

The background of the entire page is a close-up photograph of camellia flowers and dark green leaves. The lighting is dramatic, with some flowers in sharp focus and others blurred in the background. The colors are muted, with deep greens and soft pinks.

# ANNUAL REPORT 2020

The Growing Club CIC

# BACKGROUND

The Growing Club CIC

January 2021

Employment and enterprise skills training for women

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

We prioritise work with women in the Lancaster district, Lancashire and across the North West, to increase their confidence to enable them to use their skills for Decent Work (UN SDG 8.3) and to start, and grow, sustainable businesses

This report will run through programme areas, showing what we have achieved over the last 12-months, a period which includes the impact of the first 7.5 months of the pandemic.

We would like to start with a huge thank you to everyone who has supported us, one way or another, during this horribly difficult period. We have demanded a lot from all admin, delivery and staff and volunteers. And everyone showed up.

## OUR PRIORITIES FOR THE 2019/20 PERIOD WERE:

1. To attract core funding to employ 2 key members of staff.
2. Invest time into building strategic partnerships with local government and other agencies.
3. To train a pool of peer-trainers to support and take over from Jane in terms of delivery.
4. To consolidate the three key areas of delivery as a rolling programme.
5. Explore specific age-related work (older women and young women)
6. Run another programme with women refugees
7. To run Angels Den 2, to get support for start-ups with no capital
8. To run a community-based fundraiser event.
9. To produce the second social impact report.



## PROGRESS IN 2019/20:

We started the year well, running all programmes and submitting our application for Reaching Communities. We were notified in January 2020 that we had been awarded 3 years of core funding, which we decided would start on May 1st. This allowed us to employ Jane Booker as Finance Manager, alongside Lisa Corkerry and Paula Eales in the admin team, and Jane Binnion as Development Worker, plus Hazel Hardie as Data Management and Katie Birks as Web Developer.

Finally, after 4 years of hard graft, life was about to get easier!

**And then came Covid.**

We pulled out all the stops, working 7 days a week, to get us through what we assumed was to be a short-term crisis.

By the end of March, all our work was being delivered via Zoom\*.

We decided we would dig deep and do what had to be done to support the women we work with.

We soon realised that our work was to keep women buoyant. This has been reinforced with lots of recent research. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) conducted their Quarterly Labour Force Survey and found that women and young people (under 25s) were more likely to be disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, with long-term economic consequences for these groups.

And the UN issued a warning of the global COVID-19 crisis increasing inequalities for women.

\*<https://businesssupport.blog.gov.uk/2020/06/09/the-growing-club/>

# 96%

of participants feel more prepared to handle life's challenges after joining The Growing Club



## PROGRESS (CONTINUED):

We maintained a presence, prioritised employing women to support the local economy and individuals' businesses and we delivered a full programme of existing and new offerings. This resulted in, rather than working with 100 women a year as normal, 150 women joined our programmes, workshops and events, of which 40 were returners and 110 were new to us.

One positive impact of the pandemic on our work is that delivering via Zoom meant women from all over the UK, and beyond, were joining us. This led us to rethink our work going forward.

Whilst agency networking has taken a back seat, we are working in partnership with Lancaster City Council to deliver programmes to support the recovery and resilience of local women in business.

This includes a fully funded cohort of our growth programme for local women in business and an innovative peer mentoring programme, delivered in collaboration with Paul Aisthorpe, resulting in 14 local business women getting a trained peer-mentor for at least a year

Despite the pandemic, we have maintained and consolidated our core areas of work as a rolling programme and have already trained some colleagues to take over from Jane for delivery, with the two Sowing Club trainers successfully completing the Level 3 Award in Adult Education and Training.



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## AGE RELATED WORK:

Just before the first lockdown was introduced, we completed delivery of a project funded by Rosa, **Voices from the Frontline**, for women aged 50-plus.

The aim was to explore the position of older women in our region, who are now required to work until the age of 66, looking at their role in the workforce and their skills and experience, which often go to waste.

This project resulted in a short film. Sadly, we have not yet been able to show the film. The pandemic and the rise in unemployment led us to put younger women higher up our priority list.

We were awarded funding from FCSC Trust for one year for a pilot with local unwaged young women.

Our second Social Impact report was produced, again by Anamaria Tigan, supervised by Dr Sophie Alkhaled.

## ADDED VALUE:

Working with the FSB, we have organised and run monthly Women in Business networking events, with seminars being delivered by local women in business.

Jane was awarded a place on the highly desirable School of Social Enterprise Scale Up programme, which started in September. We also have two young women on the University of Cumbria Aspiring Leaders Degree programme.

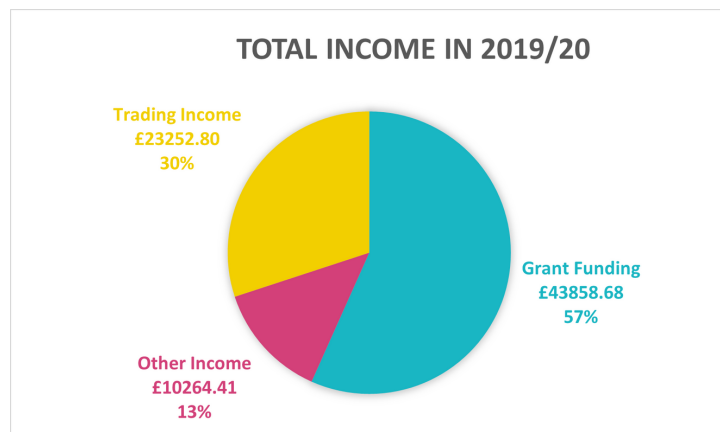
We also ran a 10 session Women in Leadership course during the first lockdown.

