



# Business Link in the South East

## 2008 – 2009 Review



# Introduction

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I'm delighted to welcome the **Business Link in the South East Review 2008-09**. In this challenging year, Business Link has:

- Supported over 145,000 businesses and aspiring entrepreneurs
- Undertaken over 17,900 Business Reviews
- Run over 1,500 Start up workshops
- Supported over 7,700 people in their first year of trading
- Seen over 3,100 businesses created with our help
- Achieved customer satisfaction levels of 92%



This report illustrates, through case studies, how customers are using Business Link support to start new enterprises and improve established companies. The Business Link Service in the South East provides practical help that is tailored around the issues affecting companies in today's climate. This Report also demonstrates how the Service refers customers to public, private and voluntary support organisations and how we work in partnership with other agencies. I trust that you will find this publication interesting.

**Deborah Wyatt, Chair of the Consortium of South East Business Link providers**



"Business Link is a crucial front line defence in the fight back against recession, a place to go to find what the government's Real Help Now initiative means for real businesses. I often hear directly from business owners about how much they value the information and support they receive from Business Link, which I am pleased to say, has achieved 92% customer satisfaction."

**Jonathan Shaw MP, Minister for the South East**



"The figures really show both the amount of work Business Link is doing to help businesses tackle this recession, and the amount that this help is clearly needed. Business Link has evolved and adapted to provide services that suit the current economic climate, and South East businesses are responding. For example 8,500 businesses have now taken advantage of the free Business Review 'Health Checks' service launched in October."

**James Brathwaite, SEEDA Chairman**

Here are some of the ways Business Link has evolved and responded to changing economic conditions over the past year:

- 'Solutions for Business' was launched in October, the result of the government's programme to streamline business support. Business Link is now the primary access point for publicly funded business support products.
- Since the new finance measures were announced by the government, Business Link Advisers have been working closely with banks and local authorities to increase awareness and understanding of these schemes.
- Over 200 Business Link Advisers and Customer Service Staff have been accredited by SFEDI; the government recognised UK standards setting body for business support and enterprise.
- Business Link has re-modelled its Business Reviews to incorporate skills analysis.
- Business Link continues to work with local authorities and partners to engage with and support local companies.
- The Service responded to higher enquiry volumes, 69% more enquiries were dealt with in Jan 09 compared with Jan 08.
- Over 30,000 copies of Business Link's 'Guide to doing business in tough times', which was written to help firms react to the recession, have been printed and distributed.

Despite increasingly challenging conditions, Business Link customers are twice as likely (49%) to expect growth over the next 12 months, compared with only 24% of non-Business Link customers who still expect to grow. South East Business Monitor

### Business support for over 145,000 businesses and aspiring entrepreneurs

A huge proportion of the region's small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) and aspiring entrepreneurs used Business Link last year.

Support is given face to face by Business Link Advisers, at events and workshops, over the phone, by post and by email. Information and advice ranges from how to calculate employees' holiday entitlement to what to include in your business plan. Over 117,000 Business Link customers receive email updates on business issues such as: changes in legislation; marketing techniques and new ideas. Business Link's website showcases support available in the South East, and provides reference information and downloadable guides on everything from setting up in business to the employers' responsibility for health and safety.

### 17,900 Business Reviews undertaken

Business Link undertook over 17,900 Business Reviews in 2008-09. These Reviews are for business owners to assess their company's performance and potential with guidance from a professional and experienced Business Link Adviser. The Review brings to light issues and opportunities for the company and Business Link Advisers then recommend solutions and sources of help. The observations and suggestions are captured in a Business Action Plan which prioritises the actions the business owner needs to take in the short, medium and long term to drive the direction they want their company to take.

## Working in partnership

Business Link works with many partners across the region. Here are a few examples:

- Business Link and Portsmouth City Council signed a Memorandum of Understanding to cement their existing relationship which led to joint programmes of business support provision for people who are looking to start up a business, or those with existing businesses, to access business support in the city. Portsmouth City Council hosted a series of FREE Business Reviews at their Enterprise Centres with 1-2-1 advice provided by Business Link Advisers.



