

## Written evidence submitted by Mastercard [FEN0020]

### Overview

Mastercard welcomes this opportunity to respond to the Women and Equalities Committee's Call for Evidence on Female Entrepreneurship, which examines the barriers women face in pursuing entrepreneurialism.

### About Mastercard

Mastercard is a global payments technology company providing the underlying technology which enables consumers and businesses to make and receive digital payments every day. Our mission is to connect and power an inclusive, digital economy that benefits everyone, everywhere by making transactions safe, simple, smart, and accessible.

Mastercard is committed to bringing 1 billion people and businesses into the digital economy by the end of 2025, with a specific focus on underserved groups such as women and ethnic minorities. Not only is it the right thing to do but there is also significant economic benefit for the UK that can be unlocked by supporting more female entrepreneurs to start and grow their businesses. The 2019 Rose Review highlighted that up to £250bn of new value could be added to the UK economy if women started and scaled new businesses at the same rate as men<sup>1</sup>; much of this new economic value continues to remain untapped.

To support UK small and micro businesses reach their full potential and address many of the most pressing barriers they faced after the pandemic, in September 2021, Mastercard launched [Strive UK](#). Strive UK was a three year social impact programme that aimed to bolster the financial resilience and unlock the growth of British small businesses, ensuring they have the knowledge, skills, social capital and resources they need to thrive in the digital economy. The programme, in partnership with Enterprise Nation, Digital Boost and Be the Business, aimed to drive digital adoption and upskilling, support underserved members of the business community, like ethnic minority and women owned micro and small enterprises (MSEs), and utilised Mastercard's data capabilities to support these businesses.

The programme had three main components:

1. A 'One Stop Shop' platform built with Enterprise Nation. This comprehensive resource aims to connect entrepreneurs across the country to business support - by providing tailored plans, advice and a supportive community on one easy-to-access platform. The results have been promising. We have seen significant gains among women and ethnic minority participants in key areas such as financial management, digital skills and strategic growth.
2. With Be the Business, Strive UK worked to increase access to networks for ethnic minority business owners through mentorship and advisory boards.
3. With Digital Boost, Strive UK supported the adoption of digital tools and technologies, and helped MSEs navigate business challenges with expert-led advice and support.

Over the course of the Strive programme, Mastercard connected over **1.5 million** micro and small business owners in the UK to training, technology, and tools to build resilience and thrive, more than

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<sup>1</sup> [The Alison Rose Review of Female Entrepreneurship - GOV.UK](#)

half of which were led by women. Mastercard’s Strive UK programme has also provided us with unique insights into female entrepreneurialism and the barriers women, including those from ethnic minorities, face in starting and growing a business in the UK, as well as which solutions may best address these barriers.

### Submission summary

Female entrepreneurs in the UK continue to face significant challenges including **accessing funding, disproportionate caring responsibilities, a lack of digital and business skills and a lack of mentoring and networking opportunities**. Female-led businesses continue to receive disproportionately low levels of investment, and while many private sector initiatives are in place, the pace of change is slow. Mastercard research has found that women report lower confidence in financial decision-making, networking, and public speaking, which can hinder their ability to grow their businesses<sup>2</sup>. Limited access to relevant advice and mentorship further compounds these difficulties, with younger women expressing a particular need for structured support in these areas. Addressing these issues requires a coordinated effort across the public and private sectors to ensure female founders receive the right support at the right time.

Mastercard advocates for stronger public-private collaboration to break down these barriers, leveraging digital technology as a key enabler. Mastercard believes that private sector led innovation needs to be the key driver of change when it comes to improving the environment for female entrepreneurship to thrive. As part of this effort, Mastercard is sponsoring the Centre for Finance, Innovation and Technology (CFIT)’s third coalition, which focuses on breaking down the barriers that deter UK small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) from seeking finance.

However, there also remains an important role for policymakers in supporting female owned and run businesses by addressing the systemic and societal barriers they face. By aligning efforts across industry and the public sector, the business ecosystem can create more equitable opportunities for female founders.

