

Community hubs: ten strategies for sustainability

Learning from the experience of Safe Regeneration
A community hub in the Liverpool city region



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About this report

This research was funded in 2019 through the Power to Change Research Institute's open research grants programme. Power to Change has a vision of better places created through community business. The Power to Change Research Institute supports this vision by commissioning high-quality research that promotes rigorous analysis and stimulates critical scrutiny and debate, aiming to shape both policy and practice.

The research is conducted independently of Power to Change. The work and any views presented are the authors' own.

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Executive summary

The study explores the factors affecting sustainability within Safe Regeneration (Safe) – a community hub organisation in Sefton, Liverpool city region – that has been operating with steady growth for 20 years, working within some of the most disadvantaged communities in England.¹

We set out to understand what has helped the organisation and what can be learnt from its experiences that might prove valuable to other community hubs. We want to help other community hub leaders in their journey towards sustainability by sharing the experiences of those involved in the success of Safe Regeneration.

Key findings

We identified ten characteristics that have helped make Safe Regeneration sustainable:

01. Operating as a business: commercially-minded with social values

There is a shared understanding that operating a community hub is a business operation integrating strong social values into commercial activities.

02. Adhering to lean principles

Organisational growth has been constrained. The core staff team has been kept small and overheads have been kept low.

03. Operating a hub-and-spoke framework

A network of interdependent organisations work together like the parts of a wheel. The hub organisation leads project development and subcontracts to the spokes, a consortium of complementary partner organisations.

04. Focusing on asset acquisition and management

Acquiring assets has created turning points, prompting new phases of sustainability.

05. Diversified and entrepreneurial

More than 20 services are offered on site, serving the complex and varied needs of the local community.

06. Community-led

Strategy is developed through a constant two-way flow through three tiers of governance – community, consortia and trustees.

¹ According to the Indices of Deprivation (gov.uk, 2019) the area in which Safe Regeneration is based is amongst the 0.2% most deprived communities in England.

07. Focusing on impact

External impact is prioritised over organisational development.

08. Communicating directly

Social media and engaging online video enable broad reach and control over message and delivery.

09. Practising generous leadership

Members are enabled to take ownership of their role, work and professional development.

10. Supporting the sector

Ideas and knowledge are shared freely with others in the sector.

We took an ethnographic, participant-observation approach, involving interviews with 27 participants including eight employees and trustees of Safe Regeneration, seven consortium members and eight community hub leaders from elsewhere in the region. We observed events and day-to-day practice over a period of six months between March and August 2019.

Conclusions and recommendations

In conclusion, we encourage you to consider whether the characteristics we've identified for Safe's journey towards sustainability could help your organisation on its own journey. We are interested in exploring the extent to which these characteristics apply in other settings and contexts.

We recommend creating a community hub leadership development programme that can support a new generation of community hub leaders to work together to grow the sector.

We also recommend that anchor institutions consider the leadership role that community hubs can play within the rich and diverse community business sector, and the role that community hub-led consortia could play in the delivery of public sector services.

Finally, we suggest that further research addresses current gaps in the literature on community hubs, particularly in relation to leadership and acquiring and managing assets.

01.

Introduction

The study explores the factors that have contributed to relative sustainability within Safe Regeneration – a community hub organisation based in one of the most disadvantaged communities in England.

We want to offer insights that might help other community hub leaders on their own journey towards sustainability.

We also hope that the study helps those involved in policy-making and commissioning to develop a richer understanding of the leadership role that can be played by community hubs.

In the rest of the report:

- The methodology section explains our approach to reviewing the literature and our fieldwork
- The literature review summarises previous research on community hubs including different types of hub and the services they provide, the scale of the sector and relevant legal forms
- We have provided a brief history of Safe Regeneration and its key projects, services and stakeholders
- The findings section presents ten strategies for sustainability that are employed within Safe Regeneration
- We conclude with some recommendations for community hub leaders and policymakers.

02.

Methodology

We set out to understand what has helped the sustainability of this community hub and what can be learnt from its experience that might prove valuable to other community hub leaders.

We reviewed the available academic and policy literature regarding community hubs, growth and sustainability, using the Web of Science (WoS) and other online resources, for the period 2000–2019 to ensure sources were contemporary. We only reviewed articles directly relevant to the community hub model and also used ‘snowball sampling’ to find further key sources from literature retrieved in earlier searches.

For the empirical phase, we employed a highly qualitative, ethnographic approach. Ethnographers suggest that to understand the world in which we live and work, we need to explore individuals’ subjective perceptions of their experiences (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994; Creswell, 2009). Organisational ethnography analyses the culture and everyday life that people in organisations share. We felt the best way to explore the experiences of those involved with the community hub was to talk to them and to observe them as they go about their daily practice. Participant-observation reveals what people and organisations *do* on a day-to-day basis, which may in some cases be quite different to what they *say* they do. Observation therefore offered us greater opportunities to understand how things ‘really’ work.

We interviewed 27 people over a six-month period between March and August 2019, all based within the region:

- eight employees and trustees of Safe Regeneration
- seven consortium members
- eight community hub leaders
- two council officers
- a councillor
- a community business researcher.

We observed a range of strategic and operational activities, including meetings of the trustee board, staff team and various project teams, as well as day-to-day activities in studios and offices, in the community pub and at community events such as the Bootle Music Festival.

In keeping with the ethnographic approach, we do not make broad generalised claims when drawing conclusions, since the detailed findings we present are particular to the specific case and setting we studied. However, we are confident that the characteristics we have identified and the scenarios we describe offer a great deal to anyone keen to explore how to make a community hub more sustainable.

03.

Literature review

What is a community hub?

A community hub is a building that is multi-purpose, open and accessible to the local community, that provides services that the local community need, and employs a community-led governance structure (Trup et al., 2019: 4).

Locality defines a community hub as a ‘multi-purpose centre or building that is made accessible to the residents of the area that it occupies’ (2016: 8). Thomson and Murray-Sanderson emphasize their openness and responsiveness to local needs, suggesting that community hubs act as ‘a focal point for local activities, services and facilities, accessible to the local community’ (2017: 4).

According to Power to Change, community hubs are a type of community business in that they trade, have broad community impact, are locally-rooted and locally-accountable (Power to Change, 2019).

Types of community hub

There are two main types of community hub – what distinguishes the two is their ownership:

- Community hubs that are owned or managed by the public sector bring together or ‘co-locate’ different public and community services and provider organisations in one location or building, for example in a library (Swersky and Plunkett, 2015).
- Organisations that are community-owned or led, or have a high level of involvement or control from local residents and groups, and are also local and not-for-profit, are described as ‘community hub organisations’ (Trup et al., 2019: 4; see also Locality, 2016; Richards et al., 2018). Community hub organisations (CHOs) may own or manage one or more community hubs.

Legal forms

CHOs may be constituted in a variety of operational, constitutional, corporate and legal forms. Typically they take the form of a charity or charitable trust, a company limited by guarantee, a community interest company (CIC), community benefit society or co-operative society (Thorlby, 2011; Stumbitz et al., 2018), but the precise nature of the legal form depends on the purpose and role of the hub, such as whether it is involved in trading or the selling of goods and services.²

Scope of sector

The diversity of legal forms makes the sector ‘very difficult to categorise and measure’ (Diamond et al., 2017: 43). The annual Community Business Market Report estimated the number of community hubs as 1,650 in 2017 (Diamond et al., 2017), 1,889 in 2018 (Diamond et al., 2018) and 2,000 in 2019 (Higton et al., 2019: 30). Together, it is estimated that community hubs own assets worth £98m, employ 7,900 staff and 39,500 volunteers and generate £247m annually (Higton et al., 2019: 37).

Services

CHOs provide multiple community services. They are often established to perform a number of specific roles, although these may expand and diversify over time. Some drive community development initiatives and have supported the creation of ‘neighbourhood plans, [while] others have been developed as a result of them’ (Locality, 2016: 17). Richards et al. (2018) define community hubs as multi-purpose centres delivering services such as parent and toddler groups, employment support, childcare, library services and health and wellbeing activities.

Multiple services

Heap et al. contend that a community hub is a community business that operates a venue or hosts three or more different services (2019: 21). However, Trup et al. (2019) found that on average community hubs offer nine different activities or services, the most common being a community hall or meeting space, followed by health or wellbeing provision, office or workspace for local community/voluntary groups, arts or cultural activities, sports or fitness, educational opportunities, advice and support for other community/voluntary groups, skills and employment training and facilities such as a community café. Often these activities and services are delivered by a range of partner organisations, rather than the CHO, which often focuses on provision of the physical space and facilities.

² For more information on legal forms see <https://www.uk.coop/sites/default/files/uploads/attachments/simply-legal-final-september-2017.pdf> Accessed on: 13/11/19.

Services delivered in response to local need

Having in place an effective delivery model for a community hub that is attuned to the local context and needs is an essential ingredient for success. As Stumbitz et al. point out, simply creating a ‘hub in name does not mean that a different framework for service delivery will be achieved’ (2018: 3). In this regard, the type and range of services and support provided by community hubs can also have a significant bearing on their development and growth. WoodGreen Community Services’ overview of community hub initiatives in Toronto identified those hubs that had a ‘broad range of service-providers’ were more ‘likely to create a community space where a thriving neighbourhood mix can emerge’ (2011: 7).

Business support and employability

Business development and employability support are services frequently offered in community hubs. Of the community businesses that offer business and employment support, 70 per cent operate out of a community hub (Diamond et al., 2018: 46). Locality notes that community hubs that act as business incubators or provide business advice for community or private businesses support local economic development and neighbourhood regeneration (Locality, 2016: 17). In the Community Business Market Report 2018, a new type of ‘enabling hub’ is described, that over the last ten years has provided guidance to embryonic groups to help them plan their next steps and establish themselves (Diamond et al., 2018: 43).

Community-led housing

A small number of CHOs have addressed local housing problems by becoming community-led housing providers or developers. Community-led housing is an approach where the development of new housing, especially affordable accommodation, is developed and controlled by local people. This approach is delivered through a variety of community controlled or community ownership organisational models and legal forms, which ‘include housing co-ops, community land trusts (CLTs), tenant management organisations (TMOs), cohousing, community self-build schemes and self-help housing groups that renew empty homes’ (Co-operative Councils’ Innovation Network, 2018: 13).

The Confederation of Co-operative Housing lists more than 1,000 community-led housing schemes in the UK, and cites the example of Berlin, where 5,000 homes – 15 per cent of new housing provision – are now being built every year by Baugruppen, Germany’s community housing movement.

Significantly, Locality suggest that studies by the community-led housing sector have shown that ‘when the community is in control of development, they are more likely to want new homes, and sometimes more homes than originally planned’ (2018: no page numbers), suggesting potential future growth in CHO involvement in community-led housing.

Asset ownership and management

The literature on community businesses is clear that acquisition and development of capital assets such as property or land is a critical mechanism through which to diversify and develop sustainability. For these organisations, assets allow for the generation of ‘asset-based income ... from rent, room hire and license agreements’ (Locality, 2016: 51) or from ‘franchises and sub-letting’ (Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames, 2009: item 32).

Furthermore, Bailey shows how community business-owned assets offer significant social benefits to service users and the wider community, including ‘direct benefits from new services and uses; a more positive attitude to the neighbourhood and its environment; increased skills, confidence and social capital amongst residents and users; the reversal of negative stereotypes and positive features which attracted new residents and businesses’ (2012: 8).

An important recent study exploring the economics, outcomes and sustainability of assets in community ownership found that community owned assets form a valuable part of the economy, with more than 6,300 assets contributing nearly £220 million to the UK economy every year (Archer et al, 2019: 2). Archer et al. conclude that, despite having limited resources, many community hub organisations are financially robust, with three-quarters described as ‘in good financial health’.

