Peer Networks Programme Year 2 (2021 to 2022) Evaluation Report

March 2023

Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

The Peer Networks business support programme ran from 2020 to 2022 as part of the Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Managed by The Department for Business and Trade (formally BEIS), the programme aimed to improve the resilience of SMEs and support long term growth and productivity gains through action learning in a peer-to-peer environment. This report provides an evaluation of the programme in its second year of funding from April 2021 – March 2022 and has been produced by Wavehill and partners BMG Research and the Enterprise Research Centre on behalf of BEIS.

Programme design

Peer Networks was originally designed to respond to the productivity challenges faced by SMEs in the UK and evidence that only 25% of SMEs seek formal business advice with a lack of trust in business advice a key barrier. Against the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the programme pivoted to respond by providing support to SMEs as they recovered from the effects of the pandemic.

The programme value for 2021-22 was £9m, fully funded by BEIS and allocated to the 38 Local Enterprise Partnership (LEPs) based on the number of cohorts each expected to deliver. Allocations were reviewed and, in some cases, revised up or down to reflect performance and ensure resource was provided where there was demand and responding provision.

The structure of the Peer Networks programme was determined centrally through a national 'Playbook' co-designed by the Growth Company, BEIS and delivery partners to ensure consistency across the programme and updated after feedback from Year 1. Cohorts comprised groups of up to 11 aspirational, eligible SMEs who met at typically 6-9 sessions lasting 2-3 hours. Action learning discussions were held at these cohort sessions on challenges and potential solutions with the help of a facilitator. A half day of separate one to one mentoring support was also provided under the programme.

There were recognised benefits of having a detailed, consistent and centrally designed programme, set out in the Playbook which saved LEPs from having to create their own versions. The Playbook was seen as a valuable tool to guide the LEPs while having some flexibility to account for local needs was advantageous.

Overall, stakeholders felt the programme was well designed with action learning sets being seen as a strong method of delivery bringing real issues forward that could be

discussed. Communication and organisation of sessions was good across most areas and although a departure from the Playbook, hybrid sessions structured around a theme with a lead business or facilitator to introduce this could help to stimulate discussion.

Facilitators and their ability to nurture a trusting environment were considered fundamental to the success of cohorts. Setting ground rules for discussions and managing expectations was important, and where facilitators worked with a business who would be sharing a challenge ahead of the session, this could add real value by framing the issue. However, not all facilitators understood the nature of action learning compared to coaching, and additional training was needed to overcome this barrier.

The programme aimed to deliver support to 5,742 participants and increase knowledge exchange among participating SMEs to overcome barriers they faced, generating improved productivity, increased survival and output growth[1].

Marketing

While national branding (which included the BEIS name) was useful in some instances for local marketing, the lack of national promotion in Year 2 did reduce the visibility to businesses. The title of the programme 'Peer Networks' was also felt to be a little misleading as it suggested networking events which did not align with the actual delivery and could be a barrier to businesses exploring the programme further. Local marketing and recruitment were also affected in Year 2 by the smaller pool of potential participants (following many that had enrolled in Year 1) and several LEPs who had contracted out marketing struggled to recruit. Telemarketing was more successful than adverts as the nature of the programme could be explained.

Management and Monitoring

The national co-ordinator role, taken on by the Growth Company, was seen as critical to ensure the programme remained organised across the 38 different LEP areas and provided visibility and accountability. Weekly meetings between the Growth Company and BEIS ensured close tracking of progress and resolution of any issues with both organisations felt by stakeholders to have managed the programme well. Earlier introduction of a system to assess the delivery profile of cohorts would have allowed easier identification of where areas needed support to deliver improvements as this was valuable when introduced in October 2021. The

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[1] Target number based on budget and cohort operating costs. See actual and completion numbers in 'Performance'

relationship the Growth Company had with the growth hubs and knowledge sharing also enhanced the programme management.

Communication through the monthly cluster calls led by the Growth Company and attended by cluster leads[2] was considered effective by national and local delivery partners, with the latter finding the responsiveness of the team effective in resolving issues. The cluster lead roles may have provided less benefit with some areas suggesting that sharing of good practice by the leads was limited, though Growth Company led best practice sessions that helped to alleviate this.

Local level management was generally commissioned by the LEPs to an external provider, though some did manage internally. While all were successful to a greater or lesser extent, where a dedicated local Peer Networks programme manager was in place delivery was typically more successful than where the role was split or balanced with others.

A lot of data collection and information was required through two monitoring systems (Growth Company dashboard and templates) which was felt by local delivery partners to be burdensome and clunky. Data entry onto the Growth Company dashboard, however, was felt to be straightforward, though local delivery partners would have benefited from getting more insight back from the dashboard. Further, satisfaction surveys were required from participants after every action learning session which was felt to be disproportionate. Both processes could have been refined and simplified.

Performance

With no national marketing budget recruitment to Peer Networks only 5% of referrals came via the national landing page and instead promotion was undertaken locally through existing networks, online, direct telemarketing and in some cases local print media or radio. **The programme received strong levels of demand with 40% more expressions of interest than in Year 1**, though this may not have been sufficient for the delivery partners to select the most suitable businesses for the programme and still meet their targets.

From a target of 522 cohorts, 454 (87%) were started and the total number of participants starting the programme was 4,631, 81% of the 5,742 target that could be accommodated within the budget. Of those who started 3,760 businesses completed the programme leaving 871 businesses (19%) who withdrew. The programme had allowed for a withdrawal rate of 30% which would have reduced

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[2] A cluster lead was a LEP area chosen within each geographic cluster to lead communication between the national delivery partners and the local LEP delivery partners within that area.

the cohorts from the 11 participants expected to the optimum size of 8 for action learning. **Overall,** 3,760 businesses completed the programme, equating to 94% of the original target number of completions (4,019 – based on a target of 5,742 participants and 30% withdrawing). Most cohorts took 12 or more weeks to complete where the programme had anticipated 3 months.

Supported Businesses

The programme eligibility criteria required at least five employees initially, but this was changed in November 2021 to permit a proportion of those with between 2-4 employees. Therefore, while most businesses recruited to the Peer Networks programme had between 5-10 employees (41%) or 11-49 employees (29%), a large number (21%) had four or fewer members of staff. To a greater extent the businesses supported reflected the distribution of sectors across England though manufacturing was notably over-represented while wholesale and retail trade and construction were under-represented.

Almost half (44%) of the beneficiary businesses had not engaged with a Growth Hub prior to the programme, suggesting the project had in part successfully reached businesses who had not received business support before rather than those that would've accessed support anyway (though no insight from other business support accessed was possible). The majority (60.7%) of participants were male compared to 39.1% female and 0.2% who prefer to self-describe. These individuals tended to be between 35 and 54 (65%), with fewer younger participants (14% below 35), and white (90.3%).

Motivations to sign up for the Peer Networks programme were broad, but a majority wanted to learn from other businesses (76%) and to understand how to enhance their business performance (66%). Some 96% of businesses reported growth aspirations for their business when joining the programme and 79% believed they were likely or extremely likely to be able to achieve this.

The effects of COVID-19 varied between the supported businesses. 41% reported that their turnover was below normal, 17% had not been affected and 34% suggested turnover was higher than usual. Some 27% felt that their risk of insolvency had increased as a result of COVID-19 while 14% said this risk had decreased.

Activities

Overall, 671 participant businesses responded to the evaluation survey (18% of the 3,760 population) which supported findings from the 4,546 participants who

completed satisfaction surveys at the end of each action learning session. Results from 30 respondents who had withdrawn from the programme (3.4% of the 871 population) were also used.

Most (60%) businesses had heard about the Peer Networks programme as a direct invite from the LEP or Growth Hub. One in ten had heard of the programme via word of mouth and the same amount through promotion activity. **Application onto the programme was regarded as easy by most of the beneficiaries (93%)** and this was reinforced by stakeholders**.**

Withdrawals from the programme were generally due to not being able to commit the time (40%) or other business activities took priority (28%). One-fifth did not like the structure of the sessions. It should be noted that the small number of participants in the withdrawal survey is a limitation of these findings.

Given the restrictions of the pandemic, the majority of sessions in the second year of Peer Networks were still delivered online, though some face to face delivery was being reintroduced. Some 81% of respondents attended all the sessions virtually and 13% attended the majority online, typically allowing for one or two face to face sessions (often at the end of a cohort). There was generally good satisfaction with the duration and frequency of the action learning sessions, and the composition of the cohorts was thought to be good by 80% of beneficiaries. While some stakeholders felt that weekly sessions helped momentum, reducing this to fortnightly (as recommended by the Playbook) or less would have reduced time commitment and helped improve attendance.

The fully online mode of delivery also positively helped a majority (78%) of beneficiaries in accessing the sessions. However, online delivery was viewed less positively for holding good or effective discussions (65% positive) and building relationships with other attendees (56% positive). Facilitators also reported that online it could be harder to read the room or manage participants and any distractions in their respective settings. Despite being online, on average attendance to the action learning sessions was 54% with time commitment and unexpected business or personal issues (including catching COVID-19) reducing the attendance.

Participants felt they were able to share relevant issues for their business, build trust with other participants and get useful insight from them. Responses from the satisfaction surveys showed that between a score of one and five where five is high an average of 4.6 was found for the relevance of the session to business needs, while quality of the facilitation was rated as 4.8. Satisfaction, and the quality of input from other businesses was 4.7. Respondents reported an average of 4 for the extent to which the project met expectations. **Overall, across all the sessions a satisfaction score of 4.7 was achieved**. Stakeholders felt that though many

sectors could work well together, in some industries competition between businesses reduced the opportunity for participants to share.

As part of the programme, 82% of beneficiaries reported they received one to one support. Whether successfully interspersed between the action learning sessions or conducted afterwards, the rapport with the one to one lead was considered key to success by stakeholders. Nearly three quarters (72%) used these one to one sessions to build on topics covered in the action learning sets with 25% focusing on different topics in their one to one sessions. **Overall, 95% of respondents were satisfied with the one to one sessions** (80% very satisfied and 15% somewhat satisfied). The content usefulness and length of the sessions were all positively regarded.

Without the Peer Networks programme, 34% of respondents stated that they did not know what they would have done if the programme had not been available while 40% would have looked for alternative free business support.

Outcomes

These findings are gross changes for the beneficiaries between baseline and the post-completion survey, not all of which are attributable to the Peer Networks programme. In particular, the evaluation did not gather insights around the involvement of beneficiaries in any other business support programmes which might also have influenced these outcomes.

Attitudinal changes took place among business leaders, with improvements in confidence, leadership and business skills, with the latter seeing notable increases; there was **a 24 percentage point increase in those reporting they have the skills needed to lead their business over the next three years**).

Approximately 68% of participants reported that the programme had enabled them to establish a wider network of businesses to consult with. **Nearly two-thirds (65%) stated that they anticipated keeping in touch or engaging with those they met through Peer Networks over the next year**.

At baseline, 79% of businesses felt that it was likely that they would achieve their growth ambitions which increased notably to 97% at post-completion stage. Some 84% of beneficiaries intended to make changes to their business over the next three years with a focus on sales and marketing, staff recruitment and retentions and leadership and management approaches.

Of those participating in the programme, 67% reported that their aspirations had changed, either for their business, themselves on a personal basis, or both, with 96% of these stating they were raising aspirations.

1. Introduction

Peer Networks was a business support programme launched in 2020 as part of the Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with an aim to contribute to improving the resilience of SMEs, but also looking to support longer term growth and productivity gains. This evaluation report relates to the second funded year of the programme (running from April 2021 – March 2022).

The Peer Networks Programme and this evaluation have been funded by BEIS.

The evaluation has been undertaken by Wavehill and its partners, BMG Research and the Enterprise Research Centre, extending into 2022-23. The evaluation seeks to answer key evaluation questions about the effectiveness of programme implementation as well drawing insights on early benefits generated for businesses supported.

Whilst the evaluation of the 2021-22 Peer Networks programme was originally anticipated to be delivered over two phases (with this report covering the first phase up to the end of scheme delivery), the decision by BEIS not to fund the programme for a third year, has meant that the second phase of this evaluation (to assess impact) will not now proceed.

The report draws on a number of fieldwork tasks, including:

- Analysis of programme data collected by delivery partners, both through input to the monitoring dashboard developed and managed by the Growth Company, and through completion of a data collection template produced by the evaluators and completed by delivery partners.

- Analysis of data from four different surveys capturing beneficiary information and perspectives at different stages of the programme:

- Baseline survey – basic business information and insights around factors such as motivations for joining the programme and business growth aspirations

- Satisfaction survey – a series of five simple satisfaction questions asked to all businesses after each action learning set session

- Post-completion survey – data collected via web survey, from business completing the programme, conducted by the evaluation team. This explored factors such as satisfaction with the support received, perspectives on the quality of different aspects of delivery, and indications around early impacts

- Withdrawals survey – data collected via web survey, from business withdrawing from the programme part-way through, conducted by the evaluation team. This explored reasons for withdrawal as well as many of the same topics as the post-completion survey[3].

- In-depth consultations with a sample of stakeholders, including local delivery partners, action learning set facilitators and business participants, as well as national delivery partners in BEIS and the Growth Company.

- Observational analysis of a sample of action learning set sessions, including reviewing one hour of action learning set activity across 17 different cohorts, to draw out insights around the way sessions were delivered and factors such as the extent of engagement or number of interruptions experienced in delivery.

Evaluation Objectives

The aims of the evaluation were to:

- Understand performance levels of the programme across LEP areas

- Understand how the Peer Networks project was being delivered in practice, gather evidence of how to make improvements to delivery through LEPs

- Test the theory of change to understand whether the desired outputs and outcomes are being achieved (e.g. SMEs making positive changes to their businesses)

- Understand how, and to what extent, the programme influences business behaviour

- Provide evidence to inform future funding decisions

- Collect the right data to enable a longer-term impact evaluation to be conducted

The evaluation consists of five high-level evaluation questions, with a set of more detailed sub questions below these which are summarised at Appendix G):

- HLQ 1 - How effective is the Networks project in recruiting businesses and ensuring they complete the scheme?

- HLQ 2 - To what extent does the project successfully deliver high quality business support?

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[3] N.B. Previously referred to in year one as a drop out survey

- HLQ 3 - How effective is the Networks project at encouraging SMEs to adopt practices to improve productivity?

- HLQ 4 - What early changes are businesses making as a result of the Peer Networks scheme?

- HLQ 5 – What other factors influence how and what changes businesses are making after they complete the scheme?

Note: the decision not to provide funding for Phase 2 of the evaluation of the 2021-22 programme means there is limited evidence on detailed questions around programme impacts (particularly under HLQ4 and HLQ5).

Limitations and Generalisability of Findings

Across the evaluation tasks, there were a number of limitations affecting the overall analysis undertaken as part of the evaluation. These included the following:

- **Programme Data Analysis** – the majority of programme data analysed for this evaluation was drawn from data collected by the Growth Company and presented through its PowerBI dashboards. While comprehensive access was provided to this data by the Growth Company, the evaluators were unable to access the raw data, meaning limited ability to cross tabulate certain data fields, limiting the analytical breakdowns that were possible.

- **Withdrawal Surveys Response Rate** – the response rate for the withdrawal survey was relatively low, reflecting lower appetite to engage in the evaluation from those who had not completed it. While still providing useful indicative findings, the low number of responses and response rate meant large confidence intervals around these findings.

- **Timing of Evaluation** – as the evaluation was undertaken shortly after completion of programme delivery, little time had elapsed within supported businesses, meaning that only very early outcomes and indications of how businesses intended to use the learning in their businesses could be captured through the evaluation. This constrained the insights that could be drawn around programme impacts.

- **Unknown Participation in Other Programmes** – no information was gathered from participants around their engagement in other business support programmes, which might also have contributed to the early outcomes explored through this evaluation.

With respect to generalisability, the Peer Networks programme only covered SMEs in England, but was open to all sectors and all small and medium sized businesses with five or more employees. The consistency of (mostly positive) findings around

beneficiary satisfaction and early outcomes in this evaluation from across all LEP areas in England and across all sectors and sizes of SME indicate that this programme could be effective in other devolved nations of the UK.

There are however some aspects which may make the scheme slightly less immediately transferable:

- The programme was delivered in the unique context of economic recovery from COVID-19, which may have affected recruitment of businesses, topics of focus and outcomes secured. While this makes it less easy to compare to other schemes, the evaluation findings typically show the effects of COVID-19 had a negative effect on delivery. As such, if anything, it might be expected that the programme is more effective once economic recovery from COVID-19 is a less significant contextual factor.

- Certain aspects of programme governance were bespoke to structures within England, in particular the network of growth hubs, the role of the Growth Company, and the close working relationship between BEIS and these organisations. Consistency and quality of delivery was strongly steered by these structures, which differ from those in other devolved nations.

2. Overview of Peer Networks and Theory of Change

This section sets out a detailed overview of the Peer Networks programme, including its background and rationale, objectives, inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts. It then goes on to summarise the overall intervention logic in a detailed theory of change diagram, summarising the expected logic chain and key assumptions that underpin this.

Background and Rationale of Policy

The Peer Networks programme was a national initiative funded by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS), and delivered across England through Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and their respective Growth Hubs or other delivery partners.

The first year of the programme was launched in 2020 as part of the Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with an aim to contribute to improving the resilience of SMEs, but also looking to support longer term growth and productivity gains.

The programme built on evidence of business needs identified under HM Government's Business Productivity Review (BPR). It was also informed by best practice, particularly drawing on findings from the PLATO peer networks programme delivered in Belgium (detailed below).

The sections below provide an overview of the scheme's rationale, market failures, objectives, and inputs, as well as the expected outputs, outcomes and impacts from the programme.

Rationale

- Business Productivity Review[4]: the BPR found that businesses like to learn from each other and that they trust that learning. Peer Networks were identified as an intervention that was more cost effective than alternatives, easier to implement and addressed gaps in existing market provision. Evidence indicated that Peer Networks can result in 2.5% higher labour productivity.

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[4] BEIS (2019). Business Productivity Review.

- Evidence from PLATO[5]: an evaluation of a government-supported networking programme (PLATO) in Flanders found, through robust counterfactual impact analysis, that participation in the programme increased labour productivity. Learning from PLATO was considered in designing the BEIS Peer Networks programme, including an approach that involved standardising the programme with common training, to ensure that projects organised at different times and in different locations were broadly the same.

The original strategic case for the programme indicated that SMEs accounted for approximately 60% of private sector employment and 46% of private sector turnover. It highlighted they were both less resilient to changes in the UK and global economy and often had low ambition and willingness to improve their business. The Longitudinal Small Business Survey results in 2019 found that only 24% of SME employers sought formal business support. It also found that businesses that accessed external business support had a higher probability of being a high growth in turnover firm[6]

Market Failures

The Peer Networks programme was designed to address two main types of market failure, amongst others:

- Information failure: lack of awareness of business support offer and trust in business advice due to the barriers to accessing and assuring this information. The BPR found that businesses like to learn from each other and that they trust that learning but that the current public and private sector support market is confusing and fragmented.

- Positive Externalities: evidence suggests that business support services often have an alumni network to enable participants to continue to benefit from peer learning beyond the formal end of the schemes. However, uptake of peer networking among SMEs can be limited due to them not considering the wider / external benefits of learning through networking which limits knowledge transfer.

The programme aims to overcome these market failures through:

- focusing on enabling businesses to help each other to address issues associated with lack of trust in business advice

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[5] Schoonjans, B et al. (2013). Knowledge networking and growth in service firms. The Service Industries Journal, 33(11), pp.1051-1067
[6] Longitudinal Small Business Survey 2019

- offering the scheme nationally and operating under a single brand, to help firms to recognise the benefits associated with peer-learning and raise awareness of the support available

- raising awareness among SME managers about tried and tested practices, which would help them improve their businesses in addition to raising awareness about their own performance compared to their peers

- creating a nationally recognised programme which will raise demand for peer networking and increase the amount of knowledge sharing among both participants and wider / informal networks.

Objectives

The Peer Networks programme was originally designed to support SMEs to improve their productivity however, given the changing context due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the focus was broadened to also support SMEs to respond to the challenges of COVID-19.

The programme aimed to provide support for SMEs as they move into and through the recovery phase of COVID-19 response, to improve the resilience of SMEs, their capability to adapt their business models and position themselves for future success. The longer-term aim is that this will help to reduce the UK productivity gap through supporting business leaders to find practical solutions to strategic and operational challenges, driving an increase in sales and firm-level productivity.

Inputs and Activities

The total potential programme value for 2021-22 was £9m, fully funded from BEIS. Total spend for delivery of the networks and programme coordination was approximately £6.9 million for the second year of the programme.

Allocations of funding have been based on the total number of peer network cohorts each LEP area could deliver, and was initially oversubscribed in terms of funding sought by LEPs, meaning allocations were made based on a methodology that supported the programme objective of helping SMEs to recover from the impacts of Covid-19 whilst also reflecting local delivery capacity. .

These allocations have been subject to review through the year and in a number of cases the allocations have been negotiated down or up, depending on successful delivery performance and local demand.

LEP areas received funding (retrospectively linked to cohort completions) at a cost per cohort of up to £15,000 to enable them to manage the programme, deliver marketing and communications, recruit and train facilitators, recruit and deliver the programme to SMEs.

A national 'Playbook' co-designed by the Growth Company, BEIS and delivery partners provided a detailed guide of how the programme should be run, to ensure consistency across the LEP areas. LEPs recruited participants and ran the programme at a local level, in some cases outsourcing delivery to other providers. The 'Playbook' was updated with a number of adjustments following feedback from Year 1, including the interim evaluation findings.

The programme supported cohorts of SMEs to come together to discuss challenges and suggest tangible actions or solutions, with the support of a trained facilitator in an action learning style. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the majority of these sessions have been delivered virtually, although a few sessions were delivered face-to-face, as had been originally envisaged for the programme.

SMEs based within each LEP area were eligible for the support, on the basis that they had been

- in operation for 1 year+
- had a minimum of five employees (in November 2021 a decision was taken that this threshold could drop to 2+ employees for some of the recruited beneficiaries, up to a cap of 30% of all beneficiaries in each LEP area)
- have a turnover of £100,000 or more
- have an aspiration to improve.

Desirable characteristics also included businesses with the potential to scale up and businesses that export or have the potential to become an exporter. A more detailed summary of the eligibility criteria is set out at Appendix H.

Outputs, Outcomes and Impacts

The programme aimed to deliver peer networks to support up to 5,742 participants (522 cohorts) across each year.

Cohorts of up to 11 participants received 18 hours of support, typically over 6-9 sessions (lasting 2-3 hours each), as well as at least half a day (minimum 3.5 hours) of separate one to one support.

The Peer Networks programme aimed to deliver the following intermediate outcomes:

- an increase in knowledge exchange, whereby the SME managers find appropriate solutions to urgent and important business challenges, take this peer learning back to the business and diffuse the learning

- improvements in SMEs' ability to:

    o recruit and retain staff where appropriate

    o access cash to continue trading

    o adopt new technology into their business

- adoption of new practices in the SMEs supported (e.g. management and technology), through the SME manager and business implementing changes based on the learning to overcome challenges

- an increase in business resilience and therefore improvement in SMEs' ability to adapt and recover from impacts of COVID-19 (which can be measured through participant views on the resilience of their SME)

- improvements in SME leadership and management skills (which can be measured through participant views on whether their leadership and management skills have improved)

- maintenance of business networks after delivery of programme and engagement with other networks.

Ultimately the key impacts of the programme for businesses are anticipated to be:

- increased SME firm survival

- improved firm-level GVA

- improved firm-level productivity.

Theory of Change

The theory of change set out below draws on the version established as part of the Year 1 work, with only very minor adjustments made to this, reflecting only minor changes made in the programme between Years 1 and 2.

The theory of change provides an important foundation to help test effectiveness and impacts of the programme based on an understanding of what was expected by the policy. The key steps in the diagram were used to develop key lines of enquiry in the various research tools used in the evaluation.

