

Skills Made Easy: evaluation

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*In January 2016, NIACE and the Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion
merged to form Learning and Work Institute*

Learning and Work Institute

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Learning and Work Institute (L&W) is an independent think-tank, policy and research organisation dedicated to lifelong learning, full employment and inclusion. L&W researches what works, develops new ways of thinking and implements new approaches. Working with partners, L&W transforms people's experience of learning and employment. L&W work benefits individuals, families, communities and the wider economy.

L&W strives for a fair society in which learning and work helps people realise their ambitions and potential throughout life, and improve people's experiences of learning and employment.

Executive Summary

The Skills Made Easy (SME) service was designed as part of the Sheffield City Region (SCR) City Deal to address low levels of apprenticeships in the region and to promote growth among the large number of small to medium enterprises in the area. The service consists of a team of account managers engaging and supporting employers with their skills needs, with the aim of identifying opportunities for upskilling and apprenticeship placements.

In the past three years, the service has delivered 2,266 apprenticeship starts undertaken by 2,162 apprentices; approximately three-fifths (57%) of its target of 4,000. The upskilling target was exceeded, with upskilling undertaken by 2,079 individuals compared to a target of 2,000.

Promoting the service

During the pilot, SME has developed a targeted approach to engaging stakeholders of different types and now conducts a range of promotional activities, in addition to the face-to-face visits its account managers regularly conduct.

In the early days, the approach taken for targeting employers was not considered systematic by several of the stakeholders that were interviewed. However, stakeholders agreed that engaging target employers was inherently difficult, as they are often very time constrained. The approach now is to offer bespoke networking opportunities that are focused and accessible to small employers.

Likewise, SME have developed their approach to working with providers. Some stakeholders felt SME had missed early opportunities to work with providers to identify employers. Despite this many providers are now regularly involved with SME, and some saw SME as integral to their business.

The user experience

The experience of users, both employers and learners, was broadly very positive. Our interviews and surveys with both groups showed that account managers were able to offer a high quality service that users were satisfied with. Employers particularly appreciated the intensive support they received.

*“Very positive, explain what they can offer; what is available, learning providers, and upskilling with existing staff. A quick understanding of what is needed, and actually a caring approach, not just ticking boxes, not a numbers exercise.” **Employer***

Indeed, half of the employers interviewed stated that the SME service was the reason why they took on an apprentice.

Small employers with limited time to research skills options valued someone offering to do it for them. This was in contrast to the poor experience some employers reported when dealing with training providers directly. Particularly when the end result – the apprentice candidate identified by the training provider – were generally unsuitable.

Learners were also very satisfied with the service they received from SME. Many appreciated the local support; it helped to make the process of finding a placement less daunting.

However, a number of stakeholders were less satisfied with the responsiveness of some of the administrative functions of the service. This revolved around the time it took to process payments, internal communications, and the usability of the online portal for managing training – the system used to collect and select provider bids for employers using the service.

Some stakeholders also highlighted the current governance arrangement as an area in need of review. Some felt that the lines of communication and responsibilities were at times confused. However, some stakeholders felt that the end of the pilot would mean that this could be easily addressed.

How Skills Made Easy makes a difference

Almost all stakeholders felt that a local skills service was important. A number also felt that the impartiality of Skills Made Easy was important for those who used it, providing guidance that was free of the profit motive. Employers did not explicitly say that this was important for them. For learners, the service offered a local and supportive service that helped with the challenges of navigating apprenticeship applications.

The consensus from all we spoke with was that:

- A **face-to-face service** appears to be the most effective way of engaging time limited small employers in the skills system
- **Account managers** will continue to be a valuable offering to employers if they have **expert and up to date knowledge** of training options and funding opportunities
- The current **online portal system** used by Skills Made Easy to manage providers and contracts has not been a core part of the offering during the

pilot, and the introduction of Digital Apprenticeship Service suggests that it will likely become obsolete.

- Despite early challenges, Skills Made Easy has now developed into a **brand** with traction. Given the challenges associated with engaging employers it would likely be a loss if this brand was lost to the region. The Skills Made Easy website is an example of where the brand has high visibility.

Introduction

The Skills Made Easy service has been running as a pilot in the Sheffield City Region for the past three years with the aim of increasing the number of small and medium sized enterprises who take on apprentices or upskill their staff.

Learning and Work Institute were commissioned by the City Region to evaluate the service in order to assess the effectiveness of the service.

Aims of this report

This report sets out the findings of the evaluation. In particular, it will explore the appropriateness and effectiveness of SME in relation to:

- Its marketing and engagement
- The design and delivery of the service
- The experience of learners and employers

The report also explores:

- The governance of Skills Made Easy; and
- The main challenges ahead for the service.

Methodology

Learning and Work Institute used a mixed methods approach for this evaluation. For service users (employers and learners) we made use of SME's databases to contact them via email to conduct short online quantitative surveys (focusing on awareness of SME, engagement, and user experience).

Survey results are reported as absolute numbers, rather than percentages, in this instance due to the relatively small number of responses that were received.

For a more nuanced view of how the pilot had worked, we also completed 18 qualitative interviews, with a range of stakeholders. We used semi-structured in-depth discussion guides to collect insight and opinions on the service and the challenges involved in its delivery. Most of these interviews were conducted over the phone; a small number of stakeholders met with researchers face to face.

The stakeholder groups we spoke with were as follows:

- Strategic level stakeholders (both external and internal to the service – i.e. SFA, LEP and local authority representatives)
- Service users (employers, learners and providers of varying sizes and type)
- Skills Made Easy delivery staff

Attempts were also made to speak with candidate referral partners, but none were willing or able to participate in our research. This group would include Jobcentre Plus advisors or employment agencies. They may have had wider comments on the impact of the service on potential learners and apprentices.

All the interviews were completed using semi-structured interview techniques using discussion guides focused on each stakeholder type. Each interview was recorded and subsequently analysed to assess the themes running across and within each stakeholder strand.

When reviewing individual responses, it is important to note not only the context of who is providing the information, but also the time that has elapsed. It is important to be mindful of the development of the service over the period of the pilot. For example, responses given by stakeholders who have not had recent access to the Skills Made Easy service are likely to differ from those who have made use of the service more recently.

About the service

The Skills Made Easy service was conceived as part of the City Deal Business plan to promote economic growth in the region. Sheffield City Region has a private sector economy that is dominated by small to medium employers, many of which have not engaged with the skills agenda, or the publicly funded skills system.

