



Department  
for Business  
Innovation & Skills

RESEARCH

BIS RESEARCH PAPER NO. 193

Evaluation of the Business Support  
Helpline and GOV.UK

DECEMBER 2014

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# BIS Expert Peer Review for Evaluation

The BIS Expert Peer Review Group for Evaluation reviews all BIS impact evaluation publications, and provides an independent assessment of the methodological quality of the evaluation.

This publication was peer reviewed by Dr Edward Anderson and Professor David Torgerson.

The peer reviewers' assessment can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/business-support-helpline-and-govuk-evaluation>

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

Ecorys was commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to conduct an evaluation of GOV.UK and the Business Support Helpline, including the telephone helpline and social media services.

Between February and April 2014, Ecorys conducted a telephone survey of 1,647 users of GOV.UK and the Business Support Helpline, as well as a number of non-users; 60 qualitative interviews with users of GOV.UK, the Business Support Helpline and Business Link social media;<sup>1</sup> a number of stakeholder consultations; and consultations with Helpline staff.

## Policy context and background

GOV.UK provides access to the Government's business support services. It aims to provide straightforward information to businesses that may not be available elsewhere, or is not easily accessible from other sources, and which meets users' needs. The business section of GOV.UK replaces the former Business Link website which closed in autumn 2012.

The Business Support Helpline complements GOV.UK by providing bespoke information and signposting to customers with queries that they could not answer from using the website alone. The Helpline offers two tiers of support (Tier 1 for light-touch support and Tier 2 for more in-depth business support). The Business Support Helpline has more recently been expanded to offer business support through social media channels.

BIS's rationale for placing information on GOV.UK and for providing Helpline services is to intervene only to address market failures where i) businesses find it difficult to place a value on the benefits of formal assistance, particularly prior to receiving assistance, ii) businesses face difficulty assessing the competence and trustworthiness of external information or advice, and iii) businesses face difficulties finding information and advice.

## Key findings

The findings suggest there is considerable demand for business support, particularly from pre-starts and established businesses that are less than a year old or are aspiring to grow.

Estimates from the survey are that 8.5 per cent of businesses (around 365,500) have used GOV.UK in the last year (a third of the proportion that used to access the old Business Link website). The Helpline received 36,000 calls over the same period.

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<sup>1</sup> This has been re-branded to Business Support Helpline social media since the research was conducted.

Between a third and half of non-users of GOV.UK and Helpline were not aware of these services.

Many users reported accessing GOV.UK regularly. The typical GOV.UK user sought a specific piece of factual information, in particular information relating to employing people, tax or legal issues or used the website to undertake administrative activities. Many users reported finding other useful information they had not specifically been looking for when accessing the site.

The reasons for calling the Helpline were most commonly related to starting a business and funding. Many people chose to call the Helpline having not found all the information they were looking for on GOV.UK or because they preferred to speak to a person.

There is clear complementarity between GOV.UK and the Helpline, with many businesses using both services in relation to the same query. In addition, the evidence suggests the Helpline is supporting the transition to a web-based service, as the majority of Helpline users who had not used GOV.UK before reported that their understanding of GOV.UK had improved as a result of their call to the Helpline and reported they would be more likely to use GOV.UK as their first port of call in the future.

Many users of both services reported that they expected to access business support on the internet in the future, approximately one in five businesses had accessed other sources of business support on the internet already and the majority accessed GOV.UK and the Helpline after finding results high on a search engine. Moreover, many Helpline users called the Helpline having found the number on GOV.UK.

While the majority of SMEs using GOV.UK and the Helpline have been able to access the information that they were looking for and found the information practical, useful and valuable to their business, a minority of Helpline users found that they have not received the information they wanted as a result of their call. This is perhaps related to the greater complexity of queries handled by the Helpline.

The findings suggest that both GOV.UK and the Helpline have a role in addressing the market failures associated with sub-optimal use of business support. For example, most users of both services reported high levels of trust in the services and are more likely to trust the information they received from GOV.UK and/or the Helpline than from non-Government sources. There is evidence that some users are more likely to value business support and are more likely to know how to access business support as a result of using GOV.UK or the Helpline. These impacts seem to be stronger for individuals using both GOV.UK and the Helpline than for those using just one of the services.

Where users had taken action, the information received from GOV.UK and the Helpline was widely considered to be an important factor in their decision.

Where established businesses had taken action after using GOV.UK or the Helpline, the majority did not expect to experience any change in business performance as a result of the improvements made. However, among those that did, the impact was judged to be significant.

The economic impact estimates presented in this study are based on data from a small number of respondents and need to be treated with caution. However, based on the available data, it is estimated that over the last 12 months, at least £17 million additional Gross Value Added (GVA) has been generated from GOV.UK only users, at least £8 million from Helpline only users and at least £7 million from users of both services combined. When compared to the relatively low cost of delivering these services, these positive estimates of GVA appear to suggest good value for money.

Business Link social media<sup>2</sup> had around 80,000 followers on Twitter and just under 5,000 Facebook likes when this research was conducted. Evidence from the survey suggests that just under two per cent of businesses had accessed Business Link social media in the last 12 months.

## Findings for GOV.UK and Helpline

### GOV.UK

#### Use of GOV.UK

Our estimates suggest that around 8.5 per cent of SMEs in England have used the website in the past 12 months, compared to 27 per cent who used the old Business Link website (businesslink.gov) over a 12 month period.

GOV.UK is used by businesses of all sizes but is more likely to be used by relatively new businesses, those with growth ambition and women-led enterprises. Many SMEs use GOV.UK on a regular basis (over ten per cent of users visit the site at least once a week) including to carry out transactions and administrative activities (e.g. tax returns).

Users typically accessed GOV.UK to search for a specific piece of factual information, in particular for information relating to employing people, tax or legal issues.

The majority accessed the website via an internet search engine such as Google and were directed to the relevant page on GOV.UK after it appeared high on the list of search results.

Users were generally satisfied with the information received and felt it was a highly accessible service. Many users also found other useful information that they had not been specifically looking for while browsing the site.

#### Addressing market failures

The research suggests that GOV.UK is addressing the market failure associated with a widespread lack of trust in business support providers, as it is widely recognised as a Government service which is generally perceived as being official and impartial. The majority of users reported that it was a service they could trust.

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<sup>2</sup> This has been re-branded to Business Support Helpline social media since the research was conducted.

There is evidence that some GOV.UK users feel that the service has helped them to understand the value and benefits of business support.

About half of GOV.UK users did not access further business support having used GOV.UK. This may be due to them having found the information they required on the website or because they were using it to carry out administrative activities.

## Impact

Around half of users of GOV.UK had taken or were planning to take action to improve their businesses after using the website. The most common actions taken or planned were to improve compliance with legislation, introduce new products, services or processes and accessing finance or grants to help the business grow.

Where users had taken action (including setting up a business or making improvements to the business), the information received from GOV.UK was generally considered to be a very important factor in their decision.

Where established businesses had taken action after using GOV.UK, the majority did not expect to experience any change in business performance as a result of the improvements made. Among those that did, the impact was typically judged to be significant. However, much of the estimated increase in GVA and employment among all users due both to businesses starting and growing is expected to be displaced from other firms in the UK.

Based on the available data from a small number of respondents, it is estimated that over the last 12 months, GOV.UK may have generated at least £17 million additional GVA for the English economy. The research suggests that GOV.UK will have had a further GVA and employment impact through providing information to help people to set up a business.

It is also estimated that users of GOV.UK saved nearly £2 million in fees paid to other providers and nearly £4 million in time due to using GOV.UK (although it is assumed that these savings are implicitly included in the overall GVA impacts).

## Non-users

Over a third of businesses that had not used GOV.UK in the last 12 months reported that they were not aware of the website while over two fifths said that they had no need for business support information.

## Business Support Helpline

### Use of Business Support Helpline

The Business Support Helpline answered about 36,000 calls in 2013.

About two-thirds of callers were pre-starts. Most of the established businesses using the Helpline have no employees. Businesses with one to nine employees and those that are less than a year old are over-represented when compared to the general business population.

Women-led, minority ethnic group (MEG) led businesses, pre-starts and businesses planning to grow are also over-represented among users of the Helpline.

A proportion of Helpline users who had also used GOV.UK called the Helpline because they preferred to speak to a person rather than continue to use the website or because they could not find what they were looking for on GOV.UK.

Help with starting a business and information about funding or finance were the most common reasons for calling.

Most users found the number of the Helpline on the internet, either directly through a search engine or via GOV.UK. Some were referred to the Helpline by other providers including Jobcentre Plus and Chambers of Commerce.

Where users had called the Helpline directly (rather than via GOV.UK), the majority reported that their understanding of GOV.UK had improved as a result of their call and they were more likely to use the website as a first port of call in the future.

Levels of satisfaction among Helpline users were similar to those expressed in the previous evaluation, with more than 60 per cent reporting they were very or fairly satisfied. However, the survey showed a less positive picture than the Helpline monitoring data, most likely due to the monitoring data not taking account of any subsequent dissatisfaction as a result of not finding the required information, grant or scheme from the signposted sources.

Most users obtained all or part of the information they needed and found the information practical and useful and valuable to their business. However, a minority of users expressed dissatisfaction that they were unable to obtain the information they needed or felt the information provided was not useful.

### **Addressing market failures**

Similarly to GOV.UK, the high level of awareness that the Helpline is a Government service made users more likely to trust the information provided, suggesting the Helpline is addressing the market failure surrounding trust.

There is evidence that, for some, the Helpline has had an impact on reducing market failures associated with difficulties finding information advice and valuing the benefits of support. This impact was stronger for individuals using both GOV.UK and the Helpline than for those using just the Helpline.

### **Impact**

The majority of Helpline users had taken action to improve or grow their business after calling the Helpline, or in the case of pre-starts, taken action to help set up or start their business.

Where users had taken action (including setting up a business), the information received from the Helpline and GOV.UK was generally considered to be an important factor in their

decision, particularly for users of both services. Similarly, where users had not set up a business, the information obtained from the Helpline was considered to be an important factor in that decision.

A minority of users taking action to improve their business reported that these improvements have made, or are expected to make, a substantive change to their business performance (including turnover and employment). While the estimated increase in GVA and employment among all users due both to businesses starting and growing is significant, much of this is expected to be displaced from other firms in the UK. Based on the available data from a small number of respondents, it is estimated that over the last 12 months the Helpline may have generated at least £8 million additional GVA through its impact on creating new businesses and growing existing businesses. Meanwhile, the Helpline used in conjunction with GOV.UK is estimated to have generated at least £7 million additional GVA. In total, it is estimated that at least £8 in GVA is created for every £1 spent on the Helpline.

Similarly, it is estimated that users saved over £1 million in fees paid to other providers and over £4 million in time due to using the Helpline (including in combination with GOV.UK) although it is assumed that these savings are implicitly included in the overall GVA impacts.

## Non-users

About half of businesses that had not used the Helpline in the last 12 months reported that they were not aware of the service while about two fifths said that they had no need for business support information.

## Social media

Interviewed stakeholders and users (predominantly business support providers) felt that social media is becoming an increasingly important channel for communicating and engaging with business people. The evidence from the survey suggests that just under two per cent of surveyed GOV.UK and Helpline users and non-users have used Business Link social media<sup>3</sup> in the last 12 months.

Some users of Business Link Twitter reported viewing Business Link tweets alongside tweets from other Government services as a means to keep up-to-date with relevant news and developments rather than as a tool for acquiring support or information on specific issues faced by businesses at any point in time.

Opinions of Business Link Twitter vary among the users consulted in the research. It is considered favourably when compared against other Government social media accounts but is still considered by some to be bland and impersonal. Some users felt that the Government should do more to use social media to engage with its audience in an interactive conversation rather than using it as an information sharing platform. The

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<sup>3</sup> This has been re-branded to Business Support Helpline social media since the research was conducted.

information provided through Business Link Twitter is also considered by some to be too generic and more could be done to make tweets and postings more targeted and relevant to a specific audience.

# Introduction

## Policy background / context for evaluation

A key objective of the Government is to promote growth in the UK economy through making it easier for businesses to set up and thrive. At the start of 2013, small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) accounted for more than 99 per cent of businesses, about 59 per cent of private sector employment and about 48 per cent of private sector turnover.<sup>4</sup> SMEs are vital to the economy as they drive economic growth by stimulating innovation, acting as a competitive spur to existing businesses to increase their productivity and making a disproportionately large contribution to job creation.

Evidence from the Small Business Survey<sup>5</sup> suggests that businesses which access advice are more likely to grow but around 50 per cent of businesses do not use external advice.

Research consistently shows that the use of business support is affected by market failures.<sup>6</sup> The particular market failures leading to the sub-optimal use of business support are mainly related to imperfect information:

- Businesses find it difficult to place a value on the benefits of formal assistance, particularly prior to receiving assistance. In turn this makes businesses reluctant to pay for it and limits the incentive for private sector suppliers to provide assistance.
- Businesses also face difficulty assessing the competence and trustworthiness of external information or advice.
- Businesses face difficulties finding information and advice.

BIS's provision of business support services is designed to respond to these market failures.

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<sup>4</sup> BIS (2013) *Business Population Estimates for the UK and Regions 2013*, Statistical Release, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/254552/13-92-business-population-estimates-2013-stats-release-4.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/254552/13-92-business-population-estimates-2013-stats-release-4.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> BIS (2013) *Small Business Survey 2012: Growth special report*, Table 9.1, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/204183/bis-13-883-small-business-survey-2012-growth-special-report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/204183/bis-13-883-small-business-survey-2012-growth-special-report.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Centre for Enterprise and Economic Development Research and BMG Research (2011) *Research to understand the barriers to take up and use of business support*, Chapter 7.5, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/32250/11-1288-research-barriers-to-use-of-business-support.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32250/11-1288-research-barriers-to-use-of-business-support.pdf)

GOV.UK provides access to the Government's business support services. It aims to provide straightforward information to businesses that may not be available elsewhere, or is not easily accessible from other sources, and which meets users' needs. It provides a range of information on how to start and run a business and how to address regulatory requirements, and facilitates transactions with Government. The business section of GOV.UK replaces the former Business Link website which closed in autumn 2012.

The Business Support Helpline complements GOV.UK by providing bespoke information and signposting to customers with queries that they could not answer from using the website alone. The Helpline was established as a national service offering two tiers of support:

- Tier 1 – light-touch support for all callers, with a focus on signposting them to the appropriate source of information (including GOV.UK).
- Tier 2 – more in-depth business support service for enquiries fulfilling certain criteria.

The Business Support Helpline has more recently been expanded to offer business support through social media channels.

These services form part of the Government's measures to simplify and improve the way SMEs access information, guidance and support with a focus on making business support simpler, more joined up and easier to access.<sup>78</sup> This evaluation will contribute to the objectives of this policy by helping Government to understand the impacts of different elements of Government business support services and providing some baseline measures.

## Terms of reference

Ecorys was commissioned by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to conduct an evaluation of GOV.UK and the Business Support Helpline, including the telephone helpline and social media services.

The evaluation is designed to provide a comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness and impact of these core business support services. The evaluation focuses on the demand for business support, awareness of the Government's business support services, how these services are used, the extent to which they meet users' needs and the extent to which these services are helping people to set up and grow their business. The key research questions include:

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<sup>7</sup> HM Government *Small Business: GREAT Ambition*, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/266212/bis-13-1313-small-business-great-ambition-FINAL.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/266212/bis-13-1313-small-business-great-ambition-FINAL.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> BIS (2011) *Bigger, Better Business: Helping small firms start, grow and prosper*, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/32225/11-515-bigger-better-business-helping-small-firms.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32225/11-515-bigger-better-business-helping-small-firms.pdf)

- Who are the main users of the Government's business support services and how does the profile compare to non-users?
- Why did users seek business support from these channels and why did non-users not seek business support from Government?
- How did users become aware of Government business support services?
- What are the levels of satisfaction among users and to what extent did the support provided meet users' needs?
- To what extent is Government business support addressing market failure?
- What has been the impact of Government business support services in terms of helping people to start or grow their business?
- What has been the impact of Government business support services in terms of saving users time and money to find the information they required?
- To what extent does Government business support deliver value for money?
- To what extent would benefits to business have occurred without the support from Government?
- In what format are SMEs and people wanting to start a business likely to require support from Government in the future?

## Methodology

### Stakeholder consultations

Ecorys undertook in-depth consultations with nine stakeholders with a knowledge and interest in business support provision in England. These stakeholders included representatives of small business organisations, enterprise support providers, Local Enterprise Partnerships and growth hubs.

Consultations were conducted by telephone and covered the following main topics: general business support environment in England; assessment of GOV.UK as a resource for people in business or wanting to set up a business; assessment of the Business Support Helpline; and assessment of the role of social media for Government business support. Consultations lasted about 30 minutes.

### Consultations with Business Support Helpline staff

Further consultations were conducted by telephone with Business Support Helpline staff. This involved interviews with the team leaders of the Tier 1 and Tier 2 services, as well as interviews with four advisors in total, two from Tier 1 and two from Tier 2.

## Customer survey

Ecorys also conducted a large-scale telephone survey of users of GOV.UK and the Business Support Helpline, as well as a number of non-users. This survey took place between February and April 2014, and asked about respondents' usage of business support in the last 12 months. The interviews were undertaken by Ecorys's in-house computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) unit. Depending on how respondents were routed through the survey, most interviews lasted between 15 and 45 minutes. The questionnaire used for this survey is published separately alongside this report.

The sample was drawn from two main databases.

- Ecorys was provided with a full list of people who had contacted the Business Support Helpline in the last 12 months and had agreed to be re-contacted. This list was split into two groups: those that received Tier 2 support (i.e. referred to a Business Support Advisor) and those that received Tier 1 support only (i.e. spoke to a front-line call agent only before being referred to GOV.UK or elsewhere). In order to ensure a sufficient sample from customers receiving more in-depth support, the survey over-sampled on customers that had used Tier 2 support. Within the Tier 1 and Tier 2 groups, however, respondents were selected at random.
- To find users of GOV.UK as well as non-users, Ecorys purchased a business database from Experian containing a random sample of all businesses in England (including both registered and unregistered businesses). At first, respondents were selected at random from this database. However, this approach generated a large number of refusals and respondents that had not used GOV.UK.<sup>9</sup> Our preliminary analysis suggested that businesses less than one year old and businesses with no employees were the most likely to have used GOV.UK. Therefore, a decision was made to switch to a targeted sampling strategy focused on these types of businesses.

Overall, the survey achieved a response rate of about ten per cent, and a total sample of 1,647 completed interviews. Table 1 shows the samples achieved by user type and source database.

### ***Table 1 – Composition of survey sample***

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<sup>9</sup> The random sample of all businesses generated 59 GOV.UK users and 94 non-users. However, a further 496 subjects refused to complete the interview on the basis that they had not used GOV.UK. On this basis, it was estimated that 59 out of 649 businesses (9%) selected at random had used GOV.UK in the past 12 months.

Sample source	GOV.UK users	Helpline users	Users of both GOV.UK and Helpline	Non-users
Helpline database	137	380	522	69
Experian – random sample of businesses	132	0	8	137
Experian – businesses with no employees	111	0	0	0
Experian – businesses less than 1 year old	56	0	0	95
<b>Total</b>	<b>436</b>	<b>380</b>	<b>530</b>	<b>301</b>

About 44 per cent of all Helpline users sampled for the survey (including users of both the Helpline and GOV.UK) were Tier 2 users.

To account for the targeted sampling strategy, weights were applied in the analysis of survey results to ensure that the achieved sample was as representative as possible of the user population.

In terms of distribution of trading status, the achieved sample from the Helpline database was found to be closely aligned with the overall user population. As a result, it was considered that no bias had been introduced through the over-sampling of Tier 2 users and a decision was made not to apply weights for the analysis of Helpline only users and Helpline and GOV.UK combined users.

In the absence of other information, it was assumed that the sample achieved from the random sampling of the Experian business database provided a representative profile of the population of businesses using GOV.UK as well as a representative profile of the population of businesses using neither GOV.UK nor the Helpline (non-users). As subsequent sampling was biased towards businesses less than a year old or having no employees, age of business and size of business were considered as weighting variables to analyse the results from GOV.UK (only) users and non-users. With these two variables themselves being closely correlated, it was considered necessary only to weight according to business size. This is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2 – Weighted and unweighted samples of GOV.UK users and non-users**

	GOV.UK users		Non-users	
	Unweighted sample	Weighted sample	Unweighted sample	Weighted sample
<b>Not in business</b>	29	2	60	3
<b>No employees</b>	79	92	133	105
<b>1-9 employees</b>	145	145	178	213
<b>10-49 employees</b>	36	48	53	102
<b>50-249 employees</b>	5	9	5	7
<b>250 or more employees</b>	2	2	3	3
<b>Don't know/ refused</b>	5	2	4	3
<b>Total</b>	301	301	436	436

## Qualitative research

In order to provide a more in-depth assessment of the different experiences and opinions of people using the Government's business support provision, Ecorys also undertook a number of qualitative interviews with users of GOV.UK, the Business Support Helpline and Business Link social media.<sup>10</sup> These interviews were conducted by telephone by researchers in Ecorys and lasted approximately 30 minutes.

In total, 24 qualitative interviews were conducted with GOV.UK users and a further 25 were conducted with Helpline users or users of both GOV.UK and the Helpline. These interviewees were selected randomly from individuals who had completed the telephone survey and gave consent to be contacted again to take part in further research. These interviews were designed to allow users to provide more details of their journey that could not be extracted from a quantitative survey, including the circumstances behind their decision to use the service, the way in which they used it (including complementing the use of other support), their opinions of the support provided and what they have done since. While this provided some useful in-depth perspectives that could supplement the statistics provided from the survey, it should be noted that, mainly due to the relatively "light touch" nature of GOV.UK and the Helpline, a number of interviewees were only able to add a little to the information they had provided through the survey.

Qualitative research was also conducted with users of Business Link social media. Use of social media was covered in the survey, but minimally. The sampling strategy for the quantitative survey did not place any quota on finding social media users, and only a very

<sup>10</sup> This has been re-branded to Business Support Helpline social media since the research was conducted.

small number of users were identified. Respondents who said that they had used Business Link Twitter or Business Link Facebook and were happy to be contacted specifically to take part in further research on social media were selected to take part in the qualitative interviews. However, this approach generated only one interview.

In view of this low usage and recruitment, an attempt was made to recruit further interviews by sending out a number of tweets from the Business Link Twitter account asking for volunteers to participate in the research.<sup>11</sup> This call-out was also re-tweeted or advertised by other business support providers and networks on social media. As expected, this “self-selection” method generated a higher response rate and a further seven interviews were completed. However, it should be noted that, while most interviewees were themselves entrepreneurs or business owners, these individuals tended to be business support professionals or management consultants using Business Link social media to keep up with developments in Government policy in order to provide better advice and support to their own clients. It is likely that these participants are not representative of the average user of Business Link social media. Nevertheless, these individuals tended to exhibit extensive knowledge about social media and how it is used by business, and had clear opinions about the role of Government in this field.

Further research participants were recruited from the City Business Library in London. A number of people in the Library on 1 May 2013 were approached to take part in the qualitative interviews, including several people attending a seminar on social media at the Library on that date. The interviews themselves were conducted by telephone at a later date and a further three interviews were completed.

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<sup>11</sup> The tweet contained a link to a stand-alone webpage on the Ecorys domain. This provided brief details of the research and a space for viewers to submit their name and telephone number to a secure database. These individuals were then contacted by telephone by an Ecorys researcher to take part in the qualitative interview.

# Policy context and background

## Introduction

Since 2010 the Government has taken forward a major programme of reforms to publicly funded business support provision. This evaluation focuses on two of the key elements of the Government's business support provision.

The Business Link Helpline service was launched in November 2011 to support the transition to businesslink.gov as the main channel for the Government's business support offer of information and advice to entrepreneurs and businesses. The "tools and guidance for business" section (or business support section) of the GOV.UK website replaced businesslink.gov in autumn 2012. This formed part of the wider Government policy of joining up all Government websites into an integrated online service. Since this research was conducted, the Helpline has undergone change by moving away from the Business Link brand to become the Business Support Helpline, instigating a social media strategy for the delivery of business support and introducing a partnership operating model.

This section provides an outline of the key strategic and policy drivers and market failures underpinning the Government's investment in business support services.

## Key strategic and policy drivers

### Overall strategic objectives

The development of content in the business section of the GOV.UK website and the Business Support Helpline are designed to support the Government in achieving its policy objective to generate economic growth through making it easier for people to start and grow a business. This policy recognises the important contribution that SMEs make to UK economic growth and also recognises the importance of external support and advice to drive the formation of viable businesses and growth within SMEs.

### Government digital agenda

The development of online business support provision is part of the Government's Digital Strategy<sup>12</sup> which is driving the development of the Single Government Domain to offer consistent, authoritative and trusted information to the public while minimising duplication across departments and ensuring a focus on the user with every interaction. The Single Government Domain enables access to all departments' information and transactional digital services to citizens and businesses using one web address. Its purpose is to enable services to be organised around specific user needs (e.g. starting a business) rather than around departmental structures. In the case of business support this should avoid duplication of information and help users to navigate the relevant online content more effectively.

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<sup>12</sup> Cabinet Office (2013) *Government Digital Strategy: December 2013*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-digital-strategy/government-digital-strategy>

Business support policy also recognises the changing preferences of business users with regard to digital communication. While there is still substantial need for face-to-face and telephone support and advice, business people are increasingly turning to social media as a primary means of communication and networking. Moreover, as consistently reported by business stakeholders, the internet generally (including popular search engines such as Google) is increasingly becoming the first port of call for business people to find answers and guidance in response to any query they may have.

The Government is also putting in place measures to simplify and improve the way SMEs access its information, guidance and support, with a focus on making business support simpler, more joined up and easier to access.<sup>1314</sup>

## Market failure

BIS's rationale for placing information on GOV.UK and for providing Helpline services is to intervene only to address market failures. A core objective is to stimulate the market for enterprise support services through addressing market failures associated with information asymmetries that cause sub-optimal use of enterprise support services, while reducing inefficient crowding out of private sector services.

Research on the barriers to take-up and use of business support finds that many businesses have identified unmet demand for business support.<sup>15</sup> This research was based on a survey of SMEs in England. The study concludes that the reasons for this unmet demand can be explained by the following market failure arguments:

- Some businesses have doubts about the benefits and value of assistance. A number of businesses reported that they did not access business support because they felt it was too expensive, they did not have the time to engage in business support or they were unsure about the value and benefits of assistance. While this does not necessarily infer market failure, as in some cases the cost of accessing business support may be greater than the actual benefit to the business, it is possible that insufficient information or risk averseness causes business people to undervalue these benefits. It should be noted that this market failure also has supply side implications as suppliers would be unwilling to offer business support if the market price is lower than the cost of provision.

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<sup>13</sup> HM Government *Small Business: GREAT Ambition*,  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/266212/bis-13-1313-small-business-great-ambition-FINAL.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/266212/bis-13-1313-small-business-great-ambition-FINAL.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> BIS (2011) *Bigger, Better Business: Helping small firms start, grow and prosper*,  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/32225/11-515-bigger-better-business-helping-small-firms.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32225/11-515-bigger-better-business-helping-small-firms.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Centre for Enterprise and Economic Development Research and BMG Research (2011) *Research to understand the barriers to take up and use of business support*, Chapter 7.5,  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/32250/11-1288-research-barriers-to-use-of-business-support.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32250/11-1288-research-barriers-to-use-of-business-support.pdf)

- Relationship issues also constrain demand for external information or advice, where businesses have insufficient information about the competence and trustworthiness of providers. SMEs reported that they did not use business support because they found it difficult to trust external advisors, they felt advisors do not understand their business or sector, they do not feel confident to approach external assistance or they had been deterred by previous experience.
- A further reason for unmet demand for business support is that businesses are not able to access information or advice. These include businesses that reported not being able to find suitable assistance as well as those perceiving that suitable assistance does not exist.

In theory, a Government service for providing easily accessible information and signposting businesses to further sources of advice can reduce this market failure by helping business people to understand the value of business support, giving them information about how to find other support and enabling them to be more confident about using the available provision.

# Demand for business support

## Introduction

This chapter provides an analysis of the general demand for business support in England, drawing on evidence from the stakeholder consultations and survey of users and non-users. This analysis helps to place the Government services on which this evaluation focuses into a wider context of the overall business support market.

## Survey evidence

In the survey of users and non-users, respondents were asked to state any requirements they have had for business-related information in the last 12 months, and the results are presented in Table 3. This gives an indication of the level of demand for support from people running a business or wanting to start a business. As our overall sample is biased towards people that have used the Business Support Helpline or GOV.UK in the previous 12 months, the overall (all respondents) figure is likely to overestimate the demand for business support among the target population as a whole. This is demonstrated by the fact that demand was significantly lower from non-users (all of which were established businesses at the time of the survey) for the majority of types of business support information listed. Nevertheless, note that more than half of all non-users identified that they had some requirement for business support in the last 12 months, suggesting significant demand generally from the business community.

Overall, respondents were most likely to require support for starting a business (36 per cent) followed by information on tax or national insurance (31 per cent). There was a clear distinction between the type of business support need and the type of support accessed from the Government. Around half of Helpline users (47 per cent of people using the Helpline only and 57 per cent of people using both the Helpline and GOV.UK in relation to the same query) required information on starting a business, compared to just 19 per cent of people using GOV.UK only. Meanwhile, GOV.UK users were significantly more likely to have required information on tax or national insurance (42 per cent) or employment issues (36 per cent). This may suggest that online information is more effective at meeting demand for more factual queries or queries related to transactions (such as tax), while people demanding a broader business support service (e.g. general help and guidance on starting a business) prefer to speak to a person. However, this distinction may also be a result of sampling methods as the GOV.UK only users sampled in the survey were much more likely to have a business than the Helpline only or Helpline and GOV.UK users.

The survey also found demand for business information differed by business status and growth ambition. The survey found that:

- respondents who did not have a business at the time of the survey were significantly more likely than average to require information on starting a business, accessing finance, general information for running a business, marketing, business planning and sources of business information and advice; and

- among respondents who were in business, those who said that they wanted to grow the business over the next two to three years were significantly more likely (13 per cent) to have required business information in the last 12 months compared to those with no stated growth ambition. (Only 13 per cent of businesses with growth ambition had not required business support compared to 31 per cent of businesses with no growth ambition.) This suggests a clear link between growth ambition and demand for business support.

The survey also suggests that demand for business information is higher among women and people from a minority ethnic group (MEG). For example, 47 per cent of women-led enterprises and 50 per cent of MEG-led enterprises required support on starting a business compared to 32 per cent of men-led enterprises and 31 per cent of enterprises led by a White British or Irish person.

