

North East business owners survey



On behalf of the
North East Combined Authority

December 2025



Background & objectives

With a focus on ensuring that women leading businesses in the North East are given the **encouragement and support** required to establish and scale successful businesses, it was recognised that their views needed to be heard.

Rather than conducting a survey exclusively aimed at women, MMC Research recommended a broader approach, suggesting a survey open to all business owners would be more sensible to **identify the key differences between the experiences and viewpoints of women and men.**

In collaboration with North East Combined Authority (NECA) Business Board member, **Sophie Milliken** (Founder of Moja) and **Zara Ford**, (Project Manager, Inclusive Investment at NECA) this survey was designed and disseminated across the North East.

This report presents the findings.

Methodology

Methodology



8-minute online survey, conducted between the 17th October and 25th November 2025



Invitations to complete the survey were distributed on LinkedIn, through enterprise agencies and their client/email lists and the NE Growth Hub email list



348 respondents completed the survey



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Not all percentages will add up to 100% because of decimal point rounding or multiple-choice questions



Findings based on small numbers (i.e. <5%) should be interpreted with caution



Where respondents skipped a question, the base size will not equal the total number of surveys completed



Where 0% is shown, answers were less than 1%

Executive summaries



Executive summary – all business owners

-  Businesses that responded to the survey were mostly **service-related businesses** (87%) with the primary motivations of **being able to employ people and expanding / growing**
-  Support needs were predominantly around **accessing funding / investment** (69% of businesses), **growth strategies** (49%) and **mentoring / networking opportunities** (46%)
-  While 42% felt business networks in the region are inclusive, **51% feel opportunities are not fairly distributed** across varying business sizes and sectors
-  **80% felt they had a good idea of what support is available** in the region. First port of call for support would be **dedicated organisations** such as the BIC, RTC (33%) or an online search (17%)
-  **80% had considered applying for external funding** and 60% had made a successful funding application. Again, **dedicated organisations support organisations were most commonly used** when making applications (49%)
-  The biggest barriers to applying for funding were **poor awareness of opportunities, complex processes, and support that doesn't always go far enough to give meaningful help**
-  Businesses were happy to share their top words of wisdom with other business owners starting out. The most common advice was to **have a good support network, plan properly, and have a resilient mindset**

Executive summary – female business owners



Women and men had similar demographics and caring roles, but **female-owned businesses were more often start-ups (46%) or early-stage (21%)** and were more likely to be sole traders (53%)



Female business-owners were less motivated by growth / employing others (17% vs 26% men) and were **more likely to be motivated by transitioning to self-employment (9% vs 3% men)**



Female-owned businesses are more likely than male-owned to **associate business support with advice, mentoring & coaching (84%)**, regulatory & legal advice (54%) and wellbeing & inclusion support (36%)



39% of female-owned businesses would **first approach business support organisations such as the BIC or RTC if they needed support** vs 25% of male-owned, suggesting female-specific support from such organisations would land well



Female-owned businesses were **more likely than male-owned to use business support organisations when applying for funding (57% vs 39% of men)** and were less likely to say they didn't know where to get support (17% vs 38% of men)

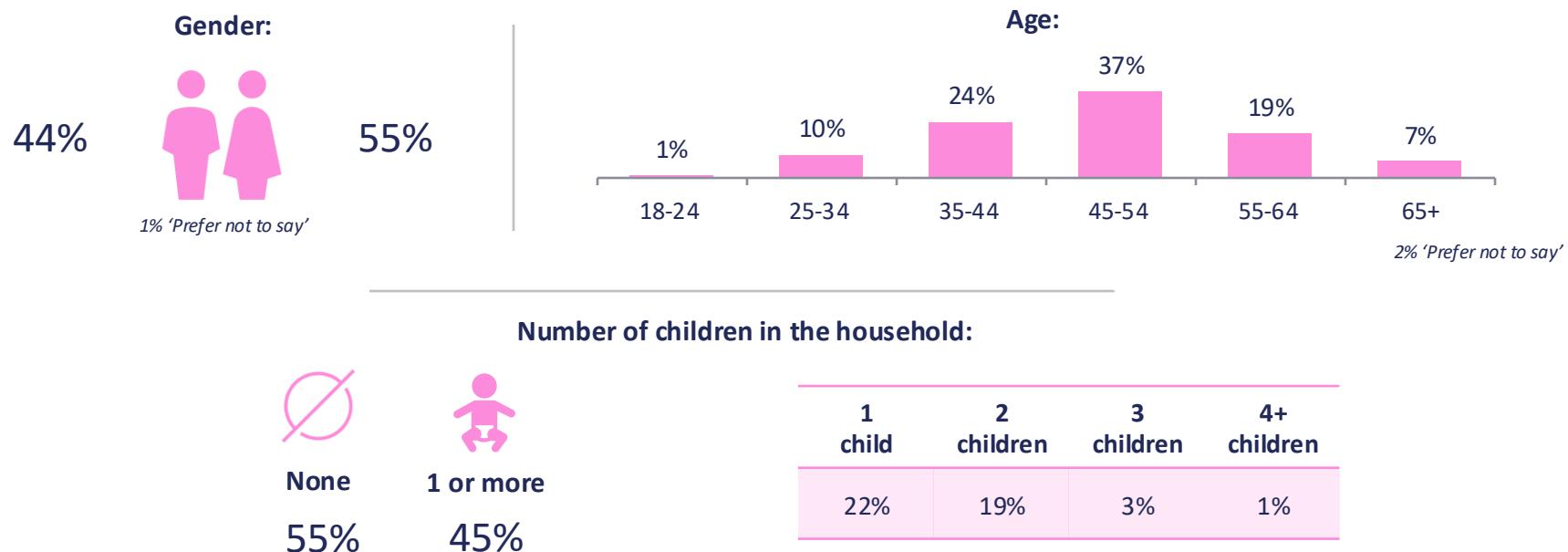


Women were **as likely as men to consider applying for funding but were less likely to achieve successful outcomes**; comments show that start-up / sole-trader status can present barriers that are more likely to apply to women

Respondent profile

Demographics (1)

Slightly more women completed the survey than men. Respondents were spread across age brackets with just over a third aged 45-54. Half had children at home



Q19. Please select your gender.

