

EMPOWERING SOCIAL FIRMS

**Knowledge Transfer Partnership 008439
between Social Firms UK and Middlesex University**

Project Report – March 2013

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The Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) was established in 1990 to provide a focus for research in the social sciences at Middlesex University and support high quality research of national and international standing. Members of staff are involved in a wide range of projects funded by research councils, the EU, government departments and the major charities. The Centre supports postgraduate research students, including students funded by research councils, and a number of well-established masters programmes. The Centre runs events, including conferences, seminars and short courses. Main areas of interest include: migration, refugees and citizenship; welfare restructuring; service provision and third sector organisations; urban policy, regeneration and communities; drug and alcohol policy; human security and human rights. For further information and to view reports from our recent research projects visit the SPRC website: www.sprc.info.

Social Firms UK

Social Firms UK is the national membership and support organisation for the development of the Social Firm and Work Integration Social Enterprise (WISE) sector in the UK. These are employability-focussed social enterprises that believe that everyone has the right to be employed and support those furthest from the labour market. A Social Firm is a market-led social enterprise set up specifically to create good quality jobs for people severely disadvantaged in the labour market. Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs) focus on improving their employment prospects through a wider range of work-based opportunities. Social Firms UK carries out lobbying and awareness-raising activities, research and practical initiatives to support employability focussed social enterprises across the UK. For further information visit: www.socialfirmsuk.co.uk.

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1. Introduction

This **Knowledge Transfer Partnership** brought together the expertise within the Social Policy Research Centre at Middlesex University with Social Firms UK (SFUK), the umbrella organisation representing, supporting and developing the social firms sector in the UK.

Knowledge Transfer Partnerships is a business support product run and managed on behalf of the government, funding organisations by the Technology Strategy Board, a non-departmental public body. A Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) is a relationship formed between a company (including social enterprises) and an academic institution (Knowledge Base Partner), which facilitates the transfer of knowledge, technology and skills. Each partnership employs one or more recently qualified people (known as Associates) to work in the company on a project of strategic importance, whilst also being supervised by the Knowledge Base Partner. For further information about the KTP programme visit: <http://www.ktponline.org.uk>.

The overall **aim** of this KTP project was “to develop a range of evaluation tools to assess successful growth factors in the Social Firm sector, identify best practice and inform future support interventions”, as stated in the original proposal. In order to achieve this, a thorough investigation of the UK social firms sector was completed. The data collected will equip Social Firms UK (SFUK) with the information and tools to better understand, support, strengthen and grow the sector; and through this, provide greater lobbying power for it.

During this KTP project, the following **outputs** were produced:

- Background research on the social firm sector;
- Enhanced sector mapping;
- Social Firms InfoMine – an online diagnostic and business development toolkit to encourage start up and growth in social firms;
- Online and Social Media Strategy for SFUK and Social Firms InfoMine;
- Recommendations on future sector mapping, maintenance and development of InfoMine, and enhancement of SFUK social media strategy.

From the company’s point of view, the impact of the KTP includes a greater ability to support the development of the social firm sector, attract member organisations and clients and – through a stronger online network – to promote and provide professional services such as mentoring, business advice, training and workshop. The knowledge which will be gathered by SFUK by using its new tools will be of strategic importance to apply for funding, both nationally and internationally, and to produce evidence to influence policy makers and other stakeholders.

This report starts with background information on the UK social firm sector, followed by the findings of the latest mapping exercise and the research conducted as part of this project. The other key project outputs - Social Firms InfoMine and the Online and Social Media Strategy - are described in the next section. The report ends with a number of recommendations for Social Firms UK to maximise the impact of the project’s outputs and develop its role of support and development of the SFUK in the coming years.

1.1 Acknowledgements

This project has been funded through the *Knowledge Transfer Partnerships*, a business support product run and managed on behalf of the government, funding organisations by the Technology Strategy Board, a non-departmental public body. Support from *NOMS CFO* and by *Remploy* has also been invaluable in getting the project off the ground.

The project team included:

Company Supervisor:	<i>Di Cunliffe</i> , Social Firms UK
Knowledge Base Supervisor:	<i>Alessio D'Angelo</i> , Middlesex University
Knowledge Base Advisory Team:	<i>Mel Evans, Fergus Lyon, Eleonore Kofman</i> - Middlesex University
KTP Associate:	<i>Carly Malling</i>
Project Officer:	<i>Magdolna Lőrinc</i> , Middlesex University

We would like to thank all the people who contributed to the success of this project by providing information and advice, taking part in interviews and focus groups, and testing and giving feedback on Social Firms InfoMine.

Social Firms and Work Integration Social Enterprises that took part in the research stage of this project included: *Clarity EFBP and GWB Products, Lambeth Accord, Argonaut Community Enterprises, Blue Sky Development and Regeneration, The Grow Organisation, Cafe Nova Interchange, Strawberry Line Cafe, Park View Cafe, and 12 Cafe.*

The online development of Social Firms InfoMine was commissioned from *Fluster Design*. The InfoMine header image was designed by *Clear as Mud*, and the Online and Social Media Strategy was delivered by *Electroville*.

Special thanks go to *Anne Hartnell*, Knowledge Transfer Partnership Adviser, for her support throughout this project.

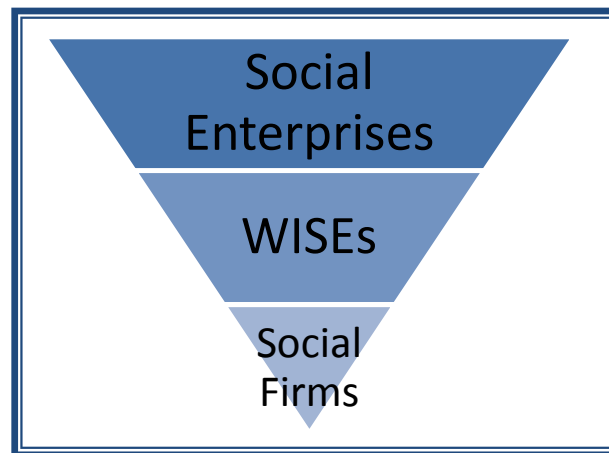
2. The Social Firm Sector

2.1 Background and research evidence

An increasing amount of research, resources and statistics are available on **social enterprises** and the social enterprise sector in general through a variety of sources, including the Third Sector Research Centre's Knowledge Portal¹. Whilst no definite consensus has been reached on the exact definition of the term, it is generally accepted that a social enterprise is an organisation that trades commercially in order to achieve social or environmental objectives (Social Enterprise UK, 2011). Social enterprises have a wide range of objectives that differ widely throughout the sector.

