

Cross-Party Group on Women in Enterprise: Business Support Provision

26th February 2025 6.00-7.00pm

Minute

Present

Carolyn Currie
Sophie Rooney
Hugh Lightbody
Alyson Pearson
Angela Prentner-Smith
Annabelle Beckwith
Chrissy Scott
Christine Esson
Dr Shaif Ahammed
Dr Claudia Duffy
Dr Suzanne Doyle Morris
Dr Poonam Malik
Elaine Morrison
Jane Beasley
Josie Saunders
Katrina
Lesley Boyd
Lissa Herron
Liz McCutcheon
Nathalie Agnew
Rachel Jones
Ryan Brown
Sandra Dailidtye
Sarah-Jane Burns
Susan Harkins
Tracy Hogarth

MSPs

Michelle Thomson MSP
Sue Webber MSP

Invited guests

Non-MSP Group Members

Apologies

Michelle Smith
Anna Bell
Yvette Hopkins
Emma Sedgwick

Welcome and opening

Michelle Thomson MSP welcomes everyone to meeting.

Michelle gives stats to lay background of discussion from the 2023 WES Survey of Women in Enterprise Report:

- Almost half (49%) said they did not have the skills needed to develop a digital or technology strategy for their business or effectively use digital tools
- 39% of women entrepreneurs lacked confidence in their company's ability to achieve Net Zero and 21% thought Net Zero did not apply to their company. This highlights a majority of women-led businesses (60%) are somewhat disengaged from achieving positive climate action.
- While 27% said business advisers had a solid understanding of their business and business aspirations, 38% disagreed and 35% said they were not in touch with a business adviser.

Michelle Thomson MSP introduces first speaker.

Speaker 1 – Hugh Lightbody: Business Gateway

- Business Gateway (BG) - Publicly funded, Scotland-wide service managed by local authorities.
- Provides free business support and advice to startups and existing businesses through online resources, digital tools, webinars, local events, and business advisers.
- Recognized need for SME digital skills development at all levels.
- Current digital skills offering is less comprehensive than before.
- Previous DigitalBoost program covered all of Scotland but was discontinued.
- Current support is more fragmented than before.
- Supports over 50,000 people annually in starting or growing their businesses.
- Assists 7,000–10,000 new startups per year.
- Since the pandemic, over 50% of new startups have been women-led (52% average over the last four years).

- Each supported startup is forecasted to create 1.2–1.3 new jobs, equating to at least 8,000 new jobs annually.
- Overall service satisfaction remains high at ~80%. National webinars achieve 95%+ satisfaction rates.
- Upskilled advisors on Net Zero agenda through training and awareness sessions. Provided Green Champions training for staff - case studies online showing businesses that have benefited.
- Business Survivability - 12-month survival rate:
 - 69% for startups.
 - 52% for established businesses.
- Women-led businesses have the same survival rate as the overall average.

Michelle Thomson MSP invites questions:

Claudia Duffy - Q. In terms of sectors, what types of businesses do you see women come to business gateway with to seek support?

Hugh Lightbody - A. Every sector but key ones being health and wellbeing, creative industries, interesting construction and trades come next, food and drink, retail wholesale etc and more. I think they're represented across just about every sector.

Josie Saunders – Q. We know that startup rates vary across the country. How are you (BG) and the government are integrating startup support with large-scale funding, such as city region and growth deals, particularly in stimulating sectoral growth.

Hugh Lightbody – A. Since the 2017 Enterprise and Skills Review, efforts have been made to transform the business support ecosystem and address integration challenges. The review highlighted clutter and confusion in the marketplace. We've been working through something called the Business Support Partnership, where we bring all the agencies and local government together to streamline support and increase business assistance.

Convenor introduces next speaker.

Speaker 2 – Sarah-Jane Burns: Techscaler, Codebase

- Techscaler delivered by CodeBase, supporting founders and entrepreneurs in creating and growing tech companies.
- Launched in November 2022 as a five-year government-funded program—free to access.
- Aims to establish Scotland as a leading tech nation by building a strong tech ecosystem.
- Open to anyone or any company building a digital or software product.

- Focuses on business development, not tech development—helping founders avoid common mistakes.
- Recognizes that tech company growth differs from other businesses (business models, funding, customer acquisition).
- Recent redesign of the education programme Techscaler delivers due to the feedback after the first 2 years. Education delivery available for high growth companies as well as those wanting to grow organically.
- Techscaler also delivers networking events, pitching events co-working spaces with the purpose to create the community
- Mentorship available as well as office hours with experts in other fields.
- We run international programs, where we take cohorts of founders to other tech ecosystems globally.
- We also work with Scottish Enterprise - grant funding available for our members.
- Founders can dip in and out as needed, accessing support from techscaler at different stages.
- Aims to make the tech sector accessible to all, regardless of background.
- 34% of Techscaler members are women, compared to the 20% industry average.
- Focuses on welcoming, inclusive spaces rather than traditional “tech bro” culture.

