The Oversight Trust

Assets for the Common Good

# Access: The Foundation for Social Investment

## Quadrennial Review

28 January 2026

# Contents

# Summary

Access — The Foundation for Social Investment's impact and style was viewed as positive by the overwhelming majority of our interviewees, who included Access' partners and investees, as well as sector experts and governmental bodies. We agree with this positive assessment and highlight:

- Access' unique role in providing investment and enterprise development, tailored to the needs of the charities and social enterprises sector.
- Access' success in testing and learning with partners how to deploy the grant elements of £180 million investment most effectively to 3,552 organisations, transforming the supply of small-scale, patient finance. 24% of Access' investments are in the 10% most deprived areas in England, reaching communities not otherwise funded by traditional funders and foundations.
- Access' lean organisation which, despite doubling to 14 staff since 2021, continues to mirror the sector in its listening approach and culture.

Access has extended its life beyond the original 2025 horizon and has received additional dormant assets funding, but will be under pressure from opportunities and challenges foreseeable or already in play in the period 2025–28. Access' leadership will be stretched during 2025–28 to deliver on its current strategy, which adds significant tasks that can only be delivered by senior leaders:

- Access' core investment allocation task during a period of continuing scarcity of capital for social investment at the vulnerable end of the spectrum.
- Access' convening/advocacy/supporting/empowering/insight tasks at this moment of opportunity for social investment, given the revived interest of Government and the enhanced Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs).
- Access' acknowledged obligation to increase investments into Charities and Social Enterprises (CSEs) who are founded in minoritised communities and are tackling structural inequities.
- Preserving the organisational culture whilst adapting to the demands of the new higher-profile sector-shaping strategy.

Taken together, changes in Access' context and strategy result in a significantly more complex model. This Quadrennial Review (QR) highlights the heightened complexity for Access and identifies three issues that should be considered as the leadership of Access approaches the delivery of its 2025–2028 Strategy[1]:

1. The social investment ecosystem remains fragile despite continued subsidy, currently largely via Access, and despite the overwhelming social benefits delivered by social enterprises. It is possible to see the path whereby individual intermediaries and individual CSEs become self-sustaining, but the social enterprise ecosystem requires ongoing subsidy. Given that context, what does long-term sustainability mean for Access and the ecosystem?
2. Impact investment has shifted since 2022 towards commercial impact-fund managers and away from social intermediaries. Dormant assets allocations have been delayed and fallen

short. Can other sources of capital for social enterprise fill the gap or, in time, replace Access/dormant assets?

3. Access has a full and expanding agenda, in part because all stakeholders trust its leadership style and culture. Such an expanding agenda risks leadership over-stretch and governance complexity. How can Access' positive organisational culture be enhanced while taking on new strategies, activities and goals?

# Review process

The independent review panel ('the Panel') of Keith Leslie (Chair), Magdalene Bayim-Adomako and Lucy Findlay, supported by Fiona Young Priest (secretariat), was tasked with assessing whether Access — The Foundation for Social Investment (Access) has met its objectives and whether it is effective in its operations. The Panel was accountable to an Oversight Trust (OT) group of Nicola Pollock, Kevin Davis, Vicki Thornton and Alastair Ballantyne. Access made its senior staff available for interview; established a comprehensive data room of material comprising meeting records, analyses and other documents; and Access senior leadership engaged regularly with the Panel. We are grateful to Claire Goodridge for her support with documents, arranging meetings and dealing with various questions from the Panel. Terms of Reference are appended, as are brief biographical notes on the reviewers (Appendices 1 and 2 respectively).

The approach adopted by the Panel, in agreement with OT and Access, was to engage the people and stakeholders of Access in conversation, exploring:

- Successes, challenges and opportunities for the organisation during the preceding four years.
- Progress on the issues identified in the 2021 QR and the impact of changes in the external world since then.
- Issues for Access to consider as it develops its Mobilisation Strategy.

The Panel did not conduct an audit of Access' data nor develop alternative analyses; the review was conducted on the basis of data and analyses provided by Access. The priority was to have open conversations with a wide range of stakeholders on the topics they wished to discuss and to do so in a constructive and confidential atmosphere. The Panel believes this priority has been realised.

The Panel worked with OT and Access to identify 40–plus stakeholders and organisations including: Access Board members, OT Directors, policy-makers, delivery partners (intermediaries), co-investors, peer organisations, trade/infrastructure bodies, foundations and other partners. Appendix 3 lists the stakeholder organisations who were represented during the interview process. Interviewees also suggested further organisations and individuals who could provide valuable insight. Alongside the internal and external interviews, an open invitation was shared on the Access and OT websites, and via social media channels (from 15th September to 31st October 2025). Respondents were encouraged to share free-form responses to a dedicated mailbox.

We found a high degree of consensus across all our circa 35 interviews, across all stakeholder groups. Typically, an interview discussion comprised 15–20 minutes' appreciation of Access' work and 20–40 minutes' discussion around issues and options facing Access, all addressed constructively. Another beneficial aspect of the high degree of consensus is that it should enable Access both to respond to this review and to constructively use its findings when considering areas on which to focus.

Internal interviews took place at Access' offices, with external interviews taking place virtually. The Panel believes that we obtained full and open input both from interviewees and from Access on our thinking and the report as they developed. Our thanks are due to all whom we 'met' during the review period 13th October to 20th November 2025. All data cited was correct as of 20th November 2025, but some may be subject to later change as reports are updated in the normal course of events.

# Glossary of terms and actors

The terms used in this report to describe the spectrum of investments and key actors are defined as follows — this glossary is not intended to be an exhaustive list:

| | |
|---|---|
| **Better Society Capital (BSC)** | Social impact-led investor; its mission is to grow the amount of money invested in tackling social issues and inequalities in the UK. |
| **Blended finance** | Investment into social purpose organisations and/or funds that benefit from a grant or guarantee from others as 'first loss' and/or risk mitigation or contribution to fixed costs, as well as investment from other investors seeking a market or concessionary rate of return. |
| **Catalytic capital** | Capital designed to stimulate impact, mitigate risk and improve an opportunity's viability to attract third party investment. |
| **Concessionary capital** | Below-market debt or other investment instrument, including patient equity-like capital. |
| **CSEs** | Charities and Social Enterprises sometimes referred to as Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprises (VCSEs) |
| **EDI** | Equity, Diversity and Inclusion |
| **Impact investment** | Investments at or below market rate of return, with measurable social or environmental impact. |
| **Intermediaries** | Organisations that deploy capital and provide support within specific regions and communities to CSEs. They are sometimes referred to as social investment retailers and are the type of organisation that Access funds directly. |
| **Local Access** | A joint funding programme, established by Access and BSC, that aims to support the development of stronger, more resilient and sustainable social economies in six places across England. |
| **Mayoral Combined Authorities** | Legal bodies set up using national legislation that enables a group of two or more councils to collaborate and take collective decisions across council boundaries. |
| **Pathway Fund (Pathway)** | An impact investment wholesaler dedicated to catalysing opportunities for Black and Ethnically Minoritised (BEM) communities across the UK. |
| **Social investment, social investment funds/'social funds'** | Sub-set of Impact investment — investment in social enterprises and charities, at or below market return, primarily for social impact, alongside financial return. Can take the form of equity or repayable finance. |

# Overview of Access: The Foundation for Social Investment

## Context

Access was created in 2015, following a realisation that sustained efforts to grow the social investment market had not resulted in meeting the needs of many CSEs. Typically the type of finance that is suitable for most CSEs has not been readily available, either because there was too much risk, or the size of the investment was too small. Equally, support for CSEs to grow their enterprise models and to access investment was patchy, under-resourced and uncoordinated — Access was created to grow the reach of social investment.

CSEs play a unique role in communities, tackling deep-rooted challenges and creating lasting social change. They create jobs, strengthen communities, and contribute to economic growth — but they need the right finance to succeed. Too often, they struggle to access the finance and support they need to grow their impact.

Access wants to see a social investment ecosystem that works for all CSEs, supporting them to meet the evolving needs of communities across the country. It works to make sure CSEs can access the finance they need to sustain or grow their impact. It does this by supporting a range of tools — from grants to investments — to help charities and social enterprises grow their trading income, strengthen their resilience and access social investment that works for them.

Access believes that social investment should work for the organisations and people that need it most. That means finance that is patient, flexible and designed around the realities of delivering social impact.

Access focuses on:

- Underserved places and communities — ensuring investment reaches those who need it most.
- Innovative financial tools — from blended finance to enterprise grants. It explores tools to build resilience and sustainability.
- Systems change — by connecting, convening, and collaborating, it is reshaping the system to work better for charities, social enterprises and the communities they serve.

## Vision and strategy

Access wants to see an investment ecosystem that works, particularly for those in need of patient and flexible investment, helping to create stronger communities, especially in underserved places.

Through its programmes and advocacy work, it seeks to build the capacity of the social investment ecosystem to provide blended finance and boost the resilience of CSEs by growing enterprise.

