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# Evaluation of the Swindon and Wiltshire Growth Hub

April 2022 – March 2023



**Growth Hub**

SWINDON & WILTSHIRE LEP

# Wavehill: Social and Economic Research

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# List of abbreviations

BEIS	Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy
BICS	Business Insights and Conditions Survey
CPI	Consumer Price Index
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
DLUHC	Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
HR	Human Resources
IAG	Information, Advice and Guidance
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LEP	Local Enterprise Partnership
LIS	Local Industrial Strategy
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprise
SME Competitiveness	Small and Medium-sized Enterprise Competitiveness
SWG	Swindon and Wiltshire Growth Hub
SWLEP	Swindon and Wiltshire Local Enterprise Partnership
TCA	Trade and Cooperation Agreement

# Contents page

## Contents

Executive Summary.....	v
1. Introduction.....	1
1.1 Swindon and Wiltshire Growth Hub .....	1
1.2 The Evaluation.....	2
1.3 Navigating this Report.....	3
2. Policy Context .....	4
2.1 National Policy.....	4
2.2 Local Policy .....	4
2.3 Rising Business Costs.....	5
2.4 COVID-19.....	6
2.5 Summary and Rationale for Intervention .....	7
3. Governance and Management of SWGH .....	8
3.1 Growth Hub Objectives .....	8
3.2 Governance of the Growth Hub.....	9
3.3 Growth Hub Management .....	10
3.4 Partnership Arrangements.....	11
3.5 Management Information.....	13
4. Delivery of Business Support.....	14
4.1 Types of Business Support .....	14
5. Hub Achievements.....	22
5.1 Performance against Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) .....	22
5.2 Stakeholder Reflections on Progress .....	23
5.3 Impact on businesses .....	23
6. Conclusions.....	26
6.1 Context.....	26
6.2 Management and Governance .....	26
6.3 Delivery of Support .....	26
6.4 Hub Achievements .....	27

## Table of tables

Table 3.1: Overview of engagement with key partners .....	11
Table 5.1: Overview of performance against KPIs .....	22

## Table of figures

Figure 4.1: How participants heard about the programme.....	15
Figure 4.2: Challenges faced by businesses prior to accessing the support.....	16
Figure 4.3: Brexit, Covid-19, and cost of living crisis as reasons for participants to engage with SWGH .....	17
Figure 4.4: Support services accessed by participants .....	17
Figure 4.5: Beneficiaries' assessment of the overall support received .....	19
Figure 4.6: Further questions on businesses' satisfaction with Growth Hub support .....	20
Figure 4.7: Current conditions for participants' businesses .....	21
Figure 4.8: Support activities through the Growth Hub over the next 12 months .....	21
Figure 5.1: Participants' views on the impact of SWGH .....	24

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

In August 2023, the Swindon and Wiltshire Local Enterprise Partnership (SWLEP) commissioned Wavehill to carry out an evaluation of the services provided by the Swindon and Wiltshire Growth Hub (SWGK). The evaluation builds on previous reviews that took place in 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021 and 2022 which provides the opportunity to take a longitudinal perspective on the SWGH's development.

The research focused on understanding:

- the relevance and coherence of support on offer;
- progress against stated objectives of the SWGH;
- experience from delivering and managing support; and
- the range of impacts attributable to support from the perspective of businesses.

The evaluation has been informed by interviews with stakeholders involved with the management and governance of the SWGH alongside a survey of supported businesses.

## Policy Context

The SWLEP determines the region's economic development priorities and business support policies. The 2020 Local Industrial Strategy provides the overarching vision for the region to promote and support inclusive and clean economic growth agendas with a particular focus on:

- delivering improved connectivity;
- greater exporting power; and
- more innovation from our high-tech sectors, universities and Research and Development assets

In the 2023 Spring Statement, Central Government moved their decision from 'minded-to' transfer LEP functions to Local Authorities to a position of confirmed. However, solutions are to be agreed locally to ensure continuation of services and minimise disruption.

## Management and Governance

The SWGH is tasked with advancing the key objectives integral to the delivery of the SWLEP Local Industrial Strategy. The SWGH serves as the primary gateway for businesses seeking local support services and has adapted its vision and goals in response to evolving challenges in the local business community. In recent times, this has included supporting businesses to overcome issues relating to Brexit, Covid-19, the cost of living crisis and pressures caused by inflation and energy price increases.

The SWGH is governed within the remit of the SWLEP Board's Business Environment Subgroup. Several subgroups have been formed that represent the strategic objectives of the SWLEP and each subgroups reports and advises the SWLEP board. Stakeholders considered the governance arrangements as effective and suitable. Stakeholders noted that the current arrangements enabled decisions to be taken quickly and the organisation to remain agile.

Responsibility for the operational performance of the Growth Hub sits with the Growth Hub Manager. With guidance and support from the Business

Environment Subgroup, the Manager’s role focuses on overseeing all aspects of the development, implementation and operation of the Growth Hub. This includes developing and implementing the strategy for the Growth Hub Service itself.

Stakeholders that were consulted with for the evaluation felt that the management and governance of the SWGH was effective. They felt the SWGH’s response to external economic challenges such as the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, cost of living crisis and inflationary pressures had been strong, particularly given the significant reduction to funding the SWGH has experienced.

#### Delivery of Business Support

The SWGH delivers business support across the following themes:

- Start-up support
- Skills
- Access to finance
- Digital marketing
- Scale-up support
- Decarbonisation
- Health and wellbeing
- Digital capacity

Findings from the survey indicated that businesses engaged with the SGHW for a range of reasons:. The most commonly cited challenge was a lack of experience or understanding of running a business followed by lack of specific skills (including management and finance).

Overall beneficiaries were positive about the overall quality of the support they received. In particular, beneficiaries felt that communication between businesses and the SWGH was effective and that the information provided was helpful. High proportions of businesses felt the support

they received was delivered by experienced and credible people (91%), the amount of the support was appropriate to their businesses’ needs (72%)

#### Hub Achievements

The SWGH’s performance relating to businesses engaged in light touch, medium intensity and high intensity is shown in the table below.

Table 1: Overview of performance against KPIs

	SWLEP KPI	2022/23 Total	Percentage
<b>Light Touch</b>	800	728	91%
<b>Medium Intensity</b>	290	535	185%
<b>High Intensity</b>	216	188	87%

As the table shows, SWGH exceeded the number of businesses engaged in medium intensity support. The number of businesses engaged in light touch support was lower than the KPI, although, this was due to the proportion of businesses that were converted to medium intensity engagement. The SWGH fell slightly short of reaching the targeted number of businesses engaged in high intensity support.

In relation to outcomes for businesses, three quarters of respondents thought their business was in a better place because of the support they received from the Growth Hub. Of these, 32% felt their business was in a better place to a great extent.

Respondents were asked to assess the extent to which specific business elements had been positively influenced by the support provided by the Growth Hub. These findings showed that:

- Confidence as business managers was boosted for 50% of the respondents;
- Overall business knowledge and acumen saw a positive impact for 43% of the participants;
- SWGH support increased leaders' ambition for their business amongst 42% of respondents

In relation to business growth, a quarter of respondents to the survey indicated that their turnover had increased since accessing the SWGH support. Over half of these businesses indicated that the SWGH support had played some role in that increase.

A smaller proportion of respondents indicated an increase in employment (13%) and this equated to 98 FTE jobs. Although this figure was influenced heavily by the creation of 80 jobs in one business. Each of the respondents that had seen their employee count increase indicated that the this increase could, to some extent, be attributed to the support received from the SWGH.

The modest growth reported by businesses responding to the survey may be as a result of the challenging economic conditions businesses were experiencing throughout 2022/23. This included the 41 year high in the annual rate of inflation and spiralling costs seen across all aspects of the economy which has stifled growth nationally.



# 1. Introduction

In August 2023, the Swindon and Wiltshire Local Enterprise Partnership (SWLEP) commissioned Wavehill to undertake an evaluation of the progress and impact of the services and support offered by the Swindon and Wiltshire Growth Hub (SWGK). Previous evaluations have taken place in 2017, 2019, 2021 and 2022 consequently, this evaluation will reflect on progress made over time.

