



ITEM 7: BUSINESS SUPPORT - DISCUSSION PAPER

1. Purpose of the Paper

- To outline the key changes to the way Business Link branded business support services will be delivered in the W.Midlands wef 1 April 2007.
- To seek WRAF member's views on how to ensure the new business support service will be fit for purpose and accessible for new and existing owners that are based in rural areas.

2. Timing

The 3 organisations that have been contracted to deliver the new regional Business Link West Midlands from April 2007 are in the process of consulting all key stakeholders on the issues they need to take into account in their detailed business plans. These plans need to be submitted to Advantage West Midlands (AWM) in February 2007 for approval. Initial discussions have been held in September and November with the Rural Business Advisory Group (RBAG) on how to "rural proof" the new service.

3. Recommendation

- To note the content of the short presentation that will be made at the meeting on the new West Midlands Business Link service;
- To provide initial comments on how the contractors should ensure businesses and entrepreneurs based in rural areas can better access and make use of the Business Link service;
- To ensure all subsequent views on the "rural proofing" of the new service should be fed into the Rural Business Advisory Group.

4. Background

Responsibility for enterprise and the work of Business Links was passed to the nine regional development agencies from April 1 2005. This provided an opportunity to review the way each region delivered support in line with their own priorities. In light of the fact that the W.Midlands economy faces two key challenges - underperformance in productivity and business formation - AWM asked the independent, business-led Enterprise Board to lead the work into how the region's enterprise performance could be improved.

Between May 2004 and October 2005, the Enterprise Board carried out consultation with stakeholders and businesses across the region about their views on the existing services and how the service could be improved. The findings largely matched those of study conducted by the Organisation for

Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) in 2004 into entrepreneurship in the region which found the publicly funded business support network to be complex and confusing, that companies favoured a sector-led approach and underlined the importance of high-quality experienced and skilled advisors.

In October 2005, based on the advice of the Enterprise Board, the AWM board approved a new regional Business Link branded business support model for the West Midlands. The main components of the new service are:

- Gateway – a telephone and web-based information and advice service for companies
- Core Brokerage – providing business advisors to undertake business development plans and direct companies to the most appropriate service or scheme from the private, public or voluntary sectors in order to implement these plans
- Enterprise Brokerage – providing support and advice to drive up the number of new business start-ups in the region and working with Enterprise Agencies to raise the profile of enterprise and entrepreneurialism
- Skills Brokerage – an integrated part of the new service which is being managed by the Learning and Skills Council, the first time skills and business support have been available within the same service
- Specialist Manufacturing Brokerage – providing support and advice to improve the competitiveness of the region's manufacturing companies, focusing on the areas and sectors which will be most vital to the future of manufacturing in the West Midlands

On April 25th 2006, the AWM Board approved the selection of the preferred bidders and on August 11th 2006, the final contracts for each of the elements were signed. As a result of negotiations between AWM and the Learning and Skills Council, the Train to Gain skills brokerage will be delivered by the same organisation and will therefore be fully integrated into the new Business Link service. This means, for the first time in the West Midlands, businesses will have a true one-stop shop for all business and training support enquiries.

5. Discussion

There have been comments made in the past that Business Link business support services are not easily accessible or are not felt to be relevant for businesses and entrepreneurs living and working in rural areas. AWM and the contractors who are going to deliver the new West Midlands Business Link service from next April would welcome comments and views from WRAF members on how they can best tackle these issues.

Contact details: Gill Hamer, Head of Business Support, Advantage West Midlands. Tel : 0121 503 3258, E.mail : gillhamer@advantagewm.co.uk