

Improving government services for small and growing businesses

In 2000, the government set itself the target of making the UK the best place in the world to start and grow a business by 2005. The Small Business Service (SBS) then set out seven themes to deliver this target, including “improving small businesses’ experience of government services”. This CBI brief puts forward key recommendations for delivering on this theme, mainly focusing on the business support network.

Summary

The CBI supports the government’s objective of improving small businesses’ experience of government services to make them ‘more coherent, accessible and of better quality.’¹ The evidence shows that good quality services to businesses improve their survival and growth prospects. Improving small businesses’ experience of government services is therefore crucial to enabling the enterprise revolution in the UK.

However, while the government has, over recent years, made some positive steps in improving the delivery of government services, businesses of all sizes continue to report fundamental problems of duplication, confusion and inconsistency in the quality of services being delivered on the ground.

Small businesses are the most dynamic and job creating part of the UK economy, with half of UK employment and GDP provided by this sector. The government currently spends an estimated £8bn on government services for these businesses, defined as those who employ up to 250 people. With this reach, and this level of financial support, these businesses should be able to experience government services which are appropriate, achievable, deliverable and measurable.

However, it is important to recognise that businesses do not just expect support and advice. They are willing to earn other forms of government support by supplying goods and services, as of course these revenues enable growth and reinvestment. Recommendations on improving this process will be included in the next Enterprise Brief on ‘improving regulation for small businesses.’

The ‘de-proliferation’ exercise of the business support network that the government is proposing to undertake must be taken forward as a priority. However, the government must be clear that this does not result in a covert reduction of aggregate funding. Instead the primary aim of the exercise should be to provide ‘seamless’ and targeted support to businesses through their life cycle particularly as they grow. The government should therefore focus on complementing the private sector by filling gaps in supply and addressing market failures.

The RDAs have an important role to play in this. If they are to reach their targets of sustainable economic development and regeneration they must focus on enabling and encouraging enterprise. In particular, they must recognise the gap in support for growing businesses. Business Links must also consistently raise their performance. In particular, they have a role to play in reducing confusion on the ground, and must aim to position themselves as a high-quality ‘gateway’ to the business support network. However, with Business Links only reaching 14% of existing small businesses each year, businesses should be able to access the support network at any point through a ‘no wrong door’ approach and be confident that they will be sign-posted correctly irrespective of the ultimate provider of the service.

The majority of businesses consulted by the CBI support the principle of working within the existing framework to improve the quality of government services. However, unless there are significant delivery improvements which feed through to businesses across the UK, calls for a more radical overhaul of the system will grow.

Current situation

The UK government's objective of improving small businesses' experience of government services is to make them 'more coherent, accessible and of better quality'.² As part of this, over recent years, the DTI has rebranded, amalgamated or wound down 200 business support schemes.

Businesses access 'government services' at a local, regional, national and international level. Government services include advice, grants, skills & training and specific support for manufacturers, such as the Manufacturing Advisory Service, and involve a range of bodies including the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), SBS, Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), Business Links, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC), UK Trade and Investment (UKTI), Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Learning and Skills Councils (LSCs).

The government currently spends an estimated £8bn on government services for small business, defined as those who employ up to 250 people. In addition to this, numerous business support organisations have been established by local and European government funds.

However, despite numerous changes to the way business support is provided across the UK, the problems of duplication and inconsistency in the quality and sources of services on the ground still exist. For example, there are still nearly 2,700 government grants and support schemes available to businesses in England alone.

It is also clear that this support is not as widely used as it could be. During 2004/05 Business Links reached just 14% of existing businesses.^{*} While awareness about the publicly funded business support schemes seems to be gradually growing, the main sources of advice for businesses remain accountants and other private sector organisations. Public sector providers are still generally considered to provide advice of a lower quality than private sector providers and focus too heavily on supporting start-ups rather than businesses looking to grow. Businesses also report difficulty in accessing publicly funded support, both in terms of time and cost.

Exhibit 2 shows that performance on improving small businesses' experience of government services is still not as strong as it should be. While there are signs of improvement in some services, there are still government agencies whose approach to business is poor. Much more work is required for government services to be considered coherent, accessible and of a high quality.