Furthermore, there has been significant growth in community asset ownership, with nearly a third of assets coming into community ownership within the last decade. However, community assets are not equally distributed across the country; there are higher numbers in less deprived rural areas. Sustaining community hubs in more deprived urban communities can be more challenging – the most deprived 30 per cent of neighbourhoods contain just 18 per cent of community assets (ibid.).

People

Local people may develop diverse and fluid relationships within community hubs. Individuals may ‘play multiple roles, not just as customers or users of services, but also as volunteers, as trustees, as paid staff, as donors or (where there has been a community share issue) as shareholders’ (Trup et al., 2019: 16). Gilbert points out that connecting with the community is not a singular event, rather the creation of a common local vision needs to be ‘constantly revisited to ensure relevance to local need’ (Gilbert, 2016: 6).

Leadership

While the literature clearly sets out how successful community business leaders require a ‘particular understanding of, and ability to negotiate and combine, the social and commercial dimensions of their activity’ (Stumbitz et al., 2018: 32) and how they serve as ‘change makers’ (Sheila McKechnie Foundation, 2018: 3), little has been written about the leadership attributes of community hub leaders.

A report by WoodGreen Community Services which examined the development of community hubs in the Canadian city of Toronto, found that the most effective leaders in this sector were those with a ‘unique blend of community development and facilities management and planning skills’ (2011: 7). The Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames, which explored public sector-owned community hubs, suggests that ‘strong and inspired leadership in defining the focus and direction of the Hub is of great importance’ (2009: item 33).

Culture

The organisational culture and the internal atmosphere established by a community hub and its personnel for visitors can assist in attracting the involvement of the local community and wider engagement beyond the local area. In a physical sense, the ‘presentation’ of a building or facility in terms of its layout in particular, can encourage community engagement.

Community hubs with a ‘strong sense of openness in a non-threatening, welcoming environment’ are preferable to those that may convey an austere or formal atmosphere to potential service users and the wider community (Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames, 2009: item 21).

Sustainability

What does being sustainable mean, in this context? In this study, we wanted to move beyond straightforward definitions of sustainability such as numbers of staff, years of operation, rates of growth or the value of assets. These metrics are important indicators of economic sustainability and can be particular challenges for organisations within the social economy, and as such they are addressed within this report. However, sustainability is more holistic and complex than this.

It has long been recognised that sustainability can mean different things to different people. One study identified some three hundred definitions of the concept (Johnston et al, 2007: 60). But while most definitions imply that the goal of sustainability is human survival, they can vary hugely in the emphasis they place on economic, social or environmental perspectives, prompting some to argue we should avoid searching for a simplistic ‘one solution fits all’ definition (van Marrewijk 2003: 95).

Models of corporate sustainability tend to focus on the extent to which sustainable practices such as pollution prevention, ethical supply chains, carbon neutrality and fair pay and conditions are embedded within firms’ values, processes and practices (see for example Elkington’s (1998/2004) Triple Bottom Line, Hart’s (1995/1997) Natural Resource-Based View or Amini and Bienstock’s (2014) Corporate Sustainability Framework). The breadth and depth of debate around sustainability has led some to describe it as a mega-trend, akin to information technology (Beltz, 2003; Porter and Kramer, 2006; Hansen et al., 2009).

Here, we draw on the more qualitative, inclusive and holistic view of corporate sustainability described by van Marrewijk (2003). van Marrewijk argues that the most sustainable organisations move far beyond considerations of legal compliance and profit motivations, towards a system in which sustainable practices are fully integrated and embedded in every aspect of the organisation because each person and organisation is seen as having a universal responsibility towards all other beings.

Highly sustainable organisations, he argues, aim to improve the quality and continuation of life of every being and entity, now and in the future, because they see all beings and phenomena as mutually interdependent. With this philosophy, sustainable practices become the *only* option (van Marrewijk 2003: 102). Sustainability is not, therefore, simply concerned with longevity or financial security, but with the role and impact of an organisation within society and the broader environment.

Summary

It is evident that community hub organisations share a number of common features, which include:

- being led by and accountable to the community they serve and responsive to changing local needs
- being locally rooted and operating out of one or more buildings or facilities, which are focal points for local communities
- offering multi-purpose or mixed-use facilities that offer a range of ‘co-located’ neighbourhood place-based services, which specifically cater for the needs of local communities
- utilising local assets and their activities aim to have a beneficial community-wide impact beyond a narrow sectoral interest
- trading, providing a community or creative space or venue, and/or providing multiple services, advice and activities under one umbrella.

In essence, the community hub organisation is a community-led, locally-rooted, entrepreneurial, trading non-profit organisation which offers a diverse range of services and delivers social, economic or environmental benefits for the wider community.

04.

Safe Regeneration: an ethnographic case study

Introduction

Safe Regeneration (Safe) is a pioneering community hub organisation which manages two thriving community hubs: St Mary's Complex – a former primary school building which now houses more than a dozen creative and social organisations – and The Lock and Quay community pub, both based beside the Liverpool-Leeds canal.

Amidst a highly challenging economic and political context where 43.2 per cent of all businesses collapse within five years (ONS, 2018) and 12 per cent of businesses overall fail annually (House of Commons Library, 2018), Safe has spent 20 years growing and learning about 'what works', with a variety of sustainability strategies now bearing fruit.

'We believe passionately that the good people of Bootle deserve quality and choice and are committed to working with our community partners to continue to bring significant social, economic and environmental benefits to our neighbourhood.'

Safe Regeneration website (no date)

Based in Bootle, a post-industrial town north of Liverpool, the organisation sits within sight of Peel Ports' Liverpool2, a £400 million deep-water terminal which opened in 2016. Despite its proximity to 'one of the largest, busiest and most diverse ports in the UK' (Peel Ports, no date), the government's 2019 Indices of Deprivation ranks Bootle amongst the 0.2 per cent most deprived communities in England (gov.uk, 2019). This alarming ranking suggests deprivation within the community has worsened since the Indices were last calculated in 2015, when it was ranked amongst the 0.5 per cent most deprived in England (gov.uk, 2015).

Within this context, Safe's core aim is 'to foster community cohesion, social inclusion and individual well-being whilst contributing to economic and environmental regeneration' (Charity Commission, no date). More succinctly, Safe's mission is for all in the locality to 'live in a happy, healthy neighbourhood' (Safe, no date).

This study set out to learn from the experience of Safe as a community hub organisation, and to draw lessons that might help other community hubs develop sustainable and resilient approaches which could better facilitate their impact and long-term growth. We have identified a range of factors which have underpinned Safe's journey towards sustainability. These are not presented as universal rules which will engender sustainability in all settings and contexts. Rather they are offered as examples of the strategies and approaches that one community hub organisation has adopted, that might offer ideas, inspiration and guidance for others involved in the sector or who may be considering starting up a new community hub or business.

History

Safe began life as Supporting Arts for Everyone (Safe), a small collective of young, disenfranchised artists working out of a disused community building in the multicultural community of Toxteth, South Liverpool. In the late 1990s, it began winning commissions from schools, charities, public services and private contractors to engage communities in the co-production of public artworks. Safe was able to set up in a tiny office/studio to prepare materials and store artworks. But in the tight-knit urban communities of Toxteth and later the city centre, space was at a premium and rents were high. As the city's Capital of Culture year approached, rents increased and the market became so saturated with arts and culture activities that it became difficult to connect with participants.

In 2007 the organisation took the decision to relocate to Bootle, a couple of miles north of the city centre. There it found plenty of space, cheap rents and a community hungry to engage. It quickly established a base, gaining visibility and goodwill by working with local communities to create murals and regenerate local 'grotspots'. Bootle may not have had the cultural appeal and allure of the city centre but it offered plenty of opportunities to work with people eager to get involved, and the organisation developed a much broader range of projects and services.

To reflect a shift from producing participatory artworks to a broader emphasis on community regeneration, in 2015 the organisation changed its name from Liverpool Safe Productions Limited to Safe Regeneration Limited. It registered as a charity the following year. Charity status is permissible only for companies that have ‘charitable purposes’ (Charity Commission, 2013); they work for the public benefit and reinvest surplus funds into charitable work. Charitable status offered Safe several advantages including:

- making clear its core focus is public benefit, even if its financial strategy involves trading
- providing reassurance to potential funders and investors regarding charitable purposes, governance and financial management
- access to forms of funding only available to charities
- a range of tax reliefs.³

Today, Safe has become firmly established as a key community hub organisation in the Sefton community, supporting thousands of local residents and helping hundreds of small businesses, social enterprises, creative and social organisations to start up and grow.

Projects and services

Safe directly provides a range of services and activities including:

- participatory arts programmes
- environmental activities
- employment and skills programmes
- business enterprise start-up and support
- community events.

The organisation also acts as a community-led and place-based regeneration body. It was one of the first organisations funded by Power to Change to enable its purchase of The Lock and Quay community pub.

³ Tax reliefs include exemption from corporation tax on profits from trading undertaken in the course of charitable provision (primary purpose trading); 80 per cent mandatory, and 20 per cent discretionary, relief from business rates (rate relief); Gift Aid relief on donations from individuals; Stamp duty land tax relief on freehold property and leases acquired for charitable purposes; do not pay VAT on some goods and services. NCVO website. Pros and cons of becoming a charity. Available at: https://knowhow.ncvo.org.uk/setting-up/setting-up-a-charity/charitable-status/pros_and_cons_of_becoming_a_charity.

The renovation and reopening of the pub is part of a larger regeneration project led by Safe, focusing on the five acres of land surrounding their current St Mary's Complex site. This project, #DestinationBootle, is part of a wider £100 million plan for the metropolitan borough of South Sefton (Sefton Council, 2017) and plans to deliver an ambitious £33 million community-led housing, enterprise and leisure development. The development includes 200 new homes as well as a creative enterprise hub, a canal-side pub and restaurant, geothermal renewable energy, a canoe hub, leisure facilities and a marina offering moorings for canal boats.

This community-led development is the culmination of several years of intensive work by Safe and partners, which will not only contribute to regeneration of the local area but will also have the ancillary benefit of significantly growing and strengthening the resilience of the organisation, contributing significantly to its long-term sustainability.

Stakeholder engagement

Safe engages with a wide range of people including local residents, artists, musicians, craftspeople and other creative and social enterprise practitioners within the locality and internationally. Last year, more than 7,000 people engaged in activities either directly with Safe or with one of the tenant organisations (Safe visitor records).

As suggested by Trup et al. (2019), the nature of the relationship between Safe and its stakeholders can be fluid and dynamic. There are few clear demarcations between beneficiaries or service users and staff, management or partners, and Safe employs a 'person-centred approach' to engaging with people – exploring their unique circumstances, skills, interests, capabilities and needs.



For example, some stakeholders arrive at Safe's door as 'ready-formed' small businesses or social organisations. These organisations may be supported through business development or office space, or they may be invited to become a member of the Safe consortium, enabling them to serve as a delivery agent on a collaborative funded project led by Safe.

Others approaching Safe may have been out of education or work for significant periods, are perhaps recovering from drug or alcohol misuse or facing chronic illness or mental health issues. These people might initially be encouraged to join the Green Dream gardening team, a weekly art group, attend regular yoga or mindfulness sessions or something else offered within the hub. Once they have grown in confidence and developed their skills, they might be supported to move into another activity.