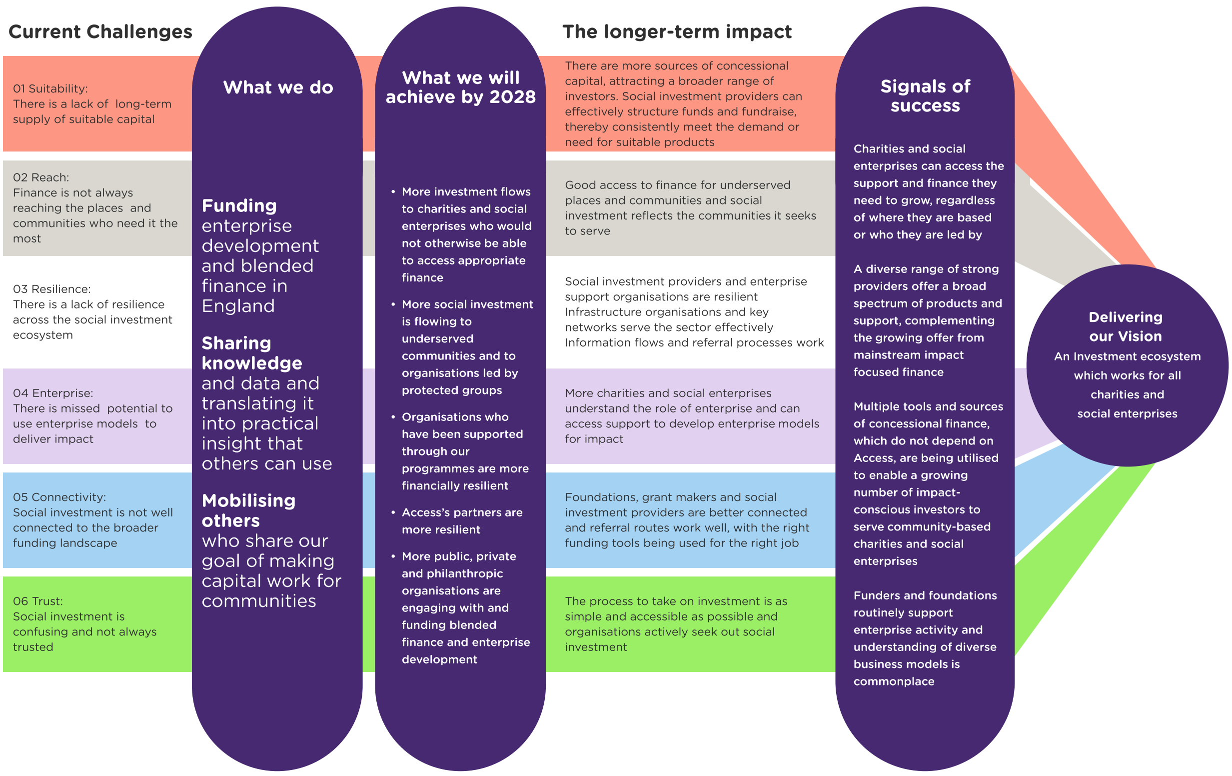
Designed to disrupt the existing social investment market and widen its reach into places and communities that were previously excluded, Access targets those most in need of patient and flexible investment through:

- Funding blended finance and enterprise development programmes in England.
- Sharing knowledge and data and translating it into practical insight that others can use.
- Mobilising others who share its goal of making capital work for communities.

In 2025 Access launched its 2025–2028 Strategy[1], updating its Theory of Change model. Over the next four years, the strategy aims to use its three levers of funding, sharing and mobilising:

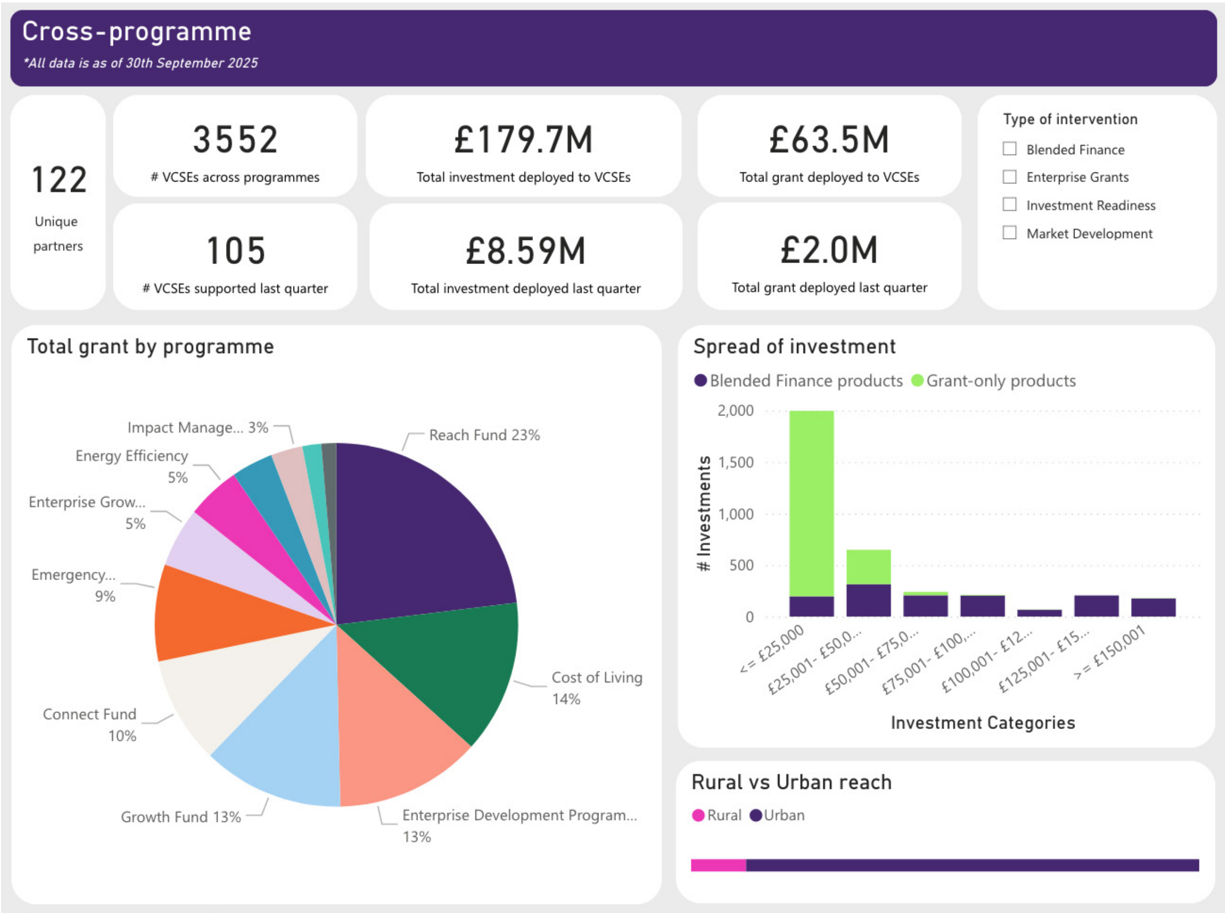
- Through **funding**, Access will provide concessionary capital for social investors to create blended finance structures and help build their resilience, grow support for enterprise development and investment readiness, and support networks and targeted infrastructure interventions which better inform and connect the sector.
- Through **sharing**, Access will gather, analyse and share data and insight on its work and that of others in its ecosystem, support research and insight projects which deepen knowledge, and influence key partners across the ecosystem.
- Through **mobilising**, Access will deepen understanding and broaden access to Blended Finance structures, build the movement of enterprise grants and encourage funders to value the role of enterprise in supporting resilience, and encourage more foundations to invest their endowments for impact.

## Theory of Change

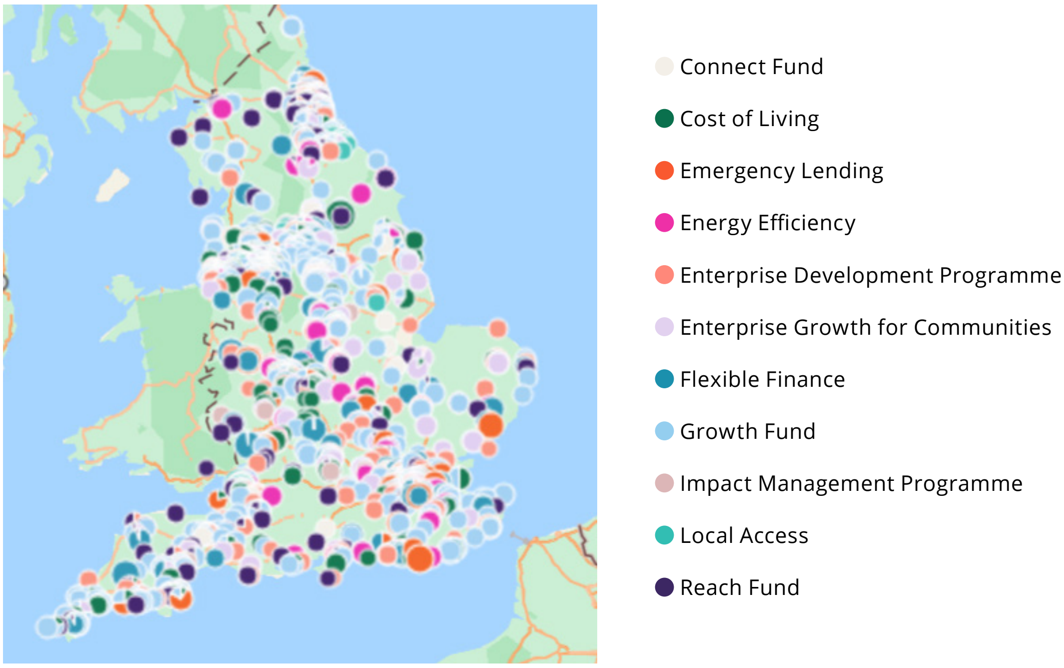


Central to Access' vision is the need to stimulate additional flows of the right sort of capital to meet the needs of community-based CSEs. This is because Access' resources are not sufficient to meet the need and it cannot assume long term financial support after the current round of dormant assets funding. Access has always assumed it is building an ecosystem that is not dependent on Access' existence in perpetuity. It is therefore developing a **Mobilisation Strategy** to map out in more detail how it should prioritise its work over the next few years, to incentivise flows of the right sort of capital for community based CSEs. This will require a focus on stimulating other flows of concessionary finance.

