Case study

How a blank sheet of paper and 53 minutes working with the Viable System Model (VSM) kept Shepton Mallet Community Bookshop open for ten more years

Dr Lesley Rowan

- Shepton Mallet is small market town in Somerset in South-West England
- population 11,000
- industrial since the Romans
- key industries have been wool and more recently cheese and cider

- Shepton Mallet Community Bookshop is a volunteer-run social enterprise that opened in 2019
- People donate books
- The bookshop volunteers clean them and present them well
- People buy them at affordable prices
- The surplus after running costs is donated to local groups and projects that will benefit the people of Shepton Mallet

Feeback from review conversations with volunteers

"It's wonderful and everyone is full of praise."

"This gives us company and community. It's great."

"I think it's brilliant. I love it."

"It's a lifesaver for me. I come out and see friends. I buy too many of the books though!"

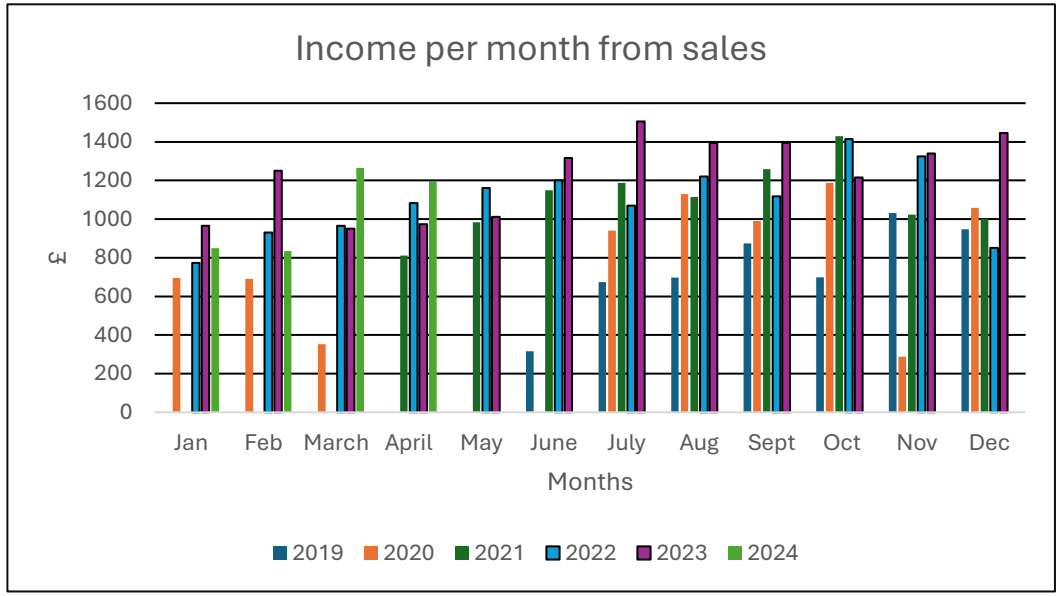
"I love it."

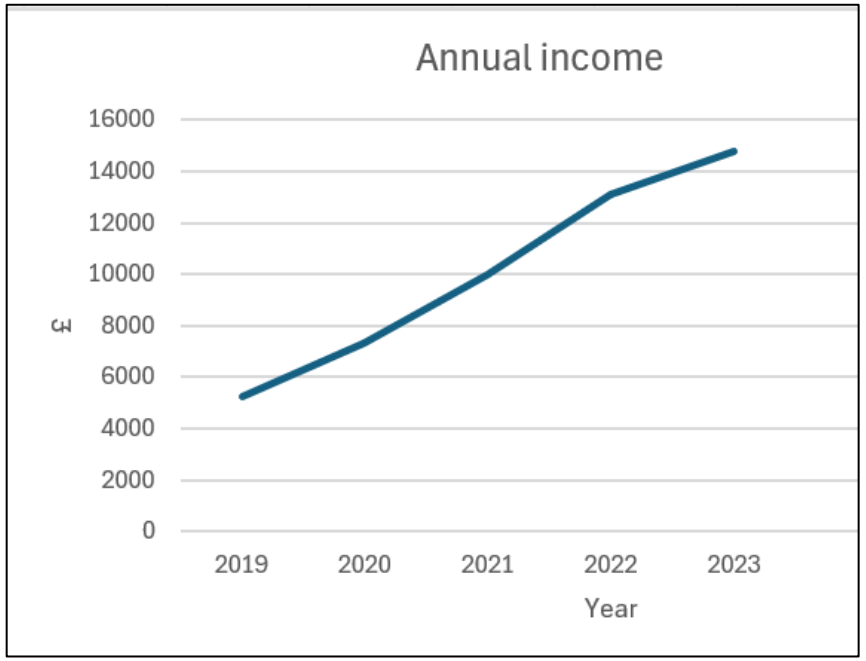
"It's lovely in here."

"I think the atmosphere is lovely. I do other groups but this is the only time I actually do something and I do enjoy it."

Despite interruptions due to Covid which meant the community bookshop had periods of closure or limited trading income has continued to rise

2019 – 2023 income from sales totaled £50,400





2019-2023 Shepton Mallet Community Bookshop donated £25,000, in amounts of £250 - £1000 , to support 22 projects across a range of locally valued activities

Learning & Literacy

- Reading books and library resources for four local schools
- Funds for a publishing project involving local children focusing on how they helped save their local library
- IT and learning equipment for a Citizen's Advice young people's education project
- An inclusive 'literary festival'

Inclusive arts projects and festivals

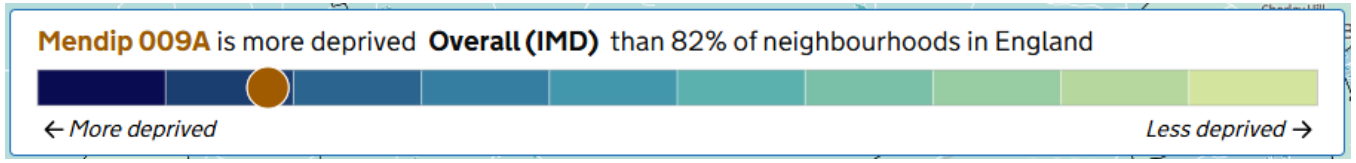
- An arts and drama festival for children
- Materials for three community art projects to support wide participation
- Funds for the Snowdrop Festival

