

Pathways to Start Programme Evaluation – Final Report

Highlands and Islands Enterprise
July 2026



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Executive Summary

Fortia Insight was appointed in December 2025 by Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) to undertake an evaluation of the Pathways to Start pilot programme. Highlands and Islands Enterprise is a non-departmental public body of the Scottish Government responsible for the economic and community development of the North and West of Scotland. The evaluation aims to assess the programme's effectiveness in supporting underrepresented groups in entrepreneurship, examine associated outcomes, and assess emerging evidence of socio-economic benefits.

The Pathways to Start programme, delivered across parts of Argyll & Bute and Moray, was delivered over a nine-month period, with a pilot training intervention stretching over three months from participant onboarding to offboarding. It was designed to support individuals at an early stage of their entrepreneurial journey, with a particular focus on those facing barriers to starting a business. A total of 158 applications were received, with 123 participants recruited following reprofiling of the budget. A total of 111 participants completed the programme, with 12 participants withdrawing. In terms of grants, 102 grants were distributed, amounting to £99,892 for an average of £979, ranging from £414 to £1,000.

The evaluation has adopted a mixed-methods strategy, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods to assess the programme's delivery and outcomes / impact to date, whilst also capturing feedback from beneficiaries and stakeholders on programme processes.

Programme Overview

Pathways to Start was developed to provide an accessible entry point into enterprise support, targeting individuals who may not typically engage with mainstream provision, particularly underrepresented groups. This includes women, individuals from ethnic backgrounds, neurodiverse individuals, those who are economically inactive, unemployed, or otherwise facing barriers to business start-up, including caring responsibilities, health challenges, or limited prior experience.

The Pathways to Start programme offered a blended model of support, combining:

- group-based workshops covering core business topics;
- one-to-one mentoring tailored to individual needs; and
- financial assistance through grants (£1000) and expenses support (£500).

Delivery took place over a relatively short timeframe, reflecting the programme's pilot status. As such, the primary focus was on testing delivery approaches, engaging participants, and generating insights to inform potential future roll-out.

Key Findings

1. Strong overall performance by beneficiaries and positive participant experiences

The Pathways to Start programme has performed well overall, with consistently positive feedback from participants. Satisfaction levels were high across both workshops and mentoring support, with participants valuing the supportive, informal, and accessible nature of delivery tailored to their needs. Participants reported improvements in their confidence, understanding of key business concepts, and readiness to take on next steps towards start-up. One-to-one mentoring was particularly valued, providing tailored guidance, accountability and reassurance, while workshops offered structure, knowledge-building, and opportunities for peer interaction.

2. Effective and flexible delivery model

The blended delivery model - combining workshops and mentoring - has been a key strength of the Pathways to Start programme. It enabled a balance between structured learning and personalised support, accommodating a wide range of participant needs and starting points.

Flexibility in delivery was also important, ensuring that training was provided in a way that best suited the individuals participating. It was recognised that some methods will fit some people and some

places better than others. For example, online sessions were used where appropriate. This supported participation among individuals with:

- caring responsibilities;
- mental and physical health constraints; or
- geographic barriers, particularly in more rural and island communities.

At the same time, there is evidence that in-person interaction added value in building confidence and peer support, suggesting that a flexible, locally responsive approach to delivery is most effective.

Importantly, the flexible and supportive delivery approach also enabled engagement from participants with neurodivergent needs, anxiety, and low confidence, who may have found more traditional or formal business support difficult to access. Tailored support and one-to-one mentoring were particularly valuable in supporting these participants.

3. Successful engagement of participants new to enterprise support

The Pathways to Start programme has been effective in reaching individuals who are new to entrepreneurship and, in many cases, unfamiliar with the wider business support landscape. For a significant proportion of participants, this was their first experience of structured business support or engagement with public sector provision. While the delivery model suited the majority, many individual adaptations were made in response to individual circumstances.

This highlights the role of Pathways to Start as a **low-barrier entry point and the need for flexibility and adaptable support for individual needs**, helping to widen participation in enterprise support and engage individuals who may not otherwise take part.

4. Evidence of progression and onward activity

There is clear evidence that participants are progressing along the entrepreneurial pathway following programme completion. More than half of participants set up a business, and many plan to pursue further training or access additional support through referral pathways.

These findings reinforce the programme's role as a gateway intervention, supporting individuals to move from early-stage ideas into more structured or advanced forms of business support.

5. Demand for further practical skills development

Participants expressed a clear demand for additional practical support in areas such as financial management, digital skills, and marketing/promotion. This demand reflects participants moving closer to implementation and seeking more detailed, applied knowledge.

While elements of this support are available through mainstream provision, there is an opportunity to strengthen early-stage confidence and readiness through enhanced practical content within, or alongside, the programme. Assessment of participants' existing digital skills such as to provide initial training on any clear knowledge gaps could be embedded into the onboarding process of the Pathways to Start programme.

6. Administrative processes presented challenges for some participants

Participants reported some challenges in navigating the grant and expenses processes, such as issues understanding requirements, completing applications, and providing the appropriate evidence.

However, it is important to note that, for many participants, this represented **their first experience of engaging with public funding processes**. As such, some of the perceived complexity reflects the necessary legal and compliance requirements associated with public funding (including due diligence and verification procedures), rather than issues of design alone. The fact that this was a pilot programme with a short, limited duration also played a part in this. A longer timeframe of support with less immediate deadlines would likely limit the negative impact of the administrative burden.

This highlights the importance of providing clear, accessible guidance and appropriate support to help participants navigate these processes effectively.

7. Constraints associated with pilot delivery

As a pilot programme, Pathways to Start was delivered over a relatively compressed timeframe, which had some implications for outreach, participant progression within the delivery timeframe, participants feeling overwhelmed and long-term tracking of programme outcomes. As noted above, with more time, further flexibility could have been imbedded to avoid participants becoming overwhelmed with the Pathways to Start programme, and improve overall progression.

In addition, a formal set of output and outcome KPIs was not established beyond operational targets such as participant recruitment. While this is consistent with a pilot approach, it limits the ability to assess performance against defined benchmarks.

Key Conclusions

The evaluation finds that Pathways to Start has been a successful and well-received pilot programme, delivering meaningful outcomes for participants and demonstrating clear value within the enterprise support landscape.

Key strengths include:

- its ability to engage individuals who are new to enterprise support;
- a flexible and participant-centred delivery model;
- strong evidence of improvements in confidence, skills, and progression; and
- support the set up of new start-ups and develop entrepreneurial skill and culture in Scotland.

The Pathways to Start programme addresses an important need by providing an accessible, early-stage intervention that supports individuals to explore and develop business ideas. It complements, rather than duplicates, existing provision by acting as a stepping-stone into more advanced support.

There is a strong case for continuation, with refinements focused on longer delivery timeframes, strengthening targeting, enhancing progression pathways, and integrating greater flexibility and modularity to support different place contexts and participant needs.

Recommendations for Future Delivery

Building on the findings from this pilot, a set of 16 detailed recommendations has been developed to inform future delivery. These are grouped around the following key themes:

Strengthening targeting and programme design: Recommendations focus on improving how the programme engages priority groups, including underrepresented and younger participants, and ensuring sufficient mobilisation and delivery time to support effective implementation and participant progression.

Retaining and refining the delivery model: The blended model of workshops and one-to-one mentoring should be retained as a core strength, with greater flexibility to reflect local context, geography, and participant needs.

Improving participant support and accessibility: A number of recommendations focus on enhancing the accessibility of programme processes and support, including clearer guidance and structured assistance to help participants (many of whom are engaging with public funding for the first time) navigate grant and administrative requirements. It is also noted that longer timelines may aid in removing some of the pressure involved with meeting these requirements.

Enhancing skills development and participant readiness: Recommendations highlight opportunities to strengthen practical support in areas such as financial management and digital skills, particularly as participants progress towards business start-up, alongside improved signposting to existing provision.

Strengthening progression pathways: Future delivery should reinforce the Pathways to Start programme's role as a gateway into the wider business support ecosystem, including clearer referral routes and access to follow-on or more advanced support for participants ready to take next steps.

Improving monitoring, data, and evaluation: Recommendations include the introduction of proportionate performance monitoring and improved data collection to support robust assessment of outputs, outcomes, and longer-term impacts.

Pathways to Start Programme Evaluation

KEY ATTRACTION OF THE PROGRAMME

74%

said mentoring was a key attraction



61%

were attracted by the grant and expenses offer



QUALITY OF SUPPORT PROVIDED

100%

rated 1:1 mentoring as good or very good



96%

rated workshops as good or very good



91%

rated peer-to-peer support as good or very good



INCREASED KNOWLEDGE



Rated knowledge 7–10:

12%

at baseline



82%

at endline

Rated knowledge 1–3:

28%

at baseline



2%

at endline

(1 = "no knowledge"; 10 = "full knowledge");

Participants reported a strong shift towards higher self-rated knowledge by the end of the programme.

INCREASED CONFIDENCE



Rated confidence 7–10:

20%

at baseline



82%

at endline

Rated confidence 1–3:

37%

at baseline



2%

at endline

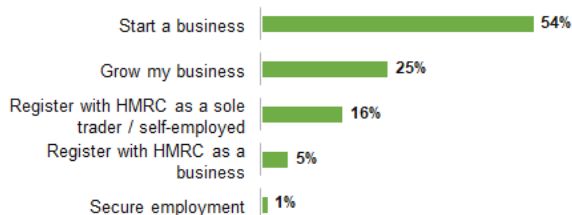
(1 = "no confidence"; 10 = "full confidence");

Confidence ratings also shifted strongly towards the higher end of the scale.

BUSINESS OUTCOMES

54%

of respondents had started a business as a result of participating in the programme



IMPORTANCE OF GRANT SUPPORT

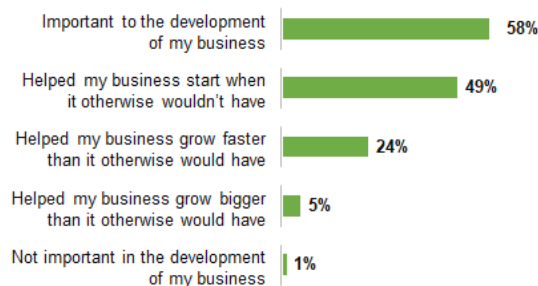
58%

said the grant was important to the development of their business



49%

said it helped their business start when it otherwise wouldn't have



Source: Evaluation Survey

1 Background and Introduction

Fortia Insight was appointed in December 2025 by Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) to undertake an evaluation of the Pathways to Start pilot programme. The evaluation aims to assess the programme's effectiveness in supporting underrepresented groups in entrepreneurship, examine associated outcomes, and assess emerging evidence of socio-economic benefits.

1.1 Pathways to Start Programme

The Scottish Government requested HIE to run the Pathways to Start programme as a **three month pilot**, to deliver actions from their Pathways report "*Pathways: A new approach for women in entrepreneurship*"¹ to increase the number of female and other underrepresented groups starting up businesses in Scotland. HIE is a non-departmental public body of the Scottish Government responsible for the economic and community development of the North and West of Scotland.

The Pathways to Start programme, which targeted pre-start entrepreneurs but also included some early-stage entrepreneurs, aimed to inspire participants to increase their ambition, confidence and capability to develop an entrepreneurial mindset and enter pathways for starting a business. It provided entrepreneurial training and mentoring tailored towards underrepresented groups / individuals and their needs². Due to the pilot nature of the Pathways to Start programme, explicit output and outcome targets were not established.

The Pathways to Start programme was carried out across two separate geographical lots within the HIE area. Lot 1 covered the Argyll and Bute council area (i.e. excluding Helensburgh and Lomond) and Lot 2 covered the Moray Council area. The Argyll pilot area was selected to include areas that included both Argyll and Bute council and HIE area, Helensburgh and Lomond are not in the HIE area so were excluded from the pilot. The HIE area also extends to Arran and Cumbrae but which are not part of Argyll and Bute Council so were not included in the pilot. The Pathways to Start programme's delivery model comprised:

- two outreach and training suppliers (and one subcontractor for Lot 2) delivering outreach, stakeholder engagement and training;
 - Skillfluence were the lead partner and training provider for Argyll and Bute.
 - UHI Moray were the lead delivery partner for Moray, with CJM Lumina subcontracted as training provider.
- HIE managing data and participant applications. Monthly progress reports were provided by delivery partners to HIE throughout delivery;
- one marketing supplier for both areas (Muckle Media) delivering marketing assets and a recruitment campaign; and
- one video supplier for both areas (JHP Visuals) to create promotional videos and case studies with participants, mentors and trainers.

Key timescales for delivery of the pilot programme included:

- Training delivery design, outreach and application: October – December 2025;
- Training delivery: 12 January – 15 March 2026; and
- Contract End: 31 March 2026.

¹ [Pathways: A new approach for women in entrepreneurship - gov.scot](#)

² This may include women, young people, people with neurodiversity or disability, carers, care experienced young people, refugees, ethnic minorities, ex-military veterans, ex-offenders, people on low incomes, people located in very rural areas and operating in or with minority languages such as Gaelic or Scots, etc

Selection criteria included postcode eligibility and identifying as part of an underrepresented group (self-declared), with two priority levels, higher for people who had not started a business and lower priority given to established businesses. Identification of member of underrepresented group was done through self-declaration to avoid collection of sensitive data. In the application information, underrepresented groups in business included lists of examples: women, young people, disabled or neurodivergent individuals, carers, care-experienced young people, refugees, ethnic minority groups, veterans, people with experience of the justice system, those on low incomes, individuals in very rural areas, and those operating in minority languages.

The Pathways to Start programme was delivered through a blended model combining online and in-person workshops, peer learning within cohorts, and structured one-to-one support through mentoring and expert help (a minimum of six hours available to each participant). Training content focused on building an entrepreneurial mindset and core meta-skills (such as resilience, problem-solving, creativity and communication), alongside practical early-stage business development inputs including idea generation and validation, an overview of the Scottish entrepreneurial ecosystem (including HIE support), introduction to technology and AI tools, early financial and business planning, and branding, pitching and presentation skills.

A total of 158 applications were received, with 123 participants recruited following reprofiling of the budget. A total of 111 participants completed the programme, with 12 participants withdrawing. In terms of grants, 102 grants were distributed, amounting to £99,892 for an average of £979, ranging from £414 to £1,000.

Participants completed tailored Action and Implementation Plans with support from their mentors to set out clear plans and support their next steps. Progression beyond the Pathways to Start programme was supported through referrals to mainstream business support following completion. In addition, financial support included a grant of up to £1,000 for business idea or skills development (for participants who met minimum completion requirements of 4 workshops and 3 hours mentoring) and an access and expenses grant of up to £500, helping to reduce barriers to participation. **Appendix 1** provides further detail on programme information.

1.2 Evaluation Scope

The objectives of this evaluation are to:

1. Present commentary on the programme objectives, alignment with national policy and suitability of the programme's management and delivery model.
2. Review the effectiveness and efficiency of programme delivery, with a focus on activities, outputs and wider outcomes generated. This is to include:
 - a. Analysis of the monthly reports generated by the training suppliers and data held by HIE to present an overview of the activities and outputs achieved against the targets set.
 - b. Review of the marketing campaign messaging and audience reach/engagement statistics to ascertain the effectiveness of delivery.
 - c. Undertaking a survey of participants at the start and end of the Pathways to Start programme, to identify the progress achieved, the wider skills, confidence and knowledge attained, the lessons learned from participation and the challenges/barriers faced with participation and what additional support may have added value to their entrepreneurship journey.
 - d. Provision of indicative findings of any wider socio-economic benefits (linked to the outcomes and impacts outlined by the Scottish Government and HIE) starting to accrue through participation in the Pathways to Start programme.
3. Provide high-level recommendations for future programmes which could inform support to underrepresented groups, building on lessons learned from programme delivery and other existing/planned programmes, and in doing so:
 - a. Consider the relevance of the current delivery model and approaches and types of intervention for potential future support.

- b. Consider how best to support underrepresented groups overcoming barriers to entrepreneurship, place-based delivery and achieving effective messaging to engage participation.
4. Provide a recommendation on how scalable businesses can be identified and tracked, to allow them to be supported through their journey.

The evaluation specification also highlighted the need to reflect the Pathways to Start programme's focus on underrepresented groups and to reflect the geographic context of the two delivery areas throughout the findings.

1.3 Evaluation Approach

The evaluation adopted a mixed-method strategy, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods to assess the Pathways to Start programme's delivery and outcomes / impact to date, whilst also capturing feedback from beneficiaries and stakeholders on programme processes. Key elements of the evaluation approach are detailed below.

1.3.1 Theory of Change Development

A Theory of Change (ToC) provides a structured explanation of how and why a programme is expected to achieve its intended outcomes. It clarifies the problem being addressed, maps the causal pathway from inputs and activities through to outputs and longer-term outcomes, and makes explicit the underlying assumptions that must hold for change to occur.

Figure 1.1 (overleaf) presents a diagrammatic representation of the Pathways to Start programme ToC, which was informed by scoping interviews and desk-based research. It has been designed to reflect the unique objectives, activities, and expected outcomes and impacts of the Pathways to Start programme, while also aligning with HIE's strategic goals.

Further detail, including key programme assumptions required to achieve the intended outcomes and impacts, as well as delivery risks that may limit their achievement, is provided in **Appendix 2**.

1.3.2 Desk Based Research

Desk research included review of: (i) programme documentation and datasets provided by HIE; and (ii) external evidence relevant to the programme and the pathways to impact.

Existing monitoring data from HIE and delivery partners has been analysed to assess performance against key performance metrics, such as the number of participants supported, the type of services accessed, and immediate programme outputs and tracked entrepreneurial outcomes. This is based on monitoring data available as of 31 March 2026.

1.3.3 Stakeholder interviews

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out online with stakeholders, including: programme beneficiaries; key stakeholders (e.g. Scottish Government, Woman Enterprise Scotland, Scotland's Rural College, Academy of Enterprise Education, WEvolution); delivery partners (i.e., HIE's pilot management team, outreach and management training suppliers, marketing supplier, and video supplier); and, local authority representatives. In total, 20 out of 25 target interviews were conducted - refer to Table 1.1. Fewer beneficiary interviews were completed than planned due to non-response, limited availability and time constraints amongst participants.

Figure 1.1: HIE Pathways to Start programme ToC

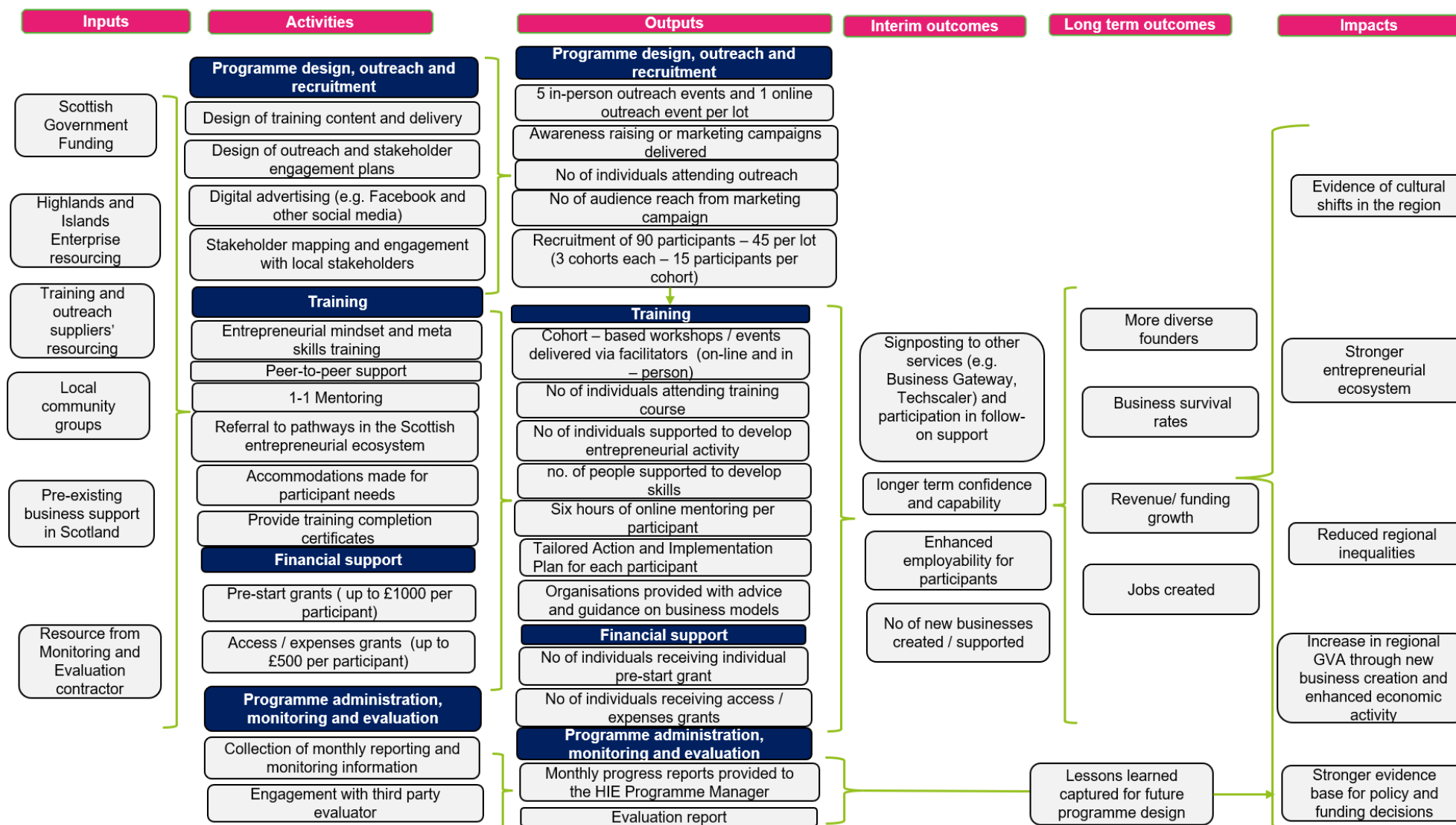


Table 1.1: Stakeholder Engagement

	Beneficiary	Delivery	Wider	Total
Target	12	6	7	25
Complete	8	8	4	20
%	67%	133%	57%	80%
Focus of interviews	Participants / beneficiaries reflected on how they accessed the Pathways to Start programme, their experience of training, mentoring and peer support, and the accessibility of delivery. They discussed perceived changes in confidence, skills and readiness, progress toward starting or developing a business, use of grants and referrals, and areas for improvement.	Delivery partners and HIE focused on delivery roles and approaches, including outreach and recruitment, the effectiveness of the blended training and mentoring model, and how accessibility and inclusion were addressed. Discussion also covered participant engagement, early outcomes, use of grants to reduce barriers, and opportunities to strengthen management and referral pathways.	Wider stakeholders discussed the Pathways to Start programme's strategic rationale and continuing relevance, its alignment with HIE and Scottish Government priorities, and its role in filling gaps in pre-start support for underrepresented groups. They also reflected on early signs of impact, system-level benefits, key risks, and expectations around value for money and longer-term impact.	

Note: interview topic guides were designed for the three groups of stakeholders, as such, all stakeholders within a category were asked the same questions, but stakeholders in different categories were asked different questions.

1.3.4 Surveys

Two tailored online surveys were deployed via Smart Survey to beneficiaries at the start of programme support (i.e., baseline) and following completion (end of programme). The surveys aimed to capture specific data points, including:

- satisfaction with the support received;
- output, outcome, and impact metrics (e.g., progress achieved, broader skills, confidence, and knowledge attained);
- lessons learned from participation;
- barriers and challenges; and
- the counterfactual position (i.e., what would have happened in the absence of the intervention).

Where possible, baseline responses were linked to follow-up survey responses to enable tracking of outcomes at the individual level. Participants who had not completed the baseline at the outset were able to complete it retrospectively at the point of the follow-up survey.

Table 1.2 details the responses received for each survey.

Table 1.2: Survey Responses

	Argyll & Bute	Moray	Location not provided	Total
Total Participants	62	49	-	111
Baseline	30 (48%)	30 (61%)	-	60 (54%)
Post-programme	45 (73%)	32 (65%)	2	79 (71%)

	Argyll & Bute	Moray	Location not provided	Total
Total responses	75	62	2	139
Unique responses (i.e. across both surveys)	53 (85%)	41 (84%)	2	96 (86%)

Table 1.3 provides a breakdown of the unique responses across both surveys to identify:

- the respondents for which baseline and endline surveys could be linked;
- respondents who completed a baseline survey but could not be matched to an endline survey; or
- respondents who completed an endline survey, and:
 - stated they completed a baseline survey, but this could not be matched; or
 - did not complete a baseline survey.

Table 1.3: Unique Survey Responses by Type

	Argyll & Bute	Moray	Location not provided	Total
Responses linked (i.e. respondent completed both baseline and endline surveys)	22	21	-	43
Baseline survey completed, but no corresponding endline survey	8	9	0	17
Endline survey completed, but no corresponding baseline survey	14	5	0	19
Endline survey only completed	9	6	2	17
Total	53	41	2	96

In relation to this evaluation, this means that **complete baseline and endline data is available for 60 unique respondents** (i.e. to measure the progress between the start and end of the Pathways to Start programme). However, **some responses to individual survey questions may have higher response rates (potentially up to 96 respondents)** in cases where both a baseline and endline data point is not required (e.g. in relation to demographic data).

1.3.5 Case studies

Five case studies have been developed based on interviews with programme participants to complement the quantitative analysis by providing in-depth insight into individual participant journeys. Specifically, they aim to illustrate how participants engaged with the Pathways to Start programme, the types of support accessed, the key barriers and challenges encountered, and the outcomes achieved. They also help to explore how and why outcomes occurred, highlight variation in experiences across different participant groups, and bring the Pathways to Start programme's impacts to life through practical, real-world examples. The case studies focused on specific themes such as women in rural entrepreneurship; overcoming confidence barriers; and transition from idea to business. This is displayed in Table 1.4 overleaf.

Table 1.4: Summary of case studies

Case study	Sector	Geography	Underrepresented group	Case study theme			
				Women in rural entrepreneurship	Overcoming confidence barriers	Transition from idea to business	Transitions into self-employment & entrepreneurship
1	Childcare services	Argyll & Bute (rural)	Woman; rural resident; carer	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Wellbeing services	Argyll & Bute	Woman; carer; out of labour market		✓		✓
3	Animal services	Moray	First-time founder		✓	✓	✓
4	Craft / manufacturing	Moray	Long-term health condition		✓	✓	✓
5	Social enterprise	Argyll & Bute (Island community)	Disabled; remote location		✓		

1.3.6 Evaluation Questions, Key Metrics and Data Sources

Table 1.5, overleaf, provides a detailed overview of the proposed evaluation questions (EQs), relevant sub-questions, and the key metrics and data sources that will be used to answer each question.

The EQs are structured to assess both process and impact related areas. The process evaluation questions (PEQs) focus on the effectiveness of the programme's design and delivery model in reaching and supporting underrepresented groups. The impact evaluation questions (IEQs) assess entrepreneurial outcomes as well as emerging evidence of wider socio-economic benefits. This approach ensures alignment with the programme's logic model and evaluation objectives.

1.4 Methodological limitations

The findings identified in this report are subject to the following limitations:

- Due to the pilot nature of the programme (9 months) and the timing of the evaluation, insufficient time passed to allow the outcomes and impacts of the programme to be realised. As such, the outcomes and impacts identified in this evaluation should be treated as a snapshot of emerging evidence and not an assessment of the full potential of the programme;
- The number of beneficiary interviews completed was slightly below the planned target (8 out of 12). While this places some limits on the representativeness of the qualitative findings, these are mitigated by the high survey response rate;
- Survey responses rates identified that 72% of beneficiaries responded to the survey. This is a strong sample, however, it is possible that non-respondents would have different views to those represented in this report;
- Sample size has limited the extent to which the evaluation can explore variations in the views / experience of particular groups / categories of participants, particularly equalities groupings;
- The second survey was initially released with a minor fault. As a result, this impacted three questions (Q25, Q27 and Q28 – refer to Appendix 4) and there were 40 responses before it was identified/fixed, as such the findings for those specific questions may be limited; and
- Performance of the programme has been assessed based on monitoring data provided by the delivery partners. It has not been possible to verify the accuracy of the data.