In Safe the emphasis is often on supporting individuals to start their own business. Over a period of months or years, an individual might be supported to start and grow their own business and become a member of the Safe consortium. Consortium membership offers the business access to larger collaborative projects and commissions. As they grow, consortium members are encouraged to support less experienced participants in the same way they were once supported, and in some cases to consider becoming a Safe trustee.

All stakeholders, irrespective of their social and economic status or the way that they engage with Safe, are seen as equal partners in a shared mission to support each other and improve the community. This is often referred to as the Safe 'family':

'We look at the whole person, get to know them, we see them as friends. We talk a lot about the Safe family. That can sound a bit twee but it's true. We're not just names and numbers. We're friends, we're colleagues, we pull together, we look out for each other. We've got this shared vision of what we're creating here, and it just works.' Employee

'I have my own family and I have my Safe family. I really do feel at home here. It's a space where you can just be yourself.' Consortium member

Through this 'family'-based approach, Safe focuses on supporting individuals – whatever their circumstances, interests and aspirations – to build an enterprising and sustainable community.

Hub-and-spoke model

The person-centred approach described above enables Safe to operate what it describes as a ‘hub-and-spoke’ model. In this model, Safe itself forms the central hub; a consortium of complementary, like-minded partner organisations with whom it works very closely form the spokes, and the wider stakeholder communities form the wheel’s rim.

The consortium is a fluid network which comprises a core group of around twenty organisations that have long-term tenancies and partnership arrangements with Safe. As the Safe website explains, these are ‘wonderful people, all doing very cool things individually and all working together as part of the Safe family’ (Safe, no date b). Members are mainly, although not exclusively, part of the creative industries and involved in activities such as arts and crafts, digital media, horticulture, leisure and wellbeing.

At the time of writing, the consortium includes ABColourful CIC, Art In Me CIC, Brynn Gerard – Inventor & Digital Innovator, Canal and Rivers Trust, Caring Connections – Counselling Support Service, Creative Carpentry CIC, Dot Art CIC, FunkyDoorys Pizza CIC, In Nature with Keren CIC – Horticultural Therapy & Dementia Support, Incredible Innovations, LA Dance School CIC, Lock & Quay Entertainments CIC, Muladhara Theatre CIC, New Beginnings CIC, Nordoff Robbins Music Therapy, Periscope Productions CIC, Stamps Brewery, Start Creative CIC, The Well Artist Collective and Well Being Creatives CIC – Ceramics & Sound Bed Therapy.⁴

⁴ Links to company websites, where available, are provided on page 64.



Members are bound together by a set of common values, the most significant of which is ‘an ethos of inclusive practice, with a focus on participative working with local communities’ (Traynor, 2014: 5). One participant described this in the following way:

‘If you can help someone you help them, don’t you? It’s a good network of people. Everyone’s from the same ethos. We all try to help people.’

Consortium member

As leader of the consortium, Safe acts as a conduit between members and major anchor institutions such as Sefton Borough Council, the local CCG and NHS trusts, colleges and universities, housing associations and regeneration bodies such as Regenerus. In this respect, Safe can be viewed as a place-based networked community anchor organisation, at the nexus of a number of interdependent partnerships or networks - some of which are closer and more enduring than others and which cut across a range of spatial scales.

This hub-and-spoke model, and Safe’s leadership role within the consortium, are key to the success and sustainability of Safe.

Being at Safe

Safe offers a relaxed and nurturing space where people can create beautiful mosaics, potter in the gardens, feed the chickens, harvest honey and wax from the beehives, or simply have a cup of tea and a chat. Arts and crafts studios and community business offices look out over growing beds, a wildflower meadow, boat restoration projects. A team of ‘Safe Rangers’ – paid apprentices on a ‘back-to-work’ scheme offered by Safe – clean up litter and fly-tipping around the community, install new public artworks, learn how to lead participatory arts workshops or environmental projects, and learn about what it means to start up and run a community business.

In the hall, a mindfulness session wraps up. Refreshed and cleansed, the participants wander back to their studios and their other lives. They make way for a workshop on tax compliance for small businesses. One of the participants stays behind to enquire about office space, a recent Facebook post suggested a unit would become available next month. She stays to help tidy away the chairs and projector so a local dance troupe can run through a routine. This evening, the cadets will be using the space for drill practice.

Most staff, tenants and volunteers head off home or pop over to Safe’s community pub to wind down with friends and colleagues after a long week. Back in the meeting room, the Safe CEO and Chair review feedback from the local authority planning committee regarding the organisation’s pre-planning application for #DestinationBootle, a major capital development on the land bordered by the hub, the pub and the canal. There’s a lot of work to be done; they’ll be working for a few hours yet. Through the open window, music drifts over from the pub’s open mic night, where the band are hoping to secure a slot at next year’s Bootle Music Festival.

4.1 Operating as a business, commercially-minded with social values

Perhaps the most important factor we identified as underpinning sustainability in Safe is a shared vision, mindset and understanding that operating a community hub is a business operation:

'Ultimately, we run as a business.' Safe CEO

'Community hubs have to be viewed as a business. We have to operate like a business.'
Community hub leader

'It's about business. It's about business first and foremost!' Community hub leader

'It's basically a business.' Local authority officer

The emphatic embrace of the 'business' narrative serves a number of purposes for Safe and other community hubs. It suggests a well-defined offer, in terms of products or services, that is of value to others, that 'customers' would choose to 'purchase' and signifies a professional, efficient approach to operations. Importantly, it also serves to differentiate and distance community hubs from the voluntary sector, which has for some time been lobbying government and other funders for a shift away from business-like practices and terminology such as commissioning and contracting, towards a more grant-based, beneficiary-led approach.

For Safe, profitable commercial activity is a means of enabling the organisation to generate greater social benefit. Since inception, Safe's core product has been transformative experiences. Whether those involved with Safe engage in creative arts workshops, business start-up and development support, environmental schemes, community events, festivals or construction projects, it is less about the artwork, the business plan, the organic fruit and veg, the headline acts or the bricks and mortar, and much more about the empowering process of self-exploration, personal development and the strengthening of social bonds that underpins all of Safe's work.

In some respects, Safe acts as a business-to-consumer retailer selling directly to the general public, such as through The Lock and Quay community pub. In other ways, it works on a business-to-business basis selling its services to other groups, for example, being commissioned by a local social landlord to deliver a participatory art project with sheltered housing tenants. Finally, it works as a service provider, securing grants and donations to undertake projects and services, such as applying to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a project exploring local history with young people, Well Sefton to offer activities that improve health and wellbeing for local residents, or the European Union to work collaboratively with arts organisations in Spain, Latvia and Italy to develop a participatory arts toolkit.

However, participants were clear that the term ‘business’ is holistic in the sense that community hubs are businesses that are socially-minded, reinvesting profits into projects and services for social good:

‘It’s basically a business, but it’s what you do with your profits.’

Local authority officer

‘It’s business, but it’s different to how most people think of business. It’s got social good at its heart.’ Community hub leader

‘We pride ourselves on being commercially-minded with social values.’ Safe CEO

‘It’s about having social hearts and commercial brains.’ Community hub leader

‘Profits in one part of the company are reinvested into projects that benefit the community. Profits from the pub for example, can be ploughed into training for the long-term unemployed, we could buy some new beehives or growing beds, put on a family fun day, or clean up the canal. In the future, any profits from housing sales or rentals will be ploughed into neighbourhood improvements and help for those who need it.’ Trustee



This combination of ‘social hearts’ and ‘commercial minds’ aligns with discussions of the ‘dual mission’ (Doherty et al., 2014: 417) of social enterprises which focus on both financial sustainability and social purpose. In a study comparing community-based social enterprises in three European countries, Bailey et al. (2018) found that all three cases had developed ‘hybrid’ business models which may rely on grants and loans from public and charitable sources particularly during the early years, later combining trading and non-trading activities to achieve financial sustainability in the longer term.

Indeed, our research suggested that the terms ‘community business’ and ‘community hub’ are often used by practitioners interchangeably with similar approaches such as ‘social enterprise’ or ‘social business’. Despite variations in terminology, our research was clear that there is a shared understanding within the organisation and wider sector that community hubs run as businesses which re-invest profits into projects for social good.

There was a strong sense among participants that such approaches offer ‘the best of both worlds’ in terms of sustainability, because they offer access to a greater diversity of revenue streams within a challenging economic context:

‘If you can operate semi-commercially ... the likelihood of sticking around and helping more people is a lot higher, if that makes sense ... it’s conscience and cash.’
Consortium member

However, the participants we spoke to were cautious of veering too far in either direction, a strategy described by Chapman and Gray as ‘striking a balance’ (2019: 4) between the needs of community hubs to support communities while ensuring that their organisation remains operationally sustainable. One suggested some leaders are overly-focused on addressing social concerns to the extent that they fail to consider enterprise or sustainability:

‘Most people I bump into are not doing business, they’re doing charity. I try to say to people, it’s about changing the way we think, from having these social hearts to commercial brains.’ Community hub leader

Another warned against allowing commercial interests to overtake social concerns:

‘It blends together. You’re driven by your mission and your vision – that’s what you’re on. If you move away from that, that’s when it becomes a challenge. You have to be very clear – your core values are very important. What you say in your governing docs is what you’re about. If you lose sight of that, that’s when you can become distracted.’ Community hub leader

The Bootle Music Festival, now in its second year, is what the CEO calls a ‘win-win’ project because it clearly satisfies both objectives. From a commercial perspective, it generates sponsorship as well as sales of tickets and merchandising, and creates economic benefits for local businesses. From a social perspective, it offers rich cultural experiences for those participating and creates a wealth of positive imagery which can work online to challenge negative perceptions of the area. The following observation notes offer an account of the Bootle Music Festival and some of the comments from those attending.

LOVED LOVED LOVED this festival ♥

In a canal-side meadow that, until quite recently, few had ever really noticed, 5,000 festival-goers are having the time of their lives. The sun is shining, the bands are playing, and the brewed-on-site beer is flowing.

‘BOOOOTLE! ARE YOU HAVING A GOOD TIIIIIME?’ comes the cry from the local radio DJ compère as she takes to the stage. The crowd roars in response. ‘We’ve got a brilliant line-up for you this weekend! We’ve got our very own Real People, we’ve got Dodgy, we’ve got Glenn Tilbrook, we’ve got Space, we’ve got Mercury, we’ve got The FAAAAAARM!’ At the name of each act, more cheers from the crowd.

‘And if all that great music isn’t enough for you we’ve got free canoe trips on the canal courtesy of the Canal and River Trust, a free climbing wall, we’ve got craft activities, we’ve got LA Dance Studio performing later! In the wellbeing zone we’ve got Zendooning, we’ve got yoga, we’ve got mindfulness sessions, that’s for mums, dads, kids, it’s for everyone!’

‘What an amazing line-up, eh, who would’ve thought it, right here in Bootle?’ The compère introduces the next act, an up-and-coming local band who tell the audience how ‘honoured’ they feel to be playing this afternoon.

‘I just love the festival’, says the CEO. ‘You can see, you can feel, the atmosphere’s really warm, hospitable, and so it goes a long way in putting Bootle in a different light.’

Comments from festival-goers suggest the feeling is shared:

‘The community round here’s never had anything like this before, it’s all been segregated and no-one’s really gone together before, but this has been a place where everyone can get together and be introduced to each other, everyone’s having a positive time.’

‘I’ve never ever, in all the years I’ve lived in Bootle, thought I’d see this, in a million years, never. It’s fantastic.’

‘People can feel part of it, that’s the thing, ordinary people feel part of it.’