## CASE STUDY: MEGAN LOWTHER

"Before joining the Sowing Club I was in a really difficult place, with no confidence. Now I am finally in a place where I feel strong enough to accomplish anything. I have been accepted onto an Aspiring Leaders Programme at university, and I can now see light at the end of the tunnel. All thanks to The Growing Club."

# TRADE AND INCOME STREAMS

In 2019/20 we received a total of £77,376 in funding, from grants, training courses, branded product sales and other income streams.



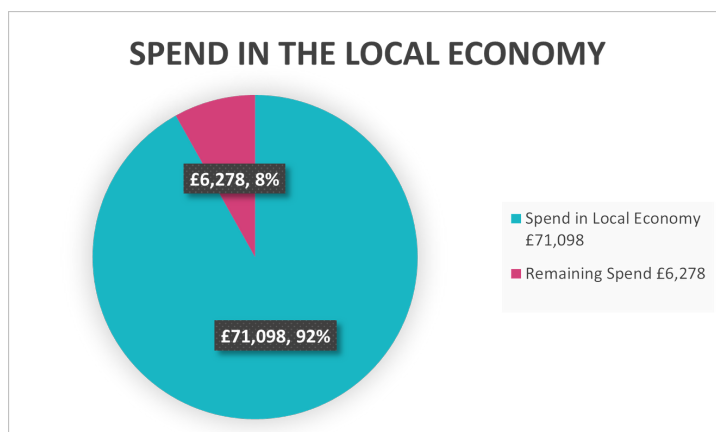
The majority of our income comes from grant funding.

This year we have received funding from: The National Lottery, the European Social Fund (ESF), RBS Back Her Business and other grant providers.

Additional income came from donations, fundraising events and the Lancaster City Council's support grant.

This year, 92% of our income has been spent in the local economy, including supporting women running small businesses such as web designers, content providers and training facilitators.

We have directly employed 45 people during this year.



# 150

unique women attended  
our courses and  
workshops in 2020

## THE CHALLENGES:

Like most other organisations, we have been hurt by the pandemic.

Not only has it impacted how we can deliver our services, we have been unable to meet priority items 6,7 and 8, which has left us more reliant on grants.

It has impacted us all on other levels too; recruiting and onboarding team members in lockdown has been a challenge.

And we are all tired from working many, many extra hours before we realised this is a marathon, not a sprint. Prolonged homeworking has shown up some gaps in our systems.

There was little to no money for us to apply for in the first six months of the pandemic and then very short-term funding was released, which means we are back to short term planning.

Whilst a lot has been achieved, the development worker has not been able to focus on the areas that were intended. We are also paying considerable rent on a building we cannot use, both because of lockdown and because our training room is not big enough to enable social distancing for a full-sized group. The only rooms locally that are big enough cost £50 an hour.

And so, moving again to a larger space is high on our agenda.

## CASE STUDY: SOAAD PATEL

"I like the fact that there are women at all stages in their business involved in the Growing Club, so whatever stage you're at, people will relate to you and can help you. Thanks to the Growing Club, I know how important it is to do the right steps in order to be successful and to have a concrete business."



## GOING INTO YEAR 5:

In the spirit of continuous improvement, we have taken advantage of short-term funding from Smallwood and Unltd to bring in people to help us ensure our foundations are solid for sustainable growth.

We are working on our IT systems, operating processes and HR policies and procedures.

We also have a Wellbeing Officer, Sarah Ludford, until the end of March and a Chief Storyteller, Claire Stephenson, to gather, record and share case studies.

Having trialled recording modules of Bloom and Grow, the growth programme, for an online course, we now plan to do the same for the start-up course, Roots and Shoots.

We start the work with young women after Easter and we are starting to explore collaboration with the probation services in terms of offering our work to women leaving the justice system.

And we are very proud to have won a contract via Boost, to deliver an all-female cohort for the BEIS initiative of Peer-Networks. This has taken us into the realms of working with women with a higher turnover.

In the coming year we need help to:

- find a suitable venue to move our work into;
- get our core programmes accredited.

## CASE STUDY: RACHEL GRISTWOOD

"The support I've received from Jane and the Growing Club community over the past 12 months has been instrumental in starting up and growing my proofreading business. Being able to talk things through and learn new skills has made the journey much more enjoyable and less stressful."



## FINAL THOUGHTS:

This pandemic has made us realise the value of the work we do in terms of training and supporting women, and creating safe spaces for women to support each other.

We have seen some wonderful successes, but we have also seen abject misery, as women fell through the net time after time regarding Covid business support policies.

Far too many women have been left in desperate hardship, businesses unable to survive and with the burden of home-schooling almost invariably falling to women, their businesses got little to no attention.

We have never seen so many struggling to just about function for such a prolonged period.

We are proud to be part of a solution to help keep women buoyant and hopeful, but again we are frustrated that working class women's needs remain ignored, as they still have no place at the table.

As Nahla Valji, the UN's senior gender adviser, said:

*"There is no single society where we've achieved equality between men and women, and so this pandemic is being layered on top of existing inequalities, and it's exacerbating those inequalities."*

"Our work at The Growing Club helps us to strive to correct inequality through providing skills and entrepreneurial training, bespoke for women, so that they can thrive and progress sustainably."

Jane Binnion MBA, Growing Club Founder and Director