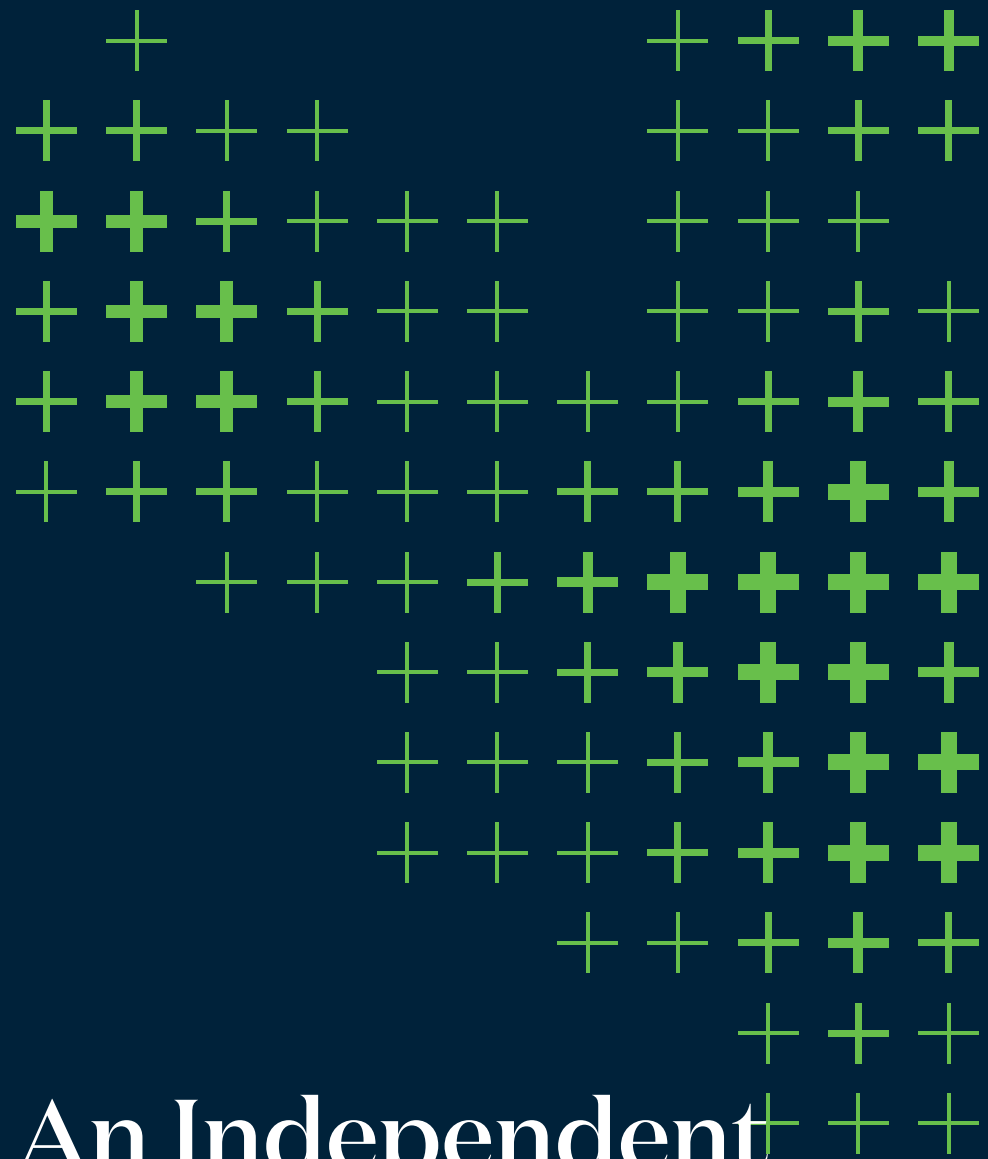




An Independent Evaluation Report of Enterprising Durham

Final Report March 2025

Executive Summary

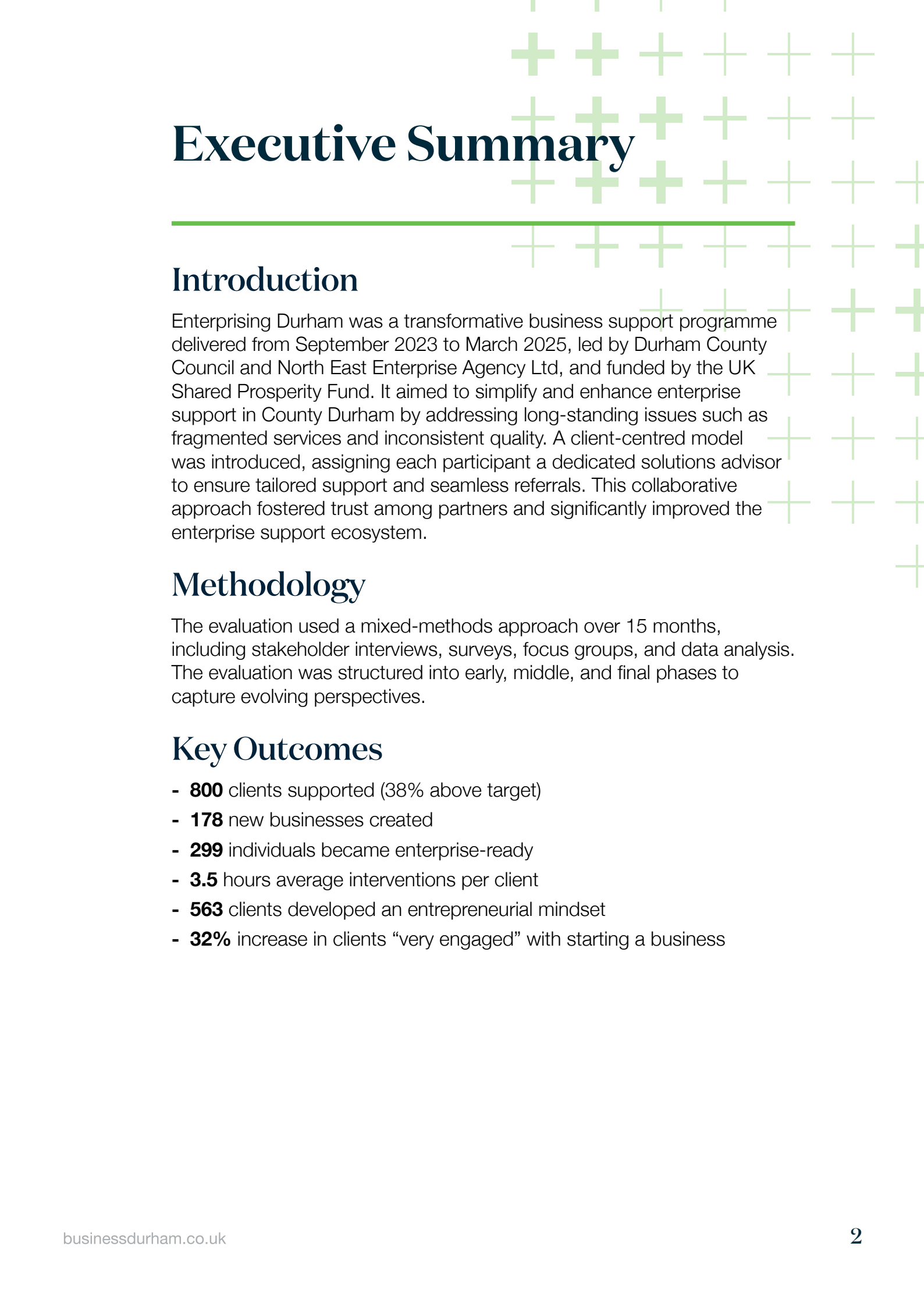


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Executive Summary

Introduction

Enterprising Durham was a transformative business support programme delivered from September 2023 to March 2025, led by Durham County Council and North East Enterprise Agency Ltd, and funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. It aimed to simplify and enhance enterprise support in County Durham by addressing long-standing issues such as fragmented services and inconsistent quality. A client-centred model was introduced, assigning each participant a dedicated solutions advisor to ensure tailored support and seamless referrals. This collaborative approach fostered trust among partners and significantly improved the enterprise support ecosystem.

Methodology

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach over 15 months, including stakeholder interviews, surveys, focus groups, and data analysis. The evaluation was structured into early, middle, and final phases to capture evolving perspectives.

