



# Growth Hub Cluster IMPACT REPORT

April 2020 - March 2025





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## Disclaimer

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# 01 Executive Summary

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This Growth Hub cluster wide impact report reflects on activities undertaken between April 2020 and March 2025.

The Cluster focusses on three core areas, 'Our Mission':

- **Strategic Engagement:** Contributing to the region's economic priorities, identifying opportunities and challenges to support the long-term vision for sustainable growth.
- **Direct Support for Business Growth:** Securing and managing key funding streams to drive business expansion and innovation, while also coordinating tailored support services.
- **Collaboration and Partnership Building:** Bringing together key stakeholders to address economic challenges, promote cross-boundary cooperation, and unlock new opportunities for growth.

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Over the five years from (2020 – 2025) **92,719** businesses have been supported<sup>1</sup>.

The scale of this support is demonstrated by these key metrics:

**178,563**  
HOURS  
of business support provided

**3,934**  
PEOPLE  
have been helped to start a business

**6,970**  
JOBS CREATED  
in supported businesses

**6,093**  
JOBS SAFEGUARDED  
in supported businesses

**THE BUSINESSES WHO RECEIVED MEDIUM OR HIGH INTENSITY SUPPORT**  
employ over  
**968,000** people, nearly 6% of the UK SME workforce<sup>2</sup>.

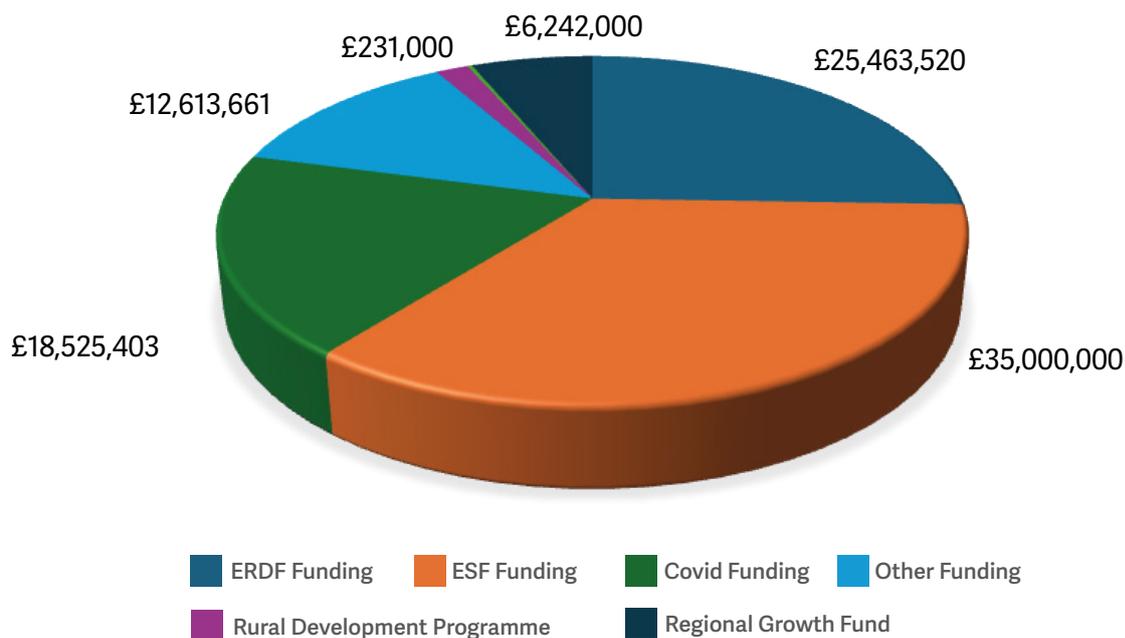
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<sup>1</sup> Some businesses will have been double counted as they have been supported in more than 1 year in different programmes.  
<sup>2</sup> Department for Business & Trade, 2024. *Business Population Estimates for the UK and regions 2024: statistical release*. [online] GOV. UK. Published 3 October 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/business-population-estimates-2024/business-population-estimates-for-the-uk-and-regions-2024-statistical-release> [Accessed 29 June 2025]

**For every £1 of core government funding for the Cluster, £35 of economic and social value has been delivered.**

(calculated using the TOMs Framework and detailed in Section 5.8)

The Cluster was able to attract additional funding above the core government funding of **£99,753,186**.



**For every £1 of core government funding, the Cluster attracted a further £24 to support SME business growth.**

(See Section 5.8)

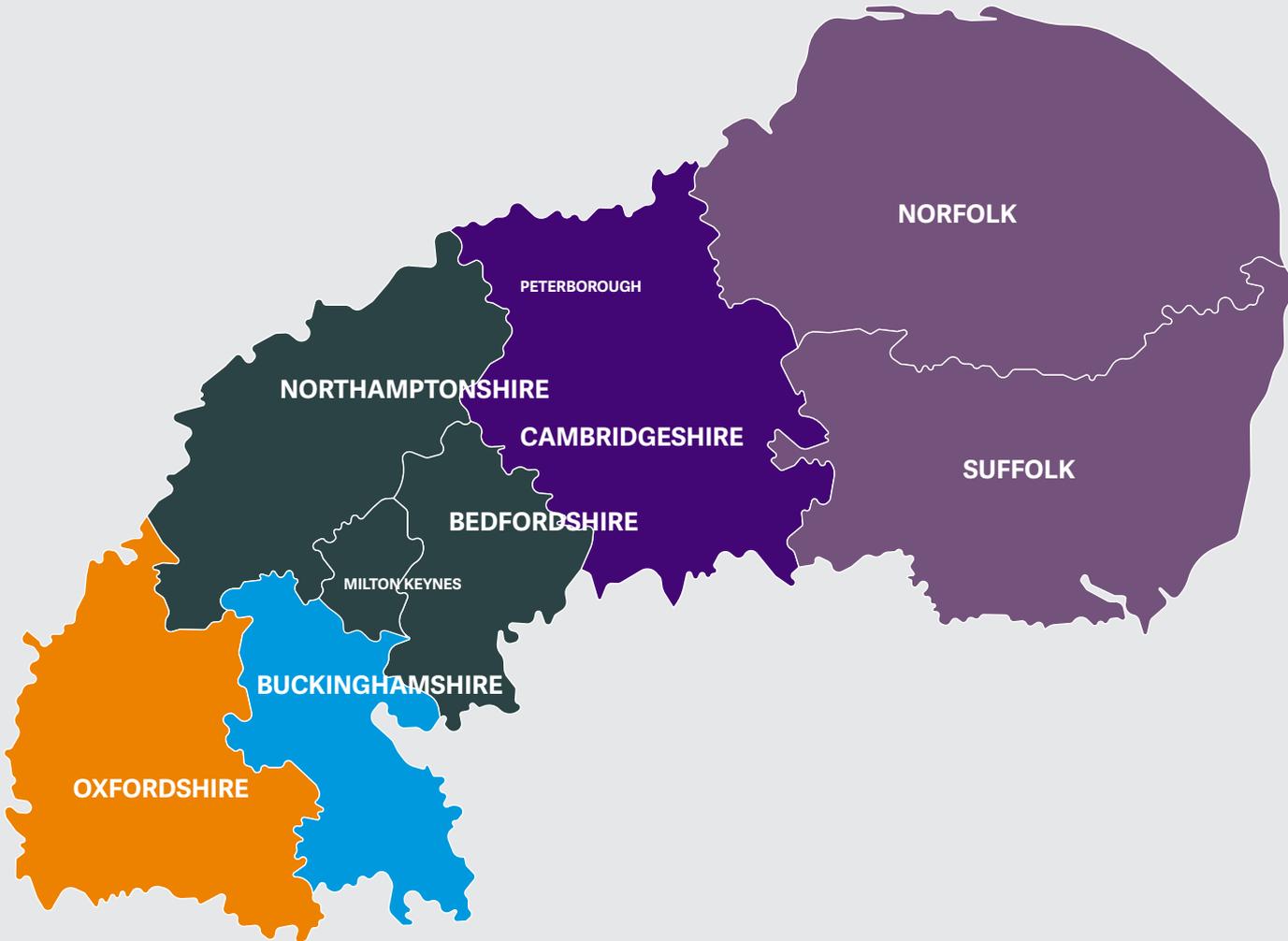
The significance of the economic footprint of the SME businesses supported is demonstrated by the combined turnover value, **£25.7 billion**, for those businesses who have engaged with between 2 and 12 hours of support.

**3,919** Business Leaders / Owners joined a Mentoring Programme delivered by the Cluster.

The Growth Hubs ensure that the businesses that they engage are provided with the most appropriate support for them. In many cases this means that the businesses are referred into support programmes delivered nationally or by others locally. The Cluster made well over 15,000 referrals for their client businesses to other support.

Overall, the Growth Hub cluster has been highly effective in delivering against its business support aims. Through a combination of intelligence gathering, direct support, tailored programs, investment readiness initiatives, green recovery efforts, inclusivity, and peer-to-peer support, the cluster has successfully met the diverse needs of businesses and fostered growth and resilience in the business community. Section 5.8 demonstrates how the value for money of the Cluster business support delivery stands proudly above its peers.

# MAP of Growth Hub Cluster



- ENTERPRISE OXFORDSHIRE
- BUCKINGHAMSHIRE BUSINESS FIRST
- SOUTH MIDLANDS GROWTH HUB
- CAMBRIDGESHIRE & PETERBOROUGH GROWTH HUB
- NEW ANGLIA GROWTH HUB

# 02 Context



The Growth Hub cluster (Cluster) is a network of five Growth Hubs consisting of South Midlands Growth Hub, Buckinghamshire Business First, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Growth Hub, New Anglia Growth Hub and Enterprise Oxfordshire, who were operating as the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP) at the time, together they cover Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridge, Milton Keynes, Norfolk, Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire, Peterborough and Suffolk.

This Cluster wide impact report reflects on business support activities for SMEs (Small and Medium Sized Enterprises) undertaken between April 2020 and March 2025.

A number of the Growth Hubs have been rebranded or renamed over this period in response to changing national, regional and local priorities.

In January 2020, SME businesses were facing an intricate matrix of implications because of EU Exit / Brexit, which was swiftly followed by perhaps the most challenging period ever for businesses, the COVID-19 Pandemic. Some SME businesses closed altogether, many struggled but survived, but thankfully many thrived.

