CO-OPERATIVES UK

INNOVATIONS IN BUSINESS SUPPORT: A REVIEW

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report considers how state-provided business support in England has changed over recent decades and how it has both catalysed and responded to social innovation and a growing social economy.

Based on this historical analysis, the report draws out insights on various approaches to business development that can actively support communities facing the myriad economic and social challenges that have characterised areas of deprivation and decline.

There is a focus on business support models that are directed towards organisational forms associated with the generative economy, such as co-operatives, social enterprises and community businesses.

This report also acts as an important literature review to support wider place-based research associated with the Empowering Places programme. Empowering Places was a five-year initiative funded by Power to Change and delivered in partnership by Co-operatives UK, New Economics Foundation and the Centre for Local Economic Strategies. It worked with six community-rooted organisations to test the idea that kick-starting and nurturing networks of social businesses can actively tackle economic inequality in areas classed as the most deprived across England.

The programme worked with catalyst organisations in Plymouth, Hartlepool, Leicester, Bradford, Wigan and Grimsby to empower communities to develop community businesses. These businesses in turn will provide benefits and opportunities to local people and create more resilient places. A key feature of creating effective ecosystems for social businesses to start and thrive is to develop a business support offer delivered by local actors. This offer must meet the needs of individuals and businesses who may have barriers that prevent them from accessing, or making best use of, mainstream business support.

The findings of this report have informed further place-based research within each of the six Empowering Places community business catalyst areas. The results of this practice-based research are available as a separate report titled ‘Innovation in Action’, alongside a final national report outlining the Empowering Places model of business support - bringing together key recommendations for practitioners and commissioners.

This work will empower advocates of place-based enterprise support and social purpose business models to make a stronger case for more relational, human-centred support. This will enable greater equity of access and contribute to the inclusive growth and ‘levelling up’ agendas in communities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

There is untapped entrepreneurial potential within our communities, yet despite decades of high-profile government business support programmes, much of that potential remains unrealised. There is little evidence to show the long-term or wider societal benefits of these centralised interventions, with studies pointing to the inability of programmes to adequately capture their impact.

This has the direct effect of a lack of innovation in the business support sector, as there has been no standardised process for evaluation, iteration and improvement. Recent literature shows a desire from a range of actors to build a better business support ecosystem post-Covid, which enables local businesses and the communities they serve to recover and flourish.

This literature review highlights some of the programmes which have attempted to address market failures in the general take-up of business support, while addressing inequalities of access and capacity. The successes of these programmes have been diluted in a complex policy landscape, driven by short electoral cycles and the economic growth measures which serve them.

The growth agenda and these impact measures have themselves become a barrier to access for many in our communities. With centralised programmes responding to market failure by focusing on transactional support, dictated by funding conditions from the Treasury, place-based programmes often fail to demonstrate their impact on these terms, despite their clear transformational benefits.

The Levelling Up White Paper, published in early 2022, sets out a new devolution framework for England which not only seeks to shift more power to regional and local tiers but to communities on the ground, with a commitment to putting in place a bold approach to 'community empowerment' and 'neighbourhood governance.' Initiatives cited in the paper such as Community Covenants – agreements between councils, public bodies and the communities they serve – presents an opportunity for community anchor organisations to contribute significantly to local growth initiatives through delivering transformational business support.

Case studies on social innovation in business support demonstrate what can be achieved when support is aligned with emerging social issues, and operates within self-contained ecosystems which are insulated from short-term political growth drivers and impact measures.

2. HOW DID WE GET HERE

PART A: A POTTED HISTORY OF MAINSTREAM SME BUSINESS SUPPORT IN THE UK

Business support as a policy intervention in the UK has been a fundamental pillar of economic policy at a national, regional and local level for decades. Similar to other developed economies, business support activity in the UK is based on the conviction that support for enterprise can spur economic growth, boost employment and strengthen the competitiveness of specific sectors or geographies.

Emergence of dedicated support to the SME sector (1971 to 1992)

There have been a series of distinct phases of business support policy in the last 40 years. The Bolton Committee (1971) provided a rationale for helping the Small Firms, with dedicated support to the SME sector beginning in the 1980s (Stanworth and Gray, 1991). Emerging in the late 1980s, the Enterprise Initiative (EI) responded to the perceived market failure for business advice in which SMEs underestimated the benefits of external advice.

EI was a national scheme, albeit delivered locally, to encourage use of external advice through approved consultants at a cost to the taxpayer. The scheme was generally seen to increase the numbers of SMEs using advice from about 10% to almost a third. Evaluation work identified that assistance through the programme created jobs and increased turnover amongst SME beneficiaries (Wren and Storey, 2002).

Decentralisation and the rise of the productivity agenda (1992 – 2006)

In the 1990s, policy shifted towards a more decentralised local business support system. In Scotland, services were provided through Local Enterprise Companies (LECs), while in England and Wales local agents ran Business Link (Business Connect in Wales). Business Link was established as a 'one stop shop', replacing various fragmented services that emerged after the EI (Cook et al, 2020).

The Labour government from 1997 placed "productivity" at the centre of the policy narrative for achieving economic objectives of high and stable levels of growth and employment. Their "five drivers of productivity" framed a number of policy interventions – including the business support landscape. These drivers comprised: investment, innovation, skills, enterprise and competition.

The dominance of the productivity narrative generally persisted through the 2000s. However, the key government departments responsible for delivering the policies and programmes were restructured substantially. The government maintained support for many established business support programmes, not only the flagship Business Link programme. It continued the Small Firms Loan Guarantee (since 1981), the Enterprise Investment Scheme (since 1994) and Venture Capital Trusts.

However, there was a renewed emphasis on stimulating take-up of business support by addressing barriers to using advice, particularly amongst SMEs. Key changes in business support mirrored the overall narrative of policy changes and institutional shifts over the period. Three key themes are evident:

- The regionalisation of business support
- A shift in orientation, from generalist support to reach as many businesses as possible, to targeted support for businesses with growth ambition and 'scale-up' potential.
- Ongoing efforts over the period to simplify business support

This is most clearly seen with the shift in 2005, when Business Link services were transferred to the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). The RDAs were set up between 1999 and 2000 in the nine English regions. They had five statutory objectives, outlined in the 1998 RDA Act: the promotion of regeneration; enterprise; employment; the development and application of skills; and sustainable development.

The RDAs created a newly resourced regional tier, linked strongly to the productivity narrative. Meeting the needs of regional businesses and sectors and tackling regionally-specific issues were key aspects of their role. RDAs took greater responsibility for business support, to achieve "greater coherence in business support delivery from the customer's perspective" (HM Treasury, 2004a). This included Business Link and innovation support programmes such as Smart/Grants for R&D.

At its peak, Business Link operated locally through 89 offices employing 650 personal business advisers (Centre for Cities, 2013). Following regionalisation in 2005, the model shifted to one based on "information, diagnosis and brokerage" with private companies contracted to deliver support. RDAs could develop different support strategies, linked to a national policy framework, increasing the range of business support options available.

The financial crisis and a return to industrial strategy (2008-10)

The financial crisis and the recession that followed signified a change in wider government economic policy making, with implications for the business support landscape. In particular, it marked a return to industrial strategy policy making which had fallen away since the mid 1980s through misplaced attempts at "picking winners" and creating "national champions" (White and Wilkinson, 2017).