Q20. Please select the age band that applies to you.

Q22. How many children under the age of 18 live in your household?

Base size: All respondents (348)

Demographics (2)

The majority of respondents were from a White ethnic background and two-thirds had been to university. 23% lived with a health problem or disability and 13% considered themselves a carer



Q21. Which of the following best describes your ethnic group or background? **Q25.** What is the highest level of education you have attained?

Q23. Are your day-to-day activities limited because of a health problem or disability which has lasted, or is expected to last, at least 12 months?

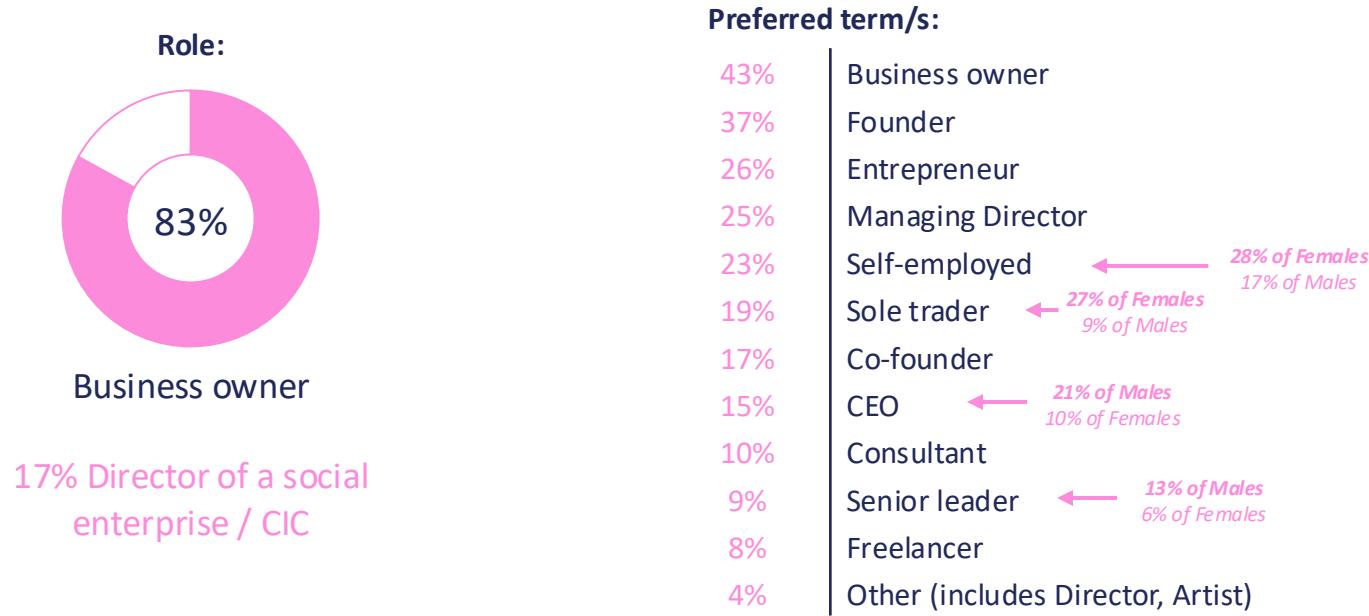
Q24. Are you a carer? By this we mean that you regularly look after someone to help them with their daily life because they're ill, disabled, or can't manage without your support. **Base size:** All respondents (348)

Business profile



Position in business

Respondents confirmed they were a business owner or social enterprise director in the North East to qualify for the survey. 21% of males would describe themselves as 'CEO' compared to 10% of women



Q1. Which of the following best describes your company position?

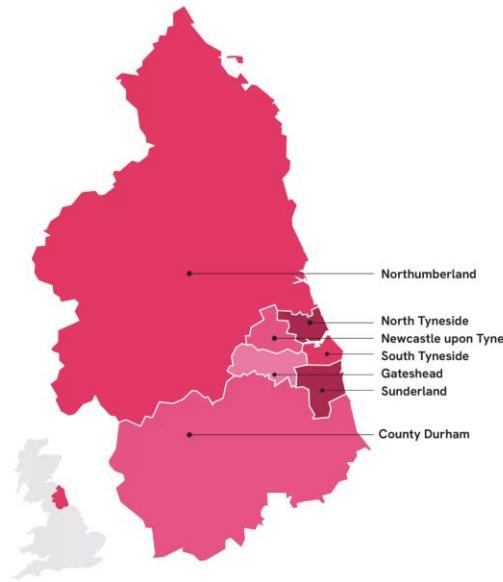
Q3. Which, if any, of the following would you use to describe yourself? Please select all that apply.

