

# E3M



## E3M & Suara Co-operative Learning Exchange

# Our Suara-E3M learning exchange

Suara draws on 40 years' experience delivering caring services. The non-profit co-operative was formed in 2018 when three organisations merged to create a common, powerful and transformative project with a focus on social innovation. It serves more than 40,000 people across the whole life-cycle, has a turnover in excess of €118m, operates a "full participation" model and is a member of the €396m CLADE group, a "co-operatives' co-operative."



E3M is a strategic initiative to support social enterprise innovation in public services led by Social Business International, working with three strategic core partners, Stone King, Buzzacott and Zurich. Launched in 2012, E3M facilitates three networks: mature social enterprises delivering public services (with a collective turnover of £1bn and over 24,000 employees), commissioners in local and public authorities, and funders investing in the social economy.



For Suara and E3M members, mutual support, learning and co-operation accelerate and catalyse our shared purpose of transforming people's wellbeing. Our UK-Catalonia learning exchange followed online and other meetings.

Suara's delegation visited E3M members delivering public services across the UK:



The delegates also learned about social investment and the UK social economy from E3M, Better Society Capital and Stone King.

E3M's delegation visited Suara's headquarters in Barcelona and projects throughout the city and Catalonia, focusing on four key service areas: **elderly care, homelessness, nurseries (including early years care) and youth provision**, to learn more about Suara's operating model and the wider social economy.

Participants returned to Catalonia and the UK with new perspectives and ideas, many of which they are already embedding into their workstreams or organisations.

**"It was a great trip that was really beneficial to us all. It gave us time to focus on areas of innovation and different ways of working."**

Exchange participant

# Introduction

E3M launched in 2012 to champion social enterprise innovation in public services. Ever since, we have enabled mutual support and learning among purpose-driven organisations running public services and people commissioning them.

We've also continually participated in international knowledge exchanges with parties interested in social enterprise and innovation. I've been curious about and privileged to be able to build relationships with people working in the co-operative and social economy across Europe throughout my career.

I first met Jordi Picas Vilà, director of innovation at **Suara Cooperativa**, in 2018. It was immediately obvious that Barcelona-based Suara, an employee-led co-operative with over 4,500 employees, is something special. It has developed a powerful model for delivering its mission of social transformation that puts people – its employees, members and the people who use its services – at the heart of the businesses.

Suara's participation model, developed over 40 years, is built on trust and transparency and is key to how it provides over 200 high-quality services, from early years to elderly social care, employment support to services for young people, homelessness and supported living, across Catalonia. Innovation and partnership are at the heart of Suara's approach: it has intentionally developed its culture to enable both.

What can the UK's mature social enterprises delivering public services, and those who commission and invest in them, learn from Suara's approach? What can Suara learn from the experience and innovation of the UK's mature social enterprises, co-operatives, mutuals, leisure trusts, employee-owned businesses and trading charities involved in public service delivery?



While E3M has organised several events, webinars and talks involving Suara members, this learning exchange broke new ground. E3M members in Belfast, Birmingham, Bristol, Liverpool, Manchester and London, delivering services across the UK, hosted 23 members of Suara over three days in October 2023. Then in November, 25 UK social enterprise leaders, social investors and E3M partners visited Suara in Barcelona and some of its services in Catalonia.

The exchange has been an inspiration to all parties. Participants – whose organisations are driven by purpose, and already exemplary in their delivery – gained new ideas, were stimulated to consider new approaches to addressing challenges, and returned hungry to embed innovation into their work. How? This short report and accompanying suite of video interviews reveal some of the key learning points.

**Jonathan Bland**  
E3M

**The exchange “allowed us to learn about other realities, experiences, ways of working or how they implement innovation and technology to offer better support.”**

**Jordi Picas,**  
*Director of Innovation,  
Suara Cooperativa*



Scan the QR code or click the link to watch a short video featuring Jonathan and Jordi: <https://youtu.be/OI4ZCzDOZLY>

# Immersive reality rooms

Many E3M delegates described visiting one of Suara's immersive reality rooms as a highlight of the exchange.

The co-operative has immersive reality rooms in Barcelona, Amposta and Olot; it uses them to improve the wellbeing and physical, emotional, psychological and cognitive health of the people it serves. Suara showed us its immersive reality room in its headquarters in Glòries, Barcelona, used for a wide range of activities, including:

- **cognitive and physical stimulation programs for the elderly** users of Suara's day care and residential centres
- **emotional wellbeing sessions with young people** who access Suara's educational action residential centres
- **mindfulness training and coaching** for Suara **employees**, to support their emotional wellbeing

Suara is also part of a pilot study with **Consorci Hospitalari de Terrassa** to evaluate how **virtual reality** can be used **to improve the mental health and wellbeing** of patients.