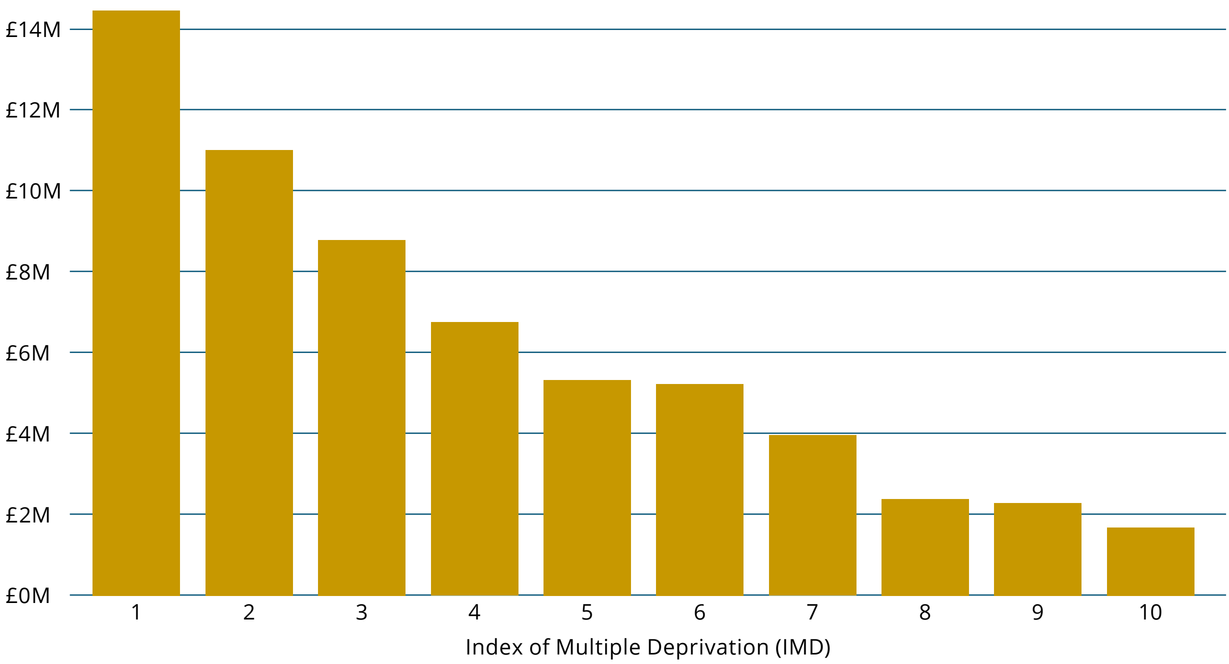
## Total funds deployed through Access since inception[2]



## Total Investment by Postcode and Programme




## Total Grant by IMD



## Key achievements and impact

Access monitors its progress using five Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):

1. More investment flows to CSEs who would not otherwise be able to access appropriate finance — flow of money theme
2. Proportionally more money is flowing to underserved communities and to organisations led by protected groups — flow of money theme
3. Organisations who have been supported through programmes/funding are more financially resilient than they were before/would otherwise have been — resilience of system theme
4. Social investors Access works with are more resilient — resilience of system theme
5. More public, private and philanthropic organisations are engaging with and funding CSEs through blended finance, enterprise grant making and responsible investment — wider ecosystem behaviour theme.

In September 2025, Access celebrated 10 years of its impact. During this time, according to its latest figures (up to end of September 2025), Access reports that it has:

1. **Unlocked investment for CSEs** — over the past decade, Access' partners have deployed more than £180 million in investment to over 3,552 organisations, transforming the supply of small-scale, patient finance[3].
2. **Broken down barriers** — access to finance used to be a major barrier. In 2011, 44%[4] of social enterprises cited access to debt or equity as their biggest challenge. By 2021, that had fallen to just 6%[5].
3. **Created a clear front door** — more than 700,000 people have used Good Finance[6], which Access co-founded with BSC, making it easier for organisations to explore whether social investment is right for them. The platform has become a trusted and accessible resource for CSEs navigating a complex funding landscape.
4. **Targeted underserved places** — more of Access' money has flowed to the most deprived communities (24% of its investments are in the 10% most deprived areas in the country)[7]. Access' place-based work[8] has helped CSEs access new markets.
5. **Reached where others don't** — Access has shown that social investment reaches communities not otherwise funded by traditional funders and foundations — 44% of its funders do not appear anywhere else on 360Giving[9] or BSC's[10] deal level data, highlighting the additional reach that blended finance can enable.
6. **Backed new partnerships** — through backing first-time fund managers and new partnerships Access has created more ways for CSEs to access the finance they need, with partners who really understand the markets they are working in and the impact they are creating. Its Flexible Finance programme[11] has delivered 3.5 times more investment to BEM-led organisations than other Access programmes.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7. **Boosted resilience through enterprise** — Access' programmes have supported organisations to test and grow trading models, build income streams and reduce reliance on short-term grant funding. In the Enterprise Development programme[12], 97% of participants reported a positive or very positive confidence to trade, and 96% reported increased ambition to trade.

8. **A step-up when needed** — Access has provided long-term support for CSEs seeking support to get ready to take on investment, delivered in partnership with 122 delivery partners, providing stability to a market used to stop-start initiatives. The Reach Fund[13] has supported more than 1,100 organisations with every £1 of grant funding unlocking £7 of investment, which would not otherwise have flowed to those organisations.

9. **Maximised impact through its endowment** — Access' total impact approach[14] has delivered strong financial returns, beating market benchmarks while aligning investments with its mission. Capital has been channelled into affordable housing, clean energy and fair finance — demonstrating that investing for impact and for returns can go hand-in-hand.

10. **Building the future together** — Access has invested in the infrastructure[15] that holds the social investment market together — including the Connect Fund[16] and Diversity Forum[17] as well as new networks building expertise in blended finance, responsible investment and enterprise grant-making. Through sharing insight and convening decision-makers, Access has helped shape how funders, investors and Government think about social investment — securing £170 million of additional funding since 2019.

## International sharing of practice

Access has become an exemplar of market-building in social investment, which has been drawn on in many countries around the world. For example, in 2022 the CEO was invited to share the lessons from Access' work with representatives from the Australian Social Impact Investing Taskforce, and with ministers and officials at federal and state level across the country. In 2025 he gave a keynote speech at the second annual Blended Finance Summit in Toronto, Canada.

Access plays an active role as a member of communities such as Impact Europe, where members of the team have led workshops in recent years on place-based social investing and systems change strategies.

Over the last few years international delegations have visited Access from Singapore, Hong Kong, Saudi Arabia and many other countries.

## Organisation and resources

Access was established as a charity in 2014 to bridge the gap in the social investment market so that suitable finance and support is available to social enterprises and charities new to social investment. Access is a wholesale provider, working with and through existing market players to deliver its programmes — enabling Access to take a strategic view of the needs of the whole ecosystem. Access was originally set up with funding for a 10-year life. Based on the assumption that further dormant assets would flow to social investment over the long term, in September 2022 its Board made the decision to extend Access' life. In March 2023, it was confirmed that further dormant assets would be available for social investment wholesalers.

The decision to continue Access' work was reinforced by the independent review of grant subsidy into blended finance[18], the Adebowale Commission on Social Investment[19] and the 2021 QR[20] commissioned by the Oversight Trust.

Access originally received an expendable endowment of £60.65 million from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) (formerly based with the Cabinet Office) in 2015 as Grant-in-Aid to enable the growth of a sustainable social investment market. Further funding of £83 million was made available from the English allocation of monies collected by the Reclaim Fund under the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Act 2008. The investment returns on the expendable endowment have generated a further circa £10 million.

Alongside this, in 2015 Access entered a partnership with The National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF) and BSC to manage the Growth Fund. Access manages NLCF's grant of £22.5 million in the programme, which is invested in intermediaries, alongside a £22.5 million loan fund provided by BSC.

On 15th October 2025, the UK Government issued a Policy Direction confirming a further allocation of £87.5 million of dormant assets to Access to grow social investment in underserved places and communities; this includes £12.5 million for organisations that support improved youth outcomes. Also included is £12 million allocated to Pathway for scale-up funding. Access will oversee Pathway's allocation of dormant assets and will appoint a representative to Pathway's Board.

