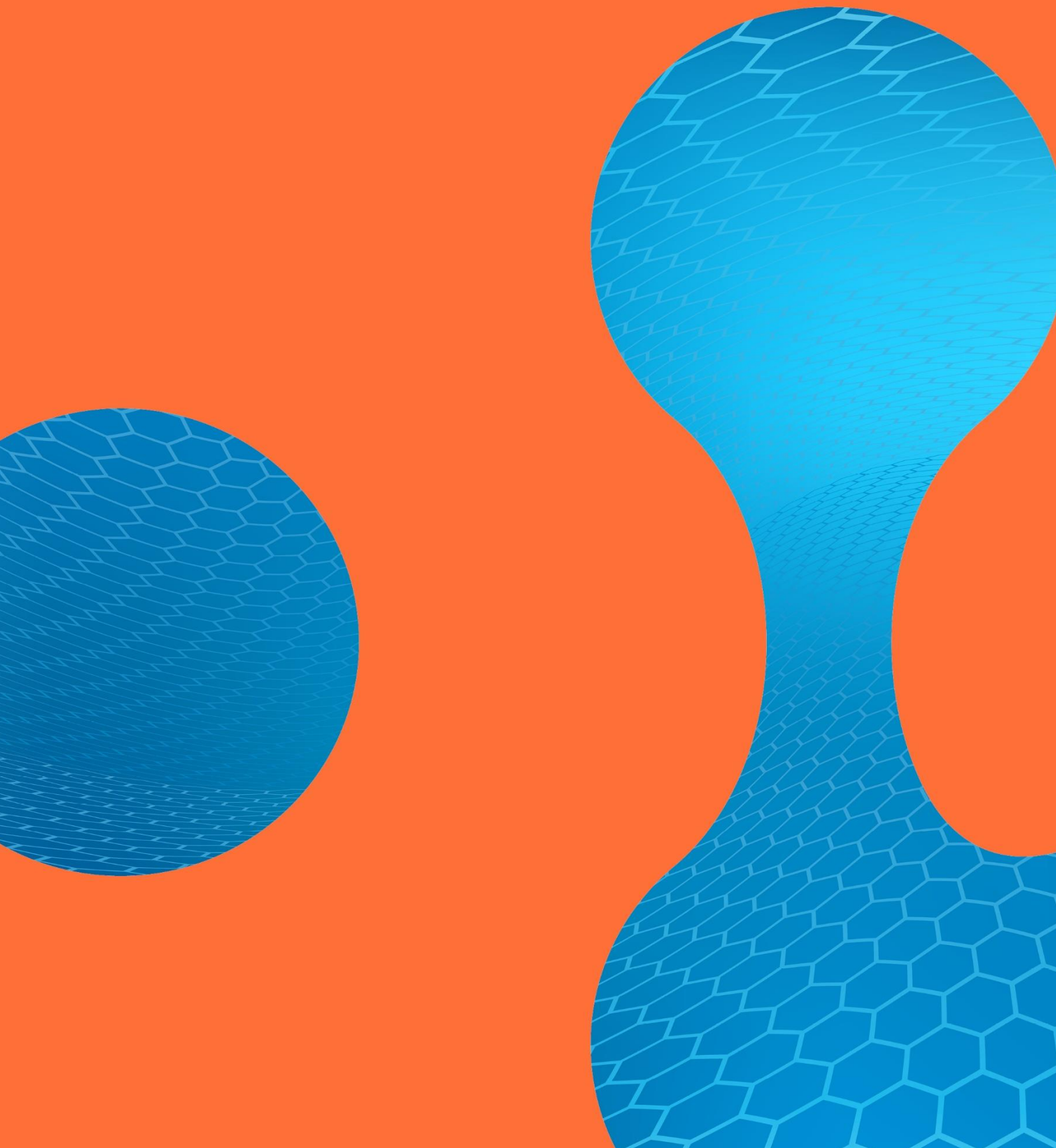




**A Summative  
Assessment of the  
ERDF funded Swindon  
and Wiltshire Digital  
Business Acceleration  
Hub**

**A Report**  
for the University  
of Bath  
May 2023



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the executive summary for an evaluation of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) supported Swindon and Wiltshire Digital Business Acceleration Hub (SWDBAH) led by the SETsquared partnership.

### THE CONTEXT FOR THE REVIEW AND INNOVATION SUPPORT

The Swindon and Wiltshire Digital Business Acceleration Hub's (SWDBAH) aim was to support SMEs in the development of digital tools and the embracing of digitalisation within their firms. Two workshop programmes under the Hub; Innovation Workout and Business Strategy Workout (formally known as Entrepreneurs Workout); ran from September 2019 until February 2023 to firms based within the region and incorporated topics such as customer profiles, value proposition and business model evaluations and testing.

This evaluation aims to assess the success of the SWDBAH programme in meeting its objectives and delivering its targets. The evaluation used a combination of desk research, online survey results from businesses, qualitative interviews with stakeholders and a review of economic and wider impacts and performance.

Strategic plans at national and local levels underpin the rationale and premise for the programme. National examples include the governments build back better plan for growth, levelling up programme and BEIS UK innovation strategy. Locally the programme aligns well with the aims of the Swindon economic strategy and the Swindon and Wiltshire strategic economic plan and local industrial strategy which focus on sustainable business development growth.

### BUSINESS EXPERIENCE AND IMPACTS

The headlines from the survey appear in chapter two. A review of the progress towards the programme's ERDF outputs and outcomes can be found in section three.

In terms of impacts:

- All participants were satisfied with the programme and all would recommend the programme in some capacity.
- The support was well received in particular the knowledge and expertise of the delivery team and the administration and management of the project.
- The workshop sessions were equally well received, both support strands rated the business model canvas highest.
- While many firms felt commercial benefits were not applicable at this stage, those who had experienced impacts were positive with new products and services most cited.
- The business model canvas and the testing of markets/business plans was the most important piece of advice/support received while access to external support and advice was the barrier most overcome by firms.

- For programme improvements, longer timeframes, more follow up support and smaller bite size sessions were some of the most suggested.

In terms of the realisation of programme outputs and outcomes:

- 102 enterprises (for C1/C4) have received support (85% of the target (120)).
- 30 jobs have been created by 10 enterprises (125% of the target of 24). The output 'Employment increases in supported enterprises' (C8) is recorded throughout the lifetime of the project. These impacts take time to come to fruition and firms have indicated their intention to create employment in the future.
- 24 enterprises have been supported to introduce new to the market products for target C28 (200% of the target of 12).
- 27 enterprises have been supported to introduce new to the firm products for target C29 (104% of the target of 26).

The estimated GVA of £6.68m resulting in a benefit cost ratio (BCR) of 1:6.6 i.e., each £1.00 of public investment generating £6.60. This is high value for money according to the DCLG (now DLUHC) Appraisal Guide.

#### PROGRAMME DELIVERY

The key points are as follows:

- The rationale and design of the programme were strong however COVID-19 made it hard to attract businesses to engage in strategy innovation when they were focussed on surviving the pandemic.
- Different approaches were needed to recruit beneficiaries, despite a relatively small budget, which despite challenges did help drive uptake and progress towards meeting targets.
- The programme delivery team responded well to COVID-19 by switching to online delivery to keep the project progressing, although this made networking and knowledge exchange harder.
- The workshop contents were well received by businesses and stakeholders viewed the sessions as successful, useful, and engaging.
- The project management was well regarded by stakeholders. The project ran smoothly with positive feedback on communication, administration, finance, and programme governance.

#### STRENGTHS

Key strengths of the programme were as follows:

- The stakeholder's belief that the course materials were strong was shared by participants. They particularly valued the introduction provided to the Business Model Canvas. It helped them to think about their business in new ways helping them to reimagine their value propositions and customer strategy and identify potential new opportunities.
- Participants welcomed the opportunities provided to peer review their business strategies, to test out their business ideas, assess risk, explore business model patterns and to learn more about the benefits of innovation.

- The knowledge and expertise of the programme delivery team and the relevance and quality of advice provided was rated highly by participants.
- The administration and management of the process, the ease of the application process and the analysis of business need were also considered to be a strength of the programme.
- The range and diversity of companies supported by the programme, many of whom were first time participants in this type of programme.
- The successful completion of four programme outputs (C5, C8, C28 and C29) despite the difficult economic context.

#### ADDED VALUE

SWDBAH created the following added value:

- The workouts provided beneficiaries with the opportunity, space, materials, and support to focus upon strategy.
- The Business Model Canvas provided a clear framework and starting point for businesses to adapt their business strategy. This is evidenced by the outcomes already achieved by participants as highlighted in Section 2.5.
- Six participant businesses stated that the programme had led to them to developing new products or services. Three firms stated that it had led to increased R&D spend and three stated that it had led to increased turnover.

#### LESSONS

Lessons from the evaluation are:

- Limited previous contact with local businesses coupled with a difficult economic context made SME recruitment very challenging. SMEs are often reluctant to give up two days to attend programmes. Further networking is required to deepen relationships and understanding with local SMEs.
- Further research is required to develop a stronger picture of the local business landscape, the most effective marketing methods and how to incentivise full business participation.
- ERDF geographical restrictions meant that the pool of eligible SMEs was limited.
- The focus upon innovation made selling the opportunity to businesses difficult. They cited other factors such as recruitment difficulties, business costs, supply chain difficulties and limited land for economic development as bigger factors negatively affecting their business.
- Increased business development programme competition requires further clarity on differentiating the programme from its competitors.
- There is an appetite for increased partnership working out with Swindon and Wiltshire to widen the pool of businesses, to share and consolidate best practice and to widen the range of opportunities. A narrow perspective on in region spending is seen as a barrier toward securing inward investment and talent acquisition.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evaluation findings Kada propose the following recommendations for consideration for programme delivery, programme design, and policy makers, in keeping with ERDF Summative Assessment guidelines:

### *Programme Design*

- Recording protected characteristics routinely and acting on data trends to assess and enhance performance on the equality cross cutting theme if this is a requirement and priority of future funding sources.
- Source and/or develop cross region business development opportunities using strategic partnerships to share and scale up best practice.
- Continue to refine marketing and promotional material to develop a clearer support offer and more clarity to prospective firms during recruitment.
- Approach larger businesses to explore whether the programme could be used to improve efficiencies/productivity within their local supply chains.
- Scope out with local inward investment agencies/stakeholders whether the programme could be used as an incentive for businesses looking to invest/establish themselves within the region.
- Developing environmental benefits such as business energy savings are built into the programme material.

