

**A review of the relationship between business support services and further education**

**January 2021**

**THINK...**

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the Gatsby Charitable Foundation for their support of this work, and to Jenifer Burden and Daniel Sandford Smith for their guidance throughout the project. We would also like to thank all those who we interviewed for their participation, particularly the growth hubs case studies. The views expressed in this report are those of the author.

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## About us

THINK is a consultancy specialising in skills, employment and workforce development, offering policy, strategy, research and management support. We work with local and regional government, employers, further education colleges and universities to develop and implement innovative skills and education programmes.

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## 1. Executive Summary

This report provides the key findings and analysis of a project undertaken on behalf of the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, reviewing business support provision in England and its relationship with further education.

From the perspective of an employer, ready access to appropriately skilled labour is a pre-requisite for growth. However taken in isolation, skills themselves are not sufficient to drive growth. Business growth strategies embrace multiple considerations such as innovation and research and development; marketing and sales; exporting; digital transformation and so on. National and local business support programmes respond to these diverse business needs.

With employer leadership becoming increasingly embedded within our post-16 skills system, this report provides an overview of the scope, scale, funding, focus and impact of business support services, before moving on to consider how well further education – which equips learners with the skills required in the workplace – and business support work together.

Key findings emerging from extensive desktop research, a survey of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), in-depth case studies of growth hubs, and interviews with key stakeholders include:

- There appears to be great variability in the scope and scale of business support provision that is either coordinated or delivered within LEP areas, making standardised approaches to local integration between FE and growth hubs difficult.
- Both growth hubs and further education are entering a period of significant change, as Department for Business, Enterprise and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) reviews national and local business support, just as Department for Education (DfE) launches a new White Paper<sup>1</sup> which aims to better enable colleges to work with employers on business development and innovation.
- The national policy framework and system incentives for growth hubs and FE colleges do not support the integration of services around the needs of employers. Whitehall silos are being repeated at a local level. Our work found very few examples where FE colleges are working closely with growth hubs to provide aligned, sequenced packages of interventions to employers.
- Some colleges already work with businesses in ways that go beyond the delivery of education and training. This is not the norm, and can happen outside of the primary local infrastructure (growth hubs) created over the past decade to support business growth.
- FE's reach into foundational sectors and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) represents an opportunity, such as via knowledge transfer, that focuses on absorption (rather than cutting-edge research) in the 'everyday economy'. But the capacity of FE to engage with business may require development to move beyond transactional relationships.

The report's analysis highlights two main avenues via which growth hub and further education collaborations could develop, steered by the priorities of local industrial strategies.

First, there are operational alignment opportunities that would see FE and business support services share common data, business-facing vocabulary, understanding of local priorities, and cross-pollination of governors and directors – all to improve the quality of service to employers and the impact of public investment in FE and business support.

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Education (2021), *Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth*, London: The Stationery Office.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/953510/skills-for-jobs-lifelong-learning-for-opportunity-and-growth.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/953510/skills-for-jobs-lifelong-learning-for-opportunity-and-growth.pdf)

Second, we think that, as FE colleges engage employers on a more strategic basis (rather than transactional), there are opportunities to build a business support offer from FE colleges which responds to local priorities, gaps in business support provision and the specialisms and networks of the college itself. None of this should detract from colleges' core function, to develop the skills required within the workplace. Instead it should be regarded as a welcome by-product of this core function.

## 2. Introduction

### 2.1 Background

The future success of an economy rests on its ability to attract investment, grow new start-ups and expand current enterprises. Business support services have existed for centuries in one form or another to help people, companies and places to prosper and grow.

From the point of view of the employer, the purpose of business support (providing access to finance, enabling innovation, growing exporting, new technologies, and so on) and of further education (developing skills for the workplace) all drive towards the same goal – enabling their business to succeed and grow. However as this report shows, in public policy and delivery terms, there appears to be limited alignment of business support and further education.

Uneven growth and weak productivity performance have for some time been the focus of significant interest by leaders and policymakers. These concerns have been thrown into sharper focus by the events of the past year. The Coronavirus pandemic, combined with risks to growth associated with Brexit, mean that arguably now more than ever, the role that publicly-funded services can place in stimulating growth has rarely been more critical.

### 2.2 Purpose of the report

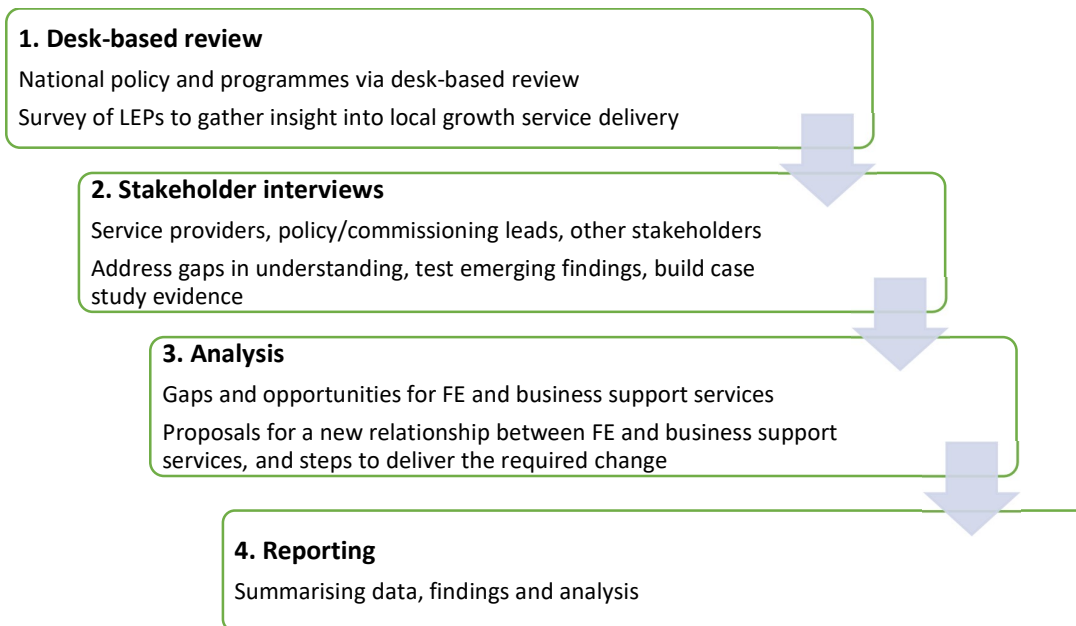
Weak productivity growth has long been a feature of the UK economy. The pandemic has brought these issues into sharper relief. With Whitehall-led reviews of business support services (via BEIS) and further education major reform plans (announced in the recent White Paper) now underway, this report aims to make an important contribution by examining how further education and business support work together currently, and how this relationship might strengthen in future.

To do this, the project team have focused their activity on the following topics:

- Identifying the scope of business support services provided to businesses via nationally and locally commissioned programmes
- Understanding the vehicles that are used to deliver business support services in England, and how they are funded
- Clarifying for whom business support is designed (such as particular sizes of employer, sectors and geographies)
- Identifying evidence of the impact of business support services (and whether this information is used to further develop and market services to employers)
- How further education colleges contribute to the delivery of business support, and how this might develop in future.

### 2.3 Method

Starting in early September 2020, over a period of around 10 weeks, a four-stage project plan was established for delivering the review. The overall structure of the project is summarised in the diagram below.



Evidence gathered to inform the findings and subsequent analysis was derived via four main sources:

- An extensive desktop review of relevant policy and evaluation reports.
- Four growth hub<sup>2</sup> case studies derived via interviews with LEP and growth hub partners, providing in-depth analysis of the function and management of business support within the following LEP areas: Humber, Thames Valley, Greater Manchester and Black Country (each case study is included at Annex A).
- Feedback from growth hubs in response to a survey that we developed, aiming to understand the scale and scope of business support provision within LEPs across England (see Annex B)
- Interviews with civil servants, research and education providers and other interested stakeholders.

## 2.4 Related activity

This report is one of several related enquiries designed to provide a timely contribution to the debate over further education. Other relevant recent work includes:

- A qualitative study of innovation by FE Colleges in their relationships with employers,<sup>3</sup> completed in September 2020
- A survey by the Association of Colleges of the role played by innovation in strategic planning and employer and local engagement by FE colleges,<sup>4</sup> completed in September 2020

<sup>2</sup> Note: Our evidence gathering focused on growth hubs as a key example of known local infrastructure that contributes to the provision of business support services. We recognise that growth hubs are not the only infrastructure offering these type of services in a locality, and depending on geographical location/size of hub etc, other institutions may play a significant role

<sup>3</sup> Baxter, E (2020) *Further Education Colleges and Innovation*, London: Gatsby Charitable Foundation.

<https://www.gatsby.org.uk/uploads/education/reports/pdf/fe-colleges-and-innovation.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Association of Colleges (2020) *Innovation in Further Education Colleges Summer 2020 AoC Survey*.

<https://www.aoc.co.uk/system/files/AoC%20Innovation%20in%20Further%20Education%20Colleges%20survey%20summer%202020%20final.pdf>

- A report by the Learning and Work Institute to understand how further education providers can best grow demand for higher technical learning and Institutes of Technology among local employers.<sup>5</sup>

## 2.5 Project delivery

The project was delivered by THINK, a Greater Manchester-based consultancy specialising in vocational education and training strategy and delivery. The team incorporated individuals with extensive track records of success in managing and leading large-scale business support functions built over the last three decades, in addition to our specialism in further and higher education delivery.

