UK
HEALTHY
CAPITAL
Coalition

Business development as if people mattered: A MANIFESTO

mind your business.

1. The World We Inherited

Business support as we know it was not designed for most businesses. It was designed for a particular kind of business, one that grows fast, scales aggressively, attracts investment, and exits profitably. Over the past few decades, this model quietly became the template against which all entrepreneurial activity is measured, funded, and judged.

The logic behind it is seductive. A small number of companies do generate extraordinary returns. Venture capital, accelerators, and innovation ecosystems have produced genuine breakthroughs. But somewhere along the way, the exception became the rule. Infrastructure built to serve outliers started presenting itself as the natural home for everyone.

This is not a neutral mistake. Entrepreneurship, like most human phenomena, follows a power law distribution. The vast majority of ventures are small, local, and purposefully so. They employ people, sustain families, anchor communities, and contribute quietly but meaningfully to economic and social life. They were never going to become unicorns, and most of their founders never wanted them to. Yet the dominant support system was built as though they should, and judges them accordingly when they do not.

The result is a world in which most entrepreneurs are invisible to the very institutions that claim to serve them.

2. The Costs We Don't Talk About

Running a business is hard. That is not a secret. But there is a particular kind of harm that comes not from the challenges of enterprise itself, but from a support system that was never designed with most founders in mind.

When the infrastructure around you is built on assumptions that do not match your reality, the gap between where you are and where you are told you should be does not read as a systems problem. It reads as a personal one. Ambition gets questioned. Commitment gets doubted. And when things go wrong, as they often do in any venture, the failure is yours to carry alone. The evidence is not subtle. Entrepreneurs experience significantly higher rates of stress, anxiety, depression, sleep deprivation, and burnout than the general population. These are not simply the occupational hazards of risk-taking. They are, in large part, the predictable consequences of operating within a system that mistakes resilience for a virtue rather than a symptom. A system that responds to struggle with encouragement to try harder, rather than asking whether the demands being placed on people are reasonable in the first place.

When a business closes, the dominant narrative frames this as individual failure. The founder did not pivot fast enough, did not hustle hard enough, did not want it badly enough. The possibility that the venture met a reasonable end, or that the founder made a sound decision to stop, is rarely entertained. And so the costs, financial, psychological, relational, are absorbed privately, while the system that contributed to them moves on unchanged.

This is neither an accident, nor an anecdote. It is what happens when support is designed around outcomes that matter to funders and investors, rather than around the lives of the people it claims to serve.

3. The Fictions We Were Sold

Every support system carries a set of assumptions about what success looks like, who deserves help, and what kind of help is worth giving. In business development support, those assumptions have hardened over time into something that functions less like a framework and more like a script. A script so appealing in its clarity, so pervasive in its reach, and so deeply embedded in the culture of enterprise that imagining something different can feel almost impossible. It tells us who the entrepreneur is, what they want, how they should behave, and what they should be willing to sacrifice. And it does all of this so seamlessly that most of us absorb it without ever being asked whether we agree.

This is the entrepreneurial script. And like all powerful scripts, its greatest trick is making itself look like common sense.

The first fiction written into that script is that growth is always the goal. Not growth as one possibility among many, but growth as the self-evident purpose of any serious venture. Founders who build deliberately small businesses, who prioritise sustainability over scale, who make conscious choices to protect their time, their health, or their communities, are routinely labelled as unambitious. The language is telling. Lifestyle business. Necessity entrepreneur. These are not neutral descriptions. They are ways of sorting people into those whose aspirations are worth supporting and those whose are not.

The second fiction is that the entrepreneur is a hero. The dominant culture of business support is saturated with this figure: relentless, visionary, willing to sacrifice everything in pursuit of the mission. It is an intoxicating story. It is also a damaging one, because it makes the very real costs of enterprise into evidence of commitment rather than signals worth listening to. Stress becomes passion. Exhaustion becomes dedication. Asking for help becomes weakness.

