

THE FUTURE OF BUSINESS SUPPORT IN THE WEST MIDLANDS

Business Link in the West Midlands is being improved to better meet the needs of business

From April 2007, the Business Link service for our region will be delivered by one region wide organisation

This document explains how the business support service will operate and how it will benefit businesses in the West Midlands



Business Support Transformation:

The Process

Responsibility for enterprise support in the regions and the work of Business Links was passed to the nine regional development agencies from April 1 2005. This provided an opportunity to review how business support could work better in the West Midlands.

Advantage West Midlands asked an independent, business led, Enterprise Board to come together to advise on setting stretching targets to improve enterprise performance right across the West Midlands region and also advise on the right sort of business support model to help make it happen.

The Enterprise Board has now completed the first phase of its work and made its recommendations to Advantage West Midlands. (The membership of the Enterprise Board is shown in Annex A).

The Board of Advantage West Midlands has now adopted the two key targets recommended by the Enterprise Board that will help to address the West Midlands' productivity and enterprise performance.

These are:

- Improving the productivity of the region
- Increasing the number of new businesses and self-employed people in the region – focusing on those start-ups most likely to add value to the region's economy

With these targets and the wider Regional Economic Strategy framework in mind, Advantage West Midlands decided to develop a new business support model which could contribute to these objectives and address concerns raised by users of the current service.

One Regional Business Support Service

On Tuesday October 25 2005, based on the advice of the Enterprise Board, the Advantage West Midlands Board approved a new regional Business Link branded business support model for the West Midlands.

The proposals will lead to :

- the setting up of a new regional independent Gateway service that is branded Business Link. This Gateway will provide the IT and telephone platform for the regional business support model and provide a fully integrated telephone and web-based information and enquiry service for businesses and individuals
- one Business Link branded general business support broker that will manage the entire Business Link branded Information, Diagnostic and Brokerage (IDB) service
- specialist service offerings for the business and professional services sector, creative and knowledge industries and enterprise creation which will include support for women, young people, ethnic minorities and social enterprises
- a separate manufacturing specialist broker which will focus on the competitiveness of manufacturing companies

This business support model will provide, across the whole of the West Midlands, individuals and businesses with access to consistent, practical and high quality advice and support.

Over the past 18 months Advantage West Midlands staff have worked with the existing business support operators to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their current service delivery model, where funds are deployed and how they deliver against current contracts.

Advantage West Midlands has reviewed these findings and as a result developed a new business support model for the region.

To ensure the new model is demand-led, a wide-ranging survey was commissioned by the Enterprise Board in order to test their reaction and the likelihood that they would use business support services.

In addition, a consultation was undertaken with key stakeholders in the region to understand their business support needs.

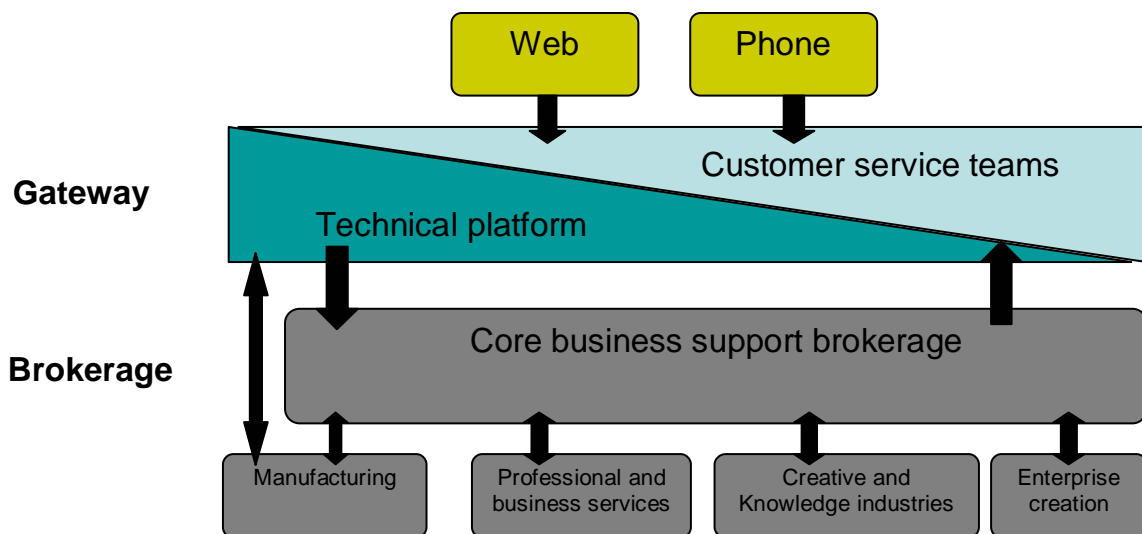
Both the market testing with businesses and the consultation with stakeholders endorsed the principles of the regional business support model which are:-

- It must actively contribute to the Regional Economic Strategy.
- It should be demand led and responsive to the needs of businesses.
- The model must be impact (i.e. value) not volume focused. However, it must be able to deal with high volume transactions cost effectively.
- It must provide simple access for users by offering a one-stop-shop to support.
- It must provide unbiased support, always acting in the client's best interests.
- A greater proportion of resource should be diverted into front-line services.
- Interventions should be high quality, appropriate and sustainable.
- There must be a reduction in the proliferation of business support initiatives to avoid customer confusion.
- The business support service must provide a consistent 'core' regional business support offer to all businesses across the West Midlands.
- Additional resources should be focused on those businesses that have the potential to grow and provide a return to the regional economy. This additional focus should be market focused and sector relevant.
- Business advisors must be credible and be able to talk to businesses in a language they understand.

