University of Huddersfield

Group Consultancy Project

We Are Wakefield

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Executive Summary

This report evaluates the value that We Are Wakefield (WAW) created for its members and for the wider Wakefield district. The research is underpinned by stakeholder theory and social capital theory, both helps to explain how organisations like WAW generate value not through transactions alone, but through relationships, trust and the networks members build over time.

To explore this, the study uses a mixed method approach. Semi- structured interviews alongside a structured member survey built around Social Return on Investment (SROI) principles. Altogether six interview participants were analysed by using Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis process which produced seven overarching themes. Two of which particularly stood are Networking, Relationships and Trust and Challenges and Future Development. On the quantitative part, a sample of 17 completed survey responses were analysed using descriptive statistics, inferential tests and SROI adjusted valuation that accounted for deadweight and attribution.

Considering together all the findings, most members (82%) reported securing new business through WAW, and over half (59%) reported in direct cost savings. Members also rated the organisation highly for visibility, awareness and professional connection. The analysis of the financial outcomes produced an indicative ratio of £5.84 in social and economic value for every £1 invested.

Based on the findings this report suggests recommendations aimed at addressing the key issues. Overall, WAW clearly delivers measurable value to its members and local business community and there’s a clear achievable path to strengthening it further.

Table of Contents

1.0 Introduction

This report focuses on the measurable impact that We Are Wakefield (WAW) has had on the Wakefield district. Specifically, the research examines three interconnected objectives: the social and economic impact of WAW on the district, the impact of membership on individual member businesses, and the contribution to strengthening sustainable and responsible practices, leading to an increase in social wellbeing across the local business community.

WAW is a non-profit organisation funded through membership subscriptions that aims to connect local businesses, local authorities, education and community organisations. This is delivered through regular networking events held on the first Friday of the month, collaborative opportunities and business support, including members' newsletters, pop-up stands at event venues and seminars. These activities are designed to promote business growth, facilitate knowledge sharing, foster sustainable and responsible practices and strengthen the local economy of Wakefield. Despite the distinctive position WAW holds in the local community; its importance depends on the value it provides to the district in service and to its members. As it is a membership-funded organisation, an evidence-based assessment of its impact is necessary for future strategic direction.

WAW, as a district, has in recent years emphasised local economic resilience, place-based regeneration and the role of small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) in sustaining the town economy. Business support networks are expected to reflect the wider principles of responsibility, ethics and sustainability, not only the value generated to the economy. Therefore, due diligence has been taken throughout the research to assess how WAW’s activities align with responsible business conduct, including transparency and fairness of relationships with stakeholders, the support and inclusivity offered across different businesses and the promotion of socially and environmentally sustainable practices among members. The research project was also conducted in alignment with ethical principles, including confidentiality, voluntary participation by respondents, and informed consent, as the participants were drawn from WAW’s membership base.

To establish the research in an academic context, stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) was one of the frameworks used to understand and measure the impact WAW creates for its various stakeholder groups. Social capital theory (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998) were applied to review how the cognitive, structural and relational dimensions of WAW's network generate value through business opportunities and knowledge sharing. These theoretical viewpoints, together with the principle of stakeholder return on investment, buttress the approach taken to both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of the study.

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, with a focus on qualitative data, supplemented by quantitative data. Primary qualitative data were collected through survey questions sent to members; 72 responded, six semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected members via Microsoft Teams, and eight semi-structured interviews were conducted in person at the First Friday networking event. Quantitative data were gathered through a specific follow-up survey in which 17 responded, generating data for numerical analysis of stakeholder return on investment.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review critically examines both theoretical and empirical literature relevant to assessing the impact of business membership organisations. It investigates how businesses generate value for a wide range of stakeholder groups through business networks and collaborative activities, as well as critically evaluating acceptable frameworks for measuring social and economic outcomes. Specifically, the review uses Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), Social Capital Theory (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998), to lay the conceptual foundation for this consulting project.

2.2 Business Membership Organisations and Their Role in Local Economic Development

Business Membership Organisation (BMOs) is a subscriber-funded, not-for-profit, social movement organisation connecting businesses to promote economic growth within a geographical area or a specified sector (Bennet 2011). Organisations like We are Wakefield

(WAW) illustrate this; they serve as a bridge connecting and supporting businesses, mostly in the Wakefield District, offering collaboration and practical support that leads to economic growth and stability.

Business Membership Organisations creates networking opportunities and collaborations among SMEs and larger firms, increasing visibility for both sectors, especially for SMEs as they often lack internal resources for market intelligence while larger organisations secure regional supply chains such as the Mid-Yorkshire NHS Trust. “Business collaboration is widely recognised in local economic development literature as a driver of productivity and resilience, underpinning knowledge spillovers with regional business ecosystems and clusters” (Porter, 1998; Huggins, 2000). These collaborations enhance community wealth-building, circulating and maintaining capital regionally. Subscribing to newsletters or monthly events held by WAW and its likes facilitates knowledge sharing, enabling organisations to exchange best practices, acquire new competencies and adapt effectively to changing market conditions (Audretsch & Belitski, 2021), which is key to a successful business ecosystem. Consequently, measuring the impact of BMOs has become important to stakeholders and members, as this quantifies the evidence of value.

