

DEVELOPING A VALUE PROPOSITION: THE BRISTOL POUND

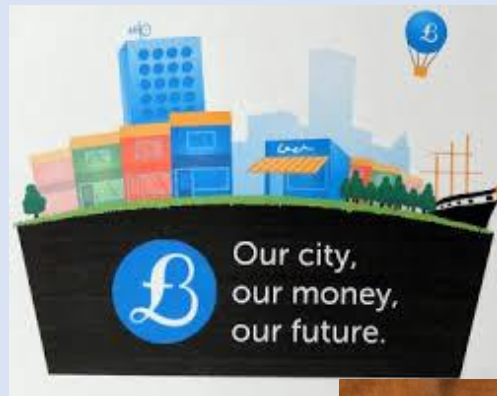


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Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a research project with the purpose of evaluating what services and features the Bristol Pound¹ (£B) might offer its business members in order to encourage and expand its business membership and the active engagement of this membership with the £B. The research was funded by the ESRC and took place between January and June 2019. It was comprised of 26 semi-structured interviews with £B business members and non-members. It represents a collaboration between the Inclusive Economy Institute at the University of Bristol and the £B. It was conducted by Dr Thomas Sealy and overseen by Professor Martin Parker.

Local currencies have seen a renewed interest in the last few decades and the Bristol Pound is one of several that have been founded in the UK. These currencies aim to exert change along three lines, making economic, social and environmental impacts in order to create a reorientation towards increased local and sustainable patterns of trade and currency circulation. Yet these currencies face considerable difficulty in breaking the ‘lifecycle phenomenon’ and becoming financially self-sustaining beyond the first five to eight years, resulting in many of them folding. Moreover, and linked to this, they also face significant challenges in penetrating the mainstream to a degree that would enable them to begin to meet their goals. The £B is at a critical juncture in its lifecycle and bid to reach self-sustainability as a viable business in its own right. Its business membership has been identified as key to attaining both its general aims as well as its aim of being financially self-sustaining. By creating a package of services that it can offer to its business members, £B hopes to become financially sustainable, which will in turn allow it to meet its wider economic, social and environmental aims.

Full findings and recommendations are presented in the following pages, but the headline findings are:

- The £B needs a targeted strategy for expanding beyond its current membership. This should also involve concentration on sector by sector development and include key consumer targets and influential anchor institutions.
- Technology needs to be prioritised for investment and development. Without this, expansion will be limited and curtailed.
- The £B needs to focus on adding business value to its business members. This means being able to bring economic benefit to its business members as well as being able to demonstrate this benefit.
- The £B should develop more collaborative and personal relationships with its members, developing forms of communication and support.
- The £B needs to know its members, their businesses and their needs better in order to facilitate more meaningful communication both between the £B and its members as well as between businesses themselves.
- The £B needs to have a greater presence in local, community events and projects.
- Businesses are willing to pay to be a member of a network organisation such as the £B but will only do so and continue to do so if they see added value to their business as a result.

¹ <https://bristolpound.org>

Introduction

Aims and focus

The principal aim of this project is to contribute towards a value proposition that £B might offer its business members as part of it becoming a financially self-sustaining organisation. The findings presented and recommendations made aim to feed into the development of existing services and features that £B offers its members, current thinking and developments of additional services and features £B might offer, as well as suggesting other propositions £B might offer its members. The aim is to provide research-based evidence for these developments. The focus is thus on what kinds of services and features independent businesses in Bristol value and would find attractive as part of a membership package that the £B might provide.

Literature overview

Local, community or complementary currencies have a long and varied history but have seen renewed attention more recently and developed across the world, including in the UK, since the 1980s in varying forms (Blanc, 2010; Michel & Hudon, 2015; Seyfang & Longhurst, 2013a; North, 2010; North, 2007). Convertible Local Currencies (CLCs), such as the £B, which is the focus of this report, are limited to use within a particular geographical area, and the BerkShare, founded in the USA in 2006 was the first of this kind. Probably the most successful local currency has been the Chiemgauer *regiogeld* scheme in Bavaria, Germany, although this operates on a wider regional basis, which is considered important to this success (see Gelleri, 2009; North, 2010 chapt 9; North, 2014; Thiel, 2012). In the UK local currencies have appeared in Totnes, being the pathbreaker, (Longhurst, 2012; North, 2010), Lewes (see Graugaard, 2012, North, 2010), the Lake District, Brixton (North, 2010), and Stroud (see Scott Cato & Suárez, 2012; North, 2010), although with very limited evidenced success in terms of impacts.

According to Zelizer (1994), all money expresses social values, not least because far from being a neutral ‘thing’, money is indicative of, and reinforces a particular pattern of relationships (North, 2010). Complementary currencies are specifically and deliberately formed in order to offer an alternative to national and global currency circulation and the dominance of national corporate and financial sectors. They are grassroots or bottom up innovations whose function broadly speaking is to change economic, social and environmental pathways and impacts. As such, they have been characterised as a form of technology as ‘purposed systems’ (Longhurst, 2012) given their orientation towards fulfilling specified purposes. They are aimed at developing local value and facilitating trade among local businesses by preventing wealth from leaking away from local economies. They are also aimed at developing trust and relationships locally and helping to enable participation of more socially and economically marginalised groups. Furthermore, by keeping currency and trade circulating locally, by encouraging a ‘local multiplier effect’, they aim to encourage a more sustainable form of business and development, reducing carbon footprints and encouraging greater local consumption. A further aspect of local currencies is developing local resilience, through encouraging interdependency between a vibrant population of SMEs (Graugaard, 2012).

A common observation of local currencies is a lifecycle phenomenon. Local currencies exhibit similar trajectories, with an initial period of growth and enthusiasm, which lasts around five years, followed by a plateau and then decline, resulting in limited impact (Blanc, 2010: 307). An important part of this cycle is the importance of ideological and value alignment in a currency’s initial stages, supported by a ‘novelty effect’ (Collom, 2005), which helps drive early membership take up. A significant aspect of the later drop off is that despite social values being a motivating factor, when there is no perceived economic benefit, membership is not maintained and users can become disillusioned (Evans, 2009; Blanc, 2010). A further aspect of this is that however much part of the “local ambience” they may become for some circles (Jacob et al., 2004), local currencies struggle to gain legitimacy beyond

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narrower alternative trade circles or activists (Blanc, 2010). That is, they remain restricted to what have been conceptualised as niches and niche actors (Longhurst, 2012; Seyfang & Longhurst, 2013b) and struggle to gain usage and legitimacy amongst the wider public within the area of operation of the currency. The problem then is how to *scale-up*, become widely *replicated* or *translate* into mainstream contexts through which they could exert greater influence (Seyfang & Longhurst, 2016). This suggests that ideology and value are not sufficient in themselves for a local currency to be successful. It must also be able to meet business needs. That is, there is a relationship rather than opposition between theories which emphasise ‘values change money’ and those which emphasise ‘money changes values’ (Evans, 2009).

Longhurst (2012), in discussing the Totnes Pound that emerged out of the Transition Town project, identifies three functions of the currency for businesses: an economic function by way of increased turnover, a political one by supporting re-localisation, and a publicity function for the businesses and the town. We might for the purposes of this report think about these three functions as three key challenges for the £B: an economic challenge to offer a concrete economic benefit to business members, which in turn is connected to and the result of a publicity challenge, with the overall result being for the £B and its members to meet the political challenge of tilting² the local economy towards greater localisation of currency circulation and trade relationships. Longhurst in fact notes that meeting the economic challenge for its members was a significant difficulty for the Totnes Pound. Moreover, a previous study on the £B has suggested that as yet it has not been able to increase localisation of currency circulation, more simply replacing transactions that would have occurred anyway in £Sterling (Marshall & O’Neill, 2018). This in fact has been found more generally for local currency schemes, where limited economic and environmental impact have been derived directly from such schemes, and serves to highlight the importance of such currencies gaining the support of businesses and working through anchor institutions and local authorities (Dittmer, 2013; Michel & Hudon, 2015; Seyfang & Longhurst, 2016). Aggregate findings from studies suggest that local currencies have had most impact on community building and social networks. There has been more limited impact in terms of increasing income for members, supporting local business, and any significant impact on the local economy (Johnson & Wilson-Harvey, 2017). What the discussion so far suggests is that in order to address the political challenge, core to the aims of the £B, addressing the economic and publicity challenges for business members is vital.