As a result of the points above, the findings of this evaluation should be treated as a snapshot of the experience and impact of participating in the pilot programme. However, over time the full outcomes and impacts of the programme will be realised, hence the findings of this report may under- or over-estimate the true results of the Pathways to Start programme.

1.5 Report Structure

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2: Programme Relevance;
- Chapter 3: Programme Performance;
- Chapter 4: Programmes Delivery;
- Chapter 5: Programme Outcomes;
- Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations;
- Appendix 1: Programme information;
- Appendix 2: TOC detail;
- Appendix 3: Case Studies; and
- Appendix 4: Surveys.

Table 1.5: Evaluation Questions, Key Metrics, and Data Sources

Evaluation Question	Sub question	Key Metrics	Data Sources
Process Evaluation Questions			
PEQ1: Was the Pathways to Start programme designed appropriately?	<p>How well-aligned is the Pathways to Start programme's design with the strategic objectives of HIE and wider national policy?</p> <p>What specific challenges and barriers are faced by underrepresented groups starting up businesses and has the Pathways to Start programme addressed these barriers?</p> <p>What were the primary motivations for participants to engage with the Pathways to Start programme?</p>	Alignment with national and regional policy agendas.	Stakeholder interviews (HIE staff, Scottish Government) Existing policy & strategy documents.
PEQ2: How effective was programme outreach and recruitment?	<p>How did participants hear about the Pathways to Start programme?</p> <p>How effective were the outreach strategies and recruitment mechanisms?</p> <p>Which channels produced the highest audience reach?</p> <p>How effective and in what ways was application support provided?</p> <p>To what extent did external stakeholders act as effective referrers?</p> <p>What barriers affected outreach effectiveness and how well were mitigations implemented?</p> <p>Which demographics is the Pilot not fully reaching?</p>	<p>No of audience reached during outreach</p> <p>No of outreach / information events</p> <p>No of community organisations / stakeholders involved in engagement and recruitment</p> <p>No of participants recruited</p> <p>Participant demographics against benchmarked national datasets</p>	<p>Monitoring data (programme tracker, monthly reports)</p> <p>Stakeholder interviews (delivery partners, community organisations)</p> <p>Beneficiary Survey</p>
PEQ3: How effective was the Pathways to Start programme's delivery model and training content?	<p>How effective was the training material and structure of delivery?</p> <p>To what extent was content adapted to meet participant needs?</p> <p>Which delivery features are transferable to other areas and to future national roll-out?</p>	<p>Satisfaction with training content and relevance</p> <p>Attendance rates %</p>	<p>Monitoring data (monthly reports)</p> <p>Beneficiary Survey</p> <p>Interviews (programme participants)</p>

Evaluation Question	Sub question	Key Metrics	Data Sources
PEQ5: Was the Pathways to Start programme managed appropriately?	How efficiently were grants and expenses processed, and did they reduce practical barriers? Were monitoring arrangements and data collection appropriate and effective?	% of budget for grants & expenses allocated Programme delivered on schedule	Monitoring data Interviews (delivery partners, programme participants) Beneficiary Survey
Impact Evaluation Questions			
IEQ 1: To what extent has the Pathways to Start programme improved access to business support for underrepresented groups?	What barrier-reduction supports were most effective?	No of participants completing programme No of Action & Implementation plans developed	Monitoring data Beneficiary Survey Interviews (programme participants, delivery partners, community orgs)
IEQ 2: To what extent have entrepreneurial outcomes improved for programme beneficiaries?	How do outcomes compare between different delivery models (Argyll vs. Moray)?	No participating in follow on support No of new businesses created / supported % change in confidence and capability self-ratings	Monitoring data Beneficiary Survey Interviews (programme participants, delivery partners, community orgs)
IEQ3: To what extent have wider socio-economic benefits occurred in the region because of the Pathways to Start programme?		No of new jobs created % of revenue / funding growth	Interviews (delivery partners, community orgs) Beneficiary Survey



Final celebration event in Oban for Argyll cohorts. Photo credit: LJF Photography.



Pathways to Start participants speak about their experience starting a business with course trainer Jamie McCallum from Skillfluence (Left to right: Deborah Wright, Shelley Richmond, Iain Waug, Jamie McCallum). Photo credit: LJF Photography.

2 Programme Relevance

This chapter presents a summary of programme relevance (i.e. the rationale for the Pathways to Start programme, how it fits with the strategic and economic landscape and how it complements / duplicates existing provision). This is informed by desk-based research and stakeholder interviews.

2.1 Rationale for the programme

The rationale for the Pathways to Start programme was grounded in both national policy and a perceived local gap in pre-start enterprise support for underrepresented groups.

The Pathways to Start programme was developed in response to the Scottish Government's Pathways agenda, which highlighted persistent barriers to entrepreneurship for women and other underrepresented groups and emphasised the need for more inclusive and flexible forms of support. The Highlands and Islands (H&I) pilot was also informed by learning from the South of Scotland Enterprise Pathways Pilot Programme³, while being tailored to the specific needs and delivery context of the HIE area rather than directly replicating that model. Drawing on this prior evidence, it was anticipated that many potential Pathways participants would lack the confidence, clarity, or practical readiness required to engage fully with conventional start-up provision. The Pathways to Start programme therefore focused on supporting individuals at an earlier stage, providing help with idea formation and early-stage planning, as well as exploring how enterprise activity could be shaped around wider personal circumstances. In this way, Pathways to Start was intended to offer a low-pressure entry point into the enterprise support landscape, enabling participants to build confidence and readiness before progressing into mainstream provision.

This rationale is considered particularly relevant in the Highlands and Islands context, where structural barriers such as rurality, limited transport, childcare availability, digital access, health conditions, and uncertainty around benefits can further constrain access to entrepreneurship, particularly for underrepresented groups.

The Pathways to Start programme design reflected these contextual factors, including the need for flexible and accessible delivery approaches tailored to varying local circumstances and individual needs. Both Argyll and Bute and Moray cover large geographic areas and were, therefore, anticipated to benefit from a hybrid delivery option to enhance accessibility. Argyll and Bute in particular were anticipated to benefit from a hybrid approach due to rural and island communities with long travel distances and limited public transport options. A hybrid option was, therefore, required for contractors to bid but contractors could propose different models mixing in-person, hybrid and online delivery.

The successful bidders delivered the models below:

- Skillfluence won the bid for Argyll and Bute with an online delivery model; and
- UHI Moray with CJM Lumina won the bid for Moray with an in-person delivery model with options for hybrid attendance if needed.

Overall, evidence indicates that the Pathways to Start programme rationale was sound and was appropriate to place-based contexts and individual needs. Pathways to Start aligned with a clear national policy objective (this is further explored in section 2.2), addressed a gap in early-stage support, and reflected the particular barriers faced by underrepresented groups in the H&I. Its relevance was further reinforced by the wider strategic and economic context and by the case for providing a more accessible entry point into entrepreneurship for groups less likely to engage with mainstream provision.

2.2 Strategic Fit

As highlighted in Table 2.1, the Pathways to Start programme demonstrates strong alignment with Scottish national and regional policy priorities relating to inclusive economic growth, entrepreneurship,

³ <https://www.southofscotlandenterprise.com/media/mapj0gko/sose-pathways-evaluation-final-report.pdf>

and widening participation. It directly supports strategic objectives aimed at increasing business creation and improving access to enterprise support for underrepresented groups.

Table 2.1: Programme Strategic Alignment

Policy / Strategy	Description	Alignment
Pathways Report (Scottish Government)	Focuses on increasing participation of women and underrepresented groups in entrepreneurship	Pathways to Start directly delivers on the objectives of the Pathways report by targeting underrepresented groups and supporting early-stage entrepreneurial development
Scottish Government's National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET)	Aims to create a more productive, inclusive, and entrepreneurial economy in Scotland	The Pathways to Start programme contributes to inclusive growth by enabling individuals from diverse backgrounds to participate in entrepreneurship
Scotland's Economic Action Plan / Inclusive Growth Agenda	Emphasises reducing inequalities and improving economic participation	The Pathways to Start programme aligns with inclusive growth objectives by reducing barriers to entrepreneurship and improving access to support
Highlands and Islands Enterprise Strategy 2023 - 2028	Focuses on sustainable economic growth and supporting business development in the Highlands and Islands	Pathways to Start supports regional priorities by encouraging business creation and strengthening local economic activity and supporting fair and inclusive growth.
UK Shared Prosperity Fund	The UK Government's main local growth fund, supporting communities, businesses, and skills to improve life chances and promote inclusive economic participation. A core focus is supporting people furthest from the labour market and strengthening local economies through inclusive growth.	Closely aligns by supporting underrepresented groups at the pre-start stage, addressing participation barriers and strengthening the early-stage pipeline into enterprise.
Levelling up White Paper	The UK Government's long-term strategy to reduce regional disparities in productivity, opportunity and wellbeing, with a focus on place-based inequalities.	Aligns through delivery in rural and island communities, improving access to early-stage entrepreneurial support and reducing geographic barriers.
Department for Business and Trade SME and Enterprise Policy Agenda	UK Government policy focused on supporting SMEs through improved access to support, skills development, and conditions that encourage business start-up and growth.	The Pathways to Start programme strengthens the early-stage entrepreneurial pipeline by preparing individuals for progression into mainstream business support and SME development services.
Economic Growth Mission (introduced 2024)	The UK Government's central mission is to drive sustained economic	Contributes by developing entrepreneurial skills and participation, supporting the pipeline of new businesses and inclusive

Policy / Strategy	Description	Alignment
	growth, increase productivity and raise living standards across all regions through investment, innovation and partnership with business. It emphasises partnership with business and local actors, alongside reforms to remove barriers to growth and ensure that economic gains are shared more widely.	economic growth in underserved communities.

Overall, the Pathways to Start programme demonstrates strong strategic alignment by supporting national and regional objectives related to entrepreneurship, inclusive growth, and economic participation, reinforcing its relevance within the current policy landscape.

2.3 Economic Context

The Pathways to Start programme was delivered in the Argyll and Bute Council area (excluding Helensburgh and Lomond) and the Moray Council area. Both are rural areas, but they differ somewhat in their demographic and economic profiles. Moray is a single mainland geography, whereas Argyll and Bute has a much more dispersed settlement pattern, with a lower population density and communities spread across a mainland area and a number of inhabited islands. These place-based differences have implications for access to services, transport, and the delivery of enterprise support. Moray had a resident population of 95,010 in mid-2024, while Argyll and Bute had 87,690 residents. In both areas, the population structure is older than Scottish average:

- in Moray, the 45 to 64 age group was the largest in 2024 and the 16 to 24 age group the smallest. Wider local demographic reporting also points to a relatively old age structure, with around 23% of the population aged 65 and over⁴, compared to 20.5% across Scotland⁵. This indicates a relatively older population structure and a smaller pipeline of younger entrants to the labour market.
- in Argyll and Bute, demographic ageing is even more pronounced. Around 14% of the population was aged 0 to 15, compared to around 16.2% nationally, while 28% were aged 65 and over⁶ - substantially higher than the Scottish average of 20.5%. This underlines both an ageing population and a relatively smaller working-age base compared to the national picture.

Labour market indicators show that both areas had relatively modest employment performance in the latest local labour market release:

- in the year ending December 2023, Moray's employment rate was 72% for those aged 16 to 64, compared with 68% in Argyll and Bute, and 74% across Scotland.
- unemployment remained comparatively low in both places, although the most recent estimates suggest slightly lower unemployment in Moray than in Argyll and Bute. Moray recorded approximately 1,400 unemployed people, with a rate of 2.7%, while Argyll and Bute recorded around 1,100 and a rate of 2.9%, both rates being below the Scottish average of 3.8%.

⁴ <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/statistics-and-data/council-area-profiles/moray/>

⁵ [Mid-2024 population estimates - National Records of Scotland \(NRS\)](#)

⁶ <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/statistics-and-data/council-area-profiles/argyll-and-bute/>

- Argyll and Bute reported a relatively high economic inactivity rate, at 29.5% of the 16 to 64 population in the year ending December 2023⁷.

Both local economies are characterised by a significant small-business base:

- in Moray, NOMIS UK Business Counts 2025 records⁹ 3,095 enterprises, of which 2,705 (87.4%) were micro-businesses employing fewer than 10 people, broadly in line with the Scottish average of 87.6%.
- in Argyll and Bute, NOMIS UK Business Counts 2025¹⁰ records 3,870 enterprises, of which 3,465 (89.5%) were micro-businesses employing fewer than 10 people, above the Scottish average of 87.6%¹¹.

Sectoral evidence also points to a business base shaped by locally important industries. In Moray, local economic evidence highlights food and drink, tourism, construction, manufacturing, renewables and aviation as key business sectors, with food and drink manufacturing accounting for 36% of Moray's economy compared with 4.4% across Scotland¹². In Argyll and Bute, local economic strategy identifies tourism, food and drink, defence industries and clean energy as key sectors¹³, while VisitScotland data shows that 600 tourism businesses accounted for 15.5% of all businesses in 2025, underlining the significance of tourism within the area's business base¹⁴.

These wider socio-economic conditions are also relevant to underrepresented groups. In March 2026, the claimant count was 1,590 in Moray (2.8% of the working-age population) and 1,390 in Argyll and Bute (2.7%), compared with 3.1% across Scotland. Younger people in Moray in particular showed higher claimant rates, with 5.2% of 18 to 24 year olds claiming out-of-work benefits, compared with 4.5% across Scotland¹⁵. Lower earnings, higher rates of part-time work, and pockets of deprivation may make flexible self-employment or business start-up a more attractive option for some individuals, while also increasing the need for tailored support.

Sectoral composition also reflects the rural and coastal character of both areas. In Argyll and Bute, there is an above-average dependence on agriculture, forestry and fishing and tourism-related activities, with relatively high levels of self-employment¹⁶. In the year ending December 2025, 9.4% of working-age residents in Argyll and Bute were self-employed, compared with 7.1% in Moray and 7.8% across Scotland¹⁷. In Moray, there are strengths in food and drink, tourism, construction, manufacturing, and aviation/defence-linked activity¹⁸.

Business demography data also points to ongoing business churn in both areas. ONS Business Demography 2023 data shows that there were 290 business births in Moray and 270 business births in Argyll and Bute in 2023¹⁹. In terms of business sustainability, the most recent published three-year survival data show that 63.5% of businesses started in Moray in 2019 were still operating in 2022, compared with 60.4% in Argyll and Bute higher than the Scottish average of 57.4%²⁰.

Wider socio-economic indicators also highlight differences in local context. In Argyll and Bute, 13 of 125 data zones were in Scotland's 20% most deprived areas in SIMD 2020, equivalent to around 10.4% of local data zones, below the Scottish benchmark of 20%²¹. In Moray, 4 of 126 data zones were in the 20% most deprived areas, equivalent to around 3%²². Working patterns also differ from the

⁷ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/labourmarketlocal/S12000020/>

⁸ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/labourmarketlocal/S12000035/>

⁹ <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/lad/1778385225/report.aspx#tabidbr>

¹⁰ <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/lad/1778385235/report.aspx>

¹¹ <http://www.moray.gov.uk/downloads/file155616.pdf>

¹² http://www.moray.gov.uk/moray_standard/page_102693.html

¹³ <https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/moderngov/documents/s223140/>

¹⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/policies/cities-regions/regional-growth-deals/>

¹⁵ <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/lad/1778385235/report.aspx>

¹⁶ <https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/media/v13gmf2e/rsa-growth-deal-report-moray.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/lad/1778385225/report.aspx>

¹⁸ https://mymoray.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Moray_Economic_Strategy_final.pdf

¹⁹ www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/business/activitysizeandlocation/datasets/businessdemographyreferencetable

²⁰ https://www.improvementservice.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0033/47877/SLAED-Indicators-Report-2022-23.pdf

²¹ <https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/my-community/quick-facts-and-figures-about-argyll-and-bute>

²² <http://yourmoray.org.uk/downloads/file151588.pdf>

national profile: in Moray, 61.1% of employee jobs were full-time and 38.9% part-time, while in Argyll and Bute the split was 65.7% full-time and 34.3% part-time, compared with 67.1% full-time and 32.9% part-time across Scotland. Earnings were below the Scottish average in both areas. In 2025, median gross weekly pay for full-time resident workers was £659 in Moray and £726 in Argyll and Bute, compared with £776 across Scotland²³.

Overall, both areas display characteristics that support the case for tailored pre-start support: ageing populations, dispersed settlements, a high prevalence of small and micro-businesses, and local economies shaped by sectors such as tourism, food and drink, agriculture, construction and local services. Evidence from Scotland^{24,25} shows that self-employment and part-time working are more common in rural areas, and that small businesses are relatively more important as employers, while wider evidence also highlights how ageing populations, lower critical mass and transport or access barriers can constrain participation in employment and enterprise. These features create opportunities for flexible and small-scale enterprise activity but also help explain why additional support may be needed for people from underrepresented groups who may face barriers to entering self-employment or starting a business.

2.4 Fit with existing business support provision

Table 2.2 profiles existing business support provision within the HIE region and considers how the Pathways to Start programme complements or differs from these interventions. It provides an indicative overview of the main programmes relevant to the Pathways to Start target group and delivery areas, including their geographical focus.

²³ <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/lad/1778385225/report.aspx>

²⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/rural-planning-policy-2050-research-inform-preparation-npf4/pages/5/>

²⁵ <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/research-and-analysis/2022/07/rural-enterprise-support-evaluation-report2/documents/integrated-place-based-business-support-pilot-evaluation/integrated-place-based-business-support-pilot-evaluation/govscot%3Adocument/integrated-place-based-business-support-pilot-evaluation.pdf>

Table 2.2: Business Growth Programmes in the HIE Region and their geographical focus

Programme	Focus	Type of organisation	Geographical focus	Description	Differentiation from Pathways to Start
Business Gateway	Mainstream enterprise support	Public sector – Scottish Government-funded national business support service	Scotland-wide, including Moray and Argyll and Bute	Provides advice, training, and funding support for individuals starting or growing a business across Scotland	Primarily targets individuals already ready to start or grow a business, whereas Pathways to Start focuses on pre-start individuals and underrepresented groups requiring confidence-building and early-stage support
InspirAlba	Entrepreneurial support and mentoring	Social enterprise	Argyll and Bute / Highlands and Islands-focused	Offers mentoring, networking, and business development support for entrepreneurs in the Highlands and Islands	Delivers targeted, funded programmes as part of the Argyll employability partnership, typically focused on specific groups. This contrasts with Pathways to Start's broader remit, which is open to a wider range of underrepresented groups. InspirAlba's provision is therefore more niche in scope and limited in capacity to meet wider demand.
Firstport	Social enterprise development	Third sector	Scotland-wide	Supports the creation and growth of social enterprises through funding and advisory services	Focuses specifically on social enterprises, whereas Pathways to Start is broader and targets a wider range of underrepresented individuals regardless of business model
Just Enterprise	Third sector support	Third sector	Scotland-wide	Provides business support and development services to third sector organisations and social enterprises	Targets established or forming third sector organisations, whereas Pathways to Start focuses on individuals at the idea or pre-start stage

Programme	Focus	Type of organisation	Geographical focus	Description	Differentiation from Pathways to Start
Local Authority / Employability Services	Employment and skills support	Public sector	Locally delivered within Moray and Argyll and Bute	Provides employability support, training, and pathways into work	Focuses on employment outcomes rather than entrepreneurship, with Pathways to Start bridging the gap between employability support and enterprise support
Impact Hub Inverness	Place-based entrepreneurship, skills and enterprise support	Third sector / social enterprise	Inverness and wider Highland area; not delivered directly in Moray or Argyll and Bute	Provides entrepreneurship, business support, mentoring, networking, skills or talent development support across different parts of the Highlands and Islands, including island-focused provision	These programmes form part of the wider regional support landscape but differ from Pathways to Start in terms of geography, target cohort, thematic focus or stage of support. Pathways to Start was specifically designed as a targeted pre-start intervention for underrepresented groups in Moray and Argyll and Bute.
GrowBiz	Enterprise support (rural focus) Entrepreneurship and talent development	Third sector / social enterprise	Rural Scotland, including parts of Argyll and Bute and other rural areas	Provides enterprise support to individuals starting and growing businesses in rural communities, including mentoring, peer support and business development advice	Forms part of the wider regional support landscape but differs from Pathways to Start in terms of stage of support, target cohort and delivery model. GrowBiz supports individuals across a range of stages, including those already operating or developing businesses, whereas Pathways to Start was designed as an early-stage, pre-start intervention focused on engaging underrepresented individuals not yet participating in mainstream enterprise support.
TalEntEd Islands Programme	Entrepreneurship, skills and talent development	Third sector / programme-based initiative	Island communities within the Highlands and Islands, including parts of	Provides tailored skills, entrepreneurship and leadership development for individuals in island communities, including	Forms part of the wider regional support landscape for island communities but differs from Pathways to Start in terms of geography, thematic focus and stage of support. TalEntEd Islands focuses on

Programme	Focus	Type of organisation	Geographical focus	Description	Differentiation from Pathways to Start
			Argyll and Bute (not Moray mainland)	employability and enterprise-related support	broader talent and skills development within island contexts, whereas Pathways to Start was designed as a targeted pre-start enterprise intervention addressing barriers to business entry among underrepresented groups across both mainland and island areas in Moray and Argyll and Bute.

Overall, the analysis indicates that Pathways to Start largely complements existing provision by addressing a clear gap at the pre-start stage, particularly for underrepresented groups who may not engage with mainstream enterprise support. However, stakeholder feedback suggests that there is some potential for overlap with elements of existing local provision, underlining the importance of local alignment, referral pathways and clear positioning in any future delivery model. While most interviewees agreed that tailored pre-start support was needed, some noted risks of duplication with existing local provision and emphasised the importance of aligning future support with services already available locally.

2.5 Summary

Our analysis highlights the following key conclusions:

- **Clear and justified rationale:** *Pathways to Start* addresses a recognised gap in pre-start enterprise support for underrepresented groups who are not yet ready to benefit from mainstream provision, aligning closely with Scottish Government *Pathways* policy to widen participation in entrepreneurship and reflects both common participation barriers (e.g. confidence, caring responsibilities) and additional place-based constraints relevant to rural HIE areas, including geographic isolation, digital access, and service reach.
- **Strong strategic fit and complementarity:** The Pathways to Start programme is well aligned with national and regional priorities on inclusive growth, entrepreneurship and widening participation, and is positioned as a feeder into mainstream support (e.g. Business Gateway), complementing rather than duplicating existing provision.
- **Relevance to local geographic, demographic and economic context:** The focus on flexible, pre-start support is well aligned with the geographic, demographic and economic characteristics of Argyll and Bute and Moray, including dispersed rural economies and relatively high levels of self-employment and micro-business activity. This includes evidence of lower employment rates and higher economic inactivity than the Scottish average in Argyll and Bute, alongside slightly lower employment levels in Moray. The delivery approach also reflects place-based differences, for example, a stronger reliance on online delivery in Argyll and Bute given its more dispersed geography and island communities.



Cohort 3 of Pathways to Start in Moray graduation photo. Photo credit: Leigh Meile/UHI Moray

3 Programme Performance

This chapter presents a summary of programme performance (i.e. programme activities delivered, expenditure and outputs achieved). As noted above, due to the pilot nature of the Pathways to Start programme, explicit output and outcome targets were not established. This is informed by a review of programme monitoring data (dated 31 March 2026) including outreach and engagement data, programme activities, programme expenditure and outputs delivered. Core demographic data on participants was not available through programme monitoring data and this has been provided via the evaluation survey.

3.1 Programme Outreach & Engagement

A structured programme of outreach and engagement activity was delivered to promote Pathways to Start across Argyll & Bute and Moray. The approach combined place-based in-person drop in sessions and sharing in online social media communities relevant to reach rural communities and wider marketing campaign for Argyll and Moray to reach a diverse target demographic. Activity focused on early-stage engagement, using trusted local venues and networks to maximise reach and inclusivity.

3.1.1 Argyll

- A total of seven outreach and engagements events were held over three days (25th-27th November 2025) which achieved 93 signups and an overall attendance of 53 individuals.
 - Five of the events were in-person, delivered across community and island locations (Oban, Rothesay, Dunoon, Mull and Campbeltown), selected deliberately to ensure broad geographical coverage and to maximise engagement across Argyll & Bute. These sessions took place in familiar, trusted spaces within local communities, helping to create a welcoming and accessible introduction to entrepreneurial thinking. They enabled individuals to understand that Pathways to Start was designed specifically for people at early stages, including those who may feel unsure, overwhelmed, or disconnected from traditional business support.
 - Two online events also took place, one of which was a women-only session. This offered a flexible route for individuals unable to travel due to caring commitments, mobility limitations, health conditions, or geographical constraints.
- Promotion of the Pathways to Start programme extended beyond formal events, supported through a wide range of community-based channels. Programme information was shared via development trusts, third sector organisations, employability teams, libraries, island Facebook groups, WhatsApp networks and informal community messaging.
 - In total, 15 local stakeholders actively promoted the programme to their own audiences using media packs provided. Their support played a key role in amplifying outreach and driving attendance. The estimated individual audience reach as a result of each stakeholders' activity was varied, ranging from 100 to 23,000 (23,000 refers to Facebook group members of an organisation). Digital advertisements consisted of Facebook events and advertisements (six advertisements and five events respectively). Overall, events and advertisements received 34,252 impressions²⁶, with advertisements receiving an average of 4,732 impressions and events receiving an average of 1,172 impressions.
 - Social media outreach was carried out Facebook groups. Outreach spanned 30 Facebook groups, with combined members of 300,084. It is important to note that due to many of these

²⁶ An impression refers to the number of times an advert or event listing was displayed on a user's screen.

groups being based in local areas, it is possible that there may be individuals who are members of multiple groups.

3.1.2 Moray

- **In-person and online information sessions:**
 - A total of eight in-person information sessions/recruitment events were held in five locations (Elgin x2, Buckie, Keith, Aberlour, Forres) and one online throughout November and December 2025, with an overall attendance of 27 individuals.
- **Community and employability engagement:**
 - Attendance at the Erskine Veterans Centre open day.
 - Drop-in outreach sessions delivered at Elgin Library and Moray Leisure Centre.
 - Engagement with employability services through attendance at a DWP work coach meeting (all Moray-based coaches) and a Moray Pathways practitioners meeting. Digital engagement and online promotion:
- **Digital engagement and online promotion:**
 - Digital engagement (social media and advertisements) was carried out via Facebook (posts, advertisements, groups), Instagram and LinkedIn. The total reach of the engagements was 7,326, with 14,850 impressions and 119 engagements²⁷.
 - Paid social media promotion was used to advertise information sessions and increase visibility.
- **Website presence:**
 - Programme information hosted across four partner websites.
 - There was presence across four websites and, based on available data, a total of 429 views were recorded from three of the websites.
- **Print and offline promotion:**
 - Distribution of flyers and posters across community locations.
 - Advertisement placed in *The Northern Scot* to reach a wider local audience.
- **Direct marketing and partner networks:**
 - Email communications issued to all partners and wider contact networks.
 - Targeted email sent to the youth cohort of Business Gateway.
 - Marketing assets shared with key partners to distribute through their own channels.
- **Follow-up and inclusive engagement:**

²⁷ Engagements are defined as user interactions with digital content (e.g. clicks, likes, shares or comments)

- One-to-one appointments offered to individuals unable to attend scheduled information sessions.
- Follow-up emails sent to individuals who registered via Eventbrite but did not attend, supporting re-engagement and take-up.