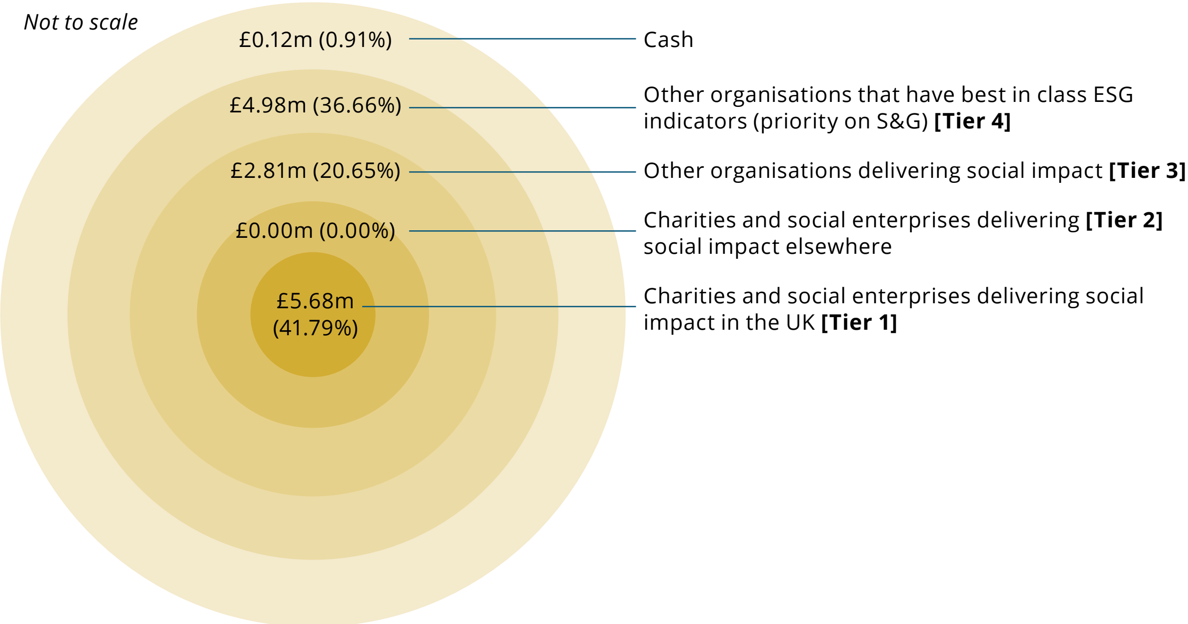
Access has a head count of 14 Full Time Equivalent staff as of October 2025 and based on its current strategy does not expect to grow beyond circa 16 staff. Access shares office space with BSC in London and, following COVID19, established hybrid working for staff. Access has a Senior Leadership Team (SLT) of five — staff are organised into four groups: Programmes, Impact and Evaluation, Partnerships and Advocacy, and Finance and Operations.

## Investing the endowment

From inception, and as required by DCMS, Access has invested its endowment with the intention of making a financial return, whilst also aligning investments where possible with its overall mission[14]. Access adopted an innovative 'bull's eye' model, prioritising those investments that most closely align with its mission. Access was mindful, in setting such an objective, that this prioritisation may not always be possible when considering overall return, risk and liquidity needs.

This is part of Access' 'Total Impact' approach to its operations; choosing to make investments that would achieve as much social impact as possible, before being repaid monies then used to make grants. To deliver this, Access adopted a tiered view of the varying degrees of impact. Set out below is the way in which funds were invested in 2024, mapped to the framework[21]. Over time the ambition has been to shift as much of the capital in the endowment as possible to being invested at the centre of the bull's eye:

## Portfolio mapped to the Bull's eye framework as at 31 December 2024




Note:
The portfolio currently contains a number of ethically screened/SRI bond funds which are being held until suitable direct investments become available. These have been classified within the outer tier of the bull's eye model (Tier 4) as they are considered to be "best in class' in terms of their ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) performance relative to conventional unscreened bond funds.

Underlying holdings within these funds June span all tiers of the bull's eye model: for example, the Rathbone Ethical Bond Fund holds bonds issued by organisations which would sit firmly within tier 1 (eg Golden Lane Housing), as well as those that would fall outside the model (eg, Lloyd's of London).

We believe that categorising these funds within the outer tier is a fair assessment of both their approach to ethical investment and the spread of underlying holdings.

It is anticipated the original endowment of £60.65 million will be fully expended by 31st December 2025. Over the last 10 years, Access has demonstrated that investing in high-impact areas is not only possible, but also profitable. According to its latest Endowment Impact Report[22] the portfolio has yielded returns of 12.73% total weighted return (after fees), with 35% of the portfolio directly invested in UK CSEs and 53% directly invested in organisations delivering social impact.

# Issues and changes since the first Quadrennial Review in 2021

Access produced a comprehensive programme of action in response to the QR in 2021. In parallel, a great deal also changed in the external environment and as a result of Access' actions. Before reporting the findings of the current QR, we summarise the main Access actions and changes in context.

## Quadrennial Review 2021 and Access progress

The first QR in 2021[20] identified a number of issues for consideration by Access' leadership and, in its initial response[23] in 2021, Access set out plans to address these issues. Access' Board discussed progress on these plans at its meeting in September 2024 and felt there was only one remaining area where it had further work to do; most references below refer to internal minutes from that meeting. This remaining area was Issue 3 where Access had committed to becoming more transparent around the trust costs of programme delivery. A blog update on progress was published on 12th May 2025[24].

| Issue identified in QR 2021 | Access progress by 2024 — as per Access update 2025 |
|---|---|
| **1. Sustainability of the flow of blended capital beyond 2022, given the inevitability of subsidy to offset the costs of investing in and supporting small CSEs** | |
| The costs are principally the unavoidable transaction costs, provision of 'first loss' cover and the costs of support to small CSEs. There should be a longer-term commitment to fund the sector, in order to ensure CSEs are not subject to stop-go shocks, while they play a critical social and economic role in the aftermath of the pandemic. | Delivering long-term change to the financing ecosystem for community-based charities and social enterprises, to ensure the long-term provision of blended finance, is central to our strategy. We are contributing to this outcome both through our continued funding (having received further dormant assets allocations since the QR and anticipating further) and our learning and advocacy work. The clear decision for Access not to close was partly influenced by the conclusions of the QR. |
| **2. Complexity, fragility and cost in the social investment ecosystem** | |
| The social investment ecosystem is complex and high-cost, resulting in many small, fragile intermediaries. The sustainability and scale of intermediaries would be improved by longer term commitment to fund infrastructure, as well as measures to increase the flow of investment through existing channels and reduce the complexity of decision-making. | Supporting and building the resilience of our delivery partners has become a more explicit element of programme design, as well as dedicated funding over the past six years through the Connect Fund and some other direct interventions. We are more intentional about identifying where we should support new partners and where we should back those with significant track records. In the design of more recent programmes, we have implemented many lessons from the design of the Growth Fund and been able to provide more flexibility and reduce complexity for our partners. |

| Issue identified in QR 2021 | Access progress by 2024 — as per Access update 2025 |
|---|---|
| **3. Vulnerabilities of Access running a lean organisation** | |
| Access clearly benefits from the effectiveness, flexibility and shared values of its agile, lean internal organisation, outsourced model and its culture. The corollary of these benefits is vulnerabilities, including key individual risk and dependence on key suppliers and partners. While not shifting away from the fundamental model, measures could be considered to address these issues. | In 2021 we undertook a staff survey to test the assumption in the QR that the team was over-stretched and, while a number of useful conclusions arose from this, it was clear that workloads were generally appropriate.<br><br>Crucially we don't feel that staying relatively lean ourselves is inefficiently pushing work and costs onto our partners[24]. |
| **4. Equality, diversity and inclusion** | |
| The social investment sector does not appear at all diverse and has not reached all organisations that could benefit from a truly inclusive mode of operation. Access is committed to pursuing change and has invested to address issues of inequality in the CSE investment sector. Access could catalyse work across the sector through its programme design, its investment in intermediaries and its investment in CSEs that is focused on tackling inequalities. | Continuing to develop our impact in this area has been a major part of our work over the last three years. A comprehensive organisational EDI strategy and action plan has resulted in a much clearer programmatic focus on ensuring that our finance is reaching organisations led by minoritised people and organisations focused on driving equality outcomes.<br><br>These principles, and in particular a focus on race equity, have also been a priority of the development of the Community Enterprise Growth Plan (CEGP) and the planned dormant asset commitment to Pathway. |
| **5. Advocacy** | |
| Access has positive relationships with Government and across the CSE sector, which it can use to catalyse and convene coalitions to build the case to Government and beyond for the importance of blended finance and support for building resilience through enterprise, for CSEs and their role across England. | We have made significant progress both to develop Access' advocacy role and, as demonstrated through the strategy refresh, focus on the topics where we can add unique value: blended finance, enterprise development and foundation impact investing. |

| Issue identified in QR 2021 | Access progress by 2024 — as per Access update 2025 |
|---|---|
| **6. Legacy** | |
| Access is already discussing how it approaches its 2025 deadline. The CSE sector and Government need to be enrolled in the debate (one that is quite pressing given the full commitment of the Growth Fund and Connect Programmes in the next 18 months) around sustainability of blended capital, enterprise support, CSE infrastructure and learning. The options for post-2025 provision need structured evaluation | The Panel's reflections on this topic formed one of the factors which encouraged the Access Board no longer to pursue closure, on the assumption that further dormant assets would be available via Access. Our refreshed strategy reflects a clearer articulation of Access' longer-term role in bringing about change in the ecosystem. The recommendation that DCMS undertakes a review of blended finance options was adopted in 2022 and this was an important element of decision-making around the future of dormant assets for the previous Government. |

During our interviews for the present QR, we followed up on the 2021 issues. The following incorporates feedback received.

