

Outer West Leeds – Well-being Fund Proposal

Purpose of Application

The funds will help establish a locally-run programme to support small businesses across Outer West Leeds. The programme will include events, specialist workshops and peer learning groups, enabling small businesses to learn from experts and each other.

The local support programme will add value to business broker service now being run within the area by Ahead Partnership in conjunction with Leeds City Council Development Department.

Background

The business broker service covers WNW Leeds and builds on the approach first developed through the 2012-13 OWL Project (supported by Outer West Leeds Well-Being funding). Leeds City Council Development Department has seconded a member of staff to Ahead Partnership for an initial 12 month period to further develop the approach, improve the business support offer and extend it across WNW Leeds. If successful, the model may then be adopted more broadly across Leeds. There is no operating budget for the project and a local budget is required to fund local events or specific programme of specific support within the LS28 area.

Context and Need

Statistics show that 95% of businesses are small businesses with fewer than 50 employees. All the available evidence suggests that businesses that take up external support are much more likely to grow (in turnover, profit and employment terms). In order for sustainable new jobs to be created within these businesses, a mechanism is needed that allows engagement with more businesses to encourage the take-up of business support.

However publicly-funded business support has reduced by 85% since 2010. The funding that does remain is focused on national (often web-based) programmes with no local dimension or outreach to encourage take up of support. Evidence suggests that the majority of small businesses are not capable of diagnosing the support they need; they do not know where to go for support and are either unwilling or unable to pay a market price for that support.

Business Broker Service

The business broker service provides an efficient way of engaging with small businesses that need support. By linking with partners that have support on offer but no way of connecting to local businesses, the broker can help more businesses to find out about available support.

Ahead Partnership's model has the support of Leeds York and North Yorkshire Chamber of Commerce and Leeds University Business School. The model also provides local businesses with the opportunity to invest back into their area through a menu of opportunities. The menu includes opportunities to create apprenticeships and support local schools, and initiatives and community enterprises. The pilot project was very successful in attracting business engagement in Crawshaw School, building a partnership that has now entered a second year.

The seconded Business Broker, Amrit Choda, has been in post since July 2013.

The project commenced with a review of the recommendations made in the final report on the Well-being Fund pilot project. A toolkit of the latest business support and resources available at national, LEP and local level has been pulled together (see Appendix 1 – SME Business Support Toolkit)

The broker has also met with strategic and business support partners to brief them on the service and establish the required connections and collaborations to enable a structured offer to be made to local businesses. As the project aims to work in partnership with and through networks that are already in existence (e.g. local business forums), work has been done upfront with partners to collate one master database to enable wider promotion of the offer across the area.

LS28 Focus Group Feedback

In order to gauge interest in the project from small businesses in the area, a focus group was held on 9th October 2013 attended by 12 people from small businesses operating in a variety of sectors. The focus group was hosted by Pudsey Legal and included members of Farsley Business Forum, SMEs that have been able to access support and have grown rapidly, as well as those that have struggled to access the support they need.

The session was brought together by the business broker and was facilitated by experts from Leeds University Business School. Other partners - the Head of Business Support at Leeds City Council and the Chamber of Commerce – also attended. During a lively discussion, local businesses affirmed the need for this project, identified the most pressing issues that they face and provided valuable input on the proposed local programme.

Proposed Business Support Local Programme

The proposed LS28 support programme, which would be funded by Well-Being funding, reflects feedback from the focus group and wider research findings.

There are three principal constituent parts to the proposed programme:

1. Board Room (Local) for LS28

Board Room (Local) is a learning group for up to 8 business owners (or senior decision-makers) who will share their experiences and:

- Learn through critical reflection on the actions they have taken
- Learn from the experience of their peers in other SMEs
- Develop their problem solving and decision-making skills
- Address severe problems that previously seemed impossible to solve
- Be both supported and challenged

During an application and selection process, potential Board members identify their challenges and areas for focus. Each Board Room session will last up to 3 hours and will be facilitated by an experienced facilitator from the University of Leeds. The timing for each session will be by mutual agreement between the Board Room and the facilitator. The first two meetings will be at a neutral venue; thereafter meetings will rotate between members' premises. There will be 6 meetings per year at roughly two monthly intervals.

Peer learning is a creative way to “learn” and “do” at the same time. It is a shared endeavour with the Board Room meeting acting as a sounding board for members' individual learning the businesses involved in Board Room may act as facilitators of further groups in subsequent years. The ambition is to develop a network of “local boards” across the area over subsequent years as many small businesses do not have any external representation on their Board. Board Room (Local) will be delivered by Leeds University Business School.

2. Workshop Programme

A wider group of businesses will have access to a series of workshops on topics of interest to SMEs. These may include accessing finance, sales and marketing, use of social media, protecting your brand and managing people. Further topics will reflect the needs and requirements of businesses with the designated areas.

The Workshop Programme will be organised by the business broker and delivered by experts to be sourced through the Business School and Chamber of Commerce.

Workshops will be hosted by local businesses in order to keep costs down.

3. Events Programme

The business broker service and the local support programme would be launched at an evening event with a guest speaker to be held in the area ideally within the Global Entrepreneurship week within the last week of November 2013. Businesses will have the opportunity to sign up for workshops or to express an interest in applying for a place on Board Local LS28.

A follow-up event will be held in May 2014.

The events will be organised by the business broker and will complement regular newsletters which will be sent out as part of the business broker service.

Funding Sought

Funds will contribute towards the budget required to fund the local support programme for an 18 month period until end March 2015. A project budget which breaks down the proposed items of expenditure is attached at Appendix 2 Business Support Local Costs - LS28 Programme - July 2013 - Mar 2015. The amount of funding requested at Appendix 2a, in the current financial year is £12,620 which reflects the balance of the remaining costs to be incurred. The amount that would be sought during 2014-15 is £18,780 which covers a 12 month period, as the intention is to continue the secondment arrangement if the project is successful.

The schedule shows that match funding totalling £116,800 is being provided by Leeds City Council and other partners.

Outcomes

The aim will be to engage the following number of businesses in each element of the local support programme and within the service in general:

- 8 businesses in the boardroom project
- 25 businesses attending workshops
- 75 attending the local events
- 200 business via a newsletter including attendance to various business support events, e.g. Farsley Business Forum