



Let's talk about sustainability: the Bureau Local's approach to business development

Thanks to support from the European Journalism Centre's [Engaged Journalism Accelerator](#), the Bureau Local had the opportunity to build a sustainable revenue plan for our organisation — which we are calling “business development” — over a six-month period. Joaquin Alvarado of StudiotoBe, a strategic planning and journalism development firm led a commercially minded process with the team to interrogate the market challenges and build a workflow within the team to explore revenue opportunities beyond philanthropy and membership models. If you want to know more about the Bureau Local, read [about us here](#) and access [our user guide here](#).

The following sections outline our process and findings:

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Our inquiry: how do we sustain our commitment to UK communities?

This is the question at the heart of our business development scoping. With a mission and commitment to local people, local communities and local stories, we approached sustainability not as a pursuit of profit but one of longevity and impact.

The Bureau Local is currently dependent on foundation and major donor funding. Yet we realise that this is not enough to respond to the full scope of the challenge. Going forward, we believe

that sustaining our mission and output needs a diversified, hybrid revenue model. The goal of this process is to create additional diversified income streams for the core operating budget of the Bureau Local. We also chose not to scope membership models in this exercise as that is already being explored in our organisation.

There is no pretence that revenue-generating activities will replace the funding provided by philanthropy. Our objective is to make smart bets on activities that will help expand our mission, support Bureau Local operations and increase our resources to invest in and support a wider market transformation.

Phase 1: building a culture and process

As a non-profit that has never dipped its toe in revenue-generating activities — outside of philanthropic fundraising — we knew this would not be simply a challenge of economics but one of culture, process, experience and resources. It became clear early on that we needed to be disciplined in establishing the foundations for growth. The first step in building this foundation was to bring every member of our core team (five full-time staff) into the process. We know that if we are going to make it work, everyone, reporters and editors alike, must be switched on to the problem and part of building the solution. This will inherently generate new thinking, new roles and new responsibilities in a fundamentally inclusive way.

Most of our team had been trained in a traditional media industry in which revenue and sustainability was rarely discussed. If we are to transform our industry we believe this must change too. To do this, we set out to create a process and a culture that felt comfortable for everyone. The following collaborative and inclusive approach to raising and testing business development opportunities was co-created as a team. It is designed to provide us with an ongoing platform for regular business development and evaluation. Going forward, our plan would be to pitch ideas and run them through the following process every 3-6 months.

Process

1. **Pitching:** Any member of the team or network can submit an idea. Pitching an idea does not require business experience or hours of work. This is rooted in the belief that ideas can come from any part of the organisation. The submission template includes: a) name/title, b) a one sentence pitch/description, c) a couple of paragraphs on the opportunity and application to the Bureau Local, d) any known demand or logistics that might already be thought of, e) identification of whether the project is a service, product or access, f) any other background, contacts, references or planning developed.
2. **Scoring:** The idea is then sent to all members of the team to read and score ahead of a group discussion. The scoring tool was co-created by the team in order to test the idea

against the values, mission and ethos of the Bureau Local. Each member scores the idea — 0 (poor) to 10 (strong) — on a 12-point criteria. You can see this scoring tool in full in the appendix.

3. **Agreement:** The role of scoring is not to generate a hardline figure that decides whether a revenue opportunity should proceed but instead act as a proxy for team sentiment on the idea, build consensus and to generate discussion to mitigate concerns and risk. We discuss the high and low scores on the categories and excitement and concerns are captured. A unanimous yes/no decision is needed from the team for the idea to move into the research phase. Note: no member of the team is scoring the idea from a financial perspective (the knowledge and experience is not there). This happens in the next phase.
4. **Market Research:** A business development lead responds to what is captured in the team scoring session, builds on the pitch idea and takes the team concerns and requirements to market testing. They conduct stakeholder interviews, comparative pricing analysis and market landscape analysis — a skill set and perspective that sits outside of the core Bureau Local team. This research process provides additional benefits in generating new ideas and potential lead partnerships.
5. **Findings:** The market research is presented to the team and other stakeholders. The findings include pricing, demand and expectations from potential customers and collaborators. This step ensures potential services align with the requirements developed by the team. It takes what the team thought would be a well-aligned project and presents back on the business realities of that idea. Guided by feedback from the team, the Bureau Local Director and Executive Editor of the Bureau decide if the idea should get further due diligence.
6. **P&L:** If given the green light, a financial analysis and model is built. It is critical to advance the insights and data derived from the research phase into the design and projections for each of the business development lines. A profit and loss statement (P&L) is built to articulate and analyse assumptions on pricing, expense and potential revenue. Building the P&Ls is an important way to expand the conceptualisation of the opportunities by asking very specific questions to expose potential liabilities or hidden costs and to establish net revenue and projections so that a final decision can be made.
7. **Greenlight/Redlight:** The decision to launch a pilot or not proceed is made by the Bureau Local Director and the Executive Editor of the Bureau, recommendations are then presented to the team for discussion before a full business plan is drawn up and potential piloting begins.

