

# INSIGHT PAPER

## FROM INSIGHT TO IMPACT: A BLUEPRINT FOR SUPPORTING SME PRODUCTIVITY AND GROWTH



Having been involved in configuring and leading SME business support programmes for over 20 years, I genuinely believe that the approaches to delivery we have developed with Leeds Beckett University have been the most impactful for businesses I have seen.

**Martin Coats, Chief Operating Officer, Exemplas Limited**



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# FOREWORD

In this challenging economic landscape, the government must consider all the levers of macro and microeconomic policy-making to facilitate productivity and economic growth.

The UK has been grappling with sluggish productivity and economic growth since the financial crisis of 2007. The 'Productivity Puzzle,' so-called partly because economists and other commentators have struggled to find reasons for the poorer economic performance of the UK in comparison to other advanced economies, is a dominant focus of policy discussion. The new government has come to power with a promise to secure the highest economic growth across all G7 countries to raise wages and living standards. This target is all the more ambitious given the UK's modest economic performance since 2007, which has been largely attributed to weak productivity growth.

Exemplas and Leeds Beckett University have been working in partnership since 2022. In this partnership, we have brought together academic research and delivery expertise to design and deliver grassroots SME business support programmes that support business growth and productivity at a local level on behalf of West Yorkshire Combined Authority.

This is the fourth in a series of co-authored Insight Papers from Exemplas and Leeds Beckett University. The Papers to date have showcased the research evidence and design principles that informed Exemplas and Leeds Beckett University business support programmes (Principles of Effective Business Support), insight and learning from the delivery of business productivity (Understanding & Delivering Business Productivity), and business growth (Understanding and Supporting Business Growth) programmes.

This final Insight Paper summarises the insights acquired from the development and delivery of both programmes and how this led to an evidenced and research-informed Blueprint for the successful design and delivery of grassroots business support programmes to SMEs. We believe this Blueprint is pertinent at a time when government and commissioners will be looking to invest in interventions that drive productivity and growth for SMEs that will deliver benefits to local economies.

This paper will be of particular interest to policymakers, commissioners, and stakeholders with an interest in designing and implementing evidence-based approaches to supporting SME productivity, growth, and economic development.



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## ABOUT US

**Exemplas Limited** is a national provider of business support and has operated for over 30 years largely delivering business support programmes to SMEs on behalf of public funders including government organisations and local and combined authorities. During this time Exemplas has supported over 600,000 businesses. This delivery experience gives Exemplas a significant understanding of what works in helping SME businesses grow and become more productive. Exemplas is a private company, wholly owned by the University of Hertfordshire.

**Leeds Beckett University** is a key anchor organisation in the West Yorkshire region committed to making a positive and decisive difference to people, organisations, and communities through excellent education, research, and services. Every year, the university delivers a £1.43bn impact on the UK economy. This represents a return of more than £6 for every £1 spent on university operations.

## 1.0 THE CALL TO ACTION

The new government has come to power with ambitious manifesto commitment to grow the economy to improve living standards, with a view to the UK becoming the fastest growing economy in the G7.

The Autumn 2024 Budget set out the extent of the challenges for the UK economy and the ambition to secure a pathway to long-term growth. It has long been acknowledged that the UK economy has experienced notably sluggish economic growth since the financial crisis of 2007. The UK economy is not alone in seeing a reduced rate of economic growth, however, this tail-off has been greater in the UK than in the US, France, and Germany. The recent Budget explained how low productivity growth, measured through GDP per capita, is a key reason for the UK's weaker performance versus competitors, and that narrowing this gap will yield significant economic benefits.

“The benefits of closing these productivity gaps are significant. If the UK were as productive as Germany, GDP per capita would be around £8,000 higher in today's prices. If it reached US levels, it would be around £9,000 higher.”<sup>[1]</sup>

### 1.1 Government Policy Direction

Shortly before the 2024 Autumn Budget, the government published a Green Paper to consult on their initial thinking for an Industrial Strategy, which is central to their growth mission. <sup>[2]</sup> The Green Paper set out a plan to focus on eight key economic sectors and related clusters that the government believes will drive economic productivity and output growth and this should be a key focus for investment.

This strategic focus on key sectors and clusters will be supported by 10-year regional growth plans led by devolved authorities and a statutory, independent Industrial Strategy Council to advise on industrial policy direction.