Comments posted on the festival’s Facebook page after the event further emphasized the emotions experienced by those involved:

'LOVED LOVED LOVED this festival and amazing to watch back the film and relive the memories. Roll on next year well done everyone who made it happen' ♥

'So Proud to be part of this, be Part of something Bigger & Better, Safe Regeneration Bootle, LOVE IT,'

'Brilliant festival and great to see this film. I've been at two, can't wait for next year. Flew over from Ireland first year, came by the Belfast ferry the second year, next year I fancy one of those canoes. Keep up the good work.' 🎵

'Amazing we had a ball was great to see everyone enjoying themselves well done to u all will see u next year'

4.2 Adhering to lean principles

'I really like the fact that Safe, at their core, have stayed quite small.'

Local authority officer

Safe has always maintained a small core staff team. Organisational growth has been deliberately constrained. Throughout its start-up phase, the core Safe staff team consisted of just two people – the CEO and a project coordinator/finance manager. These two people did everything from generating sales and commissions, bidding for funds, researching local history or new creative approaches, buying materials, advertising projects, delivering workshops, constructing and installing artworks, writing press releases, to managing the finances and arranging insurance. In some cases, external artists would be brought in to provide additional support in workshops or with design or construction, but essentially the two staff managed and delivered the organisation's work. Led by the CEO, the approach was supported by the board:

'I've seen it so many times. Organisations set up, they get some funding, they think "oh this is good" and get some more, probably do some great stuff. They grow and grow, sometimes really quickly. And when you grow quickly you can have real problems. You lose control. You lose the vision, the culture. You just become a juggler, a plate spinner, trying to sustain all these jobs, because you've got all these staff, and they're good people with families and bills to pay. Do you really need all these people, all these jobs? Maybe not, but what then? Plenty of organisations have been and gone because they thought that rapid growth was great.' Trustee

A community hub leader from elsewhere in the city highlighted how Safe's strategy has been to grow in response to need, rather than for the sake of growth in itself:

'He allows it to organically grow in terms of the services being led by need, as well as what he's seen with gaps in provision.' Community hub leader

This deliberate strategy to remain small and lean enabled the organisation to maintain very low overheads, while delivering an increasing range of projects and impact. This has been a valuable advantage at times when cashflow was unreliable, particularly during the early phase of the organisation's life when reserves were low and it held little clout with tardy customers:

'Cashflow can sometimes be an issue but we get past it, we get through it all the time.' Employee

At such times, careful management of outgoing payments and access to overdraft facilities proved invaluable. There has been little turnover in staff. The founding members of staff have been constant throughout and, while freelancers and partner companies may come and go, the core staff team has on the whole remained very stable. While everybody has their main job roles, there is a high degree of flexibility and fluidity amongst the staff team, with everybody 'mucking in' and helping out with whatever work is required:

'We can all swap roles – it is kind of hard to explain but it's just, we'll do sort of anything as long as it's good for the area and for people.' Consortium member

'We just all muck in together. We do what we need to do.' Employee

'The festival will be a complete team effort, but the main things are we all work together.' Consortium member

This 'can do/will do' approach of the core staff team has enabled the organisation to remain flexible and dynamic, able to diversify and remain entrepreneurial throughout its life.

However, this 'lean' approach could be considered a potential cause of occupational stress or burnout. According to the World Health Organisation, work-related stress is 'the response people may have when presented with work demands and pressures that are not matched to their knowledge and abilities and which challenge their ability to cope' (WHO, 2019a: no page numbers). Stress can result from internal and environmental demands that influence psychological wellbeing (Haynes and Love, 2004).

Meanwhile, burnout is defined by the WHO as 'a syndrome conceptualized as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed' (WHO, 2019b). Burnout is characterised by three dimensions: 'feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;

increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and reduced professional efficacy' (2019: no page numbers). Burnout has been referred to as an 'extreme stress phenomenon' (Jugdev et al., 2018: 198), 'a fundamental crisis in the psychological connections that people establish with work' (Leiter and Maslach, 2016: 91) and the long-term consequence of mental strain (Demerouti et al., 2002). The condition has long been identified in client-oriented occupations such as nursing (Leiter and Maslach, 2009), social care (Cherniss, 1980), education (Farber, 1984), policing (Kop et al., 1999) and youth work (Savicki, 2002), and more recently in more business-focused roles such as construction (Leung et al., 2008) and project management (Jugdev et al., 2018).

Workload overload, where job demands exceed human limits, is commonly associated with burnout (Schaufeli and Enzmann, 1998). It is therefore perhaps surprising that within this study, neither stress, burnout nor any related issues were raised by participants in conversations about factors impeding sustainability. It's possible this is because organisational risk factors commonly associated with stress and burnout such as lack of control, poor sense of community, insufficient rewards, perceived unfairness and conflicting values (see Schaufeli, Leiter and Maslach, 2009) are less present in Safe, and that the organisation's work to reduce individual risk factors such as neuroticism (Deary et al., 1996; Hills and Norvell, 1991) also plays a part in minimising stress and burnout. Nevertheless, community hub leaders should be mindful that lean principles are not employed without careful consideration.

4.3 Operating a hub-and-spoke framework

Safe Regeneration describes its operating model as a ‘hub-and-spoke’ framework. What they mean is that the organisation is not one body which becomes larger and larger in order to achieve greater impact. Rather, in keeping with the lean principles, they have developed a network of interdependent organisations working together like the parts of a wheel. The hub is the Safe core team, the spokes represent the consortium members, and the wheel’s rim represents the wider stakeholder communities.

‘I’ve always described our approach as a hub-and-spoke framework. Think about the parts of a wheel. The outer rim, that’s our community, or communities, I should say, because this is our home, this place, but we have other communities all over the world that we work with, who we share our work with, who we learn from – India, Brazil, Latvia, Spain, France, Sweden ... they’re the people and organisations we work with, wherever they are in the world. In the centre you have the hub. That’s Safe, the core team, the trustees. That’s the core, the nucleus that binds everything together. Connecting us all are the spokes. The strong, solid partners that we engage with constantly, who help us reach new communities, bring new skills, new perspectives, to do the work. We couldn’t do a tenth of what we do without strong partners, we just couldn’t do it. What I’ve learnt is, you have to keep the hub small, keep it tight. In too many organisations I’ve seen the hub get heavy, bloated. The spokes get consumed. The wheel becomes solid and heavy. All your energy goes into just keeping it upright. You hit a bump in the road, you’re done for.’ CEO



This hub-and-spoke model describes the essential framework of the organisation and its modus operandi. In practice, some partner organisations have come to Safe as fully-formed functional organisations, but Safe has played a part in helping to establish many of the consortium partner organisations.

'Our staff is essentially the consortium of tenants... In the school there are 13 social enterprises and most of those enterprises are run by local people. We support them to become legal entities, CICs or private businesses. They set up as an independent enterprise. They're in charge of their own business. That suits a lot of people we work with, they don't want to be an employee, in some cases they've been there, done that, want something different. They want the independence and freedom to manage their own work, take the jobs that they want, not those they don't, work their own hours, come and go as they please. We'll subcontract with them to contract them to deliver that work. So it's a social enterprise development model as we call it.' CEO

As the hub of the wheel, leader of the consortium, Safe develops relationships and negotiates with a range of anchor institutions across the region such as the city region combined authority, borough councils, healthcare providers, educational institutions, funders and supra-national entities such as the European Union.⁵ As Safe's track record and organisational capacity has grown, it has been able to secure a growing number of increasingly valuable contracts, commissions and grants. Packages of work are then subcontracted to partner organisations within the consortium so that the project is co-delivered by a flexible and fluid collective of organisations who would otherwise be competing with each other or 'locked out' of such opportunities due to their size. One consortium member described how the approach encourages collaboration and joint working between partners:

'People can't afford to be hiding in their little corners anymore. It's a necessity, for instance, if you want to get money to support the community, all the CICs have to drop their own agendas and have a collective agenda. Commissioners don't want to commission ten different companies, that's too much bother. So, instead of giving ten people ten grand, they give a hundred grand to one organisation like Safe and they administer that around the other nine. You know, it works.'

Consortium member

⁵ For example as part of the SILO project supported by the Erasmus+ funding programme, under the Vocational Education and Training scheme: Key Action 2, Cooperation and Innovation for Good Practices. The project developed and tested a framework for artists and creative practitioners through which they could validate adult employability competences gained through engagement in participatory arts programmes.

‘The local authorities and commissioners all kind of want to streamline things and make things more efficient, and they also want to make their lives easier. They don’t want to commission 15 bodies, they just want one body they can deal with.’

Local authority officer

In this context, Safe as a consortium or ‘networked organisation’ has the collective critical mass and the breadth of expertise to access substantial grants and take on major contracts and commissions which are beyond the capacity of small organisations working alone. For Safe, this role as consortium leader is therefore central to its sustainability.

Our findings align in this respect with the findings of Chapman and Gray who explored the ways in which community businesses ‘strike a balance’ (2019: 8) between the desire for organisational autonomy with the need to work with other organisations in the private, public or third sectors, and the need to access resources to sustain their organisation while meeting their desire to have a beneficial community impact. Our findings also support Bailey et al.’s (2018) analysis of hybrid organisations that demonstrate characteristics akin to both public and private sectors, combining both trading and non-trading activities and striving for a dual mission combining financial sustainability and social purpose.

4.4 Focusing on asset acquisition and management

For Safe, owning and managing assets is of critical importance, recognised as central to the organisation’s capacity to diversify, grow and develop sustainability:

‘We couldn’t have grown like we have without assets.’ CEO

This is because, as highlighted by Bailey (2012), asset ownership and management enables organisations to offer significant social benefits to service-users and the wider community. Some community hubs are created purely to prevent closure or reopen a community asset, particularly where those assets are crucial to sustaining the viability and wellbeing of a local community. One community hub leader explained:

‘Does the community need it? Is it an asset? Then we’ll do something about it and make it happen; find a way through. That’s it.’ Community hub leader

The importance of maintaining vital community assets has become more critical over the last decade as a consequence of public expenditure austerity that has often hastened the decline of community assets and infrastructure. The leader of another community hub in the region explained the significance of austerity as a driver for community hub development:

‘It’s all been based on needs ... not that we wanted to ... because ... in 2008 the council had to proceed with austerity and so we stepped in. Not because we felt at the time that we had the expertise, but we’ve had a massive learning curve and said: “We can’t let this go”. Because if the buildings go ... then they just get houses or flats built on it and the crucial infrastructure will then disappear.’

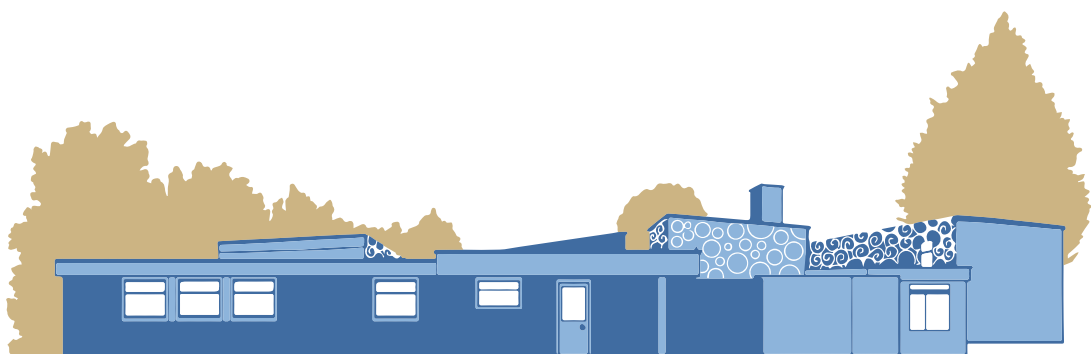
Community hub leader

During its start-up phase between 2000 and 2004, Safe was focused on delivering services rather than developing assets. Turnover had grown relatively quickly, but assets remained negligible. In 2007, Safe was able to relocate to St Mary’s Complex in Bootle, a former primary school offering significant space, both internal and external, at relatively low cost from the local diocese. At the very point when austerity-related cuts began to be implemented, affecting large segments of public, private and non-profit sectors, Safe entered a new phase in which it scaled up its activity by reorganising the old building into spaces suitable for sub-letting to tenants. During this second phase, turnover continued to grow at a similar rate, the staff team grew from two to six and, crucially, assets became more secure, growing from £11,000 to £57,000.

