



Department  
for Business  
Innovation & Skills

**ASSESSMENT OF THE BUSINESS  
LINK HELPLINE**

Report by ECORYS for the  
Department of Business,  
Innovation and Skills

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# Contents

<b>Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>5</b>
1. Study Aims and Context .....	5
2. Main Findings .....	5
<b>1.0 Introduction.....</b>	<b>9</b>
1.1 Study Aims and Context .....	9
1.2 Scope of the Assessment and Research Questions .....	10
1.3 Study Methodology .....	12
1.4 Structure of Report .....	12
<b>2.0 Background to the Helpline.....</b>	<b>14</b>
2.1 Introduction.....	14
2.2 Strategic and Policy Drivers .....	14
2.3 Rationale .....	15
2.4 Aims and Objectives of the Helpline.....	16
2.5 Operational Objectives and KPIs.....	19
2.6 Role of the Helpline in the Universal Service Offer .....	20
2.7 Helpline Delivery Approach .....	20
2.8 Continuous Improvement and Sharing Information with Website Team .....	24
2.9 Summary of the Client Journey .....	25
<b>3.0 Early Delivery of the Business Link Helpline .....</b>	<b>28</b>
3.1 Introduction.....	28
3.2 Overall Demand for the Helpline .....	28

3.3 Trends in Number of Inbound Calls.....	30
3.4 Callers to the Business Link Helpline .....	31
3.5 Categories of Calls.....	32
3.6 Avoidable Calls.....	33
3.7 How Callers found out about the Helpline .....	35
3.8 Comparison with the Business Population .....	35
3.9 Unit Cost Comparisons .....	37
3.10 Summary .....	38
<b>4.0 Delivering a Service that is Valued by Customers.....</b>	<b>40</b>
4.1 Introduction.....	40
4.2 Reasons for Calling the Helpline .....	40
4.3 Responding to Customer Needs .....	43
4.4 Supporting Callers with No Internet Access .....	50
4.5 Customer Satisfaction .....	51
4.6 Summary of Key Findings .....	55
<b>5.0 Supporting the Digital Transition .....</b>	<b>57</b>
5.1 Introduction.....	57
5.2 Awareness and Use of businesslink.gov.uk .....	58
5.3 Helping Customers Find Information on the Website.....	61
5.4 Encouraging More Effective Use of the Website.....	63
5.5 Encouraging Continuous Improvement in businesslink.gov.uk .....	68
5.6 Impact on Call Volumes and Repeat Calls.....	69
5.7 Summary of Findings .....	69

<b>6.0 Economic Impacts and Time Savings .....</b>	<b>71</b>
6.1 Introduction.....	71
6.2 Intermediate Benefits to Businesses .....	71
6.3 Availability of Alternative Sources of Information .....	73
6.4 Cost Savings .....	74
6.5 Economic Impacts: Pre-Starts.....	74
6.6 Economic Impacts: Existing Businesses .....	77
6.7 Displacement.....	80
6.8 Net impacts on GVA per annum.....	82
6.9 Present Value GVA Impacts Sensitivity analysis: impacts endure for three years.....	83
6.10 Sensitivity Test .....	83
6.11 Time Saved .....	84
6.12 Value for money .....	85
6.13 Summary of Findings .....	87
<b>7.0 Conclusions and Recommendations .....</b>	<b>89</b>
7.1 Demand and Capacity of the Service .....	89
7.2 Helping Businesses to Make Effective Use of Business Support and Delivering a service that is valued by customers .....	91
7.3 Supporting the Digital Transition .....	91
7.4 Time Savings and Economic Benefits.....	92

# Executive Summary

## 1. Study Aims and Context

The Business Link helpline is a critical element of the Government's new landscape of business support provision. Its role is to provide signposting, basic diagnostic support and advice on business improvement over the phone to pre start, start ups and existing businesses wishing to improve their operations. The Helpline is designed to provide business improvement information and guidance in England to up to 400,000 SMEs per year and potential start-ups. It was planned that the the Business Link Helpline would receive £8.3m of BIS funding between 2011/12 and 2014/15, with provision in the contract to reduce capacity and costs in line with any achieved reductions in demand.

The core service offer is telephone contact service which supports customers to use the information on [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk). It is aimed at those who have not been able to find the information they need on the website, those needing advice and who do not have access to the internet, or those who run into difficulties using the tools and transactions on the website. These are dealt with by agents assisted by a database of information referred to as the 'Knowledge Bank'. A specialist business advice service also forms part of the Helpline service offer. This is a targeted service which provides pre-starts and established businesses meeting specific criteria (triggers) with a referral to a small team of qualified business support advisers (BSAs) providing more in-depth advice.

The primary objective of this study is to provide BIS with an early understanding of whether the Business Link helpline is performing an effective role against its strategic objective of 'digital transformation' whereby more businesses are assisted through the online business support offer rather than provision with much higher marginal cost (for example face-to-face contact). In addition, the research has assessed the value of the service being provided to callers and how far actual demand has matched expectations. The findings are being used to help inform plans for continual improvement of the service. The review is based on interviews with Helpline staff, analysis of monitoring data, call case studies and a customer survey which consisted of 657 telephone interviews were completed with customers of the Helpline.

## 2. Main Findings

### Demand and Capacity

The service was procured on the basis of estimated call volumes, drawing on data relating to the former Regional Business Link contact centres. It is worth noting that some of these services carried out targeted outbound calls to stimulate demand for business support and use of the telephone and face-to-face services. Given that the current Helpline is focused on meeting unprompted demand for support it was difficult to project call volumes. Further sources of uncertainty in terms of demand for the service lie in the significant changes to the public sector's business support infrastructure including the development of the website and ending of the support for face to face start-up support as well as the continuing economic uncertainty resulting from the financial crisis. To mitigate the risk associated with demand, provision was made in the contract for reductions to staffing volumes (up to

20 percent per month) to allow BIS to bring capacity into line with actual demand. In practice, demand has been lower than planning estimates:

- On average there have been 1,516 calls to the Helpline per week, which is nearly 20 percent of the planned volume of 7,690 per week. The peak weekly call volume of 1,775 calls occurred in week commencing 23rd January.
- On average there were 43 outbound calls made by BSAs per week following referral against a set of criteria relating to need and potential benefits of business advice during the period of the study. Currently, the BSA call volumes are 144 per week following some adjustments to the triggers for referral to BSA, which are discussed below.

In two-thirds of cases customers called the Helpline because they could not find information on the website. The main reasons for pre-starts and businesses contacting the Helpline were obtaining finance and funding and start up advice, with smaller proportions seeking legal advice and start-up finance. There is some overlap in the categories used to monitor reasons for calling which could usefully be refined and arguably it would be sensible to align these with categories of information in the My New Business and Growth and Improvement Service, which could permit more systematic analysis of how improvements to the website may lead to reduced demand for support from the Helpline.

Given the importance of Jobcentre Plus as a source of information about the Helpline for customers responding to the survey, we suggested that marketing campaigns are extended to Jobcentre Plus. In planning marketing campaigns and assessing take-up amongst individuals without access to the internet or broadband connections it would be helpful to distinguish clearly between individuals/potential entrepreneurs and pre-starts (in the process of establishing a business) and established businesses. Since the research was conducted the Department has taken further steps to promote the service to the Jobcentre Plus offices.

## **Delivering a Service that is valued by Customers**

The Helpline is successfully helping businesses to navigate the new business support landscape. The responses to the customer survey indicate that as a result of calling the Helpline, 22 percent of all callers plan to take up support provided by Government agencies while 15 percent plan to take up support provided by the private sector.

The Helpline seems to be effectively supporting established businesses with slower internet access who would find it difficult to use the [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) site. Businesses without broadband internet access are currently overrepresented amongst customers compared to the business population. Our survey indicates that a very low proportion of callers do not have access to the internet at all (1.3 percent). Take up of the service by pre-starts with no internet access is lower than expected although there is no corresponding data on access to the internet amongst pre-starts to permit a measure of usage to be developed.

The assessment found that in general the referral process for access to in-depth advice provided by the BSA is working well and that callers passed to BSAs generally have potential to benefit from

more in-depth support. The BSAs adopt an appropriate approach in dealing with customers that have complex queries.

A policy decision has been taken to maintain the capacity of the BSA service at current levels and to stimulate demand, through marketing and in particular by adjusting the criteria for referral to BSAs so that they are less restrictive. This is being achieved by relaxing some triggers and by replacing the framework of single and double triggers by a more straightforward approach focused on four automatic triggers (for businesses in financial trouble, businesses with potential for growth, businesses with a specific query that is not addressed by the website or Knowledge Bank and businesses in a priority area).

The evidence confirms that some of the triggers for referrals are clearly appropriate in reflecting major challenges faced by callers, for example the financial difficulties trigger. However some triggers are open to different interpretations and therefore require clearer and more objective criteria: 'major change' is perceived as too broad. There may be a need for a clearer rationale around why being in a priority area should require the type of in-depth support provided by BSAs.

These automatic triggers directly relate to the rationale for the BSA service. A further four triggers have been classified as discretionary triggers, 'relating to access to finance', 'businesses facing a challenge', 'taking on new staff' and 'need for additional guidance'. Arguably, a more open definition of 'businesses with potential for growth' trigger should be sufficient to capture all possible qualifying referrals under the discretionary triggers so further simplification may be possible.

Customer satisfaction is relatively high with 69 percent of callers reporting that they were either very or fairly satisfied with the support they received. Whilst satisfaction ratings for the former Business Link services were higher at 89 percent, the rating at this stage is reasonable given the more limited availability of telephone advice and the more highly targeted provision of face-to-face support. The survey revealed that satisfaction is lower amongst former Business Link users and it will take time for expectations amongst businesses to adjust. Around 60 percent of callers reported they had saved time as a result of calling the Helpline, suggesting one of the key benefits of the service is making information available in a straightforward format.

It is worth highlighting that the positive satisfaction rating relates to a situation in which 40 percent of callers contact the service for advice (rather than information or for help with using [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk)). This reveals that the Helpline is currently handling a large proportion of calls through referral to third parties or by answering queries directly, typically by using information contained in the Knowledge Bank. Whilst this is clearly meeting objectives related to meeting the needs of customers and customer satisfaction there is a potential conflict with aims to transition customers to the website in the medium term.

## Supporting the Digital Transition

Overall, almost half of callers responding to the survey were provided with information on [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk) in response to their call. This confirms that the Helpline is assisting a large number of callers to find information they are looking for on [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk). The customer survey indicated that the Helpline is influencing callers to make more effective use of the website (particularly those that have searched the website prior to calling): 37 percent of all callers will

definitely use [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk) as first port of call for information and just under a third probably will, therefore 70 percent are more likely to use the website as the first port of call in the future.

The survey has revealed that significant numbers of customers with internet access remain reluctant to use web-based provision and continue to prefer one to one support to obtain the information they need. This highlights a particular challenge of encouraging such callers to use the website in the future or to trust the on-line information. A significant proportion of callers (over 50 percent) were not given more general advice on the website tools available. There is capacity within the service for call agents to spend more time on promoting the website and providing more detailed advice on the benefits of using particular modules. We understand that in the longer term this could potentially be addressed by the wider activity of the Department's Business Improvement Programme, for example through the mentoring service.

Currently, the Helpline is collating information on potential areas for improvement to the website to support although this information is not being acted upon as [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk) is currently not being actively developed by HMRC. This is likely to work against objectives to promote a transition of customers to the website.



# 1.0 Introduction

Ecorys was commissioned in December 2011 to undertake the Assessment of the Business Link Helpline on behalf of the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS). This is the final report of the study.

## 1.1 Study Aims and Context

The Business Link helpline is a critical element of the Government's new landscape of business support provision which includes:

- A programme of enhancements to the Business Link website ([businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk)) so that it becomes the “universal” basic support service for established businesses and individuals who would like to start a new business
- A start up service – 'My New Business' a module on [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) to act as a one stop shop for those wanting to start up a business.
- A Growth and Improvement Service, also delivered via [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk)
- The Business Coaching for Growth service catering for businesses with very high growth potential by providing coaches to work with senior management teams to implement their growth strategies.
- A national mentoring network, Mentorsme, which brings together existing networks of mentors in the voluntary and private sectors and the Get Mentoring campaign which helps train experienced business people to mentor other businesses.

The role of the Helpline is to provide signposting, basic diagnostic support and advice on business improvement over the phone to pre start, start up and existing businesses wishing to improve their operations. The core service offer is telephone contact service which supports customers to use the information on [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk). It is aimed at those who have not been able to find the information they need on [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk), those needing advice and who do not have access to the internet, or those who run into difficulties using the tools and transactions on the website. These are dealt with by agents assisted by a 'knowledge bank'. There is a related email service which deals with queries submitted via [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk). A further rationale for the service was to provide a means of dealing with business enquiries that may be generated by an unforeseen event.

A specialist business advice service also forms part of the Helpline service offer. This is a targeted service which provides pre-starts and established businesses meeting specific criteria (triggers) with a referral to a small team of business support advisers (BSAs). BSAs are qualified business advisors who can provide customers with more in-depth advice to individuals seeking to start a business and established businesses. The triggers have been designed to target this more expensive support based on an assessment of need and potential benefits of support on a case by case basis. The BSA

service is also currently used as a back up when call agents are unable to diagnose a caller's requirement or find the information they are looking for on the website.

The Helpline is designed to provide business improvement information and guidance to up to 400,000 SMEs per year and potential start-ups in England. The Business Link helpline will receive up to £8.3m of BIS funding between 2011/12 and 2014/15, with provision in the delivery contract to reduce capacity and costs in line with any achieved reductions in demand. The service is being delivered by a lead contractor providing a team of call agents dealing with inbound calls and a sub-contractor providing a team of specialist business support advisors who make outbound calls to customers referred to them.

The primary objective of this research is to provide BIS with understanding at an early stage of whether the Business Link helpline is performing an effective role against its strategic objective of 'digital transformation' whereby more businesses are assisted through [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) rather than provision with much higher marginal cost (for example face-to-face contact). In addition the research has assessed the value of the service being provided to callers. The findings are being used to help inform plans for continual improvement of the service.

## 1.2 Scope of the Assessment and Research Questions

The study addresses evaluation questions which have been included to examine: assessment of demand; how the service has helped businesses make effective use of support and supported the digital transition; and to provide early evidence of how the service has supported economic benefits.

The research questions are set out below:

1. Assessment of demand:
  - How far does actual demand match plans/expectations?
  - How were callers made aware of the service?
  - How effective is the Helpline's communication to target customers?
  - What are the characteristics of callers and how do these differ from the general business population?
  - What are the detailed reasons for calling?
  - How does the characteristics of callers compare with the business population?
2. Effectiveness of the Helpline Service – helping business make effective use of business support:

- How far is the helpline successfully assisting callers in navigating the new business support landscape and directing them appropriately to the help or other external support outside of Businesslink.gov.uk?
- How far is the Helpline meeting the needs of those who do not have internet access, vulnerable groups or those who are unable to use the website for business support e.g. through visual impairment?
- How far is the Helpline meeting the needs of those who don't have internet access, vulnerable groups or those who are unable to use the website for business support e.g. through visual impairment?
- How far is the service helping to maintain customer satisfaction with the Business Support Offer (i.e satisfaction overall by supporting the transition process)?
- How far is the Helpline providing an appropriate level of support to businesses in crisis or who have immediate, complex needs that need to be met?
- Are the Business Support Advisors (BSAs) being used effectively and appropriately? ie Are they calls that can't be dealt with by core agents, what sort of issues are being passed to BSAs and what do customers think of the service?

### 3. Effectiveness of the Helpline Service - supporting the digital transition

- Had callers visited the businesslink.gov.uk site and if so why didn't they get the information they were looking for?
- Are the Helpline staff successfully enabling businesses to find what they needed or provide the right information on businesslink.gov.uk?
- Is the Helpline helping to achieve channel shift by assisting callers to make more effective use of the website and highlighting the full range of information that is available?
- How far is the Helpline improving the Business Link website by capturing customers' experience identifying issues and feeding information back to the web development team?
- Effectiveness of the Helpline in Supporting Economic Growth
- What are the potential benefits to the businesses (e.g. time or cost saved)?
- Is the service provided by the BSAs likely to have a positive impact on the performance of assisted businesses and or their survival?
- What are the potential impacts from the information that is obtained through the more simple queries?

## 1.3 Study Methodology

The assessment of the Helpline has involved the following research tasks.

- **Review of Service Delivery Model:** The study began with a detailed review of the service delivery model including key documentation supporting the delivery of the programme to understand key Helpline processes in more detail.
- **Interviews with contact centre directors and managers:** In-depth interviews with contact centre directors and managers were completed to explore the scope and purpose of guidance issued by BIS to the contact centres, review delivery processes in more depth and explore any formal processes put in place for exchanging information between teams.
- **Analysis of monitoring information** Monitoring evidence was analysed focusing on demand for the service, reasons for calling, proportion of avoidable calls and a comparison of callers with the business population.
- **Staff interviews:** A sample of call agents - 7 call agents and 3 Business Support Advisors (BSAs) were interviewed to examine in detail how call agents and BSAs respond to customer queries and how well service delivery processes were working in practice.
- **Call case studies:** 9 case studies of call agent responses and 8 case studies of BSA responses were undertaken to provide qualitative insight to the call handling process.
- **Customer Survey:** A telephone survey of customers was completed to provide information on the effectiveness of the Helpline in responding to the needs of customers and supporting the digital transition. 657 telephone interviews were completed. Details of the sampling framework, responses rates and confidence intervals are provided in Annex 2.

## 1.4 Structure of Report

The remainder of this document is structured as follows:

- Section 2 sets the scene for the study by describing the strategic and operational context for the Helpline and detailing the different elements of the delivery approach.
- Section 3 provides an analysis of the delivery of the Helpline focusing in particular on demand for the different elements of the service.
- Section 4 focuses on the extent to which the Helpline is helping to maintain customer satisfaction with business support provision during a period of transition. It examines the effectiveness of the Helpline in assisting callers in navigating the new business support landscape and directing them appropriately to help or other external support outside businesslink.gov.uk. It also explores the role of the Helpline in supporting groups with no internet access.

- Section 5 considers how far the Helpline is helping to support digital transition by encouraging customers to access information and advice on [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk) and promoting the website for future use.
- Section 6 examines the economic impacts of the service focusing in particular on the direct economic outcomes of using the service and the cost and time savings involved.
- Section 7 summarises the evaluation findings and draws out recommendations for future improvement.

The report also includes a number of annexes as follows:

Annex 1: Further information on Helpline delivery approach.

Annex 2: Survey technical information.

## 2.0 Background to the Helpline

### 2.1 Introduction

The Helpline service began in September 2011 and was formally launched in November 2011 to support the transition to [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) as the main channel for the Government's universal business support offer information and advice to entrepreneurs and businesses. This evaluation is being conducted at an early stage in the delivery of the service in order to provide a formative assessment of aspects of the service which to date are working well or less well. This section provides the context for the assessment by describing the strategic and operational framework for the service and detailing the different elements of the delivery approach. In summary it contains:

- The rationale for the Helpline including the policy and strategic context, the need and case for public sector intervention and related trends/drivers;
- A description of the Helpline's aims and objectives;
- A description of the service offer and approach to delivery; and
- A logic model describing the relationship between the activities of the Helpline (and associated financial inputs), and its expected outputs, outcomes and impacts.

### 2.2 Strategic and Policy Drivers

There are a number of strategic drivers supporting the need for a Business Link helpline alongside the Business Improvement Programme which includes the enhanced [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) and the development of a consolidated and streamlined landscape of business support that makes it easier for growth-orientated businesses to find the information and support they need.

The need to support the growth of small businesses – The Government's strategy *Bigger, Better Business* confirms business growth as a key priority and outlines a series of measures to provide businesses with the information and advice they need to help them grow. The strategy is to intervene in the market only where there is clear evidence of market failure. The Business Improvement Programme is designed specifically to address the market failures which have prevented private sector suppliers from addressing the sub-optimal demand for transformational business advice, with the aim of maximising jobs and growth. Market failures tend to be the results of information failures, with many businesses unable to assess: the potential benefits to their business; their most critical support need; and levels of quality and impartiality of providers.

The need for public sector cost savings - The Government's approach to addressing these market failures moves away from the old Business Link model which consisted of a regional network of providers who provided face-face support services, workshops, telephone contact centres and supplementary content to the national [businesslink](http://businesslink.gov.uk) website, to a model which shifts general information and advice to lower cost web-based and telephone services and targets resources for

face to face support at firms with higher growth potential. In March 2010, the cost to BIS of the programmes being close or reformed through the Business Improvement Programme was £234m per annum. The Business Improvement Programme aims to reduce that expenditure to £65m per annum by the end of the current Spending Review period.

Government digital agenda – the Helpline also supports the wider Government agenda of encouraging greater use of on-line information tools. With the proliferation of high speed internet access, it is increasingly possible to replicate face-to-face and event based mechanisms using web based services at a substantially lower marginal cost – and a successful migration of customers to online methods of service provision can deliver substantial efficiency gains.

## 2.3 Rationale

The rationale for the Helpline relates to a broader policy rationale underpinning the Business Improvement Programme which is to intervene when there is evident market failure in the provision of business support services. A core objective of the Business Improvement Programme is to stimulate the market for enterprise support services through addressing market failures associated with information asymmetries that cause under-consumption of enterprise support services, while reducing inefficient crowding out of private sector services. Market failures tend to be the results of information failures, with many businesses unable to assess:

- the potential benefits to their business;
- their most critical support need; and
- levels of quality and impartiality of providers.

For the purposes of this study it is also important to identify the specific rationale for different elements of the Helpline, which help the Government to address the market failures outlined above and support the delivery of an enhanced programme of universal business support. The key elements of the Helpline rationale are identified as follows:

**Channel shift (digital transition):** One of the overall objectives of the Business Improvement Programme is to move users to services with a lower marginal cost (i.e. digital services). However, some users will need support to adjust to the re-structuring of publicly funded mainstream enterprise support services, and telephone based one-to-one support will be needed to help businesses who cannot find the information they need on-line or face difficulties in navigating the website to stimulate use of [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) and maintain levels of customer satisfaction in the short term.

**Providing support to users unable to access the internet:** In addition, close to 20 percent of SMEs do not have broadband internet and 20 per cent of SMEs also do not make use of the internet for a range of business activities. Both may prevent SMEs from accessing the information and advice available through [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk), particularly as awareness of the businesslink is lower amongst both groups. There will also be further accessibility issues: those with visual impairment problems may find it difficult to effectively use on-line services. As such, there is a longer term need to provide

telephone based services to provide information and advice to those unable to use businesslink.gov.uk.

Providing support to users with complex needs: In-depth telephone based support can also support economic growth outcomes by providing assistance to users facing complex issues, in financial crisis, or aiming to grow. A review of the enquiry services provided through the prior RDA network, for example, suggested that users reported attribute a gross increase in profit margins of 4% to these services . Targeted provision of more in-depth support than available through businesslink.gov.uk is needed to support the overall economic growth objectives of the Business Improvement Programme.

Response to emergency: There may be national emergencies requiring the Government to quickly communicate with businesses (such as the foot and mouth outbreak of 2001). Funding for a national Helpline service will offer the Government the opportunity to respond to such risks.

Improved efficiency: The provision of telephone services of operation of nine regional contact centres through RDA network, was costly at £20m per annum and involved inefficient duplication of functions and use of outbound calls to market Business Link services. Telephone services are more cost-effectively provided by a national service with flexible capacity, creating one off savings through economies of scale, and on-going savings through efforts to supporting callers to use businesslink.gov.uk (ultimately resulting in lower call volumes).

## 2.4 Aims and Objectives of the Helpline

As noted, the Helpline has a specific role in supporting the following BIS (Enterprise Directorates) objective :

'Help small and medium sized businesses start and thrive through better business support, improved access to finance and stronger competition with fewer market barriers to entry, creating a more entrepreneurial culture.'

The specific objectives and benefits of the Helpline, as identified in the BIP Monitoring and Evaluation Plan, are set out in the table below:



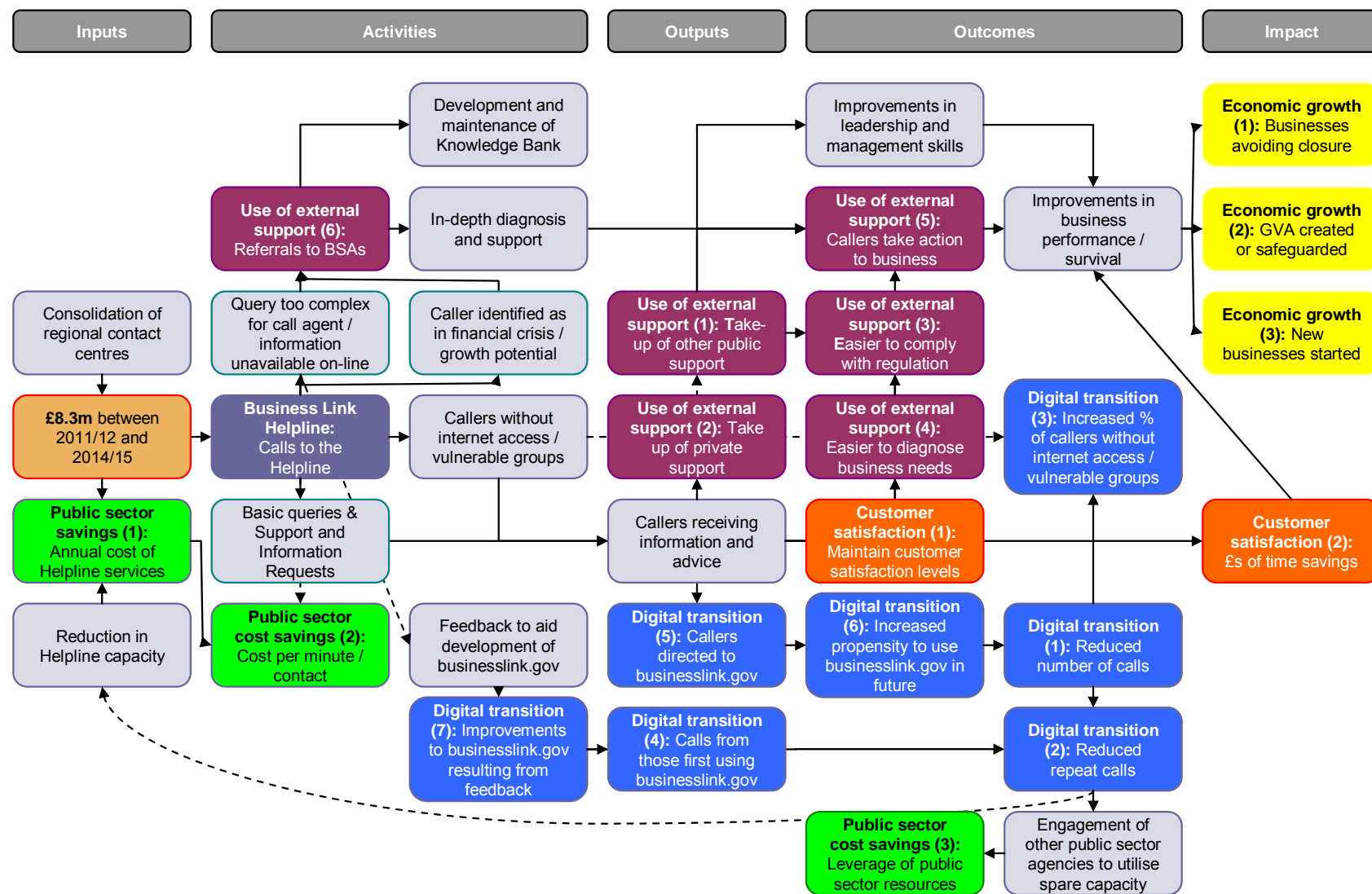
**Table 2.1 Objectives and Benefits: Business Link Helpline**

1 Objective	2 Benefits	3 How benefits will be delivered
<b>Deliver cost savings to the public sector</b>	Reducing the cost of delivering a Helpline service against the cost of the Helpline service run by the RDA	Economies of scale resulting from consolidation of nine regional contact centres and ending outbound calls.
	Deliver further year on year cost savings once operational.	Reductions in capacity released by reductions in overall call volumes, and engagement of other public sector partners to maximise utilisation of Helpline capacity
	Manage the transition to Businesslink.gov.uk as the primary channel for advice by improving the accuracy of web use for those with access to the web ( <b>Digital transition</b> )	Provision of basic telephone based support to callers to navigate and find the information they need on businesslink.gov.uk while providing feedback to support to development of on-line content.
	Improve the effectiveness of Businesslink.gov.uk.	Capturing customers' experiences, identifying issues, and feeding information back to the web development team.
<b>Stimulate the market and increase the effective use of external support by businesses</b>	Help those who are unable to find the information they are looking for on the web or do not have web access.	Help users identify and procure support provided by the public and private sector, and maintain provision of telephone based services so those without access to internet or other vulnerable groups can access businesslink.gov.uk services,
	Increase the effective use of external support by businesses who are experiencing financial crisis or facing other immediate complex needs	Maintain a small team of Business Support Advisors (BSAs) to provide in depth support and advice to businesses with more complicated needs, and help users identify and procure support provided by the public and private sector.
<b>Deliver a service that is valued by customers and stakeholders</b>	Maintain reasonable levels of customer satisfaction during the period of significant change.	Provision of clear, understandable, accurate and impartial information and advice.
	Create time savings for callers in accessing information and support.	Simplifying the process of obtaining information on regulatory compliance
<b>Economic growth</b>	Avoidance of the costs of business closure, that would result from short-term rather than long term viability, and safeguarding of GVA.	In-depth support provided to users in financial crisis through BSAs.
	Support growth in GVA	Encouraging callers to take actions to realise business performance improvements as a result of information and advice received either directly through the Helpline or take up of support provided through third party support.
<b>Meet the needs of protected groups</b>	Increased market awareness and use amongst protected groups	Market awareness and useage amongst protected groups will be monitored

Source; Business Improvement Programme Draft Monitoring and Evaluation Strategy

A logic model describing the relationship between the activities of the Helpline (and associated financial inputs), and its expected outputs, outcomes and impacts is set out in the diagram below.