### *Programme Delivery*

- A more streamlined administration process post-ERDF will enable greater focus upon networking opportunities and developing relationships with local businesses.
- Undertake a business intelligence gathering programme to build a stronger understanding of local business need. Identify continued opportunities for face-to-face contact with businesses using referrals and case studies to evidence impact.
- Shorter (half -day or two hour) and more frequent sessions focused upon the material that has the greatest commercial impact would assist with programme recruitment.
- Further refine programme material to reflect current business need and priorities.
- Further develop online programme material so participants can undertake activities in their own time. This would then free up contact time for the peer discussions, idea testing and mentoring opportunities that participants value most.

### *Policy Makers*

- No ERDF timeline restrictions allows for longer lasting account management with SMEs.
- Expanding the eligibility criteria for geographies from which businesses can be recruited would have increased the programme's impact. Enquiries were received from businesses which were not within the programme's scope.
- More streamlined admin processes post-ERDF will enable more focus on delivering even more impact.



# The Swindon and Wiltshire Digital Business Acceleration Hub in numbers

## Impacts

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**106**

Gross jobs  
(85 direct,  
21 indirect)

**£6.68m**

NPV GVA

**£1.00:£6.60**

Return on investment

**£9,970**

Per business supported

## Innovation Benefits

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**78%**

of businesses have, will  
or may meet recruitment  
and skills needs

**92%**

of businesses have or will  
develop(ed) business  
leadership/entrepreneurial  
skills

**91%**

of businesses have  
will or may develop  
a brand/marketing  
strategy

**100%**

of businesses have  
improved their  
growth/resilience  
planning

## Commercial Benefits

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**79%**

of respondents have or will  
prioritise target customers

**87%**

will or may secure new or  
potential customers

**83%**

of businesses have  
or will clarify their  
value proposition

**65%**

of respondents have  
will or may create full  
time jobs

## Service Received

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**20 of 23**

participants are likely to  
recommend the  
programme to others

**100%**

of businesses were  
satisfied with the  
programme

**96%**

of businesses rated  
the programmes  
administration and  
management as 'Very  
Good' or 'Good'

**100%**

of businesses rated  
the 'knowledge and  
expertise of the  
delivery team' as  
'Very Good' or 'Good'



# 1 INTRODUCTION AND PROJECT CONTEXT

This chapter introduces the aims, objectives, and activities of the Swindon and Wiltshire Digital Business Acceleration Hub. It discusses the programme's rationale and the sub-regional and national strategic context. The scope of the evaluation study, the objectives and approach are also covered.

## 1.1 PROJECT SUMMARY (OBJECTIVES, DESIGN AND DELIVERY MODEL)

### PROJECT SUMMARY

The Swindon and Wiltshire Digital Business Acceleration Hub (SWDBAH) was principally led by the University of Bath in conjunction with the SETsquared partnership consisting of the Universities of Bath, Bristol, Cardiff, Exeter, Southampton, and Surrey. The Hub was part-funded under Priority Axis 1(b) (PA1b) of the European Regional Development Fund. PA1b aims to promote business investment in research and innovation by:

*"Developing links and synergies between enterprises, research and development centres and the higher education sector, in particular promoting investment in product and service development, technology transfer, social innovation, eco innovation, public service applications, demand stimulation, networking, clusters and open innovation through smart specialisation."*

It also aims toward:

*"Supporting technological and applied research, pilot lines, early product validation actions, advanced manufacturing capabilities and first production, in particular in key enabling technologies and diffusion of general-purpose technologies."*

The Hub provided two free digital business support workshops both operating over a two-day period: the Innovation Workout and the Business Strategy Workout (formally known as Entrepreneurs Workout). These workshops ran from September 2019 until February 2023. They were open to firms based within the region and they incorporated topics such as customer profiles, value proposition and business model evaluations and testing. The initial programme duration was intended to run until August 2022, but a project change request was submitted to extend delivery by six months (this is discussed further in Section 3.1).

### WHAT WAS THE PROJECT SEEKING TO DO?

The Digital Acceleration Hub built on and utilised the experience of the SETsquared partnership and examples of other best practice projects. The Hub was initially intended to operate through face-to-face business support workshops but because of the Covid-19 pandemic the delivery team moved to digital provision. As restrictions eased face-to-face support was re-introduced but this led to limited engagement levels.

The workshops were based on Strategyzer's Business Model Canvas<sup>1</sup> and the input of several expert mentors for a combination of one-to-many and one-to-one sessions. The Hub and the workshops focused upon supporting participants with scale up plans, increasing revenues and 'recession proofing' their businesses. The Business Strategy Workout support cumulated in a pitching event to a panel of experts.

The Hub also focused upon supporting SMEs with the development of their digital tools and the embedding of digitalised processes within their firms. This aligned the programme with the priorities outlined in the Swindon and Wiltshire Digital Capabilities Strategy.

## 1.2 RATIONALE AND MARKET FAILURES

Research undertaken during the development of the 2018 Swindon and Wiltshire Digital Capabilities Strategy<sup>2</sup> found a 35% increase in the number of digital sector enterprises operating within the region since 2010. It warned that opportunities to further support the sector and recognise development opportunities had been missed. It stated that limited networks had resulted in a fragmented local digital market with significant geographical disbursement.

The main rationale of the programme was to promote the use of digital technologies and to facilitate the cultivation of networks and clusters of like-minded innovation firms through a targeted engagement and support programme.

It was hoped that a central incubator would connect these businesses and provide them with access to financial assistance and business support. The programme aimed to increase the number of local digital SMEs and raise the number of SMEs using digital technologies to enhance their productivity. It was hoped that this process would increase the amount of foreign investment within Swindon and Wiltshire.

## 1.3 EVALUATION SCOPE AND STUDY OBJECTIVES

This Summative Assessment assesses the programme against its objectives and highlights any lessons learnt for future programmes. The scope and aims of the evaluation were to:

- Assess the rationale for the project and whether it remains valid and fits with ERDF priorities and those of relevant local, regional, and national strategies.
- Assess the effectiveness of programme delivery including the support offered as well as programme management and administration.
- Review the appetite to invest in businesses given recent economic shocks.
- Conduct a quantitative impact evaluation of the performance including: a review of contracted expenditure and outputs and wider employment and GVA gross and net impacts.
- Undertake a value for money assessment.
- Identify lessons learnt and provide recommendations to improve operational delivery, beneficiary experience and project outcomes.

Following the inception meeting, a desk review of market failures and the strategic context was undertaken. Eight stakeholders were interviewed and are listed in Annex one. Discussions covered programme strengths and weaknesses, challenges, and lessons. 24 businesses completed an online

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<sup>1</sup> Strategyzer, [Business Model Canvas](#), Accessed 2023

<sup>2</sup> Swindon and Wiltshire LEP, [Swindon and Wiltshire Digital Capabilities Strategy](#), 2018

questionnaire (see Chapter 2). Performance against ERDF targets and economic impacts are considered. Beneficiary case studies appear throughout.

## 1.4 STRATEGIC CONTEXT

### LOCAL CONTEXT

The **Swindon Economic Strategy**<sup>3</sup> aims for Swindon to be the UK's most innovative, productive, and fastest-growing city by 2026 while growing sustainably, upskilling the workforce to enable businesses to compete and enhancing residents' quality of life. The strategy sets out the area's ambition and approach to growth. The key 10-year outcomes include an £8.4bn increase in economic growth and the creation of 20,000 new jobs, including 10,000 within its key sectors (pharmaceuticals, automotive, aerospace, banking, professional services and the digital economy). The strategy also highlights Swindon's current standing as third nationally for employment in the digital economy how this very important sector requires continued development and support.

The **Swindon and Wiltshire Strategic Economic Plan**<sup>4</sup> outlines the LEPs priorities and ambitions through to 2026. The Plan's five strategic objectives are similar to that of the Swindon Economic Strategy. They include a focus upon business development and the need to strengthen the competitiveness of the region's SMEs. It calls for improved access to specialist public and private business support providers such as the Digital Business Acceleration Hub. The plan also highlights the "need to deliver excellence in digital connectivity and cyber transformation to achieve business growth, innovative public services and influence societal change".

The **Swindon and Wiltshire Local Industrial Strategy**<sup>5</sup> for 2020-2036 highlights the LEP's ambition for its communities to benefit from inclusive and sustainable growth and the development of a world reputation for innovation, entrepreneurialism, and an excellent quality of life for its residents. The strategy places emphasis upon the importance of excellent business environment foundations with expanded levels of start-up and scale-up support and an increased proportion of innovation-active firms within the LEP region. It also makes reference to the importance of improving local digital infrastructure and exploiting the market opportunities created by Industry 4.0.

### UK GOVERNMENT

The UK Government's Build Back Better: Plan for Growth<sup>6</sup> placed a large level of emphasis upon investment in skills and innovation. The Plan noted that the UK has a lower proportion of innovative businesses compared to other advanced economies and it aimed to support and incentivise the development of creative ideas and new technologies. The Plan suggested that entrepreneurs needed to be well prepared to benefit from innovation and gain the confidence to invest in developing innovative new products/services. It identified continued government support for the accelerated growth and access to finance of SMEs including start-ups and scale ups.

The plan identifies the digital and creative sector as a priority sector for helping to drive the post-pandemic recovery. The plan cites the digital and creative field as a major UK success story and a critical

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<sup>3</sup> Swindon Borough Council, [Swindon Economic Strategy](#), Accessed 2023

<sup>4</sup> Swindon and Wiltshire LEP, [Swindon and Wiltshire Strategic Economic Plan](#), 2016

<sup>5</sup> Swindon and Wiltshire LEP, [Swindon and Wiltshire Local Industrial Strategy](#), 2020

<sup>6</sup> Gov.UK, [Build Back Better: our plan for growth](#), 2021

driver of innovation and economic growth. It states that the UK Government will work to ensure that the UK has a safe, fair and open digital economy and that they will grow the sector building upon the UK's competitive advantages in foundational technologies like AI and quantum computing through the National Data Strategy and the Digital Strategy<sup>7</sup>.