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Net Additional Increase in UK Level GVA and firm productivity

Co-benefits including:
- Spillover effects as participants change jobs and bring their insights to new companies
- Unsupported businesses see competitors making productivity improvements and respond with further investment

Changes contribute to enhanced productivity and growth (typically expected to materialise after 3-7 years):
- Growth in / Sustaining firm level GVA
- Improvement in / sustaining labour productivity levels

Changes contribute to effective COVID response and strengthened business skills in the short term
- firm survival
- participant views on the resilience of their SMEs
- participant views on their leadership and management skills
- participant perception of ability to recruit and retain staff
- participant perception of ability to access cash to continue trading
- changes in the participant SME's intention to adopt or actual adoption of technology

Changes implemented to leadership and management approaches

Changes implemented to staff recruitment and retention

Changes implemented in approaches to accessing finance

Changes implemented in technology use / adoption

Changes implemented to sales and marketing approaches

Changes implemented to business products / processes

Changes implemented in response to COVID-19, EU Transition or Net Zero

Economic growth supported is not significantly displaced from other firms

Support from this scheme is not significantly substituted from alternative schemes

SME stays in business long enough to implement improvements

Changes made by businesses would not have happened without the support from the scheme

Length of the programme is sufficient to enable participants to learn

Participants are able to make the changes they need to their businesses

SME Manager diffuses knowledge to colleagues and makes / contributes to decisions about changes in their business

SME Manager uses network contacts in future to help in making decisions about the business

SME Managers reflect on application of learning to current business challenges

SME Manager learns and increases their confidence in how to improve their business

SME Manager builds their networks of trusted business colleagues

One to one support complements and builds on learning from ALS's

SMEs have access to required equipment to effectively engage in a virtual format

Participants find the support content and ALS process relevant, high quality and valuable

SME Manager Participants attend full programme

SME Managers engage with network colleagues within and outside sessions

Intervention – Action Learning Sets, 1 to 1 support and networking. Delivered through 18 hours of support over 6-9 sessions, to up to 5,775 SME managers through 522 cohorts.

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Intervention – Action Learning Sets, 1 to 1 support and networking. Delivered through 18 hours of support over 6-9 sessions, to up to 5,775 SME managers through 522 cohorts.

Participants build trust in facilitator/coach and fellow participants and feel comfortable sharing problems

Delivery is undertaken following the guidance in the Playbook

Drop out rates from cohorts do not exceed 40%

LEPs are able to develop effective cohorts, following guidance in the Playbook

Sufficient number of skilled facilitators recruited to meet demand

Marketing materials will be consistent across all areas to build a brand

Each LEP Area:
* Sets up local system for management, delivery and monitoring
* Recruits and trains facilitators
* Curates cohorts for action learning sets

SME Managers invited to Action Learning Sessions

SME Manager commits to the programme and signs contract for participating

Eligible SME Managers invited onto the programme

Application assessed and both formal eligibility & informal suitability checks undertaken

SME Manager becomes aware and applies to receive support

Marketing Campaign – delivered locally

Challenges faced by participants align with topics the programme is targeted at

Participant is a senior manager / person with influence in the business

SMEs see the support as relevant, valuable, high quality and unique in its offer

LEPs have sufficient knowledge and networks in local areas to recruit the target businesses

Intervention. £9m made available to deliver Peer Networks cohorts across 38 LEP areas. Delivery model provided (including Playbook for delivery) as well as technology platform licences

External factors which might affect intervention: Continued role of LEPs – Changes in wider business policy or business support policy – Impacts of Brexit on delivery – Impacts of COVID on delivery – impacts of other business support programmes received by participants – Differences by size, sector and geography of participants.

Rationale
Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as focusing on improving the resilience of SMEs, their capacity to adapt their business model to external changes and position themselves better for future growth, driving longer-term productivity gains. Concept of the Peer Networks programme has been evidenced to be cost effective, meet business needs and improve productivity. More widely, there is a low demand for external advice, low ambitions and willingness to improve despite evidence showing businesses that participate being more likely to be a high growth in turnover firm.

Target outcomes

Processes

Intervention

Assumptions

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3. Programme Performance and Beneficiary Business Characteristics

This section sets out analysis of programme performance data, including data gathered by the Growth Company and by delivery partners (reported through the Growth Company monitoring dashboard and/or data templates issued by the evaluation team). The analysis provides an overview of:

- programme performance, including recruitment, cohort delivery by LEP area, cohort completions and topics covered
- characteristics of supported businesses.

Programme Performance Data

Businesses Recruited Following Referral from Programme Landing Page

Recruitment to peer networks was primarily undertaken at the local level, with no budget allocated for national level marketing. Local partners promoted the programme through existing networks, via websites and social media, direct telemarketing to local businesses and in some cases via other local media channels such as print media and radio. Some areas referred to the national landing page and some areas chose not to.

Data was collected from the Growth Company from each LEP area on the number of expressions of interest to join the programme, and the proportion of these which came via referrals from the national Peer Networks landing page either referred, or as a result of organic searches. The table below summarises this by cluster area.

Table 0-1: Expressions of Interest

	All EOIs	% from national landing page
East Midlands	1,570	2%
London and South East	996	6%
North East	1,249	1%
North West	1,246	16%

	All EOIs	% from national landing page
Ox/ Cam Arc	878	6%
South Central	607	9%
South West North	553	2%
South West Peninsula	406	3%
West Midlands	1,246	2%
Yorkshire and Humber	494	11%
England	9,245	5%

Source: The Growth Company, analysis by Wavehill

The data highlights a number of important messages about overall recruitment:

- The programme received strong levels of demand, with 40% more expressions of interest than there were in Year 1 of the programme. With an aim to support 5,742 beneficiaries, even taking account that some of the beneficiaries might be ineligible, this should have been a sufficient number to meet the programme target. However, this level of demand, after taking out ineligible businesses might leave limited scope for delivery partners to select the most suitable businesses for the programme – a greater level of demand would have given more scope to target the support at those businesses which could benefit most.

- Only 5% of referrals to the programme came via the national landing page (down from around 22% in Year 1 of the programme), which largely reflects that there was no national marketing activity, generating awareness and directing businesses to that landing page in this year of programme delivery.

Cohort Recruitment by LEP Area

Each LEP area was invited by BEIS to bid for a number of cohorts that they could deliver under the second year of the programme. The sum of all the bids put forward by LEP areas exceeded the total number that could be funded and BEIS therefore made allocation decisions using a method developed for the task. This resulted in the original target number of cohorts outlined in the table below, which totalled 522 across England. It was assumed that there would be 11 starting participants in every cohort.

The table below then also sets out the final number of cohorts completed and participants that started the programme.

Table 0-2: LEP Cohort Allocations

Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP)	Allocation Number of Cohorts	Allocation Number of Participants Started	Actual Number of Cohorts	Actual Number of Participants Started
East Midlands				
D2N2 LEP	17	187	19	195
Greater Lincs LEP	20	220	10	103
Leicester and Leicestershire LEP	17	187	22	236
London & South East				
London Economic Action Partnership	20	220	23	235
South East LEP	15	165	15	161
Hertfordshire LEP	10	110	10	109
North East				
North East LEP	26	286	22	240
Tees Valley LEP	12	132	12	135
North West				
Cheshire and Warrington LEP	10	110	10	102

Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP)	Allocation Number of Cohorts	Allocation Number of Participants Started	Actual Number of Cohorts	Actual Number of Participants Started
Cumbria LEP	17	187	17	160
Lancashire Enterprise Partnership	26	286	21	210
Liverpool City Region LEP	14	154	15	167
Greater Manchester LEP	25	275	31	339
Ox/Cam Arc				
Buckinghamshire LEP	8	88	8	69
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough CA	14	154	14	120
New Anglia LEP	19	209	13	131
Oxfordshire LEP	15	165	14	142
South East Midlands LEP	14	154	13	114
South Central				
Coast to Capital LEP	10	110	8	80
Enterprise M3 LEP (EM3)	9	99	5	44

Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP)	Allocation Number of Cohorts	Allocation Number of Participants Started	Actual Number of Cohorts	Actual Number of Participants Started
Solent LEP	14	154	13	125
Thames Valley Berkshire LEP	8	88	8	77
South West North				
GFirst LEP	12	132	13	132
Swindon and Wiltshire LEP (SWLEP)	10	110	3	22
West of England LEP	10	110	8	80
South West Peninsula				
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly LEP	12	132	2	17
Dorset LEP	20	220	17	176
Heart of the South West LEP	17	187	11	113
West Midlands				
Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP	18	198	21	245
Black Country LEP	14	154	10	95

Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP)	Allocation Number of Cohorts	Allocation Number of Participants Started	Actual Number of Cohorts	Actual Number of Participants Started
Coventry and Warwickshire LEP	12	132	6	76
The Marches LEP	3	33	3	29
Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire LEP	14	154	11	108
Worcestershire LEP	8	88	4	42
Yorkshire & Humber				
Hull and East Yorkshire LEP	6	66	8	89
Leeds City Region LEP	12	132	7	47
Sheffield City Region LEP	8	88	2	23
York & North Yorkshire LEP	6	66	5	43
England	522	5,742	454	4,631

Source: BEIS – LEP cohort allocations; The Growth Company – Cohort and Participant numbers.

The data highlights a range of important messages about recruitment overall and by LEP area:

- In the end, 454 cohorts started, equating to 87% of the original target.
- The number of participants starting the programme was 4,631, which works out as an average 10.2 participants starting each cohort – this is slightly below the 11 participants

required to start a cohort, reflecting that some local discretion was allowed to enable planned cohorts to proceed in a timely manner.[7]

- Had the original targets of 522 cohorts and 11 participants per cohort been met, there would have been 5,742 participants starting the programme. The actual number of participants starting the programme was 81% of that target.

Cohort Completion Data

A total of 4,631 businesses were recruited to the programme, of which 3,760 businesses were recorded as having completed the programme, with 871 having begun the programme but later withdrawn (19% withdrawal rate).

The programme was designed on the assumption of a 30% withdrawal rate from cohorts, and cohorts were designed to begin with a group of 11 participants, in order that these would fall to an ideal size of around 8 participants per cohort. In practice, the average starting number of participants on each cohort was 10.2, and the overall withdrawal rate (defined as those participants who attended at least one session but later withdrew from the cohort) was 19%. The combination of these two factors means that on average, cohort size should have been around the size that was originally expected.

Against the original allocations, the combination of lower starting numbers per cohort but also lower withdrawal rates meant that 3,760 business completions against the original target of 4,019 (which had been based on an expected 30% withdrawal rate). This equates to 94% of the business completions target having been achieved.

The expectation from BEIS was that the minimum time needed to complete the programme would be around three months, on the basis of either nine 2-hour action learning set sessions, or six three-hour sessions set up at least two weeks apart, and with time at the end, or during delivery to complete a further half day of one-to-one support.

Table 0-3: Time Taken for Delivery of Group Sessions, by Cohort

ALS Delivery length	Number of Cohorts	% of those Analysed
Less than 6 weeks	26	10%
6-8 weeks	20	8%
8-10 weeks	46	17%

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[7] At the end of June 2021, BEIS confirmed that in those instances where a cohort was due to start within a week and had a minimum of 8 participants that the Growth Hub believed were strongly committed to attending, BEIS agreed to waive the need to seek prior written notification. This was on the understanding that efforts would continue to secure the full 11 participants while allowing arrangements to be confirmed with those already signed up.

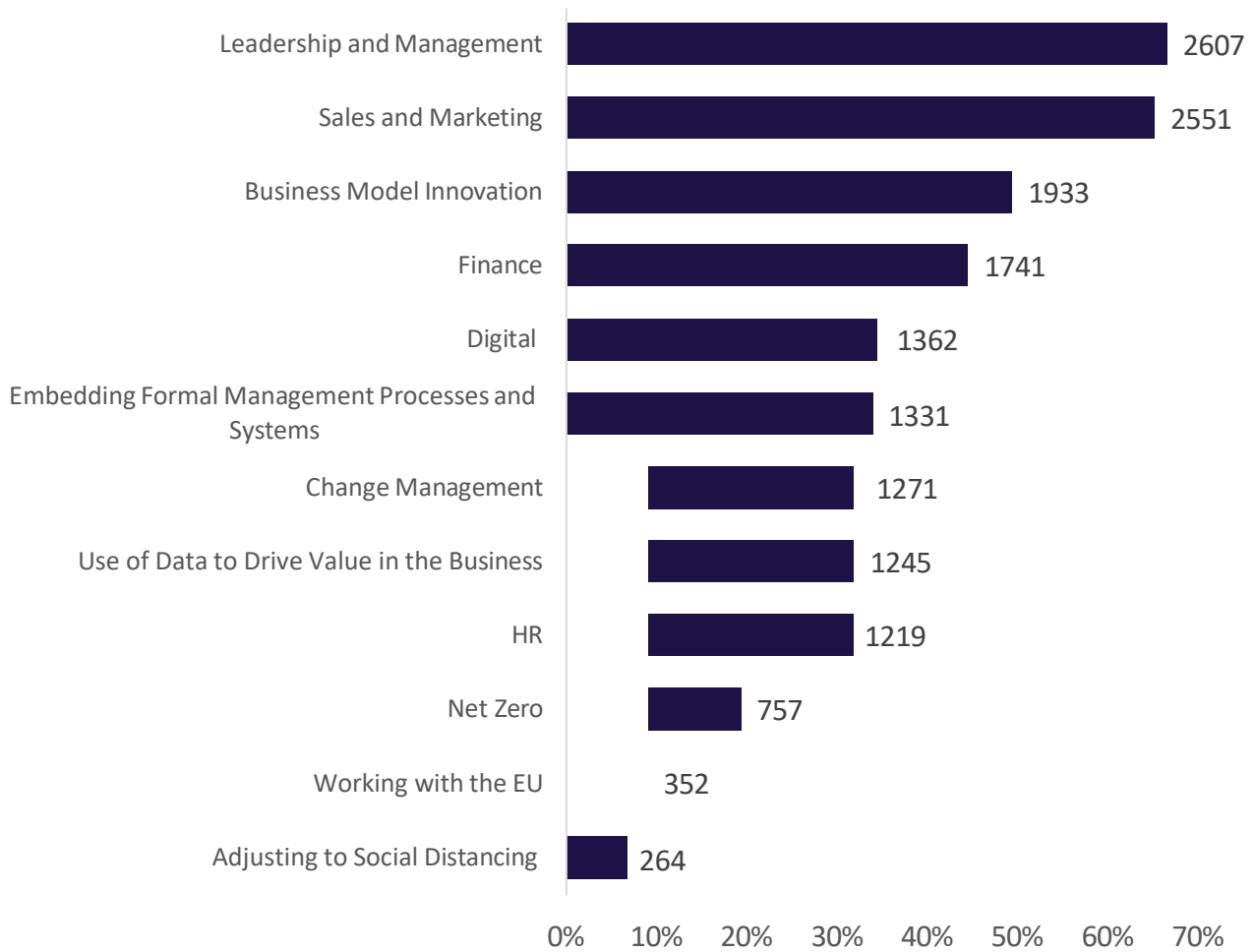| 10-12 weeks	35	13%
12 weeks or more	137	52%
Total	264	100%

Source: the Growth Company, analysis by Wavehill n=264. Note full data not available for all 454 cohorts due to errors in data entry requiring cleansing to a) remove all entries where start and end dates entered were outside the programme delivery period, and b) to remove the highest and lowest 5% to reduce inaccuracies.

The table shows that, in practice, just over half of cohorts for which data is available, took 12 weeks or more for completion of the cohort sessions. Almost one in five completed the cohort sessions in fewer than eight weeks, suggesting a more compressed timescale for this latter group (though this excludes the time taken for the one-to-one support).

Action Learning Set Topic Coverage

On signing up to join the programme, participants were asked about the topics they were most interested to learn about, and subsequently, following each action learning set session, facilitators recorded the main topics discussed in that session. The two charts below compare the findings from these two pieces of analysis.

Figure 0-1: Topics of Interest to Participants at Onboarding Stage

Topic	Value
Leadership and Management	2607
Sales and Marketing	2551
Business Model Innovation	1933
Finance	1741
Digital	1362
Embedding Formal Management Processes and Systems	1331
Change Management	1271
Use of Data to Drive Value in the Business	1245
HR	1219
Net Zero	757
Working with the EU	352
Adjusting to Social Distancing	264

Source: the Growth Company – Participant onboarding survey. Based on data from 3,929 participants – note: participants were able to select several topics of interest in their responses.

Figure 0-2: Topics Covered in Group Sessions

Topic	Value
Sales and marketing	1141
HR	1102
Leadership and Management	866
Business model innovation	627
Change management	580
Finance	544
Embedding formal management processes and systems	367
Digital	242
Net Zero	149
Use of data to drive value in the business	87
Adjusting to social distancing	72
Working with the EU	43

Source: the Growth Company. Based on data from 3,207 action learning set sessions, with up to three topics noted per session. 2,551 'Null' responses and 1,250 'Other' responses are not included in the chart.

The two charts show that:

- Sales & marketing, leadership & management, and business model innovation were topics businesses were seeking support on going into the programme, and were amongst the most common topics of discussion within cohorts

- Support around finance and digital were also areas that a large proportion of businesses highlighted as topics of interest going into the programme, however in practice were less common topics of discussion within cohorts

- HR was a topic that a low proportion of businesses highlighted as a topic of interest going into the programme, but was actually one of the most common topics of discussion within action learning sets.

These topics largely reflect findings draw out in the post-completion survey, summarised at Figure 0-2.

Characteristics of Supported Businesses

The following sections provide an overview of the characteristics of supported businesses, based on data received from the 38 LEP areas. This data covers 4,546 businesses recruited onto the scheme (approximately 98% of all businesses recruited onto the programme). However, gaps in the data provided by some LEP areas mean that the response rate for certain questions is lower.

## Business Size

Figure 0-3: Size-band of Supported Businesses
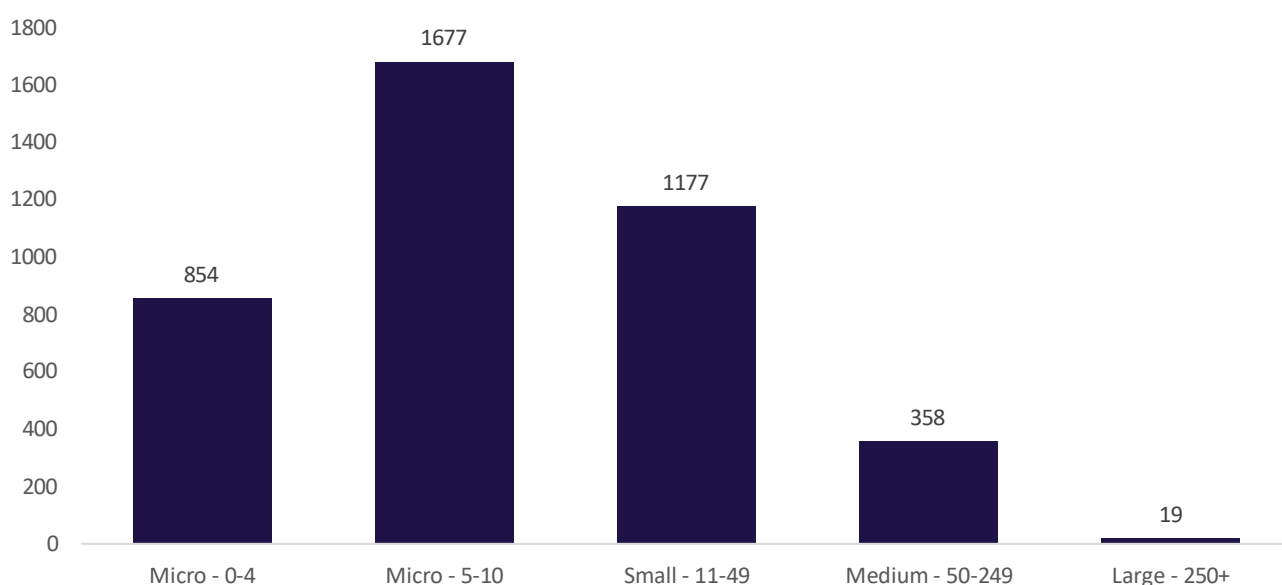
Source: Peer Networks Onboarding Survey – based on size of businesses in local office. N=4,085. Note – the programme was aimed at SMEs so should not have included any businesses with over 250 employees. The small number of these may reflect either a data inputting error, or errors in the recruiting with a small number of large companies being onboarded to the programme.

The programme eligibility criteria required supported firms to have at least five employees, although, as with Year 1 of the programme, this criteria was relaxed following requests from a number of LEP areas to allow additional flexibilities in certain cases for firms with 2+ employees. On the basis of the data here, around 21% of supported businesses had fewer than five employees. Overall, around 62% of supported businesses were micro sized, 29% small and 9% medium sized[8].

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8 Note: this data is based on employment at the local office of the programme participant, and so in some cases the overall business size may be larger when including other offices.

Business Sector

Figure 0-4: Sector of Supported Business, compared with National Distribution
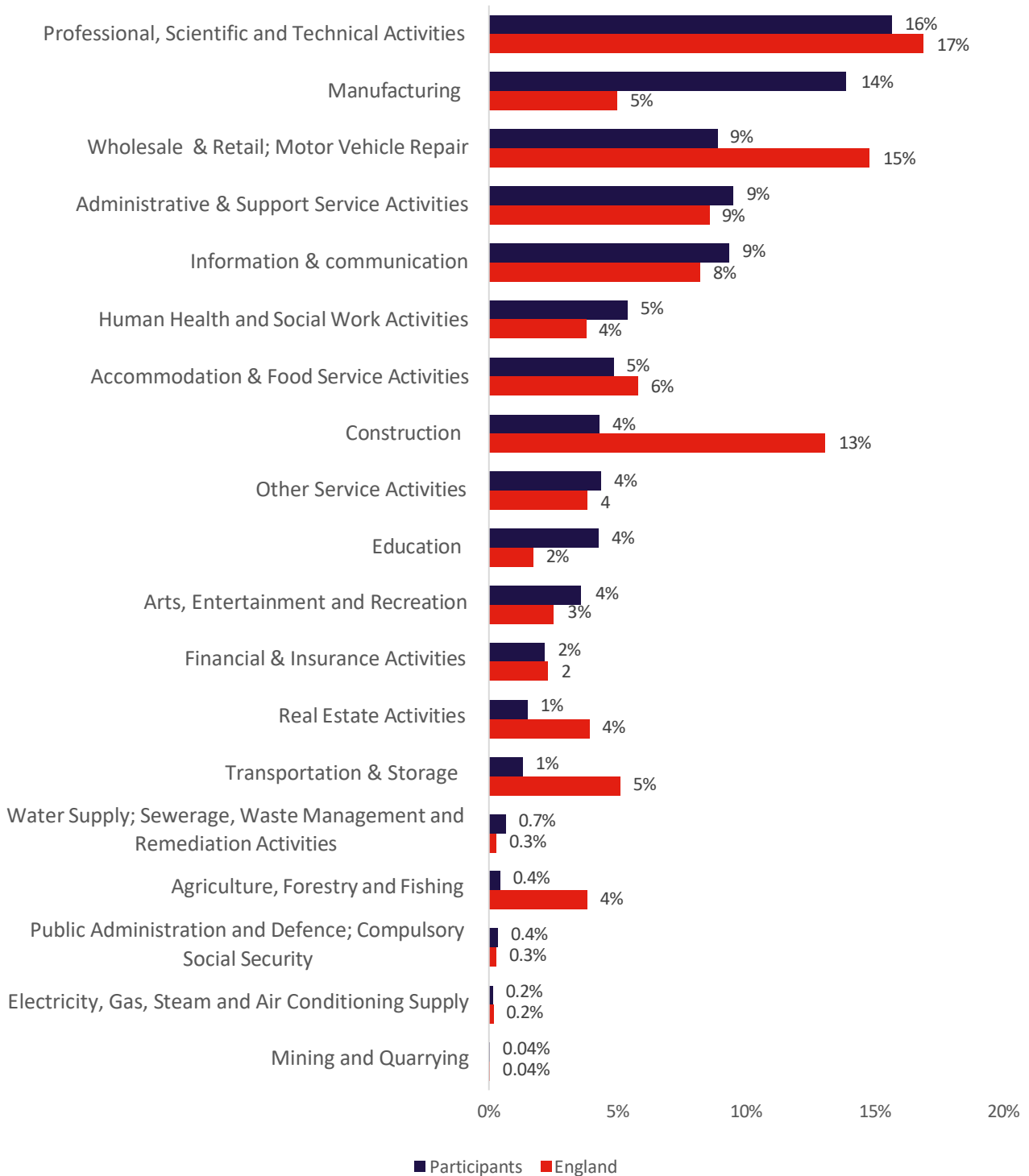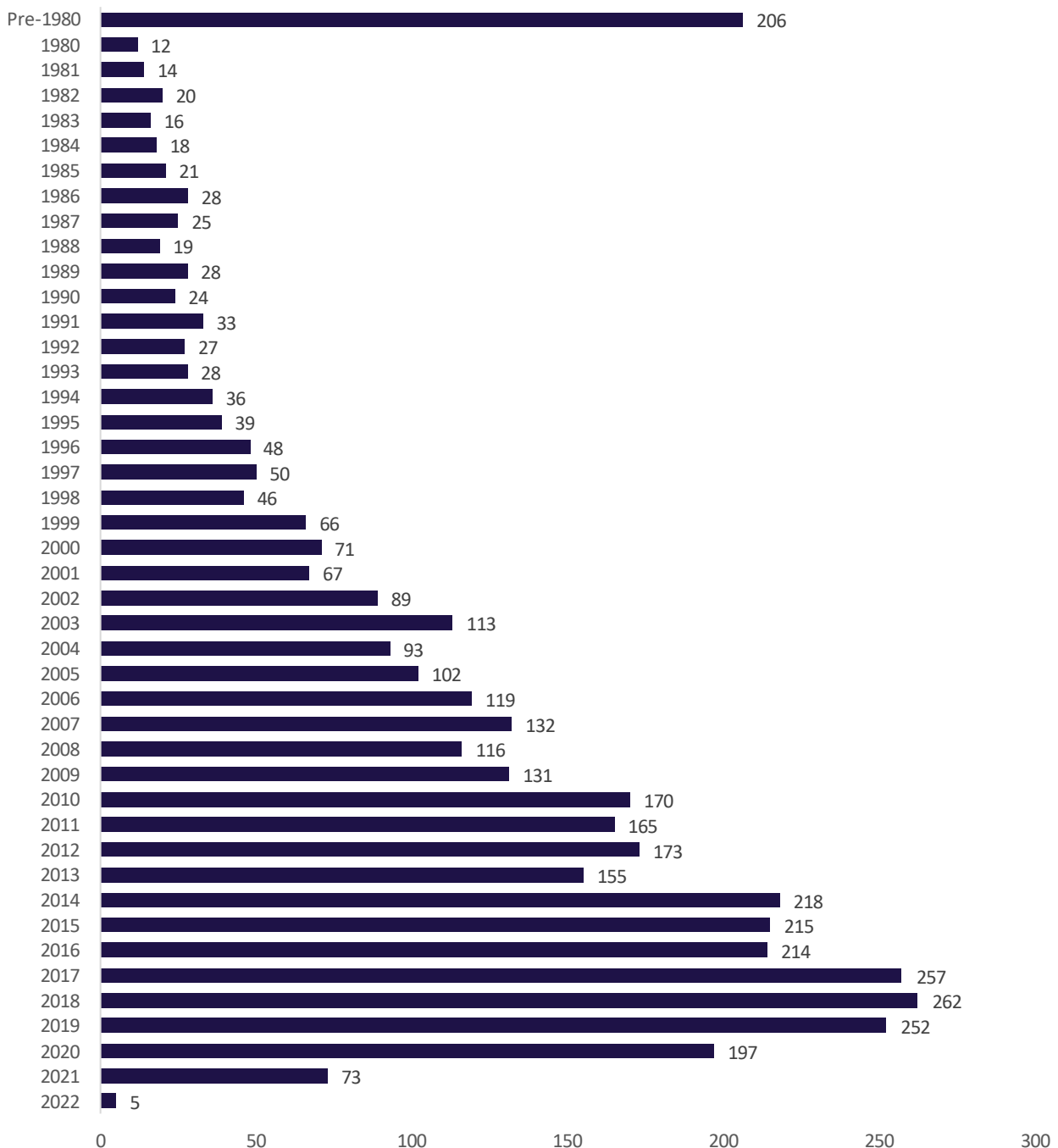