* Based on SBS Management Information of Business Links reaching 510,000 existing businesses in the year to September 2005, and the SBS SME statistics that there were 3,553,740 enterprises in England in 2004.

EXHIBIT: 1

Business support across the UK

- In England, the government has handed over responsibility for the Business Link network from the SBS to the RDAs, and committed itself to the Business Link brand as a 'gateway' that small businesses can use to access an increasing range of government services. They have also begun to produce 'no-nonsense' guides and established a well-respected and well-used businesslink.gov website. Several RDAs are also in the process of rationalising the way Business Links operate in their regions.
- In Scotland, Scottish Enterprise and its local enterprise companies run Business Gateway. They are both funded by the Scottish Executive and involve local councils, local enterprise trusts and other partners. For small businesses in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, Highlands and Islands Enterprise run a similar service. Business Gateway offers assistance in helping small businesses access advice in many areas, including skills development, staff recruitment, sales and marketing, IT and the latest business regulations.
- In Wales, the Welsh Development Agency (WDA) has authority for providing advice and support to businesses through Business Eye. However in April 2006, when WDA ceases to exist, the functions of the WDA including business support will fall directly within the Welsh Assembly Government. The new support mechanism will be called Business Foundations. It is unclear what impact this will have on businesses in terms of business support.
- In Northern Ireland, services for small businesses are provided by Invest NI and the local enterprise agencies, which are located in each of the current 26 council areas. These arrangements are likely to change as a result of the recently published Review of Public Administration, which will cut the number of councils and affect the number, roles and functions of other public bodies.

EXHIBIT: 2**Government targets and performance**

Government target	Evidence
Increase the number of small businesses saying they are satisfied with government services. ³	In 2003, for different types of contact with government, the proportion satisfied ranged from 53% to 84% ⁴ . In 2004, the proportion satisfied ranged from 51% to 81%. ⁵
Increase Business Link Operator market penetration and customer satisfaction. ⁶	Business Links helped a total of 685,000 customers in the year ending Sept 05. This was the highest performance so far. Overall customer satisfaction with Business Link services stood at 90%, a 9.5 percentage point improvement over four years. ⁷
Increase small businesses' perceptions that their concerns are being taken into account by government. ⁸	While 56% of businesses in England and Northern Ireland consider that the government takes at least 'a little' account of their concerns compared with 44% in 2003, only 1% said that the government took 'very much' account. ⁹

Key CBI recommendations

- All relevant government departments and agencies must 'buy-in' to the aim of improving small businesses' experience of government services.
- The government must ensure that initiatives funded with public money reflect business demand, address a market failure and provide added value.
- The government must ensure that the business support network provides a 'seamless' and targeted service to businesses as they need it through their life cycle.
- Policymakers, both at a national and regional level, must recognise that the process of business growth has significant policy implications for government services, and look at ways to address these implications.
- RDAs must focus on enabling enterprise to deliver sustainable economic development and regeneration.
- RDAs must ensure that the business community plays an integral role in the workings of the RDAs and in the development of regional policy.
- RDAs must improve lines of communication with each other to increase collaboration and share best practice.
- Business Links must continue to work towards positioning themselves as a high quality 'gateway' to the business support network.
- Businesses should be able to access the business support system in any place, and be confident that they will be sign-posted correctly.
- HMRC should develop a high-quality, customer-focused accessible system for dealing with queries from businesses and offering appropriate advice.
- The LSC must ensure that the 'Train to Gain' programme is a catalyst for improved provision of workforce training at all levels.
- UKTI should rebalance its efforts to support medium-sized and growing businesses and significantly increase awareness of its services.

CBI proposals

1 Improving the business support network

Using government figures from 2001/02, it is estimated that the government spends nearly £8bn on services for small business every year (Exhibit 3). However, given changes in the last spending review and reprioritisation, a new review of expenditure on services for small business by all relevant government departments and agencies is urgently needed. The National Audit Office’s proposed review of support for small business should also be pursued as a matter of urgency.