## 1.1 Swindon and Wiltshire Growth Hub

The SWGH is the business support arm of the SWLEP and the region's frontline of business support provision and in many cases the gateway for businesses to access a wealth of different support elements. It aims to provide free, independent advice and guidance (IAG) together with direct support to businesses across the region, helping them to navigate challenges and improve productivity and growth. The SWGH is key to advancing the broader objectives of the SWLEP in relation to supporting businesses as well as regional economic growth and prosperity.

The SWGH launched in February 2014 as part of the Wave 2 Growth Hub Programmes under the banner of 'Gateway for Growth' and operated on the basis of an initial one-year pilot. It was the first Growth Hub of the Wave 2 programme to get established, with the rapid launch enabled by building on existing support models and delivery partners in the local area. Initially, the SWGH focused on providing signposting services and support, highlighting high-quality, relevant business support and advice to entrepreneurs, start-ups, and SMEs in Swindon and Wiltshire. This was predominantly focused on the dissemination of information and advice through a web portal.

Throughout 2020 and 2021, the Growth Hub focussed its support on helping businesses to respond to the initial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and UK Government's health and safety response, including but not limited to three separate lockdowns and social distancing. Subsequently, the SWGH played an important role in supporting the area's socio-economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, the SWGH's continued focus has been around supporting the area's continued recovery and assisting businesses to become more resilient and grow.

Businesses have overcome the worst of Covid-19 and Brexit, with the effects of both having somewhat stabilised. However, throughout 2022 and into 2023, businesses faced a challenging operating environment due to the cost of living crisis including energy bills spikes and inflation. The result of this saw European wholesale gas prices rise ten-fold from pre-pandemic levels, and prices remained up to four times higher on the previous year. High energy costs have contributed to an increasing number of firms going out of businesses and

between May and June 2022, company insolvencies in England and Wales hit a 13-year high.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout 2022/23 and the challenging economic environment, the SWGH has tailored its offer to support businesses through this period. It has remained versatile and reactive supporting businesses to navigate the socio-economic change. The SWGH operates as the go-to, one-stop business support shop offering a ladder of support for pre-starts to scale up/growth. It continues to adapt to the context, and in the last year has seen new support offered for example health and wellbeing support and support around the green economy in response to growing climate change concerns at the national level and the role SMEs will play in the UK's transition to net zero.

## 1.2 The Evaluation

The evaluation has sought to understand the SWGH's role and effectiveness in supporting businesses as well as exploring the impact of the range of support made available to businesses. In undertaking the evaluation, the approach has been shaped by the guidance associated with HM Treasury's Magenta Book. Specifically, the research focused on understanding:

- the relevance and coherence of support on offer;
- progress against stated objectives of the SWGH;
- experience from delivering and managing support; and
- the range of impacts attributable to support from the perspective of businesses.

With the objectives of the evaluation, during August and September the research team undertook:

- a comprehensive desk-based review of:
  - documentation associated with the SWGH's management, governance, and operation;
  - analysis of evidence held on Hubspot – SWLEP's Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system; and
  - of the SWGH's service provision.
- three interviews with stakeholders involved in the governance, management, or delivery of services and support delivered through the SWGH; and
- a web survey of 33 Swindon and Wiltshire based businesses which have engaged and or been supported by the SWGH in the last two years to gain their perspectives on the support they received, including the impact of support across a range of measures

The low levels of engagement with the primary fieldwork elements of the evaluation, namely the survey and stakeholder interviews, means that the findings have been drawn from a limited dataset and therefore should be treated with caution.

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<sup>1</sup> See [ONS 2022](#) rising business insolvencies and high energy prices

## 1.3 Navigating this Report

The remainder of the report is as follows:

- [Chapter 2](#) provides the broader policy context in which the SWGH operates;
- [Chapter 3](#) explores the governance and management of the SWGH;
- [Chapter 4](#) examines the effectiveness and appropriateness of service delivery for the programme, including from the perspective of businesses;
- [Chapter 5](#) outlines the impact of the support delivered through the SWGH; and
- [Chapter 6](#) summarises conclusions from the evaluation.

## 2. Policy Context

### 2.1 National Policy

In 2021, the UK Government announced a review of Local Economic Partnerships (LEPs) would be undertaken as part of a wider Whitehall review. The remit sought to consider the future of LEPs and respectively their role, function and structure. The Levelling Up White Paper published in 2022 concluded the review. The Paper's guiding principle was to better integrate, align and empower local institutions to level up the country. It further recognised that "the private sector which LEPs represent will be critical to levelling up" and that businesses should still be able to access the support and insights LEPs provide.<sup>2</sup>

In 2022, a joint letter from the Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) to LEPs and local authority mayors set out guidance on how to integrate LEP functions into local democratic institutions through the establishment of Mayoral Combined Authorities or County Deals by 2030.<sup>3</sup> This marked the transition of LEPs functions and roles to local authorities over an 8 year period.

In the 2023 Spring Statement, Central Government moved their decision from 'minded-to' transfer LEP functions to Local Authorities to a position of confirmed. However, solutions are to be agreed locally to ensure continuation of services and minimise disruption.

### 2.2 Local Policy

Working in partnership with local authorities and other stakeholders on the LEP Board, the SWLEP determines the region's economic development priorities and business support policy. The SWLEP also invests in various programmes and projects to bring about the sustainable economic development of the region delivered through the SWGH.

It still remains the case that at the top level the SWLEP's 2020 Local Industrial Strategy (LIS) represents the overarching vision for the region, to promote and support inclusive and clean economic growth agendas with particular focus on:

- delivering improved connectivity;
- greater exporting power; and
- more innovation from our high-tech sectors, universities and Research and Development assets

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<sup>2</sup> [Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy \(2022\) - Integrating Local Enterprise Partnerships into local democratic institutions](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Local Enterprise Partnerships: Integration guidance \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

There is recognition within the strategy, that to deliver against its ambition, business support will be critical. The SWGH is viewed as an important element of the overall strategy, providing and coordinating support aimed at building and strengthening the business environment where objectives are:

- expanding start-up and scale-up support;
- improving the overall competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs);
- improve the productivity of low-output sectors; and
- increasing the proportion of innovation-active businesses and encouraging technological diffusion.

Beyond supporting the SWLEP's economic development priorities, the importance of the SWGH has grown over time. It is recognised as an effective mechanism in responding to and supporting regional policy responses to national and regional socio-economic shocks including COVID-19 and Brexit, as noted in the LIS. Recently, the importance and role of the SWGH have been identified in the SWLEP's:

- **Local Skills Report 2020** – and the role of the SWGH's two skills advisors in promoting apprenticeships, workforce health in boosting productivity; and aiding COVID-19 recovery by supporting entrepreneurs on the SWGH's Small and Medium-sized Enterprise Competitiveness Project
- **2021 Annual Report** – which re-emphasised the successes and role the SWGH plays not only as part of its remit but also in supporting the pandemic recovery of the region; and
- **Delivery Plan for Sustainable Economic Growth 2022-23** – in developing new commercial business support services, assist in scoping support services for low carbon tourism businesses; the opening of the Business Cyber Centre; and co-ordinating inward investment enquiries.

## 2.3 Rising Business Costs

Rising energy prices and supply chain issues have meant UK inflation reached 9.1% in May 2022, the highest it has been in over 40 years. Prices of consumer goods and services rose by 9.6% in the year to October 2022 – the fastest rate in four decades. Since then, the annual inflation rate, as measured by the Consumer Prices Index including owner occupier's housing costs (CPIH), has slowed. In the year to July 2023 the annual inflation rate was 6.4%, down from 7.3% in June. Whilst the rate of inflation is falling, it has not fallen at the rate analysts expected earlier in the year.

This has had significant impacts on both households and businesses with spiralling costs of goods and services over the past 18 to 24 months. Recent data from the ONS's Business Insights and Conditions Survey (BICS) suggest that conditions seem to be improving. In August 2023, the proportion of trading businesses that reported an increase in the prices of goods or services they bought in July 2023 compared with the previous calendar month was

30%; this percentage has fallen over time and is the lowest figure reported since a peak of 50% in March 2022.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this, there are still considerable pressures on households in relation to food, energy prices and housing and this continues to affect some businesses given the subsequent reduction of non-essential spending.<sup>5</sup> In summary, conditions for businesses at present are difficult. On the supply side, costs of materials and stock are increasing whilst on the demand side high living costs are impacting on non-essential spending and therefore demand on goods and services. This combination has squeezed profit margins and created a challenging economic backdrop to trade in.