Inevitably, since taking power a key focus of the government's economic policy-making has been securing the macro conditions in the economy to stimulate growth, to corral greater public and private investment. However, as the government moves towards the Spending Review in Spring 2025 which will set out the longer-term financial settlement and policy landscape, there will be a keener focus on the micro-levers that can further facilitate growth, supported by a raft of future strategies around small business, SME productivity and digital adoption, devolution, and international trade.

<sup>[1]</sup> Autumn Budget 2024: Fixing the Foundations to Deliver Change, HMT, 2024

<sup>[2]</sup> Invest 2035: the UK's modern industrial strategy, 2024

## 1.2 Firm-Level Productivity

SMEs account for 99.9% of the business population in the UK, three-fifths of the employment, and around half of the turnover in the UK private sector. It follows that macroeconomic interventions to move the dial on productivity need to be complemented by support that grows firm-level productivity for a scaled volume of SMEs.

Researchers have long identified that business performance management is a contributory factor for higher productivity. Many studies review the difficulties that SMEs face in developing performance management approaches to improving productivity. For instance, recent research by Bloom et al. (2020, p. 6) frames this as “How well do organisations monitor what goes on inside the firm and use this information for continuous improvement of productivity”.

This highlights that performance management capability is a critical step in helping SMEs improve their productivity and growth. As a result, an SME-focused grassroots approach to support firms to put in place systematic, practical management approaches that help generate productivity and business growth could have significant potential to generate economic benefit at a local, regional, and national level.

This firm-level productivity and growth focus at scale will be complementary to macro and structural economic interventions designed to facilitate improved productivity and growth.

## 2.0 AN EVIDENCE-BASED AND SME-FOCUSSED APPROACH TO DRIVING PRODUCTIVITY AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

Exemplas and Leeds Beckett University have been working together to develop precisely this type of grassroots firm-level, SME-targeted support that improves productivity and growth performance management capability.

The development and delivery of this support have involved a novel approach that brings together academic knowledge and research on SME business productivity and growth with Exemplas’ 30 years of practical experience in delivering business support programmes to over 600,000 SMEs nationally. This is a strong proposition combining academic knowledge transfer with practical experience and understanding of what works when delivering impactful support to SMEs.

Since February 2023 Exemplas and Leeds Beckett University have delivered SME business productivity and business growth programmes at scale to over 600 firms. The productivity and growth programmes have involved the deployment of research-validated tools and frameworks to support these SMEs put in place practical approaches to improve productivity and growth. This leading collaboration has enabled SMEs to put in place robust, evidenced plans for productivity and growth, and through the support from the programme, develop management practices and capabilities that will facilitate ongoing productivity and growth improvement.



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“The benefits of the programme for Skopos were enabling us to take a helicopter view of the drivers of productivity in our business. This led us to identify where we might place additional performance measures and monitoring to grow overall productivity. We now have some important new performance measures and metrics that will meet our wider ambitions to grow.

James’ expertise and understanding were invaluable and facilitated new insights that will benefit our organisational management and productivity and growth objectives.”

### John Burrill – Operations Manager Skopos Fabrics

What is also notable about the programme is that the deployment of these research-validated tools and frameworks have been applied across SMEs from a range of sectors and sizes, demonstrating their pan-sectoral validity.



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“We chose to work with the West Yorkshire Business Productivity Service primarily to drive our high-growth plans. While investment into our offices was a consideration, our main focus was on enhancing productivity and operational efficiency to support our rapid expansion. The resources and expertise offered by the West Yorkshire Business Productivity Service were instrumental in helping us identify and implement critical improvements in our business processes.”

“The benefits of the programme for Trust Electric were enabling us to proactively use the diagnostic tool, guided by an expert, and allow us to gain comprehensive insights into our operations.”

### Olivia Hullah, Marketing Manager Trust Electric Heating

## 3.0 IMPACT

It is worth recognising that the impact of business support programmes cannot be evaluated over a short-term period, and it is more realistic to undertake monitoring over a medium/longer term to understand the real benefits at a firm and aggregated level. By way of example from the productivity programme typically, the beneficiary Productivity Improvement Plan will require implementation which will likely involve investment of time, resources and organisational change. As such, the results of the programme are unlikely to be immediate, but by the same token, are all the more transformative as a result.