While it is estimated that there are 2,650 grants and support schemes in England alone, in reality nobody can be certain. There is much anecdotal evidence about which schemes work and which ones are less successful. However, there has been no systematic evaluation of the business support network to look at what schemes exist and which ones are most effective and add most value.

The CBI understands that the SBS is currently leading a project which proposes to look at de-proliferation opportunities for regional and local business support schemes. In conducting this exercise, the work of the SBS must be fully supported by other government departments, agencies and local government. Improving small businesses’ experience of government services can only be achieved by cross-government co-operation.

This exercise though must not be carried out in isolation. The SBS must work closely with businesses across the UK. The CBI would be keen to be involved in this project as it moves forward.

The SBS must also recognise the importance of working with the RDAs. In part, the regionalisation of business support took place in April 2005 to tackle the proliferation of the business support network. The RDAs also have a function to manage business support schemes in their regions. Ultimately, the success of the de-proliferation project will largely be determined by whether the RDAs can deliver changes to the business support network in their regions. Involving the RDAs at an early stage is therefore crucial.

All relevant government departments and agencies must ‘buy-in’ to the aim of improving small businesses’ experience of government services.

2 Support must reflect demand

The de-proliferation exercise should also not result in a covert reduction of aggregate funding for the business support network. Instead, the primary aim should be to free

EXHIBIT: 3

Government spending on services for small business

Body	Estimated Cost
SBS	£349m
DTI	£160m
DTI agencies	£115m
BTI	£43.6m
DTLR and Agencies	£107.1m
DCMS and Agencies	£107.1m
DfES and Agencies	£138m
DEFRA and Agencies	£3,120m
DWP	£71m
Customs & Excise	£31m
Inland Revenue	£50m
RDAs	£274m
Local Authorities	£300m
European Commission	£227m
European Investment Bank	£19m
Tax measures	£2,590m
Total	£7,932m

Source: Cross-Cutting Review of Government Services 2001/02

up resources to allow them to be used to enhance support for those schemes that are effective and add value. This will mean that schemes which add less value and serve a limited market are phased out.

In achieving this, initiatives must reflect business demand, and should not be the result of a top-down, planning methodology. They should not duplicate what is already being successfully provided by the private sector, and must instead fill a gap or address a market failure.

As the system moves forward, meaningful performance management systems must be developed which encourage efficient publicly-funded services, and ones that provide added value to the business community.

The government must ensure that initiatives funded with public money reflect business demand, address a market failure and provide added value.

3 Supporting business growth

Whilst government efforts to support business start-ups should be welcomed, it is important to recognise that driving up enterprise is about encouraging growth in firms of all sizes. The evidence shows that whilst labour productivity growth is driven by changes in market shares and the entry and exit of firms, the dominant component of labour productivity growth is actually growth within existing firms.¹⁰

The overall aim of the business support network must be to support the private sector in providing a ‘seamless’ service to businesses as they need it through their life cycle. There is

EXHIBIT: 4

The transition from owner-managed to owner-directed

Owner-directed companies have different, usually more sophisticated, needs. These companies will deliberately look for ways of diversifying their markets and customers, improving productivity, implementing innovative processes and business methods but they have limited resources to put to this task.

The transition process can be difficult, and there is scope for policymakers and business support solutions to recognise and assist companies through the transition.

The routes for providing services and information will involve different partners and organisations. There is a marked shift of recognised sources of information, partly because more of the company’s directors will be members of professional associations.

clearly an imbalance at the moment, with 519 schemes which help people set up a business, and just 345 which look at business growth and expansion.

