

Evaluation of the Swindon and Wiltshire Growth Hub

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List of abbreviations

BCC	Business Cyber Centre
BEIS	Department for Business Energy & Industrial Strategy
BING	Business Intelligence & Network Group
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
DLUHC	Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
FTE	Full-Time Equivalent
GVA	Gross Value Added
IAG	Independent advice and guidance
LEP	Local Enterprise Partnership
LQ	Location quotient
OBR	Office for Budget Responsibility
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ONS	Office for National Statistics
NCC	National Composite Centre
NVQ	National vocational qualification
pp	Percentage point
R&D	Research & Development
SMEs	Small and medium enterprises
SMEC	SME Competitiveness
SWG	Swindon and Wiltshire Growth Hub
SWLEP	Swindon and Wiltshire Local Enterprise Partnership
TCA	Trade and Cooperation Agreement

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Executive Summary

In February 2022, the Swindon and Wiltshire Growth Hub (the SWGH) commissioned Wavehill to undertake an evaluation of the progress and impact of the services and support it offers. Previous evaluations have taken place in 2017, 2019, and 2021; consequently, this evaluation will reflect on progress made over time.

The evaluation involved a comprehensive review of documentation associated with national and local policy, and the governance of the SWGH, alongside a review of web analytics, data, evidence held on Hubspot (the SWGH's customer relationship management system), and a review of the portal itself. The desk-based research was supplemented by interviews with Public, Private and Third sector stakeholders involved in the governance, management, or delivery of services associated with the SWGH. The evaluation also surveyed 124 Swindon and Wiltshire based businesses which have engaged and or received support from the Hub in the last two years (2,196 were contacted in total) through a detailed online beneficiary survey.

Key Findings

As with last year's evaluation, the team at the SWGH has continued to evolve and expand its support services. More specialist support has been brought in to respond to evolving and growing business needs including a Green Economy Navigator. Partnerships have been formed with organisations, some local, to provide more technical support including Mintivo and Carbon Lens. This has ensured the Hub remains relevant to the times. In recent years, the Hub has demonstrated its ability to adapt and take on more responsibility to support businesses through uncertain times. In doing so, it has not only built a reputation amongst the business community within the SWLEP but has gained the trust within the local, regional, and business community.

The Hub has been helping businesses navigate and respond to several unprecedented challenges including staff shortages, supply chain disruptions and, rising input costs related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing fallout of the EU exit, climate change and more recently Russia's invasion of Ukraine. More specifically, the SWGH's work has revolved around supporting digital skills, promoting green development, and continued support for those businesses which have been impacted by Brexit and are unsure of changes to regulations that affect their businesses. In response to the pandemic, it first helped stabilise businesses and ensure their survival and is now in its second phase to help them grow and become more resilient.

The Hub has continued to deliver across its existing breadth of services and sectors and intends to continue doing so going forward. For the 2022/23 financial year, the SWLEP for the first time has contributed some of its own funding in response to the Hub receiving less funding from BEIS, with the purpose being to ensure the SWGH can maintain its existing services, sustain its profile and continue to contribute to the recovery of the local economy. This reflects the importance the SWLEP places on the critical role the Hub plays in the local economy in bringing clarity and simplification to what can be a confusing business support landscape.

Between April 2021 and end March 2022, the Growth Hub had provided support to just under 2,402 businesses against a target of 2,100 by end-March 2022. That is, 8% of all businesses operating within the SWLEP area. Overall, perceptions of the support that businesses received were positive, with 74% of respondents reporting that accessing the SWGH had met or exceeded their expectations.

As a result of engaging with the Hub, 69% of respondents felt that they were in a better position because of the support that they had received. The beneficiary survey finds a positive impact the Hub has had at the business level and, when accumulated, a notable contribution to the wider SWLEP economy. The survey indicates that as well as playing a role in supporting local businesses to safeguard 149 gross jobs and £8.4m gross GVA over the last two years there are wider intangible benefits including enhanced business confidence, ambition, and ability to take advantage of future opportunities which will only serve to the benefit the business community and local economy in the future.

Of those surveyed, 65% felt that they would value further support from the SWGH over the coming year (2022-23). Most prominently, the most desired support was around access to finance (47%) and mentoring (47%). This was closely followed by business planning (43%) and team training (40%).

Plans for the Future

A lot has happened in the last two years. During the first year of the pandemic, the Growth Hub helped businesses survive and become more resilient. In the second year, it helped them find their feet again and grow, a return to the original objectives of the Growth Hub. Furthermore, in the last year, BEIS has cut the Growth Hubs' budget nationally by 50%. Unlike SWGH which has been supported by SWLEP, not all LEPs across the nation have sought to bridge the BEIS funding gap. With ongoing global uncertainty and significant rises in business input costs, the Hub remains a key source of support for businesses. The fallout from the pandemic, Brexit, and transition into a new era of trading will create new opportunities. Businesses will need to develop their capacity and upskill their talent to ensure they are ready to seize these opportunities

In the longer term, the Hub is seeking to become less reliant on public funding and pivot into a more commercial setup whilst retaining the free one-stop-shop of business support services Swindon and Wiltshire businesses have come to expect.

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

1 Introduction

In April 2022, Swindon and Wiltshire Growth Hub (the SWGH) commissioned Wavehill to undertake an evaluation of the progress and impact of the services and support it offers. Previous evaluations have taken place in 2017, 2019 and 2021, consequently, this evaluation will reflect on progress made over time.

1.1 Swindon and Wiltshire Growth Hub

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

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

The COVID-19 pandemic and UK Government's health and safety response, including but not limited to three separate lockdowns and social distancing, has meant in this last year the Growth Hub's role has evolved significantly. The Hub plays an important role in supporting the area's socio-economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, this meant strengthening and expanding its support to delivering business support programmes themselves. Most critically, at the toughest of times, when the economy was locked down and trading for businesses halted, the Hub was a conduit for helping cash-strapped businesses to access Government funding. Since then, the SWGH's continued focus has very much been around supporting the area's recovery and assisting businesses to become more resilient and grow. The Hub has been helping businesses navigate and respond to several unprecedented challenges including staff shortages, supply chain disruptions and, rising input costs related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing fallout of the EU exit, climate change, and more recently Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

It is clear the Hub has evolved with the times which has meant it now essentially operates as the go-to one-stop business support shop offering a ladder of support for pre-starts to scale up/growth. In the last year alone, the Hub's introduction of green economy support in response to growing climate change concerns at the national level to the business level further serves to showcase the Hub's ability to adapt and provide needed and relevant support with the times.

1.2 The Evaluation

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

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

1.3 Methodology

With the objectives of the evaluation, during April and June the research team undertook:

- a comprehensive desk-based review of:
 - documentation associated with the Hub's management, governance, and operation;
 - 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); and
 - of the SWGH's service provision.
- five interviews with Public, Private and Third sector stakeholders involved in the governance, management, or delivery of services and support delivered through the SWGH; and
- a web survey of 124 Swindon and Wiltshire based businesses which have engaged and or been supported by the SWGH in the last two years to gain their perspectives on the support they received, including the impact of support across a range of measures

1.4 Navigating this Report

The remainder of the report is as follows:

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

2 Policy Context

This section examines the broader policy context in which the SWGH operates. It goes on to outline the broader rationale for investment in business support delivered through the SWGH.

The SWGH also operates within the broader context of local and national policy that informs and shapes 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 the COVID-19 pandemic, cost of living challenges, and EU Exit. These developments have continued to raise the profile and importance of business support.

2.1 National Policy

In 2021, the UK Government announced a review of Local Economic Partnerships would be undertaken as part of a wider Whitehall review. The Cities and Local Growth Unit remit sought to consider the future of LEPs and respectively their role, function and structure. The Levelling Up White Paper published in 2022 concluded the review.

The Paper's guiding principle was to better integrate, align and empower local institutions, including LEPs, to level up the country. It further recognised that "the private sector which LEPs represent will be critical to levelling up" and that businesses should still be able to access the support and insights LEPs provide.¹

Ultimately, the Government's long-term ambition is for all LEPs to integrate into devolved institutions. For LEPs in areas where there is not yet a devolution deal, there was a recognition that the partnerships will continue to play their critical pre-existing role in supporting local businesses and the local economy. The continued support for LEPs is evidenced by the Government's core/transition funding at a rate of £375,000 per LEP for the financial year 2022/23.