2.3 Measuring Organisational Impact

According to established research in international development and evaluation the term impact refers to “significant or lasting changes in people’s lives, brought about by a given action or series of actions.” (Ebrahim & Rangan, 2014). However, Impact should not be confused with activity or attendance. Events, training sessions, and outreach are important outputs, but they themselves do not show that an organisation has made a difference (INTRAC, 2024). Impact refers to the longer-term change that happens because of these activities, such as improved knowledge, behaviour, wellbeing, performance or wider system change (Maas, 2009). This distinction matters because a high number of attendees at sessions may look impressive, yet it does not prove that anything meaningful changed for the people involved (INTRAC, 2024).

Maas (2009) research on Corporate Social Performance is useful because it explains the shift from measuring outputs to measuring impact, showing that organisations need evidence of change rather than just evidence of delivery. In the same way, Noble et al., (2020) argues that a theory of change helps organisations connect their activities to intended outcomes and decide what should be measured. This is why impact measurement is more than recording participation numbers. It requires organisations to define the change they expect, select indicators that match that change, and collect evidence over time to see whether the change really happened (Noble et al., 2020).

A useful way to think about this is like, a training session is an output, increased confidence after the session is an outcome, and sustained improvement in performance or life chances is closer to impact (Maas, 2009). Therefore, organisations should not claim success simply because they delivered events, they should show what difference those events made and whether that difference lasted (Ballard Center, 2022).

2.4 Stakeholder Theory as a Framework for Measuring Organisational Value

2.4.1 Overview of Stakeholder Theory:

Stakeholder Theory, founded by Freeman (1984), proposes that organisational success should be measured by the value provided for all stakeholders rather than simply by financial results. In contrast to shareholder theory, which focuses on profit maximisation (Friedman, 1970). Stakeholder theory acknowledges that organisations rely on an array of stakeholder groups whose interests influence long-term sustainability and organisational legitimacy (Donaldson and Preston, 1995). However, the theory has been criticised for providing insufficient assistance when stakeholder interests clash with complicating managerial decision-making (Jensen, 2002). Despite this constraint, it is nevertheless very significant for non-profit organisations whose goals is to go beyond financial returns to encompass wider social and economic value creation.

2.4.2 Applying Stakeholder Theory to We Are Wakefield:

Stakeholder Theory is an effective framework for measuring organisational impact in the context of WAW since the organisation exists to provide value for a variety of stakeholders. Mitchell, Agle, and Wood's (1997) Stakeholder Salience Model reinforces this viewpoint by arguing that stakeholder significance is defined by power, legitimacy, and urgency (Balmer, 2017). As a result, member organisations are the key stakeholders, as they financially support the organisation through membership subscriptions and have direct access to its services. This project assesses the value provided by business opportunities, collaboration, networking, and knowledge sharing.

Beyond individual members, the Wakefield District is a secondary stakeholder, with organisational effect measured by contributions to local economic development, commercial connectivity, and improved inter-organisational cooperation (WAW, 2026). Furthermore, the organisation's role in promoting ethical corporate practices, community participation, and social wellbeing acknowledges the larger community as a valid stakeholder. As a result, Stakeholder Theory underpins both research design and findings interpretation by recognising that We Are Wakefield's performance should be evaluated in terms of the value created across its stakeholder network rather than solely on operational outputs or financial indicators.

2.5 Importance of Business Networks for the Community:

2.5.1 The Social Capital Theory and Value Creation Through Business Networks:

Social Capital Theory discusses how relationships and networks add value by providing access to resources that would otherwise be unavailable to individuals or organisations. Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) describe social capital as the resources embedded in social networks that can be used to achieve collective and organisational goals. They suggest that social capital has three interconnected dimensions: structural (network connections), relational (trust and mutual respect), and cognitive (shared goals and knowledge). Collectively, these dimensions promote trust, collaboration, information exchange, and knowledge production, all of which can improve organisational performance and creativity. Similarly, Putnam (2000) claims that social networks generate reciprocity and trust, which improves economic and social outcomes.
However, Social Capital Theory has been critiqued for presuming that network membership always results in positive outcomes, ignoring the possibility of exclusion, unequal access to opportunities, and the establishment of closed networks that may limit creativity (Bachtiar, 2024). As a result, the efficiency of business networks is determined by both the quality and diversity of established connections.

2.5.2 Applying Social Capital Theory to We Are Wakefield:

Within the context of WAW, Social Capital Theory offers an insightful explanation of how networking activities generate organisational and regional benefits. Member organisations form relationships at networking events, which promote commercial partnerships, knowledge sharing, and access to new prospects (Dao, 2026). Similar corporate membership organisations, such as the Greater Manchester Chamber of Commerce, have shown that collaborative networks can boost business growth and regional competitiveness by increasing inter-organisational cooperation. As a result, this study measures social capital by investigating members' perceptions of business connections, partnership development, and new business prospects, recognising them as critical mechanisms through which networking contributes to organisational growth and local economic development.

