



**Middlesex
University**

Final Report

MYSTERY SHOPPING THE EARLY STAGES OF THE BUSINESS LINK SERVICE

For the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

Centre for Enterprise and Economic Development Research (CEEDR)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Summary

This mystery shopping exercise, commissioned by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS), tests the early stages of contact when businesses seek advice from Business Link, focusing on the level of responsiveness, professionalism and timeliness of the service. These factors are important for the delivery of the Government's 'Real Help for Business' package (January 2009). Findings reported here show, overall, that there is widespread satisfaction and approval of the Business Link response and services received. Where dissatisfaction exists, much of it relates to failures in communication at the initial stages. The level of satisfaction increased as the customer journey progressed.

Methodology

Real businesses with genuine business needs for advice and support were recruited to act as 'mystery shoppers'. They were randomly sampled from Experian business data (with quotas by region and sector) and cold-called to ascertain their interest and suitability for the research. The sample was supplemented by Middlesex University's networking sources, in particular to obtain a sample of pre-start businesses. In total, 159 businesses took part in the research between mid-July and the end of September 2009. In order to test different aspects of service delivery, businesses were classified into one or more pre-determined business scenarios: (i) a growth seeking business; (ii) a business seeking finance/working capital; (iii) a declining business/business seeking recovery; (iv) a business seeking training assistance; and (v) a business starting-up.

Businesses made initial contact with Business Link via either the national telephone helpline, the regional telephone helpline or email (Stage 1), and progressed through to follow up calls (Stage 2) and if appropriate a face-to-face meeting with an adviser (Stage 3). Businesses rated their levels of satisfaction on a five point scale after each stage of the journey.

Findings on Satisfaction Levels

Overall view of the Service

- Overall, there was widespread satisfaction and approval of the Business Link services, with around 70 per cent of business owner/managers rating the service and outcomes as satisfactory or above and at least 57 per cent as above satisfactory.
- The level of satisfaction increased as the customer journey progressed. The further participants progressed through the early stages of contact the higher the level of satisfaction with both service outcomes and service delivery.
- Almost two-thirds of businesses stated that they would benefit from the assistance that they had received, with a similar proportion suggesting that they will continue to use Business Link.
- Two-thirds of participants in the mystery shopping exercise would unreservedly recommend Business Link to other businesses.
- Businesses seeking assistance with training showed the highest levels of satisfaction with service outcomes and delivery (83 per cent at least satisfactory). Start-up cases exhibited the lowest levels of satisfaction with the service outcomes and delivery they received (55 per cent satisfied) and it was notable that the majority of this group did not advance beyond the initial enquiry stage as they were typically channelled into a start-up assistance package, delivered by a suitable locally accredited start-up agency.
- Three in ten businesses were in some way dissatisfied with at least some aspect of the service they received. Dissatisfaction related mainly to failures in communication, particularly in responding to initial emails, but also with regard to failures to return telephone calls, keeping to meeting arrangements and delivering information.
- Dissatisfaction with service outcomes was frequently related to inability to access finance (particularly grants) and what were interpreted as inappropriate recommendations, for example in three cases where it was believed that Business Link had an agenda to push training initiatives.
- Ethnic minority led businesses exhibited lower levels of satisfaction with service delivery and outcomes than their white counterparts. This may be associated with their

concentration in those regions where initial enquiries were less likely to lead through to face-to-face meetings with Business Link advisers.

Telephone Enquiries (stage 1)

- At least 90 per cent rated their initial telephone call as satisfactory or above in terms of the call handlers' politeness, ability to listen and the arrangements made (with three quarters rating as fairly good or excellent). Only in terms of understanding the line of questioning were satisfaction levels slightly lower.
- 90 per cent found the service easy to access by telephone. Dissatisfaction was more likely amongst those businesses using the national enquiry number, 14 per cent of them being less than satisfied because of difficulties with call options, being asked to call back and confusion over which Business Link would deal with some enquiries.
- Less than half (44 per cent) of the businesses making telephone enquiries were asked by Business Link about appropriate timing of call backs and this led to some problems with the arrangements for telephone follow-up calls.

Email Enquiries (stage 1)

- Overall, where a response was received, 85 per cent rated the e-mail enquiry service as satisfactory or above on all measures.
- Some problems were encountered with initial e-mail contact. Almost one in six businesses approaching Business Link by email failed to obtain any response over at least a two week period.
- One in ten businesses making email enquiries mentioned having some difficulties finding and using the regional website e-mail enquiry links.
- Only one quarter of those businesses making e-mail enquiries received a response to confirm that their email had been received by Business Link.

Follow-up Telephone Calls (stage 2)

- Half of participant businesses (82 cases) received a follow-up telephone call from a Business Link adviser. A further 13 per cent progressed straight from stage 1 to face-

to-face meetings, whilst for the remainder their enquiry did not progress beyond stage 1.

- Transfer to a specialist adviser occurred immediately at the time of the initial enquiry in 15 per cent of cases and for a further 10 per cent a call back took place the same day. More typically a follow-up call from Business Link occurred within two to three days.
- There were particularly high levels of satisfaction with regard to the politeness of the response (98 per cent of businesses rated it as at least satisfactory; 90 per cent above satisfactory) and the specialist adviser's understanding of the line of enquiry (93 per cent at least satisfactory; 77 per cent above satisfactory).
- Satisfaction with follow-up times for call-backs was slightly lower (87 per cent satisfied), typically relating to calls coming at inappropriate times and resulting in missed calls. Additionally five participants did not receive a call back.
- There was some dissatisfaction with telephone diagnostic advice (a fifth of relevant cases), where it was felt that Business Link had simply sent lists of information through without appropriate direction and accompanying advice, had been lacking in sufficient knowledge about the subject matter, or had made an incorrect signposting.
- A particular issue arose for businesses that wanted to relocate or expand in another region, where Business Link regional boundaries sometimes prevented appropriate assistance being provided to clients by the region which they sought to move into.

Face-to-face Meetings (stage 3)

- 40 per cent of participant businesses (64 cases) received a face-to-face meeting with a specialist Business Link adviser.
- On average it took seven working days to meet face-to-face with an adviser (ranging from one to 40 days after initial contact). 92 per cent of businesses considered this to be at least satisfactory (88 per cent above satisfactory).
- More than four fifths of businesses rated the face-to-face meetings as above satisfactory in terms of the arrangements, politeness, knowledge of the adviser and their ability to listen, and the extent to which their enquiry was appropriately addressed.

- 90 per cent of those who had a face-to-face meeting indicated that the actions recommended by the Business Link adviser were at least satisfactory (78 per cent above satisfactory).

Action Plans

- Just over half (33 cases) of businesses progressing to a face-to-face meeting received a written Action Plan from Business Link. These were typically felt to be satisfactory (88 per cent satisfied). One in eight clients indicated some dissatisfaction, this being levelled at content rather than delivery timing.
- Action Plans were typically delivered next day by e-mail, although in seven cases the plan took over five working days to be delivered and in two cases it took 10 days. There were also two cases where Action Plans were promised, but not delivered.

Background

Challenges and lessons from the method of recruitment

The recruitment of real businesses into the study provided authenticity and credibility to the research process in that it avoided diverting Business Link adviser attention away from assisting real businesses and brought genuine value to those businesses participating. This method of recruitment was, however, challenging and required a high volume of telephone 'cold-calling'. Around one in fifteen businesses contacted expressed an interest in participating, and around 10 per cent of these subsequently dropped out for various reasons. This included finding the time to contact Business Link, even when it appeared an obvious and necessary thing for them to do. There was also some misapprehension about the nature and range of the service provided, which led to a loss of confidence in making contact with Business Link in some cases.

Characteristics of Participating Businesses

The businesses represented a wide range of sectors, including business services (31 per cent), manufacturing (18 per cent), retail (15 per cent), and construction (10 per cent). With the exception of the overrepresentation of manufacturing, these are broadly in line with the English sector distribution. The size distribution is broadly in line with Business Link's client base, there being a strong bias towards micro businesses (80 per cent employed less than

10 staff) and only 2 per cent had more than 50 staff. The panel included 12 start-up businesses trading for less than one year, supplemented by 15 pre-start cases.

Characteristics of Business Owner/Managers

Two thirds of owners were aged between 30 and 50 and only four per cent were less than 30 years of age. One sixth of businesses were ethnic minority owned, with the majority of these being South Asian or African-Caribbean. The proportion of male to female managerial respondents was 3:2. This is in alignment with the overall business population where two-fifths of businesses are women-led or joint gender owned, although where businesses are joint owned, women managers may have been more inclined to participate.

Distribution by Type of Enquiry

In terms of their fit into one or more of the research's pre-determined business scenarios, almost half of the participating businesses were seeking growth, just over a quarter were seeking training assistance, a quarter were seeking finance, a fifth were seeking help with business recovery, and a sixth were seeking start-up assistance.

More specifically, by far the most frequent types of assistance required related to sales and marketing, raising finance, business planning and training (all between 27 per cent and 33 per cent of cases, with businesses able to record multiple responses). Several cases sought help with web design and e-marketing.

Proportion of Face-to-face Meetings

A high proportion of initial contacts (40 per cent) led to face-to-face meetings, with particularly high proportions in the North East (65 per cent) and South East regions (50 per cent), and the lowest proportions in the West Midlands, Eastern and London regions (26 per cent, 27 per cent and 29 per cent respectively). There is no indication that the timing of research between regions made any impact on these findings.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study, commissioned by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) and carried out by CEEDR, is designed as a mystery shopping test of the initial and early stages of contact between businesses and Business Link. As such, the research is intended to test elements of the Business Link service which are important for the delivery of the Government's 'Real Help for Business' package (January 2009) to existing trading businesses, including the level of responsiveness, professionalism, and timeliness of the service. It also aims to identify the barriers which might discourage particular types of business and entrepreneur from using the Business Link service. The research has involved developing and piloting a 'mystery shopping' methodology that is both practicable when testing the experiences of existing businesses and capable of producing robust findings.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE BUSINESS LINK SERVICE

Business Link is the Government's multi-channel business support service in England, providing customers with access to the help and support needed to start and develop a business, the three channels being a network of regionally-based business advisers, a national help-line, and an on-line portal. Over the last seventeen years the Business Link service has taken various forms, but since 2005 it has been the responsibility of the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) who contract with providers to deliver the service. This may inevitably lead to some regional differences in the way the service is delivered, although the National Management Information Requirement ensures some consistency in the delivery of Business Link operations across the nine English regions. The service is based on the Information, Diagnosis and Brokerage (IDB) model which aims to provide customers with access to a wide range of business support solutions from the public and private sectors, to help businesses identify their requirements, to broker them to the most appropriate solution for their needs and to monitor the on-going relationship between businesses and providers to ensure that the customer's needs are addressed.

According to Management Information provided by RDAs, Business Link nationally has consistently increased its customer base year on year; in the 12 months to 31st December

2008, it helped 45,600 start ups, over 679,500 established businesses, and 215,600 pre-starts. In addition in their first year from October 2008, over 88,000 businesses have benefited from Business Link 'Health Checks'.

Whilst the evidence from the most recent Business Link Customer Satisfaction Survey shows that the satisfaction of those businesses that use Business Link services is high, this evidence relates solely to those businesses that are already using Business Link services and excludes those businesses that may have tried to use the service but encountered problems in the initial and early stages of contact. BIS therefore considers that further evidence is needed on the actual experience of businesses, starting with their point of initial contact with Business Link, in order to ensure the service is responsive, high quality, professional and timely.

3. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The research aims to assess the initial and early stages of contact when existing businesses seek advice from Business Link. Specifically, the research aims to address the following questions:

- (i) When a business contacts Business Link is the response welcoming, open and keen to help? Are there any barriers that may discourage certain groups from using the service?
- (ii) Is the service responsive to business needs? Does the adviser listen fully to the caller and probe for understanding? Does the response from the adviser address the core issue the business is concerned with?
- (iii) Is the service high quality and professional? Is the business given a point of contact for future queries? Does the adviser make clear what will happen next? Is there a focus on achieving an outcome for the business?
- (iv) Is the service timely? Does the business get offered a prompt (though not necessarily instant) solution that meets the agreed target times?

Whilst the scale of this pilot study is such that it is unlikely to reveal statistically significant variations, it is specifically designed to take into account:

- (i) Business Link inter-regional variations, by including at least 15 cases from each of the nine regional English Business Links.
- (ii) Business Link intra-regional variations, by including cases from a range of different counties and metropolitan areas within each Business Link.
- (iii) Business characteristics, with regard to: employment size; trading age; broad sector.
- (iv) Business ownership characteristics with regard to: age; ethnicity; gender and disability.
- (v) The point of entry for enquiries, by examining an even spread of cases covering: (i) national telephone; (ii) regional telephone; (iii) e-mail enquiries.
- (vi) A range of five enquiry case scenarios (which are not mutually exclusive): (i) seeking growth; (ii) finance seeking; (iii) businesses seeking stabilisation/recovery; (iv) seeking training; (v) start-up.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Rationale

An essential element of the approach to mystery shopping adopted in this study is that the initial/early stage contacts with Business Link were undertaken by genuine existing businesses, located within the regions and specific Business Link catchment areas. This approach adds authenticity and credibility to the research process, for the following reasons:

- Real businesses approaching Business Link have genuine requirements that Business Link will need to address. This avoids deflecting vital adviser resource time away from businesses and hopefully leads to real improvements and benefits for those businesses involved in the mystery shopping exercise.
- By using existing businesses that fit within the case scenarios agreed with BIS, the study is able to present actual examples of businesses experiencing different elements of Business Link assistance.
- By using local businesses, with genuine business support requirements, the study is better able to address aspects of specialist business/sector knowledge and local area knowledge. It is also able to avoid potential problems of traceability if businesses could not provide actual business addresses and contact telephone numbers.
- The survey has been able to provide a wide range of different types of businesses by sector, owner/manager characteristics, types of business assistance and locality.
- The adopted approach provided opportunities to track the experience of business support more naturally through the assistance process from early contact through to the first face-to-face meetings with advisers and in some instances to the production of outputs such as Action Plans.

4.2 Research phases

The research was undertaken in the following three phases:

Phase 1: Review of Business Link Mystery Shopper Research and Consultation with RDAs

Initially, CEEDR consulted with the RDAs in order to obtain details of mystery shopping research undertaken at the regional level of Business Link services. The aim was to collate relevant elements of best practice and to learn from previous experience, in order to inform the present research. Each RDA was also asked to provide contact details of the Business Link providers in their region as well as the protocols for delivering BL services to both new and existing customers. Background information relating to the 'journeys' through the early stages of the BL services that businesses could possibly take was also requested.

Phase 2: Development of Survey Instruments and Evaluation Materials

Drawing on the information gathered in Phase 1, the survey questionnaire and other evaluation materials were drafted in consultation with BIS/RDA representatives (attached at Annex I). These were piloted in the East of England region in early July 2009, before rolling out the wider research across the regions in late July 2009.

A key element of the research has been the development of a series of scenarios for existing and start-up businesses, designed to test different aspects of Business Link's frontline delivery service. The actual businesses recruited to take part in the research were chosen because they fit into at least one of these scenarios.

For each scenario, a series of measures were developed in order to test Business Link's initial service response against a list of expected outcomes (as designated requirements of Business Link's IDB service to existing businesses). These measures were set out in a standardised evaluation checklist used by the participating businesses and researchers to measure (using standardised scaling techniques) (i) responsiveness, (ii) professionalism and (iii) timeliness. The checklist was designed to take into account the slight variations in the delivery of Business Link's services across the English regions.