2.2 Local Policy

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

¹ Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2022) - Integrating Local Enterprise Partnerships into local democratic institutions - https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1066191/Letter-and-Guidance-on-integrating-Local-Enterprise-Partnerships-LEPs-into-local-democratic-institutions.pdf

It still remains the case that at the top level the SWLEP's 2020 Local Industrial Strategy (LIS) represents the overarching vision for the region, to promote and support inclusive and clean economic growth agendas with particular focus on:²

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

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

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

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

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

2.3 COVID-19

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

² 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 response, to support businesses and the economy, the Government introduced several support schemes such as the job retention scheme (closed September 2021) and the recovery loan scheme (closed June 2022). A key objective of these initiatives has been to prevent a crisis of liquidity from turning into a crisis of solvency that would lead to widespread business failure and permanent economic damage.

Furthermore, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) permitted ERDF business support programmes to shift their focus to supporting businesses in their area with resilience rather than growth. Growth Hubs were viewed as an important element in supporting businesses to navigate the challenges presented by the pandemic. This was demonstrated in the pivotal role in managing and delivering the national Peer Networks programme. (For more information see below.)

At present, with Government pandemic restrictions being lifted in their entirety, society has been encouraged to return and operate as it would in a pre-pandemic state. The state of affairs compared to pre-pandemic however could not be further apart. The pandemic has had devastating and long-term impacts on economies, communities and business operations. Drawing on the Office for Budget Responsibility's (OBR) estimates, Hatch's Local Economic Assessment of SWLEP (2022) estimated the region lost £1.7bn in GVA in 2020 due to the pandemic.

2.4 Rising Business Costs

More troublingly, rising energy prices and supply chain issues have meant UK inflation reached 9.1% in May 2022, the highest it has been in over 40 years.³ For businesses, this means the rising cost of inputs (including wages, materials, stock), transport and energy. On the latter, it is important to remember that OFGEM's energy price caps only protects domestic households. With energy prices expected to continue to rise and remain high over the medium term, "18 months to two years" according to the Chief Executive of Centrica, businesses are facing unprecedented challenges to their bottom line and their ability to survive.⁴

2.5 EU Exit

Following a period of considerable uncertainty, on 24 December 2020, the UK and EU agreed on 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 prepare for additional paperwork and costs.

³ ONS, Consumer price inflation, UK: May 2022

⁴ Centrica boss says high energy bills could last two years, Guardian (2022), <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/jan/12/centrica-boss-says-high-energy-bills-could-last-two-years>

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. However, there is some early evidence to suggest businesses are beginning to feel the impacts of Brexit including recruitment difficulties in sectors that rely disproportionately on EU workers⁵, increased trade barriers such as more complex customs processes⁶, and disruptions to supply chains⁷. However, fewer EU restrictions have enabled the UK to pivot to non-EU more easily.

2.6 Summary and Rationale for Intervention

In the last few years, SWLEP's businesses have had to navigate, adapt and survive a number of economic shocks and challenges including the EU Exit, COVID-19 pandemic and more recently cost of living challenges. For the most part, it remains far too early to quantify the impact of each on the business community, early evidence with regards to the new trading relationship with the EU suggests transition pains. Whereas it is clear to see that the pandemic and cost of living challenges have severely damaged and tested the resilience of businesses.

The policy context presents a strong rationale for the focus on and investment in business support in the region. Further demonstrated by the Government's intention to retain the role of LEPs within devolved institutions and its promise of continued funding for the 2022/23 financial year.

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

⁵ Labour Market Outlook, CIPD, Summer 2021

⁶ Beyond Brexit: trade in goods, European Union Committee, House of Lords, 25 March 2021

⁷ What is causing supply chain problems?, Institute for Government, April 2022. Accessed at: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/publication/supply-chains/causes>

3 Governance and Management of the SWGH

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

3.1 Growth Hub Objectives

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

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

In addition to broader objectives, the 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 with Government. The SWGH provides an important link to businesses in the region and collects and disseminates important business intelligence including to BEIS and local MPs on a monthly basis. Through its activities, the SWGH provides a **source of data and market intelligence** 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 a result of emerging and evolving challenges facing the business community across Swindon and Wiltshire. In 2019/20, the SWGH sought to move from light touch/responsive engagement to the **provision of a full Information, Advice and Guidance and direct business support service**. The Hub's successful ERDF bid and extension to deliver the three-and-a-half-year SME Competitiveness (SMEC) programme would see the SWGH move from light touch to a full programme of business support ranging from start-ups 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.

⁸ Swindon and Wiltshire Local Industrial Strategy, 2020

This contract enabled the SWGH to change its short-term focus at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Strategically, emphasis pivoted towards implementing and establishing an IAG service, direct business support and supporting BEIS and LAs with COVID-19 response initiatives. Reacting to COVID-19, Wiltshire Council seconded three of its team to support the SWGH and these resources assisted in the premobilisation of the SMEC. The SMEC contract was awarded in April 2020 with a start date of June 2020. Staff members were accordingly recruited and delivery partners appointed. Various communications initiatives were planned and executed to position and promote the SWGH as the one-stop for business support, as agreed with the elected leaders of both Councils via the SWLEP Commissioning Group in March 2020. This enabled LAs to focus on the provision of grant relief. A specific engagement programme was designed to further position the SWGH 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 Networks (which ended in March 2022).

Building on the Hub's role in assisting businesses to access grant funding during the immediate response phase of the pandemic, the focus has since shifted to supporting the area's recovery and assisting businesses to become more resilient and grow in the last year. The Hub has been helping businesses navigate and respond to a number of unprecedented challenges including staff shortages, supply chain disruptions and rising input costs related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ongoing fallout of the EU exit, climate change and more recently Russia's invasion of Ukraine. More specifically, the SWGH's work has revolved around supporting businesses with their digital skills, promoting green development, and their continued EU transition support.

Stakeholders interviewed noted in the upcoming next 12 months it would be beneficial for the Growth Hub to look at the support needs of businesses struggling with the impacts of inflation and rising fuel costs. A second suggested focus was around looking at how the Hub could promote businesses to develop in a more environmentally sustainable manner. Over the longer term, the majority of stakeholders felt the Hub should continue to remain aware of the emerging opportunities and challenges facing businesses and adapt and develop support in response.

3.2 Governance of the Growth Hub

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

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

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

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

3.2.1 Stakeholder Perceptions of Governance Arrangements

Overall, stakeholders considered the governance arrangements as being both effective and sustainable. However, given the recent changes it was felt this will take some adjusting to, particularly for the newer staff. It was also noted that being governed by SWLEP's Business Environment Subgroup not only helped raise the Hub's profile but enables the Hub to partake in broader business environment conversations.

On improvements, it was felt that the Governance Group could be strengthened further, by growing SME representation within the board despite this falling outside of the Hub's remit. In addition, there was also an acknowledgement of the resource- and time-intensive commitment needed as part of joining the Board. It was also suggested that the role of the Governance group could be simplified by only focussing on progress, future strategy and sustainability. Elsewhere, stakeholders felt moving meetings online would be beneficial as it allows for greater flexibility. That being said, overall, it was indicated that meetings had become far more accessible since the format change and the length shortened.

3.3 Growth Hub Management

The strategic lead is currently the CEO with the Operational performance sitting with the Growth Hub Manager. The Manager reports to the SWLEP CEO. The day-to-day management of the SWGH is led by a dedicated Growth Hub Manager. With guidance and support from the Business Environment Subgroup, the Manager's role focuses on overseeing all aspects of the development, implementation and operation of the Growth Hub. This includes developing

⁹ Section B: Board Constitution October 2021 - https://static.swlep.co.uk/swlep/docs/default-source/governance-documents/governance-framework/framework-web/section-b-board-constitution-oct-21.pdf?sfvrsn=666dcbf7_3

and implementing the strategy for the Growth Hub Service itself. The role also includes overall coordination and support of the Growth Hub team and overseeing different parts of the overall Growth Hub offering, including marketing and communications, and the Navigator service. The role also includes engaging and communicating with respective partners across the region, including the various business support projects the SWGH signposts businesses to, and beyond.

3.3.1 Stakeholder Perceptions of Growth Hub Management

Stakeholders consulted felt that the management of the SWGH was working well especially considering the unforeseen external challenges that the SWGH has had to contend with and the impacts this has had on the Hub's resources. As reported above, external socio-economic shocks to the economy including Brexit, COVID-19, and more recently rising input costs have presented new challenges for businesses in the region which the Hub has needed to respond to and support businesses with. In response, the SWGH scaled up its operations to meet the new demands. Stakeholders suggested that this scale-up may not have been as successful without the management team's support and facilitation.

