



Innovate
UK



Evaluation of the Black Country Innovation Services

(funded by Innovate UK - part of UKRI)

A Final report to
Walsall college

Project Reference: 10101833
below report prepared by EPM



March 2025



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1: HIGHLIGHTS



1 HIGHLIGHTS

- The Black Country Innovations Services project is a £795,029 pilot initiative funded by Innovate UK, which is part of UKRI. Led by Walsall College in collaboration with a consortium of five colleges, the project aims to create a network of hubs that provide innovation support services to local SMEs seeking technical and innovation expertise in key growth sectors, including advanced manufacturing, engineering, ICT/digital, and retrofit/green technologies. Additionally, the project facilitates industry placement opportunities. The project benefited 3 PCRs to revisit the financial allocations across the budget heads in light of actual delivery and reprofile them to reflect delivery.
- The programme offers the following services:
 - Organisation Needs Assessment (ONA)
 - Innovation Action Plan
 - Workshops
 - Knowledge transfer activities
 - Technology demonstrations
 - Internships and apprenticeships
- The Final evaluation of the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project was conducted between February and March 2025 based on a combination of evaluation tools with inputs and analysis from official contracts and claims, survey responses from 19 project beneficiaries, interviews with beneficiaries and wider stakeholders, a Management Team and delivery workshop.
- The majority of companies that benefited from the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project (61.9%) are micro companies with fewer than 9 FTE employees. 21.4% of beneficiaries are small companies and 16.7% are medium sized enterprises.
- The most frequently accessed services through the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project are: AI and digital solutions used by 22.2% of participants, followed by SMES' website update at 13.6% and the 3D Printing service at 8.6%.
- Thanks to the support provided by the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project, 15.8% of beneficiaries reported securing at least one new commercial contract, while 5.3% successfully obtained at least one grant.
- 33.3% of beneficiaries have adopted environmentally sustainable practices, and 36.8% have reported experiencing social benefits as a result of their participation in the project.
- 52.6% of companies reported initiating new R&D collaborations, while 6.7% noted the creation of new patents, designs, trademarks or copyrights.
- 89.5% of beneficiaries indicated that their expectations were met or exceeded with the services that they received from the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project.
- Only 10.5% of beneficiaries have implemented the innovative measures following the ONA at the time of the final evaluation of cohort 1.
- The services found most useful are the product design & development support, access to facilities, access to AI, cybersecurity, green technologies and manufacturing support each reporting at 26.32%.

- Concrete impacts reported by beneficiaries include: 47.37% improvement in employee upskilling, 26.32% improved efficiency, 10.53% increase in productivity, 5.26% enhanced profitability, 36.84% increase in revenue.
- 47.4% of companies reported making progress towards new-to-firm product or service with an increase in TRL of +1.77 (and 84% due to the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project intervention).
- 1 FTE job has been created and 6 FTE jobs safeguarded across 5 companies at the time of the evaluation. Additionally, 25% of companies plan to offer a position to their intern(s) appointed through the pilot project.
- The main channels of referrals are: Innovate UK Midlands (29.4%), via the colleges themselves (35.3%) and from Business Growth West Midlands (17.6%).
- 3 out of 4 targets have been successfully met or exceeded, with the remaining target reaching over 96% attainment. The final target, involving SMEs embedding the ONAs, will be achieved during the granted extension, further enhancing the project's outstanding outcomes.
- The net economic impact for the Black Country Innovation Services of Cohort 1 is for every £1 invested in delivering the project, £14.15 was generated in the economy. This is a great achievement.
- The main themes of interest mentioned by the beneficiaries for future activities are: technical expertise on 3D rendering, AI and digitalisation, green tech, marketing, sales and e-commerce, prototyping, contacts and networking, grants.

EPM provides the following recommendations for the legacy and extended duration of delivery:

- **Keep Building on the Success of the Pilot:** Use case studies, videos, and podcasts to share the initial results of the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project widely and encourage take-up for the continuation of the project.
- **Create a Digital Knowledge Hub:** A centralised online platform for resources, case studies, best practices and a forum that can support SMEs long-term.
- **Build on the Strength of the Facilities:** Continue to use the interest generated by showing the facilities to potential project participants as a key plank of the recruitment process.
- **Keep Strengthening Collaboration Across Hubs:** Agree on a common branding and joined marketing activities among the various hubs and facilitate cross-referrals between the innovation centers to maximise the project's effectiveness.
- **Support SME Implementation:** Motivate SMEs to implement the recommendations from the ONAs more promptly. In cases of budget constraints, provide guidance on potential funding sources for SMEs and explore the feasibility of creating a grant funding pool linked to the main scheme. Alternatively, improve the accessibility to funding knowledge and expertise.

- **Introduce Follow-up Mentorship Programs:** Structured mentorship can help SMEs continue embedding ONAs and other innovation tools.
- **Foster increased collaboration across the region:** Explore ways to pull together information on all the services available into a single point of reference to enhance the programme's impact and create a more cohesive innovation ecosystem, benefiting a broader range of businesses in the Black Country.
- **Ensure that IT based reporting systems are clarified and included from the start:** The introduction of the Xpand platform and the requirement to make that retrospective has been challenging. Improve data collection from long-term tracking of SME progression over time.
- **Promote Peer Learning and Networking Opportunities:** encourage collaboration between SMEs through networking events and knowledge-sharing initiatives.
- **Encourage Policy and Funding Support:** Advocate for regional and national policies that sustain innovation ecosystems and secure long-term funding.

2: PROGRAMME DESCRIPTION



2 INTRODUCTION

This report sets out the findings of the external final evaluation of the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project. It covers the project's activity managed by Walsall College involving a consortium of five colleges including Dudley College/Black Country and Marches Institute of Technology, City of Wolverhampton College, South Staffordshire College and Halesowen College. Funded by Innovate UK, which is part of UKRI, the project is implemented in the Black Country Sub-region. EPM Consultancy carried out the final evaluation in the first quarter of 2025, quantifying the economic impact and providing recommendations for the legacy and the approved 12-month extension.

2.1 Project overview

The Black Country Innovation Services project is a £795,029 pilot initiative funded by an Innovate UK grant, led by Walsall College in partnership with a consortium of five colleges. The project runs from 1st April 2024 to 31st March 2026, following a recently approved 12-month extension.

The project has helped to create Innovation Centres for local businesses seeking technical and innovation expertise. The pilot project aimed to drive innovation adoption among local SMEs, encourage businesses to embrace advanced technologies to optimise their operations, and enhance efficiency, enabling them to stay competitive. The project also created opportunities for industry placements at T-Levels and apprenticeships, supporting upskilling and career development. They focus on key growth sectors aligned with the make-up of the industry in the Black Country: advanced manufacturing, engineering, ICT/Digital, Retrofit/green technologies.

Each Innovation Hub specialises in a specific area of expertise:

- **Walsall College Hub:** Digital Innovation
- **Dudley College Hub:** Manufacturing
- **City of Wolverhampton College Hub:** Digital Innovation
- **South Staffordshire College Hub:** Green Technologies
- **Halesowen College Hub:** Digital Innovation

Each college appointed an Innovation Consultant and an Innovation Advisor/Technician to collaborate closely with the businesses, identify their technical needs and offer various support. The Innovation Consultants operate as a network to offer the best solution to the businesses.

The main services and interventions on offer under the Black Country Innovation Services project included:

- Organisational Needs Assessment (ONA)

- Innovation Action Plan
- Workshops
- Knowledge transfer activities
- Technology demonstrations
- Internships and apprenticeships

It is mandatory to evaluate UKRI-funded pilot projects. Following the completion of the interim evaluation, EPM is now conducting the final evaluation of this initial phase for the cohort 1 to measure the pilot's impact.

The final evaluation aims to assess :1- Project Context, 2- Project Progress, 3- Project Delivery and Management, 4- Project Outcomes and Impact, 5- Project Value for Money, 6- Conclusions and Lessons Learned.

Additionally, the evaluation seeks to identify best practices and provide recommendations for scaling up the pilots and strengthening the initiative's legacy.

EPM Consultancy was selected to carry out both the interim and final evaluations of the Black Country Innovation Services project. This report outlines EPM's assessment methodology, findings, and conclusions, aligning fully with the latest UKRI Impact Guidance, updated on 2 March 2023.

2.2. Innovation Hubs' expertise

Through the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project, revenue funding has been allocated to support the appointment of an advisor and a support advisor at the Innovation Hubs. Their role involves coordinating various activities, including collaborating with technicians, lecturers, and practitioners to promote the use of existing hub equipment and services, making these resources accessible to businesses.

Each innovation centre is promoting state-of-the-art facilities spanning technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), networking and cyber security, green technologies, advanced computer numerical control (CNC) production, robotics, computer-aided design (CAD), web solutions and digital services, materials and product testing, rapid prototyping, and additive manufacturing.

At **Dudley College**, the Manufacturing Hub is based at the Black Country and Marches Institute of Technology. The official launch of the Hub took place on 3rd June 2024. The hub provides services in various technological domains, including:

- High-end CNC production
- Automation and Robotics
- Computer Aided Design
- Rapid Prototyping
- Additive manufacturing/3D printing
- 3D scanning
- Materials and Product Testing



Based in a £22 million campus in the heart of Dudley, the Hub has given local employers, including sole traders and start-ups, the opportunity to engage with a range of engineering

and manufacturing technologies. Projects have included the creation of a disability-accessible bollard for the country's canal network, investigating the possibility of bringing automation into a 50-year-old production process, introducing a local jewellery maker to laser cutting techniques and creating CAD models to allow a welding fixture to be 3D printed. They have also held workshops around innovation and additive manufacturing, with a workshop on automation due to be held in the new year.



Photos of machineries and events

At **Staffordshire College**, the Green Technologies Hub is based at the SSC Net Zero Centre. The official launch of the Hub took place on 6 December 2024. The hub provides services in various technological domains, including:

- LEAN
- Net Zero
- Green Technologies
- Engineering
- Construction



The hub is based within the NET Zero centre which has newly built facilities geared up to facilitate the training and development of Skilled and New workforce technicians. The hub's approach is rooted in cutting-edge technology and sustainability, ensuring that local businesses can stay ahead in an evolving marketplace. With the launch of their state-of-the-art Net Zero Energy Training Centre, they are pioneering advancements in the green energy and tech sectors.



Photos of events and Hubs' Tours

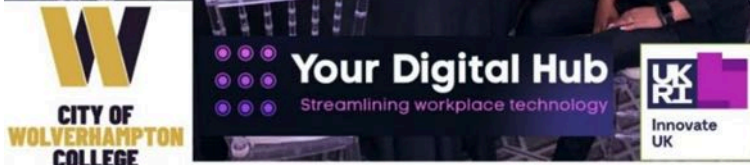
At **Wolverhampton College**, the Digital Innovation Hub is a virtual hub. The official launch of the hub took place on 1st April 2024. The hub provides services in various technological domains, including:

- Artificial Intelligence (AI)
- Cyber Security
- Green technologies

In collaboration with Cisco, IBM, and ThirdwaveICT, this hub offers a series of free selfpaced courses. These courses are available to all colleges, students, and employers. Participants will receive a certificate and digital badge upon completion.

Examples of training courses include:

- Introduction to Data Science
- Introduction to Cybersecurity by Cisco
- AI Fundamentals with IBM Skills Build



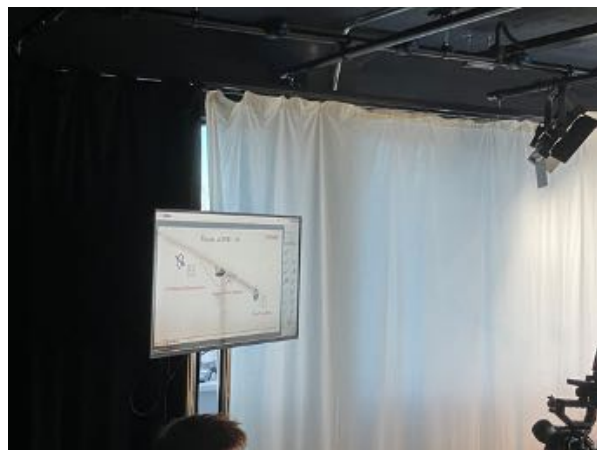
Photos of events and training resources

At **Halesowen College**, the Digital Innovation Hub is a drop-in-access point working with Halesowen College's Skills Shop, currently located in the Cornbow Shopping Centre in Halesowen town centre. The official launch of the hub took place in November.

The hub provides services in various technological domains, including:

- Artificial Intelligence (AI)
- Web technology
- Cyber security
- Other technology interests

The Innovate Hub is a drop-in access point, working with Halesowen College's Skill Shop, currently located in the Cornbow Shopping Centre in Halesowen's town centre, allowing businesses to access support outside of the main project. The hub also offers free advice on web technology, cyber security, artificial intelligence, and other digital technology interests. Additionally, it signposts support from other partners and external bodies. The hub also utilises the college studio facilities which are operated by T level students under the guidance of lectures, to record and deliver virtual workshops from the studio. The hub has successfully delivered combined in-person and virtual workshops on AI Tools for businesses and on AI and Cyber security.



Photos of events and digital support sessions to companies

At **Walsall College**, the Digital Hub is located at the Wisemore Campus, with businesses also gaining access to additional facilities at the Green Lane Campus. The official launch of the Digital Hub took place on 15 November 2024.

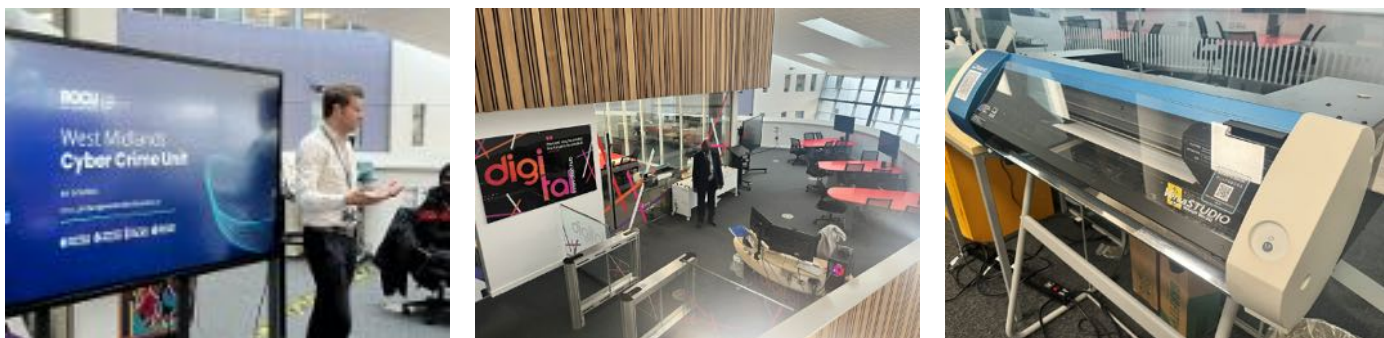
The hub provides services in various technological domains, including:

- Electric Vehicle (EV) Safety training for non-technical staff
- Podcasting support
- 360-degree imaging and video capture
- Software training across multiple platforms
- 360-degree photography and video services
- 3D CAD Modeling
- 3D Scanning and 3D Printing

The hub provides local businesses with the opportunity to advance, update and transform for a brighter future. Whether in person or virtual, support is through 1:1s, workshops, demonstrations and training led by expert technicians and delivered in a way that's fast and fuss free.

The hub offers workshops in areas such as AI Marketing including cyber security. There is training, using industry standard software such as Part 1 hyper MILL 2.5D and 3D Machining. Comprehensive step by step courses for manufacturing companies to gain the skills to program 2.5D and 3D parts. Part 2 teaches users to be more advanced with a good understanding of additional features, toolpaths and settings to increase efficiency. Adobe software training improves skills in three of the world's most popular design tools.

Other workshops include Electric Vehicle (EV) Safety, ideal for non-technical staff, sales assistants, valets and managers. The workshop brings EV safety skills up to date. 360 degrees Image and video capture fully immersive, interactive content is a must-have for any business keen to demonstrate and showcase who they are and what they offer. Podcasting courses teach businesses how sharing their unique industry perspective and promoting the business to an audience of thousands has never been easier, thanks to the world of podcasting.

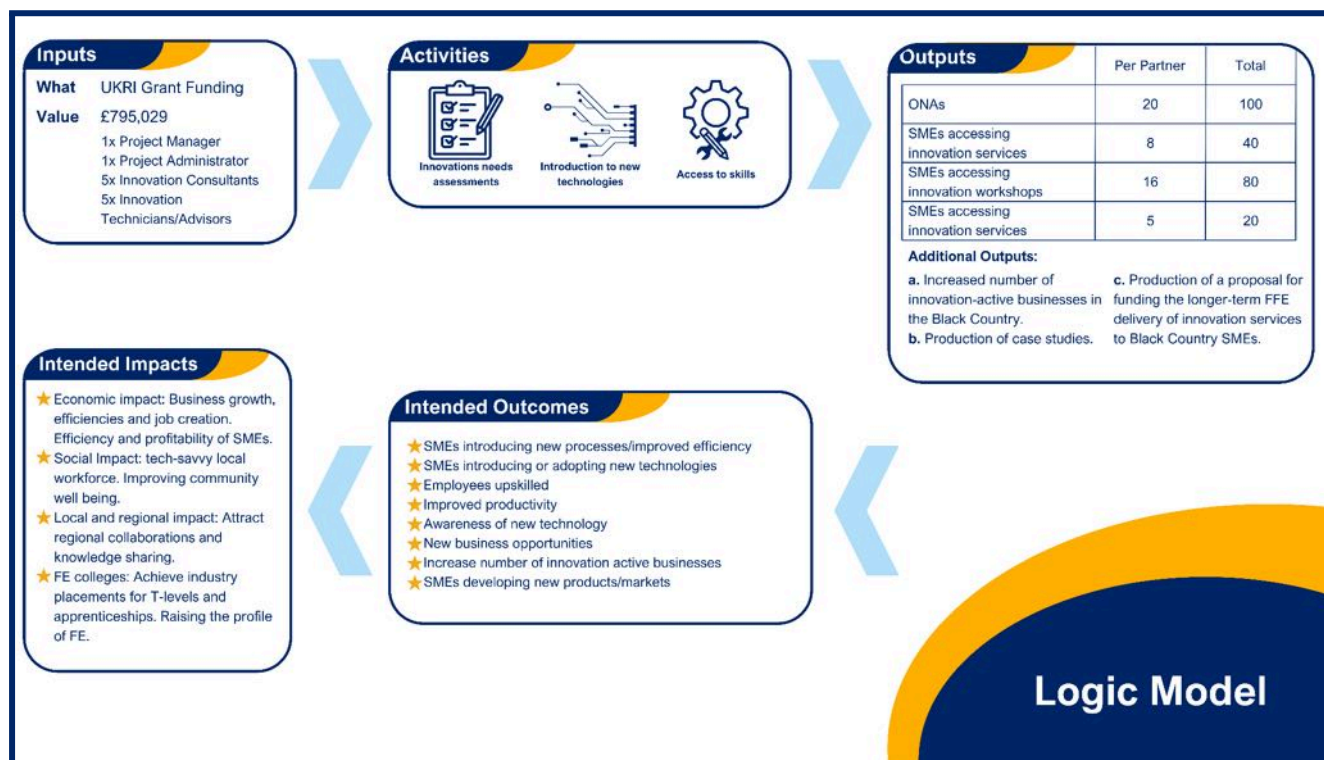


Photos of events and specific equipment

2.3 Logic model

Diagram 1 identifies the key project details as set out in the grant application form and Funding Agreement.

Diagram 1: Logic model of the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project



2.4 About the Authors

EPM consultancy is a multi-disciplinary consultancy company providing specialist advisory and consultancy services in the areas of grant funding, programme management and evaluation. We are experienced in the development of Government-funded projects, managing and delivering UK and EU funding programmes, Public sector, Private sector and collaborative projects, and evaluating project delivery, performance and impact on intended beneficiaries. We have unrivalled experience in developing, managing and administering UK-funded projects and evaluating programmes, including UKRI, UKSA and UKSPF funded projects.

All our evaluations are bespoke to the project, requiring a multifaceted evaluation methodology and in line with governmental guidance.

This evaluation report has been compiled by EPM Consultancy with input from Walsall College and Innovation Hubs and delivery partners of the Black Country Innovation Services.