The Department of Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) published the UK Innovation Strategy<sup>8</sup> in July 2021. The government's vision is to make the UK a global hub for innovation by 2035. The key strategic actions include supporting businesses who want to innovate and ensuring that research institutions serve the needs of businesses and places across the UK. The UK Innovation Strategy claims that government structures and the public sector must learn from the experience of the Covid 19 Pandemic working more efficiently with industry to improve innovation. The central aim of the Strategy is to create the world's best innovation eco-system.

The 2022 Levelling Up Programme<sup>9</sup> sets out the UK Government's plan to increase development opportunities across the UK, realising the potential of all places. The programme cites developing a business-friendly environment, developing a new model of public and private investment and incentivising inward investment as key strategic aims. It includes a series of UK post EU successor funds including the UK Community Renewal Fund 2021/2022<sup>10</sup> and UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) with an emphasis upon community and place-based priorities. It includes a 'Supporting Local Business Investment Priority' that includes an ongoing commitment to:

*"Increasing private sector investment in growth-enhancing activities, through targeted support for SMEs to undertake new-to-firm innovation, adopt productivity-enhancing, energy efficient and low carbon technologies and techniques, and start or grow their exports."<sup>11</sup>*

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## CHANGING ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

The programme was developed and delivered during a period of economic turbulence that included several market shocks including the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, a cost-of-living crisis and the country's exit from the European Union. The impact did result in a change to the programmes structure, most noticeably the shift from face-to-face to a virtual delivery because of lockdown restrictions. This is part of a wider trend that has seen increased digitalisation in almost all economic sectors during this period<sup>12</sup>. Despite this uncertainty, the team were able to adapt the Hub and its support provision accordingly with its focus on assisting firms to 'recession proof' their business and designed to help local business navigate the difficulties caused by the difficult economic context.

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<sup>7</sup> Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, [UK Digital Strategy](#), 2022

<sup>8</sup> Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, [UK Innovation Strategy](#), 2021

<sup>9</sup> Gov.uk, [Levelling Up Programme](#), 2022

<sup>10</sup> Gov.uk, [UK Community Renewal Fund Prospectus](#), 2021

<sup>11</sup> UK Shared Prosperity Fund: prospectus - GOV.UK ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk))

<sup>12</sup> McKinsey & Company, [How COVID-19 has pushed companies over the technology tipping point- and transformed](#), 2020

## 2 BUSINESS SURVEY

This chapter contains the results of a survey of the business participants in the programme.

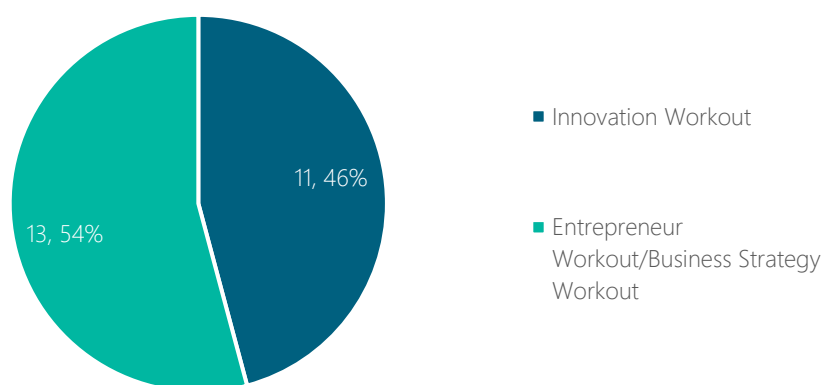
24 participants completed the online survey providing comprehensive feedback. These have been analysed and presented as follows.

### 2.1 SUPPORT RECEIVED AND MOTIVATIONS

#### Key Messages:

- Most participants wanted to gain expert advice and support with business plans and growth guidance.
- They also wanted the opportunity to reflect upon and reappraise their products and services.

Support Received



Source: Kada Business Survey, April 2023 (n=24)

Firms were engaged in two separate work strands under the Swindon and Wiltshire Digital Acceleration Hub (SWDBAH). 46% of respondents (11) took part in the 'Innovation Workout' strand and the remaining 54% (13) engaged with 'Business Strategy Workout' strand (formally known as 'Entrepreneur Workout').

Businesses who engaged with the Business Strategy/Entrepreneur Workouts stated that their main motivation for participating was to gain expert advice and support with business plans and growth guidance. Several participants stated that they had been directly approached to join the programme:

*"I was at the beginning of my new business journey and wanted to make sure I had thought of everything for setting up a successful business."*

*"I needed to update my business practices and focus on building a more resilient business."*

Participants in the Innovation Workout activities shared similar motivations for joining the programme. In addition to this several firms referred to wanting to reflect upon and reappraise their products and services:

*"We needed a refresh to look at new ideas for the business and to also understand other businesses' experiences."*

*"Covid caused us to rethink all of our services, and having found new ways to deliver them, we were interested in finding out if this would offer us some potential new market opportunities."*

The most significant growth barriers for participants prior to their involvement in SWDBAH were 'Lack of Finance and Investment (including for R&D and innovation)' and 'Access to External Support and Advice.'

Other barriers cited by firms included marketing/business development, funding, current economic conditions, proposition complexity and balancing projects against team size prior to the programme.

Post their programme involvement, 'Lack of Finance and Investment (including for R&D and Innovation)' remained the most cited obstacle to firms' growth, followed by 'External Factors'<sup>13</sup>. Other cited barriers post programme were marketing/business development, funding, current economic conditions, time constraints, proposition complexity and lead generation.

The barriers that saw the most significant drop in citations following SWDBAH support were 'Access to External Support and Advice' (five fewer citations), 'Risk of Failure' (three fewer citations) and 'Leadership and Managerial Skills Gaps' (three fewer citations).

Businesses were asked about other areas of support they had valued. Firms' responses were varied but there was evidence of further SWDBAH impact. Responses cited support with idea development, how to best utilise their time and resources, how to approach product development and market assessment, managing cashflow and how to access receiving external financing. Support with marketing, confidence and overall strategy were all also cited.

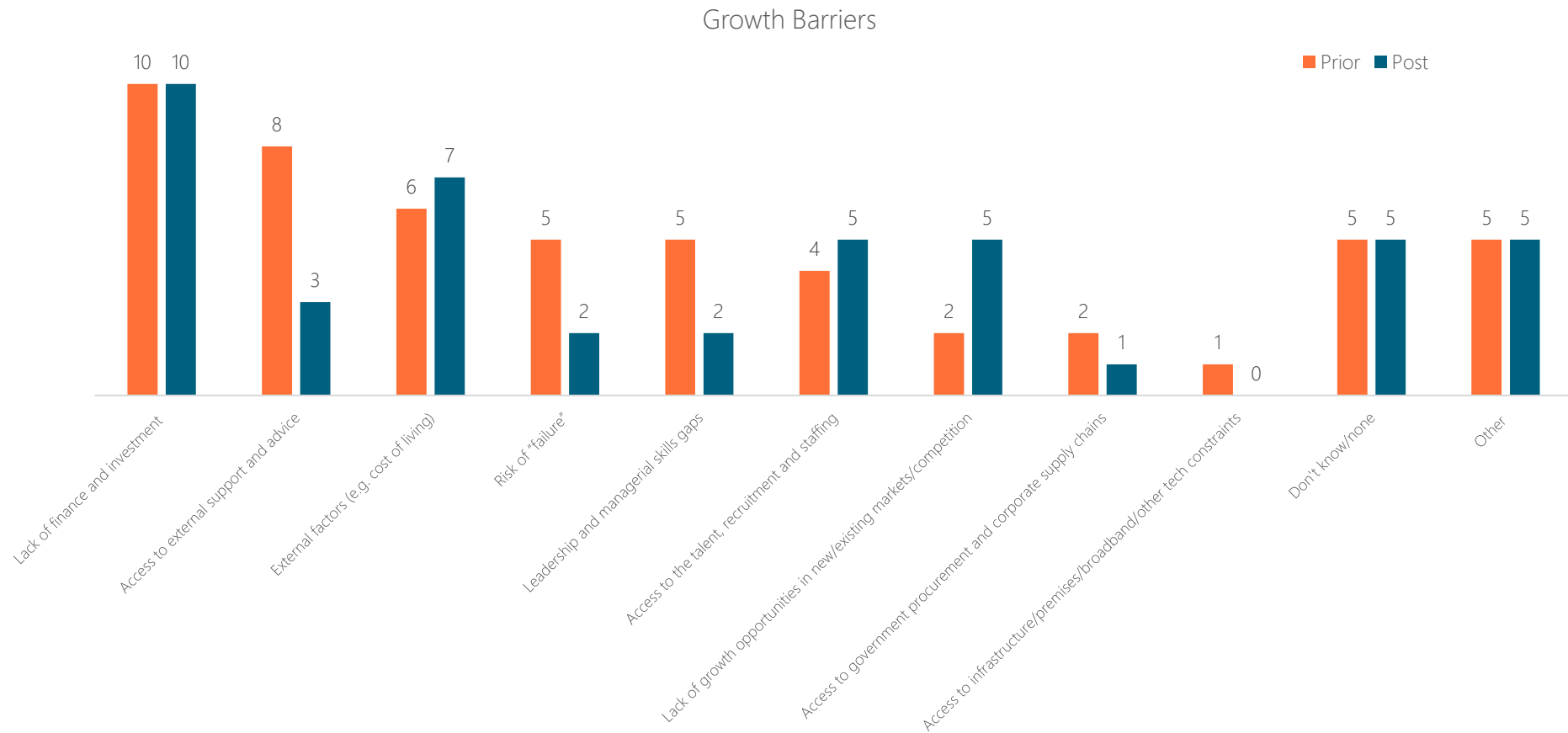
Participants cited the business model canvas and the testing of markets/business plans as the most important advice that they had received from the programme with references also made to concentrating exclusively upon one idea, adopting more analytical business approaches and not being afraid to change business models/approaches.

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<sup>13</sup> Regarded as outside the scope of the programme (i.e. cost-of-living crisis).

## 2.2 IMPACT OF BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT

**Key Message:** The programme had a significant impact upon participant's access to external support, risk of failure and managerial skills gaps.



