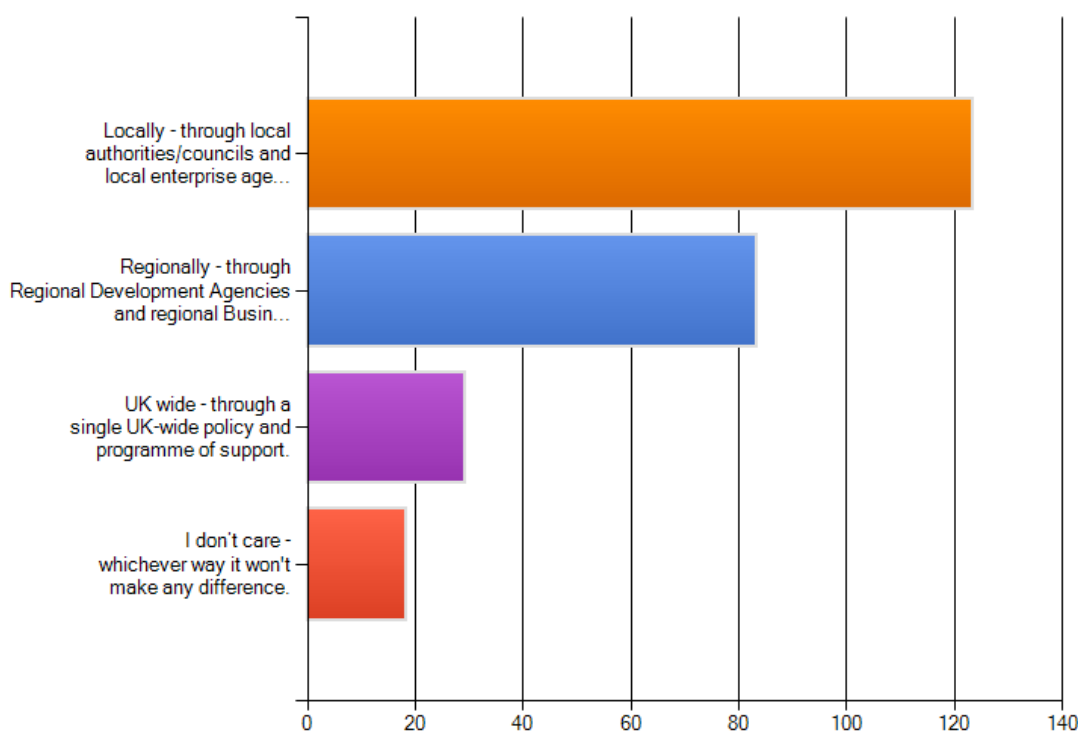


In December 2009 Cobweb carried out its latest survey of UK business advisers to find out their opinions on whether business support policy and delivery should be driven locally, regionally or centrally (ie nationally).

