

Making Impact Meaningful for Social Entrepreneurs

Akou's Approach to Participatory Evaluation

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AKOU

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- Alison Horton, Gateway Collective
- Jayne Howard, Arts Well UK CIC
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Foreword

**by Charlotte Young,
founding team member and
long-standing trustee of SSE**

The School for Social Entrepreneurs (SSE) was set up more than 25 years ago. Its founder, Michael Young, was identified by his admirers as a *serial social entrepreneur* who had created a highly-effective model for tackling a great range of social issues, which existing public and private organisations had failed to resolve.

It was clear from the beginning that identifying and training potential social activists to become *hard-headed and high-minded* social entrepreneurs would need a new approach and SSE chose to adopt Action Learning as its learning model. Participants were selected based on characteristics such as their powerful life experiences, their strong commitment to solving a social problem in a new way, and their willingness to engage with others.

This AKOU report explores some highly significant areas that go beyond previous impact assessments of SSE's core programme. SSE and its thousands of previous participants generally held the belief that the programmes create ripple effects within communities.



“It is quite evident that each research associate has gained valuable skills and understanding about how their venture creates impact and how its interactions with its community create value.”

For the first time, AKOU and the research associates have been able to show ways in which this occurs, and which may provide the foundations for more complete forms of social evaluation. Our very unequal society needs to be able to identify and support those interventions that build social capital, crack intransigent social problems, and empower communities.

The case studies in the report come from research associates, fellows of SSE, who, together with their beneficiaries, identified significant change at the human level. They and their participants have captured important improvements in confidence and empowerment, growth in highly relevant areas of capability and understanding, stronger and broader relationships and networks, increased

optimism and ambition, better mental health and resilience – all of which have led to more engagement in employment, education, community activity, and to broadening horizons.

These can be seen as significant building blocks of social capital. But it is also quite evident that each research associate has gained valuable skills and understanding about how their venture creates impact and how its interactions with its community create value. Through these insights, they are not only able to attract more volunteers, but also become more confident and influential leaders.

This report is therefore an important endorsement of SSE's approach and strong confirmation that the investments by Lloyds Bank, Bank of Scotland, and The National Lottery Community Fund have allowed more than 2,400 social entrepreneurs and their ventures to make their valuable impact both on economic and social development.

In the UK, inequality has been growing for many years, and centrally generated programmes to bring about change have often failed to solve key social problems – irrespective of their promised outcomes and their huge budgets. SSE's approach is part of a growing body of thought and action which believes in bottom-up action, engaging with those who have first-hand experience of the issue at hand. This approach is better, cheaper, more acceptable, and far longer lasting. Now there is evidence of how it empowers and supports people to solve problems and to strengthen communities on which human life depends.

1. Executive Summary

In 1997, the School for Social Entrepreneurs (SSE) embarked on a mission to empower individuals to address society's most pressing challenges. It would champion the social entrepreneur: commercially-minded individuals who place equal, if not greater, emphasis on wider social benefits of their businesses instead of pure profit. SSE's social entrepreneurs have positively impacted millions of lives. The Lloyds Bank and Bank of Scotland Social Entrepreneurs Programme – run in partnership with the SSE and jointly funded by The National Lottery Community Fund – has been running from 2012 to 2022, making it the UK's longest-running social entrepreneurship programme. In September 2022, AKOU joined forces with SSE to evaluate this pioneering programme, which has supported over 2,400 social entrepreneurs across the UK.

Our evaluation approach prioritised co-design, collaboration, and participation. Leveraging our established Research Associate Programme, we engaged SSE fellows in the evaluation process, enabling us to gather new impact data about their social enterprises. This report highlights AKOU's participatory and co-design methodology, offering insights into the methods, outcomes, and benefits of our approach. Furthermore, it showcases the social impact and place-based change catalysed by SSE fellows nationwide.

Above all, this report demonstrates how this methodology can be applied, and be of benefit to evaluations of similar programmes.

A key innovation of our Research Associate Programme was the harmonised collection of data from SSE's secondary beneficiaries – the community members impacted by SSE fellows. This groundbreaking effort allows for a nuanced understanding and quantification of the ripple effects of SSE's impact in communities. The report presents compelling data and case studies illustrating how SSE fellows contribute to generating social impact in diverse locations.

Key
Findings
from the
Research
Associates
Programme

1,451
beneficiaries

on average, supported
by SSE fellows'
activities.¹

418%
increase

in beneficiaries
supported by ventures
over the course of SSE's
programme.²

91%

of respondents made
new connections
through participating
in activities offered by
social enterprises.³

7
out of **10**

research associates'
social enterprises
increased the
employability of their
beneficiaries, leading to
paid employment.⁴

62%

of beneficiaries feel
they can help shape the
activities of the social
enterprise.



You can find the full report about the impact of SSE's Lloyds Bank and Bank of Scotland Social Entrepreneurs Programme [here](#).

2. Programme Overview

Collaborating with SSE Fellows to Gather Data

AKOU’s guiding principles for data collection are to make the process empathetic, fair for all, and well evidenced. We designed the Research Associate Programme to provide training in social research methods and tools for measuring impact. Guided by the AKOU team, research associates collected evidence of their impact on their beneficiaries.

Throughout the programme, we explored insights through lenses of diversity, fair representation, equity, and power balance. We ensured accessibility of our findings by closely collaborating with SSE teams and fellows. Our aim was to make information useful for all stakeholders, including SSE fellows, SSE teams, and funders.

The Research Associate Programme:

From February to March 2023, AKOU, on a regular basis, met online with research associates (who were paid for their time). Activities included:



How Research Associates Collected Data for this Report

The research associates collected crucial insights for this evaluation in a unified but creative way. This allowed scope for the nuances of their social enterprises while also ensuring approaches were similar and data sets would be comparable. Outcomes of the Research Associate Programme were:

10

SSE fellows trained in research design and mixed methods data collection.

338

beneficiaries provided insights via harmonised surveys.

164

connections and collaborators mapped by reseach associates.

Impact stories

of beneficiaries captured through the use of journey maps.

New methods

and ideas developed for data sharing across SSE fellows to the benefit all.

Data summaries

individualised and shared with research associates for their use.

3. Outcomes and Impact

The Impact Made by SSE Fellows on Beneficiaries

Comprehensive Evaluation and Research

Since research associates are often embedded in their own local communities, the research process benefitted from the existing trust between them as researchers and participants. Mutual trust is a foundational element in the research process, and leads to enhanced engagement, openness, and ultimately more credible, authentic research findings.