Source: Kada Business Survey, April 2023 (n=23)

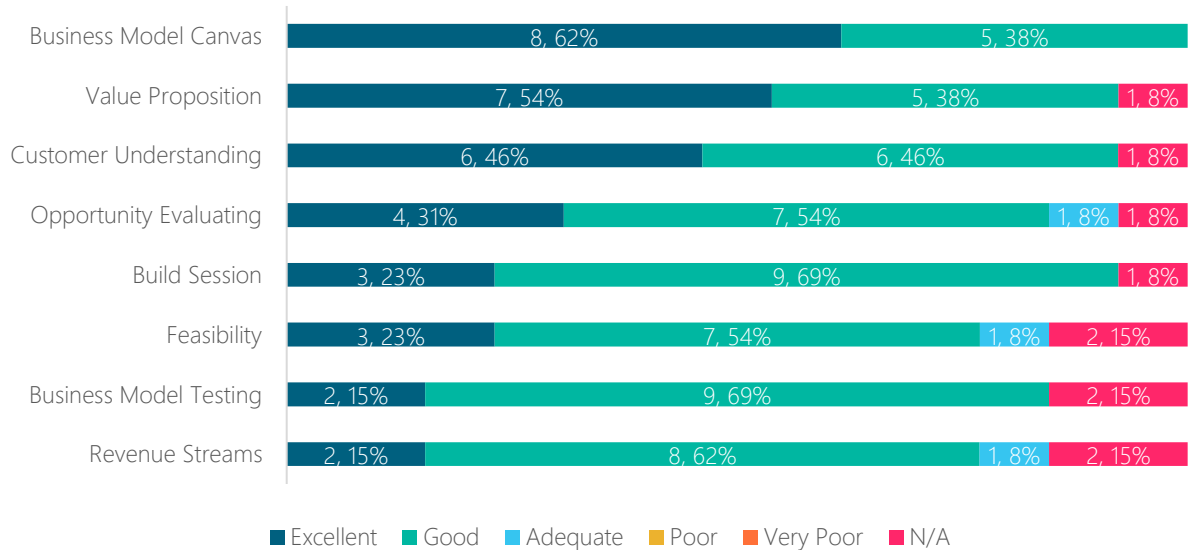


## 2.3 PROGRAMME DELIVERY

## Key Messages:

- The Business Model Canvas was the best received element of the programme.
- The knowledge and expertise of the delivery team was an important element of the programme.
- Further work is required to ensure that all participants establish useful connections

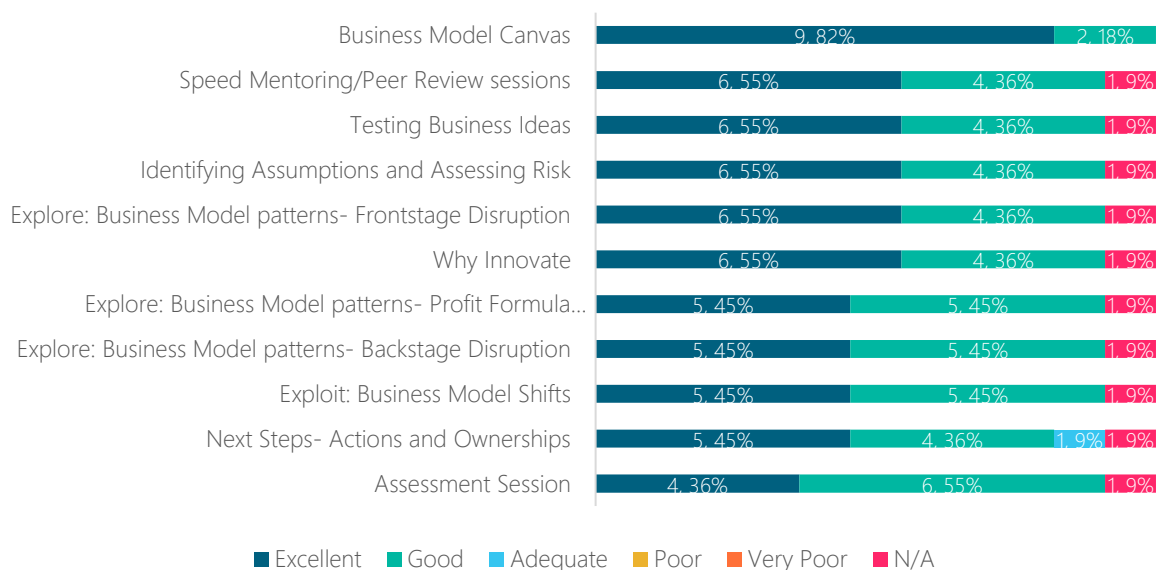
## Workshop Sessions Ratings (BSW/E)



Source: Kada Business Survey, April 2023 (n=13)

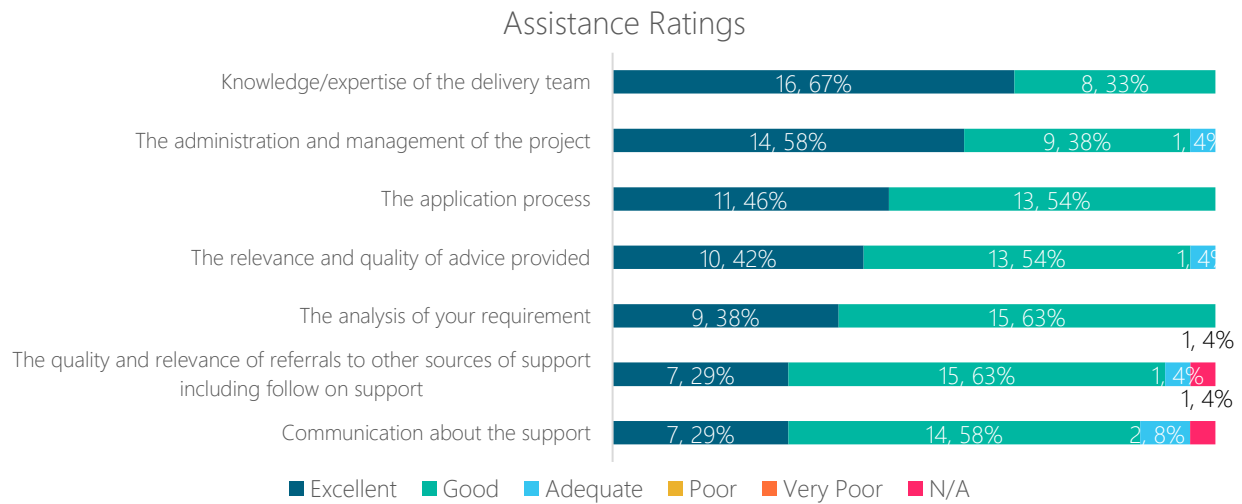
Firms that took part in the Business Strategy Workout and Entrepreneur Workout were asked to rate the workshop sessions. All elements of support were rated highly. The best received was the 'Business Model Canvas' with 62% of respondents (8) rating it as 'Excellent' and 38% (5) as 'Good'. No respondents rated any element of the workout as 'Poor' or 'Very Poor'.

## Coaching Sessions Ratings (IW)



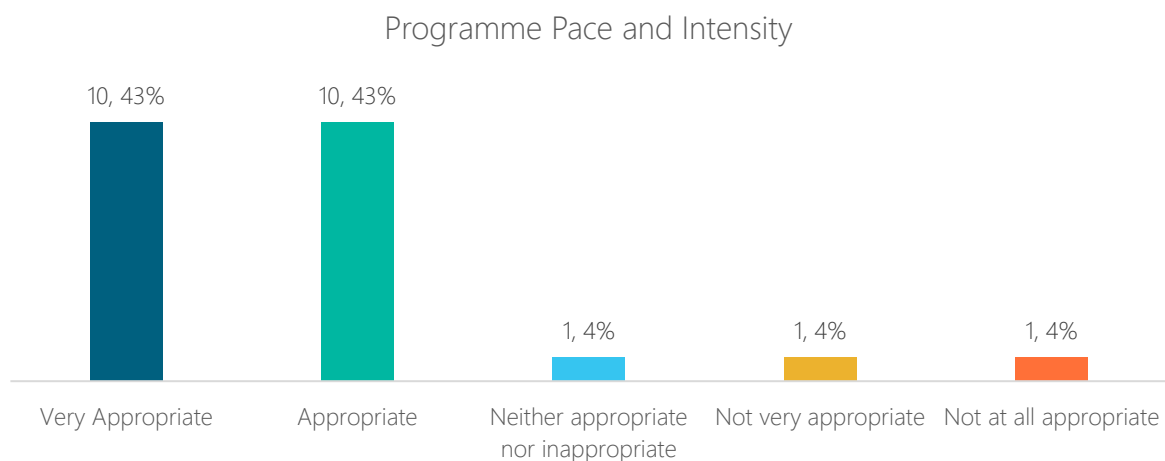
Source: Kada Business Survey, April 2023 (n=11)

The coaching and workshop elements for the Innovation Workout programme were equally well received. The 'Business Model Canvas' was the most highly rated with 82% of firms (9) citing their experience as 'Excellent' and 18% (2) as 'Good'. No respondents rated any element as 'Poor' or 'Very Poor'.



Source: Kada Business Survey, April 2023 (n=24)

Participants rated the assistance they received very highly. The most positive feedback was in relation to the 'Knowledge/expertise of the delivery team' with 16 respondents (67%) citing it as 'Excellent' and eight as 'Good' (33%). This was followed by 'The administration and management of the project' with 14 beneficiaries (58%) citing it as 'Excellent' and nine (38%) as 'Good'. No aspect of assistance received was rated as either 'Poor' or 'Very Poor'.

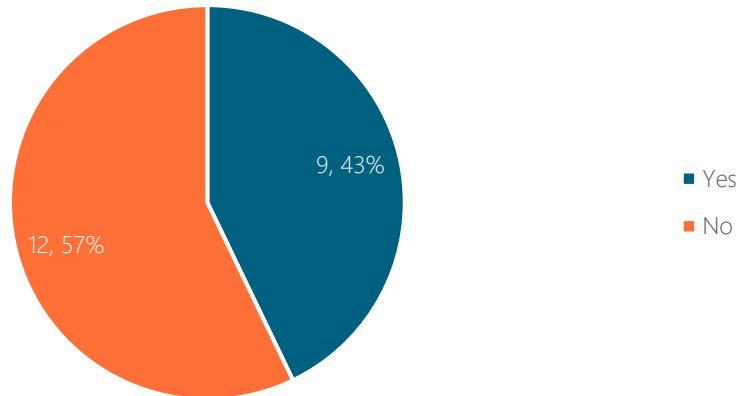


Source: Kada Business Survey, April 2023 (n=23)

The pace and intensity of the programme was generally considered appropriate with 43% (10) of beneficiaries rating it as 'Very appropriate' and 43% (10) as 'Appropriate'. Only two companies (8%) found it as inappropriate. Additional comments provided mixed feedback, some participants had no issues with the pace, but one felt it could have been quicker and one stated that they would have liked more time with the 1-2-1 mentors. The learning environment created by the delivery team was cited as

a strength. One participant asked for more entrepreneurship context and one asked for less forms and administration.

