



## COMMUNITY WEALTH BUILDING



Oxford City Council

## Growing the Social Economy Through Collaboration, not Competition

Over the past several years, Oxford City Council's Economic Development Team has developed strong working relationships with several local partners and has worked collaboratively to address the opportunities, gaps, and needs of the social economy support sector as a whole.

The council decided to invest £35,100 of its UKSPF allocation to extend and strengthen the work of these local partners, to help deliver several outputs and outcomes identified in its UKSPF investment plan, including:

- Social and local businesses receiving non-financial support
- potential entrepreneurs supported to be business ready
- training sessions for community ambassadors
- support socially excluded people accessing support

### Why was a grant used?

Rather than follow a competitive procurement approach for contracting these services, the council took a decision to direct award the funding as a grant to a coalition of local partners and co-develop the scope of services through a transparent and open dialogue.

The question of value for money was addressed by fixing the amount of funding available, and working in dialogue with partners to estimate the outputs and outcomes that were achievable, then ensuring that the input costs represented fair compensation, based on local and national market rates.

As asset-locked social enterprises coming together to work for a shared purpose, there was no commercial, 'profit-making' incentive for partners to overstate costs or narrowly target performance at the expense of quality – any surplus generated would be put towards increasing the delivery of outcomes within the available financial envelope. This impact has been further extended by the fact that partners were able to contribute significant match funding/ resources to the partnership.

By removing the competitive process and direct awarding the funding, the council was able to co-develop the programme of activity, without undermining the intention of partners to work together to further their shared aims. It was felt that a competitive procurement approach which put partners in competition for a limited amount of funding would be less conducive to the strategic goal of building a thriving and interconnected connected local support system.

The service design approach was heavily influenced by Power to Change's lessons on growing the Social Economy; as well as research by Refugee Resource in Oxford, which found that entrepreneurs from global majority backgrounds are less likely to access mainstream business development support offers, and the findings of the Owned by Oxford Report. These sources all emphasise the importance of support that is tailored, local, and delivered through trusted relationships, as well as the (social) value of collaboration across different elements of the system.

The joint initiative was guided by a set of comprehensive aims and objectives designed to bolster Oxford's social economy and foster positive impacts on the local economy, society, and environment.

The key components of the project included:

**Direct support for grass-roots community businesses and community entrepreneurs:**

The grant was used to provide direct support to grass- roots community businesses and community entrepreneurs. This support aimed to strengthen their foundations and enhance their capacity to contribute positively to the local economy, society, and environment.

**Development of a peer-led support group for the social trading sector and social economy:**

The programme focussed on the establishment of a peer-led support group for the social trading sector and social economy. This initiative helped to create a supportive community where knowledge and experiences can be shared, fostering growth and sustainability.

**Feasibility Study for a local funding model:**

The project explored potential for a local funding model to ensure sustainability and resilience within the social economy. This innovative approach seeks to create a self-sustaining ecosystem that can support the growth of local enterprises.

The collaboration of OSEP, Aspire Oxfordshire, Co-op Futures, and CAG Oxfordshire reflects a strategic alliance that maximises the collective impact of enterprising charities, social enterprises and purposeful businesses in Oxfordshire.

In delivering this specialist support, the project worked closely with other, well-established partners, such as the Owned by Oxford partnership, to continue signposting to the wealth of mainstream support services

and resources where appropriate, also available locally, demonstrating the power of collaboration in driving positive change and creating a more vibrant and sustainable social economy.

Grant Hayward, Enterprise Manager at OSEP commented;

“We’re delighted Oxford City Council has grasped this opportunity to reinforce the foresight and leadership they have shown over the past few years supporting and developing the social economy and initiatives that prioritise the well-being and prosperity of the local community.”

Alice Hemming, Cooperative Development Worker at Co-operative Futures added;

“To grow a more inclusive social economy, we know that tailored business development support for start-up community businesses and social enterprises is vital. Co-operative Futures is pleased to be working in partnership on this project to provide this kind of support. We are planning to train and work alongside local social entrepreneurs and community members, so that they can start new businesses and take control of community assets.”

### **Outcomes**

The project exceeded its original goals. Just as importantly, it ensured that the work of these local partners could continue, creating connections with

Due to the success of the initial programme, the Council has followed up with a further allocation of £20,000 for the 2025-26 programme. This programme will seek to further the priorities highlighted in the first programme while exploring how to bring a Social Investment Fund for Oxfordshire to fruition.

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