Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy

RESEARCH

Business Support Helpline

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Contents

Executive Summary

The Business Support Helpline, provides a service which is complementary to the business support information on the government website, GOV.UK, which aims to provide straightforward information on starting and running a business that may not be available elsewhere, or is not easily accessible from other sources. The Helpline provides bespoke information and signposting to respond to queries that businesses could not answer with the website alone, using a variety of communication channels. This research uses 70 interviews with business owners throughout England, from a range of sizes and sectors and a diverse range of enquiry reasons, to gather evidence on opinions and perceptions relating to their reasons for use of the Helpline *after* using GOV.UK, and the impact the Helpline's support has had on the business. It also identifies gaps and makes recommendations for improvements to the content on GOV.UK, in order to provide more effective information provision through digital channels and, in particular, information aimed at supporting start-ups.

Awareness of GOV.UK and helpline. Most users found GOV.UK and the Helpline through internet searches, although a small number had been referred to GOV.UK and the Helpline from other organisations such as the Citizen's Advice Bureau, the Prince's Trust or accountants, or encountered the Helpline via other sources, such as a Growth Hub website. Most had little prior awareness of the Helpline's remit although most interviewees were aware, in at least a vague way, that GOV.UK was intended to be the main portal for interaction with the Government and that would contain some business-focused information. They often assumed the Helpline was linked to the specific government website on which they encountered it. They had encountered little, if any, specific information about the purpose of the Helpline or what it provided in detail.

Preferred channel. The majority of users cited telephone contact as their preferred channel for communication with the Helpline. Webchat was ranked second, substantially less popular that telephone, but much higher than email or social media communications. Telephone was thought to facilitate a more in-depth conversation to fully explain the user's needs.

Reason for using the Helpline after using GOV.UK. Callers cited one or more of six main reasons why they called the Helpline after using GOV.UK:

1. Users could not (readily) locate the information they required on the GOV.UK website.
2. Users wanted to ensure that the information which they received from GOV.UK was not only correct, but also that they had interpreted it correctly in how it applied to their specific situation.
3. Users wished to ensure that their search for particular information (e.g. relevant or local support) was comprehensive.
4. Users had a preference for finding solutions through talking rather than using digital technology.
5. Users were not particularly ICT-literate or business-literate, as both worlds are new to them.

6. Users considered that their query was so specific or complex that it required a 'conversation with a human being' to fully explain their needs. This is distinct from (4) above, as it is more concerned with need than personal preference – users considered that GOV.UK would not have been able to deliver such specific information.

There were four *types* of calls, relating to the information users were seeking:

1. Users with simple factual queries, including interpretation for their situation of information on GOV.UK
2. Users seeking simple but specific types of support (e.g. searching for finance relevant to their needs which was specific in some way – e.g. geographically, sectorally – that they felt the existing tools did not cover adequately)
3. Users with more in-depth support needs, precisely specified (e.g. 'what steps do I need to take to register a business and set up for tax?')
4. Users with more in-depth support needs, but a lack of precision about the support required (e.g. 'How do I start a business?')

Meeting expectations. Users were generally very positive about the Helpline, and the support it delivered, although few had initial preconceptions, beyond hoping that the Helpline would successfully answer their query - although it was not uncommon that users also assumed or hoped that the Helpline would be able to offer more advice and guidance that it is able to.

Impact of helpline. Users reported four main types of impact on the business.

1. Just under half reported that they had improved their business knowledge, strategy or operations, and were better placed to achieve their business aims in the future, although had no tangible impact on the business as yet
2. Approximately a third resolved a technical issue, such as establishing whether their interpretation of tax regulations was correct in their situation, enabling them to trade compliantly, or continue trading at all
3. Around a quarter had more tangible impacts, such as obtaining finance, or increasing sales or turnover
4. Approximately a fifth reported no impact, because there was no relevant support for their needs, the advice or signposting was too generic or did not match their needs, or they had temporarily stopped working on start-up.

The vast majority of interviewees reported that the Helpline supported them in providing information that they probably would not have found themselves, accelerated the process of finding information that they may have been able to find in time, or provided confirmation as to how the information they found applied to their business situation.

Although most users were uncertain how precisely they would use the Helpline and GOV.UK in the future, most would be happy to use them again, as returning customers if they had a new need. They understood better how to make good use of GOV.UK after using the Helpline.

The research produced six suggestions for enhancing the effectiveness and usage of GOV.UK:

1. Improvements to organising and searching for information.
2. Enhancements to the presentation of information, making it more dynamic and customisable.
3. Enhancing the way the content is presented in terms of comprehension, such as using less obscure terminology or jargon.
4. Ensure the content is maintained so it is as up to date and locally specific as possible, and older or archived links are more difficult to retrieve unless specifically searched for.
5. Managing more effectively the information provided on GOV.UK about the Helpline and other ways of communicating with the government
6. Encouraging users to access additional information: GOV.UK business content should help to address the fact that users 'don't know what they don't know' through prompting, links, signposting and guidance.

Added value of Helpline. Compared to GOV.UK, Helpline staff can more effectively

1. Interpret requests, and direct callers to the page required.
2. Interpret the information presented on GOV.UK to ensure it applies correctly to the user's situation.
3. Provide up-to-date information about local services or time-limited schemes.
4. Help pre-starts without detailed ideas for their business, directing them to the most relevant information.
5. Help users to put together the 'jigsaw' of business support in terms to give them a better overview of where to go for the most relevant support,

1 Introduction

1.1 Policy background

A key Government objective is to promote growth in the UK through making it easier for businesses to set up and grow. In 2014, small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) accounted for more than 99 per cent of businesses, approximately 60 per cent of private sector employment and about 48 per cent of private sector turnover.[1] SMEs are vital to the economy and make a disproportionately large contribution to job creation.

Evidence from the Small Business Survey[2] suggests that businesses which seek external information and advice are more likely to grow. However, approximately 50 per cent of businesses do not use such external support. Research shows that the use of business support is affected by market failures[3]; in particular, related to imperfect information:

- businesses find it difficult to place a value on the benefits of support, especially prior to receiving it, which means they are reluctant to pay for it
- it is also difficult for businesses to judge the competence and trustworthiness of external information or advice.
- furthermore, businesses find it difficult to locate suitable information and advice

Research on the barriers to take-up and use of business support finds a high level of unmet demand, as would be implied by the market failures above.[4] The provision of business support from BIS aims to ameliorate these failures, with both GOV.UK and the Business Support Helpline key components in that provision.

1.1.1 GOV.UK

The *tools and guidance for business* or *business support* section of GOV.UK, launched in 2012, aims to provide straightforward information on starting and running a business that may not be available elsewhere, or is not easily accessible from other sources, and which meets users' needs.

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[1] BIS (2013) *Business Population Estimates for the UK and Regions 2015*, Statistical Release, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/467443/bpe_2015_statistical_release.pdf

[2] BIS (2013) *Growth special report*, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/204183/bis-13-883-small-business-survey-2012-growth-special-report.pdf

[3] Centre for Enterprise and Economic Development Research and BMG Research (2011) *Research to understand the barriers to take up and use of business support*, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32250/11-1288-research-barriersto-use-of-business-support.pdf

[4] 5 Centre for Enterprise and Economic Development Research and BMG Research (2011) *Research to understand the barriers to take up and use of business support,* https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32250/11-1288-research-barriersto-use-of-business-support.pdf

This provision is a component of the Government's Digital Strategy[5]. The Single Government Domain offers authoritative and trusted information while minimising duplication across departments and focusing on user needs, rather than departmental structures, which should aid navigation. The internet is increasingly significant for businesses accessing support information, and simple access to joined-up support online is thought to be crucial to successful provision.[6]

1.1.2 Business Support Helpline

The Business Support Helpline, launched in 2011, provides a service which is complementary to GOV.UK. It provides bespoke information and signposting to respond to queries that businesses could not answer with the website alone, using a variety of communication channels: the most common method is via telephone, but the Helpline also offers communication via webchat, email and social media. The Helpline is a national service offering two tiers of support. Tier 1 provides light-touch support for all callers, focusing on signposting to appropriate source of information, including GOV.UK. Tier 2 provides more in-depth support for enquiries fulfilling certain trigger criteria (e.g. business being in crisis).