£B overview

Launched in 2012, the Bristol Pound (£B) is the UK’s largest local currency, operating in Bristol city and the Avon area. It aims to create a more resilient and sustainable independent business sector in Bristol, and in turn, a fairer and more inclusive local economy. Social, economic and environmental impact are at the centre of the £B’s mission. It aims to achieve this mission through promoting the circulation of money through the local economy as a way of helping local independent businesses and keeping wealth in the city. The £B operates on a basis of parity exchange rate with £Sterling and comes in both digital and cash forms. It has over 570 business members and 1500 individual members. It is administered by the Bristol Credit Union, where members must open an account in order to have a £B account. It also has support from the City Council – Council tax and business rates can be paid in the currency, for example. As a model of a local currency, £B is the first to simultaneously operate on a (semi)regional basis, be administered by a Credit Union, and have the support of the local authority (Marshall & O’Neill, 2018).

Thus far, the Bristol Pound CIC has been reliant on grant funding. It now needs to focus on developing a sustainable future as a trading social enterprise. Given that the business members are key beneficiaries of the project, as the scheme encourages members to keep their supply chains within the

² A phrase borrowed from talks given by Professor Martin Parker.

Bristol Pound network, it is through services to business members that the scheme should earn most of its income. In a recent Roundtable, increasing the volume and value of business to business spending was identified as essential in order for the £B to have its desired impact as well as its ability to become financially sustainable³.

Previous research (Johnson & Harvey-Wilson, 2017) has established that members join motivated by support for the character and identity of Bristol and to promote the local economy, intertwining identity, image and values. The reason that membership has been free historically is that it was initially difficult to incentivise membership, and meanwhile there were disincentives and barriers to membership in the form of ‘hassle factors’, such as having to operate more than one bank account, split supplier payment runs and change suppliers. However, there is now a more significant potential to add value to membership through marketing, networking and increased sales opportunities. Given the very varied business membership (for example, cafés, sole traders, and companies offering various business services), it is difficult to devise a value proposition that will contain elements that can attract each business sector. Simply put, if the £B is to grow and have policy impact, it needs to clarify its ‘offer’ to business users. It is to this that this report aims to contribute.

The Study

This study is based on twenty six semi-structured interviews with people who own and/or run independent businesses in Bristol. Of these, fifteen are members of the Bristol Pound (£B) and eleven are not. The sampling deliberately aimed to speak to a balance of £B members and non-members, allowing for some comparison to be drawn between the two along the points of focus of the study. £B members who participated in the study were recruited through two means. The first was a general advert sent out via email to £B members through the £B’s business membership mailing list. The other was through meeting people by attending £B networking events. Non-members were recruited through meeting people by attending networking events of a different organisation, as well as through personal contacts⁴. Interviews were conducted face to face (at the participant’s place of work or a café), by Skype or by phone, depending on convenience for the participant.

The interviews lasted between 30 mins and 1 hour and covered four general areas with a focus on business to business (B2B) activity. (B2B here may mean different types of business relationship depending on the type of business. For a restaurant, for example, it primarily refers to the supply chain, whereas for those offering business services of various kinds a large proportion of clients may be businesses.) The first area participants were asked about was some basic information about the business and what is looked for in B2B partnerships and relationships. The second asked about existing network memberships and what services and features were valued as part of these memberships. The third asked for participants to rate how important, attractive and valuable a set of general features and services that such a network might offer its members would be. They were asked to rate them on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 = not at all important/valuable, and 5 = extremely important/valuable. The list for this section was developed from the literature on local currencies, looking at what other local currencies in the UK offer (from their websites), and from discussion with £B. In addition, £B members were also asked to rate the existing services and features of £B on the same scale and comment upon how they might be improved. The fourth area covered was whether businesses would be willing to pay for membership of a network if it were to offer the services and features they had rated highly (4 or 5); and furthermore, if they were willing and able to pay, on what basis they would prefer this to work. An overview of the sample is presented in Table 1. The sectors allocated in the table mirror those of the £B directory, with the exception of 2 (marked with *), which were both members but did not appear in the directory.

³ Available at https://bristolpound.org/wp-content/uploads/Bristol-Pound-Roundtable_-The-Future-of-Complementary-Currencies.pdf Accessed 03/01/2019

⁴ I am extremely grateful to Andy West and Jack Nicholls who both helped me with this.

There are a few notable characteristics of the sample worth highlighting. The business members of £B spoken to vary between those who had been members for a matter of months to those who had been members ‘since the beginning’ of £B. Of the 26, 11 have an annual turnover of below £50 000, 3 a turnover of between £50 000 and £99 999, 3 of between £100 000 and £249 999, 4 of between £250 000 and £499 999, 2 of between £500 000 and £999 999, and 2 a turnover of £1 000 000+. It is notable that 6 of the 14 members interviewed had never used £B in their business, and all had fairly limited circulation of the currency. One reason this is notable is that several of these were enthusiasts of the £B and all were recruited either through meeting at a £B event or they responded to an advert that went out through a £B newsletter. Thus, even those members who are engaged and enthusiastic are not necessarily seeing significant £B activity in their businesses. There are various reasons for this, which will emerge in the following sections.

The project and the interview schedule were co-created between the research team based in the University of Bristol’s Inclusive Economy Institute and the Bristol Pound team, and are expected to be the beginning of a series of knowledge exchange projects between the Inclusive Economy Institute and the £B, which are aimed at creating impact through the creation of a sustainable business model for the £B. This is also a part of the wider remit of the Inclusive Economy Institute, which is interested in working with local businesses as part of stimulating the City’s social economy.

Report Structure

The discussion of the findings in this report is presented as follows: the first section discusses the most important characteristics that businesses highlight in B2B partners. The following section moves on to discuss the current services and features that the £B offers its business members and which of these are most highly valued by those members. Then it presents an overview of what features and services businesses, both £B members and non-members, value in other networks they belong to. The largest section of the report discusses what services and features businesses would look for and value in membership of network organisations in a more general and more expanded sense than the previous sections. It then discusses if and how businesses would be prepared to pay for membership of a business network organisation that offered the services and features they value. The final section summarises the report and presents recommendations for the £B based on its findings.

Most important characteristics of B2B partners

When asked about the most important characteristics and considerations of B2B partners, there was a strong sense of ensuring value alignment. For many, being local, independent, ethical, (in terms of practices, values, sourcing of products and so on), with good environmental practices and policies were all influential. In addition, personal characteristics such as being genuine, pleasant to operate with, and likeable were also mentioned. Notably, these values often overlap with those explicitly stated as core to the £B. Nevertheless, for practical business reasons, for businesses there are various ways in which these values are balanced both alongside each other as well as alongside other business factors.

For some types of businesses, values align more neatly with B2B partners. This might, however, not always mean local as defined by £B. As one person remarked, although local was important, this is “local but not local for local's sake”. However, this is usually indicative of shared values rather than a repudiation of them. In many cases products that meet other ethical values might necessarily only be available outside of Bristol. This is the case, for example, with cafés and restaurants whose produce comes from businesses in the south-west region but not the city. ‘Local’ as a value for supply chain partners is necessarily interpreted in a different way from £B. In a different example the meaning attached to ‘local’ could be more contracted; one person, talking about switching to a more local supplier within the city, remarked: "I started paying for my flyers with a company who used £B for a while and then they stopped using it. And then I went to a different supplier but one that didn't accept £B but one that was more local to me. So in that respect I felt like in my head it balanced out." In this example, the local factor either outweighs or compensates for the B2B partner not accepting the £B.

For all, however, there were business factors that were just as important and which perhaps in some cases or circumstances could offset other considerations to an extent, or at least be a balancing consideration. Business factors which are particularly important here are cost, reliability, and product or service availability. To this extent a balance is often struck between as cost-effective or reliable as possible as long as they are local and ethical on the one hand, and as local and ethical as possible as long as they are cost-effective and reliable, on the other; although often, as one participant remarked, "truth be told, probably cost and reliability are the most important things".

For others, even when perhaps sharing these values in a more general sense, other factors were more significant. This was primarily a result of the type of business. A few businesses offer specialist services or products which make adhering to values such as maintaining a local and independent supply chain extremely difficult if not impossible. Others who deal with mainly business clients may not choose these relationships in the same way and with the same considerations.

Eight of the fifteen £B business members had never actually used the £B as part of their business activity and all of them used the £B with less than 50% of their Bristol based (and therefore eligible) B2B partners. Indeed, this was the case for some who had been members for a number of years and even for those who were most explicitly enthusiastic about £B, its aims and what it stands for. There are various reasons for this which parallel the discussion above and which have implications for the purpose of this report. The following section expands on some of these as it turns to focus on perceptions of the services and features that £B currently offers its members.

Key Take-aways

- There is significant value-alignment between £B and businesses, both members and non-members.
- For businesses, meeting these values in their practice is significant to how they operate but is also part of a wider context and balance that includes business factors.

