Business Link
Research into drivers of perceptions of Business Link
Table of contents

1. Executive summary ................................................................. 3
2. Introduction .............................................................................. 6
   2.1 Business Link today ............................................................. 6
   2.2 What's at the heart of the matter? ....................................... 6
   2.3 Our approach ................................................................. 6
3. Defining business support ......................................................... 6
   3.1 Introduction ....................................................................... 6
   3.2 Defining business support ................................................ 6
   3.3 The relevance of business support ...................................... 6
   3.4 Defining quality business support ...................................... 6
   3.5 Reasons for and against using business advice .................. 6
4. Purpose of Business Link .......................................................... 6
5. Relevance of Business Link to businesses today ....................... 6
6. Clarity of the Business Link offer ............................................. 6
7. Effectiveness of Business Link delivery ..................................... 6
8. Business Link as a quality experience ...................................... 6
   8.1 Understanding experiences of Business Link ...................... 6
   8.2 Why businesses do not use Business Link ......................... 6
   8.3 How Business Link sits against what businesses want from business advice 6
   8.4 A service-delivery perspective on services in demand .......... 6
9. Looking at the future of Business Link ....................................... 6
   9.1 Where Business Link is heading ......................................... 6
   9.2 Reactions to Business Link as a primary access point ......... 6
   9.3 Suggestions for improvement of Business Link .................. 6
10. Recommendations ................................................................. 6
1. Executive summary

Background and purpose of study

The Department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) commissioned FreshMinds, an independent Research Consultancy, to carry out a study to investigate the factors that determine perceptions of Business Link.

BERR wished to understand a contradiction; whilst Business Link has very high customer satisfaction ratings, some sections of the business community continue to be critical of the service. BERR was also interested in the extent to which the business community was aware of and understood the changes to Business Link service model and how this may be shaping perceptions. Business Link used to provide business support products itself, but now offers impartial provision of information, diagnosis of business needs and brokerage to third party suppliers of business support solutions.

Overall, the study was intended to help answer the following questions:

- What factors are shaping the business community’s perceptions of Business Link?
- Is Business Link meeting the needs of businesses?
- How might Business Link better deliver Government policy objectives?
- How we might improve the customer experience of Business Link?
- How we might generate greater efficiency in service delivery?

The reader needs to be aware that this study is qualitative and exploratory in nature and was designed to understand the issues that Business Link needs to focus on; those that are associated with some members of the business community continuing to be critical of the service. It was not designed to evaluate Business Link delivery model but does provide a ‘temperature gauge’ of the extent to which Business Link is perceived to be meeting the needs of businesses today by stakeholders.

This report contributes to the ongoing programme of monitoring and evaluation of Business Link conducted by BERR and to hopes to help inform future research.

Approach

In order to answer these questions, the study explored qualitatively the experiences and perceptions of four key stakeholder groups:

- Target users: over 70 businesses participated in focus groups around England (including current users, lapsed users and non-users of Business Link), to understand the views of those Business Link aims to support.
- Wider stakeholders: Interviews were undertaken with 13 national and regional business representative bodies, enterprise agencies, and other organisations operating within the business community, to explore their broader perspective.
- RDA contract-managers: each of the nine RDAs responsible for commissioning and managing the delivery of Business Link services were interviewed, to understand their perspective.
- Business Link contract-holders: nine Business Link service providers (one in each region) were interviewed, to gain the perspective of those directly involved with the delivery of RDA Business Link service.
FreshMinds worked closely with BERR to define areas of enquiry for each stakeholder group that were then used to inform the overarching research questions. What emerged was a set of research instruments that explored perceptions that centred around the following key themes:

- Attitudes toward business support in general.
- The purpose of Business Link.
- The relevance, clarity, and quality of the Business Link offer.
- The efficacy of the current Business Link delivery model.
- The future of Business Link, including reactions to Businesslink.gov, as well as potential areas for the improvement of Business Link.

Analysis of the research data along these themes involved the identification of common perceptions, as well as the drivers behind those perceptions, for each stakeholder group. Areas of consensus and difference in perception between stakeholder groups were also explored.

Key findings

What follows is a synopsis of the key findings from the study, in relation to the themes stated above.

Attitudes toward business support in general

- Perceptions of the role and relevance of Business Link can only be understood when set within the context of entrepreneurs’ understanding and expectations of business support in general. All stakeholders felt that business support should be broadly defined to reflect the fact that the needs of an individual business change over time, and the exact nature of support (and expectations of it) is dependent on what stage the business is at in terms of development. Businesses identified a broad range of activities they associated with business support including information provision, funding, mentoring, networking, advice, seminars and internet searches.
- Business support was seen by all as relevant to all types of business, but particularly to those from the pre-start-up phase up to the second year of development.
- Business owners participating in the focus groups defined good quality in relation to business advice as a service that is bespoke; timely; experienced; continuous; accessible; impartial; credible; affordable, and that challenges businesses to be better.
- The implications of this breadth of expectation around what business support can include indicates that Business Link needs to be marketed clearly to businesses, so they have a good understanding of what it can and cannot do. This will allow businesses to realistically set their expectations of what support they can expect which in turn should influence their perceptions of the quality of service.

The purpose of Business Link

- There is a generally positive understanding of the overall goals and relevance of Business Link; it exists to support businesses and help them develop.
- How Business Link achieves this is seen quite broadly; as a service that is there to support businesses across a wide range of needs.

---

[1] The data collection instruments used to engage with each stakeholder group varied to a small extent, to allow for certain issues to be probed in more detail where the perspective of a particular group was felt to better inform that issue. The topics covered with each stakeholder group are outlined in detail within the report body.
• The majority of current and lapsed users believed that Business Link acts as an access channel to support, and also as a direct provider of support to businesses. Non-users that were aware of Business Link either did not understand its purpose, or saw it generally as a service that supports businesses.

• Importantly, the rationale behind Business Link and the IDB (Information Diagnostics Brokerage) model was well received and seen as potentially beneficial to businesses, particularly the impartiality of the service. When the model was introduced and explained to businesses in the focus groups, all three target user groups felt it was clear and comprehensive as a concept, and could see the benefits of the model. However, reservations were raised about how it might work in practice.

• However, Business Link does not seem to be reaching its full potential as few businesses seem to be aware of the model, and those that did tended to be businesses that provided consultancy services to other businesses. This lack of awareness helps maintain false perceptions of the nature of Business Link, thereby hindering adoption and limiting the potential benefits of the Business Link service.

• Business Link is understood by RDA contract-managers and contract-holders as providing a single, free and impartial access-channel to information about business support for all businesses. Both stakeholders on the service delivery side also see Business Link as having an overall purpose of boosting the local and national economy.

The relevance of Business Link to businesses today

• Business Link is seen by businesses and wider stakeholders as most relevant, and therefore beneficial, in meeting the needs of smaller businesses and those at the early stages of their development. It was felt that larger, more established businesses are more prepared to pay for private, sector-specific support in order to meet their business’ needs.

• From a service delivery perspective, Business Link is seen to be increasingly relevant and successful in targeting hard-to-reach groups.

• According to contract holders, increasing penetration targets (percentage of businesses accessing Business Link services) have resulted in the successful delivery of more “light-touch” services. From this it can be inferred Business Link is meeting its objective of increasing the use of business advice by the business community, which is important as the use of external advice by business owners is associated with better business performance and ultimately economic growth. However, contract holders would prefer to focus on providing more intensive assistance to businesses which they perceive as a strength of the Business Link service.

• Building on the awareness point raised above, the relevance (and therefore potential benefit) of Business Link was seen by all stakeholder groups to be restricted because of a lack of visibility of the service within the business support market.

Clarity of the Business Link offer

• Businesses and wider stakeholders remain unclear about what the current Business Link offer is in terms of what is provided and how. In particular all current and lapsed users - and some non-users - when asked about what Business Link provides referred to one or two aspects of the Business Link Information Diagnostic Brokerage service: only a few fully comprehended the nature of the service provided by Business Link. In addition, a good proportion were aware of the brand, but did not understand what Business Link actually provides. This was particularly the case with the non-user group. Just one wider stakeholder mentioned IDB without being prompted.
As expected, contract-managers and contract-holders demonstrated a detailed awareness of the model, and they believed that the new service model had not yet had sufficient time to properly establish itself and the offering and its benefits had not been effectively marketed to businesses.

Effectiveness of Business Link service delivery

- Business Link was seen by all stakeholder groups to be most effective in supporting SMEs and in particular businesses in early stages of development.
- Both businesses and those who deliver the service believed that face-to-face support can have the greatest impact on businesses that receive it. Contract-holders and contract-managers expressed a preference for providing a more intensive face-to-face service to fewer businesses.
- The IDB model was viewed as effective in theory by those delivering the service as well as target users in that they felt the services included were comprehensive and relevant to businesses; however, the potential effectiveness of the model was seen to be limited due to a lack of awareness amongst businesses of the services provided. Contract-managers and contract-holders felt that the service’s effectiveness was limited by a lack of visibility and a need for the IDB model to bed down.
- Devolution of the management of Business Link to the Regional Development Agencies is perceived to have enabled coordination of Business Link activities with Regional Economic Strategies by RDAs, contract managers and Business Link contract holders. There was however a divergence of views on the extent to which best practice is shared between regions. Both groups saw it as a positive measure that needed to be developed further, though contract-holders felt that the need to compete in future retendering exercises would limit the extent to which best practice could be shared.

Business Link as a quality customer experience

- Business Link was praised for its accessibility, impartiality, credibility and affordability.
- Current and lapsed users rated highly Business Link’s provision of information, seminars and networking events.
- Business Link successfully provides valuable and relevant face-to-face support, although there remains a challenge in making this consistent. It was clear from the focus groups that there was considerable variation in the extent to which face-to-face advice sessions met expectations. Those that were positive about their experiences referred to their advisors being expert; providing useful insights; providing follow-up after advice sessions, and checking on outcomes. However, some repeat users referred to a lack of consistency in the quality of advisors and in some cases made the distinction between different phases of public business support.
- Those that had negative experiences referred to advisors lacking business experience or sector knowledge, as well as advice lacking an element of continuity and longer-term account management.
- Both current and lapsed users had mixed experiences of the brokerage element of the service – in which users of Business Link, once their needs are identified, are brokered to third party supplier to deliver a solution to their business support needs. Some had positive experiences and were happy with the support provider they received, while others felt negatively toward Business Link because of a lack of follow-up after brokerage. Some businesses were concerned by the lack of transparency of the brokerage process and would like to know how third party providers are selected and monitored for quality.
- Lapsed users stopped using Business Link because they felt the service lacked the appropriate resource and expertise to deal with the increasing complexity of their business challenges, could not provide appropriate information to the business, or in
some cases because the quality of the advice had not been sufficient to encourage re-use.

- Non-users displayed a lack of awareness or understanding of what Business Link does; were more cynical about a Government-run support service; believed that Business Link could not meet their needs, or used other means of finding advice or support.

**Businesslink.gov as the future primary access point for all business-facing Government web content**

- Businesses’ reactions to the role of Businesslink.gov as a primary access point for all business-facing Government web content were explored.
- The concept of a single access channel was well received, with businesses recognising the potential convenience and time-saving benefits of the proposal.
- However, some members of the focus groups expressed concerns around how it would work in practice. These concerns included:
  - fears around data security,
  - the impact of site failure on e-transactions,
  - issues of digital exclusion,
  - ability to navigate and locate information on a much larger and more comprehensive website, and
  - potential loss of impartiality of the Business Link brand should it become associated with other Government departments and their interaction with businesses, especially on enforcement issues.
- Businesses were also concerned about how Businesslink.gov would be aligned with the current Business Link service and in particular whether existing Business Link services would discontinue and mitigate to the web.
- Despite these concerns, businesses were generally receptive to Businesslink.gov as a primary access point for businesses into Government subject to the changes being fully thought thorough and properly implemented.

**How Business Link could be improved upon to better meet the needs of businesses**

All stakeholders were asked for their opinion on how Business Link could be improved to better meet the needs of businesses, which can be summarised per group as follows:

- **Businesses** recommended:
  - Business Link should invest in improving the quality and consistency of its advisors.
  - The need for a more consistent service which is not dependent on where the business is located,
  - Better customer-facing account management.
  - Business Link needs to be advertised more prominently and clearly, using case studies showing what Business Link does and how it has been effective.

Businesses also suggested methods of ensuring an impartial, transparent brokerage service, including using an online eBay-style rating mechanism whereby users rate support providers, and these scores are visible to potential users.

- **Wider stakeholders** recommended:
  - Business Link restore and forge relationships with local commercial providers to avoid replication of services already provided within the business community.
Like businesses, wider stakeholders also believed that Business Link would benefit from increased and improved marketing, and also called for an improvement in the quality of Business Link advisors which were found to vary in quality.

This group also felt that the current service model needed to become established, and that Business Link needed to become more attuned to the needs of businesses.

- **Business Link contract-holders** made suggestions relating largely to the improvement of operational processes, including:
  - The implementation of more informative performance measures.
  - Echoed recommendations from businesses and wider stakeholders around the improvement of advisor quality, as well as the need to increase awareness and understanding of Business Link services amongst businesses.

Contract-holders also felt that current arrangements for the delivery of Business Link needs time to bed down in order for the new service model to become fully effective. They also felt that the balance between meeting penetration targets and delivering services that best meet the needs of businesses (frequently cited as the intensive assists) needed to be addressed.

- **RDA contract-managers** were concerned with securing more resources from Government in order to invest in the marketing of the brand and its services to businesses. They however identified:
  - An opportunity for Business Link to improve through better co-ordination between regions, which should include the sharing of best practice at a contract-holder or RDA level.
  - Business Link could do more to evaluate the value of different service elements and assess whether the current balance between light touch and intensive assists is best meeting the needs of businesses.
  - The opportunity to provide businesses with more topical, regionally relevant information on the Business Link website(s).

**Conclusions**

Taking these key findings into account, conclusions can be made regarding the first two of the five main research questions:

**What factors are shaping the business community's perceptions of Business Link?**

Perceptions of Business Link are mixed, and driven by a combination of direct experience (both positive and negative) and awareness of the brand and its offer. A few important factors have been identified as driving the business community’s perceptions of Business Link, as follows:

- Businesses have a broad understanding of what business support should include, which sets high expectations around what Business Link might be able to provide.
- The majority of businesses are aware of the Business Link brand, but there is a widespread lack of understanding about what exactly Business Link offers businesses through the IDB model and how this might be relevant to them.
- Businesses’ experiences are mixed, with some reacting positively to the services provided by Business Link, and others having had a negative experience. Businesses felt they benefited from the information, networking events and seminars provided via Business Link. Businesses also benefited from advice that is expert, insightful and
continuous, however this is not universal with some businesses critical of Business Link for providing advisors that were under-qualified, lacked business experience, lacked relevant sector insight, or did not follow up with the user.

- The research revealed some mistrust, particularly amongst non-users, of a Government-run service aimed at supporting businesses.

Is Business Link meeting the needs of businesses?

Overall, the research indicates that Business Link is going some way to meeting the needs of businesses in England today, but there are several opportunities for the service to both better meet the needs of existing users, as well as the needs of potential users as well.

Businesses’ praise of the information available via the website indicates that Business Link is meeting a key need of businesses, and should continue to provide an excellent, up-to-date information service. Praise for networking events associated with Business Link suggests that the service should continue to support these types of events. Business Link is definitely seen to meet the needs of businesses through the delivery of “intensive assists”, but only where these are delivered by experienced, high-quality advisors, and where businesses receive some kind of follow-up customer service. Business Link is seen to be failing those businesses that receive poor quality advice from a Business Link advisor, and the research showed that these businesses are likely to fuel negative word of mouth about the service.

Perceptions were that Business Link serves the needs of smaller, start-up businesses well, but is not seen to meet the needs of larger, more established businesses that prefer to pay for support that can meet the complexity of their needs in a sector-focused, experienced manner. Crucial to Business Link’s development will be a clear vision and communication of the types of businesses it is best placed to serve.

A significant reason why Business Link is seen as not fully meeting the needs of businesses is that while most businesses are aware of Business Link, they do not have a full understanding of what the service offers and therefore cannot fully understand what the service can (and cannot) provide for their business. Thus, the service could be said to be failing to meet the needs of those businesses that do not have a strong enough understanding of how they might benefit from the service.

Recommendations

The research leads to a number of recommendations that serve to answer the following three research questions:

- How might Business Link better deliver Government policy objectives?
- How we might improve the customer experience of Business Link?
- How we might generate greater efficiency in service delivery?

These recommendations can be seen to fall into two broad categories: communications and operations. The core message emerging from the research is the need to improve communication and overcome low awareness of the brand.
Communications

- **Clarify the offer** – what Business Link offers, to whom and how needs to be clearer. Currently there is confusion across the board and this is resulting in negative perceptions of Business Link.

- **Communicate the offer** – a general lack of awareness of Business Link itself and the offer continue to drive negative perceptions. There are a number of potential solutions to raising awareness:
  - **Advertising campaign** – depending on budget, perceptions and awareness of Business Link could be improved through a targeted advertising campaign aimed at raising businesses’ awareness of the brand and understanding of the offer.
  - **Alignment under the Transformational Government (T-Gov) programme** – the streamlining efforts of the T-Gov programme suggest the possibility of aligning all of Government’s business-facing services under a single brand identity. If Business Link fronted this, awareness is likely to increase dramatically almost by default.
  - **Sign-posting** – it needs to be made clear to businesses how the Business Link IDB model works so that they can assess which aspects might benefit them, and why.
  - **Case studies** – businesses want to see examples of what works, for what businesses, at what stage of development, and why.

- **Develop relationship managers** – the establishment of more frequent contact between Business Link and business representative bodies will facilitate a better understanding of the role that Business Link plays within the business support market place, and will foster more positive perceptions of the service within the business community.

