Hackney Impact Consortium Learning Partnership

Final Report

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Executive summary

Hackney Impact is a Consortium of five organisations – Allia, East End Trades Guild, Green Business London, Hackney Cooperative Developments and Social Founders – offering free business support through training courses, coaching, mentoring, one-to-one advice, peer networking events, energy audits and more.

Established in Autumn 2023, Hackney Impact brings together organisations with complementary expertise to strengthen the local business ecosystem. Although the Consortium itself is newly formed, each member has a longstanding presence and track record in the Hackney area. Over the course of 18 months, Hackney Impact designed and delivered a wide-ranging business support programme that reached close to 2,000 local business participants.

Renaisi partnered with the Consortium as its learning partner, playing a critical friend role by collecting and analysing data, and generating insights in real-time alongside delivering a suite of collaborative learning sessions designed to inform ongoing reflection and improvement. This report summarises the learning from Renaisi's 18-month learning partnership with the Hackney Impact Consortium.

Learning questions

The learning partnership was guided by six learning questions, that were co-produced by Hackney Impact members, and aimed to ensure the Consortium remained accountable both to businesses in Hackney and programme participants:

1. What are the needs of Hackney Businesses?
2. What are the benefits for participants of engaging with a consortium over and above its individual members?
3. Which businesses are involved in HIC and which businesses are not? Why?
4. What about the Hackney Impact Consortium model is working well and what is working less well, including any elements that were not planned?
5. How can Hackney Impact work better as a consortium?
6. What does it take to build a collaborative model?

Method

Renaisi conducted 33 interviews, three case studies and one focus group with Consortium members, external stakeholders/peers, participating businesses and non-participating businesses during three fieldwork periods; and analysed impact data collected by Consortium members over the course of the programme. Seven workshops were held with Consortium members to co-design the evaluation and collectively reflect then act on emerging findings.

The six learning questions are addressed in sequence in this report, drawing on evidence collected throughout the learning partnership.

Findings

The needs of Hackney businesses

The support needs of Hackney businesses differ based on their size, structure and stage of growth. Small businesses and startups need support with essential functions such as finance, governance and branding, often because they are balancing multiple roles beyond their core expertise. For businesses looking to scale and grow, primary needs centre around support to diversify, enter new markets and find trusted suppliers. Larger, more established businesses tend to be looking for support with high-level strategy, policy influence and building strategic partnerships with key stakeholders, such as the council and local funders. More broadly, the economic context is driving a need for support with fundraising, financial planning and affordable workspaces. There is also a demand for peer-to-peer networking across all these groups to connect with similar businesses to share learning and experience.

Hackney Impact is supporting local businesses to address many of the above needs, particularly small enterprises and those looking to grow, with a direct link between the needs of businesses and the services being offered by the Consortium.

The benefits for participants of engaging with a consortium

Engaging with the Consortium offers Hackney businesses access to a wide range of support that goes beyond what individual organisations can provide. Triaging the needs of businesses ensures they are directed to relevant, tailored support that aligns with their challenges and goals. Participants benefit from the deep local knowledge, relationships and networks of the five Consortium members, including access and connections to trusted suppliers.

The research showed that Hackney Impact was a trusted brand, with external stakeholders and participants consistently emphasising its positive impact, viewing the Consortium as a driver of innovation, a catalyst for greater community support and a brand that strengthens relationships among businesses in Hackney. The Consortium plays a key infrastructure role within Hackney's business ecosystem - an area that has seen declining levels of funding in recent years.

The profile of participating and non-participating businesses

Hackney Impact has consistently engaged a diverse range of individuals, with demographic patterns across age, ethnicity and gender remaining relatively stable throughout the project. In general, these patterns do not vary significantly based on the type of support provided. The key exception is the women-only peer support spaces led by the East End Trades Guild, which are specifically designed to support female entrepreneurs. Throughout delivery, Consortium members have aimed to reach Hackney's diverse communities through inclusive outreach, including communities who face barriers to engaging with services. While individuals from racially minoritised groups made up a significant portion of participants, the overall breakdown by ethnicity does not fully reflect Hackney's broader population. To ensure equity of access to its services, there is an opportunity for the Consortium to develop a shared understanding of target communities and develop targeted outreach strategies that reflect the diverse ways different groups seek and access support.

Hackney Impact has been particularly effective in engaging businesses from creative industries, public benefit sectors, and service-based enterprises. However, more traditional or corporate sectors appear to be underrepresented. The programme primarily supports startups, sole traders, and micro-businesses, especially those in the early stages of development, through services such as coaching, training, and mentorship. One notable exception is the green energy audits, which more commonly involve mid-sized organisations.

Strengths and improvement areas for the Hackney Impact model

Hackney Impact has met its funder's targets, with 1,205 total activities delivered and 1,223 hours of delivery achieved across the Consortium. Beyond these targets, the depth and quality of the Consortium's person-centred interactions have been central to the programme's success. In particular, participants praised Hackney Impact's ongoing, individualised support; the connections they had made through the programme; and its inclusive methods of service delivery. The Consortium continually improved its programme by reflecting on the emerging needs of businesses, for example, by establishing peer-to-peer networking opportunities. Hackney businesses reported tangible benefits from participating in Hackney Impact, including increased confidence, new opportunities and a clearer sense of direction; and the most notable outcomes identified through the feedback survey focus on operational improvements, strategic planning and growth.

Challenges facing Hackney Impact have included managing the demand from businesses for support that is increasingly tailored to specific sectors and business growth stages, on a limited budget. The short-term funding cycle left little time for Consortium members to develop the necessary relationships and programme infrastructure; and limited the Consortium's strategic, longer-term ambitions to build an inclusive economy.

Working as a consortium towards a collaborative model for delivering businesses support services

Developing strong, trusting relationships, both within the Consortium and with external stakeholders, are essential for effective collaboration and this requires a deliberate investment of time, particularly at the early stages of a project. This phase is crucial for defining a shared purpose, setting a joint strategy, and agreeing on ways of working to ensure all partners are aligned in their goals, and with accountability mechanisms in place. Developing partnerships based on existing relationships of trust would likely help to overcome any challenges and tensions that can emerge. However, clear governance structures and establishing a structured approach to decision-making, accountability and impact measurement, contribute to successful collaborative models.

Leaning into a place-based approach can help unite collaborations around the powerful connecting force of pride and deep connection to Hackney, motivating individuals and organisations to work together, invest in their communities, and commit to long-term change.

Recommendations

A number of lessons have been learnt during the delivery of Hackney Impact Consortium, which are relevant to any future phases of work for this or similar programmes. While much has been achieved in 18 months, a longer runway of funding should be made available to grow and tailor the service offer, and support progress towards the ambitions of Hackney Impact to build an inclusive economy. The set up phase of programmes should allow for relationships of trust and programme infrastructure, including governance, to be developed before delivery targets are expected to be met. Clarity on target groups has emerged as a priority to ensure business support programmes agree key needs and carve out niche expertise that is connected to a broader ecosystem of support; and user research on target groups should be continuously informing service design and delivery to ensure they are accessible and inclusive.

A policy influencing role for Hackney Impact could meet the ambitions of local businesses, including more established ones, for a more inclusive business ecosystem, while drawing on the evidence of business need that is generated as a result of the Consortium being embedded in the community. Businesses and people identify with Hackney in a positive way and the value of Hackney Impact Consortium's local, inclusive 'brand' should be harnessed whereverpossible to cultivate and strengthen a sense of community for the business ecosystem. Hackney Impact should celebrate its successes with a positive public narrative about the impact of the Consortium, at the same time as inculcating a culture of continuous, collective learning, reflection, adaptation and improvement.

Introduction

Hackney is a borough synonymous with change and diversity. Navigating the opportunities and challenges that come with this dynamic context is a learning journey for the borough's entrepreneurs, founders, businesses and social enterprises. Business support services are an important part of this ecosystem, working alongside enterprises to ensure they have access to the knowledge and expertise that can help them sustain and grow. Hackney Impact, a Consortium of five organisations with complementary service offers to businesses, entered Hackney's business ecosystem in Autumn 2023 – although member organisations have a long history in the area – and over a period of 18 months, developed and delivered a programme of support that reached almost 2,000 business participants.

Renaisi partnered with the Consortium as its learning partner, playing a critical friend role by collecting and analysing data, and generating insights in real-time alongside delivering a suite of collaborative learning sessions designed to inform ongoing reflection and improvement. This report summarises the learning from Renaisi's 18-month learning partnership with the Hackney Impact Consortium.

Who are the Hackney Impact Consortium?

Hackney Impact is a Consortium of five organisations – Allia, East End Trades Guild, Green Business London, Hackney Cooperative Developments and Social Founders – that offers free business support through training courses, coaching, mentoring, advice, peer networking events, energy audits, and more. Information about the five organisations can be found below.

Allia

Allia is a charity that helps small businesses and charities to develop, grow and achieve their impact aims, through a range of ways, including: Future Business Centres that support local business communities; support programmes that help entrepreneurs and ventures to grow their ideas and businesses; and through advising and arranging responsible finance for charitable organisations.

East End Trades Guild

The East End Trades Guild (EETG) unites small independent businesses, leveraging their collective power by working together. With 350 members, the guild represents 7,000+ years of trading experience, 1,200 local jobs, and £77 million in turnover. The EETG advocates for small traders' interests and values, demanding recognition from landlords, big business and government. Members receive access to research on small business impacts, a united voice, and support from experienced local entrepreneurs.

Green Business London

Green Business Action (GBA), founded by West London Business, is a non-profit initiative supporting micro, small and medium-sized enterprises in London to reduce their environmental impact. Since its launch, GBA has helped over 800 businesses, with a goal of supporting 1,000+ by March 2025 and 10,000 by 2030. GBA delivers green business support programs and expert

advice, helping businesses cut carbon emissions, reduce energy bills, and build sustainability skills.

Hackney Cooperative Developments

Hackney Cooperative Developments (HCD) is a local community economic development agency with membership open to all those who subscribe to its co-operative goals and values. HCD works with the local community to explore ideas and opportunities to create a sustainable environment for Hackney's communities to flourish, such as the creation and growth of co-operatives and social enterprises, and connects organisations so that the movement can work together to grow the locally-owned social economy in Hackney.

Social Founders

Social Founders is a global network supporting founders in the charity, social enterprise, NGO, and community sectors. Since mid-2021, they have focused on supporting Hackney-based social impact founders. Through both in-person and online events, Social Founders provides practical and personal support, resources, and connections to enhance skills and impact. They share inspiring stories through blogs, guest blogs, and podcasts, aiming to inform and motivate current and future social founders, while engaging a wider audience through various media and stakeholders.

Purpose & Aims

The Hackney Impact Consortium learning partnership commenced in Autumn 2023 with a set of broad objectives, which were to explore:

1. The impact of the Hackney Impact Consortium model.
2. What has contributed to the successes and challenges of the model.
3. How emergent learning can inform the progress and possible adaptation of the programme.
4. The implications of the learning partnership's findings for the future of the model and similar schemes.

In the partnership's early workshops, Consortium members co-designed a Theory of Change for the programme and an evaluation framework that refined the scope of the learning partnership by understanding Consortium members' motivations for learning and priority learning questions to guide the learning partnership.