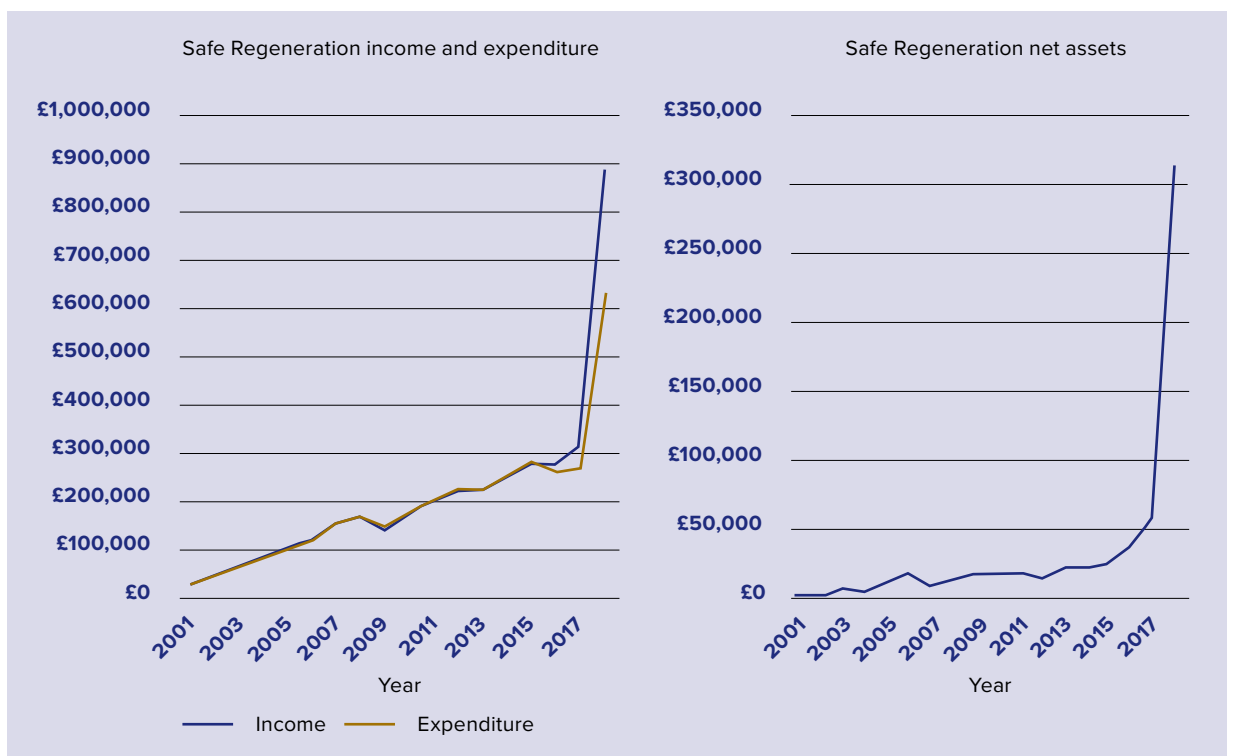
Safe was keen to purchase the St Mary’s site but found it challenging to locate good quality finance products designed for community hub organisations:

‘The [loan] rates we were offered by social investment schemes weren’t competitive so in our case we went to the bank, we got a loan, and we have a mortgage and that’s because of our commercial kind of approach to our work.’

CEO



Once this asset was secured, Safe explored further opportunities to acquire assets. In 2017, a second key turning point in the organisation’s evolution occurred when Power to Change agreed to fund Safe’s purchase and renovation of the former Little Merton pub. This initiated a third phase of evolution in which the organisation established its capacity and advanced its track record in the transformation of derelict spaces. Within a short time the pub had been cleared, renovated, restocked and reopened as the region’s only community pub, and began generating revenues to cover the costs of staffing, stock and overheads.



Source: Safe Regeneration, 2001-2018

With this track record, the organisation has now been able to attract significant funding to help realise a third wave of asset acquisition. Safe’s #DestinationBootle is the largest community-led housing, enterprise and leisure development in the UK. In this third phase, both turnover and assets are increasing rapidly. If this development comes to fruition, there will be further significant increases in both turnover and assets in the years to come.

Can we do that?



'To top it all off, we'll build your new centre for you, up to the value of £1.1 million.' The developer closed his laptop and leant back in his chair.

After he'd left, the board discussed his proposal.

'The designs were quite nice ...'

'They say they save money on the build through modern materials, but the rents were sky-high, who could afford them?'

'£1.1m for our new centre, though? Shouldn't we consider it?'

'And what then? Scrabbling around for pennies, running up the overdraft again? This should be the making of us, not send us back to square one.'

'That's the fourth developer we've had interest from. Clearly the site is viable. We should be finding the money and doing it ourselves.'

'Can we do that ...?'

The realities of the situation were beginning to crystallize. The possibility of giving away much of the control and ownership of the project we had worked so hard on, for so many years, to a developer for whom this was one of dozens of potential sites, who might easily price out local people and our creative community. In return for a new centre of our own. It felt like selling our souls. Versus the possibility of creating our vision of a new community, different from everywhere and everything else. Owning it, managing it, leading it, making sure it was everything we wanted, everything the community deserved, and would stay that way in the decades to come. We wanted our new community to have a soul, and we began to realise that to achieve that, we'd need to do it ourselves.

'We could become a housing association. We'd need to do the research. Look at the business plan. Look at the risks, the regulations. How would we need to change? How would we get there?'

'It's a lot of work.'

'We've never been shy of hard work.'

4.5 Diversified and entrepreneurial

'He's bang on it, all the time, he's constantly developing.' Employee, about the CEO

Safe is highly entrepreneurial and diversified, offering more than 20 services on one site, far in excess of the average of nine services identified by Trup et al. (2019). This diversity of provision achieves complementary strategic goals including developing an engaging offer that effectively serves the complex and varied needs of the local community, diversifying revenues and managing risk.

Projects and services

Arts and crafts	Music therapy
	Film and photography
	Creative writing
	Zendoodling
	Fine art classes
	Ceramics/mosaic workshops
	Carpentry
	Micro-brewing
Horticulture	Community growing
	Permaculture
	Bee keeping
	Poultry-keeping
Business start-up	Business development
	Business incubation
	Space and venue hire
	Community business model tour
Wellbeing	Mindfulness
	Yoga
	Sound bed therapy

Leisure	Canoeing
	Canal trails
	Community pub
	Community festivals
	Heritage trails
Community development	Public artworks
	Community clean-ups
	Community-led housing
	Communal spaces

The CEO explained how this had started:

‘For a few years we just focused on getting really good at the participatory arts stuff. We built up a reputation, got bigger commissions, better sites for our installations. But even then, we never stayed still, we were always asking, how can we make it better? Different materials, different methods, more challenging clients and so on. We were making a decent living, well for artists anyway. Other artists started asking us how we had done it, could we help them? So we started helping them. And we realised we could get paid for doing that. So the first time, it wasn’t really planned, it just sort of happened.’

While the first major diversification may have evolved relatively organically, future efforts were more strategic, particularly after the organisation secured the St Mary’s site:

‘Once we got St Mary’s, I mean it looked a state and it’s freezing in winter, but I knew it’d be the making of us. We cleared it all out, it was full of rubbish, roof leaking and all the rest of it. We divvied it up into studios, offices, workshops, started filling the space. All kinds of people. Not only artists. Dressmakers, carpenters, environmental projects, kids’ clubs, the cadets, a dance group, anyone who needed a bit of affordable space. Whatever help they needed, we’d organise it, business planning, tax advice, access to finance ... Once we had this network of people, all different skills, all doing their own thing, we could put bigger projects together, go for bigger commissions that none of us could have done on our own.’
CEO

Entrepreneurialism, collaboration and diversification have enabled the organisation to achieve complementary strategic goals. Firstly, it enables them to serve the complex and varied needs of the local community more effectively. For example, when an opportunity arose to secure grant funding to improve the wellbeing of local people, Safe was able to lead a consortium bid involving delivery by a complex network of 14 partners to Well Sefton, part of the Well North⁶ programme:

‘Well Sefton is a great example of where working together on a consortium or collaborative basis enabled us to better meet the needs of the local community and access grant funding to do that. For that project we put together a consortium of 14 partners who all act as delivery agents in one way or another, we manage the grant and then subcontract to them to deliver. So part of that is around community engagement in health and wellbeing activities – mosaic workshops, music therapy, mural making, carpentry workshops, people making planters and outdoor furniture, mindfulness, yoga, canoeing ... the community can access all those services here on one site.’ CEO

Consortium members also understand the value of diversifying and apply this thinking within their own operations, to develop their own organisational sustainability independently of Safe:

‘Diversification can help the company along I think because, as I know myself, because I am from an art background, you can’t just get by, by doing just one thing, if you’re a company. Even large companies, like Hitachi, they’ll do power tools, they’ll do diggers, you know, so you can’t just do one thing really, you’ve got to do multiple things.’ Consortium member

‘The success of Safe is not having barriers and not being scared to upskill yourself. If there’s a line of revenue but you don’t think necessarily that you’re skilled for it, you can upskill yourself. You can learn new things.’ Consortium member

An entrepreneurial approach also enables the organisation to take advantage of opportunities for vertical integration – the business strategy of acquiring firms involved in other stages of the production or distribution chain. In the same way that a fashion design company might decide to acquire a clothing manufacturing plant or a delivery firm to increase control and reduce the costs of purchasing those services externally, when an opportunity arose to purchase a nearby derelict pub, Safe was well-positioned to diversify swiftly into the hospitality and leisure sector. A community pub offers a welcoming social space not only for the local community to meet and socialise but serves as a space for company events and a place for staff, partners and participants to relax and unwind.

⁶ Well North is a social business whose goal is to unlock potential in people and place. www.wellnorthenterprises.co.uk

'We had a track record didn't we really, of taking on a derelict building in Bootle and turning it into a cultural hub.' CEO

Coming together as a consortium, and securing increasingly larger commissions and grants, has encouraged the organisation to become more ambitious, and develop larger and larger projects. The planned diversification into housing and construction has demanded significant organisational learning, which can be challenging to resource, which is likely one reason why community-led housing developments on the scale planned here are rare. One trustee commented:

'This is a £30 million investment. It's a lot bigger than Safe or any community organisation has taken on for a long while in Liverpool. I think the last scheme of this size taken on by the local community was in the 1980s by the Eldonians.'