**Table 3 – In the last 12 months, have you required or do you currently require information on any of the following issues? By type of user**

	Total <sup>16</sup>	Helpline and GOV.UK	GOV.UK only	Helpline only	Non-users
Starting a business	35.6%	<b>56.8%</b>	<b>19.0%</b>	<b>46.6%</b>	<b>8.6%</b>
Tax or national insurance	31.8%	33.8%	<b>42.2%</b>	<b>25.8%</b>	<b>20.9%</b>
General information for running a business	29.0%	<b>38.3%</b>	28.7%	30.8%	<b>11.0%</b>
Accessing finance	28.0%	<b>37.5%</b>	<b>20.0%</b>	<b>34.5%</b>	<b>14.6%</b>
Understanding regulatory and legal issues	27.0%	<b>31.7%</b>	29.4%	26.8%	<b>15.6%</b>
Sources of business information and advice	24.5%	<b>32.8%</b>	22.2%	25.5%	<b>12.0%</b>
Employing people or employment issues	23.5%	<b>19.2%</b>	<b>35.6%</b>	<b>18.4%</b>	19.9%
Business planning	22.5%	<b>31.3%</b>	<b>16.3%</b>	25.5%	<b>12.3%</b>
Growing a business	22.3%	<b>28.9%</b>	<b>17.0%</b>	25.8%	<b>14.3%</b>
Marketing	18.5%	<b>22.6%</b>	<b>14.2%</b>	<b>23.4%</b>	<b>11.3%</b>

<sup>16</sup> Sample average

	Total <sup>16</sup>	Helpline and GOV.UK	GOV.UK only	Helpline only	Non-users
Health and safety	17.7%	16.4%	20.0%	17.4%	17.3%
E-commerce or technology	12.3%	14.7%	9.4%	15.0%	<b>8.6%</b>
Importing or Exporting	9.0%	<b>12.5%</b>	<b>6.2%</b>	10.8%	<b>4.7%</b>
Other	2.4%	2.1%	3.7%	2.6%	<b>1.0%</b>
Any requirement for information in the last 12 months	83.3%	<b>94.6%</b>	<b>90.6%</b>	85.5%	<b>50.5%</b>
Have not required any information on these issues in the last 12 months	14.8%	<b>4.5%</b>	<b>8.0%</b>	12.1%	<b>45.8%</b>
Don't know / Refused	1.9%	0.9%	1.4%	2.4%	3.7%
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	<i>1647</i>	<i>530</i>	<i>436</i>	<i>380</i>	<i>301</i>

Source: Ecorys survey, GOV.UK only users and non-users weighted by business size, figures in bold are significantly different to the row average (total column) at the 5% two-tailed significance level

Table 4 shows what other sources of business information respondents used in the last 12 months. It shows that about two thirds (67 per cent) of all respondents and more than half (56 per cent) of non-users had used other sources to access business support information. The results suggest that online sources of information are particularly important, with 20 per cent using other websites besides GOV.UK. Accountants (15 per cent) and other Government agencies (15 per cent) were also frequently mentioned as well as more informal support from colleagues and networks (nine per cent) and family and friends (nine per cent).

Users of GOV.UK and the Helpline are significantly more likely to have used other sources of business information in the last 12 months than non-users. This may suggest that the Government's business support services have been effective at reducing the barriers to take-up of other business support. An alternative interpretation, however, is that GOV.UK and Helpline users have a stronger appetite for business support anyway.

Further analysis shows that 58 per cent of respondents reporting that they had not used any sources of business information in the last 12 months also reported that they had a need for information. This suggests significant levels of unmet demand for business support.

**Table 4 – In the last 12 months, what other sources (not GOV.UK or Helpline) have you used to access information relating to running a business or starting a business? By type of user**

	Total	Helpline and GOV.UK	GOV.UK only	Helpline only	Non-users
Other websites	20.4%	<b>26.0%</b>	22.4%	17.6%	<b>10.9%</b>
Accountant	15.3%	<b>10.4%</b>	<b>21.9%</b>	<b>9.9%</b>	<b>21.2%</b>
Other government agencies (e.g. HMRC, enterprise agencies)	14.6%	17.1%	15.1%	15.0%	<b>8.9%</b>
Family and friends	8.9%	<b>13.1%</b>	<b>5.9%</b>	8.0%	7.2%
Colleagues/networks	8.6%	11.5%	7.5%	5.9%	8.5%
Local authority	5.8%	<b>8.7%</b>	<b>3.5%</b>	6.7%	<b>3.1%</b>
Bank	5.6%	7.1%	4.2%	7.0%	3.4%
Solicitor	4.9%	5.6%	5.9%	3.2%	4.4%
Management consultant	4.7%	5.4%	4.7%	<b>2.7%</b>	5.8%
Trade bodies	3.4%	3.8%	3.3%	2.4%	4.1%
Chamber of commerce	3.0%	3.8%	2.1%	3.2%	2.7%
Educational/ public trainer	3.0%	2.7%	2.8%	4.3%	<b>2.0%</b>
Other	5.6%	6.9%	4.5%	5.6%	5.1%
Any usage of business support in the last 12 months	66.6%	<b>74.7%</b>	68.6%	<b>60.9%</b>	<b>56.3%</b>
Have not used any business support in the last 12 months	29.2%	<b>19.0%</b>	28.1%	<b>34.8%</b>	<b>42.0%</b>
Don't know / Refused	4.2%	6.3%	3.3%	4.3%	1.7%
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	1611	520	424	374	293

Source: Ecorys survey, GOV.UK only users and non-users weighted by business size, figures in bold are significantly different to the row average (total column), at the 5% two-tailed significance level

Respondents not in business at the time of the survey were significantly less likely than average to use an accountant for information (five per cent). Among respondents that were in business, there was again a positive relationship between growth ambition and use of business information. As shown in Table 5, businesses with growth ambition are significantly more likely (71 per cent) to have used business information in the last 12 months compared to businesses with no growth ambition (53 per cent).

**Table 5 – In the last 12 months, have you used any other sources (except the Helpline and GOV.UK) to access information relating to running a business or starting a business? By growth ambition**

	Total	Plans to grow business in next 2-3 years	Does not plan to grow business in next 2-3 years
Any usage of business support in the last 12 months	66.5%	<b>71.0%</b>	<b>53.4%</b>
Have not used any business support in the last 12 months	29.2%	<b>24.8%</b>	<b>41.5%</b>
Don't know / Refused	4.2%	4.2%	5.1%
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	1611	875	234

Source: Ecorys survey, figures in bold are significantly different to the row average (total column, at the 5% two-tailed significance level)

The Small Business Survey suggests a somewhat lower demand for business support. According to the Small Business Survey 2012, nearly half (45 per cent) of all businesses in the UK employing people and about a third (34 per cent) of businesses without employees sought information or advice in the past 12 months.<sup>17</sup> Medium-sized (50-249 employees) and small businesses (10-49 employees) were significantly more likely to demand external support than micro businesses (1-9 employees).<sup>18</sup> This finding was not replicated in our survey, which found no difference in business support usage according to business size. Among SMEs in England and Wales completing the Small Business Survey, the most

<sup>17</sup> BIS (2013) *Small Business Survey 2012: Businesses with No Employees*, Table 7.1, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/193548/bis-13-p180-small-business-survey-2012-businesses-with-no-employees.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/193548/bis-13-p180-small-business-survey-2012-businesses-with-no-employees.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> BIS (2013) *Small Business Survey 2012: SME Employers*, Table 9.6, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/193555/bis-13-p74-small-business-survey-2012-sme-employers.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/193555/bis-13-p74-small-business-survey-2012-sme-employers.pdf)

commonly reported types of information or advice sought were in relation to business growth or financial advice / information for general running of the business.<sup>19</sup>

## Stakeholder views

The stakeholder consultations conducted as part of this evaluation revealed that stakeholders generally believe that there is greater demand for business support from pre-starts and start-ups than from established businesses. The key reasons for this are that start-ups generally have more time to engage (as they are not yet running a business) and they have a greater appetite for support. It is considered that established businesses either do not have the time to engage in business support or they perceive that they do not need further support. While it is difficult to test this conclusively from the survey, due to potential bias in the sample, it should be noted that over half of Helpline enquiries were from pre-start callers while GOV.UK users are significantly more likely to be new businesses than non-users. These findings are presented in the following chapters.

A common theme emerging from the stakeholder interviews was the continuing need for advice and guidance on the availability and quality of business support, particularly in light of the complex and diverse market for provision. Stakeholders believe that this is equally relevant to both start-ups and established businesses.

The vast majority of strategic stakeholders consulted believe that the supply of public and private sector business support provision is sufficient, in terms of both quality and quantity, to meet the needs of pre-start and start-up businesses. A common issue identified by many stakeholders is ensuring that those looking to start a business are aware of the range of support that is available.

Some stakeholders expressed concern at the limited supply of more specific information for individuals at the pre-start stage. One stakeholder with a background in business suggested that this group requires more practical steps to finding the appropriate support. It was argued, for example, that there is a need for more detailed information and advice on the range of finance options which are available to start-ups. Some stakeholders also identified a need for more specialist sector support, for example advice on supply chain opportunities. One stakeholder indicated that even one and a half hours of face to face support can have a major impact.

Views amongst stakeholders were more mixed on whether the supply of business support is sufficient to meet the needs of established businesses. Particular concerns included the confusing landscape of support with too many schemes and initiatives provided by the public sector.

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<sup>19</sup> BIS (2013) *Small Business Survey 2012: Businesses with No Employees*, Table 7.2, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/193548/bis-13-p180-small-business-survey-2012-businesses-with-no-employees.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/193548/bis-13-p180-small-business-survey-2012-businesses-with-no-employees.pdf)

Some stakeholders also suggested that business support provision for established businesses places too much emphasis on growth businesses. Although the GrowthAccelerator programme was generally praised, there is some concern that focusing solely on growth businesses can overlook the needs of more established businesses or those that perhaps need more support due to their limited potential for growth.

## Use of internet for business support

To assess the use of internet for business support among SMEs and people looking to start a business, an additional section was included in the survey of all user types, as well as non-users. Table 6 shows that over 90 per cent of survey respondents have broadband internet access which they can use for business purposes. However, GOV.UK users were significantly more likely to have broadband and less likely not to have any internet access at all.

**Table 6 – Whether respondent has internet access that can be used for business purposes**

	Helpline only	Helpline and GOV.UK	GOV.UK only	Non-users	Total
Yes - broadband	91.8%	93.2%	<b>97.5%</b>	94.6%	94.3%
Yes - but not broadband	2.4%	2.1%	1.2%	2.1%	1.9%
None	4.7%	3.8%	<b>1.0%</b>	2.5%	3.0%
Don't know / refused	1.1%	0.9%	0.3%	0.8%	0.8%
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	380	530	436	301	1647

*Source: Ecorys survey, GOV.UK only users and non-users weighted by business size, figures in bold are significantly different to the row average (total column), at the 5% two-tailed significance level*

Table 7 shows that, among GOV.UK and non-users (which are predominantly established businesses), respondents were equally likely to have internet access at home or at work. Fewer than half of Helpline users had internet access at work, but this is likely to be due to the fact that more of them are pre-starts and do not have a business premises. This is confirmed by the subgroup analysis which finds that, among Helpline only users and Helpline and GOV.UK users, respondents from established businesses are significantly more likely to have access to the internet at work than pre-starts.

Over half of GOV.UK users have access to the internet via smart phone although this proportion is lower among Helpline only users and non-users. GOV.UK only users are also significantly more likely than the average respondent to have internet access via a tablet.

**Table 7 – Where do you have internet access?**

	Helpline only	Helpline and GOV.UK	GOV.UK only	Non-users	Total
At home	88.0%	<b>94.3%</b>	84.1%	<b>78.8%</b>	87.3%
At work	<b>41.3%</b>	<b>44.8%</b>	<b>83.2%</b>	<b>79.5%</b>	60.9%
Via smart phone (e.g. Blackberry/iPhone/Android)	<b>37.4%</b>	<b>59.2%</b>	51.6%	43.2%	49.3%
Via tablet (e.g. iPad)	<b>21.8%</b>	35.8%	<b>40.3%</b>	27.9%	32.5%
Somewhere else	3.4%	3.2%	<b>1.1%</b>	1.6%	2.4%
Don't know / Refused	0.3%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.1%
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	358	505	429	291	1583

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = users with internet access, GOV.UK only users and non-users weighted by business size, figures in bold are significantly different to the row average (total column), at the 5% two-tailed significance level

Users that do have internet access for business purposes and were not GOV.UK users were asked to report whether they use the internet to access business support information. As shown in Table 8, 82 per cent of Helpline only users and 67 per cent of non-users do use the internet for business support, despite not having used GOV.UK in the last 12 months. This suggests that other websites have been used to access business support or that people tend to use the internet as a first port of call for any queries they may have. This is consistent with the finding (explored in the Business Support Helpline chapter) that the majority of Helpline users that had not previously used GOV.UK found the number for the Helpline via an internet search engine.

**Table 8 – Do you use the internet to access business support information?**

	Helpline only	Non-users	Total
Yes	<b>82.1%</b>	<b>67.4%</b>	75.5%
No	<b>17.3%</b>	<b>31.5%</b>	23.7%
Don't know / Refused	0.6%	1.1%	0.8%
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	358	291	649

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = users with internet access, non-users weighted by business size, figures in bold are significantly different to the row average (total column), at the 5% two-tailed significance level

The most common reason given for not using the internet for business support was that respondents felt that they had no need for online business support information. See Table 9.

**Table 9 – What prevents you from using the internet to access business support information?**

	Helpline only	Non-users	Total
No need for online business support information	<b>42.2%</b>	65.5%	56.8%
Level of IT skills	17.2%	4.8%	9.9%
No access to internet at my residence or place of work	6.3%	3.3%	4.6%
Physical factors (e.g. visual impairment)	0.0%	0.1%	0.0%
Not aware of online business support information	<b>0.0%</b>	14.8%	9.0%
Other	14.1%	8.6%	10.9%
Don't know / Refused	25.0%	10.1%	16.3%
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	<i>64</i>	<i>93</i>	<i>157</i>

*Source: Ecorys survey, Base = users with internet access that do not use the internet to access business support, non-users weighted by business size, figures in bold are significantly different to the row average (total column), at the 5% two-tailed significance level*

Table 10 shows that the majority of respondents to the survey stated that they would expect to access business support information on the internet in the future, including 89 per cent of Helpline only users and 86 per cent of non-users. This provides a strong argument for a continued and increasing presence of online business support information.

**Table 10 – Would you expect to access business support information on the internet in the future?**

	Helpline only	Helpline and GOV.UK	GOV.UK only	Non-users	Total
Yes	88.9%	92.6%	<b>96.8%</b>	<b>85.5%</b>	91.6%
No	8.4%	4.5%	<b>2.3%</b>	<b>10.6%</b>	5.9%
Don't know / Refused	2.6%	2.8%	<b>0.9%</b>	4.0%	2.5%
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	380	530	436	301	1647

Source: Ecorys survey, GOV.UK only users and non-users weighted by business size, figures in bold are significantly different to the row average (total column, at the 5% two-tailed significance level)

Among respondents who said that they would access business information on the internet in the future, over two thirds of GOV.UK users (69 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users and 72 per cent of GOV.UK only users) and about half of respondents who had not used GOV.UK (52 per cent of Helpline only users and 52 per cent of non-users) said that they would expect this to be through smartphone or tablet. This finding suggests that business support information provided online should be presented in a format that is easily accessible for tablet and smartphone users, as well as computer users. See Table 11.

**Table 11 – Would you expect to this to be via smartphone or tablet?**

	Helpline only	Helpline and GOV.UK	GOV.UK only	Non-users	Total
Yes	<b>52.4%</b>	<b>69.0%</b>	<b>72.3%</b>	<b>52.4%</b>	63.4%
No	<b>44.1%</b>	<b>28.5%</b>	<b>27.0%</b>	<b>43.8%</b>	34.2%
Don't know / Refused	3.6%	2.4%	<b>0.7%</b>	3.8%	2.4%
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	338	491	419	259	1508

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = users expecting to access business support information on the internet in the future, GOV.UK only users and non-users weighted by business size

## Conclusion

The following key findings can be inferred from an analysis of the demand for business support.

- There is considerable demand for business support from businesses of all sizes and ages.
  - The type of information demanded varies considerably between pre-starts and established businesses, with the former requiring information on starting a business and accessing finance and the latter more likely to demand information relating to running a business, including employing people and tax and national insurance.
  - Users of GOV.UK and the Helpline are significantly more likely to have also accessed other sources of business information in the last 12 months than those who had not used either service.
  - Demand for business information is also higher among businesses with growth ambition as well as businesses or pre-starts led by women or people from a minority ethnic group.
  - About half of non-users of either the Business Support Helpline or GOV.UK reported that they have required business support information in the 12 months and over half have accessed business support information from some external source.
- There is also evidence of unmet demand.
  - Over half of respondents that did not access external information reported that they did have information needs, suggesting a large unmet demand for business support.
  - Close to a half of non-users of GOV.UK or the Helpline have not accessed any other business support in the last year.
- Stakeholders familiar with the business support market feel that there is sufficient provision of business support services from the public and private sectors, but that there is a continuing need for advice and guidance on the availability and quality of business support, particularly in light of the complex and diverse market for provision.
- There appears to be demand for online business support, and this may increase in the future.
  - One in five businesses surveyed had accessed other sources of business support on the internet in the last 12 months.

- The majority of business people contacted by the survey have access to broadband internet for business purposes, many of whom have internet access through a smartphone or tablet.
- Most respondents said that they would expect to access business support on the internet in the future, with over half saying that this would be via mobile devices.

The findings suggest that many businesses and people wanting to start a business understand that they need external information and support, and this support is being accessed from a variety of private and public sector sources. There is particular demand for support from people in the early stages of setting up a business but external support continues to be required by businesses of all sizes and ages.

The view from stakeholders that the business support market is fragmented and there is greater need for coherent signposting suggests that the market failure of low awareness may be driving an under-utilisation of business support. This is consistent with the finding that close to a half of non-users of GOV.UK or the Helpline have not accessed any other business support in the last year.

Stakeholders also report that, often due to time constraints and the pressures of managing a business, people running SMEs do not always appreciate the long-run value of investing in external support suggesting that the market failure relating to lack of value of business support may also be prevalent.

There is a significant correlation between usage of GOV.UK and the Helpline and usage of other business support, although this does not give conclusive evidence of the effectiveness of these services at reducing the barriers to take-up.

The extent to which GOV.UK and the Helpline are effective at reducing market failures is explored further in the next two chapters.

# GOV.UK

## Introduction

This section provides detailed findings from our primary research, in relation to evaluating the business support elements of the GOV.UK website. It draws on evidence from GOV.UK monitoring data, the quantitative survey, the qualitative in-depth interviews and stakeholder consultations. It should be noted that many GOV.UK users had also called the Helpline in relation to the same query. The analysis relating to these combined users is primarily reported in the next chapter so, unless otherwise stated, the results presented in this chapter refer to those who used GOV.UK only.

## Background to GOV.UK

### Specific rationale

The business section of GOV.UK contributes to the Government's role in helping businesses access information on a variety of topics. In doing so, it plays a role in stimulating the market for enterprise support services through addressing market failures associated with information asymmetries that cause sub-optimal utilisation.

Moreover, the business section of GOV.UK supports the Government's overall duty of care to provide information on the processes and procedures businesses need to set in place to comply with regulation.

### Overall aims and objectives

By providing input to the development of the business section of GOV.UK, BIS aims to ensure that the website supports the Department's business and enterprise objective which is "to create the right conditions for companies to thrive and make it easier for people to start successful new businesses."<sup>20</sup>

### Operational objectives and monitoring approach

The specific operational objectives of GOV.UK are defined and monitored by the Government Digital Service (GDS) which includes aims to meet the needs of businesses that cannot be met elsewhere. Additionally, BIS monitors the usage of the business support section of GOV.UK on a monthly basis using Google Analytics. The box below describes the key metrics.

- Unique Pageviews - This represents the number of unique user visits to a page. So, if a user visits a page 5 times during their browsing session, it will show up as 1 unique pageview in Google Analytics.
- Pageviews - This is a count of every time that page was viewed. For example, if someone

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<sup>20</sup> GOV.UK website, <https://www.gov.uk/government/topics/business-and-enterprise>

visits page X, then goes to page Y and then page X again, then page X will be shown having 2 pageviews (and 1 unique pageview).

- Entrances - This is the number of times that page was the first page on the site viewed by users.
- Entrances/Pageviews - Calculation showing entrances to the page as a percentage of the pageviews.
- Bounce Rate - The percentage of “single-page sessions” – that is, users who viewed only this page and then left GOV.UK.
- Average Time on Page - How long users view the page on average.

## Delivery approach

GOV.UK was launched to provide a single point of access to Government information and services. The websites of all Government departments and many other agencies and public bodies are being merged into GOV.UK. Responsibility for developing the GOV.UK website lies with GDS. GDS therefore has lead responsibility for the development of the business support section of the website, which is also known as the “tools and guidance for business” section.

While BIS does not have direct responsibility for the development of the business support content, a procedure is in place which enables BIS to make suggestions to GDS in respect of updated content. Any changes suggested by Government departments need to be supported by a clear statement of case. As part of a joint GDS-BIS content review of GOV.UK business support content, a panel of 20 independent experts will review the business support content. This review is ongoing at the time of this report and is due to report later in 2014.

The “tools and guidance for business” section of the website includes information on starting-up, running, growing and financing a business.

Specifically this includes:

- information on regulations (e.g. registering a business, employment regulations, health and safety regulations);
- information on accessing finance;
- signposting to other sources of information/advice;
- events finder tool (e.g. business related training, workshops, networking, seminars etc.);
- business finance and support finder tool (e.g. government grants, publicly-backed finance and loans, business support such as mentoring and consultancy and funding);
- information on starting and growing a business (e.g. “Start your own business” guide, “Growing your business”); and

- access to Government services (e.g. applying for a patent, tax return form).

The GOV.UK website also contains sections entitled “Employing people” and “Money and tax”. While much of this is relevant for individuals seeking information relating to their own employment or tax affairs, these pages also provide important business information for SMEs and self-employed people.

The business section of the GOV.UK website utilises and builds on content developed by BIS and HMRC for the previous Business Link website (businesslink.gov). The Business Link website was developed to enable clearer customer journeys for new and growing businesses. The website was designed as the first port of call for information on how to start and run a business and included specialist content such as My New Business, the Growth and Improvement Service, and Mentors Me portal. Other features such as Business Support Finder and Events Finder were also developed for the Business Link website. The website was designed to enable businesses to understand the extent of their support needs as well as find and discriminate between suppliers of advice.

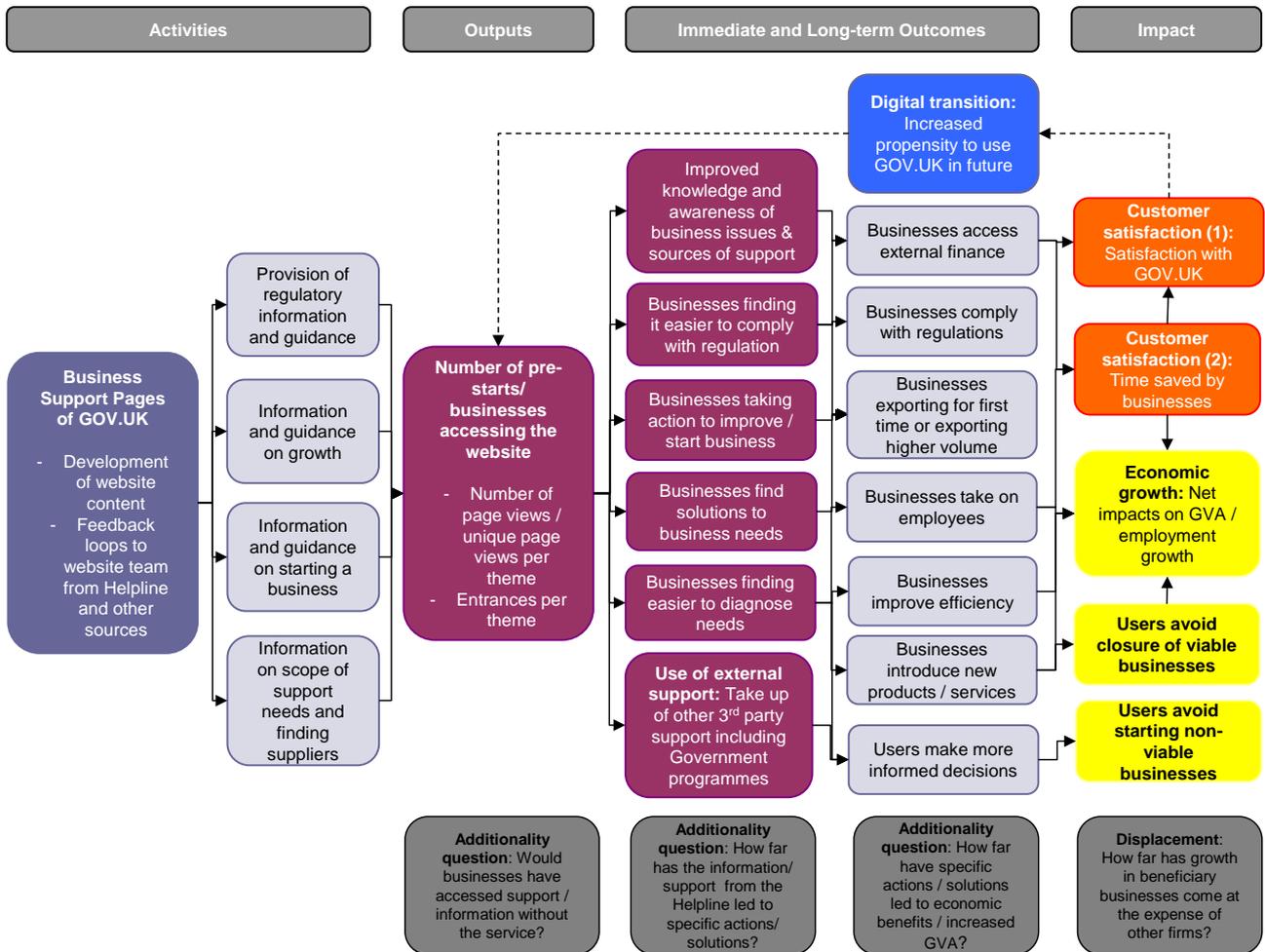
Many of the essential features and content of the Business Link website have been maintained on the GOV.UK website. However there are distinct differences in the branding approach and layout. A key aspect of the GOV.UK approach is to rely on Google searches as the main route to finding information on the website rather than assuming that businesses are aware of the name of the website. The website focuses on providing information which is clearly needed by pre-starts and established businesses such as information on compliance with regulations. This includes signposting businesses to other information available online including private sector provision.

BIS does not have a specific marketing budget to promote the business support content of GOV.UK. The “GREAT Business” website has been an important source of referrals for the business support pages of GOV.UK. The website is part of the GREAT marketing campaign which had a strong association with the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games and specifically the role of UK businesses in its successful delivery. The “GREAT Business” website promotes the range of business support and advice which is available through Government. The other key source of referrals for the GOV.UK website is the Business Support Helpline.

## **Theory of change / logic model**

A logic model describing the relationship between the activities of the business section of the GOV.UK website (and associated financial inputs), and its expected outputs, outcomes and impacts is set out in Figure 1.

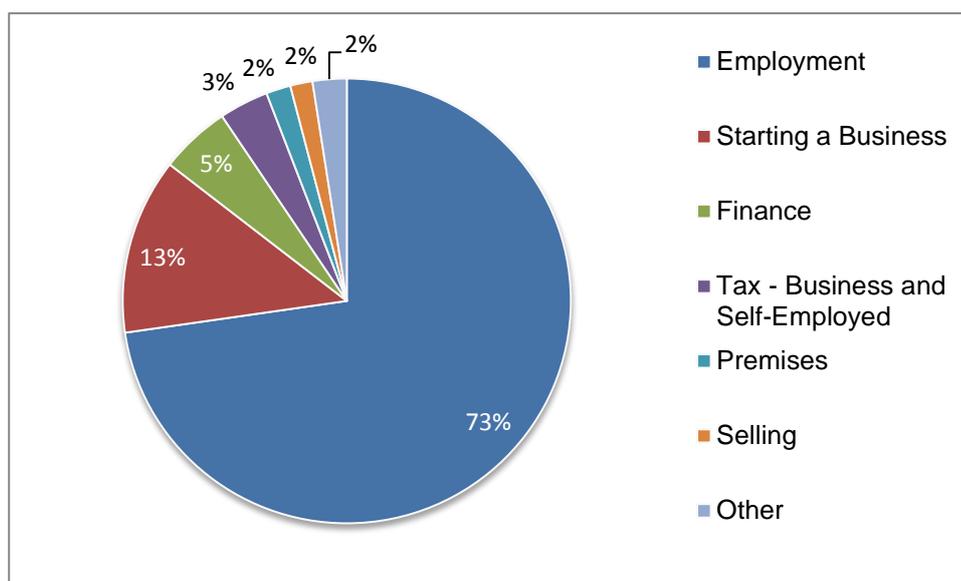
Figure 1 – GOV.UK Logic Model



## Profile of GOV.UK users

### Number of visitors

According to a recent GOV.UK usage report, between September 2013 and January 2014, the business and self-employed pages were viewed about 23.8 million times. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of page views by theme.

**Figure 2 – GOV.UK Pageviews by theme, September 2013 – January 2014**

Source: BIS GOV.UK usage report, January 2014

As shown in Figure 2, the majority of page views relating to business and self-employment were under the theme of employment, with the most commonly viewed pages being the “calculate redundancy pay” tool (624,000 page views in January 2014), the “calculate holiday entitlement tool” (600,000) and the “parental pay calculator” tool (310,000). While these are designed to be used for both employers and employees, it is possible that usage by employees has been greater than employers for these particular frequently viewed pages. This is suggested by the fact that the number of views of the redundancy pay tool aimed at individuals was over seven times higher than the same tool aimed at employers.

After employment related queries, the next most frequently viewed theme was start-up support. In January 2013, there were 237,000 page views of pages within the “starting up a business” section of the website, suggesting high usage among people in the very early stages of setting up a business.

However, this monitoring data has limited use in assessing the total number of visitors to the site, as a given individual may have made several separate visits to GOV.UK browsing several pages each time. We can, however, produce some indicative estimates based on the results from our business survey.

Part of our sampling for the survey involved contacting a random sample of businesses in England to ascertain whether they had used GOV.UK in the past 12 months. From this, it can be estimated that about 8.5 per cent of businesses in England had used GOV.UK in the past 12 months when contacted for the survey.<sup>21</sup> On the basis that there were 4.3

<sup>21</sup> This was calculated as follows from the contacts made from the random sampling of businesses: (Number of GOV.UK interviews achieved) / (Total number of interviews achieved + Number of contacts refusing to take part in the survey on the basis that they had not used GOV.UK). Contacts refusing to take part in the survey for other reasons are not included in this denominator as we do not know whether or not they are GOV.UK users. This calculation is based

million private sector businesses in England at the start of 2013,<sup>22</sup> it is estimated that around 365,500 businesses have used GOV.UK for business support in a given 12 month period.

This may, however, be an underestimate of the total number of users as:

- it does not include people who have not yet set up a business but may have used GOV.UK for business support;
- excludes people who used both GOV.UK and the Helpline: these users are profiled in the next chapter;
- it may exclude some users who although in the survey were given a full description of the website, may have forgotten that they have used it or not realised that they had been visiting GOV.UK; and
- excludes users of GOV.UK based outside of England.

It should also be noted that the 8.5 per cent figure contrasts strongly with the evaluation of the old Business Link website in 2012 which finds that 27 per cent of SMEs had used the website in the previous year.<sup>23</sup> This may suggest that GOV.UK usage among SMEs is much lower than for the old Business Link website, perhaps due to limited awareness, or that users do not realise that they have been visiting GOV.UK, perhaps due to less distinctive branding or the fact that users are more likely to be directed from other web addresses or search engines.

## Profile of users

Over three-quarters (79 per cent) of survey respondents using GOV.UK were established businesses (trading for a year or more) at the time when they last used the website. A further 12 per cent were start-ups (in business for less than a year) and eight per cent were pre-starts.<sup>24</sup> However, due to the sampling approach used to find users of GOV.UK (in which we sampled from a business database, and therefore all respondents had a business at the time of the survey), it is likely that this underestimates the percentage of business users that could be classified as pre-starts.

