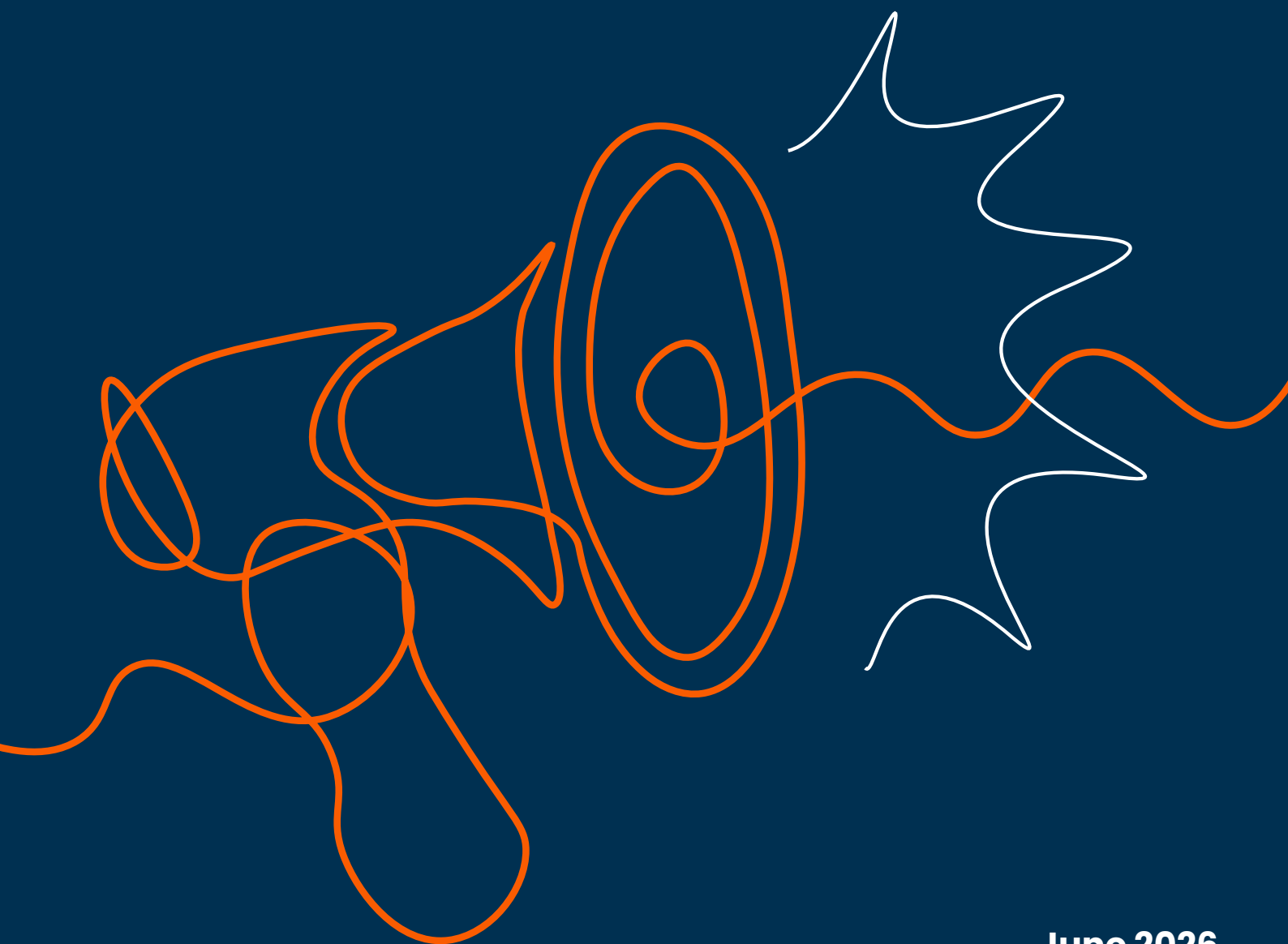


Exclusion and Enterprise

Entrepreneurship, Poverty and
Breaking Down Barriers



Foreword

Blair McDougall MP

Minister for Small Business



Across our high streets, market stalls, industrial estates, and at kitchen tables, new businesses are forged and innovation, jobs, and communities are created. Entrepreneurship is a powerful engine for economic growth and a vital route for social mobility.

But the Maple Review confronts an uncomfortable truth: talent and determination are spread evenly across society, but opportunity is not.

Too many people with the potential to build successful businesses are held back by barriers that have nothing to do with the quality of their ideas, and everything to do with their starting point in life. Systematic blockers like financial exclusion, digital poverty, and a lack of inherited networks make entrepreneurship far more difficult for founders without this crucial support.

This matters, not only because it is unfair, but because it represents a significant missed opportunity for our economy and our communities. Which is why this Government is committed to building an economy where opportunity is universal.

When people from areas of economic deprivation are able to start and sustain businesses, the benefits ripple outward: productivity and employment increase, local supply chains strengthen, and talent is unlocked across the UK.

The Maple Review brings together one of the most substantial evidence bases to date on entrepreneurship among people in areas of economic deprivation. It is a call to action to government, corporate partners, and the entire business support community. We have a shared responsibility to ensure that the chance to succeed in business is determined solely by the quality of an idea and the founder's drive, not their background.

I welcome its challenge and look forward to working with partners across the country as we look at its recommendations and continue our work to ensure that entrepreneurship in the UK is not a privilege, but a genuine possibility open to all.

Defining Economic Hardship

For the purposes of this report, economic hardship is defined in a number of ways in order to understand the impact of economic difficulties on a person's life opportunities. The important factor for the Maple Review is to understand where those economic hardships are causing barriers that otherwise would not be there and look for ways to bring those barriers down.

Poverty is defined through different approaches in the UK. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and the Social Metrics Commission, define poverty as follows, *'When a person's resources (mainly their material resources) are not sufficient to meet their minimum needs (including social participation).'*¹ For the purposes of this report, the Maple Review has adopted the Joseph Rowntree Foundation definition.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation also notes that *'Poverty is not a static condition. Resources rise and fall as do needs and people's ability to meet them. Individuals can move in and out of poverty over time – so it may be temporary, recurrent or persistent over longer periods. Though the risk of experiencing poverty exists for many more than are in poverty at any one point in time, some people and groups are far more vulnerable to poverty than others. Thinking about poverty in a dynamic way implies a focus on preventing poverty as well as routes out of it.'*

The Government measures poverty as relative low income (people living in households with income below 60% of the median in that year) and absolute low income (people living in households with income below 60% of median income in a base

year, adjusted for inflation). This is further adjusted to reflect both with and without housing costs.

For the purposes of this research, participants have self-defined as living in or having experienced economic hardship either growing up or as an adult. There is little available robust data on the number of current entrepreneurs that have come from a background of economic hardship, and it is an area of disclosure many entrepreneurs do not feel comfortable with. Data from Small Business Britain research over the last five years suggests around a quarter (25%) of entrepreneurs have experienced economic hardship at some point in their life. This number, however, does not capture the people who have never had the opportunity to give entrepreneurship a go. What is also clear from the Maple research is that entrepreneurs who do start from a background of hardship will be less financially successful over time.

Whilst there is not a baseline to demonstrate that the following Maple Review interventions will increase economic impact by X millions of pounds, there is clearly a huge population of people, young people in education and adults now at an age to start a business, that are facing significant barriers or are costing the Government millions in welfare support.

Removing barriers to entrepreneurship is not just about increased access to starting a business, but is about reducing economic hardship overall. With the skills to generate income, individuals and households will certainly see more opportunities. And over time, all measures of economic hardship and poverty will benefit.

1 [A definition of poverty](#), Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2014

Foreword



Michelle Ovens CBE

Founder and CEO, Small Business Britain



Entrepreneurship is often spoken about as a route to opportunity, ambition and growth. It is celebrated as a symbol of aspiration: the chance to build something of your own, to create independence, to shape your future. But for many people in the UK today, starting a business is not a lifestyle choice or a passion project. It is a survival strategy.

For those who have experienced economic hardship, entrepreneurship can represent the most viable route to stability in an insecure labour market. It can offer flexibility where employment does not. It can offer dignity where systems have failed. And it can offer a pathway to financial independence where opportunity has too often been limited. But it also comes with significant risk, particularly for those who begin without savings, assets, networks, or a safety net.

This is the reality we must confront. Too often, our economic system is skewed towards helping people with assets grow assets, rather than helping those from a standing start to build something of their own. Business support, finance, and growth infrastructure frequently assume a level of security that many founders simply do not have. The result is that those who could benefit most from entrepreneurship are often those least able to access the tools that make it possible.

Where you come from still has a disproportionate impact on where you can get to. That correlation remains far too strong in the UK and if we are serious about social mobility, inclusive growth, and a thriving entrepreneurial economy, we must do more to reduce it.

The scale of economic hardship in Britain today makes this urgent. According to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 14.3 million people are living in poverty, and of those, 6 million are living in deep

A survival strategy

poverty. These are not marginal numbers. They represent a huge proportion of our society for whom the idea of starting a business can feel impossibly distant, not because of a lack of ambition or ideas, but because the risks are simply too high.

Economic hardship does not fall equally. Women are disproportionately affected: 5.2 million of the 8.1 million adults living in poverty (64%) are women. This is even more acute for single mothers, with 45% of single mums living in poverty, significantly higher than the national average. These disparities are particularly stark at the intersection of race and gender, where women of colour face some of the most significant structural barriers to entrepreneurship. Disability is also a major driver of hardship, with a poverty rate of 30% among Disabled people, around 10 percentage points higher than the general population. These inequalities shape who is able to take entrepreneurial risk, and who is forced to prioritise survival.

And this is one of the most important findings of the Maple Review: founders from economically disadvantaged backgrounds often cannot afford to think about growth in the way policy assumes they should. Stability comes first. When you are building a business without a financial cushion, when one unexpected cost can derail everything, ambition is constrained by reality. The business may be viable, but the founder is working without a net and that lack of security can be paralysing.

Confidence is also central. Entrepreneurship demands self-belief, resilience, and the ability to navigate uncertainty. Yet for many founders who have experienced hardship, confidence has been eroded by exclusion, by financial insecurity, and by systems that are difficult to access or trust. Starting a business is hard for anyone. Starting a business when you feel the stakes are existential is something else entirely.

