

# joining forces

an integrated framework for  
business support in the south east



The South East of England is the engine that drives the UK economy but there is still a need for productivity growth, if it is to take its place as a world class competitive region. An increase in the take-up of business support services would support that ambition. This is likely only if businesses find the 'journey' through the business support maze to be as seamless, effortless and effective as possible. For this to become reality, customer needs must be at the heart of the way business support services will operate in the South East. This paper is a summary of the initial thinking undertaken by the South East England Development Agency, the six Business Links and the six local Learning and Skills Councils in the South East of England to achieve better deployment and commissioning of publicly funded business support. We welcome any comments you have.

## what is it?

Joining Forces is a framework, which will lead to a better deal for businesses through an improved business support service in the region. It seeks to ensure that publicly funded business support is coherent and helps to achieve increased economic success. It is a long-term vision for the Business Support Network of the future.

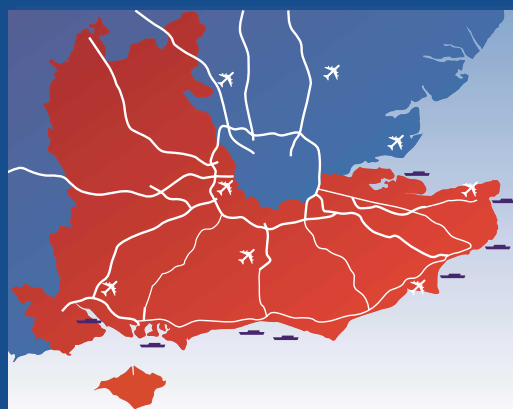
In summary, the proposal puts the customer at the heart of the way we operate.

It provides a stronger 'front of house' for business support - through the Business Link gateway.

It ensures there is 'no wrong door' for customers.

It will also provide a platform for local businesses and employer representatives to inform and influence policy making within the region.

The framework focuses on what businesses should expect when they seek support from any publicly funded business support organisation.



**SEEDA** SOUTH EAST  
ENGLAND  
DEVELOPMENT  
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Working for England's World Class Region

  
**Business  
Link**

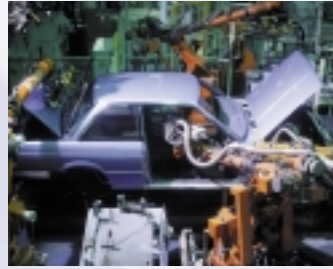
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Leading learning and skills

## what's new about it?

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- A common shared strategy, strong leadership and joined up delivery of business support
- Reduced customer confusion and greater clarity in business support
- Improved and simpler access to business support
- Business Link recognised as the access brand for business support
- A much closer relationship between demand and supply with demand driving supply
- Better focused and targeted services
- Improved brokerage service through to the services of private and voluntary sector business support providers
- Shared market intelligence and analysis between partners
- A common marketing strategy to reduce costs and duplication in customer acquisition
- Common service definitions and common understanding of who the 'customer' is



## what are the benefits for local businesses?

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### Joining Forces will ensure that:

- More businesses understand the benefits of using external business advice and have confidence in the support provided
- Businesses know where to go for business support
- Businesses can access services to meet their needs - easily and impartially
- Businesses get the most appropriate advice and support to meet their needs - from the organisation best placed to provide it
- Businesses receive consistently high quality service from all providers
- Improved intelligence about customer needs enables gaps in business and skills support to be accurately identified and filled

## maintaining sub-regional determination

The South East is a large and complex region in terms of geography, business base and population. SEEDA has made a commitment to maintaining the current set up of six independent sub-regional Business Link Operators. The underlying rationale for this commitment is:

- SEEDA recognises the importance of the sub-regions within a region of such size and complexity as the South East, and the value to be gained from improved working together with the Business Links and Learning & Skills Councils.
- Business Links are independent and impartial organisations, backed by business-led Boards. They relate to the business communities in their sub-regions and have demonstrated significant and growing market penetration (circa 32.5% 2003/4) together with high levels of customer satisfaction. SEEDA wishes to build on the success of current performance to deliver a better deal for businesses across the region.



## how does the framework fit with national and regional policy?

The framework is entirely in tune with key Government business support strategies and the South East's Regional Economic Strategy (RES).

In particular, it supports the aims set out in the National Skills Strategy, '21st Century Skills' - putting employers' needs for skills centre stage; raising the demand for skills from employers and ensuring colleges and training providers are more responsive to employers. The framework will also link directly to the Regional Skills for Productivity Alliance.

