

Evaluation of the Swindon and Wiltshire Growth Hub

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Wavehill: social and economic research

- Wales office: 21 Alban Square, Aberaeron, Ceredigion, SA46 0DB (registered office)
- West England office: 12 Orchard Street, Bristol, BS1 5EH
- North of England office: Milburn House, Dean Street, Newcastle, NE1 1LF
- London office: 52 Cecile Park, Crouch End, London, N8 9AS

Contact details:

Tel: 01545 571711

Email: wavehill@wavehill.com

Twitter: @wavehilltweets

More information:

www.wavehill.com

<https://twitter.com/wavehilltweets>

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Report authors:

Llorenc O'Prey, Oliver Allies and Paula Gallagher

Any questions in relation to this report should be directed in the first instance to Llorenc O'Prey (llorenc.oprey@wavehill.com)

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Client contact:

Chris Stevens

Growth Hub Manager

Swindon & Wiltshire Growth Hub

chris.stevens@swlep.co.uk

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List of abbreviations

BEIS	Department for Business Energy & Industrial Strategy
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
FTE	Full Time Equivalent
GVA	Gross Value Added
LEP	Local Enterprise Partnership
ONS	Office for National Statistics
R&D	Research & Development
SWGK	Swindon and Wiltshire Growth Hub
SWLEP	Swindon and Wiltshire Local Enterprise Partnership

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Executive Summary

In February 2021, the Swindon and Wiltshire Growth Hub (SWGHT) commissioned Wavehill to undertake an evaluation of the progress and impact of the services and support it offers. The previous evaluation took place in the spring of 2019, consequently the evaluation has also sought to reflect on progress made since then.

The evaluation involved a comprehensive review of documentation associated with national and local policy, the governance of SWGH, alongside a review of web analytics, data, evidence held on Hub Spot, and a review of the portal itself. The desk-based research was supplemented by interviews with stakeholders involved in the governance, management or delivery of services associated with SWGH. The evaluation also engaged 105 businesses registered on the Growth Hub Portal through a detailed beneficiary survey of businesses administer over the phone and online.

Key Findings

Over the last year, the team at SWGH have made significant progress in building and extending the support it offers to businesses. With the support of funders such as BEIS and ERDF, in exceptional circumstances SWGH have successfully transitioned to a new model of delivery and expanded exponentially. This includes the transition to a full Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) service, which seeks to provide businesses with more in depth, tailored support. This should be viewed as a significant achievement, one that ensures that SWGH will play an important role in providing effective support to the business community into the future.

Alongside these achievements, SWGH is also making a meaningful contribution to the broader economic objectives of the region. As a result of engagement, 43.7 per cent of businesses felt that they were in a better or much better position as a result of the support that they had received. The support offered by SWGH team is also at its most effective in raising the ambitions of businesses, which will be important for the region as it emerges from the economic shocks of Covid-19 and the Honda plant closing. Overall, the need for impartial, free, and high-quality business support has never been greater.

Growth Hub Objectives

SWGHT provides the regions frontline of business support provision and in many cases the gateway for businesses to access a wealth of different support elements. In this last year, SWGH have often been the conduit between Local Authority and businesses in supporting them with accessing grant funding. SWGH has had to shift its strategic vision as result of emerging and evolving challenges facing the business community, including in responding to business disruption caused by Covid-19. Since 2019, SWGH has sought to move from light touch/responsive engagement to provision of a full Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) service.

Management and Governance of SWGH

The transition towards an IAG model has been led by SWGH management under the guidance and support of the Governance Group. Within conversations with stakeholders, it was felt that SWGH had successfully navigated significant challenges, and that this had been down to effective and conscientious management and governance of SWGH. An external stakeholder, for example, suggested that management of SWGH had been exemplary, and that submissions and work emanating from SWGH were of very high quality. Internally, members of the team highlighted that they had felt that SWGH provided a supportive environment, one that helped them to navigate the challenges of remote working.

Recent Operational Changes

The positive perceptions of management were driven, in part, by the successful scaling up of services and support offered through SWGH. Delivery changes were initiated by SWGH to enable the team to support clients virtually and deliver a slightly restructured programme with crisis management and resilience elements. Together, this has significantly expanded the level and depth of support available to local businesses. The team has grown from three staff in March 2020 to now 15 strong, enabling SWGH to strengthen and extend business support.

In March 2020, the Growth Hub rapidly mobilised in response to the pandemic. SWGH significantly expanded its capacity to deliver support, including in providing more tailored and intensive advice and guidance. This has included the expansion on more one-on-one support, as well as the administration of grants and other schemes. This expansion took place alongside operational transition towards home working for the SWGH team.

Recent developments have also significantly expanded SWGH's budget. Building on core grant funding of £205,000k in 2020/2021, SWGH now services and delivers contracts to a value of £3.5m. This includes core and additional funding from BEIS and ERDF to deliver a range of support programmes, including ERDF Competitiveness Programme and 'This Way Up', a recovery themed programme.

Support Delivery

As the business support arm of the SWLEP, the Growth Hub offers a range of information and support to businesses across the region. The guiding principles of SWGH are to provide high quality, relevant business support and advice. SWGH is also designed around the principles of providing universal, free and impartial advice to all businesses that seek support.

In the last year, SWGH has seen a significant expansion in the demand for services and support. Drawing on the Business Survey, key challenges facing businesses included securing cash flow and finance (49.5 per cent). This is consistent with the challenges presented by Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown of March 2020. Further, 67.3 per cent of respondents went on to say that they sought specific advice and guidance because of challenges they were experiencing as a result of Covid-19, and 21.9 per cent of respondents sought advice and guidance in responding to EU Exit.

Respondents accessed a range of different support from SWGH, including more light touch engagement through the online portal, through to more in-depth and financial support offered through initiatives such as the ERDF Competitiveness Programme and the BEIS funded This Way Up seminar series. Across all forms of support, SWGH experienced significant increases in demand and engagement.

Overarching Perceptions of Support

Overall, perceptions of the support that businesses received was positive, with 74 per cent of respondents reporting that accessing SWGH had met or exceeded their expectations. In terms of global perceptions of the support businesses received, 62 per cent of respondents reported that they were likely or very likely to recommend SWGH to other businesses (Net Promoter Score of 8 or above out of 10).

Future Support Requirements

Of those surveyed, 61.9 per cent felt that they would value further support from SWGH over the coming year (2021-22). The support requirements reported by respondents reinforces the continuing liquidity problems that many businesses are encountering because of the ongoing impact of Covid-19. Financial support, including through grants, as well as accessing financial services were both highlighted by respondents as key support needs.

Impacts for Businesses

As a result of engagement, 43.7 per cent of respondents felt that they were in a better or much better position because of the support that they had received. These businesses were more likely to have received more intensive and bespoke support from SWGH. More detailed responses exploring impact against a range of domains suggests that support has been relatively effective in raising the ambitions of a business. Relative to other factors, on average businesses reported greater impacts for raising the ambition for the business, the ability of the business to market effectively, and improving overall business knowledge and acumen.

Plans for the Future

A key objective for the short-term is to focus on preparing businesses from for the economic recovery. This includes supporting them to remain resilient to the ongoing socio-economic challenges that the pandemic presents but also in supporting businesses to adapt or pivot to new opportunities.

The report expands on these themes in greater detail, including in highlighting achievements of the SWGH over the last year.

1 Introduction

In February 2021, Swindon and Wiltshire Growth Hub (SWGK) commissioned Wavehill to undertake an evaluation of the progress and impact of the services and support it offers. Previous evaluations took place in spring 2017 and 2019. Consequently, the evaluation has also sought to reflect on progress since 2017.

1.1 Swindon and Wiltshire Growth Hub

SWGK is the business support arm of the Swindon and Wiltshire Local Enterprise Partnership (SWLEP). It is the regions frontline of business support provision and in many cases the gateway for businesses to access a wealth of different support elements. In this last year, SWGH has also often been the conduit between Local Authority and businesses in supporting them with accessing grant funding. It aims to provide free, independent advice and support to businesses across the region, helping them to navigate challenges and improve productivity and growth. The Growth Hub is key to advancing the broader objectives of the LEP, supporting regional economic growth and prosperity.

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 dissemination of information and advice through a web portal.

SWGK has since sought to strengthen and extend the services and support it offers. Since 2020 the Growth Hub has significantly expanded support, including moving beyond providing signposting through the web portal to include the delivery of business support programmes themselves. This has been in response, in part, to emerging challenges facing businesses across the region, including EU Exit and Covid-19. New funding and support were made available to help businesses navigate the transition to new trading arrangements following EU Exit, for example, including through the introduction of a transition readiness grant. In March 2020, SWGH rapidly mobilised and has been key in responding to the needs of the business community since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.

SWGK has also significantly expanded its capacity to deliver support. with the deployment of four Business Navigators, a Digital Advisor, a Skills Advisor, and a Peer Networks Project Manager. This increased the capacity of SWGH, including in the services and support that it can offer. This has included greater depth of engagement with businesses, as well as in providing support in accessing grants and other government schemes.

1.2 The Evaluation

This evaluation sought to understand the implications of this expansion operationally, 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 summative assessments of European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) initiatives. This is important as all ERDF funded initiatives require summative evaluations. Specifically, the research focused on understanding:

- The relevance and coherence of support on offer.
- Progress against stated objectives of SWGH.
- Experience of delivering and managing support.
- The range of impacts attributable to support from the perspective of businesses.

1.3 Methodology

With the objectives of the evaluation, during February and March the research team undertook:

- A comprehensive desk-based review of:
 - Documentation associated with the management, governance and operation of SWGH.
 - Web analytics data to enable an assessment of trends in performance and market penetration of the Growth Hub Portal.
 - Analysis of evidence held on Hubspot (a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system).
 - A review of SWGH service provision.
- Interviews with stakeholders involved in the governance, management or delivery of services and support delivered through SWGH.
- A survey of 105 businesses registered with SWGH to gain their perspectives on the support they received, including the impact of support across a range of measures. The survey was completed both through telephone interviews and online.

1.4 Navigating this Report

The remainder of the report is as follows:

- **Chapter 2** provides the broader social, economic and policy context in which SWGH operates.
- **Chapter 3** explores the governance and management of 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 SWGH.
- **Chapter 6** summarises conclusions and recommendations emanating from the evaluation.

2 Context

This section examines the broader socio-economic and policy contexts in which SWGH operates. It goes on to outline the broader rationale for investment in business support delivered through SWGH.

2.1 Socio-Economic Context

SWGH supports businesses across Swindon and Wiltshire. The region is largely rural in character with Swindon as the largest town and commercial centre with an additional network of market towns throughout Wiltshire. The area is well served by transport and communication corridors, including its situation within the M4 Corridor.

2.1.1 Employment

With a total population of 722,200 people living in Swindon and Wiltshire, 60.6 per cent are considered of working age (16-64).¹ As of September 2020, the region enjoys slightly higher levels of employment, with 78.4 per cent in work compared to 75.7 per cent across the UK as a whole. Two thirds of those in employment are in full time jobs, which is slightly under the UK average.²

People living in Swindon and Wiltshire are more likely to be in managerial, professional, and manufacturing roles compared to those living in the UK. Conversely, there are relatively lower numbers of people in caring and other service occupations within the region as compared to the UK as a whole.³

In terms of employment and commuter flows, there is a high level of self-containment, with 78 per cent of residents who live and work within Swindon and Wiltshire.⁴ This is substantially higher than that of neighbouring LEAs, including those with major urban conurbations. This suggests the presence of a combination of large, established businesses, with good local travel links and a high proportion of residents willing and able to work from home or from a local office base.

2.1.2 Earnings

Comparatively, the average gross weekly earnings of people living in Swindon and Wiltshire is broadly in line with those living in the UK. Earnings growth has also tracked broader UK earnings trends over the last decade.⁵

¹ ONS (2019) ONS Population estimates - local authority based by five year age band: <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/lep/1925185573/report.aspx>

² ONS (2020) ONS annual population survey

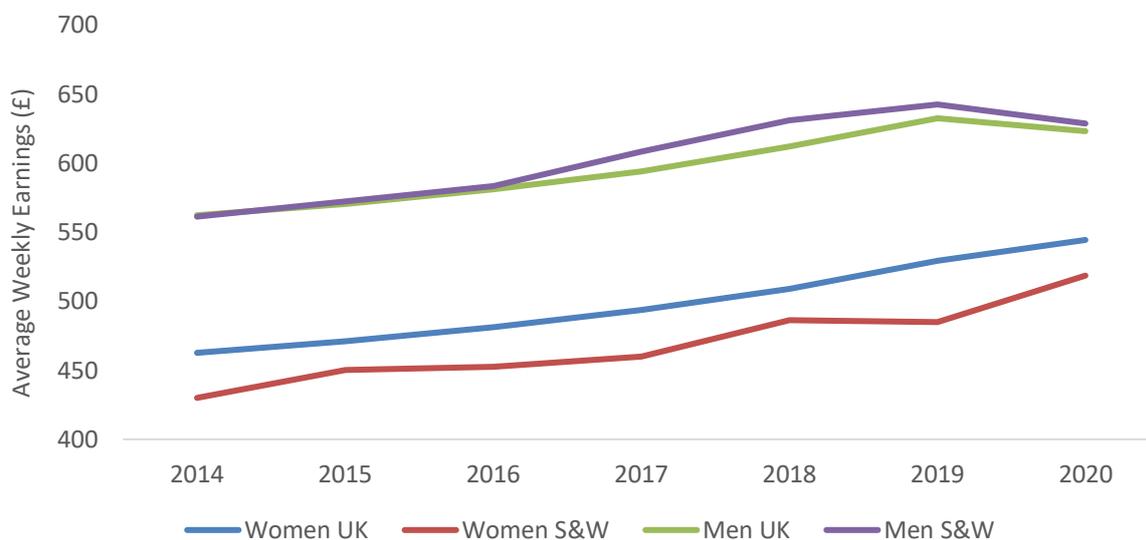
³ Ibid

⁴ Local Economic Assessment, SWLEP (2018)

⁵ ONS (2020) ONS annual survey of hours and earnings - resident analysis, Median earnings in pounds for employees living in the area.

There are, however, significant disparities in earnings between women and men. Women in full time jobs living in Swindon and Wiltshire, for example, earn less than women across the UK. Men on the other hand earn slightly more than the national average for men across the UK. As of 2020, men in Swindon and Wiltshire earn on average £110 a week more than women, where the disparity across the UK is £79.