2.6 Overview of Sustainable Business and Social Value

Sustainable business is operating an organisation in ways that are not solely focused on financial profit, but rather on creating value across social, economic and environmental dimensions. According to Elkington (1997), organisational performance should be evaluated as businesses can be successful while still causing harm to the social and economic environment, thereby creating the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework (People, Planet, Profit), which organisations should be measured across. However, he later critiqued that TBL has been reduced to a mere exercise rather than what it is meant for (Elkington 2018). Scholars like Freeman (1984), Stakeholder Theory, and Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 2000; Bourdieu, 1986) agree that members act as each other's stakeholders, creating value by exchanging referrals, suppliers and support, which leads to a trust-based relationship generating benefits beyond financial transactions.

Applying the TBL to the survey findings, respondents strongly emphasised the economic and social dimension, as many benefits were tied to commercial performance but not limited to commercial exchange, such as increased business collaboration, opportunities and visibility created by WAW, thereby delivering value for money. For example, one of the survey respondents validates a multi-year collaboration with 15-20 businesses for careers development activities, demonstrating how social capital is converted into community value beyond commercial gain

2.7 Literature Review Conclusion

The literature demonstrates that evaluating business membership organisations requires consideration of both the mechanisms through which value is created and the methods used to measure that value. Stakeholder Theory and Social Capital Theory, form a solid conceptual foundation for evaluating organisational, economic, and social outcomes. These perspectives guide stakeholder identification, outcome measurement, and interpretation of organisational influence in the We Are Wakefield's case (Freeman, 1984; Nicholls et al., 2012).

3.0 Research Design and Methods:

3.1 Research Design

A primary mixed-method approach was adopted in this study, with qualitative methods being the dominant research design, using both interviews and survey data to evaluate the impacts of We Are Wakefield on the Wakefield district. The qualitative approach is known as interpretative and explanatory. Whittaker (2000) argues that qualitative methods are suited for research problems that require understanding of contextual events from those experiencing them. Hence, evidence was gathered from 72 respondent member organisations via a questionnaire, providing a comprehensive display of economic and social impact. Interviews were conducted, with 7 being Teams interviews and 8 semi-structured interviews held during the first Friday networking event, which allowed members to elaborate in depth on their experience with the organisation. According to DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), this type of interview allows participants to construct meaning using their own words.

Drawing on both survey responses and interviews within a qualitative framework revealed a wide range of experiences, shared themes and identified patterns across a broader section, enhancing the credibility and richness of findings. This also allowed for a degree of triangulation across data sources, strengthening the trustworthiness of the findings while remaining grounded in an interpretative understanding of impact (Denzin, 1978).

3.2 Data collection Design & Instrument.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) emphasises the importance of aligning the research design in accordance to research questions and the objectives. Following this approach, the survey was designed around the key constructs identified within the conceptual framework ensuring that each question was relevant to the focus of study and contributed in addressing the research objectives. However, DeVellis (2017) highlights importance defining the constructs before turning them into measurable items, following this the three dimensions of framework i.e. district level impact, member value and business outcomes and social value and sustainability were operationalised.

Saunders et al. (2019) states that the choice of question format should be guided by the type of information required so the question format were selected according to the nature of each construct like multiple choice questions were used to capture categorical information, ranking questions used to assess member value and business outcomes and yes/no questions used to identify the presence of sustainability practices. Likert scale and open-ended questions were also included where more detailed information about participants' perceptions and experiences was required.

The questions were arranged using a funnel structure progressing from contextual to specific/reflective questions (Bryman, 2016). The questionnaire was administered via Microsoft forms which was selected for its accessibility to a professional respondent base and efficient export of response data. Prior to full distribution, the form underwent informal review with the academic supervisor functioning as a preliminary check.

3.3 Sampling Strategy and Ethical Considerations:

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure to ensure data was directly collected from WAW members which aided in informed evaluation of the organisation's impact. Purposive sampling is a non-probability technique in which researchers deliberately choose people, cases, or events according to characteristics, expertise, or experience required to address the research issue (Ahmad, 2024). A survey was created using Microsoft Forms, which was then given to the client and sent to WAW's membership database via email. Since researchers were not granted direct access to personal data, this strategy allowed access to a relevant demographic while maintaining the privacy of member contact information. The survey was safe to access, as the data for analysis from survey responses were electronically submitted and automatically recorded within Microsoft Forms. A total of 73 valid responses were obtained from organisations representing a range of business sizes, sectors and membership durations, providing diverse perspectives on organisational impact.

Seven semi-structured interviews were then carried out utilizing purposive sampling to strengthen the survey results and achieve methodological triangulation (Fusch, 2018). To capture a wide range of experiences and perspectives, seven interviewees were chosen to ensure variation in organization size, industrial sector, and length of membership.

Throughout the entire research, ethical principles were taken into consideration, and prior to data collection, the University granted ethical permission. Informed consent was obtained from respondents and interviewees, participation was optional, and respondents were guaranteed confidentiality, anonymity, and the freedom to withdraw participation at any time. In compliance with the Data Protection Act of 2018 and the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), data were securely stored so that organizations and participants could not be recognized in the final report.

