

Can business be a force for good? Greggs and Sage think it can

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The question of whether businesses exist purely to make a profit, or if they should play a role in society, is not one that is likely to be settled any time soon.

But two of the North East's largest and most successful companies believe very much in the latter, and have published wide-ranging reports in recent months on how they plan to make the world a better place.

Both food-on-the-go company Greggs and software firm Sage have a long history of philanthropy, with established charitable foundations and sponsorship of events, breakfast clubs and cultural venues in their North East heartlands.

But now the Newcastle companies have stepped up those efforts with plans that outline a number of ways they want to make an impact on society in this region and further afield.

In February, Greggs issued a 10-point sustainability plan which outlined how it aims to reducing plastic packaging, increase its healthy food options and improve animal welfare standards. It also outlined plans to open 50 Greggs Outlet shops to provide cheaper food in poorer areas, have a more diverse workforce and become a carbon neutral, zero waste

business.

The goal of becoming a net zero business was also central to the sustainability strategy published by Sage last week, with the firm pledging to be net zero across its operations and supply chain by 2040, with an interim step to reduce carbon emissions by 50% by 2030.

And just as Greggs focussed on how its position as a food business could make a difference to disadvantage communities, Sage is looking to leverage its long-held role as a champion of small businesses for benefits that go beyond the company's day-to-day operations.

As part of that effort, Sage commissioned research in association with The Entrepreneurs Network into attitudes to starting a business in some of the more deprived areas of Newcastle, including Walker, Byker, Elswick, Benwell and Scotswood. Research was also carried out in London.

That study found that around 40% of people in the UK's most deprived communities have a start-up idea, but most lack the confidence or the know-how to put that into action.

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As a result, Sage has set up a scheme with MyKindaFuture – an award-winning HR tech company specialising in helping underrepresented people get into work – to provide training and mentorship to help disadvantaged and underrepresented groups to develop their business ideas.

But it also wants the Government to increase help in this area, by doubling the New Enterprise Allowance and providing support to empower more people to earn independently and help deliver the levelling up agenda.

Sage CEO Steve Hare said: “The most deprived communities in the UK have taken a huge hit over the last 12 months. We know that starting and growing a business is a proven route to long term employment, high job satisfaction and wealth creation, but that opportunity is not always accessible to everyone in these areas.



Sage CEO Steve Hare
(Image: Philip Gatward)

“As a business that supports millions of SMEs globally, we want to knock down these barriers.

“I passionately believe that everybody should have the opportunity to thrive and have seen first-hand the long-term benefits individuals, families and communities experience when given that chance. Our partnership with MyKindaFuture will provide real support, the right tools and quality mentoring so that people can build and own their own businesses and be part of an inclusive recovery.”

Report author Sam Dumitriu, research director from The Entrepreneurs Network, said: “In communities where work tends to be low paid and career opportunities limited, entrepreneurship is a real and viable path towards higher earnings, greater flexibility, and more fulfilling work.

“Even in the face of the significant setbacks in financial outlook and wellbeing caused by the pandemic, there are thousands of potential business owners in communities across the UK with strong ideas, but most lack the confidence and

resources to take that leap.

“If we can put the right support in place by expanding and revamping the New Enterprise Allowance, making it easier for budding entrepreneurs to learn from established SMEs, and demystifying the administrative aspects of starting a business, we will create highly valued work and empower hundreds of thousands of people to build businesses, change their lives and create jobs in their communities.”

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Efforts by businesses to have an impact on society are now

referred to as corporate social responsibility (CSR) and seen as an essential part of business life. Companies looking for investment especially are expected to have a strong CSR policy.

Doing good in your community can have PR benefits and can also help recruitment of younger staff keen to work for companies with a sense of purpose, rather than just pursuing the bottom line.

But for Greggs' CEO Roger Whiteside, the company's efforts to make a difference were nothing new.

Speaking earlier this year, he said: "Greggs, right from the beginning – from John Gregg to his son Ian Gregg and beyond – has always been a business that sought to be a good corporate citizen and has had activities that support local communities. Trying to make great quality food accessible to everybody, not just to the well-to-do.



Corned Beef Bakes are back on the Greggs menu

(Image: ncjMedia)

“There’s a separate Greggs Foundation that was set up by Ian Gregg 30 years ago. We’re well known among those who know for our support of people in hardship, things like our Greggs breakfast clubs. But we tend not to publicise that because we don’t want it to be misinterpreted, that we’re only doing it for the brand. We’re doing it because we genuinely think it’s the right thing to do.

“Over the years that whole agenda of trying to be a better business has taken on an importance now which is becoming of interest to investors; they’re interested in how your business operates. We responded to that by pulling together everything we’ve done to date and asking what we can do to stretch ourselves further.

“That led to our sustainability report – we need to tell the world what we’re doing and be held to account for it.”