



Optimising Business Broadband
Evaluation 2015
*Delivery area: Shropshire and
Staffordshire*



June 2015

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Executive summary

Project	Optimising Business Broadband
Time period	Sept 2013 – June 2015
Areas covered	Shropshire and Herefordshire. Staffordshire from Nov. 2013
ERDF value	£108,233
Nos. of business assists	75/34

Key findings

- OBB was a small scale project which over its lifetime has provided 75 business assists, over double the ERDF target of 34. In addition it engaged with over 300 eligible companies.
- The project was a first in using external consultants for delivery. This approach was successful, and especially appropriate to the hi-tech nature of the project. Looking ahead, the model provides significant opportunity for future delivery.
- The proactive development and use of online and social media demonstrated the success of such an approach in generating momentum for a programme, illustrated by over 500 LinkedIn followers and over 1000 Twitter followers.
- Programme evaluation is currently being undertaken by the external consultancy to establish the business impact of OBB. Case studies developed to date however illustrate the impact which the programme has had on companies developing their marketing activities.
- The success of OBB and the lessons learnt provide a strong legacy to take forwards for future programmes:
 - There is significant potential value in contracting the service delivery to an external organisation which can provide a dedicated, focused, responsive and specialist resource. In a short timescale, OBB has developed significant brand awareness.
 - Event topics and titles benefit from being promoted at the level of understanding of, and relevance to, the target market rather than at the level of expertise of those delivering the service.
 - Delivery mechanisms, such as webinars, should be used to the extent they reflect the level of adoption of the target businesses. These were viewed a lot more when they were converted into YouTube videos as the client had the flexibility to view them when they were free.
 - Networking, online and social media methods for engagement reflect the ethos of the programme. Ensuring ERDF eligibility at this initial contact however could assist in developing a total focus on attracting those businesses that will contribute directly to the programme's targets.
 - Currently superfast broadband is not available throughout all of Shropshire and Staffordshire, and as it is rolled out it may be expected that demand for the support offered by OBB will grow.
 - The legacy of the project is a successful brand, a network of partnerships, a business support portal for SMEs.

1. Introduction

A consortium of three Shropshire Based consultancies was appointed in May 2015 to undertake the evaluation of Marches Financial Assistance & Business Support Schemes. Ask for Research, one of the consultancy firms, led on evaluating the Optimising Business Broadband Project (OBB) which was one element of these support schemes.

ERDF funding was applied for under Priority 2 – Stimulating Enterprise Development, with the project supporting Priority 1: Improving Business Performance.

In conducting the evaluation within the confines of a restricted budget, allowing limited consultancy activities, the following activities were undertaken by Ask for Research:

- Meeting with the project officer responsible for managing OBB
- Face-to-face and telephone discussions with a further 5 members of the Steering Group and Project Delivery Team
- Consideration of various aspects of OBB paperwork and procedures
- Research regarding strategic documents to provide a context to OBB.

Specifically with reference to OBB, the evaluation was to consider the following areas:

- Impact of promotion
- Content of events and effectiveness
- Changes to business marketing methods.

2. Background and objectives

The impetus for OBB came from an acknowledgement that there was a significant knowledge gap amongst SMEs regarding the opportunities offered by fibre broadband to transform business.

The overarching aim of OBB was therefore to stimulate business interest and encourage businesses to develop their understanding and application of ICT. The long term project aim was to increase the use of superfast broadband services for the whole community, and to increase the sub-region's economic competitiveness through business growth and job creation.

The programme, which covered Staffordshire and Shropshire comprised 4 levels of support:

Level 1 – Awareness Raising

This comprised running both high level and local events. The high level events were to be undertaken with the aim of selling the benefits of ICT optimisation to businesses across the region and building on the high profile of the Government sponsored BDUK Scheme. The local events were to be held in geographical areas and sectors where opportunities were being missed.

Level 2 – Practical learning

Practical learning was available to businesses throughout the duration of the project with businesses able to access support through webinars and development programmes.

