

BUSINESS REGULATORY SUPPORT HUB PILOT SERVICE – REVIEW OF PROGRESS

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Portfolio: Environmental Excellence; Economic Development

Ward(s) Affected: All wards

Purpose of the Report:

To present a review of the progress of the Business Regulatory Support Hub pilot service following its introduction in January 2022.

Recommendations:

1. To receive and review the report on the business regulatory support hub pilot service progress review, and provide feedback to officers as appropriate.

1. Summary

- 1.1 This report presents an overview of the Business Regulatory Support Hub pilot service, initially from January to October 2022 and secondly from June to November 2023 (ongoing).
- 1.2 The Business Regulatory Support Hub pilot service was started in January 2022 with the planned project outcomes being designed to promote the widest possible accessibility, delivery and uptake by local businesses of good, well-received and ultimately influential regulatory information and advice. The two key advantages to our communities to be maximised during this pilot are:
 - a. Growing business certainty, ability and confidence in their regulatory compliance both to maintain high standards and to encourage business success, diversity and growth.
 - b. Offering the highest standards of public protection to our residents and visitors who are served by or otherwise affected by business compliance.:
- 1.3 The original post holder left their post in late Autumn 2022 and following recruitment a new post holder took up the post in Spring 2023. In several places, data in this report refers separately to these two periods.
- 1.4 The report highlights some of the work planned during the remainder of the pilot. The Business Regulatory Support Hub pilot has funding in place and a fixed-term contract for the Coordinator post up to 31st May 2024.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Business Regulatory Support Hub pilot service was introduced in January 2022, developed jointly between the Council's Regulatory and Economic Growth services.
- 2.2 The pilot service was designed to offer an inexpensive but highly beneficial service to businesses that is complementary to, and one that bridges between, the specialist operational functions within Regulatory and Economic Growth. The aim being to support the local economy and employment opportunities, together with integrating awareness and adherence to any relevant legal requirements from an easy to access pilot service.

The appointment of a Business Regulatory Support Hub Coordinator has both responded to and actively sought out business enquiries at the first point of contact. The role and the right postholder has added value across a number of operational areas of service delivery, together with effective signposting to where specialist advice would be that 'next step' of support for our business customers.
- 2.3 The Business Regulatory Support Hub pilot had a temporary break in operation between 1st October 2022 and 7th June 2023, as the initial Business Regulatory Support Hub Coordinator secured continuity of employment in an alternative role (at the Council), with almost 9 months of the original 12-month pilot period having elapsed.

Whilst continuity options for the pilot were explored, arrangements were put in place to pick-up reactive work arising from the bespoke email (businesshub@southnorfolkandbroadland.gov.uk) and local rate telephone number (0345 034 8691) for the Business Regulatory Support Hub. The initial successes from the pilot service (refer to Background paper) had already been demonstrated and yet onboarding a new high calibre candidate for the Business Regulatory Support Hub Coordinator role for the remainder of the 3-month funded period was neither likely to be successful nor would it offer or value-for-money for such a short timeframe.

- 2.4 Alternative funding was secured from Economic Growth’s UK Shared Prosperity Fund for a 12-month period, allowing re-recruitment to begin in Spring 2023 and the Business Regulatory Support Hub pilot to be re-established in 2023.

A replacement due to staff turnover Business Regulatory Support Hub Coordinator was secured in post from early June 2023, picking up where the pilot was paused temporarily in 2022.

- 2.5 Interconnected to the provision of funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, the Business Regulatory Support Hub Coordinator has also supported the day-to-day on-site activities Carrowbreck House training facility. In turn, this has offered additional opportunities for the Business Regulatory Support Hub to develop networking and training options out of this excellent facility (refer to paragraph 5.2 of this report).

- 2.6 The Business Regulatory Support Hub Coordinator appointments (January 2022, and re-recruitment in June 2023) were tasked to:
- a. Bring together and enhance a wide range of standardised information and advice focussing on business regulatory compliance (see Figure 1 below).
 - b. Research business needs and what further information and advice would be helpful to businesses and / or to maximising the protection offered by local businesses to consumers and residents.
 - c. Explore how the Council could optimise its information, advice and support to businesses across and by connecting the range of business contact points and service connections.