3: EVALUATION FRAMEWORK



3 EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

The EPM evaluation methodology aligns with HM Treasury's **Magenta Book** principles, employing a theory-based impact approach when a counterfactual is unavailable, or adopting experimental or quasi-experimental methods when a control group is accessible.

Our approach includes a range of techniques: conducting surveys and interviews, facilitating workshops, calculating the net economic impact and developing a series of case studies.

As part of the final evaluation for cohort 1, we will assess the programme's effectiveness and efficiency, considering unintended outcomes and contextual factors. Additionally, we will calculate value for money and estimate the net economic impact of the Black Country Innovation Service Pilot after 12 months of implementation.

3.1 Methodology

Diagram 2 summarises the methodology used to conduct the Black Country Innovation Services final evaluation.

Diagram 2: Methodology



This methodology was conducted in three major stages:

STAGE 1 - DESIGN AND PLAN THE SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT

- **Inception Meeting**

EPM consultants met with the Black Country Innovation Services Governance Team during an online inception meeting on 3 October 2024 and 9 October 2024 to agree the objectives, quality control, roles and responsibilities and programme of work.

- **Documentation familiarisation**

The consultants familiarised themselves with the Application Form, Grant Funding Agreement, Project Change Request documents, Claims Forms and client relationship management and monitoring system used by the management and delivery team.

STAGE 2 - DATA COLLECTION FOR SUMMATIVE ASSESSMENT

- **Designing of questionnaires and ‘Aide Memoires’**

EPM consultants prepared two sets of electronic questionnaires using Google Surveys software: one for SME beneficiaries (beneficiaries are companies who registered for and received Black Country Innovation Services -) and one for the counterfactuals, companies who were introduced to the pilot project but did not take up any services or that registered for the project but subsequently withdrew.

The purpose of the questionnaires was to collect core data with which to assess attainment of project targets, beneficiary outcomes and impacts and beneficiary satisfaction with the project, and also to identify SME needs for further support. The majority of the questions prompted a quantitative or multiple-choice answer to enable these assessments to be made in a rigorous way. These quantitative and multiple-choice questions were supplemented with a series of logic-driven questions that prompted qualitative answers that are tailored to the different types of beneficiaries. These qualitative answers enable us to interpret the quantitative answers, and provide quotes with which to emphasise key messages in this report.

‘Aide Memoire’ templates were prepared to support 1.2.1 phone interviews performed on a sample of SME beneficiaries, counterfactuals and with wider stakeholders. The purpose of the phone interviews is to check correct interpretation of the questionnaire answers, to make deeper enquiries about aspects of the project that generate interesting or unexpected questionnaire results, and to give the EPM consultants the contextual understanding to prepare this report in a rounded, engaging and relatable style (as opposed to dry, statistical style).

- **Questionnaires**

The questionnaires were sent electronically to the full list of 73 project beneficiaries. No emails bounced back. After a period of 5 weeks, an aggregated number of 19 beneficiaries had responded to the survey including responses from both the interim and final stages.

- **Beneficiary and wider stakeholder 1.2.1 online interviews**

EPM consultants conducted 5 online interviews with a sample of the beneficiaries. They also conducted interviews with 5 wider stakeholders: Catherine Bray from Oxford Innovation (OXIN), Dominic Murphy from GTG, Miranda Kimball from Place

Making London/Kightsbridge, Ishy Fillon from Metrobank, Cameron Blount from Keyence POC demonstration.

- **Case studies**

From the initial responses to the questionnaire, 10 beneficiaries were selected as case studies. These case study beneficiaries were identified as having had particularly great impact from participating in the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project. The EPM consultants had in-depth conversations with these beneficiaries to collect the qualitative and quantitative information with which to assess the impact of the project on their individual company.

- **Management and Delivery Team workshops**

On the 9th January 2025 and 21st March 2025, EPM consultants ran two 'Management and Delivery Team workshops' online. The aim of these workshops was to collect feedback on all aspects of project governance and management, team dynamics and complementarity with the Innovation Hubs other support programmes, and to hear the various project management and delivery team perspectives on the beneficiary survey and interview answers.

STAGE 3 - ANALYSIS AND REPORTING

For the project context assessment, the EPM Consultants will reflect on whether the consensus is that the project is meeting its objectives. To do this, Google Forms® was used to analyse the management team's beneficiary tracking data (e.g. company age, gender) as well as quantitative beneficiary survey responses relevant to assessing the project context. In the case of qualitative data, the EPM consultants used three-stage Framework Analysis to analyse the qualitative information and insights gained through the surveys, interviews and workshop. This analysis method begins by identifying the themes for which qualitative data exists (Thematic analysis), then separating this by stakeholder type (Typologic analysis) to create a matrix of qualitative responses from which patterns of responses between the different stakeholder types become apparent (Explanatory analysis). This analysis was independently completed by the two consultants and differences in results were discussed until a consensus was reached, removing any potential researcher bias in analysing the qualitative data.

For the project progress analysis, the consultants used the latest project claims data to forecast attainment of the project targets by project end (Innovation Organisational Needs Analysis (ONAs), SMEs accessing innovation services, SMEs accessing innovation workshops, SMEs embedding NOAs over lifetime of project, Number of case studies, jobs created, jobs safeguarded, SMEs introducing new product development, SMEs introducing new processes/improved efficiency, SMEs introducing or adopting new technologies, SMEs projecting increase in turnover, employees upskilled, improved productivity, awareness of new technology, new business opportunities).

For the project management and delivery assessment, the EPM consultants reviewed the project's approach to recruitment, communications and services delivery using the same data methods as described for the project context assessment above, namely Excel functions to analyse the relevant quantitative data and three-stage Framework Analysis of the qualitative data that helped to add context and interpretation of the quantitative data.

Finally, the EPM consultants amalgamate all the data and insights made in the process of conducting this summative assessment, including the gathering of best practice and lessons learnt, in order to make recommendations for how to maximise the impact during the reminder period of delivery of this pilot project.

3.2 Methodology challenges and Assessors' appraisal

EPM Consultants left the questionnaires open for 6 weeks during the winter 2024/25.

A sizable number (19) and percentage of project beneficiaries responded to the questionnaire: 23.17%. This is an excellent response rate and perfectly sufficient for the purposes of this summative assessment.

4: OUTCOMES AND IMPACT ANALYSIS



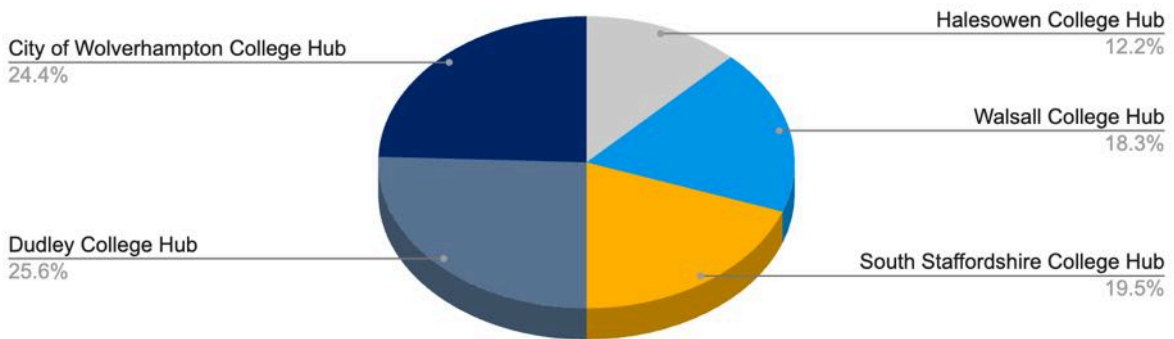
4 OUTCOME AND IMPACT ANALYSIS

4.1 Beneficiary profile

Baseline data from 82 businesses, who have benefitted from the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project, were provided to the EPM team. The characteristics of the participants in the Black Country Innovation Services are presented below.

Figure 1: Breakdown of beneficiaries supported across the five Innovation Hubs

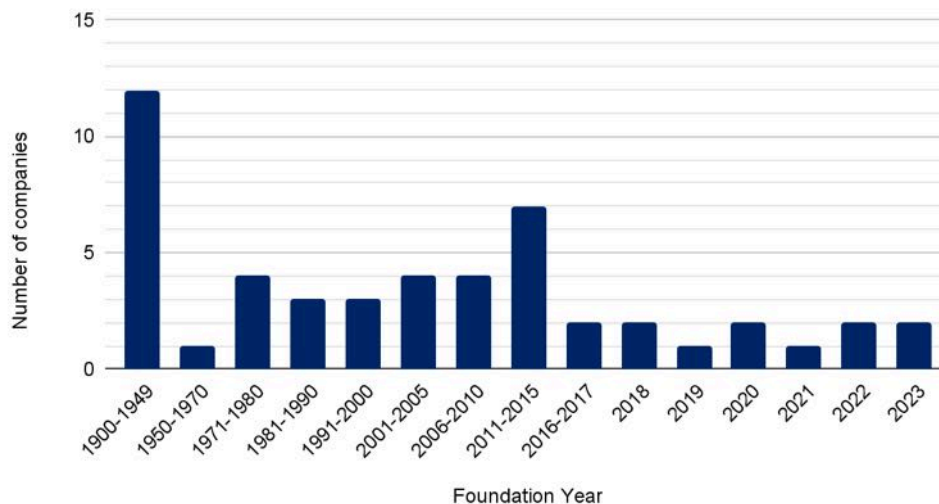
Percentage of beneficiaries supported across the five Innovation Hubs



Beneficiaries are utilising the various entry points of the network, with the Dudley College Hub being the most popular, having supported 25.6% of the cohort 1.

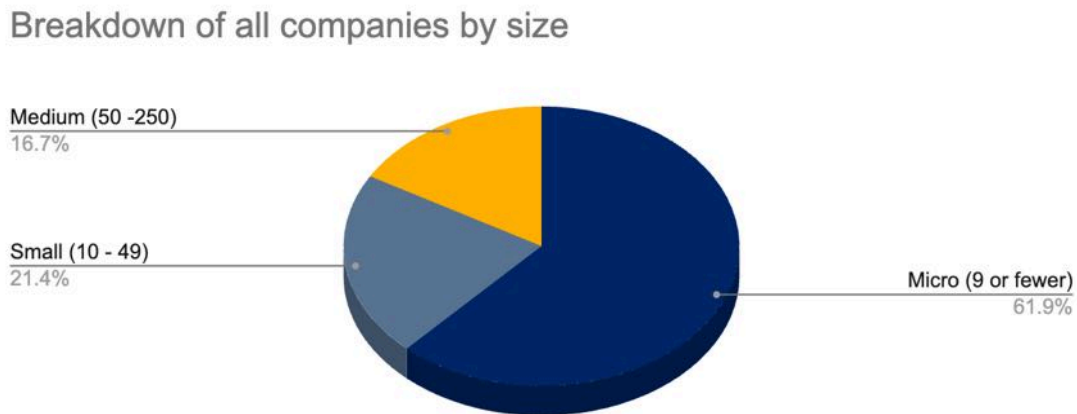
Figure 2: Breakdown of all beneficiary companies by age

Breakdown of all beneficiary companies by age



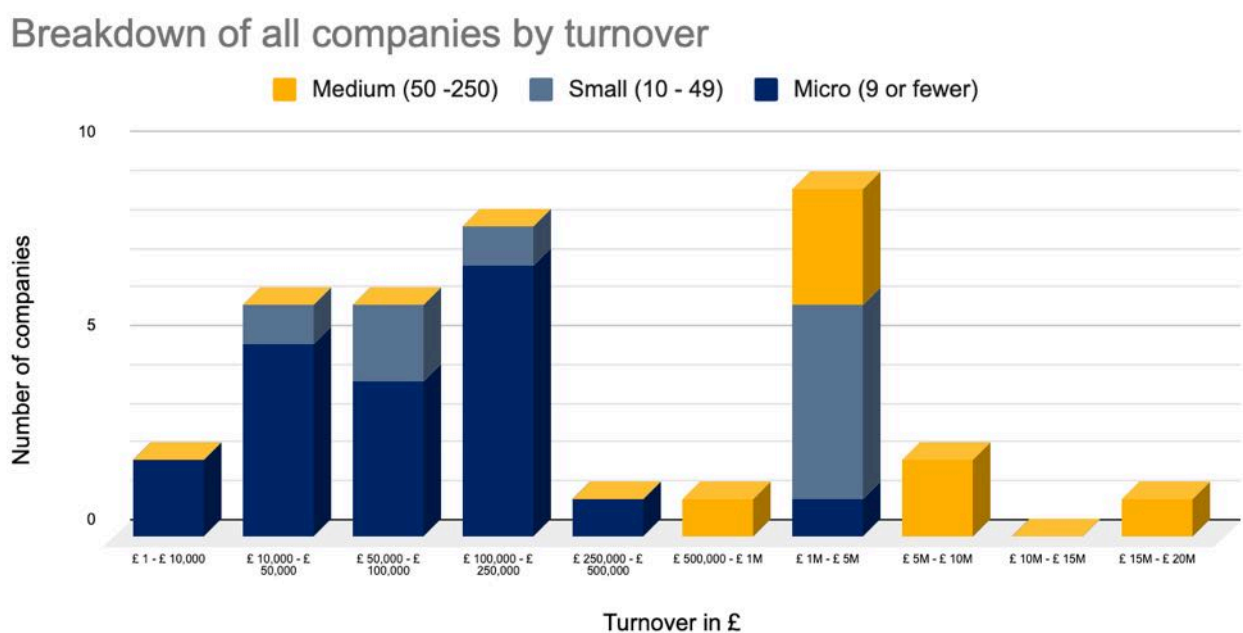
The Black Country Innovation Services beneficiaries include both long-established companies and relatively newer ones. The majority of the companies supported by Black Country Innovation Services were founded between 1900 and 1949, reflecting the region's industrial heritage with its foundation in traditional and long-standing businesses. The primary focus of Black Country Innovation Services has been on established and mature companies.

Figure 3: Breakdown of all beneficiary companies by size



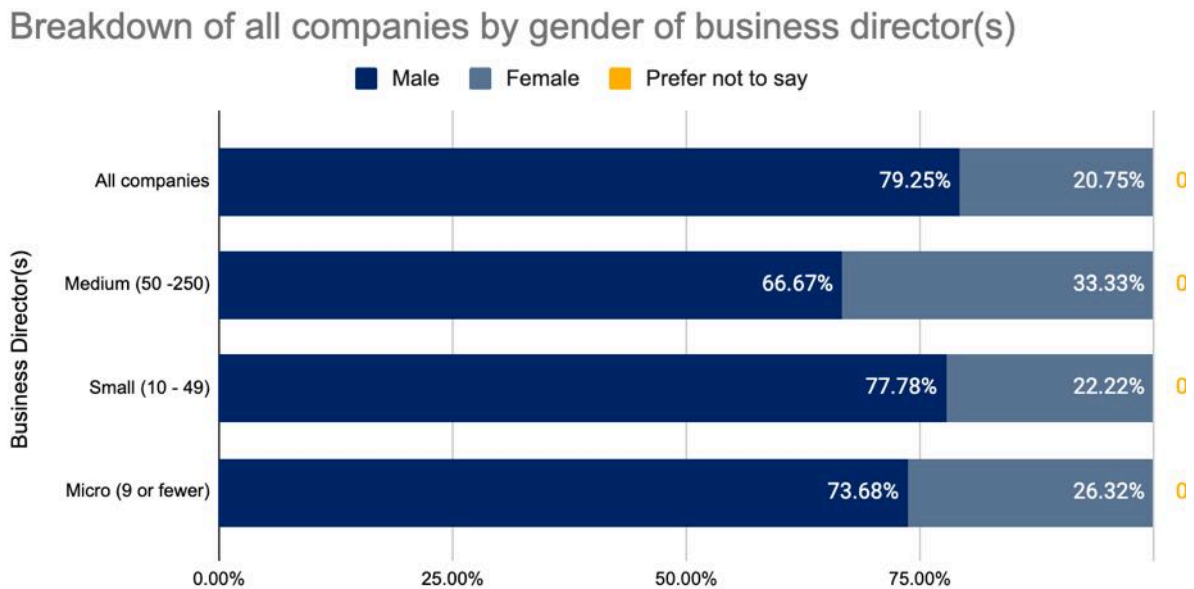
The majority of Black Country Innovation Services' beneficiaries are micro-companies with fewer than 10 employees. UKRI-funded projects generally focus on providing higher intervention rates for micro and small businesses, similar to those supported by Black Country Innovation Services.

Figure 4: Breakdown of all companies by turnover



54.54% of beneficiaries are reporting a turnover below £250K.
 22.72% of beneficiaries are reporting a turnover between £1-£5M.
 Finally, only medium sized companies are reporting a turnover above £5M.

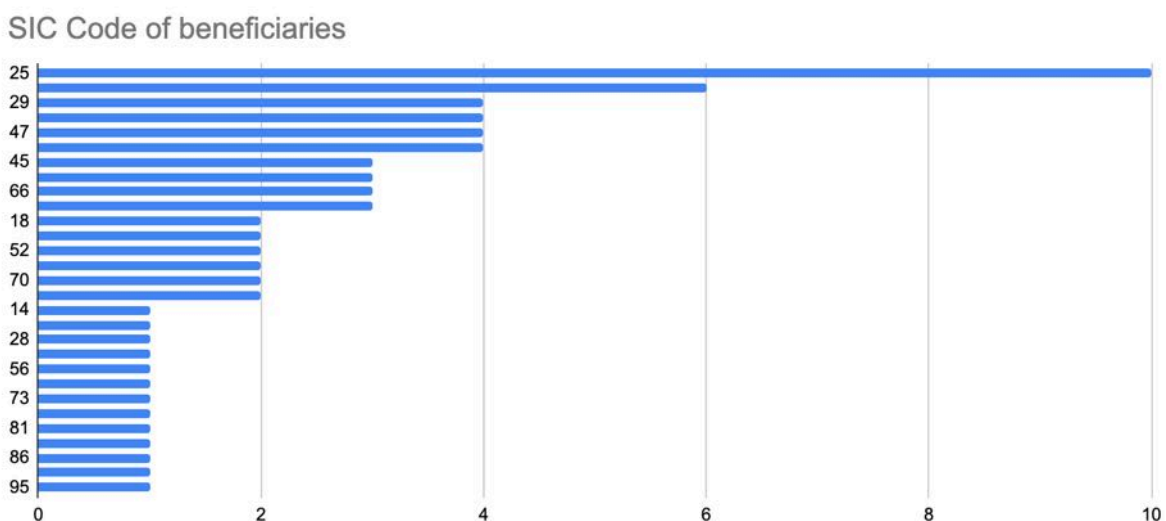
Figure 5: Breakdown of all companies by gender of business director(s)



The vast majority (79.25%) of the beneficiary companies are male-led. Only 20.75% of the beneficiaries are female-led businesses.

This is similar to the national average as according to the annual Small Business Survey, only 15% of UK businesses were led by women in 2023.