Indeed, the data collected by the research associates is the first dataset SSE has received about the specific impact of their SSE fellow's social enterprises on beneficiaries. This participatory approach grounded the evaluation in local contexts and was therefore enriched by the insights and experiences of those who act, work, and live within communities.

“We’re now using the data we gathered from the Research Associate’s Programme to write our own impact report. We feel more skilled now to do so.”

Ali Horton, The Gateway Collective

Empowering researchers with skills and Knowledge

The training of social entrepreneurs as research associates provided crucial skills in social research and impact measurement, and allowed them to play an important role in shaping the evaluation of SSE's programme.

Impact measurement skills are crucial for social enterprises to continuously demonstrate their social value, attract and retain funders, and improve their services. Empowering fellows to develop skills in evaluation has allowed many research associates to begin working towards independent impact evaluations for their enterprises, often re-using the research questions/design to gather new data. Several research associates mentioned that at first, they were hesitant to ask for feedback from the people they work with, but this piece of work offered a good opportunity to reach out to people. Overall, the Research Associates Programme has facilitated more sustainable and independent impact measurement in the long term.

“Since our collaboration with AKOU...our new policy is to gather feedback on every single project that we do.”

Adekemi Giwa, The Play Center

Adaptable Research Design

Evaluating the impact of a programme on various communities was not a 'one-size-fits-all' exercise. Co-designing the research process alongside research associates ensured that the research was responsive to the contexts of the community being evaluated.

This iterative process allowed research associates to adjust and adapt research design according to their insights, needs, and perspectives – which ultimately uncovered unique and good-quality data.

“We will plan to do the AKOU beneficiary survey next year, with modifications to the questions.”

Jayne Howard, Arts Well

Ownership of the Research

Participatory research helped to foster a sense of ownership of the research process, and outcomes within communities and for research associates. Promoting a more equitable distribution of power in the research journey helped to address certain power imbalances that present themselves in traditional 'researcher-subject' relationships, allowing Research Associates and participants from the community to be actively involved in the research and evaluation process, rather than simply passive participants of it.

4. Igniting Change

The Impact Made by SSE Fellows on Beneficiaries

Sse Fellows Improve The Relationships, Skills And Wellbeing Of Their Beneficiaries

With the skills and knowledge that fellows develop through their time on SSE programmes, they create resilient enterprises that are better equipped to catalyse positive change in the lives of their beneficiaries. The data collected by research associates shows that the social enterprises of SSE fellows primarily improve people's relationships, skills, and wellbeing. Working to empower beneficiaries, helping them to develop a greater sense of personal agency, wellbeing, and connectedness, makes individuals better able to seek employment, education, and opportunities to be more involved in community life. This has led, ultimately, to thriving and better-connected communities.

Responses from beneficiaries demonstrated that social enterprises greatly facilitate making connections with others, including building links in the local area and supporting networking. One SSE fellow works on average with ten volunteers and has increased their volunteers by 54% while on the programme.⁵ In addition, many social enterprises improve their beneficiaries'

knowledge on certain topics; whether this is how to fix a bike, grow a business or organisation, or improve communication and language abilities. Moreover, data shows that social enterprises have a strong impact on their beneficiaries' confidence, wellbeing, and sense of agency. Beneficiaries mainly feel happy, inspired, excited, accepted, and supported through participating in the activities of the social enterprise.

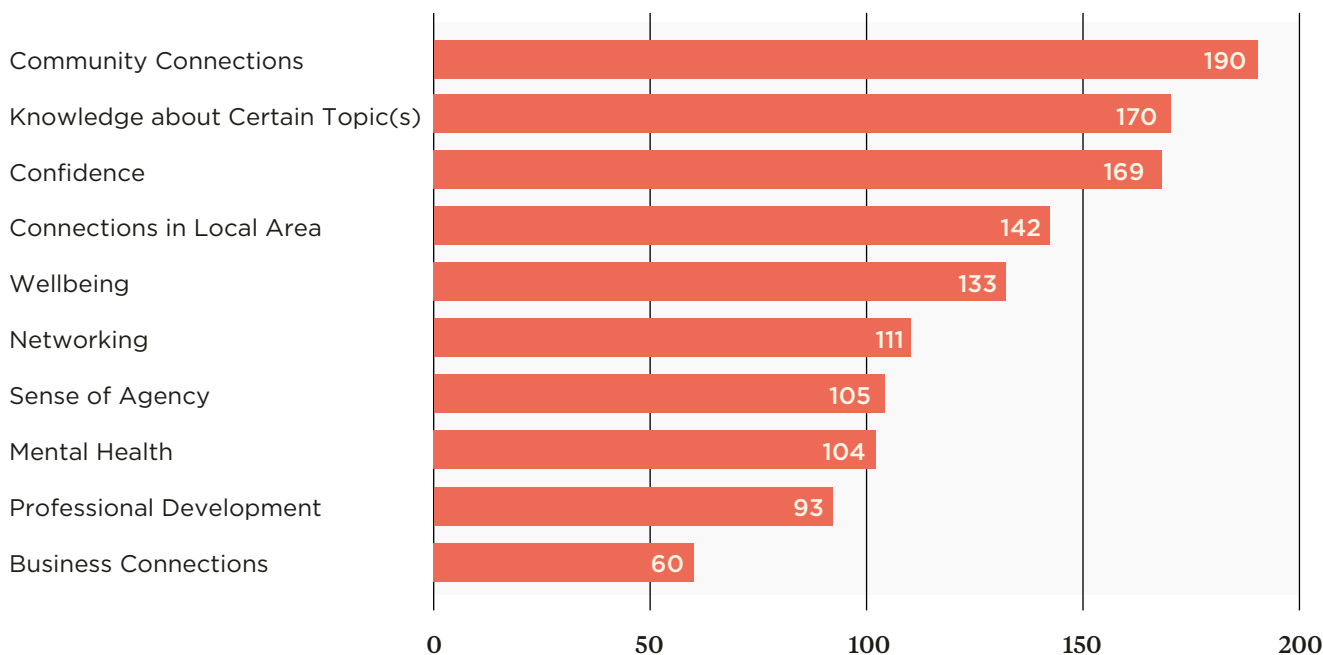
4 out of 5

beneficiaries rate the positive impact of SSE fellows' social enterprise in their community.⁶

