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Start up on the hunt for local Dorset producers

A new online platform aiming to showcase local food and drink businesses across Dorset is looking for more high quality producers to join its network.

Launched in December 2016, the Dorset Food Network is designed to help the region's local businesses reach more customers by appearing higher on internet search engines and offering member discounts to use the services of local companies such as marketing and public relations, business insurance as well printing and design facilities.

The platform has already signed up 22 high-quality local producers, shops, cafés and pubs based across the region

It was created by Jon Gwynne, who previously worked as a Royal Mail Delivery Office Manager for 15 years. As a longstanding 'foodie', he was inspired to start the network after visiting a local food festival. Impressed by the quality of food and drink on offer in the local area, he then struggled to find the websites of these businesses back at home and decided he could help.

After receiving £2,500 in funding from the Government-backed Start Up Loans Company via Pinnacle People and teaching himself web design and digital marketing, he launched his website. The Dorset Food Network is already proving popular, attracting hundreds of web visitors a day.

Jon is keen to grow the network and help more local food businesses get their brand out into the public domain.

Over the next 12 months, he has plans to host an event allowing all members of the network to showcase their products and he hopes corporate partners will get involved and promote their services.

Since launching in 2012, the Start Up Loans Company has provided more than 150 loans to new and early stage business owners in Dorset, totaling £1.1 million.

Jon Gwynne, Founder of the Dorset Food Network, said: *"I wanted to celebrate the great food and drink we make here in Dorset. I think we need to do more to promote our produce and our network lets locals find the best food and drink places nearby. It's hard to do in such a crowded online market. That's why our platform can help and I want to encourage more business owners to take a look. I'm so happy with the reaction I've had so far from clients and I have high hopes for growth."*

"I launched the Dorset Food Network because I was so passionate about local food and drink. It's been a real adventure already, but it's great to travel around the local area and meet so many other business owners. The funding and mentoring I've had from The Start Up Loans Company has made the start-up process much easier."

Tim Sawyer, CEO of The Start Up Loans Company, said: *"So many of our loan recipients are determined to help their community or region. In fact, 44% of those we support launch a business to contribute to their local area. That's why Jonathan's business is such a great example of an original enterprise designed to help Dorset's food and drink scene."*

"It's great he can now do a job he's passionate about. So many of us have a great business idea but are too nervous to give it a try, but it's never too late. We provide first-stage funding and mentoring support to make that start-up journey simpler and a viable option for all those who are keen to take the leap into self-employment."

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Notes to editors

About SULCo:

The Start Up Loans Company (SULCo) was formed in June 2012. SULCo provides personal loans for business purposes of up to £25,000 at 6% fixed rate per annum, and offers free dedicated mentoring and support to each business.

Free guides are available on the website: <https://www.startuploans.co.uk/free-start-up-guides/>

The primary aim is to ensure that viable start-ups and early stage businesses have access to the finance and support they need in order to thrive. A network of Delivery Partner organisations support applicants in all regions and industries throughout the UK.

The funding for SULCo is provided by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), formerly the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). SULCo is now a member of the British Business Bank group. The British Business Bank makes finance markets for smaller businesses work better, enabling the sector to prosper, grow and build economic activity. Their Business Finance Guide explores finance options and the journey from start-up to growth. Access the Business Finance Guide here: <http://www.thebusinessfinanceguide.co.uk/bbb>

In November 2015, the Chancellor committed an additional £166m of funding through to 2020 on top of the £131m already invested up to March 2015.

The Start Up Loans scheme is not designed to generate a commercial profit.

Key statistics

* Since 2012, SULCo has delivered over 46,000 loans, providing more than £300m of funding and helping to back 25 businesses a day.

* In the financial year 2015/2016, the scheme provided 9,141 loans with a total value exceeding £64.1m - helping start around 28 businesses every day of the year

* 19,000 loans have been provided to individuals formerly unemployed or economically inactive and 46% of loans to young people are helping those who were formerly NEET (not in employment, education or training)

* Approximately one in five loans go to residents in the UK's most deprived communities

* The overall return on investment of the scheme is at least £3 per £1

* Loan recipients report estimated average turnover of £49,000 in the first year. For more information about Start Up Loans, please visit: <https://www.startuploans.co.uk/>

**All of these statistics are gross estimates, with the exception of the return on investment numbers, and are based upon Start Up Loans CRM and externally commissioned research from two major surveys undertaken by Qa Research.*