Figure 2.1: Earnings, Gross Weekly Pay Full Time Female and Male Workers: Source ONS

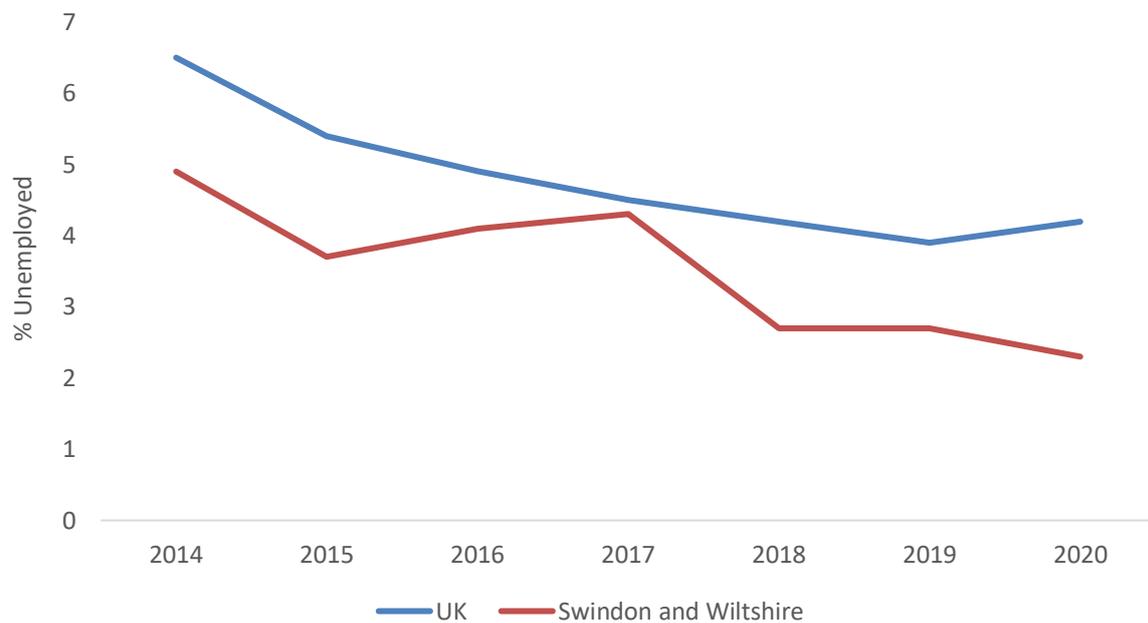


2.1.3 Unemployment and Economic Inactivity

In September 2020, an estimated 2.3 per cent of people in Swindon and Wiltshire are unemployed compared to 4.2 per cent across the UK.⁶ These Office for National Statistics estimates do have a time lag however, and the picture may have changed significantly since then as a result of the pandemic in early 2020.

⁶ International Labor Organisation definition defines unemployed people as being without a job, have been actively seeking work in the past four weeks and are available to start work in the next two weeks. Data from ONS annual population survey: https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/lep/1925185573/subreports/ea_time_series/report.aspx?

Figure 2.2: Rate of unemployment over time: Source ONS



There are also relatively lower levels of economic inactivity within Swindon and Wiltshire, with 19.6 per cent not in employment compared to 21 per cent across the UK. There are also significantly fewer workless households in Swindon and Wiltshire, with 11.1 per cent compared to 13.9 per cent across the UK as a whole. This data relates to December 2019 however, and again the situation may have changed significantly as a result of the pandemic.⁷

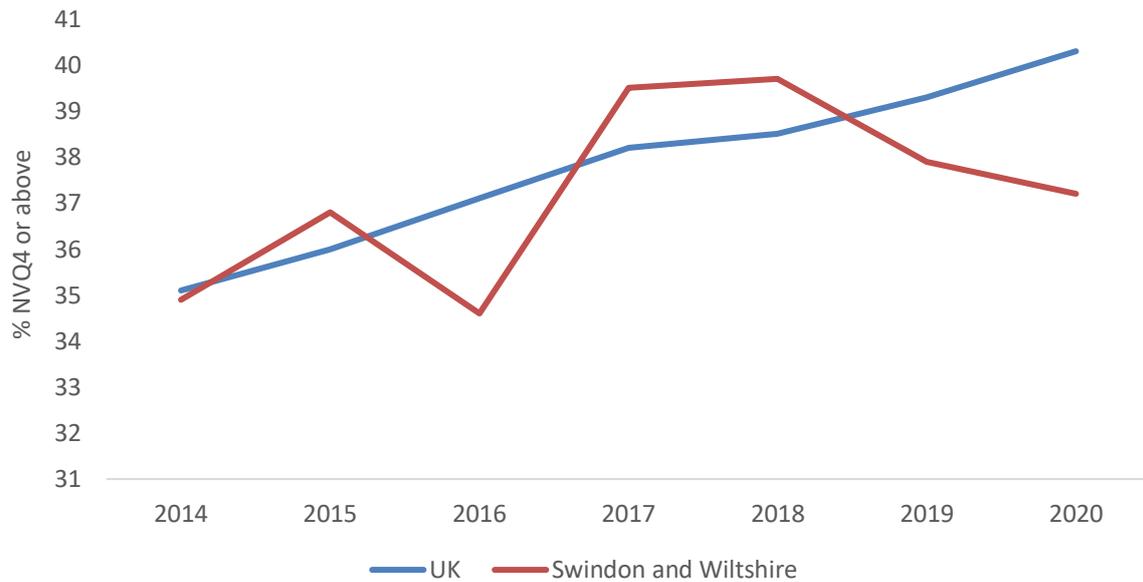
2.1.4 Skills

In terms of skills, there are relatively higher levels of people holding equivalent of NVQs 1 and 2 living in Swindon and Wiltshire than those across the UK. There are, however, fewer people holding equivalent of NVQs 3, 4 and above than the UK as a whole in 2020.⁸ It is estimated that 37.2 per cent of people in Swindon and Wiltshire hold NVQ 4s or above for example, compared to 40.3 per cent of people across the UK.

⁷ ONS (2019) ONS annual population survey
<https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/lep/1925185573/report.aspx>

⁸ Ibid

Figure 2.3: Per cent of population aged 16-64 holding NVQ4 or above: Source ONS



Whilst this trend appears to fluctuate significantly and may be an issue of sensitivity in data collection, the issue of higher order skills and training was highlighted in the SWLEP's Skills Plan 2020-21. The strategy sets out to address imbalances in the supply and demand for skills, and to achieve a higher proportion of the workforce qualified to NVQ 4 and above.⁹ The strategy determined that higher skills shortages existed in the region that impact negatively on businesses ability to recruit and grow.

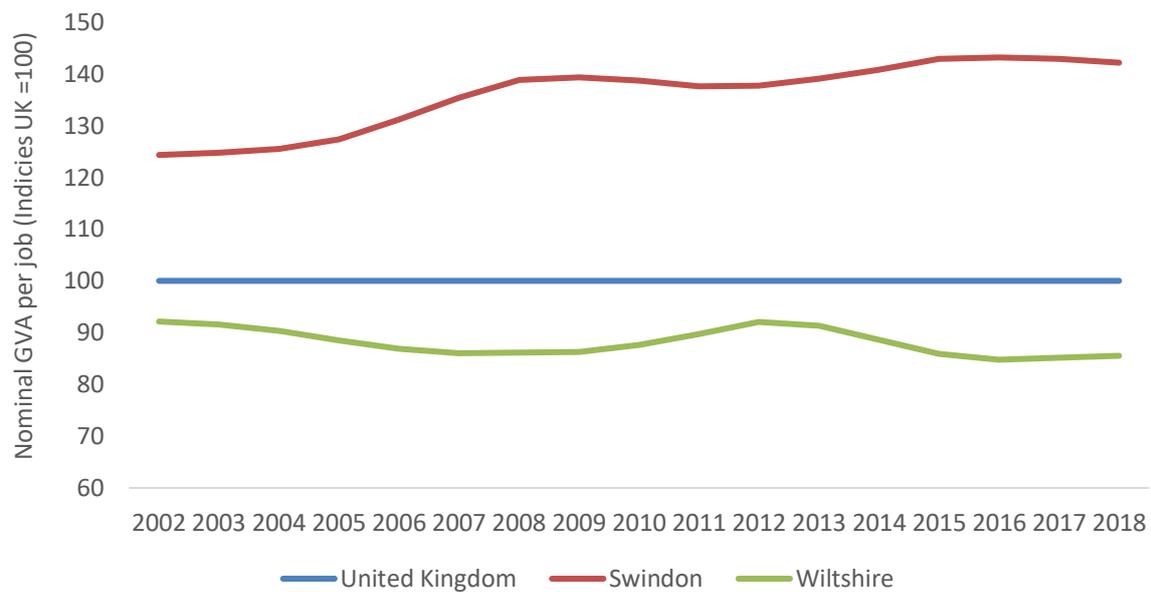
2.1.5 Productivity

The region benefits from relatively high levels of productivity as measured by Gross Value Added (GVA) This is particularly evident within Swindon where the GVA per job is greater than the national average. Since 2002, Swindon has seen consistent productivity improvements relative to the UK as a whole. Conversely, the data suggests that the picture is the other way round for Wiltshire, where GVA per job is slightly lower than the UK as a whole. There have been fluctuations, but since 2002 gap in productivity has been widening:¹⁰

⁹ SWLEP (2020) https://static.swlep.co.uk/swlep/docs/default-source/strategy/swindon-wiltshire-skills-plan.pdf?sfvrsn=af743f0f_2

¹⁰ ONS (2019) Sub regional Productivity <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/labourproductivity/datasets/subregionaproductivitylabourproductivitygvaperhourworkedandgvaperfilledjobindicesbyuknuts2andnuts3subregions>

Figure 2.4: Nominal (smoothed) GVA per job indices 2002 – 2018, indexed to UK 100



2.1.6 Business Demography

There are estimated to be 29,755 businesses across Swindon and Wiltshire in 2020. In terms of the size of businesses within the region, the distribution of businesses is broadly similar to that found across the UK and one which is dominated by microbusinesses. Where there are slight differences, Wiltshire tends to have slightly more micro and less large businesses as a proportion of all businesses compared to the UK as a whole:¹¹ Swindon, on the other hand, the situation is reversed, where there are slightly fewer micro businesses, and a greater proportion of large businesses compared to the national average.

Table 2.1: Businesses by employee size in Swindon, Wiltshire and the UK (2020)

	Swindon	Wiltshire	UK
Micro (0 to 9)	89.1	91.5	89.5
Small (10 to 49)	8.2	7.0	8.7
Medium-sized (50 to 249)	1.8	1.2	1.5
Large (250+)	0.7	0.3	0.4

2.1.7 Sectoral Dynamics

The focus of businesses across the region broadly compares to the national average. There are slightly greater concentrations of businesses engaged in agriculture, information and communication and the professional, scientific and technical sectors than are found across the UK.

¹¹ ONS (2020) Inter Departmental Business Register (ONS): <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/lep/1925185573/report.aspx>

Figure 2.5: Proportion of Enterprises by Broad Industrial Sector – 2020, Source ONS

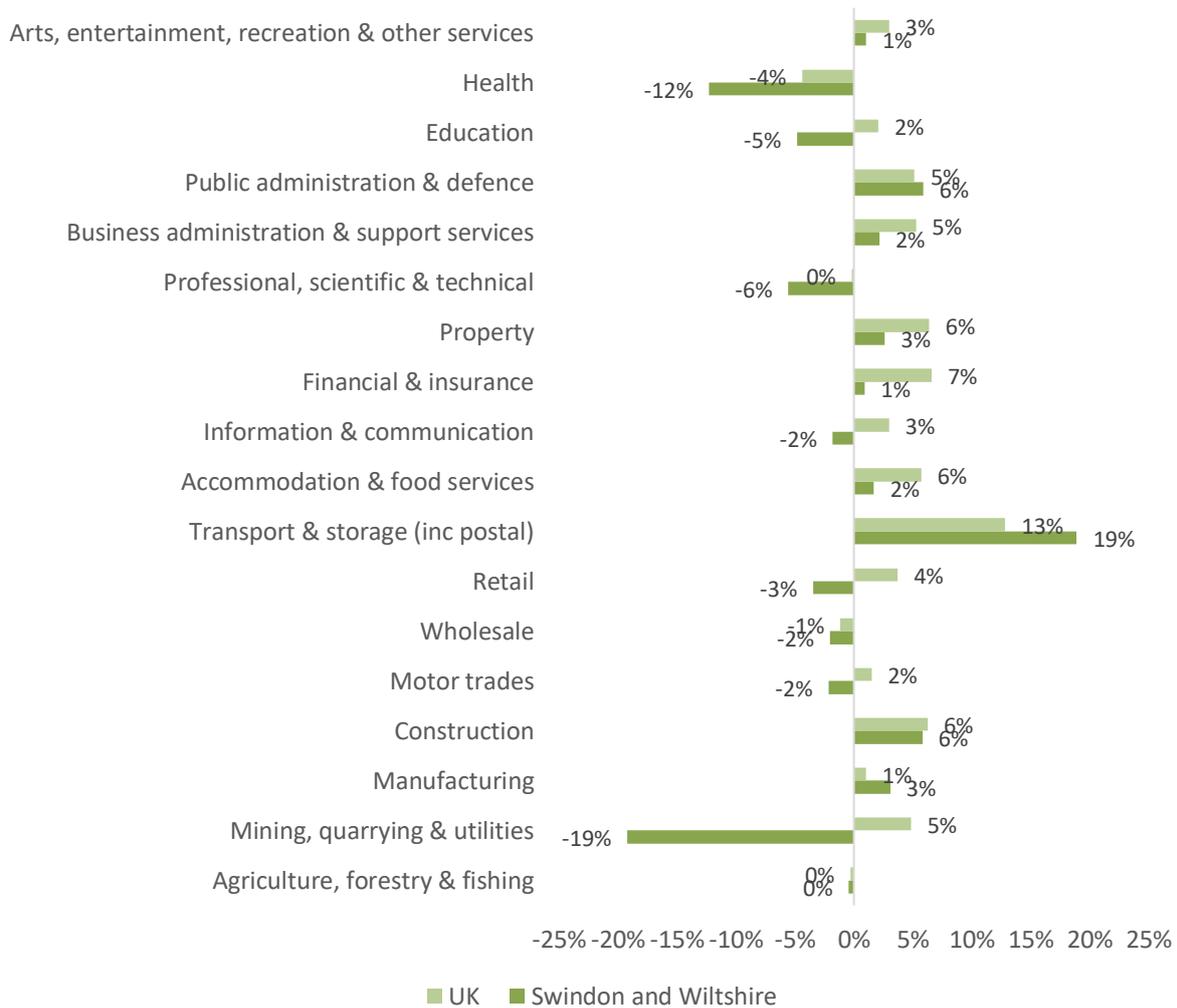


In understanding trends in the size of different sectors over time, there has been an estimated 0.5 per cent reduction in the total number of businesses in the region since 2018, representing a total of 160 businesses. A significant proportion of these are in the mining, quarrying and utilities sector, and health sectors, where there has been a 19 and 12 per cent reduction respectively, or 170 businesses.¹²

In terms of reflecting broader UK trends, the picture is mixed. Swindon and Wiltshire have broadly mapped UK trends across some sectors that are contracting, including in health and wholesale. In some sectors that are growing across the UK, however, Swindon and Wiltshire have experienced contractions, including in education, retail and utilities. Growth areas in the region include transport, construction and public administration and defence. In many cases, growth has not been as pronounced as the UK as a whole. Overall, where the UK has seen growth in the number of businesses by three per cent, Swindon and Wiltshire has seen a reduction by an estimated 0.5 per cent.

