

**REPORT ON A REGIONAL APPROACH TO STARTING A BUSINESS AT 50+****TARANAKI REGION****A HYBRID APPROACH: USING ONLINE MATERIALS PLUS A LOCAL COACH****The Proposal**

A proposal to Venture Taranaki (VT) and the Office for Seniors (OFS) to trial a regional approach to starting a business for those 50 or over was approved, with funding support, in March, 2025.

Venture Taranaki already actively supports startup coaching activities in the province and OFS had previously funded the development of customised online materials for those 50+ in New Zealand.

The trial was to test the effectiveness of combining 'local' coaching integrated with a customised 'national' online programme tailored for the 50+ demographic. This so-called 'Hybrid Model' had not previously been tested.

This Report details how the trial was carried out and its effectiveness.

**Delivering the 'Hybrid Model' Course****1. Setting the Scene**

Venture Taranaki and the Office for Seniors covered the personnel and other costs of this Regional Trial as detailed in a signed agreement.

Dr Chris Kirk and Sharon Albrechtsen were jointly responsible for the delivery of the course:

- Sharon Albrechtsen was appointed by Venture Taranaki as the regional coach. Sharon is a very experienced startup coach, has worked with Venture Taranaki for years, and in particular has managed a Venture Taranaki Startup Clinic.
- Chris Kirk was appointed as the overall Programme Director, responsible for working with Venture Taranaki to advertise the programme, interview and select candidates, deliver the online materials, take part in Cohort Sessions, and collaborate closely with the Coach.
- The Programme consists of 4 online Modules (2 weeks allocated to work through each Module) with 4 coaching sessions to be held at the end of each Module (2 sessions were 1-to-1 with the candidate and the coach; 2 were as a cohort group).
- Each Module has a series of Worksheets which candidates fill in as they work through the Module and submit to their coach.

Due to fiscal constraints, the original target of 12 candidates participating and 1-to-1 individual coaching sessions for each of the candidates at the end of each of the Modules, were modified to accommodate:

- 6 candidates (plus/minus 2)
- 2 individual coaching sessions and 2 group 'Cohort' sessions.

## 2. Candidates

Initially 8 candidates responded to the advertising and promotion in the region carried out by Venture Taranaki.

All were sent a 2 page summary entitled 'Preliminary Notes for Starting a Business at 50+ - TARANAKI COURSE' (attached separately) containing details of the course and its requirements. All were subsequently interviewed and all satisfied selection requirements. In particular, each candidate had an idea they wished to turn into a business, the passion to pursue it, and the hardware and software to work online.

This resulted in 8 candidates:

Gender:	5 Female 3 Male.
Age sector:	4 in the 50-54 age group 4 in the 55-60 age group.
Ethnicity:	1 NZ Maori 3 born overseas, now NZ citizens, Taranaki residents 5 NZ (European).
Locality:	6 from New Plymouth 1 from Stratford 1 from Urenui.

All 10 (8 candidates, Coach and Programme Director) met up with each other at an initial Cohort Session at Venture Taranaki's New Plymouth premises at the start of the course and introduced themselves, shared ideas, and affirmed their commitment.

Unfortunately, one of the initial group of candidates who participated in the first cohort meeting did not participate or respond again. She was been sent all the materials and meeting dates.

The remaining candidates participated throughout the entire programme.

Two additional potential candidates made contact after the initial deadline had closed, but they were not interviewed as the quota had been filled at that stage. Given this, had the selected candidate who dropped out responded to any of our communications, we could have offered the opportunity to others.

### 3. Operating the Programme

All course materials were made available online and were able to be accessed by all candidates. There were no particular operational or access issues that arose or delayed participation.

The timing of the two 1-to-1 coaching appointments were arranged directly by the Coach with each of the participants to suit. The Coach kindly offered additional 1-to-1 meeting times if required and suggested that the Worksheets also be sent to the Director for information/comment. The Coach and the Director together arranged the 2 cohort meetings at Venture Taranaki's New Plymouth offices allowing for in-person or online participation.

All 7 active candidates participated in coaching sessions and undertook all aspects of the programme in a serious and committed manner. All Worksheets and associated discussions completed during the course are **confidential** to the candidate and the Coach/Director.