Since then, economic policy has been characterised by 'horizontal' policies designed to create the economic conditions and business environment for increased competitiveness, growth and productivity – agnostic of the specific sectors, business models or localities where it may impact. A key feature of Labour's New Industry, New Jobs report (HM Government, 2009) was to "support advanced industrial projects of strategic importance to the UK's economic renewal and future growth."

These were the origins of the rise in importance of industrial policy-making taken forward by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition that came to power in 2010 and subsequently led to the Industrial Strategy under the Conservatives from 2015.

BUSINESS SUPPORT SIMPLIFICATION

This devolution of business support and wider scope of activities led to the total number of schemes reaching 3,000 by 2006 (Centre for Cities, 2013). The Government had sought to simplify the business support landscape, establishing the Small Business Service (SBS) in April 2000, to improve coordination of small business support policies across government.

SBS led a Cross Cutting Review of Government Services for Small Business (DTI, 2002), outlining recommendations for improving the effectiveness of support services. The Business Support Simplification Programme (BSSP), announced in the 2006 Budget (HM Treasury, 2006), led to the creation of Solutions for Business (SfB), an umbrella for government's portfolio of business support.

The SfB aim was to reduce the thousands of publicly-funded support schemes to 100 or fewer by 2010. It launched with 30 products, including business advice (e.g. Business Links and the Manufacturing Advisory Service), support for innovation (e.g. grants for R&D, Knowledge Transfer Partnerships), the provision of coaching (e.g. Coaching for Growth) and access to finance schemes. Business Links became the primary access point for businesses seeking support.

The Coalition Government – Austerity, LEPs and a move to targeted business support (2010-2015)

The business support landscape underwent its third major reform in less than two decades following the formation of the coalition government (Centre for Cities, 2013). The abolition of the RDAs (2010) and spending cuts resulted in many business support programmes being centralised or scrapped.

The austerity agenda pursued by the coalition was a key reason for the reforms, although enterprise support maintained a high profile in the policy narrative. Business Link was centralised within the Department for Business (BIS) and was simplified to a website and call centre.

Other business advice services were either brought into BIS or distributed to other institutions, such as the newly formed Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), Jobcentre Plus and Chambers of Commerce. The Regional Growth Fund (RGF) was launched as a vehicle for allocating public money to business support, representing a shift to challenge-based funding, obtained via a competition process with a focus on job creation. Other initiatives included the re-launch of Enterprise Zones in 2012 and the establishment of local Growth Hubs in 2014.

Crucially, instead of seeking to maximise the reach of business advice, the coalition changed focus towards tackling barriers to the expansion of businesses with growth ambition. Nesta's 2009 report, The Vital 6%, was influential through highlighting the potentially "vital role fast-growth businesses will play in UK economic recovery" (Nesta, 2009). This manifested in the launch of the flagship Growth Accelerator (2012), designed to increase the stock of high-growth businesses in England.

The programme focused on four key areas (raising finance, leadership and management, commercialising innovation and strategy development and execution) through the use of 'growth managers/coaches'. Growth Accelerator was subsequently consolidated within the Business Growth Service (BGS) in 2014, alongside the Manufacturing Advisory Service, to create a single access point for businesses seeking mentoring support and growth.

The coalition government also placed an emphasis on enabling the private sector to provide advice to businesses through mentoring and peer-to-peer networks.

The British Mentoring Gateway, established in 2011 in collaboration with the British Bankers Association, UK trade bodies and networks of mentors, set out to raise the stock of mentors, as well as awareness of the benefits of mentoring to SMEs (in order to raise demand and use). This theme continued under the Conservative government, most recently to draw on the experience of leaders and managers of high productivity firms by sharing knowledge with those seeking to improve.

LEPs, "growth hubs" and the rise and fall on the Industrial Strategy (2015 onwards)

The transition from coalition to a Conservative-led government was marked with the 2016 Spending Review, in which the Business Growth Service was abolished as part of a 17% budget cut for BIS. It was suggested that £12m of the £84m saved through the scrapping of BGS would be directed through the Growth Hubs and LEPs.

Growth Hubs were positioned as local public/private partnerships, often led by LEPs and local authorities, to provide a single local access point for business support; to join up different sources of support so businesses could get the support they need quickly and easily. Growth Hub partnerships include a range of organisations, including business bodies like Chambers of Commerce, universities, enterprise support organisations, libraries and colleges.

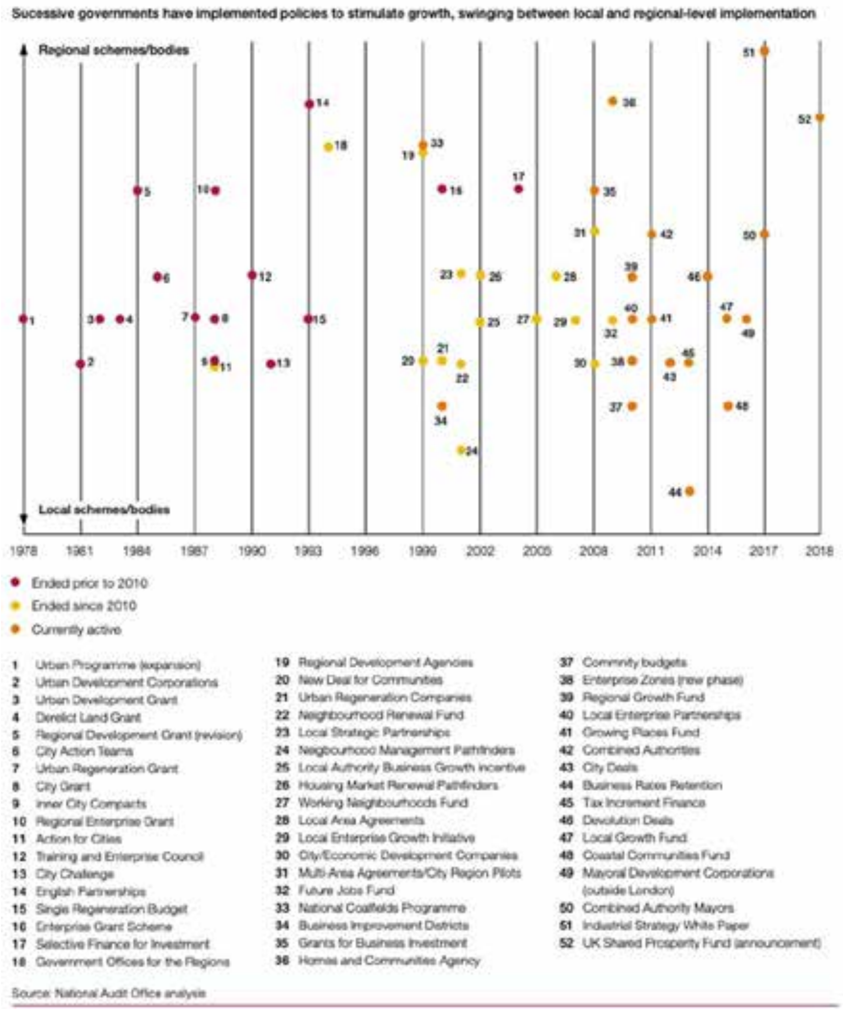
In 2017, the government published its much-anticipated 'Industrial Strategy' which intended to provide a clear plan for boosting production and earning power throughout the UK. With this, business support policies were positioned as aligning with the strategy. However, the National Audit Office identified in 2020 (NAO, 2020) that the Strategy has "yet to have a significant impact on the [BEIS] Department's support for business." In response, BEIS indicated that the Industrial Strategy would have greater impact in the future when there had been sufficient time for it to shape the overall portfolio of business support.