### Useful connections developed



Source: Kada Business Survey, April 2023 (n=21)

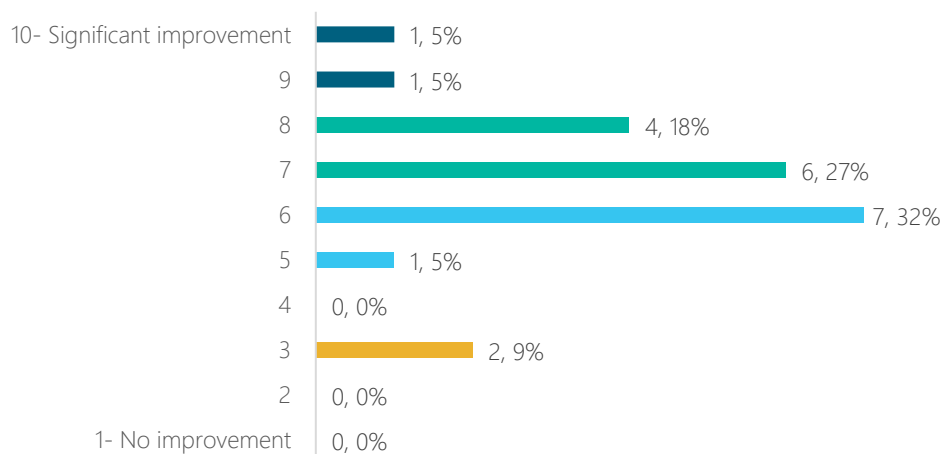
Nine participants (43%) stated that they have developed useful connections because of the programme. The most common connection referenced was that with other businesses engaged with the programme with participants welcoming the opportunity to share business ideas and continue contact post programmes. The access to university networks was highlighted as a programme asset as well as access to potential external funding opportunities.

## 2.4 IMPACT

### Key Message:

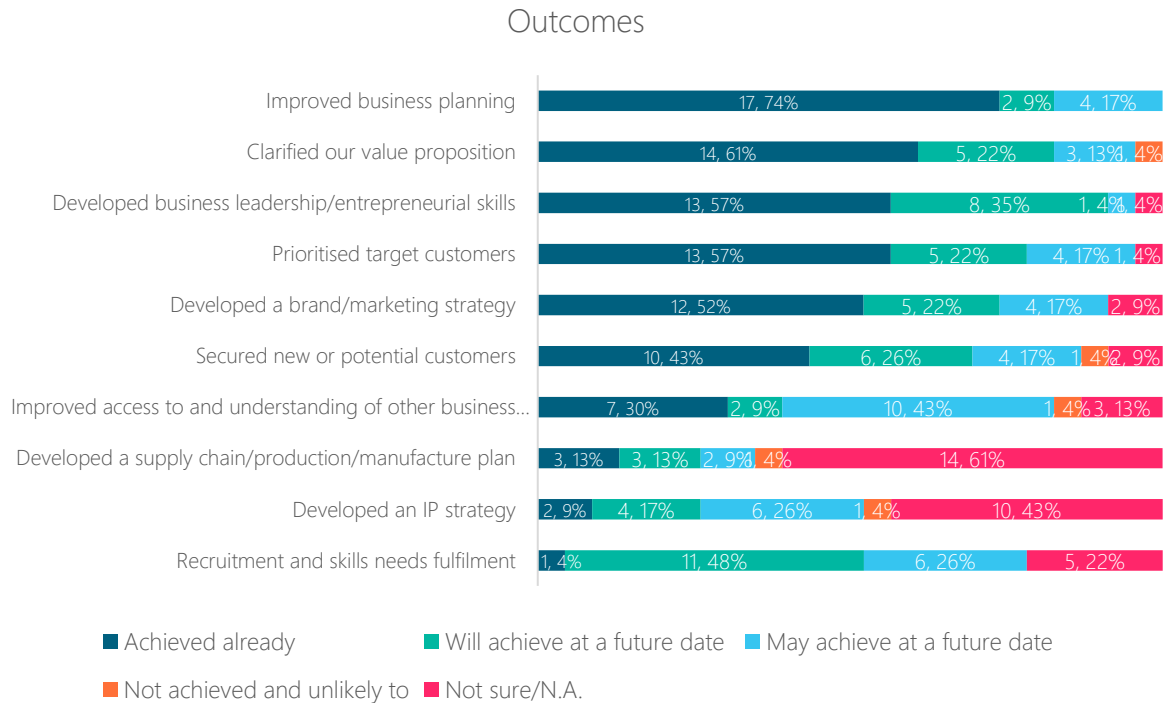
- Most participants believed they had improved their growth/resilience planning.
- Six participants have gone on to develop new products/services.
- Perceived additionality amongst participants was high.

### Improvement to growth/resilience planning



Source: Kada Business Survey, April 2023 (n=22)

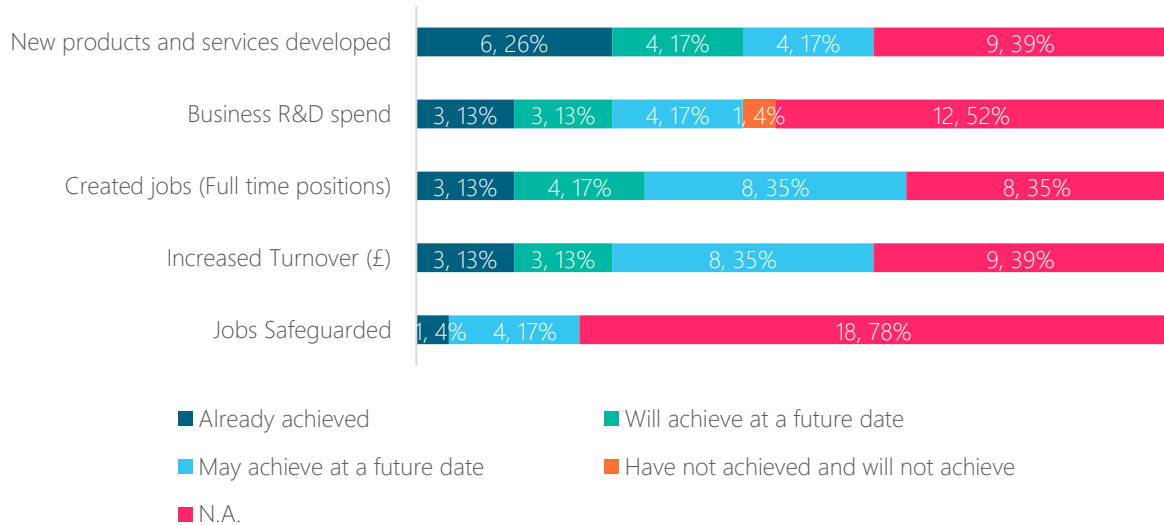
Two participants (9%) rated the improvements the programme made to their outlook to growth/company resilience as 9 or 10 or above. A further four (45%) rated it as 8 out of ten and a further six (27%) rated it as 7 out of 10. The remaining six (46%) firms rated it as between 3 and 6 out of 10. Across all respondents the average improvement score was 7 out of 10.



Source: Kada Business Survey, April 2023 (n=23)

'Improved business planning' was achieved by 17 (74%) of participants. Two (9%) further participants believed that they would achieve it in future and four (17%) stated that they may achieve it. 13 participants stated that they had developed their leadership/entrepreneurial skills and 13 (57%) participants said that they had already started to prioritise their target customers. The lowest impact was made upon recruitment and skills needs fulfilment, developing IP strategies and developing supply chain/production/manufacturing plans.

## Commercial Impacts

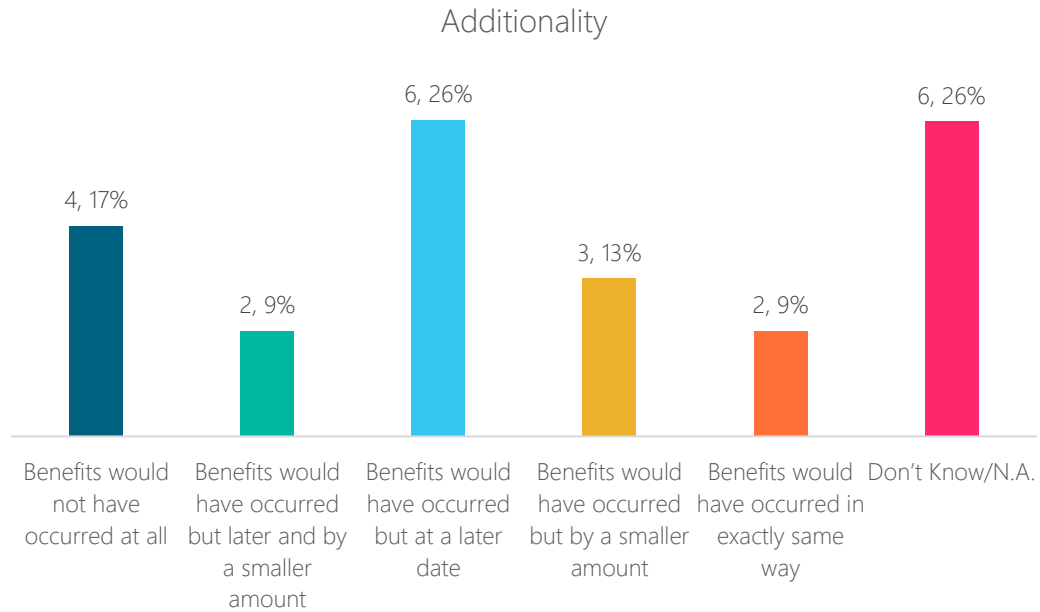


Source: Kada Business Survey, April 2023 (n=23)

Many respondents felt commercial impacts from the programme had not been applicable to their business. Of those who did respond, the sentiment was positive. The most cited commercial impact was the development of new products and services with six (26% of businesses) stating that they had already achieved this, four (17%) expecting achieve this in future and 4 (17%) stating that they may be achieved. 15 (65%) of firms have already, expect to, or may create full time positions because of the support they received from the programme.

