
INCREASE *Valorisation Sociale* EVALUATION REPORT

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Foreword

The Increase Valorisation Sociale (Increase VS) programme is a significant social innovation programme supported and grant funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Southern Housing (previously and referenced in this report as Optivo), has had the privilege of leading this partnership project over the last five years.

This report demonstrates the scale and impact of the programme. The test and learn aspects for those seeking to stimulate, promote and create enterprise opportunities with and for residents in social housing localities. It gives recommendations for policy makers and potential practitioners alike. Of key interest is the learning about co-creating training and skills service offers focused on customer journeys and perspectives using a place-based approach. This includes:

- Better linking and integrating key stages of the customer journey
- Developing links between participants' areas of interest and aspirations, and their trading option or career pathway
- Building on partnering with local support organisations and local work and business opportunities.
- On completion of training or trading starting, ensuring ongoing advice and support networks are integrated into the programme.
- Encouraging 'successor' participants to act as mentors or ambassadors to new entrants.

Zografia Bika and her team at the University of East-Anglia (UEA) – Norwich Business School, have been on our journey with us and have undertaken in-depth research and surveys to provide substantial recommendations and conclusions for this report.

Thank you to them, other key project partners and everyone involved in the project. Our shared endeavours have brought people together and created significant opportunities and learning within communities. The UEA analysis will help inform the further development of enterprise support activities, training and skills provision. I encourage you to read the review and embrace the recommendations – so together we can have greater impact in our communities.

William Miller, Director of Social Impact, Southern Housing.



Residential building in a *Quartier Prioritaires de la politique de la Ville* (QPV), Rennes, France.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United Nations recently highlighted¹ the growing inequality in many countries around the world, with these disparities exacerbated² by the COVID-19 pandemic. This has resulted in a concerted effort³ among policymakers to try and create a fairer and more equal society.

It's a situation that is also typified by geospatial disparities, with Nicholas Kristof chronicling the plight of so-called "left behind" communities in his best-selling book *Tightrope: Americans Reaching for Hope* in which he documents the panoply of issues facing people in communities that are often typified by a decline in industry and a lack of opportunity.

Increase Valorisation Sociale (henceforth referred to as INCREASE VS) is an initiative created by a partnership of nine housing associations and training providers in England (Optivo, Abri and Clarion) and France (Archipel Habitat, NEOTOA, Pas-de-Calais Habitat, Logirep, WeKer and INCO) that has developed integrated micro-enterprise and employment support services (MEESS) in a variety of neighbourhoods in France-Channel-England (see Figure 1). The £10.8 million, five-year [Interreg VA France \(Channel\) England](#) programme (that has been financially supported through the [European Regional Development Fund](#), 2018-2023) has helped more than 4,526 participants learn how to, and receive support in, starting their own business. The programme included support in developing or testing business ideas and managing finances and administration of the business. It has helped to create 1,020 new businesses, while also supporting 1,136 participants into work. The programme service statistics by September 2022 indicate that of the 6,259 participants who began training, 16% started a business, 18% had a new job, and 7% had enrolled in more education. Taken together, 41% of INCREASE VS participants reported a change in work or education status.

INCREASE VS directly targeted both the individuals and communities that have been "left behind" by globalisation, with participants those furthest from jobs and long-term unemployed, who are often 'invisible'⁴ and face various complex barriers to work.

The programme has supported participants in the creation of micro-enterprises that are both well suited to their particular skills but also the context of their local environment. The inclusive nature of the programme ensured that both the businesses that have been created benefit the local community and that the entrepreneurs themselves have been enabled to pay it forward and provide mentoring support to others who wish to embark on a similar path.

¹ <https://www.un.org/fr/desa/covid-19-recovery-measures-could-prevent-widening-inequalities-due-pandemic>

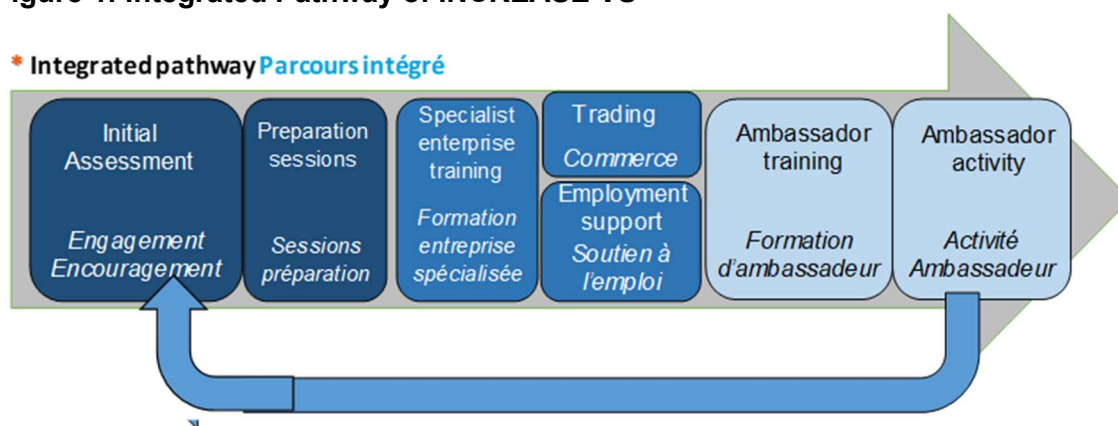
² <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/covid-19-increasing-global-inequality>

³ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/01/1055681>

⁴ This is a term being used as part of the academic study.

The programme also offered professional support to residents seeking employment. These participants were often far from the labour market and were “invisible” to employers, so support had to be tailored to their unique circumstances so that they gained the confidence and the ability to re-enter the labour market again.

Figure 1: Integrated Pathway of INCREASE VS



Needs of those furthest from the market

The development of micro-enterprises has been a key theme for policymakers in both the developed and developing world since the late 1970s in response to underemployment, unemployment, and growing economic insecurity that has accompanied the de-industrialisation that has emerged in the wake of increased globalisation.

The evaluation of these initiatives has uncovered a number of key lessons for modern micro-enterprise support schemes:

- **National issues cannot be discounted** – While projects are inevitably local in their nature, they remain affected by the national, and even international, environment and events.
- **The strength of the local economy is crucial** – As the nature of any employment or entrepreneurial opportunities created will rely heavily on the local economy.
- **Economic exclusion results in lower entrepreneurship** – Due to the lower levels of demand and purchasing power, but also due to the highly competitive nature of many of the markets entered into by micro-entrepreneurs, such as hairdressing.

- **Motivation is crucial** – Micro-entrepreneurship activities in economically excluded regions are commonly characterised as high effort, high risk, and low profit, so motivation and resilience are crucial to success.
- **Interventions need to be personalised** – Perhaps the key factor, however, is the need to take the personal characteristics of the individual into account when determining the intervention. For instance, age is often particularly important, with younger and older participants seemingly more likely to benefit from interventions than their middle-aged peers.
- **The right approach in the right place** – Evidence suggests that there is a huge variation in the micro-entrepreneurship support programmes available, whether in terms of the components of the programme, the way they're combined, and the target groups and objectives they have.

Meeting those needs

The following four approaches were broadly deployed across the INCREASE VS programme using a strength-building logic⁵ to try and apply a place-based intervention over a longer time frame towards tackling the same problem of economic deprivation in the coastal parts of Southern England and Northern France:

- **Parallel Approach**, which involves running an enterprise pathway alongside the employment pathway that existed before. This was an approach offered by Clarion in East Anglia, England.
- **Integrated Approach**, which sees support for those seeking self-employment or wanting to develop microenterprises integrated into the existing support services for people seeking employment. This approach focuses on community investment and has been deployed by Optivo in Kent and Sussex and Abri in Hampshire, England.
- **Collaborative Approach**, which aims to support those people who are furthest from the market and involves close collaboration with other institutions that are already providing statutory support services. The aim is to extend micro-enterprise and employment support services more effectively to those furthest from the market. This was the approach adopted by Archipel Habitat and NEOTOA working in and around Rennes, France.

⁵ <https://sase.confex.com/sase/2021/meetingapp.cgi/Paper/16743>

- **Collective Approach**, which works towards deepening social integration and developing an innovative approach that marries social enterprise with mobilising excluded tenants to allow them to develop activities that meet the needs of their social housing community. This was the approach developed by PDCH in Pas-de-Calais, France.

How effective were they?

The four distinct approaches were assessed for their effectiveness via a mixture of qualitative and quantitative approaches. This allows for a robust and holistic examination of each approach, while also providing some lessons for how those furthest from the market can be better supported in the future.

The assessment found that quantitatively speaking, the integrated and parallel approaches do not appear to have much difference between them in terms of client satisfaction, although they both score considerably higher than the collaborative and collective approaches. A similar outcome emerged when looking at the usefulness ratings from participants. As a result, it's perhaps no surprise that the most highly rated training providers were Abri, Clarion, and Optivo.

It is noticeable that changes in employment status found in our online survey (by November 2022) were relatively minor between the time periods 'before the training starts' (T1) and 'immediately after the training' takes place (T2), with 85% experiencing no change in their status. The exception to this was the participants of the Collaborative Approach, for whom 47% managed to move into either employment or self-employment. This was a more modest 11% for the Integrated and Parallel approaches, and only 7% for the Collective Approach.

Things had progressed somewhat six months or more after the training ended (T3), however, with 16% of respondents saying they had found work and 17% saying they had begun self-employment. Participants in the Collaborative Approach continued to perform well, with 28% back in employment, with a significant increase in participants from the Integrated (15%) and Parallel (17%) Approaches. In terms of transitioning to self-employment, both the Collaborative and Integrated approaches showed sharp increases with 20% and 22% of participants respectively becoming self-employed by T3. Moreover, the online survey analysis showed that respondents' self-assessments of their goal investment and pursuit, life satisfaction, psychological wellbeing, and social wellbeing saw a significant and uniform increase across the INCREASE VS programme at both T2 and T3.

While the quantitative assessment focused primarily on the support provided by each approach, it also underlined the importance of self-efficacy, as this was found to influence both which pathway individuals were on and the degree of success in their transition to employment or self-employment. It was also a key predictor of life satisfaction and mental

well-being. This should come as no surprise, as research from the University of Basel⁶ highlights the importance of the so-called *Pygmalion Effect*, whereby higher aspirations consistently lead to higher achievements. Interestingly, research drawing on data from the European Social Survey for 18 countries⁷ found that status loss/gain across generations affects young adults' well-being in addition to the level-effect of ending up in a lower/higher status position only in Continental Europe where social mobility is less common.

In a broader context, the absence of a control group (people in the target group who have not participated in INCREASE VS, for obvious reasons) makes a rigorous quantitative assessment of the benefits of each programme difficult. It is not possible to know if the results we obtained here are due to the specific approach, the contextual effects of the area, or the specifics of each respective training programme. Results need to be interpreted cautiously as the overall response rate of clients that completed training were low (27.6%) and only a fraction of those participated at T2 (9.5%) and T3 (6.4%) and especially for the Collaborative and Collective approaches which represented 15.6% and 13.2% of the total sample. Moreover, some of the attrition at T2 and T3 is likely to be systematic in that participants could drop out from the study for reasons that relate to the very measures we wanted to capture such as well-being, or even transitioning from unemployment to employment.

When comparing qualitatively the INCREASE VS client experiences across five different regions, we concluded that none of the four approaches stood out as universally successful, and each was quite dependent on the particular circumstances of both the communities they operated in and the individuals that signed up (there wasn't a uniform demographic, for instance).

There is clear qualitative evidence from our client respondents of significant wellbeing benefits, including higher self-confidence, improved motivation and aspiration, and improved ability to build a pathway towards one's goals more generally. While these benefits aren't directly linked to the number of job starts or business start-ups created, they nonetheless play a key role in supporting both. This was reflected in the detailed feedback from in-depth client interviews, which explained that these were high-quality services that out-competed the other statutory and free enterprise or start-up training and advice that was available.

For instance, in England, the housing associations have either added (Parallel Approach) or extended (Integrated Approach) new support for those seeking self-employment to their existing support services for those seeking employment.

The higher level of client deprivation in the Parallel Approach meant that the majority of clients gained considerably in terms of their wellbeing via their involvement in INCREASE VS. Participation helped to significantly decrease their social isolation and improve their sense of purpose, even whilst only making rather limited progress towards securing decent,

⁶ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0014292122001143?via%3Dihub>

⁷ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11205-017-1753-7>

stable employment or self-employment. These latter difficulties were due in large part to a lack of local opportunity and local economic demand.

The higher level of client engagement in the Integrated Approach reflected the fact that INCREASE VS was not experienced merely as training, but rather as training plus ongoing mentoring in which the strength of the relationships with the trainers and peers, together with their ongoing support after the training ended, were considered to be vitally important. As

such, while only a few of these clients found the programme to be transformational, many made valuable gains including starting side or hobby businesses or making strong progress towards developing business start-ups nonetheless. This progress is not to be dismissed, not least due to the challenging personal circumstances many participants faced.

In France, the housing associations used their social proximity to their tenants, and other residents in deprived neighbourhoods, to either re-engage those furthest from the market with local support services so that they can work towards work integration (Collaborative Approach) or mobilise excluded tenants through resident associations to develop volunteering activities that respond to community needs (Collective Approach).

The higher motivation of clients in the Collaborative Approach projects produced an understandable response in terms of the evaluation of the project, with clients praising both the training itself (especially if this was accredited) and the open nature of the relationship that those supporting them fostered, as they found the network of support services they were able to connect with particularly useful.

The response was more mixed for clients of the Collective Approach projects, not least due to difficulties distinguishing the activities of INCREASE VS with those of their housing association. This blurring of boundaries didn't affect the overall satisfaction levels, however, with most appearing to be content despite the very limited impact in securing work afterward. This is reflected in the improvements in both the wellbeing and social networks of participants.

The COVID-19 pandemic created additional challenges in evaluating the efficacy of training and it is likely that it influenced the results in ways we cannot assess. For example, we cannot know what the results would have been without the challenges compounded by the pandemic, or whether some of the differences between the different approaches, training providers, or regions, were lessened or amplified.

Key takeaways

While the communities covered by the INCREASE VS project had very unique circumstances that make direct comparisons between the different approaches taken difficult, a number of key findings emerged nonetheless that can help to guide us going forward.

- **Local context is key** – Local circumstances were crucial in terms of the strength of the local economy and the shortcomings in the local labour market, and so each programme needed to reflect this environment and respond accordingly.
- **Housing associations are agents of change** – Housing associations can be key agents of change due to not only their embeddedness in the local community but also their long-term presence and robust funding, especially in comparison to local authorities.
- **Support requires certain key characteristics** – Support should strive to be non-judgemental and inclusive, responsive, interactive, practical, but most importantly continuous support that is delivered close to clients over a longer time frame both one-to-one and as part of peer learning communities.
- **This is a long-term challenge** – Deprived communities represent difficult environments in which to make progress, so it's vital that programmes are committed to long-term support.
- **Gardiens⁸ and local ambassadors have crucial roles** – These individuals can act as the social glue that binds communities together, while also helping to maintain shared spaces and other conviviality areas in social housing communities in the former case or peer-learning groups in the case of the latter.
- **Co-funding can provide continuity** – What is needed is not a project but an institutionalised service that is ongoing as opposed to a 'stop and start' process funded by external bodies. This underpins the crucial role 'co-investment' can play in providing such an institutionalised service with sufficient sustainability to ensure this continuity occurs.

Policy recommendations

While much of the policy work on “levelling up” has focused on smaller, regional cities in the hope that they can experience some of the gains seen in London and Paris, there remains much that can be done to improve the prospects of those in small, often deprived towns and communities.

⁸ *Gardiens* are resident caretakers, that is housing association staff who combine cleaning and maintenance responsibilities with supporting social and community relations, whilst privileging a sense of *proximité* (closeness) in their work – these frontline staff are part of the community in French housing estates.

- **Encouraging returnees** – A sense of place is important for bolstering the local economy and encouraging people who left deprived areas for better opportunities to return can bring fresh ideas, connections, investment, and vitality to a region, thus bolstering both entrepreneurship and employment opportunities.
- **Bolstering self-efficacy** – A first step in progressing and changing one's life is the belief that such change is possible. This belief is often lacking, which makes any interventions harder, if not impossible, to achieve. As a result, it is vital that interventions factor this in to provide the basis for all that follows.
- **Developing extra local connections** – Social capital has been identified as crucial to supporting deprived communities, but opportunities to develop this are often not present. Many of the participants in INCREASE VS had lived in their local community all of their lives so they lack those extra local connections, so it's important either to attract returnees or otherwise support the development of broader networks.
- **Social infrastructure** – Research suggests that 25% of "levelling up" investment should be devoted to so-called "social infrastructure" that will allow people to interact with their local communities and generate a sense of local identity. While this is not directly linked with employment and entrepreneurship, the value of both a sense of place and stronger social networks will bolster both.
- **Tapping into net zero** – The Levelling Up White Paper⁹ makes explicit reference to the Net Zero agenda, stating that the transition "could have large and long-lasting effects on virtually every aspect of the economy, including jobs and skills, infrastructure and technology, and investment and innovation". INCREASE VS has shown potential for generating skills, jobs, and community-based energy, so this is an avenue that should be explored further.
- **Boosting digital literacy** – The last few years have seen a wide range of projects designed to boost digital skills in areas such as coding, cyber security, and data science, and while these high-end skills are important, it's also important that more rudimentary digital skills are provided so that people can actively participate in modern society.

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/levelling-up-the-united-kingdom>

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ACRONYMS

- ADIE: An association giving microcredit for microenterprise which works in collaboration with CitéLab and Mission Locale/WeKer in Rennes (www.adie.org)
- ASS: L'Allocation de Solidarité Spécifique (An unemployment benefit for those who have exhausted their other unemployment entitlements)
- BGE: A national network supporting business creation in France
- CAF: La Caisse d'Allocations Familiales (The Family Allowance Fund)

CAP: Le Certificat d'Aptitude Professionnelle (Vocational Qualification)

CAPE: Contrat d'Appui au Projet d'Entreprise (Business Project Support Contract)

CCAS: Centre Communal d'Action Sociale (Communal Social Action Centre)

CCI: Chambres des Commerce et de l'Industries (Chamber of Commerce)

CEDAS: Centre Départemental d'Action Sociale (Departmental Centre for Social Action)

CNLE: Conseil Nationale des Politiques de Lutte Contre Les Pauvreté et l'Exclusion Sociale
(National Council of Antipoverty and Exclusion Policies)

CLPS: Centre for Occupational Training for Adults

CREFO: Accredited Training organisation

CSCS: Construction Skills Certification Scheme. The CSCS card is required for all workers on larger building sites in the UK.

EOA: Eco-Ostrohove Association

GDP: Gross domestic product

HA: Housing association

INCO: Business training organisation

INSEE: L'Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques

Job Centre : Public employment service, UK

MEESS: Micro-enterprise and employment-support services

ONS: Office of National Statistics, UK

PDCH: Pas de Calais Habitat

Pôle Emploi: Public employment service, France

RSA : Revenu de Solidarité Active (A benefit that provides a minimum income)

T1: At the start of training

T2: At the end of training

T3: 6 months or more after training completed

WEMWBS: Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale

ZAC: Concerted development zone



Art on the façade of the building of an organisation supporting young people, Rennes, France.

SECTION 1

1. Introducing the notion of the ‘left behind’

A world of income inequalities

When the Occupy Wall Street protests entered into the popular consciousness the concept of the 1%, who the protestors believed were harvesting ever greater portions of global wealth, created a very emotive start to discussions around income inequality. This then took on a more academic tone a few years later when French economist Thomas Piketty published *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*¹⁰. These events started a global conversation that may have predicted the backlash that underpinned the Brexit vote, the Trump election, and the *gilet jaunes* (yellow vests) protests, even if these discussions didn't appear to do enough to ward them off.

¹⁰ <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674979857>

While economists and policymakers argued over Piketty's remedy, social and economic inequality itself has worsened. Indeed, the UN's World Social Report 2020¹¹ revealed that income inequality has been rising in most developed countries, with the UN Secretary General António Guterres urging the world to confront "the harsh realities of a deeply unequal global landscape".

It's a situation that is also typified by geospatial disparities, with Nicholas Kristof chronicling the plight of so-called "left behind" communities in his best-selling book *Tightrope: Americans Reaching for Hope*¹² in which Kristof documents the panoply of issues facing people in communities that are often typified by a decline in industry and a lack of opportunity. He asks readers how we can have sat by and let "tens of millions of people suffer an excruciating loss of jobs, dignity, lives, hopes, and children, and how we can recover."

While the inequalities that blight the developed world are often characterised in economic terms, this is by no means the extent of the picture. Indeed, research¹³ from the University of Cambridge highlights the profound, and growing, health inequalities that exist across the United Kingdom, with poorer towns suffering double the number of hospital admissions than residents of more affluent towns. There was a clear geographical divide in the data, with the healthiest towns typically found in the South East, and the unhealthiest found in the post-industrial heartland of Northern England. Coastal towns typically had the highest levels of self-harm, with child obesity also common in these areas. The INSEE reported that health inequalities also divide territories in France, with Hauts-de-France, Brittany and Normandy among the most affected regions by avoidable mortality through primary prevention (e.g., vaccination, smoking and alcohol campaigns) and by excess mortality from cancer and cardiovascular disease (CVD)¹⁴.

Research¹⁵ from Cardiff University highlights how often there is a distinctly urban/rural divide, with the agglomeration effect ensuring that talent, capital, and opportunity gravitate to larger cities. The academic paper highlights how the austerity policies introduced in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis have often exacerbated the challenges communities face as they resulted in a decline in local government services.

"It is well documented that austerity has hit the most deprived urban areas the hardest, but the impact on rural poverty is often overlooked given difficulties in measurement and idyllic representations of the countryside," the researchers explain. "Beyond the image of 'leafy shire counties' and 'idyllic chocolate box villages', the last decade has seen a steady

¹¹ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/world-social-report/2020-2.html>

¹² <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/588999/tightrope-by-nicholas-d-kristof-and-sheryl-wudunn/>

¹³ https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Townscapes_Englands_Health_Inequalities_May_2020.pdf

¹⁴ https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/5039901?sommaire=5040030#figure2_radio2

¹⁵ <https://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/S0743016719308083>

dismantling of the social infrastructures — bus routes, libraries, youth centers — which many people in rural areas rely on.”