¹² ONS (2020) Inter Departmental Business Register (ONS): <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/lep/1925185573/report.aspx>

Figure 2.6: Change in the number of Businesses by Broad Industrial Group 2018-2020



More detailed sectoral analysis suggests the presence of key sub-sectors that are anticipated as being key drivers for economic growth in the future.¹³ Several of these sub-sectors are identified as having a greater prevalence in the region compared to that typically found throughout the UK suggesting some form of comparative advantage. Those identified are:

- Life Sciences
- Energy
- Advanced Manufacturing
- Agri-Tech
- Envirotech
- ICT/Telecommunications.

¹³ SWLEP (2018) Swindon and Wiltshire Economic Assessment <https://swlep.co.uk/docs/default-source/strategy/economic-priorities/economic-assessment-2018/chapter-3-business-and-enterprise-may-2018.pdf>

2.1.8 Total Output (GVA)

Mapped against trends in aggregate output, recent contractions in the numbers of businesses have also mirrored contractions in total GVA across the region. The latest available data suggests that in 2018, total GVA contracted in Swindon by -1.23 per cent, and in Wiltshire by -0.79 per cent. In contrast, UK total GVA output grew by 1.36 per cent.

Exploring trends over time, the data suggests that Swindon and Wiltshire tend to outperform the rest of the UK in periods of growth, but also experiences greater contractions in downturns. This suggests that the region is well placed to stimulate growth when the conditions are right, but is also more susceptible to shocks or structural changes in the economy:¹⁴

Figure 2.7: GVA Changes in Chained Volume Measures in 2016 Monetary Value



2.1.9 Entrepreneurial Activity

One proxy for understanding dynamism and entrepreneurial activity within a region is to look at the number of business start-ups. Relative to the size of the working age population, over time Swindon has seen slightly lower numbers of start-ups in comparison with the UK as a whole. This may be accounted for, at least in part, by the prevalence of larger employers in Swindon that provide stable and attractive employment opportunities that reduce incentives to take risks in establishing new businesses for some.

¹⁴ ONS (2019)

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossvalueaddedgva/datasets/nominalandrealregionalgrossvalueaddedbalancedbyindustry>

For Wiltshire, the picture is more mixed. In 2016, Wiltshire saw a spike in new start-ups, with 265 new businesses per 10,000 people of working age. The 2016 data appears to be an anomaly and was initially picked up in the local economic assessment. The assessment suggested at the time that “based on local intelligence and in discussion with local stakeholders, it is reasonable to assume this has been caused by the presence of a business in Warminster which has registered a large number of companies with a local address”. Despite the issues in 2016 data, there is evidence to suggest start-up rates in Wiltshire have returned to previous levels which are slightly under the national average.

Figure 2.8: Number of new enterprises per 10,000 people of working age (18 to 65 in 2019)



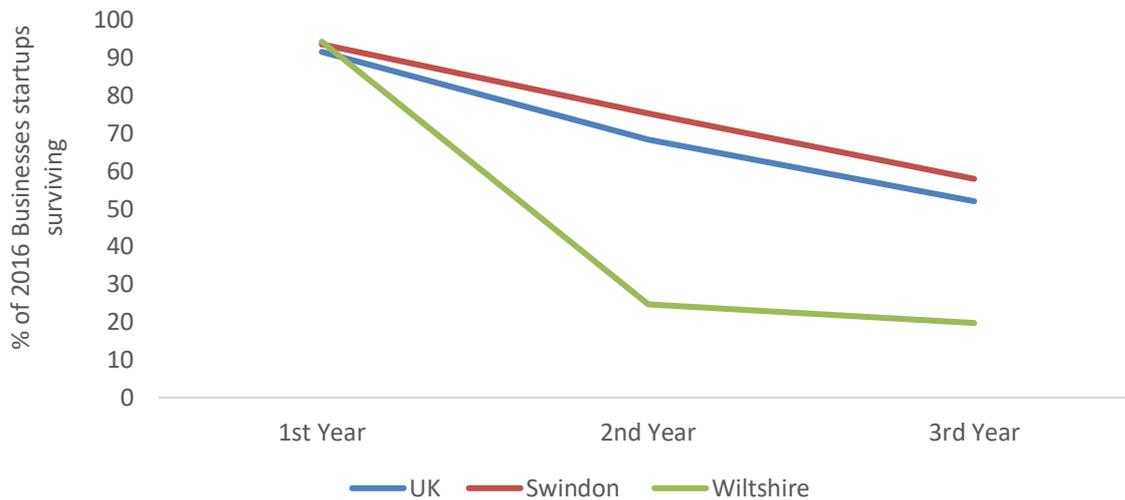
Given the issues with data from previous years there is a need for caution in drawing too much from this data, however it is a key element that needs to be followed closely particularly in light of the news regarding Honda’s closure of operations within the region. A cautious interpretation of the data suggests that there may be barriers to people establishing new businesses.

2.1.10 Start-up Survival Rates

Another lens from which to explore the dynamics of entrepreneurialism within a region is to explore business survival rates. This specifically explores the numbers of start-ups that remain operational after a number of years. This serves as a proxy for understanding the effectiveness of start-ups to navigate business challenges and to establish themselves. Business start-up survival rates are commonly impacted by the support of the wider business community and opportunities for entrepreneurs to thrive, as well as access to a much-needed talent pool.

Within Swindon, for example, the latest available data suggests that survival rates are better than the UK as a whole. Again in Wiltshire, however, the picture is markedly different, with only 19.7 per cent of start-ups surviving into their third year.¹⁵ This may be another anomaly within the data, given the spike in new businesses experienced in 2016.

Figure 2.9: Survival of start-ups born in 2016



In interpreting the significance of these findings, for people in Swindon the barriers to entry may be more significant, including greater employment opportunities. However once established, the chances of success are greater. If this observation holds then this could indicate that there may be a need for greater focus on supporting people in establishing businesses within the Swindon area. It also suggests that existing support and infrastructure available to start-ups is effective in helping them to navigate the challenges of the first few years.

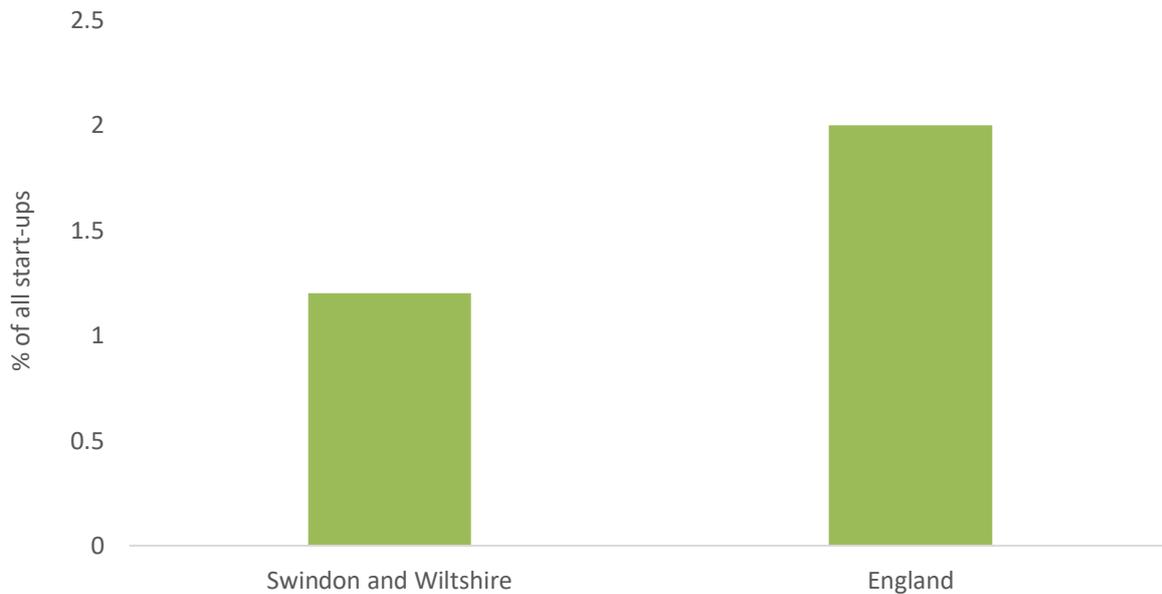
2.1.11 High Growth Start-ups

Another important indicator of entrepreneurial activity includes the proportion of start-ups that scale quickly from less than £500k turnover per year to greater than £1m in under three years. Data suggests that, within Swindon and Wiltshire, scaling can be a challenge relative to businesses located across England as a whole. Between 2015 and 2018, for example, 1.2 per cent of start-ups were high growth, compared to 2 per cent across England.¹⁶

¹⁵ ONS (2019) Business Demography

¹⁶ Enterprise Research Centre (2019) <https://www.enterpriseresearch.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/UK-Local-Growth-Dashboard-2019-FINAL.pdf>

Figure 2.10: Start-ups Scaling <£500k to £1m + in 3 years 2015-18



This suggests that whilst start-up survival rates are relatively good in Swindon, growth trajectories may not be as positive as they could be. This should be interpreted with caution, however, as the only available data relates to Swindon and Wiltshire as a whole. This suggests that there may be a need for scale-up support within the region, helping businesses to establish themselves more firmly and to expand their operations.

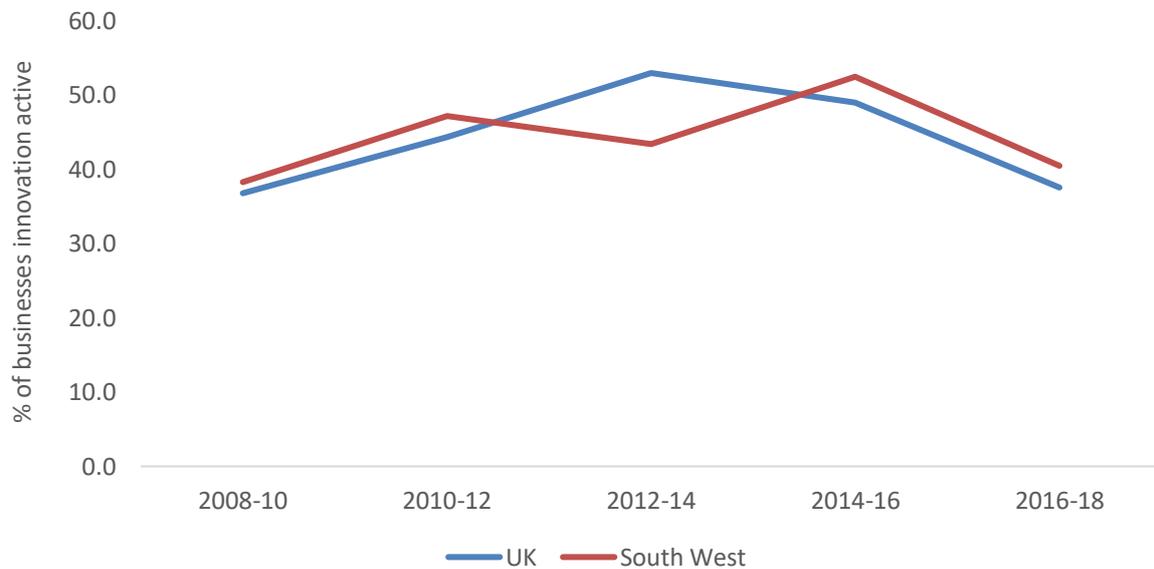
2.1.12 Innovation

Under a broad definition of innovation,¹⁷ the latest publicly available data suggest levels of innovation amongst business within the South West of England is broadly comparable to innovation across the UK as a whole. The available data does not allow for closer examination of trends within Swindon and Wiltshire.¹⁸ The latest data from the ONS UK Innovation Survey suggests that in 2016-18, 37.6 per cent of UK businesses were innovation active, compared to 40.5 across the South West. Exploring trends over time, the South West tends to outperform UK as a whole, however innovation appears to have dipped in 2012-14.

¹⁷The UK definition of innovation is based on an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) definition adopted by Eurostat. This includes activity that seeks to improve or develop new products, services, as well as forms of organisation, structures and business models, and investment in new knowledge or capital items.

¹⁸ ONS (2019) UK Innovation Survey <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/uk-innovation-survey-2019-main-report>

Figure 2.11: Innovation active businesses by size of business, region and sector, 2008-10 to 2016-18



2.2 Policy Context

SWGK also operates within the broader context of local and national policy that inform and shape the business support landscape, including in determining the objectives and focus of support, investment, and grant funding opportunities. The policy landscape is itself shaped by broader socio-economic trends and political developments, such as EU Exit and the Covid-19 pandemic. These developments have served to raise the profile and importance of business support.

2.2.1 Local Policy

Local policy responses to business support are determined, in part, by SWLEP itself. Within the LEP's 2020 Local Industrial Strategy, for example, it set out a vision for the region, including in promoting and supporting the inclusive and clean economic growth agendas.¹⁹ The strategy placed a particular focus on delivering improved connectivity, greater exporting power and more innovation from our high-tech sectors, universities and Research and Development assets. SWLEP influences decisions in partnership with local authorities and collaboration with a variety of stakeholders at Board level to determine economic development priorities. It also invests in various programmes and projects accordingly to bring about the sustainable economic development of the region delivered through SWGH.

¹⁹ SWLEP (2020) Industrial Strategy 2020 to 2036 https://static.swlep.co.uk/swlep/docs/default-source/strategy/industrial-strategy/emerging-lis-v0-1-master-31032020.pdf?sfvrsn=4fe0ce5e_14

In order to achieve the stated objectives set out in the strategy, business support plays an important role. SWGH is viewed as an important element of the overall strategy, providing and coordinating support aimed at building and strengthening the business environment. The focus has been on expanding start-up and scale-up support and improving the overall competitiveness of small and medium sized businesses (SMEs). Another objective for SWGH is to improve the productivity of low-output sectors, increasing the proportion of innovation-active businesses, and encouraging technological diffusion. Further, the strategy views SWGH as important in supporting the business community to manage the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their economic viability and survival, as well as in navigating changes to the business environment presented by EU Exit.

A key element of support offered through SWGH is the ERDF SME Competitiveness Programme. The initiative represents SWGH's flagship support programme. The aim is to provide businesses with a package of bespoke support tailored to their needs. The programme provides advice, guidance, and funding across a range of areas, from starting a business to employing new staff, growing a business to launching new products. The programme is ERDF funded and delivered via SWGH along with partners YTKO, SETSquared, Swindon Borough Council and Wiltshire Council.