As shown in Table 12 below, the majority of businesses using GOV.UK are micro-enterprises. About a third (31 per cent) of users have no employees while a further 41 per

on a sample of 694 contacts, and infers a 95% confidence interval of +/- 2 percentage points around the 8.5% estimate. The upper and lower bounds for the estimated number of users is therefore  $4.3m \times 6.5\% = 279,500$  and  $4.3m \times 10.5\% = 451,500$ .

<sup>22</sup> Business Population Estimates for the UK and Regions 2013, Statistical Release p12, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/254552/13-92-business-population-estimates-2013-stats-release-4.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/254552/13-92-business-population-estimates-2013-stats-release-4.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> BIS (2012) *Assessment of the Online Business Support Offer: Growth and Improvement Service, My New Business and Helpline*, Chapter 3.3.3, <sup>23</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/assessment-of-the-online-business-support-offer-growth-and-improvement-service-my-new-business>

<sup>24</sup> These estimates are weighted according to size of business at the time of the survey

cent have between one and nine employees. A further 12 per cent are small business of between 10 and 49 employees, while very few users are found to be medium or large.

It should be noted that the profile of businesses by size is markedly different to the profile of all business in the UK. The Business Population Estimates for the UK and Regions 2013 reports that three-quarters of all businesses in the UK have no employees. The sample drawn from the Experian business database was skewed towards larger businesses, a divergence which was due to random chance rather than a systematic bias in the distribution of businesses contained in the database. However, it is unlikely that this resulted in bias in the overall results as GOV.UK users were no more or less likely than non-users to have ten or more employees, despite the fact that larger businesses have been over-sampled overall.

**Table 12 – Size of business**

	GOV.UK users	Non-users	All businesses in UK <sup>25</sup>
Not in business	13.8%	9.6%	n/a
No employees	30.5%	26.2%	75.3%
1 - 9	40.8%	<b>48.2%</b>	20.2%
10 - 49	12.2%	12.0%	3.8%
50 - 249	1.1%	1.7%	0.6%
250 or more	0.7%	0.7%	0.0%
Don't know/ Refused	0.9%	1.7%	n/a
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	436	272	

*Source: Ecorys survey, Base = all respondents, responses not weighted, figures in bold show where non-users are significantly different to GOV.UK users in each row at the 5% two-tailed significance level*

<sup>25</sup> Business Population Estimates for the UK and Regions 2013, Statistical Release p12, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/254552/13-92-business-population-estimates-2013-stats-release-4.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/254552/13-92-business-population-estimates-2013-stats-release-4.pdf)

While about a quarter (26 per cent) of businesses using GOV.UK are more than 20 years old, GOV.UK users are significantly more likely than non-users to have been in business for less than a year (14 per cent compared to 7 per cent) and are also significantly more likely to have been in business for one or two years. This suggests that GOV.UK is of most use to businesses in the pre-start or start-up stage. See Table 13.

**Table 13 – Age of business**

	GOV.UK users	Non-users	All businesses with no employees <sup>26</sup>	All SME employers <sup>27</sup>
Not in business	0.8%	0.0%	n/a	n/a
Less than 1 year	14.3%	<b>7.4%</b>	2%	1%
1 year	7.4%	<b>3.3%</b>	2%	2%
2 years	4.6%	<b>1.9%</b>	3%	4%
3 years	4.9%	4.7%	4%	4%
4 years	6.5%	6.5%	3%	4%
5 years	6.7%	8.5%	4%	4%
6-10 years	18.4%	19.8%	23%	16%
11-20 years	9.9%	<b>16.7%</b>	24%	23%
More than 20 years	25.5%	29.3%	36%	41%
Don't know/Refused	1.0%	1.9%	n/a	n/a
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	<i>436</i>	<i>272</i>		

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = all respondents, responses weighted according to size of business, figures in bold show where non-users are significantly different to GOV.UK users in each row at the 5% two-tailed significance level

<sup>26</sup> BIS (2013) *Small Business Survey 2012: Businesses with No Employees*, Table 2.6, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/193548/bis-13-p180-small-business-survey-2012-businesses-with-no-employees.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/193548/bis-13-p180-small-business-survey-2012-businesses-with-no-employees.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

Table 14 shows that the most common sector among GOV.UK users with a business is the consumer products, personal services, retail and wholesale sector, accounting for 26 per cent of GOV.UK users, although this sector accounted for a similar share of non-users. Professional and other business services is the second most common sector, accounting for 24 per cent of GOV.UK users which is significantly higher than the 15 per cent of non-users.

**Table 14 – Sector**

	GOV.UK users	Non-users
Consumer Products, Personal Services, Retail and Wholesale	25.5%	28.1%
Professional and Other Business Services	23.5%	<b>15.1%</b>
Manufacturing and Engineering	9.5%	12.6%
Construction and Property Services	10.0%	11.8%
Recreation, Culture and Tourism	6.2%	3.7%
Transport, Warehousing and Distribution	5.7%	5.9%
Hotels and Restaurants	4.2%	<b>10.5%</b>
Information Technology and Telecomms	3.8%	<b>1.1%</b>
Biotechnology, Medical and Chemical	3.4%	1.4%
Agriculture and Fishing	2.8%	2.3%
Creative Services and Media	2.3%	2.2%
Energy and Water	1.6%	<b>0.0%</b>
Other	0.0%	<b>4.2%</b>
Don't know / Refused	1.5%	1.1%
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	376	272

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = respondents with a business at the time of the survey, responses weighted according to size of business, figures in bold show where non-users are significantly different to GOV.UK users in each row at the 5% two-tailed significance level

Table 15 shows that 74 per cent of GOV.UK users are planning to grow the business over the next two to three years, compared to 66 per cent of non-users, which is a statistically significant difference.

**Table 15 – Growth ambition: Percentage of users with a business aiming to grow the business in the next 2-3 years**

	GOV.UK users	Non-users
Yes	74.0%	<b>65.8%</b>
No	23.1%	<b>30.4%</b>
Don't know / Refused	2.8%	3.9%
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	376	272

*Source: Ecorys survey, Base = respondents with a business at the time of the survey, responses weighted according to size of business, figures in bold show where non-users are significantly different to GOV.UK users in each row at the 5% two-tailed significance level*

Among the issues and challenges faced by businesses at the time they used GOV.UK, taking on new staff was the most commonly cited, mentioned by over a quarter (26 per cent) of users, compared to 13 per cent of non-users. Moreover, 15 per cent of GOV.UK users were experiencing difficulties in understanding or complying with legislation or regulations (compared to five per cent of non-users) and 11 per cent of GOV.UK users were experiencing difficulties in understanding or complying with tax obligations (compared to five per cent of non-users). These specified differences are all statistically significant. See Table 16.

These issues relate to the reasons given by users for accessing the website (discussed in the next section) and can also explain the pages most frequently accessed on the website (e.g. the Employing People section).

Table 16 also shows that over a third of non-users of GOV.UK were facing one or more of the challenges listed, suggesting the potential existence of unmet demand for the information provided on GOV.UK

**Table 16 – Issues and challenges faced by businesses at the time they last used GOV.UK (or current issues faced in the case of non-users)**

	GOV.UK users	Non-users
Taking on new staff	25.6%	<b>13.2%</b>
Difficulties in understanding or complying with legislation or regulations	15.0%	<b>5.1%</b>
Difficulties in understanding or complying with tax obligations	10.9%	<b>4.5%</b>
Obtaining finance to support growth	9.0%	11.1%
Introducing new products or services	6.1%	<b>13.6%</b>
Introducing a major change to the way the business is managed	5.4%	9.2%
Introducing a major change to the way you do business	4.2%	7.2%
Managing major growth in turnover	3.9%	6.1%
Severe financial problems and at risk of closure	2.1%	4.9%
Entering a new export market	1.9%	3.5%
None of the above	49.8%	<b>61.5%</b>
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	<i>348</i>	<i>272</i>

*Source: Ecorys survey, Base = respondents with a business at the time of the survey, responses weighted according to size of business, figures in bold show where non-users are significantly different to GOV.UK users in each row at the 5% two-tailed significance level*

As shown in Table 17, women-led enterprises accounted for 25 per cent of users of GOV.UK while mixed business ownership accounted for a further 28 per cent of users. Moreover, 11 per cent of GOV.UK users were minority ethnic only and a further three per cent had at least one minority ethnic partner or director. When compared to the business population as a whole, the analysis suggests that women and people from a minority ethnic group are more likely than average to use GOV.UK.

**Table 17 – Gender and ethnicity of business owner(s)**

	GOV.UK users	Non-users	All businesses with no employees <sup>28</sup>	All SME employers <sup>29</sup>
Female only	25.2%	19.5%	21% <sup>30</sup>	19% <sup>31</sup>
Male only	46.5%	<b>57.3%</b>	61%	49%
Both	28.3%	23.2%	16% <sup>32</sup>	23% <sup>33</sup>
<i>Unweighted base</i>	416	278		
Minority ethnic only	11.4%	11.7%	5% <sup>34</sup>	7% <sup>35</sup>
White British/Irish only	85.4%	85.7%		
Both	3.3%	2.6%		
<i>Unweighted base</i>	410	270		

Source: Ecorys survey, Don't know / refused excluded, responses weighted according to size of business, figures in bold show where non-users are significantly different to GOV.UK users in each row at the 5% two-tailed significance level

As shown in Table 18, the majority of GOV.UK users are multiple users; while a minority of businesses (11 per cent) surveyed reported using GOV.UK once a week or more, 14 per cent had used it only once. Users were most likely to visit the website about once every month (22 per cent). Businesses in the professional and other business services sector were significantly more likely than the average to use GOV.UK every month and significantly less likely to have used the site only once.

<sup>28</sup> BIS (2013) *Small Business Survey 2012: Businesses with No Employees*, Table 2.6, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/193548/bis-13-p180-small-business-survey-2012-businesses-with-no-employees.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/193548/bis-13-p180-small-business-survey-2012-businesses-with-no-employees.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Majority-led by women

<sup>31</sup> Majority-led by women

<sup>32</sup> Equally-led

<sup>33</sup> Equally-led

<sup>34</sup> At least half of management team from ethnic minority

<sup>35</sup> At least half of management team from ethnic minority

These results suggest that, for many businesses, GOV.UK is being used on a regular basis rather than an ad hoc basis. The qualitative research revealed that some businesses use GOV.UK to undertake administrative tasks such as filing a VAT return, rather than simply to get support for their business. It is possible that this administrative use of GOV.UK may be driving the relatively high frequency of visits to the site.

**Table 18 – Frequency of GOV.UK use**

	No employees	1-9 employees	10-49 employees	Total
Once a week or more	13.5%	10.7%	5.7%	11.1%
Once every month	17.3%	23.0%	24.5%	21.7%
Once every quarter	13.5%	23.0%	17.0%	18.8%
Once every six month	15.8%	18.0%	26.4%	18.9%
Once every year	12.0%	7.9%	7.5%	8.5%
Less frequently than once every year	6.0%	5.1%	3.8%	4.8%
Only used it once	19.5%	10.7%	11.3%	13.5%
Don't know / Refused	2.3%	1.7%	3.8%	2.5%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	133	178	53	436

*Source: Ecorys survey, responses weighted according to size of business, users not in business or with 50 or more employees included in Total but not in breakdowns*

## Reasons for using GOV.UK

### Nature of queries

As shown in Table 19, the most common reasons given by businesses for using GOV.UK were employing people or employment issues (36 per cent), tax or national insurance (30 per cent) and understanding regulatory or legal issues (11 per cent). As one would expect, users who were pre-starts or start-ups at the time they used GOV.UK were significantly more likely to cite starting a business or obtaining finance and funding for a business start-up as their reason for using the website.

**Table 19 – Nature of issues addressed by using GOV.UK**

	No employees	1-9 employees	10-49 employees	Total
Tax or national insurance	40.6%	26.4%	28.3%	29.7%
Employing people or employment issues	20.3%	38.2%	45.3%	35.5%
Starting a business	14.3%	7.3%	0.0%	7.6%
Obtaining finance and funding for a business start-up	6.8%	4.5%	0.0%	4.4%
Understanding regulatory or legal issues	6.8%	11.2%	13.2%	10.6%
General business information	6.8%	5.6%	11.3%	7.1%
Growing a business	3.0%	5.6%	0.0%	3.5%
Sales and marketing	2.3%	1.7%	0.0%	1.4%
Types of business models / ownership structures	2.3%	0.6%	0.0%	0.8%
Business planning	1.5%	2.2%	0.0%	1.5%
Importing / exporting	1.5%	4.5%	3.8%	3.7%
Business support availability	0.8%	1.7%	0.0%	1.0%
Finance management	0.8%	1.1%	5.7%	2.1%
Premises / property	0.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%
Trademarks, copyrights and intellectual property	0.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%
Health and safety	0.8%	3.4%	<b>15.1%</b>	5.3%
E-commerce / technology	0.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%
Obtaining finance or funding for an established business	0.8%	6.7%	1.9%	3.9%
Don't know / Refused	11.3%	6.2%	<b>1.9%</b>	6.2%

	No employees	1-9 employees	10-49 employees	Total
Other	6.0%	8.4%	9.4%	8.4%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	133	178	53	436

*Source: Ecorys survey, responses weighted according to size of business, figures in bold significantly different from the row total at the 5% two-tailed significance level, users not in business or with 50 or more employees included in Total but not in breakdowns*

The qualitative research supports the finding that GOV.UK has been used for a variety of purposes, but particularly relating to tax and employment issues. Users requiring support on tax issues tended to use the site for either browsing for general tax-related information, including latest updates regarding tax policy, or using the website's online portal to file VAT and other tax return forms. Those citing employment issues were often using the site to work out their legal obligations as employers.

The qualitative research suggests that established businesses typically use GOV.UK to seek answers to narrow, specific queries often relating to legal issues or businesses' interaction with Government rather than more general requirements for support to improve or grow the business. This suggests that the benefits of using GOV.UK may be more to do with ensuring compliance rather than improving management capability or generating business growth for established businesses.

Among interviewees in the process of setting up a business, the most frequent topic accessed was general information on the process of starting a business, including legal, tax-related and procedural implications. The latter also includes procedures to register as self-employed, or to register one's business for tax purposes. Users also explored the range of financing opportunities available to them (grants and funds for SMEs).

### Reason for using GOV.UK rather than other source of information

Table 20 shows the reasons given by survey respondents for using GOV.UK rather than an alternative source of information. Nearly a third (32 per cent) said it was the simplest method of getting the required information, and over a quarter (26 per cent) said it was easily accessible. Trust and reputational value are also found to be important reasons for using GOV.UK with 19 per cent saying that they do not trust other sources of information and 17 per cent saying they were attracted by the reputation of a Government website.

**Table 20 – Reason for using GOV.UK rather than other source of information**

	No employees	1-9 employees	10-49 employees	Total
Simplest method of getting the information I needed	30.1%	28.1%	43.4%	32.2%
Do not trust other sources of information	27.1%	15.2%	18.9%	18.8%
Easily accessible	18.8%	28.7%	28.3%	26.1%
Government website - reputation and reassurance	11.3%	19.1%	20.8%	17.3%
Quick to access	9.8%	9.0%	7.5%	8.9%
Was advised to/ it was recommended to me	9.0%	6.2%	3.8%	6.2%
Internet search led me here	6.0%	5.6%	1.9%	5.0%
One of several sources used	5.3%	2.8%	<b>0.0%</b>	2.7%
Immediate	4.5%	2.8%	3.8%	3.4%
Not aware of other sources of information	4.5%	1.7%	1.9%	2.8%
Would have to pay	2.3%	0.6%	1.9%	1.3%
Other	4.5%	5.1%	3.8%	4.5%
Don't know / Refused	4.5%	3.4%	3.8%	3.8%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	133	178	53	436

Source: Ecorys survey, responses weighted according to size of business, figures in bold significantly different from the row total at the 5% two-tailed significance level, users not in business or with 50 or more employees included in Total but not in breakdowns

The qualitative research also suggested that the website's reputation and the fact that its users perceive it as an official, reliable source was a prime reason for using GOV.UK. Respondents reportedly tend to trust the website, particularly for policy-related matters such as taxation and legal implications of running or starting a business.

Four users indicated they used the website because it offers services that no other platforms provide, notably the portal to submit VAT return forms. These users are not usually looking for business support information, but simply use the website to carry out

administrative tasks at regular intervals. Two users chose GOV.UK rather than other services due to the fact that it is a free resource.

Three interviewees indicated that the main determinant of choosing the website was the fact that it offers factual and comprehensive information. However, a few users claimed that they still felt the need to collect or triangulate information with other sources, either because they were not satisfied with the quality or quantity of information found or because they wanted to have a second opinion or a more tailored support.

Many users interviewed perceive the GOV.UK website as a signposting portal to gain a general understanding of the range of business support available and subsequently to be pointed towards the appropriate third party source. The website therefore does not appear to substitute for third party sources of information; it rather guides the user through to the most appropriate source. While most users felt that they were effectively signposted to appropriate support, a shortcoming that was raised by two users was that the signposting kept on going back and forward, with the user being “bounced back” from one channel to another.

## Awareness of GOV.UK

### General awareness

In the stakeholder consultations, stakeholders were asked to assess the general awareness of GOV.UK among SMEs and people considering setting up a business. Stakeholders were also asked to suggest ways in which awareness of the service could be improved.

Stakeholder responses indicated that there is good awareness of GOV.UK as a “one stop shop” for general queries and this should continue to develop over time particularly as the GOV.UK website achieves “high rankings” in search engine results.

However, there was some concern that people are not aware that GOV.UK has replaced the Business Link pages. There is also a general perception among stakeholders that GOV.UK is not as comprehensive as the old Business Link website. Not all information has migrated across and, while this information is available from other sources, some users may miss this information if they only use GOV.UK.

Some stakeholders highlighted the potential role of the Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) in promoting GOV.UK content either through direct links or by using the LEP branding to display the content.

One stakeholder suggested that GOV.UK should be particularly targeted at early stage start-ups who are more likely to benefit from the information. Another suggested that the content on the site should be promoted through a suite of micro sites with each site focusing on particular segments of the market for business support such as individuals at the pre-start stage.

### How users found out about the service

According to the survey of users, in about two fifths (40 per cent) of cases, the user had tried other sources to help with their query before using GOV.UK. See Table 21.

**Table 21 – Before using GOV.UK, did you do anything else to try to find information or advice to help with your query?**

	No employees	1-9 employees	10-49 employees	Total
Yes	48.4%	36.9%	39.2%	39.8%
No	48.4%	60.1%	60.8%	57.8%
Don't know / Refused	3.3%	3.0%	0.0%	2.4%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	122	168	51	404

*Source: Ecorys survey, responses weighted according to size of business, users not in business or with 50 or more employees included in Total but not in breakdowns*

Where users did look elsewhere before visiting GOV.UK, over a third (38 per cent) undertook a basic internet search to find the answer to their query while a fifth (20 per cent) searched other websites. Aside from online searches, the most common action taken prior to using GOV.UK was face-to-face advice from a private sector service, accounting for 14 per cent of responses. A significant minority also used telephone advice from a private sector provider or telephone or face-to-face advice from a Government source. The most common sources of support includes accountants, lawyers, HMRC, Jobcentre Plus, the Citizens' Advice Bureau and business representative organisations. This is shown in Table 22.

**Table 22 – What users did before going to GOV.UK**

	No employees	1-9 employees	10-49 employees	Total
Basic internet search (Google etc)	44.3%	31.9%	36.4%	38.0%
Advice over the telephone from other Government service	15.7%	8.3%	9.1%	10.5%
Searched other websites	12.9%	22.2%	27.3%	20.2%
Face-to-face advice from private sector service	11.4%	19.4%	9.1%	14.3%
Face-to-face advice from other Government service	10.0%	5.6%	0.0%	5.7%
Advice over the telephone from private sector service	5.7%	11.1%	13.6%	9.9%
Sought informal advice (from colleagues, friends, etc)	5.7%	4.2%	13.6%	6.8%
Called Business Link Helpline or Business Support Helpline	1.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%
Contacted Chamber of Commerce	1.4%	1.4%	13.6%	4.2%
Used Business Link social media	0.0%	0.0%	4.5%	1.1%
None of the above	11.4%	15.3%	9.1%	12.4%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	70	72	22	203

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = respondents who had looked elsewhere before using GOV.UK, responses weighted according to size of business, users not in business or with 50 or more employees included in Total but not in breakdowns

Over half (58 per cent of GOV.UK only users and 56 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users) of GOV.UK users found out about the website from a basic internet search, highlighting the importance of ensuring that GOV.UK features prominently on search engines such as Google when users type in queries relating to business support. About a tenth (10 per cent of GOV.UK only users and nine per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users) of users knew about GOV.UK having used businesslink.gov in the past while a tenth (10

per cent of GOV.UK only users and nine per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users) found out about GOV.UK through word of mouth. See Table 23.

**Table 23 – How users found out about GOV.UK**

	GOV.UK only	Helpline and GOV.UK
Basic internet search (Google)	57.8%	56.0%
Businesslink.gov (previous Business Link website)	10.4%	8.5%
Word of mouth	10.1%	8.9%
Was given link given by other Government Agency	5.9%	6.0%
Used GOV.UK for a purpose other than business	3.5%	2.6%
Was given link by professional third party advisors	2.4%	1.5%
TV / radio advertising	1.3%	0.9%
Local authority/ Council	0.9%	1.1%
Found link on other website	0.6%	1.1%
From the Business Support Helpline (previously Business Link Helpline)	0.2%	6.4%
Press advertising	0.0%	0.4%
Other	2.9%	2.1%
Don't know / Refused	4.0%	4.3%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	436	530

Source: Ecorys survey, GOV.UK only responses weighted according to size of business

Most of the users who participated in qualitative interviews also indicated that they ended up on the GOV.UK website having been signposted there from web-based search engines (primarily Google). The GOV.UK website typically appeared as the first return – or among the first returns – of web searches performed by these users seeking various types of business support. A minor sub-sample of the qualitative interviewees was signposted to the website from the Helpline or got redirected while looking for the old Business Link website.

This analysis suggests that, for most users, GOV.UK is their first port of call, perhaps having undertaken a simple internet search. However, a significant minority are referred to GOV.UK from other sources, having attempted to find the required information elsewhere.

## **Experience of using GOV.UK**

### **How users interact with GOV.UK**

In the qualitative interviews, users were asked to describe their visit to GOV.UK in some detail.

By and large, the interviewees used the website to search or browse for specific, readily-available information. However, some respondents highlighted the fact that related content was also easily accessible and helped gain a more general overview of the specific topic initially looked up. Links on the side of the webpage were highlighted as being helpful by users. This is considered by users as an asset in the website's structure, as it broadens the range of information that is collected during a single visit, making users more aware of related issues that they may have not previously considered. This helps to address market failure by making businesses aware of information and support that they had not previously been looking for.

Some users felt that the website's main function is to signpost to other sources of information. A few users felt that they were signposted back and forward to the same sources, and therefore were not able to access the information they were looking for, and would have preferred the information to have been available directly from GOV.UK. Conversely, others recognised that selecting the basic facts only is necessary to make the website accessible and easy-to-navigate (too much information was considered to overburden the user).

It can be noted that two users said that they preferred the old Business Link type of support, because it ensured a more interactive and hands on assistance. This suggests that some users are looking for a more interactive and engaging experience from GOV.UK. Alternatively, there may be scope for improving users' awareness of the more tailored support provided by the Helpline and that the GOV.UK website should be treated as a complement rather than a substitute for this.

In terms of modes of navigation through the website, out of the sample of 24:

- eight respondents used the search facility;
- five browsed across the menus;
- five used a combination of both;

- two were directly signposted to the section of the website they were looking for from search engines; and
- four could not recall their mode of navigation.

Among the most useful sections of the website, the online tax service (to file VAT returns), webpages on tax-related information and the FAQ section were identified.

### Satisfaction with the service received

In the survey, the majority of users were satisfied with the information they received from GOV.UK with 40 per cent saying they were very satisfied and 41 per cent saying they were fairly satisfied, as shown in Table 24. This is a similar level of satisfaction expressed in the most recent evaluation of the Business Link website.<sup>36</sup>

**Table 24 – Overall satisfaction of information received through GOV.UK**

	No employees	1-9 employees	10-49 employees	Total
Very satisfied	33.1%	39.9%	47.2%	39.7%
Fairly satisfied	42.1%	41.0%	39.6%	40.9%
Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	8.3%	9.0%	5.7%	8.0%
Fairly dissatisfied	9.8%	5.1%	5.7%	6.7%
Very dissatisfied	4.5%	4.5%	1.9%	3.8%
Don't know / Refused	2.3%	0.6%	0.0%	0.8%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	133	178	53	436

*Source: Ecorys survey, responses weighted according to size of business, users not in business or with 50 or more employees included in Total but not in breakdowns*

Table 25 shows that about two fifths of users (37 per cent of GOV.UK only users and 41 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users) reported that they came across other useful information which they were not looking for when they accessed the website. Again, this supports the importance of having other relevant links visible on the page as users navigate the site, to encourage users to access other useful information that they were not otherwise looking for.

<sup>36</sup> BIS (2012) *Assessment of the Online Business Support Offer: Growth and Improvement Service, My New Business and Helpline*, Table 6.5 – 30 out of 36 (83%) were very or fairly satisfied.

**Table 25 – Whether users found other useful information which they were not looking for on GOV.UK**

	GOV.UK only	Helpline and GOV.UK
No	55.9%	50.6%
Yes	36.5%	41.1%
Don't know/refused	7.6%	8.3%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	436	530

Source: Ecorys survey, GOV.UK only responses weighted according to size of business

Table 26 shows that four fifths (81 per cent) of GOV.UK only users agreed that the information provided was relevant and a similar proportion (81 per cent) agreed that the information was practical and useful. Meanwhile, over three quarters (77 per cent) agreed that the information was valuable to the business. Just over half (54 per cent) agreed that the service provided users with information on other sources of support, which may suggest a perceived deficiency in the range and scope of links provided. However, note that this result may not necessarily infer a weakness as, for many users, the information provided may have fully answered their query and they did not consider it necessary to find further sources of support. Alternatively, some users may have been accessing the website to carry out a transaction and therefore signposting to other sources was less relevant.

**Table 26 – Opinions of the service received from GOV.UK (GOV.UK only users)**

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The information provided was relevant	28.3%	52.9%	14.2%	3.2%	1.5%
The information provided was impartial	27.0%	49.4%	19.4%	3.2%	1.0%
The information provided was valuable to my business	25.5%	51.2%	14.0%	6.7%	2.6%
The information provided was practical and useful	25.4%	55.7%	13.4%	3.7%	1.8%
The information provided enabled me to address my needs independently	22.2%	51.3%	16.9%	6.9%	2.7%
The service provided me with	11.4%	42.1%	34.6%	10.1%	1.8%

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
information on other sources of support					
The information on the website was easy to find	20.0%	49.4%	20.8%	5.8%	4.1%

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = GOV.UK only users, responses weighted according to size of business

In terms of users' opinions of GOV.UK as a service generally, over four fifths (86 per cent) of users agreed that GOV.UK is a service they can trust while 83 per cent agreed that GOV.UK is a highly accessible service. However, only 43 per cent agreed that GOV.UK is known for providing specialist support for people trying to start a business, perhaps suggesting that this is a weakness in the information and support provided by GOV.UK. However, note that the vast majority of respondents in the survey had established businesses and were not using GOV.UK for pre-start support. See Table 27.

**Table 27 – General opinion of GOV.UK (GOV.UK only users)**

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
GOV.UK has a reputation for providing a high quality information service	22.3%	49.0%	23.4%	2.9%	2.5%
GOV.UK is a service I can trust	33.7%	52.0%	11.1%	2.0%	1.2%
GOV.UK is a highly accessible service	31.8%	51.0%	13.9%	2.4%	0.9%
GOV.UK is the first port of call for finding out about business support services	18.9%	45.2%	22.3%	10.4%	3.1%
GOV.UK is a unique service	15.9%	37.4%	33.3%	10.9%	2.5%
GOV.UK is known for providing information on specialist support for people trying to start a business	13.3%	29.4%	46.7%	7.4%	3.3%

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = GOV.UK only users, responses weighted according to size of business

Opinions of GOV.UK were also high among those using GOV.UK in conjunction with the Business Support Helpline. Among these users, 83 per cent agreed that GOV.UK is a service they can trust. See Table 28.

**Table 28 – General opinion of GOV.UK (Helpline and GOV.UK users)**

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
GOV.UK is a service I can trust	34.9%	47.4%	11.3%	3.6%	2.8%
GOV.UK is the first port of call for finding out about business support services	24.7%	42.5%	17.0%	10.4%	5.5%
GOV.UK has a reputation for providing a high quality information service	21.3%	42.1%	26.8%	6.2%	3.6%
GOV.UK is a unique service	18.7%	39.4%	27.2%	10.8%	4.0%

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = Helpline and GOV.UK users

Findings from the qualitative research provide more insight on the reasons for satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

Most users felt that GOV.UK was accessible to anyone and user-friendly, with one user stating that the website strikes a good balance between quantity of information and being user-friendly.

In the minority of cases where users did express dissatisfaction, some users felt that GOV.UK could be made more user-friendly particularly for disadvantaged users including those with low levels of education, older people and disabled people (including users with dyslexia). Another user felt that GOV.UK “looks like it was produced by civil servants rather than businessmen”.

A few users were dissatisfied with the level of detail provided on the website. Some felt that GOV.UK had too much information and it was thus difficult to navigate through, while others were looking for more detailed technical information and were unable to find it. It was also mentioned that GOV.UK appears to be designed for individuals who are in the process of starting a business, rather than for established businesses. This is consistent with findings from the quantitative survey which suggests that GOV.UK is more likely to be used by pre-starts or new businesses. Even though mainly established businesses were sampled for the survey, a relatively high proportion of these (compared to non-users) were new businesses.

In the majority of cases, users consulted in the qualitative interviews were satisfied with their experience and the information received. It was noted by some that, even when the specific information is not there, there is sufficient signposting to the relevant source.

When asked for suggestions for how GOV.UK could be improved, users offered the following comments:

- Website needs more advertising;
- More transparency on the forms of support for SMEs (particularly in financing);
- Introduce a newsletter sent by email to subscribers to keep them updated on policy developments, new sections on the website, and relevant newspaper articles; ideally the newsletter would be tailored to the subscriber's preferences, so that he/she only receives updates on topics of interest;
- Introduce a “couldn't find this info” button to elicit information as to what users have been unable to find or were looking for, and act accordingly;
- Putting figures on business rates on the website.

## **Extent to which GOV.UK is addressing market failure**

This section explores evidence from the survey and qualitative interviews on the extent to which GOV.UK may be addressing the three market failures identified in the introduction.

### **People not valuing business support**

GOV.UK aims to provide a single point of access to Government information and services. In this function, it may not necessarily be expected to stimulate demand for business support or to help users to place a higher value on business support.

Nevertheless, Table 26 shows that more than three quarters of users agreed the information was valuable to their business, and a similar proportion agreed that the information provided was relevant and was practical and useful.

In addition, Table 29 shows that it helped almost two in five (38 per cent) users understand the benefits of information and advice and one in four (25 per cent) understand that they needed advice, support or services. The evidence suggests therefore that, although GOV.UK is aimed primarily at supplying information, it appears to be having an impact on understanding the value of business support for some users.