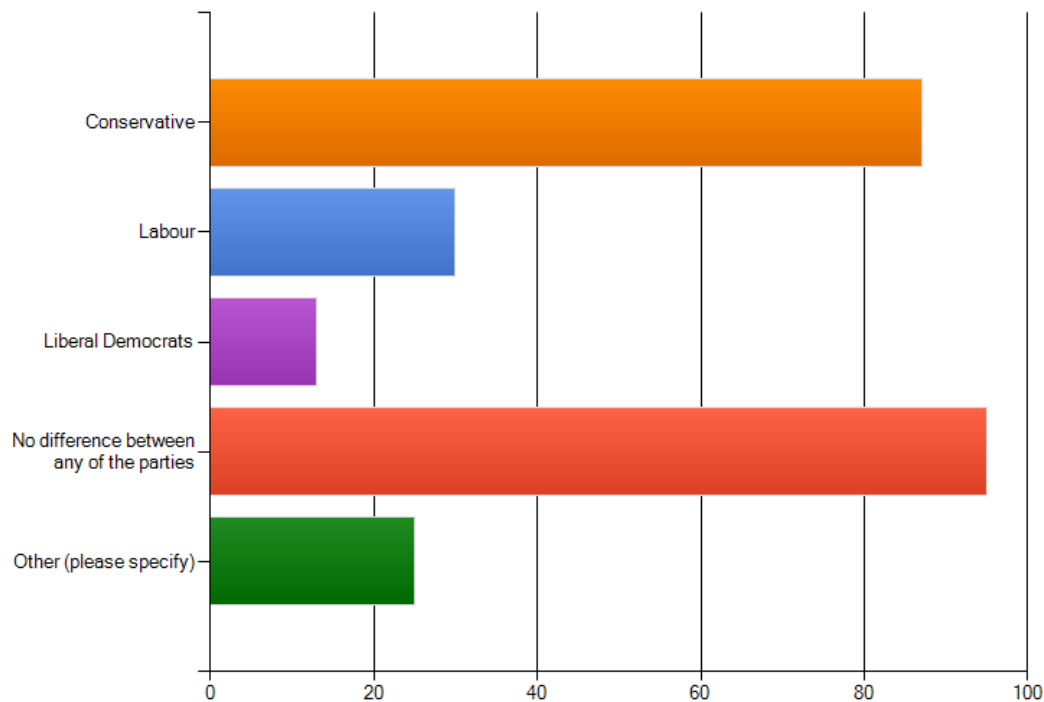
The survey was carried out among subscribers to Cobweb's BAD News service and 254 individual business advisers participated. Respondents were located across the whole of the UK and were working for (or with) a range of support agencies including regional Business Links, local enterprise agencies, local councils, Chambers of Commerce, RDAs, charities, trade associations, as well as independent business advisers and consultants.

The results of the survey are as follows:

With regard to business support provision in the UK, what are your views on whether the strategy, policy and delivery of support programmes should be driven centrally (ie nationally), regionally or locally?



In your professional opinion, which political party do you believe is most capable of understanding and formulating a support policy and framework that will best deliver the needs of the UK's small and micro businesses and prospective new start ups?



Individual comments given by survey respondents are provided below:

- Local delivery with policy autonomy supported by a national framework but no regional quangos either Business Link, RDA's, Strategic groupings or equivalents - for example national Business Link website but no physical presence / BIS programme - solutions for business but local deliverer.
- There should be equal access to all main areas of support, however this needs to take into account local issues and priorities, and there should be local provision of support services.
- I believe that only local support really meets the needs of clients as they do not tend to adopt a "one size fits all" approach of some of the national/regional bodies.
- There are already too many public bodies doing their own unco-ordinated thing.
- There should be a core programme taking 50% of the national budget with the other half under regional control with minimum percentages to be allocated to each of the 29 support for business products.
- EMDA has done some good work in the past but with constant changes in support packages there is not clarity in what is on offer and what people can apply for. I also believe that there are too many non business bureaucrats and untrained staff involved in the organisation. Although local government seems the right route they don't have a clue about how businesses work.
- Does it have to be either/or? How about a basic national policy that has scope for local adjustment - ie more funding/support targeted at distribution and sales problems in sparsely populated areas,

more support for ethnic minorities in big cities etc?

- It changes so often that clients can't keep up with who and where.
- It is currently very difficult to source any specialist support unless the business is in a "favoured" sector seen as key by the local RDA. There is also the very real problem that RDAs in my experience are completely unaccountable to local small businesses, even though this was the main reason for their insertion over Regional Gov. Offices.
- Business support and advice needs to be streamlined and local.
Too much time and far too much money have been wasted in the past on paperwork, too many forms and too much checking!
It should be as simple as possible and concentrated on the client not on form filling etc.
The old business link was bad but the LDA was far worse!
One to one advice is far more effective - the old Up & Running was good.
- Too much money is wasted on the admin and bureaucracy not enough gives real beneficial help and services that businesses really need.
- Those on the ground locally know what their markets need.
- Customers already do not understand why there are differences in support, and especially in levels of funding, across regions.
- Funding to support local enterprise agencies needs to be available centrally but administered locally by the enterprise agency in partnership with the local authorities.
- Local enterprise agencies provide a better service to their communities.
- The "new" Business Links are seen by some as being the worst incarnation of the Business Link brand yet. Local Authorities and local business support agencies appear to have all the knowhow to make a success of local delivery.
- I would prefer to see provision managed and delivered locally, based on core policy and strategy developed from the centre. It should enable a flexible approach to ensure differing local requirements could be met under the umbrella of a central framework.
- There does need to be more 'localisation' of services relevant to the local businesses and not just 'one size fits all' which is the way it is going.
- Need to focus on real businesses and less time on life style business owners.
- I would say this as I work for Business Link, however, I would say that I felt it worked well when delivered locally through BL.
- I believe this will ensure that the advisors working at the coal face with their clients, will be able to easily discuss issues locally, where as at the moment the structure is far too big and glacial in speed of response.
- There needs to be consistency in the products and services provided that clients can understand. Regional programmes allow for this while being capable of being moulded to local conditions if required. This approach also allows for larger budgets to be allocated.