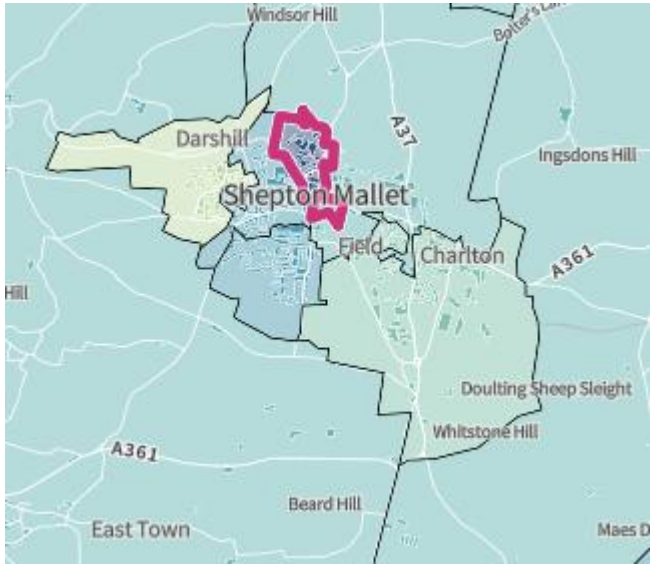
Support for those who need it

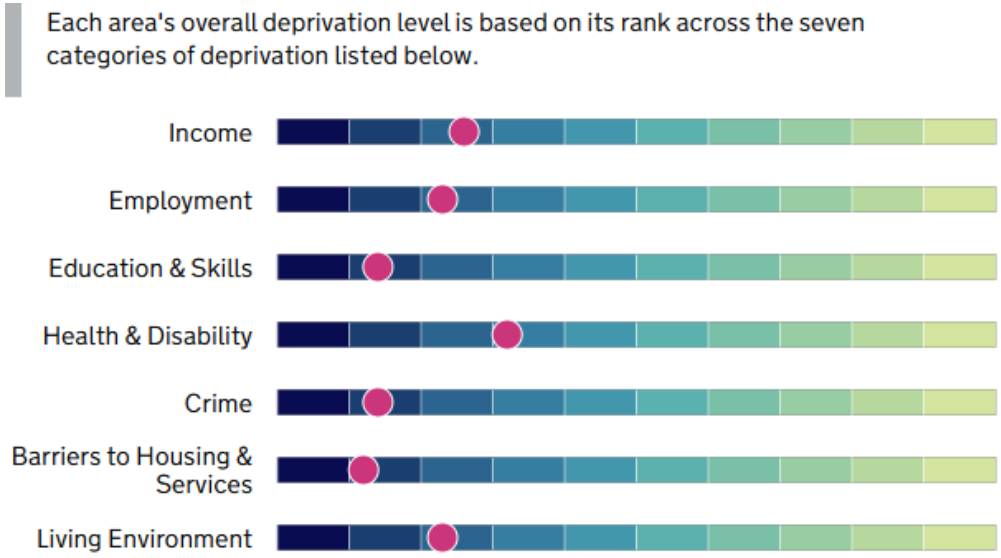
- Youth worker provision around mental health and around eating disorders
- Youth worker provision via a local church
- Christmas presents for young people in supported accommodation
- Utilities costs for a local rehabilitation project
- Running costs for a bereavement service
- Running costs for an animal rescue and rehoming service
- Funds to buy items for the Foodbank
- Infrastructure for the Community Fridge

Why are these activities especially valued locally?

Shepton Mallet Community Bookshop is in the oldest part of the town, a neighbourhood recognised by government as facing significant deprivation



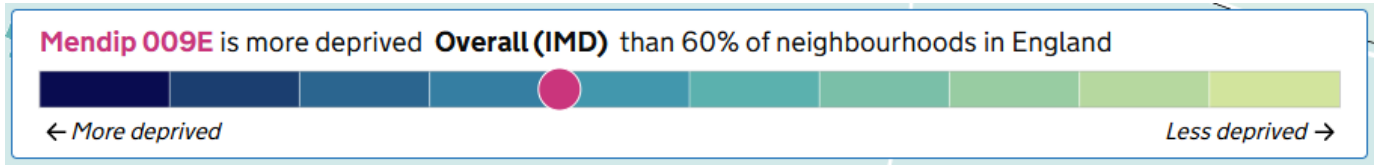


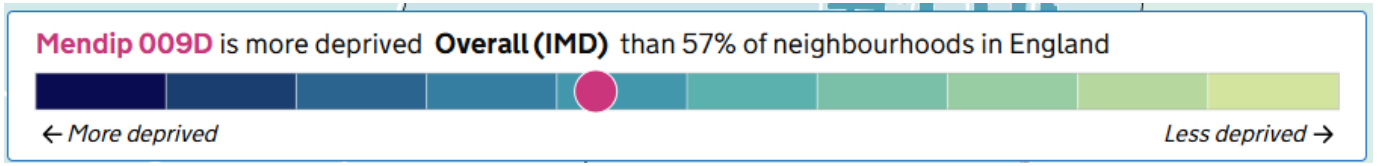


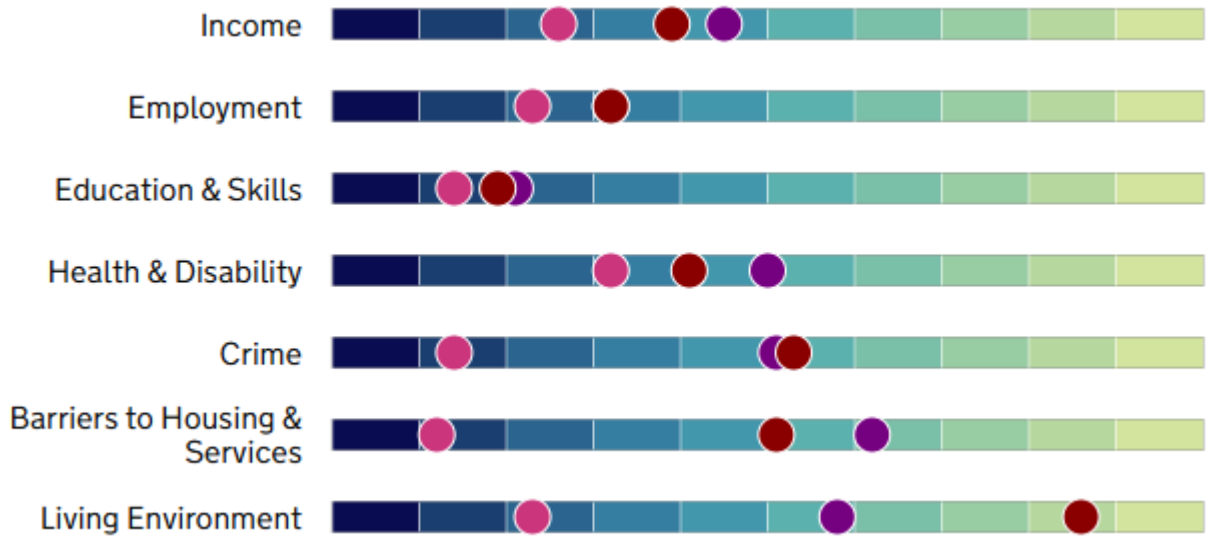
Only 8% of neighbourhoods in Somerset are more deprived