The UK economy contracted by 10% in 2020. Following a bounce-back in 2021 and 2022, the economy has seen low levels of growth over recent years<sup>3</sup>. This specific cluster area economy contracted by around 9% in 2020, with GDP now some 2% higher than 2019 levels in 2023<sup>4</sup>.

UK SMEs continue to face challenges, and in February 2025 as part of the 'Business Insights and Conditions Survey' from the Office for National Statistics, the most common challenge that businesses reported was economic uncertainty (29%)<sup>5</sup>.

Throughout this period, the Cluster has played a vital role in driving business innovation and growth by providing targeted support, securing investment, and aligning local economic priorities. The Cluster has acted as a bridge between businesses, the public sector, and academia, ensuring that companies have access to the resources, infrastructure, and skills they need to thrive. The focus is on boosting productivity, creating jobs, and fostering long-term, sustainable economic growth across the region.



3 Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2025. *GDP quarterly national accounts, UK: October to December 2024*. [online] Statistical bulletin. Released 28 March 2025. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp/bulletins/quarterlynationalaccounts/latest#headline-gdp-figures> [Accessed 28 June 2025].

4 Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2025. *Regional economic activity by gross domestic product, UK: 1998 to 2023*. [online] Statistical bulletin. Released 17 April 2025 (corrected 29 May 2025). Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp/bulletins/regionaleconomicactivitybygrossdomesticproductuk/latest> [Accessed 28 June 2025]

5 Booth, L., 2025. *Economic update: Uncertain times for business*. [online] House of Commons Library. Published 26 February 2025. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/economic-update-uncertain-times-for-business/> [Accessed 28 June 2025].

# 03 Our Role and Mission

The Cluster represents the arching sweep of land between Oxford, Milton Keynes and Cambridge extending it across to Norwich.

The value and importance of this growth corridor has long been recognised, fuelling debate on further development to unlock its full potential and achieve transformative economic growth while also benefiting the entire UK and supporting thriving communities.

In January (2025), Rachel Reeves (The Chancellor of the Exchequer) in a speech stated that proposals to link up Oxford and Cambridge will add up to £78bn to the UK economy by 2035. Connecting the university cities could create "Europe's Silicon Valley".

The Chancellor also highlighted the three main macro challenges that need to be addressed in the area: transport and connectivity, affordable homes, and environmental impacts, highlighting that:

“To get from Oxford to Cambridge by train takes two-and-a-half hours.

“Oxford and Cambridge are two of the least affordable cities in the UK. In other words, the demand is there but there are far too many supply side constraints on economic growth in the region.”<sup>6</sup>

In its 2025 Industrial Strategy, the government continues to express its interest in supporting connections within and between the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor.

As ambitions for the area are debated, the Cluster has long had a collective mission to drive strategic economic growth and support thriving local economies and encourage green development as part of a global hub for innovation.

*We will deepen our support for the Oxford Cambridge Growth Corridor and its strengths in Digital and Technologies, Life Sciences, Defence, Advanced Manufacturing, and Clean Energy Industries, anchored by two of the best universities in the world.*<sup>7</sup>

The Cluster focusses on three core areas, 'Our Mission':

- **Strategic Engagement:**

Contributing to the region's economic priorities, identifying opportunities and challenges to support the long-term vision for sustainable growth.

- **Direct Support for Business Growth:**

Securing and managing key funding streams to drive business expansion and innovation, while also coordinating tailored support services.

- **Collaboration and Partnership Building:**

Bringing together key stakeholders to address economic challenges, promote cross-boundary cooperation, and unlock new opportunities for growth.

*Gareth Thomas MP, Minister for Services, Small Business and Exports, when visiting Buckinghamshire in March 2025, stated "A 1% increase in SME productivity could generate £100 billion for the UK."*

6 BBC News, 2025. Oxbridge growth corridor 'to add £78 bn to economy'. [online] BBC News. Published 29 January 2025. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4gpzrnx3zo> [Accessed 28 June 2025].

7 Department for Business and Trade, 2025. The UK's Modern Industrial Strategy. Published 23 June 2025. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/industrial-strategy> [Accessed 3 July 2025]

This mission is:

- **Inclusive**

The Cluster supports all SME Businesses (those with less than 250 staff) including sole-traders, Limited Companies, Social Enterprises and Charities (as long as they have earned income).

- **Sector Agnostic**

General support programmes for any sector and bespoke programmes for specific sectors based on area needs.

- **Underpinned by Social Value**

While the primary focus is protecting and creating jobs, the Cluster is also supporting its business clients with sustainable procurement, training, improving environmental performance, and wider community engagement.

- **Output and Outcome Focussed**

Businesses are listened to and provided with support activities aligned to their needs, using proven approaches that deliver results for the business and the funding streams utilised.

- **Incredible Value for Money**

Providing a 'First Stop Shop' for businesses who might not otherwise engage with support, the Cluster offers the catalyst and stimulus for change, development and growth. For every £1 of core government funding for the Cluster, £32 of economic and social value has been delivered.

Growth Hubs engage the hard-to-reach SME businesses, lay the foundations for good growth and encourage those businesses to dream big. When they start to believe their dreams then we connect them into national, sector or cluster specific programmes to continue their journey.

## National printer with sustainability at its heart

Ecoflexibles provides innovative flexible packaging solutions to some of the UK's best-known retailers. Following significant investment in its printing programme, the company sought new ways to enhance sustainability and turned to the South Midlands Growth Hub's Resilience and Innovation Fund.

In 2024, Ecoflexibles secured a £50,000 grant to purchase a new slitter machine, allowing the business to bring the entire printing process in-house. Previously, printed master rolls were shipped to a supplier for cutting, incurring transport costs and generating CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. The new machine eliminated these steps, reducing environmental impact and improving efficiency.

The investment has led to an estimated £125,000 per year margin improvement and around 10% less waste. It also allows for bulk material purchases, lowering overall costs and reducing lead times for customers.

To support growth, Ecoflexibles hired four new employees in October 2024. Director Matt Fracklow praised the Growth Hub's support, saying, "The investment has positioned us as a market disruptor, strengthened our partnership with Fuji Film, and enabled us to operate more sustainably.



<https://growthhub.southmidlands.org.uk/ecoflexibles-success-story/>



# 04 Making Strategic Connections

The provision of business support to SMEs by the Cluster is a critical element in fostering local economic development and ensuring that businesses receive the necessary assistance to thrive.

## 4.1 Meeting Local Priorities

The Cluster, comprising five Growth Hubs, plays a pivotal role in aligning business support with local economic development strategies.

The cluster's strategic engagement with local stakeholders ensures that the support provided is tailored to the specific needs and priorities of the areas it covers.

For instance, Enterprise Oxfordshire, took the lead on the Business Support element of the Local Economic Recovery Plan through the COVID-19 pandemic, bringing together local stakeholders to develop a cohesive strategy. And again in 2023, Enterprise Oxfordshire initiated the development of Oxfordshire's Strategic Economic Plan.

Enterprise Oxfordshire, working with key strategic partners developed Oxfordshire's Strategic Economic Plan, which looks ahead to 2033.

Early on, a scoping exercise identified four critical issues for the county (deep dives), each of which potentially has transformational and long-term implications:

- How do we enable progression within Oxfordshire and achieve more inclusive economic growth?
- How do we advance net zero and sustainability in shaping future economic growth?
- How do we secure the future of the 'foundational economy' within Oxfordshire?
- Recognising Oxfordshire's world class strengths, how do we accelerate innovation and diffusion – both within Oxfordshire and across the UK?

Development of the Strategic Economic Plan involved:

- A call for evidence – which generated submissions from stakeholders across Oxfordshire and was structured to map onto the deep dives.
- Six workshops, which were held in Spring 2023. These were well-attended, and the early workshops focused specifically on key areas of evidence in relation to each of the deep dives.
- Bilateral discussions, focusing especially on the four deep dives.
- A broader review of key evidence and literature, in part structured by the deep dives, but also in relation to more general trends and drivers.

View the Strategic Economic Plan and supporting documents [here](#).



The Cluster's engagement with local economic development strategies is also reflected in its role in the development of each Local Industrial Strategy. By working alongside partners like the Councils, and universities, the Growth Hubs ensure that their support is aligned with the broader economic goals of the region. Additionally, the cluster's involvement in the development of the Investment Prospectus for the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor highlights its commitment to supporting local businesses in expanding their reach and competitiveness on a global scale.

The cluster also plays a key role in the supply of business intelligence reports and updates to the Department for Business and Trade, giving government real time intelligence of business conditions across the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor.

**Buckinghamshire Business First (BBF) has shaped the delivery for a number of Sector Deals most notably the Creative Industries Sector Deal in which the Buckinghamshire Local Enterprise Partnership Chair and BBF Board member Andrew Smith OBE DL from Pinewood Studios played a direct role as Chair of the LEP Creative Industries taskforce.**