Many of them are focussing their attention on employability, due to the recent economic crisis and consequent increase in unemployment. These are commonly referred to as **Work Integration Social Enterprises** or WISEs, and include a wide range of organisations. **Social Firms** are more specific type of WISEs, which seek to provide employment opportunities for people severely disadvantaged in the labour market as a result of learning or physical disability, sensory impairment, mental health issues, or a history of substance abuse, offending or homelessness.

Figure 1: Social Enterprise Inverted Pyramid



The social firm business model is relatively established internationally, particularly in Europe. It was developed in Europe in the 1970's for people with mental health difficulties, having the guiding principle of a market led enterprise that pays at least minimum wage and with at least a third of its employees being disadvantaged (Warner & Mandiberg, 2006). Over the past 15 years, the social firm movement has grown rapidly in the UK as well.

Social Firms UK has been the driver of much of the research conducted into social firms in the UK, with some similar research conducted internationally. The organisation has recently extended its remit to include representation of all WISEs in the UK rather than just social firms. This recognises that the majority of social firms are already providing training and

¹ See at www.tsrc.ac.uk.

support that is characteristic of WISEs, and conversely, many WISEs incorporate some level of market-led employment for their service users.

Social firms are generally defined as market-led organisations that create employment for those severely disadvantaged in the open labour market. Over the past two decades, Social Firms UK have refined this definition so that in order to be considered a social firm, an organisation must gain at least 50% of its income through commercial markets and a minimum of 25% of its staff must face severe labour market barriers. While such a strict definition may exclude many organisations that do not meet all requirements, SFUK has acknowledged this through the inclusion of the additional category **emerging social firms**. An emerging social firm is 'a business that is in the early stages of trading and is working towards becoming a social firm' (Social Firms UK, 2010).

The social firm sector is currently developing against a backdrop of economic instability, which has both facilitating and limiting consequences. There is undeniably a higher need for WISEs and social firms specifically, considering the high levels of unemployment currently being experienced by the UK. However, decreased public spending and broader austerity measures create a difficult environment for social firms to start up and develop. This increases the importance of developing social firms that are truly market led and competitive.

Social firms are spread widely across the UK under a variety of legal structures, including: Community Interest Companies (CiCs), charities, co-operatives, limited companies or subsidiaries of another parent organisation. Additionally, Social Firms UK has acknowledged self employment as an option within the social firms model (Social Firms UK, 2009).

Social firms tend to be located in certain low skill, low risk industries, such as catering, training, recycling, retail, grounds maintenance, gardening and horticulture, packaging and printing. Since there is greater cost and risk associated with employing severely disadvantaged people, it makes business sense to opt for an industry sector that is otherwise associated with low entry barriers and start up capital requirements in order to mitigate failure risk elsewhere. This tendency to opt for 'easy entry' industries could also be attributed to the fact that many social firms are set up as an extension of a health organisation aiming to place their service users in employment. As business start up may not be their area of expertise, opting for these industry sectors may be the obvious choice. As such, it is clear that appropriate support and advice mechanisms must be in place to enable social firms and WISEs to succeed in achieving their social aims and operating successful, sustainable businesses.

A study by Secker, Dass and Grove (2003) produced some recommendations for best practice within the social firm sector. In particular, they found that in order to provide the best work environment for disabled people, a social firm must demonstrate and ensure:

- genuine user participation and empowerment;
- availability of expert advice and guidance;
- payment at or above minimum wage;
- workers coming off benefits are not disadvantaged in the short term;
- ongoing development opportunities;
- opportunities for integration with both disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged employees;

- involvement of carers in early stage decision making;
- consultation with local socio-economic agencies.

Similarly, Jeffery (2005) concludes that service user involvement is essential to social firm development at board, management and operational level. This again stresses the importance of developing a business-focused approach, which understands the needs and wants of disadvantaged employees.

Warner & Mandiberg (2006) found that two of the major success factors of social firms are supportive legislation and finding a market niche in which they can be competitive. Similarly, Mason (2010) highlighted that in order to maintain sustainability and their long term social objectives, social firms must ensure that they are competitive in their chosen market. On the other hand, maximising social benefit helps legitimising a social firm in the eyes of its stakeholders (Ibid, 2010).

In addition to the primary social objectives, social firms and WISEs often produce wider benefits to the society. Waddell & Burton (2005) found that entry or re-entry to employment by sick or disabled people promotes recovery, improves quality of life and wellbeing, and reduces the long term risks of unemployment and incapacity. Svanberg, Gumley and Wilson (2010) discovered that employment within an emerging social firm can provide people suffering from mental illness with an 'environment of recovery'. REDF, a US organisation that actively employs people who are homeless, have criminal convictions and/or mental health issues, found that within 6 months of employment their employees exhibited decreased criminal convictions and a decrease in general (non-disability specific) benefit claims. Within two years, the majority of employees had moved to jobs in the community, and those who had not done so beforehand, completed their high school diploma (REDF, 2005). Overall, WISEs and social firms increase the social networks of the users and improve their psycho-socio wellbeing (Ho & Chan, 2010).

According to calculations made by SFUK in 2008, social firms in the UK account for annual savings of £40 million in welfare benefits, £8 million in health care and £1 million in social services per year. Whilst financial performance and impact can be measured in terms of covering costs or profit, the wider social impacts are more difficult to measure. A universal social impact measurement tool for the social firm sector has not been developed yet (Neville, 2008), although several measures (such as Social Return on Investment and Social Accounting and Audit) are in use.

2.2 Mapping the social firm sector

Over the past few years SFUK has conducted a number of surveys and mapping exercises to provide an overall picture of the social firm sector in terms of number of firms, turnover, trading sectors and employee groups. The work undertaken within the KTP has highlighted the strategic need to develop this area of work much further, with more systematic mapping exercises, based on sound research methods but also implementing innovative approaches to minimise the use of resources.

Having 'hard' and comprehensive data on the state of the sector would be an invaluable tool for advocacy work, to identify needs and priorities and to inform future interventions and service provision. In particular, the development of longitudinal datasets would allow identifying trends and emerging challenges and opportunities.