Consortium members ranked their motivations for learning and placed 'accountability to businesses and participants' at the top, with the priority of ensuring they get a better service. This was in line with the formative design of the learning partnership, ensuring that emergent learning was informing continuous improvement. Next came accountability to the programme's funders, providing an independent assessment of what has been achieved and learnt. Members also prioritised learning for critical reflection, in order to understanding different views and perspectives on the work, and achieve clarity on what they were doing and why.

Learning questions

Consortium members selected a limited number of priority questions to provide focus and structure to the learning partnership. In the evaluation framework workshop, Renaisi facilitated an exercise to co-design a list of priority learning questions for Consortium members by asking: "*what do you want to know?*"

During the exercise, Consortium members identified 21 learning questions, of which 6 were selected through priority voting. The 6 questions are listed in the textbox below. The decisions were informed by Consortium members' motivations for learning to ensure that the learning partnership met their learning goals.

Learning partnership questions
1. What are the needs of Hackney Businesses?
2. What are the benefits for participants of engaging with a consortium over and above its individual members?
3. Which businesses are involved in HIC and which businesses are not? Why?
4. What about the Hackney Impact Consortium model is working well and what is working less well, including any elements that were not planned?
5. How can Hackney Impact work better as a consortium?
6. What does it take to build a collaborative model?

Methodology

The methodology of this learning partnership was refined in light of Consortium members' motivations and priority learning questions. The six learning questions focus on the implementation of the programme and our method therefore draws on a process evaluation approach, combining developmental and summative elements. They include a focus on the context in Hackney, what can be learnt from the Consortium's way of working and what improvements can be made. A key priority for the learning partnership was to provide ongoing, emergent learning to inform the development of the Hackney Impact Consortium model. We therefore designed a method with three fieldwork stages, interim reporting and collaborative reflection along the way. Our fieldwork aimed to understand different perspectives and positionalities on the partnership's learning questions, and we therefore interviewed Consortium members, external experts working in the Consortium's field, participants of the programme and Hackney businesses that were not participating in the programme. These data

were charted against the six learning questions and analysed to identify key findings, trends, themes and recommendations. We also draw on impact data collected by Consortium members over the course of the programme and stored on centralised AirTable software.

In total, we conducted 34 interviews/focus groups with the following groups:

- Consortium members – 11 interviews
- External stakeholders/peers – 11 interviews
- Participating businesses – 6 interviews and 1 focus group (with 7 participants)
- Non-participating businesses – 6 interviews

We also collected 3 case studies of participating businesses using a journey mapping methodology, which are included in the penultimate section of this report.

A summary of the learning partnership and data collection timeline is included below:

Learning activity	Date	Description
Theory of Change workshop	Dec 2023	Co-designing a Theory of Change to support the Consortium to understand the connections between what it does and the change it seeks to achieve
Evaluation framework workshop	Jan 2023	Understanding Consortium members' motivations for the learning partnership Agreeing priority learning questions Refining the learning partnership methodology
Fieldwork period 1	Jan – Mar 2024	Seven interviews conducted
Collaborative learning conversation 1	Apr 2024	Reflecting on Renaisi's interim report and emerging themes – peer support and tailoring services to meet diverse needs.
Fieldwork period 2	Apr – Sep 2024	Twelve interviews and one focus group conducted
Collaborative learning conversation 2 - Customer journey mapping	Jun 2024	Mapping Hackney Impact customers' journeys across the following phases: Pre-engagement; Early stage engagement; Mid stage engagement; Late stage engagement; and Post-engagement. Identifying connections between Consortium members and improvements to the journey (final version is included in Appendix 2 of this report)

Collaborative learning conversation 3	Oct 2024	Reflecting on Renaisi's interim report Exploring place-based approaches Exploring Hackney Impact's legacy
Fieldwork period 3	Oct 2024 – Feb 2025	Fifteen interviews conducted Three case studies collected
Collaborative learning conversation 4	Dec 2024	Revisiting and refining the Hackney Impact Theory of Change, based on the learning from the programme (final version is included in Appendix 1 of this report)
Co-analysis workshop	Mar 2025	Reflecting on Renaisi's analysis of all data collected throughout the learning partnership and co-designing recommendations.

Structure of this report

This report is structured in six main parts, one for each of the partnership's learning questions, followed by three case studies illustrating significant impact achieved by participating businesses, and concludes with a set of recommendations.

1. The needs of Hackney businesses

This section explores the key needs of businesses in Hackney, focusing on the support required at different sizes and stages of development, from small start-ups to established companies. It examines common challenges faced across the borough, such as the demand for peer support networks, access to affordable workspaces and the pressures of broader economic conditions. The section concludes by highlighting how Hackney Impact is addressing these varied business needs.

The diverse needs of Hackney's business community

Hackney is a diverse and dynamic borough with a thriving business ecosystem. It is home to a broad mix of sectors, including innovative technology, a wide range of services, independent retail, a well-established creative industry, and a lively night-time economy. Alongside this sits an active VCSE (voluntary, community and social enterprise) sector – comprised of charities, grassroots organisations, and cooperatives - working to support local communities, deliver social value and contribute to the local economy.

While all these businesses and organisations share a strong connection to Hackney and its local community, their support needs differ significantly based on their size, structure and stage of growth.

As one external stakeholder noted:

> *"Hackney is a diverse borough in terms of size and structures of business and their needs are different depending on these."*
> *External Stakeholder Interview*

Small businesses & start ups

> *"Small business needs are distinct – they need basic coaching on how to run a business."*
> *External Stakeholder Interview*

Small businesses and startups often balance multiple roles beyond their core expertise and therefore face difficulties establishing essential functions such as finance, governance, and branding. While these areas are fundamental to long-term success, they take time to develop. Without dedicated teams, business owners can feel overwhelmed by complex processes and lack the capacity to manage them effectively. Early-stage business owners highlighted the need for targeted training in financial management, such as budgeting and forecasting, along with marketing strategies, including social media and brand positioning, to help define their unique selling point (USP).

> *"When you're running a small organisation, you have to be the fundraiser, project coordinator, doing marketing, and all sorts of things."*
> *External Stakeholder Interview*

"[I needed support] just to tell me at the start what VAT is, what Corporation Tax is, and what tax brackets I might be falling under."
Hackney Business Owner Interview

Charities and organisations with social missions face additional challenges, particularly in registration, governance and regulatory compliance. The lengthy registration process and ongoing charity management requires them to navigate strict legal and financial regulations, meet Charity Commission requirements, and comply with funding restrictions.

Businesses looking to scale & grow

For businesses in the growth phase, we found that scaling and diversification are top priorities. Many are eager to expand their product or service offer, build teams, and enter new markets but often lack the knowledge and support needed to do so effectively. Several participants highlighted the need for tailored guidance on scaling up or branching into new sectors.

Reflecting on the questions they had before receiving support from Hackney Impact, one participant shared:

"How do I successfully build a team? I don't know what steps to take or questions I need to ask."
Programme Participant Focus Group

In addition, finding reliable suppliers and partners can be a major challenge with more established business owners, who often spend valuable time searching for trusted connections. Many entrepreneurs recognise the importance of outsourcing key business functions, such as marketing, finance and administration, but struggle to find experienced professionals who are both affordable and well-suited to their needs. There's a noticeable preference among businesses to work with suppliers that have ties to Hackney and understand the local landscape.

"Finding suppliers or people with the right expertise and experience is a challenge. Hackney business owners shouldn't have to do everything themselves—whether it's social media, finance, or marketing. There are trained professionals for this, but finding the right people is difficult and expensive."
Hackney Business Owner Interview

"I don't want to spend three days on Google trying to find all the reviews of different bookkeepers."
Hackney Business Owner Interview

Large, established businesses

Larger, more established businesses typically have dedicated teams managing governance, communications, branding and HR. As Hackney businesses grow, their priorities shift toward

high-level strategy, policy influence and building strategic partnerships with key stakeholders, such as the council and local funders.

Business rates and regulatory factors remain key concerns as these businesses navigate Hackney's broader economic and policy landscape. Keeping up with new legislation and licensing requirements is also a priority, as regulatory changes can have a direct impact on costs.

Peer-to-Peer networking

In addition to the vertical support delivered by Hackney Impact, which provides specialised knowledge and strategic assistance, Hackney businesses also require horizontal support through peer-to-peer networking. This type of support focuses on building connections, sharing experiences and creating mutual support among businesses.

Many small business owners in Hackney experience a lack of local peer relationships, leading to feelings of isolation. Entrepreneurs often struggle to find the right support networks and feel disconnected from other business owners, limiting opportunities for advice and knowledge sharing.

> *"The feedback that we're getting all the time is people feel alone. They didn't know where to turn to for support."*
> *Consortium Member Interview*

Hackney businesses are actively seeking peer-to-peer support networks that align with their sector, demographics or business type to help them navigate their unique challenges. Many have found networking opportunities through the Consortium valuable, particularly when connections develop organically. Informal events, such as networking lunches or dedicated spaces for conversation, are especially helpful for small and medium-sized businesses looking to connect and collaborate with peers.

> *"They [Hackney businesses] were looking for that sense of community, with people they had something in common with."*
> *Consortium Member Interview*

Accessible and inclusive networking opportunities are essential, allowing participants to engage in ways that meet their needs. For women business owners, structural and systemic barriers such as childcare, often limit their ability to attend networking events that haven't taken these barriers into account. Peer support opportunities held at flexible times, such as at weekends or outside-standard working hours, are especially important for them.

While larger organisations may not require peer support themselves, they recognise the value of engaging with smaller businesses and contributing to a thriving local economy. Many are increasingly interested in investing in local business networks and getting involved with Hackney Impact - whether through mentorship, knowledge-sharing or offering resources. There is potential for larger businesses to provide funding, guidance, or collaborative opportunities to smaller enterprises, helping them grow, build resilience, and overcome challenges

Workspaces

Consortium members, external stakeholders, and local business owners have consistently raised concerns about the borough-wide shortage of affordable and appropriate workspaces. For small businesses, high rent prices, restrictive private rental policies, and difficult landlord arrangements create major barriers. Larger businesses, meanwhile, struggle to find adequately sized and well-equipped spaces that can support their expanding operational needs.

This issue is especially challenging for businesses in the arts, creative, and trade sectors, where a lack of suitable workspace creates difficulties beyond financial constraints. Limited space restricts their ability to produce, store materials, and develop projects, forcing many to consider relocating outside Hackney.

> *"The difficulty is securing appropriate workspace, I don't need an office, but a workspace. Workspaces in Hackney are very expensive; it can be £1000s per month & still not enough space."*
> *Hackney Business Owner Interview*

Funding challenges

Hackney businesses are facing growing financial pressures, with rising costs and declining consumer spending directly impacting income generation and cash flow. Many business owners and external stakeholders have highlighted the urgent need for increased financial support, including greater access to public and private grant funding to help businesses remain resilient.

When support is available, Hackney businesses have noted that delayed payments from grant-giving bodies create significant financial strain. Even after funding has been approved, these delays disrupt cash flow and financial stability, making it difficult for businesses to plan effectively and sustain operations.

> "*People are very overwhelmed with the funding landscape."*
> *External Stakeholder Interview*

However, both Consortium members and external stakeholders noted that financial challenges, while influenced by external economic conditions, are often exacerbated by limited financial management skills and knowledge. The current economic climate has created an even greater urgency for effective business planning and the ability to secure diverse income sources through fundraising.