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<sup>5</sup> Learning and Work Institute (2021) *Making a market for the missing middle: Higher Technical Education*  
<https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/research-and-reports/making-a-market-for-the-missing-middle-higher-technical-education/>



### 3. Landscape review – business support

#### 3.1 Recent history

Both further education and business support are subject to high levels of instability in terms of national policy and funding. However unlike FE, which has seen relatively stable governance since colleges were incorporated in the early 1990s, the recent history of business support services has seen frequent change to its delivery vehicles, as follows.

- 1990-2001: **Training and Enterprise Councils**<sup>6</sup> were established to manage publicly-funded training programmes. TECs had no statutory role in relation to business support, beyond the provision of activities that better enabled unemployed adults to start a business. However, largely at the prompting of local authorities, some TECs developed business support offers – in some cases merging with local Chambers to create hybrid organisations.
- Between 1993 and 2011, **Business Link**<sup>7</sup> formed the primary vehicle via which business support was delivered. Face-to-face services were managed on a regional basis and, from the mid-2000s, funded by Regional Development Agencies (which managed Business Link from 2005 to their closure in 2012), supplementing a national telephone helpline and, in later years, an online portal. Compared with the growth hubs of today, Business Link was well-funded. This enabled a stronger focus on evaluation than previously, and a stable provision offer. Business Link offered skills brokerage by engaging employers and delivering skills diagnostics, primarily in support of Train to Gain<sup>8</sup>, which integrated its brokerage function into Business Link.
- From 2012 to 2015, the successor to Business Link – the **Business Growth Service**<sup>9</sup> – comprised two main services: the Manufacturing Advisory Service and the Growth Accelerator. Commissioned nationally, both services were overtaken by the emergence of Growth Hubs. Business Growth Service was closed by Government in 2015.
- Since 2015, Government has pursued a twin track approach to the provision of business support, with a wide range of national programmes supplemented by local **Growth Hubs**<sup>10</sup> – the first was founded in Greater Manchester in 2011 (see case study, Annex A).

#### 3.2 Policy context – business support

Launched in late 2017, the UK's Industrial Strategy<sup>11</sup> set an ambition to boost productivity and increase the earning power of people throughout the country. The Industrial Strategy marked a departure from previous non-interventionist approaches to UK economic policymaking, signalling

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<sup>6</sup> See Lourie, J (1997) *Training and Enterprise Councils: Research Paper 97/48*, House of Commons Library, London: The Stationery Office. <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/RP97-48/RP97-48.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> See Overman, H et al (2014) *Evidence Review: Business Advice*, London: What Works Centre for Local Growth. [https://whatworksgrowth.org/public/files/Policy\\_Reviews/14-05-16-Business-Advice-Review.pdf](https://whatworksgrowth.org/public/files/Policy_Reviews/14-05-16-Business-Advice-Review.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Hands, A et al (2009) *Train to Gain: Developing the Skills of the Workforce*, London: National Audit Office, pages 11-12. <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/0809879.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> For more details on the Business Growth Service, see: House of Commons (2015) *Government Support for Business*, Business Innovation and Skills Select Committee, London: The Stationery Office. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmbis/770/770.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> More information about Growth Hubs and their development is available here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/full-network-of-39-growth-hubs-boost-business-support-across-the-country>

<sup>11</sup> Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2017) *Industrial Strategy: Building a Britain fit for the future*, London: TSO. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/industrial-strategy-building-a-britain-fit-for-the-future>

Government's desire to intervene to promote structural change in the economy. It notes that previous decades have produced an imbalanced economy with low productivity and a lack of well-paid jobs in much of the country.

The 'Business Environment' chapter addresses themes such as access to finance, diffusion of good practice, entrepreneurship and scale-up, exports, competitive and regulatory environment and inward investment. It sets out how LEP-based growth hubs should become the route via which business support activity at a sub-national level is accessed, as follows:

- All LEPs/Mayoral Combined Authorities must produce a Local Industrial Strategy
- HMG to work with LEPs (and Mayors, CAs and Local Authorities) to drive growth
- All businesses should have access to a local growth hub
- Growth hubs to receive continued Government funding
- Growth hubs to build reach, develop peer-to-peer networks, and connect businesses to the best support available
- HMG to work with LEPs and growth hubs (and universities and the private sector) to support high-potential businesses in scaling up.

Other relevant policies that influence the shape of business support delivery within England include.

- *Strengthened Local Enterprise Partnerships*<sup>12</sup> – a 2018 Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government policy document, which outlined the purpose of local industrial strategies (including identifying priorities for business growth, and guiding the use of local funding and national schemes) and described the mission for LEPs as “to deliver Local Industrial Strategies to promote productivity”.
- *Business Productivity Review*<sup>13</sup> – a 2019 HM Treasury and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) report which focused on the need to improve access for SMEs to mentors, peer-to-peer networks and business leadership programmes.
- *International Research and Innovation Strategy*,<sup>14</sup> published by BEIS in 2019, this focused on connecting research with entrepreneurs, new Innovation Hubs across UK, financial support for innovative start-ups/scale ups, intellectual property and governance standards.
- *Export Strategy*<sup>15</sup> by Department for International Trade (DIT) in 2018 described the role of LEPs and growth hubs in growing exports, providing advice and guidance for business, and creating new international market links.

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<sup>12</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2018) *Strengthened Local Enterprise Partnerships*, London: MHCLG.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/728058/Strengthened\\_Local\\_Enterprise\\_Partnerships.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/728058/Strengthened_Local_Enterprise_Partnerships.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2019) *Business Productivity Review*, London: BEIS [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/844506/business-productivity-review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/844506/business-productivity-review.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2019) *International Research and Innovation Strategy*, London: BEIS. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-international-research-and-innovation-strategy>

<sup>15</sup> Department for International Trade (2018) *Export Strategy*, London: DIT [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/737201/HMG\\_Export\\_Strategy.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/737201/HMG_Export_Strategy.pdf)

- *ERDF England Operational Programme 2014-20*<sup>16</sup> by Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) prioritises the use of EU structural funds on research and innovation, SME competitiveness, low carbon, and latterly Covid-19 recovery.

### 3.3 Future reforms to business support

In early 2020 the National Audit Office published a report into national business support schemes,<sup>17</sup> examining how well BEIS is managing such schemes “in a way that is likely to maximise value for money”.

Using a broad definition, the NAO found that Whitehall departments manage over 100 separate business support schemes, costing around £17bn annually. Two-thirds of this figure is accounted for via tax reliefs to business for activities such as research and development, largely via HM Treasury. BEIS manages 47 business support schemes, valued at around £2.4bn in total per annum.

The NAO’s key findings include:

- BEIS and HM Treasury recognise the need to reduce the complexity of business support, because firms find the range of support available difficult to navigate.
- The Industrial Strategy is yet to have a major bearing on BEIS’s business support offer.
- BEIS did not evaluate alternatives when designing schemes and most lack measurable and time-bound objectives. Information collected from schemes is rarely used to refine the support offer.

The NAO recommended that BEIS should undertake a review of its business support offer, to ensure a better strategic fit with the requirements of the Industrial Strategy. Other recommendations focused on the need for BEIS to ensure better scheme management, and improved collection and use of performance data, to improve current and future provision.

In response, BEIS is undertaking a review of business support for SMEs, incorporating national and local provision, which is set to complete in 2021. The aim of the review is to improve the stability, quality, consistency and accessibility of business support – this includes better integrating publicly-funded business support with private sector sources of support (such as via banks).

Feedback from stakeholder discussions undertaken by BEIS in 2020 indicates that there is an appetite to move towards a more consistent core set of business support programmes delivered by local partners, backed by tighter rules governing the use of flexible funds within localities to safeguard value for money. This may reduce the variability in the scope and scale of business support available within local areas (see section 4, below).

BEIS’s review of business support provision to SMEs will be informed by an external evaluation of growth hubs, covering the period 2015-20, which is due to be delivered in 2021. This promises to be the largest study of its kind in recent history and comes on top of existing annual and biennial reviews of growth hub performance. BEIS also intends to fund business support at least at current levels, including via the new Shared Prosperity Fund, set to replace EU structural funds from 2023.

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<sup>16</sup> Department for Communities and Local Government (2014), *ERDF England Operational Programme 2014-20*, London: CLG.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/342297/ERDF\\_Operational\\_Programme.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/342297/ERDF_Operational_Programme.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Prideaux et al (2020), *Business support schemes*, London: National Audit Office; available here: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Business-support-schemes.pdf>

## 4. Findings

The project's growth hub case studies, desktop review, LEP survey and interviews with other stakeholders built an extensive evidence base which we have used to inform our findings.

Findings are presented in response to each of the five topics highlighted within section 2.2 (above) as the focus of this project, as follows.

### 4.1 Scope of business support services

Our work found significant variability in the range of business support services available to employers across England via nationally and locally commissioned programmes.