The previous evaluation of business support on GOV.UK and the Business Support Helpline[7] was based on a quantitative survey, supplemented by a relatively small amount of qualitative research. The current research is entirely based on qualitative data; it makes use of interviews to probe customers for opinions and perceptions relating to their reasons for use of the Helpline *after* using GOV.UK, and the impact the Helpline's support has had on the business. It also identifies gaps on GOV.UK, in order to provide more effective information provision through digital channels – in particular, information aimed at supporting start-ups.

This encompasses

(a) assessing the reasons for the caller's approach to the Helpline, both in terms of following use of the GOV.UK website and in more general terms (e.g. because they prefer that method of contact, or more concrete 'push' reasons e.g. lack of internet access, could not locate required information);

(b) assessing the perceptions of callers of the Helpline and its relationship to the GOV.UK website e.g. why did business owners approach GOV.UK in the first place rather than other sources of support/information? What are the alternatives, if the Helpline was not available?;

(c) assessing the opinions of owners about the call – was it useful? Were they asked appropriate questions? Were they appropriately signposted? What was not provided that should have been?;

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[5] Cabinet Office (2013) *Government Digital Strategy: December 2013*,
   https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-digital-strategy/government-digital-strategy
[6] 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-betterbusiness-helping-small-firms.pdf
[7] Ecorys (2014) *Evaluation of the Business Support Helpline and GOV.UK,* BIS Research Paper no 193.
   https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/381818/bis-14-1192-evaluation-of-the-business-support-helpline-and-gov-uk.pdf

(d) assessing actions that business owners have taken in response to the information and support provided by the Helpline , and what the outcome has been for the business (i.e. are they provided with appropriate support, and how do they go on to act on it?); and

(e) how the Helpline and GOV.UK could be more effective in the future, including how it relates to GOV.UK – e.g. in what areas does it perform well, is it complementary to the GOV.UK service?

1.2 Aims

To summarise, the aims and objectives to the research are:

- To understand in more depth the reasons businesses contact the Helpline after accessing GOV.UK, with a view to enhancing content on the website, reducing the need to contact the Helpline and refining its services in the light of evidence on where it provides best value in complementing the online content.

- To contribute to the review of content on GOV.UK, including identification of gaps and relevance of content to various business seeking information on particular issues e.g. businesses starting up, growing or looking to accelerate In particular, the review will examine the starting a business content in this context.

- To inform the discussions on the future development of the Helpline offer, such as its role in the business support landscape, its complementarity to GOV.UK, and wider appeal to different groups of business owners/entrepreneurs.

2 Methodology and sample

This research makes use of a qualitative methodology to assess both how the service has functioned in delivering its remit, but also elicit in depth responses from business owners about why they have made use of the service, how it fits with other elements of the business support landscape (both at national and local level, and with GOV.UK in particular), where support gaps are and if the helpline is the most effective method for filling those gaps. The research team conducted 70 in-depth telephone interviews in March and April, each lasting approximately 20 minutes, with users who had previously accessed GOV.UK. For context, there are approximately 3,500 inbound contacts to the Helpline each month, around 30% which come from the GOV.UK website. The main reason for customers contacting the Helpline after visiting GOV.UK (49% of this group in October-December 2015) is because they could not find the information they were looking for. In addition, approximately 95% of users state that they have taken action after speaking to the helpline or are planning to take action

The interviews did not aim to be completely representative of all those who called the Helpline after using GOV.UK, but covered a broad spectrum of types of business (size, stage, age geographical location and reason for enquiring to the Helpline). The research team had access to the database of calls made to the Helpline in late 2015 and early 2016: this enabled a rough sample frame to be constructed, consisting of stage of business (pre-start, start-up and most established businesses) and recorded reason for enquiry; the team also aimed for a good geographical spread of interviews. The length of time since accessing the Helpline (3-4 months on average) should have allowed for some businesses to be able to report impacts from the support. Size of business was not recorded in the database, so could not be used to construct sample criteria. Similarly, the previous evaluation noted an over-representation of minority groups among Helpline users, but the ethnicity of callers is also not recorded, so also could not be used.

All interviewees had been recorded as having previously visited the GOV.UK website, to examine why customers contacted the Helpline *after* using GOV.UK (e.g. they could not find relevant content, or did not fully understand the content). The sample aimed for approximately half of the interviewees being pre-starts of new start-ups, reflecting the nature of the actual caller base. However, the proportion of new businesses or pre-starts in the sample was purposely skewed lower than the actual proportion of approximately two-thirds, to cover as far as possible the extensive range of reasons for calling among more established businesses (most pre-start businesses called for the same reason, namely information on starting a business), and identifying commonalities. The achieved sample is shown below.

The research also included a workshop with Helpline staff, approximately halfway through the interviews, to help contextualise the initial findings and give pointers to follow up in the remaining interviews.

2.1 Sample

The tables below show that the interviews achieved a good spread of geographical location (Table 1), reason for calling and age of business, including pre-starts (Table 2) and size and sector of business (Table 3)

Table 1   Region of interviewees

Region	Interviews
East	8
East Midlands	4
London	10
North East	7
North West	7
South East	6
South West	12
West Midlands	10
Yorkshire & Humber	6
Grand Total	**70**

Table 2   Interviewees: age of business and reason for calling

	Pre-start	Start up (<1 yr)	1 - 3 yrs	3 - 10 yrs	> 10 years	Total
Starting a business	17	2				19 _27.1%_
Finance/funding est. businesses	1	2	3	1	1	8 _11.4%_
Start-up finance/grants	5	2				7 _10.0%_
HMRC/tax		5	1	1		7 _10.0%_
Legal structure		4	1		1	6 _8.6%_
Planning for business growth	1		2		1	4 _5.7%_
Business in crisis		1	1		1	3 _4.3%_
Late payment/ payment practices		2	1			3 _4.3%_
Other reasons	1	6	2	1	3	13 _18.6%_
Total	25 _35.7%_	24 _34.3%_	11 _15.7%_	3 _4.3%_	7 _10.0%_	70

Note: shows main reason for enquiry as recorded in call database, rather than the reason the business noted to the research team in the interview; 'other reasons' covers business planning, closing a business, franchising, HR & recruitment, innovation & IP, international import/export, premises/property, regulations, Russian sanctions, website & IT.

Table 3   Interviewees: sector and size of business

Employment	Pre-start	1-4	5-9	10-19	20-49	Grand Total
Agriculture, Forestry and fishing	1					1
Manufacturing	3	1		1		5
Construction		2				2
Retail/wholesale etc	6	13	1			20
Financial and business services	9	12	2	0	1	24
Other services	4	10	1	1	0	16
Unsure*	2					2
Total	25	38	4	2	1	70

Note: employment includes owners and partners
* two interviewees were unsure about the precise sector in which they were planning to start a business

2.2 Analysis

A data mapping matrix was constructed, and analysis conducted using NVivo software to organise, categorise and code the evidence, and facilitate retrieval of the required evidence by specific topics or areas, or characteristics of businesses and owners.

3 Analysis

3.1 Awareness of GOV.UK and helpline

The majority of users found support from GOV.UK through internet searches, either relating to a specific query (e.g. is private swimming tuition VAT-exempt[8]) or looking for support in a more general way (e.g. advice on how to start a business). In most cases, this has led to GOV.UK either directly or indirectly (e.g. via a Growth Hub site), which is where users tend to locate the Helpline phone number. A relatively small number of users had been referred to GOV.UK by other organisations, either with or without mention of the Helpline as an additional source of support.

Most interviewees had not previously been specifically aware of the Helpline's existence, and had either 'stumbled' across the phone number, or deliberately sought out contact details. The Helpline focus groups confirmed findings from the interviews that many callers are not necessarily aware of the stated purpose of the Helpline. Most do not attempt to search for guidance as to the purpose of the Helpline, and are more concerned that the first impressions indicate that the Helpline is likely to provide an answer to a wide range of queries: users are highly solution-focused. As such, many come across the phone number without registering exactly what it might be or might provide, other than government-backed advice and guidance. They tend to assume – given the non-specific name – that it is geared towards providing support on the (broad) issues which are most relevant to the website on which they found the phone number. For example, if the number is linked from a page dealing with imports, many callers will assume that they are ringing a helpline dedicated to providing advice and information on importing issues e.g. UKTI.