Suara's project to apply innovation and technology to social challenges, especially in the health, welfare and care sectors, involves training its workers in how to apply immersive reality in therapeutic and socio-educational sessions for children, adolescents and young people.

Immersive reality "makes it possible to simulate real environments to live experiences through which people receive stimuli that can help them to maintain physical health, emotional wellbeing through mindfulness sessions, prevent cognitive degeneration, and can become a tool to help overcome migratory grief," says Natàlia Alonso, head of immersive and virtual reality at Suara Cooperativa.



**“That’s something we’ll need to think about, how we work with children outside of the home rather than all being inside the home, and looking at those immersion rooms, which I think are fantastic for young people and for adults and parents.”**

**Helen Brown,**  
Bryson Care



Scan the QR code or click the link to watch a short video featuring Helen: [https://youtu.be/fJU\\_tGJ9Y7o](https://youtu.be/fJU_tGJ9Y7o)



# Innovation in elderly care

**Suara provides person-centred home care, medical and social care services to elderly people as part of its accompaniment to people during the whole life cycle. E3M delegates visited:**

- SAD Barcelona, a Home Care Service which provides personalised support with household and personal needs; palliative, home health and hospital at home care; and innovative teleassistance monitoring systems.

- Habitatge gent gran Camí Antic, purpose-designed housing for elderly people, where we also learned about the 'Vincles BCN' project.
- Residència Dovela, a residential and day centre with large interior spaces, terraces and a garden, equipped to offer maximum wellbeing to the people served.

**“So many impressive things at Suara: the participation of workers, the person-centric care. One thing that really stood out was the innovation...they deliver some of the best care services I’ve seen whilst retaining that co-operative model.”**

**Daniel Monaghan,**  
*The Co-operative Party*

Vincles BCN’s tablet-based software enables elderly people to break social isolation by building and maintaining contact with trusted circles: family, friends, care workers, volunteers. The project “combines new technology with attention to people” and secured first prize in a Bloomberg Philanthropies’ initiative.

Suara participated in the development of the app, designed for and with users to reflect their priorities and needs. Its easy-to-use, bespoke interface also links elderly people with others living in the same area, enabling in-person meetups supported by the Suara team.



Scan the QR code or click the link to watch a short video featuring Danny: <https://youtu.be/eoKNMT-0b-k>

# Children and young people

## E3M delegates visited services managed by Suara in Figueres and Girona:

- The Lilaina Municipal Nursery School. An open, welcoming and innovative centre, which offers 73 places for children aged 4 months to 3 years and their families, supporting them in the education of their children.
- The Mar i Cel nursery school. Its pedagogy is based on experimentation, play, music and psychomotor skills. Boys and girls can participate in activities which promote growth and learning and the school involves parents in their children's education.
- The Centre Obert De Girona, a socio-educational intervention service aimed at children and adolescents aged 3 to 18 and their families. Its purpose is to support, stimulate and enhance children's and young people's development, socialisation, learning and recreation. Its services are all based on a person-centred care model; it offers individual, group, and family work, activities and direct care.

E3M's delegates were struck by:

- How the services operate with different staff:child ratios
- Early intervention
- The person-centred model



**“In the UK when children go into the care system, every word is institution, unit, foster care, but none of those words were used within any of these services. It was all about children having an anchor, children having a home, even in the nurseries, it has to be home from home. Children's sense of belonging and ownership and responsibility is being developed here.”**

**Rachele Parker,**  
Operations Manager, LEYF



Scan the QR code or click the link to watch a short video featuring Rachele: <https://youtu.be/MB20o-Nm8Ls>



**“It's been good to understand how they ensure the needs of all of the children in their care are met. In the UK it's a 1:4 ratio, whereas here it's a 1:8 ratio. So it was interesting to see how they do that safely. It was great to see how open their spaces are. There's lots I'll be taking back in terms of how we deploy our resources and link with our families. And they can understand how we support children's emotions, how we do intergenerational care, how we link the older and the younger generations together. It's been a useful opportunity to get together and collaborate, really valuable.”**

**Bethany Patrick,**  
Head of Educational Excellence,  
The Midcounties Co-operative



Scan the QR code or click the link to watch a short video featuring Bethany: <https://youtu.be/YIU05s-Gu74>

# Supporting children and young people at risk of exclusion

**E3M delegates visited services managed by Suara in Amposta, Tarragona, including a residential reception centre; a Care and educational housing service for young people between 16 and 18; and a Child Development and Early Care Centre (CDIAP).**

“We went to Tarragona and looked at settings where young people aged 18 to 21 were living independently after leaving care. And we went to a facility we’d call a children’s home, where 10 young people aged 16 to 18 were living with supervision from staff. Then we went to a centre where they would provide treatments like physiotherapy and psychology to young children, age zero to six who maybe had been presenting with delays in speech or development.

