

# Connect More: How can services, sectors & communities find a shared vision?

## National Multiple Disadvantage Summit 2025

### The Bottom Line: How can local businesses help tackle multiple disadvantage?

#### Workshop Notes

**Martin McKervey** talked about his roles as Non-Executive Director of AESSEAL plc and as Business Commissioner working with Community and Civic Commissioners as part of the Sheffield Poverty Truth Commission.

At AESSEAL the business is concerned equally with customers, quality of product and supporting the most disadvantaged people in local communities. Its community focus includes:

- Being one of the largest employers of apprentices, and focussing those opportunities of young people from the poorest communities, many of whom are the first person in their family to work.
- Working in schools to raise awareness of careers in STEM
- Close partnership working with South Yorkshire Community Foundation, as their biggest donor.

The Poverty Truth Commission brings together people with lives experience and civic and business leaders, on an equal footing, to develop initiatives to reduce and end poverty in the city. The key to the Commission is building relationships, trust, deepening understanding, and respecting all views.

Martin is also on the Sheffield steering group for Homewards, the Royal Foundation initiative to end homelessness in six locations.

Martin sees business as having a key role to play in ending poverty and disadvantage, and a responsibility to help and support those in greatest need. But this needs to be done collaboratively and with the voices of people in poverty at the centre.

He ended with a quote from Henry Ford - "Coming together is a beginning, keeping together is progress, working together is success."

**Chris Sylvester, Founder, Getting Clean CIC**, talked about his journey to entrepreneurship, starting with his lived experience of drug misuse and the criminal justice system, which ended after 26 years when recovery found him. Once in recovery Chris went into support work, as he wanted to give back and share his learning with others but found himself frustrated by the homelessness system and the services he worked in. In particular, seeing the revolving door of people through the hostel, whilst short term 'positive outcomes' were celebrated even though many people ended up back in the hostel. He knew things could be different and started a programme of voluntary action litter picking to support each other, challenge stigma and show visible recovery in communities. As this grew, the group started to do more in communities, including helping older people with DIY and environmental work including planting wildflower

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meadows. It became clear there was a need for better pathways to employment and so set up Getting Clean CIC. Collaboration is at the heart of the company so competing for grants and other funding didn't fit, and they wanted to develop an income stream to sustain the activity. Getting Clean now makes and sells soap in a therapeutic workplaces – “Reducing crime and grime at the same time”.

### Questions and Answers

**Q** The impact of work can take time to be felt, and it can be tough for people to sustain work while they wait for the positive impact. How can we better engage people in work for the long term?

**A** Chris – Getting Clean uses a Recovery Capital model that sets goals and show progress. Showing people how they are developing and what they are contributing is important. Volunteering has also been a pathway into work, as it demonstrates to people they ARE an asset to society. There is also the aspect of finding something people love to do as work, then it doesn't feel so much like work.

Martin – society has failed a lot of our young people when their postcode defines their employment options and life chances. At AESSEAL all apprentices get a mentor and a buddy, they put structures in place to help people understand the rules of engagement and have a strong belief in everyone's talent and abilities – essentially creating the conditions so people can be the best versions of themselves.

**Q** Our Outreach Team is keen to reach Prolific and Priority Offenders (PPOs) – how should we engage them?

**A** Chris – empowerment and showing people what is possible. Example of working in prisons (with people he knows) to show that change is possible. However, the system sometimes blocks innovative work – Getting Clean's “Bars from Behind Bars” project to make soap in prison was blocked from going ahead because of Chris's criminal record – the risk/reward balance was heavily weighted on the risk side.

**Q** What is a Business Commissioner?

**A** Martin – explained that Poverty Trust Commissions are made up of both Community Commissioners (people with lived experience of poverty) and civic/business commissioners. They commit to coming together monthly, sharing power and resources, to plan and deliver practical action on poverty. Sheffield is 5 months in to the process.

**Q** How should we be engaging with businesses?

**A** Martin - It's tricky for businesses to know who needs help and support. Community Foundations have a lot of links to businesses, who rely on them to guide giving. So, linking up with your local Community Foundation would be a good start. Also, Chamber of Commerce, CBI, Make UK and other business groups – go and ask for help and ask them how they could help you. A criticism of CSR is that businesses write a cheque twice a year and feels it has met

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its obligations. At AESSEAL the leadership of community involvement and support is as important as customer experience and product quality.

**Q** What support is needed for LERO (Lived Experience Recovery Organisation) businesses?

**A** Chris - Resources, space, funding. Real commitment to co-production, avoiding tokenism. Collaboration not competition with other organisations.

**Q** Businesses used to really invest in communities, for example in industrialised towns they would build playgrounds and social clubs. How can we unlock the value of businesses in communities again?

**A** Chris – “If you want a sausage, find a butcher. You don’t need to be the butcher”. Its all about relationships – businesses and communities talking to each other, valuing lived experience and finding a shared purpose.

Martin – in times when Local Authorities are so strapped for cash, we can’t rely on them to have the answers any more, businesses can fill some the gaps if they know what they are and how to work collaboratively,

**Q** There are Business Improvement Districts in Leeds and Sheffield, and many BIDs include looking at responses to rough sleeping in town and city centres, have you worked with them and do you have any observations on how they work?

**A** Martin – there has been some engagement but the concern is that BIDs are often self-interested – it’s about what members want to see i.e. a clean city centre, reduction in ASB, rather than community collaboration and benefits. Work could be done to win hearts and minds and try to engage BIDs more widely in collaboration, rather than “what do I / my business get from this?”

Chris – some engagement, especially with the Leeds International Festival of Ideas. Could do more.

Chris (audience member & MEAM Experts Group) – in Preston the BID was very supportive until we wanted to set up a night service in the city centre, which was strongly opposed by the BID – members didn’t engage with the consultation – they just sent one person to say no. The BID does not proactively support vulnerable people. Chris also commented that he started a food delivery initiative to those in need from his kitchen and then asked local businesses to support him and he started using their kitchens. Really important to focus on local businesses who are part of the local community – they often want to help but don’t know how. If you knock on the door and tell them how they can help, they will often respond. “If they don’t know what they can do, they can’t do it!”

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### Summary

- **Business as a Force for Good:** Businesses can play a central role in addressing poverty and disadvantage by embedding social impact into their core values—not just through donations. Co-production must be central in this, doing things with people not to them.
- **Recovery and Employment Pathways:** Structured support, visible progress, and meaningful work (e.g. through volunteering or apprenticeships) help people sustain recovery and re-enter the workforce.
- **Collaboration Over Competition:** Effective responses require cross-sector collaboration and co-production, between businesses, public sector, and the VCS and most importantly communities,
- **Community-Led Business Engagement:** Many local businesses are willing to help but don't know how—direct engagement and relationship-building are key.
- **Reimagining Corporate Social Responsibility:** Moving beyond one-off donations to long-term investment in people, places, and purpose.