Furthermore, one stakeholder suggested that management had been very good at acting proactively to ensure when business issues did arise they were able to respond and support. It was noted that this proactive approach was very much welcomed during the Brexit process as it was often felt that the Hub was having to deal with large-scale changes that the national Government were unsure on how best to approach.

3.4 Recent Developments at the SWGH

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Hub shifted its strategic focus to ensuring business survival and recovery. Delivery changes were initiated by the SWGH to enable the team to support clients virtually and deliver a slightly restructured programme around crisis management and resilience elements. As mentioned, in the last year focus has now shifted to helping businesses grow and supporting wider economic recovery. Naturally, as the economy emerges from the pandemic, there is now less emphasis on helping businesses with access to finance and there is far greater in-person outreach work and in-person workshops.

It is clear the Hub has evolved with the times which has meant it now essentially operates as the go-to one-stop business support shop offering a ladder of support for pre-starts to scale up or growth orientated businesses. In the last year alone, the Hub's introduction of green economy support, in response to growing climate change concerns, further serves to showcase the Hub's ability to adapt and provide needed and relevant support with the times. This is also reflected in the evolution of its resource and capacity:

- Digital Navigator – to build on and continue the Digital Advice sessions;
- Green Economy and Net Zero Business Navigator – to provide expert advice and guidance to businesses on reducing their carbon footprint and adopting green technology/working practices;
- second skills advisor – bolstering the skills support available to businesses, driving national priorities with work-based learning and aligning to SWLEP's Plan for Growth and Skills & Talent Plans;

- two Digital Marketing Apprentices - who are contributing to the website and social media channel engagement; and
- a Peer Networks Project Manager to oversee and facilitate the community – with the Peer Networks programme ending in March 2022, the individual has since been re-deployed to SWLEP’s Business Cyber Centre as Project Manager, Cyber Networks.

In the 2021/22 financial year, the Hub has been able to draw down its full £462,000 core grant allocation. As part of the Peer Networks programme, the Hub was allocated £150,000 in funding but only drew down £65,000. The underspend was because the Hub delivered three of the ten targeted cohorts “despite strong efforts, due to an incredibly challenging recruitment climate with eligibility, availability and time-constraints on the business community”.¹⁰

Much change is expected for the upcoming 2022/23 financial year with a number of significant developments which will fundamentally shape the Growth Hub’s budget:

- BEIS core grant funding has been reduced by 50% to £231,000 for the 2022-23 financial year;
- SWLEP has provided £70,000 in funding to bridge the BEIS Core Grant funding gap;
- Peer Networks concluded in March 2022; and
- ERDF SME Competitive programme due to conclude in June 2023.

For a full breakdown of the SWGH budgets for 2019/20 until 2022/23, see table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1: The SWGH Budget breakdown

Period	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Scope	Business as usual, COVID-19	as pre COVID-19 response	COVID-19 response	Response Recovery
Headcount	3 FTE	15.5 FTE	15.5 FTE	12 FTE
Funding/Income*	<u>Total: £231k</u>	<u>Total: £1.82m</u>	<u>Total: £870k</u>	<u>Total: £1.10m</u>
	£205k Core Grant £26k EU Transition Grant	£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	£462k Core Grant £65k Peer Networks £342k ERDF SME Comp	£231k Core Grant £70k SWLEP £800k ERDF SME Comp

Despite a reduction in its budget and fewer staff working in the SWGH, the Hub has continued to deliver across its existing breadth of services and sectors and intends to continue doing so going forward. For the 2022/23 financial year, the SWLEP for the first time has contributed some of its own funding in response to the Hub receiving less funding from BEIS, with the

¹⁰ Business Environment Subgroup – Wednesday, 9 March 2022

purpose being to ensure the SWGH can maintain its existing services, sustain its profile and continue to contribute to the recovery of the local economy. This reflects the importance the SWLEP places on the critical role the Hub plays in the local economy in bringing clarity and simplification to what is a confusing business support landscape.

3.5 Partnership Arrangements

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

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

- following the success of working with the Trowbridge Chamber of Commerce, the SWGH is now actively engaged with **Chippenham's and Salisbury's Chambers of Commerce and Salisbury BID** to deliver Digital Content and new Video Content workshops;
- Growth Hub's involvement with the SWLEP-chaired Rural Economy Sector Group has meant the Hub has been and is working in partnership with the **National Farmers Union** and **Country Landowners and Businesses Association** to support the sector with more general business support services;
- the recruitment of the Green Economy & EU Transition Business Navigator has enabled the SWGH to connect to (and directly support) initiatives such as the **Planet Mark** work, **Climate Hub** and **Race to Net-Zero**;
- new partnerships with sector and technical experts and specialists to expand the array of support the Hub can provide including:
 - **Mintivo** – digital including search engine optimisation, cyber security and data solutions and management
 - **Team Doctor** – workforce health and wellbeing
 - **Carbon Lens** – in developing carbon plans
 - **Purple Lime** – accountancy and finance services
- and as noted in the previous evaluation continued partnerships to:
 - deliver the SME Competitiveness programme (ERDF £2.4m) drawing upon match from delivery partners as well as **Swindon Borough Council, Wiltshire Council, SETsquared and YTKO** - including specific support to former Honda employees;
 - provide loans to businesses through the Growing Places Investment Fund;
 - referring SMEs to specialist services and programmes including **South West MAS** and the **National Composite Centre (NCC)** to support manufacturing SMEs to diversify and increase productivity;
 - works with 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; and

- working closely with the **Department for International Trade** and its associated delivery partners to facilitate inward investment opportunities, as well as supporting export-ready SMEs.

Given the Hub's ongoing success in nurturing and developing partnerships, some stakeholders felt that the Hub should be publicising this more. All stakeholders consulted reported that they felt the Hub had been successful in maintaining their existing partnerships. This was attributed to its ability to engage in regular contact with partners, and its growing and good reputation as an organisation to be involved with. With the pandemic ending and therefore more capacity, some stakeholders suggest the Hub could re-contact and re-establish old partnerships.

Looking to the future, stakeholders spoke about how they felt the Hub should make links into new areas, geographically, to engage with and learn from services providers in neighbouring regions, and in terms of topic areas, by engaging more with partners whose specialisms sit outside the Growth Hub's current offer. Some specific industries that were suggested included higher education, manufacturing, farming, retail and hospitality.

3.6 Management Information

As noted in the 2021 evaluation of the SWGH, the integrated HubSpot CRM system was adopted to enable a range of stakeholders, including local authorities and the SWLEP, to use and assist in the coordinated delivery of programmes in specific areas such as SMEC.

The CRM system has equipped the SWGH with a powerful tool from which to coordinate communications and manage engagement with, and enhance support to, businesses. It is also useful in monitoring and evaluation, such as assessing Hub performance and providing business intelligence to funders and other stakeholders, including BEIS. Given the level of complexity of the services and support offered to businesses, including the bespoke nature of support advice, effectively and accurately collecting information is challenging. Moreover, challenges are compounded by the number of people across the SWGH and in partner organisations' access and input into the system. The Hub has made improvements and refined its approach to address issues identified as part of last year's evaluation related to the consistency and accuracy of information entry. However, efforts will need to continue to maximise the operational and strategic benefits the system can bring.

There was a view from stakeholders that the Growth Hub's learning and use of analytics within its systems to inform its approach was improving – one example provided were changes to target areas based on the geographic mapping of businesses supported. (See section 4.2.4 for more information.) Elsewhere, some stakeholders felt data sharing between partners could be improved. It was acknowledged that this would require information sharing protocols to be developed however the widened availability of information could assist partner organisations to improve their services to better support local businesses.

4 Support Delivery

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

A beneficiary survey was issued to Swindon and Wiltshire based businesses which have engaged with and or been supported by the SWGH in the past two years, totalling 2,196. The survey achieved a response rate of 5.6% - which at a 90% confidence level gives a margin of error of 7%.

- This means we are 90% confident survey result findings could be c.7% higher or lower for the population than was found in the survey sample, with a 10% chance the margin of error could be greater.