“When we started the productivity work with Exemplas, we were not thinking about data, we weren’t really thinking about recording these elements of the business.”

“Working with Jonathan we were able to translate and apply the productivity diagnostic tool into a structure that fitted our business. We were able to understand the key drivers of productivity for our business – time duration from order to finished goods, suite downtime, resource utilisation, and labour effectiveness.”

**Adam Bennett – Director Sticks and Glass.**

Whilst it is important to consider impact through a longer time frame, it is very clear that there are already some very promising leading indicators of effectiveness for both the productivity and growth programmes delivered by Exemplas in partnership with Leeds Beckett University.

### 3.1 Behavioural Change

98% of participants going through the productivity programme looked at productivity in other areas of their business as a result of the support, which suggests strong internalisation of productivity management practices. This suggests that providing SMEs with this growing capability is beneficial both in the short and future terms for productivity growth.

Across productivity and growth programmes support has stimulated action on productivity and/or growth for over 95% of the participating SME businesses, emphasising behavioural impact.

### 3.2 Productivity Improvement Indicator Review

We have followed up a small sample of businesses who completed the Business Productivity Service programme at least six months ago. All four businesses in the sample show clear, significant, and measurable, quantitative improvements in productivity indicators that were targeted through their Productivity Improvement Plans. The programme intends to undertake future longitudinal follow-ups with all the businesses that complete the programme.

Taken together the small-scale review of Productivity Improvement Indicators as well as behaviour change suggested in 6.1 demonstrate indicators of effectiveness.

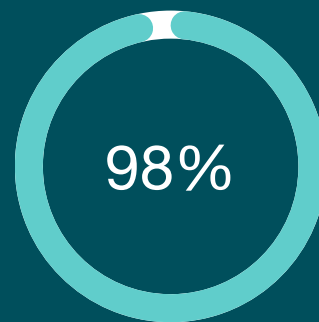
Separate outcome monitoring of growth programme delivery has suggested that between September 2023 and the end of November 2024 the programmes has supported SMEs to safeguard 232 jobs, create 75 jobs and help 290 participating SMEs to improve process, products or services.

### 3.3 Feedback from SME Beneficiaries

Feedback from participating businesses has been significantly positive. This provides further evidence of the value of approach adopted.

#### Business Satisfaction Data from the Business Productivity Service (July 2024)

How did you find the process of accessing the Business Productivity Service?  
(Very difficult 1 - 5 Very easy)



How valuable did you find the Diagnostic in identifying the key areas of supporting your business?  
(No impact 1 – 5 Extremely valuable)



Would you recommend the Business Productivity Service to others?  
(Yes/No)

- Yes
- No





Example feedback from clients on the Business Productivity Service:

“It was a really worthwhile process that has meant we value our data creation and the analysis of that data to a much higher degree.”

“It is brilliant it has shown us so many places we need to make improvements.”

“The exercise helped us look at all aspects of our business. It was good to see that our production was not deficient in many ways - except for our energy and CO2 emissions.”

“Good support from the Business productivity service focused our minds on the goals we were trying to achieve and enabled us to document them and review them going forward.”

“The business productivity service is an excellent service to provide support for genuine businesses that require help/support for development and growth. Investing is the key to moving forward and also bringing interest in working with modern technology. Without support, a lot of businesses wouldn't invest which in the long term will reduce growth.”

“Jonathan was brilliant to work with throughout the initial stages. It was nice to have a meeting with someone with such on-site experience. I feel that speaking to someone who had previously owned their own successful business makes the whole process feel very natural and that both parties get a deeper understanding of one another.”

“It has helped us identify areas of concern and where we need to implement and manage processes more. So all in all we have now identified where we can move forward with things. This will be ongoing for a while as we will have to put this into plans to action gradually.”



### 3.4 Case Studies

We have also been capturing case studies from participants to illustrate the value of the approach in helping businesses develop their productivity performance management. Three very different case studies can be viewed on the following links, which include a creative sector business, a full-service soft furnishing company, and an electric heating firm. (Please insert case study links)

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James’ expertise and understanding were invaluable and facilitated new insights that will benefit our organisational management and productivity and growth objectives.”

**John Burrill – Operations Manager Skopos Fabrics**



## 4.0 LEARNING FROM DELIVERY

This Insight Paper shows how the delivery of both programmes so far has strengthened and validated the evidence base for the best practice principles upon which both productivity and growth programmes were based. This is shown in Section 5.

