

5. Learning Exchanges

5.1 What is a Learning Exchange?

A learning exchange is an opportunity for individuals, groups and communities to visit and learn through the exchange of ideas and the sharing of common solutions.



Exchanges create opportunities for information sharing, and learning from people with similar interests, or facing similar challenges.

Exchanges are particularly useful within the rural context, where communities in different locations face similar challenges and there is a willingness to share learning and experiences from approaches taken, including social enterprise experience.

This can be particularly useful when a group is starting out on a new area of work and they are able to learn from others who have implemented a social enterprise solution. Travelling to other geographically rural or remote social enterprises can provide shared learning about how both groups deal with rural-specific opportunities or challenges.

‘When community groups make visits to other communities, the most valuable part is often meeting new people with similar interests and gaining new insights and perspectives on shared challenges. Visiting groups come away armed with new ideas and approaches, and host organisations have the opportunity to explain their project to a new and interested audience, often seeing their own projects afresh through new eyes’.

- Scottish Community Alliance

5.2 Benefits of Attending or Hosting a Learning Exchange

There are benefits to both the host partner and the visiting partner of a learning exchange, which are based on sharing learning between partners around common interests and challenges.

The visiting partner will have the opportunity to view how a similar group, organisation or community approach shared challenges, and will come away armed with new insights and perspectives. The hosting partner have the opportunity to explain their project to a new and interested audience, often seeing their own projects afresh through new eyes.



Each partner group will meet new people, make lasting connections and expand their networks. In the rural context, networks for peer support are especially important due to the isolating nature of rural remote locations.

See an example of a learning exchange in this video about a learning exchange to the Lahemaa National Park, which was run in Estonia by the ERASMUS team from the 'Social Entrepreneurship for Local Change' project.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2c8tRzKmtk&feature=youtu.be>

5.3 How to Plan and Get the Most From a Learning Exchange Visit

Planning is a key element of any learning exchange event, but particularly so for visitors from rural communities, where the total cost and time of travel is greater than that of their urban counterparts. For this reason, it is wise to thoroughly review all aspects of your plan, taking into consideration logistics and cost, to maximise the learning you can gain from your journey.

This could include planning to visit more than one location during the journey, to maximise the benefits from the travel and time away and to bring a range of experience to inform future plans.



Identifying who and where to visit can seem like a difficult task to begin with, but you have to first consider what it is that you want to learn. Make a list, and once you have identified the key things you want to learn, you can start to consider who you might be able to learn from. There may be regional or national organisations that can assist you to identify suitable partners to visit, or via contacts you have made through existing networks.

Generally speaking, most people want to attend a learning exchange to learn about specific information, opportunities or ways of dealing with challenges. This should make it easier for you to identify places to visit by:

➤ **Enterprise Activity**

- If you are already delivering an enterprise activity or are planning to develop a new area of business activity, it can be useful to visit another organisation with experience in this area of work.
- This can provide a deeper understanding for both the preparatory work for taking forward a new area of activity or opportunities to refine and improve operational activities for existing activities. This can also provide opportunities for ongoing collaboration.
- Quite often, a social enterprise may operate activities across more than one area of business activity to achieve social and environmental benefits for their local community.



➤ **Geography**

- Perhaps you are connecting with this organisation because they face similar opportunities or challenges due to their rural location.
- You might also choose to learn from organisations because they are within close proximity to you and deal with the same contextual factors, or you might choose to go further afield to learn how things are done in different locations.



Fitting in more than one learning visit during your journey makes a lot of sense if you are travelling from a remote or rural location. This will make the most of the journey, and the additional learning you will gain will balance out the cost and time of travel. For more information about this, see our case study about Orkney Zerowaste.

Before you attend any learning exchange visits, you must have a clear outline of what you want to learn, and identify key questions to ask. Having a list of pre-prepared questions will ensure that you don't forget to ask anything, and gain the maximum amount of learning possible from the exchange. There will also be further questions and discussions that arise from the visit.