As part of the KTP, Social Firms UK has been provided with detailed feedback on previous surveys and recommendations for future mapping of the sector (some key points are summarised in section 5). Over the next few weeks, SFUK and Middlesex University will produce a working paper containing some findings emerging from the 2011-2012 mapping exercise – which involved over 100 firms – as well as a more detailed discussion of future plans to strengthen the availability of reliable data on the social firms sector as a whole.

3. Research Findings

The aim of the mainly qualitative research undertaken within this KTP was to gain detailed insight into the challenges and opportunities faced by social firms. These issues were investigated in two ways: first across the sector, then through two case studies:

1. difficulties of starting a social firm - explored in the context of the catering sector;
2. challenges of running and developing a social firm while balancing business and social objectives – explored with social firms that work with ex-offenders.

Most of the fieldwork took place between January and April 2012. During this time, an exploratory focus group with social firm managers and two case studies were conducted. The first case study involved visits to four social firms, during which a number of semi-structured interviews were completed with social firm managers, employees and customers. Then, as part of the second case study, further interviews were undertaken.

For a full list and brief description of social firms and WISEs that took part in the research, see Appendix 2.

3.1 Challenges and Opportunities in the Social Firm Sector

3.1.1 Aims and Methods

The aim of the focus group was to have an initial exchange of ideas with representatives of social firms from a variety of geographical locations, trading sectors, and employing different groups of disadvantaged people. The focus group discussed the specific challenges and opportunities faced by social firms and explored knowledge needs within the sector.

Participants to the focus group were from London and East of England; representing a range of trading sectors: facilities management and cleaning, grounds maintenance and recycling. Among them, these social firms provided employment opportunities for a range of groups in severe disadvantage.

3.1.2 Key Findings

One of the areas discussed related to the challenges of starting up a social firm. The key point raised was the difficulty of building customer base and reputation. This is further aggravated by the fact that in order to win contracts a track record is required. However, in order to build a track record, contracts need to be won. Furthermore, in order to bid for public sector contracts, 3 years of accounts are required, which is not possible to obtain without some initial contracts.

Concerns were raised about tenders that favour larger organisations. Contracts are often offered for full rather than part service, for example full facilities management rather than just cleaning, which makes it impossible for small businesses to apply. Participants concluded that there needs to be greater opportunities for and emphasis upon partnerships or consortia building in contract tendering.

On the other hand, participants expected that a greater focus on private sector contracts will enable more opportunities for social firms. However, to be effective, these private sector contracts must be facilitated by open communication and understanding of the social firm/ social enterprise model.

Another issue that emerged was the problem of overcoming pre-conceptions about employing people with specific disadvantages, particularly ex-offenders. Building customer base and reputation were found to be a problem with many people believing that ex-offenders were being given precedence over non-offenders for employment.

Participants reported that social firms experienced difficulties at the stages just beyond initial start up. It was felt that there were funding and financing opportunities for start up social firms, as well as for growing and developing the organisation (seed funding and development funding), but nothing to cross the 'chasm' between.

When discussing the challenges and opportunities facing social firms now and in the near future, the main topics that emerged focused on funding and income generation, contracts and social firm growth. All focus group participants showed interest in winning larger contracts rather than relying on individual domestic customers.

It was agreed that growth can present both challenges and opportunities. Concerns were raised that growth must be sustainable and meaningful, not growth for its own sake.

There was some discussion on the support available for social firms. Most of the support mentioned was around pro-bono opportunities that are widely and easily available. However the group mentioned that it is important to be aware of the values of the organisations providing such support and their motives for doing so. There were experiences of 'hidden agendas' and the support turning into a sales pitch.

There are also external issues that affect the availability of support for social firms. For example if one key contact leaves an organisation the promise of support often goes with them. In addition to this, the uncertainty of the wider political and economic environment means that many organisations do not want to commit to giving support.

All participants agreed that awareness-raising organisations such as Social Firms UK are perceived as useful throughout the sector.

Finally, any additional support or resource requirements were discussed. Lobbying provided by support organisations like Social Firms UK were seen as a valuable resource, however the group felt that there could always be more lobbying undertaken, or specifically more help for members to lobby on specific issues.

Additionally, partnerships within the social firm/ social enterprise sectors were considered important for sharing best practice, knowledge, as well as consortia building for larger contracts. Information on where to go for financing opportunities and how to get it was considered an important support need within the sector.

3.2 Case Study 1: The Catering Sector - The Challenges of Starting Up

3.2.1 Aims and Methods

The main purpose of the first case study was to compare social firms in one particular trading sector in order to understand the challenges and opportunities associated with operating a firm in that sector, and to identify the rationale behind the choice of a trading sector. Informed by background research and consultation with stakeholders, the catering sector was chosen as a case study.

Four cafes participated: Park View Cafe, 12 Cafe, Cafe Nova Interchange and Strawberry Line Cafe². Here, semi-structured interviews were completed with Cafe Managers, alongside staff members from parent organisations that had been instrumental in starting up the business. Where possible, employees were also interviewed to identify their thoughts on working at the cafe; and customers were also asked a series of short questions to identify their opinion about the cafe and their knowledge of social firms.

3.2.2 Key Findings

The first finding was that, out of the four cafes, only one was a true social firm as it was the only cafe making profit. Two were emerging social firms as they had not yet broken even and one was just a project, with no expressed desire to become a social firm. All cafes expressed the belief that their commercial success or lack thereof, was due to footfall. However it became clear that the three cafes that were not self-sustaining prioritised the social aspect of their businesses in terms of developing training packages, offering work experience and employment and making their staff members comfortable. Only one of the cafes had running the business as primary focus, although this could be attributed to the competence and level of disability of the disadvantaged workers, meaning that they had lower support requirements. Another cafe admitted that their focus was getting their employment strategy right and that the commercial aspect had fallen by the wayside somewhat. A third cafe similarly acknowledged this, but had funding to allow for this strategy; therefore they considered that they would have the time to address the commercial side of running a social firm cafe later on.

Those cafes that have their costs covered by funding, seemed to place a greater focus on achieving their social objective of providing work experience; and as such, income

² More details about the cafes in Appendix 2.

generation did not factor into the challenges they faced. Their challenges therefore were centred on their social objective. One cafe's funding did not cover all costs, therefore the managers faced the challenge of increasing footfall, managing additional employment costs and operating a profitable business – balancing business and social objectives. There was only one cafe that was totally self sustaining; however they also were thinking about seeking additional finance to cover costs of developing the business. Therefore their challenges related to developing the business.

