

East Northamptonshire Supporting Mothers into Business: Peer Support Group (DRAFT)

Project Outline:

This proposal is to set up a pilot peer-led support group for mothers who are considering starting up a business. Many mothers consider self-employment as a means of balancing returning to work with childcare. However, with evidence that the current economic climate will negatively affect women - perhaps more than men, through public sector cuts for example, even more women may consider working for themselves as a viable option.

The pilot support group would be comprised of 'women-returners' - those who have taken a break from their career due to child-care commitments and are looking to start a business rather than return to their former employer or look for a new job.

All group members will be from the East Northamptonshire area. The group will operate using a facilitated 'action-learning' set model - each member will get a chance to put an issue or question to the group, who will then take turns in sharing advice, contacts, local intelligence, anecdotes, case-studies, etc.. By the end of the session, each member should have had a turn in sharing their issue / problem, and would have also had the opportunity to help other members. This is a great way of sharing and disseminating collective knowledge, and also builds confidence and members have a chance to articulate the skills and knowledge they already have at their disposal.

The optimum numbers for such a group would be around 6 - 10 members. If there is desire to do so, the group would arrange to meet again - perhaps on a regular basis. The group could then also use an online tool such as LinkedIn, Facebook or Googlegroups to facilitate ongoing discussion, to share information and resources and offer regular support.

Objectives:

One of the key objectives of this initial group would be to gather local intelligence on the issues and opportunities for women in this position in East Northamptonshire. For example:

- What are the barriers facing local women starting up in business?
- What are the key industry sectors / sub-sectors which women-returners are attracted to?
- What are the barriers to market?
- What opportunities and gaps in the market can be identified locally that business Mums might look to target?
- What support do women-returners need going forward?
- What skills are represented by the pilot group, and what training do members think they might need to progress with their business?

This information could begin to build a picture on how to nurture and stimulate pre-start-ups in the local area, in particular, through women-returners, who might otherwise struggle in returning to work.

A map of current start-up support provision available locally will be provided to group members, including the Economic Development Team in the Local Authority, Business Link, Creative Northants and business networks and, where relevant, members can be signposted to these.

Should the pilot be successful, more groups could be established in other locations, perhaps with the support of informal project partners - perhaps those who have regular contact with mothers such as Surestart, National Childbirth Trust or schools,

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who might help spread the word, provide meeting venues and maybe even a creche facility?

If the initiative is a success, it could be developed into a social enterprise franchise that could be rolled out in other areas of the country.

Why Mothers?

Here are some of the issues that could be barriers to women with children successfully starting-up or succeeding in business:

- Long periods outside of the professional loop;
- Isolation and an absence of professional peers to use as a sounding board;
- Lack of confidence connected to your idea, skills or business acumen;
- Limited access to other professionals and connections with business networks;
- Skills gaps in areas connected with running a business, for example, book-keeping or business planning;
- Lack of training and development opportunities;
- Lack of information on where to access training and development;
- Limited routes to market.

Why East Northamptonshire?

There are real benefits to choosing to start-up a business in East Northamptonshire. For example:

- A range of established companies are based here representing a range of sectors; Proximity to thriving towns like Northampton and Milton Keynes;
- Good transport links to London and other cities;
- Part of the Milton Keynes and South Midlands growth area - an expanding population and high economic growth¹.

There are also areas for improvement:

- Lack of business space suitable for start-up and micro-business;
- Failing manufacturing and agricultural industries;
- High levels of graduate skills migration to other areas;
- Towns in the area frequently have empty retail units;
- Low start-up survival rates.²

Some localities in the district have particular issues relating to their geography or economic landscape. For example, lack of employers, high levels of under or unemployment, lack of local public transport provision.

Whilst this proposal is a small intervention, it is hoped that it might at the very least stimulate start-up among local women-returners and support them in taking their business to the next level, connecting them with agencies such as Business Link for ongoing and specialised support.

What does it need to happen?

Women to join the pilot group: I need to identify and recruit between 6 - 10 women who are in the early stages of start-up, or pre-start up;
A venue for the initial meeting: as the project has no funding, I would be looking to

¹ <http://www.mksm.org.uk/>

² East Northamptonshire Economic Strategy 2009 - 2012

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secure a venue in-kind for an initial 2 hours;

Local partners and advisors: partners who have a knowledge of the local economic / business infrastructure and partners who have contact with the target group members.

Why me?

I have a background in researching, managing and delivering services that stimulate and support pre and early stage start-up working with local authorities, Business Link, national and regional agencies such as Arts Council and NESTA. I have particular experience in the creative and cultural industries and not-for-profit sectors, and have worked with numerous women-returners who are considering starting in business after employment-gaps of various lengths. One of my recent projects, **start**, was based in the South Midlands - delivering a programme of support for creative and cultural start up in Milton Keynes, Rugby and surrounding areas. I deliver this work in partnership with Siân Prime and more about our work in this area is on our website: <http://www.sarahandsian.co.uk>.

I also work as a web developer and have expertise in social media, information architecture, online marketing, search engine optimisation, content management and content development. More on my work in this area is here: <http://sarahbucknall.com>.

I have recently moved to Irthlingborough in East Northamptonshire. I have taken a period of maternity leave after having my baby and have recently returned to work.