3.4 Data Analysis Process:

Thematic analysis will be used to analyse interview data in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach of familiarization, coding, theme generation, reviewing, defining, and reporting. Codes will be produced from recurrent patterns in the seven interviews and divided into categories such as business potential, collaboration, networking, and organizational value. Quantitative data will first be analysed using descriptive statistics. A follow-up member-impact survey will measure outcomes such as new business produced, revenue due to opportunities, and costs saved. These metrics will help to develop the SROI framework, which will use appropriate financial proxies to quantify outcomes' social and economic worth. The research will thus integrate qualitative evidence of change with quantitative measures of outcomes, so improving the assessment of WAW's stakeholder impact.

4.0 Presentation and Analysis of Findings

4.1 Analysis of Qualitative and Quantitative Data:

Thematic analysis was used to examine the qualitative interview data, using Braun and Clarke's approach of detecting, analysing, and interpreting reoccurring patterns within qualitative data. Interview responses from the six participants were classified in an organized manner, with comparable codes grouped into larger topics. This approach allowed the research to go beyond individual experiences and discover general trends in the impact and value of WAW. The next section provides and examines the primary themes and associated codes, with selected participant statements to help illustrate the findings.

The quantitative analysis is based on 17 surveys, and descriptive statistics were used to summarise reported outcomes. Inferential tests were used to looks at the relationships between variables and member investments and final value was valued using SROI. Financial outcomes were adjusted for dead weight and attribution following SROI principles and an indicative ratio was calculated. Since responses from surveys were ambiguous and inconsistently formatted, they were cleaned and standardised as needed.

4.2 Qualitative Data Analysis:

Thematic analysis was used to examine the qualitative data gathered during six semi-structured interviews. Interview responses were coded and then organised into broader themes to find repeating patterns, common experiences, and variances among participants. The analysis identified multiple interconnected themes, including networking and connection building, company development and organizational outcomes, access to knowledge and resources, community engagement, and difficulties and future development (see appendix 5).

A dominant finding across all participants was the importance of face-to-face relationships and trusted networks. Participants consistently described We Are Wakefield as providing access to people, organisations and opportunities that would otherwise have been difficult to reach. As Participant 2 explained, *"It can be quite lonely running a business… the opportunity of meeting other like-minded business leaders was what attracted me."* Similarly, Participant 6 highlighted the value of having a reliable network and a first point of contact when specialist advice or support was required.

The data also revealed strong organizational and economic benefits. Participants mentioned new customers, suppliers, partnerships, recommendations, cost reductions, and improved visibility. Participant 2 estimated that engagement had contributed to a *"five and ten percent increase"* in profitability, while Participant 4 stated that the network had generated *"three potential new clients."* For Participant 3, the network helped to double employer engagement and improve opportunities for students.

Another key theme was the social and community benefit created through cross-sector collaboration. Participants highlighted links with charities, educational institutions, local governments, and other enterprises, suggesting that the benefits went beyond direct monetary gain. However, problems were highlighted, such as the difficulty new members face when attending large networking events and the uncertainty of whether possible possibilities will result in measurable outcomes.

Overall, thematic analysis reveals that We Are Wakefield's greatest value is not in individual services, but in its ability to develop long-term relationships, knowledge sharing, cooperation, and access to opportunities.

4.3 Quantitative Data Analysis:

The Evaluation of the resources that members committed to the organisation was analysed based on the Social Return on Investment (SROI) framework. It was selected for its established use in valuing both financial and non-financial contributions within membership and voluntary sector organisations (Nicholls et al., 2012). Within this framework, investment was conceptualised not solely as the cash cost of membership, but as the full resource commitment made by each member capturing opportunity cost, the value of resources including time that could have been used elsewhere (Nicholls et al., 2012). For each respondent, total investment cost was calculated as below.

Total Investment = Membership Fees + (Events Attended x Hours per Event x Hourly Staff Cost) + Other Reported Costs.

The middle term here captures the time & cost of participation, which is total staff hours spent attending the events valued at the hourly costs of that time to the business. For example, one of the respondents attended 10 events, which is 3 hours each on average at an hourly staff cost of £34.

Time Cost = 10 x 3 x £34 = £1,020

This is combined with a nominal membership fees and other costs, which total in this case is £8. This gave a total investment of £1,028. Applied across all 17 responses this produced a sample wide total investment of £46,464, ranging from as little as £180 for one low engagement member to £10,800 in staff time alone for a member who had comparatively high hourly staff rate of £300.

This variation reflects methodological strength of the approach as it prevents low fee, high engagement members from appearing artificially "cheap" to serve capturing genuine differences in resource commitment across the membership base (Arvidson et al., 2013). For cases where the number of events attended could not be determined from a response for example- one respondent wrote "new member" rather than a figure, time cost was conservatively treated as zero rather than imputed with the assumption documented to preserve analytical transparency (Nicholls et al., 2012).

