# Incubator and Accelerator Network

20 March 2025

# Setting the scene:
# The Future — Building a Sustainable Ecosystem

The Centre for Entrepreneurs' Incubator and Accelerator Network (IAN) 8th Annual Conference held in March 2025, co-hosted with Innovate UK Start-up Connect, saw over 100 participants attend from across the UK's innovation and start-up landscape. These included representatives from incubators, accelerators, higher education institutions, local authorities, government funding bodies, investors, and commercial organisations. This publication provides an overview to the day and insights gathered.

Dave Wilkes, Director Innovation Ecosystem at Innovate UK, opened the conference with a keynote that outlined the guiding theme: "The Future — Building a Sustainable Ecosystem". His opening statement established the aim to explore how the innovation ecosystem can become more cohesive, transparent, and inclusive, particularly in the context of regional disparities and the evolving needs of early-stage ventures. The ambition was framed in the context of building a community.

The event brought participants together to focus not just on outcomes, such as investment and growth, but also on how the system supports entrepreneurs across their journey. Key issues recognised included measures to reduce fragmentation, funding continuity, sector-specific needs, equitable access, measuring impact and collaborative infrastructure, themes which framed the discussions throughout the day.

**The Day in Focus**

The event featured two panels followed by a series of roundtable sessions exploring regional mechanisms, collaborative signposting, and systemic innovation.

The objectives from these discussions included:

- To identify visibility gaps and market failure
- To clarify what resources and inputs are required to enhance national, regional, and sectoral transparency across the ecosystem
- To share best practices and learning across programmes
- To generate ideas that support founders throughout their lifecycle—from ideation to scaling

The purpose of the day was not just discussion, but to start to explore how the community can work together to increase the efficiency of the innovation ecosystem. "To build ideas from lessons learned, and insights from organisations of where they have improved sign-posting and visibility".



**The future — building a sustainable ecosystem**

# Panel 1: Navigation and Transparency

The first panel of the day tackled one of the most persistent challenges in the UK innovation ecosystem: the fragmented landscape of incubators and accelerators—and the resulting lack of visibility for entrepreneurs seeking support.

While the UK offers a wealth of programmes, the discussion revealed a clear tension between the abundance of choice and the high degree of fragmentation, which leads to a lack of clarity. As a result, founders face difficulties navigating their options without effective signposting or quality indicators.

As Professor Paula Whitehouse from Aston University noted, "Choice is not a bad thing. Many entrepreneurs are savvy and pick what they need at the right time. The challenge is the lack of visibility on what's available—each organisation has a responsibility to be good at signposting."

Dr. Laura Ciccolini from University College London added that from the founder's perspective, the innovation support landscape can appear disjointed and complicated. "It's hard to capture everything on one map— transparency would help entrepreneurs understand where to go." Effective sign posting would provide a huge boost to the efficiency of the ecosystem.

The impact of this lack of clarity was further illustrated by Sanghamitra Karra of Morgan Stanley, who shared that early-stage founders often arrive after participating in multiple programmes—each with different strengths— leading to convoluted cap tables that can pose challenges for investors. Without clarity about the purpose and outcomes of different incubators and accelerators, the consequences can leave a founder in the future with fund raising challenges.

## Transparency is essential—but where does responsibility sit?

# Panel 1: Navigation and Transparency



Ayokunmi Ajetunmobi (AJ) of Pioneer Group stressed the importance of programmes taking responsibility for communicating their own value: what they do, why it matters, and their track record in delivering impact. This led to a broader discussion around the idea of creating a national directory of incubators and accelerators—a topic that surfaced several times throughout the day. While the panel recognised the strategic value of such a resource, they also acknowledged the challenge of building and maintaining a directory that is both useful and up to date. A small working group will explore this further in the coming months.

**Key Takeaway:**

Transparency and navigation tools must evolve in tandem with the ecosystem. The responsibility for clarity and coordination does not lie with any single stakeholder —it is a shared challenge that requires collaboration across the entire system from funders, service providers and policy makers. If we aim to raise the efficiency and impact of support for start-ups, we must design with the entrepreneur in mind, underpinned by a shared commitment, accessibility and coordinated communication.