Lack of nuance

Many of the challenges faced by "left behind" communities are exacerbated by the homogeneity with which such communities are viewed. For instance, research¹⁶ from the University of Cambridge reveals how these towns often display very unique characteristics that define how people think and behave.

For instance, the study found that former mining communities were much less likely to turn to populist or nationalist parties than their socio-economic peers elsewhere in the region. Instead, they have simply succumbed to a degree of apathy and cynicism that belies their loss of faith in politics to do anything to help them. This makes people in these communities less likely to vote than in non-mining communities that have also fallen on hard times.

The Nuffield Foundation's English Atlas of Inequality¹⁷ aims to provide such nuance by using three measures of inequality to try and provide a more detailed evaluation of each town and region. The Atlas then maps these with population data on things such as mortality, poverty, and entry to higher education to explore how distinct approaches to understanding inequality can provide very different results.

The project highlights how many coastal communities would be overlooked if one were purely using economic inequality, despite poverty being high in such communities. By contrast, when inequality was measured via geographic income clusterings, it was more common for patterns of income deprivation to match those of outcomes more broadly.

A new approach

This improved understanding urgently needs to translate into more effective policies to help such communities, especially after research¹⁸ from the Brookings Institute highlighted how the prosperity gap between large cities and smaller towns is growing.

The report suggests that top-down investments in infrastructure, such as those seen across the European Union to try and reduce economic divergence between regions, have largely failed to fend off the political challenges of such divergence or helped to place these regions on a more sustainable path towards growth.

Similarly, attempts by regions to provide financial incentives to firms in the hope of attracting employers to them have also largely failed, with the authors suggesting that any boost to

¹⁶ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0143622821000643>

¹⁷ <http://ajrae.staff.shef.ac.uk/atlasofinequality/>

¹⁸ https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/2018.11_Report_Countering-geography-of-discontent_Hendrickson-Muro-Galston.pdf

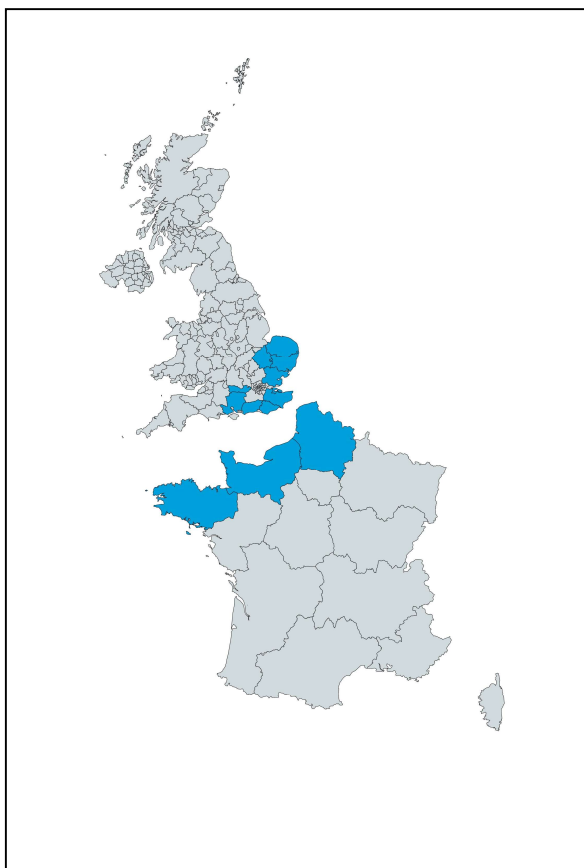
employment in these areas is largely down to newcomers migrating there rather than boosts for the native population. What's more, these funds tend to go towards larger, incumbent firms, which aren't necessarily the kind that will drive growth.

One of the recommendations made by the report is to boost the skills of people in "left behind" communities, and this was the focus of our research into fostering employability and entrepreneurship, and new business creation in numerous coastal communities across Southern England and Northern France.

The Increase *Valorisation Sociale* Programme

Increase *Valorisation Sociale* (henceforth referred to as INCREASE VS) is an initiative created by a partnership of nine housing associations and training providers in England and France. The £10.8 million programme (to date) has helped more than 4,526 participants learn how to, and receive support in, going back to work or starting their own business. The programme includes support in testing business ideas and managing the finances of the business. It has helped to create up to 1,020 new businesses, while also supporting 1,136 participants into work. The programme service statistics by September 2022 indicate that of the 6,259 participants who began training, 16% started a business¹⁹, 18% had a new job, and 7% had enrolled in more education. Taken together, 41% of INCREASE VS participants reported a change in work or education status.

The programme has developed integrated micro-enterprise and employment support services in 38 neighbourhoods split between Southern England and Northern France, with each neighbourhood selected due to the above-average unemployment in the area. Its key aim has been to create a sustainable pipeline of job starts and new businesses that can support households



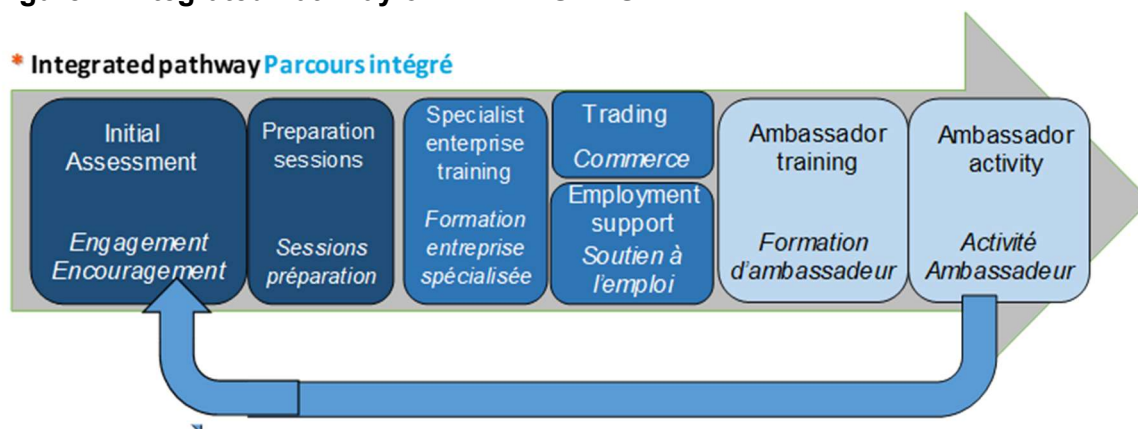
¹⁹ This includes those with 'hard' as well as 'soft' evidence of start-up or self-employment. Hard evidence used for Increase VS partners to report microenterprise and self-employment outcomes includes registration with Companies House; acquirement of a business Insurance; or along term lease, whereas soft evidence includes elements such as the client has receipt of sale; a photo of sales at shop/stall; or a screenshot of website/eBay page.

and benefit the local economy, while also developing a network of ambassadors to provide peer support to future participants.

INCREASE VS directly targets both the individuals and communities that have been "left behind" by globalisation, with participants those furthest from the jobs market and the long-term unemployed, who are often 'invisible' and face various complex barriers to work.

The programme has supported participants into re-employment and the creation of micro-enterprises that are both well suited to their intrinsic skills and learning capabilities but also the context of their local environment, and has offered an integrated service. With regards to entrepreneurship, the inclusive nature of the programme ensured that both the businesses that are created benefit the local community and also that the entrepreneurs themselves were enabled to pay it forward and provide mentoring support to others who wish to embark on a similar path (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Integrated Pathway of INCREASE VS



Each participant has therefore received a programme of support and a clear action plan to help them achieve their goals that is tailored to their intrinsic skills, their personal circumstances, and the possibilities of their local market.

Evaluating progress

The University of East Anglia (UEA) has been engaged in an evaluation of the work conducted to date to assess both the progression of clients and the overall social value achieved. The evaluation process has been designed to:

- inform the development and adaptation of project activities in real-time,
- facilitate learning between project partners and across project neighbourhoods
- rigorously evaluate the impact of the support services so that lessons can be shared beyond the project

The evaluation process undertaken by this five-year project has been ongoing and focuses on the delivery of support services, the outcomes they achieve for clients, and the subsequent legacy for the neighbourhoods supported. Ultimately, the aim has been to understand how, or indeed whether, the programme positively impacts the lives and economic prospects of participants.

It recognises the various challenges clients face as well as their unique circumstances, together with the particular responses made by project partners to effectively support each participant in their varying contexts.

Evaluating impact

To evaluate the impact of INCREASE VS, rigorous evidence was collected based upon both hard and soft outcomes, with the evidence generated via primary research. Hard information has provided insight into the work status, education, and business activities of participants before, during, and after training. Soft information has provided insight into the skills, self-perceptions, experiences, and aspirations of participants before, during, and after training.

The evaluation tests the hypothesis that for the intervention to be effective, diagnosis of client needs and contextual challenges must feed into the development of integrated services for clients. The effectiveness of these services has thus been assessed according to the client engagement they produce, and the outcomes they generate in terms of new business generation or securing of employment. It has also assessed whether participants who are successful in this pathway go on to become ambassadors of the programme and help to establish a positive legacy in their neighbourhood (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Simplified Intervention Logic



As the evaluation progressed, the aim has been to understand why INCREASE VS services sometimes work, as well as why (sometimes, in some places, for some clients) they do not work as intended, with the assessment conducted across INCREASE VS as a whole rather than via an assessment of individual housing associations. There has been an explicit assumption that interventions, and outcomes, would vary in each neighbourhood and that

there would likely be various external factors that influence outcomes that are outside of the control of INCREASE VS.

This report will discuss next the needs of previous micro-enterprise and employment support schemes implemented in deprived communities similar to those covered here, before looking at what results were achieved by the INCREASE VS project both in terms of individual participants and their wider communities. It will then conclude with an assessment of the lessons that can be gleaned from the different interventions, contexts, and approaches and how those furthest from the labour market who are often ‘invisible’ could be better supported in the future.



Vacant commercial area in Waterlooville, Hampshire, UK.

SECTION 2

2. What are the needs for MEESS in deprived areas where Housing Association partners work?

The development of micro-enterprises has been a key theme for policymakers in both the developed and developing world since the late 1970s in response to underemployment, unemployment, and growing economic insecurity that has accompanied the de-industrialisation that has emerged in the wake of increased globalisation.

This was especially so during the period of Reagonomics with its neoliberal economic policies that encouraged and promoted self-reliance rather than dependence on welfare benefits. Many interventions to date have combined micro-enterprise training and microfinance and differ noticeably from efforts to tackle unemployment, which have tended to focus more on the various challenges individuals face, including poverty, crime, and mental health problems.

Previous efforts to evaluate these initiatives have uncovered a number of key lessons for modern micro-enterprise and employment support schemes.

National issues cannot be discounted

While most micro-enterprise support schemes have been conducted on a local level according to the local needs and circumstances, it's impossible to completely divorce oneself from the national picture. This is especially so as many micro-enterprises operate in so-called non-traded services, such as hairdressing, cleaning, and childcare²⁰. As such, the relationship between micro-enterprises and the welfare system can be important, especially as many micro-enterprises begin life as a “side hustle” alongside the primary source of income.

If this primary source of income is via the welfare system, then many participants and potential participants are concerned that beginning to earn a small amount of money independently will jeopardise their benefits²¹. This is especially problematic if a “cliff-edge” exists whereby any income results in a complete retraction of benefits, as opposed to a more gradual decline in benefits as independent income increases.

²⁰ [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X\(03\)00112-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(03)00112-8)

²¹ <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/42.1.44>

The strength of the local economy is crucial

While national factors are undoubtedly important, programmes such as INCREASE VS rely heavily on the vitality of the local economy. For instance, previous data²² has shown that 76% of businesses created via the Enterprise Allowance Scheme were primarily dependent on their local economy. This is especially so when these new businesses are designed in part to revitalise the local economy.

There has been a degree of evidence from Germany²³ suggesting that protective spaces can serve as effective incubators for new businesses, with this especially so for businesses created by local residents. While there have been some suggestions that the internet, and the global market it provides access to, can help to overcome some of the challenges presented by weak local markets, it is largely unclear whether this can be sufficient to help overcome other local challenges, such as weak access to financial and human capital²⁴.

Economic exclusion

This can be particularly so in areas that are furthest from significant markets. Previous research shows²⁵ that economically depressed areas have consistently lower levels of entrepreneurship. This is in large part due to the lower levels of demand and purchasing power, but also due to the highly competitive nature of many of the markets entered into by micro-entrepreneurs, such as hairdressing.

What's more, communities with high levels of economic exclusion often lack the skills, finance, role models, and premises to support entrepreneurship, while psychological mechanisms can also play a crucial role. For instance, when areas suffer from high levels of unemployment, it can be detrimental to the self-efficacy of residents to attempt positive changes in their life²⁶, for example via re-employment²⁷ and entrepreneurship²⁸.

In addition, economically depressed areas can come with a wide range of environmental stressors, such as noise, pollution, crime, and poor-quality housing that can further hinder the prospects of residents²⁹.

²² <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/001979398704000406>

²³ <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11365-007-0069-5>; https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/0-387-24519-7_16

²⁴ <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781784712006.00024>

²⁵ <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0269094210391166>

²⁶ <https://doi.org/10.2307%2F1389785>

²⁷ <https://doi:10.1037/0021-9010.78.3.352>

²⁸ <https://www.elgaronline.com/view/edcoll/9781784711993/9781784711993.00010.xml>

²⁹ <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.59.2.77>

Motivation matters

Micro-entrepreneurship activities in economically excluded regions are commonly characterised as ‘high effort, high risk, and low profit’³⁰. They can also often be exploitative in nature and conducted from home³¹. Indeed, many forms of modern micro-entrepreneurship can be difficult to distinguish from underemployment or even criminal activity³².

Previous data shows how economically marginalised groups are often forced to become entrepreneurs because of a lack of meaningful alternatives in the labour market³³. This can be especially so for groups such as refugees and other migrants, who can struggle due to a lack of acceptable credentials, contacts, and awareness of the local labour market. This can result in entrepreneurship for these groups being far from the money-making image of popular lore and more a case of basic survival.

The home-based nature of many micro-entrepreneurs is also an important factor, not least because it enables women and other carers access to opportunities they might not otherwise enjoy. The flexibility of various micro-entrepreneurship roles can allow them to be undertaken alongside other responsibilities. Researchers ponder³⁴, however, how these opportunities for empowerment sit alongside the often uncertain and unpredictable nature of such micro-entrepreneurship.

Such home-based roles can also blur the boundaries between personal and professional lives, so it is important to examine such micro-entrepreneurship in the wider household context rather than something that stands apart from it.

Job Search Interventions need to be personalised

Employment research³⁵ stresses the need to take the personal characteristics of the individual into account when determining a job search intervention. For instance, age is often particularly important, with younger and older participants seemingly more likely to benefit from job search interventions than their middle-aged peers.

Job search interventions can also be highly effective for groups that are otherwise marginalised. For instance, people with special needs and conditions, such as chronic health problems, drug addiction, or mental disabilities can benefit more from interventions than job seekers in general. Such interventions can be particularly effective when they include social

³⁰ [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X\(03\)00112-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(03)00112-8)

³¹ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0308275X17694944>

³² <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/bitstream/handle/1813/3716/Rethinking%20Informalization.pdf?sequence=1#page=10>

³³ <https://doi.org/10.1080/0390670032000087069>

³⁴ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/089124398012004004>

³⁵ <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0035923>

support and self-efficacy initiatives to help provide both moral support and role modelling to participants.

As with other communities, however, the longer people remain unemployed the less effective a job search³⁶ form of intervention is, whether due to the difficulty explaining gaps in employment, diminished social networks that can help secure jobs, and lower levels of education, all of which cannot effectively be compensated for by short-term interventions.

The right approach in the right place

Evidence suggests that there is a huge variation in the micro-entrepreneurship support programmes available, whether in terms of the components of the programme, the way they're combined, and the target groups and objectives they have. For instance, a common form of distinction is whether the programmes provide just training or a degree of financial support as well.

While many programmes attempt to overcome challenges, such as a lack of capital, premises, or skills, they can do little to affect more profound economic issues³⁷. Programmes are also often compromised by the need to be economically self-reliant, which can prompt programme managers to exclude lower-income groups and rather work with those clients who are more likely to pay back loans³⁸.

However, programmes also tend to target areas that are not well serviced by more traditional entrepreneurship support programmes, such as accelerators and incubators³⁹. This can provide interesting opportunities, but the best results appear to emerge when micro-entrepreneurship support programmes are able to operate across a neighbourhood, local, and national scale.

It is also important that programme managers take full account of the domestic circumstances of participants, as failure to do so will almost certainly result in many potential participants being excluded⁴⁰.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a notable impact, both on employment prospects and entrepreneurship, whilst the broader ramifications of this crisis are yet to be identified. Research⁴¹ from the University of Michigan suggests that workers aged between 21 and 25 are made redundant roughly twice as quickly as those of other ages when the economy

³⁶ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14623730.2010.9721812>

³⁷ https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/_/hXBSz-vAgkC?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PR9&dq=balkin+1989

³⁸ <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/bitstream/handle/1813/74104/BootStrapDreams.pdf?sequence=1>

³⁹ <https://www.bioin.or.kr/InnoDS/data/upload/policy/1310018323687.PDF>

⁴⁰ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1068/c0528>

⁴¹ <https://news.umich.edu/young-workers-suffer-longer-from-recessions/>

goes into a recession. A significant rise in people turning to gig platforms has also been reported, with data⁴² from the University of Chicago highlighting for the US the rise in work that is characterised as insecure with irregular hours and low wages over the last forty years. Precarious employment is therefore a longstanding trend rather than something brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and something that does not come alone. As the researchers explain, “poor employment quality may be contributing to widening health inequities, as women, people with lower education levels, and minorities have a higher prevalence of precarious employment”.

There has been a corresponding increase in entrepreneurship and self-employment due to the precarious labour market situation, but this again has been primarily characterised by necessity rather than seeing clear gaps in the market to capitalise on. As a report⁴³ from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor indicates, this was as true for what may be viewed as traditional entrepreneurs as it was for those taking more micro-entrepreneurship routes.

“The recognition of good opportunities to start a business may not be sufficient enticement to actually do so if individuals do not see themselves as having the necessary skills, knowledge, and experience, or if they fear that the business they start might fail,” the authors explain. “Hence, self-perception and attitudes towards risk can be important influencing factors on the decision to start a new business.”

Common challenges

These broader trends were certainly evident among the areas covered by the INCREASE VS project, with both France and England among the countries hit by the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe. As a response to this, both countries introduced stringent lockdown measures to try and restrict the spread of the virus, with economic and social life in both countries intensively interrupted as a result.

These periods were therefore typified by reductions in business activity, rising unemployment, rising claimant counts, rising food price indices, and rising poverty, with extensive social and economic policy responses introduced to try and ameliorate the impact of the pandemic on the national economy in both countries.

In both England and France, the COVID-19 pandemic made clear, and indeed worsened, the inequalities that had existed prior to the Covid period. This was clear in both health metrics, such as hospital admissions and infections, and also in poverty rates, rising unemployment, and rising claimant rates that became all higher in deprived areas. What’s more, there was over-exposure to the virus among those in low-paid temporary work, low-paid self-employment, and/or zero-hour contracts.

⁴² https://www.sjweh.fi/show_abstract.php?abstract_id=3939

⁴³ <https://gemconsortium.org/reports/latest-global-report>

There were also noticeable rises in the risk of domestic violence, while those who experienced chronic health issues or mental health issues found themselves often unsupported, which corresponds to a historic rise in issues such as depression, while Harvard research⁴⁴ suggests we are also in the midst of a “loneliness epidemic” that rivals the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a result, it's clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has both worsened the structural conditions for projects like INCREASE VS and impacted severely on those areas that are already deprived and those people who are most disadvantaged. What's more, the economic consequences of the pandemic have also increased the target group who required support to get back on their feet, whether through employment, self-employment, or entrepreneurship. This included many of those who resorted to insecure and low-paid jobs to try and make ends meet or people whose ventures into self-employment or entrepreneurship failed due to challenging circumstances.

Given the psychological toll imparted by the COVID-19 pandemic, it also seemed inevitable that interventions had also needed to pay particular attention in addressing issues such as confidence, resilience, and hope in order to equip participants with the foundations to embark on the next chapter in their life.

