

<b>Meeting:</b>	Hampshire Prosperity Partnership Board
<b>Date:</b>	June 9th 2025
<b>Title:</b>	Digital platform for business support
<b>Appendices</b>	
<b>Report From:</b>	Economy & Skills Team – Hampshire 2050
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### **The Purpose:**

1. To provide details of the proposed digital platform for the delivery of support to Hampshire businesses, enabling them to curate the tools and resources needed to support their business growth. This was discussed with the HPPB at its March meeting (referred to as an “online business support hub”), when it was agreed that we would provide further information about the proposal.
2. To propose development of an improved website to support delivery of the Growth Hub, and of skills programmes delivered by Hampshire County Council’s Economy and Skills team. This website improvement is a necessary precondition of the successful implementation of the digital platform.

### **The Hampshire Prosperity Partnership Board (HPPB) is asked to:**

3. Agree the approach to the website improvements and digital platform project, as set out in this paper.
4. Recommend the allocation of up to £100,000 from the LEP legacy reserves to fund this work, for approval by the formal decision maker.

### **Background**

5. Having a strong and impactful web presence is a key element to the success of any organisation as it is an essential tool in attracting clients and service users

and helps create an effective shop window to the outside world but also plays a key role in connecting teams internally. Websites need to be dynamic, visual, and where possible utilise the very latest technologies.

6. Also, in line with the prevailing trend in the digitisation of Government services, HCC's digital first policy, and the great opportunities that innovative technologies can provide for economic development, a number of organisations are looking to introduce 'digital platforms.' These differ from traditional websites, in that they provide the user with a dedicated account allowing them to curate their own content, set up alerts and utilise diagnostic and business planning tools. Some business support platforms also allow the user to be matched directly to advisers and investors, and some have been monetised to some degree with a subscription model.
7. A number of economic development teams and Growth Hubs have already invested significantly in their web presence and some good examples are given here:
  - <https://www.durhambusinessgrowth.co.uk/>
  - [Home - The Growth Hub Gloucestershire](#)
  - <https://www.businesssurrey.co.uk/>
8. These sites have a number of features that we do not currently have, but would like to replicate including:
  - A registration function so that contact details can be captured, and ideally directly integrated into our CRM (the HCC Transport Service has this function for use by the public for reporting potholes, for example)
  - Effective use of colours and contrast in the website design
  - Images of real people in business
  - A mix of buttons and quick links
  - Case studies, reviews, and testimonials
9. DBT are investing significantly in their digital presence with the launch of a new national Business Growth Service at the end of June, which will simplify the customer journey for the SME looking for business support and bring as far as possible all DBT key programmes under one roof. A prototype for the new website has been presented to some of the Growth Hub Cluster Leads and has four pathways to government support – for start-ups, established businesses looking to grow, exporters and inward investors. The first two gateways take users of the service directly into the Growth Hub network depending on the post code of the business.
10. It is still unclear what the full digital functionality of the Business Growth Service website will be, but the Government have already introduced digital platforms

such as the Export Academy and Innovate UK's 'No Limits' which provides curated online information and training to allow businesses to self-serve.

11. Other key platforms in this space run by the private and third sector include Enterprise Nation and Digital Boost (see below). In the case of the latter two, a key part of their model is to connect businesses to paid for mentors nationally, but they also have diagnostic and business planning tools.

- <https://www.great.gov.uk/export-academy/>
- [No Limits: Connecting talent with opportunity](#)
- <https://www.enterprisenation.com/>
- [Get Free Business Mentoring and Support | Digital Boost](#)

### **The Current Position: Economy & Skills team**

12. The Economy and Skills team currently have multiple sites where individuals, businesses, key stakeholders and partners can connect with us and where we promote the services that we offer:

- [Hampshire Prosperity Partnership | Business and economy | Hampshire County Council](#)
- [Business in Hampshire | Business and economy | Hampshire County Council](#)
- [Skills Bootcamps | Business and economy | Hampshire County Council](#)
- [Economic Intelligence | Business and economy | Hampshire County Council](#)

13. Having information across these separate pages can cause confusion and an unclear customer journey; there is no clear entry point for businesses, employers and individuals seeking skills support.

14. The Hampshire Prosperity Partnership pages lack visual appeal and are text heavy. This has had an impact on our ability to attract as many users as possible and the session time they spend on our site. To illustrate this, the number of unique visits to the Enterprise M3 LEP site in 2023/24 was over 48,000; the final figure for the current Hampshire Prosperity Partnership and Business in Hampshire pages combined in the same financial year was just under 14,000.

15. Going forward, we need to improve substantially our SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) score assessments, keyword rankings, and most importantly conversion rates (where site visitors convert to being clients / those engaging with our services), and to achieve this we believe that significant investment in our web presence is required.

16. Government funded programmes such as the Growth Hub and Careers Hub, require us to maximise opportunities to promote these services in the most efficient and effective manner and this will be just as important for new programmes such as Connect to Work. It is also important that as we advise our business clients on the importance of a strong web presence, we back this up by showing we have invested in our own website assets.
17. In addition, in their current form, our website pages do not facilitate a seamless link between our work on business support and our employment and skills offer. For the vast majority of our businesses, access to the right skills, workforce retention and development, and the availability of labour market intelligence are key issues, and we need a site that delivers a seamless customer journey and maximises interactions with businesses.
18. The other aspect that we need to consider is the need to integrate a future/updated website into our CRM, as colleagues in Surrey have done, which speeds up the customer journey, improves the triage system and creates efficiencies for both customers and staff.