The business case for Skills Made Easy was to create a brokerage to draw in these small employers with a view to providing them with a bespoke skills offering that was responsive to their needs and simple and easy for employers to use. In turn, this would tap into an additional market for apprentices and so contribute to improving skills and growth within the City Region.

Initially Skills Made Easy planned to use existing training brokerages (sector specific intermediaries) to deliver support to employers; using a core administrative staff to coordinate activities and provider bidding. After some time using this approach, their performance of the contracted brokers dictated that an alternative arrangement was put in place and a team of account managers were eventually directly employed by Skills Made Easy to deliver in workplaces around the region.

Since inception, the service has contacted 6,844 companies in the Sheffield City Region. Interest has been high, with over half of contacted companies (3,575) engaging with the service. Of these, approximately two fifths (1,405) have taken up some form of training.

In total, the service has delivered 2,266 apprenticeship starts undertaken by 2,162 apprentices; approximately three-fifths (57%) of its target of 4,000 starts. In contrast, the upskilling target was exceeded, with upskilling undertaken by 2,079 individuals compared to a target of 2,000. Funding for upskilling has been twice as likely to come from the SFA than other sources, with 1,379 individuals undertaking SFA-funded upskilling (137% of the 1,000 target) compared to 700 undertaking non-SFA-funded upskilling (70% of the 1,000 target).

Skills Made Easy Sheffield have achieved these results from a standing start and in a region where participation in apprenticeships was particularly low.

Engagement and marketing

For Skills Made Easy to be successful in generating new apprenticeships it needed to find new ways of engaging small businesses in the area. The ambition was to tap into the body of employers in the region who had not already engaged or been active in sourcing skills and apprenticeships for their businesses.

Targeting small employers

Stakeholders were undecided as to whether Skills Made Easy had been successful with targeting at its outset. The brokerages services¹ recruited by Skills Made Easy were deployed to approach business, to make new contacts with unengaged employers and to develop leads using traditional promotion materials that were produced in-house by the local authority. On the ground, few stakeholders felt this approach was systematic in targeting the right businesses in the early stages.

“I think they really need to do a better job of advertising themselves. I don’t think that many people know about them”. **Employer**

“when my sales team are speaking with employers, it’s rare that any of them know what Skills Made Easy is or what it does” **Provider**

However, as the service has matured the methods used to promote Skills Made Easy have become more sophisticated. Networking events are now being used for specific industry sectors, along with events for providers working via the service and online portal system.

“it had taken a bit of time to build momentum for the service but the offering is now pretty well known ... people were aware of it.” – **Strategic Lead**

“I know they get out there and try to engage businesses, but I don’t know how successful they’ve been.” - **Employer**

A number of stakeholders thought that much of the promotion work had to be done on the ground; speaking directly to employers and promoting the service with schools and colleges that refer potential apprentices. Several who spoke with us felt that account managers, by virtue of providing a high quality service that employers are aware of, should be the main source of promotion for Skills Made Easy.

¹ Initially SME employed existing services to perform the account management function. The service level and performance of these existing services were not as the pilot intended. Subsequently, it was decided that SME would directly employ account managers and not sub-contract.

Many within the delivery process, both internally at Skills Made Easy and providers also felt that there was still a need to better target specific sectors; this is now part of the service's work. Account managers we spoke with thought that greater traction could be gained with employers if they provided more labour market data on skills gaps in the region and how these gaps could affect their business in the future.

However, this perspective should be tempered with the data on what has been achieved over the lifetime of the service. Of the total number of apprenticeships facilitated by the service, Skills Made Easy have achieved a high proportion in High Value Added sectors (Finance, ICT, Creative and Digital (CDI), Engineering, Manufacturing and Construction).

Figure 1. SME Apprenticeships by sub sector

Sub-Sector	% of SME target clients	% of Non-target SME clients*	% of Total Apprenticeships
Business	28.0%	18.2%	26.2%
Finance			
ICT			
CDI			
Child care	19.3%	19.0%	19.3%
Adult Care			
Other Care			
Engineering	26.7%	47.7%	30.6%
Manufacturing			
Construction			
Hospitality	25.9%	15.1%	23.9%
Retail			
Logistics			
Overall numbr	2,266	516	2,782

*Source: Skills Made Easy MI. *these are employers who did not meet SME scheme criteria.*

To bolster take-up of apprentices, some stakeholders discussed whether other partners in the Skills Made Easy endeavour had been engaged sufficiently; this was particularly the case with the involvement of providers. One provider felt there should be a bigger role for them – and other providers – in marketing and engagement more generally.

“We’re all fighting for the same side and that the more apprentices recruited, through whatever route, the better.” – Provider

However, another provider considered that they had been able to contribute to engagement in cases where they had existing relationships, which helped to sell the Skills Made Easy service.

Importantly, it seemed that marketing and targeting activities were now more aligned with the City Region strategic plan. Account managers reported organising activities focusing on green technologies, for example, and were aware of the need to identify High Value Added sectors to promote growth in the region.

Employers who responded to our survey identified that account managers were the primary ‘first point of contact’ when asked how their business had first heard about the service. The largest group (13 out of 29) first heard about it through contact from an account manager. This was followed by contact from a training provider (seven), finding the service’s website (three), employer network or forum (three), word of mouth (three) and local or national media (two).

It should be noted that after learning about the service most employers (25 out of 34) did not have any questions on the service and thought that the information provided was clear. A small number (eight) found the information less clear with one employer finding it unhelpful.

Engagement with learners was hard to gauge. Promotion was seen as an ongoing process and, as will be discussed, finding learners for specific placements was a challenge at times. Of the learners that responded to our survey, around half (five out of 11) heard about the service through their workplace. The National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) website (three) also featured, as did the Skills Made Easy portal (two).

Innovation

The approach to engaging with potential users appeared to improve over time, with Skills Made Easy developing more innovative approaches. The website is one example of this which was developed much later; as are the other social media offerings and networking events. Nonetheless, there remained a desire to do more, particularly through more targeted use of social media for engagement of employers in specific industries rather than just marketing.

The ease of accessing information was also seen as key. The message from most stakeholders we consulted with was that any attempt to engage employers had to be as easy as possible for them to use. For example, one account manager described

how events they organised were now much shorter so that employers had the time to attend.