The Paper then also details some of the insights from the productivity and growth programmes based on analysis of programme data, and the implications of this for future business support programmes aimed at SMEs (Section 6).

Taking this strengthened evidence base and insights together we have then outlined a Blueprint of elements that should be included in impactful business support programmes to drive productivity and growth at a local level. This is detailed in Section 8 of this Insight Paper.

Given the scale of the productivity and growth challenges facing the UK economy and the need to adopt a multi-faceted approach that tackles the issue at the grassroots level as well as working on the macroeconomic levers, we believe this Blueprint provides an important guide for commissioners seeking to invest in impactful, firm-level business support programmes that will derive value for the national and local economy.

## 5.0 VALIDATION OF EFFECTIVE BUSINESS SUPPORT DESIGN PRINCIPLES

The co-authored Insight Paper (Principles of Effective Business Support) in this series showed how effective delivery and management elements for business support were identified through academic research and corroborated by Exemplas' own delivery and programme management experience, to inform the design of the productivity and growth programmes.

The subsequent delivery of the productivity and growth programme in West Yorkshire has strengthened the evidence base for the inclusion of these elements in a Blueprint for business support delivery.

### 5.1 The Importance of Diagnostic Dialogue

The productivity and growth programmes have both deployed research-validated diagnostic tools and processes to assess the productivity or growth needs of businesses. In all cases, an expert adviser has facilitated this. Interim programme feedback demonstrates that diagnostic tools are critical to helping focus and prioritise finite resources for the greatest return for participating SMEs. The evidence and research data indicate that it is the dialogue around the diagnostic facilitated by the externality of the advisers, together with the diagnostic tool(s) that provides real value to the SME.

### 5.2 The Central Role of Expert Coaches

The use of expert coaching was a core design principle used in both programmes since all the research studies showed that the use of experts bolsters trust and provides highly codified knowledge that is easier to transfer to SME clients, as well as being highly suited to assist in the deployment of any diagnostic tools. Evidence from the programmes to date has demonstrated the value of external expert support, in particular translating best practices to the individual situation and needs of SME clients.

A further learning point from both programmes has been the value of not just a coach, but also further external specialist expertise to augment value. In the case of the productivity programme, the timely review and input of academic experts into developing Productivity Improvement Plans optimised the quality and focus of the plans. For the growth programme, businesses, alongside the support of their coach were able to access specialist consultancy or leadership coaching to further their growth plan ambitions.



### 5.3 Depth of Organisational Engagement is Important

The delivery of the productivity and growth programmes further illustrated the value of working with a broad range of personnel within the business through support programmes. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, the development of SME productivity and growth capabilities involves strategic and operational change which cannot be facilitated by working with a narrow range of personnel across the organisation. Secondly, productivity and growth drivers identified through the diagnostic lens extended across the range of organisational departments or responsibilities, so improvement will need wider engagement than being within the purview of isolated groups of individuals. Finally, our experience showed that typically diagnostic dialogue needs to challenge commonly held firm-level perceptions of productivity and growth issues, and the involvement of a broader range of stakeholders within this diagnostic conversation is crucial.

### 5.4 Systematic 'Interaction Pattern' Adds Programme Value

The 'interaction pattern' refers to the configuration of how, when, and with whom SMEs interact on business support and knowledge exchange programmes. The research points to the value of this being structured and time-bound, requiring a framework that has space for information gathering, business dialogue, reflection, and the absorption of knowledge by the business (internalisation).

Both productivity and growth programmes have reflected this principle by operating a systematised journey of three months with a core set of interventions and milestones and a structured exit. The value of this approach has been evidenced by high levels of client satisfaction, programme demand that has exceeded capacity at times, and most importantly a virtually zero percent drop-out rate from client start to end-point. In the case of the productivity programme the structured exit is a Productivity Improvement Plan with measurable improvement indicators, while for the growth programme, this is a completion of their growth action plan.

Coach/adviser feedback has emphasised how important this structured, sequenced approach has helped businesses clearly understand the purpose of the programme and focus on the achievement of client outcomes.

## 6.0 PRODUCTIVITY AND GROWTH INSIGHTS

Ongoing research and analysis of data collected from the productivity and growth programmes have enabled us to develop valuable insights about where future productivity and growth business support should focus, and the elements it should include.