Operations

- **Improve quality of advisors** – Business Link should review the competency framework currently used to set quality standards for advisors, and consider raising core competency levels in order to ensure a consistently high quality service for businesses across England. This performance minimum could then be communicated to stakeholders and business to help define the scope of the Business Link offer and set realistic expectations.

- **Improve client relationship management** – businesses look for continuity from business support, and are disappointed by experiences of Business Link that are disjointed and lack long-term maintenance of customer relationships. The development of client-facing account managers will serve to increase the perceived continuity of the service for businesses. As perceptions are influenced by a number of wider stakeholders, Business Link may also want to consider a more proactive approach to managing these relationships.

- **Develop co-ordination between regions** - sharing best practice needs to be developed, and so Business Link needs to consider ways to overcome the current reservations around doing so. The ability of a contract-holder to deliver quality advisors is seen as a source of competitive advantage and so, understandably, they are reluctant to share this knowledge with other (competitor) organisations. One option to consider would be to look at the contractual specification and see if a requirement to share best practice could be ‘hard-coded’ into the system. Opened up to competition, this may well generate innovative solutions.
2. Introduction

2.1 Business Link today

The following section is an introduction to the history of Business Link, as well as the remit, structure and delivery model of the organisation today. Given that the service has gone through a number of iterations, this introduction will help contextualise some of the research findings that follow.

Business Link is the Government’s “multi-channel business support service in England”.

Business Link exists to help support the development of small and medium-sized enterprises in England. Business Link delivers free and impartial information and access to business support from the public, private and voluntary sectors to English businesses, co-ordinated on a regional basis.

The aim of the service is to provide customers with access to the advice and support they require to start up, develop and grow through an access channel that offers “generic advice to customers on a wide range of business topics”.

The service was first created in 1992 as a “one stop shop” for business support from Government. By 1997 there were 89 Business Link Partnerships. Since then this number has been gradually reduced. In 2000 the number of Business Links was taken down to 45 and, following the devolution of responsibility for the administration of regional Business Link services to the RDAs in April 2005, there are now 15 Business Link providers across the nine regions. In each of these regions a tailored, regionally-specific service is offered that both falls within a national framework and allows for regional economic differences.

The National Framework was created in 2005 and is designed to foster a wider understanding of the national brand on the part of providers. It was also used by the RDAs to create the new provider contracts introduced over the last few years and ensures that their chosen providers are contractually obliged to operate the Business Link service within the boundaries of the National Framework.

The core Business Link offer today is Information, Diagnosis and Brokerage.

From April 2005, Business Link ceased to deliver business support services directly and has moved to an Information, Diagnosis and Brokerage (IDB) model of delivery. The introduction of IDB has shifted Business Link’s focus to concentrating on a market-making approach to business support.

Responsibility for delivering Business Link services (apart from online services) now rests with the nine RDAs, and the service is structured in one of three ways across the country. Seven of the nine RDAs have a single Business Link operator covering the whole region that operates a fully regional model of delivery. Six of these (Advantage West Midlands; East Midlands Development Agency; One North East; East of England Development Agency; London Development Agency; and Yorkshire Forward) have contracted a single, private company to deliver the Business Link service within their region. The Northwest Development Agency, although having chosen to operate a single Business Link in its region, does so having elected to retain in-house responsibility for service delivery. As such, it has full control of all aspects of Business Link operations within its region. In contrast to this, the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA) and the South West Development Agency both decided to retain a sub-regional model for delivering Business Link services. SEEDA contracts Business Link services out to six contract-holders, which operate under a consortium model, offering local points of access into the service for the following counties: Berkshire; Hampshire & Isle of Wight; Kent; Milton Keynes, Oxfordshire and
Buckinghamshire; Surrey; and Sussex. The South West Development Agency has two Business Link contract-holders or “delivery partners”.

**Business Link is a national brand but is delivered regionally.**

All Business Links now offer a service within the Business Link National Framework under which a nationally consistent and integrated Business Link service is provided at regional level. This involves the delivery of a free and impartial Information, Diagnosis and Brokerage service designed to provide businesses with up-to-date and relevant information to diagnose their individual needs and, where relevant, broker them towards the most appropriate sources of business support to cater to those needs.

The Business Link contract-holder operates a business support service on behalf of the RDA, delivering a service that falls within the Business Link National Framework of 2005 that retains scope for ”regional overlay”. This means that Business Link occupies a unique position in the business support marketplace.

Business Link currently offers a core branded service made up of the provision of information through leaflets, websites and consultations, the diagnosis of businesses’ support needs and the provision of brokerage to business solutions whether from the public, private or voluntary sector. Business Link aims to “make customers intelligent purchasers of solutions”.

**2.2 What’s at the heart of the matter?**

**Whilst there are high reported levels of customer satisfaction with the service offered by Business Link amongst current users, there remain persistent negative perceptions within some quarters of the business community.**

There is a paradox between high levels of reported satisfaction amongst current users of Business Link and views held by some members of the business community, in particular wider stakeholders. Recent changes to Business Link have begun to take effect and are in the process of bedding down, including the adoption of the Information Diagnosis and Brokerage model and the reorganisation of the Business Link network by Regional Development Agencies. The starting point for FreshMinds research into the “Drivers of perception of Business Link” is the need to understand the extent to which perceptions of Business Link are being shaped by recent changes or by other factors.

Data from the most recent Business Link customer satisfaction survey (Q1 2008) indicates that the overwhelming majority of businesses that have used the service are happy with their experience. In the first quarter of 2008, 87.7% of customers were satisfied with their experience, with almost double the number of respondents being very satisfied (57.1%) as opposed to fairly satisfied (29.3%).

Negative perceptions of the service have been expressed strongly by some members of the business community, with some membership organisations and other wider stakeholders publishing documents about Business Link that reflect negatively on the service.

This research attempts to uncover the drivers behind negative perceptions such as these within the broader business community. The core focus of the research is thus on areas where Business Link could improve.
2.3 Our approach

FreshMinds developed the following three-stage methodology for this project:

- **Stage One – Preparation and design**: this first stage aimed to fully understand BERR’s aims and objectives for this study and interpret these into detailed research instruments.

- **Stage Two – Exploring experiences and opinions of Business Link**: FreshMinds then carried out primary field work with the four stakeholder groups (Businesses, Regional Representative Bodies, RDA contract-managers and Business Link contract-holders).

- **Stage Three – Analysis, interpretation and reporting**: The final stage brought the findings together to help BERR understand whether Business Link is meeting the needs of business and why.

FreshMinds carried out in-depth research across four discrete stakeholder groups.

- **Businesses**: In order to gauge customer perceptions and experience, FreshMinds conducted a series of nine focus groups with businesses across three regional catchment areas in the South (London), the Midlands (Birmingham) and the North (Manchester). Businesses were classified into three distinct categories:
  - **Current users** of the service who have had a recent experience of the Business Link service were questioned so as to understand experiences of the current delivery model.
  - **Lapsed users** who had used the service at some point in the past but had not used it recently were questioned so as to understand why users have stopped using Business Link.
  - **Non/potential users** of the service, who had never used Business Link, were questioned so as to understand why businesses have not used Business Link.

Businesses were also recruited from across a range of sectors and sizes, with a particular focus on growth enterprises.

- **Wider stakeholders**: 13 stakeholders predominantly from national business representative bodies, but also some Chambers of Commerce, Enterprise Agencies and one county council within the South East, were interviewed. These included:
  - Small Business Investment Taskforce
  - Federation of Small Businesses
  - ICAEW
  - EEIA
  - CBI
  - Country and Land Association
  - National Federation of Enterprise Agencies
  - M-Institute
  - FPB
  - British Chambers
  - A Chamber of Commerce
  - A Regional Partnership
  - Association of Chartered Certified Accountants
  - A county council

Some individuals within the representative bodies were located within regional offices, but commented from a broader, national perspective.
• **RDA contract-managers and Business Link contract-holders**: in order to gauge the perceptions of those delivering the Business Link service, FreshMinds interviewed nine RDA contract-managers and nine Business Link contract-holders.

**Focus groups and interviews with wider stakeholders** examined the following subjects:

- What business support includes.
- What quality business advice looks like?
- Defining experiences of business advice.
- Understanding how businesses choose advice providers.
- Establishing awareness of the services offered by Business Link, and understanding how businesses become aware of them.
- Defining the types of businesses that benefit most from Business Link.
- Efficacy of the IDB delivery model – the provision of information, diagnosis and brokerage to most appropriate support – is it meeting their needs?
- Understanding why some businesses use Business Link and others not - what are the reasons why lapsed users have not returned?
- Perceptions of changes to the Business Link service.
- Reactions to Transformational Government and Business Link as the primary access point for business support.
- Suggestions for improvements to Business Link.

**Interviews with RDA contract-managers and Business Link contract-holders** covered the following topics:

- Perceptions of Business Link today.
- Efficacy of the IDB delivery model and whether Business Link is meeting the needs of businesses.
- Barriers that work against meeting the needs of businesses through the IDB model.
- Implications of the regional delivery of Business Link for the national brand.
- Understanding how best practice is shared between RDAs.
- Role of the national brand manager.
- How Business Link is marketed at a regional level.
- Awareness of operations in other regions.
- How effective Business Link is at meeting the needs of diverse groups.
- Perceptions of customer satisfaction levels – what businesses are most/least happy with.
- How RDAs can share best practice more effectively and improve performance nationally.
- Whether or not more meaningful performance data can be collected.

Following the completion of Phase Two, FreshMinds carried out analysis on the findings from the interviews and focus groups in order to draw out key findings, recommendations and action points for BERR.

This document comprises the body of the outcome of this research.
### 3. Defining business support

#### Summary: what is understood by business support?

There is no common definition of business support within the business community; it means different things to different people at different stages of their business.

- Support is perceived by all target users and wider stakeholders to be available from a wide variety of sources and can vary in quality.

- All target user groups believe business support can be relevant to all businesses at any stage in their development, but is seen to be particularly relevant to businesses either from the pre-start-up phase to their second year of development or when they encounter specific business challenges (e.g. market entry).

- Expectations of business support change as businesses grow in size and maturity.

- All want support that is relevant to their needs, to be provided by an advisor with sector-specific knowledge. This was cited in particular by current and lapsed users.

- Amongst those who had negative experiences of business support, some reported receiving disjointed, generalised support. All target user groups stressed the importance of timely advice.

- There was consensus amongst all target user groups that businesses seek advice at important junctures of their development.

- All target user groups believed that businesses may not seek advice due to a lack of awareness of available support or because it is too costly.

- Non-users, principally, felt they would not seek advice because advisors may have ulterior motives or because they are cynical of a public service.

From the perspective of **RDA contract-managers and Business Link contract-holders**, businesses most commonly seek support on issues such as skills, employment legislation and accessing finance, amongst others, and had a greater knowledge of government organisations delivering support. Businesses and wider stakeholders had similar views on what was required from business support and both stakeholder types mentioned a wide range of support needs and providers. The responses of wider stakeholders tended to focus more upon the types of support that is most relevant to the businesses they represent.
3.1 Introduction

This research sought to identify what businesses, wider stakeholders and those responsible for the delivery of Business Link believe business support to be. By identifying these four stakeholders’ attitudes to business support as a whole, it is possible to frame and contextualise what drives their perceptions of Business Link.

This section focuses largely on discussions with businesses, but also takes into account the views of the other three stakeholder groups.

It should be noted that the focus group topic guides were structured so that, in discussing business support as a general concept, an association had not yet been made between the purpose of the research and Business Link. This was necessary to prevent bias in participants’ discussion of their perceptions and experiences of business advice.

Business Link was raised by some participants at this point, but those experiences were explored in greater detail at a later point in the focus groups. These experiences are discussed in Section 8 below.

3.2 Defining business support

The research sought to identify businesses’ and wider stakeholders’ understanding of what they believe business support to be. Focus groups examined businesses’ experiences and perceptions of business support in general: what businesses want from business support and what they understand as good and bad qualities of that support. Wider stakeholders were asked what types of support were in greatest demand, as well as what they define as quality support.

Businesses have a wide understanding of what business support means.

Businesses from all three focus group types, as well as wider stakeholders, had a broad understanding of what business support means. It was seen to include a variety of services, including information provision, mentoring, networking, seminars and internet searches. Figure 1 below represents the most frequently mentioned types of business support according to all three business groups and wider stakeholders.

Figure 1: Defining business support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business support includes…</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Networking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free/Paid-for</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminars</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet searches</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Funding was often seen to be the primary form of business support by businesses and wider stakeholders. Although it was perceived as hard to secure, unsurprisingly those who did receive financial support spoke very positively of the benefits it can generate.

“When I was setting up I was supported by the Small Business Service and effectively they paid my wages for the first year…it meant I was able to get all the management into position.”

User (Birmingham)

The consensus amongst all three business groups was that business support is a combination of various elements, as businesses’ needs are ever changing:
“Yes, it constantly changes. It appears this week it will be an employment issue, next month it might be something else.”
Non-user (Manchester)

Given the variety of sectors covered by wider stakeholder interviewees, the range of services and support areas stated were equally diverse:

“This is a complex issue as businesses are different sizes with different requirements.”
Wider stakeholder (Chamber of Commerce)

Like businesses, wider stakeholders believed access to finance was an important consideration for businesses, but ultimately, as a collective, the types of support mentioned were as varied as those discussed by businesses. One national representative body interviewee saw it as follows:

“All companies need the whole range of advice, finance, regulation, skills, innovation. It could be anything across the range they need advice on to help them grow.”
Wider stakeholder (National representative body)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, wider stakeholders as individual interviewees tended to focus more upon the types of support that is most relevant to the businesses they represent. So for example, a regional representative body discussed how the high concentration of high-tech companies in his area would warrant:

“Direct to professional services. There is a range of business angel networks and venture capitalists networks…. a plethora of professional support for the high tech/bio tech sectors.”
Wider stakeholder (Regional representative body)

The research also examined what those responsible for the delivery of Business Link understood business support to be. Interviewees were asked what type of support was in greatest demand in their region and in the UK.

As Business Link is positioned to offer any type of business advice to any type of business, it is unsurprising that a wide range of services and support areas were mentioned by contract-holders and contract-managers.

Services most frequently mentioned by contract-managers and contract-holders included:

- general business management capability – including planning issues,
- skills – either to fill a skills gap or to recruit new employees,
- sales and marketing; financial management,
- access to finance or raising finance,
- assistance with starting a business or at the start-up stage of a business’s development,
- help with penetrating new markets – including advice on all aspects of importing and exporting,
- information about employment legislation,
- networking,
- market-making,
- advice on inclusivity,
- and advice on how to bring technology into the running of their business.

“Typically, it’s the issues any business faces…”
Business Link contract-holder

It is clear that businesses, wider stakeholders and those responsible for delivering Business Link have a closely aligned understanding of what business support constitutes, and when a
business might need it. Given the variety of support needs available, it is unsurprising that many concluded that it could be “just about anything”.

3.3 The relevance of business support

Business support is relevant to, and necessary for, all types of business, but particularly to those from the pre-start up phase up to the second year of development.

As a concept, businesses support was considered by all three user groups to be relevant to all companies at any stage in their development.

“It is relevant at any time, stage, size or number of people.”
Lapsed user (Birmingham)

Many, though, felt that generic support was most applicable to businesses in the pre-start up phase and up to their second year of development. This was stated by all user groups. Beyond the pre-start up stage, growing businesses were thought to reach a point where their needs become more complex and they become more willing to seek a more specialised service from larger, predominantly private sector service providers such as consultancies. This perception was raised primarily by focus group participants whose businesses were, in themselves, larger and more mature.

“The rule is once a business grows to a certain point, all its internal systems can’t cope.”
User (Manchester)

3.4 Defining quality business support

Businesses were asked what they felt constitutes good and bad business support. Business Link itself had not yet been introduced as the main focus of the research.

Experienced advisors, seminars and events were highly valued and considered to constitute good business support.

Events such as seminars, courses and networking groups were widely regarded as adding value to businesses as they facilitated personal contact with other business experts and their peers. This was cited in particular by current and lapsed users of the service:

“I’ve actually got a lot more out of the networking. I had brilliant business advice, I’d already started my business but I happened to go to a business start-up course a few months in and they were fantastic, everything from business planning, marketing and just being in a room of people who are all in the same boat.”
User (London)

Focus group participants, particularly from the lapsed and non-user groups, appreciated the transparency of a service where advisors have no underlying motives to sell products and where they have a genuine concern for a client’s business:

“My experience was positive because they understood my objectives very clearly and I felt I could trust them that they had my best interests at heart, they weren’t just there to make money out of me.”
Non-user (London)

Respondents from all focus group types also believed it was crucial that advisors should be experienced and proactive, and that they should provide a continuous service.
Amongst those who had negative experiences of business support, some reported receiving disjointed, generalised support.

A number of businesses expressed dissatisfaction with the support they had received in the past because it had neither been specific to their needs nor to their particular sector.

“Sometimes the financial advice you get from them is almost like a template, it doesn’t always have anything to do with your business either.”
Lapsed user (London)

“But I think some of the government websites they’re quite inaccessible, they spin in circles, they are non specific.”
Non-user (London)

The three focus group types also stressed the importance of timely advice that is immediately available. It was therefore not surprising that protracted, sporadic and inconsistent advice was poorly received.

“One council may do a very good job and produce a lot of links and ‘phone numbers; another council or Chamber might do a very poor job and only give two or three…”
Lapsed user (Birmingham)

“These government helplines, they are a nightmare to get through to…have you got time to spend hanging on to the end of the phone?”
Non-user (Manchester)

“It can take forever to find the person you need to speak to about a particular piece of information.”
Lapsed user (Birmingham)

Equally, businesses criticised support that is disjointed, or that lacks a proactive follow-up service on the part of advisors:

“Continuity with someone who’s a real expert, who drives you hard, I found the only way to get it, is to pay for it and then come in and spend half a day and another half day…force you to have a ninety day plan.”
User (Manchester)

Within the broader discussion around business support, focus group participants were asked what qualities define good business advice. The graphic below illustrates those attributes that arose most frequently amongst current users, lapsed users and non-users.