Developing services

The rapidly changing context within which the INCREASE VS micro-enterprise and employment support services operated resulted in inevitable changes in both the services offered and the operations of the service providers. The following four approaches were broadly deployed across the INCREASE VS programme (see Figure 3), but there were also other noticeable changes emerging during the pandemic period:

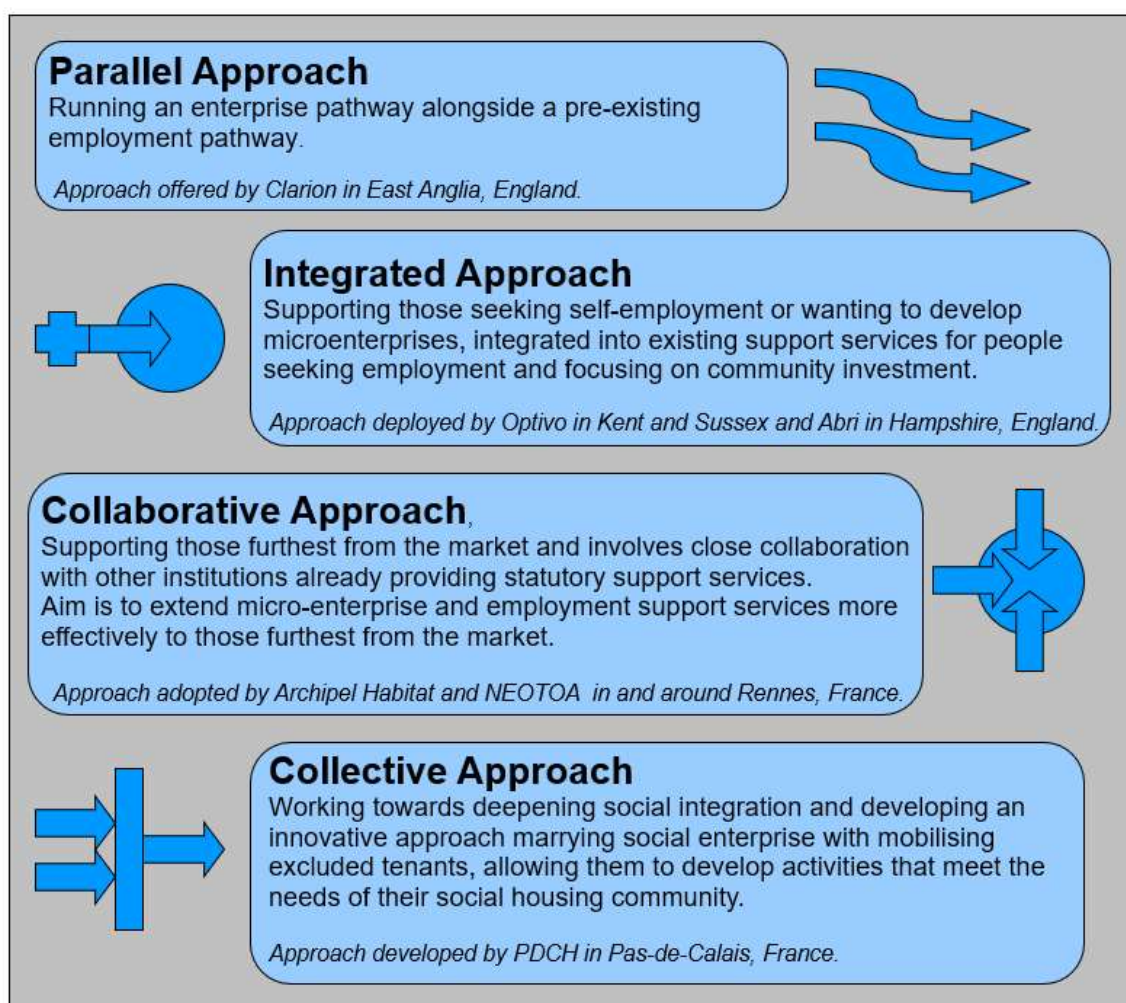
- **Parallel Approach**, which involves running an enterprise pathway alongside the employment pathway that existed before. This was an approach offered by Clarion in East Anglia, England.
- **Integrated Approach**, which sees support for those seeking self-employment or wanting to develop microenterprises integrated into the existing support services for people seeking employment. This approach has been deployed by Optivo in Kent and Sussex and Abri in Hampshire, England.
- **Collaborative Approach**, which aims to support those people who are furthest from the market and involves close collaboration with other institutions that are providing statutory support services. The aim is to extend employment support more effectively

⁴⁴ <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2021/02/young-adults-teens-loneliness-mental-health-coronavirus-covid-pandemic/>

to those furthest from the market. This was the approach adopted by Archipel Habitat and NEOTOA working in and around Rennes, France.

- **Collective Approach**, which works towards deepening social integration and developing an innovative approach that marries social enterprise with mobilising excluded tenants to allow them to develop activities that meet the needs of their community. This was the approach developed by PDCH in Pas-de-Calais, France.

Figure 3: The four INCREASE VS Approaches



The changing circumstances imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic had a noticeable impact on participation in the INCREASE VS programmes. For instance, the collaborative approach adopted by housing associations in and around Rennes, France has evolved in a number of ways due to the challenges of COVID-19. These changes included moving delivery online; working with smaller groups; investing in developing digital skills; and postponing training

that needs to be done face-to-face. These approaches ensured that engagement with the programme among participants remained strong despite the considerable disruption caused by the pandemic.

For instance, the Exploratoire programme, run by training provider WeKer, suffered disruption to their face-to-face workshops, but managed to deliver some of them online, especially those that didn't require external people to deliver them. The programme managers also noticed a change in the type of participant in the programme, with an increase in those looking for a "dream job", or at least an appreciation that quality work is as important as any work.

Meanwhile, for programmes adopting a more collective approach they too had to adapt to the changes imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic and provide workshops online. This was particularly challenging for the PDCH project revolving around the electric car (driven by volunteers and available to hire to residents at low cost), with numerous issues emerging, such as the legal structure for managing the car, and COVID-19 regulations.

There was also a degree of adaptation undertaken according to the changing needs of the market, or at least a changing understanding of the market's needs. For instance, the Outreau project in Pas-de-Calais, France was strongly linked with an urban renewal of the project's neighbourhood, so the nature of the project changed with the changing landscape within which it operated. A central problem that emerged with the evolution of the renewal was the decline in neighbourhood spirit, which helped to embed issues such as drug dealing, delinquency, and domestic violence. The project managers tried to rebuild this by including residents in the operations of the project so there was greater community involvement and investment in its success.

Similar disruption was felt by the programmes operating in England. For instance, Abri also moved their delivery online where they could during the pandemic, but also had to postpone training that required face-to-face delivery. They also established online support networks to help participants. Moving online created flexibility for clients who could not otherwise have attended the MEES due to personal circumstances or geographical location. With a view to the future, they envisage maintaining a hybrid approach to delivery moving forward where an initial series of online workshops ends with a face-to-face graduation workshop followed by online post-course support.

As in France, there was also a significant disruption caused to the lives of clients and potential clients, whether due to changes to their health or their economic circumstances as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, many found themselves unemployed for the first time as a result of the lockdown measures. Abri's recruitment benefitted from the strong institutional links it had already developed through its employment support service with other HAs, Job Centres, and other business, training and support networks. Additionally, Abri had a strong online presence and ensured their MEES continued to be visible internally and externally at this time.

Optivo also migrated their training online during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this influenced the nature of the support they were then able to provide, as it enabled them to work with smaller groups and to engage more closely with them than had been possible before and each training was adapted to the needs and requests of the specific group of clients from the outset. The focus remained however on keeping it practical with dynamic discussions. As a result of these changes, the original 5 days of training now unfolds over 5 weeks giving time for clients to process information between sessions and for trainers to adapt the content of later sessions to the emerging requests of trainees.

Optivo's post-course support has also evolved during that period to accompany people on a one-to-one basis over a longer period and see safeguarding the interests of clients furthest from the market as part of this role. Post-course support was built around weekly group meetings and more extended monthly individual catch-ups by Optivo staff. In response to the uncertainty created by the COVID-19 pandemic, Optivo also added more resilience elements to their training, including the idea of bullet-proofing your business and, in response to demand, more wellbeing elements too.

What best practice looks like

Of the roughly 6 million businesses in the UK, approximately 95% are micro-businesses that employ less than 9 people⁴⁵. Indeed, 59% are solopreneurs, but this crucial group is often under-represented in terms of discussions and policies designed to support "entrepreneurship".

Through the diverse experiences of the various micro-enterprise support schemes in operation across different countries, a number of best practices emerged to help bridge that conceptual and practical gap with regards to policymaking, especially in terms of support for deprived areas and socially excluded communities. The research into this matter was conducted according to three key lenses:

- **An individualistic perspective**, which explores how support services can provide people with a way out of poverty. This lens tends to focus attention on removing barriers and building individual skills, with these then believed to support entrepreneurship. This approach suggests that poverty and exclusion are largely individual problems and once people manage to change that, things will be better. This approach has mixed results, especially in deprived areas, precisely because it doesn't engage effectively with people's personal and social constraints⁴⁶.

⁴⁵ <https://www.smeloans.co.uk/blog/micro-business-statistics-uk/#:~:text=Parliament%20Statistics%20reveal%20that%20in,and%2021%25%20of%20UK%20turnover.>

⁴⁶ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08985620500419566>

- **A structuralist perspective**, in which there is general scepticism about the potential for enterprise to thrive in deprived areas. As such, this perspective urges policymakers to implement strategies designed to close the inequalities that span society and so disadvantage many communities. These might include addressing the lower social capital and weak networks in deprived areas⁴⁷.
- **A critical perspective**, which views support services as part of welfare-to-work policies that can often promote low-return businesses. This perspective is largely opposed to interventions, arguing that, at best, they only ameliorate rather than address poverty and social exclusion⁴⁸. This perspective does provide some value, however, not least in helping to identify the challenges people in deprived communities face. They also highlight the importance of individual agency, and challenge support services to prove that people actually want to start a business or otherwise improve their life.

While each of these perspectives has merit,⁴⁹ the true nature of life in deprived neighbourhoods requires us to view human agency as something that is both embedded in the culture of the neighbourhoods, but not determined by it. As such, we propose a "unifying-realist" approach that combines insights from the three different perspectives and would see micro-entrepreneurship support services as something that cannot stand alone but instead be deeply embedded in the community in order to truly grasp the complexity of everyday motives of those within the community.

It also urges us not to assume a pre-defined pathway for developing ideas for a business and instead take a more personal approach that accepts the role of luck and happenstance just as much as it does the role of intentionality⁵⁰. Indeed, it envisages that many actions will be driven in response to changing circumstances rather than a pre-determined plan. The unifying-realist perspective would also allow support service providers (and their interventions) to be more adequately scrutinised to better understand how they work in practice.

We will next explore the INCREASE VS intervention logic and adaptive learning across different partners, settings, and approaches to try and draw out any lessons for future interventions.

⁴⁷ <https://doi.org/10.1068%2Fc1188b>

⁴⁸ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00220388.2015.1126249?src=getftr>

⁴⁹ <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2014.09.003>

⁵⁰ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0883902617305402#bb025555>



Pop-Up Business School training in Dover, UK.

SECTION 3

3. The INCREASE VS Intervention Logic and Adaptive Learning Across Different Contexts: Partners, Settings, and Approaches

As briefly touched upon in the previous section, the housing associations participating in INCREASE VS deployed four distinct approaches to working with participants.

Adding parallel support

The **Parallel Approach** adopted by Clarion Futures in East Anglia saw an enterprise pathway developed alongside a pre-existing employment pathway. This employment pathway was operated by the Clarion Housing Association in close partnership with local Job Centres and community centres to try and support those who are far from the labour market. The programme operates across East Anglia, including Norfolk, Suffolk, and Cambridgeshire, with a particular focus on areas with high levels of deprivation, such as

Great Yarmouth. In this target-oriented approach eligibility criteria are used to select those most in need of support, but it remains challenging to provide the continuity of support participants need given the often short-term nature of funding and competition with other third sector organisations.

The client group was identified as being predominantly male, and communication was a challenge given the limited email access among participants. This resulted in patchy attendance records and a generally disconnected sense to their lives. The service statistics as per September 2022 show that just over 59% of those who engaged with the programme started training. These difficulties were compounded by the lack of basic literacy among participants, which made dealing with administration and statutory support services difficult. This fundamental fragility was further compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, not least as the kind of insecure, zero-hours work that many relied on was not eligible for furlough support.

There were also particular challenges in terms of reaching EU citizens, who often have their own support networks and services.

There is a risk that the hostile environment introduced by the Conservative government made migrants wary about interacting with support services, with the bordering process extended to landlords, employers, education, and healthcare providers.

While the Clarion programme was ostensibly designed to focus on younger people, the reality was that older adults were those predominantly served (see Box 1). Many of these clients were interested in employment rather than entrepreneurship. This is reflected in the service statistics from the programme, which shows that 54% of participants had secured a job by September 2022, compared to just 12% who had started a business of some kind (made up of 3% using 'soft' evidence and 9% using 'hard' evidence). Suffice to say, while this may reflect the desires of the clientele, it may also reflect the weaknesses in the local economy and the challenging climate during the pandemic.

Box 1: Alan – male, older and with work experience but lacking qualifications

Alan has married and divorced three times. He worked for 35 years in the oil and gas industry, earned a large salary and lived a luxurious lifestyle. He was made redundant in 2017 and found himself on Universal Credit. At the same time, he was given full parental custody of two grandchildren (10 and 15 years of age) because their mother (his daughter) has mental health and addiction problems. He was unemployed for just over 4 years when he engaged with INCREASE VS to access the CSCS (Construction Skills Certification Scheme) training so that he could target more secure work on larger building sites.

He recently found employment again in the energy industry with the support of the Clarion employment adviser he originally met in the Job Centre who referred him to the relevant employment agency after he finished his CSCS training. He feels that this opportunity came out of the connections that he developed through INCREASE VS MEESS and the local links and partnerships this facilitates.



Community Centre in Wisbech, UK.

Integrating support

The **Integrated Approach** adopted by Abri (formerly Radian) aims to successfully combine support for entrepreneurship with that already provided for employment. The focal point of the programme is the “Create” training scheme, which aims to offer a range of pathways for small and micro-enterprise development, with up to 2 years of highly structured support offered after graduation from the course.

The programme is delivered across Hampshire, with minimal apparent eligibility criteria imposed on clients. For instance, data from the study suggests that a significant proportion of clients were people currently furloughed or otherwise had income from employment or their own business which need to be developed.

As with the other programmes, Abri migrated much of its delivery online during the COVID-19 pandemic, albeit with a degree of disruption to training that needed to be delivered face-to-face. They also established various new online support networks and now envisage this hybrid approach remaining during the post-Covid period. Such an approach consists of various online workshops, each followed by a face-to-face graduation workshop, with online support offered after graduation. This approach proved popular with clients due to the flexibility involved, and many reported that they were able to attend virtually in ways they wouldn't have been able to in person, whether due to personal circumstances or geographical restrictions.

The Abri programme managers also highlight the wide variety of clients they have worked with. For instance, some joined the programme due to changes in their health, others due to a breakdown in their marriage, while some just wanted a change in lifestyle (see Boxes 2 and 3). It was also increasingly common that people were made unemployed for the first time in their lives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Box 2: Igor – a successful graduate of the CREATE programme

Igor first set up his car detailing and leather restoration business for car collectors three years ago. He moved to England from Poland 20 years ago and had an excellent work history for automotive companies including McLaren, Rolls-Royce, BMW, Jaguar, and Land Rover. He insists that the CREATE course was a “good experience” saying that “I became aware of a lot of things in a business. It gives me the opportunity to see other businesses in terms of new business owners. I could actually see who is going into the business and how they behave, how confident they are. I think for me, this was the biggest learning”.

Since he first engaged with Abri, his business has continued to grow in Hampshire. He recruited one employee and he was looking for another one.

Box 3: Kate – making progress with self-employment

Kate is a 43-year-old woman who has fibromyalgia which causes her physical pain and stress. She is highly educated with an illustration degree and good work experience in her chosen field of arts and printing. She resigned from her previous employment with the idea of becoming self-employed because they would not accommodate the needs of her health condition or childcare.

She found the Abri course useful for moving her aspiration to open an online shop for the goods she designs and creates: paintings, mugs, and cushions. She has faced challenges developing her art business due to COVID-19, facing obstacles with supplies and deliveries. However, she has been “successful a little bit over Christmas” selling some items she made, as the lockdown had lifted.

Recruitment to the programme was primarily via the strong ties the programme had with local institutions, such as job centres and local training networks. They also have a strong presence online, which helped to attract participants. Managers suggest that the pandemic has increased retention as it gave participants a strong motivation to complete the programme. This was only moderately reflected in the service statistics (September 2022), however, with 79% of those who engaged in the programme starting training. In terms of outcomes, the service statistics show that there was a comparable number of clients continuing into education and training at the end of the programme (41%) or starting a business or becoming self-employed (41% - made up of 33% using ‘soft’ and 8% using ‘hard’ evidence), and another 17% of clients going on to find a job.

Post-course support for Abri clients typically consists of one-to-one sessions alongside group sessions and access to a business club, whereby graduates themselves can share

experiences and knowledge with one another. Managers have developed a pool of ambassadors who are paid to help during this post-graduation phase, both in providing tangible support (mentoring and hosting workshops) and role modelling for the current cohort of participants (see Box 4).

Box 4: Jack – testing whether his side hustle was a viable business

Jack, in his 50s, began university but started working before finishing it. He has a long professional experience in different fields, having worked as a private detective, a proofreader, and an assistant director in a film production company until he decided to change pathways because he felt unsatisfied. He started his outdoor adventure business in July 2019 and facilitates tree-climbing and camping experiences. He attended the INCREASE VS training in Hampshire “to find out whether this is work, whether this is a business or just an expensive hobby”. Subsequently, he successfully moved his idea from being a hobby to being a viable business. In addition to group bookings, he contributes to local festivals and is an INCREASE VS ambassador.

The integrated approach was also used by Optivo when delivering INCREASE VS in Kent and Sussex. They were originally using Pop Up Business School and Smarter Society to deliver the course before moving it in-house. They also shifted their programme to become more group-focused and interactive in a bid to be more responsive to the needs of participants.

These developments were ongoing when COVID-19 restrictions were introduced in March 2020, with the restrictions forcing training to migrate online. This transition enabled the Optivo team to work with smaller groups, which in turn allowed them to work more closely with clients than was previously possible.

What was previously 5-days of training was subsequently delivered over 5 weeks, which also gave clients the time to process information between sessions. This also gave trainers some breathing space to absorb the feedback from each session and adjust accordingly. This ability to adapt to the changing needs of clients was something the trainers found particularly valuable. The Optivo service statistics show that of those who completed training (1,102) by September 2022, 29% started a business (18% made up of ‘soft’ and 12% of ‘hard’ evidence) whilst only one programme participant went into education/training – please note that the service statistics do not include data with regards to employment for Optivo.

Optivo has also adapted the support they provide after graduation to enable one-to-one support to be offered over a longer period. A key part of this process is to ensure that clients who are furthest from the market are safeguarded. Central to the post-graduation support offer that became more structured over time, is resilience building, while also factoring in the importance of the well-being of participants as they undergo what is inevitably a challenging process of change (see Box 5). Indeed, Optivo very much sees this relatively flexible post-course support as fundamental to the success of the programme that relies in the long term

on ambassadors volunteering to lead predominantly online peer-support groups that help its members share tips and useful business information with each other.

Box 5: Laura – using INCREASE VS to weather the COVID-19 storm

Laura has had a severe hearing impairment since childhood, which worsened a few years ago, and lives at risk of becoming completely deaf. While waiting to obtain suitable hearing aids from the NHS, she learned sign language. After working for almost two decades in the care sector as a nurse, she quit to devote herself to teaching sign language with music during in-person workshops as a business, which she started after having attended in-person INCREASE VS training in 2018. COVID-19, however, forced her to rethink her business model. With the help of INCREASE VS trainers over a two-year period, she moved her business online expanding her reach all over the UK, and in the meantime, she found another full-time job as a community worker in order to get a stable income.

Collaborating with existing support

The **Collaborative Approach** was adopted by two housing associations in Rennes, France, Archipel Habitat and Néotoa that worked closely with the existing statutory support services (WeKer) with the aim being to support people who were furthest from the market, and specifically their tenants and other residents from the QPVs⁵¹ in which they work.

The collaborative approach involves working with other organisations that are providing their own support services. The partnership included the housing associations Archipel Habitat and Néotoa, who helped to promote INCREASE VS to their tenants, and other organisations such as the CREFO (accredited training organisation), who provided gardiennage training via the *Ecole de la Proximité*, and Bouygues Construction, who were working with WeKer to leverage concrete employment opportunities from the regeneration of Néotoa housing. WeKer is also providing training and events to clients as well as access to the CitéLab mentoring initiative.

All three partners also work to support *La Cohue* – a social space run by a non-profit organisation in Maurepas that has been created in the context of an urban renewal project to create opportunities for residents (see Box 6). Néotoa has built on INCREASE VS to develop a new partnership outside that framework with CLPS (adult-learning training provider) called *Laboratoire des Idées*.

The response to the lockdown was predominantly ad hoc, with what could be moved online done so, investments in digital skills to help support this transition, and postponement of

⁵¹ QPV: *Quartier Prioritaires de la politique de la Ville* - These are deprived areas in France that since 2015 have been designated as 'priority neighbourhoods' and represent a key tool of French social and urban policy). Today there are 1,300 'priority neighbourhoods' in metropolitan France across 700 communes with more than 10,000 inhabitants – see Stébé, J.M. (2016) *Le logement social en France*. Presses Universitaires de France).

training that needed to be done in person. Indeed, the gardiennage training which could only be delivered face-to-face was one such victim of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 but also resumed after lockdown and there was one cohort per year benefitting from this accredited training (four in total).

Box 6: Zeynep – overcoming a lack of credentials on the pathway to employment

Zeynep was identified by a Néotoa social worker whilst paying a visit to a Turkish HA social tenant who was not fluent in French. Zeynep, who is French but has Turkish origins, was also visiting at the same time and helped with the translation. She is well-known in the local Turkish community because she has been volunteering for years as an interpreter and had previously hosted French conversation classes for classmates of her children. She accepted to take on the INCREASE VS ambassador role for Néotoa and was paid to deliver French conversation classes for the local Turkish women in collaboration with *La Cohue*.

This process quickly highlighted how many of the group's target markets were digitally excluded. Areas where digital inclusion was higher, such as training aimed at enterprise support, continued. The process also revealed that already vulnerable neighbourhoods were heavily affected by the pandemic. Those with low-paid, insecure jobs have been badly affected, and the need for support, including food parcels, increased dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic.

What's more, social tenants have struggled with social distancing while living in dense residencies. This coincided with a rise in anti-social behaviours, such as domestic violence and drug dealing. This impact was far from evenly spread, with the inner-city areas covered by Archipel Habitat and WeKer typically operating under stricter lockdown restrictions, which had a big impact on activities. *Gardiens* were withdrawn and they only offered a telephone reception service during full lockdown.

The partnership used the reduced activity level during the COVID-19 pandemic to liaise more with local partners and develop social assessment indicators for INCREASE VS. Néotoa noted that the lockdown re-energized their partnership with WeKer because they both had to refocus on what they could do quickly and practically. They were also more willing to drop things that did not work and to focus on quality not quantity with respect to outcomes.