### 6.1 The Productivity and Growth Nexus

One of the key insights from the work to date with SMEs is the interdependence of SME productivity and growth, which is crucial, but often overlooked. Productivity is typically seen as outputs divided by inputs. Hence firms might achieve higher productivity by reducing inputs (costs), or by increasing output, whilst sustaining inputs (or marginal increase in inputs).

However, we have seen that most businesses' primary mode to improve productivity is by increasing outputs, indicating a focus on growth, rather than just profit. Despite this, many SMEs are hesitant to pursue growth due to concerns about meeting increased demand as a result of their current throughput performance. This suggests throughput (typically defined as the amount of material or information processed through a business during a given time) is the engine that drives SME productivity, but at the same time, the business capability to accelerate output is the foundation for driving growth.

In simple terms, the productivity-growth nexus suggests that business support programmes need to help businesses balance the equation of increasing throughput (at a greater rate than increases in inputs) while increasing market demand for this increased output. Whilst this may seem obvious, it is largely the case that current publicly funded business support programmes tend to focus either on productivity or growth rather than both at the same time. What this means is that business support programmes do not necessarily always take a holistic view of the dynamics which drive growth within SMEs. This is an important omission and arguably makes them less successful than they might otherwise be.

### 6.2 Internalisation of key productivity and growth management practices

Research has highlighted concept translation which reflects the customisation and adaptation of 'standard' best practices into individual SME business contexts is critical to the successful diffusion and development of management practice. This translation process is supported by external coaching and enables SMEs to become capable and independent in these practices and require less practical support in the long term.

The productivity and growth programmes have highlighted the need to help SME leaders translate three key management practices into their businesses. Firstly, the measurement of what productivity means specifically in their business. Secondly what business processes affect this productivity measurement? This second management practice includes the development of key performance indicators, and how to manage and improve productivity performance. The third management practice is awareness of all their potential growth paths and the clarity and focus of their growth ambitions. In both programmes, the academically validated diagnostic and accompanying dialogue and expert coaching was able to help businesses identify and develop these management practices.



### 6.3 Focus on Distinct SME productivity and growth Knowledge Gaps

The productivity and growth programmes identified that in the productivity and growth nexus, there were common, specific, knowledge gaps that required targeted knowledge transfer interventions.

The analysis of the productivity programme showed the importance of flow management. Flow management is the management and coordination of labour and resources to increase throughput. One implication of good flow management is that not all businesses will require immediate capital investment to increase throughput. However, a significant amount of medium-term support and engagement is required to learn how to apply the principles of good flow management. Secondly, 75% of growth projects were sales and marketing-related and nearly 50% of SMEs needed knowledge transfer to develop their marketing capabilities. It is also pertinent to note areas like sales strategy, e-commerce, and brand development featured strongly in this area.

### 6.4 Formalisation of Planning and Change Management Capability

The co-development of productivity and growth plans respectively featured in both of the programmes delivered. Both the productivity and growth programmes highlighted that significant intensive advisory support was required to help businesses formalise and translate their ideas and insight from the programmes into meaningful plans. This formalisation of planning is a prerequisite and subset of the capability of managing strategic and operational change, which other research (Jones et al, 2022) has shown to be weak in SMEs.

The interim evaluation of both programmes has suggested the benefits of the externality of support and that this external input had positive outcomes for the SMEs in terms of helping develop planning and change management capabilities.

### 6.5 Effective Business Support Should Facilitate Stimulus for Action

The interim evaluation highlights that effective business support acts as a stimulus for action, in both programmes the external support stimulated direct immediate follow-on action in 98% of the businesses that benefitted from support. Research and analysis showed that the structured nature of the programmes stimulated businesses to realise the need to start formalising their development plans. For example, in the productivity programme, businesses started to formalise their performance management of metrics around productivity, whilst the growth process helped validate businesses' growth ideas, giving them confidence in initiating a formalised structured approach to growth planning and delivery.

Additionally, 98% of the SME participants set off to investigate productivity in other business areas because of engaging in the support programme, whilst 85% of SMEs on the growth programme were inspired to seek out additional learning opportunities related to their chosen growth path, demonstrating independent internalisation.