**Figure 2: Defining good business advice**
3.5 Reasons for and against using business advice

Businesses were asked when they would use business support. At this stage, Business Link itself had not yet been introduced as the main focus of the research.

Businesses seek advice at important junctures in their development.

Businesses tend to seek support during important phases in their existence, such as during periods of growth or when they encounter difficulties. This was expressed by participants from all three focus group types. Businesses may seek advice on strategic issues – i.e. when evaluating new markets – or when the enterprise owner does not have sufficient expertise in a particular field:

“When there’s a change, whether that’s upwards or downwards.”
Lapsed user (London)

“When something has obviously gone wrong”
Non-user (London)

All focus group types highlighted the fact that support needs might arise at any point in time and that businesses will access the service when it best suits them:

“There are thousands of businesses out there in different stages of life cycle, different needs, so any one could crop up at any time.”
Lapsed user (Manchester)

Businesses may not seek advice due to a lack of awareness of available support; because they perceive advisors may have ulterior motives, or because support may be too costly.

The majority of participants across all focus group types felt that most businesses do not know where to get advice from. Businesses may not seek advice when they are unaware of potential support providers. This may result from insufficient promotion of these services, as evidenced in the quotation below:

“I found out about all the agencies available to me, which I didn’t know about because they’re not publicised.”
User (Birmingham)

Focus group participants from the non-user group, as well as one current user, voiced concerns that some support providers, especially banks, are not trustworthy and could have ulterior motives selling their products instead of providing impartial advice. Specifically, businesses from the non-user group were notably both reluctant to use, and very cynical of services with a connection to the Government:

“Anything that Government is telling us right now. I wouldn’t trust them with a barge pole.”
Non-user (London)

“When you think there might be something of bias, like you said go to a bank manager or something. They essentially give you good advice but there might be something…a sales aspect.”
Non-user (London)

Businesses may also lose sight of support services whilst working hard on the day-to-day running of the company.

“I work from home and on my own most of the time. I’ve got my head down beavering away, and you tend to forget the peripheral stuff.”
User (London)
They may also be reluctant to divulge commercially sensitive information, or they may be put off by the cost of the service:

“I think there is also an element of not wanting to wash your dirty linen in public.”
User (Manchester)

Expectations of business support change as businesses grow in size and maturity.

Opinion was divided over the value of a paid-for service compared to a publicly available free resource. There was a strong belief, especially from those with larger, more mature businesses, that:

“There is a loss of value if something is free.”
Non-user (Birmingham)

and that:

“Paying an amount of money saves you an amount of money”.
Non-user (Birmingham)

One participant valued the continuity of a paid advisor that he could meet on a regular basis, whilst another was aware that his business was profitable enough to justify paying for the highest calibre of support.

Some felt it would not be viable to roll out a free intensive service nationally.

A number of focus group participants believed that a free intensive service would be unrealistic to operate on a national scale:

“Project management is very much a labour intensive job and I was just thinking about practicalities. You have got a business advisor in Manchester, he does six weeks training and he has six weeks holiday, he doesn’t take any sick days like me…so he has got 40 weeks of the year to work with businesses so, if he works with 40 businesses, that’s a week he can devote to each business.”
Non-user (Manchester)

Focus group participants from all three group types employed accountants directly, and they were seen as providing an essential service to their business. Some examples of other support providers used by focus group participants include Chambers of Commerce, Enterprise Agencies and other niche or sector-specific support bodies.

Some businesses do not access support at all because of a lack of trust in the quality of advice, because they rely on personal contacts, or because they are selfhelpers.

A minority – primarily from the non-user group - did not seek third party support at all, either because they questioned the quality of business advisors “because consultants haven’t got a clue. If they had a clue, they would be out making money for themselves” or simply because they sought to identify problems themselves.

“It’s mostly just my thoughts, that’s my thing, so I don’t use external at all and if I have a problem I sort it out [myself].”
Non-user (Birmingham)

Some participants also said that they relied upon contacts and personal recommendations when it came to seeking support.
Businesses’ understanding of business support is therefore very broad. It was seen to encompass a variety of service types and to be relevant to all businesses of any size and stage of development. However, in practice, generic, publicly available support was perceived as most relevant to pre-start-ups, and to businesses up to their second year of operation. Events, seminars and quality advisors constituted good support. Disjointed, inexperienced and untargeted advice constituted bad business support.

Businesses tend to seek support at important junctures in their development and may not seek advice through a lack of awareness of available support. They also may not seek support when they feel advisors may have ulterior motives or because they believe it may be too costly.
4. Purpose of Business Link

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary: stakeholders’ understanding of the purpose of Business Link</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Target users viewed Business Link as a provider of business support and as a broker to support suppliers, although they usually viewed it within the context of increasing the effectiveness of their own business instead of the wider context of the regional economy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• From the service-delivery perspective, Business Link’s purpose is viewed as being to provide a single, free and impartial access-channel to information about business support for all companies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• RDA contract-managers and Business Link contract-holders also felt that Business Link was there to facilitate access to business support and to broker businesses towards appropriate sources of that support with an overall purpose of boosting the local and national economy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RDA contract-managers...</th>
<th>Business Link contract-holders...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“at the front line in terms of economic development.”</td>
<td>“To help all new and established businesses to grow”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Businesses...</th>
<th>Business representative organisations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“…boost the economy and make us all entrepreneurial”</td>
<td>“…to aid business with information to enable them to grow”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drivers of these perceptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Users’ perceptions of the purpose of Business Link were more general and more diffuse than those delivering the service. This was because they might not have experienced all aspects of the service, or because their interaction might have been relatively distant, fleeting, or simply because they had not taken significant interest in understanding the service in detail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Interestingly, current and lapsed users displayed a similar level of awareness of Business Link’s function.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Some non-users were completely unaware of the brand. Of those who had heard of the brand, some were unfamiliar as to what services Business Link provides.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• When it came to explaining Business Link’s services, there was alignment between all three user group types.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Unsurprisingly, those involved in Business Link from the service-delivery side on the whole demonstrated a more precise, aligned view of Business Link’s purpose with the current delivery model. This is due to their much greater proximity to, knowledge of, and acquaintance with, the Business Link service because of their direct involvement in its delivery.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The research sought to identify all four stakeholders’ understanding of what Business Link’s purpose is, and what might be driving positive or negative perceptions of the service. Interesting points of comparison can be drawn between the four stakeholder groups.

**Businesses** saw Business Link as a provider of business support and as an intermediary to support suppliers. Non-users displayed a lack of awareness as to its function, and low awareness of the brand.

All three focus group types viewed Business Link’s principal purpose as being to help businesses to develop. Similarly, all three commented on its role as a support provider to businesses in general:

> “I would presume…it’s a support mechanism for business.”
> Non-user (London)

Current and lapsed users noted that its broader purpose was to support businesses so as to boost the economy and to create jobs. This perspective was not mentioned amongst participants from the non-user group:

> “Is it not to in some way boost the economy and make us all entrepreneurial?”
> User (London)

A minority of participants from the non-user group appeared to be unaware of Business Link and misinformed as to its function. One business owner believed it was a postal service:

> “I’m sure there is a parcel delivery called Business Link.”
> Lapsed user (Manchester)

Another participant confused it with another Government service:

> “Business Link sounds like Connexions, just another way of saying it.”
> Lapsed user (Manchester)

There was some awareness amongst all three business user groups of Business Link’s signposting function, but only a minority of non-users made reference to it:

> “I haven’t used them, but I would think that they’re kind of like the middle person, so you need something, they’ll link you into the person who is going to help you.”
> Non-user (London)

> “It provides a communication route between the hard world of real business where wealth is created and governed.”
> Lapsed user (Birmingham)

However, knowledge of the IDB model itself was not widespread. The minority of businesses that did allude to IDB tended to be support providers themselves, such as consultants:

> “Business Link now is supposed to be the gateway through which if any business is asking for advice, then the way that it is supposed to work is that you contact Business Link in the West Midlands region and they act as a brokerage matching you with somebody who can help with your problem.”
> Non-user (Birmingham)

The consensus amongst all target user groups was that Business Link is positioned to provide support to start-ups and to SMEs:

> “It’s to advise and help new business, small to medium business.”
> User (Birmingham)
“It’s literally someone that should be able to hold your hand through the first six months to a year.”
User (Birmingham)

Given the recent implementation of the IDB model, it was perhaps unsurprising that a minority of focus group participants mentioned it. All group types referred to Business Link in general terms as a provider of business support, and there was consensus amongst the three groups that its role is to develop business. Similarly, all groups alluded to its role as a communication route or gateway through which businesses would find suppliers.

**Wider stakeholders displayed familiarity with Business Link’s general purpose, although they displayed a degree of confusion when it came to stating its exact purpose.**

As a group, wider stakeholders displayed a degree of confusion about the exact nature of the advice and support offered by Business Link. One national representative body interviewee, for example, when asked for their opinion on Business Link’s main function, said that it acted as:

“…the broker for various government support schemes,”
Wider stakeholder (National representative body)

and that it exists

“to ensure local/regional businesses are aware of what is on offer for businesses.”
Wider stakeholder (National representative body)

The first quotation points to a lack of understanding of the Business Link offer. It is the case that Business Link brokers businesses towards government-funded support. However, it does not do so exclusively. Clearly, awareness of the current offer is variable within the business community.

About half the wider stakeholder interviewees mentioned the signposting element within Business Link’s current model of service-delivery when asked about the purpose of Business Link. The proportion of focus group participants that demonstrated a general awareness of the Business Link service was slightly higher, reflecting the make-up of the groups (two-thirds of participants had direct experience of Business Link).

However, detailed awareness or knowledge of how the service is delivered to customers was low – only a minority of businesses and wider stakeholder interviewees were able to describe the way in which the service operates in a level of detail that accurately reflects the service’s current configuration.

On the other hand, some made the point that Business Link acts as a ‘signposting service’ or ‘conduit’ for business advice and support. Other wider stakeholder interviewees felt that Business Link’s main purpose was to help businesses to be more effective and to become more successful. Business Link was viewed as performing a signposting function to point businesses in the direction of the support that they require. One interviewee from a trade body explained their view of Business Link’s purpose as follows:

“To cover the areas of market failure that exist and that would relate across the whole of the business functions, HR, marketing, etc.”
Wider stakeholder (Trade body)

This reinforced what was said by a Business Link contract-holder when asked about the same issue. Their response questioned where Business Link was able to have the greatest impact, and felt that this was:

“[…] where market failure occurs driven by cost.”  Business Link contract-holder
Other interviewees from this target group felt that Business Link’s most important function was to help and support businesses in the UK. Business Link was held to be a “one stop shop” to meet the needs of companies by providing relevant and effective business advice with a regional focus. Business Link is viewed as acting as the “how to” service for companies at the smaller end of the SME segment: it provides a route by which companies can access advice, rather than providing them with that advice directly.

The fact that the Business Link service is both independent and free was also highlighted by some interviewees. This point of view was not universal, though; some other wider stakeholder interviewees hold the view that the brokerage element of the Business Link delivery model diminishes the service because it potentially compromises its independence and transparency.

**Those responsible for service-delivery viewed Business Link’s main purpose as being to provide a single, free and impartial access channel to information for all companies.**

Both RDA contract-managers and Business Link contract-holder groups were asked what they considered as Business Link’s main purpose, and for their opinion of what they felt had been the most significant developments to the service over the last five years. In addition, focus group participants and wider stakeholder interviewees were asked for their understanding of Business Link’s main function.

RDA contract-managers and Business Link contract-holders viewed Business Link’s main purpose as being to provide a single, free and impartial access channel to information about business support for all companies.

Business Link was felt to facilitate access to business support and broker businesses towards appropriate sources of that support. Some, but not all, of the interviewees across the service-delivery target groups raised the importance of Business Link’s role in contributing to the economic growth of the regions they serve.

RDA contract-managers talked about Business Link’s main purpose with more of a focus on its impact upon their region, thus reflecting the purpose of their organisation and highlighting the role Business Link plays within the structure of each RDA in improving the economic productivity of the regions.

One RDA contract-manager emphasised this point by identifying the purpose of Business Link as follows:

“To increase the business stock in the region and to increase GVA, the wealth in the economy coming from the business stock.”

RDA contract-manager

Others understood Business Link’s main purpose differently. Nevertheless, there was still a general consensus about what the service was there to do. A second RDA contract-manager felt that Business Link exists:

“[...]to assist and energise businesses to the extent that they will take up support, as it has been proven that those businesses that take support grow quicker and are more sustainable than those that don’t.”

RDA contract-manager

A third viewed it as the Government’s “flagship business support programme,” identifying two sides to the service:

“[It’s] the face into the business community. It provides the necessary information and access into wider business support provision. [It] also provides us with an insight into the needs of businesses.”

RDA contract-manager
In general, Business Link contract-holders see Business Link as an “access-channel” or “gateway” to business support in common with their RDA colleagues. Perhaps unsurprisingly, though, their individual responses had a more direct focus on the businesses’, rather than the region’s, perspective. One Business Link contract-manager described Business Link’s purpose as being:

“[…fundamentally to help businesses make informed decisions about the type of support they need and then how to implement that support effectively in their businesses so that it results in a change in performance.”

Business Link contract-holder

One other described it as being there:

“To help all new and established businesses to grow.”

Business Link contract-holder

Another stated that it exists:

“…to help businesses start, grow and succeed.”

Business Link contract-holder

The interviews with those responsible for service-delivery revealed that there is some divergence across the two service-delivery groups on the issue of what the precise focus of Business Link operations should be. While some RDA contract-managers and Business Link contract-holders felt that Business Link ought to be targeting a specific type of business – or aiming to cater solely to businesses at a particular stage of growth – others held the opinion that Business Link should cater to market-failure within the private business support services marketplace and, as such, act as a resource to businesses unable to make use of the services of private business support providers.

One RDA contract-manager described Business Link as being a “one-stop shop for business support”, while another said that it “provides a single gateway to appropriate support for all businesses”. In addition to this, another felt that Business Link was positioned:

“[…] at the frontline in terms of economic development,' with many of the interviewees mentioning its regional focus.”

RDA contract-manager

**IDB is seen by contract-holders and contract-managers as the most significant development within Business Link over the past five years.**

As well as asking about the purpose of Business Link, contract-holders and contract-managers were asked what they felt to be the most significant development within Business Link over the past five years. Those responsible for service-delivery saw the introduction of the Information, Diagnosis and Brokerage (IDB) model as the most significant development.

Both sides of the service-delivery group held that the most significant development to the Business Link service over the last five years had been the move to the IDB model. They felt that this had improved Business Link because it has given the service an impartiality that it did not have before.

In addition to this, both the introduction of the Business Support Simplification Programme and the transition to delivering Business Link at regional level rather than sub-regional level (in all but two of the English regions) were raised as significant recent developments.

Because the service-delivery stakeholder groups were made up of individuals from the nine regions, the interviews did produce some regional variation in responses. For example, the RDAs’ role in co-ordinating the Business Link offer in line with the targets of their Regional
Economic Strategy (RES) was highlighted. One RDA contract-manager outlined the target of Business Link in that region as being to:

“[…] bring the business stock of the region closer to the national average.”
RDA contract-manager

Others from this stakeholder group highlighted the unique economic focus or diversity of their region, which has a knock-on effect on the exact make up of the Business Link service sought by, and offered to, businesses across the different regions.

The findings above identified that users’ and providers’ understanding of Business Link’s purpose differed on a number of counts. Firstly, those responsible for delivering the service often alluded to its overarching purpose in line with terminology contained in the National Framework. Contract-managers in particular referred to Business Link’s purpose in terms of developing the economic productivity of the region. Unsurprisingly, there was less conformity with the policy statement amongst businesses and wider stakeholders on this concept.

Similarly, service-delivery interviewees had a close understanding of how the service was delivered, whereas wider stakeholders and especially businesses demonstrated a low awareness of the IDB model. This may point towards a lack of clarity in the way the brand is being communicated.

Despite this variance, none of the stakeholder groups appeared grossly misinformed as to Business Link’s purpose. Rather, the way in which each referred to the service differed, but overall there was an understanding as to its fundamental purpose: to support businesses.
5. Relevance of Business Link to businesses today

**Summary: perceptions of Business Link’s relevance**

- Business Link is seen by all stakeholder groups to cater best to the needs of start-ups and SMEs at early stages of development. It therefore meets some, but all needs, of all businesses.

- From a service-delivery perspective, Business Link is seen to be increasingly relevant to hard-to-reach groups.

- Businesses have a relatively good awareness of what Business Link generally does. The fact that there is still a lack of awareness in some quarters reduces the potential benefits of the service.

- The implementation of market penetration targets was seen by contract-holders to be diluting the service.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RDA contract-managers...</th>
<th>Business Link contract-holders...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“…it’s a huge part of the local economy”</td>
<td>“Targets drive bad behaviour”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Businesses...</th>
<th>Business representative organisations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I don’t think Business Link understands the exact role its should be fulfilling”</td>
<td>“If you asked a packed room of small business if they knew of Business Link a lot will say no”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Drivers of these perceptions**

- Participants from the focus groups and those responsible for service-delivery felt that Business Link was most effective at meeting the needs of start-ups and SMEs at early stages of development. This was because it was seen to provide information and support that was most tailored to these businesses and which was less suited to scaling with the complexity and ambitions of some businesses.

- Those responsible for the service-delivery of Business Link were confident that Business Link is increasingly relevant to hard-to-reach groups. Measures or targets are in place across the board to ensure these groups are receiving the service.

- All stakeholder groups felt that Business Link is not as beneficial to businesses as it could be because it is not visible enough. This is attributable to ineffective, or insufficient marketing to date.