“I have seen my account manager at many of the networking events I go to...It’s the marketing of this that’s particularly difficult. Particularly with smaller employers, they don’t have the time and they don’t always latch on to how important this can be.”

Employer

Delivery

The delivery model for Skills Made Easy has remained consistent over the pilot, albeit with a change in brokerage arrangements during the programme and some additions to the support that has been offered to learners.

The approach has been for account managers to meet face-to-face with employers in their place of work, in order to assess the skills needs of an employer and attempt to work out what skills options are best for the business. Account managers may identify skills gaps in the labour market of which employers may not be aware. Account managers also spoke of setting out strategies with employers for upskilling existing staff so that responsibilities could be shifted around to generate a need for apprentices.

In addition to these advisory services, Skills Made Easy sources providers and candidates via the Skills Made Easy website (where apprenticeship opportunities are advertised) and the online portal, either by the employer or by the service on their behalf. The online portal also aims to foster competitive tendering from providers, in order to generate the best deal for employers. Account managers also advised employers on the grant and funding options that may be available to them.

Administrative staff within Skills Made Easy and account managers provide ongoing administrative support.

Account managers

Account managers spoke of the importance of a face-to-face approach; a sentiment echoed by providers and employers alike. It was felt that a face-to-face approach made it easier to engage with employers in the first instance, particularly those who were yet to engage with skills providers. Almost all the employers surveyed had a good impression of the account manager service too, with 29 out of the 32 who had engaged with them reporting that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with account managers.

Most of the frontline stakeholders we spoke with underlined that many employers were unlikely to pick up leaflets and take time to research skills independently. This appeared to validate the view of account managers that they were the key to successful engagement. One stakeholder felt that the account manager support was the USP for Skills Made Easy.

“there isn’t any equivalent intensive support available to small and medium businesses to broker and help them navigate the training system.” **Delivery**

This was echoed by an employer, who was impressed with the quality of service that had been provided in their interaction with a Skills Made Easy account manager.

“In terms of what they offer I think it is broadly the same as other providers; however I would normally only chose someone who is known to me and trusted. But after the meeting and the information they gave to me I’m confident that this is going to work.” **Employer**

“without [account manager] we just wouldn’t have got it done” **Employer**

Employers wanted to have an account manager that was independent but with an expert opinion. An employer who had engaged with Skills Made Easy twice, once at the very beginning of the pilot (when the external account manager service was being used by SME) and again more recently, illustrated this point best.

“Very positive, explain what they can offer what is available, learning providers, and upskilling with existing staff. A quick understanding of what is needed, and actually a caring approach, not just ticking boxes, not a numbers exercise.” **Employer**

This view was supported by the online survey. The majority of employers were satisfied with the information given by their account manager: 29 out of 31 agreed that their advisor was knowledgeable about the needs of their business. Almost all employers (29 out of 30) agreed account managers gave a good explanation of the process of hiring an apprentice or that they gave a good explanation of the process of upskilling their staff (27 out of 29).

Impartial advice

Some stakeholders (mainly those involved in the service at a high level) described impartiality as a key element of the Skills Made Easy service, but overall stakeholders did not agree as to whether this was critical for users.

Providers had differing views; with some believing that there was potential bias in how account managers referred on to providers, while others saw account managers

as acting independently at all times. These differences seemed to be related to the size of the provider and was perhaps a reflection on their relative dependence on the Skills Made Easy service for their own business leads. In addition, a number of the larger providers had existing sales teams working to try and engage new employers, whereas smaller providers saw the SME marketing work as central to their employer engagement.

There was more consensus between what account managers themselves said and what employers felt about the offering. Each said that the Skills Made Easy support was transparent, and account managers emphasised that the decisions on who should be contracted with for training were very much left to employers.

“[account manager] did have a view on some of the providers. She said, we have some apprentices with these, I don’t know much about these ones; but she never pushed the matter and it was totally up to us.” **Employer**

Administration systems

Very few stakeholders mentioned the online portal as an important function of the service; despite it being a platform for facilitating provider competition. There was a sense that it was not particularly user friendly, or that it was used only if it was completely necessary.

“our team never use it [online portal] to bid for things, we find the candidates and put it through the system at the end so we can access the funding” **Large provider**

“it is a bit clunky at times and it’s timed out on me in the past too, so you have to go back in and re-enter stuff” **Large provider**

“we said what we were ... and they came back to us with two providers’ briefs...We’re a small company and we don’t have the time to go through searching for options.” **Employer**

However, this was not universal; one provider we spoke with said they had used the online portal extensively and had very little issue with it. Some stakeholders mentioned being able to use short cuts in the system that saved time, or used it only after a placement had been finalised. This could either be seen positively – highlighting a flexible system – or may suggest an issue with process.

Given that stakeholders that described using it most reported fewer complaints, the former may be closer to the truth.

Over and above the IT systems used, there were some complaints about the wider systems and processes. Several stakeholders – providers and employers – suggested that response times from administrative functions could be slow or complicated.

*“there seems to be a piece of paperwork for every activity that you do with a candidate, which can make it hard to deal with. - **Provider.***

“we had to raise a purchase order number, then we had to send out an invoice, then make a claim.... In this day and age there must be an easier way to do this stuff.”

Employer

However, there was agreement that, over the phone, most stakeholders received a good response from staff, who were described as being helpful.

Providers suggested that at times the quality of administrative service could be an issue. This was often noted at the same time as commenting on the administration costs they paid. Several providers had teams that duplicated some of the Skills Made Easy functions (sales, payment administration etc.).

*“Fundamentally that’ll only work if they improve their administrative and compliance side of things, because they do not pay you, and they do not sort out their financial and employer side of things in a timely fashion” **Provider***

Finally, one provider we spoke with mentioned experiencing issues around different roles and responsibilities, with it being unclear at times whether the provider or Skills Made Easy were responsible for actions such as talking to the employer.

Competition

The Skills Made Easy service has a secondary goal of increasing competition within the skills sector locally. This would come about through the bidding process that the brokerage service has created. Almost all stakeholders involved in delivery reported participating in some form of selection process. The online portal had been designed to help facilitate this competition, however, many stakeholders described having been part of the bidding process without having used it. However, in some instances, where employers had decided on a provider in advance of working with Skills Made Easy, account managers may have simply been avoiding unnecessary work for them.

