

21st MEETING - NATIONAL ECONOMIC FORUM: 19 NOVEMBER 2018

DISCUSSION REPORT: SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE AVAILABLE TO BUSINESS

Hosts: Fergus Ewing, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy
Kate Forbes, Minister for Public Finance and Digital Economy

Facilitators: David Oxley, Highlands and Islands Enterprise
Jane Martin, Scottish Enterprise
Hugh Lightbody, Business Gateway
Rob Dickson, South of Scotland Economic Partnership

Overview

The Scottish Government aims to grow Scotland's economy by making it one of the best places in the world to do business. This means supporting Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), improving business regulation, and investing in the future. To do this, the Scottish Government needs to ensure that Scotland's businesses have all the information and support they need to succeed and grow. Working with key partners is essential to succeed.

Format of Workshop

Around 40 businesses and representatives were at the workshop which focused on two areas:

- What are key issues and challenges in the current business support system?, and
- How can support and guidance be delivered better going forward

Tables of 8-10 discussed each of the topic areas in turn, with each table facilitated by a Scottish Government or SG Agency representative. Mr Ewing and Ms Forbes were able to listen and contribute to the discussions on each table

Key points raised included

Key Issues and Challenges

- The support system still feels disjointed to many
- Movement between agencies can be clunky, e.g. moving from Business Gateway to HIE/SE, but when it works well it works really well
- Lack of clarity over which sectors are important to the Scottish economy, and some businesses felt their sector was sometimes disregarded.
- New entrants to the system find navigating the system challenging
- Doing business in Scotland can be more expensive, e.g. transport costs, energy, non domestic rates
- In addition to the public sector support, it was recognised that support is available from private sector, e.g. banks, accountants, Chambers of Commerce, but this support is not universally available to all businesses, e.g. Chambers do not exist across whole of Scotland
- Entrepreneurship culture needs to be built in from school

- A better joined up process between schools and businesses would ensure schools are providing businesses with employees with the right skills, and businesses would be highlighting the opportunities locally to school
- Cashflow remains of fundamental importance to businesses ,and accessing finance can still be a challenge
- The overall support system needs to be more agile and transparent to users
- Innovation is important for growth, but it does not exclusively mean digital
- Scotland is recognised as a place with provenance and quality, but more needs to be done to promote Scotland as place to do business
- Businesses should not rely exclusively on the public sector for support, and an improved system of self help should be available

Support and Guidance Improvements

- Priority to keep the application process as simple as possible, with clear and understandable guidance for applying for grants
- A one stop shop was considered very important, so that businesses know where to go to for support
- Support should be available to all businesses, and digital access is important
- A better system of funnelling good innovative ideas through a peer review system to ultimately receiving finance
- Funding is important, but there are other ways by which Government can support businesses, e.g. tax credits
- The needs of businesses vary, e.g. what a start up needs is different from a mature established business, and there was support for a more bespoke approach based on customer needs

Ministerial Comments

At the conclusion of the event, both Cabinet Secretary Ewing, and Minister Forbes took the opportunity to give their thoughts and thank all those attending for their valuable input. Specific comments from the ministers were as follows

Cabinet Secretary, Fergus Ewing

- The Globalscots service is an under utilised part of the support system, and can the use by businesses should be encouraged
- There are many more Scottish Government agencies than the enterprise agencies involved in areas which affect business, and their aim should be to supportive of business growth as well as their specific responsibilities
- Priority to ensure the account management system of the agencies works well, and provides a continuity of support to businesses

Minister, Kate Forbes

- Need to ensure that the best and ideas and opportunities come to the surface
- Highlighted the ScotlandIsNow campaign, and the requirement for Scotland to sell itself overseas

- Priority is to ensure the provision of an environment where businesses in Scotland can thrive