Reflecting the ongoing barriers to female entrepreneurship and building on the recommendations from our [Get Britain Growing policy report](#)<sup>3</sup> which focused on how to unlock small business growth using digital technology, Mastercard recommends that to encourage female and ethnic minority-led entrepreneurship the Government should:

1. **Encourage a much-needed increase in VC investment** for female and ethnic-minority founded businesses by:
  - a. **Creating a specific Enterprise Investment Scheme for female-founded businesses**, so that VC investors receive tax breaks when they support female founders. The scheme could replicate the existing Enterprise Investment and Seed Enterprise Investment schemes and could include quotas for ethnic-minority led businesses.
  - b. Taking the schemes out of the party-political system and making them permanent, to provide long-term security to founders and certainty to investors.
2. **Consolidate business support resources by taking the lead in signposting to resources like Strive UK, leadership skills programmes and financial education resources** on relevant

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mastercard.com/news/europe/en/newsroom/press-releases/en/2025/from-gen-z-to-gen-e-the-rise-of-generation-entrepreneur/>

<sup>3</sup> [Europe | Mastercard Newsroom](#)

government channels and during critical small business milestones. For example, after registering with Companies House, small business owners should automatically receive information on accredited funding, banking and support services, such as, how to access a start-up loan, where to go for free training on topics like social media marketing and how to get free targeted business advice. While the Help to Grow campaign site's advice page is a step forward, it should be expanded to encompass diverse industry initiatives.

3. **Consider introducing improvements to childcare provisions** to address the disproportionate caring responsibilities undertaken by women.
4. Consider **women entrepreneur specific trade missions**.
5. Consider **embedding private sector initiatives into the Digital Adoption Taskforce's work**, focusing specifically on supporting female entrepreneurs.
6. Introduce a **national system of ethnicity data collection about entrepreneurs in the U.K.** For example, Companies House could add an ethnicity field to the annual registration process and include additional questions as part of the Management and Expectations Survey.

### Question Responses

**1. What are the barriers facing women, including specific groups of women such as those from an ethnic minority background, seeking to start and grow successful businesses in the UK?**

There is broad agreement that the UK can capture a massive economic boost by helping more people, especially women, to start and, more importantly, grow their businesses. However, many businesses face significant barriers to growth including a lack of digital tools and skills, difficulty accessing finance, and inadequate cash flow.

The challenges facing SMEs are particularly compounded for women-owned and ethnic minority-owned businesses. At the beginning of our Strive UK programme, Mastercard conducted a social listening exercise<sup>4</sup> to identify the barriers facing SMEs in the UK including female-led businesses. The primary challenges faced by female owned or led businesses identified during our discussions mirrored the findings of the government-commissioned Rose Review of Female Entrepreneurship<sup>5</sup>: access to funding, disproportionate caring responsibilities, digital skills, and a lack of mentoring and opportunities for networking.

Throughout the programme, Mastercard has identified the following key barriers still facing female entrepreneurs:

1. Access to finance

Access to funding is widely considered to be the top barrier women face when starting and growing a business in the UK. Illustratively, the British Business Bank's latest Small Business Equity Tracker found that all-male founder teams have raised over 300% more funding in the last year alone than all-female founder teams have raised over the last 10 years. The study found that all-female founder

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mastercard.com/news/media/zmnfdgt1/strive-uk-white-paper-a4-v10.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-alison-rose-review-of-female-entrepreneurship>

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teams raised £2.0bn in announced equity funding over the last 10 years whereas all-male founder teams in 2023 alone, raised £6.5bn in announced equity funding<sup>6</sup>. This underlines the stark fact that while there are numerous awareness campaigns, female focussed initiatives, and research on the topic existing, change is still slow<sup>7</sup> and not enough women founders are able to access the funding needed to start and then grow their businesses.

### 2. Disproportionate caring responsibilities

The Rose Review and Mastercard's Striving to Thrive report (2021) found that women (30.3%) find the difficulty of balancing care and work commitments a barrier to business success compared to (11.5%) of men<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, Mastercard's Striving to Thrive report (2022) found that two in five (41%) women and 40% of mothers say that the stress of running their business through the cost-of-living challenges is impacting their mental health, compared to just 22% of men and the same number (22%) of fathers<sup>9</sup>.