Sample

Table 1. Sample overview

	Sector (following £B categories mostly)	How long business operating	How many other businesses trade with?	How many are local Bristol businesses?	No. of employees	Turnover	How long £B Member	How many businesses use £B with?
1	Speciality food	2 ½ years	1-5	1-5	1	< £50 000	2 ½ years	2
2	Cafes	3 months	11-20	11-20	2 f/t : 3-4 p/t	< £50 000	3 months	5-11
3	Cafes	10 years	51-100	6-10	8	£250 000 - £499 999	8 years	1-5
4	Restaurants	2 years 4 months	11-20	11-20	8	£250 000 - £499 999	1 month	0
5	Groceries	16 years	51-100	21-50	100+	£1 000 000 +	A good few years	1-5
6	*Deliveries	25 years	100+ (2 supply chain – rest business customers)	100+	2 f/t : 8p/t	£500 000 - £999 999	5 years	0
7	Shopping	6 years	51-100	51-100	2	£100 000 - £249 999	1 year + (inherited membership)	0
8	Shopping	1 year	51-100	21-50	3	£100 000 - £249 999	1 year	1-5
9	Building Things	14 years	51-100	21-50	11	£250 000 - £499 999	5 ½ years	0
10	*Print & Design	6 years	11-20	6-10	2	£50 000 - £99 999	4-5 years	1-5
11	Energy Services	11 years	6-10	0	17 volunteers	< £50 000	4 years	0
12	Websites & IT	14-15 years	51-100	51-100	2-3	< £50 000	4-5 years	0
13	Health & Leisure	6 ½ years	6-10	6-10	1	< £50 000	1 year	0
14	Business Services	8 years	11-20	11-20	1	£50 000 - £99 999	The beginning	1-5
15	Business Services	14+ years	businesses as clients	0	1	< £50 000	The beginning	0
16	Business Services	2 ½ years	51-100	21-50	1 f/t : 5 p/t	£100 000 - £249 999	N/A	N/A
17	Business Services	1 ½ years	1-5	1-5	1 + 1 intern	< £50 000	N/A	N/A
18	Business Services	6 months	6-10	1-5	1	< £50 000	N/A	N/A
19	Media Services	6 months	6-10	1-5	1	< £50 000	N/A	N/A
20	Education	3 years	1-5	1-5	1	< £50 000	N/A	N/A
21	Building things	3 years	11-20	0	5	£100 000 - £249 999	N/A	N/A
22	Shopping	7 years	51-100	0	16	£250 000 - £499 999	N/A	N/A
23	Shopping	1 years	21-50	0	3	£50 000 - £99 999	N/A	N/A
24	Entertainment	20 years+	51-100	21-50	20+	£500 000 - £999 999	N/A	N/A
25	Marketing	20 years+	100+	21-50	70	£1 000 000 +	N/A	N/A
26	Financial & Legal Services	8 months	1-5	1-5	1 (+ consultants)	< £50 000	N/A	N/A

Current £B members

Table 2. Services/features current £B members value

Rating → Service/feature ↓	1 not at all important	2	3	4	5 extremely important	Total rated important (4 or 5)
personal support (e.g. on using payment system)	1	1	3	5	3	8
networking events	1	1	1	4	4	8
social media presence and promotion	2	0	6	2	3	5
smartphone app	1	1	2	5	4	9
T2P/ in app payment	0	1	1	6	4	10
material to let people know take £B	2	1	4	3	1	4
online payment platform	0	0	1	5	4	9
£B news	3	1	5	2	0	2
video training material	5	2	0	0	1	1
business champion scheme	9	1	2	0	0	0
a printed directory	2	3	2	3	1	4
online directory	1	0	3	1	6	7

£B membership: Interpreting the data

Personal support

Forms of personal support were, outside of technological features that businesses rely on in order to be able to process payments, the joint top-rated feature of £B membership. Indeed, it was the feature that most consistently elicited more developed and fervent responses, either positively or as a point of necessary improvement. This itself points to a possible inconsistency from which £B might improve its service package to its members.

On the positive side, where businesses had received personal face to face support, on, for example, using the £B and integrating it into their business practices, they were extremely pleased with this support and generous with their praise.

On the negative side, however, a lack of support of this kind was often a pointed focus of critique of £B. This comes through in comments such as “I just wish that someone would pop in!” and “I need someone to come and talk to me!”, for instance.

It is probably fairly safe to say that receiving this kind of support can be the difference between a business engaging with £B or not. Indeed, this point of contact could be a significant way in which the £B can work in bespoke fashion with its members to possibly expand their engagement with £B. As one member remarked, for example, “in terms of doing more with it I’m not sure but would be open to more communication with £B”.

Overall, there was definite desire for communication with £B. For some this would enable them to understand the value of using the £B more and what it does, as well as work out how to implement it in their business. Several businesses reported not having the time to do their own research into the issue, even if relevant information is available online. For many this means that either their knowledge of the £B comes from random sources, or perhaps not at all. One result is that even if there is a desire to learn more, £B drops down the priority list and out of the minds of its members. When asked if they thought they might use £B more in the future, one person responded: “I could do in future, but I don’t even pay [other businesses] in Bristol Pounds because I forget and don’t think about it. I should make a mental note to do that.” This highlights the necessity of keeping £B in people’s minds through effective communication. Moreover, for this kind of communication to be effective, personal contact is vital. This is so for the reasons discussed in this section as well as those in the section below about £B news.

There is a further aspect relevant here also. In one instance, through a visit from £B one of the members had realised a way of adding £B to their till system, thereby overcoming a practical difficulty in accepting £B alongside £Sterling. That is to say that for the £B, these types of engagement bring them closer to the businesses in their network and therefore closer to the difficulties and, as this example illustrates, closer to possible solutions that may benefit £B and its members more widely.

£B involvement here might even usefully be extended. One employee I spoke to at a comparatively large retail outlet suggested that most of the staff don’t know about the £B and how payments work as this is not always a part of the training they receive. There may be scope, therefore, for £B to collaborate with businesses to train staff who are dealing with requests from customers, where appropriate. This, furthermore, highlights the importance of top-down processes when it comes to implementing £B into a business’s activities.

Networking events

Networking events were the other jointly top-rated service by £B members. For many this is an extremely important part of business network membership, especially for smaller and more newly-established businesses, as it provides a vital point of contact and interaction with other businesses. For some, however, it is a matter of time that they do not necessarily have. As one person remarked, "we see them [the networking events], but we don't have a lot of time to do them as a business". This is especially given there are plenty of events in the Bristol area that businesses can attend offered by a variety of organisations and networks and those more specifically focussed in a business's area, where available, will take priority. For others, it might be the timing of these events. £B networking events tend to be arranged as breakfast events, which prove difficult for some to attend. Several people remarked how they would be keen to attend but struggle to make them because of the timing or a general lack of time for such events.

Social media presence and promotion

This represented an area of potential but where it was felt improvement was needed. Some commented, for example, that "I don't even notice it" or "could do more shout-outs". It was generally commented that this was a weak area of £B marketing and businesses didn't feel as if their business had received any specific promotion or benefit. As a result of a lack of active promotion, this was generally felt to be ineffective and required 'tripling or quadrupling'. There was also some scepticism expressed about the ability of the £B to effectively market and support some businesses this way as any such marketing would need to be targeted at the right audiences.

Smartphone app/ in app payment/T2P/ Online payment platform

This was a generally highly-rated feature. In fact, the technological features that mean the currency functions smoothly were all rated as being extremely important overall, "the app is key to push. Cash is old hat" as one person commented. This could also, nevertheless, represent a point of critique and frustration where people felt that the technology didn't function as it should, was unreliable, or was not as advanced as alternative and more mainstream versions. The online payment platform "seems outdated", for instance. As one person put it, it is "bereft with problems - keeps crashing". Where these problems arise, the frustration can lead to a lack of trust in the system and a subsequent disengagement from the £B, "because it's too much hassle". It might also be an area where personal support can be of benefit, as one person remarked, "I just need a nudge. I just need to get to grips with it."

People also expressed frustration over the difficulty in converting £B to £Sterling, citing in particular having to go to Bristol Credit Union, which "makes it too difficult so it drops down priorities". A couple of people also remarked of the £B cash that its demurrage, or expiry date, was frustrating in this regard: "I wish they wouldn't expire so bloody quickly! Going to BCU is a pain"; or "demurrage is a pain in the arse" as sometimes old notes are accepted by staff by mistake and then can't be exchanged.

A further issue was reconciling £B in the business's accounts. Some commented how their accountants didn't know what to do with it. For others, who do their own accounts, it was confusing, not least as there are rarely enough £B in the business to pass on as full payments and part payments are "too annoying". This can, therefore, make it quite hard to integrate £B into the business. As one person commented "I like the idea in principle, but in reality, it's 2 bank accounts". This is a significant area where £B needs to understand business members needs and be able to provide support and solutions or it is highly likely that businesses will disengage from the £B.