Aside from providing an update of the analysis presented as part of the 2021 evaluation of the SWGH, this evaluation report further seeks to differentiate and deepen findings by segmenting findings by the support “intensity” businesses received. 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 intensity categories were adopted and used by the Hub to measure support provided:

- **Light** – transactional interactions with Growth Hubs which do not consume significant dedicated resources including telephone enquiries and basic signposting, light-touch diagnostics, and web-based interactions;
- **Medium** – interactions which use moderate Growth Hub resource (approximately one-hour plus) and which broadly align with the point in the customer journey at which SWGH start collecting basic firm-level data. Examples include business diagnostic with Growth Hub advisor/ business attendance at a support workshop and referral to business support schemes and programmes (local and national); and
- **High** – interactions representing sustained support and using significant Growth Hub resources, broadly aligned to the EU 12-hour metric for “Enterprise Support”. And examples include businesses with managed accounts and services/support directly provided by Growth Hub.

4.1 Guiding Principles

As documented in the previous evaluation, the guiding principles of the Growth Hub remain the same. In summary, as the business support arm of the SWLEP, the Growth Hub offers a range of information and high-quality and freely accessibly business support and impartial advice to all businesses, regardless of circumstance or characteristics, across the region. Hubs in differing areas of the nation may take a different approach, including a more focused and intensive support package or businesses with specific characteristics (that is, high growth or priority sectors). Within the context of Swindon and Wiltshire, there was a consensus and satisfaction amongst stakeholders that the SWGH approach is fair, holistic and comprehensive.

Looking ahead, stakeholders felt that mapping existing and emerging business support provisions should be an ongoing process to ensure that the Growth Hub is continually offering

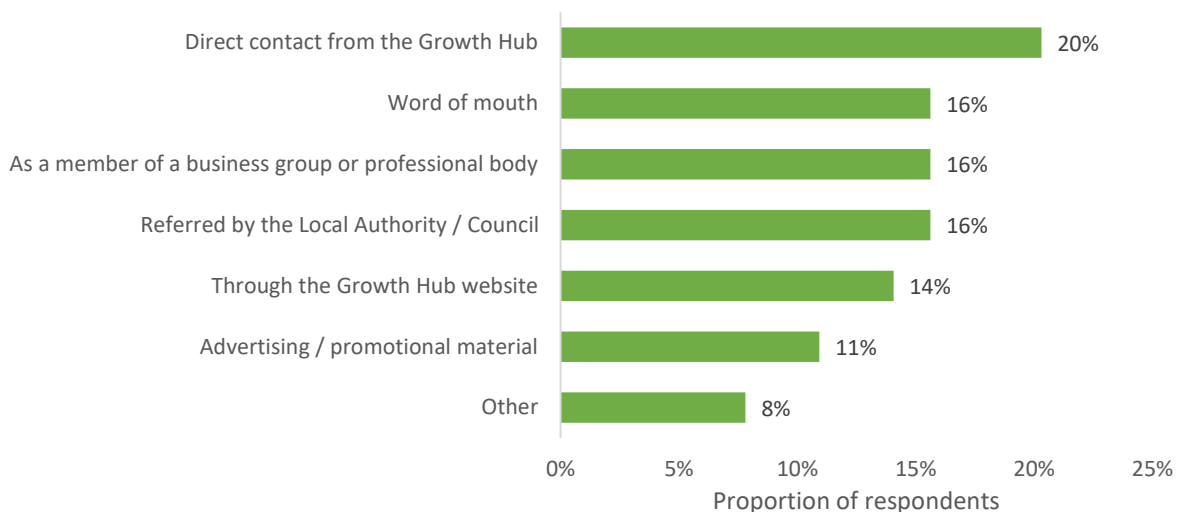
new services that meet businesses' evolving needs and are not duplicating the work of other support offers. It was also suggested that where overlap does occur the Hub should consider whether or not they are the most appropriate service to provide support or whether external providers would be better suited.

4.2 Types of Support

4.2.1 Initial Engagement with the SWGH

Respondents were asked how they first heard about the Growth Hub. It was found that the most effective engagement method was through direct contact from the Growth Hub (20% of respondents) which demonstrates the value of a proactive and tailored approach. This was followed by word of mouth, through business groups or professional bodies, and referrals from local authorities/councils (all 16%) and highlights the importance of the Growth Hub's enduring strong reputation amongst businesses in the area and the strength of the SWGH's brand. Furthermore, the survey findings indicate that the Growth Hub's networking activities and efforts have been rewarding in leveraging partner's networks.

Figure 4.1: How did you first hear about the Growth Hub? (n=66)

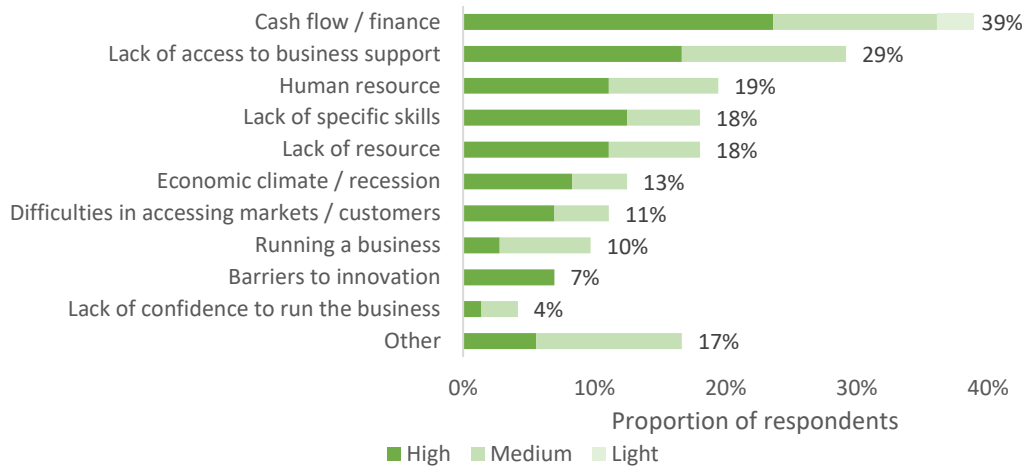


Source: Wavehill, Beneficiary Survey 2022

4.2.2 Reasons for Engagement

Businesses engaged with the SWGH and accessed support to address a variety of challenges. The most common challenge for businesses was around cash flow or finance (39%). Despite being a significant problem, the challenge is less widespread than last year when this was reported by 51% of survey respondents. Another significant challenge for businesses was a reported lack of access to business support and advice (29%) – which further evidence the relevance and importance of the SWGH as a one-stop shop for business support.

Figure 4.2: When you initially reached out to the Hub what were the challenges you or your business faced? (n=72)



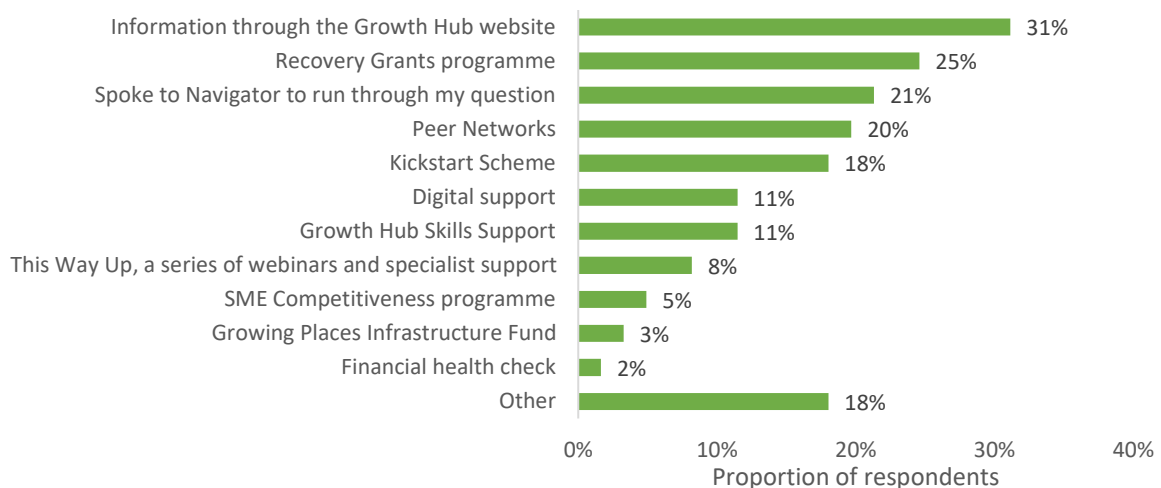
Source: Wavehill, Beneficiary Survey 2022

With regards to the 17% of beneficiaries that identified other challenges, a qualitative assessment of the data found, that common issues around adjusting to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic (25% of other responses), importing and exporting of goods post-Brexit (17%). Challenges arising from COVID-19 remain a key concern for businesses with 36% of respondent businesses seeking specific advice and guidance to address this specifically, albeit down from 67% last year. Similarly, for 13% of businesses Brexit remains an area they seek help on, down from 21% last year.