### 3. Lack of digital and business skills

Mastercard's 2025 female entrepreneurship study<sup>10</sup> found that across Europe, women are less likely than men to say they feel confident with general business-related skills – particularly financial decision making (25% vs. 37%), networking (15% vs. 23%) and public speaking (25% vs. 32%). This sentiment extends into running their own business. Risk of failure (31%) and lack of confidence (21% vs 18% of men) are also significant barriers for women when it comes to setting up their own business.

Adopting digital technology and building digital skills, particularly for female founders, is therefore key to increasing productivity and supporting small business growth. In 2022, Mastercard's research<sup>11</sup> found more than three-quarters of MSEs said that technology helps save time, while 62% believe the right digital tools will allow them to retain and grow their customer base. However, many small businesses lack the digital skills to embrace the power of technology. Over a third (35%) of small business owners want to adopt more digital tools, services, and other emerging technologies, but they face several barriers. These include the cost of new technology, the costs of implementation, and the pace of change associated with the world of technology<sup>12</sup>. Digital skills are another core barrier for minority-led small businesses, with ethnic minority business leaders rating their digital skills lower than non-minority counterparts<sup>13</sup>. Mastercard's Strive UK programme worked to bridge this skills gap by helping businesses build the digital skills they need to start and grow their business.

### 4. Lack of mentoring and opportunities for networking

Many female entrepreneurs continue to struggle to expand their contacts and often remain in small networks and can lack awareness of the broader business ecosystem and access to professional support. Mastercard's recent study found that to improve their confidence, younger women are

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.british-business-bank.co.uk/about/research-and-publications/small-business-equity-tracker-2024>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.mastercard.co.uk/en-gb/vision/priceless-causes/prosperity/strive.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.mastercard.com/news/media/dejfu3sr/striving-to-thrive.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.mastercard.com/news/media/2i3k5fcd/striving-to-thrive-2022.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.mastercard.com/news/europe/en/newsroom/press-releases/en/2025/from-gen-z-to-gen-e-the-rise-of-generation-entrepreneur/>

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.mastercard.com/news/media/j3hnze5d/striving-to-thrive\\_2022.pdf](https://www.mastercard.com/news/media/j3hnze5d/striving-to-thrive_2022.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.mastercard.com/news/media/j3hnze5d/striving-to-thrive\\_2022.pdf](https://www.mastercard.com/news/media/j3hnze5d/striving-to-thrive_2022.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> <https://bethebusiness.com/our-thinking/be-the-business-productive-business-index-edition-six-q1-2023>

more likely to want a support network such as a mentor (24% of Gen Z) and 30% of Gen Z said that having a business partner would make them more confident. The Government should consider how the wider business support ecosystem can coordinate offers to this community.

**3. How can women best be supported to overcome the challenges they face in securing funding to start and grow their businesses?**

When searching for funding, female-led businesses are often presented with several options including business loans, grants, and competitions. However, many may not know about all the options available to them including options to access credit and funding through Community Development Finance Institutions (CDFIs).

Furthermore, female founders from ethnic minorities also face broader systemic barriers when seeking funding to start and grow their businesses. Ethnic Minority Businesses (EMBs), including those that are female owned, are disproportionately more likely to be based in, or serving, disadvantaged lower income communities with less access to digital payment options and more reliant on cash payments. These issues do not just disproportionately affect ethnic minority consumers, they have also consistently been flagged as issues that have led to EMBs encountering disproportionate demand side barriers to accessing finance. These issues were exacerbated during the pandemic<sup>14</sup>.

There is also a strong case for a more coordinated and systemic approach to collecting data to ensure better transparency and regulation of how this data is used to make decisions about access to finance. Business lobby groups such as the FSB have joined the APPG for Ethnic Minority Business Owners in supporting the Office for National Statistics in its call for a national system of ethnicity data collection about entrepreneurs<sup>15</sup>.

Furthermore, support is needed from Government to encourage a much-needed increase in VC investment for female and ethnic-minority founded businesses by a) creating a specific Enterprise Investment Scheme for female-founded businesses, so that VC investors receive tax breaks when they support female founders. The scheme could replicate the existing Enterprise Investment and Seed Enterprise Investment schemes and should include quotas for ethnic-minority led businesses, and b) taking the schemes out of the party-political system and making them permanent, to provide long-term security to founders and certainty to investors.