3.3 Case Study 2: Working with ex-offenders - Balancing business growth with the needs of the target employee group

3.3.1 Aims and Methods

The challenges and issues discussed in Case Study 1 related predominantly to the start up phase of social firms. It was felt that more information was needed on the issues of balancing business and social objectives. As such, it was decided that case study 2 would retain an element of discussing business start up where appropriate; however it would focus on social firm development and growth. After conducting initial exploratory research through a number of telephone interviews, two social firms, Mow and Grow and Blue Sky Development were chosen as case studies due to their size and subsequent history of growth. Both organisations employ ex-offenders in the grounds maintenance sector which aided comparability, but also brought in a different trading sector and an employee group with very specific support needs.

During case study 2, in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of the two companies. In addition, information was collected through questionnaires as well. The questionnaire included questions about reasons for growth and measures of this in a social firm, and ways of balancing business growth with the needs of the specific employee group (ex-offenders in this case). Additionally, information was sought regarding the social firms' experiences of barriers to growth in the social firm sector and their subsequent support needs.

3.3.2 Key Findings

Both growth **strategies** involved forming partnerships across the third, public and private sector to provide a greater breadth of service. In addition, both involved aspects of diversification into different trading sectors. However, where one company had a long-term continuous growth strategy, the other social firm had a well-defined aim to achieve, above which point they did not intend to grow. It was felt that increasing size and production would jeopardise their social objectives, which is to provide close, personal support to their employees.

Having a greater social impact in terms of the amount of people that they can employ is the **growth driver and measure** for both organisations. Whilst both acknowledged that revenue

is an important consideration, it is seen as a means of achieving the social objective rather than any measure of size.

Both organisations commented on the economic downturn having an impact on their earned income and **funding streams**. As such, both acknowledged a greater dependency on grant funding for survival as well as growth. Both companies made it clear that it is vital for any funding body to understand and support the business model and not try to implement or force changes. Spreading risk and tapping into different knowledge and experience are also drivers of a diverse funding mix.

Both companies are keen to measure their impact. One company takes a very structured approach to their **impact measurement**, using Social Return on Investment (SROI) and supporting it with assessing the 'distance travelled' of all employees. The other has a variety of measures that are used interchangeably depending on the situation. Impact measurement for this firm centres on numbers – the amount of people through the door, the number of gardens they do; but also considers the distance travelled of their employees and the extent to which the vulnerable people feel safer in their homes.

Both organisations acknowledged that **access to commercial contracts** was a big challenge within the social firm and wider social enterprise sector. Both social firms stated that access to commercial contracts is generally challenging. One company highlighted that it is difficult to justify the investment in more people and machinery required to bid for larger contracts, because if they are not renewed or other large contracts are not won, they will have surplus resources. Both organisations also agreed that funding is a constant challenge. However, only one of them highlighted staffing issues in terms of quality and consistency as a challenge.

The key challenges identified in **employing ex-offenders** centred on the quality and consistency of the work they produce and the work skills they exhibit in terms of attendance, time keeping etc. This both impacts service quality and costs money. Additionally many ex-offenders have other specific needs that must be managed. This requires the organisations to have significant risk management procedures in place, with both stating that when issues arise they must be dealt with immediately.

However, due to these complex needs that commonly go beyond employment to housing, counselling and others, there are many partnership opportunities for development of the organisation through serving this disadvantaged group.

3.4 Conclusion

From the findings collated over the research phase of the project, it can be seen that social firms face a number of challenges.

The main challenges of starting a social firm can be summarised as follows:

- issues associated with employing certain disadvantaged groups;
- finding the right match between the trading sector, the skills of the start up team and the capabilities of the disadvantaged group;

- finding the right balance between business and social objectives;
- developing a business strategy based on market research and taking strategic opportunities rather than any opportunity;
- tendering for contracts as a small/ start up social firm.

Challenges associated with growing a social firm are fewer, but significant:

- getting specific funding for growth and development;
- achieving sustainable growth and reliable cash flow;
- balancing meeting social needs with enhanced market performance and profit.

One major issue identified was the additional cost in terms of time, administration, training and general coordination related to the employment of people with specific needs. Even in the cases where the companies were prepared for this, for example in the larger organisations interviewed, it was still cited as one of the biggest operational challenges they faced.

The issues identified with regards to general business acumen focussed around the idea that some social firms, particularly in early stages, do not place enough emphasis on running a business and covering their costs. This jeopardises the social firm, and subsequently the employment opportunities being created, and creates a reliance on grants or funding subsidies. This can also put social firms at risk through dependence on the changing fortunes of funding organisations. Simple aspects of business start up such as market research, waste management and attempting to reduce costs were not present in the start up social firms interviewed.

Many of the challenges faced by social firms are shared by start-ups generally. However, the difference is that social firms have the additional challenge of meeting their social mission. Therefore it is very important that social firms get access to business advice that is specifically tailored to their needs and mission.

4. KTP Project Outputs

4.1 Social Firms InfoMine

4.1.1 Rationale and Brief Summary of Toolkit Development

The initial literature review uncovered that a great deal of material - guides, handbooks or toolkits - has already been produced to address the issues faced by social firms. On the other hand, research participants reported that one of the main challenges of starting, developing and growing a social firm is actually finding the right information tailored to their needs in this mass of information. Therefore the project team decided to produce an online toolkit that enables users to access all relevant resources in one place and diagnoses the areas that users had not thought about but may find useful.

Time was spent researching existing resources available on all the various aspects of starting up, running and growing a social firm in order to ensure that no gap in the market was missed. A comprehensive database was compiled and populated with a variety of resources including fact sheets, guides, websites and case studies covering everything from basic social enterprise start up, through to tendering for public sector contracts, legal structures and governance.

After a comprehensive planning phase, the final toolkit design was decided and developed. It was named Social Firms InfoMine in order to highlight the toolkit's primary function, which is to help finding relevant information - 'mining for information' in other words - and reveal relevant areas that might have been overlooked before.

A prototype of the toolkit was developed by November 2012. This was introduced to Social Firms UK members at the SFUK Annual General Meeting on 12 November 2012. The response from the audience was very positive: they found the idea very innovative and effective for finding information about various aspects of the social firm sector, as well as starting up, running and developing a social firm. Several people volunteered for beta testing the toolkit to give detailed feedback on its usability, design and efficiency.

Testing was completed in early December 2012 and the toolkit finalised during January to go live in March 2013.

