

Meeting:	Hampshire Prosperity Partnership Board
Date:	6 th October 2025
Title:	Agenda item 9 – Joining up the business support system
Appendices	Attached as separate PDF files: Annex A – Draft report Annex B – Slide pack for presentation on 6 October
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The Purpose

1. This report addresses one of the priority workstreams agreed with the Hampshire Prosperity Partnership Board (HPPB) in March: “Joining up the business support system”.
2. The workstream aims to increase the impact of the business support ecosystem across Hampshire, by bringing providers together to map provision, reduce duplication and increase cross referrals, and by exploring the potential for some form of business support partnership.
3. This project also aligns strongly with the Government’s own attempt to simplify and rationalise the SME business support journey, with the recent launch of its new Business Growth Service. The network of local Growth Hubs, including the Hampshire Growth Hub, remains very much at the heart of the national offer.

Background

4. Small and medium sized enterprises frequently complain that accessing the right business support is both complicated and confusing, with different routes and points of contact, which is backed up by research done by groups like the British Chambers of Commerce and from the findings of parliamentary committees. The reasons for this are complex, but include issues such as poor communication on new programmes, a lack of resources of time-poor SMEs to research the opportunities, stringent eligibility criteria, and lengthy application processes (particularly when trying to access finance).
5. Based on recent national surveys, the majority of SMEs do not actively look for external support for the reasons above. If we could help simplify and join up the business support

landscape in Hampshire this could have a positive impact on our economy and levels of business productivity and survival rates.

Approach

6. The Hampshire Growth Hub Team commissioned Andy Pringle from Start Your Own Business Ltd to undertake detailed research into the current business support landscape across Hampshire (covering both the Hampshire and Solent Growth Hub areas) and to provide a detailed report of his findings, including recommendations for the future. Andy has over 25 years of experience in supporting SMEs in Hampshire and is recognised as a business start-up specialist.
7. Andy and his team used a broad methodology to gather this information including desk research, web reviews, stakeholder interviews and an assessment of relevant national programmes. The detailed draft report from this work is attached as a separate PDF file, **Annex A**. A slide pack that will be presented at the HPPB meeting on 6 October is also attached as a separate PDF file, **Annex B**.

Key Findings

8. The research revealed that finding effective business support across the region remains challenging due to fragmentation and complexity, which creates barriers for small businesses. Key findings include the following:
 - a) **Fragmentation and Access Issues:** The landscape is confusing, characterised by duplication in some areas and significant gaps in others. Most identified provision is online only, which is often outdated, difficult to navigate and functions as signposting rather than direct support.
 - b) **Geographic Inequalities:** Although Growth Hub and Skills Bootcamp support is available across all areas, other local programmes operate with inconsistent coverage, creating a patchwork of provision (particularly when it comes to business grants). There are significant geographic gaps in dedicated provision.
 - c) **Structural Challenges:** Strong local identities mean that Portsmouth, Southampton, the Isle of Wight and the rest of Hampshire operate largely in separate spheres with limited collaboration.
 - d) **Sustainability Risk:** Much current provision relies heavily on UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) funding, which is scheduled to end on 31st March 2026. This expiry creates significant uncertainty and threatens the continuity of many current programmes.
 - e) **Underserved Segments:** There are some limitations in cluster-specific activities (although good progress is being made by HCC in developing key clusters identified in the Industrial Strategy) and a lack of specific targeted support for the hospitality and retail sectors (although Growth Hubs have recently been tasked with addressing the needs of high street businesses). Start-ups require more intensive "handholding" support. Rural communities are also underserved.

Recommendations

9. In his report, Andy Pringle has suggested that a coordinated business support partnership is required to address these systemic issues, eliminate duplication and improve the business experience through a 'no wrong door' approach. He proposes an independent, simplified and sustainable partnership model. Features of this model would include:

- a) **Partnership Governance:** An independent governance structure would be essential to overcome regional divisions and political sensitivities, particularly perceived concerns about Hampshire County Council dominance.
- b) **Addressing Geographic Gaps:** The partnership would prioritise the establishment of support programmes in relatively underserved areas.
- c) **Coordination and Access:** A regular communication framework using concise monthly newsletters, a shared calendar, a WhatsApp group for quick referrals, and a unified digital platform to provide a single, user-friendly access point with up-to-date information.
- d) **Sustainability and Resources:** The model would prioritise minimal infrastructure and shared responsibilities to ensure sustainability.
- e) **Targeted Support:** Targeted programmes for key sectors experiencing challenges, such as hospitality, retail and rural businesses, alongside area-wide support for start-ups.

Questions for the Board

- 10. What do the Board think of the findings in the report? Do they reflect their own knowledge and experience of business support in Hampshire?
- 11. Are the recommendations regarding the proposed business support partnership workable? Are there alternative options?
- 12. What further work should be done to build on the findings of the report, who should lead it, and how might it be resourced?