Some firms provided further detail to the commercial impact of SWDBAH:

- An estimated 20 jobs had been created or were anticipated by six firms and one firm stated that it had safeguarded all of their jobs.
- Five firms cited turnover increases which included a £5000, a £50,000, a 10% increase and a 300% increase.
- Three businesses referenced increased R&D spend of £2500, £120,000 and £1,600,000 respectively.



Source: Kada Business Survey, April 2023 (n=23)

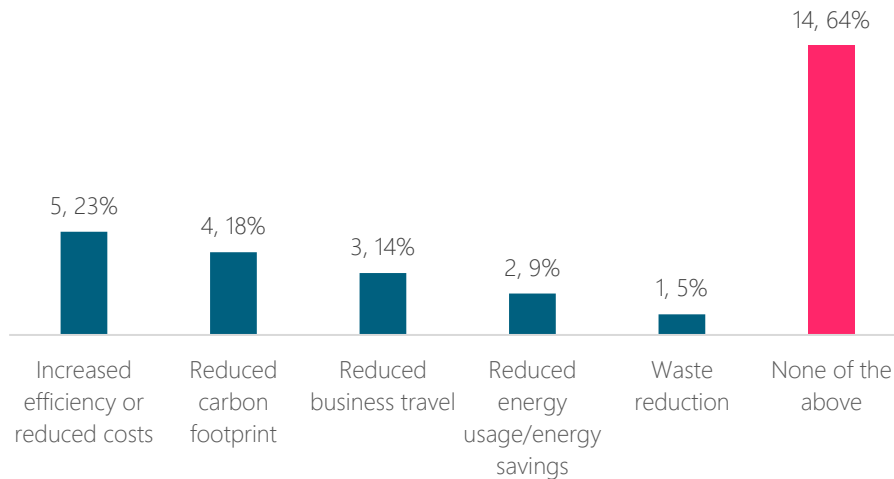
Looking at additionality, only two participants (9%) cited 'deadweight' i.e. the benefits would have occurred in exactly the same way without the programme. Four claimed pure additionality i.e. the benefits would not have occurred at all without participation in the programme. Of the remaining firms, six (26%) stated that the benefits would have occurred but at a later date, three (13%) stated that they would have occurred but by a smaller amount and two (9%) stated that they would have occurred later and by a smaller amount. Six (26%) firms were unsure or felt the question was not applicable.

## 2.5 PROGRAMME ASSESSMENT

## Key Messages:

- 64% of participants saw no wider environmental benefit from programme attendance.
- 87% were satisfied/very satisfied with the programme and most would recommend it to peers.
- Participants would welcome shorter bitesize sessions.

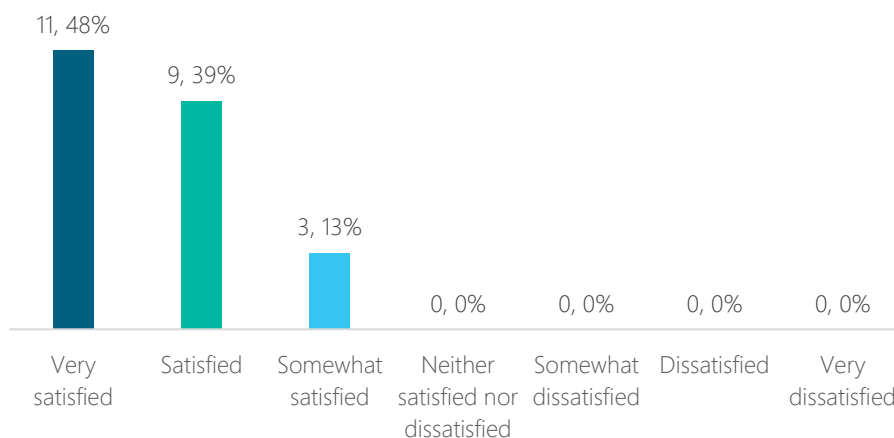
## Wider environmental benefits



Source: Kada Business Survey, April 2023 (n=22)

Most respondents advised they did not experience any wider environmental benefits as a result of the SWDBAH programme. Of those that did the most common response was increased efficiency or reduced costs (5,23%) followed by a reduced carbon footprint (4,18%).

## Overall Satisfaction



Source: Kada Business Survey, April 2023 (n=23)

Overall satisfaction responses for the programme were high. 100% respondents were satisfied with the support received, 11 (48%) respondents were 'Very satisfied', nine (39%) were 'Satisfied' and the remaining three (13%) were 'Somewhat satisfied'.

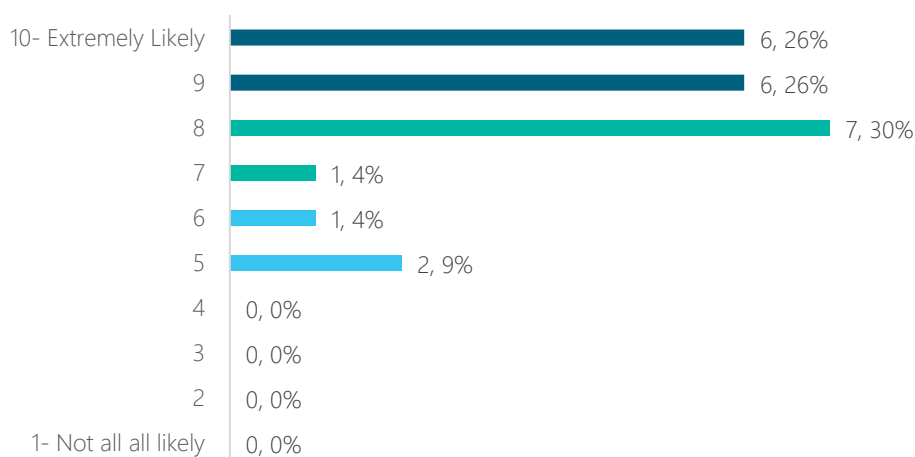


## IMPROVEMENTS AND THE FUTURE

Several firms stated that they would like to see the programme running over a longer period, two stated that they would like it broken down into smaller 'bitesize' sessions and two stated that they would like more follow-up support to review progress.

The most cited suggested improvement focused upon increasing the size and variety of the cohort of businesses to increase networking opportunities and to facilitate grouping businesses by type, focus or sector. Other suggested improvements included reducing the amount of paperwork and administration, restructuring the content to meet all levels of development and reducing the focus on investment raising and on product-based businesses.

Likelihood of recommending the programme



Source: Kada Business Survey, April 2023 (n=23)

All respondents indicated they would be likely to recommend the SWDBAH programme to others. 12 (52%) stated that they were 'Very likely' or 'Extremely likely' to recommend the programme.

### 3 PROJECT PERFORMANCE

This chapter focuses on the performance of the Swindon and Wiltshire Digital Business Acceleration Hub. It looks at finance and outputs and considers and presents the economic benefits. It concludes with an assessment of value for money.

The information has been provided by the project team at the University of Bath.

#### 3.1 CONTRACTED SPEND

##### Key Messages:

- The project is projected to spend 90% of its allocation.
- A project change request was submitted because of Covid related project issues.

The spending profile at the evaluation reference date and projections to the end of the project are illustrated in the following table.

Expenditure	Amount in most recent Funding Agreement	Amount following project change request	Total achieved at time of evaluation	% of target	Projected to be achieved at Project Closure	% of target
Total ERDF Expenditure	£1,016,956.00	£1,013,459.48	£913,459.48	90%	£913,459.48	90%

Source: University of Bath Monitoring Data

The delivery team did submit a project change request. This was as a result of a late start to delivery and a refocus of the value proposition from face-to-face workshops to online delivery and the respective marketing activities associated with this. This reduced the expenditure profile by £3,496 as a result, which was attributed to reduced consultancy and marketing costs, changes to staff profiles/vacancies and a transition to online programme delivery.

The programme timescales were also adjusted for SWDBAH to ensure enough time for output targets to be met. The outputs themselves were not changed with the exception of C28 (Number of enterprises supported to introduce new to the market products) which were increased by 100% as the target had already been met at the time of the PCR and more were anticipated to be experienced before the programme end.

The project is projected to spend 90% (£913,459.48) of its allocation of £1,013,459.48.

## 3.2 CONTRACTED OUTPUTS

## Key Messages:

- The project has exceeded its C5, C8, C28 and C29 output targets.
- The project has not met its C1, C2 and C26 targets.

At the time of evaluation the headlines are as follows:

- 102 enterprises (for C1/C4) have received support (85% of the target (120)).
- 30 jobs have been created by 10 enterprises (125% of the target of 24). The output 'Employment increases in supported enterprises' (C8) is recorded throughout the lifetime of the project. These impacts take time to come to fruition and firms have indicated their intention to create employment in the future.
- 24 enterprises have been supported to introduce new to the market products for target C28 (200% of the target of 12).
- 27 enterprises have been supported to introduce new to the firm products for target C29 (104% of the target of 26).

The output profile and achievements at project close are reported in the next table.

ERDF Outputs	Amount in most recent Funding Agreement	Amount following Project Change Request	Total achieved at time of evaluation	% of target	Projected to be achieved at Project Closure	% of target
(C1) No. of enterprises receiving support	120	120	102	85%	102	85%
(C4) Number of enterprises receiving non-financial support	120	120	102	85%	102	85%
(C5) Number of new enterprises supported	24	24	26	108%	26	108%
(C8) Employment increase in supported enterprises	24	24	30	125%	30	125%
(C26) Number of enterprises cooperating with research entities	6	6	4	67%	4	67%
(C28) Number of enterprises supported to introduce new to the market products	6	12	24	200%	24	200%
(C29) Number of enterprises supported to introduce new to the firm products	26	26	27	104%	27	104%

Source: University of Bath Monitoring Data

### 3.3 IMPACT ASSESSMENT

#### Key Messages:

- The Project has or will create 36 net FTE direct and indirect jobs
- The project is estimated to have generated £6.68m in NPV GVA.

