

Cross-Party Group on Women in Enterprise

Wednesday 22nd September 2021

Held via Zoom

Minute

Present

Carolyn Currie, WES; Bronwen Thomas, WES; Katie Birrell, WES; Lynne Cadenhead, WES; Jane Grant, Enterprise & Business Innovation at Borders College; Chrissy Mackay, BeYonder; Anne-Marie Morrison, W20 G20 Advisory Group; Susan Harkins, South of Scotland Enterprise; Nathalie Agnew, Muckle Media; Mairi Damer, Word Up Communications; Niamh Burns, Office of Gillian Martin; Criona Courtney, Royal Bank of Scotland; Lisa Wardlaw, Young Enterprise Scotland; Caroline Brown, Lanarkshire Women in Business.

MSPs

Gillian Martin, MSP; Collette Stevenson MSP; Michelle Thomson MSP

Invited guests

List names – do not use tables

Non-MSP Group Members

List names – do not use tables

Apologies

Liam Kerr MSP; Claire Baker MSP; Emma Harper MSP.

Proceedings

1. Introduction by Carolyn Currie, outlining the proceedings of the Cross Party Group.

2. Presentation by Carolyn Currie, explaining the current landscape of entrepreneurship for women in Scotland.
3. Gillian Martin, MSP, offered words of welcome and opened nominations for Office Bearers.
 - Convener Gillian Martin MSP proposed by Michelle Thomson MSP, seconded by Collette Lawson MSP
 - Deputy Convenor Michelle Thomson MSP proposed by Gillian Martin MSP and seconded by Collette Lawson MSP
 - Secretary Katie Birrell, nominated by Carolyn Currie and seconded by Gillian Martin MSP.
4. Carolyn Currie invited the attendees to share their views and experiences of running and pivoting businesses through the past few months of the pandemic.

Funding and Finance

- Criona Courtney highlighted that disproportionately few women business owners had approached the Royal Bank of Scotland for lending, suggesting that it may be a result of asking and declining of their requests.
- Niamh Burns related that some of her friends, who had started businesses during the pandemic due to childcare commitments, were unaware of the funding open to them. Carolyn Currie added that many early stage businesses, which lacked established relationships with funding organisations and account management support were unaware of their options.
- Wendy Edie gave an example of the Digital Boost Fund, which closed so quickly that it was difficult to meet the deadline as a business owner.
- Ann Marie Morrison shared a similar experience, describing how she was notified of a grant the day before it closed.
- Chrissy Mackay highlighted that part of the Pivotal Enterprise Resilience Fund (PERF) assessment was conducted through AI, suggesting that investigation into potential biases is required. Her application was knocked back. She runs a non-displacement multi-manufacturing business, and was seeking funding to pivot to have women supporting in manufacturing from home. However, a male new entrant to textiles received money for a singing manufacturing product, close to the amount she had applied for.

Business Support Organisations

- Jane Grant suggested that it can be challenging for businesses to make the most of the services of Scottish Enterprises, as it offers generic services, with no signage to specialist account management services.
- Susan Harkins shared that in her previous role in Business Gateway, she felt the organisation was restricted in efforts being made for women. At South of Scotland Enterprise, she shared that she will have dedicated women's support.

- Mairi Damer suggested that renewed efforts were needed to encourage women to start businesses, encouraging Women's Enterprise Scotland to spearhead a campaign, perhaps in collaboration with the Federation of Small Businesses.
- Lynne Cadenhead shared that, as a member of the National Advisory Council for Scotland's Economic Transformation, she was part of a group pushing to put entrepreneurial culture at the heart of the strategy, supporting enterprise for all, including micro businesses. She suggests moving away from a sector to a mission-based approach and wishes to work with the Business Gateway and Scottish Enterprise to ensure that delivery mechanisms work for women.

Digital Skills

- Jane Grant raised issues in computer science education in schools, highlighting that there is unconscious bias in teaching materials. She suggests that gender specific work with school-age girls from early years is necessary.
- Wendy Edie highlighted that ScotlandIS, the digital skills advisory board, were working to encourage more focus on computing in schools, but found that a lack of teachers with the appropriate skillset was an obstacle.
- Anne Marie Morrison highlighted best practice in Singapore, in which 74% of women leave school with digital skills. Mentors and role models are required, with press coverage and women speaking in schools.

Data

- Michelle Thomson MSP, who sits on the Finance and Economy Committees, was shocked at the data demonstrating how little private equity goes to women-owned businesses. She calls for routine gathering of gender-disaggregated data to tackle systemic issues.
 - Caroline Brown suggested that there is some level of obfuscation around support for women – some of the figures which appear seem positive, but when explored in deeper detail, the picture for women in entrepreneurship is concerning. Wage disparity increased by a £2000 salary difference in the last ten years, and there are low levels of women in management roles. It is a systemic issue, created by education, mindset and opportunity.
5. Gillian Martin MSP presented her closing statement. She raised concerns that, in the last five years of the Cross Party Group, the experiences of women entrepreneurs and the group's discussions remain unchanged. Gillian explains that she has similarly been asking the same questions of the Finance and Economy Committees over this time. She notes the need for male engagement, highlighting that many of her colleagues were unaware that statistics like the gender pay gap were so concerning. However, she is delighted by the Government's pledge of £50 million for a national Women's Business Centre and she will continue to work with Women's Enterprise Scotland to see greater equality in Scotland's entrepreneurship ecosystem.

The meeting closed at 19:30