Nationally, the NAO identified 48 business growth programmes which are managed by BEIS. Feedback from LEPs and growth hubs suggests that the following programmes play an important part in the local business support landscape, summarised in the table below:

#### Key nationally-commissioned business support programmes

Industrial Strategy theme	Programme
Entrepreneurship and improved productivity and growth of SMEs	<b>Be The Business:</b> A business-led, HMG-funded initiative offering mentoring, peer learning groups, leadership development, digital advice and benchmarking.
	<b>BEIS Business Support Helpline</b> offers a phone and web-chat service to assist with basic enquiries, often sign-posting to growth hubs and other services.
Access to Finance / Business Investment	<b>British Business Bank (BBB)</b> is the Government's agency managing a variety of financial instruments to support business growth, including alternative loans and equity investment (with ERDF providing £564m towards this over a 7-year period), start-up loans and emergency coronavirus funding. In 2018 BBB supported 74,000 businesses via new financial commitments totalling £678m.
Business Innovation, Research and Development	<b>UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) Strength in Places Fund</b> supports research and business partnerships with innovation projects which will have local economic impact. £186m allocated to seven projects to date; total budget is £236m 2019-22.
Exports	<b>UK Export and Finance</b> provides Government loans to exporters to help them win new overseas contracts and also provides guarantees against buyer default. In the last year UKEF provided £4.4bn of support to 339 companies.
	<b>International Trade Service</b> is operated by DIT and delivered by procured regional delivery organisations. It employs International Trade Advisers to provide practical advice and support to existing and new exporters. Small grants are also available to support activities such as attendance at trade fairs.

Within LEP areas, our research found an extreme variability in both the scope and scale of business support services. Furthermore, we could find no clear pattern in the nature of the business support offer in an area relative to local economic need.<sup>18</sup> In summary:

- All LEP areas which responded to our survey indicated that they provide an enquiry handling and account management service for businesses. One growth hub indicated that this is its sole

<sup>18</sup> The extent of local business support provision appears not to be influenced by the strength of the local economy – ie. LEP areas with weak local economies do not therefore have well-funded, extensive business support provision to help address local economic challenges.

function – to act as a ‘front door’ to business support in their area, coordinating and managing access to appropriate support for business without delivering any support services itself.

- The service delivery either by growth hubs and/or commissioned locally by LEPs usually incorporates some or all of the following:
  - Start-up programmes, supporting new entrepreneurs
  - Growth/scale-up initiatives, the latter seeking to deliver exponential growth – more rapidly than the former
  - Digital programmes, seeking to exploit growth opportunities across all businesses, where digital can be used to help develop new markets and drive down costs
  - Access to finance, sometimes signposting to national schemes or, in some cases, directly providing loans and equity investment which provides businesses with the capital required to grow.

Employer use of growth hubs varies considerably according to the needs of the local economy, market awareness and the services available via the growth hub. Information from the case studies indicates that:

- Speculative enquiries from businesses seeking grant-funding comprise a portion of initial contacts, though this appeared to vary across the case study LEPs. Growth hubs will also use this opportunity to engage the business on other issues requiring non-financial assistance.
- Interest among employers is highest within services targeted at business growth (such as initiatives targeting scale-up opportunities, sectors and/or high-growth businesses), followed by innovation and research and development themes.
- Local business support is a mix of universal and targeted services, the latter typically focused on priority sectors and businesses demonstrating the greatest potential for growth (‘gazelles’).
- A major driver of demand for growth hub services is the complexity of available business support provision. Employers come to growth hubs because they find the choice of existing initiatives difficult to fathom.
- There appears to be a consensus – both in Whitehall and within LEPs – that skills and workforce development is one of the least well-developed aspects of business support provision; though our service experience exercise cast a broadly positive light on the ‘first line’ response of growth hubs to enquiries relating to workforce skills.

## 4.2 Vehicles used to deliver business support services and how they are funded

### 4.2.1 Delivery

The variability in the scope of business support services is mirrored in delivery arrangements – between LEP areas, there is little consistency about who delivers business support. In LEP areas including Thames Valley (see case study, Annex A), the growth hub is a procured service, contracted to a service provider who typically handles enquiries and delivers account management (as a minimum) along with a selection of business support programmes. In other places, companies that are either wholly or part-owned or governed by the LEP are responsible for the delivery of growth hub services (see the Greater Manchester case study). In some cases (such as in Greater Birmingham and Solihull) the LEP itself is the delivery agency. While in others, the LEP manages the growth hub under a common branding, but the bulk of delivery resources sits within local authorities (as per the case study from the Humber LEP, Annex A).

Regardless of how the growth hub is governed, in the main LEPs use their growth hubs to deliver business support services that go beyond enquiry-handling and account management. In addition to

activities delivered by the growth hub itself, LEPs often commission other providers to deliver local business support projects. Our survey found that universities are key business support providers in the bulk of the LEP areas that responded. Discussions with growth hubs revealed that university activity tends to focus on innovation, networks, and research and development projects which are often sector-specific and respond to local economic priorities. For example, in the Black Country, eight universities (most of which are located outside the LEP area) share the bulk of the £65m European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) invested by its LEP across a wide range of projects within the current programme, to 2023. University-led business support projects in the Black Country<sup>19</sup> focus on improving the productivity of key sectors such as aerospace, low carbon, digital, advanced materials and automotive. Other common vehicles for delivering business support are:

- Local authorities, many of which have retained business support staff and, in some cases, form a central plank of the growth hub's core resource
- Business support providers, who offer a range of services such as start-up programmes, access to finance, and specialist workshops and masterclasses focused on SME growth
- Banks, accountants and other professional services, who offer privately-funded business support to existing and prospective clients.

Our survey highlighted few examples of further education and growth hubs working together, and this was confirmed via discussions subsequently held in the four case study areas and with other key stakeholders. More feedback about the nature of the existing relationship between growth hubs and further education is available in section 4.5, below.

#### 4.2.2 Funding arrangements

Definitions of what constitutes business support vary, hence estimates of total funding for business support activity can vary considerably too. While the NAO concluded that total annual investment is around £17bn (2020), in 2015 NESTA declared the figure to be £10bn. Both reports concurred that the largest expense is on tax reliefs. The summary of national programmes above (see section 4.1) provides an indication of the scale of investment by BEIS within key England-wide programmes.

Investment in key national business support programmes likely exceeds comparable figures for locally-commissioned projects by a significant margin. Within local areas, public funding for business support activities typically comprises three primary elements:

- **Growth Hub core funding** – supporting the running costs of all growth hubs in England, amounting to £12m annually from BEIS.
- **Local Growth Fund (LGF)** – which aggregated Whitehall budgets to be devolved to LEPs in support of Growth Deals. Over recent years this has led to an average of around £2bn annually being awarded to LEPs to deliver their strategic economic plans, with the largest share taken by capital projects such as transport, housing and physical regeneration. Some LGF has been awarded to support skills and business support/finance, but this usually represents a small fraction of the available funding (around 3%, in the case of Greater Manchester).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> A full list of Black Country ERDF projects can be found via this link:

<https://www.blackcountrylep.co.uk/upload/files/BC%20DELIVERY%20PLAN%20FINAL%202019.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> As an example, Greater Manchester's Growth Deals have yielded almost £500m in Local Growth Fund investment, 72% of which (£358m) was spent on transport. Of the remainder, the bulk (£85m) was spent on FE capital projects. Within business support, £15m was invested in a productivity programme, and a further £1m spent on business support digital capital projects – amounting to around 3% of all Local Growth Fund within the LEP area. More detail is available via [this link](#).

- **European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)** – to support the delivery of local (LEP-based) ERDF Operational Plans aligned to the national plan. Business support services typically access funding under the research and innovation and SME competitiveness themes, which we estimate to be worth around £350m per annum to business growth services. Case studies highlight how dependent LEPs are upon ERDF as the source of funds for locally-commissioned services. ERDF is set to be replaced by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, which is due to come on stream in 2023 when European structural funds (including ERDF) expire. Details of this fund are not yet known.

LEPs responding to our survey identified a handful of other sources of income, as follows:

- **Local authorities**, whose ability to invest in business support services has diminished significantly following a decade of austerity, but remain a funder of business support for almost all those responding to our survey
- **Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government**, which allocates ERDF to LEPs and latterly has provided Coronavirus recovery grants
- **Other EU funding** in selected LEP areas, such as those able to access the European Agriculture Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF).

#### 4.3 Business support services' target audience

Business support services provided by LEPs via growth hubs are a mix of universal and targeted services, the latter usually defined by the size of the employer, growth potential and/or the sector they operate in. Universal services typically encompass the kind of support any employer might seek – such as enquiry handling, account management, start-up programmes and exporting.

All growth and scale-up programmes usually have an element of targeting in their marketing and delivery arrangements, where business support providers are incentivised to actively seek clients in a proactive fashion, rather than operate on a reactive basis when a business gets in touch.

Funding rules, particularly for ERDF, mean that most locally-commissioned activity has to be targeted on SMEs. Some LEPs responding to our survey provide sector-specific local business support programmes, but in a number of places no sector-specific activity was reported. It should also be noted that only three Local Industrial Strategies are published on [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk) to date (the 2017 UK Industrial Strategy stated that Local Industrial Strategies should be developed in each LEP area) suggesting that the majority remain incomplete, potentially weakening the strategic alignment of business support provision with local economic priorities.