“It was absolutely fascinating. I really enjoyed meeting the young people themselves in their settings. And the passion of the staff came across the most, the ones that are supporting those young people in their placements and helping them to live independently, supporting them with getting work and learning how to budget. You could see a real connection between the young people and the staff. It was almost like they were family.

“I suppose for me the learning would be around how we work with children maybe outside of the home rather than all being inside the home; and looking at those immersion rooms [see page 4] which I think are fantastic for young people and for adults and parents.

“And the trauma therapy. Suara seem to be leading the way, and they’re providing trauma therapy to the whole family. And it’s how they practically do it. We’ve seen the room, we’ve seen the setup. It was really good to see it in action.

“From speaking to the people from Suara who came to visit us, we realised that all of our families are suffering from the same type of issues in the same order...So it was very interesting to be able to learn from them how they support people, and hopefully they learnt something from us about how we support people...Our staff are really committed and passionate, Suara’s are exactly the same.”



**“I think for me as well, the fact that they’re using the innovation and the technology, that is a big thing that we can learn from.”**

**Helen Brown,**  
Bryson Care



Scan the QR code or click the link to watch a short video featuring Helen:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJU\\_tGJ9Y7o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJU_tGJ9Y7o)



# Homelessness

**There are around 25,000 homeless people in Catalonia. Suara is committed to a homelessness model of care which guarantees everyone access to a home as a safe and intimate space, to which everyone has a right. Suara currently offers “housing response” to 2,913 people in Barcelona. E3M delegates visited:**

- Equipament Integral Zona Franca, a homelessness centre managed by Suara for the past 15 years which houses 100 men, to learn about the “Primer la LLar” (Home First) project.
- Centre de Primera Acol·lida Sarrià, a centre which recently increased its capacity to house 100 women (formerly 41) after Suara’s refurbishment and redevelopment quadrupled its size in order to implement a care model more focused on the person and living spaces with more intimacy. The facility offers daily meals and showers, community activities and a therapeutic garden.
- El Centre Sara de Sabadell, a 15-bed centre which has been accompanying homeless people affected by HIV for nearly 30 years and designs individual support plans to enable people to recover autonomy by developing their capacities, skills, personal and community resources.

The visits showcased:

- Suara manages several homelessness centres which offer support, services and socio-educational care to the people they serve. Its work to reduce inequalities and the social inclusion of vulnerable groups is central to its homelessness model of care, which goes further than a purely welfare intervention.
- Suara is committed to innovative models focused on access to housing, such as Housing First, based on offering a stable home to people in chronic exclusion. It finds this model efficient and effective, with positive effects on people’s lives.
- The co-operative continually trains its workers to offer the best possible support to those who are at risk of social exclusion or vulnerability.
- Collaboration with local government and other agencies is crucial: alliances are essential to be able to offer people experiencing homelessness better support.
- We were struck by Suara’s person-centred approach and the quality of its facilities and care: “The value they attach to people who are homeless, raising the bar on the quality of accommodation provided as well as the support programmes their staff offer,” (Charlie Mack, CEO, Cranstoun).



# Big Life's evolution in community service revolution

**The Big Life Group traces its roots back to early-nineties Manchester, when people living in the inner-city communities of Hulme and Moss Side were fed up waiting for public services to support them and started to develop their own solutions – needle exchange, family support, play schemes and self-help groups.**

At the time, services for the poorest, most under-served and most in need in society had the longest waiting lists, the worst quality buildings and the least care. Big Life determined to be different: to give people first class support, tailored to what they really wanted.

Today the £20m+ turnover organisation delivers services including supported accommodation, education, drug and alcohol recovery, health and wellbeing, family support, early years care, talking therapies, and mental and physical health support. It has been recognised in the

Sunday Times' best not-for-profit organisations to work for.

Suara delegates visited The Zion Centre in Hulme, Manchester, one of the community centres where Big Life began. Today it continues to create opportunities for people to change their lives and hosts a range of self-help groups, activities, community services and social enterprises and charities.

We discussed Zion's Community Café, which seeks to reduce food waste and offer low-cost meals, and sits "somewhere between a food bank, a supermarket and a regular

café." Delegates also learned more about Big Life's **Be Well** social prescribing service, its **Achieve** substance misuse service and **Life Lines** project, as well as the Big Issue.

Suara delegates praised their visit to the Zion Centre as "a very rich, full experience because everybody learned from each other. And it's very interesting to see how, in other countries, they work in some similar projects, but with different situations, or help people in different ways. We can learn from this."



