

20 January 2026, 13.00 – 14.30

Notes

Item	Item
1.	Welcome and Notes of the Previous Meeting <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Apologies were noted.- The minutes from the previous meeting were approved.- Pim Van Baarsen has stood down from his position on the Board due to other commitments – he was thanked for his contributions and we will continue to work collaboratively.
2.	Reflections on Morning Strategy Session
	VH <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Found strengths analysis valuable; helped clarify how the board can support and collaborate more effectively.
	AB <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Session felt useful and collaborative; wants more in person board presence-person board presence.• Appreciated Nic’s facilitation and forward-looking focus.• Realised the need to act more as an ambassador.
	HM <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emphasised importance of a 3-year vision and emerging stronger.• Questioned expectations placed on operational staff managing day to day work.• Highlighted need for strategic thinking and new models of working for board and team.
	IA <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Suggested another session and creation of annual/3-year plan for clearer targets.• Found strengths analysis helpful.• Wants clearer understanding of board roles and for team to feel more confident engaging with the board
	YL <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Concerned that Business Board (BB) not referenced – not clear how these link up.• Noted lack of integration with wider South Midlands economic strategy. RR confirmed strategy input had been provided previously and action page informs GH work.• Suggested need for a business plan and joint sessions; GH absent from BB agendas. VH acknowledged limited visibility of some of this in BB meetings but believes support is present.
	JM <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Need to focus on key strengths, especially with a small team.• Important to communicate strengths and focus areas to local authorities and partners.
	LC <ul style="list-style-type: none">• South Midlands is not a natural geographic area; Local Authorities have a role in promoting it.• LC and RR exploring closer working and branding opportunities.• Emphasised the need to ensure the Growth Hub is productive, not just busy.
	NB <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Positive to meet the team and hear enthusiasm for their work.

- Highlighted the importance of staying connected on opportunities.
- SS**
- Found the session a safe space.
 - Valued being able to drop individual organisational “hats” when needed.

Discussion

- Agreement that GH Board should be acting more like ambassadors.
- Recognition that the Business Board should also be doing this and representing the Growth Hub by attending external meetings where possible.
- YL checked whether the team has all board contact details; RR confirmed they do.
- NB noted that the GH team should feel comfortable reaching out to any Business Board members, who include several large employers.
- RR suggested trialling a mentoring or buddying approach between board members and GH staff to support development and knowledge sharing, particularly for younger team members.
- RM estimated GH is currently engaging with only 3–4% of the South Midlands business base. RM also highlighted the importance of collaboration, data-led activity, and remaining a trusted, business focused partner, especially around scaleup support.
- RR emphasised that data sharing needs to happen both ways. AB feels this is a pivotal moment for this due to the Connect to Work programme. VH recognised the opportunity but understood the team’s caution around data sharing due to it being a valuable asset.
- HM asked about geographic differences in engagement; RR noted strongest activity in West Northamptonshire, MK, the North and parts of Bedfordshire.
- Referral tracking is being trialled by embedding GH enquiry forms into local authority websites (live with WNC, MK next), helping identify referral routes and supporting target reporting.
- LC noted this helps avoid duplication and reduces the risk of businesses falling through gaps.
- RR highlighted the professional services sector as a significant route to accessing businesses, with partner engagement forming part of the business plan.
- The Board suggested a follow up session together. RR noted desire to create a three year strategic plan focused on direction and intent.
- Board discussed meeting efficiency and papers - some members prefer receiving reading papers ahead of meetings to maximise discussion time, whilst others preferred hearing information presented on the day. It was agreed to try find a balance between detailed pre-reads and concise on-the-day summaries.

Next steps

- **Action:** GH team will collate the outputs from the morning session for RR and RM to review.
- Board agreed it would be useful to have another session with the GH team, as we will need the team in the room to discuss whether ideas are practical from an operational point of view. RM reminded the Board that their role is strategic oversight, not operational, so it’s important to find the right balance.
- **Action:** RM and RR to set up another session with the GH team.

3. **Growth Hub + Grants Update**

- RR presented the GH performance stats.
- HM questioned whether achieving 150% of our target before year end suggests current targets are not the right measure in some areas. RR confirmed that targets are set by DBT but agreed the board should define what *its* expectations are and

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consider stretching internal targets. RR also noted improved reporting processes mean past performance may have been similarly strong but less visible.

- RR noted that GH no longer uses Wenta, and have introduced an AI phone bot and chatbot to manage initial enquiries, giving better control and cleaner data.
- Board queried what the enquiry numbers would look like if grants were removed, whether referrals be broken down by local authority, and if like for like comparisons can be provided. Penetration data showing engagement alongside the business base in each area to assess proportional reach was also discussed.
- RR noted the GH previously produced LA specific reports, but these received no feedback and were discontinued.
- AB highlighted that if all partners reported into GH data properly, penetration rates would be much higher and more accurate.
- VH suggested giving board members access to CRM generated reports so they can drill into their own areas; AB volunteered to pilot this.
- YL highlighted significant procurement opportunities through East West Rail that businesses may be unaware of.
- RR presented the event stats. Upcoming events include a three-event procurement series in Bedfordshire, that will conclude with an event focused on Universal.
- Three WNC-funded programmes are due to launch soon: Inspire Her, Resilient Futures, and SM Growth Accelerator all confirmed.
- The Board requested we share dates for upcoming events.

