

F  
O  
R  
M



# ScaleLeaders Creative Birmingham

—  
May 2026

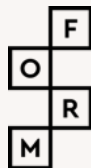


## ScaleLeaders Creative

ScaleLeaders brings together the people shaping scaleup growth across the UK.

It helps regions, institutions and support systems better understand and respond to the realities of growth.

[Website](#)



## Form

We are a B Corp committed to building fairer, stronger economies.

We work with founders, leadership teams and regions on the practical challenges that shape growth — from commercialisation and leadership to stronger support systems for scaleups.

[Website](#)



Goldsmiths works at the intersection of creativity, culture, technology and social change, supporting new thinking around the future of the creative economy.

[Website](#)

# Between Survival and Scale: What It Really Takes

Ruth Allan - Managing Director, Wire Press Limited  
Claire Downes - Founder and CEO, Virtual Decisions  
Jenni Fulton - Managing Partner, Emperor  
Siân Prime - Academic Lead: Enterprise, Innovation and  
Incubation - Host

# O1

## Between Survival and Scale

- Three creative businesses at different stages of growth, from early expansion through to international scaling.
- The session focused on what happens as businesses grow more complex, exposed and harder to hold together.
- Not how businesses start, but what happens when teams expand, operational pressure increases and leadership responsibility deepens.

why

“If we could work together every day, I think we would probably triple our revenue.”

— Ruth Allan on the importance of workspace

## What starts to show up when growth kicks in

One issue surfaced repeatedly. Growth was experienced not as a release from pressure, but as an increase in it.

As businesses begin to grow, the stakes rise. Founders described taking on responsibility for salaries, contracts and delivery, often without much room for error, and without the structure fully in place to support it.

This shift does not happen cleanly. Rather than moving from startup into scaleup as a defined step, businesses stretch into growth. Cashflow remains tight, decisions stay close to the founder, and there is an ongoing sense that things could slip back.

Part of that is specific to the nature of creative businesses. The models described involved public sector contracts, multiple revenue streams, longer sales cycles, and work shaped by social or cultural outcomes alongside commercial ones.

Several businesses were also operating through hybrid models, combining creative delivery with technology, product development or innovation-led services. That often made growth harder to communicate externally. Revenue did not always scale in predictable ways, and future value was not always visible through conventional business metrics.

## What starts to show up when growth kicks in

This creates a mismatch when support assumes faster cycles, clearer models or more standardised growth patterns. While support was visible, much of it did not feel relevant. Founders referred to programmes that did not reflect their market, repeated familiar content, or failed to move the business forward. What proved most useful was support that was specific, trusted and relational.

Support that worked tended to come from people who understood the business well enough to offer relevant advice, challenge decisions, or step in at the right moment, including financially where needed.

Alongside this, more practical pressures surfaced repeatedly: access to space, hiring decisions, and cashflow that did not align with delivery cycles. These were described not as secondary issues, but as factors directly shaping the ability to grow.

Running underneath this was a further point.

Even as businesses grow, the behaviours formed in earlier stages remain. Founders described holding on to risk, delaying decisions, and staying close to every part of the business long after growth had started.



“Although the support is very evident, sometimes it’s not the right support”

—Claire Downes

# What Matters

- **Growth increases exposure before it creates stability**  
Businesses are taking on team, delivery and financial responsibility before the underlying structure is fully in place.
- **There is no shortage of support, but there is a gap in fit**  
Much of what is available does not reflect how these businesses actually operate at this stage.
- **The most useful support is still relational**  
Trusted individuals, not programmes, are often the difference between momentum and stall.
- **Operational pressures are directly shaping growth**  
Space, hiring decisions and cashflow timing are not secondary issues. They determine whether growth holds.
- **Survival mode continues into growth**  
Founders carry risk, caution and decision-making habits developed earlier, affecting how quickly they move.
- **This transition phase remains under-recognised**  
Support is strong at startup and increasingly focused on scale, but the space in between is still less clearly addressed.



# From Policy to Practice: Commissioning for Creative Growth

Gillian Easson – Executive Director, Creative Dundee

Hayley Pepler – Head of Culture, Creative Industries and Digital Roadmap, West Midlands Combined Authority

Helen Pheby - Head of Culture, Heritage and Sport, West Yorkshire Combined Authority

John Newbigin OBE – Ambassador for the Creative Industries, Mayor of London - Host

“One of the big issues with creative industry policy in this country is it’s all about supply side... it’s not about demand side.”


