

South Midlands Growth Hub

South Midlands Growth Hub Board Meeting

8 October 2025, 11.00 – 12.30

Notes

Item	Item
1.	Welcome and Introductions Welcome and apologies were noted.
2.	Notes of the Previous Meeting No comments or questions, the minutes were approved.
3.	Growth Hub Update Performance: positive year-to-date stats, on track for 50 high-intensity hours. Engagement is up via LinkedIn and newsletters. Match funding secured (DIG/new grant). Community membership at 268 and growing. Hosted events well attended. Referrals progressing after partner meetings. January Away Day: <u>Action</u>: Reminder to complete the poll. KPIs: HM flagged the lack of a customer feedback metric. RR noted strong event feedback but acknowledged the need to better capture feedback from business support services. Improvements made already include sending a questionnaire at enquiry closure. Enquiry Tracking: PVB asked about tracking total enquiries responded to; RR confirmed all receive team engagement. PVB suggested monitoring enquiry sources and outcomes for clearer insight into enquiry paths. Sector Data: PVB also requested a breakdown of enquiries by business type/sector. RR confirmed this can be included in the next report, especially given the new government targets for high street and retail. CRM & Data Insights: HM requested CRM dashboards for future board meetings, as these are visually impactful and useful for geographic breakdowns. RR agreed and noted these give a better breakdown of geographical area / tracking of sector priorities across regions. <u>Action:</u> RR to look at including these CRM System Use: PVB asked if we still use Evolutive and our thoughts on their dashboards. RR confirmed continued use and satisfaction with automated client emails. Local KPI & Engagement: Universal work is active in Bedfordshire. KPI tracking shows Central Beds, Luton, and North Northants slightly behind target. Events like Corby and Luton Enterprise Week boosted enquiries. Luton engagement remains difficult; we're working with the LA to increase local events. RR highlighted partner collaboration as key to improving engagement and stats. Referrals: Northamptonshire referrals expected to rise with full BA team in place. Quarterly meetings with Cranfield Uni are proving valuable, generating multiple referrals. RR sees these as mutually beneficial and aims to replicate with other teams to build understanding of each other's services. Referrals and sources were reviewed, with the understanding these

should be higher. HM queried whether the 'financial support' category includes grants or other types of financial support and requested a further breakdown into loan finance, debt equity etc. YL highlighted Innovate UK offers more than funding - worth expanding our referral scope to more than financial. HM also requested a breakdown of the 359 referrals for 192 businesses, e.g. business demographics, size, and types of support needed.

Action: RR to add further breakdown of referral data and financial support breakdown to next GH board update.

Sources: 37 partners are currently referring into GH, which is positive. We have embedded the GH enquiry form onto WNC's website to support LA referrals. RR suggested this could be offered to LAs to further increase LA referrals.

Activity & Strategy: RR shared the 2025/26 activity overview. Luton tender was unsuccessful. IA raised tracking post-interaction impact; RR agreed it's important. Commercial income target is £20K, with £10K secured. LSIP work is being integrated via the Chamber and Tony Knaggs. Community membership remains free; commercial options under review. Website revamp planned for Q3. GH is supporting the Economic Growth Strategy and promoting BGS online.

Paid Membership Discussion: YL raised concerns about a potential shift to paid membership. RR clarified there are no plans to completely remove the free offering – the GH is government-funded and will always include a free element. Internal discussions are exploring sponsorship and income generation due to rising delivery costs. Other GHs are also exploring commercial models for sustainability.

Events & Sponsorship: 9 events have been held with 200+ attendees. Sponsorship secured: 1 platinum, 2 gold, and 1 partner totalling £10K, mainly from professional services working with businesses every day. We have completed membership swaps with the Chamber of Commerce and NNBN.

Communications & Engagement: New podcast launched, linked in with Radio Northampton and Radio NN. LinkedIn/social strategy refreshed, team trained, resulting in more followers and partner cross-promotion. Website survey launched for user feedback.

Action: Board to listen to podcast and share feedback.

Technology & Innovation: AI bot launching soon (online & phone) - acts as Business Advisor. **Action:** Board to advise if they want to trial service; RR to share details with anyone interested.

Mentoring: Lord Lieutenant's mentoring programme entering next round.

Strategic Planning: Data-driven support planning continues. No fixed commitments for 2026–2027; delivery will be tailored to regional needs.

4. Grants Update

Driving Innovation Grant Update: 120+ expressions of interest, 57 applications, 23 grants awarded. 24 additional applications passed internal scoring but couldn't be funded due to overwhelming interest. Lenders clinic held on 14 Oct for unsuccessful applicants.