Figure 2.1 Logic Model: Helpline



Source: Ecorys

## 2.5 Operational Objectives and KPIs

An operational objective of the Helpline is to be capable of:

- Providing information and guidance to around 600,000 business contacts (via 400,000 inbound calls, 150,000 emails, 10,000 outbound calls from an adviser giving in depth support) each year as improvements to the Business Link website are implemented.

As noted, demand for the Helpline is influenced by a range of factors and for this reason the volume of calls or measures of market penetration are not Key Performance Indicators for the service. The Key Performance Indicators for the Helpline are focused on how efficiently the Helpline handle calls and emails and how effectively the service (i) leads to reduced repeat calls (from Year 2) and (ii) manages demand for access to the more expensive business advice. The KPIs are set out in the table below.

**Table 2.2 KPIs**

Area Measured	Specific Measurement
<b>Inbound Calling</b>	BIS guidelines are for inbound calls (basic queries and support and information requests) to be kept to an average of 13 minutes per call (including wrap time)
<b>Repeat Callers</b>	The target for repeat callers generated will be no more than 3% of total calls answered. This target will be reviewed in line with the agreed definition of repeat callers and the method of measurement and will not be applicable until Year 2.
<b>Email Handling</b>	95% of all emails must be responded to within 1 working day of receipt. All emails must receive a full response within 3 working days of receipt.
<b>Outbound Calling</b>	<p>Inbound Core agents must ensure all outbound call appointments for BSAs are prearranged with the enquirer in advance of the meeting. This should be done at the point of their initial enquiry for the next available appointment if they meet the appropriate criteria.</p> <p>If a BSA is available for the following 1 hour at the point of inbound enquiry, the caller could be offered a slot with a BSA immediately although it is likely that the majority of BSA calls will be pre booked, diarised and be outbound.</p> <p>Call-backs should only been carried out by BSAs at a prescribed time where additional data can be collected to evaluate the justification and impact of the call.</p>
<b>Outbound Calling</b>	Business Support Advisors (BSAs) must perform all outbound calling (including any preparatory time and wrap up) within an average of 50 minutes.
<b>Outbound Calling</b>	No more than 10,000 outbound calls to be scheduled and completed per annum (based on key triggers).

Source: Helpline Service Design Document Appendix

## 2.6 Role of the Helpline in the Universal Service Offer

The Helpline is part of a universal business support offer that also includes the developing Business Link website ([businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk)). With funding for face to face services including event-based support ending with the closure of the regional Business Links, [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) will become the primary channel through which the Government will provide information and guidance to SMEs and other businesses. In recognition that there is scope to enhance the [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) website which previously operated alongside the regional Business Links, HMRC and BIS have invested in developing and enhancing the content of the website – including new approaches to disseminating information and guidance (such as via videos), as well as two new services – the Growth and Improvement Service targeted at firms looking to grow or improve their productivity, and My New Business targeted at individuals aiming to start a business. The Helpline's intended role is to support the transition to a new system of universal support by guiding people to relevant information on the website, providing more detailed information and advice which cannot be found on the website and supporting those unable to use the internet.

Demand for the service will be influenced by overall demand for information and advice, specific demand for such support through Government channels and crucially, the extent to which businesses have tried and succeeded in finding the information they were seeking on [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk). Similarly, since the Helpline primarily supports customers by directing them to [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk), questions around how far the service has met needs and customer satisfaction will probably be influenced by views on the content [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) and related to expectations which may be influenced by engagement with former BLO services. These issues can only be partially explored through research with users of the Helpline and will need to be explored through wider evaluation work.

## 2.7 Helpline Delivery Approach

### Call Handling and Routing

Demand for the helpline falls into different segments. Different levels of support are therefore offered by the Helpline depending on the nature of the enquiry. Contacts are divided into calls requiring simple redirections and relatively simple support and information requests, with a much smaller number of more complex enquiries responded to by the experienced Business Support Advisors.

At the time of the evaluation the Helpline contractor employed 77 call agents to handle basic queries and support and information requests from businesses and individuals aiming to start a business. If callers are identified as having internet access, call agents aim to direct them to relevant information on [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) with a view to enabling them to 'self-serve' in the future. If the query requires a more detailed and specific response it may not be possible to have the query answered by the website tools. If information is not available on the website call agents will refer callers to other public telephone services (for example Acas or HMRC) or other 3rd party agencies which are able to provide more detailed and relevant Information.

The Government has identified the need for targeted provision of more in-depth support than available through businesslink.gov.uk to support the overall economic growth objectives of the Business Improvement Programme. If a caller is identified as being in financial crisis, or the caller is identified as having strong growth potential, they are referred to a BSA for more in-depth support with their query (a team of seven BSAs is employed by BENE). Additionally, a referral is made to a BSA in the event that a call agent is unable to provide the information or advice requested on the basis of the information available on the website or the Knowledge Bank. The types of calls that fall into this category are defined by the BSA triggers which are described in detail below.

The contact types that the Helpline is expected to handle are summarised below (drawing on guidelines from the original BIS Service Specification, SLAs and the recently developed Service Design documents):

- **Basic Queries:** To direct customers to the relevant area of the website, or 3rd party organisations that are best able to assist.
- **Support and Information Requests:** To deal with detailed queries, provide diagnostics or referrals.
- **Complex Queries:** To use experience and knowledge of the business support market to analyse issues and identify solutions; to diagnose issues behind the presenting problem and offer more tailored help and support fitted to the business' particular circumstances and market

Detailed guidance on the telephone enquiry handling process along with a detailed description of the types of calls and examples are provided in Annex 1.

## Email Handling

Core agents are also required to respond to email enquiries. It was expected that email queries are likely to come via the businesslink.gov.uk website (and via queries arising from its monthly e-Newsletter) where the email address will be made available to the customer, and could cover questions from users on where to find specific information online as well as more general business support queries. It was anticipated that this could reach up to 150,000 contacts per year requiring on average about 10 minutes for each response. It was anticipated that some customers would prefer to use email for more specific queries. The provision of an email service also enables customers to refer queries to the Helpline when the Helpline is closed (we have been informed that a significant proportion of email queries are sent during the weekend).

## BSA Triggers

The advice provided by BSAs is a targeted service and not a visible or promoted offer as it was considered necessary to manage demand for the more in-depth element of support using a filtering approach. It was expected that the triggers used to refer callers to a BSA would be developed overtime by the contractors using the experience of the BSAs and BIS as time would be needed to test how the triggers work in practice.

The initial set of triggers were designed to reflect the particular challenges faced by businesses that would be most likely to require more in-depth advice from more experienced advisors. It was anticipated that experienced BSAs could add value to the client in addressing the particular challenge.

The triggers, as described in the Service Design Document, are listed below:

- Where more in-depth support is needed for struggling but viable businesses (e.g. regarding cash flow, recovering bad debts etc);
- Where businesses are facing key events/issues (e.g. creating formalised systems; initiating new product lines; taking on new staff and do not have internet access);
- Providing more in-depth support to disadvantaged businesses or to groups in those areas that the government have identified as high priority.

Detailed guidance on the triggers and process for referrals at the time of the evaluation is set out in the table below.

**Table 2.3 – Guidance on BSA Triggers**

Summary	Descriptions	Examples / Key words	Automatic Handoff to BSA
In financial Trouble	You need to check that the problems are severe i.e. the business is at risk and imminent. i.e. it is likely to come to a head within the next 4 weeks or so	They may mention Cash Flow problems, debt, or they need to find loans / funding.	Yes
Query unanswered by knowledge bank / website	The business has asked a question that is within the remit of the service but cannot be answered by the content on either the website, on the knowledge bank, or after speaking to your team leader.	n/a	Yes
Priority area	If the postcode you entered for the business shows that the business is in a priority area such as an Enterprise Zone or area of multiple deprivation.	n/a	Yes
Taking on new staff	Businesses which are facing a challenge by taking on new staff	They may be employing staff for the first time, or significantly expanding taking on a lot of staff.	No – needs 1 other trigger

Summary	Descriptions	Examples / Key words	Automatic Handoff to BSA
Major change to business plan	Businesses which are facing a challenge by changing the way they do business	Selling on-line for first time; Exporting for first time; Making a significant change to business strategy.	No – needs 1 other trigger
Major change to business operations	Businesses who are facing a challenge by changing:	The way they structure their business e.g. introducing new management functions	No – needs 1 other trigger
Obtaining finance for growth	Businesses which are looking for funding/grants/finance to help them expand. These are not businesses in financial trouble.	Funding/grants/finance to help them expand.	No – needs 1 other trigger
Significant growth potential	It is very difficult to identify these businesses, so this trigger will be rarely used. These are businesses who are suggesting they are likely to have a major growth in their turnover / no of employees in the next two years.	A new business expecting to grow to 10+ employees in 3 years or a business expecting average 20% annual growth for 3 years.	No – needs 1 other trigger

Source: Careline

BIS and the Helpline contractors have recently reviewed the initial triggers with the aim of increasing referrals in order to increase the utilisation of BSA advisors. The following changes have been implemented:

- Priority postcode areas - analysis is being carried out of the high proportion of calls from priority areas that are not currently referred to BSAs. Priority areas are defined as Enterprise Zones and areas of multiple disadvantage.
- Single triggers - the last 5 triggers (which currently need one more trigger) will now provide for a discretionary referral to a BSA.
- Definition of major change - in addition to the filter above, the agent will need to be clear that a BSA could add value to the client by making them more likely to overcome the challenge.
- Additional trigger for pre-starts – feedback from the contractors is that there are some occasions on which it is appropriate to refer a call to a BSA despite none of the formal triggers being met. This is where it is felt that the barriers to start-up are such that without further BSA guidance, there is a danger that a business start would be lost, or future business growth not achieved.



## Knowledge Bank and Knowledge Management

The Knowledge Bank operates as an intranet that enables call agents and BSAs to access more specific information than is available on the website, for example on local grant schemes and free services. The Knowledge Bank is maintained by two knowledge managers employed by BENE providing a resource used by both call agents and BSAs to address callers' queries. The knowledge managers develop the Knowledge Bank by identifying and forging partnerships with national and local stakeholders. The Knowledge Bank is updated as information changes or develops and has the capability to be updated very quickly to reflect the changing content, for example changing business legislation or follow-on support. The Knowledge Bank contains the following:

- Government schemes and initiatives including national/local Government, LEP (Local Enterprise Partnerships) and European Regional Development Funded schemes (ERDF) including full description; eligibility; process; applications forms; key contacts;
- Diagnostic tools;
- Key contacts for referral including regional contacts; and
- Key information about the providers of private and public sector schemes such as contact details etc (e.g. Chambers of Commerce; FSB, etc);
- Information on specific local business support services and grants which can be searched by postcode and local authority area.

## 2.8 Continuous Improvement and Sharing Information with Website Team

As the development of the website is still in transition, the Helpline has a role in gathering feedback to support the development of the website. The service specification requires the contractor to develop a feedback loop to the website team to constantly improve the service and information available via [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk). It has been reported to us that a framework for continuous improvement / knowledge management is currently being developed. Monthly review meetings take place to review recommendations about content improvement, service improvement and to identify key trends and topics.

The review meetings to date have identified a number of ways of improving information flows and feedback loops between the Helpline and Serco User Support Team (UST) (Website) teams including:

- BE-UK have given access to the Knowledge Bank to the Serco UST and BE-UK feedback on any updates to the Knowledge Bank and make recommendations regarding website updates.
- Serco UST and Careline are to finalise the process for dealing with multi-part queries –



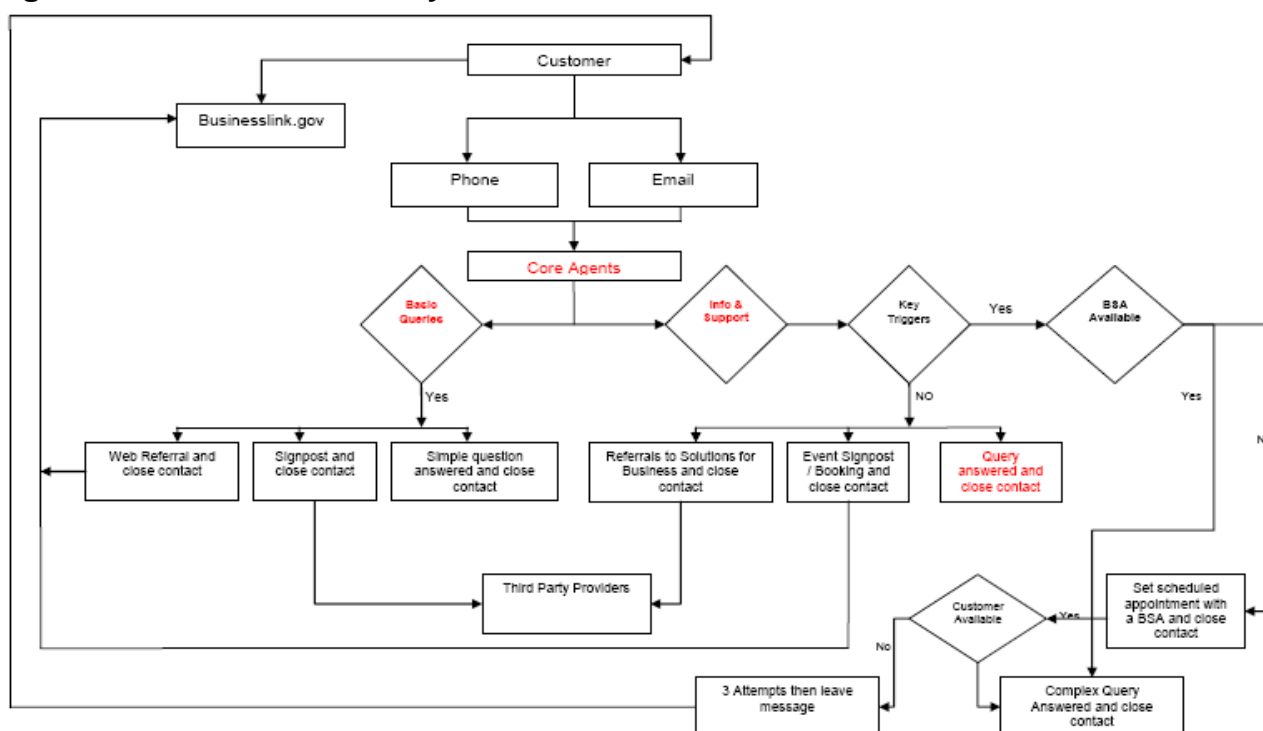
in particular the standard text for responding to technical queries raised alongside content queries.

- Appropriate links to technical guidance in the Serco UST will be shared with Careline.
- Careline will let the group know what their agents' top 5 recommended changes to the site are.

## 2.9 Summary of the Client Journey

A schematic of the customer journey, which provides an overview of the contact handling responsibilities, is set out in the diagram below.

**Figure 2.2 Customer Journey**



Source: Service Design Document

## Training

As set out in the Service Design Document, the objective of the training for Call Agents (as outlined in the training plan) is to ensure that all Careline and BE-UK staff delivering the service attain and maintain competence levels which achieve and exceed common core Business Support National Occupational Standards. Advisors employed to deliver all levels of service undergo an initial skills gap and training needs analysis to ensure that development is timely and appropriate.

Call Agents in the Core Team at Careline have all received 10 days of foundation training covering:

- Introduction to Business link Service;

- Business Link Website Navigation;
  - Start up business knowledge;
  - Business Growth;
  - Established business; and
  - Systems Training.
- **All Business Support Advisors (BSAs) have long-term experience of working for the regional Business Links and have been provided with one day of systems training to gain familiarisation with businesslink.gov.uk.**

## Marketing and Communications

The Helpline's original communications strategy<sup>1</sup> has two key objectives:

- Raise awareness of the extent of business support available online at businesslink.gov.uk.
- Raise awareness of telephone business advice to those not online and navigational help to users of the businesslink.gov.uk website from 25 November when the BL network offices close.

The strategy proposes working in partnership with national level stakeholders to maximise opportunities and engagement with the most relevant and appropriate Business Improvement Programme stakeholders. For deprived communities and/or those encouraging enterprise, the strategy proposes to engage with Enterprise Allowance, The Princes Trust, and ERDF funding groups. The strategy also proposes to target sector specific organisations such as National Hairdressers Federation and Federation of Master Builders to target micro businesses that have some of the lowest levels of internet usage.

The strategy identifies the following actions with the purposes of making use of available 'channels' for communication:

- Make contact with DCLG to identify and use existing channels to rural communities and local authorities.
- Make contact with HMRC, LEPs, BIS local teams to identify and use local channels to SMEs.
- Approach UKTI to see if they can identify any opportunities through their networks or channels.
- Make contact with BIS Partner Orgs to this list such as Companies House and Intellectual Property Office.
- Work with BIS sector teams to target specific sectors (eg. construction, retail transport and distribution) where low usage of the internet for business support has been identified.

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<sup>1</sup> Business Improvement Programme - Communications Strategy for Business Link Helpline (July 2011)26

The Helpline number is advertised on the Business Link website. In the early weeks of the service the Helpline number could only be found on the website after going through a series of steps. This reflected early concern that the Helpline might receive a very high volume of calls and to ensure therefore that avoidable calls were limited. However, given the low call volumes and to respond to some anecdotal feedback that the number was too difficult to find, the Helpline number was recently moved to a more prominent position on the website and can now be accessed from the Help menu on the home page.

We have also been informed that verbal engagements have been undertaken with Chambers and Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses which are regarded as important channels for communicating the website (and Helpline) because of their wide business membership bases.

The Department has recently launched a campaign focusing on providing additional information to those organisations that are known to have most contact with non internet users including Business Advice Centres, Citizens Advice, General Social Welfare Organisations/Charities, Job Centre Plus Offices, local authorities and Council for Voluntary Service. The campaign responds to anecdotal evidence that the Helpline number is not reaching those groups who do not have internet access. Analysis of how far Helpline users do not have internet access is explored in detail in section 4.

The Business in You campaign, which launched in early January, has also been relevant to the Helpline. A desired effect of the campaign was to drive more people to [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) which in turn may mean more people use the Helpline. However, there were no plans to directly mention the Helpline.

## 3.0 Early Delivery of the Business Link Helpline

### 3.1 Introduction

This section focuses on the activity of the Helpline since the launch date in November 2011. The analysis draws mainly on monitoring information collected through the Helpline CRM system. The analysis covers the period between the launch of the Helpline of 25th November 2011 and 17th February 2012. The analysis focuses on the following research questions:

- How far has actual demand for the different elements of the service been matching expectations?
- How callers were made aware of the service?

### 3.2 Overall Demand for the Helpline

As noted in section 2, it was expected that the Helpline may need to provide information and guidance to up to 600,000 business contacts (via 400,000 inbound calls, 150,000 emails and 10,000 outbound calls from an adviser giving in depth support) each year as improvements to the Business Link website are implemented. It is understood that the forecast number of contacts was based on monitoring analysis of the previous Regional Business Link contact centres and assumptions about how these might be affected by various drivers that could increase or decrease web traffic and call volumes. The data indicates that the regional contact centres received circa 500,000 calls per year<sup>2</sup>.

Table 3.1 summarises the progress of the helpline during the assessment period against the SLA's Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and forecasts for Helpline activity which underpin BIS' planning assumptions.

**Table 3.1 Progress Against KPIs and Forecasts**

Area Measured	Specific Measurement	Progress During Evaluation Period
Inbound Calling	Planning assumption is that a maximum of 230,000 calls will fall into this category per year or 7,690 per week	Average of 1,516 inbound calls per week
Inbound Calling	Basic queries and support and information requests must be kept to an average of 13	Average handle time is 593 seconds or 9.8 minutes

<sup>2</sup> Business Link Inbound Call Volume Report (2011)

Area Measured	Specific Measurement	Progress During Evaluation Period
	minutes per call (including wrap time)	
<b>Repeat Callers</b>	The target for repeat callers generated will be no more than 3% of total calls answered.	This target will be reviewed in line with the agreed definition of repeat callers and the method of measurement and will not be applicable until Year 2.
<b>Email Handling</b>	Planning assumption is that a maximum of 150,000 emails will be received per year or 2,880 per week.	Average of 95 emails received per week.

Source: Helpline Service Design Document Appendix

The progress of the Helpline as measured against the KPIs and planning forecasts relating to demand for the service can be summarised as follows:

- Since the Helpline launch date of 25th November 2011 and to 13/02/2012 there have been 15,200 calls to the Helpline<sup>3</sup>. On average there have been 1,516 calls to the Helpline per week, which is nearly 20 percent of the planned capacity of 7,690 per week. The peak weekly call volume of 1,775 calls occurred in week commencing 23<sup>rd</sup> January which, even taking into account the Christmas period, is still some way short of the weekly call volume planning assumption.
- All calls have been answered within 10 seconds and the average handle time of the calls is 593 seconds or 9.8 minutes which is well within the expected average of 13 minutes.
- The planning assumption is that a maximum of 150,000 emails will be received per year or 2,880 per week. The monitoring data indicates that the Helpline has received 1,150 emails since the launch or only around 95 emails per week which is 3 percent of the planned volume.
- There were 43 BSA appointments per week against a forecast of 190 during the period of our field work but we note that since then this had climbed to an average of 144 during March. This steep increase appears to relate to the relaxing of BSA referral triggers which are discussed in detail in section 4.
- The average duration of BSA outbound calls is 35 minutes excluding wrap up time which is well within the target of 50 minutes.

At the time of this analysis 9,572 calls had been recorded on the CRM as customer enquiries, which is significantly below the total number of calls. Calls may not be recorded on the CRM for a number of reasons, for example, queries may not be relevant to Business Link or callers may not want to share their details. The analysis below on

<sup>3</sup> From weeks commencing 28/11/2011 to 13/02/2012

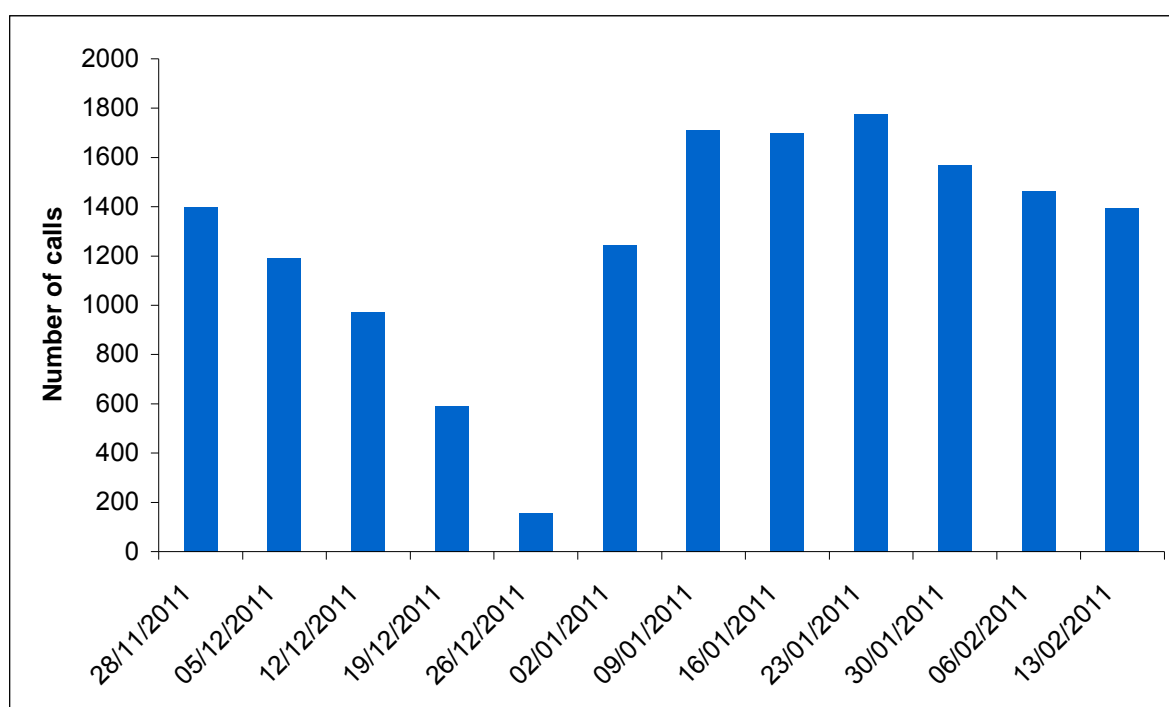
categories of callers refers to the CRM data which provides more detailed information on call outcomes.