Source: Peer Networks Onboarding Survey, n=4,026; UK Business Counts, ONS (2021)

The spread of businesses supported by the programme in many cases mirrors the relative proportion of those businesses across England, although a number are notably over or under represented. In particular, manufacturing, was one of the most strongly supported sectors and is over-represented in the spread of beneficiaries supported by Peer Networks compared to the proportion of those businesses across England. Under-represented sectors compared to the national business base included wholesale & retail motor trade and construction.

Business Age

Figure 0-5: Supported Businesses by Year Started Trading

Source: Peer Networks Onboarding Survey, n=4,193

The programme has attracted businesses with a broad range of business age. Around half of supported businesses were up to ten years old, with around a quarter trading for 20 years or more.

Growth / Scale-up Potential and Exporter Status

Two desirable criteria for businesses onboarded onto the programme were the potential of participant businesses to be able to scale-up, and whether the business was an existing exporter. The table below indicates a varied approach to utilising these criteria in decision making about which businesses to onboard, with the large majority of supported businesses having been seen to have scale-up potential, but only around a quarter were existing exporters, indicating that this may have been seen as a lower priority characteristic for supported businesses, or that there were lower numbers of SMEs which export coming forward for support through the programme.

Table 0-4: Representation of Desirable Characteristics in Supported Businesses

Desirable Criteria for Onboarding	Yes	No	Total	% Yes
Business having scale-up potential	2650	160	2,810	94%
Business being an existing exporter	931	2681	3,612	26%

Source: Peer Networks Onboarding Survey. Response numbers as shown in table.

Existing Growth Hub Client Status

The Peer Networks programme had an aim to reach a large base of businesses, many of which had not received business support before. The table below shows that 44% of supported businesses were new to growth hubs, which suggests that over half of supported businesses had previously received business support. However, this 44% is an increase compared to the first year of the programme, where just 38% of supported businesses were new to the growth hub.

Table 0-5: Existing Growth Hub Client Status

Existing Growth Hub Client	1,991
New Growth Hub Client	1,536
Total	3,527
% New Clients	44%

Source: Peer Networks Onboarding Survey

Diversity Characteristics of Participants from Supported Businesses

The table below shows a breakdown of gender identification, age bracket, ethnic group and physical or mental health condition. Compared to the first year of the programme there has been an increase in the proportion of female participants, up from 34% in Year 1[9]. As a comparison, business statistics highlight that around 19% of SMEs are women-led and around 6% are minority ethnic group led[10].

Table 0-6: Diversity Characteristics of Supported Participants

Characteristics of Participants	%
Gender Identification (4,321 responses)	
Male	60.7%
Female	39.1%
Prefer to Self-Describe	0.2%
Age Bracket (4,013 responses)	
16-24	1.0%
25-34	13.0%

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[9] While further analysis around completion and withdrawal rates from the programme by demographic group would have been useful, the data provided for the evaluation was aggregated at a higher level, so did not allow for more detailed breakdown analysis.
[10] House of Commons Library, (2022), Business Statistics Research Briefing

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Characteristics of Participants	%
35-44	32.6%
45-54	32.4%
55-64	18.4%
65+	2.6%
Ethnic Group (4,132 responses)	
White	90.3%
Asian / Asian British	5.8%
Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups	2.3%
Black / African / Caribbean / Black British	1.2%
Other ethnic group	0.4%
Physical or Mental Health Condition or Illness Lasting or Expected to Last 12 Months or More (447 responses)	
Yes	3.4%
No	96.6%

Source: The Growth Company. Response numbers as shown in the table

Motivation for Signing Up

Figure 0-6: Motivation of Supported Businesses to Sign-up for the Programme
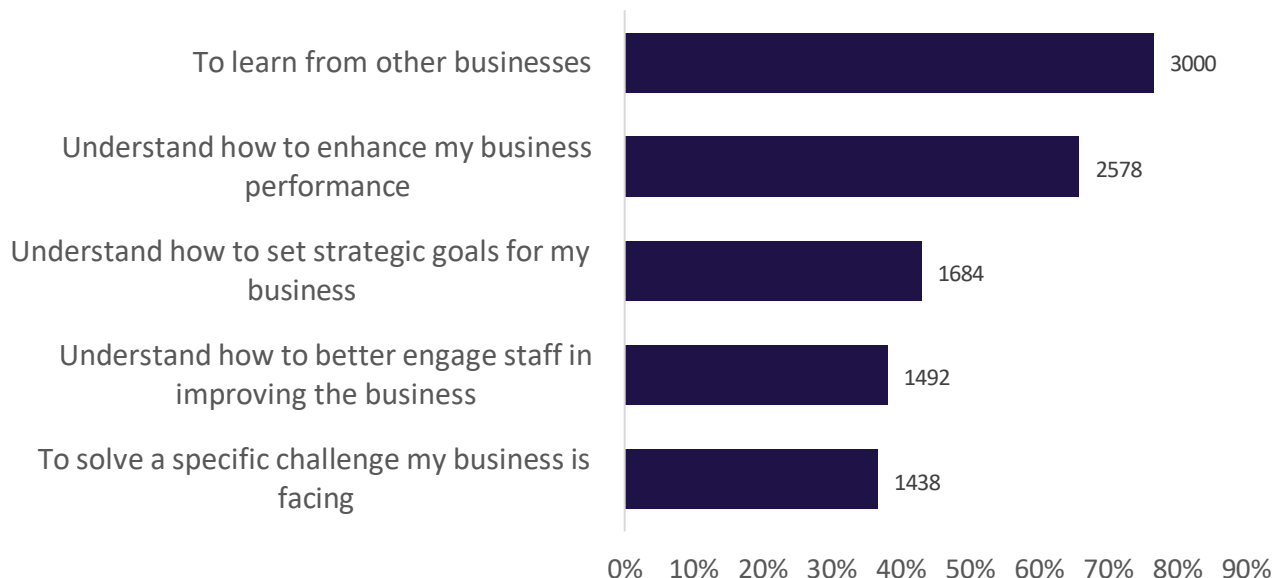
Source: The Growth Company, n=3,852

The chart above shows a broad range of motivations for participants to sign up to the programme. The most common were more general aspirations around learning from other businesses and understanding how to improve business performance. Less than 40% indicated that they were coming into the programme with a view to addressing a specific challenge faced by their business,

Growth Aspiration

When joining the programme, 96% of businesses reported having growth aspirations for their businesses (based on 3,929 responses) and 79% believed they were either likely or extremely likely to be able to achieve this (from 3,569 responses). Analysis in Section 4 shows how these figures changed following attendance on the programme.

COVID Impacts

The charts below provide an overview of the extent to which participating businesses regarded the impacts of Covid-19 on their business finances, collected at baseline stage. Around 41% of businesses reported that their turnover was below normal, with 17% indicating it had not been affected and 34% indicating it was higher than normal. This is a more balanced picture compared to the Year 1 data, where around 60% of businesses indicated turnover was below normal levels.

As outlined in Figure 0-8, around 27% of businesses felt their risk of insolvency had increased as a result of Covid-19, with around 14% saying it had decreased.

Figure 0-7: Participant Response to the Onboarding Question: In the last six months, how has the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic affected your business's turnover, compared with normal expectations for this time of year?
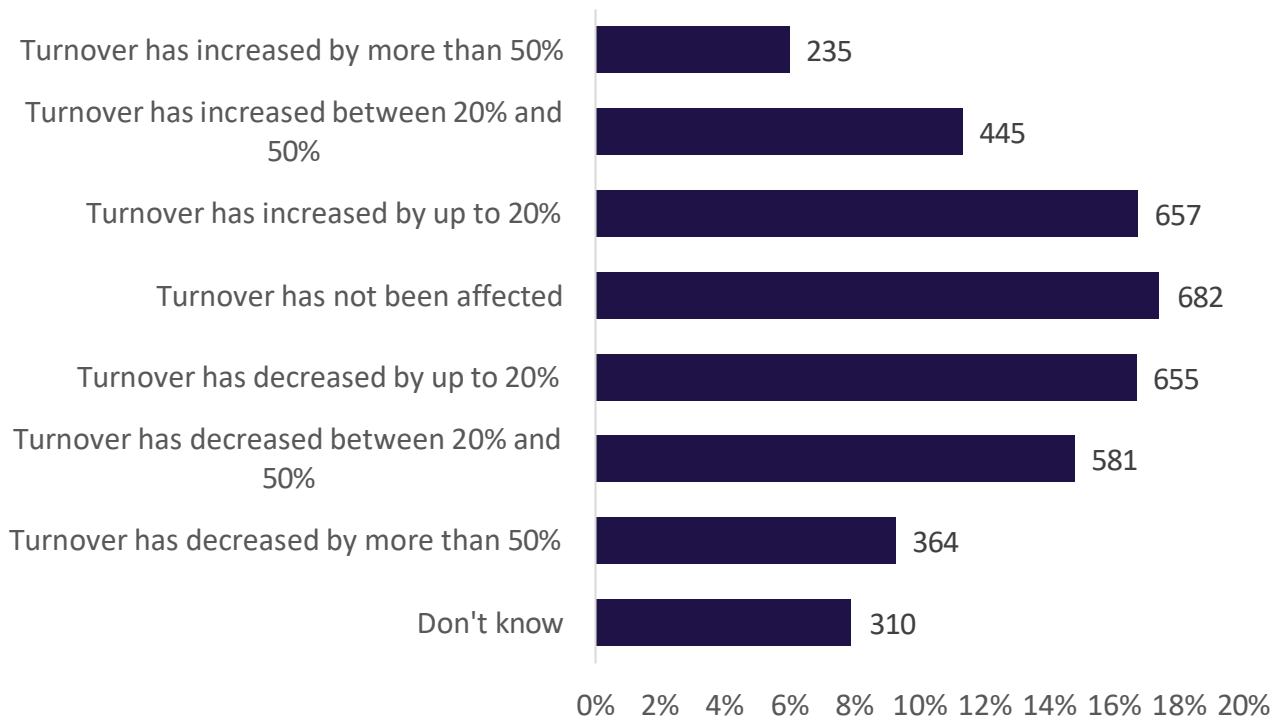
Source: The Growth Company, n=3,929

Figure 0-8: Participant response to the Onboarding Question: How has the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic affected your business's risk of insolvency?

Source: The Growth Company, n=3,929

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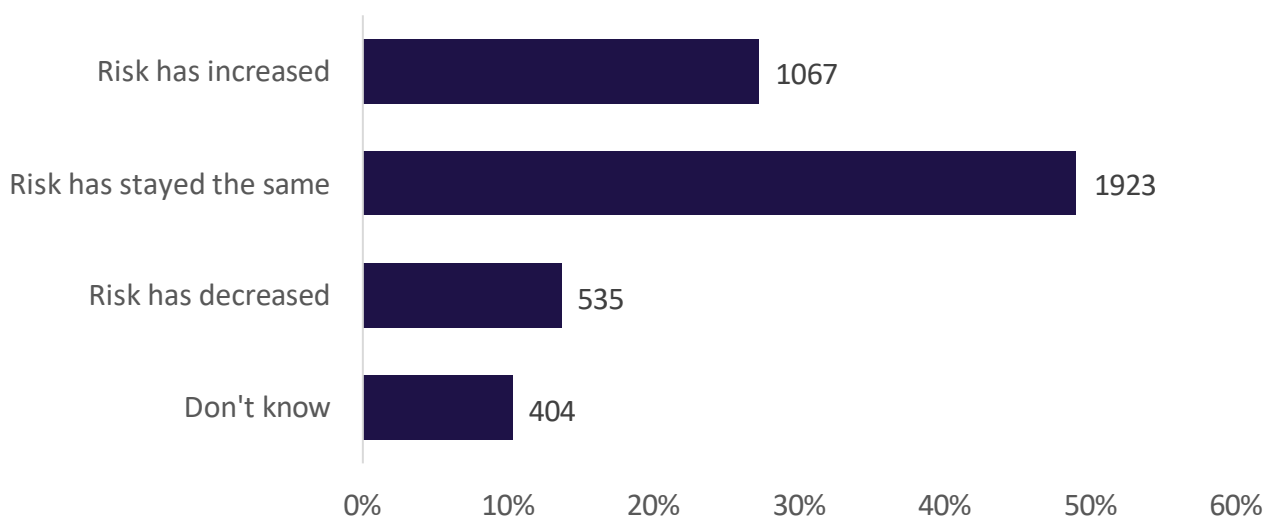
4. Beneficiary Survey Analysis

This section sets out analysis of data collected through three main surveys:

- the beneficiary post-completion survey, which received a total of 671 responses (18% of the 3,760 participants completing the programme)
- the withdrawal survey, which received a total of 30 responses (3.4% of the 871 participants withdrawing from the programme). It should be noted that the low response rate and low overall number of responses is a limitation and that the findings from this survey should be treated as indicative.
- satisfaction surveys gathered after each ALS session, which comprise responses from a total of 4,546 participants (98% of the 4,631 total programme participants)

The analysis set out in this section covers: beneficiary perspectives on delivery, satisfaction with the support received, reasons for withdrawals from the programme, and early outcomes identified by beneficiaries.
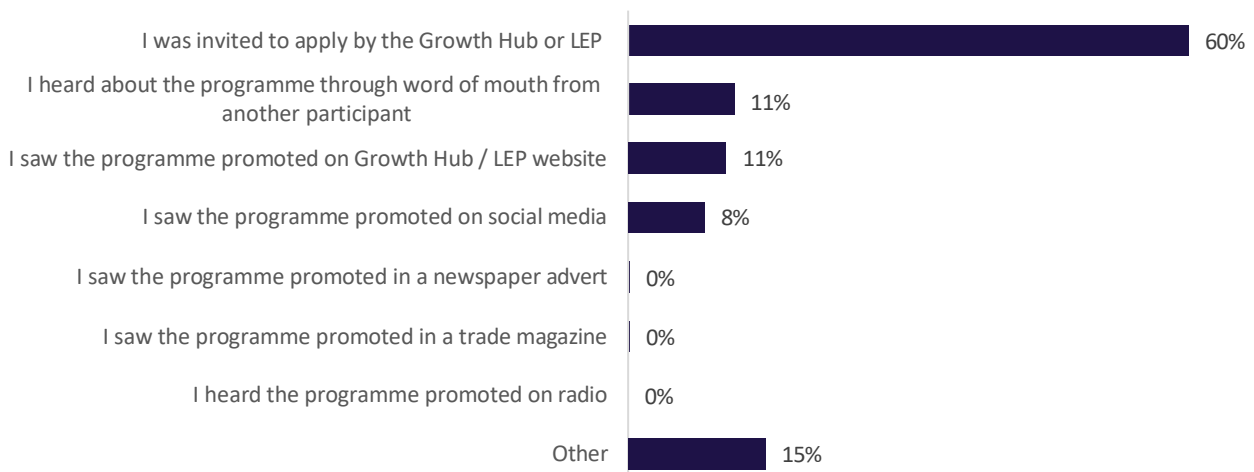
Where questions around experience of the programme were asked in both the post-completion and withdrawals survey, the main data presented relates to the post-completion survey responses, but where findings from the withdrawal survey differs notably, these have been highlighted in the narrative.

Perspectives on Delivery

Pathways to Peer Networks

Figure 0-1: How businesses heard about the Peer Networks programme

Q. How did you hear about the Peer Networks programme?

I was invited to apply by the Growth Hub or LEP	60%
I heard about the programme through word of mouth from another participant	11%
I saw the programme promoted on Growth Hub / LEP website	11%
I saw the programme promoted on social media	8%
I saw the programme promoted in a newspaper advert	0%
I saw the programme promoted in a trade magazine	0%
I heard the programme promoted on radio	0%
Other	15%

Unweighted base (671), multiple response

Three in five respondents heard about the Peer Networks programme after being invited to apply by the Growth Hub or LEP. Around one in 10 respondents heard about the programme through word of mouth from other participants, or through promotions on Growth Hub / LEP websites or promoted on social media. Those responding 'other' commonly identified receiving information from another business body such as a chamber of commerce, through email or e-newsletter content, or being passed on the information from a colleague.

Most businesses agreed that it was easy to apply to the Peer Networks programme (93%, n=671) and that their application was dealt with quickly (94%, n=671).
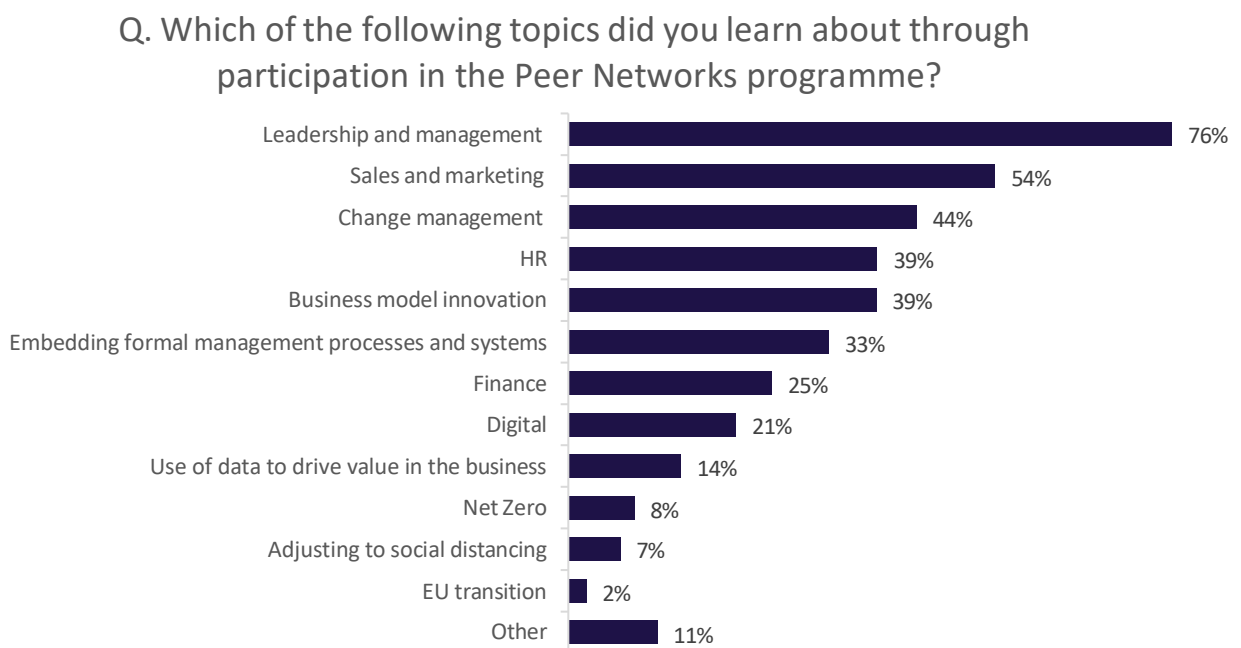
Withdrawals from the Programme

When those withdrawing from the programme were asked why they decided not to take up the full support offer, the most common responses included: 40% stating they were not able to commit enough time to the sessions, 28% stating other business activities took priority, and 20% stating that they did not like the structure of the sessions (n=25, multiple responses allowed).

More than half (53%) attended fewer than 3 hours of support before withdrawing from the programme (n=30).

Learning Outcomes

Figure 0-2: Topics businesses learned about through programme participation

Q. Which of the following topics did you learn about through participation in the Peer Networks programme?

Topic	%
Leadership and management	76%
Sales and marketing	54%
Change management	44%
HR	39%
Business model innovation	39%
Embedding formal management processes and systems	33%
Finance	25%
Digital	21%
Use of data to drive value in the business	14%
Net Zero	8%
Adjusting to social distancing	7%
EU transition	2%
Other	11%

Unweighted base (671), multiple response

In line with the action learning methodology, choice of topics is led by the participants. The top three topics learnt about through participation in the Peer Networks were leadership & management (76%), sales & marketing (54%) and change management (44%). Topics not commonly reported as covered included Net Zero, adjusting to social distancing and EU transition.
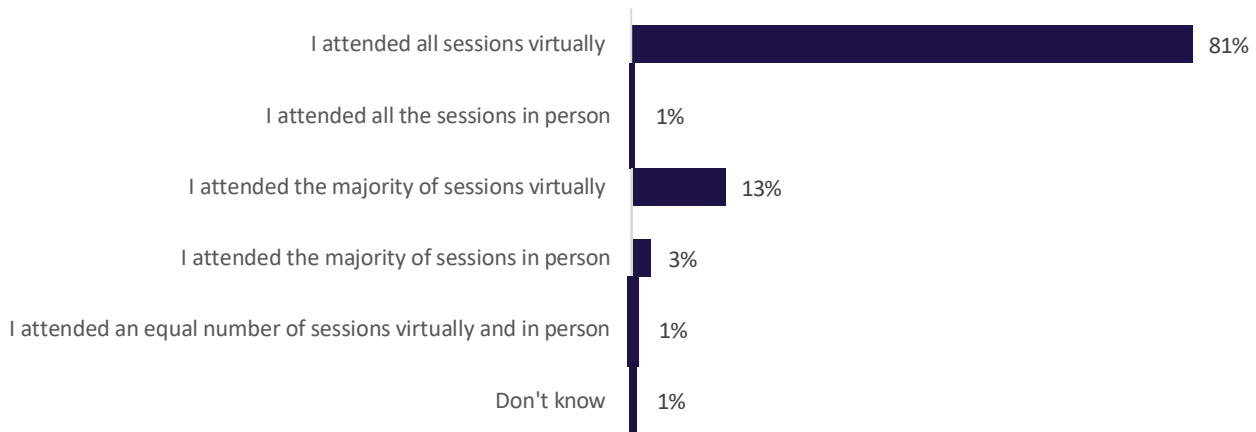
Action Learning Sets

Attendance

As the chart below shows, the large majority of participants completed all or most sessions online, although around 5% did an equal number or more in person.