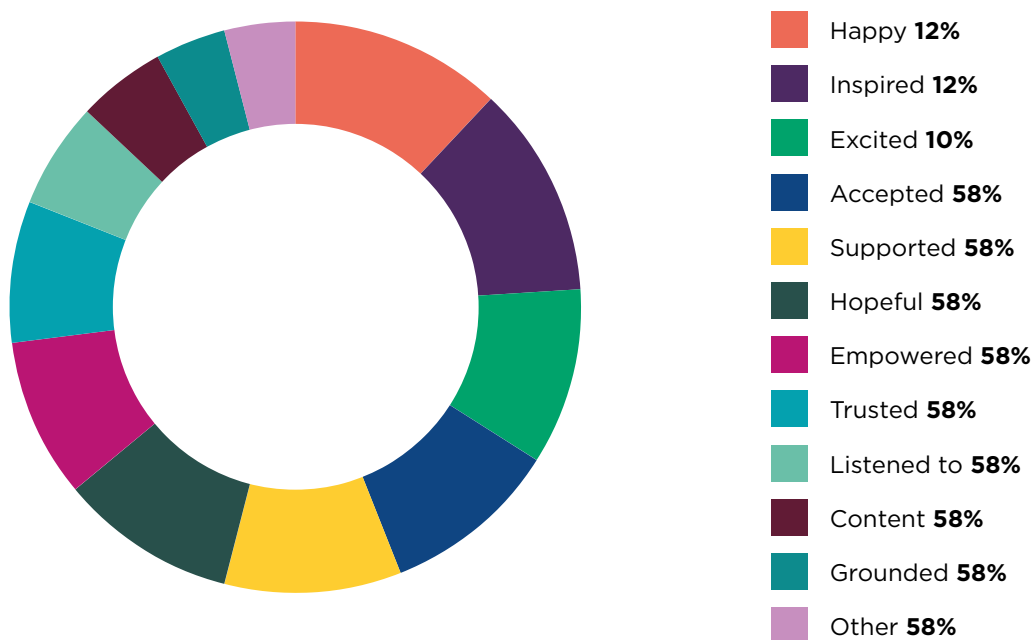
“Mental health issues were greatly improved. Many of the people attending, although some have social workers, do not have agency support. The project and the project community ‘look out’ for them.”

Beneficiary of The Gateway Collective

The top 10 areas that Have Improved for Beneficiaries Since Participating in an SSE Social Enterprise:⁷



How Does Taking Part an SSE Social Enterprise’s Activities Make You Feel?⁸



Social Enterprises Increase Employability by Supporting Skills Development

Many of the social enterprises support their beneficiaries in developing their soft skills by providing role models or volunteering opportunities.

Qualitative insights support this, showing that enterprises support the self-development of beneficiaries through:

- Developing confidence
- Better social and communication skills
- Lower social isolation and increased friendship
- Improved mental health
- Sense of connection through shared interests

Sse Fellows Grow the Social Capital of the People they Work with – Supporting Social Mobility

SSE fellows experience the impact of increased social capital themselves. Many SSE fellows continuously build new connections and bring people together to help increase the social capital of their beneficiaries and the people they work with. Making new connections and widening networks is one key factor in increasing social capital and social mobility in the UK.

Social enterprises, and their ability to build social capital and connections within communities, are a vital first step in strengthening the social infrastructure of a region. The social infrastructure of a region is defined by the crucial organisations, places, and spaces that enable communities to create social connections – to form and sustain relationships that help them to thrive.⁹ Where social capital provides the

foundation for social cohesion, social infrastructure offers the spaces and services that facilitate these interactions. These spaces and organisations serve as a catalyst for community engagement and empowerment in local areas.

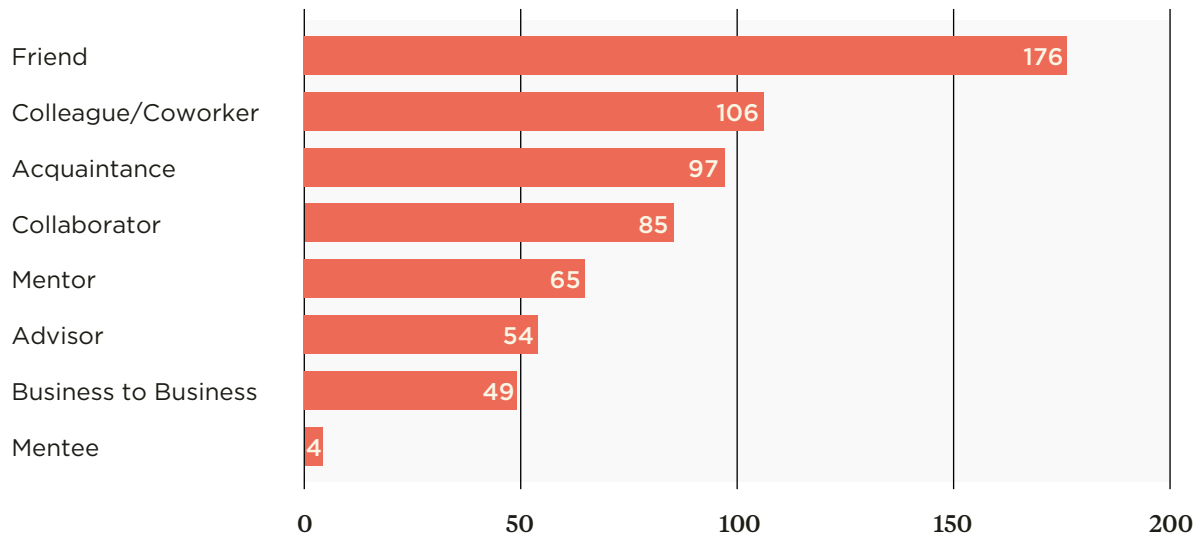
Through gaining relationship-building skills on both personal and professional levels on the programme, SSE fellows gain greater capacity to build social capital, collaborate with other social enterprises, and better connect with the communities they serve. Beneficiaries of SSE fellows say that they mostly gain community connections from participating in the social enterprise.¹⁰

SSE fellows strongly support their volunteers and beneficiaries in making new connections and building professional as well as personal relationships. Supporting the growth of social capital is crucial for reducing loneliness, improving wellbeing and increasing the likelihood of hearing about new opportunities which might lead to new relationships, learning, or employment. Increasing social capital is one way of improving social mobility in the UK, which performs poorly on international comparisons for both social mobility¹¹ and inequality.

“I work in the arts sector and have done so for over 20 years and so have a long list of contacts but still struggle to make connections within the health sector... Arts Well often allows me to find new links.”

Beneficiary of Arts Well

Understanding the Types of Relationships Formed Through Social Enterprises¹²



5. Case Studies

The research has generated ten case studies that delve into the individual stories and specific impact of each research associate's social enterprise on the beneficiaries they collaborate with. The impact of the research associates covers three areas:

01

Investing in Individuals and Communities

Social enterprises highlighting the impact that investing in communities and individuals has on creating sustainable social change.