### 3.3 Trends in Number of Inbound Calls

The graph below shows the number of calls by week. There was fairly low demand for the Helpline service in December; however the number of calls returned to pre December levels in January, and reached a peak of 1,775 during week commencing 23<sup>rd</sup> January when the Business in You campaign was launched. Over the next three weeks the number of calls fell reaching 1,523 in week commencing 13<sup>th</sup> February (as shown in the graph below) which was a school holiday. Since this time and beyond the period covered by the assessment the number of calls has recovered and seems to be consistent at approximately 1,500 each week.

The expectation was that call volumes would rise in the first months of the service in line with increasing awareness of the Helpline. Helpline publicity appears to have been assisted by the Business in You campaign which launched in early January. A desired effect of the campaign was to drive more people to [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk). Calls data indicates that the campaign has had a sustained impact in driving up the number of calls to the Helpline as customers tend to access the Helpline number through the website. How callers found out about the Helpline is examined in more detail in section 4.

**Figure 3.1 Number of Inbound Calls per Week**

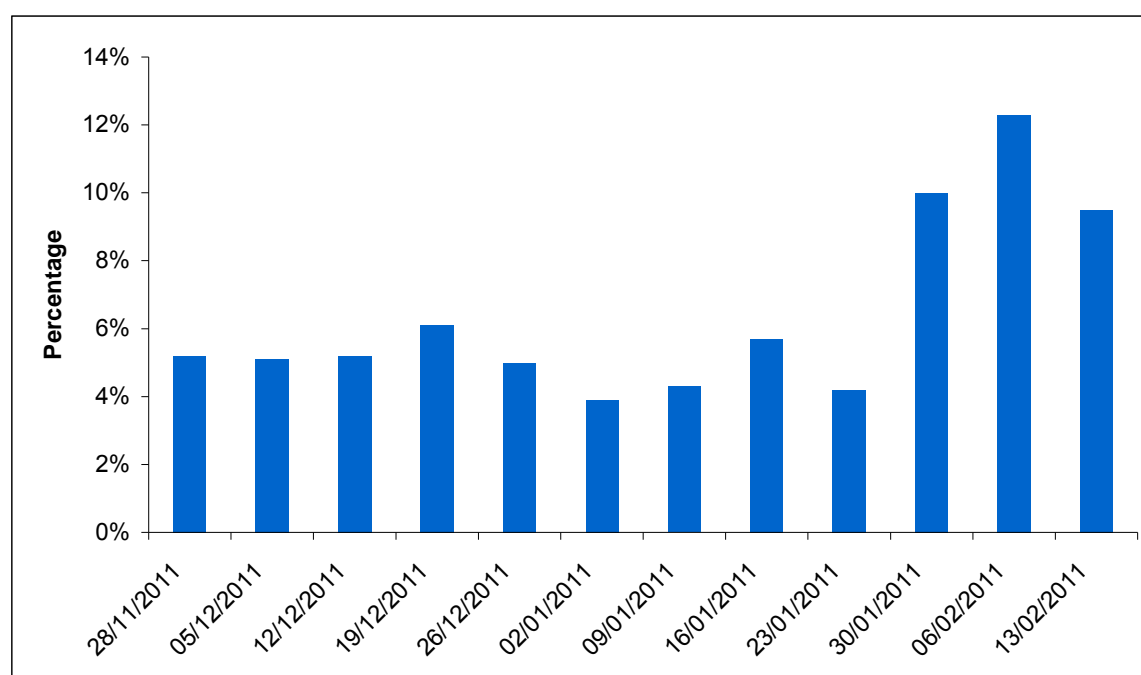


Source: Business Link Helpline Monitoring Data

As set out in section 2, call agents refers callers to Business Support Advisors (BSAs) if they are facing a specific issue or challenge that requires in-depth advice. In absolute terms, the number of BSA referrals is, as noted in section 3, well below planning

expectations. However, the graph below indicates that the ratio of BSA referrals to the total number of enquiries has been increasing over time from 5 percent in the early weeks of the service to an average of around 10 percent in recent weeks. The recent ratio is significantly higher than the planned ratio of 2.5 percent over the first year. These figures should be considered in the context of the current drive to increase BSA utilisation by increasing the use of single triggers and clarifying some of the definitions, as outlined in section 2, which have successfully increased BSA utilisation.

**Figure 3.2 Referrals to BSAs – Percentage of Caller Enquiries**



Source: Business Link Helpline Monitoring Data

### 3.4 Callers to the Business Link Helpline

Over the evaluation period, 9,572 calls have been recorded as customer enquiries by the Business Link helpline. The survey suggested that across all customer groups, an average of 1.21 calls were made to the Helpline<sup>4</sup>, suggesting a total of around 8,000 unique callers. The survey suggested that 36 percent of callers were pre-starts in the early stages of formulating their ideas for a business, 18 percent were pre-starts that had committed some resource to setting up in business, and the remaining 46 percent were established in business. Estimates of the number unique callers by customer group are set out in the table below.

<sup>4</sup> Respondents were asked to report how frequently they called the Business Link Helpline. If they reported they had never called before, or had called once per quarter or less frequently, it was assumed they made a single call over the evaluation period. If respondents reported that they called once a week or once per month it was assumed they made 12 and 3 calls over the period respectively.

**Table 3.2 Estimated number of unique callers to the Helpline**

	Customer group				Total
	Pre-start – early stages	Pre-start – in process of establishing	Start-up	Established business	
Number of calls received					9,572
Average number of calls made					1.21
Percentage of respondents	36	18	12	34	100
Number of unique callers	2,879	1,403	953	2,706	7,942

### 3.5 Categories of Calls

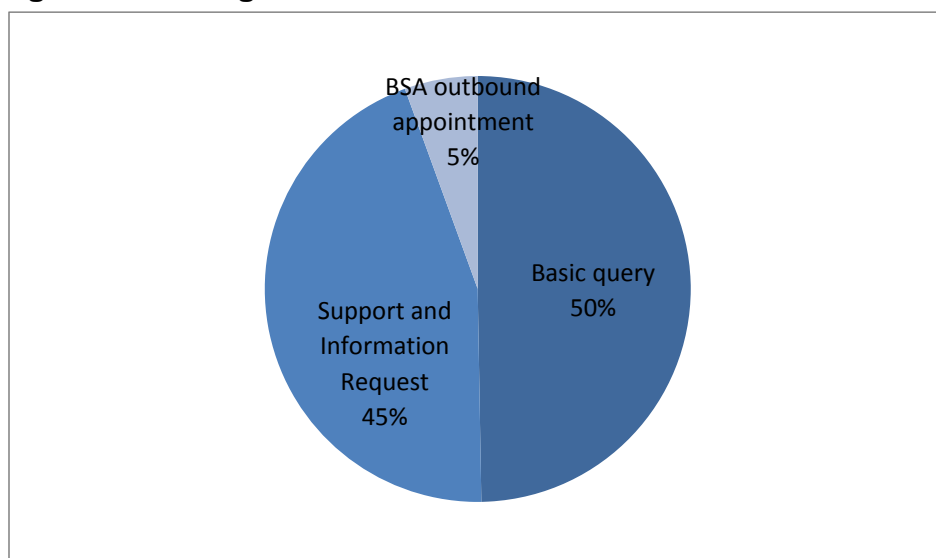
As set out in section 2, calls are categorised as follows:

- **Basic Queries:** To direct customers to the relevant area of the website, or 3<sup>rd</sup> party organisations that are best able to assist.
- **Support and Information Requests:** To deal with detailed queries, provide diagnostics or referrals.
- **Complex Queries:** To use experience and knowledge of the business support market to analyse issues and identify solutions; to diagnose issues behind the presenting problem and offer more tailored help and support fitted to the business' particular circumstances and market.

Calls are categorised as either 'basic queries' or 'support and information requests' using an automated approach (through the CRM) on the basis of specific outcomes from the call. It is worth noting that calls are not categorised on the basis of the length of call.

The pie chart below shows the breakdown of categories of calls.



**Figure 3.3 Categories of Calls**

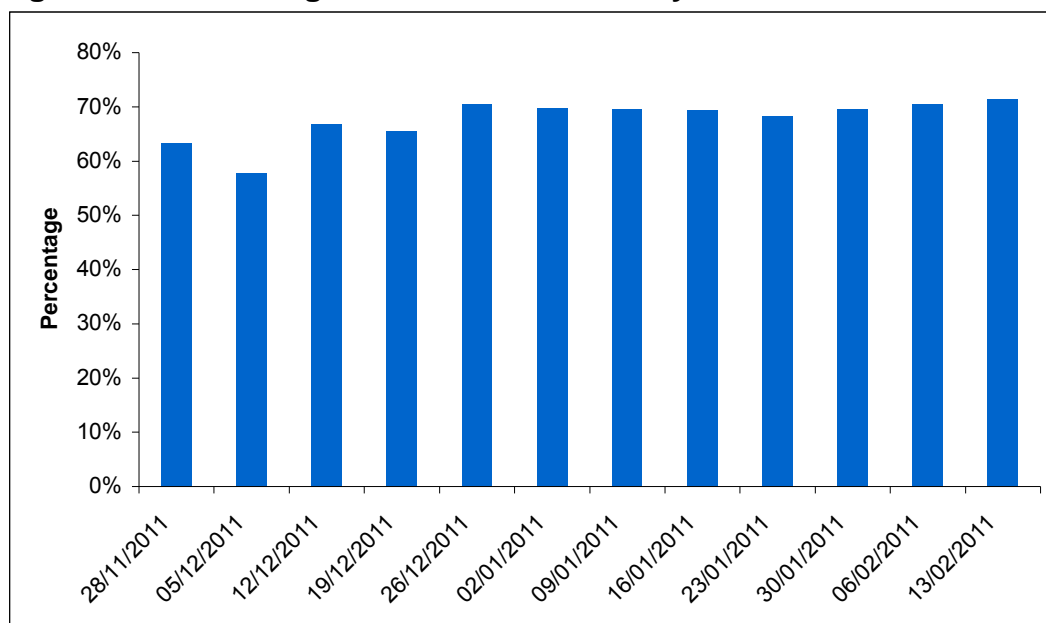
Source: Business Link Helpline Monitoring Data

The monitoring data indicates that to date there have been 4,600 basic queries, 4,234 support and information requests and 510 BSA outbound appointments. When measured against the expectations of the service, the proportion of basic queries is higher than anticipated (50 percent compared to a forecast of 35 percent) while the proportion of support and information requests is lower (45 percent compared to 62 percent). The extent to which the Helpline is achieving the right balance in terms of the provision of basic information and more in-depth advice is explored in detail in section 4.

### 3.6 Avoidable Calls

An indicator of the success of the digital transition is a reduction in the number of avoidable calls. Although the completeness and quality of Businesslink.gov.uk offer is the main influence on reducing calls for additional support, the Helpline has an important role to play in reducing the number of avoidable calls as the service can encourage customers to look for information on businesslink.gov.uk and use the website in the future. According to the Business Improvement Programme Monitoring and Evaluation Framework, avoidable calls can be measured as the number of callers with internet access 'guided to businesslink.gov.uk'. This definition is regarded as the best proxy using the monitoring data although it is likely to overstate the actual volumes of avoidable calls as some callers will require additional advice.

It is too early to assess the effectiveness of the Helpline in reducing the number of avoidable calls as more time is needed to optimise awareness of businesslink.gov.uk (and the Helpline). The number of callers with internet access 'guided to businesslink.gov.uk' is nevertheless used here as a baseline for comparing how the rate of avoidable calls changes over time. The monitoring data indicates that 68 percent of those with internet access were guided to the website. As the graph below shows, the number of 'avoidable calls' using this definition has been steady since the early weeks of the service.

**Figure 3.4 Percentage of 'Avoidable Calls' by Week**

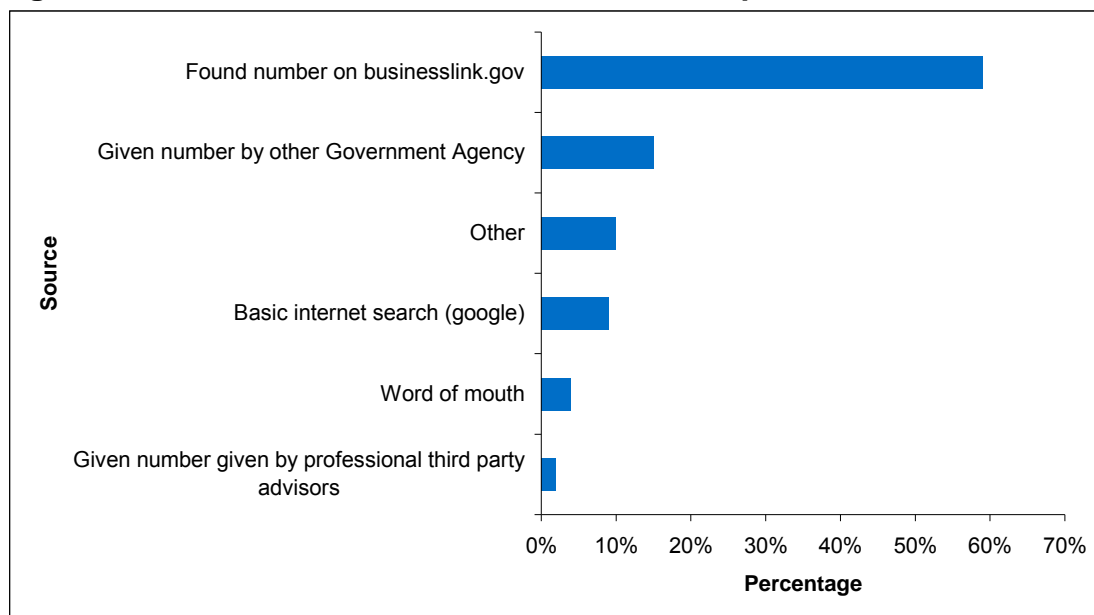
Source: Business Link Helpline Monitoring Data

A more precise definition of avoidable calls would be the number of callers with internet access that are directed to the website only and are satisfied with the service they received (as this would suggest that they were content with the information they used on the website). Our survey suggests that 74 percent of those who were directed to the website were fairly or very satisfied with the service which suggests that around a quarter are looking for more detailed advice.

### 3.7 How Callers found out about the Helpline

The graph below shows how respondents found out about the Helpline.

**Figure 3.5 How did callers find out about the Helpline?**



Source: Customer Survey  
Base: All respondents (657)

As noted in section 2, the main source of information on the availability of the Helpline and the telephone number has been businesslink.gov.uk (60 per cent of those surveyed). The second most common way of finding the number was through a Government Agency. Of those who found out about the Helpline through Government Agencies, 43 percent found it through Job Centre Plus (all of these were in the pre-start category) while 17 percent found the number through contact with their local council.

### 3.8 Comparison with the Business Population

This section compares the characteristics of established businesses calling the Helpline with the business population.

The table below compares the size of established businesses responding to the Helpline survey with the SBS 2010 results on SME size. The proportions are broadly similar although in respect of the Helpline customers there are a significantly lower proportion of businesses in the 10 to 49 employees category compared to the business population as a whole.

**Table 3.3 Size of Businesses**

Sector	Percentage	
	Helpline	SBS 2010
1 to 9	86	84
10 to 49	8	14
50 to 249	4	2

Sources: Customer Survey; SBS 2010

*Note: does not include enterprises with no employees as these fall outside of the scope of SBS survey*

The tables below compare the sectoral composition of the established businesses respondents to the customer survey with the SBS 2010 survey results. Different sector definitions have been used for the customer survey (following the approach in Helpline monitoring data) so it is difficult to make direct comparisons<sup>5</sup>. However, the data indicates that the Helpline is attracting more enquiries from the retail sector than the proportion in the business population as whole.

**Table 3.4 Sectors of Business Population**

Sector	Percentage
Primary	3
Production	11
Construction	12
Wholesale & retail	23
Hotels and restaurants	5
Transport, storage and communication	4
Financial intermediation	2
Real estate, renting and business service activities	25
Public administration and defence, compulsory social security/Education	2
Health and social work (N)	4
Other community, social and personal activities	7

Sources: SBS 2010

<sup>5</sup> It may be beneficial for Helpline monitoring to use the categories used for the SBS.

**Table 3.5 Sectors of Helpline Callers**

Sector	Percentage
Agriculture and Fishing	1
Biotechnology, Medical and Chemical	2
Construction and Property Services	8
Consumer Products, Personal Services, Retail and Wholesale	30
Creative Services and Media	7
Hotels and Restaurants	5
Information Technology and Telecomms	5
Manufacturing and Engineering	9
Professional and Other Business Services	17
Recreation, Culture and Tourism	1
Transport, Warehousing and Distribution	3

Sources: Customer Survey

According to the SBS 2010, 39 percent of SMEs had at least 50 per cent female leadership (majority-led by women & equally led). The Helpline Monitoring Data shows that 42 percent of callers in the established business categories were women suggesting that the Helpline is meeting aspirations to make the service equally access for women-led businesses.

### 3.9 Unit Cost Comparisons

To examine the unit costs of the service to date we have examined the period of activity covered by the assessment since the Helpline was launched i.e. w/c 28<sup>th</sup> November 2011 to w/c 13<sup>th</sup> February 2012. The unit costs per minute and contact are calculated on the basis of the costs of the service for this period which total £792,000<sup>6</sup>. For comparison the pro-rata cost for the previous service would be £1,600,000.

The table indicates a large difference between the actual unit costs of the Helpline and the previous BL contact centres based on call data during the evaluation period. Clearly, this relates to the lower than expected call volumes in this period, however this is an early stage of the Helpline and unit costs are likely to change as a result of the planned reduction in capacity and associated costs and through efforts to increase call volumes. Importantly, costs have since reduced as core agent numbers reduced from 77 and will be 50 by 1<sup>st</sup> April 2012. Moreover, as noted earlier, BSA utilisation has improved. With monthly volumes projected on the basis of the most recent weekly data, it can be seen that while these changes would have a significant impact on cost per minute (through the increased activity of the BSAs). This would result in the Helpline's unit costs being much closer to the previous BL service although a significant gap would remain.

<sup>6</sup> Costs include fixed costs calculated on a pro rata basis and ongoing costs for this period.

**Table 3.6 Units Costs**

Unit Cost Item	Planned Unit Cost of the Helpline	Actual Unit Cost of Helpline Service – Evaluation Period	Unit Costs with Lower Call Centre Staff & Increased BSA utilisation	Previous BL Regional Contact Centres
Cost per minute	£0.96	£4.69	£2.99	£2.23
Unit Cost Item	Planned Unit Cost of the Helpline	Actual Unit Cost of Helpline Service – Evaluation Period	Unit Costs with Lower Call Centre Staff & Increased BSA utilisation	Previous BL Regional Contact Centres
Cost per minute	£0.96	£4.69	£2.99	£2.23

Source: Ecorys analysis; BIS

Despite call volumes being lower than the previous Business Link service, there is a relatively smaller gap between the unit costs per minute. This suggests that there is scope for improved efficiencies if demand for the Helpline service is brought closer in line with capacity. We understand the intention is to match capacity to call volumes once call volumes have clearly stabilised, latent demand assessed and once external impacts on demand including the affect of any Eurozone instability on the economy has been assessed.

### 3.10 Summary

This section has focused on demand for the Helpline service using management information collected by the Helpline contractors. Key findings from the analysis and their implications are as follows:

- **Overall demand:** Call volumes and email volumes are much lower than planned. This may relate to the challenge of forecasting numbers of calls at a time of a major overhaul of the business support infrastructure, economic uncertainty and on the basis of the experience of the previous Business Link contact centres where different promotional approaches were utilised and outbound calls were made to generate demand for the service. However, this means that there is some excess capacity in the operation of the Helpline contact centre at present. Under the terms of the service delivery contract capacity can be reduced if demand does not match BIS' expectations and BIS has taken steps to reduce capacity with staff numbers reducing to 50 from 77 by 1<sup>st</sup> April 2012.
- **Demand for BSAs:** In absolute terms, during the period of the evaluation, the number of BSA referrals was significantly below planning expectations and by March was

averaging 144. The demand data for BSAs should be considered in the context of the current drive to increase BSA utilisation by increasing the use of single triggers and clarifying some of the definitions, as outlined in section 2. This is explored in more detail in the next section.

- **How callers found out about the service:** The responses confirm that the website is the main source of publicity for the Helpline. The graph shows that 60 percent of the respondents found the Helpline number on the Business Link website. The second most common way of finding the number was through a Government agency. The issue of how far marketing approaches are appropriate in attracting customers who do not have internet access is considered in the next section.
- **Call handling times:** The average duration of calls is well within the forecast length. Call agents could use additional time to focus more effort on promoting the website and this is considered in section 5.
- **Unit costs:** Related to the key findings above, the unit cost per minute of the service to date is significantly higher than planned and when compared with the previous Business Link contact centres. However, our analysis indicates that the cost per minute will fall significantly as a result of ongoing changes to reduce staff capacity and increase BSA utilisation..

## 4.0 Delivering a Service that is Valued by Customers

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### 4.1 Introduction

The Terms of Reference for this assessment of the Helpline poses a number of questions which are relevant to how effectively the Helpline is delivering a service which is valued by customers:

- The detailed reasons why people are calling the Helpline: an examination of the reasons for calling the Helpline provides an indication of how the service can provide assistance to callers in meeting specific needs. The Helpline's role is also to respond to individuals who have access to the internet but who generally need encouragement to use the web for their information needs (due to limited awareness or use of the internet for business purposes for example) as well as to provide more detailed information for those with more complex queries.
- The effectiveness of the Helpline in responding to customer needs and in particular whether the Helpline is successfully assisting callers in navigating the new business support landscape and directing them appropriately to help or other external support outside businesslink.gov.uk. There is also a need to examine how far the Helpline is responding appropriately to the needs of businesses which cannot be met by businesslink.gov.uk. Part of this role is managing the expectations of customers, many of which may have become accustomed to the provision of face to face support and events through the regional Business Link service. There is also a need to examine whether the BSAs are being used effectively and appropriately in particular what sorts of issues are being passed to BSAs and how customers value this element of the service.
- How far the Helpline is meeting the needs of those who do not have internet access, vulnerable groups or those who are unable to use the website: it is important to ascertain the numbers of customers calling the Helpline who do not have internet access and how far the service is providing an appropriate response to meet the requirements of this group.
- Specific customer satisfaction ratings: The Helpline has a specific role in supporting customer satisfaction during a period of transition in the provision of universal business support services. It is therefore important to assess the overall satisfaction ratings of callers and in respect of different aspects of the service.

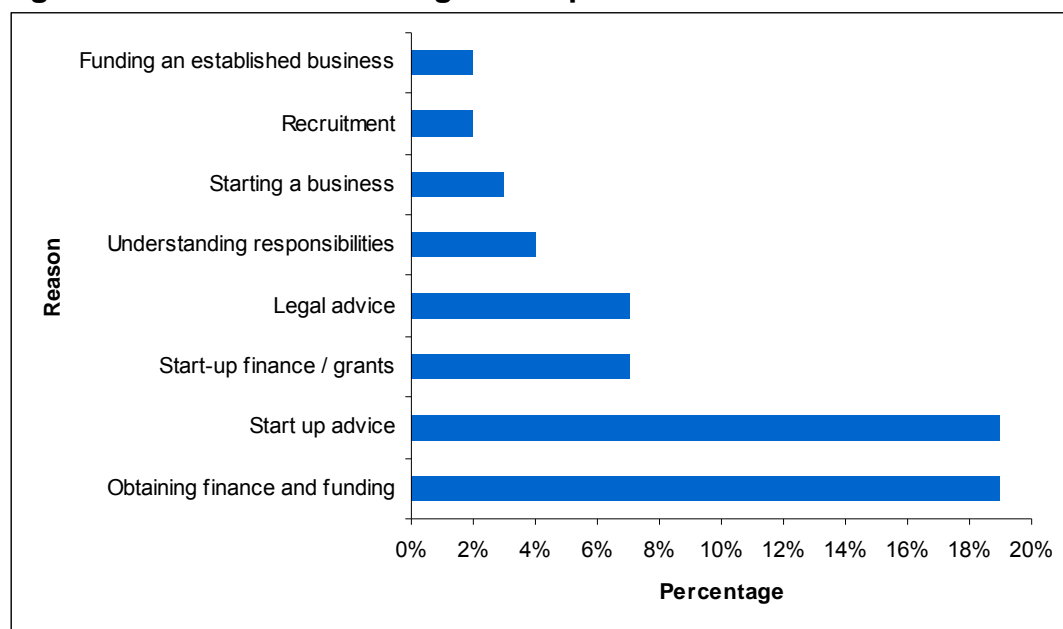
### 4.2 Reasons for Calling the Helpline

The Helpline CRM categorises callers in terms of specific reasons for calling the Helpline. The most common reasons are displayed in the graph below. It is worth noting that a large number of callers are grouped under 'other' (17 percent) and there are numerous



categories where the proportion is 1 percent or less. We understand that Careline are developing a new set of 'reason for calling' categories to address the large numbers recorded as 'other'. Our survey indicated that in the vast majority of cases the reasons recorded on the CRM were correct.

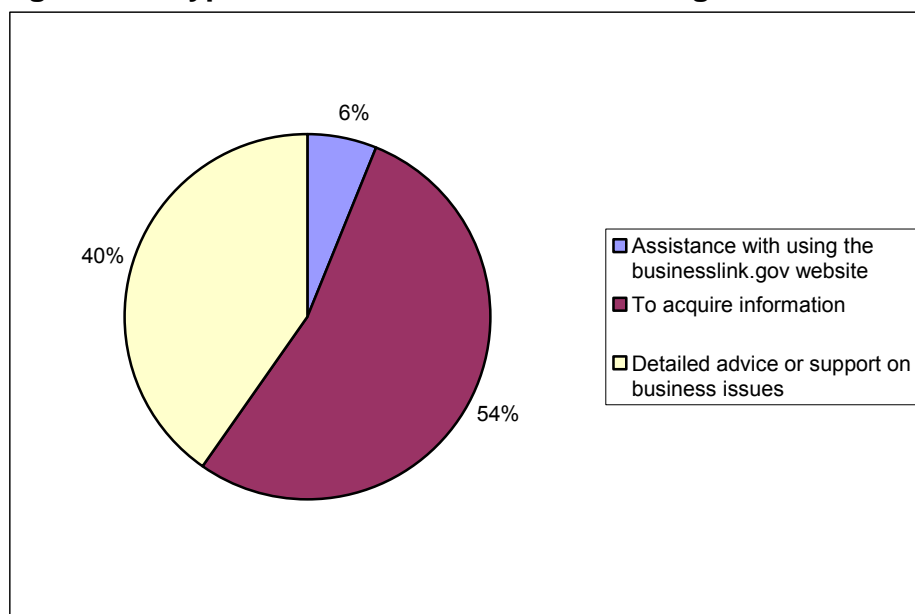
**Figure 4.1 Reason for Calling the Helpline**



*Source: Helpline monitoring data; only includes reason where proportion is 2 percent or above*

As the graph shows, the CRM data indicates that 'obtaining finance and funding' and 'start-up advice' have been the most common reasons for calling the Helpline (both 19 percent of callers). The next most common reasons have been 'start-up finance and grants' and 'legal advice' (both 7 percent) followed by 'understanding responsibilities' (4 percent). There is some overlap between the categories for example 'obtaining finance and funding' overlaps with 'start-up finance'. It may therefore be appropriate to review the categories and to tie them in more closely with the website categories as this would also facilitate analysis of how far the content of [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) is meeting needs.