Material to let people know take £B

While people appreciated this and displayed the stickers or posters, most were unconvinced about how effective it is: "I put them up but they haven't persuaded anyone yet" was a fairly typical response in this regard with many saying they had never been asked about the £B as a result. A few people also commented that the £B needed to make more people aware: "it needs another drive. It needs stuff to help people understand how it works and why", for example. This raises a question about the role of businesses in promoting and raising awareness of the £B through actively asking customers about it, as these types of comments represent a general passivity in this regard. Businesses, if the frequency of this type of remark is anything to go by, do not see it as their job and there seems to at times be a question of who is promoting who, especially in the context of questions raised about the quality and impact that £B marketing was able to provide for their businesses and the hassle factor of businesses using the £B.

£B news

This, technological frustrations aside, was possibly the area that elicited the most vocalised critique. On the positive side one person commented that the regular email "can be good to keep [£B] in people's minds". Most often, however, it was negatively remarked upon, with a couple of people, when asked to rate it on a scale of 1 to 5, responding "0!". There is again the issue of lack of time, which means that those that might otherwise browse it, do not. There is also the issue of priorities and volume of such communication that is received from a variety of sources. Simple responses such as "don't read it" were common here. The point of priorities is important here though. That is, that when people have little time and receive a large volume of similar emails, they are necessarily extremely selective over which they read. This view is captured well by one person who commented that, "I've not seen it but if I can be perfectly honest, what I'd imagine it to be it's a 1 for me". This represents a broad sense, based on experience extending beyond the £B, that these types of communication are ineffective, often irrelevant and there is little point in even looking. There is then a question of value and relevance. Thus, many remarked that the news was very rarely relevant to them and contained little of value.

Video training material

Of the people spoken to as part of this project, nobody had really used this, although one person had found it useful. This may serve to reinforce that people prefer face to face training as part of member support rather than having to spend time on different aspects of using the £B. For others, they had been members before such videos were available online, or as they did not use the £B had had no need for such materials.

Business champion scheme

Almost all the people spoken to had never heard of this. This is perhaps unsurprising as it is a relatively new scheme and given the low numbers of people who read the £B news, it is unlikely they would have come across it there. Of those couple who had heard of the scheme, they remarked that they had "not seen any influence so far". More will be said about this type of initiative in the section below.

A printed directory/ Online directory

These are generally seen as useful, especially the online directory and access to it through the app.

Summary

Overall, we can point to a few trends. One is that there is often not a direct match between enthusiasm for the £B and active engagement with it. In fact, a couple of the most enthusiastic people I spoke to had never used it.

Many businesses do share the values of the £B and display these in their business practices in various ways, but for a host of reasons again, do not actively engage with £B as part of their business or indeed see it as necessary to fulfilling those shared values through their business practice. Some of the most important reasons for this include too little time, the lack of ease and convenience of using it, especially as it has to fit into an already busy working day. Thus, comments such as “I love the idea, but it needs to run smoothly and work” are typical.

Communication is vital, but equally vital is that it is effective, helps support and adds value to businesses and is relevant enough to gain their attention amidst a busy schedule and large volume of communication. Thus, those businesses that had received the kind of personal contact and support that helped facilitate their use of £B, spoke highly of this. For those who hadn't, this was a key point of equally emotive critique. It is indicative that a few people remarked that public services such as buses and the council need to be on board – many £B members were not aware that you can pay with £B on the bus service in the city and can also pay council tax in £B. The importance of anchor and influencer institutions such as the City Council were mentioned several times, and this is a point that will be returned to. Indeed, it has been suggested that to be successful it is crucial that organisations such as local currencies find political allies (Collom, 2005) and this has been a crucial central feature of the Preston model, which although not a currency, has similar aims for its vision for the local economy (Manley, 2017).

Membership of other networks

In total, thirteen of the businesses were members of generalist business networks or similar organisations and ten were members of both generalist and specialist business networks or similar organisations. A few were not members, or only inactive members, of any.

Overall, general networks were seen to be more valuable in the early phases of a business as an important source of contacts and way of ‘getting out there’. As a business grows, there is less value in such networks as more targeted events are increasingly important. This is also the case because the support that such networks offer is more helpful in the earlier phases of a business. Specialist networks, however, are on the whole rated more highly because of the specific nature of a business in that they are better placed to be able to offer more tangible benefits. These may include sector specific contacts, sharing of issues, materials, and knowledge.

Services and features valued in existing memberships

Something that was continually stressed throughout the interviews is a tangible added value that is brought by being members of a business network or similar organisation. Where there was no such tangible sense, members are likely to simply disengage but retain nominal association, if membership is free, or to formally leave if membership is paid for.

Tangibility can mean different things. For some, especially newer businesses as mentioned above, the support they find through talking to people at events or through organised presentations and workshops prove valuable. For some, especially if they work alone/at home a lot, the social opportunities that networks can offer can be important. This is particularly the case when networks are targeted at people in a similar position. One person, for example, stressed the importance of a network aimed at single mums who run their own business. The benefit here is social but also specialist and of the kind a generalist network may struggle to offer.

More often, however, tangible means being able to offer contacts that prove important for business generation or specialist services that are far cheaper than they would be otherwise. In terms of this latter, the Federation of Small Businesses was frequently cited as an example of a network that offers good value because it provides legal advice, help with contracts, GDPR information, insurance, help with HMRC, and so on. It also holds events, but these specialist service features mean that it offers good value even if a business is unable to attend the events or gets no specific benefits from the events themselves in terms of valuable business contacts. In this way, membership of this organisation is seen as ‘cost-neutral’.

Introductions to clients through networking was seen as valuable by most, but again, the benefits accrued must be seen as ‘cost-neutral’ in so far as contacts that are made and subsequent benefit to the business offset the time and money investment made in them. Time constraints mean that for some the most valuable support and networking opportunities come through online fora. These provide a lot more flexibility in terms of people’s opportunities to participate actively or vicariously. They can offer material such as presentations that are available after the ‘live’ event for those who can’t make it, either because of the particular timing of an event they would otherwise be interested in or because they are unable to attend such events more generally. Furthermore, discussions online proceed over an extended period potentially allowing more flexible participation. Thus, several people commented how they were more involved with online networks than face to face ones. In this vein people also commented on the value they have found through a network facilitating online introductions as well as face to face. This was not, however, an overall preference and face to face networking is still highly valued. It represents an important addition, however.