Phase 2: Developing ideas

After building the process as team it was time to put it to the test!

All members contributed to a first slate of revenue ideas in order to test the process — these stemmed from ideas and opportunities that presented themselves to us over the course of the past two years. Before we mention the ideas themselves, it is important to note that our seven-step process (above) was tweaked as ideas were tested on it, resulting in improvements along the way and what we believe is now relatively well established for future use.

The ideas that the team brought to the table provided a snapshot of the discipline, experience and curiosity of the Bureau Local team. One suggestion was a creative studio for integrating artistic expression and public performance with Bureau Local reporting. Inspired by the learnings of the [Refuge Woman](#) project, the team considered what an expanded and ongoing platform would provide for sources, storytelling and community engagement. Other simpler ideas also had life — a Bureau Local coffee van to engage communities in public venues such as concerts and farmers' markets. Revenue from this mobile platform would be dedicated to funding local journalism. There were several more that fell somewhere along this spectrum.

A certain clarity began to form as more and more ideas were put forward. Core values of the Bureau Local became connected to revenue opportunities that were directly connected to the mission of bringing greater resources to the network. In fact, these ideas were expressions of the Bureau Local model itself but applied in different spaces: education, civic infrastructure, and local dialogue. As this crystallised, we began to settle on concepts that reflected the needs of our community. They spoke to the three clear asks from our network — a means to learn, to connect and network with others and to contribute or add to our projects.

What follows are three philanthropy-independent business case studies that speak to this alignment and would allow us to both collaborate with our network and communities and generate mission-aligned income.

Bureau Learn: A partnership for journalism education

The Bureau Local has established a successful track record of partnering with university journalism programmes. These have included hackdays, trainings and engagement. There is already a wide range of students operating in the network and publishing in the local press as a direct result of our work. Students and teachers have gone on to dedicate entire lectures/modules to participating in Bureau Local investigations. Many of these institutions have also been grappling with how to best evolve their curriculum and professional development to address the market disruption that the Bureau Local is responding to.

The potential for partnership is clear, with demand and partners at the ready. With further support it would be possible to launch a new fee-based Bureau Local subnetwork of universities to innovate and collaborate on the future of journalism and journalism education. This network — **Bureau Learn** — would deliver a rich set of resources, training, and publishing opportunities built on the networked infrastructure of the Bureau Local. Bureau Learn would provide students hands-on learning and produce collaborative and investigative outputs — both for the university

and for their community (and possibly nationally) by reporting with the Bureau Local. This would also provide a platform for reimagining internships — where the idea originated. To ensure immediate value, Bureau Learn would launch with a select group of universities. These founding members would also help to define and test the most critical components of the initiative.

Bureau Exchange: a framework for sharing insights and learnings

The Bureau Local has received considerable interest from newsrooms and foundations in the UK and abroad who are interested in building a Bureau Local for their city, country or sector and need detailed insight from our team. To respond to this demand we are designing a new offering — **Bureau Exchange**. This is designed as a fee-based offering to exchange key findings and insights developed in the UK to new partners and markets.

The pilot partnership has already [launched in Germany](#) with Correctiv — a Berlin based investigative reporting non-profit. In this pilot the Bureau Local team is providing programme design and hands-on support to help them establish the Bureau Local model in Germany. This includes mentorship and coaching to prepare for launch; onsite workshops in London and Berlin; monthly calls; HR frameworks and job descriptions; and the Bureau Local user guide. We've also had interest from open data groups and foundations that are interested in several elements of what we do, including our reporting recipes and community engagement work. In response to this, the programme would provide a wide range of support — from training to coaching to ongoing support — to respond to the demand for the wealth of experience and insight that the Bureau Local has gained over the past two years.

Bureau Bridgemaker: a springboard for impact and engagement

A core part of the Bureau Local is community engagement and events are a critical channel for maintaining this commitment. Public spaces for journalism are rare, so every time we bring journalists from our team and the network into direct contact with community members we are taking a step towards raising awareness and accountability in our work. Often these develop into full-blown dialogues on how to move past the findings from a particular investigation and into deeper considerations of solutions to the deep issues we report.

We know there is more to do on this, but need a way to resource any expansion. To generate this the Bureau Local is developing a new fee-based model — **Bureau Local Bridgemaker** — to do deep engagement with community partners to produce facilitated explorations of the findings from our investigations as well as potential community-driven solutions. This Bureau Local methodology would be applied to **Bureau Local Bridgemaker** by engaging those impacted by the issues we report directly with those able to make a difference. The Bureau Local network will additionally deliver a rich set of resources, trainings, and publishing assets to educate and inform Bridgemaker participants.