— John Newbigin OBE



## 02

# From Policy to Practice: Commissioning for Creative Growth

- This session brought together people working at the point where creative industries policy becomes delivery.
- The discussion moved across Combined Authorities, local systems and intermediary organisations, with perspectives from West Yorkshire, the West Midlands, Dundee and London.
- Each approached the conversation from a different position, but with a shared concern: how national ambition for the creative industries translates into support that actually works in places.



“We don’t generate jobs.  
We generate work.”

— John Newbigin OBE on creative  
labour and economic policy

## What becomes harder when policy meets place

What came through clearly is that the creative industries now sit in a far more visible position within economic policy, but the systems around them are still catching up.

Combined Authorities are being asked to play a more active role in shaping creative growth, but that role is still forming. They are not local authorities, national agencies or traditional delivery organisations. They sit somewhere in the middle, translating between government priorities, local realities, sector needs and business growth.

That position matters.

It creates space to do things differently, but, also creates uncertainty. Businesses, artists, cultural organisations and even national institutions are still working out what Combined Authorities are for, where their powers sit, and how they relate to existing support structures.

One of the strongest themes was that places cannot build creative growth strategies from deficit.

## What becomes harder when policy meets place

The West Midlands example reflected this clearly. Rather than starting with what the region lacks, the focus has shifted towards identifying existing assets, strengths and creative capacity, then using those as the basis for policy and investment decisions.

That idea echoed throughout the session. Dundee was described not only through its games sector, but through its wider mix of makers, artists, microbusinesses, grassroots networks and civic energy. West Yorkshire pointed to fashion, textiles, music export and production infrastructure. Creative growth does not start from a blank sheet. It starts from what is already there.

A second thread was the need to ask better questions.

John Newbigin argued that too much policy begins at the wrong end, focusing on gaps, sectors and delivery models while missing the less visible conditions that make creative economies function.

The phrase "invisible infrastructure" carried weight throughout the discussion: networks, trust, intermediaries, local knowledge, confidence and informal relationships. These rarely appear neatly in funding frameworks, but are often what allow creative businesses to move from isolated activity into something more durable.

# What becomes harder when policy meets place

That linked directly to data. Current measures still miss much of the reality of creative work: freelancers, project-based income, informal enterprise and early creative ambition.

Gillian Easson's point about paying "invoice number one" cut through because it identified the moment creative ambition becomes economically real, long before most systems recognise it.


There was also a clear tension around pace.

Creative businesses move quickly. Public systems often cannot. Procurement, governance, political oversight and funding cycles slow the process down. That is not simply bureaucracy as inconvenience. It shapes what becomes possible, and whether support arrives in time to matter.

The final thread was demand.

Newbigin challenged the room to think beyond the supply side. Skills, finance and workspace matter, but growth also depends on who buys, commissions, procures and opens markets for creative businesses.

That shifts commissioning beyond programme delivery. It becomes a question of market shaping.

A black and white photograph of a woman with shoulder-length, wavy hair, smiling and looking towards the left. She is wearing a dark, long-sleeved top with a subtle pattern. In the background, other people are seated at a table, and the setting appears to be a meeting or a workshop. The lighting is soft, and the overall mood is professional and positive.

“We should be celebrating  
paying invoice number one”

— Gillian Easson on how creative  
growth becomes visible

# What Matters

- **Invisible infrastructure is doing visible work**  
Networks, intermediaries, trust, local knowledge and informal connection are often what make creative systems function, even if they rarely appear in funding metrics.
- **The system is still measuring the wrong things**  
Jobs and GVA matter, but they miss freelancers, early enterprise, project-based work and the quieter signs that a creative economy is becoming more capable.
- **Pace is a real design issue**  
Creative businesses often move faster than public systems. If support takes too long to approve or deploy, it can miss the moment when it is most needed.
- **Demand needs more attention**  
Skills, finance and workspace matter, but creative businesses also need markets, buyers, procurement routes and commissioning that creates opportunity.
- **Devolution creates possibility, but not instant clarity**  
There is room for Combined Authorities to test new models, but relationships between regional, local and national actors still need time to mature.

