

What businesswomen really want

Is there enough support for female entrepreneurs in the North-East? **Rebekah Ashby** investigates.

THE Journal reported last week that Chancellor Gordon Brown has awarded the North-East just £80,000 to pilot a new women's enterprise unit.

With the average woman-owned business costing £4,000 to get off the ground and creating an average of 1.5 jobs, the sum is likely to create just 20 businesses and was branded 'derisory' by some leading businesswomen.

They labelled the Chancellor toothless and insulting and said the Government must "put its money where its mouth is" when it comes to supporting women into business.

We also revealed that regional development agency One NorthEast has allocated just £180,000 - or 0.07% of its £258m 2006/07 economic development budget - to specifically-targeted business support for women. It pointed out this must be put into the context of the mainstream business support it also funds including the Business Link network - support that is equally available to men and women.

So the real question is what the women running businesses in this region want to help them run their business? Do they want women-only networks? Do they want to be part of the mainstream? Or do they want a healthy mix of both?

Women into the Network (WIN)

THE main organisation supporting women's enterprise in the region is Durham University's Women Into the Network.

Set up seven years ago by programme director Dinah Bennett, the One NorthEast-backed programme now has 1,600 members and has won two European Commission awards for best practice.

Whether women are thinking of branching out on their own, are new to business, already established or want to support other women in business, Women Into the Network offer a range of activities.

These include networking, providing inspirational role models and the highlight of the North-East's women in business calendar - The North-East Woman Entrepreneur of the Year Awards.

Dinah Bennett said: "Research has shown that any economy which has both specifically-targeted and mainstream support has done infinitely better."

"Mainstream support often doesn't understand the needs of women, that's old women, young women, ethnic minority women, disadvantaged women - it's a very diverse group."

"If you get disadvantaged women running their own businesses, for example, then the knock-on effects are huge."

"Around 80% of care responsibilities, and that's not just children but elder care, are borne by women so you need to think differently about how to support women to juggle those responsibilities."

"Women also say that in the early days, when confidence may be an issue, that they want women-only events. When they grow in confidence, that's when it's about integrating mainstream support and women-only support."

"It's about access to finance, women can have very fragmented credit histories and might have a 12-year gap in employment because they have been raising children, and targeted initiatives fully understand the needs of this very diverse client group."

Mentoring Women into Business
A NEW mentoring scheme launched by Durham Business

LEADING THE WAY: Dinah Bennett, director of Women Into The Network.

School's Women Into the Network provides North-East women entrepreneurs with a head start on the road to building successful businesses.

Mentoring Women into Business aims to support women from a variety of backgrounds and stages of business development, from pre-start to growth. The entrepreneurs will be matched with male and female mentors and, with access to a new website, there is support available 24 hours a day for newcomers and experienced businesswomen alike.

The initiative was developed from the GLEAM (Graduate Learning of Entrepreneurship Accelerated through Mentoring) programme, which teaches the practice of business to graduates wanting to set up their own company.

Dinah Bennett, programme director of Women Into the Network (WIN) and Wendy Parvin, programme director for the Enterprise Development Team at Durham Business School are leading the WIN mentoring programme, which is sponsored by One NorthEast.

"WIN has been very successful at linking the women of the region so that they can share their huge wealth of enthusiasm and experience."

"The mentoring process unlocks doors and offers the long-term survival and growth of new ventures. The Mentoring Women in Business programme will enable experienced entrepreneurs to use their expertise to boost the confidence of less experienced managers," said Ms Parvin.

Business Link

An increasing number of female entrepreneurs in the North-East are being supported in their endeavours to launch their own enterprises.

More than a quarter of customers working with Business Link in the region are women - a figure which has risen by 5.8% in less than two years and which is 4.1% above the national average.

Business Link recognises that a one-size-fits-all approach will not succeed in a region which has very distinct requirements from across its geographically diverse business community. It believes that what works for women starting up an enterprise in our towns and cities does not necessarily work for those in remote rural locations.

Therefore, Business Link is working to adapt both service provision and accessibility accordingly to maximise the benefits delivered. Providers offer an independent route to a network of specialist advice and wide-ranging information to help businesses to grow and prosper.

