

Oceansgate Phase 2 Evaluation Report

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Executive Summary

The Oceansgate business park and Enterprise Zone in Plymouth constitutes a major investment area within the city, supporting regeneration of the Devonport Dockyard. In addition to funding for phase 2 of the site development, this ERDF supported project included a business support element titled *Meet the Expert* focusing on providing specialist business advice and guidance to small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

Plymouth City Council secured £2.63m from ERDF under Priority Axis 3 to deliver the second phase of Oceansgate. The scheme and accompanying business support project were well aligned to local and regional strategies (Heart of the South West LEP Local Industrial Strategy, Local Economic Strategy for Devon *Delivering Economic Growth* and *Resurgam* in Plymouth) and UK Government policy on improving productivity, such as the Industrial Strategy and subsequent Build Back Better: our plan for growth.

The objectives of the Oceansgate project are to enhance the development of key sectors in Plymouth, including Marine, where supply chain opportunities and research and development can sustain high value jobs. Meet the Expert will help support the growth and development of small organisations who can benefit from light touch specialist workshop support to resolve specific issues that they face and be offered grants to access external expertise where they may not have needed capabilities with their companies.

Oceansgate Phase 2 Build

Despite the challenges of Covid-19, adverse weather and some issues bringing power to the site, which in total led to a four month delay, phase 2 of Oceansgate was completed to budget and achieved a BREAMM rating of “Excellent”. The relationship between the project team at Plymouth City Council and the contractor was strong, with effective processes established for communication and collaboration. Design adjustments were made early in the process to mitigate against risks and the supply chain was also factored into delivery. Resource was appropriate for the delivery and management processes were felt to demonstrate best practice.

The key area of learning was around handover of the site, with the contractor moving many of the build team away from the project leading to a loss of site knowledge and relationships at an important moment and could have been improved. This led to some issues with the handover, which was then supervised by AECOM, rather than the contractor, Kier which had implications for snagging and resolving remaining issues. The team were quick to identify this themselves at an internal learning session, again demonstrating good approaches used.

The phase 2 Oceansgate units was completed in February 2021 and fully occupied by June of that year. Suitable and interested tenants had been identified by the responsible team at the Council and were able to lease the units quickly, demonstrating the demand.

Meet the Expert Business Support

After facing some initial delays caused by recruitment and resourcing of the team (which continued to operate at below planned capacity throughout) and an early Project Change Request, delivery commenced in January 2020. As initial processes were being embedded the Covid-19 pandemic and ensuing crisis led to a restructure of the design approach. Some of the original planned activity, such as pop-up cafés, had been limited in take up and with increasing use of virtual mediums, Meet the Expert pivoted to online workshops led by a specialist in a particular area.

Grants were also offered to allow SMEs to engage the services of specialists and consultants to bring them expertise that they might otherwise lack. Insufficient resource and limited promotion meant that initially the project fell behind profile on issuing these grants. Recruitment of staff to run the project was an ongoing challenge, but with a new full time business relationship manager brought in (the previous postholder only being part time with other functions) there was additional resource and drive behind the project to deliver against the targets.

Though simple, the management structures for Meet the Expert were successful and the hands on nature of the business relationship manager meant that relationships and contacts were soon established resulting in greater numbers of expert led workshops being delivered (by various consultants and specialists from across the city) and marketed effectively via social media to push participation.

Information on the participants was captured from the Eventbrite registrations for the online workshops and transferred into Excel while evidence was collated in project folders. This worked effectively for a project of this scale.

The workshops and events were well regarded by the participants and the team were able to issue all the grants they had despite the resource challenges they faced. Overall the project met most of its targets, which given the delays with implementation and difficulties of Covid-19 is a strong outcome.

Only improvements were around some of the paperwork required, both for staff on the project and participants, particularly the grant applicants. Stakeholders did comment that though beneficial the short duration of the interventions meant that there was always going to be limited outcomes demonstrable or attributable to the project come the end, even if the grants and sessions were useful to attendees.

While more in depth and structured business support may have resulted in greater quantitative outcomes, qualitative findings suggest that the project did contribute to increased confidence, networking opportunities and updates to business plans or improved processes.

Conclusions

- Oceansgate Phase 2 was relevant and met the needs of businesses who leased units or accessed the Meet the Expert support.
- The capital build and business support strands of the project were unrelated and could have been

distinct projects, potentially providing more focus to Meet the Expert.

- The project met most of its output targets which was a success considering the challenges faced.
- Good project management and approaches were demonstrated on both the capital build and the business support strands.
- There is a demonstrable demand for specialist led workshop delivery in Plymouth and this could be taken into future interventions, though these could be more structured and in depth to generate greater outcomes.
- Value for Money is not possible to estimate for the scheme as a whole, but estimates for some metrics suggest that it did provide value and qualitatively it was well regarded.

1. Introduction

Oceansgate is a business unit space and Enterprise Zone in Plymouth that is undergoing several phases to development as part of the regeneration of Devonport Dockyard. Oceansgate Phase 2 encompasses a capital extension to the initial Oceansgate building and an associated business support project referred to as *Meet the Expert*. The Oceansgate Phase 2 project secured £2.63m from ERDF funding and is being led by Plymouth City Council (PCC). The Council commissioned Wavehill to provide a Summative Assessment of the project in line with the ERDF funding requirements. This report presents the findings of the evaluation for Oceansgate Phase 2, covering both the capital build and business support elements.

1.1 Background

The Oceansgate scheme comprises a business unit development in the Marine Enterprise Zone as part of the Plymouth and South West Peninsula City Deal. The ambition is to create an innovative high tech business hub in Devonport Dockyard with 25,000m² of floorspace and 1,200 jobs. The land was transferred to PCC from the Ministry of Defence in 2016 with preparator works undertaken ahead of the first phase of building in 2018. Phase 1 of the scheme has already been completed and the premises are occupied. Gap funding was necessary to build out Phase 2 which has been supported by the ERDF allocations which are the subject of this evaluation.

As well as providing new enterprise space, a programme of targeted business support was envisaged to target SMEs who needed support to address productivity challenges. Pop up cafés offering opportunities for businesses to meet with a dedicated team from PCC and business support providers were envisaged with follow up Information Diagnostic and Brokerage (IDB) support. In addition, a small grant was available to subsidise engagement of a business support consultant by the companies who had accessed the support. This was designed to move businesses through any challenges they faced or onto higher growth and productivity. In certain cases, wraparound support could be offered to some businesses providing the option to capture some 12-hour assists.

Oceansgate Phase 2 received ERDF funding approval in June 2019 and delivery of the business support commenced in January 2020. The build development had been part of the Masterplan for the site, and the Council team was already in place from Phase 1 so continued to manage the project, procuring a design and build contractor. After the design phase the Phase 2 build commenced in the summer of 2019 and was handed over in February 2021, following some delays to the programme. Since then, the business units have been let and the space is occupied.

2. Methodology

The evaluation adopted a mixed methods approach to reviewing the Oceansgate Phase 2 project, drawing on the Rationale, Objectives, Appraisal, Monitoring, Evaluation and Feedback (ROAMEF) policy cycle as set out in the Green and Magenta books.¹ The approach adopted also adheres to the requirements of the Summative Assessment Guidance.² An interim evaluation was undertaken in early 2022 to provide initial learning and insight as well as setting out the evaluation approach in more detail.

2.1 Evaluation Aims

The aims of the evaluation are to determine the extent to which the overall objectives and targets of the Oceansgate Phase 2 project have been achieved, and what factors contributed to this. It will consider how effectively the project has been managed and governed, awareness of the scheme among stakeholders and businesses and the contribution the impact that the operation has had, both for beneficiaries and more widely in the local economy, and an assessment of whether the activity and build has provided value for money.

As well as impact-oriented aims, the evaluation will review management, implementation and delivery of the Oceansgate Phase 2 project. Through a review of the processes developed and the approach of the delivery the evaluation will seek to understand what has worked effectively and what could be improved, as well as, importantly, what aspects of delivery have had the most impact. Through exploring the effectiveness and consistency of the approach, the evaluation will be able to support the project to refine its processes during delivery and inform the legacy outcomes of the Oceansgate 2 project when the funding period is completed. It will also be important should any objectives not be met, to understand why.