This suggests that effective business support needs to be an important stimulus for immediate action and have an impact in the short, medium, and longer term for productivity and growth, and then can lead to independent internalisation by the SME of this knowledge.

## 7.0 TOWARDS A BLUEPRINT FOR BUSINESS SUPPORT

Publicly funded business support is designed to address market failures in the provision of assistance to SMEs. This market failure might be evidenced by low take-up of market-based support by SMEs; the availability of private support to SMEs; or address commonly identified shortfalls in business capabilities that impact the wider economy.

Since the demise of the Business Link service in 2011 it is widely recognised that there has been further fracturing of publicly funded business support for SMEs. As a result, the landscape of publicly funded business support is now regionally distinct and increasingly complex. Several national and regionally delivered business support programmes co-exist alongside local growth hubs. Growth hubs in turn operate alongside locally commissioned programmes which often have a short life span due to their dependency on time-limited funding streams like the Shared Prosperity Fund.

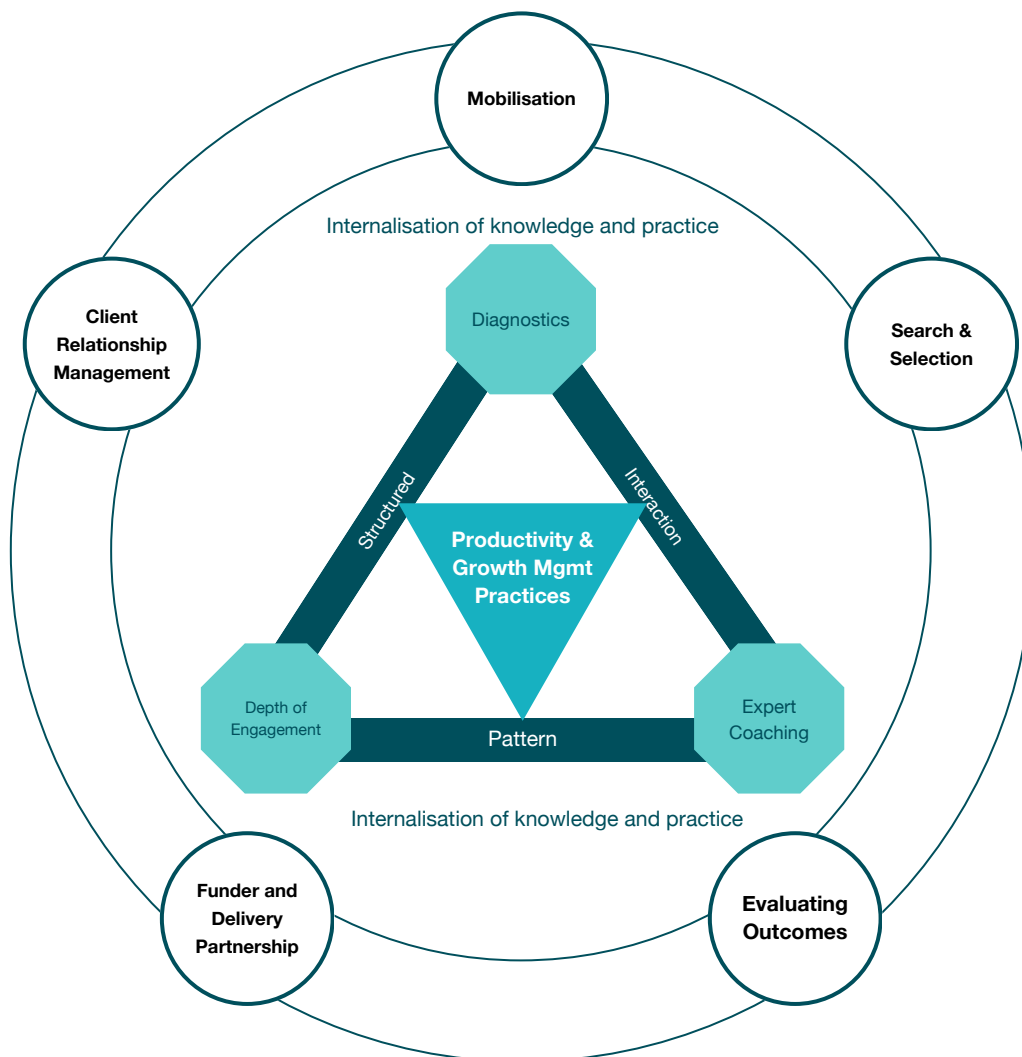


There is modest evidence of the efficacy of publicly funded business support programmes but limited established principles of good delivery practice.[4]

The absence of support for SMEs to develop the business management practices that drive productivity and growth arguably represents a gap in the current business support landscape. In addition, as highlighted earlier in this Insight Paper it is largely the case that current publicly funded business support programmes tend to focus either on productivity or growth which means that at present there is a tendency for programmes to take a partial view of the success drivers for SME businesses.