Grants Update

Two schemes currently running:

- **Micro Capital Grant:** £500 to £3,000
- **Capital Growth Grant:** £5,000–£50,000
- Roughly £1.5M over 3 years (~£500K/year). Likely 1–2 cohorts. Applications closed on 20 January, 180 applications received, with awards to be made by the end of March 2026. 9-month spend window post-award to avoid rush with claims, ending Dec 2026.
- NB asked if we can see how many women-led businesses have applied for grant; RR confirmed we have breakdowns for various key data in CRM dashboards and the GH team have worked hard on data/reporting element for this new programme.

4. Dashboards

- EP presented the CRM dashboards, noting they are continually being developed and refined.
- KPIs are set by DBT; each enquiry counts as a new engagement, even if from the same business.
- Historically, time spent (hours) has been under-reported; improvements made to ensure better quality and accuracy.
- Most GH events are delivered in partnership with external organisations.
- Intensity levels are reported according to DBT's specific definition, based on tasks completed within the relevant year; grants and events contribute heavily to high intensity figures.-intensity figures.
- Area dashboards use postcodes, but some postcodes fall into "out of area" due to geography or registration addresses; planned improvements for next financial year.
- LC asked whether out of area patterns reflect neighbouring regions; EP explained joint events (e.g., MK AI conference) draw wider audiences.
- YL queried whether expanded postcode areas take time to load into the system; EP confirmed some postcodes are split between LAs and are being cleansed.

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- HM asked for metrics on unique vs repeat businesses, as well as sector and size demographics; also queried potential API links to Companies House, which EP is exploring.
- EP noted first contact processes have recently changed: quicker calls may not collect full business data; new forms will help balance speed with information quality.
- AB asked whether referrals can be tracked both ways; EP showed this is now possible via source data.
- Board members expressed interest in understanding how many enquiries stem from their own promotional activity; data can be broken down accordingly.
- EP confirmed more detailed information is now being captured, improving prioritisation, resource planning, and partnership insights.
- IA requested visibility of new business registrations; EP confirmed this can be pulled.
- AB asked for more detailed data for Central Beds; EP can provide this.
- YL raised the question of when support becomes consultancy rather than advisory; RR noted the need to define boundaries clearly and avoid competing with partners.
- EP welcomed post meeting discussions with board members and highlighted future options for data sharing through systems like Beauhurst and Growth Canvas.
- Concern raised around the upcoming UKSPF gap for start-ups; AB highlighted the need to track the full customer journey and survival rates.
- SS noted significant upcoming events and stressed the importance of sharing activity across partners such as the Chamber and FSB.
- RR emphasised strengthening relationships with key partners as part of GH's future vision.
- EP noted the system can track time and tasks to monitor team efficiency and activity levels.

5. Business Intelligence Update

AB

- Amazon closing its Bedfordshire site; planning relocation to Northampton. Net reduction in jobs expected.
- Working closely with Amazon's Dunstable site on skills and outreach activity.

SS

- Highlighted upcoming events with Amazon and eBay aimed at getting young entrepreneurs into colleges.

YL

- Asked for an overview of how LSIP, skills work, enterprise hub, GBW, all fit together.
- Stressed that RR's plan must link to CH's; need to avoid siloed programmes.
- Emphasised the importance of aligning skills and enterprise activity.

LC

- Shared that MK has approved a £75m events venue, tying into the New Towns Commission's future vision.
- Mentioned potential additional development near Olney.

JJ

- Reported a challenging year for apprenticeships.
- Seeing increased engagement from employers.
- Organising an event in late March for SEND learners, inviting employers to participate.

NB

- Noted upcoming events focused on the Employer Rights Bill.
- Mentioned a promising conversation with a private investor who may support a future scaleup event, sharing what investors look for

6. AOB

RM thanked everyone for their time today.

Attendees

Name	Organisation
Rachel Mallows (RM)	The Mallows Company, Chair
Ruth Roan (RR)	South Midlands Growth Hub
Vicky Hlomuka (VH)	West Northamptonshire Council
Yvette Lamidey (YL)	FSB
Lewis Campbell (LC)	Milton Keynes City Council
Naomi Butters (NB)	Icena, Business Board Lead
Sunny Singh (SS)	Northamptonshire and MK Chamber of Commerce
Helen Miller (HM)	University of Northampton
Ian Achurch (IA)	North Northamptonshire Council
Anna Bosworth (AB)	Central Bedfordshire Council
Julie Jeffery (JJ)	MK College
Joanna Mayhead (JM)	Luton Borough Council
Melinda Frankland (MF)	South Midlands Growth Hub (Notetaking)
Emma Panter (EP)	South Midlands Growth Hub (Item 4 only)

Apologies

Name	Organisation
David Sheridan (DS)	Europa Components, Vice Chair
Justine Ives (JI)	Bedford Borough Council
Rizwana Zaman (RZ)	Luton Borough Council
Louise Wall (LW)	Northamptonshire and MK Chamber of Commerce
Eleanor Karklas (EK)	Bedford Borough Council