



LEP – Sub Committee

LEP - Business Support Management Board

Private and Confidential: No

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Peer Networks Update

**Report Author: Andy Walker, Tel: 01772 535629,
andy.walker@lancashire.gov.uk**

Executive Summary

In September 2020, the department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) provided additional support through the English Growth Hub network to organise Peer to Peer business groups, as a practical support mechanism addressing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Boost – Lancashire's Business Growth Hub quickly responded to commission a range of organisations to facilitate these groups. This allowed groups in the same sector, with the same profile of ownership or aligned to existing business organisations to start meeting and help one another.

Following two further cohorts of Peer 2 Peer provision, BEIS has now announced that this ear-marked funding will end in March 2022.

This report considers the impact that this programme has had in Lancashire and whether we should seek alternate resource to continue a similar programme as the configuration of new funding regimes becomes clear.

Recommendation

The Business Support Management Board are asked to note this report.

Background and Advice

- 1.1 Peer Networks is an initiative funded by BEIS that is being delivered through the LEP network and their respective Growth Hubs. The programme's aims are focused on reducing the UK productivity gap by helping business leaders find practical solutions to strategic and operational challenges. It has formed part of the Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing EU transition, seeking to improve the resilience of SMEs, their capability to



adapt their business models to the “new normal” and position themselves for future success, driving longer-term productivity gains.

- 1.2 The programme is delivered using Action Learning methodology and involves the creation of a series of Peer Networks (cohorts) through the Growth Hub network, with each group consisting of 8-10 owners or managers from the local SME business community. Led by an experienced facilitator, these Peer Networks typically meet fortnightly as part of delivering 18 hours of action learning through 2-3-hour sessions. Individual one-to-one support (coaching, mentoring, or advice) is also provided.
- 1.3 Delivery in Lancashire is via a series of procured contractors managed by Lancashire County Council’s Business Growth Team. In 2020-21 Peer Networks was delivered to 31 cohorts of businesses in Lancashire with 327 participants and a 97% satisfaction rating. In 2021-22 there are currently 208 participants across 23 cohorts with 98% of participants reporting being very satisfied. The current programme, delivered by 15 contractors, is due to end in March 2022.
- 1.4 Issues covered in the initiative include supply chain and logistics issues, staffing and recruitment problems, exporting, production and finance. The programme has proved very popular, and as shown by the satisfaction ratings, it has been well received by local businesses. From the case studies that have been captured in Rounds 1 and 2 it is clear that participants have very much valued this format of support and have been able to resolve both ongoing issues and more immediate problems through participation on the programme.

2. Funding considerations

- 2.1 The Round 1 programme cost £432,000 and was fully funded by BEIS. The current year’s programme (Round 2) has been awarded a grant of £390,000. BEIS have made now the decision not to fund a Round 3, but rather have taken the learning points from the Round 1 and 2 Peer Networks evaluations and incorporated them into the national Help to Grow programme. This leaves a gap at local level.
- 2.2 Officers feel that the programme is worthy of consideration as a more permanent element of the business support programme in Lancashire, perhaps on a reduced scale or with new delivery models. Based on the average costings in Rounds 1 and 2, a programme offering say 15 cohorts could be delivered for a budget of £225,000.

Recommendation

It is recommended that Members note this report and to seek support for endeavours to find alternative sources of finance.