

Building Bristol's Diverse Social Economy

Local Access Programme Stage 1: 2023-2024 Final Report

Background

Voscur is a key delivery partner within the Bristol Local Access Programme (LAP), led by Bristol and Bath Regional Capital (BBRC) and funded by Access: The Foundation for Social Investment.

The objectives of the Programme are to:

- increase opportunities for diverse and marginalised entrepreneurs to thrive in business
- grow access to/understanding of social finance
- build social impact amongst Bristol VCSE enterprises
- provide business development support



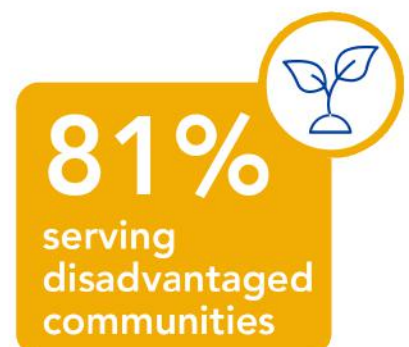
The Bristol LAP Delivery Partners are Black South West Network; Bristol & Bath Regional Capital; The School for Social Entrepreneurs and Voscur, with ACH (Ashley Community Housing) and Street2Boardroom participating as Advisory Partners.

Summary

Stage 1 of the Local Access Programme (LAP) ran from January 2023 to June 2024.

During this time, Voscur worked with 90 unique Bristol social enterprises, providing training and skills, consultancy, peer relationship brokerage and bespoke one to one support. Many enterprise clients engaged with multiple programme elements, with 127 support interventions carried out overall.

81% of those engaging with the LAP were enterprises serving communities of disadvantage with the majority rooted in the communities they serve. The Voscur LAP has fed the circular social economy in Bristol by investing in skilled social enterprise leaders who provide impactful consultancy services.



While the social enterprise sector in Bristol continues to grow with a high rate of start-ups, many enterprises do not sustain in the long term; nationally one in three social enterprises operates for less than three years (source: 2023 State of the Sector Report: Social Enterprise UK).

For social enterprises to deliver lasting social mobility, foster equality, inclusion, participation, and diversity, they need to sustain and thrive in the medium to long term, rather than being short lived. The LAP has focused on sustainability, scale, and readiness for social investment.

Voscur has achieved this through trusted city-wide partnerships and relationships which enabled us to reach and support social enterprises in the most under-served parts of Bristol. The demand for social enterprise support has been high, driven by referrals from Voscur's development and outreach team, as well as a targeted, sustained promotional campaign and a clearly articulated and inclusive offer.

Programme objectives have been achieved through Stage 1 of the LAP, and the following report marks the successes and positive impacts, as well using learning to develop the Stage 2 Programme (July 2024 – March 2025).

The input has been invaluable. Really amazing. We've made new connections, increased our resilience, and gained so much confidence in running our CIC.

Client

Social Enterprise Development Event

March 2023

Easton Community Centre



Programme Elements

The Voscur LAP focused on supporting and building capacity within social enterprises particularly in communities facing inequality. The activities undertaken included:

- One-to-one social enterprise support
- Enterprise Consultancy
- Preparation for social investment
- Leadership Development
- Training/skills

We worked with charities and community groups starting to trade and generate their own income, as well as new and established social enterprises. Each client organisation was encouraged to engage with all parts of the programme that are useful for them at their stage of development.

The following section presents what took place under each of the programme activities.

One-to-one Social Enterprise Support

Voscur's bespoke social enterprise support enabled both new and well-established enterprises to access support and advice. 40 organisations engaged in diagnostic meetings, which provided a baseline of an organisation's governance, resilience, financial situation, and capacity to scale.



Following baseline discussions, advice and information was provided on the following topics:

- Business development
- Governance
- Financial planning
- Diversifying income / increasing trading
- Social investment preparation
- Community engagement
- Marketing and communications

Case Study: Baby Bank Bristol

Over the summer of 2023, Bristol's Baby Bank Network received one-to-one support from Voscur's Enterprise team. Becky Gilbert, CEO of the charity shared the following feedback:

"The ongoing enterprise support that we received was fantastic. Setting up a charity shop is brand new to us, and having a friendly face to bounce ideas off, think aloud with and who could point us in the right direction for further support was really useful."