## 2.4 COVID-19

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020, the Government enacted many measures restricting economic and social activity, placing businesses under severe strain. These measures included three national lockdowns, a tiered regional lockdown approach, and restrictions on certain sectors and business operations. Many businesses were forced to close for some time, have had difficulties working at full capacity due to social distancing, or have seen demand decline. Soon afterwards the economy went into recession.

The aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic and impact of restrictions imposed by the Government placed significant pressure on businesses for several months. The pandemic disproportionately impacted wholesale and retail; transportation and storage; accommodation and food services; arts, entertainment and recreation; and other services. The pandemic also led to a large drop in employment which remains an issue for some sectors who are experiencing recruitment difficulties. Covid-19 has made it more difficult for businesses in SWLEP to recruit staff.<sup>6</sup>

Similar experiences have unfolded nationwide where labour supply and employment are below pre-pandemic levels because of a rise in economic inactivity. These are more pronounced amongst businesses in the accommodation and food services (35.5%) and construction (20.7%) industries<sup>7</sup> which when considering the economic make up of Swindon and Wiltshire, suggests that they may have avoided some of the worst effects. Conversely, changes to working patterns and behaviours such as hybrid/remote working have led to greater competition for local labour as businesses in areas such as London are able to offer higher wages combined with infrequent visits to London offices.

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<sup>4</sup> [ONS, Business insights and impact on the UK economy: August 2023](#)

<sup>5</sup> [ONS, Cost of Living Insights](#)

<sup>6</sup> [SWLEP Annual Report 2021/22](#)

<sup>7</sup> [House of Commons Skills and labour shortages](#)

## 2.5 Summary and Rationale for Intervention

In the last few years, SWLEP's businesses have had to navigate, adapt and survive a number of economic shocks and challenges including the EU Exit, COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing cost of living challenges. For the most part, it is difficult to isolate and quantify the impact of each on the business community although evidence with regards to the new trading relationship with the EU suggests transition pains. Brexit led to inefficiencies as businesses were required to recalibrate their operations , develop new processes and raised trade barrier with the EU.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a significant shock to the national and regional economies which have led to some scarring years on. The changes the pandemic brought about in relation to working patterns and practices as well as a rise in economic inactivity are still exerting pressure on businesses.

The war in Ukraine and the subsequent turmoil in relation to the cost of wholesale gas prices, inflation and the cost of living crisis have stifled the post-pandemic economic recovery and resulted in a continuation of what has been challenging trading conditions for business. The report now turns to consider governance and management arrangements surrounding the SWGH.

## 3. Governance and Management of SWGH

This section reviews the operation of the SWGH, including its governance and management arrangements. It first reviews the broader objectives of the SWGH, whilst drawing on the views and perspectives of both internal and external stakeholders.

### 3.1 Growth Hub Objectives

In evaluating the Growth Hub, it is useful to frame progress against its key aims and objectives. The Growth Hub represents a key element of the SWLEP's Local Industrial Strategy, which sets out to promote inclusive and sustainable growth.<sup>8</sup> The SWGH provides the region's frontline of business support provision and in many cases the gateway for businesses to access various other local support elements.

Aligned with national policy, the SWLEP has set out to **expand start-up and scale-up support and improve the overall competitiveness of SMEs within the region**. This key commitment is being driven by the SWGH. In particular, the SWGH sets out to strengthen the competitiveness of small and medium-sized businesses whilst **attracting significant foreign and domestic investment** in the area.

Strategically, the SWGH has shifted its vision and objectives as a result of emerging and evolving challenges facing the business community across Swindon and Wiltshire. In 2019/20, the SWGH sought to move from light touch/responsive engagement to the **provision of a full Information, Advice and Guidance and direct business support service**.

This was supported by a successful ERDF bid to deliver the three-and-a-half-year SME Competitiveness project which enabled SWGH to move from light touch to a full programme of business support ranging from start-ups through to growth companies with the ambition of supporting SMEs to create new jobs, products, and services.

This programme, which ended in June 2023, was delivered through partners and enabled the employment of three additional Business Navigators to provide a full IAG service. A separate summative assessment evaluation of the SME Competitiveness project programme was commissioned and carried out between April and June 2023.

Building on the SWGH's role in assisting businesses to access grant funding during the immediate response phase of the pandemic, the focus has since shifted to supporting the area's recovery and assisting businesses to become more resilient and grow in the last year. The SWGH has been helping businesses navigate and respond to a number of unprecedented challenges including staff shortages, supply chain disruptions and rising input costs related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing fallout of the EU exit, climate

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<sup>8</sup> Swindon and Wiltshire Local Industrial Strategy, 2020



change and more recently Russia's invasion of Ukraine. More specifically, the SWGH's work has revolved around supporting businesses with their digital skills, promoting green development, and their continued EU transition support.

## 3.2 Governance of the Growth Hub

As part of the SWGH's governance restructure in 2021, the SWGH is now governed within the remit of the SWLEP Board's Business Environment Subgroup, previously within the Growth Hub's Governance Group. The intentions and purpose of this change were to streamline existing processes, ensure enhanced transparency, and deliver greater efficiency and less duplication of information and reporting.

Several subgroups, representing the strategic objectives of the SWLEP, report and advise the SWLEP's Board. Each subgroup is chaired by a SWLEP Board Director, who acts as the link between the subgroup and the Board. The Business Environment Subgroup is chaired by the SWLEP Co-deputy Chair. Separately, a Lead Officer acts as the link to the Secretariat.

The Business Environment Subgroup meets at least five times a year. Membership includes two non-executive Board Directors, one acting as the Chair and the other as Deputy Chair, the CEO of SWLEP, up to three technical businesses representatives, a Lead Officer, and where needed additional attendees such as experts and temporary members according to needs. At the meetings the Growth Hub's operational and financial performance are reviewed and scrutinised. More specifically, these members are integrally involved in providing high-level direction for the Growth Hub, monitoring the performance of the existing delivery mechanisms, reviewing evaluation reports of the service and monitoring spending of the Growth Hub budget.

The SWLEP's governance and assurance framework, transparency measures and accountability arrangements, including conflict of interest policies, have all been approved by the SWLEP Board and signed off by the Accountable Body Section 151 Officer to the satisfaction of the BEIS Local Relationship Manager. All transactions are now administered by SWLEP with Wiltshire Council as the LEP's Accountable Body which reviews and authorises all claims to Central Government. The SWGH engages external auditors annually and, as per the Business Environment's Terms of Reference, "the Growth Hub is subject to external and internal evaluation annually. These reports are shared with the SWLEP Board and are published on the SWLEP website".<sup>9</sup>

### 3.2.1 Stakeholder Perceptions of Governance Arrangements

Overall, stakeholders considered the governance arrangements as effective and suitable. Stakeholders noted that the current arrangements enabled decisions to be taken quickly and the organisation to remain agile.

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<sup>9</sup> [Section B: Board Constitution October 2021](#)

A point raised by stakeholders, which was also raised during consultations for the 2021/22 report was the perceived need for greater SME representation on the board. There was also acknowledgement that governance arrangements may need to be reviewed as the future operations and strategic direction of the SWGH evolves and following the end of central government support. This included in relation to the way the SWGH support offer dovetails with the wider business support eco-system and local authority local economic growth priorities.

## 3.3 Growth Hub Management

The strategic lead for the SWGH is SWLEP's Head of Business Support with the operational performance sitting with the Growth Hub Manager. The Manager reports to the Head of Business Support. With guidance and support from the Business Environment Subgroup, the Manager's role focuses on overseeing all aspects of the development, implementation and operation of the Growth Hub. This includes developing and implementing the strategy for the Growth Hub Service itself. The role also includes overall coordination and support of the Growth Hub team and overseeing different parts of the overall Growth Hub offering, including marketing and communications, and the Navigator service. The role also includes engaging and communicating with respective partners across the region, including the various business support projects the SWGH signposts businesses to, and beyond.