Figure 6: Beneficiaries' sector of industry by SIC code



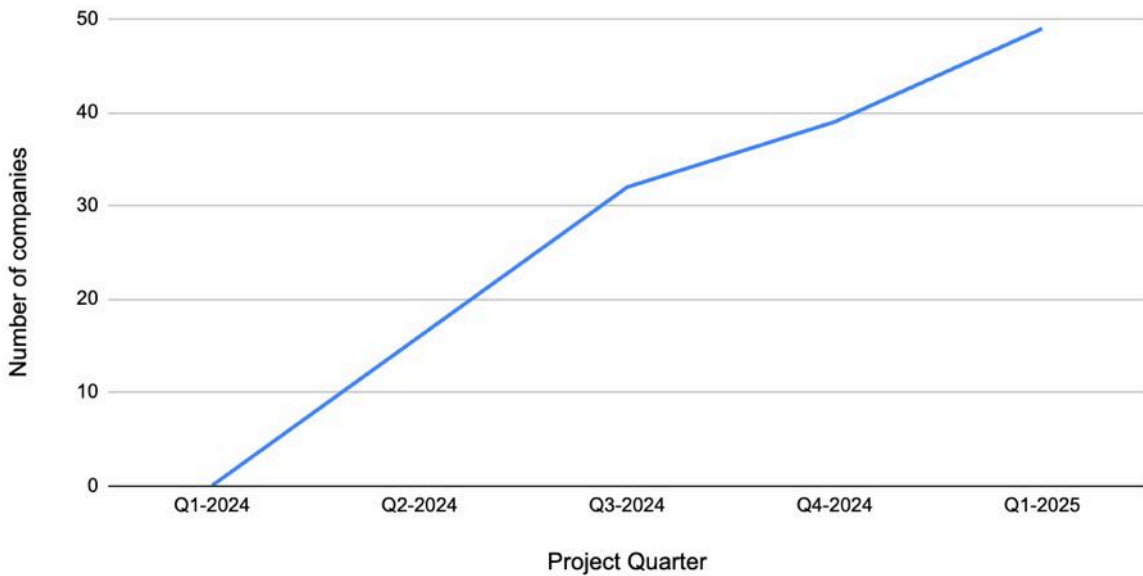
The main sector of industry represented amongst the beneficiaries are:

- 14.49 % from category “Manufacture of fabricated metal products, excluding weapons & ammunition” (SIC code 25)

- 8.70% from category “Computer programming, consultancy and related activities” (SIC code 62)
- 5.80% from category “Education” (SIC code 85)
- 5.80% from category “Manufacture of motor vehicles, trailers and semi-trailers” (SIC code 29)
- 5.80% from category “Other manufacturing” (SIC code 32)

Figure 7 : Breakdown of all companies by date Black Country Innovation Services support started

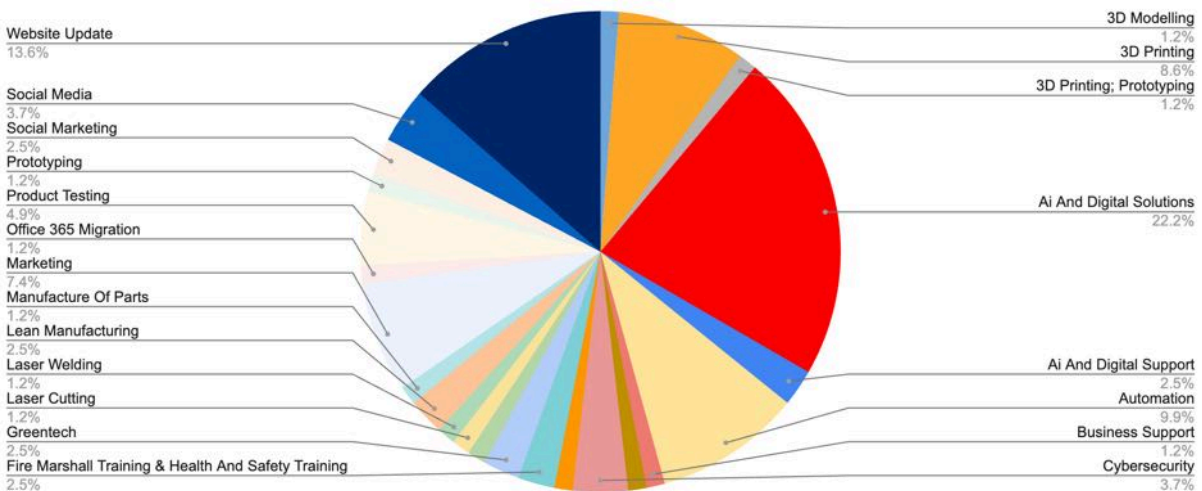
Distribution of companies by date support started



The recruitment of companies on the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project started in Q1-2024 with a high take up as soon as the pilot programme was launched and with a steady increase which shows the demand for such a support scheme.

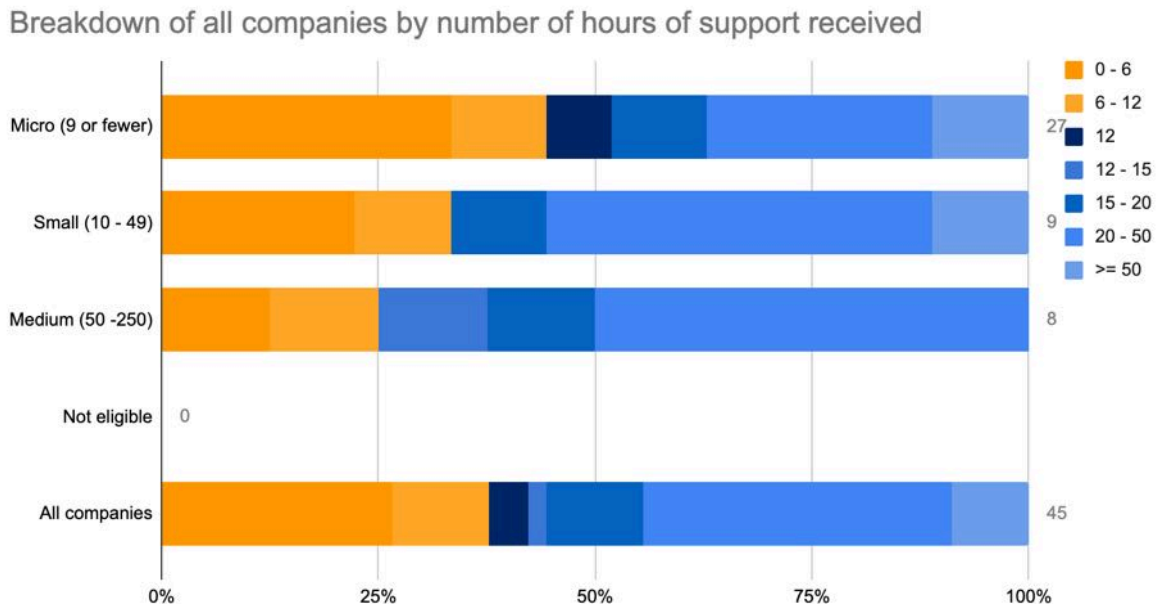
Figure 8 : Breakdown of all companies by type of support they received

Type of support received



The most popular services accessed through the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project are: AI and digital solutions at 22.2%, followed by Website update at 13.6%, the automation at 9.9% and the 3D Printing service at 8.6%.

Figure 9: Breakdown of all companies by number of hours of support they received



26.67% of the Black Country Innovation Services beneficiaries listed the data monitoring database have received up to 6H of support;
 44.44% of beneficiaries have received at least 12H of support.
 35.56% have received between 20-50H of support.
 8.89% have received over 50H of support with one company having benefitted from over 50H of support.

4.2 Counterfactual profile

The list included 8 counterfactuals representing various industry sectors, including:

- SIC code 70100: Activities as head offices
- SIC code 43210: Electrical installation
- SIC code 85510: Sports and recreation
- SIC code 43342: Glazing
- SIC code 46690: Wholesale and machinery, equipment
- SIC code 24510: Casting of iron
- SIC code 56102: Unlicensed restaurants and cafes

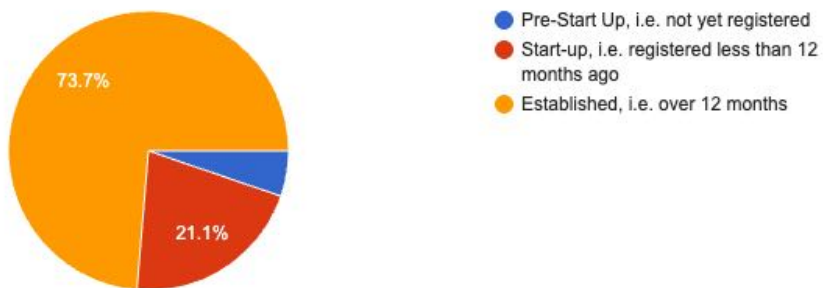
There are 12.5% of counterfactuals companies, who inquired about the services but ultimately did not proceed, either because they were ineligible for the program or determined it was not suitable for their needs.

4.3 Feedback from beneficiaries who completed the survey

4.3.1 Characteristics of survey respondents

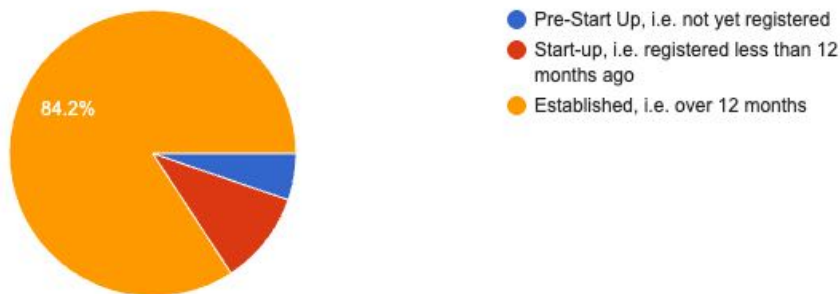
The survey remained open for 6 weeks and answers were collected from 19 beneficiaries (representing 23.17% of beneficiaries).

Figure 10: Company type of beneficiaries that completed the survey at first engagement with the Black Country Innovation Services



The Black Country Innovation Services pilot project has been predominantly supporting established companies as 73.7% of all beneficiary survey respondents classed themselves as an established company (over 12 months old) when they first engaged with the Black Country Innovation Service project. Only 21% were start-up companies.

Figure 11: Current company type of beneficiaries that completed the survey



By comparing Figure 11 with Figure 10, it is possible to see that 10.5% of the start-up companies have now become established companies.

Figure 12: Beneficiaries accessing the different Colleges' hubs

Please indicate which of the following Black Country Innovation Hubs you have benefited from?

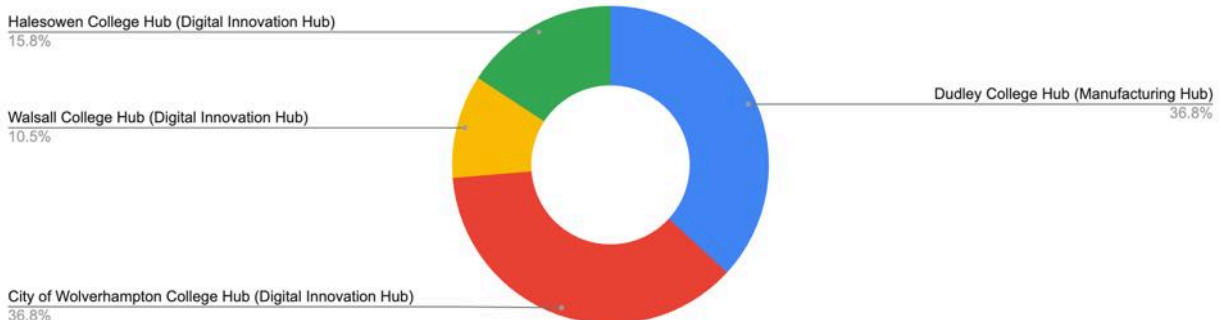


Figure 12 indicates that 36.8% of survey respondents benefited from support provided by the Dudley College Hub, 36.8% from the City of Wolverhampton College Hub, 15.8% from the Halesowen College Hub, and 10.5% from the Walsall College Hub. Some companies were referred to another hub in the network to access further support.

4.3.2 Beneficiaries' financial position

Figure 13: Beneficiaries turnover

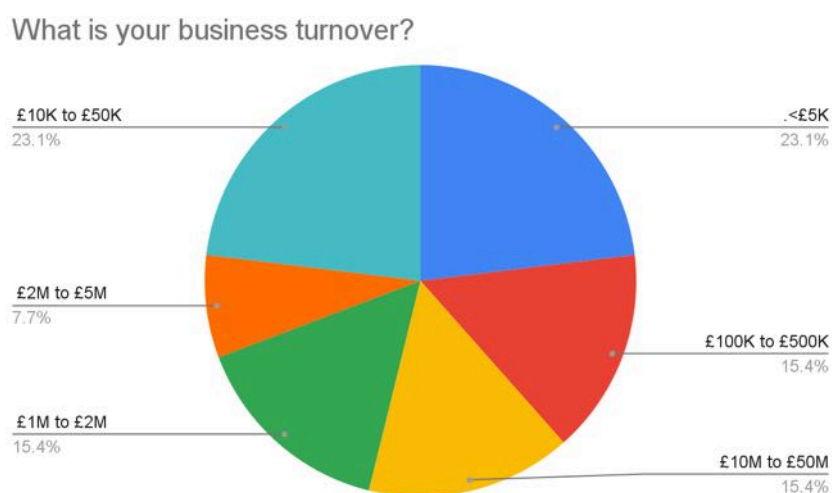
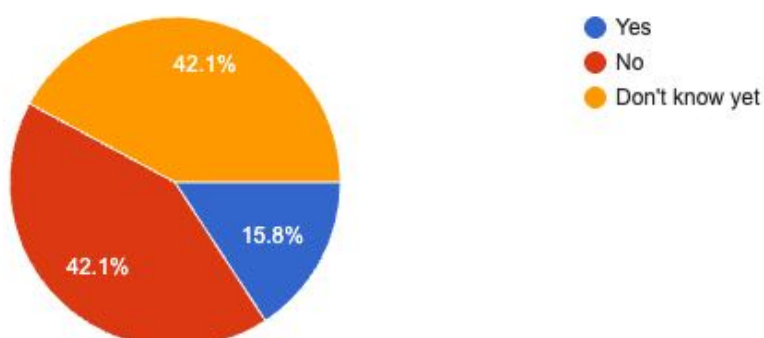


Figure 13 presents the distribution of beneficiaries' turnover. It shows that 23.1% report a turnover of less than £5K, while another 23.1% fall within the £10K to £50K range. Additionally, 15.4% of beneficiaries fall into each of the following turnover brackets: £100K to £500K, £1M to £2M, and £10M to £50M. Meanwhile, 7.7% of beneficiaries have a turnover between £2M and £5M.

This is a good sample and representation of the entire Black Country Innovation Services cohort.

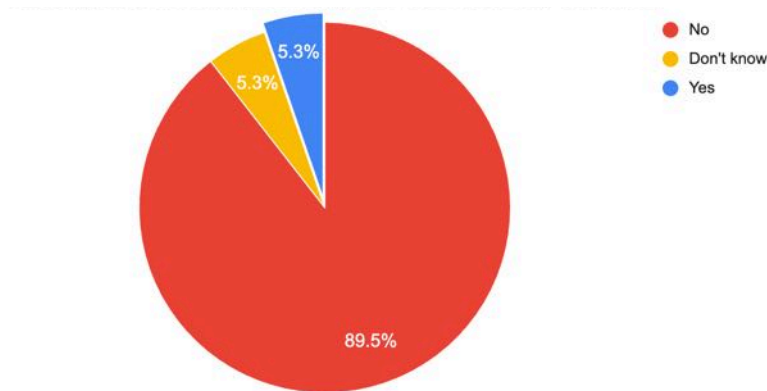
Figure 14: Beneficiaries securing new contracts



15.8% of beneficiaries have indicated securing at least one new contract thanks to the support of Black Country Innovation Services pilot project.

42.1% are unsure if the project has helped to secure new commercial contracts yet.

Figure 15: Beneficiaries securing grant funding (non-commercial contract)

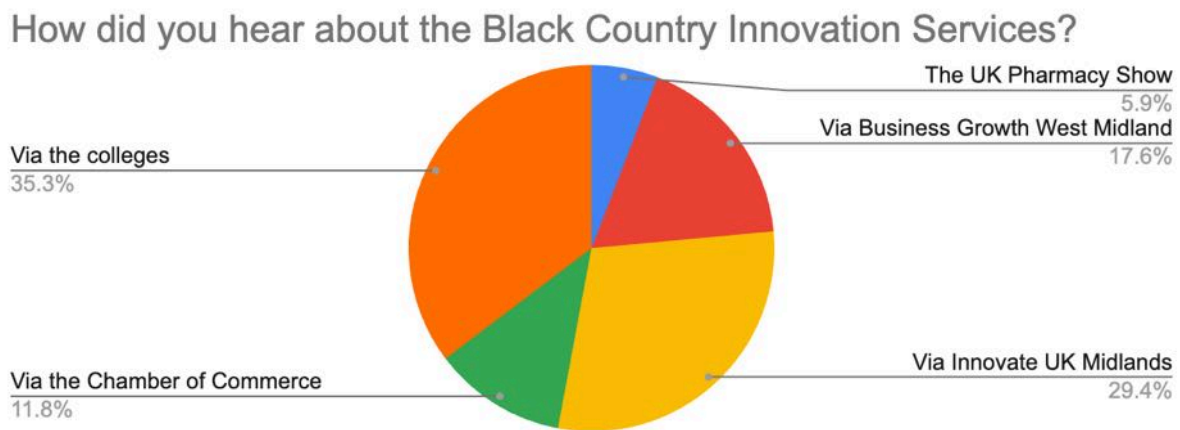


5.3% of beneficiaries reported securing at least one grant with the support of the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project.

An additional 5.3% remain uncertain whether the project has contributed to securing new grant funding at this stage.

4.3.3 Main sources referrals

Figure 16: Main sources of referrals

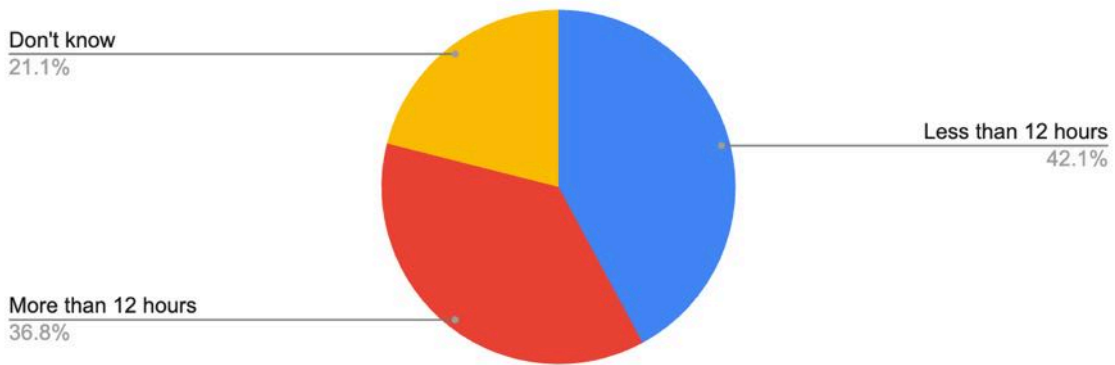


The biggest source of referrals into the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project came from Innovate UK Midlands (29.4%), via the colleges themselves (35.3%) and from Business Growth West Midlands.

5.3.4 Hours of support

Figure 17: Perception of beneficiaries of the hours of support that they have received.

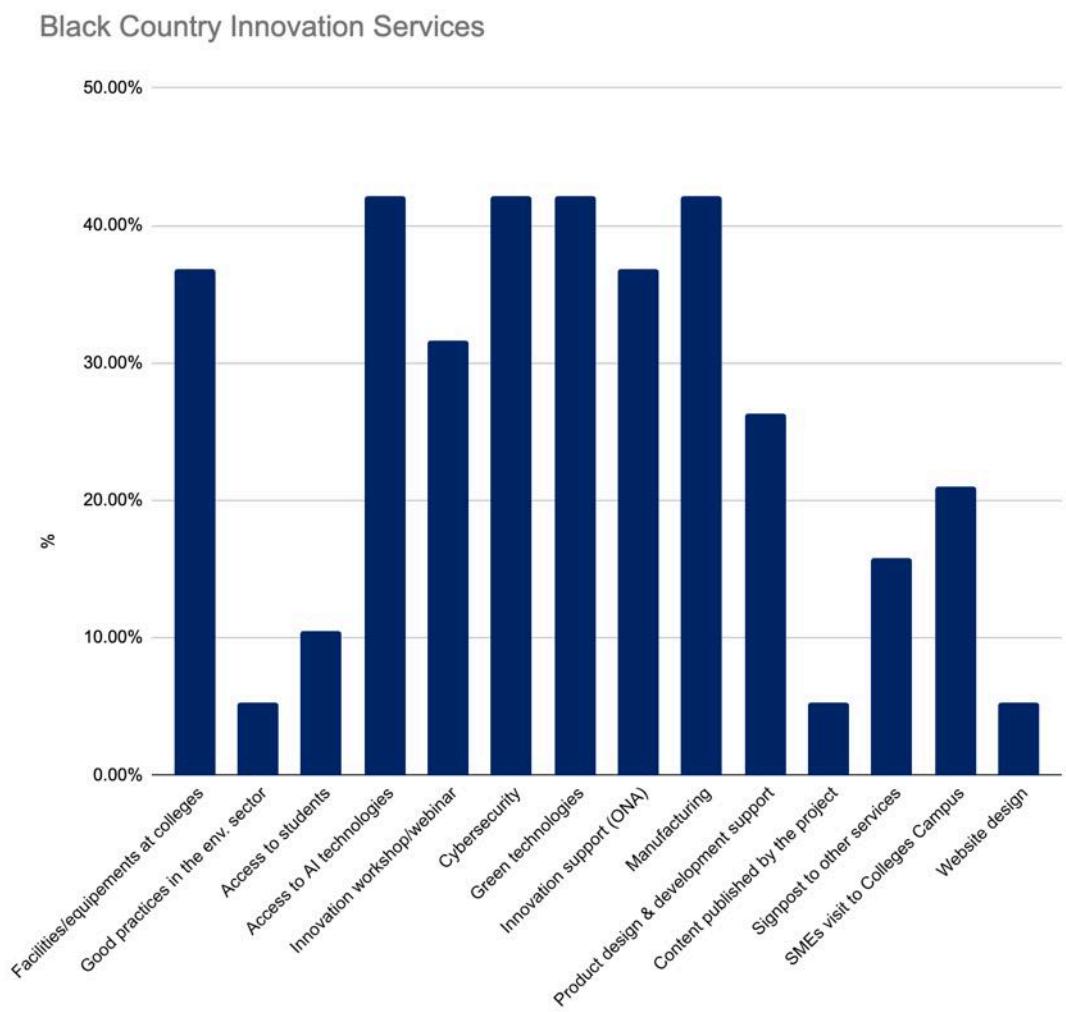
From memory, how many hours of Black Country Innovation Service project support have you received?



