

# CROSS PARTY GROUP on WOMEN IN ENTERPRISE ANNUAL REPORT 2024



Secretariat: Sophie Rooney, Women's Enterprise Scotland

## From the Convenor – Michelle Thomson MSP



I am pleased to continue my role as the Convenor of the Cross Party Group for Women in Enterprise, a forum that remains a beacon of collaboration and progress in addressing the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs across Scotland. This group fosters a shared commitment to generating innovative, actionable policy ideas that uplift women-led businesses and promote a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem for all.

Over the past year, we've navigated a rapidly evolving economic landscape, marked by the lingering effects of the cost-of-living crisis and new hurdles for women entrepreneurs. The group has deepened its focus on these interconnected challenges, including the growing importance of community wealth building as a strategy to support women-led enterprises. Our discussions have reaffirmed the urgency of improving policies that will ensure women entrepreneurs not only survive but thrive, allowing them to make their rightful contribution to Scotland's economy.

Our November meeting focused on *What's Next for Women-Led Businesses?*, sparking insightful discussions on the future of entrepreneurship and the changes that are needed to empower women entrepreneurs in the years ahead. This conversation exemplifies what makes this group so vital: a dual focus on tackling immediate barriers and providing actionable strategies that will accelerate change.

Amid the challenges, there have been encouraging moments of progress and collaboration and as we move into 2025, I am inspired by the dedication and ingenuity of our members and partners. Together, we will continue to confront challenges head-on while championing the voices and contributions of women in enterprise across Scotland.

I look forward to the year ahead and the meaningful work we will accomplish together.

## The Cross Party Group

Women's Enterprise Scotland established the Women in Enterprise Cross Party Group 8 years ago to provide a platform for Scotland's women entrepreneurs to advocate for their needs. In those years there have been 7 annual reports, amplifying the voices of diverse women, 26 sessions of cultivating collaboration across the political spectrum and 26 topics tackled,

including access to finance, internationalisation, minority ethnic women in enterprise, older women, disabled women, rural based women, pension poverty, intellectual property and Cost of Living.

The Cross Party Group (CPG) for Women in Enterprise was set up to –

- Establish a forum for the sharing of experiences and information on the landscape for women in enterprise in Scotland.
- Enable discussion and debate on the enduring gender gap in enterprise participation and seek solutions on how this might be tackled.
- Bring partners together with an interest in women and enterprise to develop a collaborative approach towards solutions and action.

Each year, a number of themes are chosen which are important to the discussion on women in enterprise and speakers and guests are invited to take part in the meetings. Organisations and individuals with expertise and interest in each theme are invited to attend and participate in the CPG. This enables relevant and structured discussion on a thematic basis and allows for varied attendance at each meeting.

This year, meetings focussed on – Community Wealth Building, Intellectual Property, and “What’s Next for Women Led Businesses?”.

## February 2024: Community Wealth Building

Rhoda Meek, Managing Director of Isle Develop CIC and Lesley Landels the founder of Love Scottish spoke openly and honestly about their personal experiences as women entrepreneurs and the challenges they faced when starting out and those which they still have to battle. They shared the ways in which they are tackling these barriers and how we can build a stronger community through entrepreneurship and empowerment and create positive change through business.

Starting the presentations was Rhoda Meek who has lived on the Isle of Tiree for over a decade, with a background in community development, media, and tech, particularly in building websites. She started Tiree Tea in late 2019, planning to sell to tourists, but when COVID hit, tourism vanished, leaving her with stock and no market. Recognizing the need for a digital solution, she founded Isle20, a business directory to help island businesses—many run by women—transition online, especially those dependent on craft fairs and local retail. Isle20 quickly became an “island Etsy,” a social enterprise that now supports small, often women-led businesses across Scotland's islands.

Most of Isle20’s vendors are “kitchen table” businesses, balancing work with childcare, making crucial supplemental income that is often overlooked by funders. Starting out is tough,

especially with barriers like high shipping costs, limited childcare, and housing issues on the islands. Applying for grants is also daunting, requiring intense detail that would overwhelm many new business owners. Early support grants, even as small as £2,500, would significantly boost rural women entrepreneurs.

The need for early support was evident when 23 women from Argyll signed up for the WES Business Creation Course within 48 hours, underscoring the demand for accessible resources and peer support. Women are the backbone of island communities, and investing in their confidence and early ventures will build community wealth. More support for women-led businesses will result in remarkable returns and empowering them will drive sustainable economic growth in these rural areas. The takeaway from Rhoda's presentation was the perspective of 'impact' needs to change. Whilst these 'micro businesses' from outside look little in impact, the reality for the women and the family in those communities is that the impact is huge on their own lives and can be the difference between a good Christmas for those families or a bad one.

Next, we heard from Lesley Landels. Lesley's journey with Love Scottish has grown from modest beginnings ten years ago, when she launched her business from a caravan during a self-build project while raising a two-year-old, managing two dogs, and expecting another child. As a committed side-hustler based in the Scottish Borders, Lesley was determined to succeed locally, choosing to stay close to her community rather than moving to Edinburgh, drawing inspiration from the rich textile heritage near Hawick.

