

# **Project helps thousands of people in England and France into employment and entrepreneurship**

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# START-UP

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New research led by the University of East Anglia (UEA) shows that large infrastructure projects which are the focus of the UK government's leveling up agenda and include support for business start-ups, must also offer sustainable, local investment in deprived communities.

Through place-based micro-enterprise training and employment support over a longer time frame, lasting local impact can be demonstrated, according to the study's policy recommendations.

Supporting people to return to their communities, increasing [social cohesion](#) within them, boosting digital literacy and enabling net zero jobs are also likely to play a role.

These goals can be easily supported by housing associations and other labor market intermediaries—such as social centers, [community colleges](#), religious organizations and non-profits—that have a long-term local presence, are respected members of their communities and can match workers to employment and entrepreneurship opportunities.

The findings are the result of a five-year (2018–2023) study into deprived communities in England and France and how residents can be supported into either employment or entrepreneurship.

The study was conducted as part of the Increase Valorisation Sociale (INCREASE VS) project. Led by Southern Housing (formerly Optivo), one of the largest housing associations in England, the £10.8 million program aimed to boost enterprise training and job opportunities for thousands of social housing residents in England and France.

The program has supported residents facing barriers such as disability, multi-generational benefit dependency, high rates of poverty and low job opportunities.

A partnership between UEA, nine housing associations and training providers, the findings from the project, published in a report today, provide insights into what has and has not worked across a range of different communities.

Zografia Bika, professor of entrepreneurship at UEA's Norwich Business School and lead author of the report, said, "While much of the policy work on 'leveling up' has focused on smaller, regional cities in the hope that they can experience some of the gains seen in London and Paris, there remains much work to be done to improve the prospects of those in small, often deprived towns and communities.

"Our analysis will help inform the further development of enterprise support activities, training and skills provision. We can still influence much in the delivery of the leveling up agenda, delays have meant there is still time to adapt plans to relevant research findings."

Adrian Gaskell of the INCREASE VS team at UEA's Norwich Business School, said, "Inequality and the social breakdown that it helps to trigger were identified by the World Economic Forum as a key risk facing the world in its [Global Risks Report](#) this January, so it's vital that countries get better at ensuring the benefits of globalization are more evenly spread."

Researching the microenterprise and employment support delivered to the long-term unemployed by the partnership, the team found that it works best when this is non-judgmental and inclusive, responsive, interactive and practical, but most importantly it is continuous support that is delivered close to clients over a longer time frame, both one-to-one and as part of peer learning communities.

Local circumstances were crucial in terms of the strength of the local economy and the shortcomings in the local labor market, and so each

program needed to reflect this environment and respond accordingly.

Also, the team found that housing associations can be key agents of change due to not only their embeddedness in the local community but also their long-term presence and robust funding, especially in comparison to local authorities.

Deprived communities represent difficult environments in which to make progress, so the researchers say it is vital that programs are committed to long-term support.

Tom Arkle, Head of Program at Southern Housing, said, "The INCREASE VS program is a significant social innovation partnership program, which we have had the privilege of leading.

"This report demonstrates the scale and impact of the program. Our shared endeavors have brought people together and created significant opportunities and learning within communities."

The INCREASE VS program has helped more than 4,500 participants in 38 neighborhoods learn how to, and receive support in, starting their own business. The program included support in developing or testing business ideas and managing finances and administration of the business. It has helped to create 1,020 new businesses, while also supporting 1,600 participants into work and further education.

Service statistics gathered up to September 2022 indicate that of the 6,259 participants who began training, 16% started a business, 18% had a new job, and 7% had enrolled in more education. Taken together, 41% of INCREASE VS participants reported a change in work or education status.

The areas involved are in the South and East Coasts of England

(Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Cambridgeshire, Kent, Sussex and Hampshire), and the North Coast of France from Ille-et-Vilaine to Pas-de-Calais.

Of the total budget, £7.5m came from the EU's [Interreg France \(Channel\) England](#) program, through the [European Regional Development Fund](#).

**More information:** INCREASE Valorisation Sociale EVALUATION REPORT, [www.uea.ac.uk/groups-and-centr ... valorisation-sociale](http://www.uea.ac.uk/groups-and-centr...valorisation-sociale)

Provided by University of East Anglia

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