3.2 Overview of Participants

3.2.1 Demographics

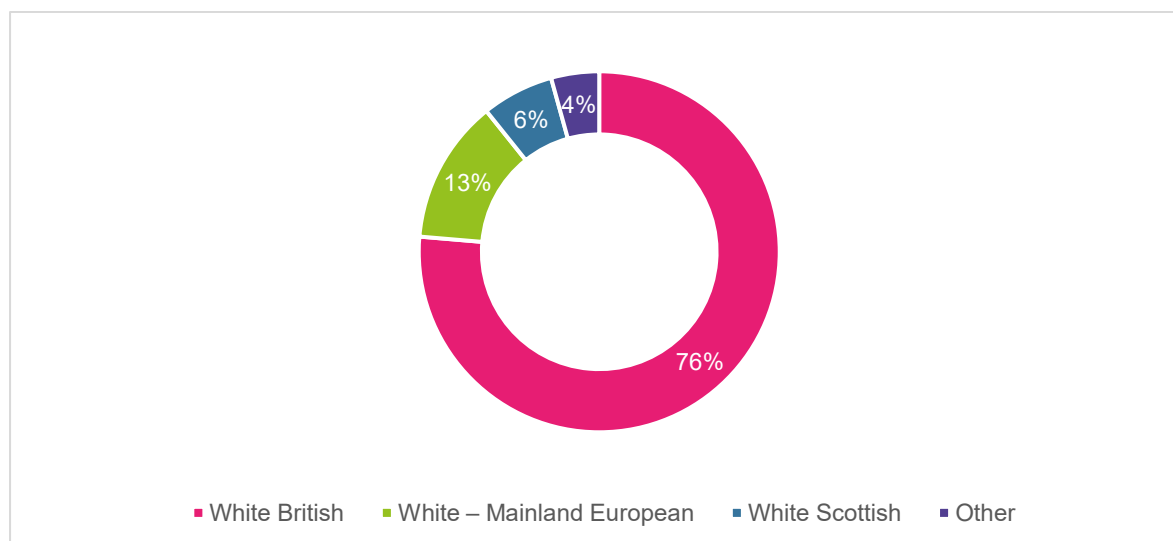
The Pathways to Start was designed to target people identifying as a member of an underrepresented group in business, there was not a strict definition of underrepresented instead a list of examples were included:

- women,
- young people,
- disabled or neurodivergent individuals,
- carers,
- care-experienced young people,
- refugees,
- ethnic minority groups,
- veterans,
- people with experience of the justice system,
- those on low incomes,
- individuals in very rural areas, and
- those operating in minority languages.

Higher priority was given to those who had not already started a business.

The majority of those responding to the participant surveys identified as White British, with 76% of respondents. Of the remaining responses, there was a spread between White Scottish and White Mainland European. Of those selecting other, there were four ethnic groups identified with one respondent for each, these were White Australian, Mixed / Multiple Ethnic Groups, White South African and Scottish. This is highlighted in Figure 3.1. English was the primary language of 88% of respondents (n=80 out of 91), whilst 8% selected Scots as their primary language (n=7 out of 91), and the remaining 4% of responses primary language were Polish and Italian (n=4 out of 91). It should be noted that this reflects the respondents of the survey and not all participants participating in the training programme.

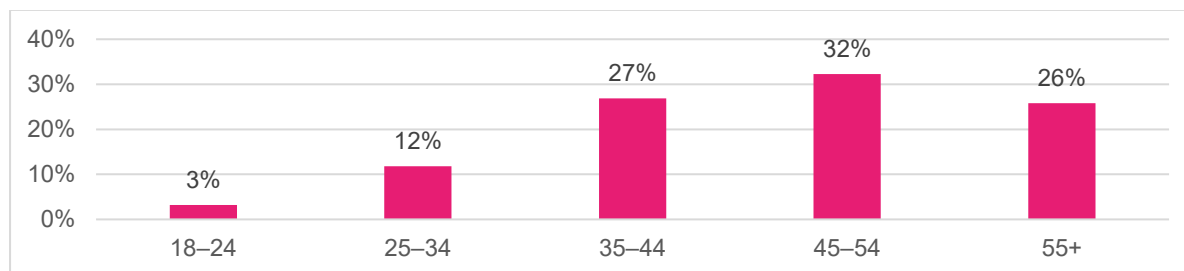
Figure 3.1: Ethnicity of Participants



Source: Evaluation Surveys (baseline and endline), n=93

Figure 3.2 shows the age of programme participants. This shows that the Pathways to Start programme was more successful engaging older age groups, with a lower engagement of those between 18-24 and 25-34. There was also greater engagement of women than men, with 74% of respondents (n=67 out of 91) identifying as female and 25% male (n=23 out of 91). One respondent identified as non-binary. These findings suggest that the Pathways to Start programme was effective in reaching women, a key target demographic identified in the Scottish Government's Pathways report.²⁸

Figure 3.2: Age of Participants



Source: Evaluation Surveys (baseline and endline), n=93

As highlighted in Table 3.1, a relatively large percentage of respondents had a disability or long-term health condition (43%). A relatively large proportion also identified as neurodivergent (37%). A low number of respondents had accessibility needs for participation (12%).

Table 3.1: Diversity and Inclusion Characteristics of Respondents

	Number	Total Responses	Percentage
Respondents with a disability or long-term health condition	40	94	43%
Respondents identifying as neurodivergent	35	94	37%
Respondents with accessibility needs	11	92	12%
Care-experienced respondents (i.e., were or previously have been in care)	4	93	4%
Ex-military veterans	3	93	3%
Ex-offenders	2	93	2%
Refugees or asylum seekers	0	93	0%

Source: Evaluation Surveys (baseline and endline)

3.2.2 Employment and Income

In relation to income level, almost three-quarters of respondents considered themselves to be on a low income. Nearly half were eligible for income-related benefits or financial support, while over one-third reported having caring responsibilities. This is summarised in Table 3.2 below.

Table 3.2 Respondent income, benefits and caring responsibilities

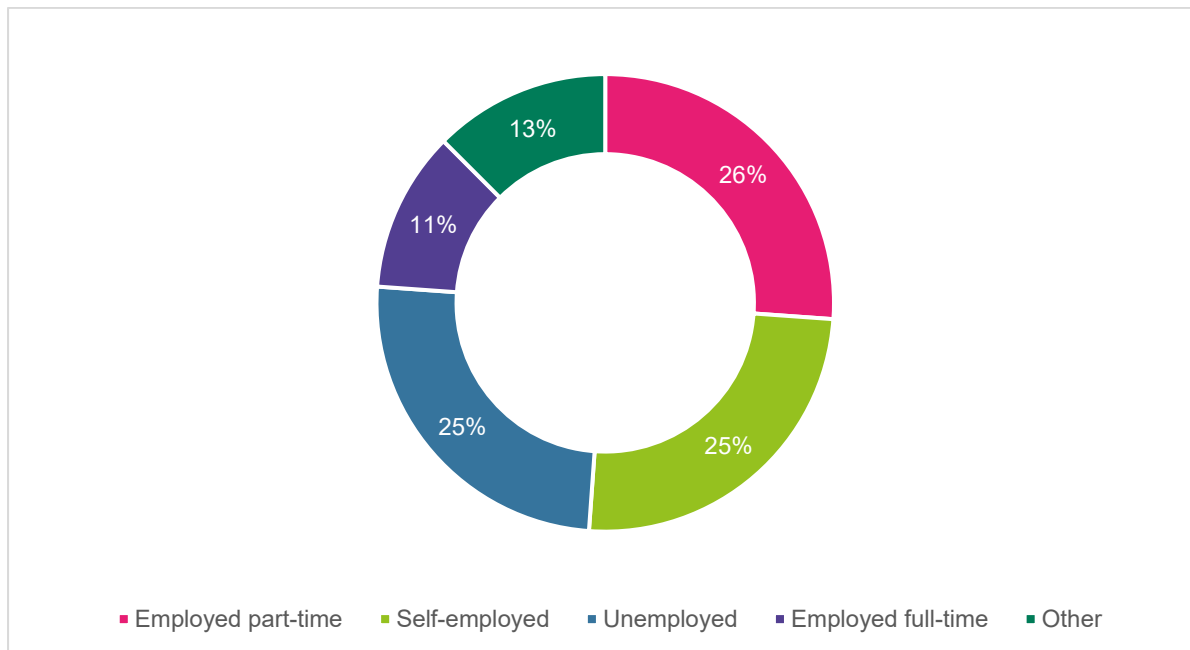
	Number	Percentage
Respondents reporting low income	69	74%
Respondents eligible for income-related benefits	42	47%
Respondents with caring responsibilities	35	38%

Source: Evaluation Surveys (baseline and endline), n=93

²⁸ [Pathways: A new approach for women in entrepreneurship - gov.scot](https://www.gov.scot/publications/pathways-to-start-report/pages/100.aspx)

As highlighted in Figure 3.3, respondents represented a diverse range of employment types. Part-time employment and self-employment were the most common categories, followed by unemployment and full-time employment, with a smaller proportion of respondents captured under “other”, including retirees and students.

Figure 3.3: Employment Status

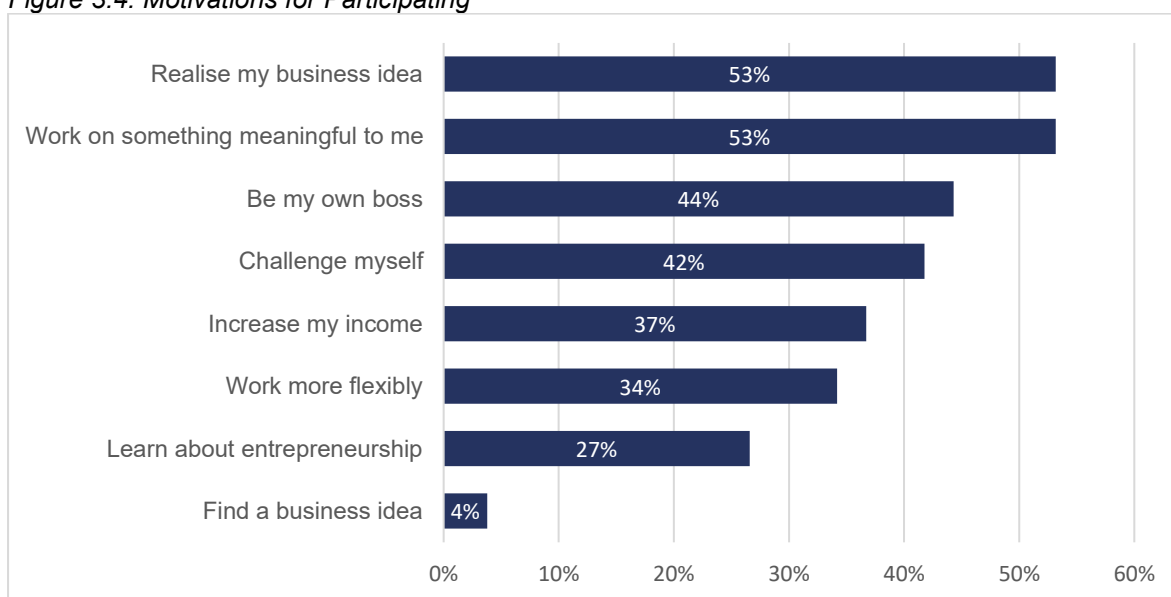


Source: Evaluation Surveys (baseline and endline), n=88

3.2.3 Participant Motivations

Participant survey respondents were asked about their motivations for joining the Pathways to Start programme. These responses are shown in Figure 3.4. The most common responses were “Realise my business idea” and “Work on something meaningful to me”, with over 50% of respondents selecting these reasons. Interestingly, only 4% of respondents selected “Find a new business idea” indicating most participants already had a business idea.

Figure 3.4: Motivations for Participating



Source: Evaluation Surveys (endline), n=79

3.3 Programme Activities

The outreach and training delivery of the Pathways to Start programme was delivered by two contractors (Skillfluence and UHI Moray with CJM Lumina) who were appointed via an open, competitive public procurement process. The scope for procurement requested a hybrid option for delivery but allowed contractors flexibility to specify how to balance different delivery modes. Skillfluence mainly delivered online in Argyll, and UHI Moray delivered in person in Elgin with hybrid or tailored options for individuals. Table 3.3 provides a summary of programme delivery in each area.

Table 3.3: Overview of Programme Delivery

	Argyll and Bute	Moray
Training supplier	Skillfluence	UHI Moray with CJM Lumina
Applications received	95	63
Applications accepted	70	53
Withdrawals	8	4
Participants completing	62	48
Cohorts	4	3
Delivery Model Outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two online and five in-person outreach activity and information sessions delivered in collaboration with delivery partners and local community organisations. Six 2-hour workshops delivered across four online cohorts (48 hours of workshop delivery in total), alongside one final in-person showcase event. 354.5 hours of individual mentor sessions delivered (online and in person) across 62 sessions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One online and Eight in-person outreach activity and information sessions delivered in collaboration with delivery partners and local community organisations. Six 4-hour workshops (in-person). 220 hours of individual mentor sessions delivered (online and in person). 291 hours of designated expert help delivered.

Source: Programme Monitoring Data

3.3.1 Workshops

3.3.1.1 Argyll

A total of six core programme workshops (online) and an end of programme event were delivered in Argyll. Workshops were well attended, with over 80% attendance for all core programme workshops (between 81 and 97% attendance, excluding programme withdrawals). Full attendance figures can be seen in Table 3.3. Attendance at the final in-person programme event was 50%, which was lower compared to the online workshops, the lower attendance was likely mainly linked to long travel distances involved and time commitment. Participants were able to claim for travel and overnight accommodation if required. Throughout this section, attendance will refer to the percentage of overall participants which were in attendance.

Table 3.4 summarises attendance by workshop.

Table 3.4: Workshop Attendance (Argyll)

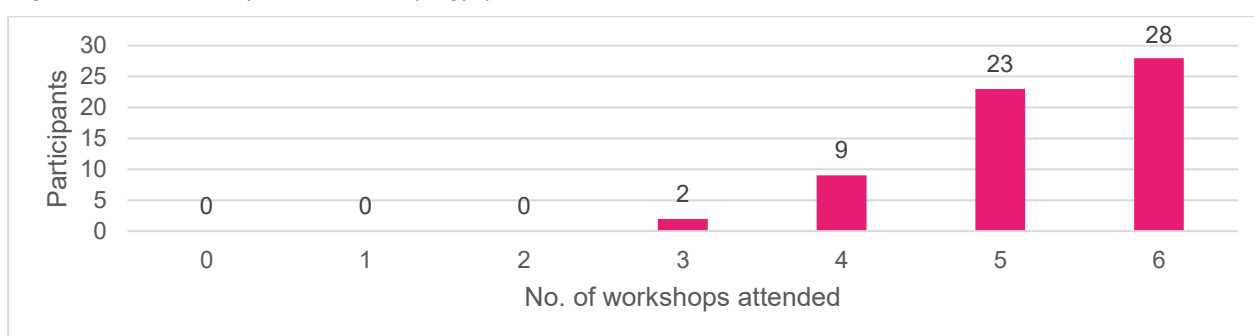
Workshop	Attendees	Attendance
SPARK Workshop 1 – Starting with Confidence	53	86%
SPARK Workshop 2 – Following Your Curiosity	60	97%

Workshop	Attendees	Attendance
SPARK Workshop 3 – Enterprising Skills	56	90%
SPARK Workshop 4 – Developing Your Customer Understanding	55	89%
SPARK Workshop 5 – Mapping Your Opportunity	50	81%
SPARK Workshop 6 – Shaping Your Enterprise Journey	51	82%
Final Programme Event (in-person)	31	50%

Source: Programme Monitoring Data

On average, among the participants that completed the Pathways to Start programme, they attended 5 out of 6 workshops. All participants attended at least three workshops, with 82% of participants attending either 5 or 6 workshops (37% attended 5 workshops and 45% attended 6).

Figure 3.5: Workshop Attendance (Argyll)



Source: Programme Monitoring Data

3.3.1.2 Moray

A total of six core programme workshops were delivered in Moray, with high attendance rates (excluding programme withdrawals) between 82 and 90%. Table 3.5 summarises attendance by workshop.

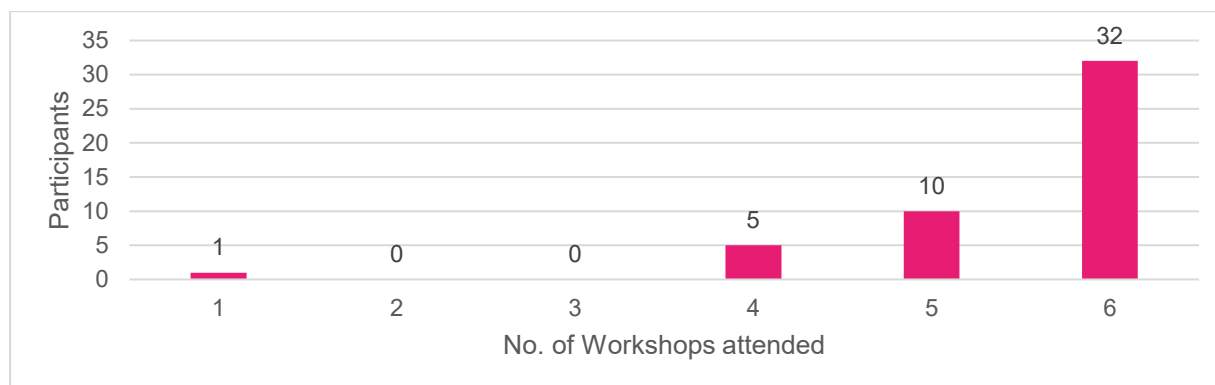
Table 3.5: Workshop Attendance (Moray)

Workshop	Attendees	Attendance
Workshop 1: Be your Own Boss	46	90%
Workshop 2: Support Available	44	86%
Workshop 3: Strategy & Validation	45	88%
Workshop 4: AI & Tech	46	90%
Workshop 5: Bus & Finance Planning	44	86%
Workshop 6: Branding & Pitching	42	82%

Source: Programme Monitoring Data

On average, excluding programme withdrawals, participants have attended 5 out of 6 workshops each. Two thirds of participants attended all 6 workshops in Moray.

Figure 3.6: Workshop Attendance (Moray)



Source: Programme Monitoring Data

3.3.2 Roundtables (Argyll)

A series of six roundtables were delivered in Argyll across January and February 2026, which were open to all participants. Attendance is outlined below.

Table 3.6: Roundtable Attendance

Roundtable title	Attendees	% of total Argyll participants
Journey Talks: Stories & Q&A with Local Entrepreneurs	26	42%
Digital Focus with Digital Druid	38	61%
Tax & Accounting Essentials for Early-Stage Founders	25	40%
Finance Foundations: Funding Options for Your Start-up Journey	32	52%
Post Programme Support (HIE / Business Gateway / InspirAlba)	25	40%
Confidence: Balancing Wellbeing and Productivity	23	37%

Source: Programme Monitoring Data

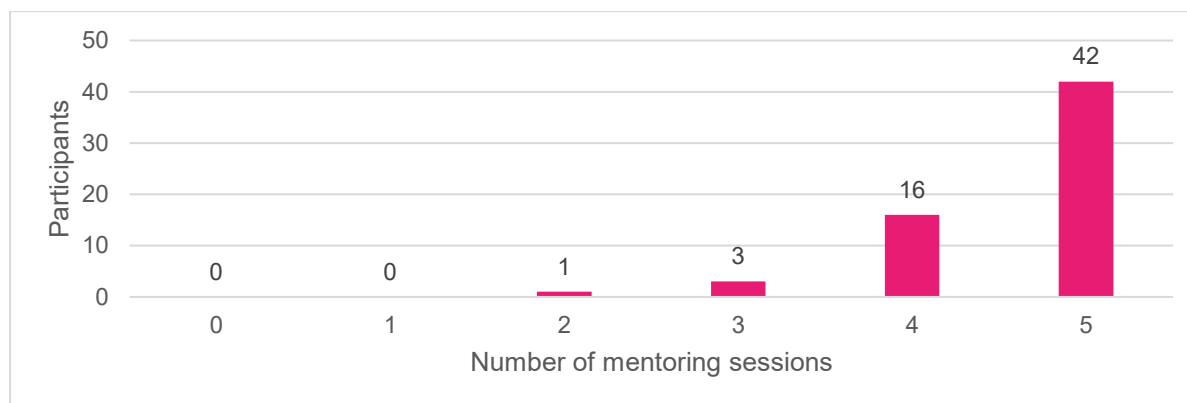
3.3.3 Mentoring and expert help

Mentoring and expert help was monitored by each delivery partner through trackers. The data presented, therefore, reflects how the data was recorded and metrics may differ between delivery partners / areas e.g. sessions vs hours.

3.3.3.1 Argyll

A total of six hours of mentoring were offered to participants, consisting of 1.5-hour onboarding and offboarding sessions alongside three 1-to-1 mentoring sessions. Mentoring attendance was generally very strong in Argyll, with only four participants attending less than four sessions. As outlined in Figure 3.7, the large majority of participants attended all five mentoring sessions, comprising 42 participants (68%).

Figure 3.7: Mentoring Attendance (Argyll)



Source: Programme Monitoring Data

The drop off in attendance is generally low, with 98% of participants attending at least 3 sessions. The session with the lowest attendance is offboarding, which currently sits at 71%. While those who withdrew from the Pathways to Start programme are not included in the overall figures, it is important to note that of the eight participants that did withdraw, only four attended a mentoring session, and none of these attended a session after the onboarding.

Table 3.7: Mentoring session attendance (Argyll)

	Number of attendees	Attendance
Onboarding	62	100%
1-2-1 Mentoring	62	100%
1-2-1 Mentoring	61	98%
1-2-1 Mentoring	56	90%
Offboarding	44	71%

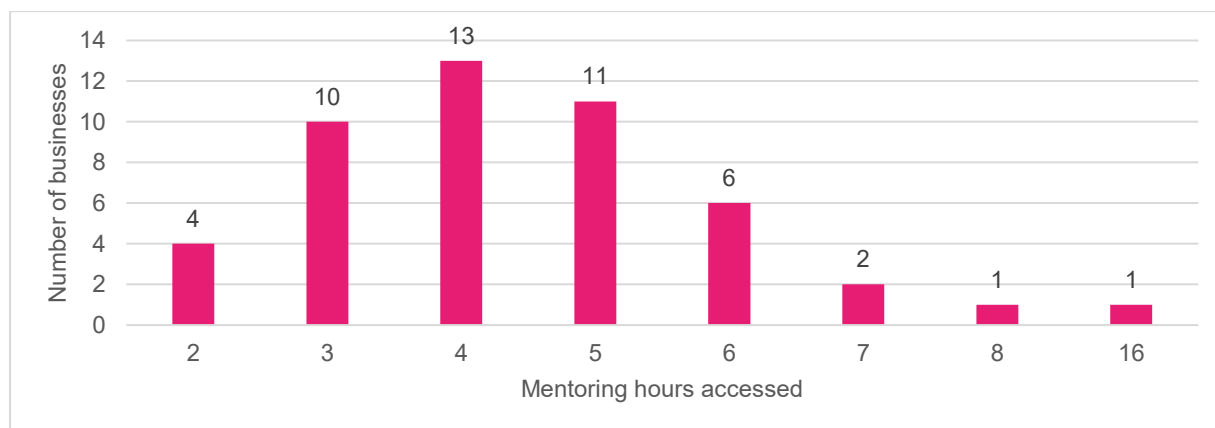
Source: Programme Monitoring Data

3.3.3.2 Moray

In Moray, participants were offered two forms of 1-2-1 support; meetings with an assigned mentor and an additional maximum of 6 hours of expert help.

Mentoring was delivered throughout the Pathways to Start programme on an ongoing, needs-led basis rather than through a fixed hourly allocation. As noted, participants were offered six hours of mentoring, although adjustments were made for some participants due to their needs, and they were offered one-to-one mentoring instead of group sessions, or extra support as needed. Over the six-week delivery period, participants received 322 individual mentoring meetings, totalling 216 hours. This equated to an average of 4.4 hours of tailored support per participant. As illustrated in Figure 3.8, 71% of participants received 4 or more hours of mentoring support.

Figure 3.8: Mentoring hours accessed (Moray)

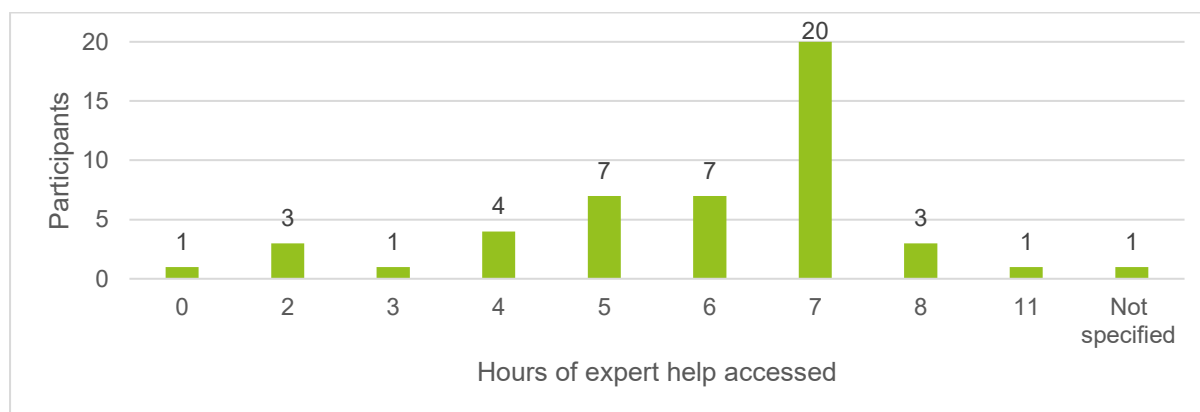


Source: Programme Monitoring Data

Expert help complemented mentoring, with each participant able to access up to one day of specialist additional support brokered through their mentor and tailored to identified needs. This included one-to-one input from subject-matter experts across areas such as branding, marketing, finance, Intellectual Property (IP), legal, digital and Artificial Intelligence (AI), alongside practical technical support (e.g. IT set-up). Expert input focused on addressing concrete barriers and supporting real-world progression, directly informing business plans and next steps.

Participants received a combined total of 291 hours of expert support, averaging 6 hours per participant. Figure 3.9 shows that 71% of participants availed of between 5 to 7 hours of the allocated expert help. Four businesses received expert help beyond what was expected, between 8 and 11 hours.

Figure 3.9: Hours of expert help accessed



Source: Programme Monitoring Data

3.4 Programme Expenditure

Total programme spend for Pathways to Start was reported to be £640,356 excluding VAT against a budget of £725,355 excluding VAT, resulting in an overall underspend of £84,999 (12%). Expenditure across most delivery lines was well controlled and closely aligned with budget, the underspend was due to two reasons: firstly due to lower spend on business and expenses grants either through participants withdrawing or each participant not spending the full £1,000 grant and £500 expenses available, and secondly, due to HIE reprofiling the budget and not claiming full cost of administration as these were covered by internal budgets. Key points to note include:

- Delivery expenditure by contractors in Argyll and Moray was broadly in line with approved budgets. Minor underspend (less than £2,000) was incurred in both areas.

- The main area of underspend related 'Grants', where expenditure of £107,691 against a revised budget of £184,500 resulted in an underspend of £76,808.
- Other areas of programme expenditure are close to budget. Marketing, Video and Evaluation budgets show only modest underspends.
- The budget included an administration fee for HIE to deliver the Pathways to Start programme, although this was reduced in a budget amendment to increase participant numbers from 90 to 123. The reduced HIE administration was fully spent but did not cover the administrative resource cost so does not reflect the actual cost to deliver the programme. The administration of the Pathways to Start programme was therefore supplemented by HIE's budgets for their staff costs.

Table 3.8 below provides a full overview of programme expenditure. Due to increased demand, the budget was reprofiled to increase training delivery budgets in the Pathways to Start programme.

Table 3.8: Programme Expenditure (in £ excluding VAT)

Area of Expenditure	Initial budget	Amended budget	Actual spend	Underspend
Argyll	211,500	232,000	230,200	1,800
Moray	203,061	204,613	202,837	1,775
Grants	135,000	184,500	107,691	76,808
Marketing	16,667	16,667	14,630	2,036
Video	12,333	12,333	11,100	1,232
Evaluation	21,000	21,000	19,655	1,345
HIE fee	130,205	54,242	54,242	0
TOTAL	729,766	725,355	640,356	84,999

Source: Programme Monitoring Data

3.5 Programme Outputs

A summary of programme outputs is provided in Table 3.9. Although no explicit output targets were originally set for the Pathways to Start programme, the programme team established a recruitment target of 90 participants, with 45 participants from each area. As shown below, a total of 158 applications were received, with 123 participants recruited following reprofiling of the budget. A total of 111 participants completed the programme, with 12 participants withdrawing.