4.1.2 Features of InfoMine

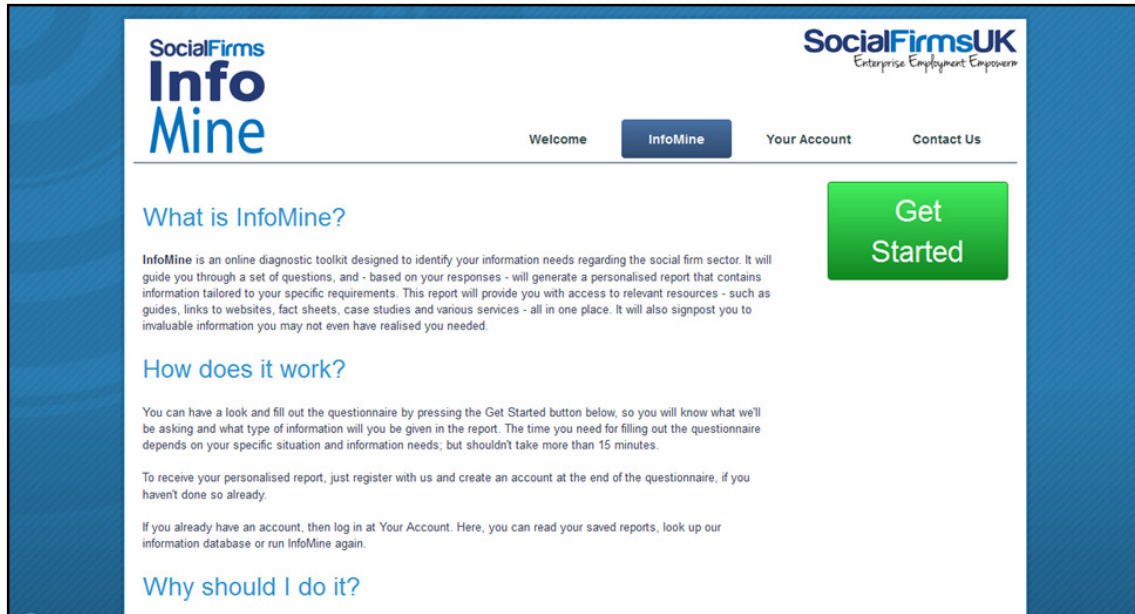
It was decided that the toolkit will have its own stand alone website (<http://www.socialfirmsinfomine.org.uk>) instead of being incorporated into Social Firm UK's main website. InfoMine is connected by several links to SFUK's main website, as well as to the company's LinkedIn page and Twitter account.

Figure 2. Social Firms InfoMine Home page



Users will find information about InfoMine and its benefits, and a brief description of the KTP project under the InfoMine heading, which is the starting point of the questionnaire. Instructions on how to use the website and data protection issues are also discussed (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. InfoMine



The online toolkit guides users through a series of questions to determine their information needs. The answers given to certain questions will decide the 'route' a user will progress through the toolkit, i.e. which questions they are asked next.

The toolkit was designed to be useful for a wide audience: anyone setting up a social firm; emerging social firms wishing to turn into full social firms; existing social firms who want to develop and grow, or anyone else interested in the social firm sector. InfoMine provides information and various resources on a number of topics, including starting up a social firm; trading sectors and social firms in specific geographic areas; labour market barriers and how to overcome them; HR and employment; finance, sales and marketing; legal structures and governance; impact measurement; balancing business and social objectives; procurement, tendering and consortia; growing a social firm – all dependent on the specific route chosen by the user.

The first few questions capture baseline information, such as the location of the organisation, trading sector they operate in, their business idea, the type of labour market barrier faced by the people they intend to work with (see figure 4).

Figure 4. InfoMine questionnaire 1.

SocialFirms Info Mine

Welcome **InfoMine** Your Account Contact Us

What type of labour market barrier is faced by the people you (intend to) work with? ?

Please select as many answers as apply:

- Sensory impairment
- Physical disability
- Learning disability
- Mental health issues
- Substance misuse
- Criminal record
- Experience of homelessness
- Other or Not Applicable

Your Responses

Where are you or your organisation located?
'England: London'

Which trading sector are you considering or currently working in?
'Training, Catering, Hospitality and Events, '

Please give us some more specific details about the trading sector you are considering or currently working in
''

Please briefly describe your business idea / business model:
''

Then, they are sent on different routes depending on the type of information that they specifically need (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. InfoMine questionnaire 2.

SocialFirms Info Mine

Welcome **InfoMine** Your Account Contact Us

Who are you/ who do you represent?

Please select one answer:

- Independent / Individual
- Charity
- Public Sector Organisation
- Private Sector Organisation
- Social Enterprise ?
- Social Firm ?
- Emerging Social Firm

Your Responses

Where are you or your organisation located?
'England: London'

Which trading sector are you considering or currently working in?
'Training, Catering, Hospitality and Events, '

Please give us some more specific details about the trading sector you are considering or currently working in
''

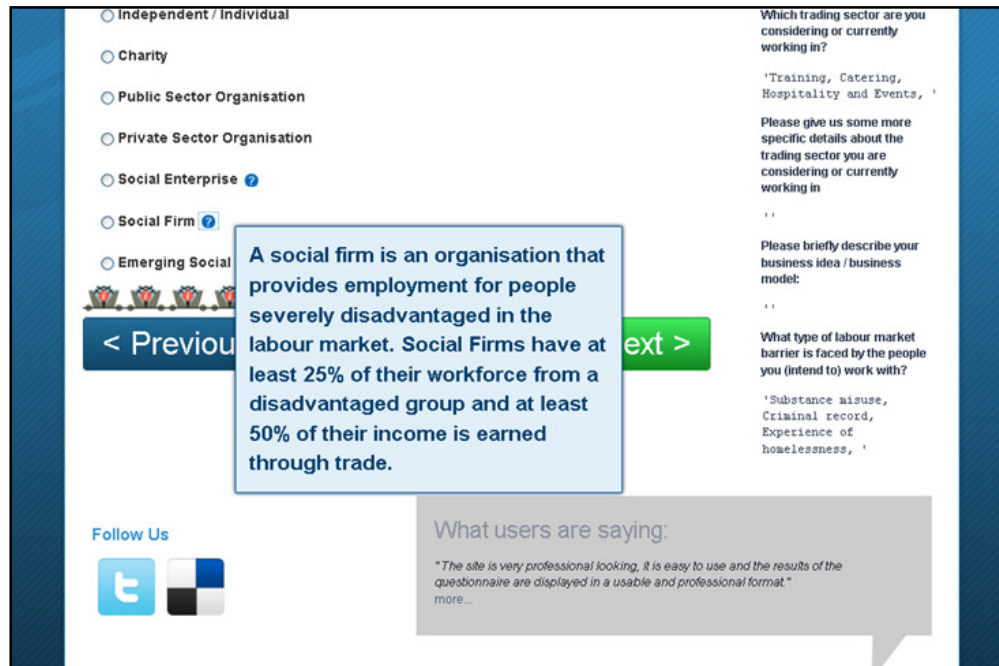
Please briefly describe your business idea / business model:
''

What type of labour market barrier is faced by the people you (intend to) work with?