Featured case studies:

- [The Gateway Collective](#)
- [BizEd](#)
- [Monty's Bike Hub](#)
- [Breadwinners](#)

02

Challenging Institutional and Social Power Structures

Social enterprises working to address harmful institutional and social power structures by addressing the root causes of systemic inequality.

Featured case studies:

- [Restart](#)
- [Our Version Media](#)
- [Her Path to Purpose](#)

03

Enhancing Community Wellbeing Through Art, Play and Media

Social enterprises seeking to harness art, media, and play to shape a brighter future for communities.

Featured case studies:

- [Arts Well](#)
- [Wythenshawe Community Radio](#)
- [The Play Center Glasgow](#)

01

Investing in Individuals and Communities

Findings by research associates highlight the impact that investing in communities and individuals has on creating sustainable social change. SSE fellows invest in communities by first empowering individuals: by creating opportunities, facilitating the development of skills and knowledge, and providing inclusive spaces for community participation and connection building. Enterprises such as The Gateway Collective, BizEd, Breadwinners, and Monty's Bike Hub help cultivate a sense of agency amongst disadvantaged or marginalised members of a community.

Consequently, empowered individuals are better able to become the driving force of change within their own lives and community, often seeking work and employment, education, and becoming more civically engaged as a result of working with fellows' social enterprises. Fellows set in motion an important ripple effect; by addressing the immediate needs of individuals in their community, they help them become more resilient and socially engaged, leading to more prosperous and healthier communities.

Featured Case Studies:

- [The Gateway Collective](#)
- [BizEd](#)
- [Monty's Bike Hub](#)
- [Breadwinners](#)

Case Study: Gateway Collective

“Welcome!” floated a cheery voice as we entered the garden. Our heads turned and we were met with a vibrant smile and inviting energy by a volunteer pruning a bush lining the pathway through the garden.

Gateway Collective was founded by Ali Horton and Janet Hughes in 2015, in a local community garden in North Park in Bootle, Merseyside. It has quickly become a collaborative and much-loved community hub, connecting the local community and fostering positive relationships amongst beneficiaries. And as their slogan says, the Gateway Collective is ‘growing food, growing people, growing community’.

For marginalised and socially isolated people in the community, Gateway Collective acts as a centre of social support, offering companionship, and helping people make new connections with each other.

Gateway Collective works collaboratively with other community regeneration projects in Bootle to help it thrive. For example, the collaboration Made in Bootle Project showcases independent creatives, makers, and social enterprises, reinvesting any profit into the community. They also regularly donate to food banks in the Bootle area, and support other local businesses via networking and connections.



“The meals shared are often the only time during the week the beneficiaries eat a meal with others.”

Beneficiary of Gateway Collective



“Attendees have ownership... it is their project. People are fed. Attendees learn how to make the best of their budgets food-wise. There is a massive impact and improvement of mental health as the majority of attendees live alone.”

Beneficiary of Gateway Collective



By providing voluntary positions as work experience, Gateway Collective helps beneficiaries into paid employment. They also help beneficiaries develop their employability skills by improving their self-confidence and communication skills, as well as teaching gardening and cooking skills.

Through gardening, learning new skills, and connecting with others, beneficiaries' wellbeing improved. Gateway Collective helped beneficiaries to feel valued and hopeful by tending to their own green space, and sharing experiences regularly. This helped them cultivate a sense of purpose and belonging, improving their mental health. Social isolation and loneliness are reduced significantly in the community with a regular, safe space for local people to meet and bond over shared interests and experiences.

100%

of beneficiaries feel that Gateway Collective has a positive impact on their community.¹³

📍 Bootle, Merseyside

🖱️ gatewaycollective.co.uk

Ali Horton was on the SSE programme in 2019 as part of the North West Trade Up cohort.

Case Study: BizEd Projects CIC

Vicki Ayton set up BizEd Projects CIC to meet the need to support businesses in creating collaborations and partnerships. Previously she spent 15 years working with businesses and organisations to design and deliver innovative skills, training, and business projects. Based in Shropshire, Staffordshire, and Cheshire, BizEd Projects connects individuals, community organisations, and businesses to grow social capital and strengthen communities.

BizEd offers support for businesses and training providers (such as higher education colleges), to reduce barriers faced by local people seeking work placements. Helping institutions demonstrate the value of work placements has led to an increase in the number of people in placements. By creating more accessible inroads to employment, BizEd has improved the diversity of people seeking placements.

Vicki and her team aim to help more people overcome barriers to employment through collaborations and partnerships. They support individuals to find good quality placements and employment in their local area.

“As a small business, you want to help engage young people and those looking to access work placements but often we don’t have the time to support. Having a resource which understands the business challenges inherent in offering placements and able to help support to overcome the barriers is good for the business and good for students too.”

Beneficiary of BizEd Projects CIC

93%

of beneficiaries feel that BizEd has a positive impact on their community.¹⁴

“We need more people like Vicki with her knowledge, skills, and professionalism to accelerate action – particularly in local areas where the greatest benefit is to be had.”

Beneficiary of BizEd Projects CIC

By providing professional training and encouraging development, beneficiaries felt that BizEd helped their businesses have better environmental and social impact. For example, one beneficiary mentioned how BizEd supported them in reopening a local non-profit membership organisation supporting people in the construction industry in Shropshire.

BizEd increases valuable impact on businesses through its collaborative ethos and the instigating of connections. Beneficiaries had the opportunity to engage, connect, and collaborate with a wide range of other businesses because of BizEd. As a result, they expanded their knowledge and reach as businesses.

 Shropshire, Staffs, and Cheshire

 bizedprojects.com

Vicki Ayton was on the SSE programme in 2020 as part of the Midlands Start Up cohort.

Case Study: Monty's Bike Hub

At the heart of Montague Avenue Estate in Sholing, Southampton Monty's Bike Hub is a fun, social bike workshop. Young people stand around bike stands, learning to repair their bikes, or quickly getting something fixed so they can be out cycling again, or riding on the local pump track. Chatter wafts through the air as volunteers have tea together and talk about upcoming group rides.

Monty's Bike Hub is part of Monty's Community Hub, which started out working on kids' bikes in the youth group. As demand grew, the social enterprise needed its own workshop, and moved around the corner. Today, both Monty's Bike Hub as well as the Community Hub are key places for the local community. The Community Hub runs different activities throughout the week, and income generated by the bike hub helps support this work. Throughout the week, there are youth groups, a food pantry, a community cafe, elderly groups, faith-based groups, pilates, and more.