## What changed for Access 2021-25?

In the external world:

- Interest rates increased substantially to historical norms and the UK experienced a cost-of-living crisis with inflation levels peaking at 11.1% in October 2022.[25]
- COVID19 and its ongoing impact — Access committed at least £18 million to its Flexible Finance programme to support further the development of social enterprise models in the sector in the 'recovery', alongside a number of emergency support interventions and adaptations to existing programmes.
- Following the 2024 General Election, the UK Government expressed the intention of greater engagement with social investment.
- On 10th November 2025 the Office for the Impact Economy[26] was launched following the publication of the Social Impact Investment Advisory Group's (SIIAG) report[27]. There are also a number of new units operating in a range of Government departments promoting the CSE agenda approach.
- The allocation of dormant assets to Access in 2025 (£87.5 million)[28] was smaller than the social investment market needs and was anticipating.

Examples of new initiatives and approaches include:

- Access allocated £11 million from the Dormant Assets Scheme to the Cost-of-Living Programme — targeting areas most affected by the cost-of-living crisis and long-term economic decline. Its goal was to help CSEs scale up or sustain their work.

- Established in 2022, the £20 million Enterprise Growth for Communities Programme was set up to sustain the flow of small-scale unsecured loans and is a successor to the Growth Fund.
- Energy Efficiency Social Investment Programme — aims to support CSEs looking to reduce energy costs, improve efficiency, and support a just transition towards a greener future. A £20 million programme with co-investment from BSC.
- The Enterprise Grants Taskforce was set up — bringing together funders and foundations looking to support the development of earned income across the sector.
- Development of the Community Enterprise Growth Plan with a broad coalition of stakeholders to support and influence decision-making on dormant assets.

Internal changes within the Access organisation:

- Access chose to extend its life from the original 10-year life span.
- Board changes — there has been little change within the Board over the last four years. However in the next year (2026) a number of trustee terms will come to an end and Access is using this opportunity, through its recruitment process, to bring further diversity onto the Board.
- Staff team has grown from seven as of May 2021 to 14 — the increase in number has led to the formalisation of the SLT.
- Access is currently working across the team with support from an external consultant to continue to maximise the potential of the organisation's culture and create an environment where everyone can thrive.

# Overall assessment of Access' impact and style

Access' impact and style was viewed as positive by the overwhelming majority of our interviewees, who included Access' partners and investees, as well as sector experts and governmental bodies. We agree with this positive assessment and highlight:

- Access' unique role in providing investment and enterprise development, tailored to the needs of the CSEs sector.
- Access' success in testing and learning with partners how to deploy the grant elements of £180 million investment most effectively to 3,522 organisations, transforming the supply of small-scale, patient finance. 24% of Access' investments have been in the 10% most deprived areas in England, reaching communities not otherwise funded by traditional funders and foundations.
- Access' lean organisation which, despite doubling to 14 staff since 2021, continues to mirror the sector in its listening approach and culture.

Access' model will be under pressure from opportunities and challenges foreseeable or already in play 2025–28. Access' leadership will be stretched during 2025–28 to deliver on its current strategy, which adds significant tasks that can only be delivered by senior leaders. We explore these issues in the next section of our report.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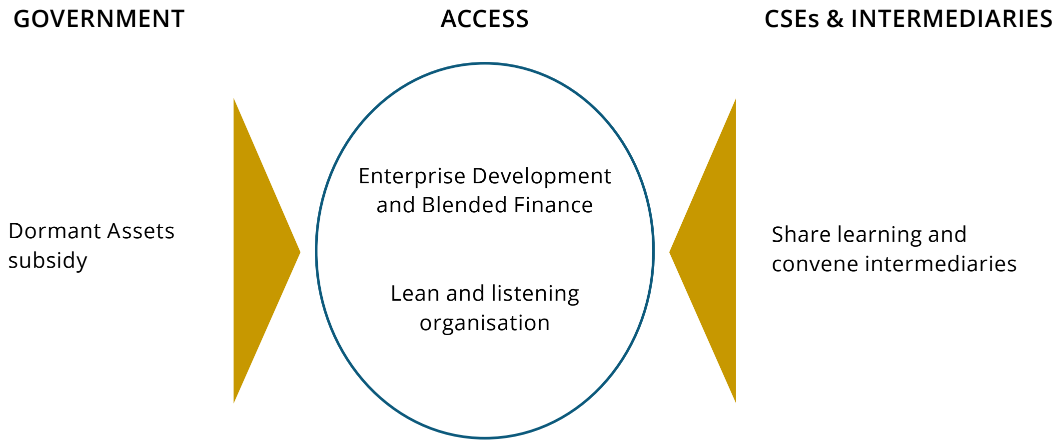
# Strategic issues to be considered by the leadership of Access

Access' strategy and the social investment ecosystem have evolved significantly since Access' inception in 2015. In its early years, Access' mission was conceptually relatively linear, transactional and predominantly about channelling funding. We acknowledge that this is a gross simplification of the complex innovative work to launch and deliver and we refer readers to Access' strategy documents[29] for a much fuller description. The diagram below illustrates Access' focus during its first five years on CSEs' enterprise development and blended finance, successfully building its organisational culture — with Government relatively passive beyond allocating dormant assets funds.




The objective of drawing a simplistic diagram of past practice is to contrast it with the evolving context within which Access is operating in 2025–28. Access now understands the real complexity of the ecosystem, which is also shifting considerably, with:

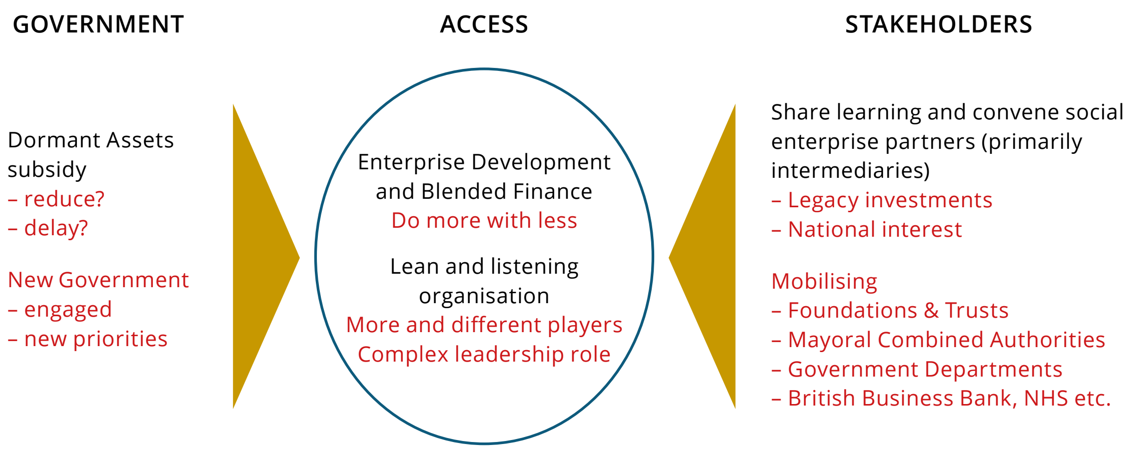
- More stakeholders, including a much more activist Government generating a richer set of policy options and multiple new bodies.
- Doubts over future dormant assets funding of social investment.
- New political priorities and eroding political consensus around social investment.
- Difficult choices between continuing 'legacy investments' versus extended national coverage and increasing focus on 'place'.
- Potential to engage more (and more different) players in funding/supporting CSEs, including MCAs.

Within this more complex context, Access aims to deliver a full and expanding agenda 2025–28, as set out in the strategy document[1], including:

- Access' core investment-allocation task during a period of continuing scarcity of capital for social investment at the vulnerable end of the spectrum.

- Access' convening/advocacy/supporting/empowering/insight tasks at this moment of opportunity for social investment, given the revived interest of Government and the enhanced MCAs.
- Access' acknowledged obligation to increase investments into CSEs who are founded in minoritised communities and are tackling structural inequities.
- Preserving the organisational culture whilst adapting to the demands of the new higher-profile sector-shaping strategy.

Taken together, changes in Access' context and strategy result in a significantly more complex model. This is crudely illustrated in the conceptual diagram below, showing the new complicating factors (in red), in order to visualise their number and potential impact on Access' work:




This additional complexity of context and strategy causes the Panel to reflect on the balance of challenges facing Access, the key points for Access to shape, and the implications for Access' capacity and capabilities that will need to be built. We explored the issues further during our interviews and, as a result, this QR highlights three that should be considered as the leadership of Access approaches the delivery of its 2025–2028 Strategy:

1. The social investment ecosystem remains fragile despite continued subsidy, currently largely via Access, and despite the overwhelming social benefits delivered by social enterprises. It is possible to see the path whereby individual intermediaries and individual CSEs become self-sustaining, but the social enterprise ecosystem requires ongoing subsidy. Given that context, what does long-term sustainability mean for Access and the ecosystem?
2. Impact investment has shifted since 2022 towards commercial impact-fund managers and away from social intermediaries. Dormant assets allocations have been delayed and fallen short. Can other sources of capital for social enterprise fill the gap or, in time, replace Access/dormant assets?
3. Access has a full and expanding agenda, in part because all stakeholders trust its leadership style and culture. Such an expanding agenda risks leadership over-stretch and governance complexity. How can Access' positive organisational culture be enhanced while taking on new strategies, activities and goals?

Issues 1 and 2 ask broad strategic questions about Access' direction and priorities, whereas Issue 3 is about specifics for Access' organisation and culture.

