

Huron-Kinloss Business Incubator Report

The Hub

December 22, 2023

Background

The Hub, a regional business support center, opened its doors in October 2020 with a mission to provide entrepreneurs with the resources, knowledge, and connections necessary for success in starting or expanding their businesses. Over the past three years, The Hub has been a guide for the local business community, offering free business consultations, training, events, self-paced business courses, and rental spaces for offices and meetings.

Additionally, The Hub launched a retail incubator program called “The Homestead”, designed to empower entrepreneurs by providing a move-in ready space, comprehensive business support, networking opportunities, and a platform to test their business concept in a retail location.

The underlying mission of The Hub is to provide a space where entrepreneurs can connect, network, grow, and find support for their business ideas. The impact of this mission is evident in the success stories, collaborations, and growth witnessed within the local business community.

As we reflect on the past three years, we express our profound gratitude to the community, partners, and entrepreneurs who have contributed to The Hub’s success. The impact of The Hub extends beyond its physical presence, leaving a legacy of empowered and thriving businesses in the region.

The information provided in this report is consistent with and keeping with the Municipality’s Vision & Mission. The recommendations contribute to the goals in achieving a prosperous community.

Projects in this report assist staff in achieving the following projects in the 2019-2023 Strategic Plan Action Plan:

P2.2 Business Incubator

Acknowledgements

The sustained operation of The Hub has been made possible through contributions from three key funding sources:

1. Rural Economic Development (RED) Program (October 2020 - May 2023):

The Township of Huron-Kinloss successfully secured grant funding from the Province of Ontario's Rural Economic Development Program, supporting The Hub from its inception in 2020 until May 2023. This financial backing facilitated the establishment of The Hub and the hiring of a full-time business development coordinator.

RED's contribution covered 50% of the initial funding during this period.

2. Nuclear Waste Management Organization (NWMO) (October 2020 - December 2023):

NWMO contributed the other 50% of the initial funding for The Hub from its launch in October 2020 to its conclusion in December 2023. A three-year funding agreement with NWMO ensured financial stability and support during this period.

3. Bruce County (2020):

In addition to the RED and NWMO funding, The Hub received a one-time contribution from Bruce County in 2020. This supplementary funding played a vital role during The Hub's early stages. Bruce County Economic Development has consistently supported The Hub's programming, referring businesses, and providing ongoing support.

The Township of Huron-Kinloss expresses gratitude to the Rural Economic Development Program, Nuclear Waste Management Organization, and Bruce County for their instrumental support. The collaborative contributions from these entities have been pivotal in establishing and sustaining The Hub, fostering entrepreneurial growth within the community.

Business Support

Since its inception, The Hub has been dedicated to assisting entrepreneurs by offering a range of services, including business consultations, access to resources, training programs, and networking events. Over the course of our operations, we have worked with 213 businesses seeking support for scheduling consultations, reserving private offices, and seeking guidance on various business-related inquiries. Notably, many businesses have engaged with The Hub multiple times, underscoring our role as a trusted and ongoing resource for continuous business development support.

The inquiries received by The Hub have spanned a wide array of topics, highlighting the diverse challenges faced by entrepreneurs. Common themes include seeking advice on business initiation, devising digital marketing strategies, and obtaining information about available grants. The Hub has played a crucial role in providing practical assistance, ranging from helping businesses formulate comprehensive business plans to addressing specific operational concerns. Our multifaceted approach ensures that entrepreneurs receive tailored support at various stages of their business journey.

The impact of The Hub extends beyond Huron-Kinloss, reaching businesses regions across Bruce County and beyond. This expansive geographic distribution underscores our commitment to fostering entrepreneurship on a regional scale. The diverse reach of our services reflects The Hub's unwavering dedication to supporting businesses across different locations.

Space Usage

The Hub offered flexible workspace solutions, including a private office and co-working space designed to accommodate varying working preferences. As the rare provider of professional workspace in the region, The Hub addressed a unique demand, offering people a distraction-free space for efficient work.

