

Overview and Scrutiny Report

Business Support



March 2017



1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Economic Prosperity Sub-Committee is a scrutiny committee whose role is to review and challenge services and decision makers in relation to economic development, inward investment, transport networks and tourism. It has no decision making powers but it can make recommendations to the Elected Mayor, her Cabinet and other decision makers on how services might be improved.
- 1.2 In setting its work programme for 2016/17 the sub-committee heard from one its members who, based on his own experiences of setting up a new business, believed that whilst there was considerable and effective support for start up businesses, many encountered difficulties in their 3rd and 4th years and faltered. The sub-committee therefore agreed to investigate how many enterprises are not sustainable beyond this period, the impact this has on employment and the economy and whether additional support could be provided to businesses over a longer period of time.
- 1.3 Following preliminary enquiries the sub-committee established a time limited sub group to undertake the study and in particular to:
 - a) examine the range of support available to start up businesses;
 - b) examine the sustainability of new businesses in their 3rd and 4th years;
 - c) consider whether providing extended and enhanced support for businesses in their 3rd and 4th years would reduce the likelihood of businesses failing and consequently have a positive impact on the local economy; and
 - d) formulate recommendations as to how existing support might be enhanced or how additional services might be developed to improve the success rate of start up businesses. Any recommendations to be supported with an assessment of the financial implications.
- 1.4 In undertaking the exercise the sub-committee were seeking to contribute to the Council's Our North Tyneside Plan which states that "our economy will grow by building on our strengths, including our existing world-class companies, and small and growing businesses."

2. National and Regional Context

- 2.1 Nationally the Government has recognised that the rate of start up businesses in the UK is comparable with other countries such as the US¹ and that the success of start up businesses is not dependent on the quantity or quality of support provided but the drive and skills of the individuals involved. The Government has therefore concluded that investment in support for start ups does not produce sufficient returns and it has decided to prioritise support for businesses who have the potential for high growth, typically after 2 years of operation. The rate of businesses to achieve this position is less in the UK than other countries.
- 2.2 The North East Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), a voluntary partnership between local authorities and businesses, published its Strategic Economic Plan

¹ But there are fewer business start ups in the North East compared with England.

(SEP) in March 2014, the region's road map to economic success. The plan acknowledges that the area continues to have a significant deficit of private sector employment compared to most other parts of the UK. Whilst business births and deaths are in line with the rest of the country when measured against the existing stock of businesses, too few private enterprises are created to build the low base of private firms towards levels found in other regions, and too few of these grow to become significant providers of employment. There are almost 57,000 businesses in the region of which 89% have fewer than 20 employees. In addition, the area has a low number of businesses per head.

- 2.3 The LEP's goal is to create more and better jobs, so that by 2024, 60,000 new private sector jobs will have been created, 60% of which (36,000) will be higher skilled & higher paid jobs, and to create a world class business support and finance ecosystem that enables more businesses to grow.
- 2.4 Research has shown that 1% of businesses create a third of new jobs. In the North East, 420 businesses, employing 15,500 people, accounted for 33% of Gross Value Added (GVA)² during 2014. The estimated impact of increasing the number of growing businesses by 25% would be 2,786 additional jobs and £130m additional GVA.
- 2.5 The LEP therefore places greater emphasis on intensively supporting the relatively small proportion of businesses that contribute a disproportionate amount of growth rather than addressing the gap in business formation and density rates. Start up support are not over-looked and self-employment and new businesses in new sectors are both key characteristics of a vibrant and inclusive economy, but with scarce resources available the LEP believes it is important that interventions are concentrated on those most likely to create more and better jobs.

3. The North East Growth Hub

- 3.1 In October 2015 the Government announced the closure of the Business Growth Service which incorporated a range of services aimed at businesses with the potential to improve and grow. It included the GrowthAccelerator programme and the Manufacturing Advisory Service. The North East LEP has commented that the removal of Business Growth Service and the Manufacturing Advisory Service has resulted in a 'donut effect' in the North East business support ecosystem as other programmes were designed around it.
- 3.2 In its place, the Government has challenged LEPs across the country to co-ordinate business support at the local level through Growth Hubs, a single place where businesses can go to get help. The vision is that Growth Hubs will improve the coordination of support provided by local public and private sector partners, creating a more streamlined and coherent offer for businesses, based around local needs.
- 3.3 In the North East, the LEP is responsible for delivery of The North East Growth Hub. This is a website to help micro, small and medium enterprises access the business

² GVA is a measure of the value of goods and services produced in an area.

funding and support they need to grow. The Government is committed to providing £500,000 per year towards the development of the Growth Hub for the next two years, beyond which it envisaged that the hub will become commercially self financing. Future development of the hub will involve greater use of social media, a message forum, tracking usage to target advertising and marketing.