Data from our survey of LEPs illustrates the variable nature of growth hub provision and the degree to which targeting of business support provision is possible:

- LEPs reported their growth hub business advice budgets ranged from £0.2m per annum (within one of England's most deprived LEP areas, home to 1.1m people) to over £20m (within one of its largest city regions, with a population of 2.8m).
- Reported growth hub staffing numbers ranged from a low of three to a high of 201.
- Start-up support appears limited, given that one in seven workers are self-employed. Only one growth hub reported supporting more than 800 individuals to start a business in the past year; most growth hubs reported start-up numbers well below this level.
- Small businesses comprise the overwhelming majority of growth hub clients. On average:
  - 61% of growth hub clients are micro businesses (employing fewer than ten staff). One LEP reported that 95% of its growth hub clients are micro businesses

- 36% of clients are SMEs
- Only 3% are large businesses – ERDF cannot be invested in large employers, while many of these firms have the capacity to pay for their own business support via consultancies.

The range illustrates the huge variation in business support provision (and expenditure) across the country – a business’ ability to access quality support will be determined by where it is located. This makes ‘one-size-fits-all’ policy recommendations more challenging, given the extreme variability of the business support offer delivered with or via Government’s preferred local route – growth hubs.

#### 4.4 Evidence of the impact of business support services

At a national level, the NAO report<sup>21</sup> highlighted that BEIS has not consistently followed Government’s own guidance on the design and evaluation of national programmes. The NAO concluded that:

*“Most schemes in our review lacked measurable objectives from the outset or evaluations of their impact to know if they are providing the most value or if they should be discontinued.”*

This finding was endorsed by the research and evaluation providers we spoke with as part of our enquiries, applying equally to locally-commissioned programmes they had reviewed and to those managed nationally by BEIS. In preparing its report into Business Advice in 2016,<sup>22</sup> the What Works Centre for Local Growth analysed over 700 relevant policy evaluations from the UK and other OECD nations, finding that 23 impact evaluations met the Centre’s minimum standards.

Insight from the What Works reports, along with evaluations of Business Link<sup>23</sup> and the 2007-13 ERDF Programme,<sup>24</sup> allow some tentative conclusions to be drawn about the impact of business support services, as follows.

- The type of business that is most likely to access business support is under five years old, a limited liability company (rather than a partnership), and does not operate in sectors such as retail, hospitality and financial services.
- More intensive forms of support, and business support that is selective and targeted, appears to have greater impact.
- There is no evidence of differences in impact between local and national delivery, or between public sector or private sector delivery, according to the What Works review.
- The What Works Centre judges that 2.5% of business support impacts are additional and would not have otherwise occurred; a further 22% of impacts have been achieved more quickly.
- Sales growth is more commonly achieved via business support than productivity or employment gains (What Works), although the Business Link evaluation found that employment growth is more commonly achieved.
- ERDF knowledge transfer and research and development collaborations tend to be more cost-effective than intensive forms of business support in terms of the return on public investment.

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<sup>21</sup> Prideaux et al (2020), *ibid*.

<sup>22</sup> Overman, H et al (2014), *ibid*.

<sup>23</sup> Such as Mole, K et al (2006) *Economic impact study of business link local service: final report* London: Department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform.

[https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/sources/docgener/evaluation/library/united\\_kingdom/0611\\_uk\\_business\\_link\\_eval\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/evaluation/library/united_kingdom/0611_uk_business_link_eval_en.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> See 2007 to 2013 ERDF Programmes: Achievements, available via <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/erdf-programmes-progress-and-achievements>



When asked to identify the key strengths and weaknesses, LEP survey respondents highlighted growth hubs' function as a single front door for business support as their key strength. Common weaknesses highlighted via the survey include funding constraints, capacity, and the cluttered and confusing landscape of business support provision.

#### 4.5 Further education colleges' contribution to the delivery of business support

Existing relationships between local business support services and further education appear limited and ripe for further development. Most growth hubs surveyed and interviewed did not indicate that FE is a delivery partner. However:

- One LEP mentioned the existence of referral mechanisms, directing employers to training delivered by FE
- Another LEP highlighted business support provision delivered by FE
- One LEP reported a skills brokerage service, providing impartial analysis of a business's skills needs and facilitating a response from FE providers.

On the latter, the Greater Manchester Growth Hub's skills brokerage service has enabled 168 apprenticeship starts over the past twelve months, a quarter of which have been delivered by FE colleges (a figure that is broadly in line with colleges' share of the total market for apprenticeships). According to the Growth Hub, FE colleges might be better positioned to secure a greater share of activity arising from the skills brokerage service if they became prompter in updating the information about available courses, learner satisfaction and achievement rates on their websites. They added that FE colleges face challenges addressing poor SME perceptions – some employers presume that college delivery is inflexible to their needs, focused more on the completion of the course than the impact of training on a business.

The limited engagement between business support and further education means that employers are highly unlikely to be experiencing a skills offer which is integrated with other aspects of business support to form a coherent, sequenced package of interventions designed to improve business productivity and performance. Interviews revealed that the opportunity to better align local FE skills provision with local business support is recognised, but appears to be rarely acted upon.

- Interviewees from within growth hubs and at BEIS appeared to have little sense of the potential role that FE can play in the business support landscape. One growth hub interviewee commented that colleges in their area appeared to be largely on the back foot – responding to Ofsted, fixing the failures of secondary education, tackling financial problems and so on – rather than appearing able to act as animators of the local economy.
- Interviewees with an FE background noted colleges' extensive reach into so-called 'foundational sectors', where the bulk of working people are employed, is a key strength. This was observed in the Cumberford-Little report into the tertiary system in Scotland<sup>25</sup> and within a series of essays published by the Policy Exchange in summer 2020,<sup>26</sup> noting that improvements in productivity cannot be achieved via high-growth sectors alone. As IPPR North<sup>27</sup> stated in 2019 "*Policy for productivity must target both advanced industries and high-tech sectors, as well as the 'everyday*

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<sup>25</sup> Cumberford, A and Little, P (2020), *One Tertiary System: Agile, Collaborative and Inclusive*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government. <https://view.pagetiger.com/inlhij/1/PDF.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Goodhart, D (editor) (2020), *The Training We Need Now*, London: Policy Exchange: London. <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/the-training-we-need-now/>

<sup>27</sup> Round, A and Hunter, J (2019), *Perspectives on SMEs and Productivity in the Northern Powerhouse*, Manchester: IPPR North. [https://www.ippr.org/files/2019-06/1559567818\\_perspectives-on-smes-and-productivity-in-the-northern-powerhouse-final-report.pdf](https://www.ippr.org/files/2019-06/1559567818_perspectives-on-smes-and-productivity-in-the-northern-powerhouse-final-report.pdf)

*economy' in which many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) provide employment and support communities and places."* This 'everyday economy' is not a part of the economy that HEIs routinely engage with, but further education colleges do.

FE's priority – described by DfE within the recent White Paper as giving people the skills required to get good jobs – should make it a key partner in any support offer that aims to enable local businesses to grow. Ready access to skilled labour will not in isolation drive improvements in productivity, but it is a critical ingredient for any business seeking to grow. This alone should be reason enough for a closer relationship between further education and business support provision.

Evidence from other surveys, such as that published by the Association of Colleges (AoC) in summer 2020,<sup>28</sup> highlight good examples of colleges playing a fuller role in local growth than that portrayed in the evidence gathered via this project. Upon further enquiry, in many cases these positive developments appear to have occurred almost *in spite of* current FE system incentives for providers, not because of them. Within further education, success metrics are focused on learner volumes, achievement rates and efficient use of allocated funding, not the impact of learning upon businesses and the local economy. Similar could be said for growth hubs. While key growth hub metrics often capture (for example) the number of jobs created and businesses supported, or project spend against planned profile, outcome measures (such as business growth and productivity) are not usually recorded.

Experience suggests that it is possible for FE colleges to operate on a sustainable basis delivering classroom-based 16-19 study programmes. For FE, the riskier, more uncertain part of the market is that which is more likely to deliver more immediate economic benefit to workplaces – employer responsive training. It is understandable that some FE leaders choose not to prioritise this activity – why do it if there are more predictable income streams elsewhere requiring less investment in capacity?

#### 4.6 Summary findings

Following completion of the desktop review, interviews, draft case studies and mystery shopping, a draft set of summary findings from the project was developed, based on the evidence gathered:

- **Both growth hubs and further education are entering a period of significant change.** For the former, BEIS is undertaking external evaluation of growth hubs ahead of a review of local and national business support in 2021 – 'local flexibility within a national framework'. The Shared Prosperity Fund replaces ERDF in 2023, but very little is known about its planned operation. The recently-published Skills for Jobs White Paper contains a reform proposals which, taken together, will "*move on previous underestimations of further and higher technical education*", ensuring that "*people can learn the skills they need to get great jobs*"<sup>29</sup>.
- **The national policy framework and system incentives for growth hubs and FE college do not support the integration of services around the needs of employers.** National policy fault-lines are mirrored at local level due to an absence of strategy and delivery integration by LEPs between business support and skills. Growth hubs are aware that support to employers on workforce development and recruitment is not aligned (unlike R&D, finance, exporting, etc). Skills are a 'blind spot', FE not seen as an economic 'animater'. Funding and quality success metrics for FE college governors and leaders understandably focus on the delivery of education

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<sup>28</sup> AoC (2020), *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> DfE, (2021), *ibid.*

and training. Increasing the impact an FE college makes to local growth is much harder to measure, and as such carries less incentive for leaders and managers.

