

GREEN & BLUE FUTURES

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

JULY 2015



**SOCIAL
ENTERPRISE
UK**



INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

The Green & Blue Futures project has been a hotbed of innovative practice, both in its overall construction and from within individual projects in the different countries. The innovation in part comes from the intersection of green and blue infrastructure with the social enterprise model, in part from viewing that infrastructure in a different way, and in part the translation of existing models to new areas (or of new models to existing fields of work).

These findings are consistent with a wider picture – Social Enterprise UK's most recent 'state of social enterprise' survey revealed that social enterprises are more innovative than their mainstream counterparts: 59% have developed a new product or service in the last 12 months, compared to 38% of mainstream small and medium businesses. The experience from the Green & Blue Futures project supports these findings in a European context, and there are a number of key areas of innovative practice which can be built on, learned from and extended by other actors.



Recommendations:

1. There is clear innovation in the overlap not only between the traditional environmental, social and economic aspects of social enterprise (the genuine 'triple bottom line') but also in a further combination with regenerating green and blue infrastructure. This project has demonstrated the latent potential in the crossover between these various elements, and how they can be mutually supportive and reinforcing – other agencies, enterprises and environmental bodies should take incorporate this into their own plans
2. A further innovation of the project is in changing how waterways and other spaces are viewed: not as passive environmental assets to be conserved or maintained, nor as simply travel routes, but as potential sites of learning, pathways to employment, and hubs of entrepreneurial activity. In short, they can be at the centre of regenerating communities and transforming people's lives, not at the fringes of urban-focused activity
3. In particular, there are important innovative practices that link learning and education to the future of waterways and green space; in the examples of canal college, Tipperary, Canal & River Trust and others, it can be seen how multiple positive outcomes can be generated by dedicated activity of this type. Not only are there important soft and hard outcomes for the individual participants (self-confidence, self-esteem, skills, qualifications) but also a significant increase in knowledge about these green and blue spaces, and a sense of 'ownership' in the broadest sense - of an understanding of heritage and history. The outdoor nature of such work, and the associated positive health outcomes, should also not be underestimated. All provide compelling evidence for more of this work.
4. The enterprising elements have also been extremely innovative: whilst most involve employment, the projects have covered a wide range of enterprise activity: from canoe-based leisure to social supermarkets; from spirulina and biogardening to dedicated business support. These move away from more common industries such as energy production, for example. Businesses, policymakers and those working in the social sector should be inspired by such creativity and ingenuity. They also use a variety of business models - some utilise cross-subsidy (i.e. charging a higher price to some customers and using the profits to fund work with people who can't afford the same), some are commercial but achieve their social impact through who they seek to employ, while others focus on a diversity of income streams to achieve resilience.
5. The role of communications in several of the projects is also worthy of mention; canal college has created a professional brand around its work, whilst Hainaut undertook promotional activity about social enterprise in the local press and with TV coverage; the organisations involved in these pilots understand that success relies on reaching key audiences and building awareness and markets.