Some stakeholders suggested that other barriers needed to be overcome that were out of the control of the service. The most obvious issue was the geographical proximity of the different parties involved in any apprenticeship placement.

*“We can’t really bid for everything, if a learner is out of the area, then the [college] is always going to have an advantage, because you’re going to have to travel to see the placement.” **Provider***

Commercial interests were also a factor. One provider described how they made use of the service so they could benefit from the funding – sourcing the employers and candidates themselves. Another large provider described having set offerings that meant that small contracts were not commercially appealing.

*“We’ve been told that we likely not get a contract if we don’t add some sort of bespoke element for a bid. We’re not going to do that as we have our courses so we don’t really bid anymore.” **Provider***

This view in particular, highlights the challenges faced by bodies seeking to make the market for skills more competitive.

Despite this resistance from some providers, Skills Made Easy have been able to introduce new apprenticeship frameworks and bespoke offerings to the City Region. By using the competitive tendering approach, Skills Made Easy have encouraged new providers to the region who are able to deliver the training required by local employers (thus deepening the market for apprenticeship training).

Furthermore, as figure 2 shows, blended or bespoke apprenticeship offerings have also become more of a feature in the City Region.

Figure 2. Apprenticeships frameworks new to SCR

Full Framework rolled out to SCR	
Course	Learner No.
Security Systems	8
Glass Industry/Fenestration	23
Medical Secretariat	13
Smart Metering	5
Jewellery Manufacturing	2
Roofing	9
Butchery	7
	67
'Blended' Frameworks - Additional Bespoke Training added to an existing Framework	
Mech. Engineering + Geometric Tolerance Testing	4
Warehousing + Folk Lift Truck License	28
Mechanical Engineering + FANUC Robotics Training	3
Manufacturing Apprenticeships + built in CAD	5
Polymer Manufacturing	7
Motor Vehicle Maintenance + Tyre Fitting	3
Telephony Receptionist Business Admin	5
Accounts Business Admin (Sage added)	12
Horticulture encompassing Chainsaw Training	3
Health and Social Care in Challenging Behaviour Environment	6
Business Admin + Social Media	5
IT Coding	3
Construction + Powered Access Equipment Training	14
Plumbing encompassing MetGas award	4
IT Telecoms + Networking	6
Construction PASMA Trades	27
Construction Telescopic Handler	3
	138

Source: Skills Made Easy MI.

Supply and support of candidates

Another area that was discussed with stakeholders was the service offering to candidates. This was an additional service provided by Skills Made Easy, and was not explicitly part of their main remit of supporting employers. Account managers felt this was a useful function, as it increased the likelihood of candidates maintaining

their placements. Employers and providers liked the support that account managers offered to candidates, as it often made for a better placement for everyone.

However, a strategic level stakeholder suggested that it was important that account managers offered a service focused on employers only.

Additionally, stakeholders were asked about the issues around sourcing candidates for placements. There has been at times a poor supply of learners; Skills Made Easy have taken some actions to address this, including marketing via social media and promotion within colleges and schools, but it has not always been possible to fill each vacancy.

One account manager mentioned particular issues with sourcing work-ready applicants. At times, and for specific types of vacancies, it was hard to locate suitable applicants. Providers reported similar issues with finding candidates, and highlighted the fact that 'quality' candidates were always highly sought after.

Many believed this to be a result of the funding system and the raising of the participation age, leading to a higher retention of young people at schools. Although several stakeholders thought that good quality candidates would be aware of vacancies. One learner, for example, felt that the service should be more proactive and better promoted at Jobcentres, since his work coach at the local jobcentre had not informed him of a vacancy matching his interests.

Traineeships had also been used by Skills Made Easy to try and increase the number of candidates who were work ready. Traineeships were mentioned positively by many of the stakeholder we spoke with. Several providers were very grateful for the work Skills Made Easy had done to improve the supply of work ready learners.

Overall, there was no consensus as to whether improving the number of job ready candidates was a critical role for Skills Made Easy, although several stakeholders did describe the steps that Skills Made Easy had taken to try and improve this issue. For example, one account manager saw the filtering of applicants by suitability as an important role of Skills Made Easy, and mentioned that the service could refer unready candidates to other support if needed.

Most stakeholders agreed that the quality of candidates was the result of much wider issues and as such should be addressed by a wider group of actors. The supply of candidates was not an issue for Skills Made Easy to address alone.

User Experience

Employers

Employers we spoke with were very positive about apprentices in general, and were supportive of the idea that young people should be helped by employers.

*“We really think that it’s important to give younger people a chance so it wasn’t difficult to accept an apprenticeship really” **Employer***

*“I have always thought that apprenticeships were important and we’ve been getting them in regularly for years...I know the benefits it has to for the area, with development and brining in money.” **Employer***

The indication was that the processes involved in engaging with the skills sector make it difficult for smaller employers, so the wider support offerings from Skills Made Easy were particularly helpful

Despite some teething problems in the initial phases of the Skills Made Easy service, the experience that employers have had of the service has been generally very positive. Our survey of employers and learners highlights this view.

For example, all (35) employers that responded to the online survey were either satisfied or very satisfied with their initial engagement by Skills Made Easy staff, and all but one of the 27 who employed apprentices were satisfied or very satisfied with their experience of the process of filling that position.

*“[I] just want them to continue in the same way as it's the best service I've had from any training broker or apprentice provider.” **Employer***

Likewise, although one employer expressed dissatisfaction with their experience of upskilling staff and two were indifferent, the remaining 28 were satisfied or very satisfied with this process. Similarly, most (30 out of 34) employers were either satisfied or very satisfied with the overall package of support; with the training provider service (25 out of 29); and with grant incentive fund² service (24 out of 29).

In our survey 24 of the 35 employers had taken at least one apprentice. Over half of these reported having taken on more than one apprentice.

² The GAP – Grants for Apprenticeships – have also been offered to Skills Made Easy employers.

When asked if they would have taken on apprentices without the service, employers were evenly split, with 13 stating they would have done so and 12 saying that the service was the reason for them taking on an apprentice. While this would suggest that only half of Skills Made Easy apprenticeships are additional there may be other factors that may be affecting employers' responses here. For example, of the 12 who were planning to find an apprentice only two had found out about the service themselves (through advertising and social media) and five employers began their process with Skills Made Easy after they had been engaged by an account manager. The remaining five were made aware of Skills Made Easy by a provider. Furthermore, when asked, six employers said that the most helpful aspect of the service was the support that they received during the apprenticeship hiring process.