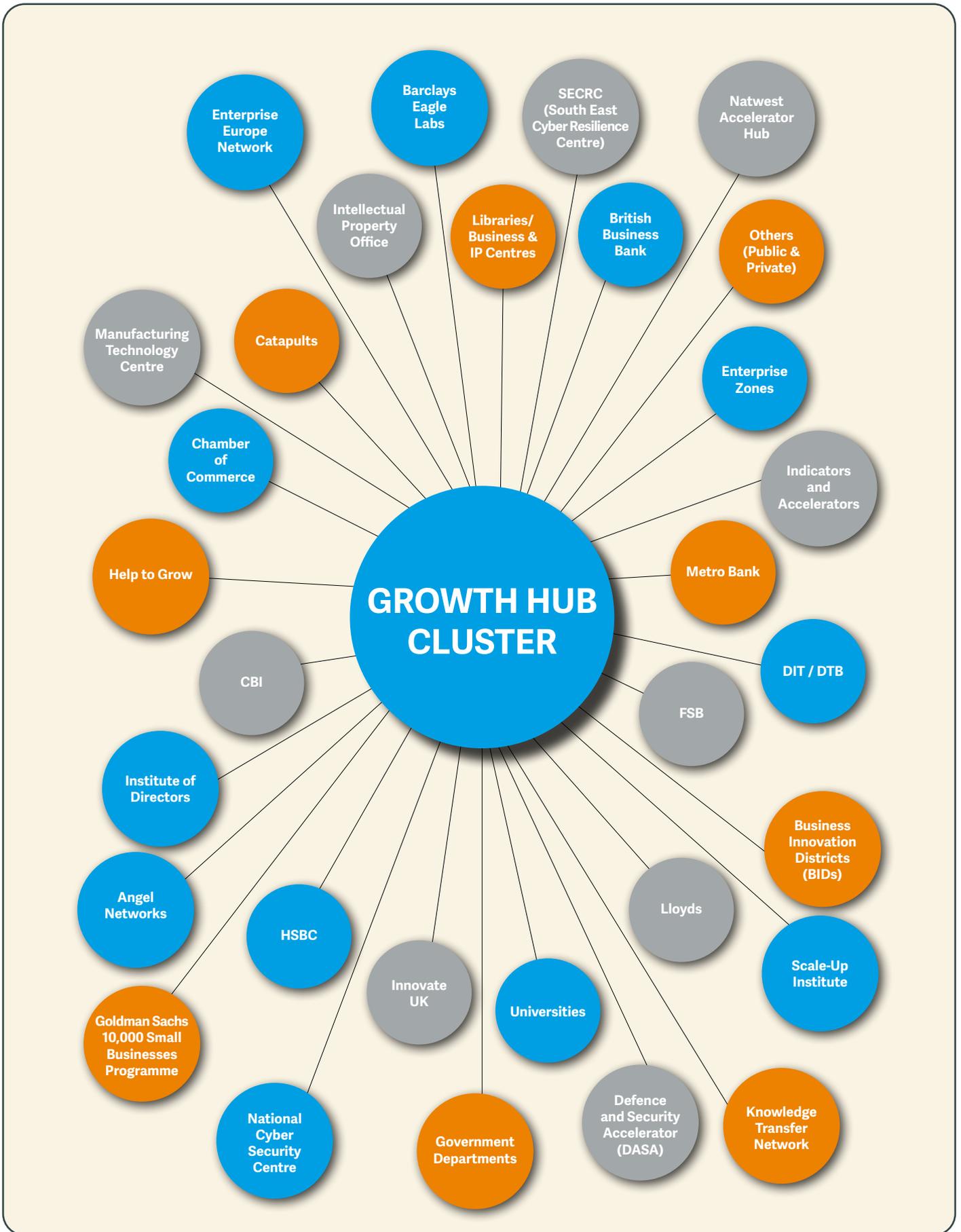
**This provided a link through into the BBF Creative Sector Skills Group and through the £20m Arts and Humanities Research funded Story Futures programme, supporting the use of Augmented and Virtual Reality technologies operating from the National Film and TV School in Beaconsfield.**

The Growth Hubs do not claim to be the experts in specialist areas, but they excel with their knowledge of all the support that is available, both locally and nationally and can signpost and broker very effectively.

Furthermore, the Cluster's partnerships with various organisations, including the Institute of Directors, CBI, and Chambers of Commerce, demonstrate its dedication to addressing the diverse needs of the local business community.

The diverse range of partnerships which enable the cluster to leverage the expertise and resources of these organisations to provide comprehensive support to businesses are highlighted on page 12 in the partner network diagram.

## 4.2 The Growth Hub Cluster Partner Network



## 4.3 Simplifying the Local Business Support Landscape

One of the core principles of the Cluster is to simplify the local business support landscape. The Cluster aims to provide a central point of contact for businesses seeking support, thereby reducing the complexity and fragmentation often associated with accessing business support services. Each Growth Hub's role as a central point of business support was particularly crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic and the end of the EU Exit transition, where they worked closely with Local Authorities, Business Representative Organisations, and other key stakeholders to provide a coordinated response.

In support of the government's call for evidence on UK regulation, the South East Midlands Growth Hub played a critical role in collecting and disseminating feedback from businesses. This initiative aimed to gather businesses' perspectives on existing regulations, identifying areas for improvement to create a more conducive business environment. By participating in this activity, we ensured that the voices of local businesses were heard at the national level, potentially influencing future regulatory reforms.

Despite the challenges posed by the multitude of business support schemes funded both locally and nationally, the Cluster has made significant efforts to streamline its services. For example, each Growth Hub has worked with Local Authorities to ensure a consistent and coherent message to businesses, despite the varying priorities and schemes launched by different authorities.

This collaborative approach has helped mitigate the potential confusion and duplication of efforts that could arise from the diverse range of support programs available.

The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority Growth Hub website illustrates well how the Cluster aims to simplify the business support landscape. The user-centric navigation menu allows businesses to find information by stage of business or support topic and each page then guides the business through their choices. The page on export support for instance explains and links to the following:

- The business support they provide
- Local business case study videos
- Export support from the Department for Business and Trade
- The Chartered Institute of Export and International Trade
- UK Export Finance
- Local Chambers of Commerce

## Making Work Fit Life: Big Bear Creative

Big Bear Creative, a marketing and communications agency founded in 2016 by Emma and Dave Sheppard, has grown with support from the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority Growth Hub. A year-long mentorship programme gave them the tools, confidence, and networks to build a nationally recognised business. Since then, Big Bear has contributed to regional initiatives, including COVID-19 communications and climate and rail summits.

For the Sheppards, starting Big Bear was as much about lifestyle as business. “I take my kids to school every day and have dinner with them every night,” says Dave. Balancing parenting and entrepreneurship, they set out to make work fit life, not the other way around.

The Growth Hub’s local support was vital during Brexit, COVID, and regional projects like Ely Junction. Still, recent years brought tough decisions, including office closure and redundancies. “Sometimes you have to make those choices to see the better times,” Dave reflects.



Despite the challenges, the Sheppards remain optimistic. They see potential in the region’s growing tech sector and are exploring international opportunities, including working with U.S. hotel chains.

For Big Bear, success means more than profit—it’s about purpose, flexibility, community contribution, and building a resilient business that supports their lifestyle.



However, the cluster acknowledges that the business support landscape remains complex, with new schemes and funding sources continually emerging.

The introduction of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) has added a new dimension to this issue, with many district authorities developing their own schemes that may overlap with the Growth Hub’s services.

Despite these challenges, the Cluster remains committed to providing high-quality support to businesses and ensuring that the lessons learned over the past decade are not lost due to short-term approaches.

The introduction of UKSPF funding in 2022/23 complicated The Cluster and Growth Hub role in simplifying the local business support landscape. New, locally based schemes, some overlapping with Growth Hub services, have created a fragmented patchwork, making it difficult to deliver a clear, consistent message to clients. Significant time is spent tracking who offers what and when, impacting the overall business support ecosystem.

Despite these challenges, the Cluster continues to collaborate closely with various providers. The New Anglia Growth Hub also chairs both the Norfolk Economic Development Officers Group and the Norfolk Business Partnership Board, which bring together local business support organisations to promote joint working and coordination. These efforts help reduce duplication and improve access to support for businesses across the region.

*In conclusion*, the Cluster's provision of business support is closely aligned with local economic development strategies, and its efforts to simplify the business support landscape have been instrumental in providing businesses with the necessary assistance to navigate the complexities of the support ecosystem.



# 05 Supporting Growing and Ambitious Businesses

By fostering strategic partnerships, engaging with local stakeholders, and continuously adapting to the evolving needs of the business community, the Growth Hub cluster plays a vital role in supporting the growth and resilience of local businesses.

The Cluster has demonstrated significant effectiveness in delivering against its business support aims. This effectiveness can be observed through various initiatives, programs, and outcomes that have been implemented and achieved by the cluster.

Over the five years from (2020 – 2025) **92,719** businesses have been supported <sup>8</sup>.

The scale and impact of this support is demonstrated by these key metrics:

**178,563**

**HOURS**

of business support provided<sup>9</sup>

**3,934**

**PEOPLE**

have been helped to start a business

**6,970**

**JOBS CREATED**

in supported businesses

**6,093**

**JOBS SAFEGUARDED**

in supported businesses

**THE BUSINESSES WHO RECEIVED MEDIUM OR HIGH INTENSITY SUPPORT**

**968,000** employ over  
people, nearly 6% of the UK SME workforce <sup>10</sup>.

**For every £1 of core government funding for the Cluster,  
£35 of economic and social value has been delivered.**

**For every £1 of core government funding, the Cluster attracted a  
further £24 to support SME business growth.**

<sup>8</sup> Some businesses will have been double counted as they have been supported in more than 1 year in different programmes.

<sup>9</sup> Light touch = 1 hour, Medium intensity = 3 hours, High Intensity = 12 hours

<sup>10</sup> Department for Business & Trade, 2024. *Business Population Estimates for the UK and regions 2024: statistical release*. [online] GOV.UK. Published 3 October 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/business-population-estimates-2024/business-population-estimates-for-the-uk-and-regions-2024-statistical-release> [Accessed 29 June 2025]

South Midlands Growth Hub provided Scale-Up support through their European Regional Development Funding (ERDF) funded Growth Curve project. The Growth Curve end of project evaluation report includes an evaluation of the Recovery and Resilience grants scheme which was initiated to help businesses to recover from the impacts of COVID19.

Expected economic impacts due to the Growth Curve programme:

- **Employment:** Estimated additional total direct and indirect employment impact for the target areas = 73 Jobs Created, estimated to rise to 418 jobs in the next two years.
- **GVA Impact of Additional Employment:** The anticipated jobs as a result of the project will have the potential to generate an additional £4.15 millions of GVA per annum with the potential to reach £23.78m in two years.
- **RD&I Spend:** Businesses supported through the Growth Curve project to date have invested £1.70m in RD&I as a result of their involvement with the project. RD&I spend in beneficiaries is forecast to reach £2.02m in the next two years.
- **Turnover:** Increase in business turnover to date because of their involvement with the project is estimated to be circa £61.17m per annum, estimated to increase by circa £72.79m in the next two years.

The Recovery and Resilience Grant Scheme has created an estimated 1 new job for every £12,693 spent.



## 5.1 Direct Business Support and Collaboration

The Growth Hubs in the Cluster have been proactive in providing direct business support and fostering collaboration among businesses. Each Growth Hub provides phone, email and online support for businesses. Many Business Advisers work remotely, efficiently providing direct support to businesses through Teams or Zoom.

Additionally, the Growth Hubs organise a wide range of workshops and webinars to enhance business capabilities covering a wide range of topics including:

- Cash flow and support during the Coronavirus crisis
- Investment Masterclass: How to grow your business using finance
- EU Exit: Navigating customs formalities and ensuring HMRC compliance
- Smart ways to manage remote teams
- Working safely during the Coronavirus outbreak
- Tips and hints for a successful grant application
- Getting ready for 2023: Business resilience
- Dispelling the myths around taking on an apprentice
- Climate solutions accelerator course
- Understanding your B2B customers and how they have changed
- Reducing pressure, increasing performance
- Business Survival
- Developing your purpose
- Business Planning for Growth
- SME Business Net-Zero Masterclass
- The Innovation Process
- Investor Pitching – Fast Track
- Writing a Winning Grant proposal
- Using AI In Your Business
- Digital Sales Masterclass
- Networking dos, don'ts and success
- CXO Masterclass - Strategic Planning (Vision, Goals and Execution)

## 5C Consulting

5C Consulting supports the UK defence and security sector with pre-contract consultancy and post-contract expertise, particularly in military training and experimentation. Recently, the company expanded into digital twinning, offering end-to-end services for creating and applying digital twins in defence and construction procurement.