**Transparency and navigation tools must evolve in tandem with the ecosystem**

# Panel 2: Business Models and Longevity

Panel 2 explored the sustainability of incubators and accelerators, highlighting the financial models, strategic goals, and impact metrics used across different types of organisations—public, private, academic, and hybrid.

Each of the panellists provided an overview of their organisation's business model with a particular focus on funding source:

- Dr Laura Bennet from Royal Academy of Engineering (RAEng) explained that their model received Government funding from the Department of Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT). In addition, RAEng has been able to create additional income streams and broaden the organisation's offer to early-stage businesses in the engineering sector, by providing programme support to other organisations. Philanthropic funding was also an additional source of income.

- Amy Farrington from STFC Incubators and Accelerators explained that their model operates within the public sector and is funded by DSIT. Amy also shared that they work with other incubators, BBSRC, the local region, and the European Space Agency.

- Aline Charpentier from Bruntwood SciTech described a more commercial model with a focus on driving investment. For them, ecosystem building is critical in what they do. She stated: "By training good companies, you attract other good companies and generate an ecosystem. This is what creates a virtuous ecosystem."

- Chantelle Young from Tech Nation explained the corporate nature of their model, with a focus on access to founders and alignment with shared missions. They collaborate with partners, recognising that they cannot do everything alone. This model allows them to share resources and pursue global collaborations.

- Colin Dart from the University of Exeter noted that they receive funding from three sources: HEIF funding via the university to deliver innovation related services, South West regional funding and income generated through consultancy services. They prefer to partner with organisations that already offer incubation and property support, rather than trying to do everything themselves. He shared that relying on government/ public sector funding, such as ERDF, has taught them valuable lessons. They recognise that running incubators and accelerators can often be a loss leader, which reinforces the need for strategic partnerships. Their overarching objective is to support the longevity of the businesses they serve.



**What's your value—and are you ready to evolve?**

# Panel 2: Business Models and Longevity

Throughout the discussion, panellists agreed on the importance of collaboration to ensure value delivery and long-term sustainability. There was a clear consensus that incubation can be expensive, and partnerships offer a way to de-risk operations. Many current offerings are at a superficial level, 'cookie cutter'/look the same, and do not develop real insights and thinking logic for entrepreneurs like the more established and locally rooted incubators do. The discussion also highlighted the need to align with founder needs and to measure success using broader metrics than just funding secured.

Aline Charpentier summarised it well: "Provide space and operational support, and you then have a place to operate sustainably and avoid having to move around."

The discussion dived into the topic of measuring success, and the panels discussion revealed metrics varied for the different organisations, influenced by the way that incubators and accelerators are funded e.g. public sector vs private and the type of returns and value that funders are looking for.

There were additional discussions, in the room, on metrics which included:

- How metrics can be used as indicators of the quality of incubators and accelerators and help with sign-posting, building understanding, strength of the different types of incubators and accelerators.

- Looking at it from a founder's perspective, it would be good to get transparency, for example, of acceptance rates, to help determine suitability of incubators and accelerators.

- Other thoughts on measures of success included; building confidence – how connected are they, what funding have founders raised, how much has their business grown?

Laura Bennett highlighted some of the RAEng measures, which included job creation, evaluation of the companies, NPS scores, connections made by founders, ratio of male/female entrepreneurs and applicants outside of the golden triangle.

For STFC, Amy Farrington shared that measures of success are predominately around economic growth, focusing on the return on public spend. Some other measures for STFC include jobs created and investment raised. STFC tracks companies over 10 years with a 25x plus return on investment found. Being a public sector organisation, both Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, and environmental data is important and tracked.

Aline Charpentier noted for Bruntwood SciTech that given their commercial model the focus is on return on investment, as well as the building of the ecosystem. Aline also shared other measures of success which included talent that can be developed e.g. become more commercial, and diversity data.

For Tech Nation, Chantelle Young highlighted their focus on both qualitative and quantitative measures. Tech Nation also looks at metrics focused on founders, e.g. what their personal goal is, what success looks like for them, how much has their business benefitted from the programme.