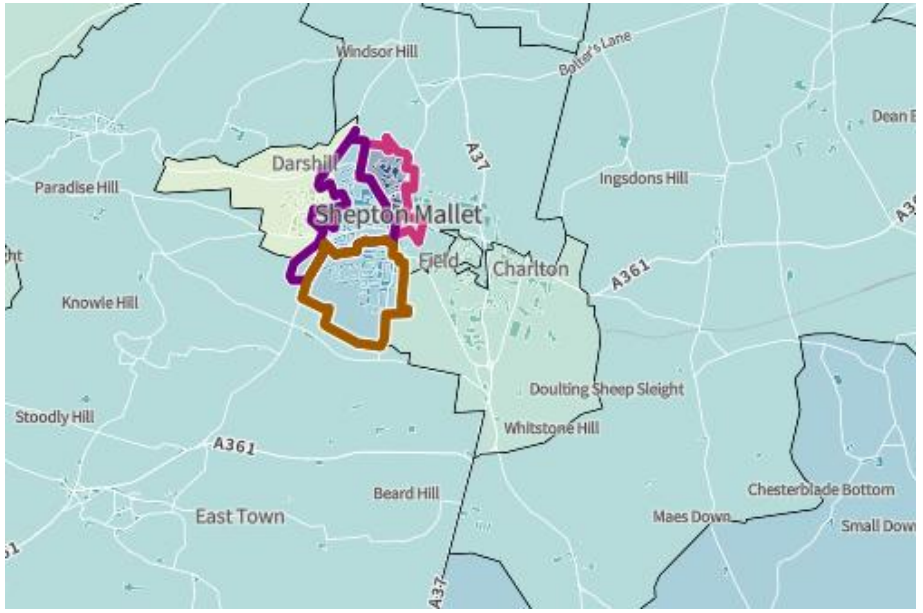
Source: English Indices of Deprivation
https://deprivation.communities.gov.uk/

The two closest neighbourhoods are less deprived, but are still below the England averages overall, and sharing significant issues around education and skills









April 2024

"I think we will need to shut the bookshop in September, too much has changed, and I am not sure I can lead it anymore” Sheena

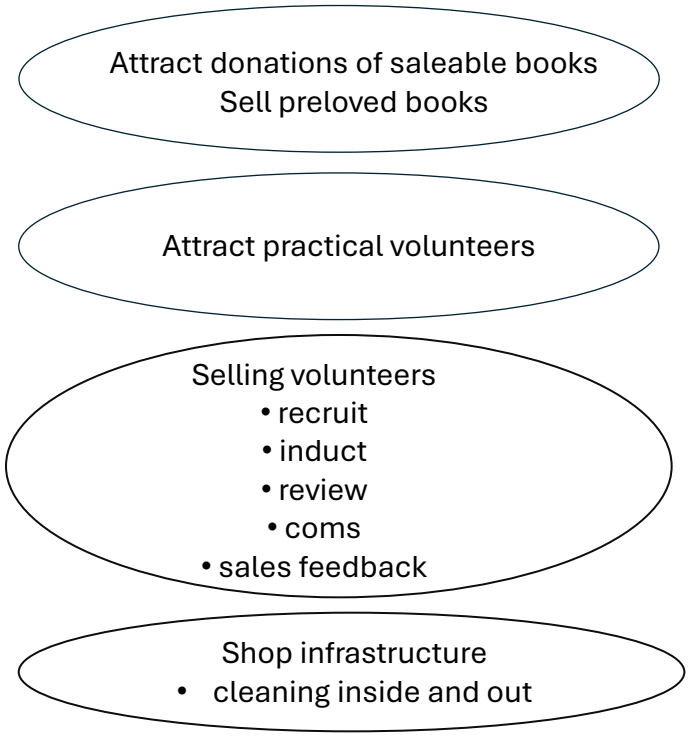
I proposed a coffee and using ‘something I work with’ to explore what had changed and the impacts this was having on Sheena

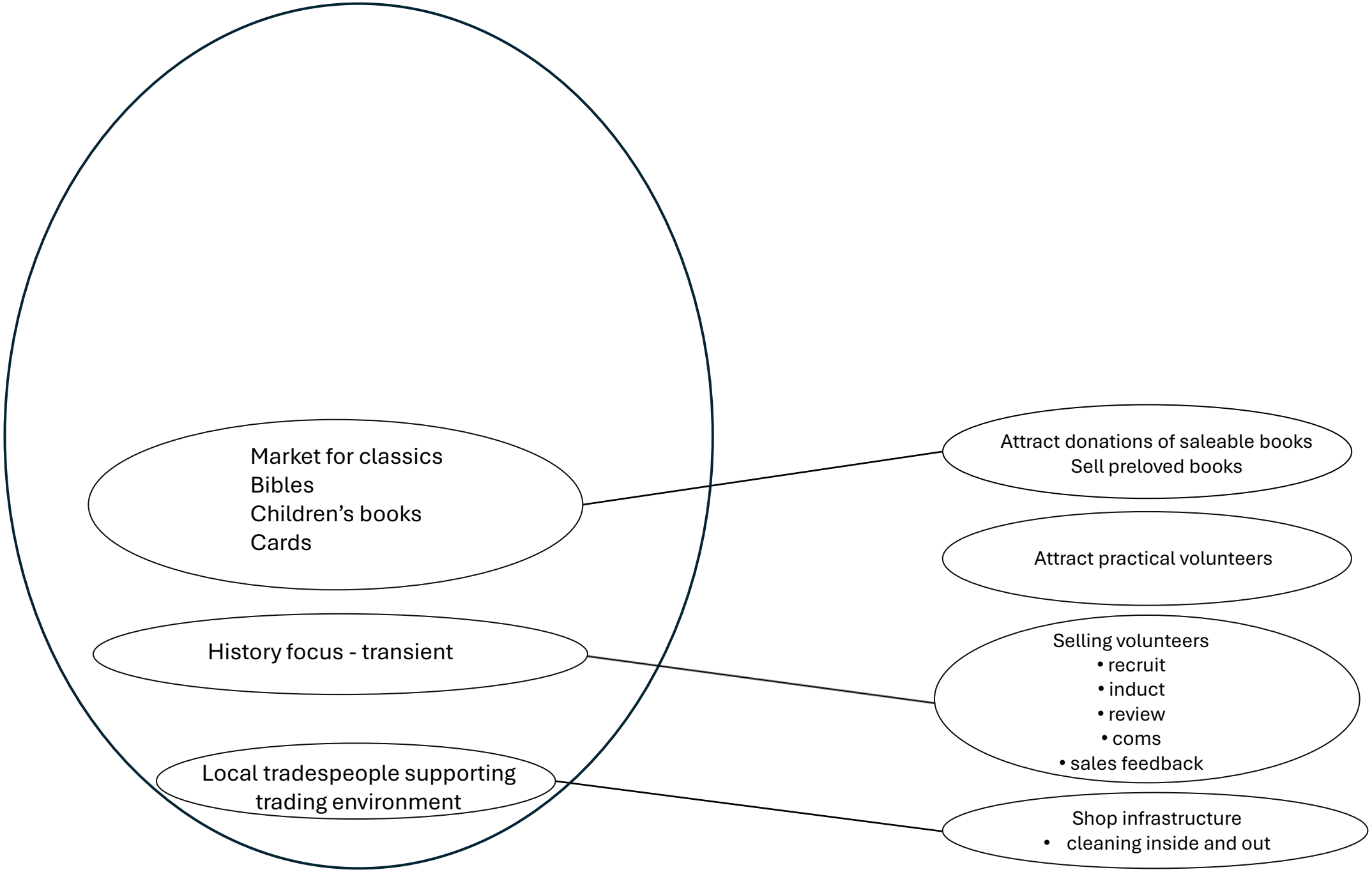
- I brought a drawing pad, a soft pencil, and an eraser to the coffee shop .