Becky Gilbert, CEO
Baby Bank Network, Bristol

"Voscur's support helped me think about the bigger picture but also focus on our most important aims to make it achievable and avoid overwhelm."

"As well as support directly from Voscur, I was put in touch with other people with relevant experience and expertise who were also generous with their time and resources. This has been a great service, and I would definitely recommend it."

Enterprise Consultancy

The enterprise consultancy element paired experienced social entrepreneurs (Enterprise Associates) with social enterprise clients. Two days of consultancy were provided per client organisation, with the most commonly requested support focusing on business planning, income generation, product development, marketing, and communications.

11 Enterprise Associates based across the West of England were recruited to provide consultancy, 3 of whom are from minoritised backgrounds. 7 of the Enterprise Associates are leading charities and social enterprises in priority neighbourhoods (top 20% Bristol Indices of Multiple Deprivation wards).

A total of 192 hours of specialist social enterprise consultancy was provided to local enterprises at a rate of just £35 per day to ensure an accessible and affordable support provision. Positive benefits were seen by both Enterprise Associates and their social enterprise clients.

"It was great to share our knowledge and know that in a relatively short time we were able to make fairly significant changes to improve process and communications and in turn decision making and impact in a great organisation. There was also opportunity for me to learn from [the client] in areas and share knowledge and experiences."

K, Enterprise Associate

"We benefitted from bespoke support to help us develop organisational strategy, Theory of Change and Fundraising to support our new direction of travel."
Client

Case Study: Bedminster Down Community Farm

In January 2024 members of the Bedminster Down Community Farm team attended the Voscur Local Access Programme Unlocking Social Enterprise event, which they found **"extremely useful"**, commenting, **"the Finance session for non-Finance managers was great!"**. Directors reported feeling **"more energised in the role as a result."**

"We gained so much confidence in running our CIC."

Lizzie Stephens, Director
Bedminster Down Community Farm

Following the event and positive one-to-one support, in Spring 2024, Bedminster Down Community Farm received two days of enterprise consultancy from a Social Enterprise Associate, who is part of the leadership team at Redcatch Community Garden.



Preparation for Social Investment

Upskilling social enterprises to enable them to understand social investment loan finance was a key objective of the LAP.

A workshop was held in January 2024 and attended by 30 social enterprise organisations, with a speaker from Good Finance/Better Society Capital, providing advice and information on how social finance works.

Social Investment Workshop

January 2024
The Hub, Lockleaze



Voscur worked with 8 clients to provide advice and prepare to apply for a social investment loan, but the Local Access Programme pathway to the sub-£50k loan was not available during LAP Stage 1. Two clients have received social investment from other social financiers outside of the Local Access Programme. Others, such as client organisation The Mazi Project, have sought to increase their trading capacity rather than pursuing social investment.

Case Study: The Mazi Project

Voscur supported The Mazi Project to consider social investment, as well as signposting and advice on new premises, transport options, intellectual property, governance, and peer learning. Director, Melanie Vaxevanakis commented,

“Voscur helped me understand the world of social investment and the path to receiving it, enabling us to grow.”

Melanie noted that the Voscur-led business planning discussions have helped The MAZI Project to *“reflect on what we are currently doing and what we need to be working towards to help us become self-sustainable.”*



Leadership Development Programme

The Voscur Social Enterprise Leadership Programme, which ran from November 2023 to March 2024, had a profound impact on the 20 Bristol-based social enterprise leaders who participated.

To increase inclusion, social enterprises participating in the programme received places for just £100 (heavily discounted from the full cost of £1200 per place) to help ensure that cost was not a barrier to participation.

The programme's focus on self-reflection, growth, and relationship-building led to significant changes in the leaders' approaches to their work and personal lives. Participants reported increased self-awareness, confidence, and ability to lead change, with tangible outcomes such as improved relationships with staff and a more effective approach to risk management.



Leadership Development Programme

November 2023 until March 2024



Participant Kate Humphrey of Arnos Vale Cemetery Trust noted, ***"I came away thinking about what kind of leader I want to be, and how to use my own tools to get there."***



The LAP project has some really lovely, impactful examples of organisations pooling and sharing learning to assist each other and our communities.

Social Enterprise Associate



The programme's impact was felt not only by the individual leaders but also by their social enterprises, which benefited from their enhanced leadership capabilities.