The outcome value was adjusted for dead weight and attribution using SROI principles following the same procedure as investment. This can be demonstrated using figures from one respondent. The reported outcome of £10,000 was reduced by 70% dead weight to £3000 and then adjusted by 90% attribution to give adjusted social value of £2700. Similarly, when applied to whole sample gave a total adjusted value of£271,208 for a total investment of £46,464 representing an indicative ratio of 5.84 for every £1 invested. The ratio is conservative and not definitive for respondents who failed to provide an attribution.

5.0 Recommendations:

The qualitative findings from the six participant interviews and surveys directly inform the recommendations that follow. The research suggests that WAW adds significant value through networking, trustworthy relationships, information exchange, commercial prospects, and community involvement. However, participants noted issues with new-member integration, the growing number of networking events, limited sector-specific contact, organizational visibility, and the requirement to demonstrate measurable benefit. The following recommendations aim to address these challenges in a practical, ethical, and long-term manner.

1. Organise welcome briefings for new members: New members should receive a brief orientation that explains the network's purpose, available resources, and how to participate effectively. This is a direct response to Participant 4, who found huge gatherings daunting and suggested further help.

2. Create smaller networking segments for various businesses: Along with huge events, WAW should host smaller sector-specific sessions. Participants 5 and 6 noted that huge events might be overwhelming, and that charity or specialty organizations may have different requirements than commercial corporations.

3. Create color-coded badges for similar sectors: Color-coded badges could help members swiftly identify relevant contacts and promote sector-specific interactions. This is a low-cost, practical method that could increase networking efficiency while preserving cross-sector connectivity.

4. Increase social media participation and regularly share accomplishments: Participants identified enhanced exposure and brand recognition as key benefits. More frequent social media content might highlight member success stories, partnerships, events, and community impact, thereby improve WAW's profile and attract new members.

5. Improve engagement with Wakefield Council: A stronger partnership with the Council could boost credibility, provide greater access to larger businesses, and create possibilities to publish impact findings. Participant 2 recognized engagement with the Council and independent validation as critical to increasing the network's influence.

6. Increase the diversity of membership: WAW should actively engage businesses of varying sizes, industries, and organizational structures. This will expand the network's knowledge base and ensure that varied viewpoints and opportunities are available to local enterprises, charities, and larger employers alike.

7. Schedule separate networking events for new members: Dedicated new-member events would create a less daunting setting for introductions and connection building. This would complement the welcome briefings and address issues about accessibility at major events.

8. Schedule regular follow-ups and member surveys: Short surveys and regular follow-ups should be utilized to assess member satisfaction, difficulties, and outcomes. This would provide credible evidence of impact and encourage continued development.

9. WAW could implement sustainable networking techniques: Such as enhancing local suppliers, eliminating unnecessary travel by holding digital meetings, and encouraging members to share environmentally responsible business practices. This would help to achieve SDGs 11 and 12 (Sustainable Cities and Communities and Responsible Consumption and Production), as well as enhance the local economy.

6.0 Conclusion:

This consultancy project examined the social and economic impact of WAW on its member organizations and the greater Wakefield District. A mixed-methods approach was used, including a survey of 73 member organizations and six semi-structured interviews with participants from various organization sizes, sectors, and membership durations. The survey gave quantitative evidence of members' experiences with networking, cooperation, business prospects, local economic impact, and sustainability, whilst the interviews provided more qualitative insights into how and why WAW adds value. The interview data were analysed thematically using codes and recurring themes, while quantitative outcomes were evaluated using an SROI-informed approach to identify and consider measurable economic and social value, such as business opportunities and cost savings.

Overall, the research shows that WAW promotes corporate connectivity, collaboration, and knowledge exchange, while also adding value to the local business community. However, there are still chances to increase member participation, attract larger organizations, and thoroughly demonstrate efficiency. The recommendations consequently emphasize focused networking, stronger onboarding, increased external visibility, diverse membership, and constant impact monitoring. Collectively, these indicators can increase WAW's value proposition while also providing a more solid evidence base for its contribution to the Wakefield District.

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Appendices:

Appendix 1: Ethics Form Attachment

Ethics Form- UG_PG RESEARCH ETHICAL REVIEW FORM_E1.docx

Appendix 2: Survey Questionnaire

Survey 1 Link- https://forms.cloud.microsoft/e/JMteqn3wjM?origin=lprLink

Survey 1 Link- https://forms.cloud.microsoft/e/Q6rAckGCzu?origin=lprLink

Appendix 3: Interview Questionnaire

Link- We Are Wakefield- Interview Questions.docx

Appendix 4: Quantitative Analysis

Link to Working file- SROI Analysis.xlsx

Appendix 5: Thematic Analysis

The qualitative interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to identifying, analysing and interpreting recurring patterns within qualitative data. Responses from six participants were systematically coded, and related codes were grouped into broader themes. The analysis below presents the themes and associated codes identified for each participant, followed by a cross-participant synthesis of the principal patterns emerging from the data.

Participant 1

Theme	Associated Codes	Analytical Interpretation
Motivations for Engagement	• Succession and Survival • Influence and Advocacy • Addressing Sector Challenges • Specialized Networking	Engagement was motivated by the need to sustain the existing manufacturing forum, strengthen collective representation and address sector-specific challenges.
Nature of Engagement and Collaboration	• Merger and Integration • Collaboration over Transaction • Facilitated Access	The relationship centered on integration, collaboration, stakeholder access and knowledge exchange rather than transactional service use.

