



Simplifying Business Support: A Consultation – PUSH Response

On the business support government should be funding:

- Q1 Do you think the business support outlined in Figure 2 and at Annex A adequately covers the key needs of business and helps achieve public policy aims outlined in this document?

It covers the key needs and meets core public policy and PUSH supports the effective and efficient delivery of business support and agree that where appropriate and practical activities should be brought together in order to achieve those objectives. The product range and methods of delivery should be sufficiently flexible to meet local needs especially as they relate to disadvantaged groups and specific sectors.

- Q2 Where do you see duplication in publicly-funded business support?

Sub regionally we don't see duplication; as example one major business advice provider has been integrated with another and it is clear that some voluntary sector providers are less active in the region, partly due to revenue cuts.

- Q3 Where do you feel support is adequately provided by the private sector, thereby reducing the need for public sector support?

The provision for gender specific start-up advice is clearly provided by the private sector, but local public sector organisations were slow to respond to this gender specific initiative. Locally private sector provision runs a peer to peer networking and support model that seems to have delivered good results and they now have extended this model to BME targets under public funding within the Southampton area.

- Q4 What publicly-funded business support do you regard as being of the highest priority?

The start-up target groups are those that need the greatest public support and are of the highest priority as sub-regionally (and particularly within Portsmouth and Southampton) the start up rates do not meet the regional figures. With the shift by government to tackle the economically inactive, particularly those on long term sickness benefits and given that for many of them, self employment is an important option of employment and sub regionally we have a particularly high level of the economically inactive, thus this would be a priority. We also consider that business support should prioritise those measures that support our own policy directions i.e.: development of the 'knowledge economy', through business services, advanced manufacturing and providing services that focus on encouraging enterprise in disadvantaged areas and amongst other disadvantaged groups.

Q5 Do the business support themes make it easier for you to know what publicly-funded support is available to meet the needs of your business? Are they the right themes?

Generally it is agreed that they are the right themes, although there is the opportunity for greater clarity with regard to “Tackling Barriers to self-employment” and commitment to and greater understanding of local provision is needed.

Q6 To what extent will reducing the amount of branded business support make it easier to know what is available to meet the needs of your business?

In theory as a start up business or expanding business the simplification will help as a “one stop number”. There are concerns that this simplification will not allow for those starting up and with multiple barriers and that initially, if put off, there is then no one else to refer to What will be the follow up to those that only seek advice once? How do we monitor their progress and ensure continued support? The BSSP is not appropriately responsive to this.

Q7 How can the delivery of business support be better arranged to minimise customer confusion and achieve economies of scale?

Ensure that the system meets the diverse needs of a diverse client base. For those in business there is a sense that they will be prepared to engage with a system, for those thinking about starting up and with multiple barriers, engagement will be more complex and a single portal for those unaccustomed to phone or e-mail will not readily engage. With the South East, and particularly within Hampshire, the Enterprise Gateway Model has been very successful in delivering outreach to communities and areas that do not engage with other forms of business support. We consider that it is vital for the emerging model to recognise that the channels to business support meet the needs of these groups and areas and not reduce everything to a single channel that does not meet the needs of all potential customers.

On the route for business to reach publicly-funded support:

Q8 How can Business Link be further developed to meet business and Government needs consistent with this policy?

By ensuring that all business advisers used by BL (whether in the public or private sector), are qualified to a minimum national standard and that this qualification is externally verified. Further, there is some concern with regards to the long term monitoring of the survival rates of start up businesses, reasons for failure and initial needs and it is not fully clear how this will be accomplished by BL.

Q9 How can business support services make best use of Business Link as the primary access channel for business?

We recognise that Business Link is the dominant brand in terms of business support and that satisfaction levels with Business Link services appear to be high. We also recognise that a brand needs to be applied consistently and that there has to be some flexibility from the owners of the brand in recognising that where projects/services are delivered in partnership then the role of the partners should be recognised and communicated.

On the way to keep business support simple in future:

Q10 Do you agree with the proposed strategic oversight of business support?

PUSH strongly supports oversight at a sub-national level to reflect the reality of economic areas and consider South Hampshire to be such an area. The Partnership for Urban South Hampshire would like to be a participant in any structures/mechanisms overseeing the range and scale of business support in this sub-region. The consultation document 5.3 states: "Within this partnership, there will need to be devolution of day-to-day operational management responsibility to sub-national level" and this has raised concerns over the provision and potential costs to Local Authorities, particularly as stated in 6.11: "There will be some costs to the public sector as we implement the change". Greater clarity needs to be given as to the potential resource implications for local authorities.

Q11 Is there another option that you think we should consider and how would you justify it?

At this time no alternative or additional options have been put forward.

On the costs and benefits of simplifying business support:

Q12 If you have experience of using publicly-funded business support, what were the costs to you of finding out what was available to meet your needs?

This is not applicable to Local Authorities.

Q13 How much do you think our proposals could reduce your costs in looking for and understanding publicly-funded business support?

This is not applicable to Local Authorities.

Q14 How far do you agree with our initial estimates of the benefits and costs of simplifying publicly-funded business support?

Initially there will be savings, through economies of scale and hopefully those savings will be transferred to and not at the expense of marginalised groups or disadvantaged areas.

Q15 Are there other benefits or costs to the proposals? For example, what other costs and benefits are there for the private sector, the third sector and for public, private and third sector providers of business support?

This is not applicable to Local Authorities.

On the proposals as a whole:

Q16 How far will our proposals make it simpler for business to know what publicly-funded business support is available and how to access it?

Clearly the simplification process will promote and make it easier for businesses to know what is available; there still remains the concern that, as with other public sector funded opportunities, potential future erosion of funding will lead to a revised service particularly for the “start ups” and the exclusion of the disadvantaged. Further; local authorities and communities will need to be confident that local issues are addressed and funding channelled through Business Link will not be so constrained centrally as to restrict services to those areas and communities which in terms of business start ups and growth may be considered to be more marginal or difficult. Locally there is evidence that Business Link is engaging with local communities to address needs within the context of adopted policy and it is important that this is not undermined by the simplification process.