While using a virtual office at Bloxham Mill, 5C connected with Enterprise Oxfordshire through networking and later engaged with the **Cherwell Accelerator programme** to support business growth. They successfully applied for a Cherwell Business Adaptation Fund grant to develop their digital twin capabilities. The funding enabled the purchase of two advanced IT systems for processing data from tools like Lidar scanners, and covered consultancy to upskill three team members on new technologies.

**The result:** 5C secured contracts worth over £500,000—growth that would have been difficult without the initial investment.

*“The grant process was slick and professional,” said the founder. “From the first webinars to application support, Enterprise Oxfordshire was clear, responsive, and flexible when our needs changed. I’ve worked in defence for years—if military innovation funding were this efficient, far more contracts would be placed.”*

He added, “Engaging with the Cherwell Accelerator and Enterprise Oxfordshire has been a breath of fresh air for our business.”



The Growth Hubs also deliver a wide range of activities aimed at attracting businesses towards support such as social value workshops, neurodiversity webinars, and networking for women in business.

The Buckinghamshire Business First Growth Programme (UKSPF Funded) was designed to provide in-depth support for businesses to grow sustainably and to introduce and adopt new processes and technologies, leading to increased productivity and efficiency. This in turn, allows jobs to be safeguarded, new job roles to be created and the encouragement of businesses to seek financial support and investment (other than grants) to sustain long term growth.

The programme achieved outstanding results:

<b>274</b>	<b>1087.4</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>33</b>
Businesses Receiving Support	Jobs Safeguarded	Businesses Adopting New Technologies or Processes	Jobs Created	Business with Improved Productivity

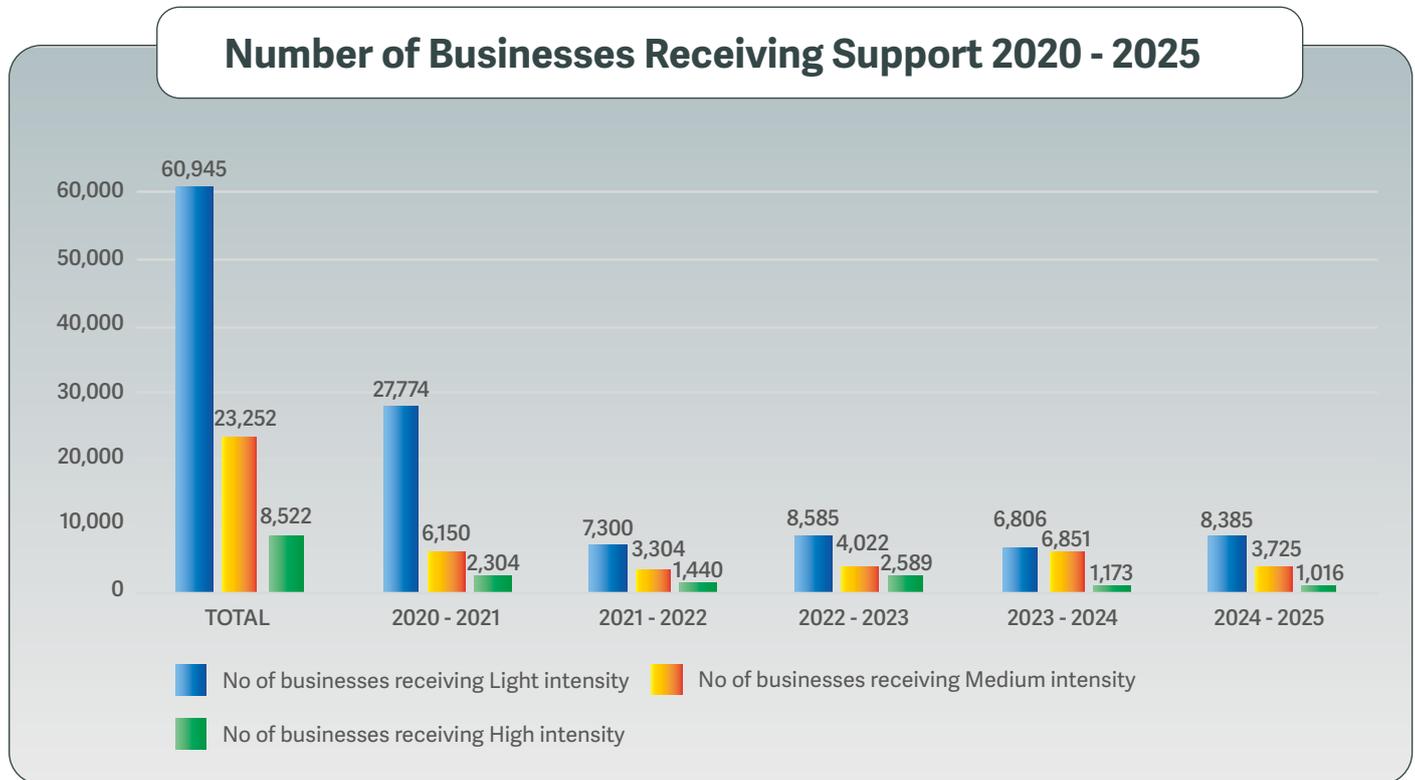
Businesses are expecting long-term benefits from this programme including:

- 84%** of businesses engaged are forecasting a combined £41m in increased turnover,
- 83%** are expecting an increase in profitability,
- 78%** are expecting and increase in productivity.

For every £1 invested it has delivered a return on investment of £6.65 of local economic value.  
<https://bbf.uk.com/growth-programme>

## 5.2 The COVID-19 Response

The Growth Hubs played a vital role in 2020, swiftly responding to the COVID-19 pandemic by pivoting all resources to support business resilience, safeguard jobs, and promote growth. The scale of the Cluster’s response is clearly demonstrated by the following graph showing a significantly greater business engagement with light touch triage in 2020/21 versus the following years.



**Note:**

*'light touch' support is triage, information and/or signposting support taking up to 1 hour (excluding website traffic).*

*'medium intensity' is information, diagnostic and brokerage support taking between two and 11 hours.*

*'high intensity' support examples include account management / intensive support of around twelve hours.*

The imperative to provide the best possible support to businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic came at the expense of some data collection and reporting. This means that there isn't the usual strength of evidence for the value provided to the businesses, but we do know that across the Cluster £18,525,403 of COVID Grants and support were distributed. We also know that at least 409 jobs were created in businesses supported with COVID grants.

For the New Anglia Growth Hub, one of their key objectives during the COVID period was to be able to operate effectively and efficiently, whilst maintaining the high quality of service, as well as supporting a far higher number of businesses than usual. This applied not only to supporting businesses that had been impacted directly or indirectly by the COVID-19 pandemic, but also business that had not seen an impact and were seeking to grow.

During 2020/21, the Growth Hub operated entirely remotely, to deliver a consistent, robust, reliable and accurate service, using information that was constantly updated to reflect up-to-the-minute changes and a comprehensive database of schemes, funds and programmes to support businesses in the region.

Cont ... /21

A Business Support Script was produced so that Business Advisers and others could refer to specific support areas for information, whilst on a call to clients, and were able to formulate rapid, high quality and accurate responses to client needs, even during the height of the crisis when call and enquiry levels were at their highest.

The Growth Hub helped to deliver new grant schemes to clients, checking and confirming eligibility and working with clients to produce application packs. Schemes that were launched during this time included the Business Resilience and Recovery Scheme (BR&R), a part of which provided consultancy support via a LEP approved broad range of consultants. The main scheme could provide funding towards capital equipment to diversify and differentiate the business in response to COVID-19 impact. Also, the Visitor and Wider Economy Grant schemes (VEG/WEG) could help businesses purchase small items of equipment or access specialist advice.



## 5.3 Tailored Support and Flexibility

The Growth Hub cluster has shown flexibility in its support offerings, adapting to the needs and feedback of businesses. Each Growth Hub collects a range of ‘firm level’ data from the businesses engaging with support, which is key to local understanding, delivery of support and reporting.

Enterprise Oxfordshire’s Business Support Tool has been instrumental in allowing business needs to inform the design and content of their support programs.

Between July 2020 and March 2023, **2,578** businesses completed the Business Support Tool. Information collected from the Business Support Tool provided valuable insight on business needs and allowed the teams to shape and continually adapt the support offered over this period.

In Oxfordshire, a place famous globally for its research and innovation, it might be expected that the support businesses would need most would be ‘raising finance for growth’ or ‘intellectual property’. That hasn’t proven the case. In fact, the five most frequently identified business needs, by a factor of 2+ over ‘raising finance for growth’, are:

- Grow my customer base,
- Develop a business plan for growth,
- Improve my communications and marketing,
- Upskill staff / expand workforce,
- Launch a new or different product to market.

These business needs are summarised in the graph alongside.

