



ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

Evaluation of the Business Support Team

Final Report for
Invest NI

December 2018

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This report documents an independent evaluation of the Business Support Team (BST) covering the period 1st April 2012 to 31st March 2018.

The BST provides a centralised contact point for NI business enquiries. The service is delivered directly by Invest NI staff (there is no External Delivery Organisation), and the BST provides as a first point of contact for enquiries (8,400 in most recent year, using several channels) from businesses at all stages of the business life cycle.

APPROACH

The Research Team worked closely with Invest NI to develop an approach that met the assignment aims and objectives. The five main research phases included:

1. Inception Meeting;
2. Desk Review of Background Information;
3. Stakeholder Consultation and Benchmarking;
4. Analysis and Initial Feedback; and
5. Final Reporting.

Full details of the approach are included in the Project Initiation Document (PID) (see Appendix **Error! Reference source not found.**).

STRATEGIC FIT & CONTRIBUTION

There is a strong fit between the BST and the strategic context, including:

- Independent Review of Economic Policy (IREP) (2009)¹;
- Northern Ireland Programme for Government (2016)²;
- Northern Ireland Economic Strategy (2012)³;
- Northern Ireland Industrial Strategy (2017)⁴; and the
- Invest NI Business Strategy (2017-21)⁵.

The strategic fit of the work of the BST is apparent in the key strategy documents and the strategic rationale for such a service remains valid, with the need and demand for the service closely tied to core aspects of relevant economic, industrial and organisational strategies requiring a matching of resources with thematically and sector prioritised beneficiaries. The market failure rationale (around the concept of addressing information failures) is also a persistent and justifiable rationale for intervention.

Given these strategic drivers it is therefore important that Invest NI can achieve effective signposting, filtering and advice through the BST, so that Invest NI can focus resources on achieving the outcomes identified in their business plan.

¹ DETI & Invest NI (2009) Independent Review of Economic Policy, September, DETI & Invest NI: Belfast.

² Northern Ireland Executive (2016) Programme for Government Consultation Document, NI Executive: Belfast.

³ Department for the Economy (2012) Economic Strategy, Priorities for Sustainable Growth and Prosperity, Building a Better Future: Department for the Economy: Belfast.

⁴ Department for the Economy (2017) Economy 2030, A Consultation on an Industrial Strategy for Northern Ireland.

⁵ Invest Northern Ireland (2017) Business Strategy 2017-21, Invest NI: Belfast

PROGRESS TOWARDS INDICATORS AND TARGETS

The BST service has consistently achieved its speed of response target for calls and following the introduction of more stringent email/online enquiry response targets, has now achieved this target too.

The original Business Case did not set out targets for the volume of enquiries handled, neither have subsequent Business Cases set targets for the number of enquiries handled, given that the BST was established to be a service that responds to business demand.

BST targets relate to standards of service: average speed of answer (ASA) for telephone calls, and speed of response for email and online enquiries. The ASA has remained constant at six seconds, consistently below the target, including the revised target of 10 seconds from 2015/2016.

The speed of response target in place for email and online responses was initially for 90% of initial responses to be handled within three working days. The target was amended in 2015/16 to 90% handled within 2 working days. The original target was exceeded; however, the more challenging target was not met in 2015/2016 or 2016/2017, but by 2017/2018 this target has been achieved (partly because of the lower number of enquiries received).

A Live chat service was introduced in January 2018 as a three-month pilot. The initial target was a 60 second response time, and the BST averaged 27 seconds. Consequently, the target has been revised to 40 seconds.

BENCHMARKING

It is notable that equivalent services are provided as an area of core funding (i.e. overhead costs of the organisation, as opposed to those specific to a project and they are viewed as part of necessary basic functions required for an organisation to deliver on its activities). Otherwise channels used are broadly comparable and resourcing is also broadly comparable relative to market size.

The different approaches to business enquiry handling in Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland reflect the different ways in which the business support infrastructure is arranged, and because of the way business support services have evolved. In both Wales and the Republic of Ireland, business support enquiries are initially handled via the main Government department responsible for economic development, whereas in Scotland (like Invest NI) business support enquiries are handled by the (main) enterprise agency in the first instance.

The table below provides some 'at-a-glance' comparators. Lower unit costs in Scotland may also partly reflect the maturity of the Scotland model which has been in operation longer than in the other two areas, and the economies of scale that can be derived with a larger business base and enquiry handling team.

Factor	BST (Invest NI) ¹	SEEFRS (Scotland) ²	Business Wales Helpline ³
Annual cost budget	£228,693	£ 444,500	£450,000
Actual annual cost	£194,354	-	-
Staff numbers	7	18	14
Budget cost per staff person	£32,670	£24,694	£32,143
Number of businesses	126,000	350,410	238,200
Annual cost per business	£1.82	£1.27	£1.89
Enquiries handled per year	12,999	30,000	24,000
Cost per enquiry handled	£17.59	£14.82	£18.75

Notes 1. Average annual enquiries over 6 years; budget includes NI, pensions etc. 2. Budget excludes overheads; includes an analyst; includes advice & info (50%) and advice & referral (50%) 3. Budget exclude overheads
Source: BST Approval Papers and Consultations

MANAGEMENT & DELIVERY

Overall, effective management and delivery arrangements are in place and consistent with the objectives of team.

Service monitoring arrangements are in place and are systematically measured, analysed and responded to. However, there is scope to increase the measurement of enquiry handling quality, of which Invest NI is aware, and actively examining.

The process for engaging with businesses and appraising their requirements is generally well-developed and supported via the operation of different enquiry channels, a knowledgeable and experienced team, effective links with internal and external partners, and extensive templates and knowledge resources.

The BST has a front-line role in filtering and prioritising enquiries from existing Invest NI clients, prospective clients, and the wider business base, in line with the organisation's strategic objectives. Despite this, the service has been provided on a non-mainstreamed basis with repeated approvals.

Although this has not prevented the BST from developing in response to need, and there has been consistency in the level of annual budgets, there are however no obvious benefits in continuing this approach. As a first point of contact for many customers, it is noted that the service operates with a small budget relative to the total budget of Invest NI and, with resources broadly comparable with comparator mainstreamed services. Service budget by year is noted in the table below.

Position	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	Total
Management (DP)	47,539	47,539	70,230	45,747	49,245	49,245	309,546
Staff (EO)	159,744	159,744	182,738	182,738	188,822	188,822	1,062,610
Total	207,283	207,283	252,968	228,485	238,068	238,068	1,372,156

Source: BST Approval Papers

PROGRESS TOWARDS OVERALL AIMS & OBJECTIVES

In terms of benefits, the precise economic impact of the BST is difficult to establish as the work of the team is an integral part of the support provided by the wider Invest NI organisation. Nonetheless it is clear the BST contributes significantly to this work and ultimately to the gross benefits achieved by Invest NI in terms of export led economic growth.

We identify two main ways that this benefit is achieved. Firstly, the BST has significant 'catalytic' effects: via a high volume of quality referrals to Invest NI colleagues and teams; and a high volume of start-up referrals to councils (as well as associated information provision). There are benefits to these businesses who act on the support they have been provided via their referral and advice.

The number of start-up referrals totalled 17,511 over the period examined. Most significantly, the team has permitted targeting of Invest NI support on business that meet appropriate criteria in terms of export orientation and sectoral focus, by referring on enquiries to internal Invest NI teams. The team made some 4,114 such referrals in the evaluation period.

Secondly, we highlight the significant 'combination' effects brought about by the BST coordinating with a wide range of partners and providing a comprehensive and coherent body of knowledge for enquiring businesses). However, as noted in the full report, there is scope for the BST to further enhance links to partner organisations.

VALUE FOR MONEY

In terms of service inputs there has been consistency in the main cost drivers and management costs for the BST. There is also some evidence for significant cost savings by bringing the service in-house at the start of the evaluation period. Staffing costs are comparable with those of the Business Wales Helpline, but somewhat higher than those for SEEFRS (Scotland), although there are differences in the nature of the services.

Cost per Enquiry has fluctuated over the evaluation period as the volume of enquiries has changed relative to the more stable cost base. For the most current year, cost per year is at its highest level over the evaluation period and significantly higher than comparator services.

Cost per Total Referral (internal and start-up) displays a strongly upward trend: a diminishing amount of the service's inputs have been converted to outputs or outcomes in terms of quantity (although feedback discussed earlier suggests quality remains high and indeed is improving) (see section 3.4).

The increasing costs per output/outcome must be weighed against the wider benefits of the service (which are likely to be significant in several ways through catalytic effects, avoidance of duplication, efficiency gains etc), the strong strategic fit of the service, the 'front-line' role of the service in supporting other Invest NI activities, and the low relative cost of the service in relation to the total Invest NI budget, and a need to have a degree of flexibility to meet changing demands. Taking these factors into account, the BST provides good value for money.

MAIN CONCLUSION

The BST makes an important contribution to the achievement of Invest NI strategic objectives by providing an effective first-line means of identifying, prioritising, and signposting new and existing clients as well as providing a necessary and important source of information, advice and signposting for the wider business base.

This significant role and the effective performance of the service (notwithstanding several suggested refinements) has been established over six years while operating under programme budget arrangements.

A move to a 'mainstreamed' core funding basis as an overhead cost of Invest NI, as opposed to those specific to a project, is justified given that the service can be considered part of the necessary basic functions required for Invest NI to deliver on its activities (a position that is consistent with practice in several comparator organisations).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made:

1. Consider a move to a 'mainstreamed' core funding basis as an overhead cost of Invest NI,
2. Maintain the relevance and responsiveness of the service to the wider strategic developments in business support outside of Invest NI, ensuring all relevant partners are engaged routinely so that duplication is avoided, and information made available to business is up-to date and comprehensive (a mapping exercise of stakeholder and services may be a useful exercise to support ongoing systematic coordination with partners) (roles and responsibilities for this to be defined between BST, nibusinessinfo.co.uk info team, and other Invest NI colleagues).
3. Contingency resources should be put in place to handle an increase in enquiry volumes associated with Brexit.
4. Consider a proportionate client feedback mechanism to capture BST internal and external enquiry and referral quality performance and impact.
5. Review opportunities for integration of CRM systems, to allow effective referrals between all those providing business support services.
6. Review opportunities for developing use of chatbots (automated enquiry handling), and digital self-serve approaches.
7. Monitor trends in other jurisdictions for a more centralised and single enquiry handling services across government.
8. Consider provision of a dedicated post for Knowledge Base development and maintenance.
9. Further develop where feasible co-location of BST team members in multiple regional offices to maximise local networking and knowledge transfer.
10. Increase feedback internally to Invest NI colleagues on the type of support demanded by businesses.
11. Maintain systematic learning and development opportunities for BST team members.
12. Develop consistent connection and communication channels with all parts of the organisation (this could be developed by regular briefing of teams of the role and benefits of the service for their staff).
13. Revise the categorisation of internal referrals to permit more accurate analysis by type of referral.

14. Routinely capture relevant procurement and implementation savings to demonstrate ongoing value for money. Routine capturing of cost savings measures on a quarterly or annual basis would assist in monitoring the overall value for money of the service (i.e. a note of actions taken, and if possible, a monetised value of the saving measure).

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

This report documents an independent evaluation of the Business Support Team (BST) covering the period 1st April 2012 to 31st March 2018.

1.2 EVALUATION OBJECTIVES

The evaluation objectives are as follows:

1. **Strategic Fit and Contribution:** Assess whether the strategic context remains valid and if need and demand still exist considering other (Invest NI and other) available services;
2. **Meeting Objectives and Targets:** Assess the extent to which the BST is meeting its objectives and all associated targets;
3. **Delivery Model:** Assess the appropriateness of the intervention's delivery model;
 - a. Including, the assumptions and 'logic' underlying the current delivery model, including market failure rationale;
4. **Management and Delivery:** Effectiveness of the intervention's management and operating structures;
 - a. Including appropriateness of appraisal processes, engagement with participating businesses, and financial management and output monitoring arrangements, including speed and quality of service indicators;
 - b. The effectiveness of service monitoring arrangements (including ability to report on equality considerations);
 - c. Assessing need for /and mainstreaming of the service;
 - d. Consideration of other activities the service may wish to consider delivering;
 - e. Including the potential role of other technologies or channels.
5. **Benchmarking:** Compare the support offered by the intervention against equivalent services available to businesses in the UK, EU and other similar regions, identifying, where appropriate, potential service options for consideration going forward⁶;
6. **Assessing BST Benefits:** To assess the inputs, outputs, outcomes and impacts associated with the intervention, recognising that BST is primarily about the central provision of information, advice and signposting in a comprehensive and timely manner;
 - a. Including any unforeseen effects or wider benefits of the approach; and
7. **Confounding or Supporting Factors:** To identify any internal and external factors which have impacted upon the performance of the intervention either positively or negatively, within the period;
 - a. Including an initial assessment of the potential future implications of Brexit;
8. **Value for Money:** Assess the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which public funds have been used on the intervention, using proxy indicators where relevant and the extent to which the intervention represents good Value for Money (VfM);
9. **Succession:** Any existing plans to ensure sustainability and/or succession of the service (notwithstanding that this is itself an objective of the appraisal phase);
10. **Conclusions:** Present a succinct set of conclusions from the evaluation, taking account of all the evidence gathered during the assignment; and

⁶ It is noted that BST has engaged with the Business Wales Helpline and Scottish Enterprise Enquiry Fulfilment Service on an ongoing basis

11. **Recommendations:** identify recommendations for future delivery. We note that recommendations should be numbered and concisely worded and be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-Bound (SMART) where possible/relevant.

Error! Reference source not found. in Appendix **Error! Reference source not found.** confirms those sections of the report dealing with each of the evaluation questions.

1.3 BST BACKGROUND

The BST provides a centralised contact point for NI business enquiries. The service is delivered directly by Invest NI staff (there is no External Delivery Organisation), and the BST provides as a first point of contact for enquiries (8.4k in most recent year, using several channels) from businesses at all stages of the business life cycle.

The operating context of the BST is changing due to several factors, including new enquiry channels, partner organisation roles, and the nature of enquiries. One of the most significant of these changes has been that Local Councils now provide 0800 number support to start-up businesses, as part of their start-up support responsibilities.

The role of the BST has been stated by Invest NI as key to the effective delivery of business support in Northern Ireland: the ability of the BST to quickly and accurately direct businesses to the right form of support and/or the right person/organisation best placed to help is viewed as critical:

- To the businesses' perception of the quality of service provided;
- To saving both the business and service delivery organisations (including Invest NI) time, avoiding wasted efforts, by getting it right the first time; and
- To the achievement of better economic outcomes for the business and the economy.

Invest NI wish to critically examine these roles to inform the future delivery of the BST service.