**Table 29 – Did GOV.UK help you in any of the following ways?**

	No employees	1-9 employees	10-49 employees	Total
Helped me to understand the benefits of information and advice	36.8%	38.2%	41.5%	38.2%
Helped me understand what advice, support or services I needed	24.1%	22.5%	35.8%	25.7%
Helped me understand that I needed advice, support or services	21.8%	24.2%	30.2%	24.9%
Helped me understand how to find a supplier for advice and support	21.8%	14.0%	15.1%	16.4%
Directed me to a specific supplier or suppliers for advice and support	15.8%	13.5%	13.2%	13.9%
Helped me understand how to choose between different suppliers for advice and support	14.3%	13.5%	11.3%	12.8%
None of the above	42.1%	41.0%	34.0%	39.7%
Don't know / Refused	3.0%	2.8%	5.7%	3.5%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	133	178	53	436

*Source: Ecorys survey, responses weighted according to size of business, users not in business or with 50 or more employees included in Total but not in breakdowns*

### **People not knowing what business support is available**

Views from stakeholders interviewed for the research suggested that the Government's business support offer has a more important role in providing businesses and people wanting to start a business with clearer information about the available support, rather than affecting the value that businesses place on support.

However, as shown in Table 29 above, a relatively small minority of survey respondents reported that GOV.UK helped them to understand how to find a supplier for advice and support (16 per cent), directed them to a specific supplier for advice and support (14 per cent) or helped them understand how to choose between different suppliers for advice or support (13 per cent). This may be related to the fact that the majority of GOV.UK users

covered by the survey were primarily using the website to find information relating to a specific enquiry (e.g. relating to tax or employing people) and were not seeking further support, having found the information. However, as stated above, the qualitative interviews revealed that some people felt that they were signposted round in circles and therefore their usage of GOV.UK did not enable them to be directed effectively to an appropriate supplier.

These findings suggest that, contrary to stakeholder views, GOV.UK has had limited impact in helping users to access further business support. A much larger share of users felt that the website helped them to understand the value of business support than those reporting that the website enabled them to find and access further business support.

### **People not trusting business support**

Our qualitative research suggested that the website is generally perceived as trustworthy and “official”. This tackles asymmetric information, by lowering the costs incurred by business support seekers in screening business support providers.

The survey results also suggest that GOV.UK has an important role to play in helping people overcome trust issues. Virtually all respondents to the survey were aware that GOV.UK is a Government website. Table 30 shows that over two thirds (68 per cent) reported that this made them much more likely to trust the information while a further 16 per cent said that this made them a little more likely to trust the information. This implies that users are also more likely to trust other providers if they have been signposted there from a trusted source such as GOV.UK.

**Table 30 – Did the fact that GOV.UK is a Government service affect your trust in the service?**

	No employees	1-9 employees	10-49 employees	Total
Yes, makes me much more likely to trust the information	59.4%	69.7%	73.6%	68.0%
Yes, makes me a little more likely to trust the information	21.8%	14.3%	13.2%	16.1%
Yes, makes me a little less likely to trust the information	1.5%	1.1%	0.0%	0.9%
Yes, makes me much less likely to trust the information	0.8%	1.1%	0.0%	0.7%
No, does not affect my trust in the information provided	15.8%	10.9%	13.2%	12.6%
Don't know/refused	0.8%	2.9%	0.0%	1.6%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	133	175	53	431

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = Users who were aware that GOV.UK is a Government service, responses weighted according to size of business, users not in business or with 50 or more employees included in Total but not in breakdowns

## Actions taken since as a result of using GOV.UK

### Customers subsequently accessing other business support

As shown in Table 31, about half (51 per cent) of GOV.UK users covered by the survey reported that they have no plans to take up further business support. The single most commonly mentioned source of supplementary advice was HMRC, but this accounted for just seven per cent of all users. Users with growth ambition were significantly more likely to say they have plans for taking up further advice (45 per cent of users with growth ambition said they had no plans for taking up further business support compared to 64 per cent with no growth ambition).

**Table 31 – Further business support taken up since using GOV.UK**

	No employees	1-9 employees	10-49 employees	Total
Other government service	5.3%	3.4%	3.8%	3.8%
The private sector (e.g. consultancy, mentoring)	3.8%	3.4%	7.5%	4.3%
Local authority	3.0%	2.2%	3.8%	2.7%
Enterprise agencies	3.0%	1.1%	0.0%	1.3%
HMRC	1.5%	9.0%	7.5%	6.8%
Mentorsme	0.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%
Donut services (e.g. IT Donut, Law Donut, Marketing Donut, Start Up Donut, Tax Donut)	0.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.2%
Funding bodies	0.8%	0.6%	0.0%	0.5%
Other	20.3%	22.5%	13.2%	19.7%
No and I don't have any plans to take up other advice	51.1%	46.6%	56.6%	50.5%
No but I am planning to take up other advice	11.3%	12.4%	9.4%	11.1%
Don't know / Refused	3.0%	1.7%	5.7%	3.1%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	133	178	53	436

*Source: Ecorys survey, responses weighted according to size of business, users not in business or with 50 or more employees included in Total but not in breakdowns*

There are various possible reasons explaining this relatively low take-up of subsequent business support. It is possible that, for about half of all users, GOV.UK has had limited success in addressing the market failures associated with stimulating demand for external support.

Evidence from the qualitative interviews suggests, however, that a typical user of GOV.UK is looking for specific, factual information. As a result, they may not be interested in the first place to seek business support beyond their specific initial query. This may also explain why only a limited number of users have sought further business support.

Several respondents to the qualitative interviews did not feel the need to seek further business advice as they were able to find all the information that they were looking for on GOV.UK itself. However, some users reported that they subsequently received some informal business support (notably from family and friends) or more in-depth business advice, including from private suppliers, citing the underlying reason that they needed more tailored support than that found on the website.

### **Actions taken by pre-starts**

In the survey, the sample of GOV.UK users was recruited primarily from a database of established businesses. While some of these users were pre-starts at the time they used GOV.UK, by definition virtually all of them had gone on to set up a business. As this sample of pre-starts is clearly not representative of the overall pre-start population that might be accessing GOV.UK, it is not possible to assess robustly the impact of the website on helping people to set up a business. However, note that we do have a more representative sample of pre-starts that used the Helpline and GOV.UK. The impact of this combined usage of business starts will be assessed in the following chapter.

Among pre-starts who have set up or plan to set up a business having used GOV.UK, just under a third (29 per cent) had developed a business plan, just under a third (30 per cent) had developed an action plan on what they needed to do to establish the business and a fifth (21 per cent) had accessed start-up finance. See Table 32.

**Table 32 – Specific actions taken by pre-starts**

	Already taken forward	Planning
Developed an action plan on what I needed to do to establish my business	29.9%	2.3%
Developed business plan	29.2%	10.0%
Accessed start-up finance	21.0%	13.5%
Received telephone advice from an advisor on establishing a business	17.8%	3.6%
Received face-to-face advice from an advisor on establishing a business	12.1%	5.7%
Attended a interactive workshop on establishing a business	0.6%	0.3%
Attended a presentation or workshop on how to establish a business	0.3%	0.7%
Other	17.0%	8.9%
None/ Don't know	30.4%	67.3%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	75	75

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = GOV.UK users who have started or are planning to start a business, responses weighted according to size of business

### Actions taken by established businesses

Among businesses that had already been established at the time they used GOV.UK, a quarter (26 per cent) of start-ups and over a third (37 per cent) of established businesses said that they have already taken action to improve their business having used GOV.UK while a further 21 per cent of start-ups and 12 per cent of established businesses were planning to take action. This is shown in Table 33.

Businesses with growth ambition were significantly more likely than firms with no growth ambition to report that they have, or have plans to, implement actions to improve their business having used GOV.UK (51 per cent of businesses with no growth ambition had no plans to implement actions compared to 35 per cent of businesses with growth ambition).

**Table 33 – Whether start-ups and established businesses took any action to improve the business after using GOV.UK**

	Start-up (less than 1 year)	Established business (over 1 year)	Start-up and established business
Yes – have already done so	25.9%	37.0%	35.6%
Yes - planning to do so	21.2%	12.0%	13.2%
No, have no plans to implement any actions	47.9%	41.0%	41.8%
Have stopped trading	0.2%	0.0%	0.1%
Don't know / Refused	4.7%	10.0%	9.3%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	53	288	341

Source: Ecorys survey, responses weighted according to size of business

Table 34 shows that 20 per cent of start-ups or established businesses that had already taken action or were planning to take action to improve their business had improved compliance with legislation having used GOV.UK while 12 per cent had introduced new products, services or processes and 10 per cent had accessed finance or grants to help the business grow.

**Table 34 – Specific actions taken by start-ups and established businesses**

	Already taken forward	Planning
Improved compliance with legislation	19.6%	2.9%
Introduced new products, services or processes	11.9%	6.4%
Accessed finance or grants to help the business grow	10.0%	4.0%
Developed a recruitment plan and/or taken on more employees	7.6%	2.8%
Introduced improvements to operations of the business	9.4%	5.6%
Developed a marketing plan	4.8%	5.4%

	Already taken forward	Planning
Attended a presentation or event on improving my business	2.1%	3.8%
Developed a marketing plan for new export markets and/or started to export or increased exports	0.0%	3.6%
Other	21.8%	21.3%
None/ Don't know	41.8%	61.4%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	165	165

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = GOV.UK users who have taken action or are planning to stake action to improve the business, responses weighted according to size of business

### Additionality of support

It is important for the research to assess the extent to which users would have set up a business or taken action to improve their business without the information and support provided by GOV.UK.

As shown in Table 35, 71 per cent of GOV.UK users felt that they were very likely or likely to have found similar information elsewhere if GOV.UK were not available. This suggests that the additionality of support associated with GOV.UK (the extent to which the service provided support that would not have been available elsewhere) is relatively low. It should be noted, however, that, even though other sources of support were available, users may have saved time and money, and have been more likely to trust the information provided, by going to GOV.UK first. This is explored further below.

**Table 35 – Additionality of support – If GOV.UK was unavailable, how likely is it that you would have obtained the information you received elsewhere?**

		Additionality assumption
Very likely	35.0%	0
Likely	35.6%	0.25
Unlikely	12.9%	0.75
Very unlikely	9.9%	1
Don't know / Refused	6.6%	0.5
Overall additionality	<b>0.32</b>	
<i>Unweighted base</i>	436	

Source: Ecorys survey, responses weighted according to size of business, overall additionality is the average of the assumed additionality of each respondent

Where users would have otherwise obtained the information elsewhere if GOV.UK were not available, about two thirds (65 per cent) thought that they would have found similar information from an internet search. This question assumes that users would have known about and accessed these other websites without going to GOV.UK first, although clearly it is likely that many users would have found out about alternative sources of support as a result of visiting GOV.UK. See Table 36.

**Table 36 – Where users would have otherwise obtained the information if GOV.UK were unavailable**

	No employees	1-9 employees	10-49 employees	Total
Internet search	67.7%	55.7%	78.9%	65.1%
Government agency (e.g. HMRC, Job Centre)	13.5%	9.8%	10.5%	10.5%
Accountant	11.5%	13.9%	5.3%	10.7%
Word of mouth/networking	6.2%	7.4%	0.0%	5.1%
Solicitor	2.1%	3.3%	0.0%	2.1%
Other	17.7%	22.1%	26.3%	22.5%
Don't know/ refused	3.1%	7.4%	0.0%	4.3%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	96	122	38	310

*Source: Ecorys survey, Base = respondents who were very likely or likely to have received similar support elsewhere, responses weighted according to size of business, users not in business or with 50 or more employees included in Total but not in breakdowns*

### Additionality of actions taken

Table 37 shows that 42 per cent of pre-start users and 57 per cent of established businesses (including start-ups) felt that the information received from GOV.UK was very important in their decision to start a business or take action to improve their business respectively. This suggests that additionality of actions (the extent to which the actions they took to start or improve their business were as a result of the support received on GOV.UK) is relatively high.

**Table 37 – Additionality of actions – how important was the information received in your decisions to start your business or implement actions**

	Pre-start	Established	Additionality assumption
Very important	42.2%	56.8%	0.9
Important	27.4%	23.0%	0.75
Not very important	20.5%	8.6%	0.25
Not at all important	6.0%	6.8%	0
Don't know / Refused	4.0%	4.7%	0.5
<b>Overall additionality</b>	<b>0.66</b>	<b>0.73</b>	
<i>Unweighted base</i>	237		

*Source: Ecorys survey, Base = respondents taking or planning to take action to start or improve their business, responses weighted according to size of business, overall additionality is the average of the assumed additionality of each respondent*

## Impact of GOV.UK

### Introduction

This section provides a discussion and some indicative estimates of the economic impact of GOV.UK over a 12 month period. The analysis considers the cost savings to business due to users saving time and monetary expense from accessing business support through GOV.UK, as well as the economic impacts due to businesses experiencing growth (measured through GVA and employment) as a result of additional actions taken to improve the business following usage of GOV.UK

All economic impact estimates in this study are derived from values provided by respondents to the quantitative survey. With this in mind, it is important to note the following caveats when interpreting the analysis in this study:

- In many cases, the number of respondents providing a quantitative estimate in response to some questions was very low. Therefore, the average (mean) response is in some cases very sensitive to specific individual responses. Sample sizes for all estimates are provided in the footnotes
- In this analysis, the estimates of the counterfactual (the outcomes that would have occurred in the absence of GOV.UK) are based solely on respondents' own assessment of additionality. A more robust assessment of additionality would be to measure any changes in outcomes in a "control group" or "comparison group" of non-users, and only attribute impact where there are significant differences between the outcomes experienced by users and those experienced by non-users in a similar time frame. However, such an exercise was beyond the scope of this evaluation. Nevertheless, it should be noted that self-reported additionality can be

subject to optimism bias, where beneficiaries overstate the true impact of a particular factor in any overall change in performance.

To estimate the aggregate impact of GOV.UK usage on the England economy, GVA impacts due to turnover growth are grossed up according to the estimated number of established businesses using GOV.UK in a 12 month period. Any impacts on pre-starts due to businesses being created have not been included in these aggregate estimates, as the survey sample does not adequately represent pre-starts and therefore insufficient inference can be made about these impacts. Moreover, time and cost savings have not been included in the aggregate estimates as these are assumed to be included in the GVA impacts or (in the case of cost savings) to be offset by reduced revenue to business support providers elsewhere in the economy.

Sensitivity analysis has also been undertaken to test the sensitivity of the results to changed assumptions about the number of users, the persistence of impacts and an alternative calculation of GVA based on changes in employment rather than turnover.

### Time and cost savings for the business

Where respondents to the survey reported that they were likely or very likely to have accessed similar support elsewhere in the absence of GOV.UK (see Table 35 above), they were subsequently asked to estimate how much time and money they might have saved due to using GOV.UK.

Where users would otherwise have used alternative support, in the majority of cases (73 per cent) they estimate that this would not have cost anything. However, where they would have otherwise paid for alternative support, the estimated amount saved was substantial. From the survey, it is estimated that costs saved were on average £41 for every business that would have used alternative support otherwise. After taking account of businesses that were unlikely to have used alternative support in the absence of GOV.UK (implying zero cost savings for these users) from Table 35, it is estimated that the average cost saving per user was £29.<sup>37</sup>

Survey respondents were also asked to estimate how much time they saved through using GOV.UK. Among the users that had taken forward or were planning to implement actions to start their business or improve their business, 80 per cent said that their use of GOV.UK had saved them time. See Table 38.

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<sup>37</sup>Mean cost saving x (Percentage likely or very likely to have used alternative support in the absence of GOV.UK from Table 35) = £41 x (35.0% + 35.6%) = £29

**Table 38 – Do you think the information you received from GOV.UK saved you time in deciding what action to take or deciding how to take action?**

Yes	80.2%
No	17.6%
Don't know / Refused	2.2%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	237

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = users who had taken forward or planned to take forward actions to start a business or improve their business, responses weighted according to size of business

Where users considered that they had saved time, the average estimated time saved was 41 hours. Applying this figure to all users that had taken action to start a business or improve their business from Table 33 and had saved time (and assuming zero time saved for all other users), the average time saved per user is estimated to be 12 hours,<sup>38</sup> equivalent to a further cost saving of £250.<sup>39</sup>

### Businesses created

Respondents who were pre-starts when they used GOV.UK and subsequently created a business were asked to estimate their expected turnover after one year of trading. Average estimated turnover was £65,000.<sup>40</sup> This estimate is a little lower than the average turnover of businesses with no employees aged up to three years (£80,200) as reported in the latest Small Business Survey.<sup>41</sup>

However, it would not be appropriate to extrapolate this estimate to all users as, by nature of the sampling method used, the survey will have significantly overestimated the percentage of pre-starts using GOV.UK that went on to start a business.

<sup>38</sup> Mean time saved x Percentage taking action to improve their business x Percentage saving time = 41 x 35.6% x 80.2%

<sup>39</sup> Based on assumption that average working time costs £21 per hour, from BIS (2012) *Assessment of the Business Link Helpline*, p84, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/36780/12-1153-assessment-of-business-link-helpline.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/36780/12-1153-assessment-of-business-link-helpline.pdf)

<sup>40</sup> Mean of 23 responses

<sup>41</sup> BIS (2013) *Small Business Survey 2012: Businesses with No Employees*, p14, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/193548/bis-13-p180-small-business-survey-2012-businesses-with-no-employees.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/193548/bis-13-p180-small-business-survey-2012-businesses-with-no-employees.pdf)

## Economic impacts for established businesses

Respondents who were start-ups or established businesses when they used GOV.UK were asked in the survey to assess whether their usage of GOV.UK has led to any changes in business performance.

As shown in Table 39, in the majority of cases respondents felt that their usage of GOV.UK had not had any impact on business performance. However, 19 per cent reported an impact on running costs, 13 per cent reported an impact on turnover and 22 per cent reported an impact on employment.

**Table 39 – Do you expect the actions you have taken, or plan to take, as a result of the information received through GOV.UK to have any effect on the following aspects of business performance?**

	This year	Next year	Next 2-3 years	No / don't know	Unweighted base
Running costs	18.7%	5.5%	0.6%	75.2%	165
Turnover	13.3%	5.7%	3.6%	77.5%	165
Export Sales	2.0%	1.2%	0.4%	96.4%	165
Number of employees	22.1%	5.7%	1.0%	71.2%	165

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = start-ups or established businesses that have taken forward or plan to take forward actions to improve their business, responses weighted according to size of business,

Where respondents reported an impact on running costs, 53 per cent reported that running costs had increased, by £3,900 on average.<sup>42</sup> This may be a result of increased levels of compliance with legislation or regulation as a result of the information sourced directly or indirectly from GOV.UK. The remaining 47 per cent reported that running costs had decreased, by £9,200 on average,<sup>43</sup> suggesting productivity improvements as a result of the support received. This suggests that, among these users, there was a net reduction in running costs of £2,300,<sup>44</sup> which translates to a reduction in running costs of £200<sup>45</sup> on average for all GOV.UK users.

<sup>42</sup> Mean of 10 responses

<sup>43</sup> Mean of 10 responses

<sup>44</sup> Mean increase in running costs x Percentage reporting an increase in running costs – Mean decrease in running costs x Percentage reporting a decrease in running costs = £3,900 x 53% - £9,200 x 47% = -£2,300

<sup>45</sup> Average change in running costs among users reporting an impact x Percentage of users reporting an impact on running costs (across all time periods) from Table 39 x Percentage of users taking action to improve the business from Table 33 = £2,300 x (18.7% + 5.5% + 0.6%) x 35.6% = -£200

Among respondents reporting an increase in turnover, the average annual increase was £67,000.<sup>46</sup> When applied to all users who have already made improvements to the business and reported an impact on turnover (assuming zero impact for all other users), this implies a gross turnover impact of £5,300 per user.<sup>47</sup> Applying a GVA:turnover ratio of 0.283<sup>48</sup>, this equates to a gross GVA impact of £1,500.<sup>49</sup>

Users reporting an employment impact estimated an increase in employment of 1.2 jobs<sup>50</sup> on average. A number of users (7.8 per cent of all established businesses who had taken action or planned to take action to improve the business) also reported that they would otherwise have decreased employment, safeguarding 2.1 jobs on average. Applying these figures to all users implies a gross employment impact of 0.18 jobs per user.<sup>51</sup>

Users only reported changes experienced as a result of the actions taken to improve the business (see Table 39), and therefore no further deadweight assumption is applied to take account of outcomes that would have been generated anyway.

### Estimates of displacement

To estimate the extent to which any impact on turnover and employment would displace economic activity from elsewhere in the economy, survey respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of their sales that would be taken up by competitors in the event of them ceasing to trade and the percentage of these competitors based in the UK. On this basis, displacement was estimated to be relatively high suggesting that any GVA or employment gains among beneficiaries may be displacing GVA and employment from elsewhere in the economy.

### Net additional economic impact

Table 40 summarises the estimated net additional impact of GOV.UK on the UK economy in terms of jobs and GVA. This is an estimate of the overall impact on the UK economy taking into account deadweight and displacement. These do not include any impact due to businesses created due to potential significant bias in our estimates, and also due to the fact that only established businesses are included in our assumed user population.

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<sup>46</sup> Mean of 16 responses

<sup>47</sup> Mean impact on turnover x Percentage taking action to improve the business from Table 33 x Percentage reporting an impact on turnover (across all time periods) from Table 39 = £67,000 x 35.6% x (13.3% + 5.7% + 3.6%) = £5,300

<sup>48</sup> Annual Business Survey, 2012 Provisional Results (Total GVA in UK in 2012 / Total turnover in UK in 2012 = 0.283), <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcM%3A77-323688>

<sup>49</sup> £5,300 x 0.283 = £1,500

<sup>50</sup> Mean of 45 responses

<sup>51</sup> (Mean jobs created x Percentage reporting an impact on employment (across all time periods) from Table 39 + Mean jobs safeguarded x Percentage reporting the safeguarding of jobs) x Percentage taking action to improve the business from Table 33 = (1.2 x (22.1% + 5.7% + 1.0%) + 2.1 x 7.8%) x 35.6% = 0.18

**Table 40 – Net additional economic impact**

	Cost savings	Time savings	GVA per year	Employment
Gross impact per user	£29	£250	£1,500	0.18
Additionality of support	-	0.32	0.32	0.32
Additionality of actions	-	0.73	0.73	0.73
Additional impact per user (= Gross impact per user x Additionality of support x Additionality of actions)	£29	£58	£353	0.04
Estimated displacement	-	-	0.82	0.82
Net additional impact per user (= Additional impact per user x (1 – Displacement))	£5	£10	£63	0.008
Estimated number of users per year	365,500	365,500	365,500	365,500
<b>Total net additional impact per year (= Net additional impact per user x Estimated number of users per year)</b>	<b>£1.9m</b>	<b>£3.8m</b>	<b>£23.2m</b>	<b>2,800</b>

### Overall economic impact and value for money

To estimate the cumulative economic impact of GOV.UK on established businesses, the estimated time profile of turnover impacts in Table 39 is used. It is assumed that Year 1 represents the “current” year (when the intervention was received), Year 2 is “next year” and Year 3 is therefore two years from the “current” year. It is also assumed that GVA impacts associated with business support persist for three years<sup>52</sup> and that GVA generated in future years is discounted at a rate of 3.5 per cent per year.<sup>53</sup> Under these assumptions, Table 41 shows that the total net additional impact of GOV.UK for established businesses (including GVA effects only) is estimated to be £66 million, a figure that does not include the potential impact of GOV.UK on helping people to set up a business. This suggests that GOV.UK would represent value for money if the cost of support provided to established SMEs through the website is less than £66 million per year.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (2009) *Impact of RDA Spending – National Report – Volume 1 – Main Report*, Table 53, <http://www.berr.gov.uk/files/file50735.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> <sup>54</sup> At the time of publication, a reliable estimate of the cost of GOV.UK was not available

<sup>54</sup> At the time of publication, a reliable estimate of the cost of GOV.UK was not available

It should be noted, however, that estimated usage of GOV.UK by SMEs is significantly less than the estimated usage of the old Business Link website. While it is not possible to make a direct comparison between the economic impact of the two websites, it is likely that GOV.UK may be delivering less value for money than Business Link due the lower level of usage.

**Table 41 – Net additional economic impact over time**

	GVA (this year) <sup>55</sup>	GVA (next year) <sup>56</sup>	GVA (next 2-3 years) <sup>57</sup>	Total not discounted	Total discounted
Year 1	£13.7m	-	-	£13.7m	£13.7m
Year 2	£13.7m	£5.9m	-	£19.5m	£18.8m
Year 3	£13.7m	£5.9m	£3.7m	£23.2m	£21.7m
Year 4	-	£5.9m	£3.7m	£9.5m	£8.6m
Year 5	-	-	£3.7m	£3.7m	£3.2m
Total					£66.0m

## Sensitivity analysis

To test the extent to which the overall assessment of impact is sensitive to certain assumptions in the model, we present a sensitivity analysis to show how the estimates net additional impact would change when making the following adjustments:

- Upper and lower bound of the estimated number of users per year, based on a confidence interval of +/- two percentage points around the estimated 8.5 per cent of the business population in England. The upper bound of users is estimated to be 451,500 and the lower bound is estimated to be 279,500.
- Assumption that GVA impacts persist for one year rather than three years.
- Calculating GVA impacts from employment estimates rather than turnover estimates. For this sensitivity analysis, the estimated net additional impact on

<sup>55</sup> Total impact x Percentage of users reporting impact to start this year from Table 39 = £23.2m x (13.3%/(13.3%+5.7%+3.6%))

<sup>56</sup> <sup>56</sup> Total impact x Percentage of users reporting impact to start next year from Table 39 = £23.2m x (5.7%/(13.3%+5.7%+3.6%))

<sup>57</sup> <sup>57</sup> Total impact x Percentage of users reporting impact to start in next 2-3 years from Table 39 = £23.2m x (3.6%/(13.3%+5.7%+3.6%))

employment from Table 40 is multiplied by the average GVA per worker in the UK (£43,700).<sup>58</sup>

Table 42 shows the results of this sensitivity analysis.

**Table 42 – Sensitivity analysis**

Sensitivity test	Total discounted GVA impact
No changes	£66.0m
Total users assumed to be 451,500 (upper bound), no other changes	£81.5m
Total users assumed to be 279,500 (lower bound), no other changes	£50.5m
Persistence assumed to be one year, no other changes	£22.8m
GVA impact based on jobs created and safeguarded, no other changes	£347.8m
Total users assumed to be 279,500 and persistence assumed to be one year, no other changes (overall lower bound)	£17.4m

The results shown in Table 42 show that the specified changes in assumptions make substantial changes to the estimated cumulative net additional GVA impacts. In particular, estimating GVA based on employment impacts increases the estimated GVA impact considerably. This difference is in part due to substantially more users expecting an impact on employment than those expecting an impact on turnover (see Table 39). It is unlikely that a given business would increase its staff numbers without also experiencing an increase in turnover so it is possible that some users have underestimated the impact on turnover and the actual GVA effects may be much higher than £66 million.

Nevertheless, the lower bound for GVA impacts based on the different sensitivity tests applied is estimated to be £17 million (using lower bound on number users, one year persistence and GVA calculated via the turnover method).

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<sup>58</sup> Annual Business Survey, 2012 Provisional Results (Total GVA in UK in 2012 / Total employment average during the year in UK in 2012 = £43,700), <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcm%3A77-323688>

## Reasons for non-use

Table 43 shows the reasons given by non-users (all of whom are established SMEs) for not using GOV.UK. Over two fifths (42 per cent) said that they did not need business support and a similar proportion (38 per cent) said that they were not aware of the services provided. Businesses with no growth ambition in the short to medium term were significantly more likely to say that they did not need business support information (55 per cent, compared to 37 per cent of non-users with growth ambition).

These findings are consistent with the idea that demand for business support is being constrained by imperfect information, including low value placed on business support and low awareness of the available sources. However, it should be noted from the previous chapter that over half of non-users had accessed some level of business support from elsewhere.

Moreover, over three quarters (77 per cent) of non-users said that they would consider using GOV.UK in the future, although this was significantly lower for businesses with no employees (66 per cent) and businesses with no growth ambition (65 per cent), suggesting the relative importance of GOV.UK for queries relating to employing people and growing the business.

Non-users were asked to express what information they think should be provided on GOV.UK. Common answers given include general business information (24 per cent), information relating to legislation and regulations (23 per cent) and information and support relating to finance and funding (15 per cent).

**Table 43 – Reasons for not using GOV.UK (non-users only)**

	No employees	1-9 employees	10-49 employees	Total
Did not need business support information	37.7%	45.1%	34.3%	41.6%
Not aware of services provided	36.4%	37.5%	37.1%	37.8%
Too much information / difficult to navigate	6.5%	2.1%	5.7%	3.9%
Information not clear	6.5%	2.1%	5.7%	4.0%
No access to internet	5.2%	1.4%	0.0%	2.3%
Do not trust the service	5.2%	0.7%	0.0%	1.9%
Prefer other services	5.2%	7.6%	22.9%	9.0%

	No employees	1-9 employees	10-49 employees	Total
No time	3.9%	4.9%	2.9%	4.3%
Quality of the service	2.6%	4.2%	0.0%	2.9%
Other	3.9%	1.4%	0.0%	1.9%
Don't know/ N/A / Refused	1.3%	1.4%	0.0%	1.7%
Unweighted base	77	144	35	295

*Source: Ecorys survey, responses weighted according to size of business, users not in business or with 50 or more employees included in Total but not in breakdowns*

## Conclusions

The evidence from the research conducted with predominantly SME users of GOV.UK provides the following key findings:

- While page views of the business support elements of GOV.UK average at around four to five million per month, our estimates suggest that only around 8.5 per cent of SMEs in England have used the website in the past 12 months, compared to 27 per cent who used the old Business Link website over a 12 month period. GOV.UK is used by businesses of all sizes but is more likely to be used by relatively new businesses, those with growth ambition and women-led enterprises.
- Among users of GOV.UK, over ten per cent visit the site at least once a week, while only 14 per cent have used it only once, suggesting that many SMEs use GOV.UK on a regular basis. This may include businesses that use the website to carry out transactions (e.g. tax returns) with a certain frequency.
- Users accessed GOV.UK for a variety of reasons but it was predominantly to search for a specific piece of factual information, in particular relating to employing people, tax or legal issues. This highlights the importance of GOV.UK in providing accurate information to support compliance with regulation or legislation. Some users also accessed the website to undertake administrative activities.
- The majority of GOV.UK users accessed the website via an internet search engine such as Google. Many report typing their query into the search engine and then being directed to the relevant page on GOV.UK after it appeared high on the list of search results.
- Users were generally satisfied with the information received through GOV.UK, and the majority found the information relevant, useful and practical, and valuable to their business. Many users reported that they found other useful information that they had not been specifically looking for while browsing the site. Overall levels of satisfaction are similar to those expressed by users of the Business Link online service.