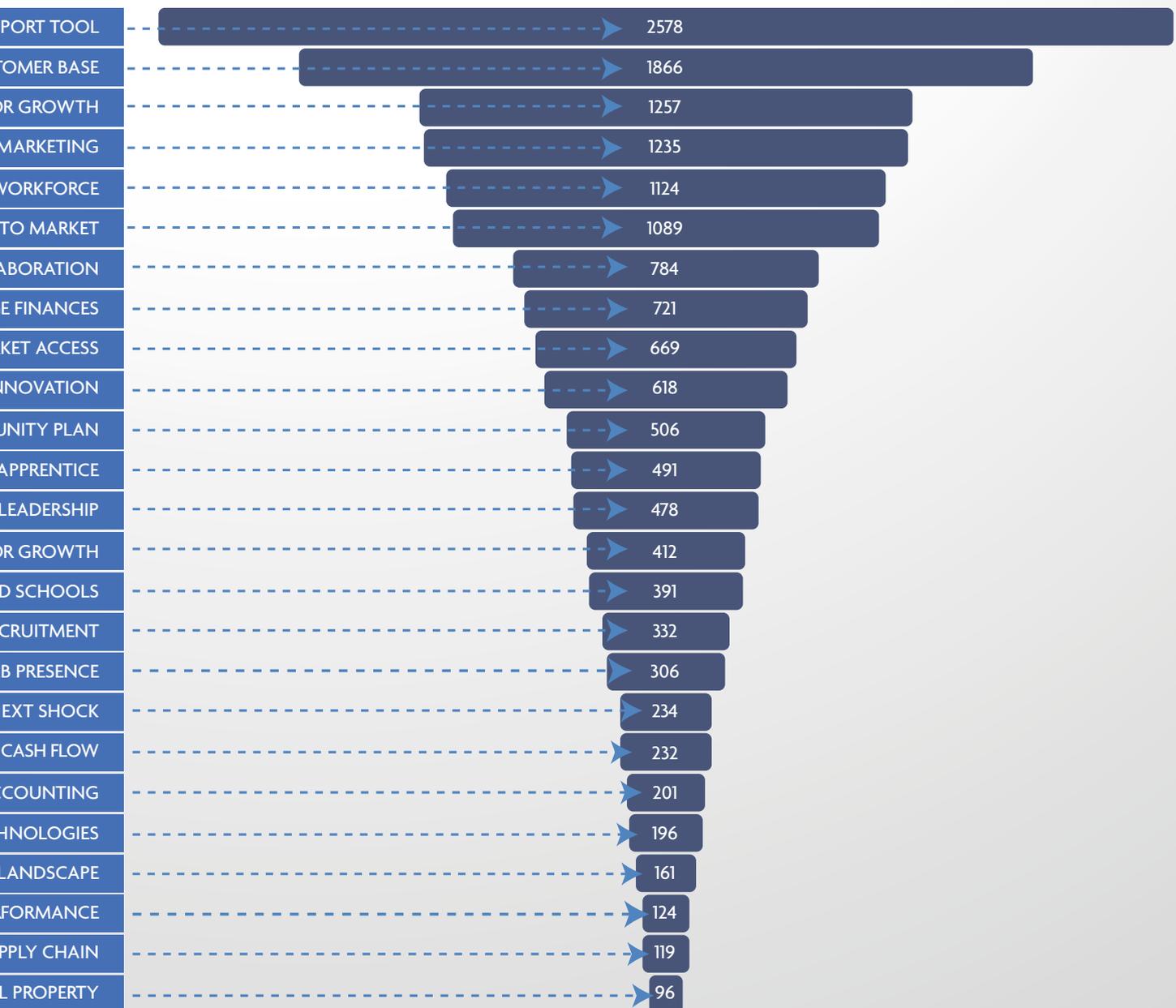


### BUSINESS NEEDS

BUSINESSES COMPLETING THE BUSINESS SUPPORT TOOL
GROW MY CUSTOMER BASE
DEVELOP A BUSINESS PLAN FOR GROWTH
IMPROVE MY COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING
UP-SKILL STAFF / EXPAND WORKFORCE
LAUNCH A NEW OR DIFFERENT PRODUCT TO MARKET
INCREASE COLLABORATION
IMPROVE THE WAY I ACCESS AND MANAGE MY BUSINESS
GROW MY REVENUE
IMPROVE, RESEARCH, DEVELOPMENT AND INNOVATION
CREATE OR IMPROVE MY BUSINESS COMMUNICATIONS
TAKE ON AN INVESTMENT
IMPROVE MY FINANCIAL RECORDS
RAISING FINANCE FOR GROWTH
ENGAGE MY BUSINESS WITH THE LOCAL COMMUNITY AND NETWORK
RAISE THE PROFILE OF MY BUSINESS TO SUPPORT REVENUE
IMPROVE OUR ONLINE WEBSITE
MAKE SURE MY BUSINESS IS RESILIENT TO THE NATIONAL ECONOMY
UNDERSTANDING BALANCE SHEETS, PROFIT AND LOSS ACCOUNTS
UNDERSTANDING BOOK-KEEPING AND ACCOUNTS
IMPROVE OUR USE AND ADOPTION OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY
UNDERSTANDING THE NATIONAL AND LOCAL SKILLS SHORTAGE
IMPROVE OUR SUSTAINABILITY AND NET-ZERO PERFORMANCE
EXPAND MY SUPPLY CHAIN
UNDERSTAND INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY



## BUSINESS NEEDS IDENTIFIED, JULY 2020 TO MARCH 2023



The connections each Growth Hub has with the businesses allows the cluster to deliver a wide range of high intensity support, including peer networks, mentoring, and in-depth business reviews.

Buckinghamshire Business First Growth Hub delivered the LEADER rural programme in 2021/22 in 3 geographical areas i.e., Northamptonshire, the rural areas around Milton Keynes, parts of South Oxfordshire and the rural areas of Southwest Hertfordshire. LEADER was a European funded rural grant programme designed to support local businesses and to create jobs. It focused on six investment priorities which were:

1. To increase agricultural productivity.
2. To support micro and small enterprises and farm diversification.
3. To boost rural tourism.
4. To provide rural services.
5. To increase forestry productivity.
6. To provide cultural and heritage activities.

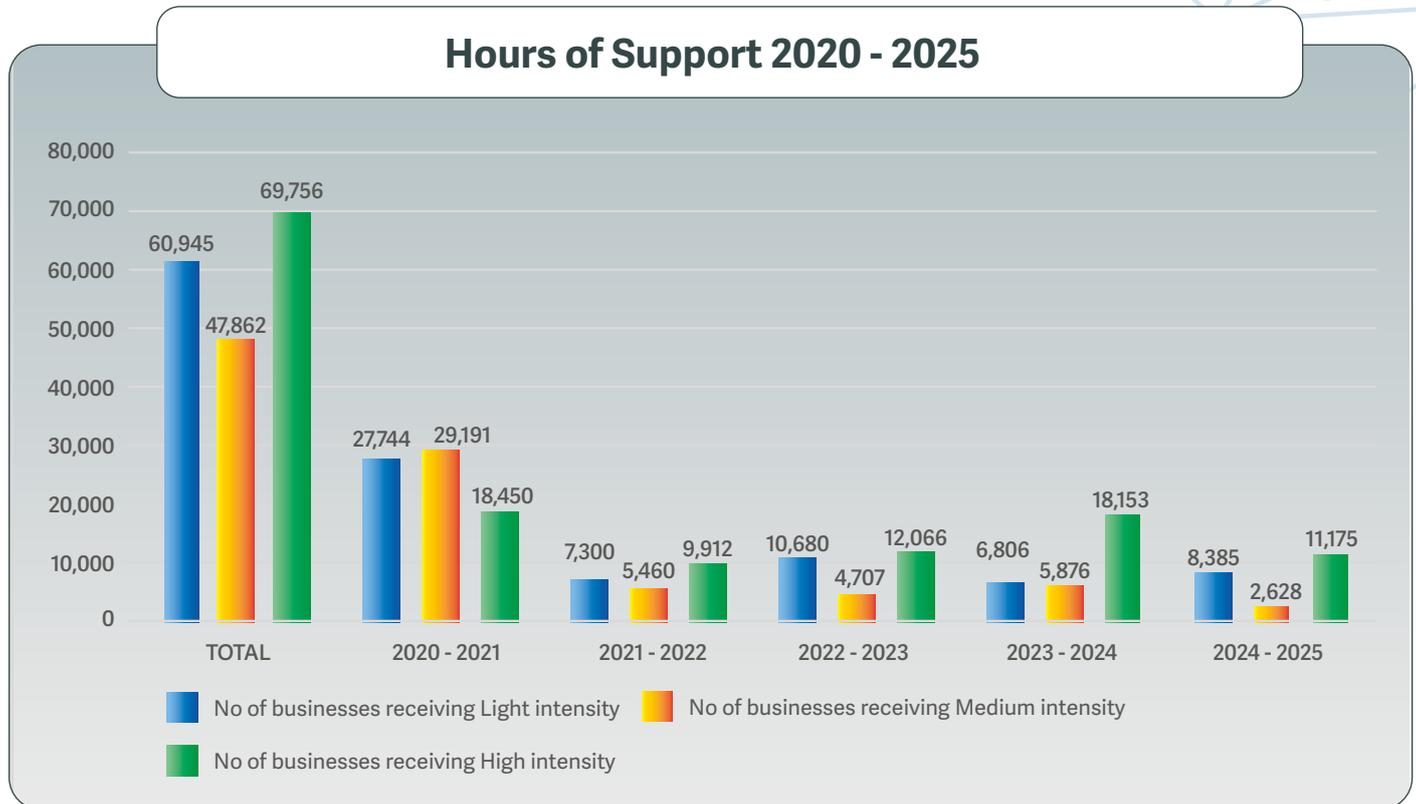
After 4 years of delivering the programme, the outputs of this programme have been significant:

- **13** new businesses set up
- **52** businesses diversified
- **42** new products launched
- **87** new services launched
- **45** businesses reaching new customers nationally



## 5.4 Investment Readiness and High Growth Support

Supporting ambitious businesses with high-growth potential has been a priority across all Growth Hubs. ERDF funding was instrumental in a wide range of programmes providing one to one support, peer networks, webinars and specialist advice and support to scaling companies. The graph below illustrates that the Cluster has spent more time delivering 'high-intensity' support in all years apart from 2020/21 which was dominated by more light-intensity support due to COVID-19.



Enterprise Oxfordshire developed a specialist two-day workshop with the British Business Bank and local investors, 'Investor Pitching Fast Track', which focused on preparing businesses to become ready to pitch alongside other investment readiness activities. This scale up support was repeated multiple times due to high demand and has continued to be delivered through the Core Growth Hub programme.

Business Advisers across the cluster are well equipped to provide specialised support to potential scale-ups and pre-scale-ups. Their expertise in executive coaching, leadership development, and organisational change is crucial in helping businesses develop action plans and scalability summaries. The team at South East Midlands Growth Hub used their expertise to develop a high growth business diagnostic which then leads into an action plan. The Action Plan provides a full scalability summary including their readiness to scale, their challenges and priorities.

## Expanding a Legacy: Hippo Motor Group

Hippo Motor Group is a family-owned automotive business with roots dating back to 1906, when George Paley Preston founded a coal merchant company. By the 1960s, the Preston family moved into the motor trade, establishing a strong reputation through EWS Preston as a trusted prestige car dealer.