1.4 REPORT STRUCTURE

The remainder of this report is set out as follows:

- Chapter 2 Methods;
- Chapter 3 Findings;
- Chapter 4 Conclusions & Recommendations; and
- Appendices

2 METHODS

2.1 EVALUATION APPROACH

The Research Team worked closely with Invest NI to develop an approach that met the assignment aims and objectives. The five main research phases included:

1. Inception Meeting;
2. Desk Review of Background Information;
3. Stakeholder Consultation and Benchmarking;
4. Analysis and Initial Feedback; and
5. Final Reporting.

Full details of the approach are included in the Project Initiation Document (PID) (see Appendix **Error! Reference source not found.**) and are outlined below.

2.2 EVALUATION METHODS

The approach made use of a combination of methods, reflecting the study aims, the range of stakeholder groups, and the resources available. The main proposed methods included:

- Desk Review - analysis of existing beneficiary surveys and monitoring data of the main groups supported by the service; and
- Stakeholder consultations - face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with selected key stakeholders; and
- Benchmarking of comparator approaches.

2.3 DESK RESEARCH

A full complement of background documents was received from Invest NI, as scheduled in the PID, and a detailed review was undertaken of background documentation relating to the service, including Invest NI Business Strategy, BST Business Cases and related monitoring reports.

2.4 FIELDWORK

Consultations were held with stakeholder representatives to assess the evaluation questions and to provide the most up-to-date picture of issues affecting service performance. We note that a full list of consultees was provided by Invest NI, along with appropriate contact details. Consultees were notified of the consultation programme by Invest NI and requested to participate. A list of consultees is provided in **Error! Reference source not found.** in Appendix **Error! Reference source not found.**

The consultations were conducted through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews in the first instance or by skype/phone if a suitable time could not be arranged during the main fieldwork phase.

Topic guides to support the consultations were developed in advance of fieldwork and submitted to Invest NI for review and comment. These included core questions applicable to all consultees, and consultee-specific questions appropriate to groups of consultees (see Appendix **Error! Reference source not found.**).

2.5 BENCHMARKING

The evaluation also made a systematic review, analysis and synthesis of alternative delivery examples, including examples from Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland.

2.6 ANALYSIS & TRIANGULATION

The analysis included review and triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative data collected during the fieldwork phase to answer the evaluation questions. Interim feedback of findings consisted of a draft written report with Invest NI, to:

- Present the main findings;
- Provide an opportunity for challenge and clarification of findings;
- Work through and consider the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats inherent in the findings to date; and to
- Facilitate initial thoughts on lessons learned including, for example: changes to management, delivery and partnership arrangements; identifying solutions to client issues; prioritisation of actions identified; and scheduling and allocation of any actions identified.

2.7 FINAL REPORTING

The final step drew together all the material from the consultations, desk research, secondary analysis of beneficiary feedback, and discussion to produce a concise report highlighting key findings and conclusions and providing a prioritised list of recommendations/ issues for consideration to inform future service delivery.

3 FINDINGS

3.1 STRATEGIC FIT

This section examines the following evaluation questions:

1. Strategic Fit and Contribution: Assess whether the strategic context remains valid and if need and demand still exist considering other (Invest NI and other) available services.
4. Management and Delivery: Effectiveness of the intervention's management and operating structures
 - c) Assessing need for /and mainstreaming of the service.

3.1.1 Introduction

This first section of the findings considers whether the fundamental strategic rationale for the BST is appropriate and remains valid.

3.1.2 Strategic Rationale

In summary, the main strategic drivers for the service include the:

- Independent Review of Economic Policy (IREP) (2009)⁷;
- Northern Ireland Programme for Government (2016)⁸;
- Northern Ireland Economic Strategy (2012)⁹;
- Northern Ireland Industrial Strategy (2017)¹⁰; and the
- Invest NI Business Strategy (2017-21)¹¹.

Independent Review of Economic Policy

The 2009 IREP report recommended that "the concept of Invest NI 'clients' should be removed to allow Invest NI to work throughout the entire business base to raise awareness and provide support" (p10). It is noted that in response to this Invest NI established the Business Support Team (BST) as a key instrument through which Invest NI works with the entire business base.

More generally the review also called for "Better co-ordination in the delivery of the key factors influencing economic policy in NI, including more tailored support for businesses in NI" (p9) support of which also fits the advisory and signposting roles of the BST.

Consequently (as of March 2018), the BST had handled over 76,000 enquiries, made over 17,000 referrals for start-up support and over 4,000 referrals for follow up support from Invest NI colleagues (as cited in the 2018 BST Business Case).

Programme for Government

The draft programme contains strategic outcomes which set a clear direction of travel and enable continuous improvement on the essential components of societal wellbeing, including the attainment of economic success in Northern Ireland. The Programme provides the strategic context for other key Executive strategy

⁷ DETI & Invest NI (2009) Independent Review of Economic Policy, September, DETI & Invest NI: Belfast.

⁸ Northern Ireland Executive (2016) Programme for Government Consultation Document, NI Executive: Belfast.

⁹ Department for the Economy (2012) Economic Strategy, Priorities for Sustainable Growth and Prosperity, Building a Better Future: Department for the Economy: Belfast.

¹⁰ Department for the Economy (2017) Economy 2030, A Consultation on an Industrial Strategy for Northern Ireland.

¹¹ Invest Northern Ireland (2017) Business Strategy 2017-21, Invest NI: Belfast

documents, including the Economic Strategy. In turn the programme cites the central role of supporting local business as a driver of economic growth (as set out under Outcome 1 of the Programme).

A key feature of the new Programme is also its dependence on collaborative working between organisations and groups, whether in the public, voluntary, or private sectors. The BST aligns with both broad policy directives.

Economic Strategy

The overarching goal of this Strategy is to improve the economic competitiveness of the Northern Ireland economy, with a focus on export led economic growth. Within this context the strategy seeks to encourage business growth and increase the potential of local companies. The strategy also identifies a requirement for prioritisation and that certain sectors and markets have the greatest potential to succeed. The strategy includes specific targets for business investment, job creation in locally owned companies, and jobs in new start-up businesses. The BST service has a strong fit with these goals.

Industrial Strategy

Economy 2030, the Department for the Economy's proposals for a new Industrial Strategy, sets out several priorities for growth highlighting those sectoral opportunities where Northern Ireland has competitive advantage, capacity and capability to compete in international markets: demonstrating the need for identification and targeting of appropriate areas of the business base. Within those sectors, several pillars for growth are also identified, further specifying the types of support that should receive the greatest effort (including accelerating innovation and research, and succeeding in global markets, for example): again, requiring a matching of resources with thematically and sector prioritised beneficiaries (an important function of the BST).

Invest NI Business Strategy

In line with the above policy drivers, the Invest NI Business Strategy 2017-2021 places focus on working with selected account managed companies, sectors and markets. In support of this focus, amongst other things, emphasis is placed on greater prioritisation, partnership and digital delivery (pp 7-8).

Within this context, the BST supports Invest NI's 'one to many relationship' with the NI business base: providing guidance and advisory, web-based delivery, one to many engagement (it is noted that in some regards the service sits between a 1:1 and 1 to many format, with a degree of 'transactional' tailored guidance and advice, but not on a face-face, relationship-driven basis), real time phone-based response, and co-delivery through partners (p10).

The strategic rationale for the BST is comprehensively set out in the most recent BST business case¹², which elaborates on the Invest NI Business Strategy's reflection that the business development ecosystem in NI is "a complicated landscape which can be difficult for companies to navigate", noting that the BST, "through providing information, advice and signposting to businesses at all stages of the business life cycle, adds real value in helping time poor businesses to navigate this landscape". Further, "for all businesses the BST is a customer focused one stop shop providing awareness of products and services offered by Invest NI and other business development organisations. This also provides an opportunity to identify export focused businesses that can deliver the greatest return to the NI economy and who can subsequently be pulled through into Invest NI interventions to maximise their growth potential".

Consultations with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders widely agreed that there is a strong strategic fit and ongoing need for the service provided by the BST¹³ (none of the consultees thought

¹² Invest NI (2018) Business Case Proposal (Programme Funding) to Executive Director Regional Business on behalf of Business Support Team (BST), March, Invest NI: Belfast.

¹³ Including consultees ID1,2,3,4,5,6,11,13,14,16,17,18,19,20,22, and 23.

otherwise); one senior Invest NI manager¹⁴ summing up the views that the service provided a “central point of contact for customers”, providing a “one-stop-shop” for Invest NI and “NI as a whole”, and delivering this service with a high degree of “impartiality” and “credibility that comes from knowledge and experience”. Another that the service was a “core part of the organisation” and “integral to the daily workflow”¹⁵ of the organisation. Another viewed the service as “the open end of the funnel” and a vital stage in prioritising support¹⁶.

3.1.3 Market Failure & Equity Rationale

In addition to consideration of the policy drivers for the intervention, the underlying rationale may also be considered either in terms of ‘market failure’ or where there are clear government distributional or ‘equity’ objectives to be met.

As indicated in HM Treasury Green Book, “Market failure refers to where the market has not and cannot of itself be expected to deliver an efficient outcome; the intervention that is contemplated will seek to redress this. Distributional objectives are self-explanatory and are based on equity considerations”¹⁷.

Market failures exist where the market is judged not to be working effectively causing inefficiencies in the use of resources and in the resultant outcomes. In such instances public sector intervention is justified.

‘Imperfect information’ is probably the most common type of market failure that public agencies address, and this is the most relevant to the role of the BST. Markets can only work well if good quality, accurate and up-to-date information is available on market conditions.

Information failures occur where there are barriers to producers and/or consumers accessing accurate and reliable information. The main type information failure addressed by the BST is that of ‘Information deficiencies’: where there is a lack of information of sufficient quality to enable informed decisions to be made.

Consultations with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders, as described in section 2, confirmed that there are persistent, complex and varied information needs for Northern Ireland businesses, and these would be significantly impeded without a service such as the BST. One team echoing other in citing the need for “central point” and “one-stop-shop” to coordinate information for business¹⁸.

These views suggest significant information deficiencies whereby it is difficult for Northern Ireland businesses to navigate the support landscape due to the high number of actors/organisations, changing roles and responsibilities of actors, and varying support criteria.

In terms of equity, public intervention is justified on the grounds that it will result in a more equitable distribution of benefits than the market would produce if left to its own devices. Underpinning this rationale is a view that the operation of the market is resulting in distributional impacts that are deemed to be economically, socially or politically unacceptable.

Such considerations align with the goals of BST in relation to providing support to business of all sizes and at all stages of development. In addition, the BST seeks to provide more equitable support across all geographical areas within Northern Ireland. However, it is noted that there exists a tension between strategic imperatives to prioritise support on those themes and sectors of greatest impact, and a responsibility to provide support to the wider business base, across all companies at all stages of development. Performance regarding these equity considerations is discussed in section 3.6.7.

¹⁴ ID20

¹⁵ ID18

¹⁶ ID13

¹⁷ HM Treasury (2018) The Green Book, Central Government Guidance on Appraisal and Evaluation, HM Treasury: London.

¹⁸ ID4

3.1.4 Conclusion

There is a strong fit between the BST and the strategic context. The strategic fit of the work of the BST is apparent in the key strategy documents and the strategic rationale for such a service remains valid, with the need and demand for the service closely tied to core aspects of relevant economic, industrial and organisational strategies. The market failure rationale (around the concept of addressing information failures) is also a persistent and justifiable rationale for intervention, and one that is likely to remain the case for businesses, requiring intervention on an ongoing basis.

Given these strategic drivers it is therefore important the Invest NI can achieve effective signposting, filtering and advice through the BST, so that Invest NI can focus resources on achieving the outcomes identified in their business plan. The *contribution* of the BST to fulfilling this strategic need and addressing the market failures and equity rationale, considering other available services, is examined further throughout the following sections.

3.1.5 Lessons & Recommendations

To maintain the relevance and responsiveness of the service to the wider strategic developments in business support outside of Invest NI, ensuring all relevant partners are engaged routinely so that duplication is avoided, and information made available to business is up-to date and comprehensive.

3.2 PROGRESS TOWARDS INDICATORS & TARGETS

This section examines the following evaluation questions:

2. Meeting Objectives and Targets. Assess the extent to which the BST is meeting its objectives and all associated targets
6. Assessing BST Benefits: To assess the inputs, outputs, outcomes and impacts associated with the intervention, recognising that BST is primarily about the central provision of information, advice and signposting in a comprehensive and timely manner (focus on inputs/outputs in this section)

3.2.1 Introduction

This section assesses internal monitoring data to determine how BST has performed against relevant indicators and targets, and comments on the appropriateness of those indicators and targets.

3.2.2 Service Delivery Performance

Over the period of the evaluation 2012-2018, the BST service has secured approvals, via successive Business Cases, of £1.37m. Actual expenditure over this period has been £1.17m (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Budget and Expenditure

Business Case Period	Approved Budget	Actual Expenditure
01/04/2012 to 31/03/2014	£414,567	£344,035
01/04/2014 to 31/03/2016	£481,454	£375,830
01/04/2016 to 31/03/2018	£476,135	£446,259
Total	£1,372,156	£1,166,124

Source: BST Approval Papers & Invest NI Brief

Initially termed the Enquiries Handling Team (EHT), the first approval envisaged one manager (a two-year secondment) and six call handlers (EO11). Subsequently termed the Business Support Team (BST), the successive phases have defrayed the majority of the approved budget; the resource inputs have remained broadly unchanged over the six years of the evaluation period (there was a slight uplift in budget from 2014 with the introduction of the DP Grade manager, although actual expenditure did not increase until 2016), which largely reflects that the overall structure of the team (1 manager and 6 call handlers) has been unchanged.

The resource inputs are the staff costs of delivering the BST service and are appropriate for the work being undertaken (and broadly comparable to benchmarked services in Scotland and Wales (see section 3.3); additional costs of £532,594 have been incurred for new contact centre technology introduced from February 2014, which included telephony upgrade available to all Invest NI staff, not just the BST.

The original Business Case did not set out targets for the volume of enquiries handled, neither have subsequent Business Cases set targets for the number of enquiries handled, given that the BST was established to be a service that responds to business demand. The following table summarises the volume of enquiries handled (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.2 Number of Enquiries Handled

Business Case Period	Year	Number of Enquiries Handled
01/04/2012 to 31/03/2014	2012/2013	8,852
	2013/2014	13,328
01/04/2014 to 31/03/2016	2014/2015	16,304
	2015/2016	16,771
01/04/2016 to 31/03/2018	2016/2017	14,355
	2017/2018	8,381
Total		77,991

Source: BST Approval Papers & Invest NI Stats

The volumes of calls handled increased each year over the period 2012/2013 to 2015/2016, before falling in 2016/2017, and reducing further in 2017/2018. Whilst there was some reduction in the number of telephone calls handled between 2015/2016 and 2017/2018 (from 9,515 to 7,096) the greater reduction has been in email/online enquiries over this time (from 8,368 to 3,279). The transfer of responsibilities for start-up enquiries to Local Councils in 2015 as part of Local Government Reform has been the principal reason for the decline in the overall number of enquiries handled.