Note: As typically happens in these courses, at times "life gets in the road" – that is, unexpected and unplanned events occur during the 2 months of the programme and candidates have to fit in the course along with the new situation. Examples:

- One candidate was asked at short notice to use their expertise in Singapore on a short term contract which limited the time for the course though he continued filling in Worksheets and coaching sessions (he has committed to further developing his Business Model, which at this stage is very promising, and will use one of the local Co-working Spaces on his return).
- Another candidate had overseas visitors to accommodate/entertain at short notice, so was unable to conduct the necessary interviews which will be critical to her modifying her current business model. Again, she has committed to doing this in the near future.

One of the reasons for the course materials remaining available for 3 months after the formal end of the course is to allow plenty of time for further progress and modifications to be made, particularly if the original Business Model needs further iteration, especially if the coach is also available from time to time.

### 4. Feedback on the 'Regional' Aspect

One of the questions being trialled in this initiative was how the 'hybrid model' of combining a 'national' online startup resource with a 'regional' coaching resource was viewed by candidates.

To determine this, each of the 7 active candidates agreed to a short interview (using Zoom/Teams technology) to discuss and comment on 5 brief questions.

Broad Area of Questioning	Discussion Summary
Does this type of startup online learning work for you?	Yes, well set up, easy to work through for all. “seamless access”. Some had previous online learning experience, from industry certification short courses to fulltime Diplomas. Going back to check or redo parts was valuable.
How many hours (approx.) did you spend on each Module?	20 or more hours for Modules 1 and 2; Less for M3 and for M4; Financials take longer for some. Having the Module materials accessible for 3 further months was seen as helpful.
How helpful is it having a coach* from the Taranaki region?	All were positive. Answers ranged from ‘quite helpful’ to ‘extremely helpful’ to “nuggets of local expertise” – particularly appreciated having a coach that was well connected locally to contacts, local knowledge/service providers (accountants etc), and to local support networks. ‘Local adds relevance’. “Like having a local ‘Help Desk’”!
Were the Worksheets helpful when learning online?	Yes – represent a “learn by doing” or “learn as you go” approach. Everyday language appreciated. Extra resources in tab very helpful.

\*This was not intended to be a question on “quality of coaching” per se, but rather the relevance of having a coach living in the region. However, in discussions it became clear that it was the overall “coaching experience” that was important to participants, and both the quality and experience of the coach as well as living in the region that were also regarded as being very helpful/excellent.

## 5. Progress made by Participants in Establishing New Business Ventures

Candidate 1	<p>Is new to the Province and has developed her starting idea (a professional organising service – ‘decluttering’) into a viable Business Model.</p> <p>Has completed market research, competitor analysis, costs/income model, name/logo/marketing plan etc and has produced a viable Business Model. She is now ready to start this new business (as a Sole Trader initially) with her new entity ‘Sorted Spaces’.</p> <p>Just lacks the confidence to take the initial step!</p>
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	<p>Prediction: This new venture is ready to start - will be formally underway with its first client within the next month. Hopes are high that this will be an ongoing successful and sustainable new business.</p>
Candidate 2	<p>Has made progress in developing her starting idea of “teaching parents” about the importance of “first phase early childhood development”, but there are key gaps in her draft Business Model that need further work.</p> <p>She has excellent skills and qualifications in this space but realises that she currently lacks crucial information about her potential customer segment and target market. As yet, she has not been able to carry out the interviews that were part of Module 1 (due to unforeseen external distractions). She understands that these will be critical in determining whether her current focus on a particular customer segment will be large enough to sustain the business on its own or whether she may need to include related activities as well - for instance, “teaching parents” may need to be supplemented by offering a defined amount of activity time with the children of these parents.</p> <p>She also has a colleague with similar interests who is moving to Taranaki from Tauranga at the end of the year, and they may decide to form a work partnership.</p> <p>Prediction: Has considerable promise – candidate committed and eager to complete the work still in progress, especially the interviews, so she can finalise a viable Business Model built on facts not assumptions - and whether additional activities (eg: activities with the under 5s) need to be included in her value proposition to parents. Will continue to need some coaching guidance but she has the attitude and determination to establish this new business venture successfully by the end of the year or first quarter of 2026.</p>
Candidate 3	<p>Has developed a draft initial Business Model.</p> <p>Has high-level skills and experience in marine environments and plans to develop his novel value proposition into a system that will significantly increase safety at sea. Details of the idea are confidential but, in broad terms, it involves the novel integration of standard existing marine industry systems with new advances in artificial intelligence. He is currently distracted by a short term contract that emerged after the programme started but he is determined to complete the further market research and the R&amp;D activities that will be required to fully articulate his value proposition and lead to a validated Business Model. He plans to work on these developmental aspects in one of the local co-working spaces in the city.</p> <p>Prediction: He is committed to completing these developmental activities, interacting further with industry experts, and finalising product design. Confidently expect he will produce a viable Business Model and establish a new</p>