Our ongoing work reporting on the lack of accountability surrounding the deaths of UK citizens experiencing homelessness would provide a powerful demonstration of the Bridgemaker approach. The Bureau Local has already built a deep network of stakeholders, from advocates to government officials, who already benefited from our roundtables, events and grassroots work to shine a light on the tragedy of deaths occurring on the streets without official recognition or recording — eventually leading to direct change on this matter. This format would focus the participants on the fact-based findings of the reporting, bridge stakeholders and open the discussion for solutions.

Phase 3: Learnings and recommendations

We are thrilled that this six-month project landed us with a) an integrated and team-created process for business development, b) a slate of revenue ideas and proposals built by our team, and c) a clear understanding that none of this can proceed without changes to the way we work and grow. Below are our learnings and recommendations.

Resources are crucial

For the Bureau Local, the key challenges in implementing any future business development activities are time, capital, and resources. The Bureau Local already operates at an intense and highly aggressive pace. We deliver tremendous value and output with relatively few resources (five full-time employees). In order to maintain authenticity alongside growth, we need to keep the Bureau Local team strong and resourced to continue to pursue its mission and deliver hard-hitting and important stories. Any revenue depends on it. In order to be successful in launching new revenue streams, we need to capture up-front investment to provide the runway required to support the existing team and the resources for driving revenue.

- **Recommendations:** In order to take the next step, we need additional editorial resources. If we are serious about focusing on new revenue then we need to create the space in our small team to achieve it. We need additional editorial resources to oversee the existing work of the Bureau Local so that we have the capacity to manage future business.

We would also hire a part-time business development lead. The integration of a business development lead to support us and project manage the process is essential to early viability. This role would be focused on launching the first revenue line and in time that would underwrite their time and future activities, growing the role to full-time as revenue scales.

Values and authenticity must be embedded

The core principles of the Bureau Local are important drivers for potential revenue opportunities. The key attraction for potential partners to pay for services are rooted in the deeply embedded values and authenticity of the Bureau Local. It is critical to keep these foregrounded as an expression of transparency, as well as distinction. Also, the Bureau Local's mission of openness and collaboration has been built into its culture and we see this as an important feat — not just in how we approach our editorial work but now in how we have created the foundation for business development. It is crucial this continues to be part of growth.

- **Recommendations:** Future business development ventures should not borrow funding from core team resources. We must ensure the quality of our work does not waver by insuring our newsroom continues to be well resourced. Additionally, if the team grows to include members working on business development, they should be integrated into the current team workflow and adopt the values, culture and inclusive workflow processes.

The market requires marketing

There are very few coherent communication initiatives to bring the public and local businesses into the discussion on the crisis in journalism. A great deal of work needs to be done to market the value of journalism for society and articulate our distinct approach to collaborative, local journalism in order to sell our value and potential services/business ventures and bring in revenue.

- **Recommendation:** This is not an immediate requirement but success going forward will need a dedicated member of the team focused on communicating the value of journalism — and our work — and marketing this at events, to potential partners, and ultimately to the wider public (possibly through a well-executed campaign to shift public perception on supporting investigative journalism).

An ongoing inquiry: how can we build local power to transform the marketplace?

While this six-month process gave the Bureau Local a foundation for future success, it also resulted in a deeper understanding of and concern for the market underpinning our industry.

The reality is that there is more at stake than just the Bureau Local. Despite the government's recent announcement of a new local news fund, we still think there is not enough money in the

fight for local news. The market — for-profit, nonprofits and philanthropy — is not solving the problem. For our work to continue and our wider industry to thrive, we must explore new revenue models. Our media industry needs radical market transformation.

There is a small window for all of us to fight for one of our most important institutions. That fight must reimagine local news through a modern lens. It must reclaim cultural value, relevance and need, and there are funding opportunities there. We believe the answer is similar to what we've seen arise from the Bureau Local — it needs local and collective action.

Just as we have attempted to bring innovation into this space from an editorial perspective, we now see the need to bring innovation and shared infrastructure to the fight for the market.

We are just at the start of this inquiry but invite members and allies to collaborate with us and put it into action. Please get in touch to join us.

APPENDIX

Bureau Local scoring tool:

Mission aligned/ focused /contradictory	Does the proposed activity respect and reflect core values?
Improves the Bureau Local	Does the proposed activity add resources to increase impact?
What and why? Can you explain easily?	Is the proposed activity clear and coherent?
Replicable and scale	Can we grow and extend proposed activity?
Positive impact on the team	Will this make our team's work and lives better?
Return on investment generally (perceived £ return) worth doing?	What are the clear monetary and programmatic opportunities for success?
BL vibe/exciting/culture	Do we feel like this is 'us'.
Helps us become more diverse	Can we recruit, engage and connect with diverse stakeholders by committing to proposed activity?
Non-exclusionary	Will the proposed activity be available to all, regardless of race, class, gender, region, and sexuality?
Gap in the market/is anyone doing this?	Is there a clear space for us to occupy with proposed activity?

Brand awareness	Will doing this strengthen our vitality in the community and marketplace?
External/public reaction (includes members)	What will people think?

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