Level 3 – Face-to-face support

Intensive support was made available through one-to-one diagnostics by ICT specialists and ICT business advisors. Consultants were to provide diagnostics to local SMEs to result in an action plan

providing the type of business broadband package, hardware, software and specialist support/training the company would require to fulfil its ambitions.

Level 4 – Follow-up and specialist training

This level responded to the collective training requirements identified in the action plan, providing webinars on specialist areas of support. Follow-up sessions were also to be undertaken with businesses 6 months after the face-to-face support to assess the anticipated growth as a result of implementing the action plan.

The support was aimed at SMEs and social enterprises and designed to address the distinct needs of key sectors including; Food & Drink, Horticulture, Manufacturing, Environmental & Services, Tourism & Leisure, Advanced Manufacturing, Defence & Security (including Cyber Security and Manufacturing).

The programme was very small-scale, with ERDF revenue funding of £108,233, making the total project cost of £216,467.

The number of outputs was as follows:

- 34 business assisted
- 34 business assists to be SMEs
- 1 business assist to be a social enterprise.

The “12 hour business assist” element comprised 7.5 hours of one-to-one activity couple with business engagement in other activities, such as events and online webinars, for the business assist to be complete.

Shropshire Council was the accountable body, responsible for coordinating the monitoring, reporting, budget management, procurement and contracting with the partners.

A Project Board with representatives from Shropshire Council and Staffordshire County Council was formed to oversee the programme.

3. Programme management

A new approach to programme delivery was introduced by OBB with the use of an external company, Winning Moves to deliver the OBB programme to businesses. The company had a proven track record in delivering IT support and the cutting edge expertise they could bring aligned well with the type of specialist IT support OBB was designed to offer.

Whilst the procurement process of appointing an external consultant did take a considerable time, which then had a knock-on effect regarding the timing of the project, outputs were nevertheless delivered as scheduled. In future, it will be possible to factor the time needed to procure external consultants if the model of external delivery is to be rolled out in association with the Growth Hub.

Winning Moves was allocated a higher level of targets (73 business assists) than required by ERDF funding (34 business assists). This was good practice which ensured that the targets were met and value for money was achieved.

Winning Moves were monitored weekly by telephone, conference meetings, face-to-face and quarterly board meetings. It was reported that Winning Moves colleagues were very good on the

day to day running of the programme and communication; they were very quick to respond and to provide online access to project folders to help with the monitoring.

It was concluded that working with Winning Moves provided a good 'pilot' for commissioning programmes to be delivered by external suppliers.

Overall, external provision was more reactive and quicker to respond than could have been achieved through internal delivery. The benefits were seen to be:

- A professional, independent and high quality website
- Development of contacts
- Quick reaction
- The way the project was marketed and perceived (i.e. it wasn't seen as another council project, it was perceived as something separate to the council)
- The webinars would not have happened without Winning Moves
- The level of social media, including 26 downloads
- Technical support – 6 webinars were put onto YouTube which could be accessed without the need to register (the council would not have had the technology to do this).

Compared with other ERDF projects evaluated at the same time, such as BEF and Eureka! Moment, the extensive use of social media, the value of an external website and webinars are all examples of best practice from which future projects can learn.

4. Marketing and promotion

OBB benefited greatly from having its own externally managed website. This provided the opportunity to update and respond quickly in comparison to restrictions of an internally hosted website, which other projects have experienced.

Social media had been used from the beginning, with around 500 followers on LinkedIn and over 1000 Twitter followers. This social marketing was seen as effective in raising awareness and the approach complemented the whole ethos of OBB – using available technology to promote the brand. In addition, the value of recommendation by word of mouth and social media was felt to support the programme's momentum. The social media activity far exceeded any other programme, with, for example blogs being run after each event.

It was possible for any company to sign up through the website and social promotion, and this self-selection approach by businesses made it difficult to ascertain ERDF eligibility. In future, it would be worthwhile considering the development of an online filter mechanism for this.

The Project Team were seen as very proactive in networking and promoting OBB, and the programme linked in well with other IT-related initiatives, such as Women in Rural Enterprise (WIRE). In a short space of time, OBB became a recognised brand in its own right.