However, in early 2021, government signalled that the Industrial Strategy was being scrapped and replaced with a new 'Plan for Growth', intended to reflect the economic circumstances that emerged following the pandemic. The BEIS Commons Committee criticised this decision, suggesting the new plan was vague and lacked credibility. The Levelling Up White Paper, published in February 2022, essentially encompasses a further updated Industrial Strategy, albeit under a different name, with business considerations occupying a notable presence within the 12 levelling up missions central to the white paper. The report also provided clarity on a future role for the LEPs in which there was a reinforced commitment to the partnerships, after several years of ambiguity on their future direction. However, the paper included a call for LEPs to integrate into wider Mayoral Combined Authorities and County Deals, where these were already in place.

Institutional and policy 'short-termism' in local economic growth initiatives

Overall, recent decades have been characterised by an overwhelming trend of short-termism in regional and local growth initiatives. Successive governments have chopped and changed initiatives aimed at stimulating local growth since the late 1980s, as shown in Figure 1 as compiled by the National Audit Office (NAO, 2019). There has been very limited institutional and policy stability between governments and sometimes within the same administration. This has been compounded by a lack of spatial consistency within and between governments, with significant swings between local and regional-level implementation (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Regular changes in initiatives for local economic growth



PART B: THE EVOLUTION OF BUSINESS SUPPORT TO MEET WIDER SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

A pervasive theme in the opening section is that the emergence and development of business support to SMEs has been overwhelmingly concerned with a traditional economic growth perspective of increasing turnover and boosting employment. The belief is that a more competitive SME sector will raise output across industries and regions, contributing to increased national GDP.

However, it is important to recognise that this 'mainstream perspective' actually sits within a wider business support ecosystem that recognises and responds to the myriad of alternative business models that have characterised the UK corporate sector over the last 200 years. Many of these alternatives seek to balance economic activity with social and environmental concerns.

Co-operative development as an early form of business support for alternative business models

In the past 30 years, the concept of social has played an increasing role in the UK, with a growing interest in approaches that combine social and environmental aims with business. While the term 'social enterprise' has entered common parlance relatively recently, the idea of combining business with social value and commonwealth can be traced back much earlier.

The co-operative movement of the 19th century was a response to the inequities of capitalism, placing ownership of enterprise into the hands of an organisation's key stakeholders, whether consumers, suppliers or workers, rather than distant investors. Democratic ownership of enterprise through co-operative models coupled with strong values and principles, including 'concern for community'.

Co-operative development as an identifiable early form of business support can be traced back to a similar period. Robert Owen inspired the development of co-operative communities, in which production and distribution was governed democratically and fairly. Early consumer co-operatives raised funds to develop capital-intensive co-operative complexes (Cornforth et al, 1988).

However, co-operative development only really evolved from a form of mutual aid between co-ops into a considered form of business support in the late 1970s, when Labour established a national Co-operative Development Agency (CDA) in 1978 (Lawrie, 2017). Coyne and Wilson describe a brief period of dramatic innovation, as UK CDA-inspired local initiatives with similar goals:

"1979 saw the formation of local 'Co-operative Development Groups'. These groups offer a range of services to potential and established co-operatives, from information on how to set up and control a co-operative, to advice on marketing product lines and finance... many have also been involved in the training of appropriate skills and education in co-operative principles" (Coyne & Wilson, 1981).

The UK CDA saw its status and resources shrink through the 1980s, under the Thatcher government. While local and regional groups attempted to continue under a CDA banner, the number of Co-operative Development Bodies (CDBs) began to decline in the 1990s and did not experience a resurgence following the Labour Government's rise to power in 1997, with the wider 'social enterprise model' becoming the flagship policy that fitted well with the political agenda of New Labour.

The rise of the social enterprise model and targeted business support

The political shift in the 1980s and 1990s embraced more neoliberal policies and laid the foundations for the social enterprise model, in which there was a growing trend over the period of outsourcing services from the public sector. Social enterprise became more established under New Labour, advocating in its manifesto that it would boost social justice while supporting a market economy.

In 2001, it established a dedicated Social Enterprise Unit (SEU) within the Department of Trade of Industry (DTI), with a social enterprise strategy following soon after which advocated for significant growth in the sector. Labour's commitment to devolution also empowered the administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to develop targeted activity to support social enterprise.

Considerable investment took place in the social enterprise support infrastructure, with a key focus on business support initiatives. It has been claimed that the institutionalisation of social enterprise has been more rapid and advanced in the UK than in many other parts of the world (Nicholls 2010).

Social enterprises have been actively encouraged to benefit from mainstream business support provision. This is on the basis that the business support needs of social enterprises are, for the most part, similar to those of conventional SMEs.

Social enterprises benefit from business support areas spanning market research, business planning and raising finance. However, key characteristics of social businesses such as their legal structure, overriding social mission and mix of trading income with grants and donations, means mainstream business support in some areas is less appropriate. Growing recognition of the unique features of social enterprise has driven a range of programmes delivering specialist support over the last 15 years.

SOCIAL ENTERPRISE BUSINESS SUPPORT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME

A key development in this period was the Office for Civil Society's (OCS) Social Enterprise Business Support Improvement Programme, running from 2007 to 2011, sought to achieve improvements in the quality of support for social enterprises to address perceived market failures:

- Lack of social enterprises accessing publicly funded business support
- Lack of understanding and expertise in supporting social enterprises amongst publicly-funded business support staff
- Inability of social enterprises to purchase high quality business support; and
- Lack of advisor and organisational capacity/standards among the social enterprise support agencies (Step Ahead, 2011)

Central to the programme design was the OCS decision to commit its social enterprise focused business support funding of £5.9m equally across English regions. This was to ensure it reflected local conditions, complemented existing projects and responded to a changing economic environment. However, as a decentralised programme it amplified some regional disparities. In particular, social enterprise was already a strong established feature of business support in the North West, South West and Yorkshire and the Humber, where EU funding was being utilised to fund social enterprise specific support activities – with OCS funding used to provide additional support.

These programmes have sometimes targeted enterprise development and employment creation, but more significantly have been concerned with labour market exclusion, community regeneration and rural development; recognising that support to the SME business base can enhance the wider physical and community regeneration efforts to tackle deprivation in disadvantaged areas.

Business support linked to Area Based Initiatives (ABIs)

The availability of European funding reflects longstanding efforts by UK governments to tackle problems of urban deprivation through Area Based Initiatives (ABIs). ABIs are generally defined as time-limited programmes designed to address particular issues associated with deprivation in urban localities, forming part of a wider regeneration policy which has evolved considerably in that time.

A pervasive feature of many programmes, such as City Challenge in the late 1980s and the Single Regeneration Budget in the 1990s, was the attempt by government to mobilise local stakeholders from local authorities and both the voluntary and private sectors to form partnerships. These would deliver area-based, holistic models of delivery where the partnership itself defined a specific geography (Lawless, 2007).

The New Deal for Communities (NDC) was one of the most extensive ABIs in England, forming part of government's National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal announced in 1998. Its primary purpose was to reduce the gaps between some of the poorest neighbourhoods and the rest of the country, in relation to three place-related outcomes relating to fear of crime, housing and the physical environment and the three resident-related outcomes of health, education and unemployment.

Communities were seen to be 'at the heart of the regeneration of their neighbourhoods' and 39 local deprived communities were provided with around £50 million over a 10-year period to reduce deprivation in their areas relative to others. Evaluation work relating to SRB and NDC provided useful evidence on the impact of local business support in assisting neighbourhood renewal.