- 3.4 The group heard that the proposed devolution deal with the North East Combined Authority would have been a key component in delivering a flexible and co-ordinated programme for business growth in the region. As the deal was not to be progressed the region was back to delivering a pipeline of different projects.
- 3.5 In the absence of the devolution deal it was suggested that the Council could become part of a hub and spoke model, if someone within the Council could be a reference point for referencing SMEs to the Growth Hub and recording and inputting data about the Council's interaction with SMEs to build a more comprehensive picture. The LEP could also share with the Council its list of scale up businesses who they may wish to support.

Recommendation 1

The Cabinet request the Council's Business and Enterprise Team to signpost SME's to the Growth Hub, record and analyse substantive interactions between the Council and SME's and review the LEP's list of scale up businesses to identify any unknown businesses requiring support.

4 The North East and North Tyneside Business Support Ecosystem

- 4.1 The sub group discovered that the North East business support ecosystem is made up of a wide range of organisations delivering different programmes. Members met with representatives from a sample of business support providers to better understand the range of support available, to judge its effectiveness and to identify whether there are any gaps in provision.
- 4.2 The sub group met with representatives of two providers operating across the region, TEDCO and NBSL:
 - a) TEDCO is an enterprise agency that delivers a number of business support programmes to both pre and post start businesses in the region including the New Enterprise Allowance, Virgin Start-up Loans and Start & Grow, a programme which provides support to individuals looking to develop businesses over a period of up to 3 years. TEDCO also provides an element of the North Tyneside Business Factory's offer.
 - b) NBSL is an enterprise agency based in Northumberland, It delivers funding and support programmes to help people to start their own business and it supports existing businesses to grow and develop. It delivers the North East Business Support Fund across the Northumberland, Tyne & Wear and Durham areas. The Fund provides up to 35% grant funding for business improvement projects valued between £3,000 and £8,000. Therefore the minimum grant is £1,000 and the maximum £2,800.

- 4.3 North Tyneside appears to be well served in terms of business support. The North Tyneside Business Factory has a successful track record in terms of GVA. This is reflected in the fact that it has won national awards, has a positive reputation and is a recognised brand across the region.
- 4.4 Having previously focussed on start ups, the Business Factory now delivers an extended programme of not only start up support but also high growth start up support, specialist consultancies for any small or medium sized enterprise and support for social enterprises. This programme is jointly funded by the European Regional Development Fund and the Council. The Council contributes £300,000 to the overall cost of the £600,000 programme. Generally there is a perception that there is a lack of business support advisors for more established businesses but the new programme delivered from the Business Factory has addressed this need in North Tyneside.
- 4.5 North Tyneside has been complemented for being proactive in commissioning the Business Factory and seeking to increase the number of start up businesses which in turn creates employment and is likely to lead to an increase in the number of businesses surviving. However, this approach appears to be inconsistent with the priority given by the Government and the LEP to targeting diminishing public resources at those businesses who have the potential for high growth and therefore the greatest likelihood of creating new jobs.
- 4.6 The sub group heard that the vast majority of businesses in North Tyneside are sole traders or micro businesses. This sector therefore accounts for a significant proportion of the borough's economy and economy. The sub group supports the continued investment in supporting start ups on the grounds that increased numbers of businesses, however small, increases employment and the greater number of start ups the greater the likelihood of businesses becoming high growth.

Recommendation 2

The Cabinet should seek to maintain the Council's investment in the provision of business support for start up businesses through programmes such as the work currently delivered through the Business Factory.