Figure 1: Sources of Information



The following opportunities were identified:

- i. Promoting business grants and sharing local business knowledge
 - ii. Discovering any key regulatory compliance training needs that were insufficiently met in the current training marketplace.
 - iii. Promoting trade waste contracts where businesses were uncertain about how best to lawfully deal with their wastes.
 - iv. Maximising awareness and encouraging early applications for planning permission, licences, permits and registrations.
 - v. Saving time for environmental health officers on routine provision of standardised information.
- 2.7 The pilot service corresponds with the Council's strategic aim for 'Protecting our natural and built environment' (Delivery Plan 2022/23 – 2023/24) it forms the specific commitment R3: 'Business Regulatory Support & Advice Hub' with the intended outcomes:
- a) Improved regulatory compliance and business support.
 - b) Encouragement to take up additional information, advice and support.
- There is also an appreciated linkage to 'Growing our Economy'.

3. Current position/findings

- 3.1 The Business Regulatory Support Hub is currently in the second phase of delivery, since June 2023, which has adapted to challenges due to staff turnover during the pilot.
- 3.2 In order to monitor and evaluate the success of the pilot, the following nine success measures have been pursued:
1. Carrying out service remodelling to offer a high-quality pilot service.
 2. Gathering repackaged regulatory compliance information and advice in one place and efficiently offering it to businesses, both reactively and proactively
 3. Connecting up the various points of contact that businesses have with the Council and reaching out to offer the full range of support available.
 4. Maximising local business awareness and uptake of the enquiry service
 5. Numbers of businesses in Broadland / South Norfolk reached during the pilot.
 6. Numbers of businesses making use of the pilot service and information and advice
 7. Business customer satisfaction ratings and feedback
 8. Businesses reporting positive benefit derived from using the pilot service.
 9. Promoting uptake of Council services, including enhanced compliance services such as business start-up support and pre-inspection support

Commentary is provided below on progress against each of these measures.

3.3 Success measure 1:
Carrying out service remodelling to offer a high-quality pilot service

Developing and delivering an attractive, highly approachable and easy to contact 'one stop shop' approach to business regulatory compliance matters, linking closely with and promoting Economic Growth services.

The single point of contact hub and dedicated coordinator were set up to offer a single, highly responsive contact point and frees up the council's teams from provision of standardised information and advice, enabling them to focus on providing more specialist and professional advice and support where it is needed. This service is free of charge to businesses however many times they make use of the pilot service.

The Business Regulatory Support Hub has taken an 'ask me anything' approach and been reached by a dedicated phone number 0345 034 8691, in addition to a dedicated email address: businesshub@southnorfolkandbroadland.gov.uk

The Business Regulatory Support Hub webpage was further hosted under the 'Business' section of the joint Councils' website at:
www.southnorfolkandbroadland.gov.uk/business/business-regulatory-support-hub

The content has been further updated in 2023, including online YouTube video content 'Better call Sham' to improve overall messaging and content, with web design to attract and engage businesses.

3.4 Success measure 2:
Gathering repackaged regulatory compliance information and advice in one place and efficiently offering it to businesses, both reactively and proactively

The first task of the Coordinator which took a period of a number of weeks was to familiarise with, gather, organise and repackage where necessary the Regulatory services written information and advice designed for delivery to businesses. This body of support is now available and on offer in easy-access formats to all local businesses.

The Business Regulatory Support Hub Coordinator was appointed in January 2022. Their first tasks were to:

- i. Bring together and enhance a wide range of standardised information and advice focussing of business regulatory compliance.
- ii. Research business needs and what further information and advice would be helpful to businesses and / or to maximising the protection offered by local businesses to consumers and residents.
- iii. Explore how the Council could optimise its information, advice and support to businesses across and by connecting the range of business contact points and service connections.

The following opportunities were identified:

- iv. Promoting business grants and sharing local business knowledge.
- v. Discovering any key regulatory compliance training needs that were insufficiently met in the current training marketplace.
- vi. Reinforcing the food allergen messaging, particularly for 'Pre-Packed Food for Direct Sale'.
- vii. Promoting trade waste contracts where businesses were uncertain about how best to lawfully deal with their wastes.
- viii. Maximising awareness and encouraging early applications for planning permission, licences, permits and registrations.
- ix. Saving time for environmental health officers on routine provision of standardised information.

The enquiries, feedback and intelligence gained during the pilot to date about business needs have helped to continually improve and grow the offer and capability of the Business Regulatory Support Hub and the Council's wider Regulatory and Economic Growth services.