“I loved the kids so I volunteered as a youth worker...eventually applied for a paid youth worker position – my first job in 12 years due to health!”

Beneficiary of Monty's Bike Hub



Monty's Bike Hub secured funding from Southampton City Council and the Veolia Environmental Trust to design and build a public pump track next to the local playground, which is now a meeting point for young people and their families. One afternoon a week, Monty's Bike Hub team sets up at the track, renting out BMX bikes to local people for free.

By offering volunteering positions and encouraging professional skill development, Monty's Bike Hub has opened up new opportunities for beneficiaries. For example, they offer a Cycle Instructor Qualification in exchange for volunteer hours, and teach skills such as IT, first aid, and mechanics to diversify beneficiaries' professional skill sets. This has helped beneficiaries into paid employment, and allowed them to discover new interests.

Through repair services and workshops, Monty's Bike Hub has made bike ownership and riding more accessible for people in the community. It allows individuals more freedom and independence in access to community organisations.

The bike hub provides an affordable alternative to buying bikes from bigger companies and brands (Halfords, Decathlon). For young people and those on lower incomes in the community, generous repayment plans that are responsive to their needs are an asset, and encourage individuals to pick up cycling - improving their skills, health, and wellbeing.

94%

of beneficiaries feel that Monty's Bike Hub has a positive impact on their community.¹⁵

“If you get your bike repaired at Halfords, they just take it in the back and you don't get to learn how to repair it yourself... I can do smaller repairs by myself after being taught at Monty's.”

Beneficiary of Monty's Bike Hub



“People would lose having people to turn to for help or advice. The community would stagnate socially. Children and youth would lose trusted adults to whom they may have turned r.e. safeguarding disclosures. The community would be less physically active. The community would lose people modelling good parenting, healthy relationships, compassion, good housekeeping. The community would lose access to resources e.g. laptops, internet, printing, space to work. The community would lose a source of free food”

Beneficiary of Monty's Bike Hub



Extending support out to the wider community, Monty's Bike Hub is recognised by people in the community as a key player in driving forward social change. Beneficiaries see the hub as a valuable community space which connects people through the activities they provide.

Through regular socialisation with other people in the community, beneficiaries felt that Monty's Bike Hub had helped them feel more connected to their community. Many made new friendships and experienced a sense of belonging. Beneficiaries also felt that this was beneficial for young people, especially those who, without Monty's Bike Hub, would have nowhere safe to meet.

The services and support provided by Monty's Bike Hub improved beneficiaries' wellbeing and mental health. By encouraging people to be more physically active, and by engaging with others with shared interests and experiences, beneficiaries felt happier, and their self-esteem improved.

📍 Southampton

🖱️ montysbikehub.org

Josh Allen was on the SSE programme in 2016 as part of the Hampshire Start Up cohort.

Case Study: Breadwinners

Chatter wafts through the air intertwined with the aromas of fresh bread. A buzz surrounds the Breadwinners stall at Victoria Market in East London on a Sunday, as young refugees train one another and learn through selling bread and making friends with the local weekly shoppers.

Founded in 2016, Breadwinners is a grassroots charity supporting young refugees into paid employment. They do this by delivering three employability programmes in London and Brighton that provide jobs, work experience, training, and mentoring at their market stalls, and through their wholesale service selling baked goods.

Around 70% of refugees are unemployed in London despite being highly skilled.¹⁶ Refugees face many barriers when looking for work in the UK: lack of in-country experience and connections, legal constraints, bias, and discrimination against refugees.



“We refugees and asylum seekers have no voice, no one can empower us like Breadwinners... Breadwinners gave us [a] voice and confidence. If they stop, that power will be taken away from us. No organisation [does this] like Breadwinners.”

Beneficiary of Breadwinners



“Offering a space for sharing of cultures, ideas, and friendship. An opportunity to be involved in the local community and meet people you wouldn’t usually. Helping to bring awareness and offer a voice/ opportunities to asylum seekers who are too regularly vilified by UK society. It is vital that organisations like Breadwinners continue to cultivate this sense of belonging, and encourage independence and autonomy, for individuals who are seeking sanctuary, to reinforce the message that they are not alone.”

Volunteer at Breadwinners

Breadwinners empowers young refugees and asylum seekers, and shifts the biased perception of the local community. It has a powerful impact that leads to integration through increasing awareness, and provides a sense of belonging through establishing a community.

Beneficiaries felt that Breadwinners helped them access new opportunities in employment and work experience. The provision of training in skills like language and communication, business management, CV writing, and sales improved beneficiaries’ employability. Connections made via Breadwinners also enabled beneficiaries to access other organisations and services for support. Continued social and financial support, as well as training, builds beneficiaries’ confidence, and allows them to work towards particular self-defined goals they decide.

📍 London and Brighton

🖱️ breadwinners.org.uk

Marting Cosarinsky Campos was on the SSE programme in 2020 as part of the London Scale Up cohort.

02

Challenging institutional and Social Power Structures

SSE fellows also work to address harmful institutional and social power structures. By addressing the root causes of systemic inequality, social enterprises such as Restart, Our Version Media, and Her Path to Purpose, work towards dismantling institutional frameworks and social structures that perpetuate inequality. Simultaneously they work with and empower

individuals who have been negatively impacted by institutions and uneven power structures. In doing so, these social enterprises assume a crucial role in instigating a reshaping of oppressive power dynamics in both an institutional and a wider societal context, as well as empowering individuals to better navigate these systems in the present.

Featured Case Studies:

- [Restart](#)
- [Our Version Media](#)
- [Her Path to Purpose](#)

Case Study: Restart

Surrounded by massive concrete structures, inhibiting people from both looking in and out and surrounded by wired gates, Restart is nestled on the compound of three prisons in Wolverhampton. Founded by Pauline Miller-Brown, Restart provides support to people whilst in custody and during their transition back into the community as ex-offenders. It is a holistic service, strategically planned to reduce recidivism and promote resettlement.

A bright blue sky and strong sun welcomed us as we visited Restart, the first guests at the newly acquired community supermarket. Pauline’s vision and energy radiate as she shares the challenges and beauty of running a social enterprise in a community stigmatised by many. The supermarket is the most recent effort to ensure those in custody, their families, as well as staff at the prisons have access to affordable, fresh food. At £5 a bag, Restart is meeting the hunger needs of an entire community impacted by the industrial prison system, acknowledging the economic challenges faced by each individual.