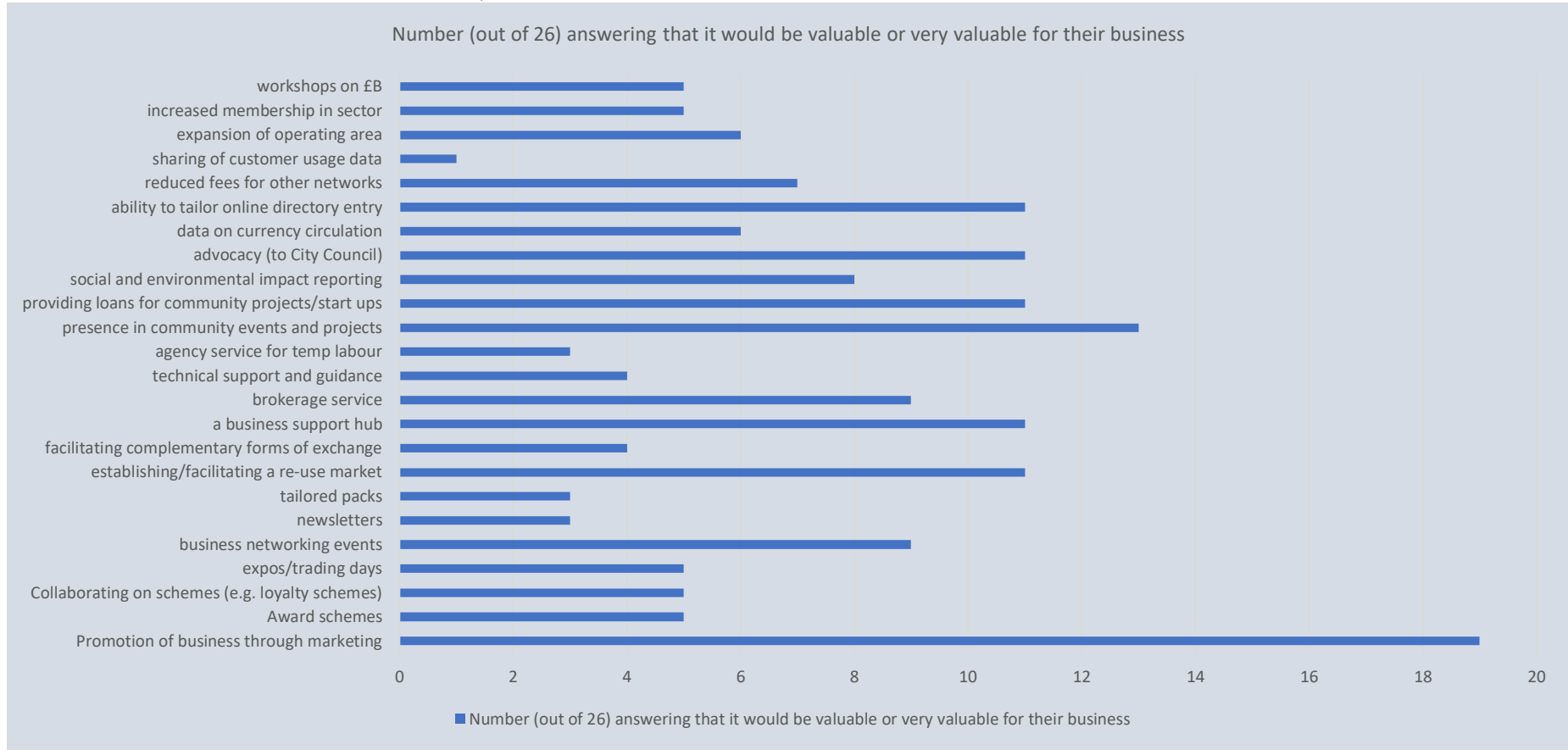


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Tangibility is also a difficult thing to measure, presenting a challenge. One person commented, for example, on how often contacts came “a few people removed” and after a longer period of time. This meant that although the benefit of attending such events was fairly intangible, they were still “nervous about stopping going altogether”. This intangibility, however, and despite the nervousness of stopping, did have a direct effect on how much they would be willing to pay for membership.

Table 3. General services/features valued by both £B members and non-members



Valuing services and features of networks

Table 3. above shows data on how services and features of business network membership were rated by those interviewed. The results are based on the same rating system as used in the previous questions; from 1 to 5 with 1 being not at all important/valuable and 5 being extremely important/valuable. The figures in the chart reflect combined scores of 4s and 5s. These questions were not tied to membership of any particular network but taken in a more general sense of what a business would look for and be attracted by when considering membership of a business network or similar organisation. A table such as this, however, reveals only so much. The following section presents an in-depth discussion of this data and points to some of the reasons and dynamics behind it.

Interpreting the data

Workshops on the benefits of the Bristol Pound

For a few this scored positively as it was seen as an important way to increase awareness, something they stressed as being necessary. Nevertheless, there were more often resignations about this. As one person expressed it, "I think if you're already a member you've signed up for some reasons, so it's not that relevant". Time was also an important factor. It was unclear that stand alone workshops of this kind would attract new members.

Increased membership of relevant businesses in your sector

This offered an oddly paradoxical set of responses. On the one hand, this was mentioned as a definite positive. Where there is low sector membership, for instance, "other businesses don't want to take it [£B], so you get stuck with them – and then they expire". This means that for some this can effectively feel like a loss: "there's a difficulty in spending what we could potentially take - so it's almost like not having a bill paid". A further smaller business commented that they are too small to pay business rates, "so can't dispose [of £B] there". The choice of 'dispose' here is significant. Where there is a lack of suppliers or other outlets through which to circulate or pass on the currency, it becomes an irritant that can also, as the previous two quotations express, come to be seen as detrimental to the business. There are a couple of different aspects that are raised by this. One is discussed in the section below on expansion of the £B area. The other is that businesses often have long-standing relationships with particular suppliers, suppliers who, moreover, meet their most important stated attributes of reliability, cost and trustworthiness as well as values such as local (within parameters discussed above), independent, ethical and sustainable practices, and so on. Thus, the ideal situation for these businesses is that existing businesses they deal with start to take the £B and not that they switch suppliers for that reason. Increasing sector membership is, therefore, seen as a positive move as it overcomes one of the significant issues that some businesses experience, that of currency circulation.

On the other hand, however, a number of people were not in favour of this type of expansion for the reason that if it were accepted more widely, it would result in a loss of distinctiveness for their business. This type of response is driven by the idea of standing out in a busy market and the potential of the £B to be a marketing aid for particular types of customer, which may bring business to them rather than a competitor (see also North, 2014: 256). In the context of the £B not being widely used if at all by those expressing this view, however, it is outweighed by the former consideration. This does, nevertheless, indicate something important: that the £B as tied up as it is with value identification is also seen from a business perspective and not solely through the lens of values, even for its more enthusiastic supporters.

Expansion of the operating area of the Bristol Pound (regional rather than city scope)

This also elicited mixed responses. As the following quote conveys, for a number of businesses this would make a large difference to their ability to use £B because of where some of their partners are located, "I think the only thing that would make us use it more would be if there were more businesses involved to create the flow of movement". In this situation expansion of the area "would be brilliant!" Thus, a lack of relevant businesses using it as a result of location was one of the more important barriers to businesses being able to expand their own usage. This in fact is an important factor that North notes in contrasting the success of the Chiemgau (a regional money) to that of the Transition Towns (2014: 260). It's also worth noting here that this is often a matter of necessity; that is, there are not more local options of suppliers that a business might switch to.

Those who were already members and reported more negative experiences dealing with £B, or no experience at all, were more reserved about such expansion. Here, comments such as "No, sort out Bristol first of all" were typical. For these businesses then, any expansion would have to go alongside and not lead factors around personal support in Bristol for existing members.

Sharing customer usage data

This, for the vast majority, was not something they would be keen on. They are extremely protective of customer data and many would be extremely uncomfortable doing so and "apprehensive even if within the law". Even for those few whose response was not as strong as this, it was not something of any importance, thus "if it was there, I would probably have a little glance at it, but for the amount of work, I'm not sure it's that useful".

Reduced fees for other business networks

This received largely and cautiously negative responses. "These kinds of offers come too easy" was a common attitude, suggesting that they are not a concern when deciding to join a network and might even have the negative impact of devaluing that network in the perception of a business. There were also concerns over how these kinds of offers were being financed behind the advertising rhetoric. "Who's taking the hit here?" and "how is it offset and distributed?" being typical kinds of questions that these offers raise in the minds of businesses seeing them as part of a membership package. That is, they see these offers as something that they would be paying for through membership fees and so more of a hidden cost than a bonus benefit. Such offers, therefore, were not seen as supplying the kind of financial benefit to engagement that businesses look for.

Ability to tailor your online directory entry

People generally are keen for this, valuing the ability to personalise these adverts to suit their business image as well as the flexibility it would allow; for example, "that would be useful - to change pictures and information quickly". In fact, a few expressed surprise that this was not already a standard feature of the directory format and set up, "Can't you already?!", for example.

Data on currency circulation

This was not on the whole attached much value. A few people would "personally find it quite interesting" but "not really relevant or important". That is to say that most people would probably not pay too much attention and those that would, would do so out of personal curiosity rather than it being seen as adding real value to their business and therefore a reason for membership. In fact, one person highlighted that it could be "possibly dangerous as it might show a negative message".

Advocacy for independent Bristol businesses to the City Council

As with £B community presence (see below), this was seen by several as being a valuable role given the values and aims of £B. One person even remarked that this could potentially be one way that a network organisation could stand out from the market: "this is possibly the kind of thing that is different and that we would look for". There were, however, more reservations expressed than with involvement with community projects, which present a series of considerations for any such role being undertaken in an effective way that members would value. As one person both supported and cautioned, "no harm in having it but depends what they're advocating for". For some it was seen as a valuable way to "help to push back against the corporates" because, "yeah, small business can use all the help they can get".

Others questioned £B's ability to be effective as a representative organisation. Thus, one person commented that it was "a nice consideration but it's unlikely one body can represent the range of businesses properly. There would be a conflict of interest between business types". It will be important, therefore, for £B to consider the range of businesses in its membership and how its activities represent this range. Others though questioned the £B's ability to be effective and credible in this role; that is, could they exert influence over the Council? A couple of other organisations (the Federation of Small Businesses and the role of the Business Improvement Districts, BIDs) were seen as both already doing this and in a better position to be effective as they are better established and able to exert more influence.

Social and environmental impact reporting

As with data on currency circulation this was for many seen as something that may or may not be of personal curiosity, or "may be quite nice but not so important". That is, that it "could demonstrate added value of £B" as one person commented but, to quote another, is "no use to us unless it generates some good publicity". As a further person put it, "maybe being a bit of an advocate and shouting about their members doing wonderful things and championing and supporting the businesses that are going in the right direction would be cool". This last comment was not without qualification though as they continued, "I think there are other bodies that can do the report writing though. I'm not sure that is the £B's job". This raises the question over what exact form this would take, i.e. what aspect of it would be 'the £B's job'? There is a clear sense running through the data that promoting business members through a channel such as this would be the £B's job but questions over what beyond that would be the best use of its resources. There were also questions around the possible negative impacts of such reporting; that, for example, it might create an element of competition in which some businesses were doing better than others, especially when different types of businesses and businesses at different stages may find it easier or more difficult to consistently do well and 'improve' on such measures. There are important considerations here then around possible unintended consequences.