3.1.1 Preferred channel

As the list for reasons to use the Helpline rather than GOV.UK indicates (Section 3.2 below), users particularly value the Helpline for the way it can facilitate nuanced interaction and explanation, and reassurance that the user is going about things the 'right' way. As such, users generally rated telephone more highly than the other channels of communication, which were less conducive towards fostering an in-depth conversation, as well as less immediate.

Social media. Users would be happy to use Facebook and Twitter to receive notices – e.g. future events, changes to regulations. However, most would not consider using social media to receive support in a similar manner to the Helpline, as they regard it as more open, and more suitable for broadcasting information to quite a wide circle of contacts (e.g. advertising a business), rather than one-to-one support. This applies regardless of the age of the user; furthermore, many older users stated that they did not use social media at all.

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[8] All examples of searches are taken from user interviews.

E-mail. Users were happy to initiate a contact via e-mail, and were very positive towards receiving links and a summary of the support received via this channel, as that collects all relevant information to be easily retrieved and revisited at a later date. However, for the actual interaction with the Helpline, users considered that e-mail was substantially inferior to the telephone, as it did not lead to a real-time conversation, it could be quite laborious – and involve to-and-fro exchanges - to establish exactly what the user required, and may lead to misunderstandings without the Helpline asking for clarification of need.

Webchat. Webchat was the most preferred alternative channel - although still ranked below telephone as an imperfect substitute. This channel has similar disadvantages to e-mail, although less marked as it is closer to real-time (while still allowing the user to multitask while the conversation is ongoing), but the telephone still allows for a greater degree of nuance and allows the user to explain their query in more depth to aid understanding. Some users noted that they would be worried that they were chatting to an automated response 'bot', as seen on some commercial websites, rather than to an actual person. Several users summed up well the typical feelings about webchats as that they would use it if telephone support was not available, or if they had fairly simple needs, but would usually prefer the telephone.

3.2 Reason for using the Helpline after using GOV.UK

There were six main reasons why users opted to call the Helpline, after using GOV.UK, as revealed by both the interviews and the Helpline focus groups. Their motives were clearly often inter-related, rather than mutually exclusive – for example, users having a complex query, and wishing to check the application of the answer to their situation, or users less ICT-literate who get frustrated by the search engine on the website. Therefore, users tended to indicate one or (more likely) a combination of the general reasons listed below for calling the Helpline, with the precise mix of reasons depending on the exact information sought (see below for a typology of queries by nature of information sought), in combination with their personal preferences:

a) *The user had a preference for finding solutions through talking rather than using digital technology* (not only websites, but also via emails and webchats). A number of interviewees stated that this stemmed from their slightly older age, although the wide cross-section of users citing this reason implies it is more connected to personal preference than being a younger 'digital native'. Some younger users noted that their preference may seem unusual to other people of their generation - one noted that 'it might seem a bit old-fashioned, but I prefer talking to people' – even though that was not borne out by the research. In fact, this was the most common reason to be given as to why they chose the Helpline, although it was often combined with one or more of the responses below.

b) *Users could not (readily) locate the information they required on the GOV.UK website.* Users did not necessarily explicitly state that the information was *not* on the website, but that they *could not find* it: around twenty users noted that they had given up in frustration after the website did not deliver the relevant information sufficiently rapidly. Helpline staff said this may be related to the quirks in the search engine, which sometimes requires overly precise wording to locate particular items. Around ten users noted similarly that the website contained 'too much' information, such that it could take a long time to plough through the apparently relevant items, and extract the parts that were most appropriate for their situation. In particular, this

applied to information such as funding availability,, which could produce a large number of potential hits, of which very few may be directly relevant.

In these situations, users appear to make the rational decision that asking for help which directly relates to their need is quicker than continuing to search GOV.UK in the hope that they will locate relevant material.

c) *Users wanted to ensure that the information which they received from GOV.UK was not only correct, but also that they had interpreted it correctly in how it applied to their specific situation.* Several interviewees (all established businesses) noted that they did not doubt that the information was correct, but that it was too 'generic' for their needs. There was no apparent way – in most cases – to use a more interactive approach (e.g. a flowchart) to gain the more nuanced and specific answers they required.

There was a widespread sentiment that users did not wish to breach regulations and risk incurring negative consequences in the future, or that they wanted to 'do things right' from the start if a pre-start. This applied not only to ensuring that their own interpretation of the information on GOV.UK was correct, but also to situations where they could not fully understand the information presented there, and wished to access a layman's version, free of jargon or 'legal speak', as one put it.

This applied in particular to businesses checking a legal or tax-related point, and to pre-starts, for whom the jargon could seem 'impenetrable' (Helpline FG1), as they lacked the business experience necessary to understand how the information on GOV.UK applied in their case, or even to understand some of the technical terminology at all.

A good example of this issue (trying to ensure compliance, but encountering difficulties in applying specifics) was provided by the Helpline focus group – they considered that the license finder works well, but there may be something that 'falls through the cracks' i.e. that the business does not quite fit any of the options given by the tool restricting progress, and leading to the need to seek advice.

d) *Users wished to ensure that their search for particular information (e.g. relevant or local support) was comprehensive* i.e. they rang to ensure that they had not *missed* support that would be useful. This relates to the above point (a): users do not fully trust the search engine to return all relevant items, and they cannot be sure that they have located them through browsing GOV.UK. This particularly applied to users wishing to exhaustively research a particular topic, and especially advice on starting a business – a number of users stated that they had called the Helpline to ensure that they had not missed any support which could help them learn better how to most effectively set up a business, and to accelerate the process if possible.

e) *Some callers noted that they are not particularly ICT-literate or business-literate, as the world of both are new to them* – an example given by Helpline staff (and which also applied almost exactly to an interviewee) was an older worker in a manual occupation made redundant and seeking information on start-up, but insufficiently familiar with how GOV.UK operates to make best use of it. In these situations, the Helpline staff are skilled at gauging users' levels of knowledge and skill, and interpreting the information on the website in a way with which users are comfortable.

f) *Users considered that their query was so specific or complex that it required a 'conversation with a human being' to fully explain their needs*; information on the web and GOV.UK in particular, was though by many to be 'too generic', since it was perceived to be targeted at businesses requiring simple or straightforward answers, rather than their own problem which may only apply to small number of businesses.

This point clearly overlaps with (a) and (c) here, but users citing this reason stressed that they were comfortable with ICT use and/or business technicalities, and their call was more about *need* than personal preference i.e. they considered that their need was so specific or niche or it required a complex, often technical response, that it was highly unlikely that it would be found on GOV.UK, and they required the nuance and flexibility afforded by a conversation to fully explain what they were searching for.

Therefore, while there are an extremely wide range of reasons for seeking support (see Section 2.1), a more useful distinction for the purposes of this research would be a fourfold categorisation of broader types of reason for calling, which stem from a combination of one or more of the reasons listed above. One interviewee provided a good example of how a number of these factors (in this case, elements of every factor) may combine to push users into calling the Helpline after GOV.UK:

> *We've all worked in call centres before, and it was to do with P45s, corporation tax, that sort of thing. I tried to google things – there are so many different things... like the stuff on GOV.UK, but it didn't answer my queries directly, didn't give answers in black and white, I'm thinking is that right for me? It's the first time I've set a business up and I could be really naive... and maybe I'm old school, but i like talking to people!*
>
> *[Start-up recruitment agency]*

Furthermore, as noted above, the precise reasons for calling the Helpline after using GOV.UK depends partly on personal preference, and partly on the nature of the information sought. A broad typology of the four types of queries (as indicated by interviewees) relating to type of information sought is shown below:

(i)   simple factual queries, including interpretation for their situation of information on GOV.UK
(ii)   seeking simple but specific types of support (e.g. searching for finance relevant to their needs)
(iii)   more in-depth support needs, precisely specified (e.g. 'what steps do I need to take to register a business and pay tax?')
(iv)   more in-depth support needs, but a lack of precision about the support required (e.g. 'How do I start a business?')