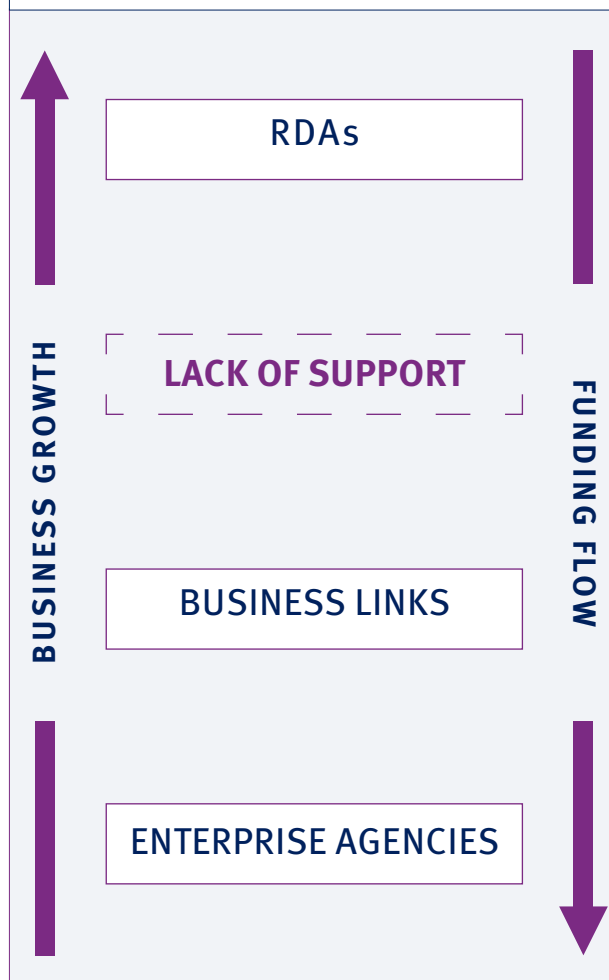
The government must ensure that the business support network provides a ‘seamless’ and targeted service to businesses as they need it through their life cycle.

In a number of regions, RDAs coordinate support for the large businesses, and task Business Links with co-ordinating support for small businesses (Exhibit 5). In many areas, Enterprise Agencies then tend to lead support for pre-start-ups and start-ups. However, there is a risk that this leaves both unco-ordinated and inadequate support for the growing businesses in the middle.

With no obvious agency for these businesses to approach, it is not surprising that the feedback from CBI members seeking to grow their companies—and not necessarily at stellar rates

EXHIBIT: 5

Business support network in the regions



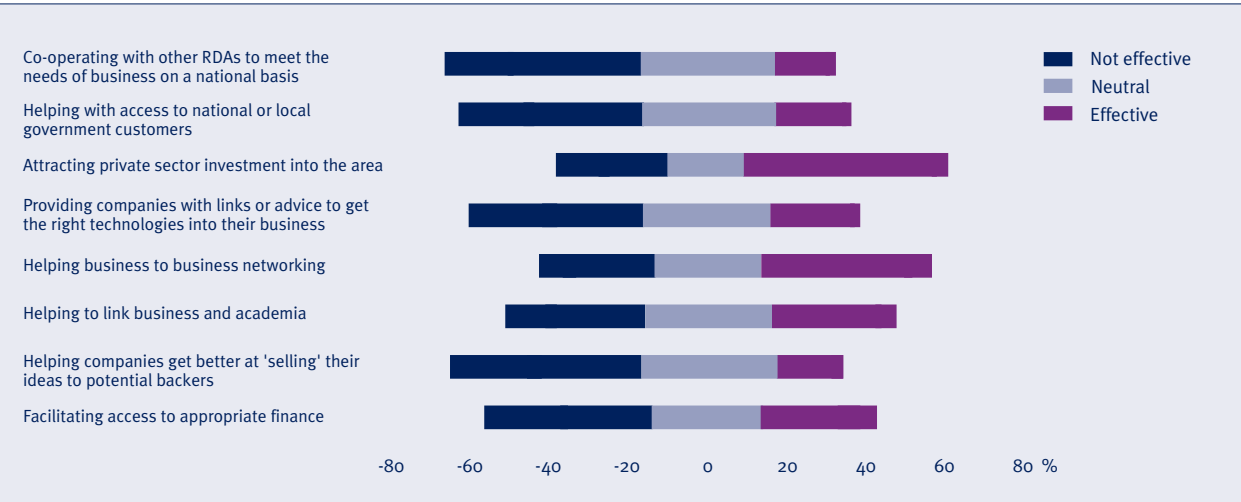
—indicates that they are unlikely to think to use government support or advice. This is particularly true in the case of trade and investment support, where there has been relatively little support for growing exporters.