The Enterprise Associates benefitted from fully funded places on the Social Enterprise Leadership Development Programme, and an 'experienced leader' cohort was run specifically for these Associates to provide appropriately paced and pitched learning.

Training and Events

Two large training and networking events were held in March 2023 and January 2024, with over 50 participating social enterprises. These events provided an opportunity for peer networking, interactive workshops and presentations, as well as a panel Q&A discussion.

Unlocking Social Enterprise Event

January 2024

The Hub, Lockleaze



Three training workshops were carried out, both in person and online, with a focus on diversifying income and understanding finance within a social enterprise setting. 30 people attended these sessions, and reported positive learning outcomes, including the following feedback from a workshop participant,

"I have completely overhauled our management accounts and how I report on them - the trustees are delighted, and we have a better understanding of our position than we have ever had before. That extra understanding is already helping with how we approach our strategy and our income generation."

When asked what they would do differently as a result of attending the sessions, participants noted they would:

"Make it clearer how we are performing against our budget at our trustees meetings and what that means for our future decisions"

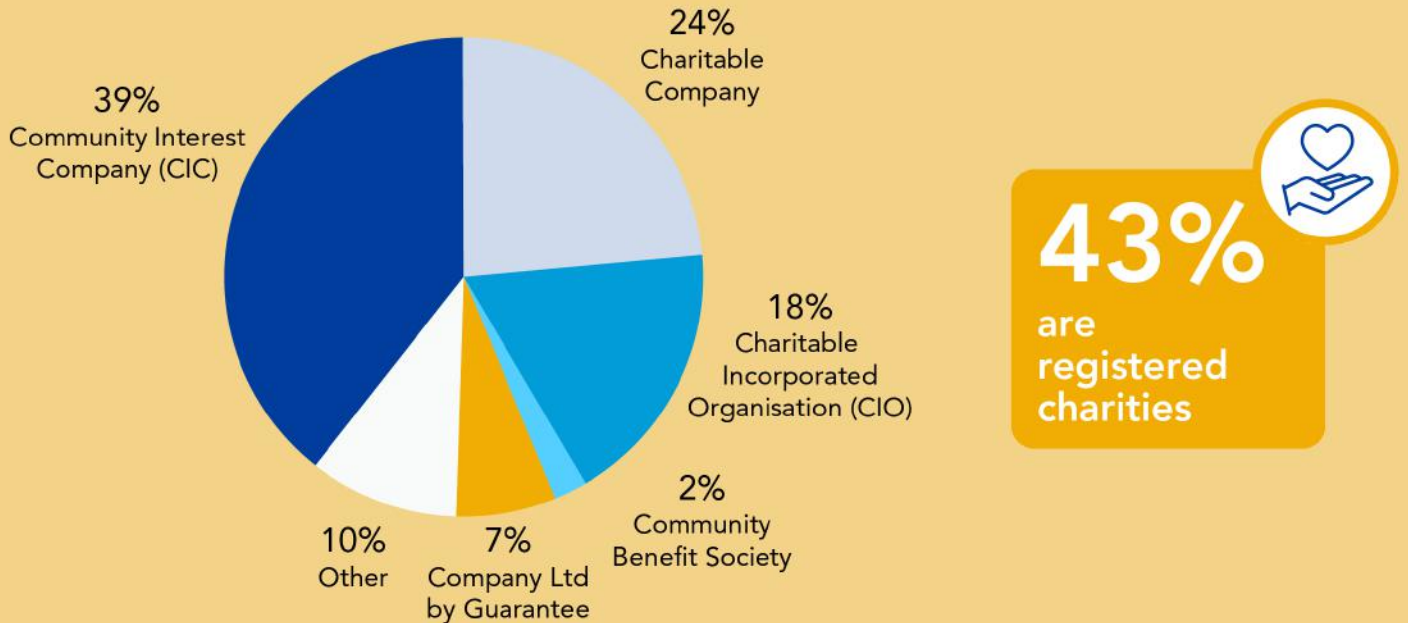
"Request more tailored information from accounts. The added confidence is helping us in the process of producing budgets for departments for the first time."

Two 'lunch and learn' sessions were held online to enable inspiring social enterprises to tell their stories, and for participants to ask questions. 13 people attended these sessions, which allowed for mutual learning, peer support and new connections to be established.

