

COMMUNITY WEALTH BUILDING PRACTICE

North Lanarkshire Council: Growing the Social Enterprise Sector

Context

North Lanarkshire's [Social Enterprise Framework \(2021-2026\)](#) defines social enterprises as trading businesses with a primary mission of delivering social or environmental benefits, reinvesting any surplus into the business or community, and operating with clear governance and accountability. The Framework sets out three strategic priorities: stimulating sector activity, strengthening organisations, and realising market opportunities.

Strategically, this Framework is a key component of the Council's broader vision for inclusive growth and prosperity, as articulated in [The Plan for North Lanarkshire](#). That plan aims to ensure that economic regeneration reaches all communities, reducing inequality and poverty. The framework also aligns with North Lanarkshire's [Community Wealth Building \(CWB\) Statement](#) and emerging action plan. Stimulating and growing the local SE landscape directly feeds into the CWB pillar 'Inclusive Ownership' and provides a best-practice example for a tangible action that can be taken to progress this pillar.

Funding for the Development Support for the SE Sector Programme was secured through UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), under Intervention S22, which supports the growth of the local social economy - covering community businesses, cooperatives, and social enterprises. The Council chose an open tender with clearly defined KPIs but no prescriptive delivery method, allowing bidders to tailor their approach to local needs and develop innovative solutions

[Inspirent](#), an experienced provider of business support, itself a 'for-good' business with no shareholders, successfully won the contract in a partnership bid with CEIS. This was their first programme tailored specifically for social enterprise in North Lanarkshire.



The project's implementation required collaboration across several internal teams, including business support, external funding, and procurement.

What did the Development Support programme involve?

The primary aim of this contract was to support the development and growth of social enterprises across North Lanarkshire. This was to be achieved through a combination of one-to-one support, group sessions, and structured programmes, engaging a minimum of 120 participants. The support was designed to focus on key areas essential to social enterprise success, including governance, funding, trading, and income generation, tendering and procurement, marketing, recruitment, and business planning. In addition, the programme sought to identify previously unlisted social enterprises, facilitate the creation of 30 new enterprises, support the development of the North Lanarkshire Social Enterprise Network (NLSEN), and deliver four themed sector events aligned to current sectoral needs.



Format: Three Accelerator cohorts were delivered, providing an intensive, structured support journey for 38 entrepreneurs. Each cohort benefitted from expert-led weekly workshops, followed by more in-depth one-to-one support sessions, applying each topic on the social entrepreneur's organisation.

The programme embedded inclusion and accessibility throughout its delivery. Support was adapted for neurodivergent individuals, non-native English speakers, and deaf participants. Measures included hiring translators, using visual aids, and reformatting content for better comprehension, a best practice model for future initiatives.

Outcomes and impact

Participants reported increased confidence, enhanced business knowledge, and a clearer understanding of the resources and support available to them. Many applied this learning directly, resulting in improvements to key operational areas such as funding strategies, internal systems, and marketing approaches.

A particularly strong legacy of the programme was the emergence of a collaborative, supportive community among participants. Entrepreneurs regularly continued their engagement beyond the formal sessions, exchanging ideas, offering peer support, and forming new working relationships. This spirit of mutual learning not only enhanced



individual outcomes but also contributed to a more connected and resilient social enterprise ecosystem.

In addition, council officers and delivery partners gained a far richer understanding of the vibrancy, needs, and diversity of the local SE landscape—insights which are now informing SE and CWB strategic planning and ongoing sector development.

The programme successfully supported:

- 82 organisations supported, including 48 not previously recorded
- Over 120 individuals engaged
- 8 SEs created, with 11 more in the pipeline
- 5 sector-themed events delivered

Learnings

A key challenge was engaging and supporting new social enterprise start-ups. While the programme aimed to create 30, only eight were fully registered during the contract period, with another eleven in active development. This shortfall reflected the longer incubation period typical of social enterprises, which often require time to refine ideas, address legal structures, and build community links. The programme effectively nurtured these early-stage ventures and signposted them to ongoing support from partners such as Business Gateway, Just Enterprise, Firstport, and Voluntary Action North Lanarkshire (VALN). This experience highlighted the need for funders and delivery partners to consider longer, more flexible timelines when supporting SE start-ups.

An important learning from the programme was the need for earlier and more strategic collaboration with local partners to enhance outreach and pipeline development. While the programme did engage a range of stakeholders, it became clear that deeper involvement from community-facing organisations (such as local police, fire services, existing social enterprises, and grassroots groups) could have significantly improved identification and engagement of potential social enterprise founders. These partners often have close relationships within communities and can play a key role in surfacing individuals with lived experience of local issues who may be well-placed to lead social ventures. Had these relationships been formalised earlier, particularly during programme planning and recruitment phases, the Accelerator could have more effectively targeted underrepresented or latent community entrepreneurs.

Reflecting on the process, an important area for improvement was the need to adopt a more collaborative, multi-partner approach to designing and delivering future social enterprise support. Engaging a wider range of stakeholders would help mobilise the full

“The key take away for us, was that the Social Enterprise sector is much stronger in North Lanarkshire than it’s sometimes been given credit for.”



local ecosystem to better identify needs, promote opportunities, and sustain long-term engagement.

Many of the social entrepreneurs who took part were juggling multiple roles within small organisations, so asking them to commit substantial time to a support programme was an anticipated challenge. To overcome this, the delivery team focused on flexibility, offering varied session formats and personalised one-to-one support. Once participants saw the value of the programme and the tangible improvements it brought to their organisations, commitment levels remained high throughout.

A particularly rewarding but unexpected challenge emerged around accessibility needs. A significant number of participants required additional support, including BSL interpretation, language translation, and adjustments for neurodivergent learners. These adaptations not only enabled wider participation but also deepened understanding across both council services and the delivery partner about the importance of inclusive design. This has led to a longer-term commitment to build neurodiversity awareness and accessibility training into future programmes and service delivery – an unexpected source of learning for both partners.

The revitalisation of the North Lanarkshire Social Enterprise Network (NLSEN) was initially seen as a potential challenge. Past disengagement and leadership transitions had affected the momentum of the network. However, the programme used events like “Connect, Collaborate, Celebrate” to re-establish connections and model the benefits of collective working. By delivering events in SE-run spaces, using SE-led catering, and encouraging collaboration at every stage, the programme demonstrated the potential of a strong, self-sustaining network.

Sustainability and next steps

As of 2025, the programme’s legacy is being carried forward through:

- Plans to fund a dedicated role to support development of the NLSEN.
- Use of learning to inform the next Social Enterprise/Social Economy Strategy (due 2026), which will link closely with the council’s Community Wealth Building Action Plan.
- Continued collaboration with organisations like VANL and Business Gateway to nurture SE pipeline development.
- Further outreach and education to demystify the process of starting a social enterprise and draw in new founders.

Crucially, the programme has demonstrated that North Lanarkshire’s SE sector is stronger, more diverse, and more vibrant than previously understood. With continued support, the foundations laid by this programme will enable inclusive economic growth rooted in community-led solutions.