New Grants Scheme:

- **November Launch:** pushed back due to Evolutive setup
- **Two grants** – Micro Capital Grant / Capital Growth Grant
- **Micro Capital Grant:** £500 to £3,000. Option to apply via video to improve accessibility.
- **Capital Growth Grant:** £5,000–£50,000. Applicants reaching panel stage will be invited to pitch their project to bring it to life. Any accessibility issues will

be encouraged to contact us to discuss. RR encouraged any further feedback from board on inclusivity.

Programme Structure: Roughly £1.5M over 3 years (~£500K/year). Likely 1–2 cohorts. Applications open until mid-Jan; awards by mid-Feb 2026. 10-month spend window post-award to avoid rush with claims, ending December 2026.

Geographic Balance: No fixed allocation per area. Marketing strategy includes sector-focused case studies (e.g. high street/retail) and press packs to encourage broad uptake. Sector priorities across the region will be considered and GH will market the scheme in a way that we hope would spread out evenly.

Partnerships & Promotion: RM emphasised legacy potential and importance of LA and partner involvement in promotion and signposting. RR agreed joint branding with LAs would be beneficial.

Action: RR to share grant documentation with the Board when ready.

5. Business Intelligence Update

HM: Fuelling Innovation campaign has really helped shift business mindsets - highlighted accessible support and small changes that can drive innovation. Also helped raise awareness of support currently in Northamptonshire and wider area. Strong partnerships formed (e.g. Central Arc Angels, British Business Bank). Focus now on strategic impact and sector-specific innovation.

PVB: Businesses facing rising costs and staffing shortages. Many absorbing costs or unable to fulfil orders due to lack of skilled workers.

LW: Quarterly Chamber Survey results show inflation and taxation as top concerns, both increasing from the previous survey. Exchange rate less of a worry, suggesting macroeconomic stabilisation.

YL: Central Arc Angels most active angels network in SM region – runs 3 events per year with 1 business per event typically receiving investment. MK Tech Week event revealed hidden business potential – aim to roll this out across MK more. Small Business Index will be released next week, last results were lowest since start of covid pandemic. Banks being unsupportive is having a knock on impact on overall economy. High employment costs and housing shortages also impacting wider economy. YL also noted FSB seeking stronger voice in MK economic discussions - feedback passed to NB.

NB: South Midlands Economic Growth Strategy signed off at the last Business Board Meeting – great this can be used as a united authority. Board keen to connect with local leaders. Devolution remains a key topic of discussion. Workshop held with Get Britain Working team on skills gaps and long-term unemployment. **Action:** GH board to share any case studies they want at Business Board with NB

RM: Hospitality sector under pressure – one third of businesses operating with only 1–2 months' cashflow. High vulnerability regarding poor trading months.

IA: Jaguar Land Rover issues affecting wider region. Energy costs and standing charges rising also a concern.

LC: Marshall Aerospace pulling out of Cranfield move noted as disappointing considering LA work required to get to final deal stages. Business closure and staff redeployment for

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PwC in MK noted. MK named for major investment - 40,000 homes, rapid transit. Consultation period opening for 2030–2050 MK growth plan.

EH: Bedford Borough Council facing financial challenges but continuing programme delivery.

VH: Several employment-focused programmes on the go (e.g. GBW, Connect to Work). Suggested future meeting discussion on aligning programme aims with business needs.

6. **AOB**

Terms of Reference

The new Terms of Reference were approved. RR stressed the board's role in actively promoting the South Midlands Growth Hub. Members should proudly share their involvement to raise the Hub's profile and be recognised as key regional representatives.

Membership

RR proposed increasing business representation on the board by inviting expressions of interest from local businesses. If agreed, an EOI form will be created and promoted through networks. The aim is to recruit three new business members, with further details to follow. Additionally, YL confirmed she will take over FSB representation following JT's secondment.

Next Meeting

The next meeting is scheduled for 17 December 2025. A final decision on whether to proceed with this date will be made when the minutes are circulated.

Attendees

Eleanor Karklas (EK)
 Rachel Mallows (RM)
 Ruth Roan (RR)
 Vicky Hlomuka (VH)
 Yvette Lamidey (YL)
 Melinda Frankland (MF)
 Pim Van Baarsen (PVB)
 Lewis Campbell (LC)
 Naomi Butters (NB)
 Louise Wall (LW)
 Helen Miller (HM)
 Ian Achurch (IA)

Organisation

Bedford Borough Council
 The Mallows Company, Chair
 South Midlands Growth Hub
 West Northamptonshire Council
 FSB
 South Midlands Growth Hub (Notetaking)
 Silverstone
 Milton Keynes City Council
 Icena, Business Board Lead
 Northamptonshire and MK Chamber of Commerce
 University of Northampton
 North Northamptonshire Council

Apologies

David Sheridan
 Julie Jeffery
 Justine Ives
 Rizwana Zaman
 Anna Bosworth
 Jennifer Thomas

Europa Components, Vice Chair
 MK College
 Bedford Borough Council
 Luton Borough Council
 Central Bedfordshire Council
 FSB