



## **Social Enterprise Disabled Leaders Network Co-production Summary**

**Co-produced by Lex Scotland and members of the  
Social Enterprise Disabled Leaders Network**

**With thanks to our  
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**Thanks to Social Enterprise Scotland  
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**And finally thanks to Lutalica and Em-pao-er for support  
with comms and survey design**



## Executive Summary

Disabled social enterprise leaders are holding significant responsibility with inadequate structural support. We need a network that protects our wellbeing, values our labour, and gives us collective power to reshape the systems that currently exhaust and exclude us.

In essence, participants want a network that is run in a way that doesn't harm us, that supports our survival and growth as leaders, and that wields collective power to reshape hostile or inaccessible systems, all while refusing the old pattern of unpaid, extractive lived-experience labour.

This means setting up governance and processes so that when the network does work for others, it is funded and time-bound, and doesn't drain members.

Lex Scotland and other Disabled-led organisations are in a position to work in collaboration with members and external organisations to host the network, but it must be properly resourced.

## What did we do?

- Participants were recruited by promoting network sign-up through Social Enterprise Scotland newsletters and website, and through social media posting by Lex Scotland. The opportunity was also shared in Lex Scotland's Lex Leaders Network members newsletters.
- Communications design was created by Lotalica, making sure design elements and language were as accessible as possible.
- 45 members signed up to the network.
- All members were invited to take part in one of two focus group sessions held online. 8 people participated across the two sessions.



- Based on the discussions in the focus group, a survey was developed in partnership with Em-paor-er, which was shared with all 45 members. Members were also given the option of responding to the survey by email or one-to-one conversation. This ensured that members had a variety of ways to contribute.
- 5 members completed the survey.
- 3 members responded by email.

Once a draft of this summary had been written, it was shared with all network members, including those who had not taken part in the focus groups and survey. All members were given an opportunity to attend a final feedback meeting, and to give feedback by email. This feedback was included in the final version of this report.

## Skills and knowledge sessions

At the end of the process, we offered all network members a series of free training & skills sessions. This was important as it provided a pilot for what on-going support could look like, and the feedback was very positive.

It was also important to make sure participants got something in return for their time and work on the co-production process.

## Who responded to our survey?

We heard from participants across a range of stages in their social enterprise journey, including those just at the idea stage through to those with established enterprises. Most were leaders or founders, but some worked for social enterprises or organisations that support social enterprises.

You can find more details about the people who responded in the appendix at the end of this report.



## What challenges are our members facing?

### Burnout, masking and the struggle to set boundaries

Many leaders are operating in or near constant burnout:

“How do we navigate this way of working without being in a constant state of burnout or near-burnout?”

We know what good boundaries look like in theory, but can't easily apply them to themselves:

“It's far easier to help other people set their boundaries... and totally impossible to apply that to yourself.”

Our survey respondents shared this concern, with around 20% saying that burnout was a significant challenge.

### Leadership under intense health and capacity pressures

Participants are leading work while managing complex, fluctuating health needs:

“In a team where we're all disabled, having two out of three off sick... is not wildly surprising.”

“ I haven't had a day off where I wasn't sick in four years.”



Unpredictable health events and inadequate accessibility make in-person work risky, even when it's more effective:

“Sometimes I prefer face-to-face... but just the way things are for me, I can't risk the face-to-face as much as I'd like to.”

“We are constantly pushing ourselves so hard... we all face additional challenges to our wellbeing because of what we're trying to do.”

## Inaccessible and fragmented support systems

The current ecosystem of enterprise and disability support is experienced as confusing and poorly joined up:

“It can feel super overwhelming... I was thinking about some kind of tool or pathway that helps new or existing social entrepreneurs to navigate that ecosystem.”

Formal schemes like Access to Work are slow and inaccessible, especially for founders and self-employed people:

“I have now been on a waiting list [for Access to Work] for over a year, and I've not even been assessed yet... Access to Work generally is the least accessible system ever.”

Our survey respondents echoed this, highlighting a lack of accessible business support, lack of accessible training opportunities, and again highlighting Access to Work as a particular challenge.



## Financial precarity and unsafe risk-bearing

Disabled founders often carry all the risk with no safety net:

“We’ve got no sick pay, we’ve got no holiday pay, we’ve got no staff... it doesn’t come without its challenges and barriers.”

Growth is constrained by disability, but systems read this as weakness:

“I’ve lost two [grants] because they said my financial forecasts weren’t strong enough... my growth isn’t as rapid as the next company. But that’s because of my disability. It’s not a lack of competency.”

## What do we want the network to do?

Participants see the network doing two core things:

- Supporting Disabled leaders’ wellbeing and practice
- Shifting systems through collective influence.