BST targets relate to standards of service: average speed of answer (ASA) for telephone calls, and speed of response for email and online enquiries.

The ASA has remained constant at six seconds, consistently below the target, including the revised target of 10 seconds from 2015/2016 (see Table 3.3).

Table 3.3 Telephone Response Targets

Business Case Period	Year	Target ASA (seconds)	Actual ASA (seconds)	Telephone Calls Handled
01/04/2014 to 31/03/2016	2014/2015*	15	6	9,147
	2015/2016	10	6	9,515
01/04/2016 to 31/03/2018	2016/2017	10	6	7,629
	2017/2018	10	6	7,096

* Excludes April; note, no targets were set for 01/04/2012 to 31/03/2014

Source: BST Approval Papers & Invest NI Stats

The speed of response target in place for email and online responses was initially for 90% of initial responses to be handled within three working days. The target was amended in 2015/16 to 90% handled within 2 working days (see Table 3.4). The original target was exceeded; however, the more challenging target was not met in 2015/2016 or 2016/2017, but by 2017/2018 this target has been achieved (partly because of the lower number of enquiries received).

Table 3.4 E-mail and Online Response Targets

Business Case Period	Year	Target for email/online response	Actual	Initial Responses Handled
01/04/2014 to 31/03/2016	2014/2015*	90% in 3 days	99% in 3 days	8,288
	2015/2016	90% in 2 days	63% in 2 days	8,368
01/04/2016 to 31/03/2018	2016/2017	90% in 2 days	86% in 2 days	8,331
	2017/2018	90% in 2 days	91% in 2 days	3,279

* Excludes April; no targets were set for 01/04/2012 to 31/03/2014

Source: BST Approval Papers & Invest NI Stats

A BST Live chat service was introduced in January 2018 as a three-month pilot. The initial target was a 60 second response time, and the BST averaged 27 seconds. Consequently, the target has been revised to 40 seconds.

Making referrals is a key part of the BST offer, although there are no formal targets associated with this aspect of the BST service (again, given that demand cannot readily be estimated). Nonetheless, referrals to Invest NI colleagues by theme are recorded; the largest number of referrals over the evaluation period have been new client referrals followed by new technology referrals (see Table 3.8). R&D referrals were also significant in the early years of BST. In general, the number of referrals to Invest NI colleagues has diminished over time, however the strong links between BST and the Technical Advisory Unit (TAU) - evident through the evaluation - are reflected in the number of new technology referrals made.

The number of start-up referrals per year have also been recorded, which increased from 2,046 in 2012/2013 to a peak of 4,313 in 2014/2015 (see Figure 3.4). Since then, the number of referrals has decreased in line with the transfer of start-up support function to Local Councils, and in 2017/2018 the number of referrals fell to 1,208.

As well as staff resource (inputs) and enquiry activity indicators (outputs), there have been some attempts to measure the quality of service and impacts (via the monitoring of the performance of businesses referred as Potential New Clients). Quality of service has been periodically assessed via surveys of client satisfaction, where the BST service has always performed well, and through the recording of any client complaints (and how these are handled), although it should be noted that satisfaction with BST is not measured directly in Invest NI CSAT surveys. Initial feedback on the live chat service is also extremely positive.

Without ongoing and regular client surveys, the recording and capture of client satisfaction and impact on their business from BST support is challenging, although discussions are ongoing within Invest NI to reintroduce wider surveying of BST customers beyond the live chat channel. At the same time, more widely Invest NI (as with other economic development agencies) are extremely mindful of the issue of survey fatigue and the number of surveys required of customers, especially given BST support is a 'light touch' support mechanism.

3.2.3 Conclusion

The BST service has consistently achieved its speed of response target for calls and following the introduction of more stringent email/online enquiry response targets, has now achieved this target too.

The resource inputs deployed are appropriate for the volume of enquiries (and, as discussed in the next section in more detail, are broadly consistent with similar services). However, it is noted that the volume of enquiries has been declining with a shift in a higher share of start-up handling to local government.

As we go on to discuss, the team has at times in the past been stretched given the volume of enquiries. The reduction in the overall volume of enquiries in 2017/2018 allows the BST service staff a degree of flexibility to provide a higher degree of customised advice and signposting, that was perhaps less possible when enquiry volumes were higher. Providing more customised advice and signposting will help fulfil the strategic relevance of the service in providing a front line in filtering and prioritising support for export-led business growth.

3.2.4 Lessons & Recommendations

The speed of response target is appropriate as a measure of the BST responsiveness to clients, as are recording the referrals by type both internally, and externally.

The EDO Access pilot (that allows Local Council Economic Development Officer (EDO) access to part of the Invest NI CRM system), which we discuss in subsequent chapters, will increase the number of two-way referrals between Invest NI and Local Councils, and may result in an increase in the volume of enquiries handled by the BST.

The reduction in overall volumes of enquiries may be temporary, particularly as there may well be a spike in enquiries because of Brexit in the coming months. Contingency resources should be put in place to handle this.

The client satisfaction and feedback mechanisms have been limited, and there is a case for further client survey work to capture BST performance and impact (it is noted that approval for such additional client survey work has been granted), although Invest NI must remain mindful of survey fatigue. Going forward, there is the potential to tap into other relevant evaluation activity that is being undertaken by Invest NI, for example picking up BST support feedback as part of Invest NI's segmentation of its supports to the wider business base.

3.3 BENCHMARKING

This section examines the following evaluation questions:

5. Benchmarking: Compare the support offered by the intervention against equivalent services available to businesses in the UK, EU and other similar regions, identifying, where appropriate, potential service options for consideration going forward

3.3.1 Introduction

We have undertaken a review of several alternative delivery examples relevant to the BST, in Scotland, Wales, and the Republic of Ireland, identifying, where appropriate useful lessons for future BST service delivery.

3.3.2 Scottish Enterprise Enquiry Fulfilment & Research Service

The Scottish Enterprise Enquiry Fulfilment & Research Service (SEEFRS), based in Clydebank near Glasgow, has been established since 2007. Several features of the service are noted below.

Staff: The enquiry handling side of the service has 18 staff in total (13 enquiry handlers, 3 supervisors, 1 analyst, and 1 team leader) (there are another approx. 22 staff in the research side of the service).

Budget: A minimum annual salary budget of £444.5k (excluding any overheads). As a mainstreamed service, the service had no dedicated separate budget as such. However, salaries are as follows: Call handlers (Grade 9) £21.5 to £25k; Supervisors (Grade 7) £32k to 37k; Analyst (starting salary of £27k); and Team Leader starting salary of £42k.

Approval: The service is mainstreamed and does not require periodic approval.

Hours: The team operates 8-6pm Monday to Friday.

Channels: The service handles enquiries via telephone (12 lines), email (30 email accounts), Live Chat (Business Gateway only at the current time, with plans to extend), and web form.

Volume: The service handles approximately 30k enquires per year (49% phone, 22% email, 16% web forms, and 13% Live Chat).

Live Chat: Live Chat has been operational for 3-4 years. It currently only operates for Business Gateway enquiries as noted above. However, it is expected to be made available for Scottish Enterprise (in 2019) and will likely represent an increasing share of enquiry volume. However, it is noted that these enquiries take on average 3 times longer to completion than other channels.

Scope of Service: The service handles enquiries for Business Gateway (start-up and business base) which is delivered by local government in Scotland (transferred several years ago from Scottish Enterprise). The service also handles enquiries to Scottish Enterprise/Scottish Development International, as well as Highlands and Islands Enterprise. The service is an all-Scotland service.

Councils: As noted SEEFRS provides enquiry handling for Business Gateway, which is delivered by local government. However, Councils also have their own local numbers, which receive an increasing share of start-up related enquiries.

Type of Support: As for the BST, SEEFRS also provides advice and signposting, assessing need and filtering calls to appropriate destinations. Approximately 50% of enquires involve advice and provision of information (via packs), and 50% involve provision of advice, plus referral to other colleagues.

Knowledge Base: A Knowledge Base is maintained by the service. The analyst position has responsibility for keeping this up-to-date and liaising with external colleagues to agree and edit content for distribution. Several packs are prepared for different types of enquiry. Templates are available for call handlers, which can be customised to an enquiry as required.

Monitoring: Speed of response is monitored. Quality is also monitored by supervisors via monthly quality monitoring and reviewing a sample of calls (it is noted that this would have resource implications for BST). Follow up links are provided to a customer survey via email 'survey monkey', although this is challenging as response rates are low and customers often fail to distinguish the enquiry service from wider SE support. A new phone system may permit direct call back following an enquiry for immediate feedback (this was previously available and superior to current email approach).

Developments: There are a number of new and emerging developments: The team has launched a Brexit Helpline; Skills Development Scotland are moving to compatible IT systems which will facilitate common enquiry handling; Live Chat will be extended beyond Business Gateway enquires (in the New Year); there is a drive from the Scottish Government to promote a single digital entry point for public services, with uncertain implications for the team. This may mean a reduction in the number of separate web sites and phone numbers and widening of call handling responsibilities to cover a wider range of partners and require closer working with partners.

3.3.3 Business Wales Helpline

Business enquiry handling In Wales is carried out by Business Wales. Business Wales is the umbrella support organisation that covers the full range of support services from youth entrepreneurship, FE/HE to support for accelerated growth companies at the upper end of the SME market. Support functions are no longer delegated to the Local Councils.

There are three entry points for businesses in Wales:

- a) via the Business Wales website - this provides several self-directed services, including information, weblinks, online learning platforms (like workshop etc.);
- b) via the telephone helpline - which covers all business-related enquiries, including those not just related to Business Wales, but all those associated with Welsh Government services, from State Aid, to access to skills, to innovation, to direct support for trade and investment; and
- c) via face-to-face services, which are all contracted out to third parties, whether these relate to the start-up market, the established business market or whether these are specialist services, such as tendering, skills, HR, innovation etc.

In terms of the telephone helpline, call volumes handled are 2,000 per month, in the context of 238,200 active businesses in Wales¹⁹ (which is 89% higher than the number of businesses In Northern Ireland).

¹⁹ See <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/business/business-news/record-238200-active-firms-wales-10681825>

The approach is to undertake a diagnostic of the enquiry, not of the business, and there is no set script, although there are some prompts for the call-handler (the expected ones in relation to name, turnover, number of employees, growth potential).

The helpline is designed to have bespoke conversations. The information on the business and enquiry are recorded on the centralised CRM system, which is accessible by all the third-party business support delivery agents, and all Government departments with business facing functions. Government therefore has the same information as the third-party delivery agents, which gives the system complete transparency.

Although all have access to the CRM system, not all individual business support advisors update the system in the same way - some type up notes, others enter information directly - and there remains some way to go to ensure the correct behaviour amongst advisors.

Given the range of business enquiries handled there is a well-developed Induction Programme of 2-3 weeks and it can take between 3 and 6 months for the team member to be fully up to speed. This includes spending time sitting with Welsh Government teams. Given the number of business support organisations, including the private sector, product knowledge is a large part of the role.

There is a knowledge library, as well as information on standard services; the team ask Government departments and others what preference they have for the way businesses are referred and whether they have any specific needs.

The team, when all the posts are filled, has 14 staff. The staff costs of the team are approximately £450,000 per annum. There are two administrative posts and two managers, and various grades in between (with the average grade slightly lower than for the BST although direct comparisons are not possible).

One of the greatest challenges is ensuring that the team is fully staffed; the typical length of time in post is 2-3 years. The helpline is viewed as a great way to learn about Business Wales, but the role is also repetitive; the longest current serving staff member has been with the team for four years. Staff tend to move on, and the team manager seeks to motivate staff by getting them involved in other aspects of Business Wales, including social media and website design. Team roles are also changed regularly, for example two at any time are concentrating primarily on email enquiries, and these are rotated.

Business Wales are starting to explore automated services and Artificial Intelligence (AI), including chatbot²⁰ services and voice recognition. Wales has the added challenge that all automated services need to be fully bi-lingual; however, chatbot approaches are becoming increasingly successful, where rarely is there a human being at the end of the enquiry.

Business Wales are looking closely at the way in which AI-based services are being used by the NHS - where there is reportedly a 99% accuracy rate in diagnoses. The technology to allow this is developing all the time.

Business Wales view the service as a helpline, so more than a call centre, yet they are clear that they do not provide advice. They provide a business with information, links, self-serve options and so on, but stop short of saying how the business should apply this, which becomes advice.

For Business Wales it is the consistency of the service that is critical. Before 2006, Business Wales was arm's length from the Government, but there was confusion for businesses about who provided what, from Business Wales to local authorities, to Government to the private sector. So, when Business Wales was integrated into the Welsh Government, which has overall responsibility for economic development, all the feedback at the time was that businesses needed a single point of access. Since then, this has been the core of the Business Wales helpline rationale.

²⁰ We use 'chatbot' to refer to a computer program that holds conversations using Artificial Intelligence through a chat room while 'chatbox' is a chat room.

3.3.4 Republic of Ireland

Business enquiry handling in the Republic of Ireland is also closer to the model in Wales, where general business services are undertaken by the Government Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation. This helps businesses navigate to the right form of support, whether this is from IDA Ireland (the Inward Investment promotion agency), Enterprise Ireland (the broad equivalent to Invest NI) and to the Local Enterprise Offices.

The Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation offers online support²¹, and a telephone service, which provides basic signposting to the right form of support. If the business is directed to Enterprise Ireland, the business encounters their Client Information Service, which in turn direct clients or potential clients to the suite of Enterprise Ireland supports (export services, R&D, productivity, leadership/management, access to finance etc.).

Enterprise Ireland themselves operate a basic general enquiry service if businesses come directly through to them, although volumes are low. Most of the Enterprise Ireland enquiries come online via the web page (<https://www.enterprise-ireland.com/en/Contact-Us/>) which again routes enquiries to the client information service function client.service@enterprise-ireland.com.

The Enterprise Ireland website provides direct contact details for different company types and programmes. Companies can enquire through these systems, and will be assisted directly, or, where appropriate, re-directed to another information source. Examples of this include the Enterprise Ireland High-Potential Start-Up enquiries²².

Furthermore, any new supports/offers to clients typically will have a dedicated 'hot-line' or e-mail address to answer client company queries at the time of its launch.

3.3.5 Discussion

The different approaches to business enquiry handling in Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland reflect the different ways in which the business support infrastructure is arranged, and because of the way business support services have evolved. In both Wales and the Republic of Ireland, business support enquiries are initially handled via the main Government department responsible for economic development, whereas in Scotland (like Invest NI) business support enquiries are handled by the (main) enterprise agency in the first instance.