Figure 0-3: Most common method of delivering ALS sessions

Q. Did you primarily attend sessions virtually or in-person?

Response	Percentage
I attended all sessions virtually	81%
I attended all the sessions in person	1%
I attended the majority of sessions virtually	13%
I attended the majority of sessions in person	3%
I attended an equal number of sessions virtually and in person	1%
Don't know	1%

Unweighted base (671), single response

Just under half of businesses (46%, n=671) reported they had attended all of the available sessions. There were some differences by LEP area, however the sample size was too small to be confident in reporting these differences.

Of those who did not attend all sessions, most respondents stated contracting COVID-19 or caring for someone who had contracted COVID-19 as a reason for missing a session. Others mentioned work commitments, staff shortages or meetings that meant they were unable to attend a session. However, some respondents commented that they did not feel sessions offered enough value to attend all sessions:

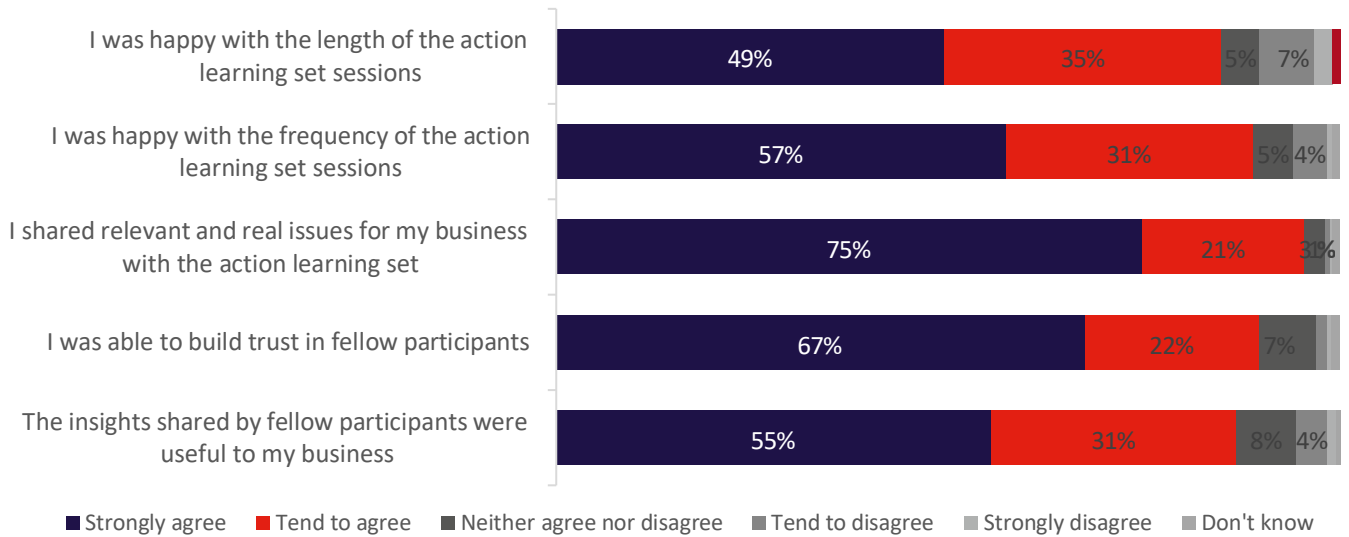"The value of these sessions was quite low, with much of the material hashed old workings"

"Wasn't very impressed with it."

"Not enough value in the subject matter"

Quality

Figure 0-4: Feedback on quality of action learning sets

Q. Overall, to what extent do you agree with the following statements about action learning sets?

Statement	Strongly agree	Tend to agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Tend to disagree
I was happy with the length of the action learning set sessions	49%	35%	5%	7%
I was happy with the frequency of the action learning set sessions	57%	31%	5%	4%
I shared relevant and real issues for my business with the action learning set	75%	21%	3%	1%
I was able to build trust in fellow participants	67%	22%	7%	
The insights shared by fellow participants were useful to my business	55%	31%	8%	4%

■ Strongly agree ■ Tend to agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Tend to disagree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Don't know

Unweighted base (671), single response

Generally, satisfaction levels are high with different aspects of the action learning sets. Over 4 in 5 respondents agree with each of the aspects they were surveyed on.

The aspect least agreed on was the length of the action learning set sessions, though 84% of respondents agreed they were happy. The majority of respondents, 96%, agreed that they had shared relevant and real issues for their business with the action learning set.
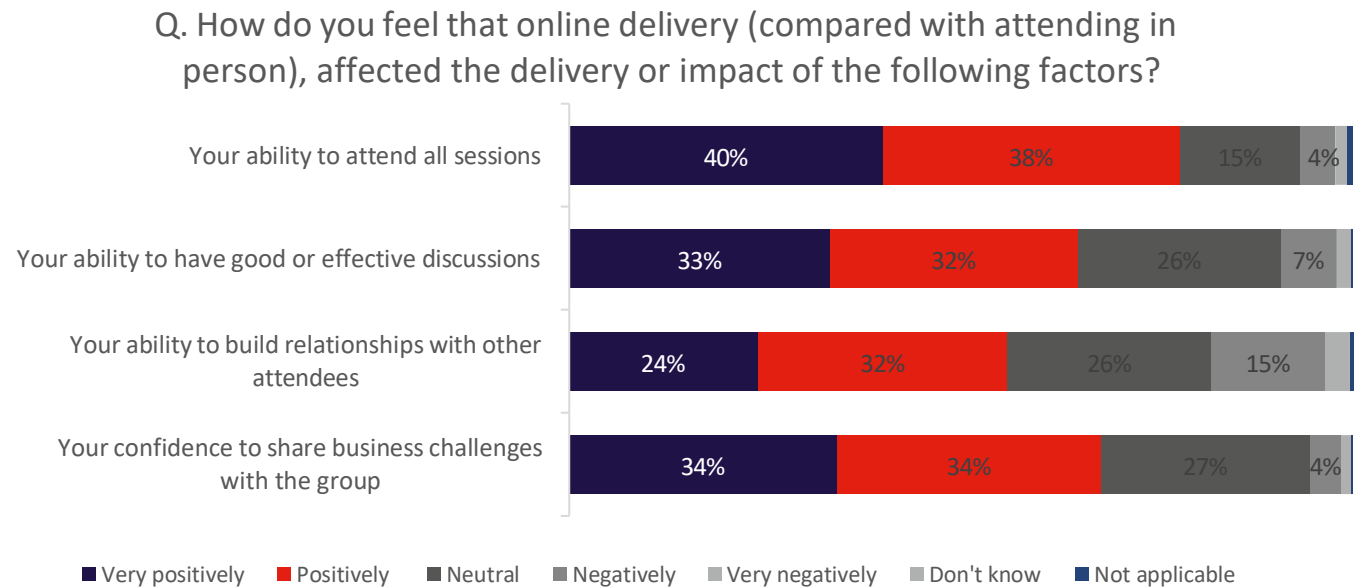
Respondents to the withdrawal survey (n=30) had less positive responses on some of these points, with:

- 33% indicating they were not happy with the length of the ALS sessions
- 47% indicating they were not happy with the frequency of the ALS sessions (there are further insights in the process review on this, at Section 5)
- 37% indicating they did not share relevant and real issues for their business
- 37% indicating they were not able to build trust in fellow participants
- 47% indicating that insights shared by fellow participants were not useful to their business.

It is important to note that these comments are based on a very small sample however and should be taken only as indicative findings.

Online Delivery

Figure 0-5: How online delivery approach affected programme delivery and impact

Q. How do you feel that online delivery (compared with attending in person), affected the delivery or impact of the following factors?

Very positively ■ Positively ■ Neutral ■ Negatively ■ Very negatively ■ Don't know ■ Not applicable

Unweighted base (640), single response

Over half of the respondents feel that the online delivery of the action learning sets affected each of these factors positively. Over three quarters (78%) of respondents said that online delivery positively affected their ability to attend all the sessions. Around two thirds of respondents said it positively affected their ability to have good or effective discussions (65%) and their confidence to share business challenges with the group (68%). Over half (56%) said it positively affected their ability to build relationships with other attendees.

Responses to the withdrawal survey (n=26) had some differing responses overall to these, including:

- 38% felt online delivery negatively affected their ability to attend all sessions
- 46% felt this negatively affected their ability to have good or effective discussions
- 42% felt this negatively affected their ability to build relationships with other attendees
- 31% felt this negatively affected their confidence to share business challenges with the group

Cohort Composition

Most participants reported that the cohort they participated in had the right number of businesses (80%, n=671), with 2% reporting there were too many and 14% reporting there were too few. As shown in the figure below, over half of those surveyed (54%) said that the mixture of businesses in their cohort met their expectations and enabled an effective action learning set. Just over a quarter (27%) stated there was a better mix of businesses than they expected. 14% said there was a worse mixture of businesses in their cohort than they had expected.

The findings from those who withdrew from the programme (n=30) were slightly more negative with 33% suggesting there was a worse mix of businesses than expected.

Figure 0-6: Extent that mixture of businesses attending group sessions met expectations

Q. To what extent did the mixture of businesses in your cohort meet your expectations in enabling an effective action learning set?

■ Worse mix   ■ The mix met my expectations   ■ Better mix   ■ Don't know
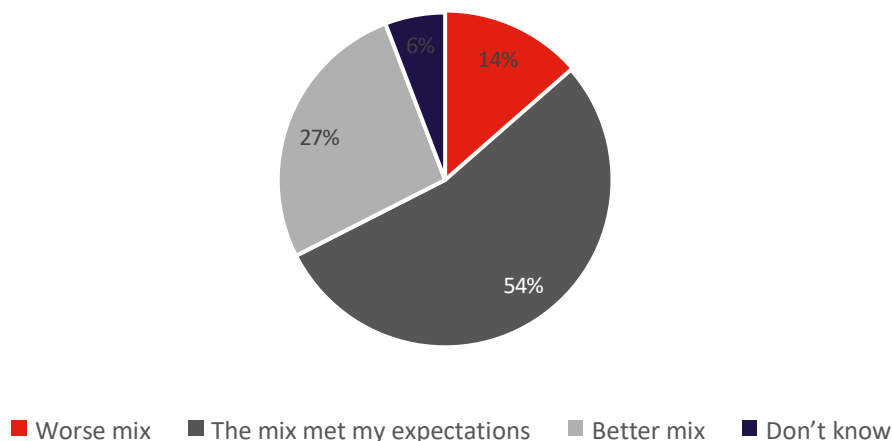
Unweighted base (671), single response

Respondents who had said there was a better mix of businesses in their cohort than they had expected mentioned the relevance of discussions, and the diversity of backgrounds and opinions and how useful they were. Example verbatim comments from respondents included:

"The cohort was very similar businesses so the learning pathways were more relevant"

"I was able to learn through people in industries I never would have thought I had anything in common with. It helped to see we have common issues across the board and that I wasn't on my own."

"All mixed backgrounds so good to learn about how other businesses think in their context and bring this across to my own business."

Respondents who said there was a worse mix of businesses than they expected cited lack of attendance as key issues, as this prevented healthy discussion. Others were unhappy with the variety of businesses in their cohort. Example verbatim comments from respondents included:

"poor attendance by some members of the group - only 50% attended each session. This leads to having too much recapping and also prevents levels of trust and confidence being built"

"We didn't have enough businesses in the cohort, and the range of them didn't meet my expectations. I was happy with the multi-sector approach, but some were at start-up stage or seemed far-removed from the rest of us. We struggled when it came to commitment of people too, which meant that most calls only had four or five participants."

"I was hoping to learn from my 'peers' however some of the businesses whilst successful in their own rights, were not comparable to where I wish to take our company. I was hoping to have more larger firms to be able to learn from their mistakes..."

Satisfaction Survey Analysis

All programme participants were asked to complete a short satisfaction survey after each ALS session, with five satisfaction questions included. Each satisfaction question involved a scale from one to five where one was the weakest response e.g. very dissatisfied, and five was the strongest e.g. very satisfied. The charts below show average responses across each of the questions over all sessions, and then subsequently how the overall satisfaction question response changed over the course of the ALS sessions.

**Figure 0-7: Average satisfaction ratings (all beneficiaries, all sessions)**
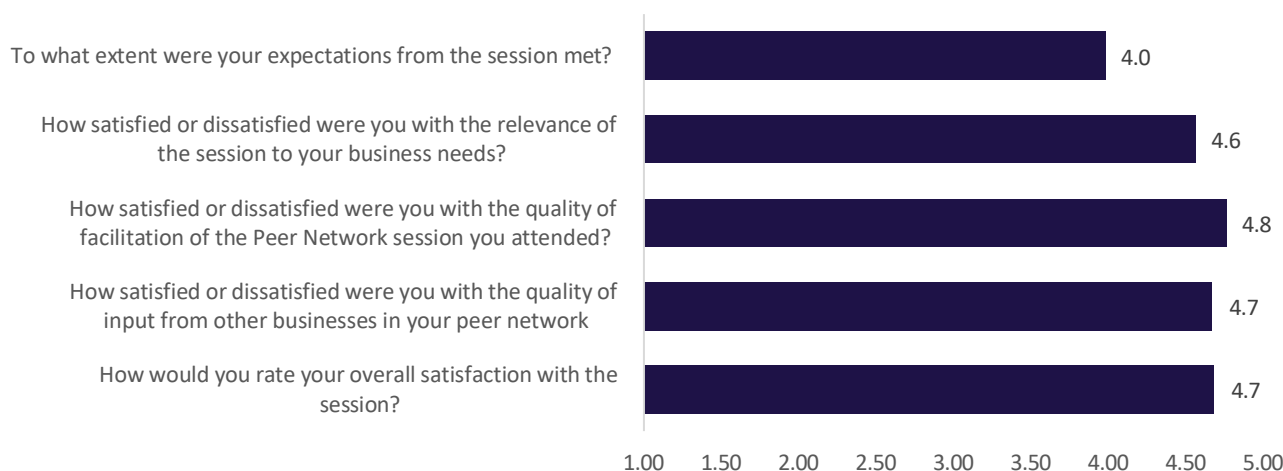
Source: Peer Networks Satisfaction Surveys (n=4,546)

The chart above highlights extremely positive feedback across the set of questions, with an average of 4.7 out of five for overall satisfaction, and similar scores for the other three satisfaction questions. Although slightly lower, respondents also gave an average score of four out of five in terms of expectations being met.

Across the 33 LEP areas for which data was provided, there is some variation in these averages, but across the four satisfaction questions, all received an average rating of at least four out of five in every LEP area. The expectations questions ranged from 3.4 – 4.8 across the 33 LEP areas.

Figure 0-8: Average overall satisfaction rating by session (all beneficiaries)
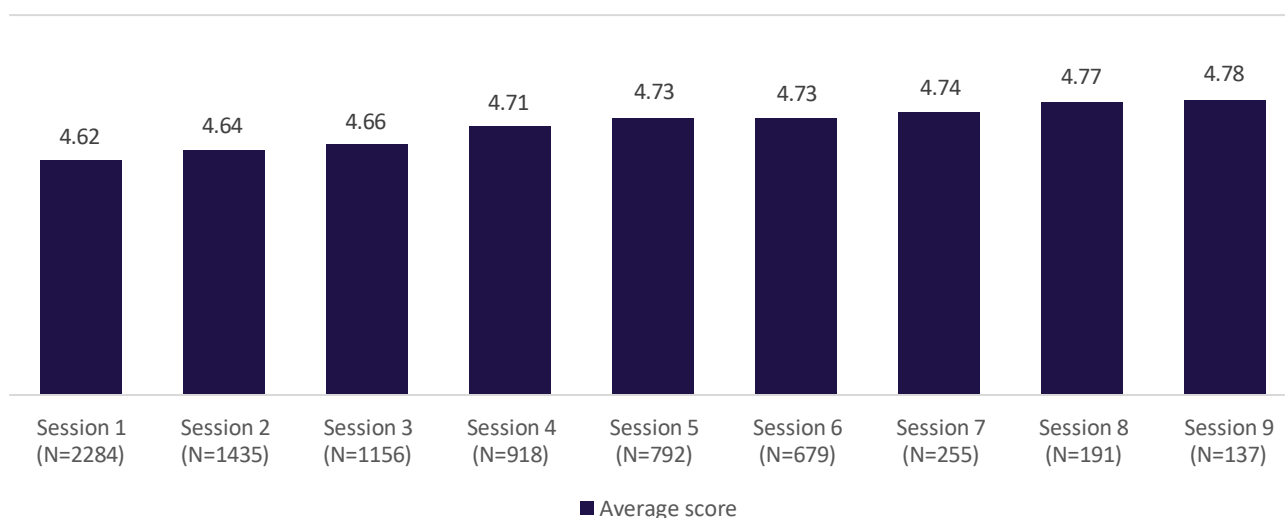
Source: Peer Networks Satisfaction Surveys

The chart above highlights that as participants continued through the programme, the average rating of sessions increased session by session. This may reflect both increasing value drawn from the sessions by participants, although could also reflect that those finding the sessions less useful may have gradually withdrawn and so the average rating of those still attending later sessions would be higher.
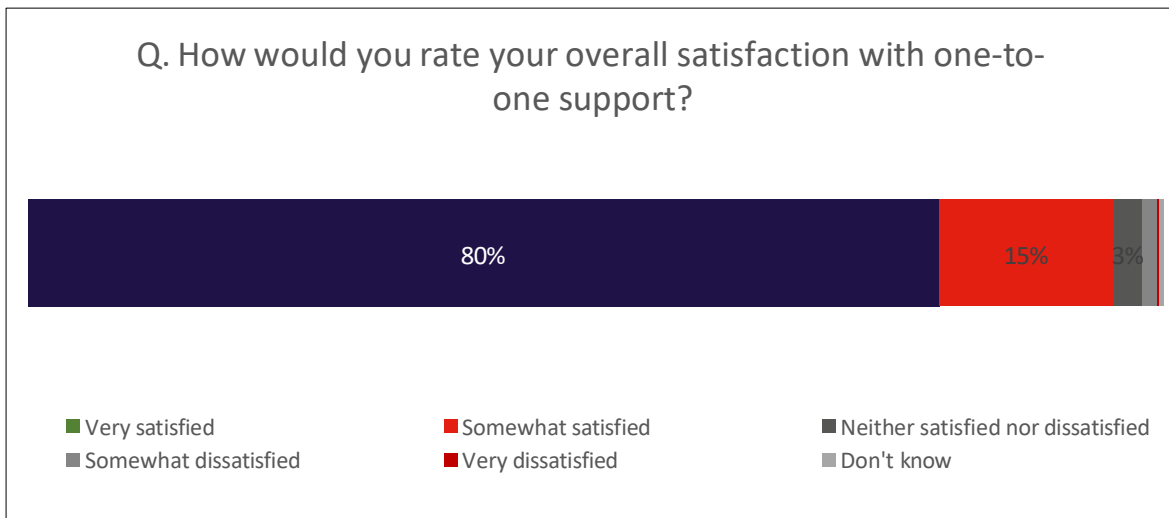
One to One Support

Of those completing the post completion survey, 82% (n=671) reported that they had received one to one support and so were asked to provide feedback on this element of support.

Almost three quarters (72%; n=547) of those accessing one to one support had used the session at least in part to build on topics covered in the action learning sets, while 25% reported that the one to one sessions had focused on topics not covered in the action learning sets.

As shown in the charts below, the vast majority of respondents (95%) stated their satisfaction with the one-to-one support they received as part of the Peer Networks. This high level of satisfaction was also reflected with the individual aspects of one to one support where:
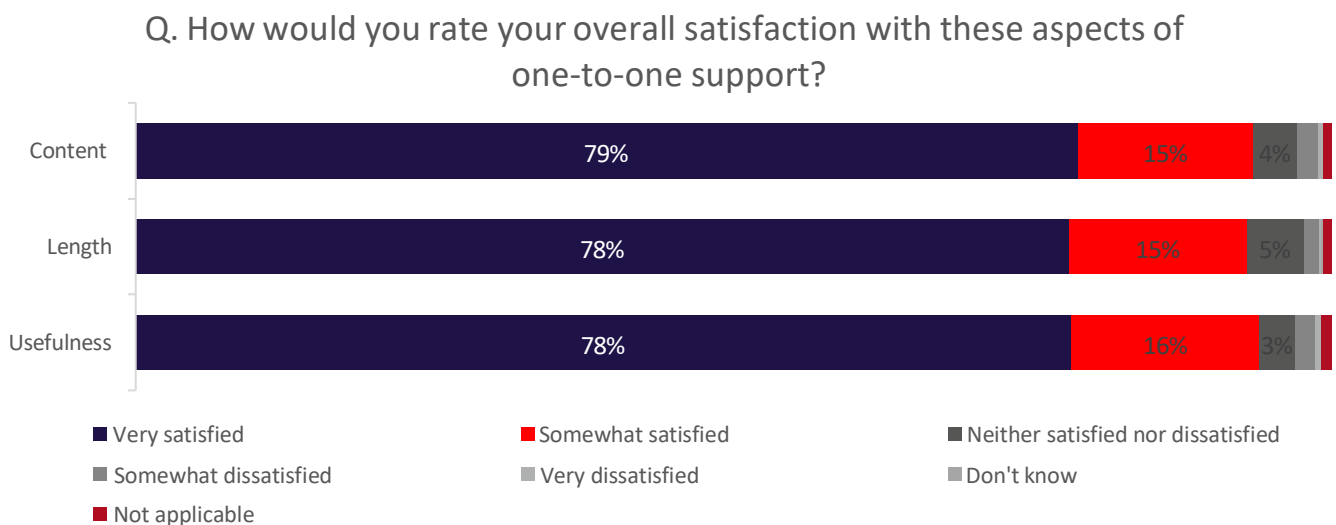
- 94% were satisfied with the content of one to one support
- 93% were satisfied with the length of one to one support
- 94% were satisfied with how useful the sessions were.

Figure 0-9: Overall Satisfaction with one to one support

Q. How would you rate your overall satisfaction with one-to-one support?

80%	15% 3%

Very satisfied · Somewhat satisfied · Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied · Somewhat dissatisfied · Very dissatisfied · Don't know

Unweighted base (547), single response

Figure 0-10: Satisfaction with aspects of one to one support

Q. How would you rate your overall satisfaction with these aspects of one-to-one support?

Content	79%	15% 4%
Length	78%	15% 5%
Usefulness	78%	16% 3%

Very satisfied · Somewhat satisfied · Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied · Somewhat dissatisfied · Very dissatisfied · Don't know · Not applicable

Unweighted base (547), single response

45

Beneficiary Recommendations for Future Delivery

When respondents were asked whether they had any recommendations in order to improve the Peer Networks programme, respondents suggested having more face-to-face meetings in order to build trust between attendants and having a clearer focus on how to implement the take-away messages from the sessions. Others mentioned making the content more useful for smaller businesses too. Some verbatims from respondents follow below:

"The difference between winning and losing in business is a very fine line. For some businesses it just happens but for most it has to be built one brick at a time from nothing. The general topics covered were great but I also needed some focus on the fundamentals of a business - what numbers are important, what are the key processes you need to keep your business on the straight and narrow, what to do to start making step changes in a business, how to generate new leads and close new business, what to be careful of that might knock us off track"

"Build-in at least 1 physical meeting. Merge groups at the end of the formal programme by inviting to a joint physical meeting."

"I think maybe ensure the groups have more in common with each other"

"Greater focus on how the "takeaways" from each session have or are intended to be implemented into your business to ensure you are doing it correctly and effectively. The takeaways are really useful but sometimes I was unsure how to implement them or unsure if I had implemented them correctly but there was little follow up on that throughout the course i.e. you were just given the takeaways."

Early Outcomes Analysis

This section draws out insights from the post-completion survey around what businesses expect to do following support from the Peer Networks programme, and how the average attitudes and aspirations of beneficiaries may have changed compared to the average responses to a series of questions asked both at onboarding stage and post-completion stages.