Mastercard believes that getting the right support at the right time will significantly increase the chances of business survival and growth. In order to facilitate this, Mastercard would like to see increased private-public partnership, with the Government openly backing the work of the private sector to address barriers faced by female entrepreneurship, for example by harnessing technological innovation as a leveller for business owners.

Those founders who are too often locked out of traditional support systems can also benefit from digital alternatives like e-learning, online networking and crowdfunding. Mastercard has worked alongside Enterprise Nation to build on an existing ecosystem of support, creating the 'Make a Plan' tool as a way for entrepreneurs to access free, tailored support recommendations which are

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<sup>14</sup> [get-britain-growing\\_powering-small-businesses\\_july-2023.pdf](#)

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

surfaced through an individual and personalised dashboard. It can support women getting the right advice on funding, by utilising technology and data at its heart. Digital tools like ‘Make a Plan’ are continuously increasing their reach, particularly with women and ethnic minority founders, to provide them with relevant, tailored support.

Adopting digitalisation, including digital payments, can play a significant role in addressing some of the most pressing issues faced by SMEs by helping businesses get paid and get capital. Mastercard is sponsoring the Centre for Finance, Innovation and Technology (CFIT)’s third coalition, which focuses on breaking down the barriers that deter the UK’s 5.6 million SMEs from seeking finance. The coalition will develop demand-side solutions to complement the work already undertaken by CFIT on how to boost the supply of lending to SMEs.

To address the lack of awareness regarding the various support options available to female entrepreneurs, the Government should consider championing and signposting successful private sector initiatives, investments, and lending efforts. For instance, partnering with the private sector to develop and scale leadership skills programs aimed at underserved business community members should be explored. An example of such a private sector initiative is Mastercard’s Strive UK programme.

**4. What examples are there of best practice in supporting female-led entrepreneurship, both in the UK and internationally?**

To support UK businesses reach their full potential, in September 2021, Mastercard launched [Strive UK](#), a social impact initiative focussed on bolstering the financial resilience and unlocking the growth of British MSEs; ensuring they have the knowledge, skills, social capital and resources they need to thrive in the digital economy. Strive UK engaged entrepreneurs through its one stop shop platform that provided them with tailored guidance on their business, through connecting them with mentors and digital advisors, and through helping them connect with Advisory Boards to unlock their access to networks.

Mastercard’s Strive programme in the UK reached more than **1.5 million** small businesses, more than half of which were led by women. Businesses supported by Strive in the UK reported increased expectations for business growth (65%), increased capacity to adapt new digital tools (68%) and increased productivity (66%).

Given the success of Strive UK and other private sector programmes, the Government should consider embedding private sector initiatives, such as Strive UK, into the work of the Digital Adoption Taskforce. It should also consider how the Taskforce can specifically support female entrepreneurs. Relatedly, the Government should consider signposting to resources like Strive UK and others on relevant government channels and during critical small business milestones. For example, after registering with Companies House, small business owners should automatically receive information on accredited funding, banking and support services, such as, how to access a start-up loan, where to go for free training on topics like social media marketing and how to get free targeted business advice. While the Help to Grow campaign site’s advice page is a step forward, it should be expanded to encompass diverse industry initiatives.

**5. What steps should the Government take to help support the development of female-led high growth enterprises?**

Mastercard believes that private sector led innovation, working with the public sector needs to be the key driver of change when it comes to addressing the barriers for female entrepreneurship. The Government should champion successful private sector initiatives and encourage and fund more work to eliminate barriers for female founders. Mastercard recommends the Government undertakes the below initiatives to support female entrepreneurialism:

1. Signpost Business Leaders to Support

The Government and the business support community should collaborate to launch a business leader-centric starting point, consolidating and signposting business leaders to appropriate support. While the Help to Grow campaign site's advice page is a step forward, it should be expanded to encompass diverse industry initiatives. For example, after registering with Companies House, small business owners should automatically receive information on accredited funding, banking and support services, such as, how to access a start-up loan including via CDFIs, where to go for free training on topics like social media marketing and how to get free targeted business advice.

The Government should also consider embedding private sector initiatives, like Strive UK, into the Digital Adoption Taskforce's work and consider how elements of the work of these Taskforces can be focussed on specifically supporting female entrepreneurs.