The events

Winning Moves ran more events than the 12 events originally planned to add more weight to the programme. The events ranged from those which Winning Moves fully organised through to sharing a platform/providing a speaker at partner events such as those run by the Federation of Small Businesses.

In total around 20 events were run against a target of 12 events. These took place across the two counties and specific efforts were made to make them accessible to the more rural parts of the counties. Winning Moves linked with partners to promote the events which secured an average of around 20 participants at each.

Initially, the event content was decided at a stakeholder workshop when the event plan was first put together. Response was also made to the feedback sheets identifying any particular topics which employers wanted covering, and the content of events was varied based on what worked well. In addition, Winning Moves had run a similar programme in the Black Country and were aware of which content had been of interest to those businesses. As the programme progressed, the Project Team got to know businesses attending the events and learnt about the level of IT they were at and therefore what was appropriate for them. This will provide useful intelligence going forwards.

One lesson learnt was that those events focusing on advanced technology titles were less popular, and some like “Cloud Technology” were cancelled. It was felt that some of the wording used to promote the events may have dissuaded interest by some companies. In contrast, titles with direct content relating to sales and finance made it easier for businesses to assess the relevance and benefit. A 6 hour session run towards the end of the programme which covered SEO and E-marketing was well attended.

Feedback from the events was very positive with the vast majority of businesses reporting that:

- ✓ They now intended to upgrade to fibre broadband
- ✓ The event was relevant
- ✓ It helped them understand the subject area
- ✓ It helped them develop their skills
- ✓ They would recommend it to others

Client testimonials on the website illustrate the benefits which businesses achieved from attending the events:

“Thought provoking – content will help shape our future IT strategy.”

“Gave me the information I need to start using LinkedIn, we have a profile but nothing is being done with it”

“The OBB event has given me a much greater understanding of the subject and how we can utilise this for our benefit”

It was felt that the webinars were not as successful as had been anticipated, and the last round of these was dropped. In hindsight, as with the event titles, this is likely to reflect the stage of IT adoption in the two counties.

5. OBB and partnerships

It was noted that there were quite a few social media programmes in the market at the time, which provided the opportunity for cross-referrals. Examples include Women in Broadband, FSB and the Chamber of Commerce. From the outset, OBB did not want to go into competition with organisations hosting similar events but work alongside them and prove OBB’s reputation by offering a level of information which would gain their respect.

Numerous business networks recommended OBB to their clients and supported OBB through social media and at their own events. This open communication meant that there was a significant element of cross-referral to, for example, the Women And Broadband project.

In general, partnership working between the two councils was seen to have worked well:

“Shropshire has managed it brilliantly, it’s quite stringent for European funding and Nikki’s fantastic. Logistically it’s always challenging working across authorities.”

6. Project spend and outputs

The planned spend of £216,561 has been achieved. The direct cost of outsourcing (i.e. to Winning Moves) was £139,362.50, the internal management costs were £77,198.50. These internal costs covered the salaries of the part time manager, claims and monitoring officer and overheads. The management role also included marketing and event organisation.

The overall management costs incurred by Shropshire Council are relatively high from a small budget, however in future, more activity could be commissioned in this way providing more cost efficiencies and better value for money thought managing projects as a single contract. Despite this, given that the project has achieved twice its target numbers OBB represents very good value for money in terms of outputs.

As can be seen, for a small-scale project running over a short space of time, the project achieved double the ERDF targets against all measures.

Outputs	Achieved	% target achievement
34 business assists	75	220%
34 businesses assisted to be SMEs	75	220%
1 business assist to be a social enterprise	2	200%

42 of the business assists were in Staffordshire and 33 in Shropshire.

A further target involved 73 businesses in receipt of intensive support implementing actions within their Action Plan and increasing business turnover by 4% thereby boosting GVA in the two counties by £10,103,856. At this stage, monitoring information is not available to comment on this aspect.