4.2.3 Types of Support

Respondents had a wide range of support available to them through the SWGH. With over one out of every three businesses engaged accessing more than one type of support and 18% accessing more than two types. The most popular or accessed support amongst surveyed beneficiaries was receiving information from the SWGH website (31%). This was followed by the Recovery Grants programme (25%) and drawing on Navigators (21%).

Figure 4.3: Types of services or support received (n=61)



Source: Wavehill, Beneficiary Survey 2022

4.2.4 Reach of Support

Between April 2021 and end March 2022, the Growth Hub had provided support to just under 2,402 businesses against a target of 2,100 to end-March 2022, equivalent to 8% of all businesses in SWLEP. In line with BEIS’ definition of support intensity, although the number of businesses receiving light (less than 1 hour) and intensive (more than 12 hours) support were lower than expected, both 74% of their target numbers, medium levels (between 1 to 12 hours) of support delivered surpassed expectations with 759 businesses supported against a target of 300.

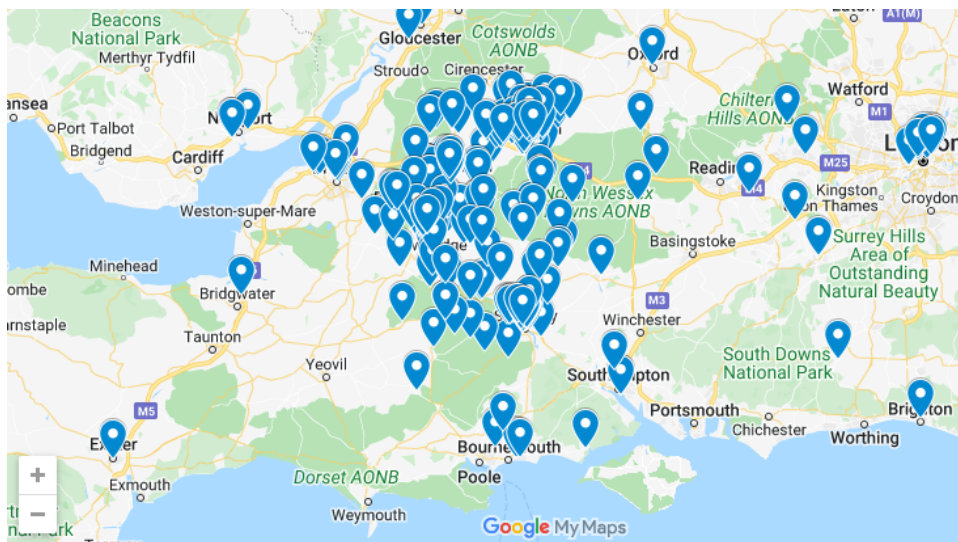
Table 4.1: Business supported by the SWGH between April 2021 and end March 2022

	Target	Achievement to date
Number of businesses receiving light support (<1 hour)	1,600	1,248
Number of businesses receiving medium support (1-12 hours)	300	921
Number of businesses receiving intensive (12+ hours)	200	233

Source: Meeting Papers, Business Environment Subgroup 9/3/22

Geographically, the location map below illustrates the coverage of businesses registered as Growth Hub Community Members – note business registration address does not necessarily mean the primary area of business operation. This demonstrates the Hub has been successful in targeting and delivering support to businesses within and more importantly across the SWLEP region.

Figure 4.4: Distribution of businesses supported by the SWGH between April 2021 and end March 2022

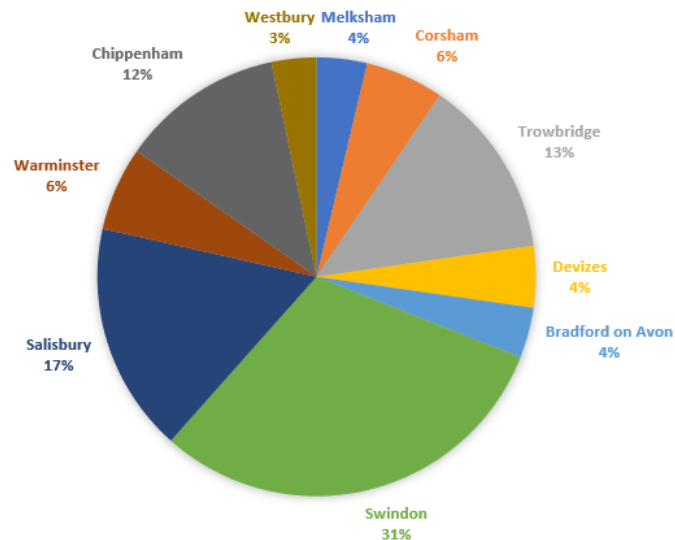


Source: Meeting Papers, Business Environment Subgroup 9/3/22

The pie chart below shows the businesses registered by town/city accessing Growth Hub Services. There has been significant growth in those engaging from Salisbury and Trowbridge. This success has been attributed to the SWGH’s recruitment of a Navigator and tailored

targeted and intentional engagement within the two cities, where historically presence was not as prominent. More specifically, the Navigator was successful in working with and offering its services to existing institutions in the area including Salisbury Business Improvement District and Trowbridge Chamber of Commerce.

Figure 4.5: Support by urban area within SWLEP between April 2021 and end March 2022



Source: Meeting Papers, Business Environment Subgroup 9/3/22

4.3 Growth Hub Website

A key element of the support offered through the SWGH is the online portal. Since its development, there have been efforts to strengthen and refresh the offer, functionality and resources available through the website. As noted in the previous evaluation, investment in the website has helped it become easier to navigate, with clearer and more consistent content and communication. Stakeholders as part of this latest round of consultations were very positive about the progress that has been made towards establishing the portal as a light touch, one-stop-shop for business support in the Swindon and Wiltshire areas. They also found it particularly useful in keeping up to date with the Hub's activities. In 2021/22, the website had 18,710 unique visitors.

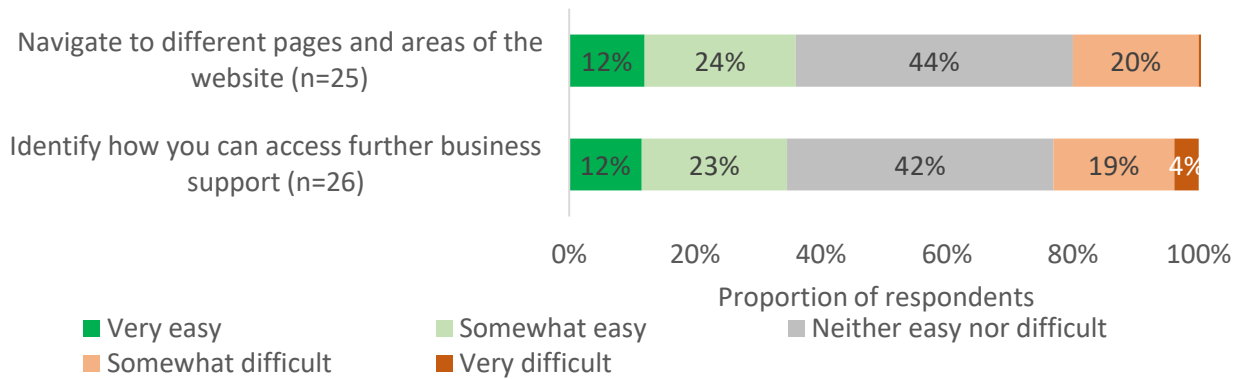
4.3.1 The Views of Businesses towards the Website

Of those surveyed, 43% used the website to access support from the Growth Hub. Of those that accessed support from the site, views were mixed:

- 35% found it easy or very easy to identify how they could access further business support however 23% felt that this was not the case;
- 36% found the site easy or very easy to navigate but 20% felt this was not the case;
- in both instances, most businesses noted it was neither easy nor difficult (42% and 44%, respectively); and
- all respondents found the content of the website and links at least somewhat useful, for the former 50% found it very useful or extremely useful and latter 42%.