### 3.3.1 Stakeholder Perceptions of Growth Hub Management

Stakeholders consulted felt that the management of the SWGH was working well especially considering the challenges that the SWGH has had to contend with. Namely, the rising inflation and challenging trading environment for businesses along with the halving of core Growth Hub funding. As reported above, the turbulent economic landscape presented challenges for businesses in the region which the SWGH has needed to respond to and support businesses with. This was perceived to have been effective amongst stakeholders.

It was noted that the SWGH was being managed effectively with strong leadership team in place. Directors felt that they were kept updated with operational performance and this was a strength.

In relation to improvements, stakeholders suggested that there was a need to continue to refine approaches to capturing the impact of the SWGH's work supporting businesses. It was acknowledged that the availability of resource to investigate outcomes and impacts fully, combined with the difficulties of establishing attribution between the SWGH support and outcomes meant that this had been challenging.

One stakeholder felt that, at times, there had been a need for greater clarity on the specific support activities the SWGH were providing to businesses to better enable strategic partners to communicate the support offer to their networks.

## 3.4 Partnership Arrangements

At the heart of the SWGH's approach to delivery is collaboration. It remains ever open to opportunities and actively seeks to increase and strengthen partnerships. Working with and alongside different organisations not only raises the profile of the Hub, enabling it to engage more businesses than it could alone but more critically expands the breadth and depth of support beneficiaries can access. When it was created the SWGH primarily focused on providing digital support to businesses, however, it is now able to directly or leverage partners to deliver a broad range of business support. This ensures the Growth Hub can be and is the one-stop holistic shop for the provision of business support for entrepreneurs, pre-starts, SMEs and other organisations.

The information in Table 3.1 below provides a summary of the approaches the SWGH has taken over the past 12 months to develop strong, inclusive partnerships with local and national partners:

Table 3.1: Overview of engagement with key partners

Partner	Description of engagement
<b>Innovate UK / through Science and Innovation Audits</b>	Participated in Innovate UK/EDGE events, delivering information on the SWGH business support offer in tandem with GFirst.
<b>Knowledge Transfer Network</b>	Attended events and webinars, disseminating information as appropriate.
<b>Department for International Trade / Enterprise Europe Network</b>	SWLEP services a link with DIT/DBAT, responding to 'Requests for Information' (RFI) in collaboration with Local Authority partners. There is dedicated personnel for this function.
<b>British Business Bank (BBB)</b>	Recently formed stronger links having built the relationship during the pandemic through Bounce Back Loans and Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan schemes.
<b>Intellectual Property Office</b>	Limited involvement. Some referrals made.
<b>Banks</b>	As part of general sign posting and working with lenders such as such as Purple Shoots and SWIG Finance, SWGH has made businesses aware of lending and funding opportunities. Referrals have also been made to the NatWest Accelerator Hub where it has been felt appropriate
<b>ICAEW / Accountants:</b>	Some work with ICA, attending events and networking to increase profile and visibility of SWGH offer.
<b>Angel Networks</b>	Recently introduced to the UK Business Angel Association, it is SWLEP's aim to have regional network of Angel Investors.

<b>Universities/ Business Schools (inc. on Help to Grow)</b>	Connected primarily to University of West England and have actively promoted delivery across the county. Have supported Help to Grow by publicising upcoming cohorts across the SWGH news and social media channels.
<b>Enterprise Zones</b>	To be progressed.
<b>Catapults/Incubators and Accelerators</b>	Limited referrals to NatWest Accelerator programme.
<b>Government Departments</b>	<p><b>DCMS (leisure and tourism activity, digital initiatives):</b> Working with Visit Wiltshire and promoting the region’s attractions.</p> <p><b>HMRC:</b> SWGH is in receipt of bulletins, newsletters and updates directly from the HMRC office which are shared across their networks.</p> <p><b>DWP:</b> Regional Partnership Manager attends and actively contributes to SWLEP’s Business Intelligence Networking Group (BING). SWGH have also worked with DWP on the Wellbeing for the Workplace programme on the financial wellbeing aspect. This included a speaker and resources being provided.</p> <p><b>DfE:</b> Limited involvement by SWGH.</p> <p><b>DEFRA (environmental and agri-food supply chains):</b> Limited involvement by SWGH</p>
<b>Local Energy Hubs (and or other Net Zero partners):</b>	The SWGH service has supported businesses with the review and reduction of carbon emissions in Scope 1, 2 and 3 areas, together with the general development of businesses Environmental/Green Strategy through workshops and 1-2-1 support. Whist funding was available for the Target 2030 programme for green energy transition SWGH have acted as a referral partner. The importance of this support was highlighted by the high energy prices which were seen throughout the last 12 months. This prompted SWGH to provide advice tips and guidance on our website in a similar manner to the signposted that was in place during the COVID pandemic

### 3.4.1 Partnerships with the Private Sector

In addition to the partnership working outlined above, SWGH have also developed partnerships with organisations in the private sector. SWGH ran several networking events at the Business Cyber Centre in Chippenham, including hosting a Google Garage Day which had over 90 attendees. Working in partnership with KRHR Training Consultancy, SWGH have delivered four Human Resources (HR) Masterclasses, on topics to help managers of small businesses deal with day-to-day HR issues. These sessions were arranged after receiving feedback from surveys that businesses would find them useful, taking a demand-led approach.

SWGH has worked in collaboration with Swindon Borough and Wiltshire Council's to deliver a series of 3-hour webinars called 'Wellbeing for the Workplace'. Topics covered included:

- Mental health and financial wellbeing in the workplace
- Musculoskeletal health
- Anxiety, Psychological safety and the benefits of mental health advocates in the workplace
- Healthy behaviours in the workplace and the support available for those with an addiction

### 3.5 Management Information

SWGH use the integrated HubSpot CRM system to manage client information as well as capture key metrics to assist in the coordinated delivery of support and programmes such as SME Competitiveness project.

The CRM system has equipped the SWGH with a powerful tool from which to coordinate communications and manage engagement with, and enhance support to, businesses. It is also useful in monitoring and evaluation, such as assessing Hub performance and providing business intelligence to funders and other stakeholders, including BEIS. Given the level of complexity of the services and support offered to businesses, including the bespoke nature of support advice, effectively and accurately collecting information is challenging. Moreover, challenges are compounded by the number of people across the SWGH and in partner organisations' access and input into the system.

The Hub has made improvements and refined its approach to address issues identified as part of last year's evaluation related to the consistency and accuracy of information entry. However, efforts will need to continue to maximise the operational and strategic benefits the system can bring. This includes the use of analytics within its systems to inform its approach and approaches to data sharing with partners.

## 4. Delivery of Business Support

### 4.1 Types of Business Support

This section maps the services and support offered through the SWGH. It highlights the experiences and perceptions of businesses that have accessed SWGH support over the past 12 months.

An online beneficiary survey was distributed to businesses that had engaged with or been supported by the SWGH in the past 24 months. The response rate was low, with a total of 33 completed responses. With this in mind, the findings presented in this report should be treated with caution as they draw on a limited number of responses and may not be reflective of the whole population.