It should be noted that this analysis is not a counterfactual impact evaluation, and the findings have not been considered in the context of understanding any counterfactual position. As such, the analysis presented has not been able to control for factors such as whether businesses received other business support alongside the Peer Networks programme. As such, the outcomes presented here must be understood as gross changes that have occurred in supported businesses, not all of which are necessarily attributable to the Peer Networks programme.

Changes in Attitudes

Figure 0-11: Changes in attitude observed between the baseline and the post-completion survey
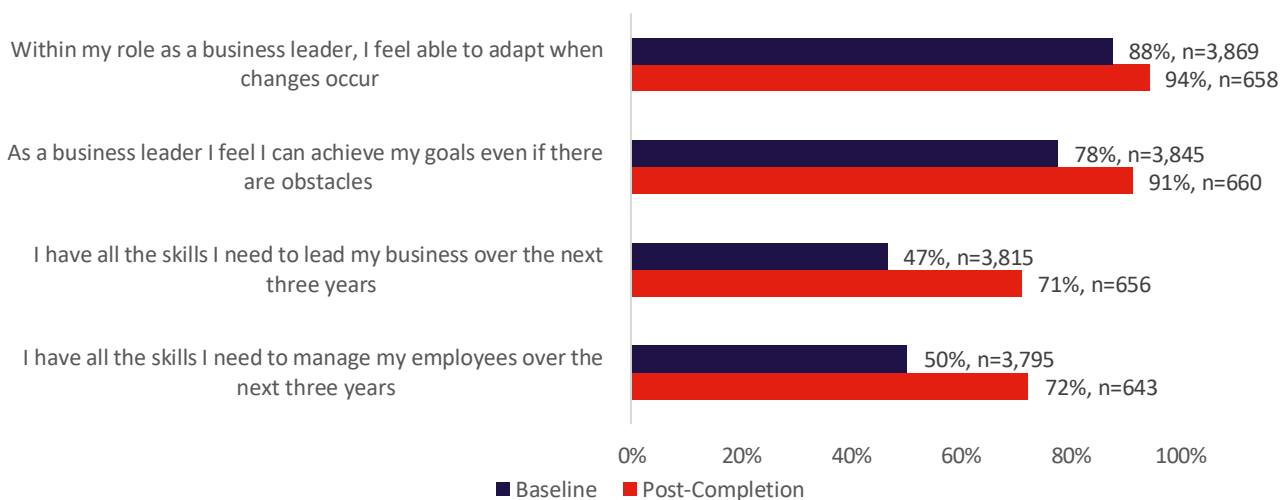
Source: Onboarding Survey, Post Completion Survey, respondent numbers included in chart.

The four statements captured in the chart above reflect attitudes around confidence in business skills and leadership, comparing the average response of participants at the onboarding stage, and the average of responses at post-completion survey stage. In each case there is an uplift in the self-reported attitude statements most notably with a large step change in the average response of participants around having the skills to lead their business and manage their employees – which reflects the findings from

Figure 0-2 that management & leadership and HR were among the most discussed topics in the ALS sessions.

Effects on Network Development

When asked if the programme has enabled participants to establish a wider network of businesses to consult with or to support them, 68% (n=671) reported it had. Of the remaining businesses, 22% reported it had not and the balance (10%) were unsure or felt this was not applicable.

Almost two thirds of respondents (65%, n=671) stated that they anticipated keeping in touch with / engaging with businesses they met through Peer Networks over the next year. 14% stated they did not expect to do so and 20% stated they did not know.

Changes in Growth Aspirations

At baseline stage, 96% of businesses reported having aspirations to grow their business over the next three years (n=3,929). At post-completion stage the figure was slightly lower at 94% (n=671).

However, while at baseline stage, 79% felt it was likely, of which 33% felt it was extremely likely that they would be able to achieve their growth aspirations (n=3,569), these figures increased notably in responses to the post-completion survey, with 97% stating it was likely they would be able to achieve their growth aspirations, of which 50% stated this was extremely likely (n=629)[11].

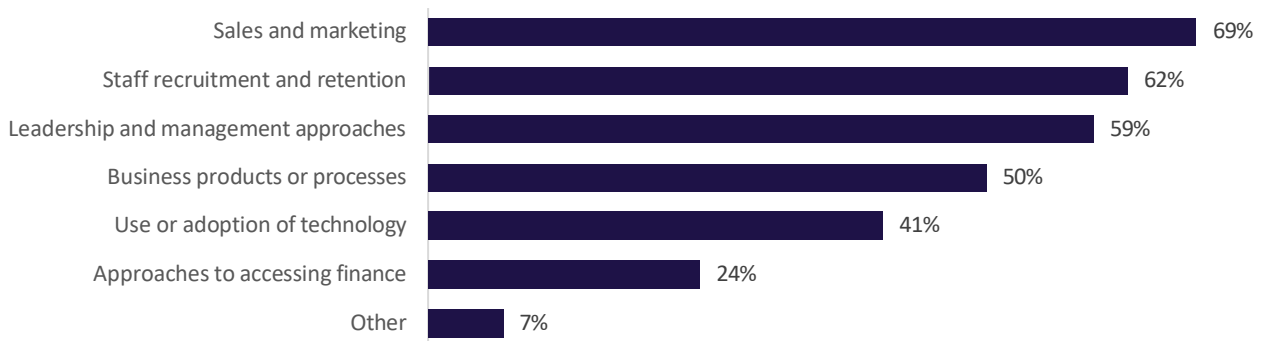## Indicative Plans to Make Business Changes

Overall, 84% of businesses reported that they intend to make changes in their business over the next six months (n=671), with most changes expected in relation to sales & marketing, staff recruitment & retention and leadership & management approaches, as shown in the chart below.

Figure 0-12: Types of changes businesses intend to implement in the next six months

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[11] Statistical significance has not been included in this analysis given the large differences in sample size pre and post support.

Q. What are these changes related to?

Sales and marketing 69%
Staff recruitment and retention 62%
Leadership and management approaches 59%
Business products or processes 50%
Use or adoption of technology 41%
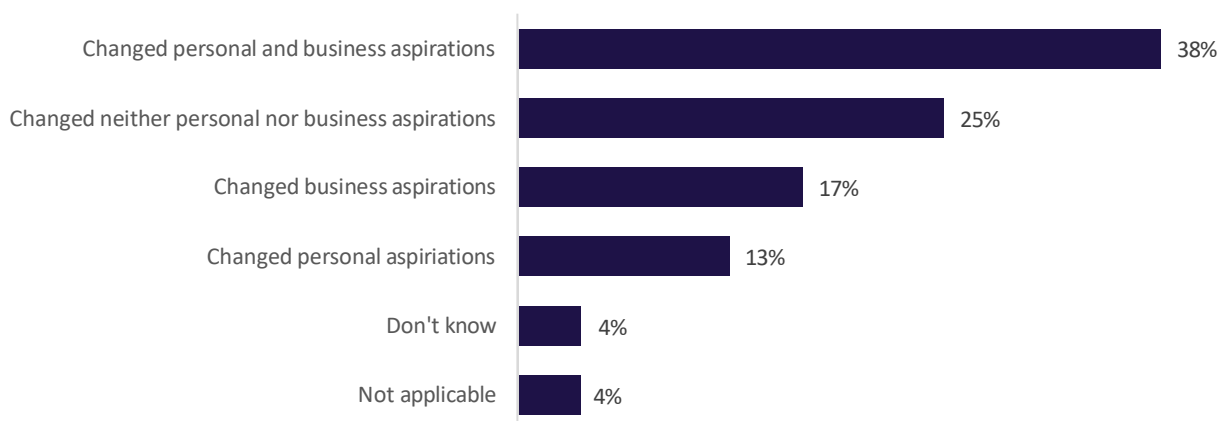Approaches to accessing finance 24%
Other 7%

Unweighted base (564), multiple response

Changes in Aspirations

Overall, 67% of businesses reported that participating in the programme had changed their future aspirations, either on a personal basis, for the business, or both, as shown in the chart below. For both business and personal aspirations, over 96% stated that the change was to raise those aspirations.

Figure 0-13: Effect of the Peer Networks programme on changing aspirations for the future

Q. Has participating in Peer Networks changed future aspirations for you or your business over the next three years?

Changed personal and business aspirations 38%
Changed neither personal nor business aspirations 25%
Changed business aspirations 17%
Changed personal aspirations 13%
Don't know 4%
Not applicable 4%

Unweighted base (671), single response

Negative or Unintended Consequences

Over two thirds (68%, n=671) of respondents have said that engaging in the Peer Networks programme had negative or unintended consequences for them or their business.

Reasons for this vary greatly. Most were unintended but ultimately positive – stating how the programme helped them and their business, although some reflected that there was a trade-off that by participating in Peer Networks, it took them away from spending more time in their business. Some verbatim responses are included below:

"Clarified my thinking to help make some business decisions"

"Unintended consequences - greater network of peers I can access, learnt about aspects of business I did not expect."

"Only negative is that the dates went on longer than expected, were not published and took full days out of the business. Understanding that this was a course, but this didn't need to take the time it did, it could have been compressed."
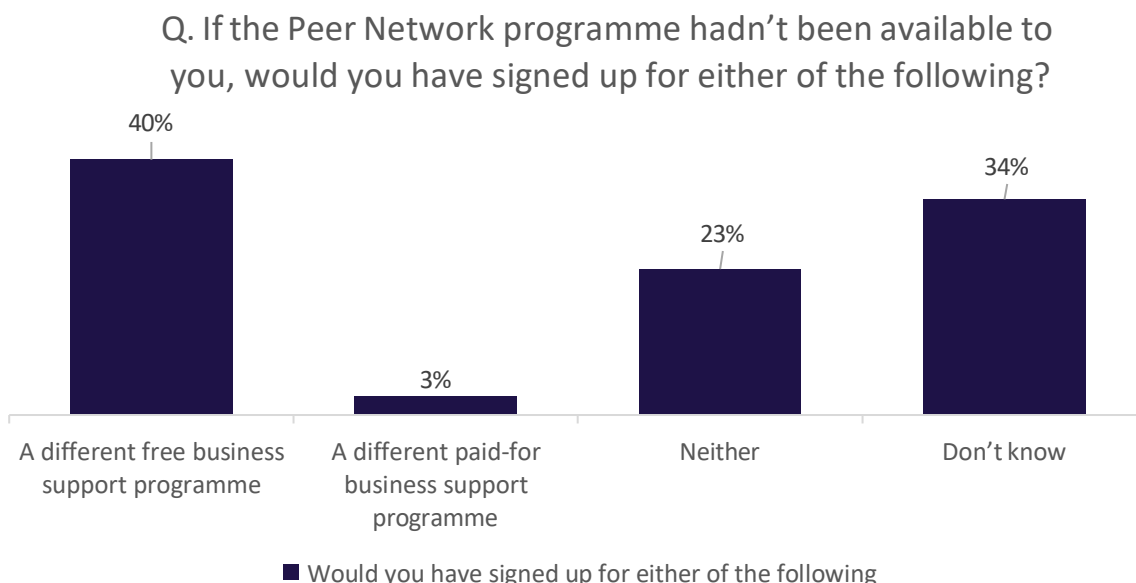
It is too early at the time of evaluation to know if the trade off was ultimately positive for participants.

Self-Reported Counterfactual

Over a third of respondents (40%) said if the Peer Network programme had not been available (i.e. their self-reported counterfactual position), they would have looked for a different free business support programme, with 34% stating they do not know what they would have done if the programme had not been available.

A small proportion (3%) stated they would have looked for a different paid support programme.

Figure 4-14: Self-reported Counterfactual of Beneficiaries

Q. If the Peer Network programme hadn't been available to you, would you have signed up for either of the following?

- A different free business support programme: 40%
- A different paid-for business support programme: 3%
- Neither: 23%
- Don't know: 34%

■ Would you have signed up for either of the following

Unweighted base (671), single response

5. Process Review

This section sets out findings of the process review analysing the effectiveness of aspects of programme design and delivery. It draws on consultations with BEIS and the Growth Company, as well as with a cross-section of 20 LEP level delivery partners, 20 action learning set facilitators, and 18 business beneficiaries. These findings are supplemented with insights drawn from programme level data analysis and findings from observational analysis undertaken on 17 action learning set sessions. Further details on the research tools and consultees are provided in Appendices 5 and 6.

Programme Design and Playbook

Programme Design

Consultations generated continued positive messaging, building on the messages from the Year 1 evaluation, on the value of having a detailed, consistent, centrally designed programme. This approach saved 38 LEP areas having to each reinvent their own version of the programme. The playbook and accompanying documents such as the metrics pack were seen as key to enabling this.

It was similarly seen as very valuable that local areas had some flexibility to refine the programme to best meet local needs. Some would have liked more flexibility, for example over eligibility of businesses - particularly cohort size, but it was generally recognised that consistency of the programme at a national level was helpful.

There were some context changes through the year affecting delivery – in particular continued Covid related restrictions meant that the majority of ALS sessions were still run online rather than face to face (the implications of which are discussed later in this section). Additionally, uncertainty over regional funding for LEPs and growth hubs had an impact, especially around staff retention in some areas at later stages of the programme.

Quality of the Playbook

Overall, the Playbook was seen as a highly valuable resource and was well received by local areas, with many indicating this was clear and easy to apply to delivery. The Growth Company in particular highlighted the importance of the inclusive process involved in designing and writing the guide, and that LEPs were consulted after Year 1 which informed an update, leading to fewer questions in Year 2.

Where comments were made during evaluation consultations around areas that could be improved, some highlighted that it could be more succinct and could simplify the language used. Some felt it could say more on information flows and how to collect and share the

relevant information needed, and some highlighted that supplementary guidance in another format, such as a video guide, could be valuable.

Links to Other Programmes

The main programme that overlapped to a degree with Peer Networks was the introduction of the Help to Grow: Management[12] scheme, which came in part way through the year. This programme similarly arose from the Business Productivity Review and involves peer group calls, mentoring and structured learning. Although different in its intensity, it targets a similar beneficiary audience, which may have taken demand away from Peer Networks.

Beyond this, most areas reported limited other overlap with other schemes, with some highlighting elements of other programmes that included a peer learning element, or other schemes in the private sector, but none that were quite the same offer as Peer Networks.

Marketing and Onboarding

National Branding

National branding was provided by BEIS and was used by LEPs in local marketing, in line with the approach set out in the guidance provided. Some noted that having the BEIS name on it added credibility to the programme which was helpful in local promotion.

Others highlighted that the lack of national promotion of the programme in Year 2 had meant that the programme had not been very visible to businesses, and some facilitator and beneficiary consultees engaged had little awareness that there was a national brand for the programme.

More generally, the name 'Peer Networks' was felt by many to be a little misleading – as it made businesses think of networking events, which did not really capture what the programme was trying to deliver, and in some cases they felt was a barrier to businesses finding out more about the programme.

On balance, although local marketing was recognised as being the main route to recruiting, many felt that a degree of national promotion to raise general awareness of the programme would have been valuable to aid recruitment efforts.

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12 https://helptogrow.campaign.gov.uk/

Local Marketing – What Worked and Barriers

Local LEP and facilitator consultees reported that marketing and recruitment of beneficiaries was a bigger challenge in Year 2 than had been expected and, despite best efforts, a large proportion of cohorts had to be delivered on a compressed timescale towards the end of the financial year.

Several noted that recruitment in Year 2 had been made more challenging because those immediately keen had signed up in Year 1. For LEP areas that primarily focused on existing businesses known to the LEP, this marketing approach was therefore less effective in Year 2.

Similarly a number of areas highlighted that recruitment had been contracted out to delivery partners, and several highlighted this had had limited effect, as those delivery partners similarly focused recruitment at their own existing directories of local businesses. For delivery partners based outside the area in which they were delivering, this was typically even less effective as they usually lacked strong local networks of potential beneficiary businesses.

Another key barrier highlighted by several was that the programme does not lend itself to being explained very succinctly, as might be needed by simple adverts / social media messages. Several areas appointed telemarketing firms to assist with speaking to businesses about the programme and explaining it, which met with more success.

Some highlighted that word of mouth had started to become an effective route for local promotion and could be a route that local partners might have continued to build on going forward, encouraging the alumni of local programmes to spread the word in their own networks.

The Growth Company undertook a deep dive review of marketing approaches employed by each LEP part way through the year, with findings from this work leading to a best practice webinar in Autumn 2021 which shared insights and case study examples. This highlighted that where LEP areas monitored and responded to what worked in recruitment, some had achieved high levels of businesses recruited, including businesses which had not previously engaged with the Growth Hub.

Other challenges affecting recruitment included many business leaders feeling unable to make the time commitment required, in some cases due to needing to focus on their business as the economic landscape changed, due to covid restrictions easing. Another challenge highlighted by one consultee, in recruiting for female only cohorts was that the marketing collateral was primarily focused on images of men.

Application of Eligibility Criteria

Core eligibility criteria was based on national programme design and reflected a need to focus on businesses where more significant impacts could be achieved – mostly focused on increasing turnover and employee numbers in the business.

Other criteria that were highlighted as 'desirable' in the Playbook were typically not a strong focus for local areas, with most indicating that it was already challenging to recruit businesses based on the 'essential' criteria. Despite this, as reflected in the data in Table 0-4, around a quarter of supported businesses were existing exporters (one of the desirable characteristics), which compares with around 11% of all SMEs across Great Britain being exporters of goods or services[13]. This suggests that exporting businesses were better represented in the set of supported businesses than in the overall business population.

The main issues raised around eligibility criteria were the exclusion of: businesses with high turnover to staff ratios (so employee numbers fell below the minimum, but local areas felt they still had significant growth potential); and other businesses where local delivery partners felt there was strong growth potential despite them not meeting core eligibility criteria.

Part way through the year, additional flexibilities were included by BEIS (summarised at Appendix H), allowing a proportion of beneficiaries from certain business types to be below the minimum size threshold originally set out, and these flexibilities were welcomed by many areas. Data from Figure 0-3 shows that around one in five supported businesses had fewer than five employees, showing these flexibilities were taken up by many areas.

Enrolment

Feedback from business consultees on the enrolment process was very positive overall. Form filling was recognised as a necessary part of the process and the common message was that this process was straightforward and communication around this was good. This reflects positive feedback from the beneficiary survey on ease and speed of enrolment, summarised in Section 4.

Retention and Programme Completion

Session Attendance

Overall attendance at ALS sessions across the programme was 54%, meaning on average participants only attended around half of the scheduled sessions available, and in most cases would have fallen short of the target of 18 hours support received through the programme. This was reflected in the observational analysis undertaken, where the attendance across 17

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[13] ONS, 2020, Annual Business Survey Exporters and Importers

observed ALS sessions varied from 4-11 with an average of 6-7 individuals per session across the sample.

A key challenge was around the time commitment – with occasionally unexpected demands on time as a result of business needs, staff shortages or other caring responsibilities – the latter in many cases triggered by Covid-19. This time pressure challenge was felt to be especially the case for managers of micro sized business who were more typically involved in all aspects of business delivery and more likely to get draw away if anything unexpected arose.

Online delivery helped make it easier for individuals to keep their time commitment to the programme, by reducing time needed for travel to and from sessions

Levels of Withdrawals

As outlined in Section 3, there were 871 participants, which withdrew from the programme after attending at least one session (around 19% of total participants).

Where businesses did withdraw from the programme it was most commonly down to unforeseen circumstances – similar to those reasons behind missing sessions – e.g. business needs, staff shortages or other caring responsibilities – but where these led to the individual needing to miss several sessions and then feeling they were unable to continue on the programme.

In a small number of cases individuals found that the support was not what they were expecting or was not for them.

Consultations did not identify very notable patterns in the types of businesses most commonly withdrawing from programmes, other than where the cohort composition was particularly unbalanced, for example a larger company put in the same cohort as many smaller companies might be more likely to drop out, if they felt they were giving out more advice and support with limited valuable insights coming back to them.

Quality of Delivery

Overall Programme and Focus

The overall view on the programme from across the range of stakeholders consulted was very positive. Delivery partners felt it was a well designed and beneficial programme that offered very good value for money from a cost perspective; businesses rated the quality highly and recognised the value of having the opportunity to step back from their day-to-day work and critically review their businesses.

Facilitators and businesses interviewed highlighted that the focus was primarily on longer term business development goals, and that while responses to Covid-19 came up as part of that –

and in many cases had been a catalyst for the need for changes, this was only in the context of working towards longer term growth and development of the business.

Overall, businesses interviewed felt that the issues discussed cut across sectors and business types so generally individuals felt able to contribute and learn in all sessions. Some noted that HR issues came up often, which may reflect that personnel issues may be particularly challenging to discuss in small companies.

ALS Effectiveness

Consultees were commonly very positive about the effectiveness of the ALS sessions – it was felt that businesses brought real and relevant issues. Beneficiaries reported some sessions were more relevant than others, but all were interesting. Individuals reported that they took satisfaction from supporting others as well as receiving support themselves.

These findings were reflected in the observational analysis of 17 ALS sessions undertaken as part of the evaluation, which similarly found that businesses across all sessions were sharing real and personal challenges facing their business, and that there was strong engagement from others in the group. In 16 out of 17 sessions observed, every participant made at least one contribution within the observed hour. On average participants made 3.8 substantive contributions in the hour of ALS sessions witnessed through this analysis.

The general view was that communications and organisation had been good across most areas, which was seen as very important to ensure smooth running.

One particular challenge in running the ALS groups was choice of topic and how to manage the sessions. In most cases, each session focused on one or two businesses' issues, and in some cases this ran the risk that once the business had had their issue discussed and received feedback, they might be less inclined to attend future sessions.

In many areas, one approach used which helped to address this issue was to focus on different themes at each of the sessions, aligning specific business issues to those themes, and starting off each session with a presentation on the topic or an external speaker, which helped to stimulate discussion among the group on that topic. This type of hybrid delivery approach had been generally welcomed by participants, and helped retain business attendance after the session where their issue was discussed. It should be noted, however, that this type of hybrid approach was not part of the Peer Networks design, with sessions intended to focus purely on action learning.

ALS Facilitators

It was commonly regarded that the role of the facilitator was fundamental to the success of cohorts. Participants identified that it was important that facilitators were able to make people feel comfortable to share, were good listeners, were approachable and charismatic. Critical to

success, was that facilitators built a trusting relationship with the participants, and several facilitators highlighted that this began with a discussion at the onboarding stage to begin to build understanding, rapport and participant buy in to the programme.

In terms of behaviours, businesses and facilitators highlighted the importance of setting ground rules for the groups, managing expectations of how the sessions would run, managing discussions and encouraging participation from all of the group. Several businesses highlighted that where facilitators were able to draw on their own experiences and examples, it added to their credibility.

A number of facilitators highlighted that they worked with businesses ahead of ALS sessions where that business would be sharing their issue – helping to ensure they (the facilitator) fully understood the issue, and that the business was able to frame the issue in a way that helped to make it relatable to others in the group, which was seen as important to effective discussion in the ALS.

While feedback on facilitators was strongly positive across all areas, some delivery partners noted that not all facilitators had fully understood the difference between action learning, compared with coaching or other types of business support, and that in some cases there was an ongoing training need there (despite the training sessions set up by the Growth Company and the emphasis in the playbook and year 2 update events (in March and April 2021) that facilitators should be familiar with and utilise the action learning methodology).

ALS Length, Frequency and Cohort Composition

Regarding length of sessions, this was in almost all cases between two and three hours – as recommended in the Playbook. Some felt that three hours in an online session was too difficult to maintain concentration over, while others felt that this amount of time worked well and was necessary to get into the level of detail required.

Regarding frequency of sessions, many cohorts had weekly sessions, which may reflect the compressed timescales required for many cohorts beginning toward the end of the financial year. In some cases, those involved felt that this maintained a good momentum between sessions. A more common view was that slightly less frequent sessions were preferred, at least fortnightly (as recommended in the Playbook), in order that the commitment to Peer Networks was not too time intensive.

With respect to composition of cohorts, there were more sector or demographic focused cohorts in Year 2 of the programme than in Year 1. There were 63 sector specific cohorts in total, with the most common sector focus being manufacturing (21) and tourism & hospitality (16). For sector specific cohorts, some felt that this was beneficial and did not create any issues with competition between participants (e.g. around advanced manufacturing). However, in other sectors (e.g. food and drink) there was a feeling of more competition between

participants and lower willingness to share. While delivery partners were advised to avoid having competitors in the same groups, especially for sector specific cohorts, these findings suggest that may have still happened in some cases.

There were 21 cohorts of female only participants, and two with ethnic minority only participants. Feedback from one of the female-led business cohorts, covered in the qualitative consultation analysis, was very positive, noting that the group had been very empathic to issues raised, leading to a very supportive group.