A further factor impeding the capacity of community hubs to undertake work on this scale is the high level of risk associated with such projects, which is seen to conflict with the responsibilities of charity trustees:

‘The thing about innovation, developing new products and services, and especially one on this scale ... it’s expensive and it’s risky. These are things that charities normally try to avoid. Charity trustees are required to be prudent. We wouldn’t be doing our jobs if we didn’t constantly ask ourselves, what is the value, what are the risks, are they worth it, how can they be managed?’ Trustee

Careful analysis of the risks and benefits is therefore required when considering any innovation or asset acquisition strategies. Having the confidence to accept a degree of well-managed risk was an essential attribute highlighted by a number of community hub leaders:

‘I think we all use the word risk, but it’s how you mitigate it – it’s what you put in place in order to feel comfortable with it ... but we manage it don’t we? We manage risk and what professional services do we bring in to help us mitigate that?’ Trustee

The danger of not feeling confident or able to take on risk can be to the detriment of the organisation and the wider community. One participant recounted a visit they had made to another organisation within the region, to advise them about taking on ownership of some local assets:

‘We were asked to speak to an organisation in [another local area], and there was loads of things we could have done to help them but they were so risk-averse, they were just terrified really. Yeah, they were looking for an opportunity to develop what they had, like a pub and shops or whatever, it had loads of potential. And we’re looking at it thinking, “I could do loads with that”, and we could see they were quite terrified really, weren’t they? ... They were very much, I don’t know, sort of scared off. It was the responsibility really; it was the risk ... That was quite an eye-opener for me.’ Community hub leader

This study suggests that to achieve sustainability, community hub leaders, both individually and as teams, need to work through risk rather than avoid it; to overcome anxiety and concerns and develop the self-confidence and skills necessary to manage and exploit the asset effectively. Firmly establishing the community business and achieving early goals and successes are often critical, as one community hub leader explained:

'We've got the vision, we know what we'd like, but it is the responsibility and the governance, the due diligence. It is scary stuff, but the more you do it, success breeds success. And then you become "we've always taken risks, haven't we?" You then say: "We can do it." So there's that mindset of ... we've been successful, so ... that success does bring success.' Community hub leader

Small early successes build confidence, which can heighten ambition and increase the level of acceptable risk, creating a virtuous circle of confidence, ambition, innovation, risk and success.

4.6 Community-led

Community leadership is a fluid concept that can be defined and interpreted in many ways. As discussed in the literature review, local rootedness and local accountability are two of the four key characteristics of community business as defined by Power to Change. Trup et al. (2019: 4) agree that community leadership is a key feature of a community hub.

Within Safe, community leadership and accountability are embedded across three levels of practice – governance, strategy and operations. Over time, the organisation has developed a three-tier governance structure:

'We have a kind of three-tier governance structure. One is the trustees, the second is the consortium, mainly tenants here in the building and others we work with closely, say 30, 40 people, then we have a stakeholder membership of 160 people which is local people who've signed up to support the programme. They all shape what we do, it's a constant back and forward through those mechanisms to kind of check we're going in the right direction.' Trustee

The first tier, the board, currently comprises six trustees including two consortium/tenant representatives, an accountant, a solicitor, a university lecturer and a community regeneration specialist. In keeping with the lean thinking principles, the organisation has always maintained a board that is small in relation to many charity boards, but perhaps larger than many private businesses which may be led by just one or two executive directors. In addition to the trustees, board meetings are attended by the CEO and other core staff, with specialist advisors such as the company accountant, legal or commercial consultants attending meetings as appropriate. Trustees tend to be long-standing, recruited due to their specialist knowledge, skills and passion for the local community. It is important that trustees share the values that underpin the organisation's mission and approach. The chair of the board explained his own motives for joining:

'I've been involved in social enterprise, local authorities or public sector since 1990 which goes back a bit of a way and I've developed quite a few large-scale projects along the way, such as the Eldonians group in Liverpool ... I've got an affinity to the [Bootle] area because I originally grew up on the other side of the road so I spent a lot of time there as a young kid so I know the area very very well and it was a case of I've got a, I wouldn't say a responsibility to put anything back by any stretch of the imagination, but I did want to be able to get involved so that I could hopefully support [the CEO] and the team to deliver a greater ambition that would support the wider community.'

The second tier of governance, the consortium, is a network of organisations that work closely with Safe and each other on a day-to-day basis. The consortium is a fluid network of a dozen or so organisations that have long-term tenancies and partnership arrangements with Safe. As the Safe website explains, these are 'wonderful people, all doing very cool things individually and all working together as part of the Safe family' (Safe, no date, b). Two representatives from the consortium are elected from within the group to serve as trustees of Safe. One comments:

'I represent the consortium side of Safe but my role there is the same as every trustee there, is to try and progress the company a little bit further and offer, like, a different skill set to what a lot of other people on the board have. I'm more practical, a lot of people are more knowledge based.' Consortium member, Trustee

The consortium holds monthly meetings with Safe where news, events and project/work opportunities and plans are discussed, as well as any issues with tenancies, such as new tenants joining or spaces becoming available.

The third tier of governance is the stakeholder group. This wider group emerged from a major community consultation exercise undertaken by Safe not long after it had settled into St Mary's:

'Not too long after we moved here, we'd got ourselves sorted and we were like, "right, what now? ". We started this huge community consultation programme, we brought in hundreds, thousands of local people, we went out and talked to all the local organisations. "There's tons of stuff going on here, but what's missing? How can we help?" And the answer that came back was "we want decent housing, we want stuff for the kids to do, we want somewhere we can get together as a community, we want the canal to stop being a no-go area, full of god-knows-what, we want it to be somewhere we can spend time, be proud of". So in a nutshell, that's what we're doing. All those people who were interested in doing something, in being part of it, they signed up as stakeholders, they're the stakeholder group. They're like community reps. They keep us in touch with everyone, they let us know the lay of the land. If there's something they're not happy about, we hear about it.' CEO

This three-tier structure and broad engagement is what has given Safe a sense of local embeddedness, local roots and accountability to the local community. This willingness to adapt to the local community and work to address local community needs has enhanced its sustainability.



4.7 Focusing on impact

Safe's emphasis on external impact over organisational development has been a key factor in developing sustainability. We define impact as a marked effect or influence on social, economic, environmental and cultural capital within the community. Participants we spoke to agreed that community hubs in general have a responsibility for this kind of broad impact, in particular for the welfare of local residents and the wider community that stretches well beyond the boundaries of the welfare of its staff and volunteers and the quality of its products and services. One explained:

'Community hubs don't just have a responsibility for the services they deliver ... it's much wider. It's very strategic. You can't look after somebody's wellbeing if they haven't got a job. You need to help them get employment. You make sure they've got income, that they are safeguarded, that their children are safe, that the lighting is right, the roads are right and the housing is right.' Community hub leader

Individuals approaching Safe are offered a distinctive range of options which focus on the start-up and development of enterprising initiatives building on their skills and interests. Far from fuelling the decline towards a 'gig' economy – meaning a labour market characterised by the prevalence of short-term contracts or freelance work – this approach enables a much broader range of individuals, including many who have experienced long-term unemployment, disability, substance misuse and mental and physical health issues, to participate in meaningful, enjoyable work. This offers not simply economic rewards to the individual and state, but satisfaction, sustenance and friendship, all of which assist with recovery, increase resilience and bring long-term mental and physical health benefits.

A social return on investment analysis of Safe and three consortium members (Traynor, 2014) identified particularly strong social impacts relating to improved confidence and self-esteem, reduced social isolation, improved health and wellbeing, improved engagement in employment and enterprise and improvements in the physical environment. The study also demonstrated that through subcontracting within the consortium, the hub-and-spoke approach offered greater social return on investment than each of the organisations working alone.

Despite the range of individual social impacts achieved by Safe and consortium members, it is challenging to tackle the debilitating long-term effects of poverty, unemployment, depression, substance misuse, disenfranchisement or chronic illness if the physical environment is dilapidated. If housing is cramped and decrepit; if public spaces like walkways, parks and canals are dirty, dark, dangerous no-go areas, and buildings are derelict and vandalised, it can be particularly challenging to achieve individual-level social impacts to the extent that the collective community becomes a happier, healthier or more prosperous place.

Safe therefore approaches impact from a collective physical regeneration perspective as well as a social perspective. Since inception, Safe has used the co-creation of physical artworks, sited in public spaces, to enhance the physical environment and inspire pride and a sense of belonging. During the second phase of its life, Safe bought and renovated the former Little Merton pub. The pub occupies a very visible position on a main road through a residential area, next to a bridge spanning the canal. For years, the pub was boarded up, set fire to and surrounded on all sides by fly-tipped mattresses, old bikes and shopping trollies. The Safe team cleared the area, restored the Victorian cobbles leading down to the canal, and reopened the pub. Coming over the bridge today, the view is of a warm and cosy community pub, surrounded by bunting, marquees covering upcycled cable barrel tables, hanging baskets and outdoor heaters. As one community hub leader from elsewhere in the region put it:

‘What he’s done was took a building – and that’s all it was, just bricks, an empty building – and ... installed a sense of community pride.’ Community hub leader

For the last six or seven years, Safe has been developing a much more ambitious plan to transform the physical environment in the surrounding area by constructing a whole new community in a now-derelict area of land between its site and the Leeds-Liverpool canal. This is an ambitious, high-impact strategy to create a new kind of neighbourhood that is instigated, designed and constructed by and for the community, creating long-term social, economic, cultural and environmental impacts for residents, communities, businesses and visitors.





4.8 Communicating directly

Following mixed experiences with coverage in the local and regional press, Safe has become adept at exploiting social media to communicate directly with stakeholders. The organisation runs five social media channels – Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and to a lesser extent Instagram.

With more than 1,700 followers and 13,000 check-ins, Facebook is by far their preferred means of day-to-day communication with the majority of the local community and broader networks. They find this more direct form of communication works more effectively in reaching their target audiences, in conveying their intended message and in generating greater levels of positive engagement.

The Community Business Market in 2019 report suggests that some community businesses feel that their marketing strategies are a weakness that limits their sustainability, because they lack the resource and know-how to maximise the potential of websites, Facebook pages and Twitter accounts to promote their business effectively (Higton et al., 2019: 25). Within Safe, marketing communications are jointly managed by a member of the core team and a consortium member who specialises in community journalism and digital video:

‘I would say that they have a great marketing team. They’ve been getting, like, engagements of 25,000 people for a single film that might only be about two minutes. So the people that do not get to know about it, like first hand, you cast your net wider on social media. You have be quite consistent with that. We all are.’
 Consortium member

A key challenge for a complex and diversified organisation such as Safe is explaining what the organisation does in straightforward terms that can be easily communicated through media channels to the target audience: potential stakeholders. Paid-for regional newspaper coverage has produced some positive pieces which achieve the organisation's communicative goals, reach a relatively large regional audience, legitimise the organisation's work and provide a lasting legacy with strong search engine results.

However, it is social media and high-quality video content that appear to achieve the widest reach and offer the greatest control over the message and style of delivery. Therefore, there is a constant drive to document visually all that they do, to create videos and other social media content that can communicate what they do to an increasingly visually-driven audience and to change perceptions about the wider community through the online environment:

'Part of the Well Sefton programme is about changing perceptions of Bootle, trying to lessen the negative connotations people have about the area and create a lot of feel-good activities and images that create more positive perceptions. The festival is part of that. As well as giving people a great time, that gives us loads of great visuals that can go out all year long. It fuels up the social media machine. That creates more buzz, drives engagement, not just with us but with other stuff. I think that really makes a massive difference to how people see and feel about the area and what they choose to do with their time and money.' CEO

To reach wider audiences, Safe shares media through the channels of better-connected national and international partners such as Power to Change and Goldman Sachs. A video about Safe's social enterprise model and capital development plans has reached more than 4.2 million views on Twitter through the Goldman Sachs 10k Small Business channel, following the CEO's earlier completion of their training programme.

However, social media also enables users to post reviews and comments which are beyond the subject's control. At the time of writing, there are 155 Google reviews of the Lock and Quay, and an overall score of 4.7 out of 5 stars. One recent review read:

'I had my first visit to this pub last night. We had a ball! Staff and customers were all lovely and welcoming. Even more love for the place when we realised it was a non-profit pub that gives back to the surrounding area!'