# Issue 1.
# *What is the path from fragility to sustainability for the social investment ecosystem?*

## The 2021 Quadrennial Review

The previous QR[20] identified the impact delivered through Access, and the ongoing need for dormant assets funding to provide the grant element of blended finance — which argued for an extended lifespan for Access. The 2021 QR also highlighted the need for Access (and BSC, in its 2020[30] and 2024[31] QRs) to:

- Advocate more for the impact and expansion of social investment.
- Make more use of its data and learning about 'what works/doesn't work'.
- Strengthen the fragile ecosystem (and intermediaries in particular) to provide sustainable flows of capital for social enterprise, particularly at the most challenging and highest-value end of the spectrum of CSEs.

Since 2021, Access has developed its strategy to address the social enterprise ecosystem and to secure the next phase of dormant assets funding.

## Consensus in 2025 on continuing importance of funding for Access

Having reviewed the data and interviewed a range of Access stakeholders, this 2025 QR highlights the continuing fragility of the social investment ecosystem — and Access' role in sustaining the system:

- **Positive and unique role of Access in funding social investment.**
  Enterprise development is a key subsidy in generating new ventures in communities less commonly running businesses, while the grant element in blended finance covers some core costs and first loss. Access is not the only provider but only Access operates at scale, and others typically do not have the deployable funds for both enterprise development and the grant element in blended finance.
- **Need for provision of blended finance to some of the hardest-to-reach and highest-impact community-based CSEs.**
  These CSEs tackle some of society's most persistent problems and excluded communities. However, they tend to take out small (and therefore expensive to administer) loans and their business models carry higher default risk which, in turn, result in minimal margins for intermediaries. We pointed out in the 2024 BSC QR[31] that the bulk of impact investment has focused on asset-backed and relatively mature business models. Attraction of social investors with different risk appetites, while reaching these most vulnerable social enterprises, requires blended finance. Interviewees viewed Access as unique in market-building, especially through Local Access Partnerships (LAPs).

- **Importance of 'place'.**
  Government, Combined Authorities, Access, intermediaries, investees, LAPs and specialist investors all agreed the need to reinforce place-based social investment. Meeting the needs of specific local communities is seen as a major opportunity and obligation to generate economic benefits, address structural inequities and shift power relationships. Access' data demonstrates significant progress since the 2021 QR, with support for, amongst other places, Bristol, Liverpool and Manchester. However, limited funding constrains both continued and new support to many other communities that would benefit.

- **Downside of the periodic uncertainty around dormant assets.**
  2024-25 was a difficult hiatus year when Access — and therefore its intermediaries — stopped committing funds. The dormant assets allocation was significantly delayed and, although a significant amount, leaves Access with difficult choices and the likelihood of continuing fragility across the ecosystem. Numerous interviewees suggested that an annual flow of funds to Access would be preferable to the current 'feast and famine' — or that allocations be made in advance to avoid gaps in commitments.

  Interviewees appreciated Access' work to keep funds flowing during the hiatus as part of greater flexibility. This includes the proposed move to a more flexible 'single pot' approach, rather than the previous 'multiple programme' approach of separate 'growth', 'cost-of-living' and 'enterprise' funds. Access has placed limits on flexibility in funding, including re-stating its policy of only investing in asset-locked organisations.

- **Risks implicit in the fragility of the intermediaries, where many are sub-scale, operate thin business models, and carry low reserves and working capital.**
  Intermediaries are crucial to Access and (to a lesser extent) BSC. Access' dashboard[2]/ KPIs[32] focus on social investors' resilience and Access monitors the resilience of its intermediaries. If dormant assets funding via Access was no longer available, most intermediaries would shrink back to a lower-risk core business and in other cases such loss of funding could lead to collapse. This illustrates one of the major challenges for Access in 2025–26 as it allocates funding — i.e. the need to balance funding between intermediaries with a track record and those offering new reach and access. Recently created place-focused LAPs are particularly vulnerable to losing continuation funding.

## Challenges/opportunities for Access

Given the continuing consensus from interviewees, it is unsurprising that the challenges/ opportunities for Access in 2025 are an evolution of those from 2021. Although Access plays a stabilising and stimulating role in the social investment ecosystem — it will take much more than Access and elapsed time to make the system self-sustaining in the sense of not requiring subsidy. Access' leadership will be sufficiently stretched to deliver:

- **Access' core investment-allocation task.**
  Balancing choices and effective project management during a period of continuing scarcity of capital for social investment at the vulnerable end of the spectrum.

- **Access' convening/advocacy/supporting/empowering/insight tasks.**
  Access is acknowledged as representing the sector, based on the power of its funding

(dormant assets), its demonstrated social impact and its organisational style. Access' role and influence in CEGP, SIIAG and the launch of the Office for the Impact Economy all demonstrate the potential for wider impact, working with partners drawn from the plethora of interested parties, to make progress towards making the system self-sustaining. Given the revived interest of Government and the enhanced MCAs, 2025–28 is a period of opportunity for social investment.

- **Access' acknowledged obligation to increase investments into CSEs who are founded in minoritised communities and are tackling structural inequities.**
  In addition to its specific goals, Access is committed to work closely with Pathway both in funding and governance, which adds to the tasks of senior leaders who are already fully engaged.
- **Adapting Access' organisation to match high-profile sector-shaping tasks.**
  While retaining the capacity for its traditional investment allocation, Access will need to change significantly internally, developing entrepreneurial skills to deliver the future positioning and fundraising required by the sector.

We highlight risks of leadership over-stretch and governance complexity, as a result of high ambitions, in Issue 3: How to enhance the positive organisational structure while taking on new strategies?

The Panel suggests that Access' leadership considers options to address the sustainability of the social investment ecosystem, a subject that surfaced in most of our interviews. Social investment for the most vulnerable — and, arguably, for the highest-impact CSEs coming into the social investment pipeline — requires subsidy. This subsidy for enterprise development and the 'first loss' element of blended finance is currently largely provided via Access from the dormant assets allocation. Given that a subsidy-free social investment ecosystem appears unlikely within the foreseeable future:

1. What does sustainability mean for the social investment ecosystem in the longer-term? Is it defined as resilience of supply of subsidy?
2. Can sufficient capital be sourced 2025–28 to provide continued subsidy and thereby system sustainability, given the overwhelming social benefits of social investment?

The fact that impact-investors are not filling the capital gap for social intermediaries (cited in the BSC 2024 QR[31]), as well as the shortfall and delay in dormant assets allocation, highlight the need to explore other sources of capital for social enterprise — explored in Issue 2.

## Issue 2.
## *Can the sector, led by Access, mobilise further capital for social investment?*

Access is developing its Mobilisation Strategy as a wider strategic approach to ensure a funding pipeline for future social investment and support to frontline CSEs. The shortfall and delay in the 2025 dormant assets allocation highlight the need to explore other sources of capital for social enterprise, as does the shift since 2022 in impact investment towards commercial impact-fund managers and away from social intermediaries (BSC 2024 QR[31]).

## Consensus on the need for further capital and Access' leadership role

As covered in Issue 1, our stakeholder interviews during this QR:

- **Affirmed that the requirement for blended finance persists and is unlikely to cease.** Most interviewees believed the need for grant subsidies to generate blended finance would not diminish; in fact, they expected this requirement to grow due to the current economic environment, where securing funding is becoming increasingly difficult. There is a challenge for Access as to where to focus resources for the future given the huge breadth of the current portfolio of products, in comparison with its capacity and the lean resources of the team.
- **Cited Access' unique leadership position to bring together stakeholders to address the continuing need for blended finance (and wider social enterprise support).** There is no doubt that Access and its staff team are well regarded for their positive work and strong reputation, which has significantly increased since the 2021 QR — "relationships that Access holds are quite unique". This consistently positive reputation over an extended period is evidence of Access' understanding of the social investment sector — and the sector's understanding of Access' strategy and approach. Access is also trusted and respected by intermediaries, government, funders and other partners, playing an important role as convenor for the social enterprise and social investment sector. Alongside this, Access coordinates and combines 'silos' of different funding pots from philanthropists and investors, making the journey smoother. Dormant assets have been an important catalyst, enabling Access to perform this role and, if reduced, would likely diminish this catalytic activity in the marketplace of funders.

  Interviewees universally praised the leadership of the CEO; the team has matured, taking on national and international stature and gravitas. This has led to Access becoming a repository of expertise and renown in the social investment world. One challenge will be how to ensure that this valued position is maintained as part of the Mobilisation Strategy, whilst maintaining a clear focus on mission.

  A 'price of success' for Access — as an organisation of limited resources and capacity — is the risk of its being drawn into multiple extensions of its remit — e.g. community capacity building and incentivised grants, increased funded local specialist enterprise support. Deciding what not to do in Access is critical to allowing it to focus on its 'USP', as the Foundation for Social Investment — addressing financial inclusion in marginalised communities.

## Prioritising options for 'mobilisation'

From our interviews, it is clear that the shift in political climate and experience with blended finance give some clear priorities for tapping sources of capital for the vulnerable end of the spectrum of CSEs — notable sources being foundation funders and devolved regional bodies. Interviewees agreed:

- **There is some appetite from a few national funders to support a subsidised repayable funding allocation for CSEs, although their appetite for the grant element is less clear and further market analysis is needed.**
  Given the expertise and track record of Access, some of the more experimental/progressive Trust and Foundation partners have expressed an interest in targeting funding increasingly towards blended finance options. However, this appetite is still not generally tested, with many foundations having their own criteria. These include the exclusion of use of charitable funds for generating private profit and resistance to the value of providing grants as part of a blended finance deal. Even those funders that are interested often limit themselves by continuing to run social enterprise funding 'pilots' or limiting future funding discussion to enterprise grants. The grant-making sector is known to move slowly and is unlikely to provide large sources of grant funding in the absence of future dormant assets funding.