2. Build Capacity of Female Entrepreneurs

The Government should support female business leaders to improve their digital and wider skills and confidence to successfully navigate the financial and digital technology ecosystem. This could include free finance courses and tools to give business leaders the knowledge and confidence to understand their financial health and steer their companies in the right direction.

3. Improve Leadership Skills

The Government should support leadership skills programmes that focus on underserved business community members. Following the example set by Mastercard's Strive UK programme, the industry can support and scale initiatives that meet the learning preferences of business leaders and promote participants as role models who can inspire others. For example, Be the Business offers fully funded options through Mastercard Strive UK. Supporting collaboration among business ecosystem actors can bring advice to more diverse communities.

4. Improve access to funding

As the main barrier to female led business growth, the Government should consider encouraging a much-needed increase in VC investment for female and ethnic-minority founded businesses by:

- a) Creating a specific Enterprise Investment Scheme for female-founded businesses, so that VC investors receive tax breaks when they support female founders. The scheme could replicate the existing Enterprise Investment and Seed Enterprise Investment schemes and should include quotas for ethnic-minority led businesses.



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- b) Consider support for the CDFI sector to help unlock further access to funding for female led businesses.
- c) Taking the schemes out of the party-political system and making them permanent, to provide long-term security to founders and certainty to investors.

To address the disproportionate childcare responsibilities faced by female business owners, the Government should consider further improvements to childcare provisions. Additionally, the Government should consider women entrepreneur specific trade missions.

### 5. Improve the data ecosystem for female founders from ethnic minority backgrounds

To enable greater transparency, the Government should introduce a national system of ethnicity data collection about entrepreneurs in the U.K. For example, Companies House could add an ethnicity field to the annual registration process and include additional questions as part of the Management and Expectations Survey.

<h3><b>6. What data exists or is required to track success and monitor progress in female entrepreneurship?</b></h3>
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Mastercard’s recent study into global female entrepreneurs<sup>16</sup>, the key findings of which have been cited in this response, as well as the findings from Mastercard’s Strive UK programme<sup>17</sup> <sup>18</sup>are helpful resources for understanding the female entrepreneurship landscape. Mastercard’s European female entrepreneurship study was conducted by independent research agency, Opinium, gathered data from an online quantitative survey that was carried out across 41 countries in North America, Latin America, Asia-Pacific, Europe, the Middle East and Africa<sup>19</sup> between 16 December 2024 and 3 January 2025. The study produced data on trends in the motivations and challenges facing female entrepreneurs over generational age groups and included:

- 42,500 general population (21,000 within Europe, 2,000 within UK)
- 4,300 entrepreneurs / founders (1,830 within Europe, 200 within UK)

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.mastercard.com/news/europe/en/newsroom/press-releases/en/2025/from-gen-z-to-gen-c-the-rise-of-generation-entrepreneur/>

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.mastercard.com/news/media/j3hnze5d/striving-to-thrive\\_2022.pdf](https://www.mastercard.com/news/media/j3hnze5d/striving-to-thrive_2022.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.mastercard.com/news/media/dejfu3sr/striving-to-thrive.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> The full list of countries surveyed: UK, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Austria, Ireland, Belgium, Norway, Denmark, Czech Republic, Greece, Poland, Netherlands, Sweden, Portugal, Slovakia, Switzerland, India, Indonesia, Singapore, Australia, China, Thailand, Korea, South Africa, Nigeria, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Kenya, Egypt, Ukraine, Morocco, Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, Chile, Canada, USA.



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To drive greater data transparency and support minority-led female-owned businesses, the Government should introduce a national system of ethnicity data collection about entrepreneurs in the UK building on its introduction of ethnicity pay gap reporting for large employers. For example, Companies House could add an ethnicity field to the annual registration process and include additional questions as part of the Management and Expectations Survey. The provision of accurate quantitative data will enable a better understanding of the barriers that minority-owned businesses face and will address the overall lack of transparency about these issues across the financial services industry.

As set out above, there is also a strong case for a more coordinated and systemic approach to collecting data in order to ensure better transparency and regulation of how this data is used to make decisions about access to finance. Business lobby groups such as the Federation of Small Businesses have also joined the APPG for Ethnic Minority Business Owners in supporting the Office for National Statistics in its call for a national system of ethnicity data collection about entrepreneurs.

*March 2025*