“Business Link is the first point of contact for anyone thinking of starting a business, and for existing business support enquiries. It provides an uncomplicated service which reduces duplication.” Councillor Mike Hancock CBE MP, Portsmouth City Council (pictured above with Phil Wilding, Chair of Business Link in Hampshire & Isle of Wight (left))

- Business Link teamed up with the owners of Slough Trading Estate (SEGRO) to offer business support to small and medium sized firms in this international trading park. Companies are referred by SEGRO to Business Link Advisers who work locally.
- 3,500 visitors attended Kent 2020 in April 2008. This annual conference and exhibition is organised by Business Link with support from Kent County Council.
- Business Link ran a series of Start-up workshops for 18 delegates at the request of Arun District Council.
- Business Link co-ordinated and published an easy reference guide for companies in Milton Keynes, Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire. This leaflet signposts readers to the publicly funded support available from local councils and business organisations in the area.
- A BAME business-led network called the Woking Asian Business Forum (pictured) is supported by Woking Borough Council and Business Link. Members of the Forum use hot desks and meeting rooms in Business Link offices. The Forum organises events which attract attendees from diverse communities.



# Support for individuals starting up in business

Despite tough trading conditions, start up rates across the UK increased slightly in 2008\*. Business Link in the South East supported over 3,100 new businesses created and helped over 7,700 in the first 12 months of trading.

\*Source: [www.newsroom.barclays.com](http://www.newsroom.barclays.com)

Business Link offers a series of workshops for people thinking of starting a new business. 3,000 aspiring entrepreneurs attended these workshops last year. The series starts with an introduction to enterprise called 'Foundations for Success'. Three further workshops cover finance, business planning and marketing.

Business Link's Enterprise Gateways worked with almost 4,000 individuals and referred 1,500 to other Business Link services. Business Link also supports new and established social enterprises.

Over 1,200 women attended 12 What's Stopping You? workshops (pictured). They are funded by SEEDA and are for women to find out if running a business is a viable option for them. One of the participants said, "Great way to get the entrepreneurial juices flowing!"



Julie Martin set up **Make Me Cake** a few months before she was made redundant from her job as a secretary. Business Link's workshops for those starting up a new business were ideal for Julie and she completed the four modules in three weeks. Julie also received support from Jason Martin (no relation) the South Kent Director of the Business Link Enterprise Gateway Service.

Julie explains, "I have always loved making cakes. Business Link's support is keeping me focussed on writing my business plan, carrying out the sales and marketing necessary to get a good stream of customers and getting organised so that I can meet orders quickly and create a sustainable business for the future."



Sally Davis (pictured), a social entrepreneur from Portsmouth, established **Growing Ambitions** - a Community Interest Company - to broker careers information UK-wide from real people in real jobs. Schools, colleges and universities access the volunteer speakers via **[www.growingambitions.org](http://www.growingambitions.org)**. Sally developed a 'white label' version of the portal for large organisations, and Microsoft is the latest company to adopt it.

Business Link helped Sally with common start up challenges, such as lack of manpower and income to populate the website until it started to attract paying subscribers.

Sally comments, "My Business Link Adviser, Tracey Ansell, took my vision seriously and provided reassurance that I was heading in the right direction. She also made me realise that I am most likely to achieve more funding as the result of joint bids with other complementary initiatives."



Forty-eight extra workshops were run with colleges, banks and Jobcentre Plus as part of 'call off' arrangements which responded to local needs. One of these was a joint initiative between Bracknell & Wokingham College and Business Link to introduce 20 photography students to the tools they will need if they start their own business when they leave education.

Aftab Juna, from Winnersh, studying for his Level 2 City & Guilds award, said: "I decided to attend this course as it was being offered for free by Business Link. It is a useful starting point to explore whether going into business is actually suitable. This is a very valuable service offered by Business Link."

Workshop delegates Jonathan Cleaver (pictured right) and Chris Williams (left) absorb the information supplied by Business Link.

# Helping businesses to face changing market conditions

Business Link in the South East undertook over 17,900 Business Reviews in 2008-09.

**Harmony Carpets** (pictured below), a family run carpet and flooring business from Brighton, supplies commercial as well as residential customers and started to see sales fall off in 2008. Managing Director, Mark Yelland, called in Business Link at the end of 2008 for a free Business Review.



Mark explains, "After a two hour discussion, my Business Link Adviser, Jon Love, came up with three suggestions on how we could best avoid bad debts, manage our money more effectively and find free software to help us deliver even better customer service. The advice made good sense, and the cost of implementing the recommendations was minimal as we only needed to use our existing resources more effectively. I'm also getting more information and forecasting from our accountant. After the meeting we saw Business Link again to check that we had handled the changes correctly, and we now feel much more certain about the future."