This is why we cannot underestimate the importance of starting early. If entrepreneurship is to become a genuine pathway out of poverty, it cannot be something people only discover later in life after opportunity has already narrowed. We need clearer routes into business for young people, particularly in economically deprived areas, where extracurricular opportunities and role models are too often absent. Business skills are not universally taught, and without intervention, inequality simply reproduces itself.

**14.3
million**

**Number of people
living in poverty**

45%

**of single mothers
are living in
poverty**

This report brings together one of the largest evidence bases to date on entrepreneurship among people who have experienced economic hardship. Drawing on a national survey of over 600 entrepreneurs from a background of poverty, focus groups with entrepreneurs from across the UK, and more than 80 written submissions to the Call for Evidence from a huge number of organisations working in this area, it reveals a system that consistently fails those without assets, savings, confidence, or institutional trust.

What emerges is not a story of individual failure, but of structural gaps. People from deprived backgrounds are starting businesses in significant numbers. They are resilient, resourceful and deeply motivated. Yet the support system around them is fragmented, hard to navigate, and often designed for a very different type of founder.

The work of the Maple Review is not the only initiative in this sector, and there are many, many activities going on to combat this endemic challenge. There is work being undertaken to look at growing CDFIs in the UK, albeit from a tiny base at present; there are initiatives by the Careers and Enterprise Company to bring business skills and experience into schools across the UK; and there is the Government's Youth Guarantee moving towards opening up opportunities for young people from all backgrounds. There are also many fantastic schemes across the country, from organisations such as the King's Trust, Young Enterprise and more with many charities working at a local level to deliver change.

However, despite this, the situation has got worse in recent years. Poverty rates are up, economic inactivity is up, and the number of small businesses is significantly down. Something needs to change at a national level.

This report is a call to build an entrepreneurial economy where opportunity is not determined by your starting point and where business ownership can truly become a route out of poverty, not another barrier to overcome.

The Maple Review sets out a clear challenge: to **build a system where entrepreneurship is not a privilege for the secure, but a possibility for everyone.**

A possibility not a privilege

Executive summary



Key Recommendations

1**Introduce a National Public–Private Business Skills Guarantee for Secondary Schools**

Ensure every young person has access to business skills, role models and entrepreneurial pathways before leaving education, starting with schools in the most economically deprived areas and reaching all state secondary schools by 2030.

2**Create a National Micro-Capital System for Asset-Poor Founders**

Establish micro-loans as core economic infrastructure, recognising that small amounts of capital, when paired with support can unlock viability for founders starting without savings, assets or a safety net.

3**Reform Welfare-to-Enterprise Transitions**

Redesign welfare and self-employment rules so founders are not forced to take unsustainable risks before their businesses are viable, including more realistic runways, transitional support and faster access to Access to Work.

4**Make Financial Confidence a Core Part of Enterprise Support**

Treat financial confidence, understanding cash flow, pricing and compliance, as essential infrastructure for business survival and growth, not a “soft” add-on.

5**Fund Digital Inclusion as Economic Infrastructure**

Ensure all founders can access the digital tools, connectivity and skills now essential to running a business, recognising that digital exclusion is a primary barrier to participation and growth.

6**Invest in Long-Term Mentoring and Peer Networks**

Shift away from short-term, transactional interventions towards sustained mentoring and peer support, delivered by people with lived experience, recognising that relationships change outcomes.

7**Adopt Strengths-Based, Trauma-Informed Enterprise Support**

Redesign enterprise systems to reduce fear, complexity and stigma, recognising that stability and wellbeing are prerequisites for sustainable business growth.

8**Target Enterprise Interventions at Those Most Excluded**

Explicitly design and fund enterprise support to reach women, single mothers, Disabled founders and people from ethnic minority backgrounds, recognising that poverty and exclusion do not affect all groups equally and that neutral policy risks reinforcing inequality.

Entrepreneurship is playing an increasingly important role for people who have experienced economic hardship. For many, it represents the most viable route to financial independence, flexibility, and stability in a labour market that may have failed to offer secure alternatives.

However, the evidence gathered through the Maple Review shows that the UK does not currently have a robust system to support these founders effectively. Financial and digital exclusion, confidence deficits and fragmented business support are not separate challenges; they form an interconnected system failure that blocks business viability at the earliest stages.

Many founders coming from a background of economic hardship start businesses with little or no personal capital, limited access to credit, and a high fear of debt. Unsurprisingly, 63% report lacking personal savings to invest, 60% face uncertainty around cash flow, and almost half struggle to access start-up loans or grants.

Support is often poorly timed or inaccessible. More than half of businesses surveyed did not know where to get business support when starting out. Where support does exist, it is frequently short-term, generic, and disconnected from the realities of poverty, caring responsibilities, disability or trauma.

Despite this, ambition remains strong. Most founders want to sustain their businesses, increase revenue, and make a positive contribution to their communities. The evidence is clear: with the right mix of micro-capital, long-term mentoring, accessible digital tools and confidence-building support, many more of these businesses could survive and grow.

The Maple Review calls for a fundamental shift in how entrepreneurship policy is designed and delivered. Moving away from a system that rewards those who already have resources, to one that actively builds capability, confidence and resilience among those starting from the least.

“Growing up in poverty you just don’t get the same kind of opportunities or have any kind of safety net when it comes to running a business. Despite now being an accountant, I can say poverty leaves behind so much fear around money and debt, so much so it took me 41 years to set up myself when I should have done it years before.”

Stuart Hurst

Founder, *Cloud 10 Accounting*



Effort and ingenuity should shape success, not background.



Grace Graham

Founder of Workspa and Co-Chair of the Maple Review

We often speak about entrepreneurship as the ultimate expression of that belief. But this Review makes something very clear: for many people, starting a business is not about chasing opportunity. It is about creating stability where there has been none.

As a woman of colour who relied on external support to build WorkSpa, I understand what it means to navigate systems that were not designed with you in mind. I built without financial cushioning and within an ecosystem where representation was scarce. When you do not see yourself reflected, it quietly shapes what you believe is possible. Much of what this report uncovers is not abstract to me. It is a lived experience.

The data reinforces what many of us have felt quietly for years. 56% of entrepreneurs surveyed say low confidence negatively impacted their business, and this statistic is comprised of many different layers of confidence and identity: without role models and early life support, people will not see themselves as entrepreneurs, and won't invest in their own ideas, believing that the entrepreneurial world is not even open to them. This is exacerbated by a severe lack of access to finance, as 50% did not know how to access finance when starting up.

Barriers compound. Women, Disabled founders and those from racially marginalised backgrounds often face additional layers of scrutiny, doubt or invisibility when seeking investment or support. For many starting from economic hardship, the risk is not theoretical. It is deeply personal. One wrong decision can mean real instability. That reality shapes how people approach debt, growth and even their own sense of possibility.

This report is a direct challenge to this current system, which penalises entrepreneurs based on their inherited resources. For those starting from disadvantage, the risk is existential, and practical support is essential not only for the survival of their businesses, but for sustained growth.

The Maple Review provides a pragmatic blueprint for change. From its focus on financial inclusion and simplifying the support system for those who would benefit most from it, to investing in peer networks and mentoring, the report's recommendations will help us to build capability and confidence among entrepreneurs from the ground up.

My hope is that this Review marks a turning point. We must transition from a model of enterprise support that serves the already-privileged to one that is explicitly designed for those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, which will, in turn, make entrepreneurship accessible to all. We have a moral and economic imperative to act on this evidence, ensuring that entrepreneurship becomes a truly viable pathway to dignity, stability, and control for every UK citizen, regardless of their starting point.

Entrepreneurship as Survival, Not Lifestyle

For many founders in this research, entrepreneurship is not driven by aspiration alone. It is a response to limited opportunities, insecure work, and a desire for control over income and time.

Nearly half of respondents were motivated by the need for flexibility, while over a third cited frustration with limited work opportunities. A quarter started their business following redundancy or crisis, and one in six said they had no other viable options.

Entrepreneurship is filling gaps left by the labour market, but often without the protections or support traditionally associated with employment.

One in six entrepreneurs from deprived backgrounds started a business because they had no other viable options



“[In our Barriers to Entrepreneurship for Female Entrepreneurs in the South West of England Report] financial precarity emerged as a central barrier to both business entry and growth. Participants frequently reported operating with limited savings, unstable income streams, and high household expenses, including housing costs, childcare, and family financial responsibilities.

“These financial pressures constrained entrepreneurs’ ability to invest in essential business inputs such as marketing, professional services, training, digital tools, and childcare support. Several participants described delaying or avoiding investment decisions due to concerns about affordability and financial risk.”

Dr Sarah Preedy

Lecturer in Enterprise, *University of Plymouth*

The Weight of Early Life Experience

Early life economic hardship has a lasting impact on confidence, ambition and risk tolerance.

An impact on confidence

- 60%** grew up in **low-income households**
- 22%** experienced **benefits or welfare dependency**
- 17%** experienced **food insecurity**
- 12%** experienced **unstable housing**
- 6%** experienced **homelessness**

These experiences shape how founders view debt, failure and institutions. Many internalise a belief that business success is “not for people like us”, which suppresses confidence and delays growth.



“There’s a societal expectation in the area where I grew up and it starts in school. You go to work in a trade and you are not encouraged to pursue dreams or passions that aren’t viewed as having a future. People will actively warn you against pursuing entrepreneurship and shoot down your ideas when confidence is most vulnerable.”

Richard Liverman

Founder, *Richer Solutions*

This is compounded by a lack of business education or engagement during education, with most leaving school or full time education with no business skills and no sense that starting a business is an option for them.

Programmes such as those offered by the King's Trust, which provide opportunities for young people to get skills, work and start a business, demonstrate that when young people are given access to business support, mentoring and skills at an early age there are huge opportunities that can come as a result. However, these programmes are limited, they're not part of the core curriculum and are unavailable to many young people.

Early business education is even less accessible to young people from marginalised groups. Evidence from the Maple Review suggests that women are often less encouraged to pursue entrepreneurship, and at the intersection of race, class, and gender, these discrepancies are even more prevalent.



“I went to a girls’ school, and at the time it wasn’t really a thing for girls to start businesses, so we didn’t have options like business studies available. I was into the arts, so for my GCSEs, I picked creative subjects and nothing practical.