As one external stakeholder reflected:

> *"The need may present as cash flow, but the problem is business planning."*
> *External Stakeholder Interview*

Inclusive funding & structural barriers

Small business owners, particularly those with a social mission, face complex and time-consuming application processes, which create barriers to securing financial support. Several

focus group participants noted that Black and minoritised-led organisations often feel that funding applications serve to meet funders' diversity targets rather than providing meaningful financial support.

Additionally, the tendering process remains a significant challenge, as businesses are required to put together lengthy application forms and presentations, often using jargon-heavy language. This creates further barriers for those without dedicated bid-writing expertise or resources. Several businesses noted they rarely receive feedback on unsuccessful applications, making it difficult to identify areas for improvement and refine future applications.

When funding opportunities do exist, they are not always distributed equitably, making it harder for some businesses to access the support they need. Larger businesses tend to have more connections with grant-making bodies, a better understanding of the language required in applications, and more flexibility to handle tight deadlines. This gives them a significant advantage in securing funding compared to smaller businesses, which may lack the same networks and institutional knowledge.

"There's a level of privileged access... it's not just that larger, more established organisations are better equipped to make those applications. They have a structural advantage."
Consortium Member Interview

Responding to Hackney businesses' needs

Hackney Impact is supporting local businesses to address many of the above needs, particularly small enterprises and those looking to grow. Insights from interviews and focus groups align closely with the support participants are receiving, as reflected in AirTable data which shows a direct link between business challenges and the support provided.

Type of Activity	Count of participants who completed activity
Capacity Building	157
Community Level Cost Crisis	71
Cost Crisis	484
Net Zero	75
Peer Support Networks	112
Scale Up Advice	339

Airtable – Count of Hackney Impact participants who completed each type of activity.

The most in-demand activities included:

- Cost crisis support - Providing resilience advice and guidance to help businesses navigate ongoing financial challenges.
- Scale-up advice - Offering startup and scale-up training for founders of socially focused businesses rooted in local communities.

- Capacity building - Strengthening the capacity of local organisations that support independent businesses, ensuring they can continue to facilitate future programme delivery and review cycles.
- Peer support and networking - Creating opportunities for business owners to connect, exchange knowledge and collaborate through structured networking initiatives.

Whilst Hackney Impact's current support is less tailored to larger businesses, there is an opportunity to consider and utilise their role within the Hackney ecosystem. Larger businesses could contribute by providing funding, mentorship, and shared resources, helping to strengthen connections between businesses.

While Hackney Impact has responded to local business needs, some challenges remain beyond the Consortium's direct control, requiring broader systemic or policy shifts. Structural issues, such as workspace accessibility and equitable funding, require collaboration with policymakers, landlords, and other key stakeholders. A coordinated effort is crucial to drive long-term, meaningful change and ensure that businesses in Hackney have the necessary resources to operate, grow, and remain embedded in the local community.

2. The benefits for participants of engaging with a consortium

This section explores the benefits for participants engaging with a consortium model. Here we discuss the advantages of accessing a broad range of support and the deepening of local networks, the impact of building a shared and trusted brand, and the Consortium model's ability to fill existing funding and infrastructure gaps.

Breadth of support

Engaging with the Consortium offers Hackney businesses access to a wide range of support that goes beyond what individual organisations can provide. Many participants described the Consortium as a "one-stop shop", where local businesses can access a variety of support options, from training to mentorship to coaching and networking events.

> *"I love that there are different areas of expertise that I could tap into to help me grow simultaneously."*
> *Programme Participant Focus Group*

> *"Every Consortium member could have something to offer to that participant, creating a one-to-many support model. When joining Hackney Impact, you can engage as much or as little as you want."*
> *Consortium Member Interview*

The triage process, led by experts with subject matter knowledge and a strong understanding of Hackney's local context, helps identify business needs and provide tailored support that aligns with each participant's specific challenges and goals. By assessing businesses at different stages of growth and understanding their unique circumstances, this approach ensures that they are directed to the most relevant support.

This streamlined and personalised approach not only improves access to support but also strengthens the overall experience for participants, making it easier for them to navigate the available services, connect with the right experts, and receive guidance that is practical, timely and directly applicable to their business needs.

One external stakeholder highlighted the effectiveness of this support model for businesses, stating:

> *"The model works really well; it's something that we want to be able to refer to because there is so much there."*
> *External Stakeholder Interview*

Participants and Consortium members emphasised that its strength lies not only in the support it provides but also in its deep local knowledge, relationships and networks. With five organisations contributing unique expertise and connections, the Consortium has significant potential to expand opportunities for collaboration across Hackney's business ecosystem.

By bringing together a network of trusted suppliers, organisations and key stakeholders, the Consortium helps businesses build relationships, access reliable resources and connect with valuable contacts that might not have been available otherwise. Being Hackney based strengthens collaboration across the borough, creating a sense of belonging and shared growth that drives energy and momentum within the local business community.

As one programme participant reflected:

> *"[Hackney Impact] provide opportunities to connect us to our local community in Hackney."*
> *Programme Participant Focus Group*

Building a shared and trusted brand

Consortium members noted the significance of creating a singular brand that brings together organisations under one trusted identity. Hackney businesses see Hackney Impact as a reliable space where they can access high-quality support and build connections.

Participants highlight that Hackney Impact has become a trusted brand and resource, providing businesses with a dependable source of guidance and opportunities. External stakeholders and participants consistently emphasised its positive impact, viewing the Consortium as a driver of innovation, a catalyst for greater community support and a brand that strengthens relationships among businesses in Hackney.

Filling the funding and infrastructure gap

By pooling resources and infrastructure under one unified brand, the Consortium has been able to secure funding that individual organisations may not have been able to access alone. Funding programmes are often structured to support partnerships or have restrictions on funding smaller or non-constituted organisations, meaning a fiscal host organisation is required.

As one external stakeholder noted:

> *"Collaboration expands capacity because it creates efficiencies in back-end work."*
> *External Stakeholder Interview*

By streamlining back-office functions and improving the efficiency of project delivery, the Consortium model becomes more attractive to funders. Rather than each organisation spending time and money setting up systems independently, the shared approach allows resources to be pooled, and administrative burdens reduced—freeing up capacity to focus on delivery and impact.

Additionally, the reduction in public funding and infrastructure for business support has created a significant gap, which that the Consortium is working to address with the support of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF).

The decline in local infrastructure funding for private-voluntary-public sector partnerships, particularly in recent years of austerity, has left a critical gap in funding and support for local

organisations and businesses. The Consortium is stepping in to bridge this divide, playing a vital role in ensuring that businesses and organisations can access the support, resources, and networks they need to thrive.

3. The profile of participating and non-participating businesses

This section begins by examining the demographics of individual participants involved in Hackney Impact, highlighting the Consortium's efforts to engage a diverse range of communities across the borough. It then explores the types of businesses accessing Hackney Impact's support, focusing on their sectors and organisational structures. Finally, it reflects on the typical pathways through which businesses first connect with Hackney Impact, offering insights into how initial engagement occurs and where support can be most effectively targeted.

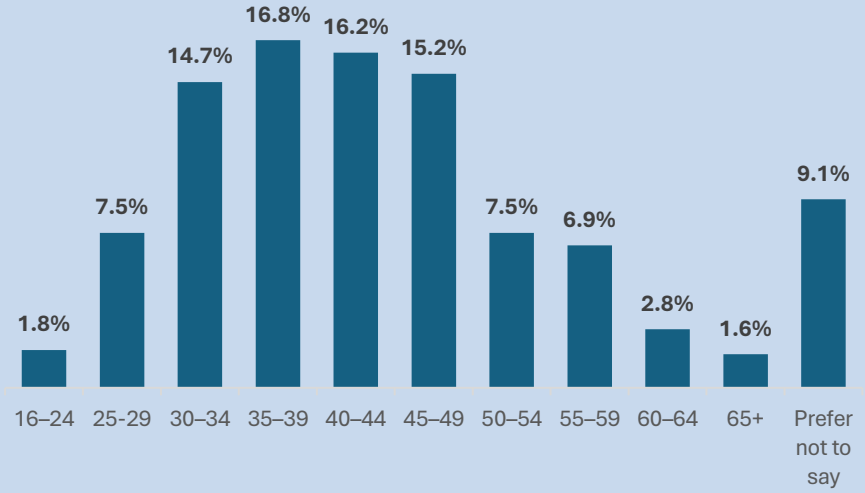
Demographics of individual participants

Hackney Impact has consistently engaged a diverse range of individuals, with demographic patterns across age, ethnicity and gender remaining relatively stable throughout the project. In general, these patterns do not vary significantly based on the type of support provided. The key exception is the women-only peer support spaces led by the East End Trades Guild, which are specifically designed to support female entrepreneurs.

Age

Participant engagement is highest among those aged 35–39, 40–44, and 45–49, indicating strong representation from mid-career individuals. In contrast, engagement is notably lower among younger participants aged 16–24 and those aged 60 and over.

Age Breakdown of Participants Engaged with Hackney Impact (*by percentage*)

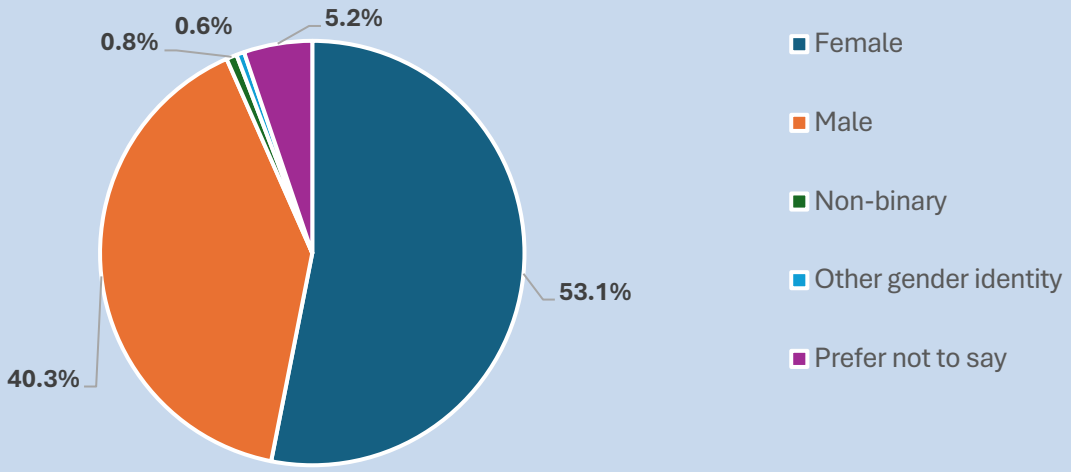


Airtable data

Gender

Among Hackney Impact participants, women are more likely to engage than men, making up a slight majority of participants. A small proportion of participants identify as non-binary or with another gender identity.