The survey asked a question about the reason for calling the Helpline which confirmed how far the call was directly related to use of the web as well as the callers' motivation for calling in terms of the type of information or advice sought. The breakdown of responses is shown in the graph below.

**Figure 4.2 Type of Information or Advice Sought**

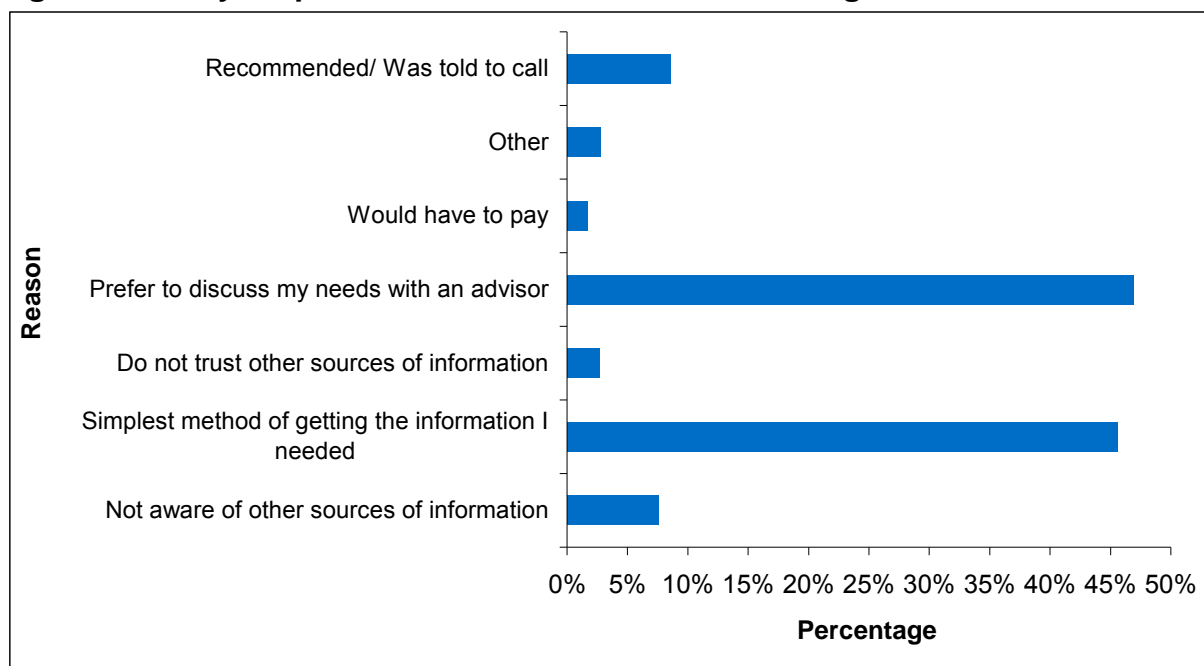
Source: Customer Survey Base: All respondents (657)

The graph shows that a majority contacted the Helpline to acquire information while only a small minority called for specific assistance on using the website. As noted elsewhere, around two-thirds had accessed the website prior to calling the Helpline.

Early stage pre-starts were significantly more likely to call for the reason of acquiring information (80 percent of callers in this category) compared to the other categories of business. Similarly, pre-starts in early stages were less likely to require detailed advice or support.

A significant proportion (40 percent), however, called to obtain detailed advice or support on business issues. The high proportions wanting detailed advice or support in the pre-start in later stages, start-ups and established categories highlights the particular issue of managing callers' expectations on the scope of the service as the Helpline generally does not provide detailed advice unless the customer is facing a major challenge as identified by the BSA triggers for referral (see section 2). Call agents' use of the website in addressing information needs is considered in section 5 and the issue of expectations on the scope of the service are returned to later in this section.

As the graph below shows, on the question of why the Helpline was contacted instead of using other sources of information, almost half of the respondents indicated that they preferred to discuss their advice needs with an advisor. This highlights the challenge of encouraging customers to use the website rather than the website if they feel that there is a need to talk to an advisor. The next most important reason was that it was the simplest method of getting the information needed. This suggests that many customers call the Helpline because there is a perception that this will save them time. The measurement of time savings is considered in section 6.

**Figure 4.3 Why Helpline was Contacted Instead of Using Other Sources**

Source: Customer Survey  
 Base: All respondents (657)

## 4.3 Responding to Customer Needs

This section focuses on the effectiveness of the Helpline in assisting callers to navigate the new business support landscape and direct them appropriately to the help or other external support outside of businesslink.gov.uk. It is important to examine how the service is responding to the needs of customers within the context of changes to the Business Link service which have been designed to encourage efficiency savings and reduce the crowding out of private sector provision.

### Call Agents

The interviews and case studies indicate that call agents are helping to support the Helpline objectives of supporting digital transition and providing appropriate guidance on support outside of businesslink.gov.uk. Notwithstanding the high levels of demand for detailed advice, the interviews and case studies indicate that call agents are able to tailor their responses accordingly to reflect the specific information requirements and needs of different types of businesses.

The two week foundation course for call agents and floor walking from experienced and qualified staff at BE-UK have helped the call agents to build up rounded knowledge of information available on the website and business support landscape. This enables the agents to effectively signpost callers to appropriate information on businesslink.gov.uk and 3<sup>rd</sup> party organisations. Call agents reported that a valuable aspect of the induction programme were the talks from organisations such as HMRC and Acas as this helped them to understand the scope of support available from key referral organisations. The

training and emphasis on feedback in the early stages has brought a level of consistency in the way call agents respond to queries, as considered below.

It was reported to us that Call Agents adopt a structured approach to questioning and information / advice provision which initially focuses on whether callers are aware of or have previously accessed the [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) site. The call agents then tend to provide the information to callers by finding it on the website and identifying links which are relevant to the caller's needs. The agent then moves on to discuss the website content more generally, highlighting any additional information which might be relevant to the caller. If the required information is not available on the website, call agents tend to refer to the Knowledge Bank which contains more specific information on local services and grant schemes.

Interviews with call agents have indicated that the Knowledge Bank has been an effective tool in enabling call agents to understand the new business support landscape and pass on relevant information to customers. The interviews suggest that call agents regularly refer to the Knowledge Bank as on some aspects of support the Knowledge Bank provides more specific information than can be found on the website. BSA agents also reported that the Knowledge Bank provides useful support in relation to background research that needs to be undertaken on business support provision in the caller's local area.

As indicated in section 2, the Knowledge Bank is maintained and updated by knowledge managers whose role is to build relationships with stakeholders. It is regarded as especially important to maintain relationships with local contacts who can provide details on local services and grant schemes. A key challenge is maintaining the quality and timeliness of the information on the Knowledge Bank as resources allow for only two knowledge managers to maintain the information.

The interviews indicated that the contractors do not undertake systematic quality checks on referrals through the Knowledge Bank. While efforts are made to communicate with local services to ensure that provision is appropriate, it does not seem that any formal procedures are in place to undertake systematic checks. For example, it has not been possible for Careline to track customers satisfaction in terms of the responsiveness and information and advice received from local service providers.

The case study below illustrates the use of the Knowledge Bank.

### **Careline Case Study – Use of the Knowledge Bank**

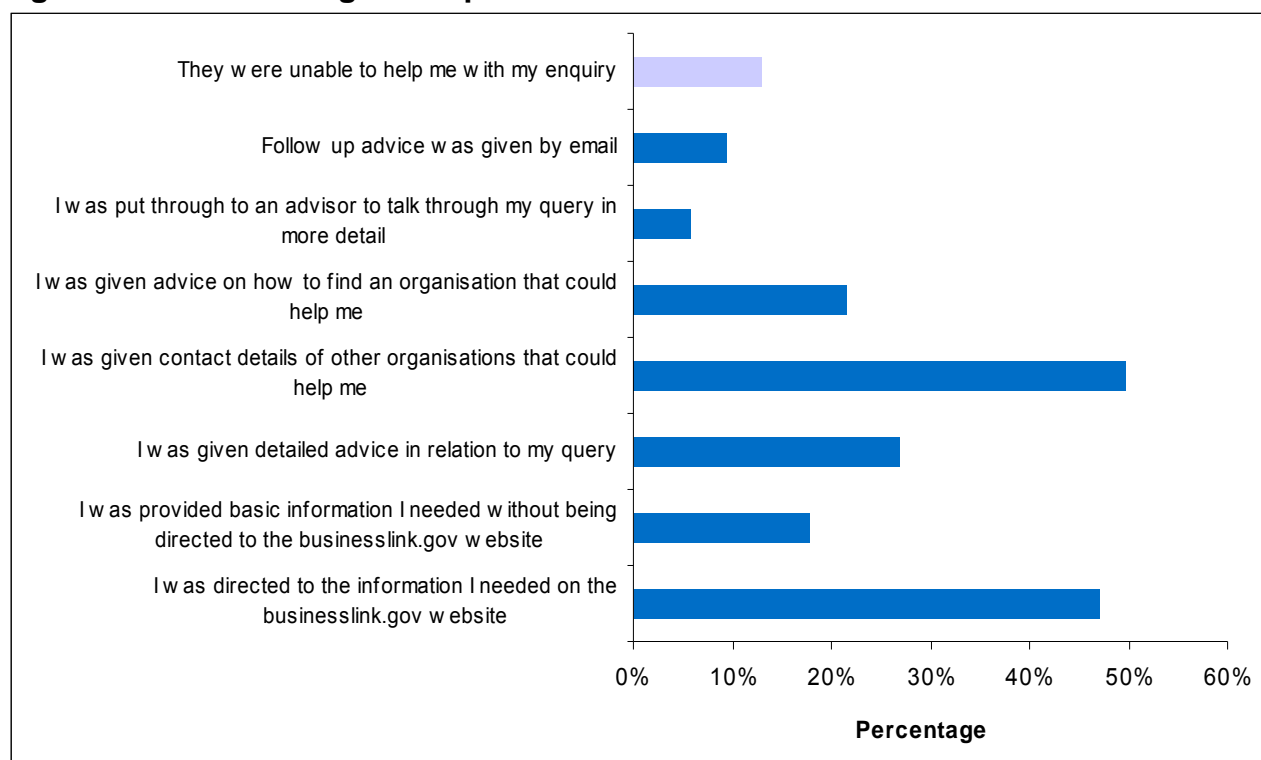
The caller was planning to set up a beautician practice and was calling to ask about the availability of start-up finance. The caller was asked to open website but did not have access to the internet at the time of the call. The agent talked through the information which was available in the 'finance and grants' section but the caller had already looked at this. The agent then checked the Knowledge Bank and gave the caller details of an organisation called Entrust which provides loans and equity to businesses in the North East. This was appropriate to the callers needs and provided some added value to the information which was on the website. The caller was highly satisfied with the advice provided.

The typical approach of the call agents, which was reported in the interviews with call agents, is supported by survey responses on how the call agent responded to the calls, as shown in the graph below. Respondents asked how call agents helped them with their

enquiry. Just under half were given the contact details of other organisations that could assist with their query whilst 47 percent were directed to the relevant information on the website. This finding does not show how far details of other organisations are available on [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) and therefore whether the website did or could have met callers' needs. Although there is no data available on the proportion of calls which need to be referred to the Knowledge Bank, as noted the interviews and case studies indicated that the Knowledge Bank is used regularly by call agents. This implies that that a significant proportion of organisations which callers are signposted to are not included on the website.

For just over one quarter of respondents (27 percent), their query was dealt with by the provision of detailed information. In around 10 percent of cases follow up advice was provided by email. The survey responses therefore confirm that call agents are able to provide a range of responses and tailor their approach accordingly depending on whether information can be found easily on the website or if more detailed information is required. 13 percent of respondents said that the Helpline was unable to help with the query. The qualitative analysis later in this section provides some insights into the reasons why some callers were dissatisfied with the service.

**Figure 4.4 How Call Agent Helped Customer**



Source: Customer Survey  
Base: All respondents (657)

Respondents were also asked if they plan to take up any training or advice recommended by the Helpline. The responses indicate that 22 percent plan to take up support provided by Government agencies while 15 percent plan to take up support provided by the private sector. This provides further evidence that the Helpline is working effectively in signposting callers on to third parties. A majority of callers that plan to take up advice from third parties

indicate that the Helpline influenced them to access this advice by providing information on what advice was available or helping them understand that advice was needed.

The case study below provides an illustration of how callers are signposted to other organisations.

### **Careline Call Agent Case Study – Approach to Signposting**

The caller was a farmer and had several alpacas and wanted to start using their wool to make garments. He wanted some help in identifying someone who could help him to do this (i.e. a clothing business). The caller had advertised and made enquiries locally to try to find someone who would be interested in using the wool but this was not successful. The agent asked the caller about their plans for growing the business – the caller explained that he had also noticed that other farmers in the area kept alpacas and did not seem to be using the wool so he thought there might be opportunities to collect this wool too. The agent suggested that he try 'your business sector' and then type 'fashion' into the search box in order to bring up a list of trade bodies – for example Association of Suppliers to the British Clothing Industry (ASBCI) - which might be able to help. The agent also recommended the information on business growth, use of the events finder agent and provided a contact number for DEFRA given their expertise in relation to farming. The caller was made aware of the [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) website through their call to the Helpline and their understanding of the information available on [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) website improved as a result of the call. It helped the caller to save time as they did not know where to look for further help. Generally the caller was satisfied because the call has pointed him in the direction of further assistance.

In terms of categories of businesses, the survey responses indicate that established businesses were less likely to be guided to the [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) website (32 percent of established businesses were given this guidance compared to the overall proportion of 47 percent) while pre-start businesses were more likely to be guided to the website (57 percent). This suggests that the information available on the website is to a small degree more likely to meet the information needs of pre-starts than established businesses as established businesses tend to require more detailed advice and guidance. However, this evidence suggests that the call agents have been effective in terms of tailoring responses to the needs of different types of businesses.

### **Support to Businesses in Crisis or with Complex Needs**

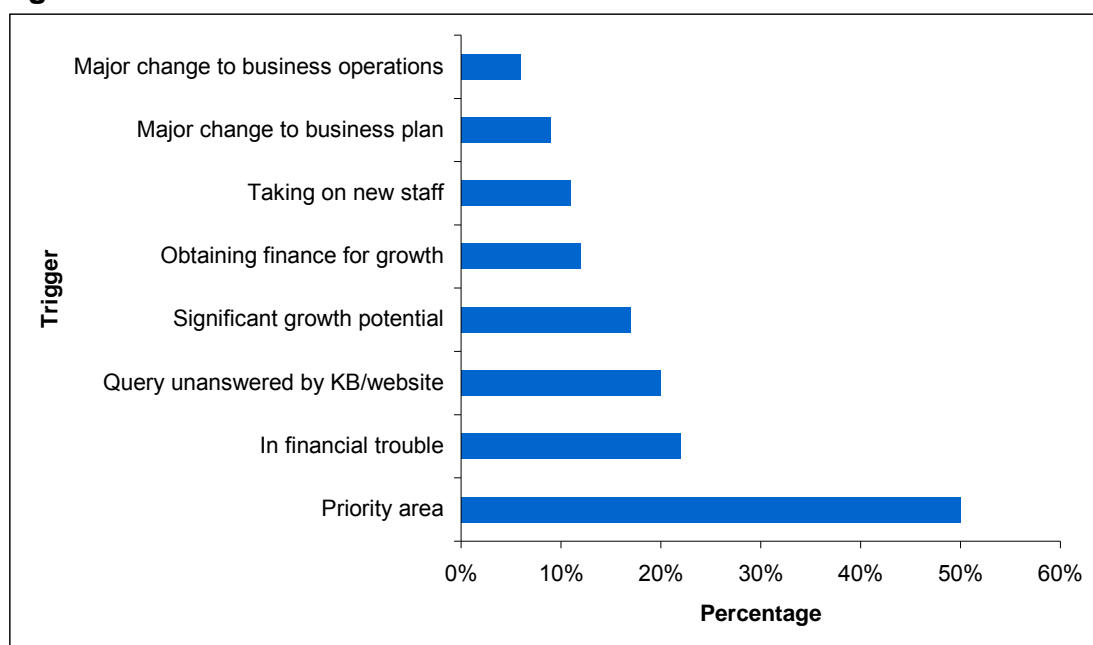
As described in section 2, call agents refers callers to Business Support Advisors (BSAs) if they are facing a specific issue or challenge that requires in-depth advice.

There was a general consensus amongst interviewees that the triggers generally promote appropriate referrals to the BSAs. However, interview evidence indicates that some improvements could be made to the definitions of the triggers to support a more consistent approach to BSA referrals which supports the recent BIS proposal to develop the definitions as highlighted in section 2. It was reported to us that some triggers are more open to differences in interpretation by call agents, for example 'major change to business operations' and 'major change to business plan' have both created some problems for call agents as 'major change' lacks a clear definition or criteria.. Some call agents also reported some difficulty with applying the 'significant growth potential' trigger as this relies on the caller's view of their business prospects. This suggests that a more detailed and

objective criteria should be developed for these triggers.

As shown by the graph below, the most common reason for being referred to a BSA is being located in a priority area such as an Enterprise Zone or area of multiple deprivation. It is not clear from the service design documents why more in-depth advice from BSAs is necessarily always appropriate for pre-starts or businesses from deprived areas as customers from these areas may still only need some basic advice. We understand this issue is current being considered by BIS. The second most frequent reason has been 'financial difficulties' and the third was 'queries unanswered by knowledge bank or website'. During the period covered by the assessment, callers could be referred to a BSA on the basis of a single trigger or double triggers. The data shows that callers are more commonly referred to BSAs using the single triggers i.e. 'priority area', 'in financial trouble' or query unanswered by Knowledge Bank/ website'. The data indicates that it has been more difficult to refer customers using the other triggers which supports the recent decision to introduce discretionary referrals for these triggers on the basis of whether value could be added to overcome barriers.

**Figure 4.5 Reasons for BSA Referrals**



The case study below demonstrates how the Priority Area trigger is applied is shown in the box below.

### **BSA Case Study – Priority Area Trigger**

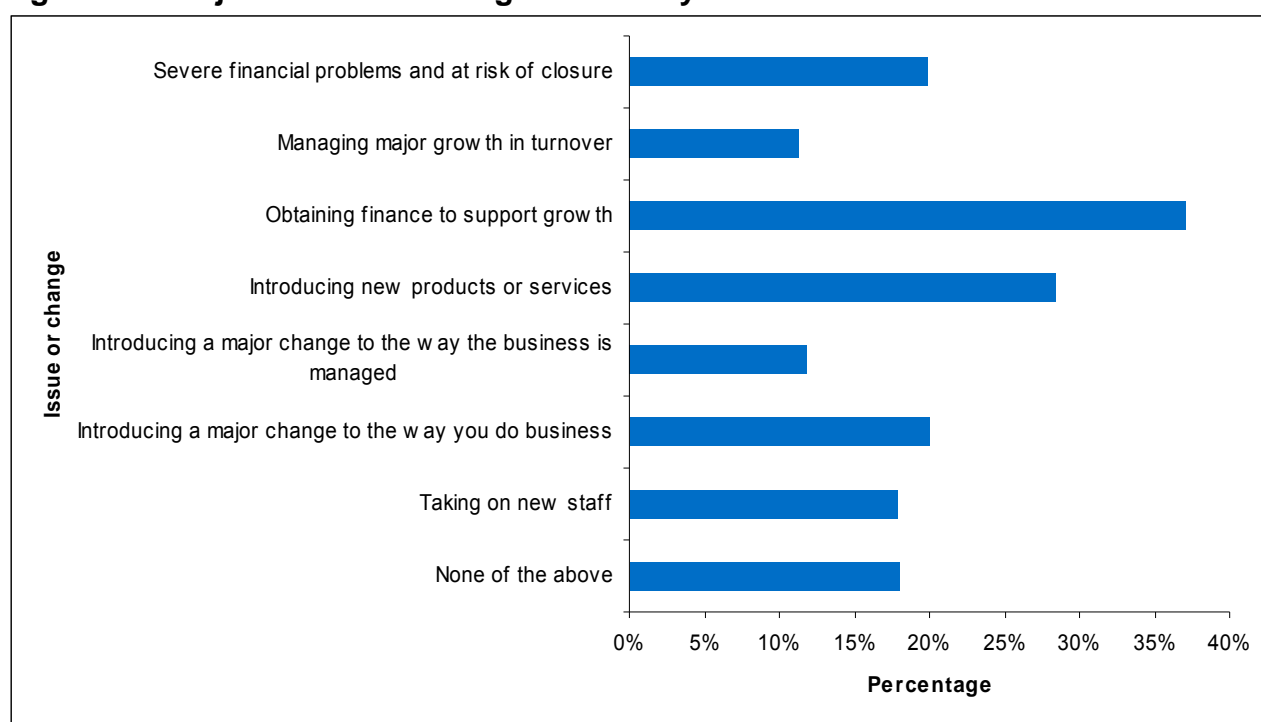
The caller wanted to set up her own business as a training provider. She had never been self-employed before so was seeking advice on how to get started. The customer was referred through being located in a priority area – a deprived area in Birmingham. The customer was starting with very limited knowledge so the BSA went through all the elements of starting a business. The BSA gave the following suggestions: the link to [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) for guidance on developing a business plan; workshops provided by Birmingham Council (Business Insight) and Breathing Space (Enterprise Agency); to read a fact sheet that provides information and advice on deciding upon the legal structure of the business which the BSA would send; to register with qualification bodies to ensure that she can offer accredited training; to look at the guidance on the BL website about



developing a marketing strategy; the possibility of setting up a website – the BSA advised to look into Get British Business Online for free support; They also discussed how much time she would devote to the business relative to her current employment and how much to charge. The BSA also mentioned free legal advice from Birmingham Flag (University of Birmingham) and gave a website link for HMRC to help with financial matters. The BSA summarised this advice by suggesting next steps and sending out an email.

Respondents to the survey in the start-up or established categories were asked if they were facing major changes, threats or planning to grow at the time of calling the Helpline. The purpose of this question was to provide an indication of how far customers are expecting the Helpline to assist on more complex issues and to provide an indication of the type of support required for such businesses. A higher proportion of start-ups (56 percent) than established businesses (44 percent) perceived that their business was facing such issues and therefore indicates that start-ups are more likely to expect a higher intensity of support from the service. Nevertheless, the proportion of callers who perceive that they are facing major issues or changes is significantly higher than the proportion of callers referred to BSAs (an average of 10 percent in recent weeks) and the proportion of respondents in the start-up and established businesses categories that reported they were given detailed advice (25 percent).

**Figure 4.6 Major Issues or Changes Faced by Callers**



Source: Customer Survey

Base: Start-ups and established businesses facing major changes (144)

The graph shows that almost 40 percent of those facing major issues or changes were looking to obtain finance to support growth, just under 30 percent were in the process of introducing new products or services and 18 percent were facing severe financial problems and risk of closure. 'Introducing new products or services' is currently not



referred to specifically in the triggers criteria though could be considered as a type of major change facing a business. The proportion facing severe financial problems is broadly in line with the proportion of customers which are referred for this reason.

The interviews and case studies suggest that advisors adopt an appropriate approach in handling complex queries. The case studies showed that BSAs tend to start the call by asking a series of probing questions to find out more about the nature of the problem facing the business. The BSA then goes through a list of sources of advice, most of which they research before making the call. These include links to particular pages on [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) and other websites, fact sheets about particular issues, and information / contact details for other sources of advice, some of which may be tailored to the local area of the business. The BSAs use their experience and questioning techniques to diagnose the key issues affecting the business. Generally, the BSA do not give a definitive answer to the caller's query but encourage the customer to think through the options and decide on the best course of action. In many cases, the BSA offers advice or signposts customers to advice, on issues that were not directly relevant to the customer's initial enquiry but could nonetheless help the business. In the case study calls we observed that all customers were also given the opportunity to ask about anything else or confirm that the advice given was useful (i.e. "Is there anything else we can help you with?"). All information is then sent by email (or sent in the post if the customer does not have access to the internet). This approach is illustrated by the case study below.

The appointments system is generally regarded as working effectively. This enables the BSAs to examine the background issues and identify appropriate links to information / services on the website or Knowledge Bank. Postcode data is used to look at what information the Knowledge Bank has on the local area. Careline call agents provide a synopsis of the issue(s) facing the business which enables the BSA to focus their preparation and research. The interviews highlighted lack of face to face contact with businesses and limited time as key constraints in meeting the needs of customers facing more complex issues. Particular constraints identified through the research are identified later in this section.

### **Case Study BSA – Diagnostic Approach**

This customer was looking for advice on setting up a social enterprise that combines football coaching for young people with broader education on values such as respect and race relations. The caller was clear on the objectives of the business but wanted advice on whether a social enterprise was the right business model. The customer lived in a deprived area of Manchester so was referred because of being based in a priority area. The BSA advised the customer to write down his ideas in a business plan, including estimates of costs and funding required. Drawing on the knowledge bank the customer was sent a list of organisations in the Manchester area that might be able to provide advice. The BSA could not directly answer the question "should this be a social enterprise?" as the customer had to decide this for himself, but was able to give advice on the key aspects of the social enterprise model. BSA asked the caller whether he would have time to attend some events, and said she would also send details through. Much of the advice sent on the email directed the customer to the BL website. This included business plan template, a fact sheet on social enterprises (advantages / disadvantages of this business model), case studies on social enterprises and a questionnaire on achieving legal status.

## 4.4 Supporting Callers with No Internet Access

As noted, a key rationale for the Helpline is to meet demand for business support services from individuals who do not have access to the internet as well individuals who could not find what they were looking for. As indicated in section 2, the latest Small Business Survey shows that 20 percent of SMEs do not have broadband internet access. It is fair to assume that this group will not be able to easily access [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) as the enhanced content requires fast internet access.