Table 3.9: Programme Outputs

	Argyll and Bute	Moray	Total
No of applications	95	63	158
No of participants recruited	70	53	123
No of participants completing programme	62	49	111
No of participants provided with advice/guidance on business models	68	53	121
No of participants signposted to HIE grant	70	53	123
No of participants successfully applying for grants	57	45	102
No of participants signposted to HIE T & S	70	53	123
No of participants supported with action & implementation plan	65	49	114

Source: Programme Monitoring Data

3.5.1 Grant support

In total there were 102 grants distributed, amounting to £99,892. The average grant size across both areas was £979 and grant values ranged from £414 to £1,000.

Table 3.10: Grant allocation breakdown by location

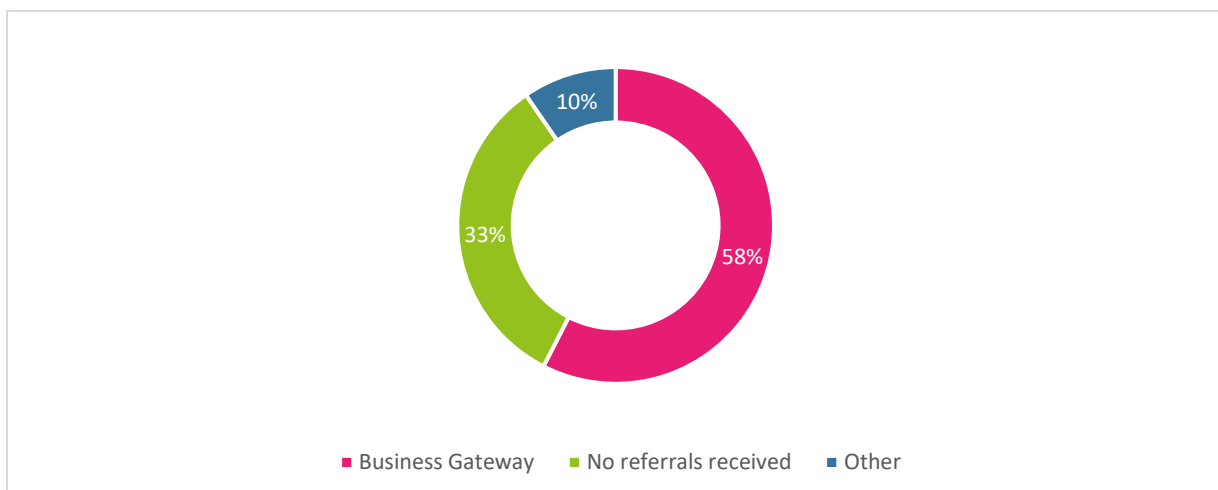
Location	Number Awarded	Total Awarded	Average Grant	Max Grant	Min Grant
Argyll and Bute	57	£55,508	£974	£1,000	£414
Moray	45	£44,383	£986	£1,000	£817

Source: Programme Monitoring Data

3.5.2 Referrals

In relation to referrals or signposting to mainstream business support, the survey identified that 67% of participants (n=49) received referrals to mainstream business support, with the majority of these stating Business Gateway as the referral (58% of total participants, n=42). Other types of business support mentioned were InspirAlba, Firstport and Just Enterprise. This is detailed in Figure 3.10.

Figure 3.10: Referrals



Source: Evaluation Survey (endline), n=73

3.6 Summary

Salient points to conclude from our analysis are as follows:

- Strong engagement and completion:** The three-month pilot attracted high levels of interest across both Argyll and Bute and Moray, receiving 161 applications in total. The original 90 spaces were increased to 123 following high demand. Of these, 111 participants completed the Pathways to Start programme, showing high retention and relevance to the target group.
- Effective outreach and marketing led to high recruitment:** A mix of in-person events, community networks and targeted digital marketing generated strong engagement, particularly through local Facebook groups, trusted organisations and referrals from Business Gateway and other partners.
- Participant profile aligns with programme aims:** Demographic information was gathered through the first and final surveys, and the survey results indicate the Pathways to Start programme reached a high proportion of underrepresented groups, including women, people on

low incomes, individuals with disabilities or long-term health conditions, carers and neurodivergent participants, many of whom faced multiple barriers to accessing mainstream enterprise support.

- **Uptake was substantially higher among participants over 35 years old:** 85% of survey respondents were aged 35 and above, compared to only 3% aged 18–24 and 12% aged 25–34. This indicates any future programmes should review whether the marketing approach or the training offering needs to be catered to reach younger target groups.
- **High participation in programme activities:** Attendance was consistently high in both Argyll and Bute, and Moray. Most participants attended 5 out of 6 of the group sessions, and with particularly high engagement in one-to-one support.
- **Programme delivery was achieved within budget:** Total programme expenditure remained below budget, with the main underspend due to participants withdrawing before applying for a grant or not applying for the full amount available and HIE administration staff costs being covered by internal budgets. Core delivery, marketing, evaluation and management costs were closely aligned with planned budgets.
- **Programme activity successfully delivered:** The Pathways to Start programme effectively delivered awareness raising, advice, action planning, grant signposting and referrals to mainstream business support for the majority of participants, reinforcing its intended role as a pre-start gateway into the wider enterprise support ecosystem.



Angus Campbell (Chair of HIE) hands Pathways to Start participant Lexie Shaw her Certificate of Participation. Photo credit: LJF Photography

4 Programme Delivery

This chapter assesses the programme delivery model. This is informed by stakeholder interviews and analysis of the participant surveys. This chapter is structured around the EQs set out in Table 1.1. Analysis is themed by EQ, presents strength of opinion and indicative numbers of stakeholders, and differentiates findings by stakeholder type. Explicit comparisons are made between Argyll and Bute and Moray where evidence allows.

4.1 Programme design and strategic alignment

4.1.1 Addressing barriers faced by underrepresented groups

Programme delivery staff and project delivery partners (i.e., HIE’s pilot management team, outreach and management training suppliers, marketing supplier, and video supplier) emphasised the need for a flexible, pre-start model combining workshops and one-to-one mentoring for participants with low confidence, complex life circumstances, or limited prior engagement with enterprise support; this view was reported by four stakeholder interviewees.

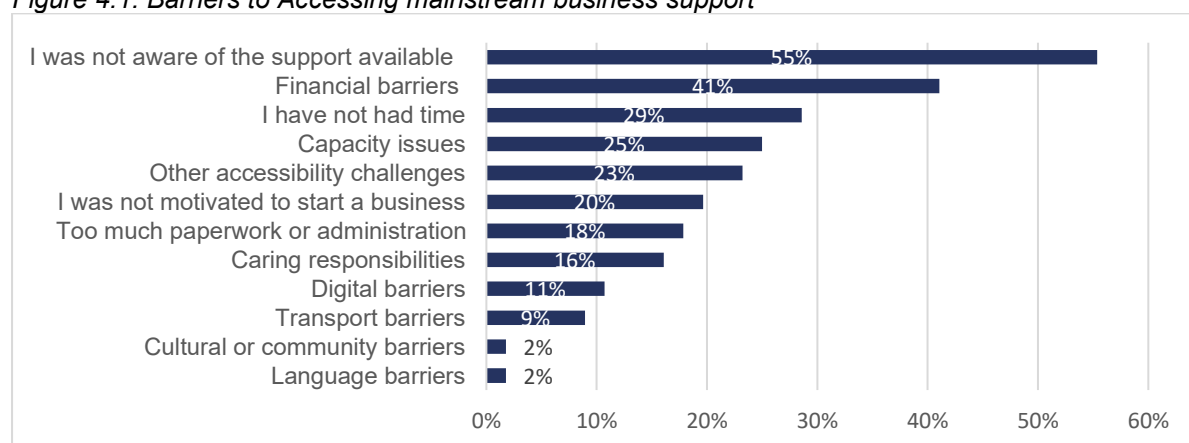
Across programme delivery staff, project delivery partners, and wider stakeholders, there was consistent agreement (reported by 12 stakeholder interviewees) that the Pathways to Start programme was appropriately designed to address structural and personal barriers including low confidence, caring responsibilities, health conditions, neurodiversity, rural geography, digital exclusion, and benefits-related risk.

Participants frequently contrasted the Pathways offer with more formal mainstream provision, describing the pilot programme as being accessible and psychologically safe.

Several participants viewed self-employment as a more realistic and flexible alternative to conventional employment, but one that would have been difficult to pursue without structured support. In this sense, the Pathways to Start programme was intended not only to encourage business creation, but also to make entrepreneurship appear more achievable for individuals who might otherwise remain outside the enterprise support system.

However, stakeholders indicated that the short lead-in and delivery timescales associated with the pilot reduced the Pathways to Start programme’s ability to embed locally and reach those furthest from mainstream support. These reflections do not weaken the core rationale, but they do suggest that this type of intervention works best when it is well connected to existing local services and delivered over a longer delivery timeframe to build awareness and trust. Various barriers were identified in the participant survey for not accessing general business support previously. These are highlighted in Figure 4.1. The most commonly cited barrier was that participants were not aware of the support available, with 55% of participants highlighting this as a barrier. This highlights the importance of outreach and engagement for increasing awareness. The next most significant barrier selected was financial barriers such as cost of participation and travel, with 41% of responses, highlighting the importance of covering expenses for involvement.

Figure 4.1: Barriers to Accessing mainstream business support

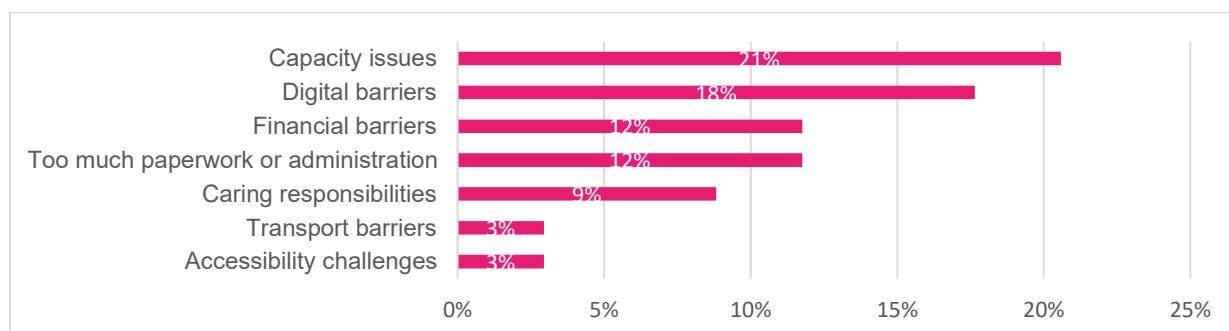


Source: Evaluation Survey (baseline), n=60

Survey findings show that when asked about the single biggest barrier to accessing mainstream business support, 44% of participants (n=25 out of 57) reported not being aware of the support available. This reinforces the finding above that lack of awareness is a key barrier to engagement. Notably, 11% of participants (n=6 out of 57) identified caring responsibilities as the biggest barrier—the second most frequently selected option. This suggests that while caring responsibilities affect a smaller proportion of participants overall, they have a substantial impact on those who experience them.

43% of respondents to the survey (n=34 out of 79) reported barriers still remained that limited their ability to fully benefit from the training programme. Figure 4.2 highlights the barriers that were identified, with capacity issues and digital barriers most prevalent. Longer delivery time frames would benefit people that struggle with capacity issues, and additional digital support could support those with low digital literacy.

Figure 4.2: Barriers remaining that limited benefit realisation of Pathways to Start



Source: Evaluation Survey (endline), n=34

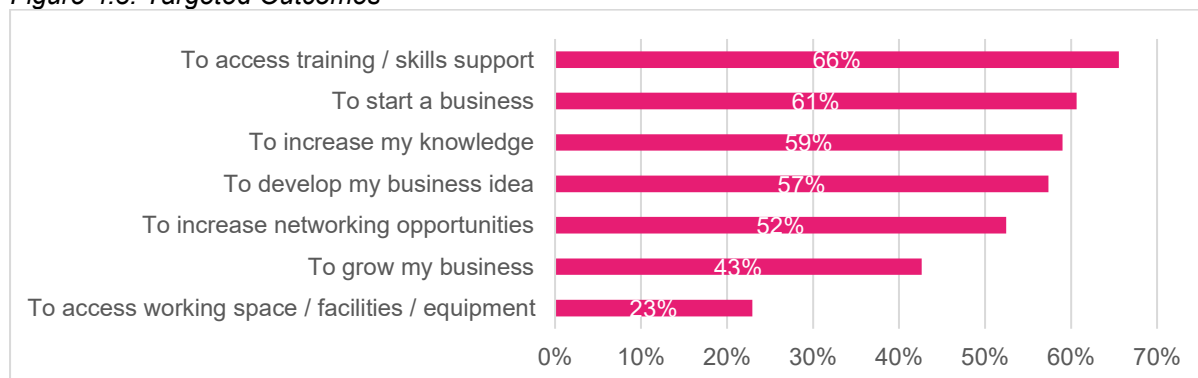
4.1.2 Motivations for engagement

Interview evidence suggests that the Pathways to Start programme responded to a genuine gap between mainstream business support and the needs of people at a much earlier stage of entrepreneurial development. Stakeholders described a cohort who were interested in self-employment and already had budding business ideas, but needed additional support with confidence, idea formation, practical planning and understanding how enterprise activity would fit around wider personal circumstances. A wider stakeholder noted that some of these individuals were not yet ready to fully benefit from mainstream start-up support, and that Pathways to Start was intended to provide an entry point into the wider support landscape.

Results from the participant survey reinforce this idea, whereby reported motivations for engagement are centered on gaining confidence, clarity and structured support to progress long-held business ideas. Strategic and delivery stakeholders noted strong latent demand for this type of provision, evidenced by rapid recruitment and full cohorts.

As per Figure 4.3, participants wanted to get a range of outcomes from the Pathways to Start programme, with the majority of options receiving over 50% selection. The most common reason however was “To access training / skills support”, with 66% of participants selecting this.

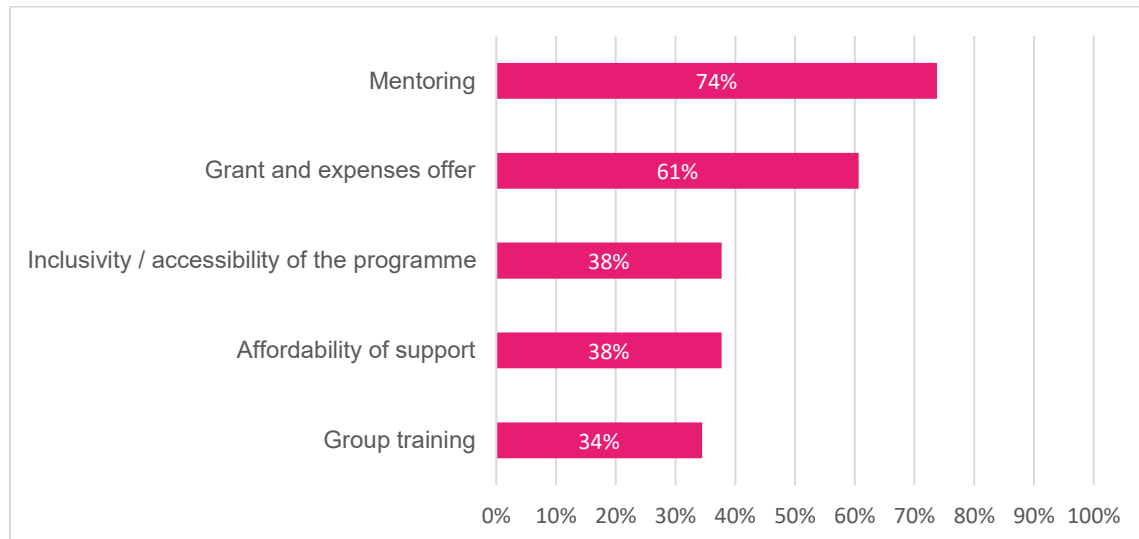
Figure 4.3: Targeted Outcomes



Source: Evaluation Surveys (baseline), n=60

When asked what most attracted them to this programme specifically, 74% of participants selected mentoring and 61% selected the grant and expenses offer. When combined with the fact only 4% listed “Find a business idea” (see table 4.3) as a reason to join the Pathways to Start programme, this indicates people are looking for support to develop their existing business ideas by receiving tailored support and investment to test or grow the idea.

Figure 4.4: Key Attraction of the Pathways to Start programme



Source: Evaluation Surveys (baseline), n=60

4.1.3 Argyll vs Moray

- In Argyll, design appropriateness was strongly linked to flexibility and online delivery, reflecting the area’s dispersed rural geography, including island communities, and associated travel distances. This approach helped mitigate barriers related to transport, childcare and remoteness, albeit with some connectivity challenges in more remote locations; and
- In Moray, in-person design was viewed as particularly effective for confidence-building and peer learning among participants new to business environments. Adaptations were made on an individual basis allowing tailored solutions to suit individual learning needs.

4.2 Outreach and recruitment effectiveness

4.2.1 Outreach channels and effectiveness

The majority of stakeholders (n≈10 across strategic, delivery and marketing roles) agreed that trusted local networks and community-based outreach were the most effective recruitment mechanisms.

Delivery partners consistently reported that in-person information sessions, word-of-mouth, and referrals via Business Gateway, Jobcentre Plus and community organisations generated higher-quality applicants than digital advertising alone.

The participants surveys highlighted that participants heard about the Pathways to Start programme via range of sources. The most common response was via a “local Facebook page / group” (18% of respondents). This was closely followed by “Referral from other organisation”, “Business gateway” and “Advertisement on Facebook” (17%, 13% and 12% respectively). With Facebook coming out twice in the top four most common options, this suggests this is a strong medium for spreading awareness in particular when taking a place-based approach.

When asked who recommended them to apply for the Pathways to Start programme, there was similarly large range of responses (n=59). The most common response was “Friends and family” (19% of respondents) and “Local community organisation worker”, “Business gateway worker” and “Key worker or programme staff”, cited by 14%, 15% and 10% of respondents respectively. With

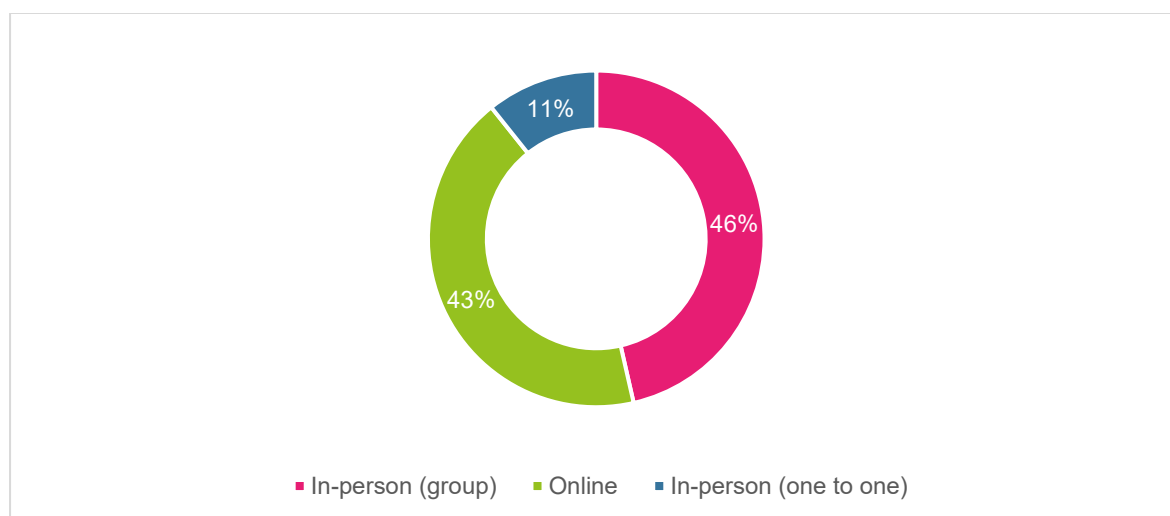
Business Gateway appearing again, this appears to have been a key method of attracting individuals to the Pathways to Start programme.

4.2.2 Outreach events

Around half of baseline survey participants (47%) attended an information event (n= 28 out of 60) indicating information events were effective in generating applications. Figure 4.5 shows the attendance type, in-person (group) and online events, with 46% and 43% respectively. Only 11% of those that attended an event, attended a one-to-one in-person event²⁹. Participants generally found the events useful, with 93% of participants stating they found them very useful (n=26 out of 28) and 7% finding them slightly useful (n=2 out of 28). No participants stated the events were not useful.

When asked about the main benefit of attending the event, the most common response was “Clarifying if the programme was suitable for me”, with 70% of participants stating this (n=19 out of 28). Relatively low numbers of participants stated that the main benefit was either increasing confidence to apply, understanding of how to apply, or meeting training providers.

Figure 4.5: Method of attendance for outreach events



Source: Evaluation Surveys (baseline and endline), n=28

When asked for suggestions for improvement, very few responses were provided. One respondent requested that there should be increased networking opportunities amongst participants in the Isle of Bute, while another simply stated that they would appreciate a vegan food option.

4.2.3 Role of marketing and communications

Marketing stakeholders highlighted that targeted paid social media performed well in generating volume and awareness, particularly among women. However, attribution to harder-to-reach groups was limited by the absence of detailed equalities data.

Stakeholders acknowledged that digital marketing was most effective when reinforcing, rather than replacing, community-based engagement.

4.2.4 Gaps and limitations

Four of the delivery stakeholders interviewed noted that compressed mobilisation timescales constrained the ability to test messaging, refine targeting, or identify groups not reached. Additionally, limited equalities monitoring restricted insight into who may have been excluded from the pilot.

4.2.5 Argyll vs Moray

Outreach and recruitment were effective across both pilot areas, with each approach successfully engaging target participants despite tight delivery timescales. Both areas benefited from strong local

²⁹ Individual, in-person events were offered as a flexible option for participants who were unable to attend group sessions.

employability networks; however, other outreach and recruitment mechanisms differed, reflecting local context, geography, and the strength of existing networks in each area. Evidence from Interviews with delivery partners and analysis of monitoring data is outlined below:

- **Argyll:** Outreach was community-led and locally tailored. Community-based outreach approaches (particularly Facebook groups, local networks and word of mouth) proved most effective in engaging harder-to-reach individuals. Partnerships with local organisations further supported recruitment, while holding events in familiar, accessible venues and adapting language improved engagement. However, the compressed mobilisation period limited the ability to fully refine targeting and may have reduced reach among some groups.
- **Moray:** Outreach was more institutionally driven. Moray benefited from strong institutional partnerships (UHI, Business Gateway, and employability services), with recruitment effectiveness improving as word-of-mouth grew. A broad mix of approaches, particularly stakeholder networks (e.g. the Moray Pathways partnership), social media (notably Facebook), and information sessions, supported reach, with strong engagement from local organisations working with disadvantaged groups. Online outreach proved especially effective in attracting participants, while in-person sessions saw more variable attendance. However, recruitment was initially slow due to short mobilisation timescales and logistical challenges (including weather conditions and delays in promotional materials), and participation remained geographically concentrated in Elgin.

4.2.6 Application process, information provision and onboarding

The application process was rated positively by 98% of baseline survey respondents (n= 59 out of 60) who rated it as either easy or very easy. When asked for suggestions for improvement, only one was provided, with the respondent stating they would appreciate more information before applying.

When participants were asked how they would rate information provided before starting the Pathways to Start programme, 96% rated either good or very good (n=57 out of 59). Only 2 participants (3%) rated the information provided before starting the programme as poor. When asked for additional comments, two participants stated that due to last minute acceptance, their preparation for the programme was rushed. Additionally, one respondent stated that they were only accepted after a space became available and as such, they felt underprepared. While these situations are unavoidable, it highlights the importance of additional support for those offered a place on the programme last minute or late. In this pilot programme spaces were reallocated up until the end of the first week if someone withdrew to allow most people to benefit. If the training programme is delivered over a longer timeframe, the funding for these spaces could be reallocated to a subsequent cohort avoiding any rushed, last minute replacements.

13% of participants stated that they had experienced challenges or barriers during the onboarding process (n=8 out of 60). Two participants stated that they had technical issues, one of which specified they were to do with the portal, while another two participants stated they found the onboarding process overwhelming. Other challenges included childcare, late acceptance to the programme and laptop issues.

4.3 Delivery model and training content

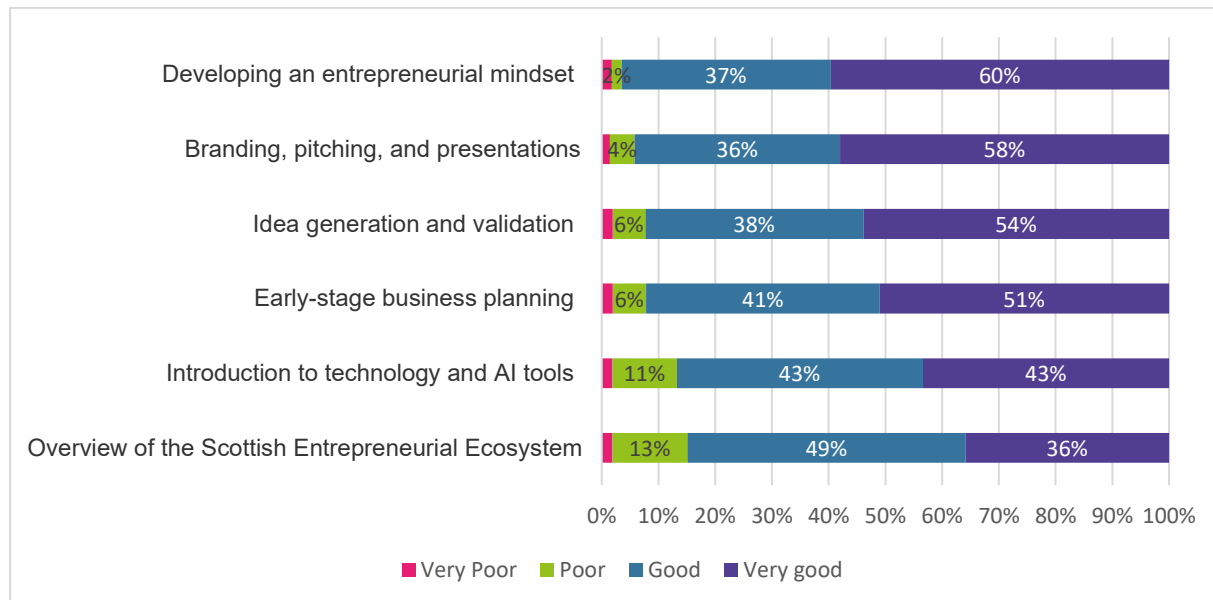
4.3.1 Training structure and content

There was strong agreement among delivery partners and participants (reported by 12 interviewees) that the blended delivery model, combining workshops with one-to-one mentoring, was central to programme effectiveness.

Participant case studies (Appendix 3) further demonstrate the value of workshops in building foundational knowledge and facilitating peer learning and support. Consistent with this, mentoring was most frequently cited by participants, across both Argyll and Bute and Moray, as the most impactful element, providing accountability, confidence building, and practical support for progression, while workshops were valued for introducing core concepts, enabling peer learning, and normalising shared challenges.

Figure 4.6 illustrates how participants rated the quality of training content. All aspects of training content were rated either good or very good by at least 85% of participants. The areas ranked best were “Developing an entrepreneurial mindset”, and “Branding, pitching, and presentations, ending with a celebration”, which both received 97% and 94% good or very good ratings respectively.

