

Evaluation of the South of Scotland Enterprise Pathways Programme for Under-Represented Groups

Final Report for

South of Scotland Enterprise



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Executive Summary

Programme Overview

Phase 2 of the Pathways Pilot Programme ran from July 2025 to 31 March 2026, building on the success of Phase 1 to continue supporting women and other under-represented groups in their entrepreneurial journey and business growth. The Programme continued to provide support through place-based coaching with the addition of growth and innovation coaching for clients identified to benefit from more focused support in these areas. The Concept Fund offered grants of up to £1,000 and specialist support was provided by Women's Enterprise Scotland and Volunteering Matters to enhance accessibility.

The Programme did not operate to fixed numerical outcome targets. Instead, the Scottish Government requested enhanced short term data collection to evidence engagement, participant circumstances, barriers, networking and early entrepreneurial outcomes. Longer term targets such as business survival, revenue growth and job creation were identified as future measures beyond the evaluation timeframe.

Evaluation Objectives and Methodology

Frontline was commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the Phase 2 Pilot Programme focusing on:

- determining the relevance and level of achievement of project objectives, development of effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability
- identifying the outcomes that have been achieved, for whom and under what circumstances
- the activities and outputs – what has been delivered, when and to who

This evaluation report draws on evidence from the following sources:

- a desk review of secondary data
- qualitative interviews with 19 stakeholders and 13 coaches
- e-survey and consultation with 161 clients

Key Findings

Stakeholder insights

There was a strong and shared understanding of the purpose of Pathways as a means of supporting women and other under-represented groups at pre-start up and early stage business phases. Stakeholders highlighted how the Programme has evolved since Phase 1 and is now seen as an increasingly embedded and proactive component of SOSE's wider economic development ecosystem. This includes strengthening referral pathways, improving connections and partnership working across the support landscape and supporting early identification of founders with growth potential.

Stakeholders consistently praised the quality of Programme management which included streamlined operational processes and strong data collection and reporting. Marketing and word of mouth promotion of the Programme were identified as key drivers of the high and sustained demand. Suggested improvements focused on managing continued demand, continuity of support in the context of yearly funding, improving CRM connectivity across partner organisations, streamlining grant processes and ensuring clarity around criteria for growth coaching.

Coach insights

Place-based Coaches identified confidence, self-belief and mental health challenges as the most common barriers facing clients embarking on starting a business, alongside personal circumstances, language barriers and isolation. Growth and Innovation coaches highlighted additional challenges around visibility, commercialisation and accessing relevant networks. Coaches consistently reported that while grant funding was valued, the coaching itself delivered the strongest and most sustainable impact, providing accountability, clarity, emotional support and access to wider networks.

Coaches observed clear outcomes including increased confidence, clients starting businesses, progression to trading, and improved resilience and wellbeing. They strongly endorsed the need for the Programme to continue and identified areas for improvement including clearer eligibility criteria, greater flexibility in coaching and grants, additional specialist support for neurodiverse clients and those with language barriers, and increased coaching capacity to meet demand.

Client insights

Client outcomes were consistently strong. 90% of clients completing coaching reported achieving what they set out to accomplish with significant improvements in their confidence to run a business (31% increase) and knowledge of running a business (47% increase). Overall, 76% of clients receiving support had started trading, with 88% of them considering themselves a business person compared to 50% before receiving support.

Clients reported exceptionally high satisfaction across all elements of Programme delivery. The Programme achieved an excellent Net Promoter Score of 92, indicating extremely strong advocacy. Grant support was seen to play an enabling role, with the majority of clients stating they would still have attempted to start a business without it, but 63% reported it would have taken longer and 21% said progress would have been on a smaller scale.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Phase 2 of the Pathways Pilot has maintained a clear focus on supporting women and other under-represented groups with evidence highlighting this focus has successfully driven engagement, particularly through locally based coaches and strong word of mouth referrals. Evaluation findings indicate that since the completion of Phase 1, Pathways has evolved and is starting to serve as an embedded, important and proactive part of SOSE's wider economic development ecosystem as well as serving a sense of community that encompasses entrepreneurs and stretches across partner organisations. Overall, the Programme is highly valued and clearly meeting a regional need. Its impact extends beyond business creation, supporting personal development, strengthening local enterprise culture and embedding a more inclusive ecosystem.

Whilst no formal targets were set, the Programme has fully met Scottish Government requirements for enhanced short term data collection and has generated strong early outcomes across engagement, coaching, grant uptake and business progression. Pathways is well positioned to report against future targets should they be introduced.

Recommendations to support continued demand and success of Pathways:

Programme Design and Strategic Development

- continue and sustain Pathways, given strong demand, positive outcomes and its unique role in the regional ecosystem. Review annually to ensure alignment with evolving needs and avoid duplication with wider business support offerings
- strengthen strategic targeting to reach under-represented groups beyond women, focusing on those with language barriers, neurodiverse clients, older entrepreneurs (60+) and digitally excluded groups
- maintain and reinforce local delivery, as local knowledge and proximity are highly valued by clients

Coaching Delivery

- introduce clearer eligibility criteria and definitions for inclusion on the Programme, growth coaching and expectations for business progression timelines
- explore options for more flexible coaching models, including longer support durations, more sessions, or group/cohort-based onboarding to better manage demand
- provide additional training and resources for coaches to support clients with neurodiversity, language challenges or complex personal circumstances

Grant Management

- simplify and digitalise grant processes, including making applications mobile friendly and clarifying timelines from the outset
- consider greater flexibility in grant value and spending timeframes, particularly around holiday periods or for clients with caring responsibilities
- enhance guidance for grant use, ensuring clients understand eligible expenditures and how the grant aligns with business planning

Ecosystem, Infrastructure and Visibility

- develop a Pathways community with ongoing peer support events, networking and shared learning opportunities, particularly between early stage and growth ready founders
- create an online portal or resource hub, offering centralised access to materials, signposting and SOSE/Business Gateway services
- increase visibility and outreach activity – particularly in areas with lower uptake – and continue leveraging successful word of mouth channels
- enhance CRM connectivity and data sharing across partner organisations to streamline client journeys, track progression and improve reporting

Monitoring and Evaluation

- continue to gather robust outcome data, including long term monitoring of business survival, revenue growth, job creation and scalable businesses, in line with Scottish Government asks
- identify and track high growth potential founders earlier, building on existing success and strengthening referral pathways to growth/innovation coaches

1 Introduction

Building on the success of the previous Pathways Pilot Programme, SOSE was asked by Scottish Government to continue and develop this place-based enterprise support for women and people from other under-represented groups to explore self-employment. Phase 2 of the Pathways Pilot ran from July 2025 – 31 March 2026.

1.1 Programme activities

Activities funded under the Phase 2 Pilot include:

- **a framework of nine place-based Enterprise Coaches** – procured on a contractual basis, the Enterprise Coaches are based locally within the South of Scotland delivering enterprise coaching and support to people from under-represented groups and building connections with local partners to embed an entrepreneurial mindset
- **Concept Fund** – grants of up to £1,000 to individuals exploring and starting a business in the South of Scotland
- **two Pathways Growth Coaches (one based in each local authority area)** – contracted to drive growth mindset and complement programme activity
- **one Innovation Coach** – to support particularly innovative/technical/high growth founders across the region
- **one Partnership Lead** – to support partnerships with the Colleges and other organisations

The Phase 2 Pilot has also secured specialised support from both Women's Enterprise Scotland and Volunteering Matters to enhance accessibility. Volunteering Matters provided direct assistance by working alongside clients with multiple and complex barriers as they progress through the Pathways coaching programme.

In addition, the Phase 2 Pilot has delivered courses and workshops aimed at reducing the gender export gap, commissioned specialist training and support for young entrepreneurs and developed an online library of video content and downloadable resources, available on the SOSE website.

2 Evaluation Objectives

Frontline was commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the Phase 2 Pilot Programme (the Programme) focusing on:

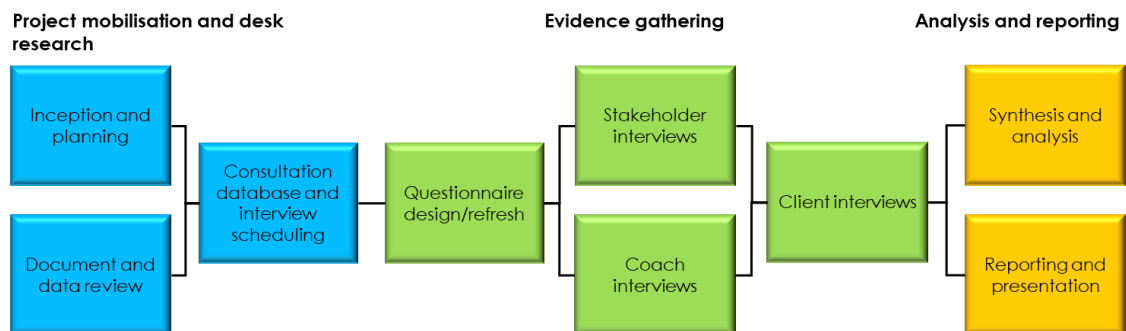
- determining the relevance and level of achievement of project objectives, development of effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability
- identifying the outcomes that have been achieved, for whom and under what circumstances
- the activities and outputs – what has been delivered, when and to who

This evaluation report draws on evidence from the following sources:

- a desk review of secondary data
- qualitative interviews with 19 stakeholders and 13 coaches
- e-survey and consultation with 161 clients

Evaluation methodology is outlined in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1: Method diagram



3 Funding and Programme Performance

3.1 Programme funding

£1.6m was invested by the Scottish Government, as part of a £6m investment focused on supporting women and other under-represented groups at the start of their entrepreneurial journey. The Programme team consists of two FTEs:

- Project Manager
- Project Coordinator

As part of the funding, the Scottish Government asked for additional data to be captured rather than setting targets. Many of the additional data asks are longer term and while starting to be collected, will take time before meaningful trends can be reported. Scottish Government data asks that have been measured include:

- **participants entry point** into the Programme – enquiry source captured through the Programme tracker
- **circumstances when engaging** with the Programme – captured as part of the Programme's pre-evaluation form
- **barriers to participation** – captured through the Programme start evaluation
- **data on entrepreneurial outcomes** – number of new businesses started captured through the Programme tracker
- **data on networking** – e.g. number of collaborations/partnerships formed, engagement with local innovation clusters captured as part of the Programme dashboard

Scottish Government asks that have been incorporated into the Programme management and marketing include:

- strengthen and continue to build relationships with partners, including those out with the SOSE region; bringing ecosystem partners together across Scotland to support the participants and broaden their support network; bringing founders who are slightly further on in their journey together to connect with participants as a valuable source of information and experience
- monitor progress of participants who have been through the Programme and started trading within their business, identifying and utilising success stories for data and marketing purposes
- identify the gaps and demographics the Programme is not fully reaching, adapting marketing techniques to target potential participants within these gaps
- continue engagement with colleges to promote the Pilot, holding workshops and career events to create interest

Other areas the Scottish Government would like the Programme to consider that are more long term and yet to be captured and evidenced include:

- cultural shifts in the region
- business survival rates, revenue funding growth, jobs created and follow-on support
- disaggregated data on participant demographics – using national datasets to benchmark participation rates, to identify under or over-represented groups
- a mechanism to identify and track scalable businesses, supporting them through their journey, signposting and possibly providing additional services to ensure they are reaching their full growth potential

3.2 Phase 2 Pilot Programme performance

The Programme received 823 enquiries and supported 529 clients (up until 31 March 2026) across:

- coaching provision (529)¹
 - 462 received place-based coaching
 - 85 received growth or innovation coaching
- grant provision (464)
 - 440 received coaching and grant support
 - 24 received grant only

Across the 464 receiving a grant, a total of £464,000 funding was approved with a further £298,706 leveraged through other funding means.

Figure 3.1 provides a snapshot of the demographics of participants.

Figure 3.1: Participant demographics



Source: SOSE Pathways Phase 2 PowerBI

All coaching support has been completed at the time of reporting.

¹ Some people were supported by both coaching provisions.