Gender Breakdown of Participants Engaged with Hackney Impact (*by percentage*)

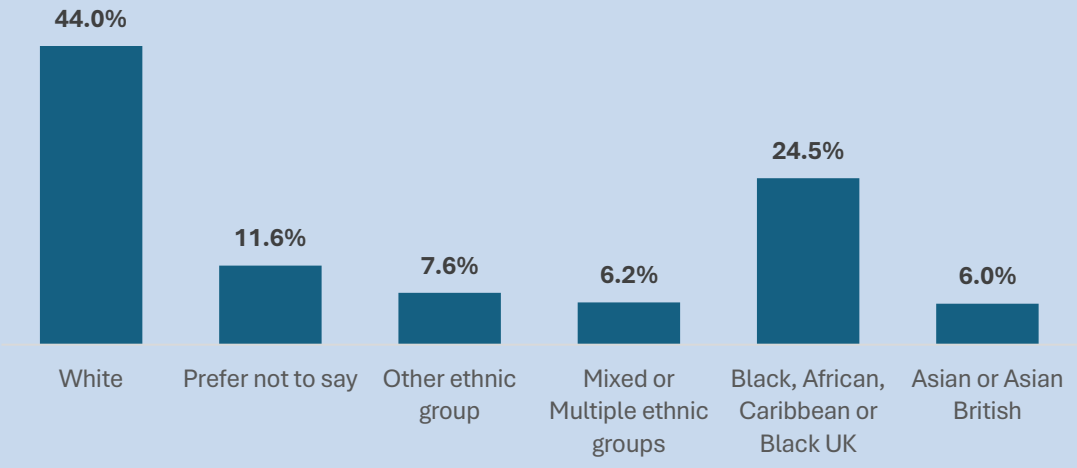


Airtable data

Ethnicity

The largest proportion of participants identify as White, followed by those identifying as Black African, Black Caribbean or Black British. Smaller groups include individuals from Asian, Mixed, and Other ethnic backgrounds, with some participants choosing not to disclose their ethnicity. While individuals from racially minoritised groups do make up a significant portion of participants, the overall breakdown by ethnicity does not fully reflect Hackney's broader population, which is among the most ethnically diverse in London.

Ethnicity Breakdown of Participants Engaged with Hackney Impact (*by percentage*)



Airtable data

Reach of and demand of support among diverse communities

Throughout delivery, Consortium members have aimed to reach Hackney's diverse communities through inclusive outreach, including communities who face barriers to engaging with services. Building on this, there is an opportunity for the Consortium to develop a shared understanding of target communities and an approach to ensuring equity of access—reflecting Hackney's diversity and the varied needs within its business community. Establishing this clarity would help guide more targeted support and ensure resources are directed toward those who could benefit most.

Some respondents also highlighted that certain communities may prefer to seek support from within their own community. This insight suggests an opportunity for Hackney Impact to explore more collaborative and culturally responsive approaches such as partnering with trusted community organisations or adapting outreach strategies to better reflect how different groups access support.

Demographics of individuals who did not engage

Available Airtable data for individuals who registered with Hackney Impact but did not go on to engage shows broadly similar demographic patterns in terms of age and ethnicity when compared to the overall participant group. However, more noticeable differences appear in relation to gender.

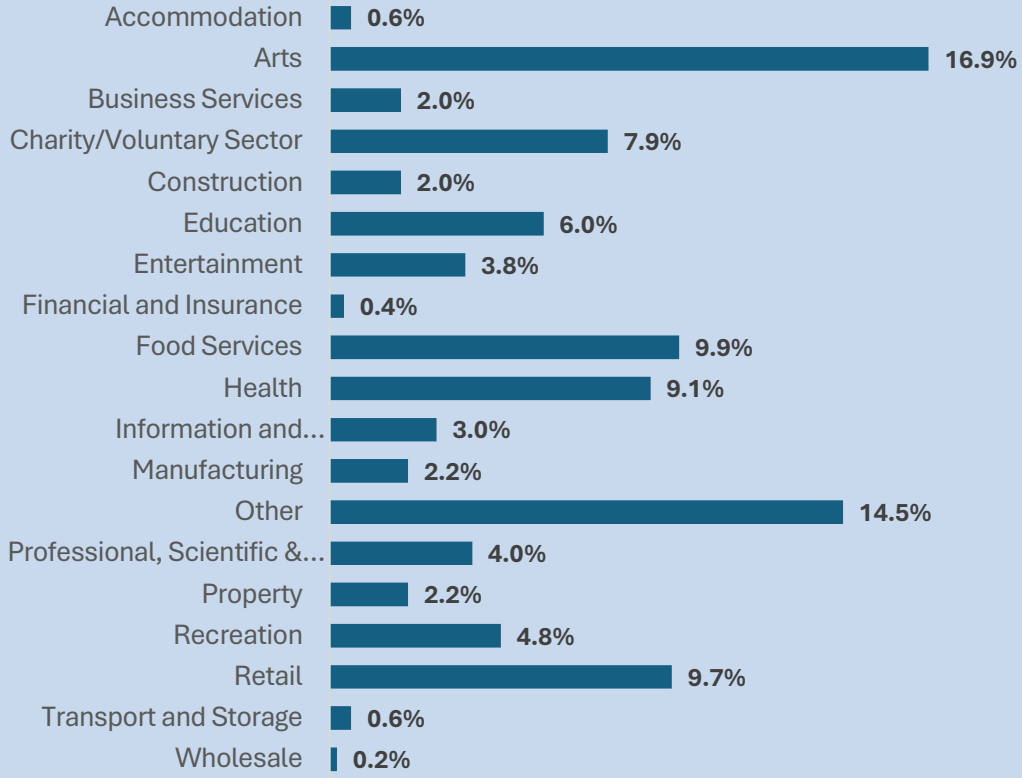
A slightly higher proportion of men dropped out compared to women. While women tend to be more likely to engage, this disparity suggests that men may face greater challenges in maintaining engagement. These patterns highlight the need for deeper understanding and targeted action to address barriers and support more consistent participation.

Business sector

Hackney Impact is reaching a broad range of business sectors across the borough, with particularly strong engagement from those working in the arts, food and retail sectors. A notable portion of businesses fall under the "Other" category; however, further data are needed to better understand what specific sectors this includes. In contrast, sectors such as accommodation, transport and financial services tend to be less engaged.

This distribution suggests that Hackney Impact is particularly successful in engaging businesses from creative, public benefit-related, and service-based industries, while more traditional or corporate sectors may be underrepresented. Consortium members and participants have also highlighted the importance of including social mission-driven businesses and those focused on creating positive social or environmental outcomes. These enterprises contribute significant value to the local community and align closely with the Consortium's broader goals.

Breakdown of Business sectors engaging with Hackney Impact *(by percentage)*



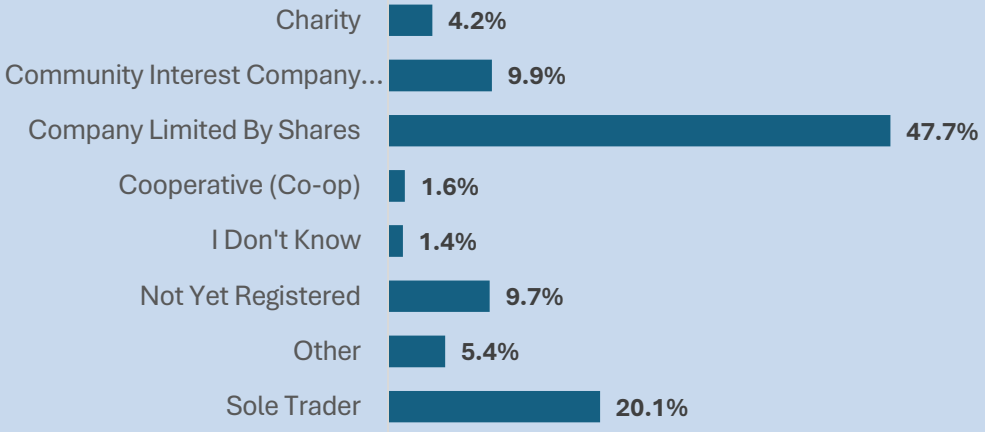
Airtable data

Business type

Hackney Impact predominantly supports startups, sole traders and micro-businesses, particularly those in the early stages of development. Support is typically delivered through activities such as coaching, training and mentorship. An exception to this trend is found in the green energy audits, which tend to involve mid-sized organisations.

In terms of business structure, the majority of participants are companies, making up nearly half of the total. This is followed by sole traders, community interest companies (CICs) and charities. A notable proportion of participants are still in the process of formal registration, suggesting that Hackney Impact is currently reaching a high portion of businesses at the start of their journey.

Breakdown of Business type engaging with Hackney Impact (*by percentage*)



Airtable data

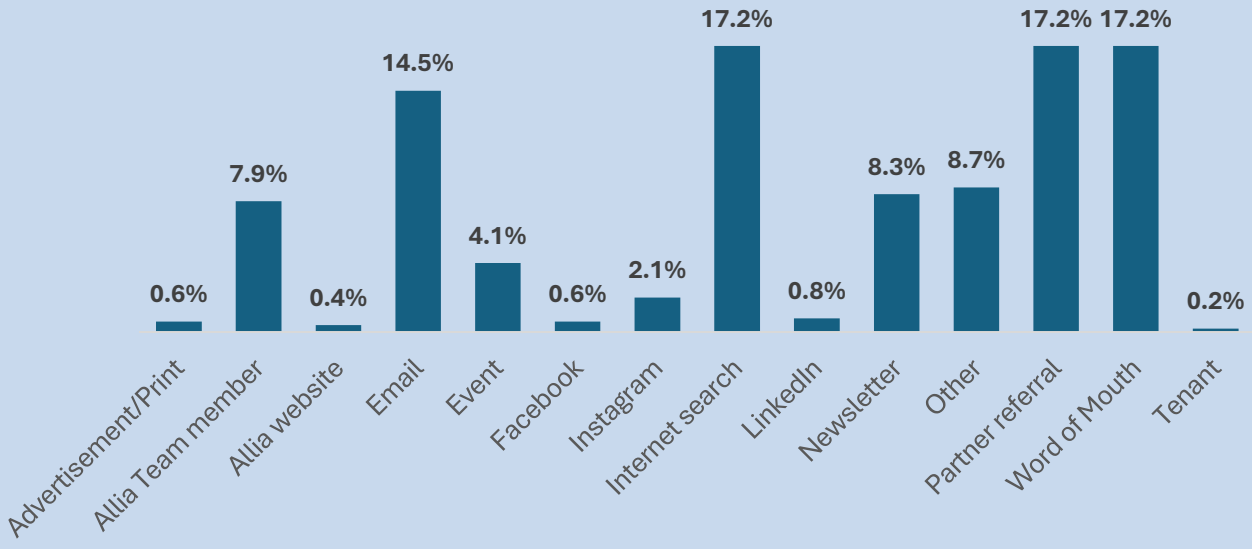
Recruitment and outreach

Hackney Impact participants are currently being reached through a range of outreach methods, with varying levels of success across different channels. Data from Airtable shows that the most effective outreach methods were word of mouth, partner referrals, and LinkedIn, all of which generated strong levels of engagement. Email also emerged as a key communication channel. Other notable sources included direct outreach from team members, newsletters and referrals from partner organisations, highlighting the value of personal and relationship-based approaches to participant recruitment.

By contrast, social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and internet searches as well as print advertising and organisational websites were cited far less frequently as sources of engagement. This suggests that personal connections and direct communication remain the most effective ways to reach participants, while digital and print channels still play a supporting role, particularly for engaging harder-to-reach groups.