	• Knowledge and Best Practice Sharing	
Direct Organizational Impacts and Outcomes	• New Business Partnerships • Access to Opportunities • Addressing Recruitment Challenges • Pathways for Future Growth • Enhanced Public Profile	The network generated partnerships, recruitment support, access to projects and opportunities for future growth.
The Voice of Manufacturing and Systemic Impact	• Collective Advocacy • Raising Sector Profile • Talent Attraction and Retention • Influencing Local Policy	The network provided manufacturers with a collective voice and a mechanism for influencing perceptions, talent development and local decision-making.
Challenges, Risks and Contingency	• Pre-existing Support Failure • Difficulty of Sector Engagement • Time-to-Impact Gap • Risk of Partnership Cessation	Benefits were developing over time, while the potential loss of the network was perceived as a significant risk to established relationships.
Organizational Context and Positioning	• Business Scale and Structure • Local Integration and Sustainability • Workforce Development Focus • Barriers to Traditional Support	The organization's scale and internal capabilities shaped how it engaged with the network and which benefits it valued.

Participant 2

Theme	Associated Codes	Analytical Interpretation
Networking and Relationship Building	• Peer-to-peer Support • Personal Connections • Trust-based Referrals • Long-lasting Business Relationships • Community of Like-minded Leaders	Face-to-face relationships, trust and peer support formed the foundation of engagement.
Supply Chain Localization	• Preference for Local Suppliers • Cost Savings through Local Sourcing • Ongoing Supplier Contracts • Five New Suppliers Sourced • Supplier Endorsement	Membership influenced procurement decisions and encouraged the use of trusted local suppliers.
Business Growth and Profitability	• Increased Bottom Line • Brand Awareness • New Business Opportunities • Referral Generation • Efficient Procurement	The network contributed to commercial opportunities, increased visibility and improved business efficiency.
Sustainability and Environmental Impact	• Net Zero Achievement • Carbon Footprint Reduction • Reduced Travel • Sustainable Product	Relationships within the network supported environmental improvements and sustainability objectives.

	Partnerships • Scope Emissions Reporting	
Corporate Social Responsibility	• Paid Volunteering Days • Community Clean-ups • Education Partnerships • Talent Pipeline Development • Charity Support	The network created routes for community engagement, education partnerships and social contribution.
Access to Expertise and Knowledge	• Grant and Funding Information • HR Advice • AI Training • Knowledge Portal • Signposting	Membership functioned as a practical knowledge and expertise resource.
Membership Evolution	• Individual to Company Membership • Headline Sponsorship • Board Membership • Exhibition Participation • Three-year Journey	Initial individual participation developed into deeper organizational involvement and commitment.
Organizational Efficiency	• Improved Visitor Management • Enhanced Communication • Streamlined Procurement • Better Buying Rates • IT Infrastructure	Network relationships contributed to operational improvements and more efficient business processes.
Unique Value Proposition	• No Comparable Organization • Combination of Services • Personal Connections Not Replicable Online • Testimonials over Blind Purchases • Local Community Impact	The distinctive value was perceived as the combination of trust, collaboration, visibility and community access.
Future Development and Recommendations	• Engage Larger Businesses • Collaboration with Wakefield Council • Independent Validation • Showcasing Measurable Impact • Growth Ambition	Future priorities focused on credibility, measurable impact and engaging larger employers.

Participant 3

Theme	**Associated Codes**	**Analytical Interpretation**
Partnership Formation	• Referral Through Personal Networks • Prior Organizational History • Strategic Timing Alignment • Rapid Network Growth	Personal connections and favorable post-COVID timing influenced the formation of the partnership.
Engagement Mechanisms	• First Friday Networking Events • On-site Event Hosting • Digital Communication Channels	Engagement occurred through regular networking, hosting, communication and targeted introductions.

	• Personalized Introductions • Twilight Attendance Events	
Student-Centered Outcomes	• Experiential Career Exposure • Micro Work Simulations • Improved Student Destinations • Student Empowerment and Choice • Cliff Edge Transition Support	Business engagement created practical career exposure and improved pathways for students.
Business Partnership Development	• Flagship Partnership • Active Partnership Portfolio • Warm Relationship Management • Symbiotic Partnership Model • Sector-Specific Targeting	Partnerships were developed as reciprocal and sustained relationships rather than one-off placements.
Pre-Partnership Challenges	• Post-COVID Employer Disengagement • Inefficient Cold Calling • Limited Organizational Visibility • Resource-Intensive Site Visits	Prior employer engagement was time-consuming, inefficient and constrained by low organizational visibility.
Value and Measurable Impact	• Doubled Employer Engagement • Enhanced Regional Visibility • Student Enrolment Growth • Time and Stress Reduction • National Recognition and Advocacy	Membership produced measurable improvements in employer engagement, visibility and organizational capacity.
Socioeconomic Impact	• Reduced Public Purse Burden • Improved Long-Term Mental Health • Community Inclusion and Valuing • Intergenerational Independence	Improved student outcomes were perceived to generate wider social and economic benefits.
Operational Adaptation	• Prioritized Networking Attendance • Expanded Careers Week Activities • Cross-Departmental Procurement Integration • Membership Retention Advocacy	The organization adapted internal practices as the value of membership became increasingly evident.
Dependency and Risk	• Gradual Relationship Decay Without Network • Irreplaceable Networking Function • Long-Term Investment Perspective • Significant but Not Catastrophic Impact	The network was viewed as strategically important, particularly for maintaining employer relationships over time.
Future Development Opportunities	• EDI Growth Initiative • Structured EDI Training Sessions	Future development focused on strengthening EDI support and reciprocal value for businesses.