After entering the job market pre-internet, Lesley felt an entrepreneurial itch early on, and with the encouragement of a mentor and support from the Princes Trust, she left her job to start her business, despite warnings from others that the idea was too risky outside a big city. Her resilience kept her going through those early doubts. Starting with an initial investment of just £28.10, Lesley's candle-making venture steadily grew. Today, Love Scottish employs 11 local staff, including mothers, semi-retirees, and community members who benefit from flexible working arrangements. The business has expanded from manufacturing in Hawick to include retail locations in Melrose and Kelso, and even a coffee shop. She values an open, supportive workplace and ensures her team can balance work with life's other commitments.

As an enabler for the WES Business Creation Course, Lesley has seen a strong local interest in entrepreneurship, especially among women who benefit from the Women's Business Centre's online resources. In the Scottish Borders, where transport links can be limited, she values how virtual resources have opened doors for those who might otherwise struggle with in-person opportunities. Her journey reflects her commitment to her community and the belief that with the right support, women in the Scottish Borders can thrive. Lesley's main message is that support in those early stages is so crucial and giving women the confidence and self-belief from

the get-go, can be the difference between a successful start-up or choosing to give up their ambitions.

## May 2024: Intellectual Property

In May, we welcomed Rachel Jones, Founder of SnapDragon Monitoring, CEO and Inventor of G-Hold, Alison Grieve, and a presentation was given on behalf of Claudia Duffy, a European Patent Attorney and Founder of Innovare IP. They joined us to discuss Intellectual Property and the economic impact on women owned businesses. In this session we explored how intellectual property rights affect women entrepreneurs and their businesses, to understand the challenges and opportunities they face in the marketplace. It was also highlighted how important it is to recognise the unique hurdles that women-owned businesses come up against and discuss how different aspects of IP including patents, trademarks and copyrights can either aid in success or act as barriers.

Rachel Jones's passion for intellectual property (IP) stems from her love of travel and her journey as an inventor. Twenty years ago, she created the Totseat, a baby product that reached 52 export territories before counterfeit versions emerged. This experience taught Rachel how to use IP protections to combat fakes, a lesson that inspired her return to the UK with a mission to help SMEs avoid similar challenges. Raising £4 million in venture capital funding—a significant feat given that only 2% of funding goes to women-led businesses—she built Snapdragon, a technology-driven business that helps global brands protect themselves online.

Snapdragon monitors online platforms for IP infringements, identifying and removing counterfeit content within minutes. Rachel highlights the vast economic impact of counterfeiting, which costs over half a trillion dollars annually and often funds serious criminal activities such as trafficking and terrorism. She emphasizes that IP—whether tangible like trademarks and patents, or intangible like copyrights—is vital for protecting brands and ensuring business success. Drawing from her own experience, Rachel advises entrepreneurs to register trademarks early, particularly in territories like China, and to stay vigilant about their brand integrity, especially where health and safety are at stake. Her message is love, recognize, and protect your intellectual property.

Fellow entrepreneur, Alison Grieve then shared her entrepreneurial journey which began 14 years ago with a dream of becoming an inventor, inspired by a catering accident that led to the creation of Safetray. Although she had a basic understanding of running a business, Alison was fortunate to receive strong advice on protecting intellectual property (IP) early in her journey. She successfully commercialized Safetray, licensing its patent after selling part of the business to a product design consultancy. While traveling to promote Safetray, Alison purchased an iPad, which inspired her next innovation, G-Hold—a product influenced by her work on Safetray. She

commercialized G-Hold and ensured all its products are manufactured in Scotland. Through this process, Alison learned firsthand the high costs of building a patented business and the systemic challenges women face in accessing equity funding. A recent research report she conducted highlighted the lack of financial support for early-stage businesses led by women, an issue that left her feeling isolated until she recognized it as a widespread systemic problem.

Alison also notes the discouraging advice women often receive about the difficulty of obtaining patents, which stifles ambition and innovation. To address these barriers, she advocates for a government-backed IP insurance scheme to help more entrepreneurs, particularly women, protect and commercialize their ideas effectively. Her journey reflects both the potential and the challenges of turning innovative ideas into reality.

Lastly Lynne Cadenhead presented on behalf of Dr Claudia Duffy. Claudia, a former scientist turned patent attorney and Women's Enterprise Scotland (WES) ambassador, is a passionate advocate for addressing the gender disparities in intellectual property (IP) and innovation. She emphasizes that many businesses, particularly those led by women, fail to recognize the value of their IP, leaving untapped potential. Claudia highlights the systemic sexual and sectoral biases in the IP system, where patents—commonly associated with technology-focused companies—are predominantly filed by male-led businesses. According to WIPO data, only 16% of inventors named in international patent applications are women, and at current rates, it will take 40 years to achieve gender parity in patent applications.

