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ScaleLeaders Creative Birmingham

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April 2026

ScaleLeaders Creative

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

Form

We partner with ambitious regions to support scale ups, building stronger, fairer economies.

We work with creative, digital and tech businesses to overcome growth challenges, from sales and commercialisation to AI adoption, exporting, leadership and scaling operations



A photograph of two women sitting at a table, engaged in a conversation. The woman on the left is wearing glasses and a striped shirt, resting her chin on her hand. The woman on the right is seen from the back, wearing a dark jacket and glasses. In the background, there are several papers and a bright yellow sticky note on a wall. The image is dimmed to serve as a background for the text.

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

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Between Survival and Scale

- Three very different creative businesses, all growing beyond the early stage while still carrying a high degree of personal and financial risk.
- The session looked closely at that phase.
- Not how businesses start, but what happens when they begin to grow: when things get more complex, more exposed and harder to hold together.

A photograph of a panel discussion. Three women are seated on a stage in front of a large window. The woman on the right is speaking into a microphone. A sign with the text 'x+why' is visible behind them. The foreground shows the backs of several audience members.

x+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.

That creates a mismatch when support assumes faster cycles, clearer models or more predictable growth. While support was visible, much of it did not feel relevant.

What starts to show up when growth kicks in

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 more specific and more 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.

A woman with glasses on her head is speaking into a microphone at a podium. To her left, another woman is smiling and clapping. In the foreground, the back of a person's head is visible, looking towards the speaker. A sign on the podium reads "x+why".

x+why

“There were times when I used to cry in the shower because I didn’t know how I was going to pay the wages at the end of the week.”

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 Newbiggin 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

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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.

A woman in an orange suit is standing at the front of a room, speaking into a microphone. She is facing an audience of women seated in rows of chairs. A large poster titled "Leading in Complex Systems" is visible on the wall behind her. The audience members are mostly seen from the back, and several of them have tote bags hanging from their chairs. The tote bags feature a grid pattern with the letters F, O, R, M. The room has large windows with curtains on the left and right sides.

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

John Newbigin 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 Newbiggin 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 dimly lit room, possibly a conference or meeting space, with a large presentation screen in the center. The screen displays text and a small image. An audience of people is seated at tables in the foreground, facing the screen. A man in a light blue shirt is standing on the left side of the room. The room has modern lighting fixtures and a sign that says "x+why" on the right wall.

“We should be celebrating
paying invoice number one”

Gillian on how creative growth starts long before it
appears in formal economic measures

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.

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

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X+

A group of people are seated around a table in a meeting room. A man with glasses and a woman are visible in the foreground, looking towards the right. A large green plant is in the background. The image is dimmed to allow text to be overlaid.


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

Rupert Lyle

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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.

A photograph of two men sitting at a table in a meeting. The man on the left is older, with white hair, wearing a patterned button-down shirt. The man on the right is younger, with a beard, wearing a dark t-shirt. They are both looking at each other. On the table in front of them are a white mug, a smartphone, and a book titled 'ALCHEMY'. The background is a bright, modern office space with a large plant.

“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 look to 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 look to 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 – Founder, Black Music Export (BlackMex)

Sian Prime – Academic Lead, Enterprise, Innovation and Incubation, Goldsmiths University

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Beyond the Mandate: Who Gets Seen, Backed and Valued

- This conversation with Kwame Safo moved beyond a conventional DE&I framing and into something more specific: how Black music, grassroots enterprise and informal creative economies build commercial value long before they are recognised by funders, commissioners or industry gatekeepers.
- Drawing on Kwame's experience across pirate radio, DJing, live music, funding programmes and Black Music Export, the session explored 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.

A photograph of a man with a beard, wearing a black t-shirt, speaking into a microphone. He is sitting at a table with a notebook and a pen. In the background, there is a large screen displaying the word "Beyond" and the name "Kwame Safo - Co-Founder, 8B". A potted plant is visible behind him. The foreground is slightly blurred, showing the back of a person's head and shoulders.

“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.