It should be reiterated at this point that the Helpline *cannot* give advice *per se*, although users (especially those who have less experience with support) often initially assume that it *can*; in particular, this applies to those in categories (iii) and (iv) above. When informed of the Helpline's remit, though, most users understood why it does not give advice, appreciating that this would risk the Helpline straying into territory of suggesting how they should run their own business, or recommending particular private sector providers.

On the other hand, it is also fair to say that users often treat the Helpline as a *sounding board*, seeking to gain reassurance that they are managing their business in the correct manner and fully compliant with tax and other regulations (which the Helpline can provide factual information on), as opposed to using the most favourable strategy and operational procedures for the future development of the business (which it cannot). This distinguishes the Helpline from GOV.UK: it is implicitly expected that the users of GOV.UK

have a good idea of what they are searching for, but the evidence from the research shows that whereas they often initially *think* they know what their business requires, they very often do not know in its entirety what is needed, and have not clearly expressed it in GOV.UK terms to enable them to locate the information, or have not considered the further implications that may arise from finding an answer. The Helpline, though, can provide suggestions for the type of factual information they could provide to support the business in a given situation i.e. the Helpline often receives somewhat loose or vague queries, for which GOV.UK has proven less useful for retrieving information. It is worth noting that users *can* 'inadvertently' find information on GOV.UK in terms of fulfilling a need that they may not have realised they had – although they would prefer clarity and simplicity in terms of finding the information they needed.

It is therefore not uncommon, according to Helpline staff, that what is initially assumed to be a simple question becomes a more involved discussion, as the response from the Helpline leads to further questions about implications. For example, the Helpline staff noted that 'people don't know what they don't know...some businesses may stumble on growth but don't really know what it involves'; this would lead to discussion and questions about other areas. The Helpline *cannot* tell the user where to go or what to do following some disruptive event such as sudden unexpected growth, but *can* supply factual information relating to the possible situations a business may encounter in the future.

Commonly, businesses were extremely positive about this:

> *Other [support services] weren't that helpful, so I had low expectations, but the lady was enthusiastic, friendly and helpful... she highlighted things I would have never thought about and I probably wouldn't have found them on the web - she knew there was no funding through [Agency A], for instance. If I hadn't talked to her, I would have just had to muddle through regardless.*
> *[Pre-start clothing manufacturer]*

Equally, however, a small minority were adamant that they only wanted an answer to their specific question, rather than any other information. As long as the original query was answered, it was difficult to generalise about the caller's reaction to the Helpline offering other support, as it largely depended on their attitudes towards how proficient they considered themselves as a manager of their own business.

Some, especially those in typology (iii) and (iv) above - and particularly pre-starts - were welcoming of, or were even seeking in the first place, this 'hand-holding'. The Helpline provided reassurance that they were heading in the right direction, particularly through confirmation that they had gathered all the information they required and had not missed something important. According to the Helpline, it is not uncommon for pre-starts, in particular, to initially contact the Helpline to gain some general support, and recontact subsequently when they have a more specific enquiry.

3.2.1 Recall of Helpline support

In terms of the value of the Helpline, and the recall of the process, it is worth noting a point which emerged during the recruitment and interview process. As recruitment continued, a lack of recall of the Helpline – and, in many cases, GOV.UK – became noticeable. Users

were unsure from where they had sourced support, and (quite often) could barely remember the actual call, if at all. Helpline staff, backed up by some brief questioning of those lacking recall, suggested this was especially marked in two scenarios:

1. Pre-starts attempting to amass information and advice to enable them to start an effective business. This may entail multiple phone calls and face-to-face meetings, in addition to scouring the internet, attending courses etc, meaning that they may not be able to remember the details of any particular encounter or website, the support they received, or its value. As several interviewees, and Helpline staff, noted, 'it all blurs into one'. This does not mean that the government support is not effective, but simply that it is inherently difficult to distinguish different sources, all of which will have contributed towards start-up.

This issue may be exacerbated by the Helpline having a slightly nondescript or vague name, and pre-starts may remember better the organisation which referred them (e.g. Prince's Trust), with whom they have a longer term relationship.

The upshot of the above points is that it is often difficult for pre-starts to call to mind the Helpline specifically. This creates difficulties in accurately evaluating the Helpline or GOV.UK, especially in stating which parts are most or least effective; and it particularly applies to pre-starts, who tend to be more concerned about progressing towards start-up, using any source to help them, than about recalling which site helped them the most. To take a random snapshot of the extent of this difficulty, on a single day of interview recruitment focused on pre-starts, approximately half of those approached (and who answered the phone) could not recall where they received particular support to the extent that there would be little point undertaking an interview.

2. More established businesses checking a minor detail of fact or interpretation, or seeking a specific link. The Helpline staff noted that, on the whole, more established businesses 'tend to be directed to a snippet of use, rather than us talking to them' i.e. they are often highly solution-focused on obtaining a specific answer to a specific question – in many ways, the opposite of the looser queries often asked by pre-starts and start-ups. As such, interviewees with more established businesses were most concerned that (a) their question had been answered satisfactorily (or not, as the case may be); (b) that had been more accomplished more quickly that searching the web or specifically GOV.UK; and (c) they were not interested in anything else the Helpline or GOV.UK could offer them. Again, this was noted in the interviews, with some businesses struggling to remember anything other than that the Helpline gave them an accurate answer which solved their difficulties.

In both of these cases, the Helpline has performed a valuable service in supporting businesses above and beyond the information provided by GOV.UK. The fact that they cannot remember the service in any detail is less important, but to increase the returning user base, there may be scope to improve the recall through brand enhancements.

3.2.2 Meeting expectations

Most users had very few initial expectations of what to expect from the Business Support Helpline, beyond what the name implies: business support in a loose sense. Virtually all interviewees were aware that it was government-backed, but were unsure of exactly what kind of help would be provided – hence, the long list of different types of support sought. A significant minority initially assumed that the Helpline would provide advice, rather than

signposting or factual information – common examples would be to recommend a particular type of legal structure, or to recommend the most appropriate provider of finance, whereas the Helpline can only provide information on the structure. One business, for example, seeking advice about clearing a debt, noted: *'I think the Helpline spent too long talking about things generally instead of saying specifically – right there's the letter, print it off, this is how it should be filled in etc – which is what I was looking for'* (start-up wholesaler).

When it was explained how the Helpline operated, most understood why the government could not provide that sort of advice, or signpost to a particular provider, although there remained a small number of users who considered that the Helpline *should* follow a different sort of model, providing advice and guidance in terms of strategic or operational choices, rather than the model it uses. This stems partly from a lack of information in detail on what the helpline provides (or users ignoring this information and imposing their own assumptions on the Helpline as to what support the government should provide), or being wrongly 'sold' the Helpline as a solution to their difficulties by third party support providers. In some cases, it seems likely that the provider could not help the user in question, so directed them to the Helpline in order to be able to provide at least something of use to the client.

These difficulties stem from managing expectations, and how (and where) the service is promoted, rather than any fault with the Helpline per se; as the Helpline staff noted, 'people tend to make it suit own expectations depending on the site they found the number'.

4 Impact of helpline

4.1 Impact on business

Interviews showed a broad fourfold categorisation of the main types of impact (note that interviewees could fall into multiple categories):

1. Improved business knowledge or strategy/operations

30 interviewees – nearly half of the total - indicated that, because of the information they received from the Helpline (or advice from the organisations referred to), the business had:

- upgraded their knowledge about the business (or the market); and/or
- enhanced their strategy or operational procedures;
- were better placed to achieve their business aims, whether that is growth or establishing a business in the first place; and/or
- were more confident and reassured about their ability to achieve those goals.

As explicitly acknowledged by interviewees, it is not only achieving growth itself which is a lengthy process, but also finding the time – in between actually running the business – to absorb the information from the Helpline, action it for progress, and put the improved measures into place. Many businesses noted that the information provided by the Helpline had proven useful, but had only made a start on following up signposting and understanding how these organisations could support them in practice.

As such, for most of these businesses, the support provided by the Helpline was 'a good foundation for growth', as one interviewee put it. They anticipated (or hoped) that this foundation would be converted to growth in employment or turnover at some point in the future, although most were unable to say when, given the other pressures on their time and external influences on growth.