- Contract-holders and contract-managers believed that Business Link was not as relevant as it could be to businesses because of market penetration targets, which were fuelling a drive for more “light-touch” services to the detriment of the more valuable intensive advice.
In order to gauge how relevant Business Link is to businesses, it was necessary to evaluate stakeholders’ awareness of the service; what measures it is taking to ensure it is meeting the needs of businesses and whether it is reaching the right people. The research took into account the perceptions of all four target groups.

**All stakeholder groups believed Business Link is most relevant to start-ups and SMEs at early stages of development.**

Responses from all target user groups revealed that businesses think Business Link is effective at meeting some, but not all, of businesses’ needs. The service-delivery target groups also revealed that Business Link is more suited to meeting the needs of certain types of business than it is to others, with those most suited to advice from Business Link being businesses at the smaller end of the SME spectrum:

> “Where they are effective is in pre-start-up and start-up business up to 250 employees.”
> Business Link contract-holder

This was also stated by a number of interviewees from the wider stakeholder group, including a respondent from a national representative body:

> “Business Link…come into their own in the SME sector.”
> Wider stakeholder (National representative body)

Business Link was therefore perceived by all stakeholder groups to be able to cater best to smaller, less complex businesses. For this reason, the service was seen to be less suited to scaling with the complexity and ambitions of some businesses. This was explained best by a contract-holder, who stated that:

> “At the lower end I think we are very well configured to, in terms of the basic model we deliver, to add some value. And progressively as you move up the scale in terms of our target market, we may get into a debate about how these innovative, high growth businesses are fully catered for. The high growth end of the Business Link spectrum are looking for a level of calibre of support that I don’t think fits comfortably with IDB.”
> Business Link contract-holder

There was variation across all the target groups about precisely what Business Link exists to do. A user from the Manchester focus group, for example, suggested that Business Link itself was not configured in a focused enough way to meet different businesses’ needs:

> “Successful businesses have [not] tapped into Business Link […] I don’t think Business Link understands the exact role that it should be fulfilling.”
> User (Manchester)

This was reinforced by a wider stakeholder interviewee from a national representative body:

> “There is a whole bunch of businesses that don’t believe that Business Link is appropriate for them, I think there is a limitation to how far business Link can go as being the signposting service for this stuff that’s on offer.”
> Wider stakeholder (National representative body)

**From a service-delivery perspective, Business Link is increasingly relevant to hard-to-reach groups.**

In terms of increasing its relevance to hard-to-reach and ethnic minority groups, interviewees from the service-delivery side felt that Business Link had become increasingly successful at catering to their specific needs. Across the board, measures or targets are in place to ensure
that the Business Link service is delivered to diverse groups more successfully. One contract-manager was confident in his region’s drive to engaging with hard-to-reach groups:

“The LDA’s contract with its Business Link operator has specific diversity targets that increase year-on-year and these are high targets.”
RDA contract-manager

The precise approach taken by the different Business Links does differ on this issue. Whether it forms part of ‘a broad plan for reaching those groups,’ or is explicitly laid out in the contractual agreement between service-provider and contract-manager, all RDAs have arrangements in place to ensure that Business Link caters to different groups. As an RDA contract-manager said:

“It was part of our tender […] to have much more targeted support for women and ethnic minorities […] it’s a huge part of the local economy.”
RDA contract-manager

Whilst another stated how they can monitor activity with hard-to-reach groups through Business Link advisors:

“They track this through customer satisfaction services and information that brokers pick up whilst working with clients.”

The diversity in approach was further confirmed by an RDA contract-manager, who had employed an external company to evaluate his RDA’s work with hard-to-reach groups:

“We have a company coming in to see how we engage with businesses that are either operated by women, ethnic minorities or disabilities.”
RDA contract-manager

The relevance of Business Link is compromised by a lack of awareness.

Businesses demonstrated a relatively good awareness of what Business Link does but, in general, had little acquaintance of how all service elements function. This was especially the case amongst the non-user target group. Some businesses, then, do not regard Business Link as relevant to their needs because they do not know about it, or perceive it to be aimed at different types of business to their own. Consequently, there are issues relating to Business Link’s visibility and awareness of the service.

RDA contract-managers and Business Link contract-holders tended to hold views on the service’s relevance to businesses which were influenced by their close personal involvement with the service’s delivery. All vouched for its relevance.

In contrast to this, wider stakeholder interviewees mostly held opinions marked by a vested interest in criticising the service or an overall ignorance of what it offers. Membership organisations tend to be hostile toward Business Link because they:

- View it as a competitor; hold negative views of the service because they themselves previously delivered it but no longer do so.
- Are prejudiced against government-funded business support, or had competed unsuccessfully to deliver it in a particular region on the last occasion a contract was up for tender.

This hostility aside, when wider stakeholder interviewees were asked whether or not they thought Business Link met their members’ expectations, many of them replied that they thought it probably did. However, they qualified this by saying that this was only because their members’ expectations of it were so low. Much of the explanation for these low expectations rests on a lack of knowledge and awareness of what Business Link does.
Business Link has not been adequately marketed.

All interview groups felt that Business Link had been ineffectively marketed. The service has been hindered first, by a lack of publicly available information about it and second, by a lack of awareness amongst its target customers of what is on offer.

Several interviewees from the service-delivery target groups identified the lack of a coherent marketing campaign for Business Link (at either regional or national level) as a contributory factor in the development of negative perceptions and a lack of knowledge of the service. Business Link contract-holders and RDA contract-managers alike lamented the lack of available resources for marketing, with one Business Link interviewee saying:

“…we’re not resourced to do enough [marketing].”
Business Link contract-holder

An RDA contract-manager emphasised that:

“more intelligent and focused marketing would be hugely beneficial.”
RDA contract-manager

This point was further reinforced by a wider stakeholder:

“If you asked a packed room of small businesses if they knew of Business Link, a lot will say ‘No’.”
Wider stakeholder (National representative body)

Given this lack of marketing, it is perhaps unsurprising that businesses are not fully aware of what Business Link can offer. It is possible that they may not have come into contact with the service themselves or they have never been targeted by Business Link marketing that explains what it does. Those delivering the service have sought to deal with this in different ways. One example was a partnerships being established with a national coffee chain to hold events in a coffee shop in their region, or advertising space being bought on taxis in a city centre.

More generally, one Business Link contract-holder summed up the challenges facing their organisation on the marketing front as follows:

“[We] spend what budget we have on customer acquisition. What we’re not so good at is raising visibility because there isn’t funding for it. I don’t think we’ve cracked it yet. This is probably the same in other regions.”
Business Link contract-holder

An RDA contract-manager’s comments also point towards the problems brought about by low levels of investment in marketing: even when it is carried out, because there is not enough funding to do it properly, the impact of any marketing is less effective than it could be:

“…we have marketing campaigns, work through intermediaries, banks etc. Having said that I still don’t think we do enough. We’re not resourced to do enough.”
RDA contract-manager

They went on to say:

“What appals me about all this nationally is that in April 2007 when it was all changed, relaunched, that was when [they] slashed our marketing budget, from £10 million to £1.7 million. […] All of the media campaigns stopped overnight at the most crucial point. Crazy, absolutely crazy!”
RDA contract-manager
Business Link balances its offer well to ensure that targets can be met, but this does not necessarily make the service any more relevant to businesses.

Business Link was felt to strike the “right” balance by those speaking from a service-delivery perspective, in line with targets, but the fact that it is meeting those targets does not necessarily mean that it is providing the best service to businesses. Market penetration targets were felt to get in the way of delivering the more valuable intensive advice that the Business Link contract-holders would like to offer. This conflict gets in the way of Business Link being able to have the positive impact on individual businesses – or indeed the region’s economy – that they would like. The tension that exists between meeting market penetration targets and providing the more valuable intensive advisory service was explained by one interviewee as follows:

“What I think we’ve done is dilute the offer of the intensiveness. With those levels of targets you can’t do hand holding. This is a shame as it leaves action plans unimplemented.”

Business Link contract-holder

This was echoed by a contract-holder, who believed:

“[…] targets drive bad behaviour.”

Business Link contract-holder

Another felt that the same tension would cause “intensive support to suffer,” while a third interviewee commented that:

“you buy market penetration […] is that what the business community wants?[…] if you set a target, people will get around it.”

Business Link contract-holder

Another Business Link contract-holder reinforced this point by saying:

“The IDB model was conjured up by people with little understanding of what real clients needed from the service. The chase after large numbers of intensive assists has caused demoralisation amongst staff and detriment to the service. What clients really value is the time they get to spend with an impartial advisor.”

Business Link contract-holder

The feeling that advisors’ usefulness was being “diluted” by Business Links facing a requirement to meet performance targets that increase yearly for the duration of their contracts despite their budgets “flat-lining” over the same period was also raised, pointing towards a further conflict between the way in which the service is configured and the practicalities of delivering it.

The main upshot from this section is that Business Link is not relevant to businesses if they are unaware of what it does and how it can help them. There was consensus from all four stakeholder groups on this issue.

Those responsible for service-delivery all vouched for Business Link’s relevance, as they have a close personal involvement with it. They believed the service was increasingly successful in meeting the needs of hard-to-reach groups, and also stated that it was meeting its market penetration targets. However, in doing so, it was compromising the relevance of Business Link because it was diluting the efficacy of intensive assists.

By contrast, wider stakeholders often had a vested interest in criticising the service for the reasons stated above. Despite this, they believed the service probably did meet their customers’ needs, albeit because they felt their members’ expectations were low to begin with.
Businesses were aware of Business Link’s purpose in a general sense, but gave mixed responses as to what size of businesses it serves best. There was a sentiment amongst some businesses that Business Link was relevant to some businesses, but not necessarily their own. All stakeholder groups believed Business Link was best positioned to meet the needs of start-ups and small to medium enterprises (SMEs) at early stages of development. It was therefore possible to conclude that Business Link was seen to be relevant in addressing some needs of some businesses.
6. Clarity of the Business Link offer

**Summary: perceptions of the clarity of Business Link’s offering**

- As stated in further detail in Section 8, it was clear to the majority of businesses (primarily the current and lapsed user groups) that they could receive some form of information and advice from Business Link.

- The Information Diagnosis Brokerage (IDB) model was seen by businesses to be clear, once it had been explained, as a concept. However, there was a lesser understanding amongst businesses of how each element of the service works. Unsurprisingly, different stakeholder groups had differing levels of awareness of the model.

- The recent changes to service delivery were also a source of confusion amongst businesses, which again affected how clear Business Link’s services were perceived.

- In addition, some elements of the service were perceived as inconsistent, which impacted on clarity of perception.

---

**RDA contract-managers...**

“More intelligent and focused marketing would be hugely beneficial”

**Business Link contract-holders...**

“We’re not resourced to do enough marketing”

**Businesses...**

“What do you mean by the IDB approach?”

**Business representative organisations**

“...it is not coherent it is quite clear that the regions pursue their own agendas”
The research sought to understand all four stakeholders’ perceptions of the clarity of Business Link’s offering. Businesses were asked whether the new service delivery model was clear to them, whilst their experiences and perceptions of the service also informed the key findings emerging from this section. Wider stakeholders and those responsible for service delivery also provided feedback relating to the IDB model, how the service is marketed, and how the service is delivered. Looking at these perceptions, it is possible to identify what is driving positive or negative sentiment in relation to the clarity of Business Link.

It was clear to most businesses within the current and lapsed target user groups that they could go to Business Link for information and advice. In this respect, Business Link’s fundamental purpose was clear to many businesses, which is discussed in more detail within chapter 8. What emerged from the research was that businesses were less aware of each element of the Business Link offering and what the IDB model is.

Business Link’s IDB model of delivery was clear to, and well-received by businesses in theory, but businesses were less sure about how successfully the service would run in practice.

Although businesses, primarily from the current and lapsed user groups, were aware that they could go to Business Link for information and advice, most neither knew about nor understood the IDB model of delivery. Once the IDB model had been explained to them, as was the case with the wider stakeholder interviewees who were also unaware of the service, the vast majority of people felt it was clear and were receptive to it. Current and non-users were most receptive to the model, whilst some lapsed users displayed an element of negativity towards it:

“A library of comprehensive information covering issues facing business. They don’t understand the issues facing business, so they’ve got that wrong for a start.”
Lapsed user (Birmingham)

All three target user groups displayed, at certain points, a lack of understanding of what the IDB model entails, even after it had been introduced to them. One focus group respondent was unaware of some elements of the service:

“When I came here tonight I didn’t know it was going to be about Business Link. I’ve only got the vaguest conception now, this helps me, and I didn’t actually know they did these things.”

Lapsed users (Birmingham)

More specifically, a current user remained unclear as to what IDB is:

“What do you mean by the IDB approach?”

User (London)

Whilst a lapsed user did not know about Business Link’s capacity to broker to suppliers:

“I wasn’t aware of the brokerage part of it”

Lapsed user (London)

As stated above, those that were able to relate best to the IDB model were participants in business support industries such as management accounting and consulting.

Even when businesses have used Business Link recently, they are often not aware of IDB as the service delivery model or what that means for the practical delivery of the service. Equally, businesses that had used the service under previous iterations of the delivery model were not able to relate to IDB with any greater ease. When businesses have no previous experience of Business Link, they may find it harder to understand how the service works in practice. In all cases, this may be attributable to a lack of communication of the Business Link service.

Because of this, businesses are largely unaware of how Business Link works, giving rise to a widespread confusion and ignorance about what Business Link actually does.

Unsurprisingly, RDA contract-managers and Business Link contract-holders demonstrated a detailed awareness of the IDB model.

The research found that those responsible for managing and delivering Business Link services had a clear understanding of what IDB provides for businesses. In strong contrast to this, however, only one wider stakeholder interviewee from a regional representative body raised the IDB model as being one of Business Link’s main strengths or functions before being prompted.

As discussed earlier, of the businesses that participated in focus groups, including those who had used the Business Link service recently, very few demonstrated any awareness of the IDB model itself without having been prompted; only a small minority understood what IDB meant. As such, it is clear that a knowledge gap exists within the business community between what Business Link is there to do in theory and a specific awareness of how it looks to deliver this – what it actually does in practice.

For example, the IDB model explicitly does not include any mentoring or ‘hand-holding’ of businesses. Despite this, and while acknowledging that this was the case, a minority of the interviewees from the service-delivery target groups expressed the opinion that Business Link’s remit should include acting as a “hand-holding” service to businesses. They argued that, by stopping their support so strictly at the point of brokerage, the overall effectiveness of what Business Link could offer to businesses had been reduced along with the potential impact it could have on the economy at national and regional level. Many businesses continue to associate Business Link with “mentoring” and “hand-holding” services, and there is an overall lack of awareness of what the service currently involves.
This diversity of opinion strengthens the idea that arose that, as the Business Link service is not delivered in the same way for people in different areas of the country; there might end up being a “postcode lottery” in what was available. In practice, of course, there needs to be variation in the precise nature of service delivery across the regions. The majority of RDAs have now centralised Business Link provision at regional level (with one of these having taken those arrangements in-house), while two have chosen to continue with a sub-regional model of service delivery. In addition, further regional variation occurs with the Business Link service being offered in conjunction with the delivery of government programmes, such as Train to Gain, in some regions.

Such variation in delivery creates confusion about the service and exerts a negative impact upon perceptions of its consistency. Indeed, within the business community there is little detailed awareness of what the National Framework entails – namely, to guarantee a “platform of common service definition […] delivering a nationally consistent service across all regions […] upon which the current and future success of the brand and the service depends”.

**Variation in the quality of advisors leads to confusion around what businesses should expect from Business Link.**

Businesses’ different experiences of Business Link indicate that there is not a uniform perception of the service at present. This perception has been influenced by two sources of opinion. First, experiences with advisors were stated by businesses as being hit-and-miss:

“You get young graduates who don’t know anything about life or business, with the nicest, the best will in the world and you get some people who are experienced, like the advisor I spoke to, so it’s a mix and match.”

User (London)

While a second, from a different perspective on the service, said that:

“[…] from the [Business Link advisors] I’ve spoken to, a lot of them have never actually run a business and a lot of them have come from maybe a bank or something like this.”

Lapsed user (London)

This sentiment that experiences with advisors are inconsistent was shared by both current and lapsed users. Non-users did not comment on this issue.

Another focus group participant expressed the likelihood of a negative experience putting off a customer from returning to the service in future, emphasising the importance of consistency in the quality as well as the content of service-delivery across Business Link. They stated that they:

“[…]wouldn’t be surprised people might be put off once on Business Link and then they never go back to them again, whereas I’m getting as much as I can off this lady.”

User (Manchester)

**Business Link is viewed as inconsistent because of regional variation in the way the service is delivered.**

The second factor influencing perceptions of Business Link as inconsistent is the fact that the exact nature of the service offer differs from region to region. Despite the national offer, Business Link is currently delivered differently across the nine regions (see section on Business Link today for details) and our research, as discussed in further detail in the following section, shows that regional variation can be perceived as both good and bad.
The principle behind a nationally-defined offer with regionally-tailored services is that Business Link services will, as a result, best serve the needs of their region and be better able to fit in with the priorities set out by their RDA in the Regional Economic Strategy. And the argument holds, particularly on the delivery side, where examples from the interviewees we spoke to included the positive aspects of being able to tailor the way they target hard-to-reach groups in their regions.

So, those responsible for delivering the service view regional variation as a positive facet of the service. However, in contrast to this, there remains a considerable degree of suspicion of Business Link in some quarters precisely because it is delivered differently depending on geographical location.