- 4.7 The sub group also received, and it wishes to highlight, positive comments that the Council benefits from having a visible, pro-active and responsive economic development function.
- 4.8 It is clear that much of the business support ecosystem is heavily dependent on European funding. Inevitably there is a great deal of uncertainty about the future of European funded programmes following the outcome of the referendum in June 2016. Whilst the UK will remain members of the European Union for up to 2 years after Article 50 is triggered, it has been suggested that funding programmes could be in place up until 2020 as the UK has already contributed to these. If the Government are to replace European funded programmes it will be important to ensure there are no breaks in funding so that the delivery infrastructure can be maintained.

Recommendation 3

The Cabinet, through its risk management processes, continue to monitor the likely impact of Brexit on European funding for business support and take appropriate action to mitigate against the risk of funding for business support programmes delivered in North Tyneside being withdrawn and not replaced by alternative funding from the UK Government.

Recommendation 4

The Elected Mayor and Cabinet Members, in conjunction with local Members of Parliament, the North East Local Enterprise Partnership and the local business community, take every opportunity to lobby the Government for continuing investment to replace the European funded business support programmes following the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union.

5. Factors for Growth

- 5.1 In discussing the state of business support with policy makers, providers and the business community the sub group identified a range of barriers to business growth and characteristics of growing businesses. These are set out below. The sub group gave consideration as to how the Council and its partners might enhance the support they provide to businesses to enable them to overcome these barriers and achieve those characteristics for high growth.

6. Access to Finance

- 6.1 There have been significant changes in the nature of finance available to start up and growing businesses. Generally there has been less money available for investment from traditional sources such as banks and from families. There has also been a shift away from publicly funded business grants towards a greater emphasis on loan finance. Some say this has been a good thing because it reduces the culture of grant dependency.
- 6.2 There are a range of loan funds available such as Virgin Start Up Loans which offer low interest loans of up to £25,000 to businesses less than two years old. The region has been successful in securing the £145m North East Fund (also known as JEREMIE2) which over the next five years, will provide pump loan, equity and mezzanine funding into new and existing fast-growing businesses across a wide range of sectors. It is envisaged that the North East Fund will help finance viable firms unable or partially unable to secure loan funding from the banks and other sources.
- 6.3 The sub group heard that access to finance is a critical factor in the growth and sustainability of businesses. Whilst the North East Fund and other loan offers are welcome there remains demand among small businesses for small capital grants. It is clear that new and different models of funding are required.

- 6.4 The sub group gave consideration as to whether the Council, could contribute to the range of financing options available, by offering finance through mechanisms such as a revolving fund. A revolving fund would involve the Council establishing an account from which it would provide discounted loans whilst the account would be continuously replenished by income or repayments.
- 6.5 If the Council were to proceed with such a scheme careful consideration would have to be given to:
- a) whether the scheme should be targeted at priority sectors or geographical areas to maximise its impact;
 - b) the likely administrative costs, which experience has shown can prove to be significant;
 - c) securing the initial capital financial investment. The sub group noted that when the Council previously provided financial services as part of the City Challenge and Single Regeneration Budget programmes the initial capital sum was provided by the Tyne and Wear Development Company (TWEDCO); and
 - d) ensuring that the scheme complies with the relevant laws and regulations regarding state aid.
- 6.6 The sub group also gave consideration to examples of crowd funding schemes. Crowdfunding is a way of raising finance by asking a large number of people each for a small amount of money. Newcastle City Council has partnered with Funding Circle, a peer-to-peer lender, to provide a new funding option for businesses in the city. This is part a drive by the City Council to promote crowd funding as a new and innovative option for funding business growth. Loans are available from £5,000 - £1million and are highly flexible. Typically each loan is funded by hundreds of people willing to invest. There were no operational costs for the City Council. Whilst it had given a commitment to invest in some projects, experience had shown that sufficient funding had been forthcoming without the need for the Council's contribution.

Recommendation 5

The Cabinet give consideration to ways in which the Council can enhance access to finance by micro and small businesses in North Tyneside, including the possible use of revolving funds and the promotion of crowd funding schemes.

7. Property

- 7.1 Growing businesses need access to suitable and affordable property. SMEs often struggle because they have a lack of knowledge in relation to property matters. The Business Factory now offers a consultancy service in relation to property and this is welcomed.
- 7.2 The Council, through its partner Capita, manages a range of commercial properties. across the borough, including retail, office and industrial properties. Due to the size and nature these units they are attractive to small local businesses. The Council provides incentives for new tenants and this approach appears to be successful in that start up businesses tend to succeed.

