Creative United

Evaluation of, and learning from,

Prosper business support project

Executive Summary | September 2018

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Contents

Photo: Cambridge Live, supported by Prosper

The Prosper Busine

In mid-2016, Arts Council England (ACE) launched a call for proposals to deliver 'business support targeted at the arts, museums and libraries sector'.
The call was deliberate in targeting a very broad and diverse business population mix of sub-sector, enterprise, organisation, and activity.

Photo: Juliana Vasquez

Photo: Max McClure, New Brewery Arts, supported by Prosper

Business support was taken to mean "providing specialist information, guidance and advice to build the capacity of the organisation. This can include, but is not limited to, support for strategic planning, governance development, financial planning, investment readiness, alternative business models, understanding impact, using digital technology, environmental sustainability, diversification of income and HR capability".

ss Support Project

Over a nine-month period, the project provided:

> one-to-one business advice
> workshops
> masterclasses
> webinars
> a free-to-access online business support resource

to 70 arts organisations, museums and libraries.

- Creative United was grant funded by ACE (£400,000) for the period December 2016 to 31 May 2018 to develop and deliver Prosper. A further £55,000 (and beyond the expected 10% match funding contribution) was raised by Creative United from other funders: (Access – The Foundation for Social Investment, Creative Scotland, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and Heritage Lottery Fund) and programme partners (Centre for Business in Society (CBiS) at Coventry University and the Arts Marketing Association (AMA)).

- The model was based on a credit system whereby businesses could spend their allotted twelve credits (equivalent to twelve hours of support) on their chosen support activities, having been matched with a specialist Business Advisor.

- As part of Prosper, CBiS at Coventry University was commissioned to provide research and evaluation services. This is the Executive Summary of the final evaluation report on Prosper.

Prosper

Key Findings
Delivering business support to the cultural creative sector

- Prosper was designed from previous understandings of 'what works' in business support to the sector, alongside meeting the specification request for regional coverage across the diversity of the arts, museums and libraries sector.

- Design included a credit system allowing clients to self-select from a suite of business support activities (Business Advisor and/or Group Learning Events as well as free to access online resources).

- Prosper was very successful in engaging the target sector, achieving 416 online registrations, and 208% of its contracted target.

- Of the 416 organisations that registered, 259 completed and submitted the online Application Form with key information. This number comfortably exceeded the target of 150 applications from eligible organisations.

- A total of 231 businesses and organisations completed both the application and Diagnostic Tool – a requirement to be considered for the final cohort of 70 Prosper clients.

- Analysis of application data confirmed Prosper's successful engagement and recruitment of the diverse target market - by art form, geography, size, business /organisational type, and life stage.

- **Two-thirds of applicants had not used business support in the previous two years.** Those that had, showed evidence of impact of increased confidence against a range of business development skills in comparison to the broader applicant population.

- Applicants who were not selected for Prosper received an element of 'business support signposting', through a Diagnostic Tool Report, feedback on their application and signposting to other business support resources. Prosper had limited success achieving 'paid for' business support beyond the cohort.

- Over the nine-month project, **Prosper achieved high levels of participation** (87% of credits used, minimal client drop-out) and high levels of satisfaction (95% would recommend a Prosper project to peers).

- Usage was overwhelmingly through Business Advisors (91% of 715 Prosper hours used), with very high client satisfaction.

Usage was overwhelmingly through Business Advisors

91% of **715**

Prosper hours used

- Group Learning Events, whilst still positively received, had more mixed client satisfaction related to matching breadth, depth and level of content across participants. The online resources of AMA *CultureHive* were underutilised.

95% would recommend Prosper to a peer

Good practice and lessons learned have been created.

3 key areas are:

1 market engagement (sector, geography);

2 client choice within a support offer which, critically, includes 1:1 specialist Business Advisors;

3 project management which understands and actively manages an 'intermediary and brokerage' role between client businesses and Business Advisors (successfully matching need, demand and supply).