Since May 2022, our private office has been rented 18 times, while our co-working space has been rented 10 times. Notably, our space was used as the venue for regular events as well as the monthly meetings of the Ripley Business Community.

Our business development coordinator also operated from an office within The Hub, providing an accessible point of contact for businesses seeking support. The coordinator was available for drop-in meetings, offering personalized assistance and guidance.

Additionally, The Hub complemented these offerings by providing dedicated retail space for entrepreneurs to test and refine their business concepts through a retail incubator called The Homestead Program.

Partnerships

The Hub has worked with a variety of partners since opening. These include:

Santa Clara University:

Santa Clara University collaborates with The Hub by providing free online business programs through their My Own Business Institute (MOBI). These programs, including Start a Business, Business Expansion, and Quick Start Entrepreneur, are accessible on The Hub's website, engaging 71 people to date.

Contact North Grey-Bruce:

Contact North Grey-Bruce housed a desktop computer at The Hub from October 2020 to July 2023. This computer served as a satellite location for Contact North's clients, offering a space for the local Online Learning and Recruitment Officer to meet with clients. Contact North is a vital part of the distant education and training network.

Business to Bruce:

The Hub collaborated with Business to Bruce on multiple initiatives, including hosting a Re-Opening Ontario event with the Ministry of Labour, organizing a Bridges to Better Business event, and facilitating an Agricultural Business training series.

Catapult Grey-Bruce and Grey County Business Enterprise Centre Collaboration:

The partnership with Catapult Grey-Bruce and the Grey County Business Enterprise Centre led to the establishment of Wednesday Warm-Up, a virtual entrepreneur networking group launched in March 2021. Conducted on the last Wednesday of each month, this initiative gathered entrepreneurs from the Grey-Bruce region for guest speaker sessions and breakout room discussions. Wednesday Warm-Up hosted 17 sessions with over 100 registrations, averaging 15 participants per session.

Grey-Bruce Entrepreneur Ecosystem:

Since 2021, The Hub was of the Grey-Bruce Entrepreneur Ecosystem, a collective of regional business support organizations. The group collaborates to share resources and organize events. The Ecosystem meets quarterly to discuss updates on programs, events, and partnership opportunities.

Events

Since opening, The Hub has offered virtual and in person events for regional entrepreneurs. A variety of events have been hosted including two Wellness Series to support our entrepreneurs and their wellbeing, digital marketing workshops, and a youth entrepreneurship night. The Hub has also worked with facilitators to host a variety of marketing and business training events.

Wellness Series (Feb 16 – Mar 9, 2021): 4 sessions / 77 Registered

The Hub's Wellness Series, aimed at supporting entrepreneurs in managing their health, featured 4 sessions: "Mental Health Talk", "Sleep Talk", "Yoga Class", and "Pandemic Posture".

Instagram Workshop Series (Mar 16 – Sept 28, 2021): 9 sessions / 69 Registered

The Instagram Workshop Series in 2021, designed to enhance participants' skills in utilizing the popular social media platform Instagram, featured three sessions of three different workshops: "Instagram 101", "Instagram 201", and "Instagram Content Planning & Creation".

Canva Series (Apr 20 – Jul 20, 2021): 3 sessions / 18 Registered

The Canva series in 2021, developed to instruct participants on how to use a popular graphic design tool, included 3 sessions titled "How to Use Canva for Your Business."

Digital Marketing Series (May 12 – Nov 23, 2021): 11 sessions / 72 Registered

The Digital Marketing Series in 2021 offered 11 diverse workshops to enhance participants' skills in online marketing. Topics included: "Social Media Marketing," "Email

Marketing," "How to Use Later & Facebook Business Suite," "Visual Branding for Business," "Content Creation for Your Business," "Search Engine Optimization," "Social Media Marketing," "Email Marketing," "Creating Video Content," "Holiday Marketing Tips & Tricks," and "How to Use Pinterest for Your Business."

