkshire: 4

Sector spread was a good mix of established and emerging enterprises, radical and more traditional. There was not much representation from leisure and culture or self-help groups.

Agencies were over-represented, reflecting unsuccessful marketing of the benefits of the event to social enterprises. However, the event itself was pitched as the Steering Group wanted, which was described as 'grass-rootsy', so word-of-mouth testimony should help in the marketing of a future event. The speakers were judged by the Steering Group to be "A+".

The opportunity to collect data from attenders was not fully taken, which will make the development of a directory more difficult to achieve. It was felt that there would have been more space for registration downstairs near the entrance to the venue, which would have made data capture easier.

The event was described overall as "funky and enjoyable", highlighting the importance of long breaks for networking.

Although the workshops were highly regarded, the aims of the event should have been detailed to the workshop leaders, including the intention to provide useful information/ case study material for the future. This might have been easier to achieve if the workshop leaders had been given an incentive such as a fee.



The event celebrated the achievements of the sector in an enjoyable and accessible manner and boosted the confidence of participants

Local benefit was most evident through the bursary scheme, which was taken up by 11 local people. The event helped to boost the economic activity of the Moody Baker Co-operative, but benefits to other local social enterprises such as Alston Wholefoods were considered to be less. Some other of Alston's retail outlets benefited from the extra visitors. The Town Hall benefited from the 'live' experience of hosting a small conference, which tested its facilities and gave an indication of its future requirements. Only two delegates visited the Hub. Seven completed the Trail. It is believed that no-one stayed in local overnight accommodation. The Steering Group felt that local benefit could have been improved through greater awareness-raising. There was little explanation of the event to local people. The media release was not picked-up by local media. A future event needs to be publicised with a 'human angle', and through the personal networks of the Steering Group.

The event and future development has the potential to promote networking, mutual aid and trade between existing and emerging social enterprises.



team drawing by Andrew Morley



Alston, 27 March 2004

Celebrating Social Enterprise in England's Far North

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