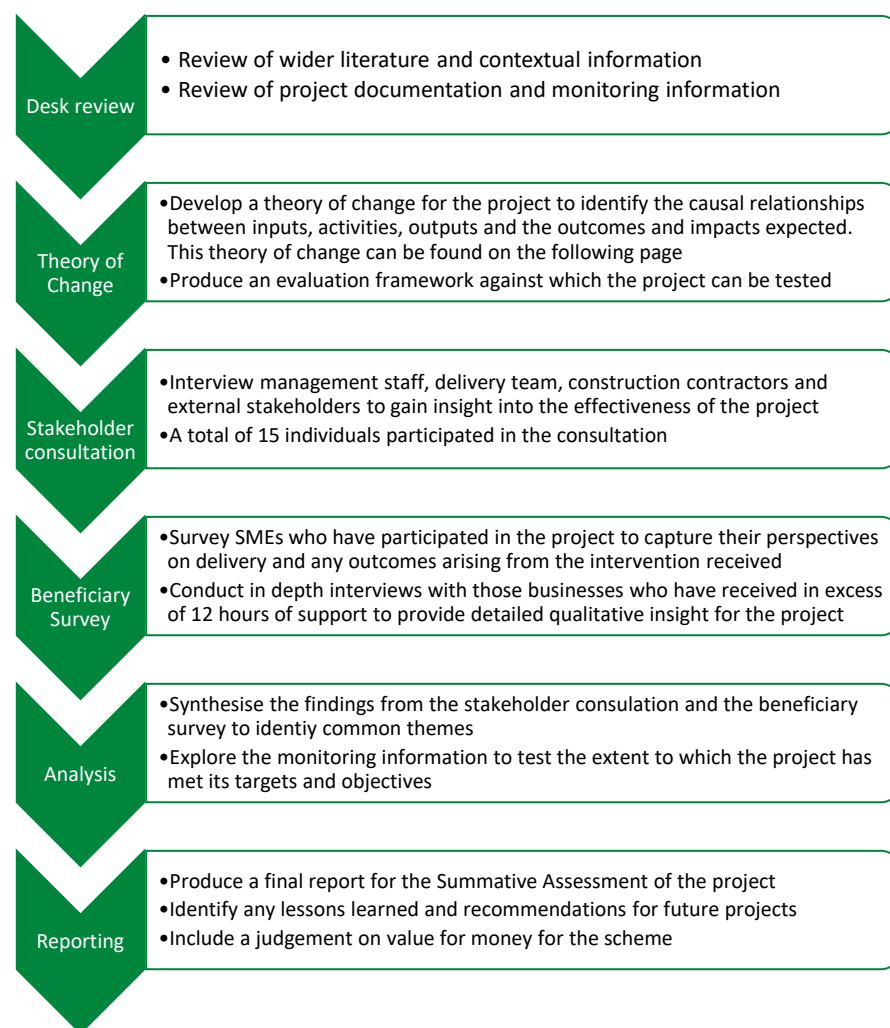
¹ Green Book, HM Treasury, 2020 & Magenta Book, HM Treasury, 2020.

² ERDF Summative Assessment Guidance and Appendices, European Union, 2020.

2.2 Evaluation Approach

The evaluation has been conducted through the following process.

Figure 2.1: Oceansgate Phase 2 Evaluation Approach



2.2.1 Survey

A survey was conducted at the interim (January 2022) and final (January 2023) evaluation periods. The interim survey provided 29 responses and the final 58 for a total of 87 respondents. This report presents findings on process feedback from both survey respondent groups together, and then splits the respondents when reviewing impact.

Theory of Change

Objectives →		Inputs		
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Enable economic growth in the transition area of the Heart of SW economy as proposed through the Government’s Productivity Strategy• Encourage long-term investment in economic capital, including, skills and knowledge• Promote a dynamic economy that encourages innovation and helps resources flow to their most productive use		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ERDF (Capital) £2,247,201• ERDF (Revenue) £389,692• Public Match (Capital) £1,695,256• Private Match (Revenue) £41,200		
Activities				
Construction <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Development of new grow on workshops to create industrial units and business space		Business Support <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provision of pop-up business café events to facilitate contacts with business support organisations• Provision of information, diagnostic and brokerage support• Grant funding to subsidise business engagement with support providers• Provision of additional bespoke support through workshops		
Outputs →	Outcomes 1 →	Outcomes 2 →	Outcomes 3 →	Impacts
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 100 Enterprises receiving support (C1)• 80 Enterprises receiving grants (C2)• 20 Enterprises receiving non-financial support (C4)• 20 New enterprises supported (C5)• 33% Private match rate for public support (C6)• 7 FTE Employment increase in supported enterprises (C8)• 10 Enterprises supported to introduce new to the firm products (C29)• 466m² of commercial floorspace built or renovated (P2)• >200 Enterprises receiving IDB (P13)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Greater awareness among supported SMEs of business support available• Improved leadership and management skills among supported businesses• Improved network support systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Changes to business plans and operational processes• Greater investment into companies• Improvements in staff training• Innovation and competitiveness in product or services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increases in company turnover• Increases in company employment• Improvements to efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increased local GVA in the local economy• Increased local employment (rate or FTE) in the local economy• Increased productivity• Greater awareness of the benefits of professional business support• Improved SME competitiveness and survival• Reduction in shortfall of commercial business space• Greater retention of businesses in Devon• Attraction and retention of specialist skills• Increased trade out of HotSW
	Construction <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Jobs safeguarded directly and indirectly in the construction sector• Skills and training improvements• Community benefit schemes• Businesses locate to Oceansgate• Clustering achieved at Oceansgate to encourage collaboration and shorter supply chains• More attractive area for investment			
Assumptions		Barriers	Risks	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Businesses occupy the new Oceansgate units• SMEs are able to engage with the business support• Support is relevant to the target businesses• Businesses implement the changes proposed through support• Appropriate networks for businesses can be facilitated through business cafés• Support received will accelerate growth• Appropriate businesses will locate at Oceansgate		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Awareness of the business support available• Recognition of the need for support• Awareness of the new available• Cost of relocating• Strength of commercial business support available• Capacity of networks to support the SMEs• Grants require match funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lack of suitable applicants and prospective tenants• IDB support is duplicating existing provision available• Development is not completed within the timeframes or budget• Businesses accessing support do not need it (high level of deadweight)• Businesses do not invest, employ more staff or change practices reducing long term impacts• Relocating businesses leave long term vacancies in other properties (high displacement)	

3. Context and Rationale

Summary

- Oceansgate Phase 2 was well aligned to the strategic context at the time of application and remains well aligned to subsequent policy changes.
- The socio-economic context in Plymouth is mixed, with strengths but also challenges, particularly around job availability, skill provision and areas of deprivation.
- The rationale for Oceansgate Phase 2 is strong, and clearly responds to a market failure addressing a regeneration need in a key area of Plymouth.
- Meet the Expert fulfils a service to SMEs that they might not otherwise be able to access.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a challenging context for delivery of the Oceansgate Phase 2 capital build scheme and the Meet the Expert business support programme.

3.1 Socio-economic Context

Plymouth has a mixed socio-economic performance with various strengths and challenges which are quite different to the Heart of the South West (HotSW) LEP area in which it sits. The working age population in Plymouth is above average (63.1% between 16-64 compared to 62.4% in the UK) while HotSW is below average at 59.1%.³ The rate of economic activity in Plymouth is also above average (79.3% compared to 78.6% in the UK and 78.5% in HotSW) and unemployment low in both Plymouth and HotSW (2.9% in Plymouth and 2.6% in HotSW compared to 3.8% in the UK).⁴ There are inherent strengths in manufacturing and health in Plymouth which represent 30% of all employment compared to 21% in the UK, with defence and education sectors also strong. As well as manufacturing and health, HotSW has a large proportion of employment in retail (16.6%) and accommodation and food services (10.8%). Productivity in Plymouth is near to the regional average (GVA per hour is £31.30 compared to £33.70 in the South West). The urban nature of Plymouth supports larger businesses with greater proportions of small and medium sized organisations than in the HotSW, though micro firms (<9 employees) still dominate (87.3% of firms in Plymouth are micro compared to 89.5% in the HotSW).

³ UK Population Estimates, ONS, 2020.

⁴ Annual Population Survey, ONS, 2022.

There are some challenges including qualification rates which in Plymouth are below average at higher levels (37.7% are qualified to Level 4 and above compared to 43.6% in the UK) and earnings are lower than average (£553.40 per week compared to £619.80 in the South West).⁵ Despite being a large urban area job density, the availability of jobs per working age member of the population, is low at 0.79 (compared to 0.88 in the South West). Recruiting individuals with the right skills and offering competitive earnings can be challenges facing businesses in this context. The number of workless households is high at 15.1% and many parts of the city are among the most deprived 20% in the country.⁶ Creating growing businesses that can support jobs is key to overcoming some of these challenges.