- We both recognized that I was also bringing my systems thinking practitioner experience to our meeting.

- I have lived in Shepton, in the old part of town, for over 20 years and have run social enterprises there too

- My plan was to start with a blank page because Sheena seemed quite overwhelmed. This was about listening and structuring, not about teaching new theory


Attract donations of saleable books
Sell preloved books
Attract practical volunteers
Selling volunteers
• recruit
• induct
• review
• coms
• sales feedback
Shop infrastructure
• cleaning inside and out


Market for classics
Bibles
Children’s books
Cards
History focus - transient
Local tradespeople supporting trading environment
Attract donations of saleable books
Sell preloved books
Attract practical volunteers
Selling volunteers
• recruit
• induct
• review
• coms
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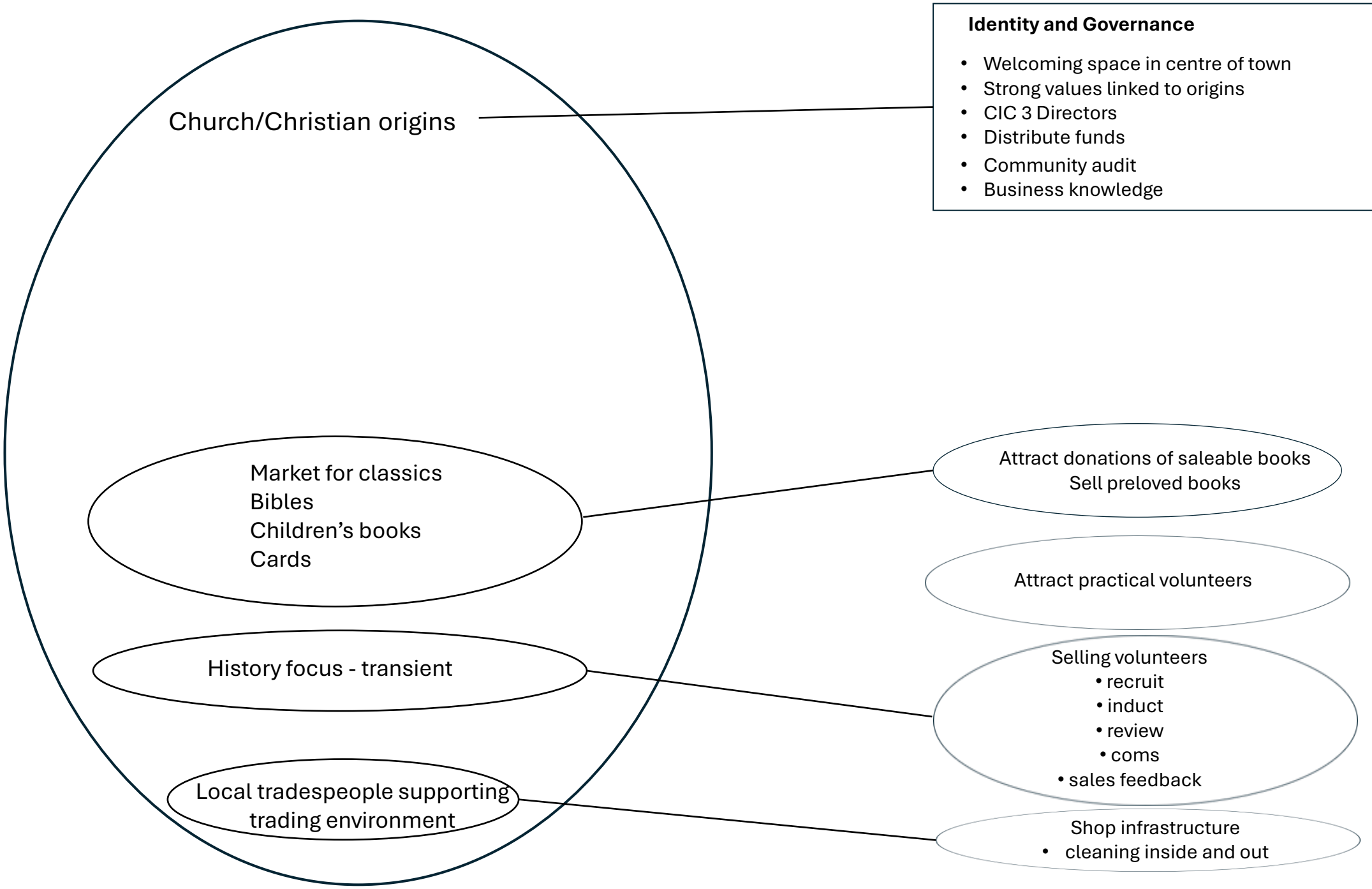
Shop infrastructure
• cleaning inside and out