Base size: All respondents (348)

Business location

Businesses that responded to the survey were based across the North East region, with a balanced regional split

21%	County Durham
19%	Newcastle upon Tyne
16%	Sunderland
14%	Gateshead
11%	North Tyneside
10%	Northumberland
9%	South Tyneside

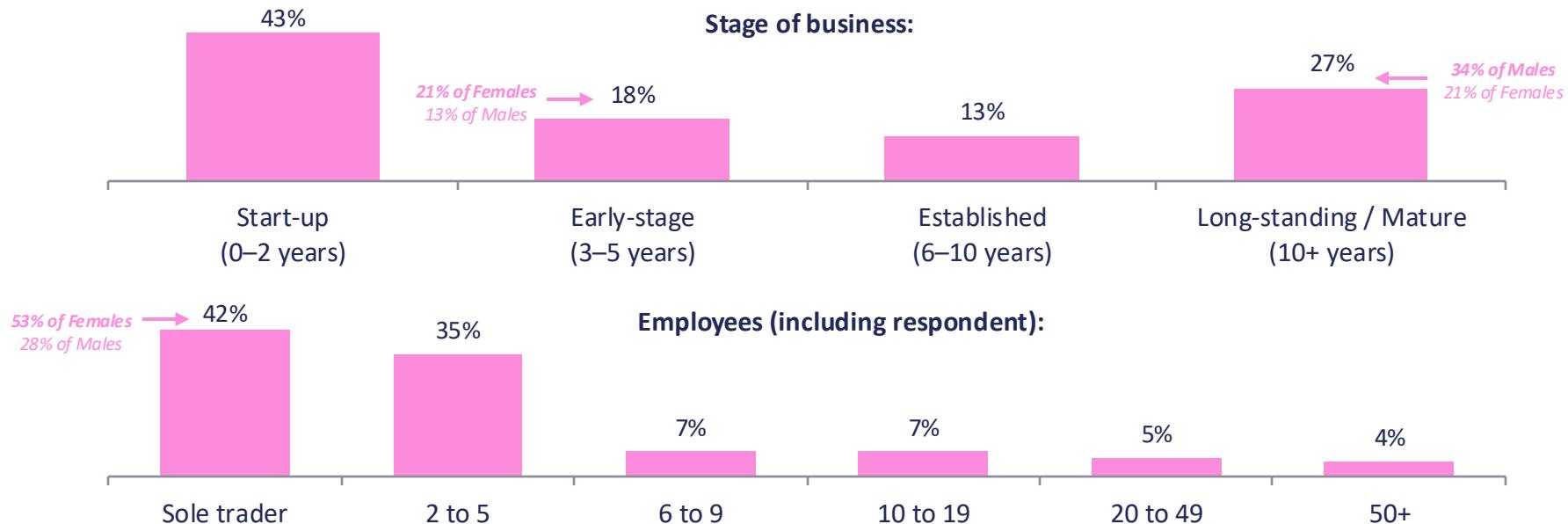


Q2. In which local authority area is your business based?

Base size: All respondents (348)

Business size

Just over two-fifths of businesses were start ups, and the same proportion were sole traders. A further 40% were established or long-standing businesses with 6 or more years trading



Q26. What stage is your business currently at?

Q28. Including yourself, how many people are employed by your business?

Base size: All respondents (348)

Business type and motivations

63% of businesses were service based (i.e. professional services, hospitality). Businesses owners and CIC directors had different goals, with businesses focused on growth while CICs aim for social impact



Q27. Which of the following best describes your business type?

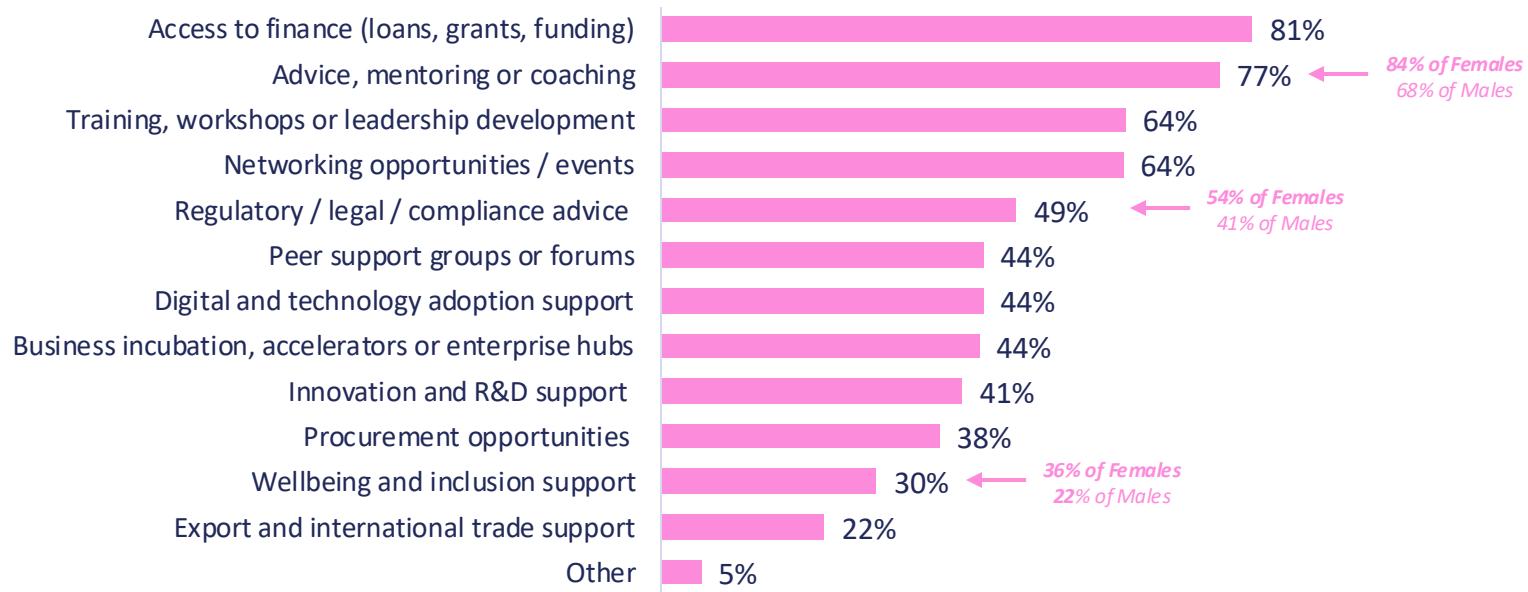
Q4. What is your main motivation or goal at this stage in your business?