- **The diverse range of business support available is itself a major driver of publicly-funded business support.** In some areas, growth hubs function primarily as a signposting/advice and guidance service. There is a desire for the future business support offer to avoid current levels of variability and complexity (via better national/local alignment).
- **There appears to be no pattern to the scale and scope of growth hubs relative to economic need and opportunity.** Our sense is that, in some areas, growth hubs are driven by requirements of public contracts, not always in alignment with the priorities of local business. Support for those looking to start a business appears an area for development – one in seven working people nationally are self-employed but the growth hub offer appears limited.
- **Some colleges already work with businesses in ways that go beyond the delivery of education and training.** This is not the norm and can happen outside of the infrastructure (growth hubs) created to support growth. We are yet to encounter examples of ‘quick wins’ that would demonstrate FE and growth hubs working together (see section 5.2).
- **FE’s reach into foundational sectors and SMEs represents an opportunity**, such as via knowledge transfer that focuses on absorption rather than cutting-edge research in the ‘everyday economy’. But the capacity of FE to engage with business may require development to move beyond transactional relationships. The potential of Investors in People and National Careers Service to foster employer relationships that address workforce barriers to growth may be under-exploited.

## 5. Analysis: Developing the contribution of FE colleges to growth

This section of the report sets out our analysis of the changes required to enable business support and further education to work together better, maximising the contribution of FE to growth.

### 5.1 Guiding principles

A key conclusion of this report is that services for business growth and skills development appear to be rarely aligned to useful effect from the point of view of employers. Our findings also highlight the variability of both business support services and employer-facing activity by further education colleges.

As a result, we believe that DfE and BEIS should avoid creating rigid, one-size-fits-all policy responses to the need to better integrate and align FE and business support. In many places this risks forcing together weak business support and FE services, creating a combined offer that fails the employer and individual.

Instead, we think an approach that fosters specialisms and builds on good practice would be more effective. We think there are two levels to this:

1. Initially, focus is required upon FE/business support collaborations that strengthens the delivery of skills which employers need.
2. This should then extend into other activities that promote growth, as colleges occupy more strategic relationships with employers and become better able to meet a more diverse set of business growth needs – still largely as a by-product of FE's core function – to deliver skills.

Stable and capable providers/coordinators of business support services should be encouraged to work with similarly stable and capable FE providers. This could be helped by coordination by bodies such as LEPs, the FE Commissioner's regional representatives, growth hubs and chambers of commerce (the mix of actors could flex according to local capacity) to work with FE providers to identify assets and specialisms within FE that can be capitalised upon to benefit growth.

### 5.2 Stage 1: Developing skills for the workplace

Following a review of our interview and survey evidence, we undertook detailed investigation via the case study growth hubs into the connections between business support services and FE colleges at an operational level. Having tested the alignment of growth hubs and FE delivery in detail, we found a very limited degree of common practice on the following operational themes.

**Data:** Growth hubs and FE colleges are using different data sets for planning and delivery. FE colleges are using labour market analysis tools, past planning data, and their capacity to plan the curriculum offer. Growth hubs are using company data from providers such as Experian, and local authority-populated customer relationship management (CRM).

**Knowledge:** Direct knowledge-sharing between growth hubs and FE is limited. However, LEPs do have skills (people) departments who are influencing the demand side of the skills system, either by providing sector data or by commissioning programmes (such as Adult Education Budget) and FE capital spend.

**Governance:** We expected to find greater governance alignment between growth hubs and FE. However, there is connectivity between LEPs and the skills system. This is mostly taking place at LEP Board level and on advisory boards. Colleges often have local authority governor representation.

**Communication:** We saw little evidence of joint communications between colleges and growth hubs. Given both support businesses to prosper, we expected to see website details, signposting, etc. With one growth hub, they felt that such a connection would damage their reputation as independent broker.

**Investment:** On investment, we found a range of practices. In the Thames Valley there was evidence of the growth hub investing in employer direct training. In other areas, decisions such as the allocation of capital funds for investment in FE facilities and estate had no input from the growth hub.

**Employer engagement** was not planned or integrated, but the beginnings of an approach exist: Humber LEP is recruiting a Workforce Development Officer, Greater Manchester has a workforce development and skills brokerage function, and Thames Valley have a provider skills commitment.

Overall, we think that the current relationship between growth hubs and FE colleges in respect of the development of skills for the workplace is one of misalignment, but that this can be rectified over a relatively short timeframe.

The chart below summarises the recommended action required to deliver a better functioning relationship between growth hubs and further education which supports the improved delivery of the skills that businesses (and places as a whole) need to grow, while also helping to improve the effectiveness of business support provision in the area.

Following the recent FE White Paper and the 2021 BEIS review of growth hubs, Government could task institutions to deliver the 'high-performing system' characterised in the chart below as a desirable future state for further education and growth hub alignment across all 38 LEP areas. Our view however is that a variable, place-based approach may work best – allowing those which can take such steps to do so, sharing learning with those which still require capacity to be built.

Stage 1 – developing skills; from misalignment to a high-performing system

### Current state 2020: misalignment

- Different data generates misaligned strategy and delivery
- Limited sharing of knowledge, no common view of sectors
- LEP/Growth Hub and FE Boards have limited common membership
- Transactional employer relationships on people and skills topics by FE and growth hubs
- Little clear joint purpose in FE and business support investment
- Limited evidence that growth hubs prioritise skills and workforce development
- No evidence reported of FE working with its employers to feed demand for growth hub services



**ACTION**

### Future state 2025(?): a high performing system

- Create shared local economic datasets between business support and FE
- Transparent sharing and challenging of business support & FE service data
- Shared events, cohesive web, PR, staff vocabulary
- Refresh LEP/Growth Hub and FE boards to cross-pollinate
- Investment (skills capital, AEB) consistently and transparently aligned on skills and growth priorities
- Business support stimulates & aggregates demand for FE & vice-versa
- Aligned data underpinning shared responses – sectors, inward investment, market failure
- Common understanding of routes and occupations, shared product development
- Cohesive employer dialogue – FE and business support talking the same language
- Boards better influencing strategy and sharing demand-side intelligence
- Local FE and business support investment aligned with gazelle sectors /employers, not decline
- FE investing in quality responses to business support-led demand

### 5.3 Stage 2: Enhancing business support services via FE

The role played by FE colleges in supporting growth can go beyond their core function of delivering skills for good jobs within an area.

We do not consider that FE colleges as they are currently configured should be expected to become major providers of business support services. There are existing specialists providing these services. But there are activities that support business growth (beyond FE's primary focus on human capital) where some colleges can play a role.

Importantly, this must sit within a growth/productivity strategy for the local area, managed by the LEP. While the bulk of this business support activity will be either by or via the growth hub, there are examples already where the FE college relationship with employers goes well beyond the provision of education and training and into examples of more strategic employer engagement.<sup>30</sup> In short, there is an opportunity for LEPs to better harness and build upon this capacity in FE in a way that supports delivery of their Local Industrial Strategy. In this context, LEPs should consider skills provision to be a matter for growth strategies, rather than a 'people' issue.

The activities delivered by an FE college should be developed as a by-product of their core function, building upon their reach into local employers (especially SMEs) to better address business needs. The available offer should vary from place to place because local needs are diverse and so are business support providers and FE colleges. This is in part the result of local priorities and devolution. It is also a consequence of variable employer engagement capacity among colleges. It should also flex according to a college's specialisms and the needs of employers, especially where the relationship between businesses and their local college evolves beyond a relatively transactional task of (for example) placing apprentices, and instead moves into dialogue about the business's strategic growth ambitions.

While we again highlight the variable nature of the existing FE and business support capacity in places, there is merit in DfE and BEIS considering what a viable 'menu' of business growth service options looks like, on the basis that if colleges can do more in this area, they should. For example, such services could be brigaded into sector-based employer 'hubs' at FE colleges – or 'business centres', as the White Paper proposes – which within city regions could form part of an FE sector-based strategy that recognises specialisms within individual institutions as part of a network FE strategy, potentially brokered by the LEP.

A summary of the types of intervention that could be supported by colleges, based on feedback from interviews and case studies in this project, is presented in the table below.

### 5.4 Long term reform

Discussions with civil servants in the latter stages of this project identified an interest in how reform to the governance and structures of FE could help enable an improved contribution towards local growth. This has not been a focus of enquiries and evidence gathering, and as such would be best served via a separate research commission.

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<sup>30</sup> Several examples of employer-focused innovation by FE colleges are highlighted in a recent report on the topic prepared for Gatsby by Elaine Baxter, *ibid.*

**Proposed business support activity delivered by FE colleges**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Rationale</b>	<b>Local economic conditions</b>	<b>FE college features</b>
<b>Start-up support</b>	Host or, if there is market failure, deliver start-up support	Significant recent growth in self-employment. Low labour demand. Gap in the offer in most LEP areas	Low business births and/or high unemployment	May be better suited to some routes– eg construction, digital
<b>Knowledge sharing within sectors</b>	Enable the sharing of well-evidenced good practice to improve the performance of local employers	The performance of the ‘everyday economy’ needs to improve. FE has links into large numbers of SMEs in foundational sectors	Weak productivity growth, especially in ‘left behind’ places	Best delivered in routes that are a known college specialism
<b>Share equipment</b>	Allow local employers access to high-quality kit on FE sites	LEP skills capital supports the purchase of equipment that may also benefit local employers if made available to them	Priority sectors, backed by LEP skills capital investment in kit on FE premises	Within routes that are a known college specialism
<b>Low-cost business space</b>	Provision of low-cost office/workshop space to support new and micro businesses	New college estates increasingly design-in co-working spaces with employers, opportunity to provide low-cost space to businesses, network and to share ideas	Start-up and scale-up a priority. Sectors where homeworking is not an option	Availability of space at low cost, IT connectivity, access to other resources
<b>Networking hub</b>	College acts as the place where businesses gather to meet, discuss and learn	College facilities are well-suited to networking events (including catering)	Priority sectors within a place, working with chambers, LEPs etc	Build on existing employer customer base



## 6. Conclusion: An opportunity not to be missed

This project has highlighted the opportunity to improve the interface between business support services and further education. From the perspective of an employer, such a move would be entirely logical – better aligning recruitment and workforce development with activities designed to accelerate business growth.