“In college, there was no careers guidance, and at university, there was no careers guidance. I remember graduating and thinking ‘what do I do now?’” I’d also worked the whole way through my degree, around 25 hours a week, so I was behind in applying for grad schemes.

“Now, I’m really involved with the University of Birmingham, and they do so much to prepare students through their careers network, such as mentoring, talks, placements, and internships. But back then, there wasn’t anything.”

Ameesha Green

Founder, *The Bookshelf*

Financial Exclusion Is the First Barrier

The most consistent barrier identified through the Maple Review evidence is access to finance.

- 63%** lacked **personal savings** to invest
- 50%** did **not know how to access finance**
- 47%** **struggled to access** start-up loans or grants
- 60%** feared **cash flow instability**
- 47%** feared **taking on debt**

Existing finance options for entrepreneurs with a background of economic hardship are not meeting the needs of this sector

For many founders from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, the challenge is not that finance does not exist, but that existing products and routes can be difficult to access and may not be compatible with very small early-stage borrowing needs.

Traditional lending systems often rely on factors such as credit history, affordability assessments, documentation requirements and confidence in engaging with formal finance. For founders who are asset-poor with a limited credit history this can create significant friction at the earliest stage. Experian estimates that around half of UK adults have never checked their credit score, so large swathes of people will be unaware of why they are being turned down for credit.

This is an opportunity to improve alternative pathways into finance. Small, flexible capital, often in the range of £100–£5,000, is repeatedly identified as transformative, but hard to secure. Existing finance options provide an important foundation, but for entrepreneurs from economically disadvantaged backgrounds they are not yet consistently meeting needs at the earliest stage.

Excerpt – PWC and Totally Money

Our survey has revealed that millions of UK adults are under-served by the credit industry and as a result may lack financial resilience. Notably, this under-served group has grown considerably in the past six years, and we expect this trend to continue or even to accelerate.



As well as experiencing a lack of choice of credit options, to the under-served the credit system can appear complex and daunting. When making lending decisions financial institutions are often using information and data which are not well-understood by individuals. Individuals in the under-served population in particular do not always have a good understanding of their credit rating and how it impacts their financial lives.

We estimate there to be 20.2m financially under-served adults in the UK in 2022. This means that at least 1 in every 3 adults may have difficulty accessing credit from mainstream lenders.

Overlooked and Financially Under-served. Sizing the financially under-served population in the UK, Report, 2022

“A significant issue is access to finance. Government loan guarantees apply to loans of £25,000 and above. That’s not a sole trader or microbusiness. There’s a huge gap at the bottom end. We lend up to £5,000 because that’s all we can afford. And £5,000 can make a huge difference. That can be tools, a van, stock, a laptop, or the first few months’ rent. That’s often all someone needs to get going.”

Karen Davies

Founder, *Purple Shoots*



Many sole traders and microbusinesses describe difficulty accessing smaller-scale finance at the point they need it most. While larger government-backed schemes and established lending products play an important role in the market, some founders report that the level of finance they require is often far lower than standard lending thresholds, particularly during the earliest stages of business. Focus group discussions suggested this is not always a reluctance to borrow. Rather, available products do not always match immediate needs, timescales or borrowing amounts. Where suitable finance is unavailable, founders may delay investment or miss growth opportunities altogether.

In 2024, Responsible Finance shared that £141.6 million was delivered by CDFIs in small business loans, which according to British Business Bank data is less than a quarter of a percent of the UK small business lending market. In contrast, in the US the CDFI market has \$446 billion of assets and represents closer to 10-12% of the market, a significant scale larger than its UK comparable.

With some founders unable to access conventional lending, and community finance provision not yet operating at national scale, many viable businesses risk falling between existing routes rather than progressing through them. A more connected system; linking mainstream lenders, Start Up Loans, CDFIs, local support organisations and business advisers, could help more founders access the right finance at the right time.

“Purpose-led, ethical specialist providers, Community Development Finance Institutions (CDFIs), that are able to take a different approach to risk and lending, are struggling to meet demand, and do not currently work on a level playing field in terms of their own capacity to scale and operate sustainably.”

Fair Banking For All
Maple Review
Submission of Evidence



“I see clients end up in real difficulty because they already have County Court Judgements, no financial backing and no personal funds to fall back on...Businesses are not always failing because they are not viable, but because people have not had the education, advice or support to know where to turn.”

Claire Rulton
Director, Addison Accounts & Training Ltd



“The Start Up Loans Company is a fantastic offer, [but] there’s a whole raft of kitchen-table entrepreneurs that it isn’t reaching because they fail the very first test, which is having an acceptable credit score. And also, they often want to borrow much less: the average SULCO loan is like £7,000 to £9,000 and if they want to borrow less than £1,000 – or even less than £500. There are so many entrepreneurial people in communities across the UK – those who are under-employed or living on benefits and have poor credit scores - who only need to borrow £500 or so to get their business going or growing.”

Liza Kellett

Chief Executive, *Trust Leeds*

Case Study — Fair Banking for All

Sian, a mum and carer from Llandeilo, had built a successful bath and bodycare business, trading at craft fairs across Wales. When Covid struck, her business collapsed overnight. Because she had no premises or staff, Sian was ineligible for government support. Seeking to rebuild, she applied for a loan from a bank but was turned down.

Sian then contacted CDFI Purple Shoots, who sat down with her to discuss her business plan, and offered her a small start-up loan. With this support, Sian rebuilt her business, and expanded to other products including jewellery, furniture, and even ice cream.

“If it wasn’t for organisations like Purple Shoots who invest and support not only the business but also the person, I don’t know where I’d be. Whilst your request is assessed, it isn’t in a judgemental, stigmatised or condescending way... instead they’re able to give you the time and support to fit your needs... they realise that everyone has a past, but it’s where you are now that matters.”

Thanks to a small loan from Purple Shoots, Sian went from struggling to cover her essential bills to running a successful business employing seven people.



Business Support That Is Hard to Find and Hard to Trust

More than half of founders did not know where to get support when starting their business.

Where support was accessed, it was most often informal: family, friends or community groups. Banks, microfinance providers and national programmes played a minimal role.

Government programmes were widely seen as neutral or ineffective, with only a small minority reporting positive impact.

Support is described as:

- ✗ Generic rather than tailored
- ✗ Short-term and transactional
- ✗ Poorly signposted
- ✗ Inconsistent by location

This creates a postcode lottery, where access depends more on chance than design.

“If you’re in the creative industries, there’s often less business support. It’s generally dependent on the sector and the region, so if you’re in an area where traditional trades are emphasised during education, you’re a lot less likely to find support or advice on starting and growing a business.”

Ameesha Green

Founder, *The Bookshelf*

**More than half
of founders
surveyed did not
know where to
get support**

Digital Exclusion Is Blocking Modern Business

Digital capability is now essential for trading, compliance, marketing and finance, yet many founders lack access to tools, skills or affordable connectivity.

36% report **limited digital skills**

Founders describe building websites, managing accounts and marketing manually because digital tools can feel inaccessible, unaffordable or intimidating.

For Disabled founders, inaccessible platforms and portals act as a further barrier, excluding them from finance and support entirely.

Focus group discussions also revealed an age gap when it comes to digital adoption—older founders may not be immediately tech savvy enough to seek out further support, or even establish themselves on any digital platforms to drive engagement with new clients. An intersection of economic disadvantage and age also comes in; one might assume that younger founders would have quicker access to devices and technological awareness, but those coming from poverty may not have had the same access, and thus struggle from the start. As a lot of business support requires digital access, this creates a poverty cycle.

Whilst free software and training is available, there is a lack of awareness and accessibility among entrepreneurs with a background in economic hardship as they are often digitally excluded. This means when regulations come in, they can appear more overwhelming to this particular group than those with ready access to support, even if that support is free to access.

A poverty cycle caused from lack of digital access

Data Highlight: Digital Exclusion in the UK

Millions of UK adults lack basic digital skills or access

Good Things Foundation's *Digital Nation 2025* estimates that **7.9m people lack basic digital skills**, **21m adults can't complete essential digital tasks for work**, and **1.6m adults do not have a smartphone, tablet or laptop**.

Affordability remains a barrier to connectivity

Good Things Foundation research shows that around **1.9m UK households struggle to afford their mobile contract or broadband**, limiting their ability to access online services.

Digital exclusion disproportionately affects those in poverty

Analysis linking digital exclusion and deep poverty shows that internet access and digital participation are strongly associated with income, with exclusion more prevalent among those experiencing deep financial hardship.

Digital exclusion intersects with socio-economic inequality

Academic research shows that digital exclusion is linked to age, lower socio-economic status, disability and lower educational attainment, the same groups who are often most economically marginalised.³

A significant share of households face digital access gaps

Ofcom research indicates that around **7% of households struggle to afford broadband access**, and a proportion of households still lack reliable internet access or adequate devices, factors that hinder both personal and business participation online.²

Together, this evidence demonstrates that digital exclusion is not a marginal issue, it is a structural barrier to entrepreneurship and economic mobility and must be addressed as core economic infrastructure.

² Ofcom (2025), Pricing and consumer engagement report, Ofcom

³ Kulkarni, K. and Bhattacharya, S. (2023), Digital exclusion and digital empowerment: implications for understanding digital poverty, *Technology in Society*, Elsevier.

Confidence, Identity and Isolation

Confidence emerges as both a cause and consequence of exclusion.

25% Only a quarter felt supported or inspired to start a business

Isolation, lack of role models, and repeated rejection contribute to imposter syndrome and burnout. Networks are not a 'nice to have', they function as shadow infrastructure, generating customers, confidence and credibility.

This is also exacerbated at the intersections between different aspects of disadvantage: ethnic minority background founders, women, Disabled people, among others, may experience heightened discrimination due to their backgrounds, and will often have even fewer role models or positive experiences when trying to start or grow a business. All of these experiences compound to lower confidence if not addressed at a systemic level.

36%

of founders said low confidence has impacted their business.

Poverty and exclusion do not affect all groups equally

Economic hardship is not experienced evenly across society, and the Maple Review evidence makes clear that entrepreneurship policy cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach. Poverty is disproportionately concentrated among groups who already face structural barriers in the labour market and in business ownership.