If you are engaging in a learning exchange as a group, it is well worth meeting with your group before attending the exchange to discuss what you collectively want to learn. This will bring diverse perspectives and ideas to the discussion, and might flag up questions which otherwise wouldn't be considered.

5.4 Case Studies and Learning Resources

- **Learning Resource: Scottish Community Alliance - Community Learning Exchange**
- <http://www.scottishcommunityalliance.org.uk/community-learning-exchange>
 - The Scottish Community Alliance is leading the campaign network for a stronger and independent community sector in Scotland. Their 'Community Learning Exchange' initiative creates the opportunity for communities to learn through the exchange of ideas and the sharing of common solutions.
 - The SCA Exchange funds the costs of community groups to make visits to other communities, to connect people with similar interests and allow them to gain new insights on shared challenges and grow their networks for peer support.
 - The above link will take you to an explanatory page, which links to all of the case studies from learning exchanges funded by the Scottish Community Alliance, including the example linked below, featuring Orkney Zerowaste.

- **Case Study: Estonia Lahemaa Community Innovation Laboratory**
 - https://localchangelwiki.hfwu.de/index.php?title=Lahemaa_Community_Innovation_Lab
 - A good practice example of how universities and local community groups can collaborate with rural entrepreneurs to network and learn from each other. This creates a new environment for the co-creation of knowledge and the co-visioning of sustainable solutions.
 - Resource describes a research approach called Participatory Action Research (PAR), which engages academics and students in deep and extended partnerships with civil society, aimed at uncovering context-specific and action-oriented strategies to deal with sustainability challenges in the community.

- **Learning Resource: EU Rural Review - Networking**
 - https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/publications/eu-rural-review-14-networks-and-networking-rural-development-policy_en
 - The EU Rural Review of Networking defines and highlights the role of networks and networking in rural development, and gives an overview of European and Member States' network structures.
 - Section 3: Networking in Action gives good practice examples of networking from across Europe, and includes a section on 'the exchange of relevant experience and know-how amongst stakeholders' (page 34). This gives examples of learning exchanges from across member states, for example where Latvian forest owners visited Finland and Sweden to learn about forest management practices.

- **Case Study: Orkney Zerowaste Learning Exchange**
 - <http://www.scottishcommunityalliance.org.uk/case-studies/orkney-zero-waste/>
 - Case study of a learning exchange undertaken by Orkney Zerowaste, a voluntary organisation based in the remote Orkney islands north of Scotland. Orkney Zerowaste was set up to reduce the volume of rubbish going into landfill sites and incinerators, and also aims to provide employment and training, as well as addressing other social and environmental concerns.
 - The isolated nature of the Orkney Isles, and fact that there were no similar organisations based locally, limited the potential for Orkney Zerowaste to learn from any local organisations. A learning exchange offered the opportunity to learn from other like-minded organisations, an experience which would not have been possible within Orkney.
 - They visited three other reuse organisations on their learning exchange, where they learned about applying for industry-specific accreditations, how to improve their methods and services, and gained many inspirational ideas for improvement in their own organisation.

➤ **Case Study: Romanian Demonstrative Farm and Training Centre**

https://ilias.hfwu.de/goto.php?target=file_26557_download&client_id=hfwu

- Case study of good practice from a demonstrative farm in Romania, which is used to educate rural farmers and provide them with the knowledge and support to make the transition from subsistence farm to commercial farm.
- The Agrovision Demonstrative Farm involves different stakeholders to provide educational training to rural inhabitants who are looking to turn their local production into a business. Stakeholders include international and national foundations for rural development, international volunteers and rural farmers.
- The model of knowledge transfer is accompanied by a ‘summer school’ learning exchange, where farmers from various regions of Romania are brought together to share their collective experiences and perspectives and learn from each other. This allows people in rural and remote locations to deepen their personal and professional networks, and increases the possibilities of partnerships and collaboration for better business results.
- Networking abilities are further improved through this learning exchange experience by integrating the farmer’s activities with international volunteers who teach them English. Knowing an internationally-spoken language helps farmers to better interact with peers from other countries and develop networks for better connection.