Base size: All respondents (348)

North East business support

What is business support?

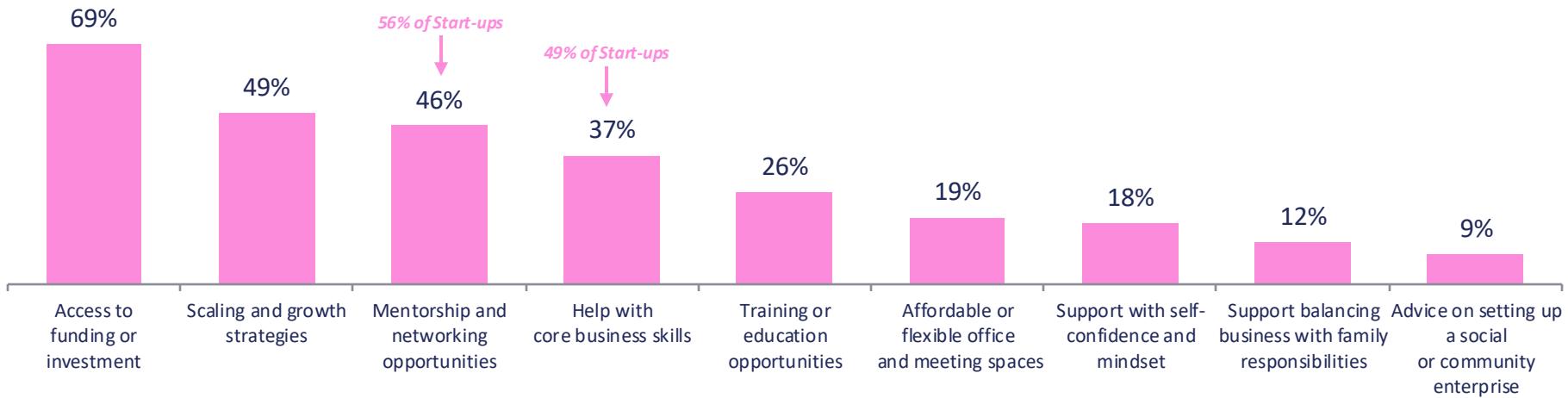
The term 'business support' is most associated with accessing finance, getting advice and training, and being able to network with others



Q5. When you think about 'business support', what types of things do you include in that? Please select all that apply.
Base size: All respondents (348)

Current support needs

Businesses are most likely to be interested in support to access funding or investment. Newer businesses are especially looking for mentoring and core business skills support



10% 'Other' (see next slide)

1% None

Q13. Which of the following types of support would be useful to you right now? Please select all that apply.

Base size: All respondents (348)

Current support needs – other

The comments below demonstrate the wide range of specific needs from across the whole spectrum of businesses

'Public-sector partnership brokerage and innovation procurement guidance. Support in navigating NECA and local authority frameworks to accelerate the adoption of our company's CX and digital inclusion solutions at regional scale.' **Male, 55-64 years, Start-up**

'Resource management (having access to professionals or organisations working in a similar field).' **Female, 35-44 years, Start-up**

'Specialist support for neurodivergent business owners through the access to work scheme would be helpful. For example, an ADHD coach who can help with strategy, task and goal setting and accountability.' **Female, 45-54 years, Early-stage**

'IP & Copyright especially from government funded initiatives as those are the most [important] to protect yourself from copyright infringement.' **Female, 35-44 years, Early-stage**

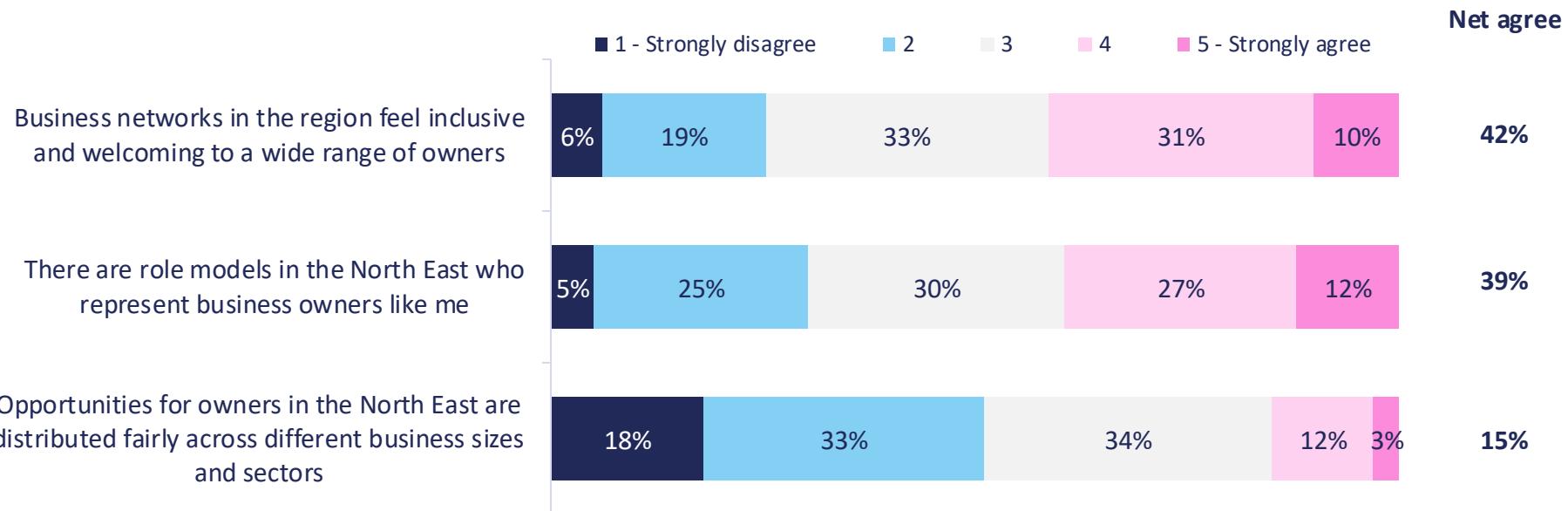
'Help with dealing with new regulations such as MTD; understanding how AI could be used in my business; opportunities to link with other businesses for joint opportunity development.' **Female, Long-standing**