Surrey based entertainment company **Event Planners** (part of Widdowson Enterprises Ltd) won two new corporate entertainment contracts as a result of a low-cost mail shot recommended at a Business Review. Other actions discussed included: cost cutting measures; how to win new customers by updating the website and arranging better search engine optimisation; improving marketing; and opening up new customer driven product lines.

"Thanks to my Business Link Adviser, Ian Alexander," comments Event Planners owner, Paul Widdowson. "I have a clear business plan to help me take action to mitigate the effects of the downturn. At my Business Review in January, we discussed ways to eliminate any wasted expenditure and improve current marketing activity such as the website."

## Guide to doing business in tough times

Monitoring the key concerns discussed at Business Reviews and the most popular articles in its monthly e-newsletter, led Business Link in the South East to publish a free Guide to doing business in tough times. Over 30,000 copies of the Guide have been printed and distributed.

**A number of Business Link programmes, some of which receive extra SEEDA or European money, complement the aims of the Regional Economic Strategy (RES), around specific priority areas.**

### Support for small and medium sized firms tendering for contracts

Over 4,500 South East companies have been accepted as approved bidders on **www.competefor.com**, and 1,400 companies attended 42 Business Link workshops on Fit2Supply, Bid Writing and Quality Management.

**Oxford Archaeology** records, protects and preserves remains of past human activity and helps people to get better access to and more enjoyment from their heritage. The company secured a contract with the Olympic Development Agency, through **www.competefor.com** to carry out archaeological investigation at Eton College Rowing Lake at Dorney Lake, Buckinghamshire. The lake will host rowing, flatwater canoe/kayak and paralympic rowing events.

Hugh Beamish of Oxford Archaeology comments, "We found the registration process easy to work through and very much welcome CompeteFor as a new portal for finding out about opportunities connected to London 2012."

### Innovation

**EVO Electric**, Woking, develops and manufactures electric motors and generators for a number of applications including transport. It plans to develop 'DuoDrive', a highly efficient hybrid-electric drivetrain design which can be retrofitted into commercial vehicles. The system will allow vehicles to operate in electric/zero-emission mode for significant distances while providing all the functionality of a hybrid vehicle.

The company approached Business Link in 2008 to find out more about the support available for technology projects. Business Link Innovation Adviser, Simon Warran-Smith, a chartered engineer with over 20 years experience in vehicle power train development with Ford, suggested that they apply to SEEDA for a Research & Development Grant.

The Grant, for 35% of the project costs, was approved in spring 2009. Evo Electric is now progressing with their plans to produce a fully operational, pre-production vehicle fitted with a DuoDrive system.



CEO David Latimer, (pictured above with Dr Michael Lampérth (right)) comments, "Business Link's assistance has been invaluable. They identified this grant and helped us to produce a viable and ultimately successful bid application. I plan to stay in touch with Simon to update him on the progress of the project. It's great to have someone to call on who can guide us to the government funded help available."

## Finance

**GMDC Global Ltd** owner, John Pemberton (pictured below), approached Business Link for advice on how to manage his fast growing business, a one-stop menswear e-tailer which sells internationally on eBay and Amazon.



John attended a Business Link clinic for small companies, had a Business Review and also met with one of Business Link's Financial Specialists, Eamonn McArdle. The company's orders were growing, which meant that John faced some big decisions about how much stock to buy and how quickly to expand. Business Link has helped him with cash flow forecasting and how much bank finance he needed. With help from Business Link, John produced a viable business plan which gave the bank the confidence to lend the company £87,000.

John explains, "Business Link gave me some really important guidance about how to structure my business growth, assistance with cash flow forecasting and advised me that bank finance was the best source of finance for my company. I now have the finance and the business plan to take my company forward."

## Leadership and management skills for entrepreneurs

Business Link supports business owners who want to improve skills within their company, both at senior management level and staff.

**Sennet Insurance Services Ltd**, Kent benefited from a £1,000 Leadership & Management Grant for training to help cope with change management. The Grant was identified and arranged for the company by Business Link Adviser, Sharon Davies.



"Sharon's help and support over the last three years has been invaluable. The training in change management helped me to communicate with and motivate the staff and customers who were affected by the management buyout. I feel that we have the right mix of products and skills to keep growing the company even during the current economic downturn." Rob Ward, Managing Director, Sennet Insurance Services Ltd (pictured above)

From April 2009, Business Link Advisers have incorporated skills analysis into Business Reviews and can identify the skills training and support available through Train to Gain.