< Previous Next >

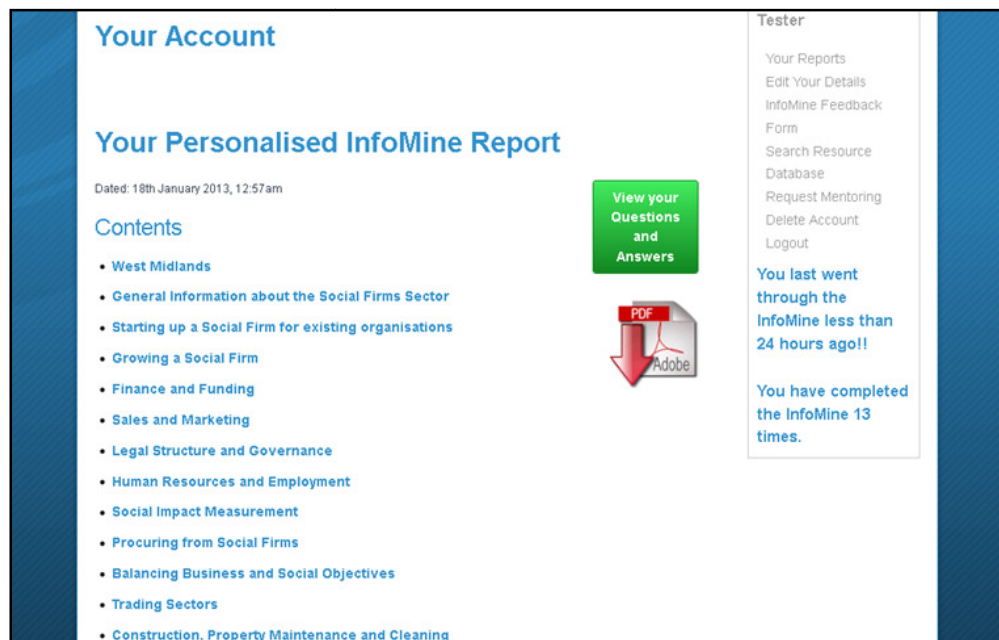
Additional information – such as explanations for specific terms and other help text – are presented in pop-up windows that can be activated by clicking the sign with the question mark in blue circle (see figure 6).

Figure 6. Pop-up windows



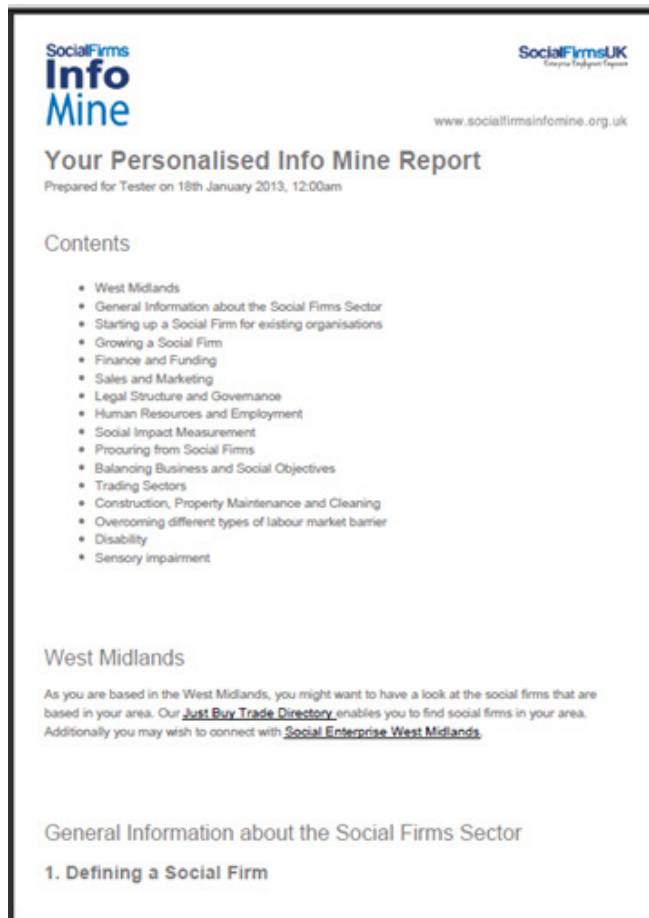
Having progressed through the toolkit, a personalised report will be generated that brings together different pieces of information determined by the answers given to the questions (see Figure 7 and 8).

Figure 7. Personalised InfoMine Report



While the questionnaire is accessible to the public, users need to create an account in order to receive their personalised final reports. After registration (or logging in for registered users), users get access to their tailor-made report, which can be downloaded in PDF format (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Personalised InfoMine Report - PDF



In addition to the final report, users are able to download their answers given to the questions along the route that they have taken (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. The questions and answers given



The screenshot displays the 'SocialFirms InfoMine' website interface. At the top left is the 'SocialFirms InfoMine' logo, and at the top right is the 'SocialFirmsUK' logo with the tagline 'Empower Employment Empower'. The URL 'www.socialfirmsinfomine.org.uk' is centered below the logos. The main content area shows a title 'Questions Answered by on 18th January 2013, 12:57am'. Below this, several questions and their corresponding answers are listed:

- Where are you or your organisation located?**
England: West Midlands
- Which trading sector are you considering or currently working in?**
Construction, Property Maintenance and Cleaning,
- Please give us some more specific details about the trading sector you are considering or currently working in**
- Please briefly describe your business idea / business model:**
- What type of labour market barrier is faced by the people you (intend to) work with?**
Sensory impairment,
- Who are you/ who do you represent?**
Charity
- What is your interest in the Social Firm Sector?**
I would just like some general information
- To help us tailor the final report to your needs, please indicate which, out of the below topics, you would like to know about:**
All of the above

Registered users can complete InfoMine as many times as they think necessary. These reports will then be stored in the website's Mine Report Database, where users can access them at any time after logging in. This way, they will be able to follow their company's progress by completing the questionnaire at regular intervals. Another benefit of registration is that users will get access to all information and resources available through InfoMine, regardless of their choices made through the questionnaire. Social Firms UK can upload various services and training opportunities they offer; and users can book mentoring through the website. In addition, testimonials by previous users are presented and a feedback form is built into the website.