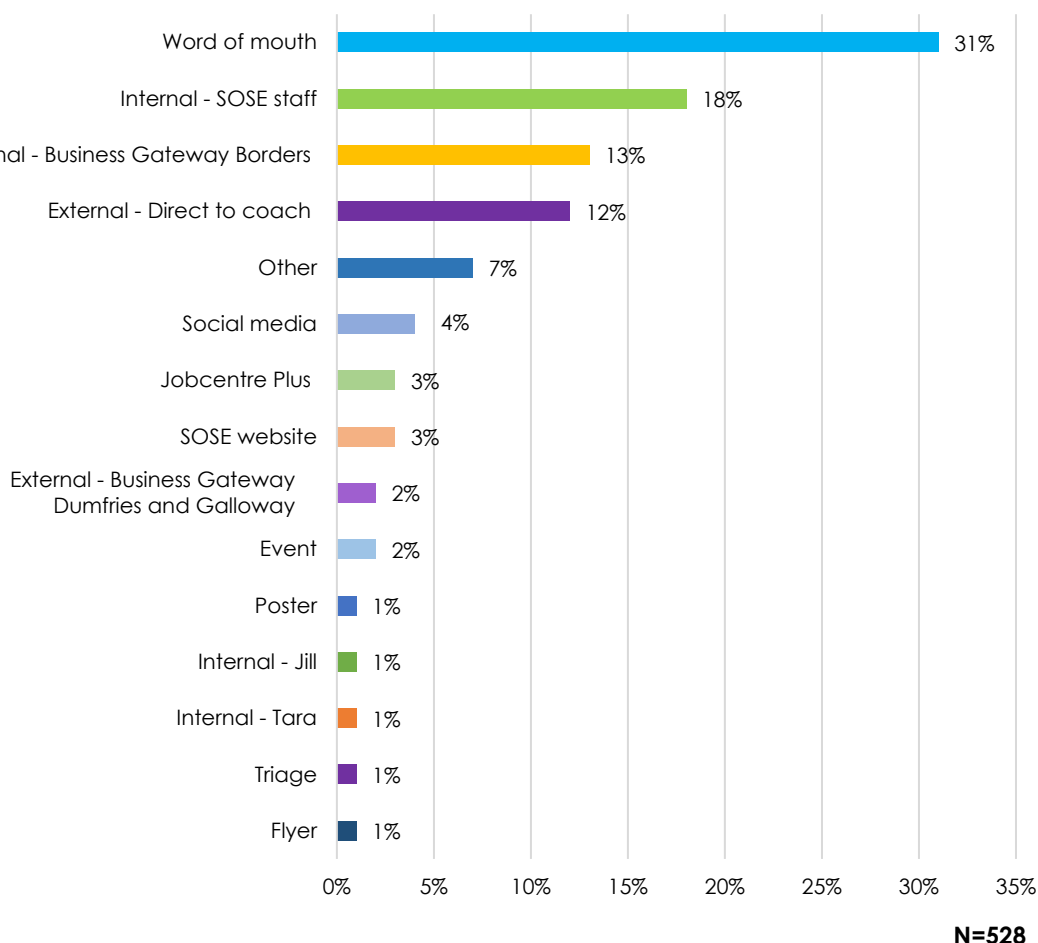
3.2.1 Scottish Government data capture and measurement requirements

The following data is captured and measured by the SOSE Programme team to meet Scottish Government requirements.

Entry point (enquiry source)

Participants heard about the Programme through a range of sources including word of mouth (31%, 168), SOSE staff (18%, 99), Business Gateway Borders (13%, 75) and direct to coach (12%, 61) being the key ones as shown in Figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2: Participant entry point (enquiry source)



Circumstances at time of engagement

Almost a third of those completing the pre-evaluation form (29%, 131) were working part-time with a further quarter (25%, 116) working full-time when they engaged with the Programme. Other common circumstances included:

- self-employed looking to grow (24%, 107)
- other caring responsibilities (23%, 103)
- in receipt of out of work benefits (12%, 55)
- unemployed more than six months (12%, 54)
- self-employed looking to do something different (11%, 52)

Table 3.1: Circumstances when engaging with the Programme²

Circumstances	No. of participants
Working part-time	131 (29%)
Working full-time	116 (25%)
Self-employed looking to grow	107 (24%)
Other caring responsibilities	103 (23%)

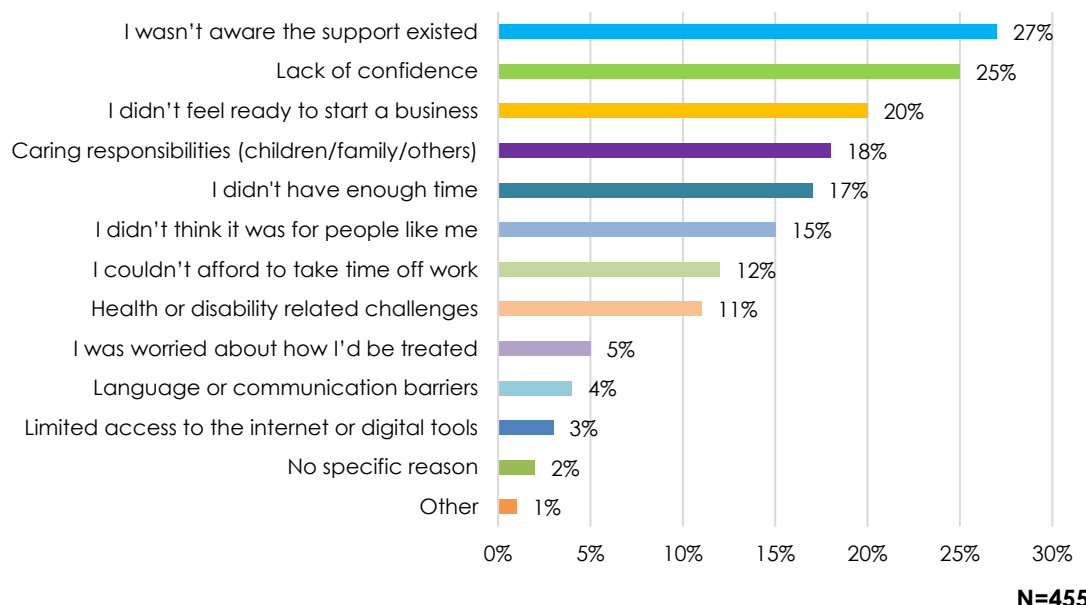
² Participants could note more than one option.

Circumstances	No. of participants
In receipt of out of work benefits	55 (12%)
Unemployed more than 6 months	54 (12%)
Self-employed looking to do something different	52 (11%)
Single parent	47 (10%)
Working casual/zero hours contract	32 (7%)
Volunteering	31 (7%)
Unemployed less than 6 months	30 (7%)
In training	27 (6%)
In education	24 (5%)
Refugee or asylum seeker	6 (1%)
On a career break/sabbatical	7 (2%)
Facing redundancy	4 (1%)

Barriers to participation

When asked what/if any barriers previously prevented access to similar support, the most common barrier identified was “not being aware that support existed” (27%, 125) followed by “lack of confidence” (25%, 114) and “not feeling ready” (20%, 90). Figure 3.3 shows a breakdown.

Figure 3.3: Barriers to participation



Entrepreneurial outcomes

Of those that had completed the post-evaluation form for the place-based coaching (343), 65% had started trading. Next steps identified following Pathways support included³:

- 49% (168) self-directed development of business
- 48% (166) accessing SOSE coaching
- 44% (150) accessing support from Business Gateway
- 24% (82) accessing education/training
- 3% (11) entering employment
- 2% (7) undecided

Data on networking

515 participants were involved in collaboration i.e. clients who have been working together in small groups or involved in group coaching sessions.

³ Participants could note more than one option.

4 Stakeholder Findings

Interviews were undertaken with 19 stakeholders in the following organisations and roles:

- SOSE including senior management team
- Programme management team
- internal coaches
- marketing team
- those in related projects and teams
- partner organisations
- strategic stakeholders
- Scottish Government
- Scottish Borders Business Gateway
- Dumfries and Galloway Business Gateway
- Women's Enterprise Scotland
- Borders College
- Scotland's Rural College
- Dumfries and Galloway College
- Volunteering Matters

The range of stakeholder views and perspectives reflect the connection and level of engagement they have with the Programme.

4.1 Views on the purpose of Pathways

Stakeholders were asked to describe their understanding of the purpose of Pathways together with how this had changed in any way since the first phase of the Pilot.

The initial aim of the Pilot to provide women and other under-represented groups with the support to consider and start a business remains core to stakeholders' understanding of its purpose. Several stakeholders went on to describe how Pathways has evolved and is now starting to serve as an important and proactive part of SOSE's economic development ecosystem through:

- embedding and refining Pathways to identify, signpost and provide support for businesses at pre-start up through to growth and scale up stages
- strengthening connections with the wider support network and partner organisations
- early identification and support of founders and businesses with growth potential

"It's all part of creating the ecosystem and a circular approach for businesses from start up through to growth, inward investment and supply chain with a local focus. Pathways is a key part of this."

"To have a truly buoyant ecosystem we need to have start up and established businesses, those with growth potential and founders with a product to get to market. Pathways has helped connect those types of founders that have been there but didn't see SOSE as the mechanism for support."

Stakeholders believe the Programme provides unique and individual support specifically through one-to-one coaching for those at pre-start up and more recently, start ups with growth potential. Stakeholders also saw the Programme as complementing other business supports that are available e.g. Chambers of Commerce, Business Gateway, through a facilitator and connecting role and in making engagement more accessible.

"We are about understanding the blockers and what is holding them back all while going through the business process while using a coaching model."

"The growth coaching is going back to coaching the individual, to understand so that they can be empowered to take their business forward. We have three companies with potential to be high million pound companies, that wasn't on our radar a few years ago, it has allowed us to work with those founders and drive those potential sales and routes to market that wasn't there before."

"Pathways helps people to make the most effective use of other supports that are out there."

4.2 The focus on place and under-represented groups

The Programme's focus on place and under-represented groups was considered to still be relevant by stakeholders and although the definition of under-representation was seen not to be specified, it was felt to imply a broadness that represented the South of Scotland population. This included factors from cultural difference through to neurodiversity, deprivation and rurality through to gender and ethnicity, all of which were seen to pose challenges for some people in starting their own business. The fact that coaches know their areas and that coaching is delivered locally was seen to address some of these challenges and promote engagement with the Programme by making it both trusted and accessible. Women as an under-represented group were most frequently referred to by stakeholders.

Stakeholders mentioned word of mouth amongst those who have received support has been significant in driving continued demand for the Programme which also indicates the success of the place and under-representation (mainly women) focus.

4.3 Feedback on Pathways operational and management processes

All stakeholders agreed operational and management processes had been streamlined and that the second phase of the Programme had naturally evolved, built on and benefited from work undertaken in the previous phase. They described a strong, responsive and flexible team together with excellent data collection and reporting processes.

Marketing for this phase of the Programme was particularly highlighted as working well, evidenced by the high demand for support. This was seen to be due to focused targeting of marketing efforts and that Pathways was increasingly being promoted through word of mouth by past and current clients.

Suggestions for improvement to processes included:

- better CRM connection across some partner organisations
- further streamlining the application process for coaching and grants if possible

4.4 Views on what is working particularly well

When asked to identify what is working particularly well in the Programme, stakeholders highlighted a number of areas:

- a sense of community and network across partner organisations which feeds into other supports available e.g. accelerators
- a sense of community and a network of entrepreneurs across the region
- the broadening of conversations about entrepreneurship in educational organisations
- the greater breadth of sector involvement
- greater geographical uptake
- the new focus on growth with experienced coaches to support this

"The sense of community and networking is really powerful, a bonded network which is invaluable for businesses."

"There is now an established community relating to entrepreneurship at college level and clarity on how Pathways provides support. The decision makers are now engaged across the college allowing the broader conversations about supporting entrepreneurship rather than sector specific. We wouldn't be here without Pathways support."

"It has felt that we are running a programme as part of a wider, established initiative for those women who have already engaged with Pathways. We are recruiting from an already established community. It feels like there is a network of women being supported in the South of Scotland."

"Strategically the name "Pathways" is working well – it feels like things are more connected and part of a wider sphere of activity."