- Some programmes could be supported regionally but nationally controlled is totally unreasonable.
- Strategy, policy and delivery are three different aspects and cannot be compounded in quite this way. There are good reasons to deliver locally but there are also good reasons to have an overlay of national work. PRIME as a specialist national provider for enterprise support for 50+ would find it difficult to contract with all local authorities, but has considerable expertise that should not be re-invented.
- However, it has been my experience that using local government as the lead authority puts huge barriers in the way of achieving results.
- Funding has been drastically reduced over the past 12 months particularly in London at a time when the recession is biting and increased support to SME's is required.
- One size DOES NOT fit all. Experience working in rural and urban areas shows the present system to be a complete shambles. Government support programmes are merely ticks in boxes systems devised to micro manage the programme.
- Regional but with a local context and flexibility to allow clients to purchase the support from who they prefer to work with.
- Provision currently through BL is very poor.
- The crux is adequate scale with local flexibility.
- Business support provision should be driven by feedback from businesses, via Business Link Advisers, on what support services are useful / pointless / required / not offered.
- Regionally with a local emphasis provides real time support to the area. One size does not fit all!
- I believe that strategy and policy should be devised locally to better meet the specific needs of the area. I also think that Business link support should operate on a county by county basis instead of through RDA's.
- They should just bin the lot and give new businesses a grant to spend as they wish - would save millions in unnecessary marketing and admin.
- Start-ups particularly need understanding of the local situation in the advice they get. This is not possible with even regional based support.
- I know, from being on a local funding panel, that support has most impact when planned and delivered by local people who have the interests of the local community at heart. Unfortunately LAs, Councils & many Enterprise Agencies don't meet these criteria as they are politically, ideologically or financially motivated. The last thing on their minds is the good and benefit of local communities. Having attended any number of meetings of the LA/Council I can confirm that the level of competence of most elected members is worse than abysmal. The people who should be making local decisions for the local community are simply not up to the job.
- When Business Links first came into being they really worked here in the North East. Whilst there was some duplication with the County Council the end user businesses being helped did not suffer from this, although there seemed a tendency for the County Council to want to be involved in some

projects, but with nothing to offer in return.

Then followed re-organisation of the BL offices, a headlong flight into IT as being the panacea for every small business need [it failed] and more recently the grand regionalised approach that has again failed to meet the small business needs at the coal face or on the ground or customer facing, or whatever jargon expression suits - it has failed!

I suppose all this was inevitable when you have management structures comprised of individuals who do not have direct experience of running an SME and worse, believe they know all the answers to business problems. If only such were to be possible!