Respondents were asked how the functionality and content of the web portal could be improved. The majority of the responses were around the website’s navigability including clearer signposting and operational links. Others mentioned accessibility improvements such as printable documents. One suggested a user forum where Hub feedback could be given.

Figure 4.7: Beneficiaries’ views on navigating the Hub’s website and digital portal



Source: Wavehill, Beneficiary Survey 2022

4.4 Tailored, In-depth Support

The SWGH also offers more tailored and in-depth advice, guidance and direct business support, including through one-to-one support offered by Navigators. The Hub’s portfolio of support means that it acts as a one-stop shop for businesses from pre-start to scale-up and growth.

4.4.1 Growth Hub Membership

The SWGH also runs a membership scheme, which is coordinated through the website. Growth Hub Membership gives businesses a range of additional information and support, including segmented communications and access to a dedicated micro site. Members are also able to access news and events, as well as targeted business support. Since April 2021, the community has grown by 520 members and now stands at 2,323 members.

4.4.2 Financial health check programme

Demonstrating the Hub’s continued focus to expand support services available to businesses, since June 2021 a financial health check program delivered in partnership with local SME accountants, Purple Lime, has been made available to businesses. A total of 30 businesses have accessed and been supported with a health check since its inception.

4.4.3 SME Competitiveness

The SME Competitiveness initiative remains the SWGH’s flagship support programme which seeks 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 the SWGH along with partners YTKO, SETSquared, Swindon Borough Council and Wiltshire Council.

As noted in the previous evaluation, the ERDF programme had enabled the hub to increase its capacity including the recruitment of business navigators and a compliance officer. The pandemic has significantly changed the way the programme was intended to be delivered. COVID-19 created substantial demand particularly amongst smaller, lifestyle businesses that relied heavily on corporate supply chains that had been significantly affected by COVID-19.

The programme's aims quickly re-orientated to helping start-ups and scale-up businesses survive and only this year returning to the original aims of the programme, to grow businesses. The Growth Hub worked hand-in-hand with both local Unitary Authorities to refer and cross-refer enquiries, endeavouring to ensure that every business that needed help had access to information, advice and guidance particularly those ineligible for COVID-19 support. More recently, monthly meetings have been used to discuss ongoing engagement and outreach plans to support the Honda workforce being made redundant. Face-to-face support has also only recently resumed. Increases in the Hub's budget from SMEC funding, and therefore capacity, have been particularly helpful in helping to meet business needs effectively.

To date, the SWGH has delivered over 1,400 hours of support to 673 businesses through the SMEC programme. The two businesses surveyed which stated they were referred to the SME Competitiveness Programme both said they were very likely or extremely likely to recommend the Hub to other businesses.

4.4.4 Peer Networks

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 the SWGH had to deliver within tight timescales both in the first and second year of delivery. The 2021/22 financial year represented the second and final year the SWGH managed and delivered the National Peer Networks programme for the SWLEP region.

The overall 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. However, given the impact of the pandemic on business operations and the community, the programme's design further sought to provide actionable insight to tackle the short-term issues and those related to COVID-19.

The Peer Networks programme brings together business leaders from specific sectors to participate in action learning sets as well as deliver one-to-one mentoring support. On the former, the Growth Hub establishes 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.

During its first year, from April 2020 to March 2021, the SWGH met its targets, to deliver support to seven cohorts with an average of seven participants per cohort. In its second and final year of the Peer Networks programme, the SWGH contended with an incredibly challenging recruitment climate – a common challenge faced by the majority of other LEPs on the programme – related to:

- **eligibility constraints** – which were later eased, meant SWLEP’s significant base of smaller businesses, those employing fewer than five FTEs, were ineligible and were arguably most in need of business support in the face of COVID-19; and
- **availability and time-constraints** – related to staff shortages (due to COVID and immigration policy) and slow supply chains with reduced capacity on the business community as the economy re-opened and consumer demand picked back up.

Despite huge efforts, the Growth Hub has only been able to deliver Peer Networks support to 35 businesses of the targeted 110 or three of the ten cohorts targeted. However, not only was the Hub able to maintain a 100% retention rate of the programme but the Hub also pioneered sector and female-specific cohorts.

The Hub’s promotion of the programme can be considered as strong and wide, with 61% of respondents to this evaluation’s survey noting they were aware of the programme with over one in four (27%) engaging with the Peer Networks programme. Of those who participated in Peer Networks, 82% of respondents found it to be helpful, of which 27% found it extremely helpful. Despite three out of five respondents saying it is extremely likely they would recommend Peer Networks to other businesses one in four said extremely unlikely – this could be related to the varying quality of support received between years one and two and between cohorts.

4.4.5 Growing Places Infrastructure Fund

Launched in 2012, the GPIF is a c. £8m capital fund that enables businesses to attain a loan to accelerate and deliver innovative projects to stimulate growth, productivity and jobs. The fund tackles market failures directly by loaning to businesses with a lack of collateral or short trading history that would not have otherwise been able to access traditional High Street lending.

Since 2012, SWLEP and the Hub have supported an array of exciting, innovative and much needed projects within the SWLEP area including the expansion of manufacturing lines, investment in research and development capability and creation of coworking space.

The SWLEP has so far loaned £11m to 16 projects and has successfully leveraged nearly four times that in match funding (£41m). Recipients of the loans have all been SMEs, with the majority employing less than 25 staff. Projects to date have delivered circa 160,000 sq. ft of new productive floorspace and approximately 100 new jobs to the SWLEP area. An additional 791 new jobs are forecasted to be created in the next three years as projects complete.

4.4.6 This Way Up Webinars

In September 2020, the 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 leadership, effective digital commerce, sales finance, mental health and marketing.

All webinars were recorded and are available on catch-up through the website. Between April 2021 and March 2022, of the 1,689 registrants to the 59 webinars (surpassing the target of 45 webinars) that were delivered across the year, 919 attended, 700 less than the year before. The 55% attendance rate is considered average for training webinars. Stakeholders attributed lower live attendance to the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions and the switch to and an upturn in catch-up or on-demand content figures. There were 1,372 catch-up views this year, up from 413 last year.

The most popular webinars during that period were around cyber security, crowdfunding and other ways to increase funding as well as the Green Agenda. Stakeholders noted the former and latter were relevant and timely considering recent geopolitical events. Of those that accessed the webinars, 57% of respondents indicated that they were extremely likely to recommend the Growth Hub to another business.

4.4.7 Digital Advisory Services

The 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 its digital capability. To date, 104 one on one Digital Advice appointments and workshops have been delivered with action planning and follow-ups. Six respondents to the survey had accessed digital support from the Hub and all of them said they would likely or extremely likely recommend the service to another business.

4.4.8 Coronavirus (Covid-19) Business Support

Dealing with the fallout and impact of the pandemic on businesses has primarily been the Hub's focus since 2020. Existing support has been re-orientated and new services added to help businesses become more resilient and more recently grow as the economy focuses on recovery. Overall, 36% of respondents to the survey indicated that they were receiving specific support as a result of challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key challenges faced by businesses following the outbreak of COVID-19 included reduced income (35%), closure as a result of lockdown (26%) and recruitment (22%). These factors together created significant challenges for businesses:

"Unable to teach face to face, and recruiting new customers was extremely difficult. There was also a lot of admin to be done as the lockdowns were announced with so little warning."

"We were not at all set up for working remotely, Zoom meetings etc. We were forced to close but some tasks still needed to be performed and that was difficult without the technology."

In response to the challenges posed by the pandemic, of those respondents that received specific support from the Hub, including assistance in adopting remote working arrangements:

- 56% of responses accessed additional grants and funding through the Hub;
- 42% accessed guidance from Hub staff; and
- 20% were provided with valued moral support.

Grants were particularly helpful for businesses, with many saying that the grants helped them adjust to the pandemic:

"Helped secure a grant to implement changes to make business more flexible during covid"

Moral support and general guidance were also a significant benefit for the businesses, allowing them to remain confident in the wake of the pandemic. One business noted that the support gave them "guidance and hope for the future". It is worth mentioning, that despite the range of services available, seven businesses felt either the support received did not help or that they had not received any COVID-19 support.

4.4.9 Skills and Apprenticeships

The SWGH has 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. In February 2022, the Growth Hub ran a three-part webinar series on Apprenticeships throughout National Apprenticeship Week that culminated in a networking coffee catch-up event.