This is supported by both the monitoring data and the survey responses which indicate that only a very small proportion of callers have no internet access. The monitoring data indicates that 7.5 percent of callers (which includes both pre-starts and existing businesses) do not have access to the internet. Our survey indicates that an even lower proportion of callers do not have access to the internet (1.3 percent).<sup>7</sup> This suggests that many of the target group of non internet users may not be aware that the Helpline, or in some cases that even the Business Link website exists. However, examination of the type of internet access reveals that 30 percent of respondents in the established businesses category did not have broadband internet access at work. The survey data therefore shows that a higher proportion of established businesses accessing the Helpline do not have broadband internet access than the business population as whole. This suggests that the service is having the intended effect of penetrating businesses with no broadband access although the take up of the service by businesses and pre-starts with no internet access at all appears to be lower than expected. However, there is no corresponding data on access to the internet amongst pre-starts that would allow a comparison with the wider population.

A larger proportion of survey respondents (18 percent) reported that they do not use the internet for business purposes which has also been perceived as being a potential barrier to using the Business Link website. Pre-starts were significantly more likely to say that they did not use the internet for business purposes which is likely to be a reflection of their current status rather than being a specific barrier to internet use. Generally, a small minority of pre-starts (4.5 percent) did not have access to the internet when they called the Helpline, as many as 91 percent of respondents had access to Broadband at home while 38 percent had access to the internet via their Blackberry, iPhone or Android devices.

The rationale for the Helpline indicates that there is a need to attract a higher proportion of callers who do not have internet access. Section 2 showed that to date there has been limited promotional activity aimed specifically at those groups without internet access. The results on non-internet access support the need for a more targeted promotional campaign aimed at non internet users which we understand is currently being considered.

The case studies showed that not having access to the internet at the time of making the call does not appear to prevent the call agents from directing callers to [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk). This is supported by the survey data: of those that did not have access to the internet when they called the Helpline, 63 percent were directed to the website for information.

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<sup>7</sup> Some callers which were classified as not having internet access on the Helpline's CRM claimed to have internet access when responding to the survey questions. This might relate to the different approaches to questioning: for monitoring purposes callers are asked a general question on whether they have internet access while our survey allowed more detailed response options on levels or type of internet access.

Only a very small minority of respondents did not have access to the internet more generally when they called the Helpline and on the basis of the survey responses, whether callers had access to internet or not does not appear to have influenced the agents in their approach to directing callers to the website. An element of caution should be applied when comparing the outcomes of those with and without internet access as there were only a handful of respondents without internet access (only 5 percent of the sample). As the numbers of callers without internet access has been so small, it has also been difficult to assess the approach of the agents to callers without internet access. Nevertheless, the interviews with call agents suggest that callers are strongly encouraged to use the internet even if they do not have access to the internet at home. For example, agents indicated that they encourage callers to use the internet at the local library. If barriers to accessing the internet appear insurmountable, the agents send hard copies of the information in the post although the interview evidence suggests that these cases have been rare.

## 4.5 Customer Satisfaction

The Helpline has a specific role in supporting customer satisfaction during a period of transition in the provision of universal business support services. Part of this role is managing the expectations of customers, many of which may have become accustomed to the provision of face to face support and events through the regional Business Link service.

Some 69 percent of all respondents reported that they were either 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied with the support received. This compares to 89 percent of customers of the regional Business Link service<sup>8</sup>, as shown in the table below. A fifth of Helpline customers reported that they are either 'very' or 'fairly' dissatisfied with the service. This compares to 4.2 percent of customers of the regional Business Link service. The results on satisfaction also need to be qualified by the context of the need for greater levels of efficiency in the provision of business support and the reduced scope of the Business Link service. As the Helpline is more of a signposting service than the previous Business Link service, it is perhaps not surprising that satisfaction scores for the Helpline are lower than recorded for the previous service. The results may also reflect levels of satisfaction with the Helpline service specifically rather than necessarily the whole Business Link service which includes [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk). Wider evaluation evidence would be needed to confirm this.

The survey responses suggest that a higher proportion of respondents who received advice from a BSA were satisfied with the service (80 percent) than those in the support and information and basic queries categories (68 percent). However, it should be noted that the difference in satisfaction levels is not significant at the 95 percent level. (How about the difference with the old regional business link service figure)

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<sup>8</sup> Business Link Customer Insight Report 2010.

**Table 4.1 Customer Satisfaction**

	Helpline	Call Agents	BSAs	Regional Business Link Service
<b>Satisfied</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>89</b>
<i>Very Satisfied</i>	38	37	44	50
<i>Fairly Satisfied</i>	31	31	36	39
<b>Neither</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>7</b>
<i>Fairly Dissatisfied</i>	13	12	8	3
<i>Very Dissatisfied</i>	10	10	8	1
<b>Dissatisfied</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>4</b>

Source: Customer Survey

Base: All respondents (657)

Note: difference in satisfaction levels between Call Agents and BSAs not significant at 95 percent level.

Customers that are new to the Business Link service tend to report a slightly higher level of satisfaction with the Helpline service than those that have used face-to-face support or advice from Business Link in the past. 70 percent of those that are new to the service were 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied compared to 64 percent of those that had used the service in the past. Similarly, 14 percent of those that had used the regional Business Link service were 'very dissatisfied' compared to 8 percent of new users. This highlights a particular challenge of managing the satisfaction levels for those whose previous experience, and therefore likely reference point, was a much more intensive and less self-servicing service. It is possible in the longer-term that satisfaction levels settle at a higher level as customers' expectations adjust to the new service. It will therefore be important to track satisfaction ratings over time.

An example of a caller satisfied with a response to a basic query is shown in the box below:

### Case Study – Basic Query

The caller owns and runs their own sign and graphics company. They recently had an order to do some work for a restaurant and a deposit was paid. The work had now been completed but they had not received the full payment and the caller was concerned that the customer is trying to avoid paying. Specifically the caller wanted to know if he would be within his rights to take back the work. Questions were asked to clarify the details of the problem (e.g. when the work had been completed, whether the customer had accepted the work as being complete, etc) The caller was then directed to 'finance and grants/debt recovery/recover your debts' on the website which was an appropriate page for the

caller to use to review his options on debt recovery. The caller was not aware of the businesslink.gov.uk website before making the call and will use the website in the future. The caller was satisfied with the advice received.

Respondents indicating that were very or fairly dissatisfied with the service were asked why. In a significant number of cases callers were dissatisfied because the scope of the service did not match their expectations. Some believed that the service was too narrowly focused on signposting at the cost of providing more in-depth advice, as demonstrated in the quotes below:

*"Advisors were unable to provide any advice for me for what I thought was a general query, I was just provided with a list of links to other websites, some of which were not very helpful at all."*

*"I couldn't speak to an advisor about the business plan I've done - all the help I got was to be shown to a list of links on the website, most of which didn't help."*

*"The advisor I spoke to sent me an email that had 7 different links on it and it was confusing, I feel that the advisor should have provided more verbal business advice."*

Similarly, some callers were dissatisfied with the limited opportunities to speak to a specialist advisor, as illustrated by the quotes below:

*"Couldn't get a face to face service, would like something more personable and helpful."*

*"I asked for face to face advice but it was not available."*

*"When contacting Business Link in the past I had face to face contact with an advisor who took time to understand the business, and then put me in touch with appropriate support. The website in comparison is too generic and you can't find what you're looking for."*

*"The information I was looking for on the website wasn't comprehensive or clear, and the helpline didn't clarify anything, they just referred me back to the website. I asked if I could speak to a specialist advisor, but was told that wasn't an option."*

Respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with different aspects of the service received. These results are shown in numerical terms in the table below. The table shows the order of satisfaction ratings of the different aspects starting with the aspect of the service which received the highest rating.

**Table 4.2 Satisfaction with Aspects of the Service**

Aspects of the service	Percentage				
	Very Satisfied	Fairly Satisfied	Neither	Fairly Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
Staff sympathetic to needs and willing to help	56	27	8	5	2
The information / advice provided was impartial	48	23	15	5	5
Relevance to the needs of the business	41	24	12	10	11
The information/advice provided was sufficiently comprehensive	36	26	14	11	12
The information/advice provided was practical and useful	38	24	13	10	14
Satisfaction with levels of business knowledge	33	26	17	11	9
Value of the service to the business	33	21	16	12	15

Source: Customer Survey  
Base: All respondents (657)

As the table shows respondents were most satisfied with the general approach of the call agents in terms of being sympathetic to needs and being able to help while 'value of the service to the business' scores lowest on the satisfaction ratings. The qualitative responses suggest that some callers were dissatisfied because they could not find the support they needed which may have been a consideration in the rating for value of the service. However, as the response from one customer illustrates, this might relate to issues that are outside the scope of the Helpline service:

*“The helpline staff were very helpful and competent, but I didn’t find what I was looking for, namely sources of grants/funding for which my business would be eligible, because they don’t exist any more.”*



## 4.6 Summary of Key Findings

This section has focused on how far the Helpline is meeting the business support needs of customers. Key findings from the analysis and their implications are as follows:

- **Reasons for calling:** 'Obtaining finance and funding' and 'start-up advice' have been the most frequent reasons for calling the Helpline. The Helpline is limited in how far it can respond to many queries on finance and funding as the purpose of the service is to signpost callers to other Government programmes or 3<sup>rd</sup> party provision. For future monitoring purposes it would be useful to match the reasons on the CRM to businesslink.gov.uk topic areas as this would help to facilitate future analysis of website issues.
- **Assisting callers in navigating the new business support landscape:** There is a level of consistency in the way call agents respond to customer queries - while prioritising the need to refer callers to businesslink.gov.uk, the evidence is clear that call agents are able to tailor their responses to meet the specific needs of customers. The survey responses indicate that in the vast majority of cases customers are provided with the contact details of third party organisations or directed to relevant sections of the website. Just under half of all respondents plan to take up support from 3rd party organisations recommended by the Helpline. The high proportion of callers being signposted to 3rd party organisations and the call agents frequent use of the Knowledge Bank indicates that a significant proportion of these organisations do not have their specific details on the website. It is therefore unclear how callers could access this information and advice without the Helpline.
- **Use of BSAs and referral process:** The BSAs use their experience to provide appropriate advice in responding to the needs of customers with more complex needs. The most common reason for being referred to the BSAs is being located in a priority area such as an Enterprise Zone or area of multiple deprivation (50 percent of all referrals). The review of programme documents and consultations indicate that the rationale for including priority areas as a single trigger for referral needs to be examined; in particular it is not clear why being located in a priority area alone provides a sound reason for being provided with more in-depth support. The triggers were designed to ration the number of referrals to BSAs. However, we understand that BIS is proposing to relax the triggers to encourage higher utilisation of BSAs. The need to relax the triggers is supported by the customer survey which indicated that the proportion of callers who perceive that they are facing major issues or changes is significantly higher than the proportion of callers referred to BSAs. A significant number of these reported that they were introducing new products and services which could be included as an additional criteria under 'major change to business plan'.
- **Meeting needs of those that do not have internet access:** The Helpline is reaching businesses with slower internet access who would find it difficult to use the businesslink.gov.uk site and take-up from this group is higher than might be expected with reference to the proportion of businesses without broadband internet. There is

no data on access to the internet amongst pre-starts although the take up of the service by pre-starts with no internet access at all appears to be lower than expected. Currently, overall demand from pre-starts and businesses without internet access is very low although since the research the Department has undertaken steps to promote the service to non internet users through appropriate channels. Although numbers are small, the Helpline appears to adopt an appropriate approach in responding to those without internet access.

- **Satisfaction:** Customers are generally satisfied with the service: 69 percent reported that they were either 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied with the support received (which compares to 89 percent of customers of the regional Business Link service). Dissatisfaction appears to be linked to the Helpline's focus on information provision and signposting and the expectation that more intensive support should be available; this is supported by survey evidence which shows that satisfaction is lower amongst previous Business Link users. However, this needs to be viewed in the context of the overall funding reductions for universal business support provision and the transition to enhanced website provision. The evidence indicates that the approach of call agents supports digital transition and efficient delivery; however a significant proportion of customers (40 percent) call to obtain detailed advice which implies that the need to deliver an efficient service in the climate of public sector cost savings may be at the expense of higher satisfaction ratings.



## 5.0 Supporting the Digital Transition

### 5.1 Introduction

This section focuses on the extent to which the activities of the Helpline have increased awareness of, and engagement with, the Business Link website, and provides an indication of how far the Helpline has helped to influence a reduction in call volumes and requests for one to one support from the service.

A key objective of the Business Improvement Programme is to encourage businesses to make use of lower cost online services in the future, while facilitating those without web access to also obtain support available through [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk). A key element of the specific rationale for the Helpline is that there is a need for a contact centre, at least in the short to medium term, to help transition customers from the previous business support framework by signposting enquirers to relevant areas of the website.

The Terms of Reference for this assessment of the Helpline poses three questions in respect of how effectively the delivery of the Helpline is shifting demand towards [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk):

- Whether callers had visited the [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk) site and if so why they didn't get the information they were looking for: The Helpline is designed to respond to demand from three main groups: pre-starts and businesses who search [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk) and experience difficulties finding the information they need; individuals who have access to the internet but who generally they need encouragement to use the web for their information needs (due to limited awareness or use of the internet for business purposes for example); and, individuals who do not have access to the web. A key requirement of this assessment is to understand more about how callers to the Helpline are interacting with [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk).
- How far the helpline is helping to achieve channel shift by assisting callers to make more effective use of the website and highlighting the full range of information that is available: The intention is that as awareness, engagement and effective use of the website increases over time so The demand for information will be increasingly met through this channel and the call on the Helpline service will reduce over time. To help achieve this ambition and mitigate the risk that demand for business information and advice will decline in overall terms due to the reduction in face to face services, the Helpline's function is to signpost to the web for immediate support needs and, crucially, to demonstrate the wider offer (My new business and Growth and improvement service) to customers who contact the Helpline.
- Is the helpline picking up and feeding back any gaps in the information or tools available on the website to encourage continuous improvement: As noted, the content of [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk) is evolving and it is recognised that there may be gaps in information and scope to improve. The Helpline has a role capturing data on the reasons for calls to the Helpline and the extent to which this reflects deficiencies in

businesslink.gov.uk that could be addressed.

The main quantitative measures of effectiveness in achieving the digital transition are a reduction in repeat callers as well as an overall reduction in overall call volumes in the longer term and relevant data is considered at the end of this chapter. As noted, demand for the service has fluctuated to date and there will be a range of factors influencing overall demand for information and advice which may drive up the volume of calls to the Helpline, including BIS campaigns and possibly economic shocks. It is also relevant that whilst the long term aim is to reduce demand, the Helpline is currently being actively marketed to individuals without internet access, as well as being promoted on the businesslink.gov.uk website as a back-up whilst Businesslink.gov.uk is being fully developed and optimised.

This assessment provides an opportunity to examine how far the Helpline delivery processes are effective in achieving the planned changes as well as identifying potential improvements, focusing in particular on the internal factors identified above.

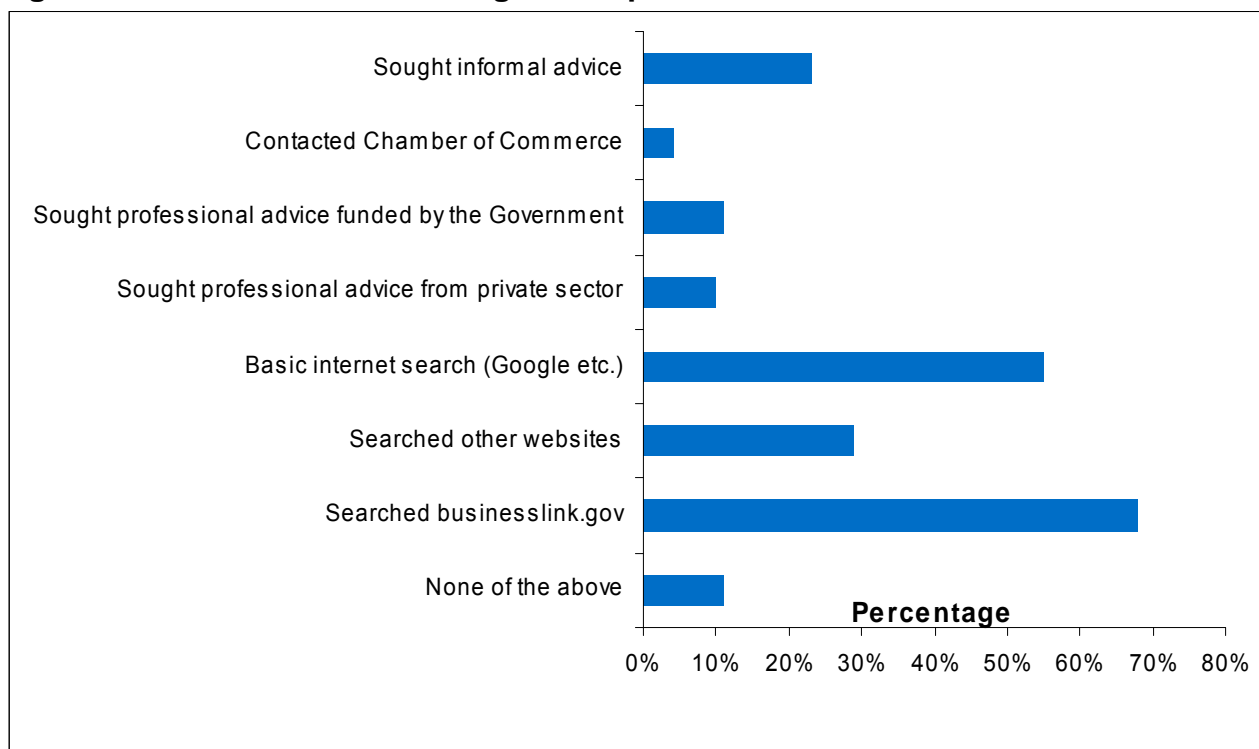
To address these questions, this section draws on evidence from the customer survey, specifically examining whether callers had visited the businesslink.gov.uk site and if so why they were not able to get the information they were looking for. It then goes on to consider the processes used by the Helpline to encourage the use of businesslink.gov.uk and whether the Helpline staff successfully enabled businesses to find what they needed or could provide the right information on the website. It then assesses whether the Helpline is helping to achieve channel shift by assisting callers to make more effective use of the website and highlighting the full range of information that is available. Finally, it examines how far the Helpline is improving the Business Link website by capturing customers' experience identifying issues and feeding information back to the website development team.

## 5.2 Awareness and Use of businesslink.gov.uk

This section focuses on awareness and use of businesslink.gov.uk prior to calling the Helpline. The purpose is to ascertain whether customers are calling the Helpline because of a lack of awareness of the website or problems in navigating the tools and finding the specific information they need and how these factors are driving demand for the Helpline service are being addressed.

The survey responses on website awareness and previous use indicate that the proportion of callers contacting businesslink.gov.uk who are unaware of businesslink.gov.uk is low (11 percent). With respect to categories of businesses, 11 percent of pre-starts were unaware of businesslink.gov.uk, falling to 8 percent and 6 percent amongst start-ups and established businesses respectively. However, this should be expected as the vast majority of callers found the Helpline number on the website. It indicates that the role of the Helpline in further raising awareness of businesslink.gov.uk through telephone contact is currently restricted to a relatively small number of businesses.

As the graph below shows, over two-thirds of respondents had searched businesslink.gov.uk before calling the Helpline while around 55 percent had undertaken basic internet searches on business support services. Overall, respondents were significantly more likely to undertake internet searches than seek advice from an organisation or person.

**Figure 5.1 Actions Before Calling the Helpline**

Source: Customer Survey

Base: All respondents (657)

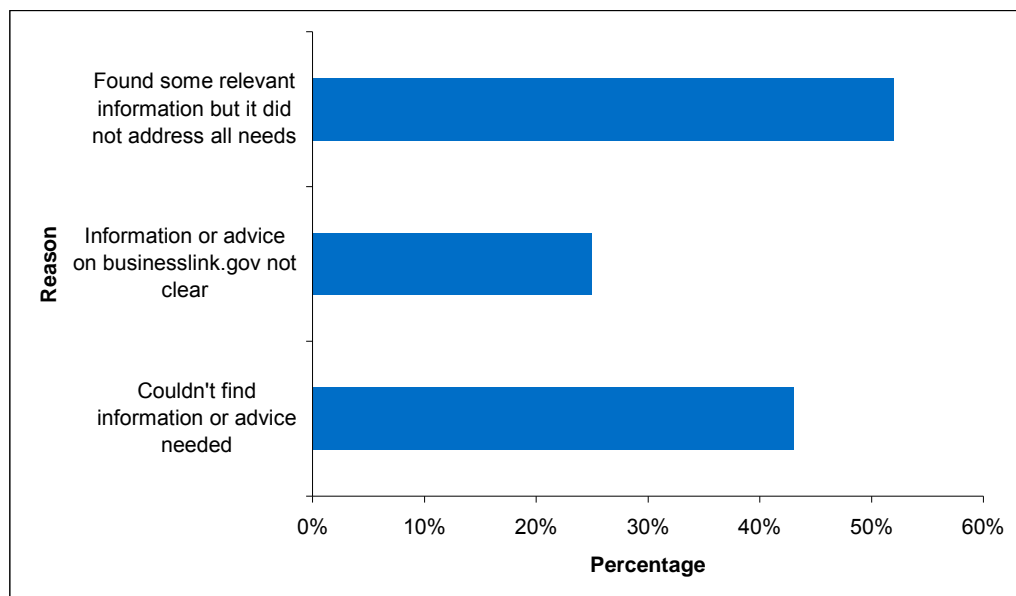
However, a significant proportion (44 percent) had searched businesslink.gov.uk for the first time before calling the Helpline while a further 15 percent had used the website only once previously in the last six months or year. This suggests that a significant proportion of callers is new to the website and have a low level of familiarity with the information and tools available. It also implies that regular users of the website are less likely to call the Helpline.

The majority of customers contacted the Helpline because they faced problems in finding specific information on businesslink.gov.uk. Interviews with call agents and case studies indicate that a significant proportion of callers have faced problems in navigating the website and identifying the pages that are most relevant to their needs. The interviews indicated that customers new to the website in particular often need guidance on navigating. The variety and scope of information available may be confusing to new users particularly those that are going into business for the first time. Call agents' experience is that some initial guidance can encourage some customers to get started on using the website and give them the confidence to use the website in the future while other callers require more detailed guidance on using the specific tools. The analysis below explores how far the Helpline has been able to identify solutions to information needs on the website.

Respondents that had searched the website were asked about the specific problems that they faced in accessing information. The purpose of this question was to understand the nature of the navigational problems faced by callers. The responses indicate that around a half had found some relevant information which did not fully address their information and advice needs. As shown in the graph below, just over 40 percent could not find the information they needed while around a quarter felt that the information on the website was not clear. There were no significant variations between the categories of business 59

on this question. The responses on accessing information on the website therefore suggest that a significant proportion of callers are undertaking detailed searches but face specific barriers in accessing relevant information.

**Figure 5.2 Reason for Calling Helpline after Using Website**



Source: Customer Survey

Base: Those searching businesslink.gov.uk previously (444)

The case study below illustrates how customers can be searching in the right area of the website but require some final guidance and reassurance that they are using the correct links.

### **Careline Call Agent Case Study – Direction to the Website**

The caller was a pre-start looking to set up a web and phone based recruitment agency. The caller was aware of the VAT threshold but wanted to know whether she should register from the start or wait until she knows how much turnover she is likely to make. The agent was also clear that he could not provide advice but would instead provide her with relevant links on the website. The caller was asked to open the website and the caller said that she already had it open. The caller was directed to the following pages in response to their query: 'Tax, payroll and company information\ VAT\ How and when to register for VAT'. The agent also suggested that 'useful tools and calculators' in this section would be helpful. The caller had previously looked for the answer to her query on the website but wanted confirmation from the Helpline that she was looking at the most relevant information. The caller reported that the call helped to improve her understanding of the information available on businesslink.gov.uk website and as a result of the call would be more likely to use businesslink.gov.uk as a first port of call for information in the future. Overall, the caller was satisfied with the support provided and found the call agent very helpful.

## 5.3 Helping Customers Find Information on the Website

This section focuses on whether Helpline is successfully enabling businesses to find what they need on [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk). As section 3 showed, central to the approaches of both the Careline Call Agents' and BSAs is promoting the website and signposting customers to relevant pages on the website. This is borne out by the Helpline monitoring data on call outcomes which indicates that 67 percent of customers are directed to [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk). More importantly, the customer survey data showed that almost half of respondents were directed to the information they needed on the website. However, there were some significant variations across the business categories – 57 percent of pre-starts were directed to information they needed on the website compared to 48 percent of start-ups and only 32 percent of established businesses. This provides a clear indication that the information needs of pre-starts can be more easily served by the website compared to established businesses who tend to have more complex requirements.

The evidence suggests that the approach of the Careline call agents is appropriate in helping customers find the information they need. It was reported to us that call agents adopt a structured approach to questioning and information / advice provision which initially focuses on whether callers are aware of or have previously accessed the [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) site. The call agents' first priority is to provide the information to callers by finding it on the website and identifying links which are relevant to the caller's needs. An example of how the call agents direct customers to the website is illustrated by the case study below.

### **Careline Call Agent Case Study – Improving understanding of the content of [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk)**

The caller was looking to start their own business, providing mobile beauty treatments. They had picked up a leaflet some time ago from a Business Link West Midlands event which included the (regional) helpline number. The leaflet said that 'essential guides' to starting a business were available so the caller contacted the helpline to request more information. The agent explained that changes to the BL service had taken place since then but that he would still be able to help. He asked the caller for more details on the documents she was looking for ('Starting Your Own Business' and 'Running Your Own New Business'). The caller was asked to open the website but was unable to do this as they were not near a computer. The agent explained that he could not source the exact documents the caller was looking for as they were no longer available but that there was relevant information on the [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) website. He explained briefly how to access the relevant information ('starting up' – 'starting a business: the basics' also 'what's new' – 'starting a business essential reading' (6 modules)) and also sent a follow-up email with details of and links to key documents on the website.