Providing loans for community projects/start ups

This, on the whole, had general support - as one person responded, "Oh, yes, yessy, yes, yes, yes, yes. Definitely!" Positive responses of this kind, even if not as effusive in their expression, were from a values and role-led perspective. It was seen to fit with £B's local focus and focus on sustainable and independent businesses and values, responses such as, "yeah, definitely. Any form of community support is good" and "it could have good impact" capture this. This was also seen as one way in which the £B could increase its presence and people's awareness of it, "£B would get a lot of good press off the back of that", for example.

When it came to loans to businesses, there were also more muted responses, however. One long-time member, for instance, remarked on how "they experimented with B2B loans 2013 to 2014 but it got

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complicated and was dreadful”⁵. It appears that the terms of such loans and their organisation had lacked clarity and resulted in frustration from those initially attracted by the scheme. There was also the issue of the currency of the loans; supplied in £B rather than £Sterling, for example, means that they proved of limited scope and use given the difficulties faced in circulating the currency. Any undertaking of this sort would have to be carefully and clearly set out. Given the caution expressed over taking £B because of the issues surrounding circulation, it is thus likely that such a scheme could only have limited impact if other areas of membership numbers and circulation are not addressed first. Alternatively, it might be worth considering loans part in £B and part in £Sterling. This raises clear questions over priorities in terms of developing membership package offers. Where features are interlinked in ways such as this, it will be important to ensure that features grow in tandem.

Presence in community events/projects

As with the above, this kind of presence was seen as an extremely useful way of £B increasing awareness as well as a clear demonstration of its values in-action playing a role in city and community life. It would thus demonstrate the added value of £B to the community through involvement. They “need to be everywhere, all over” and “needs to be in local stuff, to be seen”, for instance. This, moreover, is likely to be more effective when it comes to these goals than loans as a result of the restrictions of currency.

An agency service for temporary labour

This was generally not seen as desirable for more general reasons around caution over temporary agency staff and their ability to fit in and ‘know the business’; one person, for example, recalled previous bad experiences, “in previous businesses I've had nightmares with terrible quality from agencies”. More specific concerns were again expressed over whether an organisation such as the £B would be able to be effective in this regard. One person, for example, remarked that although it would be no use as they would need labour that had specific skills and experience, it could perhaps better function as a pool of potential volunteers.

Technical support and guidance (using the £B)

As far as this was part of a more general support package, this was seen as positive.

Brokerage service

For a number of people this would be seen as a valuable aspect of a network, “it could be relevant and useful as part of the networking thing”. It would, therefore, be a way of generating the kinds of contacts that businesses look for in networking. One person commented that a national network they are a member of does just this and that the £B could be local version. To be successful, however, and to ensure it was a service distinct from networking events or as an integrated aspect of (some of) them, this would need to be based on in-depth knowledge of different member businesses and their needs, and careful matching and management. If not, it could be seen as superfluous or even as generating increasing amounts of irrelevant correspondence or time commitment. A more sceptical view was that, “This would depend on how it's used. If it's pushed to everyone, a single product, it would slant range and therefore prices, and narrow and limit the choice on offer”, or “[it] can get cliquy with cliquy referrals”. This raises two issues: the first is that in so far as the £B was playing a ‘tilting’ role in the local economy this may not be a bad effect. The second is that it needs to go hand in hand with an expansion of active members as well as deepening relationships between the £B and its business membership. If this kind of service is seen as being pushed but also as being too narrow, it is unlikely to find a receptive audience for its recommendations.

⁵ It should also be mentioned that this came before the current management of the £B.

Business support hub

There were two ways in which this was commented on. One was thinking about a physical space, such as spaces where people can use IT facilities or meeting rooms. Physical space is seen as beneficial for some who work on their own from home and can feel isolated, also that it could help separate work from home, with the caveat that "there's always a cost/benefit balance as working at home is free!" For some, who need specific resources, it can be impractical and depending on location, difficult to reach. On the whole, it seemed that this would be something nice, but not necessarily well-used if it was that specific. Thus, £B membership that opens options to use already existing spaces through partnership would be a good option.

The other way in which this was thought about was a form of peer support from others in similar positions or who have been through similar business problems. This would take the form of primarily an online forum, where questions can be asked and views shared, with some organisation into themes for reference, and with possible workshops on different issues. This was generally felt to be a valuable form of support, which small, independent businesses would benefit from, "help is never a bad thing" as one person remarked.

There was, as ever, some more sceptical voices. One person, for instance, noted that "there's enough out there" already so such a scheme would have to be carefully thought through and set up to ensure that it was effective enough to have the desired beneficial effect. A more sceptical voice remarked that, "If you need, for example, specialist legal advice, you pay for a specialist and pay for proper services, this is better than half-baked steering advice". Others, for example, highlighted the role of the Federation of Small Businesses in being able to provide expertise in particularly important and complicated areas, and where such expertise rather than peer support is more necessary. Yet, there was a felt need for support and sharing of experiences and difficulties that small independent business owners can benefit from. This, moreover, varies depending on type of business and the stage that a business is at. This would need careful curating but offers scope for clear value.

Complementary forms of exchange

Complementary forms that were discussed included exchanges of skills and time as well as currency between members. This was generally seen as "a nice idea but is it workable?". It was seen as particularly useful for start-ups who would benefit from more general swapping of advice and skills and not necessarily have the resources for professional advice all the time. It was also seen as something that could create a "community feel". Scepticism, however, on whether it could be effectively managed was common. A few had experiences of previous schemes such as time banks and these came with heavy reservations about the practical difficulties despite the apparent appeal. Further reservations were around how such swaps are quantified to ensure parity, and whether a 'bank' of time would be able to run on this basis; questions, for example, about how time and skills are valued against each other. Thus, reservations were also expressed about the potential for such a scheme to create more work that would not offset the time involved and benefit received. Indeed, one person commented that as a result of all the practical difficulties, they would "rather give charitably than a formal skill swap". This, therefore, may be worth considering as an aspect of the support hub feature above rather than a stand-alone scheme.

A re-use market

For many this was seen as a good scheme, "anything that tackles that issue of waste is brilliant" and "I think if £B is driving those kinds of ethical things, it can only be good", for example. It was seen as particularly beneficial to start-ups to be able to benefit from cheaper goods. People also commented on the fact that while it was a good idea, it would need to be organised well and "not mean extra time and work". Thus, it might be a "nice idea but unlikely that time and effort would be worth it". A further caution expressed was: "This is a nice idea but would actually be a horrible experience of

drilling down into unfair estimations of value". Such a scheme would then need to very carefully set up and managed to ensure that perceptions of value of goods were not unfair and that it was easy and time-efficient for businesses to use.

Tailored packs

The pilot study out of which this project grew had indicated that tailored packs might be a worthwhile and valuable feature. These would include information tailored to the particular needs of a business/business sector, rather than receiving general information on other members as currently available through the £B website, directory, and newsletters, for instance. Businesses would receive such information in a more targeted form that would be more relevant for their business. This was not corroborated in this study, however, which returned more mixed results. While some commented that "this is not often done", others said that it would be "useful if service specific", and there were consistent reservations about the ability of a generalist organisation such as the £B to be able to supply packs that offered the kind of value that would be worthwhile for both the £B and business, "they don't know my business so they wouldn't know what to send" typifies this. For such an approach to work then, there would need to be considerable communication between £B and its members in order to define how this would work.

Newsletters

Along the same lines as members' responses to the existing £B news, these were more often than not met with exasperation: "No more!!", "Oh, God. I hate newsletters, I really do!", "More than once a month does my brain in", "the quality of the content is rarely worthwhile", "I never have time to read them". This again indicates the volume and irrelevance of these types of features. With a slightly more positive take others shared these general sentiments but did see a possible important role for them based on how they distinguish currently between those they read and pay attention to and those they discard. What emerged as important was that they must add value and are not just be marketing for the organisation. Examples of this include announcements of events and schemes that are relevant. People were highly critical of what they saw as too frequent and too easy emails that are sent out and serve more as a marketing exercise for the organisation rather than benefitting the business; thus, "If there's something to say! I find businesses do newsletters for the sake of doing a newsletter. Is this information really relevant? Is this information really useful to the businesses we're sending it out to? How often do we need to send them? If not, they're not gonna get read" puts it straightforwardly.