Now led by Tom Preston, Hippo Motor Group has grown into a national vehicle sales, leasing, and finance business. Operating through brands like Hippo Leasing and Hippo Motor Finance, they serve thousands of customers monthly, offering flexible finance, a wide vehicle range, and a service-first approach.



As they expanded into Peterborough, Hippo turned to the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority Growth Hub to help navigate the regional business environment. The Growth Hub provided valuable support—connecting them with Peterborough City Council, local media outlets, recruitment agencies, and networks like Cambridgeshire Chambers of Commerce.

“The Growth Hub’s support made a real difference,” says Tom. With their help, Hippo established a strong local presence and built a capable team quickly.

As their Peterborough branch officially opens, Hippo is focused on community engagement. “It’s not just about selling cars—it’s about becoming part of the community,” says Tom, highlighting their commitment to quality service and support for local causes like Sue Ryder.

hippo<sup>®</sup> motor group

# Philip Clay Design Ltd

Philip Clay Design Ltd specialise in high-end bespoke kitchens and fitted cabinetry. Husband and wife team Phil and Keighley, Founder and Director respectively, come from design backgrounds and needed support in areas like business planning and marketing. They joined the Growth Programme—and the rest is history.

Keighley says: *“When we joined Buckinghamshire Business First (BBF), it was great to see all the workshops available to us. Thanks to the Strategic Planning Masterclass, we completely changed our mindset on the vision of how we saw the business. We’re going to continue being really involved with BBF, it’s been so helpful.”*

Phil says: *“BBF has helped us focus going forward, to realise we have a great business and can grow it considerably. It’s been invaluable meeting the experts and getting their knowledge. The Lean manufacturing principles are driving efficiencies, creating more gaps in our schedule to grow.”*

*“Support does exist—reach out to BBF, it’s been great for us.”*

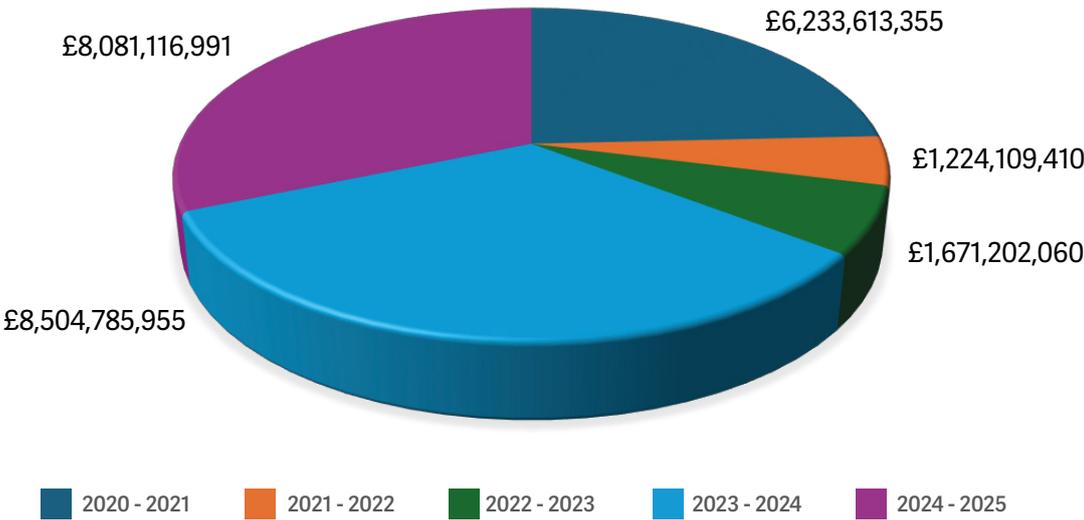
[https://youtu.be/9gO8CIY4\\_VM](https://youtu.be/9gO8CIY4_VM)



The Cluster is supporting businesses that have significant potential for growth. Across the cluster workshops are delivered aimed at improving businesses’ understanding of securing future investments. Topics covered include developing IP strategies, business valuation, and SEIS/EIS approval.

The significance of the economic footprint of the SME businesses supported is demonstrated by the combined turnover value, **£25.7 billion**, for those businesses who have engaged with between 2 and 12 hours of support.

**Combined turnover (amount £) of businesses receiving ‘Medium intensity’ information, diagnostic and brokerage support.**



The South East Midlands Growth Curve programme to support pre-scale and scale up businesses forecasts impressive economic impacts (2020 - 2023):

- **Employment:** Potential estimated additional total direct and indirect employment impact for the target LEP areas of the Growth Curve project = 73 Jobs Created. This is estimated to rise to 418 jobs in the next two years.
- **GVA Impact of Additional Employment:** The anticipated jobs that will be created as a result of the Growth Curve project will have the potential to generate an additional £4.15 millions of GVA per annum for the local economy, with the potential to reach £23.78m in two years.
- **RD&I Spend:** It is anticipated that businesses supported through the Growth Curve project to date have invested £1.70m (total for all businesses) in RD&I as a result of their involvement with the project. RD&I spend in beneficiaries is forecast to reach £2.02m in the next two years.
- **Turnover:** The potential increase in business turnover to date of the businesses supported (total for all businesses) as a result of their involvement with the project is estimated to be circa £61.17m per annum. It is estimated that business turnover will increase by circa £72.79m in the next two years as a result of the project.



## 5.5 Sustainability and Innovation

The Growth Hubs have provided a wide range of sustainability and Net Zero support through grants and funded consultancy, together with advice and carbon reduction planning.

### Low Carbon Workspaces - support for decarbonisation and the Green economy

This ERDF funded programme delivered by Buckinghamshire Business First provided grants to SMEs to reduce their carbon emissions, waste and water. The programme has assisted over 700 businesses with the purchase of low carbon technologies, with reduction impact on annual energy bills now over £2million.

58% of the programme's grant recipients have recommended the programme to fellow businesses. This has helped considerably with organic interest into the scheme demonstrating the ripple effect businesses can have on each other with regards positive environmental strategy.



## St John's Hall Storage

St John's Hall Storage, based in Suffolk, received over £43,000 from the New Anglia Growth Hub's 'Business Transition to Net Zero Grant' to buy six electric forklifts and an automated pallet wrapper. Serving clients from large corporations to small businesses and individuals, the company has experienced steady growth.

HR and Operations Manager Jenny Green explained the expansion: *"With high customer retention and rising demand, we needed more vehicles. The new electric forklifts, powered by solar panels, help us operate carbon neutrally."*

The investment has brought major operational improvements. *"We can now wrap pallets faster, turn work around more quickly, and complete tasks within a day, reducing the need for overtime. Unloading is faster, and customer service has improved."* said Jenny.

The switch to electric forklifts has also improved the workplace. *"They're safer, easier to use, cleaner, and more responsive. The warehouses are now dust-free, and even customers have noticed."*

Jenny praised the grant process: *"It was excellent, supportive and transparent. We couldn't have made this investment without it. It's helped us implement our strategy two years early, expand capacity, and strengthen our Net Zero plan."*

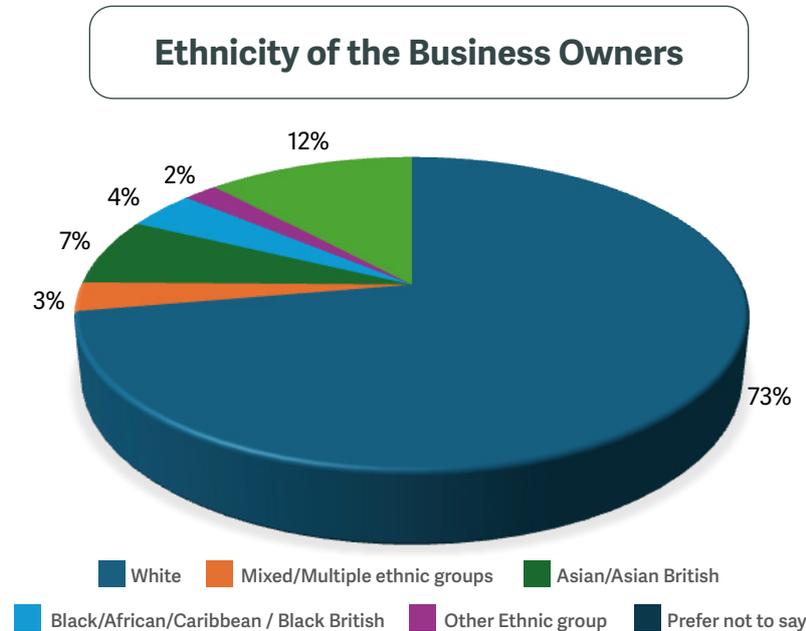
She added, *"The grant has helped us not just survive, but thrive."*



<https://www.newangliagrowthhub.co.uk/success-story/warehousing-firm-gets-it-all-wrapped-up-with-net-zero-grant/>

## 5.6 Inclusivity and Outreach

The cluster has made significant efforts to reach hard-to-reach areas and minority communities. Initiatives such as creating flyers in multiple languages and holding surgeries in community centres have helped raise awareness of the Growth Hub's offerings. Each Growth Hub has also engaged with various minority groups, including Ukrainian Nationals, the African Business Owners' Association and the Hong Kongers Society, to ensure inclusive support.



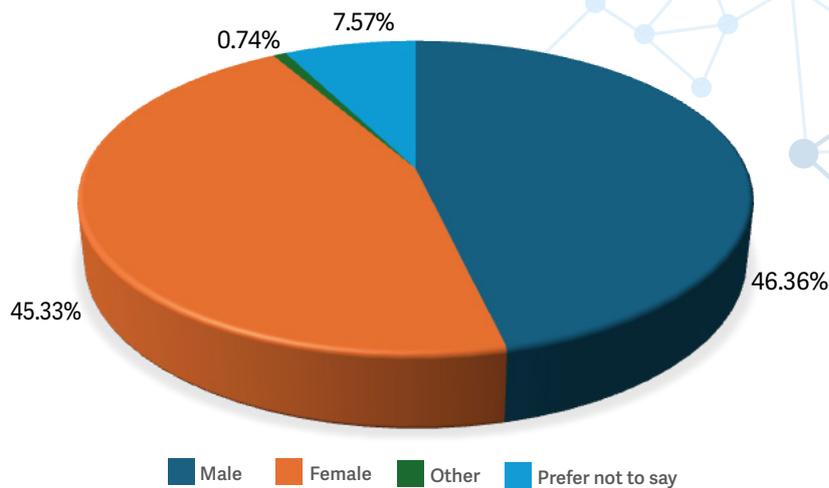
Across the 5 growth hub areas, according to Census 2021 about 86% of the resident population reported a white ethnicity. Annual Population survey estimates for 2024 suggest about 88% of the population aged 16+ were white. As a result, 73% of supported owners being white could be considered a good outcome. However, the large 'prefer not to say' category could make this less reliable.