2.2.2 Covid-19

The coronavirus pandemic and the subsequent restrictions imposed by the Government have put businesses under severe strain. Many businesses have been forced to close for some time, have had difficulties working at full capacity due to social distancing, or seen demand decline. In response, the government has rolled out various policies to support businesses. A key objective of these initiatives has been to prevent a crisis of liquidity turning into a crisis of solvency that would lead to widespread business failure and permanent economic damage. Early in the pandemic the Government response included a broad package of support for businesses, including:

- A Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme that will see HMRC pay 80 per cent of furloughed workers' wages, up to a £2,500 per month cap for at least three months.
- A Self-Employment Income Support Scheme that will pay self-employed individuals up to 80 per cent of their profits for three months, up to a £2,500 per month cap.
- A new Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme that will see banks offer loans of up to £5m to support SMEs. The Government will cover the costs of interest on these loans for the first six months. The scheme was extended to larger businesses from 20 April. A simplified scheme, Bounce Back Loans, launched on 4 May.
- Scaling up HMRC Time To Pay service, allowing businesses and the self-employed to defer tax payments over an agreed period of time.
- Tax deferments on both self-assessment tax returns and the quarterly tax return for 20 March-30 June.
- Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) costs for businesses with fewer than 250 employees will be met by the Government in full for up to 14 days per employee.
- Business Rate Relief for all businesses in the retail, hospitality or leisure sector in England, for one year in 2020-21. Eligible pubs will also be entitled to a business rate discount of £5,000.

- Cash grants worth:
 - £25,000 to the smallest businesses in the retail, hospitality or leisure sector.
 - £10,000 for all business in receipt of Small Business Rates Relief (SBRR) and Rural Rates Relief.
- The Covid 19 Corporate Financing Facility (CCFF) for large businesses.
- Provisions to prohibit forfeiture of a lease for non-payment of rent initially for three months to 30 June 2020 but since extended on multiple occasions to the end of May 2021.

As part of widespread changes in government support, including business grants, loans and a job retention scheme, the Ministry for Homes, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) permitted business support programmes to shift their focus to support businesses in their area with resilience rather than growth. Growth Hubs were viewed as an important element in supporting businesses navigate the challenges presented by the pandemic.

2.2.3 EU Exit

Following a period of considerable uncertainty, on 24 December 2020 the UK and EU agreed a new Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) to govern future trading relationships between the UK and the EU. The Agreement outlined a different basis for market access. A number of new processes and costs were introduced that businesses must now take into account when trading between the UK and the EU. In some cases, this has required exporting and importing businesses to recalibrate their operations, and to prepare for additional paperwork and costs.

It is too early to explore the long-term impacts of the new trading arrangements for businesses across Swindon and Wiltshire. The issue is complicated by disentangling the cumulative impacts of Covid-19 on trade and business operations generally from the impacts of EU Exit. Analysis suggests that there has been a three to four per cent hit to UK manufacturing output in January, though it is unclear how much was solely down to EU Exit-related disruption. The pandemic, stockpiling, and December's Covid-related port disruptions have also played their part.²⁰

The forthcoming end of the EU Transition Period requires a ramping up at pace of Growth Hub activity through the deployment of additional targeted resources within each English region. As part of this programme of work the Department for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), SWGH has secured additional Growth Hub total funding of £3.4m, with £2.4 million for the current financial year (2020-2021).

²⁰ See for example, AMG (2021) Economic and Financial Analysis <https://think.ing.com/articles/measuring-the-EU-Exit-effect-its-complicated>

2.3 Summary and Rationale for Intervention

Collectively, economic data provides evidence of the underlying strength and good prospects for the Swindon and Wiltshire economy. Employment is buoyant, and productivity in Swindon is relatively good compared to the UK as a whole. The area is well placed with a higher prevalence of businesses than is typically the case in several priority sectors that are expected to be influential in the growth of the knowledge economy. This suggests an element of comparative advantage within the region in these sectors that it would be useful to capitalise upon.

The sectoral focus and structure of the regional economy suggests, however, a high degree of exposure to the influence of shocks and broader political and economic trends and developments. Historical data on total output (GVA) suggests, for example, that the region is well placed to take advantage of periods of broader economic growth, however tends to be hit harder when in periods of contraction. This presents a strong rationale for business support, which may be able to dampen the negative economic and social impacts of downturns.

The full impacts of both Covid-19 and EU Exit on businesses in the region are yet to be fully understood. Emerging data suggests, however, that against some measures the region experienced weaker performance across a range of measures going into the pandemic and the transition to new trading relationships with the EU.

Together, the economic data presents a strong rationale for focus on and investment in business support in the region. The evidence suggests that:

- There is a need for entrepreneurial support to boost start-up rates, and to support greater growth and productivity once they are established.
- Support is important in periods of contraction and economic shocks in order to ensure business survival and that they are prepared for growth over the longer term.

The report now turns to consider governance and management arrangements surrounding SWGH.

3 Governance and Management of SWGH

This section reviews the operation of the SWGH, including governance and management arrangements. It first reviews the broader objectives of 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 the key aims and objectives associated with SWGH. The Growth Hub represents a key element of the SWLEPs Local Strategy, which sets out to promote inclusive and sustainable growth.²¹ SWGH provides the regions frontline of business support provision and in many cases the gateway for businesses to access a wealth of different support elements. In this last year, SWGH have often been the conduit between Local Authority and business in supporting them with accessing grant funding.

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

In addition to broader objectives, SWGH also serves as the barometer and advocate for the local business community, capturing and feeding back issues to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS). In the first six months of 2018, the SWLEP focussed on developing its evidence base to underpin its local industrial strategy developed with Government. SWGH provides an important link to businesses in the region and collects and disseminates important business intelligence. Through its activities, SWGH provides a source data and the means by which growth-orientated businesses can be recognised and promoted in pursuit of local and national industrial strategic priorities.

Strategically, the SWGH has shifted its vision and objectives as result of emerging and evolving challenges facing the business community across Swindon and Wiltshire. In 2019/20, SWGH sought to move from light touch/responsive engagement to provision of a full Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) service. This included submitting a bid to deliver the SME Competitiveness (SMEC) programme, funded by ERDF. This ultimately successful application generated a three-year contract would see SWGH move from light touch to a full programme of business support ranging from start up through to growth companies, creating new jobs, products, and services. This programme would be delivered through delivery partners and would also see the introduction of three full time Business Navigators to provide a full IAG service.

²¹ Swindon and Wiltshire Local Industrial Strategy, 2020

This contract enabled SWGH to pivot provision at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Strategically, emphasis pivoted towards implementing and establishing IAG service and supporting BEIS and LAs with COVID response initiatives. Reacting to COVID-19 Wiltshire Council kindly seconded three of their team to support the GH and these resources assisted in premobilisation of the SMEC. The SMEC contract was awarded in April 2020 with a start date of June 2020. Staff were accordingly recruited, and delivery partners appointed. Various communications initiatives were planned and executed to position and promote the GH as the One Stop Shop for Business Support, as agreed with the elected leaders of both Councils via the SWLEP Commissioning Group in March 2020, and to enable LAs to focus on provision of grant relief. A specific engagement programme was designed to further position GH as a business support leader within the area through a webinar series and a greater sense of leadership via the SWLEP managed Business Intelligence Network Group (BING) and through the implementation of the Peer Network contract.

In thinking about future business support requirements from 2021/22, SWGH then set out to measure effectiveness of IAG, driving skills, capacity building to support economic recovery and promotion of skills and re-skilling as sectors contract and grow. This was in response to the pandemic and current economic crisis and the yet to be understood impact of Brexit to focus on skills, re-skilling, and capacity building to support SMEs.

3.2 Governance of the Growth Hub

In guiding the management of SWGH, governance is provided by the SWLEP and others. It provides direct leadership and governance of SWGH through the Growth Hub Governance Group.

The Governance Group currently has 10 members, made up from the business community, business support organisations, including FSB and Chamber of Commerce, Local Authorities and the SWLEP. These members are integrally involved in providing high level direction for the Growth Hub, monitoring performance of the existing delivery mechanisms, reviewing evaluation reports of the service and monitoring spend of the Growth Hub budget. The group benefited from the appointment of a new Chair towards the start of the pandemic when the group met in accordingly in line with Governance framework guidelines.

The Governance Group's purpose is to ensure appropriate governance and programme assurance activities for the SWLEP Growth Hub funding. It also ensures the funding associated with the service is directed and spent in a responsible way whilst also ensuring the necessary processes are in place to do so.

The Growth Hub Governance Group meets quarterly and is chaired by a SWLEP Board Member and the membership includes other business support organisations and local business representatives to ensure a broad range of views and perspectives are covered in terms of measuring performance. The governance arrangements are changing during 2020/21.

The responsibilities of the Growth Hub Governance Group will be transferred to the new Business Environment Group to make it consistent with the governance structure established to oversee the implementation of the SWLEP's Local Industrial Strategy.

The SWLEP's governance framework, assurance framework, transparency measures and accountability arrangements, including conflict of interest policies, have all been approved by the LEP Board, 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 Accountable Body for the SWLEP reviewing and authorising all claims into Central Government. SWGH is subject to an annual external audit organised and overseen by the Accountable Body.

3.2.1 Stakeholder Perceptions of Governance Arrangements

Overall, governance arrangements were broadly seen by stakeholders as appropriate, rigorous and transparent. SWGH had encountered significant operating challenges over 2020-21. This included the transition to home working due to a national lockdown in March 2020. Concurrently, SWGH significantly scaled up its operations, onboarding significant numbers of staff at a distance and implementing new programmes and services. The recent challenges and SWGH response are expanded in more detail in section 3.4 below. Together, it was felt that SWGH had made significant strides under challenging circumstances, and that the governance arrangements had facilitated and supported Growth Hub management.

Within stakeholder conversations, it was felt that the Governance Group membership could be strengthened with greater representation from SME businesses. Securing active and engaged participation from representatives from SMEs was highlighted as challenging. Time constraints coupled with the significant commitment membership brings, may present barriers to some in participating in governance arrangements. This is currently being actively addressed by the Group.

3.3 Growth Hub Management

The Director of Programmes is the strategic lead for SWGH and oversees both direction and operations. The Director reports to the SWLEP CEO. The day-to-day management of SWGH is led by a dedicated Growth Hub Manager. With guidance and support from the Governance Group, 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, the Navigator service. The role also includes engaging and communicating with respective partners across the region, including the various business support projects SWGH signposts businesses to.

3.3.1 Stakeholder Perceptions of Growth Hub Management

Within conversations with stakeholders, it was felt that SWGH had successfully navigated significant challenges, and that this had been down to effective and conscientious management of SWGH. An external stakeholder, for example, suggested that management of SWGH had been exemplary, and that submissions and work emanating from SWGH were of very high quality. Internally, members of the team highlighted that they had felt that SWGH provided a supportive environment, one that helped them to navigate the challenges of remote working. Together, stakeholders were complimentary about the management of SWGH over the last 12 months.

3.4 Recent Developments at SWGH

The positive perceptions of management were driven, in part, by the successful scaling up of services and support offered through SWGH. Recent developments, including Covid-19 and EU Exit, shifted the strategic focus of support away from stimulating and supporting business growth, to business survival and recovery. In March 2020, for example, SWGH rapidly mobilised in response to the impacts of Covid-19 on SMEs. Delivery changes were initiated by SWGH to enable the team to support clients virtually and deliver a slightly restructured programme with crisis management and resilience elements. SWGH significantly expanded its capacity to deliver support with the deployment of:

- Four Business Navigators that provide tailored guidance and support and are a key component of support delivered through SWGH.
- A Digital Advisor that focuses on support businesses around their digital presence, including through the delivery of a Digital Health Check.
- A Skills Advisor that focuses on helping businesses understand and address any training and skills needs.
- A Peer Networks Project Manager to oversee and facilitate the community.

These staff have been brought on with fixed term contracts.

Alongside the response to Covid-19, SWGH also set up new arrangements to support businesses navigate the transition to new trading relationships with the EU. New staff were brought into the service as part of SWGH's EU Transition Business Readiness programme. SWLEP made a delivery partnership arrangement with local business representative group – Inspire – to have two full-time, experienced, Business Engagement Advisers seconded into the Growth Hub Service for the duration of the programme.

These advisers held both outbound and inbound calls and digital communications responsibilities to ensure business enquiries are fielded and subsequently referred into specialist services should the enquiry be of a technical nature. This was supplemented and overseen with the recruitment of a part-time Programme Controller to support the outbound/inbound work, but also, to provide some contractual and operational management support in ensuring effective delivery, intelligence gathering and accurate reporting metrics. In addition, there was a third part-time, internal member of staff recruited who will remain more inbound focused and support with the planning and co-ordination of the webinars within the specialist support element. In total, 3.5 FTE staff were brought into deliver the service. To support the expansion, grant funding was received in December 2020 and concluded on the 31st March 2021.

Together, this has significantly expanded the level and depth of support available to local businesses. The team has grown from three staff in March 2020 to now 15 strong. This has enabled SWGH to strengthen and extend business community engagement. The expansion of SWGH was very well received by broader stakeholders, they have been under considerable pressure and achieved the expansion well and successfully inducting and integrating a large new team at pace.

Recent developments have also significantly expanded SWGH’s budget. Building on core grant funding of £205k in 2020/2021, SWGH now services and delivers contracts to a value of £3.5m. In the financial year 2020/2021, SWGH successfully drew down £257k of BEIS funding relating to the delivery of ‘This Way Up’ programme. It drew a further £503k of transactions and grant payments relating to other BEIS and ERDF programmes. This includes the SME Competitiveness programme which will run to 2023.

For a full breakdown of SWGH budgets for 2019/20 until 2021/22m, see table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1: SWGH Budget breakdown

Period	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Scope	Business as usual, pre COVID-19	COVID-19 response	Recovery
Headcount	3 FTE	15.5 FTE	7 FTE
Funding/ Income*	<u>Total: £231k</u> £205k Core Grant £26k EU Transition Grant	<u>Total: £1.822m</u> £205k Core Grant £660k ERDF SME Comp Year 1 pro-rata £257k Additional Funding BEIS £150k Peer Networks £414k ERDF Grants £136k EU Transition Grant	<u>Total: £1.005m</u> £205k Core Grant £800k ERDF SME Comp Year 2 full *awaiting 2021/20 funding confirmation

3.5 Partnership Arrangements

The Growth Hub manager has actively increased and strengthened engagement with key partner organisations to help extend its profile and to broaden the nature of service provision. Regionally, SWGH plays both a strategic and operational role with regards to business support. SWGH has recently demonstrated its ability to mobilise, collaborate and establish partnership working arrangements. The nature and extent of partnership arrangements has been well received by external stakeholders.