- Unless whatever provision is focussed on what businesses really need rather than just ticking boxes dreamed up in Whitehall it will be a waste of time and money.
- needs to be consistent wherever you are.
- This should ensure the maximum is spent on clients and the minimum on layers of bureaucracy.
- Local would be too fragmented - for instance on Teesside there are 5 local authorities. Already some things are local, and some are regional (eg Business Link). This is a nice balance which gives the local authority power to fine-tune the situation by local offerings while giving a good flavour of regional co-ordination. Our main strength is our region.
- UK wide for overall Strategy ONLY. Actions 7 delivery should be on a local basis. Regional involvement only confuses the issue and adds another unwanted layer of bureaucracy.
- Every local authority area is different in their needs and no regional programme can ever come up with a satisfactory "one size fits all".
- Small businesses are essentially entrepreneurial 'bottom up, outcome led' operations as opposed to the corporate/public sector which is managed 'top down, system led. Any support, in order to be effective, needs to understand and take note of this.
- Whilst I have ticked "Regionally" above, I am of the view that the regions should not be too blinkered and adversely limit support available to businesses and new business start-ups in "affluent boroughs", i.e. considerably reduced levels of support available in such locations. Whilst there is a need to generate the economy in "poorer" boroughs this can be done equally (possibly more) effectively by providing greater levels of support than at present to businesses in the "affluent boroughs", they in turn being potentially more likely to succeed and create more job opportunities across the region.
- Business Support should be run independently. Councils are as useless as the Government, RDA's a waste of time. This country is going to need far more expertise than either of the latter can ever provide to recover quickly from the mess the banks and Mr Brown has currently got it into.
- It works now so why change at cost to taxpayer.
- I believe a mix of both regional and local - strategy should be set regionally but delivered through local agencies.
- A high quality national online resource, support and advice centre should be far more effective in terms of content, delivery and cost.

- No, it is unlikely to make any difference!
What are STILL needed are funds made available to small enterprises set up; grants maybe, but at least access to bank funding to get the economy moving.
- I have identified this area "Locally" as I do believe that there is a need for as much competition between local areas to be undertaken. The "Locals" can also identify and build on strengths much more quickly and learn from failures and weaknesses. There is support required by Regional Governments in providing resources and support to initiatives that the "Locals" want to develop - Policy guidelines required.
- Delivered as a national programme but utilising local/regional partners to deliver specific support relevant to the area i.e. marine/fishing brokerage partners for coastal areas.
- All sorts of initiatives have been tried - they all waste money and resources.
- It seems to me the regional model at the moment is not working so a local method may be more beneficial.
- Options for question 1 are much too rigid; support must be sensitive to requirements which may be local, national or in between and not just a simple programme.
- Local factors are relevant and should influence availability and delivery, although remain sceptical about it actually making much difference!!
- At a local level, people delivering support understand the needs of those they work with. Top down interventions are flawed because of the hands-off, theory based, backgrounds of many policy-makers.
- Policy and strategy needs first to be centrally led but implementation of p&s should be regional to meet local needs.
- There needs to be a mix and this must involve business people not just civil servants. Some policies are best driven centrally and regional needs must be respected. At the end of the day small firms operate in different markets: some local, some regional and others global. Support needs to be appropriate to these needs and may not all be available locally but SMEs need to be able to access to top quality support that has the ability to make a difference whether it be in raising finance or deploying technology (not just IT).
- Whilst local input is important there are issues of equity and availability of support to all organisations. Hence I feel that the regional level is the appropriate level.
- Should be shaped by business people and delivered by enterprise agencies. All Government interference should be as kept to a minimum. Private enterprise and local government culture does not mix too well.
- But a business should have only one point of calling and support. Currently other agencies offer support too but it should be after routing through one support source e.g Business Link who can then be a gateway to any specialist support agencies.
- In order of priority business support should be :
 1. Through the Internet.