Although recruitment and onboarding can take time, the Skills & Enterprise advisor has successfully placed six apprentices, against a target of 50 in 2022-23, with more in the pipeline. To further the Hub's impact the advisor has been actively attending and participating in working groups with training providers, Ofsted, and others to remain up to date and involved in the latest offering (that is, Skills Bootcamps) and news.

4.4.10 Kickstart Scheme

The SWGH was an approved gateway for the Government's Kickstart programme, designed to support young people 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). By the programme's placement end date, 31st March 2022, the SWGH had successfully placed 111 young people in Kickstart opportunities, against a target of 100. Several of which are leading to apprenticeship opportunities for the beneficiaries.

4.5 Growth Hub as a Disseminator of Information

As mentioned above, the SWGH’s website has been used to further regional and national apprenticeship policy and take-up. Elsewhere, in partnership with DIT, the SWGH launched a campaign, appealing for businesses to come forward in support of providing employment opportunities for the UK’s 10,000 Afghan refugees following the evacuation of Kabul. More recently the Hub has created two pages on the Website in Ukrainian to support efforts to integrate Ukrainian refugees. Not only does this demonstrate the Hub’s economic role within the region but its ability and social role to integrate and deliver vital social outcomes. In addition, the Hub hosts e-learning for health and wellbeing webinars to highlight their growing social and economic importance within the workplace.

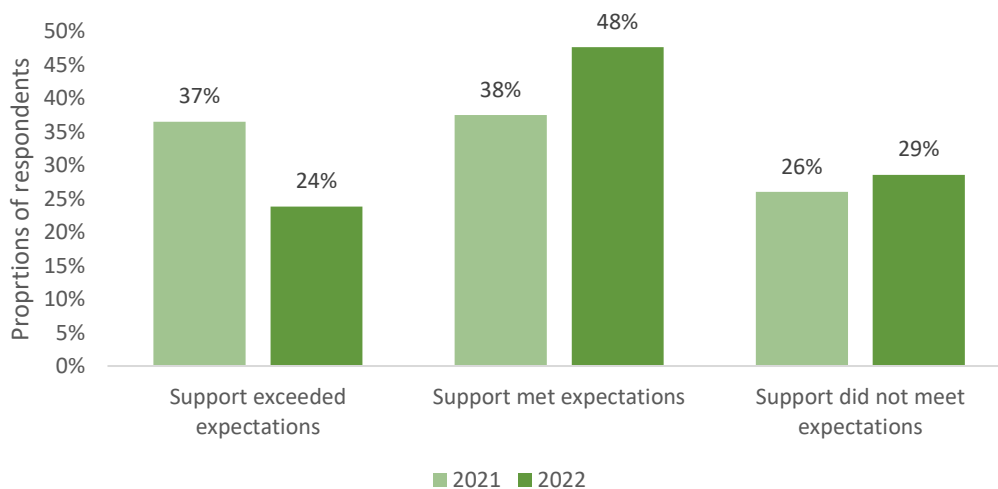
The SWGH 2021 Impact Report documented through the eyes of the local business community the operational and trading struggles experienced during the pandemic and how the SWGH had responded through IAG and signposting to available business support. In total, the report was distributed to over 16,000 contacts.

4.6 Overarching Perceptions of Support

Overall, perceptions of the support that businesses received were positive, with 74% of respondents reporting that accessing the SWGH had met or exceeded their expectations. However, compared to the survey conducted as part of last year’s evaluation the proportion of those that said exceeded expectations fell by 12pp to 24% and those that said did not meet expectations increased by 3pp to 29%.

An analysis of expectations by the intensity of support received found that the more intense the support received the more likely the respondent’s expectations would be met. There was little differentiating between those that answered support had exceeded expectations between high-intensity support recipients (26% of high-intensity responses) and medium (22%). However, 44% of respondents that said they had received medium intensity of support said expectations had not been met whilst for those receiving high this was only 14%.

Figure 4.8: Overall, were your expectations unmet, met, or exceeded?



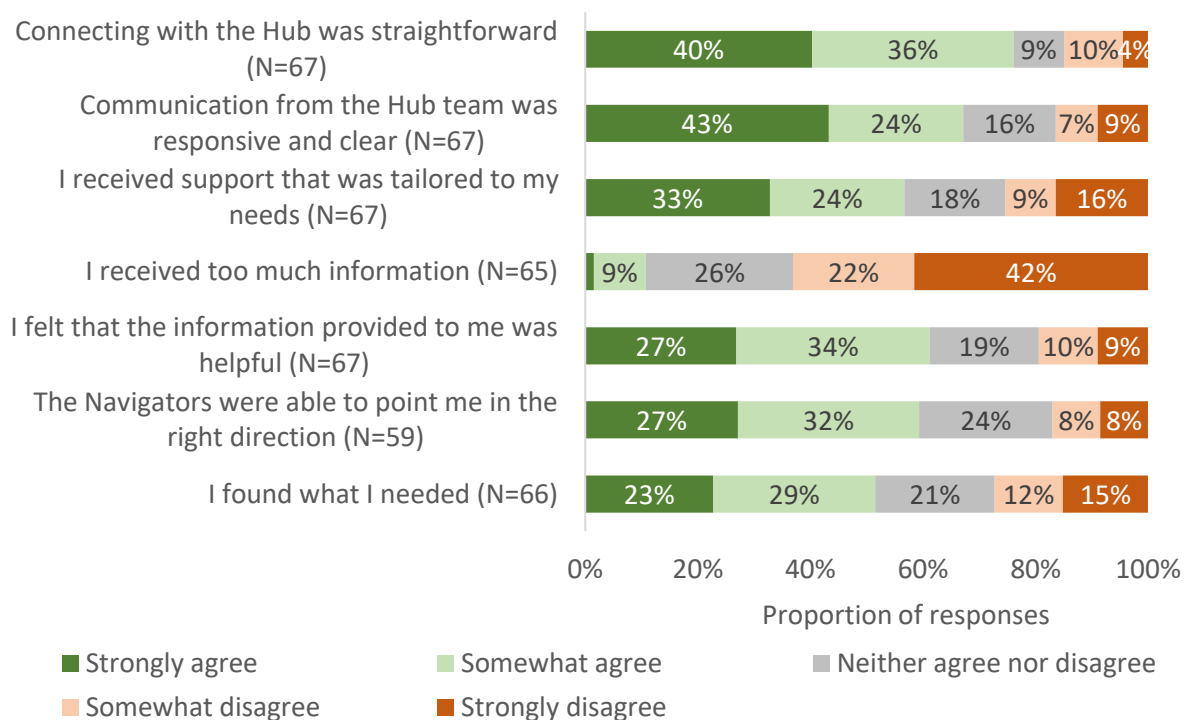
Source: Wavehill, Beneficiary Survey 2022

In trying to better understand the differences between expectations a year ago and now, respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about the support they had received from the hub. (See Figure 4.9 overleaf):

- the vast majority (76%) found engaging and connecting with the Hub as straightforward;
- 65% of respondents agreed communication from the hub was clear and responsive, and only 16% disagreed;
- the quantity of information received was not considered a problem with only 10% thinking it was excessive and 64% thinking it was not too much information being received; and
- results were more mixed with regards to the quality of support with around 60% of respondents finding information provided as helpful including the help of the Hub’s Navigators.

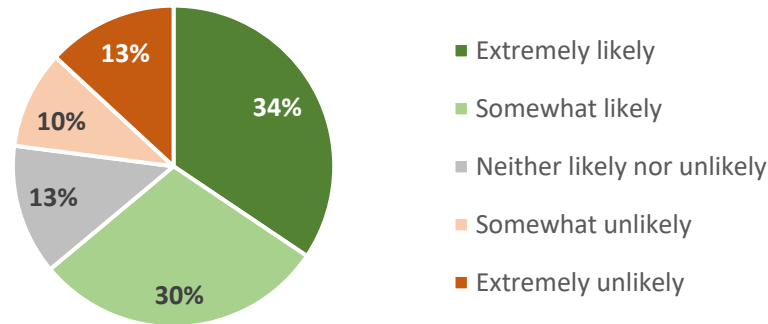
When asked if respondents would recommend the Growth Hub to other businesses, 63% of respondents reported that they were extremely likely or somewhat likely to recommend the Hub to other businesses. As with expectations of support, the type of support received impacted the likelihood of Hub recommendations. With those receiving more tailored and in-depth support being more likely to (75% from those receiving high intensity of support). Whereas businesses which received more general advice from the Hub or medium intensity of support were less likely to (with 34% being unlikely to). The findings suggest an area for improvement around the Hub’s medium intensity of support.