Of the **14.3 million people** in the UK that are living in poverty⁴, women are particularly affected: 5.2 million of the 8.1 million adults in poverty (64%) are **women**. This is particularly acute for **single mothers**, with 45% living in poverty. There is also a poverty rate of 30% among **Disabled people**, around ten percentage points higher than the general population. In ethnic minority background households, this is even more stark, with 40% of **Black African** households in poverty, 49% of **Pakistani** households in poverty, and 56% of **Bangladeshi** households in poverty.

These inequalities shape who is able to take entrepreneurial risk, who has access to informal support, and who is forced to prioritise survival over growth. If entrepreneurship is to become a genuine pathway out of poverty, interventions must explicitly recognise and respond to these unequal starting points.

64%
of adults living
in poverty are
women



“I’ve found barriers in terms of finding mentors, accessing information, and all of the foundational aspects of thinking about starting a business before you even get to the practical steps to do so. As a Black, Disabled woman, I’m at an intersection of identities that prevent you from getting a foot in the door in the first place. You have the ideas and the gusto, but circumstance dampens it before you even get started.”

Jennifer Smith

Founder & CEO, *Jennifer G. Smith Consulting*

⁴ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2025), UK Poverty 2025: The Essential Guide to Understanding Poverty in the UK, JRF.

The Risk of Leaving Welfare is High

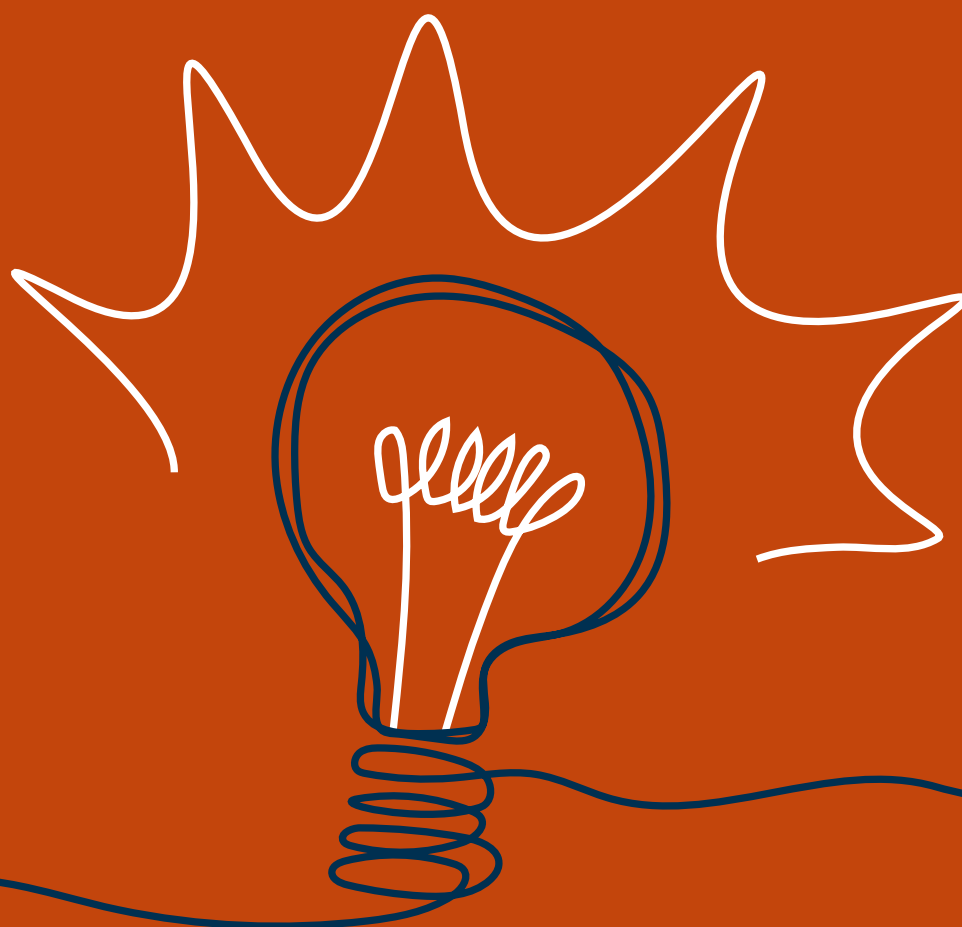
For people living day to day off Universal Credit, and in particular adults with care responsibilities such as single mothers (45% of whom are living in poverty), there is a significant risk to survival from moving to self-employment. When a household is existing on the bare minimum, any drop in income will impact the ability to meet basic needs, such as food and heat. This risk is felt keenly by individuals reliant on Universal Credit, and the length of time to start and make a business viable is broadly seen as not long enough to allow for a low risk move from welfare to business sustainable income.

“The interaction between Universal Credit (UC) and self-employment remains a significant barrier. The UC “Start-Up Period” is time-limited to 12 months, after which the Minimum Income Floor (MIF) can create a sudden cliff-edge, regardless of business trajectory. This sudden ‘cliff-edge’ deters young people from starting their own business as they have to be certain they can meet the MIF within the 12 month time period.”

The King’s Trust

Maple Review Submission of Evidence

Recommendations



RECOMMENDATIONS

Building a System That Works

The evidence gathered through the Maple Review is unequivocal: entrepreneurship can be a powerful route to stability and dignity for people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, but only if the system around them is redesigned to recognise how poverty, exclusion and risk actually operate in practice.

The recommendations below are focused on changes that are achievable, scalable, and grounded in lived experience. For each recommendation, the Review sets out what it means, who has a role to play, and the realistic timeframe for delivery.

Kate Hayward, Managing Director, Xero

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Starting a business, for many, is an ideal way of claiming power and control in their professional lives.

It is not only about following a passion, but also about finding a path to stability and dignity in an insecure economy. But circumstance has a lot to do with who can engage with entrepreneurship, and too often, economic disadvantage prevents those who could benefit the most from setting up their own business from pursuing their dreams.

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Xero is extremely proud to support the Maple Review. This report is a crucial examination of the systemic barriers facing founders who start from the least privileged positions. It presents evidence to prove that the current system is not fit for purpose for those who need it most, and outlines practical recommendations for the private sector, policy makers, and business support organisations, to take real strides in improving social mobility in the UK.

The findings are stark. We see a landscape where financial exclusion, digital poverty, and a profound lack of early-life confidence conspire to suppress the potential of incredibly resilient and motivated individuals.

The digital economy is meant to be a great enabler, but as the Maple Review highlights, digital exclusion, from skills to connectivity, is a primary barrier for asset-poor founders.

Our work at Xero is built on simplifying the complex financial landscape for small businesses, and we recognise that for those starting without a financial cushion, the fear of cash flow instability and the opacity of compliance can be paralysing. Financial confidence is foundational for survival.

The Maple Review's recommendations offer a clear, actionable pathway forward. From creating a national micro-capital system to reforming welfare-to-enterprise transitions and embedding financial confidence early, these proposals demand a fundamental shift: moving from a system that rewards those with assets, to one that actively builds capability and resilience among those starting from scratch.

This report is a challenge to Government, corporate partners, and the entire business support community. It reminds us that if we are serious about social mobility, we must ensure entrepreneurship is a genuine route out of poverty, not another barrier to overcome. We must build a system where the chance to succeed is determined by the quality of an idea, not the size of a savings.



**A clear,
actionable
pathway**

Recommendation 1

A National Public–Private Business Skills Guarantee for Secondary Schools



What this means

The Maple Review evidence shows that entrepreneurship is too often treated as something people “discover” later in life rather than something they are equipped for from the start. Most young people leave full-time education with little or no exposure to the skills, pathways or confidence needed to start a business.

Business skills are not part of the core curriculum in the UK (with the exception of Wales ⁵), and unless a school has exceptional capacity or external partnerships, **students may never encounter:**

- **Role models** who have built businesses
- **Practical understanding** of what entrepreneurship involves
- **Basic skills** such as pricing, budgeting, marketing or pitching
- The idea that **self-employment** could be a viable route

This gap is particularly damaging for young people from economically deprived backgrounds. Where family networks, local opportunity and extracurricular provision are limited, entrepreneurship becomes something that feels distant, “not for people like us.”

The result is that business ownership remains structurally unequal, with those from more advantaged backgrounds far more likely to access early inspiration, mentoring and informal business knowledge.

“Our study found that if young people are taught financial education at an early age, it could result in an additional 76,400 businesses being formed each year, creating an annual increase of 123,000 jobs and reducing unemployment by 8%, injecting an extra £6.98 billion into the UK economy each year.”

Go Henry, Youth Economy Report, 2025

⁵ [Business Studies in the Curriculum for Wales 2022](#)

The opportunity

Embedding business education universally through the formal curriculum would be a significant shift and is unlikely to happen quickly. While financial education is beginning to enter the curriculum in England⁶, there is currently no plan to provide universal business skills in the same way.

This creates a major opportunity for a **national public-private partnership model**, delivering entrepreneurship exposure at scale without placing additional pressure on already overstretched teachers or school budgets.

The UK has successfully delivered large-scale universal provision through partnerships before, from breakfast clubs⁷ to sports programmes⁸. The same model can be applied to business skills.

A national public-private partnership model

A National Business Skills Guarantee: How it could work

The Maple Review proposes the creation of a **Business Skills Guarantee**, ensuring that every state secondary school student has access to practical entrepreneurship education, inspiration and pathways.

The ambition should be clear:

To reach all c.4,000 state secondary schools in the UK by 2030, with a focus on economically deprived areas first.

⁶ [New curriculum to give young people the skills for life and work](#), UK Government 2025

⁷ [British brands back free breakfast clubs](#), UK Government, 2025

⁸ [Prime Minister meets with Lionesses ahead of the Euros to announce a new approach to school sport](#), UK Government, 2025

This would be delivered through a national partnership between:

- **Government** – Government’s role would be to Guarantee the proposed Business Skills which would cement a national rollout to all secondary school children. The Government’s role is to convene organisations.
- **Local government and combined authorities** – These bodies would provide the insight and experience to back the proposed Guarantee. A lot of great work is already underway in this area that will play a vital role in securing and rolling out the Guarantee.
- **Corporate partners** – Approximately 10-15 corporate partners will work with Government to fund and deliver its national execution. The partners will not only fund this rollout but also work closely on its execution plan.
- **Business support organisations and charities** – Once funding is in place, business support organisations and charities already doing work in this area will be enlisted to deliver the skills nationally.
- **Local entrepreneurs and mentors** – Many local entrepreneurs and mentors already work extensively in this area all over the UK. They would assist in the Business Skills Guarantee rollout through a nationwide network of local business skills champions.