The Cambridgeshire Peterborough Combined Authority Growth Hub has reached out to every minority within their region:

*"We are very proud of our progress within the African Business owners' Association which we now present to on a bimonthly basis, this has seen us receive far more enquiries from African business owners across the region, our continued association with the Hong Kongers Society is immensely successful and we continue to work closely, again the enquiries from Asian business owners has been far higher due to this connection, we also attended Pride in Cambridge and Peterborough reaching out to the LGBTQ+ community, gaining trust and sharing national and local programmes, we don't have specific programmes for protected characteristics, but we do ensure that every business owners knows about all the eligible programmes, ensuring we are a Growth Hub that delivers to all business owners."*

The Cluster's support programmes appeal equally to male and female business owners / leaders and to a range of ages. The support is also reaching entrepreneurs, business leaders / owners who have physical or mental health conditions. Peer-to-peer support has proven to be highly effective, especially during challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic and EU Transition. Across the Cluster many hundreds of peer-to-peer cohorts, with thousands of ambitious business leaders have been delivered, achieving high satisfaction levels.

## Gender Identification of Business Owners 2020-2025



## Damascus Rose Kitchen

Damascus Rose Kitchen (DRK) received a £13,830 Visitor Economy Grant from Enterprise Oxfordshire, which transformed their ability to scale up operations and accept high-value external catering orders.

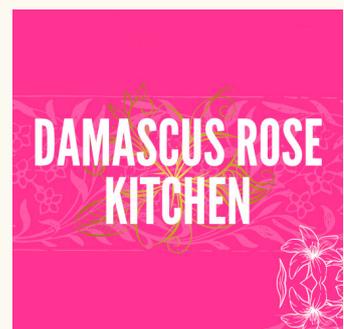
The grant funded professional catering equipment, branding materials, and marketing support, enabling DRK to deliver services with greater reach and professionalism.

Founded by Syrian refugee Nour, DRK began in a small kitchen at Flo's, Oxford, as a community-led enterprise empowering Arabic-speaking women through food. Initially lacking resources and industry knowledge, the team steadily built experience through pop-ups and small catering jobs.

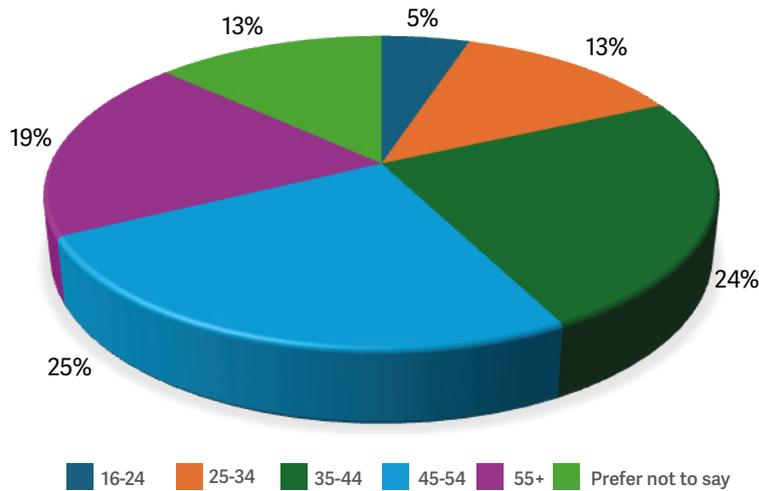
The grant has propelled DRK's growth. They've catered major events, including a 150-guest dinner at Somerville College, University of Oxford, private parties, and a wedding. Their new equipment and branded gazebo also allowed them to cater at the Wood Festival for 2,000 people, where they've already been invited back for 2025.

DRK now benefits from a professional marketing calendar, festival signage, and a new website launching in summer 2024. This visibility has helped secure further bookings and national recognition, including shortlisting for the Muddy Stiletto and Ox in a Box Food Awards.

The grant didn't just boost DRK's business, it enabled them to thrive and inspire through inclusive, community-focused enterprise.



## Age of Business Leaders / Owners 2020-2025



## The Cube Disability

The Cube Disability has a history of delivering inclusive environments for their students. From an Arts Academy to Adventures, Kids and Sports, their pioneering approach to adult disability education provides opportunities for students to flourish in a safe and welcoming environment.

Based in Northamptonshire, The Cube Disability is a pioneering disability care company serving adults and children with learning disabilities. The next step in their evolution was to open a cooking academy to provide students with core skills they need to take up positions in the hospitality industry. To get the project off the ground, they needed grant support.

The Cube Disability was awarded £40,171.88 by South Midlands Growth Hub to renovate and fit a specialist kitchen, designed to accommodate the diverse needs of their students. Specialist equipment was also required, such as adaptive utensils, ergonomic tools, and sensory-friendly cookware. The cooking academy is now open five days a week, delivering all day training and education to students. Students are learning the skills needed to not only cook nutritious, but ultimately to work in the hospitality industry

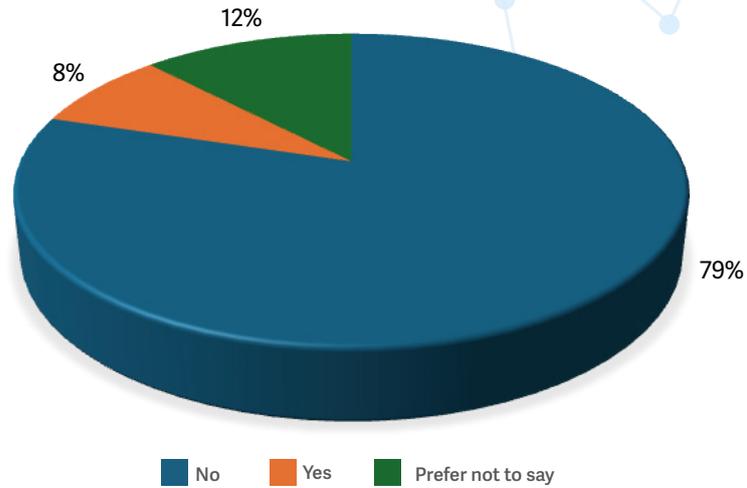


The addition of the cooking academy has seen four new jobs created to support students, with further full time and part time roles are expected to be in place later in 2025.

**the cube**  
DISABILITY

<https://growthhub.southmidlands.org.uk/cube-disability-success-story/>

## Business Leaders Who Stated They Have a Physical or Mental Health Condition or Illness Lasting or Expected to Last 12 Months or More



## 5.7 Peer-to-Peer and Mentoring Support

Peer-to-peer support has proven to be highly effective, especially during challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic and EU Transition. Across the Cluster many hundreds of peer-to-peer cohorts, with thousands of ambitious business leaders have been delivered, achieving high satisfaction levels.

**3919 Business Leaders / Owners** joined a Mentoring Programme delivered by the Cluster.

New Anglia Growth Hub produced 19 testimonials, filmed using glowing recommendations from participants. They then used the Peer Network Programme to link and feed into their Scale Up New Anglia Programme so that participants could continue their growth journey.

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCS423NZ4QcgLDBh9RbLVbAA>

### TalkOne

Greg, Managing Director of Buckingham-based TalkOne, a specialist in telephony and software solutions, firmly believes in the power of community and collaboration. He actively engages with the local business network, particularly through Buckinghamshire Business First (BBF), and sees tangible value in doing so.

TalkOne is a committed BBF member, with Greg contributing his time as a mentor through the BBF Mentoring Programme. He also participated in MD Ngage, BBF's leadership development initiative designed to support business growth and strategic thinking.

*"I wanted to be part of a tribe, the tribe is stronger together," Greg explained. "You can't do everything alone. The value comes through knowledge sharing, mentoring, experience, and support. It's multi-faceted."*

Through BBF's MD Ngage, Greg connected with like-minded business leaders. The programme's structured sessions included roundtable discussions where participants shared challenges and offered practical solutions. *"You needed to invest your time to reap the rewards,"* he said.

Greg found the content insightful and directly relevant. *"The first session was on AI, which really resonated with me. My business is all about workflow and system integration, AI is part of that. It challenged my thinking and gave me fresh perspectives."*

For TalkOne, engaging with BBF has been a catalyst for connection, learning, and growth



## 5.8 Value for Money

Value for money has been assessed using the National TOMS 2024 Open Access Framework, Social Value Portal.

- Measure NT1, creating local employment opportunities, provides a proxy value of £38,436.50.
- Measure NT15, providing expert support to SMEs has a value of £106.34 per hour.

The core government funding for the cluster over the period April 2020 to March 2025 was £8,126,601. Over that same period, 178,563 hours of support were provided to SME businesses, and 6,970 jobs were created. For every £1 of core government funding for the Cluster, £35 of economic and social value has been delivered.

A calculation using these figures would estimate that the cost per job created was £1,165.89. For comparison purposes a review of 63 ERDF project Summative Assessments roughly estimated that the average cost per job created through those projects was £26,400 <sup>11</sup>.

Comparison Programme	Metric	Value
Cluster Delivery – <i>this report</i>	benefits-to-costs ratio (BCR)	35
Made Smarter Innovation (2020-2025) <sup>12</sup>	benefits-to-costs ratio (BCR)	2.2
Innovate UK (IUK) EDGE Scaleup Programme (2016-2021) <sup>13</sup>	benefits-to-costs ratio (BCR)	12.2

Although the core government funding for the cluster over the period was £8,126,601, the Growth Hubs were hugely successful at attracting additional funding for business support:

- Additional funding of **£99,753,186** was secured to support businesses,
- Private sector match funding (for grant schemes etc) was £98,478,146.

Therefore, for every £1 of core government funding, the Cluster attracted a further £24 to support SME business growth.

Overall, the Growth Hub cluster has been highly effective in delivering against its business support aims.

Through a combination of intelligence gathering, direct support, tailored programs, investment readiness initiatives, green recovery efforts, inclusivity, and peer-to-peer support, the cluster has successfully met the diverse needs of businesses and fostered growth and resilience in the business community.

The value for money of the Cluster business support delivery stands proudly above its peers.