This section looks at the economic impacts of the investment made by the project.

The analysis of impacts is based on reported outputs to date and responses to the business survey. A comprehensive assessment of economic impact was undertaken comprising of:

- Net Employment and GVA Net Present Value (NPV) impacts to date (over three years of persistence in total).
- Total cost impacts and value for money.

Two tiers of effects were considered:

- Direct Employment: Employment impacts and resultant GVA from jobs created.
- Indirect Employment Effect: The effect on suppliers and resultant productivity/GVA

Several steps have been taken to assess gross and net GVA and employment impacts and net present value:

- The models used reported, verified figures for jobs created and anticipated to the end of the programme (no future jobs beyond this period have been accounted for even though firms indicated this was likely to be the case).
- Deadweight was assumed at 41.18% and was informed by the survey.
- Displacement and leakage were assumed average and low at 19.5% and 10%.
- A composite multiplier was used to calculate the indirect employment effects (from the HCA Additionality Guide Fourth Edition) using the sub-regional mean for business development and competitiveness (1.25).
- The persistence of the benefits i.e. how many years the benefits are expected to persist and the period over which the benefits will accrue until they reach their full potential. In this instance, a modest three-year time frame was chosen based on experience elsewhere.
- A decay of 10% per annum has been used i.e. the proportion of annual benefits expected to be lost from one year to the next due to economic changes, other investment decisions etc.
- Calculation of the Net Present Value (NPV) of the GVA benefit stream over the appropriate persistence time period by discounting back utilising an appropriate rate. HM Treasury Green Book guidance has been followed which recommends discounting by 3.5% in order to determine NPV.
- A cost benefit ratio calculated by Net Present Cost (NPC) against NPV i.e. the amount each £1 of investment generates.
- Estimates for GVA per head used Office of National Statistics figures for GVA per filled job (£); for Swindon and Wiltshire (updated to today's values).

The following table shows that the Project has or will create 36 net FTE direct and indirect jobs (9 gross) generating a total NPV GVA of £6.68m.

#### ECONOMIC IMPACTS

	Gross Jobs	Gross GVA	Net Jobs	Net GVA	NPV (3 years)
New Jobs Created/Safeguarded	106	£5,972,514	45	£2,545,345	£6,683,335
Direct Jobs (FTE, £GVA)	85	£4,778,012	36	£2,036,276	£5,346,668
Indirect jobs (FTE, £GVA)	21	£1,194,503	9	£509,069	£1,336,667

Source: Kada Research

### 3.4 VALUE FOR MONEY

#### Key Message:

- The project has generated a benefit cost ratio (BCR) of 1:6.6.
- The value for money of business assists was strong.

This section looks at the value for money of the investment. The estimated GVA of £6.68m resulting in a benefit cost ratio (BCR) of 1:6.6 i.e., each £1.00 of public investment generating £6.60. This is high value for money according to the DCLG Appraisal Guide<sup>14</sup> which states the value for money categories as based on the size of the BCR.

The cost per business assisted at £9,970 is towards the low end of what is expected against ERDF benchmarks. For this type of activity these range from £6,032 for low intensity support to £13,091 (more intensive assistance) and £43,638 (for very high-level support)<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Department for Communities and Local Government [Appraisal Guide](#), December 2016, p 2.56

<sup>15</sup> England ERDF Programme 2014-2020: Output Unit Costs and Definitions, A Final Report by Regeneris Consulting, 2013, 3.2 page 6 (values updated to present day)

## 4 DELIVERY AND MANAGEMENT

This section of the report explores the implementation of the programme. Interviews with stakeholders, partners and mentors provide the feedback. It reports on the discussions on delivery, impact, and the strengths and challenges of the programme.

### Key Message:

- The rationale and design of the programme were strong however COVID-19 made it hard to attract businesses to engage in strategy innovation when they were focussed on surviving the pandemic.
- Different approaches were needed to recruit beneficiaries, despite a relatively small budget, which despite challenges did help drive uptake and progress towards meeting targets.
- The programme delivery team responded well to COVID-19 by switching to online delivery to keep the project progressing, although this made networking and knowledge exchange harder.
- The workshop contents were well received by businesses and stakeholders viewed the sessions as successful, useful, and engaging.
- The project management was well regarded by stakeholders. The project ran smoothly with positive feedback on communication, administration, finance, and programme governance.

### 4.1 RATIONALE AND CONTEXT

The rationale for the programme was clear and well understood by stakeholders. Funding would be used to support SMEs within Swindon and Wiltshire to expand, develop and scale up. This process would increase local jobs, GVA and tax revenue whilst supporting productivity improvements. SETsquared's ecosystem of six different universities brought significant research specialisms and assets to the programme.

There was a general sense that many businesses, especially SMEs, often have good business ideas but they struggle how to effectively market, develop and scale up their businesses. This makes them heavily reliant upon outside assistance and support to develop effective and clearly outlined growth strategies.

*"So it's sort of like that external insight, then maybe they're sometimes a bit too close to their own business. They don't always know what they need side of things. It's external insights."*

The predominance of small businesses within the area (90% of all businesses within Wiltshire are classed as micro businesses - less than 10 employees)<sup>16</sup> was seen as a significant contributing factor to the county having a GVA per head rate £7,226 below the English average<sup>17</sup>. Frequent reference was made to the large number of long-standing family businesses within the area who were not always aware of how hardwiring clear business modelling/strategy into their plans would support productivity gains and future growth. Within this context the provision of strategy and innovation support was welcomed.

<sup>16</sup> Inter Departmental Business Register (2022). 'UK Business Counts – 2022'. [Available here](#).

<sup>17</sup> ONS (2022). 'Regional GVA Per Head and Income Components'. [Available here](#).

The Covid-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdowns had a significant impact upon the international, national and regional economic context. The huge economic impact forced many businesses to prioritise immediate survival. Stakeholders acknowledged that getting firms to think about strategy during this period was understandably very difficult. Very large amounts of time and energy were expended by businesses, local authorities, and support services to help process COVID-19 business grants. The delivery team acknowledged that this was a very difficult context in which to launch the programme.

Once survival had been guaranteed the limited operational pressure during the lockdown period did provide some business owners with the space to start thinking about strategy.

There was consensus that despite the impact of Covid and the current cost-of-living/inflationary concerns the programme rationale remains valid. The programme developers highlighted how market downturns and heightened economic pressure have forced businesses to rethink their business models and develop new revenue ideas/streams.

## 4.2 RECRUITMENT AND DIAGNOSTICS

Recruitment of businesses for the programme was challenging. The initial belief that there was a large appetite for business development and scale up support proved not to be the case, with COVID-19 challenges being a factor in changing business priorities. Business reluctance to become involved meant that the outputs targets became very challenging.

Stakeholders provided a wide variety of reasons for the difficult recruitment process.

- The impact of the Covid pandemic meant that businesses became very focused upon survival not possessing the time or inclination to dedicate time to the workshops. Even once the lockdown periods had completed the ensuing inflationary/cost-of living crisis meant that businesses maintained their survival focus.
- Businesses, even during periods of economic stability, often fail to prioritise strategic thinking. Significant incentives are required to encourage them to think holistically and get them out of their operational comfort zone.
- Some businesses were hostile to ERDF funded programmes having had some negative experiences with previous programmes.
- Businesses were reluctant to complete the administrative paperwork and undertake the bureaucratic processes involved.
- Small typically long-standing family businesses did not always see the need for business growth advice often expressing that they were happy to remain as a micro business.
- When businesses did sign up to the programme, they did not always attend the workshops.
- The restricted geography of the programme meant that interested parties from out of Swindon and Wiltshire had to be turned away.
- Business feedback collected by the marketing team suggested that they found the terminology used off putting. The term innovation was often misinterpreted with businesses believing that it only applied to high tech firms. The marketing team stated that it was only after numerous



conversations with firms that they realised that the programme was relevant to all firms regardless of the level of technology they deployed within the business.

- Some marketing channels such as cold calling firms proved to be unsuccessful. Businesses that had no existing relationship with SETsquared were often reluctant to commit to the programme.
- The fact that there is no university in the county skews the business demographics away from the type of young tech professionals/graduates who are often most engaged in this type of programme.
- Limited referrals were received from other local business organisations.

Despite these difficulties the delivery team were happy with the eventual uptake as reflected in the final output figures. A multi-channel marketing process was undertaken with key methods such as telephone contact, social media postings/contact and stands at relevant conferences deployed. The programme name also underwent several reiterations to try and make it more appealing to local businesses. The marketing team reflected that LinkedIn was a good forum for contacting businesses and raising the profile of the programme. Developing trusting personable relationships was also identified as a crucial factor supported by getting face-to-face contact with businesses. A process that was restricted because of the Covid 19 pandemic.

#### 4.3 PROGRAMME DELIVERY

##### THE PROGRAMME

The programme leads put together a delivery team that worked closely to formulate, market and deliver the programme. This was focused upon ensuring that output targets, a positive beneficiary experience and delivering clear positive beneficiary impact were achieved.

The programme content was developed taking account of local and national strategy (see Section 4.1), identified business need and insights from previous programmes that had been positively received by attendees and achieved commercial impact. A wide pool of different advisors were utilised to develop the programme content, with a focus on getting input from as wide a skills base as possible. The content was based around the Strategyzer Business Model Canvas by the Swiss business theorist Alex Osterwalder. It uses nine building blocks that provide a clear framework on a business logic can develop a strategy that improves efficiencies and increases revenue generation. The content has been iteratively developed over time with an emphasis on interactivity, bespoke content and providing attendees with a foundation that they can then develop in their own time.

The onset of the Covid 19 pandemic meant that the course delivery had to be reorganised and content updated with face-to-face sessions being replaced by online sessions.

Stakeholders reported that the course content was well received with beneficiaries seeing the Strategyzer toolkit as useful and welcoming the impartial, objective advice they received. They also reported that participants welcomed the time and space to prioritise strategy. It was acknowledged that key course features such as beneficiary interaction and knowledge exchange were more difficult to achieve online. It was also acknowledged that matching general business support programmes to very specific individual business needs can be very challenging.

It was acknowledged that limited resource, compared to other similar ERDF programmes, did place restrictions upon some elements of the programme development particularly the amount of time that could be devoted to developing new business contacts and relationships.

