



Annual Report - The Growing Club CIC

January 2020

Education, Empowerment, Economic Growth for Community Wellbeing

Background

The Growing Club is a community interest company, formed in October 2016, delivering pre-start up, start-up and business growth programmes for local economic growth and community wellbeing.

We work with women in the Lancaster district, Lancashire and across the North West, to develop their skills to enable them to:

1. Be financially resilient
2. Run sustainable businesses
3. Grow the local economy, thus addressing child and adult poverty issues and supporting the growth of healthy communities, by being role models.

This report will run through each programme area showing what we have achieved over the last 12 months.

First, the goals for 2018 /19 as stated in our last annual report:

*As a social enterprise we bring in income through trade as well as grants and we will continue to develop areas where we can bring in earned income.

*This year a priority is to attract core funding to employ Jane as a development worker, as sustainable growth is limited if we only have delivery staff. Daniel from Great Places is helping us with this.

*Coordinate joined up support for women running micro-manufacturing businesses under a possible “Made in Lancashire” brand collective.

*Run the second Slow Fashion Show.

* Via Lancaster and Morecambe College, we are advertising for an apprentice, our first employee. We want to train a young person to support us in administrative tasks and we hope this post will be filled by the end of February 2019.



- *To complete Roots and Shoots and Crafty Women
- * To trial Sunflowers, an 8-week pre-start up programme for women aged 50+. Funded by Santander, this will be fully evaluated to see if it fits the government agenda of Healthy Ageing. As we have had a significant increase in older women joining us generally, in the summer we will work with Lancaster University to run a research project on older women and enterprise start-ups
- * The growth programme to be delivered in Cumbria and Preston as well as Lancaster
- *Further develop the drop-in sessions
- *Continue with our programme of monthly skills workshops
- *Continue creating networking opportunities
- *Recruit and train programme graduates to run the pre-start up courses in other districts
- *Run regular programmes in Morecambe
- *Attract funding for a second start-up course to start in June
- *New website to be funded by SIMRA, built by Katie Birks with design by Better with Jam and hosted by Shadow Cat.
- *Launch of new branding via Better with Jam.

Most of these have been achieved; all have seen progress.

***Trade and income streams**

In addition to the paid courses, we made a decision to ask for voluntary donations from participants if they could afford it, based on household income.

We have produced products to sell; water bottles, journals and Christmas cards

We have won 3 delivery contracts: Nat West's Back her Business, WEA (ESF) and Lancashire County Council work with refugee women.

We were the recipients of the raffle income from Lancaster Chamber of Commerce IWD event, which provided a 50% bursary for a woman to join Bloom & Grow.

Increased income via trade is an area we want to investigate further in 2020.

***Core Funding**

Changes at Great Places meant Daniel was unable to give us much time; he did help with one bid which was rejected, but he referred us to an NFP consultant who got us focussed, so we submitted a proposal to Reaching Communities for 3 years' core funding. We passed the first round and go to panel for the decision in January.

***We launched meetings for women running micro-manufacturing** businesses supported by Lancaster City Council and Maya Dibley from the County Council. The meetings enabled us to connect women to other support opportunities and led to a Made in Lancaster market in market square in September.

We tried to organise a shared Made in Lancaster pop up Christmas boutique, but were let down at short notice by the shop owner. With more knowledge we can organise this for Christmas 2020. We aim to hand this over to UnFactory, a collective of 3 of our growth programme graduates.

***The second Slow Fashion Show**, an initiative of Gabriella Bavone, a growth programme graduate, ran in October with support from Lancaster City Council and LUSH and us, plus lots of volunteers. Income from this will fund 2 places for creatives to join the growth programme this year. The purpose of SFS is to showcase local designers and makers and raise awareness of the harm done by the throw away fashion culture. In 2020 SFS will become a social-enterprise in its own right.

***In March we appointed an apprentice**, our first employee, as we wanted to train a young person to support us in administrative tasks. Sadly, she was not well enough to stay with us despite conversations with the college to explore ways to support her continued employment. However, this did lead to us taking on a woman from one of our courses on work experience via the job centre, and we later employed her. She now has a better job nearer her home.

***The first Roots & Shoots** 12-month start-up course, funded by Walney Extension Community Fund, was completed in March and those women now meet with their mentors. As we reported at the last AGM, there were issues with women being forced into low paid work before they could launch their business, but we are still in touch with these women.

A film was made by Forgebank Films at graduation. This won us £1,000 from Walney to support our work.