Key Outcomes

- **800** clients supported (38% above target)
- **178** new businesses created
- **299** individuals became enterprise-ready
- **3.5** hours average interventions per client
- **563** clients developed an entrepreneurial mindset
- **32%** increase in clients “very engaged” with starting a business

Design and Delivery Approach

The programme's success was underpinned by a co-designed framework that reinforced shared values, trust, and inclusivity.

Staff surveys showed:

- **93%** saw a positive ROI in trust and collaboration through Enterprising Durham
- **87%** supported the Single Integrated Framework model
- **63%** felt the design accelerated implementation

Clients reported

- **100%** rated initial access as excellent or good
- **95%** felt their needs were well identified
- **90%** confirmed effective referrals to specialist support

The “no wrong door” approach and the role of solutions advisors were central to success. Suggestions for improvement included implementing a CRM system and streamlining administrative processes.

Enterprising Durham

Strand Highlights

Enterprising People strand - 'To develop a confident people with a 'can do' attitude, spotting opportunities to transform their lives and their communities.' Key findings from the activities delivered in this strand is set out below:

- Peer-to-peer engagement at Durham University increased student involvement by 33%
- A new enterprise CPD module for teachers was adopted by Durham University's School of Education, embedding enterprise education across the region

Enterprising Places strand – 'County Durham will be seen as a thriving place, with a buzz and air of enterprising activity within communities and a hot spot for start-up activity.' The highlights from the enterprising places strand are set out below:

- Despite delays, a spoke at the Dales Centre was launched, with more planned to reach rural areas
- Community building research by Durham Community Action identified venues with enterprise potential
- Enterprise roadshows, designed around local assets, delivered strong local impact and engagement

Enterprising Start-ups 'A rising number of sustainable start-ups driving economic and social change.' This strand contained central functions such as web portal www.durhamstartups.co.uk helpline and triage service, online delivery, support via the newly created solutions advisor role and the cross-partnership referral to specialist and other additional support.

The key highlights from the enterprising start-ups strand are set out below:

- Web portal delays affected early engagement, but satisfaction with the portal was high once launched
- Online courses and helpline services had slow starts but showed potential
- Solutions advisors were highly rated:
 - **95%** said advisors identified needs well
 - **90%** saw them as supportive “critical friends”
 - Staff confidence in specialist support grew significantly over time

Specialist support included marketing, green economy, incubator, and more. While workshops had lower uptake, one-to-one support was preferred. Grants were used selectively and effectively, though administrative burdens were noted.

Client Feedback

- **57 NPS** (Net Promoter Score – considered “great”)
- **84%** said the service met or exceeded expectations
- **100%** rated service quality as excellent or good
- **72%** would recommend starting a business to others

Metrics and Future Development

A metrics group developed new indicators for awareness, engagement, and entrepreneurial mindset. While a Global Entrepreneurship Monitor booster survey was not completed, it remains a recommended next step for regional benchmarking.

Scalability and Transferability

Research into other UK start-up support models highlighted key success factors:

- Trust and shared values
- Strong leadership and clear roles
- Localised delivery with centralised support functions
- Flexible specialist support via framework agreements

The Enterprising Durham model is seen as scalable and transferable, with potential for broader application post-2026. Recommendations include adding central data and e-learning functions for larger-scale implementations.

Key findings

Findings	Description
Finding 1:	Enterprising Durham has benefitted significantly from the County Council's strategic commitment and the delivery partners investment in developing the framework and partnership.
Finding 2:	The model design has been robustly evaluated over a period of fifteen months and has worked very well overall. It is a noteworthy achievement to have designed and implemented a new model in a relatively short time frame.
Finding 3:	The model succeeds because the lead partner centrally holds the risk and responsibility for delivering contracted programme outputs.
Finding 4:	The delivery partners have gone above and beyond their contractual role to ensure a successful programme.
Finding 5:	The Enterprising Durham programme has provided an inclusive service, enabling clients from diverse backgrounds to access tailored support. Most advisors have integrated this inclusive approach into all aspects of their practice.
Finding 6:	Learning has played a central role in partnership development, and it has helped to build knowledge, capability, facilitate networking and develop new ways of working.
Finding 7:	There has been a positive culture involving testing, experimenting, and learning from approaches that did not work. This was perceived as new by delivery partners.
Finding 8:	The Enterprising Durham programme has developed valuable resources for the partnership to use.
Finding 9:	Procurement challenges have significantly hindered the delivery timescales of some core activities and led to a rethink of contracting methods with others.
Finding 10:	The leadership and management team have been very effective, performed their role extremely well and created a collaborative and supportive atmosphere. This has been central to the pilot's success.
Finding 11:	Overall, there has been very positive feedback from clients on the Enterprising Durham programme.