SWGH proactively collaborates with numerous organisations and partners to access existing government programmes and other sources of funded support, which include:

- Working with the local authorities to coordinate support and connect SWGH's resources with programmes such as the Digital Acceleration Hub (ERDF £1m) delivered by SetSquared in partnership with Wiltshire Council.
- Delivering the SME Competitiveness programme (ERDF £2.4m) drawing upon match from delivery partners as well as Swindon Borough Council. This includes specific support to former Honda employees.
- Referring SME's to specialist services and programmes including South West MAS and the National Composite Centre (NCC) to support manufacturing SMEs to diversify and increase productivity.
- Working closely with DiT and its associated delivery partners to facilitate inward investments opportunities, as well as supporting export ready SME's.
- Providing loans to businesses through the Growing Places Investment Fund.
- The Innovate 2 Succeed programme delivered by Business West and funded by Innovate UK and Enterprise Europe Network has engaged with Hub members and businesses via workshops and immersive events.

3.6 Management Information

A key element of coordinating service delivery is the management of information (MI). When the contract for managing and delivering the SW Growth Hub programme was passed back to SWLEP, some customer related evidence was also shared, however it remained the case that various elements of support offered through the LEP and the two local authorities were operating with their own customer relationships management (CRM) systems. Multiple CRM systems undermined the ability to work collaboratively and could lead to duplication and overlap of engagement with local businesses.

To address this issue SWGH team purchased a CRM system from Hubspot with the aim of it being an integrated CRM system that enabled a range of stakeholders, including local authorities and the LEP could use. This enabled the delivery of programmes in specific areas and more coordinated responses, such as the SME Growth Programme and the Salisbury Recovery programme.

HubSpot provides SWGH with a powerful tool from which to coordinate communications and manage engagement with businesses. It is also useful in monitoring and evaluation, including in providing Hub performance and business intelligence to funders and other stakeholders. This includes returns to BEIS. The key factor determining the aggregate statistics and firm-level data LEPs are required to report is the “intensity level” of the support SWGH has provided to a business. Recognising that, in practice the intensity of support exists on a continuum (both in terms of time spent with a business and in terms of the nature of support), the following categories are thought to be a practical way of measuring the support provided:

- “Light touch” – transactional interactions with Growth Hubs which do not consume significant dedicated resource. Examples include:
 - telephone enquiries and basic signposting
 - face-to-face appointments (involving very light-touch diagnostics)
 - web-based interactions (e.g. contact form, user registration to members area, use of live chat, online diagnostic tools, message through social media) [note: only interactive actions should be counted – not passive actions like views of a web page]
- “Medium intensity” – interactions which use moderate Growth Hub resource (approximately one-hour plus) and which broadly aligns with the point in the customer journey at which GH start collecting basic firm-level data. Example:
 - business diagnostic with Growth Hub advisor/ business attendance at a support workshop
 - referral to business support schemes and programmes (local and national)
- “High intensity” – interactions representing sustained support and using significant Growth Hub resource, broadly aligned to the EU 12-hour metric for “Enterprise Support”. Examples:
 - businesses with managed accounts
 - services / support directly provided by Growth Hub

Given the level of complexity of the services and support offered to businesses, including the bespoke nature of much of the advice, effectively and accurately collecting information is challenging. Through broader conversations with stakeholders, the rapid scaling up of SWGH delivery team coupled with the remote onboarding of new staff created challenges in ensuring consistency of enumeration, the entry of information onto the system. Examination of a download of CRM data for this evaluation found that the system logged over 500 variables, often with duplications. This presented challenges in understanding exactly what support businesses had received, and when. It was also subsequently found that some data was incorrect or out of date, including the extent of support that businesses had received. Some of this is to be expected given the scale of engagement, the complexity of support offered to businesses, and the fact that many people across SWGH and in partner organisations access and input into the system. Certain initiatives, including EU funded programmes require robust MI that accurately accounts for ERDF funded provision.

4 Support Delivery

This section maps the services and support offered through SWGH. It also highlights the experiences and perceptions of businesses towards the support that they received.

4.1 Guiding Principles

As the business support arm of the SWLEP, the Growth Hub offers a range of information and support to businesses across the region. The guiding principles of SWGH are to provide high quality, relevant business support and advice. SWGH is also designed around the principles of providing universal, free and impartial advice to all businesses that seek support. This model seeks to support all businesses regardless of their circumstances or characteristics, or the specific challenges that they face.

Across conversations with internal and external stakeholders, the principle of universality was held as important and valuable. Some other Hubs across the country take a different approach, including for example the Thames Valley Hub, which provide more focused and selective approach to delivery of more intensive support. They focus support on businesses that can demonstrate high growth potential and operate in the priority sectors identified by the Thames Valley LEP. Within the context of Swindon and Wiltshire, within conversations it was felt that the approach of supporting all businesses that engaged SWGH addressed important gaps in business support provision. It ensured that all those businesses requiring or seeking support were able to access it.

4.2 Types of Support

The support offered by SWGH is broadly structured around a tiered system. As an introduction, businesses first encounter a light touch service provision offered primarily via the Growth Hub website. Businesses can then access more in depth and tailored support coordinated and, in some cases, delivered directly through SWGH. Together, SWGH combines digital and light touch engagement and more direct delivery methods that are bespoke to create a comprehensive, blended offer.

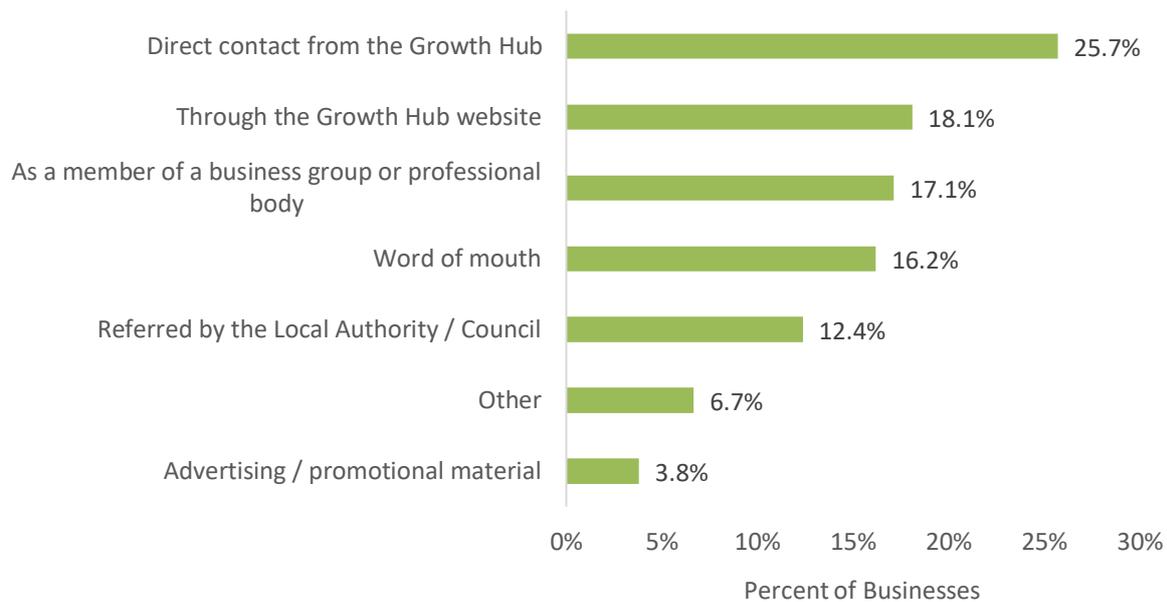
Historically, the support offered through SWGH centred around an online portal. The website seeks to signpost relevant information across a range of topics, including on starting a business, securing funding and finance, and regulation and compliance. The website historically also signposted relevant services and support offered by other providers. Together, the website provides businesses with an accessible and visible portal from which to explore the questions that they face, and information and support that is available to them.

In March 2020, the Growth Hub rapidly mobilised in response to the pandemic. SWGH significantly expanded its capacity to deliver support, including more tailored and intensive advice and guidance. This has included the expansion on more one-on-one support, as well as the administration of grants and other schemes.

4.3 Initial Engagement with SWGH

Within the survey of businesses that engaged with the evaluation (n=105), respondents were asked how they first became aware of the Growth Hub. Key methods of engagement included direct contact from SWGH (25.7 per cent), through the website (18.1 per cent), and through business groups or professional bodies (17.1 per cent). Word of mouth was also important in attracting businesses to SWGH, suggesting that SWGH holds a good reputation amongst the business community within Swindon and Wiltshire (16.2 per cent).

Figure 4.1: How did you first hear about the Growth Hub?

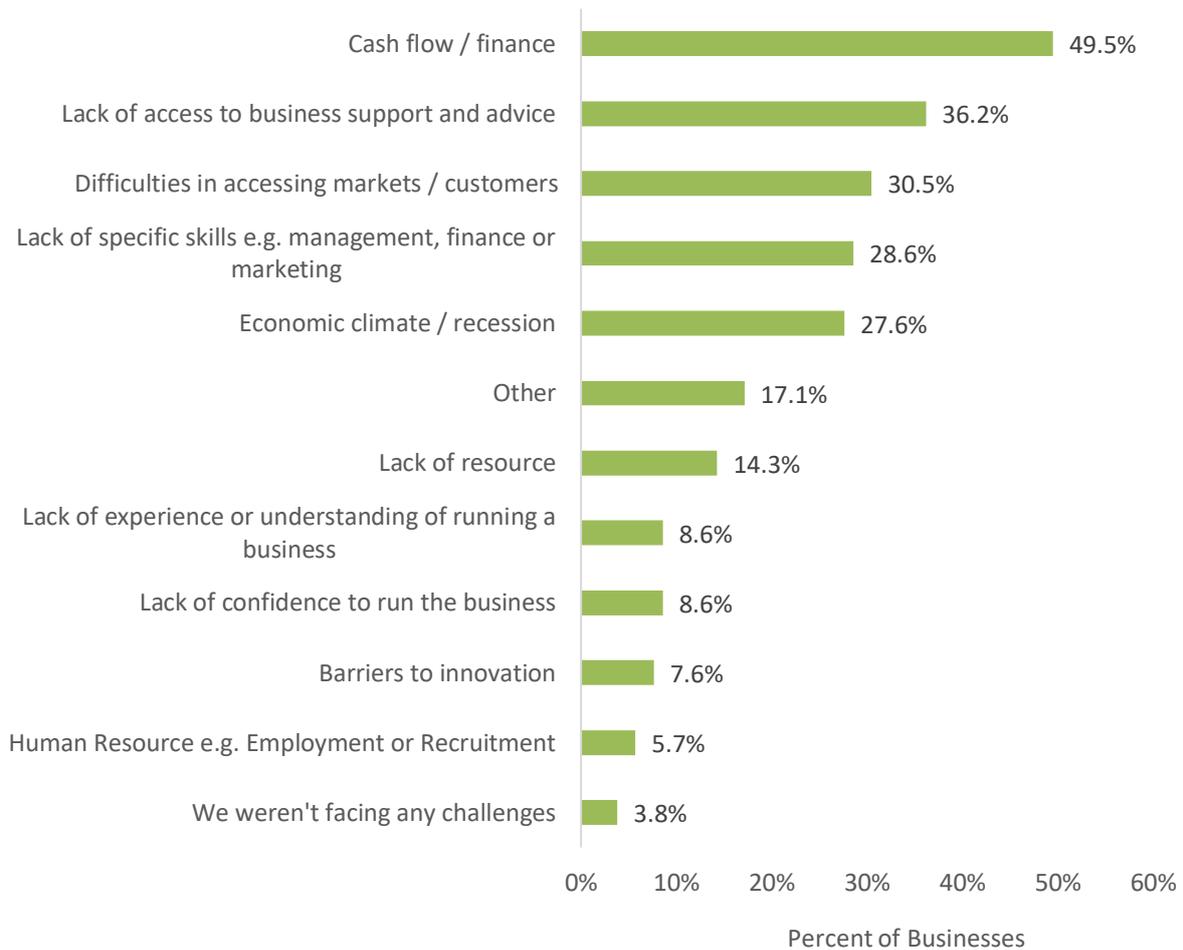


This data highlights that proactive communications with potential businesses may be a valuable and effective approach to driving engagement. It also indicates that advertising and broader promotional materials may not be as effective in driving engagement. This suggests that activities such as SWGHs engagement with the Business Intelligence Networking Group (BING) are effective in raising awareness amongst businesses. It also suggests that less targeted, broadcast communications may be less as effective than more focused communications with existing networks, business groups and professional bodies.

4.3.1 Reasons for Engagement

The reasons for businesses engaging with SWGH and accessing support were many and varied. Key challenges facing businesses included cash flow and finance (49.5 per cent). This is consistent with the challenges presented by Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown of March 2020. Another key reason for engaging SWGH was the perceived lack of access to business support and advice (36.2 per cent). This suggests that SWGH provides a key source of support and advice, bridging gaps in the existing business support landscape within Swindon and Wiltshire. The majority of businesses reported experiencing more than one challenge, suggesting that respondents are navigating complex and wide-ranging issues that are affecting their operations.

Figure 4.2: When you initially reached out to SWGH what were the challenges you or your business faced? Note: Businesses could report more than one challenge (n=250)

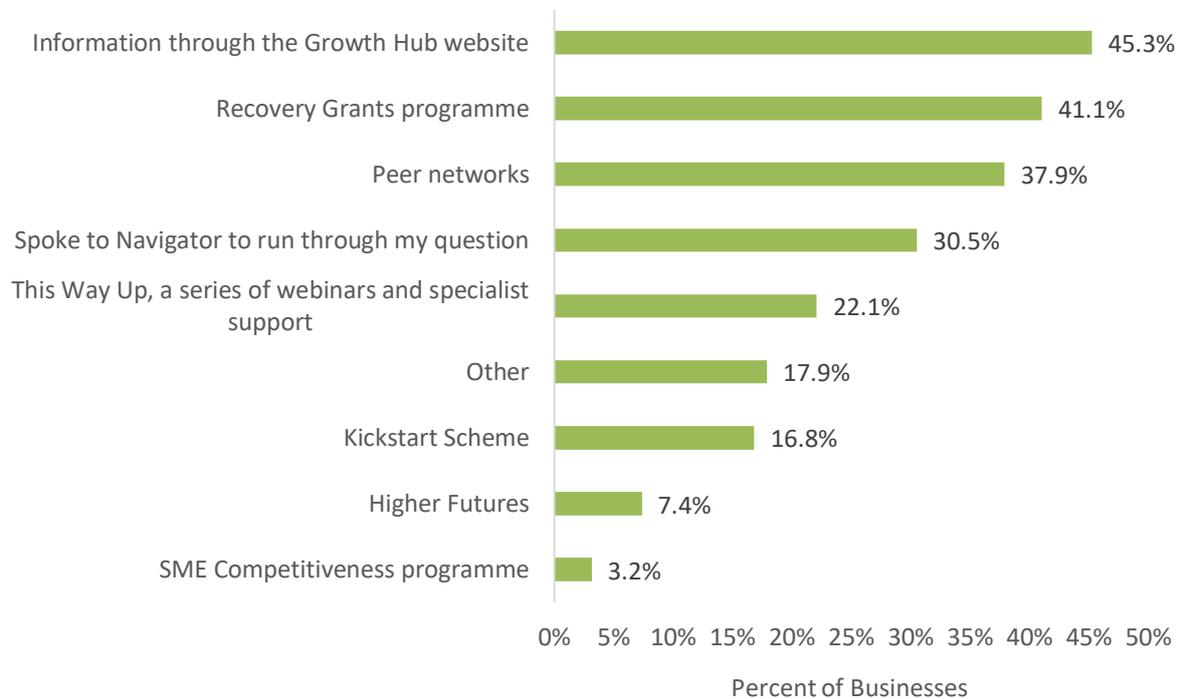


Further, 67.3 per cent of respondents went on to say that they sought specific advice and guidance because of challenges they were experiencing as a result of Covid-19 (n=105). In supporting the transition to new trading relationships, 21.9 per cent of respondents sought advice and guidance in responding to EU Exit (n=105).