Business owners also face a number of challenges in Plymouth, the HotSW and elsewhere, including a lack of confidence and strategic direction, constraints on accessing finance and insufficient time and resource. Many of the challenges stem from a lack of expertise, from marketing and sales, through to internal IT systems and processes and legal advice.

3.2 Policy Context

In recent years, the UK Government has focused its efforts on tackling the UK's productivity gap. There is now a great deal of policy emphasis on raising productivity to balance regions and increase living standards. The Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) published the UK's Industrial Strategy in 2017, setting out a plan for creating the conditions in which businesses can thrive in order to create jobs, increase productivity and drive growth.⁷ The Industrial Strategy identifies several areas in which the economy could be improved by increasing support to SMEs and encouraging start-ups and scale ups, which is key to productivity and unlocking economic potential.

Since the pandemic, the UK Government has produced *Build Back Better: our plan for growth* which builds on the industrial strategy and identifies the opportunities for levelling up the UK and creating an environment which enables success.⁸ This includes infrastructure as a pillar for growth and encouraging competitiveness, with support to SMEs to upskill and grow. Both of these strategic policy documents are aligned to the objectives of the Oceansgate 2 project, which looks to create the physical and support environment to foster success.

⁵ Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, ONS, 2022.

⁶ Index of Multiple Deprivation, Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019.

⁷ The Industrial Strategy, Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2017.

⁸ Build Back Better: our plan for growth, HM Treasury, March 2021.

The Heart of the South West (HotSW) Local Industrial Strategy (LIS) further identifies the opportunities for clean and inclusive growth and improved productivity in the region which is echoed in the recovery plan.⁹ Supporting SMEs in the business environment is key to this, aligning to the refreshed Local Economic Strategy for Devon *Delivering Economic Growth 2020-25*.¹⁰ Since the impacts of the pandemic, Plymouth has also produced *Resurgam* in response. While these policies have been introduced since the funding award for the Oceansgate 2 project, the alignment with productivity improvements and infrastructure to address market failures remains consistent. The flagship areas of business growth and investment, and Ocean city infrastructure being two areas that are particularly pertinent for the Oceansgate 2 project strands. The designation of Plymouth as one of the UK's eight new Freeports is also providing opportunities for businesses located in and around the city, as well as creating alignment with additional infrastructure investment.

As part of this focus on marine infrastructure and business growth, the Oceansgate scheme comprises of business unit development in the Oceansgate Enterprise Zone as part of the Plymouth and South West Peninsula City Deal. The ambitions laid out in the City Deal have been furthered since the implementation of Oceansgate 2 with further growth in the marine sector and its position within much of the wider regional policy, from skills to inward investment.¹¹ Key to enabling the vision of a dynamic and strong marine sector is providing critical employment sites for growing marine companies and facilities that enable marine research, development and commercialisation activities. The Oceansgate project, and the second phase, with its complementary business support, continues to support the wider vision and ambition for the sector into which other strategies feed.

3.3 COVID-19

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on delivery of the business support activity and some effect on the construction of Oceansgate Phase 2. National lockdowns and the recessionary effects brought on by the unprecedented decline in economic output created widespread challenges for organisations who continued to operate. While the rationale for Oceansgate remained consistent despite this change in context from the pandemic, pivoting the business support strand to meet the needs of a post COVID-19 environment was required. With face-to-face meetings being restricted, Meet the Expert had to shift to online mediums.

⁹ Build Back Better, Heart of the South West LEP, 2021.

¹⁰ Plymouth's plan for economic growth 2020-2025, Plymouth City Council, 2020.

¹¹ Heart of the South West Skills Plan, HotSW LEP, 2021.

3.4 Rationale

The aims of the Oceansgate Phase 2 project are to address key market failures, including a lack of workspaces in the area and a lack of awareness among SMEs of the potential benefits from accessing specialist support. Evidence at the time of the funding bid recognised that there was a lack of mixed-use business space in the city, particularly aimed at supporting the marine and R&D light manufacturing sectors which are strong industries in Devon. Further, through specialist support to overcome key business challenges, start-ups and SMEs could move towards higher productivity and growth.

Phase 2 of the Oceansgate project builds on the marine focus of Phase 1 which is a central part of the Marine Enterprise Zone and aimed at attracting businesses in the marine supply chain to the area. Many of the accommodated businesses in the Phase 1 space have located there because of the proximity to larger companies such as Babcock and Princess Yachts which operate in Plymouth and support micro firms as suppliers. Oceansgate Phase 2 builds on the existing capacity and opportunity for the Enterprise Zone enhancing the supply chain, as well as offering closer links to academia. The site has also been designed to be a gateway for spin out companies and those accessing research and development support, as well as cutting-edge facilities and expertise.

The rationale for the Oceansgate 2 project remains consistent despite shifts in the wider context. Though it is recognised that demand for business units may have been impacted by the pandemic and people working from home, the nature of the units as supporting light manufacturing means occupant businesses are less likely to be affected by any changes in working patterns. In addition, the new workspaces offer a clustering opportunity helping to facilitate closer ties and networks between organisations encouraging a stronger environment for SMEs and young companies to interact and scale-up.

There is still evidence of need to support scaling up businesses, both as a policy priority and means to overcoming restrictions faced by SMEs.¹² With businesses not engaging with specialist consultants and private sector support, growth and opportunities can be inhibited. Better coordination between public and private sector provision of support is therefore needed to help businesses in this space. However, one challenge faced by the business support element of the project has been navigating the landscape of existing provision available in Devon and the Heart of the South West LEP.

¹² Going for Growth; Scale-ups Research, prepared by Ash Futures and the South West Growth Service on behalf of the C&IOS, HotSW, Dorset and Gloucestershire LEPs, October 2017.

Stakeholders describe the programme as enabling businesses to overcome barriers to their sustainable growth by helping business owners to identify the areas of their business that needed prioritising. The limitations in management capacity and skills to manage growth are the key barrier to growth that the business support element of Oceansgate Phase 2 is looking to overcome.¹³ Further, stakeholders also refer to the limited opportunities for networking and the benefits of this at sessions which can support growth. There are, however, several business support schemes in Devon and the South West which have similar aims.

Phase 2 of the Oceansgate development offers additional opportunities as both the workspace and business support provision are sector blind. This is in recognition of the desirability for a cluster of marine businesses but removes any eligibility criteria which might inhibit aligned businesses who may not directly operate in the marine sector. Too tightly defined eligibility criteria were one of the main criticisms of current business support offerings identified by businesses in the South West and the Marine Business Technology Centre already offers targeted business support.¹⁴ Recognising and responding to this is a strength of the project.

¹³ Business Support Mapping and Simplification Study <https://heartofswlep.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Appendix-4-Business-Support-Mapping-and-simplification-Study.pdf>

¹⁴ Ibid.

4. Build Review

This chapter explores the delivery of the construction of phase two at Oceansgate and performance against targets.

Summary

- Oceansgate Phase 2 build has met its output targets, was rated as BREAMM “Excellent” and completed to budget.
- The build was delayed by four months due to COVID-19, adverse weather and issues bringing power to the site.
- Relationship between the Council project team and the contractor, Kier, were strong.
- Early consideration of supply chain and design adjustments to mitigate risk was highlighted as good practice.
- There were some learning opportunities at handover where the contractor moved many of the original build team away from the project, losing knowledge and relationships and leading to responsibility for the handover being moved.
- Team resources were appropriate and good feedback loops and management processes were adopted showing best practice.

4.1 Aims and Objectives

Phase 2 of Oceansgate was designed to create additional business unit spaces to facilitate business growth and development while strengthening integration of the marine sector supply chain. As part of the wider masterplan for Devonport Dockyard, it is also supporting regeneration of the area.

The capital element supports the overall aims of the project to:

- Enable economic growth in the transition area of the Heart of SW economy as proposed through the Government’s Productivity Strategy;
- Encourage long-term investment in economic capital, including infrastructure, skills and knowledge; and,
- Promote a dynamic economy that encourages innovation and helps resources flow to their most productive use.

4.2 Funding and Targets

The Oceansgate Phase 2 project had a capital budget of £3.942m which was fully spent out on completion of the build.

The capital element only had one ERDF project indicator target against P2 for the floorspace being built and this was achieved.

Table 4.1: Target indicator for Oceansgate Phase 2 capital build

Indicator		Target	Output	%
P2	Public or commercial buildings built or renovated	461m ²	461m ²	100%

4.3 Design and Procurement

Phase 2 of the Oceansgate site adopted a design and build approach and early procurement prior to funding award in June 2019 to facilitate delivery by the funding deadline. Kier was appointed as the contractor with a design team at Plymouth City Council working with Kier and their subcontractors, AECOM, to ensure the vision for the building was aligned in the design and the cost managed. Prior to construction, enabling drainage works off site had been carried out by Balfour Beatty. Once design was completed and approved by planning in the Spring of 2019, Kier was able to commence building works following funding approval.