Hackney Impact participants highlighted the strength of adopting a 'place-based' marketing approach: one that identifies and leverages communication channels specific to the local area. This approach could help ensure recruitment efforts are more targeted, inclusive and reflective of the borough's diverse business community

Breakdown of How Businesses First Heard About Hackney Impact (*by percentage*)



Airtable data

4. Strengths and improvement areas for the Hackney Impact model

This section examines what is working well within Hackney Impact, as well improvement areas. It begins by exploring the activities delivered and the quality of these interactions, followed by a consideration of business outcomes—particularly the positive impact of peer support. We then consider areas for improvement within the Consortium, including the challenge of balancing universal and targeted support, identifying outcome metrics that align with strategic priorities, and navigating the implications of short-term funding cycles on this type of work.

What's working well?

Activity targets

Hackney Impact has successfully expanded its operations, demonstrating significant growth across all areas of delivery. According to data recorded in Airtable:

- Total number of activities delivered across the Consortium: 1,205
- Total hours of delivery across the Consortium: 1,223

Quality, tailored interactions

Hackney Impact's person-centred approach has been widely praised by both participants and external stakeholders. Beyond simply meeting targets, the depth and quality of interactions have been central to the programme's success. External stakeholders and participants highlighted the effectiveness of the engagement approach, noting that businesses received tailored support that extended beyond one-off interactions.

Participants emphasised the value of having Consortium members who maintained regular contact and provided ongoing, individualised support. Rather than offering generic solutions, the programme's structure allowed for meaningful connections to be built, ensuring that businesses received support relevant to their specific challenges and goals.

One participant described the mentorship activities as a particularly strong aspect of the programme, noting:

"It's not about just matching people; they find the right match for you."
Programme Participant, Focus Group

External stakeholders also recognised the impact of this tailored engagement, noting that the programme worked to address the real challenges businesses face. The inclusive and thoughtful nature of the sessions contributed to a more open and productive environment, where businesses felt heard and supported

"I've attended numerous sessions, and I've found them to be very inclusive and really trying to get to the core of what businesses are facing".
External Stakeholder Interview

Continuous improvement

Consortium members have also noted their efforts to continually adapt the programme based on feedback and emerging participant needs. By regularly adjusting and improving activities such as peer support circles and workshops, Hackney Impact has kept the programme relevant and effective. Consortium members specifically mentioned how this responsiveness has improved the quality of support offered:

> *"Henrietta's peer support circles have been really effective... she's taken the time to understand what people want from them."*
> *Consortium Member Interview*

> *"We've carved out exactly what works, how to get that sweet spot between engagement, theory, practice, networking & bringing a good balance of external speakers and the core delivery team"*
> *Consortium Member Interview*

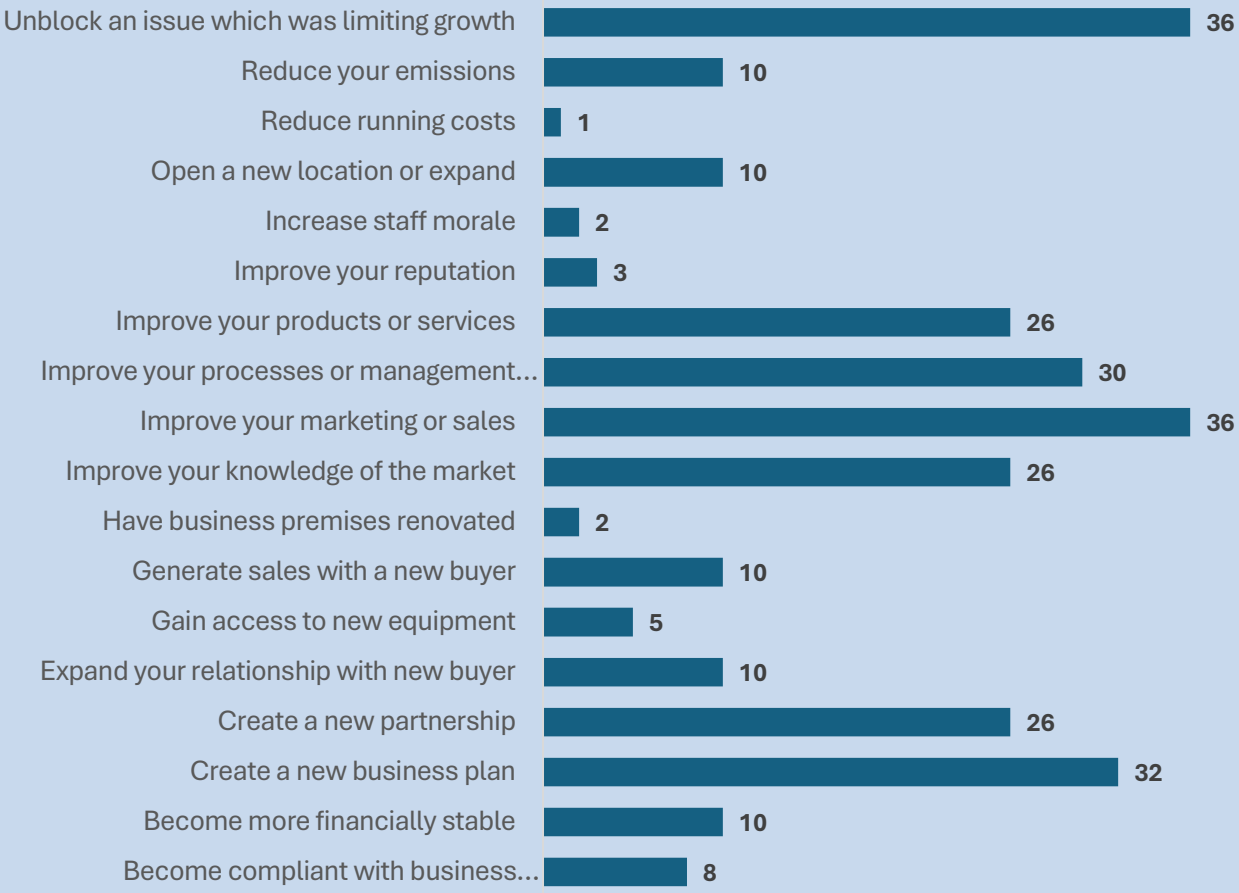
Improved business outcomes

Hackney businesses reported tangible benefits from participating in Hackney Impact, including increased confidence, new opportunities and a clearer sense of direction. Many participants described their experience as transformative, highlighting not just the practical support but also the deeper engagement and meaningful conversations that helped shape their business decisions.

> *"In the last nine months, the trajectory of my business has changed. It has added vibrancy to my work and given me more confidence to listen to myself."*
> *Participant Interview*

According to the Airtable data, the most notable outcomes identified through the feedback survey focus on operational improvements, strategic planning, and growth. Several Hackney Impact participants reported improvements in project management, particularly in areas such as planning and partnerships. Some responses also highlighted enhanced financial stability and cost reduction, while a few referenced outcomes related to environmental impact and compliance.

Outcomes reported by businesses after engaging with Hackney Impact *(by count)*



Airtable data

Strengthening Hackney's business community through peer support

A central strength of Hackney Impact has been its place-based, community-driven approach. Participants have highlighted their strong emotional attachment to Hackney and a shared commitment to collectively developing the local business ecosystem. The programme's Hackney-based approach has helped build meaningful connections across the community, both between businesses and individuals.

Peer-to-peer support has significantly contributed to this increased sense of connection. Many businesses emphasised that mutual encouragement and peer support helped them feel more integrated into Hackney's wider entrepreneurial community. One participant reflected:

> *"It was nice to be surrounded by people with a connection to Hackney. I didn't realise there was such a vibrant community of entrepreneurs here—I was struggling on my own, but now I've made some really good connections. I've been able to do more work locally and give back to my area."*
>
> *Participant Interview*

"They don't allow you to drift away from the group; they support you to support each other."
Participant Interview

The Consortium's approach to networking has evolved, moving beyond traditional methods to actively facilitate meaningful conversations and connections. This shift was not originally planned but emerged in response to an identified need for more intentional relationship-building within the local business community. Recognising this gap led to a significantly different service offer than initially expected, with a stronger focus on enabling peer connections and building a trusted local network. A further unexpected benefit has been the strengthening of relationships across Hackney's business community, particularly by creating spaces for supporting smaller enterprises to connect with reliable local suppliers.

"We often talk about networking and collaboration as ideas, but what's emerged through Hackney Impact is a deliberate and thoughtful effort to create real connections—co-creating events, bringing people together who might not otherwise meet, and facilitating meaningful conversations."
Consortium Member Interview

Improvement areas

Finding a balance between universal and targeted support

As Hackney Impact expands its reach, participants have expressed a preference for more specialised events and courses tailored to specific sectors and business growth stages. Resources are a limiting factor here and Hackney Impact cannot meet every need. Therefore, the Consortium should consider who it aims to support and how to diversify its offerings in a strategic and focused way. One implication of this is whether some services used by more established businesses – such as the Green Energy Audit - would feature in a programme targeting new and growing businesses. Greater clarity is needed on the Consortium's role - whether it should act as a general support provider for all local businesses or concentrate on specific areas and business types.

Outcome metrics that align with strategic goals

The reporting requirements for Hackney Impact currently prioritise quantitative metrics, such as the number of businesses reached, and activities delivered. However, some Consortium members have raised concerns that these metrics do not adequately capture the quality of support provided or reflect progress toward broader ecosystem change.

The existing monitoring framework is designed for short-term service delivery, focusing on individual-level interactions rather than assessing wider business impacts or systemic outcomes. As a result, it limits the Consortium's ability to demonstrate progress in key areas like business learning and development, and risks overlooking the deeper, long-term change the Consortium is working to achieve.

Much of the Consortium's support has focused on sustaining income, maintaining stability, and preventing business closures. Including these metrics is important, given the significant

challenges businesses face in remaining viable in the current economic climate. However, some Consortium members have noted a gap between what the programme is currently delivering and its original, broader goal of building an inclusive economy

> *“We've overdelivered on our outputs, and most of our outcomes are there. But that's the funders' requirements—that wasn't the initial impetus for even going for the funding in the first place. So, there's a disconnect between those two, and we never resolved that.”*
>
> *Consortium Member Interview*

Short term funding cycle

The short-term funding cycle for Hackney Impact required the Consortium to begin delivery quickly, resulting in a rushed project setup. This limited the time available for essential foundational activities such as building trust, recruiting staff and collectively establishing a strategy and plan. As a result, Consortium members did not have sufficient time to develop strong working relationships with one another.

> *"There wasn’t enough trust built that we could allow each other to jump in. We didn’t understand each other’s methodologies. No one got a chance to understand the difference between coaching and, mentoring or where networking begins and coaching ends."*
>
> *Consortium Member Interview*

> *“This is the challenge of working in funded projects (how councils allocate funding) because under pressure to start and start delivering, you don't necessarily have the time—you have 18 months, but it can take you three months to get the right people and things in place."*
>
> *External Stakeholder Interview*

While members were able to refer participants to one another, Consortium members stressed that they were still operating as individual businesses. Their activities remained distinct and independent rather than forming a cohesive, collaborative approach. Consortium members also highlighted that the short funding cycle limited the type and scale of activities that could be delivered, ultimately constraining the programme’s reach. Much of Hackney Impact’s support targeted micro and mid-sized businesses, limiting their ability to provide structured, long-term assistance.