The main reason reported for employers not taking on an apprentice (given in five out of eight cases) was that they simply did not need one. In contrast, the main reason given for not upskilling their staff through the service was that they chose to upskill their staff through a different route (given by five out of eight cases).

Almost half of employers (16 out of 34) stated that the most valuable aspect of the service was that it supported their apprenticeship process. Roughly a quarter (eight) thought that the most valuable aspect was explaining training options for their business; five employers thought that it was supporting the upskilling process.

"They are very switched on to what we're looking for and very responsive to our needs" **Employer (survey response)**

Employers did report limitations to what Skills Made Easy could do. One employer had sought to employ a customer service apprentice for a business expansion plan. Unfortunately, Skills Made Easy were not able to find a candidate and the expansion did not happen. The employer themselves did not see this as a failure on the part of Skills Made Easy and saw it more of an issue with interest from candidates.

"I don't think young people are that interested in a customer service apprenticeship"
Employer

Other issues related to the over use of jargon by account managers; and that some providers were not providing a quality service; an employer thought that the provider they had used *"seems a bit shoddy and this undermines [their] reputation"*.

Learners

As with employers, most of the learners responding to our survey (11 out of 13) thought that the information provided to them from Skills Made Easy was clear and did not leave them with more questions to ask.

Learners were evenly split between those who first contacted Skills Made Easy before making an application (four by email, one face-to-face and one by telephone) and those who applied for an apprenticeship first (four through Skills Made Easy online and one through the NAS website). For six out of ten learners, Skills Made Easy was the sole advisory service that they had spoken to about apprenticeships. However, four learners had also spoken to other services.

One learner specifically appreciated that Skills Made Easy was a local organisation; they felt it was helpful to have a service run by local people, as opposed to employer-submitted positions on a Government website. This was echoed in the survey where over half of learners (six out of ten) thought that the most valuable aspect of Skills Made Easy was offering apprenticeships in the local area; a further three learners thought that the most valuable aspect was explaining apprenticeships.

They also felt it was more reassuring for applicants to deal with Skills Made Easy in the first instance rather than directly with companies.

“I had to submit my application forms through the job centre. They went on to [Skills Made Easy]. I ended up having an interview with them next; it was okay, pretty standard and not too stressful.” **Learner**

Almost all of the learners who spoke to an adviser (nine from ten in our survey) were either satisfied (five) or very satisfied (four) with the information the adviser gave them when they met. Seven agreed that their adviser knew about local career opportunities, nine agreed that the adviser was clear about what they needed to do to apply for apprenticeships and nine agreed that their adviser gave them a good explanation of the process of applying for an apprenticeship.

When asked about the information provided by the service, the highest level of satisfaction was for information about future career prospects, with three quarters of learners (nine out of 12) satisfied or very satisfied with the guidance. Learners also appreciated the information about employers – eight out of 12 learners were satisfied or very satisfied with this support.

However, it was not all positive. One learner stated that *“more understanding of what can be done after the year of apprenticeship”* would be useful. This was a sentiment that they shared with some employers and account managers who also wanted to see more support for learners.

The lowest level of satisfaction was for information about the pros and cons of apprenticeships: while most were satisfied or very satisfied (seven out of 12), three learners were dissatisfied and one very dissatisfied.

“They do not tell you any cons of apprenticeships, but I guess that is because they want an apprentice and don’t want to put you off.” **Learner (survey response)**

Governance

The existing governance structure³ was discussed with strategic and delivery stakeholders to gain an understanding of any issues that needed to be addressed in future governance structures. Given that the service was incepted in advance of the combined authority being fully established, it should be remembered that the governance arrangements were not instigated within the combined authority structure as it is now.

Funding was provided to Sheffield City Council who acted as the accountable body, responsible for procurement and contract management; however, Skills Made Easy were required to report monthly to the Combined Authority Executive Board and its Skills Executive Board. These requirements were stated in the City Deal Business Plan and governance responsibilities were set out for the service.

For the majority of stakeholders, governance did not feature in their comments on the service, however, a small number did see a few issues with the existing structure.

Fundamentally, the issues arose with a city authority trying to coordinate a regional service. Some stakeholders reported conflicting responsibilities in the structure such as individuals with multiple roles. These issues did not explicitly create problems for stakeholders we spoke with, but were perceived as barriers that in more normal circumstances (i.e. where a combined authority fully existed) would be avoided.

However, the end of the pilot and creation of the Combined Authority present an opportunity to reset these functions with a possible benefit for delivery.

“In the future the service will need to become more agile so that it can respond more quickly to the demands of its customers... there isn't a need to worry about the requirements of the city deal either as that's run out now.” **Strategic Stakeholder**

³ (currently overseen strategically by Skills for Growth Partnership Board, and operationally by SCR technical group)

The future for the Skills Made Easy service

As part of this evaluation we spoke with stakeholders about their views on the value of local strategies for skills delivery; their views on the impact of upcoming changes to the apprenticeship system; and what value the Skills Made Easy service currently offers that is additional to what was available.

Because of the number of policy changes that were in the process of being announced while this evaluation was being conducted, it was difficult for stakeholders to respond with certainty about what the future held for the service. As such many of the responses were more general in nature.

The following section details which themes appeared most in these conversations, and what functions of Skills Made Easy could be useful after the changes are implemented.

Apprenticeship levy

Unsurprisingly, most stakeholders felt that the Apprenticeship Levy, the new funding system for apprenticeships, would present a significant challenge to the way Skills Made Easy operated in the future.

While much of the funding system has now been revealed, there are still some decisions to be made on what contributions will be made by smaller employers who do not have to pay the levy.

To some extent, this new funding system changes little for the employers targeted by SME. Stakeholders felt that there would still be a challenge for employers in navigating a skills system that is complicated at the best of times. Stakeholders were concerned that funding may be reduced slightly and that smaller employers would have to contribute somehow. But this may not be wholly a negative, as one provider pointed out:

“employers don’t always trust that you are offering something for free. They either think there is a catch or it’s free because it’s not worth anything” **Provider**

The view was that Skills Made Easy can continue to add value to employers by offering a service; specifically through account managers going out to employers and providing their expertise of the skills funding system and course options.

It was clear that some felt the overall funding of Skills Made Easy was likely to be complicated by the new funding arrangement. Despite this, the needs of employers remains the same, as does the need for improved growth in the City Region.