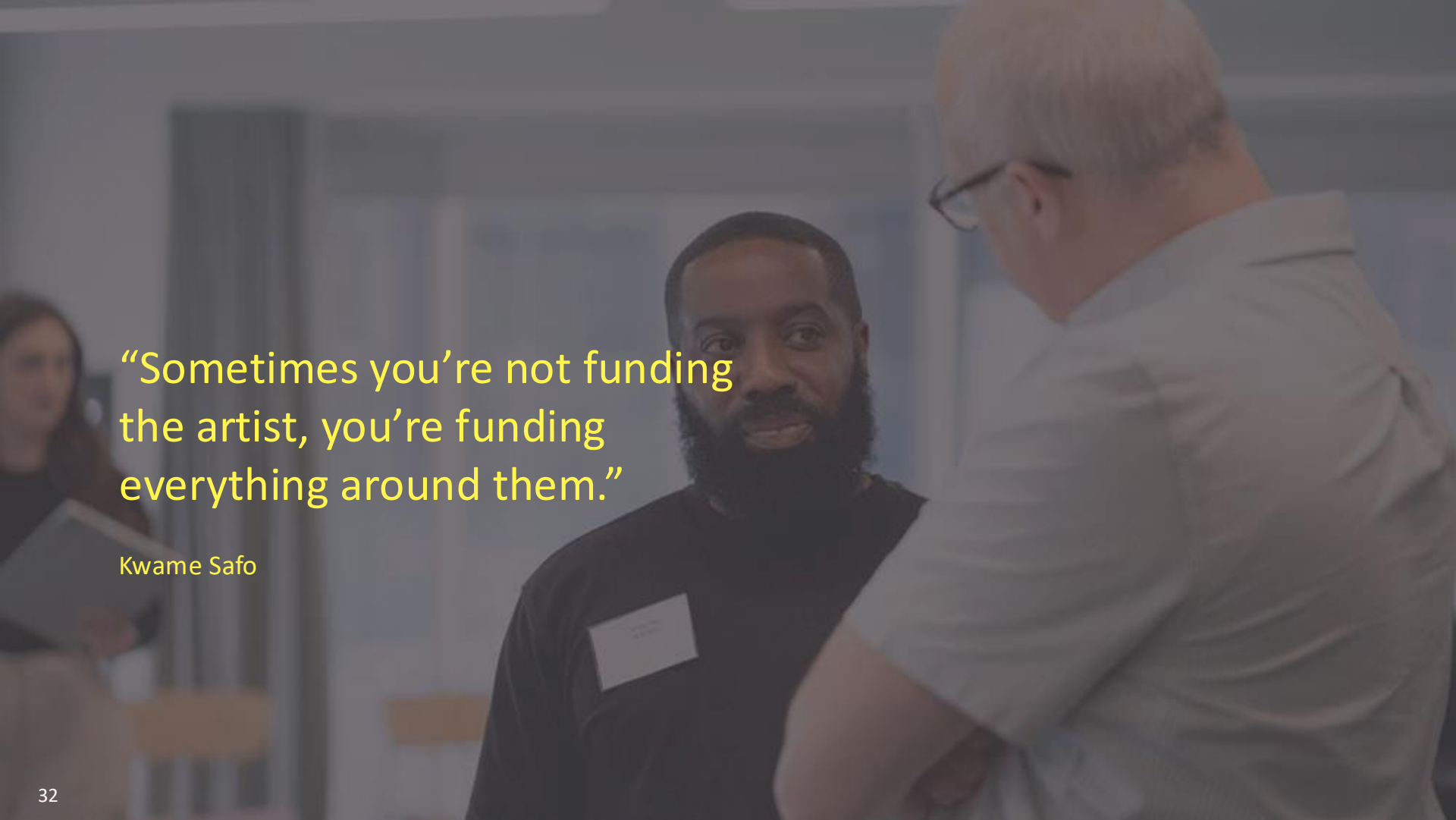
What gets missed before it gets recognised?

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 building audiences, 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 having to translate it into signals the system recognises. 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.

A photograph of two men in conversation. The man on the left is Black with a beard, wearing a dark t-shirt and a name tag. The man on the right is white with glasses, wearing a light-colored short-sleeved shirt. They are in a blurred indoor setting. A quote is overlaid in yellow text on the left side of the image.

“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.



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 were building markets, generating revenue and creating demand, while still operating through uneven cashflow, fragmented support pathways and systems that struggle to interpret how creative growth actually works.

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

That includes:

- 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

For commissioners, funders, investors and ecosystem leaders, the question is not whether creative businesses can scale. It is whether the systems around them can recognise and support growth early enough for it to continue.

A special thank you to the incredible community who joined us, and the cast of speakers who generously shared their experiences and candid insights.

If these conversations have sparked your interest, we invite you to join us as we continue shaping the future of scaleups together - join us for more at the next ScaleLeaders event.

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.