4.5 Benefits and impact

Stakeholders provided a number of examples of benefit and impact as a result of the Programme. These included:

- high demand and an increase in the number of businesses starting up
- increased confidence of clients to take forward their business
- college student national achievements and business successes often in challenging personal circumstances
- being able to earmark 67 companies as having high growth potential for specialist support with one business likely to be a unicorn company
- increased onward referral to other support provision with increased connectivity of support offers
- the development of valuable and recognised transferable business skills whether or not a business is established

4.6 Challenges and areas for improvement

Only a few challenges and areas for improvement were identified by stakeholders. These included:

- managing demand within SOSE and for those partner organisations who provide further business support
- ensuring that the criteria for growth coaching is understood
- exploring sustainability and continuity of the support offer in the context of yearly funding
- continued marketing in areas with less uptake
- a more flexible and greater value grant

4.7 Views on the future of Pathways

All stakeholders saw a continued need for Pathways as a way of supporting pre-start up businesses for under-represented groups. Many felt the current demand justified this view with others adding that as long as there was demand then the support should continue. It was stressed any continuation needed to evolve to meet changing need and to be reviewed to ensure the ecosystem remained joined up with no overlap of roles.

5 Coach Findings

Interviews were undertaken with all 13 coaches across in the following roles.

- Place-based Coach x 9
- Growth Coach x 2
- Innovation Coach x 1
- Partnership Lead x 1

Several coaches had provided coaching as part of the first pilot phase.

5.1 Challenges encountered by clients and ways in which Pathways supports them

Challenges most frequently identified by coaches (those not offering growth or innovation coaching) were:

- confidence and self-belief
- mental health issues
- personal and relationship issues
- language barriers

Other challenges identified less frequently included lack of skills to use technology, disability, isolation and lack of network, being overwhelmed and fear of judgement.

Issues relating to lack of vision, confidence, time and visibility were mentioned as challenges for those clients with growth potential. Those receiving innovation coaching were experiencing challenges in communicating the value of their product together with a lack of connections to take the business further.

Two coaches mentioned differences in client challenges compared to the first phase of the Pathways pilot. One coach suggested their clients seemed to have more of a focus relating to the grant and less effort being put into the coaching. Two others mentioned an increase in complex personal challenges particularly for clients in deprived areas which took up coaching time and effort to support.

In terms of how the Programme has helped clients deal with their challenges, several coaches mentioned that although clients welcome the grant, it is the coaching that leads to the greatest benefits and impact. Coaches described how the Programme helps to address client challenges through:

- providing one-to-one support for both the individual and the business and a safe place to do this
- focusing on actions and accountability
- connecting to and signposting other supports which include:
 - Business Gateway
 - Chambers of Commerce
 - internal SOSE coaching
 - SOSE events
 - Volunteering Matters
 - Women's Enterprise Scotland
 - GrowBiz
 - referring and making connections between clients with complementary skills
 - grants and funds e.g. Career Tech Fund

In addition, Growth Coaches spoke of providing support to address the challenges of commercialisation of products and actively facilitating direct connections and contacts.

As well as delivering one-to-one coaching, coaches reported being involved in additional activities which they felt helped to address client challenges. These included group sessions offering peer support or subject specific insight, networking groups and partnership development and collaborations to address client skills gaps.

5.2 Benefits, outcomes and impact

Coaches described a number of client benefits, outcomes and impacts as a result of the Programme. Most frequently mentioned were:

- clients starting their own business
- clients resigning from employment to focus on their business
- gaining access to networks and peer support

Personal benefits and impact such as improvements to mental health through increases in confidence and self-worth and a return to earning an income were also identified. Growth Coaches identified additional benefits which include, personal and company resilience, the creation of additional jobs and increased revenue.

Coaches provided a number of examples of clients who had benefited from the Programme. Examples included:

"Actions and accountability – the two weeks in between is good as they have time to do it. I help support them emotionally and mentally. Help consolidate ideas and make decisions."

"Safe place to talk things through and a structured place where you can put things in order. Some say that the coaching turns out to be much more valuable than the money."

"It helps to provide the connections and linkage across all the supports available e.g. getting the skills, having the confidence, accessing funding, forming networks."

"Being a sounding board, a feeling of accountability that they need to do something before meeting up with me, they appreciate getting the ideas out of their head and onto paper, talk it over and have clearer priorities and plans in place while gently being held to account."

Without Pathways coaches felt that clients would be much less likely to have started a business or be in a better position to start a business. It was acknowledged some people would have progressed without the support but that this may have been a slower process. The confidence and financial grant that the Programme affords was seen to provide the impetus for those who were potentially "stuck" in relation to starting their business.

5.3 Suggested improvements to Pathways

All coaches believe that there was a continued need for the Programme given the current level of demand and the benefits and impact they were seeing realised by clients. They also made several suggestions for improvements which included:

Process improvements:

- greater clarity and consistency on the criteria for inclusion on the Programme e.g. whether clients are expected to be in business in three or six months
- greater clarity on “growth” in terms of which clients are suitable for growth coaching
- simplifying grant application including being able to complete applications on phone
- more flexibility and discretion regarding grant amount
- a cohort approach for coaches to take on new clients to better support more manageable onboarding
- lengthening timescales for spending the grant
- flexibility to provide coaching over a longer time period and/or the number of coaching sessions
- more coaches to meet demand
- an online portal for resources
- simplifying coach administration requirements
- support to access suitable venues for coaching and events

Client support improvements and addressing unmet needs:

- access to translators and additional support for those for whom English is not the first language or who are new to the country
- support for coaches to meet the needs of neurodiverse clients
- access to support for those aged 60+ to upskill or reskill in order to start a new business
- greater awareness of the Programme amongst wider under-represented groups other than women
- small business finance and digital marketing skills training

6 Client Findings

Table 6.1 provides a breakdown of response rates across the support delivered.

Table 6.1: Client consultations

	Support provided		
	Coaching – place-based	Coaching – growth/innovation	Grant
Population	462	85	464
Clients consulted	135	20	148
% of population consulted	29%	23%	32%

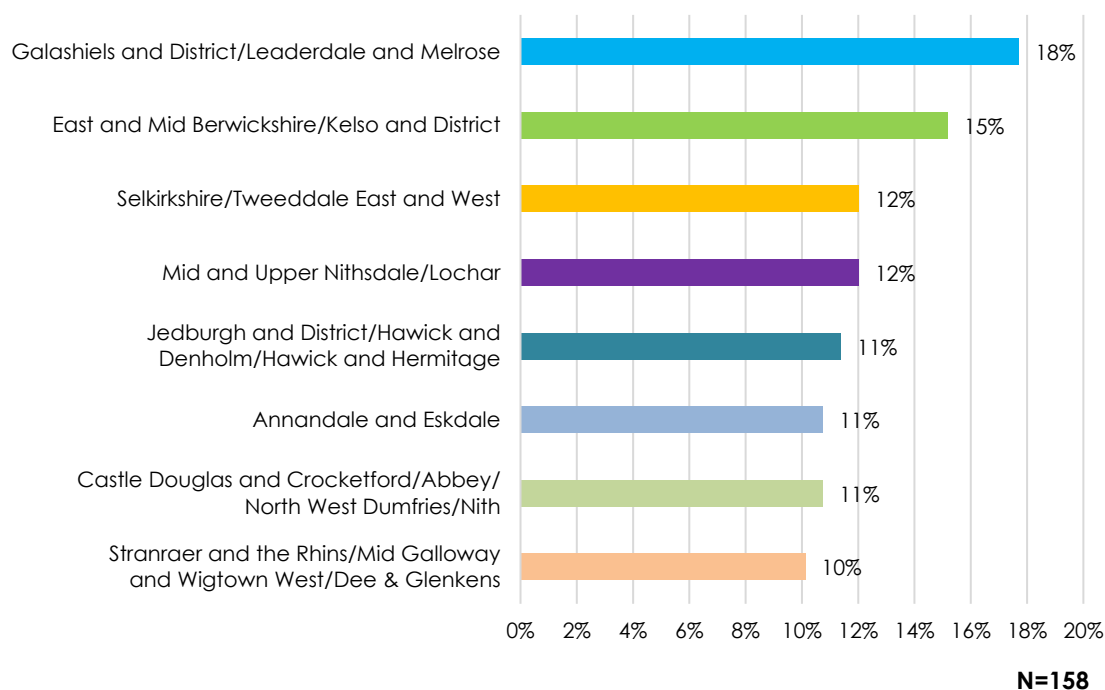
6.1 Background

A total of 161 clients responded to the survey split across:

- coaching and grant support – 148
- coaching only – 13

Clients were located across Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders.

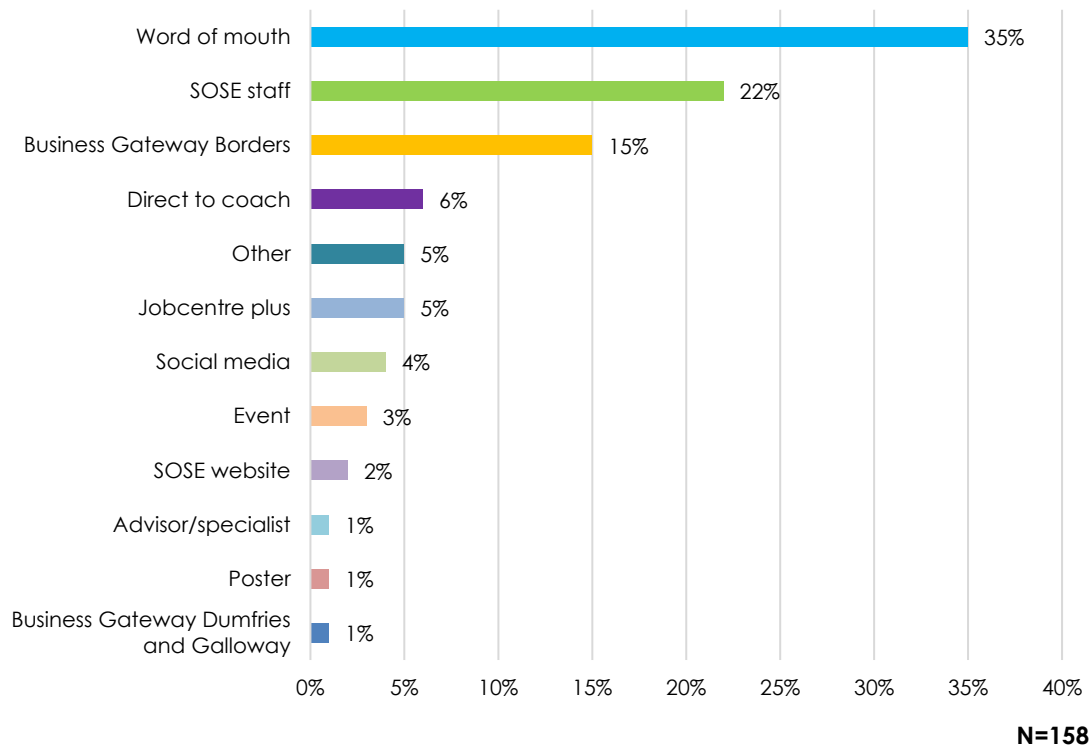
Figure 6.1: Client location



Enquiries came from a range of sources, the most common being:

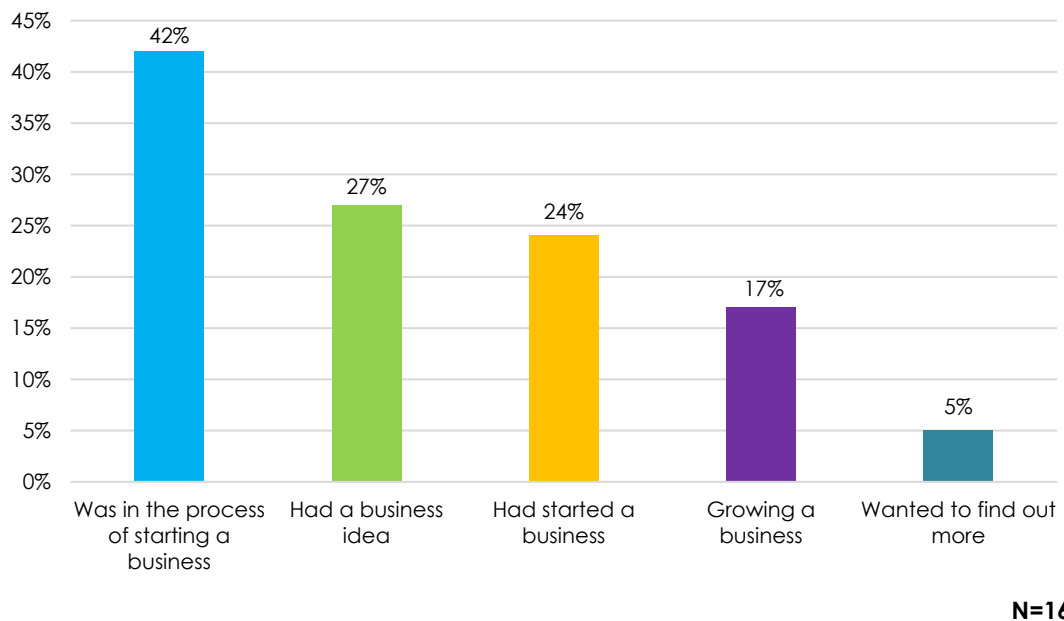
- word of mouth – 35% (55)
- SOSE staff – 22% (35)
- Business Gateway Scottish Borders – 15% (24)

Figure 6.2: Enquiry source



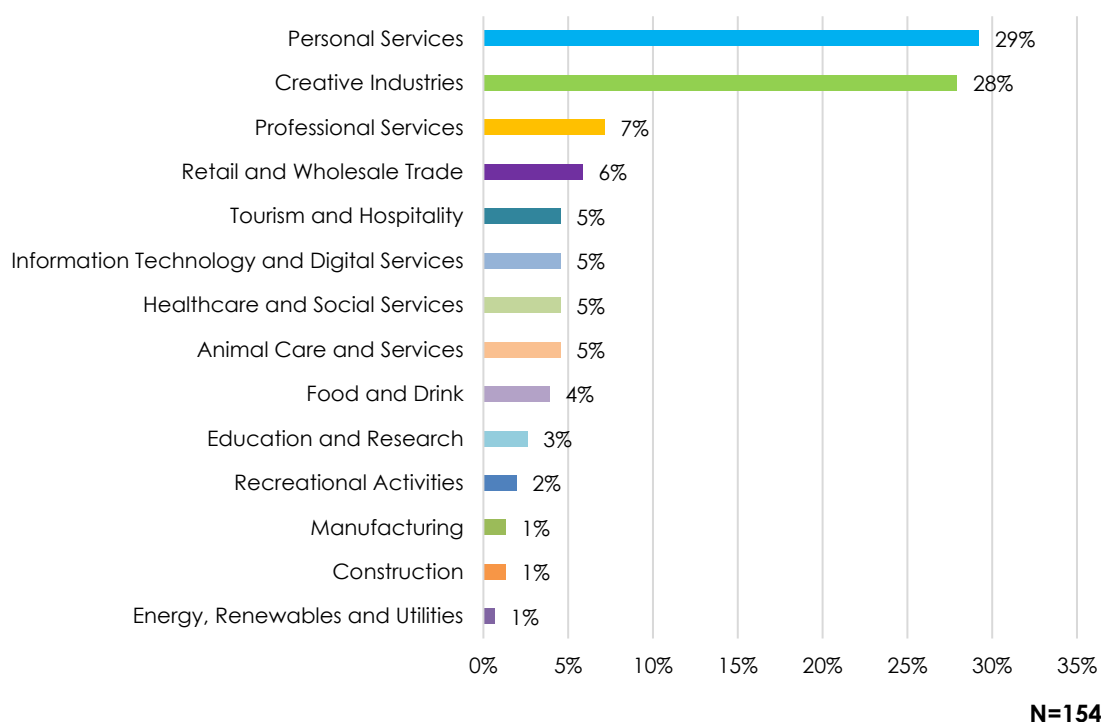
At the point of engagement, 42% (68) of clients were in the process of starting a business, 27% (43) had a business idea, 24% (38) had started a business, 17% (27) were growing a business and 5% (8) wanted to find out more about starting a business.

Figure 6.3: Business stage when first engaging with the Pathways Pilot



Clients identified a range of business ideas they were interested in developing with Programme support. The majority of ideas related to the personal service (29%, 45) and creative industry sectors (43, 28%). Figure 6.4 provides a full breakdown of sectors.

Figure 6.4: Business idea by sector



6.2 Coaching support

6.2.1 Background

Of the 161 clients accessing the coaching, 111 had completed their sessions, with 50 still ongoing at the time of reporting⁴. For those that had completed the coaching, the average length of time to complete the (up to) six sessions was 13 weeks. 26 had accessed either the growth or innovation coaching. In addition, 148 had accessed the grant as well as the coaching. Findings in this section are based on all 161 clients. Due to the small number accessing coaching only (10), we did not do any comparison between those receiving just coaching versus coaching and grant support. Equally we had no one complete the survey that had received grant support only.

Where findings differed between general enterprise coaching clients and growth/innovation clients, these are reported separately.

Data has been drawn from clients' pre- and post-evaluation forms administered by the coaches⁵ as well as the e-survey.

⁴ 16 March 2026.

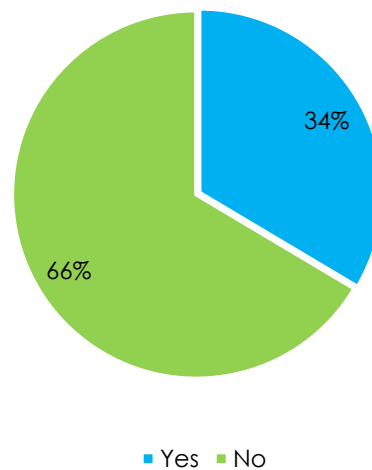
⁵ The n number for some areas may vary throughout as not all clients provided an answer to every question in the e-survey and some clients hadn't completed their post-evaluation form at the time of reporting.

6.2.2 Previous business support received

Two thirds (66%, 107) of clients had not received any previous business support. Of those that had, Business Gateway was most frequently mentioned (56%, 31), followed by SOSE (18%, 10) which included business advisors, grants, coaching, Pathways and Accelerate.

Those accessing the growth/innovation support were much more likely to have accessed previous business support compared to those accessing the place-based coaching (70% compared with 26%).

Figure 6.5: Previous business support



N=161

Other sources of support mentioned less frequently included Firstport (3), Borders College (2) as well as REDS, CABN, IWORK4ME, employment support allowance and sector specific peer support groups.

Those able to comment (42) felt that the Programme compared favourably to other business support they were aware of. The most common differentiators mentioned were:

- coach quality (43%, 19) – with coaches often named specifically and praised for their expertise and approach
- comprehensive, holistic and practical planning (23%, 10)
- one-to-one and personalised delivery (18%, 8) – frequently contrasted against more generic supports
- networking and peer support (14%, 6)

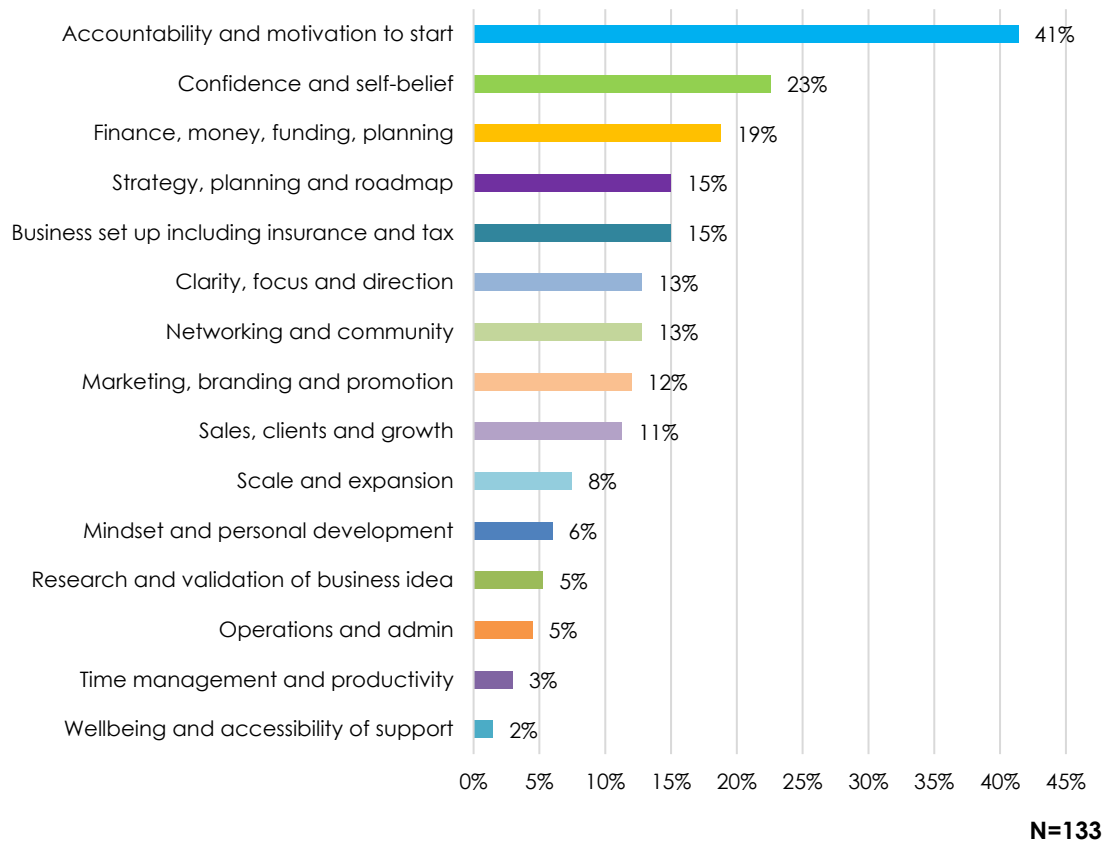
82% (133) stated the reasons for not accessing similar support in the past included:

- not aware the support existed (59%, 79)
- lack of confidence (40%, 53)
- not feeling ready to start a business (35%, 47)
- not having enough time (32%, 42)
- caring responsibilities (children/family/others) (32%, 42)
- not thinking the support was for people like me (23%, 30)
- health or disability related challenges (16%, 21)
- not able to afford to take time off work (15%, 20)

6.2.3 Expectations of coaching

Clients were asked what they expected to achieve from the coaching. Those receiving place-based coaching identified a number of areas where they expected the support to make a difference, the most frequently being to gain motivation and be held to account in terms of starting a business (41%, 55). Building confidence and self-belief (23%, 30) and understanding finance, funding, money and planning (19%, 25) were the second and third most frequently mentioned expectations of the coaching. A full breakdown of their expectations is provided in Figure 6.6.