4.3.2 Types of Support

Once engaged, respondents were signposted or accessed a range of different support offered through SWGH. A key element of information support was information and guidance published on SWGH’s website (45.3 per cent). Another key support offering was the Recovery Grants programme (41.1 per cent), Peer Networks (37.9 per cent), and bespoke advice delivered through Navigators (30.5 per cent). Again, most respondents highlighted that they had received more than one type of support.

Figure 4.3: As a result of your engagement with SWGH, were you referred to any of the following services or support? Note: Businesses could report more than one support offer (n=211)



4.4 Growth Hub Website

A key element of the support offered through SWGH is the online portal. The website was extensively redeveloped in 2017. Within an overall digital strategy, the website initially set out to:

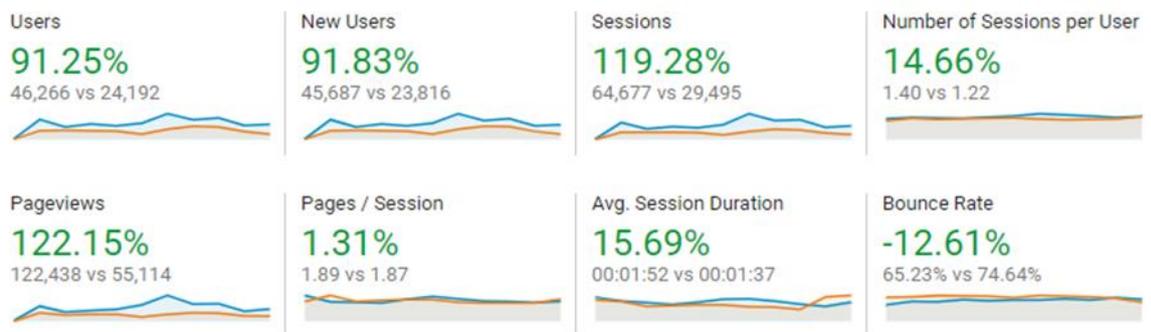
- Integrate business intelligence data.
- Address the lack of awareness of the SWLEP/SWGH.
- Implement robust communications and operational service standards for all third-party delivery partners to eradicate conflicts of interest and to ensure visibility of the SWLEP brand and establish effective performance reporting and business intelligence data flow into the LEP.
- Develop a content strategy that addresses the specific support and service delivery needs of businesses within the region.
- Provide a Growth Hub platform with digital service delivery, a capability to allow business support to be delivered at increased scale and cost-efficiency.
- Develop and implement a strategy for commercial self-sustainability.

Since its development, there have been further efforts to strengthen and refresh the offer, functionality and resources available through the website. The investment in the portal is clearly evident, with previous evaluations establishing that the website has become easier to navigate, with clearer and more consistent content and communication. Stakeholders were very positive about the progress that has been made.

4.4.1 Website Performance

Improvements to the functionality and content on SWGH's website are translating to observed improvements in engagement. Since March 2020, the website has seen exponential growth in traffic and the time visitors spend on the website. The website received 52,862 visitors between April 2020 and March 2021, up from 24,192 for the same period the year before, representing a 91 per cent increase. This also included an increase in repeat visitors, from 8.2 per cent in 2019-20, to 13.4 per cent in 2020-21. The website also saw an increase in the time visitors spend on the website. Average session duration grew from 1 minute 37 seconds in 2019-20, to 1 minute 52 sec in 2020-21. Bounce rate, the proportion of visitors that immediately leave the website, is also down by 12.6 per cent.

Figure 4.4: Growth Hub Website Analytics, Source SWGH, Google Analytics, 2021



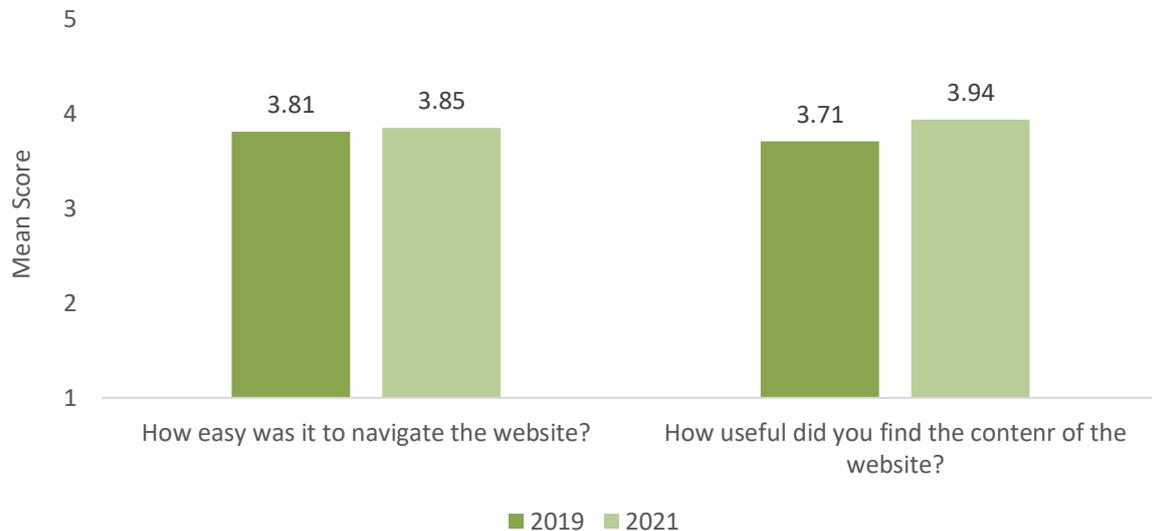
This data suggests that the website is providing more relevant and engaging material to businesses that access the site. When businesses have engaged, they have engaged for longer, and they are more likely to return.

4.4.2 The Views of Businesses towards the Website

Improvements to functionality and content of the website also translated to improvements in the perceptions of businesses accessing the site. As part of the survey, respondents were asked to rate how easy it was to navigate the website and how useful they found the subsequent content. Most respondents, for example, felt that the website was easy, or very easy to navigate (72.5 per cent). A further 86.5 per cent of respondents felt that the subsequent content was useful or very useful. Respondents also felt that the website made it easy or very easy to identify how they could access further business support (68.2 per cent).

The data also highlighted improvements to visitor perceptions since the last evaluation in 2019, especially surrounding the value of content on the website. In 2019, businesses reported on average a score of 3.71, which increased to 3.94 in 2021.

Figure 4.5: Mean scores for responses to questions exploring perceptions of the functionality and content of the website, with a scale of 1-5 where 1 is very hard/not useful at all and 5 is very easy/very useful (2019, n=25, 2021, n=105)



Respondents in 2021 were also asked how the functionality and content of the portal could be improved. On the whole responses were broadly positive:

“Not really as it’s a very good site.” - Response ID: 12

“It couldn’t. The website hasn’t been the main thing for me though, I’ve used it but it’s sort of sat in the background, it’s the people at the hub that have been the most important for me.” - Response ID: 97

Where respondents did offer substantive suggestions on how the website could be improved, these tended to centre on three distinct themes. The first involved the specificity of the information available through the website. Some felt that the information was too generic in nature, and that there would be benefit from more focused, detailed guidance:

“Perhaps splitting it out by business size, i.e. what you need to be considering for a start-up, vs, longer term issues/larger businesses I definitely felt there was a ‘blanket’ amount of advice, a lot of which wasn’t that helpful. I have very little time and need help to figure out what I need to focus on, from the site and advisors.” - Response ID: 67

“More concise information needed especially for SME’s who don’t have time to trawl through hundreds of documents. More support for actual SME’s with smaller turnover - maybe we are just more effective with our budgets and do less with more, but that should not preclude us, as we offer local employment.” - Response ID: 80

A second substantive theme related to improvements in navigating the website. These tended to be minor, focused suggestions:

“I think navigation of the system needs to be improved slightly, it's trying to figure out how you navigate to certain things like a certain webinar or weblink. I think greater clarity on the drop-down menus is needed because you could look at the list and wonder is that it or not, will that take me to what I need, so if it is was labelled more clearly it would be good.” - Response ID: 104

“The search function fails to find webinars when I search by their exact title.” - Response ID: 94

The third substantive theme related not necessarily to the website itself, but how the portal connected to broader support offered through SWGH. From these perspectives, respondents felt that the follow-up support could be more coherent and effective. These responses suggest that these perceptions were formed prior to the expansion of capacity and support available through SWGH in May 2020:

“I haven't visited the website for a while, I don't think it's the website that's the problem it's the lack of response to direct enquiries.” - Response ID: 38

Overall, however, the perceptions of businesses accessing the website were broadly positive. In accessing support, 60.6 per cent of respondents reported drawing on the website. Together, this suggests that the website is a valuable and important element of the support delivered through SWGH.

4.5 Tailored, In-depth Support

SWGH also offers more tailored and in-depth advice and guidance, including through one-to-one support offered by Navigators.

4.5.1 Growth Hub Membership

SWGH also runs a membership scheme, which is coordinated through the website. Membership of SWGH gives businesses a range of additional information and support, including segmented comms and access to a dedicated micro site. Members are also able to access news and events, as well as targeted business support. Membership has increased since it was founded in 2018. The community continues to grow, now sitting at a total of 1800 members in April 2021, an increase of 107 in the previous two months.

4.5.2 SME Competitiveness

The SME Competitiveness initiative represents SWGH's flagship support programme. The aim is to provide businesses with a package of bespoke support tailored to their needs. The programme provides advice, guidance, and funding across a range of areas, from starting a business to employing new staff, growing a business to launching new products. The programme is ERDF funded and delivered via SWGH along with partners YTKO, SETSquared, and Swindon Borough Council and Wiltshire Council.

The ERDF funding was fortunate in the sense that it provided SWGH with a three-year contract to deliver start and scale up support through delivery partners. It increased the capacity of SWGH including the recruitment of business navigators and a compliance officer. Covid-19 subsequently created significant demand, and the funding meant SWGH was in a better position to meet it. It also meant that businesses actively sought out support, and SWGH did not have to actively engage potential beneficiaries.

SWGH then shaped the offer to the businesses that were seeking support. There was a high proportion of smaller, lifestyle business that relied heavily on corporate supply chains that had been significantly affected by Covid-19. Revenue funding was therefore focused on issues surrounding Human Resources, including how to furlough and make redundancies, and broader legal and financial support. Capital investments were focused on technology adoption and developing online business models.

To date, SWGH has made 130 referrals to the programme. Within the business survey, those explicitly citing that they had received support through the SME Competitiveness programme reported an average net promoter score of 9.0 out of 10.

4.5.3 Peer Networks

SWGH also runs and facilitates Peer Networks which aim to bring together business leaders from specific sectors. SWGH established diverse cohort groups to collaboratively work through common business issues. Through interactive action learning, the groups are brought together virtually to discuss challenges, gain and reflect on valuable feedback and implement practical solutions to overcome them. The workshops are facilitated and draw on sector experts to share knowledge across a range of topics, such as finance to Human Resources. The programme includes:

- Nine x two-hour fortnightly sessions
- Interactive action learning
- Cohorts of 8-11 Business leaders
- Flexible topic selection
- Additional three and a half hours of one-to-one support.

The Networks are designed for business leaders who want to grow and develop their organisations. The programme is open to SME businesses that have:

- Operated for at least one year
- At least five employees
- A turnover of at least £100,000
- An aspiration to improve.

The aim is to help businesses to build and strengthen and improve their overall performance. The programme's long-term objectives are focused on reducing the productivity gap by helping business leaders find practical solutions to strategic and operational challenges. The programme also aims to provide actionable insight to tackle the short-term issues and those related to COVID-19. The Peer Networks Programme is funded by the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) in response to a commitment made in the 2019 Business Productivity Review. Funding for the project took time to secure, and once achieved SWGH had to deliver within tight timescales.

As of April 2021, SWGH were on track to complete seven cohorts of peer networks, averaging seven participants per cohort. Sectors covered include Professional Services, Health & Wellbeing, Community and Manufacturing. It is intended to extend the programme for another year.

Overall, awareness amongst respondents to the business survey of Peer Networks was high, with 82.7 per cent reporting that they were aware of the networks. Only 33.7 per cent had however engaged with the Networks, suggesting that the support network is not for everyone.

Of those that had accessed the networks, 82.7 per cent of respondents had found them useful or extremely useful, suggesting that they are a valuable resource to those that accessed them. Further commentary suggested that some might benefit from sectoral or thematic peer groups, for example:

"I come from an admin background which is a bit of a jump to running a business, we're likely to turnover between £1.8 million to £2 million turnover in the next couple of years and I feel as though I'm winging it, I'm all for equality but I think if there was something for women on the website, it might help me and make it more accessible for me." - Response ID: 105

4.5.4 This Way Up Webinars

In September 2020, SWGH launched the 'This Way Up' series of webinars to help businesses recover and adapt to the challenging trading and operating environment presented by Covid-19. Written and delivered by subject experts, the series covered topics including amongst others:

- Leadership
- Effective digital commerce
- Sales finance
- Mental health
- Marketing

All webinars were recorded and are available on catch up through the website. A total of 2500 business leaders registered for webinars. A total of 1600 delegates attended live, and 413 people clicking through the 'watch again' links. Overall, reception from businesses that engaged with the webinar series was positive. Those explicitly citing that they had attended or viewed a webinar reported an average net promoter score of 9.0 out of 10.²²

4.5.5 Digital Advisory Services

SWGH also offers dedicated digital advisory services, delivered by the Digital Advisor. This includes the delivery of a Digital Health Check. This is aimed at giving businesses an understanding of strengths and limitations across online operations. If a business is adapting their digital approach, then the Digital Advisor can help by guiding them through the latest technologies that could be deployed, increasing digital capability. To date, 102 one on one Digital Advice appointments have been delivered with action planning and follow-ups. The service has been very well received by businesses, with those explicitly stating that they had received a Digital Health Check reporting an average net promoter score of 8.2 out of 10.