Key Findings

Prosper business support outcomes and impacts

- Prosper generated a range of data, from a number of different methods, which details the outcomes and impacts of its support on clients. This data is both quantitative and qualitative, pre-and post-project in some cases, from clients and the delivery team.

- Overall, following Prosper business support, and across different data collection methods, there was an increase in confidence expressed consistently by the cohort as a whole for all of the business development outcomes.

- Generally, there was greatest uplift in confidence for the weakest business development areas prior to the project. In some instances, reduced individual scores reflected organisational learning and a recognition of a 'misconception' of the level of understanding and skill of a business function held prior to support.

- Evidence for a sub-set of 'key' outcomes demonstrates the Prosper cohort moving towards greater commerciality and/or diversity of funding and/or resilience. This concerns:

> new products or services, 18% of clients had launched such an outcome and a further 50% planned to do so;

> 17% had diversified their funding and a further 67% planned to do so;

> a relatively high 27% of respondents were implementing investment readiness steps, but only 25% planned to do so, and almost half had decided not to.

CONFIDENCE

64%
increased their confidence with approach to business planning and development

- A range of evidence provides examples and illustrations of a possibly more profound and deeper sense of organisational and business development, reflecting potentially longer-term impacts on future development and resilience.

- On exit from Prosper the cohort reported an understanding of the value of business support:

> 82% stated they would invest in more business support in the future;

> 95% stated that they would recommend a programme like Prosper to their peers;

- In slight contradiction, only 62% stated that they would 'very likely' or 'definitely' use business support in the future, and 37% 'somewhat likely'. Some evidence suggests that this contradiction may reflect a continued aversion to the term 'business support' and its connotations, given the dual concepts of cultural and commercial value that exist within the target sector.

67%
plan to increase the diversity of their funding streams

Meeting the aims of
the ACE Business Support Call

	ACE Aim	Prosper
1	Improve the resilience of the arts, museums and libraries across the cultural sector nationally by investing in bespoke business/investment readiness support.	Business support programme offering free 1:1 advice, workshops, masterclasses and webinars and online resources for an estimated 70 organisations across the arts, museums and libraries.
2	Improve understanding of building financial resilience in the sector and what resources are needed in this area, providing evidence to support decision making on longer term national business support investment.	Research and evaluation activities to assess the business development needs, demand and journeys of the cultural creative sector in England and Scotland, particularly through Prosper.
3	Engage with Partners nationally to promote co-ordination and provide information more widely on current activities in these areas.	Engagement and Dissemination of knowledge and information on support available to the wider arts/cultural sector.

Photo: Juliana Vasquez

Table ES1 provides a high-level assessment of Prosper's achievements against the aims of the Business Support Call, and as set out in the Prosper partnership agreement with ACE.

Evidence Base

- 70 arts, museum and libraries businesses and organisations supported nationally (80% from outside London)
- Additional project investment leveraged from high profile Partners and Funders
- High utilisation rate and high levels of client satisfaction
- Wide range of strong evidence of business development outcomes across the cohort
- Range of evidence of organisational steps to resilience (cultural change, learning and actions, recognition of value of business support)

- *Business Support and the Cultural and Creative Sector in England and Scotland: A Review (2017)*
- *Business Support and the Cultural and Creative Sector in England and Scotland Review: Scottish Survey Module (2018)*
- Learning Workshops (London and Edinburgh) and Policy Workshop (London)
- *Evaluation of, and Learning from, Prosper Business Support Project (2018)*

- Prosper Partners, Sponsors, Steering Group and Learning Workshops (London and Edinburgh), Policy Workshop
- Prosper engagement, recruitment and launch activity
- *Compendium of Business Support for the Cultural and Creative Sector* (completed 3 times, March 2017 to March 2018)
- Addition of 58 pieces of content to AMA *CultureHive* website
- *Arts Professional* articles, newsletter, social media, presentations

Photo: Soul Labels, supported by Prosper

Photo: AØE, supported by Prosper

Supporting understanding of cultural creative business support and investment

There is particular interest in the experience of Prosper and the generation of evidence to support decision making on longer term national business support investment to the cultural creative sector.

