

New SFEDI assessor puts people and passion at centre of social enterprise advice

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The term 'people person' might have been coined to describe life-coach and SFEDI (Small Firms Enterprise Development Initiative) accredited assessor Eileen Hutchinson. Eileen firmly believes people are central to social enterprise and aims to gain the most from individuals in a way that accommodates personal needs and styles. But make no mistake, Eileen is an experienced businesswoman with a conviction that tested business models and robust frameworks need to be at the heart of any successful enterprise.

Eileen currently runs her own coaching business Harmony Coaching and Mentoring Avenues, itself a social enterprise, and specialises in offering life coaching to disadvantaged groups who typically cannot afford coaching. Now Eileen is putting her skills to use as part of the Chamber's team of SFEDI accredited social enterprise advisors.

The Chamber was recently successful in becoming one of only twenty SFEDI Centres of Excellence across the UK, meaning the business support organisation can deliver business advisor accreditation to individuals across the Eastern Region. The term Centre of Excellence is SFEDI's quality kitemark for organisations that deliver useful, focused and entrepreneur-friendly support and learning to meet business needs. Staffed by individuals who really understand their field, Centres of Excellence focus on business objectives, identify needs and tailor approaches to meet those needs.

Eileen's work with social enterprises began some 4-5 years ago when, as a trustee for the Volunteer Agency in Stevenage, she led a project called the Together Centre. The centre was about to close but Eileen put a plan together for renting out rooms, which allowed the project to continue.

'At that stage I wasn't actually aware that this was a social enterprise' admits Eileen 'Later though I came to recognise that this project was very typical of the social enterprise model.'

Further work for incredit allowed Eileen to gain more experience in the social enterprise sector. She decided to build on her new skills to allow her to advise social enterprises. This led to work for Hertfordshire based business consultancy Exemplas including setting up a social enterprise networking group called Third Thursday.

The chance to become accredited by SFEDI couldn't have come at a better time for Eileen:

'I'd been working widely with social enterprises, making use of the experience I'd gained and innate skills coupled with a considerable passion for the idea' she says 'Being assessed for SFEDI gave me the chance to formalise and benchmark my skills and channel all that enthusiasm and commitment into a recognised advisor accreditation.'

Adds Eileen:

'I am convinced clients will benefit from using a SFEDI accredited advisor, not least because now they have a measurement of the advisor's competence and knowledge. SFEDI has provided a standard which business can recognise and rely upon.'

Eileen was assessed while working with three social enterprises, each an example of how wide the definition of social enterprise can be. She was observed working with a start up business, a business of twenty years standing converting to social enterprise status and a social enterprise project at the first stage of development. Eileen also submitted examples of the materials she has developed to help her clients, including a business plan format which allows clients to develop a robust financial plan while also identifying capabilities and skills gaps within their organisation.

Eileen believes the SFEDI process provides clients with a tried and tested framework that can be used as a firm basis for creative ideas.

'Social enterprise is a broad church with no two enterprises the same. However some basic principles apply to any social enterprise and the SFEDI standard reflects this, providing a proven model, which clients can dip in and out of according to their specific needs. The framework is robust enough to give clients direction and confidence but flexible enough to allow for creativity a vital element of the social enterprise process.'

Eileen is now looking forward to being part of the SFEDI team at the Chamber:

'I firmly believe social enterprise is about people and passion changing not only lives but businesses too. Innovation is central to this and, as part of a team with a wide range of complimentary skills and experience, I believe the SFEDI centre at the Chamber is well-placed to offer the best possible service to clients.'