This sense of cooperation with partners did not always extend to English members of INCREASE VS, however, as there was a sense of disappointment over the lack of detailed exchange with them during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially given the strong sense of having to learn as they went to the rapidly changing conditions.

This all transpired to produce a gap between the number of engaged clients, enrolees and the number of graduates to the programme (12 or more hours of training), with the former being between 45-63% and the latter between 15-16% respectively as the service statistics

showed per September 2020, even though roughly half of those who completed it managed to either get a job or enrol into further education (the job conversion rate was 43%). By September 2022, the percentages of those who have engaged with the programme starting training, and then becoming graduates increased to 50-64% and 20-24% respectively, whilst by now one third of them either got a job (22%), started a business (10% which was made up entirely of soft evidence) or enrolled in further education (1.6%). The gap therefore closed but this meant that the job conversion rate halved.

Deepening work on social integration

The **Collective Approach** was developed by PDCH in Pas-de-Calais, France, and aims to deepen social integration by marrying social enterprise and the mobilisation of excluded tenants to allow them to develop activities that meet the needs of their social housing community.

The main focus of the collective approach is to develop greater social integration in otherwise deprived communities that were “in need of more life”. Three such neighbourhoods were examined during the study, one of which had already developed an association to support elderly residents prior to participating in INCREASE VS, while the remaining two were recently established (see Box 7) as part of urban renewal projects.

Box 7: A social housing residents association that has been given a new lease of life

Z3A is a neighbourhood association established in Pas de Calais by a highly motivated long term social housing resident shortly before INCREASE VS launched. Very early on, it gained support from INCREASE VS to give it momentum. Z3A has a shared garden, a DIY workshop, and a sewing workshop. Z3A also have a social room, the ‘local’ as it is called, and this is now equipped with new toys for the younger children. The Z3A leader says that it is “thanks to INCREASE VS” that they have been able to put together lots of good projects by working closely with PDCH e.g., setting up the sewing workshops which had not originally been expected to work well, but they did, and that INCREASE VS provided raised beds for the shared gardens.

The associations relied heavily on volunteers to ensure participation in the programme, with demand primarily from the elderly and those who are either retired or unemployed. While the intervention had high conversion rates between engagement and training completion (89% of engaged clients enrolled on training and that over 67% completed training by September 2022) and managed to achieve improvements in terms of social integration and reductions in anti-social behaviour in their communities, employment outcomes were less consistent. Just over half managed to start either a job (the job conversion rate was 13%), business (22% made of using ‘soft’ evidence, 0.6% using ‘hard’ evidence) or go back to further education (14%) after completing training as the service statistics per September 2022 show.

The training for work integration and enterprise development was provided via BGE, a training provider, in four towns in the Boulogne-sur-Mer conurbation. The providers reveal

that they quickly realised the scale of the challenge and the distance between participants and the labour market. This prompted them to change the enterprise development course away from starting a business and towards a focus on awareness, confidence-building, and supporting small creative projects that would not provide a living, but which enabled participants to develop themselves and meet social needs in their neighbourhoods.

An interesting component of the project was the attempt to provide communities with renewable energy while also equipping residents with the skills to work in equipping and maintaining facilities. The approach was piloted in one neighbourhood, where buildings were fitted with solar panels, and residents were trained on how to install and maintain them. The project was then expanded into two other neighbourhoods.

This formed part of the renaming of the training as The Business Factory, with the aim being to highlight the link between the skills needed to get a job and those needed to start a business. However, these efforts were often undermined by challenging relationships with other local actors operating in this space. For instance, two projects designed to encourage small creative projects to be developed, the Shop School and the Incub'acteurs, were cancelled due to the breakdown of negotiations with local stakeholders.



Centre social (community centre) next to a QPV in Redon, Ille-et-Vilaine, France.



Pop-Up Business School training on the Isle of Sheppey, Kent, UK.

SECTION 4

4. How did those furthest from the market experience INCREASE VS and what was the impact on their lives?

Challenges in England

The ultimate aim of INCREASE VS was to help those who were furthest from the market find their way back into either employment or micro-entrepreneurship. Official data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in the UK shows how the COVID-19 pandemic has had a considerable impact on the number of people claiming welfare support, with the figure doubling between January 2020 (1.23 million) and May 2020 (2.64 million). The figure remained high throughout the proceeding year and was at 2.13 million by August 2021. The number of claimants progressively decreased from the latter part of 2021 until July 2022

(1.52 million), whilst it started to increase again from August 2022 (alongside rises in the cost of living), reaching 1.55 million in November 2022⁵².

Household income inequality in the UK decreased by 1% between April 2020 and March 2021, following a decade of widening income inequalities. Indeed, in March 2020, the ONS reported income inequality was at 36.3% and that “[t]he gap between the richest in society and the rest of the population has widened over the 10-year period (see Figure 4); the income share of the richest 1% increased from 7% to 8.3% between Financial Year Ending 2011 and that of 2020⁵³”. However, the short-lived reduction in income inequality seen between 2020 and 2021 (Figure 5) was driven by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mean disposable income in both the richest and the poorest households⁵⁴ (that saw a decrease by 3.4% and a nominal reduction of £568 in household disposable income for the fifth poorest households, and by 1.3% and a reduction of £957 respectively for the fifth richest households)⁵⁵.

Inequalities were observed in terms of health outcomes during the pandemic, with the Local Government Association⁵⁶ highlighting the different mortality rates among the most deprived communities. Drawing on ONS data, they go on to report that people who live in the most deprived areas of England and Wales are around twice as likely to die after contracting COVID-19 (if compared with the least deprived areas).

Those living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and disadvantaged individuals have also felt the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic and responses to it hardest. A House of Commons Briefing Paper⁵⁷ has highlighted 6 reasons why the income losses associated with the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated existing insecurities and vulnerabilities.

⁵²

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/outofworkbenefits/timeseries/bcid/unem>

⁵³

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/bulletins/householdincomeinequalityfinancial/financialyearending2020>

⁵⁴

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/bulletins/householdincomeinequalityfinancial/financialyearending2021>

⁵⁵

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/bulletins/householdincomeinequalityfinancial/financialyearending2021>

⁵⁶

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/908434/Disparities_in_the_risk_and_outcomes_of_COVID_August_2020_update.pdf

⁵⁷ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN07096/SN07096.pdf>

Figure 4: Household Income Inequality in the UK

Median equivalised household disposable income of individuals by quintile group, financial year ending (FYE) 2011 to FYE 2020

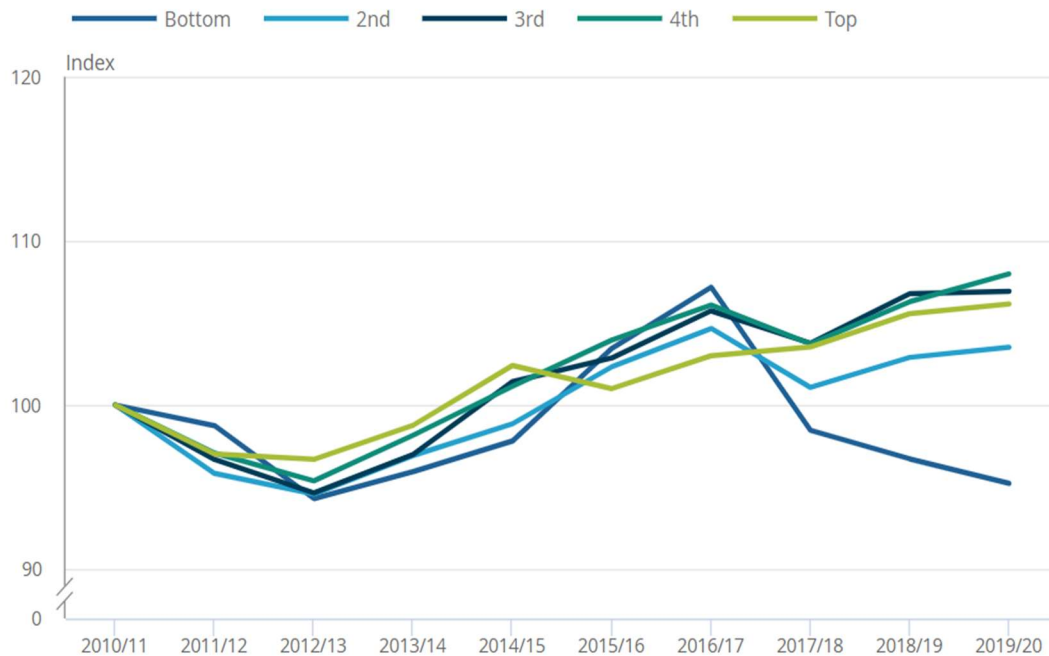


Figure 5: Household Income Inequality in the UK fell slightly in financial year ending 2021, but remains in line with the average over the decade before the pandemic

Gini coefficients for measures of original, gross and disposable income, UK, 1977 to financial year ending 2021

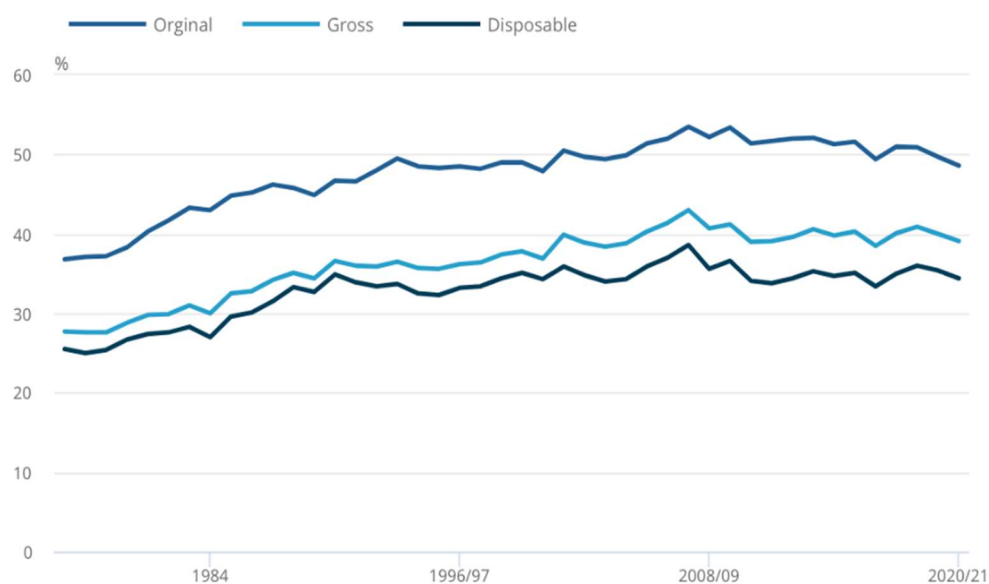


Table 1: Reasons Why Income Loss Exacerbates Existing Insecurities and Vulnerabilities

1	the inability to build and draw on financial safety nets - low-paid work, zero hours contracts, mixed self-employment/salaried work, and/or work in unpredictable sectors left people financially exposed under COVID-19
2	working without full time, reliable salaries – including key workers such as teaching assistants, social care professionals, and family support workers.
3	working in sectors that could not 'move remote' when COVID-19 hit for example, manual labour and personal services
4	caring responsibilities which limited income potential and raised outgoings - particularly but not only for women and single parents.
5	health and mental health challenges – 70 per cent were experiencing chronic health issues prior to COVID-19; 65 per cent long-term mental health issues.
6	domestic violence and abuse - several had recently fled partners who had become abusive, and were unexpectedly now raising children alone

While the complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic, and indeed the ongoing fallout from the invasion of Ukraine and subsequently rising energy prices, makes it difficult to accurately predict the precise nature of poverty and inequality in the coming years, it seems nonetheless inevitable that both will rise, even above the 1.2 million extra people that the Resolution Foundation found fell into poverty during 2021/2022⁵⁸.

Worryingly, this figure remains high despite historically low rates of unemployment, with the Trussell Trust reporting a 33% rise in the number of food parcels handed out during 2020 and 2021 as food bank usage reached unprecedented highs. What's more, this is an issue that exists across the country, with data from the All-Party Parliamentary on Faith and Society Group (2022)⁵⁹ showing that food banks have opened in 75% of local authorities.

The seeming paradox of high rates of poverty existing alongside low unemployment was perhaps explained in part by data from the ONS⁶⁰, which reveals that 1 in 5 young people have concerns about the number of hours they can get at work.

⁵⁸ <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/press-releases/33284/>

⁵⁹ <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8585/CBP-8585.pdf>

⁶⁰

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/labourmarketeconomicanalysisquarterly/march2021>

Challenges in France

Similar challenges exist in France, with COVID-19 mortality rates rising sharpest in the most densely populated areas, with some of the areas covered by the INCREASE VS project particularly badly affected.

While there has been a degree of caution in terms of linking this trend with changes in social and economic inequality, the CNLE (*'Comité Nationale des Politique de Lutte contre les Pauvreté et l'Exclusion Sociale'*) nonetheless felt confident enough to call the impact of the COVID-19 on the country as one of "*grande violence*".

The CNLE president, Fiona Lazaar, comments that "The crisis has not exposed and accelerated poverty: it has blocked routes out of poverty, thrown people living close to poverty into poverty, and led to some unexpectedly finding themselves in poverty."⁶¹

They highlight a rise in those claiming basic income allowance to over 2 million as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, with this growth alongside a rise in requests being made to various charities for help, especially with food. Alongside these material difficulties, the country has seen a considerable rise in psychological challenges, loneliness, and educational problems.

As in England, this was unfolding against a backdrop of those already in employment also relying on social security, with this trend particularly prominent among the self-employed, retail workers, and artisans. The young and the old have been hit worst in terms of rising unemployment, and as other commentators have also noted, the CNLE stresses the impact of the crisis on young people (those under 25 years).

The situation is compounded by the fact that people under 25 are not eligible for "*Revenu de Solidarité Active (RSA)*"⁶², and the extension of the "*Garantie Jeunes*"⁶³ that has been proposed by the government would be insufficient for less prominent forms of precarity. For example, the CNLE cites the case of young asylum seekers and their increasing isolation due to language barriers and difficulties of comprehension over online appointments with supporting institutions.

As in England, the mental health of young people in France has considerably worsened due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and particularly the various lockdown measures introduced to

⁶¹ <https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20210513-french-government-advisors-warn-of-covid-linked-poverty-time-bomb>

⁶² *Revenu de Solidarité Active (RSA)*: a benefit allowance that provides claimants with a minimum level of income. It is available under certain conditions to 25+ years old who are living in France and are not eligible for unemployment benefits. It is open to people younger than 25 under certain strict circumstances: being a parent not benefiting from other resources or having worked continuously for at least 2 years. <https://www.service-public.fr/particuliers/vosdroits/N19775>

⁶³ *Garantie Jeunes*: helps young people between the ages of 16 and 25 who are in a very precarious situation to find employment or training. To implement it, a contract is signed between the young person and the Mission Locale. This system is accompanied by financial aid. <https://www.service-public.fr/particuliers/vosdroits/F32700>

curb its spread. This highlights the social inequalities that continue to plague society with young people often living in inappropriate accommodation that leaves them extremely isolated.

As Lazaar explains: “The crisis underlines major fault lines that were already at work in our country, and which pose a risk to national cohesion. The issue of youth and the ‘covid generation’ calls for unambiguous action on the part of the public authorities”.

Growing demand for support

England and France were among the worst hit countries in Europe, and despite both countries introducing various social and economic policies to try and weather the storm caused by COVID-19, the challenges for disadvantaged communities have remained considerable.

Whilst commensurate in size, the employment and enterprise support measures in England have been criticised for leaving out many low-paid workers whilst the Solidarity Fund in France has attempted to provide for them. Nevertheless, both countries have seen rising claimant rates, rising poverty, and unprecedented increases in demand for food parcels. In both countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has made visible and worsened existing inequalities.

Inevitably, the COVID-19 pandemic both worsened the structural conditions for projects like INCREASE VS and impacted severely on those areas that are already deprived as well as on individual people who are already disadvantaged. It also increased the size of the target group who require help, whether getting back into work, starting their own business or migrating from low-paid and insecure jobs into something more sustainable.

Supporting the target market in England

The various approaches adopted in England by the INCREASE VS partners had a mixed record in terms of actually achieving those aims, with this variability in part because there was divergence in just how effective the different programmes and approaches were at recruiting the target market, to begin with.

The parallel approach

Many of the clients in East Anglia who responded to requests for feedback via an in-depth interview in Clarion’s parallel approach were from this target demographic, and while all had been employed at various points in their lives, they had now been unemployed for at least a year. What’s more, they were often in their 40s and 50s, also a primarily male client group (see Box 8), and were currently getting by via universal credit. They also faced various

barriers to returning to the market, including low confidence, health issues and insufficient qualifications (see Box 9).

Box 8: George – on the path to employment but struggling to find opportunities

George had experienced a series of physical health challenges requiring a change of career when a bereavement triggered severe mental health problems, including a suicide attempt, that led to him losing his job and becoming homeless. He was very apprehensive about first attending INCREASE VS (Confidence and Self-Esteem Workshops) in Wisbech but now sees it as the opportunity for a fresh start towards finding his way back into the labour market. He went on to volunteer with a local homeless charity 50 Backpacks and this experience has clearly progressed his pathways to work as he is now a fully qualified support worker, developing skills and contacts. He has put his CV on a national job search site and is willing to move “to better my life”, whilst also needing to keep an eye on managing his lung disease at the same time.

Box 9: Lisa – achieving a personal transformation thanks to INCREASE VS

Lisa has been unemployed for two and a half years but is a qualified veterinary nurse with a complex life history involving drug use, starting and not finishing things, depression, occupational injury and physical ill health. Unable to work in a full-time job and with her savings running out, she was offered a place on Transform and Achieve by the Clarion Business Adviser. She felt that this course made a difference for her. By the end of it, she had developed her business idea of installing aquariums and plants around waiting rooms, school rooms, doctor's waiting rooms, hospital surgeries, and anywhere which she sees as getting people involved in nature indoors. Since then, she has made good progress in her pathway to becoming self-employed. These changes are, in her opinion, directly a result of the MEESS support funded by INCREASE VS which she had found personally transformational.

Most had grown up in the areas under investigation (Wisbech and Great Yarmouth), with the remainder having moved there at some point in their life. As a whole, they consistently reported feeling isolated and struggling with a lack of real opportunities in their communities, while a lack of positive local identity and the weakness and seasonality of the local economy were also commonly cited problems.

The integrated approach

Among the English housing associations adopting the integrated approach, Abri's client base included many participants who had degrees and only a few had less than secondary school education. This lack of deprivation was further reflected in the housing status of participants, who were predominantly either owner-occupiers or private renters. They were also typically either employed or self-employed.

The situation was markedly different at Optivo, which had a majority of clients from the target group. Many of their clients that we interviewed were unemployed when they first engaged with the programme. They were also more likely to be older, with around half of the client respondent sample over 50 years of age (see Box 10). This group was particularly important to understand, as 80% of those interviewed were found to be unemployed. What's more, this group didn't provide a neat link between education and their employment status, as around two-thirds of the less educated were employed or self-employed, whereas half of those with degrees were unemployed.

Many of the clients in the Optivo programme reported various needs, including having caring responsibilities, mental health difficulties, and a criminal record, which hindered their previous attempts at getting work. Indeed, it was far from uncommon for participants to have a number of these challenges simultaneously.

Finding hard-to-reach candidates

Across all three English housing associations, client respondents who were furthest from the market were also among those most likely to have been referred by a support agency, such as the Job Centre. This contrasts with those closest to the market, who were more inclined to refer themselves to the programme. This underlines the importance of the right

Box 10: John – on the path to self-employment in later life alongside caring responsibilities

John has a large family (9 children). Trained in landscaping, he built a thriving business that quickly went bankrupt. Indebted, he worked full-time in a factory and as a delivery driver to pay off his debt and then turned to ambulance work, where he practised for almost two decades until he was declared unfit for work on medical grounds for suffering from PTSD. Before attending INCREASE VS, he was unemployed, in poor mental health, and uncertain about how to move forwards. Thanks to the INCREASE VS training in Kent, he has developed his confidence to return to landscaping as a viable business and has started to use social media to find new clients. In view of his mental health but also his past experience of becoming heavily indebted when his first landscaping business grew too fast at the wrong time, he has followed the advice of the trainers to keep the business simple.

connectivity with relevant agencies, as referrals were a far more fruitful avenue for recruitment than the programme's own recruitment efforts. Much less successful were things like specific recruitment events.

For instance, all Clarion clients we interviewed in Wisbech access the programme via the partnership between Clarion Futures and the local Community Centres, the Job Centre, and a number of organisations helping the homeless in the area. Similarly, all but one of the clients who were interviewed in Great Yarmouth accessed the programme via either the Job Centre, the Shaw Trust or the Priory Clinic. It's also important to note that participants furthest from the market did not necessarily enroll in the programme with the express intention of finding a job or starting a business, but were instead drawn to the aim of the programme to change their life.

This wasn't the case across client respondents in England, however, as the majority of them enrolled either because they wanted to learn more about becoming an entrepreneur, or even had an idea already that they wanted to explore. Some even had a business already that they wanted help to grow. This was certainly the case among the relatively advantaged participants in the Abri programme, who were nearly all highly motivated individuals seeking support and advice on how to create a business.

The pandemic also undoubtedly played a significant role in driving recruitment, with many participants prompted to explore other options by the general lack of work or reduction in their hours caused by COVID-19 and the various lockdown measures introduced to curb the spread of the virus. What's more, the training programme also provided many participants with something meaningful to do during the long months of lockdown. Amidst the pandemic, the training managers remained confident in the work they were doing and were bullish over their ability to continue delivering despite external disruptions. It was however for Clarion clients that the demand was highest for a return to face-to-face provisioning after the COVID-19 restrictions eased. The move online was most successful at Abri, perhaps in large part due to its newly found ability to facilitate service provision to rural clients.