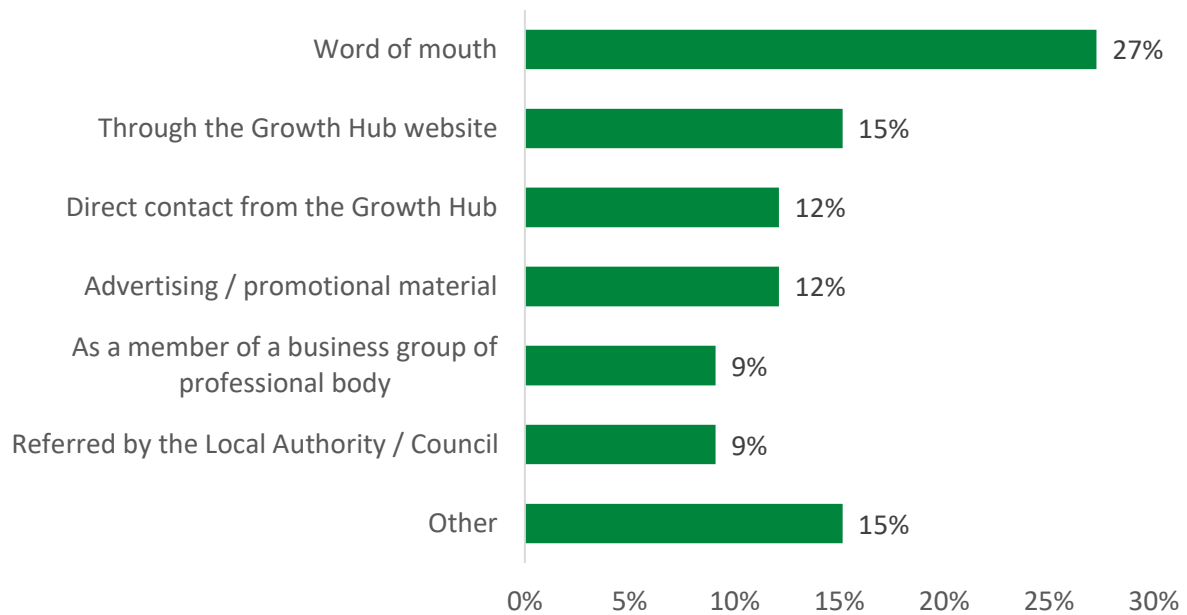
The low response rate may be due to online surveys typically generating response rates that are less than 10%. It could also be due to some survey fatigue given that businesses supported by the SME Competitiveness project were surveyed as part of the summative assessment evaluation completed in June 2023. As such, we have drawn on relevant evidence from that survey where appropriate to help build understanding of the SWGH successes and areas for improvement.

#### 4.1.1 Initial Engagement with SWGH

Findings from the beneficiary survey indicate that the primary method through which businesses became aware of the Hub was through word of mouth, accounting for 9 out of 33 (or 27%) of the businesses. The Growth Hub website (6 out of 33 or 15%) was identified as the second most common way businesses learned about the programme. Five businesses reported being drawn to the programme through unspecified channels, represented by “other” in Figure 4.1, below. For “other”, the most frequently cited source was participants’ own research.

Overall, it should be recognised that participants heard about the SWGH through a range of different sources, which suggests that the multi-pronged approach to marketing and promotion seems to be working well.

Figure 4.1: How participants heard about the programme



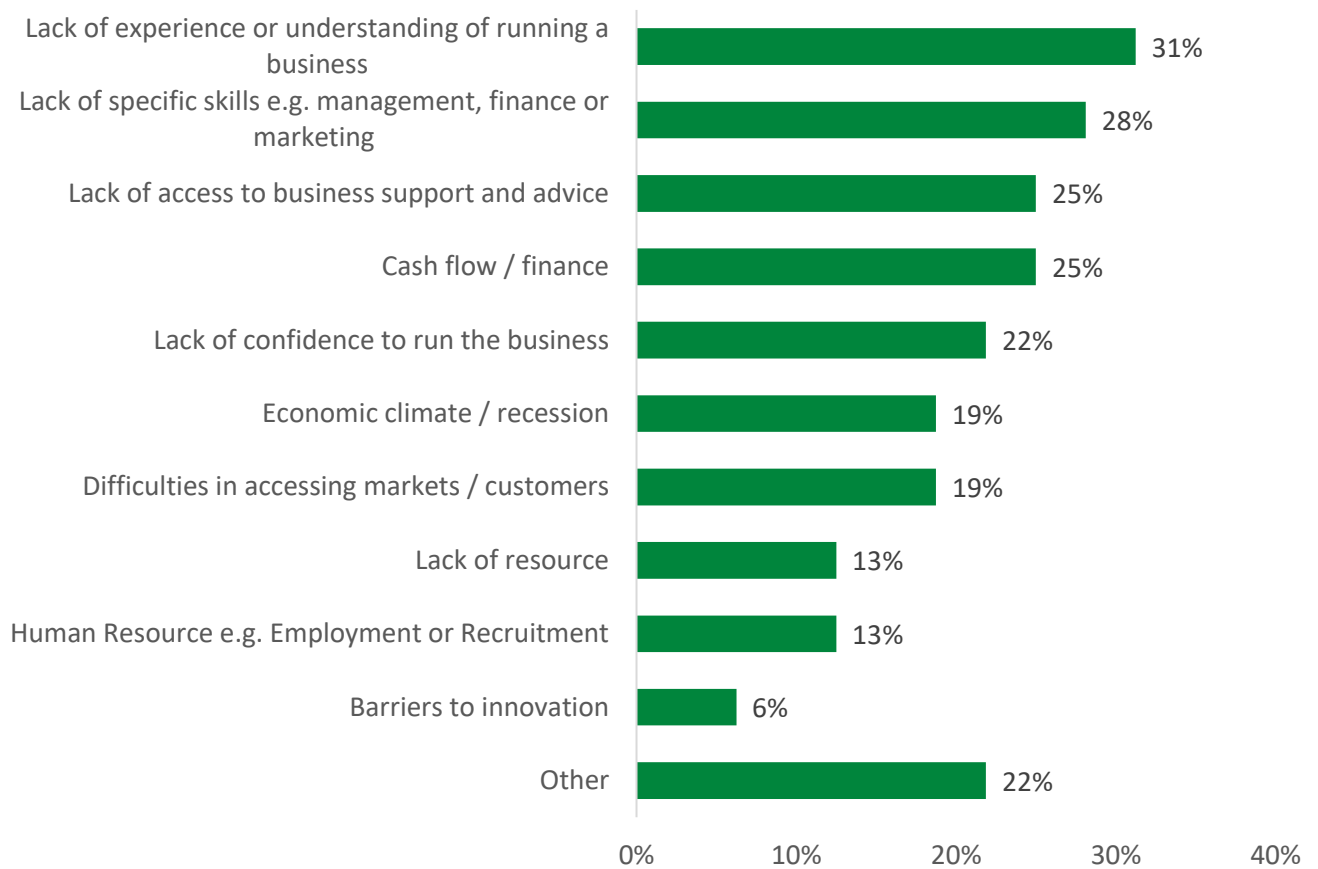
Wavehill Beneficiary Survey 2023 (n=33)

#### 4.1.2 Reasons for Engagement

Prior to engaging with the Growth Hub, businesses faced a number of challenges, which they were hoping to overcome through accessing the support. The findings of the beneficiary survey presented in Figure 4.2 below indicate that:

- the most commonly cited challenge was a lack of experience or understanding of running a business, identified by ten respondents (11 out of 33 or 31%);
- this was closely followed by the lack of specific skills, including management, finance, and marketing, which affected nine respondents (10 out of 33 or 28%);
- notably, only two respondents mentioned barriers to innovation to be a challenge for their business;
- those who selected “other” mentioned the need to understand more about social media, net zero, and how to start a business.

Figure 4.2: Challenges faced by businesses prior to accessing the support



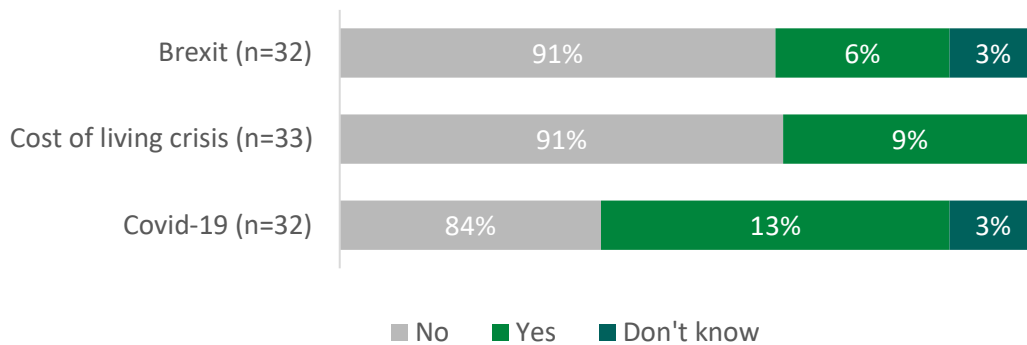
Wavehill Beneficiary Survey 2023 (n=33)

These findings represent a shift from those in the previous two evaluations where the most common challenge facing businesses was cash flow and access to finance (39%). Whilst this was still a challenge identified by a quarter of respondents to this year's survey, the findings appear to suggest growing demand for support around skill development amongst businesses and reflects the fact that the majority of respondents accessed start-up support (see Section 4.1.4 below).