Our second cohort, funded by Awards for All, started in June. This course is being monitored and evaluated by volunteer Nicola Combe.



We also have women signed up for cohort 3, for which we currently do not have funding.

Growth programme graduate, Ginny Koppenhol, is still delivering the start-up programme with Jane.

The second cohort of mentors has been recruited and trained by Jane and Paul Aisthorpe and they met their mentees at the Christmas party.

*Three **Crafty Women** courses ran in Morecambe West End, funded by Smallwood Trust. The results of this were a big lesson to us as we discovered that just 15 hours input can create a significant shift for women who have developed an identity as long term unemployed/disabled, motivating them to make changes to be productive again on their terms. The knock-on impact that has for their emotional and physical wellbeing is noteworthy.

***Sunflowers**

With funding from Santander, we successfully trialled an 8-week pre-start up programme for women aged 50+. This course was monitored and evaluated in terms of the government Healthy Ageing agenda.

Unfortunately, we could not get anyone from Lancaster University to run a research project on older women and enterprise. However, we were awarded a grant from ROSA to work with older women and create a short film aimed at policy makers, elected members and decision makers, on the issues facing older women and economic activity and skills. This is particularly pertinent in the light of changes to pension age. This will start in February with an event in **June**.

The growth programme (the original Growing Club, now branded as Bloom & Grow)

*Jane delivered her last growth programme this year, handing over to the new trainers.

The Lancaster course has continued with Nicola Garrett and Katie Birks running the first course together, Katie running the second, and the third course, starting March 2020, will be run by Nicola.

We have realised that, despite delivering on licence, the trainers need more support from us than we have been able to provide. The Preston and Cumbria courses have not yet started, mostly due to personal circumstances.

We have explored if the growth course is still relevant to us, as Boost and Lancaster Chamber are now running / planning business growth courses for women, but it seems



they are still not addressing the needs of the women we work with, micro-business owners, despite the fact that most female led businesses are micro-businesses.

The growth programme graduates group has changed its structure and we now meet every 6 weeks.

Several growth programme graduates assist in the delivery of other programmes, providing relatable role models as well as this creating the opportunity for women to deliver to adults for the first time.

*The **weekly drop-in sessions** on Thursday lunchtimes have continued and grown.

The funding we received as the regional delivery partner for NatWest's Back her Business, has meant we can now offer one-to-one time during drop-in. This can be booked via the new website.

Accountant and GC director Christine Harwood attends on the first Thursday of the month and **Vicky and Becky** from Lancaster City Council IT services come in to help on the last Thursday. Volunteer Nicola Combe attends most weeks

Women have asked that we increase this session from 90 minutes to 2 hours this year. As we have between 4 and 8 women attend each week, with Jane providing at least 1 one-to-one session during that time, we will need to recruit another paid member of staff.

***The monthly skills workshops**, have continued and increasingly, women who have gone through our programmes are now delivering sessions.

We still offer two *pay what you can* places on each workshop, and women on funded programmes can attend as part of that programme.

NUMBERS: with 60 women attending so far; 18 women for whom this was their first contact with us.

The on-line marketing workshops are the most requested as this is still one of the main areas where women feel they lack skill.

***Networking Opportunities.** Working with the FSB we organised quarterly Women in Business networking events with seminars being delivered by local women in business, creating opportunities for women to use presentation skills.

*Local branding company Better with Jam, very patiently re-branded us as their CSR project.



*Growth programme graduate and trainer Katie Birks then built our new website, funded by SIMRA. Shadow Cat are hosting our new website, free of charge.

The new website and branding enable us to present a more professional image.

***Other Developments**

This year, with the impact of policy changes that are hitting the most vulnerable women hard, we have put more attention on UN Sustainable Development Goal 8.3; *promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage formalization and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises including through access to financial services.*

Jane talked about this at a TEDx in June.

***Enterprise Skills for Refugee Women.** In collaboration with Lancashire County Council, in the summer we ran a 6-week enterprise skills course for women refugees. This was a huge success, if a little chaos as work was delivered in Arabic via an interpreter and most of them had exams. Many of the participants reported that it was the first time they had had the opportunity to think about their skills and their options. They all left feeling more confident and with greater clarity regarding their future.

***The pre-start up programme, The Sowing Club.** We won an ESF contract via WEA, to deliver a version of our pre-start up programme. This is for 6 x 6week courses for women who are not economically active. The first course started in October.