What would be delivered

The Guarantee would provide a structured but flexible offer, for example:

1. Business Skills Sessions (delivered externally)

A set of ready-made modules delivered by trained partners, covering:

- How businesses start and grow
- Basic budgeting and pricing
- Selling and marketing
- Digital entrepreneurship
- Local role models and real stories

These would be designed to be delivered without requiring teachers to create new content.

2. A National Mentoring and Speaker Network

A pool of trained volunteer mentors and speakers from business, coordinated nationally but delivered locally.

Students would meet entrepreneurs who look like them and understand their communities.

3. Pathways into Local Business Support

Clear onward routes into:

- Youth enterprise programmes
 - Apprenticeships and self-employment support
 - Local growth hubs
 - Start-up competitions and funding opportunities
-

4. Digital Platform for Universal Access

To ensure every school can participate regardless of geography, the programme would include:

- Online sessions
 - Recorded content
 - Toolkits for schools
 - A central portal for sign-up and delivery
-

The role of corporate partners

To deliver at national scale, this must be funded through a coalition of corporate partners, working alongside Government.

A target model would include:

- **10–15 major corporate partners nationally**, each supporting delivery to a region or cohort of schools
- Partners drawn from sectors with strong SME relevance, such as:
 - » Financial services
 - » Retail and logistics
 - » Energy and utilities
 - » Technology and telecoms
 - » Professional services

Corporate partners would contribute funding, mentors, speakers and expertise, while delivery would be coordinated by a trusted national intermediary. This ensures the programme is:

- Consistent
- High quality
- Not dependent on individual schools' capacity

Why this matters for economic mobility

If entrepreneurship is to become a genuine pathway out of poverty, it cannot rely on luck, privilege or exceptional schools.

A Business Skills Guarantee would:

- Normalise entrepreneurship as a viable route
- Build confidence and capability early
- Reduce the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged founders
- Strengthen local economies over time
- Create a generation better equipped for self-employment and resilience

This is a long-term intervention, but one with profound payoff.

Recommendations

Government

- Establish a National Business Skills Guarantee for all state secondary schools, delivered through a public-private partnership model

Financial Services and Large Corporates

- Participate as corporate partners to the National Business Skills Guarantee by providing funding, mentors, speakers, and expertise

Business Support Organisations

- Act as delivery partners for business skills sessions, mentoring, and pathways into support
- Provide access routes into local business support, youth enterprise programmes, and start-up opportunities

In Summary

This is not about adding another burden to schools. It is about recognising that business skills are now a form of economic literacy and ensuring that every young person, regardless of background, has access to the inspiration and tools to build their own future.

A national public-private Business Skills Guarantee could become one of the most significant long-term legacies of the Maple Review.

Recommendation 2

Create a National Micro-Capital System for Asset-Poor Founders



What this means

The UK already has important early-stage finance infrastructure, including the Start Up Loans programme, British Business Bank-backed schemes, credit unions, CDFIs, social lenders and regional support funds. However, much of the current support landscape still assumes that founders can bridge the earliest stages of business through personal savings, family support, a personal loan or some form of financial cushion. For founders who are asset-poor, or who have limited credit history, that cushion does not exist.

For these founders, the challenge is often bridging the earliest stage, when relatively small sums can determine whether a business can get past the ideation stage and become viable.

The Maple Review evidence shows this clearly. When asked about financial obstacles faced at start-up, **63% said they lacked personal savings to invest, 60% reported uncertainty about cash flow and income security, 50% lacked knowledge about how to access finance, and 47% had difficulty accessing start-up loans or grants.**

Just as importantly, entrepreneurs told the Review what they wanted at the start with: **38% said they would have liked a business start-up loan.**

Whilst current provision offers strong foundations, there is scope to broaden access and better serve founders seeking very small amounts of capital or more flexible pathways.

For founders that are asset-poor, with poor or no credit history, early stage finance is a challenge

Why this matters

This is not simply a preference issue. It reflects risk.

For founders without a financial cushion, even modest debt can feel significant. Where borrowing options are expensive or poorly matched to business needs, the consequences can be severe. This is why the Maple Review proposes micro-capital as economic infrastructure, not charity. The research shows that micro-capital consistently unlocks viability when combined with the right support. The objective is not to push people into debt but rather it is to help founders start safely and progress towards larger mainstream products over time.

“The point is not to push people into debt: it is to create a ladder of finance aligned to masterclasses designed to demystify- where founders can start safely, prove demand, and then borrow responsibly. We deliver a venture innovation loan (VIL) for our IVC venture studio founders with access to structured non-dilutive capital released in stages, for example up to £30k in £10k tranches tied to clear technology readiness and commercial traction milestones, rather than all at once.



“If you’ve come from an economically deprived background and let’s say you’re now getting Universal Credit, or some money, and the minute you get it, you spend it, which is not surprising because you don’t know how to budget.

“It is the same analogy, if you suddenly give somebody a grant then they will probably do the same thing and spend it on things they shouldn’t because they have no idea what good looks like – unless there are simple checks in place, like basic identity verification and independent investment readiness validation, to make sure capital is understood, sequenced, and used at the right points.”

Alex Cole

CEO, TIN Ventures

What “micro-capital” should include

A strengthened national micro-capital system should combine grants, smaller loans and progression routes.

- **Micro-loans (£100–£25,000):** To support working capital, early trading and growth once there is evidence of traction.
- **Progression pathways:** Clear routes into Start Up Loans, mainstream bank lending and growth finance once businesses are ready.
- **Support alongside finance:** Light-touch budgeting, cash flow and forecasting support to improve confidence and reduce risk.

Evidence that micro-loans can work (UK and internationally)

UK evidence



Start Up Loans evaluation (British Business Bank)

A major independent evaluation found that businesses supported by the UK Start Up Loans programme had **higher survival rates than comparator businesses** over five years (higher by **4 to 26 percentage points**, depending on cohort and comparator), and that on average **one additional employee job was created per loan**.⁹

This matters because it shows that properly structured, publicly backed loans with wraparound support can improve survival and employment outcomes, precisely the aim of a micro-capital system.

⁹ British Business Bank (2024). Evaluation of Start Up Loans. London: British Business Bank



UK CDFIs and community lending

Responsible Finance’s impact reporting highlights the role of Community Development Finance Institutions (CDFIs) in reaching underserved borrowers and places, and in delivering “more than just the loan” through relationship-based lending.

International evidence



Randomised evidence on microcredit

High-quality randomised evaluations of microcredit¹⁰ find that expanding access to microcredit can increase business activity for some households, but microcredit alone is not a silver bullet.

This is important because it supports Maple’s design principle: micro-loans work best when they are *targeted*, *safe*, and *paired with support*, rather than treated as a stand-alone fix.



“Graduation” models: combining capital with support can shift outcomes

Evidence syntheses on BRAC’s Graduation approach (BRAC is an NGO working in Bangladesh designed to help people living in extreme poverty move into sustainable employment; households “graduate” out of extreme poverty) highlight that the poorest often need a package including productive assets/capital plus coaching and support to make sustainable progress, especially where pure microfinance fails to reach the ultra-poor.

¹⁰ Banerjee, A. and Duflo, E. (2015), The Miracle of Microfinance? Evidence from a Randomized Evaluation, American Economic Journal: Applied Economics.

Submission of Evidence to the Maple Review – Responsible Finance

The Government's Growth Guarantee Scheme is only for loans above £25,000. For a 'kitchen-table' start-up, £25,000 is an intimidating amount to borrow. Many only need entry-level loans of up to £5,000 to buy basic equipment to get set up, yet in reality it can be difficult to find small and affordable business loans.

For mainstream, commercial lenders, the costs of making a small loan can make them commercially unattractive. The costs are similar to those of making a large loan, yet yield much less interest income. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Enterprise Finance Guarantee operated from 2009. The minimum loan size for this was £1,000, therefore there is a precedent for a loan Guarantee covering much smaller loan sizes.

Mainstream banks are often unable to make loans under £25,000 due to high administrative costs, a lack of a Guarantee, and perceived risk. However, for a microentrepreneur, a £500 to £5,000 microloan is often all that is needed to start and grow. 94% of CDFIs' lending in 2024 was to businesses who had already been declined by another lender, rising to 100% of microlending CDFIs' loans being to those who wouldn't have been able to secure finance anywhere else.

CDFIs provide the 1-to-1 support from specialist business advisers needed to help entrepreneurs navigate the practicalities of setting up a business and taking on finance, such as financial forecasting and budgeting. This seeks to reduce the failure rate of early-stage micro-enterprises through pre-and post-loan support. Beyond the finance provided, the support and backing from a CDFI can foster the confidence and community required for long-term success.



“A few years ago, we actually did a Freedom of Information request to the British Business Bank just to know exactly what their decline rates were at first instance... it was about 28% were being declined at first instance, which doesn’t sound like a lot on paper, but that is closer to a third of applicants. Purple Shoots would absolutely look at supporting those who are declined based on credit score, but we simply don’t have the resources or capital to support everyone”

Richard Kirtley

Divisional Director, *Purple Shoots*



The opportunity for existing institutions

The UK does not need to build an entirely new finance ecosystem. Instead, there is an opportunity to scale and connect existing institutions more effectively.

Mainstream banks play a vital role in business finance, but are often constrained by regulatory obligations when it comes to very small-ticket lending. This can make sub-£5,000 lending challenging to deliver at scale through traditional models. That creates an important role for specialist and community lenders, referral partnerships and blended models that allow each part of the market to do what it does best.

Similarly, public-backed schemes such as Start Up Loans already demonstrate the value of structured lending with wraparound support. The opportunity now is to widen pathways into such products and create earlier stepping stones for founders who are not yet ready.

Inclusive product design

While lenders cannot create products restricted to specific demographic groups, they can design products and pathways with underserved founders in mind.

Examples include:

- alternative credit assessment models
- recognising rental, utility or trading payment histories
- referral routes after decline decisions
- starter products with lower borrowing amounts
- staged lending journeys as businesses grow
- partnerships with CDFIs and local delivery organisations
- clearer guidance for first-time borrowers

The Maple Review makes it clear that early-stage exclusion is not simply about money; it is about confidence, trust and navigation. The system is currently difficult to access and frequently experienced as hostile or opaque, particularly for people with poor credit, limited networks, or prior institutional rejection. That is why Maple stresses that micro-capital must be paired with long-term support rather than being delivered as a stand alone transaction.