The third fiction is that the metrics tell the truth. Behind most business support programmes sits a set of key performance indicators that have very little to do with the reality of the people being supported, and a great deal to do with the needs of the institutions providing the funding. Jobs created. Turnover generated. Investment raised. These numbers are not meaningless, but they are incomplete, and when they become the primary lens through which support is designed and evaluated, the founders who do not fit the template simply disappear from view.

The fourth fiction is that entrepreneurship is a solution. To unemployment, to regional inequality, to social exclusion, to climate change. There is something in this, of course. Enterprise can be a powerful force for good. But when entrepreneurship is framed as a silver bullet, it places an impossible burden on individual founders while relieving systems, institutions, and policymakers of their own responsibilities. It also sets people up to fail in ways that are then attributed to their own shortcomings rather than to the limits of what any business, however well run, can reasonably be expected to achieve.

Taken together, these fictions do not simply distort how support is delivered. They shape what founders believe about themselves, what they feel entitled to ask for, and what they are willing to endure. The script is not imposed from outside. Over time, it becomes internalised. That is what makes it so difficult to challenge, and so necessary to name.

4. What We Believe Instead

If the dominant script tells a single story about what enterprise is for and who it serves, then a more humane approach begins with a different premise: that there is no single story worth telling, and that the plurality of human motivation, aspiration, and circumstance is not a problem to be managed but a reality to be honoured.

We believe that a business is, first and foremost, a human project. It is built by people with lives, relationships, histories, and limits. It exists within communities, depends on ecosystems, and carries consequences that extend well beyond the balance sheet. Any support system worthy of the name must begin from this recognition, not from an abstract model of what a venture should become.

We believe that ambition takes many forms. The founder who wants to build something small and sustainable is not less ambitious than one chasing exponential growth. They are differently ambitious, in ways that may be more considered, more grounded, and more honest about what they actually want from their working life. A humane support system does not rank these aspirations. It makes room for all of them.

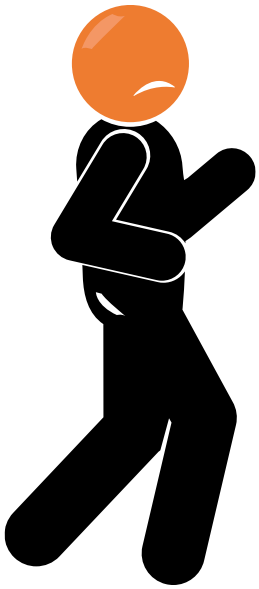
We believe that legitimacy should not be earned through growth. A business that sustains a family, employs a handful of people, serves a local community, or allows its founder to do work they find meaningful is already a success. It does not need to justify its existence by promising to become something larger. Support should reflect this, not undermine it.

We believe that the costs of enterprise are real and must be acknowledged. Not as unfortunate side effects to be minimised in the small print, but as central concerns that shape how support is designed and delivered. Founders should be able to speak honestly about struggle without fear of being judged as uncommitted. They should have access to support that addresses their wellbeing as seriously as their business model.

We believe that entrepreneurship is one tool among many. It can be a source of meaning, livelihood, and genuine social contribution. But it is not a cure for structural inequality, and it should never be presented as a driver of economic development or a route to recovery when economies falter. Placing the weight of systemic problems onto individual founders is neither fair nor effective, and it lets the institutions and policies responsible for those problems off the hook. A humane support system is honest about what enterprise can and cannot do.

And we believe that people are the experts on their own lives. The role of a support organisation is not to prescribe a destination but to walk alongside, to ask good questions, to open possibilities, and to trust that the person sitting across the table knows things about their own situation, values, and constraints that no framework can fully capture.

This is not a utopian vision. It is a practical one. It asks support organisations to reorient around people rather than metrics, around plurality rather than templates, and around honesty rather than the seductive fictions of the dominant script. It will not look the same everywhere. But it will feel different. And for many founders, that difference will matter enormously.



5. What We Commit To

Manifestos are easy. Change is harder. So we want to be clear about what signing up to this coalition actually means, what we are pledging to do differently, and what we are no longer willing to do at all.