Q13. Which of the following types of support would be useful to you right now? Please select all that apply.

Base size: All that said 'other' (32)

Perceptions of NE business support

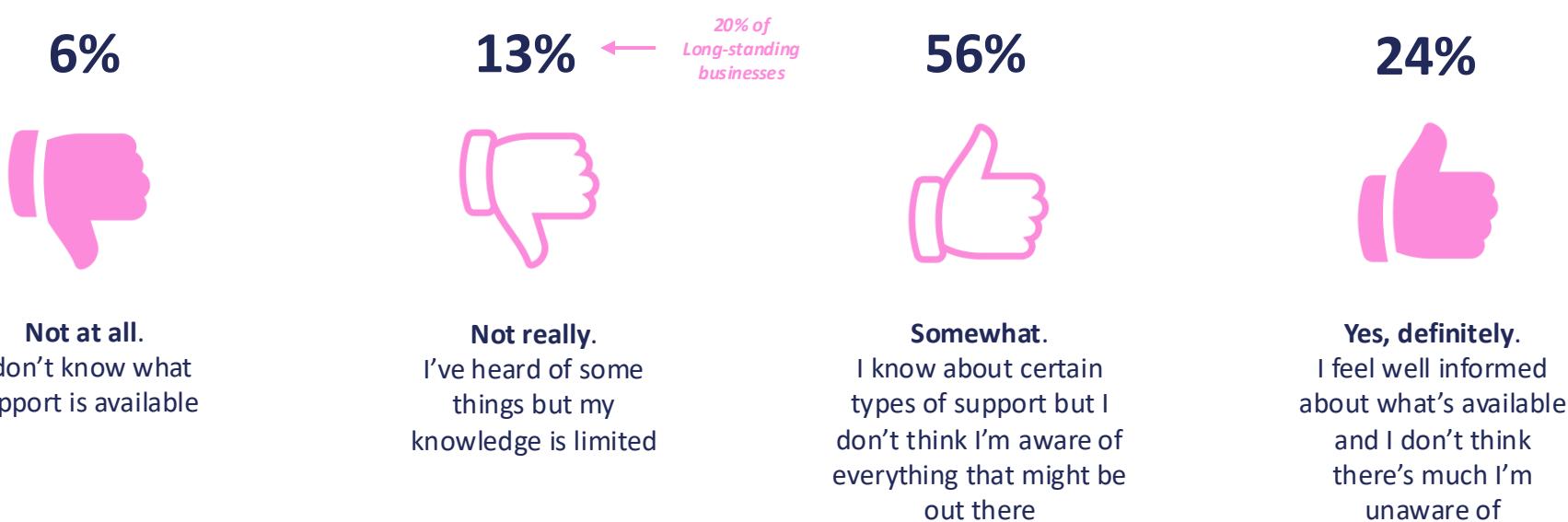
Two-fifths agreed that business networks are inclusive and welcoming, yet 51% thought opportunities are not fairly distributed across sectors



Q14. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?
Base size: All respondents (348)