Scan the QR code or click the link to watch a short video featuring Suara delegates discussing their visit to Big Life Group: <https://youtu.be/TAIHcAo0BRc>

# Driving social mobility, raising aspirations, opening pathways

**Suara's Marta Julián Pascual and Sergi Fortià Darder visited Career Connect for an insight into how organisations in the UK's social economy support young people, adults and offenders into employment, education and training.**

Marta and Sergei visited St Joseph's Bike Project in Manchester, which helps improve men's employability skills; the Achieve project, focussed on a trauma-informed approach at HMP Hindley; and the Greater Manchester Employment, Training, Education project.

"We particularly enjoyed learning how Career Connect uses digitisation across its services, seeing how their staff use data in their everyday work with communities, and discussing how to apply digitalisation, innovation and technology in social work situations." says **Marta Pascual**.

Suara delegates also visited:

- **Big Life's** Zion centre (see page 9)
- **Bryson Charitable Group's** River's Edge headquarters, home to services spanning family support, domiciliary care, skills, education and employment; the Bryson

Energy Play Resource and the Grosvenor Community Centre in Belfast; and Lisburn Sure Start

- **Catch 22's** Community Links Barking Community Hub, a free advice service covering debt, consumer and employment law, housing, welfare and benefits
- **Cranstoun's** Here4YOUth Dudley Young People's Wellbeing and Substance Use Service
- **Locala**, to learn about integrating health and social care services in Kirklees across hospital discharge, urgent and short term care
- **London Early Years Foundation's** Marsham Street Nursery
- **Midcounties Co-operative's** Little Pioneers Maida Vale
- **PossAbilities CIC**, which has developed a magnificent community asset for and with

people with learning disabilities

- **P3** projects in Hillingdon, Notting Hill and Wolverhampton
- **Provide CIC's** Essex Wellbeing Service, showcasing innovation; and Fern Lodge and Kestrel House: person-centred integrated and urgent care
- A **Quo Vadis Trust** supported housing project in London
- **Sirona Care and Health CIC** projects in Bristol
- A **Staywell's** day service centre, supporting older people to live independently in the community

"There are things that we share that are the same in Catalonia, in London. It's really important to get ideas from different countries...the idea was to know what we can improve here in our country and what we can learn." Suara visitors **Núria and Marta**.



Scan the QR code or click the link to watch a short video featuring Suara visitors:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krzCm9ogj0Q>

# Participation: a path, not a goal

## For-purpose organisations in Catalonia and the UK exist in different operating environments. How do we navigate them?

E3M delegates explored Suara's history, business model, values, priorities and social participation model. We also learned about legislation, regulation and government support for co-operatives in Catalonia and Spain, and the strong participatory, co-operative ecosystem in the region and country.

Suara's "embedding of the participation and social economy model of care is just amazing and something we should bottle," says **Mary Lewis**, Chief Nursing Officer, Sirona Care & Health. "The favourite phrase I've heard here was 'Participation is deciding to do it and then doing it.' In the UK we talk a lot about integration...in Catalonia, they've got it hard-wired into the law, to work in a co-operative way for the benefit of social value."

The UK's social investment market has evolved and adapted. E3M's delegation included participants from Better Society Capital:

"There are things that we in the UK can implement and learn from the way the system works here, and things that people from Barcelona can learn from the UK in the way that policy works. As investors, it's important to understand what the real needs of the individual are. By understanding it better we can maximize the way that our money is invested into delivering something really impactful."

**Carolina Pinzon**,  
*Investment Manager,*  
*Better Society Capital*



Scan the QR code or click the link to watch a short video featuring Mary: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFQE6iplkOs>



Scan the QR code or click the link to watch a short video featuring Carolina: <https://www.youtu.be/rJ1l-zP81NY>

## What next?

### Participants have embedded learning into their organisations and we look forward to continued collaboration and knowledge exchange.

- E3M members have continued liaising with Suara to follow up learning and action points around innovation and participation
- Participants said: "I found the experience brilliant, the team at Suara put in so much effort and made us feel so welcome. I'd definitely be up for it again and would recommend" and "I loved having this opportunity as it provided me with a greater insight into practice and gave me an opportunity to reflect on our own practices"
- This has been part of an ongoing collaboration and we look forward to deepening our relationships and learning together
- We're keen that policymakers and commissioners learn from this exchange and can offer extensive evidence, support and guidance about accelerating the **social enterprise difference** in public service delivery
- Contact Jonathan Bland at E3M for more about our work: [www.e3m.org.uk](http://www.e3m.org.uk)



E3M is an initiative of Social Business International Ltd.  
Company number 7007166.  
Registered office: 8 Coldbath Square, London, EC1R 5HL.

[www.e3m.org.uk](http://www.e3m.org.uk)

Scan the QR code or click the link to  
watch our compilation of films and  
interviews with learning exchange  
participants from E3M members and  
Suara: <https://youtu.be/iiokP8D5lak>

**E3M**

**SK**  
STONE KING

Buzzacott

**Z**  
ZURICH®

social  
business  
international