Even the above, however, is an over-simplification; in Wales, although the business enquiries are handled by the Government department, this is because Business Wales is integrated as part of the Welsh Government (and in effect there are still referrals from Business Wales to the relevant part of the Welsh Government). In the Republic of Ireland there are many different routes into the relevant business support service, with an emphasis on online enquiries.

Where enquiry handling appears to work best is where there is integration of client recording/ Client Relationship Management (CRM) systems. Wales took the bold step to integrate CRM systems across Government (and, boldly, external 3rd parties) in 2006 and now appear well set up to enable effective referrals across central and local government and even the private sector.

Scotland have an integrated CRM system that covers both start-ups and established businesses (and with start-up services increasingly delivered by Local Councils in theory a read-across between Local Councils and Scottish Enterprise/Highlands and Islands Enterprise).

There is also variation in the level of resources dedicated to enquiry handling. In Wales the team of 14 (plus an overall manager) is more the double that for the BST (even allowing for sub-regional office back-up) despite the fact its business base is not twice the size. At the same time, the service provided by Business Wales, whilst

²¹ See <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/>

²² <https://www.enterprise-ireland.com/en/Start-a-Business-in-Ireland/Do-I-qualify-as-a-HPSU-/>

similar, stops short of providing advice (which although unofficially is arguably provided by BST on occasions). The EFRS in Scotland is set up (and resourced) to provide additional services, including market research.

Table 3.5 provides some 'at-a-glance' comparators. This shows resource costs and unit costs for activities in Northern Ireland to be broadly comparable to Wales, although Scotland appears to have lower unit costs: this is partly due to costs excluding overheads (Republic of Ireland figures were not available). Lower unit costs in Scotland may also partly reflect the maturity of the Scotland model which has been in operation longer than in the other two areas, and the economies of scale that can be derived with a larger business base and enquiry handling team.

Table 3.5 Comparison of Factors

Factor	BST (Invest NI) ¹	SEEFRS (Scotland) ²	Business Wales Helpline ³
Annual cost budget	£228,693	£ 444,500	£450,000
Actual annual cost	£194,354	-	-
Staff numbers	7	18	14
Budget cost per staff person	£32,670	£24,694	£32,143
Number of businesses	126,000	350,410	238,200
Annual cost per business	£1.82	£1.27	£1.89
Enquiries handled per year	12,999	30,000	24,000
Cost per enquiry handled	£17.59	£14.82	£18.75

Notes 1. Average annual enquiries over 6 years; budget includes NI, pensions etc. 2. Budget excludes overheads; includes an analyst; includes advice & info (50%) and advice & referral (50%) 3. Budget excludes overheads

Source: BST Approval Papers and Consultations

3.3.6 Conclusion

It is notable that equivalent services are provided as an area of core funding i.e. overhead costs of the organisation, as opposed to those specific to a project and they are viewed as part of necessary basic functions required for an organisation to deliver on its activities. Otherwise channels used are broadly comparable and resourcing is also broadly comparable relative to market size.

However, there is no 'one right way' of delivering the service and there is much variation: there are examples of good practice in each case. The most effective enquiry handling services are also backed by effective and integrated systems, and Business Wales appears the most integrated in this regard. The EDO Access pilot, in giving Local Councils (at least in part) access to the Invest NI CRM system is a step in the right direction.

3.3.7 Lessons & Recommendations

There are several lessons and recommendations arising from the benchmarking review, although these would need further consideration and development. These include:

- Greater integration of CRM systems, to allow effective referrals between all those providing business support services - the EDO Access pilot is a useful start in this regard;
- Review opportunities for integration of chatbox and automated enquiry handling, which is actively being pursued in Wales, and which is being demonstrated in other agencies, including the National Health Services in England and Wales;
- While not currently being pursued in Northern Ireland, be alert to a trend in other jurisdictions for a more centralised and single enquiry handling services across government, akin to Business Wales, and as being explored in Scotland;
- The provision of a dedicated post for Knowledge Base development and maintenance;
- Increased monitoring of enquiry handling quality (via light touch technical solutions where permitted e.g. call back survey).

3.4 MANAGEMENT AND DELIVERY

This section examines the following evaluation questions:

3. Delivery Model: Assess the appropriateness of the intervention's delivery model;

- a) Including, the assumptions and ‘logic’ underlying the current delivery model, including market failure rationale;
- 4. Management and Delivery: Effectiveness of the intervention’s management and operating structures
 - a) Including appropriateness of appraisal processes, engagement with participating businesses, and financial management and output monitoring arrangements, including speed and quality of service indicators;
 - b) The effectiveness of service monitoring arrangements (including ability to report on equality considerations);
 - d) Consideration of other activities the service may wish to consider delivering; and
 - e) Including the potential role of other technologies or channels.
- 9. Succession: Any existing plans to ensure sustainability and/or succession of the service (notwithstanding that this is itself an objective of the appraisal phase).

3.4.1 Introduction

This section examines several aspects of BST management and delivery, as well as the overall model for delivery adopted by the BST.

3.4.2 Logic Model

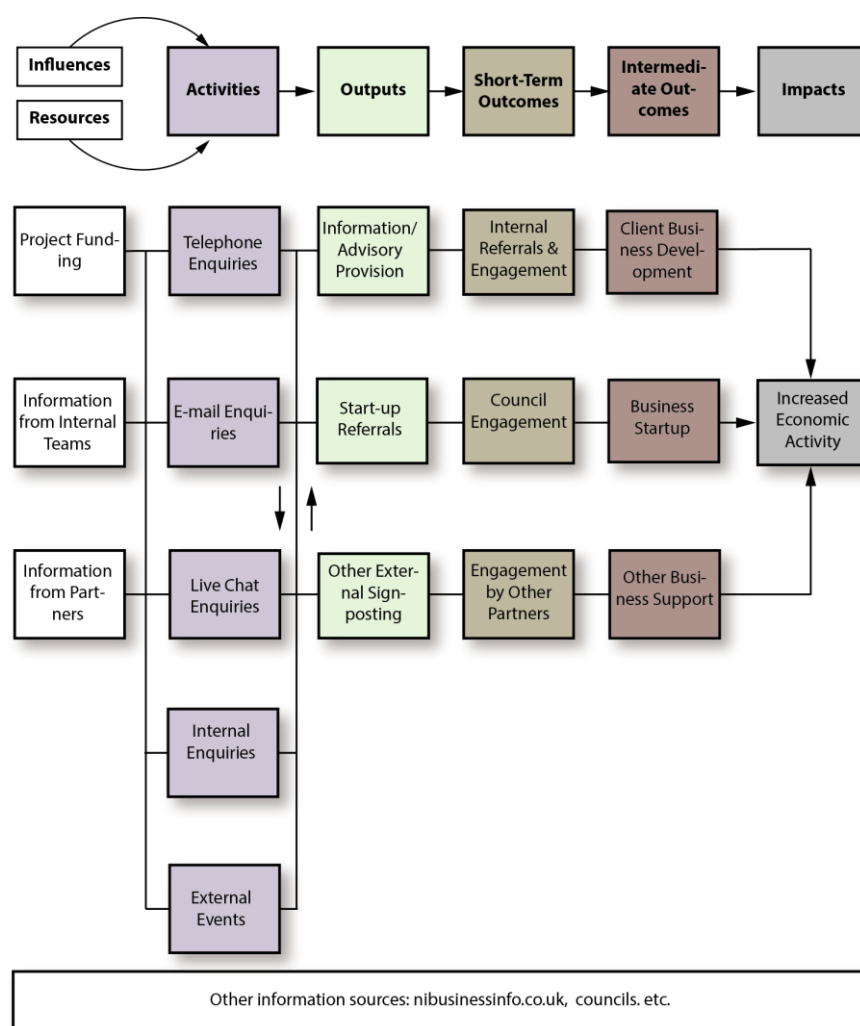
Figure 3.1 represents a logic model for the BST, highlighting the main steps from inputs (influences and resources) through to impact, in terms of increased economic activity. Key activities undertaken by the BST include fielding external telephone, email and Live Chat enquiries as well as responding to internal enquiries and providing support at external events. These in turn generate outputs in terms of volume of enquiries handled, and associated provision of information, advice, signposting and referral to external partners.

The more in-depth knowledge required to filter and refer cases to other Invest NI teams is represented by placement of ‘internal referrals & engagement’ at the short-term outcome level. Other short-term outcomes include council engagement through start-up referral and engagement by a range of other partners via appropriate signposting.

In turn, these short-term outcomes generate intermediate outcomes in the form of Invest NI customer business development, business start-up, and other forms of business support. All these intermediate outcomes support the ultimate impact which is that of increased economic activity.

The logic model, and the intended pathway to the achievement of benefits, provides a basis for further examining the management and delivery of the BST in the remainder of this section.

Figure 3.1 BST Logic Model



3.4.3 Financial Management

This section reports on the period 1st April 2012 to 31st March 2018. All relevant Business Case and funding approval papers covering this period were made available (periods 2012/14, 2014/16, and 2016/18). It is noted a further 1-year approval is in place for the period 2018/19.

Service budget averaged £0.23m per year over six years, with a cumulative budget of £1.37m, including £1.06m staff costs and £0.31m management costs (see Table 3.6, Figure 3.2, and Figure 3.3). Annual Service budget increased 15% between 2012/13 and 2017/18.

Invest NI had a total allocated budget of £129.1m in 2017/18²³, with the BST budget representing a small fraction of this at 0.2%.

A main consideration has been a requirement for repeated re-approval over this period, pending clarity on the development wider stakeholder provision of related service areas (i.e. council delivery of start-up services) (as noted in BST business cases). These considerations have been influential in preventing the BST moving to a 'mainstreamed' core funding basis and being funded under programme budget arrangements. Core funding represents the overhead costs of an organisation, as opposed to those specific to a project. They are part of

²³ Invest NI (2018) Invest NI Annual Report and Accounts 2017-18, Invest NI: Belfast p13.

necessary basic functions required for an organisation to deliver on its activities. Examples include general management staff, IT equipment and training.

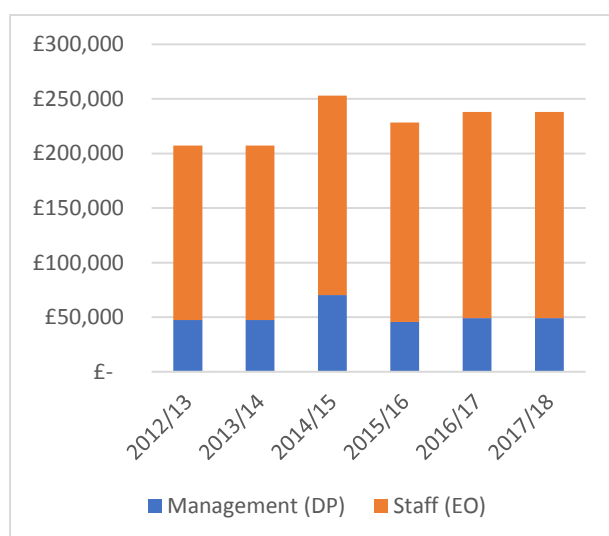
While, the repeated approval process has not prevented the BST from developing in response to need, assuming all else is equal, the service may benefit from greater degree of certainty in the funding status; as a core service, or on a longer-term approval basis.

Table 3.6 Service Budget by Year (£)

Position	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	Total
Management (DP)	47,539	47,539	70,230	45,747	49,245	49,245	309,546
Staff (EO)	159,744	159,744	182,738	182,738	188,822	188,822	1,062,610
Total	207,283	207,283	252,968	228,485	238,068	238,068	1,372,156

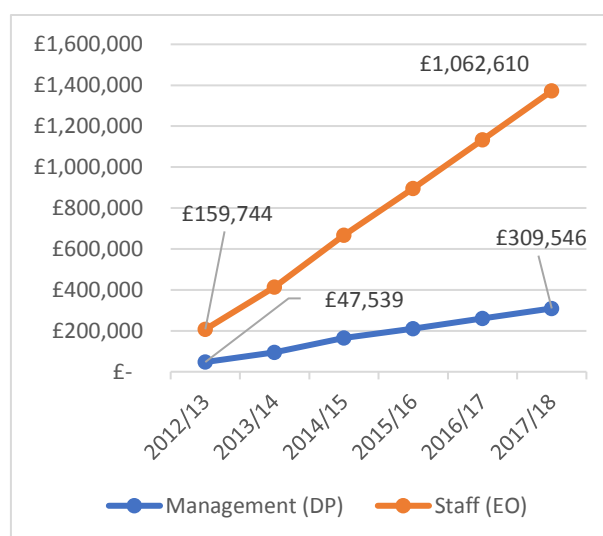
Source: BST Approval Papers

Figure 3.2 Service Budget by Year



Source: BST Approval Papers

Figure 3.3 Cumulative Budget



Source: BST Approval Papers

3.4.4 Service Monitoring Arrangements

The main standards of service monitoring arrangements are:

- Standard of Service results for inbound telephone calls- average speed of answer (ASA); and
- Standard of Service results for responses to e-mail/online enquiries.

Performance against these standards was discussed in section 3.2.2. The BST also contributes evidence to the Invest NI Customer Service Excellence assessment, demonstrating compliance with customer service excellence criteria²⁴.

In addition, the BST collates information on:

- Volume of enquires handled by the BST per year;
- Referrals to Invest NI colleagues by year and theme;
- Financial assistance resulting from Potential New Client referrals;
- Conversion rates from BST Potential New Client Referral to becoming an Invest NI client, by Regional Office and;
- Start-up referrals by BST per year.

²⁴ Invest NI (2016) Business Case Proposal (Programme Funding) to Executive Director Regional Business, Executive Director Finance & Operations, on behalf of Business Support Team, v1.0, Invest NI: Belfast pp 21-22.

Performance against these supplementary performance indicators are discussed elsewhere in this document.

A limited amount of information on the *quality* of the BST service is also collated from Invest NI customer satisfaction surveys, (it is noted that the Invest NI CSAT surveys do not specifically ask for feedback on the quality of the BST service) and customer feedback reported directly to the team (as evidenced in 2018 Business case and other submitted documents)²⁵.

It is noted that several objectives for service monitoring are outlined in the 2016 business case²⁶. There is scope to strengthen these measures: measurement of customer satisfaction with the service provided by the BST could be improved by conducting a post-enquiry follow up satisfaction survey with a larger group of customers (the benefits of this must be weighed against other survey burdens being placed on customers)²⁷.