- 7.3 A recent rationalisation of Council property has resulted in some assets being sold to generate £1.4m of investment to refurbish other units. If further capital investment could be secured then the Council could improve the condition of its property, make it more attractive to businesses and generate increased income. It is understood that at present however the Council has no plans to acquire more property.
- 7.4 In the context of the Council's ongoing office accommodation review the sub group explored options for investing in the refurbishment of surplus property to provide more small incubator units aimed at start up and growing businesses. The sub group were mindful of the benefits of sub dividing properties to create smaller units, attractive to start up businesses and eligible for small business rate relief i.e. with a rateable value of less than £12,000.
- 7.5 The sub group was however mindful that any investment would have to be based on good evidence that demand existed. Anecdotal evidence received by the sub group suggested that there is sufficient office, retail and small industrial properties available. The greatest immediate need appears to be for larger industrial units available for immediate occupation.

Recommendation 6

Cabinet ask officers to undertake an evaluation of the levels and nature of demand among SMEs for commercial property in North Tyneside to determine whether there is evidence of a significant shortfall in small and medium sized industrial units or office space.

Recommendation 7

If the evaluation shows substantial unmet demand, Cabinet give consideration to investing in the refurbishment of surplus property to provide more small incubator units and the provision of small and medium industrial units aimed at start up and growing businesses.

8. Business Rates

- 8.1 Most businesses are liable to pay business rates to the Council. Business rates are charged on most non-domestic properties, like shops, offices and factories.
- 8.2 Small business rate relief is available if a business only uses one property or if the property's rateable value is less than £12,000. Business representatives commented to the sub group that the small business rate relief system provides a disincentive to SMEs to expand. This is because the small business rate relief is not available to businesses who operate from more than one property.
- 8.3 Prior to April 2013 local businesses paid business rates to the Council who then paid the money into one single national pool. The money was then distributed back to local authorities by the Government in the form of grants. Since April 2013, local government as a whole has kept 50% of the business rates collected as a 'local' share. The remaining 50% central share continues to be paid to the Government and

is used to pay grants to councils. Individual local authorities keep 50% of any growth in rates collected in their area above those projected.

- 8.4 In October 2015, the Government announced that, by 2020, local government will retain 100% of the business rates they raise locally. The Government wants to make sure that local authorities have an incentive to grow their income from business rates and that they can keep all the growth they generate.
- 8.5 The proposed changes to the business rates system provide the Council with a very clear incentive to promote and support the growth of businesses in North Tyneside which in turn will generate additional income to spend on local services.

Recommendation 8

The Economic Prosperity Sub-Committee monitor the detailed proposals to emerge from the Government in relation to the 100% Business Rates Retention Scheme and consider undertaking an in-depth investigation to consider its impact on the future shape of business support services.

- 8.6 The collection of business rates provides the Council with a valuable database of all businesses in North Tyneside. As a matter course the Council communicates at least once a year with all businesses when it sends out the business rate bills.
- 8.7 Whilst North Tyneside appears to be well served in terms of business support and it benefits from a range of support offered by the Business Factory, the sub group were concerned that not all small businesses in the borough may be aware of its availability. As the Council corresponds with all businesses in relation to business rates the sub group concluded that this provides the Council with an opportunity to promote the Business Factory and other business support services by including promotional material with business rate bills. As bills are now sent electronically such material could be sent at little cost.

Recommendation 9

The Cabinet ask the Heads of Finance and Business and Economic Development to consider the possibility of incorporating promotional material relating to the Business Factory and other business support services with business rate bills.

9. Procurement

- 9.1 The Council spends a significant sum on goods and services purchased from the private sector and social enterprises. This expenditure can help support the sustainability of local businesses and have a positive effect on the local economy and local employment. However, there is a perception among the local business community that access to local authority contracts is complex and too onerous. The sub group heard accounts of the difficulties in registering on the North East Purchasing Organisation's (NEPO) website and on the quantity and complexity of work required by businesses to tender or quote for Council contracts. Business representatives suggested that the Council might commit itself to procuring a proportion of its works and services from local small businesses.