Those not in targeted cohorts did not highlight any particular challenges with cohorts being cross-sector, but noted being of similar size and stage of development was helpful during discussions. More generally, participants noted that the nature of specific participants was more important than the nature of businesses involved – and there was great value in having good diversity of age, gender, attitudes, experiences and business positions within the cohorts.

One-to-One Sessions

Based on programme information submitted to the Growth Company, a total of 2,799 participants engaged in one-to-one support, which is around 74% of the 3,760 participants completing the programme. On average the amount of time spent on one-to-one support for those receiving it, was 2.3 hours, compared to the recommended 3.5 hours.

Similarly to the approaches in Year 1 of the programme, usage of the one-to-one sessions was inconsistent across different areas – some successfully interspersed these sessions between ALS sessions, others did it afterwards or in some cases not at all.

In some cases, beneficiaries reported that this offered an opportunity to delve further into issues and consider the specific relevance of discussion points, while for others it was seen as an unnecessary extra time pressure. Where it was more successful, participants highlighted the rapport they had with the individual delivering that support as particularly key.

Online vs Face-to-Face Delivery

The majority of sessions in Year 2 were held online still. However, some areas did hold some sessions in person. In those cases, consultees highlighted that the face to face interaction had helped participants to build relationships, enabling side conversations before, during and after sessions.

However, with most participants far more used to online meetings than they might have been pre-Covid-19, there was little resistance to working online, with participants feeling this worked well, still enabled sharing of issues, as well as saving time and making sessions more accessible for those needing to balance other responsibilities.

The downsides of online working remained, including the greater challenge to maintain concentration for long periods in an online meeting and greater numbers of distractions in the

background. For facilitators, working online could make it harder to read the room and ensure all participants remain engaged than face to face.

These challenges were examined as part of the observational analysis undertaken across 17 ALS sessions. One notable observation is that the format of the online software used varied across different sessions, with ten having all their participants on screen, five with one person on the screen at any one time, one limited to six on the screen and one hybrid session with some online and some in-person. For many of those formats, there was a limit on businesses all being able to see one another and for a facilitator being able to see all participants, which could have been a constraint to effective running.

Another challenge noted above was around distractions. The observational analysis witnessed disturbances across several sessions, including loud background noises, parcel delivery, work-related or colleague interferences and domestic pets, which contributed to individuals turning off screens and needing to find a quiet space. Facilitators mitigated this by reminding participants of the expected conduct at the start of meetings, using mute options, and intervening during sessions to steer sessions back on track. There were also several sessions where there were late arrivals (as late as 30 minutes into a session) which led to the group revisiting previous topics to provide a summary. As indicated above, these disturbances could affect the ability to concentrate and the facilitators' ability to manage the sessions.

With respect to IT, there were five out of the 17 sessions observed where small technical issues were encountered including temporary moments where there was no or poor audio quality, screen freezing, and connectivity issues, although overall these did not seem to heavily interrupt sessions.

Taking account of the relative benefits of both delivery options, a common view was that the ideal would likely be a hybrid option with the first session being face to face, and potentially another towards the end of the set of sessions, but with the others delivered virtually.

Management, Monitoring and Reporting

National Management and Role of the National Programme Co-ordinator

The relationship between BEIS and the Growth Company was key to national management. Weekly meetings between the two worked well to ensure close tracking of progress and resolution of issues. Overall it was felt that the national co-ordinator role was critical to ensure co-ordination of the programme across 38 different areas and ensure visibility of national management to local areas, holding them to account, and ensuring management of any issues arising. One area that BEIS consultees felt could have been improved was the earlier introduction of a system to assess cohort delivery profiles – in order to identify and focus on

supporting those areas where improvement in performance was needed. This was very useful once introduced in October 2021.

The role of the Growth Company was particularly valued because of the experience within the organisation of on-the-ground delivery, and the relationships in place with other growth hubs. The enhanced offer in Year 2 included increased resources to manage all 38 growth hubs, more detailed analysis of work at individual LEP level and this led to knowledge sharing seminars which participants found useful, although some noted that more notice needed to be given in setting these up to maximise their value.

In terms of contracting with local areas, BEIS consultees noted that delivery contracts rather than grant agreements with the 38 LEP areas would have been a better way to manage delivery of the programme. Contracts would have enabled greater levers for addressing under-performance than the grant agreements offered.

National-Local Management and Communications

After evolving the communication channels several times in Year 1, the monthly cluster group calls with each of the ten regional clusters continued throughout Year 2. These were chaired by the Growth Company in Year 2 – as national coordinator. They were widely seen as effective by national and local delivery partners. Local partners found it very useful to have BEIS representatives involved in the calls and found the team very responsive when issues needed to be addressed.

Although the cluster group calls provided a useful platform, consultees suggested there may have been less value in the cluster lead roles, which involved an additional funding allocation for ten LEP areas appointed as lead for their cluster. While some delivery partner consultees felt the groups had enabled some sharing of good practice between LEP areas within the cluster, others felt this had been very limited. It was noted that the monthly cluster calls were kept to just 30 minutes and were focused on a fixed agenda, which allowed little time for sharing experiences and good practice. It may have been useful to extend these sessions to use an existing monthly meeting structure for sharing of good practice to help better embed this knowledge sharing role. However, some clusters shared best practice between themselves. The Growth Company introduced a monthly newsletter in July 2021 and hosted four best practice sessions for all areas in September-October 2021.

Local Level Management

Some LEP areas delivered in house but more commonly the delivery of the programme was contracted to external providers – and in some cases the marketing and recruitment too (whereas for others this element was kept in-house).

Feedback from consultations suggests that the different models were all successful to a degree, although outsourcing the marketing and recruitment was seen as less successful in some areas, particularly where the delivery partner was based outside of the LEP area.

National delivery partner consultees noted that areas with a dedicated Peer Networks programme manager typically managed their delivery more effectively than those where the programme was led by an individual working across multiple programmes and roles.

Monitoring and Reporting

The overall feedback on data collection for local delivery partners was that the process was quite clunky, with a lot of information expected, and two different systems for gathering this (some via the Growth Company dashboard, some using templates sent directly to the evaluators)[14]. It was highlighted that ideally this process should be streamlined and simplified. Similarly it was felt that asking participants to complete satisfaction surveys after every ALS session was disproportionately onerous, and that this could have been reduced.

Regarding the dashboard tool set up by the Growth Company for data entry, a number of updates were made following lessons learned from Year 1, including programme pipeline data fields being added to improve visibility of delivery progress, existing bugs being fixed and improvements to end user experience implemented, and an updated user guide. On the whole the feedback was positive, with most finding it useful and relatively easy to use – albeit some noted occasional timing out issues when entering data. Others highlighted they would have found it useful to have had more information coming back from the dashboard, summarising emerging findings for their area using the collected data. From December 2021, the Growth Company circulated monthly summary reports for each cluster and individual areas.

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[14] This separation was in order to enable co-ordination of non-personal data centrally through the Growth Company dashboard, while personal data for evaluation purposes was only shared directly by individual LEPs to the evaluators.

6. Conclusions

This evaluation report provides findings in relation to the five high level evaluation questions for Year 2 only (1 April 2021-31 March 2022).

Recommendations have not been included as the programme ended in March 2022. However, a synthesis report drawing together findings and lessons learnt across the two years of delivery will be produced, drawing out key lessons that can be transferable to other programmes delivered nationally and locally.

This section is therefore broken down under the five high level question (HLQ) headings.

HLQ 1 - How effective is the Networks project in recruiting businesses and ensuring they complete the scheme?

Marketing and Recruitment

The programme had an original target of recruiting 522 cohorts, with 5,742 participants across England (based on a starting number of 11 participants per cohort).. Final participant numbers achieved were 4,631 in 454 cohorts, equating to 81% of the original target.

In total, there were 9,245 expressions of interest for businesses wanting to join the programme. This was 40% higher than the number for Year 1, despite having a full year delivery period, compared to only around a 6-9 month delivery period in Year 1. The fact that many of those EoIs may have been from ineligible businesses, that this number of EoIs was spread across 38 LEP areas, and each area needed to recruit 11 participants in the same time period before a cohort could launch, means the number of EoIs was not as high as ideally needed for the programme to be able to meet its participant targets.

The first year of the programme had incorporated a national marketing campaign, however this was excluded for the second year of delivery, with all marketing undertaken at a local level. The national landing page for the programme was retained, but only 5% of all expressions of interest to LEP areas came via that route, via organic searches typically. While most direct recruitment in Year 1 had come from local approaches to businesses, some local delivery partners noted that the national marketing campaign in Year 1 had helped raise awareness and add credibility to local marketing of the programme by its association with national government. The loss of that in Year 2 was felt by some consultees interviewed to have negatively affected local recruitment efforts.

A key challenge noted by delivery partners interviewed was that the programme was not easy to explain in a simple way, and so adverts or social media messages which relied on short succinct messaging were not an ideal channel. Rather, the greatest success was found to be through using tele-marketing services, or advertorial content, whereby the programme could be explained to prospective SME applicants. The majority of participants (60%) reported they had

first heard about the programme via the Growth Hub or LEP, which is likely to include any tele-marketing activities with businesses on behalf of the Growth Hub or LEP.

Perspectives on Branding

Local partners interviewed noted different perspectives on the branding for Peer Networks. Some particularly highlighted the value that the programme was connected to BEIS and making this connection in local marketing helped to boost credibility of the scheme. Others noted that they had not realised that it was a national brand, and that had not been immediately obvious in the way this was used. From a review of how the programme was promoted online in different areas, there is a lot of variation, with some aligning the Peer Networks logo alongside the BEIS logo, but in other cases there being less immediately clear messaging that it is a national brand. The lack of investment in national programme marketing may also have reduced general awareness that the programme was being delivered nation-wide.

Another challenged raised by delivery partners and businesses was that some found the name 'Peer Networks' itself a little misleading. The reference to networks made some think of more general business networking events, rather than capturing the deeper connections and peer support through action learning that was the core of the programme.

Eligibility and On-boarding

With 9,245 EoIs received and an aim to fill 5,742 participant places, the programme secured 1.6 applicants for every place it sought to fill through local targeting. Given that some of these would have been ineligible against the core criteria, and given the complexity of these numbers being spread across 38 LEP areas and cohorts needing 11 people ready to start at the same time, this left LEP areas with relatively limited opportunity to be more selective in which businesses to support.

As such, in most cases only the essential criteria were normally applied by LEP areas in on-boarding businesses to the programme and, as with Year 1, a number of representations were made to BEIS about easing those essential criteria, notably allowing businesses with fewer than five employees to join the programme in certain cases. Overall programme data shows that 21% of participants had fewer than five employees by the end of the programme, indicating those flexibilities were widely used.

Some flexibility was also given around numbers starting in each cohort, with the Playbook stating that the starting position should be 11 participants per cohort. Programme data showed that the average overall was 10.2 participants starting per cohort.

Across all areas, 44% of participants were new to the Growth Hub (i.e. they had not previously received support from the growth hub), up from 38% in Year 1, reflecting some success in local areas reaching a wider set of businesses to recruit from, and contributing to the programme aim of engaging more businesses which had not previously received business support.

There was a strong mix of participant businesses by size, sector and age of business, with few clear gaps that would indicate substantial barriers to any businesses engaging. The breakdown by sector indicates an over-representation of manufacturing businesses and under-representation of wholesale & retail and construction businesses compared to the overall numbers of businesses in each sector nationally, which may indicate the programme design appealed more greatly to the challenges faced in some sectors than others. COVID-19 impacts varied across participating businesses - 41% of businesses reported that their turnover was below normal, and 34% indicated it was higher than normal.

In terms of participant demographics, as with Year 1, a typical participant is a white, middle-aged, non-disabled man, reflecting the most common demographics of senior managers in SMEs. However, female participants comprised 39% of all participants, compared with 34% in Year 1 which represents positive progress and may reflect the more targeted marketing approaches taken in some areas, including 21 cohorts in total being for female participants only.

Completions, Attendance and Withdrawals

Although the number of participants supported on the programme was 81% of the original target, the proportion of those who withdrew from the programme was 19%, compared with 30% expected. The overall result of this is that 3,760 businesses completed the programme, equating to 94% of the original target number of completions (4,019 – based on a target of 5,742 participants but 30% withdrawing).

For those who did withdraw from the programme, findings from the withdrawal survey showed that this was most commonly down to not being able to commit enough time to the sessions (highlighted by 40% of respondents) or other business activities taking priority (highlighted by 28% of respondents); only 20% of those who withdrew stated that they did not like the structure of the sessions.

However, although withdrawals were lower than anticipated, the attendance rate at ALS sessions was a common challenge. Programme data shows that average attendance at ALS sessions was 54%, meaning that on ALS sessions would on average have had six participants. Of those who did not attend all sessions, most respondents stated contracting COVID-19 or caring for someone who had contracted COVID-19 as a reason for missing a session. Common messages from businesses through the evaluation surveys and consultations was also that many felt there were too few participants at certain sessions, and in commenting on the mix of businesses in cohorts one of the main complaints was around participants often not turning up.

HLQ 2 - To what extent does the project successfully deliver high quality business support?

Programme Design

Feedback from delivery partners was very positive on the value of having a detailed, consistent, centrally designed programme, which saved 38 LEP areas having to each reinvent their own version of the programme. It was similarly seen as very valuable that local areas had some flexibility to refine the programme to best meet local needs.

The Playbook was seen as highly valuable and the inclusive process involved in designing, writing and updating the guide with LEPs was seen as key to enabling delivery to operate smoothly. Overall stakeholders felt it was a well-designed and beneficial programme that offered very good value for money from a cost perspective.

Quality of Delivery

The quality of support delivered by the programme is ultimately reflected in satisfaction scores provided by business beneficiaries. Across all areas participants rated overall satisfaction with the ALS sessions as at least four out of five in every area (based on data available for 33 out of 38 LEP areas). Similarly in every LEP area, satisfaction was rated as four out of five for: relevance of the sessions, quality of facilitation and quality of input from other businesses.

The one-to-one support was also rated highly with 95% of programme completers surveyed stating their overall satisfaction with the support received, and93% or more stating satisfaction with respect to the content, the length and the usefulness of these sessions.

Feedback on the quality of facilitators was generally very positive across all areas and the role of facilitator was commonly regarded as fundamental to the success of cohorts. Participants identified that it was important that facilitators were able to make people feel comfortable to share, good listeners, approachable and charismatic, and able to build a trusting relationship with the participants. Some delivery partners interviewed noted though that, despite positive feedback, not all facilitators had fully understood the difference between action learning, compared with coaching or other types of business support, and that in some cases there was an ongoing training need there.

An important aspect of quality of delivery was around the means of delivery – whether online or face to face. 81% of participants undertook all sessions online, and a further 13% did the majority of sessions online. While virtual delivery therefore remained the dominant approach, mainly due to COVID-19 restrictions, there was more of a combination compared to Year 1 where everything was delivered virtually when feasible. Alongside a more general shift back towards more face-to-face meetings in the business world during the Year 2 delivery period, this may have given participants greater perspective on the relative benefits of each option.

In participant feedback, 78% agreed that online delivery made it easier for attending sessions, compared with face-to-face sessions, and this appears to be increasingly well-recognised as a valuable approach to offering business support going forwards.

Regarding the question of whether online delivery helped effective discussions though, 65% of those completing the programme agreed that it did, however a substantial proportion (46%) of the 30 programme withdrawers surveyed felt this was not the case (however given the small sample size, this finding should only be taken as indicative). Observational analysis of sessions undertaken as part of the evaluation highlighted a range of distractions occurring in the backgrounds for online participants that would have been less likely to disturb discussions in a face-to-face context.

There was a similar divergence of views with respect to building relationships with other participants. 56% of those completing the programme felt that virtual delivery had aided development of relationships, although 17% felt this was not the case. A substantial proportion (42%) of those withdrawing from the programme also felt this was not the case, indicating that face to face interaction may have been more beneficial for developing relationships – a point also highlighted by some delivery partners and participants in evaluation consultations.

One factor arising from observational analysis was around the range of software platforms used – while some allowed participants and the facilitator to see all of the others on the call at the same time, others restricted the view to a smaller number of participants or only focused on the person talking at any one time. These latter alternatives could make it more difficult to read the room, and potentially affect both the ability for effective discussions and for building relationships, when compared with a face-to-face environment.

With respect to technological challenges, this was rarely raised as a notable issue by consultees, and in the observational analysis, IT issues only arose in a minority of sessions reviewed, and in those cases did not lead to any substantial interruptions.

Topics Discussed

The most common topics discussed in ALS sessions were around sales & marketing, and leadership & management, both of which were anticipated by businesses beforehand to be particular topics of interest.

Human resources was not expected by most businesses to be a main topic of interest at onboarding stage, however in practice was one of the most common topics in ALS sessions. Through consultations, it was highlighted that, particularly in micro and small sized companies, personnel issues were often a challenging topic to discuss in a small team setting, and so the peer networks provided a useful format to be able to explore these with external objective peers.

Management and Governance

The key management and governance structures for the programme built on the foundation that was developed and revised over the first year of the programme. It included weekly meetings between BEIS and the Growth Company (previously twice a week in year 1), as well as monthly cluster calls involving BEIS and the Growth Company with each of the ten growth hub clusters, plus a series of individual meetings with areas (implemented in year 2). This structure of meetings was felt to have worked very effectively, by consultees, in ensuring clear communication on progress and highlighting and addressing any issues or risks arising with appropriate response times.

The use of clusters and appointed LEP cluster leads was felt by consultees to have been less effective than anticipated for knowledge sharing between LEP areas within clusters. In most cases, the monthly cluster calls were more focused on communication between the national programme coordinator and the LEP delivery partners, rather than for knowledge sharing between the local partners, which may have been a missed opportunity.

The national co-ordinator role was viewed by BEIS and local delivery partners as an important connector, ensuring good communication channels between BEIS and local delivery partners, and ensuring local partners were kept well-informed and could seek clarifications whenever needed, without creating an over-burdensome administrative role for the BEIS team.

The data collection dashboard developed and administered by the Growth Company was felt to be very valuable for BEIS in monitoring progress across a range of indicators, and generally found to be straightforward to use for local partners. BEIS identified it would have been ideal for the cohort delivery profile assessment to have been in place at an earlier stage. The local partner noted they would have liked to have had access to more of the synthesised data from the dashboard on an ongoing basis to support them with steering local delivery.

Most LEP areas contracted out delivery of the programme, which stakeholders indicated had worked well for delivery of the support, but in some cases had been less effective where the marketing of the programme had also been contracted out. This was particularly the case where the contracted partner was based outside of the LEP area and may have therefore been less well placed to approach and promote the programme to businesses within that LEP area. From its own analysis of performance, the Growth Company noted that areas which had a dedicated internal project manager leading their peer networks programme typically operated more effectively than those areas where the project management role was one amongst a series of roles being managed by a LEP or growth hub employee.

With respect to monitoring, several local delivery partners highlighted that the amount of information being collected was quite intensive, and the requirement for some of this to be recorded via the Growth Company dashboard and some via the data monitoring template for the evaluation team felt quite inefficient. This reflected; the limitations of data that could be held on the Dashboard, which had been established in year 1 i.e. some areas did not wish personal

data to be stored centrally, preferring data to be held solely on local CRMs and in-depth evaluation required enhanced data collection requirements.

HLQ 3 - How effective is the Networks project at encouraging SMEs to adopt practices to improve productivity?

Effectiveness of the ALS Sessions

The findings around the effectiveness of the ALS sessions strongly indicate that the approach worked. The theory of change outlines key assumptions around effectiveness, including that participants feel comfortable sharing problems, they build trust in the group and that the topics discussed are relevant to the challenges they face as a business. Feedback from participants completing the programme indicated they had shared real and relevant issues with the group (96% agreed), had built trust in fellow participants (89% agreed) and found insights from other participants useful (86% agreed).

One of the key factors affecting ALS effectiveness was around the length and frequency of sessions. Each session typically lasted two or three hours, and although the advised approach from the Playbook is that sessions should be at least two weeks apart, around one third of cohorts were delivered in fewer than 10 weeks overall, which indicates a higher frequency of sessions. Some participants indicated that more frequent sessions were useful and helped maintained momentum in the group, while for others it made the time requirement from the programme too intensive. Notably, almost half (47%) of those surveyed who had withdrawn from the programme stated they were not happy with the frequency of sessions (although the sample here is very small and so this should only be taken as indicative). Overall attendance at ALS sessions across the programme was just 54%, with those who missed sessions commonly noting that work commitments had prevented them attending in some cases.

One of the differences in terms of delivering ALS sessions was in the way these were structured. Some facilitators took an open approach to discussions, depending on who attended each session and what issues they brought, while others introduced a much more structured approach, with themed sessions, sessions dedicated to just two businesses' issues, and in some cases introductory presentations or expert speakers introduced to begin the sessions and help to focus the discussion. For the more structured sessions, this often involved the facilitator engaging beforehand with the businesses who were bringing issues to the next session, in order to help them frame their issue in a way that would make it more accessible and relevant to the wider group. The more structured approach was welcomed by many, recognising that it helped order the sessions to maintain business interest, and give substantial time to each business. Others, however, noted that introductory talks meant a shift away from a pure action learning approach. By dedicating certain sessions to certain businesses, it ran the risk that once that business' issues had been discussed, the participant may be less motivated to continue to join future sessions.

Another factor impacting effectiveness of the ALS sessions was the composition of cohorts. For the Year 2 programme, there was a greater focus on supporting more sector or

demographic focused groups, to explore whether this contributed to a more effective way of meeting the key objective of bringing together sufficiently similar businesses that could learn from one another and build trusting networks of peers. Feedback from sector focused groups was mixed with some finding this very useful and not creating any issues of competition (found in discussion with one of the manufacturing sector focused cohorts). Another group found that there was greater competition between participants which constrained conversation and became an obstacle to developing trusting relationships (in one of the food and drink sector focused cohorts).

Regarding demographic groups, the main focus was female only participant groups, of which there were 21 cohorts across the programme. The feedback gathered on this was that supportive and empathic relationships had developed, and it is notable that the programme secured a substantial uplift in female participants compared to Year 1 (up from 34% of participants to 39% in Year 2). More generally, however, mixed groups also received very positive feedback, with the indication that a range of approaches to cohort composition can work.

Effectiveness of the 1:1 Sessions

Across the programme, 74% of participants received one to one support, with an average of 2.3 hours of support received. Feedback from participants completing the programme was strongly positive with 95% reporting they were satisfied with the support, of which 80% very satisfied. Feedback was equally positive with respect to the content, length and usefulness of this support received.

The majority (72%) of participants suggested that the one-to-one support had built on the topics discussed in the ALS sessions, while 25% indicated that this had explored different topics. When highlighting areas that the programme could be improved, one of the common messages from participants was that they would have liked there to have been a greater focus on how the topics discussed in ALS sessions could be translated into lessons for their business. As set out in the playbook, this was the purpose of the one-to-one sessions, and this issue raised therefore suggests that the delivery of one to one sessions may not have been as effective as they could in helping to achieve that translation from ALS session discussion to practical steps that could be taken by businesses.

HLQ 4 - What early changes are businesses making as a result of the Peer Networks scheme?

Development of Networks

A key objective of the programme was to help form trusting relationships between participants that would outlive the programme and provide an ongoing source of advice and support to aid business leaders in making key business decisions. Feedback from those completing the programme highlights 68% of participants felt they had an improved network following the

programme, and 65% indicated they expected to keep in touch with some of those other participants, with just 14% indicating they did not expect to do so.

Changes in Attitudes / Aspirations

Overall 67% of participants completing the programme felt that their personal and/or business ambitions had changed following the programme, of which 96% said that this represented them raising those aspirations.

There were substantial uplifts in four measures that represented the change in the participant's confidence in their own skills and leadership abilities comparing from before receiving support to after completing the support. There were very large increases in the proportion of participants who felt they had the skills needed to lead their business and manage their employees over the next three years. There were more modest but still notable rises in the proportion who felt confident that as a business leader they could adapt to changes and overcome obstacles facing their business.

With respect to growth aspirations, there was little change in the proportion of participants which had growth aspirations over the next three years, comparing responses before and after receiving support. However, there was a substantial rise in the proportion of those who felt confident they could achieve this aspiration. This rose from 79% who felt it was likely they could achieve their growth aspirations at onboarding stage to 97% who felt this was the case after programme completion.

Future Changes Businesses Expect to Implement

Overall, 84% of businesses reported that they intended to make changes in their business over the next six months following support from Peer Networks, with most changes expected in relation to sales & marketing (69%), staff recruitment & retention (62%) and leadership & management approaches (59%).