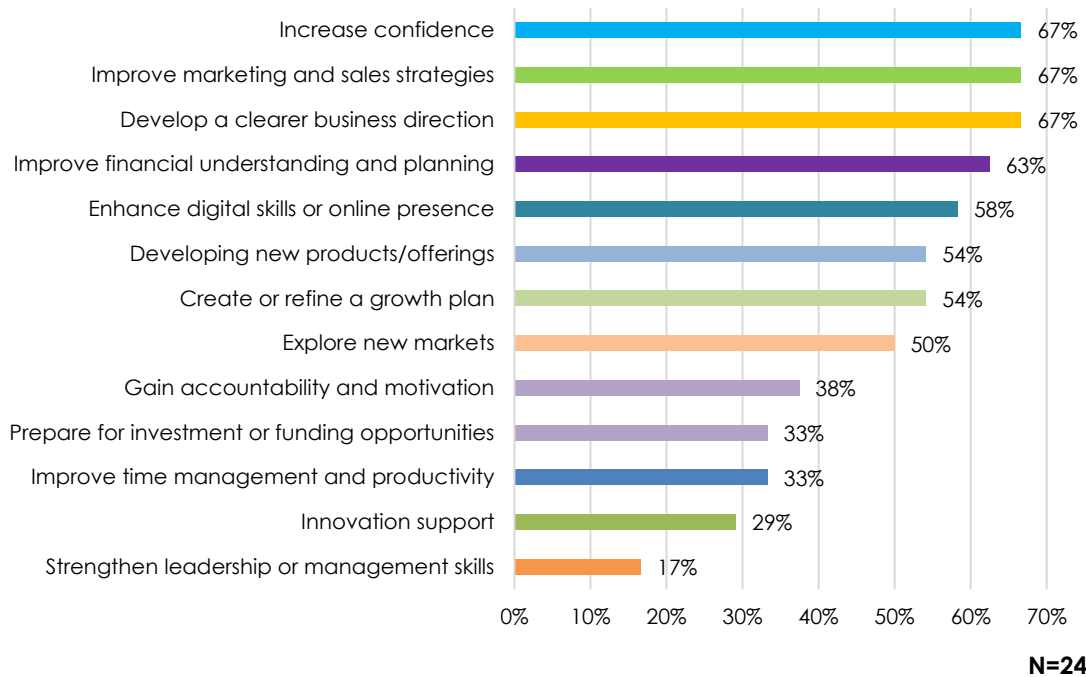
Figure 6.6: Expectations of place-based coaching



Clients receiving growth/innovation coaching most frequently identified improving marketing and sales strategies and developing a clearer business direction as expectations (71%, 17 respectively).

Similar to place-based coaching, gaining increased confidence 67% (16), and improving financial planning and understanding, identified by 63% (15) were expectations also frequently identified by those accessing growth/innovation coaching. Figure 6.7 provides a breakdown for this group of clients.

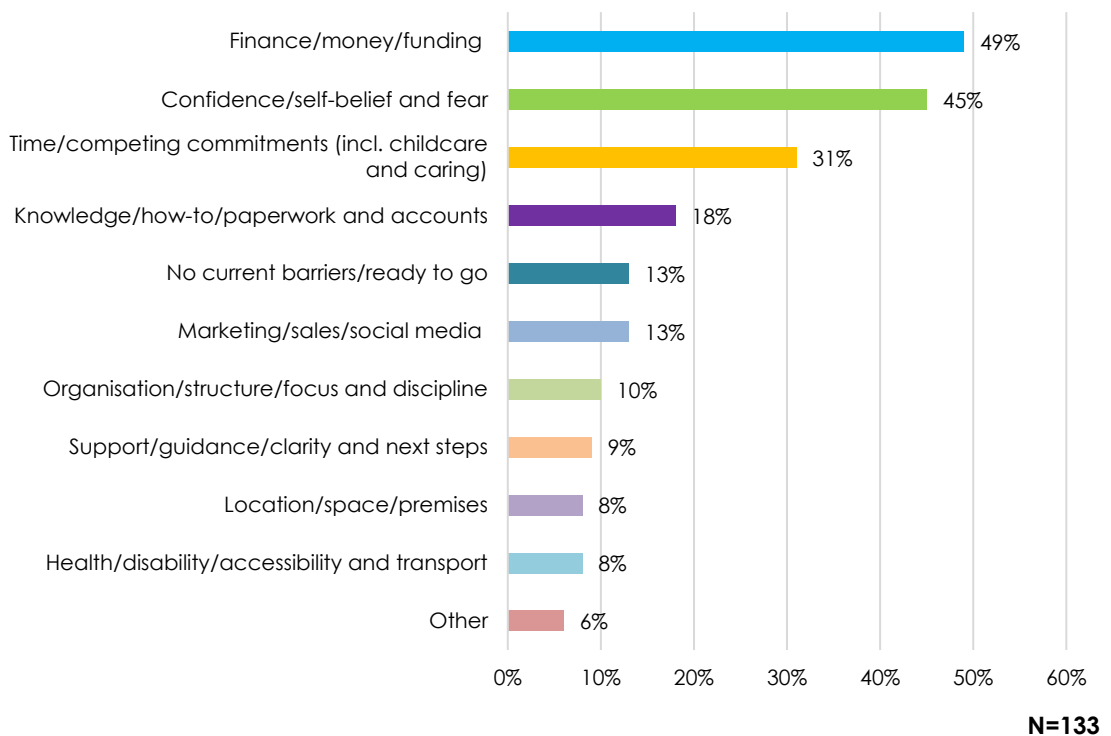
Figure 6.7: Expectations of growth/innovation coaching



6.2.4 Factors holding clients back from running their own business

The most commonly stated factors holding clients back from running their own business previously, were finance, money and funding as well as confidence, self-belief and fear, mentioned by 49% (65) and 45% (60) of clients respectively. Time and competing commitments including childcare and caring was a factor for nearly a third of clients. Whilst still factors, areas of business skills and knowledge including administration and marketing were identified less frequently. Figure 6.8 provides the full breakdown of factors.

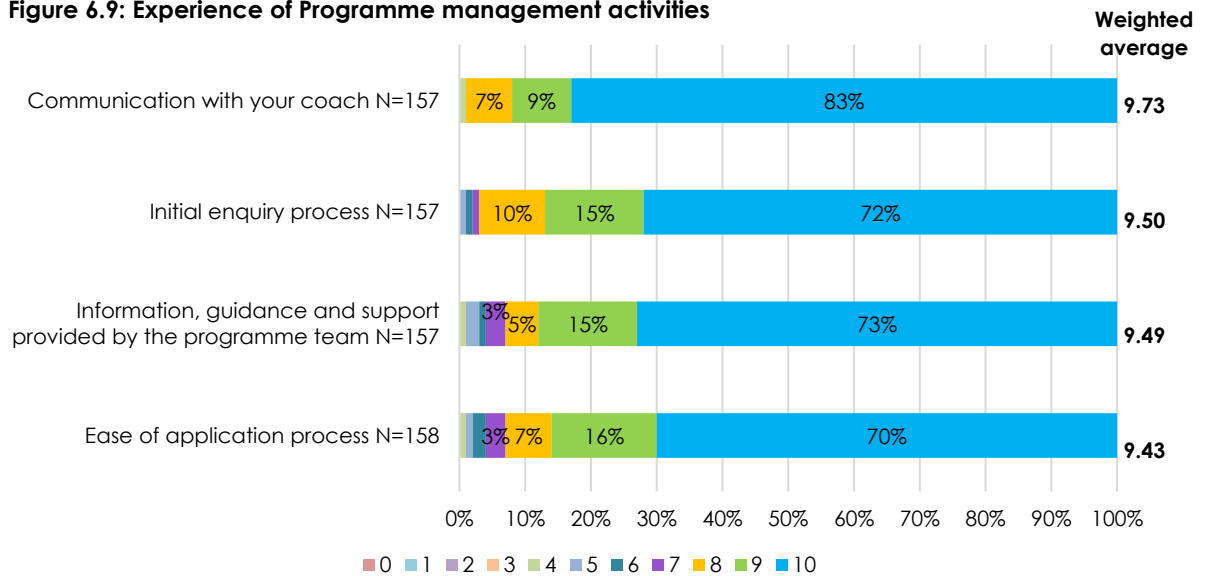
Figure 6.8: Factors holding clients back



6.2.5 Programme management and delivery

Clients were asked to rate their experience of the following Programme management activities (on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is not at all satisfied and 10 is completely satisfied). All elements were rated very highly scoring an average of 9.43 or above out of 10 with communication from the coach rated highest.

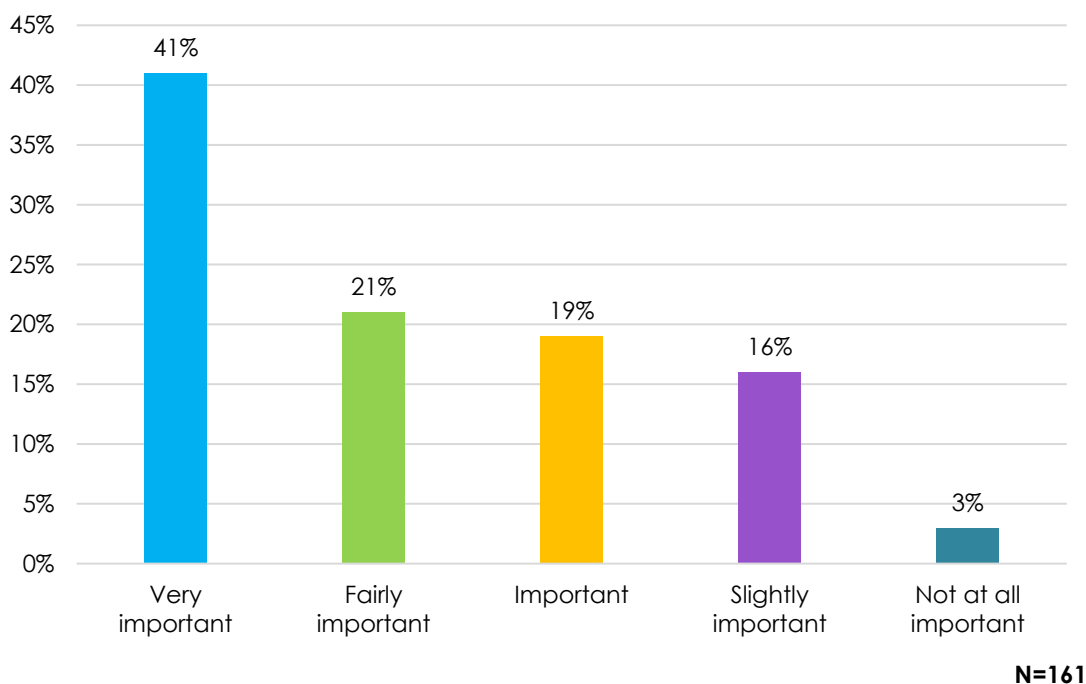
Figure 6.9: Experience of Programme management activities



The majority of clients (97%, 156) felt that having a coach who knows the local area was important, with 41% (66) viewing it as very important.

This was less significant for those accessing the growth/innovation coaching with only 35% (7) finding this important.

Figure 6.10: Importance of having a coach who knows the local area



Comments from those that thought it was important included:

"Knowing the area was a huge benefit as there was less to explain about the rural barriers and transport issues."

"Having knowledge of the area was really helpful and not something I think is offered elsewhere."

"In a rural area it's important to have someone who understands the wider challenges that location can present."

"A coach knowledgeable about the area was able to advise on local support and networking opportunities...which was invaluable."

Comments from those that didn't feel it was important included:

"More relevant was a coach who understood my business rather than the locality, as I work remotely."

"I can work remotely in my business so that doesn't matter, but it is lovely to be able to attend face to face."

"Absolutely irrelevant...the coaching skills and knowledge are more important."

6.2.6 *The most helpful aspects of coaching received*

Clients receiving place-based coaching highlighted a wide range of coaching elements they found helpful. Helpful aspects most commonly mentioned were:

- support, encouragement and reassurance – with coaches providing a safe space for emotional and moral support
- confidence building – both in themselves and in their business idea
- being held accountable and being kept on track – an aspect that clients found helpful ensuring momentum was maintained
- somewhere to talk things through – having a sounding board that enabled clarity and strategic thinking
- practical guidance, advice and tools – which included areas such as marketing, social media and finance

Other aspects less frequently mentioned included grant funding support, networking and clarity, structure and planning. Several clients receiving place-based and growth/innovation coaching also mentioned they found the group sessions helpful, gaining valuable learning and support from peers.

Clients receiving growth/innovation coaching identified similar aspects as helpful with confidence building, having somewhere to talk things through and clarity, structure and planning being of particular value.

Comments included:

“Most helpful was the shift I had from resistance to acceptance – instead of trying to suppress the fear of getting started in business and fear of the unknowns, I reframed my fears as something natural that can coexist alongside growth.”

“Having someone to speak to who just gets it, understands and is not related to me - not emotionally attached.”

“Accountability, progressing out of being stuck. Being challenged on unhelpful mindset with encouragement.”

“Accountability has been really helpful, loved the Growth Strategy Plan and having someone there to support the journey.”

“Having someone to talk to, reflect back, with practical actions and techniques to support my growth have all been really positive.”