The regional variation in Business Link services was outlined from the service-delivery perspective by an RDA contract-manager who said:

“It does differ by region. You have nine RDAs and nine models.”
RDA contract-manager

And a Business Link contract-manager mentioned that the way the brand is described was consistent, but that the way it is delivered is not:

“[…] how it’s delivered differs; how it’s described doesn’t.”
Business Link contract-holder

Again, this can be viewed both positively and negatively, with the managers and operators differing in opinion. One RDA contract-manager compared Business Link to the product offering of a national high street bank: they argued that a mortgage product may be advertised nationally, but it is the individual bank branches themselves that take responsibility for how it’s delivered in their local area, leading to a situation where Business Link is:

“[…] delivered regionally, although it [is] a core national offering and advertised as such”
RDA contract-manager

A Business Link contract-holder, on the other hand, felt that any inconsistency posed problems for the brand. They highlighted the importance of consistency – of message, if nothing else – by saying:

“A brand can only work when it’s consistent!”
Business Link contract-holder

The suspicion of a regionally variable service on the part of users was expressed by one of the wider stakeholder interviewees who outlined the situation as they saw it:

“I’m not sure the regional model is fully implemented […] it is not coherent. It is quite clear that the way the system is set up the regions pursue their own agendas.”
Wider stakeholder (Regional representative body)

The first quotation demonstrates that, in practice, it is not possible for a wholly consistent offer to be provided nationwide when a regional model of service-delivery is employed but that this is not necessarily a weakness in itself.

The second demonstrates a need for Business Link to assuage concerns within the business community around a national brand delivered regionally, through communication that focuses on the benefits of regional delivery of a national brand.

While the regional variation is held in suspicion by some, it was viewed positively by some on the delivery side of the service. One of the RDA contract-managers summed it up as follows:
“...if they were to put [in] a national structure they would lose the nuances and niceties of being able to target and prioritise.”
RDA contract-manager

None of the criticisms of the regional service delivery model are helped by the lack of coherent marketing at both national and regional levels. To reinforce this point, where marketing has happened at a regional level, positive results have been recorded, but they are still limited as the overall marketing budget for Business Link has been reduced.

A positive example of how marketing can improve awareness of the brand and clarity and therefore public understanding of it, was provided by an RDA contract-manager, who mentioned that, in their region, they had used both “direct marketing and PR” to raise awareness and had held coffee sessions with local businesses in the region to harness the growing trend for business meetings to take place in coffee shops. As a result of these simple initiatives, they reported an 18 per cent increase in awareness of the Business Link brand in their region.

Opinions of the service as expressed by wider stakeholder interviewees included that it was “poorly communicated,” “indeterminate,” “in need of improvement as far as coherence was concerned,” “varied in terms of quality of delivery,” and is “confusing” and “inconsistent”.

All of these judgments of the service emphasise that Business Link lacks clarity and reinforce the idea that Business Link is not the same for people in different areas of the country.

**Business Link has changed too much too often for people to understand it clearly and needs more time to bed down.**

When asked whether Business Link had had enough time to bed down in their particular region, most RDA contract-managers and Business Link contract-holders said that the service needed more time to establish itself properly. Some were satisfied with the progress that had been made since the recent changes in service-delivery but, for the most part, there was a general consensus that the changes to the service needed more time before they were fully understood by businesses.

Given the constantly shifting nature of recent incarnations of Business Link and indeed that of its predecessors since the early 1990s, it is hardly surprising first, that there is often confusion about what the service now offers and second, that there is a lack of faith in the brand amongst businesses as a result. An RDA contract-manager outlined the problem by saying that:

“[It] is communicating the changes to the business market. This has not been done well enough. There is generally a five-year lag in businesses understanding anything that changes. Lots of businesses still believe that Business Link is an advisory service. This has not been the case for many years. Business Link is a gateway service, and this is a concept that is taking a very long time to get through to the business community.”
RDA contract-manager

This assessment is supported by a focus group participant who had not used the Business Link service for some time:

“I think the important thing is that the goalposts seem to always be changing, so if it’s another radical change is there going to be another radical change in 2 years time, you know, is there more a long-term view that this is now going to happen for the next five to 10 years.”
Lapsed user (London)

The level of continuity of Business Link services has a strong impact upon how it is perceived by businesses. However, it is not possible for those delivering the service to maintain the
required levels of consistency when change is so common – and sweeping – that it necessitates wholesale restructuring of personnel and infrastructure.

In conclusion, all stakeholders were of the opinion that, for one reason or another, Business Link could be improved in terms of its clarity and consistency. The themes discussed above elicited differing levels of consensus from these stakeholder groups, as explained below:

- **Clarity of the IDB model**
  Unsurprisingly, the IDB model was clear amongst those responsible for service-delivery. However, only one wider stakeholder and a small minority of focus group participants alluded to the model before it was raised during the course of questioning.

- **Lack of clarity resulting from structural changes**
  The perception that a lack of clarity has come about from changing iterations of the service came largely from those responsible for service-delivery. This issue was raised, to a lesser degree, by businesses.

- **Inconsistency of advice drives lack of clarity around what businesses should expect**
  One reason why Business Link was perceived to lack clarity is because businesses felt it was a hit-and-miss experience; they were aware that some businesses did have positive experiences of the service, but that there was no guarantee of quality advice.

- **Regional variation can drive a lack of clarity**
  Those responsible for service-delivery had mixed opinions on whether the regional implementation of Business Link was a positive or negative model. However, regional variation was seen to potentially compromise clarity of perception.
7. Effectiveness of Business Link delivery

**Summary: perceptions of Business Link’s effectiveness**

- All stakeholder groups felt that Business Link was most effective in providing information to businesses, which includes the website; events; workshops; and seminars.

- Those who had experienced, or had heard about, a positive face-to-face experience with advisors believed that this aspect of the service can have the greatest impact on businesses.

- All stakeholder groups believed that Business Link supports SMEs most effectively.

- Contract-managers, contract-holders and businesses believed that the introduction of the IDB model was a good thing, but it was ultimately limited due to a lack of awareness.

- Those who deliver the Business Link service feel it does not strike the right balance between intensive assists and light-touch activity.

- Business Link needs more time for the IDB delivery model to bed down.

- The sharing of best practice was seen as a positive measure that could be further improved.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RDA contract-managers...</th>
<th>Business Link contract-holders...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“...It does differ by region, you have 9 RDAs and 9 models”</td>
<td>“...the more intensive service is more effective”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Businesses...</th>
<th>Business representative organisations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“...If that worked that would be exactly what I think we would be looking for.”</td>
<td>“They do provide quite a good service in pooling information and flagging up things businesses need to know”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Drivers of these perceptions

- All stakeholder groups believed that Business Link’s information provision is currently the most effective part of the service. This is based upon feedback from businesses from the current and lapsed user groups, some wider stakeholders, and those responsible for delivering the service.

- Both businesses and those who deliver the service believed that face-to-face support can have the greatest impact on businesses that receive it. This was informed by positive feedback from businesses when the process had gone well. Ultimately though, respondents from focus groups reported mixed experiences of the service.

- Interviewees across all stakeholder groups felt that Business Link was able to support SMEs most effectively. This was because it was better positioned to address straightforward business needs.

- Contract-managers and contract-holders felt that the IDB model was a good thing for Business Link because it lent an element of impartiality to the service. The effectiveness of the model was limited because of a lack of awareness, highlighting the need to get the message across more clearly.

- The changes to service-delivery have been a source of confusion amongst businesses, and there is a lack of awareness about what the service now offers. Contract-managers and contract-holders believed this was because the service needed time to properly establish itself.

- Business Link’s impact and effectiveness was perceived as limited for a number of reasons. Wider stakeholders and those on the service-delivery side believed it tries to do too much. That is, it sacrifices effectiveness by trying to meet the needs of as many businesses as possible instead of providing an intensive service to fewer businesses. Contract-managers and contract-holders felt that the service’s effectiveness was limited by a lack of visibility and a lack of maturity.

- Contract-holders and contract-managers believed that Business Link was not as effective as it could be to businesses because of market penetration targets, which were felt to get in the way of delivering the more valuable intensive advice.

- It was felt that more could be done to ensure that best practice is effectively communicated: contract-holders and contract-managers still have a low awareness of the process of knowledge-sharing, whilst contract-managers are reluctant to share information in a competitive marketplace.
In the analysis of the effectiveness of Business Link, the focus predominantly centred upon the attitudes of contract-managers and contract-holders in order to gain an internal perspective. This section also draws in analysis of the other two stakeholder groups, but the views of businesses and wider stakeholders are addressed in more detail in Section 8.

The following issues were analysed in order to understand the effectiveness of the service:

- Which elements of the service work best?
- Which companies does Business Link serve most effectively?
- How effective is the service from an operational perspective and given the delivery mechanisms now in place?
- What is holding the service back?

**Businesses were positive about the information provided by Business Link, supporting the effectiveness of this element of the service.**

All four stakeholder groups viewed Business Link’s information provision (including the website; events; workshops; and seminars) as currently the most effective element of the service. Amongst businesses, a number of current and lapsed users spoke highly of various elements of the service relating to information provision:

“I got excellent advice actually from their website, you know, it’s a fairly complex IT issue and I had to clarify the legal situation and I was able to do that from the information directly on their website.”
Lapsed user (London)

This was supported by some interviewees responsible for service-delivery, such as a contract-holder who praised the value of the Business Link website:

“We now finally have Business Link.gov, which I think is a huge step forward as a national website resource.”
Business Link contract-holder

This was supported to a lesser extent by wider stakeholders, with a regional representative body saying that:

“In some respects they do provide quite a good service in pooling information and flagging up things businesses need to know…”
Wider stakeholder (Regional representative body)

Business Link positions itself to “meet the needs of any business” with the IDB model, but this is not necessarily the case in practice. The Business Link service is viewed by current and lapsed users as being effective when addressing straightforward issues, but less so when dealing with more complex problems. Current and lapsed users believed it was effective in its capacity as a provider of basic information, but it is perceived as being less effective when dealing with more detailed, specific business needs. This was most clearly expressed by a lapsed user from one of the focus groups:

“As soon as it becomes a little bit more complex there’s a massive kind of disconnect, a massive disconnect between the experience that you’re so desperate to kind of access and the experience they put on the table.”
Lapsed user (London)

“If the query is basic and simple and if the answer is simple then absolutely, without a doubt [it meets the needs of businesses].”
Lapsed user (London)
Face-to-face support can have the greatest impact on businesses....but service-providers feel limited in their capacity to deliver it.

Both those who use and those who deliver Business Link believe that face-to-face support can have the greatest impact on businesses who receive it.

“I think that the face to face service works well and works with our skills brokers as well.”
Business Link contract-holder

Despite this consensus, focus group participants who had used the service reported mixed experiences of this type of intensive advice. When businesses had experienced face-to-face advice and it had gone well, they were extremely positive about it, showing that it is one of Business Link’s key strengths. There were, nevertheless, some cases of dissatisfaction with face-to-face advice. One participant from the lapsed user target group questioned whether it was appropriate – or even possible – for a public service to offer such in-depth advice to businesses on a mass scale. They said:

“I wouldn’t say it’s realistic to expect one-to-one support on business mentoring from a public organisation or from an organisation which purports to serve a whole business community. But yes, if I spoke to someone at Business Link, I would anticipate speaking with someone who was certainly up to date with the specific area I was enquiring about but I wouldn’t necessarily expect them to stand in my shoes and run my business for me.”
Lapsed user (Manchester)

This indicates that businesses’ have an awareness of the difficulties of delivering intensive advice in sufficient quantity whilst achieving a support service for the whole business community. Equally, those who deliver the service hold the belief that Business Link can have the most positive impact when it provides face-to-face support.

“I think the capability to have more customer facing staff is a powerful thing.”
Business Link contract-holder

In addition to this, many of the contract-holders and some contract-managers stated that they would actively like to deliver more face-to-face support or intensive assists:

“I think you’d always like to do more face-to-face work.”
Business Link contract-holder

“We need to take a step back and find a different way of doing the light touch so we can focus on the intensive activity.”
RDA contract-manager

One Business Link contract-holder suggested that, for Business Link to make a significant difference to the economy, face-to-face business advice needed to be doubled.

“You could double the face-to-face resource to really affect the performance of the region. It creates the most GVA.”
Business Link contract-holder

Business Link is therefore perceived by all stakeholder groups to be effective when it provides basic information and quality face-to-face advice. It is seen to be less effective when the needs of businesses become more complex.
Business Link is perceived to support SMEs most effectively.

The majority of interviewees across all three interview target groups felt that Business Link was best positioned to help small to medium-sized enterprises. It was similarly felt that it was less well-positioned and less well-equipped to provide support to larger businesses. This was consistent across the stakeholder groups, with one of the interviewees we spoke to from a regional representative body stating that they understood Business Link to be:

“The provision of IDB to SMEs.”
Wider stakeholder (Representative body)

This was reinforced from the service-delivery perspective by an RDA contract-manager:

“Business start-up provision is, in my opinion, the finest in the country. The programme takes them through a series of workshops before that, so they get to the point that they really understand what it takes to start up a business and so they are energised sufficiently to start.”
RDA contract-manager

“Business Link is very much focused on the smaller end of the SME market.”
RDA contract-manager

In addition, current customers of the service understand it as having the aim to:

“… advise and help new businesses, small to medium businesses.”
User (Birmingham)

There is therefore strong alignment amongst all four stakeholder groups, which believe that Business Link is most effective in providing support to SMEs.

The introduction of the IDB model has been a good thing for Business Link...

When asked for their views on Business Link’s main purpose and for what they thought had been the most significant developments to the Business Link service, those responsible for delivering the service identified, across the board, the introduction of the IDB model of service-delivery. RDA contract-managers and Business Link contract-holders felt that the impartiality given to Business Link by the IDB model had made it the most important development to the service in recent years.

“The fact it is impartial and allows the business owner to step outside the business and look back in with someone with diagnostic techniques and having information that is one website which comes direct from best sources is very valuable.”
RDA contract-manager

It had stopped the service being viewed as a money-making concern and added an essential “validity” to the service. One contract-manager believed the model was clearer for all concerned:

“It’s a very good model, works well, and is increasingly working better. It’s best at providing clarity to a business on what it needs to do, and in what order it needs to do it, so in a sense it’s a sort of mentoring organisation.”
RDA contract-manager

Whilst another felt the diagnosis and brokerage elements provided real added value for businesses:

“So I and D is effective and coupled with B is then very effective. So it’s not just about information provision – it’s about adding value.”
Business Link contract-holder

... but awareness has a huge impact on how effective the service can be.

Our research shows that when businesses are aware of what the Business Link service offer entails, they are much happier with the idea of using it. Although businesses are generally aware of Business Link and have a basic idea of its function, most businesses are unaware of the detail of the IDB offer. This was the case across all three target user groups. Businesses’ awareness of the brand, Business Link’s services and the IDB model is discussed further in Section 6.

Once businesses had had the IDB model of service-delivery explained to them, they were generally positive about, and receptive towards, it. The same applied with the wider stakeholder interviewees of whom only a small proportion mentioned IDB unprompted.

In one of the focus groups for Business Link users, one participant, despite being a recent customer, needed the IDB model explaining to them. After that explanation, they said the following:

“I think it’s an utterly superb statement and if that worked that would be exactly what I think we would be looking for.”
User (Manchester)

Those who had no previous experience of Business Link also viewed the IDB model positively once it had been explained:

“I think it’s quite good actually, I quite like the last part.”
Non-user (London)

For wider stakeholder interviewees, also, the model was thought to be a good thing. One interviewee from a County Council said that:

“The model there sounds good to me […]”
Wider stakeholder (County Council)

While another from a national representative body, again after having had it explained, said:

“I think the three steps are good as far as small businesses being able to equate with it […] That seems about right to me.”
Wider stakeholder (National representative body)

Therefore, businesses were very receptive to the IDB model when it was made clear to them. Opinions varied as to why this might be, but most highlighted the need to “get the message across” more effectively.

Those who deliver the Business Link service feel it does not strike the right balance between intensive assistance and light-touch activity.

When the RDA contract-managers and Business Link contract-holders responsible for delivering the service were asked about the balance struck between in-depth and light-touch support by the Business Link service, most said that the balance was ‘right’. Several of them, though, questioned whether or not this was the same thing as providing the most value to their regional economy.

Having identified the intensive advisory service as being much more valuable, they raised the concern that the impact of this was being reduced by the burden of penetration targets. The need to meet penetration targets, it was felt, created a conflict between reaching contractual obligations and fulfilling Business Link’s remit (and potential) to make as positive a contribution as possible to the economic growth and development of their region.
The majority of interviewees on the service-delivery side of Business Link would like to be able to offer more intensive advisory services for one of two reasons. Firstly, they feel that Business Link is best-placed within the marketplace for business support to provide such intensive advice and, secondly, they feel that it is a particular strength of Business Link as currently configured. They argue that the requirement placed upon them to meet particular market penetration figures forces them to deal with low-level yet time-consuming requests for information/advice in a way that conflicts with them doing what they do best. One Business Link contract-holder, when asked if they were striking the right balance, said:

“Yes. With the proviso, that our RDAs fully understand, that the more you push numbers to hit national league tables etc. in a declining budget; at a certain point you are going to have to push more clients through a less intensive [service]. Otherwise the numbers are not going to be achieved.”
Business Link contract-holder

In the opinion of an RDA contract-manager, the targets have a negative impact on how Business Link’s go about delivering the service:

“You can spend a lot of time doing not a lot if you’re not careful. Targets can drive bad behaviour. […] Easy to say you’ve touched a business but have you made a difference. At the moment targets mean that we don’t add value […].”
RDA contract-manager

Another interviewee highlighted the danger of the usefulness of advisors being diminished by ever-increasing targets, suggesting that the targets got in the way of successful service-delivery:

“The chase after large numbers has caused demoralisation amongst staff and [been of] detriment to the service.”
Business Link contract-holder

The obligation to meet high market penetration targets is not the only reason for the current imbalance between providing in-depth help to those who need it most, and providing information and signposting to the vast majority of businesses being slightly off. There was wide regional variation in other problems encountered in delivering an optimum level of intensive advisory services. The following three factors were most frequently mentioned across both service-delivery target groups:

- A lack of resources (both in terms of finance and personnel)
- The advisory team being over-stretched
- The advisors themselves not being of adequate quality – something left over from previous Business Link models.