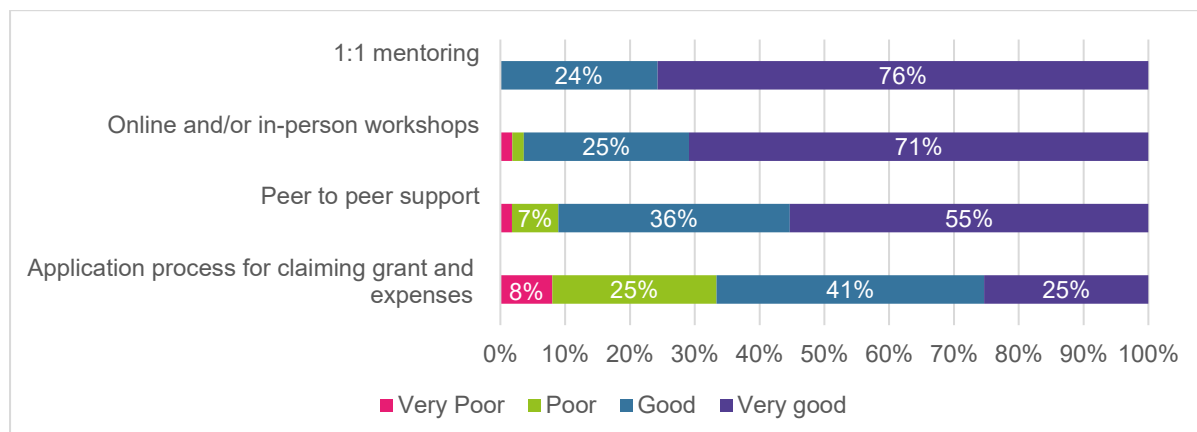
Figure 4.6: Quality of Training Content



Source: Evaluation Survey (endline), n=79

Figure 4.7 shows participants' views on the quality of support provided, with all aspects receiving ratings of good or very good by at least 66% of respondents. 1:1 mentoring, online and/or in person workshops, and peer to peer support were rated highest, with slightly lower ratings for the application process for claiming grant and expenses.

Figure 4.7: Quality of Support Provided



Source: Evaluation Survey (endline), n=79

Participants viewed **business planning** support elements very positively when asked to rate the usefulness of the tailored action and implementation plan and advice and guidance on business models. Ratings were strongest for the tailored action and implementation plan, with a majority of participants (98%) rating this element as good or very good. Usefulness ratings were also high for advice and guidance on business models, with 91% of participants rating this support as good or very good.

When asked qualitatively if there any **additional areas of training** that would have been beneficial, 40% (n=32) provided a response. Of those that responded participants most frequently (33%) identified a need for further training on **financial aspects of running a business**. This included

support on cash flow forecasting; HMRC, taxes, and compliance; understanding business finances; accountancy software; Case studies illustrating financial management and grant funding (particularly for CICs/charities). It should be noted however that these training areas exist in mainstream support and most Pathways to Start participants were signposted to further support services following programme completion (refer to section 3.5.2).

Other areas of training that participants identified would be beneficial include:

- **Digital skills, technology & platforms (21%)** – Website creation, navigating online platforms, software support and general tech skills where prior knowledge was assumed.
- **Marketing, branding & social media (18%)** – More practical support on marketing, branding and social media, particularly for niche businesses.
- **Programme structure, pacing & time (18%)** – Requests for a longer programme, more time on complex topics and greater space to apply learning between sessions.
- **Confidence, communication & soft skills (15%)** – Confidence-building, public speaking and managing imposter feelings when engaging professionally.
- **Business structures, ethics & alternative models (15%)** – Training on CICs, charities, social enterprise models and ethical business practices (including AI).
- **Delivery format & mentoring support (12%)** – Preference for more face-to-face mentoring, regular check-ins and increased group discussion.

4.3.2 Adaptation to participant needs

Stakeholders emphasised that flexibility in pacing, attendance and format was essential for engaging carers, neurodivergent participants and those with health conditions. Several participants noted that cohorts comprising individuals at different stages of the entrepreneurial journey reduced the relevance of some workshop content; however, mentoring helped to mitigate this by providing more personalised support. This is further illustrated in participant case studies (Appendix 3), which highlight the importance of tailored, one-to-one support in helping participants navigate individual barriers and maintain progress.

For those that required adjustments at the information or training events, 87% of participants deemed them suitable (n = 13 out of 15). Further to that, 79% were either very satisfied or satisfied with the adjustment that were made. In fact, of those who had suitable adjustments made for their needs, only two were left either unsatisfied or very unsatisfied with the adjustments. These figures suggest that those that needed adjustments were relatively well supported.

4.3.3 Grant support

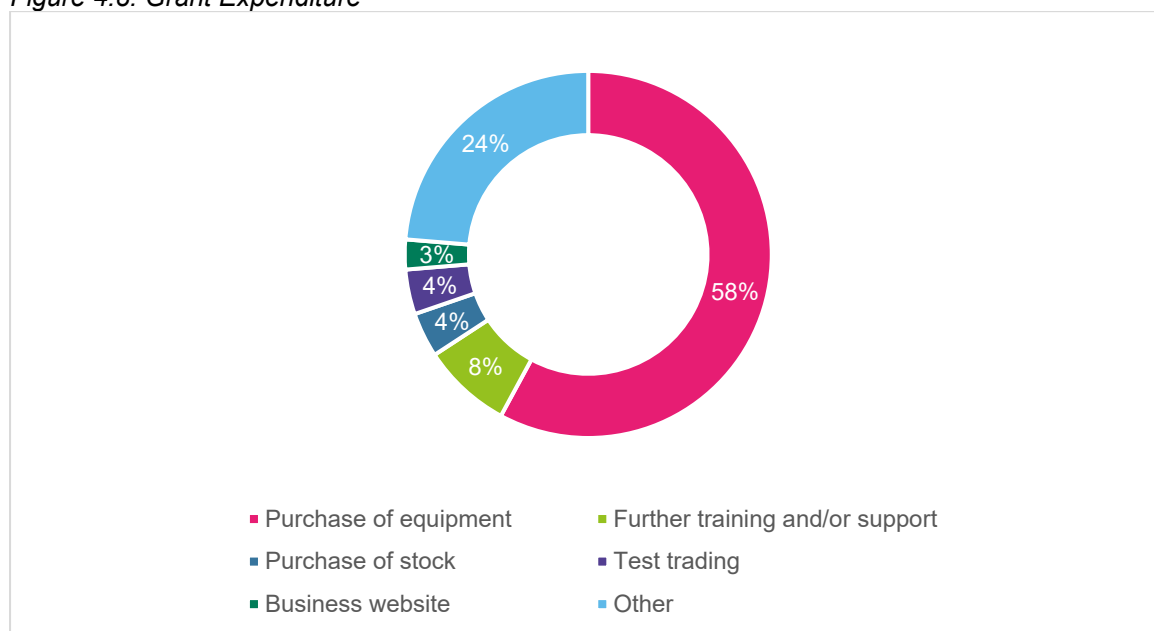
96% of participant survey respondents applied for a grant as part of the Pathways to Start programme (n=75). Notably, there was a large split in those who requested pre-payment of the grant, with 49% of participants requesting pre-payment (n=37).

The reasons for not applying are outlined below:

- *I was more interested in the learning than the grant. I wasn't ready to start up, it would have been more helpful for my own circumstances had I been able to defer starting to a later date. This would have supported momentum for me as an individual.*
- *Not ready to start business as (my) business partner had other commitments and I needed to find a job before I could commit.*

Case study evidence (Appendix 3) highlights the role of grant funding as a key enabler, supporting access to training, equipment, and regulatory requirements that would otherwise have been unaffordable. This is reinforced by survey findings, which show a clear trend in how the grant was used: 58% of participants (n=44) spent their grant on the purchase of equipment, as summarised in Figure 4.8.

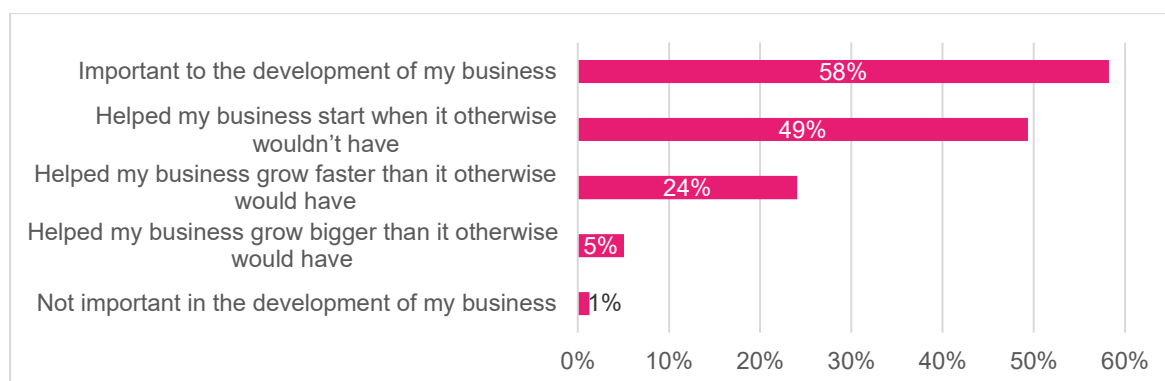
Figure 4.8: Grant Expenditure



Source: Evaluation Survey (endline), n=76

Figure 4.9 highlights that the grant was important to support the development of businesses, with only 1% of participants stating it was not important (n=1).

Figure 4.9: Importance of Grant Support



Source: Evaluation Survey (endline), n=79

When asked about the timing (post training completion) of when participants would ideally apply for the grant, preferences amongst participants were clear. 68% of respondents (n=48) would ideally receive the grant immediately after completing the training. There was a large split in the remainder of the responses, with responses ranging from 1 week to within 6 months. A breakdown is provided below:

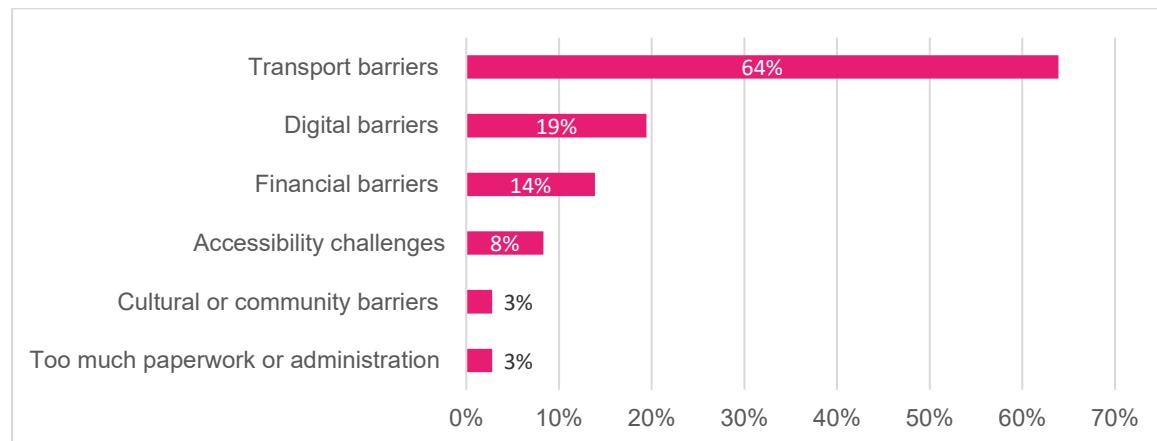
- 11% of respondents would ideally be able to apply for the grant within 1 week;
- 7% of respondents would ideally be able to apply for the grant within 1 month;
- 6% of respondents would ideally be able to apply for the grant within 3 months;
- 3% of respondents would ideally be able to apply for the grant within 6 months; and
- 6% of respondents had no preference.

4.3.4 Expenses

A total of 48 expenses grants were awarded through the Pathways to Start programme. 46% of survey respondents (n=36) received expenses grants, of which, 21% stated expenses were prepaid (n=7).

When asked what barriers these expenses helped to break down, the most common response was transport barriers, with 64% of respondents (n=23) stating this. Of the remaining barriers, there were no clear trends, with the next most common responses being digital barriers at 19%, and financial barriers at 14% - refer to Figure 4.10. No respondents stated that the expenses helped to break down Language barriers, Capacity issues (e.g., work or school commitments) or Caring responsibilities.

Figure 4.10: Barriers Addressed by Expenses



Source: Evaluation Survey (endline), n=36

These findings were reinforced in a follow up question, when participants were asked what their expenses money was used for. Of those that provided a response, 75% stated that they used it for an expense related to travel (n=30), this included fuel and transport related responses. The next most common response was for a laptop/tablet with 18% of responses (n=7), closely followed by accommodation for the in-person event in Argyll, identified by 15% of participants (n=6).

4.3.5 Beneficiary experience

Significant qualitative feedback about the support was also provided via the participant survey, with 38% (n= 79 respondents) providing a response. Of those that provided feedback, 40% highlighted positive staff, mentor and team support, with participants praising these aspects as helpful and reassuring. However, 27% of participants highlighted positive staff experiences in the face of difficulties in using the systems. Constructive feedback provided via the survey is outlined below:

- **Complexity and difficulty of the claim and grant process:** 60% of respondents described the claim or grant process as confusing, complicated, daunting, or not straightforward. It was also noted that the process could deter participation or cause significant frustration.
- **Issues with the MyHIE portal:** 57% of respondents criticised the HIE portal for being difficult to navigate, not user friendly, overly complicated, or “not fit for purpose”.
- **Clearer guidance, explanation and training:** 37% expressed a need for clearer explanations, better guidance, or dedicated sessions (e.g. roundtables, in-person sessions) to support understanding of the claims process.
- **Technical and accessibility barriers:** 33% of respondents reported technical issues such as difficulty uploading evidence, unreadable menus, system errors, and poor functionality on mobile devices or without access to a laptop.

- **Other themes highlighted include:** communication and responsiveness issues related to emails and follow-up; a feeling that the process was stressful, time consuming and overwhelming; duplication of information requirements and issues with records not being kept of information already provided.

4.3.6 Transferability and scalability

Delivery partners and strategic stakeholders highlighted that the core delivery model is transferable to other geographies, provided sufficient lead-in time, local tailoring and multi-year funding are available.

- Argyll's online delivery maximised accessibility and flexibility but reduced informal networking opportunities.
- Moray's in-person delivery strengthened peer networks and confidence but was more demanding for participants balancing employment.

Furthermore, half of survey respondents reported that they were either very likely or likely to recommend the Pathways to Start programme (46% very likely and 4% likely). Similarly, almost half (48%) indicated that they had already recommended the programme. Only 2 respondents (2%) reported that they were unlikely or would not recommend it. The two delivery modes provide advantages and disadvantages, which may be more suitable depending on the place or target group. The pilot highlighted there is not a one size fits all delivery mode.

4.4 Programme management and grant administration

4.4.1 Programme management and governance

Stakeholders broadly agreed that governance arrangements were robust and collaborative, with HIE providing responsive oversight and problem-solving, but that they were significantly constrained by the single-year funding cycle and compressed delivery timetable. Strategic oversight from Scottish Government was viewed as appropriate for a pilot of this nature.

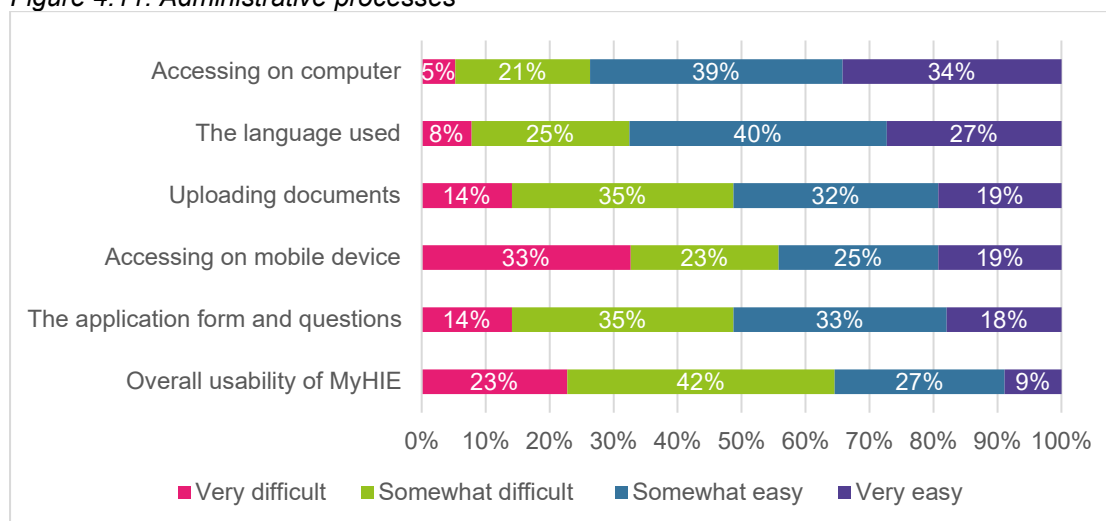
4.4.2 Grants and administration

The majority of delivery partners and participants (n=9) identified via interviews that grant and expenses administration was a significant challenge. Issues included complex digital portals, jargon-heavy language and tight timelines, which disproportionately affected participants with low digital confidence.

Despite these challenges, grants and expenses were widely viewed as critical in removing participation barriers and enabling tangible progression. HIE's hands-on support and problem-solving were consistently praised, though stakeholders emphasised that current systems are not well suited to pre-start or vulnerable participant groups.

Survey analysis supports these findings, with respondents providing mixed feedback on the usability of various aspects relating to the MyHIE Portal and grant application, as can be seen in Figure 4.11. The overall usability of MyHIE was rated poorly, with the majority of participants rating it as either somewhat difficult or very difficult (65%). This is reflected in the ratings of specific aspects, with "The application form and questions", "Accessing on mobile device" and "Uploading document" all receiving very mixed feedback.

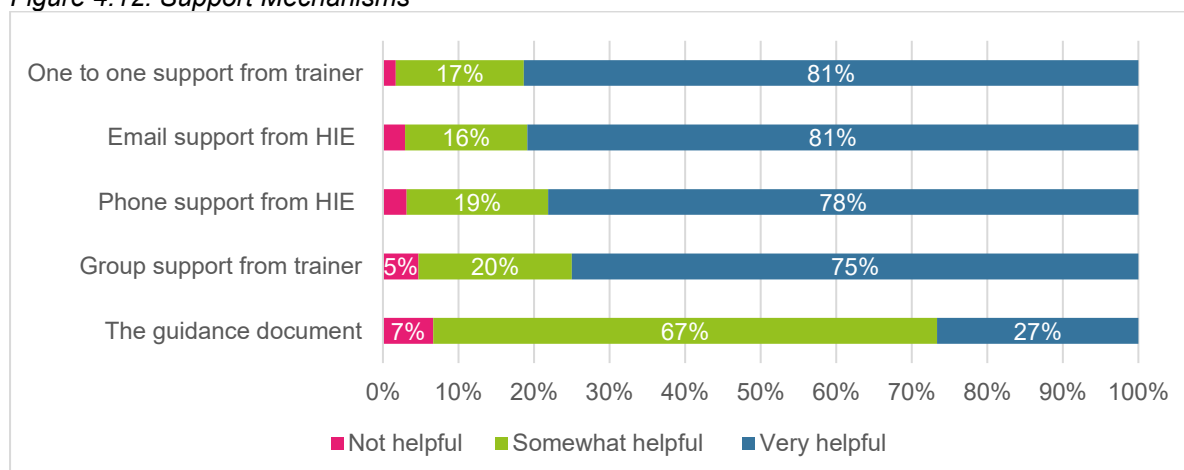
Figure 4.11: Administrative processes



Source: Evaluation Survey (endline), n=79

However, the support mechanisms received positive feedback, with the majority of these aspects rated as very helpful, as can be seen in Figure 4.12. Feedback was slightly more mixed on the guidance document, which the majority of participants rated as somewhat helpful (67%), very few participants rated it as not helpful however (7%).

Figure 4.12: Support Mechanisms



Source: Evaluation Survey (endline), n=68

65% of survey respondents provided feedback (n=51) when asked how the grant and expenses applications on MyHIE could be improved. Commonly cited areas of improvement are summarised below:

- **Usability and User-Friendliness of the portal:** 41% described the portal as difficult to use, not intuitive, or not user-friendly, particularly for people who are “not computer savvy”.
- **Complexity and navigation issues:** 35% felt the portal was overly complex, “clunky”, or confusing to navigate, with difficulties moving between sections or understanding where they were in the process.
- **Clarity of guidance, language and process:** 33% noted unclear guidance, unfamiliar terminology, and confusion about whether grants and expenses were applied for separately, as well as uncertainty about deadlines and required information.

- **Need for extra support (training / walkthroughs / 1:1 support):** 27% gave responses relating to requests for live demonstrations, walkthrough sessions, Zoom classes, or 1-to-1 support to help complete the application.
- **Process and administration streamlining:** 20% called for a simpler, more streamlined process with fewer steps, fewer communications, and clearer progress indicators.
- **Communication and responsiveness:** 18% reported difficulty getting questions answered, particularly through generic email addresses, and described a lack of timely responses when deadlines were approaching. One respondent highlighted it would be beneficial to have a named person to increase accountability.
- **Other themes included:** short timescales and deadlines for making claims; technical and access issues relating to document uploads and lack of access to IT; positive feedback relating to staff support both over the phone and in person.

It is important to note that, for many participants, this represented their first experience of applying for and managing public sector funding. While respondents identified usability and navigation challenges associated with the MyHIE portal, some of the complexity described also reflected the wider administrative and compliance requirements associated with public funding processes, including legal agreements, subsidy assessments, declarations, and evidence requirements. This suggests that some challenges related not only to the digital platform itself, but also to participants' unfamiliarity with the procedural and reporting expectations attached to publicly funded support.

4.5 Summary of Findings

Stakeholder and participant feedback highlights the following key findings in relation to programme design and delivery:

- **Appropriate and inclusive programme design:** The delivery model was well suited to early-stage entrepreneurs and underrepresented groups, addressing common barriers such as low confidence, caring responsibilities, health conditions, rurality and digital exclusion. Flexible delivery and a psychologically safe learning environment were consistently valued.
- **Blended delivery model viewed as effective:** The combination of workshops and one-to-one mentoring was widely regarded as a core strength of the programme. Mentoring, in particular, was identified as the most impactful element, supporting confidence-building, accountability and practical progression.
- **Strong engagement with training content:** Training content was rated very positively, with at least 85% of participants rating all areas as good or very good. Content on entrepreneurial mindset, branding and pitching, and idea generation and validation was especially well received.
- **Delivery adapted to participant needs:** Flexibility in pacing, attendance and format supported engagement among participants with complex circumstances. However, some respondents noted that mixed-stage cohorts reduced relevance for some sessions, reinforcing the importance of personalised mentoring.
- **Grant and expenses support reduced participation barriers:** Grants and expenses were widely viewed as critical enablers of participation and early business progression, particularly in addressing transport, financial and practical barriers.
- **Administrative processes created challenges:** The MyHIE portal and grant/expenses administration were frequently cited as difficult to navigate. Issues included complexity, unclear guidance, technical barriers and digital accessibility challenges, which disproportionately affected participants with lower digital confidence.

- **Strong support mitigated system challenges:** Despite administrative frustrations, HIE and delivery staff were consistently praised for being responsive, supportive and helpful in resolving issues and guiding participants through processes.
- **Areas for improvement identified:** Participants highlighted opportunities to strengthen delivery through longer programme timescales, more time between sessions to apply learning, greater focus on financial management and digital skills, and clearer, more accessible administrative systems.



Cohort 1 of Pathways to Start in Moray graduation photo. Photo credit: Leigh Meile/UHI Moray



Cohort 2 of Pathways to Start in Moray graduation photo. Photo credit: Leigh Meile/UHI Moray

5 Programme Outcomes

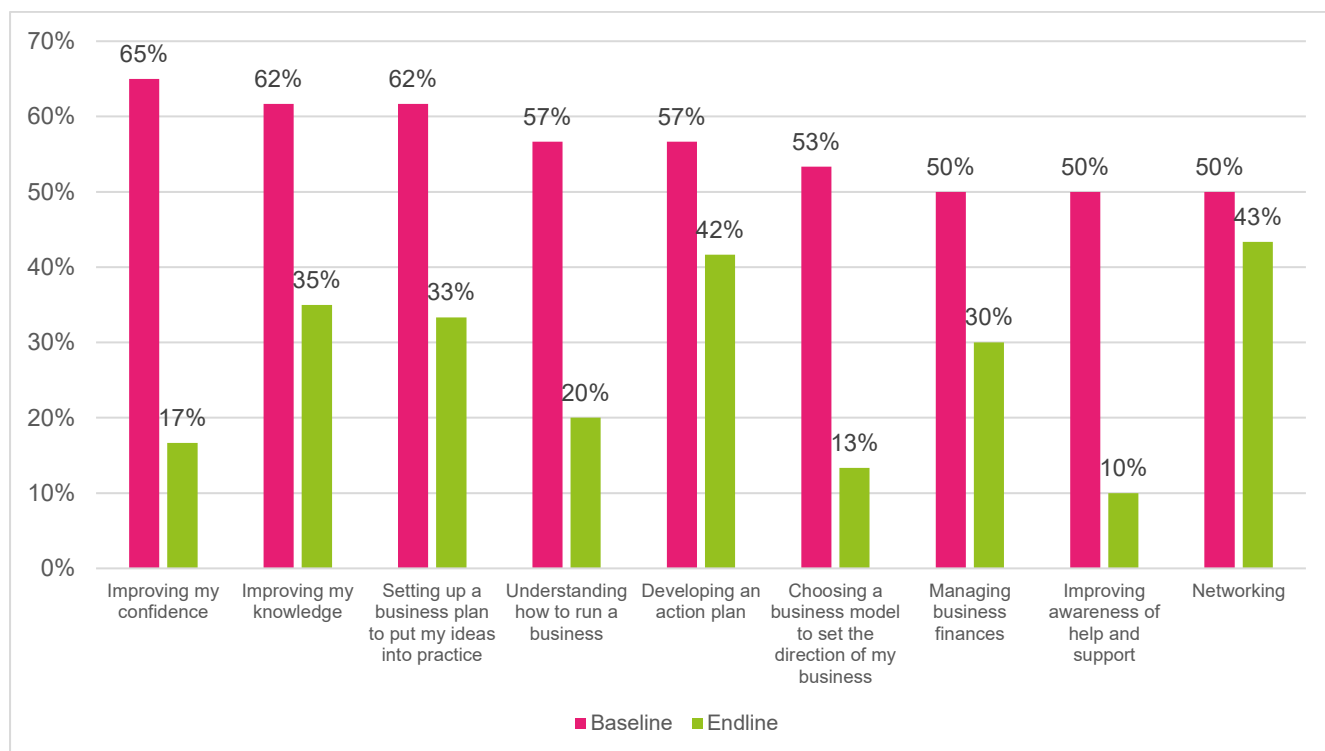
This chapter presents analysis of emerging programme outcomes and impacts. This is informed by an analysis of the programme surveys. This chapter is structured around the EQs set out in Table 1.1. As noted in section 1, due to the pilot nature of the Pathways to Start programme (9 months) and the timing of the evaluation, insufficient time has passed to allow the outcomes and impacts of the programme to be realised. As such, the outcomes and impacts identified in this evaluation should be treated as a snapshot of emerging evidence and not an assessment of the full potential of the Pathways to Start programme. Due to limited monitoring data in relation to outcomes, this chapter draws upon the stakeholder interviews and evaluation survey. This chapter includes an assessment of additionality in section 5.5.

5.1 Personal Development Outcomes

Participants were asked, via online surveys conducted at the start and end of the Pathways to Start programme, to identify the areas in which they felt they needed support, spanning both entrepreneurial capability (e.g. confidence and knowledge) and practical aspects of business development.

Figure 5.1 shows that there was a significant decrease in required support in almost all categories, other than networking, where the decrease was more minor (7%). The category which saw the largest decrease was “Improving my confidence”, which was the category most commonly cited as requiring support in the baseline survey.