Our Participants

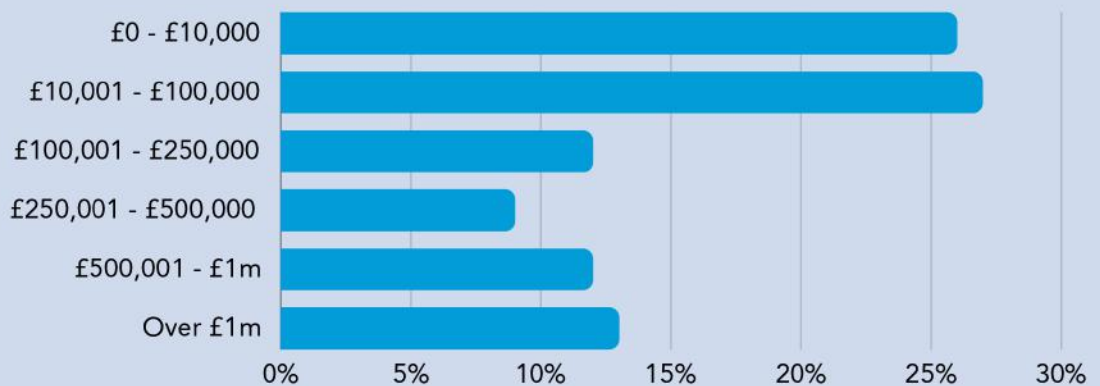
Type of Organisation

A variety of organisations participated in Voscur's LAP Stage 1, of which 43% were charities.



Organisation's Annual Income

The majority of social enterprises Voscur worked with had an annual income of £100,000 or below, with more than a quarter having an annual income of £0 - £10,000.



Organisation Leadership

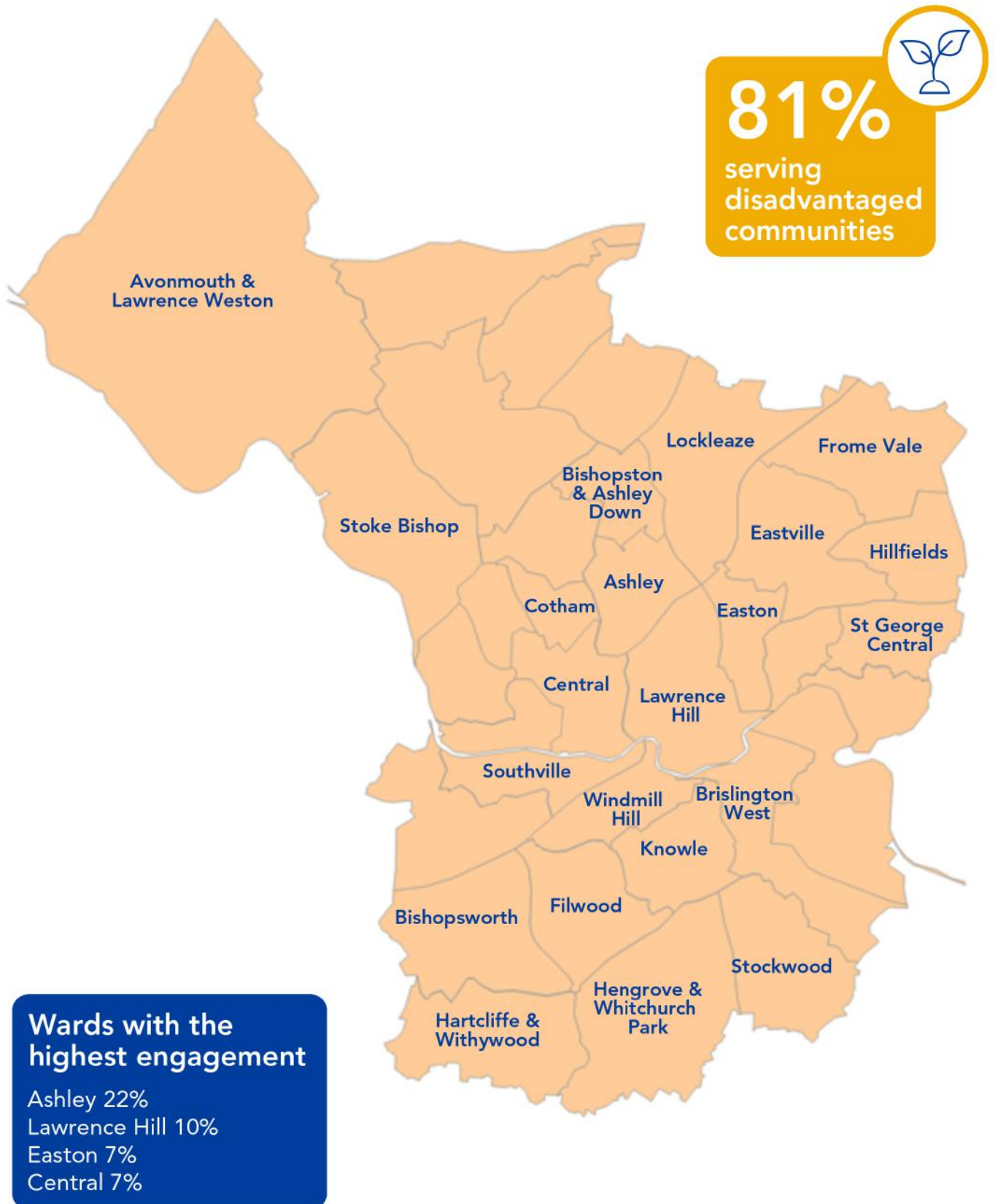
Nearly half of the organisations who participated identified as being 'equalities-led'.



