

# Chapter 19

## Birmingham: The Youth Employment and Enterprise Rehearsal Project

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### 19.1 Introduction

The Youth Employment and Enterprise Rehearsal (YEER) project provided business support to black and minority ethnic individuals who were not in employment, education or training (NEET) in Birmingham, UK. The YEER project was designed to provide business-specific training and assist young people from developing an idea to starting their own business. The project was run by a social enterprise, The Future Melting Pot (TFMP). This chapter briefly describes the city context, how the YEER project was organised, how it interacted with beneficiaries of the project and some key context factors that influenced the innovation.

Birmingham is located in the West Midlands region of England and is the largest city in the UK outside London with a population of just over 1 million inhabitants. Local government for the city is the metropolitan authority of Birmingham City Council, the largest local authority in the UK made up of 40 wards (administrative/electoral districts within council boundaries). It has the youngest population of any major European city; over half the population is under 35 years old. Birmingham's population is significantly diverse in terms of ethnic composition. The city has unemployment rates twice the national average, and in some areas over 50% of the working-age population is not in employment.

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Labour market policy is largely a function of central government who are responsible for activation strategies in local areas. However, due to Birmingham containing some of the most deprived areas with the highest levels of unemployment in England, various central government initiatives have been implemented locally through the city council since 2000. These initiatives have had addressing unemployment as their sole objective or as part of wider neighbourhood or regeneration strategies. The Working Neighbourhoods Fund (WNF), which came from the national Department for Communities and Local Government and the Department for Work and Pensions of the previous Labour government, was a key programme for Birmingham. The city was allocated £118 million over 3 years from 2008, and almost half of the WNF resources specifically targeted worklessness (worklessness is a wider term than unemployment as it includes everyone of working age who does not work no matter what their circumstances). The funds were allocated as part of a general grant given directly to local authorities. This was not ring-fenced, and so local authorities were able to use it as they saw fit to support the delivery of local, regional and national priorities. Therefore, the remainder of the WNF was allocated to strategic partners to address barriers to worklessness and other key priorities such as supporting business, improving educational attainment and skills, addressing health inequalities, encouraging active involvement in sport and culture, improving energy efficiency, reducing the number of people living in temporary accommodation and making the city a safer place.

Significantly, the WNF enabled the development of a targeted approach at a local ward level to select and commission organisations to help people find work (described in the following chapter). It also led to the Worklessness Innovations Fund which provided small grants of up to £25,000 for feasibility studies, research and demonstration projects. In 2010, 44 organisations were awarded resources to try new and interesting ways of helping people gain employment, of which TFMP was one.

The organisation responsible for YEER, TFMP, is a social enterprise set up in 2009 after identifying a gap in the market for an organisation to support the aims and aspirations of disadvantaged young people in the West Midlands. The organisation works primarily with women and young people, particularly those classed as NEET and from ethnic minority backgrounds. The philosophy of TFMP is to “enable and empower young people to achieve their potential through enterprise”. The concept is very much about developing individual ideas and talents, to “open new gateways to disadvantaged groups who find it hard to engage meaningfully with traditional business networks”. TFMP focuses on self-employment and enterprise creation and encourages the individuals they work with to develop new social enterprises to benefit local economies.

Underpinning their work is that services and opportunities should be those that young people have determined they want themselves, not just with them in mind.

## 19.2 YEER Project

In 2010, TFMP successfully obtained funding from the Worklessness Innovations Fund to set up the flagship YEER pilot project. The aim of the project was to provide business support to black and minority ethnic individuals who were NEET with the main aim of participants being able to set up their own businesses or social enterprises. The project included training, support and access to accredited advisers. The approach could be characterised as intensive, personalised support to stimulate entrepreneurialism. Creating young entrepreneurs was seen as helping to address the breakdown of the traditional route usually taken where young people progressed to employment after school (or university). There were already various agencies in existence to support businesses but only once the business was developed to a certain point; no support, however, was provided to explore options or with the set-up phase.

The project provided a structured yet flexible programme of support in a “safe and welcoming atmosphere”. Young people had to be over 18 years old and on welfare benefits for at least 3 months. There were a limited number of places, and young people had to complete an application form and take part in an interview. Participation therefore required a certain amount of motivation and commitment from the outset. The usual timeframe for young people to be engaged with the project was 6 months or less.

Participants were offered the chance to improve personal development; nurture their entrepreneurial “mind”; start the business they had always wanted to start; create their own work and become their own boss; and make a difference for themselves, their family and their community. An action plan was drawn up with a mentor and participants received support in developing business ideas from initial design through to completion. Training covered confidence building, time management, personal goal planning, ideas generation, market research, business planning and the practical aspects of setting up a business. It provided the opportunity to explore the option of self-employment through a personalised approach led by the needs of the individual and where feedback was incorporated into the project. The project responded to the different learning paces of individuals, and more advanced learners could benefit from a “fast-track” approach to courses and additional sessions.