Digital Service Squad Trainings (Jan 11 – Feb 22, 2022): 7 sessions / 26 Registered

The Digital Service Squad Trainings in 2022 aimed to elevate participants' understanding of digital marketing tools. The series revisited the successful Instagram workshops from the previous year, alongside new training sessions on "Canva 2.0," "Website Development 101," "Facebook 101," and an extra session of "Instagram 101."

Wellness Series (February 24 – Mar 22, 2022): 5 sessions / 45 Registered

The Wellness Series in 2022 focused on the holistic well-being of entrepreneurs, offering sessions such as "Wellness and Your Small Business", "Yoga Class", "Sleep Talk", "Fitting What's Important In", and "Wellness Toolbox".

Find Your Niche (May 3 – May 19, 2022): 6 sessions / 90 Registered

The Hub hosted a comprehensive "Find Your Niche" series, consisting of 6 workshops that offered valuable insights into the realm of branding. These workshops covered diverse aspects of brand development and strategy, including: "What is a Niche?", "Analyzing Your Industry and Audience", "You and Your Niche", "Social Proof and Brand Voice", "Value Proposition and Mission Statements", and "The Branding".

Back to Basics (Sept 8 – Sept 22, 2022): 3 sessions / 34 Registered

In addition to the series of branding workshops, The Hub conducted a series of copywriting workshops titled "Back to Basics." These workshops provided essential skills for effective brand communication. Workshops included: "Craft Clear Brand Messaging", "Be Authentic, Above All", and "Writing Words That Work".

Other 2023 Events: 3 sessions / 91 Registered

Alongside the workshop series, The Hub hosted information sessions on specific topics. The "Digital Main Street Information Session" had 11 registered participants, focusing on instructions for their grant program. The "Grey Bruce Entrepreneur Ecosystem Information Session" attracted 42 registered participants, offering insights into local entrepreneurial opportunities. Additionally, the "ChatGPT Information Session" drew 38 participants interested in exploring the capabilities of ChatGPT in the digital domain.

Ask an Advisor Series (May 4 - Nov 2, 2023): 5 sessions / 51 Registered

In 2023, The Hub unveiled the "Ask an Advisor Series," a webinar series with five sessions aimed at providing participants with the expertise of industry professionals and engage in discussions related to their businesses. The sessions covered diverse topics, starting with "Storytelling for Entrepreneurs" hosted by Becky Nethery, exploring aspects of branding and copywriting. Emily Bailie led two sessions, "Content Marketing: Tips & Trends" delving into social media marketing, and "How to Promote Your Business Using Instagram," a focused exploration of Instagram marketing strategies. Deborah Clarke hosted "Unlocking the Secrets to Digital Success," providing insights into search engine optimization. Finally, Michael Kotyck shared expertise in "Mastering the Language of Success," offering essential insights into accounting fundamentals.

Creative Futures (December 2023): 2 Sessions / 19 participants

The Hub's Creative Futures events, held to inspire youth entrepreneurship, featured a Filmmaking & Content Creation Workshop with JOI Creative and a STEM and Business Challenge led by NII Explore. The workshops aimed to blend creative exploration with business savvy, offering valuable insights for attendees. The total attendance of 19, with 7 in the Filmmaking Workshop and 12 in the STEM and Business Challenge, reflects the community's growing interest in after-school youth enrichment and youth entrepreneurship.

Partnership Events:

- *Reopening Ontario Event - November 6, 2020:* In partnership with Business to Bruce and the Ministry of Labour, The Hub hosted an event addressing the reopening of Ontario.

- *Bridges to Better Business - December 2, 2020:* Business to Bruce partnered with The Hub for the Bridges to Better Business event, fostering collaboration and knowledge-sharing.
- *Small Business Week - October 2021:* Small Business Week featured a series of impactful events with 296 registrations. Topics ranged from economic updates to content creation for small businesses.
- *International Women's Day (Week) - March 2022:* The Hub, in collaboration with the Grey Bruce Entrepreneur Ecosystem, organized a virtual mentoring and networking event for International Women's Day, attracting 33 registrations.
- *Small Business Week Celebration - October 2022:* The Grey Bruce Small Business Week Celebration in October 2022 drew 153 registrations, with 100-110 attendees and 97 captured through on-site registration.
- *Bootstrap Bootcamp: Agriculture Business Training - November 2022:* The Hub partnered in hosting a Bootstrap Bootcamp with 15 registrations, covering essential topics for agriculture business development.