> *"I think the project cycle is too short to have that sort of benefit with a more mature organisation. But then it also goes back to that thing that I was saying at the start—just activity for the sake of activity—that’s never going to be a benefit to a serious business owner. To have a serious impact with a mature organisation, you need to be far more intentional. You need to be far more systematic about what you’re doing, and that's just not the case."*
>
> *Consortium Member Interview*

Additionally, some members pointed out that the time-limited nature of the project conflicted with the long-term goal of building an inclusive economy. Creating inclusivity is an ongoing

process rather than something that can be achieved within a fixed timeframe. The short duration of the programme also made it difficult to gather meaningful data, highlighting the need to assess its medium- to long-term impact on participating businesses in the future

"The conceptualisation of this as a time-limited project creates difficulty. The difficulty that it creates is to do with the fact that inclusivity and the creation of inclusive economies, which is the purpose of what we're trying to do, is not a one-off event or an achievable end point."

Consortium Member Interview

5. Working as a consortium

In this section, we explore how Hackney Impact can strengthen its effectiveness as a consortium. We examine improvements around communication, the need for greater clarity on complementary and overlapping activities and acknowledge tensions that have emerged within the group before considering how these might be addressed moving forward.

Communication

As the Consortium has progressed, members have reported noticeable improvements in both communication and the development of shared infrastructure. This includes the introduction of a Consortium WhatsApp group for more immediate and informal updates, as well as better planning and structuring of meetings to ensure clearer, more consistent engagement across partners.

Consortium members had initially encountered challenges with communication, which affected collaboration and information sharing, and led to some frustration and misunderstanding. One key issue identified was the lack of a centralised and widely adopted platform where all members could easily access core documents, meeting notes and updates. While a shared SharePoint existed, access restrictions caused by organisational firewall requirements affected engagement.

As one Consortium member noted:

> *"Ways of communicating have really evolved over the last six months, specifically around the way that meetings are planned, schedules, minutes, and agendas are distributed."*
> *Consortium Member Interview*

Clarifying overlapping activities and strengthening strategic focus

Many Consortium members have actively referred and signposted to one another, reflecting a strong spirit of collaboration and a complementary service offer. The customer journey mapping exercise was a particularly useful tool in helping partners identify areas of alignment, understand where services naturally complemented one another, and uncover further opportunities for signposting and coordination.

At the same time, as Hackney Impact continues to grow, ensuring that activities remain complementary and avoid unnecessary duplication is an important consideration. Both external partners and Consortium members have highlighted the need for greater clarity around the functions and purposes of specific support activities delivered by each organisation. While collaboration is intended to create a more coordinated support system, better definition of each partner's contribution would help reduce the risk of overlap and enhance the value of joint delivery.

A key opportunity lies in refining the focus of Hackney Impact's support. Members have noted that, while the Consortium serves a broad range of businesses, the Theory of Change remains wide in scope - making it harder to strategically align activities and target support effectively.

Although updates were made in December 2024, several members felt more work is needed to create a shared understanding of who Hackney Impact aims to support, and at what stage in their business journey.

> *"Our Theory of Change is so wide-ranging … if we said we are going to do one thing, and this is what we're going to do, this is how we're going to do it, it would have been so much easier. And that's not necessarily how Hackney Impact was set up. Hackney Impact was set up to do lots of different things, but it does make it harder to do any one of them."*
>
> *Consortium Member Interview*

Going forward, refining the Consortium's strategic focus, whether through clearer target groups, sharper objectives or more defined business-stage intervention, could strengthen coordination and improve outcomes. Greater clarity would support more effective alignment of activities, make engagement easier for businesses, and provide a stronger foundation for measuring impact.

Tension within the Consortium

Consortium members have identified periods of tension through the project duration, which have waxed and waned over time but never fully disappeared. These tensions have primarily stemmed from resource allocation, power dynamics and the balance between strategic and operational priorities. Such challenges are common in collaborations, because they do not start with the systems, structures and accountability mechanisms that individual organisations have taken years to develop.

> *"We do not have a board; we do not have clear governance. We do not have a form of hierarchy. We have different people from different organisations coming in, and we really needed to figure those things out earlier. We have done quite a lot in the last six months, but it made everything a lot more challenging."*
>
> *Consortium Member Interview*

Whilst a backbone organisation plays a crucial role in collaborations by managing the infrastructure needed for delivery, this structure can also create tensions over resources, as different organisations may have competing interests in how resources are allocated. Power dynamics can further contribute to some members feeling more or less valued in decision-making processes, which can impact overall collaboration. Effectively managing these tensions is a common challenge in collaborative working and requires intentional governance structures to ensure fairness, transparency and shared ownership.

Consortium members and external stakeholders have highlighted the importance of clearly separating strategic and operational functions. Strategic planning sets long-term goals and defines the consortium's direction, while operational planning focuses on the daily activities required to achieve these objectives. By defining these roles more clearly, the consortium can align strategic goals with actionable tasks and reduce tensions between planning and execution. Some members have noted that recent meetings among senior leadership from different organisations have been positive and could serve as a valuable space for providing this clarity and oversight.

6. How to build a collaborative model for the delivery of business support services

This final section brings together the learning and reflections captured throughout the previous section to explore what it takes to build an effective collaborative model. It begins by examining the importance of investing in trust and relationship-building, before highlighting the value of developing collaboration from the ground up. The section then considers the role of governance in enabling effective joint working and concludes with a reflection on the significance of 'place' in shaping and sustaining collaborative approaches.

Investing time in trust and relationship building

Several Consortium members emphasised that strong, trusting relationships, both within the Consortium and with external stakeholders, are essential for effective collaboration. Trust serves as the foundation for building sustainable partnerships that extend beyond individual funding cycles. It is rooted in open communication, shared decision-making and a sense of mutual accountability.

> *"Working together as a consortium needs to have a certain level of communication - which is open, clear and trusting."*
> *Consortium Member Interview*

Both Consortium members and external stakeholders stressed that establishing trust requires a deliberate investment of time, particularly at the early stages of a project. This phase is crucial for defining a shared purpose, setting a joint strategy, and agreeing on ways of working to ensure all partners are aligned in their goals. Consortium members also highlighted the benefits of building relationships outside formal work settings, through in person interactions such as shared dinners.

> *"You need to allow them [partners] to actually learn to trust each other, because trust isn't something that you can do in a rush."*
> *Consortium Member Interview*

When trust is present, organisations are more willing to share challenges, offer support, and work collectively toward common objectives.

> *"It's about being able to pick up the phone to one another."*
> *External Stakeholder Interview*

However, due to time constraints in the Hackney Impact project, Consortium members noted that it was challenging to prioritise relationship-building over delivery in the early stages. That being said, the Consortium has later attempted to embed trust-building activities, such as rotating meeting chairs and co-creating agendas, to strengthen collaboration and create a more inclusive working environment.

Building relationships from the ground up

Several consortium members emphasised that strong, sustainable collaboration must be built from the ground up. Hackney Impact was initiated by the Council, which identified the need and brought organisations together. While this approach created opportunities for cross-sector partnerships, it also meant that some organisations were placed into collaboration rather than forming partnerships organically.

> *"I think there is a difference between putting together a tender bid for a programme that has been put out to council or one that you've created yourself."*
> *Consortium Member Interview*

When organisations come together through shared values, common goals, and existing relationships, they are more likely to both work well together but also overcome challenges.

Shared goals and clear governance

Successful collaboration within a consortium relies on a shared vision and clear governance structures. A collective plan and a Theory of Change help ensure alignment by providing direction, defining goals, and establishing a structured approach to decision-making, accountability, and impact measurement.

> *"You need to be very clear and concise about what you are trying to do. The more limited your goals are, but the more clearly you define what you are going to do, the more effective you will be."*
> *Consortium Member Interview*

External stakeholders and Consortium members highlighted the importance of clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of all partners, including the lead organisation. This clarity is essential for avoiding confusion, ensuring smooth coordination, and maintaining trust within the partnership.

Strengthening governance requires a commitment to transparency, shared decision-making, and clearly defined roles. Many stakeholders emphasised the need for shared leadership, with approaches such as rotating chairs or co-leadership models helping to create more inclusive decision-making processes. Additionally, establishing structured decision-making processes, along with effective mechanisms for conflict resolution and change management, was identified as key to maintaining stability and trust within the Consortium.

Role of 'place' in collaborative working

There were mixed views on the role of place in collaborative working. Some Consortium members questioned the limitations of a place-based approach, suggesting that it may create a "false ecosystem" where partnerships appear cohesive but may not always be the best fit for achieving broader goals. A narrow geographic focus could potentially be restrictive, preventing collaborations from engaging with wider economic and policy ecosystems that extend beyond Hackney.

> *"It is too limiting, because Hackney is embedded within London and it's part of an integrated economy. So when we're talking about an inclusive economy... you can see that a certain*

disconnects starts to happen."
Consortium Member Interview

On the other hand, there was broad support for a focus on place. Hackney Impact participants highlighted a strong sense of pride and deep connection to Hackney, with this pride emerging as a powerful connecting force—motivating individuals and organisations to work together, invest in their communities, and commit to long-term change. This emotional and civic connection underpins the foundations of a successful place-based collaborative model such as Hackney Impact, which depends not only on strategic coordination but also on a deep understanding of the local environment. This means being attuned to Hackney's business landscape, community dynamics, and relationships with key organisations, the council and other local funders.

As one external stakeholder noted:

"Think of it as a larger system of support, it can't just come from one organisation or the council or certain funders… it has to happen from everywhere."
External Stakeholder Interview

Strong local networks are essential, as effective collaboration relies on genuine connections and strategic partnerships with funders, local authorities and influential actors. Individuals and organisations bring unique and complementary assets, such as networks, lived experience, or specialist knowledge, and these strengths are most valuable when deeply rooted in the local context and its specific needs.

7. Case Studies

Duncan Howard - Castle Climbing Centre

Duncan has been CEO of Castle Climbing Centre (CCC) since 2015 and has been using the centre's facilities since 1996. In 2019, Duncan became the Chair of the Association of British Climbing Walls.

Duncan's passion for climbing stems from the impact it has on him as well as its impact on the lives of others. Climbing needs complete focus and enables Duncan to switch off from work as it is both a mental and physical workout. For others,

> "*having that release, having that opportunity to go and do the thing they love once or twice a week, and it not being prohibitively expensive, and not being, a three-hour car drive away is a good thing to do.*"

The Story So Far

Castle Climbing Centre was established in 1995 by four climbing enthusiasts who wanted an easily accessible place for Londoners to be able to maintain climbing fitness between trips to outdoor climbing areas. CCC is the second largest indoor climbing centre in Europe and the largest in the UK.

Since its early days, indoor climbing has grown considerably as a sport, particularly with the advent of bouldering in the 2010s. Additionally, the clientele has diversified, and customers have increasingly come as an alternative to gym-going because it is a great way of keeping fit. CCC's visitors peaked at 900-1000 per day before the pandemic, during which time additional bouldering walls were added to expand capacity and rope lines increased from 18 to 112. They also opened a café, yoga space and provide meeting rooms for hire; and opened a two-acre market garden, producing organic food for its café, other cafes and local food charities.

Weathering Bumps Along The Road

The closures and restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic followed climbing's boom period and significantly disrupted operations at CCC. They were able to keep going due to an insurance payout, secured after legal action. After COVID the number of climbing centres in London increased from 13 to 42, affecting visitor numbers at CCC.