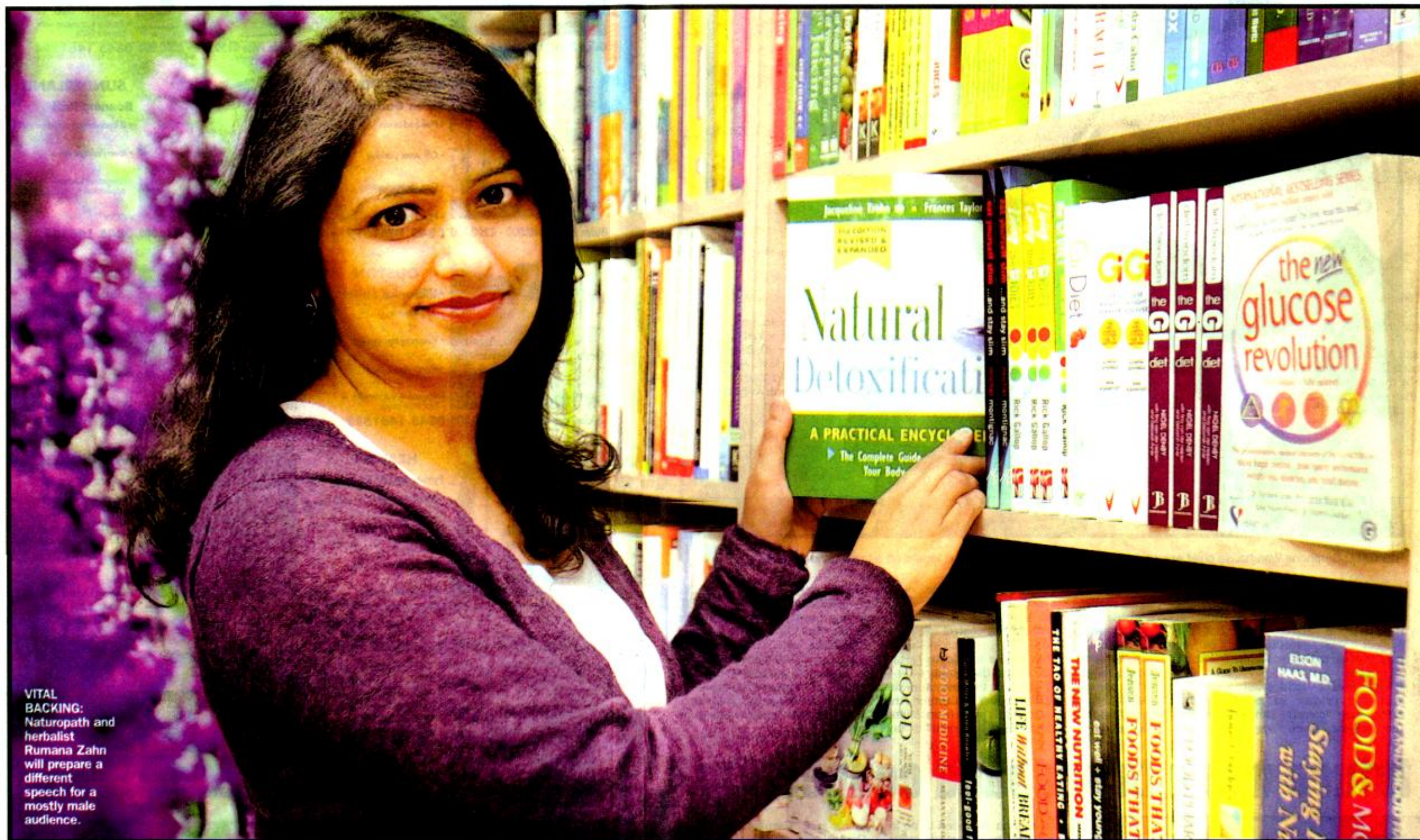
One NorthEast enterprise and volume business support manager, Dorothy Kelly, said: "The agency is increasingly clear about the importance of the role of women within the enterprise agenda, both in terms of participation and productivity."

It is widely acknowledged that there is a strong economic case for ensuring that women are targeted as both a key group for potential business starts and also for business growth.

"Women's enterprise represents a real opportunity to improve the region's start up and business performance and there is a demonstrable need to engage women more actively and fully."

Business Link has given the following examples of steps it is taking to support female-led enterprises across the region.

Business Link in County Durham
Business Link in County Durham is taking great strides to link up with other agencies and organisations to ensure



VITAL BACKING: Naturopath and herbalist Rumana Zahn will prepare a different speech for a mostly male audience.

opportunities to work with women are identified and progressed. Relationships have been forged with Enterprise, Young Enterprise, Jobcentre Plus and Sure Start to ensure all women, regardless of age and personal circumstances have easy access to appropriate support.

The service is identifying barriers to female entrepreneurship in County Durham by designing workshops and focus groups for females who are looking to start up a business. Data collected from these events will form the basis of a tailored approach to business support for women.

Business Link in Northumberland
Business Link in Northumberland has had enormous success with its EVE project, launched in 2002 to encourage women in business. Over 1,000 women are now active members of EVE, a business support and networking group for potential and existing female entrepreneurs.

Events, including the "Invest" conference in June, are based on the needs of members and provide business-to-business trade opportunities. Increasing in popularity, the county-wide events have engaged nationally recognised professional speakers who have a successful track record in enterprise. Further support is available throughout Northumberland via Business Link advice centres which provide access to a wide network of opportunities.

