



Rishi Sunak meets staff and students during a 2021 visit to Aston University Business School to publicise the Help to Grow scheme

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MANAGEMENT

## The tender young businesses receiving Help to Grow

Richard Tyler

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Bobby Bradstock turns 30 today and will be juggling her celebrations with running her three therapy clinics and completing homework set by the government's Help to Grow management training scheme.

Bradstock, a psychotherapist, is among the latest cohort of business people to start the taxpayer-subsidised 12-week course, which is being provided by business schools across the UK.

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Sunak announced the scheme with £520 million of public funding [in August 2021](#).

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Bradstock is studying at Aston Business School and has just finished the third of 12 modules. “I have already got the value out in the first weeks,” she said. “I have never done business and have started from scratch. Having this support makes it way less lonely.”

Bradstock started her business, called Serenity, in 2021. It employs 16 therapists in clinics near Solihull, Burton upon Trent and Nottingham and is looking to open a fourth site in Leicester.

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She heard about Help to Grow from Aston Business School as she is an alumnus of a start-up support scheme that it runs. The three modules so far have confirmed that she is on the right

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it gives you space to grow.”

Lauren Guthrie, who runs a dressmaking business called Guthrie & Ghani from her shop in Moseley, south Birmingham, has not had such a positive initial experience. “I am finding it quite overwhelming,” she said. “There’s a lot of information in a short period of time. As a busy business person it’s a lot to take in and action.”

Guthrie, who was a contestant in the BBC programme *The Great British Sewing Bee*, employs ten people and sells everything required for dressmaking, from fine fabrics to needles, threads and patterns. She has just started a dressmaking kit service with an accompanying video in which she explains what to do. Her business makes just under £1 million in sales, 80 per cent of which are online.

She said that she had sought out support because she wanted to become more strategic in her decision-making. “I have been making it up for the last ten years for better or worse,” she said. “The course has given me reassurance in parts that I’m on the right track.”

She heard about Help to Grow when she received a letter from HM Revenue & Customs. “There’s always a slight holding of breath when you receive letters from them,” she said, but it was positive, saying that they had identified her business as meeting the criteria

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webinar and a one-hour peer call. Every third week there was an in-person session from 12.30pm to 5pm. She said that anyone considering signing up should set aside another four to five hours to go through the extra reading that is provided. She had hoped for more time to implement some of the lessons from each stage. “There is just not that much time between each module,” she said.



Bobby Bradstock said the enthusiasm generated by the scheme gave her more energy

SERENITY PSYCHOTHERAPY

Another problem is the curation of the cohort. Guthrie said that she had been hoping to meet other retailers that were going through similar challenges. So far the people she had met were largely selling to other businesses rather than to consumers.

The mentoring offered also had some teething troubles. Guthrie took time to identify a shortlist but none replied to her request and when she returned to the portal her shortlist had disappeared. She was paired automatically with a mentor, who happened to be on her original shortlist but who said they had not received the notification of her interest.

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Bradstock found the mentoring system more straightforward, likening it to a dating app. Approach a handful of likely mentors and do not expect to hear back from them all, she advised. She found a local business coach in less than two weeks who had experience of supporting female-run businesses, she said. They will meet monthly for the duration of the course. Two thirds of Help to Grow participants surveyed for a government evaluation said they were very satisfied with the mentoring provided.

Bradstock has also found managing the time commitment easier because although it is extra work she has two colleagues looking after the administration of the business. “Because of the enthusiasm that comes with the programme I feel like I have the energy for it,” she said.

Nine out of ten of the 3,340 company directors who have completed the course said they were “fairly or very satisfied” with how the programme was taught.

James Morris, founder of Trafalgar Marquees, is one of them. He joined in October 2021 and said the course had provided far more practical advice than other academic-led management courses. He continued to use the “simple tools” today. “A hell of a lot more of it has stuck than I thought would,” he said.

His business, which has provided temporary structures for the Queen’s funeral and the King’s coronation, grew by about 15 per cent in the year following the course. Last year he was able to send one of his managers to Kingston Business School to take part in the course, which he said had helped to “embed the practices”.

“As a policy tool for government, it’s a cheap growth tool,” he

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