Negative or Unintended Consequences

Over two thirds of respondents said that engaging in the Peer Networks programme had negative or unintended consequences for participants or their business, although in most cases this referred to positive unintended consequences, as the programme had provided greater support than they had anticipated it would. The main negative consequence highlighted was a reflection that in taking part in the programme there was a trade-off with being able to spend more time in their business. It is too early at the time of evaluation to know if the trade off was ultimately positive for participants.

HLQ 5 – What other factors influence how and what changes businesses are making after they complete the scheme?

Motivations for Entering the Programme

While the Peer Networks programme was originally formulated to support businesses with longer term growth and productivity, its launch as a Covid-response programme raised the question of whether businesses would bring shorter term Covid-related issues to the group or longer-term growth and productivity related issues.

Findings from the onboarding survey of participants highlights that most businesses came into the programme seeking more general support – with 78% indicating they joined the programme in order to learn from other businesses, and 67% indicating they wanted to understand how to improve their business performance, while only 37% came into the programme with a specific issue they wanted to address. Feedback from consultations also indicated that in many cases the issues raised were about longer term productivity issues, but the need to respond more quickly to the issue as it had been triggered in the shorter term by Covid related challenges.

Underpinning these messages, it is notable that the businesses supported under the programme in Year 2 appear to have been less affected by Covid at the point of engaging with the programme than those in Year 1, which may reflect less of a focus on Covid-response issues being discussed. Of the participants onboarded in Year 2, 41% said the impact of Covid meant that their turnover in the year to date was below normal expectations for that time of year, compared with 60% for Year 1 participants.

What Businesses Would Have Done in the Absence of Peer Networks

Participants were asked whether they would have sought other support in the absence of the Peer Networks programme. Just 3% indicated they would have sought similar support from another paid-for programme, indicating little displacement from private sector support programmes. 40% reported that they would have sought support from a different free business support programme, while 23% indicated they would not have accessed any other support.

Appendix A: Baseline Survey Approach and Analysis

As business registered to join the Peer Networks programme, Growth Hubs / delivery partners captured baseline data on those companies, alongside a series of onboarding survey questions, exploring motivations for joining the programme, anticipated improvement benefits, self-perceived leadership skills, business growth aspirations, business plans and risk.

Every business joining the scheme was required to complete this and the information was uploaded to a central database managed by the Growth Company. Data was not captured for every question from every beneficiary, and so the base number for each question is presented alongside the analysis in the report.

Full Onboarding Survey

The full set of onboarding questions is included below.

Question	Response Options
Sign Up Motivation	
What motivated you to sign up for Peer Networks? (Select all that apply by answering yes or no)	1. To solve a specific challenge my business is facing 2. Understand how to enhance my business performance 3. Understand how to better engage staff in improving the business 4. Understand how to set strategic goals for my business 5. To learn from other businesses 6. Other - what? (Use box to describe) 7. Don't know 8. Not applicable 9. Description of other reason [free text]

Which of the following topics of peer support are you interested in? (select all that apply by answering yes or no)	1. Finance
	2. Leadership and management
	3. HR
	4. Sales and marketing
	5. Adjusting to social distancing
	6. Business model innovation
	7. Change management
	8. Embedding formal management processes and systems
	9. Digital (including adoption and implementation of technology, cyber security
	10. Use of data to drive value in the business
	11. EU transition
	12. Net Zero
	13. Other - what? (Use box to describe)
	14. Don't know
	15. Not applicable
	16. Description of other reason [Free text]
Improvement Benefits	
Which of the following improvement benefits do you hope the Peer network will help you achieve? (select all that apply by answering yes or no)	1. Increased chance of business survival
	2. Recovery from Covid-19 impacts
	3. Increased productivity
	4. Improved leadership and management skills
	5. Improve ability to recruit and retain staff Understand how to access cash to continue trading

	6. Understand what technology is available for my business 7. Other - what? (Use box to describe) 8. Don't know 9. Not applicable 10. Description of other reason
Skills and Leadership	
If you selected understanding and adopting technology do you know how to access technology that would benefit your business?	(1 = Yes, 2 = No, 3 = Don't know, 4 = Not applicable)
Thinking about the way you feel today, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement: I have all the skills I need to manage my employees over the next three years	(1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree, 6=Don't know, 7=Not applicable)
Thinking about the way you feel today, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement: I have all the skills I need to lead my business over the next three years	(1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree, 6=Don't know, 7=Not applicable)
Thinking about the way you feel today, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement: As a business leader I feel I can achieve my goals even if there are obstacles	(1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree, 6=Don't know, 7=Not applicable)
Thinking about the way you feel today, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement: Within my role as a business leader I feel able to adapt when changes occur	(1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree, 6=Don't know, 7=Not applicable)

Growth	
Over the next three years, do you aim to grow the sales of your business?	(1 = Yes, 2 = No, 3= Don't know)
If yes, how likely is it that you will be able to do this?	(1 = Extremely unlikely, 2 = Unlikely, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Likely, 5 = Extremely Likely, 6 = Don't know, 7 = Not applicable)
How you would rate your ability to grow your business?	(1 = Very poor, 2 = Poor, 3 = Average, 4 = Strong, 5 = Very strong, 6 = Don't know, 7 = Not applicable)
Business Plans and Risk	
My business has a plan in place for responding to economic change	(1 = Yes, 2 = No, 3 = Don't know)
To what extent do you agree or disagree that your business is able to survive negative national or local economic changes?	(1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree, 6 = Don't know, 7 = Not applicable)
How long do you believe you can sustain your organisation on your existing financial reserves?	(1 = No cash reserves, 2 = Less than 1 month, 3 = 1 to 3 months, 4 = 4 to 6 months, 5= Don't know)
COVID 19	
In the last six months, how has the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic affected your business's turnover, compared with normal expectations for this time of year?	(1 = Turnover has increased by more than 50%, 2 = Turnover has increased between 20% and 50%, 3 = Turnover has increased by up to 20%, 4 = Turnover has not been affected 5 = Turnover has decreased by up to 20%, 6 = Turnover has decreased between 20% and 50%, 7 = Turnover has decreased by more than 50%, 8 = Don't know)
How has the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic affected your business's risk of insolvency?	(1 = Risk has increased, 2= Risk has stayed the same, 3 = Risk has decreased, 4 = Don't know)

Appendix B: Satisfaction Surveys Approach and Analysis

On completion of every action learning set session, Growth Hubs / delivery partners captured responses from every beneficiary to a series of satisfaction questions about the support received.

A standard set of questions and fixed options were provided and each LEP area captured this data, with the information uploaded to a central database managed by the Growth Company.

In total, 4,546 participants (98% of total participants) provided feedback as part of the satisfaction surveys.

The full set of satisfaction survey questions is included below.

Question	Response Options
How would you rate your overall satisfaction with the session?	(1 = Very dissatisfied, 2 = Somewhat dissatisfied, 3 = Neither satisfied or dissatisfied, 4 = Somewhat satisfied, 5 = Very satisfied, 6 = Don't know, 7=Not applicable)
How satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the quality of input from other businesses in your peer network	(1 = Very dissatisfied, 2 = Somewhat dissatisfied, 3 = Neither satisfied or dissatisfied, 4 = Somewhat satisfied, 5 = Very satisfied, 6 = Don't know, 7=Not applicable)
How satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the quality of facilitation of the Peer Network session you attended?	(1 = Very dissatisfied, 2 = Somewhat dissatisfied, 3 = Neither satisfied or dissatisfied, 4 = Somewhat satisfied, 5 = Very satisfied, 6 = Don't know, 7=Not applicable)
How satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the relevance of the session to your business needs?	(1 = Very dissatisfied, 2 = Somewhat dissatisfied, 3 = Neither satisfied or dissatisfied, 4 = Somewhat satisfied, 5 = Very satisfied, 6 = Don't know, 7=Not applicable)

To what extent were your expectations from the session met?	(1 = Much less than expected, 2 = Less than Expected, 3 = As expected, 4 = More than expected, 5 = Much more than expected, 6 = Don't know, 7 = Not applicable)

Appendix C: Post-Completion Survey Approach and Analysis

The survey was sent to participants following completion of the support programme and aimed to:

- gather additional feedback on the full programme including satisfaction with the application process, an understanding of the full scope of topics covered, and to capture details on any one-to-one support received

- recapture metrics on self-perceived leadership skills and business growth aspirations from the baseline to understand if there had been any changes as an early indicator of impact of the programme

- gather early insight into whether businesses have plans to make changes in the next six months since accessing the programme.

Approach to fieldwork

The survey was issued online, and participants were sent a warm-up email from individual Growth Hubs/LEPs alerting them that they would be invited to participate in the survey.

Following programme completion, the survey was sent to participants by email inviting them to provide their feedback.

To improve response rate:

- a reminder was sent one week after the initial invitation to all those that had not yet replied

- one week after the reminder email a push-to -web approach was adopted and those participants that had not yet completed the survey were telephoned and asked to complete the survey.

Survey overview

The full survey is included below. In this survey the following overarching topics were covered:

- 1) Pathway to the Peer Networks programme
- 2) Learning Outcomes
- 3) Attendance

- 4) Feedback on action learning set sessions

- 5) Feedback on one-to-one support

- 6) Recapture of metrics on business aspirations

- 7) Capture details of other support accessed Peer Networks Programme

Sampling approach

The survey was emailed to all participants with a valid email address that had completed the programme. This was carried out in batches based on when the support was completed. The population size for each batch, date sent and number of bounce backs where the email address was deemed inadequate are shown in the table below.

Table C-1: Post-completion Survey Batches, Date Sent and Population

Post completion survey				
Batch	Date	Number of invites sent	Reminder	Completes
1	14/1/22	368	322	84
2	27/1/22	459	19	91
3	10/2/22	695	101	113
4	16/3/22	475	109	96
5	29/3/22	250	91	53
6	11/4/22	1,520	48	234
total		3,767		671

The number of responses included in this report is 671, representing a response rate of 17.8%.

Analysis approach

The analysis consisted of running frequencies of each question and the presentation of the results graphically. Cross-tabulations were examined by the following profiling groups:

- Business sector
- Business size
- LEP/Growth Hub
- Whether businesses have accessed other business support schemes over the last year.

Full online post-completion survey

The full survey is included below.

Question	Aim
How did you hear about the Peer Networks programme? [Please tick all that apply] I was invited to apply by the Growth Hub or LEP I saw the programme promoted on social media I saw the programme promoted on Growth Hub/LEP website I saw the programme promoted in a newspaper advert I saw the programme promoted in a trade magazine I heard the programme promoted on radio I heard about the programme through word of mouth from another participant Other (please state)	Pathway to Peer Networks
Thinking about the process of applying to the Peer Networks programme, to what extent do you agree with the following statement? It was easy to apply to the Peer Networks programme	

My application to the Peer Networks programme was dealt with quickly 1 = Strongly disagree 2= Disagree 3= Neither agree nor disagree 4= Agree 5= Strongly agree 6=Don't know 7=Not applicable	
Which of the following topics did you learn about through participation in Peer Networks? (select all that apply) Finance Leadership and management HR Sales and marketing Adjusting to social distancing Business model innovation Change management Embedding formal management processes and systems Digital (including adoption and implementation of technology, cyber security Use of data to drive value in the business EU transition Net Zero	Confirm learning outcomes

Other - what?	
The next questions ask for your feedback on the sessions in your Action Learning Set.	
Did you attend all sessions of your action learning set? 1 = Yes 2= No 3= Don't know [If no]: Why did you not attend all sessions of your action learning set? (free text)	Attendance
Did you primarily attend sessions virtually or in-person? 1=I attended all sessions virtually 2=I attended the majority of sessions virtually 3=I attended an equal number of sessions virtually and in person 4=I attended the majority of sessions in person 5=I attended all sessions in person 6=Don't know	Virtual vs In Person Delivery
Overall, to what extent do you agree with the following statements about the action learning sets I was happy with the length of action learning set sessions I was happy with the frequency of action learning set sessions I shared relevant and real issues for my business with the action learning set I was able to build trust in fellow participants	ALS Quality

The insights shared by fellow participants were useful to my business 1 = Strongly disagree 2= Disagree 3= Neither agree nor disagree 4= Agree 5= Strongly agree 6=Don't know 7=Not applicable	
How do you feel that online delivery (compared with attending in person) affected the delivery or impact of the following factors: Your ability to attend all sessions Your ability to have good or effective discussions Your ability to build relationships with other attendees Your confidence to share business challenges with the group Very negatively Negatively Neutral Positively Very Positively [Only ask if they answer 'attended the majority of sessions virtually in Q0]	Impact of online delivery

Thinking about the number of businesses participating in your action learning sets, were there 1 = too many businesses 2= the right amount of businesses 3= too few businesses 4=Don't know	
To what extent did the mixture of businesses in your cohort meet your expectations in enabling an effective action learning set? 1 = worse mix of businesses than I expected 2= mix of businesses met my expectations 3= better mix of businesses than expected 4= Don't know If worse or better, why do you say this? (Free text)	Composition of Cohorts
Did you receive any one-to-one support as part of Peer Networks? (Select one) 1 = Yes 2= No 3= Don't know	Confirm one to one consultancy

The next questions ask for your feedback on one-to-one support you received through Peer Networks.	
How would you rate your overall satisfaction with one-to-one support? (select one) 1 = Very dissatisfied 2= Somewhat dissatisfied 3= Neither satisfied or dissatisfied 4= Somewhat satisfied 5= Very satisfied 6= Don't know 7=Not applicable	Overall rating
Which of the following best describes how you used the one-to-one support? 1= I used the one-to-one support to build on topics covered in the action learning sets 2= I used the one-to-one support to cover topics that were not included in the action learning sets 3= I used the one-to-one support to both build on topics covered in the action learning sets and to cover topics that were not included in action learning sets 4= Don't know 5= Not applicable	Links between one-to-one support and ALS

How satisfied or dissatisfied were you with the following aspects of the one-to-one support sessions:	Quality of One-to-One support
The content of the one-to-one support sessions The length of one-to-one support sessions The usefulness of one-to-one support sessions 1 = Very dissatisfied 2= Somewhat dissatisfied 3= Neither satisfied or dissatisfied 4= Somewhat satisfied 5= Very satisfied 6= Don't know 7=Not applicable	
The next questions ask about the programme as a whole.	
Has engaging in the Peer Networks programme had any negative or unintended consequences for you or your business? 1=Yes 2=No 3=Don't Know [If Yes] What have these negative or unintended consequences been?	Negative / unintended consequences

What recommendations, if any, do you have for how Peer Networks could be improved? (free text)	Recommendations for future delivery
The next questions ask how you feel as a business leader and your plans for your business since taking part in the Peer Networks programme.	
Thinking about the way you feel today, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements (select one for each statement): I have all the skills I need to manage my employees over the next three years I have all the skills I need to lead my business over the next three years As a business leader I feel I can achieve my goals even if there are obstacles Within my role as a business leader, I feel able to adapt when changes occur 1 = Strongly disagree 2= Disagree 3= Neither agree nor disagree 4= Agree 5= Strongly agree 6=Don't know 7=Not applicable	Recapture of attitudinal baseline questions
Since accessing Peer Networks do you feel you have developed a wider network of businesses to consult with/support you? 1 = Yes 2= No 3= Don't know	Understanding if longer term network developed

4= Not applicable	
Over the next year, do you anticipate you will you keep in touch with/engage further with businesses you met through Peer Networks? 1 = Yes 2= No 3= Don't know 4= Not applicable	Understanding if longer term network developed
Over the next three years, do you aim to grow the sales of your business? (select one) 1 = Yes 2= No 3= Don't know 4= Not applicable	Recapture of growth aspirations
If yes, how likely is it that you will be able to do this? (select one) 1 = Extremely unlikely 2= Unlikely 3= Neutral 4= Likely 5= Extremely Likely	Recapture of growth aspirations

6= Don't know 7= Not applicable	
How you would rate your ability to grow your business? (select one) 1 = Very poor 2= Poor 3= Average 4= Strong 5= Very strong 6= Don't know 7= Not applicable	Recapture of growth aspirations
Do you intend to make any changes in your business over the next 6 months? (select one) 1 = Yes 2= No 3= Don't know 4= Not applicable If yes: Are changes related to (select all that apply) 1 = Leadership and management approaches 2= Staff recruitment and retention 3= Approaches to accessing finance 4= Use or adoption of technology 5= Sales and marketing	Plans

6= Business products or processes 7 = Other (please state)	
Has participating in Peer Networks changed future aspirations for you or your business over the next three years? (select one) 1 = Changed personal aspirations 2= Changed business aspirations 3= Changed both 4= Changed neither 5=Don't know 6=Not applicable	Aspirations
The next questions ask about other business support programmes you may have had access to	
When you applied to join the Peer Networks programme, were you aware of any other similar peer network support in your area? **1 = Yes** **2= No** **3= Don't know**	Uniqueness of Peer Networks offer
Over the last year have you accessed any other business support schemes? 1 = Yes 2= No	Other support received

3= Don't know

Where yes: What did you access this support for? Please indicate if these were free schemes, paid for schemes or both:

Support type	Accessed free support	Accessed paid for support	Accessed both free and paid for support
1 = Support with research or innovation			
2 = Support with digital technologies			
3 = Support to access finance			
4 = Support for exporting			
5 = General business support			
6= Support with the effects of Covid-19			
7= Other please state			

How was the business support you accessed mainly delivered?	Other support received
1= Peer Network 2= Seminar 3= Webinar	

4= One to one consultancy (including face to face, via telephone or via email) 5= Instructor led course 6= Self-study course 7= Other- what? 8= Don't know	
Over the last year have you received any of the following? (Select all that apply) 1 = Financial support with the job retention scheme or through deferring tax introduced as a result of Covid-19 2= External finance introduced as a result of Covid-19 (i.e., grants or loan) 3= Other external finance (i.e., grants or loan) 4= None of the above 5= Don't know	Other support received
If the Peer Network scheme had not been available, do you think you would have signed up for: 1 = A different free business support programme 2= A different paid-for business support programme 3= Neither 4= Don't Know	Self-reported counterfactual
Thank you for your time, we may be in touch in six months time to understand whether participating in Peer Networks has been useful for you or your business.	

Appendix D: Withdrawing Businesses Survey Approach and Analysis

The survey was sent to participants following completion of the support programme and aimed to gather feedback on why they withdrew from the programme.

The survey was issued online, and participants were sent a warm-up email from individual Growth Hubs/LEPs alerting them that they would be invited to participate in the survey.

The survey was sent to participants by email inviting them to provide their feedback.

To improve response rate:

- a reminder was sent one week after the initial invitation to all those that had not yet replied

- one week after the reminder email a push-to -web approach was adopted and those participants that had not yet completed the survey were telephoned and asked to complete the survey.

Survey overview

The full survey is included below. In this survey the following overarching topics were covered:

- 1) Pathway to the Peer Networks programme
- 2) Why they did not take up the offer
- 3) How many hours did they attend
- 4) Feedback on action learning set sessions and how they did the sessions
- 5) Feedback on one-to-one support

Sampling approach

The survey was emailed to all participants with a valid email address that had completed the programme. This was carried out in batches based on when the support was completed. The population size for each batch, date sent and number of bounce backs/ where the email address was deemed inadequate are shown in the table below.

Table D-1: Withdrawals Survey Batches, Date Sent and Population

Batch	Date	Number of invites sent	Reminder	Completes
1	14/1	50	50	1
2	27/1	302	0	18
3	10/2	186	0	2
4	16/3	90	0	3
5	29/3	69	0	3
6	11/4	109	0	3
Total		806		30

The number of responses included in this report is 30, representing a response rate of 4%.

Analysis approach

The analysis consisted of running frequencies of each question and the presentation of the results graphically. Cross-tabulations were examined by the following profiling groups:

- Business sector
- Business size
- LEP/Growth Hub
- Whether businesses have accessed other business support schemes over the last year.

Full online withdrawals survey

The full survey is included below.

Question	Aim
How did you hear about the Peer Networks programme? [Please tick all that apply] I was invited to apply by the Growth Hub or LEP I saw the programme promoted on social media I saw the programme promoted on Growth Hub/LEP website I saw the programme promoted in a newspaper advert I saw the programme promoted in a trade magazine I heard the programme promoted on radio I heard about the programme through word of mouth from another participant Other (please state)	Pathway to Peer Networks
Thinking about the process of applying to the Peer Networks programme, to what extent do you agree with the following statement? It was easy to apply to the Peer Networks programme My application to the Peer Networks programme was dealt with quickly 1 = Strongly disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neither agree nor disagree 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly agree 6 = Don't know	Pathway to Peer Networks

7=Not applicable	
We understand that you did not take up the full Peer Networks support offer. Is that correct? 1= Yes 2= No <route to Q1.4> 3= Don't know <route to Q1.4>	Confirm did not take up full offer
Why did you decide not to take up the full support offer? (free text)	Reasons for withdrawal
How many hours of Action Learning Set sessions did you attend? (select one) 1 = Up to 3 hours 2= At least 3 hours but less than 6 3= At least 6 hours but less than 9 4= At least 9 hours but less than 12 5= At least 12 hours or more 6 = Don't know	Confirm level of attendance
Did you primarily attend sessions virtually or in-person? 1=I attended all sessions virtually 2=I attended the majority of sessions virtually	Virtual vs In Person Delivery

3=I attended an equal number of sessions virtually and in person 4=I attended the majority of sessions in person 5=I attended all sessions in person 6=Don't know	
Did you receive any one to one support as part of Peer Networks? (select one) 1 = Yes 2 = No 3 = Don't know	Confirm if received one to one consultancy
The next questions ask about the support you received through the programme and captures feedback on the Action Learning Set sessions that you attended.	
Which of the following topics did you learn about through participation in Peer Networks? (Select all that apply) (1) Finance (2) Leadership and management (3) HR (4) Sales and marketing (5) Adjusting to social distancing (6) Business model innovation (7) Change management (8) Embedding formal management processes and systems	Confirm learning outcomes

(9) Digital (including adoption and implementation of technology, cyber security (10) Use of data to drive value in the business (11) EU transition (12) Net Zero COVID-19 support (13) Other - what?	
Overall, to what extent do you agree with the following statements about the action leaning sets you attended (select one for each statement) I was happy with the length of action learning set sessions I was happy with the frequency of action learning set sessions I shared relevant and real issues for my business with the action learning set I was able to build trust in fellow participants The insights shared by fellow participants were useful to my business 1 = Strongly disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neither agree nor disagree 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly agree 6=Don't know 7=Not applicable	ALS Quality

How do you feel that online delivery (compared with attending in person) affected the delivery or impact of the following factors (select one for each statement): Your ability to attend all sessions Your ability to have good or effective discussions Your ability to build relationships with other attendees Your confidence to share business challenges with the group Very negatively Negatively Neutral Positively Very Positively Don't know Not applicable [Only ask if they answer 'attended the majority of sessions virtually in Q0]	Impact of online delivery
Thinking about the number of businesses participating in your action learning sets, were there 1 = too many businesses 2= the right amount of businesses 3= too few businesses 4=Don't know	

To what extent did the mixture of businesses in your cohort meet your expectations in enabling an effective action learning set? 1 = worse mix of businesses than I expected 2 = mix of businesses met my expectations 3 = better mix of businesses than expected 4 = Don't know If worse or better, why do you say this? (free text)	Composition of Cohorts
The next questions ask for your feedback on one to one support you received through Peer Networks.	
How would you rate your overall satisfaction with one to one support? (select one) 1 = Very dissatisfied 2= Somewhat dissatisfied 3= Neither satisfied or dissatisfied 4= Somewhat satisfied 5= Very satisfied 6= Don't know 7=Not applicable	Overall rating

The next question asks about whether you feel any aspects of the programme could be improved.

What recommendations, if any, do you have for how Peer Networks could be improved? (free text)	Recommendations for future delivery

The next question asks about other business support programmes you may have had access to

Over the last year have you taken up any other free business support schemes?   Other support received

1 = Yes

2 = No

3 = Don't know

If yes, what were these? (select all that apply)

1 = Support with research or innovation

2 = Support with digital technologies

3 = Support to access finance

4 = Support for exporting

5 = General business support

6 = Support with the effects of Covid-19

7 = Other (please state)

This final set of questions ask how you feel as a business leader and your plans for your business since taking part in the Peer Networks programme.