Networking at The Hub:

Wednesday Warm-Up (Virtual) - 2021-2022:

Wednesday Warm-Up, a virtual entrepreneur networking group, started in March 2021 and evolved into a recurring event, garnering over 100 registrations. Across this period, 17 monthly sessions featured guest speakers and breakout room discussions, offering entrepreneurs an interactive space to connect and share insights. In total, these virtual gatherings provided a platform for consistent engagement and collaboration among entrepreneurs.

Hang Out at The Hub (In Person) - March 2022 to November 2022:

The Hub hosted in-person networking events, providing entrepreneurs with opportunities to meet face-to-face. These sessions, known as "Hang Out at The Hub," gathered entrepreneurs in a casual setting to facilitate connections. A total of 9 events were hosted between March and November 2022, with 24 attendees participating in these networking sessions. These events served as valuable opportunities for entrepreneurs to connect, collaborate, and exchange knowledge.

Programs

Digital Main Street Programs (2020-2023):

Since 2020, the Hub has spearheaded the Digital Main Street programs—versions 2.0, 3.0, and 4.0. Initially, it partnered with the Kincardine BIA, and from 2021 to 2023, it extended its collaboration to include Kincardine, Brockton, South Bruce, Arran-Elderslie, Saugeen Shores, South Bruce Peninsula, and Northern Bruce Peninsula to cater to the needs of Bruce County. This initiative offers personalized assistance to businesses, supporting them in enhancing their digital marketing strategies and online presence. Additionally, eligible businesses can apply for a \$2,500 grant. To date, the program has successfully supported 340 businesses, securing a total of \$282,500 in grant funding.

Sprout Youth Entrepreneurship Program (November-December 2022):

In November 2022, The Hub introduced the Sprout Youth Entrepreneurship Program—an intensive eight-week initiative designed for students in Grades 7-12. Developed by key staff members, including the Manager of Strategic Initiatives, Business & Economic Officer, and Business Development Coordinator, the program aimed to empower young individuals with practical business knowledge and hands-on entrepreneurial experience.

Covering a wide range of essential topics such as business basics, financial management, marketing, emotional intelligence, sales, and customer service, the program provided a comprehensive understanding of the fundamentals crucial for success in the business world.

Two participants, one with an existing business and the other with a new business idea, successfully completed the program. Both were awarded bursaries through the Early Investment in Education and Skills Funding Program, supporting their entrepreneurial journey and educational pursuits.

Notably, one participant, Lily Conley, transitioned to The Hub's retail incubator, "The Homestead." Her store, Lily By Design, operated at The Hub from July to September 2023, serving as a tangible example of the program's impact on fostering entrepreneurial growth.

Retail Incubator Program – The Homestead (April 2022 – January 2024)

The Homestead (April 2022 - Present):

Launched in April 2022, The Homestead Program was a distinctive initiative tailored to empower local entrepreneurs. It provided a unique opportunity to test retail storefront concepts with low risk, granting participants access to dedicated retail space. This tangible platform enabled entrepreneurs to bring their business ideas to life, with a focus on comprehensive business support.

What set The Homestead Program apart was its commitment to nurturing entrepreneurial spirit. Beyond physical space, participants benefited from real-world testing opportunities at The Hub, allowing them to refine and validate their ideas during a dedicated three-month commitment period. This period involved hosting their business within the Business Support Center, strategically placing them near the Business Development Coordinator for immediate guidance.

The program addressed common entrepreneurial challenges, such as high startup costs, limited business experience, market testing risks, and a lack of mentorship. By offering a low-risk environment, comprehensive support, and fostering collaboration, The Homestead Program played a vital role in contributing to the growth and economic vitality of Ripley's community.

