

South Midlands Growth Hub

South Midlands Growth Hub Board Meeting

12th March 2025, 12:00-13.30

Unconfirmed Minutes

| Item | Discussion |
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| 1. | Welcome and Introductions RM welcomed everyone to the online meeting and introductions were made. |
| 2. | Declarations of Interest David Sheridan joined the University of Bedfordshire Business Board |
| 3. | Minutes of meeting held on 15th January 2025 There were no amendments to the minutes |
| 4. | Grant success Presentation - Louise Parlons Bentata Bluemethane has developed a technology for methane capture from water, combatting global warming and facilitating the energy transition through bioenergy generation. The versatile technology finds applications across various water sectors, including industrial and municipal wastewater treatment, polluted streams and reservoirs. The Resilience and Innovation Grant made it possible to complete the first prototype installation which included a custom-made gravitational spillway enclosed in an underpressurised chamber, a gas pump, biogas upgrading filter and the first of its kind, methane recovery unit, coupled with real time methane monitoring. Louise indicated she found the whole grant process great from start to finish. With support from the business adviser team through the application process and the grants team supporting with project change request and the claims. |
| 5. | Business Updates and Insights <ul style="list-style-type: none">• David Sheridan – The current business environment presents significant challenges with companies grappling with the impact of government policies, particularly the recent increase in national insurance contributions. This rise has placed additional financial strain on businesses, limiting their capacity for growth and expansion. As a result, businesses are adjusting their strategies to mitigate these financial pressures. A growing number of companies are streamlining operations to include automation and artificial intelligence (AI) which offer an efficient alternative to manual labour, helping businesses reduce operational costs. He added that the engineering sector, in particular, faces a talent shortage as many skilled engineers are opting to work abroad in search of higher wages and better opportunities.• Justine Ives - Sustainability has become a focus for most businesses engaged with by the Bedfordshire Council. She added that businesses increasingly recognise the importance of reducing their carbon footprint and minimizing their environmental impact. However, despite their commitment to greener practices, financial constraints remain a significant barrier. To better understand the specific challenges and support needs faced by businesses, a survey was recently distributed to businesses in the area to share |

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| | <p>their perspectives on the types of assistance they would find most beneficial. By gathering this valuable feedback, the Council will aim to tailor future UKSPF programmes to ensure that businesses receive the right kind of help.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helen Miller - There has been a notable increase in engagement from the logistics sector, with businesses actively exploring innovative solutions to meet evolving demands. Helen also highlighted the availability of Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF), which is designed to foster partnerships between universities and businesses. However, despite its potential, much of this funding remains underutilized. A key issue is the lack of awareness among businesses about the resources and support universities can offer. To bridge this gap, the Knowledge Transfer Institute will be celebrating its 50th anniversary by organizing a roadshow across Northamptonshire. This innovation campaign will focus on raising awareness about the support available through universities and encouraging meaningful conversations between academia and industry. • Anna Bosworth – The UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) has reached a significant milestone, having successfully supported over 1,000 businesses across Central Bedfordshire. This achievement highlights a strong willingness among businesses to engage and seek assistance when they are aware of the resources available and as a result, transitional funding for the 2025/2026 period has been earmarked by Central Bedfordshire Council to further strengthen business support. • Vicky Hlomuka – Highlighted the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) initiative, 'Get Britain Working', which includes a funded programme called 'Connect to Work.' This program is specifically designed to support individuals facing barriers to employment, helping them gain the necessary skills, confidence, and opportunities to re-enter the workforce. She indicated that, this initiative could significantly impact businesses, especially in light of rising employment costs driven by the increase in national insurance contributions and suggested a more coordinated approach that leverages support programs like Connect to Work could provide mutual benefits — businesses gain access to a broader talent pool while individuals receive the assistance they need to secure sustainable employment. In addition to discussing the Connect to Work program, Vicky noted that three West Northamptonshire UKSPF programs have recently concluded and are now undergoing evaluation. The findings from these evaluations will provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of the initiatives, helping to identify successes and areas for improvement. • Julie Jeffery – Julie highlighted the prominence of the engineering department at Milton Keynes College, which stands as the largest department within the institution. Engineering continues to thrive in the region, with many students securing apprenticeships and gaining hands-on experience with local employers in Milton Keynes and surrounding areas. This strong collaboration between the college and the industry is helping to build a skilled talent pipeline, contributing to the growth of the sector. However, she noted the challenges faced by students pursuing T Levels in engineering. While these qualifications are equivalent to three A-levels and offer a comprehensive mix of classroom learning and practical experience, students often struggle to secure the necessary industry placements. |

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| | <p>In an effort to support both students and employers, Milton Keynes College has recently opened a Green Skills Hub on its campus. This hub serves as a dedicated centre for developing skills in sustainability and green technologies, equipping students and professionals with the expertise needed to drive the green transition. Additionally, she mentioned the 'Skill Up MK', an online digital learning platform sponsored by Santander. This platform offers flexible, tailored learning solutions for companies seeking to upskill their workforce. Businesses can access a wide range of training resources designed to enhance digital capabilities.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rachel Mallows - Highlighted the contrasting experiences within the Hospitality and Food and Drink sectors. While large businesses continue to perform well, benefiting from greater resources and market resilience, small businesses are facing significant challenges due to rising operational costs, particularly due to the upcoming National Insurance contributions. The increased tax burden will make it harder to maintain profitability and invest in growth, |
| 6. | <p>Growth Hub Performance Update – Ruth Roan</p> <p>Ruth Roan presented growth hub performance metrics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12,000+ visitors to growth hub website • 190 jobs committed through grants awarded • 14,620+ businesses received support • 80 grants awarded • On track to achieve Department of Business Trade targets • Looking at commercial opportunities as a Growth Hub and supporting our partners the best way we can • Growth Hub have received funding from the careers Hub and is now being supported by the Growth Hub team with some Marketing, Admin and Events programmes. |
| 7. | <p>AOB</p> <p>In the absence of any other business, RM thanked everyone for attending. Next meeting to be 9th June 2025 via Microsoft teams.</p> |

Attendees:

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| Rachel Mallows | The Mallows Company, Chair |
| David Sheridan | Europa plc, Deputy Chair |
| Ruth Roan | South Midlands Growth Hub, Growth Hub Manager |
| Justine Ives | Bedford Borough Council |
| Helen Miller | University of Northampton |
| Vicky Hlomuka | West Northamptonshire Council |
| Anna Bosworth | Central Bedfordshire Council |
| Julie Jeffrey | MK College |
| Irene Okere | South Midlands Growth Hub Project Officer |

Apologies:

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| Jennifer Thomas | FSB |
| Pim Van Baarsen | Silverstone Technology Cluster |
| Rizwana Zaman | Luton Borough Council |