Michelle Thompson MSP – Q. what's your perception about access to finance for women-led tech businesses and the kind of risk appetite of lenders for women-led tech businesses?

Sarah-Jane Burns - A. Only 2% of women who go to access private equity receive it. Also reported that the women that are invested in, actually do better in the long run with the money that gets invested in them. Why aren't more women aren't getting VC investment? Is it less women going on a high growth journey? This is a reason we were trying to curate who we take out to get with other international ecosystems - we take them out in cohorts so they can learn from each support and encourage each other. Many women come back from those trips with a much higher aspirations.

Joise Saunders – Q. We partnered with Techscaler last week for a MedTech expo in Alloa and there were lots of women in the room. Is there an opportunity for growth in this area?

Sarah-Jane Burns – A. I can't speak to Med Tech through a gendered lens because I don't have those stats but Med Tech is a huge sector in Techscaler membership – the northeast team might just have really good networks of med tech founders that happen to be female but I think one of the things that helps is us as a company is going out and talking women.

Convenor introduces next speaker.

Speaker 3 – Jane Beasley: Zero Waste Scotland

- Zero Waste Scotland engages with businesses in various ways, offering different types of support.
- I'm focussing on the experiences gained through funding programs, specifically the patterns observed in the types of support women entrepreneurs required.
- While support was not initially designed with a gender focus, analysing funding applications and recipient experiences revealed trends that can help shape future funding approaches.
- Zero Waste Scotland has managed multiple funding programs, including European funding and grant distribution on behalf of the Scottish Government.
- A key takeaway from these programs has been that flexibility in support structures significantly benefits women entrepreneurs.
- The ability to tailor support based on individual business needs helped ensure funding reached those who could benefit most.
- These insights are drawn from the real-world experiences of teams working directly with women-led businesses in the circular economy sector.
- Many of the businesses supported were at the early stages of development.
- The financial support needed was generally in the range of tens of thousands rather than hundreds of thousands of pounds, reflecting the stage of business growth.
- Applicants were looking for funding to:
 - Develop a new business idea.
 - Move from concept to operational business.
 - Scale an existing business to a wider market.
- Feedback suggested that the approach taken for the application processes were more accessible than traditional investment models, making it easier for entrepreneurs to engage.
- Providing hands-on guidance during the application and funding process was beneficial for those who were confident in their ideas but less experienced in business admin.
- Many women-led businesses faced competing demands on their time, including childcare, caring for elderly relatives, or maintaining secondary jobs while launching their business.
- If the funding process had been more rigid, some of these businesses would likely have been lost, as they would not have been able to meet inflexible deadlines or criteria.
- Many women-led businesses emerged in response to real-world problems, either personal experiences or things they were passionate about addressing. This emotional investment often led to their businesses being labelled as "lifestyle businesses," which sometimes impacted credibility in the eyes of funders or investors.
- Businesses we've worked with were looking for different types of funding support eg. dealing with a particular skill set that they were missing. One area that more female entrepreneurs were open to was business modelling and looking at different business structures/shaping their business.

- Financial and operational modelling support was also needed to help firm up businesses ideas into formalized plans that could attract further investment.
- We've observed that the more prescriptive the funding criteria, the more exclusionary it became—particularly for women entrepreneurs who may not fit into traditional business models.
- Positively, we did notice among women-led businesses their willingness to engage in peer-to-peer support to share experiences, advice, and challenges with each other.
- Zero Waste Scotland aims to prioritize flexibility in the types of support offered to ensure inclusivity. Recognizing that women entrepreneurs may face specific challenges is key to shaping future funding models.
- Funding is not a one size fits all approach.

Michelle Thompson MSP – Q. To what extent do you think the new and evolving nature of the journey to net zero creates opportunities for women to grow businesses in a way that aligns with their approach?

Jane Beasley – A. I think it's very complimentary. All our funding will be targeting companies that are seeking circular economy solutions so by that nature, are innovative. Unlike traditional linear models, which often align with male-dominated business practices, circular economy businesses require different structures and support systems. There's a lot more openness from our women entrepreneurs to be comfortable in that space to not be turning over X many thousands by that prescriptive date. We don't fall into the trap of labelling them 'lifestyle business' as many have the potential to scale and replicate successfully. While some entrepreneurs may not initially aim to scale their business, they should be supported and empowered to do so if they choose.