The five scenarios were:

Case 1: A business seeking to grow and wanting to employ more people:

This type of enquiry included businesses that have never employed additional staff and require advice about: (i) recruitment services and processes; (ii) PAYE implications; (iii) employment law; (iv) employment assistance schemes/grants/subsidies; (v) improving the skills of employees. An alternative business growth scenario involves businesses seeking help with accessing international markets.

Case 2: A business seeking finance/working capital:

This type of enquiry included businesses that are unable to obtain sufficient funds from their current existing business banking arrangements and are considering alternative sources of finance. These included enquiries relating to recent access to finance initiatives such as the Enterprise Finance Guarantee and RDA loan funds. This scenario had particular relevance given the current period of difficult macro economic conditions.

Case 3: A declining business/business seeking recovery:

This type of enquiry included a number of possible options and types of advice that businesses might require, such as: (i) business exit strategies; (ii) business diversification strategies; (iii) marketing assistance; (iv) employment law advice with regard to making redundancies; (v) financial management advice.

Case 4: A business seeking training assistance:

This type of enquiry included businesses requiring staff or management training and were looking for reliable local accredited training providers and might also benefit from the provision of training subsidies provided through current programmes such as 'Train to Gain'.

Case 5: Business start-up:

Business start-ups, in the pre-start phase are typically seeking assistance in the following ways: (i) access to start-up finance – loans and grants; (ii) product and service development advice; (iii) marketing information; (iv) finding suitable business premises; (v) sourcing suppliers; (vi) business networking contacts. For early trading businesses, taking on staff can be a particularly important hurdle to overcome.

Phase 3: Recruitment and tracking of businesses

Sampling Frame Requirements

The research aimed to recruit 150 businesses to take part in this mystery shopping research with Business Link services. The aim was that around 120 would be from existing businesses trading for more than 12 months and around 30 would be pre-start or early start businesses within their first 12 months of trading. A key requirement in recruiting suitable businesses was that they had not had any recent (i.e. within the previous 12 months) contact with Business Link prior to their involvement with this mystery shopping exercise.

Representation was sought by:

- channel of initial enquiry: i.e. (i) email (50 cases), (ii) regional telephone (50 cases) and (iii) national telephone enquiries (50 cases);
- region (with a target of 15 cases in each of the nine English regions);
- business scenarios (i.e. at least 30 cases for each of the five business scenarios, but with a fair degree of overlap anticipated);
- different client segments with regard to ethnic minorities, women, age (over 50/under30) and different broad sectors (e.g. manufacturing/services).

In practice, 159 businesses were recruited and the sample frame requirements were met.

Recruitment and Tracking of Business Cases

Businesses were mainly selected via random sampling of 'Experian' business data (2,225 cases in total), with quotas to ensure businesses were selected from a range of broad sectors, equally across the regions (250 cases per region) and evenly throughout their counties. Additionally, where required, businesses were drawn from local networking sources (particularly through Middlesex University's resources and linkages). During the course of the business recruitment, some early stage businesses which had been trading for less than 12 months were recruited and these were supplemented by business start-ups recruited via Middlesex University's postgraduate students and networking resources.

The emphasis on recruiting businesses at random from Experian data required a high volume of telephone 'cold calling'. Once a business was found that: (i) was interested in or

already thinking of contacting Business Link in the near future and (ii) was willing to participate in the test of Business Link services, an initial proforma was completed to provide a profile of the business and the owner/manager and details on their reasons for wanting to contact Business Link. Arrangements were also discussed with the owner/manager for contacting Business Link. The recruited businesses were subsequently interviewed at various intervals to track their experience of using Business Link services. Separate proformas, typically completed by the researchers by telephone interview after each stage, were produced for the initial response to a telephone enquiry; the initial response to an email enquiry; a follow-up telephone call from a Business Link adviser; and a face-to-face meeting with a Business Link adviser. Once a business had completed the early stages of their journey (which may not have led to a face-to-face meeting), a debriefing telephone interview was held with the owner/manager to obtain their overall assessment of the service that they had received and its usefulness to the business. Debriefing interviews took place once there had been time for participants to receive and consider follow-up materials from Business Link. These interviews also provided quality control on the overall interview process, providing an opportunity to clarify matters with participants and to get a clear overview of how the initial enquiry process had operated in each case.

Difficulties of Recruiting Businesses

Recruiting the target number of businesses proved to be challenging.

- The timing of the research, from mid-July to the end of September 2009 and therefore incorporating the height of the UK summer holiday period, resulted in difficulties in contacting owner/managers of businesses and then progressing participating businesses through the early stages of Business Link contact.
- After initial pilot recruitment of participating businesses in the Eastern region, the decision was taken not to provide incentive payments. This was mainly because the research required genuine business enquiries for which relatively small-scale financial incentives should not be necessary. In essence, the reward to participating businesses would be the receipt of the assistance that they required.
- The researchers also met some antipathy and apathy towards Business Link which was indicative of some misapprehension about the nature and range of the services provided. For example, some existing businesses held the view that Business Link

services were only appropriate to pre-start and start-up situations and that there was little help that they could give established businesses. On the other hand, some business owners felt that their business was too small to benefit from the kind of help that Business Link provided. More critical comments came from some technology based businesses that, on the basis of their own or similar companies experience, held the view that Business Link could not provide the kind of specialist support that they needed.

- In practice, approximately one in fifteen businesses contacted expressed an interest in participating, but around ten per cent of these subsequently dropped out, typically because: (i) they did not have time to participate (i.e. they had a genuine requirement, but could never find time to e-mail or call Business Link); (ii) the timing of the research did not fit in with their requirements (i.e. business development plans were forecast for 6 months time, so it was currently too early to make an enquiry with Business Link). A third category also emerged which delayed contacting Business Link, but eventually did so. Whilst displaying some of the characteristics of the ‘drop-out’ cases, this category also contained businesses which were not confident to approach Business Link because they did not think that their business was suited to Business Link assistance. Examples included:

A butcher who stated: “...why would Business Link want to help a 63 year old self employed Butcher?” This was despite the fact that the business had genuine growth potential and succession issues.

An environmental consultancy which mentioned: “...I am familiar with the concept of Business Link, but have never used them. I’m not sure they can help a small environmental consultancy in our niche area of work”

One key finding from this recruitment process is that owner/managers are busy people, whose time is precious and who struggle to find time to make a call for assistance – even when it appears to be an obvious and necessary thing for them to do.

5. CONSULTATION WITH RDAs

5.1 Existing Business Link Mystery Shopping Research

During the initial stages of the study, all nine English RDAs were contacted in order to collect information on previous regional mystery shopping exercises that tested initial enquiry approaches to Business Link services. The aim was to learn from previous approaches and to utilise appropriate elements of good practice.

Five of the regions indicated that they had undertaken some form of mystery shopping test of Business Link recently: North West, East Midlands, South East, London and North East. These mystery shopping exercises typically tested a range of enquiry channels (i.e. regional and national telephone and email) taking place at different times of the day. They utilised relatively small numbers of existing business cases, often supplemented with pre-start enquiries, partly because of the difficulties in recruiting existing business participants. In the South East region a recent mystery shopper test had involved recruiting 60 existing businesses and, whilst this had required a lot of telephone calls, the participating businesses were helpful and enthusiastic.

Key findings from these studies include initial problems encountered with Business Link's national telephone enquiry line routing, particularly where client enquiries were from landlines on the border between Business Links or from mobile telephones which were routed through the national call centre. There were also some problems with telephone call cut-offs and failures to respond to email enquiries. A general trend revealed by these mystery shopper studies is that the further clients progress through the early stages of contact with Business Link, the greater their level of satisfaction, with clients being particularly impressed with the more in-depth business and sector knowledge demonstrated by Account Managers/Specialist Advisers (see for example ONE Mystery Shopper Study, March 2009).

It was widely recognised amongst the RDAs consulted that the recruitment of existing businesses was essential to the validity of the research, particularly in testing Business Link's responses and initial service offer to existing businesses i.e. through the 'Real Help for Business' support package. It was also recognised that the timescale for client progression through the early stages of Business Link contact as far as an initial face-to-

face meeting could take several weeks during the summer period, despite key performance indicator parameters aiming at seven to ten working days. This posited the need for this study to keep in contact with the business cases on a regular basis and to collect data via self-completion or interview at each stage, in order to obtain accurate information whilst it was still fresh in the mind of the participant. At the same time however, it was important to try to avoid the ‘halo effect’ that had been noted in ONE’s mystery shopper study which arose from clients providing feedback immediately after their contacts with Business Link rather than allowing time to fully consider the value of the advice given and to digest the content of action plans. It was also strongly recommended that the existing business case scenarios selected should be robust enough to generate sufficient numbers of cases achieving face-to-face meetings with Business Link.

5.2 The Business Link Customer Journey

The nine regional English Business Links operate broadly similar enquiry handling procedures, although there are some variations, which are mentioned below. This section attempts to provide a general overview of the new customer enquiry journey, tracking progress from the customer’s initial enquiry (i.e. by telephone or email) through as far as the result of a face-to-face meeting where this is appropriate.

Business Link providers typically describe this as the ‘customer journey’ process and have key performance indicators that provide guidance on how enquiries should be handled. To some extent these vary between Business Links and what is provided in this report is a general indicator of what is typically provided by Business Links, forming a contextual background to the findings of the mystery shopper test of Business Link services.

For the purposes of this report, the initial customer enquiry journey is presented in stages. As Figure 1 depicts, ‘**Stage 1**’ represents the initial method of enquiry, which can be via one of three channels:

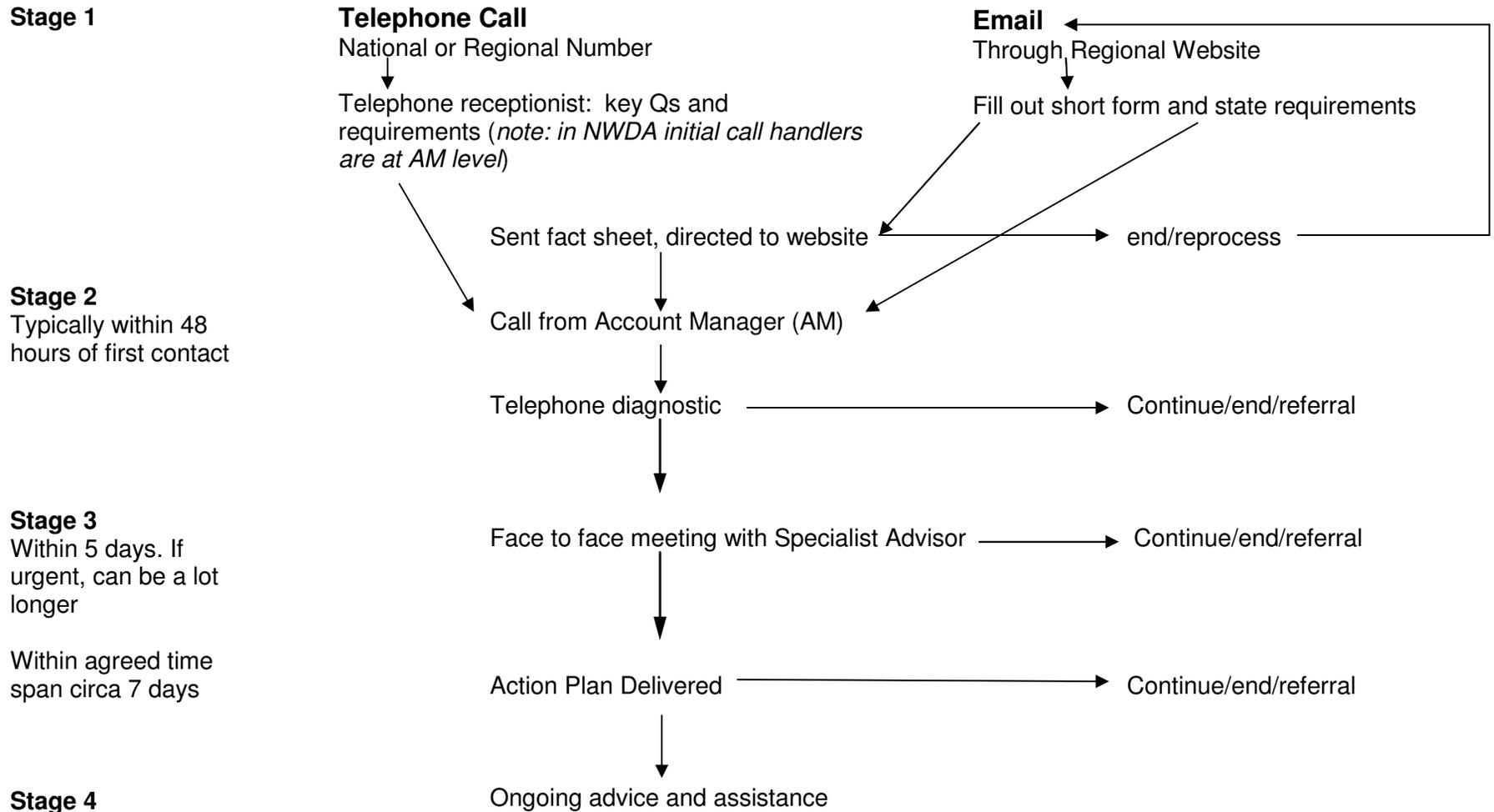
- **Telephone enquiry on the national enquiry line:** these calls are received by a national call centre hub and then routed through to the appropriate regional call centre. In the South East and North East regions, which only use the national telephone enquiry line (i.e. they do not have their own separate regional telephone enquiry line), calls are directly routed through to the regional telephone call centre, unless they are

from mobile telephones in which case they will be picked up by the national telephone helpline.

- **Telephone enquiry on the regional telephone line:** seven of the nine regions have their own direct regional telephone enquiry lines.
- **Email enquiry:** these can be made either via the national or regional Business Link websites, using the on-line enquiry form (the national website directs client enquiries via their postcode to the appropriate regional website), or by using the regional Business Link email addresses.

Key performance guidelines for the initial call handler include: being welcoming and interested in the callers line of enquiry, offering strict confidentiality, taking sufficient details of the enquiry and enquirer's contact details to facilitate a return call when they state that they will. Most Business Links aim to provide a return call within three working days and for urgent priority cases (e.g. a client threatened with immediate bankruptcy proceedings) a return call will be made within 24 hours.

Figure 1: Flow Diagram of Business Link Services



For email enquiries, there are similar key performance indicators, which require a response to the initial enquiry within three working days and within 24 hours for urgent enquiries.

'Stage 2' represents a call back from a specialist adviser, often referred to as an 'Account Manager' (they could be 'Skills Brokers', or 'Sector Brokers'). This will be an adviser who is capable of offering a telephone diagnostic which may potentially resolve the client's enquiry. Alternatively, the stage 2 contact may lead to arrangements for a face-to-face meeting with the specialist adviser. In some regions, such as the North West, it has been suggested that all initial stage 1 calls are handled by call handlers with 'Account Manager' skills and that this can potentially lead to initial enquiries receiving immediate diagnostic advice, or being routed through to face-to-face meetings (i.e. without need for a stage 2 call back).

