

SEED TO SUCCESS

Incubators and accelerators play an important role helping startups scale, and Sheffield has several which are making their mark on the city's ecosystem, as **Alex Bell** reports

As towns and cities increasingly look to generate a startup culture in their business landscapes, incubators and accelerators have become pivotal. They provide physical spaces for entrepreneurs to work and learn from peers, funding opportunities, mentoring, access to growth programmes, free resources and more.

There are a total of 274 incubators and accelerators in the UK, of which 40 are corporate incubators and 80 are university incubators, according to the research group Social Innovation Monitor (SIM).

Insider speaks to three Sheffield operations and taps into their raison d'être.

TwinklHive

"Are you a painkiller or vitamin product?" It's the question every founder is asked by TwinklHive staff before any potential collaboration. David Angrave says: "If you're a painkiller product then we want to talk to you because we'd love to support you."

That startup support initially comes in the form of investment in exchange for equity. "It's a blended investment between cash and service," says TwinklHive's Angrave, who is also chief operating officer of parent tech company Twinkl, a global education publisher founded by Jonathan and Susie Seaton in 2010.

Once accepted following an application, Twinkl residents such as Bright Drinks, naterhub and Champion Health can access physical work space as well as services including marketing and search engine optimisation (SEO), innovation support and growth programmes.

The accelerator launched in 2019 as a specialist in education technology (EdTech) but has since expanded to support tech-enabled businesses that solve real-world problems. TwinklHive has 33 residents on its books currently, from the UK and further afield.

Angrave says: "When we launched we said we were shaping the EdTech



Above: TwinklHive residents from Bippit and (immediate left) Twinkl co-founder Jonathan Seaton with Pete Mills (Crysp)



revolution. But now it's about shaping the startup revolution. While education remains part of our stable, we cover ten different industries at this stage. Our focus is 'tech for good' and 'impact tech'."

One highlight, says Angrave, was Champion Health founded by Harry Bliss, who started the company having lost a friend to suicide due to workplace stress.

"I remember when I first met Harry," says Angrave. "He had a clear vision and passion to save lives.

"He sent an update one day saying he could categorically state that 'we've just saved somebody's life'. Someone was going to take their own life and Champion Health was able to capture that and provide support.

"It's sometimes easy when we look at tech platforms and tech solutions to dehumanise it and that was humbling."

Companies in the US, the Netherlands and Poland have relocated to TwinklHive or set up a UK office in Sheffield.

"There's a lot that we are proud of," says Angrave. "One is when companies founded in London move to us. Sheffield is a fantastic place to grow a tech business, or any business."

DrumFIT is an education business targeting physical inactivity in children and has a big offering in the US and Canada.

"DrumFIT is launching in the UK from TwinklHive," says Angrave. "Bright Drinks is another of ours. It offers a B2C [business to consumer] subscription and can be found in most supermarkets as a healthy alternative to Monster and Red Bull.

"We are always welcoming of companies that believe they are solving a true pain point," he adds. "Some companies that joined us in the early days have gone on to build and buy offices of their own.

"We're continuing to invest and are supporting existing residents as they transcend through their growth journey."

TwinklHive's latest investment was in Papermill, a company established to help streamline the document creation process and avoid formatting errors such as white gaps.

Kollider Eagle Labs

Nick Morgan and Adrian Hackett founded Kollider in 2017 and won a government competition which enabled them to open in Castle House, Sheffield city centre.

A year later, Kollider became the fourth accelerator to partner with Barclays Eagle Labs. "For us, Kollider is a bit of a home-town passion," says Hackett, a tax lawyer. "We haven't taken any money out. If you get quality growth programmes right it generates incredible wealth for founders of high-tech startups – but it also has a knock-on in terms of social and regional regeneration. So much of the talent here comes from all over the world."

Growth programmes lie at the heart of Kollider's modus operandi; Morgan has designed them for the United Nations, Nike and Nokia. With Eagle Labs on board, Kollider was able to add funding readiness and global connect programmes.

Startups in health tech, agritech and energy tech are among those to have progressed through. Smart-tech bike company CrownCruiser recently moved from Castle House to a factory around the corner. The Nigerian-born founders had arrived at Kollider 12 months ago.

"It's sad to lose them but good to see them move on to bigger things," says Hackett. "They now have a £16m valuation."

A technology company related to payment aggregation – Hackett can't say who – recently attracted a £70m private equity valuation. "That's come within five years and they have scaled out to many major cities," he adds.

Barclays Eagle Labs has been running for six years, with 28 UK locations at present. Kollider Eagle Labs ecosystem manager Ian Holland says: "We're super keen on the tech sector as a whole but there's a real opportunity in games and e-sports. We now have a creative industries floor which has access to some real cutting-edge technology."

"The National Video Gaming Museum is also based here in the same building. Understanding what's driving the Sheffield ecosystem is of big interest to us."

Sheffield hasn't compared well with other core cities over the last 20 years, according to Hackett. But, as he points out, it has all the ingredients in its research



base and it is now taking off. "Sheffield has huge advantages," he adds. "We're going to start seeing battery technology here. And manufacturing is coming back into the limelight more now."

Jitesh Keswani, managing director of E-intelligence, says: "Kollider is more than just an office space. It's a community committed to making your business a success."

The Hallam i-Lab

The Hallam i-Lab at Sheffield Hallam University is a vast coworking business incubation space at Aspect Court, off Sheaf Street. Launched in April 2019 to offer advice, support and high-tech facilities to student and graduate entrepreneurs, it also offers a limited number of rental office spaces to established graduate businesses.

New limited companies to have emerged from i-Lab in 2021 clocked in at 56. It follows the Times Higher Education

Hallam Handmade market at the i-Lab last year and (left) the foyer at Kollider

Awards (THE) – widely recognised as the Oscars of the higher education sector – naming Sheffield Hallam as the most entrepreneurial university in the country.

Darren Chouings is business incubation manager and part of the enterprise team that runs i-Lab. He says: "We have 221 tenants and are very much driven by community and listening to the people we work with. Our main ambition is to not take our foot off the pedal and to refine and improve what we are good at."

Workshops are one, with roughly 130 held each year. The team at i-Lab has also recently co-designed the largest business bootcamp in the country for students.

A differentiator for i-Lab is Hallam Freelancers – a free platform that gives students and graduates the opportunity to take on paid projects with businesses in the Sheffield City Region. Its in-house collaboration with Design Futures, professional consultants in packaging, design and sustainability, is also offered.

But its flagship programme, Scale-up 360 – a £3m scheme to support scaling businesses in the region which has 500 businesses currently registered – remains a priority. As does SIP (Sheffield Innovation Programme). "We were able to use Hallam i-Lab as a space where loads of different people can come together, all with varying interests, but with one shared thing in common which is developing a career for themselves," says Chouings. ■