Equally importantly, the framework supports the priorities set out in the Regional Economic Strategy. Specifically, it supports the overall aim of boosting the wealth of the region - by encouraging an entrepreneurial spirit across all parts of the community; by removing duplication and overlap while plugging gaps; by allowing customer choice without causing customer confusion, delivered through a common shared strategy and strong leadership. This will result in a higher rate of business start-ups, greater business survival rates and growth in the region's businesses.

## The new framework for business

Recognising that the challenges facing businesses vary from the straightforward to the highly complex, this proposal is based on three 'customer journeys'.

1. **General enquiries** which can be answered quickly and easily
2. **Specific needs** which can be met with 'off the shelf' solutions
3. **Complex, in-depth needs** which call for individually tailored support

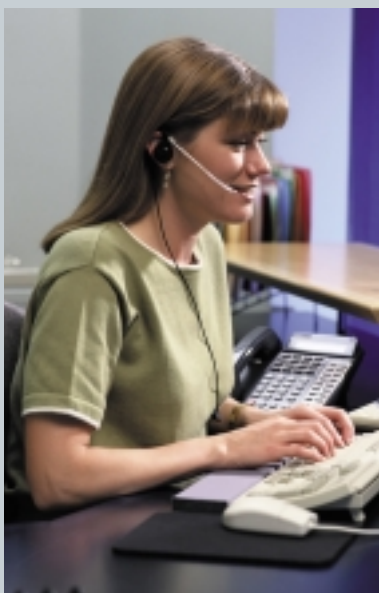
## 1. general enquiries

These are quickly answered enquiries, primarily by phone or using the web. They provide the breadth of penetration and generate leads to the business support infrastructure. This will help to reduce confusion and improve ease of access. Through this, we can increase the take-up of business support significantly.

We believe that the best way to achieve this is through a consistent and sustained campaign to promote awareness of Business Link as the primary route into the business support network. Our aim is that it will become second nature for businesses to contact Business Link whenever they need to ask a question or seek information, whether by mail, phone, email or the Internet.

In this way, everyone already running a business, and those thinking of starting up, will have a clear view of what is available, appreciate the benefits of business support, understand the types of services that are available and know how to access them.

A suitable comparison is with calls made to the NHS Direct helpline: the majority of calls to NHS Direct can be answered quite easily, but nurses in the call centre need to interpret what callers are saying and to know when it would be advisable to involve a doctor in order to make a fuller diagnosis.



## 2. specific needs

Many business needs can be met through limited intervention, such as a time limited, one-off meeting with a specialist adviser or access to a standard training course.

Many businesses already seek out this kind of support for themselves, without the need to go through Business Link. Similarly, providers market their services directly to businesses, for example by sending out details of their training courses. Nothing in the framework interferes with the right of any business to choose who they want to work with. However, current ways of offering services can cause confusion and - in the worst cases - duplication. Also, opportunities to link up the services provided by different organisations are being missed.

The aim is to ensure improved consistency and better co-ordination of business support so that businesses can access the right service at the right time. We want to ensure that all providers of specific services refer customers, whenever additional or alternative services would be of benefit to them. This means that staff in a whole range of organisations will need a better

understanding of the many services available to businesses across the South East of England. This will be achieved by ensuring a more consistent offer. To ensure this consistency a number of services will be designed regionally and delivered locally.

To extend the health service comparison, our aim is to give staff in all these organisations the range of diagnostic skills used by paramedics.

Another way to describe this approach is 'no wrong door' - in that, whichever organisation a business chooses to work with in the first instance, they ultimately will receive the services that they need from the most appropriate provider.



## 3. in-depth support

To secure regional productivity growth, the framework will continue to target certain businesses for in-depth specialist support, perhaps in areas such as innovation, international trade or strategic development. Amongst other reasons, it may be that the business is in a key cluster or sector; is undergoing major change; or has significant growth potential. At present, such businesses find they are being approached by several publicly funded organisations with offers of help. This is confusing and sometimes off-putting, and could result in the ultimate failure for publicly funded support when the business takes up none of the support on offer rather than risk making the wrong choice for their business needs.

The aim of the framework is to improve the co-ordination and impact of such in-depth support. All such businesses undergo a holistic diagnosis in advance of specialist interventions. Business Link's role will be focused on diagnosis, active brokerage and account management. In-depth, specialist diagnostic and specialist support services will be provided through specialist providers. Again using a comparison with the health service, the role of providing a holistic diagnosis is equivalent to the role of a GP, who has an all-round responsibility for the patient's health and care. Just as the GP refers patients to consultants in hospitals, so the referral will be to specialist providers.