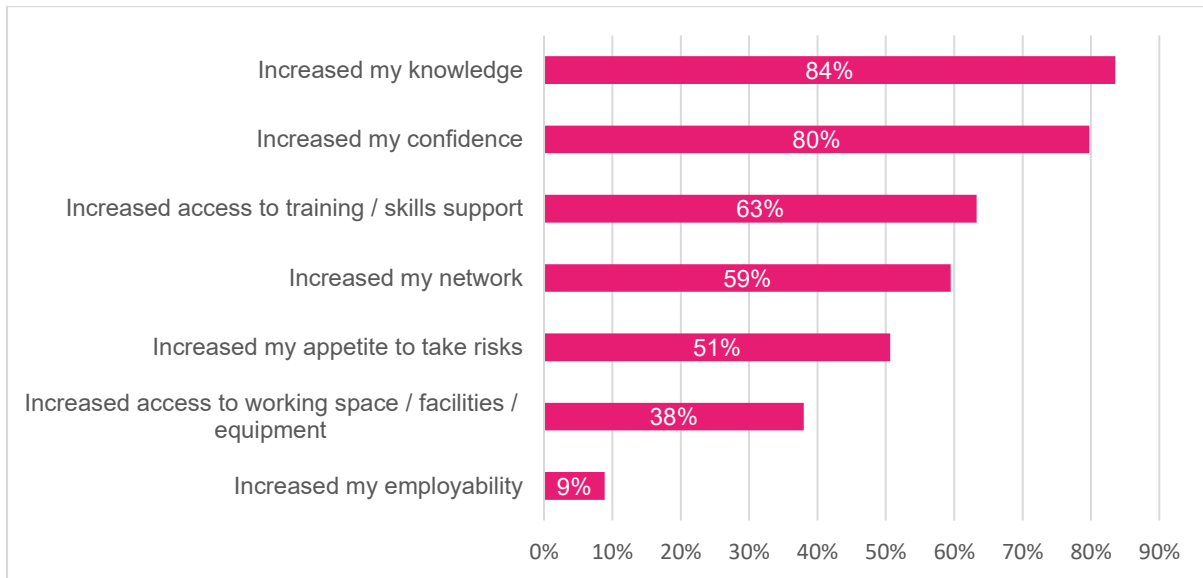
Figure 5.1: Priority areas of support



Source: Evaluation Surveys (baseline and endline), n=60

The surveys suggest strong achievement of personal development outcomes, as presented in Figure 5.2. High proportions of survey respondents stated that they experienced an increase in knowledge (84%, n=66) and confidence (80%, n=63). Respondents also reported improved access to training / skills support, networks and appetite to take risks. Relatively few respondents stated that they increased their employability (9%, n=7).

Figure 5.2: Personal development outcomes

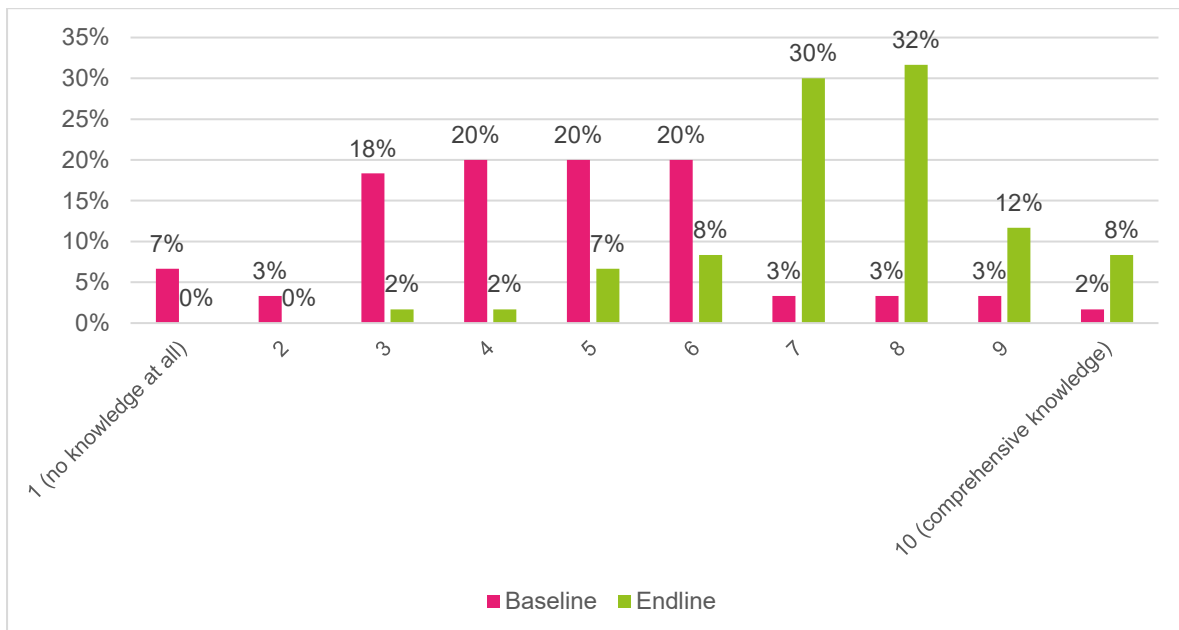


Source: Evaluation Survey (endline), n=79

5.1.1 Increased Knowledge

Respondents to the baseline and end of programme surveys were asked to rate their knowledge of running a business on a scale of 1 to 10. As highlighted in Figure 5.3, analysis of the two surveys shows a clear increase in knowledge. There is a clear shift towards the higher ratings, with increases in the number of participants selecting from 7-10 and decreases in all ratings below that. Additionally, the most common rating at baseline was 4/5/6 all of which were selected by 20% of respondents, whereas the most common rating at the end of the Pathways to Start programme was much improved at 8.

Figure 5.3: Increased Knowledge of running a business

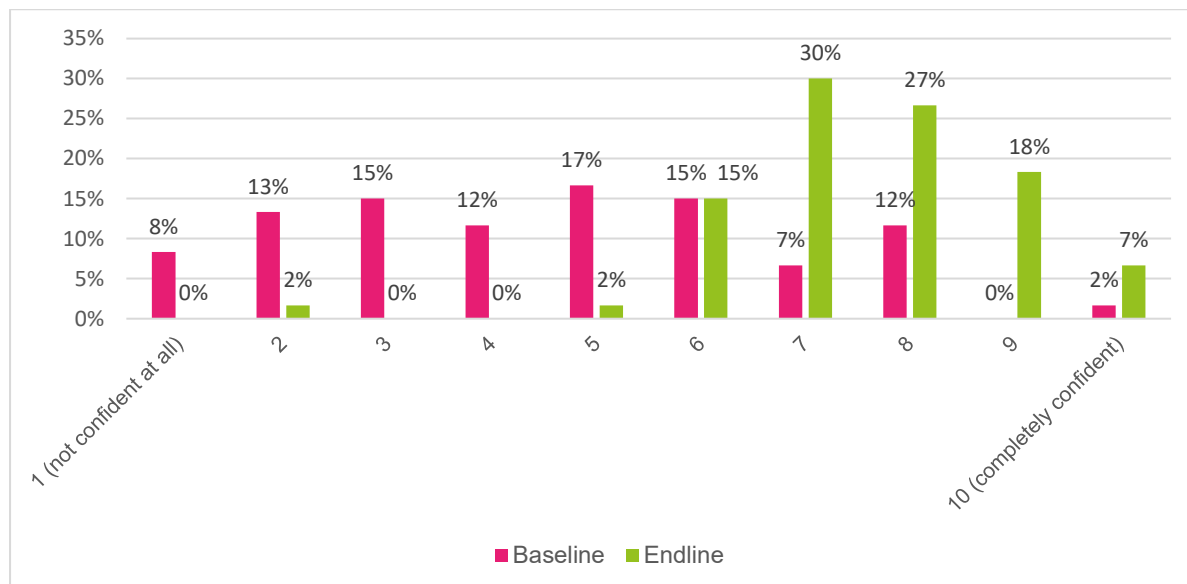


Source: Evaluation Surveys (baseline and endline), n=60

5.1.2 Increased Confidence

As presented in Figure 5.4, an assessment of change in confidence in running a business also revealed significant improvement. There was a shift towards the higher ratings, with higher numbers of participants rating their confidence between 7-10. There were also very low percentages of participants rating their confidence below a 6 at the end of the Pathways to Start programme, with 2% of participants selecting 2 and a further 2% selecting 5.

Figure 5.4: Increased Confidence in running a business



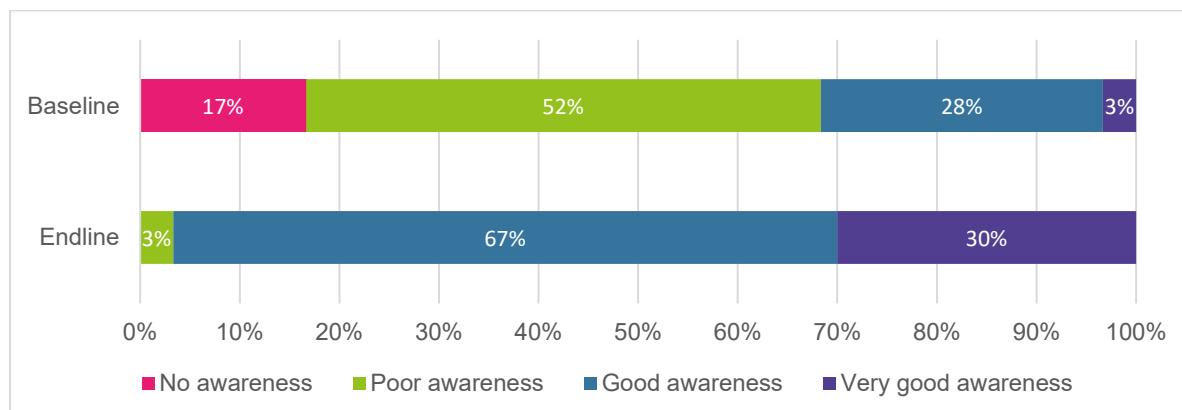
Source: Evaluation Surveys (baseline and endline), n=60

This is illustrated in the case studies (Appendix 3), where participants describe increased confidence, motivation, and clarity as a result of programme participation.

5.2 Access and Signposting Outcomes

Survey respondents were asked to rate their awareness of other business support services at both baseline and endline. The responses, as illustrate by Figure 5.5, demonstrate a clear shift towards better awareness levels, with 97% of participants (n=58) rating their awareness at either good or very good at endline, in comparison to only 31% at baseline (n=19). Additionally, no participants stated that they had no awareness of other support services at endline.

Figure 5.5: Awareness of business support services

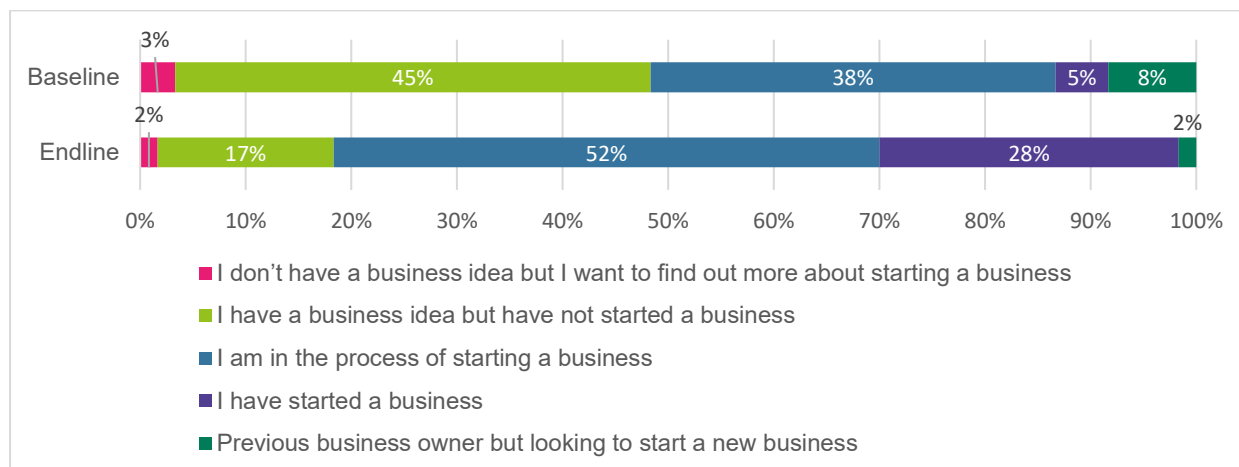


Source: Evaluation Surveys (baseline and endline), n=60

5.3 Entrepreneurial Outcomes

As highlighted in Figure 5.6, after the programme an increased proportion of survey respondents reported that they were either in the process of starting a business or having started a business, while there was also a decrease in the number of participants which have a business idea but have not started a business. This suggests that the Pathways to Start programme helped individuals progress in their business journey.

Figure 5.6: Business Journey

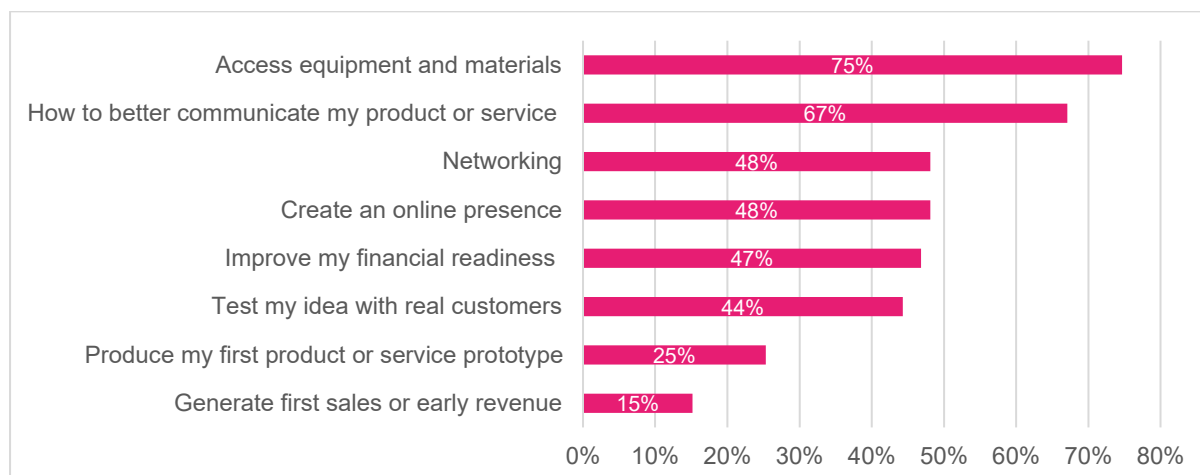


Source: Evaluation Surveys (baseline and endline), n=60

Figure 5.7 highlights the entrepreneurial outcomes reported by survey respondents, specifically the actions they have taken to develop their business ideas as a result of the Pathways to Start programme (e.g. testing ideas with customers, developing prototypes, generating early sales, and building an online presence).

As shown, 75% of respondents were able to secure equipment or materials needed to start trading (n=59), whilst 67% (n=53) were supported to improve how they communicate with customers. However, a relatively low proportion of participants stated they generated first sales or early revenues (15%, n=12) indicating most participants were still pre-trade at the end of the programme.

Figure 5.7: Entrepreneurial outcomes

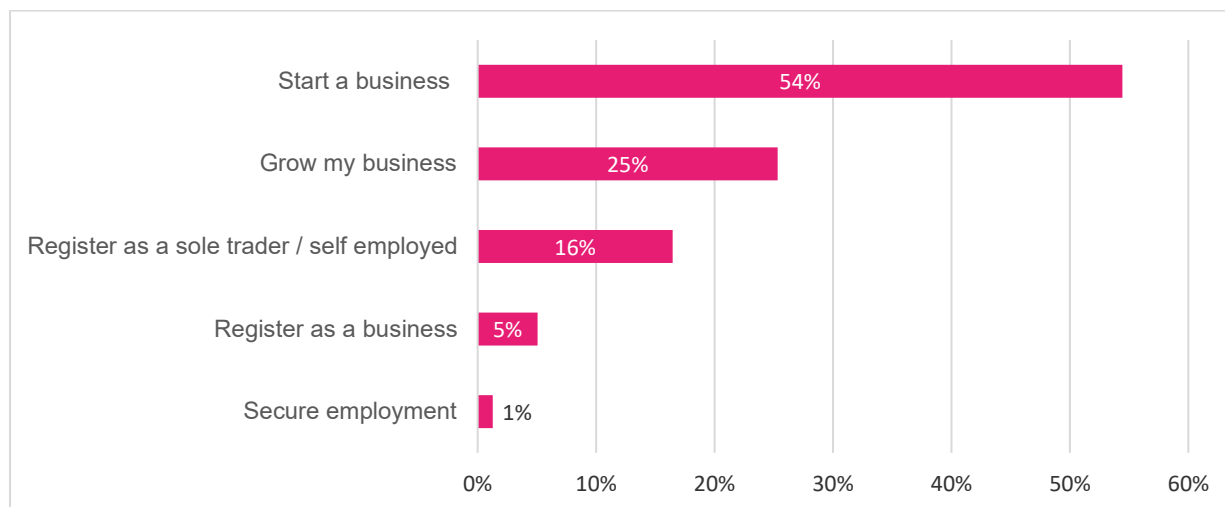


Source: Evaluation Survey (endline), n=79

Respondents were asked what business outcomes they achieved (Figure 5.8) as a result of their participation in the Pathways to Start programme. The results highlight that 54% of respondents have started a business as a result of their participation in the programme (n=43), with a further 25% of respondents reporting that they were supported to grow their business (n=20). 16% of respondents

registered with HMRC as a sole trader / self-employed (n=13) and 5% registered with HMRC as a business (n=4).

Figure 5.8: Business Outcomes



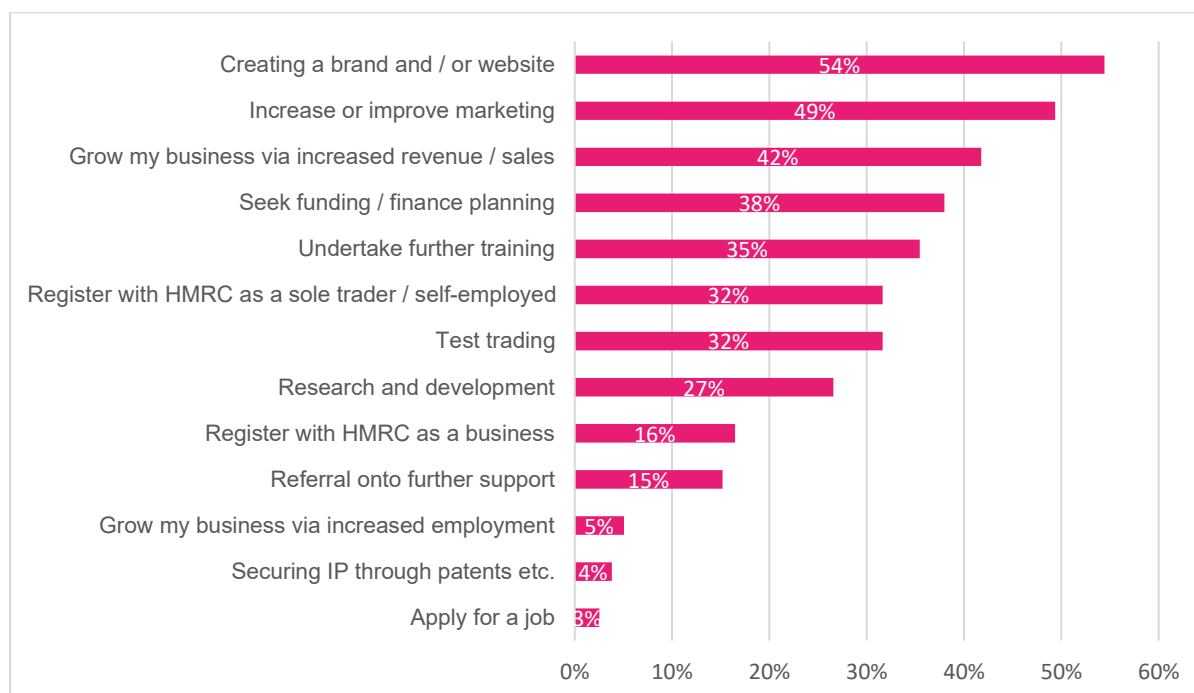
Source: Evaluation Survey (endline), n=79

Participant case studies (Appendix 3) further illustrate how the Pathways to Start programme supported progression from early-stage ideas to structured planning and, in some cases, preparation for launch.

5.4 Participant next steps

Figure 5.9 identifies the reported next steps by programme participants, as stated within survey responses. 54% identified creating a brand and/or website, 49% reported plans to increase or improve their marketing and 42% indicated an intention to grow their business through increased revenue or sales. A low proportion of respondents stated that they were going to apply for a job (3%).

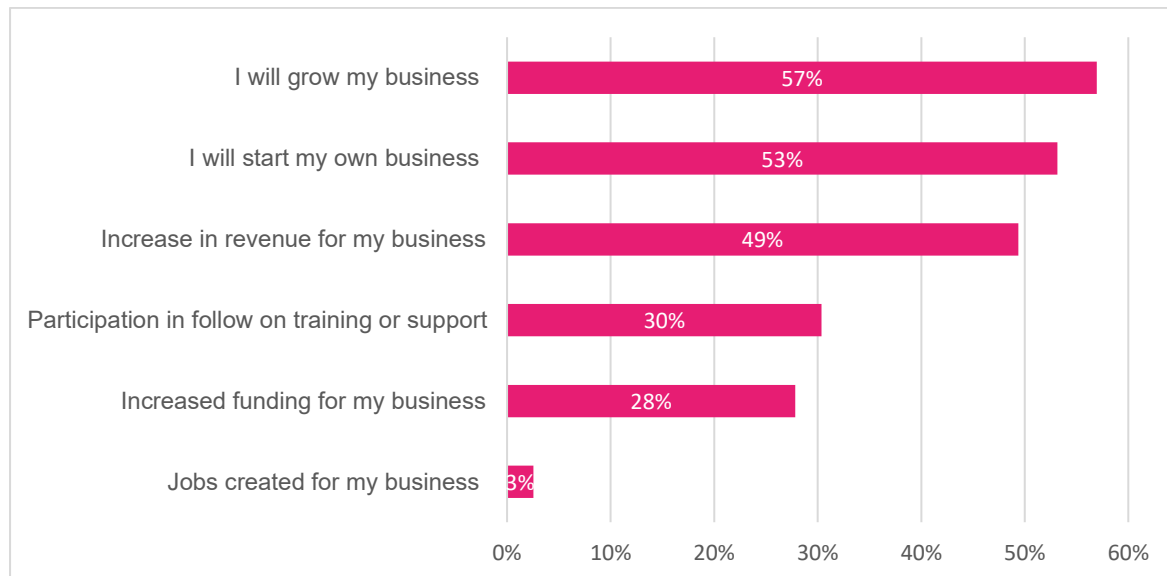
Figure 5.9: Participant Next Steps



Source: Evaluation Survey (endline), n=79

In the next 12 months, 57% of participants stated that they expect to grow their business, 53% expect to start a business and 49% expect to increase revenue. These responses demonstrate confidence in businesses and business ideas. 30% of respondents stated they expect to participate in follow on training or support.

Figure 5.10: Expected Outcomes – 12 months

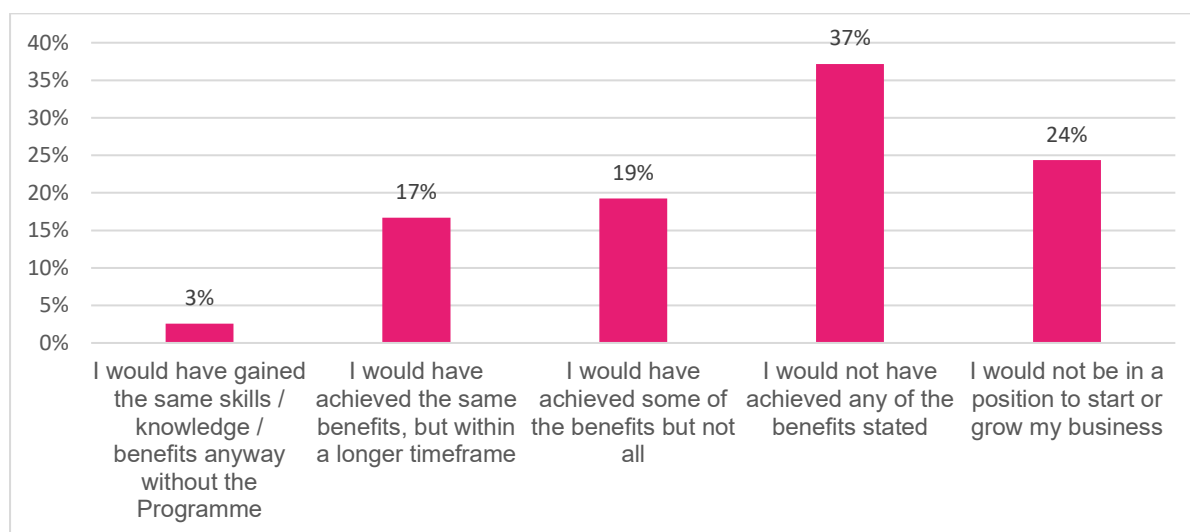


Source: Evaluation Survey (endline), n=79

5.5 Programme Additionality

Survey respondents were asked to consider what would have happened in the absence of the mentoring support and the grant received by the Pathways to Start programme. As illustrated in Figure 5.11, 37% of respondents stated they would not have achieved any of the benefits stated below, and a further 24% stating they would not be able to start or grow their business. The results clearly demonstrate that the programme provided additionality either by achieving benefits that would not have been possible without the programme or the benefits were achieved faster.

Figure 5.11: Counterfactual



Source: Evaluation Survey (endline), n=79

This is further evidenced by participant case studies (Appendix 3), which demonstrate that, in the absence of the Pathways to Start programme, participants would have been unlikely to progress, reinforcing its role in enabling movement from inertia to action.

5.6 Summary

Overall, the analysis suggests that the Pathways to Start programme has delivered strong short-term outcomes in terms of confidence, capability and access to support leading to participants setting up new businesses or growing their existing business. These benefits would either not have been realised without the programme, or it would have taken longer to achieve for some. Stakeholders emphasised that longer-term outcomes are contingent on continuity of support and integration into mainstream business support programmes and local partnership beyond the pilot.

Salient points to conclude are as follows:

- **Strong personal development outcomes:** Comparison of baseline and end-of-programme survey responses shows substantial improvements in confidence and knowledge. Reductions in self-reported support needs across most areas demonstrate meaningful progress over the delivery period.
- **Improved access to enterprise support:** The Pathways to Start programme substantially increased participants' awareness of, and engagement with, the wider enterprise support ecosystem. Awareness of available business support rose sharply, with almost all participants reporting good or very good awareness at programme end.
- **Evidence of unmet entrepreneurial demand:** All participants entered the Pathways to Start programme with a business idea, demonstrating a clear pool of untapped entrepreneurial potential and highlighting the programme's role in enabling participants to move from concept to action.
- **Positive entrepreneurial progression:** Participants demonstrated clear movement along the business journey, with fewer participants remaining at the "idea only" stage and increased proportions either starting, growing or actively preparing to start a business.
- **Early business outcomes achieved:** A majority of participants reported having started a business as a result of the Pathways to Start programme, with around one-third also indicating business growth. Participants identified a range of practical entrepreneurial outcomes, including securing equipment, improving customer communication, developing an online presence, and enhancing financial readiness.
- **Next steps show continued momentum:** Participants identified clear and realistic next steps, including branding and website development, marketing improvements and revenue growth, indicating sustained intent to progress beyond the Pathways to Start programme.
- **Encouraging short-term outlook:** Looking ahead, a majority of participants expected to start a business, grow an existing business and/or increase revenue within the next 12 months, reflecting confidence in the viability of their ideas and plans.
- **Strong additionality:** Counterfactual evidence suggests the Pathways to Start programme played a decisive role in participants' progress, with many stating they would not have achieved similar outcomes - or progressed at all - without Pathways to Start.
- **Emerging socio-economic benefits:** While longer-term impacts are not yet observable, early indicators include increased likelihood of sustainable self-employment, early trading activity and engagement with follow-on support.



John Macdonald from Business Gateway Argyll presents about business support at final celebration event in Oban for Argyll cohorts. Picture credit: LJF Photography.



Pathways to Start participants had the opportunity to showcase their business and product ranges and the final celebration event in Oban. Picture credit: LJF Photography.

6 Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

The Pathways to Start pilot has demonstrated strong relevance, effectiveness and additionality as an early-stage enterprise intervention for underrepresented groups in the Highlands and Islands. Our evaluation highlights the following:

Clear alignment with policy objectives and strategic need

The Pathways to Start programme was firmly grounded in the Scottish Government's *Pathways* agenda and HIE's inclusive growth priorities, responding directly to long-standing structural and personal barriers faced by underrepresented groups. Evidence indicates that Pathways to Start filled an important gap between employability support and mainstream enterprise provision, particularly for individuals who were not yet ready to engage with Business Gateway or equivalent services. Interview evidence indicates that longer delivery timelines would have supported participants better to complete each step of the training programme from onboarding to training and grant applications.