Recommendations

Government

- Create a National Micro-Capital Fund with a “local delivery, national standard” model delivered through trusted local partners such as CDFIs, social lenders and community organisations.
- Ensure access to capital is combined with practical support such as cash flow checks and ongoing guidance in early stages.
- Ringfence funding for underrepresented founders who are often excluded from traditional finance.

Financial Services

- Significantly increase wholesale lending to CDFIs to enable small micro loans (£100 to £5000) that reflect the real needs of early-stage, asset-poor founders.
- Provide or partner to deliver wraparound support (e.g. budgeting, forecasting, guidance) alongside finance.
- Work alongside government-backed funds to deliver grants and loans as part of a staged finance pathway.

Business Support Organisations

- Act as delivery partners (e.g. CDFIs, community organisations), providing accessible routes into finance.
- Offer practical support such as financial forecasting and budgeting guidance
- Help founders understand finance options, build confidence, and use capital effectively.

Recommendation 3

Reform Welfare-to-Enterprise Transitions



What this means

For many founders experiencing economic hardship, the transition from welfare to self-employment remains high-risk and poorly supported, particularly as many are starting businesses without a financial safety net. 65% of those surveyed report having no personal savings and 62% are uncertain about their income security.

While entrepreneurship can offer a viable route out of financial insecurity, the current system often removes income stability before a business has had a realistic chance to succeed.

Under existing rules, individuals moving onto self-employment through Universal Credit are typically given a 12-month start-up period. After this point, they are assumed to be earning at least the equivalent of the minimum wage, or Minimum Income Floor in this context, regardless of their actual earnings. In practice, this creates a “cliff edge” where financial support drops sharply before many businesses are profitable or stable.

For early-stage founders, particularly those with limited financial buffers, this can force unsustainable decisions: such as taking on additional work that detracts from building the business or even abandoning viable ventures altogether.

This challenge is compounded by the reality of how small businesses operate. Income is rarely linear, particularly in the first few years. Many founders experience significant month-to-month variation, making it difficult to predict or demonstrate consistent earnings. Yet Universal Credit assessments are typically done on a rigid monthly basis, failing to account for this volatility.

Evidence from Xero's Small Business Insights data, which uses the same definition of "profit" applied within the Universal Credit system (where outgoings exceed incomings), further demonstrates the scale of this challenge:

94% of UK small businesses experience at least one month per year where outgoings exceed incomings

On average, businesses experience **4.5 months per year** of negative cash flow

This volatility is a normal feature of small business operations, but it has disproportionate consequences for founders from economically deprived areas who are less likely to have savings or access to credit to absorb these fluctuations.



“The Federation of Small Businesses strongly supports extending the Universal Credit Start-up Period from 12 to 24 months. The current 12-month window simply does not reflect the reality of how long it takes to build a viable business from scratch, particularly for those starting without savings, assets, or a financial cushion. For founders transitioning from welfare, the cliff-edge created by the Minimum Income Floor after just one year forces an impossible choice between taking on an unsustainable financial risk, or abandoning a business that could succeed, given more time. FSB’s research shows that 28% of sole traders say better access to Universal Credit would support them to start and grow their business. Doubling the grace period to 24 months would give those founders a genuine chance.”

Hollie Whittles

Policy Champion for Skills, Federation of Small Businesses

The current Universal Credit system does not adequately account for these realities. The Minimum Income Floor assumes stable, predictable monthly income across all sectors and business types. As a result, founders can be penalised during entirely normal periods of lower income, even when their business is viable over the longer term.

As highlighted by the Xero Financial Confidence Taskforce:

“36% of small business owners don’t know if their business was profitable last month.”¹¹

This raises a fundamental issue: if a significant proportion of small business owners themselves cannot accurately assess profitability on a monthly basis, it is unrealistic for the welfare system to rely on this as a measure for withdrawing support.

In addition, there is a structural mismatch in the type of support provided. Work coaches within Jobcentres play an important role in supporting individuals into employment, but they are not trained business advisors. Founders report receiving limited or inconsistent guidance on building a viable business, leaving a critical gap at a pivotal stage of their journey.

Taken together, these factors create a system that unintentionally discourages entrepreneurship among those who may benefit from it most.

11 Xero (2025), Small business financial confidence insights (or Financial Confidence Taskforce report), Xero.

Recommendations

Government

- Extend the current 12-month Universal Credit Start-up Period to 24 months to better reflect the time needed to build a viable business.
- Replace the Minimum Income Floor cliff edge with a tapered transition as earnings grow.
- Introduce more flexible income assessments that reflect fluctuating self-employment income.
- Provide transitional support for founders during early trading stages.
- Improve Access to Work for Disabled and neurodivergent self-employed founders through faster, simpler and longer-term support.

Business Support Organisations

- Provide practical support on planning, pricing, cash flow and confidence for founders moving into self-employment.
- Offer mentoring during the first 2 years of trading.
- Improve work coach understanding of self-employment pathways and business start-up realities.
- Create clear referral routes into specialist business support.
- Ensure consistent guidance across Jobcentres.

Financial Services

- Develop flexible finance options for founders with low savings or fluctuating early income.
- Work with support providers to combine finance with guidance.

Recommendation 4

Make Financial Confidence a Core Part of Enterprise Support



What this means

Low financial confidence is not a personal failing, it is a systemic one. Many founders lack confidence in managing cash flow, understanding profitability, or navigating compliance not because they are incapable, but because they have never been taught, and because systems assume prior knowledge. Research from Xero found that over half (55%) of small business owners struggle with cashflow management and 51% are caught off guard by unexpected costs.¹²

This challenge is further amplified for founders from economically deprived backgrounds, who are less likely to have had opportunities to build financial knowledge or confidence before starting a business.

The Maple Review evidence reinforces this, with 55% of respondents identifying financial education as a key area where they would value further support. This is not a marginal issue, it is a central barrier to running a business.

Financial confidence shapes behaviour. Where confidence is low, founders are more likely to delay decisions, avoid engagement with formal systems, or operate without full visibility of their financial position.

12 Xero (2025), Small business financial confidence insights (or Financial Confidence Taskforce report), Xero

This is particularly significant at the early stages of a business, where small decisions, around pricing, cash flow or tax, can have long-term consequences.

“If you have not completed your self-assessment and do not know how much tax you owe, you can suddenly find yourself facing a large tax bill without having put any money aside. That is what ruins people’s businesses. And it is not because the business is not viable, but because of a lack of education and a lack of clear guidance on where to go for help.”

Claire Rulton

Director, *Addison Accounts & Training Ltd*

Excerpt — Xero - Financial Confidence Taskforce¹³



“Building financial confidence and creating a generation of entrepreneurs

“Small businesses are the champions of the economy. But too often low financial confidence stops them scaling up and reaching the next level of success.

“Even worse, poor confidence can stop people starting up at all, even though they’re brimming with brilliant ideas. There’s often a stigma around asking for help, and a fear of figures can quickly turn people’s aspirations into what might feel like an impossible dream.

“This has to change. That’s why we brought together a group of experts from accountancy, business and education to form the “Financial Confidence Taskforce”. We’re calling for a radical rethink in how we build financial literacy and confidence to make sure the door to entrepreneurship is open for everyone.”

¹³ Xero (2025), Small business financial confidence insights (or Financial Confidence Taskforce report), Xero.

Why this matters

Financial confidence underpins a wide range of business capabilities. It determines whether founders can:

- Make informed decisions about pricing and costs
- Understand and manage cash flow
- Comply with tax and regulatory requirements
- Engage with financial services and funding opportunities
- Plan for stability and growth

Importantly, confidence is not built through information alone. The Maple Review highlights that many founders face a combination of information overload and low trust in institutions, which can make traditional, technical or one-off training ineffective.

Instead, financial confidence is built through practical learning, supported by clear guidance and trusted relationships.

Treating financial confidence as core enterprise infrastructure recognises that it is not an optional skill, but a fundamental requirement for running a business.

Recommendations

Government

- Embed financial confidence as a core outcome of enterprise policy, ensuring that publicly funded enterprise programmes explicitly prioritise financial literacy and confidence.
- Increase provision of practical, early-stage support from accountants and financial professionals, focused on real-world business decisions such as pricing, cash flow and tax.

Financial Services

- Ensure financial products, processes and communications are clear, accessible and understandable for founders with varying levels of financial confidence.
- Clearly explain decisions (e.g. lending outcomes) and offer actionable guidance, helping founders understand how to engage with financial systems and what to do next.

Business Support Organisations

- Design and deliver training focused on everyday business decisions (such as pricing, cash flow and tax basics), avoiding unnecessary technical complexity.
- Provide sustained, practical support that enables founders to apply financial concepts within their own business, building confidence over time rather than relying on one-off interventions.

Recommendation 5

Fund Digital Inclusion as Economic Infrastructure



What this means

Digital capability is now essential for trading, compliance, finance and growth. Small business owners rely on digital tools for marketing, payments, tax reporting, supply chain management and customer engagement, yet digital exclusion remains a primary barrier to economic participation for too many, particularly those starting from economic hardship.

The Maple Review found that many founders do not have reliable access to hardware, software, connectivity or the confidence to engage online, factors that shape their ability to comply, compete and grow. These barriers are not peripheral; they determine whether a business can *survive* at all.

National research confirms the scale and unevenness of this divide. In 2025, the Good Things Foundation's **Digital Nation** analysis showed that millions of UK adults lack basic digital capabilities and access: millions of adults lack basic digital skills and households continue to struggle with device and connectivity access, including around **1.9 million households struggling with mobile or broadband affordability** and millions unable to complete essential digital tasks.

Ofcom research has found that **nearly half of families with children lack the digital skills, devices or connectivity needed to fully participate in modern online life**, with deprivation concentrated in lower-income, rural, minority ethnic and Disabled communities.¹⁴

1.9m

households
struggle with
mobile or
broadband
affordability

14 Ofcom (2022). Digital exclusion: a review of Ofcom's research on digital exclusion among adults in the UK.

This means that many small business founders, particularly those from deprived backgrounds, face a **digital divide of access, skills, confidence and cost** that mirrors and amplifies the barriers identified elsewhere in this report. Device poverty, data poverty and digital skills gaps are not optional factors; they directly shape whether a business can open a bank account online, file tax returns, take payments, market to customers or adopt productivity-boosting technologies like AI.