3.4.5 Appraisal Process & Engagement with Business

As the first “port of call”²⁸ for business enquiries, the BST has high levels of business engagement. This engagement is from across the wider business base and is reflected in the large number of enquiries handled, across the multiple channels. Enquiries are wide-ranging, and consultations with team members who have been in place since BST was established maintain that the breadth of enquiries continues²⁹.

The BST service responds to demand, so in this respect does not proactively seek to engage with businesses, other than to attend the occasional stakeholder event, on request. It is clear from the monitoring information that marketing campaigns (in the early stages the ‘Boosting Business’ and ‘Go for It’ campaigns) can increase volumes of enquiries. Within the year, the four calls for Innovation Vouchers produce spikes of demand (with 300-400 enquiries per year), with the BST performing a very useful first filter of applications, in turn saving the Technical Advisory Unit considerable time, and with the ‘right’ referrals being made by the BST³⁰.

The transfer of start-up support to Local Councils has diminished the overall number of enquiries, although more than 1,200 start-up referrals were made in 2017/2018. The BST remains one of the two key telephone routes for businesses (along with the start-up 0800 entry point). In contrast to the Council start-up 0800 number, delivered externally for Councils by a third party, the BST provides a wide range of information and signposting (including information available on nibusinessinfo.co.uk and/or via the knowledge bank³¹), whereas the start-up 0800 number is principally a booking system for the Council provided start up business support programme, where basic information on the business is collected.

²⁵ Invest NI (2018) Business case Proposal (Programme Funding) to Executive Director Regional Business on behalf of Business Support Team (BST), Invest NI: Belfast pp 21-22. Word document ‘Selected verbatims from BST CSAT 2013.docx’. Excel document ‘WBB RDS referral feedback from quarterly CSAT.xlsx’.

²⁶ Invest NI (2016) Business Case Proposal (Programme Funding) to Executive Director Regional Business, Executive Director Finance & Operations, on behalf of Business Support Team, v1.0, Invest NI: Belfast p6

²⁷ It is beyond the scope of the evaluation to appraise a detailed process for such a survey, and the relationship with existing customer satisfaction surveys. However, if fully developed, key characteristics of such an alternative approach would include:

- Method: A statistically representative sample survey sufficient to allow meaningful disaggregation by key groups of interest (e.g. 5% accuracy at 95% confidence level for sub-groups, 3% at 95% confidence level for main sample);
- Population: The population for this sample would be all enquiry customers;
- Sampling Frame: An up-to-date record of enquiry customers would be required to be kept by Invest NI, sufficient to permit drawing a representative sample and contact with customers (i.e. beneficiary profile details, contact details);
- Frequency: at minimum providing annual reporting;
- Administration: To be determined, but likely including e-mail or phone survey, conducted by an independent survey research firm, using a survey instrument that has been designed in consultation with Invest NI, and providing continuity with indicators previously collected.

The scope to introduce such an approach would need to be weighed against other survey burdens being placed on customers. A lighter touch approach may be necessary.

²⁸ ID1

²⁹ Including ID4, 13, 14, 16.

³⁰ Invest NI Technical Advisory Unit consultations

³¹ Knowledge bank is the internally developed bank of data assembled by BST in conjunction with the Nibusinessinfo team and other internal Invest NI.

There is the potential for greater levels of business engagement, particularly at the local level. Indeed, the current one-year extension of the BST for 2018/2019 makes provision for two sub-regional staff members (at the time of reporting one was in post). This gives the BST the potential to increase the knowledge of local partner activity and increase contact with businesses, as part of more joined up Community Planning via Community Action Plans, shared plans led by Councils alongside statutory agencies for promoting the well-being of an area, improving community cohesion and the quality of life for all citizens. Also, the Entrepreneurship Action Plan, launched during the evaluation preparation timeframe, will also increase BST contact with start-up businesses, which (if it works as intended) will complement the role of the Local Councils.

3.4.6 Potential Additional Activities & Approaches

The BST has already provided additional activity over the evaluation period, most recently adding the Live Chat service (real time online responses by the BST), where feedback from businesses has been good to date. There has been some discussion about the use of automated 'chatbots', as mentioned an offering being pursued by Business Wales, although even in Wales this has not yet been introduced. This could potentially offer out-of-hours services, without the need for a human presence.

The issue of extending BST hours beyond 8.30am to 5pm has been mooted; however, those consulted during the evaluation were not convinced there was enough demand from businesses to merit this approach, when balanced against the additional demands this would place on the team and its resources (one consultee referred to the pilot of the Go for It programme enquiry service over longer hours and found that the great majority of demand was within 8-6pm)³².

The EDO Access pilot will increase the two-way communication between Invest NI and Local Councils, which has the potential to increase the number and quality of referrals. In time, it is hoped that this can be extended to other business support organisations, depending on the effectiveness of the pilot (where very initial signs are positive).

The BST do not promote their services, given that the team responds to demand. However, there is potential to increase awareness general of the BST service, which may benefit more businesses, and in turn lead to more enquiries.

A greater emphasis on third party/stakeholder engagement by the BST manager (and Invest NI/stakeholder senior managers) could facilitate this; at present the level of stakeholder engagement has deliberately been modest (and not explicitly resourced). nibusinessinfo.co.uk are very proactive about stakeholder engagement (necessary to ensure correct web content and coverage) and a more proactive BST may also help ensure up-to-date knowledge of other support available to the wider business base.

Internally, more use could also be made of the intelligence the BST routinely gathers on the types of support businesses are seeking and need. As one internal consultee commented, the "profile is not as high as it should be" ...and that... "there is scope to broaden awareness of the team"³³. One good example was the BST feedback to nibusinessinfo.co.uk that businesses were seeking support with importing to China; in turn, nibusinessinfo.co.uk were able to compile a top 10 tips for importing - and more of this type of feedback would be beneficial across Invest NI teams.

Overall, no big gaps were identified in the forms of support (a view supported by consultees, for example one internal consultee commented that the service was "comprehensive"³⁴ and another that it was "appropriate"³⁵, and a third that the service "covered all bases"³⁶); there is the potential to explore approaches such as mobile messaging and other platforms for the younger demographic, and this may always need to be

³² ID18.

³³ ID1. View shared by ID 23.

³⁴ ID2

³⁵ ID18

³⁶ ID4

reviewed as ways of communicating and technologies change. There is likely to be an increasing move to digital self-serve solutions for businesses, although this transition is slow. The BST manager has previously had discussions with the Invest NI Chief Digital Officer to agree BST's positioning regarding Digital Service Delivery and will continue liaison with the Digital Team.

3.4.7 Duplication & Coordination

As with the benchmark comparators, the business support landscape in Northern Ireland involves many different organisations and support mechanisms. This is not unique to Northern Ireland, and each of the comparator areas have challenges in simplifying this landscape for businesses. The transfer of start-up responsibilities to Local Councils in Northern Ireland is just one of those challenges, and there are, as we mention elsewhere, also many external organisations providing business support.

Views from council partners were generally positive. One council official noted that the BST was responsive and that the quality of referrals was “timely” and “good and relevant”³⁷, although there was a desire for more joint working at external events. They also identified a list of relevant contacts in Invest NI as something that would facilitate signposting.

A Further Education representative³⁸ referred to multiple opportunities to coordinate with Invest NI, but that the relationships were somewhat fragmented (they were unclear on the role of the BST relative to other teams) and ad hoc, and they would welcome the opportunity for more regular updates or briefings (acknowledging this was also the responsibility of partners to ensure). They indicated that having more direct access to the Knowledge Base might be one area to consider.

A matrix of other sources of support, and what is delivered, may be beneficial (for example developed via a mapping exercise), to complement the range of useful information provided via nibusinessinfo.co.uk. The BST have a constant task of keeping their understanding of these sources up-to-date. For example, “keeping up to date with current issues” was noted as a challenge by one team member³⁹.

Overall, there remains a need for a coordinated approach to supporting the business community, and it is important more widely that Invest NI continues to work with Local Councils and others through new developments in Community Action Planning and the Entrepreneurship Action Plan. This is about maintaining an open dialogue, especially with Local Councils, who do not always see the benefit or purpose of Invest NI serving the wider business base, which is an explicit function and role for the BST.

3.4.8 Sustainability & Succession

The BST to date has relied on three successive two-year Business Cases, and now a fourth single year Business Case. The continued case-making for support belies the importance of the BST to Invest NI and to the wider business community. Similar arguments for the need for the service and the benefits in terms of the wider strategic context have been made in each of the four business cases, with the same market failures identified on each occasion. A lack of ability to navigate the available information by businesses, has always been identified as a market failure (hence similar services in Scotland, Wales, the Republic of Ireland reviewed previously) and is always likely to remain so, given the variety of business needs and types of support available.

On the basis that the need for the service has remained throughout the evaluation period, and has remained in comparator areas for many years, a two-yearly case for funding the service would not appear to be an optimal use of resources.

In practical terms, the sustainability of the team is potentially affected given the repetitive nature of the work. The BST manager is very sensitive to the need to continue to motivate the team, and to facilitate Learning

³⁷ ID22

³⁸ ID19

³⁹ ID4

and Development opportunities. This has helped keep the team in place, and opportunities for team members to progress and develop should continue to be sought.

3.4.9 Conclusion

The BST has a front-line role in filtering and prioritising enquiries from existing Invest NI clients, prospective clients, and the wider business base, in line with the organisation's strategic objectives. Despite this, the service has been provided on a non-mainstreamed basis with repeated approvals. Although this has not prevented the BST from developing in response to need, and there has been consistency in the level of annual budgets, there are also no obvious benefits in continuing this approach. As a first point of contact for many customers, it is noted that the service operates with a small budget relative to the total budget of Invest NI and, with resources broadly comparable with comparator mainstreamed services.

Service monitoring arrangements are in place and are systematically measured, analysed and responded to. However, there is scope to increase the measurement of enquiry handling quality, of which Invest NI is aware, and actively examining.

The process for engaging with businesses and appraising their requirements is generally well-developed and supported via the operation of different enquiry channels, a knowledgeable and experienced team, effective links with internal and external partners, and extensive templates and knowledge resources.

Overall, effective management and delivery arrangements are in place and consistent with the objectives of team. However, several areas for refinement are suggested.

3.4.10 Lessons & Recommendations

Several areas for consideration include:

- Implement a means to monitor the quality of enquiry handling (proportionate to the burden on customers);
- Continue to examine co-location of BST team members in multiple regional offices to maximise local networking and knowledge transfer;
- Continue to review opportunities of new or alternate technologies including automated chatbots, digital self-serve approaches, as well as call back surveys for quality monitoring;
- Reviewing current approaches to partner engagement - there has been a relatively light touch approach to this (in contrast to nibusinessinfo.co.uk for example) and a more proactive approach may promote the benefits of BST's existence to businesses (a mapping exercise of stakeholder and services may be a useful exercise to support ongoing systematic coordination with partners);
- Increase feedback internally to Invest NI colleagues on the type of support demanded by businesses; and
- Maintain systematic learning and development opportunities for BST team members.

3.5 PROGRESS TOWARDS OVERALL AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This section examines the following evaluation questions:

6. Assessing BST Benefits: To assess the inputs, outputs, outcomes and impacts associated with the intervention, recognising that BST is primarily about the central provision of information, advice and signposting in a comprehensive and timely manner (focus on outcomes/impact in this section)

a) Including any unforeseen effects or wider benefits of the approach;

7. Confounding or Supporting Factors: To identify any internal and external factors which have impacted upon the performance of the intervention either positively or negatively, within the period;

a) Including an initial assessment of the potential future implications of Brexit.

3.5.1 Introduction

This section considers the benefits provided by the service in relation to the ultimate beneficiaries, that is, the Northern Ireland business base.

3.5.2 Economic Impact

It is noted that there are limitations in the ability of the available programme monitoring data to support any quantitative analysis of BST's gross economic impacts (e.g. business turnover and jobs and Gross Value Added).

There are also limitations in determining attribution i.e. to what extent did the BST play a role in the achievement of business impacts - this cannot be determined without a client survey, which was beyond the scope of the assignment. In any case it would be challenging even with an in-depth beneficiary survey to attribute impacts to BST, given the early stage nature of the intervention. Indeed, it may be inappropriate to disaggregate the work of the BST from the other inter-related Invest NI support activities to business.

Instead, the report focuses on the potential *contribution* of the BST to Invest NI's gross economic impact.

3.5.2.1 GROSS BENEFITS

Gross benefits associated with the clients directly referred on to further Invest NI support from the BST are noted in Table 3.7. It is stressed that these cannot be attributable to the BST, as other financial/non-financial Invest NI supports have largely contributed to these benefits. Nonetheless, the BST plays an important initial link in the chain of support provided (also see Figure 3.1).

In addition, no account has been made of additionality in Table 3.7, i.e. what benefits these businesses would have attained without support of Invest NI.

We note the difference between Potential New Clients (marked as complete) (1,496) in Table 3.7 and New Clients (1,808) in Table 3.8. The latter will include several clients referred externally. Both this group and existing Invest NI clients that avail of the BST may also generate benefits. Thus, this section represents a partial picture of the benefits. The types of wider benefit provided by the service is explored further in the next section.

Table 3.7 Reported Gross Outcomes (2012/13 to 2017/18)*

Outcome	Level of Benefit
Potential New Client RDSs (marked as complete)	1,496
Businesses receiving financial assistance	328
Projects/cases arising	1,163
Total Assistance (from Invest NI)	£14,483,037
Total Investment (from Business and Invest NI)	£92,481,036
Leverage on Total Investment (from Business)	£77,997,999
New Jobs (FTE)	1,125
Total Annual Salary (Gross)	£28,087,305

Source: BST Approval Papers & Invest NI Stats

Note: Current Prices

* Not all attributable to BST

3.5.2.2 CATALYTIC EFFECTS

The consultation programme included an assessment of stakeholder attitudes and beliefs regarding the nature and extent to which the BST is having an impact on businesses supported (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).

A strong aspect advanced by consultees can be summarised as the ‘catalytic’ effect of the BST: the BST has acted as a catalyst for more and larger scale economic activity through providing advice to business at a range of stages in the business lifecycle, and through signposting to internal and external sources of support.

Monitoring evidence supporting this catalytic role is limited. Referral feedback from Invest NI quarterly customer satisfaction surveys (covering 2016-18) indicates that 72% of customers were satisfied with the interaction with Invest NI⁴⁰, although the findings represent only 29 cases and it is not possible to state with certainty that these were referring specifically to the BST. Verbatim feedback from a 2013 customer satisfaction survey provide a small number of mixed views on the support provided by the BST⁴¹. Neither can be taken as reliably representative of the customer base: this would require a statistically representative sample.

The number of start-up referrals totalled 17,511 over the period examined (as indicated in Figure 3.4). The volume per year has reduced as Councils have taken up responsibilities for this area. However, this represents a further way in which the BST has had a catalytic effect (i.e. providing a high volume of signposting and advice for prospective start-ups).