	• Business Case for Diversity • Reciprocal Value Proposition	

Participant 4

Theme	Associated Codes	Analytical Interpretation
Motivations for Joining	• Small Business Constraints • Lack of Dedicated Business Development • Cost-Benefit Hesitation • Personal Relationship • Proximity and Convenience • Desire to Overcome Isolation	A small organizational structure and limited business-development capacity motivated participation.
Services and Engagement	• Attendance at Networking Events • New Member Welcome Event • Non-Participation in Awards • Cross-Member Service Usage • Informal Advice and Feedback	The participant primarily engaged through networking, member services and informal feedback.
Networking Culture and Experience	• Organic Conversations • Warm Introductions • Word-of-Mouth Referrals • Monthly Fixed-Date Events • Contrast with Traditional Networking • Supportive Community Feel • Guide for New Members	The informal and welcoming networking culture was considered more effective than traditional structured networking.
Business Outcomes and Impact	• New Potential Clients • Prototype Development • Pipeline Progression • No Revenue Yet • Reduction in Panic • Local Supply Chain Influence	Membership created a developing pipeline of opportunities, although some benefits had not yet converted into revenue.
Organizational Change and Rebranding	• Brand Identity Realization • Name Recognition Problem • Rebrand Decision • Collaboration with Member for Branding • Validation from Community • Professional Identity Evolution	Interaction with other members influenced organizational identity, branding and strategic direction.
Skills and Knowledge Development	• Learning from Other Businesses • LinkedIn Awareness • Cross-Industry Insights • Confidence in Networking • Business Development Mindset	The participant developed greater confidence, business awareness and knowledge through peer learning.
Barriers and Challenges	• Initial Intimidation • Difficulty Spotting New	New-member confidence, limited resources and uncertain

	Members • Uncertain Lead Conversion • Resource Constraints • Award Participation Barriers	conversion of leads were identified as challenges.
Attribution and Counterfactual	• 100% Attribution • Alternative Scenario: Struggling • Time Efficiency • Reduced Need for Cold Outreach • Large Impact if Closed • Confidence to Adapt Elsewhere	The participant attributed a substantial proportion of current opportunities to the network while recognizing that alternative networking skills had also developed.
Recommendations for Improvement	• New Member Support System • Structured Onboarding at Events • Future Engagement Interest	A more structured onboarding system was recommended to support new members.
Community and Social Benefits	• Local Proximity Value • Knowledge Sharing Culture • Mutual Support Ethos • Friendship Alongside Business • Sense of Belonging	Membership created both commercial and social value through local connections and belonging.
Emotional and Psychological Impact	• Reduced Anxiety • Increased Confidence • Excitement About Direction • Feeling Supported • Overcoming Fear	The network reduced uncertainty and increased confidence and motivation.

Participant 5

Theme	Associated Codes	Analytical Interpretation
Evolution of Engagement and Relationship	• Initial Involvement • Motivation to Stay • Sense of Reciprocity • Early Support • Formalized Partnership • From Hopeful to Committed • Relationship Evolution • Growth over Change • Length of Engagement • Network Growth Witnessed	Engagement developed from early skepticism and support into a committed long-term partnership.
Value of Networking and Profile Raising	• Primary Service Used • Goal of Networking • Profile Raising • Perception Shift • Convenience of Access • Trust via Existing Relationships • Hosting Leverage • Magnified Voice • Newsletter and Social Amplification	Networking increased visibility and strengthened the organization’s position within the local business ecosystem.

Business Development Through Connections	• Access to Suppliers • Supplier Examples • Strategic Partnership • Supplier-to-Supporter Journey • Cost Reduction • Revenue Generation • Corporate Network Growth • Direct Income • Problem-Solving Access	Connections generated supplier relationships, cost savings, income and practical problem-solving support.
Impact on Organizational Standing and Growth Trajectory	• Business Audience in Theatre • Regional Appeal • Competing with Larger Cities • Business Community Engagement Revenue • Intrinsic Alignment • Credibility • Capacity to Achieve • Enhancement not Change	Membership enhanced credibility, commercial engagement and the organization's contribution to Wakefield's attractiveness.
Network Culture and Leadership	• Unique Network Culture • Sense of Purpose • Leadership Influence • Pride in Wakefield • Cynicism from Prior Networks • Welcoming Nature • Trust in Support	A distinctive culture of mutual support and local pride was strongly associated with leadership and relationship quality.
Challenges and Suggested Improvements	• Growing Overwhelmed • Accessibility Concerns • Host Venue Capacity • Charity/Non-commercial Network • Smaller/Specialist Networks • Contradiction Acknowledged	Growth created accessibility challenges and highlighted demand for smaller or sector-specific engagement.
Long-Term Dependency and Risk	• Attribution of Achievements • Alternative Route Absence • Immediate Impact of Closure • Long-Term Impact • Relationship Decay • Loss of District Pride • No Replacement	Existing relationships may initially survive closure, but long-term growth and collective local identity were seen as vulnerable.