3.5 Success measure 3:

Connecting up the various points of contact that businesses have with the Council and reaching out to offer the full range of support available

For example, a new start-up business enquiring about grant availability, business rates, planning permission, food business registration or a trade waste contract. The Coordinator worked at length in the first months of the pilot to explore, fully understand and develop the connections between different Council services involved with businesses. This helped to identify which services would be contacted by businesses and when, and which compliance needs would be useful to advise and explain in advance when they fell in another service area.

Appendix 1 contains an illustration of some of the marketing content that has been utilised, with ever greater channel shift into social media content.

In November 2023, 1,000 letters were sent to businesses to cultivate greater awareness of responsibilities about commercial waste. This led to 12 inbound calls to discuss current waste arrangements (Success Measure 4) and two offers of assistance to provide intelligence of suspected non-compliant businesses. This proactive approach by the Hub Coordinator has helped to lessen the adverse impacts of fly-tipping and has been acknowledged in positive feedback comment (Appendix 4, page two) by the Council's Lead Environmental Enforcement Officer.

3.6 Success measure 4:

Maximising local business awareness and uptake of the enquiry service

Following early feedback from businesses, the following enhancements were made:

- i. Eye-catching branding, with a further re-refresh in 2023 (see examples in Appendix 1).
- ii. Specific and transferable branding to appeal to food businesses.
- iii. Branding on a checklist to help new food businesses obtain all the necessary registrations and compliance steps.
- iv. Tailored information packs to suit each type of business.

Marketing was delivered using Facebook advertisements, the Council's LinkedIn and social media accounts, and 'Nextdoor'. The engagement rate in Broadland with marketing ranged from 0.5% to approaching 7% using Facebook (target 2%). Similar patterns were seen when marketing via LinkedIn. A Facebook paid advertisement, which was inexpensive, resulted in a higher number of clicks to the Council's website. Marketing using 'Nextdoor' often resulted in queries outside of the scope of Regulatory services. The Business Regulatory Support Hub was also promoted and enabled to widen its awareness and connect with businesses at Business Breakfasts in Broadland and events including Local Flavours, the Royal Norfolk Show in 2022 and 2023, and the Council's Business Awards 2022, plus networking groups like the Federation of Small Business and engagement with the Norfolk and Waveney Wellbeing Service (see Appendix 2).

3.7 Success measure 5: Numbers of businesses in Broadland / South Norfolk reached during the pilot

It is not possible to count the number of businesses actively reached during the pilot, however the outgoing communication of support and advice via social media and direct messaging has been provided for the benefit of well over 1,000 businesses.

Further information is included in the graphical displays/charts in Appendix 3.

The number of engagements per month have seen a pattern of growth since June 2023, with 133 further engagements receiving bespoke advice.

3.8 Success measure 6: Numbers of businesses making use of the pilot service and information and advice

By the end of November 2023, the Business Regulatory Support Hub had offered information, support and advice to 320 businesses across Broadland and South Norfolk (direct engagements providing bespoke advice, tailored to the service users). The majority of this contact support was achieved by reaching out to businesses when contacting one or another Council service.

Initially, the number of incoming business enquiries was relatively small but inbound enquires have comprised 57% of overall enquiries between June and November 2023.

In November 2023, 33 Businesses engaged, 85% of which were inbound enquiries and only 36% were food related (mostly outbound contacts) which demonstrates promotion of the hub (and potentially word-of-mouth) is developing ever-increasing

traction and service user-derived traffic. 53 businesses in Broadland and 80 businesses in South Norfolk made contact and received tailored support and advice between June and November 2023,

In terms of reach, the businesses taking up the service were a mixture of permanent fixed-premises businesses, mobile food vending units and home caterers. The most common business types were food producers, caterers and retailers, beauty sector business, public houses, and retailers. However, as of November 2023, 50% of our contacts were for a wide range of non-food businesses. A full breakdown is available in Appendix 3.

3.9 Success measure 7:

Business customer satisfaction ratings and feedback

A telephone survey method was used to measure satisfaction ratings with the service provided by the Business Regulatory Support Hub, and this achieved 10 out of 10 across all surveyed businesses using the service. Specific customer feedback on satisfaction with the service included the following:

- i. "Very impressed about how helpful she was. She was willing to go the extra mile and I would have struggled with some things if she hadn't pointed me in the right direction about who to contact and so on".
- ii. "Useful and helpful and recognised I could have [asked for more information and advice than I had in the past]. Would have liked face to face contact but it was good to know the help hub was there if I have any queries and would recommend contacting them to others."
- iii. "Absolutely more than helpful; I phoned her more than once!"
- iv. "Not setting a new business. Catering for friends and family and wanted to get kitchen covered quite straightforward really helpful. Gave some good advice and sent helpful information to her."