The coming months offer an ideal window within which policymakers can help make this happen. Not only is greater policy alignment between BEIS and DfE desirable, but consideration also needs to be given to the system incentives that shape the behaviour of LEPs, growth hubs and FE colleges in their strategy planning and delivery. Plans announced in the Skills for Jobs White Paper for a more balanced set of FE provider accountability measures offer a welcome opportunity for the realignment of system incentives towards outcomes for people, business and places.

For some growth hubs and FE colleges, any move at a national level to strengthen the relationship between business support and the provision of technical education will present a natural extension, or even a validation, of work that is already underway. However our findings indicate that such relationships are relatively rare and are often achieved in spite of the framework within which both services operate, rather than because of it.

Change will not be delivered overnight, and the highly variable nature of business support provision within localities (and our experience of similar variability in the capacity of FE colleges to engage business) mean that business support providers and FE colleges will be a very different starting-points. Similar could also be said for LEPs, whose engagement with higher education (via ERDF programmes) and capital projects (via Local Growth Fund) appears to far outstrip their engagement with further education.

Sustained leadership at a national and local level will be required to deliver the changes we have set out in this report. We should expect the future degree of integration and engagement between business support services and further education to be uneven and asymmetrical. But in 2030 it would be good to be able to look back on 2020/21 as the year when moves began to strengthen the relationship between business support and further education, benefitting businesses, residents, places and our economy as it seeks to claw back lost growth.

## Annexes

### Annex A: Growth Hub case studies

#### Case study BLACK COUNTRY LEP: BLACK COUNTRY GROWTH HUB

##### Background

The Black Country LEP area covers four local authority districts to the north and west of Birmingham – Sandwell, Dudley, Walsall and Wolverhampton. As of 2015, its Gross Value Added (GVA) per head was the lowest of all 38 LEP areas of England. The largest sectors by employment are retail (19%), health (15%) and manufacturing (15%) – the latter almost double the national average of 8%.

The Black Country (BC) Growth Hub is hosted by Black Country Ltd, a company owned by BC's four Local Authorities, which leads on economic strategy and intelligence. The BC Growth Hub acts as the "front door" to business support in the area, undertaking an initial diagnostic of the business's needs, brokering business support solutions. The Growth Hub itself does not undertake direct delivery. It was established in 2014, initially as a brand only, and has since evolved to become an independent unit comprising 6.2 FTE staff – one director, two enquiry-handling staff, three account managers and a marketing officer. One of the account managers shares his time between the Growth Hub and LEP policy, which helps ensure that the latter is informed by frontline delivery evidence. It handles 2,750 enquiries p.a., and brokers support for 1,600 businesses and 400 individuals interested in starting a business.

The Growth Hub accounts quarterly to the LEP for its performance. These performance reviews provide the opportunity for discussion around product availability and gaps with the growth hub tasked to work with partners to resolve any identified gaps. The Growth Hub, however, has limited ability to rectify any identified shortcomings in the quality of existing provision – there is no mechanism for collating or reviewing evaluation findings.

The West Midlands Local Industrial Strategy (LIS) was published in May 2019. It encompasses three LEP areas, so it has been necessary for the BC LEP to develop its own version with a greater focus on manufacturing and less focus on digital/creative. The Growth Hub has its own Business Plan which is strategically aligned whilst also consistent with the BEIS Growth Hub framework.

##### Growth Hub service provision

The Growth Hub spends around £400k p.a. (largely on staff), drawn from core BEIS funding. Business support projects delivered by other partners (mainly universities) are predominantly funded by ERDF. Around £8.2m p.a. is spent on SME competitiveness and £5.8m p.a. on innovation. Business support in BC is dependent on ERDF and the question of replacement funding is a major concern.

Services are offered on a universal basis, but for some elements a degree of targeting is expected to develop as business support services start to align with the LIS. Most enquiries received by the Growth Hub are seeking funding. Advisers use this as an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the business's needs and to explain other forms of non-financial assistance that could help. Key services accessed by businesses via the Growth Hub include:

- Growth – Coventry University operates an ERDF programme to provide digital support. Clients are also referred to other University programmes such as export, innovation and leadership.
- Access to Finance – The ERDF-supported Midlands Engine Investment Fund has five fund managers who are targeted to provide non-financial business support. Large companies that are ineligible for this service are referred to the private sector (Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales Business Advice Service).

- Start-Up – Black Country has an ERDF-funded self-employment programme which is limited to a 3-hour workshop. Customer feedback indicates that the lack of more comprehensive provision in BC is a major issue.
- Skills/Training – Serco operate a European Social Fund Skills Support for the Workforce programme across the West Midlands.
- Manufacturing Support – Employment Growth Solutions (EGS) runs an ERDF programme in the West Midlands, offering growth advice and small grants. This is a continuation of the former National Manufacturing Advisory Service and is a very popular service in BC.

During the pandemic, 95% of business enquiries have been about steps to help their survival. Inevitably, much of this has involved help in accessing emergency funding. The pandemic has also significantly impacted skills provision. Most businesses in Black Country’s priority sectors are manufacturers, and their skills/training activity needs to be on hands-on / face-to-face. On-line solutions work less well for manufacturers.

Generic marketing of business support provision is undertaken by the Growth Hub which is focused on the type of support available around specific topics rather than specific products (the latter would not be appropriate given the number of competing products in the area). Much of this is digital with an increasing use of video to deliver “think pieces” on specific topics and themes. The delivery organisations market their own products and services. This is not structured, and there is no single marketing plan or branding strategy across the business support delivery network. Delivery bodies are highly resistant to the notion of consolidated marketing as they have their own business targets to achieve and will not give up their marketing activity.

### **Delivery partners**

The Growth Hub is not a service delivery body, but it does broker services and make referrals to a wide range of national/local and public/private delivery organisations which comprise a network of delivery provision for BC businesses. Some of these are in competition with each other, and the Growth Hub sometimes has to tread carefully to be impartial. BC businesses find the business support landscape confusing and in need of greater coordination and co-branding.

The Growth Hub promotes Be The Business and the Small Business Leadership Programme as providers to BC businesses. It is also in dialogue with Innovate UK regarding the need for greater support to BC businesses – BC is the second-lowest recipient of Innovate UK funding in the country.

### **Workforce development, skills and organisational development**

Serco manage a European Social Fund workforce development programme, using local colleges as part of their supply chain. Referrals to Serco are made by the Growth Hub. Referrals are also made to colleges which run specialist programmes or facilities which would benefit business clients. An example of this is Sandwell College, which has a FabLab to which the Growth Hub refers relevant manufacturing clients. It is aware of Dudley College’s particular specialisms in construction and light rail innovation, but referrals here are likely to be through intermediaries rather than the College directly. Colleges tend to be project partners with another delivery organisation, so the Growth Hub’s relationship is more usually indirect.

There is future potential for FE colleges to play a role in leadership and management (L&M), which is in consistent demand from employers. All the college websites offer L&M support but the Growth Hub is not aware that local businesses commonly access such programmes. There are currently a wide range of local and national products in this area, but this may not be the case in the future, especially as ERDF draws to an end, creating a gap that colleges would be able to fill.

## Case study GREATER MANCHESTER LEP: GREATER MANCHESTER BUSINESS GROWTH HUB

### Background

Greater Manchester (GM) is the largest functional economic area in England outside of South-East England. Once a world centre of manufacturing, GM is now one of the most economically diverse city regions in the UK. Strengths in digital, creative industries and professional services have driven much recent growth, especially in the centre and south of the conurbation. However much of GM remains stuck in a low-wage, low-productivity economy.

GM's business support is primarily delivered by The Growth Company, a c£100m p.a. not-for-profit controlled by the LEP and Combined Authority, created in 2013 to drive economic growth. The Growth Company utilises grant funding and commercial income to deliver in GM and elsewhere:

- Business support services through the GM Growth Hub (on which this case study is focused)
- The DIT International Trade contract across the North-West of England
- Business and start-up loans and equity investment, utilising its own resources in GM and acting as fund manager for British Business Bank regional and national loan schemes
- GM's inward investment, marketing and tourism services
- Apprenticeship, 16-19 and post-19 skills provision, and employment support services
- Commercial organisational development services such as Investors in People, industry standards and accreditations

The Greater Manchester (GM) Business Growth Hub was established in 2011, the first in the country, as part of GM's Regional Development Agency/Business Link succession strategy. The Growth Hub has grown since and currently spends over £15m p.a. on the delivery of a wide range of free, grant-funded business support services. It handles almost 10,000 business enquiries and supports over 4,000 businesses per annum, employing over 200 staff. It delivers most of its services directly through its in-house team with a small number of procured specialist contractors. It is primarily funded by grants from ERDF, Local Growth Fund and Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) / Local Authorities with a small amount of core funding from BEIS.