**Business Link needs more time for the new delivery model to bed down.**

Business Link has changed markedly in recent years. This has led to uncertainty about the service. The problems created by such frequent and significant changes were encapsulated by a focus group participant:

“I think the important thing is that the goalposts seem always to be changing, so if it’s [IDB] another radical change is there going to be another radical change in two years time, you know, is there more a long-term view that this is now going to happen for the next 5-10 years?”
Lapsed users (London)

In addition, because most businesses are cyclical users of Business Link, it was felt by RDA contract-managers and Business Link contract-holders that the effectiveness of the current Business Link service was still in a developmental phase.
The Business Link contract-holders all noted the importance of the service remaining stable for as long as possible to give levels of awareness of the service the best chance to develop naturally. As the research showed, businesses were widely receptive to the IDB model, but were mostly unaware of it. This means that the IDB model has not had enough time to fully penetrate the collective consciousness of the business community. In addition to this, the inevitably disruptive consequences of a requirement to introduce widespread structural changes in service-delivery have led to a situation where Business Link is still in the process of being implemented. A Business Link contract-holder said:

“I think we are still bedding down.”

Business Link contract-holder

While an RDA contract-manager put it as follows:

“I don’t think it has […]. It [the switch to IDB] has been a very disruptive process. It’s a big operation and still settling down.”

RDA contract-manager

Business Link has made a good start on sharing best practice, but there is room for improvement.

Given the changing nature of the service, the importance of identifying best practice across the regions is clear. Currently, it is shared at the Business Link Management Group (BLMG) level. All of the RDA contract-managers who were interviewed noted that the BLMG meets every six weeks to discuss Business Link operations. At those meetings, a specific period of time is set aside for the sharing of best practice. Some highlighted the productive role of the brand manager in facilitating this, while others chose to focus on the relatively recent nature of the BLMG’s inception, noting that, like Business Link, it had not been in place for sufficiently long enough to have made a difference but that “a good start” had nevertheless been made. All thought that the move towards the promotion of sharing best practice was a good thing.

Despite the existence of this positive environment of best practice sharing between RDAs, there was a low overall awareness of the process and involvement in knowledge-sharing at contract-holder level. As one interviewee, when asked how best practice was shared at a regional level, answered:

“Our impression is that it isn’t. There’s been a rekindling of the Business Link getting together but not the RDA.”

Business Link contract-holder

Another said:

“Not a lot of it, no. We don’t even know how other regions are performing.”

Business Link contract-holder

The first quotation suggests two things. Firstly, that the sharing of best practice at one level of the service-delivery chain does not guarantee that the important messages coming out of BLMG meetings will be shared with those directly involved in operating the Business Link service on a day-to-day basis. The second shows that, in the absence of an established forum for best practice sharing at contract-holder level, arrangements for the sharing of best practice have been instigated between individual Business Link operators on an ad hoc basis.

The research indicates that, although a start has been made in sharing best practice, more could be done to ensure that, when examples of best practice do exist, awareness of them is effectively communicated all the way along the delivery chain to maximise potential improvements to the service.
One further point must be considered, as far as best practice sharing is concerned. Because there are differences in size and distribution between the various Business Link contract-holders, some potentially contentious issues were raised about sharing best practice. Due to the current manner in which contracts for the regional delivery of Business Link are awarded as part of a competitive tendering process once every three years, some Business Link contract-holders we spoke to voiced their anxiety about sharing best practice with other Business Link operators, whilst an RDA contract-manager said that:

“Competition for contracts and the frequency of contracts being renewed hinders best practice sharing.”

RDA contract-manager

This reluctance stems from a fear that sharing best practice in a competitive marketplace for Business Link delivery could lead to conflicts of intellectual property ownership. This could result in the concession of competitive advantage to a larger player within the market (there are currently two organisations delivering more than one contract), undercutting them when their contract came up for renewal if equipped with knowledge of the most effective practices around the country. The same RDA contract-manager said that Business Link:

“[…] wouldn’t be telling neighbours about innovative and different work.”

RDA contract-manager

Despite achieving high rates of customer satisfaction, there are a number of reasons why Business Link is still subject to negative perceptions within the business community.

Wider stakeholder interviewees were asked for their take on the dichotomy of Business Link achieving high levels of satisfaction across its customer base yet still being viewed negatively by businesses in general. They had a broadly aligned understanding of why Business Link is perceived negatively.

Firstly, there was a perception that other wider stakeholders might view Business Link as a competitor because they themselves, as membership organisations, offer their members some services as part of a portfolio of membership benefits that fall under the umbrella of what Business Link offers to businesses. In this case, wider stakeholder organisations, it was felt, tend to view Business Link as a threat and so develop and express negative sentiments towards the service. Secondly, it was suggested that some of those organisations might previously have delivered Business Link contracts themselves and could now have lost that contract following the rationalisation of the Business Link service down to 15 Business Links coordinated regionally. As a result of this, some interviewees suggested, wider stakeholder organisations might well not be supportive of Business Link operators today:

“It is a competitive brand i.e. with Chambers of Commerce. [There’s also] cynicism of people that failed to get a franchise.”

Wider stakeholder (National representative body)

Wider stakeholder interviewees also believed that Business Link was suffering from out of date perceptions that were formed during one of the service’s previous iterations:

“It has had a chequered history over the years and it hasn’t been able to divest itself of that chequered history.”

Wider stakeholder (National representative body)

As a public service, Business Link was also seen to be an easy target of criticism:

“But I think they are just being negative for the sake of being negative with government organisations.”

Wider stakeholder (Industry association)
The same interviewee said that a negative attitude to a Government organisation could be driven by the current political or economic situation and also mentioned that:

“[…] there is a feeling from business owners themselves that they don’t like Government intervention in general terms.”

Wider stakeholder (Industry association)

In conclusion, Business Link is perceived by stakeholders as more effective in some areas than others. Some of the key findings emerging from this section can be categorised as follows:

- Business Link’s information provision, courses, seminars and networking groups are perceived as the most effective part of the service today. This was primarily noted by businesses.

- Face-to-face interaction with Business Link advisors has the potential to be the most positively-received and effective part of the service. This was the belief of all four stakeholder groups. However, businesses and those responsible for service-delivery believed this element was hamstrung for two reasons:
  - Businesses had mixed experiences of the face-to-face element; as a result the service was not as effective as it could be.
  - Contract-holders and contract-managers felt that penetration targets get in the way of delivering the face-to-face service to the extent that they would like to.

- All stakeholders believed Business Link served the needs of SMEs most effectively, despite the fact that the service is positioned, in principle, to “meet the needs of any business”.

- The IDB model was perceived most positively by those on the service-delivery side, whilst businesses and wider stakeholders liked the concept. However, the effectiveness of the model was limited because of a lack of awareness amongst users of the service.

- Amongst those responsible for service-delivery, the sharing of best practice was seen as a good start, with the potential for this activity to develop so as to make the service more effective.
8. Business Link as a quality experience

In seeking to understand the drivers of perceptions of Business Link, this research looked at the attitudes and experiences of businesses that currently use Business Link and those that have stopped using Business Link. It also sought to understand the attitudes and perceptions of those businesses that have never used the service, to see what might be driving negative perceptions of the brand.

The analysis within this section is structured as follows:

- Understanding experiences of Business Link – why businesses use, and stop using, Business Link (current and lapsed users).
- Why businesses do not use Business Link (non-users).
- How Business Link sits against what businesses want from business advice (current, lapsed and non-users).
- Which of Business Link’s services are in greatest demand (service-delivery perspective)?

8.1 Understanding experiences of Business Link

The following section outlines the reasons why businesses use, or have used, Business Link from their perspective, and looks at the quality of experience of that particular service element. It takes into account experiences of current and lapsed users of Business Link, as discussed within the focus groups. It examines the experiences of businesses that have used Business Link for a particular reason, looking at how levels of satisfaction with and perceptions of, Business Link have been shaped by certain expectations and elements of the service. It also looks at the reasons why businesses stop using Business Link, as identified through the focus groups.

Through this analysis, we can see which elements of the Business Link service are driving either positive or negative experiences.

8.1.1 Businesses go to Business Link for information

Business Link’s information provision was rated highly by both users and lapsed user groups.

Businesses accessed a range of information from Business Link, primarily through the website. This element of the service was positively received and praised for being practical and comprehensive. One technical element, the log-in facility, received criticism but this was seen as a problem that could be easily remedied.

The majority of lapsed users who stated that they had sought information from Business Link (though not from an advisor) had accessed the website. One participant also received a quarterly marketing newsletter. Significantly, the experiences of this target group were almost all positive. Two businesses stated that they had used the site to clarify legal issues:

“I got excellent advice actually from their website, you know, it’s a fairly complex IT issue and I had to clarify the legal situation and I was able to do that from the information directly on their website.”

Lapsed user (London)

All other participants referred to the website in a broader sense but did not stipulate why they had accessed it. Those who did report a positive experience praised the website for
containing practical information that could address their needs. The website was also seen to have a comprehensive body of information.

One area of this service that received criticism from two businesses was the impractical log-in facility on the website, where it was compulsory for users to register and then submit a lengthy business identification number as part of the process:

"[The website is] infuriating, the way you have to log in every time and there’s this 82 digit reference number you need to go on the internet. I’ve had a three month problem with my log in."

User (London)

The participant who received the marketing brochures spoke highly of their content but complained that they were often out of date:

“So I haven’t actually spoken to any Business Link person but I do receive some very useful marketing, a quarterly brochure, which again, is pretty impressive. Always tends to be out of date, that’s the problem."

Lapsed user (Manchester)

Business Link’s information provision is therefore perceived by businesses as one of the service’s strengths. Limitations such as the log-in facility and the prompt delivery of marketing material were minor criticisms and are easily remedied.

8.1.2 Businesses look for advice and support from Business Link advisors

Contact with Business Link advisors was by far the most discussed element of the service and gave rise to interesting comparisons between the current user and lapsed user groups.

Current users sought advice from advisors for a variety of reasons, and there were a similar number of positive or negative experiences with advisors. In general, current users were more positive than lapsed users in their appraisal of Business Link advisors.

Businesses from the current user group provided a variety of reasons as to why they sought support from an advisor. Some needed advice when they were setting up a new business; others sought advice at crucial junctures in the businesses, whilst a lack of expertise in a specific area was another common reason to seek advice:

“Needed to get on top of business - too much time spent on work - needed direction and questioning.”

User (Manchester)

Participants stated that they had had mixed experiences of advisors. That is, a similar number of businesses reported positive or negative experiences of Business Link advice. As a collective, current users were more positive in their appraisal of advisors than lapsed users. Amongst other qualities, users praised advisors that were experienced, had sector-specific knowledge and provided continuity of advice. Negative experiences were driven by a lack of aftercare and inexperienced, under-qualified and poorly informed advisors. Lapsed users had either negative or mixed feelings about their experiences for similar reasons. In keeping with this, some participants were aware that their experience was not universal, and that other users of the service may have a differing experience of it:

“If you’ve been to the Business Link and seen the calibre of a lot of the people they send out, you would be more inclined to do what X has done and go and pay for it, but it’s a question of knowing who to buy it from. I wouldn’t be surprised people might be put off once on Business Link and then they never go back to them again, whereas I’m getting as much as I can off this lady.
User (Manchester)

Those who spoke positively of this service often praised advisors that had prior experience of running a business themselves.

“The person that I’m dealing with now is very good... somebody who’s actually been in business or even been in business and lost the business because when we make mistakes comes experience.”
User (Manchester)

Advisors with significant sector-specific knowledge were also well-regarded, whilst a number of businesses simply enjoyed being challenged and driven by a third party.

“The best thing is to use my Business Link guy, because when I go to see him I actually want to go with more than when I went last time.”
User (London)

This element of continuity and repeat consultations was also raised as a positive experience by a number of businesses:

“I had continuity from that guy for two years before he was headhunted and went somewhere else. But he was brilliant, so continuity is very important with someone who’s giving you advice.”
User (Manchester)

By the same token, those who had negative experiences of Business Link advisors often cited a lack of aftercare or continuity:

“It’s like a woman having a baby, right; she gives birth in the hospital and then the next minute they say thanks very much Mrs Jones on your way.... Yeah. No aftercare.”
User (Birmingham)

One current user had mixed feelings of the advice he received. He felt Business Link could meet his needs when the topic was specific:

“I’m happy that it’s answered the need when I’ve asked a specific question.”
User (London)

Two participants provided examples of when Business Link did not follow up in providing them with reports that had been promised:

“I’m still waiting for my report and it’s been several months now. So I’ve just sort of given up and walked away from them.”
User (Birmingham)

Those who had a negative experience of Business Link advisors viewed inexperienced, poorly qualified or unknowledgeable advisors in a bad light.

“The information is there, the library is there, the diagnostics can’t work if the person who is doing the diagnosis isn’t qualified. It’s like going to a doctor who has no training in medicine.”
User (London)

“When you get somebody to come and see you and you get the feeling that, actually, you know more about what you’re supposed to be doing than he does.”
User (Manchester)
Lapsed users were either undecided or negative about the service they had received, stating a number of reasons why advisors had not demonstrated many positive qualities.

Businesses from the lapsed user group were less explicit about why they sought business support from a Business Link advisor. Rather, they tended to describe the processes they experienced before, during and after contact with advisors. One participant did state that he had sought advice from an advisor when he was considering setting up a not-for-profit organisation, whilst another had attended a marketing course before seeing an advisor once his business was established.

On the whole, participants from this group were largely negative or undecided about their experience of Business Link advisors. Only one business stated that advisors were “more than helpful” when contacted over the phone. However, those who had had a negative experience often described a mismatch between the service they were seeking and the service they received. As stated above, one participant contacted Business Link whilst looking to set up a not-for-profit organisation. He felt Business Link was unable to cater to his specific needs in this instance:

“…and we wanted to talk to Business Link about doing it, and how did we do it and so on. This was totally outside their remit, and all that happened in the end was just this brochure, just a standard brochure on how to start a business.”
Lapsed user (Birmingham)

This was echoed by another lapsed user, who received a thorough consultation that he felt was inappropriate to his business:

“I was presented with a whole pile of benchmarking sheets and I thought what is this, how can I take this and do something with this that’s going to give me practical results, and when I questioned it, I mean the support wasn’t there, it was almost as if the guy wasn’t available to be met very frequently.”
Lapsed user (London)

A significant number of lapsed users expressed mixed feelings in their appraisal of Business Link advisors. One business had received a “very thorough report” that had helped address a number of problems in his business, whilst on other occasions advisors had been less effective:

“Others just came along for a chat and wrote a short letter two or three weeks later, saying we did this and that, which was totally inconclusive. So a very mixed report…”
Lapsed user (Birmingham)

Similarly, another business had lost confidence in the service, having had a variable experience. In this instance it resulted in the participant not using Business Link again.

“…in the beginning they were really, really fantastic, I went to a couple of meetings about kinds of marketing and support etc. but then when I set up the business, basically the information advice was completely useless, which meant that I’ve really never gone back.”
Lapsed user (London)

At present Business Link’s advisors are not delivering a consistently high quality service. This represents an opportunity to improve the service.
8.1.3 Businesses want to attend events such as seminars, courses or networking groups

Seminars, courses and networking groups were positively received by both the current and lapsed user groups.

Businesses from both the user and lapsed user groups were generally very positive about the courses, seminars and networking groups they had attended through Business Link. One lapsed user had been to a marketing course under the previous Business Link model and spoke highly of the expert running the course, as well as of the fact that it was inexpensive:

“*We went to Business Link in Shropshire and back in 2002 they had a programme of giving marketing courses at a very good discount. So, whole day courses for about £45-£50, which is very good, and the guy giving it was exceptionally good.*”

Lapsed user (Birmingham)

Another liked the concept of a speed networking event that she had attended:

“*I went when there was a speed networking thing, as opposed to speed dating. I thought that was kind of nice.*”

Lapsed user (Manchester)

One business owner had visited a Business Link exhibition and was left uninspired by what it had to offer, but not dissatisfied:

“*I did go on to the Business Link exhibition up in Manchester. I can't necessarily say I came away from the website or the exhibition with lots of new ideas, lots of useable information, but I wouldn't say it was a bad experience.*”

Lapsed user (Manchester)

The following case study describes one customer’s experience of a number of Business Link’s services, including networking events.

**Figure 3: Case study 1**

**Case Study: A satisfied user**

This respondent had set up a cafe in London six months ago. Prior to this she had spent twelve years as a contractor in marketing and advertising. She sought advice during the pre-startup stage and came across Business Link through an internet search engine. As someone in the process of starting up a business, she felt Business Link was able to provide her with invaluable information.

“Yes, I've been a huge fan of Business Link. They are professional, impartial, deal with all areas of small business, have experienced, credible, helpful staff. It's a website I go to again and again.”

Equally, contact with other businesses through networking events was an important source of reassurance for her.

“I was worried when I went to the Business Link events that they would all just be Government people who actually haven't got a clue about commercial business and have never worked out there, you know, in real life. I thought it would all be theoretical but actually they're a lot of people who have case studies who have experienced themselves and that makes it more credible.”

Business Link was therefore able to address a wide range of needs for this respondent, who declared that she would use the service in the future.
8.1.4 Businesses use Business Link to be signposted to suppliers

A small number of businesses stated they had been brokered to a support provider through Business Link. Both current and lapsed users had mixed experiences of this element of the service.

Only a small number of participants stated that they had been brokered to a supplier. One participant was signposted to a specialist organisation within her industry, whilst two other businesses from the lapsed user group received support for their websites. Similarly to businesses that sought advice through advisors, experiences were mixed. One user brokered onto a sector specialist believed the original signposting was extremely effective, but the service suffered from a lack of follow-up:

“Business Link needs to direct people on the right path to take. Somebody like me who is in food, what I needed Business Link to do for me was to say to me 'contact Supply Heart of England Fine Foods', speciality fine food and I got that support from Business Link. But whilst the interviewer was fantastic, when it went back to Business Link to follow it up, the support I got was zilch.”
User (Birmingham)

Another participant had a positive experience when it came to having a website designed, but stated that it was entirely dependent upon the quality of the supplier and that on other occasions there was an awareness that his experience may have been different.