In particular, there was limited evidence on the impact in deprived areas of mainstream programmes like Business Link. The evaluation of NDC found that business support projects were generally inappropriate where the business base was small and as such NDC partnerships tended to focus on getting their residents "job ready".

It also found that facilitating start-ups and micro-businesses required targeted and selective support. Success may be short-term, with only a modest number of jobs created and those finding work moving away (Syrett and North, 2006). Business support tended to be relatively expensive, with a proportion of jobs leaking out to residents in other areas.

BRADFORD TRIDENT NDC

An interesting example of effective business support provision in the context of the NDC programme is Bradford Trident. Bradford Trident NDC was characterised by a predominantly BAME population extending from the city centre. While there were limited businesses in the NDC area itself, there was good access to a large business base in the city as a whole.

Bradford Trident NDC commissioned Business Link Bradford to provide business support services, including skill development advice and guidance, financial support and networking. There was also a dedicated business advisor in the NDC community.

Overall, Bradford Trident focused on providing support to existing businesses rather encouraging start-ups. This was evident in the establishment of a Business Forum, encouraging local business network. Also, NDC was active in attracting inward investment by actively partnering with the local authority to build a new Lidl supermarket.

However, the experience of Bradford Trident was not typical of all NDC communities, in which Devins' 2005 study argues there was no 'one strategy fits all' approach to business support interventions – largely because of the diversity of the business base, entrepreneurial culture and socio-economic and cultural contexts (Devins et al, 2005).

Local Enterprise Growth Initiative (LEGI) and the role of local authorities in neighbourhood-facing business support

Off the back of previous area-based regeneration programmes, government launched the LEGI programme in 2006, distributing £418m across 30 deprived areas to help generate economic growth in under-performing areas. Over half of the funds were spent on forms of business support, with most resources focused on supporting residents into self-employment and increasing business start-ups.

Key to the design of LEGI was that it took established design principles of mainstream business support programmes, but heavily tailored to the area; integrated with neighbourhood and community programmes and personalised to support individuals through their enterprise journey, with a focus on coaching prior to business start-up (Local Government, 2010).

A major characteristic of the LEGI programme was that local authorities had control over how funds were allocated, to ensure it was responsive to local needs and priorities. However, local authorities have seen their role in business support provision weaken as nationally funded, area-based regeneration programmes targeting the business base all but disappeared once LEGI ended in 2011.

In its place, LEPs would deliver business support that responded to local needs through ERDF, RGF or central government funding. This expectation has now shifted into the dedicated role of Growth Hubs, as the key arm of the LEP infrastructure to co-ordinate local business support. Growth Hubs exist at varying stages of development with limited central guidance as to how they should operate.

Growth Hubs mirror LEPs in that their connections with the VCSE sector are generally weak, with limited evidence that business support to date has been targeted on social economic growth or community ownership. They are also facing their own funding uncertainties, further undermining the role that local authorities can play, with contributions limited to the influence they can assert within the strategic partnerships that govern the work of LEPs and Growth Hubs.

Business support and community-based enterprise

More recently there has been a growing interest in community-based enterprise. These take many forms: housing co-operatives; credit unions; CDFIs; renewable energy ventures; local exchange trading schemes; and land trusts. They provide a small, but important, source of income and employment that stays in the area and can be of significant value for specific individuals or groups.

The emergence of Power to Change in 2014 as a dedicated funder to this sector established the term ‘community business’. Accordingly, ‘community business support’ refers to the advice and guidance that is needed for a community business to grow and develop. Similar to mainstream business support, this generally involves a number of elements, such as business planning, financial management, peer support, professional skills, mentorship and leadership development. Like social enterprise support, it is particularly sympathetic to the features of community businesses.

Findings from studies commissioned by Power to Changes’ Research Institute show that the current business support landscape is not ideally suited to community-based enterprises. Private sector support needs to be tailored and flexible to the requirements of socially trading organisations, often led by residents that are suitably passionate but do not have a background in business.

Furthermore, the quality of support that community businesses access currently varies significantly. They also have trouble navigating what support is available and determining what types of information, advice and guidance they need.

3. HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT WORKS?

PART A: THE LIMITATIONS OF MAINSTREAM BUSINESS SUPPORT

Business support to SMEs in the UK has become an industry in its own right. The scale of investment in the sector points to a continued need to stimulate and support smaller businesses and entrepreneurs, recognising the role they play in the economic and social fabric of the country. However, evidence of the efficacy of this investment in mainstream business support is mixed, with a number of key challenges cited as limiting the impact of mainstream business support.

Limited demand for business support

Businesses do seek external help to grow, although as we have seen in the potted history, there has been a decades-long inability to address the lack of take-up of business support, while the Enterprise Investment (EI) scheme in the late 1980s increased take-up from 10% to a third. By 2011, the estimate for latent demand for using business support amongst SME employers sat at 28.2% (CEEDR, 2011).

More recently, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) concluded that use of external information and advice had declined significantly since 2010, with only 26% of SME employers having sought business advice (showing an even bigger drop from their 2010 estimate of over 40%). Interestingly, a partner study by BEIS, which focused on SMEs who were non-employers, showed that the gap was closing in terms of non-employer SMEs seeking support (18% in 2018 compared with 12% in 2016, (BEIS, 2018)), although this increase should be factored alongside the 20% growth in self-employment in the previous decade.

The persistent changes to the business support landscape is recognised as a key factor in lack of demand from SMEs. In particular, in making recommendations to the LEPs in 2015, the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) stated that the business support framework represented a lost opportunity in terms of local growth and prosperity (ERC, 2016). While the FSB acknowledged the difficulties of maintaining quality support provision in a complex landscape, the report highlighted “lack of support take-up resulting from years of confusion, duplication and absence of a comprehensive overarching strategy.”

Lack of evidence on effectiveness

One of the other reasons for the lack of take-up may be that the business support industry struggled to demonstrate its own effectiveness. Indeed, a 2016 impact evidence review of business advice concluded that only 23 out of 700 evaluations met the standard required for inclusion in the review. Only 14 of those impacted positively on at least one business outcome, including the number of individuals starting a business or supporting an existing business to achieve an increase in productivity or growth in employment, turnover or profits (What Works Centre for Growth, 2016).

Overall evidence of success was generally inconclusive as programmes had vague or multiple objectives, with only a few having explicit, singular objectives that were established from the outset. Five of the evaluations reviewed showed that business advice did not work, having no statistically significant effects on any outcomes. The review found no strong differences in impact between national or local initiatives, focused or broader programmes, or publicly or privately delivered projects. In terms of outputs, it showed that business advice programmes generally had a greater impact on an increase in sales than they did on employment and productivity rates, despite those latter outcomes often being at the centre of the rationale for funding.

The advent of the LEPs as the main player for business support co-ordination in recent years has not improved this picture. A key recommendation from the FSB in 2015 was that the LEP's coordinate their activity with the Growth Hubs, or risk not achieving shared local goals. Unfortunately, by 2019 things had not improved. A review of LEP performance by the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts was critical of the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government's (MHCLG) decision not to evaluate the Local Growth Fund. It highlighted that despite spending up to £12billion of taxpayers money, the Department had "no real understanding of either the Impact of the Local Growth Fund or whether it had provided value for money."