By providing ongoing support and services to a sector of society who are largely ignored post-release, Restart helps beneficiaries navigate the difficult transition back into society more smoothly. Beneficiaries remarked that this was invaluable to them and that without help many ex-offenders chose to repeat offences.



“One of the nicest things you did after I was released, you just treated me like a normal person... that was very beneficial and made me happy with life.”

Beneficiary of Restart



1,661

have been helped to ensure they attend their appointments with probation.¹⁸

1,098

have been able to arrange to be collected by their loved ones after being released.¹⁹



Through connections made via Restart, beneficiaries gained work experience placements to increase their employability. They felt empowered with a re-established identity that was lost during their time in prison. Beneficiaries go into paid employment, regaining independence. This leads to a feeling of hope and allows them to feel valued and appreciated as an individual. The ripple effect meant that ex-offenders became valued and contributing members of society again.

Helping beneficiaries to reconnect with society, via things like employment, helped to challenge the wider community’s perceptions of rehabilitation.

Restart’s provision of actionable care initiatives for both ex-offenders and their families significantly improved the wellbeing and lives of beneficiaries pre- and post-release from prison. Beneficiaries remarked about how the kindness and support helped keep families together through the support given to them whilst a beneficiary was still in prison. This strengthened families in the community, but also improved mental health for all individuals involved.

“If Restart did not give me a food pack and toiletries, I would take it from the shops and not pay because I have been released with little money and nowhere to live. I guess that help means I have a chance of not returning to prison.”

Beneficiary of Restart

📍 West Midlands

🖱️ restartenterprise.com

Pauline Miller-Brown was on the SSE programme in 2016 as part of the Midlands Start Up cohort.

Case Study: Our Version Media

Our Version Media was founded by Southampton-born, former TV news journalist Veronica Gordon in 2019. Driven by a desire for creative freedom and a genuine impact on the community, Veronica sought to establish a self-sufficient and trading model instead of being constrained by the rigid criteria of external grant funders. This autonomy allows Our Version Media to have full control over the direction and priorities of their work, and respond best to the needs of the communities they work with in Southampton.

Veronica combined her journalism expertise and community activism to create Our Version Media. Its mission: to equip black – and other communities demonised by the press – with media skills to tell and share their own, authentic stories.

Our Version Media amplifies black and marginalised voices by equipping individuals, communities and organisations with media skills to tell their own, authentic stories. One beneficiary states how Our Version Media is crucial in highlighting the needs of Black people in Southampton.

“I feel more seen and represented, it makes me feel heard that people who look like me are given a platform to have their voices heard.”

Beneficiary of Our Version Media





I was able to get a stronger connection within the community I work for and with other charities. In my work, networking is key and thanks to this training I improved my contacts within the city!”

Beneficiary of Our Version Media

96%

of beneficiaries feel that Our Version Media has a positive impact on their community.²⁰

Mobile storytelling workshops teach people how to create, film, and edit videos using a smartphone, empowering them to share inclusive and impactful stories that reflect their real lives, neighbourhoods, and communities. This boosts confidence, self-esteem, and wellbeing, while counteracting the mainstream’s negative narrative at the same time.

Through the provision of transferable skills in digital media and social media marketing, Our Version Media allows beneficiaries to access a skillset that they might not otherwise have access to. This increases employability and amplifies a set of community voices that are usually ignored.

These digital skills were then used by beneficiaries to draw wider community attention to particular struggles that local people from marginalised backgrounds were facing. This then helped beneficiaries to make new connections and collaborators in the community to raise more awareness and support grassroots change.

Beneficiaries felt empowered through their newfound skills, and this translates as the ability to tell the important stories of those around them. They experienced an increase in confidence and felt a sense of pride and togetherness.

📍 Southampton, Hampshire

🖱️ ourversion.media

Veronica Gordon was on the SSE programme as part of the Hampshire Start Up cohort in 2018 and Trade Up cohort in 2021.

Case Study: Her Path to Purpose

Nicole Robinson-Edwards founded Her Path to Purpose in 2018, driven by her personal journey as a young black woman facing challenges without proper direction or guidance in pursuing her ambitions. Realising that her experiences were shared by others, she decided to support and empower young women who may encounter similar obstacles.

She developed Her Path to Purpose as a way to equip and empower young women to advance personally and professionally, helping them to reach their full potential to lead purposeful lives.

By providing free and easily accessible services in mental health support and professional development, Her Path to Purpose helps marginalised young women thrive. Reducing financial and social barriers to such services resulted in beneficiaries feeling a shift in self-worth and confidence. Those with mental health issues were taught how to manage and advocate for their needs. The professional development support led to more employment opportunities by guiding the young women in their career progression and inspiring ambition to achieve their goals.



“Black women often struggle to find good quality and affordable counselling. Her Path to Purpose enables black women to gain access to therapy that has the potential to be life-changing.”

Beneficiary of Her Path to Purpose

82%

of beneficiaries feel that Her Path to Purpose has a positive impact on their community.²¹



By providing mentorship, collaborative workshops, and opportunities for networking, Her Path to Purpose encouraged beneficiaries to work towards their goals and forge new connections. This has enabled them to give back to their communities through other volunteering opportunities which were introduced to them through connections made at Her Path to Purpose.

Through connecting with other young women with shared experiences, beneficiaries felt that Her Path to Purpose fostered a sense of belonging. They felt heard and accepted, which eventually led to new opportunities outside of Her Path to Purpose via connections made there.

“There’s lots of information from big charities about how they can help women like me but it’s so hard to access the services you need. There are so many barriers, but accessing support from Her Path to Purpose felt so easy.”

Beneficiary of Her Path to Purpose

📍 Southampton, Hampshire

🖱️ herpathtopurpose.org

Veronica Gordon was on the SSE programme as part of the Hampshire Start Up cohort in 2018 and Trade Up cohort in 2021.

03

Enhancing Community Wellbeing Through Art, Play and Media.

Social enterprises, such as Arts Well, Wythenshawe Community Radio, and The Play Center Glasgow, seek to harness art, media, and play to shape a brighter future for communities. These initiatives prioritise innovative and creative approaches to improve collective wellbeing. Through cultural expression, community engagement, and therapeutic

outlets, these enterprises foster a sense of belonging for beneficiaries, whilst simultaneously contributing to education, skill development, and social inclusion. Social enterprises utilising creative mediums play a pivotal role in building stronger, healthier, and cohesive communities.

Featured Case Studies:

- [Arts Well](#)
- [Wythenshawe Community Radio](#)
- [The Play Center Glasgow](#)

Case Study: Arts Well

Arts Well was created and founded in 2017 by Jayne Howard, who has over 15 years of experience initiating, advising, and collaborating on arts-based health projects in Cornwall. She was also director of the national and award-winning organisation Arts for Health Cornwall for 11 years.