Digital Apprenticeship Service

As part of the levy system, an online system will be used to help administer the payments and commissioning of training by employers. Details on the Digital Apprenticeship Service (DAS) are limited at present but it seems that Skills Made Easy's online portal may be made redundant; at the very least DAS will duplicate several of the portal's functions.

"SME are also going to need to re-think what their unique selling point is. When the Digital Apprenticeship Service comes online they are not really going to be able to use the [online portal] in the same way" - Strategic

One stakeholder suggested that it may be better for Skills Made Easy to exploit the DAS system (which may well be better funded) and use it as a source of data as well as a tool for processing their contracts. This stakeholder saw it as an opportunity for Skills Made Easy to improve its targeting by having a list of employers in the area who were part of the apprenticeship levy and who may need support – this may even include employers with staff over the 250 threshold that denotes a small to medium enterprise.

The shift to standards, and away from frameworks

A further issue identified as a potential barrier for the target client group was the shift away from the current framework model and towards standards, as part of the new epoch in apprenticeships.

As for other issues, it was suggested that Skills Made Easy could continue to offer guidance in this area and possibly co-ordinate groups of smaller employers so that they too are able to produce standards that are viable for larger providers to deliver.

"the way it's going standards are going to make it hard for small businesses; and the economies of scale for large employers might even push it the wrong way now."

Strategic

Labour market insight

Taken as a whole, many stakeholders saw Skills Made Easy as primarily offering an information service, albeit with a strong emphasis on supporting the use of the information that was provided.

One provider in particular saw the offer of other support and networking opportunities to local businesses as a possible benefit for all and an opportunity for SME going forward.

*“there’s so much policy change to deal with and funding arrangements are very hard at times to keep up with. If Skills Made Easy were able to keep on top of this for themselves and for the training sector, it could end up being a focal point of the regions training landscape.” **Provider***

Certainly, when it came to highlighting the need for Apprentices, account managers often used skills gap data to underline the need for staff succession planning for small employers.

Brand

Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, brand was mentioned by several stakeholders. Over the period of the pilot the Skills Made Easy brand had been developed, and while there may be some negative associations from the initial development of the service, there may now be some brand traction that could be worth conserving.

It was made clear that trust was important in the decisions of employers. Skills Made Easy now have an identifiable offering, that will have gained some traction in various networks. As one strategic stakeholder put it;

*“To change this now just adds uncertainty to an already complicated and sometimes volatile landscape.” - **Strategic***

This stakeholder felt a stripped down and well-focused offering could trade on the now mature engagement strategies and experience of its work force.

Engaging employers new to the system is a challenge in itself, so maintaining a degree of brand awareness can only be a positive thing. Employers, providers and learners will be able to continue to recommend Skills Made Easy even if its remit changes somewhat. A wholesale change now would erase this work.

“Apprenticeships bring revenue and income into the region. So there’s a lot more to be done, the City Region and the LEP need to do more.”

Summary

From the responses of stakeholders and service users, it seems clear that the intensive face-to-face service provided by account managers should form part of the next iteration of Skills Made Easy.

- A **face-to-face service** appears to be the most effective way of engaging time limited small employer in the skills system

- **Account managers** will continue to be a valuable offering to employers if they have **expert and up to date knowledge** of training options and funding opportunities
- The current **online portal system** being used by Skills Made Easy has not been a core part of the offering during the pilot, and the introduction of DAS suggests that it will likely become obsolete. However, this was not the case with the main Skills Made Easy website, which had been seen by many stakeholders as a useful tool.
- Despite early challenges, Skills Made Easy has now developed into a **brand** with traction. Given the challenges associated with engaging employers, it would likely be a loss if this brand was lost in the region. The Skills Made Easy website is an example of where the brand has high visibility.

Appendix

Employer Survey Topline

How did your business first hear about the Skills Made Easy service?

Answer	N
Call or email from an account manager	13
Contacted by a training provider	7
Found the website	3
Local/national media	2
Social media	1
Other marketing campaign	1
Employer network	2
Other	6

Base: 35

Did you have any questions about the service after learning about Skills Made Easy?

Answer	N
I did not have any more questions as the information I saw was clear	25
I had a few more questions because some of the information was unclear	8
I did not have any more questions as the information I saw was clear	1

Base: 34

Did you receive a visit from a Skills Made Easy team to talk to you about Upskilling and/or Apprenticeship options for your business?

Answer	N
Yes	31
No	4

Base: 35

Were you satisfied with the information provided by the Advisor as part of your business review?

Answer	N
Very unsatisfied	1
Unsatisfied	0
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	1
Satisfied	14
Very satisfied	15

Base: 31

Did you take on any apprentices through the Skills Made Easy service?

Answer	N
Yes	27
No	8

Base: 35

How many apprentices have you taken on through the Skills Made Easy service?

Answer	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
N	10	4	5	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	1

Base: 24

Do you think that you would have taken on any apprentices without the Skills Made Easy service?

Answer	N
Yes	13
No	14

Base: 27

Please select your reason(s) for choosing not to take on an apprentice

Answer	N
We did not need to take on an apprentice	5
The benefits of using the service to take on an apprentice were not clear	0
The service is too time consuming	0
The service is too complicated	0
We chose to take on an apprentice through a different route	1
An apprentice was too costly for our business	0
Other	2

Base: 8

Did you upskill any current members of staff (not new apprentices) through the Skills Made Easy Service?

Answer	N
Yes	13
No	22

Base: 35

How many current members of staff (not new apprentices) have been upskilled through the Skills Made Easy service?