'Stage 3' represents a face-to-face meeting with the client. Appointments for face-to-face meetings with specialist advisers are typically made within five days of a stage 2 (or equivalent first Account Manager contact) call. It is acknowledged that at certain times of the year (e.g. holiday periods) and for certain specialist requirements where appropriately skilled brokers/advisers are in short supply, it may take longer to arrange face-to-face meetings. Business Link typically requires that specialist advisers should be 'SFEDI' (Small Firms Enterprise Development Initiative) accredited. Meetings are typically held at clients premises, but may be undertaken at appropriate Business Link offices, or neutral venues (e.g. hotel reception rooms) where appropriate and in agreement with the client.

A key output from a face-to-face meeting will be a written follow-up report for the client, typically delivered by e-mail. This will outline key recommendations and proposals and next steps for assistance – often referred to as an 'Action Plan'. All stage 3 meetings should result in an Action Plan, although the shape and form of these Action Plans will vary according to the nature of the enquiry and resultant requirements. Action Plans are typically delivered to the client within three working days (often within 24 hours, by e-mail).

An important variation in the service exists for start-up business enquiries, which are defined as businesses trading for less than one year. Typically, these businesses will be channelled into a start-up assistance package, delivered by a suitable locally accredited start-up agency

6. SURVEY FINDINGS

This section presents the findings relating to the 159 businesses that made initial contact enquiries with Business Link during the research period mid-July to the end of September 2009.

6.1 Profile of Mystery Shopper Businesses Contacting Business Link

Table 1: Regional Distribution of Research Participants Contacting Business Link and achieving Face to Face Meeting with Business Link

| Region | Enquiries | | Face to Face Meetings | |
|------------------------|------------|--------------------|-----------------------|--|
| | Frequency | % of all enquiries | Frequency | % within region who progressed to a face to face meeting |
| East of England | 22 | 14% | 6 | 27% |
| East Midlands | 19 | 12% | 9 | 47% |
| North East | 17 | 11% | 11 | 65% |
| North West | 16 | 10% | 6 | 38% |
| West Midlands | 19 | 12% | 5 | 26% |
| Yorkshire & the Humber | 17 | 11% | 8 | 47% |
| South West | 16 | 10% | 6 | 38% |
| South East | 16 | 10% | 8 | 50% |
| London | 17 | 11% | 5 | 29% |
| Total | 159 | 100% | 64 | 40% |

Table 1 shows that **a high proportion of initial contacts (40 per cent) led to face-to-face meetings**, with particularly high proportions in the North East and South East regions (at least half of all enquiries), but relatively low proportions in the West Midlands, London and Eastern regions. When these figures are adjusted to account for start-up cases in each region, these being the least likely to receive a face-to-face meeting with a Business Link adviser, it is notable that the regional pattern remains broadly similar, with well over half of the cases in the North East and South East regions leading to a face-to-face meeting compared to less than a third of the cases in the West Midlands at the other extreme. There is no indication that the timing of the research in each region had any impact on the proportions of clients achieving face-to-face meetings. There was some evidence that the summer holiday period had led to some delays, but these were dealt with before the end of September.

Distribution by Business Type

Tables 2, 3 and 4 present profile data for the recruited business participants. These indicate that there was a broad range of sectoral distribution, which is reflective of the Experian sampling frame. With the exception of overrepresentation in manufacturing, this distribution is broadly in line with national trends and the Business Link client base (see Table 2). In line with national trends and the Business Link client base there was a strong bias towards micro businesses (80 per cent employed less than ten staff) and only two per cent (3 cases) had more than 50 staff. Many larger businesses that were contacted explained that they did not require Business Link's services because they had their own internal resources (e.g. human resources and training departments), or because of perceptions that Business Link is for start-ups and smaller businesses. The panel of recruited businesses included 12 start-up businesses trading for less than one year, supplemented by 15 pre-start cases (some being provided by Middlesex University staff and students). Over two-fifths of the panel were well established businesses trading for 10 years or more.

Table 2: Broad Sectoral Distribution

| | Frequency | % of all participants | % ABI 2007 |
|-------------------|------------|-----------------------|-------------|
| Primary | 1 | 0.6% | 0.3% |
| Manufacturing | 29 | 18.2% | 6.8% |
| Construction | 16 | 10.1% | 9.7% |
| Wholesale | 7 | 4.4% | 5.3% |
| Retail | 23 | 14.5% | 11.7% |
| Hotel & Catering | 9 | 5.7% | 4.3% |
| Transport | 8 | 5% | 4.3% |
| Business Services | 50 | 31.4% | 32.1% |
| Health | 7 | 4.4% | 2.5% |
| Personal Services | 4 | 2.5% | 8.3% |
| Other | 5 | 3.1% | 14.7% |
| Total | 159 | 100% | 100% |

Note: NOMIS Annual Business Inquiry 2007 data

Table 3: Employment Size Distribution

| Employees | Frequency | % of all participants |
|--------------|------------|-----------------------|
| One | 41 | 26% |
| 2 to 4 | 60 | 38% |
| 5 to 9 | 27 | 17% |
| 10 to 24 | 25 | 16% |
| 25 to 49 | 3 | 2% |
| 50+ | 3 | 2% |
| Total | 159 | 100% |

Table 4: Distribution by Trading Age

| Trading Age | Frequency | % of all participants |
|--------------|------------|-----------------------|
| Pre Start | 15 | 9% |
| <1 year | 12 | 8% |
| 1-4 years | 31 | 20% |
| 5-9 years | 31 | 20% |
| 10+ years | 70 | 43% |
| Total | 159 | 100% |

Distribution by Business Owner Characteristics

Tables 5, 6 and 7 present the ownership characteristics of the participating businesses, indicating that two-thirds of owners were aged between 30-50 and only four per cent (six cases) less than 30 years of age. The proportion of male to female owner-manager respondents was almost 3:2. Whilst this might appear to be over-representative of women managers, it is in alignment with BIS's Annual Small Business Survey (2007), which indicated that women-led and joint gender managed businesses represent around two-fifths of UK small businesses. The indication here is that where businesses have joint or mixed gender management, women managers may have been more inclined to participate in the survey. Three owner-manager respondents indicated that they have registered disabilities.

Table 5: Age profile of Respondent Owner/Manager

| Age Group | Frequency | % of all participants |
|--------------|------------|-----------------------|
| <30 | 6 | 4% |
| 30-50 | 104 | 65% |
| 50+ | 49 | 31% |
| Total | 159 | 100% |

Table 6: Gender of Respondent Owner/Manager

| Gender | Frequency | % of all participants |
|--------------|------------|-----------------------|
| Male | 98 | 62% |
| Female | 61 | 38% |
| Total | 159 | 100% |

Table 7: Ethnicity of Respondent Owner/Manager

| Ethnic Group | Frequency | % of all participants |
|-------------------|------------|-----------------------|
| White | 133 | 84% |
| South Asian | 13 | 8% |
| African-Caribbean | 9 | 6% |
| Chinese | 1 | 0.5% |
| Other European | 2 | 1% |
| Other | 1 | 0.5% |
| Total | 159 | 100% |

One sixth of businesses were ethnic minority owned, with the majority being South Asian or African-Caribbean. Table 8 presents the regional distribution of ethnic minority participants and demonstrates that, whilst there is an even distribution between six of the English regions, there is a particularly high proportion of ethnic minority participants in London and no ethnic minority participants from the South West and Yorkshire and the Humber regions. In part this reflects the national ethnic minority business distribution with London containing the highest proportion and the South West the lowest (e.g. ASBS 2006 sole proprietor data indicated 24.6% ethnic minority respondents in London compared to just 0.5% in the South West).

Table 8: Ethnic Minority Respondents by Region

| Region | Ethnic Minority Group | | Base n = |
|------------------------|-----------------------|-----|----------|
| | Frequency | % | |
| East of England | 3 | 14% | 22 |
| East Midlands | 3 | 16% | 19 |
| North East | 2 | 12% | 17 |
| North West | 2 | 13% | 16 |
| West Midlands | 3 | 16% | 19 |
| Yorkshire & the Humber | 0 | 0% | 17 |
| South West | 0 | 0% | 16 |
| South East | 3 | 19% | 16 |
| London | 10 | 59% | 17 |
| Total | 26 | 16% | 159 |

Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number

Distribution by Type of Enquiry

Table 9: Mode of Initial Enquiry by Region

| Region | National Telephone | | Regional Telephone | | Email | | Base n = |
|------------------------|--------------------|-----|--------------------|-----|-----------|-----|----------|
| | Frequency | % | Frequency | % | Frequency | % | |
| East of England | 3 | 14% | 10 | 46% | 9 | 41% | 22 |
| East Midlands | 5 | 26% | 10 | 53% | 4 | 21% | 19 |
| North East | 14 | 82% | 0 | 0% | 3 | 18% | 17 |
| North West | 2 | 13% | 9 | 56% | 5 | 31% | 16 |
| West Midlands | 8 | 42% | 8 | 42% | 3 | 16% | 19 |
| Yorkshire & the Humber | 1 | 6% | 7 | 41% | 9 | 53% | 17 |
| South West | 2 | 13% | 11 | 74% | 2 | 13% | 15 |
| South East | 13 | 81% | 0 | 0% | 3 | 19% | 16 |
| London | 2 | 12% | 9 | 53% | 6 | 35% | 17 |
| Total | 50 | 32% | 64 | 41% | 44 | 28% | 158 |

Note: There is one missing case where the business point of entry to Business Link's services was via attendance at a business event, which subsequently led to a face to face meeting with a business adviser.

Table 9 demonstrates that there is a broad distribution of different modes of enquiry across the nine regions. The exceptions are the two regions (North East and South East) where there is no separate regional telephone enquiry line. It is also notable that email enquiries were particularly popular amongst participants in the East of England and Yorkshire and

the Humber regions, whilst only one participant from Yorkshire and the Humber used the national telephone enquiry line.

Tables 10 and 11 classify the participating businesses by the type of enquiry they were making to Business Link. Table 8 presents information about the main line of enquiry with regard to case scenario classification, indicating that business growth was most frequently mentioned. However, it should be noted that initial enquiries can include multiple questions with several cases covering more than one scenario.

Table 10: Case Scenario Distribution

| Enquiry Category | Frequency | % of all participants |
|--|------------|-----------------------|
| seeking to grow and expand | 78 | 49% |
| seeking finance | 39 | 25% |
| seeking business recovery | 33 | 21% |
| seeking training assistance | 43 | 27% |
| seeking start-up/new business assistance | 27 | 17% |
| Total | 159 | 100% |

Note: Businesses could record more than one category of assistance required – frequencies presented relate to total responses for each category of assistance

In the debrief with researchers at the completion of the initial contact process with Business Link, participating owner/managers were asked what their main questions for Business Link had been, with up to four options recorded (Table 11). By far, the most frequent types of assistance required were sales and marketing (33 per cent), raising finance (31 per cent), business planning (29 per cent), and training related (27 per cent). There were a number of cases where participants were interested in web and e-marketing assistance. Raising finance was mentioned by almost one third of cases. It should be noted that this category includes seeking training subsidies, rather than the more restricted definition of seeking grant, equity and mainstream bank finance referred to in the Table 10 case scenarios.

Table 11: Type of Assistance Required

| Type of Assistance Required | Frequency | % of all participants |
|---|------------|-----------------------|
| Raising finance or working capital | 49 | 31% |
| Financial management | 20 | 13% |
| Business planning | 46 | 29% |
| Employment | 3 | 2% |
| Legal advice | 1 | 1% |
| Land and premises advice | 7 | 4% |
| Relocation | 2 | 1% |
| Sales and marketing | 52 | 33% |
| Exporting and international expansion | 12 | 8% |
| Networking (developing business contacts) | 13 | 8% |
| Product/services development | 7 | 4% |
| Training | 42 | 27% |
| Sourcing suppliers | 1 | 1% |
| Regulatory | 5 | 3% |
| Other | 6 | 4% |
| Total | 159 | 100% |

Note: Businesses could record more than one type of assistance required – frequencies presented relate to total responses for each type of assistance.

6.2 Satisfaction Indicators

This section provides evidence of the levels of satisfaction with various key elements of Business Link's services during the initial and early stages of enquiry. This research covers three main initial and early stages: Stage 1: first contact communication by telephone or e-mail; Stage 2: follow up telephone communication, typically instigated by Business Link for telephone diagnostic or further assessment as an intermediate stage towards arranging face-to-face meetings; and Stage 3: first face-to-face meeting with an adviser.

The 159 participating businesses did not necessarily proceed through all of these stages, 56 did not progress beyond stage 1 whilst others (20) skipped over the second stage going straight to a face-to-face meeting with an adviser after the initial enquiry stage (see Figure 2).

Table 12 presents the distribution of initial enquiry methods, distinguishing between national and regional telephone enquiries. Nearly three quarters of the initial contacts were made by telephone. Of these, just under half (44 per cent) used the national telephone

enquiry line, most being from the North East or South East regions which do not have their own regional telephone number (see table 9 for regional breakdown).

Table 12: Method of Initial Enquiry with Business Link

| | Frequency | % of participants |
|--------------------|-------------|-------------------|
| National Telephone | 50 | 32% |
| Regional Telephone | 64 | 40% |
| Email | 44 | 28% |
| Total | 158* | 100% |

Note: *There is one missing case where the business point of entry to Business Link's services was via attendance at a business event, which subsequently led to a face to face meeting with a business adviser.

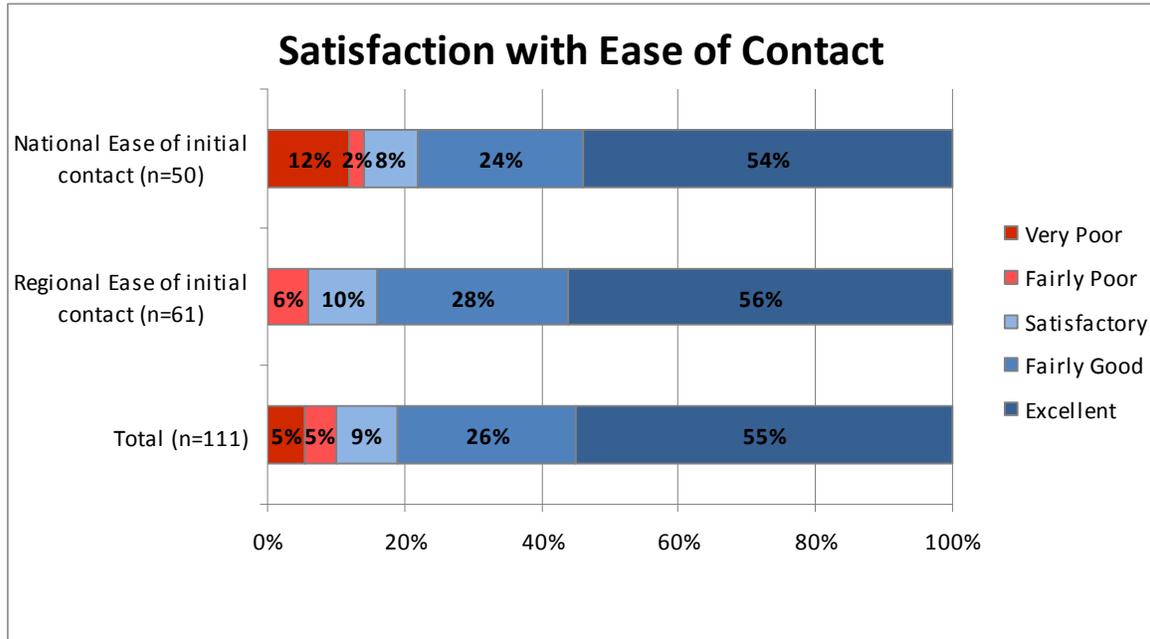
Figure 2: Flow diagram of Mystery Shopper Clients through initial Business Link Services by Mode of Enquiry

| Total | National Telephone | Regional Telephone | Email |
|--------------------|--|---|---|
| (158 cases) | (50) | (64) | (44) |
| Stage 1: | Initial Call Handling Enquiry | | |
| (158 cases) | (50) | (64) | (44) |
| | 6 no help received 2 not proceeded yet 10 referred/advised 1 no call back 7 progressed direct to f/f 24 progressed to stage 2 | 2 asked to call back 4 no call back 12 referred/advised 6 progressed direct to f/f 40 progressed to stage 2 | 7 no response 3 did not proceed 9 referred/advised 7 progressed direct to f/f 18 progressed to S2 |
| Stage 2: | Follow Up Telephone Call from an Account Manager | | |
| (82 cases) | (24) | (40) | (18) |
| | 9 resolved/advised 2 further call back 10 to f/f 3 not yet proceed to f/f | 11 resolved/advised 3 further call back 24 to f/f 1 not yet proceeded to f/f 1 asked to call back | 8 resolved/advised 1 further call back 9 to f/f |
| Stage 3: | Face to Face Meeting (f/f) | | |
| (63 cases) | (17) | (30) | (16) |

Note: Data for 158 cases – There is one missing case where the business point of entry to Business Link’s services was via attendance at a business event, which subsequent led to a face to face meeting with a business advisor.