# what are we going to do?

## co-ordinate marketing

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The aim is that all businesses, and all those thinking of starting in business, understand the benefits of business support, the types of services that are available and know how to access them.

We will review each of the services offered using public funding and ensure that over the next 18 months a more consistent approach to marketing is developed. This will enable co-ordinated regional marketing to consistently promote common messages, reduce the cost of customer acquisition and so save money. There will, however, be scope for local additions to a regionally consistent offer to be promoted.

## strengthen the 'front of house'

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The aim is to ensure better co-ordination of business support so that businesses can access the right service at the right time. The current way of offering services causes confusion and, in the worst cases, duplication and overlap.

Business Link will be the primary access point but, recognising that many businesses will continue to approach individual providers for help, the framework makes sure that there will be 'no wrong door'.

We will develop and consult on common customer service standards and referral protocols to ensure that businesses are directed quickly and impartially to the most appropriate source of help to meet their needs.



## integrate skills development with business development

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Skills are one of the drivers of productivity and are recognised as a key component of business development. Skills development is an essential part of business development; competitive businesses need skilled people who are well led and managed.

The South East LSCs are creating new employer-friendly provision through Action for Business networks - a network of publicly funded training providers led by accredited Further Education colleges with an explicit mission to offer a range of training solutions to meet the training needs of employers and employees alike.

A new Skills Brokerage service will be integrated into the framework to ensure closer working and common approaches between providers of skills development and providers of business support.

## increase integration of in-depth and specialist support

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There is an increasing range of specialist in-depth support for businesses designed to transform their performance in areas such as innovation, international trade, investment readiness, e-business, marketing and skills. These are available through a range of publicly and privately funded service providers.

The framework will ensure that such in-depth specialist support will be carefully targeted and will be preceded by a holistic diagnosis of the needs of the business, to ensure that the maximum impact is realised, for both the business and for the local economy.

## objective business brokerage

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For the framework to deliver, customers must have confidence that the business support organisation at the centre of the brokerage model is objective; capable of carrying out a robust and holistic analysis of their business needs; able to work up an action plan with the customer to address these needs across all three customer journeys and, with the in-depth knowledge of business support services available in the market place, to broker these in, as appropriate, in consultation with the customer.

Using the Business Link brand as the access brand and placing Business Links in this pivotal role, provides a very clear proposition to present to the market, both for customers and business support providers.

## clarify roles

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Joining Forces ensures that there are clear and complementary roles for the key agencies involved in publicly funded business support.

## next steps

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### So, what will happen next? - activity for 2005/2006

- A regional marketing plan will be developed, which will deliver a common message across the whole South East market place
- Business Links will build a common approach to market segmentation
- A common customer relationship strategy and customer journey will be refined across all Business Links
- A robust and consistent suite of diagnostic methods will be developed to support each of the three customer journeys
- Referral protocols and service level agreements between all providers will be developed
- Joint training events between the staff of the different organisations will be held
- A delivery framework will be developed based on a customer focused mix of regional services delivered regionally, regional services delivered sub-regionally and local services delivered locally



## how to respond

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The vision will only be achieved if all funders and providers of business support commit to working together.

Comments are invited about this document and should be e-mailed by March 31st to: [info@joining-forces.co.uk](mailto:info@joining-forces.co.uk)

A full strategy will be available from summer 2005.

## how will we know if the framework has been a success?

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- Businesses understand where to access these services
- Increased take-up of business support services
- Businesses receive the most appropriate advice, support and training to meet their business needs from the organisation best placed to provide it
- Increased levels of referrals between providers
- Customer satisfaction levels are high
- Improved business performance in the region

## how will implementation of the joining forces framework be managed?

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SEEDA, the six Business Links and the six local Learning and Skills Councils have worked together to agree this new framework for business support and to adopt a number of shared principles and ways of working. Other funders and providers of business support are invited to support the principles set out in this proposal.

A Joining Forces steering group involving SEEDA, the Business Links, the Learning & Skills Council, the Small Business Service and the Government Office for the South East (GOSE), has been set up to design and implement the framework. Governance arrangements for the longer term are also being worked up.

However, the real success of the Joining Forces framework depends on all organisations involved in business support working together in a real partnership across the region and within the sub-regions. Consultation will be undertaken with a wide range of business support providers to determine how, collectively, we achieve this ambitious goal.