## Rural enterprise

The Land Based Advisory Service, funded by SEEDA and delivered by Business Link, targets business owners who are typically working outside. Over 1,500 delegates attended 115 workshops run throughout the year on issues affecting rural businesses.

“The useful tips and advice given on these workshops have proved invaluable in our efforts to make our farm work for us. Business Link rural workshops are a must if you are thinking of diversifying. In today's changing environment it's good to explore the different ways in which profit can be gained from alternative energy.” Mrs Isabel Mason, Proprietor, **Clock Barn Farm**



## Supplier Matching Service

Business Link's Supplier Matching Service promotes business to business referrals. Based on customer requirements, Business Link Advisers use this database to compile a shortlist of best-fit consultants or suppliers from the region.

Over 4,000 searches were carried out in 2008-09. Katinka van Wyk used the service to find a PR agency. **The Pure Living Company**, set up by Katinka in 2008 specialises in unique products (examples pictured below) for the home sourced from the developing world. Katinka met Business Link Adviser, Carolyn Bradfield, to discuss her plans to start the business and produce a Business Action Plan which highlighted the need for publicity and setting up an online shop.

Carolyn used the Supplier Matching Service to select three suitable PR agencies for Katinka to choose from. Katinka settled on **Blink PR Ltd** (not related to Business Link, despite the similar name!). Blink PR is based in High Wycombe and has been registered on the Supplier Matching Service for a number of years.

Katinka explains, “The Supplier Matching Service was ideal for me, without it I would have just looked for a local company via Google, but this wouldn't necessarily have identified a company which operates in my particular field. I feel supported knowing that I have Sara's guidance to call on.”

Sara from Blink PR is pleased to recommend Business Link's Supplier Matching Service. She gets repeat business from three clients who originally approached her after Business Link had passed on her details as a possible supplier.



## Sustainability

In 2008–09, Business Link helped over 4,900 companies to improve their resource efficiency. These are businesses which included a sustainable measure in their Business Action Plan such as attending Environmental Management Systems workshops, applying for energy grants or changing practices such as turning off power switches over night.

Business Link arranged an Environmental Review for **Zoo Jewellery** with the West Sussex Business Partnership. This identified a number of steps to make heat and energy savings such as using their air conditioning units more effectively. Zoo Jewellery is an importing and retail company which has headquarters in Chichester and shops in Worthing, Salisbury and Winchester.

Business Link told the company about the Energy Grant 500. Zoo Jewellery were given a £500 Grant from SEEDA through this scheme. The investment in low energy lighting alone, has led to 15% saving on electricity.

Rob Gibbons, Co founder, comments, “I’ve been very impressed with Business Link. The Business Link team kept in touch and advised on things we would never have known about including the Energy Grant 500.”



## Accessing new markets

Victoria Ballard from the **Encourage & Praise Chart Company**, from Sevenoaks, felt that exporting was the next step for her company which produces educational and fun charts for children.

Victoria had used the information, advice and support offered by Business Link for a number of years. At her 2008 Business Review, her Business Link Adviser, Ian Netherton, discussed the company’s priorities. Ian explained, “We worked together to priorities Victoria’s next actions to move the business forward, for example, we gave her contacts in local authorities who were interested in her products as well as UK Trade & Investment (UKTI), which has advised on their export to Australia and New Zealand.”

Victoria said, “Business Link was very useful in providing advice, sourcing a packaging and fulfilment company, which was a new area for me, and to generally discuss ideas. The future of my company looks very promising.”

# South East Business Monitor

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Business Link carried out regular research to:

- Take an ongoing 'temperature check' of business issues and concerns
- Monitor business intentions and future growth expectations
- Explore attitudes towards and experiences of using business support and advice
- Identify any gaps in current support provision.

During 2008-09, Business Link commissioned four waves of research into the attitudes of business owners and senior managers across the region. A total of 4,800 interviews took place. In addition to core questions, additional 'hot topic' questions change in each survey. Subjects investigated last year included:

Hot Topic 23: Public Procurement

Hot Topic 22: Managing work-related stress

Hot Topic 21: Enterprise among the over 55s

Hot Topic 20: Responding to the economic downturn

Hot Topic 19: Women's Enterprise: Access to finance

Hot Topic 18: Social Enterprise and Ethical Business Practices

Hot Topic 17: SMEs and the 'Credit Crunch'

Hot Topic 16: Leadership and Management

All available at [www.businesslink.gov.uk/southeast/hottopics](http://www.businesslink.gov.uk/southeast/hottopics)



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