GM's Local Industrial Strategy completed in June 2019, prioritising productivity growth and focusing on three sectors – advanced materials/manufacturing, health innovation, and digital/creative – along with an overarching focus on clean growth. The Growth Hub's delivery aligns with this strategy, targeting sectors with specific programmes, while maintaining an extensive universal offer.

### Growth Hub service provision

Funding is derived from several sources. ERDF is key, matched with Local Growth Fund and, significantly, budgets from local authorities and GMCA (at a time of severe financial pressure, signifying the importance placed on the growth hub locally). As ERDF resources can only be applied to SMEs, a small proportion of other funds are used to work with larger companies.

GM Growth Hub's services include enquiry handling/account management, growth and scale-up, business start-up, innovation, low carbon / resource efficiency, digital, mentoring, leadership / organisational development, workforce development, manufacturing advice/grants, and access to finance. It also delivers manufacturing advice/grants in the other four NW LEP areas and access to finance services in Lancashire. The share of clients across the Growth Hub's key services is as follows:

Service	%
Growth – generic, high-growth, scale-up and sector specific	39%
Innovation – R&D, product/process development, digital	18%
Access to finance	16%

Workforce development, leadership and management	14%
Carbon reduction and resource efficiency	11%
Grants to manufacturers	2%

The Growth Hub also provides a business start-up advice service. This falls into two categories (a) start-ups with growth potential, and (b) “livelihood” start-ups where the owner has made a lifestyle choice to run their own business as an alternative to employment but without growth aspirations.

The Growth Hub markets its services via a referral network with over 180 organisations (public and private sector), targeting businesses that meet growth criteria via direct marketing, telesales, social media, events etc; and generic marketing via online tools and print media. Since its inception the Growth Hub’s services have been regularly and independently evaluated, measuring its impact on the GM economy, value for money, impact on beneficiaries, and lessons learned for future services.

### **Delivery partners**

Delivery partners include Manchester Metropolitan University which delivers the High-Growth Network Programme; a collaboration of GM’s four universities which deliver innovation programmes; and specialists – such as Health Innovation Manchester and Creative England – which deliver sector support.

Key national programmes that GM Growth Hub engages with include:

- BEIS business support helpline – receives referrals but these are of variable quality and eligibility.
- Be the Business – the GM Growth Hub delivers BtB’s national mentoring and peer-to-peer services.
- Small Business Leadership Programme – unlike BtB, there is limited cross-working here with the Growth Hub.
- British Business Bank – The Growth Hub’s access to finance service has a close and important relationship with BBB as an obvious potential source of alternative funding for businesses.
- UK Research and Innovation – Innovate UK has a member of staff co-located with the Growth Hub which helps to link up local and national innovation programmes.
- International trade advice – The Growth Company delivers DIT’s international trade contract across the NW. DIT provide funding to all northern growth hubs to embed the export agenda.

### **Workforce development, skills and organisational development**

The Growth Hub offer includes leadership and management and workforce development. The leadership and management provision comprises mentoring and an Executive Development Programme delivered by procured specialists. Its workforce development service includes an organisational needs analysis, a tailored action plan which includes talent attraction, acquisition, development and management. A training needs analysis is undertaken to help the business understand the provision that could be accessed.

While there is no FE involvement in the delivery of growth hub business support services, the Growth Hub’s workforce development service brokers in apprenticeship provision from FE colleges, which secure roughly one in four of the starts emerging from the service. A new £7m ESF contract, Skills for Growth, will significantly expand this brokerage function by developing skills development plans for 4000 local SMEs, including supporting these employers to access the training required.

All four GM Universities are partners in the delivery of the Growth Hub innovation service, with each employing a business development manager to help client businesses access university research, knowledge and product/process development. Universities are also in discussion with the Growth Hub regarding future leadership and management propositions.

## Case study **HUMBER LEP: HUMBER BUSINESS GROWTH HUB**

### **Background**

The Humber LEP covers an area spanning four unitary authorities on either side of Humber Estuary – East Riding of Yorkshire, Hull, North East Lincolnshire and North Lincolnshire. The area is affected by high levels of deprivation and weak growth – between 2005 and 2015, the Humber LEP saw the lowest percentage GVA growth of all 38 LEP areas (+19%, compared with an average of +31% across all areas). Its economy is focused in ports/distribution, food, petrochemicals, and energy (offshore renewables is an emerging specialism). In employment terms, the largest sectors are manufacturing including food (17% of the workforce, more than double the national average), retail (16%) and health (15%).

The Humber Business Growth Hub was established in 2014 and is hosted by Humber Local Enterprise Partnership Ltd, which itself was incorporated in 2011. The Growth Hub is staffed by one manager and four advisers. A further five business advisers are based at the LEP's constituent local authorities – unlike other LEP areas, Humber has not consolidated this workforce at the LEP. The LEP has a skills lead, the business and skills operations speak to each other, but services are not integrated. The Growth Hub receives 2500 enquiries annually, delivering support to over 2400 businesses.

The Growth Hub reports to its own steering group, comprised of twelve private and public sector members, meeting quarterly. The accountable body is Hull City Council, which employs the Growth Hub's staff.

Extensive work has been undertaken to prepare the area's Local Industrial Strategy, but this is yet to be published. Its Strategic Economic Plan, first published in 2014, focuses on three main objectives: a skilled and productive workforce; thriving, successful businesses; and infrastructure that supports growth. As with other LEP areas, the Strategic Economic Plan has been used to guide investment of EU Structural Funds, including in the activities of the Growth Hub.

### **Growth Hub service provision**

Core BEIS growth hub capacity resources and ERDF monies provide the funds to support the Growth Hub's activities. Its service offer is universal, and the Growth Hub turns no business away.

The Humber Business Growth Hub as a universal service is largely reactive, spending much time advising employers on tasks and operational issues such as contracts, and rules and regulations). Businesses rarely approach the Growth Hub on a speculative basis seeking support which would help them to grow.

Although the employment of advisers within local authorities appears out of kilter with other growth hubs, this arrangement does have benefits, specifically related to regulatory matters and contacting businesses (because the LA has registers).

The Growth Hub offers two main programmes:

- A pre-start self-employment offer, in light of high demand – this launched for 12 months in April 2020, offering 1-2-1 support and a series of masterclasses and peer networking for anyone looking to start their own business
- #GrowMySME, launched in 2018 with three strands – ICT adoption, access to finance and general business growth support – all funded via ERDF.

There is no international or business finance provision provided by the Growth Hub, though they work with other providers of these services. Promotions and events help to increase the reach of the Growth Hub, but feedback indicates that existing advisers have full caseloads. Therefore the Growth Hub may not be in a position to significantly expand its reach into businesses at this time. The need to bid for additional funding, and the reporting requirements of existing income, absorbs a fair amount of management time.

There is no distinctive sector-based offer, but feedback indicates that the Growth Hub's board is keen to see this develop. The service is limited to the expertise of its advisers. However, advertising and promotions are used on a targeted basis when a programme requires engagement from a particular type of business.

Covid-19 is reported to have driven an increase in enquiries about issues such as debt refinancing, alternatives to furlough, and personnel/redundancy questions.

Given the area's extensive interests in ports and distribution, Brexit is a key issue, with employers increasingly seeking guidance from the Growth Hub about how to respond to, and communicate, the challenges that this brings. BEIS seeks feedback on a weekly basis on employers' views.

### **Delivery partners**

The Growth Hub reported links with a limited range of national programmes – those highlighted include:

- Business Support Helpline
- British Business Bank
- UK Research and Innovation
- International Trade Advice.

### **Workforce development, skills and organisational development**

To build capacity, the Growth Hub is appointing a new workforce development adviser in response to growing interest from employers in skills. It currently provides leadership and management programmes when funding is available.

In broad terms, employers contact the Growth Hub seeking information on apprenticeships and Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) funding, rather than discussions on the role that skills can play in helping their businesses grow.

The University of Hull appears well engaged with the LEP and Growth Hub, participating in governance and undertaking project activity including knowledge transfer partnerships.

The area has several large colleges. Hull College manage the main European Social Fund (ESF) skills for workforce contract. But the Growth Hub acknowledges that there is more that could be done to capitalise on its relationships with FE – for example, Grimsby Institute (FE college) is home to a food refrigeration and process engineering research centre, which transferred from the University of Bristol in 2009, building on its long-standing specialism in this sub-sector.

## **Case study THAMES VALLEY LEP: BERKSHIRE BUSINESS GROWTH HUB**

### **Background**

The Thames Valley Berkshire LEP area is one of the most prosperous local economies in England. Its strategic economic plan concludes that it is 'the most competitive LEP area in England', largely as a result of its strength in the tech sector, which provides 90,000 jobs in the area. GVA per hour worked is £41.30, compared with a national average of £33.60. The area has the highest concentration of foreign-owned companies and remains a hotspot for inward investment.

Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership was established a limited company in 2011. It positions itself as a strategic body (rather than focusing on service delivery) and has subcontracted its growth hub delivery to Oxford Innovation Services, which is part of SQW, an economic development consultancy. Five staff work in the Growth Hub. The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead is the accountable body. In terms of governance, the Growth Hub reports to TV LEP's Business Environment and Ideas Programme Group.