- Most users felt that GOV.UK is a highly accessible service suggesting that ease of access is an important feature of the website.
- The research findings suggest that GOV.UK has an important role to play in addressing the market failure surrounding lack of trust in business support services. It is widely recognised as a Government service which is generally perceived as being official and impartial.
- While a service that is primarily about providing factual information may not be expected to change people's attitudes about business support, there is evidence that some GOV.UK users do feel that the service has helped them to understand the value and benefits of business support.
- About half of GOV.UK users did not access further business support having used GOV.UK. This may be due to them having found the information they required on the website or because they were using it to carry out administrative activities.
- Just under half of businesses using GOV.UK had taken action or were planning to take action to improve their business. Businesses with growth ambition were more likely to take action or plan to take action. The most common actions in response to using GOV.UK were improved compliance with regulation, introducing new products, services and processes, and accessing finance or grants to help the business grow.
- Where users had taken action (including setting up a business or making improvements to the business), the information received from GOV.UK was generally considered to be a very important factor in their decision. However, the majority of users felt that they could have accessed the same information from another source, including through further internet searching.
- A minority of users taking action to improve their business reported that these improvements have made, or are expected to make, a substantive change to their business performance (including turnover and employment). While the estimated increase in GVA and employment among all users due both to businesses starting and growing is significant, much of this is expected to be displaced from other firms in the UK.
- In some cases, actions taken by established businesses to improve the business had a positive impact on turnover and employment. Based on the available data from a small number of respondents, it is estimated that over the last 12 months, GOV.UK may have generated at least £17 million additional GVA for the English economy. It is also expected that GOV.UK will have had a further GVA and employment impact through providing information to help people to set up a business.
- It is estimated that users also saved nearly £2 million in fees paid to other providers and nearly £4 million in time due to using GOV.UK although it is assumed that these savings are implicitly included in the overall GVA impacts.

- Over a third of businesses that had not used GOV.UK in the last 12 months reported that they were not aware of the website while over two fifths said that they had no need for business support information.

The low level of GOV.UK usage among SMEs warrants further attention, with less than ten per cent of businesses having used the site in the last year compared to a figure of 27 per cent using the Business Link website over a similar time period. While this is not comparing like for like, there is an argument to suggest that GOV.UK should be attracting a higher usage as the website integrates other Government functions of interest to businesses, such as filing tax returns, rather than just the provision of business support information. It is possible that awareness of GOV.UK among businesses is low compared to Business Link or that users do not recognise that they are using GOV.UK when accessing the site.

Satisfaction levels with GOV.UK are similar to those experienced by online Business Link users, and the majority of SMEs using the site have been able to find the information that they were looking for. While the information received from GOV.UK and the subsequent actions taken led to growth in only a small percentage of businesses, the fact that in absolute terms the number of users is high (close to 400,000) has led to significant GVA and employment impacts. This suggests that this relatively low cost intervention may be leading to significant economic benefits.

# Business Support Helpline

## Introduction

This section provides detailed findings from our primary research, in relation to evaluating the Business Support Helpline. It draws on evidence from Helpline monitoring data, the quantitative survey, the qualitative in-depth interviews and stakeholder consultations. The survey found that a large number of Helpline users had also used GOV.UK in relation to their query (either before or after using the Helpline). Therefore, in order to isolate the experience and impact associated with this combined usage, the analysis in this chapter is presented for Helpline only users and Helpline and GOV.UK users separately.

## Background to the Business Support Helpline

### Rationale

This section describes some of the key elements of the specific rationale for the Business Support Helpline.

**Transition to digital provision:** It was recognised that some users would need support to adjust to the re-structuring of publicly funded mainstream enterprise support services, and telephone based one-to-one support would be needed to help businesses who cannot find the information they need on-line or face difficulties in navigating the website or accessing the internet. This service was designed to stimulate use of businesslink.gov and maintain levels of customer satisfaction in the short term. The Helpline continues to offer callers support and encouragement with finding information on the GOV.UK website to support the process of transition to a web-based service, and for businesses still requiring a phone service.

**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 need for targeted provision of more in-depth support was therefore identified to support the needs of businesses facing more complex issues. Callers to the Helpline are referred to Tier 2 Business Support Advisors (BSAs) if they have additional complex needs which cannot be met by GOV.UK.

**Providing support to users unable to access the internet:** The Helpline was redesigned as a national service primarily to help businesses who were unwilling or unable to access the businesslink.gov website or those that face difficulties in using online information tools. According to the Small Business Survey (2010), at the time of establishing the Helpline about 13 per cent of SMEs did not have broadband internet.<sup>59</sup> Part of the rationale for the Helpline was to therefore provide alternative telephone support

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<sup>59</sup> BIS (2011) *BIS Small Business Survey 2010*, Page 41, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/32228/11-p74-bis-small-business-survey-2010.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32228/11-p74-bis-small-business-survey-2010.pdf)

to those with limited internet access or know-how. However the most recent Small Business Survey (2012) indicates that 92 per cent of SME employers had internet access with virtually all of these having broadband.<sup>60</sup> The Helpline was also designed to address further accessibility issues; in particular those with visual impairment problems may find it difficult to use on-line services.

Since the research was undertaken, the Helpline has changed its operating model to increase delivery of business support via social media channels and also by providing services on behalf of partner organisations as part of their support delivery.

## Overall aims and objectives

When it was set up in 2011, the Business Link Helpline was established to provide information and guidance to around 600,000 business contacts, and to support the transition to a primarily web-based business information service. Further details about the aims and objectives of the service are outlined in Annex 1.

## Delivery approach

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 more experienced Business Support Advisors.

At the time of the evaluation the Helpline contractor employed 25 telephone advisors to handle inbound calls from businesses and individuals aiming to start and grow a business. This is referred to as the Tier 1 component of the service. If callers are identified as having internet access, the Tier 1 advisors aim to direct them to relevant information on the business section of the GOV.UK website 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 third party agencies which are able to provide more detailed and relevant information. The call agents also refer to a “Knowledge Bank” to identify appropriate services (described in detail below) which are not included on the GOV.UK website.

The Government’s overall strategy for providing support to small businesses identified the need for targeted provision of more in-depth support from some businesses. 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 Tier 2 advisor for more in-depth support. A team of seven advisors is employed by the Tier 2 contractor. Additionally, a referral is made to a Tier 2 advisor in the event that a call agent is unable to provide the information or advice

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<sup>60</sup> BIS (2013) *Small Business Survey 2012: SME Employers*, Page 59, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/193555/bis-13-p74-small-business-survey-2012-sme-employers.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/193555/bis-13-p74-small-business-survey-2012-sme-employers.pdf)

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 triggers which are described in detail below.

## Tier 2 triggers

The advice provided by Tier 2 advisors is a targeted service and not a visible or promoted offer. It was considered necessary to manage demand for this element of the service using a filtering approach. Triggers are therefore used to identify companies facing particular challenges who are most likely to require in-depth advice from more experienced advisors. These may be companies that are facing particular financial challenges or particular barriers to growth such as recruitment issues. The triggers are fluid and subject to ongoing review and on occasions new triggers have been introduced to help business to deal with particular one off events. For example, in early 2014 a new trigger was created to enable businesses that were calling about the extreme flooding to be automatically passed to a Tier 2 advisor. Triggers have recently been amended to accommodate working with growth hubs. This enables the Helpline to provide a more localised information service to callers.

## Knowledge Bank and Knowledge Management

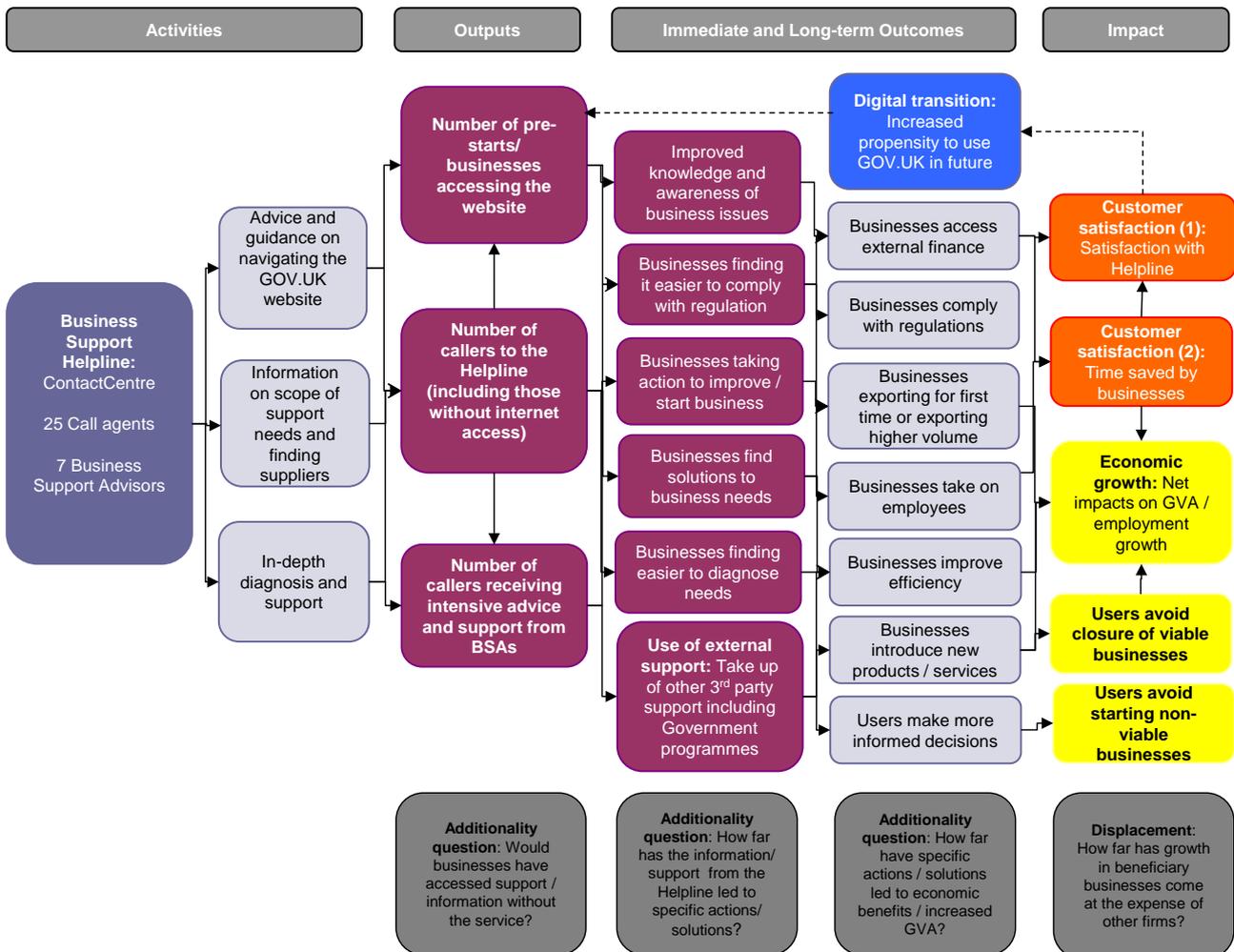
The Knowledge Bank operates as an intranet that enables Tier 1 and Tier 2 advisors to access more specific information than is available on GOV.UK, for example on local grant schemes and economic development programmes. The Knowledge Bank is maintained by three knowledge managers employed by the Helpline contractor. 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 and European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) schemes including: full description; eligibility; process; applications forms; key contacts;
- diagnostic tools;
- key contacts for referral including regional contacts;
- key information about the providers of private and public sector schemes such as contact details etc. (e.g. Chambers of Commerce; Federation of Small Businesses, etc.); and
- information on specific local business support services and grants which can be searched by postcode and local authority area.

## Theory of change / logic model

A logic model describing the relationship between the activities of the Business Support Helpline service (and associated financial inputs), and its expected outputs, outcomes and impacts is presented in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3 – Business Support Helpline Logic Model



## Profile of Helpline users

### Number of callers

According to monitoring information, the Helpline answered over 36,000 calls in 2013, a decrease from 55,000 in 2012. Approximately one-fifth of all calls received are given a BSA appointment (i.e. receive Tier 2 support) with the rest receiving Tier 1 support only.

## Profile of callers

The user survey drew from a random sample of Helpline users and found that about half of users surveyed were in the early stages of exploring or setting up a business at the time they called the Helpline or used GOV.UK. A further ten per cent of Helpline only users and 15 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users were in the process of starting a business while the remainder already had a business at the time of contact with the service. This is in line with monitoring data which suggests that just under two-thirds (63 per cent) of callers to the Helpline are pre-start with a further 18 per cent of calls coming from businesses established in the last three years. There are no statistically significant differences between Tier 1 and Tier 2 users in terms of business status at the time of the call. This is shown in Table 44.

**Table 44 – Status of business at the time user called the Helpline**

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
Pre-start - early stages	48.0%	56.6%	51.1%	51.8%	50.2%	50.4%
Pre-start - in process	9.8%	12.5%	10.8%	12.9%	15.2%	13.8%
Start-up	12.7%	9.6%	11.6%	13.5%	13.7%	13.4%
Established business	27.0%	20.6%	24.7%	21.9%	19.9%	22.1%
Don't know / Refused	2.5%	0.7%	1.8%	0.0%	0.9%	0.4%
<i>Base</i>	<i>244</i>	<i>136</i>	<i>380</i>	<i>311</i>	<i>211</i>	<i>530</i>

Source: Ecorys survey

Among users with a business at the time of the survey, well over half of businesses had no employees (57 per cent of Helpline only users and 61 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users), although this was a lower proportion than in the business population as a whole, and around a third (34 per cent of Helpline only users and 30 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users) had between one and nine employees. See Table 45.

**Table 45 – Size of business**

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK			All businesses in UK <sup>61</sup>
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	
No employees	57.2%	56.9%	57.1%	60.0%	65.6%	60.9%	75.3%
1 - 9	33.3%	36.1%	34.3%	30.0%	27.0%	29.7%	20.2%
10 - 49	3.6%	2.8%	3.3%	5.8%	3.3%	5.0%	3.8%
50 - 249	0.7%	1.4%	1.0%	0.5%	1.6%	1.3%	0.6%
250 or more	0.7%	0.0%	0.5%	2.1%	0.8%	1.6%	0.0%
Don't know/ Refused	4.3%	2.8%	3.8%	1.6%	1.6%	1.6%	
<i>Base</i>	<i>138</i>	<i>72</i>	<i>210</i>	<i>190</i>	<i>122</i>	<i>320</i>	

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = respondents with a business at the time of the survey

Among users with a business at the time of the survey, businesses less than one year old accounted for about half (51 per cent) of Helpline and GOV.UK users and 38 per cent of Helpline only users, despite only accounting for about one to two per cent of all SMEs nationally. This suggests that businesses in the early stages of setting up a business (including pre-starts and start-ups) are more likely than more established businesses to use the Helpline. See Table 46.

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<sup>61</sup> Business Population Estimates for the UK and Regions 2013, Statistical Release p12, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/254552/13-92-business-population-estimates-2013-stats-release-4.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/254552/13-92-business-population-estimates-2013-stats-release-4.pdf)

**Table 46 – Age of business**

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK			All businesses with no employees <sup>62</sup>	All SME employers <sup>63</sup>
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total		
Less than 1 year	34.1%	45.8%	38.1%	52.1%	52.5%	51.3%	2%	1%
1 year	9.4%	11.1%	10.0%	5.3%	7.4%	6.3%	2%	2%
2 years	9.4%	2.8%	7.1%	6.8%	5.7%	6.3%	3%	4%
3 years	5.8%	4.2%	5.2%	5.8%	6.6%	5.9%	4%	4%
4 years	6.5%	5.6%	6.2%	4.7%	2.5%	3.8%	3%	4%
5 years	2.2%	1.4%	1.9%	1.6%	2.5%	2.2%	4%	4%
6-10 years	13.8%	9.7%	12.4%	10.0%	6.6%	8.8%	23%	16%
11-20 years	4.3%	6.9%	5.2%	4.7%	6.6%	5.9%	24%	23%
More than 20 years	8.7%	4.2%	7.1%	5.8%	6.6%	6.6%	36%	41%
Don't know/Refused	5.8%	8.3%	6.7%	3.2%	3.3%	3.1%	n/a	n/a
<i>Base</i>	<i>138</i>	<i>72</i>	<i>210</i>	<i>190</i>	<i>122</i>	<i>320</i>		

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = respondents with a business at the time of the survey

Table 47 shows that the most common sector among Helpline users with a business is the consumer products, personal services, retail and wholesale sector, accounting for 36 per cent of Helpline only users and 30 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users with a business. Professional and other business services is the second most common sector.

<sup>62</sup> BIS (2013) *Small Business Survey 2012: Businesses with No Employees*, Table 2.6, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/193548/bis-13-p180-small-business-survey-2012-businesses-with-no-employees.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/193548/bis-13-p180-small-business-survey-2012-businesses-with-no-employees.pdf)

<sup>63</sup> Ibid

**Table 47 – Sector**

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK			Non-users
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	
Consumer Products, Personal Services, Retail and Wholesale	34.8%	37.5%	35.7%	31.1%	27.9%	29.7%	28.1%
Professional and Other Business Services	13.0%	11.1%	12.4%	13.7%	20.5%	16.6%	15.1%
Construction and Property Services	8.7%	11.1%	9.5%	8.4%	1.6%	5.6%	11.8%
Manufacturing and Engineering	8.0%	6.9%	7.6%	8.4%	5.7%	7.8%	12.6%
Transport, Warehousing and Distribution	7.2%	0.0%	4.8%	5.3%	2.5%	4.4%	5.9%
Creative Services and Media	6.5%	5.6%	6.2%	5.8%	13.1%	8.4%	2.2%
Information Technology and Telecomms	5.8%	4.2%	5.2%	9.5%	6.6%	8.4%	1.1%
Agriculture and Fishing	3.6%	2.8%	3.3%	2.1%	3.3%	2.5%	2.3%
Hotels and Restaurants	2.9%	8.3%	4.8%	4.2%	4.9%	4.4%	10.5%
Biotechnology, Medical and Chemical	0.7%	0.0%	0.5%	1.1%	2.5%	1.6%	1.4%
Recreation, Culture and Tourism	0.7%	2.8%	1.4%	10.0%	6.6%	8.4%	3.7%
Energy and Water	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	3.3%	1.3%	0.0%

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK			Non-users
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	
Other	5.1%	4.2%	4.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	4.2%
Don't know / Refused	2.9%	5.6%	3.8%	0.5%	1.6%	0.9%	1.1%
Base	138	72	210	190	122	320	272

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = respondents with a business at the time of the survey

Table 48 shows that over 80 per cent of Helpline users are planning to grow the business over the next two to three years, significantly higher than among non-users.

**Table 48 – Growth ambition: Percentage of users with a business aiming to grow the business in the next 2-3 years**

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK			Non-users
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	
Yes	80.4%	83.3%	<b>81.4%</b>	83.2%	88.5%	<b>85.0%</b>	65.8%
No	15.2%	11.1%	<b>13.8%</b>	13.7%	9.0%	<b>12.2%</b>	30.4%
Don't know / Refused	4.3%	5.6%	4.8%	3.2%	2.5%	2.8%	3.9%
Base	138	72	210	190	122	320	272

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = respondents with a business at the time of the survey, figures in bold denote figure is significantly different to the non-user figure at the 5% two-tailed significance level

Among the issues and challenges faced by businesses at the time they called the Helpline, obtaining finance to support growth was the most commonly cited, mentioned by over a quarter of users. However, 45 per cent of Helpline only users and 38 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users were not experiencing any of the challenges specified, although this was significantly less than the 62 per cent of non-users who reported facing none of the specified issues and challenges. See Table 49.

**Table 49 – Issues and challenges faced by businesses at the time they called the Helpline**

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK			Non-users
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	
Obtaining finance to support growth	27.2%	31.0%	<b>28.3%</b>	32.7%	20.5%	<b>26.8%</b>	11.1%
Introducing new products or services	14.6%	9.5%	13.1%	20.9%	15.1%	18.9%	13.6%
Severe financial problems and at risk of closure	8.7%	11.9%	9.7%	5.5%	8.2%	6.8%	4.9%
Difficulties in understanding or complying with legislation or regulations	7.8%	11.9%	9.0%	21.8%	13.7%	<b>18.9%</b>	5.1%
Taking on new staff	7.8%	14.3%	9.7%	7.3%	12.3%	10.0%	13.2%
Introducing a major change to the way the business is managed	6.8%	7.1%	6.9%	10.9%	9.6%	10.0%	9.2%
Managing major growth in turnover	6.8%	9.5%	7.6%	8.2%	8.2%	8.9%	6.1%
Difficulties in understanding or complying with tax obligations	5.8%	7.1%	6.2%	8.2%	12.3%	<b>10.5%</b>	4.5%
Introducing a major change to the way you do business	3.9%	4.8%	4.1%	10.0%	15.1%	12.1%	7.2%
Entering a new export market	2.9%	0.0%	2.1%	4.5%	11.0%	7.4%	3.5%

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK			Non-users
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	
None of the above	46.6%	42.9%	<b>45.5%</b>	39.1%	37.0%	<b>37.9%</b>	61.5%
Base	103	42	145	110	73	190	272

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = respondents with a business at the time of the survey, figures in bold denote figure is significantly different to the non-user figure at the 5% two-tailed significance level

Evidence from Helpline monitoring information finds that women-led and minority ethnic group (MEG) led businesses (or pre-starts) are particularly likely to receive support from a BSA. In January 2014, 43 per cent of BSA appointments were with women, despite women-led enterprises making up just 23 per cent of the SME population. Likewise, MEG-led enterprises accounted for 34 per cent of BSA appointments but only 7 per cent of all SMEs.

As shown in Table 50, the survey results show a similar over-representation of women-led and MEG-led enterprises among users of the Helpline.

**Table 50 – Gender and ethnicity of business owner(s)**

	Helpline only	Helpline and GOV.UK	All businesses with no employees <sup>64</sup>	All SME employers <sup>65</sup>
Male only	47.0%	44.7%	61%	49%
Female only	36.7%	42.8%	21% <sup>66</sup>	19% <sup>67</sup>
Both	16.3%	12.5%	16% <sup>68</sup>	23% <sup>69</sup>
Base	338	481		
White British/Irish only	73.7%	69.7%		

<sup>64</sup> BIS (2013) *Small Business Survey 2012: Businesses with No Employees*, Table 2.6, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/193548/bis-13-p180-small-business-survey-2012-businesses-with-no-employees.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/193548/bis-13-p180-small-business-survey-2012-businesses-with-no-employees.pdf)

<sup>65</sup> Ibid

<sup>66</sup> Majority-led by women

<sup>67</sup> Majority-led by women

<sup>68</sup> Equally-led

<sup>69</sup> Equally-led

	Helpline only	Helpline and GOV.UK	All businesses with no employees <sup>64</sup>	All SME employers <sup>65</sup>
Minority ethnic only	23.9%	26.6%	5% <sup>70</sup>	7% <sup>71</sup>
Both	2.4%	3.7%		
Base	327	462		

Source: Ecorys survey, Don't know / refused excluded

As shown in Table 51, the majority of Helpline users (70 per cent of Helpline only users and 57 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users) have only called the Helpline once in the past year. Those using the Tier 1 service only are less likely to have made multiple calls to the Helpline than those using Tier 2, although this difference is only significant for Helpline and GOV.UK users.

**Table 51 – Number of times users have called the Business Support Helpline in the past year**

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
Once	75.4%	61.0%	70.3%	<b>64.6%</b>	<b>47.9%</b>	57.2%
Twice	13.5%	18.4%	15.3%	20.6%	29.4%	24.3%
Three times	4.9%	10.3%	6.8%	6.8%	10.9%	8.5%
Four times	0.4%	1.5%	0.8%	1.9%	3.3%	2.5%
Five times	0.0%	2.2%	0.8%	0.6%	1.4%	0.9%
Six to twelve times	0.8%	0.7%	0.8%	1.9%	1.9%	2.3%
More than twelve times	0.0%	0.7%	0.3%	0.6%	0.5%	0.6%
Don't know / Refused	4.9%	5.1%	5.0%	2.9%	4.7%	3.8%
Base	244	136	380	311	211	530

Source: Ecorys survey

<sup>70</sup> At least half of management team from ethnic minority

<sup>71</sup> At least half of management team from ethnic minority

<sup>72</sup> Ibid

## Synergy with GOV.UK

According to the survey, the majority of people who used both the Helpline and GOV.UK for the same query used GOV.UK first before calling the Helpline. See Table 52.

**Table 52 – Use of Helpline and GOV.UK for the same query**

	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
Looked at the GOV.UK website before calling the Helpline	79.4%	77.3%	78.7%
Called the Helpline before looking at GOV.UK	13.5%	15.2%	14.0%
None of the above	2.9%	0.5%	2.1%
Don't know / Refused	4.2%	7.1%	5.3%
<i>Base</i>	311	211	530

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = Helpline and GOV.UK users

Where users had looked at GOV.UK before calling the Helpline, more than half (56 per cent) stated that they saw the Helpline number on the website and wanted to speak to somebody rather than use the website. Over a third (36 per cent) decided to call the Helpline after the information they found on GOV.UK was insufficient to meet their needs. See Table 53.

**Table 53 – Reason for calling the Helpline after using GOV.UK**

	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
I saw the Helpline number on GOV.UK and wanted to speak to somebody rather than use the website	55.1%	57.1%	55.9%
I contacted the Helpline after finding some relevant information on GOV.UK, but it did not address all my information needs	36.0%	37.4%	36.2%
I contacted the Helpline after being unable to find the information I needed on GOV.UK	26.7%	29.4%	27.6%
I contacted the Helpline because the information on	24.7%	23.9%	24.7%

	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
GOV.UK was not clear			
I called the Helpline to check that the information I found on GOV.UK was correct	19.0%	18.4%	18.7%
Don't know / Refused	3.2%	3.1%	3.1%
<i>Base</i>	<i>247</i>	<i>163</i>	<i>417</i>

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = users looking at GOV.UK before calling the Helpline

Table 54 shows that, among users that called the Helpline before using GOV.UK in relation to the same query, over four-fifths (82 per cent) were directed to the website by the person they spoke to at the Helpline.

**Table 54 – Whether user was directed to GOV.UK by the Helpline advisor**

	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
Yes	76.2%	90.6%	82.4%
No	11.9%	6.3%	9.5%
Don't know / Refused	11.9%	3.1%	8.1%
<i>Base</i>	<i>42</i>	<i>32</i>	<i>74</i>

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = users calling the Helpline before using GOV.UK

Many of the Helpline callers who participated in the qualitative interviews stated that they had searched for the answer to their query on GOV.UK before calling the Helpline. In the majority of these cases, the user could not find the information they were looking for on the website, or specific information relating to their query and circumstances were unavailable, and therefore decided to call the Helpline. For example:

- one user was specifically looking for information on grant funding but could not find any potential sources of support on GOV.UK that matched her specific circumstances;
- another user felt that calling the Helpline saved him time in finding the answer to his specific query compared to continuing to search the website; and
- another user, who was looking for general information about setting up a social enterprise, decided to call the Helpline because she didn't know what she was specifically looking for on GOV.UK and wanted to speak to somebody to get advice on "the steps to take".

Where Helpline callers had not used GOV.UK prior to their call, this was mainly due to not being aware of the website or not having internet at home.

The qualitative interviews found that some Helpline callers subsequently visited GOV.UK after their call to the Helpline. One user, who prior to calling the Helpline was not aware of GOV.UK, said that she looked at GOV.UK after being referred there by the BSA and was “very impressed” with the information provided. As well as fully answering her initial query, the website also provided her with additional information that “I didn’t know I needed”. Another user said that “the information received from the advisor made further searches on GOV.UK easier” and another user said that next time he has a query he would always go to GOV.UK first and only if this did not give him the required information would he call the Helpline.

## Reasons for calling the Helpline

### Nature of queries

Table 55 shows that the most common reason for calling the Helpline was related to starting a business, cited as a reason for 40 per cent of Helpline only users and 44 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users. Obtaining finance and funding for a business start-up was the second most common reason, reported by 22 per cent of Helpline only users and 31 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users. Unsurprisingly, pre-starts were significantly more likely to call about starting a business while established businesses were significantly more likely to call about obtaining finance or funding for an established business.

A similar pattern is observed from Helpline monitoring data, where over two fifths (43 per cent) of calls were on the subject of starting a business with a further one fifth (18 per cent) calling about start-up finance or grants.

**Table 55 – Reason for calling the Helpline**

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
Starting a business	36.1%	47.1%	40.0%	40.8%	49.3%	43.6%
Obtaining finance and funding for a business start-up	20.9%	23.5%	21.8%	31.5%	30.8%	30.8%
Obtaining finance or funding for an established business	10.2%	7.4%	9.2%	10.3%	7.6%	9.1%
Understanding	10.2%	8.1%	9.5%	16.4%	14.7%	15.7%

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
regulatory and legal issues						
Business planning	9.8%	11.0%	10.3%	8.0%	7.1%	7.5%
Tax or National insurance	4.9%	4.4%	4.7%	9.3%	8.5%	9.2%
Sales and marketing	4.1%	5.1%	4.5%	3.2%	3.3%	3.2%
Employing people or employment issues	3.3%	3.7%	3.4%	3.9%	1.4%	3.2%
Business support availability	2.9%	5.1%	3.7%	4.2%	3.8%	4.0%
Premises / property	2.9%	5.1%	3.7%	3.2%	3.8%	3.4%
Growing a business	2.5%	2.9%	2.6%	4.5%	6.2%	5.1%
Importing / exporting	2.5%	1.5%	2.1%	1.9%	4.3%	3.0%
General business information	2.5%	2.2%	2.4%	4.2%	2.4%	3.4%
Skills & Training	2.5%	4.4%	3.2%	2.3%	1.4%	1.9%
Finance management	1.6%	2.9%	2.1%	2.3%	3.3%	2.6%
Closing a business	1.6%	2.2%	1.8%	0.3%	0.5%	0.4%
Trademarks, copyrights and intellectual property	1.2%	1.5%	1.3%	1.6%	1.4%	1.5%
Health and safety	0.8%	0.7%	0.8%	1.9%	0.9%	1.5%

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
Business in crisis	0.8%	1.5%	1.1%	0.0%	2.4%	0.9%
Finding new customers	0.4%	0.7%	0.5%	1.0%	1.9%	1.3%
Developing new products and services	0.4%	0.7%	0.5%	0.6%	0.9%	0.8%
E-commerce / technology	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.9%	0.6%
Types of business models / ownership structures	0.0%	0.7%	0.3%	0.6%	1.4%	0.9%
Other	4.1%	2.2%	3.4%	2.3%	3.8%	3.0%
Don't know / Refused	3.3%	2.9%	3.2%	1.0%	1.4%	1.3%
<i>Base</i>	<i>244</i>	<i>136</i>	<i>380</i>	<i>311</i>	<i>211</i>	<i>530</i>

Source: Ecorys survey

### Reason for using the Helpline rather than other source of information

The survey also asked respondents to report their reasons for using the Business Support Helpline rather than using other sources of information. Among respondents using the Helpline only, over a quarter (28 per cent) said they preferred to discuss their needs with an advisor, while a similar proportion (25 per cent) felt it was the simplest method of getting the information they needed. This is shown in Table 56. This concurs with the findings presented in Table 53, showing the reasons for GOV.UK users deciding to call the Helpline.

**Table 56 – Reason for calling the Helpline rather than using any other source of information**

	Helpline only		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
Prefer to discuss my needs with an advisor	26.2%	30.1%	27.6%
Simplest method of getting the information I needed	25.0%	25.0%	25.0%
Not aware of other sources of information	12.7%	5.1%	10.0%
Could not find the information I needed elsewhere	9.8%	12.5%	10.8%
Do not trust other sources of information	4.1%	3.7%	3.9%
Would have to pay	0.8%	2.2%	1.3%
No access to the internet	0.4%	0.0%	0.3%
Was advised to/ it was recommended to me	9.8%	11.0%	10.3%
Other	9.8%	17.6%	12.6%
Don't know / Refused	10.2%	11.0%	10.5%
<i>Base</i>	<i>244</i>	<i>136</i>	<i>380</i>

*Source: Ecorys survey, Base = Helpline only users*

Respondents using both the Helpline and GOV.UK in relation to the same query were asked to state their reasons for using these two sources combined to access the required information rather than other sources. As shown in Table 57, about a third (33 per cent) of these users said that this was the simplest method of getting the information but a number of respondents (14 per cent) also mentioned that they were attracted by the reputation and reassurance offered by a Government website, suggesting that trust was a significant factor in attracting users to GOV.UK.