36.8% of beneficiary survey respondents perceived to have received more than 12 hours of support, whilst 42.1% of beneficiary survey respondents have perceived to receive less than 12 hours. Lastly, 21.1% are currently unsure.

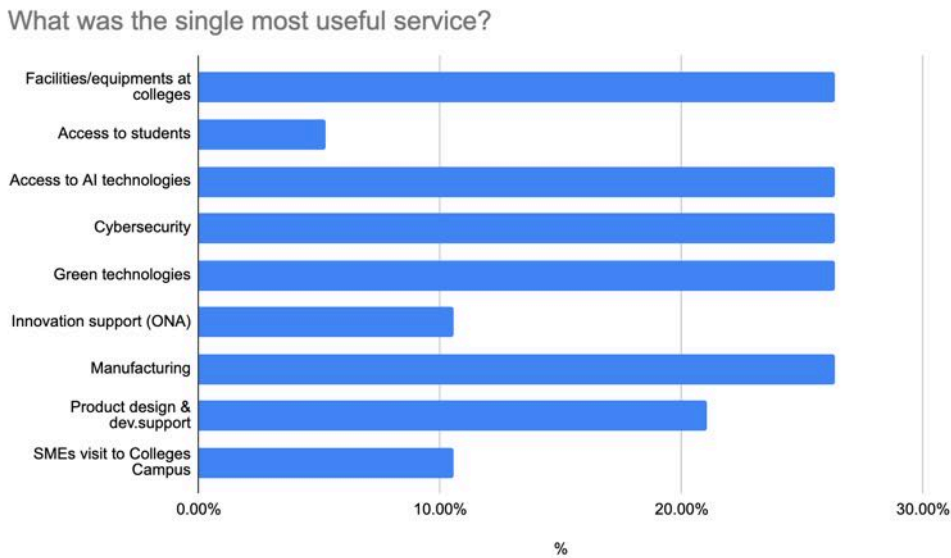
4.3.5 Support received

Figure 18: Range of support received by beneficiaries



As expected, the most frequently accessed types of support through the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project include access to facilities and equipment at the Colleges' Hubs, AI technologies, green technologies, innovation support, and manufacturing resources, each reported by 42.1% of respondents.

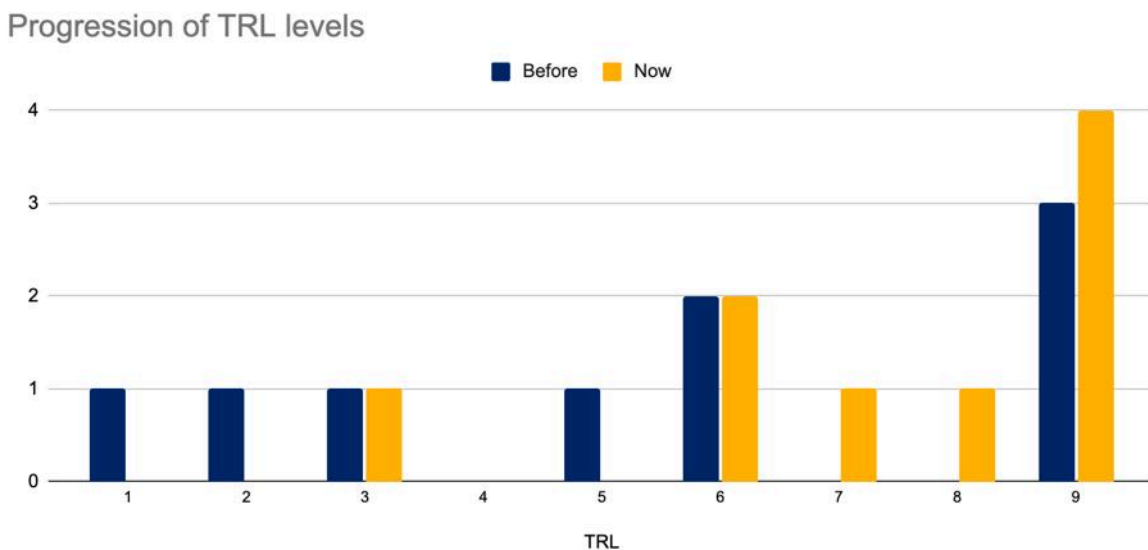
Figure 19: Single most useful services rated by beneficiaries



When survey respondents were prompted to select the one single most useful support to them, the product design & development support scored the highest with 26.32% together with the access to facilities/equipment at colleges, Cybersecurity and AI technologies, Green technologies and manufacturing.

4.3.6 Product and service market readiness

Figure 20: Progression of TRL levels



47.4% of survey respondents have tried to make progress towards new-to-firm products or services.

The survey respondents reported that, on a scale of 1 to 10, their product/service was on average at 5.55 ± 3.08 close to market when they first engaged with the Black Country Innovation Service pilot project. These same products/services are now 7.33 ± 2.06 closer to market.

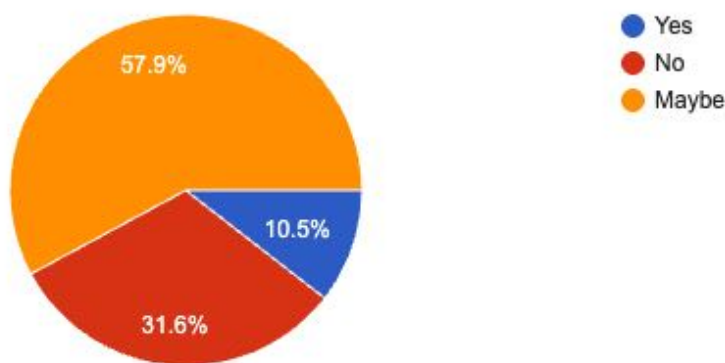
The average increase of TRL across the survey respondents is **+1.77** (and 84% due to the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project intervention).

This is a commendable jump in TRL.

In addition, some survey respondents have now reached TRL level 9.

4.3.7 Organisational Needs Assessment (ONA)

Figure 21: Implementation of innovative measures following the ONA



Only 10.5% of respondents have implemented the innovative measures following the ONA at the time of this evaluation.

When prompted to explain their most useful piece of advice/learning/knowledge that they gained through the process,, notable answers included:

- "It has raised our all round awareness in this sector"*
- "We were able to use the laser cutter"*
- "The usage of CAD programmes"*
- "The student support has helped us to increase our reach to potential new customers"*
- "To access high quality 3D printing for new part development"*
- "We can access equipment we can't afford!"*

4.3.7 Jobs created and safeguarded

Across all beneficiaries respondents, **1 FTE jobs** have been created and **6 FTE jobs safeguarded** across 5 companies.

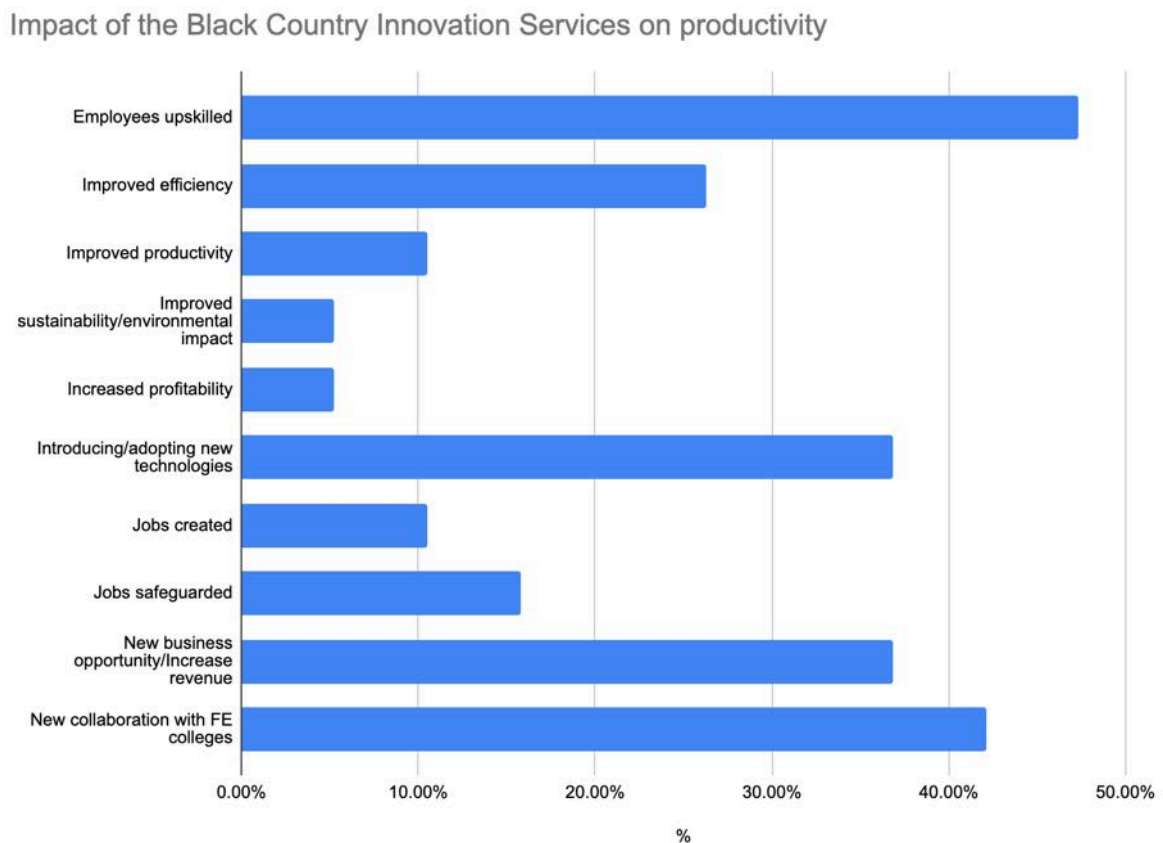
In addition, **5 paid students/interns** were hired across 3 companies.

50% of companies made an attempt to hire students from under-represented groups (e.g. women in STEM, racial/ethnic minorities, individuals with disabilities).

25% of companies plan to offer to their intern(s) a position upon completion of the internship.

4.3.8 Productivity

Figure 22: Impact of the Black Country Innovation Services on productivity



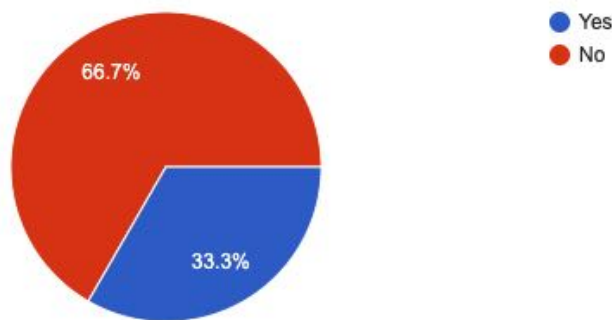
- 47.37% of survey respondents reported an improvement in employee upskilling.
- 26.32% reported improved efficiency.
- 10.53% reported increased productivity.
- 5.26% reported enhanced profitability.
- 36.84% noted support for introducing or adopting new technologies.
- 10.53% reported job creation.

- 15.79% reported safeguarding jobs.
- 36.84% highlighted new business opportunities and increased revenue.
- 42.11% reported forming new collaborations with FE colleges.

The pilot is in its early stages, and its impact is expected to increase over time.

4.3.9 Environmental impact and sustainable practices

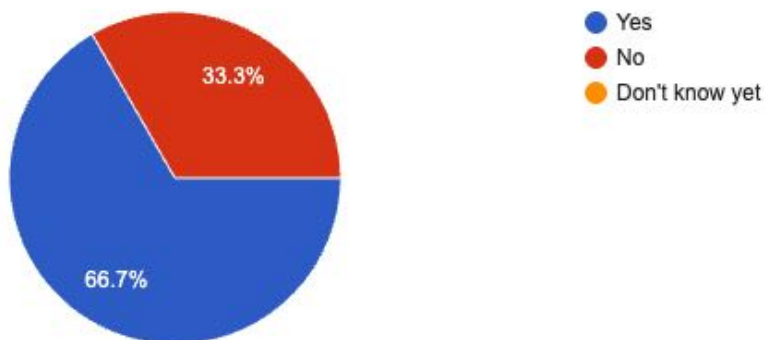
Figure 23: Businesses implementing environmentally sustainable practices



As a result of participating in the project, 33.3% of survey respondents have adopted environmentally sustainable practices.

Reported areas of green improvement include material recycling and the installation of solar PV arrays.

Figure 24: Environmental impact on customers

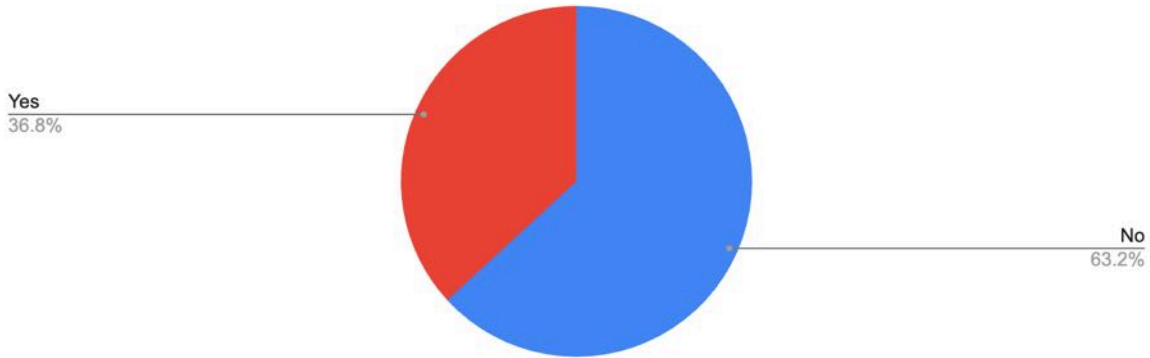


66.7% of those who adopted environmentally sustainable practices reported an improvement in their reputation with customers or stakeholders.

4.3.11 Social benefits

Figure 25: Social benefits

Has your participation in the project led to any social benefits (e.g improved employee well-being, more inclusive hiring etc.)?



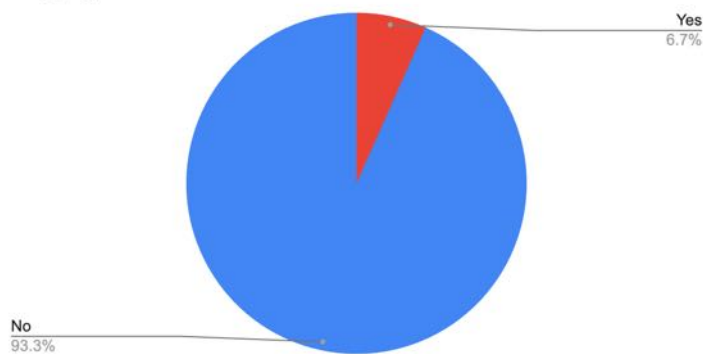
36.8% of survey respondents reported experiencing social benefits as a result of their participation in the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project.

4.3.12 R&D collaborations

52.6% of companies reported initiating new R&D collaborations, leading to a total increase of **£8,010.01 in R&D and innovation expenditure** and **cost savings of £50,772.11** as a result of their participation in the Black Country Innovation Services.

Figure 26: Creation of new patents, designs, trademarks or copyrights

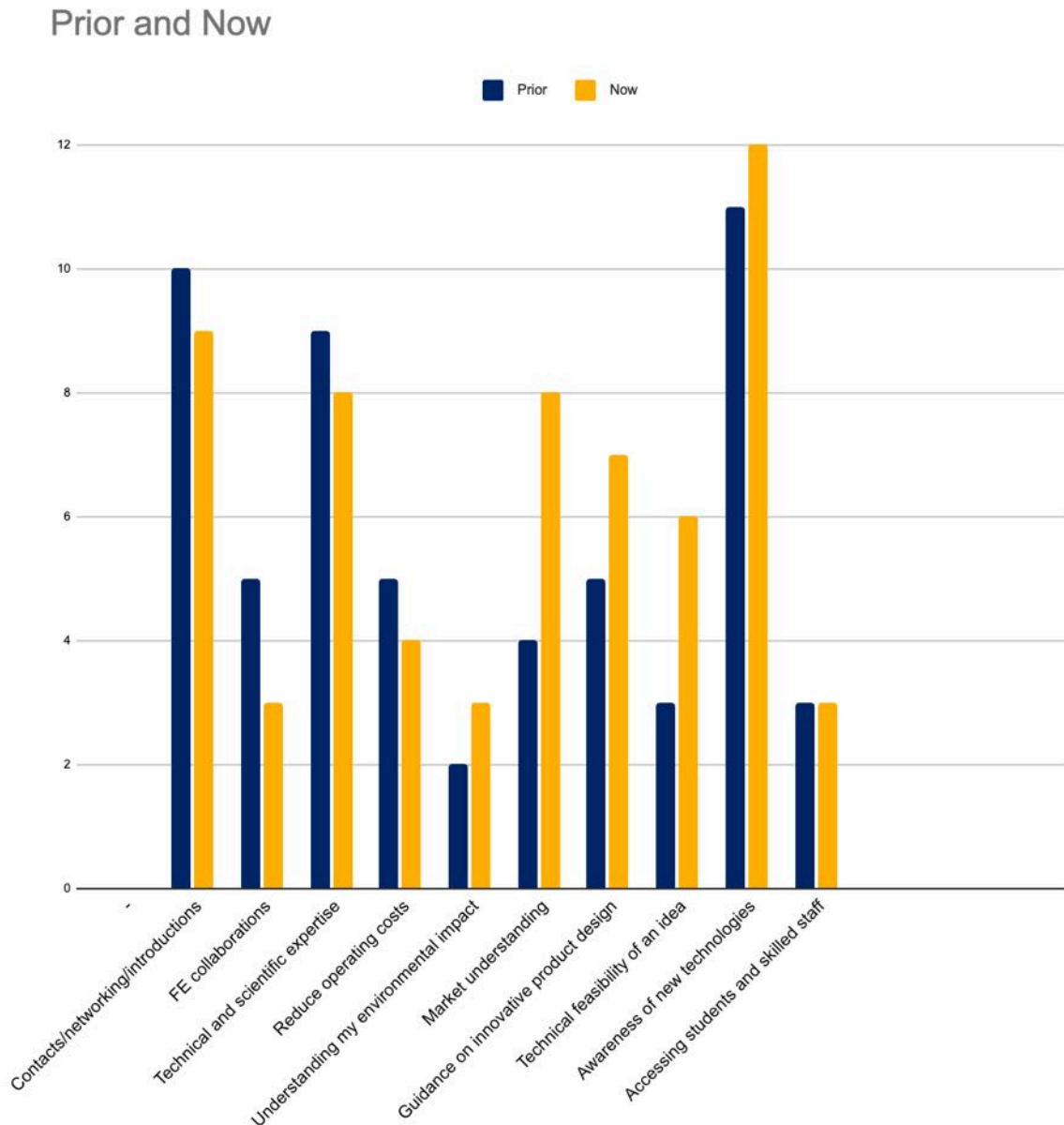
Have you created any new patents, designs, trademarks or copyrights?



Additionally, 6.7% of respondents reported creating new patents, designs, trademarks, or copyrights as a result of their participation in the project.