The problem is not just that some people lack skills. Ofcom and Good Things Foundation research show that digital exclusion is driven by overlapping factors: **access (devices and internet), ability (skills and confidence), and affordability** (being able to afford connectivity and data). For example, Ofcom's Technology Tracker 2024-25 estimated that 5% of UK households had no home internet access, and a further proportion face narrow or unreliable access.

Taken together, this evidence shows that digital exclusion is a structural barrier to enterprise for many founders and must be treated as economic infrastructure, on a par with transport, finance and skills.

What's not working now

Maple Review interviews and round tables show that existing digital support is:

- Fragmented, inconsistent and hard to navigate, meaning many entrepreneurs never access help
- Focused narrowly on basic skills or citizen use rather than business needs
- Delivered in ways that assume prior confidence and access
- Not systematically linked to enterprise support ecosystems

Device and internet access remain uneven, and the cost of connectivity and data can impose real economic trade-offs.

A recent UK business poll found that connectivity interruptions, including running out of mobile data, can cost businesses over £3,000 a year in lost revenue and disruption, highlighting how essential reliable digital access is to survival.¹⁵

Moreover, exclusion intersects with other forms of disadvantage. The Good Things Foundation data show that people with disabilities, older adults, those on low incomes, and ethnic minority groups are more likely to face digital barriers, the same groups that Maple identifies as disproportionately affected by economic hardship.

The Lilac Review – Interim Report

‘A common theme is the “gateways” to support that are fundamental to starting a business, such as HMRC, Companies House or even getting a website, are inaccessible. In many cases existing services are not accessible for entrepreneurs with limitations. When developing these services, the needs of those that face limitations must be considered from the outset.

This is not just the case for Disabled entrepreneurs: these gateways may also assume a level of education and a level of digital skills. These assumptions may be baked into the structure for applications, which needs to change.’

Why this matters

Without decisive action to fund digital inclusion as economic infrastructure, large segments of prospective founders will remain excluded from the modern economy. Digital exclusion not only limits access to customers, markets and growth, it also impedes compliance, access to finance, and participation in increasingly digital public services.

Treating digital inclusion as **economic infrastructure** ensures that the UK’s enterprise ecosystem works for everyone, not just those already equipped with devices, connectivity and confidence.

¹⁵ Survey conducted for Sky Business by OnePoll with 1000 business leaders and decision makers who rely on mobile data connectivity to run their business between December 17 – 22nd 2025

Recommendations

Government

- Treat digital inclusion as core economic infrastructure for entrepreneurs, alongside finance, transport and skills.
- Introduce digital inclusion grants for founders covering devices, software, connectivity and assistive technology.
- Mandate accessibility and usability standards across government, tax and financial platforms.
- Invest in affordable connectivity, including social tariffs, community WiFi and targeted support for underserved areas.
- Coordinate digital, enterprise and welfare policy so founders are not excluded from compliance or growth due to lack of access.

Financial Services / Tech Providers

- Ensure banking, finance and business platforms are accessible and easy to use for all founders.
- Provide plain-English guidance and trusted training on digital tasks, cybersecurity and fraud prevention.
- Offer subsidised or free access to core business tools for early-stage and low-income founders.
- Partner with community organisations to co-design inclusive support pathways.

Business Support Organisations

- Deliver practical, business-focused digital skills training linked to everyday needs such as tax, payments, marketing and compliance.
- Combine digital training with mentoring and peer networks to build confidence and reduce isolation.
- Improve signposting and referral pathways into high-quality digital support.

Recommendation 6

Invest in Long-Term Mentoring and Peer Networks



What this means

The Maple Review evidence makes a very clear and consistent point: relationships change outcomes. Founders who are supported over time, not just at a single moment, are more likely to survive the early years of business, build confidence, make informed decisions, and access further opportunities.

This is not a discretionary add-on; it is part of how excluded founders actually move forward. The Review's own research data shows:

- Many founders describe isolation, lack of support and having to navigate complex systems alone as major barriers to starting and growing a business.
- Confidence, particularly financial and business confidence, is a recurring theme, and confidence is strongly tied to having effective support and role models.
- Core enterprise support is currently delivered transactionally (e.g., one-off workshops, one-size-fits-all courses) rather than *relational* support such as ongoing contact with someone who understands both business and lived experience of hardship.

Peer networks and long-term mentoring provide **three key enabling functions**:

1. **Psychological support and confidence building.**
For founders in poverty, everyday instability, trauma and uncertainty magnify risk. Having a supportive person or network reduces fear and increases confidence to act.

Founders who are supported over time are more likely to succeed

2. **Practical business navigation.**

Mentors and peers provide information, signposting, feedback and problem-solving help, especially valuable when systems are opaque or hostile.

3. **Social capital and access.**

Networks connect founders to customers, collaborators, funders and opportunities, reducing the disadvantage of weak social capital.

Peer support is not a luxury: extensive UK research on loneliness and economic participation shows that **social isolation correlates with lower business survival and weaker engagement with formal support** (Good Things Foundation's *Connected Communities* research highlights how isolation inhibits digital and economic inclusion). Research on mentoring shows that entrepreneurs that receive more intensive mentorship show greater venture progress, including improvements in networks, fundraising and business development¹⁶. This is reinforced by the Maple Review research, where over three quarters (76%) of respondents said tailored support is important to their success.

Internationally, mentoring is one of the few interventions with a strong evidence base for improving small business outcomes, particularly for under-represented founders, when combined with other forms of support. The US Small Business Administration's SCORE mentoring (USA) has found that mentored businesses are more likely to survive, more likely to grow revenues and more likely to hire staff. The strongest effects are seen for female entrepreneurs, minority ethnic entrepreneurs and early stage businesses¹⁷.

The OECD and World Bank have repeatedly highlighted social capital and peer networks as critical components of inclusive entrepreneurship. The OECD's Inclusive Entrepreneurship work specifically notes that peer networks are particularly effective for groups facing structural disadvantage, including women, migrants and low-income founders. Studies from UK enterprise research (e.g., British Business Bank evaluation of Start Up Loans, which paired loans with mentoring) show that supported founders outperform unsupported ones over time.

16 Rechter, E. and Avnimelech, G. (2024). Intensive personal mentoring: accelerators' secret sauce. *Small Business Economics*.

17 SCORE (2023) SCORE Impact Report. Washington, DC: SCORE Association.

Taken together, this evidence reinforces the Maple insight: **support needs to be relationship-based, ongoing, and delivered through trusted networks.**

Why this matters

Enterprise programmes traditionally focus on *skills, information and short-term touchpoints*. But for founders facing economic hardship, the biggest barriers are confidence, trust and continued navigation of complexity, issues that cannot be fixed by one-off workshops.

The evidence is clear that relationship-based support works, especially when combined with other supports such as finance, digital inclusion, and tailored mentoring. Treating mentoring as core infrastructure, not an optional add-on, would make the enterprise system genuinely more inclusive and effective.

Funded, long-term mentoring and peer networks:

- Reduce isolation and burnout
- Build confidence and resilience
- Improve decision-making and problem solving
- Increase access to opportunity and referral pathways
- Generate cumulative benefit over time

Recommendations

Government

- Recognise long-term mentoring and peer networks as core enterprise infrastructure for founders experiencing economic hardship.
- Fund structured, long-term mentoring programmes rather than relying solely on short-term or one-off interventions.
- Embed mentoring and peer support within publicly funded enterprise programmes, including Growth Hubs, local authority business support and national enterprise schemes.
- Recognise peer networks within enterprise policy frameworks and funding criteria.
- Commission outcome measures that capture the impact of mentoring on confidence, business survival, revenue growth and progression into further support.

Business Support Organisations

- Recruit and pay mentors with lived experience of economic hardship and entrepreneurship where appropriate.
- Deliver ongoing mentoring programmes that support founders through the first 24 months of trading, when failure risk is highest.
- Build peer networks around shared identity, geography or lived experience to strengthen trust and relevance.
- Use existing local infrastructure such as Growth Hubs, chambers of commerce, libraries, community organisations and co-working spaces as access points for mentoring and peer support.
- Combine mentoring with practical support such as finance readiness, digital skills, pricing and business planning.

Financial Services / Corporate Partners

- Fund mentoring and peer network programmes as part of inclusive enterprise support strategies.
- Provide volunteer mentors, speakers and specialist expertise to support early-stage founders.
- Partner with Growth Hubs and trusted delivery organisations to widen reach among underrepresented entrepreneurs.
- Sponsor peer cohorts for women, Disabled founders, ethnic minority founders and founders transitioning from welfare into self-employment.

Recommendation 7

Adopt Strengths-Based, Trauma-Informed Enterprise Support



What this means

The Maple Review evidence shows that many founders starting from economic hardship are not just navigating financial barriers, but also carrying the cumulative impact of **chronic stress, instability, and low trust in institutions**.

Founders described experiences including long-term financial insecurity, precarious work, caring responsibilities, disability, discrimination, and repeated interactions with systems that felt punitive, confusing or hostile. Over time, these experiences shape behaviour: risk-aversion increases, confidence erodes, and engagement with formal support systems becomes harder. This is reflected in the Maple Review survey data, where 56% of entrepreneurs surveyed say low confidence negatively impacted their business, and 57% lacked understanding of core business requirements such as tax and legal obligations.

The Maple Review survey and Call for Evidence repeatedly highlighted fear: fear of debt, fear of sanctions, fear of “getting it wrong” and fear of being judged as a major barrier to starting and growing a business. Many founders spoke about avoiding support altogether because processes felt intimidating, opaque or designed to catch them out rather than help them succeed.

This is not a question of motivation or capability. It is a predictable response to prolonged insecurity.

A **strengths-based, trauma-informed approach** recognises that:

- Stability and wellbeing are prerequisites for growth
- Behaviour often reflects past harm, not lack of ambition
- People engage best when they feel safe, respected and trusted

Rather than asking founders to prove themselves through rigid criteria or compliance-heavy processes, trauma-informed enterprise support focuses on **what people already bring** such as resilience, adaptability, problem-solving and creates environments where confidence and capacity can rebuild over time.