Furthermore, in autumn 2021, the government confirmed that a wholesale review of LEPs would take place with "all options" under consideration as to the role, function and structure of Local Enterprise Partnership to ensure the organisations are best positioned to support productivity and growth.

Who really benefits from mainstream SME business support?

Ultimately, it is difficult to see how centralised support schemes can answer the question of who really benefits when they have not addressed issues around their justification and design. The 2020 review of Business Support schemes by the National Audit Office highlighted that: "The range of stakeholders BEIS engaged with varied and it could not demonstrate how these consultation findings had informed schemes' design. This created a risk of launching schemes that businesses do not need or that businesses find difficult to access."

The review of LEP performance by the Public Accounts committee also pointed out that the LEP Boards were not representative of their local areas and business communities – another mechanism which should have served as a means of ensuring accountability (House of Commons, 2019).

An audit of business support schemes conducted in 2020 concluded that BEIS failed to properly evaluate alternatives when designing some of the schemes in the audit, discarding options that may have provided better value for money (National Audit Office, 2020).

PART B: MODELS OF BUSINESS SUPPORT TO MEET WIDER SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

The previous section outlined general limitations of mainstream business support in adding value to the SME sector. However, in order to start to consider how best to design and deliver business support to support wider social and environmental concerns, it is important to understand some of the key concepts and mechanisms that have historically underpinned business support schemes.

Being able to recognise the usefulness (or otherwise) of the balance of these mechanisms, in the context of local need, inclusive growth and the social economy, will enable those seeking to improve business support to constructively challenge policy makers and commissioners.

Demand and supply side drivers in the inclusive economy

Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) define their economic understanding of inclusive growth in terms of two broad spheres (JRF 2016):

- Developing an inclusive economy: The ‘demand’ side of the labour market
- Including more people in economic opportunity: The supply side of the labour market

Policy in the UK typically focuses on the supply side, leading to high labour market participation, but through significant growth in low paid employment. Evidence of social and spatial inequalities shows supply-side policies struggle to achieve more and better jobs. The London School of Economics sought to broaden the understanding of demand-side policies and widen their scope to include business support, city fiscal policy and economic planning and strategy.

“Contemporary thinking on demand-side approaches differs from traditional arguments for industrial policy as they are based on strong economic rationales for geographical or place-based interventions, rather than targeting industries in a ‘spatially blind’ manner” (Pike, MacKinnon et al, 2016).

The majority of changes occurring in business support focus on the supply side; around service offers, providers and service improvement. The demand-side usually looks at needs and motivations of entrepreneurs and types of support they use. This research may be necessary to better understand under-represented groups, but reinforces the view that these groups are ‘targets’ for support rather than enablers within their own communities (Blackburn, 2008), which reduces their ability to become equal partners with mainstream enterprise development organisations.

“At some point in regeneration thinking people became the problem rather than being seen as a resource; they were described only in terms of statistics of deprivation. The physical community became the focus of the intervention to improve the economy, as opposed to the human community in the area” (Cox, nef, 2010).

Horizontal and vertical support systems

Industrial policy conventionally distinguishes between 'horizontal' and 'vertical' policies. Horizontal policies are designed to benefit the wider economy, whereas vertical ones focus on improving specific industries or sectors. The growing vertical spread of bundled business models, for example manufacturing and service provision, suggests the need for a broader focus towards value chains (and business support) which are also vertically related (Crafts and Hughes, 2013).

"A survey on inclusive growth suggested fostering slower or lower growing sectors but with potential to offer better paid work and progression opportunities, creating value chains and support mechanisms around these" (Mole 2016).

They also highlighted a need to explore the potential of specialist clusters outside the Growth Hubs, bringing higher value employment into economically marginalised areas.

Breadth, reach and depth

Business support programmes have varied in their attempts to engage with and attract businesses and entrepreneurs. Centralised programmes have generally sought to broaden their user base with horizontal, supply-side policies. Prioritising resources to achieve this often comes at the expense of achieving reach into specific communities or groups – of 'picking winners'.

Even when greater reach is achieved at community level, this does not always equate to high quality support. CEEDR (2011) differentiate between transactional assistance; support happens at arms-length, providing a piece of information or signposting; and transformational support, where more in-depth, 1-2-1 support is required to facilitate a step-change in growth and productivity.

"Hands-on approaches were more effective than 'light touch' delivery – suggesting higher levels of trust between advisors and clients resulted in more positive programme outcomes" (WWCG, 2016).

An earlier study looking at the way various Business Links provided support also showed the value of prioritising depth of support over breadth, finding that "where additional resources are available for business support these should be used to deepen the assistance provided rather than extend assistance to a wider group" (Mole, Hart et al, 2011).

Resource allocation between intensive and non-intensive support methods is a challenge for policy makers and commissioners, with many of the larger national programmes, directed by politically driven money flows, opting for 'quick win' strategies that reach a broader audience but risk excluding those furthest from the market.

Transactional 'light touch' support

As single points of access with a remit to mostly signpost, broker or align with existing business support programmes, Growth Hubs (like Business Link before them) typically deliver transactional support. Outputs are measured in temporal terms relating to the 'intensity' of support; low intensity interventions being less than an hour and medium intensity being more than an hour (BEIS, 2019).

Higher intensity interventions with businesses or individuals can be between six hours (as with the previous LEGI programmes) or as much as 12 hours (needed to achieve an SME support output on ERDF programmes). Temporal measures, however, say little of the quality (or depth) of that support – as an example, a six-hour intervention could in theory be claimed through attendance at a one hour meeting and a networking event run by a support provider.

Transactional support can take the form of advice giving. However, in order to achieve a quality of advice that sustains outcomes for businesses, advisers need a “detailed understanding of the firm with which they are working, implying that they need to build relationships” (ERC, 2016). However, this is generally resource heavy and counter to the temporal ‘soft caps’ applied by most transactional programmes.

“Face to face provision is identified as an important feature of the Greater Manchester Growth Hub model. This, however, can be very expensive to deliver” (BIS, 2013).

Another issue with single point of access support is that it assumes a level of confidence and capacity on behalf of the user; so by nature it is less inclusive than relational support. A survey of Business Links looked at policies to support ethnic minority enterprise, pointing to the need for an engagement strategy; promotion of sectoral diversity; and better evaluation (Ram/Smallbone, 2010).

“Not everyone can take part and benefit as easily as everyone else, because the conditions that make it possible are not equally distributed. This applies to capacity, whether individuals are able to participate; and access, who can join in and who gets left out” (Coote, nef, 2010).

Relational approaches

“What would the support system look like if it was 100% client-focused, and supported people to remove barriers that stood in the way of their success? If targets were replaced by values as drivers for initiatives – what would values-based regeneration look and feel like?” (Cox, nef, 2010).

One of the business support products which made it into the core national offer post-BSSP was Enterprise Coaching, although interpretations and implementations of Enterprise Coaching differ greatly. The Local Government Improvement Group saw it as helping people explore whether enterprise was a suitable option, coming before start-up support and therefore beyond the remit of mainstream business support programmes (LIG, 2010). The New Economics Foundation viewed Enterprise Coaching as much more than this; creating benefits within the community well beyond the business aspects of the project.

Literature on mentoring and coaching often bundles them together, suggesting the nuances of the differing approaches are not well understood. Mentoring is rooted in experiential learning, with mentee and mentor needing to “display certain behavioural characteristics” to enable a successful relationship (Croller-Peter, Cronje 2020). It is perceived as less formal, while coaching focuses on performance and alignment with business objectives (Walker-Fraser, 2011).