With the growing evidence that participation in creative activities transforms lives – improving physical, mental, social, and emotional health – Arts Well was founded to improve the experiences of individuals and communities, and to tackle social inequalities related to accessibility in arts and health. The social enterprise creates tailored programmes of creative activities for specific communities aimed at improving health and wellbeing. It also provides professional training and development opportunities for creative health practitioners.



“Arts Well has created a community of like-minded people. It offers a place to receive professional development and support, project/job opportunities, and a place you can go to for guidance.”

Beneficiary of Arts Well

65%

of beneficiaries feel that Arts Well has a positive impact on their community.²²



In 2021, Arts Well designed and ran a project that focused on the impact of creative practice in a post-covid world. The Creative Health and Wellbeing programme, funded by the Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF), facilitated professional development workshops across Cornwall creating impact by:

- Developing a range of accessible participatory creative activities and programmes that relied on local assets (people, venues, existing groups, and activities) through place-based creative health networks.
- Significantly improving mental health and wellbeing for both beneficiaries and practitioners and significantly reduced feelings of social isolation.
- Establishing the development of a collaborative Directory of Creative Opportunities which contains details of over 80 organisations offering creative activities in Cornwall.

The programme was impactful for social prescribers across Cornwall, helping them to identify and make new connections with local creative arts practitioners and organisations in their communities. In doing so, it allowed more beneficiaries to access creative practices more easily.

📍 Penryn, Cornwall

🖱️ arts-well.com

Jayne Howard was on the SSE programme as part of the Cornwall Start Up cohort in 2016 and Trade Up cohort in 2019.

Case Study: Wythenshawe Community Radio

You've tuned into 97.2 Wythenshawe FM (WFM), your local community radio station, operating for the people, by the people. Tune in 24/7 to experience DJs donating their time at the Wythenshawe Forum in Forum Square empowering their community through music and news.

Wythenshawe Community Radio aims to promote local services and community groups; raise awareness of issues which affect local communities; give local people access to qualifications in radio presentation and/or production leading to better chances of employment. Wythenshawe Community Radio also champions equality and believes in bringing people together – regardless of age, race, gender, sexual orientation, or religious beliefs.

During the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, Wythenshawe Community Radio was able to adapt, and became a vital repository of information for its listeners during this time.

Understanding the importance of maintaining their service while ensuring the safety of their presenters and staff, the station organised systems that allowed their presenters to broadcast from their own homes.



“It has helped build my confidence and I have been more successful in my career and doing job interviews. I feel I may be mildly on the [Autism Spectrum Disorder] and Wythenshawe Community Radio is an outlet for people like me who have poor communication and social skills to find a voice.”

Beneficiary of Wythenshawe Community Radio

The continuation of their programming and service was crucial for their community as the radio station became a vital source of public health information for their listeners during this crisis. This was particularly important for those in the community who were not as digitally literate or faced challenges in accessing online sources of information. Through their broadcasts, the station played a pivotal role in disseminating essential information, offering guidance, and fostering community connectedness in this time of uncertainty and social isolation.

Since the pandemic, Wythenshawe Community Radio still provides training to individuals on how to present on the station from their own homes, improving the accessibility of their services to the community as a whole. Through teaching new skills related to broadcasting and production, beneficiaries' self-confidence increased. It also helped improve their communication skills via sustained social contact with other presenters and the local people who interact with them via their shows.

75%

of beneficiaries feel that WCR has a positive impact on their community.²³

“In an area that mostly gets a bad rep and is classed as an area of deprivation, community means everything. WFM provides a platform for Wythenshawe residents ... to come together to share all the positive things that happen.”

Beneficiary of Wythenshawe Community Radio





“The internal community of presenters is made up of people with different disabilities and health issues, such as autism, anxiety, depression, learning disabilities or difficulty, physical disabilities, and many more. Being involved in WFM is their mental health lifeline, a place they fit in, and can make a difference to others.”

Beneficiary of Wythenshawe Community Radio

By raising awareness of local issues via radio, Wythenshawe Community Radio champions community engagement, helping Wythenshawe to feel connected. The station makes a difference to local people who are usually left without a voice.

By widening access to radio, Wythenshawe Community Radio actively promotes accessibility and equality. Beneficiaries felt accepted and valued because of their diverse lived experiences, and WFM helped them celebrate this.

Kath Forden, the chair of WFM radio – visually impaired and slightly deaf – has been involved as a presenter for 17 years. Her laugh permeates the room as she responds to co-presenter Chris Paul, sharing her passion for making accessible radio with other members of the visually impaired community.

📍 Wythenshawe, Manchester

🖱️ wfmradio.org

Chris Paul was on the SSE programme as part of the North West Trade Up in 2021.

Case Study: The Play Center Glasgow CIC

The Play Center Glasgow offers children and adults of Drumchapel, a vibrant, safe space to learn, play, and connect. On certain days, the space buzzes with energy as kids play, draw, and eat together in the after-school club. On others, adults sit with each other in conversation, or are engaged in skill development workshops. The Play Center Glasgow is a place where generations come together – where children’s imaginations flourish, and adults can continue to expand their skills and knowledge.

The Play Center Glasgow provides a one-stop shop for their local community, Drumchapel, on issues around social inclusion, delivered through youth clubs, after-school clubs, and family hangouts. The aim is to help the community thrive through the provision of mentoring, and encouraging capacity building through skill development. In doing so, The Play Center Glasgow serves as a medium in assisting the government in tackling the concern of youth delinquency, vandalism, and school absenteeism in the Glasgow community.



“If the organisation were to stop operating, a number of children would lose a valuable communal spot. This would affect parents who make use of the clubs to keep their children occupied and safe while they have work.”

Beneficiary of The Play Center

95%

of beneficiaries feel that The Play Center has a positive impact on their community.²⁴

“I know I am learning and achieving more now than I could before thanks to the programme and guidance from staff. The children’s socialising ability and behaviour, in my opinion, is changing for the better.”

Beneficiary of The Play Center

“I’ve witnessed the skills people, from all ages, have developed through the organisation and I also admire how children are given exposure to hobbies and opportunities they may not have had before.”

Beneficiary of The Play Center

By providing a locally run and accessible space, beneficiaries felt more socially connected. The Play Center Glasgow provides beneficiaries with a chance to meet other families and individuals in the community. This reduces feelings of social isolation and helps them to make new friendships. It also has a ‘ripple effect’ of opening up new opportunities in employment for beneficiaries through connections made there.