**Table 57 – Reason for calling the Helpline rather than using any other source of information**

	Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
Not aware of other sources of information	12.2%	12.8%	12.3%
Simplest method of getting the information I needed	29.6%	38.9%	33.2%
Prefer to discuss my needs with an advisor	20.9%	23.7%	21.9%
Government website - reputation and reassurance	13.5%	15.6%	14.3%
Do not trust other sources of information	12.2%	13.7%	12.8%
Was advised to/ it was recommended to me	10.9%	5.2%	8.9%
Internet search led me here	6.8%	3.8%	5.5%
Could not find the information I needed on GOV.UK	6.1%	5.7%	5.8%
Would have to pay	4.2%	3.8%	4.0%
One of several sources used	1.3%	3.3%	2.1%
Other	3.9%	2.4%	3.2%
Don't know / Refused	3.5%	2.8%	3.4%
<i>Base</i>	<i>311</i>	<i>211</i>	<i>530</i>

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = Helpline and GOV.UK users

## Awareness of Helpline

### General awareness

In the stakeholder consultations, stakeholders were asked to assess the general awareness of the Helpline among SMEs and people considering setting up a business. Stakeholders were also asked to suggest ways in which awareness of the service could be improved.

Some stakeholders were concerned that businesses perceive that the Helpline number on the GOV.UK website is different from the Business Link Helpline or that the service no longer exists. While stakeholders acknowledge that it is easy to find the Helpline number via a search engine, they also believe that businesses may be reluctant to use the number because either there is a lack of appreciation of what service the Helpline provides or because the quality of the service is not yet trusted. One stakeholder felt that the Helpline needs to add value to the GOV.UK website by being promoted as a service that provides more in-depth advice.

Stakeholders suggested a number of other approaches which could be used to promote the service more effectively.

One stakeholder suggested a “re-launch” of the Helpline to publicise the service to particular stakeholders and business representative bodies. It was suggested that a “re-launch” of the service would now be timely because people are currently unclear if the Helpline is still operating after the Business Link branding was taken away. A “re-launch” would mean providing information and alerts to key stakeholders on the services provided by the Helpline rather than a national advertising campaign.

A further way of publicising the Helpline is to inform businesses about the Helpline at the start-up stage when they register with HMRC or Companies House. The Helpline could also be publicised more at conferences and events for small businesses.

### How users found out about the service

Helpline monitoring data reveals that the majority of callers found the number for the Helpline on-line with 32 per cent finding the number directly through Google or another internet search engine and a further 32 per cent finding the number on GOV.UK. Other sources for acquiring the number included Job Centre Plus (8 per cent of all callers) and the Citizens’ Advice Bureau (7 per cent).

The survey provides similar findings, as shown in Table 58, with the majority finding the number either through GOV.UK or via an internet search. Respondents using both the Helpline and GOV.UK were most likely to find the Helpline number from GOV.UK (54 per cent) while those using the Helpline only were most likely to find the number from an internet search (43 per cent).

**Table 58 – Where users found the number for the Helpline**

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
Basic internet search (e.g. Google)	46.7%	36.0%	42.9%	26.7%	28.0%	27.0%
Found number on GOV.UK	15.6%	15.4%	15.5%	55.3%	50.7%	53.6%
Word of mouth	7.4%	10.3%	8.4%	4.5%	2.8%	3.8%
Jobcentre Plus	5.3%	11.8%	7.6%	1.6%	5.2%	3.0%
Was given number by other Government Agency (please specify)	4.1%	2.2%	3.4%	2.9%	1.4%	2.3%
Was given number by professional third party advisors	3.3%	0.7%	2.4%	0.6%	0.5%	0.8%
Local Authority/ Council	2.5%	1.5%	2.1%	0.3%	0.5%	0.4%
Citizens Advice Bureau	1.2%	4.4%	2.4%	1.0%	0.9%	0.9%
Found number on other website	0.8%	1.5%	1.1%	1.0%	0.9%	0.9%
TV / radio advertising	0.4%	0.7%	0.5%	0.6%	0.0%	0.4%
Press advertising (newspapers / magazines)	0.4%	0.0%	0.3%	0.6%	1.4%	0.9%
Other	2.9%	5.9%	3.9%	2.9%	2.8%	2.8%
Don't know / Refused	9.4%	9.6%	9.5%	1.9%	4.7%	3.2%
<i>Base</i>	<i>244</i>	<i>136</i>	<i>380</i>	<i>311</i>	<i>211</i>	<i>530</i>

Source: Ecorys survey

Over half of respondents (52 per cent of Helpline only users and 57 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users) said that they used other sources to try to find information or advice to help with their query before calling the Helpline or using GOV.UK. Where prior action was taken, the majority of users searched online for help with their query with about half saying that they used an internet search to look for information. A significant minority of users had received face-to-face or telephone support from other Government or private sector providers, while others had sought informal advice from colleagues or friends. See Table 59.

**Table 59 – Where users sought information prior to calling Helpline or using GOV.UK**

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
Basic internet search (Google etc)	52.1%	55.7%	53.4%	46.6%	53.1%	49.1%
Searched other websites	14.1%	16.5%	14.9%	18.0%	24.5%	20.7%
Sought informal advice (from colleagues, friends, etc)	11.3%	12.7%	11.8%	13.8%	22.4%	17.5%
Advice over the telephone from other Government service (	10.6%	6.3%	9.0%	12.2%	12.9%	12.4%
Face-to-face advice from other Government service	9.2%	11.4%	10.0%	12.2%	10.2%	11.2%
Advice over the telephone from private sector service	8.5%	10.1%	9.0%	6.3%	6.1%	6.2%
Face-to-face advice from private sector service	8.5%	6.3%	7.7%	11.1%	12.9%	12.1%
Contacted Chamber of Commerce	2.8%	5.1%	3.6%	1.6%	4.8%	3.0%
Used Business Link social media	2.8%	3.8%	3.2%	2.1%	4.1%	3.0%

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
None of the above	11.3%	7.6%	10.0%	10.1%	9.5%	10.1%
<i>Base</i>	142	79	221	189	147	338

*Source: Ecorys survey, Base = users that had sought information from another source before using Helpline or GOV.UK*

Table 60 shows that over half (57 per cent) of Helpline only users and about two thirds (67 per cent) of Helpline and GOV.UK users (that had not used GOV.UK before calling the Helpline in relation to the same query) had heard of GOV.UK before they called the Helpline.

**Table 60 – Whether users had heard of GOV.UK before calling the Helpline**

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
Yes	55.3%	56.6%	55.8%	67.2%	66.7%	67.3%
No	40.6%	39.7%	40.3%	25.0%	31.3%	27.4%
Don't know / Refused	4.1%	3.7%	3.9%	7.8%	2.1%	5.3%
<i>Base</i>	244	136	380	64	48	113

*Source: Ecorys survey, Base = all users for Helpline only, users that had not used GOV.UK before calling the Helpline for Helpline and GOV.UK*

From the qualitative research, it is evident that interviewees went through a wide variety of routes before calling the Helpline. Many were given the number after seeking support from other bodies, including funding agencies, Jobcentre Plus, legal advisors, Chambers of Commerce and the City of London Library. Many others came across the Helpline number on the internet, either directly through use a search engine or after a more thorough online search for relevant information, including searching GOV.UK.

The qualitative research suggests that there tends to be a correlation between the type of enquiry and the referral route. For example, Job Centre Plus is an important referral route for people in the early stages of setting up a business or exploring self-employment for the first time as an alternative to employment, while Chambers of Commerce has a more important role for directing established businesses to the Helpline.

## Assistance provided by the Helpline

### Views of Helpline staff

A small number of consultations were undertaken with Helpline staff, including the team leaders of the Tier 1 and Tier 2 services and Helpline advisors. This provided feedback on the effectiveness of the Helpline process from the perspective of the advisors.

Helpline advisors reported that guidance on length of call is working well. This has helped the advisors to focus their questioning approach and is generally sufficient in enabling the advisor to guide callers to the relevant information on the GOV.UK website. The advisors are generally very experienced now so very rarely have queries which they are not able to deal with quickly. Calls lasting longer than the 17 minutes guideline tend to relate to legal queries which require the advisor to do some additional research and arrange a call back. There is a sense that some callers would like to speak longer, particularly with pre-starts. However, as detailed below, advisors now have more discretion in referring people to the Tier 2 service which can be helpful if callers have a clear need to have a detailed discussion.

The Helpline advisors consulted for the evaluation generally believed that the trigger system provides a useful tool for guiding Tier 1 advisors on appropriate referrals to the Tier 2 advisors. The Tier 1 advisors reported that the triggers provide clear guidance in terms of the types of queries which need to be referred. One criticism of the trigger system is that they do not specifically encourage pre-start callers facing particular challenges to be referred to Tier 2 callers. There was a general feeling amongst the advisors that those thinking of starting a business require more detailed advice and guidance than established businesses requiring more specific information. The trigger system has subsequently been changed to accommodate pre-start callers being referred to Tier 2. In addition, a general “management” trigger has given Tier 1 advisors more discretion in referring callers. This has led to more pre-starts being referred and greater utilisation of the Tier 2 service. Tier 2 advisors reported that the number of pre-start customers has been increasing significantly over time.

The Knowledge Bank is regarded as a useful tool by the Helpline advisors for finding information on specific local areas. In particular the advisors use the Knowledge Bank to access information on local funding opportunities, networking and premises. The Tier 1 advisors reported that the Knowledge Bank is referred to in the vast majority of calls. The role of the knowledge managers in updating the information regularly and the daily updates (on new information which is added) are both seen as invaluable.

### Assistance provided by Tier 1 advisor

Table 61 shows the main actions taken during the user’s initial call to the Helpline. Evidence from the qualitative interviews suggests that many users found it difficult to differentiate between the Tier 1 and Tier 2 services, particularly if their call took place some time ago. This is confirmed by the fact that, in the survey, about a quarter of people receiving only Tier 1 support said that they had spoken to a second advisor while over half of people receiving Tier 2 support said that they had not spoken to a second advisor.

The survey results show that only in a minority of cases did the Tier 1 advisor provide all the information required by the user without requiring further signposting (16 per cent of

Helpline only users and 15 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users). This is to be expected as the primary role of Tier 1 is to signpost users to further sources of information or support (particularly GOV.UK) so that they are able to find relevant information without needing to call the Helpline in the future.

Nearly a quarter (23 per cent) of Helpline and GOV.UK users were directed to the GOV.UK website by the Tier 1 advisor, but this was the case for just seven per cent of Helpline only users (who presumably decided not to subsequently use GOV.UK). A fifth (20 per cent) of Helpline only users and a quarter (25 per cent) of Helpline and GOV.UK users were signposted to other organisations while 18 per cent of Helpline only users and 11 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users felt that the Tier 1 advisor was unable to help them with their enquiry.

**Table 61 – Help provided during Tier 1 call**

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
I was directed to the information I needed on the GOV.UK website	7.8%	5.1%	6.8%	25.1%	19.9%	22.8%
I was signposted to other organisations that could help me	23.0%	14.7%	20.0%	26.0%	24.2%	25.3%
I was put through to an advisor to talk through my query in more detail /...	22.5%	32.4%	26.1%	17.7%	46.0%	29.1%
They were unable to help me with my enquiry	18.9%	16.2%	17.9%	14.5%	7.1%	11.3%
I was provided the basic information I needed without being directed to the GOV.UK website	15.6%	16.9%	16.1%	16.4%	12.8%	15.3%
Follow up information was given by email	7.0%	12.5%	8.9%	11.9%	18.0%	14.2%
Don't know / Refused	15.2%	11.8%	13.9%	11.6%	2.8%	8.1%

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
<i>Base</i>	244	136	380	311	211	530

Source: Ecorys survey, *Base* = all users

### Assistance provided by Tier 2 advisor

Where users had received Tier 2 support (in-depth support from a BSA), about two-fifths (38 per cent of Helpline only users and 40 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users) reported that the BSA discussed with them the actions they could take to address the issues faced. A smaller proportion (three per cent of Helpline only users and 14 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users) were directed to GOV.UK at this stage with a higher proportion being signposted to other organisations (21 per cent of Helpline only users and 32 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users) or being provided with follow-up information via email (21 per cent of Helpline only users and 27 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users). A minority of users (18 per cent of Helpline only users and 10 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users) felt that the BSA was unable to help them with their enquiry. See Table 62.

**Table 62 – Help provided during Tier 2 call**

	Helpline only	Helpline and GOV.UK
We discussed actions I could take to address the issues I faced	38.4%	40.2%
Follow up information was given by email	21.4%	27.2%
I was signposted to other organisations that could help me	20.8%	31.7%
They were unable to help me with my enquiry	17.6%	10.2%
I was provided the information I needed without being directed to the GOV.UK website	13.8%	17.1%
I was directed to the information I needed on the GOV.UK website	3.1%	13.8%
They misunderstood my enquiry	2.5%	2.0%
Don't know / Refused	8.2%	8.9%
<i>Base</i>	159	246

Source: Ecorys survey, *Base* = users who said they had spoken to a Tier 2 advisor

## Subsequent or prior use of GOV.UK

In many cases, the Helpline improved users' understanding of the information available on GOV.UK, although this varied according to whether the user had actually used GOV.UK to find information relating to their query. As shown in Table 63, nearly two-thirds (63 per cent) of Helpline and GOV.UK users felt that their understanding of GOV.UK definitely or probably improved as a result of their call to the Helpline compared to 42 per cent of Helpline only users.

**Table 63 – Has your understanding of the information available on GOV.UK improved as a result of your call to the Helpline?**

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
Definitely	13.1%	21.3%	16.1%	31.8%	35.5%	33.6%
Probably	27.5%	24.3%	26.3%	29.9%	29.4%	29.8%
Probably not	25.8%	33.1%	28.4%	19.6%	17.5%	18.7%
Definitely not	20.1%	11.0%	16.8%	13.2%	13.7%	13.2%
Don't know / Refused	13.5%	10.3%	12.4%	5.5%	3.8%	4.7%
Base	244	136	380	311	211	530

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = all users

Similarly, Helpline and GOV.UK users were more likely to say that they would use GOV.UK as a first port of call for business support information in the future, suggesting the Helpline is supporting channel shift. Three quarters (75 per cent) of Helpline and GOV.UK users said that they were definitely or probably be more likely to use GOV.UK before the Helpline in the future compared to 57 per cent of Helpline only users. See Table 64.

**Table 64 – As a result of your call, are you more likely to use GOV.UK as a first port of call for information in the future?**

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
Definitely	20.1%	25.7%	22.1%	41.2%	46.4%	44.0%
Probably	34.4%	34.6%	34.5%	33.8%	27.5%	30.8%
Probably not	20.9%	20.6%	20.8%	13.2%	11.8%	12.6%
Definitely not	15.6%	11.0%	13.9%	9.3%	11.4%	10.0%

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
Don't know / Refused	9.0%	8.1%	8.7%	2.6%	2.8%	2.6%
Base	244	136	380	311	211	530

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = all users

### Overall satisfaction with the service received

According to the survey, users generally expressed satisfaction with the overall service received from the Helpline. About two-thirds (66 per cent) of Helpline and GOV.UK users and 61 per cent of Helpline only users were fairly or very satisfied. However, about a quarter of users (25 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users and 24 per cent of Helpline only users) said that they were fairly or very dissatisfied with the service. See Table 65.

**Table 65 – Overall satisfaction with the service**

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
Very satisfied	23.4%	40.4%	29.5%	31.2%	39.8%	34.9%
Fairly satisfied	34.0%	27.2%	31.6%	33.8%	25.6%	30.6%
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	15.2%	11.0%	13.7%	10.3%	8.1%	9.2%
Fairly dissatisfied	14.8%	7.4%	12.1%	15.1%	14.2%	14.5%
Very dissatisfied	10.7%	14.0%	11.8%	9.3%	10.9%	10.0%
Don't know / Refused	2.0%	0.0%	1.3%	0.3%	1.4%	0.8%
Base	244	136	380	311	211	530

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = all users

These overall satisfaction levels are not dissimilar to those found in the previous evaluation of the Helpline.<sup>73</sup> This contrasts somewhat with the Helpline monitoring data. According to monitoring data, in January 2014 overall satisfaction with the service was 94

<sup>73</sup> BIS (2012) *Assessment of the Business Link Helpline*, Table 4.1, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/36780/12-1153-assessment-of-business-link-helpline.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/36780/12-1153-assessment-of-business-link-helpline.pdf)

per cent (including 75 per cent very satisfied). Satisfaction has not dropped below 90 per cent in any of the previous 24 months. This contrast may be due to the fact that the monitoring data records satisfaction soon after the call, and therefore does not take into account any subsequent dissatisfaction as a result of not finding or obtaining the required information, grant or scheme from the signposted sources.

Evidence from the qualitative interviews suggests that satisfaction with the Helpline is mixed. In general, the consulted users were satisfied with the service provided by the advisors but, in some cases, felt dissatisfied with the usefulness of the information provided. This picture is also borne out by the survey results, as highlighted below.

Nevertheless the prevailing opinion from the users consulted in the qualitative interviews was that the Helpline is a helpful and professional service, and most users would happily use it again and recommend it to fellow business people.

### Value of the information received

Table 66 shows that fewer than half of all users of the Helpline felt that they obtained all the information they needed as a result of their call and, in the case of Helpline and GOV.UK users, their usage of GOV.UK, while about a third obtained the information in part.

Over a quarter (27 per cent) of Helpline only users and 19 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users felt that they did not get the information they needed from the service.

**Table 66 – Did you feel that you obtained the information you needed as a result of your call (and GOV.UK usage)?**

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
Yes, in full	33.6%	44.1%	37.4%	43.4%	49.3%	46.0%
Yes, in part	34.8%	30.9%	33.4%	33.4%	33.6%	33.4%
No	28.7%	22.8%	26.6%	20.6%	16.1%	18.7%
Don't know / Refused	2.9%	2.2%	2.6%	2.6%	0.9%	1.9%
Base	244	136	380	311	211	530

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = all users

Table 67 shows that the majority of users felt that the information received from the Helpline (and, where relevant, GOV.UK) was useful in answering their query. Two thirds (67 per cent) of those using the Helpline only and three quarters (76 per cent) of those using both GOV.UK and the Helpline felt that the information was very or fairly useful. However, a significant minority (22 per cent of Helpline only users and 16 per cent of

Helpline and GOV.UK users) felt that the information was not very useful or not at all useful.

**Table 67 –How useful was the information received in answering your query?**

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
Very useful	38.4%	44.9%	40.7%	44.7%	57.3%	50.0%
Fairly useful	25.6%	27.2%	26.2%	28.6%	23.2%	26.4%
Neutral	8.3%	8.8%	8.5%	7.1%	7.1%	7.2%
Not very useful	11.6%	5.1%	9.3%	9.3%	4.3%	7.2%
Not at all useful	12.4%	13.2%	12.7%	10.0%	6.6%	8.5%
Don't know / refused	3.7%	0.7%	2.6%	0.3%	1.4%	0.8%
<i>Base</i>	<i>242</i>	<i>136</i>	<i>378</i>	<i>311</i>	<i>211</i>	<i>530</i>

*Source: Ecorys survey, Base = all users*

It should be noted that the Helpline is primarily a signposting service and therefore most users should not expect to acquire all the information relating to their query without also using other sources. Findings from the qualitative research suggest that most callers were satisfied that the Helpline had effectively signposted them to other sources of information, even if their query had not been fully resolved from the Helpline call alone.

However, several Helpline callers interviewed in the qualitative research felt that their call to the Helpline had not provided sufficient information to resolve the query. In many cases, this was simply due to the fact that the required information or support was unavailable. (For example, there were instances where the user was looking for specific funding for their business, and their query was effectively resolved by finding out that such opportunities did not exist.)

In a few cases, however, users felt the service could have provided better information. One user felt that an appropriate funding scheme was “likely to exist” but felt that the (possibly Tier 1) advisor “lacked awareness of its existence”, another user reported that a contact list provided by the Helpline was “very out of date” while a further user felt that the information provided was too generic and not tailored to his needs.

This contrasts with the findings from the survey and qualitative research with GOV.UK only users, where most users were able to find the information required. A possible explanation for this difference is that often people with more complex or bespoke queries end up calling the Helpline as they are unable to find the information they need on GOV.UK or from other sources (see Table 53). These bespoke queries may be broad and may not have a satisfactory answer (e.g. somebody looking for funding which does not exist) and

therefore people using the Helpline, on its own or in combination with GOV.UK, may be less likely to acquire the information they are looking for.

### Satisfaction with Helpline staff

Tables 68 and 69 give more detail about the aspects of the service that most met users' needs. About three quarters (76 per cent) of Helpline only users agreed that the staff they spoke to were sympathetic to their needs and willing to help. This analysis confirms, however, that satisfaction levels were generally a little lower in terms of the actual information provided. For example, slightly over a quarter (26 per cent) of Helpline only users did not feel that the information provided was valuable to their business.

**Table 68 – Opinions of the service received from the Helpline (Helpline only users)**

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Staff were sympathetic to my needs and were willing to help	35.0%	40.5%	14.7%	5.5%	4.2%
Staff understood my query	32.6%	38.4%	16.6%	7.9%	4.5%
The information provided was impartial	31.8%	36.6%	21.6%	7.1%	2.9%
The information provided was relevant	28.7%	36.3%	17.6%	11.6%	5.8%
Advisors had suitable business knowledge	25.8%	36.1%	22.1%	10.8%	5.3%
The information provided] was valuable to my business	22.1%	34.2%	17.9%	16.1%	9.7%
The information provided was practical and useful	22.9%	38.2%	17.6%	14.2%	7.1%

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = Helpline only users

The pattern of responses was similar for users of both the Helpline and GOV.UK, although opinions were a little higher, with 85 per cent agreeing that staff were sympathetic to their needs and willing to help.

**Table 69 – Opinions of the service received from the Helpline (Helpline and GOV.UK users)**

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Staff were sympathetic to my needs and were willing to help	41.5%	43.8%	9.2%	3.6%	1.9%
Staff understood my query	37.9%	44.0%	11.7%	4.5%	1.9%
The information provided was impartial	34.9%	42.8%	15.1%	5.5%	1.7%
The information provided was relevant	31.9%	41.5%	11.9%	9.4%	5.3%
Advisors had suitable business knowledge	29.8%	40.8%	18.1%	7.4%	4.0%
The information provided was valuable to my business	27.5%	37.0%	14.3%	13.2%	7.9%
The information provided was practical and useful	27.5%	43.2%	11.9%	9.8%	7.5%

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = Helpline and GOV.UK users

Survey respondents were also asked to report their opinions of the Helpline as a whole. As shown in Table 70, the majority (71 per cent) of Helpline only users agree that the Helpline is a service they can trust, although a smaller proportion agreed that it has a reputation for providing a high quality information service (51 per cent), is the first port of call for finding out about business support services (54 per cent) and is a unique service (50 per cent).

**Table 70 – General opinion of the Helpline (Helpline only users)**

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The Business Support Helpline is a service I can trust	27.9%	42.6%	20.8%	4.7%	3.9%
The Business Support Helpline is the first port of call for finding out about business support services	18.2%	36.1%	26.3%	12.9%	6.6%
The Business Support Helpline is a unique service	17.6%	31.8%	38.4%	7.4%	4.7%
The Business Support Helpline has a reputation for providing a high quality information service	17.4%	33.9%	35.3%	9.2%	4.2%

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = Helpline only users

Again, the pattern of responses was similar for users of both the Helpline and GOV.UK, although opinions were a little higher, with 80 per cent agreeing that the Helpline is a service they can trust. See Table 71.

**Table 71 – General opinion of the Helpline (Helpline and GOV.UK users)**

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The Business Support Helpline is a service I can trust	36.4%	43.4%	11.9%	5.1%	3.2%
The Business Support Helpline is the first port of call for finding out about business support services	21.1%	43.4%	18.5%	11.3%	5.7%
The Business Support Helpline is a unique service	20.9%	35.5%	28.3%	11.3%	4.0%
The Business Support	20.6%	39.2%	30.4%	5.8%	4.0%

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Helpline has a reputation for providing a high quality information service					

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = Helpline and GOV.UK users

Similarly to the user survey, the qualitative research identified clear consensus that Helpline staff were helpful in terms of having a good attitude and doing their best to assist the caller. Interviewees were impressed with simple courtesies expressed by the advisors and the time and attention offered by advisors to go through the information thoroughly over the phone. Even where the advisor did not possess specialist knowledge about a particular subject or sector, it was commented that they put in a lot of effort to find the relevant information, and in some cases were able to provide additional information that they had not considered.

## Extent to which Helpline is addressing market failure

This section explores evidence from the survey and qualitative interviews on the extent to which the Helpline (both on its own and in combination with GOV.UK) may be addressing the three market failures identified in the introduction.

### People not valuing business support

As shown in Table 69, almost two thirds of users (64 per cent) found the information provided by Helpline and GOV.UK valuable to their business, while almost three quarters (74 per cent) felt that the information was relevant and 71 per cent felt that it was practical and useful.

In addition, Table 72 shows that 40 per cent of combined Helpline and GOV.UK users reported that the service helped them understand the benefits of information and advice and 37 per cent reported that the services in combination helped them understand that they needed advice, support or services.

Using the Helpline in conjunction with GOV.UK, rather than just Helpline or GOV.UK alone, may have improved the extent to which the service helped people place more value on business support. Table 29 in the previous chapter shows that 25 per cent of GOV.UK only users felt that the service helped them to understand their need for business support while Table 72 shows that a similar proportion (24 per cent) of Helpline only users reported that the service helped them to understand their need for business support. This compares to 37 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users.

There is an indication from the survey that reducing this market failure may have been more effective for pre-starts than for established businesses. For example, among Helpline and GOV.UK users, early stage pre-starts were significantly more likely than average (46 per cent) to state that the services helped them to understand that they needed advice and

support, while established businesses (more than one year old) were significantly less likely than average (20 per cent) to give this answer.

The evidence from the qualitative interviews also presents a mixed picture of the extent to which usage of the Helpline has enabled users to place a higher value on business support. A few interviewees reported that their Helpline advisor had provided additional information and ideas that they had not considered before and will subsequently look into further although many did not go on to demand business support from the private sector having called the Helpline, with several saying that they still would not be prepared to pay for further support. Stakeholders believe that the role of the Helpline is currently limited in creating demand for business support as this requires a pro-active and targeted approach rather than providing a service that people may or may not choose to access. According to stakeholders, the Helpline does not have the ability to solve this market failure but can provide a useful service once the lack of engagement is addressed.

**Table 72 –Did the Helpline (and GOV.UK) help you in any of the following ways?**

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
Helped me to understand the benefits of information and advice	29.9%	37.5%	32.6%	37.6%	41.7%	39.6%
Helped me understand what advice, support or services I needed	25.8%	30.9%	27.6%	38.3%	42.2%	39.8%
Helped me understand how to find a supplier for advice and support	24.6%	25.7%	25.0%	32.2%	37.9%	34.5%
Helped me understand that I needed advice, support or services	20.1%	31.6%	24.2%	35.7%	38.9%	36.8%
Helped me understand how to choose between different suppliers for advice and support	16.4%	24.3%	19.2%	24.1%	23.7%	24.2%
None of the above	46.7%	37.5%	43.4%	29.9%	26.1%	28.3%

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
Don't know / Refused	7.0%	8.1%	7.4%	4.8%	4.3%	4.5%
Base	244	136	380	311	211	530

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = all users

### People not knowing what business support is available

Many stakeholders believe that the key market failure addressed by the Helpline is helping people to find out what support is available. A minority of users in the survey felt that the Helpline improved their knowledge of the business support market, in terms of helping them understand what advice, support and services they need (28 per cent of Helpline only users and 40 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users), helping them understand how to find a supplier for advice and support (25 per cent of Helpline only users and 35 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users), and helping them to choose between different suppliers (19 per cent of Helpline only users and 24 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users). It should be noted that these figures are higher than for GOV.UK only users. In fact, the group most likely to have found the service useful for signposting to other support are those that used both the Helpline and GOV.UK. See Table 72 above.

The majority of users interviewed in the qualitative research reported that the main outcome of their call was an improved awareness of relevant support that is available and the next steps to take to resolve their query. For example, one user said that she called the Helpline as she felt that “there must be bodies out there” that could provide the funding she was looking for. As a result of the call, she obtained information (a list of potential sources of funding for her to follow up) that she would not otherwise have found.

### People not trusting business support

Stakeholder views were more mixed on whether the Helpline could help businesses to value or trust business support although some believe that this role can develop over time as people begin to trust the quality of the Helpline service. One stakeholder questioned the ability of a national business support Helpline to provide detailed advice on private sector provision and felt that this should be left to local business support providers.

Tables 70 and 71 show that the majority of Helpline and combined Helpline and GOV.UK users felt they could trust the Helpline service.

The survey also showed increased trust due to it being a Government service. According to the survey, the majority of users (84 per cent of Helpline only users and 92 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users) were aware that the Helpline and GOV.UK are Government services. Respondents were then asked to assess the extent to which this makes them more or less likely to trust the information. As shown in the Table 73, while 27 per cent of Helpline only users and 15 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users felt that this did not influence their trust in the information provided, the majority of users (65 per cent of Helpline only users and 80 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users) reported that they were more likely to trust the information due to it being a Government service. These

findings suggest that the Helpline, particularly in conjunction with GOV.UK, is helping to reduce the market failure surrounding lack of trust in business support providers.

Evidence from the qualitative interviews also suggests that the Helpline is addressing the market failure surrounding the lack of trust in business support providers. Several users commented that they deemed a Government Helpline to be “official” and as a result felt that the support would be unbiased, and that they were more likely to trust this information compared to other sources. One user said that he has looked at other business support services but, when looking at online reviews, found that “80 to 90 per cent are essentially money-grabbing schemes” where people have paid for the service without getting anything in return.

**Table 73 –How did the fact that the Helpline (and GOV.UK) is a Government service affect your trust in the information?**

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
Yes, makes me much more likely to trust the information	44.1%	46.6%	45.0%	55.9%	63.2%	59.3%
Yes, makes me a little more likely to trust the information	18.8%	22.9%	20.3%	24.5%	15.5%	20.6%
Yes, makes me a little less likely to trust the information	4.0%	2.5%	3.4%	1.4%	2.1%	1.6%
Yes, makes me much less likely to trust the information	3.5%	1.7%	2.8%	0.3%	2.1%	1.0%
No, does not affect my trust in the information provided	27.2%	26.3%	26.9%	15.7%	14.5%	15.0%
Don't know/refused	2.5%	0.0%	1.6%	2.1%	2.6%	2.5%
<i>Base</i>	<i>202</i>	<i>118</i>	<i>320</i>	<i>286</i>	<i>193</i>	<i>486</i>

*Source: Ecorys survey, Base = users aware that Helpline is a Government service*

## Actions taken since as a result of calling the Helpline

### Customers subsequently accessing other business support

Table 74 shows that, among survey respondents, 50 per cent of Helpline only users and 38 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users are not intending to take up further business support having contacted the Helpline. The qualitative research provides some examples of users that chose not to take further steps to access support. In some cases, this was due to the fact that they were able to get the funding or advice required from a different source so did not need to follow up on the information provided from the Helpline. In another case, the decision not to access further support was based on the user's previous bad experience of business support and events, feeling that this is time-consuming and not beneficial.