4.3.11 Barriers to innovation

Figure 27: Comparison of beneficiary barriers to innovation prior to engaging with the programme and now



The top three most popular company needs prior to joining the programme were: 1) Awareness of new technologies; 2) Contacts/networking/introductions 3) Accessing technical and scientific expertise.

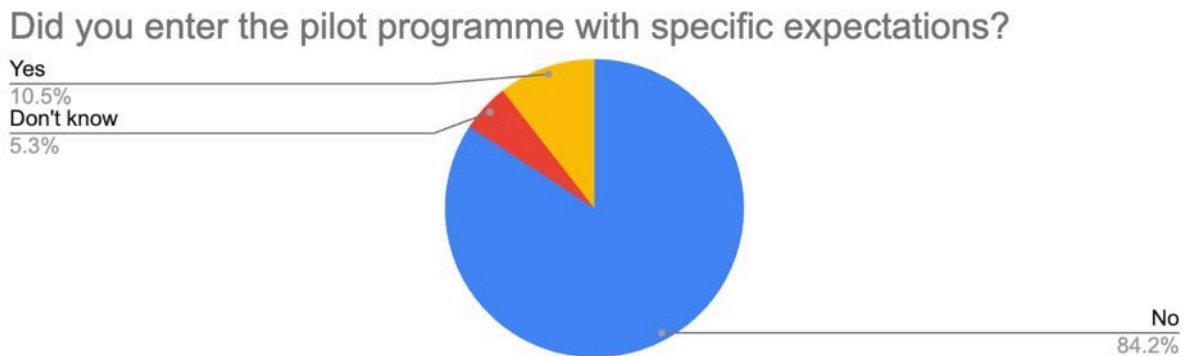
A decline has been observed in the demand for contacts, networking, introductions, FTE collaborations, FE collaborations, access to technical and scientific expertise, reducing operating costs which is a positive development. Meanwhile, new needs have emerged, as

companies now focus on progressing from concept to market and selling their innovative products and services.

Notably, the need for access to students has remained consistent.

4.3.12 Satisfaction and expectations

Figure 28: Specific expectations

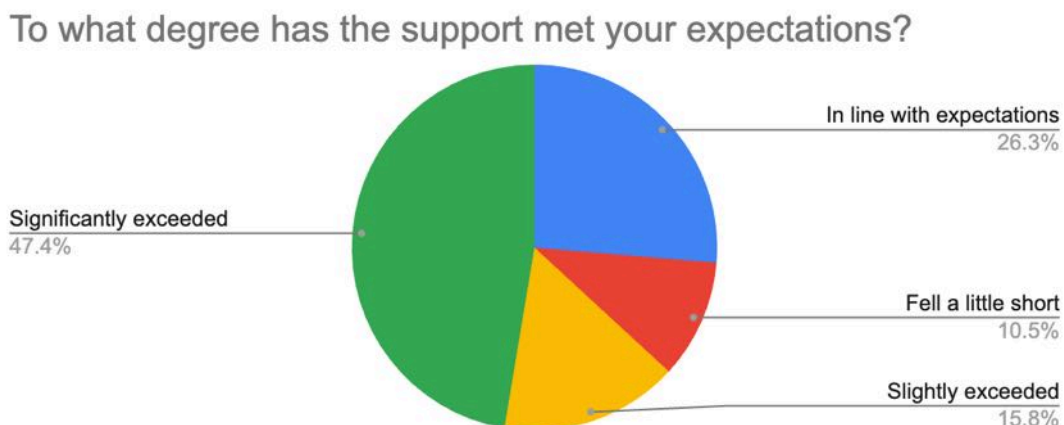


A minority of beneficiaries (10.5%) entered the programme with expectations and a huge majority 84.2% of beneficiaries entered the programme with no expectations.

When prompted to explain their expectations while enrolling in the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project, notable answers included:

- "To gain further knowledge and advice around IT"*
- "Just looking for any help we could get!"*
- "How new technology can help in new product development"*
- "To learn how to use the laser cutter"*

Figure 29: Achievement of beneficiary expectations of the programme



89.5% of survey respondents stated that their expectations were met or exceeded by the services provided through the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project. This represents a remarkably high satisfaction rate for a programme of this nature.

When prompted to explain their level of satisfaction in the programme, notable answers included:

"Very thorough in their approach and very supportive team"

"The student and professional support has been comprehensive and useful"

"The support was above and beyond what I expected"

"Everything that was asked was supported!"

"The quality of the support Richard has provided throughout has been fantastic"

"Richard Johnson went above and beyond to help assist and implement everything we required as a business"

"We learnt about Chat GPT and Gemini as well as workshops on automation. We are still implementing. All in all very useful"

"Good support from all concerned"

"They were extremely helpful"

"It has taken me in a different but relevant direction to what I expected"

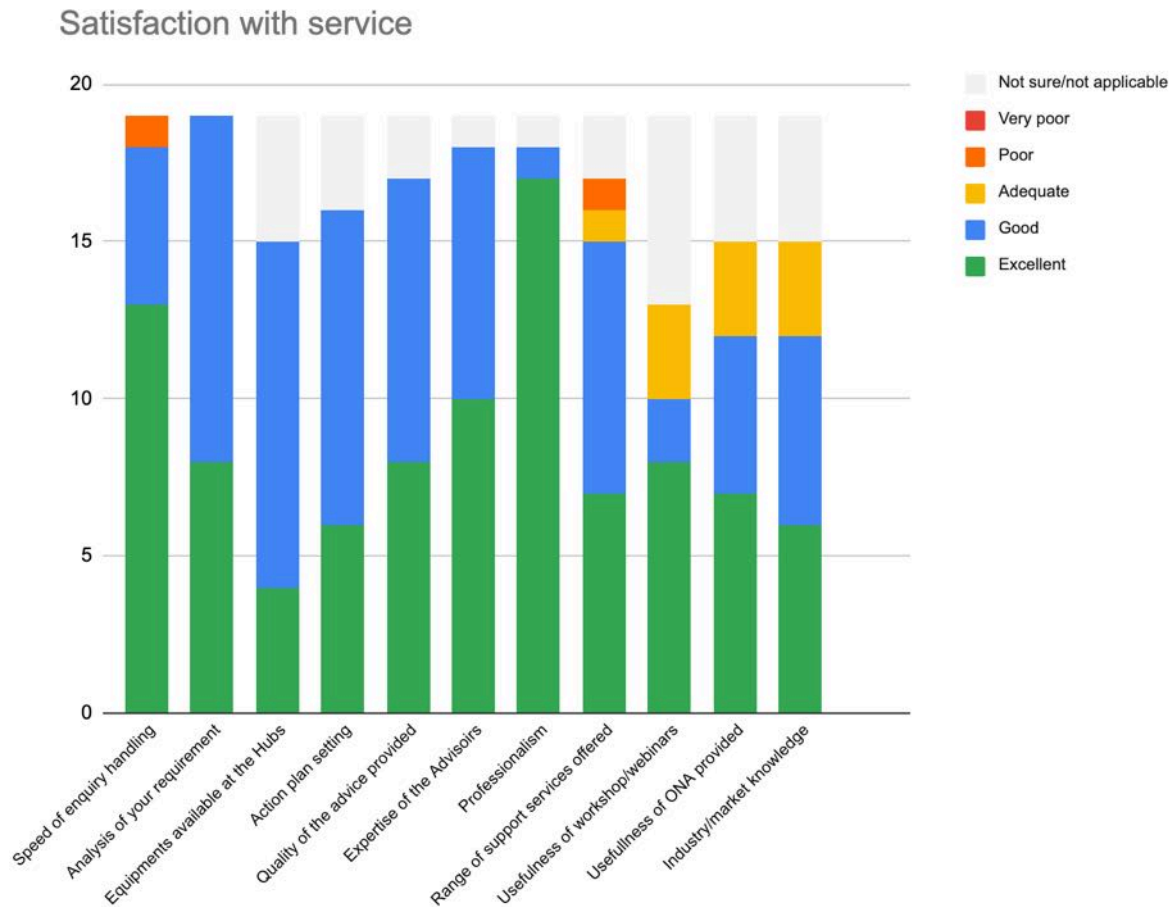
"Very professional"

Some suggestions for improvements:

"We do not qualify to get access to the DTI because we are a small business!"

"We did not get any funding but the support from consultant was good"

Figure 30: Beneficiary ratings of different aspects of the service



The aspects of the Black Country Innovation Services that survey respondents most frequently rated highly were: the expertise of the Advisors, the prompt handling of inquiries, the thorough analysis of requirements, the quality of advice provided, and the overall professionalism of the project staff.

Assessors note that the overall satisfaction rate is excellent.

4.3.13 Future Directions and Themes

Beneficiary survey respondents requested support along the 5 following themes, which are aligned with their future business ambitions.

These themes are listed below from most frequently mentioned to least frequently mentioned:

1. **Technical expertise on 3D rendering, AI and digitalisation, green tech**
2. **Marketing, sales & e-commerce**
3. **Prototyping**
4. **Contacts and networking**
5. **Grants**

5: STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK



5 STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK

5.1 Feedback from Governance and Delivery Team

The workshop with the project management and delivery team took place on 9 January 2025 and a follow up session took place on 21 March 2025. In attendance were:

- Ray Hall - Innovation Consultant - South Staffordshire College
- Georgia Tsinopoulou -Innovate Consultant - Walsall College
- Sage Lal - Innovate Consultant - Wolverhampton College
- Catherine Jones - Innovation Technician - Dudley College
- Conrad Taylor - Project Lead - Wolverhampton College
- John Lockley - Project Lead - South Staffordshire College
- Matthew Cadden-Hyde - Project Lead - Dudley College
- Harold Mututa - Project Manager - Walsall College
- Richard Johnson - Innovation Consultant - Halesowen College
- Andrew Horner - Innovation Consultant - Dudley College
- James Norris - Assistant Principal - Walsall College
- Raj Findlay - Innovate Support Advisor - South Staffordshire College
- John Murray - Project Lead - Halesowen College

Following is a summary of the insights gained in these workshops.

1. To what extent do the Black Country Innovation Services project's rationale remain valid?

“Help to create Innovation Centres for local businesses seeking technical and innovation expertise.

Drive innovation adoption among local SMEs.

Create opportunities for industry placements at T-levels and apprenticeships, supporting upskilling and career development.”

The rationale for the Black Country Innovation Services programme remains highly valid, as evidenced by the expected extension of the contract and the measurable successes achieved. While creating internship opportunities was not originally a primary output, the programme has excelled in fostering collaborative relationships. It has opened doors for individuals and businesses that had not previously engaged with the colleges, generating excitement and engagement with innovation and emerging technologies introduced by the project. This initiative has successfully widened the colleges' networks of employers and partners, ensuring better engagement from companies previously unconnected to the college. The project has filled a gap as there was previously nothing like this in, for example, Dudley.

Innovate UK's support has added great flexibility, allowing business-focused conversations to gain traction, leading to upskilling opportunities for employees. Notably, start-ups, which have historically been disengaged from educational institutions, have expressed considerable interest, further validating the programme's goals and outreach strategy.

The programme has fostered exceptional collaboration among colleges and SMEs, strengthening strategic thinking and benefiting all involved, with growing links between colleges and company boards. For example, in South Staffordshire, upskilling workshops have facilitated career development and advanced business promotion, underlining the direct positive impact of the programme on individuals and organisations alike.

The ongoing validity of the rationale is further confirmed by the programme's problem-solving approach. By identifying and addressing challenges faced by SMEs, the initiative has effectively built a robust network, enabling significant professional growth and innovation. The project has not only promoted a culture of lifelong learning but has also laid the groundwork for future development across the region. There is emerging demand for the support from larger organisations, such as NHS Trusts, which are not eligible to participate.

Additional points raised in the March review session included reference to work by the University of Manchester about the importance of interconnectivity between the centres. They are now planning to focus on more interconnectivity in the extension year and to tie in with the Skills West Midlands and Warwickshire, a collaborative partnership between local employers and further education providers working to improve access to technical skills provision, and they have reached out to the Coventry and Birmingham clusters and the Coventry Medical cluster. The consortium is interwoven into the West Midlands Innovation Alliance and are hosting the West Midlands Suppliers Forum in July 2025.

2. What was the economic and policy context at the time the Black Country Innovation Services project was designed?

The Black Country Innovation Services programme was developed prior to the change of government, which brought a degree of political and economic turbulence. However, this instability had a limited impact on the region's innovation landscape. The persistent challenges of the economic context in the Midlands, such as lower productivity levels, were already well-understood and continued to inform the programme's design and objectives. The West Midlands Combined Authority's objectives have remained stable, despite a change of Mayor.

Local initiatives, such as those in Walsall, were focused on supporting inward investment. These efforts aligned with the goals of the Black Country Innovation Services to address regional productivity challenges by fostering innovation and collaboration. Despite differences in economic contexts across local economies, the programme's flexible design enabled it to deliver significant outcomes, successfully overcoming any challenges posed by external uncertainties.

The resilience of the programme against this changing backdrop demonstrates its strategic alignment with regional priorities and its capacity to support long-term growth through innovation.

3. What are the needs/market failures being met by Black Country Innovation Services? (e.g. greening SMEs, increasing survival rate, getting new products to market, retaining employment in the Black Country region etc.)

The Black Country Innovation Services programme addresses several key needs and market failures, playing a vital role in advancing the region's economic resilience and innovation.

One major market failure is information asymmetry. Many SMEs in the Black Country are unaware of the resources, funding opportunities, and support systems available to them. Black Country Innovation Services has effectively addressed this issue by raising awareness and providing businesses with vital information about recruitment, funding, and upskilling opportunities, bridging the gap between businesses and available resources.

The programme also assists businesses that lack clear plans for growth or innovation. While many companies express a desire to grow and innovate, they often struggle to identify actionable steps or navigate logistical challenges. Black Country Innovation Services supports these organizations by providing clear pathways to progress, fostering innovation and strategic planning.

Another pressing issue is the limited engagement of certain employers with innovation and academic resources. Black Country Innovation Services has successfully connected these businesses to innovation centers and encouraged partnerships with organisations they previously might not have considered. This integration has helped businesses leverage new technologies and strategies to move forward. There is an opportunity to enhance this with the South Staffordshire Net Zero Centre, to support businesses in greening themselves.

One point noted was the delay in implementation of recommendations identified in the ONA due to SME budget constraints. The delivery partners expect to see these emerge over the next year if the extension is approved.

4. How effective have marketing, communicating and networking activities been for raising awareness of project activities and achievements?

The marketing, communication, and networking activities of the Black Country Innovation Services programme have delivered mixed outcomes. While networking has been the most effective approach to raising awareness, the lack of a dedicated marketing budget has presented significant challenges in achieving broader visibility.

Networking events have been particularly successful, drawing participation from all partners and creating valuable connections. These events, alongside regular workshops and collaborations within all colleges, have facilitated robust engagement between Local Authorities, external partners, and businesses. The involvement of local stakeholders has further enhanced the programme's reach and effectiveness.

However, straightforward marketing efforts have struggled, largely due to the absence of a specific marketing budget. This lack of funding has hindered the ability to execute targeted campaigns or develop a unified marketing strategy early in the project. As a result, awareness of Black Country Innovation Services activities and achievements has grown more organically, relying heavily on word-of-mouth and network-based engagement rather than structured promotional efforts. Some college marketing teams have been better able to provide support than others, as the marketing support needed by Black Country Innovation Services differs from the more normal student recruitment activities.

To improve awareness and impact, a dedicated marketing budget would be highly beneficial, enabling more cohesive and accelerated efforts in communications and outreach. A unified approach to marketing, potentially supported by Innovate UK funding, could further amplify the programme's reach, ensuring its successes are more widely recognised and its

resources better utilised.

To further strengthen visibility and cohesion, there is an opportunity to market the initiative as a single, unified project rather than as five separate partners. This can be achieved by creating a holistic brand identity, including a shared logo and branded merchandise, ensuring consistency in messaging and recognition. By collaborating across marketing teams to develop a unified visual identity, the project can enhance its reach, improve stakeholder engagement, and create a stronger presence in the sector.

By the time of the March follow on, the team is consider a centralised marketing function to deliver a shared branding and identity.They have recently discovered that they have an Innovate UK Expand Platform page, which allows businesses to onboard themselves but they are not yet sure how this will work. They have a LinkedIn page set up and shared.

5. How has been the take-up for the different hubs? Have there been any improvements, learning or adjustments made? Is the network of hubs working successfully?

The take-up for the different hubs within the Black Country Innovation Services programme has shown promising developments, though the project is still in its early stages. The hubs are a relatively new initiative, and while they are awaiting broader engagement, valuable insights and adjustments have already been made to enhance their effectiveness.

Dudley's Hub has experienced notable success, with a strong conversion rate of ONAs to beneficiaries driven by the appeal of its physical facilities and state-of-the-art technology. These resources have proven to be an inspiring selling point, encouraging businesses and individuals to engage with the hub to address specific challenges and explore innovative solutions.

Despite this success, challenges remain. The limited promotional efforts, constrained by the absence of a dedicated marketing budget, have left hubs reliant on word-of-mouth referrals to drive uptake. This underscores the need for a more robust marketing strategy, including dedicated branding for BCIS and consistent presence across partner college websites.

Key adjustments include leveraging platforms like Eventbrite to streamline event hosting and workshop participation. This shift has not only increased efficiency but also strengthened BCIS as a recognisable and trusted brand. Additionally, reporting requirements have evolved, with the need for more detailed metrics emerging over time, reflecting growing expectations from stakeholders.

For the hub network to work more cohesively, greater interconnectivity is desired, requiring better collaboration between the hubs and alignment with all areas of the colleges. Establishing a consistent "cycle of information" across hubs and partners is vital to sustain long-term growth and collaboration.

Engagement with companies has provided a two way flow of information both to the beneficiaries but also to the colleges themselves. Some businesses were looking for Board reports, which was not a planned deliverable.

One key improvement has been the decision to run specialised workshops that appeal to a broader range of businesses, rather than only those going through the full innovation process. This adjustment has helped to increase accessibility, attract new organisations, and

encourage wider participation.

At the March workshop the consortium was pleased that the PCR had been approved and that they were now able to target innovation services and workshops to attract participants rather than just ONAs. They felt this will enable wider engagement and more effective meeting of the needs of businesses.

6. How have project management, internal communication, data collections and recording, governance, administration and financial management been?

The management and operational aspects of the Black Country Innovation Services programme have been effective, with strong performance in project communication, financial guidance, and collaborative efforts.

Project management and internal communication have been particularly successful. Internally, the Project Manager has provided clear direction and ensured smooth communication among stakeholders, fostering effective collaboration across partner colleges. Over time, internal meetings and coordination have improved significantly, reflecting a more cohesive and structured approach to project execution.

On the financial management side, there has been sound oversight, offering clear guidance and maintaining control over budgeting and resource allocation. While initial challenges with recruitment led to some underspends, these have been managed effectively. Financial operations have contributed to the project coming together successfully, despite early complexities.

Data collection and recording, while comprehensive, have occasionally posed challenges due to their length and complexity. For some companies, this has acted as a barrier, but overall, the issue has been managed effectively. Going forward, streamlining the process and formalising evidence-gathering methods would enhance efficiency and usability.

Governance and administration have benefited from a well-organised structure, enabling colleges to collaborate effectively and maintain a unified approach. Networking through internal management has further strengthened these ties.

While the project has taken a strong shape, future enhancements could include formalising certain procedures and introducing structured methods for evidence collection to improve reporting and accountability. Such adjustments would ensure the programme remains well-organised and continues to evidence delivery of its intended benefits.

Challenges have emerged since the January workshop with the new Expand platform, particularly around the onboarding process. SMEs are required to onboard themselves, which has proven to be a barrier due to limited administrative capacity and tight notice periods. This has led to delays and frustrations among participants. A key improvement would be to allow account managers to support businesses with onboarding, streamlining the process and improving engagement. There is a requirement to very quickly onboard historic participants, which was discussed at an event on 8 October which the consortium were unable to attend and no subsequent notification of this requirement was given. While the platform will make impact recording easier, the time needed to input historic businesses into the system by early April is impractical and more time will be needed. There will be no problem for new businesses engaging with the project.

7. Have you noticed any difference in services delivered to early SMEs versus more established SMEs?

Overall, there is little distinction in the services delivered to early-stage and more established SMEs, as the core challenges faced by businesses tend to overlap, regardless of size. Concerns such as innovation, growth, and navigating market challenges are consistent across all businesses engaged.