Answer	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
N	4	1	3	0	0	1	1

Base: 10

Please select your reason(s) for choosing not to upskill staff

Answer	N
We did not need to upskill any staff	13
The benefits of using the service upskill staff were not clear	1

The service is too time consuming	0
The service is too complicated	0
We chose to upskill through a different route	5
Other	3

Base: 22

Please indicate how satisfied, or unsatisfied, you were with the following: The initial engagement from Skills Made Easy staff

Answer	N
Very dissatisfied	0
Dissatisfied	0
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	0
Satisfied	18
Very satisfied	17

Base: 35

Please indicate how satisfied, or unsatisfied, you were with the following: Upskilling your staff using Skills Made Easy

Answer	N
Very dissatisfied	1
Dissatisfied	
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	2
Satisfied	9
Very satisfied	9

Base: 21

Please indicate how satisfied, or unsatisfied, you were with the following: Employing apprentices through Skills Made Easy

Answer	N
Very dissatisfied	1

Dissatisfied	0
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	0
Satisfied	16
Very satisfied	10

Base: 27

Please indicate how satisfied, or unsatisfied, you were with the following: The overall package of support from Skills Made Easy

Answer	N
Very dissatisfied	2
Dissatisfied	0
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	2
Satisfied	18
Very satisfied	12

Base: 34

Please indicate how satisfied, or unsatisfied, you were with the following: The Account manager service

Answer	N
Very dissatisfied	2
Dissatisfied	0
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	1
Satisfied	11
Very satisfied	18

Base: 32

Please indicate how satisfied, or unsatisfied, you were with the following: The Training provider service

Answer	N
Very dissatisfied	0

Dissatisfied	2
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	2
Satisfied	17
Very satisfied	8

Base: 29

Please indicate how satisfied, or unsatisfied, you were with the following: The Incentive Fund service

Answer	N
Very dissatisfied	0
Dissatisfied	2
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	3
Satisfied	13
Very satisfied	11

Base: 29

Please indicate how much you agree, or disagree, with the following: My adviser was knowledgeable about the needs of my business

Answer	N
Strongly disagree	2
Slightly disagree	0
Neither agree nor disagree	0
Slightly agree	9
Strongly agree	20

Base: 30

Please indicate how much you agree, or disagree, with the following: My adviser gave a good explanation of the process of hiring an apprentice

Answer	N
Strongly disagree	1

Slightly disagree	0
Neither agree nor disagree	0
Slightly agree	4
Strongly agree	25

Base: 30

Please indicate how much you agree, or disagree, with the following: My adviser gave a good explanation of the process of upskilling my staff

Answer	N
Strongly disagree	1
Slightly disagree	0
Neither agree nor disagree	1
Slightly agree	8
Strongly agree	19

Base: 29

What did you find most valuable about the Skills Made Easy service?

Answer	N
Workforce planning	1
Explaining the training options available to my business	8
Supporting the apprenticeship process	16
Supporting the upskilling process	5
Other	1

Base: 30

Learner Survey Topline

How did you first hear about the Skills Made Easy service?

Answer	N
Skills Made Easy website	2

National Apprenticeship Service website	3
Local media	0
Social media	0
Other marketing campaign	0
Friends/family	1
School	0
Workplace	5
Other	2

Base: 13

How did you first get in touch with the Skills Made Easy service?

Answer	N
Through applying for a vacancy on the Skills Made Easy website	4
Through applying for a vacancy on the National Apprenticeship Service website	1
Email	4
Phone	1
Face to face	1
Other	0
I have not been in touch with the Skills Made Easy service	2

Base: 13

Did you have any questions about the service after learning about Skills Made Easy?

Answer	N
I did not have any more questions as the information I saw was clear	11
I had a few more questions because some of the information was unclear	1
I did not have any more questions as the information I saw was clear	1

Base: 13

Have you talked to a Skills Made Easy team member about apprenticeships or skills?

Answer	N
Yes	10
No	3

Base: 13

Other than a Skills Made Easy Advisor, have you spoken to other advisory services about apprenticeships?

Answer	N
Yes	4
No	6

Base: 10

Do you think that you would have started an apprenticeship without Skills Made Easy?

Answer	N
Yes	5
No	8

Base: 13

Were you satisfied with the information that the adviser gave you?

Answer	N
Very unsatisfied	0
Unsatisfied	0
Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	1
Satisfied	5
Very satisfied	4

Base: 10

Please indicate how much you agree, or disagree, with the following: The adviser knew about local career opportunities.

Answer	N
Strongly disagree	0
Slightly disagree	0
Neither agree nor disagree	3
Slightly agree	1
Strongly agree	6

Base: 10

Please indicate how much you agree, or disagree, with the following: The adviser was clear about what I needed to do to apply for apprenticeships.

Answer	N
Strongly disagree	0
Slightly disagree	0
Neither agree nor disagree	1
Slightly agree	2
Strongly agree	7

Base: 10

Please indicate how much you agree, or disagree, with the following: The adviser gave me a good explanation of the process of applying for an apprenticeship

Answer	N
Strongly disagree	0
Slightly disagree	0
Neither agree nor disagree	1
Slightly agree	3
Strongly agree	6

Base: 10

What was most valuable about the Skills Made Easy support you got?

Answer	N
Explaining apprenticeships	3
Assessing where an application could be improved	0
Keeping me up to date on opportunities	0
Offering apprenticeships in the area	6
None of these things	0

Base: 9

Please indicate how satisfied, or unsatisfied, you were with the following: The information provided by the Skills Made Easy service about apprenticeships in general

Answer	N
Very dissatisfied	1
Dissatisfied	0
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	0
Satisfied	6
Very satisfied	5

Base: 12

Please indicate how satisfied, or unsatisfied, you were with the following: The information about employers

Answer	N
Very dissatisfied	1
Dissatisfied	0
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	3
Satisfied	3
Very satisfied	5

Base: 12

Please indicate how satisfied, or unsatisfied, you were with the following: The information about the pros and cons of apprenticeships

Answer	N
Very dissatisfied	1
Dissatisfied	3
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	1
Satisfied	3
Very satisfied	4

Base: 12

Please indicate how satisfied, or unsatisfied, you were with the following: The information about future career prospects

Answer	N
Very dissatisfied	1
Dissatisfied	2
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	0
Satisfied	5
Very satisfied	4

Base: 13

Qualitative topic guides

The following guides were used with stakeholders to the research. While the guides are generic, each interview was tailored to the stakeholder that was responding.

Stakeholder topic guide

The following guide is for stakeholders to the SME Sheffield service. The guide should be used with all stakeholder types. Where questions are not directed at specific groups this will be noted at the beginning of the section.

The purpose of this evaluation is to understand to what extent the current formation of SME has been successful in increasing the number of apprenticeships in the Sheffield City region. Additionally, the evaluation seeks to understand whether the current model of delivery is robust enough to potential future changes in the legislation related to the skills and apprenticeship, and if not what an how should SME adjust to prepare for change.

The stakeholders to be consulted will be

Strategic

- Local government partners
- LEP members
- Staff at SME and Doncaster
- Skills funding agency

Local partners

- Training providers
- Staff at SME and Doncaster

Further interviews will also be conducted with apprentices and businesses either as a focus group or on a one-to-one basis.