“We’ve used Business Link twice, once when we did our web design and that was very, very good, they put us in touch with the right guy, it was fantastic. I mean some of it it’s just the luck of who they put you in touch with I think.”
Lapsed user (Birmingham)

The brokerage element of the Business Link service is therefore perceived as a hit-and-miss affair. Some participants valued the service when it was effective, but the fact that businesses were not universally complimentary in their appraisal indicates that there is scope to improve this element of the service.

8.1.5 Businesses approach Business Link for financial support

A number of current users went to Business Link to secure funding. Their experiences were largely negative.

A number of businesses from the current user group went to Business Link in search of financial support. In general, participants reported a negative experience, as often they were unable to secure funding for their business. This perhaps indicates a lack of understanding of what Business Link can and does offer. One current user spoke of poor customer treatment following an enquiry over the telephone:

“She said you want some information on Train to Gain and I said no, no, no. I want to know more about funding and what you can do for me and the girl said well I won’t need to take it any further and she just put the phone down on me.”
User (Birmingham)

Another participant did not speak highly of the information Business Link could provide, but was more interested in funding opportunities.

“So the funding side did motivate me, I was like yeah I think I’ll accept that. But otherwise any other information for my business was a waste of time for me.”
User (Birmingham)
This suggests that some negativity amongst businesses is driven by a lack of awareness of what Business Link does, and an expectation that Business Link will provide funding support: further evidence that the brand and Business Link’s services should be marketed to a greater extent.

8.1.6 Why do some businesses stop using Business Link?

Businesses stop using Business Link for a number of reasons, most commonly when they are put off after a negative experience.

Some examples stated by businesses include:

- When a business need has been met.
- When Business Link cannot scale with the complexity of a business.
- When the information is considered inappropriate to the business.
- When the support processes are very time-consuming.

Businesses may use Business Link in a cyclical manner, dipping in and out of the service over a period of time. As such, once their need has been met, they may be seen to stop using Business Link for a given period of time, but not stop using its services altogether. The research also indicated that businesses might cease to use Business Link following a negative experience of the service. This section looks at a number of experiences of businesses from the lapsed user group.

One business owner felt Business Link had provided adequate support when he was setting up his business. It was seen to meet his needs when they were basic, but he lost confidence in the service when his business matured and his needs became more complex:

“I wouldn’t say I’ve got the confidence in them to provide advice we need. I mean it was very basic stuff that they were doing back then.”
Lapsed user (Birmingham)

Similarly, a lapsed user reported a very mixed experience of the service. Business Link was able to provide “fantastic” support at the pre-start-up phase of his business. Further down the line however, the support was seen to be inadequate. As a result, the business owner felt it was more worthwhile to address his business’ problems himself:

“My experience was that in the beginning they were really, really fantastic. I went to a couple of meetings about marketing and support. But then when I set up the business, the information advice was completely useless, which meant that I’ve really never gone back. So I muddle my way through, because I’d rather just do it myself and get on with it and move it from my desk.”
Lapsed user (London)

The two quotations above suggest that Business Link may not be able to scale with the complexity of businesses and that this may be an important reason why businesses stop using the service.

Businesses may also stop using Business Link when they are brokered successfully to another supplier for support. In the following instance, once the business was brokered to a supplier, there was no need to return to Business Link:

“It was outsourced to a local consultancy and I’ve just never felt a need really to go to them since.”
Lapsed user (Birmingham)
The evidence above suggests that businesses might look elsewhere when they deem the service to be ineffective and unable to meet their businesses’ needs. On other occasions users may “lapse” simply because they have been successfully brokered on to a support provider. Interestingly, some lapsed users were not unequivocally derisive of Business Link: they appreciated that it was capable of providing good support but perhaps not consistently and throughout a business’ development. This again raises the issue of Business Link’s consistency in delivering quality support.

The case study below illustrates how one customer “turned his back” on Business Link following poor customer service and no follow-up.

**Figure 4: Case study 2**

**Case Study: No continuity**

This respondent ran a communications consultancy in the Birmingham area. When he was setting up his business he received a grant from the Small Business Service, which allowed him to focus on the day-to-day operations of his enterprise. He cited this as an invaluable form of business support that was of considerable value during the startup phase.

“It was very, very useful because it did mean that I was able to build up some funds. I was able to get all the management into position. All the form filling at Companies House. All that sort of stuff.”

At a later date, the owner contacted Business Link to find out whether his business was eligible for further financial support. Together with a Business Link advisor he underwent an initial assessment diagnosis and was told he would receive the report in due course. Having waited three months without receiving the report, the respondent has assumed Business Link will not follow up on their promised action, which has prompted him to give up and “turn his back” on the service. Business Link did, however, want to hear his thoughts on the quality of customer service he received.

“I have had a call from them saying ‘Can you feedback to us on the level of support you’ve received’ and I was like ‘I haven’t had it yet.’”

**8.2 Why businesses do not use Business Link**

The following section outlines the reasons, identified in the research, why businesses do not use Business Link. The research examined the perceptions of non-users, and took into account the perceptions of RDA contract-managers and Business Link contract-holders. From this analysis it was possible to gauge what is driving non-usage, as well as what drives non-users’ positive or negative perceptions of the service. As explained below, there was significant consensus between these stakeholder groups as to why this is the case.

- Many non-users do not use Business Link because they are unaware of, or misinformed about, what it does.
- Non-users often used other support providers instead of Business Link.
- Some non-users were cynical of a Government-run service.
- Others believed their needs would not be met by Business Link.
- Contract-holders and contract-managers were very much in agreement with non-users as to why they would not use Business Link.

From a non-user perspective, the overriding reason businesses do not use Business Link is because of a lack of awareness of what it does. Non-users from all three geographical catchment areas displayed unfamiliarity with the brand and its services. One participant believed she would consider using the service if she had known about it:
“I don’t know what they do, so I’d definitely consider anyone that will help me in developing my business. I think it’s a lack of knowledge, isn’t it?”
Non-user (London)

Other businesses appeared misinformed as to its function:

“Are they just like a small little office with a couple of people in there or this actually quite a big business? I thought it was a private set up.”
Non-user (London)

“The trouble is the name sounds like a postal organisation!”
Non-user (London)

It is therefore unsurprising that businesses which are unaware of Business Link will not use its services. A greater marketing drive would go some way to address businesses’ lack of awareness of Business Link.

Some non-users had not used Business Link because they chose to receive advice from other organisations such as Chambers of Commerce, or because they enjoyed having the control of addressing the problem themselves:

“I tend to work things out myself, generally speaking.”
Non-user (London)

“I’m like you, prefer to in-house…keeping it small, keeping it to trust.”
Non-user (Manchester)

A vocal minority from the non-user group was cynical of Government in general and of public services:

“If it’s government orientated I’m just a little bit sceptical of the bureaucracy that surrounds these sorts of things, and I just don’t have the time to waste.”
Non-user (London)

Some other participants were aware of Business Link but had not used its services. They believed Business Link was not relevant to their businesses and would not be able to meet their needs:

“They are not up to scratch…they are not connected with real business, they don’t understand what’s going on.”
Non-user (Birmingham)

“…it was a couple of old blokes on the stand, sort of going ‘What do you do, staff training?’ I’m just being a real cynic because all it’s clarifying is, OK, I’ll go to Business Link but you’re not getting advice.”
Non-user (Manchester)

Broadly speaking, non-users who had been contacted by Business Link in the past, or who were aware of what it does, tended to view it in a negative light. They often believed Business Link could not meet the needs of their business and therefore they had made an active choice to not use its services.

Those who did not know of its existence, or who only had a vague notion of what it does, were more neutral in their appraisal of the service. They displayed a greater openness to using its services in the future and, in the main, did not express negative preconceptions of the service.
Those responsible for service-delivery thought businesses do not choose to use Business Link because they use other suppliers, are self helpers or because they are not aware of the benefits that Business Link can provide.

Business Link contract-holders and contract-managers were asked why businesses aware of Business Link would choose not to use it. Their responses echoed those of businesses to a great extent. Service providers were aware that businesses might use other support suppliers or might be ‘self helpers’.

“They main source of advice comes from their accountants or their bank manager.”
RDA contract-manager

Additionally, there was a common perception that these businesses may not be aware of the services and benefits that Business Link can provide. One contract-manager believed this was attributable to a lack of marketing:

“It’s about putting sufficient marketing clout out there.”
RDA contract-manager

Whilst others felt that there would always be a part of the business community that would not seek support from any supplier. A contract-manager thought it would be wrong to target all businesses:

“Not every business wants to take external advice. We shouldn’t be trying to hit the whole market here.”
RDA contract-manager

Service-delivery interviewees also believed some businesses would associate Business Link with other Government services and, through a lack of awareness, would question whether it could provide valuable support:

“What can the government do for me?”
Business Link contract-holder

Both focus group participants and those responsible for delivering the service agreed, to a great extent, on the reasons why businesses do not use Business Link. Perhaps most evidently, they do not use the service when they are not aware of its existence. However, the research suggests there is also a significant body of businesses that knows about Business Link but chooses not to use it – either because they currently receive support from another provider, they address their businesses’ issues themselves, or because they do not trust a Government-run service.

8.3 How Business Link sits against what businesses want from business advice

Focus group participants were asked what qualities they believed to embody good business advice and the findings are outlined in Section 3. Our analysis of businesses’ experiences of Business Link now allows us to understand where Business Link sits against these qualities. It was possible to carry out a qualitative assessment of how effectively Business Link fulfils these criteria.

Business Link was seen to perform best in delivering affordable, impartial, accessible and credible support, as shown in Figure 5 below. However, it was perceived to be lacking when it came to providing experienced, bespoke, challenging and continuous advice.
**Figure 5: How effectively Business Link performs against important criteria**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualities businesses associate with good advice</th>
<th>A qualitative assessment of how Business Link performs on these qualities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bespoke</td>
<td>-ve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced</td>
<td>-ve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuous</td>
<td>-ve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessible</td>
<td>+ve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impartial</td>
<td>+ve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credible</td>
<td>+ve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affordable</td>
<td>-ve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging</td>
<td>-ve</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6 below outlines the most positive and negative elements of Business Link’s service identified by businesses that have experienced it. Business Link received positive feedback on its information provision and events such as seminars and networking groups. Its advisors, when demonstrating experience, sector-specific knowledge and continuity, were also highly rated. Conversely, Business Link was perceived most negatively when its advisors are inexperienced, demonstrate no sector-specific insight or offer no follow-up service.
Figure 6: Drivers of perception

- Information provision through the Business Link website and physical literature
- Experiences, sector-specific, continuous service from advisors
- Seminars, courses and networking groups
- Inexperienced advisors that lack sector-specific insight
- No continuity from advisors. No aftercare
- Consultation that is inappropriate to the type of business

8.4 A service-delivery perspective on services in demand

Those responsible for the delivery of Business Link were asked which of its services are in greatest demand from businesses in the UK. The research sought to understand whether those delivering the service have an understanding of businesses’ expectations of Business Link, and whether the services that they believe to be in greatest demand in fact match those reasons why businesses come to Business Link. Responses were mainly impressionistic rather than based on user statistics, but nonetheless provide valuable indicators of demand.

The majority of respondents believed there was currently greatest demand for information from Business Link, rather than deeper diagnostic work on businesses. The perceived popularity of this element of the service correlates with the majority of businesses, which believed that information provision is one of Business Link’s strengths. General business management information on areas such as sales, marketing and HR was frequently sought. However, legal and financial information appeared to be in greatest demand:

“Financial; legislation. I think this is applicable to all regions.”
Business Link contract-holder

Interviewees also emphasised that businesses would tend to seek a variety of support needs during the initial start-up phase, which again ties in with businesses’ feedback:

“Help to start your business is up there.”
RDA contract-manager

Similarly, contract-managers and contract-holders noted that many enterprises still approach Business Link with a view to getting funding, either from or through Business Link. This also holds true from the customer perspective, as noted in the section above. One participant believed some businesses were unsure as to its purpose.

“Many people phone up wanting money. Difficult to move their image away from being a grant giving organisation.”
Business Link contract-holder
This sub section therefore indicates an alignment between businesses and those responsible for service-delivery when it came to evaluating which of Business Link’s services are in greatest demand and when businesses might seek support from Business Link.
9. Looking at the future of Business Link

9.1 Where Business Link is heading

BERR’s publication “Simple Support, Better Business: Business Support in 2010,” outlines the Government’s intentions for the service over the next two years. In spite of the recent changes to the make-up of the Business Link offer and service delivery, the business support landscape remains confusing for many of the businesses that need it most. This confusion means that the system lacks efficiency and is not as cost-effective as it could be.

The Business Support Simplification Programme (BSSP) has been introduced to address this. BSSP is a cross-government agenda, led by BERR, and will rationalise and streamline the business support landscape by reducing the number of support products to less than one hundred. Business Link’s current configuration will be maintained and built on within the context of BSSP. Responsibility for delivering Business Link services will remain with the RDAs, which will continue to administer a centrally-allocated budget for Business Link services within their region. The business support landscape will be simplified so that it will not only be easier for businesses to understand what they need, but also more efficient and cost-effective for Business Link to broker them towards appropriate sources of that support.

9.2 Reactions to Business Link as a primary access point

Businesses and wider stakeholders were asked to provide their views on the concept of the Transformational Government Agenda and the Business Link website as a single access channel for all business transactions with Government. The subsequent feedback will help inform what Business Link’s role should be in delivering this service, as well as how to best achieve this.

The single access channel was well received as a concept...

In general, the concept of a single access point was positively received by some wider stakeholders and focus group participants, who saw it as a convenient, time saving system. However, each of the three target user groups expressed caution around the practical implication of this structure. A number of businesses in each group type did endorse the concept:

“The biggest advantage is that you go to one place to get to everything. I think that’s fabulous.”
Lapsed user (London)

“The advantage is that the Government is moving to a genuine one stop shop.”
Wider stakeholder (National representative body)

…but there were reservations surrounding how it would be implemented.

However, by the same measure, a good number of participants had concerns surrounding its implementation. Perhaps most significantly, they questioned whether the move to a digital service would result in a loss of personal contact with advisors and the discontinuation of some Business Link services. This was voiced by all three target user groups:

“...it doesn’t do anything for me. I like talking to people, meeting with them, talking on the phone and getting some practical advice or talking through things properly.”
Non-user (London)

One wider stakeholder interviewee from a national representative body feared that the loss of business advisors would diminish the character of the service:
“[The] web doesn’t give you that empathetic feel.”
Wider stakeholder (National representative body)

Some assumed that the initiative would geographically centralise the focus of operations within London and therefore dilute or complicate the relationship with local representatives. This prompted a participant from a lapsed user group to question whether this was part of a greater government cost-cutting initiative that did not have the interests of businesses in mind:

“This is coming from shortage of cash up there. Therefore, we’re going to start cutting costs, and consequently the impact is not what we think, but what they need.”
Lapsed user (Birmingham)

Interestingly, participants from the non-user group did not refer to the potential centralisation of the service.

**Businesses expressed concerns about the site being secure…**

A common fear amongst businesses from the current and non-user groups was one of security and the threat of confidential information falling into the wrong hands should the website be hacked. Businesses were also uncertain whether the consolidated channel would allow Government to access and hold their data from e-transactions.

“So not only are they going to lose my personal data, they’re going to lose all my business data as well: all my customers are going to be spread around the UK!”
User (London)

Participants from the current and lapsed target groups and wider stakeholders feared that reliance on a digital system would be a risky strategy. One business owner recalled how the HMRC website crashed on the tax return deadline due to heavy traffic, whilst a wider stakeholder interviewee from a national representative body believed the consequences would be far-reaching should the site go down:

“The disadvantage is if it isn’t working then there is nowhere else to go, so it is essential to ensure it works.”
Wider stakeholder (National representative body)

...as well as being free from faults or failure.

Focus group participants, especially from the current and lapsed user groups, who had doubts around the efficacy of Business Link’s current offering believed the flaws might carry over to the online service:

“Can they clean up Business Link first? Could they do a proper cleaning up, sanitising Business Link before they go ahead with this?”
User (Birmingham)

Others from the lapsed and non-user groups felt that the scope of such a project would give rise to a complex and inaccessible website that would suffer from an overload of information:

“I’m concerned about it being over packed; over filling it with information that just makes you turn round and say, I’ve got too much to do here to get to where I want to go, forget it.”
Non-user (London)
Those who are not online might be at a disadvantage.

Participants from the current and non-user groups questioned how a consolidated model would impact enterprises that are not online or that do not use the internet on a regular basis. This was especially the case for one business owner from the non-user group who was computer illiterate.

“What about businesses that are not on the web, my local butchers for example?”
User (Manchester)

Two businesses, both from the non-user group, believed that the Transformational Government Agenda suffered from not being sufficiently publicised:

“I would have thought we would have heard more about it, it’s crazy to think…”
Non-user (Manchester)

Thus, the research suggests that both businesses and wider stakeholders have a number of concerns around the impact of the Transformational Government Agenda. Not only did they fear losing the range of support services currently in place, they also questioned how well the primary access channel would work in practice. Some businesses also felt that the digitally excluded would be at a severe loss if the online channel were to be the sole access point for businesses in the future. That said, the concept of a single access point was also positively received by all three target user groups and wider stakeholders, who believed it could be a convenient, time-saving system.

9.3 Suggestions for improvement of Business Link

Participants from all four stakeholder groups were asked what could be done to improve the Business Link service. There was commonality in responses, with the following suggestions being proposed by numerous respondents across all groups:

- Increased and improved marketing.
- Improved quality of advisors.
- Time to let the current model bed down.

Businesses focused principally on the service elements of Business Link, recommending an improvement in the quality of advisors, the introduction of account managers, case studies illustrating how businesses can benefit from Business Link’s support, as well as increased visibility through marketing.