However, differences have emerged in how smaller SMEs approach and execute innovation. These businesses often differ in the scale and nature of their innovative activities and exhibit varying levels of digital maturity. Early-stage SMEs may require more foundational support in adopting digital tools and technologies, while more established SMEs might focus on refining and scaling their digital processes.

There are many misconceptions held by businesses, especially the earlier stage ones, about what constitutes innovation in different areas, e.g. the difference between AI and automation. Implementation of digital innovations faces challenges where IT services are outsourced as this presents another layer of complexity to work through.

8. How did you address the EDI and sustainability in your implementation?

There has been no specific focus on different target groups of business owners. The priority for the 12 months has been achieving the project targets, should an extension be approved the project will be able to review their EDI achievements and see whether targeted activities for year 2 are needed.

In Wolverhampton, efforts were made to engage with a broad spectrum of companies to ensure wide-ranging representation and inclusivity. As interest in the programme grew, a deliberate focus was placed on fostering diverse representation among participants, reflecting the varied demographics and sectors of the Black Country region.

Networking events further demonstrated this commitment by hosting businesses that served clients from all walks of life, ensuring inclusivity in service delivery and representation.

In South Staffordshire, the programme worked collaboratively across all areas of the college, encouraging participation from individuals with diverse practical and professional backgrounds. This approach ensured that people with varied experiences and skills could engage with the programme, fostering a rich and inclusive environment.

9. What did you procure and how did you do it?

The procurement processes used by the Black Country Innovation Services partners followed the relevant individual college requirements, ensuring compliance with established guidelines and regulations. Several key items were procured across various partner colleges to support the initiative, this included the evaluators for the programme, Open Mind software, which supported digital and technological innovation, and a range of more minor items, including software, materials, machine metals, financing, hardware, and training packages.

The one year extension agreed in the PCR in March has led to some changes in planned purchases, with these being delayed.

10. What are your observations related to the project targets and spend? Please comment on the beneficiary's profile, industry sectors, geography etc.

All hubs are close to achieving their targets now and believe they have had a great impact on those they have worked with.

At South Staffordshire, targets have been effectively met, demonstrating a significant impact in engaging participants. However, there is a balance to be struck between financial considerations and innovation. While there is a clear desire to drive innovation, the financial realities for some of the businesses, particularly in terms of cost-saving, can limit their ability to fully embrace innovation. Nonetheless, the impact on the people involved and the industry sectors being targeted has been positive.

In Dudley, the programme has encountered challenges with some targets, such as embedding innovations and achieving comprehensive case studies, which fall later in the delivery process. Due to time constraints, the programme has not yet reached its full potential in these areas. While initial targets were met, the delays in later-stage outcomes, like case study development, have been a consequence of the short length of the project.

Wolverhampton has seen strong success, with key performance indicators (KPIs) being met, including the internal development of case studies. The engagement at Wolverhampton is progressing well, and they are on track with showcasing outcomes. The targets in terms of beneficiary engagement and industry involvement have been largely successful, contributing positively to the programme's trajectory.

The consortium highlighted the challenge of reporting businesses embedding their ONAs, in the March session, and are pleased that the PCR gives them the chance to continue account managing companies supported during the first year, thus maximising the changes of ONAs being embedded. The key challenge is how to approach this with businesses, which can be unresponsive. They plan monthly follow up with businesses to try to drive this through.

11. How effective has beneficiary recruitment been? What and who have been the major referral channels?

Beneficiary recruitment for Black Country Innovation Services has been largely effective, primarily driven by word of mouth and networking. These organic forms of outreach have proven successful in attracting businesses to engage with the programme.

Key to the programme's recruitment success has been collaboration with the business engagement teams, which have played a vital role in identifying potential beneficiaries and connecting them with available resources. Additionally, the internal apprenticeships teams within partner colleges have been instrumental in reaching a broader audience, particularly in engaging younger participants or businesses interested in workforce development.

Furthermore, Oxford Innovation has been an important referral partner, supporting the recruitment process and helping to streamline connections between the programme and businesses.

One issue highlighted in March was around high no show rates for expensive workshops and the need for some action or policy to try to prevent this. They have seen up to 50% of shows which can be considered as "wasting" half of the budget for the workshop or reducing the value for money of the session.

12. How has BCIS benefited from and in turn benefited other Black Country Innovation projects?

The Black Country Innovation Services has had a mutually beneficial relationship with other regional innovation projects, contributing to and leveraging each other's strengths.

One of the key contributions of Black Country Innovation Services, particularly through Dudley-based innovation services, has been addressing a longstanding gap in local, practical prototyping and engineering services. By providing businesses with access to these specialised resources, Black Country Innovation Services has helped companies tackle specific challenges they have faced in developing new products and innovations. This service has proven valuable for local SMEs, fostering growth and addressing pressing issues within the region's innovation ecosystem.

Additionally, Black Country Innovation Services has benefited from its partnership with Business Growth West Midlands, whose event services have been crucial in supporting SME engagement.

Black Country Innovation Services fills a gap which universities previously filled and there is a potential to embed the programme further into the Black Country innovation ecosystem. The programme also offers an opportunity to utilise equipment downtimes which colleges experience during holiday periods.

13. How is the project perceived by wider stakeholders and the Black Country Innovation ecosystem?

The Black Country Innovation Services programme is generally viewed positively by wider stakeholders, with strong perceptions of its value in fostering collaboration and supporting business growth. The programme is perceived well as it brings a solution to an identified specific problem. From Walsall's perspective, the project has notably strengthened key partnerships, creating tangible outcomes and building a more cohesive innovation ecosystem. The development of these partnerships has not only helped foster collaboration but has also resulted in the creation of valuable resources and initiatives that directly benefit local businesses.

Clients, including SMEs, have gained a clearer understanding of the support available to help drive business growth, helping enhance confidence in the Black Country Innovation Services programme and its ability to generate meaningful results.

The collaboration among the five partner colleges involved in the programme has been especially beneficial in shaping a strong, reliable perception among businesses in the Black Country.

14. How have the rising of the interest rate, post-Brexit Trade arrangements and armed conflicts affected the delivery of BCIS?

The rising interest rates, post-Brexit trade arrangements, and armed conflicts have not significantly impacted the delivery of the programme. While these factors have undoubtedly presented challenges for businesses, particularly in terms of cost pressures and trade uncertainties, they have not had a direct, substantial effect on the project's execution.

Business concerns, particularly regarding financial constraints and the cost of doing business, have been more pronounced than the macroeconomic issues themselves. In particular, energy costs have emerged as a more immediate concern for businesses in the region, affecting their overall operating expenses. However, these factors have not fundamentally altered the programme's delivery or objectives.

15. How well is the delivery model working from sourcing companies to delivering innovation business support?

a) What has worked well overall? What have the successes been? Where is there transferable good practice?

Overall, the delivery model for the Black Country Innovation Services programme has functioned effectively, particularly in sourcing companies and delivering innovation business support. Key successes include the strong networking efforts and collaboration between colleges and external partners, which has fostered engagement with a diverse range of SMEs. Another great success is the scale of benefit that participating businesses have received regarding the adoption of new technologies, many businesses have acquired access to AI tech and green tech, enhancing their position for future growth. The networking events, especially those hosted by Business Growth West Midlands and Dudley-based innovation services, have been instrumental in attracting and supporting businesses showing evidence of transferable good practice. These networking efforts have allowed businesses to directly connect with the necessary resources and guidance, and also facilitated stronger partnerships with external stakeholders like Oxford Innovation. The model's success has come from its tailored, collaborative approach and strong focus on addressing specific SME challenges through innovation-driven solutions.

The collaboration among the five colleges has been a notable success, creating a reliable and unified perception of the programme among businesses. This partnership across institutions has fostered a robust support system, promoting the programme's visibility and enhancing its impact. A successful aspect of the delivery model has been the ability to address practical, real-world problems for SMEs, such as providing prototyping and engineering services in Dudley that filled a longstanding gap.

Additionally, the programme's flexible approach to working with businesses at varying stages of digital maturity, particularly by tailoring innovation support to the needs of different SMEs, offers transferable good practice. The use of platforms like Eventbrite for hosting workshops and events further adds to the program's flexibility, streamlining participation and engagement for businesses.

In March additional success elements were identified. Specifically, businesses like the upskilling of their staff and the ability to find answers through the network. Collaborative workshops and collaborations to support a business is welcomed as is the ability to introduce SMEs to each other and share best practice. The consortium thinks that the relationships with other HE bodies and the Catapults (e.g. Warwick Manufacturing Centre and Made Smarter) are good to support businesses that have reached their limit for support.

They are pleased to see inter-agency relationships forming, such as with Dudley Business Growth, but not all areas have the same success and South Staffordshire has less good links with the Black Country Business Growth. The criteria for support are key starting points.

b) What barriers and constraints do you feel the project has faced? How were they overcome? How well did this go?

The Black Country Innovation Services programme has faced several barriers and constraints, though these have been managed to some degree. One of the main challenges has been the lack of a dedicated marketing budget, which impacted the visibility and promotion of the hubs and their services. As a result, the programme largely relied on word-of-mouth referrals and existing network connections to attract businesses. While this has worked to some extent, the lack of structured marketing limited outreach in its initial stages. To address this, leveraging business engagement teams and internal apprenticeships has helped fill this gap and broaden recruitment efforts. Despite all projecting being in the same position, the team reiterated the marketing budget issue in March and argued that the lack of including a dedicated marketing budget in the Innovate UK funding was a key barrier to success as college funding teams were not always appropriate.

Linked to this, initially recruitment outreach was not allowed to reference Innovate UK in adverts prior to 1st March 2024. The team believe that this harmed the recruitment process and, although it relates to contract signing, the team feels that recruitment would have been faster and more effective had they been able to reference Innovate UK in their materials from the point at which they started recruiting.

Another barrier has been the challenge of embedding innovations and capturing comprehensive case studies within tight timeframes. While initial targets were met, later-stage targets, including case study development, faced delays due to limited time. This constraint was particularly evident in Dudley. The use of reporting mechanisms that were requested mid-project also presented some challenges, requiring adjustments to internal processes and data collection efforts.

In addition, businesses have encountered challenges in accessing certain support, such as the lengthy data collection and reporting process, which some businesses found cumbersome.

Although the programme extension was confirmed at the time of the interim evaluation, partners are concerned about the timing of its formal issuance. By March, the team felt that the PCR process had been very effective as theirs was the first PCR approved within 3 days of submission and other PCRs had received lots of questions. Their approach of strategic design followed by consultant meetings was successful.

The team felt that they should have started earlier - proceeding at risk if possible - to give them more lead time. This would help with issues such as recruitment, ideally with authority being given to recruit at risk subject to funding approval, rather than waiting until the funding agreement was signed.

The team felt that raising awareness could be improved with the offer of some free consulting type services to engage SMEs into the project.

16. What are your recommendations for the legacy of the project?

For the future, the programme should consider allocating a defined marketing budget to improve visibility and outreach, ensuring adequate time for embedding actions to strengthen long-term outcomes, and creating a centralised support hub to streamline access to services. Additionally, fostering increased collaboration across the region, pulling together information on all the services available into a single point of reference, would enhance the programme's

impact and create a more cohesive innovation ecosystem, benefiting a broader range of businesses in the Black Country. These steps would help ensure a lasting and sustainable legacy for the programme.

5.2 Feedback from wider stakeholders

5 wider stakeholders interviews took place with:

- Catherine Bray, OXIN
- Cameron Blount, Keyence POC demonstration
- Dominic Murphy, GTG
- Miranda Kimball, Place Making London/Knightsbridge
- Ishy Dillon, Metrobank

5.2.1 Cross-referrals and the wider innovation ecosystem

The Black Country Innovation Services pilot stands out as a unique initiative in the region, successfully carving out its niche. Its network of Hubs demonstrates a clear understanding of local business needs.

The Programme Team has established strong connections with the business community and is widely regarded as an excellent initiative, fostering collaboration among colleges and making knowledge readily accessible to businesses.

The Programme Management and Delivery Team has effectively integrated the pilot into the broader innovation ecosystem by engaging key stakeholders, organising briefings and webinars, and offering facility tours. Collaborative events, such as those with OXIN and the West Midland Growth support programme funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, have been instrumental in promoting the new scheme.

Despite being in its early stages, the Black Country Innovation Services pilot has already achieved significant visibility across the Black Country region.

5.2.2 Process

What has worked well?

The accessibility and diverse range of services provided are excellent.

Companies benefit from the opportunity to explore the facilities, which adds significant value.

The programme's flexibility has been especially well-received, offering tailored support to SMEs at various stages of their innovation journey.

What could be improved?

Enhance efforts to further raise awareness of the programme.

6: PROJECT PROGRESS



6 PROJECT PROGRESS

6.1 Project context; relevance and consistency

- **What was the project seeking to do?**

The mission and key purpose of the Black Country Innovation Services project is to work closely with Black Country and South Staffordshire employers to identify barriers to growth, innovation opportunities and provide tailored support to harness business representatives with the knowledge and skills to implement an innovation idea. Supporting businesses to explore innovation ideas in a safe and secure environment, in addition to participating in knowledge transfer workshops through one of the five partner colleges will facilitate business growth and ensure a business is equipped with the right skills and knowledge to be efficient, effective and sufficiently robust to adapt to continued changing environments.

The Black Country Innovation Services project is focussed on sharing best practice amongst the FE College network and in turn aligning the needs of businesses with the best possible college service offer. It is being delivered by 5 Colleges.

- Walsall (the Lead Partner)
- Dudley
- Halesowen
- South Staffordshire
- Wolverhampton

Each college has set up an Innovation Hub for local businesses seeking technical expertise and practical support. Teams of Innovation Consultants, Technicians and other college staff will work closely with local businesses to identify their technical needs around new technologies, processes and business models, thus diffusing innovation through access to facilities to support product development, delivering a series of innovation focussed workshops, access to expert staff/knowledge to support product design, innovation analysis bespoke to each SME.

The Innovation Centres will ensure local businesses have timely access to state of the art facilities and expert guidance around technologies such as:

- Artificial Intelligence
- Networking and Cyber Security
- GreenTechnologies
- HighendComputer Numerical Control Production
- Robotics, Computer Aided Design
- Websolutions
- Digital
- Materials and Product Testing
- RapidPrototyping and Additive Manufacturing

Delivering a series of fully funded innovation-focussed workshops. Each College will provide an offer from the above.

The programme had an initial target of engaging 100 SMEs to undergo an Organisational Needs Analysis (ONA) (20 per partner), 40 SMEs accessing innovation services (8 per

partner), 80 SMEs accessing innovation workshops (16 per partner) and 25 SMEs embedding their ONA over the lifetime of the project (5 per partner).

- **What was the economic and policy context at the time that the project was designed?**

The Black Country Innovation Services project objectives were aligned with:

- The slowdown in business investment, particularly since the pandemic, noted in the West Midlands Innovate Action Plan.
- The position that over 50% of Black Country companies were not innovation active in 2022 leading to a GVA per head in current prices of £19,532, compared to the UK average of £33,227 leading to a gap of £13,696.
- SME businesses dominate the Black Country, with almost 20% of jobs in the manufacturing and construction sectors.

- **What were the specific market failures that the project was seeking to address? Was there a strong rationale for the project?**

The project was seeking to address the lack of engagement by businesses with traditional business support coupled with barriers to accessing skills, technical knowledge and finance and the low level of innovation in active businesses.

The rationale for the project was strong and the project addressed what were, and what remain, key market failures and areas of underperformance in the Black Country.

- **Was it appropriately designed to achieve its objectives? Was the delivery model appropriate?**

The project offered access to five hubs, based in each of the partner colleges and each offering access to different areas of expertise. Deliverables were equally divided amongst the partners. The mixture of support and technical expertise worked well to both engage and support businesses.

Companies have valued the bespoke support being offered to them with professionals and experts with local knowledge. The flexibility of the programme in responding to the individual needs of businesses has been highly praised.

The delivery model saw the creation of 5 hubs and, although these seem to have operated independently, with limited cross referral of beneficiaries, the enhanced collaboration between the colleges has been an emerging strength.

Some companies would have liked to be able to benefit from grant funding on top of the range of business support services currently available to them.

- **Were the targets set for the Black Country Innovation Services project realistic and achievable?**

The project targets for undergoing an ONA, SMEs accessing innovation services, and SMEs accessing innovation workshops were realistic and achievable and the delivery partners are on course to achieve these.

The target for SMEs embedding their ONA over the lifetime of the project has been more challenging due to delays in commencing activity, which reduced the already short 12 month project period, and the need for companies to commit resources to embedding their ONA, which sometimes requires waiting until budgets are set for a new financial year. Both of these elements mean that embedding of an ONA may well fall beyond the planned initial end date of the project, making this a more challenging target.

This project will greatly benefit from the 12-month time extension.

- **How did the context change as the project was delivered and did this exert any particular pressures on project delivery?**

Despite the change of UK government and West Midlands Combined Authority mayor in July 2024, there have been minimal changes in the context within which the project was delivered.

The key pressure businesses continued to face throughout the project was the high cost of energy. There were no major impacts across the project due to high interest rates, the post EU Exit trade requirements and armed conflict in Europe, although some individual businesses were affected by these through the nature of their individual supply chain.

- **Bearing in mind any changes in context or weaknesses in the project design / logic model, can the project reasonably be expected to perform well against its targets?**

The Black Country Innovation Services project has successfully met or exceeded 3 out of 4 targets by project completion, with the remaining one achieving over 96% attainment.

The final target, SMEs embedding their ONA over the lifetime of the project, will be achieved during the project extension. This is an outstanding achievement given delays in recruiting staff which in turn delayed the start of the project.

6.2 Progress achieved

Table 1 presents the project-end attainment of the UKRI Black Country Innovation Services pilot project within 12 months of delivery.

These figures have been gathered from the latest project claims document and projected with due consideration to the beneficiary survey responses, management team workshop discussions and overall project context as summarised in the column titled 'Notes'.

Table 1: UKRI targets

Indicator	Original Targets	Revised target after PCR In January 2025	Projected performance at Project Closure		Notes
			Number	% of target	
Total Expenditure	£795,029 Revenue	£788,800 Revenue	£765,610 Revenue	97%	The project is slightly underspent by £23,190 at 31/03/2025.
Innovation Organisational Needs Analysis (ONAs)	100 (20 per partner)	100 (20 per partner)	101	101%	The target has been exceeded by 1 additional ONA delivered.
SMEs accessing innovation services	40 (8 per partner)	40 (8 per partner)	61	152%	The target has been exceeded by 21 additional SMEs accessing innovation services.
SMEs accessing Innovation workshops	80 (16 per partner)	80 (16 per partner)	210	262%	The target has been exceeded by 130 additional SMEs accessing innovation workshops.
SMEs embedding ONAs over lifetime of project	5	25	24	96%	The project is short of just one embedded ONA. With the granted extension, this will be achieved during the extended delivery period.

Overall achieved outputs by the project by 31/03/2025:



101 ONAs



61 SMEs accessing innovation services



210 accessing innovation workshops



24 SMEs embedding ONAs

The Black Country Innovation Services project has successfully met or exceeded 3 out of 4 targets by project completion, with the remaining one achieving over 96% attainment.

The Governance and delivery teams deserve recognition for their outstanding work performed on this pilot project working with Cohort 1.

Finally, the reported outcomes and impacts align with the Logic Model. The successful engagement and support of businesses, along with the achievement of key targets outlined in the table above, demonstrate that the tangible results closely reflect the project's rationale.