### **Digital platform for business support**

19. One of the benefits of an interactive digital platform for the Hampshire Growth Hub, in particular, would be that it would contribute to our KPIs for company interactions. If we could provide more 'self-service' functionality to manage enquiries from pre-start and start-up companies, this would help us to focus our resources and budgets more effectively.
20. For our more established growth SMEs, the Growth Hub service would benefit from an effective on-line company diagnostic tool that would allow our Growth Champions and Business Co-Ordinator to be provided with key client information prior to our first meeting (including key company data, financials, key priorities, etc). It would also be possible to access training modules and video content (again via a self-service approach) to help our clients interact with us across a range of contact points.
21. Other benefits from using a digital platform could include:
  - Connecting with potential investors, buyers, and funding and grant opportunities, and helping to drive business connections
  - Tools that could be used to provide updated sector or other information including mapping clusters or other business networks

- Curated video content that would complement the guidance and support we provide to clients
- Helping us to drive a dynamic and connected business support ecosystem – the platform could provide an effective mechanism for signposting to partners’ programmes – such as Made Smarter Southeast or Help to Grow
- Creation of a resource library for clients
- Setting up alerts to allow clients to filter which events they would like to prioritise

22. It was highlighted above that the Government is about to launch a new Business Growth Service with a new website. In establishing the technical and design brief for the digital platform, we will ensure that there is no duplication with any of the functionality on that site, or any associated tools that are included. Although DBT are bringing their programmes together (Growth Hubs, Help to Grow and Made Smarter), others such as those delivered by Innovate UK will continue to have separate websites. Having an enhanced digital presence in Hampshire will help us to highlight local programmes and support our goal of a joined business support ecosystem.

23. We are confident that the digital platform will provide additionality to what already exists locally. Some co-working space providers such as Incuhive and Signal Bordon have developed some features such access to mentors and investors and collaborative chat functions. These platforms, however, do not provide diagnostic and action planning tools. Also, we are aiming to provide a single point of entry that will enable Hampshire businesses to navigate both the national and regional business support landscapes, as well as capitalising on the latest AI technologies.

## **Proposed Approach**

24. There are two parts to this project:

### **(a) Create a new/refreshed Economy & Skills website**

There are two options for this:

**Option 1:** This would be to capitalise on the existing Business in Hampshire website as a framework, but invest in new imagery including video, establish a clearer customer journey and bring the business support, sector development, skills and employment and economic intelligence content into a more cohesive structure. The advantage of utilising the existing site is that costs would be lower, and there would be some initial benefit from existing web traffic.

**Option 2:** The second option would be to create a completely new stand-alone website that is hosted separately from the existing Hampshire County Council

website, but where the council still had oversight (this was the approach taken by Surrey County Council with the creation of Business Surrey). Such an approach would allow for optimising technical aspects, content and user experience and provide a more business friendly gateway to support, while ensuring that flexibility was maintained for updates and future content creation. An externally hosted site would need to be cyber secure and there would be other protocols to follow.

### **(b) Creation of a digital platform**

The advantages of a digital platform are highlighted above. We would need some technical advice regarding how a digital platform would integrate with the website, and whether some of the functionality already exists within Hampshire County Council and could be adapted.

Grow London Local, which was developed in conjunction with Enterprise Nation, provides an example of a digital platform that has been integrated into a website:

[Matching London small businesses to support | Grow London Local](#)

The Grow London Local platform allows businesses to access:

- **Support** specified by subject matter – including finance, marketing and legal
- **Resources** – including access to blogs, training courses, webinars, and local resources
- **Programmes and events** – with other business support partners able to add details of their programmes
- **Business Success Check** – where businesses can develop an action plan, use diagnostic tools etc.

### **Future proofing**

25. It is crucial that both projects not only deliver for users in the short term, but are future proofed, in the context of devolution and Local Government Reorganisation. The functionality and content would be developed in such a way that it could be picked up and moved, and re-branded, either as a whole entity or on a modular basis.

### **Proposed budget**

26. The following allocations from the LEP legacy reserves are proposed. In the event that further design work and market testing indicated that either figure was a substantial underestimate, the project would be brought back to the HPPB.

- **Improved Economy and Skills website allocation – up to £30,000.** This could be supplemented by programme funding where applicable.

- **Digital platform allocation – up to £70,000.** This is estimated as we are yet to undertake market testing.

### **Next steps and timelines**

- 27.** In developing new sites there is normally a validation step where we map out the customer journey to understand how they will interact with us and how our services can be linked together more effectively. This is an essential step prior to the site build as it provides the framework **(to be completed by 31<sup>st</sup> July 2025)**.
- 28.** Finalise a technical and design brief in conjunction with Hampshire County Council's IT and corporate marketing teams **(to be completed by end of September 2025)**.
- 29.** We would hope that the design, build and launch of the digital platform could be delivered in parallel with the website improvement. We would aim to have the new website and digital platform in place in **Q4 of 2025/26**.