

Please see below the summary of notes from the March 2026 Social Economy ROUNDTABLE meeting focused on Health and Social Economy Accelerators:

## Introduction

BSSEC has been holding Roundtables within the West Midlands region for the past four years to explore key themes around the ecosystem that supports social economy growth and sustainability. These reports highlight the discussions and make recommendations for key stakeholders when planning and delivering support to the social economy.

Business growth accelerators and specifically social economy accelerators targeting social businesses that have the potential to grow are a new topic for BSSEC. We see this approach operating across the country and internationally. The feedback is that there are good and bad accelerators, and we recently heard a social entrepreneur say, 'I've been on 5 accelerators, but only 2 were any good. For this very reason, this is an important topic to discuss to understand what makes a good social economy accelerator and whether they actually work.

Much of the research identifies that business growth accelerators play a vital role in enabling social enterprises to scale their impact, strengthen financial sustainability, and contribute to regional economic development. In the UK context—where social enterprises often operate within constrained funding environments—accelerators can provide structured support that bridges the gap between mission and market.

Evidence from UK programmes, including those delivered by Aston University and Impact Hub in London, demonstrates that accelerators are not only beneficial to individual organisations but also generate wider economic and social value.

## Thought leadership

**A. Emily Darko, Independent Social Economy Consultant and Board member of BSSEC**

**B. Kate Angel and Kavita Jeerh, Aston Centre for Enterprise and Entrepreneurship for Growth**

We heard excellent presentations from Emily, Kate, and Kavita. Emily gave us an overview of the research into social enterprise accelerators, what works, and key considerations when developing a new programme. Kate and Kavita spoke about their experiences of delivering targeted social economy accelerators and also the Goldman Sachs programme, which has informed their thinking and the development of their delivery model. We also heard about the sector-driven model funded by Wates and delivered by the Impact Hub, London that works with 5 organisations with a focus on them joining the built environment supply chains through Wates and other large Corporates.

## Discussion

### Why do social enterprises and social economy organisations need accelerator programmes?

- **Access to Expertise:** Accelerator programmes provide access to experienced entrepreneurs and mentors who can offer valuable insights and guidance.
- **Networking Opportunities:** These programmes create a platform for social enterprises to network with other entrepreneurs, investors, and industry professionals.
- **Funding and Support:** Accelerator programmes often offer funding and additional support to help social enterprises grow and develop their business.
- **Community Engagement:** They help social enterprises engage with their communities and drive positive social change.
- **Empowerment:** They empower social enterprises to develop innovative solutions and create lasting social impact.

### How do social business accelerators work?

The accelerator model has some typical features that set it apart from other approaches to startup investment or business incubation. These include:

- A highly selective admissions process.
- A focus on existing businesses rather than start-ups with a turnover that enables them to grow [£250k upwards]
- Mentoring, coaching or other business training.
- Intense and time-limited support, usually lasting between three and 12 months.

Most programmes encourage a high degree of peer-to-peer learning, so that founders can learn from others in similar circumstances. Mentoring from experienced entrepreneurs also plays a significant role in most programmes. The provision of funding (sometimes in exchange for equity), a workspace, facilitated networking and educational seminars/workshops are other common services.

- At Impact Hub London, the **ASSETS accelerator programme** found:
  - 60% of participating social enterprises increased turnover
  - Up to 50% of growth was directly attributed to the programme
  - All participating organisations secured new contracts
- Similarly, programmes at Aston University aimed to support organisations to:
  - Increase trading income
  - Build financial resilience
  - Reduce dependency on grant funding

The conclusions were that accelerators are not simply advisory—they deliver measurable economic outcomes, but it depends on how they are delivered.

**What do we mean by growth?** Was a question that was asked early on in the discussions. Often, ‘the accelerator’ will define growth, but it is usually in terms of turnover rather than increases in social impact. Goldman Sachs defines growth as an increase of 20% year on year.

Suggestions other than monitoring turnover were an increased number of beneficiaries; new volunteers; new business partnerships, new products and services traded. Also connections, networking, and relationships.

**Why do social businesses need a separate accelerator? Surely they can assess a mainstream accelerator? Is every business a social enterprise?** There was divided opinion on whether there should be dedicated sector accelerators. The participants came to the conclusion that we need a further Roundtable that explores the difference between a mainstream SME and a social economy organisation with an asset lock. What does social mean?

We also explored **‘what does good look like?’** How do we know they work? do we need to do more? And how do the providers work with social impact?

## Conclusions from the session

Design matters and programmes need to have a clear purpose with objectives linked to good communication concerning outcomes and expectations. There needs to be a good understanding of the needs of those taking part, especially where social economy organisations are part of mainstream accelerator programmes. The combination of the need to make a profit to invest alongside delivering social, economic, or environmental impact may not fit well when the focus of a mainstream SME is shareholder dividends, profit, and the potential of selling the business long term.

Peer learning provides the opportunity to underpin course content that includes workshops and diagnostics, while at the same time, it reinforces trust between participants and course leaders.

There was a feeling that there is not enough scrutiny and that we need to be positively critical to ensure the organisations most likely to benefit from an accelerator programme get to take part. Criteria and eligibility are important, and are we robust enough in implementing these criteria?

The more effective programmes challenge power dynamics, focusing on collaboration and co-learning, addressing issues of inclusion and barriers that prohibit growth.

Participants raised points about time commitments, especially if required to spend significant amounts of time away from their organisations. However, this was tempered by Aston, who has found through their experiences of delivering growth programmes that an afternoon and evening work well, bringing the leader away from the business so they can focus on the broader needs of their organisation.

The example from Wates/Impact Hub provided an exemplar of a sector-specific social economy accelerator, and the conversation moved to exploring the potential of other sector-specific accelerators e.g. health and social care, education, or technology.

## Recommendations

The value of social economy business accelerator continues to be important, and if we are to enable social businesses to continue to contribute to local economic growth, resourcing of these programmes are important going forward.

There are opportunities to develop the model in the West Midlands by building on the critical, and often under-emphasised, benefit of business growth accelerators, which is their ability to bridge the gap between social enterprises and large corporate supply chains. This is particularly evident in the model developed by Wates Group in partnership with Impact Hub London. The Wates-led ASSETS

(Assisting Social Enterprises to Succeed) accelerator is specifically designed not just to grow social enterprises, but to prepare them to win and deliver larger corporate contracts. Could we replicate this and also use this model to support social businesses to become more integrated into supply chains working in other sectors, and also become more investment ready?

There is a need to better understand the differences and or similarities between SME's and social businesses in order to provide the most relevant business support.

*Many thanks to our speakers and all who attended. It was a great session!*