The design of the project met the objectives of Oceansgate, building on the masterplan for the area and created mixed use spaces suitable for light industrial sectors and tenants, particularly aimed at organisations in the marine sector or its supply chain. The project consisted of five units with large front facades to accommodate configuration to suit the tenant, as with interiors which were open to fit out by occupants.

Learning from Phase 1 of Oceansgate was incorporated with design refinements made to improve efficiency and mitigate against risks and construction challenges. For instance, the same external stonework subcontractor was used as Phase 1 to ensure identical matching of the properties. Similarly, while on Phase 1 the units were built with double height eaves, these were reduced on Phase 2 bringing both economies and gains for planning. Extensive pre-build work was undertaken by the contractor, including site surveys and detailed design, which helped to de-risk the project and produce a robust build programme. Stakeholders comparing with the first phase of the project remarked that this was a particular strength and exactly how a two-stage design and build tender process should work. Supply chains were also considered early to make use of local sub-contractors and where potential issues (such as construction work around the gable end of an existing property) were identified these were addressed through detailed programming and the expertise of the site team.

4.4 Management and Governance

All stakeholders agreed that the management and governance arrangements for the build project were very successful. Relationships between parties were strong and professional, enabling a good working environment, quick resolution of issues and effectively delivered outcomes. PCC were reported to have a lot of experience working directly on similar projects and being able to bring their own expertise meant there was no difficulties with translating information into layman's terms. They were also able to positively collaborate with the designers and teams at both AECOM and Kier. Lean project management was also employed ensuring effective decision making; a single client lead from PCC was able to operate independently of any council hierarchy for the project.

Additional benefits from the strong relationship were collaborating to overcome challenges. PCC have an office nearby that Kier were able to use for parking when staff were working from home to allow their site team to travel to work separately and avoid potential contagion during COVID-19.

Team resources were felt to be appropriate across all parties with routine update meetings and good flow of information, while individuals were able to pursue their own role and area of expertise. Stakeholders reported that it always felt like progress was being made and there were robust feedback loops in place to monitor cost and performance. The strong communication between teams enabled the vision to be achieved for the best price and with limited difficulties encountered.

The project management and governance of the build element of the Oceansgate 2 project therefore appear to be exemplary and demonstrate best practice in delivering a large scheme of this nature.

4.5 Construction

With effective management processes and an experienced team, the construction phase of the project was relatively straightforward and successful. Where challenges did arise, these were unforeseeable and not possible to mitigate. One clear issue was COVID-19 and the implications this had for sourcing materials and getting people to work on site, which caused some delays. However, resolutions put in place by Kier were timely and effective and helped to get the project moving. The other key issue that arose was around bringing power to the property due to difficulties in getting landowner agreements and easement for access. It was felt that in future, this should be agreed prior to work commencing to mitigate any delays. Finally, adverse weather also affected the build programme and caused some delay.

Overall, the project had intended to be completed in October 2020 and was delayed by four months until February 2021.

One area of learning identified by stakeholders was the handover of the building. Though it was noted that across the industry handover of sites can be poor, the contractor shifted many of the site team away from Oceansgate to another local project in the last few months. While a secondary team were brought in, the loss of project knowledge and relationships led to a poor and protracted handover which was then taken over by AECOM. This had implications on the snagging process and getting the outstanding issues resolved, though the aftercare team were regarded as good.

Post completion, a lessons learnt session was run between the relevant teams which provided useful insight for what could have been improved. While useful, it was reportedly hard to identify things that could have been improved on the build phase, with the handover being the principal area of improvement. The use of such lessons learnt sessions demonstrates good practice however and had been adopted on the first phase of Oceansgate which led directly to some of the actions taken on Phase 2.

4.6 Leasing

Prior to taking over the site PCC had already been marketing the space to potential tenants and property agents were used to showcase the units. The Council team were quickly able to identify suitable and interested businesses, including Plymouth City College who based their training units there as part of the South West Institute of Technology (a regional priority activity). In total, five tenants have leased the six units at the site, with several confirmed prior to the completion of construction and the property was fully occupied by June 2021. Stakeholders commented that the strong demand for the units demonstrated appropriateness of the design and rationale for developing more space.

4.7 Horizontal Principles

To support the horizontal principles of the ERDF programme, the Oceansgate project undertook several measures. For the building element these were to support sustainable development and open and fair procurement. As outlined above the new development achieved a BREMM rating of “Excellent” demonstrating its delivery of a sustainable design and use of materials. All building works also included Construction Environment Management Plans (CEMP) under the Planning conditions to minimise waste and to protect the amenity of the area and prevent unwanted noise intrusion to any nearby domestic premises alongside protection of habitats and species. The built premises are also accessible and promote sustainable transport including electric bike charging points in the bike shelter.

5. Meet the Expert Review

This chapter explores the delivery of the Meet the Expert business support strand of Oceansgate and performance against targets.

Summary

- Meet the Expert has met most of its target outputs which is a strong performance given the context to delivery.
- Pivoting some of the project design towards workshops has been successful in providing effective light touch support.
- Implementation took some time and was hindered by the limited resources available to the project team (a challenge that persisted throughout delivery).
- Management of the project was strong and helped successfully meet the outputs.
- Workshops and expert support were well regarded by participants, though there was some scope to improve coverage and potentially reduce the paperwork burden, particularly for grant applicants.

5.1 Aims and Objectives

Meet the Expert aimed to support SME businesses in Devon to become more productive by improving their knowledge and supporting them to overcome some barriers or key challenges. This strand also intended to promote an environment of trusted, vibrant private sector business support and networking within the city and Devon.

The business support element supports the overall aims of the project to:

- Enable economic growth in the transition area of the Heart of SW economy as proposed through the Government's Productivity Strategy;
- Encourage long-term investment in economic capital, including infrastructure, skills and knowledge; and,
- Promote a dynamic economy that encourages innovation and helps resources flow to their most productive use.

5.2 Funding and Targets

The Meet the Expert strand of Oceansgate Phase 2 had a budget of £590,445 though will have some underspend by the end of the project in March 2023.

The table below sets out the targets that the Meet the Expert strand of Oceansgate Phase 2 was to deliver against. The performance at the end of the project is shown below (for close in March 2023). Overall, the Meet the Expert strand has managed to deliver on its targets, despite the challenges of operating during the COVID-19 pandemic and having a backlog of grant awards. Staff reflected that the targets were originally realistic and achievable but the hinderances faced made them harder to achieve. It was therefore a credit to the team that they had been able to deliver by the end of the programme given the difficulties. The only output that in hindsight was not considered appropriate was delivering jobs (C8) with light touch workshops and small £1,000 grants not substantial enough to produce employment increases on their own, especially given the economic context.

Table 5.1: Target indicators for Oceansgate Phase 2 business support (Meet the Expert)

	Indicator	Original Target	Revised Target	Final Outturn	%
C1	No. of enterprises receiving support	100	100	100	100%
C2	No. of enterprises receiving grants	80	80	80	100%
C4	No. of enterprises receiving non-financial support	20	20	31	155%
C5	No. of new enterprises supported	20	20	23	115%
C6	Private investment matching public support to enterprises (grants)	£160,000	£41,200	£41,200	100%
C8	Employment increase in supported enterprises	7	7	0	0%
C29	No. of enterprises supported to introduce new to the firm products	10	10	23	230%
P13	No. of enterprises receiving IDB	200	200	167	84%

5.3 Design and Implementation

The project was originally designed as a series of activities:

- **Pop-up business cafes** were conceived to make use of available space in different venues and allow businesses to drop in to speak to advisors from Plymouth City Council and private sector specialists.

- **Information, diagnostic and brokerage** services were designed to support attendees of the pop-up cafes in identifying suitable private sector specialist support that they can access to overcome a particular issue.
- **Grant funding** of up to £1,000 to subsidise initial engagement of a private sector specialist to help the organisation overcome a particular challenge and learn to trust the use of consultants for other services.

Delays in resourcing the team to manage and deliver the business support strand, as well as capacity constraints caused by a need to immediately submit a Project Change Request (PCR) in response to an error in the figures in the application for match funding, led the project to not commence until January 2020, six months after funding was received. Consequently, the project and the initial processes that had been adopted were quickly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic without having had time to embed.

With the few early pop-up café sessions receiving little take up and limited internal resource available for this approach, as well as the need to operate digitally following the lockdown imposed following COVID-19, the project team pivoted delivery to workshops led by an external specialist or expert. Eventbrite was used to invite attendees to workshop sessions held on MS Teams with initial sessions after March 2020 focused on responding to the challenges created for businesses by the pandemic.