The service statistics as per September 2022 show that the programme completion rate (i.e. 12 hours or more of training) varied significantly across the different partners in England: whereas just 68% of those enrolled in the Abri programme and 72% of those on the Optivo programme completed it, this figure was 98% for Clarion.

Optivo was however more successful with their recruitment, with 100% of engaged clients ultimately enrolling on the programme, versus just 80% for Abri and just 60% for Clarion. This might also reflect the different levels of demand for micro-entrepreneurship support in particular regions.

Different client experiences

The disadvantaged nature of the Clarion clientele in East Anglia generally resulted in a positive experience with INCREASE VS albeit with some occasional complaints relating to the employment support about not always offering appropriate training for clients and some dropped communications. There was a degree of difficulty accessing the programme, however, especially when it moved online as a result of the lockdown restrictions imposed by COVID-19. Those furthest from the market, especially in Wisbech, were among the keenest for face-to-face delivery to return as quickly as possible.

Perhaps befitting the relative advantages enjoyed by Abri clients in Hampshire, the response to the “Create” programme was generally positive, with client respondents reporting that the training was of high quality and the friendly atmosphere was widely enjoyed. Indeed, even participants with a degree of prior experience in entrepreneurship found the training a useful refresher that was often more useful than previous training they had undertaken. A common theme was that participants found the pace, structure, content, and organisation of the course highly effective.

That the Create programme also heavily involved the local community was also viewed as a distinct plus point, as this signified the clear desire to improve not only the participants themselves but also the community as a whole. With participants also revealing that the Create programme helped them to develop both strong relationships with other participants and also self-confidence in themselves and their ideas, the programme was highly supported by those involved.

Client respondents of the Optivo programme in Kent were also extremely satisfied with the quality of training provided. They were also pleased regardless of whether the training was delivered online or in-person, with this in part due to the energy and positive atmosphere in the sessions. This helped to build the self-confidence of participants, especially in terms of their belief that they can create a business without needing seed money. They were also confident that they could develop the connections required to make their business a success.

Belief is often the crucial first hurdle to overcome when becoming an entrepreneur, and the client respondents said that the Optivo programme certainly helped to give them that belief. It also helped them to build on that desire and take the first steps in trying out their ideas and actually starting their business (see Box 11). The participants revealed that being able to do this with no money was a marked difference from previous advice they had received from statutory services, which typically required participants to take out a business loan.

Box 11: Jessie – overcoming mental health difficulties to start up her own business

After working for many years in a position of high responsibility, Jessie was diagnosed with severe PTSD and was forced into retirement on medical grounds after suffering a nervous breakdown. Having grown up in a large, extended, and unstable family, she is a survivor of domestic violence during her first marriage and now enjoys the support of many loved ones, who helped her in her battle for good mental health. She began producing handicrafts from recycled materials to help her healing process and had just begun to attend markets to sell these before engaging with INCREASE VS in Kent. Through the interaction with other participants over her products, she was able to strengthen her idea and her identity as an entrepreneur. Since the training, she has established her business. She currently sells her products online and at local markets.

There were some concerns raised, however, that the Optivo programme appeared to be geared more towards people who wanted to create a side hustle rather than a full-time business that could support participants and their families (see Box 12). This made the programme less well-tuned to those whose ambitions were slightly loftier. Similarly, the programme seemed more geared towards businesses that involved the sale of services rather than goods.

It also proved difficult to get the level of the Optivo training right for a varied group of participants, with some finding it too basic and others reporting that they found it too intensive. There were also concerns that the programme provided insufficient information on various practical aspects of running a business, such as understanding taxation and setting up a website. This feedback was incorporated into later iterations of the training and additional materials developed.

The generally high level of engagement was also reflected in the fact that Optivo client respondents remained involved in the course after its completion. Indeed, more than two in three reported that they had engaged in some form of after-course support, whether through mentoring or other forms of networking. This post-course support was often regarded as extremely valuable in terms of helping to sustain the momentum generated during the course, although there was a degree of concern that the post-course support in the long-term was often provided by a volunteer ambassador rather than a member of staff.

Box 12: Sara – transforming passion into business idea generation

Sara is reliant on the benefits she receives because of her medical problems. After a history of abuse in her family during childhood and after suffering trauma from the loss of loved ones, she had to give up several fulfilling jobs and her passionate engagement in the residents' committee of a housing association due to poor health. She learnt reflexology and when she first engaged with INCREASE VS was offering sessions for free. Since the INCREASE VS training, she has been running a mobile reflexology business, which provides her with additional income to supplement the benefits she receives for health problems. She says that the training allowed her to build up her confidence, price her services and find her first customers on social media. She wants to keep her business small to make it more manageable due to her physical constraints and so as not to lose benefits.

Across each of the three programmes, however, the feedback was generally positive, with clients typically regarding the support they received as superior to that offered by other statutory and business support organisations. There did not appear to be a great deal of difference in the feedback between the Integrated or Parallel approaches, suggesting that the methods may not be that important in terms of delivering superior outcomes to clients.

Instead, there seemed to be a number of elements that were consistently valued by clients, including the supportive atmosphere of the training, the value placed on things such as social networking and interactions, and the willingness to support people in starting a business with no financial investment, the overall quality and practicality of the training, and the provision of support and mentoring after the conclusion of the course. Client respondents also valued the sense that trainers and advisers had good intentions and were safeguarding clients' best interests.

Evaluating client outcomes

Evaluating progress in terms of establishing a successful micro-enterprise is inevitably going to be something of a subjective endeavour, but nonetheless, feedback from client respondent interviews does allow us to draw some conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the various interventions in England.

For instance, all but one of the 7 Clarion client respondents from Wisbech felt that they had made good progress since enrolling in the programme. For instance, those looking to find work again report making small steps toward employment and generally getting their lives back on track. This was viewed in a positive way, even if the first steps back into work are likely to be via low-paid work.

Things were less successful in Great Yarmouth, perhaps in part due to the poor qualifications or older nature of the clientele. Only one of the 15 clients we interviewed reported finding stable full-time work after training, with those nearing retirement saying that they didn't find the programme that useful, with those who did make progress generally only gravitating towards temporary seasonal work that predominates in this context.

Things were more promising for clients that we interviewed on the Business Advice pathway in Great Yarmouth, with many clients reporting on the benefits of the programme. Indeed, several have already made good strides toward making a living from their micro-enterprise.

These findings demonstrate the difficulties in achieving consistent results in different locations, even when using the same approach, as while Clarion's work in Great Yarmouth boosted entrepreneurship (but not employment), the reverse was the case in Wisbech. This is illustrative of the availability of temporary and unstable work that exists in Great Yarmouth. That some were able to develop their own business despite such a challenging environment, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic making matters more challenging, is a distinctly positive outcome, however.

The 23 Abri client respondents we interviewed also had a mixed outcome from their participation in the programme, as some of those 3 who fall most closely within the target group have managed to start a business but have remained reliant on the welfare system to support themselves. Others have entered the workforce to support themselves albeit with the ultimate aim of starting a business. Of the 4 client respondents not obviously in the target group, one managed to secure low-paid work, albeit with a desire to move into something either more secure alongside the creation of a side hustle.

There appeared to be a greater success among the 16 relatively advantaged client respondents we interviewed in the Abri programme, albeit a large number of them were already running a business before joining the project. Nonetheless, the programme appeared to support the growth of these businesses.

Of the 25 client respondents from Optivo, 13 revealed that they were either self-employed or running a microenterprise, but only half of these were earning enough from their efforts to get by. Another 11 revealed that they were working towards self-employment or starting a business in the future, with another one individual saying they were actively seeking work.

Of the 7 client respondents who had both started their own venture and were making a living from it, 4 were previously medically retired from work and had gained a sufficient boost in self-confidence from the programme to identify as entrepreneurs. Another client revealed that INCREASE VS had managed to transform the fortunes of their business.

Among those 6 client respondents whose ventures were not sufficient to support them yet, they nonetheless revealed that participation in the programme had progressed ventures that had thus far been confined to hobby status and they felt more confident in making their ventures a full-time business in the future. They revealed that the training strengthened weak

entrepreneurial skills, helped respondents to take some practical steps to develop their businesses, and signposted them to others they could use in the future to grow them further.

Of the 8 participants who were still unemployed, they felt that despite still facing considerable barriers to employment, the Optivo programme was nonetheless useful and cited concrete improvements in their wellbeing.

Comparisons of the two approaches in England

When comparing the integrated and parallel approaches, there is clear qualitative evidence that both were focused around delivering high quality and responsive services that were adapted to the intrinsic skills of their clients and which extended beyond offering technical business skills and employment support to encompass motivation, confidence and entrepreneurial self-actualization as additional wellbeing benefits of great significance. Our qualitative data suggests that both approaches have achieved this aim but that there was only weak demand for support around self-employment and business in the relatively small and deprived contexts in which the Clarion's Parallel Approach operated but strong demand in the larger and more variable contexts in which the Integrated Approach of the other two English housing associations operated. The differences in the approaches themselves appear therefore to be less significant than differences in how each housing association worked in different contexts.

It is these different contexts that affected the patterning of benefits and how the balance between them varied considerably between Clarion's, Optivo's and Abri's client respondents. In general, the client respondents who were furthest away from the market gained considerable wellbeing gains with involvement in INCREASE VS decreasing their social isolation and improving their sense of purpose. However, these clients also made rather limited progress towards employment, self-employment or microenterprise with a few positive exceptions. This is partly due to the difficulties they faced as individuals, some with intractable personal circumstances as well as generally low skills and levels of qualification but was also compounded by a lack of local opportunity and local economic demand, particularly in Wisbech and Great Yarmouth. Conversely, the relatively advantaged clients were very well placed to make good use of INCREASE VS training (see Box 13). At the same time though, many clients who were in the target group, but not amongst those who were the most disadvantaged, were also able to make valuable gains including starting businesses and making strong progress towards developing start-ups (see Box 14).

Those INCREASE VS client respondents who were less obviously in the target group but who did face complex challenges for economic inclusion had more varied outcomes both in terms of how far they had got towards microenterprise and in terms of what they wanted out of this. Some of these client respondents had relatively unambitious ideas and wanted to develop a side business to bring in extra money, to follow something they felt passionate about and/or to improve their own wellbeing, whilst others wanted to develop something that may have been an aspiration or hobby for a while as a going economic concern that replaced reliance on benefits. Whilst a few of these clients found INCREASE VS to be personally transformational, and some made significant progress towards their goals, others did not. In large part those who did not make progress did not do so because fundamental barriers that they faced in life, such as chronic mental or physical health challenges, were untouched and remained a brake on what they could achieve.

Box 13: Paul – an educated individual charting a new course

Paul is a highly educated Engineer who lost his job in June 2020 due to the pandemic. Redundancy gave him the chance he needed to launch the business that he had already been planning to start. Since engaging with Abri, he successfully started his business during lockdown. His business, X Innovation, coaches businesses on how to become more innovative. His business took off quickly and he has been providing services to businesses in the UK and Europe. He is looking to develop his business further by taking the advice of an Abri Create coach and licensing some of the training courses that he provides.

Box 14: Andrew – starting a gardening business after divorce crisis

Andrew is a 65-year-old man who lives in social housing with his partner. He was born and raised in London, completed secondary education, and began university. However, he “chose to distance himself from the city” and moved to a remote rural area where he settled and had a family. There, he experienced bouts of unemployment and had to utilise social security benefits. After his divorce, he became homeless but meeting his current partner created a new direction in his life, and they settled down in a council house. After attending the INCREASE VS business training (Abri), he started a garden coach business “teaching people how to grow vegetables” and has improved his mental well-being by feeling he is making a positive impact on helping to prevent climate change while also being able to maintain access to supplementary benefits that he currently requires.

Box 15: Gavin – leading a local community group after bereavement crisis

Gavin had a well-paid managerial job but was unable to carry on after the loss of three close family members triggering severe mental health problems: he lives in social housing, but his savings are running out and he is struggling to get by on benefits. Thanks to the INCREASE VS Confidence and Self-Esteem Course and some Clarion funding support, Gavin has set up his beginners’ photography group to enhance locals’ social inclusion and overcome mental health issues. With this funding support, he has completed one photobook and is developing a second documenting local people’s experiences of lockdown through this photography group. He is a community champion with the local public health trust and would like to develop this photography group into a business that he could take to other areas.

These qualitative insights are further underpinned by our online survey analysis showing minimal differences between the parallel and integrated approaches. It was found that less than one fifth of the survey respondents’ work situations had changed at T2 immediately after the training (18%), with only around 5% becoming employed and up to 7% becoming self-employed at this time. The figures for those who become self-employed are 2 out of 19 participants or 10.5% for Clarion, 13 out of 144 survey participants or 9.1% for Optivo and 7 out of 151 or 4.46% for Abri. At T3, less than half of the respondents reported change to their work situation (44%), with around 16% finding employment and 18% becoming self-employed (18 out of 85 participants for Abri or 21.2%, and 5 out of 16 participants or 31.3% for Optivo). Moreover, survey respondents’ self-assessments of their goal investment and pursuit, life satisfaction, psychological wellbeing and social wellbeing saw a significant increase after the INCREASE VS training at both T2 and T3.

When comparing the integrated and parallel approaches using the online survey, there does not appear to be much difference between them in terms of the overall satisfaction of clients (Abri: 4.77; Optivo: 4.77; Clarion: 4.58), although they do both score considerably higher than clients in the collaborative and collective approaches (Archipel: 1.20; Neotoa: 2.50;

PDCH: 1.80). A similar outcome emerged when looking at the usefulness ratings from participants. As a result, it's perhaps no surprise that the most highly rated training providers for usefulness were Abri (4.59), Clarion (4.50), and Optivo (4.55) as opposed to Archipel (1.00), Neotoa (1.50) and PDCH (2.15). Scores for satisfaction and usefulness of training are consistently higher for the enterprise pathway respondents than for the employment pathway respondents. Notably, those with no or little education were more critical of the training reporting lower scores for training satisfaction and perceived usefulness.

Suffice to say, the findings are only possible from those who complete the surveys, and there are many reasons for someone to not do so that may bias the quantitative results, especially in terms of those who did not complete the training, whether through dropping out or finding work/self-employment and no longer continuing.

The online survey results from both parallel and integrated approaches also illustrate the importance of self-efficacy, as this was found to influence both which pathway individuals were on and the degree of success in their transition to employment or self-employment. It was also a key predictor of life satisfaction and mental wellbeing. Unfortunately, it wasn't possible to determine whether self-efficacy changed as a result of participation in the programmes.

In a broader context, the absence of a control group (for obvious reasons) makes a rigorous assessment of the benefits of each programme difficult. It is not possible to know if the quantitative results we obtained here are due to the specific approach, the contextual effects of the area, or to undertaking a training program (regardless of which it is).

The COVID-19 pandemic created additional challenges in evaluating the efficacy of training and it is likely that it influenced the results in ways we cannot assess. For example, we cannot know what the results would have been without the challenges compounded by the pandemic, or whether some of the differences between the different approaches, training providers or regions, were lessened or amplified.

Supporting the target market in France

While the need was certainly similar in France to England, the different approaches deployed by the various interventions meant differing degrees of success in terms of helping the target market into either employment or entrepreneurship. To gauge the effectiveness of the programme in supporting hard-to-reach clients in France, both the data from in-depth interviews with clients as well as additional key informant interviews were used to assess effectiveness.

The collaborative approach

The collaborative approach was adopted by Archipel Habitat's *Ecole de la Proximité*, WeKer, and Néotoa. The *Ecole de la Proximité* clients were all in the target group, with none having higher education but all having worked throughout their lives. The clients we interviewed were all in their 40s and 50s but had been out of work for over a year leading up to Autumn 2019. Their difficulties in finding work perhaps reflect many of those of people of a similar age and with a similar lack of qualifications.

This lack of credentials was widely cited in our client respondent interviews as a major barrier to progression in France, especially if one wishes to change sector and/or profession. Age was also cited as a challenge, not least due to a failure to keep up with any changes in the recruitment process and divergent expectations in terms of pay and conditions compared to those currently available on the market.

The client respondents we interviewed for WeKer's INCREASE VS business training programme were less likely to be from the target group, even though many had been unemployed for longer than a year. For instance, a number of them had degrees, although an equally high proportion were social tenants, with many participants middle-aged women. While many of these women had university educations, they nonetheless found themselves largely unable to find the kind of work that they wanted. Indeed, the difficulties they faced in making career changes prompted many to start a business instead.

A common complaint among these women was that traditional employment support services were ill-suited to their needs, with one remarking that she was too qualified, too autonomous, and found basic tuition, such as how to compile a CV, irrelevant.

The client respondents we interviewed for the Néotoa programme tended to be quite mixed in terms of their education. Some had degrees, some did not. What bound them together was that all were social tenants and all were unemployed and had been for over a year. They also all faced a degree of complex circumstances in their search for work.

For instance, some have special needs related to mental health, some only have lower secondary schooling, and some were first-generation immigrants with limited French, who struggled despite having degrees. A number of client respondents also reported having no driving licence, which was a significant barrier to accessing the labour market.

The participants generally had a negative experience of the Pôle Emploi, with a strong sense that advisors were overworked and little follow-up support was given to people after they were sent job vacancies. Feedback from client interviews was more positive regarding the support given by the broader welfare system, and especially those living in and around Rennes from the Archipel Habitat and Néotoa housing associations (less so in more rural areas).

Recruitment to the programme

The service statistics, as per September 2022, for the programmes operating under the Collaborative Approach show that 64% and 50% of engaged clients enrolled in the Néotoa and Archipel Habitat training, with 32% and 48% respectively of those who have started the training also completed it. As mentioned earlier, these need to be interpreted with caution but suggest that effective recruitment and retention was challenging here.

Clients were recruited into the various programmes in a number of ways. For instance, most of the attendees of the gardiennage training through the *Ecole de la Proximité* we interviewed arrived via adverts in either the Job Centre or the Achipel Habitat newsletter. A number had expressed interest in being a *gardien* before seeing the adverts, with others already having had conversations in that direction. As such, they were already inclined towards the programme and the advert was sufficient to provoke enrollment.

The programme was attractive in part because the clients wanted a job that involves contact with people and were attracted by the concrete possibilities of jobs afterward, the fact that paperwork was taken care of, and the transferability of obtaining a recognised qualification.

Recruitment at WeKer business training was greatly assisted by their previous strong profile in the target community. Their provision of the statutory support services for work integration, including their involvement in CitéLab, and their strong networks with other support organisations (like CEDAS) and enterprise organisations (like CCI), and their presence on social media (like Facebook) ensured that the INCREASE VS workshops were visible to clients who were actively looking for this kind of funded support and who already have formed some sort of intention or interest in developing a business.

A common characteristic of the WeKer client respondents is that they were digitally savvy, actively seeking (free) support and they did not need encouragement to apply (see Box 16). The numerous ways in which the clients found the INCREASE VS programme is also reflective of the work WeKer have done in liaising with partners and utilising various media to promote themselves and their work.

Box 16: Samira – a WeKer client who actively sought help to improve her life

Samira is a first-generation immigrant from Tunisia, only had primary education and did not enter paid work until their 30s, just before the participant's divorce. She escaped an abusive marriage and moved several times around Brittany. She feels unsafe in her neighbourhood and needs a secure job to upgrade her family's accommodation. She received work integration support through WeKer and was advised by a temping agency she met at Forum de l'Emploi to think about vocational training to become a fishmonger as well as the need to learn to drive and that support for both was available through the Pôle Emploi (run by WeKer). The exchange with the temping agency spurred the participant's return to the Pôle Emploi who in turn supported them to acquire both the necessary qualification to be a fishmonger (which took 2 months) and to get her driving licence. The Pôle Emploi helped Samira in finding work using her new qualifications and today she has a permanent full-time position at a supermarket. Now she is looking to use this to move out of social housing.

Box 17: Patrick – an *Ecole de la Proximité* client and the relevance of feeling listened to

60-year-old British participant Patrick living in Rennes had worked as a builder doing lucrative temporary contracts in the construction industry but, as this work dried up and he got older and experienced an injury, he felt that he needed something less physical and more secure to get him through to retirement. He struggled to change direction without the necessary qualifications and despite support from the Pôle Emploi, until he attended and completed the *Ecole de la Proximité*. Soon after the training, he was employed full-time by Archipel Habitat as an agent de proximité. He is now happy in his work and intends to stay where he currently is until retirement. He likes the housing association and his boss and feels listened to. This is particularly important for the participant because "something you find an awful lot ... in the interim [temping] work [is that] people don't listen to you".

Nevertheless, the client respondents in this group appeared to be able to make the Pôle Emploi/WeKer and other elements of the state support system work for them. In this sense, they were all in some ways self-starters who bring some experience, networks and agency to the table.

For Néotoa, most of the recruitment occurred via *gardiens*, with the majority of clients interviewed saying that they initially spoke with a *gardien* and were advised to explore the programme as a result. Key informants for Néotoa talked about these clients as having been "detected" and kept a paper trail of those who have "signed up" and followed up. In this sense, Néotoa was systematically engaged in recruiting clients that they perceived as in

need of support and who responded positively to their *gardien*'s overtures regarding INCREASE VS at ground level.

Progress since completing the training

Clients of the *Ecole de la Proximité* generally spoke highly of the gardiennage training they received, especially due to the recognised qualification they received at the end, as this was extremely useful in finding work upon graduation. The relatively short nature of the course was also viewed positively, with 5 weeks of internship completed after the original 12-weeks of training.

While all gardiennage trainees were supported in applying for *gardien* positions at Archipel Habitat, there were unfortunately insufficient jobs for the number of participants. Despite this, all participants were left with an accredited qualification. All three client respondents we interviewed managed to secure jobs and now have permanent contracts, so they have not only got work but also significantly improved job security (see Box 17 and Box 18). These are live-in positions so all three have accommodation linked to their work. They all seem well suited for their work and enjoy and find it fulfilling. As a result, the client respondents report successful outcomes both in terms of work integration and also in terms of improved well-being and security.