Where users did take up subsequent support, Table 74 reveals that the most common source was from the private sector although this only accounted for 13 per cent of Helpline only users and 10 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users. The qualitative research provides some examples of the actions taken by users after calling the Helpline. One user looking for a business grant contacted all of the providers listed in the email sent to him by the BSA. Even though none of them was able to help, he was satisfied that the Helpline enabled him to explore all his options and he was subsequently able to make the decision with confidence to invest his own funds into the project. Another user, enquiring about a legal dispute, followed up her call to the Helpline by contacting the solicitors suggested by the advisor, while another user attended business support seminars in her local area after her call to the Helpline.

**Table 74 – Since calling the Helpline (and using GOV.UK) what further business advice have you taken up?**

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
The private sector (e.g. consultancy, mentoring)	14.2%	11.1%	13.1%	10.8%	9.5%	10.3%
Funding bodies	3.8%	4.4%	4.0%	3.7%	5.7%	4.5%
Local authority	3.3%	3.0%	3.2%	4.7%	5.2%	4.9%
Other government service (please specify)	3.3%	5.2%	4.0%	6.1%	4.3%	5.4%
Enterprise agencies	2.5%	3.7%	2.9%	4.7%	5.7%	5.0%
HMRC	2.1%	2.2%	2.1%	1.0%	5.2%	2.7%
Mentorsme	0.4%	0.7%	0.5%	1.0%	0.5%	0.8%

	Helpline only			Helpline and GOV.UK		
	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total	Tier 1	Tier 2	Total
Other	3.8%	11.1%	6.4%	13.8%	21.0%	16.5%
No but I am planning to take up other advice	15.9%	15.6%	15.8%	18.2%	16.7%	17.3%
No and I don't have any plans to take up other advice	54.0%	43.0%	50.0%	38.4%	35.7%	37.5%
Don't know / Refused	2.5%	5.2%	3.5%	4.4%	3.3%	4.3%
<i>Base</i>	<i>239</i>	<i>135</i>	<i>374</i>	<i>297</i>	<i>210</i>	<i>515</i>

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = all users

### Actions taken by pre-starts

The survey results show that around 32 per cent of pre-starts using the Helpline only and 39 per cent of pre-starts using both the Helpline and GOV.UK have subsequently set up a business, while most of the remainder are still planning to set up a business. This is shown in Table 75 below.

**Table 75 – Since calling the Helpline (and using GOV.UK) have you started or are you planning to start your business?**

	Helpline only	Helpline and GOV.UK
Yes - planning to do so	39.1%	41.8%
Yes - have already done so	32.3%	39.1%
No, have decided not to start my business	24.3%	17.9%
Don't know / Refused	4.3%	1.2%
<i>Base</i>	<i>235</i>	<i>340</i>

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = pre-starts

A number of pre-start users were interviewed as part of the qualitative research. This revealed quite a variety of experiences with regard to progress in starting a business after calling the Helpline. Some users had made significant progress in starting a business but did not think that their call to the Helpline contributed to this, as they had subsequently

used other sources of advice or information that was not as a result of the signposting received from the Helpline.

An example of a user that has progressed her business idea as a result of the support received from the Helpline involves a user in the process of setting up an e-learning business. She called the Helpline for advice on the legal status of the business and has subsequently progressed towards setting up a limited company, after becoming more informed about the issues and benefits.

Among those that have started or are planning to start a business, about a third of users (35 per cent of Helpline only users and 37 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users) had developed a business plan and a slightly smaller proportion (28 per cent of Helpline only users and 29 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users) had developed an action plan for their business, since calling the Helpline. See Table 76.

**Table 76 – Actions taken forward by pre-starts since calling the Helpline (and using GOV.UK)**

	Helpline only		Helpline and GOV.UK	
	Already taken forward	Planning	Already taken forward	Planning
Developed business plan	34.5%	14.6%	36.5%	14.4%
Looked online to find further business support	28.1%	4.1%	26.4%	9.0%
Developed an action plan on what I needed to do to establish my business	27.5%	8.8%	28.9%	11.6%
Received face-to-face advice from an advisor on establishing a business	18.1%	12.3%	19.9%	10.1%
Accessed start-up finance	14.6%	22.2%	11.9%	19.9%
Attended a presentation or workshop on how to establish a business	14.6%	9.4%	12.6%	8.7%
Other	7.0%	12.9%	21.3%	20.9%
None/don't know	29.2%	46.2%	23.1%	39.4%
<i>Base</i>	<i>171</i>	<i>171</i>	<i>277</i>	<i>277</i>

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = pre-starts that have started or planning to start a business

The evidence from the survey suggests that the Helpline played an important role in helping people to decide not to go into business. Table 77 shows that 55 per cent of Helpline only users and 36 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users felt that the Helpline (and GOV.UK) was important or very important in their decision not to start a business.

**Table 77 – How important was the information you received from the Business Support Helpline (and GOV.UK) in your decision not to go into business?**

	Helpline only	Helpline and GOV.UK
Very important	20.7%	12.8%
Important	34.5%	23.1%
Not very important	24.1%	28.2%
Not at all important	17.2%	30.8%
Don't know / Refused	3.4%	5.1%
Base	58	39

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = pre-starts that decided not to set up a business

Among those who felt that the Helpline was important in their decision, the most common reason given for not starting a business was finance. It is possible that the information these users received from the Helpline (and GOV.UK) led these users to realise that the access to finance required to start the business was not available and therefore they were not able to progress their business idea. See Table 78.

**Table 78 – Why did you decide not to start a business?**

	Helpline only	Helpline and GOV.UK
Financial reasons	31.3%	42.9%
Realised there was too much to do to start a business and this put me off	18.8%	21.4%
I got a job	18.8%	0.0%
Realised that my business idea was not viable	9.4%	21.4%

	Helpline only	Helpline and GOV.UK
Other	25.0%	28.6%
Don't know	3.1%	0.0%
Base	32	14

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = pre-starts that decided not to set up a business and said that the Helpline (and GOV.UK) was important or very important in their decision.

### Actions taken by established businesses

The survey finds that around half of start-ups and established businesses have already taken action to improve their business or are planning to do so, as shown in Table 79.

**Table 79 – Since calling the Helpline (and using GOV.UK) have you or do you plan to implement any actions to improve the performance of your business?**

	Helpline only	Helpline and GOV.UK
Yes - have already done so	24.6%	31.9%
Yes - planning to do so	24.6%	22.3%
No, have no plans to implement any actions	32.6%	38.8%
Have stopped trading	7.2%	1.6%
Don't know / Refused	10.9%	5.3%
Base	138	188

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = start-ups and established businesses

Among start-ups and established businesses that have taken action to improve their business, users were most likely to have developed a marketing plan (nine per cent of Helpline only users and 23 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users), introduced improvements to the operation of the business (14 per cent of Helpline only users and 19 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users) or introduced new products, processes or services (16 per cent of Helpline only users and 18 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users). See Table 80.

**Table 80 – Actions taken forward by start-ups and established businesses since calling the Helpline (and using GOV.UK)**

	Helpline only		Helpline and GOV.UK	
	Already taken forward	Planning	Already taken forward	Planning
Introduced new products, services or processes	15.5%	2.8%	18.3%	11.5%
Introduced improvements to operations of the business	14.1%	7.0%	19.2%	14.4%
Looked online to find further business support	12.7%	4.2%	-	-
Improved compliance with legislation	8.5%	2.8%	17.3%	10.6%
Accessed finance or grants to help the business grow	8.5%	7.0%	6.7%	20.2%
Developed a marketing plan	8.5%	7.0%	23.1%	10.6%
Developed a marketing plan for new export markets and/or started to export or increased exports	4.2%	1.4%	9.6%	11.5%
Attended a presentation or workshop on improving my business	4.2%	2.8%	6.7%	12.5%
Developed a recruitment plan and/or taken on more employees	2.8%	4.2%	6.7%	15.4%
Other	9.9%	15.5%	22.1%	19.2%
None/ Don't know	49.3%	66.2%	29.8%	38.5%
<i>Base</i>	<i>71</i>	<i>71</i>	<i>104</i>	<i>104</i>

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = start-ups and established businesses

Among established businesses, there are examples from the qualitative interviews of users that have improved their business since contacting the Helpline. In many cases, the information and signposting offered by the Helpline played quite an indirect role through helping users to explore their options and move forward in accessing the support they needed.

For example, a user whose company was able to access a small loan to grow the business reported that, despite the fact that accessing this finance was not a direct result of his call to the Helpline, the support received from the Helpline gave him and his co-directors more general information about how loans work helping them to be more informed and confident about accessing other support.

Some users interviewed also reported direct benefits from the information received, including ensuring compliance with legislation and updating internal processes (e.g. health and safety procedures).

### Additionality of support

As shown in Table 81, 63 per cent of Helpline only users and 62 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users felt that they were very likely or likely to have found similar information elsewhere if the Helpline (and GOV.UK) were not available. Therefore, additionality of support is assumed to be relatively low.

**Table 81 – Additionality of support – If the Helpline (and GOV.UK) was unavailable, how likely is it that you would have obtained the information you received elsewhere?**

	Helpline only	Helpline and GOV.UK	Additionality assumption
Very likely	22.4%	27.7%	0
Likely	40.5%	34.2%	0.25
Unlikely	15.8%	19.4%	0.75
Very unlikely	11.3%	9.4%	1
Don't know / Refused	10.0%	9.2%	0.5
<b>Overall additionality</b>	<b>0.38</b>	<b>0.37</b>	
<i>Base</i>	380	530	

*Source: Ecorys survey, overall additionality is the average of the assumed additionality of each respondent*

### Additionality of actions taken

There is clear evidence from the survey to suggest that, where users had started a business or taken action to improve their business, the Helpline (particularly in combination with GOV.UK) played a significant role in this decision. Table 82 shows that,

for 34 per cent of Helpline only users and 42 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users, the information received from the Helpline (and GOV.UK) was very important in users' decisions or plans to take action. Additionality of actions taken is estimated to be moderate to high.

**Table 82 – How important was the information you received in your decision / plan to implement these actions or start your business?**

	Helpline only	Helpline and GOV.UK	Assumed additionality
Very important	34.3%	42.2%	0.9
Important	24.3%	30.3%	0.75
Not very important	15.5%	12.1%	0.25
Not at all important	22.2%	11.3%	0
Don't know / Refused	3.8%	4.0%	0.5
<b>Overall additionality</b>	<b>0.55</b>	<b>0.66</b>	
<i>Base</i>	239	379	

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = all users who have or are planning to start a business or take action to improve their business

## Impact of the Helpline

### Introduction

This section provides a discussion and some indicative estimates of the economic impact of the Helpline (both with and without GOV.UK) over a 12 month period. The analysis considers the cost savings to business and pre-starts due to users saving time and monetary expense from accessing business support through the Helpline (and GOV.UK). It also considers the economic impacts due to businesses experiencing growth (measured through GVA and employment) as a result of additional actions taken to improve the business and new businesses being established following usage of the Helpline (and GOV.UK).

All economic impact estimates are derived from values provided by respondents to the quantitative survey. With this in mind, it is important to note the following caveats when interpreting the analysis in this study:

- In many cases, the number of respondents providing a quantitative estimate in response to some questions was very low. Therefore, the average (mean) response is in some cases very sensitive to specific individual responses. Sample sizes for all estimates are provided in the footnotes
- In this analysis, the estimates of the counterfactual (the outcomes that would have occurred in the absence of the Helpline and GOV.UK) are based solely on respondents' own assessment of additionality. A more robust assessment of additionality would be to measure any changes in outcomes in a "control group" or "comparison group" of non-users, and only attribute impact where there are significant differences between the outcomes experienced by users and those experienced by non-users in a similar time frame. However, such an exercise was beyond the scope of this evaluation. Nevertheless, it should be noted that self-reported additionality can be subject to optimism bias, where beneficiaries overstate the true impact of a particular factor in any overall change in performance.

To estimate the aggregate impact of Helpline (and GOV.UK) usage on the England economy, GVA impacts due to turnover growth are grossed up according to the estimated number of Helpline users in 2013. Time and cost savings have not been included in the aggregate estimates as these are assumed to be included in the GVA impacts or (in the case of cost savings) to be offset by reduced revenue to business support providers elsewhere in the economy.

Sensitivity analysis has also been undertaken to test the sensitivity of the results to changed assumptions about the persistence of impacts and an alternative calculation of GVA based on changes in employment rather than turnover.

### Time and cost savings for the business

Where respondents to the survey reported that they were likely or very likely to have accessed similar support elsewhere in the absence of the Helpline (and GOV.UK) (see Table 81 above), they were subsequently asked to estimate how much time and money they might have saved due to using the Helpline (and GOV.UK).

Where users would otherwise have used alternative support, in the majority of cases (72 per cent of Helpline only users and 70 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users) they estimate that this would not have cost anything. However, where they would have otherwise paid for alternative support, the estimated amount saved was substantial. From the survey, it is estimated that costs saved were on average £51 (same figure for Helpline only users and Helpline and GOV.UK users) for every business that would have used alternative support otherwise. After taking account of businesses that were unlikely to have used alternative support in the absence of the Helpline and GOV.UK from Table 81 (implying zero cost savings for these users), it is estimated that the average cost saving per user was £32<sup>74</sup> for Helpline only users and £31<sup>75</sup> for Helpline and GOV.UK users.

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<sup>74</sup> Mean cost saving x Percentage of users likely or very likely to have used alternative support in the absence of the Helpline from Table 81 = £51 x (22.4% + 40.5%) = £32

<sup>75</sup> Mean cost saving x Percentage of users likely or very likely to have used alternative support in the absence of the Helpline and GOV.UK from Table 81 = £51 x (27.7% + 34.2%) = £31

Survey respondents were also asked to estimate how much time they saved through using the Helpline and GOV.UK. Among the users that had taken forward, or were planning to implement actions, to start their business or improve their business, 55 per cent of Helpline only users and 70 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users said that their use of GOV.UK had saved them time, as shown in Table 83.

**Table 83 – Do you think the information you received from GOV.UK saved you time in deciding what action to take or deciding how to take action?**

	Helpline only	Helpline and GOV.UK
Yes	54.8%	70.2%
No	39.3%	25.6%
Don't know / Refused	5.9%	4.2%
Base	239	379

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = users who had taken forward or planned to take forward actions to start a business or improve their business

Where users considered that they had saved time, the average estimated time saved was 63 hours for Helpline only users and 157 hours for Helpline and GOV.UK users. On the basis that 28.9 per cent of all Helpline users (including pre-starts, start-ups and established businesses) and 36.4 per cent of all Helpline and GOV.UK users have already either started a business or taken action to improve the business, the average time saved per user is estimated to be 10 hours<sup>76</sup> for Helpline only users and 40 hours<sup>77</sup> for Helpline and GOV.UK users, equivalent to a further cost saving of £210 for Helpline only users and £840 for Helpline and GOV.UK users.<sup>78</sup>

## Businesses created

Respondents who were pre-starts when they used the Helpline and subsequently created a business were asked to estimate their expected turnover after one year of trading. Average estimated turnover was £96,000<sup>79</sup> for Helpline only users and £74,000<sup>80</sup> for Helpline and GOV.UK users. These estimates are similar to the average turnover of

<sup>76</sup> Mean time saved x Percentage taking action to improve their business x Percentage saving time = 63 x 28.9% x 54.8% = 10

<sup>77</sup> Mean time saved x Percentage taking action to improve their business x Percentage saving time = 157 x 36.4% x 70.2% = 40

<sup>78</sup> Based on assumption that average working time costs £21 per hour, from BIS (2012) *Assessment of the Business Link Helpline*, p84, [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/36780/12-1153-assessment-of-business-link-helpline.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/36780/12-1153-assessment-of-business-link-helpline.pdf)

<sup>79</sup> Mean of 53 observations

<sup>80</sup> Mean of 92 observations

businesses with no employees aged up to three years (£80,200) as reported in the latest Small Business Survey.<sup>81</sup>

After taking into account users that have not set up a business from Table 75, this translates to a turnover impact per business of £31,000 for Helpline only users<sup>82</sup> and £30,000 for Helpline and GOV.UK users.<sup>83</sup> Assuming a GVA:turnover ratio of 0.283,<sup>84</sup> this is equivalent to a gross GVA impact per business of £8,800 for Helpline only users and £8,400 for Helpline and GOV.UK users.

### Economic impacts for established businesses

Respondents who were start-ups or established businesses when they used the Helpline were asked in the survey to assess whether their usage of the Helpline (and GOV.UK) has led to any changes in business performance. This is shown in Table 84.

In the majority of cases, respondents felt that their usage of the Helpline (and GOV.UK) had not had any impact on business performance. However, 28 per cent of Helpline only users and 24 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users reported an expected impact on running costs, 32 per cent of Helpline only users and 30 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users reported an expected impact on turnover and 16 per cent of Helpline only users and 28 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users reported an expected impact on employment.

#### **Table 84 – Do you expect the actions you have taken, or plan to take, as a result of the information received through Helpline (and GOV.UK) to have any effect on the following aspects of business performance?**

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<sup>81</sup> BIS (2013) *Small Business Survey 2012: Businesses with No Employees*, p14,

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/193548/bis-13-p180-small-business-survey-2012-businesses-with-no-employees.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/193548/bis-13-p180-small-business-survey-2012-businesses-with-no-employees.pdf)

<sup>82</sup> Mean turnover of businesses created x Percentage of pre-start users starting a business from Table 75 = £96,000 x 32.3% = £31,000

<sup>83</sup> Mean turnover of businesses created x Percentage of pre-start users starting a business from Table 75 = £74,000 x 39.1% = £29,000

<sup>84</sup> Annual Business Survey, 2012 Provisional Results (Total GVA in UK in 2012 / Total turnover in UK in 2012 = 0.283), <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcM%3A77-323688>

	Helpline only				Helpline and GOV.UK			
	This year	Next year	Next 2-3 years	No / don't know	This year	Next year	Next 2-3 years	No / don't know
Turnover	23.9%	2.8%	5.6%	67.6%	15.4%	3.8%	10.6%	70.2%
Running costs	16.9%	9.9%	1.4%	71.8%	14.4%	6.7%	2.9%	76.0%
Number of employees	11.3%	1.4%	2.8%	84.5%	13.5%	9.6%	4.8%	72.1%
Export Sales	7.0%	4.2%	1.4%	87.3%	7.7%	1.0%	3.8%	87.5%

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = start-ups or established businesses that have taken forward or plan to take forward actions to improve their business, Base = 71 for Helpline only users and 104 for Helpline and GOV.UK users

Due to the low number of survey respondents with an established business who were both expecting a change in business performance and were able to quantify this change, the following estimates are based on particularly small sample sizes (see footnotes) so should be viewed with caution.

Where respondents reported an impact on running costs, 58 per cent of Helpline users and 40 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users<sup>85</sup> reported that running costs had increased, by £58<sup>86</sup> and £16<sup>87</sup> on average respectively, while 32 per cent of Helpline users and 60 per cent of Helpline and GOV.UK users reported that running costs had decreased, by £15<sup>88</sup> and £260<sup>89</sup> on average respectively. This suggests that, among these users, there was a net increase in running costs of £29<sup>90</sup> per Helpline only user and net decrease in running costs of £149<sup>91</sup> per Helpline and GOV.UK user. When applied only to users that have implemented actions to improve their business (from Table 79) and that reported an impact on running costs (from Table 84), this translates to an increase in running costs of

<sup>85</sup> Base of 20 Helpline users and 25 Helpline and GOV.UK users

<sup>86</sup> Mean of 3 responses

<sup>87</sup> Mean of 8 responses

<sup>88</sup> Mean of 2 responses

<sup>89</sup> Mean of 12 responses

<sup>90</sup> Mean increase in running costs x Percentage reporting an increase in running costs – Mean decrease in running costs x Percentage reporting a decrease in running costs = £58 x 58% - £15 x 32% = £29

<sup>91</sup> Mean increase in running costs x Percentage reporting an increase in running costs – Mean decrease in running costs x Percentage reporting a decrease in running costs = £16 x 40% - £260 x 60% = -£149

£2<sup>92</sup> on average for all Helpline only users and a reduction in running costs of £11<sup>93</sup> on average for all Helpline and GOV.UK users.

Among respondents reporting an increase in turnover, the average increase was £55,000<sup>94</sup> for Helpline only users and £89,000<sup>95</sup> for Helpline and GOV.UK users. When applied to all users, this implies a gross turnover impact of £4,400<sup>96</sup> per Helpline only user and £8,500<sup>97</sup> per Helpline and GOV.UK user. Applying a GVA:turnover ratio of 0.283,<sup>98</sup> this equates to a gross GVA impact of £1,200 per Helpline only user and £2,400 per Helpline and GOV.UK user.

Users reporting an employment impact estimated an increase in employment of 5.6 jobs<sup>99</sup> on average for Helpline only users and 3.7 jobs<sup>100</sup> on average for Helpline and GOV.UK users. A number of users (11 per cent of Helpline only users with an established business who had taken action or planned to take action to improve the business, and seven per cent of respective Helpline and GOV.UK users) also reported that they would otherwise have decreased employment, safeguarding 3.7 jobs<sup>101</sup> and 1.8 jobs<sup>102</sup> on average respectively. Applying these figures to all users taking action to improve their business implies a gross employment impact of 0.3 jobs<sup>103</sup> per Helpline only user with an established business and 0.4 jobs<sup>104</sup> per Helpline and GOV.UK user with an established business.

Users only reported changes experienced as a result of the actions taken to improve the business (see Table 84), and therefore no further deadweight assumption is applied to take account of outcomes that would have been generated anyway.

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<sup>92</sup> Average change in running costs among users reporting an impact x Percentage of users reporting an impact on running costs (across all time periods) from Table 84 x Percentage of users taking action to improve the business from Table 79 = £29 x 24.6% x (16.9% + 9.9% + 1.4%) = £2

<sup>93</sup> Average change in running costs among users reporting an impact x Percentage of users reporting an impact on running costs (across all time periods) from Table 84 x Percentage of users taking action to improve the business from Table 79 = £149 x 31.9% x (14.4% + 6.7% + 2.9%) = -£11

<sup>94</sup> Mean of 7 responses

<sup>95</sup> Mean of 11 responses

<sup>96</sup> Mean impact on turnover x Percentage taking action to improve the business from Table 79 x Percentage reporting an impact on turnover (across all time periods) from Table 84 = £55,000 x 24.6% x (23.9% + 2.8% + 5.6%) = £4,400

<sup>97</sup> Mean impact on turnover x Percentage taking action to improve the business from Table 79 x Percentage reporting an impact on turnover (across all time periods) from Table 84 = £89,000 x 31.9% x (15.4% + 3.8% + 10.6%) = £8,500

<sup>98</sup> Annual Business Survey, 2012 Provisional Results (Total GVA in UK in 2012 / Total turnover in UK in 2012 = 0.283), <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcm%3A77-323688>

<sup>99</sup> Mean of 7 responses

<sup>100</sup> Mean of 18 responses

<sup>101</sup> Mean of 5 responses

<sup>102</sup> Mean of 5 responses

<sup>103</sup> (Mean jobs created x Percentage reporting an impact on employment (across all time periods) from Table 84 + Mean jobs safeguarded x Percentage reporting the safeguarding of jobs) x Percentage taking action to improve the business from Table 79 = (5.6 x (11.3% + 1.4% + 2.8%) + 3.7 x 11%) x 24.6% = 0.3

<sup>104</sup> (Mean jobs created x Percentage reporting an impact on employment (across all time periods) from Table 84 + Mean jobs safeguarded x Percentage reporting the safeguarding of jobs) x Percentage taking action to improve the business from Table 79 = (3.7 x (13.5% + 9.6% + 4.8%) + 1.8 x 7%) x 31.9% = 0.4

## Estimates of displacement

To estimate the extent to which any impact on turnover and employment would displace economic activity from elsewhere in the economy, survey respondents were asked to estimate the percentage of their sales that would be taken up by competitors in the event of them ceasing to trade and the percentage of these competitors based in the UK. On this basis, displacement was estimated to be relatively high.

## Net additional economic impact

Table 85 shows the net additional impact of the Helpline and the Helpline and GOV.UK combined on cost and time savings to business. These estimates are grossed up according to the number of calls handled by the Helpline in 2013. The number of repeat callers is small so it is assumed that the number of calls handled is representative of the number of users in a given year.<sup>105</sup>

**Table 85 – Net additional economic impact – time and cost savings**

	Helpline only		Helpline and GOV.UK	
	Cost saving	Time saving	Cost saving	Time saving
Gross impact per user	£32	£210	£31	£840
Additionality of support	-	0.38	-	0.37
Additionality of actions	-	0.55	-	0.66
Additional impact per user (= Gross impact per user x Additionality of support x Additionality of actions)	£32	£44	£31	£206
Estimated number of users per year <sup>106</sup>	15,200	15,200	21,100	21,100
<b>Total net additional impact per year (= Net additional impact per user x Estimated number of users per year)</b>	<b>£0.48m</b>	<b>£0.67m</b>	<b>£0.67m</b>	<b>£4.4m</b>

<sup>105</sup> These are not necessarily unique users. However, each call is assumed to handle a separate query. As the survey asked about the impacts of a specific query (not the cumulative effects of their usage of the Helpline over the year), it is valid to gross up the estimates by the number of queries.

<sup>106</sup> Total number of callers in 2013 from Helpline monitoring data was 36,284. From the survey, it is estimated that 530/910 of these callers also used GOV.UK while 380/910 were Helpline only users (see Table 1)

Table 86 shows the net additional impact on pre-starts due to the GVA and jobs created in new businesses. It is assumed that all new businesses employ just one employee (the business owner themselves). Only businesses that have actually been set up (not those that are being planned) are included in the economic impact calculations.

**Table 86 – Net additional economic impact – pre-starts**

	Helpline only		Helpline and GOV.UK	
	GVA	Employment	GVA	Employment
Gross impact per user	£8,800	0.32	£8,400	0.39
Additionality of support	0.38	0.38	0.37	0.37
Additionality of actions	0.55	0.55	0.66	0.66
Additional impact per user (= Gross impact per user x Additionality of support x Additionality of actions)	£1,800	0.07	£2,000	0.10
Estimated displacement	0.56	0.56	0.79	0.79
Net additional impact per user (= Additional impact per user x (1 – Displacement))	£810	0.03	£430	0.02
Estimated number of users per year (pre-starts only) <sup>107</sup>	9,600	9,600	13,600	13,600
<b>Total net additional impact per year (= Net additional impact per user x Estimated number of users per year)</b>	<b>£7.7m</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>£5.8m</b>	<b>270</b>

<sup>107</sup> Estimated number of users split by Helpline only and Helpline and GOV.UK (see previous footnote) multiplied by the percentage estimated to be pre-starts from Table 44

Table 87 shows the estimated net additional impact on GVA and employment due to established businesses improving their business.

**Table 87 – Net additional economic impact – established businesses**

	Helpline only		Helpline and GOV.UK	
	GVA	Employment	GVA	Employment
Gross impact per user	£1,200	0.32	£2,400	0.37
Additionality of support	0.38	0.38	0.37	0.37
Additionality of actions	0.55	0.55	0.66	0.66
Additional impact per user (= Gross impact per user x Additionality of support x Additionality of actions)	£260	0.07	£590	0.09
Estimated displacement	0.56	0.56	0.79	0.79
Net additional impact per user (= Additional impact per user x (1 – Displacement))	£110	0.03	£120	0.02
Estimated number of users (established businesses) per year <sup>108</sup>	5,600	5,600	7,500	7,500
<b>Total net additional impact (= Net additional impact per user x Estimated number of users per year)</b>	<b>£0.64m</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>£0.93m</b>	<b>140</b>

<sup>108</sup> Estimated number of users split by Helpline only and Helpline and GOV.UK (see previous footnote) multiplied by the percentage estimated to be established businesses from Table 44

## Overall economic impact and value for money

To estimate the cumulative economic impact of the Helpline (and GOV.UK) on established businesses, the estimated time profile of turnover impacts in Table 84 is used. It is assumed that Year 1 represents the “current” year (when the intervention was received), Year 2 is “next year” and Year 3 is therefore two years from the “current” year. It is also assumed that GVA impacts associated with business support persist for three years,<sup>109</sup> that new businesses will survive for four years on average<sup>110</sup> and that GVA generated in future years is discounted at a rate of 3.5 per cent per year.<sup>111</sup>

Under these assumptions, the total net additional impact of the Helpline for Helpline only users (including GVA effects only) is estimated to be £31 million while a further £25 million net additional impact is estimated to have been created by the Helpline and GOV.UK combined. The annual cost of the contract to run the Helpline and Knowledge Bank is £2.0 million, which suggests that the Helpline may be generating £28 of benefits to business for every £1 spent on the service (if the complementary impact of GOV.UK is included).<sup>112</sup> See Tables 88 and 89.

**Table 88 – Net additional economic impact over time – Helpline only users**

	Business starts	GVA (this year) <sup>113</sup>	GVA (next year) <sup>114</sup>	GVA (next 2-3 years) <sup>115</sup>	Total not discounted	Total discounted
Year 1	£7.7m	£0.5m	-	-	£8.2m	£8.2m
Year 2	£7.7m	£0.5m	£0.06m	-	£8.3m	£7.9m
Year 3	£7.7m	£0.5m	£0.06m	£0.1m	£8.4m	£7.8m
Year 4	£7.7m	-	£0.06m	£0.1m	£7.9m	£7.1m
Year 5		-	-	£0.1m	£0.1m	£0.1m
Total						£31.2m

<sup>109</sup> Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (2009) *Impact of RDA Spending – National Report – Volume 1 – Main Report*, Table 53, <http://www.berr.gov.uk/files/file50735.pdf>

<sup>110</sup> Approximately 50% of businesses survive for four years according to ONS (2013) *Business Demography, 2012*, Table 4, [http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778\\_340530.pdf](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_340530.pdf)

<sup>111</sup> HM Treasury assumption

<sup>112</sup> (Estimated total discounted GVA impact for Helpline only from Table 89 + Estimated total discounted GVA impact for Helpline and GOV.UK from Table 90) / Estimated total cost of Helpline = (£31.2m + £24.8m) / £2.3m = £24

<sup>113</sup> Total impact x Percentage expecting impact to start this year from Table 84 = £0.6m x (23.9%/(23.9%+2.8%+5.6%))

<sup>114</sup> Total impact x Percentage expecting impact to start next year from Table 84 = £0.6m x (2.8%/(23.9%+2.8%+5.6%))

<sup>115</sup> Total impact x Percentage expecting impact to start in next 2-3 years (assumed to be two years' time) from Table 84 = £0.6m x (5.6%/(23.9%+2.8%+5.6%))

**Table 89 – Net additional economic impact over time – Helpline and GOV.UK users**

	Business starts	GVA (this year) <sup>116</sup>	GVA (next year) <sup>117</sup>	GVA (next 2-3 years) <sup>118</sup>	Total not discounted	Total discounted
Year 1	£5.8m	£0.5m	-	-	£6.3m	£6.3m
Year 2	£5.8m	£0.5m	£0.1m	-	£6.4m	£6.2m
Year 3	£5.8m	£0.5m	£0.1m	£0.3m	£6.8m	£6.3m
Year 4	£5.8m	-	£0.1m	£0.3m	£6.3m	£5.7m
Year 5		-	-	£0.3m	£0.3m	£0.3m
Total						£24.8m

## Sensitivity analysis

To test the extent to which the overall assessment of impact is sensitive to certain assumptions in the model, we present a sensitivity analysis to show how the estimates net additional impact would change when making the following adjustments:

- Assumption that all GVA impacts persist for one year rather than three years (for established businesses making improvement) or four years (for pre-starts setting up a business).
- Calculating GVA impacts from employment estimates rather than turnover estimates. For this sensitivity analysis, the estimated net additional impact on employment from Tables 86 and 87 is multiplied by the average GVA per worker in the UK (£43,700)<sup>119</sup>.