- 9.2 In response to these comments, the sub group heard that the Council has invested a significant amount of time, helping local firms understand opportunities, how to bid for work and to simplify and standardise documentation. The Council has particularly focussed its efforts on social care and construction because these are the areas where a lot of its spend goes. The Council's partners Engie, Capita and Kier are all very clear on the importance of the local supply chain. Kier North Tyneside and Capita have spent a great deal of time working with their supply chains to increase local spend, including a great deal of time spent working on understanding the travel to work area as a meaningful measure of local. The Elected Mayor has made it clear that she wants the Council to work hard on local supply and making sure businesses were paid on time. Kier in particular, have changed their national terms of business to pay within 30 days and performance is measured against this on a routine basis. Given the high proportion of construction work which is subcontracted and subcontracted locally, that is an important gain for local business and a direct consequence of their feedback.
- 9.3 The Council's procurement service is delivered through its partnership with Engie. There is no obligation within the contract with Engie that requires them to procure any proportion of goods and services from local companies. Any such requirement may breach competition rules. However the importance of trading with local businesses has been recognised through key performance indicators but this has proven to be problematic as Engie has no control over the extent to which local companies will tender for the works or their capability to supply the goods and services required.
- 9.3 The process through which companies submit quotations or tenders for Council contracts is dependent on the value of the contract and determined by the rules laid down in the Council's Contract Standing Orders. Officers indicated to the sub group that the thresholds and the wording contained in Standing Orders could be reviewed with a view to simplifying the process for SMEs.
- 9.4 Businesses can register on the NEPO website to receive details of contracts they may be interested in but some had complained they had been bombarded with irrelevant notifications. This is because the system is based on national classifications and beyond NEPO's control. NEPO provides support to businesses through a business club and training focussed on how to navigate around the system, how to address social value and how to tender effectively.
- 9.5 In February 2016 the Council adopted a social value policy. The policy provides for the consideration of economic, social and environmental benefits for the people and communities of North Tyneside through the procurement and delivery of services. The policy has now been in place for one year. Whilst officers within the Council now have a better understanding of social value and how to incorporate it into procurement exercises, social value questions are being refined and support and advice is being developed to assist businesses in how to respond to such questions.
- 9.6 The Council's procurement strategy is currently under review and will be presented to Cabinet for approval in the near future. Whilst recognising the work already undertaken by the Council and its partners in improving access to the procurement processes, increasing local spend and ensuring businesses are paid on time, the

sub group suggests that current review could take account of the information obtained by the sub-group to allow further consideration to how the Council can maximise its trade with, and receive feedback from, local businesses.

Recommendation 10

In reviewing the Council's procurement strategy, the Cabinet give further consideration to how trade with local small businesses might continue to be encouraged by measures such as:

- a) simplifying the processes through which companies are required to quote or tender for the supply of goods and services to the Council;**
- b) providing further training and support for local businesses on how to quote or tender for the supply of goods and services to the Council; and**
- c) reviewing and refining how social value is evaluated within procurement exercises so that the process derives economic benefits for the people and communities of North Tyneside.**

10. Leadership, Management and Entrepreneurial Skills

10.1 Many businesses have the potential to grow, but this is not exploited because the owners or managers lack the vision, ambition or leadership skills needed. The Group heard directly from the business community that many SMEs do not expand because there is a fear and reluctance among owners of losing control of their business through expansion. It was also reported that business leaders in the UK tend to be risk averse. There is therefore a need to raise ambition and confidence among businesses leaders. Young people in particular need to be inspired and supported to become the next generation of entrepreneurs.

10.2 In North Tyneside the Business Factory's current programme only allows work with young people aged 16 and over. In this respect it works in sixth forms to raise awareness of self employment as a career option.

10.3 The sub group are aware that there are a range of activities delivered in schools to develop entrepreneurial skills and to promote self employment and business ownership as a career option but as this area fell outside the scope of the study the sub group chose not to examine it in detail.

11 Wider Council Support for Businesses

11.1 The Council engages with local businesses in many and varied ways, often working closely with new small businesses to help them grow. For example the Council has supported the development of cafes as part of the coastal regeneration plans and a lot of work is undertaken to help establish and grow businesses within the social care sector. The Council also has contact with many SMEs through its regulatory functions such as planning, licensing and environmental health. The sub group believes that there is the potential to equip officers working in these areas with a greater knowledge regarding the business support services that are available. This would enable a wider group of officers to contribute to signposting businesses in need of support to the appropriate service.

