

CASE STUDY

Black Country Innovation Services and Concept Covers

Supported by the Further Education Innovation Fund (FEIF), Black Country Innovation Services was established with the aim of working with local small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to strengthen workforce skills, improve business productivity and drive innovation. The initiative has been led by Walsall College, working alongside South Staffordshire College and Halesowen College to deliver activity across the region.

Since March 2024, the consortium has delivered a programme of workshops and one-to-one business support focused on areas including AI tools, digital marketing, social media and cyber security. These activities have supported local businesses from manufacturing, engineering and service sectors. The follow-up support offered includes an analysis of organisational needs, which in some cases has led to structured T-level student placements within businesses.

Concept Covers Ltd, a small manufacturer of handcrafted garment covers based in Lye in Dudley benefitted from this approach. With seven employees, Concept Covers built its customer base through word-of-mouth referrals and long-standing client relationships. Following the economic downturn and the loss of several established customers, they recognised the need to strengthen their online presence but lacked the time and knowledge to develop and manage a digital marketing strategy.

Following a consultation with an Innovate Support Advisor at South Staffordshire College, a T-level Digital student joined the company on an industry placement with the task of developing and implementing a coherent social media and online engagement strategy.

Working closely with the business owner, the student created regular content, responded to customer enquiries, and monitored engagement to understand what was driving interest and sales. After six months, the impact was tangible with reach rising by more than 1,600% and generating over 100,000 views across platforms, alongside nearly 500 new followers. The business received more than 20 new enquiries from UK customers and secured new international orders from the United States and Europe. Sales generated through their Instagram page have continued to grow month by month.

In turn, the placement gave the T-level student experience of delivering a live project within a small manufacturing business, with responsibility for managing activity and working directly with the business owner.

Through FEIF support, Black Country Innovation Services demonstrates how student-led projects, supported by colleges, can help SMEs adopt new approaches while providing learners with invaluable industry experience.