Church/Christian origins
Identity and Governance
• Welcoming space in centre of town
• Strong values linked to origins
• CIC 3 Directors
• Distribute funds
• Community audit
• Business knowledge
Market for classics
Bibles
Children's books
Cards
Attract donations of saleable books
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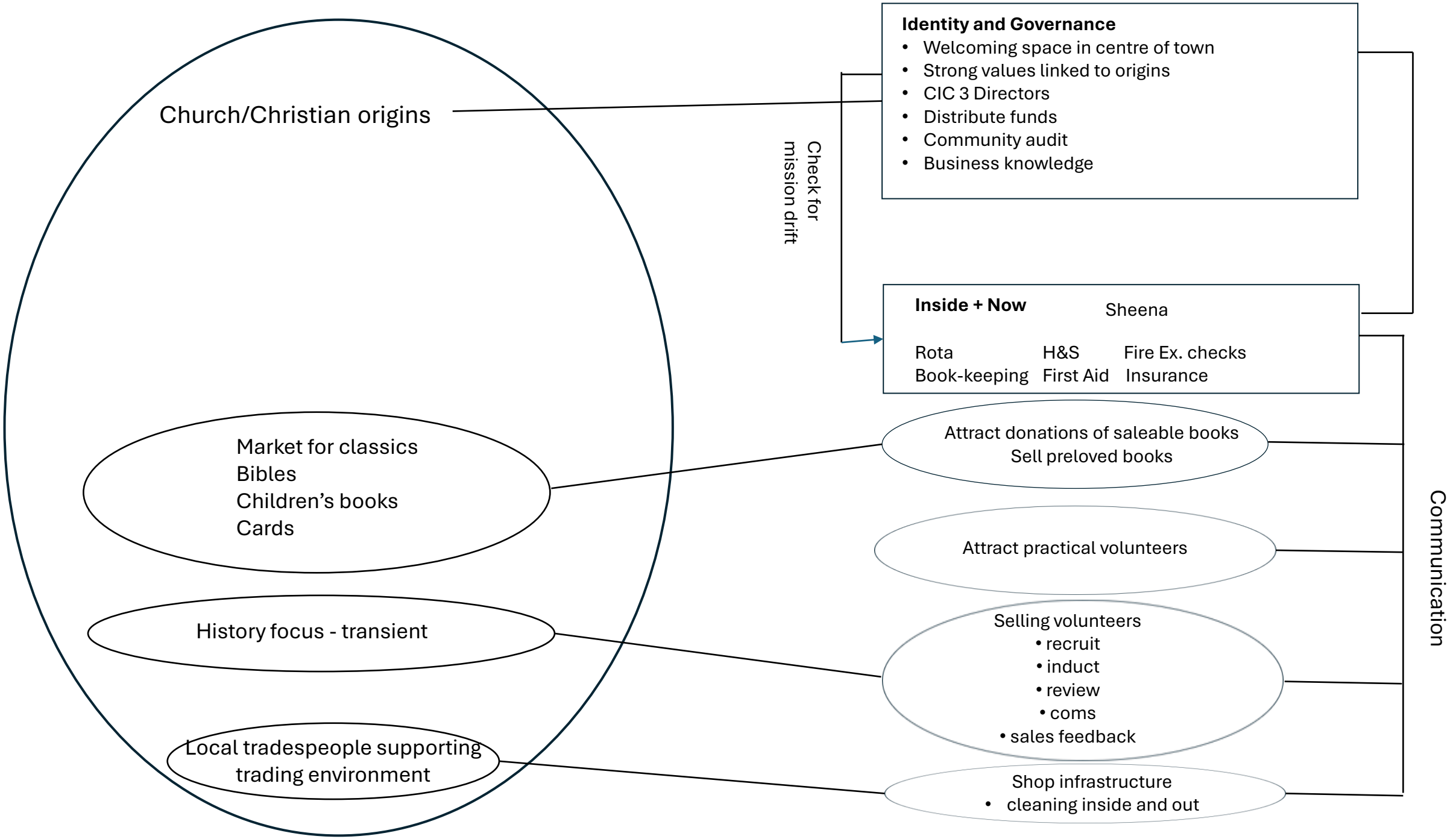
Church/Christian origins
Identity and Governance
• Welcoming space in centre of town
• Strong values linked to origins
• CIC 3 Directors
• Distribute funds
• Community audit
• Business knowledge
Check for mission drift
Inside + Now
Sheena
Rota
H&S
Fire Ex. checks
Book-keeping
First Aid
Insurance
Market for classics
Bibles
Children's books
Cards
Attract donations of saleable books
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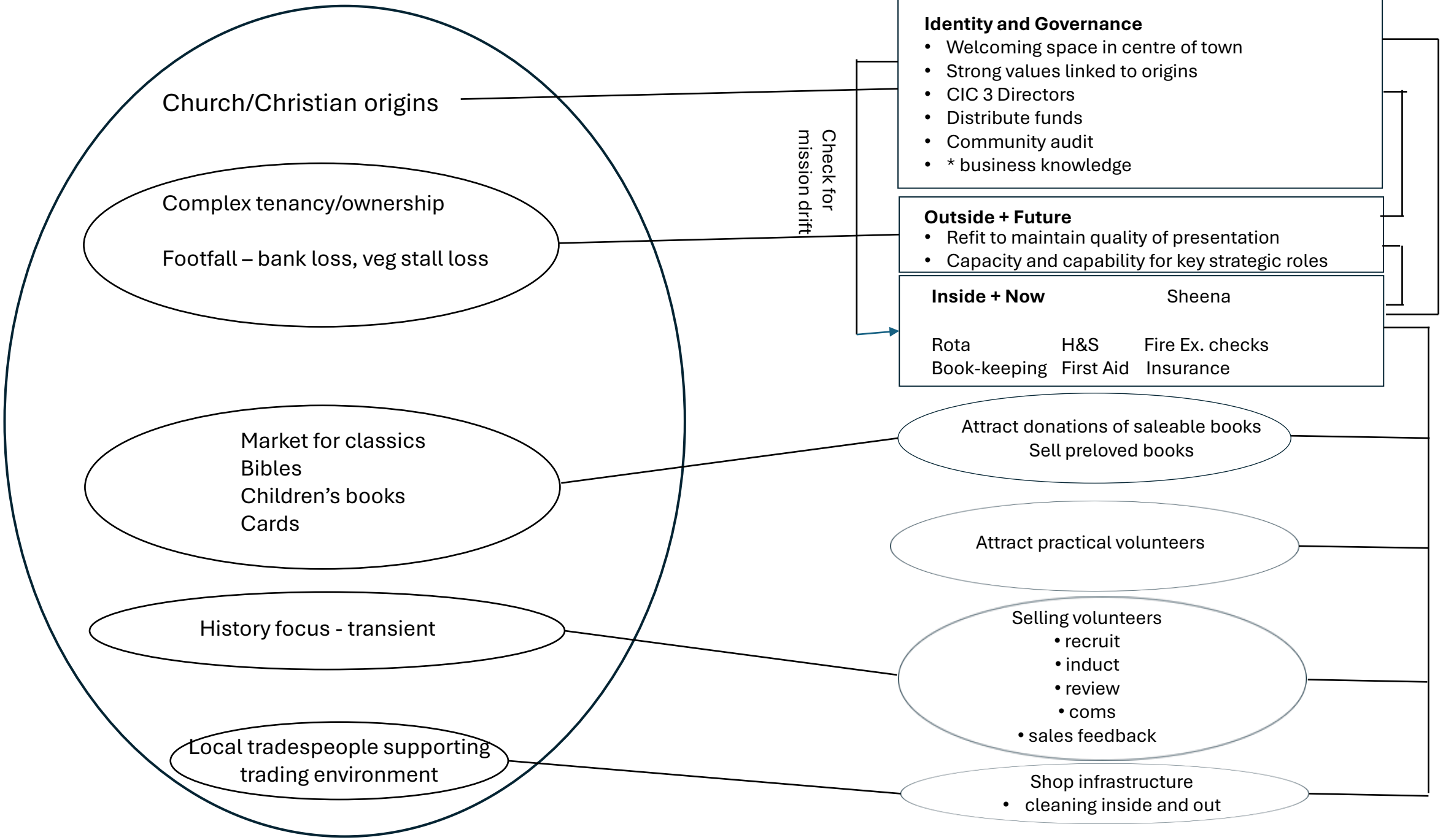
Local tradespeople supporting trading environment
Shop infrastructure
• cleaning inside and out
Communication