Social Firms UK are the web managers of this new online toolkit, having full access to its content. All routes, end reports and information available anywhere on the website are editable by SFUK. This way, new resources, new information and service provision can be uploaded to the website whenever one is identified or developed by SFUK.

The security of the website and the information entered is safeguarded by password protected security system and captcha³ features. The website is designed to be accessible for people with physical or sensory impairments and is checked for cross browser and platform compatibility. Users with outdated browsers (which could hinder their access to all features of the website, thus limiting the website's usability) are presented with a pop-up help text with a link to a site where they can upgrade to the latest edition of their browsers.

4.2 Online and Social Media Strategy

The project team decided to appoint a social media consultant to assist with the development of a social media and marketing strategy for InfoMine in order to ensure the broadest possible online presence and impact for the toolkit and the company. Electroville, a social firm itself, was commissioned to complete this task.

After analyzing SFUK's present social media use, Electroville suggested that the company would benefit from a more intensive and focussed use of LinkedIn and Twitter. According to this online strategy, SFUK is re-imagined as a collaborative community, a platform for members to engage actively and regularly on current and relevant issues. To give a focus for interaction and support, several LinkedIn sub-groups were formed around topics such as InfoMine, starting and growing a social firm, impact measurement, balancing business and social objectives, and so on – largely corresponding to subjects covered by InfoMine. In these groups, key members will be identified who will lead the discussions on various topics.

The social media strategy intends to facilitate sharing experience and best practice, quick exchange of news in the field, generate work within the group by providing a platform to share adverts about jobs, available products and services, partnership requests, etc. SFUK will post regularly on their blog on their main website, LinkedIn and Twitter; and will produce a monthly e-newsletter that will be delivered to members focussing on InfoMine and trading opportunities.

Training and guidance was also provided for SFUK staff members to make sure that they are familiar with the effective usage of various social media platforms. In addition, Electroville updated the main SFUK website to make it more interactive, to reflect the use of LinkedIn and Twitter to a larger extent, and encourage members to join in discussions. A prominent link to InfoMine will be added to the Home page when the toolkit is launched.

Electroville has also advised SFUK on the marketing strategy for InfoMine. In addition to the online platforms listed above, InfoMine will be listed on key business and social enterprises sites and directories.

³Captcha is abbreviation for Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart. The website asks users to enter a five digit number before allowing them to enter any text in. This way, spam content can be eliminated.

The toolkit has already been introduced to SFUK members at the Annual General Meeting on 12 November 2012. InfoMine will be introduced to a wider audience in March 2013 at the Growing Successful Social Enterprises conference. This will be supplemented by promotion through other social enterprise support organizations and through social media channels such as LinkedIn and Twitter.

5. Recommendations

This year-long KTP project has equipped Social Firms UK with a better understanding of the sector and its needs and, crucially, provided some tools which have the potential to enhance the way in which individual social firms are supported. The 'InfoMine' online toolkit has been developed as part of a broader strategy – including a revamped website for Social Firms UK and a much stronger emphasis on the use of social media – which re-vision Social Firms UK as a collaborative community of members sharing information and providing both voluntary and professional support to each other.

In order to maximise the impact of these new tools and strategy, it is important that individual members are engaged and motivated and, on the other hand, that Social Firms UK plays an even stronger role of leadership and coordination for the sector as a whole.

The points below summarise some key recommendations – in addition to what is included in the new 'Social Firms UK Online and Social Media Strategy' - to ensure the continued development of Social Firms UK and its ability to support social firms throughout the country.

- Social Firms UK should further **organise and rationalise the resources** and information offered to its members and other stakeholders. This could include:
 - Introduction of one central database of users, in particular bringing together the accounts used for InfoMine and those included in the 'Sales Force' CRM (Customer Relationship Management) online tool currently used by the company. This would allow Social Firms UK to have one access point to contact individual social firms and to be better able to gather a picture of the sector – and its stakeholders - as a whole.
 - Integrate the 'Resources' pages of the Social Firms UK website with InfoMine. In the medium term, InfoMine should become the main, centralised, searchable gateway to all resources available to social firms, including online documents and resources as well as support services and advice networks.
- The resources and links provided within InfoMine should be **updated regularly** – the usefulness of the toolkit is in the relevance, comprehensiveness and quality of the information and resources listed. Testing of the toolkit for broken links or out of date information should also happen on a regular basis. All this can potentially require a considerable amount of person time, so it is advisable that members of the network

play an active role in assisting Social Firms UK staff. Although the success of the network is based on volunteer engagement and commitment to the social firm sector, some kind of incentive could also be devised (e.g. free access to events or services).

- The **news section** of InfoMine should be populated regularly with updates about new resources added, significant changes to the toolkit, number of registered users, reports of reviews, testimonials or publicity of InfoMine in other social media or events.

- The **use of social media** should be further enhanced, with an increased integration between Twitter, LinkedIn groups and sub-groups and, crucially, InfoMine. In particular, thematic discussion groups should be listed under InfoMine resources (e.g. users searching for advice on setting up a social firm should be taken to a LinkedIn group on start-ups).

- Likewise, InfoMine should list advice, mentoring and **consultancy services**, particularly those offered by Social Firms UK and individual social firms. In this way InfoMine would become also a way for members to advertise specific services; this could be achieved with cross-links with JustBuy. Trusted volunteer members (or ‘managers’, as defined in the Social Media strategy) would play a key role in this process.

- Though with limited resources and a greater focus on online presence, Social Firms UK should not overlook the important role played by **‘real’ events**. Successful initiatives such as the biennial Social Firms UK conference should be maintained and developed. In this sense, a stronger on-line network can be used to initiate, organise and advertise events, workshops and thematic discussions, using a ‘meet-up’ model. Social media and InfoMine could also be used to advertise opportunities such as “visit a social firm” for both members and other stakeholders.