Coupled with a cost-of-living crisis and sky-high London costs, declining visitor numbers are affecting profit margins. Furthermore, CCC has had to adapt to changing market conditions, including the rise of large, well-funded French companies entering the market (where indoor climbing has a longer history). Despite these challenges, CCC is looking to expand further and deepen its commitment to its social and environmental role.

The Hackney Business Ecosystem

Green Business provided support to CCC to help it achieve its ambitions to become an environmentally responsible business, and Allia supported Duncan to learn about the impact reporting that will be needed for its future expansion. The wider consortium enabled Duncan to link up with other Hackney businesses, including specialist businesses that focus on wellness, physcial rehabilitation and those that support people in the criminal justice system, that can help CCC deepen its social impact partnerships for the community. Connecting with other businesses has been particularly important in the post-COVID era to share learning about how people are coping and adapting to the changing context.

What's On The Horizon

Future plans include expanding to Ilford to open a climbing centre that aligns with Redbridge Council's health and well-being strategy; and also in Brighton, where they plan to open the city's first indoor climbing centre.

Jamila Daley-Jeffers

Jamila Daley-Jeffers is the founder of *Get That Money*, a consultancy that supports charitable organisations with fundraising, especially campaigns and individual giving including donor engagement, stewardship, and retention

The Story So Far

With a background in charity fundraising, Jamila began her consultancy journey over four years ago, balancing freelance projects alongside a job. In 2022, she transitioned into full-time consultancy, expanding her client network across the UK and the globe. Jamila primarily supports small to medium-sized charitable organisations, helping them strengthen their fundraising strategies and campaigns to become financially sustainable.

Born and raised in Hackney, Jamila has always been passionate about her local community, the charities that serve it and is committed to making funding more accessible ensuring charities have the resources they need to thrive

Growing and Scaling

Despite four years of fundraising consultancy experience, January 2024 marked a turning point for Jamila, as she reflected, *"I was working **in** my business, rather than **on** my business."* Whilst continuing to expand her client network, this realisation led her to diversify her service offering.

Recognising that many clients share similar needs, Jamila developed and delivered structured training programmes for groups of organisations, expanding her reach of clients. These programmes provide charities with essential fundraising knowledge and a foundational framework, with follow-up consultancy available for those requiring more tailored support. In addition, Jamila has taken on more public speaking engagements, sharing her expertise on fundraising and the broader funding sector.

Weathering Bumps Along The Road

Starting a business as a sole trader requires more than just expertise in a particular field; it also demands a strong foundation in essential business skills. As Jamila reflected, "I came to the conclusion that I'd been running my consultancy for years, but I didn't know how to run a business."

While Jamila had extensive experience in fundraising, she recognised the need for a deeper understanding of key business fundamentals such as VAT, governance, marketing, and defining her unique selling points. Positioning her brand effectively was another challenge—learning how to market her services, attract the right clients, and communicate her value with confidence. Working as a sole trader can also be a solitary journey, and a key challenge has been building relationships with peers and a wider network to share experiences and support each other.

The Hackney Business Ecosystem

Jamila has engaged with various aspects of Hackney Impact, including training, mentoring, coaching, and peer-to-peer networking sessions.

Through training with Allia, she has strengthened her knowledge of business fundamentals, gaining a deeper understanding of governance, cash flow, and marketing. Coaching with Hackney Cooperative Developments has helped her refine her brand identity. Mentoring and networking with Social Founders, and East End Trades Guild networking has enabled her to connect with other Hackney-based businesses.

In addition, Jamila has also given back to the ecosystem by sharing her experiences and insights to support others on their journey.

What's On The Horizon?

Looking ahead, Jamila is focused on expanding her network and client base while continuing to develop new training and public speaking offerings. Central to this is her commitment to continue to deliver support that *"empowers, inspires, and helps those in fundraising."*

Julie Flavell – Shoreditch Town Hall

Julie Flavell has been CEO of Shoreditch Town Hall since December 2023 and brings extensive experience in managing artistic projects and installations across London.

The Story So Far

STH was founded as a charitable trust in 1998 and is now the largest multi-artform venue in Hackney. Over the years, it has evolved into a cultural, community, and events space, with a mission to deliver a diverse programme of activities that are both relevant and inclusive to the people of Hackney.

"The community and the cultural programmes are really, really important. There are lots of places in London that are more traditional theatres, but this is an untraditional space... We've got no restrictions on what art forms we can have... so we really have an eclectic mix."

Housed in a Grade II listed building, STH offers a range of creative and commercial opportunities. It serves as a theatre, film location, and a hub for community and co-working spaces. STH also hosts a variety of permanent business tenants, including a two-Michelin-starred restaurant, a creative agency, and an architect practice.

Scale & Growth

After falling into disrepair in the 1980s, STH was repurposed into an event hire business, utilising the former Victorian Grand Assembly Hall and reception rooms. In 2012, the Trust took a more dynamic approach, transforming it into a hub for arts, events, and community engagement, supported by its commercial ventures. More recently, it introduced a free co-working space in 2021 and is always looking at creative ways to use the building.

Now with over 40 staff members, including technicians, front-of-house staff, cultural programme coordinators, and senior leadership, Shoreditch Town Hall continues to grow, with its leadership team shaping its strategic direction.

Weathering Bumps Along The Road

STH has historically relied on earned income from its commercial activities. While it has received grants for specific projects, these funds typically cover project costs rather than ongoing maintenance and operational costs. As a historic Victorian building, it faces high overhead and running costs.

In recent years, economic and social challenges have further strained its finances. The impact of COVID-19, rising living costs, and the 2023 film and writers' strikes has led to a decline in commercial opportunities, reducing funding for creative activities and community programming.

The Hackney Business Ecosystem

A key part of STH's offer is providing space for local artists, creative collectives, and community groups. Its partnership with Hackney Impact has strengthened ties with Hackney businesses, helping match spaces with those in need while promoting its venue and co-working opportunities.

Julie noted that working with Hackney Impact Consortium Members has reinforced confidence in Shoreditch Town Hall's ability to meet local business needs:

"It's given me confidence in what we're doing because they're out there in the community, talking to people. They know what Hackney businesses want."

Through trusted partnerships with Hackney Impact, the venue has explored new opportunities with minimal risk. For example, a connection with a local wedding planner led to discussions about expanding its wedding offer to host big receptions in its historic rooms.

Through Hackney Impact, STH has also secured a green energy grant and affordable workspace grant.

What's On The Horizon?

Looking ahead, STH will continue to adapt and evolve in response to a changing external landscape while ensuring it remains an inclusive and accessible creative venue for both the local and London wide community. As Julie describes:

"It's important to evolve as needed... not being afraid to change and pivot".

8. Recommendations

The learning from this programme informs the following recommendations, which could be considered when designing and delivering the next phase of this work, and/or when rolling out similar programmes. They range from design recommendations for the funding of business support services to the delivery of those services, and as such are relevant to a range of audiences, including lead and delivery partners, funders and commissioners.

Hackney Impact Consortium have delivered a successful programme and its impact will be felt for sometime. Overall, there is value to the business support services infrastructure provided by Hackney Impact, which creates positive impact for Hackney businesses, communities and the local economy, and funding should be available to continue its work. The amount of funding would impact the level of ambition of any future initiative, and the diversity and length of funding would increase its sustainability. While the programme has made impressive progress in its 18 months, the strategic ambitions of Hackney Impact to build an inclusive economy requires a considerably longer runway. Going forward, a variety of funding models should be considered, such as membership-based, fee-based, investment, corporate sponsorship and public/philanthropic grant-based models, and ideally one that combines several of these at once.

A focus that is proportionate to the available resource

The strategy of business support services such as those delivered by Hackney Impact Consortium should be developed to meet the needs of target beneficiaries that are proportionate to the level of resource available, and based on what Consortia deem a priority. This might include, for example, a focus on businesses at particular stages in their journey (e.g. start-ups, growth stage, more established businesses) and/or demographic groups (e.g. female-led businesses, Black-led businesses), with an understanding of their needs at the outset informing service design, which is updated regularly with emerging intelligence (gathered through participatory research methods). This would enable Consortia to address collectively agreed priority needs, carve out niche expertise, and improve quality by focusing resources on priority services and activities. Onward referrals to partner organisations could support businesses whose needs fall outside this remit.

Measuring impact

Success metrics for business support programmes such as Hackney Impact should be led by the programme's desired outcomes, including longer-term systemic ambitions. Measuring outcomes alongside outputs will support improved analysis and insight, during and after delivery. For short-term projects, more intermediate outcomes that can signal progress towards long-term outcomes will be appropriate, but ideally funding timescales should allow programmes to see the longer-term outcomes of their work. Funders should be flexible in their reporting requirements to support grantees' evaluation and learning needs.

Influencing role

There is demand among stakeholders for a strategic role in nurturing a positive business ecosystem in Hackney (e.g. influencing council policy and practice), which Hackney Impact Consortium is well-placed to deliver, using the combined credibility of its member organisations, and drawing on the evidence that comes from delivering services and from being embedded in the community.

A policy influencing strand for Hackney Impact, subject to available resource, could draw in more established businesses as partners in curating the local business ecosystem, as well as being mentors to newer businesses.

Time to build trust and programme infrastructure

The set-up phase of Consortia such as Hackney Impact need longer lead in time to develop/consolidate relationships and establish trust; and to put in place the necessary governance and infrastructure arrangements. Funders should push back the participant delivery targets in the initial phase to allow adequate time for this crucial period before and include governance, infrastructure and relationship metrics in the early phase instead.

In this phase, Consortia should spend sufficient time co-designing the programme's strategy (e.g. via a Theory of Change) to clarify the programme's shared goals, and ensure a shared understanding of direction and progress. Values, ways of working and decision-making processes should also be co-designed at the outset, with a jointly agreed process for resolving disputes and addressing problematic conflict (as opposed to 'healthy conflict').

Clarity on roles and responsibilities of each partner, with operational and strategic functions delineated – potentially developed as part of the ways of working – would help to manage expectations and understanding of how individuals relate to the programme's collective goals. A system for storing programme documents that meets data security standards of all partners should be agreed, so that all have equal access.

Equity, inclusion and accessibility

User research on how target businesses hear about Hackney Impact Consortium and use the website, alongside how their needs change over time, could be built into a future phase of the project, to ensure the reach of the Consortium matches its ambitions and that continuous improvements can be made to accessibility, usability and relevance of its products and services. Refining a definition of the term 'underrepresented groups' so there is a shared understanding of its meaning and parameters is a prerequisite to deciding which businesses should be targeted.