# Roundtable Reflections:
# Connecting the Dots

**Unlocking the potential of Incubators and Accelerators in the UK**

The insights and key messages from the two round tables focused on the role and sustainability of incubators and accelerators. Consistent messages were echoed across the groups:

- **Lack of Centralised Access and Coordination**

  - Entrepreneurs face difficulty navigating support due to fragmentation and lack of a single entry point.

  - There is no consistent pathway to understand what support is available across different regions.

- **Mapping: Essential but Challenging**

  - Mapping incubators and accelerators was one of the most talked-about needs, yet also recognised as difficult to implement.

  - Local mapping is already happening, but tends to fade over time due to lack of funding, governance, and consistency.

  - No private sector incentive to maintain mapping, and changing government strategies make national coordination difficult.

## Collective responsibility means collective action

- **Government Funding and Local Ecosystem Engagement**

  - Government funding is a crucial concern, especially for sustainability of incubators and accelerators.

  - There is growing collaboration between public and private sectors with regional partners to co-shape ecosystems.

  - Sustainability may be better achieved through a locally rooted model, feeding into a broader national strategy.

**Quality, Transparency, and Trust**

- There are concerns over inconsistent quality across incubators and accelerators, which damages trust and makes referrals difficult.

- Quality assurance would support better signposting and reduce risk for entrepreneurs joining unsuitable programmes.

**Relevance by Stage, Location, and Specialism**

- Needs vary based on business stage (early, growth, scale) and sector specialism.

- Start-ups need local access, while scaling companies require national and international exposure.

- Mapping should include each incubator/accelerator's focus areas (e.g. healthtech, data, smart cities) to help start-ups find the right fit.

**Visibility and Communication**

- Accelerators need to be more open about their focus, selection criteria, and success metrics.

- Improved university-enterprise contacts would also enhance collaboration and best-practice sharing.

**The Role of Case Studies**

- Case studies paired with mapping can make benefits tangible and relatable.

- Showcasing start-up journeys post-programme can guide decision-making and help entrepreneurs understand programme impact.

- However, maintaining case studies is difficult—requires dedicated resourcing and ownership.

**Differentiation and Agility**

- There's a need to clearly delineate incubators vs. accelerators—some feel accelerators have become too uniform or 'cookie cutter.'

- Programmes must understand and review their own value proposition regularly to remain relevant—particularly important for publicly funded models under pressure.

**Investment Access Disparity**

- More consistent education and facilitation of investment access across accelerators/incubators is needed.

**Systemic transformation requires shared responsibility – across regions, sectors and institutions**

# Closing Reflections: From Conversation to Action

**Conclusion**

To achieve a sustainable, effective innovation support ecosystem, stakeholders emphasised the importance of:

- Central mapping with local intelligence
- Collaborative triage and signposting
- Clear quality benchmarks and transparency
- Strategic government involvement and funding stability
- Long-term visibility of support outcomes through case studies

The path forward involves national coordination with strong local engagement, data-informed decisions, and a founder-first approach to building impactful ecosystems.

Throughout the day, one question emerged time and again: What does success really look like—for a founder, or for the ecosystem as a whole? The answers reflected a growing consensus: it's time to rethink how we define success, to move beyond narrow metrics, and to embrace collaboration across sectors and communities.

Geeta Nathan, Deputy Director of the Start-up Ecosystem at Innovate UK, closed the day with a timely reminder: "Build on these conversations, strengthen partnerships, and maintain a founder-centric focus." Her words captured the shared accelerators, that too many events end without meaningful follow-through, and issued a challenge to break that cycle.

AJ from Pioneer Group reminded us that "when we work with the right people who are mission-oriented and driven, good stuff can happen."

The next steps are for a smaller group to come together and start to define what we mean by community for incubators and accelerator and deep dive into a couple of key challenges which were raised through the day.

"In the long-term, we need to remember the importance of encouraging new entrepreneurs to start as well as offering support to those that are growing. This has become an under-served part of the process, once again. Those who care about the economy of the UK need to pay more attention to this. IAN has so much to offer here."

**Timothy Barnes, Centre for Entrepreneurs**