2. A national telephone service.

3. Local issues dealt through a local telephone helpline / charged for service.

- A National Policy properly driven from the Centre is what is required. Clear funding streams and dedicated teams is what is required. Too much self interest and the old guard embedded in the existing structures need to be moved on.
- We won't be able to afford a locally expensive and hotch potch service across the UK that will not meet consumer needs.
- Whoever delivers will have to improve the current provision by Business Link which is patchy to say the least.
- If locally it can be very divisive and confusing with neighbours getting different levels of support.
- Centralisation and State Control has been the objective of this government since 1997. It is a socialist evil that must be resisted at all costs. Socialism died with the fall of the Berlin Wall.
- The issue for me is not about who delivers it, it is about the same faces delivering it time after time. All businesses need new thinking and new perspectives, and recycling the same basic frameworks doesn't help. I would like to see a much more radical approach, this way we could get away from the stuckness that seems to pervade the sector.
- Regional initiatives will provide the right focus - nationwide is too wide and local is too parochial.
- Here in (South Yorkshire) the links between local organisations and BL Yorkshire seems to work quite well. There are some very interesting local initiatives, but also some good regional co-operation. These can feed into, and take advantage of, anything suitable that the government decides to come up with.
- Decisions need to be made on a regional basis as each region is different with differing needs.
- The level of bureaucracy brought about via national and regional programmes hinders support providers concentrating on the needs of the client as of paramount importance, far too much time is spent on filling out forms, also the multi levels of management leads to 'top slicing' of funding that should be directed to delivery.
- The current system is expensive and it does not work. In The North West for the last four years there has been no help for able bodied white British men the push has been to help women disabled men and ethnic men.
- The targeting should be about real achievement not a tick box exercise.
- The regions do want to be too big. The regions should be based on surrounding areas that are similar and not just a geographical convenience of government.
- Majority of the support programmes for consistency purposed should be national with same criteria for all businesses. However, there should be room for local programme delivery to meet local needs, but maintaining the quality of delivery.
- We have seen policy driven nationally and from Birmingham in the West Midlands and market towns

and rural areas get left out in the drive for technology and manufacturing.

- There is a need for national policy and strategy development - not least to help give us ammunition to local funders about what things the UK government values, which is a message which sometimes doesn't get through (e.g. our RDA doesn't value/ understand creative industries whereas Creative Britain strongly argues for it).
- There is too much regional variation for a central policy to work and delivery through a local authority would dilute support mechanisms too much to be effective. Also Local Authorities do not have the resource to deal with providing business support and recruiting that resource would result in massive duplication.
- There must be scope for professional qualified business support and advice to be offered outside the Business Link brokerage-only system.
- Business issues need dealing with by people who are close enough to the business to understand the specific nuances of those issues whilst having enough resource and funding/support through a regional set-up to provide a wide range of solutions.
- Locally and regionally leads to confusion and differences resulting in post code lottery and misunderstandings of service availability.
- No tax for earnings below £10k would help new start businesses / self employed.
- Having had experience of how government statistics are gathered (cf the "Gross Value Added" stats requires by SEEDA) I despair at the lack of understanding of the mechanics of business some of these Government quangos have. They seem more interested in 'process' rather than a hands on help for the client. Of course this is a crass generalisation and I am rather long in the tooth, but I know that my view is shared by many independent business advisors.
- There are now some very large vested interests in training and advisory services around red tape which have become completely divorced from the reality of small businesses and wealth and job creation - the whole lot needs to get out of the way.
- I may have ticked Conservative but only because I think the other two parties will be even worse - best is relative.
- I am concerned about the inexperience if a number of Conservative Shadow Ministers and whether with their privileged background that they will understand the needs of local businesses.
- Will they really take control and reduce public expenditure and make public services more efficient?
- Effective funded support of generic innovation across all sectors is non-existent in some areas due to a combination of regional and national policies and the imposition on Business Link of the IDB mode of operation. RDAs effectively block the use of European funds locally within the region to this end even though the money is supposed to be there to help subregions with under-performing economies. This applies to the region I work in but speaking to others it appears to be a general problem in UK and contrasts strongly with the approach in other parts of Europe.
- If the Conservatives would accept that business support cannot be delivered only online and over the phone, I would have more confidence that they are the best bet for supporting small firms.

Anyone who had tried this themselves would know how difficult and time-consuming it can be - and small firms simply don't have the time. The more entrepreneurial they are the less patience they have! The Conservatives at least have some MPs and Shadow Ministers with business experience.