TV LEP makes no distinction between the LEP and Growth Hub, insofar as if it decided to take the growth hub service back in-house, it would be the LEP that would deliver the service, rather than establishing the Growth Hub as an entity owned by the LEP. The LEP recently appointed a new Chief Executive and the sub-contracted model is being reviewed.

### **Growth hub service provision**

In common with many other LEP areas, funding for TV LEP's Growth Hub is derived from BEIS capacity funding, along with ERDF resources. In recent months, this income has been supplemented by additional resources from BEIS, to assist with the response to Covid-19. Berkshire Business Hub employs five staff in total.

Berkshire Business Hub's offer was described as 'learning towards' being a universal service, without extensive targeting of particular sectors or types of employers.

The Growth Hub offer is focused on the following services:

- Resources and information accessible by any business via the growth hub's website, covering topics such as finance and funding, intellectual property, sales and marketing.
- A five week Pre-Accelerator Programme aimed at early-stage start-ups, build around half day workshops on common topics such as finance, sales, and business models.
- A 12-hour Recovery and Growth Programme, offering 12 hours of 1-2-1 support, masterclasses etc to a limited number of businesses
- Scale-Up Berkshire, for businesses that have achieved 20% growth year-on-year for the past three years and are turning over in excess of £1m.

The programmes and resources are supplemented by regular events and webinars.

The service reported to be in most demand is access to finance, where funding schemes are managed for Berkshire by Finance South East. This includes loans and equity up to £300,000. This is reported to be working effectively. TV LEP did not have the infrastructure to deliver this service, so it teamed up with a number of other LEPs to contract FSE to deliver.



## **Delivery partners**

The local UKTI contracts, to support businesses that are either planning to export or are already active in export markets, are held by the local Chamber of Commerce. There are also four people based at TV LEP who deliver advice and guidance to young people, through the Careers and Enterprise Company.

Berkshire Business Hub connects with a large variety of national programmes, enabling local businesses to better access this support. The key national programmes highlighted to us are:

- Business Support Helpline
- Be The Business
- Small Business Leadership Programme
- British Business Bank
- UK Research and Innovation
- International Trade Advice
- UK Export Finance
- Clean Growth Fund.

## **Workforce development, skills and organisational development**

There appears to be limited activity focused on workforce development, skills and organisational development via the Berkshire Business Hub.

The LEP has a Director of People who leads on skills and employment. This includes work with local FE and HE providers to deliver the Thames Valley Skills Priority statement – setting out Berkshire’s priorities for investment in skills and employment.

The LEP also prioritises skills capita, investing in colleges. The LEP also has one example of working with an employer, where capital was provided for training equipment

Key issues are skills shortages – both within professional/STEM roles and (with Brexit) also within foundational sectors such as care, hospitality and distribution. There is also an FE representative on the main LEP board.

## Annex B: LEP survey results

### Background

In September 2020 a questionnaire was distributed to all 38 LEPs in England. The purpose of this survey was to gather feedback about the scope and scale of growth hub activity, informing subsequent project activity. A total of nine responses were received, from the following LEPs:

- Black Country
- Gloucestershire
- Greater Manchester
- Humber
- Lancashire
- Oxfordshire
- Stoke and Staffordshire
- West of England
- Worcestershire

The nine LEP areas have a combined annual GVA of £228bn (2015). Together, they are home to 10 million residents (17% of England's population), 5.5 million jobs (18%) and 394,000 businesses (17%). GVA growth rates (not inflation-adjusted) among the nine LEP areas over the 2005 – 2015 period average 29.1% (England average is 31%), ranging from 18.8% (Humber) to 45.6% (Oxfordshire). Notably, both LEPs with the weakest growth rates (Humber and Stoke & Staffs) responded.

### Results – key findings

#### *i. Scale of delivery*

Variable	Average – 9 LEPs	Lowest	Highest
Annual expenditure – business advice	£4.21m	£0.2m (Stoke & Staffs)	£20m (GM)
Annual expenditure – business finance	£4.65m	£0m (Gloucestershire)	£21.2m (GM)
Annual enquiries	4410	1000 (Stoke & Staffs)	9580 (GM)
Business assistance, non-financial	2707	600 (Stoke & Staffs)	4042 (GM)
Individual assistance, non-financial	1181	0 (West of England)	7716 (GM)
Enquiries by size – Micro	61%	25% (Humber)	95% (West of England)
Enquiries by size – SME	36%	4% (West of England)	70% (Humber)
Enquiries by size – Large	3%	0% (Gloucestershire)	0% (Worcestershire)

- The range illustrates the huge variation in business support provision (and expenditure) across England. A business's ability to access quality support will be determined by where it is located.
- Staff employed varied from a low of three to a high of 201.
- The size of businesses supported is not a surprise. It is smaller businesses that typically require support – larger businesses either don't need it or can easily buy it in from the private sector. Funding rules will also be a factor. ERDF can only be used to support SMEs.

**ii. Scope of delivery**

Service	Number of LEPs offering this service (max = 9)
Enquiry handling	9
Account Management	9
Start-up	8
Growth/scale-up	8
Digital	8
Leadership	8
Access to finance	8
Low carbon	7
Mentoring	7
Inward investment	7
Grants	7
Innovation	6
Workforce development	6
Exporting	6
Loans/equity	4

- All LEP areas provide an enquiry handling and account management service
- One LEP does only this – the remainder all provide start-up, growth/scale-up, digital, leadership and access to finance support
- All growth/scale-up activities have an element of targeting in their marketing/delivery.

**iii. Delivery partners**

	LEP/GH directly	LEP/GH commissioned	Local authority	Universities	FE colleges	National bodies	Other public	Private sector	Third sector	Chambers
Black Country				Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	
Gloucestershire		Y	Y	Y	Y					
Greater Manchester	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Humber	Y	Y	Y							
Lancashire	Y	Y		Y				Y	Y	Y
Oxfordshire	Y									
Stoke & Staffs	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y		Y
West of England	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y			Y	Y
Worcestershire	Y									
Total	7	6	5	6	2	4	3	4	4	4

- In most areas LEPs directly deliver services through their growth hubs. After that, the most common delivery bodies are LEP/growth hub commissioned bodies and universities

- Universities were commonly identified as growth hub delivery partners (often via ERDF programmes), suggesting Government's aspiration to engage HEI in business support is being met
- The only example we could find of a growth hub service being delivered by FE was in Gloucestershire, where South Gloucestershire & Stroud College is managing the Stroud Growth Hub from its campus in the town.

## **Conclusions**

Several conclusions can be drawn from the survey, as follows:

- Growth hubs vary tremendously in the scale and scope of their activities.
- There appears to be no link between economic need and the scale/scope of growth hub delivery.
- A variety of models exist for managing growth hubs, and a wide range of organisations provide business support services on behalf of growth hubs.
- FE colleges did not feature strongly within our survey as key delivery partners.
- Growth hubs are heavily dependent upon ERDF for project activity and on BEIS capacity funds to maintain day-to-day operations. Uncertainty over both funding sources is a major issue.
- The unique selling point of many growth hubs is their ability to act as a single front door for employers to a complex range of business support,
- The most common weakness identified by growth hubs is the confused and cluttered marketplace of local and national initiatives; as well as funding and related capacity constraints.

## Annex C: Interviewees

Paula Ackers	Project Lead	The Growth Company Ltd
Amitpal Aujla	SME Policy Lead, Senior Policy Adviser	BEIS
Joanna Birrell	Skills Adviser	Thames Valley LEP
Jon Brunton	Growth Hub Manager	Humber LEP
Dan Carins	Account Manager & Productivity Lead	Black Country Growth Hub
Frances Campbell	Head of Business Environment	Thames Valley LEP
Lewis Cooper	Director	College of the Future
Alun Francis	Principal and CEO	Oldham College
Scott Grindey	Senior Skills Researcher	Black Country Consortium
Simon Hooton	Director	Hatch Regeneris Ltd
Richard Jeffrey	Director of Business Growth	The Growth Company Ltd
Alicia Law	Assistant Director, Growth Hubs	BEIS
Jonathan Ledger	Specialist, Technical & Vocational Education	Department for International Trade
Abbie Littlefair	Head of Skills	Department for International Trade
Ginny Page	Director of Programmes, Education	Gatsby Charitable Foundation
Ian Ruff	Senior Policy Manager	Greater Manchester Colleges Group
Victoria Sutherland	Head of Evidence	What Works Centre (Local Growth)

## Annex D: Workshop attendees

Amitpal Aujla	SME Policy Lead, Senior Policy Adviser	BEIS
Jenifer Burden	Director of Programmes	Gatsby Charitable Foundation
Zoe Conn	Policy Adviser, Post-16 Strategy Unit	Department for Education
Aniekan Ekwere	SME Policy Adviser	BEIS
Matthew Ellis	Assistant Director	BEIS
James Farr	Director	THINK
Irene Ferrandiz	Adviser, Business Productivity & Growth	BEIS
Mark Hayes	Director	THINK
Jo-An Higginbottom	Policy Adviser	Department for Education
Vanesa Lopez-Roman	Skills Services Adviser	Department for International Trade
Andrew McQueen	Team Leader, FE Quality & Governance	Department for Education
Steve Oram	Head of FE System Reform	Department for Education
Dave Perkins	Associate	THINK
Sam Reeve	Strategy Adviser, FE Reform	Department for Education
Daniel Sandford Smith	Director of Education Programmes	Gatsby Charitable Foundation

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