Scale



Co-Founder, L  
olicy and Strat  
r the West Mi  
oe - Dir

## The Capital Fit for Creative Scale

Jordan Dargue - Co-Founder, Lifted Ventures

Emma Thomas - Director, Policy and Strategy, British Business Bank

Rupert Lyle - Fund Principal for the West Midlands Co-Investment Fund

Darren Balcombe - Director, Form - Host

*“We saw about a thousand  
business plans last year... we  
invested in eight.”*


*—Rupert Lyle*



## 03

## The Capital Fit for Creative Scale

- This session brought together three parts of the investment system that creative businesses encounter as they move into growth.
- An angel network focused on increasing the flow of capital into female founders. A co-investment and venture fund operating in the space between early traction and scale. And the British Business Bank, shaping how public capital is deployed into the wider market.
- Different positions within the investment system, but all focused on the same stage of growth: helping businesses move from early traction into sustainable scale.



“The problem isn’t only founder readiness. It’s whether investors understand creative business models well enough to back them.”

— Jordan Dargue

## What happens when creative businesses raise investment?

What came through clearly was that the funding journey becomes far less straightforward once businesses move beyond early traction.

Early funding is still visible: grants, early support and small amounts of capital to get something moving. Further up, venture capital remains active. But the space in between is where things start to break down.

That is where the “valley of death” shows up in practice.

By this stage, businesses have usually delivered projects, tested demand and started building a market. But they have not yet reached the level of consistency or scale later-stage investors expect. At the same time, they are no longer a natural fit for early grant funding.

For creative businesses, that gap is sharper. Revenue is often uneven. Work can be project-led. Value may sit in IP or audience rather than predictable income. That makes these businesses harder for investors to assess, and easier to step away from.

What this creates is a concentration of risk. A relatively small number of investors who understand these models end up carrying much of the load, while others stay out because they do not know how to price the opportunity.

## What happens when creative businesses raise investment?

From the investor side, the expectations were clear: evidence of paying customers, evidence of demand beyond visibility, and evidence that the founder understands how to run a business, not just develop an idea.

That creates another challenge. Many founders are learning all of this at once — building the product, delivering work, hiring teams and trying to understand how funding functions. The learning gap often becomes visible the moment they try to raise.

Alongside this, the system itself still operates in disconnected stages. Grant to angel. Angel to venture. Each comes with different expectations and little continuity between them, so even where capital exists, the journey through it often feels fragmented.

There are signs this is beginning to shift. Larger institutions are bringing more capital into the market, with greater flexibility and a stronger mandate to support sectors like the creative industries. But much of that activity still sits one step removed from founders, moving through funds and intermediaries rather than directly to businesses.

What emerged in the discussion was both things happening at once: more capital trying to engage, while founders still struggle to reach or align to what that capital expects.



“The role of public capital is not to replace markets, but to help create them”

— Emma Thomas

# What Matters

- **The funding journey breaks at the point of early growth**  
Creative businesses can access early funding and see where later-stage capital sits, but the transition between the two is where most struggle.
- **Creative business models remain difficult for investors to interpret**  
Project-based income, IP-led value and uneven revenue make it harder to assess risk and return with confidence.
- **A small group of investors are carrying most of the risk**  
Where investors do understand these models, they are repeatedly backing them while others stay out through lack of familiarity.
- **Founders are expected to understand capital before they are ready**  
Many are learning how funding works at the same time as trying to build and run the business itself.
- **The system is structured as handoffs, not a continuous pathway**  
Grant, angel and venture funding operate with different expectations and little continuity between them.
- **Regional funding ecosystems remain uneven**  
Access to investors, networks and expertise still varies significantly by place, affecting whether businesses can actually raise.

# Beyond the Mandate: Who Gets Seen, Backed and Valued

Kwame Safo – Co-Founder,

Kwame Safo – Founder, Black Music Export (BlackMex)  
Siân Prime – Academic Lead, Enterprise, Innovation and Incubation,  
Goldsmiths University

## 04

# Beyond the Mandate: Who Gets Seen, Backed and Valued

- This conversation with Kwame Safo explored how grassroots creative economies build commercial value long before they are recognised by formal systems of support, funding or investment.
- Drawing on Kwame's experience across pirate radio, DJing, live music, funding programmes and Black Music Export, the session examined what happens when whole scenes are commercially active, culturally influential and audience-led, but still sit outside the data, language and validation routes that shape support and investment.