Most significantly, the team has permitted targeting of Invest NI support on business that meet appropriate criteria in terms of export orientation and sectoral focus, by referring on enquiries to internal Invest NI teams (see Table 3.8).

The team made some 4,114 such referrals in the evaluation period. The majority of these (80%) were either categorised as ‘New Clients’ (44%), followed by ‘New Technology’ (36%) (see Figure 3.5). However, it is noted that only one per cent are categorised as ‘export’ related. This categorisation may reflect ‘process’ in that to access much of Invest NI’s Trade/export support you must first become a client. Therefore, it may be appropriate to review the categories used so that a more accurate picture of referral type can be obtained.

The overall number of referrals has also declined over time (see Table 3.8 and Figure 3.6) (this may be explained by the transfer of start-up responsibilities to Councils). Internal Invest NI consultees commented on

⁴⁰ How satisfied or dissatisfied were you that the team of people you worked with from Invest NI provided a seamless approach to your business during this engagement? Source: Excel document ‘WBB RDS referral feedback from quarterly CSAT.xlsx’.

⁴¹ Word document ‘Selected verbatims from BST CSAT 2013.docx’.

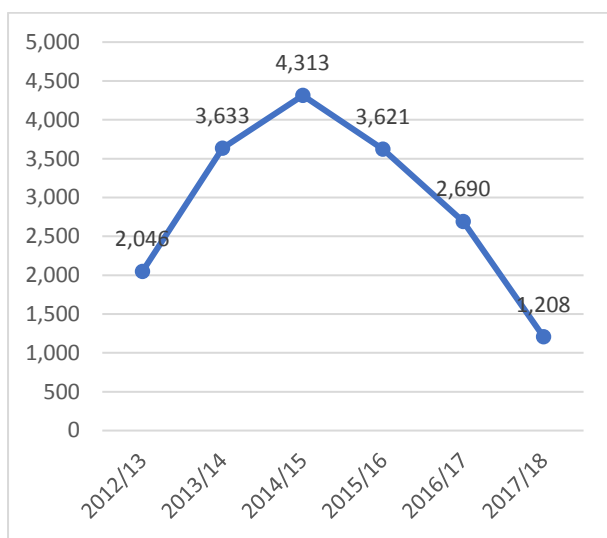
the BST referral process as significantly reducing the burden on account managers and teams by filtering out the least relevant enquires and permitting them to focus resources on the most relevant cases⁴².

Table 3.8 Referrals by Type

Year	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	Total
Exports	4	13	10	6	2	2	37
Jobs	55	30	10	2	-	-	97
Other	47	82	32	55	48	63	327
R&D	124	111	58	39	42	9	383
New Technology	327	417	269	207	133	109	1,462
New Client	427	463	371	201	196	150	1,808
Total	984	1,116	750	510	421	333	4,114

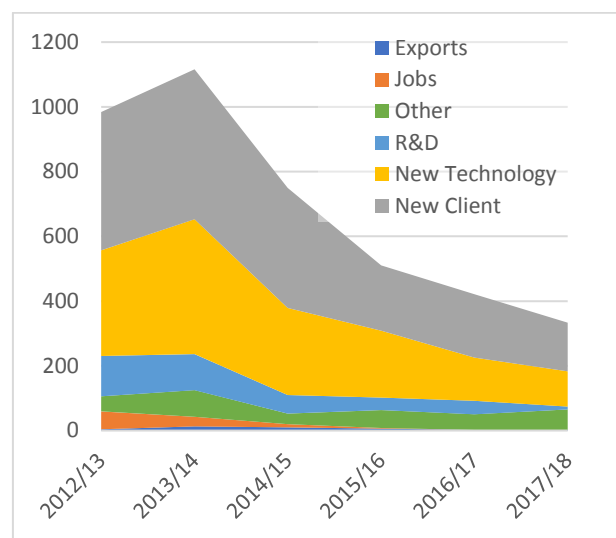
Source: Invest NI Stats

Figure 3.4 Number of Start-up Referrals



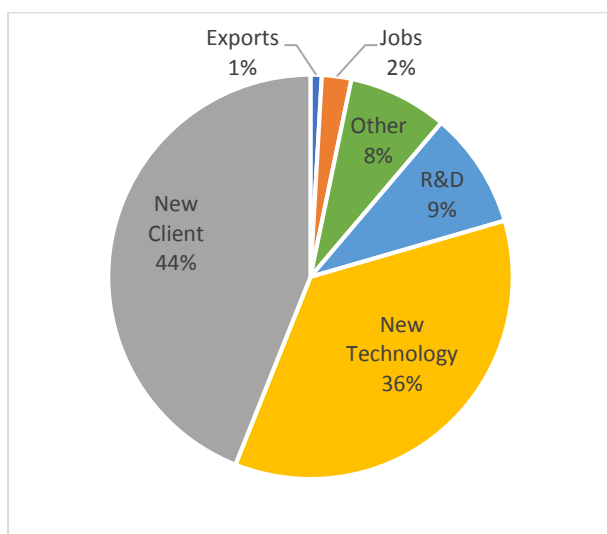
Source: Invest NI Stats

Figure 3.6 Referrals by Type, Trend



Source: Invest NI Stats

Figure 3.5 Referrals by Type, Total



Source: Invest NI Stats

⁴² ID23

3.5.2.3 COMBINATION EFFECTS

It is noted that two main important responsibilities of the BST are:

- Firstly, to “establish relationships with key stakeholder organisations in the business support community to facilitate two-way referral processes for businesses seeking support” ...and to... “recommend methodologies for efficient and effective exchange of information between these organisations (regarding the Data Protection Act)” (BST Business case 2014 p7)’, and secondly
- To “establish and update /maintain a database of support available to business in Northern Ireland” (BST Business Case 2014, p6)⁴³.

Integration of the BST service with other partner services is adding significant value, in particular, referral of start-up support enquiries to councils (see Figure 3.4), as well the collation of information to populate the ‘Knowledge Base’ (see section 3.4.5).

However, the range of relevant organisations is large, as indicated in Table 3.9, and requires a systematic approach to ensure both referrals and information sharing are working well. While feedback on the status of information sharing was generally positive, in some cases there was a desire for existing networks and contacts to be supported with a more formalised arrangement. In addition, information gathering was often reliant on Invest BST staff being proactive in gathering information from partners (rather than it being routinely provided and updated) (see section 3.4.7).

There is scope to refine current monitoring of partner networks and contacts using jointly agreed partner protocols for regular (quarterly or annual) provision of updates on relevant services (to ensure comprehensive and up-to-date information in the Knowledge Base).

Table 3.9 Indicative List of Relevant Partner Organisations

Prince’s Trust	Health and Safety Works NI	Centre for Competitiveness
Federation of Small Business	HMRC	Big Lottery Fund
Business in the Community	Credit Unions	NICVA
Halo (currently run internally)	NI Chamber of Commerce	UnLtd
DAERA	Women in Business	FE Colleges
InterTrade Ireland	Enterprise NI	Libraries NI
Advantage NI	Queen’s University Belfast	
Equality Commission for NI	Local Councils	
University of Ulster	Labour Relations Agency	

Source: Invest NI

3.5.3 Confounding or Supporting factors

3.5.3.1 BREXIT

A potential source of increased enquiry volume is Brexit, although there have been relatively few Brexit-related enquiries to date (at the time of reporting), given the uncertainties as whether a Brexit deal with the EU will be struck or not.

Invest NI as an organisation are increasing their preparations in terms of advice under different scenarios, which has cross-departmental input, and the BST are standing by to help respond to enquiries when required to do so.

There should be some flexibility within the team to respond to any increase in enquiries (given the fall in total enquiries) although that flexibility may not be enough if call numbers increase significantly (and especially given the fact that team is not at full staff complement).

⁴³ Invest NI (2014) Business Support Team, Proposal, Invest NI: Belfast

One Invest NI consultee from outside the team noted that Brexit would place an increased emphasis on the advisory aspects of the service and that this would in turn require appropriate resourcing if the volume was significant⁴⁴. Another team member cited Brexit as a potential area for further training to deal with calls⁴⁵.

3.5.3.2 STORMONT

Whilst the political situation in Northern Ireland has presented civil servants with difficulties with respect to large-scale decisions, the ongoing lack of a Stormont resolution has not impacted to any great extent on the BST service. Consultations did not indicate that the current Stormont situation was affecting the performance of the BST either positively or negatively.

3.5.3.3 CO-LOCATION

Co-location of BST staff with many other Invest NI colleagues was viewed by a wide range of internal consultees as instrumental in supporting the development of an informed and responsive service, and that this makes the service “very agile and responsive”⁴⁶.

However, it is acknowledged by several internal consultees that relationships are stronger with some teams than with others (e.g. ID 4)

3.5.3.4 TEAM EXPERIENCE AND CONTINUITY

The team have built up considerable experience over the six years of the evaluation period. Indeed, this was one of the most cited benefits of the BST to Invest NI colleagues. For example, one internal consultee commented that the team had good knowledge of programmes, good relationships within Invest NI and a “detailed understanding of the business”⁴⁷. The BST are held in high regard in terms of their experience and knowledge. The importance of the service to Invest NI and to the wider businesses base, and the need for the ongoing continuity of the service, are the most compelling arguments for mainstreaming the service rather than funding the BST service as a programme.

Some team members have been with the team for the full six years, and as well as accounting for the build-up in knowledge, this has also helped with continuity. One team member commented that they “develop a lot of knowledge over time” and that they “get to know the key characters” in the organisation⁴⁸. New team members are well supported by existing team members. Several members of the BST team have been successful in taking on other roles within Invest NI and working in the BST was regarded by several consultees as an effective route for developing a comprehensive knowledge of Invest NI.

As with any service, there are always ways in which BST knowledge can be improved; again, the team are aware of this and guest speakers (internal and external) are a regular feature of monthly meetings as well as monthly meetings with the nibusinessinfo.co.uk team.

3.5.4 Conclusion

In terms of benefits, the precise economic impact of the BST is difficult to establish as the work of the team is an integral part of the support provided by the wider Invest NI organisation, as outlined in the logic model on page 16. Nonetheless it is clear the BST contributes significantly to this work and ultimately to the gross benefits achieved by Invest NI in terms of export led economic growth.

We identify two main ways that this benefit is achieved. Firstly, the BST has significant ‘catalytic’ effects: via a high volume of quality referrals to Invest NI colleagues and teams; and a high volume of start-up referrals to

⁴⁴ ID18

⁴⁵ ID4

⁴⁶ ID18

⁴⁷ ID2, 18

⁴⁸ ID4

councils (as well as associated information provision). There are benefits to these businesses who act on the support they have been provided via their referral and advice.

Secondly, we highlight the significant ‘combination’ effects brought about by the BST coordinating with a wide range of partners and providing a comprehensive and coherent body of knowledge for enquiring businesses. However, as noted in section 3.4, there is scope for the BST to further enhance links to partner organisations.

3.5.5 Lessons & Recommendations

Several recommendations are made:

- Develop consistent connection and communication channels with all parts of the organisation (some teams are better linked with the BST than others). This could be developed by regular briefings for teams concerning the role and benefits of the service for their staff;
- The above discussion would be supported by further development of quality monitoring and feedback on internal referrals. In addition, revise the categorisation of internal referrals to permit more accurate analysis by type of referral;
- As recommended elsewhere, improved and proportionate enquiry quality monitoring and feedback from customers will help demonstrate the ways the service contributes to the wider economic impacts of Invest NI;
- Continuity of staffing and co-location have been important aspects of BST service delivery and these features should be maintained (including increased presence in regional offices); and
- Preparation of contingency arrangements for an increase in enquires associated with Brexit as a matter of priority.

3.6 VALUE FOR MONEY

This section examines the following evaluation questions:

8. Value for Money: Assess the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which public funds have been used on the intervention, using proxy indicators where relevant and the extent to which the intervention represents good Value for Money (VfM)

3.6.1 Introduction

The focus of this section is on whether the BST represents good use of public funds, when comparing the costs of the service against the benefits obtained. Value for money of the programme is assessed in terms of the criteria identified in Table 3.10. This includes analysis of the cost-effectiveness of the service (i.e. the level of outputs achieved for a given set of inputs, including how they compare to other jurisdictions, and has there been improvements in cost-effectiveness over time).

Table 3.10 Value for Money Criteria

Economy	
Programme Cost Drivers	Programme resourcing and costs (£) by main channel of support, with commentary and analysis on main cost drivers and trends, and how these compare to other jurisdictions.
Cost Savings	Cumulative monetised cost savings (£) disaggregated by a) procurement savings and b) implementation savings with commentary (i.e. examples of where value for money has been enhanced through good practice procurement or management efficiencies.)
Management Costs	Programme management costs as % of total programme costs, with commentary and analysis of trends.
Efficiency	
Budget Execution Rate	Programme expenditure against budget disaggregated by main service channel, with commentary and analysis of trends.
Cost per Output Implemented	Cost (£) per output (e.g. queries processed) implemented disaggregated by main service channel (i.e. volume and quality of support), and how this compares to other jurisdictions. Analysis and commentary of trends (i.e. have there been any efficiencies over time in terms of cost per output?)

Effectiveness	
Qualitative assessment of costs compared with high level BST outcomes and impact	Extent to which BST has delivered against its objectives, and a review of the appropriateness of those objectives. What factors have influenced the achievement / non-achievement of the BST objectives. .

3.6.2 Economy

This section reports on the extent to which the lowest possible price has been achieved for service inputs of the required quality, including the key factors that have influenced costs, significant cost-saving measures, and detailed management costs.

3.6.2.1 COST DRIVERS

The most significant cost driver is staff fees (£1.1m to date), with management costs of £0.3m, and this has been largely constant throughout the service lifespan. Figure 3.7 shows the staff and management costs to date. Management costs are discussed further in section 3.6.2.3 below.

Additional costs of £0.53m have been incurred for new contact centre technology introduced from February 2014, which included telephony upgrade available to all Invest NI staff, not just the BST. Other overhead and IT costs are not included, as also being shared items across Invest NI.

3.6.2.2 COST SAVINGS

A VfM saving is noted where the service has been able to deliver the same results for a lower cost or greater results for the same cost. Procurement savings are derived from negotiating improved purchasing arrangements. Implementation savings are derived from changes made to budgets or results compared to the original budget.

Procurement Savings

The main procurement saving noted over the life of the service is the transferral of the 'Go for It' campaign from an external provider to the then Enquiries Handling Team saving just under an estimated 50% of the proposed staffing budget (this service has now been transferred to Councils). No other specific procurement savings are noted.