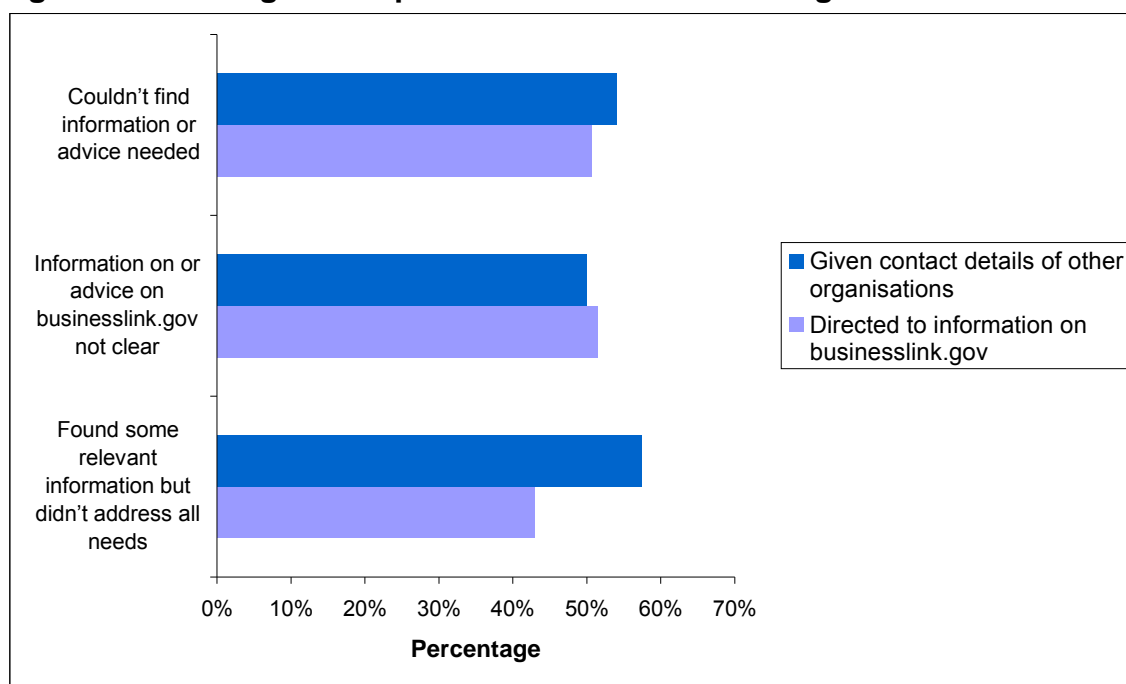
In the post-call interview the caller mentioned that she had a disability so could not easily get to her computer while on the phone, although this would not have prevented her from accessing information on the website if she had been sat in front of her computer. The caller was aware of the [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) website before making the call. However, the caller's understanding of the information available on [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) website improved as a result of their call to the Helpline. The caller was very satisfied with the service and was happy that the agent could email her some relevant information. The caller was also optimistic that the information will help in starting the business.

The case study above also shows that not having access to the internet when making the call does not appear to prevent the call agents from directing callers to [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk). This is supported by the survey data: of those that did not have access to the internet when they called the Helpline, 63 percent were directed to the website for information.

As indicated earlier, the interviews with call agents suggest that callers are strongly encouraged to use the internet even if they do not have access to the internet at home. For example, agents indicated that they encourage callers to use the internet at the local library. The agents send hard copies of the information in the post only if barriers to accessing the internet appear insurmountable, although the interview evidence suggests that these cases have been rare.

Returning to the specific problems that customers faced in accessing information, the graph below shows how far it was possible for call agents to direct customers to the website given the specific issues faced in accessing relevant information.

**Figure 5.3 Call Agent Responses to Customers Facing Different Needs**



Source: Customer Survey

Base: Those searching [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) previously (444)

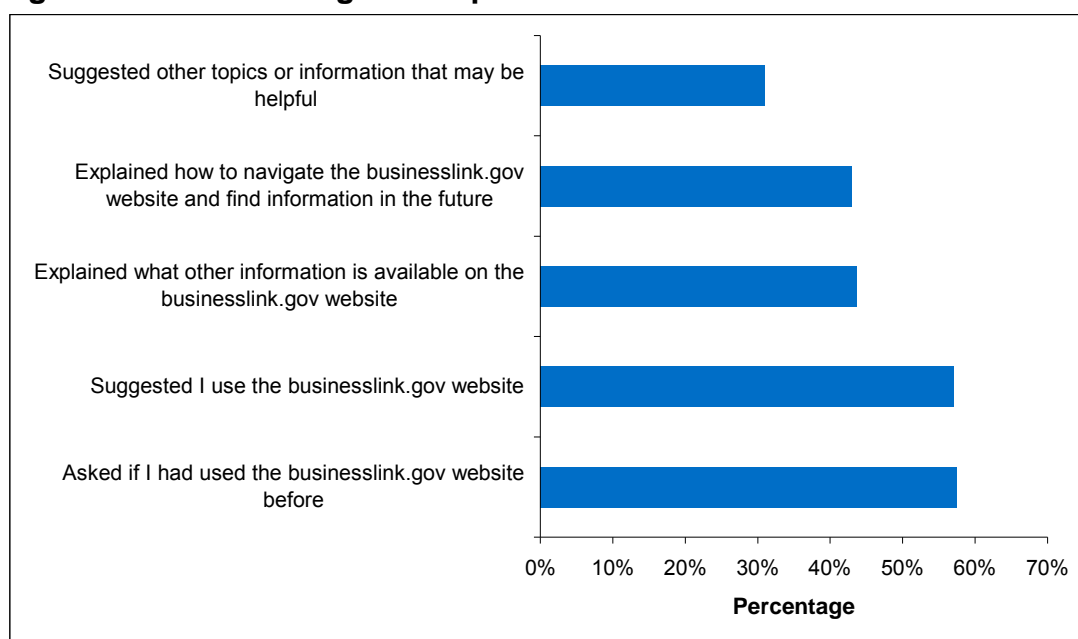
The graph shows that callers were more likely to be given contact details of other organisations and not directed to the website if they had found some relevant information which did not address all of their needs. This indicates that a significant proportion of callers did not have their needs addressed by being directed to the website alone. As indicated in section 4, call agents interviews and the case study evidence indicated that in this situation callers are likely to be given the contact details of local organisations which are kept on the Knowledge Bank and not the website.

## 5.4 Encouraging More Effective Use of the Website

This section focuses on the extent to which the helpline is helping to achieve channel shift by assisting callers to make more effective use of the website and highlighting the full range of information available.

As noted in section 3, central to the call agents approach is directing customers to the website and highlighting any additional information which might be relevant to the caller. This approach, which was reported in the interviews with Careline staff, is supported by survey responses on how the call agent responded to the calls, as shown in the graph below.

**Figure 5.4 How Call Agent Responds**



Source: Customer Survey  
Base: All respondents (657)

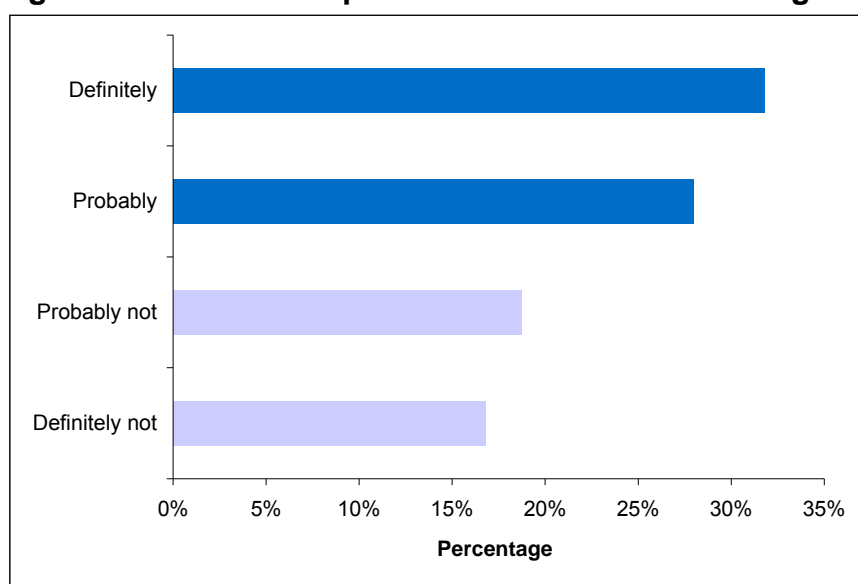
As the graph shows, 58 percent of callers were asked whether or not they had used the Business Link website before calling while 57 percent were advised to use the site and 43 percent were advised what other information is available on the site. The interviews and case studies indicate that pre-starts and start-ups with simple queries are often referred to the detailed content of 'My New Business' and established businesses are generally referred to the 'Growth and Improvement' section with a suggestion that the content would be useful. The case studies suggest that callers are happy to be given this additional guidance and the responses suggest that being given additional guidance on the website will make them more likely to use it in the future.

Given the expected role of the Helpline in raising awareness of the website, the question of why only 43 percent were advised what other information is available on the site needs to be addressed. As the graph below shows, nearly a third reported that their understanding had 'definitely' improved while a further 28 percent thought that it probably had. On this question there was some variation in terms of the type of support received: 22 percent of respondents in the 'basic query' category reported that the Helpline had definitely not increased their level of understanding of the information on the website



compared to 11 percent in the 'support and information' category. This suggests that call agents may be less inclined to provide additional information on the website when responding to basic queries and may partly explain why less than half of callers were advised what other information is available on the site. It should be recognised, however, that call agents are working within the constraints of the guidance on time limits and may in some circumstances feel obliged to close the call without promoting wider and/or future use of the website unless there is a clear steer to do so in each case. There may be some benefit in developing clearer guidance on the circumstances in which call agents should be expected to promote the website more widely, taking into account the costs involved to business of deliberate efforts on the part of Helpline staff to extend call.

**Figure 5.5 Has the Helpline Increased Understanding of the Website?**

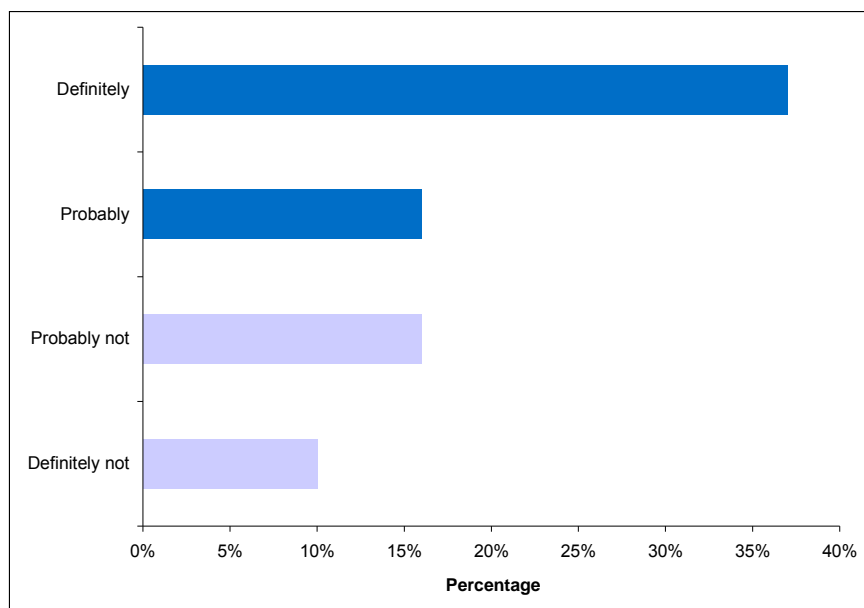


Source: Customer Survey  
Base: All respondents (657)

The survey findings suggest that the Helpline is being successful in encouraging callers to use the web for their future information needs. As a result of calling the Helpline, 37 percent of respondents will definitely use the website as their first port of call for information in the future while just under a third will probably use the website.



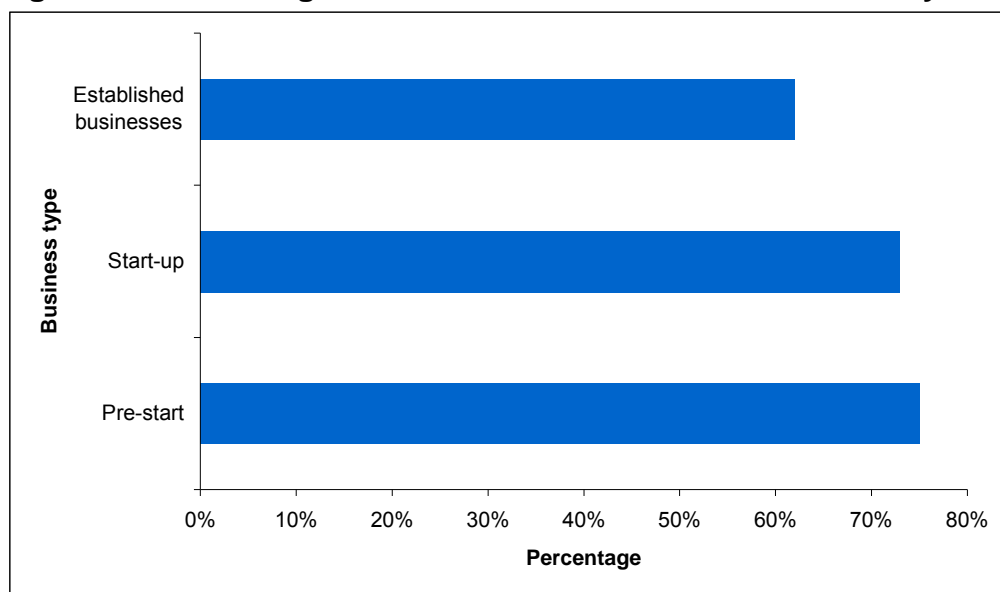
**Figure 5.6** Has the Helpline encouraged customers to use the website as first port of call?



Source: Customer Survey

Base: All respondents (657)

The survey responses indicate that as a result of using the Helpline, pre-starts and start-ups are significantly more likely than established businesses to use the website as a first port of call for information in the future, as displayed in the graph below. This provides further evidence that established business' perceive that their needs are less likely to be served by the website.

**Figure 5.7 Encouraged to Use Website as First Port of Call by Business Type**

Source: Customer Survey

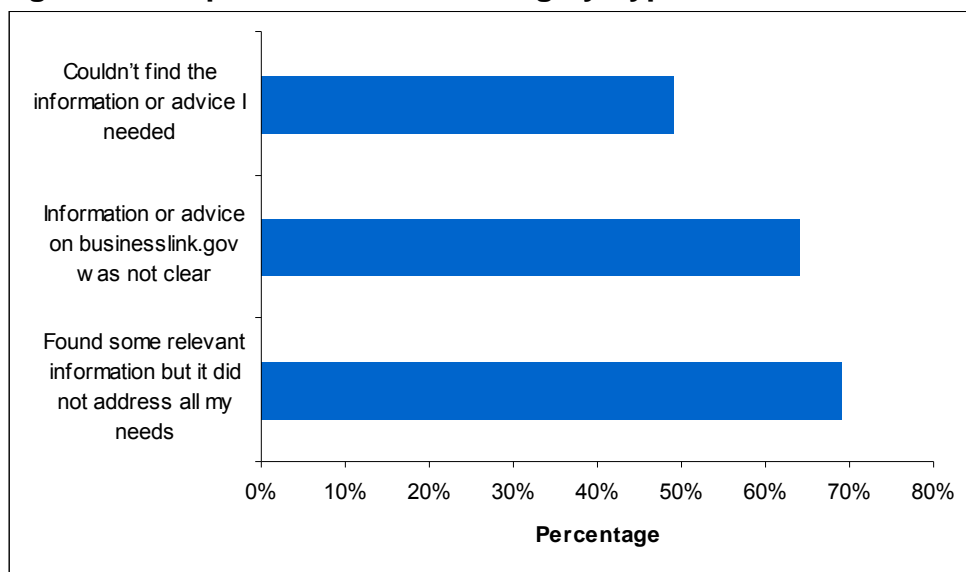
Base: All respondents (657)

Note: Percentage of those who will definitely or probably use website

As noted above, eleven percent of respondents were unaware of [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) prior to contacting the helpline; of those that were unaware of the website, 67 percent reported that their understanding had 'probably' or 'definitely' improved as a result of using the Helpline

As noted above, the scope of the Helpline to influence customers to use the website who have not previously used it is limited as a majority of callers only find the number when they use the website.

As the graph below shows, those customers that had found some relevant information on the website but not addressed all of their needs were more likely to benefit from the call in terms of increasing their understanding of the information available on the site than those who found the website information and advice unclear or could not find the information they needed. A likely explanation for this is that customers who have already found some relevant information are more likely to trust the information tools in the future than those who have faced problems in the past and are not skilled or inclined to use the website effectively.

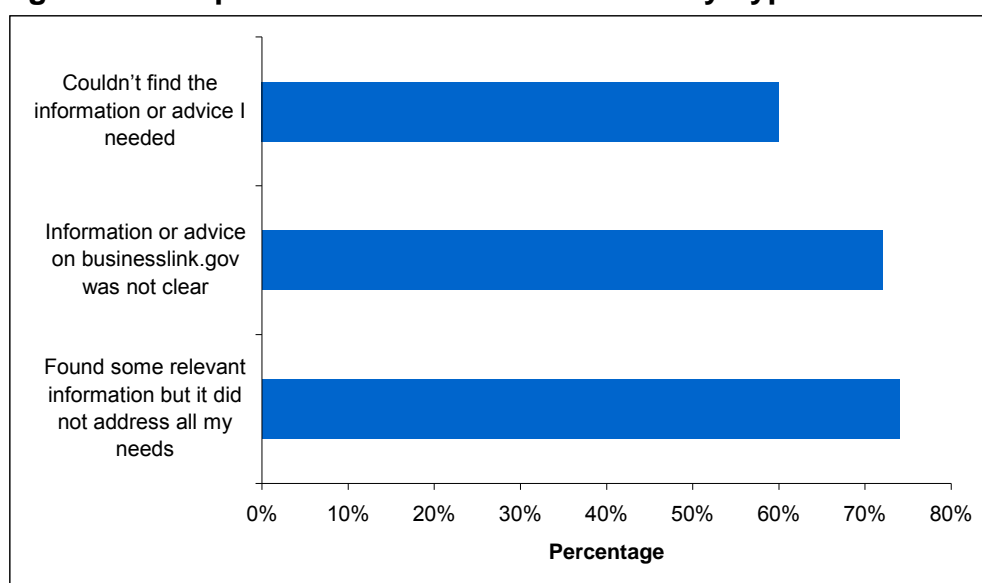
**Figure 5.8 Impact on Understanding by Type of Need**

Source: Customer Survey

Base: Those who searched businesslink.gov.uk before calling the Helpline (444)

Note: Percentage of those whose understanding definitely or probably increased

Similarly those that had found relevant information would be more likely to use businesslink.gov.uk as the first port of call for information in the future, as shown below.

**Figure 5.9 Impact on Future Use of Website by Type of Need**

Source: Customer Survey

Base: Those who searched businesslink.gov.uk before calling the Helpline (444)

Note: Percentage who will definitely or probably use website

The results above suggest that for the group who couldn't find the information and advice on the website, it is more challenging for the Helpline to either point them to the right information or encourage them to use the website. It has been reported to us that there is a category of callers with internet access that are more difficult to convince of the usefulness of the website. One interviewee attributed this to the specific learning styles of customers – while some people are very comfortable with using the website to obtain information and advice, there are some who prefer to speak an agent to get

confirmation or to talk through their issues in detail. Taking into account the proportion of BSA referrals, which provides an indication of the proportion of genuine challenges faced by businesses, there would seem to be a significant proportion of customers who face barriers to using the website despite having internet access.

## 5.5 Encouraging Continuous Improvement in [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk)

This section examines how far the Helpline is improving the Business Link website by capturing customers' experience identifying issues and feeding information back to the website development team.

As noted in section 2, a continuous improvement / knowledge management framework is currently in the process of development. Continuous Improvement review meetings are scheduled to review recommendations about content improvement, service improvement and to identify key trends and topics. Interviewees reported that the meetings have helped to focus efforts on developing suitable feedback mechanisms.

The review meetings to date have identified a number of ways of improving information flows and feedback loops between the Helpline and Serco User Support Team (UST) (Website) teams including:

- As noted, BE-UK have given access to the Knowledge Bank to the Serco UST and BE-UK feedback on any updates to the knowledge bank and make recommendations regarding website updates.
- Serco UST and Careline are to finalise the process for dealing with multi-part queries – in particular the standard text for responding to technical queries raised alongside content queries.
- Appropriate links to technical guidance in the Serco UST will be shared with Careline.
- Careline will let the group know what their agents' top 5 recommended changes to the site are.

Evidence indicates that the Helpline teams have been proactive in identifying areas where callers have faced problems with navigation. For example, through a paper to the Continuous Improvement meeting, Helpline advisors have reported that information around training opportunities are very general as callers have identified some more specific tools. The paper also reports on ways of simplifying the layout of the website to make the pages easier to use.

There are also opportunities for call agents to report any caller issues with the website via the website feedback tool. Alternatively, Careline call agents and BSAs can feedback through their team leaders to the BE-UK knowledge managers. Recommended changes are then communicated to the contractor for [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk) via the Knowledge Bank. We have been informed that currently there is only a basic maintenance contract in place which means that only priority areas identified for improvement are currently being acted upon. In these circumstances there is limited value in the activities of the Helpline is seeking to identify aspects related to deficiencies or gaps in web content that are contributing to the demand for calls. This is clearly a barrier to achieving the overall

objectives of digital transition and we understand that BIS is attempting to resolve this issue through dialogue with HMRC.

Qualitative responses to the customer survey highlighted particular topics where customers tend to prefer to talk to an agent and which may provide an indication of areas where website information could be developed or made clearer. Topics highlighted by at least a few respondents included legal issues associated with starting a business and support in moving into particular overseas markets for example China or India.

## 5.6 Impact on Call Volumes and Repeat Calls

If Helpline is being successful in encouraging callers to use the web for their future information needs it should be expected that callers will be less likely to call the Helpline again in the future. An objective of the Helpline which is linked to promoting the Business Link website to callers is therefore to reduce the number of customers contacting the Helpline more than once and to see a reduction in call volumes in the longer-term. As indicated in section 2, the SLA target for 'repeat callers' generated will be no more than 3 percent of total calls answered. This target will be reviewed in line with the agreed definition of repeat callers and the method of measurement and will not be applicable until Year 2.

The survey data can be used to estimate the number of repeat callers to Helpline to date. Respondents were asked to report how frequently they called the Business Link Helpline. If they reported they had never called before, or had called once per quarter or less frequently, it can be assumed that they have not made more than one call to the Helpline since the launch. The survey results therefore suggest that 4 percent of callers have called the Helpline more than once since the Helpline launch date.

As noted, the data indicates that call volumes have been relatively stable in recent weeks albeit well below expected levels. However a reduction in call volumes should be seen as a longer term objective which allows time for the service to bed in and for the effects of the website and Helpline promotional activity to take effect.

As was shown in section 3, using the proxy of callers with internet access that have been directed to the website, the monitoring data suggests that the number of avoidable callers has been steady in the early months of the service. This will need to be monitored in future months as it provides an indication of the scope to reduce demand by optimising the web and encouraging web use.

## 5.7 Summary of Findings

This section has focused on the role of the Helpline in supporting the Government's objective of digital transition. The key findings and implications can be summarised as follows:

- **Awareness of [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk):** The survey revealed that only a small minority of callers are not aware of [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk). However, this should be expected as the majority of callers find the Helpline number through using the website. Based upon the evidence collected for this study, it is not possible to be conclusive on the total number of potential customers who are unaware of the website and therefore how far there is an untapped demand for the Helpline service.

- **Helping businesses to use businesslink.gov.uk:** A high proportion of callers had visited the businesslink.gov.uk site but could not find the information they needed or they required further guidance on accessing specific information and tools. Just under 50 percent of the respondents reported that they were directed to information on the website that meets their needs which indicates a fairly successful rate given that many callers are likely to be facing complex needs. This suggests that the Helpline is meeting demand for navigational guidance on the website although it is too early to say if the same callers will need to contact the Helpline again at some future date.
- **Promoting businesslink.gov.uk:** The call agents' approach is commensurate with digital transition objectives as their primary aim is to direct callers to the website and their approach incorporates a strong focus on promoting other relevant website tools. However, a significant proportion of callers (over 50 percent) were not given more general advice on the website tools available. The evidence indicates that the guidance on time limitations may restrict the agents' ability to promote the website tools more generally.
- **Encouraging businesses to use businesslink.gov.uk:** The survey indicates that Helpline is influencing callers to make more effective use of the website: 37 percent will definitely use businesslink.gov.uk as first port of call for information and just under a third probably will, therefore 70 percent are more likely to use the website as the first port of call in the future.
- **Overcoming barriers to website use:** The survey has revealed that significant numbers of customers with internet access remain reluctant to use to web-based provision and continue to prefer one to one support. This highlights a particular challenge of encouraging such callers to use the website in the future. As noted above, there is capacity within the service for call agents to spend more time on promoting the website and providing more detailed advice on the benefits of using particular modules which may help to address this particular issue.

## 6.0 Economic Impacts and Time Savings

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### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the economic impact of the Business Link helpline on both pre-starts and existing businesses.

The main mechanism for achieving economic benefits is encouraging callers to take action to realise business performance improvements as a result of information and advice received either directly through the Helpline or take up of support provided through third party support. As the logic chain in section 2 indicates, the Helpline can help to influence pre-starts to form a new business or help established businesses to make improvements that result in cost savings or increases in turnover. The Helpline can also lead to potential benefits through time or cost savings as a result of callers using the service rather than paying or having to search for other services. It is worth stressing that there was very little elapsed time between the Helpline advice and the survey interviews which implies that the analysis may underestimate the final realised benefits of the support. The particular benefits of the BSAs, which are assumed to have a stronger relationship with direct economic outcomes, are examined through qualitative evidence.<sup>9</sup>

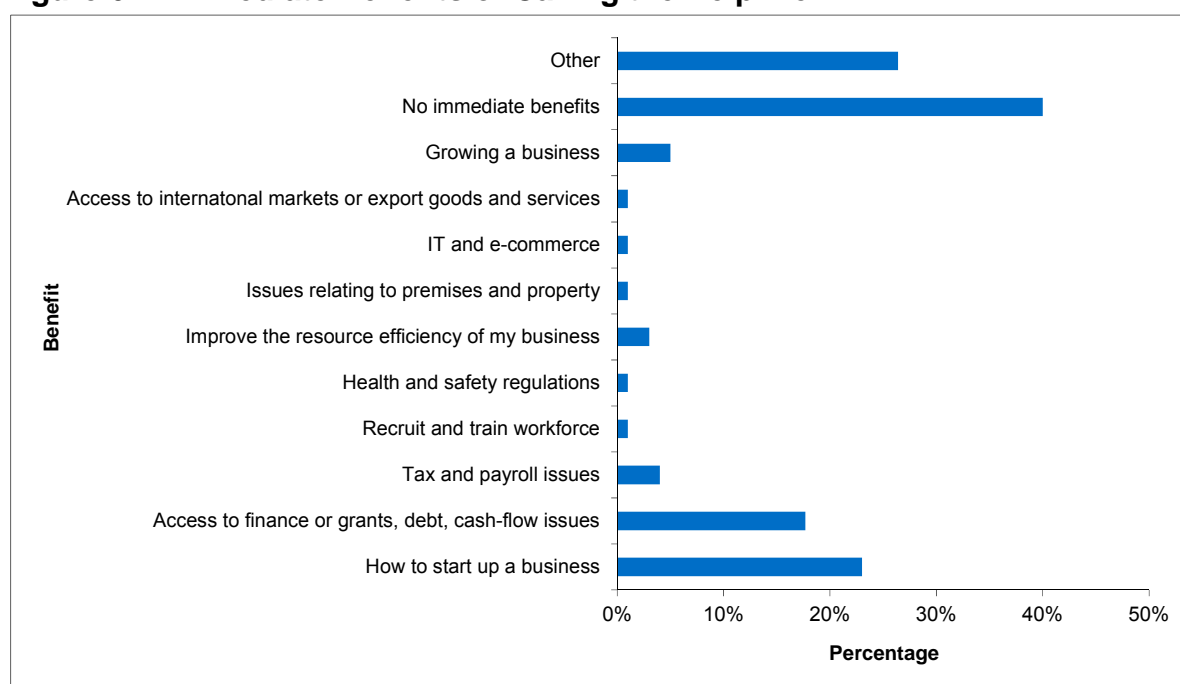
It is important to reiterate that this is an early assessment of the Helpline in particular the customer survey, which the economic impact assessment is based upon, was carried out shortly after the customer had called the Helpline. It is therefore too early to assess the benefits in full though the results provide an indication of the potential economic benefits of the service.