Recommendation 11

Cabinet to ask the Head of Business and Economic Development to work with the Senior Leadership Team to ensure those officers who work to support business have a good understanding of what support is available.

12 Business to Business Support

- 12.1 The sub group heard that there is capacity and a willingness within the business sector to provide peer support. The North Tyneside Business Forum seeks to create a supportive network between local business groups, Chambers of Trade, the Council, the education sector and community and third sector organisations. The Chair of the Forum suggested to the sub group that there are opportunities for the Council to work with the business community to create a structure within which business to business support could be developed such as drop in surgeries which, if well publicised, would be effective. This model is in line with TEDCO's vision for the future system of business support where the role of the public sector would be as 'informed networkers' introducing clients to business to business networks.

Recommendation 12

The Cabinet work with the North Tyneside Business Forum to develop and strengthen business to business networks and peer support in North Tyneside.

13. Internationalisation/Exports

- 13.1 High growth businesses tend to be successful in securing access to new and international markets. The low business density rate in the North East region limits opportunities for local trading therefore if local businesses are to grow they should look to export. The sub group notes that the primary sources of support for businesses in accessing international markets are from the Department for International Trade and the North East Chamber of Commerce and that there is not a significant role for the Council.

14. Innovation

- 14.1 The North East region is near the bottom of the English league for expenditure by businesses in research and development. Innovation is an important factor in stimulating economic growth and creating new wealth and high value jobs.
- 14.2 There are good examples of innovation in the region, such as NETPark, an internationally recognised incubator and innovation hub for science and technology companies in Sedgefield. The North East LEP promotes smart specialisation, which targets research, development and innovation in key areas of strength. The LEP's smart specialisation areas include: passenger vehicle manufacture; subsea and offshore technology; life sciences and healthcare; and creative, digital, software and technology-based services.

14.3 The innovation element of the Business Factory programme is to be developed when other programmes emerge to avoid duplication.

14.4 The sub group noted that North Tyneside does not have an identifiable innovation hub. Whilst there is an informal cluster of offshore technology companies in the Wallsend area and a concentration of information technology companies on the Cobalt Business Park, the sub group acknowledges that the Council has no clear strategy at present to establish an innovation hub aimed at attracting high growth companies to the borough.

15. Digital Technology

15.1 High growth businesses tend to be effective in adopting digital technologies. However there is a pronounced gap in the provision of support to enable businesses to better use technology to drive business growth. The LEP has established relationships with corporate partners such as Google and Microsoft and is seeking to develop these partnerships to enable businesses to grow through better adoption of technology.

16 Sales

16.1 There is little support for businesses on the development of sales skills. Activities are delivered at scale across the North East ecosystem about generating enquiries rather than sales, but there is little support to develop the skills to convert the enquiries into actual sales. When businesses are growing this is an issue as the main sales person tends to be the founder and one of their key challenges is to develop sales capacity across the organisation. To grow businesses need to grow the power of their sales engine. The LEP intend to carry out further research to validate the need for more support. In the meantime the Business Factory offers specialist consultancy support to businesses in North Tyneside in relation to marketing, branding, public relations and social media.

17 Human Resources

17.1 The business community cite the complex and onerous framework of employment regulations as a significant barrier to growth. The Group heard of one company who had incurred £3,000 of additional costs to ensure it was compliant with pensions regulations. The specialist consultancy service offered by the Business Factory does not currently include human resources advice.

18 Background Information

18.1 The following background documentary papers have been used in the compilation of this report and copies of these documents are available from the Democratic Support Officer:

- Notes and briefing papers relating to meetings of the sub group
- Business Support Sub Group Scoping Document and Work Programme
- Report and Minutes of the Economic Prosperity Sub-Committee - 13 September 2016
- Our North Tyneside Plan
- Fit for the Future: A Fresh Approach to Business Support in the North East
- North East Local Enterprise Partnership: Business Support Review
- More and Better Jobs: A Strategic Economic Plan for the North East
- Self-sufficient local government: 100% Business Rates Retention DCLG Consultation Documents

19 Acknowledgements

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