6.2.1 Initial Telephone Enquiries (stage 1)

Figure 3: Satisfaction with Ease of Contact Comparing National and Regional Telephone Enquiries (bar row percentages are of businesses in scope)



Note: Three cases did not provide initial telephone contact data

Figure 3 presents findings relating to the ease with which participants were able to make their initial telephone contact with Business Link, with regard to national regional and all telephone enquiries. This indicates that, overall, nine out of ten respondents were satisfied with the ease of contact of their initial telephone call to Business Link, although one in seven respondents experience some initial problems contacting the national enquiry line (as mentioned below).

Table 13: Satisfaction with Initial Telephone Enquiries (stage 1) (row percentages are of businesses in scope)

| How polite/courteous was the adviser? | | | | | | |
|--|-----------|-------------|--------------|-------------|------------|---------------|
| Mode of Enquiry | Very Poor | Fairly Poor | Satisfactory | Fairly Good | Excellent | Base n= |
| National Telephone | 4% | 2% | 8% | 28% | 58% | 50 |
| Regional Telephone | 0% | 2% | 3% | 39% | 56% | 61 |
| All cases | 2% | 2% | 5% | 34% | 57% | 111* |
| Did the advisor listen? | | | | | | |
| National Telephone | 6% | 4% | 16% | 18% | 55% | 49 |
| Regional Telephone | 5% | 7% | 8% | 39% | 41% | 61 |
| All cases | 5% | 6% | 12% | 30% | 47% | 110** |
| Was question fully understood? | | | | | | |
| National Telephone | 10% | 4% | 18% | 22% | 45% | 49 |
| Regional Telephone | 6% | 10% | 16% | 28% | 39% | 61 |
| All cases | 8% | 7% | 17% | 25% | 42% | 110** |
| Were call back arrangements clear? | | | | | | |
| National Telephone | 4% | 0% | 35% | 12% | 50% | 26 |
| Regional Telephone | 3% | 0% | 14% | 35% | 49% | 37 |
| All cases | 3% | 0% | 22% | 26% | 49% | 63 |
| Was it clear how matters would be progressed? | | | | | | |
| National Telephone | 2% | 0% | 9% | 29% | 60% | 45 |
| Regional Telephone | 4% | 2% | 9% | 25% | 61% | 57 |
| All cases | 3% | 1% | 9% | 26% | 61% | 102*** |

Note: * three cases not included due to incomplete stage 1 data

** a further case did not proceed beyond initial discussion because of boundary issues

*** not all remaining cases required a call back and in not all cases was it necessary to undertake a follow-up action.

Exploring the various aspects of initial stage 1 telephone enquiries in more detail (for national, regional and all telephone enquiries), Table 13 indicates that the **vast majority of respondents found that their initial telephone call to Business Link was either fairly good or excellent**. Telephone call handlers scored above satisfactory in all elements for at least three-quarters of calls, with the exception of ‘whether the line of questioning was fully understood’ (67 per cent). Call handlers scored particularly highly in relation to being polite and courteous: 91 per cent stated that this part of the telephone enquiry service was above satisfactory (86 per cent for national enquiries and as high as 95 per cent for regional enquiries). Indeed, many respondents were pleasantly surprised at the response they received, suggesting that it was “...*very welcoming and surpassed all expectations.*” One respondent (an environmental consultant) mentioned that they were “...*pleasantly surprised at how professional and knowledgeable the call handler was*” and another (a computer software systems company looking for advice on international expansion) commented that

“the BL person knew what questions to ask to build up a picture of the business i.e. what it was doing and where it was trying to get to – I got the feeling she was clued up.”

However, there were some teething troubles, particularly around the initial telephone call, with 18 per cent of national line and 11 per cent of regional line respondents having to make more than one call in order to get through to Business Link. Problems encountered included: receiving no answer at all; getting through to an ‘answerphone’ during typical office hours (regional call line); being told to call back, as no advisers were available (regional and national call lines); experiencing problems negotiating call options (national call line).

Twelve per cent of respondents (Figure 3) using the national enquiry line rated the service response as very poor. A particular source of irritation was the problem of regional boundaries, which led to callers being diverted through to the wrong Business Link with resultant confusion over how the enquiry should proceed. One respondent was consistently told that they were classified as being in Scotland, despite having an English postcode address, and another had to explain six times that they wished to be put through to a regional office and when they eventually got through they were informed that everyone suitable was in a meeting and could the enquirer call back later.

Fifteen per cent of respondents, referring to the initial call handler, were dissatisfied with the extent to which their line of questioning was understood. This included difficulties in dealing with enquiries relating to specialist sectoral issues (e.g. an electrical contractor calling on a regional line enquiring about funding to assist with the installation of photovoltaic cells i.e. a type of solar panel).

A small number of respondents, calling on both regional and national lines, felt that call handlers try to avoid putting enquiries through to an adviser if they possibly can and that call handlers need more training in how to route calls (e.g. a self-employed individual looking for advice re business contacts/networking).

There was a feeling relating to one regional enquiry line, expressed by several businesses that matters were not being thoroughly explored by the initial telephone call handlers and that their cases were either being dismissed, or referred to the Chamber of Commerce for generic assistance too readily. One example of this was an established engineering firm seeking specialist marketing assistance to help launch a new product. The business

manager stated: *“We are looking for a meeting with a specialist adviser who can help us with developing contacts and improving our marketing channels for our new product. We were not at all impressed or satisfied with a referral to a Chamber of Commerce start-up training course on marketing and being told that the only way in which we can proceed to meeting a business adviser is to attend this training course first. We do not have time to waste going around in circles between Business Link and the Chamber of Commerce!”*

The issues for the business in just over one fifth of cases (22 per cent) were able to be resolved after an initial telephone call. Resolution typically involved being signposted to other agencies, being sent information by email or post, or being directed to the Business Link website for further information. Just under one fifth of cases (19 per cent) were transferred during their initial call to Business Link to a specialist adviser.

Respondents were asked if their full contact details had been taken by the Business Link call handler. In the vast majority of cases (over 85 per cent) business trading name, contact name, business address and business telephone number were taken down. E-mail was recorded in just over two-thirds of cases (67 per cent) and mobile telephone numbers in nearly two-fifths of cases (38 per cent).

It is notable that a convenient time for a call back was recorded in less than half of cases (44 per cent). This was to prove an important issue when it came to stage two telephone call back feedback from respondents, with a number of respondents complaining about missed calls and the inappropriate timing of Business Link’s call backs.

Overall (Table 13), 96 per cent were satisfied that it was clear how their enquiry would progress, with little difference between national and regional telephone enquiries in this respect.

6.2.2 Initial Email Enquiries (stage 1)

Table 14: Satisfaction with Email Enquiries (bar row percentages are of businesses in scope)

| Question | Very Poor | Fairly Poor | Satisfactory | Fairly Good | Excellent | Base n= |
|--|-----------|-------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|---------|
| Ease of initial contact | 7% | 2% | 5% | 27% | 59% | 44 |
| Polite and courteous response | 0% | 3% | 19% | 43% | 35% | 37* |
| Clarity of enquiry handling | 3% | 8% | 3% | 47% | 39% | 36** |
| Consideration/probing on enquiry | 6% | 3% | 9% | 46% | 36% | 33** |
| Sufficient details for follow-up | 9% | 0% | 14% | 23% | 54% | 22*** |
| Was it clear how matters would be progressed | 9% | 6% | 9% | 18% | 58% | 33**** |

Note: *In 7 cases there was failure to respond to email enquiries

**cases where missing data, or did not consider applicable question for email response

***not all cases required follow-up, as they were resolved at this stage

****Not all cases required progression, which could include sending through information by post or email, but not necessarily follow-up contact.

Overall, where a response was received, 89 per cent of respondents rated the e-mail enquiry service as satisfactory or above on all measures except clarity of how matters would be progressed (85%). Table 14 demonstrates that there were some problems encountered around initial e-mail contact, with one in ten respondents indicating difficulties sending emails. These mainly related to sending emails via the Business Link regional websites, for example, one respondent mentioned “... *stumbling across the web email form by chance.*”

Table 15: Initial Email Enquiry Response

| Type of Response | Frequency | % |
|--------------------|-----------|-------------|
| No Response | 7 | 16% |
| Email Response | 16 | 36% |
| Telephone Response | 21 | 48% |
| Total | 44 | 100% |

Additionally, almost one in six (Table 15, seven out of 44) respondents who attempted initial contact via email failed to receive any response at all from Business Link after a two week period. In some cases respondents had e-mailed on more than one occasion, but still did

not receive a response. In a couple of cases, the respondent reluctantly telephoned Business Link, whilst in the majority of cases, they gave up, or decided to call back when they had more time to do so. In five of these cases, they had not called Business Link within the subsequent two months.

Almost three fifths of valid responses (57 per cent) to email enquiries were by telephone, with the remainder by e-mail. Response times to emails varied considerably, with a median response time of one day, but ranging from less than one hour up to 10 working days in two cases.

It should also be noted that only one quarter of cases indicated receiving an email read receipt and in none of the regions was an email receipt consistently provided, so those respondents not receiving a response (and none received e-mail 'bounce back') had no idea of whether their e-mail had been received by Business Link or not and within what time period they would be likely to get a response to their email. One respondent, who did not complain, noted that *"...the Business Link website was down at the time of my enquiry, which was unfortunate."*

Several respondents mentioned that they were only prepared to make enquiries by e-mail, because they felt that it was easier and more effective for them to set out their enquiry in writing, or because they felt more comfortable using e-mail, rather than an initial telephone call – when they *"...might get flustered"*. A few of these enquiries were quite detailed and lengthy – perhaps suggesting that a simple template requesting short summary of key questions could be helpful for Business Link staff to quickly assess what is required. For some of these respondents, the failure to receive a response from Business Link was particularly frustrating, particularly if they had sent several emails without a response, as they had put considerable effort into constructing their e-mail enquiries.

Some respondents referred to not having time to call Business Link during typical office hours, preferring to e-mail Business Link in the evening or early morning and simply were not prepared to telephone Business Link if their email enquiries failed to elicit a response. A typical example was a computer consultant, who explained: *"I emailed Business Link twice over the course of the last month, without receiving any response. Eventually I did find time to call Business Link, about two months after my initial email enquiry. The telephonist was very helpful, but then I never received a call back from Business Link as promised and I've now given up on the process!"*

Table 14 indicates that once e-mails were responded to, clients were typically very satisfied with the clarity of enquiry handling and consideration given to their enquiries. However, in five cases there was a lack of clarity with regard to how matters would be progressed.

Sixteen e-mail cases (43 per cent of n=37) were resolved at stage 1, with five cases being referred to other organisations, including 'Train to Gain' and local business start-up support agencies. The remainder received a mix of further Business Link information by e-mail, referral to websites and information about business seminars/courses. It is also notable that in only 40 per cent of cases where further contact was required (which would most likely involve a telephone call from an adviser) was a suitable contact time requested.

6.2.3 Follow-up Telephone Calls (stage 2)

The follow-up telephone calls relate to the 82 cases undergoing the second stage of contact where a specialist adviser either provided a telephone diagnostic, or made arrangements for a face-to-face meeting. It is notable that in 15 per cent of cases transfer to a specialist adviser occurred immediately at the time of the initial enquiry and for a further 10 per cent a call back occurred on the same day. More typically, a follow-up call from Business Link was undertaken within two to three days (median 2 days). In almost one quarter of cases a call back took more than five working days and in two extreme cases it took two months.

Table 16 demonstrates that advisers score very highly with regard to politeness; 90 per cent being rated at above satisfactory. There was also a high level of satisfaction with regard to the specialist advisers' understanding of the line of enquiry (78 per cent rated at above satisfactory). The vast majority of participants felt that they were offered a highly satisfactory service by the stage 2 telephone call from a specialist adviser/Account Manager. One manager of a manufacturing business described this part of the service as *"...of a far higher order than that of the initial call handler – this adviser really understood my financial management questions and provided a thoroughly satisfactory response."*

There was less satisfaction with the advisers' knowledge of the industry sector (although 63 per cent still rated it as above satisfactory). One seventh of cases (15 per cent rated as below satisfactory) felt that their needs were not appropriately addressed, with a similar proportion being dissatisfied with additional information that was provided. In the latter case there was some dissatisfaction with regard to training recommendations. For example, a toy

wholesaler mentioned that: “...the adviser seemed to have an agenda to push training schemes and I was not interested in undertaking health and safety training in a business with two employees.”

In one eighth of cases there was dissatisfaction with follow-up times for stage two call-backs (10 respondents). This most typically related to calls coming at inappropriate times and sometimes resulting in missed calls, rather than delays in responding, which were deemed acceptable, if explained. This underlines the importance of making suitable arrangements for call-back times during initial stage 1 enquiry calls. However, there were five cases where a call back was never received.