“Grassroots communities are building things which are incredibly valuable, but the sector doesn’t know what it’s looking at.”

— Kwame Safo

## What gets missed before it gets recognised?

What came through clearly was that creative work can be commercially active long before it is treated as a business in the formal sense.

Kwame described reaching a point where a few hours of DJing could cover more than a full week's wages. This was not a side activity. It was working income, driven by real demand.

At a larger level, the same pattern appeared across venues and scenes. Events filling 1,000 to 3,000-capacity spaces. Genres forming, building audiences and sustaining regular activity. People earning consistently from that work.

The issue was not whether value existed. It was how that value was recognised, and who was doing the recognising.

What sat underneath this was more than a timing issue. Some forms of creative work, particularly in Black music, are consistently harder for formal systems to interpret. That affects how quickly they are taken seriously, and how easily they move into funding and investment conversations.

## What gets missed before it gets recognised?

Examples throughout the discussion pointed to this pattern: pirate radio stations building large audiences while being treated as something to shut down; music movements growing for years before appearing in mainstream coverage; packed venues and strong ticket sales not reflected in the data used to inform funding or investment decisions, even while artists were testing markets and generating income.

Kwame's examples pointed to a wider pattern where Black music scenes were building commercial traction, but were still being treated as informal or early-stage for longer than other parts of the industry. That changes how risk is carried, and who gets backed.

As businesses try to grow, founders are not only running their work, they are also shifting from self-generated income into more structured forms of growth. That requires entrepreneurial instinct, but also access to advice, networks and support that can help translate creative momentum into something systems recognise.

Crowds respond to the music. Promoters respond to ticket sales. Funders and decision-makers often respond to structured data.

The difference is not always effort or quality. It is how familiar the work looks to the people assessing it, and how easily it fits existing expectations of what a "scalable" business should be.

“Sometimes you’re  
not funding the  
artist, you’re funding  
everything around  
them.”

— Kwame Safo



# What Matters

- **Black music scenes are frequently recognised later than the growth they generate**  
Commercial traction, influence and income may already exist before formal systems treat the activity as credible or scalable.
- **Creative work can be economically active before it is recognised as a business**  
Artists are earning from live shows, bookings and audiences long before they appear in formal data or funding pipelines.
- **Early growth is often visible in markets before it is visible in systems**  
Filled venues, repeat bookings and audience demand act as proof of traction long before formal recognition or investment arrives.
- **Evidence shapes who gets backed**  
Creative businesses that cannot easily translate audience momentum into recognised signals often struggle to access funding or investment.
- **Support often arrives after founders have already carried the risk**  
By the time activity is understood by institutions, much of the early growth, experimentation and financial pressure has already been absorbed by the founder.

## What this points to

Across the discussions, one tension surfaced repeatedly: creative businesses are often carrying the pressures of growth before the structures around them are ready to support it.

Businesses are building markets, generating revenue and creating demand while still navigating fragmented support, uneven cashflow and systems that struggle to interpret how creative growth actually happens.

The challenge raised was not simply how to create more ambitious businesses, but how to build the conditions that allow growth to hold.

That means:

- recognising different forms of commercial traction
- creating clearer pathways between public support and private capital
- valuing networks, intermediaries and local infrastructure
- understanding that growth in creative sectors is often non-linear and shaped by place

Creative businesses are already building growth. The challenge is whether systems are designed to recognise and support it.



A special thank you to the community, speakers and partners who contributed so generously, particularly Goldsmiths University for collaborating and supporting these conversations.

The themes raised throughout the event point to a wider challenge: how creative businesses, institutions and ecosystems build the conditions for growth that is sustainable, locally rooted and able to last.

We look forward to continuing the conversation at future ScaleLeaders events.

## Stay involved

To join the community or discuss how Form can support your work, contact Darren Balcombe, Partner, Form.

Darren@form.studio



Form is on a mission to leave people and places better than when it found them. We are committed to equity, diversity and inclusion in our team and encourage all organisations we partner with to impact people, profit and the planet positively.