***Healthy You Healthy Biz.** We attracted Sport England funding to deliver 4 x 8-week introduction to exercise and relaxation courses for women running small businesses, because the lack of self-care is not sustainable. The work is being delivered using The Growing Club philosophy of creating a safe and supportive environment and peer support.

The first course started in October and is coordinated by, and most sessions delivered by women who have been through our programmes, thus also helping to support women with health and fitness businesses.

***Older women.** We have been awarded a small grant from ROSA *Voices from the Frontline* campaign, to enable older women to speak about the issues they face around enterprise and employment. We start the group work in February and the film launch event is in June.

***Video challenge.** Jane ran her second 30-day video challenge project via a Facebook group. This was to shift women from *terrified to comfortable* using Facebook Live, or



video for their marketing. This is a demanding, but very effective training course that has raised the confidence and profile of participants. This will be run again in preparation for Angels Den.

***Values and vision session.** In spring we ran a Values and Vision session facilitated by a growth programme graduate. This led to our stated values and a focus for our direction for the next 3 years.

*We recruited 2 women from different programmes to train to co-deliver The Sowing Club.

*Jane has completed her EMBA with a strong merit. This opportunity has been invaluable in terms of challenging and directing the organisation.

*Jane has continued as an entrepreneur in residence at Lancaster University and is regularly invited in to talk to students about our work.

Clare Stephenson, a growth programme graduate and new mentor has been working on our marketing strategy. We now have an Instagram account, regular press releases going out and we are running a blog series *Growing Club Stories*, with guest blogs from women who have been through our programmes

This December we held our third cross-programme Christmas party, an opportunity for all groups to network together. Again, it was a fun and inspiring occasion.

*We continued working with Sophie Alkhaled as the English case study on SIMRA. Jane attended the think tank in Aberdeen in October ([video](#)).

We have maintained steady growth this year, as planned. There is normally someone in the office 5 days a week and delivery up to 4 days a week, with an average monthly foot fall of xxxx

We continue to average 2 new enquiries a week and we are happy to report that our welcoming ethos and commitment to a safe learning environment, means new courses are attracting 40% ethnic minority women, and 45% women with long term health conditions/disabilities.

We strive for continual improvement, building solid foundations for sustainability. Many people have given their time to support our work, both programme graduates and other organisations. For example, Lancaster City Council helped us identify our admin challenges and set us up on 365 with a shared drive.

The Challenges

Whilst we have so much to be grateful for and so many people to thank for their support, there have, of course, been many challenges. Attracting core funding is the priority this year. Without that we would have to scale down to prevent burn-out.

*Sadly, it is still the case that many organisations are scrabbling over ever-decreasing pots of money and the general feelings of insecurity with the economy has not helped, as we see both small and large organisations struggle.

* The Universal Credit agenda continues to negatively impact our delivery and we remain frustrated when women are not directed to NEA and left in financial hardship. Unfortunately, the new JC regional manager will not allow staff to do community outreach to come and explain the system to our start-ups.

*We remain impacted by the lack of clarity around Brexit, with women still uncertain if / when they will be forced to leave the UK.

*We have been unable to prioritise networking and meetings that would be useful for new developments, partly because delivery only funding means any non-delivery work is unpaid and many agencies still do not understand this, and partly because we just do not have the resource to be out and about.

Plans for 2019/20

Our priorities for the next 12 months are:

To attract core funding to employ 2 key members of staff.

Invest time into building strategic partnerships with local government and other agencies.

To train a pool of peer-trainers to support and take over from Jane in terms of delivery.

To consolidate the three key areas of delivery as a rolling programme.

Explore specific age-related work (older women and young women)

Run another programme with women refugees

To run Angels Den 2, to get support for start-ups with no capital



To run a community-based fundraiser event.

To produce the second social impact report.

We will end with a message Jane was sent from a woman who attended a 6-session course in Morecambe, to show the impact a short, supportive input can have ...

Hi Jane I just wanted to thank you for running Crafty Woman at Textile Candy. It really helped me in my journey. Especially the process of planning the end presentation. I took time to think and reflect and wrote out what I could do next. I said during presentation I was thinking of starting a uni course etc. Well today's my first full day starting a Foundation Degree in children young people and their services. Eventually I would like to help young people with mental health issues with creative play or some sort of therapy?! I know I wouldn't be doing this without the Crafty Woman course. Crazy eh? Today I am hopefully getting assessed for dyslexia as I have always struggled with spellings and reading out words that are difficult to pronounce etc! I wasn't tested at school, just labelled as lazy and a distraction to the class! Thank you so much for putting the course on.