One pre-start noted a more nuanced change in his behaviour because of the support provided by the Helpine: he had decided to progress more slowly and deliberately towards start-up, as the support had helped demonstrate how hard a process it could be. It was worth learning and understanding more before actually taking the plunge into business ownership. Although this meant that the start-up process was slower, it should also lead to more effective business in the long-run.

2. Resolved a technical issue

19 interviewees – nearly one third of the total - had a relatively straightforward issue or query, which was resolved using the support from the Helpline - either through the provision of information (often from GOV.UK) or referral to the most appropriate organisation. The majority of the queries in this category concerned tax issues – e.g. whether or not private tuition is VAT-exempt – and the main impact was to allow the business to continue trading while assured of compliance, or to continue (or start) trading *at all* – e.g. signposting an exporter to a country with a reputation for hosting fraudulent transactions to an organisation which showed him how to get a bank account, advising a

pre-start whether their qualification obtained overseas was valid in the UK. Neither could locate the detailed information needed on GOV.UK – either in terms of the information itself, or which organisation to approach for support. For the most part, this type of query is relatively simple to resolve, but it can create large difficulties for the business if they cannot locate the relevant information and guidance on GOV.UK, or – in particular – they are not entirely clear how the guidance applies in their situation.

The greatest tangible impacts in this category were that the support enabled three businesses to continue trading, a fourth to confirm that the business could legitimately start, and a fifth to hire a new employee using correct contractual terms (the support did not lead to increased employment *per se* - and the hiring would have gone ahead without the Helpline's support - but the support did inform the business the optimal way to hire the employee in the specific situation).

As such, the Helpline is clearly important in *interpreting* (or signposting to organisations which can interpret) queries on the way in which regulation works in practice - providing reassurance that the business is compliant, and permitted to continue trading without the risk that it will incur consequences at a later date. In terms of impact on employment, turnover or growth, therefore, such support usually does not have a *direct* impact, and is difficult to measure in these tangible terms. However, the resolution of the query is often either an essential precondition for the business to continue at all, or to overcome an obstacle to their trading in the most effective manner, giving the business a greater likelihood of growing in the future. The reassurance provided by the Helpline is highly valued by businesses.

3. More tangible impacts

Although the majority of interviewees had not experienced any tangible impacts *yet*, a minority of those in the above two categories could indicate was in which the Helpline support had had a more definite impact on the business in the short-run. As may be expected, given the wide range of issues on which users contacted the Helpline, the impacts are highly diverse, and, as noted above, dependent on the extent to which businesses have been able to implement or operationalise the support:

- One user obtained finance, with three more investigating or applying
- Two had experienced increase in sales directly attributable to the Helpline's support, and one recruited an employee
- Two obtained dedicated training enabling progress towards business development
- One began using a mentor
- One enhanced their marketing process
- One accessed Working Tax Credits
- Two enhanced their networking activity, in the hope of boosting orders

4. No impact

In total, 16 interviewees stated that the support provided by the Helpline had had no impact on the business. This can be divided into two quite separate subcategories:

(i)   there was no impact because there was no relevant support available. Of the 16 cases in this category, eight concerned businesses which were specifically seeking government grants (for business development, innovation etc.). They were not particularly interested in making use of the other support provided by the Helpline (e.g. links to local providers, or other types of finance), leaving, in their opinion, no impact from the support. It is fair to say that they did not regard the Helpline more negatively, seeing the 'fault' lying with the government for not providing grants in their situation, rather than the Helpline, which had, as one said, 'done their best – it's not their fault there's nothing out there for me'. Similar perceptions were found among four other users who reported 'no impact': the user had wanted a specific type of support, geared towards providing advice relating to their situation rather than 'generic' information or links to external providers.   As such, the Helpline was not able to help them.

(ii)   The remaining users in this category did report points that were more pertinent to the Helpline's operation, two reporting that the links were 'too generic' and not tailored sufficiently to their needs: one interviewee asserted that the information she was sent seemed more suitable for young or new business owners lacking experience, whereas she was returning to business ownership after a period of employment. Two found the information difficult to understand, and requested it should be more straightforward, while two asserted that the signposting turned out to be incorrect: one of these users was in a very technical area, whereas the other was incorrectly referred to the New Enterprise Allowance and Job Centre Plus when he had to come off unemployment benefit to restart a business he had inherited from a relative. The final user in this category was seeking R&D services from local universities, but could not find a central list which categorised such services (and in particular by sector). The Helpline could not find such local services, leaving the user with no useful links to signpost in the right direction.

(iii)   In addition to the 16 interviewees who reported no impact, four further interviewees – all pre-starts– reported virtually no impact *to date*. For this group, 'life got in the way' (as one put it) and they had done little to progress towards start-up for personal reasons e.g. pregnancy or simply deciding against start-up. Three stated that they may well return to the links sent by the Helpline (or call again), as and when their circumstances change and they decide to proceed with start-up. All four remained positive towards the Helpline, and attribute no responsibility towards the Helpline for the lack of impact on their business objectives.

4.1.1 Helpline's role in locating information

Interviewees were asked whether or not they thought they could have found similar information if they had not contacted the Helpline. Of the 70 interviews, only seven unequivocally stated that they could have found the information provided by the Helpline anyway. For the most part, these users were critical of the Helpline for providing support which they characterised as too generic: they desired greater in-depth help relating more specifically to the business. Only one of this group of seven was positive about the Helpline's role – she indicated that although she had already found some or the links herself, and was likely to have found the rest, she appreciated the confirmation that they

were the correct sort of links, and that she was 'going in the right direction'. This feeling of reassurance is, as noted above, a highly valued part of the Helpline.

The remaining interviewees all reported more positive evidence about the role of the Helpline in retrieving relevant information to greater or lesser extent. They fit into four broad categories:

(i)   a large group of 20 clients stated that they would very likely have found the same or similar links and information, but that the *Helpline accelerated the process*. This meant a shorter length of time for the owners searching the internet. The businesses put high value on their time, and become frustrated at spending time searching for information online, as they are extremely busy just running their business. They do not want to spend an excessive amount of time searching for what, in theory, should be a short, rapid answer: GOV.UK is intended for factual advice, rather than in-depth, time-consuming support. Cutting through the 'information overload' on GOV.UK (as one interviewee expressed a common sentiment) to focus on the most relevant and appropriate information was seen as among the most important benefits of the Helpline. The majority of interviewees expressed similar sentiments, suggesting ways to improve the retrieval of information from GOV.UK, either through enhancing the search function or changing the way the user navigates through the site (see Section 5).

(ii) Six interviewees noted that they had found - or assumed they would be able to find – the same information, but that they called the Helpline to confirm its applicability to their own situation, or to check their interpretation. As with the above point, this is seen as a key added value of the Helpline over and above the web, providing reassurance that the user's interpretation is accurate (or providing the correct interpretation, as the case may be).

(iii) 13 clients were unequivocal that they could not have found the same information, either because they 'did not know where to start', having little knowledge of the business support landscape, or their query was extremely specific. Pre-starts were the most uncertain that they could have found similar information, reiterating that the Helpline is of value to them in directing them to information of use in building their knowledge and skills to help establish an effective business.

(iv) The remainder of the interviewees (22) were unsure whether or not they could have found similar information, although tending more towards the less certain end of the spectrum, with sentiments of 'possibly' or 'probably not' substantially outweighing 'probably'.

4.1.2 Knowledge of and willingness to use support

In terms of future use of GOV.UK, there was no clear answer on the type of information users would be searching for (as opposed to their willingness to use the website). Most users were solution-focused in some way, although they fell into two broad groups:

i.   Users which had turned to GOV.UK in the first place either to solve a specific problem or information gap (more commonly in the case of established businesses) or had been attempting to find information in a more general sense about a given topic (more commonly among pre-starts). In the former case, users tended to trust GOV.UK more than a private sector website to provide authoritative, high quality

and unbiased advice, while not trying to sell support to them, and could provide (possibly with interpretation from the Helpline) definitive answers.

ii. In the second group, there was a slightly different distinction between GOV.UK and other websites, although it depended on the topic concerned. For general information about topics such procedures for exporting, legal structure, employment, tax issues (registration, National Insurance etc) or the legal aspects of start-up, GOV.UK is seen as authoritative and trusted, as there was a regulatory or legal element to the advice. This was supplemented with advice from other websites as to how to achieve the goal, with the information from GOV.UK slotted in as necessary. For pre-starts, especially, GOV.UK was seen as simply another source of learning and advice as to how to progress towards start-up, rather than being the most authoritative and definitive.