### 6.2 Intermediate Benefits to Businesses

Economic benefits flow from the specific actions undertaken by pre-starts and established businesses as a result of calling the Helpline. Respondents were asked what the immediate benefits of calling the Business Link helpline were and any information received. A summary of the responses are set out in the graph below.

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<sup>9</sup> The analysis of economic impacts is based on the survey of callers to the Business Link Helpline over the period w/c 28 November 2011 to w/c 13 February 2012, as detailed in Annex 2. The results have been grossed up on the basis of analysis of the number of unique callers as set out in section 3.

**Figure 6.1 Immediate Benefits of Calling the Helpline**

Source: Customer Survey

Base: All respondents (657)

The most common benefits related to the more general categories of 'how to start up a business' and 'growing a business'. Nearly 20 percent of callers indicated that the Helpline supported them on access to finance or grants, debt or cash flows issues where there is potentially a stronger and more direct relationship with economic benefits through the growth and safeguarding of employment. A smaller proportion of respondents reported other benefits which may also have a more direct relationship with economic benefits. These include 'access to international markets' and 'IT and e-commerce'. The graph shows that 40 percent did not perceive that they had gained any immediate benefits.

Respondents in the BSA category were more likely to report benefits under 'other' where responses tended to indicate more specific benefits and demonstrate a stronger potential relationship with economic benefits.

### BSA Case Study – Overcoming Financial Difficulties

The caller was from a farming business which was facing financial difficulties as a result of problems in the company partnership. The caller required funds to invest in the farm, including urgent maintenance work and purchase of new machinery to improve productivity. The BSA identified two types of support needed. On the legal side, the BSA advised that the customer speak to her business lawyers about dissolving the partnership as Business Link could not give legal advice. On the funding side, the customer was signposted to the helpline number for Defra as well as information on other sources of funding in the customer's locality. The BSA used her knowledge and background research, and diagnosed the key issues affecting the business through asking and listening to the customer. Generally, the BSA did not give a definitive answer to the caller's query but encouraged the customer to think through the options and decide what was best for the



business. The BSA also ensured that the customer's expectations were realistic with regard to the financial support that might be available. The caller was very satisfied with the service – "it ticks all the boxes" and felt more positive about finding solutions after speaking to the Helpline. In the post call interview the caller commented that the advice could potentially enable the company to increase its productivity although this would depend on successfully accessing grant money to pay for new machinery.

## 6.3 Availability of Alternative Sources of Information

It is important to consider how far callers may have found similar information or advice from an alternative source in order to assess how far similar outcomes would have been achieved in the absence of support. Respondents to the survey were asked to report if they would have obtained the information and advice received from somewhere else if the Business Link helpline had not been available. The majority of respondents said they reported that they were either likely or very likely to have found similar information and advice from alternative sources. Of these, over half (57 percent) would have found this information on other websites (although only 11% would have used [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk)), 20 percent would have used advice funded by the Government, and 14 would have used professional third party advice in the private sector. Using the assumptions set out in the table below, it is estimated that between 33 and 39 percent of callers would not have found similar information or advice elsewhere depending on the customer group.

**Table 6.1 Additionality of Support**

If the Business Link Business Link helpline was unavailable, how likely is that you would have obtained the information and advice you received somewhere else?	Customer group				Assumed probability respondents would not have obtained similar advice elsewhere
	Pre-start – early stages (%)	Pre-start – in process of establishing in business (%)	Start-up (%)	Established business (%)	
Very likely	28	31	30	28	0
Likely	44	32	43	37	0.25
Unlikely	21	27	19	23	0.75
Very unlikely	6	10	8	12	1
<b>Estimated percentage that would not have found similar advice elsewhere</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>36</b>

Source: Customer survey

## 6.4 Cost Savings

Customers may have made a cost saving through contacting the Helpline if they would have otherwise paid for the information and advice they received. Some 18 percent of respondents reporting that they would have obtained similar advice and support elsewhere said that they would have otherwise paid for the advice they received and made savings as a result. These callers reported an average saving of £168 (median of £100). There is some uncertainty as to whether callers reported these savings with respect to all calls they had made to the Helpline or to their most recent single call made to the Helpline alone. If these savings are assumed to accrue on a call by call basis, a total cost savings are estimated at between £109,000 and £184,000. If instead, respondents are assumed to have reported all savings made, this range falls to £91,000 to £152,000.

Additionally, there is considerable uncertainty over these results: the majority of respondents were unable to estimate how much they would have paid for relevant services and average cost savings are based on just 21 observations. Estimated total savings are limited relative to the cost of the Helpline and suggest that the Business Link helpline is not inefficient crowding out the private sector support.

**Table 6.2 Cost Savings**

	Unique callers	All callers
Number of callers	7,942	9,572
Percentage that would have obtained similar support or advice elsewhere	0.64	0.64
Percentage that would have paid for the information and advice received	0.18	0.18
Average cost saving reported (£, median in brackets)	168 (100)	168 (100)
<b>Total savings (£, estimates based on median in brackets)</b>	<b>152,306 (90,849)</b>	<b>183,563 (109,494)</b>

Source: Customer Survey, Ecorys Analysis (insufficient observations to break results down by customer group)

## 6.5 Economic Impacts: Pre-Starts

The Business Link helpline will have an economic impact amongst pre-starts where the support provided enables callers to start their business. The survey of respondents was delivered only a few weeks after many callers had contacted the Helpline, and the bulk of respondents had not yet started their business (around 70 percent), although a small share had already done so (17 percent). Around 13 percent were either not planning to start a business, or had actively decided against doing so. If these patterns hold true for the general population of callers<sup>10</sup>, then around 710 callers may have started businesses with 3,000 still planning to do so.

<sup>10</sup> The survey did not cover early callers to the Helpline, so this might underestimate the proportions that have started a business.

**Table 6.3 Gross numbers starting or planning to start a business**

Since you contacted the Business Link Business Link Helpline, Have you started or are you planning to start your business?	Pre-start – early stages (%)	Pre-start – in process of establishing in business (%)	Total (%)	Estimated number of callers *
Yes – have already done so	12	26	17	710
Yes – planning to do so	71	66	70	2977
No	12	8	11	456
Have decided not to start business	5	0	3	139
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>4,283</b>

Source: Ecorys Analysis, \* estimated by applying the survey responses by customer group to estimated numbers of unique callers

A large proportion of respondents felt that the support they received from the Business Link helpline had an important or very important influence on their decisions or plans to start a business, as set out in the table below. The assumptions set out in the table below were applied these results to provide an indicative estimate of the influence of the Business Link helpline may have had (or will have) on the probability callers start a business, which suggest the service may have a strong role in around 60 percent of cases (although these results are highly speculative, since the outcome of interest had not yet occurred for most respondents).

**Table 6.4 Importance of Business Link helpline support in plans to start businesses**

How important was the information and advice you received in your decisions or plans to start your business?	Pre-start – early stages (%)	Pre-start – in process of establishing in business (%)	Assumed probability respondent would not start business without support
Very important	30	39.0	1
Important	34	24.8	0.75
Not very important	21.4	15.2	0.25
Not at all important	14.3	21.0	0
<b>Estimated percentage of businesses that would not start without Helpline support</b>	<b>0.61</b>	<b>0.61</b>	

Source: Ecorys Analysis

The table below provides an indication of how many additional businesses may have been started as a direct result of support provided by the Business Link helpline. It is estimated that 160 businesses have started as a result of Helpline support, and a further 640 may emerge in the future (this latter figure is likely to be subject to substantial degree of optimism bias).

**Table 6.5 Gross additional businesses starting as a result of Helpline support**

	Pre-start – early stages	Pre-start – in process of establishing	Total
<b>Total callers</b>	<b>2,879</b>	<b>1,403</b>	<b>4,283</b>
% that would not have found similar information elsewhere	0.33	0.38	
% of callers starting a business	0.12	0.26	
% of businesses that would not have started without support	0.61	0.61	
<b>Gross additional businesses started</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>86</b>	<b>155</b>
% of callers planning to start a business	0.71	0.66	
<b>Potential gross additional businesses started</b>	<b>416</b>	<b>219</b>	<b>635</b>

*Source: Ecorys Analysis (estimates of additional businesses started based on applying the estimated percentage that have started or plan to start a business, the percentage that would not found similar information elsewhere, and the percentage that would not have started without support to estimated numbers of callers.*

In terms of financial impacts, respondents starting a business were asked to report expected annual turnover over the first year of operation. The majority felt that it is was too early to say, but the few<sup>11</sup> that were able to respond expected annual revenues below the VAT threshold (£73,000), and average turnover of £36,500 (the mid point of this range) has been assumed. If this holds true across callers, then additional turnover of £5.6m might be expected from those businesses established to date, and a further £23.1m from businesses that might be established in the future. On the basis of a GVA to turnover ratio of £0.30<sup>12</sup>, these effects could translate to £1.7m amongst businesses started to date and £7.0m in GVA impacts in the future – although these estimates are purely indicative at this stage<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> Only 8 respondents were able to provide an expectation of annual revenues.

<sup>12</sup> Reflecting the relationship between turnover and GVA across the whole economy as shown in the Annual Business Survey (ONS).

<sup>13</sup> Pre-starts were also asked to report employment, but there was no evidence that any more than a small proportions had any recruitment plans, so possible employment effects have been ignored.

**Table 6.6 Indicative gross additional turnover and GVA effects**

	Businesses started to date	Potential businesses	Total
<b>Estimated gross additional businesses</b>	155	635	790
Assumed average turnover per annum (£)	36,500	36,500	
<b>Gross additional turnover (£m per annum)</b>	<b>5.6</b>	<b>23.1</b>	<b>28.8</b>
GVA : Turnover ratio	0.329	0.329	
<b>Gross additional GVA created (£m per annum)</b>	<b>1.7</b>	<b>7.0</b>	<b>8.7</b>

Source: Ecorys Analysis

## 6.6 Economic Impacts: Existing Businesses

The Business Link helpline may have further economic impacts through supporting existing businesses to implement improvements the way they run their businesses, resulting in enhanced sales or reduced costs. The survey suggested that around 30 percent of established businesses calling had made some form of improvement to the way they run their business, with a further 35 percent planning to do so, as illustrated in the table below. Overall, start-up firms were more likely than established businesses to have made or have plans to make improvements to their business.

**Table 6.7 Callers making or planning to make improvements to their business**

Since you contacted the Business Link Business Link helpline, have you or do you plan implement any actions to improve the performance of your business?	Percentage of respondents	Estimated number of callers *
Yes – have already done so	29	667
Yes – planning to do so	34	784
No	36	821
Have stopped trading	1	16

Source: Caller Survey, Ecorys Analysis \* results have been weighted to reflect differences between start-ups and established businesses

Respondents to survey were asked how important the information and advice they received in their plans to implement improvements to their business, and high proportion of callers suggested that the information they received was very important or important. To reach an indicative estimate of the importance of the support provided in helping

businesses to implement improvements to their businesses, the assumptions set out in the table below were applied – leading to an estimate that support was critical in plans to deliver support in around 60 percent of cases.

**Table 6.8 Importance of Business Link helpline support in helping callers to implement improvements to their business**

How important was the information and advice you received in your decisions or plans to implement these actions?	Percentage of respondents	Assumed probability respondent would not have taken action without support
Very important	40	1
Important	21	0.75
Not very important	16	0.25
Not at all important	23	0
<b>Estimated percentage of businesses that would not have made improvements without support received</b>	<b>0.60</b>	

Source: Caller Survey, Ecorys Analysis \* results have been weighted to reflect differences between start-ups and established businesses

The table below provides an indication of what these results imply for total volumes of businesses implementing improvements as a result of the Business Link helpline. Overall it is estimated that around 238 callers had implemented changes to their business as a result of support received (about 6 percent of callers) and a further 280 were planning to do so (about 8 percent of callers).

**Table 6.9 Businesses making improvements as a result of the support received**

	Businesses already implementing changes	Businesses planning to implement changes	Total
<b>Estimated number of callers improving their business</b>	<b>1067</b>	<b>1258</b>	<b>2325</b>
Percentage that would not have found support from an alternative source *	0.37	0.37	
Percentage that would not have made improvements without support received	0.60	0.60	
<b>Estimated number of businesses making improvements as a result of the support received</b>	<b>238</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>518</b>

Source: Ecorys Analysis - \* weighted to reflected differences between start-ups and established businesses

Finally, the survey asked respondents to report how they expected any changes they had made (or planned to make) to have an impact on their business in three areas: turnover, costs, and employment. Over half of those making improvements reported they expected to see significant changes in their turnover and (or) costs, while a further 40 percent expected recruit new workers as a result.

The average size of these effects were expected to be modest, with average effects on sales of £31,000 per annum, average effects on costs of £3,400 per annum, and average effects on employment of 1.7 additional workers. Median effects tended to be lower than average effects, suggesting impacts were concentrated amongst a small proportion of firms. However, many respondents found it difficult to speculate as to likely impacts on performance, and these findings should be treated as indicative as estimates of average effects are in many cases based on small numbers of observations.

**Table 6.10 Improvements in business performance expected from improvements**

Do you expect these changes to have a significant effect on your turnover, costs, or employment?	Turnover (£ per annum)	Costs (£ per annum)	Employment	Assumed probability impacts will be achieved
Definitely	24	25	18	1
Probably	31	29	25	0.75
Probably not	20	23	16	0.25
Definitely not	24	23	40	0
<b>Estimated percentage of businesses expecting to see impacts as a result of changes</b>	53	52	41	-
<b>Size of effects</b>				
Average effect	31,063	3,373	1.7	-
Median effect	21,471	1,000	1.0	-

Source: Ecorys Analysis - \* weighted to reflected differences between start-ups and established businesses

The table below provides an indication of the total potential economic impact of support provided to existing businesses. Total gross additional GVA impacts of between £1.9m and £3.2m (depending on whether results are driven by mean or median effects) are expected across both those that had implemented improvements to their business and those that were planning to do so.

**Table 6.11 Indicative Economic Impacts**

Actual effects	Turnover	Costs	Employment	Total
<b>Effects associated with businesses already making improvements</b>				
Number of firms seeing effects*	125	125	98	-
Total effects (£m per annum, workers)	3.9 (2.7)	0.4 (0.1)	169	-
GVA Turnover ratio	0.3	0.81 <sup>14</sup>	-	-
Gross additional GVA impacts (£m per annum)	<b>1.2 (0.8)</b>	<b>0.3 (0.1)</b>	-	<b>1.5 (0.9)</b>
<b>Effects associated with businesses planning to make improvements</b>				
Number of firms seeing effects*	125	125	98	-
Total effects (£m per annum, workers)	4.6	0.5	200	-
GVA Turnover ratio	0.3	0.81	-	-
Gross additional GVA impacts (£m per annum)	1.4 (0.9)	0.4 (0.1)	-	1.8 (1.0)
<b>Total GVA effects</b>	<b>2.5 (1.7)</b>	<b>0.7 (0.2)</b>		<b>3.2 (1.9)</b>

Source: Ecorys Analysis - weighted to reflected differences between start-ups and established businesses, figures in brackets are driven by median estimates of impacts. \* number of firms seeing effects estimated by the number of business making improvements and proportion reporting that they expect to see an effect.

## 6.7 Displacement

The survey of callers to the Business Link helpline was also used to explore how far any economic impacts were likely to be displacing (i.e. achieved at the expense of other UK based competitors). Two approaches to estimating displacement are outlined in BIS guidance. The more straightforward of the two explores the extent to which firms' customers are based in the UK, and the extent to which firms' competitors (by market share) are based in the UK<sup>15</sup>. Survey evidence suggested Helpline callers primarily operated in domestic markets with strong competition from other UK based firms: on average, respondents reported 94 percent of both their sales and competition were in

<sup>14</sup> Cost reductions translate to GVA impacts if they are achieved through reductions in expenditure on intermediate goods and services. Across the whole economy, 81 percent of total input costs are accounted for intermediate goods and services and it is assumed that this pattern holds for Helpline callers.

<sup>15</sup> See RDA Evaluation: Practical Guidance on Implementing the Impact Evaluation Framework



domestic markets, indicative of high displacement (89 percent<sup>16</sup>) – this finding did not vary across customer groups.

BIS Enterprise Directorate guidance outlines a more involved approach: respondents were surveyed to establish (1) the overall extent of competition they faced for their main products and services, (2) how far they expected their sales to be taken up by competitors over the next 12 months (in the event they were to cease trading), and (3) the geographical location of these competitors.

The majority of both pre-starts (that had started in business) and established business reported they faced a degree of competition in markets, with competition reported to be more intense for existing businesses. Overall, 91 percent of pre-starts and 96 percent of existing businesses faced some level of competition for their products.

**Table 6.12 Intensity of competition faced by callers for products sold**

Response	Pre-starts	Existing Businesses	Displacement
Very intense competition	15	24	Some
Intense competition	23	27	
Moderate competition	42	34	
Weak competition	11	11	
No competition at all	9	4	None
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	-
% seeing displacement	91	96	-

Source: Ecorys Analysis - \* weighted to reflected differences between start-ups and established businesses

Respondents facing competition reported that a high proportion of competitors would be taken up by competitors in the event they ceased trading over a 12 month period. Using the assumptions in the table below, it is estimated that 55 percent of pre-start's and 72 percent of established business's sales would be taken up by competitors (if they were to cease trading). 92 and percent of pre-starts and 95 percent of established businesses reported that the majority of their competitors were based in the UK, giving overall estimates of displacement of 46 percent and 66 percent respectively<sup>17</sup>. These estimates are lower than suggested above, but still indicative of high rates of displacement.

<sup>16</sup> I.e.  $0.94 \times 0.94$ .

<sup>17</sup> I.e.  $0.91 \times 0.55 \times 0.91 = 0.46$  and  $0.96 \times 0.72 \times 0.95 = 0.66$ .

**Table 6.13 Percentage of sales that would be taken up by competitors in the event callers ceased trading over a 12 month period**

Response	Pre-starts	Existing Businesses	Displacement
Yes – all our sales	43	55	1
Yes – some of them	24	34	0.5
No – no one would take up our sales	33	10	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	
% of sales potentially displaced	55	72	

Source: Ecorys Analysis - \* weighted to reflected differences between start-ups and established businesses

## 6.8 Net impacts on GVA per annum

Estimates of the net economic impacts of the Business Link helpline per annum are set out in the table below, applying the range for displacement outlined above. Net impacts on GVA (covering both those associated with those starting businesses and those making improvements to their business, and those planning to do so in the future) for pre-starts are estimated at between £0.9m and £4.4m for pre-starts, and between £0.2m and £1.0m for established businesses. Given the highly speculative nature of these estimates, no assumption has been made on the future persistence of these effects (i.e. effects are assumed to endure for one year only) in the table below.

**Table 6.14 Net GVA impacts per annum**

Net impacts	Pre-start		Established		Total	
Displacement	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High
<b>Actual GVA effects</b>						
Gross additional GVA impact	1.7		1.5 (0.9)		3.1 (2.6)	
Displacement	0.46	0.89	0.66	0.90	-	-
<b>Net GVA impact</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>0.2</b>	<b>0.5 (0.3)</b>	<b>0.2 (0.1)</b>	<b>1.4 (1.2)</b>	<b>0.4 (0.3)</b>
<b>Potential GVA effects</b>						
Gross additional GVA impacts	6.9		1.8 (1.1)		8.7 (8.0)	
Displacement	0.46	0.89	0.66	0.90	-	-
<b>Net GVA impact</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>0.6 (0.4)</b>	<b>0.2 (0.1)</b>	<b>4.4 (4.1)</b>	<b>1.0 (0.9)</b>
<b>One year survival rates</b>	<b>0.94</b>	<b>0.94</b>	<b>0.88</b>	<b>0.88</b>		
<b>Total GVA effects</b>	<b>4.4</b>	<b>0.9</b>	<b>1.0 (0.6)</b>	<b>0.3 (0.2)</b>	<b>5.4 (5.0)</b>	<b>1.2 (1.1)</b>

Source: Ecorys Analysis \* figures based on median effects in brackets

Note: Survival Rates based on ONS Business Demography

## 6.9 Present Value GVA Impacts Sensitivity analysis: impacts endure for three years

The analysis above is predicated on the assumption that GVA impacts endure for only one year. However, BIS guidance<sup>18</sup> suggests the possibility that GVA impacts for enterprise support schemes endure for three years should be considered. The persistence of impacts needs to take account of business survival rates. In terms of impacts on pre-starts it is assumed that 94.1 percent of firms survive in the first year, 78.9 percent survive 2 years and 64.6 percent survive 3 years based on ONS Business Demography statistics. Productivity is assumed to grow in line with OBR forecasts between 2012 and 2015. In terms of established businesses, it is assumed that 88.1 percent of firms survive each year, also based on ONS Business Demography. For established businesses, no productivity effects are assumed as any productivity effects are assumed to be non-additional in relation to the role of the Helpline.

The table below illustrates the impact of adjusting these assumptions on the estimates of net GVA impacts. The present value of GVA impacts are estimated to rise to between £2.0m and £11.5m depending on the rate of displacement and whether mean or median effect sizes are used, illustrating the sensitivity of these results to durability assumptions.

**Table 6.15 Present value of net GVA impacts (£m, between 2011/12 and 2014/15)**

Net impacts	Actual		Potential		Total	
Displacement	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High
Mean	2.3	0.8	6.9	2.2	9.2	3.0
Median	2.0	0.7	9.5	2.0	11.5	2.7

Source: Ecorys analysis – potential impacts assumed to be realised one year after actual impacts

## 6.10 Sensitivity Test

A sensitivity test has been applied to the results whereby the probability ratios associated with either starting a business or implementing improvements to the business as a result of the support have been lowered as follows:

**Table 6.16 Alternative Probability Assumptions**

Additionality factor	Assumed probability impacts will be achieved
Very important	0.6
Important	0.4

<sup>18</sup> RDA Evaluation: Practical Guidance on the Implementation of the Impact Evaluation Framework, BIS, 2010

Additionality factor	Assumed probability impacts will be achieved
Not very important	0.2
Not important at all	0.0

The table below illustrates the impact of adjusting these assumptions on the estimates of net GVA impacts. The present value of GVA impacts are estimated to reduce to between £1.4m and £6.8m.

**Table 6.17 Present value of net GVA impacts (£m, between 2011/12 and 2014/15)**

Net impacts	Actual		Potential		Total	
Displacement	Low	High	Low	High	Low	High
Mean	1.4	0.3	4.1	1.3	5.4	1.8
<b>Median</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>0.4</b>	<b>5.6</b>	<b>1.2</b>	<b>6.8</b>	<b>1.6</b>

Source: Ecorys analysis – potential impacts assumed to be realised one year after actual impacts

## 6.11 Time Saved

Analysis in section 4 showed that a significant proportion of customers contacted the Helpline because it was perceived as the simplest method of obtaining the information needed. Alternative means of gathering information may be more time consuming, and the availability of a Helpline may help businesses save time. Respondents to the survey were asked whether the advice received saved them time in deciding what action to take, and if so, how much. 60 percent of callers felt they had saved time as a result of calling the Helpline, saving an average of 6.3 hours<sup>19</sup> (and a median of 2.0 hours)<sup>20</sup>. There was limited variation across customer groups, although established businesses tended to report lower time savings than other groups.

The opportunity cost of time for businesses (start-ups and established) has been assumed at £21 per hour in line with past HMRC studies examining the value of time savings associated with businesslink.gov.uk. For pre-starts, it is assumed that contacts with the Business Link helpline has been primarily in leisure time, and an opportunity cost of £5.47 for non working time was used following Department for Transport Guidance<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> Based on 242 valid responses.

<sup>20</sup> Although these time savings only accrue to those that would have otherwise obtained similar support elsewhere.

<sup>21</sup> See TAG Unit 3.5.6 Values of Time and Operating Costs, Department for Transport

The overall value of time savings is estimated at between £71,000 and £192,000 (depending on whether estimates are driven by the median or the mean) if time savings apply only to unique callers, and between £85,000 and £232,000 if they apply to all calls made to the Helpline.

**Table 6.18 Table 0.19 Value of Time Savings by Customer Group**

	Pre-start – early stages	Pre-start – in process of establishing in business	Start-up	Established business	Total
Number of unique callers	2,879	1,403	953	2,706	7,942
Percentage that would have obtained similar support or advice elsewhere	67	62	67	61	64
Percentage reporting they saved time as a result of calling the Helpline	59.7	77.3	61.5	51.5	60.3
Average time saved (hours, median in brackets)	7.2 (2)	7.6 (2)	7.6 (2)	3.1 (1.9)	6.3 (2)
Opportunity cost of time (£ per hour)	5.47	5.47	21.00	21.00	5.47
<b>Total savings (£000s, estimates based on median in brackets – results based on unique callers)</b>	<b>45 (12)</b>	<b>28 (7)</b>	<b>63 (16)</b>	<b>56 (35)</b>	<b>192 (71)</b>
<b>Number of callers</b>	<b>3,470</b>	<b>1,691</b>	<b>1,149</b>	<b>3,262</b>	<b>9,572</b>
<b>Total savings (£000s, estimates based on median in brackets – results based on number of calls)</b>	<b>54 (15)</b>	<b>33 (9)</b>	<b>76 (20)</b>	<b>68 (42)</b>	<b>232 (85)</b>

Source: Customer survey. Question asked to all respondents

## 6.12 Value for money

The total cost of the Helpline since 28th November 2011 is estimated at £792,000 (with set-up costs amortized over the 36 months of the contract). In terms of value for money:

- The value of time savings accruing to callers (estimated at between £71,000 and £232,000) are not sufficiently high to cover the costs of providing the Helpline at

current levels of capacity.

- Results suggest that the economic benefits of the Helpline have the potential to exceed its costs. Under the most pessimistic scenario of high displacement and one year durability of GVA impacts, the potential net economic (GVA) impacts of the Helpline are estimated at around £1.2m, which considered in combination with the value of time savings, would give a return on investment of close to £1.50 per £1 invested.
- More optimistic scenarios for displacement, effect sizes, and three year durability of GVA impacts give estimates of potential economic impacts of up to £11.5m, which would imply return on investment £14.5 per £1 invested (and higher returns if the value of time savings is also incorporated).
- The reductions in the capacity of the Helpline occurring combined with the increase in BSA utilisation will give scope for improving return on investment ratios (as this will reduce surplus capacity, it will be possible to reduce costs without an associated reduction in impact).
- These estimates suggest a wide range for the possible return on investment associated with the Helpline, which reflects the range of uncertainties involved (with estimates of impact highly speculative in nature). However, the overall findings do suggest the value of the impacts of the Helpline will at least cover its costs.