The insights acquired from our work to date enable us to confidently put forward a Blueprint for impactful future business support programmes for growth and productivity which are outlined below and diagrammatically illustrated in Figure 1. This Blueprint sets out all the elements and features that must be included in the delivery of impactful business support programmes, which are further explained below.

**Figure 1 Blueprint for Effective Business Support**



[4] What do we know about the effectiveness of business advice? State of the Art Review, Enterprise Research Centre, April 2023

### 7.1 Productivity and Growth Management Practices

At the centre of this Blueprint is the core need for programmes to focus on productivity and growth which we have found are interdependent. This productivity-growth nexus suggests that business support programmes need to holistically help businesses balance the equation of increasing throughput (at a greater rate than increases in inputs) whilst increasing market demand for this increased output.

This core focus on productivity and growth support requires programmes to help SMEs develop four key productivity and growth management practices:

- Awareness of all their potential growth paths and (productivity) throughput capability
- The measurement of what productivity means specifically in their business and which business processes affect this
- The formalisation of plans to aid productivity and growth improvement as a precursor to managing strategic and operational change
- The identification and prioritisation of productivity and growth knowledge gaps based on those that will derive the greatest value and impact for the business.

### 7.2 Critical Enablers

There are three critical enablers of these productivity and growth management practices, which should be present in productivity and growth business support practices.

- The deployment of rigorous, academically validated business diagnostic tools
- External expert coaching
- An appropriate depth of engagement by personnel across the business to support organisation buy-in and collective implementation.

### 7.3 Interaction Pattern and Client Journey

However, these enablers need to be deployed within a structured, systematic client support journey (in academic terms this is referred to as the interaction pattern).

The interaction pattern needs to be high intensity because this facilitates concept translation of best practices and knowledge by expert coaches, to the individual situation of each SME. The interaction pattern also should have structured space and time to reflect and respond to feedback from the experts, which then leads to independent internalisation (learning)





#### 7.4 The Blueprint in Practice

The current practical, research-validated diagnostic tools developed and deployed by Exemplas and Leeds Beckett University are novel in the current landscape of business support and add depth, robustness, and validity to the support offered and significant value to businesses in terms of the insights they derive. Placing the diagnostic process at the start of the interaction pattern focuses action planning on gaps that are likely to generate the highest rate of return for the business.

Expert, in-depth, intensive facilitation of support from an expert coach or adviser is of significant value for businesses. This should be structured, clear, and sequenced in a clear customer journey (interaction pattern). This intensive support should be augmented by further external input to enhance relevant support, which might include input from academic and technical support or consultancy. Our analysis shows the externality of the expert advisers provides significant overall value to the businesses. Our work to date demonstrates the value of the complementary skillsets of academics and professional advisers. The approach demonstrated by Exemplas and Leeds Beckett University working together is a good example of this being undertaken at scale to benefit a large number of SMEs.

Research studies stress that employee involvement is important for developing management practices, but that the depth of engagement (the number and scope of employees involved in the support intervention) is often too low. Jones et al (2022) found that depth of engagement was one of the most critical factors in the success of business support interventions and that the more employees engaged in the interventions the greater the likelihood of success. What this suggests is interaction pattern that forms the basis for the client journey needs to be designed to generate organisational buy-in and wide involvement to enable successful delivery.

These key facilitators, diagnostic, expert coaching, and depth of engagement coordinated within a structured interaction pattern, form the basis of the Blueprint. This Blueprint will help the business independently internalise knowledge from the programme into the business to maximise impact post-programme exit.