The risk of negative reviews is always a concern, but regular monitoring of reviews and prompt addressing of any concerns raised tends to limit the potentially damaging effects.

Safe has also experimented with paid-for social media content. For example, it spent £150 on Facebook promotions for the 2019 festival, which achieved more than 125,000 views of the promotional video amongst a highly localised and well-targeted audience and prompted a flurry of ticket sales.

Social media has been huge for us



'Social media has been huge for us. Pre-social, we didn't do a great deal of 'marketing' as such. In fact, you could even say it used to be a bit frowned upon, in the sector. Marketing, like, who has time for that? We're too busy doing stuff. Having a slick external profile, that was all a bit suspicious, a bit style-over-substance, looking-good rather than doing-good kind of thing. A fancy website, glossy brochures ... that would have cost money you should be spending on your projects, on your people.

It was hard to get the papers interested. They'd say they'd come to your event but something else more important would always get in the way, some celebrity bash, a stabbing, whatever. What is it they say, if it bleeds, it leads?

We had more luck with the more local papers. They like a bit of good news, our stories tend to be good news, community events, reopening the pub, the music festival and so on. We've developed a good relationship with one reporter in particular. He likes to come and visit, get some nice photos of the community, people still like to see themselves in the paper don't they, even these days? He's done some good pieces on us. He knows, if he comes to us, he'll get a decent spread.

But you've got to be on social media today haven't you. If you're not visible and active online then that's a key part of people's lives that you're not a part of. We do a lot of Facebook and Twitter. Facebook is for friends, our stakeholders, our community. People join in on there, talk about events, it's great, all emojis and people having a laugh, a lot of banter. It's a bit like actually being in the pub, now I come to think of it.

Twitter is more for professionals, that's where the wider world sees you – possible funders, investors, partners. We do a lot of video, we've a production company on site, they run community journalism and filmmaking courses, and the team there cover all our events, make little mini-docs and so on.

Our next task will be Instagram. We've dabbled but need to do much more.'

The pub offers valuable opportunities to reach out to new community members and develop much deeper and more ongoing relationships with local residents:

‘We’ve got this community pub now and it’s a constant meeting place, where you don’t have a meeting just to talk about specific issues; you just get an opportunity to speak on a grassroots level with people who live in the area and listen to what their needs are basically ... So if we found out that people needed job training or are interested in art, horticulture or bees or whatever ... so people who are disenfranchised from the community ... we can kind of integrate people into all of those things, because that’s Safe, I think.’ Consortium member

As the following observations demonstrate, the Lock and Quay pub works to draw in community members to become participants, stakeholders, partners and trustees. That is, the pub serves as a highly porous interface between Safe and the wider community which enables continuous communication and development of organisational understanding of local community needs and priorities.

This is a Community Pub



‘This is a Community Pub. All profits are reinvested back into local projects’ reads the chalkboard above the bar. Beneath the fairy lights and garlands that dot the ceiling, upturned cable reels reclaimed from nearby docks and lumber yards serve as tables, around which sit a smattering of paint-splattered artists, office workers and other locals.

Hanging from the ceiling, a makeshift chandelier constructed, rather appropriately, from two dozen empty beer bottles, casts a warm glow on the Thursday evening visitors. Behind the raised area that serves as a stage for local bands, pub quiz masters, open mic comedy, pub poetry, and community theatre performances, a line of electric guitars stand on guard, awaiting their next impromptu outing. There’s a book-swap shelf, colouring things for kids, and the odd chessboard or Jenga. On the pebbled piazza outside sits a 20-foot yacht, rebuilt as an outdoor seating area by a group of young people developing carpentry skills with a consortium member, named in memory of the late John Sutcliffe, former chair of Safe.

The walls dividing the main room from the snug – where bowls of scouse and red cabbage, homemade pies, or wood-fired pizzas are sometimes served – are adorned with intricate montages of city music icons, from Lennon to The La’s to The Picket. Lovingly crafted by a well-known figure in the city’s historic grassroots music scene, they were gifted to Safe in thanks for their support through his long recovery from mental health breakdown. It’s quiet enough now to overhear snippets of conversation from the customers dotted around the place. They’re talking music, politics, work gossip, planning their evening tea, the minutiae of life.

'It's quiet now', says one of the bar staff, pushing her fringe out of her eyes, 'but give it a couple of hours and it'll be heaving. Tomorrow we've a local band on, Xander and the Peace Pirates, they played at the festival and always pull in a decent crowd. Fridays are always chocka.'

The manager continues,

'Our prices are pretty low compared to most places round here, but we always take enough to cover our costs, plus a fair bit to go back into the pot. At the moment we're helping to clean up the canal and raise money for a new canoe hub for the kids who come of a Saturday morning.'

The idea of buying a pub didn't originate with the board, says a trustee, or a business plan or a management consultant.

'The idea came about through conversations with local people. "We've got nothing, nowhere to go" they said. "That pub's been here for years, it was a great local but the brewery said it didn't make enough ... now it's sitting there waiting to be burnt down. What can you do about it?" So Safe listened, we worked together and created something of value. And I'm not talking about financial value, I'm talking about social value. It's how it's managed. There are people that are in every single day, there are people that come in of the weekend ... It's a facility for people to meet and it's extremely valuable when it comes down to social capital, and the only reason that happened was because stakeholders said "we want it to happen" and we went out and raised the £150,000, whatever it may be, and now it's operational. And what that pub does for us is, it allows us to listen, it gives us a forum where people are relaxed, not necessarily through drink but it's an environment where people are relaxed and can talk and tell us what some of the issues of the day are.'

4.9 Practising generous leadership

Our research identified leadership as one of the key factors contributing to the sustainability of Safe Regeneration. In particular, the CEO was identified by employees and other community hub leaders as demonstrating particularly iconic or charismatic leadership. One observed that:

‘If he can help you, he’ll help you, he’s a great leader. He’s passionate and he knows what he’s doing and he’ll learn very quickly from mistakes, and I like that.’

Community hub leader

In particular, he is seen on having a well-developed understanding of how to manage and develop the qualities and skills of people within the Safe hub and consortium.

‘He knows people. He knows how they work.’ Community hub leader

It’s evident from our research that strong interpersonal skills and application of coaching and mentoring techniques established by the CEO has created a nurturing and supportive culture in which individuals are supported and encouraged to take ownership of their role, work and professional development – whether they are a volunteer, new business leader, partner or employee. We observed an open and generous approach to leadership at work in Safe, and interviews and observations suggest this is widely recognised and contributes to transformational outcomes for many individuals.

‘Generous leadership’ is an approach which offers constructive advice, support and mentoring, encourages a high degree of autonomy, sets few rules and is reluctant to direct or interfere. The approach is applied by Safe across its operations in relation to staff, volunteers, consortium members and external partners. It’s clear this is a deliberate strategy which draws on the personal and professional values of the CEO:

‘There’s a term we’ve begun to use a lot now and that’s ‘generous leadership’. And that’s about being, pretty much saying yes to most things. There’s only two rules in Safe: as long as what you do does not impact negatively on anyone else and as long as it’s cool – get on with it. That’s it ...’ CEO

Given that the majority of individuals delivering work on Safe’s behalf are community business leaders who determine their own priorities and business strategies, Safe relies as much on negotiating and influencing partners as on paid employees.

'I'll help support you if you want to make the organisation the best it can be. I can reflect on that, I'll take the time to consider the choices that you might need to make, with you, but I won't make the call for you ... It's trusting people to do things for themselves, take ownership. It's like a kid – if you keep doing something for a kid they keep expecting you to do that for them. "It's your choice, it's your organisation, you make the choice, it's your call".' CEO

This strategy perhaps offers some protection against occupational stress and burnout that has become so widespread in many sectors (discussed above).

Safe's management philosophy is based on a supportive and light-touch management approach towards new start-ups, providing social entrepreneurs with a high degree of autonomy to manage their community business as they see fit:

'It's a double-edged sword. But we kind of try and say yes to pretty much everything, unless it is obvious that is going to offend that person or it's going to displace that person.' CEO

Building strong and enduring relationships based on trust is critical but this requires patience, resilience and careful management, and does not always go to plan:

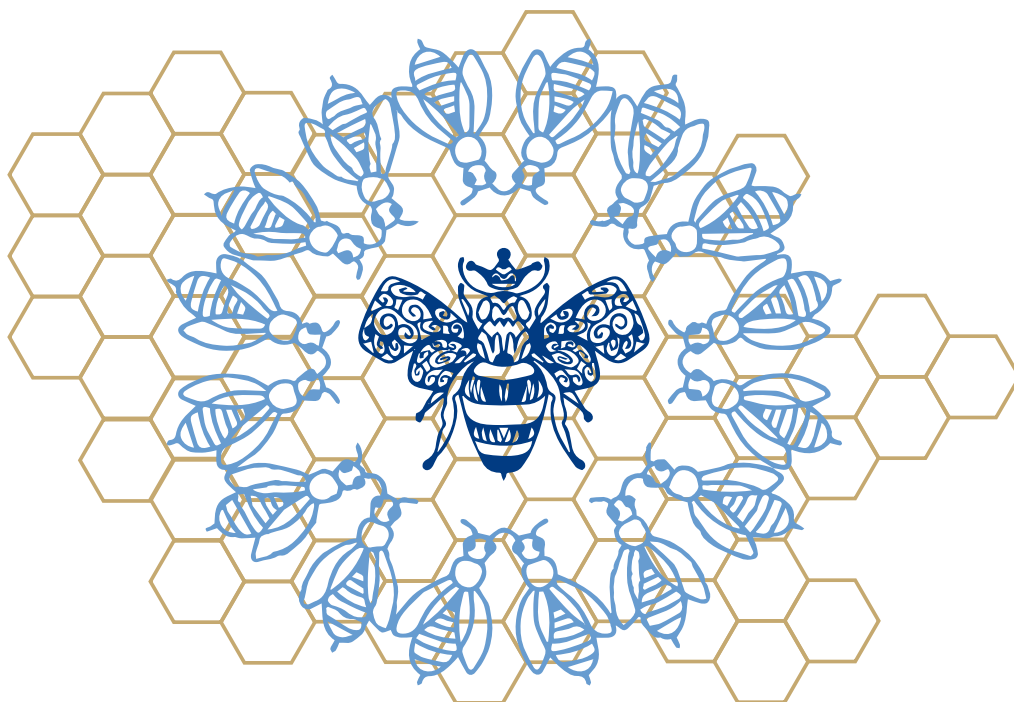
'Of 10 people that you trust, probably four people will come through that are right. You kind of minimise, by manoeuvring people; you minimise the kind of damage that they can do. It's a very hands-off process, you know. There are some people I've trusted that I've regretted but if I hadn't trusted them, then there's four people who didn't get an opportunity to do what they do and make an impact ... You can look and say: "this is going to be tough this one; this is easily going tits-up this one"; but, let it run its course. Always try to end it amicably, which I have. We've not had any major fallings out with anybody, except one or two, over the years.' CEO

As the CEO highlights, empowering people means accepting that there will be differences of opinion and perspective among consortium members and partners.