During November 2023, a study was undertaken to show the take up of services and role that the Business Regulatory Support Hub has, with reference to the Economic Development service (Appendix 3 Engagement Data, final page), with outcomes arising (Build-Up Grant / Foundation Support) stemming from initial Hub Coordinator engagement, signposting and direct referrals.

For continual improvement of the service, feedback has been invited at each contact, with a selection of customer feedback comments provided at Appendix 4. To date, we have yet to receive any negative feedback.

3.10 Success measure 8:

Businesses reporting positive benefit derived from using the pilot service

The telephone survey was also used to measure how much difference it had made using the service. Responses were most commonly that it had made quite a lot or a great deal of positive difference. A minority of businesses, receiving confirmation of what they already knew, rated the impact as making no difference or a little bit of positive difference.

Specific customer feedback on the impact of using the service included the following:

- i. “Very helpful; it made a big difference and cut a lot of time out searching for things and being pointed in the right direction. She sent out useful information”.
- ii. “Communication was friendly-setting up new business I was anxious, but she put me at ease. She sent over really helpful paperwork and checklists which I’m now using. Really helpful.”

3.11 Success measure 9:

Promoting uptake of Council services, including enhanced compliance services such as business start-up support and pre-inspection support

The offer of this regulatory compliance support service, over and above conventional local authority methods of service delivery, has connected Council services together in additional ways to help ensure a seamless experience for businesses using the service. This has, for example, brought in a small number of trade waste contracts and identified some businesses that were operating without all the required registrations, permissions and licences. The pilot has also been used to carry out limited promotion and testing of enhanced services (already approved by the Council) for encouraging business confidence and compliance, for example business start-up and pre-inspection audit support.

4. Learning so far

- 4.1 The Business Regulatory Support Hub pilot service has successfully, quickly and effectively responded to inbound requests, as well as proactively making contact with applicants seeking to register a new food business establishment. The Hub Coordinator’s additional capacity has enabled the early intervention approach to be taken and ‘best practice’ support and advice be given in every appropriate case.
- 4.2 The enquiries, feedback and intelligence gained about business needs are intended to help continually improve and grow the offer and capability of the Business Regulatory Support Hub and the wider Regulatory and Economic Growth services. Where one business seeks a particular line of advice, this may be transferable support for other businesses, so the level of learning and advice continues to be developed and, importantly, be shared.
- 4.3 Customer satisfaction has been strong due to the pilot service and Hub Coordinator enabling early interventions. Previously, when the cost of living crisis started to impact business profitability and cash flows/turnover in late 2022, we were observing a downward trend (albeit slowly) in the Food Safety Service Measure 26 for the number of food businesses in the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme with ratings of ‘4 – good’ and ‘5 – very good’.

Following the re-establishment of the Business Regulatory Support Hub in June 2023, whilst still early days, the same Food and Safety Service Measures for Q2 in 2023/24 have either seen a slight improvement (Broadland) or the same outcome

as Q1 (South Norfolk) to arrest the downward trend over recent quarters. However, from a review carried out in November 2023, there is a 100% outcome of all food businesses receiving direct contact from the Hub Coordinator in achieving the success measure Food Hygiene Rating of 4 or 5; indeed 18 out of 19 food businesses achieved the highest 5-rating of Very Good (95%). This is a strong correlation from direct engagement to final outcome, and contrasts to the control study where 88% achieved a rating of 5 – Very Good without Hub Coordinator support. A full breakdown is provided at Appendix 5.

There are many variables to consider yet receiving early contact and high quality Regulatory advice (together with a self-assessment food safety checklist) certainly affords each new food business every opportunity to attain one of the higher Food Hygiene Ratings at that all important first food inspection by one of our team of Environmental Health Officers.

- 4.4 Whilst early experiences have helped to refine the pilot service approach over time, the main enhancements have been in the areas of promotion and marketing the Business Regulatory Support Hub and drawing upon the 'in business' acumen of our Hub Coordinator. Maximising access to business network opportunities is a current area of progress. Customer feedback is being closely monitored for further learning points.
- 4.6 Customers engaging with the pilot service have the reassurance that the Council's support is available should they require it again in the future. The Business Regulatory Support Hub service has been not only for new business start-ups, but for those businesses seeking to take that next important step to expand their business, or maybe relocate into our councils' districts from further afield.

