



LOAN VOICES

Led by a top team of business brains, BIGinvest is a Big Issue spin-off that lends money to the social enterprises other financiers won't touch. Anita Pati investigates how the initiative is enabling a new breed of social entrepreneurs to develop their ideas and transform people's lives

Bubbling quietly behind the Big Issue brand is BIGinvest. Few people know what it is. While The Big Issue (TBI) is shouted from street corners, its spin-off has heaved away behind the scenes, financing social business since December 2005.

BIGinvest essentially helps social enterprises to scale up, often when other financiers won't offer assistance. Its chief executive and Big Issue chairman, Nigel Kershaw, describes it as a social finance house.

"A business solution to a social crisis has always been The Big Issue's thinking," says Kershaw. "It's not about dependency, it's not about grants, it's not about donation, it's about the market place. And that's always been our ethos.

"What makes us slightly different from

anybody else is that because we've grown out of social enterprise and that is our culture, we think of the end user and social value and what is most appropriate for you. Rather than putting the finance first, we look at how finance can help achieve their social goals."

BIGinvest, itself a social enterprise, pays any dividends to The Big Issue. Since its launch, BIGinvest has backed ventures across the spectrum from the glamorous to the coalface. From Jamie Oliver's Fifteen Foundation and Belu bottled water, to Thorpete gas maintenance, which creates jobs for the unemployed – all have benefited from BIGinvest financing. And by the end of this year, BIGinvest plans to have bumped up its £3.5m investments to £5m.

The impetus behind BIGinvest has always been a desire to give back. Both Big Issue co-

founder John Bird and Kershaw were influenced by American ideas of social venture investment in the late-1990s, before Bird decided to launch a social bank. BIGinvest was established with £120,000 seed money from Halifax Bank Of Scotland.

"In the same way that TBI co-founder Gordon [Roddick] gave the Big Issue the opportunity to grow and become such an incredible force for social transformation, we wanted to do the same for others," says Kershaw.

"Why aren't there more Big Issues? Why aren't there more Cafédirects? Why aren't there more social enterprises scaled up? We want to rearm social business because we believe it can really transform people."

The philosophy behind The Big Issue – that of instilling self-sufficiency in the marginalised – is etched right through the loan fund. ►