We commit to starting with the person, not the business plan. Before we talk about markets, models, or growth trajectories, we will ask founders what they actually want, what kind of life they are trying to build, and what success would genuinely look like for them. We will design our support around those answers, not around the assumptions we brought into the room.

We commit to telling the truth about the odds. We will not dress up the difficulties of enterprise in the language of inspiration. We will be honest about risk, about the statistical realities of venture survival, and about the limits of what any support programme can guarantee. Founders deserve accurate information, not managed optimism.

We commit to taking wellbeing seriously. Not as an add-on or an afterthought, but as a core dimension of what good support looks like. We will create conditions in which founders can speak openly about stress, anxiety, and struggle without those conversations being redirected back to productivity or growth. We will connect people to appropriate support when they need it, and we will stop pretending that resilience alone is a sufficient response to systemic pressure.

We commit to refusing metrics that do not serve founders. We will push back against key performance indicators that measure the priorities of funders rather than the realities of the people we work with. Where we cannot refuse them entirely, we will supplement them with measures that actually reflect what is happening in people's lives and businesses. We will be transparent about this tension rather than hiding behind numbers that tell a convenient but incomplete story.

We commit to legitimising the full spectrum of enterprise. We will not sort founders into worthy and unworthy based on their appetite for growth. We will offer meaningful support to businesses that are small by design, to founders whose primary motivation is autonomy or purpose rather than profit, and to those whose ventures do not fit the templates our sector has historically privileged.

We commit to being honest about what entrepreneurship cannot do. We will not promise founders that their business is a solution to inequality, economic hardship, or social exclusion. We will celebrate what enterprise genuinely achieves while being clear about its limits, and we will advocate for the systemic conditions, policy environments, and public investments that founders also need but that no business can substitute for.

We commit to learning from the people we support. We will treat founders as experts on their own lives and contexts. We will build feedback into everything we do, not as a compliance exercise but as a genuine source of insight that shapes how we work. And we will hold ourselves accountable not to funders alone, but to the communities of founders whose trust we are asking for.

These commitments will not always be easy to keep. Some of them will put us in uncomfortable conversations with the institutions that fund us. We are making them anyway, because we believe the current system is causing harm that we are no longer willing to be complicit in.

6. An Invitation

If you have read this far, you probably recognise something in these pages. Perhaps you have felt the gap between the support system as it presents itself and the reality you see in the founders you work with, or live as yourself. Perhaps you have quietly disagreed with the metrics you were asked to report against, or felt uneasy about the stories your sector tells. Perhaps you have simply known, for a long time, that something needed to change.

This coalition is for you.

We are not asking organisations to abandon everything they currently do or founders to pretend that growth and ambition are not part of their story. We are asking for honesty, for a willingness to look clearly at the system we have inherited, to name what it costs, and to commit to doing things differently.

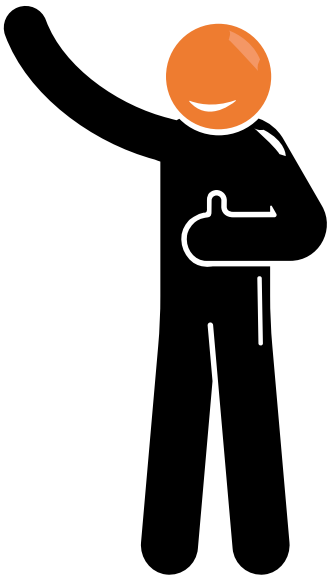
We believe there are enough of us, across support organisations, funding bodies, practitioner networks, and founder communities, who share this discomfort and this desire for change, to make something real together. A different kind of infrastructure. One that is built around people rather than projections, around plurality rather than templates, and around the quiet, serious, meaningful work that most entrepreneurs actually do.

If that is the world you want to help build, we would like to hear from you.

For updates as plans progress, join the mailing list

https://mindyourbusiness.uk/contact/#mailing-list

For more info on Mind Your Business and the founders

Website: www.mindyourbusiness.uk
E-mail: hello@mindyourbusiness.uk

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