Church/Christian origins
Complex tenancy/ownership
Footfall – bank loss, veg stall loss
Market for classics
Bibles
Children's books
Cards
History focus - transient
Local tradespeople supporting trading environment
Check for mission drift
Identity and Governance
• Welcoming space in centre of town
• Strong values linked to origins
• CIC 3 Directors
• Distribute funds
• Community audit
• * business knowledge
Outside + Future
• Refit to maintain quality of presentation
• Capacity and capability for key strategic roles
Inside + Now
Sheena
Rota
H&S
Fire Ex. checks
Book-keeping
First Aid
Insurance
Attract donations of saleable books
Sell preloved books
Attract practical volunteers
Selling volunteers
• recruit
• induct
• review
• coms
• sales feedback
Shop infrastructure
• cleaning inside and out
Communication

Sheena took the VSM sketch

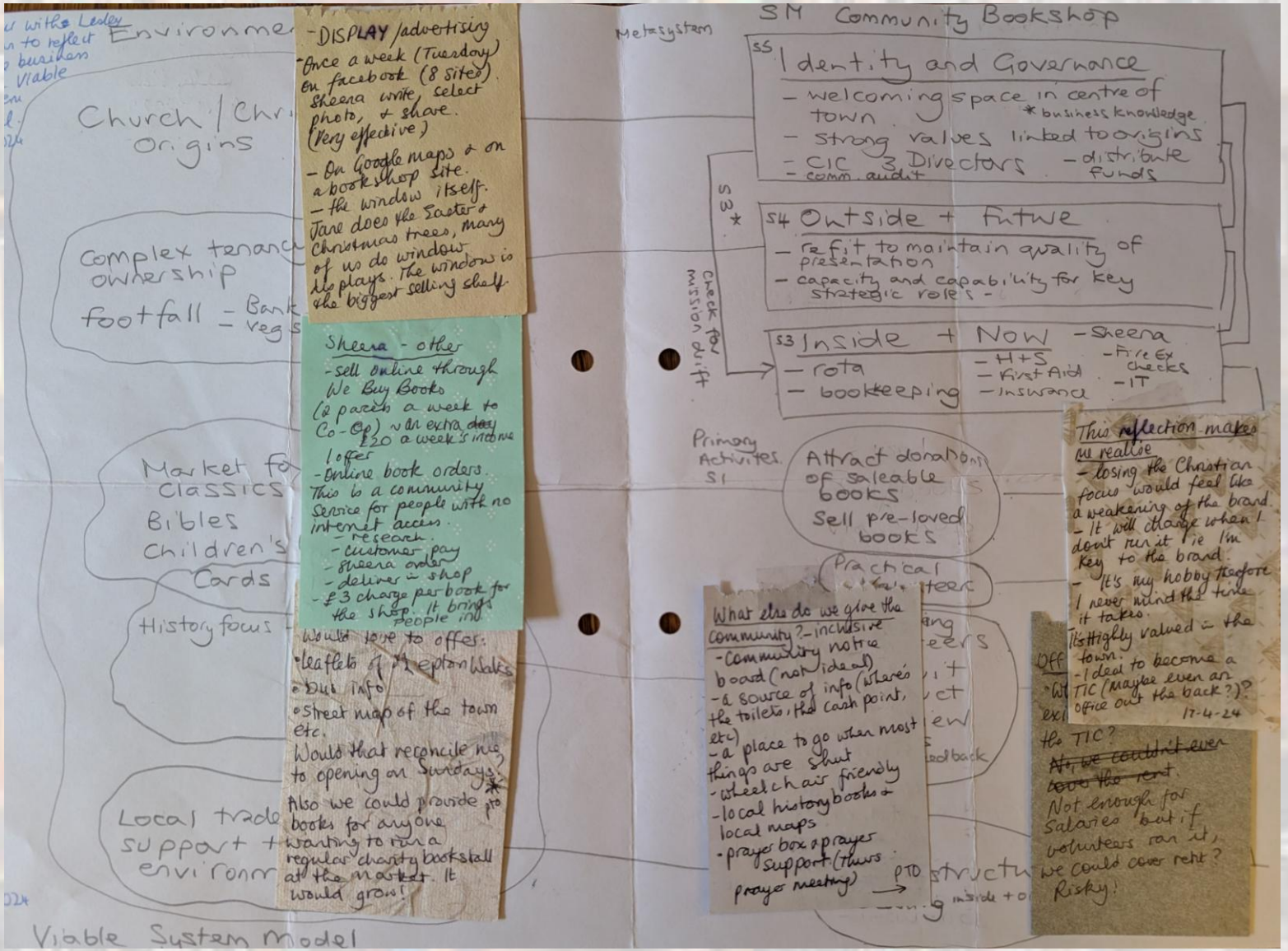
I went on holiday

Sheena annotated the diagram with additional thoughts

She identified

- a key new Director, a Town Councillor
- another new Director to take on
- a new contractor to collect books and pay for each load