Networking events

Business networking events provoked a mixed response. Similar to those above, they were seen as useful earlier on in a business's life, useful to get out and meet people, especially if work was usually quite isolated. Time, both in terms of time available as well as timing of events, and a lack of variety thereof, were cited as constraints. The specificity of their targeting was also expanded upon, with the general consensus being that they are more useful if targeted: "Does it make it easier to meet the right people?", "Targeted and specific are better - who's in the room?!", "specific equals golden".

Tangibility for generalist networks also came out strongly again, "they must add to business and be relevant and add value" remarked one person, typifying general attitudes. The difficulty of this again arose, however: "The problem with these is that connections through networks can be quite intangible", "The worthwhileness is often difficult to quantify with networks, especially in comparison with sector specific groups". Thus, being able to make tangible and somehow quantify the benefit of such events is extremely important to consider as a factor in being able to make these attractive to members.

Expos/trading days

This provoked a similar response to networking events, with being put in the room with right people and adding-value key questions. This was seen as something more difficult for a generalist network to provide. They are “too often irrelevant” and “not worthwhile enough”. Further problems arose here also as they take up more time than morning or evening networking events and as a result are “a bit time-consuming so would have to be specific to be worthwhile”. Moreover, moving stock around can be expensive and tricky and not make it worthwhile unless there is a strong chance of it generating business.

Collaborating on schemes (e.g. loyalty schemes)

A few saw this as a useful marketing tool, “it’s a bit of marketing, isn’t it? It gives you an excuse to talk about your business and what you’re doing”. Many more were sceptical, however, of the ability of these types of schemes to generate new business, “you would need to see that you got any discount back. Are you getting more customers in for that or are they just paying less? It’s difficult, for us it would be difficult”. There is the question, therefore, of who ends up bearing the burden of the discount with the feeling that businesses could not or were not happy to given the reservations expressed about how much new business these types of schemes actually generate. One person remarked along these lines that the reasons for shopping in these types of businesses or partnering with them in B2B relations should not be driven by such schemes as “independents’ margins are too narrow. Shopping local is its own reward.” Indeed, one person remarked in this vein that “£B is a loyalty scheme in itself”.

Award schemes

The type of schemes discussed here were awards such as £B’s fledgling business champion scheme or different types of ethical awards that recognise businesses for various types of practices in line with the values of the £B.

A few gave reservedly positive responses, such as “kind of okay but not any kind of priority”, as long as they clearly added value or functioned to promote broader values more generally: “they could be an interesting way of getting your business name out there”; “anything that involves more networking and makes it a bit more of a community makes sense”. Others, however, thought they would be more likely to erode this sense of community and potentially be damaging to this as an integral value: “the £B is too varied for fair, good awards. How would these be rated? It creates an implicit pressure when variation is for legitimate business reasons. It might undermine solidarity and create unnecessary rivalry.”

For most they were seen as not relevant, or worse, “in actual fact these are a bit naff”, “I don’t like these; I don’t trust them. They tend to be too self-serving”. Yet others questioned their function as a marketing and promotion tool also: “If you’re gonna do it [promote business members], do it. Awards are unnecessary and we don’t go in for them as we’re not convinced it would draw people in. Other forms of promotion would do the job”.

Promotion of your business through marketing

Perhaps unsurprisingly this received the most overwhelmingly positive responses. This was not without reservation, however, captured by this response: “could be a 1 or a 5 depending what it is and who to. It needs to be targeted”. Thus, businesses are sceptical of a too general and approach and it needs to be carefully set up to reach the right people and be effective. This was especially so for the more established or specialised businesses, which question the ability of such a network to have the right kind of reach and audience.

Other

A few people mentioned other features that they would value as part of network membership. These included: discounts for insurance brokers or other professional business services; 'unconferences' – a format where the programme is built collectively at the beginning of the day with people making pitches, following which a programme is agreed upon. This, it was suggested creates more meaningful conversations. In this sense this feature might be seen in the context of what was said about a business support hub above.

Further features included: talks from members like little TED talks; webinars; award dinners, where members pay for tables; events that take place at different members' places of business in order to get out to places and see them; "some sort of coaching would be quite useful - to be coached into doing something more suitable for my business"; other types of meet up, such as sector specific ones to share experiences; and a greater mix of general and sector specific events and meetings.

Summary

One distinction that it is necessary to make from above is those features and services which would be 'nice' and those which would add the type of value to a business that would make a difference between their being an engaged member or not. Ultimately, membership and especially engaged membership is something that businesses will evaluate against the benefit and value that is brought to their business as a result, and, moreover, it is something that is continually re-evaluated – many have dropped out of or intend not to renew their membership of other networks on this basis.

As some put it quite directly when asked what they are looking for from membership of network organisations: "I'm after lead generation", "anything that promotes footfall", or "the most important thing is that the network generates leads", that it introduces potential clients, or helps advertise to potential clients. If the market reach isn't right, it will be seen as irrelevant and time and energy that is better spent elsewhere.

Some of the scepticism and caution expressed relates to generalist networks on the whole and others to the specific position of £B. Thus, for example, some comment that "things other than marketing are hard to get right for a generalist network" and even that, as we have seen, can be difficult when it comes to demonstrating worth. Alternatively, and in line with the various ways in which specialist networks of different sorts were valued, it is a mistake to "spread themselves too thin. Focus and get it right". In terms of how £B needs to orient its approach, one person summed it up thus: "in a broader sense, making it easier to use as a business. This is often pushed by time-constraints and ease of usage. It needs to be convenient for us to use it. It's that thing between having social and ethical values but also needing to fit all these different tasks into a very busy day". What emerges clearly then is that the £B must necessarily offer added business value; value alignment is not sufficient in itself. The market of network organisations and the general features associated with them is a crowded one. It will be necessary for £B to be able to operate as an important business service provider whose services are competitive within this market in their own right in terms of the value and quality of the service provided.

Paying for services

People were open to paying for membership of a network or similar organisation "if it created real business opportunities". Businesses, "would have to see tangible support to the business - not just paying running costs [of the network]". A further way in which this sentiment was expressed was by one person who said events would "need substance" if they were paying for them, and that they were "not so seduced by free coffee and croissants" as expensive pastries were seen as something unnecessarily adding to the membership fee itself. In fact, one person remarked that "I'd be inclined to say that if it became a fee [based membership], probably all the cafés wouldn't take it [£B as a currency] as we wouldn't see the value".

There were differences, nevertheless, in how people would like to see membership fees structured. Some common responses included fees being low, perhaps unsurprisingly, but also a way of being able to test the ground and assess the likely benefit to be accrued. If they are paying, or when they are paying, they want to see benefits: "I'm always against paying for no reason" as one person put it bluntly.

For some, one way of demonstrating value would be through some form of recognition; an annual fee might include, for example, an editorial feature, a certain amount of marketing and so on. One person commented that commission-based fees were "a bit corporate" and a fixed fee with the first year free would be preferable.

For most, however, they would prefer for it to be free initially, for a set period or attendance at a set number of events, in order to assess how well the network would fit their needs, with payment coming following this, in order to "see how much it's working, how much using it and figure that out first before paying fees".

Most stated a preference for a fee structure that was based around a low, between £30 to £100 being frequently cited, or no annual fee, with payment on a commission basis, "would have to be proportional to how much you use it". A key reason for preferring this type of fee structure is that it would provide flexibility to opt in and out of features, services and events, or even advertising pushes, on an ad hoc, as needed or as time permitted basis. A low annual fee would then be supplemented by small fees per event (such as networking) or feature (such as access to support hub). Also, a tiered system was preferred by most, with business size or the amount of currency that passes through the business being ways in which a tiered system could be structured in a way perceived as fair. Thus, a common feeling was that it was "fairer for larger businesses to subsidise little ones trying to get on their feet".

Summary & recommendations

One person, who had previously been involved in a local currency in a different place before coming to Bristol, remarked that "the currency comes as a result of collaboration and not the other way round". Such an orientation seems to be borne out by the findings presented here. That is, that the £B needs to work for businesses in order for businesses to work for it. The findings on shared and aligned values particularly suggest that an ideological discourse alone or as the main driving discourse risks alienating people, and alienating those who are otherwise allies in this sense, especially if it over-emphasises a causal story about value change. There are those, for example, whose scope for using the £B is limited owing to legitimate business reasons even though they share and practise the values, as well as those non-members whose values already align with the £B's. Rather, a cooperative discourse of collaboration between the £B and businesses that combines shared values with value-added is more likely to succeed in forming a productive driver of the type of change the £B strives to help bring about. That is, adopting a discourse in which £B and its business members are cooperative and collaborative partners towards attaining their joint goals and values is likely to be more productive. As one sympathetic and generally 'on-board' member remarked "£B is just not a huge focus at the moment" because they already meet the values and focussing on their business, which occupies long hours, is the priority. The £B, where it is seen as or operates as an 'add-on' to that (especially one that itself may be time- and work-demanding) rather than as important value-added inevitably struggles to become a priority. This is reflected again in a comment made by another business member of the £B: "when XX said the focus [of the £B] was now on business to business trading rather than it being 'nice', I thought, now you've got it." As a further person also remarked:

"I think people could wanna be part of it for all different reasons. Maybe not just because they believe in it as a local currency but as something that is very valuable to be a part of in a business networking point of view, that actually this is now a bit of a club, that we can help each other. I think going down that line is quite clever and would be quite useful, especially to small businesses."