We asked the focus group and survey participants what success would look like for them, and this is what they said:

“To develop a community of resources and individuals”

“Establishing regular meetings, developing a shared agenda and ways of working. Getting funding in place”

“Establishing a group with growing membership”



“Gathering better sector-wide data in relation to disability both to inform the network's future actions and to support potential advocacy or funding requests.”

“To begin campaigning for issues surrounding disability to be integrated into mainstream policy and practice rather than as an add-on.”

## Structured help around boundaries and self-advocacy

There is a clear demand for support including structured sessions around boundaries and self-advocacy.

“Something that would be really helpful... is discussion around boundaries – how to set them... and how to communicate them and advocate for your own support needs.”

## Help navigating support

Participants want practical help to navigate systems, benefits and business support. This includes accessing business support in the social enterprise sector, and accessing wider support for both Disability and appropriate and accessible leadership support.

We want the network to map and demystify support, especially where disability, self-employment, and social enterprise intersect.

“At the moment the support systems within the [social enterprise] sector are too focused on the actual delivery side and not on the individuals’ needs and background and barriers.”



## Peer support

Participants want the network to be a space where Disabled leaders can share experiences, reduce isolation, and learn from each other.

“Peer support and wellbeing... practical support that is also wellbeing support, because it helps us work in this system.”

“It’s stuff that has been boiling away for years, and I’ve not had the place to get it out with people who actually understand or have enough time.”

“A lot of the things we get... it’s building up confidence... taking them through the steps that maybe you’ve been through yourself.”

## Influence and change systems collectively

Focus group participants and survey respondents showed a strong desire for the network to play an advisory and influencing role with sector bodies. We want the network to act as a collective voice, feeding real-world experience into funders, intermediaries and policy-makers. We are clear that the network’s role is to get those voices into the room together and on equal terms, not as token individuals, ensuring Disabled voices are in every key discussion.

“We need to be in a position to influence and change those issues... to advise and influence organisations like Social Enterprise Scotland, Just Enterprise...”



“I would really like to see a group that can be involved in these discussions and able to say, ‘These are the issues our members encounter’... not just at a superficial EDI level.”

Our survey respondents echoed this, with support for advocacy and influencing work, representing the network on forums such as Social Enterprise Scotland, and collectively responding to relevant consultations and campaigns.

## How do we want the network to run?

Participants were clear that the network must be Disabled-led, realistic about capacity, and properly resourced, not built on unpaid labour or burnout.

### Payment for labour

Payment for labour is important for two key reasons. Participants are aware that labour is often asked of marginalised people in these kinds of roles. There is strong resistance to the network being treated as a free EDI resource.

While there was a willingness to offer mutual support to other network members, we are clear that it should be paid, not voluntary, where there is external benefit. This means setting up governance and processes so that when the network does work for others, it is funded and time-bound, and doesn't drain members.



“It’s that age-old thing... we think there needs to be support for marginalised people, so let’s ask the marginalised people to provide it.”

“We need to be really clear... we want to be heard and listened to... however... we need to be extremely clear that we are not a source of unpaid labour.”

We also emphasised that we are already working and running their businesses and doing their jobs, and that unpaid labour on top of this is hard.

“I’ve just lost a day’s consultancy work... I’ve done a whole bunch of work for free that normally I would charge money for.”

Survey respondents were very keen to get involved in many aspects of the network, from contributing to advocacy and influencing to attending training. However most did not want to be involved in running the network, and we had no response to the requests to volunteer as part of the survey.

Given the discussions in the focus group sessions, we do not think that this is because members don’t want to support the network. Rather, we are aware that in order to manage burnout, and avoid placing labour on already marginalised people, we want a properly funded and supported hosting and facilitation.

## **Recognising boundaries and being supported**

Related to concerns about proper payment for labour are concerns that running the network could prove challenging without proper boundaries and support.



“What I don’t want to see happen is... the social entrepreneurs’ disability group collapses because all the work was put on disabled entrepreneurs.”

“We’ve all got impairments, we’ve all got limitations... so the way we structure this has to recognise we cannot run this like a typical network.”

“Boundaries, pacing, and wellbeing built into the design”

“We want the network run in a way that actively protects members’ health and energy.”

## Having a seat at the table

We are clear that meaningful inclusion requires their voices at every decision-making table. Participants were particularly keen to see places on boards and working groups in the social enterprise sector where the network could be formally represented.

“If they are serious about making things inclusive and accessible, then they need to have the voices of the marginalised involved in every discussion.”

## Who do we want to run the network?

- While members are very clear the network should be Disabled led, they are happy for the network to be hosted by an organisation.



- Survey participants were happy to support a variety of organisations including Lex Scotland, Disability-led organisations and an independent constituted group to run the network, providing proper funding and support was in place.
- Suggestions included larger organisations providing admin and other practical support for the network.