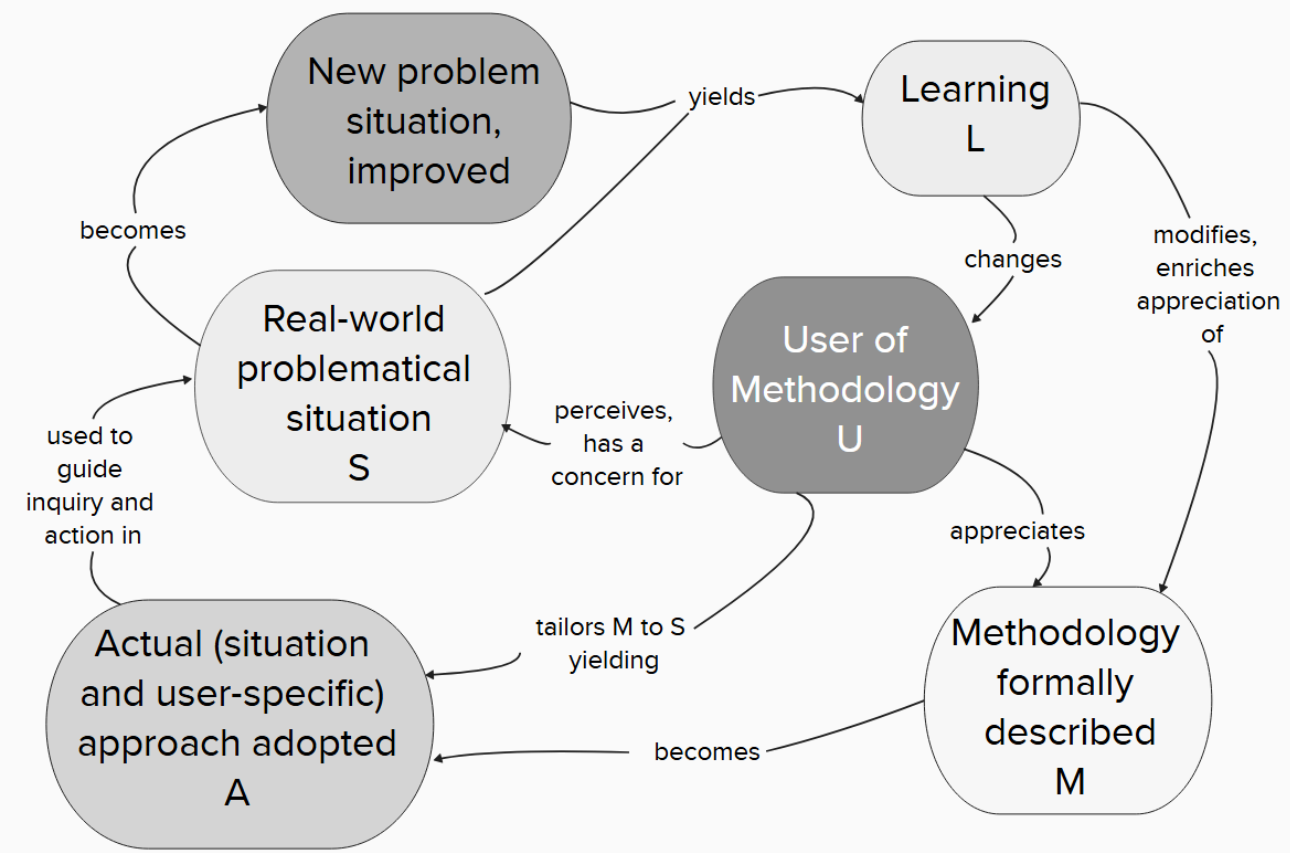
Before I was home Sheena announced on social media the bookshop would be staying open for another 5 years