An evaluation of the 75 businesses which have received their 12 hour business assists is currently being undertaken by Winning Moves. The responses to these questions will provide the information to assess the financial impact of OBB, changes to marketing and other IT activities, uptake of Superfast Broadband and impact on GVA.

“We’re really proud of it – it’s reached and helped a lot of people, a lot of the people are doing the networking for us!”

As a result of the programme, businesses are doing things differently; taking on Superfast Broadband where they can and engaging in social media. Whilst there was some comment that the programme was small scale in its achievements, it was only ever intended to be small-scale at this stage of fibre broadband roll out, and the experience will be invaluable in planning future digital

enterprise support. In addition to the one to one business assists, the events have reached hundreds of participants and the scale of the twitter and LinkedIn followers and webpage hits indicates the appetite for continued engagement.

It was noted that local companies are now engaged and this provides a readymade market for taking things forward in the future. The need for market research was identified, to take these companies to the next stage and ensure their views and needs are taken on board. Integration with other programmes such as the Business Enterprise Fund would also allow businesses to benefit from capital grants and other forms of support.

Currently superfast broadband is not available throughout all of Shropshire and Staffordshire, and as it is rolled out it may be expected that demand for the support offered by OBB will grow.

Looking ahead it is considered that the legacy of the programme is:

- Expertise in outsourcing delivery
- A business support portal for SMEs
- A valuable network of connections
- The OBB Brand is in development within the education sector
- The brand will be continued for a further 6 month period

7. Lessons learnt

- The time taken to procure external consultants needs to be factored into future programmes where the intention is to contract out external delivery.
- The project has been an effective pilot for outsourcing, and in future there is scope for management cost efficiencies by delivering more projects this way to gain better value for money.
- Local businesses engaging with the programme tended to be at the lower end of the IT spectrum and marketing and events need to respond to that and work from where they are.
- ERDF eligibility criteria which excludes B2C businesses and agriculture means that more businesses which could have benefitted from the support are excluded and there would be merit in exploring alternative finance options.
- There was some barrier in converting interested businesses to commit to a one-to-one support, largely in relation to the time constraints of small business managers.
- Simple ways for businesses to self-select online in the future, for example providing a map or post code of eligible areas, with those falling outside the required criteria not physically being able to then move to the next stage to register online, could save resources that could be directed to the target businesses.

8. Conclusions

OBB provides the first example of a Shropshire-run programme using an external consultancy to deliver a programme. From a standing start, significant progress was made in exploiting the benefits of such an arrangement, and recommendations are being developed in-house to support this approach for future programmes.

The arrangement benefitted the programme in terms of the level of response and flexibility which an external agency can provide, furthered by the high level of technical expertise in the OBB arena. The marketing benefitted from an independent and highly technical online and social media mix.

A conclusion common to all recent evaluations is that better integration of projects would benefit both businesses and delivery partners. This would mean that the offer could be more of a rounded business support package, where OBB is integrated with other support, and there is less working in silos. The proposed Growth Hub will offer a number of opportunities in this area.

The partnership work has created new links with other organisations. For example, FSB was originally negative towards OBB, thinking investment should be in the installation of Superfast Broadband rather than engaging with businesses. The relationship has developed and OBB have since shared an FSB event.

In terms of marketing, the fact that the more highly technical titles such as “Cloud Computing” had low appeal whilst the more generic titles relating to “How IT can grow a business” had far greater appeal, may be a reflection of the stage local businesses are at on the learning curve. This needs to be taken into account when planning ahead and in developing future marketing and communications; the message needs to be relevant and appeal to the target audience based on their level of knowledge and understanding, as opposed to perhaps the specialists’ level of knowledge.

Perhaps further illustrating the stage of IT development at which the target businesses were at was the low take up of the webinars. This again suggests that whilst the programme is promoting the benefits of new technology, it needs to be promoted and delivered at the level of technological understanding which the target market can associate with.

The external consultants were given a target of “business assists” over double that required by DCLG funding. This has appeared to work well in assuring delivery. DCLG have received over double the outputs for the allocated funds and there is a sound basis on which to take the work forward.



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