Thinking about the way you feel today, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements (select one for each statement):	Recapture of attitudinal baseline questions
I have all the skills I need to manage my employees over the next three years	
I have all the skills I need to lead my business over the next three years	
As a business leader I feel I can achieve my goals even if there are obstacles	
Within my role as a business leader I feel able to adapt when changes occur	
1 = Strongly disagree	
2 = Disagree	
3 = Neither agree nor disagree	
4 = Agree	
5 = Strongly agree	
6=Don't know	
7=Not applicable	
Since accessing Peer Networks do you feel you have developed a wider network of businesses to consult with/support you? (select one)	Understanding if longer term network developed
1 = Yes	
2 = No	
3 = Don't know	
4 = Not applicable	

Over the next year, do you anticipate you will you keep in touch with/engage further with businesses you met through Peer Networks? (select one) 1 = Yes 2 = No 3 = Don't know 4 = Not applicable	Understanding if longer term network developed
Over the next three years, do you aim to grow the sales of your business? (select one) 1 = Yes 2 = No 3 = Don't know 4 = Not applicable	Recapture of growth aspirations
If yes, how likely is it that you will be able grow the sales of your business? (select one) 1 = Extremely unlikely 2 = Unlikely 3 = Neutral 4 = Likely 5 = Extremely Likely 6 = Don't know	Recapture of growth aspirations

7 = Not applicable	
How you would rate your ability to grow your business? (select one) 1 = Very poor 2 = Poor 3 = Average 4 = Strong 5 = Very strong 6 = Don't know 7 = Not applicable	Recapture of growth aspirations
Do you intend to make any changes in your business over the next 6 months? (select one) 1 = Yes 2 = No 3 = Don't know 4 = Not applicable If yes: Are these changes related to (select all that apply) 1 = Leadership and management approaches 2 = Staff recruitment and retention 3 = Approaches to accessing finance 4 = Use or adoption of technology 5 = Sales and marketing	Plans

6 = Business products or processes 7 = Other (please state)	
Has participating in Peer Networks changed future aspirations for you or your business over the next three years? (select one) 1 = Changed personal aspirations 2 = Changed business aspirations 3 = Changed both 4 = Changed neither 5 =Don't know 6 =Not applicable	Aspirations
Thank you for your time.	

Appendix E: Qualitative Consultation Approach

Approach to Fieldwork

Consultations were undertaken with representatives of BEIS, the Growth Company, Local Enterprise Partnership or Growth Hub delivery partners in 20 LEP areas, action learning set facilitators from 20 LEP areas, and SME participants from 18 LEP areas.

Selection of consultees was based on the following:

- LEP / Growth Hub consultees – 20 individuals were selected based on purposive sampling, that sought to ensure coverage of: at least one LEP area per Growth Hub cluster, and a mix of areas delivering the programme in-house and those delivering through procurement of an external delivery partner.

- Facilitators - each LEP area covered in the consultations above was asked to provide contact details for a facilitator from their area who had already been involved in delivery and would be willing to be consulted as part of the evaluation. From this list, 20 individuals were selected based on purposive sampling, seeking to ensure inclusion of some facilitators that had covered cohorts where there was a focus on targeted cohort compositions, including those with a sector or demographic focus – the latter including female or minority ethnic led business participants.

- SME Participants – aligned with cohorts covered by the facilitator consultations above, one business from each of these cohorts was selected purposively, to ensure a mix of different sizes and sectors of business. Overall 18 participants were consulted.

Participation in the consultations was voluntary, which may have led to a degree of selection bias with respect to differences between those opting to participate and those opting not to. However, to a large extent the effects should have been mitigated by the use of selection criteria that enabled a spread of respondents by geography and other criteria as outlined above.

Consultee Organisations

The consultations covering LEPs / delivery partners, facilitators and business beneficiaries, covered the following 20 LEP / Growth Hub areas. LEP / delivery partners and facilitator were consulted in every area. Business consultations were undertaken for all areas other than for Dorset and Coventry & Warwickshire.

- Coventry and Warwickshire

- Cumbria

- D2N2

- Dorset

- Gfirst

- Greater Birmingham and Solihull

- Greater Manchester

- Heart of the South West

- Hull and East Yorkshire LEP

- Lancashire Enterprise Partnership

- Leicester and Leicestershire

- London Economic Action Partnership

- New Anglia

- North East

- Oxfordshire

- Solent

- South East

- Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire

- Tees Valley

- West of England

Topic Guides

The following topic guides were used to guide consultations with each of the stakeholder groups.

LEP / Delivery Partner Consultees Topic Guide

Introduction

1. Could you begin by describing your role in the set up and delivery of the Peer Networks scheme in your LEP area to date?

Scheme Design

2. Has the scheme guidance, as set out in the Playbook, been sufficiently clear to enable you to set up the scheme in your area?

- If not, where was more clarity needed?

- Are there any aspects where your local delivery has diverged from the Playbook guidance?

3. To what extent do you feel the national level branding and marketing guidance has established a clear and consistent national brand for the scheme?

4. To what extent do you feel the overall Peer Networks approach involving scheme design at a national level, but delivery at a local level has been effective?

- What do you see as the pros and cons of this type of approach?

5. Are there other business support programmes in your area delivering the same or a similar offer to businesses as the Peer Networks programme?

Marketing and Recruitment

6. How successful has your LEP area been in recruiting beneficiaries for the programme?

- What have you found the most effective recruitment channels to be?

- How effective have you been in reaching businesses that have not previously engaged with the growth hub?

- Have you found greater / lesser success with certain types of business eg by size, sector?

- Are there particular barriers to certain types of business applying (e.g. certain sectors, sizes of business etc)?

- Has COVID-19 been a factor in the success of your recruitment approach, and if so, in what ways?

7. Which, if any, of these criteria were the most important in the way you promoted the programme and selected participants?

- requirements around business size and age

- businesses with aspiration to improve

- businesses with potential to scale-up

- businesses who export or have the potential to be an exporter

- businesses facing significant challenges or opportunities

- businesses wanting a more diverse sounding board

- the participant to be somebody with the licence to act in the business

8. How, if at all, did you apply the flexibilities / exemptions around eligibility criteria, including:

- Local discretion around the minimum number of employees/turnover (the "10% flex[15]")

- Additional local discretion (from 29 November) for a total of 30% of participants per area from businesses that have 2-4 employees from under-represented groups eg women-led, ethnic minority-led, sectors particularly impacted by Covid ie retail and hospitality , businesses with turnover over £200,000.

- Creative industries exemption

9. What types of businesses do you believe gained most from participation in the programme?

- Do you believe the businesses selected to join the programme were suitable for this scheme?

- Were there any particular groups of businesses that you think would have benefitted from participation but were ineligible?

Scheme Delivery

10. Based on experience to date, what do you believe the key characteristics of an effective ALS facilitator are?

- Have the facilitators you have recruited for this work met those characteristics?

- How effective have your facilitators been to date eg in managing sessions, addressing challenges raised by businesses etc?

11. How would you assess the quality of support being delivered to businesses overall?

- Have you received positive feedback on the programme from beneficiaries?

- What have been key factors behind particular strengths or weaknesses of delivery to date?

12. To what extent do you believe the online nature of delivery has affected scheme delivery? For example:

- Business' having the right technology to be able to effectively take part?

- Business' ability to attend all sessions?

- Business' ability to concentrate on discussions?

- Business' ability to build relationships with other attendees?

- Business' confidence to share business challenges with the group?

13. Has online delivery:

- worked better for some parts of the programme than others?

- worked better for some types of businesses than others?

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[15] Note that 30% flex was allowed in Year 1 in view of the shorter recruitment and delivery window.

14. Have any of your ALS sessions been run face-to-face?

- If so, in what ways has this impacted on delivery of the sessions?

15. Where businesses have had to drop out of the scheme, what have been the most common reasons for this?

- Has COVID-19 been a factor in this, and if so, in what ways?

- Are there any common characteristics amongst businesses that have had to drop out?

16. Which aspects of the programme do you believe have been most effective for businesses to date eg ALS sessions, 1:1 support, new relationships created?

17. What role, if any, do you intend to play in supporting ongoing networks between participants following the support?

Management and Governance

18. What management and governance structures and approaches have you used locally to deliver the scheme and how have you engaged with national programme management and governance?

- To what extent do you feel the national level management and governance has added value to delivery of the scheme?

- To what extent do you feel the approach involving growth hub cluster leads has added value to delivery of the scheme?

19. In what ways has the national co-ordinator role (delivered by The Growth Company) supported delivery of the programme?

- How has it affected the way you have targeted recruitment of participants

- What impact has it had on communications between delivery partners and BEIS around programme delivery?

- Are there any ways you feel that national co-ordinator role could have been improved?

20. Overall, how effective do you feel the management and governance structures and processes have been?

- What has worked particularly well / less well?

- Are there are any aspects you feel could be improved?

Overall

21. How, if at all, do you feel the programme could have been improved?

22. If funding had been available for a third year, would you have applied? If not, why?

23. Are there any other comments on overall scheme delivery you would like to highlight?

Peer Network Facilitators Topic Guide

Introduction

1. Could you begin by describing your role in the delivery of the Peer Networks scheme in your LEP area to date?

Scheme Design

2. To what extent do you feel the national branding and marketing guidance has established a clear and consistent national brand for the Peer Networks scheme?

3. To what extent do you feel the overall Peer Networks approach involving scheme design at a national level, but delivery at a local level has been effective?

- What do you see as the pros and cons of this type of approach?

Scheme Delivery

4. What number and length of ALS sessions were used in your area, and do you feel that was the optimum length / frequency of sessions?

- What have the pros and cons of this approach been?

5. What has been your core approach to facilitating ALS sessions in order to deliver effective support to meet the needs of all businesses?

- Have you found that you are able to effectively manage the range of topics raised by businesses?

- How have you sought to develop trust between participants to initiate knowledge sharing, and how effective has this been?

- What do you believe the key characteristics are to effectively facilitate an ALS cohort?

6. What are the most common topics raised that businesses wanted to discuss?

- To what extent have topics focused on shorter-term COVID response challenges, compared with longer term growth and productivity topics?

- Have businesses brought real and relevant issues to discuss at the groups?

7. Do you feel the make-up of cohorts has been effective?

- What do you see as the key characteristics for an effective cohort?

- Have you found it to be more effective where participants are similar or more diverse in terms of personal demographics or business age, size, sector etc?

8. Do you feel that businesses which have received business support before behave differently from those who have not?

9. To what extent do you believe the online nature of delivery has affected scheme delivery? For example:

- Businesses having the right technology to be able to effectively take part?
- Business' ability to attend all sessions?
- Business' ability to concentrate on discussions?
- Business' ability to build relationships with other attendees?
- Business' confidence to share business challenges with the group?

10. Has online delivery:

- worked better for some parts of the programme than others?
- worked better for some types of businesses than others?

11. Have any of your ALS sessions been run face-to-face?

- If so, in what ways has this impacted on delivery of the sessions?

12. Where businesses have had to drop out of the scheme, what have been the most common reasons for this?

- Has COVID-19 been a factor in this, and if so, in what ways?
- Are there any common characteristics amongst businesses that have had to drop out?

13. Have you been involved in the delivery of 1:1 support to businesses in your cohorts?

- If so, to what extent has this complemented learning from the action learning set, and how?

14. How would you assess the quality of support being delivered to businesses by the programme overall?

- What have been key factors behind particular strengths or weaknesses of delivery to date?

Management and Governance

15. What have been the key aspects of management and governance of the scheme which you have been involved with?

16. How effective do you feel these structures and processes have been?

- What has worked particularly well / less well?
- Are there are any aspects you feel could be strengthened?

Overall

17. Did you deliver ALS facilitation for any other areas? If so, how did the approach and experience compare?

- What worked better / less well compared to other areas?

18. How, if at all, do you feel the programme could have been improved?

19. Would you apply to deliver peer network run on a similar basis in future?

20. Are there any other comments on overall scheme delivery you would like to highlight?

Business Beneficiaries Topic Guide

Introduction

1. Could you begin by telling me a bit about your business and what you were hoping to get from the Peer Networks programme?

- What types of business challenges were you hoping to address through this programme?

Scheme Marketing and Sign-up

2. How did you hear about the Peer Networks scheme?

3. What was it about the scheme that attracted you to apply?

- To what extent was the scheme marketing clear and relevant to your business?
- To what extent did the marketing make you feel the scheme was an established national programme?
- Were you were aware of any other local schemes that provided a similar offer, and if so, what were these?

4. Did COVID-19 influence your decision to join the programme, either positively or negatively? If so, in what ways?

Scheme Administration

5. What have been the main enrolment and ongoing administrative requirements of the scheme for you?

6. How effective do you feel these administrative processes have been?

- What has worked particularly well / less well?
- Are there are any aspects you feel could have been better?

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ALS Sessions

7. How many ALS sessions did you attend and how long were sessions?

- How suitable was the frequency and length of sessions for you?
- To what extent was the overall length of the programme sufficient to meet your business support needs?
- If you had to miss any sessions, what were the reasons for this?

8. How would you assess the overall quality of the ALS sessions?

- What worked well and less well?
- Were you able to share real and relevant challenges facing your business?
- Were you able to get useful insights back on these challenges?
- Did any of these insights lead to concrete actions you were able to take from these discussions back to your business?
- Did you find that the issues raised by other businesses were relevant to you?
- Did you feel that you were able to contribute responses to the issues raised by other businesses?

9. How effective do you feel your ALS facilitator was overall?

- How effective were they in managing the range of topics raised by businesses?
- How effective were they in building trust between participants to initiate knowledge sharing?

10. How did the mix of businesses in your ALS cohort affect the quality of your experience of the programme?

- What was good or bad about the mix of businesses in your cohort and why?
- Do you anticipate maintaining any of the business relationships you made through your cohort, in the future?
- If so, how do you anticipate using these contacts in the future?

11. How did the online nature of delivery affect your experience, positively or negatively? How did it affect:

- your ability to attend all sessions?
- your ability to concentrate on discussions?
- your ability to build relationships with other attendees?
- your confidence to share business challenges with the group?

12. Have any of your ALS sessions been run face-to-face?

- If so, in what ways has this impacted on delivery of the sessions?

1: 1 Support

13. How would you assess the quality of 1:1 support provided?

- What worked well and less well in this support?

- To what extent has this complemented learning from the action learning set, and how?

Overall

14. Which aspects of the programme do you believe have been most effective for your business to date?

15. Have you experienced any negative or unintended consequences from your engagement with the programme?

16. How, if at all, do you feel the programme could have been improved?

17. Would you recommend Peer Networks to others?

18. Are there any other comments on overall scheme delivery you would like to highlight?

Appendix F: Observational Analysis Approach

Approach to Fieldwork

Observational analysis was undertaken for one action learning set sessions across each of 17 cohorts. The cohorts selected for analysis were designed to align with those covered by the business, facilitator and LEP / delivery partner consultations (outlined in Appendix E). This ensured a broad mix of geographies, and inclusion of sector or demographically targeted cohort groups.

The analysis involved recording of a single action leaning set, where the cohort gave permission for this to be undertaken, with the recording reviewed by the evaluator, and a checklist of observational analysis questions used to capture particular findings around factors such as the way the session was run and engagement of participants.

Observational analysis was undertaken for 17 action learning set sessions across the following 14 LEP areas:

- Cumbria
- Dorset
- Greater Birmingham and Solihull
- Gloucestershire First
- Greater Manchester
- Hearts of the South West
- Hull and East Yorkshire
- Leicester and Leicestershire
- New Anglia
- North East
- Oxfordshire
- Solent
- South East
- Stoke and Staffordshire

Observational Analysis Checklist

The following analysis checklist were used to guide the observational analysis with each of the cohort sessions reviewed.

Checklist during session

Contributions

- Use a tally chart to note the number of substantive contributions made to discussion by each participant (substantive being more than short affirmations etc)

Engagement

- Note if anybody turns their camera off for some or all of the session, and for how long

Disturbances

- Note any points when any participants lose connectivity, temporarily preventing their communication

- Note any points where background factors interrupt an individual's participation e.g. pets, family members, doorbell etc

Discussions

- Note each challenge raised by a participant and the number of other different participants who then respond with advice / their own experiences

- For example: initial problem to be logged i.e. "we are facing recruitment challenges" and then the number of other businesses who have contributed to the discussion e.g. 4 people responded

Facilitator Role

Note the main roles of the facilitator in the session, including:

- Approach for starting the session

- Moving conversations on

- Bringing participants into the chat

- Other roles

Appendix G: Full list of Evaluation Questions

HLQ 1 - How effective is the Networks project in recruiting businesses and ensuring they complete the scheme?

- How successful has the programme been in recruiting the target number of businesses? Has this varied by LEP area, and if so, why?

- What are the most effective ways to drive awareness of the scheme and recruit participants? And does this differ by size, sector, region etc?

- Has the scheme effectively ensured a consistent marketing approach nationally, and has this helped to establish a Peer Networks brand?

- Do SMEs find the branding and marketing strategy relevant, clear and relatable (e.g. not using the word productivity)? If yes/no, why?

- Do participants see the training as a unique offer (e.g. they aren't part of or aware of a network that provides the same offer/benefits?

- Do SMEs in the target group have an equal chance of applying for the support (e.g. are there any unique barriers to particular sectors/sizes of businesses/ protected characteristics of business leaders applying?)

- Did the project engage with and select the target beneficiaries? Were the right procedures and criteria in place to ensure effective targeting?

- Are LEPs recruiting a mixture of known and unknown SMEs? If yes/no, how?

- Are the same participants attending all sessions? If not, why not?

- Are businesses completing the training? If not, why not?

- Is there an impact of COVID-19 on recruitment and compliance with the intervention?

- Are there any other factors which predict non-attendance / non-compliance?

- Does the online nature of the programme affect compliance / attendance / participation / engagement with the programme?

- How does the national coordinator role affect recruitment targeting?

HLQ 2 - To what extent does the project successfully deliver high quality business support?

- To what extent do businesses understand the aims of the programme?

- How well was the programme managed? Were the right governance and management structures in place and did they operate in the way they were expected to?

- How effective is virtual delivery perceived to be in delivering this support?

- What are the different impacts of different modes of delivery (face-to-face / virtual)? (if face-to-face is introduced)

- Do businesses have the right technology to take part?

- To what extent has the programme delivered its intended activities to a high standard?

- How are project activities perceived by stakeholders and beneficiaries? What are their perceptions of the quality of activities / delivery?

- How does the programme vary across cohorts / delivery / personnel / regions? What are the driving factors behind differences? What can we learn from the variation in what is delivered?

- What type of issues are SMEs bringing to the ALS sessions? And do these differ e.g. by location/type of business/size/ characteristics of business leader, etc?

- Is regional delivery through LEPs an effective way of delivering this support?

- Has the programme been sufficient in building up trust to initiate intensive knowledge transfer?

- What are the most important / effective behaviours of the ALS facilitator?

- Are the facilitators able to manage the ALS effectively? (e.g. time, topic, coaching)

- What impact does the role of the national coordinator have on the communication and delivery of the programme between delivery partners and BEIS?

- How can the national coordinator role be improved?

- Could the delivery of the programme have been improved in any way?

HLQ 3 - How effective is the Networks project at encouraging SMEs to adopt practices to improve productivity?

- To what extent is the ALS approach flexible and relevant for all cohorts?

- Do SMEs think the ALS sessions are being delivered effectively? If yes/no, why? (e.g. is it the facilitators, lack of trust?)

- Do SME's think that the intensity of support received (i.e. 18 hours of network sessions plus 3.5 hours one-to-one support) is sufficient to enable them to gain sufficient learning that they can apply to improve their business?

- What value are SMEs getting from the ALS sessions versus the 1:1 support? How do they complement each other, if at all?

- Do SMEs think the 1:1 support is delivered effectively? If yes/no, why?

- Is the 1:1 support building on and complementing the ALS sessions? If yes, how, and if no, why not?

- Are SME managers bringing relevant and real issues to the ALS? If not, what are the issues they are raising?

- What aspects of the programme are viewed as being most effective by LEPs, participants and facilitators? (e.g. networks, coaching, ALS sessions)

HLQ 4 - What early changes are businesses making as a result of the Peer Networks scheme?

- To what extent are participants' ambitions and intentions to make positive productivity changes to their business impacted following completion of the programme?

- Are SMEs making changes in their business after the ALS? If yes, what types of changes and how long after the support are these changes being initiated?

- If managers/businesses are making changes to their businesses, are these related to adopting new management and technologies. If not, what changes are they making?

- How, if at all, does participation impact business performance in the short to medium term?

- To what extent has the support contributed to the survival of the participants' SMEs at the six month stage after completion of support?

- At a six months stage after completion of support, do the participants' SME's exhibit enhanced resilience or enhanced approaches around leadership and management, staff recruitment and retention, finance or technology adoption?

- What can we learn at this stage about the costs and benefits associated with the course and the Value For Money (VFM), on the basis of testing economic assumptions set out in the programme business case?

- How confident can we be that the programme will lead to GVA improvements?

- Do networks continue after the programme ends (i.e. are they self-sustaining)? If yes/no, why and how?

- To what extent are LEPs involved in networks during and after the programme?

- Were there any negative and/or unintended consequences of the training?

- Do participants who have taken up business support previously behave differently compared to those who haven't? If yes, how?

HLQ 5 – What other factors influence how and what changes businesses are making after they complete the scheme?

- To what extent are the main motivations for businesses entering the programme driven by short term (e.g. COVID-19 response) business needs, versus longer term growth / productivity aspirations? How does this change over time?

- Are participants taking up any other business support schemes (e.g. Help to Grow Digital/ Management)? If yes, how does this influence the impact evaluation?

- What share of participants would have gone to other business training but chose this one because it's free?

To what extent do wider contextual factors e.g. COVID-19 or other economic conditions affect what changes businesses are making after they complete the programme?

Appendix H: Detailed Eligibility criteria

Eligibility

The Peer Networks programme was targeted at companies which met the criteria of the Companies Act SME definition.16 It was intended to support SMEs to recover from the impacts of Covid-19 and - in the longer term - to improve their productivity. The criteria were set to enable those firms most likely to make productivity improvements to participate in the project. The programme was targeted at those firms that would most benefit from it, and have the most to contribute to others involved:

- Those SME leaders which have businesses that have been in operation for long enough for challenges to materialise;

- Those SME leaders which are managing the challenges associated with running a sizeable team of permanent[17] staff;

- Those SME leaders whose business is well enough established to be generating a turnover; and

- Those SME leaders who are motivated to learn from others to improve their business.

Target audience

The broad eligibility criteria for SMEs remained as for Year 1:

Essential:

- Operated for at least one year

- At least five employees*

- A turnover of at least £100,000

Desirable:

- Businesses with the potential to Scale up

- Businesses who already export, or have the potential to become an exporter

The ideal was that that all criteria would be fully met but some eligibility flexibilities were allowed. It was a local matter whether to make use of this flex – bearing in mind the policy intent.

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16 To qualify as an SME, the company should satisfy two or more of the following requirements: not more than 250 employees, not more than £36 million turnover or not more that £18 million balance sheet total. (As defined by sections 382 and 465 of the Companies Act 2006)
17 A part time permanent employee should be counted as one employee.

Eligibility flexibility

3 areas of flexibility were allowed from the start of year 2 delivery as follows:

Local discretion around the minimum number of employees/turnover (the "10% flex[18]")

All areas had the discretion to recruit up to 10% of their overall participants (across all cohorts combined) from firms that had 2-4 employees. However, the preference remained for SMEs that met the original criteria of at least five employees. This flex of 10% could also be applied to turnover instead (eg a maximum of 1 in 10 participants could have turnover of less than £100k or 2-4 employees or a combination of these).

Businesses impacted by Covid-19 (the "Covid exemption")

In the case of SMEs that prior to the impact of Covid-19 would have qualified, but which now do not due to the impact of Covid-19, discretion was provided for local areas to take participants whose business would have met the criteria in the 12 months prior to March 2020, providing those businesses were likely to be viable going forwards. The flexibility only related to turnover and number of employees criteria.

Those businesses did not count towards the 10% flex mentioned above.

Sectors (covering creative industries only)

Flexibility was provided for the number of employees in creative industry businesses (defined according to SIC codes), which could include associates. This was because that sector that frequently operates with associates/freelancers in senior leadership positions.   Associates were defined as someone who "Pays their own self-employment taxes and does not have any employees".

From 29 November 2021, additional local discretion for a total of 30% of participants per area from businesses that have 2-4 employees was permitted principally if they fell in one or more of the following categories:

- under-represented groups eg women-led, ethnic minority-led
- sectors particularly impacted by Covid ie retail and hospitality
- businesses with turnover over £200,000.

For those areas that had already used some or all of the "10% flex", the 30% should be reduced accordingly (ie 20% of remainder for those who had already used 10%).

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18 Note that 30% flex was allowed in Year 1 in view of the shorter recruitment and delivery window.