11 National Evaluation of English ERDF Programme 2014-20: *Phase Two Report: Interim Impact Evaluation. Regeneris. January 2021 UK Research and Innovation, 2025. Evaluation of Made Smarter Innovation Challenge: Final evaluation report.* [online] SQW (commissioned by UKRI). Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/IUK-300525-EvaluationMadeSmarterInnovationChallenge-FinalReport.pdf> [Accessed 28 June 2025].

12 UK Research and Innovation, 2025. *Evaluation of Made Smarter Innovation Challenge: Final evaluation report.* [online] SQW (commissioned by UKRI). Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/IUK-300525-EvaluationMadeSmarterInnovationChallenge-FinalReport.pdf> [Accessed 28 June 2025].

13 Technopolis Group. (2022). *Innovate UK EDGE Scaleup Programme: Interim summative assessment.* Innovate UK. Available at: <https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/IUK-240522-InnovateUKEDGEScaleupProgrammeInterimSummativeAssessment.pdf> [Accessed 28 Jun. 2025]

# 06 Collaboration & Partnership Working

## 6.1 Working Together

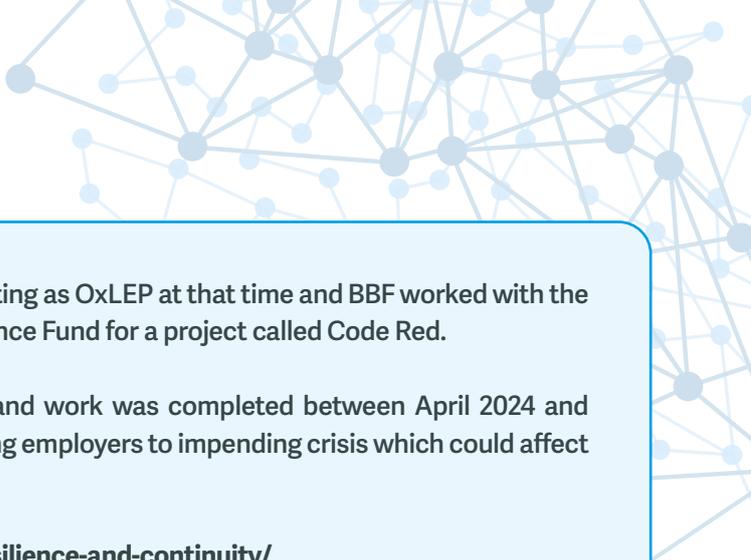
Working together as a Cluster has brought a wide range of benefits for each Growth Hub, for the businesses supported and for stakeholders. The Cluster provides the opportunity for sharing experience, collaborative problem solving and co-delivery. Cross Cluster working aids in the promotion of a consistent “one voice” business support and messaging.

Cross Cluster business support has included:

- A suite of 11 EU transition webinars with joint branding,
- Cost of Living webinars,
- A Peer Networks event,
- Promotion of MAKE UK 121’s,
- Webinars relating to customs changes delivered by Grant Thornton.

The Cluster has also collaborated on sharing business intelligence and training for the Growth Hub managers, staff and business advisors. This has included ‘Leading through change’ training, staff presentation skills training, and business decarbonisation training enabling staff to support clients on their decarbonisation journey.





In February 2024, Enterprise Oxfordshire, who were operating as OxLEP at that time and BBF worked with the Berkshire Growth Hub to create a bid for the Local Resilience Fund for a project called Code Red.

The Thames Valley Resilience Forum approved the bid and work was completed between April 2024 and March 2025. Code Red aimed to create a method of alerting employers to impending crisis which could affect their business.

<https://enterpriseoxfordshirebusiness.com/business-resilience-and-continuity/>

## 6.2 Collaborating and Partnering with Others

Each Growth Hub in the Cluster provides a proactive 'tiered' support offer; promoting a strong 'first stop shop' proposition; utilising business intelligence to shape the development of new services and a strong ethos of partnership working.

Silverstone, which straddles the border between BBF and South Midlands Growth Hub, has been the centre for numerous joint workshops and networking events with the Silverstone Technology Cluster. The Growth Hubs are integrally involved with the Enterprise Zones at Silverstone and Westcott, with business advisors supporting the site operational groups.

BBF delivered the Future Tech Summit in November 2021 at / from Silverstone. The 'hybrid' event was attended in-person and watched via livestream with a theme of 'Discovering the technology and trends that can drive your Future Tech ambitions forward.'

The Growth Hubs ensure that the businesses that they engage are provided with the most appropriate support for them. In many cases this means that the businesses are referred into support programmes delivered nationally or by others locally:

- **6,459** businesses have been referred to a finance or funding programme.
- **1,178** businesses have been referred to export / import support programmes.
- **1,985** businesses have been referred to an innovation and or R&D programme.
- **5,283** businesses have been referred to a skills or training programme.

Enterprise Oxfordshire works closely with their Local Authority partners, having overall responsibility for convening the Economic Development teams for the county on a bi-monthly basis to share intelligence and deliver collaborative activities. This 'Joint Oxfordshire Business Support' (JOBS) group focuses on Economic Growth, Covid, Shared Prosperity Funding allocation and collaboration, and Skills programmes.



New Anglia Growth Hub use the business data collated in their CRM along with data from Experian and Beauhurst, to focus support for SMEs with High Growth potential. This includes 1,400 SMEs with an annual rate of growth between 5% and 20% per annum by turnover, by profit or by the number of full-time employees.

The Growth Hub work proactively with the Scale Up Institute, Aston Business School, the Enterprise Research Centre, Goldman Sachs and several local partners and businesses to deliver a comprehensive package of support, including one to one meetings, workshops, seminars and online training.

One of the most important factors in the success of the Growth Hubs has been the additional funding that each has been able to leverage. This includes European funding such as ERDF (European Regional Development Fund), national funding such as RDPE (Rural Development Programme for England), Visit England, UKSPF (UK Shared Prosperity Fund), REPF (Rural England Prosperity Fund), and local funding from County and Local Councils, Private Foundations, and the Local Enterprise Partnerships.

The additional funding leveraged in by the Cluster was £81,227,783, plus a further £18,525,403 of funding used for COVID grants to businesses. **This is an incredible total of £99,753,186.**

The benefits of this additional funding cannot be underestimated and without it the Growth Hubs would have been unable to deliver the extensive support that they have.

# 07 Learning and Looking Ahead

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## 7. Learning and Looking Ahead

The past five years have demonstrated the vital role that Growth Hubs and this Cluster play in supporting the UK's small and medium-sized businesses. As the economic environment continues to evolve, so too must the Cluster's approach. The UK Government's **Small Business Strategy (2025)** and the launch of the **Business Growth Service** provide a timely framework for reflection and renewal.

### Learning from the past five years

Several lessons stand out.

**First**, flexibility and responsiveness are essential. From Brexit to the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, the Cluster proved its ability to pivot and provide businesses with clear, practical guidance.

**Second**, partnerships remain the bedrock of effective delivery. Where there is strong leadership to convene local authorities and stakeholders, through mechanisms such as Enterprise Zones, Growth Corridors, and joint steering groups, it has been possible to draw in significant additional investment and respond effectively to local economic conditions.

**Third**, social value matters. Our commitment to inclusivity, sustainability, and community engagement has enhanced trust and broadened the reach of Growth Hub services.

### Aligning with national priorities

The Small Business Strategy highlights the importance of 'Fixing the fundamentals', 'Backing the everyday economy' and 'Future-proofing business skills'. These priorities are mirrored in the Cluster's existing programmes, from investment readiness and mentoring networks to Net Zero planning and digital adoption support.

The launch of the **Business Growth Service**, a single digital front door to national and local support, enhances the opportunity for the Cluster to act as the local connector, guiding businesses to the most relevant help while ensuring their voices feed into national policy. This is a chance to reduce duplication and confusion in a National and local business support landscape that remains fragmented and complex, while strengthening Growth Hubs who are the trusted human interface and key to engaging and encouraging the hard-to-reach SME businesses.

The 'National to Cluster to Growth Hub' connection undoubtedly works well. This Cluster of five allows synergy where group collaboration makes sense, for instance in remote rural business engagement, but is small enough so that Growth Hub to Growth Hub connections are strong and individual identities are maintained.

For every £1 of core government funding, the Cluster has attracted a further £24 to support SME business growth, leading to job protection and creation. This has been critical to the outputs and outcomes delivered and consolidating future support (e.g. post-Shared Prosperity Fund) through Growth Hubs would reduce fragmentation and simplify access for businesses.

## Future priorities for the Cluster

Looking ahead, three challenges and opportunities stand out:

1. **Long-term, sustainable funding** – Current funding for Growth Hubs is insufficient and piecemeal. A long-term financial settlement would enable Hubs to plan with confidence, attract and retain skilled staff, and deliver even greater impact. Consolidating other support through Growth Hubs would reduce fragmentation and simplify access for businesses.
2. **Embedding social value in growth** – Building on our record of inclusivity and sustainability, we will support SMEs to adopt practices that deliver local benefits through procurement, employment, and environmental leadership.
3. **Harnessing digital transformation** – From AI adoption to cyber resilience, we will expand support that helps SMEs adapt to the digital economy, while ensuring place-based growth across the Oxford–Cambridge corridor and beyond.

### Conclusion

Growth Hubs create the appetite, the market, for business support amongst more than 99% of UK Businesses – the SMEs. As stated in 'Backing Your Business'<sup>14</sup>, 'Their contribution goes far beyond the numbers', they are central to all parts of the community and the backbone of the UK economy.

The Growth Hub Cluster enters its next phase with renewed clarity of purpose. By learning from experience, aligning with national strategy, and maintaining our focus on collaboration, inclusivity, and resilience, we can ensure that small businesses are empowered to thrive. It is clear that there is a unique strength in this Cluster that was forged in the fire of the COVID-19 pandemic that would be irreplaceable. With secure investment and simplification, the Cluster can continue to translate national ambition into local success, ensuring that SMEs not only survive but lead the UK's next wave of growth.

<sup>14</sup> HM Government (2025) Our plan for small and medium-sized businesses: Small Business Strategy. London: Department for Business and Trade.



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[growthhub.southmidlands.org.uk](http://growthhub.southmidlands.org.uk)

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Buckinghamshire Business First  
[bbf.uk.com](http://bbf.uk.com)

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Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Growth Hub  
[cpcagrowthhub.co.uk](http://cpcagrowthhub.co.uk)

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New Anglia Growth Hub  
[www.newangliagrowthhub.co.uk](http://www.newangliagrowthhub.co.uk)

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Enterprise Oxfordshire  
[enterpriseoxfordshirebusiness.com](http://enterpriseoxfordshirebusiness.com)

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