#### MANAGEMENT, ADMINISTRATION AND PARTNERSHIP WORKING

Stakeholder feedback was positive. They reflected that the programme had been run smoothly with positive feedback on communication, administration, finance, and programme governance. Positive comparisons were made with other similar programmes run by other organisations.

*"It was efficiently run. Communication about performance was always really clear. Management felt very competent, professional, and very knowledgeable."*

Strong administrative practices were reflective of the experience and expertise built up working on previous ERDF programmes.

*"The running of the programme has been very good. We had no issues with the admin of the programme. The tech and administration support were very, very good."*

A steering group oversaw the programme, with several changes enforced because of the impact of Covid 19. The delivery team empathised how this was navigated through successful co-ordinated action and clearly defined roles. They also highlighted the importance of being able to draw upon a wide range of expertise and experience accumulated from previous ERDF programmes.

#### 4.4 KEY STRENGTHS

Programme strengths cited by stakeholders included:

- The course materials were seen as a clear strength with frequent references made to their interactive, relevant, interesting, and thought-provoking content. The delivery team were confident that the material had been well received by participants directly addressing a clear business need.
- The range and diversity of companies supported, many of whom had not interacted with this type of support previously. SETSquared stated that the programme had opened them up to new range of companies that they had not worked with before describing this development as exciting.
- The rapid transfer of the workshops and resources to online provision still ensuring high quality delivery and provision.
- Expanding participants networks to include other businesses, mentors, support services and academic institutions.
- The successful completion of programme outputs despite the difficult economic context.

#### 4.5 IMPACTS AND ADDED VALUE

Stakeholders felt that the workshops had significant impact upon participants with company feedback highlighting clear added value. The workshop materials and structure have been refined over ongoing feedback informed iterative changes. It provided beneficiaries with the opportunity the space, materials, and support to focus upon strategy.

*"I think one of the key areas was that they can focus upon their business, providing time to step away and think about the bigger picture and what else they can change to improve. It has been really helpful to achieve that."*

For the delivery partners the Business Model Canvas allowed participants to explore their business model providing a framework upon which they can develop their business strategy. They emphasised how that it is not intended to fully formulate the strategy in the relatively short amount of contact time but how it provides participants with the tools and understanding to go away and do it for themselves.

*"I think it really does make businesses question what they are doing and if the status quo is actually making the most of their potential."*

Anecdotal feedback received by the delivery partners points toward significant business impact. With participants making frequent positive references to the impartial support and guidance and how it has made them focus upon new ideas, concepts, and strategies and to be more optimistic about their company's growth potential.

*"The content has impact. I think the programme is great."*

*"My instinct is that 75%/80% will act on the learning points and growing, the other 20% are often not in a position to take on these directly – but they may take some points that will help survival".*

Stakeholders also believed that the programme benefited the businesses through introductions to new networks and contacts facilitating informal knowledge exchange. It was however acknowledged that this was more difficult to facilitate in online sessions.

#### 4.6 LESSONS

Key lessons from the stakeholder consultations are:

- Delivery partners are committed to ongoing reviews and development of the course content with an emphasis upon continuing to ensure that it meets clearly identified business needs in an interesting, interactive, bespoke and impactful manner. This process will rely upon continued improvements to the data and intelligence held upon local businesses and their ongoing requirements.
- Relationship development with local businesses is a key future requirement to ensure that future programme marketing builds upon long established trusting relationships. Stakeholders reflected that these conditions are vital for ensuring strong business engagement and participation in programmes. Face to face contact with businesses and networking events that allows an increase in business contact points and the development of organic relationships is seen as vitally important in the post lockdown/restriction context. The importance of referrals and case studies displaying clear programme impact was also emphasised. These forums were also seen as a good opportunity to dispel any concerns that innovation programmes do not apply to their business.
- The geographical restrictions imposed by ERDF were seen as a barrier toward increased participation numbers. As the ERDF programmes end stakeholders saw a clear opportunity to market programmes to a wider geography potentially aligning them with inward investment opportunities and regional strategic priorities. The bureaucratic demands of ERDF programmes

were also cited as a barrier to business involvement. There was a clear appetite for less administrative criteria for future programmes.

- There was a clear consensus that some forms of marketing are not effective, such as using cold calling firms. Social media platforms, such as LinkedIn, were seen as more effective means of increasing programme profile and leveraging wider exposure through influencers. LinkedIn was also seen as a good tool for learning more about how other programmes were marketed and building intelligence on evolving business need. It was also acknowledged that there is increased competition with the number of alternative business support programmes increasing.
- Some stakeholders felt that the free nature of the workshops disincentivised the need to turn up to the events. A nominal charge was seen as preferable as previous experience suggested that even a small transaction encourages firmer commitment.
- Smaller participant numbers were seen as a barrier to informal knowledge exchange and workshop interaction. Delivery partners emphasised how sessions flow better with larger cohorts encouraging more varied dialogue/input, the sharing of more direct examples of ideas in practice and a more energetic dynamic. They would also welcome a return to some face-to-face sessions for the same reasons (although it was acknowledged that online sessions can be more accessible for participants).
- Higher workshop participant numbers were also identified as an opportunity to offer different streams to businesses according to their stage of development and providing a more bespoke offering.
- Stakeholders agreed that the programme was valuable and created clear impact for participants. They are keen to see a developed form of the programme offered in the post ERDF future.

## 5 STRENGTHS, LESSONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This section reflects on lessons learned that have emerged from the evaluation and comments from the beneficiary survey and stakeholder interviews. The evaluation offers recommendations and a conclusion on the study.

### 5.1 STRENGTHS

Key strengths of the programme were as follows:

- The stakeholder's belief that the course materials were strong was shared by participants. They particularly valued the introduction provided to the Business Model Canvas. It helped them to think about their business in new ways helping them to reimagine their value propositions and customer strategy and identify potential new opportunities.
- Participants welcomed the opportunities provided to peer review their business strategies, to test out their business ideas, assess risk, explore business model patterns and to learn more about the benefits of innovation.
- The knowledge and expertise of the programme delivery team and the relevance and quality of advice provided was rated highly by participants.
- The administration and management of the process, the ease of the application process and the analysis of business need were also considered to be a strength of the programme.
- The range and diversity of companies supported by the programme, many of whom were first time participants in this type of programme.
- The successful completion of four programme outputs (C5, C8, C28 and C29) despite the difficult economic context.

### 5.2 IMPACT AND ADDED VALUE

SWDBAH created the following impacts and added value:

- The workouts provided beneficiaries with the opportunity, space, materials, and support to focus upon strategy.
- The Business Model Canvas provided a clear framework and starting point for businesses to adapt their business strategy. This is evidenced by the outcomes already achieved by participants as highlighted in Section 2.5.
- An estimated 20 jobs had been created or were anticipated by six participant firms following their involvement in the programme.
- Six participant businesses stated that the programme had led to them developing new products or services. Three firms stated that it had led to increased R&D spend and three stated that it had led to increased turnover.

- The estimated GVA of £6.68m of these commercial impacts resulted in a benefit cost ratio (BCR) of 1:6.6.

### 5.3 LESSONS

Lessons from the evaluation are:

- Limited previous contact with local businesses coupled with a difficult economic context made SME recruitment very challenging. SMEs are often reluctant to give up two days to attend programmes. Further networking is required to deepen relationships and understanding with local SMEs.
- Further research is required to develop a stronger picture of the local business landscape, the most effective marketing methods and how to incentivise full business participation.
- ERDF geographical restrictions meant that the pool of eligible SMEs was limited.
- The focus upon innovation made selling the opportunity to businesses difficult. They cited other factors such as recruitment difficulties, business costs, supply chain difficulties and limited land for economic development as bigger factors negatively affecting their business.
- Increased business development programme competition requires further clarity on differentiating the programme from its competitors.
- There is an appetite for increased partnership working with Swindon and Wiltshire to widen the pool of businesses, to share and consolidate best practice and to widen the range of opportunities. A narrow perspective on in region spending is seen as a barrier toward securing inward investment and talent acquisition.

### 5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evaluation findings Kada propose the following recommendations for consideration for programme delivery, programme design, and policy makers, in keeping with ERDF Summative Assessment guidelines:

#### *Programme Design*

- Recording protected characteristics routinely and acting on data trends to assess and enhance performance on the equality cross cutting theme if this is a requirement and priority of future funding sources.
- Source and/or develop cross region business development opportunities using strategic partnerships to share and scale up best practice.
- Continue to refine marketing and promotional material to develop a clearer support offer and more clarity to prospective firms during recruitment.
- Approach larger businesses to explore whether the programme could be used to improve efficiencies/productivity within their local supply chains.
- Scope out with local inward investment agencies/stakeholders whether the programme could be used as an incentive for businesses looking to invest/establish themselves within the region.
- Developing environmental benefits such as business energy savings are built into the programme material.

### *Programme Delivery*

- A more streamlined administration process post-ERDF will enable greater focus upon networking opportunities and developing relationships with local businesses.
- Undertake a business intelligence gathering programme to build a stronger understanding of local business need. Identify continued opportunities for face-to-face contact with businesses using referrals and case studies to evidence impact.
- Shorter (half -day or two hour) and more frequent sessions focused upon the material that has the greatest commercial impact would assist with programme recruitment.
- Further refine programme material to reflect current business need and priorities.
- Further develop online programme material so participants can undertake activities in their own time. This would then free up contact time for the peer discussions, idea testing and mentoring opportunities that participants value most.

### *Policy Makers*

- No ERDF timeline restrictions allows longer lasting account management with SMEs.
- Expanding the eligibility criteria for geographies from which businesses can be recruited would have increased the programme's impact. Enquiries were received from businesses which were not within the programme's scope.
- More streamlined admin processes post-ERDF will enable more focus on delivering even more impact.



## ANNEX ONE: STAKEHOLDERS AND DELIVERY PARTNERS

Name	Position
Andrea Kelly	Programme Manager
Hannah Dennis	Research Project and Finance Coordinator
Emma Blunt	Marketing Manager
Billy Allen	Programme Manager
Tim Doidge	Pitching Coach and Business Mentor
Keith Dixon	Start Up and Innovation Coach and Mentor
Aleksandra Love	Health and Wellbeing Sector Lead and Mentor
Rachel Finlay	Economic and Enterprise Manager Wiltshire Council



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