- No political party has understood enterprise because politicians rarely have 'started their own business' on their CV.
- We need high profile effective business support, which is not driven by absurd qualification needs invented to please Government Ministers and their acolytes.
- In my opinion all of the main political parties are capable of understanding and formulating a support policy and framework to deliver the needs of small and micro businesses and prospective new start ups, it's the quality of, and the way that, they interpret the information they are presented with that is crucial.
- Only because they are more likely to support the smaller business.
- There is a total lack of understanding of the needs of small business by all political parties.
- Hopefully, a new government will see fit to abolish the RDAs which in many cases seem to replicate the regional Government office. Civil servants must realise that, like industry their jobs and pension schemes are not bulletproof.
- The problem is that most politicians in the current Government do not know or understand that 95.6% of businesses in the UK have less than 10 employees.
- Information from any party on their specific approach to business support is not easy to locate, so my opinion is based on traditional views that self help and individual motivation is likely to be the view of the Conservative party rather than state control and target driven policies.
- This present government is a disgrace with no regard for SMEs just paying lip service rather than providing real help.
- I have been a Business Link Adviser for a number of years and yet never have I been asked what support my business clients need! Business support provision is not rocket science - all we have to do is ask clients, listen and respond to needs! At present it is driven from above, by "those who know best".
- Whichever way the bureaucracy and admin costs should be minimised to ensure the maximum amount goes to the actual business. There are far too many tiers of bureaucracy in the current systems. Not only do they add to scheme costs but also delay applications. Adequate financial control over government funds is, of course, essential.
- I think that in some areas of the UK, particularly where there has been a long history of support because of heavy industries that have disappeared, the existence and nature of grant funding and support has become a barrier to growth and regeneration. The brightest and most motivated people in these areas seems to spend their time chasing funding and conforming to the latest 'strategy' rather than going out and creating new businesses and this has become a drag on these areas as well as those parts of the country where such support is unheard of.
- In 12 years, Labour has more than doubled the shelf space taken by legislation that applies to

business life. I hope that the Conservatives will roll back most or all of it.

- I'm afraid they are all demonstrably useless at formulating any sort of policy, let alone devising a framework to support SMEs & new starts. A significant chunk of my work as a Director of a CIC Enterprise Agency is in this area and the problem doesn't lie with the Govt of the day - who simply mouth soundbites, as dictated by their special advisers. The problem lies with all the levels of bureaucracy that oozes between Westminster and the coal face - all tinkering with the process to justify their existence and sucking up money while they do it. God save us from RDAs, Business Link and all the other useless mouths.
- The conservatives are more likely to cut red tape and reduce the burdens on business and leave business people to get on with making money.
- For me a critical factor is how Central Government and Local Authorities /Councils are going to help and support smaller businesses in reducing environmental climate change impact and saving money and carbon and also benefiting from the opportunity that "green-collar" business offers. Before the rest of the world leaves us for dead as usual...
- Business advice and low carbon economic advice needs to be brought together as fundamentally its now all about running sustainable businesses....
- I don't think any of the parties understand the problems faced by small businesses particularly the micro businesses which are the future of our economy.
- Whatever the route, there needs to be a move from the established "business school" approach to a more creative system of support. Sometimes it doesn't make any difference what we adopt, the phrase I use is "The problem isn't ignorance, it's the illusion of knowledge". Somehow we have to get over this!!
- They all understand the importance of micro and small businesses to the economy, but fail to formulate a long-term policy of support and assistance that will make a REAL measurable difference in all industry sectors apart from high tech where some good work has been undertaken.
- Political aspect is to lay out the Policy and let the "Locals" get on with it. The quality of the Local enterprise professionals is required to be enhanced and the best areas used for examples of best practice and benchmarking. Regional Government should concentrate on providing the resources (e.g. 4Ms) for the "Locals" to drive through the changes required to have a flexible, qualified and knowledgeable workforce - i.e. Education, at all levels must be a must be a priority.
- Business Support programmes should focus on helping businesses create wealth and tailor support packages that compliment this objective.
- Using support programmes to deliver political agendas will ultimately break the trust and confidence of business.
- Targets should be based on wealth creation rather than interaction or penetration.
- The creators of this programme under the Flexible Support for Business, Start-Up Service do not understand the logical progression in preparing a person for self employment (micro). The Contact Centre for FS4B seem to confuse the clients. All seems to be geared around the removal of statistics from the unemployment register in order to look good. JSA 6month package appears to rush people

into self employment, without preparation and insufficient personal capital to invest in the business idea.