In order to deliver the government’s economic growth objectives and the Lisbon Agenda more companies need to succeed in growing their companies. There is, therefore, more scope for better targeting and co-ordinating support for these growth companies. The CBI does not advocate the setting up of new agencies, but believes that the RDAs must focus on these businesses.

Policymakers, both at a national and regional level must recognise that the process of business growth has significant policy implications for government services, and look at ways to address these implications.

EXHIBIT: 6

Effectiveness of Regional Development Agencies



Source: CBI/Queen's Innovation Survey 2005

4 Focusing the RDAs

In 2004/2005 the RDAs had a budget of £1.8bn,¹¹ which is expected to rise over the next few years. However, despite this, it remains unclear as to what the long-term responsibilities and remits of the RDAs are.

It is crucial that the government makes it plain that the focus of RDAs must be on sustainable economic development and regeneration. While they should be mindful of environmental and social goals in their regions and liaise as appropriate, other bodies should take forward these aspects of achieving sustainable development.

To make progress on these challenges, RDAs must be business-led and enterprise-focused. Regional Economic Strategies should reflect this and therefore be at the heart of regional development and regeneration. Regional and local government agencies must also 'buy-in' to this process and take responsibility in enabling the delivery of these strategies.

However, the overall objectives of the RDAs must be measurable, ensuring that the performance of the RDAs is transparent. If the RDAs are to achieve these key objectives, they must have flexibility from central control. There is some evidence that the government has recognised this, particularly in terms of budgeting, with the implementation of single-pot funding. However, the government must acknowledge that micro-management from a central level will stifle rather than enhance the activity of RDAs in the regions.

RDAs must focus on enabling enterprise to deliver sustainable economic development and regeneration.

5 Improving communication

The perception amongst businesses of the RDAs is that they are unable to take swift decisions and suffer from a high level of bureaucracy. While RDAs are seen as effective in their efforts to attract private sector investment or help business to business networking, they are seen as ineffective in many key areas (Exhibit 6). The House of Commons Trade and Industry Committee reports that RDA application procedures involve disproportionate amounts of form-filling and the resulting decision-making takes too long.¹² Many entrepreneurs also see them as 'out of touch' with the demands of the business environment.

Interaction between RDAs and business is also patchy and ad hoc. RDAs need to ensure that they have extensive contacts with the private sector and understand their needs and concerns. To achieve this requires the development of more formal and informal lines of communication. The business community must be aware of the opportunities enabling them to play an integral role in the development of regional policy.

RDAs must ensure that the business community plays an integral role in the workings of the RDAs and in the development of regional policy.

There are concerns that the RDAs are working in isolation from each other, and not communicating very well with central agencies. The CBI understands that one of the main ways that RDAs share information is when the Chairs of each RDA meet about every six weeks. While this is clearly beneficial, much stronger lines of communication need to be built, at all levels between the RDAs and with the SBS.



There are examples of RDAs working in collaboration. These include the Northern Way strategy which involves One NorthEast, Yorkshire Forward and Northwest RDA working together. However, this type of activity needs to be expanded.

Closer communication would also reduce the potential duplication of research and help to co-ordinate activity, particularly work on clusters. The SBS regional teams have a strong role to play here in ensuring that the RDAs are coordinating their activities.

The CBI publication *Creating a more dynamic start-up market* recommended that the government should conduct a review pooling locally held knowledge in the RDAs and Business Links to investigate the reasons which lead to regional differences in the number of start-ups. It is also important though that best practice is shared among the regions, not just in terms of boosting start-up numbers, but on a much wider scale.

The RDAs must also build more extensive links with other central bodies, such as the Small Business Investment Taskforce.

RDAs must improve lines of communication with each other to increase collaboration and share best practice.

6 Positioning Business Links

There is clearly significant variation in the quality of support offered by different Business Links. While SBS statistics indicate a 90% satisfaction rate with Business Link

services, independent research by Prof. R. J. Bennett shows a less favourable picture (Exhibit 7).