The Craft Shack (July to November 2022)

Craft Shack, a Cricut supply and craft store led by Amber Alexander, participated in The Homestead Program from July to November 2022. Having already established her business online, The Craft Shack tested their retail concept within The Hub, and in December, Amber transitioned her business to a storefront in Wingham.

Shop Dire (April to June 2023)

From April to June 2023, Jamie Miller, a youth entrepreneur, participated in The Homestead Program, bringing Shop Dire—an eco-friendly product store that initially operated online—to a physical location. This unique opportunity enabled Jamie to test the waters of a brick-and-mortar setup, evaluating market responses and gaining valuable insights. Notably, Jamie's journey with The Homestead Program became a stepping stone as they transitioned to the next phase of their entrepreneurial growth—a college program in Business Management and Entrepreneurship. This progression exemplifies the program's success in providing hands-on experience and support for

aspiring youth entrepreneurs, guiding them toward further education and future business endeavors.

Lily by Design (July to September 2023)

In July to September 2023, Lily Conley, a graduate of our Sprout Youth Entrepreneurship Program, participated in The Homestead Program with her business, Lily By Design. Specializing in homemade candles and personal care products, Lily aimed to explore the brick-and-mortar business landscape through this opportunity. Her involvement followed a successful completion of the Sprout program, highlighting The Hub's commitment to supporting and nurturing the growth of aspiring youth entrepreneurs. The seamless transition from one program to another underscored the holistic approach taken to empower and guide entrepreneurs at various stages of their career.

Collective Co Boutique (September 2023 to January 2024)

From September to the end of December 2023, Collective Co Boutique participated in The Homestead Program, bringing a unique consignment store concept to life. The focus of this endeavor was to provide affordable fashion for women, children, and toddlers, with the goal of making shopping accessible to young mothers in rural areas. The business owner, Maggie Robinson, initially operated her venture from home with an online store and successfully expanded her reach through The Homestead Program.

Before joining the program, Maggie had already built a strong customer network across North America. The Homestead Program facilitated her transition from an online presence to a physical storefront, strengthening her connection with the local community. Notably, Maggie's business model extended beyond selling clothes on consignment; it included a vendor market. The program provided the opportunity to expand this aspect, enabling her to continue the tradition of a Christmas market in Huron-Kinloss.

Conclusion

In summary, The Hub in Huron-Kinloss played a significant role in promoting economic development in a rural area. It embraced key concepts that had a meaningful impact on the local community. By consistently supporting entrepreneurship, The Hub became a crucial force for economic diversification and the creation of opportunities in the region.

Through providing extensive business support services, it addressed a vital need for guidance and resources, ensuring the success of local businesses.

A key factor in The Hub's success was its collaborative approach, actively working with partners such as educational institutions and government agencies. This collaboration strengthened the community and improved the effectiveness of economic development initiatives. The organization's focus on youth entrepreneurship programs, like Sprout, demonstrated a forward-looking strategy that invested in the future economic sustainability of the community.

The emphasis on networking events, workshops, and training sessions by The Hub contributed to a lively community, encouraging economic activity and supporting local businesses. Notably, The Homestead Program showcased a place-based economic development strategy, tackling the challenges of startup costs and limited resources in rural areas.

The Hub's partnerships extended beyond the local level, engaging in collaborations that magnified the impact of its initiatives. The organization's success not only aided in creating an environment favorable to entrepreneurs but also served as an inspiration and model for other rural communities looking to establish similar initiatives.

Ultimately, The Hub's value went beyond immediate impact. Its long-term effects on businesses resonated in a community where entrepreneurs felt supported and empowered. Through community engagement and empowerment, The Hub fostered a sense of ownership and participation in economic development, establishing a sustainable and resilient local business ecosystem.

As The Hub inspired and provided a model for other rural communities, its story highlighted the significance of local initiatives in promoting economic development. The organization not only transformed its immediate community but also contributed to a broader narrative of how grassroots efforts can positively influence economies in rural regions.