Users in this broad grouping were also more likely to have asked the Helpline for advice about management, strategy or which support provider to use, as such information was absent from GOV.UK, and would like to see that in the future (while being aware that was not possible).

On the whole, therefore, the perception of GOV.UK largely accorded with its remit – to provide information and guidance – although a minority desired it to go further and provide some recommendations or advice. Likely future use of GOV.UK depends, instead, on two crucial factors: (a) what information users are likely to require; and (b) their willingness to return, driven by attitudes towards GOV.UK.

Future information required. Users found it extremely difficult to state for what purpose they were most likely to use GOV.UK in the future, because

a) They were not fully aware of everything on the website, as they had usually come for a specific purpose and had not strayed beyond that remit.
b) They were not sure how their needs would change in the future. Five users had returned since their use of GOV.UK/the Helpline which was the subject of the interview, but that was driven by new queries.

Users were generally aware of the volume of information on GOV.UK, so when presented with options including searching for factual information, obtaining more data about support, and choosing between specific providers, most said they may use GOV.UK for any of those at some point, but could not state with any certainty which was more likely. This evidence suggests that future use is most likely to be driven by the users' positive or negative attitudes towards GOV.UK, and how that has changed during recent interactions with the website and telephone support.

Attitude toward GOV.UK.

Approximately a third of the sample – 22 users – stated that they had few (if any) or only very minor issues with the usability of GOV.UK (although a few had barely used it, as they preferred talking over using the web). They contributed some constructive criticism (incorporated in the list of suggestions in Section 5 below) but for the most part, these users were happy to use and to continue to use GOV.UK, returning to the Helpline as an when necessary: GOV.UK would be their first port of call, with the Helpline to fall back on when they encountered a need. Most of this group were younger, ICT-literate and/or with

extensive experience with (private sector) business support in the past, and implicitly or explicitly assumed that no website with the aim of GOV.UK to provide support as widely as possible could be ideal for every user. The majority of this group called the Helpline for the purpose of checking that their interpretation of the information they had found was correct, rather than to locate additional information.

A second group, slightly larger (around 45 per cent of interviewees), would return to GOV.UK as their first port of call, but were more critical of the website, having encountered greater frustration with its use initially. Nonetheless, most had managed to retrieve at least some useful information from the website, and were now more aware of how the website worked, and – with the information and guidance provided by the links – thought they would be able to use the website more effectively. This was especially thought to be the case because now they were aware that the Helpline existed, and its purpose, they were happy to try and find the information themselves, but may more quickly turn to the Helpline if they fail to find the relevant detail. Many pre-starts fell in this group, being somewhat critical of the website (in particular, navigation and understanding terminology), but having found some relevant information, were prepared to return when they had absorbed the learning, progressed toward start-up and had a more detailed query. For pre-starts among young people, however, a larger barrier to returning was recall of GOV.UK. This would be aided by the email sent by the Helpline after contact, as the Helpline staff noted: 'if we refer a user back to GOV.UK, they'll understand better that it's a useful site, and had relevant information – what we send to them is quite specific to them, so that may provide inspiration, and it helps make them think about searching for things in a different way.' Nonetheless, the extent to which younger users, and pre-starts more generally, can distinguish GOV.UK from other websites is debatable.

The third group, approximately 15 per cent, were more critical, having undergone a poor experience with both GOV.UK and the Helpline. They were mainly unlikely to return to the website for information, due partly to this poor experience, and scepticism about the competence of the government, their commitment to support businesses, and the value of public sector support more generally. Most of this group had turned to GOV.UK in a final attempt to find some support. Not having found anything they perceived as suitable or appropriate, they were unlikely to use public sector support in the future.

5 Suggested improvements to GOV.UK

There are a number of recommendations for GOV.UK deriving from both the comments of interviewees, and the contextual information provided by the focus groups with the Helpline staff. In general, suggested improvements are based on the way information is located and the style and tone of the content, rather than the content itself. Neither the interviewees nor the Helpline staff considered that there were significant gaps which needed to be filled; if anything, the opposite was true, that there was simply too much information to search through, overwhelming and frustrating some users. The following points express suggestions for enhancing support provision on GOV.UK; issues of particular relevance to information for pre-starts and start-ups are highlighted. A more specific list of perceived omissions or errors is shown in Appendix 1, which also provides more specific detail and users' opinions on some of the issues raised here.

This motivation, to accomplish business processes more expediently, is probably especially relevant to pre-starts, who are more concerned with actually *doing* things to get their business started, rather than feeling that they are simply *reading*, rather than 'getting on with things'. The Helpline providing all relevant links in a single email proved useful in this area, allowing pre-starts to access the information at the most appropriate time in the process (both pre-start and as the business goes forward and develops e.g. networks which can be of use to a nascent business) and return to GOV.UK at the point where they required the information: pre-starts often found it hard to find a starting point on GOV.UK, or to navigate through the volume of information, meaning the email links provided a good starting point into understanding how the site worked more effectively. This implies that pre-starts, in particular, need to be able to rapidly find the information relevant to them at the time, rather than taking a large amount of time trying to filter down the information returned from GOV.UK. But very often they may not know exactly what they need, and GOV.UK can help with guidance and signposting. Note that the following suggestions overlap, to some degree, as they are addressing similar underlying issues.

5.1 Improvements to organising and searching for information

1. For the most part, the *content on GOV.UK does not attract criticism* per se – there are only minor inaccuracies in what is presented, and little content that was felt absent but should be provided. In addition, in several cases, interviewees indicated that content was missing but, on subsequent investigation, it appeared to be on the website – implying that they had failed to readily find it, rather than it being missing *per se*. Others noted that they felt like they were 'going around in circles' or 'being passed from pillar to post', finding the same irrelevant information many times, rather than that which met their needs. This evidence suggests that *locating the content* may be substantially more of a difficulty than the content itself.

    Interviewees' difficulties thus stem more from *finding* and *narrowing down* the information, and the guidance to *apply* it correctly to their circumstances than any difficulties with missing or inaccurate content. In particular, suggestions focused on ways to make results and the information retrieval process more guided, and more

dynamic and customisable to user needs, and to be able to reach similar information through multiple routes, following the divergent ways in which users think about and prioritise their needs. Examples of improving the user interface and search (derived from both interviews and the Helpline staff focus groups) include:

- use of more intuitive headings, or a more defined 'tree' structure, so that users can better identify a starting point for their needs, and browse through content, narrowing down choices at each step. Helpline staff could help identify the sort of headings which would match the ways and language in which users conceptualise their needs.
- An explicit flowchart-type interface following the same principles, again to more readily narrow down and focus support. This may be especially helpful to identifying and narrowing down support to the local area, and ensuring that users start from a point that is relevant to their needs (e.g. If pre-start, click here; if looking for finance, click here etc). Again Helpline staff can advise on appropriate starting points and flows.
- More effective filtering of how results are presented, grouped and sorted – both in general and specifically on tools such as the business finance support finder so that users can chose different filters for the same results – the most relevant result may involve searching through many hits, whereas searching would be facilitated if the user could sort using a variety of factors.
- More effective search using natural language, and taking account of synonyms and typos - in the same manner as Google, on the basis that searching Google is more likely to return desired results than using the same terms in the GOV.UK search box. It should be noted, though, that optimising the site to attract Google searches is good for an initial visit, but once at sites, users usually prefer to stay on the site, and use the internal search to continue searching, rather than return to Google for further searches. If the further searches prove fruitless, users are liable to be frustrated, implying that the search engine should work as effectively as possible. For synonyms, the Helpline staff could again provide suggestions as to how search is conceptualised by users. In particular, it should be the case that minor variants on a given term (e.g. pluralising it) should produce the same results, and users should not have to rely on using precise terminology to produce the most useful results. This is important, as users often criticise GOV.UK for being too jargon heavy (see below). This applies in particular to pre-starts, who not only do not necessarily understand some of the content, but also are less likely to use the 'correct' terms in searching – for example, legal structure is a highly important choice for new business, but pre-starts may not understand this, as they do not know the terminology.
- More effective tagging of information by keywords, following the principles and recommendations above, so that given search terms are more likely to return the information desired by the user.
- Ensuring that the 'sub-topics' or 'additional topics' presented at the side of the main article on GOV.UK are highly relevant to the topic presented, rather than of tangential relevance.