In addition, it is worth noting that, as illustrated in Figure 4.3 below, the majority of respondents did not seek support as a result of Brexit, Covid-19, or the more recent cost of living crisis. This represents a shift from previous evaluations where these issues were more pressing for businesses. It also highlights the relevance of the programme beyond economic crises and temporary shocks underscoring the ongoing need for business support provided by the SWGH.



**Figure 4.3: Brexit, Covid-19, and cost of living crisis as reasons for participants to engage with SWGH**

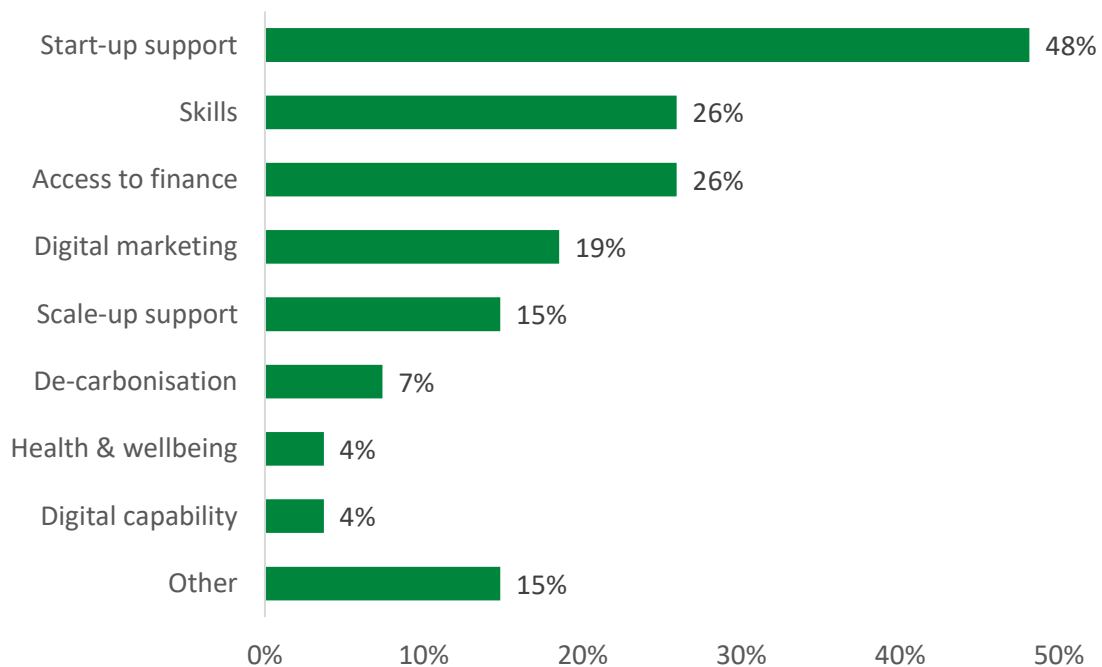


Wavehill Beneficiary Survey 2023 (n=within the graph)

### 4.1.3 Types of Support

As shown in Figure 4.4, the type of support accessed by most survey respondents was start-up support (13 out of 27 or 48%). This was followed by skills and access to finance, each of which has been accessed by seven respondents (7 out of 27 or 26%). Additionally, health and wellbeing and digital capability were the least common aspects of support respondents had accessed.

**Figure 4.4: Support services accessed by participants**



Wavehill Beneficiary Survey 2023 (n=27)

When it comes to the methods employed for delivering these services, workshops emerged as the most common mode of delivery with 54% of respondents indicating having accessed

this type of support. This is in keeping with the SWGH's shift over the past 12 months to a model that prioritises greater face-to-face engagement opportunities with businesses.

This was closely followed by one-to-one sessions, indicated by 35% of participants, and one-to-many interactions, which accounted for 11%. Notably, a well-rounded approach to service delivery was adopted, with 58% of respondents accessing services in person and 48% digitally illustrating that some accessed services through a mixture of in person and digital modes. These findings are consistent with those from the evaluation of the SME Competitiveness project where the most common mode of support was through attending a workshop.

#### Growth Hub Website and Digital Portal

Out of the 33 survey respondents, only 3 individuals (9%) accessed the Growth Hub's website and digital portal and these respondents were asked a series of further questions about this. Whilst they found the content generally useful, they faced challenges with navigation and accessing further business support information. There may be value in exploring how widespread these issues are amongst the wider user group of the digital portal.

#### In-person Workshops

Out of the 33 survey respondents, 7 individuals (21%) participated in the Growth Hub's in-person workshops. Overall, these workshops received positive feedback for their usefulness and the relevance of topics covered, such as social media marketing and the journey to achieving net zero goals. Only one topic, "taking on your first apprentice", was suggested to be less relevant.

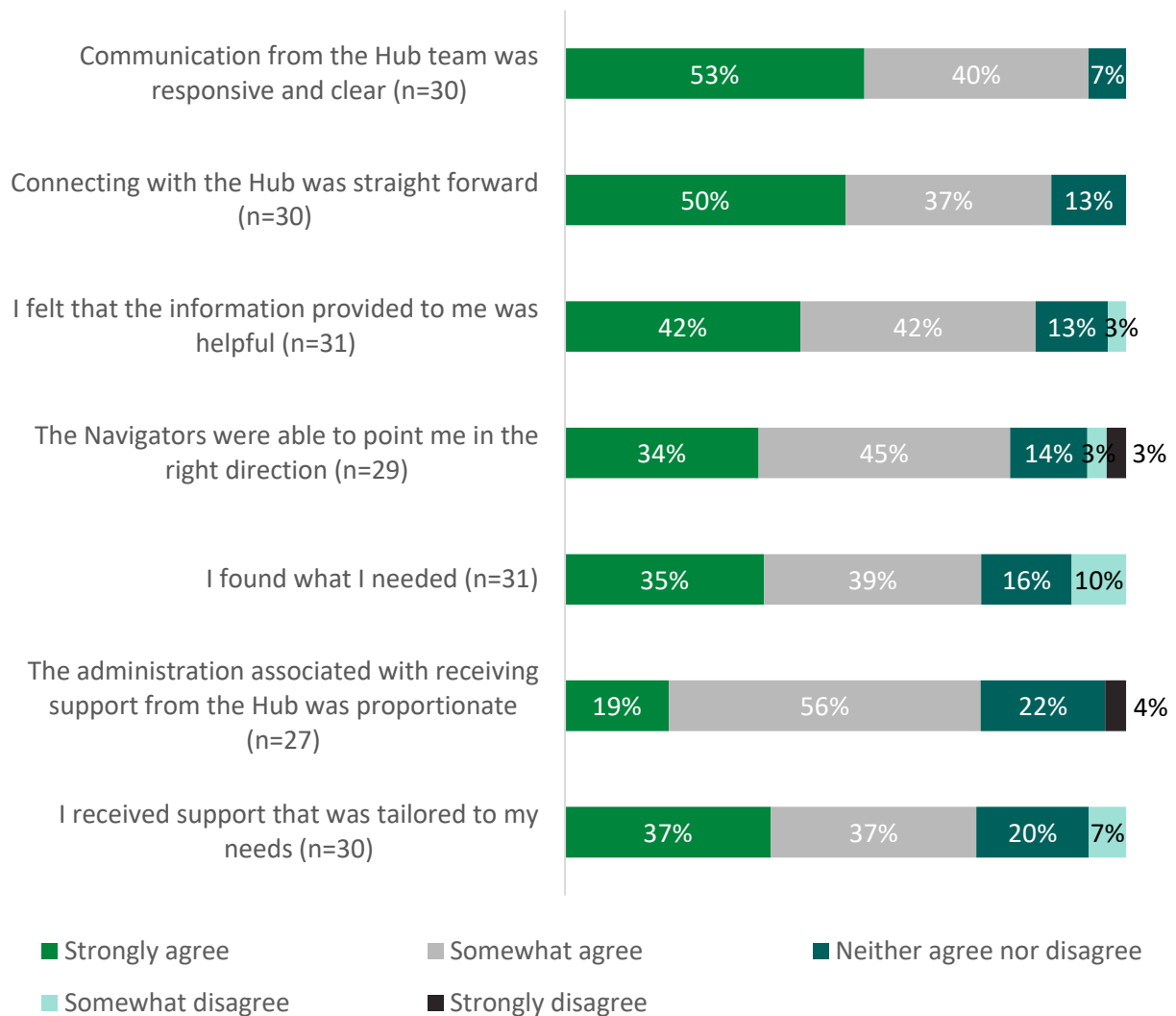
#### Cost of Living Support

None of the respondents accessed support specifically related to challenges presented by the cost of living crisis.