Table ES2 places the evidence and learning from Prosper within the conceptual policy framework of the 'business support journey' and the process of successfully matching business demand with support supply to achieve maximum economic, social, and in this case cultural, benefits to society.

86% found 1:1 support useful or extremely useful

Photo: Clowns Without Borders, supported by Prosper

The Business Support Journey	Conclusion to draw from Prosper experience
Businesses made aware of business support provision and its value	Demonstrated the existence of a high level of national demand for bespoke business support from (the full diversity of) the cultural creative sector.
Businesses engage with business support system	Latent demand was accessed by Prosper – only a third of applicants had used business support in the previous two years. Prosper overcame information failure in the business support system.
Businesses access business support	A cohort of 70 organisations participated in Prosper. Of those who responded, only a third of the unsuccessful Prosper applicants undertook business support activity subsequently within six months of their application. Signposting not strong enough and/or other supply not attractive enough? 'Missed opportunity'?
Supply is appropriate and matches need/demand	Participation in and utilisation of Prosper was very high. Very small tail of low use due to 'capacity' issues or 'content matching', both of which could be at least partially addressed through lessons learnt.
Client satisfaction	At project level, very high satisfaction (demand/need and supply successfully matched). 1:1 Business Advice very highly regarded. Confirms 'what works' for clients. Group Learning activities medium satisfaction (partially address through lessons learnt).
Business outcomes	Strong increase in confidence across components of business development (vision, business model, plan, income generation, etc.). Evidence from entrants that previous support delivered business outcomes. Small number of 'key' outcomes on new products, funding diversity, investment readiness. Variety of evidence of moving towards greater commerciality and/or diversity of funding and/or resilience.
Impacts	Exiting businesses understand the value of business support, recognise appropriate supply, and willing to invest in supply. 'Backlash?' against 'investment readiness' and continued evidence of cultural aversion to 'language of business support', but not to its activities.

Conclusions

1

Prosper has been a successful national investment in business support to improve the resilience of the arts, museums and libraries.

Prosper was over-subscribed, highly utilised, delivered to high client satisfaction, achieved a range of business development outcomes and clients have demonstrated organisational steps towards resilience.

2

Prosper has demonstrated aspects of 'what works' and good practice in business support to the arts, museum and libraries sector, based upon the 'managed brokerage' of 1:1 business advice.

Key to Prosper achievement of client satisfaction and outcomes has been the active matching and relationship management of a network of sector specialist advisors with clients, as part of a flexible support offer of a suite of activities (1:1, group, online).

3

Prosper has confirmed (Arts Council England) evidence of national demand for tailored business support for cultural creative organisations.

Applications for Prosper from across the diversity of the sector exceeded places available several times over, with even greater registered interest expressed. Two thirds of applicants had not used business support in the previous two years.

4

Evidence from Prosper suggests gaps in, and under-utilisation of, business support provision to the cultural creative sector.

Prosper outcomes included substantially increased knowledge about sources of business support by clients but under-utilisation of online resources. On exiting Prosper, clients expressed the value of appropriate business support and a willingness to invest in future support. In contrast, the limited evidence available on unsuccessful applicants suggested that, in the main, they had not gone on to access other provision.

5

The cultural creative sector continues to demonstrate an aversion to the 'language of business support', but not to its activities.

Prosper demonstrated strong commitment to business development, enterprise and innovation that is driven and shaped by the histories, missions, value systems and 'hybrid' business models of the cultural creative sector. These drivers are only partially reflected by much of the language of business support, and even possibly discouraged by others (such as 'investment readiness').

Photo: Middle Child Theatre, supported by Prosper

Recommendations

1 Invest in tailored business support to the cultural creative sector to fully access latent and expressed demand and maximise the development of a culture of enterprise, innovation and sector resilience.

2 Future business support programmes should recognise the continued evidence base for the effectiveness of tailored business advice through sector-based advisors.

3 Continue to reflect the culture, values, organisational diversity and languages of the cultural creative sector to ensure the delivery of efficient and effective business support.

With thanks to:

Photo: Cambridge Live, supported by Prosper

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