Strong engagement with the intended target group

The participant profile closely aligned with programme objectives, reaching high proportions of women, people on low incomes, individuals with disabilities or long-term health conditions, carers and neurodivergent participants. Many participants faced multiple and intersecting barriers, including low confidence, poor awareness of support, digital exclusion, caring responsibilities and rural isolation. Recruitment and retention levels indicate that the offer resonated strongly with the target audience.

Effective and inclusive delivery model

The blended delivery model, combining workshops with intensive one-to-one mentoring, was widely regarded as the Pathways to Start programme's core strength. Mentoring emerged as the most impactful element, particularly for participants requiring confidence-building, reassurance and personalised progression. Flexible delivery formats ensured accessibility across rural geographies, while place-based adaptation between Argyll and Moray reflected local needs and constraints.

High-quality training and support

Training content was rated very positively, particularly around entrepreneurial mindset, idea development, branding and pitching. Workshops provided structure, peer learning and normalisation of challenges, while tailored mentoring mitigated issues arising from mixed cohort stages. Grant and expenses support played a critical enabling role, directly addressing practical and financial barriers to participation and progression.

Strong short-term outcomes and early entrepreneurial progression

Comparison of baseline and endline surveys demonstrates substantial improvements in confidence, knowledge and readiness to progress. Participants showed clear movement along the entrepreneurial journey, with a majority reporting business start-up or early growth as a direct result of participation. Counterfactual evidence strongly suggests that these outcomes would not have occurred, or would have taken significantly longer, without the Pathways to Start programme.

Constraints associated with short pilot delivery

While the pilot delivered strong early outcomes, stakeholders consistently noted that compressed mobilisation and delivery timescales constrained outreach, sequencing of support and the ability to track longer-term outcomes. Administrative complexity, particularly relating to the MyHIE portal and grant processes, created friction for some participants, disproportionately affecting those with lower digital confidence.

Early indicators of wider socio-economic benefit

Although it is too early to evidence sustained impacts such as job creation, early indicators suggest increased likelihood of sustainable self-employment, early trading activity and stronger integration into the enterprise support ecosystem. Participants stated next steps and expectations for the next 12 months point to continued momentum beyond the Pathways to Start programme.

6.2 Recommendations

Reflecting on the learnings and evidence from the Pathways to Start pilot, the following recommendations outline considerations for how future entrepreneurship programmes targeting underrepresented groups can be scaled across Scotland and support people from all backgrounds to start their business and engage with the Scottish Entrepreneurial Ecosystem.

1. **Continue and scale Pathways-style pre-start support for underrepresented groups**
Strong outcomes, high additionality and clear demand support the case for continued investment in tailored pre-start enterprise support. Future provision should retain a strong focus on confidence-building, mindset development and personalised progression for individuals not yet ready for mainstream start-up services. The findings highlighted the training programme attracted participants who already had business ideas but needed support to make them reality.
2. **Move towards multi-year funding and longer delivery timescales**
Future iterations should move away from short, single-year pilots toward multi-year funding models with longer delivery windows. Evidence indicates that compressed mobilisation and delivery timelines constrained outreach and reduced opportunities to sequence support as effectively. In addition, delivery timescales and scheduling should be designed to align with participants' wider responsibilities, such as caring commitments, health needs, and employment. This could include more flexible pacing, spacing of sessions, and opportunities for participants to apply learning between sessions. This pilot of the programme saw some late entries, who expressed issues with getting up to speed. Having cohorts run consecutively would likely avoid this entirely. Where late entries do happen, a more structured onboarding process, i.e., recorded sessions, an induction pack, etc., could more adequately prepare them and bring them up to speed.
3. **Retain and strengthen the blended delivery model, with greater responsiveness to participant stage**
The combination of workshops and one-to-one mentoring should remain a core design feature, as evidence consistently identifies mentoring as the most impactful element of support. One-to-one mentoring should remain core to the delivery model, with sufficient time and flexibility to respond to diverse participant needs. Evidence suggests this is the most critical element for building confidence, sustaining engagement and enabling progression among those facing multiple barriers. However, interview evidence suggests that mixed-stage cohorts occasionally reduced relevance for some participants. Within longer delivery models, this could be addressed through light-touch segmentation, tiered content, or more stage-responsive pathways, while retaining flexibility to tailor delivery by geography. Both in person and online delivery modes were effective and each mode should be considered when designing place-based approaches and targeting different groups of people.
4. **Simplify grant and expenses processes for participants**
Grant and expenses support is an essential element of the Pathways to Start programme, however for many participants this is their first experience of engaging with public funding. Some of the challenges they reported reflect usability issues but also the inherent due diligence requirement that come with public funding. As such, future delivery should account for this, with a focus on improving accessibility and participant support. Options may include simplified processes, clearer language, alternative offline or supported routes, and structured walkthrough sessions delivered alongside training, while maintaining necessary processes to comply with public funding due diligence.
5. **Introduce an early onboarding diagnostic for digital access and support needs**
Implement a light-touch diagnostic at onboarding to identify digital connectivity, device access, digital confidence and specific accessibility requirements. Provide early mitigations in advance where needed (e.g. equipment via expenses, assisted completion, alternative formats). Interview evidence shows that unaddressed digital barriers created avoidable friction for participants and delivery teams and risked disengagement.
6. **Streamline participant communications**
To reduce participant overwhelm, communications should be rationalised (for example through a clear, consolidated weekly update), alongside the provision of a named point of

contact for administrative and grant-related queries. Interview feedback highlighted the burden placed on participants by multiple systems, fragmented communications and a high volume of emails.

7. **Inform programme design through co-production with local delivery partners and beneficiaries**
Future programmes would benefit from deeper co-production at the design stage with local delivery partners and organisations that have trusted relationships with underrepresented communities. Involving these organisations early can help reduce duplication with existing provision, improve cultural and contextual relevance, mitigate participant risk, and strengthen outreach to individuals furthest from mainstream enterprise support. Furthermore, coproduction with the beneficiaries the programme seeks to engage would allow for a more bespoke design of future rounds around the needs of the individuals.
8. **Embed specialist support for transitions from Universal Credit to self-employment**
The evaluation highlights that benefits-related uncertainty remains a significant barrier for some participants. Future delivery could refer to or embed specialist welfare and in-work benefits advice (particularly around transitions from Universal Credit into self-employment) within core support. This would help prevent financial harm, increase confidence in decision-making, and ensure participants can make informed choices about entrepreneurship routes.
9. **Enhance support for financial management and digital skills**
Future programmes should place greater emphasis on financial literacy and practical digital skills, responding directly to participant feedback, which indicated strong demand for additional support, particularly as individuals progress from idea development to starting up their business. Elements of this support was available, however future programmes could strengthen this support and incorporate additional practical content This could include additional workshops, practical tools or optional specialist sessions alongside clear referral pathways into more advanced support.
10. **Introduce proportionate targets / KPIs**
Given the pilot nature of this programme, a formal set of output and outcome KPIs was not established, beyond operational targets such as participant recruitment. For future delivery, the introduction of a small number of proportionate KPIs would support monitoring of programme success. These could include progress indicators such as the percentage developing a business plan or taking steps towards start up, referrals into further support, and early outcomes such as business starts or continued engagement 3-6 months post-programme. Aligning KPIs to existing programme outputs and intended entrepreneurial outcomes would support more consistent monitoring of delivery performance, improve the measurement of success across delivery areas, and strengthen learning about what works.
11. **Strengthen post-programme transition and progression pathways through structured follow-up**
Beyond immediate referral at programme completion, future delivery should incorporate a structured follow-up mechanism, such as a planned check-in at around six months post-programme, focused on participants who remain at an early or pre-trading stage. This would provide an opportunity to assess progress, re-engage individuals who have stalled, and offer targeted signposting or re-referrals into appropriate mainstream support once they are ready. In addition, targeted post-programme support should be provided to help early-stage participants move from being “prepared” to taking first trading steps, through short, practical sessions covering core start-up actions such as registering with HMRC, opening a business bank account, pricing and invoicing, and initiating customer activity. This transitional support would bridge the gap to Business Gateway provision and help convert confidence-building gains into tangible trading activity, particularly for those with limited prior exposure to business systems.
12. **Use mentor judgement and early diagnostics to identify and track scalable businesses**
Light-touch diagnostics at key points (e.g. onboarding, mid-point and end) could be complemented by mentor judgement to identify emerging indicators of scalability such as appetite for growth, wider market reach, or commercially viable business models. Participants identified in this way should be flagged within HIE’s participant management systems, enabling segmentation and ongoing tracking. This would allow HIE to distinguish

between valuable confidence-building outcomes (appropriate for many participants) and cases with potential for business growth. Scalable participants should benefit from managed transitions to growth-focused support rather than relying on end-point signposting alone. Longitudinal follow ups (e.g. 6–12 months post-programme) could better evidence longer-term business and economic outcomes.

13. Maintain place-based flexibility within a consistent national framework

While the core model is transferable, delivery should continue to be adapted to local contexts, balancing online and in-person elements to reflect geography, infrastructure and participant needs across different areas.

14. Target recruitment and messaging for younger age groups

To address lower engagement among younger age groups (particularly those aged below 35), it is recommended that future programme recruitment includes more targeted outreach and tailored messaging for young people. This could involve partnerships with youth organisations, colleges, or digital platforms popular with younger audiences, as well as reviewing programme branding and content to ensure relevance for early-career or first-time entrepreneurs. Adapting recruitment strategies in this way will help ensure the programme is accessible and appealing to potential young entrepreneurs, strengthening overall reach and impact.

Appendices

- Appendix 1: Programme Information
- Appendix 2: Theory of Change detail
- Appendix 3: Case Studies
- Appendix 4: Surveys



7 Appendix 1: Programme Information

7.1 Rationale

The Scottish Government has requested HIE to run a programme to deliver actions from their Pathways report [Pathways: A new approach for women in entrepreneurship - gov.scot](https://www.gov.scot/publications/pathways-a-new-approach-for-women-in-entrepreneurship/pages/1-to-30.aspx) to increase the number of female and other underrepresented groups starting up businesses in Scotland.

South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE) previously ran a pilot programme aligned with these goals. Building on SOSE's experience and in collaboration with partners, HIE designed a tailored pilot ("Pathways to Start") for the Highlands and Islands, reflecting the region's unique challenges. The programme was delivered between November 2025 and March 2026 in Argyll and Bute (excluding Helensburgh and Lomond) and Moray.

The Pathways to Start programme was delivered to support people from underrepresented groups to become entrepreneurs. The support was primarily aimed at pre-start entrepreneurs, although it also included some early-stage businesses. HIE delivered the programme in Argyll and Bute and Moray to fill the gap prior to Business Gateway support, with participants referred onto onward support services at the end of the programme to further develop their ideas. The focus of the programme was to enhance access to enterprise support and reduce misconceptions around starting a business, guiding participants through the early stages of idea and business development, with a strong emphasis on developing an entrepreneurial mindset.

7.2 Project Overview

7.2.1 Background

The Pathways to Start programme supported underrepresented groups in entrepreneurship (may include women, young people, people with neurodiversity or disability, carers, care experienced young people, refugees, ethnic minorities, ex-military veterans, ex-offenders, people on low incomes, people located in very rural areas and operating in or with minority languages such as Gaelic or Scots, etc.) to develop their entrepreneurial mindset, develop business ideas and access the mainstream business support system.

The Pathways to Start programme aims to inspire participants to increase their ambition, confidence and capability to develop an entrepreneurial mindset and enter pathways for starting a business through a programme of entrepreneurial training and mentoring tailored towards underrepresented groups/individuals and their needs. The Pathways to Start programme delivered:

- Targeted marketing and promotional campaign to promote the programme across Argyll and Bute and Moray and within the Scottish Entrepreneurial Ecosystem
- Outreach and training in Argyll and Bute (excluding Helensburgh and Lomond) and Moray areas. This will be delivered by third party suppliers.
- Grants of up to **£1,000** per business for further training, purchase of equipment, test trading etc. This will be delivered by HIE staff.
- Discretionary grants to individuals to address any barriers accessing the programme (childcare costs and travel) up to **£500 per participant**. This will be delivered by HIE staff.
- Video case studies of participants. This will be delivered by a third party supplier.

7.2.2 Timescales for delivery

Table 7.1 provides an overview of the timescales for delivery.

Table 7.1: Timescales for delivery

Timeline	Stage/Tasks
20 October 2025	Contract Start
October – December 2025	Outreach and application

Timeline	Stage/Tasks
1 December 2025	Training programme content developed
5 January – 15 March 2026	Entrepreneurship training delivery, referrals and last monthly report
20 March 2026	Final report and invoices
31 March 2026	Contract End

7.3 Programme Content

7.3.1 Programme Design

Programme design drew on best practice in entrepreneurship support to build confidence and capability, particularly among underrepresented groups, and embedded accessibility, diversity and inclusion throughout.

The Pathways to Start programme design phase took place in the first two weeks of delivery. The respective delivery partners were responsible for providing:

- Outreach and stakeholder engagement plans;
- Plan for delivery and content of training programme produced by delivery partners; and
- Communication processes with outreach and training participants, with special consideration to protect individuals and Special Category Personal Data.

7.3.2 Outreach, stakeholder engagement and participant recruitment

Each delivery partner was responsible for at least 5 in-person and 1 online event to recruit underrepresented groups. Delivery partners engaged with Local authorities, colleges, third sector, and community groups to help with outreach and recruitment.

7.3.3 Training content and support

Training content consists largely of the following areas:

- Developing an entrepreneurial mindset which should include meta skills development such as building resilience, dealing with challenges, problem-solving, creativity, leadership and communication etc;
- Overview of the Scottish Entrepreneurial Ecosystem (with HIE support);
- Idea generation and validation;
- Introduction to technology and AI tools for business/idea development;
- Early-stage business planning (including financial planning); and
- Branding, pitching, and presentations, ending with a celebration

Support provided across the lots consists of:

- Online and in person workshops
- Peer-to-peer support within cohorts.
- Personal development through 1:1 support via both mentoring and expert help (minimum 6 hours per participant).
- Each participant receives a tailored Action and Implementation Plan.
- Referrals to mainstream business support (e.g., Business Gateway) after programme completion.
- £1,000 competitive grant for business idea development or training (for programme completers).
- £500 access / expenses grant per participant.
- Inclusive and accessible adjustments for diverse needs (e.g., neurodiversity, language, rural access).

8 Appendix 2: Theory of Change risks and assumptions

This chapter sets out the key assumptions and risks that underpin the ToC for the Pathways to Start programme. The assumptions outline the essential conditions that must be in place for activities to operate effectively and for intended outputs and outcomes to be achieved. The risks highlight the potential operational, contextual, and participant-related barriers that may prevent progress or limit the realisation of expected results. Together, these provide a transparent foundation for understanding the dependencies and vulnerabilities inherent in the programme's delivery.

8.1 Assumptions

The following assumptions set out the conditions that must hold true for the programme's activities to function as intended and for the expected outcomes to be achieved.

- **Effectiveness of delivery partners:** It is assumed that programme delivery—training, mentoring, outreach, and support—will be consistently high-quality. Delivery partners are expected to have the required skills, experience, and capacity to engage underrepresented groups and tailor support appropriately.
- **Participants' baseline capability and readiness:** It is assumed that many participants will enter the programme from a relatively low starting point in terms of business knowledge, confidence, networks, and resources. Programme design and pacing therefore assume a need for foundational learning and confidence-building.
- **Participant engagement and community responsiveness:** It is assumed that underrepresented groups in Argyll and Moray will respond positively to the Pathways to Start programme, showing willingness to engage, participate fully, and continue through the offered support pathway.
- **Accessibility and suitability of the delivery model:** It is assumed that the blended and locally adapted delivery model will remain appropriate for the region, successfully reducing barriers such as geography, caring responsibilities, digital access, and confidence.
- **Effective outreach and recruitment:** It is assumed that outreach partners, community networks, and communications channels will continue to reach the intended audiences and maintain steady participant recruitment.
- **Collaboration across the ecosystem:** It is assumed that HIE, delivery organisations, and community partners will continue to coordinate effectively, share information, and adapt based on ongoing learning and feedback.
- **Economic stability in Argyll and Moray:** It is assumed that the regional economic environment will remain sufficiently stable to support early-stage entrepreneurial activity and provide opportunities for progression after the Pathways to Start programme.
- **Sustained government and policy support:** It is assumed that Scottish Government commitment to supporting underrepresented groups in entrepreneurship will continue, providing ongoing policy alignment, legitimacy, and resource stability for the work.
- **Post-programme progression pathways:** It is assumed that wider enterprise support organisations will maintain the capacity to receive referrals and support participants beyond programme's duration.
- **Reliable data collection and feedback:** It is assumed that monitoring processes will remain consistent and that participants will provide accurate feedback, enabling the programme to track progress and make informed improvements.

8.2 Risks

The Pathways to Start programme is influenced by a range of operational, economic, behavioural, and contextual risks. These risks could hinder participant progress or limit the achievement of intended outcomes.

- **Operational and Delivery Risks:** There is a risk that delivery partners may face capacity pressures or inconsistent delivery quality. Tight timelines and staffing constraints may affect delivery effectiveness.
- **Participant Recruitment and Engagement Risks:** Under-represented groups may not engage at expected levels or may disengage during the programme due to barriers such as confidence, caring responsibilities, transport limitations, health conditions, or digital constraints.
- **Risk of Non-Completion:** Participants may not be able to complete the full pathway due to competing responsibilities, changes in personal circumstances, health issues, or limited time availability. Reduced completion rates could weaken progression to outcomes.
- **Risk of Limited Benefit Due to Personal Constraints:** Some participants may struggle to make full use of the support provided because of ongoing time constraints, workload pressures, caring responsibilities, or other personal barriers. Even if support is available and high-quality, external factors may limit uptake and practical application.
- **Accessibility and Suitability Risks:** The blended delivery model may not fully meet all participants' needs, particularly if digital access issues, learning style differences, or cultural and language barriers are not adequately addressed.
- **General Business Environment Risks:** New entrepreneurs face inherent risks such as uncertain market demand, competition, shifts in customer behaviour, supply-chain issues, and challenges in accessing finance. These external risks may limit participants' ability to translate learning into viable business activity.
- **Regional and Economic Risks:** Economic instability or limited local market opportunities in Argyll and Moray could reduce the feasibility of new business creation or early-stage growth.
- **Policy and Funding Risks:** Shifts in Scottish Government priorities, policy direction, or resource allocation could affect programme continuity or the support ecosystem for under-represented groups.
- **Ecosystem and Referral Pathway Risks:** If onward support organisations (e.g., Business Gateway, local mentoring networks) experience capacity limitations, participants may encounter challenges progressing after the Pathways to Start programme ends.
- **Monitoring and Data Quality Risks:** Inconsistent data collection or incomplete participant feedback may limit the Pathways to Start programme's ability to evaluate effectiveness, identify challenges, or adapt delivery in real time.

9 Appendix 3: Case Studies

9.1 Case Study 1

Progressing a rural childcare business toward launch

Participant profile (Argyll)

The participant is a rural crofter developing an outdoor after-school childcare service to address unmet demand within their local community. At programme entry, they had progressed beyond the idea stage but had not yet secured the regulatory approvals required to operate as a registered childcare provider.

They became aware of the Pathways to Start programme through word of mouth. After an initial unsuccessful application, the participant was notified by HIE of a place becoming available following a drop out and subsequently joined the programme.

Challenges

Despite having a viable and well-developed concept, progress had stalled due to the complexity of regulatory requirements, particularly the application process for statutory childcare registration. The participant also experienced administrative overload, difficulty prioritising tasks alongside existing work and caring responsibilities, and digital and connectivity constraints associated with living in a remote rural area. Collectively, these barriers led to repeated delays despite sustained motivation to proceed.

Support received

Personalised mentoring was identified as the most valuable element of support. This focused on breaking down a lengthy and complex regulatory application into manageable steps, sequencing actions, setting realistic deadlines, and establishing accountability—directly addressing the primary barrier to progress.

Group workshops supported peer learning and networking with participants from other rural communities facing similar challenges related to isolation, transport, and infrastructure. Although online connectivity issues were experienced in this case, the remote format was deemed preferable to avoid lengthy travel. While the workshops overall were perceived less critical given the participant's relatively advanced starting position, practical input on pricing and reassurance from peers were considered beneficial.

Grant funding was used to fund fencing for the outdoor school facility – essential for care inspectorate approval.

The Pathways to Start programme also supported engagement with the wider enterprise support ecosystem, including signposting to mainstream business support and reinforcing informal advice from experienced local entrepreneurs. They were referred to Business Gateway for support with her business plan, but ultimately the participant chose to work with a local entrepreneur who offered up support.

Outcomes and learning

By taking part in the program, the participant felt more confident, motivated, and organised, especially when it came to planning and setting priorities. They made progress toward finishing a required SVQ childcare qualification and created a clear plan with timelines. The funding helped them prepare for a regulatory inspection and brought their business closer to opening.

The participant said that without the program, progress would have likely stalled, and they wouldn't have had a clear way to get regulatory approval. The pilot gave them the push they needed to turn a long-standing idea into a business that was almost ready to launch.

9.2 Case Study 2

Building confidence and capability to pursue flexible self-employment

Participant profile (Argyll)

The participant joined the pilot while out of the labour market and seeking a route into flexible self-employment compatible with childcare and family life. At entry, they did not have a fully defined business idea and were exploring holistic wellbeing-based services alongside accredited training opportunities.

Challenges

Key barriers included low confidence, financial constraints associated with being out of work, and uncertainty about how to begin the process of developing a business. Pregnancy and caring responsibilities also shaped the pace and timing of progression, requiring flexibility and reassurance rather than immediate pressure to launch.

Support received

Workshops introduced practical business frameworks and supported early-stage idea development, with the participant reporting increased clarity and momentum following each session. Peer learning was actively supported through the workshops, supplemented by a cohort WhatsApp group. The participant created an anonymous survey for potential customers and shared it in the group, which many other programme participants completed, making the feedback especially valuable. Workshop sessions included discussions about successes and challenges, where participants shared their experiences, doubts, and solutions. Breakout rooms provided additional space to connect. Hearing from others, including someone who felt isolated working from home, helped the participant realise the importance of finding balance in their own working arrangements. This combination of informal feedback and peer-led market research fostered a supportive environment.

One-to-one mentoring was identified as the most impactful element of support. This allowed an opportunity to build on what was delivered at the previous workshop. The mentoring sessions enabled the participant to personalise learning, reflect on emerging ideas, and agree realistic next steps aligned with family commitments. Mentoring also provided accountability and reassurance that self-employment was achievable.

The Pathways to Start programme also connected the participant to the wider enterprise support ecosystem following participation in a round table about local support:

'Business Gateway seems good—they do webinars and business advice. I plan to join some of those'

Grant funding was a critical enabler, allowing the participant to complete accredited training, obtain insurance, and enrol in a life-coaching course - costs that would otherwise have been unaffordable:

'With the grant, I've managed to complete my Reiki 2 training, which means I can practice as a practitioner and start charging'

Outcomes and learning

As a result of participation, the participant reported increased confidence, clarity, and motivation, alongside tangible progress including completion of the accredited training, a clearer business direction, and an action plan focused on preparing for business launch following maternity leave.

The participant stated that, without the Pathways to Start programme, they would likely have remained uncertain and inactive due to financial and confidence-related barriers. The pilot acted as a catalyst, accelerating progression by combining structured learning, personalised mentoring, and financial support:

"Because it's free and local, it felt personal. It sparked my motivation. I wouldn't have been able to afford the life coaching course otherwise. This programme has moved me further forward, faster"

9.3 Case Study 3

Progressing from employment to business planning in a regulated sector

Participant profile (Moray)

The participant joined the pilot while in paid employment, with a clear business concept to establish a secure dog-walking field with planned expansion into kennels and cattery services. At entry, they had no prior experience of running a business and were at an early planning stage. They heard about the Pathways to Start programme after previously speaking with Business Gateway.

Challenges

Progress was constrained by financial and regulatory barriers, particularly the need to secure planning permission and commission professional site plans. Balancing full-time employment alongside business development also limited time available for reflection, planning, and implementation, slowing overall progress.

Support received

Although finding the time to attend was challenging, requiring taking days off work, workshops played a central role in building foundational business capability, covering business modelling, bookkeeping, pricing, marketing, and social media, and supporting a shift from an employee to business-owner mindset:

“They showed us a shorter version of how to draw a business plan. For the first time ever doing one, I had no idea where to start. He went over all the basics you need to include, things you don’t need, and different mindsets to approach it”

Workshop attendance required taking time off work, and the weekly schedule limited the participants’ ability somewhat to process and reflect on learning; noting that a biweekly format would have allowed for better absorption and follow-up. Despite this, the workshops proved essential in developing core business skills, offering practical guidance on business modelling, bookkeeping, pricing, marketing, and social media. They also helped foster a transition in mindset from employee to business owner.

Mentoring and expert assistance proved invaluable, offering personalised guidance across a wide range of areas including program inquiries, grant application advice, and individual challenges. Although the grant application process was considered challenging, ongoing support, including through email correspondence, ensured continuous help and timely responses. Additionally, signposting participants to local bookkeepers was highlighted as particularly useful.

Strong peer support through cohort networking and a WhatsApp group was noted.

Access to the business grant, including the option of pre-payment, was a critical enabler. The participant applied for funding to cover the cost pay for the plans for the field and the cattery and kennels.

Outcomes and learning

As a result of participation, the participant reported increased confidence, clarity on viability of business idea, and readiness to proceed. Tangible progress included further development of a business plan, initiation of a loan application which they had been signposted to, and identification of clear next steps toward securing planning permission.

The participant reported that, without the Pathways to Start programme, they would likely have remained in employment and not progressed the business idea. The pilot enabled movement from a static concept to active and structured planning.

9.4 Case Study 4

Enabling self-employment as a flexible and accessible route to work

Participant profile (Moray)

The participant joined the pilot while unemployed and managing a long-term health condition, which limited their ability to sustain full-time employment. With a background in joinery, they were exploring self-employment, producing handcrafted wooden products from home as a more flexible and accessible route to work.

Challenges

Key barriers included health-related work constraints, low confidence, limited digital capability, and a lack of access to up-front capital for equipment and materials. Prior to the Pathways to Start programme, the participant had not progressed beyond a broad business idea.

Support received

The participant viewed the workshops as a positive and confidence-building experience. They particularly valued the quality of the facilitators, the supportive group environment, and the opportunity to learn from and network with other participants who were equally motivated to start a business:

“Being there was a chance to network, and if you become friends with twenty people in the room, those twenty people have hundreds of people on Facebook, which can get your product out to a lot of people.”

They noted that later workshop sessions, including those focused on the use of AI and routes to market, were especially useful. However, the participant felt that the workshops could be strengthened by including more practical, step-by-step guidance on business setup, such as registering with HMRC, opening a business bank account, and understanding business liabilities.

Mentoring and delivery staff provided reassurance and practical guidance, helping the participant navigate business fundamentals, routes to market, and programme systems. Expert advice supported early thinking on marketing and branding, while the programme also encouraged the participant to address skills gaps, leading them to enrol independently in a basic IT course.

The participant applied for grant funding to purchase essential equipment and materials up-front, including a CNC engraving machine, costs that would otherwise have been prohibitive.

Lessons learned and outcomes

As a result of participation, the participant reported increased confidence, motivation, and readiness to pursue self-employment. They progressed from unemployment and uncertainty to active preparation for trading, including booking an appointment to open a business bank account, sourcing materials, and purchasing tools.

Without the Pathways to Start programme, the participant stated they would likely have remained unemployed or seeking unsuitable work and would not have progressed toward self-employment. The pilot acted as a catalyst, enabling a realistic and accessible route to work.

9.5 Case Study 5

Exploring social enterprise development following major life transition

Participant profile (Argyll)

The participant joined the Pathways to Start programme following a significant life change, including relocation to a remote island community and the long-term impact of a spinal injury. They entered with a strong social mission and a clearly articulated concept focused on creating a safe, inclusive space for connection and conversation, particularly for people experiencing isolation later in life. While bringing substantial lived experience and reflective insight, the participant was at a very early stage of business planning and had not previously formalised a venture of this nature. They heard about the programme through a personal contact and were motivated to explore what support might be available within the Highlands and Islands context.