“I would like to see the practical burden of operating the network such as admin etc. to fall to SES or another entity as I think presuming to place the network's ongoing success on already overstretched disabled members is unreasonable and fails to recognise barriers”

## How should meetings and events work?

Hybrid and flexible participation is extremely important, while online and accessible formats need to be a core design choice, not an afterthought. The network should be structured around accessible, remote-friendly engagement, with in-person events only when safe and resourced.

“The main thing that’s helped me a lot is Teams and Zoom, because it’s meant I can continue my work but I can do it from home.”

There was strong support from the survey respondents for both online meetings and in-person events, supporting a hybrid approach. Survey respondents also indicated an interest in a variety of different types of session. There was strong support for regular online peer support and networking sessions, with opportunities to share information and advice. However there was also support for more structured activities including training and learning sessions, as well as in person events.



## What do we want from the network launch sessions?

The three most popular skills options in our survey were:

- Inclusive & Collaborative Leadership models
- Inclusive facilitation
- Social Model of Disability in Practice

The most popular choice for well-being support was “Understanding & Accessing Support Systems & Tools”

We were able to provide a programme of sessions for April/May 2026 which included:

### **Collaborative Leadership**

A 3 hour workshop on collaborative leadership models including lived experience leadership, delivered by Lex Scotland

### **Inclusive facilitation**

2 hour interactive workshop delivered by Lex Scotland

### **Access to Work**

A 2 hour online presentation and Q&A session delivered by This Is Me

The response to these sessions was very positive, and we now have a framework for what the network would like in future.

“It was a pleasure to be in a small group where participants felt able to share their views and experiences in a respectful & safe environment without judgement.”

“It wasn’t just educational; it also felt like a community space”



## What next?

Network members will be having a meeting in May 2026 to discuss what we will be doing next. This could include looking for funding to continue network activities, as well as meeting for peer support and networking.

### Further funding could bring:

- Regular monthly online informal peer support & networking
- Peer learning sessions facilitated by network members
- Co-producing resources and sign-posting for network members and other Disabled social entrepreneurs
- Inclusive in-person networking and conference-style events
- Network having a voice on important forums



## Appendix: Survey responses

Note: All questions were optional, to allow participants to share only what they wanted to share.

### Which best describes you?

I'm developing a new idea or early stage venture	2
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I run or co-run a social enterprise	1
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I work for a social enterprise	1
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I work for an organisation that supports social enterprises	1
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### What stage is your social enterprise or idea at?

Just an idea / early concept	2
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Scaling or mature (5+ years)	2
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Established (2-5 years)	1
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Early stage (less than 2 years)	0
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Prefer not to say / not applicable	0
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## What main barriers do you face working in the social enterprise space?

Lack of tailored business support	4
Access to Work or support funding complexity	3
Managing health, energy, or burnout	3
Isolation or lack of peer connection	3
Lack of appropriate and accessible learning & development opportunities	2
Physical or digital accessibility issues	0

## What would you most like this network to focus on?

Advocacy and influencing policy	4
Leadership and skills & knowledge-focused training or mentoring opportunities	4
Accessible business or funding support	3



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Peer connection and  
community

2

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Disability-focused  
support and learning

2

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Which types of activities would you take part in?

Sharing or receiving  
resources and advice

5

Online meet-ups or  
peer sessions

4

In-person events

4

Contributing to  
consultations or  
campaigns

4

Representing the  
network within other  
organisations such as  
Social Enterprise  
Scotland

3

Working as part of a  
team to run the  
network

1

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What kind of wellbeing or skills sessions would help you most right now?

Understanding and  
accessing support  
systems and tools

4



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Managing workload and energy	3
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Self-advocacy and communicating access needs	3
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Setting and keeping boundaries	1
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Inclusive facilitation	4
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Social Model of Disability in practice	4
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Using your Lived Experience in your leadership	3
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Running accessible and inclusive events	3
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Neurodivergency Acceptance (neuroaffirming models)	3
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In one or two sentences, what do you think success would look like for this network in its first year?

Establishing a group with growing membership - Gathering better sector-wide data in relation to disability both to inform the network's future actions and to support potential advocacy or funding requests. - To begin campaigning for issues surrounding disability to be integrated into mainstream policy and practice rather than as an add-on.



Establishing regular meetings, developing a shared agenda and ways of working. Getting funding in place

If you could choose what organisation formally hosts this network, what would your choice be?

“I said this during our call, but I would like to see the practical burden of operating the network such as admin etc. to fall to SES or another entity as I think presuming to place the network’s ongoing success on already overstretched disabled members is unreasonable and fails to recognise barriers”

Hosted by Social Enterprise Scotland	5	16.7%
Hosted by Lex Scotland or another Disability led social enterprise	5	16.7%
Hosted by another third party embedded in the disability space	5	16.7%
Hosted by another third party embedded in the social enterprise space	5	16.7%
Hosted independently, not formally linked to any organisation	5	16.7%
Something else	5	16.7%