Geographic Reach

Organisations participating were based across the majority of Bristol, with 81% working within wards that are identified in the top 20% of the most deprived in the UK (Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019).

The map below identifies the wards in which participating organisations are based within Bristol.

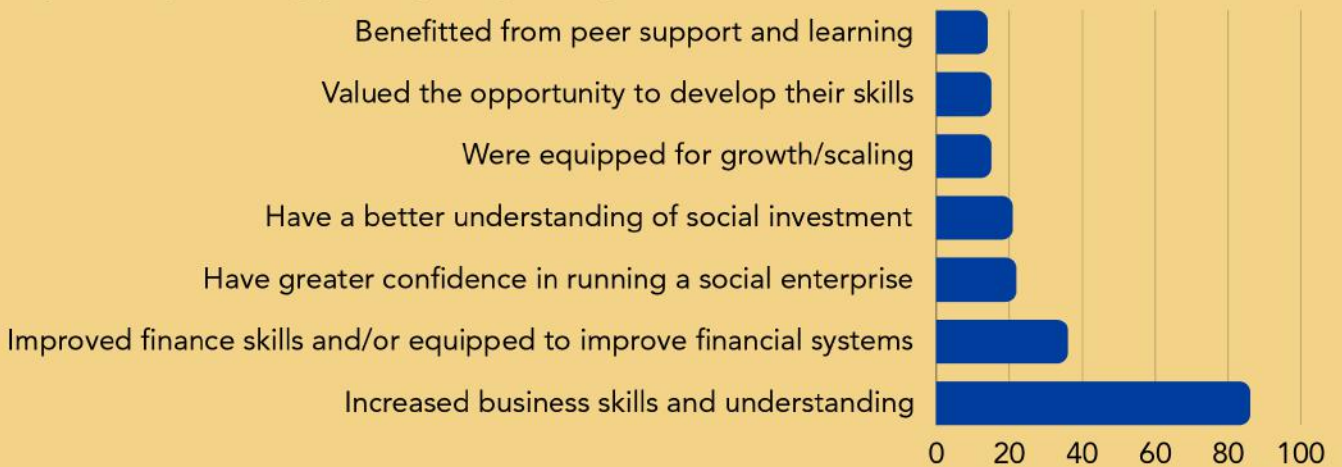


Participant Feedback

How useful was the training / enterprise consultancy you received from Voscur?



Impacts reported by participating enterprises (%)



Future Plans and Learning

Voscur identified new topics and support areas which VCSE sector organisations in would like to expand their understanding, including risk management and use of AI. Stage 2 of the Local Access Programme will see 16 workshops delivered for social enterprises, and a significant focus on small scale (under £50,000) social investment loans.

Targeted consultancy from local social enterprise experts will again be on offer in this stage of the Programme, and additional Enterprise Associates have been recruited to meet demand for business, finance and social investment advice and support. Clearer branding and programme wide communications in Stage 2 of the Programme will increase understanding and visibility, generating demand and improving the client experience.



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