Box 18: Marie – an *Ecole de la Proximité* client finding secure work after redundancy

Marie is in her late 40s and had worked in restaurants all her life but when the place where she worked was sold, she found she could not get another job that paid sufficiently given her age and considerable experience. She was shocked not to be able to work and was trying to access retraining through the Job Centre but struggling with the paperwork. Referred by Pôle Emploi, she attended the *Ecole de la Proximité* and was successfully employed by Archipel Habitat as an agent de proximité just after gaining her qualification. She particularly enjoys the social aspect of her job, and she emphasises, and values, solidarity encompassing other trainees and colleagues from different cultures and with different perspectives on life. She admits that there may be opportunities to advance within Archipel Habitat, and she is interested in these.

For clients of WeKer, the general consensus has been that the training was of a high standard, especially as it was free. The workshops run over five days and included introductory and exploratory sessions about micro-entrepreneurship in the French and local context, and more practical training about market research, business planning, pitching, and how to access financial support.

All but one of the six client respondents who accessed enterprise support are continuing to work towards starting their businesses. What's more, this group is also continuing to receive ongoing support. This suggests that the role of INCREASE VS workshops in enterprise support was mostly catalytic enabling clients to move forward with nascent ideas and connect them up with the further support that they will need before they can realise them.

Client respondents who participated in the Néotoa programme had a mixed response, as just one in four of those in the work pathway managed to acquire work, with the remainder either disengaging from the programme or continuing to face ongoing challenges.

The collective approach

The collective approach focused on social integration to allow participants to overcome any social isolation they may be experiencing. Through this, the INCREASE VS programmes fostered resident associational life in deprived social housing neighbourhoods with the broader aim of helping those furthest from the market integrate themselves into work, self-employment, or enterprise.

The neighbourhoods covered by the various collective projects were predominantly white with few immigrants. Antisocial behaviours are common, as are rivalries between neighbourhoods. One association leader told us that in some places, young people hang out all day smoking joints in the foyers. Some client respondents reported that childhood friends had gone down the wrong path and were not really looking for work. In addition, a volunteer said that there are many people who are over 50 years of age and more elderly people in these neighbourhoods and that there is “nothing” for young people to do.

Often the only option available for people after they leave school has been to join a temping agency and await the call for insecure, zero-hours work. There are some who would like to leave the neighbourhood but cannot and others who do not want to. A combination of low rents and family ties keep people in the area, even if there are few prospects for employment and people generally struggle to make ends meet.

One resident association leader revealed that some areas have experienced a substantial decline over the last 15-20 years: over this time frame, some areas that were lively are now dead, the ‘locals’ (neighbourhood level branches) of the Social Centres closed, public facilities (gardens and games) were vandalised and left to decay, and local events and activities stopped.

A striking feature is the affection, pride, and rootedness of client respondents in their deprived social housing neighbourhoods despite the coexistence of complaints about antisocial behaviour, deteriorations from the past, acknowledgement of poor reputations, and their expressed desire for the neighbourhoods to have ‘more life’.

The majority of client respondents were middle-aged and unemployed or retired and elderly, particularly women, but those holding leadership positions in the resident associations either have worked or still work in the social sector. Some of the retiree volunteers have worked in the social sector but others have never volunteered before. Many are traditional, with several women or wives never having worked: as one volunteer put it “we are still of the generation where men are at work and women are at home”.

It is also clear that the Social Centres play a crucial role in each neighbourhood. The centres have a well-established local presence and because their work is organised around providing activities for young families, single parents, and older people, they are widely appreciated in the local community. They also work in close partnership with the Town Hall and other agencies that support vulnerable people including young people seeking work or self-employment as well as those needing food parcels. Indeed, the population served by these facilities is very similar to that served by the INCREASE VS programme operating under the Collective Approach.

What is evident, however, is that the population reached by the Collective Approach of PDCH was very different from the target group for INCREASE VS as a whole (which is working-age adults who are unemployed or insecurely or exploitatively employed). While these client respondents were “far from the market”, they were not necessarily looking to either find work or create a business. Indeed, while they were financially excluded, it was not clear that work or entrepreneurship was a route out of this.

Box 19: A social housing residents’ association dealing effectively with COVID-19, extreme weather, and energy cost crises

EOA is a social housing neighbourhood association that ‘does everything for the elderly’ with a central activity being to deliver bread and water to the elderly residents with the help of volunteers, particularly during heatwaves as well as throughout lockdown. PDCH already supported the association EOA, encouraging its formation, supporting its leader and providing space for its activities. With INCREASE VS support, the EOA developed a repair service and workshop and helps elderly people with their redecoration. For the EOA, INCREASE VS has also allowed them to launch projects, like installing photovoltaics in the neighbourhood and providing residents with a shared electric car. INCREASE VS enabled the EOA to ‘put all the projects in motion’.

This resonates with the Collective Approach’s focus on social rather than economic exclusion but appears to be reaching an older, and largely female, population and was mostly unable to reach young people despite the widespread recognition of their social as well as financial exclusion.

Client engagement

The service statistics, as of September 2022, for the programmes operating under the Collective Approach show that 89% of engaged clients enrolled in training, with 75% having completed their training.

These figures are promising, not least as the primary aim of the Collective Approach is to generate social integration through fostering associational life in the various deprived social housing communities the programme operates in. For instance, one project was to work with an older resident association actively supporting the elderly in their community, while two more newer resident associations were integral parts of urban renewal projects. The associations relied on volunteers and what they had in common was a 'local' room, a workshop, a shared garden, also running regular activities, and public events with INCREASE VS helping to mobilise volunteers and participants and redefine the role of *gardiens* as being not only cleaning and maintenance but also community outreach.

The COVID-19 lockdowns certainly impacted the ability of associations to deepen social integration, however, with the workshops where communal events and other regular activities take place had to shut down. The older resident association was able to maintain its deliveries of fresh bread and water to the elderly living in the housing estates and these were much appreciated during lockdown and the summer heatwave.

Some of the projects had an energy component, which provided training to participants in the installation and maintenance of photovoltaics, with the solar cells then used to lower the energy bills for the social housing community. A similar project exists to develop an electric car.

The training for work integration and enterprise development was originally delivered with a training partner, BGE. The distance of many participants from the labour market meant that the training had to be adapted, however, with the aim modified to merely open them up to the idea of starting a business via awareness raising, confidence building, and the provision of small creative projects that would allow them to both test out their skills and meet some of the social needs of the local community.

The training was renamed The Business Factory, and it focused on setting up small creative projects at the neighbourhood level. This training has also been provided to the resident associations and their volunteers. The final workshops had to be cancelled because of lockdown and the Business Factory ended in the summer of 2020.

There have also been persistent concerns from other actors in the region about the duplication of activities, a lack of consultation, and trying to do the jobs of other more experienced local actors. These conflicts manifested themselves in the cancellation of two initiatives that were intended to encourage creative projects in the study neighbourhoods. Attempts to mitigate this risk typically involved programme leaders persuading other stakeholders that their efforts are simply trying to revitalise the neighbourhood and provide

reasons for people to get out of their homes and tackle social isolation. These attempts were generally met with a lukewarm response, however.

Energy projects

The relationship with resident associations was further complicated by the fact that the energy and electric car projects, which were both viewed positively by participants and the community, were both seen more as INCREASE VS projects than association projects. This appears to be more so for the solar power project than the electric car project, where the vehicle is driven by trained volunteers and will require people to buy a membership to the scheme (for 8 euros) and they can then use the car (for 2 euros per trip).

However, it is evident that there is a mismatch between the technical nature of the energy project and the interest and ability of the resident association to engage with it. Several elderly volunteers and the association leader were not using mobile phones or the internet at home and despite being trained for the energy project, they found its technology challenging and said that they preferred to leave it to others to implement. Importantly, not everyone had photovoltaics installed on their building and only those that did can benefit from reduced energy charge.

Fortunately, people could later on see that they were making energy savings. Initially, people had found it hard to understand that the savings would not be immediately apparent in their first bills (paid in arrears) and then needed help reading their new bills. At the time of the Pas-de-Calais fieldwork, 126 properties were connected via the pilot scheme, with these properties requiring new WiFi boxes and meter readings. This took time as people thought their internet supplier was being changed and at first refused the boxes, but the expectation was that savings of around €150 per year would be achieved.

Despite these evident challenges, the resident association leaders we interviewed felt that their activities had a big impact on the ambiance of the neighbourhood. This was particularly the case for social housing neighbourhoods that had more obviously declined in recent years. There remained concerns, however, about the ability to recruit a sufficient number of volunteers, but most felt that INCREASE VS helped in this regard.

Comparisons of the two approaches in France

The nature of those participating in the various **Collaborative Approach** projects in and around Rennes, France underlines the complex and often heterogeneous nature of the client base of the programmes and the support they need to provide to participants. Whilst many might not appear to be part of the target group, at first sight, almost all are facing some complex challenges.

For instance, some might be immigrants, some might have few qualifications, others may have become stuck after attempting career changes, and others may have struggled to get

back into work after periods of absence for whatever reason. Health problems were particularly important to people's situation, both in driving the need for change in the first place and also in impacting their ability to achieve the desired changes.

Many of our client respondents, and especially the young, had already received considerable help from the Mission Locale, including through the Garantie Jeunes scheme, but whose progress has stalled before turning into reliable work or alternatively who wanted additional support launching a new enterprise.

The collective experience of participants we interviewed underlines the fact that they are not necessarily suffering from a shortage of work, but that the work that is available is usually low-paid, insecure, and temporary. There is a clear desire to move on from this exploitative form of work and into either permanent contracts or self-employment.

As a result, many client respondents reported that they were not living on benefits out of a lack of choice, but because they were actively choosing benefits as a more satisfying option than the exploitative work that was currently available. Their experience also highlights the difficulties in how obtaining new qualifications and having prior work experience translate into new domains.

Drawing conclusions from the **Collective Approach** is difficult because the feedback from client interviews mainly reflected the target populations for PDCH's social inclusion objectives rather than for the wider partnership. Their participants were deprived social housing residents in Pas-de-Calais, but most were not seeking or wanting work integration and very few indeed could even conceive of starting a business. Here 'clients' or rather participants are predominantly retired or middle-aged and female with very few younger people involved.

As with the participants in the collaborative approach programmes, health problems were a constant barrier, whether physical or mental, with many a consequence of the older clientele recruited to the PDCH programme. What's more, participants were also much more likely to have low education levels and be out of work. There was also less of a willingness to consider low-paid, temporary work, especially if it's outside of their immediate community, which resulted over time in most being reliant on benefits and disinterested in work.

There was also a noticeable focus on the social housing community and a sense of place among participants in the Collective Approach, with many of the residents and volunteers connected to one another through family or friendship. They also tended to have lived all, or at least most, of their lives in the area and have no intention to leave.

This wasn't the case for clients of the Collaborative Approach programmes, who may not have actually been from the deprived social housing areas, and if they were, there was a greater desire to move out.

Recruitment differences

Given the fundamentally different nature of the clientele in both approaches, there were also understandable differences in how clients were recruited to the INCREASE VS programme in France. For instance, in the Collaborative Approach, the clear desire to be helped greatly assisted the recruitment efforts of the project leads as the clients were already to some extent self-starters.

Often advertising and recruitment came through partner organisations as well as from the housing associations themselves. A smaller proportion of the Collaborative Approach's clients were more obviously recruited into support by *gardiens*, particularly but not only for the gardiennage training, and needed more persuasion to engage with the support on offer.

By contrast, the recruitment for the various Collective Approach programmes leaned much more heavily on the communal aspect of the social housing communities they worked in, with participants mostly recruited through personal contacts, often family or close friends, who asked them to get involved. While there were more traditional marketing efforts engaged in, such as knocking door-to-door, these seldom produced much interest.

Nevertheless, the ability to offer INCREASE VS training played a significant role in galvanising some more participation beyond the core group in the Collective Approach. The importance of offering food to motivate the wider participation of residents in public events was mentioned several times.

Evaluation of the support received

The higher motivation of clients in the **Collaborative Approach** projects also produced an understandable response in terms of the evaluation of the project, with client respondents praising both the training itself (especially if this was accredited) and the open nature of the relationship that those supporting them fostered with them.

All contrasted the quality of what they received with that offered by other 'free' support services and particularly the statutory support services. Almost all client respondents reported learning more about how to make the services that were there work for them and how to deploy the resources and skills that they had to their best advantage. This was particularly the case for those client respondents who had a strong experience of work but were unfamiliar with enterprise and enterprise support services.

This overall positivity was reflected in the feedback from participants interviewed, nearly all of whom thought that they have made considerable gains and progress towards work integration through their participation in INCREASE VS. The long-term nature of the challenge is reflected in the fact that for many, this progress was seen via a greater clarity in the path ahead rather than achieving the ultimate end goal of a new job or business.

In other words, they have learned more about how to get to where they want to go, they have been put in contact with people who can help them get there, and they have improved how they feel about themselves, their lives, and their prospects. In the case of the gardiennage training, participants have gained permanent jobs and professional training that is transferable, marking a very significant upturn in their working lives.

The response was more mixed for clients of the **Collective Approach** projects, not least due to difficulties distinguishing the activities of INCREASE VS with those of their resident association. This blurring of boundaries did not affect the overall satisfaction levels, however, with most appearing to be content despite the limited impact in securing work afterward. This is reflected in the improvements in both the wellbeing and social networks of participants.

What's more, the social interactions were found to be useful both because they made people feel useful, while also boosting their confidence in their ability to express themselves in public. This is particularly the case for those who have taken leadership roles in their social housing communities. As such, there is a sense that participation in the Collective Approach was not felt in terms of finding a job or starting a business but instead an improved sense of being valued and valuing themselves that can have long-term positive effects on the individual and neighbourhood level. Reduced incivilities and social isolation were reported.

Online survey results (as per November 2022) from participants also demonstrated quantitatively the challenges involved, with 60% of respondents in PDCH just before the start of the training at T1 saying that they weren't interested in either starting a business or finding a job. It is interesting that this became more pronounced in the subsequent surveys with 67% of respondents immediately after the training at T2 and 88% of respondents at T3 noting that neither finding a job nor enterprise were important goals for them. While this perhaps reflected the social nature of the PDCH's collective approach, it nonetheless underlines the challenges involved in helping clients into either work or entrepreneurship. It should be noted, however, that the quantitative findings should be treated with a degree of caution, since they represent only a small proportion of client experience.

To evaluate how participants transitioned in the work situation we asked our online survey participants whether their employment status changed six months or more after the training. We found that there were only a few transitions at T3 for the collective approach (1 out of 25 or 4%), whereas for the collaborative approach transitions to employment accounted for 11 out of 40 survey participants (27.5%). Unexpectedly, 8 out of 35 (22%) Néotoa survey participants report that they have become self-employed at T3.

INCREASE VS client transitions in France and England

Despite the differences in terms of national context and approach, we identified commonalities in the INCREASE VS clients' transitions drawing on our quantitative data collected at T1 (before the training), T2 (just after the training), and T3 (six months or more

after the training). First, we found that self-efficacy is key to the client's ability to succeed in their chosen employment or entrepreneurship pathway. Secondly, INCREASE VS clients experienced transitions in terms of their employment status, pursuit of goals but also their well-being that appeared to be more significant six or more months after the end of the training at T3. This suggests that clients' trajectories towards employment or self-employment take time to unfold and HA's support along the way is what can make a difference in sustaining the clients' motivation to pursue their goals.

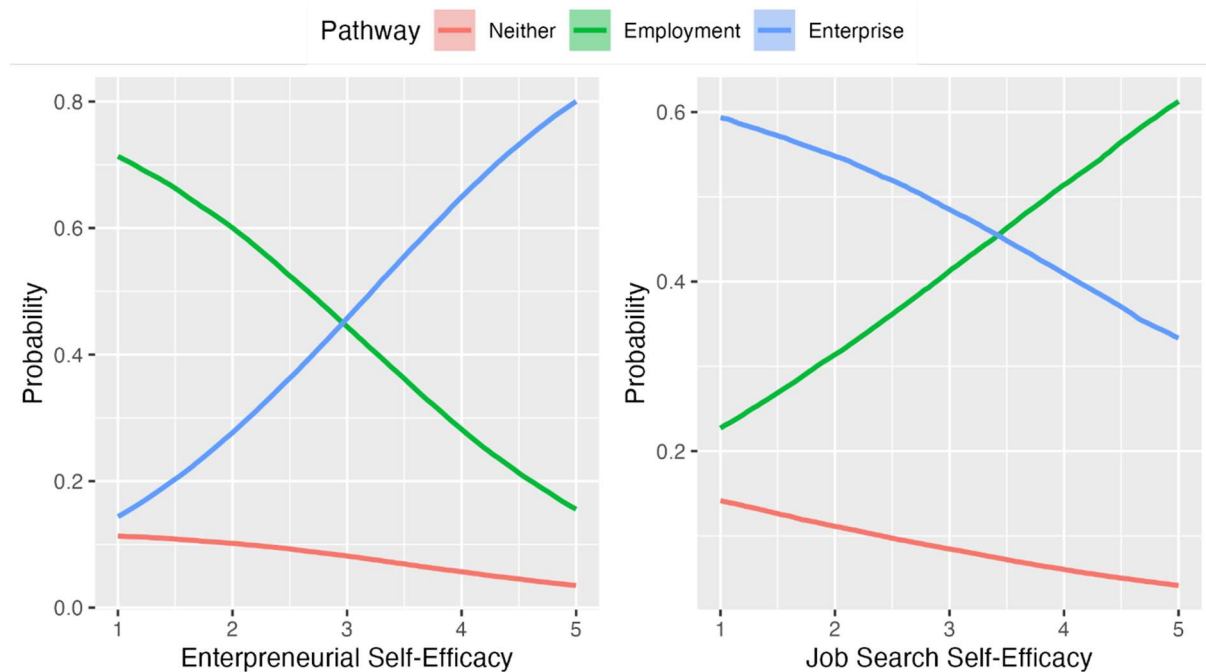
Predictors of employment or entrepreneurship

To understand what could lead to individuals preferring to pursue an employment pathway or an entrepreneurship pathway (as opposed to each other or to neither), we tested quantitatively the effect of a number of demographic variables (age, gender and education), their skills at T1 based on their self-assessment of maths, IT, reading and writing skills, and two measures of self-efficacy: entrepreneurial self-efficacy and job search self-efficacy. Entrepreneurial self-efficacy represents the confidence in one's ability to be successful with one's business and job search self-efficacy the confidence in one's ability to find a job. The measures of self-efficacy⁶⁴ were assessed using 4 questions for the entrepreneurial and 10 questions for job search⁶⁵ using a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *great deal*). These two aspects of self-efficacy are extremely important, and the literature emphasises how they underpin people's motivation to pursue, persist, and succeed in achieving goals. We evaluated this using a Bayesian multilevel logistic regression model which allowed to control for potential differences between the training providers. From all the potential demographic variables and predictors tested, only the two measures of self-efficacy were significant with entrepreneurial self-efficacy predicting membership in the enterprise pathway ($b = .80$, 95% CI = [.55, 1.07]) and job search self-efficacy predicting choosing the employment pathway ($b = .56$, 95% CI = [.13, 1.03]). These estimates translate to mean that with every subsequent score of 1 point in entrepreneurial self-efficacy individuals were 2.23 times more likely to select the enterprise pathway, and that with each additional score of 1 point in job search self-efficacy individuals were 1.77 times more likely to select the employment pathway. Figure 6 shows the changes in probability of membership in each pathway as a function of changes in self-efficacy. These results underscore the importance of self-efficacy in how individuals choose their goals and possibly in whether individuals succeed in pursuing their goals.

⁶⁴ <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0021-9010.90.6.1265>

⁶⁵ <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2014.11.007>

Figure 6: The role of entrepreneurial and job search self-efficacy in choosing a pathway



We also evaluated how participants transitioned in the work situation by asking at T2 (immediately after the training) whether their employment status changed, and these results are summarised in Figure 7. A total of 409 participants responded and this data shows that the majority did not experience any change (82.7%) since T1. However, 5.37% reported that they had become employed, and 6.60% that they had become self-employed. The remaining, small percentage of participants had experienced changes in their employment status in some other way such as retiring or becoming unable to work due to sickness or disability. A detailed breakdown of these transitions for the different partners is provided in Table 2 below and a similar breakdown for the four approaches is summarised in Figure 8. Please note that, some of the responses that said “yes, in another way” were in fact not representing changes in survey participants’ employment status but rather qualitative changes such as increases in earnings or clients, a business becoming more successful, or positive changes to life in general.