“It has allowed me to think, prioritise, set boundaries, and say no to what won't take me in my desired objective. Helped me figure out what's working, how everything is fitting together, shine light on the areas I was not putting attention on and ask for help.”

“All helpful, work life balance, organisation, time management and investing time, cutting down on all the unnecessary stuff, opportunity to network.”

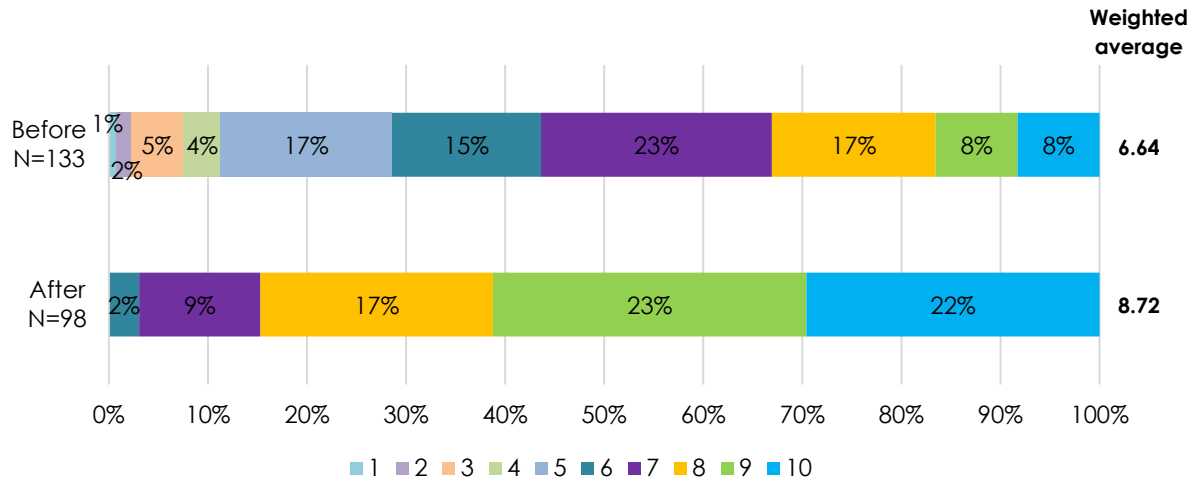
6.2.7 Phase 2 Pilot outcomes

90% (96) reported that they had achieved what they set out to accomplish through the coaching sessions, while a further 10% (11 people) said they had partially achieved their goals.

Clients accessing the place-based coaching were asked to rate their level of confidence to run their own business on initial engagement and at the end of their coaching on a scale of 1 to 10 (where 1 is not confident at all and 10 is completely confident).

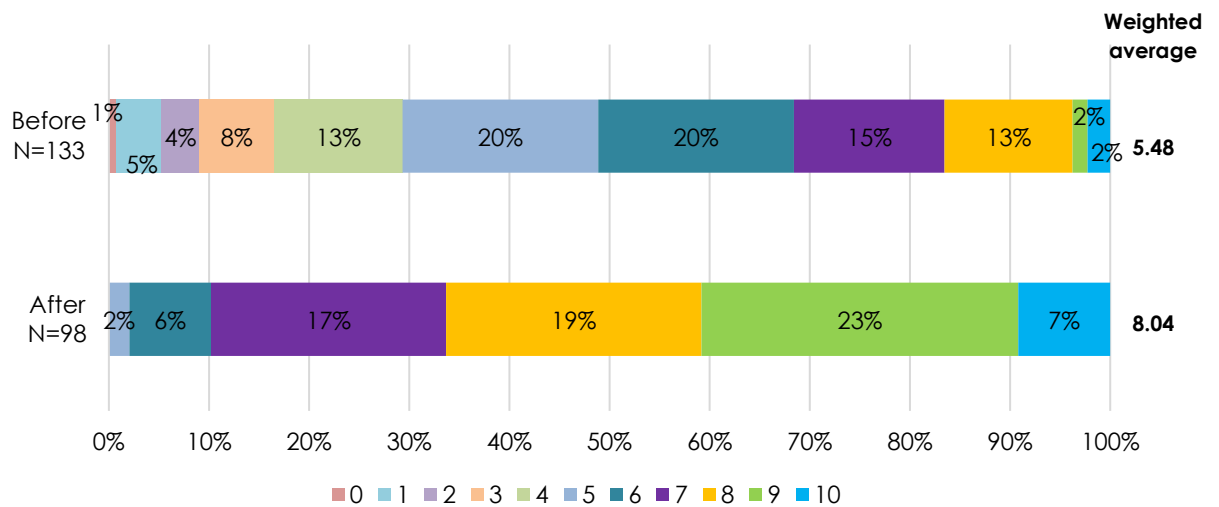
Changes in **confidence** grew from 6.64 to 8.72 (31% increase).

Figure 6.11: Confidence to run your own business



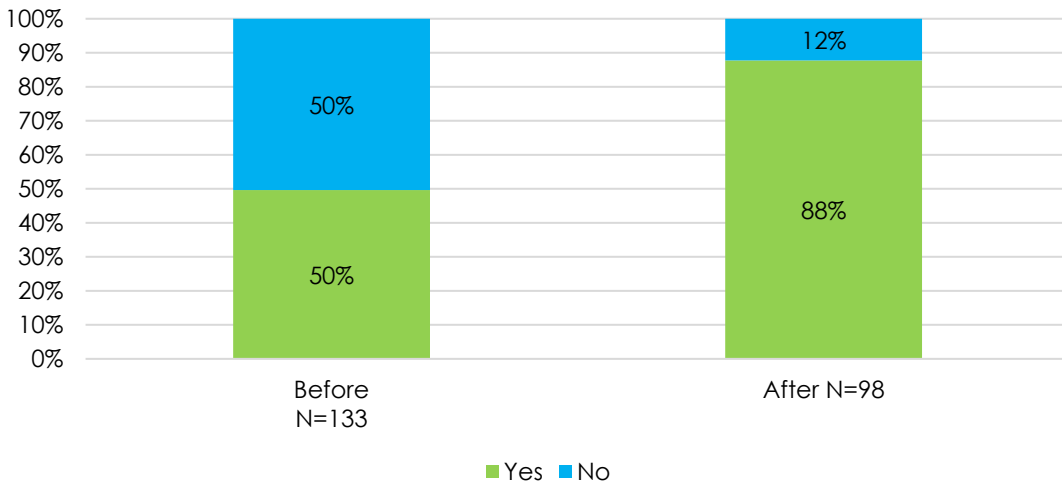
Clients were also asked to rate their knowledge of running a business on a scale of 0 to 10 (where 0 is no knowledge at all and 10 is completely knowledgeable). Changes in **knowledge** grew from 5.48 to 8.04 (47% increase).

Figure 6.12: Knowledge in running your own business



At engagement, 50% (66) of clients considered themselves a 'business person', this grew to 88% (86) following coaching.

Figure 6.13: To what extent you consider yourself a business person

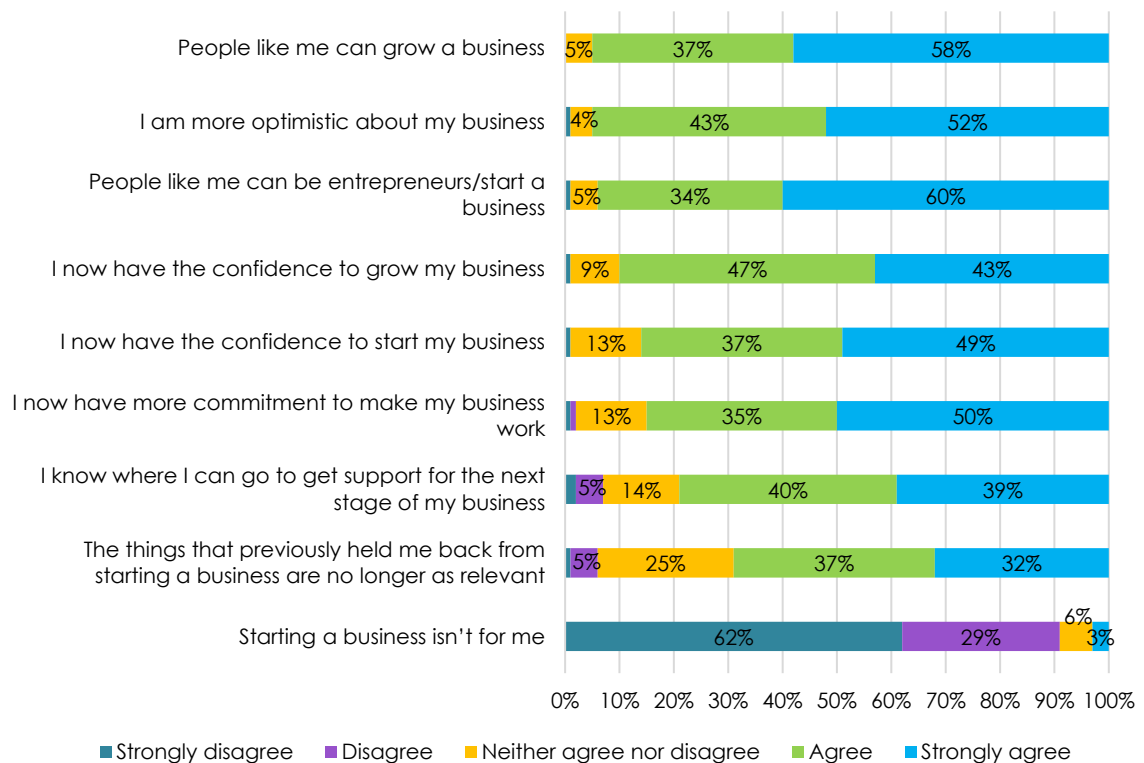


Clients were asked to what extent they agree with the following statements. As a result of the coaching participants agreed or strongly agreed that:

- people like me can grow a business 95% (150)
- I am more optimistic about my business 95% (150)
- people like me can be entrepreneurs/start a business 94% (149)
- I now have the confidence to grow my business 90% (142)
- I now have the confidence to start my business 86% (134)
- I now have more commitment to make my business work 85% (133)
- I know where I can go to get support for the next stage of my business 79% (125)
- the things that previously held me back from starting a business are no longer as relevant 69% (108)

91% (143) disagreed or strongly disagreed that starting a business isn't for me.

Figure 6.14: Outcomes as a result of the coaching



N=160

Client comments on the difference that coaching has made included:

"My coaching sessions have been genuinely life-changing...in just a few months I have grown into a confident CEO of my business."

"My one-to-one sessions really sharpened the focus of getting my business off the ground."

"The coaching helped me look at my business in a more strategic way rather than just day to day running."

"Held me accountable each week. Allowed me to connect with local business to build a network."

"Help with the legal side has been very helpful...my coach is very inspiring with a wealth of helpful information."

"The coaching has been transformational both personally and professionally...I now have paying customers."

"I was able to create a network of local businesses and people who I work with on a daily basis."

6.2.8 Innovation/growth coaching specific outcomes

For those accessing the innovation/growth coaching, additional outcomes were captured based on the nine participants (out of twenty) who had completed the coaching.

All nine reported achieving what they had set out to accomplish from the sessions. They indicated increased confidence in their ability to grow their business and greater clarity around next steps or the development of a growth strategy.