The business support strand began to market itself as *Meet the Expert* and delivered a series of full capacity one-to-many virtual sessions throughout 2020 covering topics including finance, marketing, social media and HR. The project team reflected that these were good adaptations and made it easier for business to access the support despite it shifting significantly from what was originally planned. Another key strength of this delivery model was that it allowed businesses to network and gain peer to peer support, though online restricted this to some extent.

The information, diagnostic and brokerage service element of the original design also changed as well. The project had always sought to be impartial when referring businesses on to specialists and so instead passively listed some options for consultants on their website to share with potential grant applicants. With opportunities for contact with some of these specialists at the workshop sessions, the businesses were able to determine the challenges they faced and what support might be appropriate. Applications for grants set out the nature of the challenge the business was facing and what the expert support would be able to provide in response. Support was available from the project team to the applicants prior to submission.

Grants were disbursed to successful applicants as proposed in the business plan for the project, though limited promotion of the grants and resource challenges with processing them led to few being issued early in the delivery.

Notwithstanding the implications of COVID-19, the original design of the project with pop-up café sessions was seemingly inappropriate to reach businesses who might be able to benefit from expert support. The pivot to workshops provided an incentive for SMEs to participate, see the benefits through this initial light touch session with an expert and then have the opportunity to access further support from similar experts via the grant (£1,000 which was match funded by the business to £515). This model maximised the resource by utilising external consultants for the workshops (generally without cost).

5.4 Management and Governance

Meet the Expert is led by a business relationship manager and an ERDF coordinator at PCC with other Council teams providing necessary support. The operation sits under the Head of Oceansgate and reports into the Economy Development Service under the Place Directorate. Given the business support aspect of the project is straightforward, the governance structure is little used, but key decisions can be taken within the Council hierarchy if needed.

Resourcing the project has been a challenge for the Council. As indicated above there were initially delays in appointing the team and when roles were filled, these were part time alongside other duties. During the first part of the delivery this led to some intense workload reported by staff. Though recruitment was attempted on several occasions to bring in additional resource and manage the project full time, appointed staff did not remain long in the role creating further resource challenges which hindered delivery capacity.

In February 2022 a new business relationship manager was appointed (the previous postholder having been part time and interim given the challenges with recruiting). With full-time resource and a renewed drive to deliver Meet the Expert and meet the targets, stakeholders commented that the project was transformed following the appointment. The business relationship managers leading Meet the Expert had benefitted from having agency to run the project as they saw fit and new appointment led to new engagement approaches to reach the target businesses as well as a concerted shift back towards face-to-face delivery. These adjustments to the delivery were successful and have contributed to the project meeting its target outputs. Stakeholders remarked that despite appointments there has remained insufficient resource to deliver the project and a lot of hard work has been put in from the team to get it over the line.

The staff reported they had a good relationship with the Department of Levelling Up as the funder, and that this helped with resolving any issues. It was frequently highlighted that the project team just worked through the paperwork required and got everything submitted.

5.5 Monitoring

Monitoring of the Meet the Expert project was simple and straightforward. A pipeline tracker was developed using Excel and data was input directly into the ESIF monitoring sheets following completion of registration forms on Eventbrite by participants. Given the electronic submission, it was easy for the team to determine eligibility and the same could be done for grant applicants. While these were manual processes, the relatively small volume of participants meant this was manageable within the resource available to the project.

A system of folders and evidence collection have then been maintained to ensure all the outputs can be accurately claimed. This was reportedly complex and was reliant on the knowledge of the business relationship manager and ERDF coordinator, but for the level of project and resource available, alternatives were not considered worthwhile.

Follow up communication was undertaken with businesses who had accessed grants to explore whether they had introduced any new to the firm products or services (C29) or created any jobs (C8). A declaration form is used to gather the required evidence though it was reported that getting wet signatures from participants could be a challenge prior to the allowance made by DLUHC for digital signatures. This is a common challenge across ERDF projects, particularly where interventions are light touch.

5.6 Project Integration

Meet the Expert was well established in the business support ecosystem in Plymouth and Devon, with networks and referrals through the growth hub and other support provision. Integration of the project with others reportedly improved with the additional capacity created by the recruitment of the full-time business relationship manager.

Though there was potential for the project to overlap with other services, including the Growth Hub, stakeholders generally felt that this did not happen and there was a distinction in offer and services, though the ambition and target audience of the project was similar to others. A Service Level Agreement was established with the Growth Hub and Meet the Expert worked closely with the Marine Business Technology Centre which both provided opportunities to make referrals.

5.7 Delivery

5.7.1 Engagement

Meet the Expert initially utilised a range of channels to market and promote the project, with direct contact through Council mailing lists most frequent. The workshops have mostly been filled to capacity, but sometimes demand has been lower, and it was an effort to push the remaining uptake, particularly during the pandemic. A reliance on word of mouth was particularly challenging in this context which along with a lack of capacity to deliver multiple workshop sessions in a month and drive marketing to all of these was cited as one reason the project was underperforming at the end of 2020.

In the latter stages of the project the team utilised the Council's internal marketing teams and colleagues in the economy team who have a local social media presence on LinkedIn. Stakeholders report this was effective in tapping into new networks. Several iterations of grant leaflets were created throughout the project for both physical and electronic distribution which reportedly garnered some interest and were publicised at a range of events and sessions in Devon and Plymouth. By being active in its engagement, the project was able to build a good pipeline and convert this into outputs. Those who have attended one session often come back for future sessions. Physical engagement and stands at business events and in phase 1 of Oceansgate also helped promote the project and led to several experts joining the project to deliver workshops, as well as participants. Using online channels allowed the project to increase engagement in Devon, and though this was an improvement the project still struggled with securing engagement away from its Plymouth base.

Stakeholders remarked that Meet the Expert could have had a better website and would have benefitted from having a website domain of its own rather than being situated within the Oceansgate site as there was no relationship from an end user perspective. This is indicative of the observation that despite the shared business plan and funding pot, there was very little to connect the capital strand and business support element of the project.

In the business survey, organisations were asked how they first heard about Meet the Expert. For many, they had come across the project online or following direct contact with PCC or affiliates (with others who were already clients of PCC).

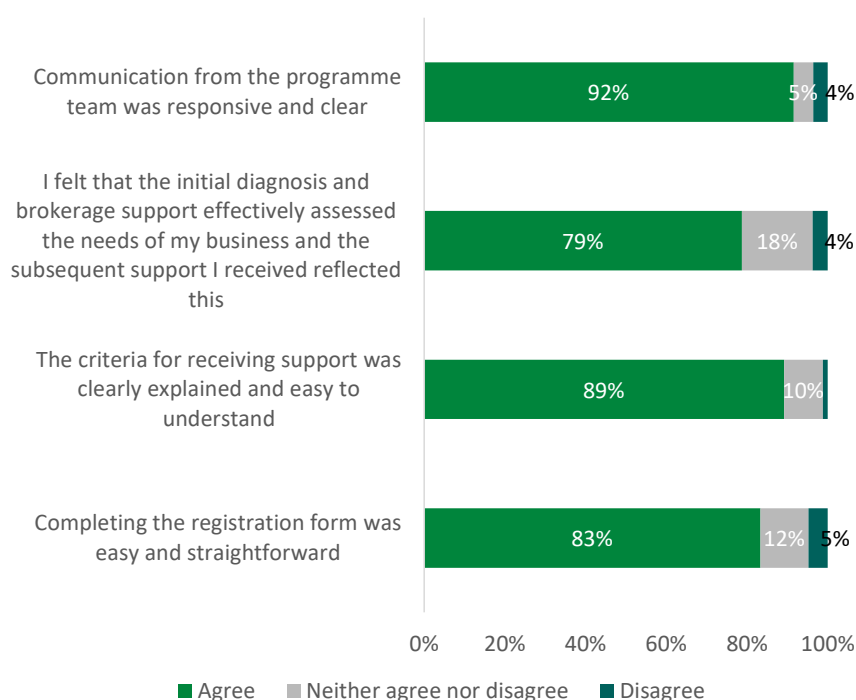
Figure 5.1: How did you first hear about Meet the Expert?