There was also strong consensus in the feedback from wider stakeholders, who suggested that Business Link should re-establish and forge relationships with local commercial partners, and not compete with the private sector.

From the service-delivery perspective, it was unsurprising that suggestions also centred upon the operation of Business Link. Therefore, a key recommendation arising from Business Link contract-holders was to measure and evaluate the service to target the right customers and to encourage uniformity across regions.

Aside from the key recommendations above, contract-managers believed increased resources would be the solution to improve Business Link.
9.3.1 Suggestions made by businesses

All target groups were asked what Business Link could do to improve. A number of key opportunities emerged from the research. There was an alignment amongst the groups about how they felt Business Link could be improved.

**The quality of business advisors could be improved.**

One significant finding, arising notably from the current user group, was that businesses appreciate the value of a good advisor. Those who had a positive experience welcomed advisors who were, amongst other qualities, experienced, pro-active and sector-specific. However, there was an understanding – either through personal experience or through the experiences of others – that advisors were not of a consistently high standard. One key opportunity, therefore, is for Business Link to improve the quality of advisors so that they have sector-specific insight and experience of running a business themselves:

“They’ve got to be around long enough to have had a few bruises, knocks themselves, had ups and downs in business, which everyone gets, even Alan Sugar’s probably got one [an advisor], they have to know business.”
Lapsed user (London)

“**It would be a lot better if Business Link was kind of sector-related, and so there were experts who were kind of experts in fashion, or manufacturing, or travel, or tourism, or education and then they’re weighted according to how many businesses there are.**”
Non-user (London)

**The introduction of account managers would encourage a continuous service.**

Businesses from the current and lapsed user groups also spoke of a lack of continuity and enterprise on the part of advisors, arising from sporadic contact and limited follow-up with businesses. With this in mind, there was a call for account managers to be introduced, thus encouraging accountability, continuity and an element of hand-holding:

“There’s a very clear cry...to have an Account Manager to come and talk to you. It would be nice to have people from industry, people from the actual industry, if they could spare some of their time to come in and mentor because they understand the ups and downs of business.”
Lapsed user (London)

Similarly, businesses saw the need for continuity in the way Business Link is structured and branded so as to allow for the new delivery model to bed down. They highlighted the importance of the service remaining stable for longer if awareness of it is to develop:

“I think the important thing is that the goalposts seem to always be changing, so if it’s another radical change is there going to be another radical change in 2 years time, you know, is there more a long-term view that this is now going to happen for the next 5-10 years.”
Lapsed user (London)

**Business Link needs to advertise the brand more prominently.**

Perhaps owing in part to changes in the operational model in recent years there was a notable lack of awareness of Business Link’s services. This was particularly true amongst businesses from all target user groups, a number of which suggested advertising the brand more prominently:
“One thing I will say is you watch the TV every day and you get a lot of adverts coming through. You hardly see any advert coming through about if you need to start your own business.”

User (Birmingham)

“Telling people what they can do for you, what information you can get. Promoting it really. And say it’s free.”

Non-user (Manchester)

Focus group participants from the current and lapsed target user groups suggested that Business Link should be clearer in communicating how it can help businesses. In other words, it should be more transparent in advertising what services it does and does not offer, thus improving the way it manages businesses’ expectations. One explained how the supplier he was brokered to charged a rate that was beyond the company’s means, whilst another believed it would be beneficial to name business advisors differently:

“The person they send to see you is not a business advisor; it should be a person they send as a link to the rest of the services. If you call somebody a business advisor you expect to meet them and you expect them to have insight into running a business. If they’re a couple of years out of University and have never run a business they can’t really be called a business advisor, [so it should be] an alternative kind of expectation for the customer.”

Lapsed user (London)

The website: impractical login facility, opportunities for peer-to-peer quality assurance.

Broadly speaking, Business Link’s website was well received by all target groups. One area of this service that received criticism from two businesses was the impractical log-in facility on the website, where it was compulsory for users to register and then submit a lengthy business identification number as part of the process. This was seen as a feature that could be easily improved.

There should be more transparency around the impartiality of the brokerage service, and assurance that businesses are being sign-posted to support providers that best meet their needs.

Some businesses were wary of the integrity of the brokerage element of the IDB model, believing there was a risk of advisors signposting businesses to suppliers who they are friendly with, or to suppliers that have not been vetted appropriately. This gave rise to the suggestion by some lapsed and non-users that eBay-style ratings of approved suppliers would be a useful form of quality assurance.

“I think the weakness for me here is the brokerage, because what you have is independent companies who have been vetted by Business Link but for me I feel not monitored by Business Link, if that makes sense. They should be online. They should have all the suppliers that are registered [and] ratings based on businesses that have approached them that says 90% of people that went to this particular supplier or brokerage found it useful and then you make the decision, not Business Link.”

User (Birmingham)

In addition, an online forum on the Business Link site, encouraging peer-to-peer sharing of ideas and advice, was seen to lend an element of transparency to the offering.

“It would be nice if we could have a forum, so you could raise a thread, start a thread. Say, I’m looking for help on ‘X’ and then other people can add, oh I knew so and so, you know perhaps you should talk to them.”

Lapsed user (Birmingham)
Case studies would help advertise Business Link’s services and encourage non-users.

In keeping with this theme, all three target user groups felt they would benefit from quantifiable or exemplary case studies of how businesses can benefit from Business Link. These could serve as an encouragement for lapsed or non-users to take up the service:

“If they could prove to everybody that this was going to work and it’s going to work for you, then I would definitely think great, I’ll use that.”
Non-user (Manchester)

“I would like to see 50 testimonials, I would like to see 50 caseloads of businesses that have been through the diagnostic and how they benefited from it.”
Lapsed user (Manchester)

9.3.2 Suggestions made by wider stakeholders

Business Link should restore and forge relationships with local commercial providers.

The most significant finding that emerged from interviews with wider stakeholders was a need for Business Link to re-establish and to forge relationships with local commercial partners, and to avoid competing with support providers in the private sector. Four interviewees gave similar answers to this effect.

“Business Links should be engaging more closely and more strategically with commercial, well established… providers of services. It seems to me crazy that the public sector should fund, or try and fund a lot of initiatives or a lot of services that are already there and exist.”
Wider stakeholder (National representative body)

Business Link would benefit from increased and improved marketing.

As was the case with the other three stakeholder groups, there was notable consensus over the need to market the Business Link brand more effectively. One interviewee believed it was simply a case of increasing the volume of marketing “because I think its marketing has been, well, poor to non-existent lately”, whilst there was also a call to promote a brand that businesses have an affinity towards:

“You have to build a brand that people want to work with, that people feel is, you know, has the right vibrations and resonances for them…”
Wider stakeholder (National representative body)

Business Link should better understand the needs of businesses.

In keeping with this idea, it was suggested by a number of interviewees that Business Link should be more attuned to the needs of businesses.

“I think it should identify where business want help. Not what they think business wants help.”
Wider stakeholder (Industry association)

One wider stakeholder from a national representative body believed it should be “a demand-led system”, whilst another interviewee felt Business Link should resolve what size and type of business it should be targeting.
Business Link should introduce case studies, improve the quality of advisors and allow for the current model to become established.

Other suggestions for improvement that received fewer mentions included the need for case studies, which was perceived as a useful and accessible way of illustrating how Business Link works; a call for quality advisors, as well as a recommendation to let the current system establish itself so as to build trust with customers:

“I think the big problem is constant change is not good for anyone. There is no continuity with staff and it’s about building up relationships.”
Wider stakeholder (Industry association)

Also at an operational level, it was suggested that the service could be improved through regional synergy and sharing of best practice.

“They need far better co-operation across regions rather than duplication and competition. Need to share best practice in a way that a business would.”
Wider stakeholder (Chamber of Commerce)

9.3.3 Suggestions made by contract-holders

Contract-holders suggested improving a number of operational processes.

Interviews with contract-holders gave rise to a number of suggestions concerning the operational processes within Business Link. One interviewee believed the service should be measured more extensively so as to deliver a more effective service, in particular evaluating the following elements:

“The amount of brokerage being recorded on the back of intensive assists….the number of referrals that occur from the number of enquiries that happen at Business Link….the retention levels of customers.”
Business Link contract-holder

This would ensure that Business Link would be better informed to “focus on meaningful relationships with customers, and the right customers”.

Three contract-holders also believed Business Link could do more to promote a coherent and uniform approach, but also a service that is streamlined:

“Better joined-upness across the agencies around planning of support services to avoid overlap.”
Business Link contract-holder

Awareness of Business Link within the business community could be raised.

There was also significant agreement from this stakeholder group that Business Link and its services suffer from a lack of awareness, calling for increased marketing of the brand.

“…Raising awareness of what Business Link is all about. It’s something worth shouting about.”
Business Link contract-holder

By doing this it would, as another interviewee stated, “define process and expectations more clearly and consistently”.

FreshMinds Research
The quality of advisors could be improved.

A recommendation that arose in all stakeholder groups was to improve the quality of advisors. One contract-holder believed this could be achieved through a combination of resourcing, continued assessment and a selective employment strategy:

“Investment in the quality of business advisors. Assessment of their competencies. Being prepared to lose advisors that don’t match up. Significant development of CPD.”
Business Link contract-holder

The current model needs time to bed down, and best practice should be developed and shared.

Two further suggestions for improvement emerged from interviews with contract-holders, namely that the model “needs stability” and that it would be unwise to “tinker” with it, but also that Business Link would benefit from a culture of sharing best practice:

“Should feel comfortable sharing the successes, and to feel proud of and brag about. [There’s] nothing more flattering than to have someone copy what you’ve done.”
Business Link contract-holder

9.3.4 Suggestions made by contract-managers

More resources are necessary for improvements to be carried out.

RDA contract-managers’ primary concern was to secure a greater level of resources from Government so as to successfully develop the Business Link service. One interviewee believed it would be unsustainable to continue expanding Business Link’s scope with the current level of funding:

“Resource it appropriately. We are meant to deliver more but the funding has stayed the same.”
RDA contract-manager

Two contract-managers also felt there should be more money channelled into marketing campaigns.

“I'd like to have more resource available for marketing…regionally but nationally is not my preference.”
RDA contract-manager

Marketing is a useful tool to shape businesses’ perceptions of Business Link.

Marketing was also seen as an effective way to shape businesses’ perceptions of the service. One interviewee worried that Business Link’s image would suffer by being associated with other public services such as HMRC once the single access channel is in place and believed marketing would be the best way to promote honesty and impartiality.

“He doesn’t want his business to think that he’s connected to the HMRC. Impartiality and honesty and independence can’t be tied to regulation. It’s more about perceptions rather than reality.”
RDA contract-manager
The website could better reflect regional and topical information.

The Business Link website was brought up by two contract-managers, who felt it should better represent regional differences but should also be more reactive and up-to-date in the information it provides:

“The scope to prioritise and theme it regionally is limited.”
RDA contract-manager

“Could be more immediately reactive readily available info on website.”
RDA contract-manager

It is necessary to strike a balance between intensive assists and light touch activity.

Another key recommendation was that Business Link should do more to evaluate the true value of Business Link’s support - whether the balance between light touch and intensive assists is right, and which ultimately benefits businesses most:

“…also making sure that the measures are right. This isn’t about the number of people that you touch but also making the difference – is it working?”
RDA contract-manager

There should be better coordination between RDAs, including sharing best practice, as well as allowing the service to bed down.

Other suggestions for improvement that were raised include the need for better coordination between RDAs and the sharing of best practice, as well as a call to allow the service to bed down.

“Stop meddling with the service. We never have time when we can run with the model.”
RDA contract-manager
10. Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations can be made about how BERR can act to answer the three future-facing questions of the research, namely:

- How might Business Link better deliver Government policy objectives?
- How might we improve the customer experience of Business Link?
- How might we generate greater efficiency in service delivery?

The following recommendations centre around two main areas: communication of the brand to different stakeholder groups including target users, and the operational aspects of the service.

Communications

- **Clarify the offer**

  The way in which Business Link is currently configured has changed and has strengths that many businesses are simply unaware of. It is important that the Business Link offer is made as clear as possible to businesses. Businesses need to know what the service involves, to whom it is offered and how this offer is delivered. Currently there is widespread confusion about what Business Link exists to do, so making it clearer will make it easier for businesses to understand it and raise awareness of it. Perceptions are often based on previous iterations of the service, so are out of date.

- **Develop relationship managers**

  Managing the relationship between Business Link and wider stakeholders in their region more effectively would serve to clarify the role of Business Link not only for the wider stakeholders but for their members as well. Increasing the regularity of communication with wider stakeholders and quantity of information available to them would take a positive step towards getting the buy-in of a stakeholder group that is currently the source of some of the hostile perceptions of the Business Link service.

  In addition to this, establishing a regular point of contact between wider stakeholder organisations and Business Link, for example in a quarterly forum, would establish better links, and build a more positive relationship between users of the service and its suppliers.

- **Communicate the offer**

  Even when businesses have used the service recently, there is no guarantee that they will be aware of the IDB model. Businesses were receptive to the IDB model once they had had it explained to them, so as a potential strength of the service, more effort should be made to get the message of what is on offer across to as wide an audience as possible.

  There are a number of potential solutions to raising the prominence of the brand within the marketplace for business support and thus raising awareness of the Business Link brand, as follows:

  - **Advertising campaign** - a targeted advertising campaign would benefit the brand by raising awareness of it.
- **Alignment under the Transformational Government (T-Gov) programme** – the alignment of the brand with the Transformational Government Agenda as all Government business-facing web-content is converged into a single brand identity may have a knock-on effect on Business Link that raises its profile. If, as planned, the businesslink.gov.uk web portal is used for this purpose, this will serve to raise the profile of the brand dramatically almost by default.

- **Sign-posting** - improved sign-posting of the different elements of the Business Link service will also help businesses to understand when they might need or make use of Business Link and help them to make more informed business decisions.

- **Case studies** - case studies were mentioned by many businesses and wider stakeholders as something that could bolster the service. Developing case studies of businesses that have enjoyed positive experiences of Business Link would allow potential users to see how the service could be of benefit to them before they approached it.
Communicating the offer: a look at potential messages to businesses

A key action point for Business Link is the improvement of the way it communicates its brand and offerings. The following are suggestions as to the messages Business Link should be communicating to its customers, based on the findings in this report.

**Explain each aspect of the Business Link offering, and state what businesses might benefit from each.**

Only a minority of businesses were aware of the full range of services – information, diagnosis, and brokerage - that Business Link provides today. For this reason, Business Link should make it a priority to promote all aspects of the service offering, highlighting where businesses can get to access each element, and how each element supports businesses. In addition, Business Link is positioned in principle to support businesses of all sizes and specialism. The service could benefit from communication around what elements of the service better suit businesses of particular sizes or stages of development.

Case studies could also be employed to illustrate when a business might need to use the service, and the extent to which they might benefit from it. It is also important to state that there is no obligation to pursue the service once a supplier has been identified, since businesses were often unclear about the relationship between Business Link and preferred suppliers.

**Communicate the benefits of the brand.**

Given the lack of awareness as to what Business Link does, there is a need to inform businesses about what they would expect from the service. More businesses would be encouraged to use Business Link if they were aware that it is free. There were also concerns that advisors might have ulterior motives or a sales drive when it came to brokering businesses to suppliers. A key message therefore would be to highlight Business Link’s impartiality in providing unbiased information and employing unprejudiced advisors, but it would also be important to emphasise the transparency of the brokerage service and the assessment criteria in choosing suppliers.

Some focus group participants voiced concerns that Business Link’s service would be compromised if it were to lose its local presence as a result of the Transformational Government Agenda. However, as the model stands today, it is worth promoting not only Business Link’s regional presence but also the accessibility of having local face-to-face contact.

**Clarify what is beyond Business Link’s remit.**

One of the sources of confusion amongst businesses is the varied history of the Business Link model. Their perceptions may well be based on previous iterations of the service, which might drive unrealistic expectations of what the service can provide. Indeed, a number of focus group participants believed that Business Link itself provides support solutions: a legacy of the pre-IDB model. Therefore, an integral part of a marketing campaign would be to emphasise that Business Link does not provide support solutions.

Similarly, there was a common misperception amongst businesses that Business Link is a provider of grants and loans. Consequently, many focus group participants were disappointed with their experience because their expectations had not been met. Business Link should make it clearer to businesses that it is not a direct provider of financial support.
Operations

- **Improve quality of advisors**

One of the elements of the Business Link service that was frequently raised by all research target groups was that inconsistency of service-delivery was a significant factor in fostering negative opinions of the service. Businesses expect continuity of personnel and dislike it when they return to a service and are not guaranteed the same level of service from one advisor to another. Ensuring that all business advisors are trained in a common skill set and establishing a benchmark standard that all advisors have to meet, which in itself could then be publicised, would increase public confidence in the brand and, in turn help raise its profile as peer reviews improved.

- **Improve client relationship management**

A second element of the service that was raised by all the stakeholder groups was customer relationship management. It is of high importance for businesses where business support is concerned, and is something that Business Link has not been doing consistently. So, improving the ways in which relationships with customers are maintained has not been achieved. By ensuring that they are contacted regularly and that they themselves have a regular point of contact within their regional Business Link, both businesses’ experiences of, and attitudes towards, Business Link would be improved. This will ensure a sense of continuity of service, identified by businesses as valuable in the delivery of business support.

- **Develop co-ordination between regions**

Although several issues were raised by the concept of sharing knowledge and best practice between contract-holders in a competitive environment, if it were possible for best practice to be shared along the length of the Business Link delivery chain, then the service would be sure to benefit.

One option might be to examine the specification of the RDA Business Link contracts to see whether it would be possible to ‘hard-code’ the sharing of best-practice into the system. If the potential stumbling blocks of stakeholder reluctance could be overcome, then standards would be improved across the board, stimulating the development of more innovative solutions in that same competitive environment.

URN 09/554