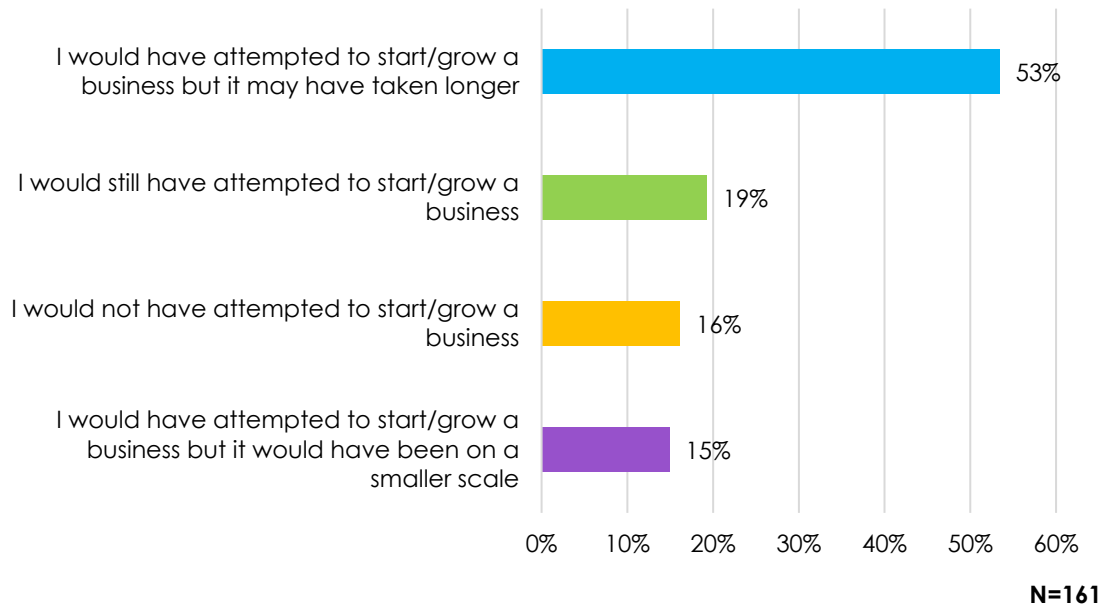
While average monthly turnover among clients receiving growth/innovation coaching rose significantly from £1,728 at the start to £190,400 following support, this figure should be interpreted with caution⁶. The sample size is small (nine clients), and one exceptionally high turnover result has disproportionately influenced the overall average.

⁶ This is based on survey responses only

6.2.9 Programme attribution

Without the coaching support the majority of clients would have still attempted to start a business (88%, 141), however over half (53%, 86) said it would have taken them longer and/or 15% (24) said it would have been on a smaller scale⁷.

Figure 6.15: What would have happened without the coaching support



Those accessing the growth/innovation coaching were more likely to still have attempted to start/grow their business (45%, 9).

6.2.10 Areas for improvement

A large number of clients felt no improvement was necessary. Suggestions that were made included:

- creation of a Pathways Community to provide peer support with ongoing events and engagement
- access to further coaching and/or coaching delivered over a longer or more flexible time period
- a portal or repository of information to include support and services offered across SOSE and Business Gateways
- making Pathways more visible to others who might benefit from it
- digitalising the grant application and management processes

6.3 Grant support

Of the 148 clients accessing the grant:

- 133 had received it and were using it
- 8 were still in the process of accessing it
- 7 had accessed it but not used it

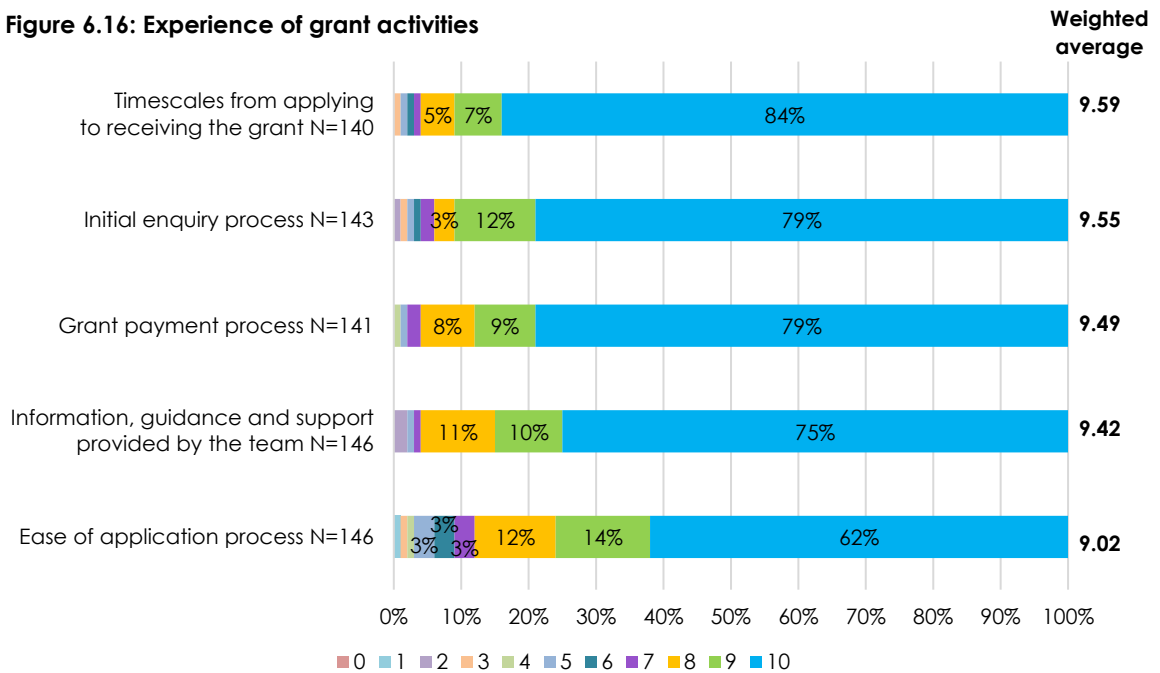
All 148 had accessed the coaching as well as the grant. Findings in this section are based on all 148 clients.

⁷ Note clients could have ticked both these options

6.3.1 Programme management and delivery

Clients were asked to rate their experience of the following grant activities (on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is not at all satisfied and 10 is completely satisfied). All elements were rated very highly scoring an average of 9.02 or above out of 10 with timescales from applying to receiving the grant and the initial enquiry process rated highest.

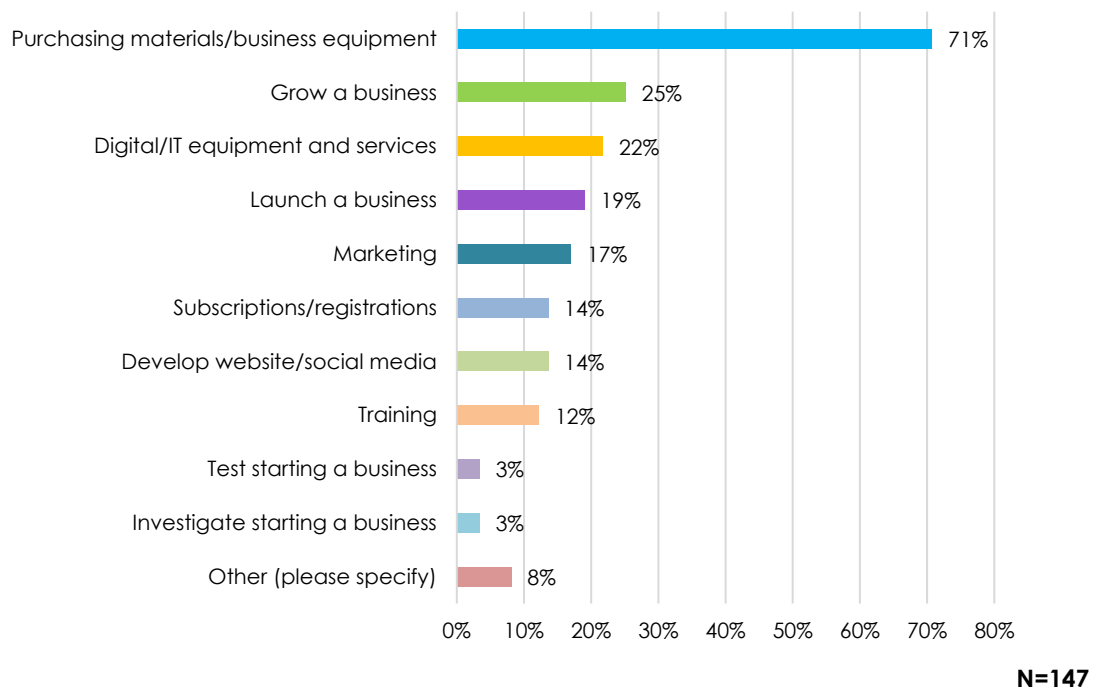
Figure 6.16: Experience of grant activities



6.3.2 Phase 2 Pilot outcomes

The majority of clients (71%, 104) used the grant to purchase material/business equipment. Growing the business was the second most common use of the grant. Digital/IT equipment and services were also commonly supported by the grant.

Figure 6.17: Use of grant

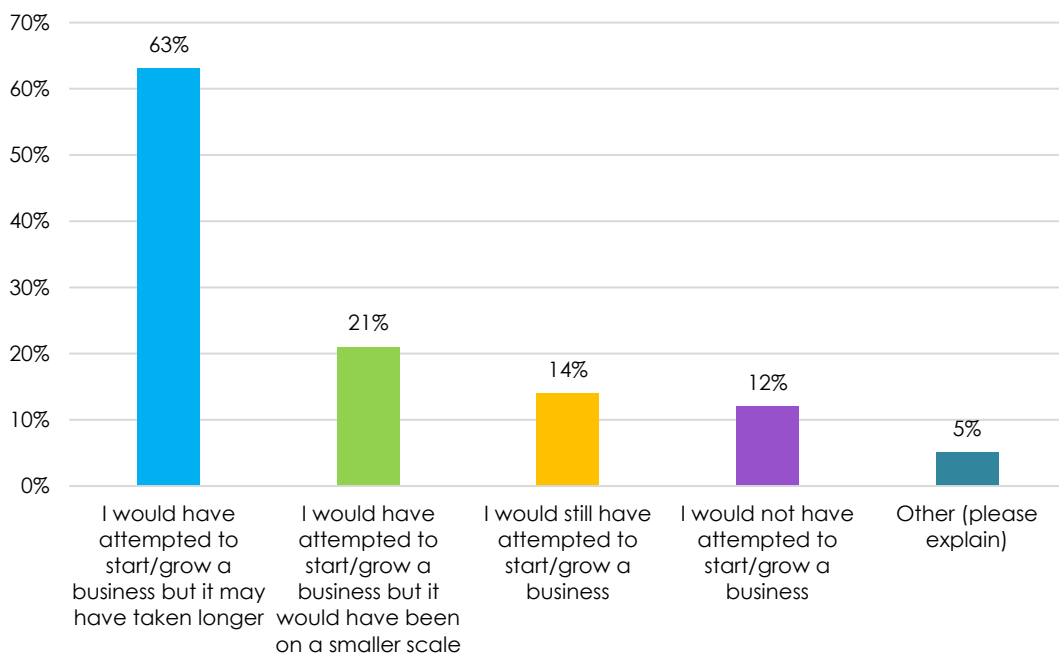


Client comments on the difference the grant has made included:



Without grant support the majority of clients would have still attempted to start a business (98%, 144), however 63% (93) said it would have taken them longer and/or 21% (31) said it would have been on a smaller scale⁸.

Figure 6.18: What would have happened without the grant support



N=148

⁸ Note clients could have ticked both these options

If the grant was not available, the majority (81%, 125) said they would not have accessed another form of business/grant support. Of those that said yes (19%, 30), Business Gateway was the primary alternative, others said they would have searched around but would not have been sure where to go. For those who would not have accessed another form of business/grant support, the reason given by the vast majority was that they were not aware of any similar support available or where to go to find out.