Awareness of NE business support

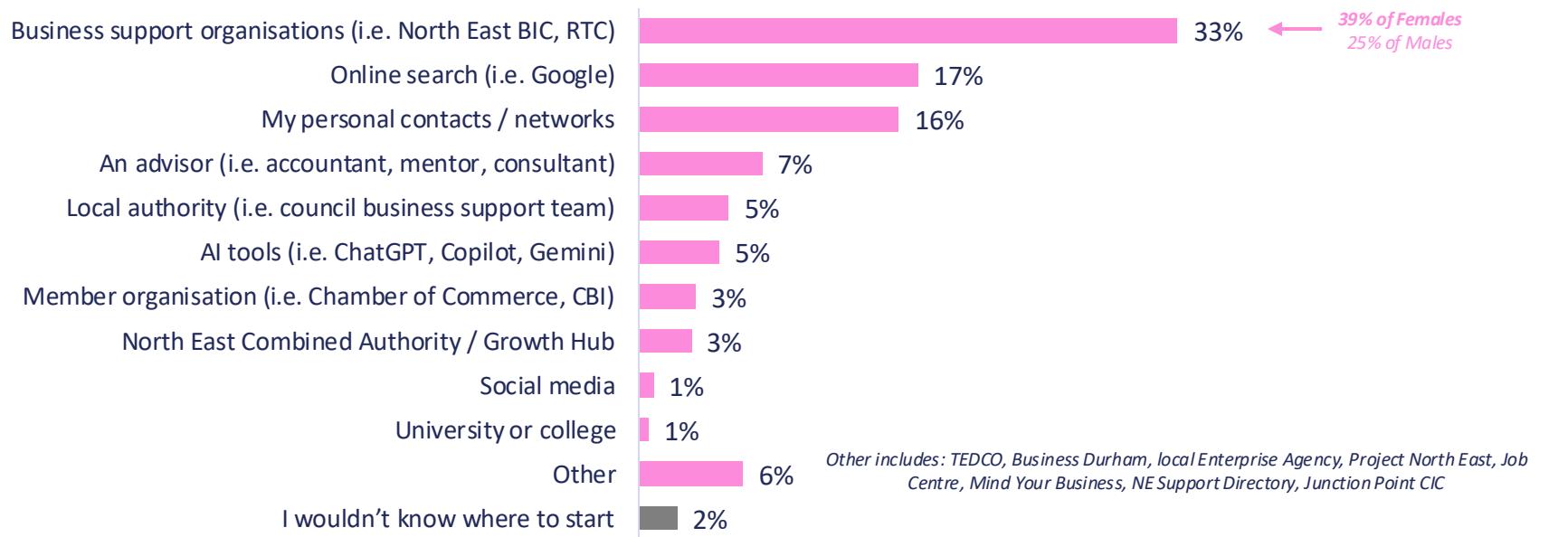
Solid levels of awareness of support available to businesses. More established businesses had lower awareness than younger businesses suggesting an opportunity for increasing engagement with this group



Q6. Are you aware of the business support available in the North East? By 'business support', we mean things like getting advice or mentoring, taking part in training or workshops, finding networking or peer opportunities, accessing funding or finance, getting help with digital or innovation, finding business space or hubs, or getting guidance on legal, compliance, or wellbeing support. **Base size:** All respondents (348)

Top channel for finding support

A dedicated business support organisation was the most commonly selected first point of call when needing support, particularly for women



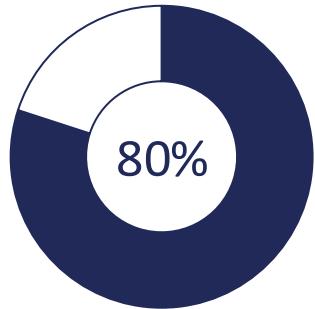
Q7. If you needed business support, where would you first go to try and find it?
Base size: All respondents (348)

Applying for funding



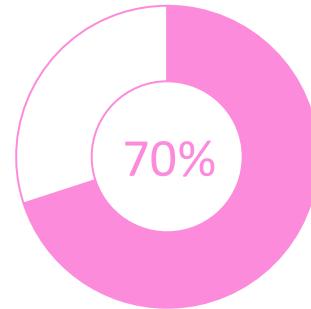
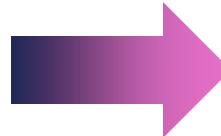
Funding consideration and application

Four-fifths of businesses had considered applying for external funding. 60% of all businesses made a successful funding application. CIC directors had more experience of applying for funding than commercial business owners



Have considered applying for external funding

95% of CICs
77% of Owners



Applied for funding

60% Successful
26% Unsuccessful

CICs were more likely to have applied for funding (both successful and unsuccessful than business owners (Net applied: 86% CIC vs 66% owners)

68% of Males
54% of Females

Q8. Have you ever considered applying for external funding for your business? **Base size:** All respondents (348)

Q10. Have you ever actually applied for external funding? Please select all that apply. For example, if you have had both successful and unsuccessful applications, choose both. **Base size:** All that have considered funding (278)

Unsuccessful female funding experiences

Women are more likely to be start-ups and sole traders and working in creative industries. The quotes below illustrate the range of experiences of women that were unsuccessful in funding applications

Words of wisdom: 'Some funding options will be not be available to you dependent on your postcode in the North East. And in fact weigh up whether being based in the NE will attract the right investors.' **Female, 35-44 years, Early-stage**

Bigest barrier: 'That the funding all seems to go to bigger businesses or ones that are rapidly scaling, not the ones who really need the support.' **Female, 35-44 years, Established**

Bigest barrier: 'Too complicated for new seed start-ups to access. Difficult to locate and not often specific enough'. **Female, 45-54 years, Start-up**

