

SSE – IRELAND

NATIONAL WORK-GROUP – FIRST MEETING

Location: Mandate training offices, Dublin

Date: November 13th 2015

PRESENT:

Stevie Nolan – stevie@trademarkbelfast.com

Bill Kelly – bill.kelly.lcg@gmail.com

Alice McLarnon – alice@trademarkbelfast.com

Duncan Walker – duncanwalker@walk.ie

Jo McDonnell – Jo@belfastcleanupociety.com

Susan Jackson – info@farmageddonbrewing.com

Lynn Boylan – lynn.boylan@ep.europa.eu

Aoife McNamara – aoife@ideaonline.ie

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Chris Gordon – chris@chrismmgordon.com

Stuart Fraser – stuart@ibcat.ie

Diarmuid O'Flynn – diarmuid.oflynn@ep.europa.eu

APOLOGIES

Michael McGrath, Golden Vale Co-op – pulling out following medical advice.

Cloughjordan ecovillage – unable to attend but will be in Brussels in January, wish to remain connected.

NOTIFIED

Irish League of Credit Unions (potential source of funding)

Department of Jobs, Enterprise & Innovation – the relevant government department.

FORMAT

The session was broken into two parts.

The first session involved short individual introductions by all present, followed by an introduction to the SSE concept by Stevie, Lynn and Diarmuid. This was followed by a general discussion to which all present contributed.

After a break for lunch, the second session we devoted mainly to developing a manifesto for the Irish branch of SSE, followed by ideas/questions for the January 26th 2016 event in Brussels.

FIRST SESSION

Introduction

Stevie outlined the current situation vis-à-vis SSE in Ireland – a wasteland, basically, and in the Republic especially. No infrastructure, nowhere to go advice/guidance/finance for anyone who has an idea for an SSE or a co-op.

Lynn added to that, explained the thinking of those in the relevant department/committee of the current government; she had a recent meeting with some of those officials and they are blind to the potential of SSE, locked into the idea that it's just a few people working from a cottage somewhere.

Lynn then also spoke of the work in the European Parliament towards having a Written Declaration ready for January 26th to make 2018 the Year of the SSE.

Bill spoke strongly and at length about not making all of this simply a talking-shop, nor even what he called 'a hug-fest'; he is interested in this only if it is working towards producing practical, workable results. That sentiment was echoed by several in the room, most especially by those who already have their SSE businesses up and running.

Diarmuid and Lynn both explained that this was exactly what this whole SSE campaign is about. The various MEPs in the European Parliament will do their damndest to facilitate, to work on getting through the system whatever is needed, working also with those from other political groups in Brussels, but that ultimately this was succeed only through the work of those like Bill and others on the ground, taking ownership of the drive at national level and taking it on from there.

On that, Bill suggested that Ireland could learn from the likes of Italy and Spain, from the Mondragon model especially, perhaps even twinning with them on a pilot project where two or three of them could be brought to Ireland for a period of perhaps six months, educating and training several Irish people on how their system works.

It was also suggested that we should start working now on getting the government involved, through the relevant department and committee – Lynn said she would get the Sinn Féin representative, Peadar Tóibín, to push on that. Change in attitude in there is needed but also, change in legislation on things like asset transfer, asset lock, number of people needed to set up a co-op (seven in the Republic as opposed to a more logical three in the Six Counties), etc.

A media campaign is also needed to try to educate people on the practical benefits of SSE, not just financially and on employment provision, but also a social level. SSE is as fit for the 21st century as it was for the 19th and 20th, but people needed to be educated to understand that.

On financing and resources, it was pointed out also that there is actually money available for start-up SSEs from the Credit Unions and from the Department of Jobs etc.

Labeling

Care needs to be taken on how we define ourselves, not just as an organisation but even as individual SSEs. A few speakers were at pains to state that they don't sell themselves as some kind of semi-charity, which people almost automatically associate with donation and inferior

goods; it's critical that SSE and all its businesses should put themselves on the same playing field as any other business, that what they're offering is quality, value-for-money in their goods and services, the added value then a positive by-product, a bonus.

Definition

There was a short discussion about the definition of SSE, some feeling this was just semantics and a waste of energy, others feeling that it's important as a start point – how do you know where you're going or what you're doing if you don't know who or where you are? No agreement was reached, certainly no definition, but this is something (I believe) we need to have finalised and agreed by the January 26th meeting.

AFTERNOON SESSION

Manifesto

There was a lot of conversation on producing a Manifesto, the result of which can be summarised as follows (with the proviso that this can and will be added to!):

- 1) Opening Statement Of Intent – rather than having just a list of desires/demands, start by stating what SSE offers, which is the creation of viable, sustainable, ethical, living-wage, in their hundreds of thousands across the EU, and based in local communities into which all revenue returns in one form or another; as an initial aim, and to set a target that the media would instantly recognise, try to double the number of jobs currently in the SSE sector in Ireland;
- 2) Institutional change – Enterprise Board offices offering expert advice on setting up and financing SSE;
- 3) Promotion of 'actually existing alternatives' in SSE, including field-trips to other countries in Europe where that culture currently thrives;
- 4) Legislative change – asset lock, co-op set-up numbers, social clause incorporated into public procurement (may need action at European Parliament level), CIC (Community Interest Company, a new legal format in the UK), Ben Com (Community Benefit Society, new form of social co-operative)/CAT (Community Asset Transfer);
- 5) Building capacity – both top/down and bottom/up approaches needed, which is where public education again comes in;

Towards January 26th 2016

- 1) Bring exhibits to Brussels;
- 2) Check out funding for transportation of equipment etc for the exhibition – can't be done overland from Ireland;
- 3) Set up fringe meetings for the Irish group as a whole with people who really catch the eye;
- 4) See about bringing reps from the Credit Union, NABCO (Housing body) and ICOS (big farming co-ops), each of those at their own expense,.

TEMPLATE FOR INTER-ACTION

Worth mentioning also, Clem circulated a template his group has created, putting their own enterprise in the centre then quantifying the various kinds of interaction they have/have had/could have with various other co-ops/social enterprises. Unfortunately I don't have a

copy but it was a very good basis for rapid growth within a tight community, SSEs using each other on a business basis, a ready-made customer base.

On that, Bill informed the meeting about energy co-ops, and one very successful organisation he knows of in Belgium, with which he will put is in touch at this meeting.

WORK SHAREOUT FOR JANUARY

Aoife: Take care of the Written Declaration stall, get MEPs to sign up.

Lynn: Arrange room for fringe meetings between Irish group and selected others.

Stevie: Along with Aoife, contact the League of Credit Unions, NABCO and Stevie's favourite organisation, ICOS, with a view to them attending the January meeting in Brussels, at their own expense – Dept of Trade, Jobs & Enterprise should also be contacted?), along with CECOPA.

Diarmuid: Look into funding for bringing over product/stand paraphernalia.