The role of place

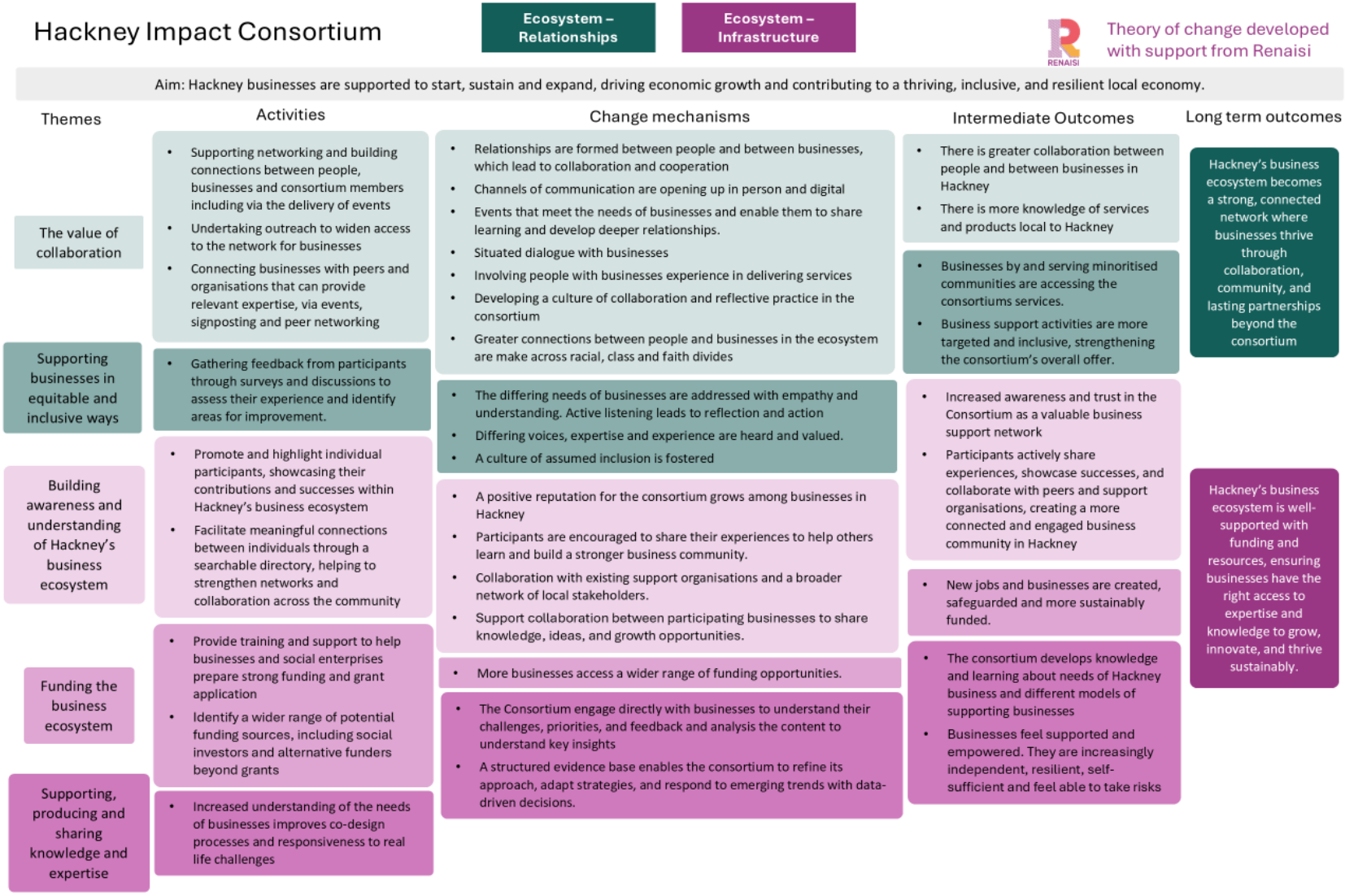
Businesses and people identify with Hackney in a positive way and the value of Hackney Impact Consortium's local, inclusive 'brand' should be harnessed wherever possible to cultivate and strengthen a sense of community for the business ecosystem.

The networks of respective Consortium members should be leveraged to build a web of contacts for participants that could be used in different ways e.g. as 'trusted suppliers', mentors or advisers. This would benefit from a peer networking approach that is delivered collectively by partners with ongoing infrastructure to connect existing and new people.

A positive public narrative

Hackney Impact should celebrate its successes with a positive public narrative about the impact of the Consortium, at the same time as inculcating a culture of continuous, collective learning, reflection, adaptation and improvement.

Appendix 1 Hackney Impact Consortium Theory of Change



Hackney Impact Consortium

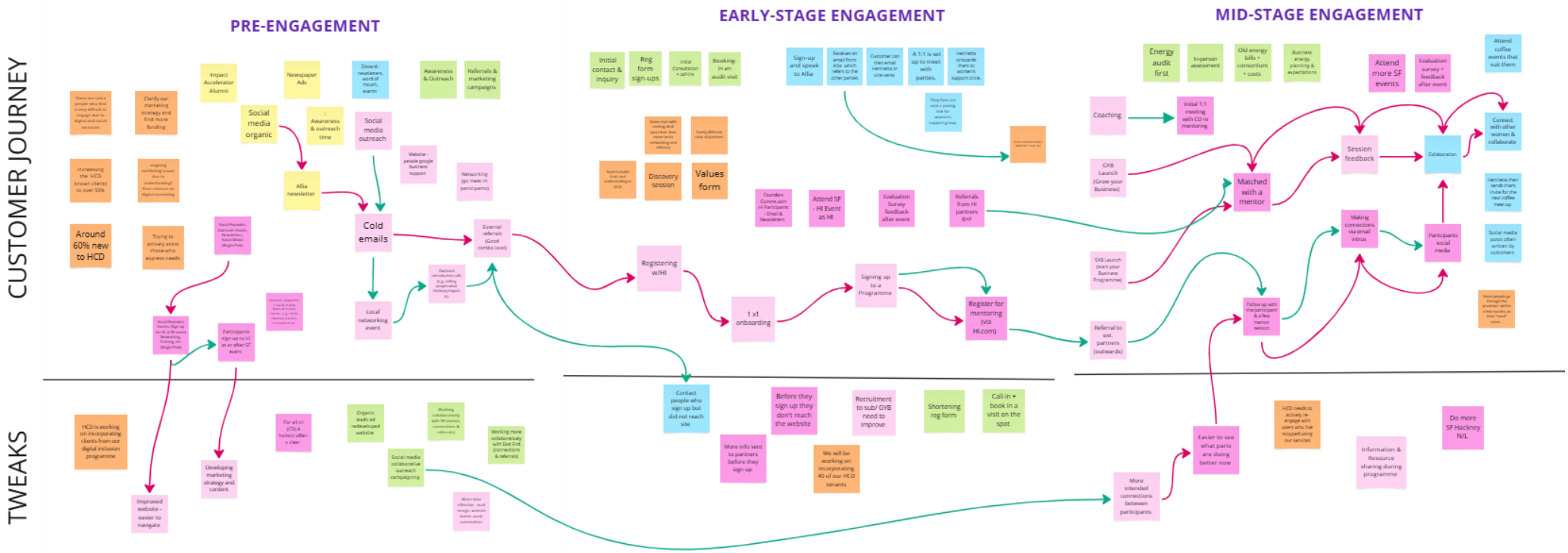
Business Level outcomes

Theory of change developed with support from Renaisi

Aim: Hackney businesses are supported to start, sustain and expand, driving economic growth and contributing to a thriving, inclusive, and resilient local economy.

Themes	Activities	Change mechanisms	Intermediate Outcomes	Long term outcomes
Environmentally sustainable businesses	• Supporting businesses to deliver energy audits, energy reduction plans, and strategy building • Promoting sustainability practices and approaches through research of energy costs and net-zero consultation	• Businesses receive ongoing support to assess their energy needs, understand their impact, and develop strategies to improve efficiency, reduce costs, and enhance sustainability.	• CO2 emissions of businesses are reduced	A thriving and inclusive business ecosystem in Hackney, where diverse entrepreneurs grow and sustain their ventures, creating jobs, innovation, and environmental responsibility.
Skills and capacity building	• Delivering organisational development and capacity building support to businesses, including in areas of fundraising, bookkeeping and business planning • Marketing and public relations support • Coaching for business leaders • Facilitating mentoring with business owners and founders • Provision of affordable workspaces • Developing a central and trusted source of digital resources	• Access to resources and expert knowledge tailored to the different needs of businesses' • Viability and awareness of available resources, networks and events • Generation of pathways to onboard new businesses	• Businesses adopt new ways of working, including AI, while gaining skills in finance, marketing, and leadership • Shifts in mentality and mindsets of people and businesses.	

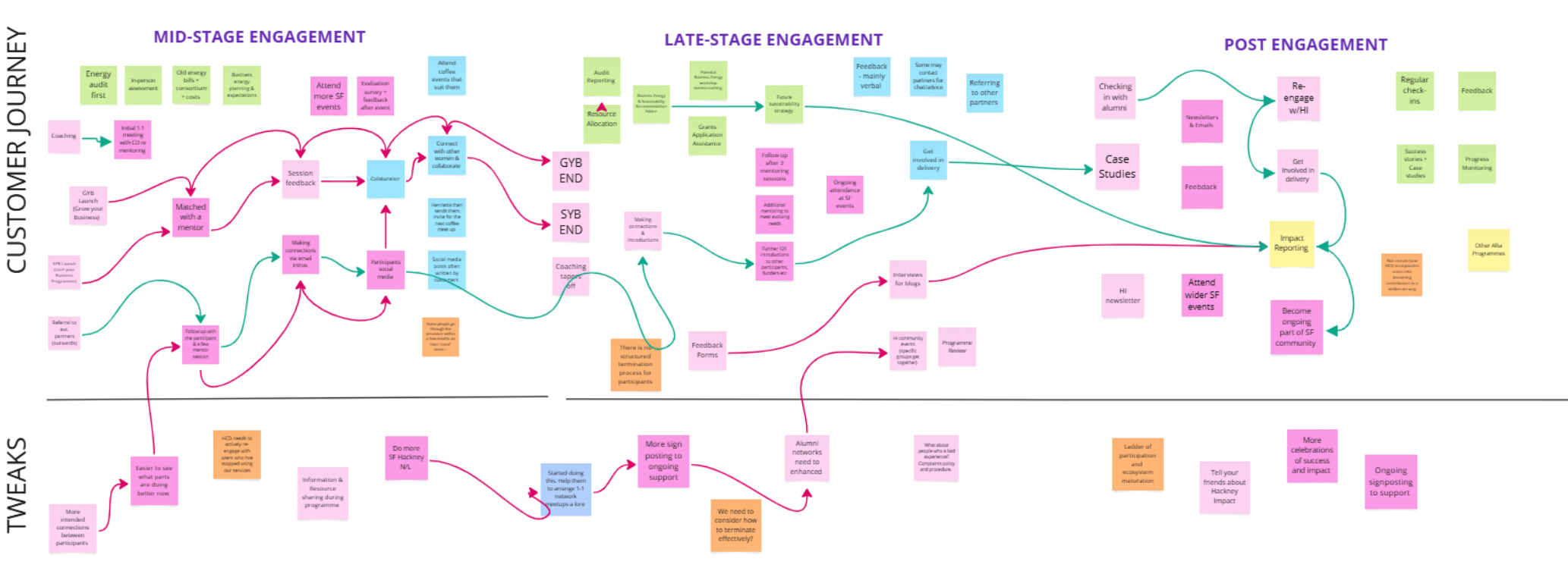
Appendix 2 Customer Journey Map



Where are there already connections between consortium members during the customer journey?

Where is there potential for future connections between consortium members during the customer journey?

East End Trades Guild	Hackney Impact Consortium – joint roles	Hackney Cooperative Developments
West London Business	Social Founders	Allia



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