Table: 16: Satisfaction with Stage Two Telephone Call (row percentages are of businesses in scope)

| Question | Very Poor | Fairly Poor | Satisfactory | Fairly Good | Excellent | Base n= |
|--|-----------|-------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|---------|
| Satisfaction with follow up time | 9% | 4% | 10% | 26% | 51% | 80 |
| Polite and courteous response | 0% | 1% | 9% | 27% | 63% | 80 |
| Level of understanding of enquiry | 1% | 5% | 16% | 23% | 55% | 75 |
| Level of understanding of sector | 3% | 2% | 32% | 18% | 45% | 66 |
| *Diagnostic by telephone | 14% | 7% | 14% | 23% | 42% | 43 |
| Appropriately addressed needs | 7% | 8% | 13% | 17% | 55% | 75 |
| **How useful was additional information received | 7% | 8% | 13% | 23% | 49% | 39 |
| Satisfaction with outcome | 8% | 6% | 9% | 25% | 52% | 79 |

Note: 82 cases went through this stage – table presents valid data responses excluding not applicable and non responses

*Diagnostic refers to cases where specialist adviser took steps to resolve line of enquiry

** Additional information refers to information that was additional to the line of enquiry

Forty-three cases (53 per cent of all businesses reaching stage 2) received telephone diagnostic advice and information, which typically resulted in Business Link e-mailing or posting information (23 cases), or referral to another organisation (seven cases), including UKTI, training organisations, Chambers of Commerce, IT consultants, a District Council and a specialist social enterprise support agency. Nearly two-thirds (65 per cent) were more than satisfied with the diagnostic advice received, some respondents referring to being “...highly delighted with the business contacts suggested” and “...really surprised that there are suitable training subsidies to help us.” Typical feedback from the participants reaching this

stage was that the *“quality, knowledge and expertise of advisers was distinctly a cut above the initial call handlers.”*

Some examples of good practice, which drew particular praise from participants, included: an engineering company and an employment agency, both seeking marketing assistance, where the telephone adviser clearly demonstrated that they had checked out the company’s website; a manufacturer referring to receiving *“an excellent range of ideas to help move the business forward, including useful contacts in the sector and interesting ideas for diversification”*; a start-up where the woman manager specifically commented upon receiving *“clear advice, very understanding of my childcare requirements, and helpful signposting to appropriate start-up training providers”*; two participants, a health consultant and a restaurateur, specifically mentioned their *“delight and surprise that we were eligible for training grants which will be really helpful for business development.”*

However, there was some dissatisfaction with this advice, where it was felt that Business Link had simply sent lists of information through without appropriate direction and accompanying advice, or had been lacking in sufficient knowledge about the subject matter and had been unable to make a helpful or correct signposting/referral. For example, one respondent from an electronics business suggested that: *“...Business Link should have known the appropriate organisation responsible for oversight of specific electronics sector regulations, rather than checking this out on Google and giving the wrong advice as to which organisation to contact.”*

A wine merchant mentioned that: *“After six weeks - and speaking to several Business Link people - I still don’t really have an answer to my specific enquiry relating to the normal payment terms relating to suppliers in the drinks industry. Business Link people are terribly nice, but tend to give ‘sitting on the fence information’ rather than a constructive outcome/reply to a specific enquiry. I’m disappointed that even the specialist retail adviser did not seem to know the answer.”*

A structural engineer noted that: *“The adviser clearly did not have knowledge of training above NVQ level 3 and suggested that this was not something Business Link could help with.”* The enquiry related specifically to training on new European codes relating to structural engineering.

A farmer looking to set up a wood fuel co-operative mentioned that: *“I was hoping that Business Link would be able to send out an adviser but they said this was not possible, partly because there wasn't anybody with sufficient knowledge of setting up co-operatives.”* The client was therefore directed to seeking information from more specialist organisations that he already knew about.

One food manufacturing business noted that they had received two follow-up calls from Business Link from different specialist food sector advisers who appeared to be competing to assist them:

“I got a response from a Food and Drink Advisor who proposed a meeting at my office in a couple of weeks. I then had another call from a different Food and Drink Advisor the next day. I pointed out that I had already received a call from an advisor. He was a touch annoyed that they had rung - it seems they're poaching! The second advisor said they'd sort it out and one of them would turn up for the meeting. Clearly this is a competitive business!”

Half (41) of the cases involved in stage 2 telephone advisory/contact sessions progressed through to face-to-face meetings, with the remainder receiving adequate telephone diagnostic advice for the present, or receiving additional Business Link information (23 cases – typically delivered by email within 24 hours). As mentioned above, seven cases received referrals to other organisations and a further two cases received booking information for seminars/courses. Whilst the vast majority (90 per cent) were very pleased with this service, two of these cases complained that the information provided was unsuitable, with one architect stating that: *“I was given the wrong contact number for Women Like Us and other information which was promised was never sent on to me.”* A surveyor indicated that: *“...it was disappointing that the marketing information provided by Business Link was too generic, when it finally arrived.”* A further two cases complained that information was not delivered as had been promised.

Area boundary problems

One problem which arose in a small number of cases related to area boundary issues impacting on regional Business Link working and policy. Six telephone enquiries met with problems relating to which regional Business Link should handle their enquiry. This problem

was most likely to occur when callers were currently resident in one region, but wanted to relocate or expand their business to another region. There were four such calls and these were met either with a refusal of assistance, or by referral to another Business Link, which ultimately ended with no assistance being received, as the examples below demonstrate:

An employment agency based in one region was seeking to expand their business into an adjacent region and was seeking advice on commercial office premises costs and availability in a large city within the adjoining region: *“I called Business Link in [the adjoining region], or I thought I had, but my call was diverted to my home regional Business Link. When I explained my requirement, I was told a specialist adviser would call back from the adjoining regional Business Link. Unfortunately when this person called back next day, I was told that they could not help me to find premises in their region because I am not currently resident and do not have a current business address in that region. I was told that the only regional Business Link that could help me was my own, but that they would not have any knowledge of commercial property within the adjoining region”*

A long established building firm in one region was seeking relocation advice from the adjoining regional Business Link, but was told: *“We cannot assist you as you have to go to the Business Link where your business is currently located.”*

6.2.4 Face-to-Face Meetings (stage 3)

Sixty-four cases attended face-to-face meetings with Business Link advisers, representing 40 per cent of the total sample of businesses. The length of time taken between contact from Business Link to arrange the meeting and the actual meeting taking place ranged from next day to 40 days (the summer holiday period affected some of the longer time delays recorded), with a median time of seven working days: 44 per cent were within five working days, with 23 per cent taking more than two weeks. The high approval rating (88 per cent scored this as above satisfactory) for time taken to achieve a first meeting with a Business Link shows that clients were typically not concerned about delays caused by the holiday period, provided that these were explained. However, one respondent did complain that: *“...the proposed waiting period for a face-to-face meeting of eight weeks was just too long to wait and I decided to make enquiries with other organisations.”*

Face-to-face meetings typically took place at the client’s place of work (73 per cent), with the remainder evenly split between Business Link offices and appropriate neutrally arranged meeting points. There was a high level of approval for the meeting location arrangements with 86 per cent rating these as above satisfactory. There was one case in a more remote rural area where a neutral meeting point with an adviser was a one and a quarter hour drive away.

Table 17: Satisfaction with Face-to-Face meeting (stage 3) (row percentages are of businesses in scope)

| Question | Very Poor | Fairly Poor | Satisfactory | Fairly Good | Excellent | Base n=. |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|-------------|--------------|-------------|-----------|----------|
| Satisfaction with f/f meeting time | 6% | 2% | 4% | 16% | 72% | 64 |
| Satisfaction with f/f arrangements | 1% | 5% | 8% | 16% | 70% | 64 |
| Polite and courteous response | 0% | 2% | 6% | 17% | 75% | 64 |
| Knowledge of advisor | 3% | 5% | 9% | 22% | 61% | 64 |
| Did advisor listen carefully | 0% | 2% | 8% | 34% | 56% | 64 |
| Was enquiry appropriately addressed | 2% | 8% | 5% | 35% | 50% | 62 |
| *Was additional advice/info useful | 2% | 3% | 7% | 38% | 50% | 56 |
| Satisfaction with actions suggested | 3% | 6% | 13% | 31% | 47% | 64 |
| Suitability of actions | 5% | 3% | 14% | 29% | 49% | 63 |
| **Suitability of Action Plan | 3% | 9% | 15% | 21% | 52% | 33 |

Note: * Not all respondents recognised additional information being delivered
 **Action Plans were delivered to around half of f/f cases

Generally, the Business Link advisers were well received and scored well with regard to their manner and approach to the client; they were welcoming, polite and courteous, listened attentively to the line of questioning and displayed suitable knowledge, with more than four fifths of respondents rating these attributes as above satisfactory. Many respondents commented on the fact that: “...it was pleasantly surprising to find an adviser who was up-to-date with matters and able to provide sensible practical hands-on advice with my business.” An environmental services company seeking help with branding and their website

commented that: *“the IT adviser was ‘outstanding’ and the marketing adviser’s knowledge of grants etc was ‘second to none’ – they were able to plug the skills gap in the business.”* And a social enterprise manager said that: *“the social enterprise adviser went beyond my initial request and covered lots of other issues I hadn’t thought of – the social enterprise adviser seemed to have lots of relevant experience and knowledge.”*

Nearly four-fifths (Table 17, 78 per cent) of respondents indicated that the actions recommended by the Business Link adviser were better than satisfactory. A good example is an environmental consultancy where the manager stated: *“We met with two Business Link advisers. They were highly professional and both provided technical information relating to asbestos removal which was up-to-date, relevant and on the button.”* Similarly an architects practice seeking help with marketing commented: *“it proved very useful to have a different perspective on the changes needed – the adviser was able to think outside the box”*

However, there was some dissatisfaction with the actions recommended by some advisers. Examples of this dissatisfaction include:

“I was disappointed that the adviser took such a negative view of my proposed business development plan and would have thought that they would make a more constructive effort to go with the grain of my proposal.” (Computer services shop diversifying into the hardware and stationery markets).

“We had hoped that Business Link could help us to find grant support or cheap finance to assist us to purchase new machinery, as is available in Scotland for opticians. Unfortunately the offer to help find bank finance at three-and-a-half percent above base was neither acceptable nor helpful as we could have done this ourselves and cannot afford to borrow at such rates. The meeting was a waste of all of our time.” (Opticians).

“Whilst the assistance and advice I received was helpful, I believe that I was misled with regard to the availability of subsidies to assist with website development. In reality, the cost of going ahead with this work was far greater than I had expected and subsequently I am not inclined to undertake this work.” (Beautician service).

Action Plans

Thirty-three respondents (52 per cent of those progressing to a face-to-face meeting) acknowledged receiving a written Action Plan from Business Link, resulting from their face-to-face meeting with an adviser. These were typically felt to be above satisfactory (73 per cent of cases), with one in eight respondents indicating dissatisfaction – which was levelled at content rather than delivery timing. Action Plans were typically delivered next day by e-mail, although in seven cases the plan took more than five working days to be delivered and in two cases it took ten days.

It is possible that other respondents received Action Plans, but failed to recognise them as such. One manager referred to receiving ‘...an e-mail statement’ which was not considered to be an Action Plan, whilst two others referred to being promised Action Plans which were subsequently never delivered.

6.2.5 Overview of Service

Final debriefing information was collected from all 159 businesses participating in the test of Business Link services. Figure 4 presents findings by stage of enquiry. Each stage is represented by cases that did not progress further, with stage 3 being the cut-off point for this study. Stage 1 represents initial telephone or email enquiry, stage 2 represents follow-up telephone calls from advisers and stage 3 represents face-to-face meetings with advisers (see Figure 2).

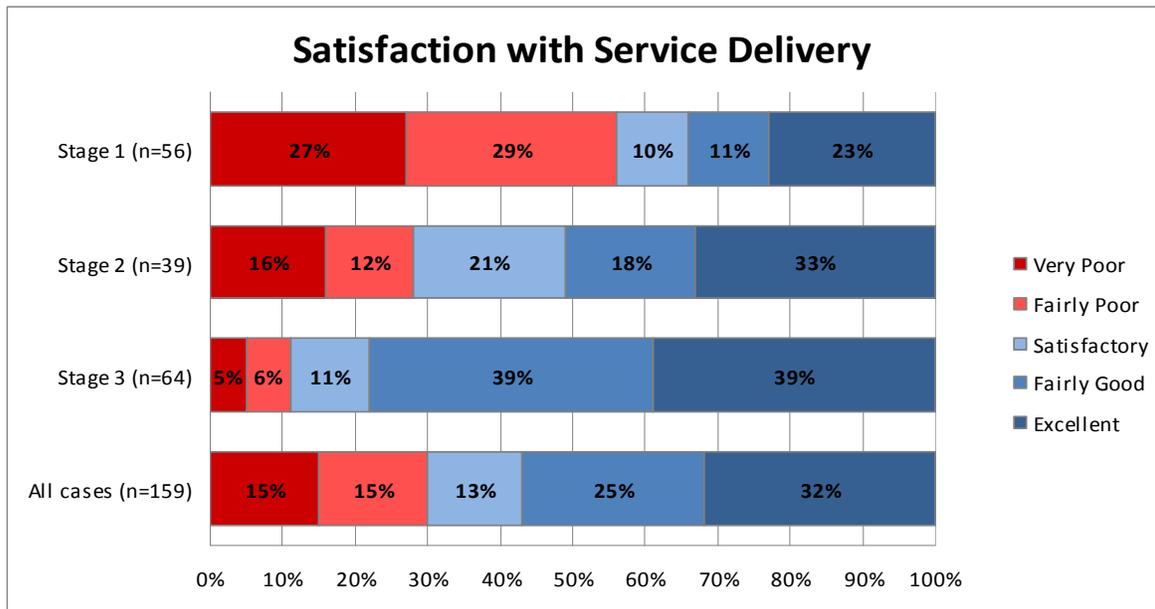
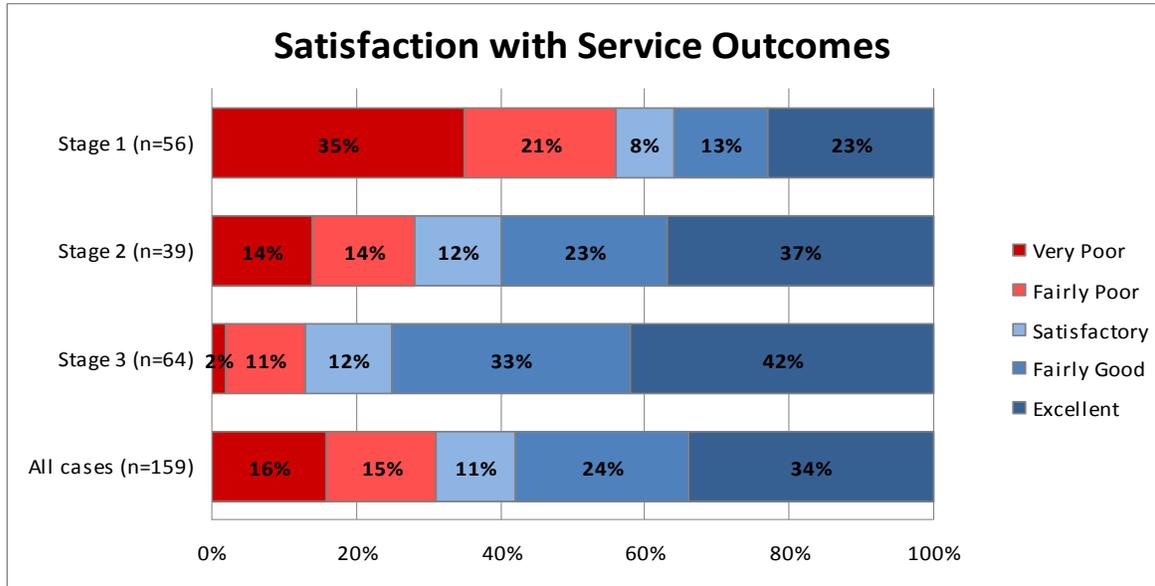
Figure 4 indicates that overall there is widespread satisfaction and approval of the Business Link services received, with around 70 per cent of participants suggesting that they had received at least a satisfactory service and outcomes, with at least 57 per cent indicating above satisfactory service and outcomes. In fact, the service was better than some participants had expected, as summed up by the comment from an established manufacturing firm that: *“the service received has been very professional – much better than my previous experience 12 years ago – all stages have been very good.”* A business consultant was particularly complementary, stating that: *“I would give Business Link 10 out of 10 for the speed and efficiency with which they dealt with our training request.”* An engineering firm manager mentioned that: *“there is likely to be a huge increase in productivity and business efficiency as a result of the business planning and financial management assistance received from Business Link!”*

It is also clear from Figure 4 that the further participants progressed through the early stages of contact with Business Link's advisory services, the higher their level of satisfaction with both service outcomes and service delivery.