6.3.3 Areas for improvement

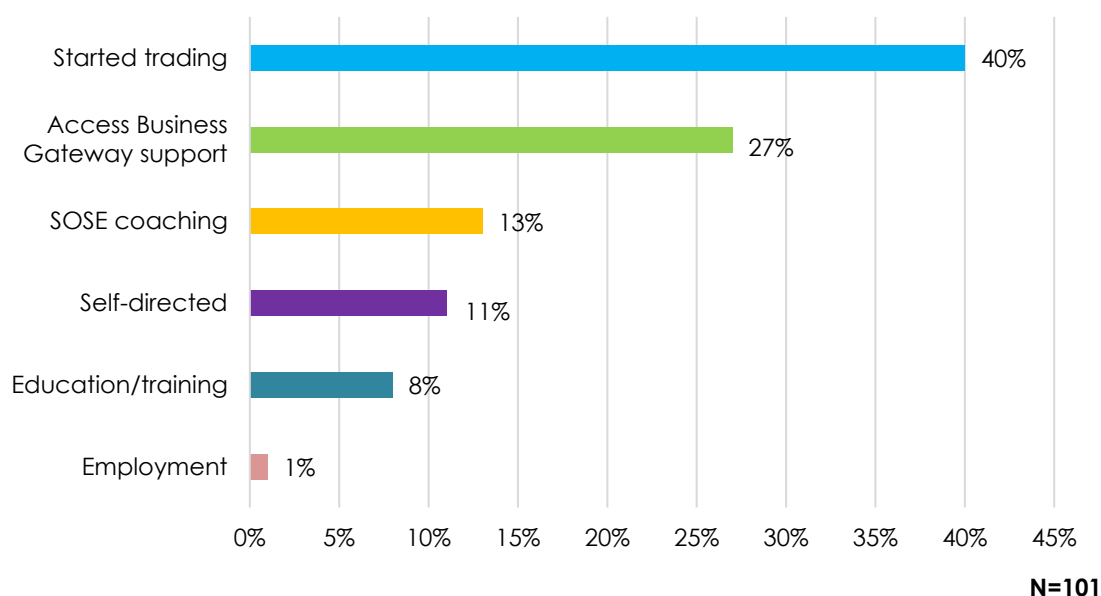
The majority of clients were very appreciative of the grant. Improvements that were suggested included:

- making the application form and process more user friendly
- clarifying grant timelines from the outset in order to support planning
- flexibility of the timeframe to spend the grant (particularly over a long holiday period)

6.4 Next steps and Net Promoter Score

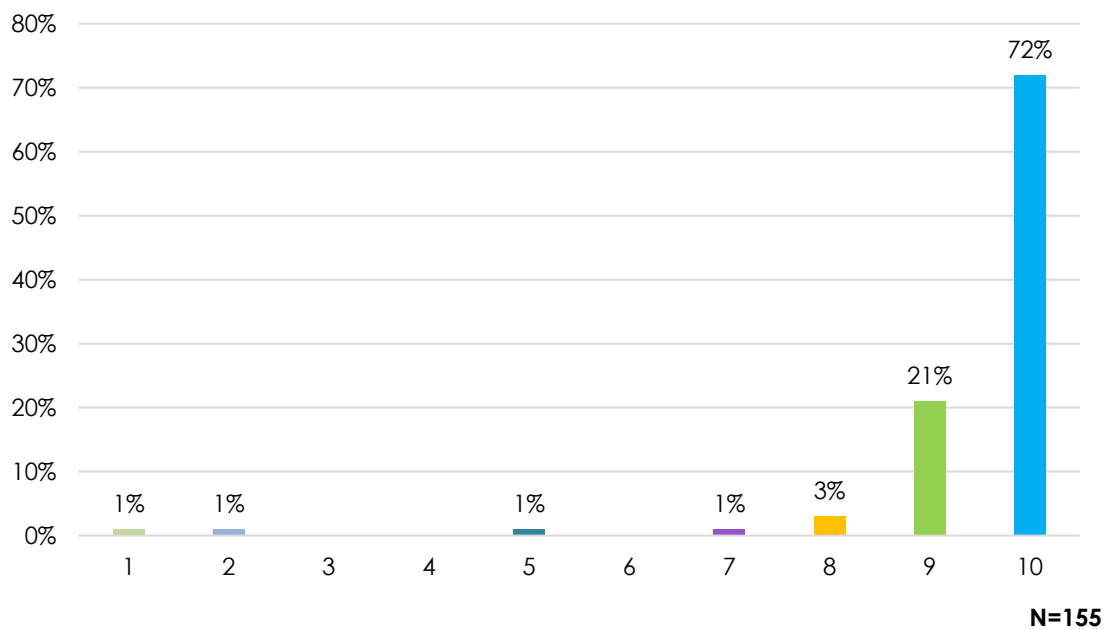
Following the coaching and grant support 40% (40) had started trading, 27% (27) had accessed Business Gateway support and 13% (13) had accessed SOSE support.

Figure 6.19: Next destination



Clients indicated how likely they would be to recommend the Programme to someone on a scale from 1 – extremely unlikely to 10 – already had. The Programme performed extremely well with 97% (152) rating their likeliness 7 out of 10 or above and 72% (112) rated the Programme 10 out of 10, i.e. had already recommended to someone else.

Figure 6.20: Likelihood of recommending the Programme



Based on the feedback the Programme has an excellent NPS of 92⁹. NPS scores can range from -100 to +100. Industry benchmarks for NPS state that any score above 0 is good, anything between 30 and 70 is very good and anything over 70 is excellent.

Comments included:

"It can completely change your business, together it can take you from failure to success."

"It offers genuine life- and business-changing support, with visible, measurable results!"

"If I can start a business at my age without any knowledge...other people need to be aware of Pathways and the help and support it provides."

"The coaching and grant have made a tangible difference and allowed me to get my business off the ground quickly and efficiently."

"Excellent support in what can be an isolating position."

"Fantastic way to help build confidence and ideas."

"It has been really helpful giving me contacts, guidance and motivation – I've recommended it to many already."

"I've loved meeting my mentor and all the other business owners in the Programme."

"The coaching has been genuinely life-changing... I'm feeling so positive and strong in what I'm already achieving."

⁹<https://www.rentently.com/blog/good-net-promoter-score/#:~:text=A%20score%20between%200%20and,happy%20customers%20than%20unhappy%20ones.>

Final comments included:

"Thank you for this valuable regional focused support."

"This support has helped me to finally take myself and my idea seriously... I feel grounded in confidence."

"It has literally changed my life and prospects... I am now able to do what I really want to do."

"My coach was supportive and knowledgeable and has really spurred me on."

"It's been good being part of a community...we can learn from each other and even collaborate."

"I now feel more confident, more focused and more ambitious about the future of my business."

"I really benefited from having someone to mentor me over a sustained period... invaluable."

"I really hope the Programme is rolled out for another year."

7 Conclusions and Recommendations

7.1 Conclusions

Phase 2 of the Pathways Pilot, running from July 2025 to March 2026, has maintained a clear focus on supporting women and other under-represented groups with evidence highlighting this focus has successfully driven engagement, particularly through locally based coaches and strong word of mouth referrals. Evaluation findings indicate that since the completion of Phase 1, Pathways has evolved and is starting to serve as an embedded, important and proactive part of SOSE's wider economic development ecosystem as well as serving a sense of community that encompasses entrepreneurs and stretches across partner organisations.

Whilst no formal numerical targets were set, the Programme has fully met Scottish Government requirements for enhanced short term data collection and has generated strong early outcomes across engagement, coaching, grant uptake and business progression. Longer term indicators requested by Scottish Government such as business survival, revenue growth and cultural change cannot yet be evidenced within the Pilot timeframe. However, the Programme's high demand, positive outcomes and strong satisfaction levels demonstrate that performance is robust and that Pathways is well positioned to report against future targets should they be introduced.

Stakeholder and client feedback includes high quality coaching, both place-based and growth/innovation coaching, as the core strength of Pathways. One-to-one, personalised support delivered locally provides a trusted and accessible service, helping clients overcome confidence barriers, clarify business direction, and progress their ideas into trading entities. Stakeholders emphasised the Programme's role in strengthening the wider business support ecosystem by improving connections, enabling early identification of growth-oriented founders and increasing referrals to other agencies such as Business Gateway and the SOSE team.

Outcomes for clients are strong with 90% reporting they had achieved what they set out to accomplish through coaching sessions. Clients accessing place-based coaching reported significant increases in confidence to run their business (31%) and knowledge of running a business (47%) after coaching. The Programme also supported practical business progression, 76% of clients who completed support had started trading. Clients also overwhelmingly endorsed the Programme, with an NPS of 92, reflecting extremely high satisfaction and recommendation rates.

The grants of up to £1,000 have played an important enabling role. Most clients used the grant to purchase materials or equipment and support business launch or growth (e.g. digital equipment, marketing, websites). The majority of clients said they would still have attempted to start a business without a grant, though 63% said it would have taken longer and 21% said progress would have been on a smaller scale.

While the Programme is highly effective, several areas for improvement were identified which, if addressed, could further strengthen success:

- managing increasing demand with the onboarding processes being challenging for the team and partners
- clients and coaches identified opportunities to streamline the grant application process, enhance CRM connectivity, and introduce more flexibility across coaching and grants (amounts, timescales, session numbers)
- some groups – particularly those facing language, neurodiversity, accessibility, or digital inclusion barriers – would benefit from more targeted, flexible or specialised support
- there remains a need to extend visibility across under-represented groups beyond women and to reach areas with lower uptake

Overall, the Programme is highly valued and clearly meeting a regional need. Its impact extends beyond business creation, supporting personal development, strengthening local enterprise culture and embedding a more inclusive ecosystem.

7.2 Recommendations

Programme Design and Strategic Development

- **continue and sustain Pathways**, given strong demand, positive outcomes and its unique role in the regional ecosystem. Review annually to ensure alignment with evolving needs and avoid duplication with wider business support offerings
- **strengthen strategic targeting**, to reach under-represented groups beyond women, focusing on those with language barriers, neurodiverse clients, older entrepreneurs (60+) and digitally excluded groups
- **maintain and reinforce local delivery**, as local knowledge and proximity are highly valued by clients

Coaching Delivery

- **introduce clearer eligibility criteria and definitions**, for inclusion on the Programme, growth coaching and expectations for business progression timelines
- **explore options for more flexible coaching models**, including longer support durations, more sessions, or group/cohort-based onboarding to better manage demand
- **provide additional training and resources for coaches**, to support clients with neurodiversity, language challenges or complex personal circumstances

Grant Management

- **simplify and digitalise grant processes**, including making applications mobile friendly and clarifying timelines from the outset
- **consider greater flexibility in grant value and spending timeframes**, particularly around holiday periods or for clients with caring responsibilities
- **enhance guidance for grant use**, ensuring clients understand eligible expenditures and how the grant aligns with business planning

Ecosystem, Infrastructure and Visibility

- **develop a Pathways community**, with ongoing peer-support events, networking and shared learning opportunities, particularly between early stage and growth ready founders
- **create an online portal or resource hub**, offering centralised access to materials, signposting and SOSE/Business Gateway services
- **increase visibility and outreach activity**, particularly in areas with lower uptake – and continue leveraging successful word of mouth channels
- **enhance CRM connectivity and data sharing**, across partner organisations to streamline client journeys, track progression and improve reporting

Monitoring and Evaluation

- **continue to gather robust outcome data**, including long term monitoring of business survival, revenue growth, job creation and scalable businesses, in line with Scottish Government asks
- **identify and track high growth potential founders**, earlier, building on existing success and strengthening referral pathways to growth/innovation coaches

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Appendix 1 – Consultees

Coach Interviews (13)

Name	Organisation
Andy Robinson	Nexus Craft
Ann Carter	
Claire Drynan	
Holly Young	
Jill Clowes	Jill Clowes Coaching
Karen Riddick	Second Nature Online
Katie Nairn	Nairn Consulting
Lindsay Thomson	CBT with Lindsay
Martina McKinnell	Enterprise Thrive
Mehalah Beckett	Lead Powerful Impact
Sarah Hanson	Interactifs
Sian Downes	Strawberry Lemonade Events
Victoria Lane	

Stakeholder Interviews (19)

Name	Organisation
Partners – funded through pathways to deliver support for Pathways Clients	
Dale Clancy	Borders College
John Magill	SRUC
Kate Glendye	Dumfries and Galloway College
Carolyn Currie	Women's Enterprise Scotland
Claire Simmonds	Volunteering Matters
Strategic Stakeholders	
Suzanne Henderson	Scottish Government
Karen Rodgers	Scottish Government
Neil Johnstone	Business Gateway Scottish Borders
Allan McNaught	Business Gateway Dumfries and Galloway
SOSE Team	
Jane Morrison-Ross	SOSE Chief Executive
Susan Harkins	SOSE
Alan Barr	SOSE
Jill Millar	SOSE Coaches
Cynthia Moore-Opdam	SOSE Coaches
Tara Bolland	SOSE Coaches
Kirsty Cummings	SOSE Enterprise Coordinator
Karen Crawford	SOSE Pathways Coordinator
Lesley Forsyth	SOSE Marketing
Kate Nairn	Partnership Lead