

BUSINESS HUNTER

20 April 2026

Service NSW

Small Business Advisory Service consultation team

By email: businessengagement@service.nsw.gov.au

SUBMISSION: New NSW Government small business advisory service

Business Hunter welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the NSW Government's consultation on the design of a new small business advisory service following the closure of the Business Connect program on 30 September 2025.

Business Hunter is the leading business advocacy organisation for the Hunter region, representing organisations of all sizes and sectors. Small businesses and start-ups are the backbone of the Hunter economy, underpinning employment, innovation and regional diversification. Ensuring they have access to effective, trusted and practical support services is an economic priority.

Business Hunter consistently and publicly raised concerns about the decision to withdraw funding from Business Connect, particularly at a time of heightened cost pressures, rising insolvencies and ongoing economic transition. While we support the Government's commitment to developing a new advisory service, this submission emphasises that any new model should draw from the proven strengths of Business Connect.

Based on direct feedback from members, providers and stakeholders, Business Hunter submits that the following elements of the Business Connect program were particularly effective and should be retained or strengthened in any new advisory service.

- **Free at the point of access**

Removing financial barriers ensured equitable access for start-ups, sole traders and micro-businesses, particularly during periods of financial stress.

- **Tailored and one-to-one**

Advice that is customised to the specific needs, stage and challenges of each business, rather than relying on generic or scripted information.

- **Consistency in touch points with the service**

Having continuity with one or more advisors was considered very important by clients, enabling them to more effectively have follow-up conversations on advice delivered, rather than having to start from scratch with each engagement.

- **Locally delivered with regional reach**

The use of local providers ensured strong place-based knowledge and understanding of specific regional market conditions.

- **Flexible delivery, integrating face-to-face as an option**

Support that can be delivered face-to-face, online or by phone, enabling businesses to

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engage in ways that suit their capacity and circumstances. The element of face-to-face delivery, where practical for clients, was highly valued in the Business Connect model.

- **Delivered by independent, experienced advisors**
Advisors who are experienced practitioners with real-world business expertise, fostering trust, credibility and practical problem-solving.
- **Focused on capability building, not compliance**
Business Connect helped owners improve decision-making across planning, marketing, digital capability, cash flow, staffing and growth by providing customised advice – rather than simply pointing them to regulatory information.
- **Available across the business lifecycle**
The program supported entrepreneurs from idea stage through start-up, stabilisation, growth and adaptation.

Business Connect assisted tens of thousands of businesses between its inception in 2017 and the end of the program last year, with high satisfaction rates and strong economic outcomes.

Business Hunter is concerned that replacing Business Connect with a more centralised, generic or concierge-style service risks:

- Diluting the quality and depth of advice available to business owners
- Replacing trusted local expertise with scripted or transactional interactions
- Reducing accessibility for regional and disadvantaged communities
- Creating an advice gap at precisely the time businesses need hands-on support.

Generic portals or call-centre style approaches cannot substitute for trusted, independent and tailored business advice, particularly for small operators navigating complex financial, workforce and market challenges.

Conclusion

Business Hunter supports the NSW Government's objective of improving small business advisory support but encourages the integration of the core elements that made Business Connect successful.

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this consultation. Should you wish to engage further, please contact me at bob.hawes@businesshunter.com or on 02 9466 4665.

Yours sincerely,



Bob Hawes
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