

Outside the Box



Despite a springtime flurry of activity, the rural pace of life isn't a model we should adopt for social enterprise, says CAN's Adele Blakebrough

Spring was especially magical in Pembrokeshire this year for my family and I, and not just because the weather was Mediterranean.

A year ago the local farmer and I bought ten sheep. The idea was that they would be efficient lawnmowers for an overgrown field and that my two girls would love them. The sheep were purchased and, apart from escaping from the field a couple of times, all was well. Roy the farmer had purchased a ram and although both of us were inexperienced sheep handlers we thought it would be a good learning experience to see if we could manage lambs as well. The ewes quickly fell pregnant and, as luck would have it, the lambs were born over the Easter holiday.

I have rarely been so exhausted. Our home and field became like *Emergency Ward 10*. Lambs got stuck during birth, died, were rejected, had to be adopted and bottle-fed by us. Miraculously, eight others took their first breaths, stood up on their wobbly feet and basked in the warm sunshine. It was a glorious, mucky business and each day brought new demands and dramas. The two lambs we had to bottle-feed are – inevitably – now members of the family and christened Scruffy and Mischief.

Because I'm an optimist I don't usually anticipate how difficult or demanding new situations might be in advance. My redeeming quality is that once committed to some activity or other I will always see things through.

The demands of rural life in Pembrokeshire can sometimes jar dramatically with trying to get anything businesslike done in that area. Deadlines are rarely kept to and little jobs take an age to complete.

I dragged myself reluctantly back to the Big Smoke and found that my burglar alarm was bust. I phoned the company at 4pm and they agreed to come round at 7.30am the following day. They duly arrived – on the dot – and had completed the work by 7.50.

Sometimes I feel it's an uphill struggle to convince social enterprises that delivery, consistency and quality are the bedrock of social business and not just 'a nice thing to have'. As CAN grows its

Mezzanine buildings – shared offices for the third sector – we're looking for suppliers who can provide the kind of products and services our customers need. It's quite frustrating that often we are driven to the corporate sector because the social enterprises can't deliver on cost and efficiency. That's a luxury that you can afford at the embryonic stages, but as we develop we need to address these issues more urgently. A few have cracked it. However, many others really struggle.

Our vision is usually very strong and compelling but we let ourselves down when it comes to focusing on the real delivery demands and evidencing our impact.

One of the reasons that businesses often succeed is that they recognise that good business more often than not relies on repetition, cost control and refining the task. That mechanistic approach doesn't always sit easily with some of us in the social enterprise sector. We get bored and like to go off at a tangent – driven by a social mission which makes us very opportunistic. After all, there is need everywhere.

If we are to provide products and services of choice for consumers then I'm afraid there's no getting away from the need to focus on the processes and not be diverted from our core business.

This is why I believe we need to bring business people and practices into our organisations. The healthy mix is crucial to enable us to fulfil our social and business objectives more effectively.

As I had no intention of walking away from a hair-raising first lambing season, so it has to be for social enterprise. We need to bridge the gap between our ambitions and dreams of where we would like to be and the reality of where we are. We have to be prepared to see this process through. The goal is that eventually I, as the consumer, will choose your products and services because they are the best, or at least comparable to business alternatives. To cap it all they'll be delivering a fantastic social mission as well.

Adele Blakebrough MBE is chief executive of Community Action Network
www.can-online.org.uk