Figure 7: Employment transitions from T1 to T2

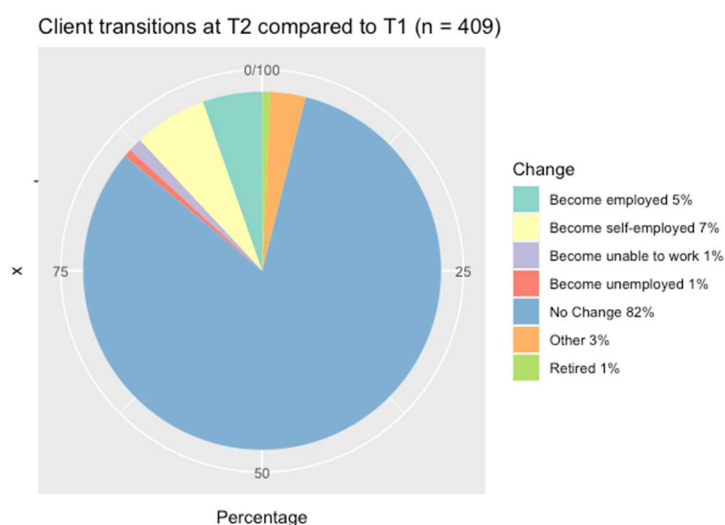
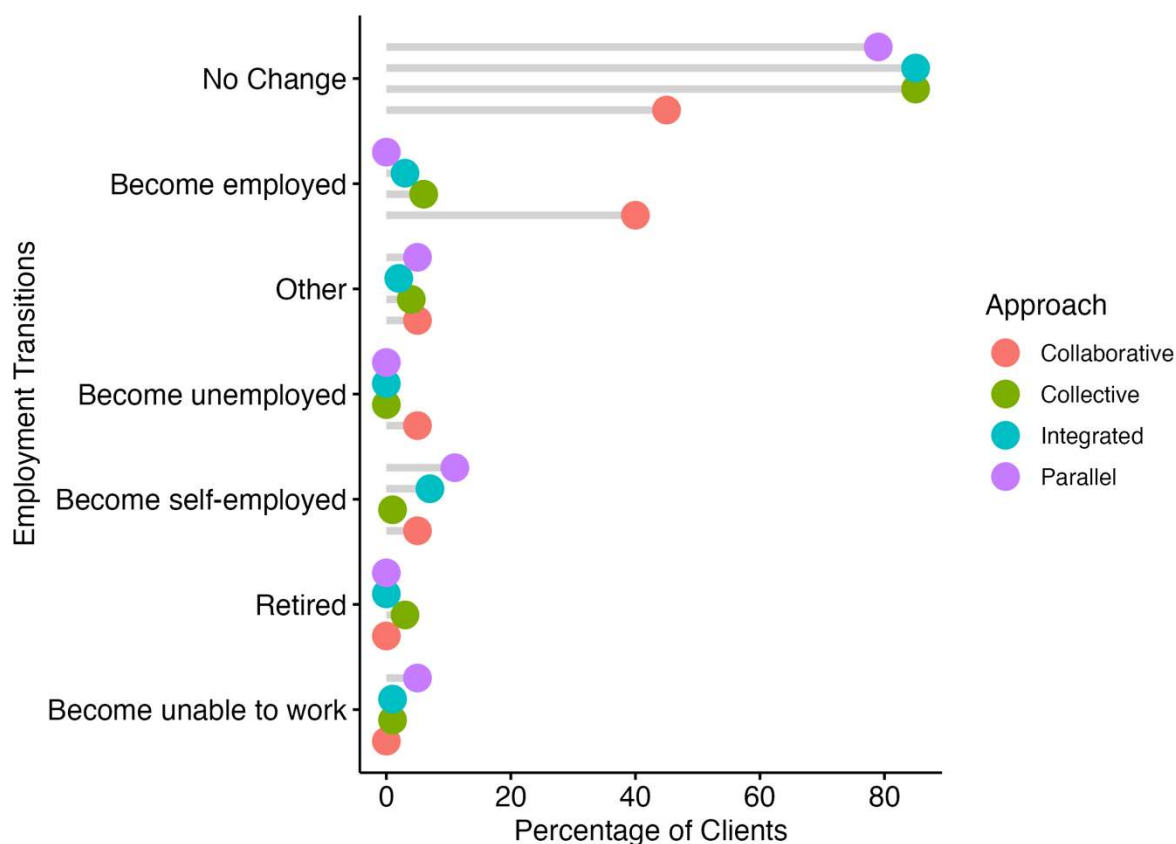


Table 2: Transitions breakdown per Partner for T2

		Abri	Archipel	Clarion	LogiRep	NEOTOA	Optivo	PDCH	Total
No, it has not changed	N	136	7	15	2	2	114	60	336
	%	90.07	43.75	78.95	66.67	50.00	79.72	84.51	82.15
I am now employed	N	4	6	0	0	2	6	4	22
	%	2.65	37.50	0.00	0.00	50.00	4.20	5.63	5.37
I am now retired	N	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	3
	%	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.70	2.82	.76
I am now self-employed	N	7	1	2	0	0	15	1	27
	%	4.64	6.25	10.53	0.00	0.00	10.49	1.41	6.60
Unable to work due to sickness or disability	N	0	0	1	0	0	3	1	5
	%	0.00	0.00	5.26	0.00	0.00	2.10	1.41	1.22
I am now unemployed	N	1	1	0	1	0	0	0	3
	%	0.66	6.25	0.00	33.33	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.73
Yes, in another way	N	3	1	1	0	0	4	3	13
	%	1.99	6.25	5.26	0	0	0	2.80	4.23
Total	N	151	16	19	3	4	143	71	409
	%	37.10	3.93	4.67	0.73	0.10	3.51	17.4	

Figure 8: Employment transitions at T2



For T3 (six months or more after the training), instead of asking directly about change, we asked about their employment status using the same question we used for T1. This means that we could only use the matched sample between T1 and T3 to make the comparison (N=174). Regardless of the smaller sample size, the results shown in Figure 9 suggest that more people managed to change their employment situation with 56.32% reporting the same employment status as in T1. In T3 16.09% found employment, and 17.81% transitioned to self-employment. The detailed breakdown per training partner is shown in Table 3 and per approach in Figure 10.

Figure 9: Employment transitions from T1 to T3

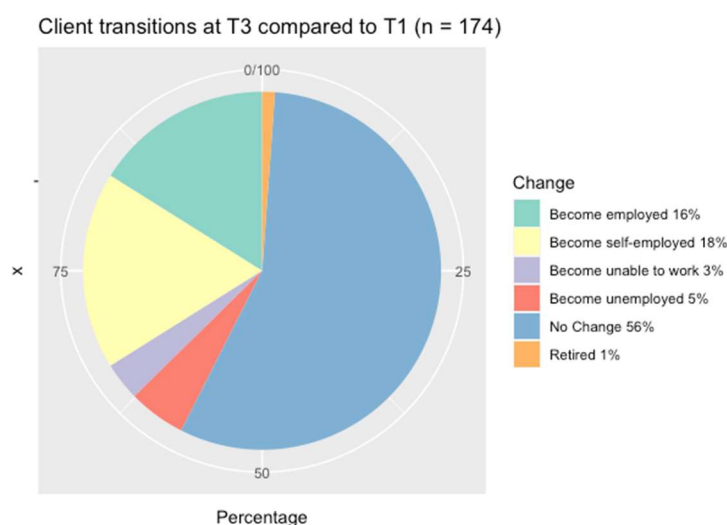
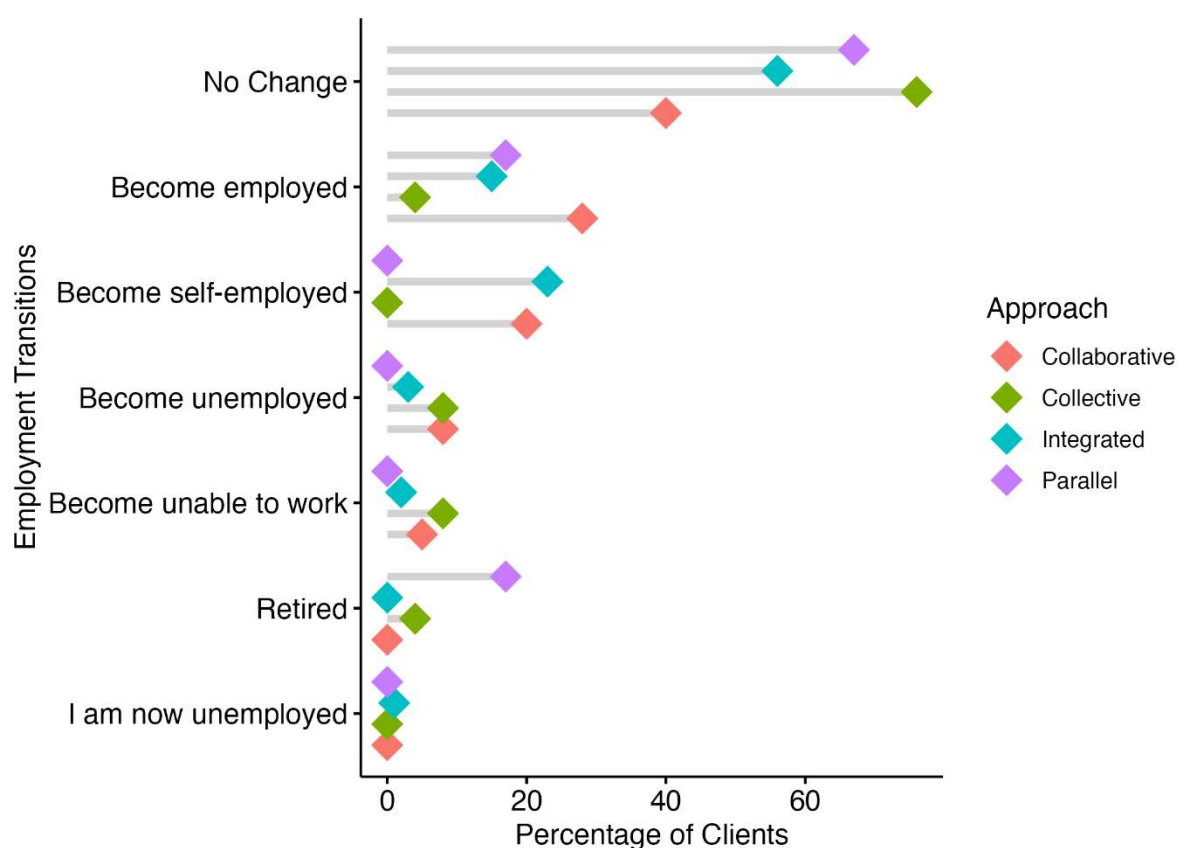


Table 3: Transitions breakdown per Partner for T3

		Abri	Archipel	Clarion	NEOTOA	Optivo	PDCH	Total
No, it has not changed	N	49	2	4	14	8	19	98
	%	57.65	40.00	66.67	40.00	50.00	76.00	56.32
I am now employed	N	13	3	1	8	2	1	28
	%	15.29	60.00	16.67	22.86	12.50	4.00	16.09
I am now retired	N	0	0	1	0	0	1	2
	%	0	0	16.67	0	0	4.00	1.15
I am now self-employed	N	18	0	0	8	5	0	31
	%	21.18	0	0	22.86	31.25	0	17.81
Unable to work due to sickness or disability	N	2	0	0	2	0	2	6
	%	2.35	0	0	5.71	0	8.00	3.45
I am now unemployed	N	3	0	0	3	1	2	9
	%	3.53	0	0	8.57	6.25	8.00	5.17
Total	N	85	5	6	35	16	25	174
	%	49.42	2.91	3.49	20.35	9.30	14.53	

There were no responses from LogiRep and therefore was removed from the table

Figure 10: Employment transitions at T3



Changes in well-being outcomes

We compared changes over time for how participants rated their goals (whether enterprise or employment-related) on eight survey questions. These were evaluated quantitatively with a series of within-person Analysis of Variance tests which are presented in Table 4. The results showed that overall, there were small positive changes for most questions. The key exceptions were that the importance of the goal and the level of disengagement (whether participants found it easy to forget about their goals) remained consistent over the three surveys.

Table 4: Goal pursuit and within person ANOVA comparisons between T1, T2 and T3

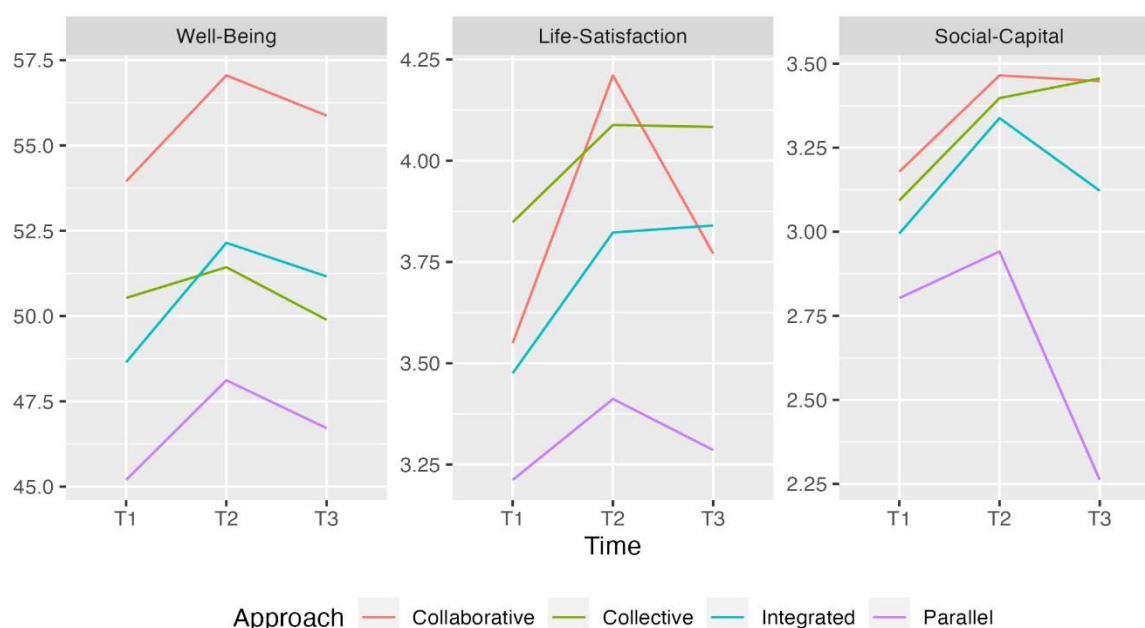
	T1	T2	T3	F-Statistic	P-value
Importance	4.57	4.61	4.59	0.52	0.59
Investment	4.18	4.42	4.45	12.41	0.00
Commitment	4.45	4.57	4.43	3.06	0.05
Control	3.75	4.07	3.83	13.02	0.00
Disengagement	2.23	2.25	2.30	0.23	0.79
Absorption	3.85	4.05	4.10	9.55	0.00
Effort	4.11	4.31	4.20	6.18	0.00
Affect	4.21	4.38	4.26	4.58	0.01

Significant effects are those with p-value < 0.05

We also evaluated changes that related to participants' well-being: mental well-being, life satisfaction, and social capital over the three surveys and also between the four approaches. The results are shown in Figure 11 below. Mental well-being was captured using the 14 item Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWS)⁶⁶ which asks participants to rate their psychological wellbeing by answering how often they feel, for instance, "loved", "relaxed", or "confident". The results showed that there was a significant difference ($F(2,122) = 5.26$, $p < 0.05$) between T1 ($M=48.76$), T2 (52.06) and T3 (51.60) but the different approaches were relatively consistent with each other.

We measured life satisfaction as another indicator of overall well-being with a 5-point Likert scale. The results suggested that there were significant differences between responses to the three surveys ($F(2,122) = 3.92$, $p < 0.05$) and between the four different approaches ($F(3,61) = 2.88$, $p < 0.05$). Examining the mean scores of life satisfaction suggested that there was an increase from T1 ($M=3.47$) to T2 ($M=3.87$) and this remained stable at T3 ($M=3.88$). The differences in terms of the approach seem to reflect a lower score for the Parallel approach as compared to the other approaches. Nevertheless, we found no evidence of an interaction effect suggesting that changes over the three surveys were in fact consistent between the four approaches and these differences may in fact reflect differences in life satisfaction between the different areas represented for each approach.

Figure 11: Well-being changes over time and between approaches



We also evaluated social capital as another indicator of well-being as measured with participants' networking ability⁶⁷ on a 5-point Likert scale. Similar to the other two measures we found that levels of social capital improved over time ($F(2,122) = 5.28$, $p < 0.05$). At T1, the average was 2.98 and increased significantly at T2 ($M = 3.34$) and T3 ($M=3.26$). We found no evidence of significant differences between the four approaches in terms of social capital.

⁶⁶ <https://doi.org/10.1186/1477-7525-5-63>

⁶⁷ <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206304271386>



Banksy's mural art in Dover, UK.

SECTION 5

5. What have we learnt about reaching those furthest from the market with micro enterprise training and employment support services?

Key takeaways

As William Easterly⁶⁸ and Richard Pascale⁶⁹ will attest, while social problems are almost always best solved by those within the communities in which they exist, the temptation to parachute in "solutions" from afar persists. Indeed, the Electoral Reform Society argues⁷⁰ that one of the driving factors behind the likes of the Brexit vote was the excessive centralisation of power in Westminster, with 67% of people believing they have little real opportunity to influence affairs that matter to them.

The importance of the local context and local empowerment pervaded throughout the research done into the INCREASE VS project. It is evident, for instance, that despite the differences in approaches adopted across the programme, that the local circumstances were crucial in terms of the strength of the local economy and the shortcomings in the local labour market. These challenges made meaningful interventions especially difficult and were often compounded by low levels of digital literacy, which made transitioning classes online during the COVID-19 lockdowns that bit harder.

By using housing associations as key agents of change, some of these challenges can be realistically addressed. In the aftermath of the 2010 financial crisis, there was a well-documented period of austerity in which local council funding was "hollowed out"⁷¹, with the poorest areas often the worst affected. That has left housing associations as often the most well-resourced stakeholder in many local communities.

As Community Housing Cymru CEO Stuart Ropke argues, "Is it housing associations' role just to be delivery agents for government, sticking to the knitting? Or is there no option but to step up as agents of recovery at the vanguard of the economic and social change?"⁷²

⁶⁸ <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/292753/the-white-mans-burden-by-william-easterly/>

⁶⁹ <https://positivedeviance.org/the-power-of-positive-deviance>

⁷⁰ <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2019/06/26/brexit-has-shown-the-limits-of-britains-broken-westminster-model-of-politics/>

⁷¹ <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publications/neighbourhood-services>

⁷² <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/comment/comment/how-housing-associations-can-succeed-as-agents-of-recovery-at-the-vanguard-of-erupting-economic-and-social-change-67295>

What's more, Kate Henderson, the CEO of the National Housing Federation, argues that housing associations play a crucial role in anchoring their communities⁷³. This strong embeddedness within the local community makes them an ideal stakeholder to both understand the needs of their community and a trusted conduit through which support can be offered, especially when that support is so wrapped up in the virtues of place in helping communities develop the social glue that not only binds the community together but also supports employment and entrepreneurship.

Housing associations are well placed to deliver this role provided that they are neither benefit providers nor benefit sanctioners and have a clear separation of their housing services from those of microenterprise and employment support. Our impact evaluation research has shown that there is consensus across each of the INCREASE VS interventions on what quality microenterprise and employment support looks like for those furthest from the market: non-judgemental and inclusive, responsive, interactive, practical, but most importantly continuous support that is delivered close to clients over a longer time frame both one-to-one and as part of peer learning communities, building their intrinsic skills and confidence and entrepreneurial self-actualisation, helping clients find their way and take action but without getting into debt, thus trying to safeguard rather than change them.

This reflects a strength-building logic⁷⁴ that was commonly found across all four INCREASE VS approaches where the focus remained on enabling credible and accessible pathways back to work that those furthest from the labour market could repetitively use in the face of setbacks, rethinks or new challenges. This was encapsulated in France by the important role played by the *gardien*. Not only were these housing association staff resident caretakers in their communities, but they also had a strong social support role that often succeeded in converting outreach into engagement with work integration. They maintained shared spaces and other conviviality areas in social housing communities suffering from a rise in anti-social behaviours and provided a range of safeguarding advice and guidance to community members.

Our research has shown that in the most disadvantaged and isolated areas of deprivation, shortcomings in the local labour market and the local economy substantially limited what could be realistically achieved by Housing Associations across each of the INCREASE VS programmes. The pandemic worsened this situation with digital literacy emerging as the key challenge for the Housing Associations' COVID-19 responses. Housing Association policies and regulation meant that the INCREASE VS was often slower than other community level activities to resume. What remains however a key takeaway is that Housing Associations are well equipped to provide the continuity that is so important for success, as programme participants across both countries often found progress slow, with life getting in the way. With many hurdles to overcome on the path to employment or entrepreneurship, there is a clear need for support to be inherently long-term in nature.

⁷³ <https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/comment/comment/housing-associations-role-as-community-anchors-is-critical-as-we-head-into-a-recession-68928>

⁷⁴ <https://sase.confex.com/sase/2021/meetingapp.cgi/Paper/16743>

Although this continuity was generously funded here by the five-year long INCREASE VS programme (2018-2023), what is needed in the future is not a project but an institutionalised service that is ongoing as opposed to a 'stop and start' process funded by external bodies. This underpins the crucial role 'co-investment' can play in providing such an institutionalised service with sufficient sustainability to ensure this continuity occurs.

As with the housing associations whose futures are locally invested, the ambassadors in England, both volunteers and paid ones, are also inherently from their local communities, and so not only gain credibility from that but also understand the local conditions and stakeholders well. An effective collaboration between the two will fine tune this much needed institutionalised service that is uniquely able to engage with the full complexity of its clients' social exclusion.

Policy recommendations

In 2022 the UK government published its long-awaited Levelling Up⁷⁵ whitepaper, which promised to improve standards of living across the country and help every place to reach its productivity potential, with a focus on improving the performance of the UK's biggest cities as a means to address regional inequalities. While the levelling up agenda incorporates a wide definition of these regional inequalities to include issues such as health, education, and public service provision, there is a clear focus on improving regional productivity.

This is a well-documented problem, with poor regional performance underpinning the lacklustre productivity growth that is the worst seen⁷⁶ in approximately 250 years. Indeed, the Economist⁷⁷ reports that the cost of this poor productivity performance amounts to around £6,700 per person in GDP. Central to the levelling up agenda is the notion that regional productivity gaps are central to this problem.

There is considerable evidence to support this perspective. For instance, the Resolution Foundation report⁷⁸ that whereas London produced around £76,000 of gross value added per job in 2019, Powys and Torbay produced roughly half that figure. What's more, this disparity is growing, as London's productivity was approximately 40% higher than the national average in 2002, but 50% higher by 2019. Places like Powys and Torbay were

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1095544/Executive_Summary.pdf

⁷⁶ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/national-institute-economic-review/article/abs/is-the-uk-productivity-slowdown-unprecedented/287949348D9BBA0223B3EA7E532C4B22>

⁷⁷ <https://www.economist.com/britain/2022/06/09/britains-productivity-problem-is-long-standing-and-getting-worse>

⁷⁸ <https://economy2030.resolutionfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Bridging-the-gap.pdf>

going the other way, as whereas in 2002 they were 20% less productive than average, this had grown to 30% less productive by 2019.

Such regional disparities are commonplace and have been observed in Germany, France, Spain, and Italy. The disparities in the UK are in large part driven by the service-based economy that benefits considerably from the agglomeration effect, which results in productive economic activity being spatially concentrated in regions that specialise in high-skilled tradable services, which are defined as services, such as finance and consulting, that can be traded across regions and exported abroad.