4.5.6 Coronavirus (Covid-19) Business Support

Across much provision, including through the website and through engagement with Navigators, a key focus of support has been on supporting businesses through the challenges presented by Covid-19.

Overall, 67.3 per cent of respondents to the survey stated that they sought specific advice and guidance because of challenges they were experiencing as a result of Covid-19. When expanding on the challenges they faced, a key theme revolved around loss of trade and subsequent cash flow problems businesses encountered:

“Loss of business overnight, cashflow impact, and no access to any kind of financial support for months other than loans.” - Response ID: 10

²² Net promoter score seeks to measure customer experience and satisfaction. The survey asked respondents on a scale of 1 to 10 whether they would recommend the Hub to other businesses. We were then able to determine the support that respondents had accessed, and the average (mean) score they gave.

“My business has been decimated by the Covid-19 outbreak and as I do not trade from a leased property the amount of help is woeful. We have lost all contracts to both motor and aviation industries because of the affect this has had on them.” -
Response ID: 95

Businesses also outlined specific support that they had received that helped them to navigate the challenges presented by the pandemic. This included transitioning to new working arrangements, and how to strengthen online presence:

“Support with IT equipment. Support with marketing. Support with funds.” -
Response ID: 86

“Advice re grants and also re using social media to keep our profile alive.” -
Response ID: 85

Within more detailed conversations, including with Navigators, some businesses that had contacted SWGH were experiencing very significant challenges. This included the emotional and personal challenges people faced in securing their livelihoods. This also suggests that there may be broader social and emotional benefits to the support offered through SWGH.

Those explicitly citing that they had received support navigating the challenges presented by Covid-19 reported an average net promotor score of 7.0 out of 10.

4.5.7 EU Transition Support

In supporting businesses to make in relation to the transition to new arrangements, SWGH developed and implemented a package of support. The key aims of the EU Transition programme were to make businesses aware of how they need to prepare for the end of the transition. It sought to help improve business resilience at the local and regional level in preparation for the transition. The aim of support was to help businesses understand what the changes mean for them if they are:

- Importing or exporting goods from the EU
- Moving goods to or from Northern Ireland
- Providing business services to the EU
- Travelling to the EU
- Living and working in the EU

The key elements of the programme involved the provision of additional advisory resources to undertake outreach and to fulfil the advice and guidance needs of businesses engaging with SWGH. It sought to provide specialist and more intensive support where needed, including via events and workshops, as well as local intelligence, analysis and monitoring functions. SWGH took on a coordination function for regional and local activity, including effectively disseminating and targeting information on key developments quickly and simply to those who need it.

The programme was mobilised in December 2020 and launched January 2021. SWGH successfully recruited a Programme Controller, and two full-time Business Engagement Advisers. The programme also enlisted the Department for International Trade and Business West to deliver specialist expertise to the service.

Over 3000 businesses have been engaged directly via telephone and digital communications with 80 referrals made into specialist support provided by Business West & The Export Department. In addition, as part of the specialist element of the programme, partners delivered six webinars. In total, SWGH set out to support c5000 businesses. Sectors initially targeted were Transport, Manufacturing and Food & Drink, branching out to a broader remit of any organisations that may be importing/exporting to/from the EU.

Overall, 21.9 per cent of businesses responding to the survey sought advice and guidance in responding to EU Exit. In understanding the challenges facing businesses, broadly these related to navigating disruption to supply chains and in exploring goods or services to the EU:

"Supply chain, it's the fact that previously, we could get our hands on all our products very easily but we've not been able to since Brexit because supplies are from Europe and we're competing with others for purchasing." - Response ID: 86

"Lots! Much like everyone else in the food industry. Our challenges have been surrounding understanding some of the legislation that comes as a result of Brexit and what that means day to day as well as how it impacts customers in the EU." - Response ID: 18

Respondents offered a range of benefits of support, including in navigating the transition. Key themes included making sense of the complexity surrounding the transition, and in planning and business development:

"Generally on helping me use assets that I didn't know existed and help my general view on business development. A consistent and very helpful business partner." - Response ID: 36

"Helped support my understanding of how I have interpreted the information and legislation I have read." - Response ID: 18

Overall, support and advice surrounding the transition was well received. Those explicitly citing that they had received EU Exit support reported an average net promoter score of 8.5 out of 10.

4.5.8 Skills and Apprenticeships (Higher Futures)

SWGNH have a dedicated Skills & Enterprise Advisor to help businesses get the most out of skills support including apprenticeships, other work-based learning and access to talent.

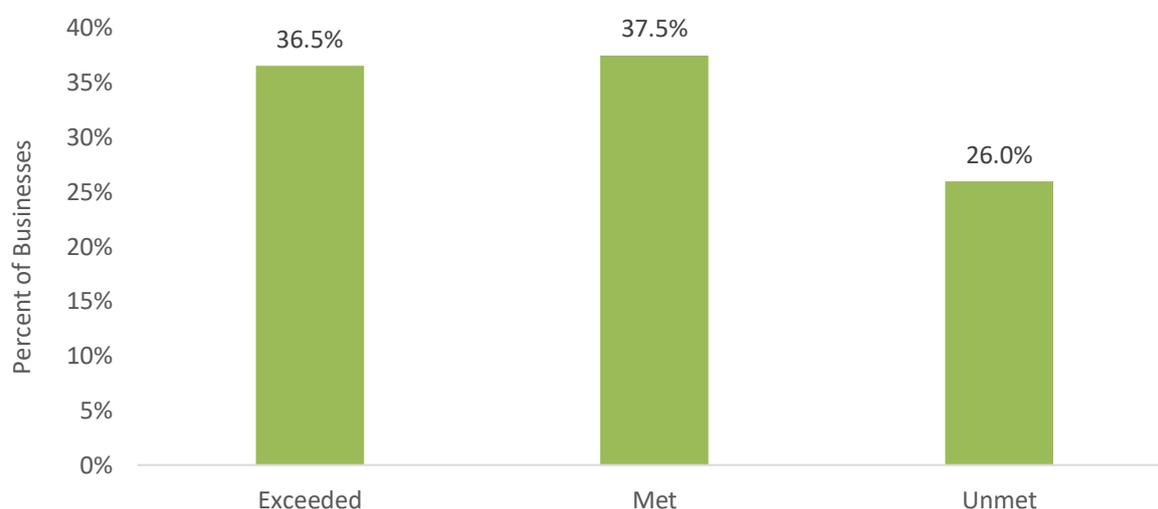
4.5.9 Kickstart Scheme

SWGK is also an approved gateway for the Government's Kickstart programme, designed to support young people move into work. Gateway organisations provide support to promote opportunities for young people and to provide administrative support and guidance to employers who are looking to benefit from the scheme (through receipt of a grant to enable them to take on a young person through a placement). With 223 placements already in progress SWGK have been particularly successful with channelling the resource from this programme into businesses in Swindon and Wiltshire.

4.6 Overarching Perceptions of Support

Overall, perceptions of the support that businesses received was positive, with 74 per cent of respondents reporting that accessing SWGK had met or exceeded their expectations:

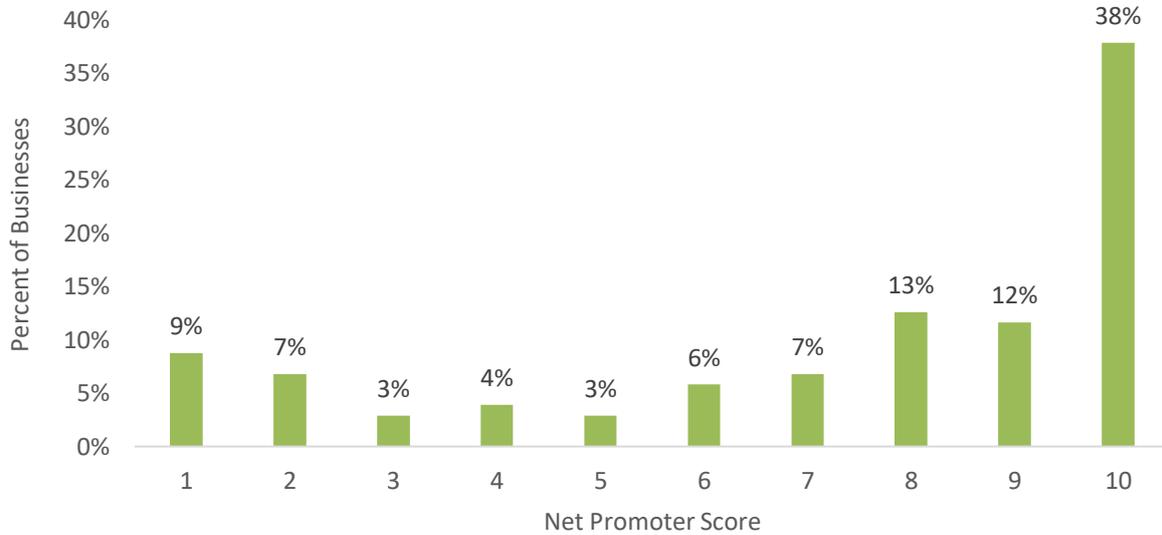
Figure 4.6: Overall, were your expectations unmet, met, or exceeded?



Overall, respondents were generally very positive about the ease of engaging with SWGK, and the subsequent communication that they received from SWGK team.

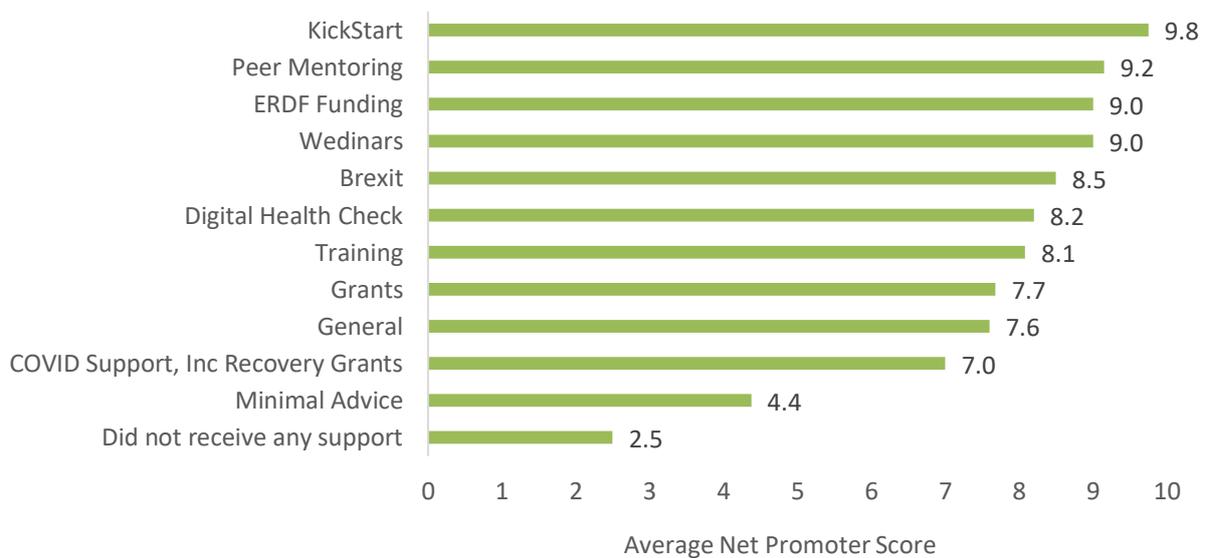
In terms of global perceptions of the support businesses received, 62 per cent of respondents reported that they were likely or very likely to recommend SWGK to other businesses (Net Promoter Score of 8 or above out of 10). This is an important proxy measure for overall levels of satisfaction with the support that they had received.

Figure 4.7: On a scale of 0 (unlikely) to 10 (very likely), how likely would you be to recommend SWGH to other businesses?



Exploring responses to this question by the support that businesses received, there were differences in perceptions between the different types of support business received. Those who reported that they received more tailored, in-depth support, for example, were more likely to view the support that they received more positively. Conversely, those that received minimal, or no support tended to view the support they received more negatively.

Figure 4.8: Mean score of Net Promoter Score by type of support received

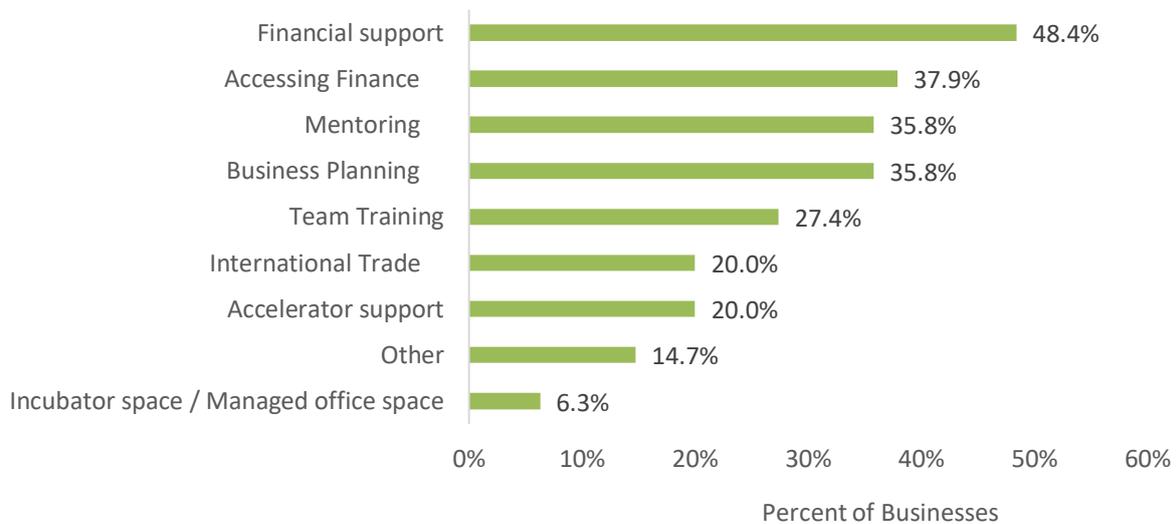


This data suggests that the blended mix of support including both light touch online provision and more in-depth and tailored advice may be effective in meeting the needs of the business community.

4.7 Future Support Requirements

Of those surveyed, 61.9 per cent felt that they would value further support from SWGH over the coming year (2021-22). The support requirements reported by respondents reinforces the continuing liquidity problems that many businesses are encountering because of the ongoing impact of Covid-19. Financial support, including through grants, as well as accessing financial services were both highlighted by respondents as key support needs. Mentoring, support with business planning, and training were also key themes highlighted by respondents.