5.2 Enhancing presentation of content (i) for different scenarios

2. Many interviewees – and in particular, pre-starts – desired a greater degree of guidance and advice than was available on GOV.UK (or would be possible to

provide), especially about ways to choose between the most appropriate providers for their situation. In addition, callers often desired confirmation that a particular regulation or information applies to their particular situation. Tools such as the licence finder and finance finder have proved popular and straightforward to use, probably at least partly because they follow the suggestions outline above for greater guidance in focusing the information before presenting it to users. This suggests that that similar tools (including flowcharts, which several users had appreciated on the old Business Link website, especially to 'test out' scenarios for the future) could be applied elsewhere i.e. narrowing down choices step-by-step to reach a final suggested selection of answers that meet the business's requirements as far as possible. We acknowledge that such a tool would never be perfect – there would always be a situation which the tool could not quite accommodate. Nonetheless, this approach has potential to prove valuable in a number of areas, with input from the Helpline as to which topics would be most appropriate, and feeding in the choices mentioned by callers as potentially ambiguous. Similarly, interviewees mentioned that worked examples would be a useful tool, as an aid to understanding more complex topics (e.g. scenarios where tax may or not apply, or the advantages to particular types of legal structure in different situations).

It would also be helpful to devise a wider range of templates on GOV.UK for different circumstances. For example, there is only a single template for a business plan, but users may have many different purposes for writing a plan, and 'shoehorning' it into a generic template, which may not cover the information required, will not be effective. Screen grabs could also be used to direct users to the relevant parts of forms relating to information contained on a GOV.UK page.

5.3 Enhancing presentation of content (ii) more user-friendly

3. Many callers noted that were confused by or did not understand some of the information presented and/or how best to search for relevant information on GOV.UK. As noted above, users often rang the Helpline to 'demystify' the information, and understand the relevance and importance for their own situation (to 'rubber stamp' their interpretation, as the Helpline staff commented). This suggests that efforts should be made to ensure the information on GOV.UK is in layman's terms as far as possible. As indicated above, this issue is of particular concern to pre-starts, as they lack the experience to understand the content or its relevance to their situation; as the Helpline staff noted, pre-starts may well understand more accessible terms, even thinking of themselves as 'self-employed' and not understanding that guidance about a 'business' would also apply in their case. The alienation and frustration they might feel when faced with something they do not understand may lead them to abandon their efforts to start a business, especially as they are attempting to be compliant with all relevant legislation and regulations, to ensure they do not suffer implications in the future. Providing better links to more local support, where they may be able to access face-to-face guidance and advice, may be a more effective way to attract pre-starts to use GOV.UK, and return in the future.

5.4 Maintaining content

4. GOV.UK needs to be as up-to-date as possible. Several interviewees noted that they had investigated links and information, only to find that they had expired or were otherwise out-of-date – which was one of the reasons they called the Helpline. Archiving all information on the site is necessary, but creates 'too much' information, with users sometimes not clear about which information is current and valid, and having a large amount of information to search through to find that which is most relevant. It should be investigated if 'outdated advice' can be 'hidden' as far as possible from users, superseded by that most recent, with older material available only if the user specifies it should be included in search results. This stipulation particularly applies to information at local level; information at national level is easier to maintain, and more likely to be up-to-date than more locally specific information. One suggestion from Helpline staff was that users should input their postcode when searching, to choose whether they wish to mainly return local results most relevant to their area.

5.5 Positioning of Helpline on GOV.UK

5. Some users (probably a fairly small minority) already know which department they would like to contact, but had difficulties locating the correct contact details, ending up at the Helpline almost by default, as it is prominent on the website. Several interviewees also noted that currently they were confused as to which Helpline among the many indicated on GOV.UK for a particular topic - the HMRC helplines were often mentioned in this regard. GOV.UK could be more effective at directing customers to the correct contact number for their needs, and clarifying precisely what the Helpline is for (using the same principles for guiding the user outlined above).

Some interviewees were also confused about the provenance of the Helpline, due to where on GOV.UK they encountered the phone number. For example, a caller wishing to check their tax codes found the appropriate HMRC website via Google; they wished to check that the codes were correct, but had previously experienced long delays on the HMRC helpline. The Business Support Helpline was the first alternative phone number which she encountered which offered support, leading the caller to assume – given the non-specific nature of the service's name - that was an alternative to directly calling HMRC, and that the Helpline acted, in some way, as a single point of contact for government services.

Similarly several interviewees were confused that the Helpline was a national service, having first seen the Helpline promoted on Growth Hubs or other local websites that it was a local service in their area, provided by the organisation where they saw it being promoted, or a related organisation. The basic title given to the helpline, and the lack of information on referring websites about what its purpose was, meant that there was a wide range of prior expectations and assumptions about its purpose (the dominant theme of answers was that most callers tended to have very few preconceptions, but that also implied that they were not sure exactly what the Helpline was most suitable for). According to Helpline staff (and backed up by the interviews), users often become slightly more wary or irritated when they

discover that the Helpline is not a direct line to a given resource, and they must be referred elsewhere to obtain the support they require.

5.6 Encouraging users to access additional information

6. GOV.UK content on business support should help to address the fact that users 'don't know what they don't know' through prompting, links, signposting and guidance. The evidence from this research shows that whilst businesses often initially think they know what their business requires, they very often do not know precisely what is needed, or how their current needs may lead onto other needs, both now and in the future. Businesses may not have clearly expressed their need on GOV.UK to enable them to locate the information, nor considered the further implications that may arise from finding an answer.

6 Added value of helpline

Compared to GOV.UK, Helpline staff can more effectively:

a) *interpret requests*, and direct callers to the page *required*, rather than the page the caller has been searching for, potentially using imprecise or poorly worded terminology;

b) *interpret the information presented on GOV.UK*, as some customers may not understand, for example, certain terminology. The information presented is not 'wrong' per se or inherently difficult to understand, but it may be that it is presented in such a way that it confuses some customers. The examples given by Helpline staff included redundant manual workers aiming to set up in business for the first time, and finding it difficult to understand some information in the way it was expressed on GOV.UK.

c) provide *up-to-date information about local services, closing dates of schemes etc.* Helpline staff and users felt that GOV.UK was less effective at providing current, up-to-date information, and maintaining it to take account of future changes, whereas the Helpline staff were more effective (although not infallible) at ensuring information remained valid. Pre-starts, in particular, would be more likely to use GOV.UK if it provided information which included *current* details about *local* support; if these are found to be lacking or incorrect, they would be likely to turn to the Helpline, and lose trust in the information on GOV.UK.

d) help *pre-starts who only have a basic idea 'in their head'*, and sometimes even less – just a desire to start a business, but no idea what to do. The Helpline directs them towards parts of GOV.UK which were not only relevant straight away (e.g. business planning), but which they would also need to think about before starting but may not have considered at all (e.g. legal structure). The Helpline also helped callers think about to how the business might develop i.e. pointing towards sections of GOV.UK which they may not have thought about looking at currently but which may well prove useful as the business develops (e.g. taking on employees). These 'nudges' towards different parts of the website are welcomed by callers, as searches are often vague (e.g. How do I start a business?) rather than searching for focused information. All this content is present on the website, but the process of finding it, or being more actively *directed* towards it by some means, could be enhanced.

e) *Help clients* – and especially pre-starts who are new to owning a business – *to 'put together the jigsaw' of business support*. There is a wide range of different services, available from a wide range of providers, such that the information on GOV.UK – especially given the issues above with searching and organisation - inevitably only gives a partial and fragmented view. Constructing on their own an effective holistic solution to queries (using both virtual and 'real world' resources) can thus be difficult. The Helpline can direct clients better to the local support which best matches their needs.