The regional disparities across both the UK and France were largely inevitable after the transition from manufacturing to services. Despite this, however, the gap between London and other areas of the UK remains larger than that between Paris and other French cities. Indeed, the UK remains the economy that is most heavily weighted towards services in the world.

The fundamental nature of the transition towards a service-based economy, and the agglomeration effect that underpins it, means that there will always be productivity gaps between large cities and smaller towns and villages, with the Resolution Foundation researchers arguing that the focus should remain on improving the performance of other cities around the UK.

The historic challenges posed by this de-industrialisation are epitomised by the fact⁷⁹ that the GDP per capita of Birmingham as the manufacturing centre of the West Midlands was 3% above the UK average in 1971 before falling to 9% below the average by 1981. While the area has recovered marginally since then, it is still below average for the country as a whole.

Labour productivity

Regional disparities are compounded by significant differences in skill levels across the country. For instance⁸⁰, whereas over half of Brighton's residents have a degree, this figure falls to just 15% in Doncaster. When compounded by the size of the local economy and the area's total physical and intangible capital stock, these factors account for around 55% of the labour productivity variation found across the UK.

The levelling up agenda is further complicated by this overall productivity malaise, with policymakers grappling with the twin priorities of raising productivity nationally while also trying to reduce regional disparities. Indeed, the Resolution Foundation report suggests that investing in "left behind" communities may produce limited results, as even if improvements

⁷⁹ <https://www.productivity.ac.uk/publications/the-persistent-consequences-of-adverse-shocks-how-the-1970s-shaped-uk-regional-inequality/>

⁸⁰ <https://ifs.org.uk/inequality/spatial-disparities-across-labour-markets/>

in skills and capital are produced, the relatively small scale of the local economy will minimise the gains achieved.

As such, the government's levelling up white paper makes a case for concentrating regional investment in cities to create regional hubs that aim to achieve comparable productivity to that seen in London. While this may boost the overall productivity picture, it threatens to do little to improve the lot of people in deprived communities like those covered by INCREASE VS, who remain hard to reach and disconnected.

Equally, it threatens to do little to dampen the sense⁸¹ within these communities that London, Paris, and even Brussels don't really care nor understand them and their lives, much less have any real interest in improving them. This is why the role of Housing Associations as anchor institutions whose futures are invested in smaller deprived towns are particularly well-placed and well-motivated to take a leadership role within the levelling up agenda in partnership with other local and national actors.

Encouraging returnees

While much innovation is indeed focused on cities, a sense of place and meaning can⁸² encourage entrepreneurship or other types of productive economic activity in smaller communities. There are four different types of entrepreneurs based upon their relationship to the location they have based their business start-up in.

Locally born entrepreneurs are those who have created their business in the place they have lived their entire lives. Returnees by contrast left, often for study or work, before returning to the place of their childhood. The third category is 'in-migrants', who were born elsewhere before moving to the area where they created their business, and then immigrants who came from another country.

Research⁸³ from Iowa State University is important, therefore, as it explores how it might be possible to attract people back to their hometowns. The study suggests that graduates are more likely to return to rural communities if they had a strong attachment to their school, with this attachment driven by their involvement in the school community or connections with individual teachers. The researchers found that the size of the school was also important, with people whose school had over 350 students much less likely to return than those for whom the school catered for less than 125 students.

⁸¹

<https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA551496466&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=0968252X&p=AONE&sw=w&userGroupName=anon%7Ec0ce251f>

⁸² <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00343404.2019.1597971?journalCode=cres20>

⁸³ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ruso.12416>

Returnees were also seemingly more likely to return to towns with lower population densities and also fewer fellow graduates. The authors argue that this is perhaps because people feel that they can make a more significant impact in the communities of such towns.

Innovation and creativity are often a case of applying habits and perspectives learned elsewhere into new contexts, which is one reason why immigrants are so often extremely effective entrepreneurs. People returning to their hometowns from cities have a similar potential to lead change in the economic vitality of a community because not only do they bring the fresh perspectives learned in the city, but they also retain the connections and context from growing up in the community.

Oxford University's Carl Benedikt Frey cites⁸⁴ mobility vouchers as a key policy instrument to help against the rising tide of automation. Such vouchers could be similarly useful in encouraging people to return to their small deprived hometowns and build individual and social mobility, especially if they help to overcome some of the practical barriers to moving there.

Numerous schemes exist to this effect. For instance, in the US, Choose Topeka⁸⁵ offers people up to \$15,000 to rent or buy a home there. Similarly, Tulsa has attempted⁸⁶ to attract remote workers by offering up to \$10,000 towards a downpayment on a new home in the city. Calabria, in Italy, has spent around 700,000 Euros trying to entice people to the region. What these schemes lack, however, is a clear link with the area among those being enticed back.

Self-efficacy and well-being

It is difficult to underestimate the importance of self-efficacy in personal development and therefore it should be integral in programmes like INCREASE VS. Our analysis showed that domain specific self-efficacy can have a very strong influence on individual behaviour. This is backed up by research from the University of Basel⁸⁷, which found that the most important determining factor of success in both one's education and career was one's aspirations.

In a form of *Pygmalion Effect*,⁸⁸ they found that if people believed they could thrive then they were far more likely to do so. This is problematic, as research⁸⁹ conducted in deprived communities in England found a strong sense of pessimism around the future and the prospects for them.

⁸⁴ <https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691172798/the-technology-trap>

⁸⁵ <https://choosetopeka.com/choose-topeka/>

⁸⁶ <https://tulsaremote.com/homeownership/>

⁸⁷ <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2022.104193>

⁸⁸ <https://doi.org/10.2307/257251>

⁸⁹ <https://gmbeewell.org/>

In the INCREASE VS project, self-efficacy associated with job search activities motivated individuals to follow the employment route, and similarly self-efficacy associated with entrepreneurial activities motivated individuals to follow the enterprise route to start new business or improve existing ones.

Past research has also underscored self-efficacy as one of the most important constructs for motivation and behavioural change⁹⁰. It is one of the key elements of psychological capital⁹¹, and it has been repeatedly shown to have positive effects on a number of personal and work-related outcomes. Importantly many researchers consider self-efficacy to be a personal resource that can help individual to mitigate negative effects of stressors and thus increase work engagement and well-being^{92 93}.

Developing extra local connections

The value of these returnees can help to overcome what researchers⁹⁴ from the University of Sheffield regard as the creation of “subsistence entrepreneurship”, which is both highly localised and underproductive, and therefore has a limited impact on economic growth.

The policies to promote entrepreneurship and economic regeneration have largely failed to return employment and growth to their former levels, much less seen any growth in those regions. Far from the high-tech jobs of startup lore, many of the new entrepreneurs were working for themselves in low-skill trades that did little to mask the impression that policies aimed at boosting entrepreneurship and economic growth were in reality more designed to mask shocking unemployment statistics.

In addition to encouraging returnees, programmes might also consider working to develop the human, social, financial, and other forms of capital of local entrepreneurs. For instance, research⁹⁵ highlights the importance of entrepreneurs developing networks to enable them to search (online and offline) for choices and repurpose rather than be granted access to resources, and this is especially relevant if it happens in deprived communities.

“The way people in the same rural area perceive and approach innovation is quite different and reflects their previous experiences and what the place means to them, for example in terms of being rich in resources or not, or being a good or bad place to live and do business,” the researchers explain⁹⁶. “The importance attached in rural innovation policy to understanding innovative activity from the point of view of local people acquires particular

⁹⁰ <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/1997-08589-000>

⁹¹ <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195187526.001.0001>

⁹² <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2007-07240-001>

⁹³ <https://bpspsychub.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1348/096317908X285633>

⁹⁴ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11187-017-9946-7>

⁹⁵ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00343404.2019.1597971>

⁹⁶ <https://workplaceinsight.net/rural-innovation-policies-need-to-exploit-differences-within-communities/>

relevance in the context of the changing demographic realities of rural areas, as these may underpin the emergence of different views among individuals.”

The importance of social capital was also underlined in a recent study⁹⁷ from the University of Manchester, which not only outlined that it can help convert those who want to be entrepreneurs into actual entrepreneurs, but also that this vital social capital is often extremely unevenly distributed.

Given the importance of such networks, it is important that small deprived towns are able to develop and maintain connections outside of the local community. Many of the participants in INCREASE VS had lived in their local community all of their lives so lack those connections, so it’s important either to attract returnees or otherwise support the development of broader networks.

Deferred tuition programmes have also been growing in importance, especially in areas such as computer science. These socially minded programmes might include encouragement, or indeed requirements, to return to one’s hometown after completing the training to help bring both knowledge and connections back with graduates.

Social infrastructure

The importance of networks was underlined in recent research⁹⁸ from the University of Cambridge, which argued that 25% of levelling up investment should be devoted to so-called “social infrastructure” that will allow people to interact with their local communities and generate a sense of local identity. The authors say that these investments are just as important as more widely publicised physical infrastructure schemes, such as the High Speed 2 rail link or the rollout of 5G. Indeed, they believe that the success of such schemes depends on the social plumbing community schemes provide.

“When the local pub is shuttered, the park is unkempt and the high street has been hollowed out, the pride of a once close-knit community can give way to pessimism and disenchantment,” the researchers say. “There is an ingrained bias in government towards large-scale infrastructure projects, but interventions that seek to restore dilapidated town centres or support local initiatives may be far more socially and economically beneficial than many policy-makers appreciate.”

They highlight how social infrastructure, such as cafes, leisure centres, and cinemas are not only invaluable for their role in bringing people together but also provide valuable employment for local communities. Indeed, such facilities provide around half of all employment in “left behind” towns.

⁹⁷ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1042258720913022>

⁹⁸ https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Townscapes_The_value_of_infrastructure.pdf

Jobs in these areas are particularly important for young people, who have been especially hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic as so many of these communal facilities have been forced to shut down. Their importance cannot be overstated, however, as the report found that there was a clear correlation between the number of community and social facilities and the level of mutual aid provided during the pandemic.

As such, communities covered by the INCREASE VS programme should consider investing in their social infrastructure, as this will not only provide local employment opportunities and means of developing the social capital of local residents, but also bolster the pride in the local community of residents. This could also include people whose role is to facilitate social connections within and outside of communities, while also circulating cost-free informal information, which could expand on the role played by the *gardiens* in France (through proximity teams) or the local ambassadors in England (through business clubs) within the INCREASE VS programme.

Tapping into net zero

The Levelling Up White Paper makes explicit reference to the Net Zero agenda, stating that the transition "could have large and long-lasting effects on virtually every aspect of the economy, including jobs and skills, infrastructure and technology, and investment and innovation".

While research⁹⁹ suggests that the transition to net zero could impose costs on society, and particularly on those least able to afford it, the desire for a "Green Industrial Revolution" also offers many opportunities.

For instance, research¹⁰⁰ from the University of Michigan highlights how transferable jobs are in fossil fuel industries to those in renewable sectors. The study analysed what might be done with the 80,000 or so workers across the United States currently working in coal-fired generators in the event that they shut. They found that the skills those workers have are certainly transferrable to renewable energy sectors, such as solar, but that government policies would need to be introduced to ensure that solar investments are targeted in former coal communities.

INCREASE VS showed what can be possible when small deprived communities are given skills in renewable energy alongside technological investments to ensure that such communities are able to generate more of their energy requirements locally and sustainably.

⁹⁹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-020-00971-x>

¹⁰⁰ [https://www.cell.com/iscience/fulltext/S2589-0042\(22\)01089-6](https://www.cell.com/iscience/fulltext/S2589-0042(22)01089-6)

A paper¹⁰¹ for the Economy 2030 Inquiry fires a note of caution that net zero isn't a silver bullet, but nonetheless believes that if investment was targeted in the right way that it could produce significant benefits to local communities.

"Smart net-zero investment should be embedded in a wider economic strategy – especially as it could have the additional benefit of bolstering the government's Levelling Up agenda," the report states.

Scaling up the kind of renewable energy projects seen in INCREASE VS could help move the country towards net zero while also improving the employment and energy security of communities across the UK and France.

Improving digital literacy

The COVID-19 pandemic saw so much of our lives move online and this was certainly the case with the INCREASE VS programme. As such, basic digital literacy is now crucial to accessing modern society, whether in terms of education, careers, or socialising. While there has been considerable attention given to providing advanced digital skills in recent years, the project reminds us that basic digital literacy is also important.

The EU are leading the way in this domain, with their "Digital Decade" initiative¹⁰² aiming to improve the basic digital skills of 80% of the population. The scale of the problem was evident, as estimates¹⁰³ suggest that nearly half of the population lacked basic digital skills.

Cisco and the Centre for Economic and Business Research (CEBR) recently conducted economic modelling¹⁰⁴ that highlighted the benefits of improving digital skills in communities that have not traditionally benefited from trends like digitization and globalization.

The CEBR researchers classified skills into three categories¹⁰⁵ that they refer to as "Essential Digital Skills (EDS)". These include: 1) EDS foundational skills (ability to access the internet), 2) EDS for life (ability to conduct transactions, make purchases, and engage online), and 3) EDS for work (ability to use basic digital apps for business).

The study found that improving basic digital skills could improve the employment prospects of 1.7 million people in the UK and add over £45 billion to the economy. Additionally, the models suggest that over 80% of these benefits would be seen outside of London, which aligns with the government's goal to enhance economic opportunities in non-urban areas.

¹⁰¹ https://economy2030.resolutionfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Growing_clean_report.pdf

¹⁰² [Europe's Digital Decade: digital targets for 2030 \(europa.eu\)](https://economy2030.resolutionfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Growing_clean_report.pdf)

¹⁰³ [How many citizens had basic digital skills in 2021? - Products Eurostat News - Eurostat \(europa.eu\)](https://economy2030.resolutionfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Growing_clean_report.pdf)

¹⁰⁴ [Cisco CEBR Report: The Benefits of Increased Digital Inclusion in the UK and Ireland](https://economy2030.resolutionfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Growing_clean_report.pdf)

¹⁰⁵ [Digital deadline: £168 billion opportunity for the UK by 2030 - Cisco News The EMEA Network](https://economy2030.resolutionfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Growing_clean_report.pdf)

As such, providing basic digital skills in this area can have a significant impact and Housing Associations as one of the “labour market intermediaries”¹⁰⁶ that have a degree of permanence in the local context have a role to play in this alongside the other services they offer, especially in the kind of deprived communities covered by the INCREASE VS programme.



Mobile Library in Wisbech, UK.

SECTION 6

6. Methodology

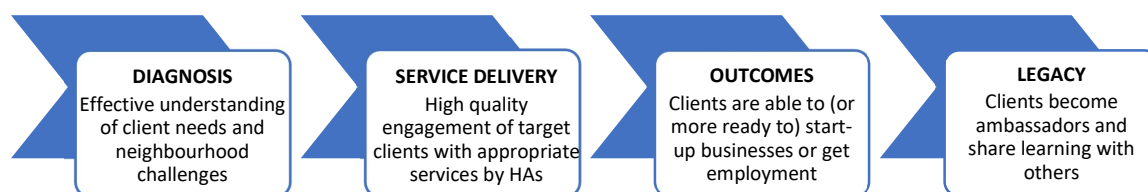
This research project has attempted to generate evidence of both soft and hard outcomes to allow for the robust evaluation of the INCREASE VS programme by linking proposed interventions and their intended outcomes.

The intervention logic (see Figure 2) rests upon the diagnosis of each client’s needs and the challenges posed by each neighbourhood. If this is effective, it will feed into developing integrated services for clients. Similarly, if the service delivery is strong, then these tailor-made services will successfully engage with the target clients, which will in turn result in trained clients that are better able to develop start-up businesses and get (better and more secure) employment. Lastly, if successful clients become ambassadors, they will be able to

¹⁰⁶ [Studies of Labor Market Intermediation, Autor \(uchicago.edu\)](#)

share their learning with others in the future, ensuring that the intervention builds a legacy in these neighbourhoods.

Figure 2: Simplified Intervention Logic



Each of these stages was unpacked throughout the evaluation process to better understand the ways in which the project was, or was not, working, and therefore provide us with rich feedback on the various interventions.

The impact evaluation process was not designed to assess each housing association (delivery partner) individually, but rather accepted that interventions varied in response to the unique conditions of each neighbourhood; that interventions would have different successes and difficulties in different neighbourhoods and with different clients; and client outcomes would be shaped by factors beyond the control of interventions.

Most importantly, the impact evaluation process employed a mixed method research design gathering data from case studies and quantitative survey data, and therefore consisting of a mixture of hard and soft information. Hard information was used to tell us about people's employment status, education, and business activities before, during, and after training. By contrast, soft information was used to tell us more broadly about people's skills, self-perceptions, aspirations and experiences of participation in INCREASE VS.

As well as conducting secondary data analysis in the first year of the project, primary field research was conducted with INCREASE VS programme managers and frontline officers of the housing associations, clients and non-clients (or ex-clients), and other key stakeholders (including those working for local authorities, or other local third sector organisations) about their experiences, needs, perceptions, and on self-defined and project-defined outcomes across the lifetime of the five-year project.

Whilst the online survey tracked progression quantitatively (at Time 1 – before the training; Time 2 – immediately after the training; and at Time 3 – more than 6 months after the training) for all clients in all neighbourhoods, primary field research by UEA researchers focused on a limited number of selected case studies only.

The quantitative online survey (as per November 2022) included 1,251 client respondents at T1 (27.6% of those who completed the training), 429 at T2 (9.5%) and 288 at T3 (6.4%). Of the responses at T1, 26.9% were for the parallel, 44.2% for the integrated, 15.6% for the

collaborative and 13.2% for the collective approaches. The majority of the respondents were female (66%) with the average age was 42.5 at the time of completing the T1 online survey questionnaire. Almost 6% (70) of the respondents at T1 had no educational qualifications, 20% had only primary or lower secondary (23 and 228 respectively), 14% (181) had higher secondary, 17% (209) had vocational qualifications and 33% (412) had a degree (Bachelor, Master or Doctorate). At T1, 40% of the survey respondents were unemployed (of which approximately one third had no or little education), 17% were self-employed and another 20% were employed. The remaining survey responses included those who were unable to work due to sickness or disability (7%), retired (3%), not seeking work (4%), studying (1%) or other (7%).

It is important to note that Abri, who had one of the largest shares of online survey participants (27%), has slightly different sample characteristics in terms of educational background and employment status of participants. Specifically, 51% of Abri had a degree, only 10% had a primary or lower secondary education, 12% had higher education, and 16% had vocational qualifications. In terms of employment status, a lower proportion were unemployed (26%), 33% were self-employed, and 23% were employed.

Out of the total online survey sample (as per November 2022), about half of respondents at T1 (51%) were parents or had dependent children and 53% had a partner or a spouse. A total of 74% of the partners or spouses were working with 15% being self-employed and the rest in other employment. Other than that, 8% of the partners/spouses were unemployed and 4% were unable to work due to disability or long-term health issues (the remaining being retired, students, housemakers, or others). In terms of housing, the single largest category amongst online survey respondents was those living in social housing, as would be expected for INCREASE VS, but this only accounted for around a third of all respondents, with 26% renting from a HA, 20% renting from a private landlord and 4% renting from the local authority. About 24% owned their property (18% with a mortgage), and about 10% lived with parents or other guardian.

Despite efforts made to make the online survey accessible (including by mobile phone) and encouragement and support from Housing Associations, returns (in terms of the proportions of clients responding but also in terms of clients responding across the time periods) made it difficult to get what would be required to generate a robust quantitative analysis. The challenge was exacerbated by missing data which made it difficult to match responses from T1, T2 and T3. This analysis was also biased by selective dropout (for reasons that relate to the very measures the online survey tried to capture such as well-being, or even transitioning from unemployment to employment) and the lack of a control group (which was not possible to do in this context).

As a core part of the mixed-methods impact evaluation, the qualitative case study selection was evenly balanced between France and England and attempted to capture the range of circumstances covered in INCREASE VS and to balance this criterion with a strong focus on areas of greatest need and the left behind communities, for instance including areas like

Outreau and Saint-Martin-Boulogne in Pas-de-Calais, Swale in Kent or Wisbech and Great Yarmouth in East Anglia where deprivation is highly concentrated.

The primary field research was qualitative in nature in order to generate softer information about INCREASE VS as it unfolded and took place throughout the project. It was carried out face-to-face, included mini ethnographies and in-depth interviews, and was phased across the project to reflect progress, adaptive learning, and evolving goals. Impact evaluation was therefore addressed through a detailed analysis of specific programme activities if, how, and why these impacted the target clients in different circumstances, whilst recognising that there was unevenness in terms of how far clients were from the market and in terms of how long it was since they trained when the interviews took place. The focus on individual clients also meant that it was harder to gauge community level impacts.

In the first round of primary data collection, 79 in-depth key informant interviews took place in both France and England with the respective housing associations and other relevant local stakeholders. Then in the second round of primary data collection in-depth research took place in France in the sample case studies (Rennes for the Collaborative Approach and Pas-de-Calais for the Collective Approach) that included participant observation and 35 in-depth interviews with clients and non-clients (or ex-clients) alongside 11 additional key informant interviews (e.g. *gardiens*, social centres etc.) to understand how MEESS were evolving and how they were impacting on client experiences.

The final round of primary data collection saw qualitative research in the sample case studies of England (28 in-depth interviews in Norfolk for the Parallel Approach, 26 in-depth interviews in Kent, and 24 in-depth interviews in Hampshire for the Integrated Approach), which included participant observation and in-depth interviews with different clients (some who have and some who haven't successfully found a job or started a business), and to a more limited degree non-clients (or ex-clients) and 8 key informant interviews (e.g. local community centre managers, employment support officers etc.) (of which 6 were in Norfolk) to understand how INCREASE VS produced not only outcomes but also legacy. In the last year of the project, 17 in-depth interviews with ambassadors in both France (8 interviews) and England (9 interviews) were also carried out.



Pétanque (boules) courts and social housing in Rennes, France.

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