At the time of engagement, businesses reported facing a range of issues reflecting on the variety of SMEs and the workshop sessions on offer. Lack of specific skills (43%), cash flow and finance (40%), difficulties in accessing markets or customers (37%), lack of access to business support and advice (32%) were given listed by the survey respondents as the key challenges faced. For 45% of the SMEs surveyed, improvements to digital proficiency or marketing were what they wanted to achieve from Meet the Expert alongside 18% who wanted to receive expert guidance. Nearly 10% wanted to improve their networks through the sessions and 9% were keen to access financial support through the grant. Given the activities delivered under Meet the Expert workshops (with sessions covering financial management and accessing finance, marketing and customer reach as well as leadership and management skill development) and grant funding, Meet the Expert provided some appropriate delivery to respond to the client needs.

Reviewing the sign-up process, eligibility criteria and the initial business diagnostic undertaken during the Meet the Expert onboarding, surveyed businesses generally felt these aspects had been well managed. Across each area only five or less per cent disagreed that these had been challenging and 92% agreed that the communication from the programme team was responsive and clear.

Figure 5.2: Reflections of participants on project onboarding



While still receiving positive responses from participants, there were notably lower proportions reporting that the initial diagnosis had effectively assessed the needs of the business. One third (35%) felt that to a great extent the diagnostic was effective, and 43% to some extent. Eighteen per cent were not sure or had not had a diagnostic session. Stakeholders suggested that the depth of the diagnostic could vary between organisations (being led in part by the demand from the SME) and that this element was perhaps less useful given many of the organisations were made aware of the workshops and chose to attend based on the content they deemed appropriate.

Commented [CE1]: The workshops were set up in a format that covered IDB. So all attendees had a diagnostic session.

Commented [DT2R1]: This was self reported from the businesses who felt that they had not had one. As the stat was based on the question we can't change as it would invalidate the proportion given.

5.7.2 Activities

Workshop sessions have been delivered by independent consultants and specialists in the private sector covering a range of themes including social media and marketing, finance, bid writing and leadership. The group of specialists has expanded and the number of sessions that any one will lead depends on the demand for the service or theme covered and the organisation by the project team. Frequency of workshops has fluctuated during the delivery period but typically there have been two to three a month and since mid-2022 these have been face-to-face at Oceansgate in Plymouth. Up to 16 businesses attend each workshop which last for 3.5 hours with opportunities for Q&A and networking built in to each.

Most businesses attended one or two workshops (64%) with a further 17% attending three sessions. 31 businesses then attended sufficient workshops to be claimed for 12 hours of support. Of these, four had participated in eight or more workshops.

Over half (52%) of the supported businesses surveyed felt that the topics covered in the workshops were very appropriate to their business, and 33% somewhat appropriate. Only two per cent said the workshops were not appropriate, likely reflecting the self-selecting nature of participation though 12% were not sure. On a scale of 1-5 where 5 was high, the average score for usefulness of the sessions was 4, with 70% scoring the sessions as 4 or 5 out of 5. Those surveyed at the interim stage were more likely to provide a lower score (with an average of 3.68) compared to the later survey for the final evaluation (where the average was 4.18).

Stakeholders reported that the project was keen to return to face-to-face delivery as a means of helping to develop relationships and fostering better networking opportunities. Basing the sessions at Oceansgate was practical, though the single location might have generated geographic barriers and was a deviation from the business plan to include provision in Devon.

The ability of the project to support businesses with additional workshops offered some flexibility and could encourage broader business development. Though this allowed the project to claim some C4 outputs, stakeholders did remark that the hours captured were generally arbitrary relative to the usefulness of the support received. Given the meet the expert sessions were not part of a structured programme or journey, this may have limited the scope for businesses to grow consequently. Conversely, the variety of session themes available could also be seen to enable businesses to pick and choose workshops that best suited them and so made the support relevant.

Grants

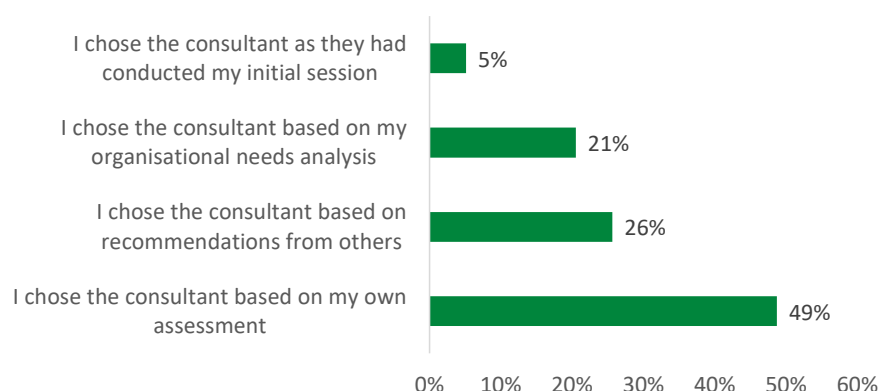
The grant aspect of the project to support funding for specialist consultancy support was regarded by stakeholders as beneficial to the project. It helped to give businesses an opportunity to go access support beyond the workshops and provide solutions to some of the specific challenges they faced. As businesses could choose their specialists, the grants enabled the project to respond more specifically to business needs.

The challenge of the grants however, beyond the match funding requirement which prevented some small businesses from engaging, was the paperwork, terminology and process required. Staff remarked that the forms repeated information already captured during onboarding and used complex language, particularly for young SMEs. To make the procedure more amenable to the businesses the project team often completed parts of the forms. It could also be challenging having to get companies to attain a quote before proceeding with the grant application, reducing participation or requiring lots of attention and reminders from the project lead. In some instances, the grant application process reportedly could take eight months from initial interest to the funding being issued, though this was balanced by some grants being awarded and cleared in two weeks.

Among those participant businesses who didn't pursue the grant, respondents suggested that they did not require the grant (22%), they could not commit to the match funding (20%) or they were not eligible (13%). Several were not aware there was a grant or were unclear on the offer.

Of the 80 beneficiaries who did receive a grant, 39 were surveyed for the evaluation. Selection of a specialist consultant to provide them with support was mostly carried out by the business manager based on their own assessment. Only a few businesses chose the expert who had led their initial workshop session.

Figure 5.3: Selection of Specialist Consultants for Grant Funded Support



Respondents were asked whether the expert support they had brought in using the grant had helped them to address their business needs. On a scale of 1 to 5, 80% gave a 4 or 5 out of 5 score with the average 4.2.

Staff reported that it had been challenging to get the grants fulfilled by the end of the programme with a lot of the delivery being undertaken in the last nine months of the project. However, that the team had been able to process the grants during this period and maintain eligibility was a key success for the project.

5.7.3 Improvements

In common with many other ERDF projects, staff highlighted the challenges with the paperwork required, both for getting organisations signed up and then to access the grant funding. While it was acknowledged that public funding needed to be accountable the low value of the grants made the paperwork disproportionate to the benefits they could receive. Forms often repeated themselves and it was suggested that all the information could have been streamlined into one form which collated all the requisite information. It was then also hard for the team to get responses to the follow up forms through which they were able to evidence outputs to claim leading to lots of chasing. However, as the results above in Figure 5.3 show, many organisations found the registration easy and straightforward, potentially suggesting that the project team had successfully been able to shelter some of the difficult elements from the beneficiaries.

It was remarked by stakeholders that though the interventions had been positive the scale of project meant it was unable to offer business support pathways and next steps. This was reinforced by the business respondents to the survey who suggested the project could be improved, with several suggesting the programme could have been longer. Meet the Expert was useful to help organisations resolve one or two of the challenges they faced but without sustained intervention the project was not going to generate transformative impacts. The size of the funding was always going to be a barrier and the paucity of other onward projects was also a factor, but future projects could consider how they improve the depth of support they can offer or link other programmes that offer the next step on the business journey. Some 63% of respondents reported that they were not referred on to further business support from Meet the Expert.

5.8 Horizontal Principles

The Meet the Expert strand of the Oceansgate project also delivered on the horizontal principles by supporting equal opportunities. Those recruited to deliver the business support project were recruited in line with Plymouth City Council's equal opportunities principles and the Council is an equal opportunities employer. All business support events were arranged in venues with accessible facilities and promoted to encourage a diverse audience. Any consultants who delivered activities as part of Meet the Expert were procured through the frameworks that incorporate equal opportunity requirements. Therefore, where appropriate for a low intensity business support initiative Meet the Expert included elements to contribute to the horizontal principles and several of the topic themes included support to organisations that would help their own sustainability or equal opportunities.

6. Outcomes and Impacts

This chapter explores some of the outcomes from the build and business support strands of the project as well as some of the early impacts that can be attributed to the scheme and its value for money.