- Once again in question 2 above, your options are too rigid. The Lib Dems would probably be a better option as new kids on the block but they ain't going to get the chance, not in a two-party state like Britain.
- Difficult to say, because at this stage, they will all say what they intend to do and promise as they are looking to get elected. What I will say, is that over the years we have had a raft of red-tape, taxation either direct or stealth introduced by this administration and I would like to see simpler measures introduced by the next government.
- The theory of Business Support Simplification is okay - it's the reality that's the problem. They haven't really simplified it - the practitioners are confused, so Heaven help the punters.
- There's a big gulf between "animation" activity and pre-start or start-up support in the current provision. The real issue is that the nature of the support needs of many clients at the low end of self-employment is not understood or catered for. In part, this is because EU definitions of support interventions require Days of support, whereas some individuals only need an hour or two of one-to-one coaching to validate their approach and answer a few queries, whilst others need to dip into this type of support a few times.
- AND it is a valid outcome for somebody to decide that self-employment is not right for them at this time in their life. Saving people from making mistakes does not hit targets, but is (in my opinion) a positive intervention for the local economy.
- control has become over the years too centralised and more autonomy should be devolved to relevant regionals or devolved parliaments so that they can better respond and support businesses which would allow them to be more astute in being more proactive rather than reactive to situations where possible.
- There's a serious need to sort out the financial services industry and banking. At the moment the economy is riding on a knife-edge which is threatening future growth and prosperity.
- Business support will have to demonstrate greater value for money to survive the cutbacks in public expenditure. Businesslink.gov offers the best value for money in terms of reaching most businesses at lowest cost.
- There is a massive need to reduce the burden of regulation which has been getting worse under Labour and always comes towards the top of business gripes. Many of the tax breaks are complex and of questionable value to a small firm. Also there is an urgent need to review the impact of all the very large and expensive public sector procurement teams on actual outcomes. Many smaller firms in London view the much trumpeted CompeteFor system as nothing more than an unaccountable and untransparent system for awarding contracts to large firms where the measure of success is just compliance with a process rather than anything meaningful.
- The merger of Business Links in Somerset, Devon & Cornwall has resulted in a significant reduction in the level of service delivered in the County. The logic is that there should be a co-ordinated service, but the reality is that budgets have been slashed and staff levels reduced.
- In my experience the people tasked (Central Government, Local Authority etc) with formulating policy

and framework, almost to a man (person), have little if any experience of business therefore by definition they are not the ones to do it.

- Labour are and always have been totally against business, both small and large. They see small business starts as a threat to their policy of centralised state control, and definitely a threat to the fast-approaching post democratic EU vision of Europe as the controller of the individual, via Common Purpose and other unelected bureaucracies. The EU purpose is to see that no individual would be able to do anything without a permit or a payment.
- The carbon credit fraud of Climate Change will soon play a significant part in re-distributing wealth and assets regardless of economic activity.
- I don't believe this is just about policy. It is also about the need to move away from public sector approaches to investment. The difficulty is often in the strings attached to government money and the way it can be used. This is at odds with what would be really useful for business. In addition, most business support posts are paid at support levels, and so really talented managers go elsewhere. Sometimes 5 minutes with an expert is worth hours with someone who isn't. Providing a structure that allows that golden 5 minutes easily and accessibly is vital.
- I no longer practice as a business consultant. I just found the frustration of not being able to do what needed to be done too great in the end! However, I passionately believe it could be possible to do great things, we just need to be much, much more creative.
- Unfortunately, the ideal of continued economic growth using finite resources is not a sustainable concept if we (as human beings) want to conserve resources and save the planet from our rapacious greed. Until greed is finally exposed as a vice and not a virtue, we are all doomed.
- Labour is more likely to take into account the social impact of the state of the businesses than conservative who are perceived to be driven by commercial judgements only.
- Most of the leading politicians have not had any industry or life experience prior to deciding to be political people so have nothing to build on as they lack imagination in general as well. Vince Cable is the best but will never get any power.
- Until we realise that trying to run the country as a service provider whilst neglecting manufacturing we are going to continue to slide. The adage that only making things add true value ring truer today than at any other time. Unfortunately none of the main parties seem to have realised this.
- While all talk about the need to support industry none of the parties seem to have any understanding of industry needs let alone the specific needs of micro-enterprises.

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