- The information about individual social firms gathered through the InfoMine questionnaires and database can be aggregated and analysed regularly to provide an assessment of the state of the sector, its characteristics, trends and needs. If used at its full potential, InfoMine will supersede the use of one-off, ad-hoc surveys previously used to conduct the **Mapping Exercises** of the social firm sector. In order to achieve this and to improve the quality of the mapping exercises, it is advisable that:
 - social firms are encouraged to use the InfoMine questionnaire regularly (at least yearly) and are made aware that information provided through the questionnaire would be used for monitoring and research purposes (though

- only as an aggregate, no data on individual firms would be disclosed without their consent).
- Social Firms UK staff carries out quality control and random checks of the information provided.
 - a small number of additional questions is added to the questionnaire to capture analytical information about individual firms. These would be complemented by a series of one-off surveys (e.g. running on the Survey-Monkey platform) to investigate specific issues or themes or to discuss hot topics (e.g. policy or funding news, emerging challenges and opportunities, etc.). This would enable to consolidate and expand the work undertaken in this areas by SFUK over the last few years.
 - a **Social Firms mapping report** should be published and widely disseminated on a regular (ideally annual) basis. It is important that the yearly report includes a key core of comparable statistics to allow for longitudinal analysis.
 - the production of the mapping reports – from the revision and design of the questionnaire, the data collection, the analysis and the writing up of the report – is undertaken with the close support of **professional researchers**. In particular, care should be taken in designing categories used for statistical analysis purposes – such as types of company, markets, user groups, etc. – ensuring relevance, consistency and comparability with other research sources⁴.
- The results of the Mapping Exercise - and, as appropriate, additional data extracted from the InfoMine database – should generally be made available upon request to academic researchers and students. Plans to do this are under discussion with Middlesex University. This would provide an opportunity to maintain and develop the partnership established with the KTP and to encourage the production of **further research on Social Firms**.
 - Additionally, InfoMine and the various social media platforms could be used by firms to submit requests of **student placements** and internships. These would be advertised on the Social Firms UK network and through academic partners. At the same time, members of staff of individual social firms could request placement opportunities with an academic research centre, for example to learn specific skills or to conduct research exercises.

⁴ Within the course of the KTP, Middlesex University team provided Social Firms UK with detailed feedback on the previous mapping exercises, with recommendations on how to better use the data collected and how to improve the research design of future exercises.

- Every opportunity should be used to gather **feedback and suggestions** from users. In addition to encouraging users to complete the online form, feedback should be requested during national and local events as well as meetings. The Social Firms UK biennial conference should include a regular slot about InfoMine, presenting case studies and stimulating discussion and ideas to improve the service.

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Appendix 2: Social Firms Involved

A number of social firms and WISEs have been involved in this project by taking part in the focus group and the case studies. Details about the nature of their business, size and employee groups are listed below in order to highlight the diversity of the sector that has contributed to the research.

12 Cafe: http://www.wgcada.org/peer_mentoring_social_enterprise.php

The cafe is set up and run by WGCADA and gives training and volunteer opportunities to its service users giving them an opportunity to develop new skills and gain qualifications in catering and hospitality. 12 Cafe is also based in South Wales and provides volunteer work experience and training opportunities for people who have been affected by substance misuse. Running for 18 months now, it is owned and operated by a larger organisation that provides support and recovery service for people with substance misuse difficulties. The cafe received funding from ESF which has enabled them to employ a full time cafe manager but aims to be self sustaining by the time the funding ends in 2013.

Argonaut Community Enterprises: <http://www.argonautenterprises.co.uk/>

Argonaut Community Enterprises operates a number of subsidiaries that provide facilities management, domestic and commercial cleaning, mail distribution and also provides staff with deaf or disability expertise for the education, health and social care sectors. The organisation currently employs approximately 20 deaf or disabled people.

Blue Sky Development and Regeneration: <http://www.blueskydevelopment.co.uk/>

The organisation was set up by the charity Groundwork Thames Valley with the aim of providing paid work to people coming out of prison in order to help them along the path of employment. Currently approximately 40 ex-offenders are employed in the grounds maintenance and recycling sector.

Cafe Nova Interchange: <http://www.justbuy.org.uk/?ent=cafe-nova-interchange>

Operating from a busy shopping centre in London, Cafe Nova Interchange currently employs two people with learning disability. The cafe originated from a catering training scheme for learning disabled people before beginning operation as a cafe. In line with the expansion of the Social Firms UK remit to include all Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs) the cafe is now working with the local volunteer service to offer volunteering opportunities for long term unemployed. The cafe is 100% self sustaining and is looking to develop a vocational training scheme to compliment the business operations.

Clarity EFBP and GWB Products: <http://www.clarityefbp.org/>

Clarity provides employment for approximately 65 blind and disabled people across the UK in a number of factory and office based positions, focused around the production of cleaning products and toiletries. In addition to employment, Clarity also provide specialist training programmes to help employees progress through the organisation or prepare them for the open labour market.

Lambeth Accord: <http://www.lambethaccord.org.uk/>

Lambeth Accord provides managed workspace specifically for organisations working to the benefit of disabled people, in addition to providing conference facilities and room hire commercially. They also provide direct employment opportunities for 3 disabled people.

Park View Cafe: <http://www.parkviewcafe.org.uk/about.php>

Based in South Wales the cafe provides work experience and training for people with learning disabilities. It is owned and operated by a larger organisation that provides a variety of support and guidance for people with learning disabilities. Funded through the European Social Fund (ESF) and Big Lottery Fund, the cafe has between 15-20 learning disabled people on training and work experience per week working towards OCN qualifications. Placements are designed to be time limited and each trainee is paired with a mentor to discuss their progression into open employment, supported employment, volunteering or further education.

Strawberry Line Cafe: <http://www.strawberrylinecafe.co.uk/>

The cafe is situated on Platform 1 of Yatton Station. It has been running for around 18 months and is actively working to become a social firm. It currently offers paid employment as well as volunteer work experience and training opportunities for learning disabled people. The cafe has recently been awarded funding to employ a co-ordinator for 6 months which has been taken on by one of the original directors. The cafe is working towards becoming fully self-funded.

The Grow Organisation: <http://www.thegroworganisation.org/>

The Grow Organisation is made up of five social enterprises that offer services in catering and hospitality, cleaning, recycling and property maintenance in addition to gardening and horticulture. The aim of the organisation is to provide flexible employment opportunities allowing for an individual to experience one or more industries, gain experience and recognised training and qualifications and prepare them for the open labour market.