ADVISING | COACHING | MENTORIING

Advising
Providing specific advice or information based on the advisers’ assessment of need, often single interaction

Mentoring
Providing longer-term development support based on the mentors’ experience, usually within a specific sector

Coaching
Enabling clients to develop with their own solutions, at their own pace and promotes self-efficacy

The benefits of coaching are many: 80% of people who receive coaching report increased self-confidence, and over 70% benefit from improved work performance, relationships, and more effective communication skills. 86% of companies report that they recouped their investment on coaching and more (ICF 2009).

“Coaching is the process of equipping people with the tools, knowledge, and opportunities they need to develop themselves” (Peterson, Hicks, 1996).

Unlike advice and some mentoring (experiential support), coaching assumes a stance which works with the pace and assets of clients, promoting self-efficacy and reducing dependency on support over time. It does not require intensive overcoming of information asymmetries; the supplier’s uncertainty about clients needs; and the client’s uncertainty about the support needed (ESRC, 1999).

Evaluation shows a cross-pollination of coaching within business support models. The Growth Accelerator programme adopted coaching as part of its support offer, noting that close engagement with the coach can have much more wide-ranging effects than those expected to be achieved in their original scope of support (BIS, 2014).

The Growth Accelerator evaluation only mentions that coaches were recruited with previous coaching experience, so no evidence exists on the quality or consistency of coaching within the programme. Whereas Bizfizz provided bespoke coach training, later cohorts of Enterprise Coaches were not trained in this way. ERDF programmes like Locally Grown did not have training budgets.

Little evidence exists around specific styles and implementations of coaching in business support. Further research is needed to determine the cost-effectiveness of coaching compared to other methods of transformational support, although evidence exists showing coaching styles such as the Solution Focused approach may offer more efficient interventions (Grant/O’Connor, 2010).

“Coaches should aim for a solution-focused theme in their work, if they wish to conduct effective goal-focused coaching sessions that develop a depth of understanding and build self-efficacy” (Grant/O’Connor, 2010).

Configuration of ‘business support contracts’

Another interesting dynamic which has influenced business support models has been the method of contracting business support. Growing evidence suggests payment by results, which in theory should incentivise positive effects, in practice stifles innovation by placing providers in a position of risk before they even begin delivery (DfID, 2014); diminishing their appetite for further risk-taking which could lead to useful spillovers of impact and learning.

“Targets do not deliver change in communities; neither do they clarify the role of a regeneration professional. Targets are established for the benefit of the funder, not the client. A support agency then finds it has two clients in any initiative – the group receiving the support, and the funding agency. With a direct link to the financial survival of the agency, the funder’s agenda takes precedent over that of the client. The pace of change required becomes that demanded by the funder” (NEF, 2010).

In ‘Social Transformations in Contemporary Society’ Bartuševičienė and Šakalytė distinguish effectiveness and efficiency as being exclusive performance measures (STICS, 2013). Efficiency concerns successful input transformation into outputs (proof of investment), whereas effectiveness measures how outputs interact with the economic and social environment (impact).

Projects like Bizfizz made a strong case for working outside of target culture and the benefits of placing greater value on relational outcomes which are harder to measure (posing greater perceived risk to commissioners). JRF picked up on this in its report on inclusive growth, providing a case study on the Banana Enterprise Network (BEN) in Salford (which sits outside the main Growth Hub).

“BEN have been able to provide tailored packages of support, built around the needs of each individual and progressing at their own pace; no pre-set targets or time limited goals. They build a network of support, based on local community organisations and service providers, and also other new entrepreneurs within the same neighbourhood” (JRF, 2016).

Recognising the value of self-employment and micro-enterprise

The supply-side, growth agenda of mainstream business support generally focuses on medium and larger SMEs that have the potential to create jobs faster and at scale. But evidence from 2008-14 shows self-employment grew faster than employment (with short-term median annual earnings from self-employment decreasing at a greater rate than of those who were employed) (BIS, 2016).

BIS concluded that over the longer term, self-employed income levels were sustained and that most well-being outcomes were similar between both employed and self-employed people (with the self-employed feeling they had more control over their lives). This is backed up by the IFS, which found that the newly solo self-employed could take up to two to three years to recover to prior earnings, but saw a large and sustained rise in job satisfaction (Cribb and Xu, 2020).

“It appears that people who remain self-employed over a period of time have more or less maintained their overall income. Well-being amongst the self-employed appears to be at least as positive as it is for employees, so there is no obvious problem with self-employment as a labour force” (BIS, 2016).

Business support programmes such as LEGI sought to stimulate enterprising activity in communities and create a culture of enterprise which would often give rise to self-employment and micro-enterprise, rather than SME-formation.

Part C: Examples of 'social innovation' within business support programmes in the UK and internationally

The case studies showcase valuable ‘social innovations’ in business support programmes where interventions are aligned with emerging social issues, and operate within self-contained ecosystems which are insulated from short-term political growth drivers and impact measures. They also draw on the business support models outlined in the previous section, in which the case studies/programmes have struck an effective balance based on the various considerations.

UK CASE STUDIES

THE BIZFIZZ PROGRAMME

A joint venture between the Civic Trust and New Economics Foundation (NEF), BizFizz supported entrepreneurs from within their own communities, particularly in those experiencing economic disadvantage. It highlighted the powerful role that enterprise can play in regeneration when supported by the wider community.

“BizFizz gives you what you need when other advisors just give you the same information they give everyone who comes through their door” (BizFizz Client).

BizFizz placed coaches within community host organisations rather than centrally, eschewing marketing and deliberately avoided all forms of promotion except word-of-mouth. The approach valued relationships by building teams of support around entrepreneurs, believing that the key to business success is who you know rather than simply what you know.

BizFizz refused to be bound by government targets, preferring to see and mobilise hidden assets that economists and policy-makers rarely recognise. The BizFizz story is about what can happen when official targets and institutional bias are put aside; when support agencies take a coaching approach that focuses support on individual clients, building credibility to enable people to follow their passion.

“Coaching focuses support on the individual client – unleashing their passion, resourcefulness, creativity and entrepreneurial flair. We see a flow of self-confidence and a solution-focused approach to life that is at the very heart of transforming communities” (Who’s the Entrepreneur).

BizFizz provided coaches with bespoke training, including transactional analysis, NLP and even counselling skills aimed at reinforcing a model of listening, summarising and reflecting.

“There was something about the power of self-reflection that people in their normal work rarely have opportunity for. The process can be very powerful. It made us constantly curious about clients, encouraging us to take necessary risks that made BizFizz such a success” (BizFizz coach).

The project and coach training also recognised the risk of creating client dependency; making the distinction between crucial intervention and abrogation of responsibility by an entrepreneur. To ensure coaches steered avoided giving advice, specific client issues were presented to a panel of peer-businesses who made suggestions to feed back to the client and work through with their coach. These panels also served as a support network for the coach and the local business community.

Some 90% of businesses supported by the BizFizz programme survived beyond one year of trading, comparable with national averages in the same period (Clark, 2020) which, when considering the challenges faced by the communities, was commendable.

Attempts to humanise and deepen business support have often focused on the role mentors can play, yet research shows the scaling of mentor support has proven problematic, particularly around the recruitment of quality mentors with the necessary skills (BIS, 2012).

The 'matchmaking' process of bringing together mentor and mentee is intensive in itself, with the personal relationship between them crucial to the success of the intervention. Coaching also requires the building of rapport, but is generally seen to be a shorter intervention with coaching techniques requiring less specialist knowledge than that of a mentor (CES, 2017).