This imbalance reflects broader challenges in STEM, where women represent only 26% of the workforce, with 70% leaving the sector, delaying equal representation until at least 2070. The dominance of patent-rich, technology-driven businesses in attracting investment worsens the problem, as these sectors are often male-led. Meanwhile, women entrepreneurs—who represent only 20% of Scotland's founders—often concentrate in industries that are undervalued by investors and less likely to generate patents, further limiting their access to funding. Currently, only 2% of institutional investment goes to women-led businesses.

Claudia argues that helping women understand and leverage their IP will unlock confidence, ambition, and growth. She notes that addressing the disparities in IP use by women and minority groups could add up to £250 billion in new value to the UK economy. Recognizing the types of IP created by women-founded businesses is essential to ensuring this value isn't overlooked. By closing these gaps, the IP system could become a powerful tool for empowering women entrepreneurs and driving economic growth.

## November 2024 (AGM): What's next for Women-led Businesses?

For our final CPG meeting of the year we asked our speakers, Elizabeth Pirrie; COO Investing Women Angels and CEO of AccelerateHer, Gillian Fleming; CEO of Mint Ventures, and Ana



Stewart; Entrepreneur, Investor and Chair of Pathways Forward, to begin our conversation on “What’s Next for Women-led Businesses?”.

Firstly, Elizabeth Pirrie challenged perception that female founders lack ambition to scale their businesses— noting the 418 applications they received to a recent female founder accelerator program run in partnership with Barclays Eagle Labs. She highlighted a recurring theme among applicants was the critical challenge of securing funding for growth, with many founders expressing the need for not only financial backing but also access to networks, mentorship, and market opportunities. Barriers to larger investments and sector-specific support are common, especially for female-led spinouts in innovation-critical sectors. Founders reported struggles to find investors who understand their innovations. Elizabeth also recognised that whilst innovation centres are being built, ensuring that women have access to these spaces is essential to unlocking their full potential. She called for consistent public funding to provide the dedicated resources female founders need—not just for starting up, but for scaling and succeeding long-term. Overall, she advocates the need for tailored support, mentorship, industry connections, and targeted funding to enable women-led businesses to fully contribute to the economy and grow.

Following Elizabeth, Gillian Fleming started with the importance of investing in woman founders. She emphasizes that companies with gender-diverse teams are 25% more likely to achieve above-average profitability, foster innovation, and develop sustainable solutions. Women-led businesses also tend to be more capital-efficient, asking for less funding and achieving more with what they receive. However, the funding landscape remains inequitable—only 3p in every pound of equity investment in the UK goes to women founders, and less than 6% of women-owned companies are equity-backed. Gillian highlights that only 14% of angel investors in the UK are women, while women investors are twice as likely to back female founders. This lack of diversity among investors limits support for sectors where women entrepreneurs are most active, such as retail, health, beauty, creative industries, and tourism, which angel groups often overlook.

To address these challenges, Gillian advocates for targeted interventions, including a co-investment fund to support underfunded sectors, better alignment of public and private capital, and educational programs to encourage more women to consider angel investing. Policy changes, such as extending the Enterprise Investment Scheme (EIS) tax relief deadline for women-led businesses, could also provide critical support. Alongside Elizabeth Pirrie’s call for consistent public funding and tailored resources, Gillian highlights the importance of systemic changes to unlock the full potential of women-led businesses and investors, driving inclusive economic growth.

Closing the presentations was Ana Stewart, who highlighted the deeply rooted challenges that hinder women-led businesses from starting and scaling successfully. These issues extend beyond funding and are embedded in systemic barriers such as education, policy frameworks, and caregiving responsibilities. Ana noted that in the past five years, £9.5 billion of institutional investment has been directed toward early-stage companies in Scotland, yet just £170 million reached female-led ventures. To address this imbalance, she emphasizes the importance of initiatives like the Pathways and South of Scotland Enterprise's pre-start model, which provide micro-grants of up to £1,000 to encourage early-stage female founders. Recognizing that business growth is often a long journey—44% of women-led scale-ups take 10–20 years to grow, and 25% take over 20 years—Ana stresses the need for sustained, consistent support rather than one-off funding injections.

In mentioning the Barclays-led Investing Women Taskforce, a UK-wide initiative stemming from the Rose Review which aims to raise £250 million in funding exclusively for women-led businesses, Ana called on the Scottish Government to ensure equitable distribution of this funding across regions to empower Scotland's female founders. Echoing the asks of the other presenters, Ana underscores the urgent need for systemic changes to create a more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem.

### Final Remarks and Thank You

As we reflect on the past year, I feel immense pride the work of this Cross Party Group. Despite the ongoing cost-of-living crisis and challenges facing women-led businesses, the expertise, dedication, and compassion has been truly inspiring. Thank you for your contributions and collaboration. Together, we are making meaningful strides toward a more equitable and thriving future for women entrepreneurs across Scotland and I look forward to working with you all in 2025.