Figure 4.9: Beneficiaries’ views on the quality of the Hub’s support



Source: Wavehill, Beneficiary Survey 2022

Figure 4.9: How likely would you be to recommend the Hub to other businesses? (n=61)



Source: Wavehill, Beneficiary Survey 2022

When asked about areas for improvement for the Hub common responses were around improving network and promotion, and Hub communication and organisation.

4.7 Future Support Requirements

Of those surveyed, 65% of businesses felt they still needed further business support. Most prominently, the most desired support was around access to finance and mentoring (both 47%). This was closely followed by business planning (43%) and team training (40%).

Overall, there still remains strong demand for business support, particularly in light of recent and current socio-economic shocks to the local, national and global economy. As with the previous evaluation, the data suggests support for more focused and bespoke advice, guidance and direct business support, particularly for those receiving medium- or light-intensity support.

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.

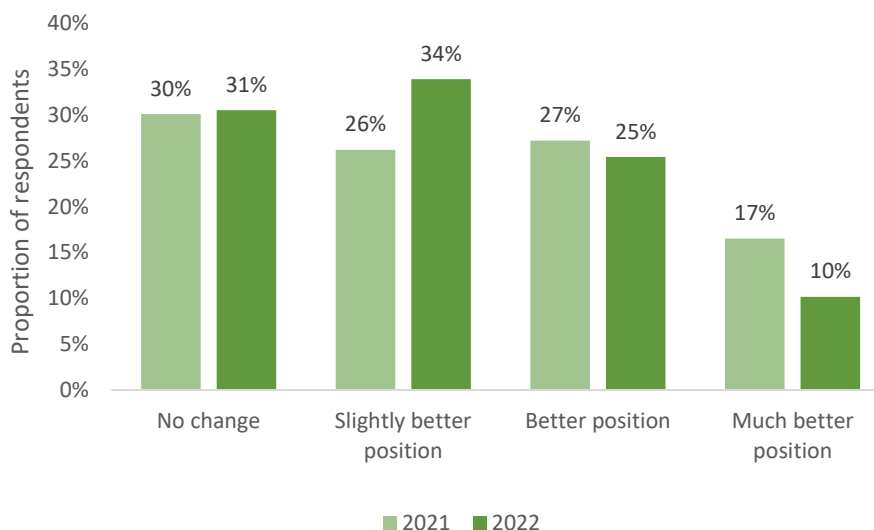
5.1 Stakeholder Reflections on Progress

Stakeholders were positive in their reflection on the progress the Growth Hub has made in the 2021/2022 financial year. Almost all stakeholders noted progress had been made towards the aims and objectives of the organisation despite wider factors constraining its ability and capacity such as Brexit, COVID-19 and rising input costs. Despite these challenges, which stakeholders felt have impacted the amount of progress the Growth Hub could make over the last year, progress had been made against its 'normal' support provision. Where it has veered away from "normal" the Hub has adapted well to respond to businesses' evolving needs and achieved positive outcomes for beneficiaries.

5.2 Impact on Businesses

As a result of engaging with the Growth Hub, 69% of respondents felt that they were in a better position than prior to joining the Hub because of the support that they received, similar to evaluation findings from last year (70%). However, the proportion that said they were in a much better position has fallen from 17% to 10% of respondents between the two evaluations.

Figure 5.1: To what extent do you think your business is in a better place because of the support that you received from the Hub? (n=59)



Source: Wavehill, Beneficiary Survey 2022

Beneficiary Outcomes

Looking more specifically at how the Hub has impacted the businesses, the survey found:

- enhanced ambition of businesses as being the most cited positive impact of the Hub;
- this was followed by business' ability to respond to new opportunities (41%) and ability to market effectively (39%), confidence (38%) and business acumen and productivity (both 37%); and
- least cited was business' comfort to take risks (15%) and networking skills (23%).

Figure 5.1: To what extent have any of the following been impacted by the support you received from the Hub?



Source: Wavehill, Beneficiary Survey 2022

Businesses surveyed also felt optimistic about the future, with 71% of businesses expecting their income to grow in the next twelve months and 22% to stay the same.

Safeguarding and creating jobs

One of the Hub's aims in the last year has been to help businesses become more resilient. As such it is positive to find that all surveyed business respondents are still trading despite the difficulties and challenges faced in the last two years.

Just over one out of every three respondents had grown their employee numbers since engaging and receiving support from the Hub, with 65% having maintained their employee numbers. As noted, survival and recovery have been the Hub's key focus in recent years. As a testament to the Hub's work, nine businesses from the survey indicated the support they received had helped them to safeguard a total of 23 gross jobs. Extrapolating this success across all the Swindon and Wiltshire based businesses the Hub has supported in the last two years (n=2,196), it can be estimated that the business supported by the Hub has safeguarded

a total of 149 gross jobs following support from the Hub, equivalent to £8.4m of gross GVA safeguarded.^{11,12}

It should be noted that economic impact figures should be taken as an indicator of the Hub's economic contribution to the SWLEP economy. For a more robust analysis, a full economic impact assessment will need to be undertaken, which seeks to determine the Hub's net contribution. That is, accounting for what would have happened without the Hub's support. The above analysis has several notable limitations including:

- challenges in self-reporting survey approaches;
- survey representativeness and therefore affecting the accuracy of grossing up;
- applicability of assumptions including GVA per filled job; and
- does not account for additionality that is attribution, deadweight, displacement, leakage, substitution or multiplier effects. Hence these are reported as gross jobs and GVA safeguarded.

Business support goes beyond the more than 2,400 businesses the Hub has provided support to in the last financial year. The beneficiary survey clearly finds a positive impact the Hub has had at the business level and when accumulated contribution to the wider SWLEP economy. Not only does the Hub help safeguard and create jobs and gross value added, but there are also wider intangible benefits including business confidence, ambition and ability to take advantage of future opportunities which will only serve to benefit the business community and local economy long into the future.

¹¹ ONS, Subregional productivity: labour productivity indices by economic enterprise region (2022) – GVA calculation uses Swindon and Wiltshire LEP GVA per filled job

¹² A full economic impact analysis has not been undertaken and

6 Plans for the Future

A lot has happened in the last two years. During the first year of the pandemic, the Growth Hub helped businesses survive and become more resilient. In the second year, it helped them find their feet again and grow again, a return to the original objectives of the Growth Hub. With ongoing global uncertainty and unprecedented rises in business input costs, the Hub remains a key source of support for businesses. The fallout from the pandemic, Brexit and transition into a new era of trading will create new opportunities. Businesses will need to develop their capacity and upskill their talent to ensure they are ready to seize these opportunities. At the time of writing, the short-term objectives of the SWGH include:

- review and agree on updated metrics for HLR following the outcome of the core funding decision;
- leading on the formation of a Skills Cluster group, derived from the South-West - North regional Growth Hub Cluster;
- working with Mintivo to provide tailored digital support as part of Growth Hub Core;
- working with Carbon Lens to develop and provide tailored support and workshops on Net Zero;
- with the rapidly emerging SWLEP Business Cyber Centre (BCC), contribute to the formation of support services housed within the BCC namely the Business Acceleration Hub, Products & Services and Skills Provision for those pursuing a career in the Cyber related sector, eventually building the centre's very own ecosystem of talent and business development;
- wind down and mop up closing Peer Networks and Kickstart programmes;
- begin work on 21/22 Impact report;
- build engagement with Growth Hub Community to encourage News articles; and
- continue to build relationships with strategic partners and hence further develop the Growth Hub's profile.

In the longer term, the Hub is seeking to become less reliant on public funding and pivot into a more commercial set-up whilst retaining the free one-stop-shop of business support services Swindon and Wiltshire businesses have come to expect. In recent years, the Hub has demonstrated its ability to adapt and take on more responsibility to support businesses through uncertain times. In doing so, it has not only built a reputation amongst the business community within the SWLEP area but has gained the trust within the local, regional and business communities. To continue to deliver the value-added services currently available to businesses and ensure its longevity, the Hub will look to launch a Growth Hub Plus service in the near future, where businesses can pay a fee to access more tailored and in-depth support.

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