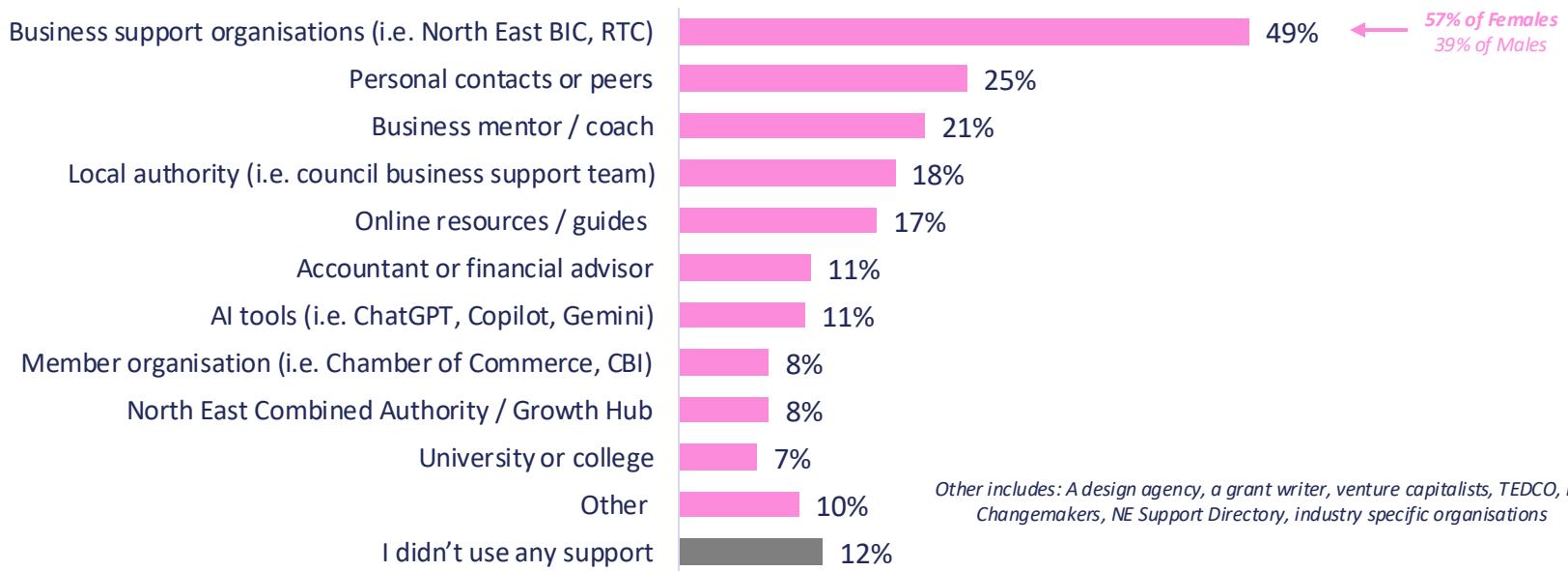
Bigest barrier: 'After more than two years of networking and trying different routes, I've found most funding schemes have narrow criteria that don't fit innovative or wellbeing-based small businesses like mine.' **Female, 55-64 years, Start-up**

Bigest barrier: 'Barriers around applications, and then all of the administrative work once funding is secured are not conducive to a neurodivergent business owner's success. The funding systems are set up for failure for the ND community.' **Female, 45-54 years, Early-stage**

Q10. Have you ever actually applied for external funding? Please select all that apply. For example, if you have had both successful and unsuccessful applications, choose both. **Base size:** Women that were unsuccessful (37). Verbatim comments from Q16 and Q17 responses filtered on women that were unsuccessful at Q10.

Support used to apply for funding

Local business support organisations were the most commonly used, especially by women. Businesses also valued the support of their peers and mentors



Q12. What support or help did you use when applying for external funding?

Base size: All that applied for external funding (195)

Barriers to applying for funding

Not applying to funding was mainly either due to low awareness of relevant funding streams, or because the process was too difficult

Barriers to considering funding:

36%	I didn't know funding was available
34%	I don't know enough about funding or how it works
26%	I haven't needed additional finance
26%	I don't think funding is for businesses like mine
20%	I prefer to self-fund
11%	I'm concerned about losing control or equity
4%	Other <i>(don't like debt, didn't see any relevant funding options)</i>

Barriers to considering but not applying for funding:

33%	I didn't think I'd meet the criteria
27%	The application process felt too complicated
24%	I didn't know where to get advice / support
18%	The paperwork looked too time-consuming
18%	I didn't feel I had the right knowledge or skills to successfully complete the application
10%	I was worried about rejection
27%	Other <i>(see next slide)</i>

38% of Males
17% of Females

Q9. You said you've never considered applying for external funding for your business. Which of the following best describe why that is? **Base size:** All that have not considered funding (70)

Q11. You said you have considered applying for external funding but haven't actually applied. Which of the following best describe why that is? **Base size:** All that have considered funding but not applied (83)

Barriers to applying for funding – other

Other reasons for not applying for funding mostly centred around lack of business confidence or struggling to justify completing applications over other business priorities

'All funding requires businesses to be VAT registered; I am not therefore fall at the first hurdle.'
Female, 45-54 years, Long-standing

'I have so much to think about, it became difficult to prioritise.' **Female, 45-54 years, Start-up**

'I wasn't aware of any small-scale funding to apply for and was told there was none available when I asked PNE.' **Female, 35-44 years, Start-up**

'It felt too early for us to be able to secure financing right now as wouldn't be profitable enough.'
Male, 45-54 years, Early-stage

'I did apply and was successful in the application but never took the money due to our business uncertainty.' **Male, 25-34 years, Start-up**

'As the data around success outcomes shows poor results for the majority of businesses, we decided to bootstrap and use our time effectively and efficiently.'
Female, 45-54 years, Start-up

Q11. You said you have considered applying for external funding but haven't actually applied. Which of the following best describe why that is?
Base size: All that said 'other' (22)

Top barriers to accessing funding in the North East

Analysis of verbatim responses shows that the biggest challenges are poor awareness of opportunities, complex processes, and not enough advice available



Q17 . What do you personally think is the biggest barrier for businesses in the North East when it comes to accessing funding? Open text response

Base size: All that answered (327)

Top barriers – verbatim comments (1)



Complex & time consuming process:

'Funding applications are complicated and unnecessarily intrusive. I understand the need for transparency but feel like reporting back on the number of paperclips I've bought is a waste of my time. Funders declare they've supported so many organisations with so many £s, but when it comes [down] to it, it's spread too thin and not worth the effort for a few hundred quid here or there.' **Female, 55-64 years, Early-stage**



Awareness & information about funding:

'There is no single resource that collates all the available finance options for business owners. It's too hard to find and no one source has access to that information nor is there is recognition by NECA/civil servants that this is critical to success particularly as high growth companies try to navigate the "valley of death" during these turbulent times.'