The higher level of dissatisfaction at the initial enquiry stage (stage 1) is influenced by e-mail contact failures (seven cases never established contact with Business Link), with e-mail being the least likely communication channel to progress beyond Stage 1. With regard to telephone enquiries, there were five cases where Business Adviser call backs never took place and four cases where referrals to other organisations were deemed unsuitable (e.g. in two cases the referral organisation contact number provided did not exist). Further analysis shows that almost half (44 per cent) of the 27 start-up cases did not proceed beyond Stage 1 and the most frequent types of enquiry for cases not progressing further typically related to sales and marketing (15 cases), training (14), raising finance – particularly grant finance (13) and business planning (13).

Overall (Figure 4), it is notable that three out of ten respondents were dissatisfied, at least to some extent, with the service that they received. With regard to service outcomes this related to issues such as the lack of appropriate grant and cheap loan access (factors beyond the control of Business Link), inappropriate recommendations for assistance (e.g. for training initiatives when the enquiry was for access to finance), insufficient guidance to assist with progressing the assistance (e.g. where lists of information were sent, but there was a perceived need for further advice to avoid time wasting and ensure that appropriate action was taken by the client), inappropriate agency referral (e.g. where the agency referred to was not able to properly assist the client, or no longer existed), failure to deliver promised outcomes such as Action Plans, email or postal information, or further contact (e.g. a follow-up call from another specialist adviser). To some extent some of these criticisms could have been reduced or eliminated if advisers had managed client expectations better, particularly in relation to access to finance issues.

Figure 4: Level of Satisfaction with Business Link by Stage of Enquiry
 (row percentages are of businesses in scope)



An architect mentioned that: *“Links between Business Link and training providers could be improved. I feel that Business Link hadn’t briefed the provider sufficiently on the nature of the business and level of training that would be appropriate. The training provider seemed to be promoting a lower level of training than would be appropriate.”*

Dissatisfaction with service delivery was typically caused by initial communication problems, most notably around initial email enquiry failures and also problems with national telephone enquiries, failures to make call backs, failure to attend meetings and to ensure that dates and times of meetings were correct and suitable. It was not uncommon to come across observations such as *“everything went well, but there was an issue over the date being wrong as Monday was the 24th not the 25th”, or “it was unclear when they [Business Link] would call me back – when they did call back I missed the call as it was when I had told them that I would not be available.”* One wholesaler respondent referred to Business Link not coming to see him for the arranged meeting at his business and several others referred to failures to return telephone calls, or deliver promised paperwork. An engineering business owner commented: *“I was promised a £90 voucher and training information, but nothing has been sent to me – and that was a month ago. To be honest they have not been the best people I have ever done business with!”*

Table 18: Overall Appraisal of Business Link Assistance and Likely Future Use (row percentages of businesses in scope)

| Question | Yes | No | Don't Know | Base n= |
|----------------------------------|-----|-----|------------|------------|
| Will you benefit from assistance | 64% | 33% | 3% | 159 |
| Re-evaluate business situation | 37% | 60% | 3% | 159 |
| Continuing to use BL | 62% | 37% | 1% | 159 |
| Expect future use of BL | 66% | 30% | 4% | 159 |
| Recommend to other businesses | 74% | 26% | 0% | 159 |

Overall (Table 18), almost two-thirds of participants stated that they would benefit from the assistance that they had received, with almost two-thirds suggesting that they will continue, or expect, to use Business Link in the future. Examples include:

- A manufacturing business that was provided with good sectoral networking contacts and sound financial management advice and was looking forward to using Business Link for a future “*financial health check-up.*”
- A third sector training organisation that received some excellent networking ideas and potential business leads and which could become a Business Link service provider and join the Business Link regional supplier list.
- An energy consultant that was “*very satisfied with training recommendations and subsidies provided*” and would continue to seek similar advice in the future from Business Link.
- An estate agent business that had received “fresh marketing ideas” and was looking forward to receiving future assistance with regard to website development.

More than one third of participants mentioned that Business Link advice had led to re-evaluation of their business, examples being:

- A roofing manufacturer that is now considering diversifying into solar panel work.
- A pre-start business that has decided that now is not a good time to start trading in the legal support services sector.
- A catering business for which employment law advice demonstrated that they could proceed with recruiting more staff.
- A business consultant for whom networking advice is leading to diversification activities.
- Several cases where marketing assistance has led to a greater understanding of the importance of building marketing planning into the overall business planning process.

Almost three-quarters of participants would recommend Business Link to other businesses – two-thirds unreservedly. These include some instances of where the participant had already recommended Business Link to other businesses in the locality, illustrating the importance of word of mouth recommendations in building up Business Link’s client base.

6.2.6 Case Scenario Satisfaction Analysis

This section examines the levels of satisfaction relating to the five case scenario groupings for this study: (i) start-up; (ii) growth seeking; (iii) seeking finance; (iv) seeking recovery; (v) seeking training. These categories are not mutually exclusive as some cases have been included in more than one category (e.g. where a business seeking growth has also sought advice about financing growth). However, the 27 start-ups (i.e. pre-starts and businesses trading for less than one year) have only been categorised as start-ups because the majority of them were treated differently by Business Link to the more established cases included in this study.

Figure 5: Level of Satisfaction of Business Link Assistance by Case Scenario
 (row percentages are of businesses in scope)

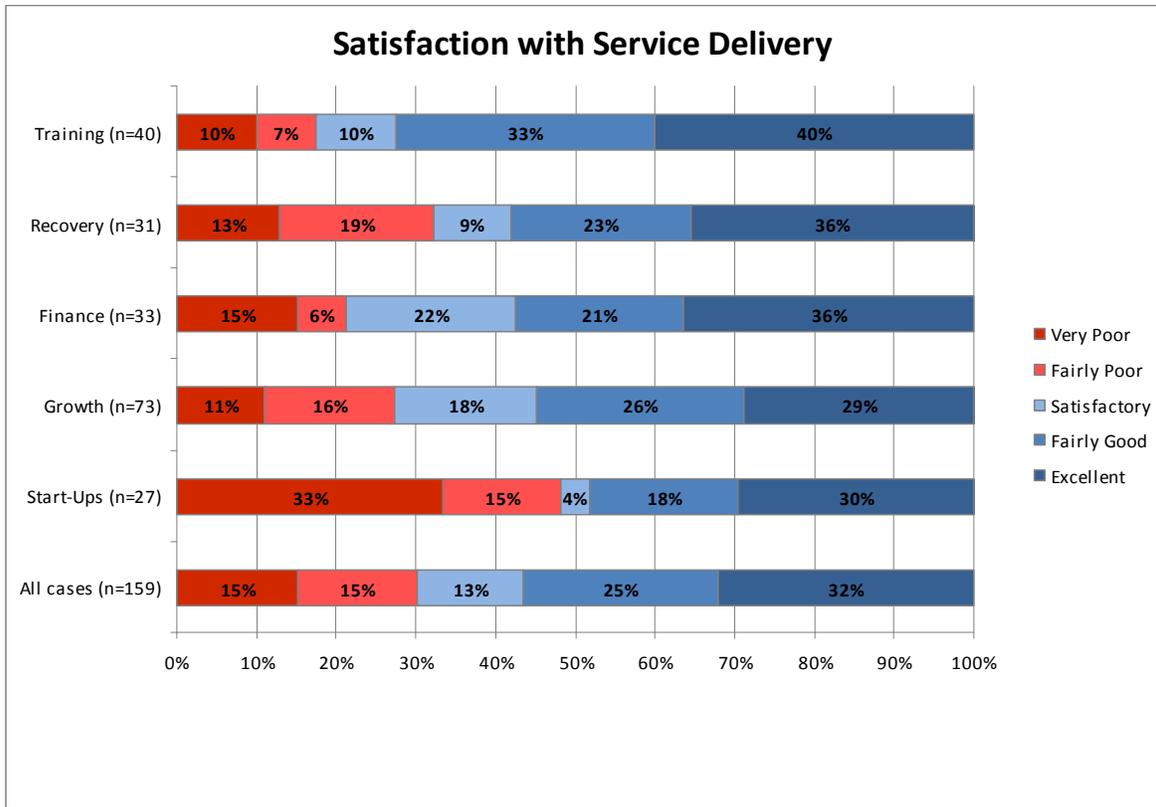
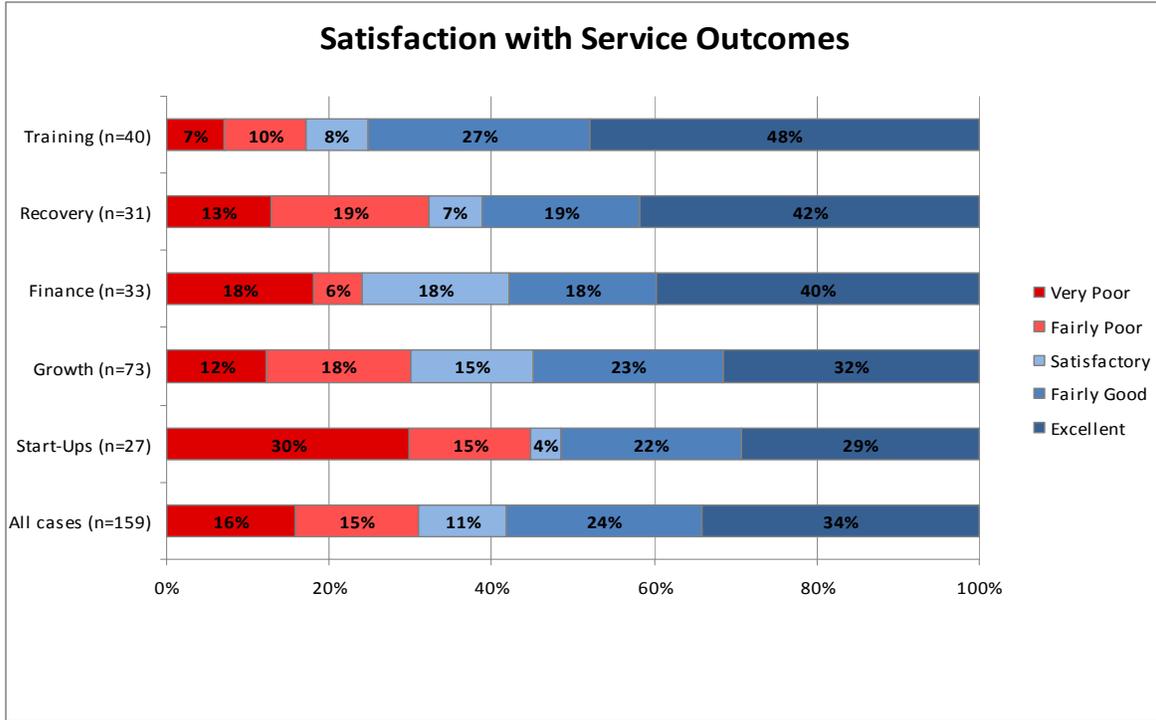


Figure 5 demonstrates that whilst there are similar patterns of satisfaction with regard to service outcomes and service delivery, there are some noticeable differences in the levels of satisfaction recorded across the different case scenarios. Businesses seeking assistance with training showed the highest levels of satisfaction, around three quarters of them rating service outcomes and delivery as above satisfactory. More than half of the recovery, finance and growth cases also rated service outcomes and delivery as above satisfactory, although almost a third of the recovery cases also considered these to be less than satisfactory. Start-up cases exhibited the lowest levels of satisfaction, with less than half of them (48 per cent) rating service delivery as above satisfactory and with similar proportions considering both service delivery (48 per cent) and outcomes (45 per cent) to be below satisfactory. A possible explanation for this is that almost half (44 per cent) of start-ups did not advance beyond the initial enquiry stage to Business Link. They were typically sent information packs, including information about courses and seminars, and in many cases referred to other organisations such as Chambers of Commerce start-up courses or those run by other local agencies. These participants were thus disappointed that they did not receive as much help directly from Business Link as they had expected.

However, where start-up participants felt that the Business Link call handler had really listened carefully to their enquiries and provided appropriate advice and signposting, there was above satisfactory feedback, such as a pre-start considering setting up a legal helpline for businesses that stated: *“I received sound advice which led me to consider my options more carefully and I subsequently decided that this was not a good idea in the current economic climate”*; a start-up retailer managed by a woman who praised the advice she received: *“the adviser understood my requirements for childcare and appropriate times to receive advice and training – the offer of telephone mentoring advice delivered during trading hours was particularly helpful.”*

6.2.7 Business Characteristics Satisfaction Analysis

This section examines the levels of satisfaction according to the characteristics of participating businesses, by sector and employment size.