Implementation Savings

There has been consistent performance (within target) on key metrics for speed of answer and there appears limited scope for further implementation savings on these (see section 3.2). The implementation of the Live Chat may shift the balance of channels handled by the BST but not the overall workload. No other specific implementation savings are noted, although greater self-service in the longer term could lead to a decrease in enquiries.

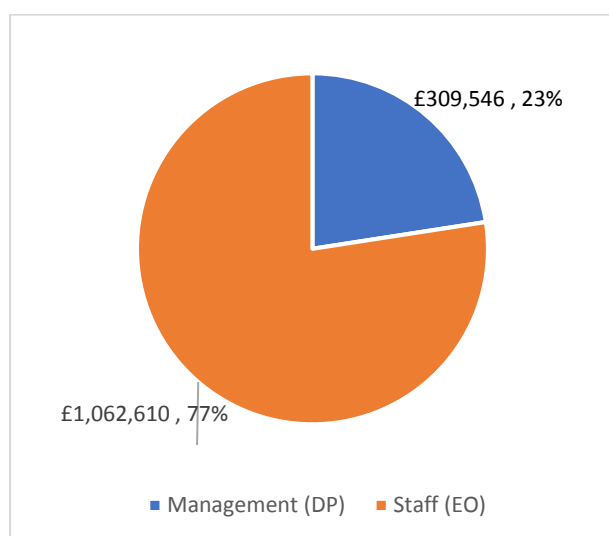
Routine capturing of cost savings measures on a quarterly or annual basis would assist in monitoring the overall value for money of the service (i.e. a note of actions taken, and if possible, a monetised value of the saving measure).

3.6.2.3 MANAGEMENT COSTS

Management costs are indicated in Table 3.6 above, representing £0.31m spend (or 23% of total spend) over the six years from 2012/13 to 2017/18 (and as shown in Figure 3.7 below). The proportion of management costs has remained largely constant during the evaluation period apart from 2014/15 where there was an increase due to a temporary secondment of a manager with specialist private sector expertise to support development of the team (see Figure 3.8)⁴⁹.

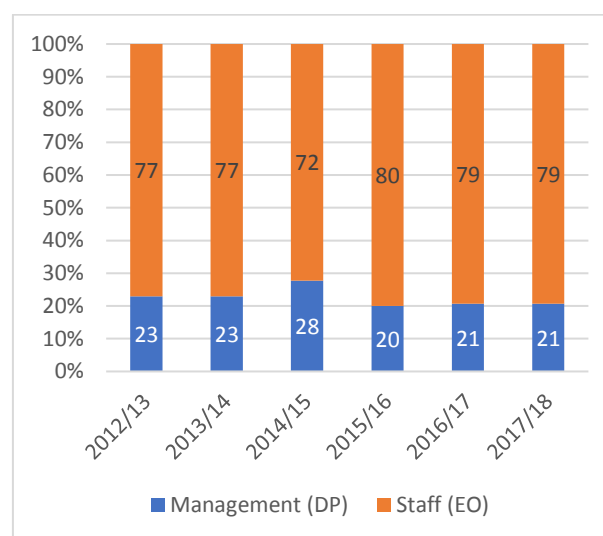
⁴⁹ Invest NI (2014) Business Support Team, Proposal, Invest NI: Belfast p3

Figure 3.7 Management Costs



Source: BST Approval Papers

Figure 3.8 Management Costs by Year



Source: BST Approval Papers

3.6.3 Efficiency

This section reports on how well the service's inputs have been converted to outputs in terms of quality and quantity.

3.6.3.1 BUDGET EXECUTION RATE

It has been somewhat difficult for the service to meet spending commitments in terms of forecast amounts and timing of spend. The average budget execution rate for the service is 85% (see Table 3.11). This is not unusual given the changing nature of service delivery over the period and it is noted that in the most recent period, budget execution rate was 94%.

Table 3.11 Budget Execution Rate

Business Case Period	Budget Execution Rate
01/04/2012 to 31/03/2014	83%
01/04/2014 to 31/03/2016	78%
01/04/2016 to 31/03/2018	94%
Average	85%

Source: BST Approval Papers

3.6.3.2 COST PER OUTPUT IMPLEMENTED

There is a close and positive correspondence between the volume of enquires handled (as a main measure of the service's output) and service spend (see Figure 3.9), although this masks significant variation in the annual cost per enquiry as described below. Service cost per enquiry averaged £17.59 over the period 2012/13 to 2017/18 (see Table 3.12).

As noted, cost per enquiry has ranged widely over the evaluation period: cost per enquiry dropped from £23.42 in 2012/13 to £13.62 in 2015/16, before climbing again to over double this level at £28.41 in 2017/18 (see Table 3.12). As indicated in Figure 3.10, periods with relatively high costs are associated with those periods where lower volumes of enquiries were handled: an increase in cost per enquiry is associated with a reduction in the number of enquiries in 2016/17 and 2017/18.

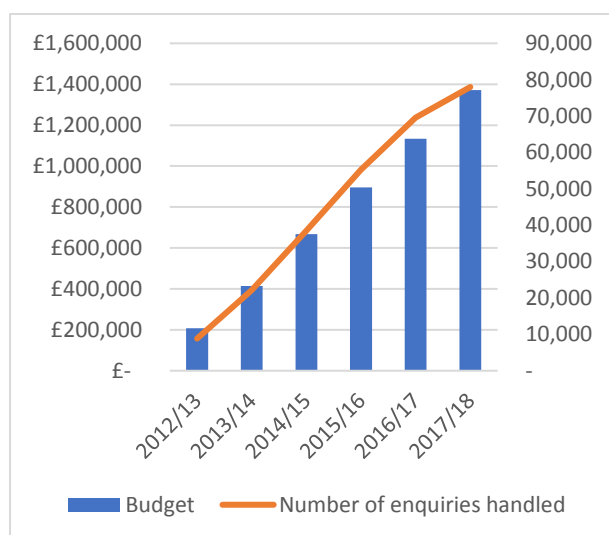
The change in number of enquires is largely attributable to the shift in service provision to Councils, as discussed in section 3.2. Comparison with other similar services is made in section 3.6.5 below.

Table 3.12 Cost per Enquiry

Year	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	Average
Cost per enquiry (£)	23.42	15.55	15.52	13.62	16.58	28.41	17.59

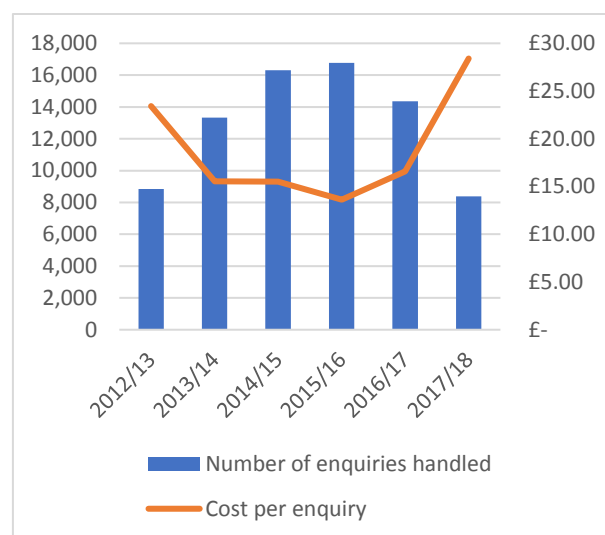
Source: BST Approval Papers & Invest NI Stats

Note: Current Prices

Figure 3.9 Budget v Enquiries

Source: BST Approval Papers & Invest NI Stats

Note: Current Prices

Figure 3.10 Cost per Enquiry

Source: BST Approval Papers & Invest NI Stats

Note: Current Prices

3.6.4 Effectiveness

3.6.4.1 COST PER OUTCOME IMPLEMENTED

The higher value-add process of referring enquiries to appropriate Invest NI or external service is defined here as a service 'outcome'.

Comparing the volume of referrals made with service budget, there is, as for enquiries, a close positive correspondence (see Figure 3.11 and Figure 3.13). Service cost per internal referral averaged £333.53 over the evaluation period (see Table 3.13).

The volume of internal referrals has reduced from the second year of the service, at a peak of 1,116 in 2013/14 to a much lower 333 in 2017/18 (see Figure 3.12). Consequently, the cost per internal referral has increased by almost fourfold from a low of £185.74 in 2013/14 to £714.92 in 2017/18 (see Table 3.13 and Figure 3.12).

Reasons for the reduction in number of referrals are discussed in section 3.2 above. Change in referral levels also reflects higher thresholds being applied in making referrals i.e. turnover /potential turnover threshold to be a client has risen to £250k (from £100k and then £150k). In addition, during the Boosting Business campaign there was less focus on determining how businesses met eligibility criteria.

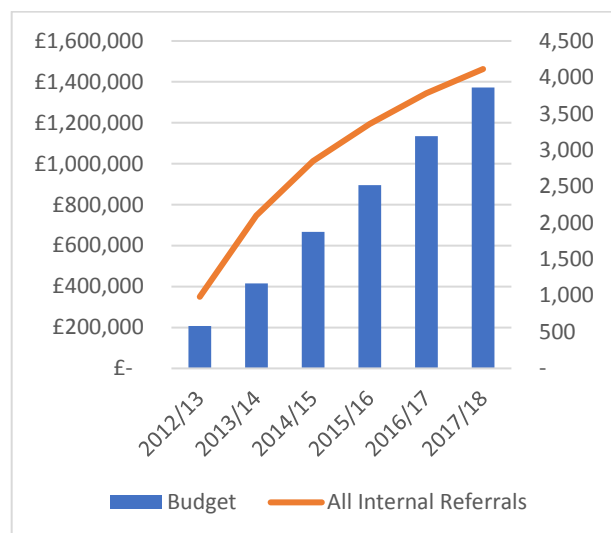
If all referrals are considered (including start-up referrals), cost per referral is a much lower average of £63.45 over the evaluation period. However, there is a similar upwards trend, increasing from a low of £43.65 in 2013/14 to £154.49 in the most recent year (see Table 3.13 and Figure 3.14). Comparison with other similar services is made in section 3.6.5 below.

Table 3.13 Cost per Referral (£) (Internal Referrals and Total Referrals)

Year	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	Average
Cost per Internal Referral	210.65	185.74	337.29	448.01	565.48	714.92	333.53
Cost per Total Referrals	68.41	43.65	49.96	55.31	76.52	154.49	63.45

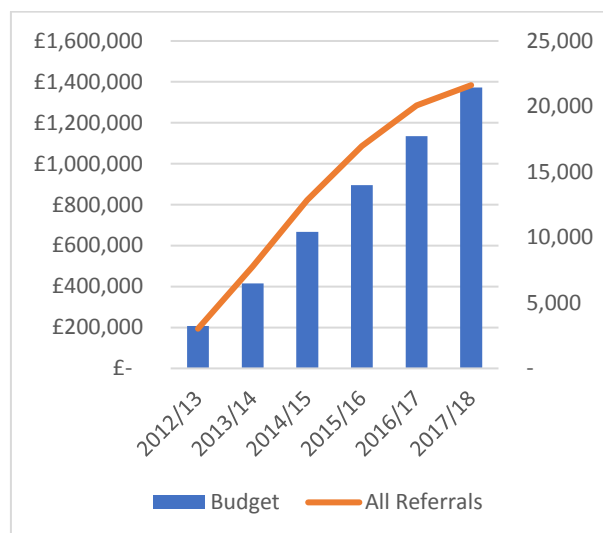
Source: BST Approval Papers & Invest NI Stats

Note: Current Prices

Figure 3.11 Budget v Internal Referrals

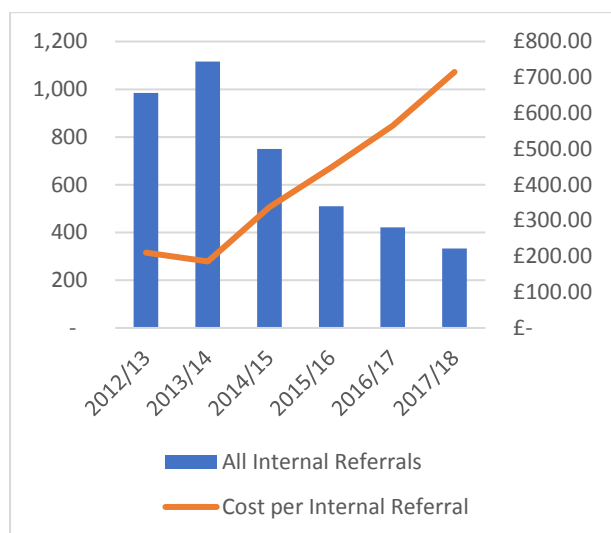
Source: BST Approval Papers & Invest NI Stats

Note: Current Prices

Figure 3.13 Budget v All Referrals

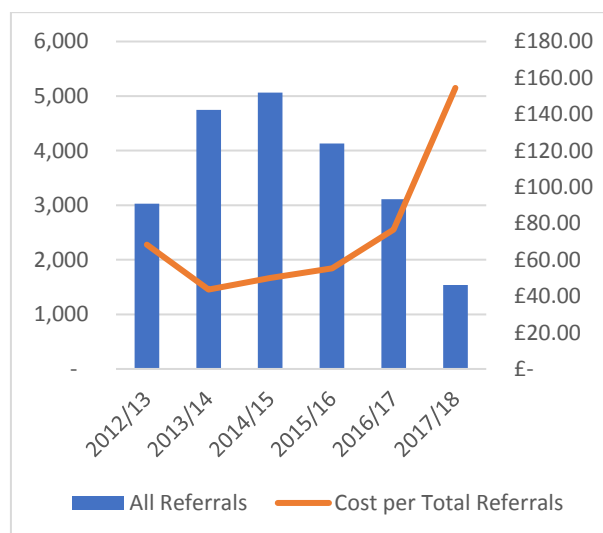
Source: BST Approval Papers & Invest NI Stats

Note: Current Prices

Figure 3.12 Cost per Internal Referral

Source: BST Approval Papers & Invest NI Stats

Note: Current Prices

Figure 3.14 Cost per Total Referrals

Source: BST Approval Papers & Invest NI Stats

Note: Current Prices

3.6.4.2 COSTS FOR OTHER OUTCOMES

Several other Invest NI outcomes can be attributed, in part, to the BST service (see Table 3.14). However, it is not possible to say, within the scope of the evaluation, what share of benefits is attributable to the work of the BST. This would require an estimate of the BST contribution to the total Invest NI cost of achieving the benefits, as well as assessment of other additionality factors (such as deadweight or displacement). Nonetheless, it is useful to report these benefits, with an understanding that the BST is an important initial link in the chain of events leading to the reported benefits (see logic model: Figure 3.1).

Nonetheless, Table 3.14 indicates BST service cost per Gross Outcome. In general terms, it is likely that the cost of the BST represents a relatively low proportion of the total Invest NI cost per outcome.