The project’s approach was innovative in that it offered excluded young people an alternative to unemployment or ad hoc paid employment. This differed from conventional employment support and the focus on “getting a job”. It used innovative approaches to communication and retention using the preferred method of communication identified by participants, for example through Facebook and other social media.

The YEER project was delivered by TFMP staff and volunteers, along with expert mentors and advisers. The mentors were recruited specifically for the project so that they had existing networks that participants could tap into. Partnership development was seen as a large part of the success of the YEER project giving participants the opportunity to network effectively from the start, both between the agencies involved and by giving the young people access to these networks and individu-

als. The city council, Business Link (government advice and guidance service until 2011), Advantage West Midlands (government regional development agency until 2012), local entrepreneurs, the Creative Community Coalition, the Business Development Service (group of professional business advisers), I-Social Entrepreneurs (social enterprise development organisation) and Young Enterprise (enterprise education charity) were all counted as partners.

The project supported 20 young people in its pilot phase, of those some set up their own businesses, some gained employment, and some started volunteering or education and training courses. All developed business skills, improved their careers prospects and gained an awareness of the business world even if they did not take their ideas forward at this point. One young person, for example, received assistance with developing a business plan, researching their idea and mentoring from a local social entrepreneur. They subsequently set up a business running drama courses for children that they continued whilst taking up a teaching course to further develop their skills. Participants reported that as well as practical skills the project had given them confidence and a greater understanding of what they wanted to do.

The services TFMP provides are the product of a series of consultations and focus groups in which over 300 young people participated to give their views on what support they would like to see available for young entrepreneurs. The main request was for more personalised, innovative support particularly for people who have an idea for business but are unsure how to take it forward and turn it into a reality. YEER was an attempt to meet that identified need. TFMP see their positive, practical approach and individual focus, coupled with the promotion of innovation and creative thinking as allowing the delivery of a personalised service to all of those they help.

### ***19.2.1 Context***

There were a number of key contextual factors that enabled the existence of the YEER project in Birmingham. Birmingham has a much higher percentage of NEETs than other areas of the West Midlands, and this project directly addressed local authority concerns about this group and their future employment prospects. In addition, the target group focus on those from ethnic minority backgrounds tied in with local political discourse about community cohesion and social inclusion. The project also connected with the national and local neighbourhood and worklessness agendas by supporting young people into self-employment based in their local communities. As part of gaining WNF funding, projects had to demonstrate how they added value to the citywide employment and skills strategy. The funding opportunity combined with Birmingham's willingness to use the resources to try some different and interesting things also provided the environment for the innovation to be supported. It also linked with the move to working in partnership and a desire to increase involvement of the third sector.

However, the YEER project was intended to be a time-limited, small-scale, pilot project; it received only £24,977 of funding and during the pilot supported 20 young

people. With the end of the WNF as a source of funding in 2011, the city council and the local strategic partnership did not make resources available to continue with the project, despite early successes. Be Birmingham (the local strategic partnership) who administered the Worklessness Innovations Fund focused on the provider's strategy for sustainability rather than providing them with continued support when giving out grants and many projects closed. Funders and providers were all aware that the main feature of the fund was to accrue learning for future strategies and projects rather than sustaining and replicating the innovations supported; for example, a best practice guide for setting up projects in the future was produced.

This kind of pilot funding will always result in limited impact on the local welfare system as a whole and a struggle with issues of scaling up. TFMP as an organisation is in a position where, should funding become available, they could run the project again in this format. TFMP still has an extensive volunteering programme aimed at providing work opportunities and improving the employability of young people in Birmingham, particularly for those from their target groups, and continues to work in partnership with existing business support providers as well as other organisations sharing a similar purpose in order to complement service delivery. This multi-agency approach of public sector partnerships, private sector alliances and community networks is seen as a way of ensuring clients receive the maximum benefit in achieving their goals and sustainability for the organisation.

### 19.3 Conclusion

The YEER project could be adapted for different age and client groups, and there is no reason to assume this could not be replicated in other cities and countries. It was a small-scale project and so low risk for the local authority and local strategic partnership to support, but therefore also the potential for impact on the local welfare system was limited. The project did shift the focus away from getting people into work to supporting entrepreneurial activities, which had not often been central in policy discussion and even less so for this particular group considered difficult to engage with. It was an example of the increased involvement of the third sector in delivering services and the application of business practices to areas of social concern, integrating economic and social development through stimulating entrepreneurialism, social enterprise and start-ups.

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