Introduction – ALL (5 mins)

- What is your role/ involvement with SME?
 - How long have you been working with SME?
- What other skills and apprenticeships experience have you had as part of this or previous roles?
- How important do you think it is that skills and apprenticeships are devolved to local agencies?

A1 Marketing and engagement – Strategic stakeholders (10 mins)

This section is to assess to what extent SME is making the most of its marketing work, so as to promote the initiative and make sure people are more likely to engage SME for support.

- Have you had any involvement in the plans to promote the SME service in Sheffield?
- What is your impression of the strategy that has been used in marketing and engagement?
 - How is/ should this be done?
- Who should be targeted as part of the marketing strategy?
 - Is it likely that any sectors or groups are being missed out at present?

PROBE – Providers, employers and/or candidates/

- How should SME attract more learners to the service?
 - Are there any particular issues that make engaging learners difficult?

A2 Marketing and engagement – Local partners (10 mins)

- How do you feel about the current approach to marketing the SME service
 - Are the right businesses being targeted?
 - Is the approach reaching everyone it should?
 - Are any sectors or businesses missing out?
- Are SME making the most of potential local partners to promote their service?
 - Which partners should be more involved in supporting SMEs objectives
- Have providers been able to contribute to wider engagement of businesses?
 - Do you think providers should have a bigger role in promoting SME?
Why do you say this?
- How should SME attract more learners to the service?
 - Are there any particular issues that make engaging learners difficult?

B Structure, governance, and legislative change? – Strategic stakeholders (LEP, Councils, SFA) only (15 mins)

This section looks at the overall governance of the SME and how it fits within the wider Skills and Apprenticeship agenda. The focus here is on how governance **(currently overseen strategically by Skills for Growth Partnership Board, and operationally by SCR technical group)** can be improved, if at all, so that it is robust to the changes ahead.

- In your view what does the programme need, if anything, with respect to overall governance? Does what it currently have fit with that need?

- Are there any aspects of the governance structure that does not work?
- How are the arrangements across the City region working? Are all areas able to contribute effectively to the strategic direction of SME?
 - Does SME need greater 'sub-region' input or not?
 - Are there any particular challenges in working across such a large area that SME is failing to address?
- How likely is it that SME would cope with changes in demand as a result of different economic conditions in the region?

C Service design – All (15 mins)

This sections should be used to probe on the effectiveness of the current model of delivery. With a particular focus on understanding whether the model and set up can respond to changes in demand.

- Have you had any input into the design of the way the service is delivered?
- How does the SME service differ from what's currently available nationally?
- What is the USP for SME that has made the difference to promoting apprenticeship?
- How sustainable is the account manager service that is used?
 - How important is it to sustain this model of delivery?
 - What needs to happen to maintain this service if it is important?
- Are there any gaps in the way the service is delivered?
- Are any of the SME offerings working better than the rest?
 - Why do you think this is the case?
- Are there any gaps in the service provided?
 - For businesses
 - For training providers
 - For candidates
- Do you think SME adds to existing apprenticeship support offerings or makes it more complex for business?
 - Why do you think this?
- Would you describe the SME service as independent?
 - Do you think this is important to – PROBE (learners, providers, employers)

D Challenges ahead - demand, competition and policy – ALL (15 mins)

This section is to gather views on the practical challenges for delivering services in a changing climate. In particular how SME fits given other services that offer similar provisions.

- Does SME have capacity to meet expanding demands from small businesses?
- How well does the SME offering fit within a market of competing offers for small businesses?
- Could it expand in the future and what would, could stop it from doing so?
- Do you think having to compete with other options is good for SME, or would SME work better if it was the only option for business in SCR?
- How flexible is SME to further policy changes going forward?
- Are there any gaps in the expertise of delivery staff that could be a weakness for future provisions?
- Are there any other risks to the programme that you feel are not being addressed at the moment?

E Supply of learners – ALL (10 mins)

This section is specifically to address the challenge in finding learners sufficiently skilled to be able to competently apply for apprenticeships.

- Are you aware of the supply side challenge that SME have faced in trying to source learners/candidates for SME apprenticeships.
- Do you think the lack of learners is an issue for SME to address? Who else is responsible for this issue?
 - Can/should SME work with these partners?
- In your view why do you think the quality of candidates is low?
 - Does SMEs candidate pool have a lower level of skills in comparisons to other routes into apprenticeships?
- Can SME increase the supply of good candidates, and should they?
- Are the right candidates able to access SME?

F Overall impressions and close – ALL (5 mins)

- What 3 things would you prioritise for the next incarnation of SME?

Thank participant and close interview

SME user – topic guide

This guide should be used with employers and learners that have made use of the SME service.

The objective of the interviews is to get further insight into the user experience of SME for those who have used it, and are not part of the skills system.

The interviews should take no more than half an hour, unless the participant has a strong view on particular aspects of the service or the skills system in the City region.

Introduction (5 mins)

This section is about establishing the situation from the participants point of view.

- Please tell me a little about yourself and why you/ your organisation have worked with SME?
- How did you find out about SME?
 - Did you find out about them or did they get in touch with you?
 - Why did you want support navigating the apprenticeship system?

Learning/ learner needs (10 mins)

This section is to understand the pre and post skills needs of the participant; did SME prompt new activity or did they offer support in the existing plans of the participant (has SME been generated ADDITIONAL activity).

- How easy or hard do you think it is to navigate the apprenticeship system?
 - Was it important for you to get help?
- What are your/ your organisation plans for the future; what part did you hope SME could play in supporting those plans?
- What was the support from SME like, tell me about the process once you got in contact with them?
- After speaking with the SME team, how much had your plans changed?
 - Why? Were these new plans a positive or negative development on what you thought you'd do?
- Do you think SME made it more or less likely that you progressed in plans?

Customer service/ support (10 mins)

This is to probe on the customer service experience of the participant.

- How responsive was SME to your personal/ organisational needs?
 - What issues did you experience (...that were overcome?)
- Tell me about your experience using their....
 - Online systems
 - Paperwork
 - Account managers
 - Office staff

Future plans (10 mins)

- Can you tell me about what you're up to now? Do you think SME could help more with your future plans?
- If you were to go through the process again, either with or without SMEs support, what sort of help would you like to get?
 - Do you think SME does/ or should offer this support?