Figure 6: Levels of Satisfaction with Service Outcomes and Delivery by Business Characteristics (row percentages are of businesses in scope)

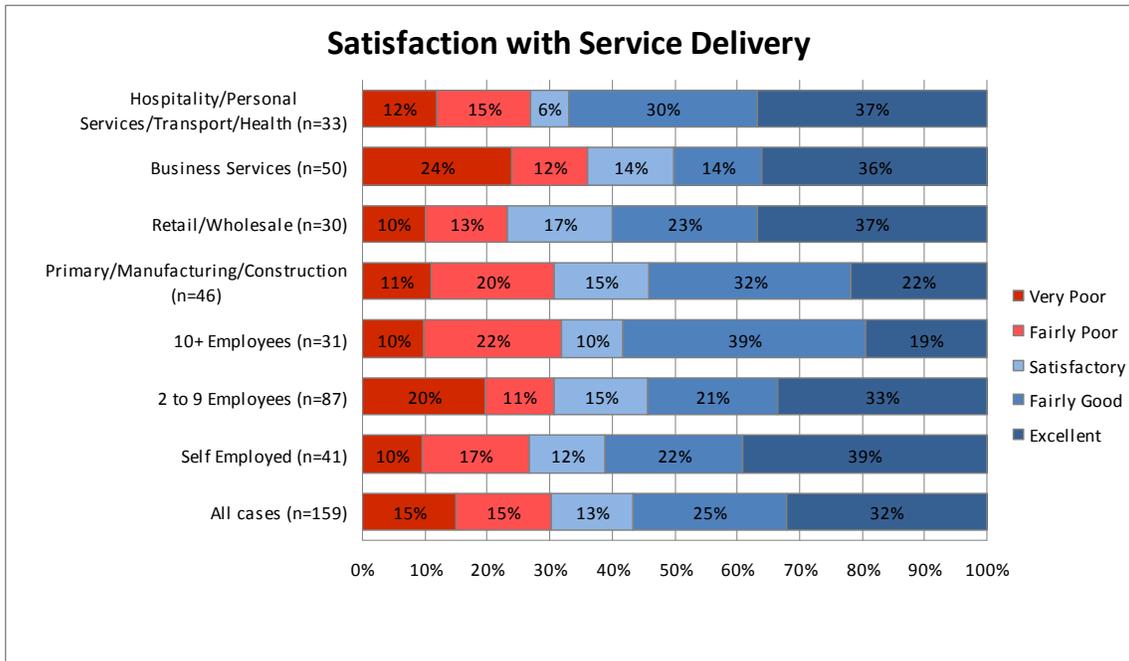
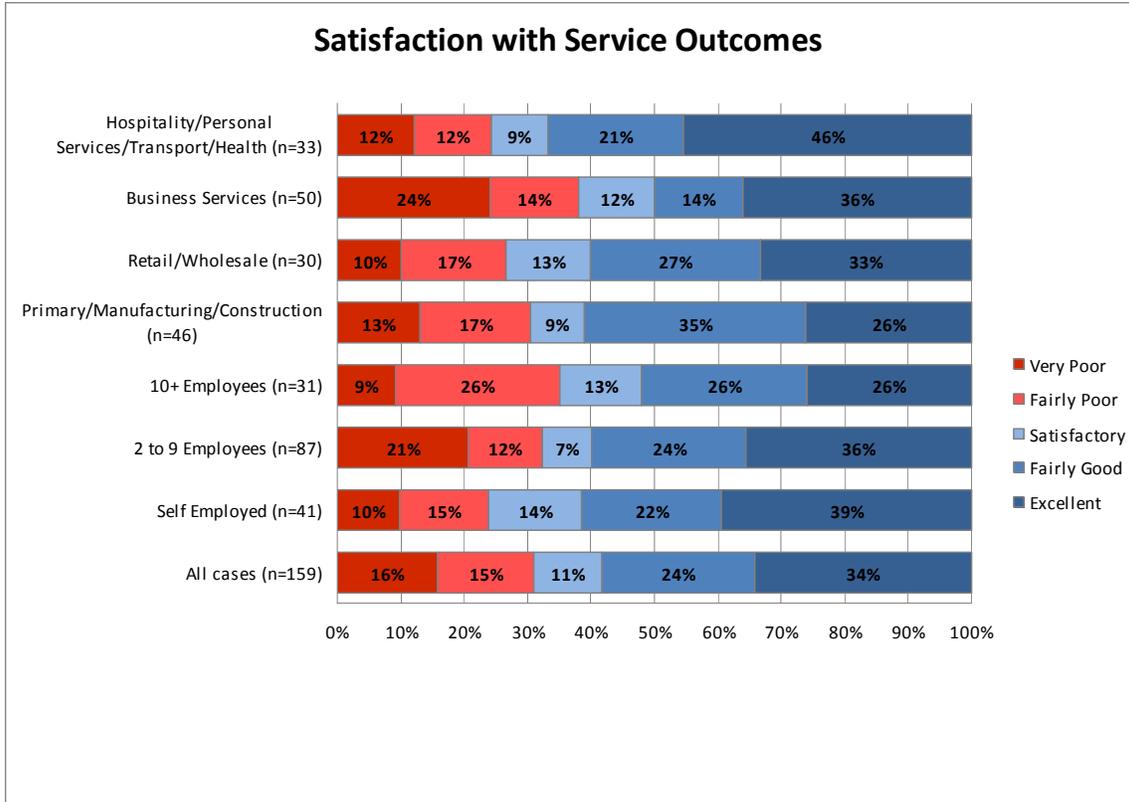


Figure 6 presents business characteristics relating to employment size and broad sectoral activities. Whilst there are no statistically significant differences, the chart indicates that the level of satisfaction with service outcomes increases with decreasing business size, with self-employed businesses exhibiting the greatest satisfaction with service outcomes (75 per cent of them) and with service delivery (73 per cent). More than a third of businesses with less than ten employees rated service delivery as excellent compared to just one fifth of their larger counterparts. This may be an indication that larger businesses tend to be more demanding in the services that they require from Business Link.

Broad sectoral analysis (Figure 6) reveals that three-fifths of businesses in most sectors rated service outcomes and delivery as above satisfactory. However, owner/managers in the business services sector were less impressed, with only half of them rating service delivery and outcomes as above satisfactory and over a third rating outcomes (38 per cent) and delivery (36 per cent) as below satisfactory.

6.2.8 Participant Owner/Manager Characteristics Satisfaction Analysis

This section examines the levels of satisfaction according to the characteristics of the participating owner/managers, by age, gender and ethnicity.

Figure 7: Levels of Satisfaction with Service Outcomes and Delivery by Characteristics of Business Owner (row percentages are of businesses in scope)

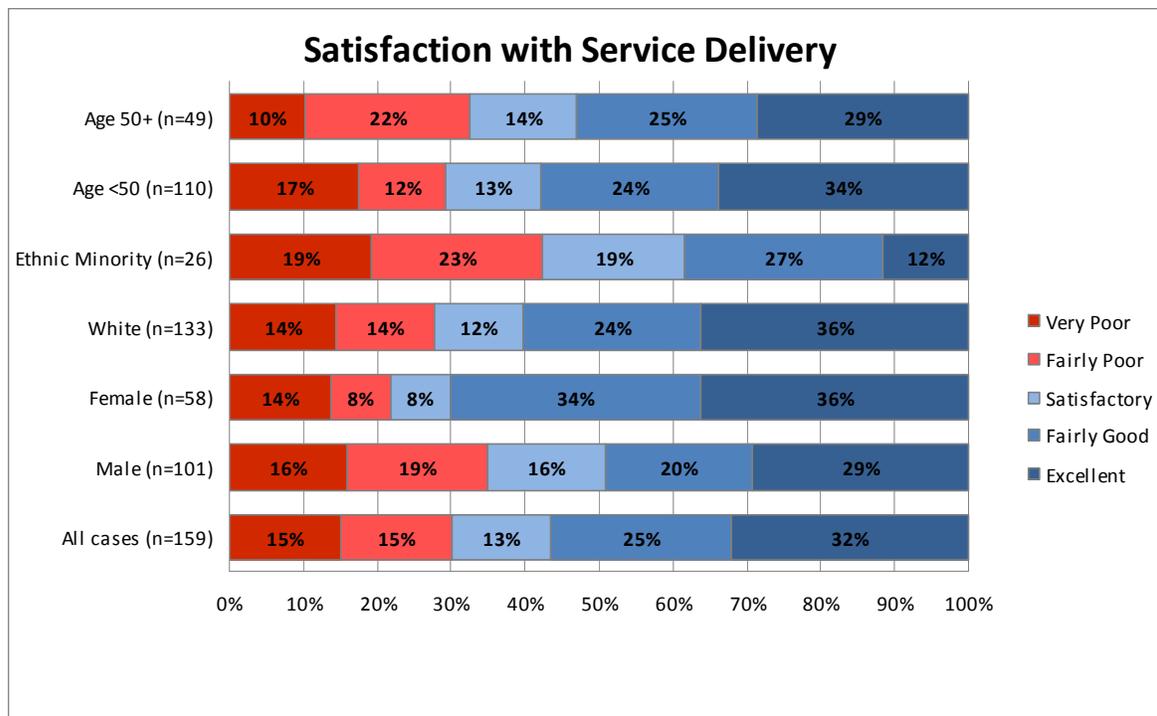
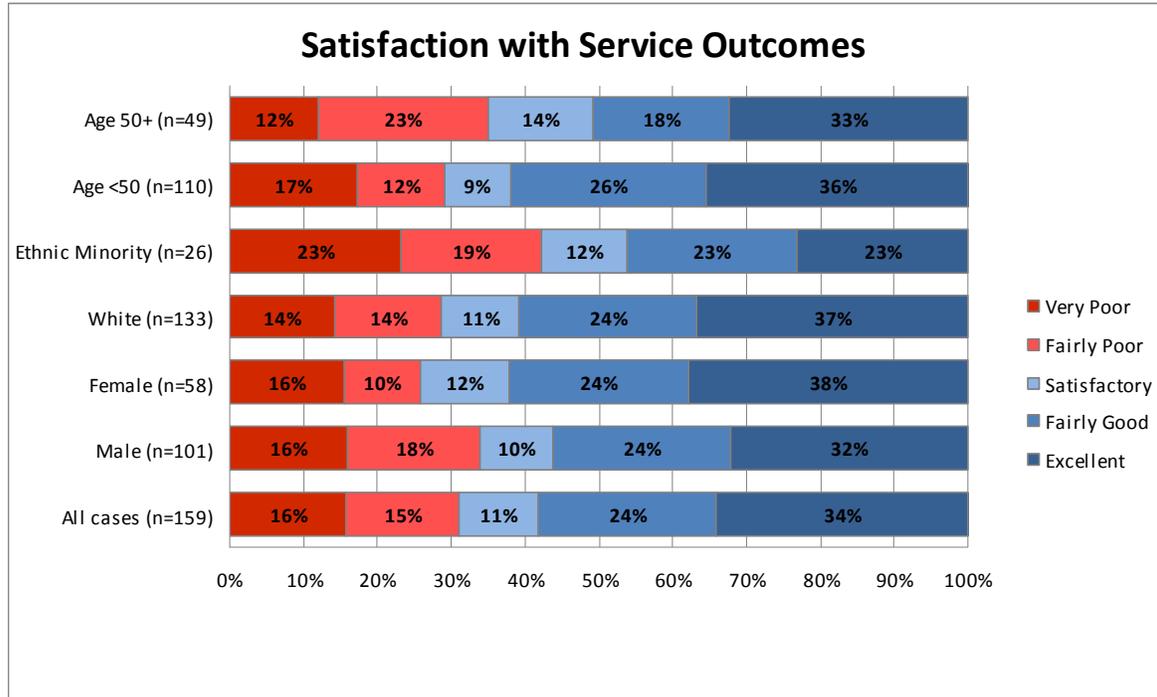


Figure 7 examines the levels of satisfaction according to characteristics of participant business owner/managers. Overall, it indicates that women and younger participants aged under 50 exhibited slightly higher levels of satisfaction with both service delivery and outcomes than their male and older participant counterparts. The main finding however is that ethnic minority respondents exhibit a lower level of satisfaction with regard to service delivery (although there are only 26 cases), as well as lower levels of satisfaction with service outcomes than their white counterparts. Over two fifths of owner/managers from ethnic minority groups were less than satisfied with the service that they had received from Business Link, compared with just over a quarter of their white counterparts. Further analysis indicates that this seems to be related to the fact that the ethnic minority owner/managers were less likely to progress to face-to-face meetings. When the start-up cases are excluded, one third of ethnic minority cases had a face-to-face meeting with a Business Link adviser compared to 45 per cent of their white counterparts. This may at least in part be due to their regional distribution, since nearly three fifths of them were located in London, the East of England and the West Midlands which are amongst the regions with the lowest conversion rates of initial enquiries to face-to-face meetings (Table 3). A few ethnic minority businesses complained about not receiving a call back from Business Link or being asked to call back themselves, which they considered to be unacceptable, and in other cases being referred to inappropriate organisations rather than receiving hands-on assistance from Business Link. There was some indication that ethnic minority businesses might be struggling to communicate adequately with Business Link. For example a Chinese business mentioned that their initial telephone enquiry did not elicit any response, yet when they made a similar enquiry with further coaching from the research team, they were successful and went on to receive *“a really helpful face-to-face meeting.”*

7. SUMMARY OF KEY LESSONS

Whilst the experiences of the businesses taking part in the mystery shopping exercise are generally very positive, the findings have drawn attention to certain aspects of Business Link's services where there is scope for improvement. This final section summarises the key lessons of the mystery shopping research into Business Link services.

Initial Response from Business Link

- 96 per cent of all Business Link responses, by e-mail or telephone, were considered at least satisfactory in terms of being polite and courteous. The participating business owner/managers are busy people who value their time and often struggle to find time to make calls or e-mails to Business Link, even when they have a strong need for assistance.

This research supports the view that the first impression that Business Link makes is vital and it is important that the initial call handler is courteous, professional and gives the right impression of being willing and able to assist.

- A small number of participants (three) did not think that being requested to call back Business Link was a satisfactory response to their enquiry and subsequently did not contact Business Link again.

As a matter of good practice, Business Link should always offer to call back clients and also ask clients for suitable times to call back, taking client mobile telephone contact numbers where appropriate.

- The vast majority of the 58 cases that were resolved through telephone advice or referral, without needing to progress to a face-to-face meeting were dealt with satisfactorily. However, a small number of clients (three manufacturing firms) requiring technical, regulatory information were misdirected to the wrong organisations.

Business Link should keep up-to-date reference lists for referral organisations and there should be an effective up-to-date mechanism for making referrals to other agencies, such as industry sector regulatory standards agencies.

Telephone Enquiries

- 85 per cent of respondents were satisfied that telephone call handlers understood their line of questioning. This level of satisfaction was slightly lower than with regard to other aspects of the initial call handling and there were some cases where enquiries were incorrectly directed/referred.

It is important that call handlers listen carefully and understand the client's questions and are able to quickly assess/recognise the type of business and correctly direct them into the Business Link system or to an appropriate referral organisation.

- 90 per cent of all telephone enquiries were made with satisfactory ease. There were some regional boundary problems associated with telephone enquiries, notably when landline calls were made from boundary areas, or where the enquiry required cross boundary inter-regional assistance.

It is important that the initial call handler is sympathetic with the client's viewpoint and is able to clearly ascertain where the client's business is located and also where the client's enquiry relates to. Where an enquiry involves two or more regions there need to be appropriate protocols in place for sharing clients with other Business Link regions.

- At least 96 per cent of telephone enquiries were clear on how matters would be progressed at the end of the initial telephone call. However, less than half (44 per cent) were asked about appropriate timing for call backs and this led to some problems with telephone call back arrangements and possibly the loss of some clients.

It is advisable to always ask for suitable/appropriate call back dates/times and take client mobile telephone numbers. Furthermore, it is important to try to call back when scheduled and agreed with the client and to leave a message on the clients' answerphone (unless otherwise instructed) in order to demonstrate that a call has been made and to maintain a point of contact with the client.

Email Enquiries

- Where e-mail enquiries were responded to there was at least 89 per cent satisfaction on all measures, except for clarity of how matters would progress (85 per cent). However,

almost one sixth of participants enquiring by email failed to obtain any response from Business Link, even after several weeks.

It would be helpful if Business Link could provide an auto response email receipt for all e-mail enquiries, so that clients are aware that their email has been received and that it will be acted on within a set period of time (e.g. "Business Link has received your enquiry and will respond to this within 3 working days. If you do not receive a response within this time period, please call").

- Some participants were only willing to make enquiries by e-mail, but struggled to formulate their enquiries and to find the Business Link website enquiry form.

The Business Link website enquiry form needs to be easy to find on the regional as well as national websites. Furthermore, it would be helpful for the website form to include a template setting out questions and key business information (e.g. sector, trading age, contact details). This would provide appropriate guidance and potentially assist Business Link with initial client handling.

Follow-up Telephone Calls

- 85 per cent of follow-up telephone calls were at least satisfactory on all measures, except for diagnostic advice. One in eight follow-up calls (10 cases) were problematic because of their inappropriate timing. Additionally, in five cases the client never received a call back.

This underlines the importance of making suitable arrangements for call-back times during the initial enquiry stage and for ensuring that the most appropriate communication channels are recorded. A message should always be left on the client's answerphone (unless otherwise requested) as proof of call back and to keep in communication with the client.

- Four fifths of telephone diagnostics were considered at least satisfactory. Dissatisfaction was usually because the client did not receive sufficiently in-depth advice or assistance.