Comment from attendee at a recent event where sentiment in the room was there was plenty of support for the start-up stage and once a business is very established high growth potentially making millions of pounds but in between those stages, it's hard to pin down where the resources of support are. Also, that anecdotally when men make business decisions, they make business decisions, when women make business decisions, they make life decisions, children decisions, family decisions.

Liz McCutcheon – Q. I'm really interested in the flexibility you (Zero Waste Scotland) offer. I'm currently delivering Pathways support, and we've worked hard to be flexible. How do you think as an ecosystem we can get better at being flexible?

Jane Beasley – A. Week to week check ins, two-way conversation, pre-empting certain decisions so provisions can be made before a crisis point is reached. Making sure it is a comfortable space to make decisions and have open communication with those accessing the services.

Convenor introduces next speaker.

Speaker 4 – Elaine Morrison: Scottish Enterprise

- Scottish Enterprise is one of three enterprise agencies that we have in Scotland. We say we're the national agency our sister organizations in the South and and highlands are equally important
- Focus tends to be on how do we bring money into the economy or get investment into business? How do we stimulate innovation, create new jobs or safeguard the jobs are important to the economy.
- Huge difference in sectors that are favoured by male and female entrepreneurs. Women orgs in health and social care are 39% of businesses vs in technology (15%) and financial services (10%), highlighting the need for targeted support.
- We sit almost at the bottom of the the OECD in terms of levels of capital investment by business.
- We have a role to stimulate the system where we don't always provide the direct support to companies as we do work with companies at a particular point of growth.
- SE have run and supported various programmes including:
 - Ecosystem fund supported 900 female entrepreneurs (2023/24).
 - Unlocking ambition programme, 72 female founders
 - 350 females participated in the Mint Ventures Road shows
 - Provided investment support for 54 female founders with AccelerateHer Programme
 - Pathways to Scale programme - we support 25 female founders through this and that's about removing those barriers to opportunity of early stage, companies then able to apply for some grant funding up to £20,000
- 100 public sector organizations provide business support. On one hand you can argue lots of provision that exists out there on the other hand, is it clear and visible and accessible to others and can we do something to improve this?
- Business Support Partnership is 39 public sector organisations, and its aim is to make business support simpler and that we can be clear on the type of support to be provided to businesses at the right point and their journey.
- Within these 100 public sector orgs, the data on provision of support is not as easily accessible as it should be.
- Through the Civtech challenge, we've developed a 'single master customer record', that all public sector bodies can have and that provides that important data and insights and captures information in a consistent manner.
- 532 different services available on Find Business Support (FBS) - many women are unaware of what's accessible or struggle to find the right support at the right time.
- There is no shortage of support that's available. It's whether or not it's the right support for the right people at the right time in their journey.
- Business support needs improved visibility, more streamlined, less confusing – consistent data capturing needed to do this.
- Women are more likely to engage in programmes etc when time commitments and expectations are clearly outlined.
- Showcasing female role models and ensuring inclusive language and imagery encourages more participation.
- Strong support networks help women feel more confident and supported in growing their businesses.

Michelle Thomson MSP picks up on points made by Elaine on the importance of data and stresses it's something Ivan Mckee MSP also knows is very important.

Nathalie Agnew – Q. 81% of a GVA came from the services industry last year in the UK. I run a services business with nearly 3 million pounds in turnover, 33 staff and really big growth ambitions however I've tried to find support from places Scottish Enterprise and I've been advised on a displacement, I tried to apply for the pathways program but told that it wasn't applicable to service based businesses and not to apply at all. Do you recognize the gap in support for services-based businesses and the huge impact that helping the services industry to grow, would have in the economy?

Elaine Morrison – A. I had gone to the team who deliver the pathways program to ask whether service industries were excluded, and I was told no so let's pick up separately.

Katrina – Q. Business Support is brilliant. Where is the support for the women, for the individual, for the business founder?

Elaine Morrison – A. We need to think about the way in which we promote the assistance available because there is support there for women, but it's not targeted specifically at women, which I think is the key component. On Find Business Support 0.01% of searches are for women support – people don't look for something with that tag therefore we don't promote it as such. This maybe causes the perception the support isn't out there so we need to take that away and think about how we can make sure people see themselves as a recipient of that support.

Closing Remarks

The Convener thanked all speakers and members for joining meeting. Highlights the next CPG will be held in May 2025 and urges people to complete the WES Survey of Women in Enterprise.