Suggested Improvements and gaps

The evaluation identified some gaps and areas for improvement.

Improvements	Description
Improvement 1:	There should be an on-going awareness raising programme for enterprise in County Durham about start up support and where to access it.
Improvement 2:	Develop formal links to follow on support between Enterprising Durham and other related programmes in County Durham.
Improvement 3:	The partnership could be strengthened further by finding ways to engage those operating at the edges of the partnership.
Improvement 4:	Review workshops as a method of delivering support and explore alternatives.
Improvement 5:	The challenge approach should be revisited by the project team and delivery partners to explore and discuss how best to assess it.
Improvement 6:	Some valuable resources have already been developed for the partnership; these should be made available to everyone.
Improvement 7:	Continued and deeper connections with the whole of Durham University with a focus on mutually beneficial activity supporting both university students and Durham start-ups outside of the University.
Improvement 8:	To avoid solutions advisors becoming a bottle neck, from time to time, alternative ways of entering the programme could be explored though they must retain the essence of the programme with a client specific focus on support.
Improvement 9:	Consider ways of streamlining the administration process for the programme through digitisation.
Improvement 10:	There should be a better integration of e-learning with solutions advisor support.
Improvement 11:	Ensure there is a consistent high quality, tailored inclusive approach to supporting clients across all delivery partners.
Improvement 12:	Explore ways of ensuring there is good connection and linkages between the different programme strands. (People, Place and Start-ups)

Some gaps have been identified which if addressed could further enhance delivery. These gaps are summarised here.

Gaps	Description
Gap 1:	A CRM system allowing delivery partners to share client information would be beneficial for the programme.
Gap 2:	Data analysis function to help turn data into intelligence to share with delivery partners will provide useful insights for the programme.
Gap 3:	Professional services including HR, IT, accountancy, and legal offer for the client to benefit.
Gap 4:	Welcome pack for clients when first entering the programme.
Gap 5:	A short film or reel about Enterprising Durham targeted at new staff to ensure a sustained and comprehensive understanding of the underlying principles and values of the programme.
Gap 6:	Out of hours offer for clients in the evenings and weekends.
Gap 7:	Continued and deeper connections with the whole of Durham University with a focus on mutually beneficial activity supporting both university students and Durham start-ups outside of the University.
Gap 8:	Satellite Solutions advisor roles in some organisations with specific client groups.
Gap 9:	Peer to peer support and mentoring to find out about potential pitfalls within the sector as well as the opportunities.
Gap 10:	Build or support the development of a Durham community of start-ups by providing physical space to meet or hosting online.

Recommendations for next steps

The Enterprising Durham pilot programme concluded on March 31st, 2025. Future funding has been secured through UKSPF for the subsequent phase of the Enterprising Durham programme. To ensure that the findings and lessons from this evaluation are incorporated into the next phase, this report provides the following recommendations as next steps.

Recommendations	Description
Recommendation 1:	The leadership and management team should review all the improvements and gaps identified to build an action plan of key priority areas to work on.
Recommendation 2:	Take the work of the metric group forward, identifying the best approach to establishing a baseline to measure entrepreneurial activity in the area.
Recommendation 3:	Share insights and learning from this evaluation with stakeholders and partners as part of the contribution to developing a North East Business Framework.
Recommendation 4:	Hold a 'look back, look forward' internal learning session with delivery partners to share the learning, experience and set out the goals for the next stage.
Recommendation 5:	Advocate for funders to acknowledge and build in time for collaboration and inclusive partnership working as this requires a time investment and should be a recommended part of all such programmes in the future,
Recommendation 6:	Maintain the on-going investment in the partnership to ensure it remains strong and trust continues to build.

About Ideas For Change – Programme External Evaluator



Ideas for Change Consulting is a North East-based consultancy helping organisations tackle economic, social, and environmental challenges. We offer tailored support in evaluation, strategy, impact analysis, and stakeholder engagement.

Founder Sanjee Ratnatunga brings 30 years of experience and is known for her collaborative, inclusive approach, working closely with partners across sectors to deliver high-quality, client-focused solutions.

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