Table 90 shows the results of this sensitivity analysis.

## Table 90 – Sensitivity analysis

<sup>116</sup> Total impact x Percentage expecting impact to start this year from Table 84 = £0.9m x (15.4%/(15.4%+3.8%+10.6%))

<sup>117</sup> Total impact x Percentage expecting impact to start next year from Table 84 = £0.9m x (3.8%/(15.4%+3.8%+10.6%))

<sup>118</sup> Total impact x Percentage expecting impact to start in next 2-3 years (assumed to be two years' time) from Table 84 = £0.9m x (3.8%/(15.4%+3.8%+10.6%))

<sup>119</sup> Annual Business Survey, 2012 Provisional Results (Total GVA in UK in 2012 / Total employment average during the year in UK in 2012 = £43,700), <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcm%3A77-323688>

Sensitivity test	Total discounted GVA impact – Helpline only	Total discounted GVA impact – Helpline and GOV.UK
No changes	£31.2m	£24.8m
Persistence assumed to be one year, no other changes	£8.4m	£6.7m
GVA impact based on jobs created and safeguarded, no other changes	£67.6m	£62.9m

The results shown in Table 90 show that the specified changes in assumptions make substantial changes to the estimated cumulative net additional GVA impacts. In particular, estimating GVA based on employment impacts increases the estimated GVA impact considerably. Although this difference is not as stark as in the sensitivity analysis for GOV.UK, it is possible that some users have underestimated the impact on turnover and the actual GVA effects on Helpline only and Helpline and GOV.UK users may be much higher than £31 million and £25 million respectively.

Nevertheless, the lower bound for GVA impacts based on the different sensitivity tests applied is estimated to be £8 million for Helpline only users and £7 million for Helpline and GOV.UK users (based on one year persistence and GVA calculated via the turnover method). Based on annual cost of £2.0 million, this translates to a lower bound return on investment of £8 of economic benefits for every £1 spent on the service (if the complementary impact of GOV.UK is included).<sup>120</sup>

## Reasons for non-use

Table 91 shows the reasons given by non-users (all of whom are established SMEs) for not using the Business Support Helpline. Over two fifths (43 per cent) said that they did not need business support information and about a half (49 per cent) said that they were not aware of the services provided. This supports the existence of information failures as being the prime barrier to usage of the Helpline among SMEs. However, the lack of awareness of the Helpline is not in itself an issue if SMEs are able to satisfy their support needs from other sources. It should be noted (as highlighted in Table 4) that over half of non-users had accessed some other form of business support in the last 12 months.

Non-users with growth ambition in the short to medium term were significantly less likely to say that they did not need business support information (37 per cent, compared to 56 per cent of non-users with no growth ambition) but significantly more likely to say that were not aware of the Helpline (55 per cent compared to 36 per cent of non-users with no growth ambition). This suggests that businesses with growth ambition recognise their need for

<sup>120</sup> (Lowest estimated GVA impact for Helpline only users + Lowest estimated GVA impact for Helpline and GOV.UK users, from Table 90) / Estimated total cost of Helpline = (£8.4m + £6.7m) / £2.3m = £7

business support information but are either going to other sources to access this information or have unmet demand due to lack of awareness about the Helpline.

However, over three quarters (76 per cent) of non-users said that they would consider using the Helpline in the future, suggesting some latent demand for business support.

**Table 91 – Reasons for not using the Business Support Helpline (non-users only)**

	No employees	1-9 employees	10-49 employees	Total
Not aware of services provided	46.8%	53.1%	44.4%	49.4%
Did not need business support information	46.8%	40.7%	38.9%	42.7%
Do not trust the service	3.8%	1.4%	0.0%	1.9%
Don't know/ refused/ N/A	3.8%	2.8%	0.0%	2.5%
No time	2.5%	2.1%	5.6%	2.8%
Prefer other services (please specify)	2.5%	4.8%	16.7%	5.8%
Quality of the service	1.3%	2.8%	0.0%	1.8%
Other (please specify)	1.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	79	145	36	301

*Source: Ecorys survey, responses weighted according to size of business*

Non-users were asked to express what information they think should be provided by the Helpline. Common answers given include general business information (18 per cent), information relating to legislation and regulations (19 per cent) and information and support relating to finance and funding (11 per cent), as shown in Table 92.

**Table 92 – What information or advice would you expect a Helpline service to provide? (Non-users only)**

	No employees	1-9 employees	10-49 employees	Total
Don't know/ N/A/ Refused	49.4%	48.3%	36.1%	45.8%
General business advice/information/guidelines	21.5%	11.7%	30.6%	17.6%
Finance/ funding/ grants information and support	13.9%	5.5%	16.7%	10.5%
In-depth information	13.9%	6.2%	8.3%	8.6%
Legal/ regulations information	8.9%	22.1%	19.4%	18.7%
Mentors/ consultants to answer queries	3.8%	6.9%	8.3%	6.5%
Other	7.6%	10.3%	5.6%	8.5%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	79	145	36	301

Source: Ecorys survey, responses weighted according to size of business

## Conclusions

The evidence from the research conducted with users of the Business Support Helpline, including those who used both the Helpline and GOV.UK in relation to the same query, suggests the following findings:

- The Business Support Helpline answered about 36,000 calls in 2013. About two-thirds of callers were pre-starts. Reflecting the general business population, most of the established businesses using the Helpline had no employees. However, established businesses with between one and nine employees and those which were less than a year old were over-represented among callers to the Helpline when compared with the general business population.
- Women-led, MEG-led businesses, pre-starts and businesses planning to grow are relatively over-represented among users of the Helpline.
- The majority of Helpline users had called the Helpline only once in the past 12 months.
- It is estimated that more than half of all Helpline callers had also used GOV.UK in relation to the same query, in most cases prior to making the call to the Helpline.

People using both the Helpline and GOV.UK tended to find the number for the Helpline on the website and called because they preferred to speak to someone rather than continue to use the website or because they could not find all the information they were looking for on GOV.UK.

- There was a wide variety of reasons for calling the Helpline, with many calling about very specific issues, but help with starting a business and information about funding or finance were the most common reasons.
- Most users found the number of the Helpline on the internet, either directly through a search engine or via GOV.UK, suggesting the importance of the internet for facilitating access to the Helpline. However, some were referred to the Helpline by other providers including Jobcentre Plus and Chambers of Commerce.
- There was evidence that the Helpline is supporting the move to a web based service. Where users had called the Helpline directly (rather than via GOV.UK), the majority felt that their understanding of GOV.UK had improved as a result of their call and they were more likely to use the website as a first port of call in the future.
- Levels of satisfaction among Helpline users were similar to those expressed in the previous evaluation, with more than 60 per cent reporting they were very or fairly satisfied with the service overall, and the majority of users were impressed with the friendliness and helpfulness of the advisors. However, the survey results showed a somewhat less positive picture than the Helpline monitoring data. This is likely to be due to the fact that the monitoring data records satisfaction soon after the call, and therefore does not take into account any subsequent dissatisfaction as a result of not finding or obtaining the required information, grant or scheme from the signposted sources.
- Most users obtained all or part of the information they needed, found the information practical and useful and found it valuable to their business. However, some users expressed dissatisfaction that they were unable to obtain the information they needed or felt that the information provided was not useful. This may reflect that the service is primarily aimed at signposting users to other sources of information or that businesses with more complex or bespoke queries end up calling the Helpline rather than using other sources of support, such as GOV.UK.
- Similarly to GOV.UK, the awareness that the Helpline is a Government service made users more likely to trust the information provided and there is therefore evidence to suggest that the Helpline is addressing the market failure of lack of trust.
- A minority of users reported that their use of the Helpline had enabled them to understand their need for business support (this was particularly the case among early stage pre-starts) or that the Helpline had effectively signposted them to other sources of information. This suggests that, for some, the Helpline (especially in combination with GOV.UK) has had an impact on reducing market failures associated with lack of awareness and lack of value.

- Pre-starts were more likely than established businesses to have taken action after calling the Helpline, in terms of setting up or planning to set up a business. This may reflect the different reasons for contacting the Helpline, with most pre-starts requiring specific help to set up a business while many established businesses were seeking an answer to a specific query that may not have involved improving or growing the business.
- Where users had taken action (including setting up a business), the information received from the Helpline and GOV.UK was generally considered to be an important factor in their decision, particularly for users of both services. Similarly, where users had not set up a business, the information obtained from the Helpline was considered to be an important factor in that decision.
- Although the majority of users felt that they could have accessed the same information from another source, most reported that they were more likely to trust the information received from GOV.UK and Helpline than information received from other sources.
- A minority of users taking action to improve their business reported that these improvements have made, or are expected to make, a substantive change to their business performance (including turnover and employment). While the estimated increase in GVA and employment among all users due both to businesses starting and growing is significant, much of this is expected to be displaced from other firms in the UK.
- Based on the available data from a small number of respondents, it is estimated that over the last 12 months the Helpline may have generated an additional £31 million in GVA and 440 jobs through its impact on creating new businesses and growing existing businesses. Meanwhile, the Helpline used in conjunction with GOV.UK is estimated to have generated an additional £24 million in GVA and 410 jobs. In total, it is estimated that £28 in GVA is created for every £1 spent on the Helpline. Sensitivity analysis, however, suggests that this may be as low as £8 per £1 spent.
- It is estimated that users also saved over £1 million in fees paid to other providers and over £4 million in time due to using the Helpline (including in combination with GOV.UK) although it is assumed that these savings are implicitly included in the overall GVA impacts.
- About half of businesses that had not used the Helpline in the last 12 months reported that they were not aware of the service while about two fifths said that they had no need for business support information.

The Business Support Helpline continues to be an important source of information for SMEs and people wanting to set up a business. It is seen by users and stakeholders as an important complement to GOV.UK as it enables users to ask questions and explore issues in a way that is not possible from browsing online information.

# Social media

## Introduction

This chapter examines the Government's business support social media services, primarily focused on the Business Link Twitter and Facebook accounts.<sup>121</sup> While the subject of social media was covered briefly in the survey, the evidence from this assessment is mainly drawn from qualitative interviews with social media users. As discussed in the methodology section above, these interviewees were self-selected and the typical respondent was a business support provider. Therefore, the views of users interacting with Business Link social media for the purposes of accessing support for their own business may be under-represented. Since the research was undertaken the social media channels have been re-badged to align them to the Business Support Helpline, rather than Business Link.

## Background to (Business Link) social media

### Overall aims and objectives

The Government's ICT Strategy published in 2011 set out the objective to embed social media as a mainstream channel used routinely by Government to engage with citizens and business. The Helpline service has established a social media presence, and this is increasingly used by the advisors to support the telephone service.

Currently, there are no formal strategic or operational objectives regarding the delivery of the Business Support Helpline's social media service. However a draft Business Support Social Media Strategy<sup>122</sup> has recently been developed which draws on research into the behaviour and habits of small businesses and start-ups in regard to both social media access and usage, as well as attitudes and usage of digital technology (specifically mobile and portable devices). The Strategy will aim to drive the development of the Helpline's social media as channels for the delivery of business support where businesses' questions and issues can be addressed and advice can be given, either on a one-to-one or one-to-many basis.

### Delivery approach

The Helpline's social media activity is currently developing in response to the behaviours and needs of customers in terms of how they utilise and respond to social media channels. SMEs are already using the Helpline Facebook and Twitter pages to seek support; this is a demand-led development, which is contained within current support delivery, but which cannot be scaled in its current format.

Social media is currently being used by the Helpline in three ways.

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<sup>121</sup> This has been re-branded to Business Support Helpline social media since the research was conducted.

<sup>122</sup> BIS (2014) *Business Support Helpline Social Media Strategy Draft Outline*

- The first is to raise awareness of business support initiatives including help available to businesses and the benefits of taking it.
- Secondly, social media seeks to engage businesses in the GOV.UK and Helpline support offer: support is provided through the Facebook and Twitter social media channels but is also being used to drive traffic through to the website and Tier 1 or Tier 2 if a business is ready for a deeper level of advice. For example, advisors have already started to answer business questions via Facebook and Twitter and they direct callers to the Helpline if more appropriate. The Helpline advisors reported that the queries coming through the social media channels are broadly similar to telephone queries.
- Thirdly, social media is being used to direct early stage customers such as pre-starts to self-service content such as guides, tools and online services on GOV.UK and elsewhere.

## Profile of social media users

### Number of users

In June 2014, the Business Link Twitter account had approximately 79,000 followers. While many of these followers are individuals or SMEs, the account is also followed by many larger organisations including other providers of services aimed at entrepreneurs and SMEs. Meanwhile, in June 2014 the Business Link Facebook page had approximately 4,800 “likes”. This may underestimate the total number of Business Link social media users as some users will have viewed the Business Link Twitter feed or Facebook page without becoming a follower.

According to the quantitative survey, 1.6 per cent of respondents had used Business Link Facebook in the past 12 months and 0.8 per cent had used Business Link Twitter. Respondents who had used GOV.UK, including those that had used both GOV.UK and the Helpline, were more likely to have also used Business Link social media than non-users or Helpline only users.

While most non-users of Business Link social media said that they would not consider accessing business support through social media in the future, about a quarter of people said that they would consider this, as shown in the following table. Analysis of sub-groups reveals that businesses with growth ambition are significantly more likely to say that they would consider accessing business support through social media in future.

**Table 93 – Would you consider accessing business support through Facebook or Twitter?**

	Helpline and GOV.UK	GOV.UK only	Helpline only	Non-users	Total <sup>123</sup>
No	68.5%	79.2%	67.2%	79.2%	73.0%
Yes	28.2%	20.0%	28.8%	17.6%	24.2%
Don't know/refused	3.3%	0.9%	4.0%	3.2%	2.8%
<i>Unweighted base</i>	511	426	378	301	1616

Source: Ecorys survey, Base = Non-users of Business Link social media, GOV.UK only and non-user responses weighted by business size

## Social media use by business owners

Despite the low use of social media among respondents to the quantitative survey, there is a strong feeling among respondents to the qualitative interviews and stakeholder consultations that social media is becoming increasingly important for business. One stakeholder talked about the “significant turnaround” in how people want to engage with business support: in particular they felt there is now less demand for face to face contact and they thought that younger people in particular now want to establish a relationship through social media. One respondent in the user interviews stated that social media represents “a fundamental shift in how we choose to communicate” and this is a trend not restricted to young people only, while another suggested that businesses using social media currently have a competitive advantage but they felt that it will soon become a necessity for all business people.

As well as providing up-to-date information on topics of interest, social media is a tool for helping people connect to others with similar interests or issues. As articulated by one interviewee, the impact of social media is that it “enables you to have a conversation all the time”. People are no longer restricted to “talking to the person sitting next to you” but can use social media to find others that are interested in talking about the same topic at the same time.

<sup>123</sup> Sample average

Social media can be an important marketing tool which can help businesses to find customers and grow. However, evidence from the interviews suggests that many business people lack the skills and knowledge to exploit these opportunities effectively. Some more experienced social media users reported how they have developed their business through social media:

- One lawyer has won work for his business through social media, describing it as a “warm up act” insofar as it helps to establish first contact and find something in common, but it cannot replace face-to-face contact.
- Another user, running an accountancy practice, uses Twitter to “promote [herself] as a thought leader”, enhancing her reputation and that of her business, rather than to generate leads or win work directly.
- Two users reported having their own blog which they update on a regular basis with posts related to their professional and business interests.

Interviewees stated that the most important social media platforms for business people are Twitter and LinkedIn, although other platforms such as Google Plus are gaining in popularity. Facebook does not tend to be used by business people, although it was suggested in the stakeholder consultations that Facebook may be an important means of engaging with pre-starts. According to the interviews conducted, business people tend to keep their business and personal use of social media completely separate. More heavy social media users tend to use mobile devices (including tablets and smartphones) to interact with Twitter and other social media sites, and many make use of multiple devices so that they are able to engage in different locations and situations.

## Reasons for using Business Link social media

There are a number of ways in which users first came across the BL Twitter account (@BusinessLinkGov).<sup>124</sup> One user, running a care centre for elderly people, found out about BL Twitter through using an internet search engine while another user conducted a strategic search on the subject of business on Twitter itself. Another user started following Business Link after it appeared in the suggestions box in Twitter, based on the other accounts she was following.

The reasons given for using BL Twitter varied although the majority of interviewees consulted used it actively to keep updated on information of benefit to clients’ businesses rather than their own. For example, an HR and training consultant follows Business Link to provide relevant up-to-date information and business support to her clients.

Business Link tends to be one of many Twitter accounts followed by the social media users interviewed. There are a number of other Government accounts that also provide information of interest to SMEs or people wanting to start a business. Business support information is also provided through the tweets of other public, private and voluntary sector

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<sup>124</sup> Since this research was conducted the Twitter address has changed to @businessgov

organisations. Other similar accounts that tend to be followed alongside Business Link include:

- Growth Accelerator (@GrowthAccel)
- National Enterprise Network (@NatEntNet)
- GuardianSmallBiz (@GdnSmallBiz)
- BIS (@bisgovuk)
- HMRC (@HMRCgovuk)
- Local Growth Hubs (for example @BizGrowthHub in Manchester) and LEPs
- Chambers of Commerce (for example @LondonCofC)
- Business networking groups

## How Business Link Twitter is used

Among the interviewees, there was a lot of variation in terms of frequency of use of BL Twitter. One user had only ever looked at it once while another user said that she looks at Twitter almost constantly throughout the day, and would see the majority of BL tweets as they come in. Most users just browse their Twitter feed until they spot something of interest. However, some users actively search Twitter for tweets on a particular subject.

More experienced Twitter users stated that they tend to organise their accounts into lists so that at any one time they are only looking at tweets relating to a particular subject. For example, one user includes Business Link in an “SME list”. Another very experienced user, who herself helps other businesses to engage with social media, views tweets through RSS feeds where Twitter shows tweets according to automated search terms. Therefore, while she does not follow Business Link, she will view BL tweets if they are picked up by these search terms.

Among the interviewees, active users of BL Twitter tend to view tweets that they think will be of particular use for their clients. This includes information about events, relevant funding opportunities, new legislation affecting small businesses or information relating to helping business people engage more with social media. Where they spot something of interest, users will click on links within tweets to find out more information although one experienced user said she prefers to “favourite” tweets that take her interest and then go back to them later when she has time to look at the information properly. Most users interviewed actively retweet information that might be of interest to their own followers, and some gave examples of Business Link tweets that they had retweeted. One user, however, said he prefers to post the link from the tweet directly on to his website, so that it is also accessible for clients that do not use Twitter.

None of the users interviewed had ever replied to a Business Link tweet, took part in a discussion based on a Business Link tweet or posted on the Facebook page although one

user said that he actively views other people's replies to see what other people are saying on a particular issue.

## Opinions about Business Link social media

Opinions about Business Link social media among interviewees were mixed.

A lack of content or frequency of tweets was mentioned as a criticism, although other users felt that the regularity of tweets was good and cautioned against "flooding the timeline" by tweeting too much and putting people off.

Users felt that the content was appropriate and relevant with a good mix of original material and relevant retweets from other Government Departments. However, there was a feeling that Business Link did not stand out from other accounts. One user could not remember any Business Link tweets so concluded that they may have been "bland and boring" while another user described it as "very formal" compared to more interesting and engaging personal tweets, although that is what he would expect from an official Government account. In contrast, another user said that Business Link felt "more human" than other Government accounts. The same user also had a positive opinion about the Business Link Facebook page. He felt that the post congratulating Steve McQueen for winning an Oscar was a good example of interesting and engaging content that is not obviously linked to business.

Users tended to have a positive opinion of the Business Link brand, based on its recent legacy. One user said that it was good to see that the name still lives on in social media, as the brand carries a lot of trust and is known to provide impartial information. Other users, however, expressed confusion as they thought the Business Link brand had been dropped. Two users specifically criticised the lack of consistency in branding. A more consistent brand for all Government business support channels would help people "know where to turn" to find trustworthy and impartial information. Note, however, that since this research was undertaken, Business Link social media has been rebranded as the Business Support Helpline.

Stakeholders were generally positive towards the potential role of social media in providing business support information to businesses. It was highlighted that the Business Link social media service has been very useful for enterprise agencies in advertising business events. Enterprise agencies like to be endorsed by Business Link on social media as it carries high kudos.

## Suggestions for improvements

Users had a number of extensive and varied suggestions as to how the Government's business support social media could be improved.

There was a feeling among both users and stakeholders that the Business Link Twitter feed is too generic and therefore of limited interest to people seeking more specialist information. One user suggested splitting the account into more specialist feeds with a targeted audience. For example, a Twitter account focused just on the needs of the manufacturing sector could be more targeted so that only information of relevance to businesses in that sector would be provided. Another user suggested that similar targeting

could be achieved through maintaining a single account. She commented that users want to know what is going on in their local areas but have to trawl through material relating to other areas. Well-known hashtags could be developed to refer to different geographical areas (or sectors, or other target groups) so that users can filter only tweets containing a hashtag of relevance to them. This maintains the consistency of a national brand (single Twitter account) but allow for a targeting of information.

There was also a strong feeling among many users interviewed that the Government needs to do more to engage with people through social media. This is about emphasising the “social” in social media and distinguishing it from one-way information channels such as websites. While Business Link social media has been designed as a complementary service to the Business Support Helpline, whereby users can submit queries and receive a response from an advisor, this does not appear to be the perception. Rather, it is perceived primarily as an information provider. One user described social media as a “jungle telegraph” or a “conversation that is going on without you”. People are having discussions on social media anyway about any given topic, so the Government should be willing to join in this conversation.

More interaction could be encouraged by proactively inviting people to comment or participate in discussion. One user suggested the introduction of a weekly discussion time on Twitter, where a hashtag discussion on a particular topic is scheduled for a particular time, and people are invited to take part. Another user suggested integrating the Business Link Twitter feed with an “off-line presence”. This could involve a business support advisor spending the day in a particular city, sending out tweets throughout the day but also inviting local business people to meet with him/her in person. Another user felt that communication could become more engaging and personal if tweets came from individuals rather than a formal organisational account.

The qualitative interviews also covered other social media platforms. One user suggested that engagement could be enhanced through the use of Google Hangouts to allow social media users to take part in free webinar sessions. Another user also highlighted the strength of webinars in getting people together with similar interests to facilitate more specialist business support. She felt that the Government’s role is primarily as a facilitator with the actual inputs coming from the participants who can provide peer to peer support to each other. While GOV.UK and the Helpline can only offer a one-way or two-way service, social media offers the opportunity of a multi-user dimension that businesses may find helpful.

A number of users mentioned that Business Link should have a stronger presence on LinkedIn. Unlike Twitter, this is a platform specifically designed for business and professional use and is the natural place that people will go for help with their business. One interviewee said that she tried to join Business Link on LinkedIn but had no response and was put off by the lack of activity in the group.

Users stressed that fully making the most of social media may involve significant investment. One user suggested that high-end software could cost in the region of £10,000 per month although another user mentioned that there are tools available to help measure the return on investment in social media.

There was some suggestion, both from stakeholders and users, that the Government needs to be engaging with the “grass roots” and asking people what they want from social media before investing further in its development.

## Conclusions

It is difficult to make definitive conclusions about the use and effectiveness of Business Link social media due to the small and potentially biased sample of users consulted in this research. Bearing in mind that the views expressed may not be representative of all users, the following points summarise the findings from the qualitative research.

- Social media was felt to be becoming an increasingly important channel for communicating and engaging with business people. However, although Business Link social media<sup>125</sup> has around 80,000 followers on Twitter and just under 5,000 Facebook likes, the evidence from the survey suggests that Business Link social media is having limited reach within the business community and the most active users are those that are already well engaged with the business support market.
- Twitter was considered to be the most important social media platform for business people and, alongside LinkedIn, is the place people would go to keep up to date with new information. Some experts suggest that Facebook is well used by individuals and may have an important role in engaging pre-starts but is less well used by established businesses.
- Among the interviewees, the most active users tend to view Business Link tweets alongside tweets from other Government services as a means to keep up-to-date with relevant news and developments, including events, funding opportunities and policy changes. It appears to be less used as a tool for acquiring support or information on specific issues faced by businesses at any point in time.
- A number of interviewees report that they actively share content from the Business Link Twitter feed, helping the information to be spread among a wider audience than just direct followers.
- Opinions of Business Link Twitter vary among social media users interviewed. It is considered favourably when compared against other Government social media accounts but is still considered by some to be bland and impersonal. There was a strong feeling among some users that the Government should do more to use social media to engage with its audience in an interactive conversation rather than using it as an information sharing platform.
- Some other users interviewed felt that the information provided through Business Link Twitter is too generic and more could be done to make tweets and postings more targeted and relevant to a specific audience.

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<sup>125</sup> This has been re-branded to Business Support Helpline social media since the research was conducted.

# Conclusions

The findings from this research suggest that there is considerable demand for business support, particularly from pre-starts and established businesses that are less than a year old or are aspiring to grow.

Although many users reported accessing GOV.UK regularly, estimates from the survey are that just 8.5 per cent of businesses have used GOV.UK in the last year (a third of the proportion that used to access the old Business Link website). The Helpline received 36,000 calls over this period.

Approximately half of non-users are accessing other sources of business support without being channelled through central Government provision.

Between a third and half of non-users were not aware of GOV.UK or the Helpline. Very little marketing has been undertaken to promote GOV.UK and the Helpline and the majority of users find out about the services from internet search results.

Approximately two fifths of non-users of GOV.UK and Helpline do not feel that they need business support.

Businesses at different stages of development may typically seek different types of support. Pre-starts and businesses with one to nine employees are more likely than other businesses to use the Helpline.

There are some clear differences in the types of query between users of GOV.UK and users of the Helpline. The typical GOV.UK user sought a specific piece of factual information, in particular information relating to employing people, tax or legal issues or used the website to undertake administrative activities. Many users reported finding other useful information they had not specifically been looking for when accessing the site.

The reasons for calling the Helpline were more diverse but were most commonly related to starting a business and funding. Many people chose to call the Helpline having first searched on GOV.UK and not finding all the information they were looking for or because they preferred to speak to a person about their query. These individuals often had a more bespoke or complex query where the required information was less easy to find on the website.

There is clear complementarity between GOV.UK and the Helpline. More than half of Helpline callers also used GOV.UK in relation to the same query, in most cases prior to calling the Helpline. The Helpline provides an opportunity for GOV.UK users to explore their issues further with a real person and have their specific questions answered

The evidence shows that Helpline is supporting the transition to a web-based service. The majority of Helpline users who had not used GOV.UK before reported that their understanding of GOV.UK had improved as a result of their call to the Helpline and reported they would be more likely to use GOV.UK as their first port of call in the future.

The importance of the internet for facilitating access to business support is also clear. Many users of both services reported that they expected to access business support on the internet in the future, approximately one in five businesses had accessed other sources of business support on the internet already and the majority accessed GOV.UK and Helpline after finding results high on a search engine, or for many Helpline users, after having found the number on GOV.UK.

Satisfaction levels with GOV.UK and the Helpline were good and have not changed significantly since previous evaluations, although rates of satisfaction with the Helpline reported in the survey are lower than those provided in the Helpline monitoring data. While the majority of SMEs using GOV.UK and the Helpline have been able to access the information that they were looking for and found the information practical, useful and valuable to their business, a minority of Helpline users found that they have not received the information they wanted as a result of their call. This is perhaps related to the greater complexity of queries handled by the Helpline.

The findings suggest that both GOV.UK and the Helpline have a role in addressing the market failures associated with sub-optimal usage of business support. For example, most users of both services reported high levels of trust in the services. Most users also reported that they are more likely to trust the information they received from GOV.UK and/or the Helpline than from non-Government sources as the information provided is generally perceived to be official and impartial.

There is also evidence from the survey that some users are more likely to value business support and are more likely to know how to access business support as a result of using GOV.UK or the Helpline. These impacts seem to be stronger for individuals using both GOV.UK and the Helpline than for those using just one of these services.

Where users had taken action (including setting up a business or making improvements to the business), the information received from GOV.UK and the Helpline was generally considered to be an important factor in their decision.

Where established businesses had taken action after using GOV.UK or the Helpline, the majority did not expect to experience any change in business performance as a result of the improvements made. However, among those that did, the impact was typically judged to be significant.

The economic impact estimates presented in this study are based on data from a small number of respondents and need to be treated with caution. However, based on the available data, it is estimated that over the last 12 months, at least £17 million additional Gross Value Added (GVA) has been generated from GOV.UK only users, at least £8 million from Helpline only users and at least £7 million from users of both services combined. When compared to the relatively low cost of delivering these services, these positive estimates of GVA suggest good value for money.

Users of the Business Link social media included in the qualitative research, who were predominantly business support professionals, felt that social media will increasingly replace traditional media as the preferred method of communication and interaction for businesses, particularly as a first point of contact. However, evidence from the survey

suggests that Business Link social media is currently having limited reach within the business community.

There are opportunities for the Government to exploit social media technology to expand its reach and develop new interactive approaches to ensure that SMEs and people wanting to start a business are effectively signposted to the information and support that will help them.



# Annex One: Aims and Objectives of Business Support Helpline

The Helpline's role in supporting the Department's enterprise objectives in 2011 was to:

- Provide information and guidance to around 600,000 business contacts (via 400,000 inbound calls, 150,000 emails and 10,000 outbound calls from advisers providing in depth support) each year.
- Bridge gaps in service from the withdrawal of face-to-face support until new on-line services are delivered.
- Help deliver the transition of the existing circa million Business Link full service customers to a primarily web based service by supporting web use and encouraging more businesses to use the website first.

The specific objectives and benefits of the Helpline and explanations of how benefits will be delivered are set out in the table below. This is based on the BIP Monitoring and Evaluation Plan and Business Improvement Contact Centre (BICC) additional terms and conditions.

**Table A1 – Objectives and benefits: Business Support Helpline**

Objectives	Benefits	How benefits will be delivered?
<b>Manage transition to digital services</b>	Manage the transition to GOV.UK as the primary channel for advice by improving the accuracy of web use for those with access to the web and encouraging more businesses to use the website first	Provision of basic telephone based support to callers to navigate and find the information they need on GOV.UK
<b>Improve the provision of information and advice to SMEs</b>	Improve the effectiveness of the GOV.UK website	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	Help users identify specific information on support provided by the public and private sector including specific local 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>Ensure support is available to the 20% of businesses who</b>	Providing detailed information and advice to those who do not have access to the internet.	Provision of telephone based services to those without access to internet or other vulnerable groups using

Objectives	Benefits	How benefits will be delivered?
<b>cannot access the internet</b>		information from the Knowledge Bank and GOV.UK
<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 usage amongst protected groups will be monitored

Source: *Business Improvement Programme Monitoring and Evaluation Strategy*

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 and (ii) manages demand for access to the more expensive business advice. The KPIs are set out in the table below.

**Table A2 – Business Support Helpline 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 17 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.
<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. 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 then 10,000 outbound calls to be scheduled and completed per annum (based on key triggers).

Source: *Business Improvement Contact Centre (BICC) Additional Terms & Conditions*

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BIS/14/1192