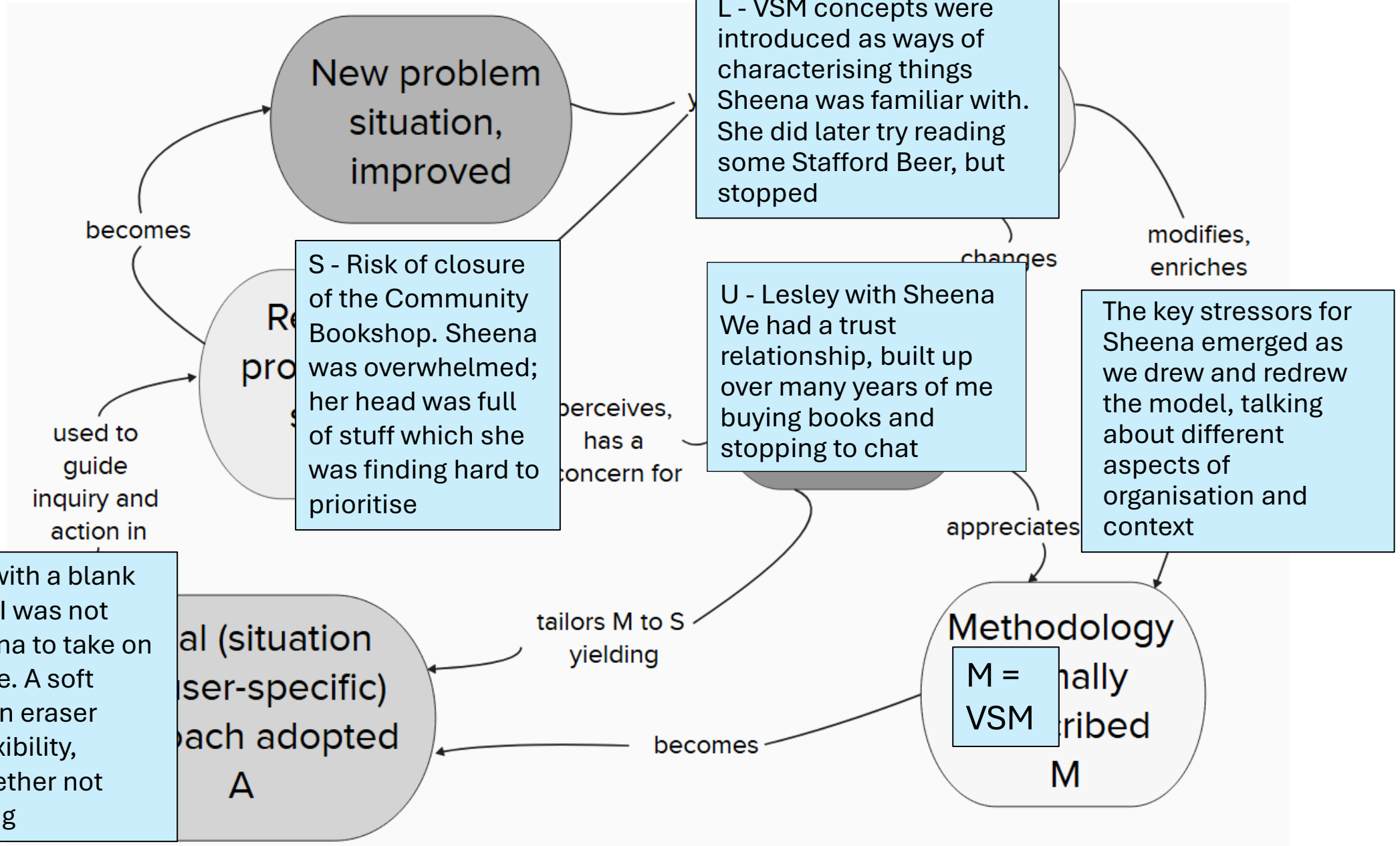


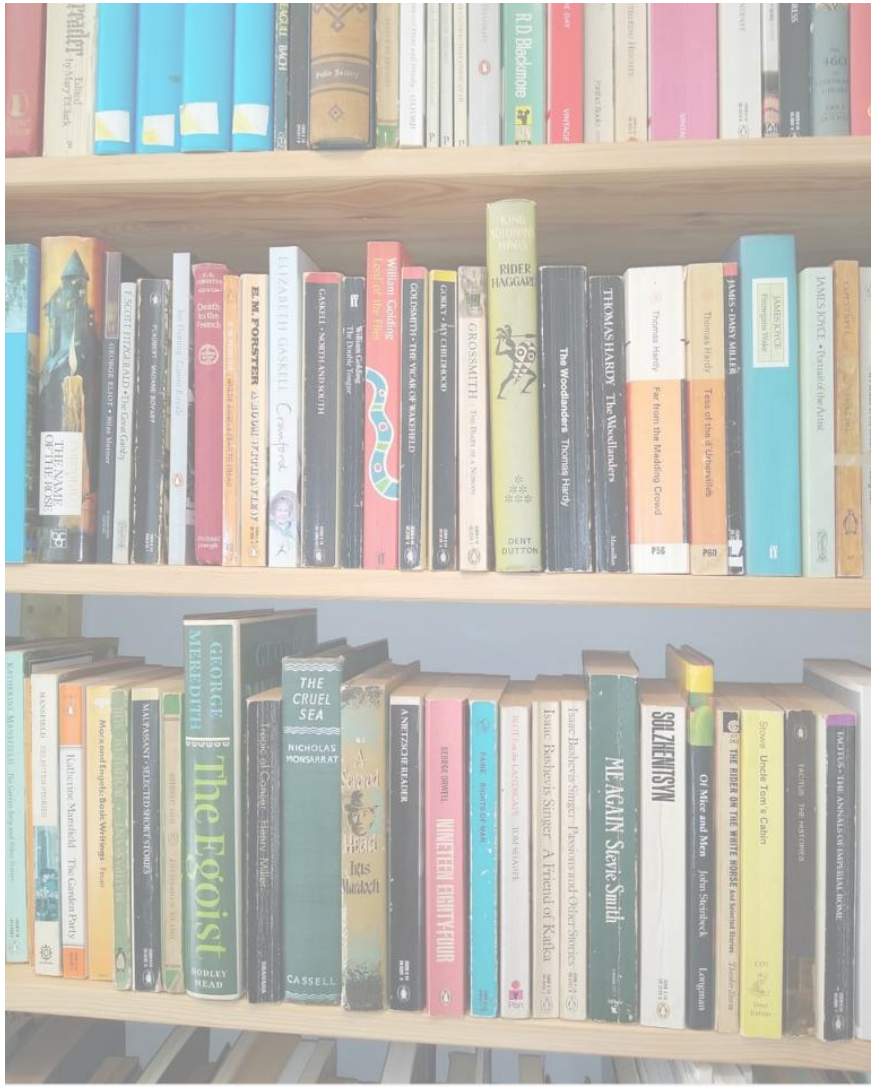
Critical reflection – why did 53 minutes of VSM starting with a blank page make such a difference?

LUMAS - Learning for a User by a Methodology-informed Approach to a Situation

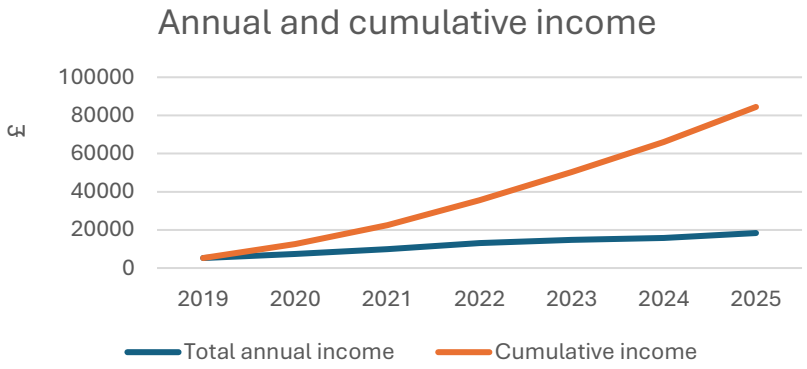
Based on Checkland & Poulter, 2020, p 208




New problem situation, improved
becomes
used to guide inquiry and action in
perceives, has a concern for
changes
modifies, enriches
appreciates
tailors M to S yielding
becomes
Methodology
M = VSM
L - VSM concepts were introduced as ways of characterising things Sheena was familiar with. She did later try reading some Stafford Beer, but stopped
S - Risk of closure of the Community Bookshop. Sheena was overwhelmed; her head was full of stuff which she was finding hard to prioritise
U - Lesley with Sheena We had a trust relationship, built up over many years of me buying books and stopping to chat
The key stressors for Sheena emerged as we drew and redrew the model, talking about different aspects of organisation and context
A - Starting with a blank page meant I was not asking Sheena to take on anything else. A soft pencil and an eraser provided flexibility, learning together not right or wrong



- This discussion highlighted
  - the tasks it was key for Sheena to do herself, particularly around support to the selling volunteers to sustain the identity of the Community Bookshop
  - the tasks it would be much better to seek out people to delegate to.
  - This felt like permission not to have to do everything and to work towards enjoying the contribution she is making to our community



- Since April 2024, the Community Bookshop has continued to thrive:
  - income from sales has increased each year, out pacing increases in costs
  - total donations for community benefit have risen to **£48,500**
  - **160,000 books** have been diverted from landfill to appreciative new owners
  - Volunteers continue to love being involved
- Sheena highlighted how her further reading and VSM-structured reflection has:
  - helped her to value the contribution she is making, through her support for all the volunteers, which is useful as not every day goes smoothly
  - encouraged her to reach out for help from others for more tasks
- "I'm so glad we didn't have to shut in 2024; I want to keep running the Community Bookshop through to 2034**. 15 years** from the start, God willing, because I am enjoying it so much".