6.3 Project management and delivery

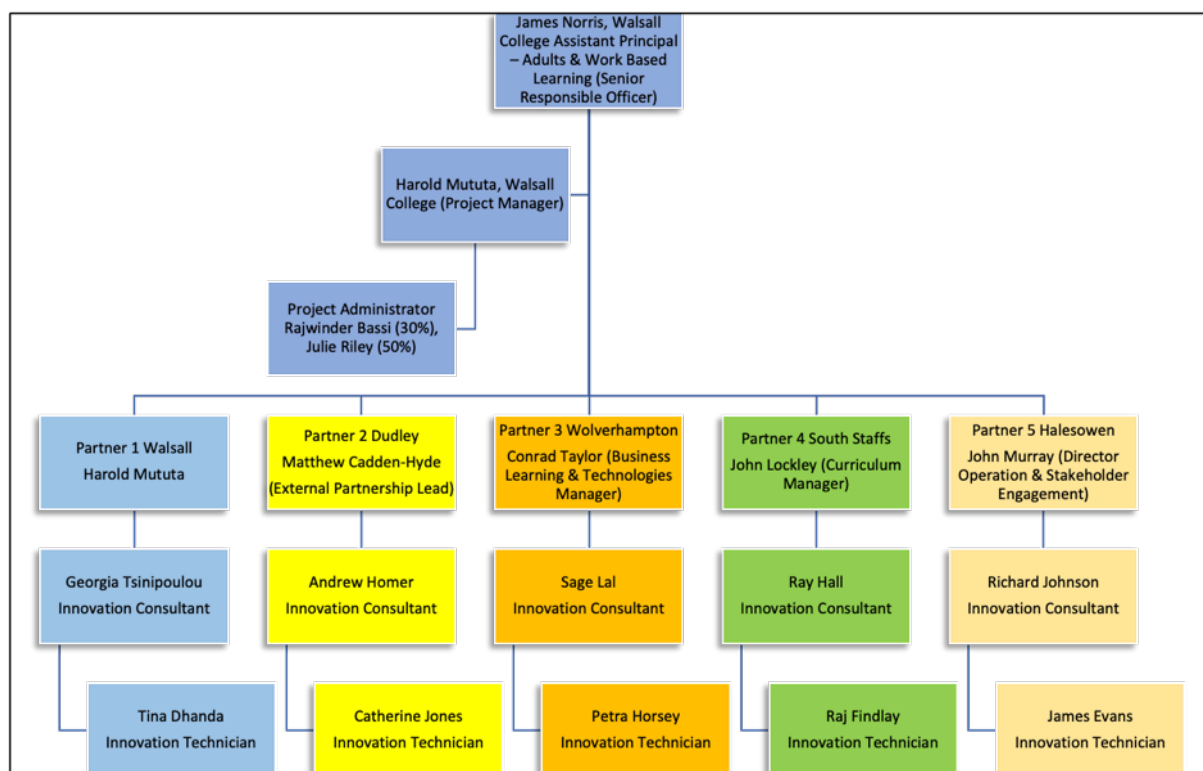
- **Was the project well managed? Were the right governance and management structures in place and did they operate in the way they were expected to?**

All stakeholders consulted mentioned that the project has been well managed, with good communications and engagement between the partners through regular meetings across different parts of the team.

There were initial delays until suitable team members were recruited and in post, but once there they have operated very effectively in delivering the project.

Diagram 3, below, presents the organogram for the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project Management and Governance structure.

Diagram 3: Black Country Innovation Services Project Organogram



- **Has the project delivered its intended activities to a high standard?**

Despite the delays at the start which meant that the project effectively had only 9 months to deliver, the overall delivery has been high quality. None of the survey respondents felt that any elements of the project had been very poor and the overwhelming majority felt that the service had been good or excellent.

The Black Country Innovation Services project has successfully met or exceeded 3 out of 4 targets by project completion, with the remaining one achieving over 96% attainment.

The programme services found most useful were the product design and development support, the facilities at the colleges, and support around AI, cybersecurity, green technologies, and manufacturing.

In addition to the satisfaction rate being good with the individual element of services being delivered by the programme, an impressive 89.5% of beneficiaries reported that their expectations were met or exceeded with the service. This indicates that beneficiaries are very pleased with the support provided and, given the low levels of expectations in entering the programme (only 10.5% entered with specific expectations), suggests that beneficiaries were impressed with the range of support and facilities available in the hubs.

- **Could delivery of the project have been improved in any way? How were project activities perceived by beneficiaries and other stakeholders?**

Very few beneficiaries were dissatisfied with their experience on the project, and a much smaller number than on many other similar projects of this nature. This appears to be testament to programme services being deemed useful and high-quality by the vast majority of beneficiaries.

External perceptions of the project seem to have been positive, with good engagement by other stakeholders with the delivery team as the project was seen to fill a gap in provision in the Black Country.

- **Did the project engage with and select the right beneficiaries? Were the right procedures and criteria in place to ensure the project focused on the right beneficiaries?**

The challenge is always to find new businesses to whom to market the project services. This requires innovative approaches for finding these businesses, such as working with intermediary organisations, showcasing the facilities available at the Hubs and a lot of effort in networking and outreach.

Colleges have found that as they move beyond those businesses with which they are already engaged, uptake has increased and this has meant that word of mouth has been important and that the hubs have taken time to gain momentum. The enthusiasm for the project amongst businesses new to the colleges could be down to the lack of familiarity with the facilities and support available and the reaction of businesses at finding opportunities to meet existing needs. One college has had a very high conversion rate from ONAs to support and part of the reason for this seems to have been showcasing the available facilities to businesses early on in the engagement process. The main referrers into this project have been the colleges themselves and Innovate UK West Midlands.

The procedures and criteria were in place to ensure the project focused on the right beneficiaries.

- **How were procurement activities delivered?**

The procurement processes used by the BCIS partners followed the relevant individual college requirements, ensuring compliance with established guidelines and regulations which are in line with the Public Contracts Regulations. The project benefitted from the support of the individual colleges' procurement teams.

Several key items were procured across various partner colleges to support the initiative, this included the evaluators for the programme, Open Mind software, which supported digital and technological innovation, and a range of more minor items, including software, materials, machine metals, financing, hardware, and training packages.

- **How were EDI and sustainability incorporated into the delivery of the Black Country Innovation Services support programme?**

There has been no specific focus on different target groups of business owners. The priority for the 12 months has been achieving the project targets, with the extension being approved the project will be able to review their EDI achievements and see whether targeted activities for year 2 are needed.

Colleges made specific attempts to engage more widely. For example, Wolverhampton College made efforts to engage with a broad spectrum of companies to ensure wide-ranging representation and inclusivity. As interest in the programme grew, a deliberate focus was placed on fostering diverse representation among participants, reflecting the varied demographics and sectors of the Black Country region. Similarly, South Staffordshire College worked collaboratively across the college, encouraging participation from individuals with diverse practical and professional backgrounds. This approach ensured that people with varied experiences and skills could engage with the programme, fostering a rich and inclusive environment.

Networking events further demonstrated this commitment by hosting businesses that served clients from all walks of life, ensuring inclusivity in service delivery and representation.

The breakdown of business directors from survey respondents is predominantly male, while around a third of UK businesses have at least one female director. 100% of medium-sized businesses were male led. This suggests that a focus on businesses led by underrepresented groups would be beneficial moving forward.

6.4 Project net economic impact

Ideally, project impacts would be calculated by subtracting the impacts experienced by counterfactuals from those experienced by beneficiaries between the times that they start receiving Black Country Innovation services and afterwards. However, as no counterfactual completed the survey, the economic deadweight component of the economic impact will instead be calculated by subtracting the percentage that beneficiaries attribute their impacts to factors other than the Black Country Innovation Services.

The methodology employed for calculating the net Gross Value Added (GVA) impact of the Black Country Innovation Services is the following:

- A. The number of barriers to doing innovation/business that beneficiaries have overcome since joining the Black Country Innovation Services, as reported by each beneficiary in their survey responses, was counted and multiplied by the percentage to which those same beneficiaries attribute overcoming those barriers to the Black

Country Innovation Services. In this way, the GVA deadweight of the reported reductions in number of barriers was subtracted from the gross direct effects. (Deadweight = the outcomes that would have occurred even if the Black Country Innovation Services project had not taken place). The average number of barriers that survey respondents indicated had been overcome during their time on the project was 1.26. Once deadweight was removed, this became 0.85 barriers on average.

- B. The GVA gross direct effects were calculated by assigning an economic value to a beneficiary overcoming one barrier. This was done using the mean 3-year economic value of incremental product or service innovation calculated in “Innovation types and performance in growing UK SMEs” Oke et al. (2007), uplifted to 2025 figures (2% compounded annual inflation was assumed) and divided by 10, which is the number of barriers to innovation on which our survey focussed. The uplifted mean 3-year economic value of the Black Country Innovation Services helping a beneficiary to overcome a barrier was calculated to be £64,179.
- C. Evidence of GVA leakage, displacement and substitution was searched for amongst all the survey responses and phone calls from all the stakeholder groups and among the responses from the management and delivery team workshop. (Leakage = % of intervention benefiting individuals or organisations outside the target beneficiary group, at the expense of potential additional benefits to the target beneficiary group. Displacement = % of outcomes and outputs generated at the expense of outcomes or outputs elsewhere in the target beneficiary group. Substitution effects = activities undertaken in order to benefit from project services at the expense of another resource).

The eligibility check carried out during registration of prospective beneficiaries ensured that none of the beneficiaries were outside of the target beneficiary group (SME based in the relevant UK eligible areas and seeking support for documentary film activities). Hence, the GVA leakage of the Black Country Innovation Services outcomes to out-of-target beneficiaries is £0.

The evaluators could not find any instances of displacement arising from the Black Country Innovation Services. For example, they could not find any instances of a business receiving free Black Country Innovation services when they would otherwise have paid for them had project support not been available. Similarly, the assessors were reassured that the unique capabilities of the Black Country Innovation Services compared to other facilities meant that there was little possibility for this project to displace services offered at other facilities too. Therefore, we consider that the project has catalysed innovation that probably would not have taken place had the project not been available and we consider the GVA displacement to be £0.

As there were no criteria for beneficiaries and counterfactuals to meet in order to benefit from Black Country Innovation Services services (e.g. they did not need to make a capital purchase in order to be eligible), the GVA substitution effects of the project is £0.

- D. The SIC codes of the beneficiaries were translated into Office for National Statistics Input-Output Analytical tables industries (updated data - April 2023) by matching the industry most closely related to each SIC code. The GVA multipliers for these industries were identified. For example, the GVA multiplier for the “Electrical installation” is 2.199. This means that for every £1 increase in GVA in that industry, there is 119.9p additionally created down the GVA supply chain (i.e. multiplier effects). These multiplier effects encompass both Type I multiplier effects (direct effects to the beneficiary companies, their employees and their supply chain companies and employees), as well as Type II multiplier effects (benefits resulting as a consequence of the Type I effects, e.g. increased disposable income of beneficiary and supply chain employees results in greater spending elsewhere in the economy).
- E. Finally, for each beneficiary who completed the survey, the number of barriers that they have overcome since joining Black Country Innovation Services (bullet point A above) was multiplied by the 3-year economic value of overcoming one barrier for that same beneficiary (bullet point B above). Any instances of leakage, substitution or displacement relating to that beneficiary (bullet point C above) were subtracted from this amount. The resulting amount was then multiplied by the GVA multiplier (bullet point D above) to give the fully corrected 3-year GVA impact estimate for each beneficiary. These individual GVA impacts were then summed and extrapolated to estimate the fully corrected GVA impact for all 82 beneficiaries, i.e. it is assumed that the GVA benefits of Black Country Innovation Services participation for all 82 beneficiaries is represented by the GVA benefits reported by the subset of beneficiaries who completed the survey.

As explained in bullet point E, the net impact is the following calculation:

Net impact = (Gross direct effects - Deadweight - Leakage - Displacement - Substitution) x Multiplier effects.

3-year net GVA impact = £8,510,143.99. This is a non-negligible GVA impact for the West Midlands region. According to The Economic Intelligence Unit, the total GVA for the Black Country in 2022 (at current prices) was approximately £23.9 billion. Within this, Advanced Manufacturing contributes £4.1 billion to the GVA, Building Technologies £2.02 billion, and Environmental Technologies £524 million. The manufacturing sector alone comprises over 3,000 enterprises in the Black Country.

The Black Country Innovation Services project will have been one of the important steps taken to realise this GVA.

In the process of creating this GVA impact, employment impact was also created. This employment benefit was calculated as follows:

- F. The number of FTE jobs created or safeguarded in beneficiary companies since they joined Black Country Innovation Services, as reported by each beneficiary in their survey responses, was counted to give an estimate of employment gross direct effects. The employment deadweight was subtracted from this number by multiplying these same number of FTE jobs per beneficiary by the extent to which the

beneficiaries attributed creation of these jobs to sources other than Black Country Innovation Services.

- G. Any employment displacement, substitution or leakage that occurred in the creation of jobs attributed to Black Country Innovation Services, as indicated by beneficiaries in their phone calls or surveys or by the Black Country Innovation Services management and delivery team in the workshop discussions, were then also subtracted. These corrections were all deemed to be 0, for the same reasons as those described in bullet point C.
- H. The process described in bullet point D was repeated but this time to calculate employment multipliers for each beneficiary. For example, the employment multiplier for the “Electrical installation” industry is 2.506. This means that for every 1 FTE increase in employment in that industry, there is 1.506 FTE additionally created down the employment supply chain.
- I. Finally, for each beneficiary who completed the survey, the deadweight was subtracted from the gross direct effects for each survey respondent (bullet point F). Any leakage, substitution and displacement (bullet point G) was subtracted from this amount. This amount was then multiplied by the employment multiplier effect (bullet point H) for each beneficiary. These amounts were then summed and extrapolated over all 82 beneficiaries to give the fully corrected employment impact.

Net employment impact = 28 FTE.

The steps leading to calculation of net GVA impact and net employment impact for Black Country Innovation Services are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Gross and Net Additional Impact for Employment and GVA (full project lifetime). All figures include Multiplier Effects as these are applied at the individual beneficiary level

Impacts		Measure	Adjustment
GVA (£)	Gross direct effects	£5.262m	-
	Minus Deadweight	£3.530m	32%
	Minus Displacement and Substitution	£3.530m	0%
	Minus Leakage	£3.530m	0%
	Net Additional	£5.708m	1.62 average Multiplier across beneficiaries
Employment (FTE)	Gross direct effects	23	-
	Minus Deadweight	18	22%
	Minus Displacement and Substitution	18	0%

	Minus Leakage	18	0%
	Net Additional	28	1.59 average Multiplier across all beneficiaries

The net economic impact is the sum of the GVA impact and economic employment impact. We assume the economic impact of the job creation outlined in Table 2 is £77,710 per job. This is the average 3-year salary for an assistant innovation technician in the UK (Source Indeed website, March 2025).

Thus, the economic impact of the 37 jobs created with Black Country Innovation Services help is £3,615m.

Adding this to the GVA impact gives a **total net economic impact of £11,246m.**

6.5 Project value for money

Total funds to deliver the Black Country Innovation Services project was £795,029. Balancing this total delivery cost against the 3-year net economic impact, we calculate the project value for money to be:

→ **Output/input unit cost: £14.15**

This means that for every £1 spent in delivering this project, £14.15 was created



The net economic impact was achieved with £795,029 cost to UKRI.

6.5 Benchmarking

Table 3 compares the value for money of the Black Country Innovation Services against comparable projects. The comparator projects were chosen either because they also had an innovation support element or business support available to companies and therefore offering a similar combination of services (innovation and business support).

Table 3: Benchmarking against comparable grant-funded projects

Project name	Lead partner	Funders	Focus / sector	Total project value	Expected beneficiaries	Value for Money
BCIS	Walsall College	UKRI	Innovation Hubs	£795k	100 businesses	£14.15
RADAR	AMRC North West	ERDF	Advanced manufacturing	£3.86m	200 businesses	£15.90
STAR	University of Leicester	ERDF	Advanced manufacturing	£4.6m	77 businesses	£0.24
ISfB	OXlep	ERDF	Engineering	£7.9m	155 businesses	£11.72
CIAMM	University of Birmingham	ERDF	Quantum innovation	£1.2m	40 businesses	£3.40
ARLI	University of Birmingham	ERDF	Low carbon, Innovation	£3.4m	125 businesses	£5.49
Smart Factory Hub (AMTECAA)	University of Birmingham	ERDF	Advanced manufacturing	£11.1m	265 businesses	£4.87
Low Carbon Solent (LCS)	University of Portsmouth	ERDF	Low Carbon	£1.8m	200 businesses	£11.94

The Black Country Innovation Services when benchmark to other funded initiatives in the UK is delivering a good return on investment of £14.15 per £1 invested, given that this project is a pilot in its initial phase with a short delivery timeline, this is a significant achievement.

7: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS



7 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Conclusions

The 12-month pilot project has successfully established its niche within the Black Country innovation ecosystem, marking a significant strength.

Despite initial delays and the challenge of forming a new partnership among five colleges, the Hub network is now fully operational and has garnered strong engagement from the local business community. Businesses have shown a preference for accessing knowledge and innovation support through their local colleges.

The programme's flexibility has been widely appreciated by both beneficiaries and referral organisations. Key referral channels include Innovate UK Midlands (29.4%), the participating colleges themselves (35.3%), and Business Growth West Midlands (17.6%).

Beneficiary satisfaction is remarkably high for a pilot programme, with 89.5% reporting that their expectations were met or exceeded.

The most accessed services provided through the Black Country Innovation Services pilot include AI and digital solutions (utilised by 22.2% of participants), SME website updates (13.6%), and 3D printing services (8.6%).

Significant outcomes have been reported by participants, with 47.4% of businesses progressing towards new-to-firm products or services, reflected in a Technology Readiness Level (TRL) increase of +1.77 (84% of which is attributed to the pilot's intervention). Furthermore, 52.6% of companies initiated new R&D collaborations, and 6.7% reported the creation of new intellectual property, including patents, designs, trademarks, or copyrights.

While the project is primarily focused on innovation, it has also achieved environmental and social benefits: 33.3% of beneficiaries adopted sustainable practices, and 36.8% reported experiencing social improvements as a result of their participation.

By project completion, 3 out of 4 targets have been successfully met or exceeded, with the remaining target reaching over 96% attainment. The final target, involving SMEs embedding the ONAs, will be achieved during the granted extension, further enhancing the project's outstanding outcomes.

The net economic impact for the Black Country Innovation Services of Cohort 1 is for every £1 invested in delivering the project, £14.15 was generated in the economy. This is a great achievement.

As the pilot enters its final phase, the Black Country Innovation Services team must prioritise gathering comprehensive evidence to demonstrate the project's final impact for cohort 1.

Looking ahead, beneficiaries have expressed interest in future activities focusing on technical expertise in 3D rendering, AI and digitalisation, green technology, marketing, sales, e-commerce, prototyping, networking, and access to grants.

7.2 Lessons learned

Lesson Learned 1: Engaging SMEs at an early stage ensures better uptake of innovation services and smoother integration of support mechanisms.

Lesson learned 2: A one-size-fits-all approach does not work. SMEs benefit most from customised innovation support.

Lesson learned 3: Transparent and consistent messaging from all delivery partners helps in managing expectations and maximising project impact.

Lesson learned 4: SMEs require time and sustained guidance to fully integrate ONAs into their operations.

Lesson learned 5: The ability to adapt the services to evolving SME needs and external factors improves project delivery.

Lesson learned 6: Working with Higher Education bodies and industry groups expanded the project's reach and impact, strengthening inter-agency connectivity achieving Cross sector engagement.

Lesson learned 7: Engaging with multiple agencies fostered greater inter-agency collaboration, improving coordination and enhancing the project's overall impact.

Lesson learned 8: Continued engagement beyond the formal end of the project for Cohort 1 helps sustain momentum and long-term benefits.

7.3 Recommendations

EPM provides the following recommendations for the legacy and extension of the project:

- **Keep Building on the Success of the Pilot:** Use case studies, videos, and podcasts to share the initial results of the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project widely to encourage take-up for the extension of the project.
- **Create a Digital Knowledge Hub:** A centralised online platform for resources, case studies, best practices, forums that can support SMEs long-term.
- **Build on the Strength of the Facilities:** Continue to use the interest generated by showing the facilities to potential project participants as a key plank of the recruitment process.
- **Keep Strengthening Collaboration Across Hubs:** Agree on a common branding and joined marketing activities among the various hubs and facilitate cross-referrals between the innovation centers to maximise the project's effectiveness.
- **Support SME Implementation:** Motivate SMEs to implement the recommendations from the ONAs more promptly. In cases of budget constraints, provide guidance on potential funding sources for SMEs and explore the feasibility of creating a grant funding pool linked to the main scheme. Alternatively, improve the accessibility to funding knowledge and expertise.
- **Introduce Follow-up Mentorship Programs:** Structured mentorship can help SMEs continue embedding ONAs and other innovation tools.
- **Foster increased collaboration across the region:** Explore ways to pull together information on all the services available into a single point of reference to enhance the programme's impact and create a more cohesive innovation ecosystem, benefiting a broader range of businesses in the Black Country.
- **Ensure that IT based reporting systems are clarified and included from the start:** The introduction of the Expand platform and the requirement to make that retrospective has been challenging. Improve data collection from long-term tracking of SME progression over time.
- **Promote Peer Learning and Networking Opportunities:** encourage collaboration between SMEs through networking events and knowledge-sharing initiatives.
- **Encourage Policy and Funding Support:** Advocate for regional and national policies that sustain innovation ecosystems and secure long-term funding.