### 4.1.4 Quality of the Support

Figure 4.5, below, illustrates the perspectives of the beneficiaries on the overall quality of support they received. Overall, there was a positive consensus amongst the beneficiaries about the quality of support with every statement in the survey receiving at least 74% agreement. The statement that the greatest proportion of respondents agreed with was the communication from the SWGH being responsive and clear (93% of respondents), which was closely followed by connecting with the Hub being straightforward (87%).

Figure 4.5: Beneficiaries' assessment of the overall support received



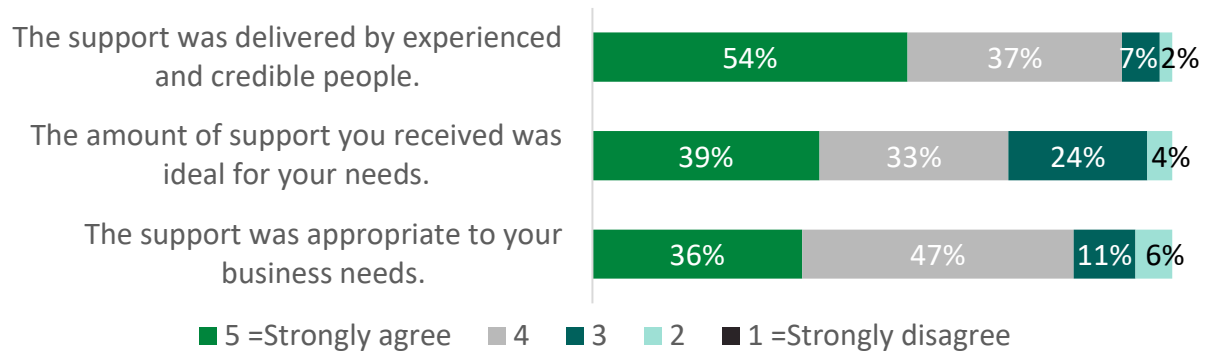
Wavehill Beneficiary Survey 2023

Aspects of the support where there were higher numbers of respondents disagreeing with the statements were the administration being proportionate and the extent to which the support was tailored to businesses' needs. The latter may be driven by the shift to increasingly delivering support through workshops given the added difficulty associated with tailoring one-to-many workshops to the differing needs and backgrounds of all participants.

Findings from the survey of businesses receiving support from the SWGH as part of the SME Competitiveness project also showed a high degree of satisfaction with each of the support streams, with at least 76 per cent of businesses rating the support a four or five out of five when asked about the benefit to the business.

The SME Competitiveness survey asked further questions about businesses' satisfaction with the activities delivered by the Growth Hub and this is presented in Figure 4.6 below. It shows a majority of respondents felt the support was delivered by credible people, the amount and type of support they received was ideal and that the support on offer was appropriate to their needs.

**Figure 4.6: Further questions on businesses' satisfaction with Growth Hub support**



Source: Wavehill, Growth Hub Beneficiary Survey, (N=46)

When asked about their likelihood to recommend the Growth Hub to other businesses, 32% of survey respondents gave a score of 10 out of 10. Overall, nearly all respondents, with just one exception, rated it at least 5 out of 10. This further highlights respondent satisfaction with quality of support provided by the SWGH.

#### 4.1.5 Potential Improvements

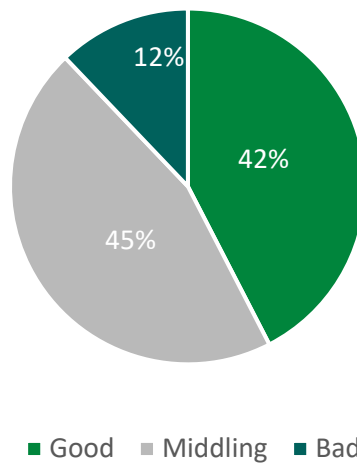
Respondents were asked to identify any ways in which the SWGH support could have been improved. The majority of responses to this question offered no suggestions for improvements (64% or 9 out of 14). The remaining suggestions included:

- More opportunities for networking between supported businesses
- Events that are accessible outside of core working hours
- More contact from Growth Hub advisors
- A greater number of events/workshops to access

#### 4.1.6 Future Support Requirements

The survey provided the opportunity to better understand the future support needs of businesses. Firstly, respondents were asked to assess the current trading conditions for their business. This is shown in Figure 4.7, below. 42% of respondents referred to the current condition for their business as good, 45% as middling, and only 12% as bad.

Figure 4.7: Current conditions for participants' businesses

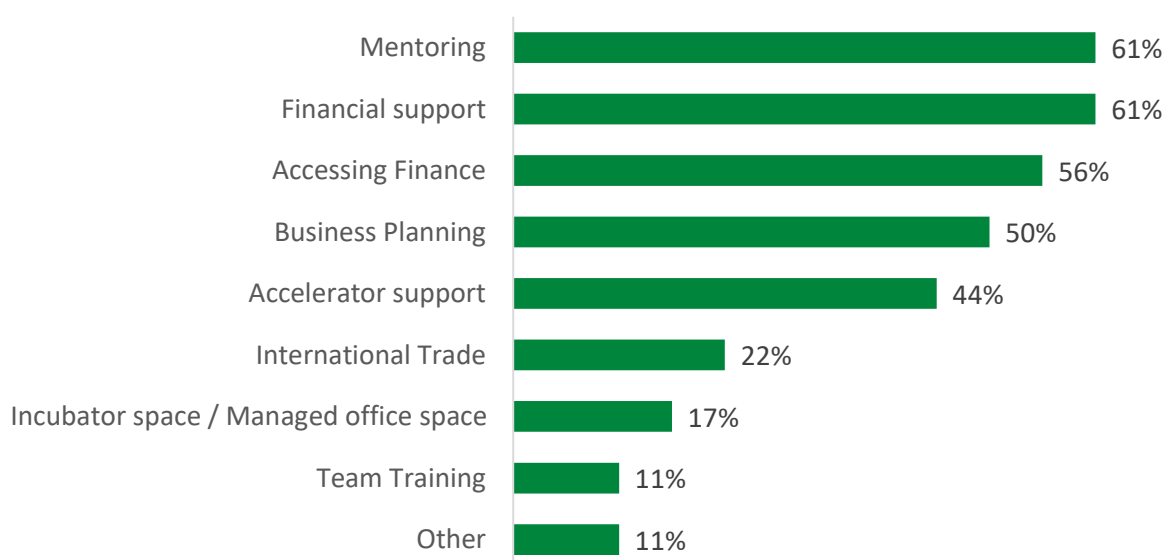


Wavehill Beneficiary Survey 2023 (n=33)

Further analysis of qualitative responses indicated that where responses had indicated 'good' current trading conditions, this was mainly driven by buoyant market conditions or good demand for the products and services those businesses were providing. Conversely, the main reasons for respondents indicating 'bad' trading conditions were the impact of the cost of living crisis on their customers and potential customers and the climate crisis.

When asked about their interest in accessing various support activities through the Growth Hub in the next 12 months, participants expressed particular interest in mentoring (11 or 61%), financial support (11 or 61%), accessing finance (10 or 56%), and business planning (9 or 50%). In contrast, only two respondents expressed interest in team training.

Figure 4.8: Support activities through the Growth Hub over the next 12 months



Wavehill Beneficiary Survey 2023 (n=18)

## 5. Hub Achievements

This section seeks to reflect on the progress and impact of the Growth Hub, drawing on available evidence from the Growth Hub’s performance data, beneficiary surveys and stakeholders’ reflections.

### 5.1 Performance against Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

Table 5.1, below, provides an overview of the Growth Hub’s performance relating to businesses engaged in light touch, medium intensity and high intensity support. It shows good progress in engaging businesses in ‘medium intensity’ support.. The main reason for falling slightly short of the ‘light touch’ support was the high proportion of businesses that were converted to ‘medium intensity’ engagements.