Why this matters (and what the evidence shows)

The Maple Review findings mirror what we see in wider research on trauma, poverty and economic participation. For example, King’s College London research shows that people living in the most socioeconomically deprived areas in the UK experience post-traumatic stress at much higher rates than those in more affluent areas (approximately three times as often) and have more severe symptoms.¹⁸ This demonstrates the strong link between deprivation and trauma prevalence¹⁹.

Research shows that people experiencing poverty are significantly more likely to experience chronic stress and mental health challenges, which directly affect decision-making, risk tolerance and confidence. This matters for entrepreneurship, where uncertainty and delayed reward are inherent.

The Call for Evidence included multiple submissions from support organisations who observed that founders from deprived backgrounds often disengage when faced with:

- Complex application processes
- High-stakes assessments
- Threat of sanctions or clawback
- Short timelines and inflexible delivery

This mirrors evidence from other policy areas, such as the Robertson Trust, “Poverty and Trauma”.²⁰

18 Delgadillo, J. and Richardson, T. (2025), On poverty and trauma: associations between neighbourhood socioeconomic deprivation, post-traumatic stress disorder severity and treatment response, *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*.

19 <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/social-and-economic-deprivation-associated-with-more-severe-symptoms-of-ptsd>

20 Robertson Trust (2022), *Poverty and Trauma: Exploring the Links Between Poverty and Trauma*, The Robertson Trust.

Trauma-informed approaches are now widely recognised in health, education and social care as improving engagement and outcomes for people experiencing disadvantage. The same logic applies to enterprise support: **systems designed without an understanding of trauma inadvertently exclude the very people they aim to help.**

The Maple Review therefore makes a clear case: if we want enterprise to be a genuine route out of poverty, the way support is delivered must change, not just the content.

What strengths-based, trauma-informed enterprise support looks like in practice

A trauma-informed approach does **not** mean lowering standards or expectations. It means designing systems that are realistic, humane and effective.

In practice, this includes:

- **Reducing fear at the point of entry**
Clear language, supportive framing, and transparent processes that explain what is expected and why.
- **Flexibility in pace and pathway**
Recognising that founders progress at different speeds depending on stability, health, caring responsibilities and life circumstances.
- **Relationship-based delivery**
Building trust through consistent contact, mentoring and named points of support rather than anonymous systems.
- **Strengths-based assessment**
Focusing on sustainability, learning and resilience rather than narrow compliance metrics or short-term outputs.
- **Psychological safety**
Creating environments where founders feel able to ask questions, admit uncertainty and learn from mistakes without penalty.

Why this matters

The Maple Review shows that many founders from deprived backgrounds are already demonstrating extraordinary resilience. What holds them back is not a lack of ideas or ambition, but systems that unintentionally amplify risk, fear and exclusion.

Shifting to strengths-based, trauma-informed enterprise support is not about being “softer”. It is about being more effective.

By designing enterprise support that recognises lived experience, builds trust and prioritises stability, the UK can unlock talent that is currently suppressed and ensure that entrepreneurship becomes a genuine pathway out of poverty, rather than another source of risk.

Recommendations

Government

- Embed strengths-based, trauma-informed principles across enterprise policy and publicly funded business support.
- Redesign application and assessment processes to reduce unnecessary complexity, fear and stigma.
- Ensure enterprise programmes measure outcomes such as confidence, progression and business readiness, not only immediate growth metrics.
- Fund longer-term, flexible support models that recognise stability and wellbeing as foundations for enterprise success.
- Require publicly funded programmes, including Growth Hubs and local business support services, to adopt inclusive and trauma-informed delivery standards.

Business Support Organisations and Delivery Agencies

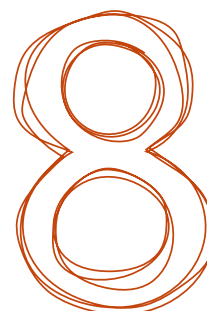
- Design programmes that build on founders' existing strengths such as resilience, adaptability and problem-solving.
- Deliver support in accessible, flexible formats that reflect caring responsibilities, disability and insecure work patterns.
- Offer trusted one-to-one mentoring and peer support to rebuild confidence over time.
- Simplify communications, eligibility criteria and onboarding processes to encourage engagement.
- Combine enterprise advice with practical support on finance, digital skills and wellbeing where appropriate.
- Train frontline staff, advisers and work coaches to understand how poverty, trauma and prolonged insecurity can affect confidence, decision-making and engagement.
- Replace punitive or compliance-heavy approaches with supportive coaching and clear guidance.
- Create smoother referral routes between Jobcentres, Growth Hubs, local authorities and specialist support providers.

Financial Services / Corporate Partners

- Review customer journeys, communications and eligibility processes to reduce intimidation and unnecessary barriers.
- Use plain-English communications and supportive decline pathways that help founders understand next steps.
- Partner with specialist organisations delivering inclusive enterprise support to reach underserved founders

Recommendation 8

Target Enterprise Interventions at those Most Excluded



What this means

The Maple Review shows that entrepreneurship is increasingly a route pursued by people seeking stability and control over their economic lives. But poverty does not impact all groups equally, and neither do the barriers to starting and growing a business.

Women, single mothers, Disabled people, and founders from ethnic minority backgrounds are disproportionately likely to experience economic hardship and are also more likely to face additional challenges including caring responsibilities, discrimination, poor health, inaccessible systems, and reduced access to networks and finance.

If enterprise policy does not explicitly target these groups, the risk is that interventions will continue to benefit those who are already closer to opportunity, reinforcing rather than reducing inequality.

What targeted support should look like

A national micro-capital system and improved mainstream business support are necessary, but not enough on their own. The UK also needs interventions that deliberately reach those most excluded.

This requires designing enterprise support that is:

- Trauma-informed and flexible
- Accessible for Disabled founders
- Compatible with caring responsibilities
- Delivered through trusted community channels
- Focused on confidence and stability as well as growth

Recommendations

Government

- Embed an explicit inequality lens across enterprise strategy.
- Ringfence enterprise funding for women, Disabled founders, ethnic minority founders and those on low incomes.
- Set inclusion outcomes as core success measures for publicly funded programmes.
- Align welfare and enterprise systems so single parents and Disabled founders are not penalised for starting a business.
- Support delivery of targeted pathways such as Women’s Enterprise Pathways, Single Mother Start-Up Support Packages, and Disabled Founder Access Programmes.

Financial Services / Corporate Partners

- Develop micro-grants and alternative credit pathways for marginalised founders.
- Fund targeted founder cohorts through corporate social investment.
- Support childcare and accessibility costs for excluded founders.
- Create procurement pathways into corporate supply chains.
- Partner with trusted intermediaries from marginalised communities.

Business Support Organisations

- Deliver targeted programmes for women, single mothers, Disabled founders and ethnic minority founders.
- Provide mentoring, peer networks and stability-focused support.
- Ensure programmes are accessible and compatible with caring responsibilities.
- Establish Trusted Community Enterprise Hubs through partnerships with women's networks, migrant groups, disability organisations and local community organisations.

Conclusion

Entrepreneurship will continue to attract people seeking stability, dignity and control over their working lives. Whether it becomes a pathway out of poverty, or another source of risk, depends on the system built around them.

The Maple Review shows that with modest investment, better design and a shift in mindset, the UK can unlock the potential of thousands of entrepreneurs who are currently being left to navigate an unforgiving system alone.

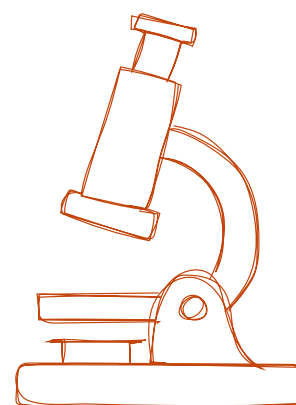
Methodology

The Maple Review was designed to rigorously identify and dismantle the barriers to entrepreneurship caused by economic deprivation, combining both quantitative and qualitative research across the UK.

Phase 1 involved comprehensive research, interviews with entrepreneurs from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, focus groups, and issuing a public call for evidence. Data collection included a national survey launched specifically for entrepreneurs who have experience of poverty or socio-economic disadvantage, resulting in over 600 survey completions. This provided a robust dataset for both statistical and thematic analysis.

This quantitative work was richly supplemented by in-depth qualitative research, including 10 focus groups with entrepreneurs with relevant experience to gather detailed insights into specific challenges, each group consisting of 3-20 participants. The Review also conducted 10 one-to-one interviews with entrepreneurs with lived experience with poverty or socioeconomic disadvantage and received more than 80 written submissions from a diverse range of organisations working directly in this area through the call for evidence. Lastly, the Review conducted a roundtable discussion with CDFI representatives to assess the state of funding available to entrepreneurs, alongside analysis of traditional loans and forms of start-up finance.

Phase 2 focused on exploring the themes that emerged from the qualitative research, analysing the data collected via the survey, examining existing literature, and conducting the final statistical evaluations. A cross-evaluation was conducted, assessing the statistical analysis against the qualitative themes derived from the interviews, focus groups, and submissions. This substantiated the key findings, ensuring the final report's practical recommendations were grounded in strong evidence.



Acknowledgements

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Their expertise has been instrumental in shaping the direction and findings of this report.

Co-Chairs

- **Blair McDougall MP**, Minister for Small Business and Economic Transformation
- **Michelle Ovens CBE**, CEO & Founder, *Small Business Britain*
- **Grace Graham**, CEO & Founder, *WorkSpa*

Steering Board Organisations

- **Kate Hayward**, UK Managing Director, Xero
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Entrepreneur Representatives

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- **Kerry Clayton**, Founder, *Trend Tonic*
- **John McDonald**, Disability Consultant
- **Alison Riley**, Founder, *Our First Dance* and Owner, *Bridal Reloved Lincolnshire*

We are also very grateful to the many organisations and individuals who contributed to the Call for Evidence. We received more than 80 written submissions, alongside invaluable input through focus groups and engagement sessions, reflecting a wide range of perspectives from across the UK.

These contributions have been critical in building one of the most comprehensive evidence bases to date on entrepreneurship and economic hardship, and have ensured that this Review is grounded in both lived experience and practical insight.

With thanks to Xero for supporting the Maple Review