However, while some Business Links and some Business Link advisers provide a good service to the business community, others fail to deliver a high quality, accessible service to businesses in their area. There is also considerable confusion about what Business Links currently do and what their role is supposed to be. For example, in some areas it is unclear how the work of Business Link fits in with that of Enterprise Agencies.

The CBI supports the principle that Business Link should be positioned as a 'gateway', rather than the providers of specialist support. This principle should be at the heart of the development of new contracts for the renewal of Business Link Operators. The Business Link network must also continue to strive for efficiency savings, to drive down 'backroom' costs and to increase the level of services on the 'frontline'. It is notable that RDAs are now beginning to address this point.

Specialist support should instead be provided by those organisations best placed to provide the support, whether in the public or private sector. For this system to work effectively, there needs to be a clear map of what support is available in each region irrespective of the source.

Therefore, raising the standards of Business Links across the country to act as a 'gateway' must be a priority. If businesses become confident about using Business Links as organisations that will provide a high quality information, diagnostic and brokerage service—this will help to tackle the confusion on the ground.

This principle should also be reflected on the businesslink.gov website. This website has successfully brought together various government online services. However, there is scope for broadening the offering, and developing the website to become the key point for business to access government services.

Business Links must continue to work towards positioning themselves as a high quality 'gateway' to the business support network.

7 Implementing 'no-wrong-door'

Raising the quality of business support overall is dependent on the skills of the business support practitioners. There are a number of schemes that are attempting to improve the skills of business advisors, particularly those that focus on business support as a profession. However, the government, working closely with other organisations, must build on this, and look at other ways in which the skill levels of practitioners can be raised.

While there are many highly skilled advisors in the Business Link networks, raising their skills is crucial. It is also clear that while many advisors have the skills-set to advise on business start-ups, there is a lack of advisors who have the knowledge and experience to advise on business growth. Business Links must therefore provide more rigorous and targeted training for their advisors.

Business advisors must also have access to information on what support is available in their area. This requires the development of good quality brokerage databases accessible across the regions. Where appropriate, business advisors should also help in the relationship between businesses and the provider to ensure that businesses are faced with minimum bureaucracy and administration.

Only a minority of entrepreneurs access publicly funded support or advice when setting up or seeking to grow a business. However, those that do have a higher chance of survival and achieving long-term growth. While the Business Link network should strive to become a 'gateway' to business support, it is clear that they are only reaching 14% of existing businesses each year. Therefore, the 'no wrong door' principle needs to be reinforced.

It is clear that some entrepreneurs, particularly young entrepreneurs are completely unaware of Business Link and other publicly funded support schemes. The government must therefore look at how it can reach out to make people aware of the assistance available.

The government should ensure that in all government services to small businesses and in the development of new contracts

for publicly-funded business support services, advisors have at least a basic level of awareness for what other business support schemes are available, or are able to direct businesses to the local Business Link service.

Businesses should be able to access the business support system in any place, and be confident that they will be sign-posted correctly.

To achieve these goals, CBI small business members have highlighted three areas that need immediate focus.

8 Putting customers at the heart of HMRC

Clear advice and guidance about the tax system, and an accessible system for dealing with queries are particularly important to small businesses. The HMRC website can provide a good basic level of information, but the ability to contact well trained HMRC staff able to respond fully to specific queries is essential.

The range of complex legislation in this area challenges professionals, and is beyond most entrepreneurs for everything except the key features. This creates innumerable traps for businesses to fall into, and the resulting uncertainty distracts them from their business objectives by making it extremely difficult to operate according to a commercial view of risk.

The CBI supports HMRC's objective of putting the customer at its heart. To do this HMRC must better understand what its customers need and this understanding should then lead to a more approachable and responsive service.

HMRC should develop a high-quality, customer-focussed accessible system for dealing with queries from businesses and offering appropriate advice.

9 Improving provision of workplace training

The experience of the Employer Training Pilots has shown that when training is delivered flexibly, to a high standard and primarily in the workplace, significant pent-up demand amongst employers is released.

The forthcoming national programme—Train to Gain—based on the pilots should be a catalyst for improved provision of workforce training at all levels, with employers able to choose the training provider that best meets their needs and access high quality support from brokers.