**Table 6.20 Return on investment ratios**

	Low displacement			High displacement		
	Impact (£m)	Cost (£m)	BCR (£)	Impact (£m)	Cost (£m)	BCR (£)
<i>GVA impacts only (one year)</i>						
Mean	5.4	0.8	6.8	1.2	0.8	1.5
Median	5.0	0.8	6.3	1.1	0.8	1.4
Mean	5.7	0.8	7.1	1.4	0.8	1.8
Median	5.1	0.8	6.5	1.2	0.8	1.5
Mean	9.2	0.8	11.6	3.0	0.8	3.8
Median	11.5	0.8	14.5	2.7	0.8	3.4

Source: Ecorys analysis

## 6.13 Summary of Findings

This section has reported on the economic benefits of the Helpline service. In summary, the findings are as follows:

- **Impact of advice from BSAs:** The qualitative responses to the survey indicate that callers receiving advice from BSAs benefit from more specific advice which has greater potential to lead to economic benefits for the business
- **Additionality of support provided:** The survey results suggested that while a relatively high proportion of callers to the Business Link helpline would have obtained the information received from an alternative source if the service was not available, only a limited proportion would have paid for this advice (with the majority likely to obtain the information from other free sources of information, including businesslink.gov.uk). This suggests that the service is avoiding inefficient crowding out of private sector support (in line with the objectives of the Business Improvement Programme as a whole), and suggesting one of the key benefits of the Business Link Helpline is its ability to provide information in an easily digestible format.
- **Economic benefits:** Where callers would not have otherwise obtained the information the received from an alternative source, the Business Link Helpline may have economic impacts through helping pre-starts to establish their businesses or assisting existing businesses to implement improvements to the way they run their business. The survey suggested that the information provided by the Business Link helpline has been valued by callers for these purposes:
  - ▶ **Pre-starts:** A high proportion of pre-starts had either started or still planned to start their business since calling the Helpline, and survey results suggested the support they received through Business Link helpline was an important factor in their ability to do so (or in their plans). Indicative results suggest that 160 pre-starts may have started their business as a result of Helpline support, and 640 may emerge in the future.
  - ▶ **Existing businesses:** Additionally, survey results suggest that around 240 existing businesses have implemented improvements to the way they run their business as a consequence of support provided, and a further 280 to do so in the future. 50 percent of respondents implementing changes reported they expected them to have a significant impact on their turnover and costs, and a further 40 percent expected to recruit new workers.
- **Gross additional GVA impacts:** Effects on GVA are expected to be modest amongst pre-starts as the few firms able to form an expectation of their future revenues expected to remain below the VAT threshold. Output amongst firms established as a result of the support provided through the Helpline may rise to £1.7m per annum, and a further £7.0m may be expected in the future. GVA impacts amongst existing firms improving the way they operate may rise by between £0.9m and £1.5, and between £1.0m and £1.8m in the future, mainly driven by effects on turnover. These results

are purely indicative, based as they are on callers future expectations of benefits after a matter of weeks of calling the Business Link helpline (and based on small numbers of observations as many respondents were unable to formulate clear expectations of these effects).

- **Displacement:** The majority of callers were primarily operating in domestic markets, characterised by significant levels of domestic competition. Economic benefits accruing through new businesses established or improvements in business performance are likely to be characterised by high rates of displacement, at least in the short term.
- **Net impacts on GVA:** Although survey results suggested the Business Link helpline provides a valuable service to callers, large scale additional economic outcomes are perhaps unlikely as: (1) the majority of callers will be able to assemble the information they require from alternative sources, and (2) where output growth among callers is additional, it is likely to have been achieved at the expense of other firms based in the UK. However, if impacts are persistent, net GVA impacts could potentially rise to around £11.5m.
- **Time savings:** Around 60 percent of callers reported they had saved time as a result of calling, suggesting one of the key benefits of the service is making information available in a straightforward format. Average time savings (over 6 hours) were substantially higher than median time savings (2 hours) suggesting a small proportion of callers derive the greatest benefit<sup>22</sup>. The value of time savings estimated at between £71,000 and £232,000 over the evaluation period.

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<sup>22</sup> Survey findings suggested that 70 percent of total time savings accrued to 12 percent of callers.



## 7.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

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### 7.1 Demand and Capacity of the Service

The service was procured on the basis of estimated call volumes, based on data relating to the former Regional Business Link contact centres. It is worth noting that some of these services carried out targeted outbound calls to stimulate demand for business support and use of the telephone and face-to-face services. Given that the current Helpline is focused on meeting unprompted demand for support it was difficult to project call volumes. This uncertainty was even greater given the economic background and significant changes being made to Government's provision of business support – all of which might have led to significant peaks in demand. To mitigate this risk, provision was made in the contract for reductions to staffing volumes (up to 20 percent per month) to allow BIS to bring capacity into line with actual demand.

In practice, demand has been far lower than planning estimates. Since the launch of the service on 25<sup>th</sup> November there have been 9,500 calls. This equates to 1,516 calls per week on average (or around 20 percent of the planning assumption of 7,690 calls per week). The peak weekly call volume of 1,775 calls occurred in week commencing 23<sup>rd</sup> January, which is just a little short of the weekly call volume planning assumption. The peak demand was considered to be associated with action to make the telephone number more prominent on [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) and interest in the Go for It campaign and demonstrates the potential effect of marketing on service take-up. Since then the number of calls seems to have stabilised at around 1,500 calls per week with variations associated apparently with BIS campaigns and bank and school holidays.

On average there were 43 outbound calls made by BSAs following referral against a set of criteria relating to need and potential benefits of business advice. The peak in demand during the period examined for this assessment was 105 calls in week commencing 30<sup>th</sup> January, also related to the Go for It campaign, compared with planned activity of 190 calls.

Currently, the BSA call volumes are 144 per week following some adjustments to the triggers for referral to BSA, which are discussed below. Steps are being taken to bring staffing volumes more in line with capacity. This is appropriate although some provision should be made for further growth in demand, perhaps with reference to the peak weekly calls received to date.

There may be latent demand for the Helpline and this can not be assessed until marketing and communication plans have been fully implemented. We understand that research recently commissioned by BIS will examine whether there is evidence of latent demand for example whether there are customers that could benefit from the Helpline if they were aware of the Helpline. The majority of callers are made aware of the service through [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) and consequently there are questions regarding how far the service is reaching potential entrepreneurs and businesses that do not use the internet for business purpose or do not have access to the internet (a group identified as a key target

customer).

The Helpline seems to be effectively supporting businesses with slower internet access who would find it difficult to use the [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) site. Businesses without broadband internet access are currently overrepresented amongst customers. However, take up of the service by pre-starts with no internet access is lower than expected although there is no corresponding data on access to the internet amongst pre-starts to permit a measure of usage to be developed. Currently, overall demand from pre-starts and businesses without internet access is very low. Although numbers are small, the Helpline appears to adopt an appropriate approach in responding to those without internet access. BIS is planning a marketing campaign targeted at potential entrepreneurs without access to the internet. This is focused on libraries, local authorities and CABs. Given the importance of Jobcentre Plus as a source of information about the Helpline for customers responding to the survey, we suggest that the planned marketing campaign is extended to Jobcentre Plus. In planning marketing campaigns and assessing take-up amongst individuals without access to the internet or broadband connections it would be helpful to distinguish clearly between individuals/potential entrepreneurs and pre-starts and established businesses.

As noted, the BSA service has been operating with surplus capacity and whilst steps are being taken to reduce capacity this will be a gradual process. The assessment found that in general the referral process for access to advice is working well and that callers passed to BSAs were considered by BSAs to have potential to benefit from more in-depth support. Our findings suggest that some triggers required clearer and more objective criteria and there was a case for including businesses facing process and product improvement as a separate trigger (businesses facing major change is too broad to capture this). The proportion of businesses being referred because they trade in a priority area (50 percent) is perhaps higher than might be expected. The general message regarding targeting of the service emphasises businesses in financial trouble or with complex needs and there may be a need for a clearer rationale to be developed to justify why being in a priority area should automatically qualify the in-depth support provided by BSAs.

A policy decision has been taken to maintain the capacity of the BSA service at current levels and to stimulate demand, through marketing and in particular by adjusting the criteria for referral to BSAs so that they are less restrictive. This is being achieved through two changes. Firstly, the definition of 'businesses with potential for growth' has been relaxed so that growth potential of any order of magnitude is sufficient to obtain a referral. Secondly, the framework of single and double triggers has been replaced by a more straightforward approach focused on four automatic triggers (for businesses in financial trouble, businesses with potential for growth, businesses with a specific query that is not addressed by the website or Knowledge Bank and businesses in a priority area). These automatic triggers directly relate to the rationale for the BSA service. A further four triggers have been classified as discretionary triggers, 'relating to access to finance', 'businesses facing a challenge', 'taking on new staff' and 'need for additional guidance'. Arguably, a more open definition of 'businesses with potential for growth' trigger should be sufficient to capture all possible qualifying referrals under the discretionary triggers so further simplification may be possible. We suggest that the application of the adjusted triggers is monitored over the next few weeks and action taken to refine the criteria further if necessary.

## 7.2 Helping Businesses to Make Effective Use of Business Support and Delivering a service that is valued by customers

The main reasons for pre-starts and businesses contacting the Helpline were obtaining finance and funding and start up advice, with smaller proportions seeking legal advice and start-up finance. There is some overlap in the categories used to monitor reasons for calling which could usefully be refined and arguably it would be sensible to align these with categories of information in the My New Business and Growth and Improvement Service, offer so that the relationship between calls for information and advice and the information available on specific parts of the website can be analysed. This would permit more systematic analysis of how improvements to the website may lead to reduced demand for support from the Helpline.

The Helpline is successfully helping businesses to navigate the new business support landscape. Customer satisfaction is relatively high with 69 percent of callers reporting that they were either very or fairly satisfied with the support they received. Whilst satisfaction ratings for the former Business Link services were higher at 89 percent achievement at this stage is reasonable given the more limited availability of telephone advice, the greater focus on signposting and the more highly targeted provision of face-to-face support. The survey revealed that satisfaction is lower amongst former Business Link users and it will take time for expectations amongst businesses to adjust. It is worth highlighting that this positive satisfaction rating relates to a situation in which 40 percent of callers contact the service for advice (rather than information or for help with using [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk)) and only a third have their query addressed by referral to information on [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk). This reveals that the Helpline is currently handling a large proportion of calls through referral to third parties or by answering queries directly, typically by using information contained in the Knowledge Bank. Whilst this is clearly meeting objectives related to meeting the needs of customers and customer satisfaction there is a potential conflict with aims to transition customers to the website in the medium term.

## 7.3 Supporting the Digital Transition

The Helpline service places a high priority on encouraging callers to use [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk) both for the current query and in some cases for future information and advice needs. Callers to the Helpline have very high awareness of [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk) with over two-thirds reporting that they had conducted a search of this website prior to calling. They called the Helpline because information on the website either wasn't clear (24 percent), they could not find what they were looking for (40 percent) or because they found some information but it did not address all of their needs (53 percent). The vast majority of callers who called because they considered that the website was not clear or because they could not find what they were looking for were directed to the information on [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk). A smaller majority of those who felt that the website only partially addressed their needs were also directed to the website. Overall, almost half of callers responding to the survey were directed to [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk) in response to their call. This confirms that the Helpline is assisting a large number of callers to find information that is available on [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk).

Nevertheless, a significant proportion of callers' queries and advice needs are handled through direct responses by the Helpline or referral to third parties rather than being

directed to information on the website. In these cases, callers would either be referred to BSAs or call agents will obtain information from the Knowledge Bank. In the light of digital transition objectives it would be beneficial to clarify the function of the Knowledge Bank and the implication for the longer-term service offer. Specifically, whether it is feasible for the Knowledge Bank to be transferred to a digital format so that businesses can conduct their own searches. As in the case of [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) there would be associated up-front and on-going maintained costs that would need to be examined.

The call agents' approach is commensurate with digital transition objectives as their primary aim is to direct callers to the website and their approach incorporates a strong focus on promoting other relevant website tools. However, a significant proportion of callers (over 50 percent) were not given more general advice on the website tools available. The evidence indicates that the guidance on time limitations may restrict the agents' ability to promote the website tools more generally. There may be some benefit in developing clearer guidance on the circumstances in which wider use of the website should be promoted.

Currently, the Helpline is collating information on potential areas for improvement to the website to support although this information is not being acted upon as [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) is currently not being actively developed by HMRC. This is likely to work against objectives to promote a transition of customers to the website.

The survey indicates that Helpline is influencing callers to make more effective use of the website: 37 percent will definitely use [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk) as first port of call for information and just under a third probably definitely will, therefore 70 percent are more likely to use the website as the first port of call in the future.

The survey has revealed that significant numbers of customers with internet access remain reluctant to use to web-based provision and continue to prefer one to one support. This highlights a particular challenge of encouraging such callers to use the website in the future. As noted above, there is capacity within the service for call agents to spend more time on promoting the website and providing more detailed advice on the benefits of using particular modules which may help to address this particular issue.

## 7.4 Time Savings and Economic Benefits

Many calls to the Helpline are related to basic information queries rather than advice that might be expected to lead to economic benefits for the business. More than a third of respondents to the survey did not report immediate benefits on their businesses. The most frequently reported immediate benefits of calling the helpline related to helping businesses access to finance or grants, debt or cash flows issues (20 percent) where there is potentially a stronger and more direct relationship with economic benefits through the growth and safeguarding of employment. A smaller proportion of respondents reported other benefits which may also have a more direct relationship with economic benefits. These include 'access to international markets' and 'IT and e-commerce'.

The assessment found that the service is avoiding inefficient crowding out of private sector support (in line with the objectives of the Business Improvement Programme as a whole) as whilst a high proportion report that they could have obtained information elsewhere a small proportion were willing to pay for it.

Where callers would not have otherwise obtained the information they received from an alternative source, the Business Link helpline may have economic impacts through

helping pre-starts to establish their businesses or assisting existing businesses to implement improvements to the way they run their business. The survey suggested that the information provided by the Business Link helpline has been valued by callers for these purposes:

1. A high proportion of pre-starts had either started or still planned to start their business since calling the Helpline, and survey results suggested the support they received through Business Link helpline was an important factor in their ability to do so (or in their plans). Indicative results suggest that 100 pre-starts may have started their business as a result of Helpline support, and 400 may emerge in the future.

2. Additionally, survey results suggest that around 150 existing businesses (around 6 percent) have implemented improvements to the way they run their business as a consequence of support provided, and a further 170 (around 8 percent) to do so in the future. 50 percent of respondents implementing changes reported they expected them to have a significant impact on their turnover and costs, and a further 40 percent expected to recruit new workers.

Effects on GVA are expected to be modest amongst pre-starts as the few firms able to form an expectation of their future revenues expected to remain below the VAT threshold. Output amongst firms established as a result of the support provided through the Helpline may rise to £1.7m per annum, and a further £7.0m may be expected in the future. GVA impacts amongst existing firms improving the way they operate may rise by between £0.9m and £1.5m, and between £1.0m and £1.8m in the future, mainly driven by effects on turnover. These results are purely indicative, based as they are on callers' future expectations of benefits after a matter of weeks of calling the Business Link helpline (and based on small numbers of observations as many respondents were unable to formulate clear expectations of these effects).

The majority of callers were primarily operating in domestic markets, characterised by significant levels of domestic competition. Economic benefits accruing through new businesses established or improvements in business performance are likely to be characterised by high rates of displacement, at least in the short term.

Although survey results suggested the Business Link helpline provides a valuable service to callers, large scale additional economic outcomes are unlikely as the majority of callers will be able to assemble the information they require from alternative sources, and where output growth among callers is additional, it is likely to have been achieved at the expense of other firms based in the UK. The economic benefits of the Helpline have the potential to exceed its costs. Under the most pessimistic scenario for displacement, the potential net economic (GVA) impacts of the Helpline are estimated at around £720,000, which considered in combination with the value of time savings, would give a return on investment of close to £1 per £1 invested. Results suggest that the economic benefits of the Helpline have the potential to exceed its costs. Under the most pessimistic scenario of high displacement and one year durability of GVA impacts, the potential net economic (GVA) impacts of the Helpline are estimated at around £1.2m, which considered in combination with the value of time savings, would give a return on investment of close to £1.50 per £1 invested.

More optimistic scenarios for displacement, effect sizes, and three year durability of GVA impacts give estimates of potential economic impacts of up to £11.5m, which would imply return on investment £14.5 per £1 invested (and higher returns if the value of time savings is also incorporated). Reductions in the capacity of the Helpline (currently underway)

provide scope for improving return on investment ratios (as the service is operating with surplus capacity, it will be possible to reduce costs without an associated reduction in impact).

Around 60 percent of callers reported they had saved time as a result of calling, suggesting one of the key benefits of the service is making information available in a straightforward format. Average time savings (over 6 hours) were substantially higher than median time savings (2 hours) suggesting a small proportion of callers derive the greatest benefit<sup>23</sup>. The value of time savings is estimated at between £71,000 and £232,000 over the evaluation period.

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<sup>23</sup> Survey findings suggested that 70 percent of total time savings accrued to 12 percent of callers.

## **Annex One: Additional Information on Delivery Approach**



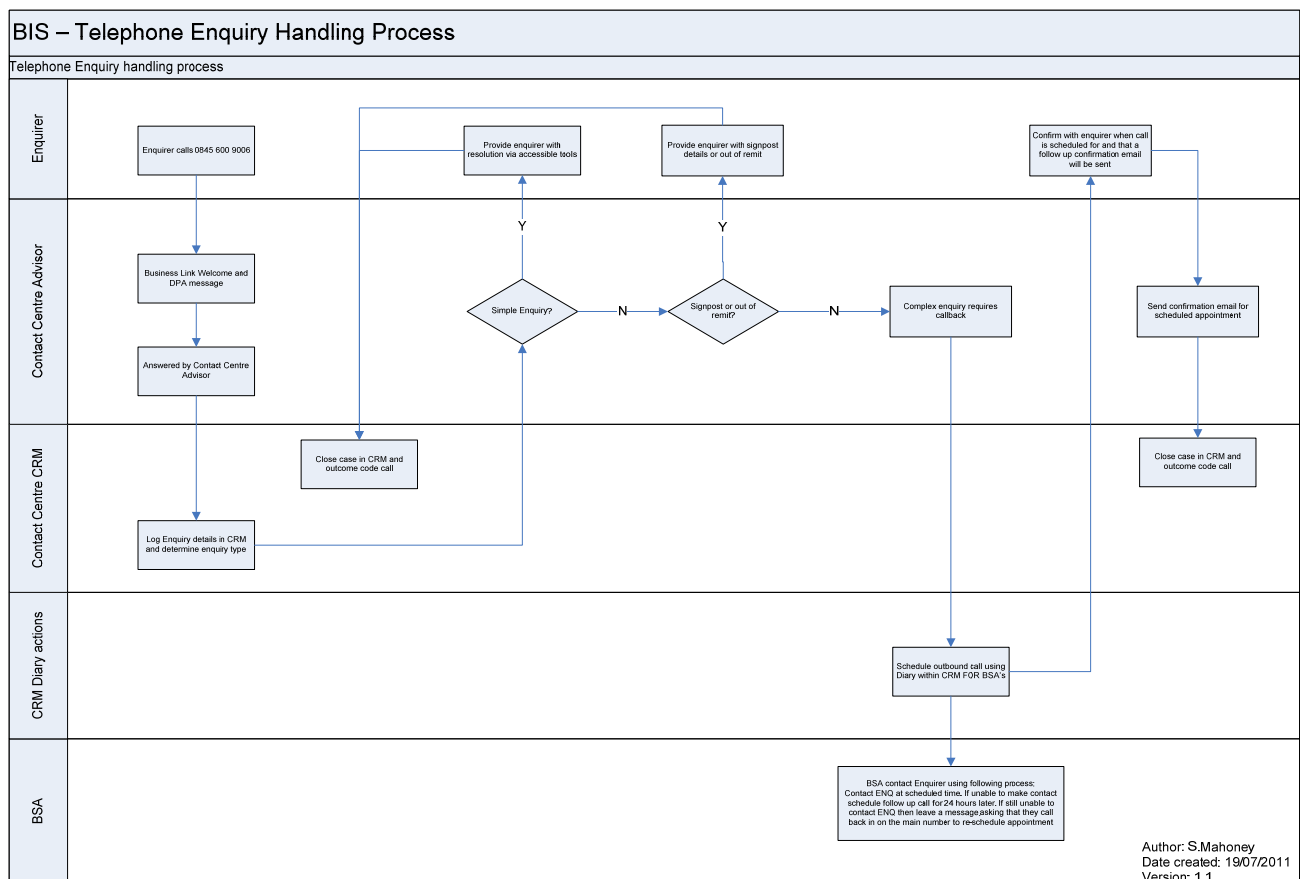
Table A1 – Types of Calls

Type of response	Key purpose	Examples	Recommended call length
Basic Queries (inbound)	To direct customers to the relevant area of the website, or 3 <sup>rd</sup> party organisations that are best able to assist.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guided web search and capability building to enable callers to use the online offer to self serve;</li> <li>• Intelligent questioning to establish customer need and suitability for referral;</li> <li>• Guidance on compliance issues;</li> <li>• Redirection of calls from Devolved Administrations to relevant support services;</li> <li>• Redirection of calls to other appropriate services (e.g. ACAS, HMRC) via hot transfer;</li> <li>• Information on how to book places on events (for those unable to access via web);</li> <li>• Signpost to appropriate services in both public and private sector based on customer needs supported by the Knowledge Bank; and</li> <li>• Handle emails in first instance.</li> </ul>	The call length for all inbound 'simple calls' received should be no more than 20 minutes long. Simple calls must be kept to an average of 6 minutes per call.
Support and Information Requests (inbound)	To deal with detailed queries, provide diagnostics or referrals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intelligent questioning to establish complex customer needs;</li> <li>• Provision of appropriate advice / support;</li> <li>• Referral to 3<sup>rd</sup> party support provision;</li> <li>• Use and maintenance of a Knowledge Bank;</li> <li>• Signpost to other appropriate services in both the public and private sector based on customer needs; and</li> <li>• Referral to BSA team</li> </ul>	Inbound support and information requests must be kept to an average of 22 minutes per call.



Type of response	Key purpose	Examples	Recommended call length
Complex queries and one-one support (outbound)	To use experience and knowledge of the business support market to analyse issues and identify solutions; to diagnose issues behind the presenting problem and offer more tailored help and support fitted to the business' particular circumstances and market	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Analysis of customer's issues</li> <li>Diagnosis of issues post analysis to offer more tailored help and support; and</li> <li>Signposting towards 3<sup>rd</sup> party solutions that will help customer achieve their goals.</li> </ul>	Recommended average of 50 minutes although this is to be reviewed during set up to check if this is a realistic call length.

Figure A1 – Telephone Enquiry Handling Process



Source: Service Design Document

## **Annex Two: Customer Survey Approach and Sampling Framework**

The survey consisted of telephone interviews with 657 customers of the Helpline giving a 95 percent confidence interval of +/- 3.7 percentage points. The response rate for the survey was effectively 52 percent as 1,263 customers were contacted.

The sampling approach was based on the characteristics of those calling the Helpline in the period up to 20<sup>th</sup> January. To achieve the sample targets we needed to interview customers making calls after this date. In order to reflect the different types of advice provided, the sampling framework was based on the caller categories defined in the Helpline Service Design Document which are recorded on the CRM system. The sample was also designed to be representative of the numbers of callers with and without internet access and the trading status of the business (i.e. pre-start, start up or established).

Based on the percentage breakdown of callers since the launch date, the sample was divided across the three principal caller categories as well as by internet access as set out in the table below. The table also shows the total number of calls at the time of developing the sampling framework, projected numbers of calls within the timescale for the survey and the projected number of available contacts within the timescale for the survey based on the opt-in rate.

As the numbers of BSA referrals and those unable to access the internet to date were significantly lower than expected, we undertook fewer interviews with customers in these categories than was anticipated at the proposal stage. However, it was necessary to oversample in these categories to achieve more robust results. The target of 50 and 75 interviews respectively for these groups was based on the expected number of callers and survey opt-in rate within the timescale for the survey.

**Table A2 - Sampling Targets by Caller Type**

Caller Type	Number of calls to date	Projected number of calls	Percentage of total number of callers (20 <sup>th</sup> January)	Available contacts allowing for opt-in	Target Sample sizes (95 percent confidence interval)	Achieved Sample sizes (95 percent confidence interval)
Basic query	2,962	3,702	53	1,110	315 (+/- 5 percentage points)	319 (+/- 5 percentage points)
Support and Information Requests	2,571	3,214	46	970	285 (+/- 5 percentage points)	288 (+/- 5 percentage points)
Outbound appointment BSA	252	314	4.5	100	50 (+/- 12 percentage points)	50 (+/- 12 percentage points)
Able to access the internet	5,142	6,427	92	1,930	575 (+/- 5 percentage points)	593 (+/- 4 percentage points)
Unable to access the internet	447	559	8	168	75 (+/- 10 percentage points)	64 (+/- 12 percentage points)
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,589</b>	<b>6,986</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>2,098</b>	<b>650 (+/- 4 percentage points)</b>	<b>657 (+/- 4 percentage points)</b>

The tables below set out the indicative target sample quotas for category of caller to ensure that the survey was representative of callers by access or no access to the internet and status of business.

**Table A3 - Sampling Framework – Basic Query (315 Interviews)**

	Percentage of Population (up to 20 <sup>th</sup> January) and Target Number of Interviews					
	Pre-start		Start-up		Established	
	% of callers	Target number (achieved)	% of callers	Target number	% of callers	Target number
Access to the internet	44	136	12	36	35	108
No access to the internet	5	19	1	4	3	12

*Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding*

**Table A4 - Sampling Framework – Support and Information Requests (285 Interviews)**

	Percentage of Population (up to 20 <sup>th</sup> January) and Target Number of Interviews					
	Pre-start		Start-up		Established	
	% of callers	Target number	% of callers	Target number	% of callers	Target number
Access to the internet	53	149	12	33	26	71
No access to the internet	5	19	1	4	2	9

*Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding*

**Table A5 - Sampling Framework – Outbound BSA Appointment (50 Interviews)**

	Percentage of Population (up to 20 <sup>th</sup> January) and Target Number of Interviews					
	Pre-start		Start-up		Established	
	% of callers	Target number	% of callers	Target number	% of callers	Target number
Access to the internet	27	12	14	6	50	24
No access to the internet	3	3	1	2	5	3

*Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding;*

Aggregate results were re-weighted according to the characteristics of the population (at the time of the survey), as shown in the table below, to avoid the biases introduced by the sampling strategy of oversampling BSA referrals and those with no internet access.

**Table A6 – Population Characteristics for Re-Weighting of Results (%)**

		Categories of Support		
		Basic Query	Support and Information Request	Business Support Advisor
Pre-start	Internet	20.9	25.5	1.9
	No internet	2.3	2.3	0.2
Start-up	Internet	5.7	5.7	0.9
	No Internet	0.4	0.5	0.1
Established	Internet	17.1	11.9	2.5
	No internet	1.1	0.8	0.2

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