"Just because someone good in business does not mean they will be a good mentor" (BIS, 2012).

LEGI AND ENTERPRISING BRADFORD

Whereas many schemes had failed to demonstrate their impact in line with clear objectives aligned to national policy, the Local Enterprise Growth Initiative (LEGI) programme was generally recognised to have both achieved this and shown a positive impact on enterprise activity in deprived areas (CLG, 2010).

Some of the lessons drawn from the 2010 LEGI evaluation can be shown to have been tracked through to ERDF programmes such as Enterprising Bradford (2009-11) – which achieved "a good balance of individual, organisational and social outcomes" (CLES, 2012) – and Locally Grown, 2013-15.

Overall, LEGI showed a positive impact on enterprise activity in deprived areas, promoting 'enterprise' as a priority within organisations and engaging well with individuals and businesses where existing programmes had failed. In Bradford, the final two years of the programme were match-funded by ERDF to create 'Enterprising Bradford', which helped create an ecosystem of neighbourhood-facing business support across the district and paved the way for new actors, such as social housing providers and dedicated Social Enterprise support charities (Locally Grown).

Where Enterprising Bradford appeared to fail was in the collection of Gross Value Added (GVA) data, noted by CLES to have been due to confusion over coordinating multiple organisations in the reporting of a lagging indicator (within a relatively short time frame). CLES provided an estimated range based on forward projections, which showed the programme would have achieved its GVA target of £5million.

Later, ERDF projects such as Locally Grown also struggled with the collection of GVA, albeit improved since Enterprising Bradford due to the experience of partners involved in both programmes (60% of GVA target evidenced by Locally Grown compared to 15% for Enterprising Bradford). The burden of evidence around GVA will have impacted on the ability of both programmes to help their communities. Standardised forward projections could help place-based schemes demonstrate growth impacts.

Expectation from the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) that community based actors were positioned to report effectively on GVA (rather than making the case to ERDF for greater recipient discretion of GVA collection), came into conflict with the wider social aims of the project. Qualitative evaluation revealed that social housing beneficiaries reported they were more concerned with the foundational quality of human interactions, such as "support from non-judgemental, compassionate staff' and 'networking with peers gave them confidence" (Incommunities, 2015).

These foundational human interactions were in many cases the direct result of the coaching and peer-network support employed by actors such as Sirolli, Bizfizz and Incommunities within the LEGI, Enterprising Bradford and Locally Grown programmes respectively.

ERDF funding typically also included outputs related to Cross Cutting Themes around sustainable development, equality and diversity. With Locally Grown, the entry of social housing providers showed a further evolution from centralised or Local Authority managed business support to place-based, mission driven actors. These actors are, potentially, better placed to tackle these broader impacts.

KINDRED, LIVERPOOL CITY REGION

Over the last decade, the social economy has achieved sizeable profile gains across the Liverpool City Region (LCR), from Granby 4 Streets Community Land Trust's Turner Prize winning regeneration scheme to the story of Homebaked's community bakery gracing the musical stage (Liverpool Echo, 2021).

However, despite significant fanfare, analysis of the community enterprise sector in Liverpool (Heap, 2019) showed that many of the social businesses in the region were operating on tight margins, with a particular need for financial and business support for growth-oriented community businesses to enable stability and growth. As a result, in 2020 the charitable trust Power to Change formed a partnership with social economy leaders and the City Region's Combined Authority, to enable a unique grassroots response to this challenge by establishing Kindred – an independent social enterprise itself that would offer social investment and support. In total, the LCR Combined Authority provided £5.5m alongside £1m from Power to Change for the new organisation.

The unique proposition of Kindred goes beyond its financial backing. Kindred was initially co-designed by the sector and is now led by the community businesses, social enterprises and pro-social businesses it supports. It is a result of this pioneering structure that it has recognised the value of growing the social enterprise sector through a patient and collaborative blend of investment and business support. The business support itself is markedly peer-based, in which a dedicated Collaborating Communities network of LCR-based practitioners build momentum in the sector, in addition to peer-to-peer advice that ensures learning stays within the sector.

This 'collaborating communities' approach is also applied in terms of resource allocation. Unlike traditional business support, which often encourages competitiveness through application and assessment processes led by 'expert' funders, Kindred finds ways to encourage collaboration, co-operation and sharing of ideas as part of its business support offer.

Kindred is looking to complete a process to become fully owned by members from the local social economy in 2022. The members will set the priorities and be able to decide who sits on the board, while also having full control over how funding – both grants and loans – are distributed and any associated terms and conditions.

Kindred is a prevailing example of how business support models for the social economy are enhanced and boosted by developing an overall ‘collaborative ecosystem’ with real and meaningful control, albeit backed by anchor funders and institutions to ensure such models have the resource and legitimacy to continue to grow the sector.

COMMUNITY CATALYSTS

While the neighbourhood-facing LEGI attempted to broaden access to business support and encourage greater entrepreneurial activity within communities, the Community Catalysts programme focused on a very specific community of interest within a more vertical sector: social care. Providing tailored support, including both help in setting up a business and navigating the regulatory landscape around social care, by 2017 Community Catalysts had helped 223 micro enterprises deliver almost £1million in cost-savings.

Community Catalysts work in a locally embedded way, employing catalyst co-ordinators with specific local knowledge, guided by an advice framework in line with CQC standards and standards developed by Community Catalysts themselves - ‘Doing It Right’, which places value on viability, sustainability and high quality, person-centred services.

Partnering with the local authority enables culture and system change, to allow micro-enterprises to flourish – aiming to help councils move away from paternalistic, risk averse models and towards more relational ways of engaging with stakeholders.

An evaluation by NEF in 2020 found these micro-enterprises were building social connectedness and growing resilience, creativity and diversity. They recommended that, as market shapers, local authorities should place a higher value on collaboration within commissioning by involving local people in redirecting investment to where it is most needed. This approach would help break through silos within councils and encourage innovation around local economic strategies for social care.

“Community micro-enterprises could be an integral part of every local economy. As community businesses, they represent a form of entrepreneurship that is accessible to and benefits people who are not, perhaps, ‘typical’ entrepreneurs. They connect communities, stimulate and support local services, and build resilience, diversity and creativity into local economies” (NEF, 2020).

CO-OPERATE ISLINGTON

At the beginning of 2022, Islington Council launched a new programme specifically targeted on supporting new and existing and co-operatives through supporting a new Co-operative Development Agency (CDA) for the borough – Co-operate Islington. Co-operate Islington aims to build a stronger co-operative sector and a more inclusive economy in Islington, enabling more money to be spent ethically and locally.

Initially, the council partnered with a consortium of local co-operatives and co-op organisers to establish and embed the support agency, alongside offering dedicated support for groups to start or grow co-operatives. Support comprises one-to-one advice, training sessions, funding, workspace, networking opportunities and other resources. They are also working with the biggest institutions in the borough, helping them adapt supply chains to buy goods and services locally from ethical providers.

The intention is that with initial funding from the council, a brand new CDA, with its own governing body and membership and a mix of funding and commercial revenue, is being established to deliver targeted support for developing co-operatives in the 'foundational economy' – goods and services that people need to access regardless of their income and social status. They intend to focus on a series of sectors; in particular the care sector (childcare and adult social care), education, housing, utilities, food supply, green initiatives and tradespeople.

The longer-term vision is to make Islington an even better environment for co-operatives and build a support base for the CDA to ensure its ongoing sustainability.