Through mentoring and workshops, beneficiaries learnt new transferrable skills and this improved their employability and encouraged career progression. Indirectly, this also increased their self-confidence, leaving them feeling more empowered and hopeful.

Through the provision of accessible youth clubs, The Play Center Glasgow also provides positive role models for children. Beneficiaries noticed that a regular, dedicated, and safe environment for young people to socialise improved behaviour. It also allowed local families to connect and support each other.

 Glasgow

 theplaycenterglasgow.co.uk

Adekemi Giwa was on the SSE programme as part of the Scotland Start Up cohort in 2021.

6. AKOU's Action Statement

Through AKOU's Research Associates Programme we set out to gain a more nuanced view of the impact experienced by social enterprises and their beneficiaries. This was to supplement wider impact data already held by SSE. Taking a participatory approach, we provided training and upskilling in impact measurement and data collection for ten social entrepreneurs – an area that many often say they need more support with. Our aim was to ensure that there was mutual benefit, paying research associates for their time and, crucially, enabling them to make use of the data they provided for the evaluation.

Using mixed methods of data collection, research associates heard first-hand from 388 beneficiaries. They developed methods and ideas for better data sharing. And were able to implement new systems for collecting impact data for their ventures that can be used beyond this impact study. For the first time, there is now a coherent quantitative and qualitative data set evidencing the difference SSE fellows make across the country, and how they positively impact the volunteers and beneficiaries they work with.

The methodology used in AKOU's Research Associate Programme, and our guiding principles for data collection (empathetic, fair for all, and well evidenced) holds relevance for other funding bodies and programme providers. This approach empowers social entrepreneurs, fostering confidence and skill in impact data practices, while offering space for reflection and support.

As clearly demonstrated, this approach empowers and incentivises social entrepreneurs to collect better quality

impact data. It can build an individual's confidence and skill in impact data practices and obtaining feedback from beneficiaries. It provides time for peer support, targeted input from experts, and space for operational reflection. Moreover, an approach like this balances power and trust around data, while demonstrating why impact data is needed and how it will be used.

Let's transform how evaluation is done. By aligning both purpose and process, we can build a more robust foundation for impact reporting within the social enterprise sector. We believe the key ingredients to do so (explained on the next page) are:

- Co-design
- Mutual Benefit
- Co-ownership
- Fair Exchange
- Support
- Equity
- Experience
- Social Capital

We advocate that other programme, funding, and support providers working within the impact sector should adopt processes similar to AKOU's Research Associate Programme. These may require a limited amount of extra resources, but will provide a richer source of impact evidence for programmes, programme participants, and beneficiaries collectively. Such data can significantly contribute to assessing and understanding the impact of initiatives addressing society's most significant challenges.

AKOU's Key Ingredients for Impact Reporting:

Co-design

Co-design adaptable processes with all impacted by the programme.

Mutual Benefit

Transform data collection from an extractive process to a mutually beneficial one.

Co-ownership

Create co-ownership of data collected, making insights useful and usable for all involved.

Fair Exchange

Train and pay participants to conduct research.

Support

Provide group settings for sharing of experiences and challenges.

Equity

Examine processes for how inclusive and equitable they are.

Experience

Value and seek to understand intersectional and lived experiences.

Social Capital

Nurture relationships in the process and explore the role of social capital.

End Notes

- 1** SSE impact data, sample size for all programmes: 623, figures are averages, calculated using the mean.
- 2** SSE impact data, sample size for all programmes: 623, figures are averages, calculated using the mean.
- 3** Research Associate Beneficiary Survey, sample size for this question: 286.
- 4** Based on findings from AKOU's Research Associate Programme with 10 SSE fellows.
- 5** SSE impact data, sample size for all programmes: 623, figures are averages, calculated using the mean.
- 6** Research Associate Beneficiary Survey, sample size for this question: 357, average rating on 1-5 scale
- 7** Research Associate Beneficiary Survey, sample size for this question: 384. Question asked: Have any of the following improved for you since participating in X's activities?, Multiple selection.
- 8** Research Associate Beneficiary Survey, sample size for this question: 328, Multiple selection.
- 9** The British Academy and Power to Change, Space for community: strengthening our social infrastructure, 2023
- 10** Research Associate Beneficiary Survey, sample size for this question: 384, Question asked: Have any of the following improved for you since participating in X's activities?, Multiple selection.
- 11** The World Economic Forum's latest Social Mobility Index report from 2020 placed the UK 21st in rank below many other European countries: <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-social-mobility-index-2020-why-economies-benefit-from-fixing-inequality/>
- 12** Research Associate Beneficiary Survey, sample size for this question: 296, Question asked: How would you describe the nature of these new connections?
- 13** Research Associate Beneficiary Survey, sample size for this question: 29. Question asked: How would you rate the positive impact Gateway Collective has had on your community (e.g family/friends)?
- 14** Research Associate Beneficiary Survey, sample size for this question: 16. Question asked: How would you rate the positive impact BizEd has had on your community (e.g family/friends)?
- 15** Research Associate Beneficiary Survey, sample size for this question: 70. Question asked: How would you rate the positive impact Monty's Bike Hub has had on your community (e.g family/friends)?
- 16** Data from Breadwinners website: <https://www.breadwinners.org.uk/our-work> ['Why is Breadwinners Necessary?']
- 17** Research Associate Beneficiary Survey, sample size for this question: 28. Question asked: How would you rate the positive impact Restart has had on your community (e.g family/friends)?
- 18** Existing Data on Impact from Restart Outcomes Report Jan 2018 – November 2019
- 19** Existing Data on Impact from Restart Outcomes Report Jan 2018 – November 2019
- 20** Research Associate Beneficiary Survey, sample size for this question: 26. Question asked: How would you rate the positive impact Our Version Media has had on your community (e.g family/friends)?
- 21** Research Associate Beneficiary Survey, sample size for this question: 17. Question asked: How would you rate the positive impact Her Path to Purpose has had on your community (e.g family/friends)?
- 22** Research Associate Beneficiary Survey, sample size for this question: 34. Question asked: How would you rate the positive impact Arts Well has had on your community (e.g family/friends)?
- 23** Research Associate Beneficiary Survey, sample size for this question: 41. Question asked: How would you rate the positive impact Wythenshawe Community Radio has had on your community (e.g family/friends)?
- 24** Research Associate Beneficiary Survey, Sample Size for this question: 21. Question asked: How would you rate the positive impact PCG has had on your community (e.g family/friends)?

AKOU

akou.co.uk

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