Participant 6

Theme	Associated Codes	Analytical Interpretation
Relationship Building and Networking	• Proactive Initial Engagement • Reciprocal and Mutual Relationships • Access to a Wider Business Community • Personal and Informal Professional Relationships • Ongoing and Sustainable Partnerships	Membership created accessible, reciprocal and sustained relationships across the wider business community.

Support and Resource Access	• Venue and Event Hosting • Professional Advice and Referrals • Marketing and Promotion • First Point of Contact for Problem-Solving • Peer Learning and Shared Experience	The network acted as a resource hub, connecting the organization to expertise, advice and promotion.
Visibility and Community Integration	• Increased Awareness Beyond the City Centre • Embedding a Civic/Heritage Building into Business Culture • Breaking Down Sector Barriers • Positioning as a Flexible Venue	Membership increased visibility and repositioned the cathedral as an accessible civic and commercial venue.
Economic Impact	• Increased Footfall • New Venue Hire and Commercial Bookings • Patronage and Direct Financial Support • Cost Savings Through Free or Discounted Advice • Reinvestment and Sustainability	Financial benefits included increased footfall, bookings, patronage and reduced expenditure on external expertise.
Social Benefits	• Informal Networking Environment • Idea Sharing and Collaboration • Unexpected Partnerships • Peer Support and Shared Challenges	The informal culture facilitated collaboration, unexpected opportunities and mutual reassurance.
Challenges and Limitations	• Funding Stagnation and Rising Costs • Lack of In-House Expertise • Limited Resources for Independent Networking • Charity-Specific Needs Differ from Commercial Needs	Limited resources and charity-specific needs shaped reliance on external relationships and support.
Organisational Value and Uniqueness	• Cross-Sector Inclusivity • Informal Low-Pressure Culture • Trust-Building Through Member Recommendations • Reciprocal Kindness-Based Culture	The network's distinctiveness was linked to inclusivity, trust and a low-pressure reciprocal culture.
Recommendations for Improvement	• Sector-Specific Networking • Maintaining Broad-Spectrum Events	The participant recommended balancing broad cross-sector networking with smaller targeted groups.
Counterfactual Scenarios	• Siloed Working Without the Network • Significantly Slower Progress • Irreplaceable Loss of	Without the network, relationship-building and organizational progress would

	Relationships • Reduced Visibility and Missed Opportunities	be slower and more fragmented.
Measurable and Attributed Outcomes	• Increased Footfall • New Formal and Informal Partnerships • Ongoing Non-Transactional Relationships • Attribution of Visibility • Confidentiality on Exact Figures	The participant attributed increased visibility, partnerships and economic opportunities to the network, while keeping exact financial figures confidential.

Cross-Participant Thematic Synthesis

Although the themes were initially developed from each individual interview, several overarching patterns were consistently identified across the six participants. These patterns demonstrate how the network creates value through a combination of relational, organisational, economic and social mechanisms.

Overarching Theme	Summary of Findings
Networking, Relationships and Trust	All participants identified relationship building as a central outcome. Face-to-face contact, warm introductions, trusted referrals and long-term relationships reduced isolation and created opportunities that were difficult to achieve through cold outreach or online searches.
Business and Organizational Development	Participants reported new clients, suppliers, partnerships, referrals, cost savings, increased visibility and improved organizational processes. However, the extent of measurable financial impact varied, with some opportunities still progressing through the pipeline.
Access to Knowledge, Expertise and Resources	The network frequently acted as a knowledge broker, providing access to specialist advice, funding information, training, technology, HR support and practical signposting.
Community and Cross-Sector Collaboration	Benefits extended beyond commercial activity. Participants described partnerships involving education, charities, sustainability, volunteering, civic institutions and social inclusion, demonstrating a wider local ecosystem effect.
Visibility, Identity and Reputation	Membership increased organizational awareness and credibility. For several participants, engagement also influenced how they positioned themselves, whether as a recognized business,

	civic venue, specialist organization or rebranded company.
Long-Term Relationships and Dependency	Participants generally viewed membership as a long-term investment. While closure would not necessarily create immediate operational failure, most anticipated slower relationship development, reduced visibility and the gradual loss of opportunities.
Challenges and Future Development	Common challenges included the size and potential intimidation of large events, resource constraints, uncertain conversion of leads and the need for sector-specific or new-member support. Recommendations focused on structured onboarding, smaller specialist groups and expanding engagement with larger organizations.