Business Link in Tees Valley

Business Link in Tees Valley has worked with women in the area to develop Buddy - a programme to help female entrepreneurs to learn from each other's experiences.

Links have also been forged with the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, Teesside University and Women into the Network (WIN). To breakdown typical barriers that have deterred women from setting up in business a number of events have been organised that will look at issues including motivation, self-esteem and confidence as well as business topics from access to finance to marketing.

Business Link in Tyne and Wear

Business Link in Tyne and Wear provides award-winning support to female entrepreneurs. The service's dedicated female business adviser Lynn Elves was named Supporter of Women's Business at the Woman Entrepreneur of the Year awards after a nomination from one of her many satisfied clients.

Tyne and Wear is seeing an increase in entrepreneurship and the emergence of more women role models in the region will help to continue this trend. Over 40% of the businesses helped to start up in the area between July and September 2005 are run by women.

'I haven't encountered any problems because I'm a woman'

MADONNA'S doing it, Sarah Jessica Parker's doing it and one of the North-East's youngest businesswomen Carly Heddon is keen to help the region get back into the newly trendy world of knitting.

But the 17-year-old has found starting up her own business - Glitter Box in Newburn - was more difficult than she first imagined. Because of her age she was unable to get any business support from either The Prince's Trust, which specialises in helping under-30-year-olds but not under-18s, or the Business Link network.

Instead she found help from credit union FIN, based at the Cruddas Park Shopping Centre in the West End of

Newcastle. But she thinks the lack of business support she has encountered hasn't been down to her gender but her age.

She says: "I haven't encountered any problems because I'm a woman but every business event you go to is full of men. I went to a Business Network International event (a business referral organisation) and there was no women there at all but it doesn't bother me."

"I am not the kind of person to sit in the corner and keep quiet, I will just push myself forward and push myself forward - I wouldn't be in this position now if I didn't."

Carly sees the worth in women-only business support

and is the youngest member of Durham University's Women Into The Network.

"I think it would be good to have more women-only support and get more women out there and into business, they need to put more money into it," she says.

The teenager designs all of her own knitwear and is selling her designs, patterns and wools to customers of all ages. She said: "My ambitions are to become both bigger and better by having more than one shop and to have people working with me."

"I absolutely love running my own business. I love the independence and being with the customers every day and I hope the business support will be there for me as I expand."



AGE CONCERNS: Carly Heddon.

'I've been at mixed networking or business events and people have started talking to my partner, assuming it's his business'

NATURAL health therapist Rumana Zahn has been in business for seven years, is about to enter a growth phase and says the support she gets at women-only support organisation Women Into the Network will be vital.

Rumana, who runs three clinics across the North-East and is diversifying into yoga retreats abroad and delivering well-being programmes to businesses, says women are "playing catch-up" and so need extra help.

She says: "My logic tells me that it (business support) should be impartial but, at the same time, there's a bit of catching up to do because women haven't been given the same opportunities."

"In some ways I do believe women do business differently to men. For example when I was employed my sales director would always send me to do the negotiations because I would get

more money than him. When I go to women-only networking events it's just completely different, compared to the ones run by men."

"Women talk about different things and are interested in different things. If I am presenting to a group I know will be mostly men, for instance I am talking to the Institute of Directors in a few months' time, I will plan slightly differently and use different anecdotes to engage them."

"I have been at mixed networking or business events and people have started talking to my partner, assuming it's his business."

"That's happened a few times and it's all about breaking down stereotypes. It shouldn't be an issue and there shouldn't be a separation, it's just that women are playing catch-up. If the tables turned and men were getting more support than women then that wouldn't be an ideal situation either."

'I can tell other women in business 'I have got a confidence issue today' and they tell me that's OK'

FAYE Stephenson says women-only business support organisation Women Into the Network (WIN) has been a tremendous support to her in the three months since she went into business for herself - but says she can't say the same for Business Link.

The consumer PR, who relocated back to the North-East from London, says women members of the organisation are very supportive of one another and support each other emotionally, as well as with business ideas.

The owner of Blue Mongoose in Darlington says: "The women just offer each other great support. I did go to Business Link but they weren't helpful at all."

"A lot of members of WIN are women who started their own business, whether that be six months ago or 16 years ago."

"They all have a story to tell and have been their themselves which is why their new mentoring scheme is going to work."

"Coming from London and working for such a large company means I can get lonely sometimes, it's hard sometimes and I've got nobody to bounce ideas off."

"I can tell other women in business 'I have got a confidence

issue today' and they tell me that's OK and that it's normal and that they've been there."

She has enrolled on WIN's new Mentoring Beyond Mainstream programme and is not only looking put for a mentor but has also put herself forward as one for women in the very embryonic stages of business.

She says: "I would like to be part of someone's support network when they are feeling like going back to the day job and I'll tell them it's definitely worth sticking at."



GREAT SUPPORT: Faye Stephenson.