Figure 4.9: What support could SWGH provide your business over the next 12 months? (n=234)



More broadly, reflecting on the trading and operating environments facing respondents, 29.5 per cent of businesses reported that current conditions for their business was poor with 54.3 per cent as middling. The remaining 16.2 per cent felt trading conditions were good. Despite the challenges facing respondents, their outlook for the future was more positive. In the next 12 months, 77.1 per cent of businesses expect their revenue to increase, and 41.9 per cent expect to employ new full-time staff.

Overall, however, the data does suggest that there is considerable need for business support, especially more focused and bespoke advice and guidance. The perceptions of businesses towards the support that they received suggest that more tailored, medium and high intensity support was welcomed by businesses, and it is more effective at addressing their needs and expectations. The data is, however, partial, and those who sought and accessed lighter touch information which they felt was effective may have been less likely or motivated to respond to the business survey.

5 Hub Achievements

This section seeks to reflect on the progress and impact of the Growth Hub, drawing on available quantitative indicators and evidence. The section also outlines broad proxies of the impact of support on businesses.

5.1 Stakeholder Reflections on Progress

Stakeholders interviewed through the evaluation were also asked for their reflections on the progress of the Growth Hub over the last couple of years. Across stakeholders there was almost universal recognition of the progress that has been made, and the recognition of the significant challenges SWGH has faced.

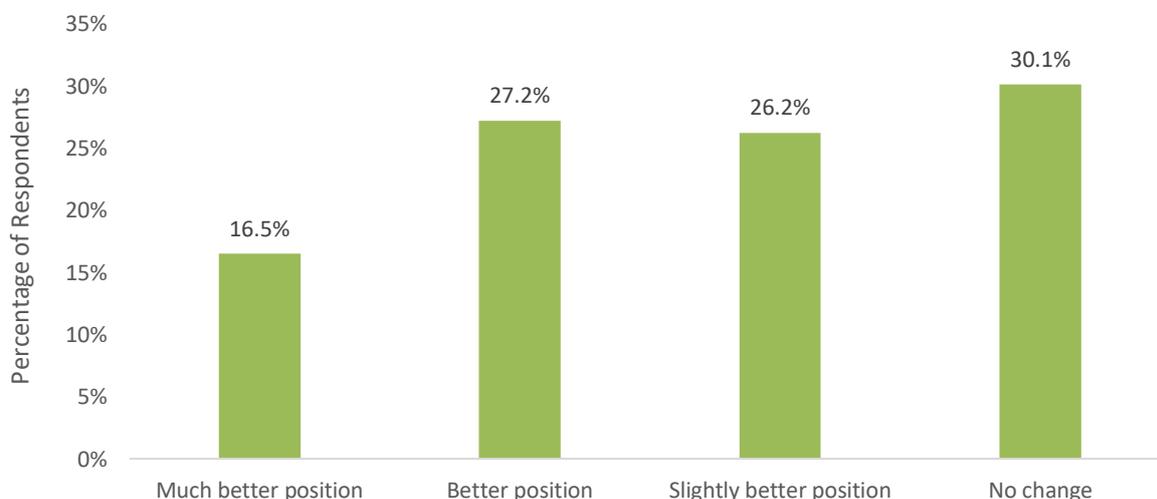
Collectively therefore there is both recognition, enthusiasm and confidence for the continued progression of SWGH with several referring to the importance of cementing a more established diagnostic and referral process that would be brought about through securing ERDF funding further details on the plans associated with securing these funds are set out in the following section.

5.2 Impacts for Businesses

The survey also examined proxies for the impact of the support on businesses. This information is based on self-reported impacts, rather than more objective measures of performance gains.

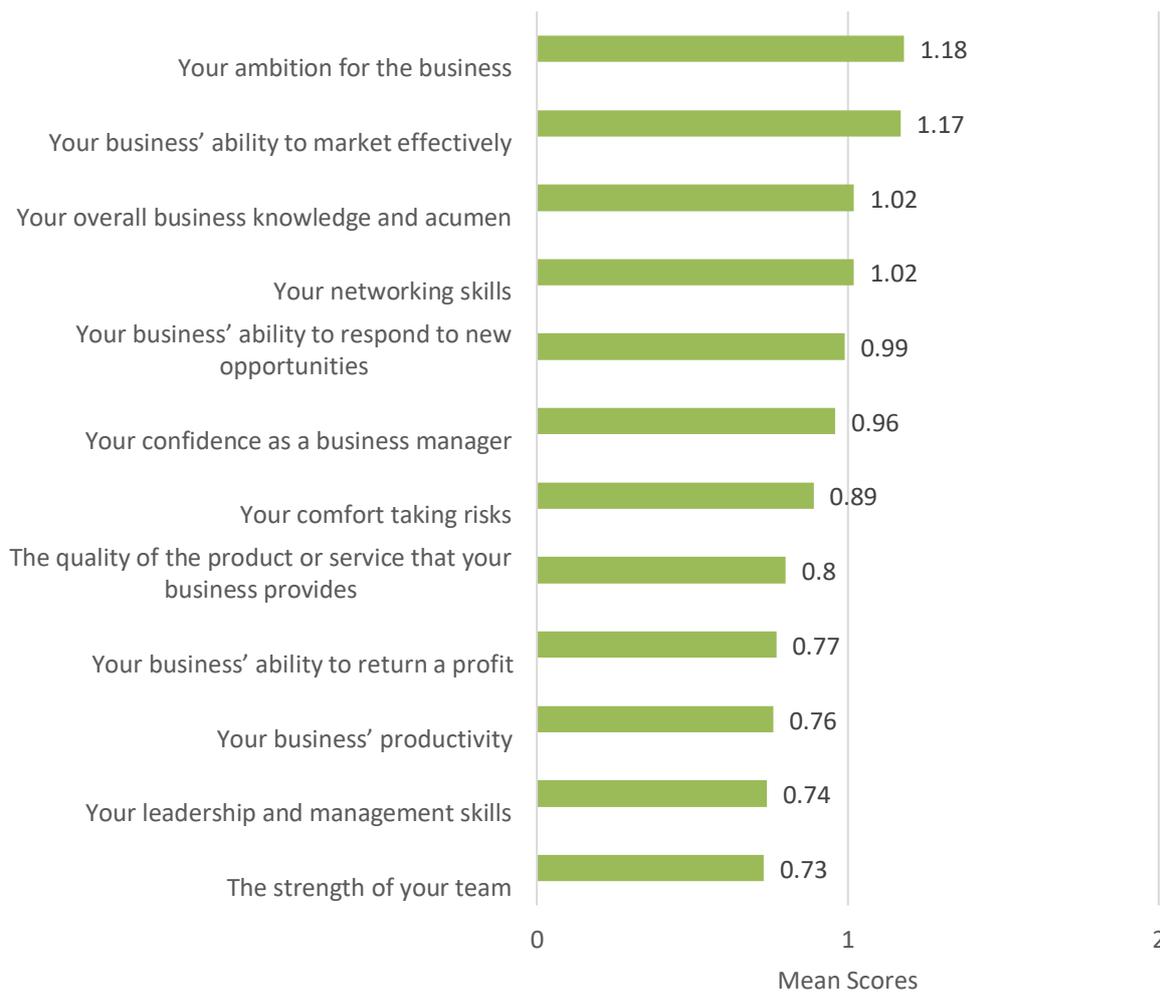
As a result of engagement, 43.7 per cent of respondents felt that they were in a better or much better position because of the support that they had received. These businesses were more likely to have received more intensive and bespoke support from SWGH.

Figure 5.1: To what extent do you think your business is in a better place because of the support that you received from SWGH?



More detailed responses exploring impact against a range of domains suggests that support has been relatively effective in raising the ambitions of a business. Relative to other factors, on average businesses reported greater impacts for raising the ambition for the business, the ability of the business to market effectively, and improving overall business knowledge and acumen. Conversely, on average respondents felt that support was less effective at improving the strength of the team, improve leadership and management skills, and in improving the firms productivity, relative to other factors.

Figure 5.2: Mean scores impact against a range of domains, where 2 = Impact, and 0 = no impact



Overall, these provide an indication of the likely impacts of support, rather than a definitive statement. They are suggestive, however, of the likely attitudinal and behaviour changes that information and support can deliver to businesses, including in improving business confidence and ambitions for the business. Together with generally positive perceptions of support, this suggests that SWGH, as it is currently configured, provides a valuable resource to businesses at a challenging time.

6 Plans for the Future

A key objective for the short-term is to focus on preparing businesses for the economic recovery. This includes supporting them to remain resilient to the ongoing socio-economic challenges that the pandemic presents but also in supporting businesses to adapt or pivot to new opportunities which may involve capacity development and upskilling of businesses to ensure that they are ready to navigate the new operating environment as it emerges.

The importance of entrepreneurial support is also recognised by SWLEP, in part linked to the Honda plant closing in 2021 but also in recognition of the socio-economic turbulence brought about by the pandemic.

At the time of writing, the short-term objectives of SWGH include:

- Strategically plan Growth Hub business support services based on funding allocation.
- Submit second ERDF SME Competitiveness and Recovery Grant financial claims.
- Submit the Q3 financial claims for BEIS contracts.
- Distribute all ERDF Recovery Grant funds and bring the project to a successful close.
- Continue to provide support to Local Authority partners by guiding and supporting businesses through Local Authority COVID-related grants schemes.
- Recruit five x Kickstart placements across SWLEP.
- Continue to build relationships with strategic partners and hence further develop the Growth Hub's profile.

Over the longer term, SWGH is exploring the possibility for incorporating as a separate entity from SWLEP.

Whilst there were extensive discussions on how to improve the financial sustainability of SWGH in 2019, recent events, particularly in association with COVID-19 have overtaken that agenda. The market for support has changed for the time being with an emphasis on utilising growth hubs to readily access support to help businesses to survive and recover in times which are operationally challenging for local businesses. The massive uplift in engagement levels in Swindon and Wiltshire is illustrative of the critical role that Growth Hubs can play as the first port of call in times of crises as well as opportunity and it is important that there remains a breadth of support on offer from free to access advice through to intensive support for those businesses that present most opportunity (or indeed greatest need).

7 Conclusions and Recommendations

Since the previous evaluation in 2019, the Growth Hub has gone through a period of significant change, including in the expansion of the support it is able to offer to businesses. This has been alongside the continued improvement and investment in the development of existing content and support, including through the website.

7.1 Governance and Management

Governance

Whilst there has been substantial change in the operational structure of the Growth Hub, the Governance Group has remained relatively stable throughout this period, operating with a largely consistent remit and a reasonable level of churn in terms of individual representation on the Group throughout that period. There has been, and indeed remains, a desire to improve representation on the Group with greater private sector engagement a particular goal. However, it is recognised that the remit of the Governance Group, the fact that private sector representatives are not reimbursed for their involvement and the extent of bureaucracy faced by the group make it challenging for a private sector representative to sustain engagement on the Group.

Recommendation

To further explore ideas and approaches for securing greater engagement from target businesses in the governance of SWGH. This includes, for example, structuring arrangements to reduce barriers to engagement such as reducing the time commitment or making it easier to participate in meetings. One approach to encourage engagement may be to reduce the commitment required, such as focusing contributions within meetings and broader input on issues relevant to businesses themselves. This could include feeding into conversations and decisions around programming and service design rather than on broader topics such as process, finance or governance. This may make representation more attractive.

Management

In the management of SWGH, there have been significant operational challenges to scaling support and ensuring consistency and continuity of provision over the last 12 months. A new Growth Hub manager was installed. Building on core funding of £205,000, SWGH now services and delivers contracts to a value of £3.5m. The team has grown from three staff in March 2020 to now 15 strong. Overall, management of SWGH over the last 12 months has been viewed positively by both internal and external stakeholders. That stakeholders and beneficiary businesses are speaking so positively about the support on offer despite these challenges is testament to the level of work implemented during this period.

Management Information

In guiding delivery and providing actionable intelligence, SWGH collects a diverse range of management information. HubSpot provides a powerful tool with which to monitor and coordinate provision. The challenges surrounding data collection are extensive, with significant complexity and heterogeneity in the precise support businesses receive, the recent expansion of support, and the extensive number of people and organisations that use the system.

Recommendation

Improving and tightening data collection may be important in mitigating any risks associated with grant funding secured by SWGH that have high evidentiary thresholds.

7.2 Delivery

Overall, SWGH provides an extensive support offer, including more light touch information and signposting, through to more detailed support including community engagement and bespoke business support. The provision is universal in nature, with support open to all that seek it.

Drawing on information provided by the business survey, respondents highlighted a diverse range of support needs and challenges, including those presented by Covid-19 and EU Exit. This creates challenges for SWGH in offering tailored and effective advice and guidance across a diverse range of issues. SWGH has, however, responded with a compelling offer, one that is broadly welcomed by respondents. On the whole, support has been well received. The website is well thought of, easy to navigate and provides useful information. This has translated to observed improvements to engagement with the website.

Those businesses that have accessed more intensive support tend to think more positively about their experiences of engaging with SWGH. Peer Networks, the webinar series, and digital advisory services have all received positive feedback from businesses. Relative to other support, those that received light touch support tended to report the lowest satisfaction. This suggests that it may be valuable to explore the user journeys from light to medium, and identify in more detail the needs and expectations of these businesses and how SWGH could better serve them. Overall, however, the data suggests that the blended mix of support including both light touch online provision and more in-depth and tailored advice may be more effective in meeting the needs of the business community than light touch provision on its own.

Plans for the Future

Overall, there are plans to continue the delivery of more detailed and tailored support, with a focus on leadership, skills and resilience. This is felt important in providing effective business support to the region in the coming months and years, where demand is likely to be high and the challenges facing businesses significant. SWGH had other objectives for the future, including in exploring business models and approaches that could make services and support more financially self-sufficient. As a result of the pandemic and subsequent disruption, this exploratory work has had to be pivoted to developing other elements of support. This includes implementing the Kickstart programme, with the SWLEP as a gateway organisation for the scheme supporting SME's in navigating and applying for placements.

7.3 Hub Achievements

Over the last year, the team at SWGH have made significant progress in building and extending the support it offers to businesses. In exceptional circumstances, they have successfully transitioned to a new model of delivery, and expanded exponentially. This should be viewed as a significant achievement, one that ensures that SWGH will play an important role in supporting the business community into the future.

Alongside these achievements, SWGH is also making a meaningful contribution to the broader economic objectives of the region. As a result of engagement, 43.7 per cent of businesses felt that they were in a better or much better position as a result of the support that they had received. The support offered by SWGH team is also at its most effective in raising the ambitions of businesses, which will be important for the region as it emerges from the economic shocks of Covid-19 and the Honda plant closing. Overall, the need for impartial, free, and high quality business support has never been greater.

wavehill™

social and economic research

01545 571711
wavehill@wavehill.com
wavehill.com