Appendix 1

The table below illustrates in detail why users chose to ring the Helpline in the cases that they contended that the information they required or desired was not available (wholly, partly, (or not available in sufficient depth or applying their situation) from GOV.UK. Note that it may be the case that the information noted actually is on GOV.UK – this table reports the perception of users, rather than the actuality. Thus, it may be the case that this information *is* available, but that users cannot find it, or that the user is uncertain if it applies in their case. In practice, the two situations (cannot find the information vs no information) equate to the same outcome for the users.

Table 4   Detailed reasons for calling Helpline – examples of 'missing' information

- Information to include on invoices [for prints] sent overseas
- Whether the user's qualification obtained overseas (in massage) was valid in the UK
- Difficulties obtaining a bank account, as business traded mainly with an overseas country regarded as potentially suspicious (links to money-laundering, terrorism etc)
- Information about rates rebates
- Advice about how to keep accounts and file returns for two separate but 'explicitly linked' businesses
- More detailed information on how partnerships work in practice
- Reactivating a dormant business
- Advice on procedures and process needed to change the form of business from e-commerce only to a physical shop
- Finance available specifically for a charity or CIC
- Advice about how to move from employment to self-employment in insurance (i.e. setting up a consultancy or brokerage) in terms of practical details, such as the steps needed to proceed, how much he can accomplish while still employed etc
- Whether private tuition (in swimming) is a VAT-exempt activity
- Specifics about starting a business from home (legal issues, planning permission etc)
- Advice on whether the business was obliged to include their address on their website or not (in plain language)
- Detailed practical advice for international trading 'flowchart of the process for importers: (1) what is the product, (2) have you the HS codes, (3) what is the tax and duty, (4) licensing aspects, (5) controlled aspects (chemicals), (6) paperwork, (7) practical contacts (lists of freight forwarders etc)'
- Basic guide to tax payment and registration

Appendix2 – Questionnaire

Preamble

1. **What is your role in the business: _____**

   _____

2. **Turnover : _____**

3. **How has that changed in the past 3 years? (+/- %) Do you anticipate growth in the next 12 months?**

4. **Number of employees: _____**

5. **How has that changed in the past 3 years? (+/- %) Do you anticipate growth in the next 12 months?**

6. **Industry: _____**

7. **Age of business_____**

8. **Do you aim to grow the business in the next three years? [Probe: how? What are you actually doing in practice?]**

9. **Stage of business: Pre-start – early stages (i.e. formulating ideas)**
   Pre-start – in process of establishing in business (i.e. committed resources to setting up a business)
   Start-up (trading for less than one year)
   Established business (trading for one year or more)

10. **Nature of main issue you were trying to address.**

11. **Any other issues you were facing at the same time?**

OR

Check against the data, read back the main points to owner, and correct anything necessary.

Stage 1: awareness

1. How did you first become aware of GOV.UK and the Helpline? Probe: what were the impressions given about what it could do for you? What services did you think it could offer?

2. What were your initial impressions of both? *Probe: How did the owner envisage the two support strands interacting?*

3. Prior to accessing GOV.UK/the helpline, how would you rate your knowledge and awareness of public or private support for small and medium businesses - including your trust in these services/ the likely costs and benefits to your business of using these services? How did you research the support available for small and medium businesses? Was it difficult to find support which met your needs? Was it clear how different support services worked together at a local level – was there a single entry point which was clear?

Stage 2: approach

Check against the purpose of the call from the metadata, and use the metadata to inform questions – what to ask about

4. What business support provided by a third party – either public or private sector, local or national - have you used or applied for in the recent past? [i.e. before using GOV.UK/the helpline]

5. Why did you initially use GOV.UK? [as opposed to other sources of other information] –

6. Why did you go on to contact the Helpline? [rather than any other source of information] *Probe: Was there something that you could not locate on GOV.UK? If so what? What was your main reason for contacting the Helpline, as opposed to GOV.UK? Perhaps here: Ask about use of social media here – FB, Twitter – or webchats: would they be a substitute, or is the helpline more interactive? What does a Helpline add over and above a web service?*

Probes relevant to this section: *Thinking back to when your business first started to consider looking for outside business support, what encouraged you to explore GOV.UK/the Helpline? Probe: What was the trigger point? Did you have a specific problem/issue that you needed help with or did you want more general advice on how to grow your business? Did your motivation change at all during the process – say from wanting help to resolve a specific problem to receiving more strategic assistance? What expectations and concerns did you have – if any – before you contacted the helpline? Were you referred to the Helpline/GOV.UK at all, or did you find it through, say, internet searches?*

Stage 3: use of the Helpline

This section and the next two are intended to find out what the helpline did, and how the owner reacted. The owner is likely to tell a story about how they used the helpline – so these are better seen as prompts and clarifications about the type of information we need – so they should be used as needed to gain the information we require.

1. How did you use the Helpline? [telephone, Twitter etc] Was this the most convenient method, or would you have liked to have seen some other method of contact?

2. Specifically, what assistance and support did the helpline provide? *Prompt: if referral to tier 2, what help did they give? Referral out – see next section, and where? For what reason? Was that appropriate?*

3. Did the Helpline fully answer your questions? *What was missing? What would you have liked to know more about? If they referred back to GOV.UK, did that help? Did the Helpline refer you to your local Growth Hub? Were you previously aware of the Growth Hub? Have you been in contact with them?*

4. Did the Helpline staff understand your needs, and probe to fully understand what was needed? *Were the needs diagnosed fully?*

5. Was the contact sufficiently long to meet the business's needs? -[*NB Tier 1 should be fairly short- around quarter of an hour at most – Tier 2 has scheduled appointments lasting around an hour]*

6. Did the Helpline suggest appropriate solutions? Was the information and assistance useful?

7. How did they respond? *[phone, email…]*Was that the most appropriate and useful way?

8. Did the Helpline suggest anything different to what you would have done/planned to have done anyway? In what way was it different? Was it a better solution to your difficulties?

9. In what way were those solutions different to what was provided on GOV.UK? What did the Helpline provide in addition to the online service? Was the information provided by GOV.UK useful in itself?

10. Did the process meet your expectations? If not, why not?

Stage 4: follow-up

1. What did you do in response to the information provided by the Helpline? In what ways was that different to what you would have done anyway?

2. How has that worked in practice? Has the information proved accurate and relevant, in terms of suggesting solutions to your problems?

3. What would you have done if the Helpline had not been available? What other sources might you have consulted?

4. Would you have been able to (or knowledgeable enough to) undertake the follow-ups which you did, if you had not contacted the Helpline? *What did you undertake that you could not have done using GOV.UK alone?*

Stage 5: impacts and reflections

1. What has been the medium/longer term impact on the business? *What have you done in response to the suggestions? Has it helped increase the likelihood of the business to grow? Has it reduced the running costs of the business? Has it helped increase sales/turnover? Has it supported starting or increasing exports? Have you recruited extra workers (or reduced the workforce) as a result of the support? Have you accessed any further assistance, or contacted any other sources of help and advice, since you used the Helpline?*

2. Have you any support recommended directly by the Helpline]? If so, is this linked to the assistance provided? Have you made useful new contacts and links in the local business support landscape?

3. Has the Helpline made you more willing to use support in the future? If so, where would you go for support in the future? Would you use the Helpline again? *[probe about likeliness of using GOV.UK in the future following advice from helpline]*

4. Would you recommend the Helpline to your business contacts as a source of support? For what? Why/why not?

5. What is missing from Helpline provision? How can it be improved in the future?

6. What is missing from GOV.UK provision? How can it be improved in the future?

7. Would you be prepared to pay for similar support in the future? *If so, how much, and delivered in what way?*

8. Does the fact that it is a Government scheme – and therefore 'official' – lead to you trusting the Helpline and GOV.UK, in terms of following up on the information they provide?

9. Would you be more likely to use the support in future to find information **about a specific enquiry**, or **to gain advice, recommendations or suggestions** for a specific provider of support or **to help you choose between support providers?** Why?