	<p>local company for this innovative marine industry safety system within a few months. Depending on final design decisions, Intellectual Property protection may be necessary and applying for a provisional patent considered.</p>
Candidate 4	<p>Has developed a semi-viable Business Model based on setting up a contracting company to offer his considerable expertise as a Management Consultant (Commercial/Contracts Manager).</p> <p>His many years in the US Marines have given him much domain expertise and skill. He has a “can do” attitude and has a particular view on how tasks can be planned and accomplished (this may need to be slightly modified to suit NZ conditions). That said, he almost won his first contract during the course! He is keen to complete a modest amount of further work to finalise the Business Model, and to refine his pitching skills.</p> <p>Prediction: Will set up a viable Business Model for a consulting company within 2 months (can still use some guidance/coaching to do this) and, once he gains his first contract, expect him to be successful with his business.</p>
Candidate 5	<p>Has developed a near-viable Business Model (H&amp;S) for setting up a Consulting Company that specialises in Health and Safety programmes for SMEs that will lead to both a changed culture and improved productivity. He has a strong H&amp;S background and experience, and some further work is needed on preparing H&amp;S materials and focussing on a niche set of initial customers.</p> <p>Prediction: Built on the candidate’s own detailed knowledge, experience and expertise, a viable Business Model for his H&amp;S Consulting Company will be completed within the next 3 or 4 weeks, and will lead to a new company being established within the next 3 months. Once he has positive results and productivity improvements from his first customers, he is expected to grow his consultancy substantially.</p>
Candidate 6	<p>Has worked very hard to develop a semi-viable Business Model for setting up a business that provides “pop up” dinners and food events based on her Italian heritage and her love of cooking and food. She has completed a good deal of market research, but there are numerous food-related legislative and compliance requirements that still need to be resolved and keep causing modifications to her Business Model.</p> <p>She has strong determination, a passion to make this business succeed, unquenchable optimism, and a willingness to follow coaching advice.</p> <p>Prediction: Within 6 months this will become a viable business. This may need to involve a partnership arrangement with an existing food operator/investor.</p>
Candidate 7	<p>This candidate, after years of experience as a tour guide for a large company in Europe, is hoping to develop her own travel company in Taranaki that has a</p>

	<p>primary focus on travel experiences for women and a secondary focus on outdoor activities – in Taranaki, New Zealand and, perhaps eventually, offshore.</p> <p>Initially, she did not realise how much work was required in setting up a travel business and has fallen behind the course timetable (in part due to accommodating unexpected overseas visitors). She would bring extensive experience and enthusiasm to such a company but her background is as an employee and not as a business owner/entrepreneur, so there is a good deal of background details to be sorted out, including compliance requirements, insurance cover.</p> <p>She is committed, determined and is working at her own pace with the assistance of the coach, and a credible Business Model is now emerging.</p> <p>Prediction: Highly likely this will become a functioning viable business as ....</p> <p><i>Either:</i> A viable travel company based in Taranaki within 6-8 months which will have a distinctive customer segment and competitive advantage.</p> <p><i>Or:</i> She may form a specialist company (based in Taranaki and retaining its distinctive customer segment and competitive advantage) that operates under the umbrella of an existing larger travel company which already has well-established operational systems and meets all compliance requirements.</p>
Candidate 8	<p>Candidate 8 attended and contributed to the first cohort meeting but, regrettably, did not communicate at all after that, despite best efforts to communicate with her.</p>

## 6. Conclusions and Comments

**These results are very positive and encouraging.**

- The findings not only reinforce earlier findings at national level that those 50 and over have the ability to establish successful new businesses for the first time, but they also highlight the additional benefits that can be gained by using regional startup coaches and discovering the range of local/provincial resources and networks that are available locally to support early-stage business ventures and their owners.
- The over 50s have a great deal to offer society, both economically and socially. In terms of startups, the skills and experience they bring are huge assets and they are serious about putting in the effort to take their own starting idea through to a successful new venture (or change their initial assumptions to make it work). The results found in this trial indicate that the combination of local coaching and dedicated online startup materials is a hybrid model that greatly assists the startup journey for those 50+.