This is the critical feature of the Blueprint. Business support is by definition time-limited and resource-constrained. Effective delivery is only possible where the business itself implements the learning independently so that it can have an ongoing impact. One of the most welcome outcomes from the productivity and growth programmes was that 98% of the SME participants set off to investigate productivity in other business areas because of engaging in the support programme, whilst 85% of SMEs on the growth programme were inspired to seek out additional learning opportunities related to their chosen growth path. The Blueprint here provides a guide to commissioners looking to understand the elements and features that impactful business support must include. Alongside this, it provides a guide for commissioners to benchmark current programmes and understand how far they reflect research-evidenced principles of effective practice.

### 7.5 Programme Management and Governance

Alongside the delivery elements that need to be included, there are also several programme management features that underpin the successful delivery of business support programmes. Insight Paper “Effective Principles of Business Support” in this series describes the five elements shown in the outer circle which are derived from Exemplas extensive business support experience over 30 years and corroborated by academic research. These are summarised below:

- Effective funding and delivery partnerships and clarity of programme core purpose and value proposition
- Structured mobilisation and implementation of programmes
- Careful search and selection of clients that have the capabilities and the capacity to internalise the knowledge and support provided through a given programme
- Client relationship management to support successful journey completion and support
- Evaluating outcomes by capturing relevant data and intelligence to support performance management and programme insights.

8.0

# FUTURE FOCUS

We are now planning the next stage of insights into SME productivity by undertaking more academic research activity related to the productivity programme in West Yorkshire looking in detail at how businesses absorb knowledge. This research will enhance business support programmes in the future by identifying the targeting and leveraging of absorption mechanisms more effectively.

We are also looking at developing another core proposition, currently overlooked in the productivity and growth support landscape, that of value creation and value capture. This explores how businesses can grow the value of their output, in terms of what they provide to customers, and then leverage this to increase the value of their sales. Value creation provides a means for SME growth and productivity improvement. It is also closely linked to inclusive growth because value creation requires greater skill sets that in turn have the potential to increase wages and standard of living.



## 9.0 CONCLUSION

The new government's mission is to secure the highest sustained growth in the G7 as a key plank of their manifesto to grow living standards across the UK. The extent of this challenge is shown by the sluggish performance of the UK economy since the 2007 financial crisis by both historical standards and when compared to competitors. Whilst the current focus of economic policy-making has largely been focussed at the macro level, as attention turns to the longer-term Spending Review, and supporting strategies around devolution, local growth plans, small business strategy, and digital adoption there will be a renewed focus on additional levers of economic growth that can be pulled to support this economic mission. One of these levers is grassroots business support to SMEs, which can be an effective and good value approach to driving local economic growth.

Exemplas and Leeds Beckett University have been working together to develop SME-targeted support for business productivity and growth in West Yorkshire, working with the West Yorkshire Combined Authority. This has involved a novel approach that brings together academic knowledge and research on SME business productivity and growth with Exemplas' 30 years of practical experience in delivering business support programmes to over 600,000 SMEs nationally. It brings together a compelling collaboration that combines academic knowledge transfer with the practical experience and understanding of what works when delivering impactful support to SMEs.

The immediate actions taken by the majority of SMEs engaged in the programmes delivered by Exemplas and Leeds Beckett University underscore the efficacy of structured business support in catalysing productivity improvements and growth. This leading indicator of success is further supported by initial outcome monitoring of the quantitative benefits generated from programme support.

Furthermore, by equipping SMEs with the tools and knowledge to formalise and execute their development plans, these programmes have shown that a grassroots approach can significantly contribute to the overarching economic goals of the UK.

The positive feedback, high satisfaction ratings and case studies from participating SMEs further validate this method, suggesting that continued and expanded efforts in this direction could play an important grassroots role in revitalising the UK's economic landscape. Additionally, the partnership between Exemplas and Leeds Beckett University demonstrates a promising approach to enhancing SME productivity and growth through systematic, research-backed support and knowledge transfer.

Learning from Exemplas and Leeds Beckett University productivity and growth informs a Blueprint for the delivery of future impactful business support. This Blueprint provides a guide to commissioners looking to understand the elements and features that impactful business support might include. Alongside this, it provides a guide for commissioners to benchmark current programmes and understand how far they reflect research-evidenced principles of effective practice.



# CONTACT

If you are interested in finding out more about the productivity and growth work of Exemplas and Leeds Beckett University please contact Rob Sale, Head of Business Development, [robs@exemplas.com](mailto:robs@exemplas.com).

Further co-authored Insight Papers on our productivity and growth work can be found [here](#).

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