Challenges

Progress through the programme was affected by a combination of health-related barriers, accessibility needs, and programme design factors. During delivery, the participant experienced further personal issues, which limited their capacity to engage consistently and ultimately led to withdrawal from some planned mentoring sessions.

In addition, the formal and structured nature of the content was experienced as challenging. The participant felt that the volume and complexity of information, particularly around systems, processes, and “business-heavy” content, was difficult to absorb, especially given their circumstances and learning preferences. Grant administration requirements and digital systems were also cited as a source of friction, contributing to the decision not to proceed with accessing the available financial support.

Geography played a role, with the participant noting that delivery was largely remote and that more locally based, on-the-ground support would have been beneficial for island-based participants.

Support received

The participant engaged with workshops and one-to-one mentoring early in the programme. Delivery partners and programme staff were consistently described as supportive, flexible, and accommodating, particularly in recognising different ways of working and offering additional mentoring sessions where needed.

Mentoring relationships were highlighted positively, with the participant noting that facilitators were responsive, approachable, and willing to adapt their approach. This flexibility was especially valued during periods when engagement became more difficult. The participant emphasised that communication and pastoral support from delivery staff were strong, even when they ultimately felt unable to continue fully.

Despite this, the participant felt that the Pathways to Start programme design was more akin to a formal business school model than an incubator, and that a more hands-on, bespoke approach, focused on practical enablement rather than systems and theory, would better support individuals with non-traditional backgrounds or additional barriers.

The £1,000 grant value was also deemed to be insufficient.

“In my case, realistic start-up costs would be closer to £2,000–£3,000. Rather than small grants, a model that provides shared resources, buying power, or practical infrastructure support could be more impactful”

Outcomes and learning

While the participant did not progress to completing a business plan or drawing down grant funding, the Pathways to Start programme contributed to important reflective learning.

“Despite this, I would consider going through the programme again. The experience helped clarify how I do and do not want to work, and reinforced the importance of designing support that genuinely meets people where they are”

In particular, the participant gained clarity on the type of support and delivery format that would best suit them in future, including a preference for more in-person, relationship-based, and practical assistance. The experience reinforced the participant's commitment to their underlying social mission and helped articulate the need for more inclusive, accessible enterprise support models.

Overall, the participant's journey highlights both the value of responsive delivery and the importance of programme adaptability when supporting individuals with complex life circumstances. Their experience provides insight into how support models can be refined to better meet the needs of diverse participants, including those facing health-related and geographic barriers.

"This type of programme is extremely important and has real value, particularly when it provides safe, confidential spaces for people who are often overlooked. The people involved delivered it with care and professionalism. With adjustments to format, pacing, and delivery style, it could be even more effective for participants like me"

10 Appendix 4a: Participant Baseline Survey

HIE is conducting this survey to evaluate the Pathways to Start programme and, as a participant, HIE is keen to gather your views and opinions about the programme. This survey collects a range of personal information about you and we would like to evaluate the impact of the programme over time. We therefore ask for some information that will identify you. This is primarily to allow us to link your survey response to any future responses to see how your views and opinions have changed.

We would like to encourage all participants to complete the survey to ensure we're able to continually improve the programmes we're offering however there is no requirement to complete the survey. Furthermore, all responses to questions within this survey are optional. Where you have provided personal information, HIE is processing that personal information using consent. You may withdraw your consent at any time and HIE will ensure your survey response is securely destroyed although please note that aggregated statistics that have been created from the response you've provided will be retained.

No information that directly identifies you will be published. HIE may pass some aggregated information to Programme stakeholders.

Further information about how HIE processes your personal data and your rights under data protection law can be found in HIE's privacy notice at [\[link\]](#). If you have any queries about how HIE will process your personal data, please contact [\[enter contact\]](#).

By clicking next to start the survey, you are consenting to HIE processing your personal data as described above.

Section 1: Baseline / current capability

1.	Which of the following best describes your current situation?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't have a business idea but I want to find out more about starting a business • I have a business idea but have not started a business • I am in the process of starting a business • I have started a business • Previous business owner but looking to start a new business
2.	Which of the following categories best describes the sector you are interested in starting a business or already operates in? (Please choose the one option that applies to you the most)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creative industries • Health / Therapies • Financial & Business Services • Retail & Wholesale • Food & Drink • Hair & Beauty services • Child & Adult care • Clothing, Fashion & Textiles • Technology and web services • Hospitality, catering & events • Leisure & Sport • Tourism - accommodation • Real Estate and Property services • Animal Services • Chemical and life sciences • Industrial & Manufacturing • Undecided / unknown / not provided • Other (please specify) [free text box]

3.	In which areas do you need support the most? Select all that apply.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving my confidence • Improving my knowledge • Setting up a business plan to put my ideas into practice • Understanding how to run a business • Developing an action plan • Choosing a business model to set the direction of my business • Managing business finances • Improving awareness of help and support • Networking
4.	On a scale of 1 to 10, rate your knowledge of running a business.	10-point rating scale (where 1 is 'No knowledge at all' and 10 is 'comprehensive knowledge')
5.	On a scale of 1 to 10, rate your level of confidence to run your own business.	10-point rating scale (where 1 is 'Not confident at all' and 10 is 'completely confident')
6.	How would you rate your awareness of other business support services available in Scotland (e.g., Business Gateway, other HIE support)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No awareness • Poor awareness • Good awareness • Very good awareness
7.	<p>To what extent do you agree with the following statements:</p> <p>"I can communicate my ideas effectively"</p> <p>"I know where to look for training and skills support"</p> <p>"I know how to turn my idea into a business"</p> <p>"I know how to develop a business strategy and business plan"</p> <p>"I know how to set up and manage a website"</p> <p>"I have the skills to become an entrepreneur"</p> <p>"I know how to conduct market research to identify my target customers"</p> <p>"I understand how to use digital marketing tools (e.g. social media and email campaigns)"</p> <p>"I know how to use AI to support my business development"</p> <p>"I understand the importance of having an online presence"</p> <p>"I know how to build a brand for my business"</p> <p>"I am confident in attending networking events and conferences"</p> <p>"I know how to manage business finances (e.g. budgeting, cash flow, profit margins)"</p>	<p>Matrix style, whereby statements are listed on the left column and the following options are available for each:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly disagree • Disagree • Agree • Strongly agree

Section 2: Engagement, outreach and onboarding

8.	How did you first hear about the Pathways to Start Programme?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HIE website • Skillfluence website • Eventbrite website • Other website • Advertisement on Facebook
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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local Facebook page / group • Flyer or poster • Other social media • Local Authority / council • Local community organisation • Business gateway • Word of mouth • HIE staff • Referral from other organisation • Other: (please specify) [free text box]
9.	What most attracted you to this programme specifically? (Please select all that apply)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affordability of support • Mentoring • Group training • Inclusivity / accessibility of the programme • Grant and expenses offer • Other: (please specify) [free text box]
10.	What is the main thing you hope to get out of the Pathways to Start Programme? (Please select all that apply)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To develop my business idea • To start a business • To grow my business • To access training / skills support • To increase my knowledge • To increase networking opportunities • To access working space / facilities / equipment • Other: (please specify) [free text box]
11.	Who recommended you apply to the programme?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local Authority / council worker • Business gateway worker • HIE staff • Employment centre worker • Key worker or programme staff • Local community organisation worker • Friends and family • Don't know • Other [please specify]
12.	What business support have you accessed before? (select all that apply)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business Gateway • HIE support • Other support organisation • Advice from family and friends • School / college • No previous support • Other: (please specify) [free text box]
13.	If you have not accessed business support before, what have been the barriers? (select all that apply)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was not aware of the support available • I have not had time • I was not motivated to start a business • Language barriers • Accessibility challenges (e.g., disability, neurodiversity needs not met) • Capacity issues (e.g., work or school commitments) • Caring responsibilities • Too much paperwork or administration • Financial barriers (e.g., cost of participation, travel) • Transport barriers (e.g., distance, lack of public transport)

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital barriers (e.g., lack of internet access or digital skills) • Cultural or community barriers • N/A • Other (please specify) [Free text box]
14.	What has been the single biggest barrier in accessing business support? (select one)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I was not aware of the support available • I have not had time • Language barriers • Capacity issues (e.g., work or school commitments) • Caring responsibilities • Too much paperwork or administration • Financial barriers (e.g., cost of participation, travel) • Transport barriers (e.g., distance, lack of public transport) • Digital barriers (e.g., lack of internet access, computer or digital skills) • Cultural or community barriers • N/A • Other accessibility challenges (e.g., disability, neurodiversity needs not met) • Other (please specify) [Free text box]
15.	Did you attend a programme information event?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No [skip next question]
16.	Which of the following best describes the type of event you attended?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online • In-person (group) • In-person (one-to-one)
17.	How useful were the information events you attended?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Not useful at all, slightly useful,' 'very useful) plus N/A • [free text box – suggestions for improvement]
18.	What was the main benefit of attending the event?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help with understanding how to apply • Clarifying if the Pathways to Start programme was suitable for me • Increasing my confidence to apply • Meeting training providers • Other please specify [free text box]
19.	How would you rate the application process?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very difficult • Difficult • Easy • Very easy • [free text box – suggestions for improvement]
20.	How would you rate information provided before starting the Pathways to Start programme?	<p>4-point Likert scale (where 1 is 'Very poor' and 4 is 'Very good')</p> <p>[free text box – Additional comments / suggestions for improvement]</p>
21.	Have you experienced any challenges / barriers during the onboarding process?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No • Yes (please describe) [Free text box]

Section 3: Demographics

This section seeks to capture demographic data about participants. This will be used for two purposes: (1) to enable the evaluators to link baseline and post-programme survey responses to an individual participant so that impacts can be measured at an individual level; and (2) to provide some more in-depth insight as to who the participants were, what worked best and for who.

Please note that all data provided in this survey will only be presented at an aggregate level, and individuals will not be identifiable in the research. These questions are all voluntary, but it would be appreciated if they could be completed.

22.	Please state your name	[free text box]
23.	Please provide your email address	[free text box]
24.	Do you consider yourself a business person/entrepreneur?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No
25.	Please state business name [if applicable]	[free text box]
26.	Which ethnic group do you belong to? (Please choose the one option that applies to you the most)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South Asian / Asian British – Indian / Pakistani / Bangladeshi • Black or Black British • Black or Black British – African • Black or Black British – Caribbean • Black – French • East Asian / Asian British – Chinese / Japanese / Korean / Thai • Middle Eastern / North African • Any other Asian / Asian British ethnicity • Mixed / Multiple Ethnic Groups • White British • White – Mainland European • Prefer not to stay • Other (please specify) [free text box]
27.	What is your age group?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under 18 • 18–24 • 25–34 • 35–44 • 45–54 • 55+ • Prefer not to stay
28.	What is your gender?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female • Male • Non-binary • Prefer not to say
29.	Which local authority area are you based in?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Argyll and Bute • Moray
30.	What is your postcode?	[free text box] <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefer not to say
31.	Do you consider yourself to have a disability or a long-term health condition?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Prefer not to say
32.	Do you identify as neurodivergent (e.g., autism, ADHD, dyslexia)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Prefer not to say
33.	Do you have any accessibility needs for participation?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No [skip to Q.36] • Prefer not to say [skip to Q.36]

34.	If yes, did the training provider make suitable adjustments to support your needs at the information event?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Prefer not to say
35.	How satisfied were you with the adjustments made?	<p>4-point Likert scale (where 1 is 'Not at all satisfied' and 5 is 'very satisfied') plus N/A</p> <p>[free text box – additional comments / suggestions for improvement]</p>
36.	What is your current employment status?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employed full-time • Employed part-time • Self-employed • Unemployed • Student • Prefer not to say • Other (please specify) [free text box]
37.	Do you consider yourself to be on a low income?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Prefer not to say
38.	Are you currently eligible for income-related benefits or financial support?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Don't know • Prefer not to say
39.	Do you have caring responsibilities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Prefer not to say
40.	What is your primary language?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English • Gaelic • Scots • Other (please specify) [free text box] • Prefer not to say
41.	Are you care-experienced (e.g. are you or have you previously been in care)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Prefer not to say
42.	Are you a refugee or asylum seeker?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Prefer not to say
43.	Are you an ex-military veteran?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Prefer not to say
44.	Are you an ex-offender?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Prefer not to say
Section 4: Concluding remarks		
45.	Are there any parts of the engagement, application, or onboarding process that you think could be changed or improved?	[free text box]
46.	Is there anything else you would like to add?	[free text box]

11 Appendix 4b : End of Programme Survey

HIE is conducting this survey to evaluate the Pathways to Start programme and, as a participant, HIE is keen to gather your views and opinions about the programme to identify what worked well and what could be improved. This survey collects a range of personal information about you and we would like to evaluate the impact of the programme over time. Therefore, we ask for some information that will identify you. This is primarily to allow us to link your survey response to any previous responses to see how your views and opinions have changed.

We would like to encourage all participants to complete the survey to ensure we're able to continually improve the programmes we're offering, however, there is no requirement to complete the survey. Furthermore, all responses to questions within this survey are optional. Where you have provided personal information, HIE is processing that personal information using consent. You may withdraw your consent at any time and HIE will ensure your survey response is securely destroyed although please note that aggregated statistics that have been created from the response you've provided will be retained.

No information that could directly or indirectly identify you will be published. HIE may pass some aggregated information to programme stakeholders.

Further information about how HIE processes your personal data and your rights under data protection law can be found in HIE's privacy notice at [Privacy Policy | Highlands and Islands Enterprise | HIE](#). If you have any queries about how HIE will process your personal data, please contact dataprotectionofficer@hient.co.uk.

By clicking next to start the survey, you are consenting to HIE processing your personal data as described above.

Motivations

1.	What was your motivation to join Pathways and start a business? (Select all the apply)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work more flexibly • Increase my income • Challenge myself • Work on something meaningful to me • Realise my business idea • Find a business idea • Be my own boss • Learn about entrepreneurship • Other
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Capability

2.	Did you previously complete the programme baseline survey?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes (Skip to Q10) • No
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Baseline Capability

3.	Which of the following best described your situation at the start of the Programme?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I didn't have a business idea but wanted to find out more about starting a business. • I had a business idea but had not started a business. • I was in the process of starting a business. • I had started a business. • I had previously owned a business but was looking to start a new one.
4.	At the start of the programme, which of the following categories best described the sector you were interested in starting a business in, or that your business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •

	was already operating in? (Please choose the one option that applied to you the most)	
5.	At the start of the programme, in which areas do you need support the most? Select all that apply.	•
6.	At the start of the programme, on a scale of 1 to 10, how would you have rated your knowledge of running a business?	
7.	At the start of the programme, on a scale of 1 to 10, how would you have rated your confidence to run your own business.	
8.	At the start of the programme, how would you have rated your awareness of other business support services available in Scotland (e.g., Business Gateway, other HIE support)?	•
9.	<p>At the start of the programme, to what extent would you have agreed with the following statements:</p> <p>“I can communicate my ideas effectively”</p> <p>“I know where to look for training and skills support”</p> <p>“I know how to turn my idea into a business”</p> <p>“I know how to develop a business strategy and business plan”</p> <p>“I know how to set up and manage a website”</p> <p>“I have the skills to become an entrepreneur”</p> <p>“I know how to conduct market research to identify my target customers”</p> <p>“I understand how to use digital marketing tools (e.g. social media and email campaigns)”</p> <p>“I know how to use AI to support my business development”</p> <p>“I understand the importance of having an online presence”</p>	•

	<p>“I know how to build a brand for my business”</p> <p>“I am confident in attending networking events and conferences”</p> <p>“I know how to manage business finances (e.g. budgeting, cash flow, profit margins)”</p>	
Post Programme Capability		
10.	Which of the following best describes your current situation after completing the Pathways to Start programme?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't have a business idea but I want to find out more about starting a business • I have a business idea but have not started a business • I am in the process of starting a business • I have started a business • Previous business owner but looking to start a new business
11.	After completing the Pathways to Start programme, which of the following categories best describes the sector you are interested in starting a business in or that your business already operates in? (Please choose the one option that applies to you the most)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creative industries • Health / Therapies • Financial & Business Services • Retail & Wholesale • Food & Drink • Hair & Beauty services • Child & Adult care • Clothing, Fashion & Textiles • Technology and web services • Hospitality, catering & events • Leisure & Sport • Tourism - accommodation • Real Estate and Property services • Animal Services • Chemical and life sciences • Industrial & Manufacturing • Undecided / unknown / not provided • Other (please specify) [free text box]
12.	Following participation in the Pathways to Start Programme, what areas do you still feel that you need support in?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving my confidence • Improving my knowledge • Setting up a business plan to put my ideas into practice • Understanding how to run a business • Developing an action plan • Choosing a business model to set the direction of my business • Managing business finances • Improving awareness of help and support • Networking
13.	On a scale of 1 to 10, rate your knowledge of running a business after completing the Pathways to Start Programme,	10-point rating scale (where 1 is 'No knowledge at all' and 10 is 'comprehensive knowledge')
14.	On a scale of 1 to 10, rate your level of confidence to run your own business after completing the Pathways to Start Programme,	10-point rating scale (where 1 is 'Not confident at all' and 10 is 'completely confident')

15.	After completing The Pathways to Start programme, how would you rate your awareness of other business support services available in Scotland (e.g., Business Gateway, other HIE support)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No awareness • Poor awareness • Good awareness • Very good awareness
16.	<p>After completing the Pathways to Start programme, to what extent do you agree with the following statements:</p> <p>“I can communicate my ideas effectively”</p> <p>“I know where to look for training and skills support”</p> <p>“I know how to turn my idea into a business”</p> <p>“I know how to develop a business strategy and business plan”</p> <p>“I know how to set up and manage a website”</p> <p>“I have the skills to become an entrepreneur”</p> <p>“I know how to conduct market research to identify my target customers”</p> <p>“I understand how to use digital marketing tools (e.g. social media and email campaigns)”</p> <p>“I know how to use AI to support my business development”</p> <p>“I understand the importance of having an online presence”</p> <p>“I know how to build a brand for my business”</p> <p>“I am confident in attending networking events and conferences”</p> <p>“I know how to manage business finances (e.g. budgeting, cash flow, profit margins)”</p>	<p>Matrix style, whereby statements are listed on the left column, and the following options are available for each:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly disagree • Disagree • Agree • Strongly agree

Outcomes

Outcomes

17.	Did the Pathways to Start programme help you develop your business idea?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No [skip next question]
18.	<p>What are some of the things you have done to develop your idea as a result of the Pathways to Start programme?</p> <p>(Please select all that apply)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Test my idea with real customers • Produce my first product or service prototype • How to better communicate my product or service to customers • Generate first sales or early revenue • Networking • Secure equipment or materials needed to start trading • Improve my financial readiness / costing / pricing model

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create an online presence (website, social media etc.)
19.	<p>Did you achieve any of the following as a result of participating in the Pathways to Start Programme?</p> <p>(Please select all that apply)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start a business • Grow my business • Secure employment • Register with HMRC as a sole trader / self-employed • Register with HMRC as a business • Other: (please specify) [free text box]
20.	<p>Which of the following outcomes did the Pathways to Start programme support you to achieve for yourself?</p> <p>(Please select all that apply)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased access to training / skills support • Increased my knowledge • Increased my confidence • Increased my employability • Increased my appetite to take risks • Increased my network • Increased access to working space / facilities / equipment • Other: (please specify) [free text box]
21.	<p>What are the next steps you have identified in your action plan for the next three months?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating a brand and / or website • Increase or improve marketing • Test trading • Research and development • Securing IP through patents etc. • Apply for a job • Undertake further training • Register with HMRC as a sole trader / self-employed • Register with HMRC as a business • Seek funding / finance planning • Referral onto further support • Grow my business via increased revenue / sales • Grow my business via increased employment • Other: (please specify) [free text box]
22.	<p>What do you expect to happen with the next 12 months as a result of your participation in the Pathways to Start programme?</p> <p>(Please select all that apply)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participation in follow on training or support • I will start my own business • I will grow by business • Jobs created for my business • Increase in revenue for my business • Increased funding for my business • Other: (please specify) [free text box]
23.	<p>What would have happened without the coaching support / grant?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I would not have achieved any of the benefits stated above • I would have achieved the same benefits, but within a longer timeframe • I would have achieved some of the benefits but not all • I would not be in a position to start or grow my business • I would have gained the same skills / knowledge / benefits anyway without the Start programme
24.	<p>How likely are you to recommend the Pathways Programme?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Already have • Very likely • Likely

- Unlikely
- Wouldn't recommend it

Training and Support

Training

25.	How would you rate the following areas of training content: Developing an entrepreneurial mindset (such as building resilience, dealing with challenges, problem-solving, creativity, leadership and communication etc) Overview of the Scottish Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Idea generation and validation Introduction to technology and AI tools for business/idea development Early-stage business planning (including financial planning) Branding, pitching, and presentations, ending with a celebration	4-point Likert scale (where 1 is 'Very poor' and 4 is 'Very good') [free text box – Additional comments / suggestions for improvement]
26.	Are there any additional areas of training that would have been beneficial?	Free text box
27.	How would you rate the following areas of support provided: Online and/or in-person workshops Peer to peer support 1:1 mentoring Application process for claiming grant and expenses	4-point Likert scale (where 1 is 'Very poor' and 4 is 'Very good') [free text box – Additional comments / suggestions for improvement]
28.	How would you rate the usefulness of the following areas of support provided: Tailored action and implementation plan Advice and guidance on business models	4-point Likert scale (where 1 is 'Not useful at all' and 4 is 'Very useful') [free text box – Additional comments / suggestions for improvement]
29.	Did you receive any referrals or signposting to mainstream business support? If so, please give details	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Business Gateway • No referrals received • Other: (please specify) [free text box]

Financial and Access Based Support

30.	Did you apply for a grant?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes (if yes, continues until Q35, but skips Q36) • No (if no, skip to Q36)
31.	How much of the £1000 have you been awarded?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £1 – £250 • £251 – £500 • £501 – £750 • £751 – £1000
32.	What did you spend/are planning on spending your up to £1,000 grant on??	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further training and/or support • Business website • Purchase of equipment • Purchase of stock • Test trading • I did not apply • Other: (please specify) [free text box]

33.	Did you request pre-payment of the grant?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No
34.	How soon after completing the training would you ideally be able to apply for the grant to ensure that you are making the best investment for your business?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immediately • Within 1 week • Within 1 month • Within 3 months • Within 6 months • No preference
35.	In what areas is the grant important in developing your business? (please select all that apply)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helped my business start when it otherwise wouldn't have • Important to the development of my business • Helped my business grow faster than it otherwise would have • Helped my business grow bigger than it otherwise would have • Not important in the development of my business <p>[free text box – Additional comments / suggestions for improvement]</p>
36.	Why did you not apply for the grant?	Free text box
37.	Expenses of up to £500 were available to participants, designed to address any barriers to accessing the programme. Did you receive expenses?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No [skip to Q42]
38.	Was your expenses pre-paid?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No
39.	What value was the expense amount you received?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £0 – £100 • £101 – £200 • £201 – £300 • £301 – £500
40.	Which of the following barriers did the expenses help to break down?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language barriers • Accessibility challenges (e.g., disability, neurodiversity needs not met) • Capacity issues (e.g., work or school commitments) • Caring responsibilities • Too much paperwork or administration • Financial barriers (e.g., cost of participation) • Transport barriers (e.g., distance, lack of public transport) • Digital barriers (e.g., lack of internet access or digital skills) • Cultural or community barriers • N/A • Other (please specify) [Free text box]
41.	What was your expenses money used for?	[free text box]
42.	Were there any barriers that the programme was unable to break down which made it harder for you to fully benefit from participation in the programme?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language barriers • Accessibility challenges (e.g., disability, neurodiversity needs not met) • Capacity issues (e.g., work or school commitments) • Caring responsibilities • Too much paperwork or administration

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial barriers (e.g., cost of participation, travel) • Transport barriers (e.g., distance, lack of public transport) • Digital barriers (e.g., lack of internet access or digital skills) • Cultural or community barriers • N/A • Other (please specify) [Free text box]
43.	How did you address the existing barriers that the Pathways to Start programme wasn't able to break down?	[free text box]

Other Support

44.	<p>How would you rate the useability of the following in relation to the MyHIE Portal and grant application:</p> <p>Overall usability of MyHIE Uploading documents The application form and questions The language used Accessing on computer Accessing on mobile device</p>	<p>Matrix style, whereby statements are listed on the left column, and the following options are available for each:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very easy • Somewhat easy • Somewhat difficult • Very difficult • N/A
45.	<p>If you have used any of the following support mechanisms, how helpful did you find them?</p> <p>The guidance document Group support from trainer One-to-one support from trainer Phone support from HIE Email support from HIE</p>	<p>Matrix style, whereby statements are listed on the left column, and the following options are available for each:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not helpful • Somewhat helpful • Very helpful • N/A
46.	How could the grant and expenses applications on MyHIE be improved?	[Free text box]

Section 4: Concluding remarks

47.	Are there any parts of the Pathways to Start programme that you think could be changed or improved?	• [free text box]
48.	Is there anything else you would like to add?	• [free text box]

Section 5: Demographics

This section seeks to capture demographic data about participants. This will be used for two purposes: (1) to enable the evaluators to link baseline and post-programme survey responses to an individual participant so that impacts can be measured at an individual level; and (2) to provide some more in-depth insight as to who the participants were, what worked best and for who.

Please note that all data provided in this survey will only be presented at an aggregate level, and individuals will not be identifiable in the research. These questions are all voluntary, but it would be appreciated if they could be completed.

49.	Please state your name	[free text box]
50.	Please provide your email address	[free text box]
51.	Do you consider yourself a business person/entrepreneur?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No

52.	Please state business name [if applicable]	▪ [free text box]
53.	Which ethnic group do you belong to? (Please choose the one option that applies to you the most)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • South Asian / Asian British – Indian / Pakistani / Bangladeshi • Black or Black British • Black or Black British – African • Black or Black British – Caribbean • Black – French • East Asian / Asian British – Chinese / Japanese /Korean / Thai • Middle Eastern / North African • Any other Asian / Asian British ethnicity • Mixed / Multiple Ethnic Groups • White British • White – Mainland European • Prefer not to stay • Other (please specify) [free text box]
54.	What is your age group?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under 18 • 18–24 • 25–34 • 35–44 • 45–54 • 55+ • Prefer not to stay
55.	What is your gender?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female • Male • Non-binary • Prefer not to say
56.	Which local authority area are you based in?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Argyll and Bute • Moray
57.	What is your postcode?	[free text box]
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefer not to say
58.	Do you consider yourself to have a disability or a long-term health condition?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Prefer not to say
59.	Do you identify as neurodivergent (e.g., autism, ADHD, dyslexia)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Prefer not to say
60.	Do you have any accessibility needs for participation?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No [skip to Q.63] • Prefer not to say [skip to Q.63]
61.	If yes, did the training provider make suitable adjustments to support your needs during the Pathways to Start programme?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Partially • Prefer not to say
62.	How satisfied were you with the adjustments made?	<p>4-point Likert scale (where 1 is 'Not at all satisfied' and 5 is 'very satisfied') plus N/A</p> <p>[free text box – additional comments / suggestions for improvement]</p>
63.	What is your current employment status?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employed full-time • Employed part-time • Self-employed • Unemployed • Student

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefer not to say ▪ Other (please specify) [free text box]
64.	Do you consider yourself to be on a low income?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Prefer not to say
65.	Are you currently eligible for income-related benefits or financial support?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Don't know • Prefer not to say
66.	Do you have caring responsibilities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Prefer not to say
67.	What is your primary language?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • English • Gaelic • Scots • Other (please specify) [free text box] • Prefer not to say
68.	Are you care-experienced (e.g. are you or have you previously been in care)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Prefer not to say
69.	Are you a refugee or asylum seeker?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Prefer not to say
70.	Are you an ex-military veteran?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Prefer not to say
71.	Are you an ex-offender?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Prefer not to say