5. Looking ahead

- 5.1 The Business Regulatory Support Hub has been exploring aims to increase 'footfall' into the further provision of support and advice. The aim going forwards will be to build upon the good work that has already taken place and, where necessary, reabsorb learning and new practice into the regulatory and economic growth teams. This may include further branding and online presence, and potentially sponsoring social media adverts on Facebook and procuring promotional material.
- 5.2 The tie-in with Carrowbreck House during the latter phase of the pilot has offered a facility to host events at this location, both to advertise support to businesses, as well as training courses, leveraging in the technical expertise from our cohort of professional officers. This offers an enhanced level of contact-based support that the professional environmental health and licensing officers subject to prevailing staffing resources in events such as 'How to Improve your Food Hygiene Rating'. This may also offer a small income stream if a nominal charge were to be levied once initial events had been piloted and where feedback suggests they would be worth hosting again.
- 1.3 Further consideration will be given to using business networks to reach a wider group of business contacts. However, a number of such network groups request a small contribution or annual subscription which would be a future budgetary consideration.

6. Issues and risks

- 1.1 **Resource Implications** –The pilot service involves a single officer (Business Regulatory Support Hub Coordinator), employed at Band D. Funding provides through to the completion of the two year pilot service in May 2024.
- 1.2 **Legal Implications** – The Business Regulatory Support Hub Coordinator post has enhanced the Council’s capacity to carry out its regulatory functions, with early advice streamlining a route to better statutory compliance, together with signposting potential business applicants to available funding sources, with a commitment towards grants and start-up viability. This has the effect of helping to raise business regulatory compliance standards in those businesses that the service reaches effectively. This is evidenced in Appendix 5.
- 1.3 **Equality Implications** – No equality implications have been identified.
- 1.4 **Environmental Impact** – Whilst the key areas of business engaging with the pilot are food and catering, retail and licensed premises, positive regulatory compliance by businesses tends to have a beneficial environmental impact for example in how wastes are controlled.
- 1.5 **Crime and Disorder** – The Business Regulatory Support Hub service has indirectly contributed to the food business start-ups attaining higher food hygiene ratings (avoidance of formal enforcement action against new Food Business Operators), it is relatively neutral in terms of crime and disorder.
- 1.6 **Risks** – At the conclusion of the Business Regulatory Support Hub funded pilot, the Council’s relevant front line services will directly deal with requests for support and advice. More broadly, businesses would self-service for advice published on the Council’s website, rather than receive a tailored approach aiming to maximise engagement with the local business sector. Some revised setting of expectations will be provided to support this.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1 The Business Regulatory Support Hub model has proven effective and efficient as an innovative approach to offer a friendly accessible service to our local business communities. The feedback from service users has been strongly positive and is indicative that people in business assign value to the advice and support provided, as well as trust the Business Regulatory Support Hub. This is reflected by repeat enquiries, where good first impressions have encouraged subsequent contacts for further advice.

- 7.2 Performance against services measures outlined in this report has been favourable, with excellent feedback from service users. The Business Regulatory Support Hub service pilot has landed well and developed in strength.
- 8.3 The added value overall of the Business Regulatory Support Hub pilot service can be summarised in two key benefits:
- a. Advice and support offer to businesses has been packaged and professionalised, particularly in Regulatory services, with a staff resource in place that now actively targets and engages with businesses in a forward-thinking and business-like approach. This is in contrast to more traditional approaches providing limited advice on request from more expensive professional officers.
 - b. The early intervention and engagement model, supported by active marketing to raise awareness of the pilot service, ensures that our local businesses can access a wide range of regulatory support and advice when they want or need it. It has involved listening to businesses and tailoring advice and support and, as a result, the Council can demonstrate a growing body of successful outcomes.
- 7.3 Strong support for the pilot service has been expressed from several partner agencies.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 To receive and review the report on the business regulatory support hub pilot service progress review, and provide feedback to officers as appropriate.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Marketing (Social Media & Website Content)

Appendix 2 – Local Connections

Appendix 3 – Engagement Data

Appendix 4 – Customer Feedback Comments

Appendix 5 – Engagement Comparators

Appendix 6 – Carrowbreck Activities

Background papers

Broadland District Council – Overview and Scrutiny Committee 15th November 2022: [Review of Business Regulatory Support Hub pilot service – review of progress](#)

South Norfolk Council – Scrutiny Committee 17th November 2022: [Review of Business Regulatory Support Hub pilot service – review of progress](#)