- **The need to scale and devolve the social investment market to ensure long term sustainability and political 'weather proofing'.**
  For the longer term, the existence of MCAs may represent an opportunity to target regions of most need, and the new Office for the Impact Economy may offer an opportunity for routes in. Access has already developed some good practice working at a more strategic regional/city level, using a variety of approaches, in:

  - Liverpool with organisations such as Kindred (not part of the LAP).
  - Bristol where Access resources have provided leverage at the local level through the LAP.
  - Manchester where Key Fund and Access stepped in after the collapse of the local intermediary.

  These examples demonstrate the importance of local political leadership, the vulnerability of intermediaries and the need to tailor solutions to 'place'. They are also examples of Access' investment allocation challenges 2025–26, in that some LAPs will shrink activity dramatically if funding ceases. Over the lifetime of the LAPs, significant capacity and expertise has been developed and there is concern that this may be lost. However, Access also faces legitimate calls to allocate funds outside the largest English cities, to towns and rural areas (where currently 285 organisations have received £17.2 million, representing 11% of Access funding), and to ensure general provision of funds to the sector nationally.

  Interviewees also talked about the opportunity for Access to use its influence at a national level within the ecosystem to lend power to places that do not have a strong political voice. Cities typically have significantly stronger infrastructure to support social enterprise than less densely populated areas. Some interviewees were keen to explore with Access use of its national power and influence to help secure further finance outside the dormant assets remit, at the local level. Access recognises that a heavy reliance on dormant assets funding risks reinforcing a centralised administrative model. Such funding requires significant engagement with stakeholders in London, which can unintentionally strengthen perceptions of Access as London-centric and disconnected from communities across the UK. Finally, many interviewees saw an opportunity for Access to use its focus on place-based investment in some of the most left-behind communities to retain the political consensus around social investment — given the rise in popularity of new political parties whose policy position in relation to the social impact economy is less clear.

- **The national opportunity arising from a change of Government.**
  Going forward, Access could have a national role to play in making the case for new funds and products, such as patient capital using avenues such as pension funds. Access is building the case for changes in the Green Book[33] /regulations to enable public bodies such as the British Business Bank to expand their funding of the sector. The Office for Impact Economy could offer coordination to support efforts. However it is unlikely that many of these sources will provide the 'grant' aspect of blended finance. Given the economic challenge facing the UK, ministers will likely focus primarily on the potential of 'big-ticket' impact investments. Access will need to keep reminding ministers of its smaller — but high social value — investments in 'place' and communities.

  A wider range of partners is required to ensure the sustainability of the social investment market, which continues to be jargonistic, niche, technical, fragile and largely unknown. Access could have a role in influencing those partners such as mutual and co-operative finance providers and British Business Bank, as well as more mainstream finance providers.

## Challenges/opportunities for Access

Mobilising other potential sources of capital will present new challenges:

- **Competition with other players in the ecosystem.**
  The size of the recent dormant assets funding allocation (£87.5 million) is small by mainstream business and loan finance standards but large by the standards of the social enterprise sector. In approaching funding outside dormant assets, Access will need to ensure that it negotiates both the perception of competition and the reality of competition with current funders, and operates in an open and transparent way, to maintain trust. While encouraging foundations to be more active in enterprise grants, this may affect other players in the ecosystem, such as School for Social Entrepreneurs and Social Enterprise UK at a national level, as well as local social enterprises.

- **Expanding Access' support to the ecosystem.**
  Dormant assets funding brings power and top-down influence which must be used wisely, transparently and supportively, in order not to create further disparities and displacement in the already fragmented and fragile, bottom-up CSE sector. Focusing on a particular social investment solution may overshadow more nuanced grassroots co-operative efforts. Active support of the empowerment of local forward strategies might help counter this risk.

  Access' new 'single pot' approach may create greater flexibility and simplification for the administration and delivery of dormant assets funding, but there is some anxiety that it could also lead to the exclusion of regional and marginalised communities, such as neurodiverse communities.

  New ways of working, such as helping to support intermediaries' 'back office' costs were suggested by interviewees, alongside developing new products such as patient capital and repayable grants.

- **Access' organisation will need to pivot towards new entrepreneurial skills, capacity and resources.**
  To date, Access has exceeded its original function as time-limited blended capital wholesaler, by taking on many more roles as a catalyser and advocate for the sector. Investment is needed to grow its own role to enhance and take up the opportunities that are set out in the Mobilisation Strategy. What activities should Access cease, what should be delegated to others, and what should be continued — or further developed? While the Mobilisation Strategy initiates this conversation, Access will quickly need to build entrepreneurial knowledge, culture, skills and systems internally, to adapt its business model in preparation for future changes.

The Panel suggests that Access' leadership considers options to address:

1. Prioritising the options for 'mobilisation', reflecting the increasing demands on Access' limited supply of capital, the legacy of past investments, and the balance of 'place' with national scale.
2. Ensuring 'mobilisation' develops flexibility within the ecosystem and minimises risks of competition for funds.
3. Building Access' entrepreneurial and leadership capacity, necessary for 'mobilisation'.
4. Making the case to ministers and constituency MPs for dormant assets allocations to fund investments in 'place' and in communities.

These mobilisation challenges lead to Issue 3 which focuses on Access as an organisation, with several more specific challenges and opportunities.

## Issue 3. *How to enhance the positive organisational culture while taking on new strategies?*

Access has grown from seven to 14 staff since the 2021 QR, formalising its SLT, governance and systems. The culture has inevitably changed but Access remains a model of inclusion, humility, flexibility and size that mirrors the sector ecosystem. The issue for Access is: How to enhance its positive organisational culture while taking on new activities, strategies and goals? Under the umbrella category of 'organisational culture', we consider organisation, culture, governance and EDI as separate but linked topics.

### Continued positive consensus on the quality, effectiveness and organisational culture of Access within the sector

The small Access team continues to be regarded as very effective and 'punching above its weight'. In our interviews we heard:

- **Praise for its commitment to keeping the team lean, continuing to mirror CSE sector structures, and prioritising control of its cost base.**
  Access recognises its privileged position as a recipient of dormant assets funding with access

to strategic networks. This allows it to overcome resource constraints by buying external expertise and/or collaboration with other expert stakeholders. Nevertheless, keeping the lean team is a conscious decision, to remain rooted in the CSE sector. The team has grown through selective external recruitment, particularly at senior level (Partnership and Advocacy Director/Impact and Evaluation Director) but also through active internal promotions. The decision to extend Access' life beyond 10 years, leading to growth in the team, has required the implementation of a more structured organisation with formalisation of the SLT and of decision-making processes.

- **Respect for the quality of the team, the expertise of individuals, and clear commitment of staff to the mission of Access.**
  The senior team is well-referenced and respected externally with continued praise for the effective leadership of Seb Elsworth, within Access and as an expert, powerful advocate for the sector. Whilst Seb Elsworth is still recognised as the driving force behind Access it was notable that there was less commentary during this QR about the 'key person' risk, which may indicate that the development of the SLT is perceived externally as positively addressing the issue.

- **Examples of Access' culture of low ego, humility, honesty, listening, flexibility, investment in stewarding relationships and active sharing of learning and good practice, leading to overwhelmingly positive trusted external relationships.**
  We heard that Access' culture of listening and taking on feedback was demonstrated by its extensive consultation on the latest dormant assets allocation, with changes made to its investment policy based on aspects of associated feedback.

## Organisation and culture challenges

As Access has chosen an extended life, new strategic moves will impose significant change on its organisation, people and culture. In our experience, other organisations undertaking such a significant change as life extension would implement an organisational review to assess whether structure, culture, performance and talent align with the strategic goals behind the life extension decision.

In our interviews, there was universal support for (and in some cases a sense of relief over) Access' decision to extend its life, as well as consensus that it continues to play a distinct role in the sector. We also heard questions regarding what is the long-term ambition of Access beyond the next strategy cycle of 2025–28? Is there a vision of Access' role for the next 10+ years? What is the legacy it wishes to leave, and how is that shaped by the decision to extend its life?

Management and governance will need to focus on an explicit shift from 'facilitator' of the ecosystem to 'expert' articulator and selective investor in the future ecosystem, as well as managing the fragmented nature of future funding opportunities that impact Access' own sustainability.

While formalising the Access organisation reduces one element of the key-person risk, does the Mobilisation Strategy increase dependence and 'squeeze' on senior leaders? It presents Access with a challenge of prioritisation, to ensure sustainable progress to delivering the strategy.

The continued need for Access to advocate for the sector, as described in Issues 1 and 2, will also bring pressure on senior team time. The challenge of the additional governance complexity of taking on an oversight role for Pathway is commented on below.

The Panel suggests that Access' leadership considers options to address:

1. How to articulate the long-term ambition behind the decision to extend Access' life beyond 10 years, the 'so what now' of deciding to continue?
2. How to support the staff team whose success rests on holding true to Access' founding ethos during the anticipated change in values and operations.
3. Continuing workload pressure, despite growth in team numbers. We heard that the team feels stretched and often lacks coverage when there are absences.
4. The culture of humility and desire to be supportive can be experienced externally as opaque decision making, not being clear in delivering challenging decisions and hesitation to be directive with partners when things are not going well. How to upskill the team for such interactions?
5. How to manage the additional pressure on senior leadership capacity in delivering challenging new strategic goals, including mobilising additional sources of capital into the sector? Extensive and sustained senior team involvement will be required, at the same time as the team is focused on deploying programmatic dormant assets, which themselves will necessitate difficult decisions on who will or will not be funded.