Table 5.1: Overview of performance against KPIs

Indicator	Local KPIs (where these are set by the LEP)	Annual Total (1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023)	Percentage
Number of businesses that have received ‘ <b>light touch</b> ’ triage, information and/or signposting support (excluding website traffic)	800	728	91%
Number of businesses receiving ‘ <b>medium intensity</b> ’ information, diagnostic and brokerage support	290	535	185%
Number of businesses receiving ‘ <b>high intensity</b> ’ support e.g., account management / intensive support directly provided by the Hub or partner organisation	216	188	87%

## 5.2 Stakeholder Reflections on Progress

Stakeholders reflected positively on the progress the SWGH had made to date. In particular, stakeholders mentioned the flexibility and adaptability of the provision to meet the changing needs of business in the area as well as the quality of support being provided to businesses.

It was noted that currently, beyond the feedback from businesses and the anecdotal evidence that stakeholders were aware of, there was a need to continue to develop approaches to capturing the impact of the SWGH's work. The reduction of core funding over a number of years has made this challenging in relation to the resource and cost implications, however, future operations should seek to develop more robust approaches to measuring the success of the SWGH.

In particular, this could include better use of the Hubspot CRM system as well as a more systematic approach to collecting impact data from supported businesses. Stakeholders noted that this was important as they had the impression that current approaches were underselling the valuable contributions the SWGH support was having to businesses and the regional economy.

## 5.3 Impact on businesses

### 5.3.1 Business Outcomes

The majority of respondents (24 out of 32 or 75%) thought their business was in a better place because of the support they received from the Growth Hub. Of these, 32% felt their business was in a better place to a great extent. Conversely, a quarter of respondents felt their businesses was in no better place as a result of the Growth Hub support.

Respondents were asked to assess the extent to which specific business elements had been positively influenced by the support provided by the Growth Hub. The key findings are presented in Figure 5.1 below and summarised as follows:

- Confidence as business managers was significantly boosted for 50% of the participants;
- Overall business knowledge and acumen saw a positive impact for 43% of the participants;
- Additionally, the programme significantly increased ambition for the business for 42% of the participants and enhanced the ability to market effectively for 40% of participants;
- However, the programme had limited to no impact on participants' networking skills, leadership and management skills, the ability of their businesses to generate a profit, and the strength of their teams. These areas received over 70% combined responses in the 'minimal impact' and 'no impact' categories in the beneficiary survey.

Figure 5.1: Participants' views on the impact of SWGH



Wavehill Beneficiary Survey 2023 (n=within the graph)

### 5.3.2 Business Growth

Findings from the survey suggest a mixed picture in relation to the impact of the SWGH support on businesses both in relation to turnover and employment figures.



### Turnover Increase

Out of the 32 survey respondents, eight businesses (25%) reported an increase in their turnover since accessing the SWGH support. A further 38% indicated that their turnover had stayed the same and 34% preferred not to say. One business indicated that their turnover had decreased. Of the businesses that indicated that their turnover had increased, five said that this increase was, to some extent, attributable to the support received from the SWGH.

### Employment Increase

Among the 32 survey respondents, only four individuals (13%) reported an increase in the number of people they employed following their access to Growth Hub support. The rest of the respondents' employee count either had stayed the same (22 out of 32 or 69%) or preferred not to say (6 out of 22 or 19%). Overall, 98 full time equivalent (FTE) positions had been created amongst those businesses and this was driven predominantly by one business which reported employment from of 80 FTE positions. Each of the four respondents that had seen their employee count increase indicated that the this increase could, to some extent, be attributed to the support received from the Growth Hub.

### Job Safeguarding

Furthermore, among the 30 surveyed businesses, six (20%) believe that the programme played a role in helping them safeguard jobs within their organisations. This equated to 9.5 FTE positions being safeguarded.

The business growth findings reported in this section are modest, however, it is important to highlight that these figures have been drawn from a survey with a particularly low response rate. Furthermore, the 2022/23 financial year was a challenging time for businesses. The high inflation and rising costs (detailed in Section 2.3 above) have stifled growth nationally and are likely to have affected businesses' ability to grow.

## 6. Conclusions

### 6.1 Context

The Growth Hub continues to work towards the ambitions set out in SWLEP's Local Industrial Strategy which prioritises delivering improved connectivity; greater exporting power; more innovation from our high-tech sectors, universities and Research and Development assets.

During 2022/23, the impacts of COVID-19 and Britain's Exit from the EU on businesses continue to reduce, however, the rising energy prices and inflation have provided new challenges for businesses during this period.

### 6.2 Management and Governance

The SWGH's objectives remain consistent with previous year's evaluations and represent a key element of support for businesses to enable the LIS objectives to be achieved. The shift in governance arrangements that led to the creation of several working groups appears to have been welcomed.

Overall, stakeholders considered the governance arrangements as effective and suitable. Stakeholders noted that the current arrangements enabled decisions to be taken quickly and the organisation to remain agile. They felt that the management of the SWGH had been effective, paying particular attention to the way in which support had been adapted to respond to several economic challenges over the course of the past four to five years.

Moving forward, there will be a need to continue to review and refine approaches to governance and management as the SWGH transitions to a new operational model following removal of central government funding. Stakeholders felt that strengthening SME representation at the board level alongside continuing to work strategically with local authorities should be a priority in the medium term.

### 6.3 Delivery of Support

Despite the low number of responses that were received to the beneficiary survey, it has been possible to draw several key messages from the analysis. In relation to the marketing and promotion of the support, it appears that beneficiary SMEs first heard about the SWGH offer in various ways. This included through referrals from strategic partners, word of mouth and online marketing. One stakeholder suggested that there was a need to continue to develop the marketing approach to raise awareness amongst the broader business base of the region in order to engage with a greater proportion of businesses.

Survey respondents indicated engaging with the SWGH support for a broad range of reasons and for help overcome a range of challenges. The most common challenge businesses faced was a lack of knowledge or understanding running a business (31%), a lack of specific skills

in relation to running a business e.g. management, finance or marketing (28%) and a lack of access to business advice and support (25%). These findings represent a shift from the previous year's evaluations where support appeared to be focused on responding to specific socio-economic events or challenges (such as COVID-19 or Brexit).

Respondents also indicated accessing the full breadth of the SWGH support. Most commonly this included start up support (48%), support to develop skills (26%) and support accessing finance (26%). Support was also offered and taken up in various modes of delivery including through one-to-one consultancy style support, through the digital portal or through one-to-many workshops. Feedback showed that the support was appropriate to businesses' needs, delivered by experienced and credible people and in amounts ideal for businesses.

Feedback in relation to the quality of support and the extent to which businesses were satisfied with the support they received was positive. In particular, the communication between SWGH and businesses was good and the information that was provided was reportedly helpful.

There was a mixed response in relation to businesses' perspectives on future trading conditions largely owing to the uncertainty created by the cost of living and its impact on consumers. Businesses indicated several future support requirements and the most common of these included mentoring support (61%) support around finance (56%) and business planning (50%). These are all aspects that would merit further inquiry to help shape future business support opportunities from the SWGH.

## 6.4 Hub Achievements

The SWGH has engaged with almost 1,500 businesses from across Swindon and Wiltshire to varying intensities over 2022/23. This is above the overall number of businesses the SWGH were targeted to reach despite targets for light intensity and high intensity support being missed. Given the challenging conditions for businesses, this represents strong performance in relation to engaging and supporting businesses.

Three quarters of businesses indicated that their business was in a better place as a result of the support they received from the SWGH. Businesses reported several benefits resulting from the support including increased confidence to manage their business; improved business knowledge and acumen; and raised ambitions.

Respondents also reported some progress in relation to business growth, both in terms of turnover increase and employment increases. Findings suggested that a quarter of businesses (8) had increased their turnover and of these, five stated that this increase was, to some extent, attributable to the SWGH support.

In total, businesses indicated that 107.5 FTE positions had either been created or safeguarded as a result of the SWGH support. All of the businesses reporting increases in employee indicated that this increase was, to some extent, attributable to the SWGH support.

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