Summary

- ~40 FTE jobs have been safeguarded during the build of Oceansgate Phase 2.
- £3.1m in GVA was created for the economy from the construction with much of this retained locally or in the South West.
- Phase 2 of Oceansgate was shortlisted for several awards.
- Meet the Expert has led to outcomes including increased confidence among beneficiaries, networking opportunities, changed business plans and process improvements.
- Impacts are difficult to determine this close to the completion of the project and there is limited robust attribution to Meet the Expert.

6.1 Building Outcomes

6.1.1 Economic Outcomes

The £4.8m build programme produced a direct impact on GVA for the construction and additional multiplier benefits through the supply chain. Using regional figures, it is estimated that £1.5m would have been generated in GVA through the build phase. A further £1.6m was generated in GVA indirectly through the supply chain, and with preferences for local suppliers (80% of subcontracted spend was in PL postcodes and ~95% of all supply was in the South West) much of this was retained locally. Many of the subcontractors were based in Plymouth, South Devon and East Cornwall further improving local retention of any expenditure.

Kier reported that there were four Full Time Equivalent (FTE) management staff on the project and the site team was typically around 45. Most of the team were either based in Plymouth or the surrounding areas in Devon and Cornwall. Allowing for the implementation and wind down of the project over the 17 months build programme, the build is estimated to have directly safeguarded ~40 FTE jobs for one year. A further 47 FTE jobs would have been safeguarded through the multiplier effect in the supply chain, and as above ~95% of these would have been in the South West. Spending effects from those employed during the build would have also helped contribute to further benefits in the local economy.

6.1.2 Social Outcomes

City College Plymouth have taken on several units and used this to support their training delivery as part of the South West Institute of Technology with industry leading equipment installed. The college are creating a new dedicated learning environment offering university-level courses in marine and engineering subjects, supporting this key sector in Plymouth.

Community benefits were heavily impacted by the pandemic restricting what Kier could do with local schools and other outreach activity. There was a school tour and an onsite charity raffle for Mind, involving the local shops. Skills plans were generated for staff based on the CITB benchmarks and Kier adopt their own initiatives such as a programme to upskill former military personnel which were regarded as positive. Several *Women in Construction* sessions were also run to support this important agenda and bring it to Plymouth.

The scheme has also been shortlisted for several awards including Constructing Excellence South West, Conservation and Regeneration Project of the Year, Client of the Year and Building of the Year and Project of the Year over £5m from Michelmores Solicitors. The site manager was also nominated for Construction Manager of the Year on the back of the scheme and completed their Chartered MCIOB accreditation following the project. As a Plymouth based management team, they were pleased to be able to deliver something important and lasting in their area.

Given the constraints, best endeavours were made towards social benefits and the impacts outlined demonstrate that where possible the scheme did generate some wider advantages.

6.2 Meet the Expert Outcomes

Meet the Expert led to a range of outcomes for the attending participants with the frequent responses from the survey participants outlined below. Figure 6.1 provides a strong indicator of the breadth of outcomes that have taken place among the supported businesses.

Figure 6.1: Meet the Expert Outcomes



6.2.1 Networking

As detailed above some organisations felt that the lack of ability to network was a barrier for their business. While some felt the sessions were beneficial in helping to create links or informal relationships with other businesses to a great extent (16%) many of the respondents thought this was only achieved to some extent (49%) and 21% suggested this had not happened to any extent. Proportions suggesting networking had taken place were higher among the later survey group likely reflecting the switch back to face-to-face delivery which naturally enables more peer-to-peer engagement.

6.2.2 Digital Marketing Support

Digital marketing support was one of the most popular workshops and an area where many of the businesses had suggested they faced challenges and for those who had received the grant used this to access further expertise. This was regarded as the most successful aspect of the Meet the Expert project with 42% of respondents citing this while 25% of respondents suggested the development of digital marketing tools or skills were the key outcomes from the support. Over 80% of the respondents also felt that their business's ability to market effectively had improved, as outlined in Figure 6.1 above.

6.2.3 Turnover and Employment

In the financial year before accessing the support from Meet the Expert the average turnover among the survey respondents was £308,439. In the financial year of or following the intervention the average turnover was £359,423, an increase of £50,983 from 62 firms. While this represents a strong growth of 16% it must be reflected that the effects of COVID-19 and subsequent recovery are likely to have affected these figures and there is no attribution of this turnover change to Meet the Expert.

Asked the extent to which they expect their business to survive or grow in the next 12 months, 75% of respondents suggested they would both survive and grow. Some 14% said they would survive and may grow with 11% suggesting they may survive. No respondents reported that they would not survive. A substantial majority (86%) felt that they were in a better place to survive following the support they had received.

As with turnover there has been some employment growth, with an average increase in employment of 1.4 Full Time Equivalent job per business.

6.2.4 Business Strategy and Innovation

As well as 53% of respondents reporting the quality of the products and services that the business produces having improved, 51% of the surveyed firms reported introducing new products, services or processes. Most (54%) of these were new processes, with 31% reporting creating new services and 15% new products. When asked whether they would have introduced these new innovations without the support from Meet the Expert, 52% said they would have but not as quickly, 16% would have introduced some and 12% would have introduced them all. One fifth reportedly would not have introduced any of these changes without the support from Meet the Expert. While these figures are self-reported, some participants have clearly been able to make changes to their business attributable to the intervention.

Further, 53% of the respondents reported that they had made changes to their business plan or strategy as a result of engagement with Meet the Expert. The specialist support offered helping to rethink and revisit how their business operated.

6.2.5 Confidence

As well as the quantifiable outcomes outlined, 27% of survey respondents suggested that their own personal confidence had grown as a consequence of the support, and they had a clearer vision of what they had to do for their business. As outlined in Figure 6.1 above, 66% of survey respondents suggested that their confidence as a business manager had also improved.

6.3 Impacts

With the Oceansgate site fully occupied there are additional economic benefits for business and job retention in Plymouth. One external stakeholder commented that the quality of the tenants was one of the strengths of Oceansgate, recognising the strong links with the MBTC and its position working with the Enterprise Solutions Service at the University of Plymouth and City College Plymouth. This presents an opportunity not only for the attraction of specialist skills and experience into Plymouth and the HotSW transition area, but also to develop and maintain the skills for local young people.

Impacts for the Meet the Expert are more difficult to ascertain given the scale of the project and number of participants, as well as the time that has elapsed between the intervention and the evaluation. It is likely that the improvements to business processes, greater confidence and the direct guidance provided through the sessions will overcome barriers and support business and local gross value-added growth, but this has not been possible to quantify. Similarly, over a longer time period there may be job benefits and improvements in business survival, as well as some SMEs expanding their services or products to export markets, though attributing any of this to the Meet the Expert project directly will not be possible. Meet the Expert forms one of many influencing factors which will contribute to business development to a various extent, but the lighter touch nature of the support makes it difficult to clearly state the impacts that it has, or will, have.

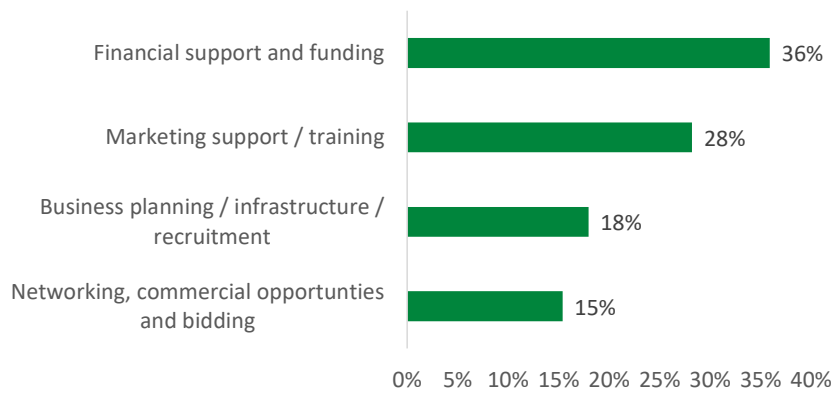
6.3.1 Wider Impacts

Stakeholders reported that the project had led to some wider impacts through its support of Community Interest Companies and Social Enterprises which will help with local community development. Other references were made to the benefits for businesses of being more aware of the support available and particularly the way the marine sector and supporting infrastructure and networks were joining up in Plymouth. Further, there were qualitative impacts of improvements to this part of the city which has traditionally been deprived and run down. Raising ambition and aspiration was cited by stakeholders as a potential wider impact that the Oceansgate development could bring for local residents.

6.4 Further Support

Asked if there was any further support the businesses still needed following the Meet the Expert intervention 49% reported that there was, while 39% were unsure currently. This likely reflects the nature of the organisations who received support and the lower intensity which may have resolved some issues, but others likely persisted or could be improved in future. For those who still needed further support a range of areas were given, most notably financial support and funding as shown in Figure 6.2 over page.