Table 3.14 Indicative BST Costs per Gross Benefit (2012/13 to 2017/18)*

Outcome	Level of Benefit	Cost per Outcome (£)
Potential New Client RDSs (marked as complete)	1,496	917.00
Businesses receiving financial assistance	328	4,183.00
Projects/cases arising	1,163	1,180.00
New Jobs (FTE)	1,125	1,219.69

Source: BST Approval Papers & Invest NI Stats

Note: Current Prices

* Not all attributable to BST

3.6.5 Value for Money Benchmarking

In value for money terms, several comparisons are made between the BST and similar services in Scotland and Wales (see Table 3.15). The services vary in size and scope, as discussed in section 3.3, therefore comparisons on a like-for-like basis are not possible. In particular, the Welsh and Scottish services are significantly larger in terms of headcount and may derive economies of scale from this.

However, the comparators provide a useful guide, and demonstrate that the cost of the BST, in terms of staffing costs, is 6% higher than Wales and 38% higher than Scotland (most recent year).

Looking at cost per enquiry, while the average cost per enquiry for the BST lies between those of Wales and Scotland, the cost per enquiry for the most recent year is significantly higher than Wales (+51%) and almost double that of Scotland (+91%). However, as noted elsewhere, in both Wales and Scotland the service is mainstreamed which is likely to reduce operating costs.

Table 3.15 Comparison of Value for Money Indicators

Indicator	BST (Invest NI) ¹		SEEFRS (Scotland) ²	Business Wales Helpline ³
	Average	Most recent year	Most recent year	Most recent year
Economy				
Annual Budget	£228,693	£238,068	£ 444,500	£450,000
Staff numbers	7	7	18	14
Cost per staff person	£32,670	£34,008	£24,694	£32,143
Efficiency				
Enquiries per year	12,999	8,381	30,000	24,000
Cost per enquiry	£17.59	£28.41	£14.82	£18.75

Notes 1. budget includes NI, pensions etc. 2. Budget excludes overheads; includes an analyst; includes advice & info (50%) and advice & referral (50%) 3. Budget excludes overheads

Source: BST Approval Papers and Consultations

3.6.6 Qualitative Assessment of Value for Money

Several other value for money considerations are noted below.

Catalytic Effects: The BST model has acted as a catalyst for more and larger scale economic development action by Invest NI and partners (see section 3.5.2.2). This is achieved through signposting/ filtering to appropriate support, and/or provision of advice. Several stakeholders consulted regarded the BST service as representing excellent value for money in this regard. For example, one internal consultee commented that this service reduces workload for other staff and allows them to be more focused on their own role, and that wider staff can also make use of the Knowledge Base (e.g. ID23).

Demonstration Effects: The development of the BST model including technical approach and customer service approach has led to some examples of demonstration effects, including internally (as a widely regarded

example of good practice in customer relations), and in terms of provision of advice and guidance to partner organisations in developing their own systems (i.e. Councils), as commented by one consultee⁵⁰.

Combination Effects: The integration of the BST service with other Invest NI support and external stakeholders is adding value in many cases: e.g. working with Councils to effectively provide advice to business start-ups. However, as discussed in section 3.5.2.3, there may be scope to further refine these links.

Efficiency Gains: The BST is achieving, to varying degrees, efficiency gains through leveraging its networks of stakeholders to provide a 'one-stop shop' approach for business information needs. For example, building on established relationships with a range of business support providers, this (is perceived by several consultees) as adding weight and credibility to Invest NI advice⁵¹.

Duplication: A well-developed partnership approach with stakeholders has minimised the risk of duplication by the BST service. However, there was some sense from stakeholders that a continuing effort is required to maintain this as discussed in 3.4.7. An internal consultee also highlighted that without the central BST there would be slower and less consistent responses by internal Invest NI staff, with risk of duplication of effort⁵².

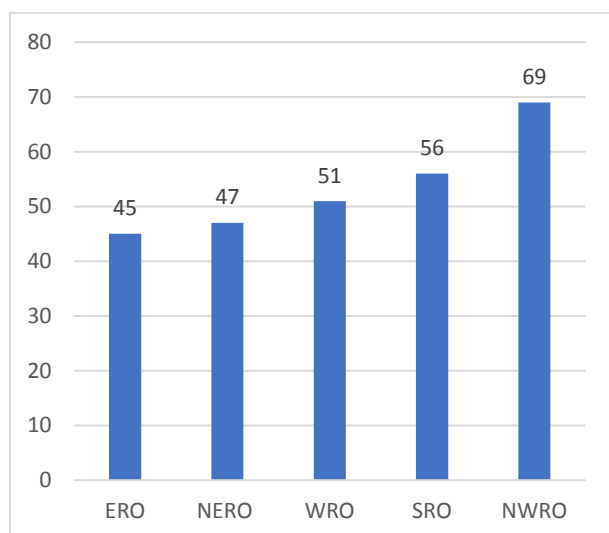
Sustainability: A marker of BST value for money would be sustainability of activity. A well-established team and approach have been developed. However, several risks to this are identified in section 3.4.

3.6.7 Equity

Figure 3.15 indicates that the conversion rate from 'potential new client' to 'client' by regional office (with regional office network in Ballymena, Belfast, Londonderry, Newry and Omagh) (average rate 54%). There is a notable variation in conversion rate, with a significantly higher than average rate in the NWRO and lower than average rate in the ERO. It is not possible to determine the reasons for this, and the variation in conversion rate may be something for future monitoring to consider.

Routine reporting of the geographical origin of enquires may help target promotion of the BST to support equitable access to the service (it is noted enquiry monitoring data permit this).

Figure 3.15 Conversion rate (%): BST Potential New Client Referrals by Regional Office



Source: Invest NI Stats

Note: Based on three years plus data from 01/04/15. Based on approximately 600 referrals.

⁵⁰ ID 23.

⁵¹ ID11, 20

⁵² ID23

3.6.8 Conclusion

In terms of service inputs there has been consistency in the main cost drivers and management costs for the BST. There is also some evidence for significant cost savings by bringing the service in-house at the start of the evaluation period. Staffing costs are comparable with those of the Business Wales Helpline, but somewhat higher than those for SEEFRS (Scotland), although there are differences in the nature of the services.

Cost per Enquiry has fluctuated over the evaluation period as the volume of enquiries has changed relative to the more stable cost base. For the most current year, cost per year is at its highest level over the evaluation period and significantly higher than comparator services.

Cost per Total Referral (internal and start-up) has not been benchmarked, but displays a strong upward trend: a diminishing amount of the service's inputs have been converted to outputs or outcomes in terms of quantity (although feedback discussed earlier suggests quality remains high and indeed is improving) (see section 3.4). As noted above, change in referral levels also reflects stricter thresholds being applied in making referrals: for example, turnover /potential turnover threshold to be a client has risen to £250k (from £100k and then £150k).

The increasing costs per output/outcome must be weighed against the wider benefits of the service (which are likely to be significant in several ways through catalytic effects, avoidance of duplication, efficiency gains etc), the strong strategic fit of the service (see section 3.1), the 'front-line' role of the service in supporting other Invest NI activities (see logic model Figure 3.1) , and the low relative cost of the service in relation to the total Invest NI budget, and a need to have a degree of flexibility to meet changing demands. Taking these factors into account, the BST provides good value for money.

3.6.9 Lessons & Recommendations

Recommendations include:

- Routinely capture relevant procurement and implementation savings to demonstrate ongoing value for money. Routine capturing of cost savings measures on a quarterly or annual basis would assist in monitoring the overall value for money of the service (i.e. a note of actions taken, and if possible, a monetised value of the saving measure);
- As recommended elsewhere in the report, monitor for quality of enquiry handling and referrals.

4 CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the findings presented, this section presents several overall conclusions as well as a list of specific recommendations for consideration.

4.1 CONCLUSIONS

Overall Conclusion

The Business Support Team (BST) makes an important contribution to the achievement of Invest NI strategic objectives by providing an effective first-line means of identifying, prioritising, and signposting new and existing clients as well as providing a necessary and important source of information, advice and signposting for the wider business base.

This significant role and the effective performance of the service (notwithstanding several suggested refinements) has been established over six years while operating under programme budget arrangements.

A move to a 'mainstreamed' core funding basis as an overhead cost of Invest NI, as opposed to those specific to a project, is justified given that the service can be considered part of the necessary basic functions required

for Invest NI to deliver on its activities (a position that is consistent with practice in several comparator organisations).

Strategic Fit

There is a strong fit between the BST and the strategic context. The strategic fit of the work of the BST is apparent in the key strategy documents and the strategic rationale for such a service remains valid, with the need and demand for the service closely tied to core aspects of relevant economic, industrial and organisational strategies. The market failure rationale (around the concept of addressing information failures) is also a persistent and justifiable rationale for intervention.

Given these strategic drivers it is therefore important that Invest NI can achieve effective signposting, filtering and advice through the BST, so that Invest NI can focus resources on achieving the outcomes identified in their business plan. The *contribution* of the BST to fulfilling this strategic need and addressing the market failures and equity rationale, considering other available services, is examined further throughout the following sections.

Progress Towards Indicators & Targets

The BST service has consistently achieved its speed of response target for calls and following the introduction of more stringent email/online enquiry response targets, has now achieved this target too.

The resource inputs deployed are appropriate for the volume of enquiries, given benchmark comparator analysis. However, it is noted that the volume of enquires has been declining with a shift in a higher share of start-up handling to local government.

The team has at times in the past been stretched given the volume of enquiries. The reduction in the overall volume of enquiries in 2017/2018 allows the BST service staff a degree of flexibility to provide a higher degree of customised advice and signposting, that was perhaps less possible when enquiry volumes were higher. Providing more customised advice and signposting will help fulfil the strategic relevance of the service in providing a front line in filtering and prioritising support for export-led business growth.

Benchmarking

It is notable that equivalent services are provided as an area of core funding (i.e. overhead costs of the organisation, as opposed to those specific to a project and they are viewed as part of necessary basic functions required for an organisation to deliver on its activities). Otherwise channels used are broadly comparable and resourcing is also broadly comparable relative to market size.

However, there is no 'one right way' of delivering the service and there is much variation: there are examples of good practice in each case. The most effective enquiry handling services are also backed by effective and integrated systems, and Business Wales appears the most integrated in this regard. The Economic Development Officer (EDO) Access pilot, in giving Local Councils (at least in part) access to the Invest NI CRM system is a step in the right direction.

Management & Delivery

The BST has a front-line role in filtering and prioritising enquiries from existing Invest NI clients, prospective clients, and the wider business base, in line with the organisation's strategic objectives. Despite this, the service has been provided on a non-mainstreamed basis with repeated approvals. Although this has not prevented the BST from developing in response to need, and there has been consistency in the level of annual budgets, there are also no obvious benefits in continuing this approach. As a first point of contact for many customers, it is noted that the service operates with a small budget relative to the total budget of Invest NI and, with resources broadly comparable with comparator mainstreamed services.

Service monitoring arrangements are in place and are systematically measured, analysed and responded to. However, there is scope to increase the measurement of enquiry handling quality, of which Invest NI is aware, and actively examining.

The process for engaging with businesses and appraising their requirements is generally well-developed and supported via the operation of different enquiry channels, a knowledgeable and experienced team, effective links with internal and external partners, and extensive templates and knowledge resources.

Overall, effective management and delivery arrangements are in place and consistent with the objectives of team.

Progress Towards Overall Objectives

In terms of benefits, the precise economic impact of the BST is difficult to establish as the work of the team is an integral part of the support provided by the wider Invest NI organisation, as outlined in the logic model. Nonetheless it is clear the BST contributes significantly to this work and ultimately to the gross benefits achieved by Invest NI in terms of export led economic growth.

We identify two main ways that this benefit is achieved. Firstly, the BST has significant ‘catalytic’ effects: via a high volume of quality referrals to Invest NI colleagues and teams; and a high volume of start-up referrals to councils (as well as associated information provision). There are benefits to these businesses who act on the support they have been provided via their referral and advice.

Secondly, we highlight the significant ‘combination’ effects brought about by the BST coordinating with a wide range of partners and providing a comprehensive and coherent body of knowledge for enquiring businesses). However, there is scope for the BST to further enhance links to partner organisations.

Value for Money

In terms of service inputs there has been consistency in the main cost drivers and management costs for the BST. There is also some evidence for significant cost savings by bringing the service in-house at the start of the evaluation period. Staffing costs are comparable with those of the Business Wales Helpline, but somewhat higher than those for SEFRS (Scotland), although there are differences in the nature of the services.

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The increasing costs per output/outcome must be weighed against the wider benefits of the service (which are likely to be significant in several ways through catalytic effects, avoidance of duplication, efficiency gains etc), the strong strategic fit of the service, the ‘front-line’ role of the service in supporting other Invest NI activities, and the low relative cost of the service in relation to the total Invest NI budget, and a need to have a degree of flexibility to meet changing demands. Taking these factors into account, the BST provides good value for money.

4.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made:

1. Consider a move to a ‘mainstreamed’ core funding basis as an overhead cost of Invest NI,
2. Maintain the relevance and responsiveness of the service to the wider strategic developments in business support outside of Invest NI, ensuring all relevant partners are engaged routinely so that duplication is avoided, and information made available to business is up-to date and comprehensive (a mapping exercise of stakeholder and services may be a useful exercise to support ongoing systematic coordination with partners) (roles and responsibilities for this to be defined between BST, nibusinessinfo.co.uk info team, and other Invest NI colleagues).

3. Contingency resources should be put in place to handle an increase in enquiry volumes associated with Brexit.
4. Consider a proportionate client feedback mechanism to capture BST internal and external enquiry and referral quality performance and impact.
5. Review opportunities for integration of CRM systems, to allow effective referrals between all those providing business support services.
6. Review opportunities for developing use of chatbots (automated enquiry handling), and digital self-serve approaches.
7. Monitor trends in other jurisdictions for a more centralised and single enquiry handling services across government.
8. Consider provision of a dedicated post for Knowledge Base development and maintenance.
9. Further develop where feasible co-location of BST team members in multiple regional offices to maximise local networking and knowledge transfer.
10. Increase feedback internally to Invest NI colleagues on the type of support demanded by businesses.
11. Maintain systematic learning and development opportunities for BST team members.
12. Develop consistent connection and communication channels with all parts of the organisation (this could be developed by regular briefing of teams of the role and benefits of the service for their staff).
13. Revise the categorisation of internal referrals to permit more accurate analysis by type of referral.
14. Routinely capture relevant procurement and implementation savings to demonstrate ongoing value for money. Routine capturing of cost savings measures on a quarterly or annual basis would assist in monitoring the overall value for money of the service (i.e. a note of actions taken, and if possible, a monetised value of the saving measure).