- Businesses must be able to receive business support locally and services must be accessible to all client groups (e.g. women, ethnic minority businesses and social enterprise).
- There must be a strong linkage between business support and skills brokerage.
- The model must operate under a robust performance and quality management framework in order to drive continuous improvement.

As a result, Advantage West Midlands is confident that the new regional Business Link business support model is right for businesses in the West Midlands. The model is summarised below.

The West Midlands Business Link Business Support Model



Why Regional?

A single regional provider will provide:

- Consistent delivery of the Information, Diagnostic and Brokerage services under the Business Link brand that is more responsive to the needs of businesses
- More rigorous recruitment and training of Information staff and credible Business Advisers
- Quality assurance leading to better advice and brokerage
- A reduction in the proliferation of business support projects
- Efficiencies will be achieved by the consolidation of back office costs which will result in a larger proportion of the funding being directed to businesses

An independent regional IT and telephone platform to support the regional business support model will:

- Provide a fully integrated telephone and web-based information and enquiry service for the region as well as the proactive management of the client relationship with all business support services
- Provide objective information on the range of national, regional and local business support services available through the public private and voluntary sectors and offer guidance on how to use them in order to ensure the smoothest possible customer journey
- Act as a central collection point for all data and information on individuals and businesses who receive advice and support
- Ensure the services are accessible to all client groups

Key Features of the Regional Business Link Offer

- Information, Diagnostic and Brokerage (IDB) – the regional Business Link Support service will provide a consistent advice, information, diagnostic and brokerage service including customer account management
- Independent Brokerage – the key to the IDB model is the independence of the Business Link brand. Independence is critical for the effectiveness of this model as it ensures that referrals are made to the most appropriate service for the business customer's needs from the private, public or voluntary sectors
- No wrong door – the provision of a regional Business Link service will allow an individual or a business to enter the business support service at any point and find the most appropriate help to meet their needs
- Consistency and coherence of business support – access to support will be improved by establishing a single Business Link branded gateway to all further services, with the introduction of improved standards and more credible business advisers
- Clear and consistent core offer – high quality business services will be available to all individuals, businesses and employers
- Reducing duplication and confusion – the new Business Link support service will continue to work with all stakeholders at a local and regional level to reduce the proliferation of business projects and maximise resources on projects that meet the needs of businesses

The Regional IT Platform

This will be managed by the Gateway Company and will be the focal point for the management, co-ordination, development, corporate marketing and tracking of all the business support services to be delivered by the new business support model.

The exact specification of the IT platform is being developed, but it is envisaged it will include a regional website, intranet for key stakeholders and a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system.

It should also incorporate a knowledge management system to share information about business support topics and customer intelligence.

It is proposed that the regional website will share the national www.businesslink.gov.uk platform.

Selecting the new Regional Business Support Service

There will be separate selection processes for the Gateway and Brokerage elements of the business support service.

The selection process will commence in November 2005 with a view to appointing the new suppliers by April 2006.

The current Business Link and Manufacturing Advisory Service (MAS) operators will continue to provide services under the current contracts until the introduction of the new service on April 1 2007.

Advantage West Midlands will be working closely with the current Business Link operators and MAS through this period to ensure that the users of these services continue to get the best service possible.

The business support service on offer to businesses in the West Midlands should not be affected during this transition period.

Keeping you informed

Advantage West Midlands is keen for you to be kept informed about this process and we will issue further updates at key stages of the selection.

If you have any questions about these developments, you can e.mail business-support@advantagemw.co.uk

November 2005

Annex A – Membership of the West Midlands Enterprise Board

Dr Ahmed Hassam (Chairman)	Currently runs two SMEs: a pharmaceutical manufacturer in Birmingham and a food flavourings company in Hereford.
Isabella Moore CBE	First female President of British Chambers of Commerce and Director of CiLT - the National Centre for Languages. Ran a technology translation company for the engineering and manufacturing sectors in Warwickshire for over 20 years.
Chris Monk	Currently a partner in a property consultancy company in Birmingham.
John Hart	Chair of the West Midlands Business Council. Until recently worked as a Director for Powergen, with responsibility for HR and organisational development.
Peter Henderson	Managing Director of a Queen's Award for Enterprise engineering company, Valve Train Components Ltd, in Lichfield.
Tony Rodger	Runs his own strategic consultancy advising SMEs. Previously was Chief Executive and Deputy Chairman of a large Birmingham-based international engineering group.
Fay Goodman	Runs her own film, TV, media and training company in Birmingham, Goodmedia Ltd. Author and journalist on small business and personal safety issues.
Chris Newis	Chief Executive of CBC, which is the Centre of Excellence in Social Economy. Has extensive experience of the social economy and the co-operative movement.
Melanie Pursglove	Runs her own specialist paint manufacturing company in Wolverhampton.
Mohammed Nazir	Runs his own consultancy business in Birmingham and has other interests in property, ICT and international trade.
Philip Whiteman	Chief Executive of SEMTA, the Sector Skills Council for Science, Engineering and Manufacturing Technologies.
Christine Jones	Chief Executive of Business Link West Mercia and Chief Executive of Herefordshire and Worcestershire Chamber of Commerce. Has a wealth of experience in providing support to SMEs and has particular knowledge of the needs of businesses located in rural areas.