Female, 35-44 years, Early-stage

Q17 . What do you personally think is the biggest barrier for businesses in the North East when it comes to accessing funding?

Base size: All that answered (327)

Top barriers – verbatim comments (2)



Support, advice & navigation help:

'The biggest barrier is the barrier that the business support organisations have as to what they can do for small businesses and how much time/help/advise/funding they are permitted to use. I was literally dumped like a hot brick on day 366 of support from several NE business support organisations, because I had reached 12 months of help and obviously, I was no Alan Sugar and didn't need any business help from anyone. I applied, begged, tried again, tried grants, tried loans, etc. I received nothing in the 12 months but vocal support.' **Male, 35-44 years, Start-up**



Regional, sector & inclusion bias:

'One of the biggest barriers is how fragmented and inconsistent the funding landscape feels. Opportunities often depend on location boundaries or networks rather than the quality of the business itself. Living in Gateshead, I've found that many funding schemes exclude my area entirely or prioritise city-centre postcodes. Information is scattered, eligibility criteria are unclear, and there's a sense that if you're not already connected to the "right" ecosystem, it's hard to be seen.' **Female, 55-64 years, Start-up**

Top barriers – verbatim comments (3)



Type & terms of finance:

'Finance is too expensive over 10% interest.' **Female, 55-64 years, Long-standing**

'Finance providers/brokers usually just want to sell the finance they have on offer. Finding someone to provide impartial advice on finance that is tailored to my situation is difficult.' **Male, 55-64 years, Start-up**



Availability, eligibility & competition:

'I think it can be difficult to find and compare all the options. It can be off-putting if you start looking at options and only find out halfway down a lengthy document that your business or project isn't eligible.'

Female, 35-44 years, Start-up

'When I asked about funding opportunities, I was told there wasn't any available and was not directed anywhere else to find out more. I would say that accessing that information, especially for my scale of business is the biggest barrier to accessing funding.' **Female, 35-44 years, Start-up**

Q17 . What do you personally think is the biggest barrier for businesses in the North East when it comes to accessing funding?

Base size: All that answered (327)

Words of
advice



Top words of wisdom to new start-ups

Analysis of verbatim responses identified the most common words of advice are to have a good support network, plan properly, and have a resilient mindset



Q16. If you were giving advice to someone starting out as a business owner today, what words of wisdom would you share? *Open text response*

Base size: All that answered (313)

Words of wisdom – verbatim comments (1)



Support, mentors & networks:

'Effective financial planning and onward monitoring from the outset. Seek mentoring and support opportunities to allow you to be open regarding burden of responsibility and challenges in running your own business. The challenges that you will face will be experienced by others in business.' **Male, 45-54 years, Long-standing**



Planning, research & finances:

'Processes and business plan are key. Identifying quick wins to generate income, branding, marketing & website are important. Building a network as quickly as possible.' **Female, 45-54 years, Start-up**

'The biggest thing I would say is 'write your why in pen and your business plan in pencil'. It can be really tempting to bend your mission to fit, for example, a particular funding pot, but that is not sustainable and not the right way to do things.' **Female, 35-44 years, Early-stage**

Q16. If you were giving advice to someone starting out as a business owner today, what words of wisdom would you share? *Open text response*
Base size: All that answered (313)

Words of wisdom – verbatim comments (2)



Mindset, resilience & confidence:

'Find a coach and mentor who can support you. A coach to address confidence, mindset and barriers and a mentor to support the business aspects when you start or when you want to grow.' **Female, 55-64 years, Early-stage**

'Own your narrative. The North East rewards authenticity; tell your story with confidence, especially when your business model doesn't fit a traditional mould.' **Male, 45-54 years, Start-up**



Customers, testing the market & marketing:

'Make sure there is a strong market there, i.e., don't be idealistic and try to sell products to sectors with no finances.' **Male, 35-44 years, Long-standing**

'Have a unique selling point and focus on that don't spread yourself too thinly. Spend a lot of time on social media and marketing.' **Female, 55-64 years, Long-standing**

Q16. If you were giving advice to someone starting out as a business owner today, what words of wisdom would you share? *Open text response*
Base size: All that answered (313)

Words of wisdom – verbatim comments (3)



Work-life balance & boundaries:

'It is difficult to maintain work life balance early on. Don't continue that for too long. Be careful about setting up a business by yourself, look for partners who have complimentary skills.' **Male, 45-54 years, Long-standing**

'Managing time and work balance is as important as knowing your market, customers, and products and services.'

Male, 35-44 years, Start-up

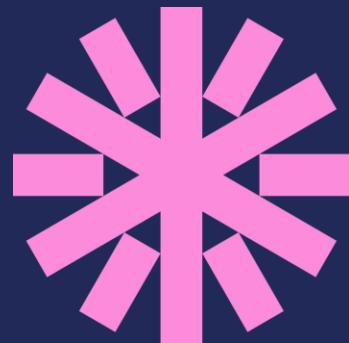


Realism about finance & risk:

'Think very carefully if you wouldn't be better off in the long-term working for someone else without the stress of being self employed with no post-retirement income to fall back on and staff who have all the rights (whereas employers have none).' **Female, 55-64 years, Long-standing 10+ years**

'Be prepared to face the lows as well as the highs. Be prudent with your finances, get a good accountant who knows your type of business and doesn't over charge you.' **Female, 45-54 years, Long-standing 10+ years**

Q16. If you were giving advice to someone starting out as a business owner today, what words of wisdom would you share? *Open text response*
Base size: All that answered (313)



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stop guessing, start knowing