



One of the last jobs to do to tidy up from our FuseCiC18 conference has been to find a home for a six foot cardboard cut-out of a Phone Box. We bought it as a prop, initially to promote the event to potential delegates and then to stand on the conference stage behind our keynote speaker, Stephen Fear, The Phone Box Millionaire.

Aged just 15, Stephen used the red phone box on the council estate he grew up on in Bristol in the 1960s to start a business that would eventually see him become a hugely successful entrepreneur. On that basis buying a six-foot cardboard phone box cut out seemed an obvious thing to do!

We've grown quite attached to the Phone Box, standing in our office for quite a few months. Everyone that's come to visit us has asked the same question, "isn't that a.....?" and we've responded with a smile and a snap shot of Stephen's phone box story.

Apart from arousing the curiosity of visitors, the Phone Box has become to us, a bit of a metaphor for the conference itself.

Stephen tells his story much better than we can - essentially, aged 15, he wanted to make a call to a business in America to convince them to let him sell their product in the UK. But he'd never used a phone before, let alone made a transatlantic call. To his aid came a friendly telephone operator – in those days you needed an operator to connect you. This particular lady helped Stephen to make the connection and the rest, as they say is history. Stephen is still in touch with the operator to this day, she became a family friend. Without that little bit of help things may have turned out very differently.

And that, for us, reflects the theme of our conference – sometimes people need just a little bit of help or support to ignite their ambitions – social enterprise can offer people positive interventions: upskilling through work placements, volunteering, training or education; improving access to childcare; offering support with transport. All this can help to remove barriers to opportunity and open up previously closed routes back into work for those who are furthest from the labour market.

Something as simple as loaning someone smart clothes for an interview – or helping them make a phone call - can be a big step towards securing employment and changing lives.

So at Fuse we are really thrilled that Stephen has asked if he can give our Phone Box a new home, at the Fear Group offices in Bristol. And every day it will remind him of how that little bit of help from a telephone operator made a real difference and set him on his way to a very successful business career.