INTERNATIONAL CASE STUDIES

NEW YORK WORKER CO-OPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

New York City Council has built a successful programme for supporting the development of new worker co-operatives. The programme works mostly in New York's poorer neighbourhoods, with significant numbers of minorities and migrants among those founding co-operatives (New York City Council, 2018).

Key to the success of the programme, in supporting co-operative formation in challenging circumstances, is the significant role played by community-based 'non-profits' in awareness raising, pre-start facilitation and capacity building within neighbourhoods and communities.

Activity to increase awareness of, interest in and adoption of the worker co-operative model, is plugged into wider community-led economic development activities.

Overall, a mixed cohort of 'non-profit' delivery partners were brought together – combining national non-profits and local co-op specific organisations. The organisations played different roles, with some focusing on community outreach and education while others provided more typical business support activities. Support was split into five distinct categories spanning worker co-op start-up, financial support, legal support and conversions to worker co-ops.

This diversity of delivery partners also helped reach the immigrant workforce, which had historically been quite active in New York City's worker co-operative growth. Overall, the initiative was shown to have a positive impact on growing the worker co-operative sector, in which 21 worker-owned co-ops were created in its first year with over two-thirds of these still in operation after five years.

EVERGREEN CO-OPERATIVES

Looking further afield at initiatives like Evergreen Co-operatives in Cleveland, Ohio, we see the potential for mission driven partnerships to create self-contained business support ecosystems that develop and sustain entrepreneurial activity, while enabling new business opportunities to evolve. With 55 local employees from their target neighbourhoods in 2015 (REDF, 2015), Evergreen Co-operatives now employs over 250 people.

Evergreen run three separate but complementary worker-run businesses: Evergreen Cooperative Laundry (serving the health care sector); Evergreen Energy Solutions; and Green City Growers. It recently made its first acquisition, Berry Insulation, through Evergreen's investment division, The Fund for Employee Ownership.

Evergreen has improved the efficiency of all three enterprises through the creation of Evergreen Business Services, which centralises and streamlines many roles related to the management and growth of the co-operatives, including in human resources, finance, marketing, and business development.

When the businesses they support have scaled up and become financially sustainable, it is assumed they will spin off from Evergreen and internalise these functions. Evergreen will then provide the same services to a pipeline of new businesses.

Evergreen promotes, co-ordinates, and expands economic opportunity and community wealth building through a network of green, community-based, worker-owned enterprises in historically disinvested neighbourhoods of Cleveland.

The success of Evergreen Co-operatives perhaps points to the need to create local business support ecosystems that are easier to sustain through measuring and managing self-determined impacts. This is opposed to attempting to interface with regional or national agendas and funding, which come with pre-conditions and risks that, in some cases, are detrimental to the effectiveness of local support.

4. CONCLUSION: THE POTENTIAL FOR SOCIAL INTERVENTION

Looking back over the last 10 years, we have seen a range of approaches to business support; informed by the policies and programmes that came before them and a fast-changing economic and political environment. This research raises more questions than answers, but hope lies in a range of actors advocating for inclusive growth and innovative relational, place-based support post-Covid.

The pandemic has created uncertainties and challenges, some of which may be similar to the 2008 financial crisis (at least in terms of the government's intended response). Lessons learned pre-2008 and throughout the last decade provide clues as to how those designing and delivering business support to SME's in the UK might best navigate the next 10 years and beyond.

While it is understandable that reduced budgets necessitate greater efficiency, evidence suggests this efficiency has been achieved at the expense of effectiveness. This approach has not reduced inequalities, despite various attempts to address them through spatial mechanisms. The innovations and resulting benefits of programmes like LEGI and Bizfizz should not be forgotten.

The new policy regime set out in the Levelling Up White Paper creates fresh impetus for social innovation in local business support. The more rounded inclusive economic objectives in relation to opportunities, pay, well-being and community require it. The empowerment of local leaders and communities, through further devolution and the ongoing design of initiatives such as the Shared Prosperity Fund, should give bold local actors greater freedom to innovate by supporting a wider range of businesses, at a community level.

Social innovation in business support is not limited to socially-oriented or mission-driven businesses; providing lessons that can help define and sustain the wider economic and social impact of all SMEs and the programmes that support them.

Furthermore, co-operatives, mutuals and other democratic businesses have been increasingly recognised as key enterprise models to address local and regional economic challenges in UK communities. Business support programmes have the potential to innovate, so they are more aligned to the unique characteristics and requirements of co-ops, where finance, governance and legal considerations often distinguish them from other SMEs.

Drawing on the Evergreen model, this in turn can create the conditions for innovation in how such support is delivered, in which a more resilient and self-contained business support provision can emerge that is resourced by the pipeline of locally-anchored co-operatives and other enterprises that begin to develop and trade within local economies.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The dominant paradigm for business support in recent times has been to support already successful businesses which have benefited an ever concentrated minority of wealthy individuals. If the government is to truly succeed in levelling up, then it must actively get behind innovations in business support that help people to build more inclusive, distributive and sustainable economies – especially in contexts of disadvantage and deprivation.

As this report has shown, there are many examples, in the UK and elsewhere, of social innovations that demonstrate how to effectively support entrepreneurship in deprived communities. Often there is a focus on supporting co-operatives, community business and social enterprise to form and thrive. However, these innovations are regularly cut short, under-appreciated and then forgotten.

Now is the time for policymakers to look again at these innovations; learn lessons and adapt what worked; to respond to today's challenges and opportunities. The action-research report, undertaken through the Empowering Places community business catalyst hubs, has informed further practical, practice-based recommendations.

In terms of policy and commissioning, the following should be considered in conjunction with the Levelling Up White Paper and recently launched UK Shared Prosperity Fund:

- Wider social impacts and qualitative evaluation need to be given greater weight when commissioning business support programmes, especially in light of bolder commitments on well-being and health identified in the Levelling Up White Paper. Meaningful evaluation of support initiatives must become an intrinsic part of their design, rather than an afterthought

- Innovative solutions need to be given the space, time and support to demonstrate their impact. Lessons drawn should inform future programme design, particularly value added to the wider business support eco-system and reach into our most deprived communities

- Support organisations should seek to become transformational rather than transactional. Relational approaches have been written off as too expensive, so finding cost-effective ways to rebalance support must be a priority

- The inclusive growth agenda needs to be fully embraced, by breaking down silos between organisations and departments which do not see themselves as part of the business support infrastructure. Equally, key partnership bodies involved in business support provision, such as MCAs and LEPs, need to make firmer commitments to resourcing business support that directly caters to the social economy

- Viewing business support as a standalone industry, with fixed methods, leads to a lack of collaboration which is unable to maximise all of the creativity and value that exists in the UK. Our place-based action research points to what can be learned outside of the business support sector. For example, where local actors have found ways to harness both the networks of grassroots organisations and buying power of local authorities and other anchor institutions – creating the conditions for service design which meets need in a more holistic way

- Educating business support providers on the range of social business models, particularly co-operatives and the support needs of those who drive them, would go some way to bridging the perceived divide between local actors and the privileged organisations that serve them

- The design of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, backed up by the Levelling Up White Paper, suggest bold local leaders could use it as a tool to enable social purpose businesses to 'scale across' and 'scale up,' rather than just continuing a myopic focus on 'scaling up' firms in a few growth sectors

To find out more about the place-based research, and how you can contribute, please visit: **www.innovationinbusiness.org.uk**

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