How to add that value, how to present a business case to businesses, therefore, is the key challenge for the £B. The sections of findings presented in this report suggest a number of avenues for the £B to explore as they develop a value proposition for business membership. Some of these consolidate, develop and systematise existing signs of good practice. Some suggest that routes the £B is currently pursuing might need to be re-evaluated or reprioritised.

Strategy: anchoring and clustering

Strategically, the findings of the report set in the literature overview suggest that a more focussed growth pathway, which targets a specific sector and seeks to saturate it with £B activity might prove fruitful. Moreover, this would also benefit or perhaps require the £B's uptake by anchor institutions and key influencers. This would allow the £B to cluster its growth, targeting key businesses, consumers and anchor institutions. This might then provide greater scope for expanding the focus as there may be knock on effects in terms of the £B's ability to expand into different sectors more thoroughly. This, furthermore, would allow the £B to develop the type of business competence, knowledge and expertise of a specific business sector, thereby improving what it is able to offer.

Perhaps the most obvious sector for this is cafés and restaurants. This is so for a number of reasons: a) it is already an area where the £B has a more expansive uptake; b) there is a high level of business to business trading to allow the £B to concentrate on developing this; c) this might mean that other features that may be necessary, such as expanding the geographical area, can be done in a more targeted and manageable way allowing the strategy and definition of how this is done to develop; d) consumer spending is high and dynamic in this sector; e) key consumer targets where there is considerable scope to expand the spending of £B can be reached, such as students, which will in turn

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help increase awareness; g) key anchor institutions, such as the University of Bristol and the University of the West of England can also be targeted; h) key geographical areas can be concentrated on, such as Park Street, which could then lead to expansion as well as through key Bristol chains which have branches throughout the city.

The knock-on effects of successfully targeting a sector area would be that if a critical mass is developed, it might then prove more influential in being able to expand other areas, such as business, financial and legal services.

Technology

What comes through very clearly in the findings of the report, and what would be necessary to make such expansion possible, is technological development. This means developing the online and app technology as well as how payments reconcile with existing financial practices (through tills and accounts, for instance). This is a significant hindrance for businesses, and it is likely that without this being on a similar level and being able to fit fairly seamlessly with existing systems, growth is always going to struggle. As such, this is a key area in which to focus funding and investment.

Developing services

The services which the findings of this report suggest focussing on and developing can be clustered into three groups: essential, valuable, and desirable. Inevitably, for one to work it involves at times overlapping with another feature, and will also no doubt involve other considerations, practical, technical and definitional, beyond what is discussed here. These overlaps are key to identify and recognise in order to ensure that development of services and features is undertaken in an order that helps their success or in tandem where necessary. The key message that comes out in the findings in different ways is to focus development and get it right before gradually expanding. Nevertheless, they are presented here in terms of what service or feature *leads* and indicates where others may follow to help facilitate this.

Essential There are two areas which are key here. The first is *effective marketing* and the second is *collaborative personal business support*. Both of these are focussed on the economic and publicity challenges for the £B.

Marketing and promotion of £B business members has a dual function. Primarily it will be a key way in which £B can pursue the goal of adding value to its membership through generating increased revenue and economic benefit for its members. If marketing is seen to be effective, it has the further benefit of demonstrating to business members that the £B is working for them. To achieve this, marketing will need to be targeted at both individual consumers as well as other businesses. It will need to involve collaboration with businesses to identify their marketing needs in order for this to be effective and be seen to be effective. It is also recommended that this marketing seeks to reach beyond the £B member network. It will also be important to *develop reporting mechanisms* so that the £B is able to demonstrate adding value in ways that are tangible or quantifiable, even if relatively informally.

Collaborative personal support in using the £B was identified extremely positively to those who had received it as well as extremely negatively by those who had not. This involves several features of its own. The first is clearer and more effective communication. It is important that such communication and collaboration is personal and where appropriate face to face. This should also be seen as an ongoing service. It is an important part of helping a business owner understand how the £B works as part of their business: facilitating its use in ways that are streamlined with existing systems and procedures, identifying scope for expansion, regular problem solving, meeting/training of staff where appropriate, and so on. It is therefore recommended that certain areas be divided up so that each

business has a personal contact at the £B for this, who visits and so on. In addition to offering a personal service, this would open up an important line of communication from which the £B can learn as it develops and be an important mechanism for listening and responding to members. As such it would be a vital part of developing working relationships between £B and its members. It is also important for £B to gain the in-depth knowledge of its business members that will enable it to provide effective publicity for them.

Valuable Two further areas and recommendations for services include developing *business support services* and *re-evaluating networking*.

Business support services through a business support hub should develop primarily online. This kind of service would prove particularly valuable to independent businesses in their early phases or at other important stages of development. An online forum with different threads for, for example, business stages, business questions, sector specific, £B questions, would enable greater participation and this can be supplemented with face to face meetings and workshops. This would also help develop a sense of community amongst members and with the £B.

Networking needs to be carefully re-evaluated to be more effective, particularly for businesses that are more mature in their own lifecycle. In order that a greater variety of businesses are able to attend, it is recommended that event times vary, breakfast works for some but not others. This would also help target different sectors. The £B should aim to facilitate effective introductions at networking events. This might be through having some targeted events or by more personal communication with particular businesses to highlight an opportunity for introductions at particular events. The kind of knowledge that will be necessary to do this requires the type of relationships and effective communication outlined above. A further way of focussing and targeting these events as well as promote key members is to hold them on the premises of members' businesses. This also means that follow up communication can be more effective. This should involve the names and details of all attendees, which are automatically sent out following the event, thereby helping enable contact after the event and facilitate business to business communication. Again, £B should seek to develop reporting mechanisms of any connections made as a result of these events in order to help enable it to demonstrate its added value.

Desirable

Expanding the region of the £B would be a significant aid to the scope of B2B transactions in the currency, particularly with important business sectors. This could be done gradually, with the definition for how this is managed evolving. This could also be done in stages as this is worked out and as sectors are focussed on. The priority here is on focussed expansion, which will in turn enable the encouragement of greater engagement from existing members. The reason this comes under *desirable* rather than *valuable* or *essential* is that without the above-mentioned features leading and being strong, this is likely to prove ineffective.

Community presence through involvement in local events and projects has the scope to boost the £B's profile and people's awareness of it. It would also fit with the values of the £B and the businesses that adopt it. Such involvement might come through sponsoring, organisation or participation. This would be seen extremely positively by members and potential members and although not perhaps decisive in its own right, in combination with strong offerings in other areas, has the potential to tip the scale in the £B's favour.

Low priority/undesirable

As well as the recommendations for expanded or new focus outlined in the above three sections, there are also existing areas of focus which the £B might need to reconsider and reprioritise. These are: *newsletters*, which need careful rethinking in terms of target, content and frequency. They are a fairly



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ineffective form of communication unless they have established a value in the content they hold for the recipient. *Award and loyalty schemes* should also be seen as a low priority as the perception of these is generally low or fairly indifferent and may, more seriously, be seen to conflict with the goals and values espoused by the £B. They are certainly not a feature which will retain existing or attract new members in their own right.

Other possible services, such as a re-use market and carefully facilitated skill sharing, might also prove value-added features. Yet, the recommendation is that these are not a priority and should be developed out of the establishment of the services identified above.

In sum, in order to fulfil its political challenge, the £B must strategise along the economic and publicity challenge lines. This is so for two main reasons. The first is that its members already accept and reflect many of the social and environmental values integral to the £B. Thus, the focus for the £B must first be on working *with* businesses on their achievement. It is, furthermore, only through demonstrating these two that further businesses are likely to join and actively engage to the extent that expansion occurs beyond a niche. Without being able to fulfil on the economic and publicity challenges, the scope, influence and impact of the £B and therefore the fulfilment of its political challenge will remain too restricted and limited. As people remarked: "people want to be associated with something making progress so they need a narrative of progress and to tell a positive story that people want to be a part of" and, they "need to get people talking about it". While such a *narrative of progress* will be essential, this is in fact what businesses need to hear and see in their own relationship with and usage of the £B as highlighted above and will only flow from this.

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