Figure 6.2: Further support required by beneficiary survey respondents



7. Conclusions and Lessons

Reflecting on the support they had received survey respondents were asked to rate Meet the Expert on a scale of 1-10 on the likelihood they would recommend the project to a friend. The average score given was 8.5 demonstrating strong advocacy for the project from the participants. As well as the positive regard from beneficiaries of Meet the Expert, the Phase 2 development at Oceansgate has also been considered a success in construction and outcomes.

7.1 Relevance and Consistency

Oceansgate Phase 2 has remained consistent to the strategic policy objectives of Plymouth and the regeneration within the Enterprise Zone. Since COVID-19 some priorities have become more aligned to some of the resultant policy including the *Build Back Better* national government strategy and *Resurgam* in Plymouth. Further, with opportunities to capitalise on the Oceansgate investment through the Plymouth Freeport, the strategic positioning of Oceansgate and how it can impact the area is growing.

Meet the Expert has met the needs of businesses to overcome some of the challenges they faced with in-built flexibility to respond to the demand from the market and therefore remains relevant. This has allowed the workshops and experts funded in the grants to adjust for the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic while still adhering to the original rationale of supporting organisations to scale up and upskill business managers. Projects of this nature are always useful in supporting business development and Meet the Expert fitted around the existing delivery from the Marine Business Technology Centre helping to provide more comprehensive coverage and eligibility for more businesses.

However, **the capital build and business support strands under Oceansgate Phase 2 were unrelated** and could have been two distinct projects. While the rationale for each strand was justified, the masterplan and continued regeneration of Devonport Dockyard including the Oceansgate property better aligned to the strategic context than the business support element. While the business support was successful and provided valuable services a separate and more comprehensive intervention might have brought greater value and delivered more intensive interventions aligned to the strategic priorities that could have led to efficiency improvements and productivity.

The relevance of phase 2 and Oceansgate generally has also improved since the onset of the project, with more strategic investment and development being considered for the dockyard area in Plymouth. On the back of the Plymouth Freeport, additional funding is being sought to inject into more regeneration of the local area and foster a marine cluster. Along with the Marine Business Technology Centre (ERDF project which ends in July 2023), Meet the Expert and the Enterprise Zone are going to be combined into an overarching Ocean Futures project which will sustain the legacy of the projects and opportunity to enhance innovation for the marine sector and supply chain. Phase 3 of Oceansgate will include an innovation centre to foster this and provide a central focus to the surrounding business units. Spin out and legacy projects from the Marine Business Technology Centre will continue to provide opportunities and attract interest.

7.2 Progress

The project has delivered successfully against most of its outputs including grants issued, match funding and new enterprises supported. The objectives of the capital project were to:

- Enable economic growth in the transition area of the Heart of SW economy as proposed through the Government's Productivity Strategy;
- Encourage long-term investment in economic capital, including infrastructure, skills and knowledge; and,
- Promote a dynamic economy that encourages innovation and helps resources flow to their most productive use.

While it is not possible to objectively determine whether Phase 2 of Oceansgate has delivered this, it has contributed to factors which will have a bearing on these objectives. The strategic development of the Enterprise Zone and Devonport Dockyard will help to encourage long term investment and future cluster activities around the innovation centre will build on the existing infrastructure to support innovation. All this will encourage economic growth and development.

The Phase 2 units were fully let shortly after completion with little marketing required for PCC. The strong demand was a good indication of the appropriateness of the development and confirmed the rationale for the investment.

7.3 Delivery and Management

Phase 2 of Oceansgate was well designed and managed by both the contractor and team at PCC. Learning from phase 1 was incorporated which helped to improve the delivery and added value was created by considering the supply chain early to maximise use of local sub-contractors. Management of the process was very successful with strong relationships and processes developed between the parties which contributed to collaboration and quick issue resolution.

There was a four-month delay to completion of the primarily due to COVID-19 and landowner agreements. However, these were unforeseen and given the circumstances, reasonable.

Handover of the site was one area that could have been improved, with the contractor team changing prior to completion which led to some disruption and delays. AECOM took over this process from Kier and outstanding issues were resolved, with a good aftercare team able to ensure the final project was delivered in accordance with the original specification.

Despite facing some challenges with implementation, early PCRs and limited resources, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, Meet the Expert has successfully met its targets. Given this context, this is a credit to the team who have been able to manage and deliver these outputs which have provided meaningful interventions to many businesses. Management of the project was considered a strength with the team able to balance the administrative requirements and deliver on the outputs.

Engagement improved during the project, especially with an enhancement in direct engagement and using networks and social media alongside physical promotion. Most of the businesses engaged were based in Plymouth and as delivery returned to face-to-face after the pandemic restrictions were lifted, the workshops were all located in Plymouth despite the project aiming to support organisations in Devon as well. **Provision of workshop sessions in Devon locations could have improved the spread of support** and allowed Meet the Expert to encourage a wider range of participants to engage with professional expertise.

Delivery itself, from diagnostic through to the workshops available and the grant support were all well regarded by the participants and the topics appropriate. Businesses received support in a number of areas and with flexibility of delivery could access sessions which were the most aligned to their needs. While there were some paperwork challenges for the grant funding element, the project team were successful in limiting the business exposure to this as much as possible, though there were still some difficulties with match funding and getting quotes. **Paperwork could have been streamlined into one form** to reduce the burden further, though this would have required adjustment of ERDF requirements as well as project processes.

7.4 Outcomes and Impacts

Meet the Expert has demonstrated that there is a demand for specialist led workshop-based business support in Plymouth. While it is difficult to demonstrate impacts and attribute them to the project, there have been some positive outcomes which will likely contribute to wider impacts for both businesses and contribute to the development of the local economy. For some organisations the learning from the expert support received could help them to resolve a direct problem they faced while for others the support will contribute to the continued development of the business and managers and how they behave or act to implement improvements.

While Meet the Expert has been a useful intervention to support these businesses, more structured interventions using some of the approaches demonstrated may have delivered greater outcomes and impacts. However, given the available resource and opportunity to reach a broad range of organisations in Plymouth using expertise available in the private sector and to encourage greater use of consultants was a prudent project design. As it was the outcomes have been achieved for some businesses, but it is difficult to demonstrate the scale of these and whether they have or will have an impact over a longer time period. **Outcomes achieved mainly relate to manager skills and confidence, updated business plans and new processes or products and services.**

The key outcomes for Oceansgate Phase 2 have been the completed and fully occupied business units which have supported the strategic goals and created some direct economic benefits as a result of the construction. These properties are part of a wider masterplan that will support regeneration of the Devonport Dockyard and catalyse future impacts.

7.5 Value for Money

Given the challenges outlined above with determining impact, it is not possible for the evaluation to provide a robust assessment of the value for money achieved by the project using quantitative measures. To date Meet the Expert has added some value to the businesses as detailed, yet whether this has been sufficient to deliver a return on the £590,445 of investment is not possible to determine. For the Oceansgate Phase 2 premises, while this has facilitated businesses to relocate and supported jobs as well as fostering additional spillover benefits from the construction phase itself, demonstrating that this has achieved a return on investment is not possible.

Instead, a qualitative assessment of the value for money achieved has been captured in discussion with the stakeholders and business beneficiaries. Key findings were positive for both the Phase 2 development and Meet the Expert. The property was reported to have delivered value for money by continuing the strategic development of the Oceansgate site which is a key regeneration area for the city and aligned to the marine opportunities. It also helped to prepare for and catalyse future investment to continue to expand and develop the area alongside other investments such as the Freeport and innovation centre. It is important to note though that Phase 2 is one step in a journey and wider programme of interventions that will transform the area, and this still has some way to go.

For Meet the Expert the value for money came in the breadth of the support provided to a large number of organisations who may not have engaged with any business support had it not been for the project. Cost efficiency and cost effectiveness figures based on each output achieved can be compared to their inflation adjusted benchmarks where available for ERDF-funded business support programmes.¹⁵ While for the C1 indicator the variance in nature of support makes any comparable figures from other programmes difficult to use, there is a median average of £12,418 which provides a general benchmark for support. The cost per participant business on Meet the Expert was £6,348 which is below the median average and slightly above the to the lower quartile benchmarks for the previous ERDF programme (£5,722).

¹⁵ England ERDF Programme 2014-20: Output Unit Costs and Definition, Regeneris Consulting, December 2013. Accessed at: <http://www.nwueu.ac.uk/NWUEU/PDFs/Regeneris%20Consulting%20-%20ERDF%20Output%20Note%20FINAL%20Version%2018%2012%2013.pdf>

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