- Although participants are typically not at the point of launching their startup immediately as the course finishes, they have covered all the basics required to produce a viable business model through the course and coaching. There are very positive indications that all (certainly most) are determined to do this, and will launch their startup in the weeks and months ahead. Having local coaching still available, the online material remaining accessible for 3 months following the formal end of the course, and access to local resources and networks, will be hugely helpful as the remaining activities are finalised.
- The final 'rate of success in establishing startups' from this hybrid approach (as measured by actively trading enterprises established) is anticipated to be exceptional.
- While a number of the startups formed will likely remain as owner-operated businesses, it is highly likely that some of the new enterprises will employ staff to enable growth and develop new opportunities that will follow on from successful entry into their niche markets.
- Among the critical factors in the success of this trial have been the commitment and the quality of the Regional Coach, the ability of the Director and the Coach to be "on the same page" about the purpose and objectives of the Hybrid Course approach and to work together positively. In retrospect, the initial in-person meeting of the Coach and Director at the Venture Taranaki Hawera site (part of the 'Train the Trainer' activity) was pivotal in laying the foundations for success.

## **7. Venture Taranaki and the Office for Seniors**

This initiative would not have happened without the leadership and joint cooperation of Venture Taranaki and the Office for Seniors.

A huge thank you to Venture Taranaki for making available both the regional startup coaching expertise and other practical logistical support, and to the Office for Seniors for providing the resources to cover many of the costs in setting up and running this trial.

This initiative has shown that a combination of a national online programme and local startup coaching is an approach that is highly effective for the over 50s wishing to start new business enterprises for the first time in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The expectation now is that the new insights gained will lead to more effective training resources being available for those 50+ who wish to launch startup enterprises in Aotearoa New Zealand.



## 8. Recommendations

Where resources allow, it is recommended:

- That the Hybrid Course approach (national online resource/local coaching) be promoted as an improved training/coaching resource for those 50+ who wish to launch startup enterprises in Aotearoa New Zealand.
- That 1-to-1 coaching is undertaken at the end of each of the 4 Modules.  
Detailed discussion and feedback with the Coach and the participants indicated that each Module's Materials/Worksheets/Coaching was a rich opportunity for shaping each participant's starting idea into a viable and sustainable Business Model (and ultimately a successful startup).
- That at least 2 one hour Cohort Sessions (either online or in-person) be held for each Course:
  - The first should be at the beginning of the course before any Modules have begun; participants/Coach/Director hearing from each other and knowing they are now going through the Modules and their 'Startup Journey' as part of a group (rather than in isolation) can be a powerful motivating force; it may also be the beginnings of forming a networking group in the future.
  - The second Cohort Session should be at the end of Module 4. It provides an opportunity for elevator pitches, discussion, and sharing the startup journeys within the group.
  - Where feasible, another shorter Cohort Session at the end of Module 2 could be useful where the focus is on participants sharing views and comments on progress to date.
- That Venture Taranaki considers offering the 'Hybrid Course' for those 50+ in the region at least annually.
- That a cohort of 8-10 participants is likely to be the optimum size for the course if there is a single regional startup coach involved. While larger cohort groups might be manageable if other local coaches or the Programme Director were available to assist the lead coach's critical role, a preferred alternative for involving more participants would be to offer the Hybrid Course more often with the small group size.
- That the Office for Seniors considers providing the limited resources required to enable other provincial startup support organisations in NZ to introduce a first 'Hybrid Course' in their region.

## **9. Final Thought**

The growing aging population in NZ (and many other countries) offers many new challenges and opportunities. One opportunity that has the potential to lead to substantial benefits to both individuals and societies in general is revisiting how we support entrepreneurship among the 50+ sector. The OFS has played a notable role in supporting the development of new resources to support 50+ ('senior') entrepreneurs and in altering public misconceptions about age and entrepreneurship.

The opportunity now exists for a step-change to make the impact of this early work genuinely effective. A 12 month campaign to introduce the hybrid approach trialled in this project to many more regions of NZ would be one way to make a such an impact. In keeping with the final Recommendation, limited resourcing and a champion would be sufficient to produce an early step-change.

Dr C M Kirk

17 July, 2025