‘They have the power themselves to go and that’s the empowering bit. It is supporting that person to be an entrepreneur and develop their organisation. So we see an organisation go from one person, to two people to three people and grow and to develop their practice with support. And that’s the interesting thing I like about it, is that you’re developing those leaders and you are developing an entrepreneurial approach rather than developing staff, and a kind of continuous personal development – it is that but it has much more autonomy away from Safe, and that’s the important thing. And there’s also kind of inter-trading by connecting with other enterprises so they work together to develop their own programmes and projects. It’s, you know, creating these little monsters: “go and do your own thing”.’ CEO

Leadership is also about self-improvement and the CEO has been willing to engage in personal development throughout his career. A community hub leader from elsewhere in the region observed:

‘[The CEO] has really developed himself, I’ve noticed a huge difference in him. The first time I met him he was like an art guy. He was a guy doing mosaics. Getting down with the kids, doing all this, producing these mosaics. Now he’s standing at the front of the room, speaking about Safe; speaking about their aspirations; coming up with strategic plans ... I imagine he’d be very comfortable now coming in to the local authority, speaking to our chief exec, dealing with anyone on a strategic level about Safe’s aspirations.’ Local authority officer



In summary, Safe's practice of generous leadership aligns with a wide range of complementary strategies such as community leadership and its hub-and-spoke model. Generous leadership is embedded within Safe's internal and external relationship management, and within its service delivery offering through business development and incubation support.

Sarah's story



Sarah is a single mum. Three years ago, she had an idea to start a community business offering mindfulness, life coaching and writing support to disadvantaged communities across the region and developed a plan to turn it into reality. Sarah was organised and driven but needed expert advice on how to proceed and what legal form would be the best vehicle for her business. Sarah had approached other organisations for support but could not access the technical advice and support needed to progress the plans she had. More than that, she found the atmosphere and personal approach of these organisations did not accord with her expectations or specific needs. Sarah had found this situation to be 'a little bit disheartening'.

Then someone advised her to go to Safe Regeneration. From the first instant, she says, Sarah knew that Safe and the atmosphere it provides was a natural fit for her and the right environment to take forward her nascent community business.

She explained: 'As soon as I got here I felt something different; it was just more down to earth; up my street and they were able to answer the questions I asked'. Sarah visited Safe and received practical business and financial advice, in particular how to register to become a Community Interest Company and information about accessing start-up grants to roll out her business venture. This advice bore fruit, enabling her to put her ideas into practice and progress her business.

Two years later, when her company had grown and she was in need of an office base, Sarah was offered an office at the St Mary's Complex 'and that has helped me even more. They're just 'boss' she explains, meaning 'the best' in the local vernacular, 'they are always there to help me; they are always there to advise me'.

4.10 Supporting the sector

The generous leadership demonstrated by Safe within the organisation and consortium extends beyond their own network into the wider community hub and business sector. Community hub leaders we interviewed consistently highlighted Safe's willingness to share ideas and knowledge with other partners without being defensive or precious about them or expecting to receive something back in return, aligning strongly with the findings of Chapman and Gray (2019):

'What they're really, really good at in my opinion ... is that idea-sharing. I like the way that they don't take ownership of ideas or methods. They share their good practice.' Community hub leader

'I'll say this. They share the knowledge, and that's everything from "do you know about this pot of funding" to "you know what about this method of working", you know, everything. They really are what you call a community asset that's spread right across the city because they've shared that good working and I like that about them.' Community hub leader

'You know, when you talk about them re-investing for social good, they're not just re-investing that, that surplus of economic, you know, income, they're re-investing ideas, methods, good practice and that's really, really important, that. That's lost in the whole, you know, "how can we become sustainable?" discussion. Maybe they should've sold us all that, that'd be a good income generator!'
Community hub leader

'They've been instrumental really in shaping my thinking.' Community hub leader

Indeed, this report is a part of that generous leadership in which the organisation has opened its doors to share its experiences and its model, with the goal of inspiring others. This kind of sharing is not only about big ideas and broad approaches, but practical advice and support regarding the everyday detail of tasks that workers in community hubs undertake. One community hub leader recounted:

'I think as well, it's ... about that shared partnership. For example, [the CEO] is always on the end of the phone. If there's something we're stuck with, he'll help out.'

The generous leadership that Safe has shown within the wider sector has generated goodwill towards the organisation and engendered calls for it to take on a role in leading sector change, through lobbying anchor institutions such as local authorities and universities to engage more effectively with the sector. One prominent community hub leader observed:

'I think where Safe Regeneration are up there, is that they could, they could deliver a lot of things on behalf of the local authority. They could be the ones that pave the way for the rest of us really, who are looking to them, if that makes sense. I think sustainability is about getting the local authority, getting the big contracts, getting them to value what we do.' Community hub leader

Participants felt that, at times, commissioners have failed to recognise the high quality products and professional level of service offered by community hubs and businesses, who at the same time deliver significant social value. Some participants felt that this limits the capacities of the sector to win the number and range of procurement contracts that could achieve a step-change in sustainability.

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Participants suggested that a lack of an effective, shared and comparative approach to measuring social value and impact has at times made it difficult to demonstrate social value and impact in ways that satisfy commissioners. Aligning with the findings of Lord Young's (2015) review of the Social Value Act – which suggested that varying understanding of the Act led to inconsistent practice amongst commissioners around how to define social value and when to include it within the procurement process – this may have led to missed opportunities for both commissioners and potential delivery agents.

Participants highlighted a need for anchor institutions such as local authorities, schools, healthcare providers and universities to recognise the potential of the community hub and business sector as efficient and professional service providers:

'The local authority say year on year on year we want to invest in community organisations but you don't stand a chance in being able to deliver the big contracts. It would only take one local authority to give one community-based organisation in the third sector a big contract to deliver for them to lead the way for all of us to benefit from that.' Community hub leader

'If you're focusing on the economic sustainability, the local authorities and public services need to see us in the same light as they see private sector organisations.' Community hub leader

According to the community hub and business leaders interviewed for this research, there has been a need for public bodies and other anchor institutions to better recognise the value of the community hub and business sector in both delivering services and creating social benefits.

However, they feel public sector procurement opportunities will only come about once there is a change in perception among funding bodies and major local anchor institutions about the capacity of the sector to manage large scale investment projects, and remain stable enough to deliver long-term commissions:

‘There needs to be an understanding, collectively what they generate for the economy, they need to be given a voice around stakeholder and committees, you know they should be a voice around the region as well.’ Consortium member

‘We need to convince our anchor institutions, the councils, the universities, the schools, the hospitals, that community hubs are a viable option, that we can deliver on big contracts. This’ll give the sector the investment it needs to start up and grow. We’re not asking for grants, for free money. We know there’s cuts, we know times are hard, but they’re still paying private contractors for services all over the place. It won’t cost them more, it’ll cost them less, because community businesses and hubs are often much better value than a private business. And we’ll be adding social value as well. The challenge is in convincing them that we can do it to the professional level that they want, and that we can coordinate between ourselves to deliver large scale contracts.’ Trustee

This need for better communication between the community hub and business sector and anchor institutions was highlighted in a recent Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) report. *Building an inclusive economy through community business* identified inner-city south Liverpool, a few miles south of Bootle, as a community business ‘hot-spot’ (2019: 2). CLES suggests that high levels of bonding and bridging social capital in the area have prompted high levels of self-help and trust, which have created strong social solidarity and enabled the growth of a vibrant community business sector. However, it found the level of linking capital in Liverpool lower than in other case study areas such as Hull and Birmingham. It argues that to address this and build more inclusive economies, existing nodes of activity (community businesses or community anchor organisations) should be encouraged and supported to play a catalyst role by bridging connections locally and linking to opportunity outwardly.

In October 2019, the Liverpool city region’s Metro Mayor Steve Rotheram announced plans to establish a new £5 million fund, delivered in partnership with Power to Change, to multiply and grow social business across the city region. The city region’s portfolio holder for Inclusive Economy and Third Sector, Councillor Pat Hackett, highlighted how ‘by nurturing an ecosystem that provides peer support together with public and private sector support, we can become a national and, indeed international, beacon for collaboration within the social economy for inclusive growth’ (in Houghton, 2019: no page numbers). The extent to which this vision is realised will be explored in the coming months and years.

05.

Conclusion

This research set out to understand what has helped one community hub organisation, Safe Regeneration, develop sustainability, and what could be learnt from its experiences that would help others. Through the study, we identified ten strategies that underpin its approach and ethos.

First, there is a shared understanding that operating a community hub is a business operation integrating strong social values into commercial activities. Second, the organisation operates lean principles in which organisational growth has been deliberately constrained, and activities are delivered through a complementary network of interdependent organisations that work together like the parts of a wheel. The organisation is entrepreneurial and highly diversified, offering more than 20 services on-site, helping to address the complex and varied needs of the local community, including social, cultural and environmental concerns. External impact is prioritised over organisational development, and strategy is developed through a constant two-way flow through three tiers of governance – community, consortia and trustees. This has enabled the organisation to build the confidence to take well-managed risks to acquire and manage multiple revenue-generating assets which improve the physical environment and offer social and economic benefits. It uses social media and video to achieve broad reach and maintain strong control over message and delivery. Finally, it practices generous leadership within and beyond its own network, sharing knowledge and ideas with others in the sector and helping the sector to grow.

To what extent can these strategies be said to have created or contributed to sustainability? From a social and environmental perspective, it is striking how closely these strategies and values connect with van Marrewijk's (2003) conceptualisation of holistic sustainability, which sees each person, organisation and phenomenon as mutually interdependent with a universal responsibility towards the other.

Considering the economic perspective, in twenty years Safe has moved through the start-up phase, built credibility and moved into a period of relative sustainability. Cashflow is manageable. It is increasingly able to generate or attract the funds it requires to achieve strategic objectives. It has developed a track record in acquiring and managing revenue-generating assets that are expected to grow in value and support an increasing proportion of its work, and it is making good progress with plans to significantly scale up assets and revenues which will significantly reduce the need for external support.

‘So what?’ you might ask. There are certainly many socially-motivated organisations with far greater resources and assets, and much longer histories, particularly those established within the great golden age of Victorian philanthropy.

This study concludes with the suggestion that what Safe represents is an interesting and replicable example of a community hub that has achieved a relatively healthy level of sustainability, within a relatively short space of time, within a relatively young sector, within a disadvantaged neighbourhood, and within a challenging economic climate.

06.

Recommendations

We hope that this study offers inspiration and hope to community hub leaders and others involved in the challenging but exhilarating journey of starting and growing a community hub.

Our main recommendation is to encourage you to consider whether the strategies that have defined Safe's journey towards sustainability could help your organisation on its journey. We would be interested to learn the extent to which these factors are important in other contexts and settings.

Second, we would like to see a community hub leadership development programme established to nurture the next generation of community hub leaders to grow and support the sector, and encourage peer learning and collaboration.

Third, we encourage commissioners in anchor institutions (such as local and combined authorities, universities and colleges, and healthcare providers) to consider the leadership role that community hubs can play within the rich and diverse community business sector, and actively engage with them to explore partnership and procurement opportunities.

Finally, we hope that further research will develop understanding of community hubs, particularly in relation to leadership and asset acquisition and management.

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ABCcolourful CIC

andybanksartist.wordpress.com

Art In Me CIC

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Brynn Gerard – Inventor & Digital Innovator

Canal and Rivers Trust

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Caring Connections – Counselling Support Service

Creative Carpentry CIC (formerly ISIS Creative Services)

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Dot Art CIC

dot-art.co.uk

FunkyDoorys Pizza CIC

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Incredible Innovations

incredibleinnovations.co.uk

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Nordoff Robbins Music Therapy

nordoff-robbins.org.uk/music-therapy/what-is-music-therapy/

Periscope Productions CIC
periscope-productions.co.uk/

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stampsbrewery.co.uk/

Start Creative CIC
startcreativecic.co.uk/

The Well Artist Collective

Well Being Creatives CIC – Ceramics & Sound Bed Therapy

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