Specialist Business Advisers offering telephone diagnostics should ensure that the client is satisfied with the level of assistance, that it is sufficient to meet the client's requirements and offer the availability for further assistance where appropriate. Where a

specific sector specialism is required it may be appropriate to refer to a specialist trade association/agency. It is imperative that referral contact details are up to date.

Face-to-face Meetings

- Whilst the vast majority of participants (at least 90 per cent on all measures) receiving face-to-face assistance received satisfactory assistance, there were some complaints, particularly relating to what businesses were expecting in terms of access to finance and sectoral knowledge.

Face-to-face meetings are typically highly successful, but resource intensive and it is important that initial telephone conversations are sufficiently detailed in order to determine whether: (i) this is an appropriate use of resources for the line of enquiry; (ii) there is an adviser with appropriate sector-based skills; and (iii) that the client's expectations are adequately managed.

- 92 per cent of participants were at least satisfied with face-to-face meeting timing and arrangements. Whilst the typical time to achieve a face-to-face meeting was up to seven working days, there were two cases where meetings could not be scheduled for up to two months.

As is most often the case, clients should not have to wait for more than a couple of weeks for specialist assistance (unless expressly agreed to the satisfaction of the client). If delays are likely to take longer, Business Link should explore other options, such as undertaking interim telephone assistance, or seeking advice from other sources (e.g. referral to other consultants within the region or seeking specialist advice from a neighbouring Business Link).

Action Plans

- Satisfaction levels were high with regard to Action Plans delivered as a result of face-to-face meetings (88 per cent receiving them were at least satisfied), but less than three-fifths of these face-to-face clients mentioned receiving them. There were a couple of cases where Action Plans were not delivered.

Some clients may not have recognised an Action Plan if it was informally sent by email. A clearly designated Action Plan should be sent to all clients receiving face-to-face

assistance. These Action Plans should be sent to the client within an agreed timescale (e.g. within 5 working days) and through an agreed communication channel (e.g. by email or post). Ideally, a follow-up call should be made with the client to ensure that the Action Plan has been received and is understood. It is vital that Business Link delivers the outputs that it promises its clients.

Overall Service

- Overall there is widespread satisfaction and approval of the Business Link services received, around 70 per cent of respondents indicating at least satisfaction with the service received. However, 30 per cent of respondents exhibited some level of dissatisfaction with some aspect of the service they received. These related mainly to: (i) communications failures, especially in the very early stages or (ii) where participants interpreted Business Link's response as inappropriate for their line of enquiry.

It is important that Business Link improves its initial call/e-mail handling procedures and that, once clients are inside the system, adequate and appropriate communications channels are maintained with clients in order to avoid the loss of clients and resultant dissatisfaction with the service. This includes ensuring that follow-up calls and meetings are made at agreed times or within agreed timescales and that follow-up information is delivered through appropriate communications channels and within agreed timescales. It is probably a good idea to check with the client (for example, by return email receipt request) that documents have been received and are understood.

It is also important that Business Link Advisers demonstrably address the needs of clients, so that they cannot be criticised for not listening and addressing enquiries appropriately. The good practice examples in this study typically stress the adviser's demonstration of understanding of client circumstances and efforts taken to understand client businesses (e.g. indicating that they have studied client websites). This would help to avoid criticisms such as being signposted on or sent information without proper explanation, or pushing an alternative agenda (even when such recommendations might appear appropriate). It is also essential that the client's expectations are properly managed, particularly with regard to access to finance enquiries. This would involve explaining thoroughly to the client, from the outset, that opportunities for obtaining funding via Business Link are limited and restricted, may not be appropriate to their needs, are often very small in scale and require considerable amounts of paperwork.

ANNEX I: MYSTERY SHOPPER SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRES

The following survey annex provides summary versions of the survey questionnaires used for each stage of the mystery shopper process. Please note that for initial Telephone and Email enquiries, different stage 1 questionnaires were used, as indicated below.

Mystery Shopper Business Filter Survey

1. Have you or your business had any contact with Business Link previously?

If Yes, was this within the last 12 months?

If Yes – ask whether contact is very recent and at what stage the respondent has reached with Business Link. If the respondent has only just made contact and has not yet received a telephone diagnostic or face to face meeting with an advisor, we may be able to use their help (therefore, continue).

If already an established Business Link user, terminate interview.

If No – continue....

2. Currently, or in the near future, does your business have any requirements for external advice or assistance (i.e. from outside of the firm's internal staff resources)?

Probe for the following areas where external assistance might be required:

- (i) Raising finance or working capital
- (ii) Financial management
- (iii) Business Planning (i.e. planning growth, survival, succession)
- (iv) Employment advice
- (v) Legal advice
- (vi) Land and Premises advice
- (vii) Relocation
- (viii) Sales and Marketing
- (ix) Exporting & international expansion
- (x) Networking (developing business contacts)
- (xi) Product/service development
- (xii) Sourcing suppliers (i.e. products or services)
- (xiii) Staff Training, upskilling, reskilling

Probe for detail about the reason for requiring this type of assistance or advice (which will help to position the business into one of the case scenarios):

If the business appears to be suitable for further case research, continue:

3. From what you have told us so far we would like to invite your business to take part in our mystery shopper research (and we believe that your business may benefit from testing your local BL's services). Please indicate if you are willing to participate in this test, which will take place during the next few days/weeks and which will require a small amount of your time to receive a briefing from us as to how to take part?

Yes/No

Please ensure that the following profile/contact questions are covered with respondents willing to take follow-up calls.

Business Profile:

5. Business Name:
6. Respondent Name and Position:
7. Business Telephone No:
8. Other Telephone contact no (where appropriate e.g. mobile/home):
9. Full Business Address (inc postcode):
10. Business sector/activity:
11. Employee size:
12. Business trading age:

Respondent Owner/Manager Profile:

13. Age profile: Please state which age group you are in?
1 = <30; 2 = 30-50; 3=50+
14. Ethnicity: Please indicate if you are a member of an ethnic minority group? (If yes; from which EM group)
15. Disabilities: Do you have any 'registered' disabilities? (If yes, please state disability)

Suitable Further Contact Times:

Please indicate when the best days/times are to call you for further information and the best method of contact (e.g. mobile or landline)?

Method of First contact:

1. National Telephone line
2. Regional Telephone line
3. Email (use email stage 1 form)

Stage 1: Initial Call Response Telephone Enquiry:

We have used a five point scale (as detailed below) for you to assess the service you receive from Business Link. **Please circle the appropriate box.** Please feel free to add your additional comments, where you feel appropriate, or as requested:

1. Very poor / very unsatisfactory
2. Fairly poor / fairly unsatisfactory
3. Satisfactory
4. Fairly good / generally above expectations
5. Excellent / completely above all expectations

For all Responses of 1 or 2, please give an explanation of why this is the case?

1. How easy was it to make contact with an appropriate person at Business Link?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N / A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-------|

2. How many times did you need to call in order to get through successfully to an appropriate person at Business Link?

3. How welcoming and keen was the person?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

4. Did the person taking your call listen to your requirements carefully, probing for understanding where appropriate?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

5. At the end of this discussion, did you feel that your business needs had been fully understood?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

6. Was the person able to resolve your query at this stage? Yes / No

If no, were sufficient details taken from you to facilitate a call back from BL?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

7. Did the person taking your call ask for the following details:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|----------|
| Full Business Trading Name | Yes / No |
| Business Contact Name/Position | Yes / No |
| Full Address and Post code | Yes / No |
| Telephone number | Yes / No |
| Mobile number | Yes / No |
| Email | Yes / No |
| Convenient times to call back | Yes / No |

8. If a call back was required, was it made clear how your enquiry would be handled?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

9. Was it clear at the end of the initial telephone call how matters would be followed up?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

If not clear, what should they have told you?

10. Were you transferred to another advisor – i.e. a Relationship or Account Manager from your initial call enquiry (i.e. during the call)?

Yes / No

If yes, please go to next section (Stage 2):

11. What follow-up options were provided by the initial call handler?

- i. Follow-up telephone call – could lead to a successful telephone diagnostic
- ii. Arrangements for a face to face meeting – at BL or on-site
- iii. Sending through further BL information – i.e. a fact sheet, events/training schedules
- iv. Arrangements to attend a course or event
- v. Referral to another organization - *If yes, who*
- vi. Other: please explain:

Stage 1: Initial Call Response for Email Enquiry:

1. How easy was it to email Business Link?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

2. Did your initial email get through first time (or did you experience bounce-back problems)?

Yes / No

If no, how many times did you need to email in order to get through successfully to BL?

3. Did you receive an email receipt (by immediate return email from BL)? Yes / No

4. Did Business Link respond to your email by email or by phone?

EMAIL

PHONE

5. How long did it take to receive that initial response?

6. How welcoming and keen was the initial response?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

7. Did the initial response make it clear how your enquiry would be handled?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

8. In response to your email, did Business Link consider all of your requirements carefully, probing for further understanding where appropriate?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

9. Were you satisfied that your query had been resolved at this point? Yes / No

If no, were sufficient details taken from you to facilitate a call back or adequate response (i.e. sufficient email answers) from BL?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

10. What details were requested from you?

| | |
|--------------------------------|----------|
| Full Business Trading Name | Yes / No |
| Business Contact Name/Position | Yes / No |
| Full Address and Post code | Yes / No |
| Telephone number | Yes / No |
| Mobile number | Yes / No |
| Email | Yes / No |
| Convenient times to call back | Yes / No |

11. What follow-up options were provided to you from Business Link's initial response?

- i. Follow-up telephone call – could lead to a successful telephone diagnostic
- ii. Arrangements for a face to face meeting – at BL or on-site
- iii. Sending through further BL information – i.e. a fact sheet, events/training
- iv. Schedules/directed to website information
- v. Arrangements to attend a course or event

vi. Referral to another organization - *If yes, who*

vii. Other: please explain:

12. Was it clear how matters would be taken forward?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

If answer 1 or 2, please explain why this was the case?

Stage 2: Follow-Up Call from Business Link

*This can come in response to telephone or email enquiry (depends on protocols for email enquiry responses and also the detail in the email as this next section deals with Business Support Broker response – rather than telephone reception response, which is covered by initial call response section). The call back is most likely to be from an **Account Manager or Relationship Manager**, but could be from a **Specialist Advisor**.*

*We have used a five point scale (as detailed below) for you to assess the service you receive from Business Link. **Please circle the appropriate box.** Please feel free to add your additional comments, where you feel appropriate, or as requested:*

1. Very poor / very unsatisfactory
2. Fairly poor / fairly unsatisfactory
3. Satisfactory
4. Fairly good / generally above expectations
5. Excellent / completely above all expectations

For all Responses of 1 or 2, please give an explanation of why this is the case?

1. **Were you given an agreed timescale for a follow-up call?** Yes / No

If yes, what was the timescale indicated?

2. **Approximately how long did it take for Business Link to call back in response to your initial enquiry?**

Please indicate time in number of hours:

3. **How satisfied were you with the time taken to deliver the follow-up information/service?**

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

4. **How welcoming and keen was the person who called back?**

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

5. **What level of understanding did the advisor have of your specific business requirements?**

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

6. **What level of understanding did the respondent have of the needs of businesses in your sector?**

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

7. Was the Advisor able to successfully diagnose your problem over the telephone?

(This is probably only a relevant question if the call back is from a Specialist Advisor who is able to provide a telephone diagnostic (rather than an Account Manager)

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

Please provide an explanation for your answer?

8. Following your discussions with the Business Adviser, did you feel that your specific business needs had been appropriately addressed?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

9. And how relevant and useful did you find any additional information and/or advice you received from Business Link beyond that you originally sought?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

10. How satisfied were you with the course of action recommended?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

11. Were you offered a BL meeting/visit? Yes / No

If no, what course of action was recommended by BL?

- i. Follow-up telephone call
- ii. Sending through further BL information – i.e. a fact sheet, events/training schedules, directed to website information
- iii. Arrangements to attend a course or event
- iv. No further action required
- v. Referral to another organization (please indicate who?)
- vi. Other - please explain?

12. What timescale was indicated for the follow-up information?

Stage 3: Site Visit / Business Link Visit

We have used a five point scale (as detailed below) for you to assess the service you receive from Business Link. Please circle the appropriate box. Please feel free to add your additional comments, where you feel appropriate, or as requested:

1. Very poor / very unsatisfactory
2. Fairly poor / fairly unsatisfactory
3. Satisfactory
4. Fairly good / generally above expectations
5. Excellent / completely above all expectations

For all Responses of 1 or 2, please give an explanation of why this is the case?

1. How long did it take from initial telephone discussion with Account/Relationship Manager or Specialist Advisor for a face to face visit to take place?

2. Was the face to face meeting organized within an acceptable time period?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

3. Did the face to face meeting take place at: -

- (i) BL offices
- (ii) on site with your business
- (iii) in an agreed neutral meeting place (e.g. hotel)

4. How suitable was this arrangement?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

5. How welcoming and keen was the face to face meeting BL advisor?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

6. How knowledgeable was the face to face advisor?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

7. Did the advisor listen carefully to your requirements, and probe for further understanding where appropriate?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

8. Following your discussions with the Business Adviser, did you feel that your specific business needs had been appropriately addressed?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

9. **And how relevant and useful did you find any additional information and/or advice you received from Business Link beyond that you originally sought?**

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

10. **How satisfied were you with the course of action recommended?**

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

11. **What course of action was suggested?**

12. **Was an 'Action Plan' drawn up and provided to you?**

Yes / No (if no, were you promised one?)

13. **How long did it take to receive the BL Action Plan? (No. of days)**

14. **How suitable for your business requirements was the Action Plan?**

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

If answer 1 or 2, in what ways could the Action Plan have been made more suitable?

Final Debriefing Notes

Section A

1. **Firstly, was the business making the enquiry with Business Link because it was:**
Please circle or highlight most appropriate descriptions:

1. Seeking to grow and expand
2. Seeking finance
3. Seeking business improvement/recovery
4. Seeking training assistance
5. Seeking start-up/new business assistance

2. **Please state what questions you asked Business Link in your initial enquiry?**
 (Code responses by enquiry classification using debriefing coding schedule):

3. **Please state details of any additional questions which arose during your discussions with Business Link?**
 (Note responses and code responses by enquiry classification using debriefing coding schedule):

Section B: General Summary Questions

1. Overall (taking all support and advice provided into consideration) were you satisfied that the outcome of the advice/assistance received was useful and relevant to the needs of your business (i.e. focused on the needs of the business)?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

If answer 1 or 2, please explain why this was the case?

2. Are you expecting to realize benefits to your business (i.e. delivered real outcomes) from the advice/assistance that you have received so far?

Yes / No

3. Please assess whether the experience has led you to re-evaluate the issues facing your business?

Yes / No (if yes, please explain in what ways)

4. What is your overall view of the delivery of the Business Link service?

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Don't Know | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|---|------------|-----|

If answer 1 or 2, please explain why this was the case?

5. How many 'chasing' telephone calls or emails did you have to make, during the course of the Business Link service that you have received? Where problems were encountered, please explain what happened.

Number of calls/emails:

Problems (if encountered):

6. What improvements in the service that you have received do you believe should be made?

7. Are you continuing to use BL services? Yes / No

If so, in what ways?

8. Are you planning on using BL services again at some time in the near future?

Yes / No

9. Would you recommend BL to other businesses?

Yes / No