## Adding governance complexity

The latest allocation of £87.5 million of dormant assets to Access to grow social investment in underserved places and communities includes a £12 million allocation of funding for Pathway. There was support in our interviews for the dormant assets allocation to Pathway and for its mission to redress the lack of race equity within the social investment ecosystem. Virtually all noted that £12 million was not a significant amount to address the issue but it was a positive development. Indeed, the Adebowale Reclaiming the Future Report 2021[19] on the social investment market (the genesis for the creation of Pathway) had advocated for £50 million to fund an entity promoting race equity in the sector.

Whilst Pathway is governed by an independent majority BEM-led Board, the arrangements for distribution of dormant assets funding to Pathway by Access require Access to take a formal role in overseeing Pathway's governance processes, in respect of such distribution, ensuring they "are sufficient and functioning, and that we remain on-mission (in the same way that Oversight Trust do for Access)"[34].

## Governance challenges

The dormant assets allocation to Pathway through Access (and indeed Access' oversight role) raises the following issues:

- What is the interplay between Access and Pathway in relation to dormant assets funding for race equity programmes? Intermediaries expressed a lack of clarity on whether intermediaries should now apply to Pathway for such programmes, continue to approach

Access or, indeed, if it were an option to do both? This confusion exists despite both organisations' public statements that the dormant assets allocation to Pathway will not result in Access' stopping funding race equity programmes.

- The risk of contraction in available funding in the sector for race equity programmes, if Pathway is seen as the 'solution' to the issue of race equity within the CSE sector. Concerns were raised that such allocation to Pathway should not result in reduction of capital funders' funding commitments to race equity programmes — specifically, from Access or BSC. With Pathway targeting early 2026 to open for applications for funding under its dormant assets allocation, there is an urgent need for Access (and Pathway) to address the sector's confusion and misconception.
- Access' senior team's capacity to deliver the additional responsibility of Access in its oversight role in Pathway governance. Access will have a seat on the Pathway Board and plans to have the Pathway CEO join the Access investment committee. Pathway sees itself as eventually having the same status as the other dormant assets operating companies. There is potential for confusion about the extent of the governance oversight Access has over Pathway: this needs to be clarified. The oversight responsibility has, rightly, been tasked to senior Access management staff. Given the comments elsewhere in this report as to the 'squeeze' on senior resource/continued over-dependence on the CEO, the necessity to take on such complex governance arrangements may place added pressure on capacity.

The Panel suggests that Access leadership considers options to address:

1. Clarification to the sector of the distinct roles of Access and Pathway in the continued dormant assets funding of race equity programmes.
2. How to guard against the risk of contraction in available funding for race equity programmes, following the dormant assets allocation to Pathway?
3. Clarification of the oversight role of Access in Pathway's governance, considering how to ensure continuing senior team capacity to execute the role in times of challenge for Pathway, against the competing demands for senior resource to deliver the ambitions set out in the Access 2025-28 strategy and the emerging Mobilisation Strategy.

## Is all the activity around EDI resulting in real impact?

From our interviews it is clear that the sector recognises Access' commitment to EDI and how EDI is embedded in its programme design. An example that was given is the requirement for intermediaries applying to Access for funding to sign the Diversity Forum Manifesto[17], committing to an EDI action plan. The EDI reporting requirements of Access programmes were generally viewed by interviewees as a positive obligation, helping to drive change in practices.

However, the social investment market continues to lack diversity and the number of fund managers with diverse leadership remains persistently small within the sector. This is despite Access' actions since the 2021 QR highlighted EDI as an issue:

- Access has continued its commitment to supporting the CSE sector in addressing challenging issues in EDI. Since the 2021 QR, Access has undertaken reviews of its programmes to assess

EDI outcomes and the learning to be gained. Initiatives funded by the Connect Fund and the current Flexible Finance programme that were aimed particularly at BEM-led CSEs have shown progress in reaching underserved communities.

- Our interviews confirmed that the sector understands Access' commitment to EDI in its work and sees it helping to drive change and good practice. The need for programmes to support funding to other protected characteristics (such as disability and neurodiversity) and female-led CSEs was flagged in several of our interviews as needing more specific attention.
- Access continues to publish its EDI policy and action plans[35] and initial diversity and pay gap reports[36], recognising its unique influence and power within the sector to role-model transparency and accountability. The commitments cover actions in relation to the organisation, its delivery partners and the work undertaken to support the wider social investment market to change in relation to EDI.
- Access' recent diversity audit showed that the team has become more diverse, particularly at the junior level. Access has committed to seek further diversity of lived experience through planned trustee recruitment and membership of its investment committees.

## EDI challenges

The Panel suggests that Access' leadership considers options to address:

1. Continued commitment to addressing EDI challenges in the system, in the increasingly challenging shifting political environment.
2. How Access continues to take a leadership role in the wider sector, holding it to account in relation to embedding EDI practices to achieve wider diversity outcomes within the sector.
3. How Access can address the possibility of contraction within the sector of funding for racial equity programmes as a result of dormant assets allocation to Pathway.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1 — Terms of Reference

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Purpose** | To examine the effectiveness of each organisation within the Oversight Trust in delivering against its respective Objects/Mission, as set out in its governance documents | | | |
| **Output** | A brief, high level report, envisaged at less than 20 pages, which is intended to be focused rather than comprehensive. The review team will identify (i) the organisation's key achievements and successes; and (ii) strategic issues where the review team believe further consideration is required. The Chair of the reviewed OpCo will be expected to offer a public response. The review will not attempt to offer specific recommendations to the organisation's management. | | | |
| **Data** | **Primary data:** interviews with key stakeholders; open call for evidence; interviews with key staff.<br>**Secondary data:** governing documents / articles of association; internal policies and procedures; published financial accounts; published impact data. | | | |
| **Potential guiding criteria** | **Social impact**<br>Does OpCo have a clear and ambitious strategy for achieving social impact which is in line with its mission?<br>Has effective execution of this strategy delivered social impact?<br>Do both the OpCo's mission and strategy meet a need, which is not adequately met by alternative interventions? | **Systems change**<br>Has OpCo articulated a clearly stated theory of change in line with its mission?<br>Does OpCo's Business Plan reflect the Theory of Change?<br>Has OpCo attracted other funding or other resources through partnerships to leverage its activities? | **Operational effectiveness**<br>Does OpCo have well functioning governance structures?<br>Is the organisation operating with appropriate levels of transparency?<br>Are the operating costs of OpCo in line with comparable organisations? | **Organisation specific**<br>What are the particular challenges faced by OpCo?<br>How well has OpCo responded to these challenges?<br>Is the organisation prepared for changes to the conditions it may face in the future? |
| **Potential points to consider** | OpCo's approach to measuring the impact of, reporting the impact of, and learning from its programmes<br>OpCo's ability to deliver sustained improvement in the social issues; it's approached longevity (i.e. spend down vs evergreen)<br>OpCo's approach to making returns on programme related investments | OpCo's role in the wider ecosystem<br>Evidence for the System Change that OpCo has achieved<br>The partnerships that OpCo has formed, resources OpCo has leveraged, and funding it has unlocked for use on the social issue | OpCo's approach to its operating costs<br>OpCo's pace of deploying funds<br>OpCo's ability to identify and manage risks, (appropriate risk appetite)<br>OpCo's controls and procedures around deploying funds | To be determined by the review panel, in association with Oversight Trust board members and key stakeholders |

# Appendix 2 — Reviewers

## Keith Leslie

Keith is Chair at Samaritans in UK & Ireland and author of A Question of Leadership (Bloomsbury 2021). He is a former partner at Deloitte LLP and McKinsey & Company, and former Chair at the Mental Health Foundation and BuildAfrica.

## Magdalene Bayim-Adomako

Magdalene is an independent consultant and trustee of various organisations, including Social Investment Business and Barnardo's. She was most recently an Investment Director at Impetus and before that a partner and head of the London Bank Finance department at White & Case LLP.

## Lucy Findlay MBE

Lucy is an award-winning social enterprise expert most known for founding the Social Enterprise Mark CIC, a former international accreditation for social enterprises. She has advised Government on specialist business support and is currently Chair of Big Issue Trust and an active member of the co-operative movement.

## Fiona Young Priest

Fiona is an independent consultant specialising in charity finance and governance. She worked as Finance and Resources Director at the Tudor Trust and Crisis UK and has been a trustee of a number of charities.

# Appendix 3 — Interviewees' organisations

A Better Way
ATQ Consultants
BBRC — Bristol & Bath Regional Capital
Better Society Capital
Black South West Network
Bristol Local Access Partnership
Department for Culture, Media and Sport
Equality Impact Investing Project
Esmée Fairbairn Foundation
European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
Impact Investing Institute
Key Fund
Kindred LCR
Lincolnshire Community Foundation
Lloyds Bank Foundation for England & Wales
NatWest Social & Community Capital
Office for Investment
Pathway Fund
Power to Change
Resonance
School for Social Entrepreneurs
Sector 3
Social Enterprise UK
Social Investment Business
Social Investment Scotland
The Social Investment Consultancy
Unity Bank
VONNE — Voluntary Organisations' Network North East