Together with ensuring that employers are able to access high quality training from providers—both colleges and private providers—brokerage services on training are often key for many small firms. In particular, there is a need to ensure

that the system is able to meet employers' needs in terms of assessing their skills requirements and identifying the appropriate training.

Employers should expect that Train to Gain is based on the following elements:

- training provision which is based on improving business performance—employers will invest in training that meets their needs and raises business performance. Where needed, brokers must work with the employer to identify their training needs and compose a package of training to address employers' wider skills needs, sourcing provision from the most appropriate providers
- flexible training provision delivered when, where and how employers want it, primarily in the workplace
- use of the assess-train-assess model to build on employees' existing competence and make the most effective use of resources
- an identified point of contact with the provider and broker with knowledge of the business to ensure that all the complexity and confusion associated with the skills infrastructure is removed.

The LSC must ensure that the 'Train to Gain' programme is a catalyst for improved provision of workforce training at all levels.

10 Supporting International Exports

The CBI has been particularly concerned about the squeeze on UKTI's budget at a time when it has been required to rebalance the resources it deploys on inward and outward investment activities respectively. Whilst we support the promotion of inward investment, there had been no clear economic assessment made of the appropriate level of such support prior to resources being reallocated. As a result export support programmes for SMEs have had to be significantly curtailed.

In line with our recommendations on business support more generally, we believe there is a disproportionate focus on the very small businesses and new to market exporters. There is considerable potential among the more experienced SME exporters to build their overseas activities. The support programmes should recognise this potential more explicitly. A number of RDAs have developed pilot "middle market" initiatives and these should be expanded upon and promoted more widely.

The UKTI support programmes exemplify the problem regarding lack of market awareness. The reports available via

the Overseas Market Intelligence Service (OMIS) are among the best regarded offerings from UKTI and yet few exporters fully appreciate the extent and flexibility of the service, nor that it is available, at an appropriate charge, to mid sized, and indeed larger companies.

The CBI acknowledges that the UKTI website is to be re-launched shortly. This is most welcome. The existing site has been difficult to navigate and the re-launch could play a valuable role in raising the awareness of UKTI services.

As stated earlier, the CBI believes there is considerable scope for greater co-operation and co-ordination between RDAs. It is particularly concerning that the multiple RDA offices in key international markets is not only an inefficient use of limited public funds but also presents a confusing and unco-ordinated image to international audiences.

UKTI should re-balance its efforts to support medium sized and growing businesses and significantly increase awareness of its services.

Enabling the Enterprise Revolution

In 2000, the government set itself the objective of making the UK the best place in the world to start and grow a business. In 2002, the Small Business Service set out seven strategic themes to focus its work to achieve their overall goal.

Throughout 2005 and 2006, the CBI is publishing a series of reports, *Enabling the enterprise revolution*, looking at whether progress has been made, and will provide key recommendations on each of the themes to achieve the governments targets.

The reports will be published and be available at: www.cbi.org.uk/enterprise:

- August 2005—The Small Business Service Five Years On
- Oct 2005—More dynamic start-up market
- Nov 2005—Building an enterprise culture
- Jan 2006—Improving small businesses' experience of government services
- Mar 2006—Better regulation and policy
- May 2006—More enterprise in disadvantaged communities and under-represented groups
- July 2006—Improving access to finance
- Sept 2006—Building the capability for small business growth
- Nov 2006—Making the UK the best place in the world to start and grow a business- recommendations

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CBI

The CBI is the UK's leading business organisation, speaking for some 240,000 businesses that together employ around a third of the private sector workforce. The majority of CBI members are from the SME sector.

The SME Council is the focal point within the CBI for identifying and addressing issues of particular interest to small and medium-sized firms, and provides a voice for them to influence mainstream CBI policy and influence government at home and abroad. The Council currently has a membership of around 40 companies, spanning all the UK regions and various business sectors.

The Enterprise Group ensures that the views of CBI SME members are directly represented to government. It has achieved considerable success over the past few years. The information flows in the other direction too, and the CBI's Enterprise Group gathers and summarises data from the legislative programme and gives pointers to likely changes that will affect members' business.

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