8: CASE STUDIES



8 CASE STUDIES

The following 10 case studies illustrate some of the services delivered to companies through the Black Country Innovation Services.

Lynsey Luu

ROLE THAT BLACK COUNTRY INNOVATION SERVICES PLAYED

Through taking part in the project via Dudley college, Lynsey was able to access the college's laser cutter and learn how to use the laser cutter herself. The access to this technology and training experts through the college has meant that Lynsey has been able to explore different settings on the laser cutter to achieve different outcomes, using different materials and therefore been able to expand on the products they sell. Lynsey now plans to invest into her own laser cutter to further support the development and evolution of her business.

INTRODUCTION

Lynsey Luu jewellery is a unique company that designs and develops quirky jewellery pieces and specialised gifts such as stationary and badges. The company has a website from which they sell the majority of their products.

CHALLENGE ADDRESSED

Lynsey Luu was looking to have access to a laser cutter in order to produce some of their unique and intricate jewellery designs themselves rather than outsourcing companies to do this for them.



"Being able to use the laser cutter through the project has meant that I have been able to have a play around with different settings to achieve different outcomes depending on the materials. I have also had the chance to make test pieces which has saved me time and money."



LYNSEY HARRIS
Director



Approved Centre

ROLE THAT BLACK COUNTRY INNOVATION SERVICES PLAYED

Gray Training Ltd were put in touch with Richard from the Dudley College Hub who assisted them with setting up and applying a secure system to their main office hub and also remote devices. Richard also assisted the company with their website development which has improved its accessibility for their customers.



“Through Richard’s support we have been able to develop our IT security system and website. The organisational support has been instrumental to ensuring that our business is secure and it has helped us immensely to know that our systems are safe.”

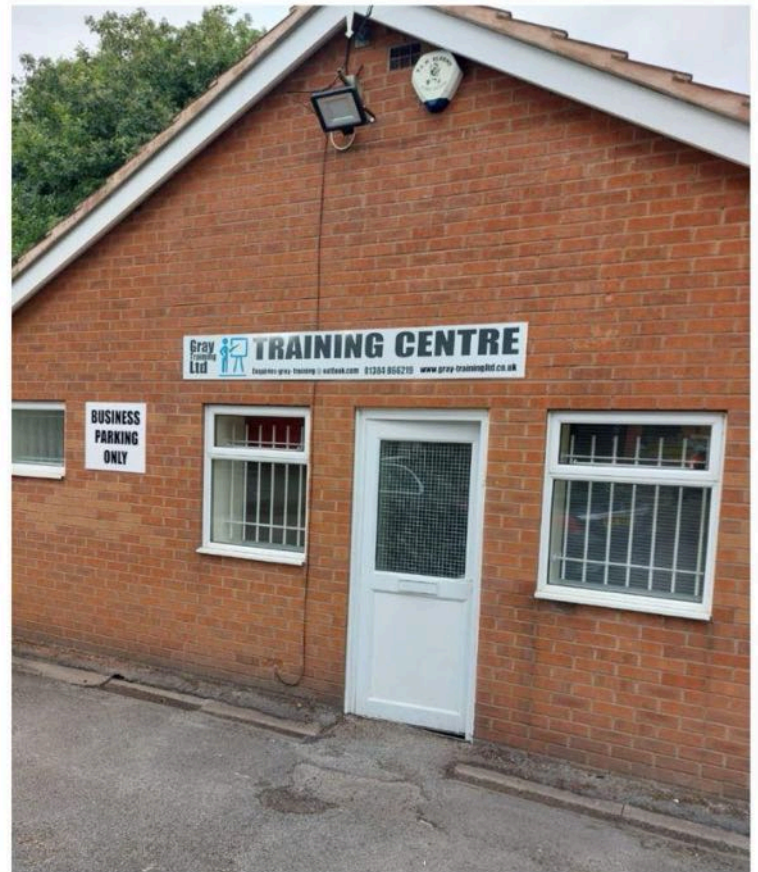
STEVE GRAY
Managing Director

INTRODUCTION

Gray Training Ltd, based in Dudley, West Midlands, provides specialist training and skills courses for the construction sector. The training programmes they offer include construction industry training board courses, energy utility skills training and in health and safety, the company also offers National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) assessments.

CHALLENGE ADDRESSED

The organisation was looking to advance and improve on their IT security and were put in touch with the Dudley College Hub to access support from the Black Country Innovation Services project.





TAILORED STRINGS
TAILORED EXCELLENCE

ROLE THAT BLACK COUNTRY INNOVATION SERVICES PLAYED

Tailored Strings received one-to-one support through Halesowen and Dudley College where they were able to set business goals and build a business plan. Business experts at the college advised the company to semi-automate the manufacturing process for the bowstrings. The machine to do this is highly expensive and therefore the company was supported to build their own machine which helped to assemble the strings in half the manufacturing time. The increase of efficiency with the production timeline has contributed to the Tailored Strings business growth, including further plans to produce a mobile app to work as a digital scoring tool for arches to track their process, as well as marketing their products.



“With the help of the project I am now in discussions with local stores to sell my bowstrings at a more reasonable trade price. Thank you for your help.”

THOMAS HOMER
Director

INTRODUCTION

Tailored Strings is a specialist company that crafts high-quality bowstrings. The products that they make are entirely customised and are made from top-grade materials. Their products are mainly sold online.

CHALLENGE ADDRESSED

The company was looking to sell their products in shops and therefore attended the Business Growth West Midlands event at the Institute of Technology. From here they were introduced to the Black Country Innovation Services project.



mediadigital

BRINGING **IDEAS** TO LIFE

ROLE THAT BLACK COUNTRY INNOVATION SERVICES PLAYED

Through taking part in the project Media Group received specialist Microsoft training for their employees, they also received an induction to artificial intelligence and received tailored guidance on the immersive wellbeing experience. This training has meant that Media Group staff have been supported to develop their skills and also supported with their wellbeing. This has allowed the company to grow and develop further.

“The innovative approach and strong industry connections make Black Country Innovation Services a valuable resource for businesses seeking growth and technological advancement.”

GARY PRITCHARD
Account Director

INTRODUCTION

Media Group is a business based in the West Midlands who develop digital signage for numerous business sectors. They work with their clients to boost their sales and improve marketing communications.

CHALLENGE ADDRESSED

The business was looking for support with Microsoft training for their employees and to have an introduction to artificial intelligence to see how this could tie in with their work processes.





ROLE THAT BLACK COUNTRY INNOVATION SERVICES PLAYED

Through taking part in the project Ståht were able to access Rapid Prototyping equipment and experts. This has now become a key part of their developmental process, offering speed and increased flexibility for their projects. The access to Rapid Prototyping has become an essential service for their workline and has meant they can better build confidence and alignment with their customers.

INTRODUCTION

Ståht is a manufacturing company that designs and builds digital pull test equipment. They are based in Stourbridge in the West Midlands. The business was created in 2020 and has grown and developed successfully since then. They have become an established SME and are now looking to scale up further, they already export on a worldwide basis.

CHALLENGE ADDRESSED

In order to develop their company Ståht were seeking some support to explore Rapid Prototyping in order to speed up their design iteration on new measurement products that they had in the pipeline.



"The Innovation Centre we accessed through the Black Country Innovation Services Project has started our Rapid Prototyping journey and now there is no going back!"

ROB HIRST
Managing Director





MEC COM FABRICATIONS

ROLE THAT BLACK COUNTRY INNOVATION SERVICES PLAYED

Mec Com Fabrications participated in the Black Country Innovation Services pilot project, where they received comprehensive support to drive sustainable growth and development. This assistance enabled the company to begin their journey towards achieving carbon neutrality in alignment with ISO 14068 standards. Additionally, the project facilitated their action plan toward digital transformation, enhancing the value of their services to customers, creating new jobs within the business, and helping them secure a Green Solutions grant to replace their roof with new cladding and thermal insulation. Through a series of webinars, workshops, and the Wolverhampton Tesla workshop, Mec Com Fabrications developed a clear and actionable roadmap for the sustainable future of their business.

“Dr Sage Lal and everyone involved with the Black Country Innovation Services have been extremely supportive from the very start of our relationship. Without their input, then I’m certain we would still be at the point of not really understanding where we are at and where we wanted to go in our digitalisation and sustainability journey. The help and advice provided has been invaluable to us.”

ANDY PRICE
Director

INTRODUCTION

Mec Com Fabrications is one of the UK’s largest independent contract manufacturers. Their contract manufacturing service is designed to address their clients specific needs and to reliably provide an agile and cost effective solution.

With over 250 employees and a combined shop-floor space of 11,000 m2 across their two manufacturing sites, Mec Com in the UK, and European Fabrications in Romania, they provide competitive solutions to market leading businesses around the globe.

CHALLENGE ADDRESSED

Mec Com Fabrications, a thriving sheet metal fabrication company based in the West Midlands, has been successfully operating for over 25 years. Recently, the company has expanded and diversified its offerings by launching electromechanical assembly projects on an international scale. To support their continued growth, Mec Com sought assistance in advancing their digitalization efforts and sustainability initiatives.





ROLE THAT BLACK COUNTRY INNOVATION SERVICES PLAYED

Collaborating with M3 Agency, the Black Country Innovation Services project enabled Your Digital Hub to enhance their website to optimise user experience, improve search engine optimisation, and integrate AI features like a chatbot, building a robust digital foundation. Social media strategies, refined with Red Rose Media, introduced video content and AI-driven engagement, strengthening Your Digital Hub's market presence. Sustainable technology solutions, including IoT for smart buildings and solar audits, positioned Your Digital Hub as an environmentally conscious consultancy. Masterclasses on AI, cybersecurity, and Greentech, along with networking opportunities via Innovate Dudley and the Black Country Chamber of Commerce, empowered Your Digital Hub with advanced insights and local connections. Ambassadors Steve Bull MBE and Paul Morris MBE further elevated the company's profile. The Black Country project contributions enabled Your Digital Hub to achieve digital transformation, enhance sustainability, and establish itself as an innovative leader in workplace technology.

"Working with Innovate UK, Wolverhampton College, and having Steve Bull and Paul Morris as our ambassadors has provided our startup with an invaluable foundation. For us, this partnership has been the best start imaginable."

TIM HUBBARD
Owner & Director

INTRODUCTION

Your Digital Hub, a forward-thinking workplace technology consultancy based in Wolverhampton, has been successfully streamlining digital solutions for businesses since its establishment in 2024. Leveraging over 30 years of industry expertise, the company specializes in optimizing managed print, mobile, IT infrastructure, and green energy solutions. To support their growth further

CHALLENGE ADDRESSED

Your Digital Hub was seeking assistance to develop their knowledge on Artificial Intelligence and to advance their sustainability initiatives. Your Digital Hub benefitted from their participation in the Black Country Innovation Services project by receiving free tailored support for their innovation design, sustainable technology solutions and strategic support.





ANKERSIDE

Shopping Centre Tamworth

ROLE THAT BLACK COUNTRY INNOVATION SERVICES PLAYED

Ankerside benefitted from taking part in the Black Country Innovation Services project as they received Fire Martial Training. This has enabled the company to legally fulfil their requirements and to foster a safe and resilient workspace for their employees and customers.

“We had a very positive experience of the project, the training courses that were offered fitted with our availability which supported us to have a friendly and positive learning experience.”

CAROLINE APPLETON
Centre Administrator

INTRODUCTION

Ankerside Shopping Centre, located in Tamworth's historic town centre, is home to over 60 stores, boutiques, and food outlets. The shopping centre was opened by Queen Elizabeth II on 6 June 1980. In addition to offering a diverse shopping and dining experience, Ankerside regularly hosts community projects, markets, and events.

CHALLENGE ADDRESSED

The organisation were looking to receive some training in order to establish Fire Marshalls in their shopping centre. Through taking part in the project Ankerside have been able to benefit from Fire Martial training.





GREEN TECH HUB

ROLE THAT BLACK COUNTRY INNOVATION SERVICES PLAYED

Green Tech Hub discovered the transformative potential of AI through tailored one to one support provided by Wolverhampton College. Building on this foundation, the company participated in multiple workshops and networking events. Since integrating AI into their operations, Green Tech Hub has achieved remarkable success, reporting a large increase in their b2b turnover.



“The use of AI has assisted us turn round quotes for businesses to around 24 hours compared to up to 14 days previously. The incoming pile of to do has almost cleared and it has enabled me to concentrate on the clients development rather than chasing technical sales proposals ”

DAVID FACER
Senior Partner

INTRODUCTION

Green Tech Hub, a company based in Birmingham, UK, specialises in solar energy solutions, including solar panel installations, maintenance, and energy storage systems. The company has over 10 years experience in providing quality bespoke solar PV systems.

CHALLENGE ADDRESSED

The company delivers services across Birmingham and the Greater Midland areas, and aim to help homeowners become self-sufficient by generating and storing their own electricity, thereby reducing reliance on the National Grid and protecting against rising energy costs. The company was seeking support to learn and develop their services with AI and see how it could stream line commercial proposals. Taking part in the project has empowered Green Tech Hub to incorporate AI into their company resulting in company wide learning and a significant increase in their b2b turnover.



CASE STUDY



ROLE THAT BLACK COUNTRY INNOVATION SERVICES PLAYED

The company received tailored support through taking part in the project that has helped Switch Up Electrics to establish themselves in the electrical services industry with a strong online presence, including building of a modern website, developing branding and advertising materials, and training with artificial intelligence. The company has also been supported to establish a virtual landline service which has enhanced their professional image and streamlined their communication with customers.

INTRODUCTION

With over a decade of experience and a commitment to safety, innovation, and client satisfaction, Switch Up Electrics provide high-quality electrical services tailored to meet the needs of homeowners, businesses, and developers alike.

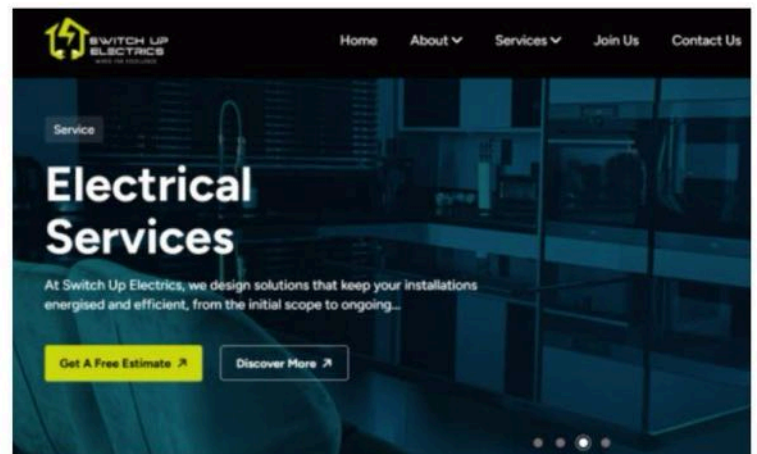
CHALLENGE ADDRESSED

Switch Up Electrics is an innovative start up company offering cutting edge sustainable technologies such as electric vehicle charging point installations. The electrical services offered by the company are not only of high quality, but also tailored to the needs of the clients. The company was looking for support to build their professional digital presence and branding.

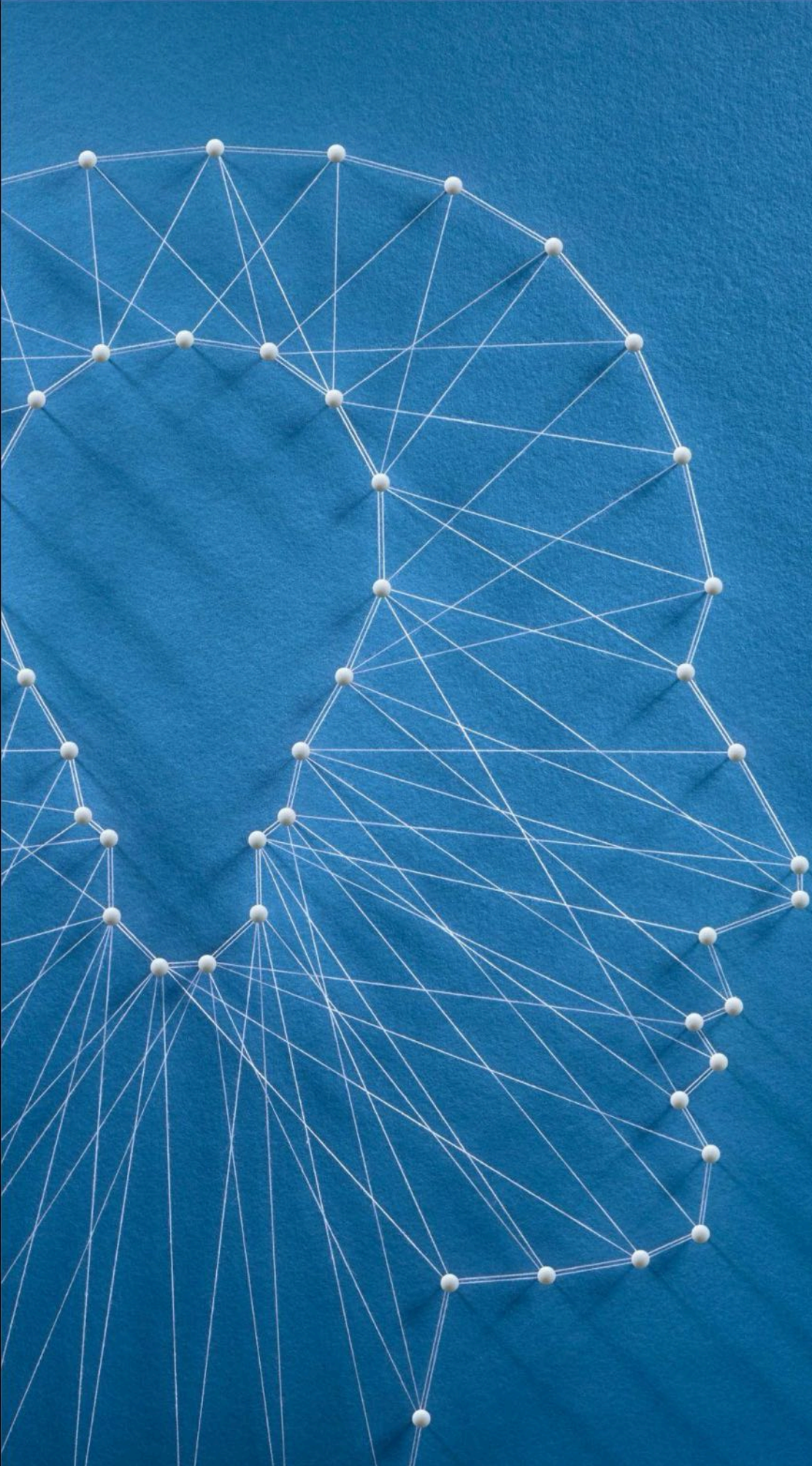


“Working with City of Wolverhampton College and the Black Country Innovation Service Project has been a game-changer for Switch Up Electrics. The support we’ve received, from building a professional website to exploring advanced tools like ChatGPT and EV charging installations, has not only helped us launch successfully but also positioned us as a forward-thinking, innovative company.”

CAROLINE APPLETON
Centre Administrator



9: GLOSSARY



9 GLOSSARY

AI	Artificial Intelligence
ONA	Organisational Needs Assessment
PCR	Project Change Request
SMEs	Small and medium sized enterprises
UKRI	UK Research and Innovation

10: APPENDICES



10 APPENDIX

10.1 Team of consultees

Name	Role	Organisation
Andrew Horner	Innovation Consultant	Dudley College
Catherine Jones	Innovation Technician	Dudley College
Conrad Taylor	Project Lead	Wolverhampton College
Georgia Tsinopoulou	Innovate Consultant	Walsall College
Harold Mututa	Project Manager	Walsall College
James Norris	Assistant Principal	Walsall College
John Lockley	Project Lead	South Staffordshire College
Matthew Cadden-Hyde	Project Lead	Dudley College
John Murray	Project Lead	Halesowen College
Raj Findlay	Innovate Support Advisor	South Staffordshire College
Ray Hall	Innovation Consultant	South Staffordshire College
Richard Johnson	Innovation Consultant	Halesowen College
Sage Lal	Innovate Consultant	Wolverhampton College

10.2 Appendix to report

Beneficiary Survey Responses

Aide Memoire notes from beneficiaries and wider stakeholders